

Hirokazu Fukawa is involved in what many contemporary artists would regard as a dangerous experiment. He's making highly formalized fine art about a seemingly irresolvable problem in his own life.

For years his sculpture has incorporated words and these words have always been about isolation and about a desperate desire to communicate. "You are the first skin around me." "I Want to Feel the Way You Do, All the Time..." "I love you madly." "You are the only real truth I know." "Love me in your full being." "Forgive me/ Forget me." "I Miss You Like Hell." In a 1994 installation at Carnegie Mellon University, Fukawa built a stairway and sandblasted into its glass steps the words of Soviet astronaut Aleksei Lenov, who, reflecting on the experience of walking in space, said, "It was a great silence, unlike any I have encountered on Earth, so vast and deep that I began to hear my own body."

These issues of human separateness and loneliness were embedded in Fukawa's work before the birth of his son Fumi, and before the subsequent realization that Fumi is autistic.

Autism is a complex, multifaceted disorder that usually becomes evident before a child is two years old. It affects at least four times as many boys as girls. Among its common characteristics are avoidance of touching and eye contact, muteness or severely limited speech, repetitive movements like rocking, and a demand for routine. Though autistic children or adults might appear from the outside to be retarded, they are often fully cognizant of all that occurs and is said around them. Those referred to as *idiot savant* are frequently autistic, with one startling, shining talent — in, for instance, music or mathematics — emerging from an otherwise deserted human landscape.

A crude but effective metaphor for the disorder is that of a cage. It's as if impenetrable, though transparent, barriers exist between autistic people and the rest of the world. However much they might desire to participate in the life around them, something — a powerful, mysterious, invisible force — prevents it.



"Like an Ethereal Transfer" was the first body of Fukawa's work to confront autism head-on.

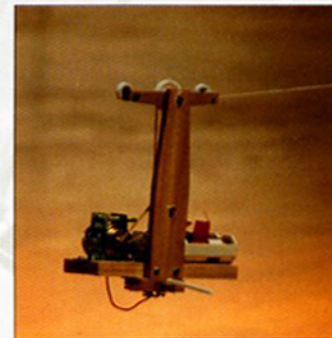
The 1995 one-man exhibition at Grand Arts in Kansas City had as its focus four puddle-shaped marble pieces deeply engraved with text letters filled with mercury. The text passages were from the writings of Birger Sellin, a 24-year-old German man who has suffered all his life from severe autism. At the age of eighteen, with someone supporting his arm, Sellin began to type with one finger. It was the first time in his life he'd been able to communicate coherently with anyone, including his mother. Much of what he revealed of his inner world is published in the 1993 book *I don't want to be inside me anymore: Messages from an Autistic Mind*. The revelations are excruciatingly painful. Those close to him must sometimes wish they'd never asked.

Because Fukawa is both a father and an artist he can't stop asking. "Adrift in the Sea of Tranquility" — a single, multi-part work — continues his exploration of autism. The subject here not his son Fumi, but a slightly older girl named Erika, whom Fukawa describes as "deeply autistic." Fukawa met Erika in the early 90s, when he and the girl's mother, Eri Haneshi, were part of a group working collectively to understand and aid their disabled children.

The centerpiece of "Adrift in the Sea of Tranquility" is a headless female figure, approximately 16-feet high. The torso is a human-scale dressmaker's form, cast in bronze. Embedded in the breast of the torso is a tiny video monitor, with a looped recording Fukawa made of Erika as she interacted with her mother. The torso sits atop an enormous metal wire cage that billows out like a hoop skirt. The figure rotates slowly, almost imperceptibly, one revolution every 15 minutes.

Ten pairs of steel stanchions are placed randomly in the vast space surrounding the central form. Each pair supports a string, and clinging to each string is a small, battery-powered, cable car. Emitting subtle, struggling noises, the toy cars inch along the strings until they reach the ends and bump into the metal supports. Then they stop with a shudder, reverse, and begin their pointless traverse in the opposite direction.

Radiating from the torso's neck to the gallery's four walls are 40 pairs of speaker wires. The tent-like array of golden wire glints in fragments of sunlight and, like an enormous, near-transparent wedding veil, graces the space with a reverent, religious aura. Suspended from these wires at ear height are small, uncased, round speakers, spaced equidistant, 10 to a wall. The speakers carry a quiet reading of a dialog between Fukawa and Haneshi. Each ratchet of the central form's rotation trips the amplifier signal from one set of speaker wires to another, causing pieces of this dialog to lurch unpredictably around the room.



Fukawa is asking Haneshi about simple things — "Did you have any trouble with Erika yesterday?" "When Erika plays with a keyboard, how does she play?" "How many words does Erika use each day?" — as well as about more personal issues, familiar only to those with an intimate understanding of the difficulties faced by autistic children's parents — "Have you hit Erika?" "When do you feel the most love towards Erika?" and "What is Erika to you?"

To the last question, Haneshi answers, "She is my fate. Pleasure as well as agony. A person who motivates as well as discourages me."

Fragments of the dialog are printed in vertical and horizontal lines on the walls of the balcony that overlooks the main gallery space. The lines cross, like a crossword puzzle, where common letters intersect. Here, too, the phrases Fukawa has chosen range from practical to poignant: "Her most favorite part is opening the

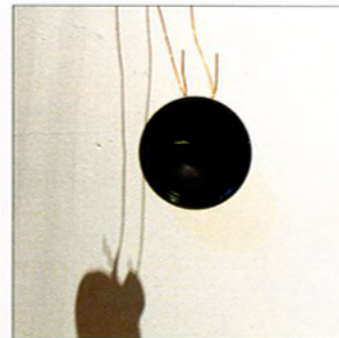
box of detergent." "Erika said 'ee,' which is 'eat.'" "She did not recognize me, went up to another child's mother." In a light projection to the right of the printed phrases, as if only shyly present, is a full-scale silhouette of Erika herself.

Two telescopes aimed at the height of the video monitor in the torso breast are mounted at the balcony's edge, and a cassette player with headphones hangs from each telescope stand. It is only from this vantage point, distant and awkward, that a viewer can listen to the complete dialog and watch the videotape — and then only when the central figure has rotated into the right position.

A slide projection of the moon's dry, gray surface rakes across the ceiling above the installation. The Sea of Tranquility is one of the moon's dark regions, thought by ancient astronomers to be oceans. Fukawa says he thinks of his son and his friend's daughter as being just as distant and as misunderstood. "Erika is right there in front of me but also so far away. So close but so far away."

In his imagination, Fukawa tries to experience the moon's isolation via its silence. "There is no air, no sound. Every couple hundred years, maybe a small piece of space debris hits the surface, a cloud of dust puffs up, but everything is silent." Silence, he knows now, through his experience with Fumi and Erika, is not a void, but a dense containment, like a black hole, of all that is known but can't be expressed.

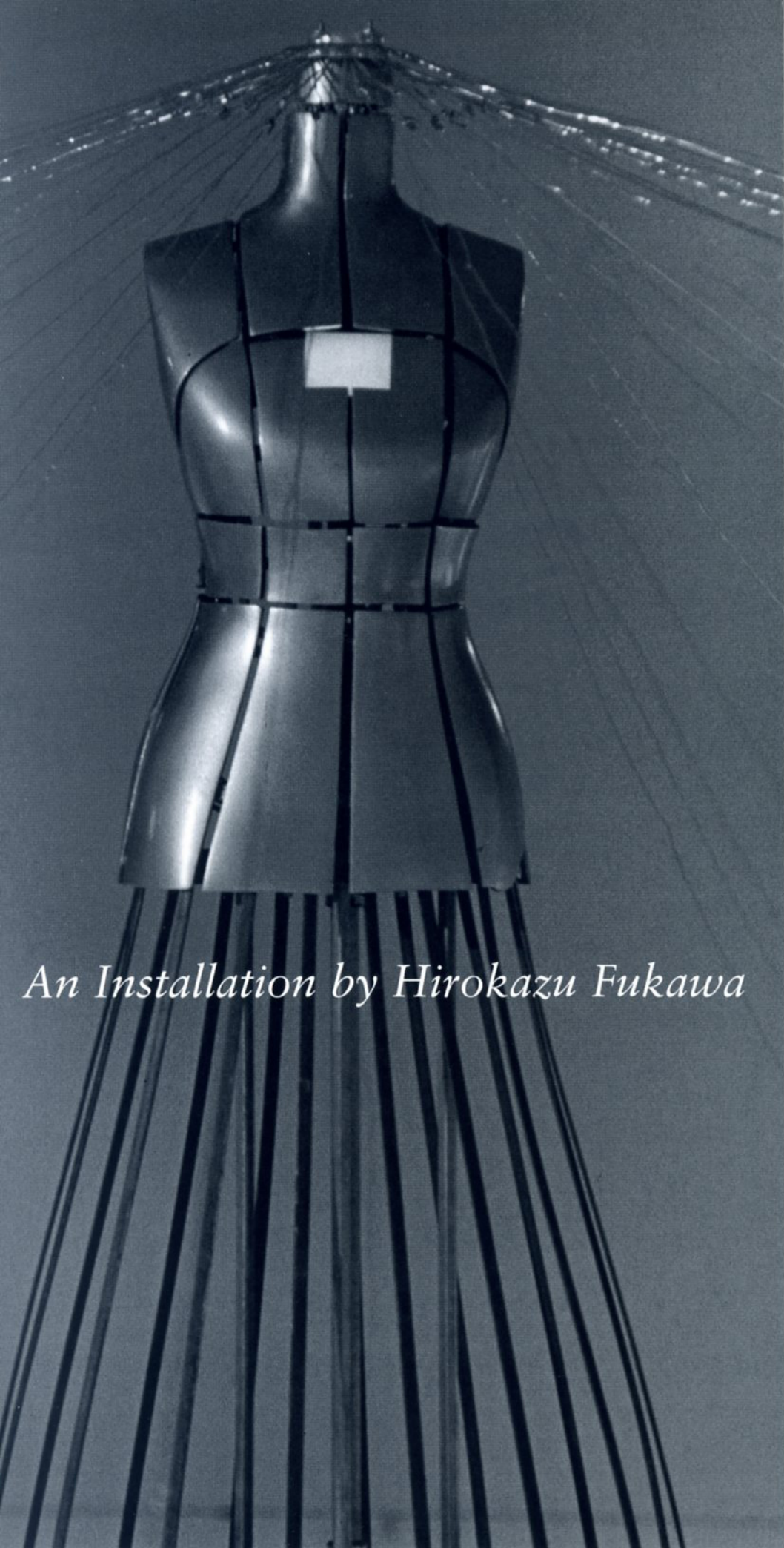
The slowly rotating central figure, the cascade of golden speaker wires, the little cars working hard to go nowhere, the erratic outbreaks of a whispered conversation, a vision of a small girl caught only from a great distance, the ravaged surface of a lonely moonscape — all of this is bathed in the work's most significant element: the sound of Erika herself. Quietly audible everywhere in the space, the tape loop is a haunting montage of cooing, chirping and popping noises. Resembling alternately dolphin communication and bird calls, these recorded vocalizations are as close as Erika comes to speech. Autistic children make these kinds of sounds, Fukawa says, in part to block outside noise, which they cannot filter and so suffer as unrelenting bombardment, and in part to comfort themselves through this elemental reassurance of their own identity.



However tortured is her inner world — and at this stage in her young life, no one can say for sure — Erika's "singing" is angelic, strangely soothing. Mounted high on the Huntington Gallery's walls, from a much earlier era, are plaster rondels of children swaddled in gauze. These sculptural icons, reminiscent of della Robbia's bas-reliefs, are traditional symbols of healing. Out of the delicate sea of Fukawa's installation, it is to these children that Erika's lovely voice seems to rise, seeking a connection with others similarly innocent, damaged and mute.

Roberta Lord





*Adrift in the Sea of Tranquility*  
*An Installation by Hirokazu Fukawa*

20 January – 28 February 1998

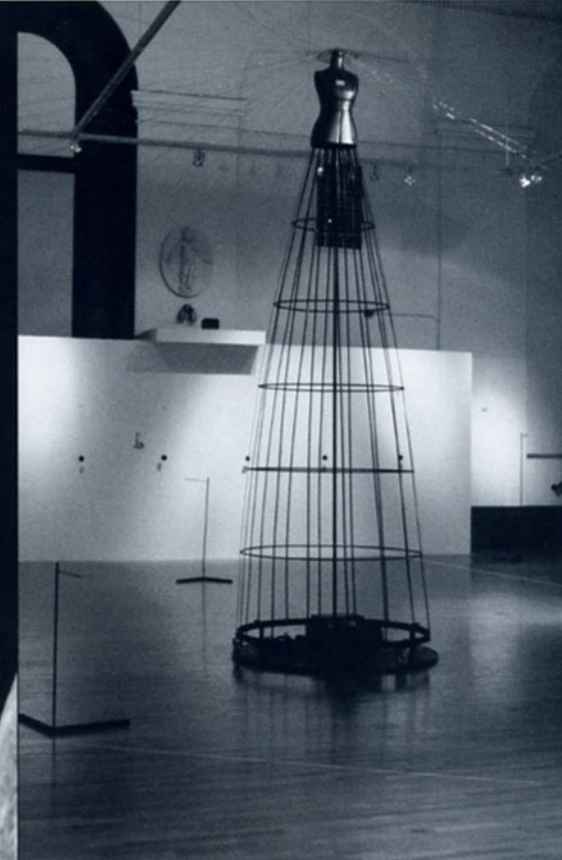
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*Adrift*  
*in the*  
*Sea of Tranquility*



*An Installation by Hirokazu Fukawa*

All the students who worked on this project from Massachusetts College of Art and Hartford Art School, University of Hartford.

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28 February 1998  
Hirokazu Fukawa

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