


site  
sensitive  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
WITH A SENSE OF PLACE



**Fresh Art International NOW** explores subjects relevant to today's cultural producers and reveals the critical importance of documenting conversations about creativity in the 21st century.



## FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW

### The Voice of Contemporary Art

**Fresh Art International NOW** is a digital publication that features themes embedded in Fresh Talk, the audio podcast series that independent curator Cathy Byrd produces for the online media platform [Fresh Art International](#). This is an interactive pdf with more than 100 reference points to inform and inspire your research and writing. Each issue includes an overview, relevant histories and biographies, photo-illustrated podcast transcriptions, and a suggested reading list.

### issue two // 2015

#### Site Sensitive

#### Contemporary Art With A Sense of Place

Site Sensitive examines how space and place influence the work of contemporary artists and curators.

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Published summer 2015  
Fresh Art International

ISBN: 978-1-329-55253-1

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# about issue two / site sensitive

In Issue Two of **Fresh Art International NOW**, we share a set of Fresh Talk episodes that embody the notion of site sensitivity. We consider not only creative projects that respond to a physical space, but also those that react to or embrace a historic moment, a cultural environment, a socio-political tension, or a psychological space. Each project involves extensive research and deliberate immersion in situ. Each conversation reflects a desire to explore and share the faceted character of the inner mind and communal psyche, private and public spaces, urban and remote geographies.

Our dialogues examine a permutation of the conventional contemporary art historical narrative of “site specific art.” Emerging in the 1960s, this art sought to transcend what was perceived as the over-curated, almost clinical context of the art museum. Artists rebelled by creating their own exhibition sites (Agnes Denes’s *Wheatfield*, 1982) or flaunting the rules of museum installation with live interventions (Joseph Beuys’s performances). In this issue, we expand the definition of the genre. *Site Sensitive* brings a broader range of cultural production into the conversation, exposing new ways of seeing place, space, and site in contemporary art.

Performance artist Joan Jonas has always summoned a highly symbolic sense of place. Her work animates layered and interconnected metaphysical environments, expressing a lifelong interest in performative rituals and storytelling. Improvisational jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran is an ideal partner for Jonas and other artists. He deftly facilitates the communal experience of space and place to shape sonic landscapes.

Sound artist Stephen Vitiello creates audible spatial experiences with mechanical, musical, architectural, and natural sounds extracted from city sites and distant landscapes. His environments reorient our senses so that our primary encounter is one of listening. All about looking, photographer Sarah Hobbs takes us inside a fraught psychological space. She selects and arranges interiors that invite us into her immersive theater of the mind. In contrast, the city of New Orleans is the emotional territory that artist Tameka Norris navigates in her video project about coming of age and returning home.

Video artist Janet Biggs pulls us toward more exotic and peripheral geographies. We join her in the experience of extreme environments that push her own physical limits—places where she views the landscape as an equal character to the people who reside there. Conceptual artist Agustina Woodgate reveals a shared perspective in her series of temporary internet radio station transmissions. Carefully selecting her guests and the physical location for each broadcast, she channels the energies, issues, and ideas of a particular socio-cultural landscape through conversations. Conversely, activist artist Tania Bruguera stages civic interventions to expose the cultural politics of Cuba. Her desire is to provoke public dialogue about the future of her home country, the prospect for social change, and the role of art in that process.

Rather than calling us to action, photographer Adam Schreiber wants to suspend our gaze. His work is all about personal contemplation. He acknowledges our active, restless relationship to art and the architectural space where most art experiences are contained. Museum director Louis Grachos is interested in the way that art can impact the quotidian encounter of what surrounds our built environment. He envisions a multi-site, citywide public art project that engages with the fabric of city life.

The voices we share in *Site Sensitive* reveal the broadening significance of space and place in contemporary art. Illustrating how context can generate content, these conversations animate the powerful creative dimensions of the world around us.

## Cathy Byrd

Fresh Art International Director/Producer

## reading list

1. Irmgard Emmelhainz, “Art and the Cultural Turn: Farewell to Committed, Autonomous Art?” *e-flux*, 2013.
2. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, “Fifth Incursion: Intersections of the Local and the Global.” *Art is Not What You Think It Is*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
3. Erika Suderburg, “Introduction: On Installation and Site Specificity,” *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
4. Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Contemporary Art: Tactical and Strategic Manifestations: A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change.” *Americans for the Arts*, 2011.
5. Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

# 01 // janet biggs

(American, b. 1959)

site sensitive: contemporary art with a sense of place // issue two // 2015

Any time I point my camera, it's political. It's a political act, just by the fact that I am focusing attention on a region or an action.

featured image: Janet Biggs, *A Step On the Sun*, 2012, film still

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

**Janet Biggs** is an American artist who pursues extreme landscapes and places in her practice of video, photography, and performance art. Based in Brooklyn, NY, Biggs's work has taken her to the literal and proverbial ends of the earth. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Biggs primarily filmed athletes, specifically, equestrians and synchronized swimmers, but more recent works have taken a consciously global approach, bringing Biggs to fringe environments such as China's **Taklamakan desert** (2013), the **Arctic tundra** (2013), and a **sulphur mine in Indonesia** (2012). Even in these places that seem to repel habitation, Biggs finds beauty and evidence of the indefatigable human spirit. Eschewing overt documentary in favor of an approach that is more poetic than explicitly political, Biggs's art nonetheless exposes entrenched inequalities and raises awareness of cultural, environmental, and even medical issues. Biggs also interrogates the traditional notion of artistic collaboration by working with scientists from a variety of disciplines, drawing on their methods and technologies to push her own work in new directions. Continuing a longstanding fascination with issues of identity, Biggs's most recent exhibition, **Echo of the Unknown** (2015), at the **Blaffer Art Museum** in Houston, TX, explores how sense of self is impacted by memory loss. Combining her own family history of **Alzheimer's**, neurological research by scientists at the University of Houston, and striking footage of Germany's **Merkers Salt Mine**, Biggs delicately poses questions of how selfhood endures, balancing beauty and chaos, optimism and hopelessness.

## reading list

Lilly Wei, "Janet Biggs." *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture*. February 13, 2015.

Prudence Peiffer, "Janet Biggs." *Art Forum*. February 9, 2015.

\**No Limits: Janet Biggs*. Survey exhibition catalog. Essays by Berta Sichel, Todd D. Smith, Andrea Inselmann, Nancy Princenthal. Tampa Museum of Art, October 2012.

Mark Jenkins, "Janet Biggs creates an active art experience with 'Kawah Ijen.'" *The Washington Post*. April 26, 2012.

Pollack, Barbara. "Janet Biggs: Winkleman." *Art in America: Exhibition Reviews*. May 2011.

## fresh talk: janet biggs ◀▶

march 27, 2014



Janet Biggs, *Somewhere Beyond Nowhere*, 2013, still

**Cathy Byrd:** I've been following Janet Biggs' work from girls to horses, to sports and drugs, and to these extreme territories of the Arctic and volcanoes. We saw each other when you had a mid-career survey, and the full range of your work there was stunning.

**Janet Biggs:** It was an interesting experience for me to see that scope of work, production from fifteen years all together in one space. It really did span all those periods you were talking about: my early interest in identity, which used a lot of girls and horse imagery, through an exploration of identity, again using world-class athletes, and then trying to understand a sense of self in terms of medication. There is an undercurrent which runs through all this work.

And then, at some point, the athletes and that focus turned into an obsession with place. It wasn't enough that it was just person. It became place as well, and I thought that they are so intrinsically tied that a sense of self had everything to do with a sense of place.

I recently was on a residency with artists who were displaced because of Hurricane Sandy, and I was talking to another artist there and it was so profound for me, that they had completely lost any idea of studio or how to go forward because their place was gone.

To get back to my connection with place, for me place has to be extreme. It has to be ends of the earth. I am continuing that and I try and push myself in new ways in the production of the work, which is kind of my back story. But in terms of the work itself, the landscape and the place has become an equal character to people who exist within that landscape that I'm focusing on.

**CB:** So what took you to Indonesia? Why did you want to go there? What was waiting there for you?

**JB:** I got my first issue of *National Geographic* when I was five, and I've been committed to that magazine forever, with its problems, with its pluses. I saw an image in *National Geographic*, probably, ten years ago now, you know it was a long time ago. It was this incredibly gorgeous image inside

an active volcano in Indonesia. And it stuck in my brain, which is kind of my barometer. If something stays there long enough, then I finally give into it and say, okay, I have to go and explore this and figure out why it's still there.

In the case of this volcano, the *Ijen volcano* in the East Java region of Indonesia, there are men in there, mining sulfur inside an active volcano. It's this weird combination of the most horrific thing I have ever seen, the most exploitive, horrific thing I've ever seen in my life, and yet this indescribable beauty of the region.

**CB:** In the volcano, you followed a laborer, and I'm wondering how you found poetry in labor within a toxic environment like that?



Janet Biggs, *A Step On the Sun*, 2012, film still

**JB:** It's so beautiful there. At the base of the caldera is a large sulfuric acid lake, which is this turquoise that is luscious, luscious blue. The sulfur dioxide fumes are billowing off this lake, and they're coming up through the fumaroles in the walls of the caldera. And laborers go in and they tap these clay pipes into the crevices, the fumaroles, and they catch the fumes. It condenses and it pours out as liquid sulfur. When it's pouring out, it's this blood red. And then it solidifies into what we all know as sulfur, which is this intense, intense yellow.

So you have these colors. You have this environment, and the fumes are unbelievably toxic. And it's not rotten egg smell—it is so acrid, when it hits you, all you can do even in a gas mask, is get as low as you can and groan until it stops. But even that, even those clouds billowing up becomes really beautiful in that environment.

The workers are independent employees. There is no overarching company. There is nothing. They weave their own baskets. They go into this volcano. There's nothing mechanized at all. They use steel rods and they break apart the sulfur. They fit it into the basket and they carry out more than they weigh.

For each trip, you climb up the outside of the volcano which is about two to three hours, and then into the caldera, which

is about another hour, load up your basket and do the exact same thing back down, carrying more than your body weight. And within that, there's also a kind of beauty, in that they've had to develop a very specific gait. The only way the workers can carry more than their body weight is to lower their center of balance. And then they move as smoothly as possible, because the strap of the basket across their shoulder not only cuts into flesh, but also reshapes the body in really severe ways. They look like beautiful dancers moving in this unbelievably gorgeous space. And then you remember what's actually happening there.

The biggest moment of poetry, of transcendence, was while I was there for two weeks sleeping on the rim of the volcano with a couple of the miners, in gas masks in a very small tent with too many of us in it. And even within these horrific conditions, Abi, who is the miner I ended up focusing on... while he was carrying more than his body weight, would stop and point out something that was so beautiful I needed to recognize it. He was able to see outside of his situation in ways that I couldn't even imagine.

What always happens is I go in first with a kind of documentary eye and record an action, record a place. Once I'm back in the studio, another part of the poetry for me is that I have no intention whatsoever of making documentary films. I am very much an artist, first and foremost. So I have to then figure out how to frame it, how to clarify it, in ways that expand it for me and hopefully expand it for my viewer. I give them a new kind of access and hopefully allow them to make their own decisions.

**CB:** To create one of your poetic visual metaphors, you filmed an atmospheric test, achieved by launching weather balloons.



Janet Biggs, *A Step On the Sun*, 2012, film still

**JB:** In this case, I juxtaposed the footage that I had shot of Abi within the Ijen volcano with footage of NOAA, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's](#) balloon launch. And it's something that's synchronized around the world, so I really liked that kind of global perspective. There are balloon launches that go from both poles at the exact same time. All over the earth, they are doing these balloon launches that give them a global weather analysis—a way to analyze the weather in a global perspective.

I used a balloon launch not only as a kind of metaphor for transcendence, because you see this balloon lyrically moving off into space, but also because I think it holds a promise, or a promise that we understand in the West, of alleviating hardship through science; that science is going to improve our lives. But I think there are so many parts of the world where that doesn't even touch.

There is no promise with science. There is what I consider no hope, and yet the human spirit is unbelievable in those situations and still has hope and still finds some kind of transcendence. It is a sad piece, ultimately, the final piece that I completed, because anytime there's a balloon launch, it goes high enough into the atmosphere and then it expands, expands, expands as it is ascending and it has to burst at some point. So it does burst and it comes back down. There is hope, there's promise, and often it is failed.

**CB:** How, in researching and developing your projects, do you look for opportunities to work with scientists and students?

**JB:** I worked with students at [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) to do this balloon launch. I filmed at NOAA, but then I also went up to MIT and worked with some students who were doing balloon launches. I attached a camera onto the balloon as it went up, so I had both the from-ground perspective of the ascent and the onboard perspective of once it got up into the atmosphere, and burst and then plummets back down.

**CB:** I see your work with the weather balloons and the Arctic and the volcano as being very tied to or concerned with the environment. Is that a continuing desire for you to explore and use as a metaphor?

**JB:** I really think of it in terms of the elemental. And so I am constantly looking for places that somehow fit whatever my definition of the elemental is, and often those kinds of places are the places that are at most risk on our planet.

You know, I think that any time I point my camera, it's political. It's a political act, just by the fact that I am focusing attention on a region or an action. There's certainly an activist side to my personality, but I keep that separate from my art production.

I think that when work is too pedantic and overtly political in terms of an environmental statement, at least for me, often it shuts it down. It's so specific that it doesn't allow you to enter in and bring new meaning or find new meaning within the piece. It's important to me that that does happen. For me that becomes successful. It defines a successful piece.

**CB:** You deeply value the world you're able to enter as an artist.

**JB:** I think I have a huge degree of privilege because I'm an artist and a tourist coexisting. And I get to go to amazing parts of the world to produce work and see regions that probably won't be there forever, if not be there in the near future. And I recognize that, and I think there is a power through that. Just presenting images, that in itself can help



cause change. But the political voice is not my strong voice. The poetic voice is what I really try to seek.

**CB:** Right. I'm thinking about the fact that that documentary element is there, the poetry is there. But one way you keep it separate is relying on the visual language and the audio. You are not interviewing these people: "how do you feel about where you are?" or "what is your life like?" You're just showing it. That seems to be really important to you.

**JB:** Yes. I think I do not define myself as a documentary filmmaker in any way, even though I ride that line very closely sometimes. But it's important I tip off it. If I don't slide sideways off that line, then it doesn't work for me as a piece.

The work is getting more narrative in structure. Sometimes I will blow that apart into a multichannel installation which makes it even less specific in terms of narrative and more experiential. But even when it's a single-channel piece with just one screen, which is a traditional movie setup, I don't want (or I haven't wanted to date, because I have something coming up that I may change on this) the voiceover. I don't want the interviews.

I love interweaving music and not only just the music itself, but often musical performances. In a way, the artists that produce the music for me give voice to what you're seeing; they witness it in a really elemental kind of way that becomes essential, or is evocative in terms of emotion but not specific in terms of limitations.



Janet Biggs, *Point of No Return*, 2013, film still

**CB:** I was just thinking about where you went after the volcano. You went someplace that people dream about going. It's very romantic and exotic; the *Silk Road* in China. What led you there and what was the work you made?

**JB:** The Silk Road, it actually started from a very good friend of mine, *Barbara Pollack*, who is an art writer. She has written amazing pieces for the *New York Times* and a book about contemporary art in China. She has always had this dream of putting together a group of friends and traveling the Silk Road.

It was one of the things I always said, yes, yes, I'd love to do that. That would be great. Then it got closer and closer to reality, and suddenly the Silk Road and that whole trip

stopped being this romantic notion and it changed, because if I really was going to commit both the time and the resources (write grants, etc.) to be able to do that, I needed to find a way to work within the region.

What I found was that Barbara's trip and going from place to place—that is, everything about the Silk Road and all the romantic notions of travel from oasis to oasis—would not function for me. It's not how I work. What I did what find a home base, which was *Kashgar*, and later *Hotan*. These are cities in the far west of China on the Pakistan border. We were right in the Pamir Mountains. We actually went up into the Pamirs and got about an hour from the Pakistan border. But there was enough military action that we thought maybe we should not go further.

**CB:** Why did Janet choose to focus on her lens on the *Uighur* people living at the far western edge of China?

**JB:** The reason I decided to use this area as a home base, and what became so compelling for me, was once I started researching I realized that all Uighur kids have to go to boarding schools where they are only taught Mandarin. So when they go home on the weekends, they lose the language and can't speak to their parents anymore. It kind of goes on and on.

The *Han Chinese* came in and tore down all the traditional homes, saying they weren't earthquake safe, even though they'd been in existence for two thousand years. There are all these moments that are happening in that place. And when I talked to my Uighur guides both of them said we won't be here by the next generation. We as a people won't be here.

As the violence is escalating, and if anyone is watching the news knows, it just severely escalated with knife stabbings in the East. And, unlike the Tibetans, the Uighurs are not pacifists. Everything is getting so much more heightened.

One fascinating thing was talking to people with families that care about the same things all of us care about: happiness, family, providing for your loved ones. And these people are saying that now without any hope, they are becoming radicals. Their hope is to get over the border into Pakistan and become jihadists. So it was very powerful to be able to see that, and have a different and more nuanced understanding about how opinions and world viewpoints are come into being, and how at times random and at times very specific influences and situations change people in such profound ways.

**CB:** And I'm wondering what drove you to the desert?

**JB:** So ultimately, it was risky to be there as a Westerner. And any Uighur person or guide that I was around for a long time, I also put them at risk. We were followed by security police everywhere. So, at one point, we decided that the easiest thing to do was to just go into the desert. We would be safest in the desert.

And the *Taklamakan Desert* is amazing, the second-largest desert in the world. It's an advancing desert rather than a

receding one. The first time it was crossed was in 1984, which lets you know it's not an easy desert.

We took a caravan with six camels, two camel men, a translator, myself, and a backup camera person. So there we are in 125 to 130 degree temperatures every day. That was only broken by the sandstorm, which brought the temperature down to 100, but had its own set of problems. But it gave me a moment to sort of put aside the political and again focus on this visual element and find an analogy through the visual.

I realized that when I got back to the studio again, it wasn't the specifics of the Uighur situation that I needed to focus on. I do have an obligation to get that out, because the Chinese press is not getting that out. There's so much censorship. But for me as an artist, in terms of the production, I needed to look broader and I needed to look at that overarching question of cultural loss.

Change and assimilation is inherent and it happens to all of us in different ways and at different times. And sometimes it can be subtle and you don't even realize change is happening, and sometimes it's incredibly violent. So the piece I made became just about that, rather than about the specific situation.

**CB:** Far from what anybody would expect from that trip.

**JB:** In some ways far from what I initially expected from that trip, and I think that part of being able to make a successful piece is to not be so attached to my original concepts and to be able to embrace failure. There were times when I was pulling my camera out of the bag and the sand was getting so trapped in it that it shut down and I lost camera after camera. And I was thinking, am I going to get anything out of here? I think in some ways that experience, and certainly the footage that I got from those moments before the cameras died was essential to the final piece. So looking at failure as opportunity versus endpoint has become important for me.

**CB:** You just got back from **Cartagena**, and that is a very exotic idea for me as well. I've never been to Colombia. From the photographs we were able to share on Fresh VUE that were sent by **Terry Berkowitz**, one of the participating artists, it looked like an amazing experience.

**JB:** It was my first trip to South America. This is actually the very first biennial to happen in Colombia.

Cartagena is the most magical place I've been. It's everything you think it's going to be. It's this beautiful walled colonial town. It's on the Caribbean, so the temperatures were just incredible and it was beautiful with the breezes coming through.

The curator, **Berta Sichel**, who came from the **Reina Sofia Museum**, did a phenomenal job curating. She realized that the town itself was a monument. She became very aware of past and present and what that means in terms of the past that then creates the monument that you recognize in the present. Can you truly take moments in the past and

make them present? So her curatorial voice interwove with the city in a way that I have never seen in a biennial before, honestly. There was generosity in that voice that was incredible.

It's this kind of labyrinth situation wandering through the streets of Cartagena, where the street names actually only exist for a block. Every block the street name changes. So everyone's always lost. The sense of discovery, both in terms of her curatorial voice and the physical sense of discovery through the place, just walked hand in hand everywhere you went.



Janet Biggs, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, film still

**CB:** This year, in the first ever Cartagena biennial, one of your video installations is on view inside the town's historic naval museum.

**JB:** I did an installation of the piece that I shot in Indonesia, which is titled *A Step On the Sun*. Depending on the space, I varied the number of channels. In Cartagena, it was a four-channel installation, so it was a kind of three-quarter piece where the viewer was immersed peripherally as well as frontally within the volcano. I love the connection with the naval museum because I can't help but think of an old family singing about joining the Navy to see the world.

One thing that Berta did, which was also incredibly lovely, was include so many sound pieces. You would walk out of my piece into a garden situation in the middle of the **Museo Naval** and experience **Kristin Oppenheim's** piece, where there is just voices singing "sail on, sail on, the sailor," from the **Beach Boys**, but in a kind of round. And it's so beautifully lyrical, it really puts you in a frame of mind. It changes your physical presence within the space.

**CB:** I like that word you were using, "witness," because that seems to me what you feel through your work—witnessing something that you might not have ever had the thought of witnessing. National Geographic shows you a view, but you take us inside that view and make it dimensional and make it real. It feels like you understand the metaphoric presence of that reality, which I think is really poetic. That is what I love about your work. But tell me what you're working on next.

**JB:** I'm in the middle of a new project, which is always an exciting place to be. It's a project that will open at the **Blaffer**

**Museum** in Houston in January 2015. They're producing the new project for me, which is also a wonderful situation to be in because I can really flex my art muscles.

In the past interview we talked about a personal biography and my relationship with relatives who have suffered from **Alzheimer's** or **autism**. In this case, I revisit both memories, adding new knowledge about Alzheimer's sufferers.

The piece is developing in threads. I'm in that stage where I'm not limiting myself in any way. I'm just following any thread and seeing where it takes me. I think what makes a good artist is once you follow them, if you can edit it down, that is that moment it becomes essential. But right now, I'm looking in all directions.

I've been at New York University in the brain research department, looking at imaging and trying to understand what the proteins are that form on the brain. There's this kind of connection to science that I love when my work overlaps—I get to personally learn new things and make leaps through the work.

**CB:** Working with scientists is important to your projects, but extreme environments are indispensable.



Janet Biggs, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, film still

**JB:** First and foremost, this piece is rooted in Chihuahua, Mexico about a mile under the earth in the **Crystal Cavern in Naica**. There is a silver mine above it, and the miners drilled so deep because they were depleting the silver thread that they broke into a chamber and realized it was full of water. It was extremely hot. But they realized there was something extraordinary in there and they couldn't figure out exactly what it was.

The mining company took the time to pump out the water. What they found was a cavern about the size of a football field filled with **selenite crystals**. They are the size of Greek columns. So it's like physically walking into a geode. It's just beautiful. Ridiculously beautiful and also ridiculously dangerous, because the cavern is sitting on a pool of magma, which is why the crystals formed on that scale. It ranges from 160 to 180 degrees. It's 99% humidity.

A global consortium of scientists wrote a contract with the

mining company to get in there to do research. I love that one of the things they thought was that it would be a great place to do Mars program research, because some of the conditions were similar to Mars.

**CB:** That's someplace you haven't thought about going yet.

**JB:** Not yet! For me, the reason I want to go there is of course the visuals are compelling, and I'm seduced constantly and I want to seduce my viewer. But when you go into this cavern, they custom-make a suit for you that has pockets all over it that are then filled with ice, so you're wearing an ice suit. And then you have a sealant suit that you seal on top of that. You have to breathe through an ice respirator and you're still only allowed to be in there for fifteen minutes tops. You are monitored by a medical team. Even with all that, as soon as you enter the cavern, within minutes you start losing your cognitive skills. So, essentially, it creates the exact same symptoms as someone who is suffering from Alzheimer's.

My grandfather was a collector. And two of his collections, stamps and minerals, are strong memories for me as a child, watching his pleasure. And as he hit those moments where the grandfather, the person I knew, was gone and he couldn't recognize any family members, he still had this connection to his mineral collection and could spout out their scientific names. He could tell you when and where he got his stamps.

So that was his last connection. To go into a place that has those kind of memories for me, but then removes those memories in the physical present—that's the place I want to start and then I will let the threads kind of go off from there.

**CB:** I cannot help but remember how you had to have a special suit in the Arctic so you wouldn't freeze the minute you went outside. And now, you're wearing an ice suit. It's still there, that desire for the extreme experience.

**JB:** I do like extremes. I like ends of the earth. I'm really excited to go there.

# 02 // tania bruguera

(Cuban, b. 1968)



It would be nice to have a place where people can exchange ideas about the future of Cuba, the prospect for social change and to give art a role in that discussion.

## biography

Tania Bruguera's installation and performance art engages local communities with the goal of effecting tangible social and political change. She has termed her artistic method "Art Útil," or "activism," an attempt to "transform some aspects of society through the implementation of art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and proposing with their activity some solutions for deficits in reality." Educated at the [Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana](#) and the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#), Bruguera tackles issues such as immigration, the legacy of Spanish colonialism in Cuba, and freedom of speech. Her political statements have not often been well-received by Cuban officials, who detained her repeatedly in early 2015 after an attempted performance of [#YoTambienExijo](#) (I Also Demand) in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution. This piece, originally called *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, gives audience participants one minute at a microphone to express their beliefs and views on the future. The participatory work attracted controversy following its first performance in 2009. Bruguera describes her latest performance attempt as "political timing specific." She initiated this revival of *Tatlin's Whisper* in response to the thawing relations between the United States and Cuba, a move initiated by the presidents of the two countries. Bruguera is currently in New York, where she will be the first artist to hold a [special one-year residency](#) that aims to raise awareness among undocumented workers about the city's municipal ID program.

## reading list

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Luis Camnitzer, "Luis Camnitzer on Tania Bruguera and the Havana Biennial." *e-flux Conversations*. May 26, 2015.

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## fresh talk: tania bruguera

june 19, 2015



Tania Bruguera reading Hannah Arendt

**CATHY BYRD:** This is Fresh Talk with Cuban artist, **Tania Bruguera**. The celebration you just heard took place on **May Day 2009**, when a sea of people gathered around **President Fidel Castro** in **Havana's Plaza of the Revolution**. On **December 30, 2014**, Bruguera attempted an unauthorized public performance there. She was arrested and jailed for three days. She remains in Havana under city arrest. The incident took place just two weeks after US President, **Barack Obama** and Cuban President **Raul Castro** announced a rapprochement between the two countries.

I have been following Bruguera's controversial activities on social media and through international press coverage. What she attempted was meant to be an open mic event – a reenactment of *Tatlin's Whisper #6*, her free speech platform from the 2009 Havana Biennial.

Requesting to set up a microphone and loudspeakers in the Plaza surrounded by key government buildings would be like asking to stage a public protest in front of the White House. Bruguera went ahead without permission. She invited Cubans to step up and express their views about their country's future. That's when police intervened.

During her detention, Cuban officials took her passport. They offered to give it back, but only if she agreed to leave and not return to her home country. She stayed...

It appears that tolerance of art activism in Cuba may be a long time coming. In fact, on the day we met, Bruguera said even after she kept silent for weeks following her first detention, the government openly denounced her.

**TANIA BRUGUERA:** For two weeks, I decided to be very calm, not writing anything on Facebook...nothing. I was being calm and quiet, not seeing anybody, in my house for two weeks without meeting, calling, nothing. They made an inflammatory video about me, and they sent it to all professors in the art school at **ISA** [Instituto Superior de Arte] explaining who I am and my counter-revolutionary means to take over the government. Which is why I am here alone this time.

**CB:** The day after my arrival in Cuba for the opening of the **12th Havana Biennial**, I learned that the artist was staging a four-day performance in her home on **Tejadillo Street** in old Havana, despite her treatment by authorities. Her neighborhood is a few blocks from the **National Museum of Fine Arts**. As I was walking there, I heard through an open door the voice of Cuban curator **Gerardo Mosquera** reading from the political theorist **Hannah Arendt's** book *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Bruguera says the performance is the beginning of her new art activism project, or "activism," as it is otherwise known.



Tania Bruguera, *Asking for My Rights Exercise*, 2015, performance

**TB:** This is the opening session for a new project I am going to start, which is **Hannah Arendt's International Institute of Artivism** in Cuba. Hopefully the police come and learn what artivism is.

**CB:** The artist launched her 100-hour ode to Hannah Arendt two days before the opening of the 2015 Biennial. Inviting volunteers to read from the book, she timed the performance to coincide with the 113th anniversary of Cuban Independence Day, **May 20th**.

Authorities responded furtively to the opening of the Institute. Less than 48 hours after I first passed by the in-home performance sessions, I returned to find a devastated streetscape. A trench had been dug down the center of the block. Rubble and construction materials made it difficult to reach the doorway. It seems that public works employees had been instructed to make noise, to repair sections of the street on which electrical wiring repairs had already been completed. Still, Bruguera thought she was free to move about the city. On the day we recorded this conversation, she considered attending an exhibition opening at the **National Museum**.

Unfortunately, security guards stopped Bruguera from entering the museum and since then authorities have arrested and detained her twice. It turns out that the video denouncing Bruguera was widely distributed. Her case made the local news. Though she had invited her network to participate via email and Facebook, the Cuban cultural community was largely absent—partly, I imagined, due to

limited cell phone service and rare access to the internet on the island. Most who ventured to the space were members of the global art community in town for the Biennial opening. We had heard about the project by word of mouth.

So, the performance started yesterday?



Tejadillo Street, first day of performance

**TB:** We started yesterday at 10, and we have been ongoing uninterrupted reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Something that I really like is the fact that it is for the street. It's indoors, but the project is on the street and it still just is nice to have music as the background, you know...

**CB:** I agree.

**TB:** ...and people listening to a little bit of this, little bit of that.

**CB:** Where would you position yourself with this new institute?

**TB:** For me, this is my answer to everything that happens. [Arendt's book] is something people should read and think a lot about. We can learn a lot. It's very interesting how she always understood that totalitarianism is not about left or right. It's about the desire to be in power and to not let it go. It is a beautiful book.

**CB:** What do you hope to achieve with this project?

**TB:** I have understood that *artivism* is something needed in Cuba. It would be nice to have a place where people can

exchange ideas about the future of Cuba, the prospect for social change and to give art a role in that discussion. So we'll see.



Digging up Tejadillo Street, third day of performance

**CB:** And you can't leave Havana?

**TB:** No, no. Not Havana, not Cuba. That's fine. I don't care. At this point, I am beyond so many things. That is it. I trust my work. I know this is a great piece. I know the idea of the Institute is good, and I just need to believe it. I think right now it's good to have *artivism* in Cuba...art in this moment is good for Cuba.

# 03 // louis grachos

(American, b. 1957)



site sensitive: contemporary art with a sense of place // issue two // 2015

I've been dreaming about creating a multi-site, citywide experience that engages public spaces, public parks, all the things that are in the design phase— The Trail, the Waller Creek Project, Laguna Gloria, the University, the East Side Studio scene—to create an exhibition of international stature that builds off our city's very festival-friendly position in the world.



## biography

Louis Grachos is currently Executive Director of **The Contemporary Austin** (formerly Austin Museum of Art-Arthouse, or AMOA-Arthouse) in Austin, TX. He has led some of the most dynamic and forward-thinking arts programs in the country, including the **Queens Museum of Art**, New York; the Center for the Fine Arts, Miami (now the **Pérez Art Museum Miami**), the **Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego**; and **SITE Santa Fe**, New Mexico. From 2002 to 2012, Grachos served as Director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, where he pioneered several major initiatives to broaden the museum's audience and blur the lines between museum and public. His commitment to community engagement is fueling plans for the future of The Contemporary Austin. Taking the curatorial program beyond its two primary venues, **Laguna Gloria**, which features an Italianate villa set on the water, and the thoroughly modern **Jones Center** downtown, Grachos imagines "a museum without walls" that transforms other Austin sites into spaces for creating, displaying, and rethinking art.

## reading list

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# fresh talk: louis grachos

may 20, 2013



Louis Grachos, Executive Director, The Contemporary Austin

**CATHY BYRD:** My guest today is **Louis Grachos**, new director of **Austin Museum of Art-Arthouse** (today known as Austin Contemporary). Louis's art career has taken him across the country to New York, San Diego, Toronto, Miami, and Santa Fe. Louis directed the **Albright-Knox Gallery** in Buffalo, New York for a decade before he moved to Austin.

Louis is no stranger to the American Southwest. He was director/curator of **SITE Santa Fe** for seven years. But still, how did he end up in Austin?

**LOUIS GRACHOS:** During my years at **SITE Santa Fe**, I learned a number of things about New Mexico and the great culture of the Santa Fe region. But I also felt the wonderful enthusiasm and support of many great Texans. So when this opportunity came up, I was delighted.

I was also really fascinated by the challenge of coming here to work on what was essentially a new museum program brought about by the merger between Austin Museum of Art and Arthouse. I love building, I love being part of organizations and projects that are new, and it is an exciting challenge for me.



The Jones Center, Austin, TX

**CB:** The Austin Museum of Art-Arthouse is also known as AMOA-Arthouse. It's a hybrid institution with a hyphenated name and two venues. One is a villa situated at the edge of Town Lake, and the other is a modern building in downtown Austin. Is there any advantage to this disconnect?

**LG:** I think the uniqueness of both sites really inspires artists to create work. The Jones Center is a historic building that has been retrofit many times over its history. It has been both a theater and a retail store. It was recently redesigned by **Paul Lewis**, a terrific architect based in New York. It has a texture and a feel to it that lends itself to experiential art, art that is about installation or different media. It's a flexible building on that front. But the fact that it's in the heart of our city is really impressive.

**Laguna Gloria** is one of the great sites to visit in the Austin area. It's really very impressive to be around water. To have such a beautiful experience with nature and with art is a great opportunity for us.



Laguna Gloria, Austin, TX

**CB:** What's the trick to directing such a complex institution?

**LG:** My challenge is to think about an organization that is one institution with multiple sites. If we think about this as an opportunity to function as a museum without walls, then we can really encourage collaborations and do projects even beyond those two sites.

**CB:** The challenge seems to be much greater than the five-mile distance that separates the two venues.

**LG:** As I continued researching, it became very clear to me that historically in Austin there was not a museum with a definitive contemporary art program. The opportunity for us is to fill that gap and really create a program that you might liken to the **Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago**, the **Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia** or in Boston, or the **Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto**. By that I mean it needs to be a program that brings education into

the community in a very strong and deep way, that creates opportunities for artists and bringing artists of international stature to our community. I think that really feeds your community. It excites young artists.



Brian Fitzsimmons, *Music for Wilderness Lake*, 2014, performance, Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park at Laguna Gloria, Austin, Texas

**CB:** The world knows Austin for [South By Southwest](#) and for music and technology. What can bring national attention to Austin's contemporary art scene?

**LG:** I've thought long and hard about that, and I've been talking to as many of my colleagues as I can about what we can do to really step forward in raising the awareness of this community as one that is filled with creative individuals, creative artists, creative musicians, performance artists, etc.

Even before I arrived in Austin, because I had a feeling that this project would work here, I've been dreaming about creating a multisite, citywide experience that engages public spaces, public parks, all the things that are in the design phase— [The Trail](#), the [Waller Creek Project](#), Laguna Gloria, the University, the [East Side Studio](#) scene—to create an exhibition of international stature that builds off our city's very festival-friendly position in the world.



Monika Sosnowska, *The Stairs*, 2014, installation, Laguna Gloria, Austin, Texas

**CB:** Germany has a great model for the citywide engagement that you would love to see in Austin: the [Münster Sculpture Project](#).



Bruce Nauman, *Square Depression*, 2009, installation, Münster Sculpture Project, Münster, Germany

**LG:** We need to think about the visual arts in a bigger way, in a way that's more integrated into our city. The model I keep going to happens in Germany approximately every seven years in the city of Münster. The sculpture project there is remarkable in that it invites international curators to help select a show that sometimes has a strong theme and sometimes not such a definitive theme.

The idea is to bring 35 or 40 artists to the community to build new projects in the city itself. It has now been done four times successfully. The city retains the projects that they thought were very successful, about 35 of them to date, and I think they will continue to grow the collection.

Like Austin, Münster exploits the summer and fall period and encourages people to take a map and a bicycle that are provided with your tour ticket, and literally go to each and every site throughout the city. That's the kind of program I can envision for us, because it would really take advantage of all those great opportunities out there.

**CB:** Is this a turning point for how the world engages with art in public space?

**LG:** Public art has gone through a cycle now where people are much more interested in engaging with art in public spaces. That's a turning point, because it seems like there was a period where those projects were either difficult to execute or not as compelling.

If you look at some of the lead programs across the country today, for example the [Public Art Fund in New York](#) or the [Madison Square Park Conservancy](#) program, art has really galvanized a neighborhood or an area, though in some cases it's a moving target. The Public Art Fund does projects throughout the area. But you can see the impact, the positive impact that art can have on community, how it can attract cultural tourism. I think Austin is ready for it.

# 04 // sarah hobbs

(American, b. 1970)



We all have one issue or another. Not on a clinical level, but just an everyday level, something that makes living your life that day just a little bit more difficult, or makes it more difficult for people to live with you.

featured image: Sarah Hobbs, *Untitled (perfectionist)*, 2002, chromogenic print

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

Human foibles, phobias, and bêtes noires haunt the work of Atlanta-based American artist [Sarah Hobbs](#). Working in photography and site-specific installation art, Hobbs creates carefully staged environments to evoke an array of compulsions and neuroses. Although her home and studio in Atlanta are frequently the backdrop, Hobbs also seeks out other house interiors or real urban spaces. For instance, in her site-specific sculptural installation *Overpacked* (2012), Hobbs reimagined three hotel rooms at the W Atlanta-Midtown as liminal spaces in which mental baggage, specifically homesickness, alarmism, and germaphobia, might develop a physical presence. Similarly, in *Repository* (2014), Hobbs plumbed the relationship of memory and material possessions, putting personal effects and intimate confessions on display at a bland, corporate Atlanta self-storage facility. In all her works, an occupant is implied, but never directly visualized. This implicates the viewer as both a stand-in for the imagined occupant and a voyeur. By refusing to represent the individual behind the behaviors she illustrates, Hobbs speaks to the universal human condition, bringing a sense of comfort and humor to dark and unsettling themes. Her large format photographs enhance the psychological vulnerability expressed in each scenario by expanding the visual entry point. With a perspective at once pessimistic and therapeutic, Hobbs reifies and normalizes our psychological flaws.

## reading list

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## fresh talk: sarah hobbs 🗣️

december 10, 2012



Sarah Hobbs

**CATHY BYRD:** Tonight, I'm speaking with artist Sarah Hobbs. Her staged photographs of domestic spaces represent a range of psychological states. There is an immersive theater quality in the installations she creates. Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions across the U.S., and last year, Charta Books Milan published her first monograph, *Small Problems in Living*.

The typical experience of Sarah's concepts is through her photographs. But at the moment, she's preparing for *Overpacked*, a sculptural installation project that she will be presenting in three rooms at the W Hotel Midtown in Atlanta for four days this December.

Sarah, when did you first become interested in staging your photographs?

**SARAH HOBBS:** When I was in graduate school, I was very interested in interior spaces and the idea that interior spaces can carry psychological weight. So I photographed interiors as I would find them, but that ran out of steam pretty quickly. Then I thought, what if I added things and created a space?

I was moving from one rental house to another and always had to paint the rooms back to white, so I started drawing on the walls. And I thought, what if I use the space itself to create an idea? That's how it started. I began dealing with concepts and figuring out what materials might illustrate those concepts and how I might arrange them to create a feeling of a psychological space.

**CB:** I think you create that space for the viewer by the scale in which you print your photographs, because the experience of your photographs in a gallery is immersive.

**SH:** It is. They are 4 x 5 feet and I am very much interested in the viewer being implicated as the person in the image. A lot of the images have a chair or something that implies a person. The viewer is asked to put themselves in the space.

**CB:** I love the photograph called *Untitled (Sensitivity)*, where the floor is covered with eggs.



Sarah Hobbs, *Untitled (Sensitivity)*, 2004, chromogenic print

**SH:** I went early one morning down to the Georgia Farmer's Market and picked up 300 dozen eggs. I rarely work with an assistant, but on this occasion I needed to have someone help me, because it took quite a while. As you can imagine, you have to be very careful with the eggs. I was hoping to not break many of them, so it was a very slow process. We worked with them very gingerly. It took probably three or four hours to get them all out onto the floor.

And then, I photographed it pretty quickly because I don't want to break down an installation until I know that I have a good piece of film—and I still am using film. I took the film to the lab as quickly as I could to get it processed, because I didn't want the eggs to go bad while I was waiting, and I couldn't shoot it the next day. It was pretty hairy, but I was very happy with the installation.

**CB:** In this photograph [with all the eggs], the viewer that's implied is a chair.

**SH:** There are two ways that the viewer could be implied. The chair is in the center of the eggs, so there is no way to get to the implied person without breaking some eggs, which represent emotions and feelings. The viewer could either be the person sitting in the chair or the person who would like to communicate with the person in the chair. No matter which one you decide you are, you feel isolated from the other person because there's this sea of breakable objects or breakable feelings that are between the two people.

**CB:** I'm curious why you're so fascinated by our mental health and our obsessive behaviors.

**SH:** I think it's a great leveler. We all have one issue or another. There's no one who doesn't have some issue. Not on a clinical level, but just an everyday level, something that makes living your life that day just a little bit more difficult,

or makes it more difficult for people to live with you. Or your outlook on the world is more difficult because it's seen through some neurosis or other. I think it's a fascinating aspect of human nature.

**CB:** What neuroses have you explored in your photographs?

**SH:** Sublimation is putting something in your life to replace something or to compensate for something that's missing in your life. So you put something else in your life, and that can become an obsession.



Sarah Hobbs, *Untitled (sublimation)*, 2006, chromogenic print

**CB:** You represented our sublimation with a bonsai?

**SH:** Yes. Bonsai trees are very finicky and they take a lot of care, almost on a constant basis. You have to get really close to them and look at them with great detail and use the tools in a certain way, and you have to water them a certain way and put them in a certain light — it's very time-consuming. I used about 30 of them to exacerbate the idea of using up a lot of one's time to compensate for something else that's missing.

**CB:** How did you select the themes for the three rooms you're staging at the hotel right now?

**SH:** Whenever we go on a trip, we don't leave our neuroses at home, so I was trying to think of ones that would be exacerbated by being away. Germaphobe worked, and alarmist seemed to work really well. And the other one is homesick, and well, that's perfect.

**CB:** You have been working on this concept for two years, and have left the domestic space for a hotel room. Even though you're saying that it's perfect for these three ideas, how did that change in setting affect your creative process?

**SH:** It is quite different, because now I'm working with 360 degrees. In the photographs I choose part of a room, a corner or a wall. I choose one object, maybe wadded up paper or wine corks, and then I use as many of them as I can cram into that space. One piece of material is repeated over and over. And that's the whole of the experience.

Here, the whole of the experience is walking into the room and seeing how this person deals—tries—to make it their own. I've had to use more than one type of material — for germaphobe I've got white gloves, I've got plastic covering things. I've got this mask that you put over your face. There are so many different types of objects that I have to think about it in a bigger picture sense in order to make all these different elements come together as one, the way that they did in the photographs.



Sarah Hobbs, *Untitled (insomnia)*, 2006, chromogenic print

**CB:** What will be the media for the room having to do with emergency preparedness?

**SH:** For that, I have a weather radio, and caution tape—one wall of the room is entirely a window, so I want to block that off as if the person wants to be sure to not go near the window. I have cardio-pulmonary resuscitator masks. I've got a travel carbon monoxide detector and a travel fire detector. I have the emergency sticks that light up after you break them open, I'm going to use those to make a path from the bed to the door. I have emergency blankets,



Sarah Hobbs, *Alarmist*, 2012, installation, W Hotel, Atlanta, GA

emergency ponchos, I have electrical tape and duct tape and emergency kits, survival kits. All of this, as much as I can find, is yellow.



Sarah Hobbs, *Germaphobe*, 2012, installation, W Hotel, Atlanta, GA

**CB:** So the germaphobe's palette is white. The person prepared for an emergency is yellow. What is the palette of the person who might be homesick?

**SH:** Homesick is blues and greens. The window I'm covering with a giant photograph of a backyard.

**CB:** You spoke to me earlier about genderizing the homesick room.

**SH:** I was thinking about the fact that the person who is homesick is going to want to bring personal items from home to make this hotel room feel more like home. And when you think about that, bringing personal items, it's hard to not have that genderized. If someone brings a scarf to put over a lamp, then that's likely going to be a woman. So I needed to make a decision about that one, and I decided that it would be a male because I wanted to be a little more unexpected. I'm trying to re-create their home in this space.



Sarah Hobbs, *Homesick*, 2012

**CB:** Have you figured out how you're going to do that?

**SH:** I will do installation shots, but I'm going to make photographs of them that will be large. I'm going to rearrange and compactify everything into a smaller area to create one photograph that conveys the idea of each room.

**CB:** Your work is influenced by Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. What poetics are you hoping to evoke with *Overpacked*, Sarah?

**SH:** It's not exactly a beautiful poem. It's not beautiful poetics. It's just the poetics of being away from home and what that means to us, given our particular difficulties with life.

**CB:** Which of these three rooms is the most autobiographical?

**SH:** I love to travel, so it can't be homesick. And I'm not really a germaphobe. So I would have to say it must be alarmist, because I do worry about things happening and I do try to prevent things from happening.

**CB:** So this room represents a philosophy of prepare for the worst, hope for the best?

**SH:** Yes, I think so; or maybe this person prepares so much for the worst that they forget to hope for the best.



# 05 // joan jonas

(American, b. 1936)



The work itself is all the same movements, the same videos, the same props, but because of the change of space, the performance itself has to become more intense in order to express the same message.

featured image: Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2014, performance with Jason Moran, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

## biography

A seminal figure in video and performance art, New York-based artist **Joan Jonas** produces multimedia works often motivated by myth, literature, or poetry. Her transmedia process translates the same idea or narrative across multiple platforms, often combining found or created images, text, sound, and installation alongside elements of video and performance. Originally trained as a sculptor, Jonas began to experiment with performance during the 1960s and 1970s, often collaborating with other contemporary artists. Jonas often performs a work multiple times in different venues, a process that requires reconfiguring the works to meet the demands of each site. Repeating gestures, visual elements, and musical motifs become nuanced site-sensitive rituals in Jonas's work. *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, a 2005 work originally commissioned by **Dia:Beacon** became a more intimate experience for the performers and the audience when recreated in 2012 at the **University of Texas in Austin**. Jazz pianist Jason Moran has partnered with Jonas on this and other performance-based works, including the *Bleed* project at the **Whitney Museum**, **documenta13**, and the **56th Venice Art Biennale**. For the biennial, Moran and Jonas worked together on *They Come to Us Without a Word*, an immersive multimedia exhibition inspired in part by Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness's novel *Under the Glacier* (1968). From ancient legend to modern literature, Jonas plumbs the spiritual and ineffable aspects of human experience.

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## fresh talk: joan jonas

june 5, 2012



Joan Jonas

**CATHY BYRD:** Today, I'm in Austin, Texas, with **Joan Jonas**, a phenomenal artist that I've know about for years and never had the chance to meet. She is a seminal video and performance artist who has worked in the transmedia process since the seventies. In her work, she combines video, movement, music, sculpture and spoken word to create non-linear narrative compositions. She has participated in **dOCUMENTA** at least four times. More recently she was in the **Venice Biennale** in 2009 with *Reading Dante*.

This month, the University of Texas invited her to present *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, a performance that was first commissioned by **Dia:Beacon** in 2004, which leads to a lot of questions for me. I read that the piece evokes a snake dance ritual. I know that ritual is very important in your work, but what about that particular dance resonated with you?



Joan Jonas, *Reading Dante*, 16th Sydney Biennial, 2008, performance

**JOAN JONAS:** It's a **Hopi snake dance** which I saw in the sixties in Arizona. It was an amazing experience but I never wanted to do anything with it. I didn't want to intrude upon the Native American culture because of the way we've treated them in this country. Also, it's sacred for them. I don't quote anything from that experience. There are no visual images that evoke the Hopi. For years, it was a memory, and it was inspiring because I've always been interested in ritual; the ritual of other cultures and the ritual in our own culture. The history of art in the Western world includes ritual; art begins with ritual.

I came across this book by **Aby Warburg**, a German art historian, who had visited the Southwest in the late part of the nineteenth century. He went to visit the Pueblo Indians and saw many ceremonies, and he wrote about the snake dance even though he didn't see that particular ceremony. I found this essay he had written about his experience when he was a patient at a sanitarium in Switzerland. He had written the piece in order to demonstrate that he had recovered from his nervous breakdown. I was very inspired and moved by this piece that he wrote, so I decided to revisit this experience through his writing.

**CB:** In your practice, you consistently connect the physical with the conceptual. From the beginning, you've taken full advantage of all the new media, props, or technology that was available. Yet, at the same time, you have maintained this really strong affinity for drawing. I think oftentimes that's left behind.

**JJ:** I was a sculptor before I stepped into performance in the late sixties. And the one discipline I took with me, besides continuing to think of it as sculpture—making three-dimensional moving events—was the practice of drawing. I'm very interested and I love to draw, and so I try to incorporate drawing in almost all my performances and video pieces. I also make drawings that are independent of my performances.

Each time I do a new work, I think of another way to include drawing or painting. In this piece, I make a painting of a snake, which has nothing to do with the snake dance, but it's my way of referencing that. The content of each work inspires different images that I can draw and integrate into the visual, all-over picture of the piece.

**CB:** It must affect the palette that you work with as well.



Joan Jonas, *Song delay*, 1973, film still

**JJ:** Colors creep in very minimally. But of course my video is color, not black and white. In the seventies, it was all black and white because that's what the technology was. So, the color in my work is really in the video. Any other color in the piece is very minimal.

For instance, my piece *The Juniper Tree*. I worked with fairytales at one point, and there are certain colors in fairytales—red and white, green and yellow. So, of course, I bring those colors.



Joan Jonas, *The Juniper Tree*, 2010, installation, Tate Modern, London, England

**CB:** I was looking at the installation today and realizing how much you stage your works and how working on a stage would be interesting for you. But, at the same time, for your early works you were on the street or in your studio.

**JJ:** Yes, I was all over. I'm interested in doing my work in different spaces. In the early days, I never worked in the theater, for instance. It was always in a gymnasium or outside or in a strange space, like a loft, because that was what was available and what was interesting at the time.

This piece was originally commissioned by Dia:Beacon as a site-specific piece for a beautiful, nineteenth-century factory space. It's this enormously huge basement space with these long corridors of columns. For me, it represented the sanitarium that Warburg was in.

I spend a lot of time on my work and the pieces have a real—well, they exist. So, I want to do them again. This is the fourth time we have done it again. But there just aren't many spaces like the original basement space. The only space that was comparable slightly was in Brazil in the *Oscar Niemeyer* building. But here, Stuttgart, we did it on a stage. It had to be reconfigured.

**CB:** Has the work evolved in a sense because of that?

**JJ:** Well, no. I think it didn't evolve. It changed a little bit. The work itself, it is all the same movements, the same videos, the same props. But because of the change of space, the performance itself has to, in a way, become more intense in order to express the same message.

The space itself at Dia:Beacon was a large part of the piece. It was beautiful. So I've noticed in this latest version, and also in Stuttgart two years ago, that our performances take on another intensity in these kinds of spaces.

**CB:** You work with a jazz innovator, *Jason Moran*. He is with you every time you perform this piece. I'm really interested in the improvisational aspect of how you work together as you are presenting it.

**JJ:** Jason is an improviser, and he worked with me in the beginning to work out this piece. It was built on improvisation, because that is the way one begins. You play with ideas and then you develop them. We worked together for six weeks, actually. I brought already edited backdrops and the script, but I didn't have the movements. So we worked on the movements. We went scene by scene.

Jason would play something and if I loved it, or if I liked it, or if I found it interesting at all, we'd work with that. If not, then we'd go on to something else. He's very inventive. So, Jason developed the musical score in that way. We also worked together—I work with sound. He's wonderful because he's very open about improvising in that sense.

It's always more or less the same, and his score always has the same motifs for each part. But he embellishes and brings in new sounds and experiments with the piano. Sometimes what he's doing sounds really electronic. Every time, especially in this version in Austin, he's bringing something new to it, but I'm always trying to do the same thing. We all move in relation to hearing his music. We're not dancing to his music, but we're moving in relation. It's inspiring for us.

**CB:** From here, do you have other presentations of this piece?

**JJ:** We're trying to work on going to Los Angeles.

**CB:** Are there other projects you are working on right now?

**JJ:** I'm working on a project for dOCUMENTA. It's an installation and there will be a performance in September, again with Jason. He didn't do the music for the installation, he doesn't play live. But we are doing one where he is playing live on September 13, 14, and 15. It's called *Reanimation*. It'll have a different name by the time we do it in dOCUMENTA, but it's a very different kind of piece.



Jason Moran and Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, dOCUMENTA, 2012

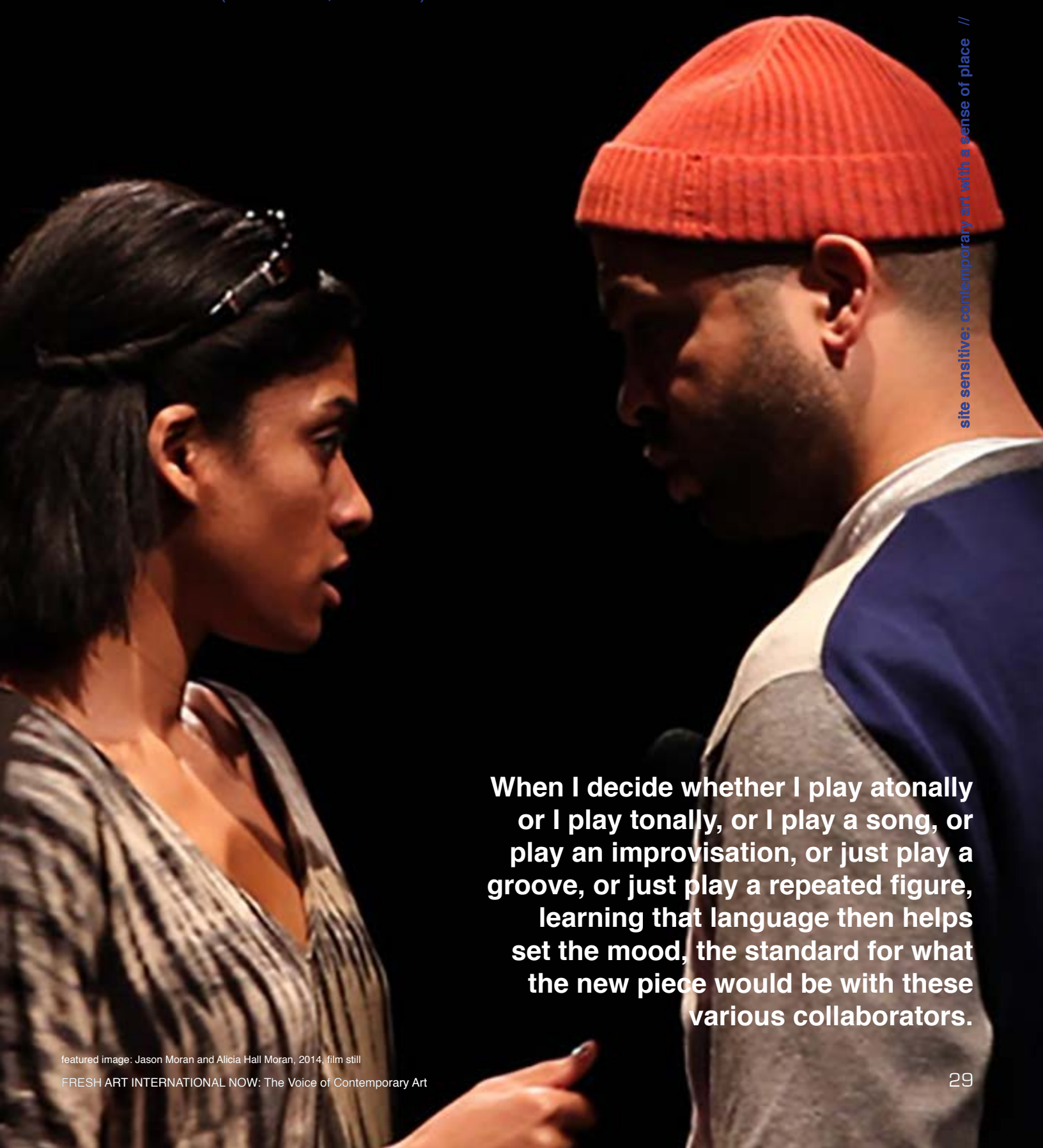
**CB:** Do you want to talk about the concept?

**JJ:** It's inspired by the Icelandic writer *Halldór Laxness*, in particular a book he wrote called *Under the Glacier*. It's about natural phenomena and nature. It's also basically a solo piece, so it's a much smaller scale. Jason and I did a performance of this at MIT last fall, and then dOCUMENTA heard about it and invited us up. I'm very glad to be working with him again.

# 06 // jason moran

(American, b. 1975)

site sensitive: contemporary art with a sense of place // issue two // 2015



**When I decide whether I play atonally or I play tonally, or I play a song, or play an improvisation, or just play a groove, or just play a repeated figure, learning that language then helps set the mood, the standard for what the new piece would be with these various collaborators.**

featured image: Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran, 2014, film still

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

Dubbed the “the most provocative thinker in current jazz” by Rolling Stone magazine, New York-based jazz pianist and master of improvisation **Jason Moran** currently serves as the **Artistic Director for Jazz** at **The Kennedy Center** in Washington D.C.. In addition to numerous albums and commissions, Moran and his trio, **The Bandwagon**, have scored independent films and documentaries, such as *RFK in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope* (2009). Winner of numerous awards, including a 2010 **MacArthur Fellowship**, Moran remains deeply involved in jazz education. Drawing inspiration from the visual and performing arts, Moran has collaborated with numerous artists, including **Glenn Ligon**, **Kara Walker**, **Joan Jonas**, and **Adrian Piper** to produce genre-defying works across a range of media. Moran and Jonas joined forces for *They Come to Us Without a Word*, the multimedia exhibition that represented the United States at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Uniquely engaging New York’s creative community, Moran and his wife **Alicia Hall Moran** curated *Bleed*, a performance event series, during their 2012 Biennial residency at the **Whitney Museum of American Art**. Throughout his composing, improvising, and performance, Moran’s work balances innovation with an acute awareness of historical precedent.

## reading list

- “World Premiere Performance by Joan Jonas in Venice with Jazz Pianist and Composer Jason Moran.” *NY Arts Magazine*. June 23, 2015.
- Joan Simon, “In the Studio: Joan Jonas and Jason Moran.” *Art in America*. May 1, 2015..
- Becca Pulliam, “Jason Moran On JazzSet.” *NPR Music*. April 17, 2014.
- Ben Ratliff, “Feet’s Too Big? No Problem; Everyone Dances Here.” *The New York Times*. May 16, 2011.
- Lloyd Peterson, “Jason Moran.” *Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2006: 199-209.

## fresh talk: jason moran 🗣️

june 11, 2012



Jason Moran

**CATHY BYRD:** This morning, I'm speaking with **Jason Moran**, an amazing pianist/composer based in New York. Jason has toured and recorded around the world for twelve years with his piano trio, **The Bandwagon**. He's a **MacArthur Fellow** and the artistic advisor for jazz at the **Kennedy Center**. I met him through artist **Joan Jonas** when they performed *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* at the **University of Texas Performing Arts Center** in Austin.

Jason, I'm really excited that I get a chance to speak with you. I am particularly fascinated with the aspect of improvisation in your work. I work with visual artists a lot, and when I'm thinking of them in particular, I know that their audience, their collectors, their gallerists, their curators, are expecting them to establish a certain style that is unique but recognizable and maybe somewhat predictable. They improvise at first, and then end up setting a pattern. When did improvising become your pattern?



Jason Moran and The Bandwagon

**JASON MORAN:** Within the jazz structure, the most important aspect is improvisation. I played **Suzuki** piano from age six to age thirteen, and it basically has no improvisation in it. At least, I didn't feel any. I fell in love when I heard **Thelonius Monk** playing piano and understood that jazz is full of improvisation, that blues is full of improvisation.

From that point on in my life, it was integral that I learned how to improvise, the language of improvisation, because within jazz there are many different languages to speak. Once you start studying the history of what has come before, just as a painter would study different painters from different centuries, then you understand the techniques. Right now improvisation is how I eat and live and breathe.



Jason Moran and Joan Jonas, *Reading Dante III*, 2008, performance, Yvonne Lambert, New York, NY

**CB:** When you're talking about your collaborations with Joan, for example, you describe the importance of the relationship between the sonic and visual landscape. I'm wondering how those relational themes evolved in projects with other artists who you have worked with.

**JM:** With Joan, it was important to break the ice and not come in with any set plan of what the music would sound like, to watch and then see how the sound would come together in the space as I looked at her work. Whether I'm looking at quilts from Alabama, or a painting by **John Biggers**, or a video by **Kara Walker**, there are different ways of addressing how to give shape to the sonic landscape.

One might be related to movement. Watching Joan is about movement and gesture. Kara Walker, her videos are more about this relationship to America's social history and the pains that man goes through to hurt other men and women. In each case, you try to understand what kind of sounds are appropriate or can help underscore these stories, whether they are abstract or very concrete and real.

When I play with those notions, I decide whether I play atonally or I play tonally, or I play a song, or play an improvisation, or just play a groove, or just play a repeated figure. Learning that language then helps set the mood, the standard for what the new piece would be with these various collaborators.

**CB:** You were saying that with **Glenn Ligon**, you actually played the same song in a lot of different ways.

**JM:** With Glenn, that was what he was asking, almost like if we were going to do **Goldberg Variations** on a **minstrel theme**, in this case "Nobody," a song that **Bert Williams**

sang in 1906. That became an interesting topic to address musically, how to play a sound that would continue to evolve and not become redundant nor repetitive.

**CB:** As I was watching you and Joan perform in Austin, I was struck with the spatial dynamic. You were on stage, seated with your back to the audience. But, at many times, it seemed to me, Joan and the other performers were out of your view or at the very edge of your peripheral vision. I wondered how you established this sonic rapport with the unseen in that situation.

**JM:** Well, sometimes, the unseen is the unseen, and you hope to have some kind of dialog whether you see them or not. A lot of what I'm focusing on in the piece is the video because the music is not the action, it's the landscape. In many ways, the video that Joan has, it also serves as the landscape, so I wanted to stay within those realms. I've never fully seen the piece. Even when I've watched the video of the piece, I've never really understood the whole aspect, because then I'm watching it on a screen. That makes a big difference.

It's like playing in a club with a band—it's impossible to hear everything that everyone is doing. You can focus on a few things and then play to those things. But, then, after that, you have to be able to make sound and hope that it will all come together in some grand unified vision for the audience to experience. Sometimes it comes together, sometimes it doesn't. But that's the risk we play with as performers.

**CB:** How did the setting affect that dynamic at *Dia:Beacon* versus the small stage in Austin?

**JM:** In *Dia*, what was beautiful was that we spent months in there. We spent two or three months working on the piece and developing it. That made a big difference for us.

What happened on the stage in Austin is we had a little bit of time. But, by that point we had a lot of history of performing that work. So, we understood how it works, what goes where and how, and then we could make adjustments. The beautiful thing is you make the adjustments and then those become the facts.

It's not about this myth of what *Dia* was; it was really only about how did Austin feel, how did it feel to perform this at the University of Texas. That's what we tried to focus on, rather than the differences between the two spaces, because every space is going to be different. Even more than that, every audience will be different. Some people really want to engage and some won't. This is how it is. To a degree, you have control, but to another degree, you have no control. Sometimes no control is good.

**CB:** That issue of the controlled space, it really played into your recent residency at the *Whitney Museum*, where you worked with your wife, mezzo-soprano *Alicia Hall Moran*. The project, which you called *Bleed*, had all these different live performances that were beyond jazz and opera completely. That must have been a very exciting process for you.

**JM:** It was very exciting to spend five days working in the *Whitney*, not only with my wife, with whom I've had a long

relationship, but also with a bunch of other friends. It really became like a community project. People like Kara Walker would come and join us. Joan Jonas joins us. A columnist from the *New York Times*, *Charles Blow*, joins us. My band joins us. We have Taiko drummers join us. That became a really ongoing exploration of what our community is and the various kinds of output that we make, whether we are writers, dancers, singers, or musicians, or artists.

Each artist decided to expand their boundaries in a way. Joan Jonas had never performed with my group, *The Bandwagon*, but there she was up on stage with us. Kara Walker had never done a musical performance before, and there she was up there singing and presenting a new work. That was how it unfolded. My wife was doing a piece with *taiko drummers* where she was singing a *Beyoncé* song.

Everything was new. Everything was fresh. And we were presenting it to an audience that was accustomed to viewing work, a museum audience, a biennial audience. Within the grand scope, it was a wonderful five days.



Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran, *Bleed*, 2012, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY

**CB:** I imagine that the experience gave you ideas for other collaborations.

**JM:** Yes, it has. Most importantly: how do I transform the small work that I do with my group visually or aesthetically? How can I expand my repertoire on the stage, not only through music but through movement, through lighting, through costumes? That kind of thing is very exciting. That's what I look forward to examining some more.

People have already begun to write my wife and me about whether or not we will present a similar project in other places. It's impossible to recreate what we did in New York, because New York is our home. So, there are other mutations that might happen in other places, but they won't be *Bleed*. They will be something different. My wife and I are continuing to sift through the options that come our way, and in due time something new will happen.



# 07 // tameka norris

(American. b. 1979)



site sensitive: contemporary art with a sense of place // issue two // 2015

Coming back home, I reverted back mentally to this other space based on being around my family or being in a certain neighborhood, and it's really challenging. I had to really think about how do I want to be treated when I walk into a room.

featured image: Tameka Norris, *Meka Jean*, 2015, photograph

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

Named one of “24 Artists to Watch in 2013” by *Modern Painters* magazine, New Orleans-based Tameka Norris has made the art world sit up and take notice, starring in her own music videos and most recently, a full-length film that premiered at *Prospect.3 New Orleans* (2014). A printmaking and painting graduate of the *Yale University School of Art* (2012), Norris’s work has expanded into installation, film, photography, and performance. Her Yale MFA thesis, for example, included collaged assemblages, photographs, textiles, video, and a neon light that spelled her name. At stake in all her installations is her identity as an African-American woman and as an artist. In many of her films, Norris plays herself, performing as “Meka Jean” or “mynameisnotshorty.” Her newest film, *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*, tells the story of the artist’s return to her hometown, New Orleans, after becoming an internationally recognized artist. New Orleans has long served as backdrop for Norris’s work, dating back to early student works that explored the city recovering after *Hurricane Katrina*. Originally a musician, Norris often co-opts the work of white singers and artists to expose the impact of racial perceptions. Connecting music and art worlds, Norris describes her process as “sampling, taking, borrowing, remixing.”

## reading list

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Charlotte Burns, “Three artists whose work you should see to understand race in America today.” *Quartz*. November 23, 2014.

Julia Halperin, “A better Prospect for African-American artists.” *The Art Newspaper*. October 21, 2014.

Kate Abbott, “Tameka Norris: ‘I’m the black Cindy Sherman.’” *The Guardian*. March 4, 2014.

Olivia Jasmine Singer, “Tameka Norris.” *Under the Influence*. September 2014.

## fresh talk: tameka norris

march 19, 2015



Tameka Norris

**CATHY BYRD:** New Orleans-based artist **Tameka Norris** just produced her first feature-length film. She plays herself in *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*. Her narrative has a lot in common with *The Moviegoer*, a novel by **Walker Percy**. Like Walker Percy, Tameka grew up in North America's Deep South and went away to seek her fortune. And like **Binx Bolling**, the book's protagonist, Meka Jean reveals what it means when New Orleans is the city you come home to.

**TAMEKA NORRIS:** I wanted to somehow document with a film installation the process of what it means to come back home. The story is about a character who is turning 30 and having these life revelations in the process of returning from the Korean War and moving back home to **New Orleans** around **Mardi Gras**. It's this idea of hovering over yourself, over your life, seeing how people see you, seeing others seeing you, and those sort of bizarre relationships that happen when you become very detached from a place and space and then return.

**CB:** Producing a feature-length film has been your most ambitious project ever.



Tameka Norris, *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*, 2014, film, screening room, May Gallery, New Orleans, LA

**TN:** I really saw my experience as parallel to what it means to come home. And although I'm very proud of the final product, more than anything, the process of making these art objects, the process of making the film, having over 20 people on payroll at any given time, were new experiences for me—things I've never had to deal with as an artist.

**CB:** Tameka's film debuted during the international exhibition **Prospect 3 New Orleans** in 2014. When we meet her at the **May Gallery**, a nonprofit arts space in the district of New Orleans known as the **Upper Ninth Ward**, Tameka is dressed in character. She is wearing bright specially-designed clothes and a hat topped off with a giant bow. Inside the multi-chambered space, there is handmade seating to match: soft and inviting beanbag chairs pieced together with the same shiny fabrics.



Tameka Norris, *Meka Jean How She Got Good*, 2014, film still

**TN:** These were sewn by a lovely woman named **Jorita Johnson**, who also designed the hat with my materials. She's kind of helping me bring more of a visual language to *Meka Jean* through this sewing and by allowing me to have sculptural objects that I can wear. I kind of see them as three-dimensional versions of my paintings.

Being here in New Orleans, it made me think about the accessibility of my work. I've been thinking a lot about my students, for example. I teach at **Dillard University** and I've done lectures at **Xavier University**. These are two historically black colleges. Or imagining my grandmother interacting with a painting and realizing that she's looking at it on a wall, but maybe there is a more tangible and usable way to approach making things. Visual language is something you have to learn. It's really a privilege, right? It's sort of an elite characteristic to be able to have visual language and to break down imagery in that way.

I wanted to make the work in a very simple way, just accessible. And what's more accessible than a beanbag chair.

**CB:** We enter a darkened room where a film projection fills one entire wall. At the edge of our view, in an adjacent space, there is a flickering grid of monitors.

**TN:** The feature is an 80-minute film. Then there are three other channels that are what I'm calling environment, which are interiors and exteriors between London, New York, and obviously lots of New Orleans and Mississippi. These are the four places that I've been in the last year. There is another channel that is sort of the rehearsal.

Once you watch the feature, everything sort of breaks down when you exit that space. You are seeing the environments

and you're seeing the takes. What does it mean to perform oneself, one take, two takes, three takes? I believe it plays with the believability or non-believability of what's happening in the narrative itself.

There were no professional actors in the film. Everyone who is in the film essentially played themselves. My grandparents play my grandparents. The taxi driver is just a taxi driver, and we just prompted him five minutes before. We called a taxi like you just call a taxi, and we just go, hey, so I'm an artist and we just want to remake the fact that I'm coming home from London right now. Can we shoot this? And will you sign this release?

You see the character in London doing interviews. You see the character have a horrible panic attack. You see her go to New York and put on a show, and then you see her get out of the taxi and now she is just arriving home.

**CB:** Is this your home?

**TN:** This is my home. It's right up the street.

**CB:** Tameka portrays a range of characters in her performance art. But this time, to play a version of herself, she reached back to her childhood.



Tameka Norris and Cathy Byrd

**TN:** Tameka Jean is my first and middle name, so Meka Jean is a name that was given to me as a very young child. It's the name that somebody would yell if I needed to get back in the house right now. Thinking back to my childhood, there was a part of me that was always quite performative.

A couple of years ago on a birthday, my mother made this scrapbook for me. It was images of me from an infant until maybe the teenage years. You can tell from the images from when I was three and four that I would make up costumes and sing into a hairbrush. I was a ham. I very much wanted the spotlight. That went away for a very long time.

With this film, I am hoping to expose some of myself. I certainly believe it happens, but before I made this film I thought that you would see a polished version. I thought the person that I would be introducing, Meka Jean, would be the

version who was in the Too Good for You music video. She is having fun. She is wild, not a care in the world. That is who I thought Meka Jean would evolve to be. But I realized that I had to sit a little bit longer in the evolution.

**CB:** After earning art degrees at the University of Southern California and Yale School of Art, and presenting your work in the US and abroad, is coming home complicated?

**TN:** I left as a kind of vulnerable teenager in lower socioeconomic circumstances with no education, just a statistically typical young woman of color. I moved to Los Angeles, moved out of a small town to a big city. And any possible mishap happened. But then returning and coming back as an Ivy League-educated, world-traveled artist who shows internationally, is a big adjustment not just for other people, but for me.

The title, ironically, is quite complicated because getting good is so relative. I very naively approached this thinking, well, I have my Ivy League degree and I'm going to move back home, and I'm going to make change here and it's going to be so easy. I'm out of school. I'm going to find a man to love me. I'm going to start making the best artwork I've ever made in my life. But lo and behold, that is just not quite how life works.

Coming back home, I reverted back mentally to this other space based on being around my family or being in a certain neighborhood, and it's really challenging. I had to really think about how do I want to be treated when I walk into a room. How do I want to be treated as a woman who is conducting business? If I'm not being treated fairly or respectfully in a room, then I will create a new room.

I'm so proud of this project as it is. But how I have grown as a person through this process is huge. I could have never expected that that would be the biggest outcome.

**CB:** Aware that your life is a work in progress, you often refer to yourself in third person.

**TN:** I think Tameka Norris is still very uncomfortable with her newfound privilege, with her newfound education and her ability to articulate in ways that maybe the younger version of myself was not. And I think Meka Jean is like, "Girl, yeah, of course. You earned this. You deserve this. You worked for this."


"How She Got Good" becomes rhetorical, because I think if there is a landing point, then it means that it's done. But I think I don't get good, I just get better.

**CB:** Tell me what you want the viewers to get from the experience. What is your goal with the piece?

**TN:** That is a good question. I'm still asking this work: what it wants, what is it, where is it going. So I don't quite know yet. I'm still figuring that out.

# 08 // adam schreiber

(American, b. 1976)



It's about understanding a feeling behind trying to see something and trying to hold something in your mind, trying to suspend perception long enough for an object to stare back and talk to you.

## biography

Though artist [Adam Schreiber](#) has rejected the term “research” as descriptive of his creative process, his work is heavily inspired by archives. Currently based in Chicago and Austin, Texas, Schreiber has mined the holdings of the [Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum](#), the [Harry Ransom Center](#), and many other local and non-traditional archives. His photographs and installations call into question the idea of photographic objectivity by revealing the relationship between an object and its architectural, historical and cultural context. Hoping to isolate and reposition the objects of his study, Schreiber purposefully uses a large-format camera to slow down the image making process. Recently, an International Artist-in-Residence at [Artpace](#) in San Antonio, TX, Schreiber was inspired by the DeLorean automobile plant in Humble, TX, which the artist saw as its own kind of archive. His 2011 exhibition [Diminishing Returns](#) presented the car alongside stark photographs of the car’s parts, isolated on white backgrounds. In this way, the artist recast the character of the quintessentially futuristic DeLorean. Similarly, in [Flanagan-Tiravanija](#), a 2012 exhibition at the [Linda Pace Foundation](#), collector Linda Pace’s collection offered the artist a fresh opportunity to conflate definitions of the word archive. Schreiber’s photographs of iconic works in Pace’s art collection were displayed in her penthouse, where the images had been captured and the collection had accumulated.

## reading list

Linda Pace Foundation. “[Linda Pace Foundation presents Adam Schreiber’s Flanagan – Tiravanija](#).” *Art Agenda*. 2012.

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## fresh talk: adam schreiber ◀▶

february 4, 2013



Adam Schreiber

**CATHY BYRD:** Today I meet photographer Adam Schreiber at an outdoor coffeehouse on East 5th Street in Austin, Texas. Adam's passion is exploring collections, warehouses and archives. During his 2010 residency at Artpace in San Antonio, he pursued his interest in the dynamic between objects and the space that contains them. His installation of a DeLorean in the Artpace Gallery animated the building's history as a former automotive plant. Context played when he photographed the contemporary art collection of philanthropist and artist Linda Pace inside her private San Antonio residence.

**ADAM SCHREIBER:** The project at Artpace was, in a sense, a way for me to use the architecture of the exhibition space to reflect on the architecture of the subject I was dealing with. Ultimately, that's what the project became about for me. That's what was ultimately important. It was, in a way, far more important than the subject of the pictures. The subject of the pictures, anomalous as it is, for me functions sort of like camouflage for the context in which the pictures are exhibited.

While I'm interested in the DeLorean, I'm less interested in the car itself than its status as a placeholder. The Artpace gallery situation was an interesting container for that particular vehicle, which has a variety of cultural references and permutations, whether historically in terms of its fabrication or in terms of its history as a cinematic icon.

With that preface, I think the Pace Foundation show took the idea of the context in which the pictures are exhibited to a different level in the sense that the pictures were exhibited in the space where they were made. There's a circularity and there is a series of temporal riffs implicit in the work and the exhibition of the work.

**CB:** I spent time with *Diminishing Returns*, which was the Artpace project, and with this project that you did at the Pace Foundation. I noticed in both of those that there was a clear sense of staging and shadows, working with shadows



Adam Schreiber, *DeLorean, Diminishing Returns*, 2012

and this super spare sense of color. This relationship you have with white and negative space gave the photographs themselves a theatrical aspect. And then whatever you chose to give color to became some sacred object. I think that's a really interesting way of looking at a composition. To make one part of it stand out, you actually made all the other parts stand out by keeping them white.



Adam Schreiber, *Mechanism Case Assembly, New Old Stock, DMC, 1981, 2010*, chromographic print

**AS:** In a deep sense, I'm using the basic aspects of photography to expose the characteristics of the space. That space, as I mentioned earlier, is very specifically designed for someone to live with contemporary art and to have what I think of as a suspended perceptual relation to objects where literally in the visual field objects float in the space.

That said, I think what Artpace director Steven Evans recognized about the way that I work and why I was interested in the space was that my particular process, using this really slow camera that records a tremendous amount of detail, had a particular relationship and potential for that space. So, the formal aspects that you referenced, and the reduced palette of color, came about pretty slowly and incrementally in the space. It came about through

spending hours, literally, with particular scenarios of objects in the space. Though the ultimate pictures feel in some way very close to the only picture that could have been made of that, or the obvious picture, the ideal picture, that's actually a process that one gets to as a maker of pictures and as a viewer.

I think in retrospect that has an interesting connection to how the collector goes about establishing a relationship to their collection. Clearly, Linda's interest in collecting work extended to viewing it. It wasn't just about having the stuff. It was about an agitation, to create a space in which the characteristics of the work could persist in the most ideal context possible for as long as possible, creating, as you said, a stage for the work.

Of course, every work is different and has different qualities. So certain qualities like color really come out in that space. And other qualities, like implied vibration: if works can make sound, even imagined sound, this is the kind of space that would allow that to happen. In fact, spending so much time there, just staring under the dark cloth at objects in the space, different things happen than being at a museum or gallery. This is still, in a sense, a private space. So those photographs came out of an unnatural or extended period of staring at an object.

The exposures also tend to be quite long because of the technical aspects of the camera. So it's not just a matter of looking at the situations for a long time, but it's also this apparatus, this camera actually recording the scene onto large pieces of sheet film. These begin the process as a latent image and then become something like what I was seeing, but in other ways totally unlike what was seen. They become their own image of the space.



Adam Schreiber, *Pace Foundation*, 2012, chromographic print

**CB:** In my mind, Linda Pace was the true subject of your investigation. Her domestic environment was designed to disappear, to fade away from the art that was the focus of her attention.

**AS:** On the one hand it's a very designed space. You feel a sense of design to it, total design. But the effect of that is not ornamental. It's design in the sense that you get into the

synecdoche of the architecture of the space in relation to the architecture of the body, to the architecture of breathing, of how time passes, of how light moves across the space, your relation to gravity.



Adam Schreiber, *Pace Foundation*, San Antonio, TX, 2012

Earlier I was talking about the role of the collector in the space, and how the space reflects the collector. As I spent time there and as I've dealt with the pictures I made there, I've grown to appreciate this really active, restless relationship to art and the simultaneous desire to anchor or ballast that restlessness with the creation of an architecture that enforces it, as you said, that highlights the objects themselves. So if that's anything like understanding Linda, it's about understanding a feeling behind trying to see something and trying to hold something in your mind, trying to suspend perception long enough for an object to stare back and talk to you.



# 09 // stephen vitiello

(American, b. 1984)



The appreciation surprised me, because it came from children, joggers, art people, grandmas. It seemed that the bells could speak to anyone.

## biography

Stephen Vitiello is a sound artist and electronic musician who creates atmospheric soundscapes that explore the relationship between sound, space, and everyday experience. Currently serving as professor of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University, Vitiello has performed and installed work for numerous prestigious events and institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art (2013) in New York, the Tate Modern in London (2008), and the 15th Biennale of Sydney, Australia (2006). With a background in punk guitar, Vitiello has collaborated with artists such as Nam June Paik, Tony Oursler, Dara Birnbaum, and Joan Jonas and written soundtracks for independent films. Vitiello, who believes that sound has a much more visceral connection to human feelings than visuality, attempts to evoke instinctual and emotional responses through his site-specific sound installations. For instance, Vitiello's ongoing installation at MASS MoCA, *All Those Vanished Engines* (2011-2016), draws inspiration from a commissioned text by novelist Paul Park to create a haunting soundscape for the museum's Boiler Room, transforming industrial noise into an affecting, site-specific experience. Ignored or incidental sounds take center stage in many of Vitiello's works, highlighting the dynamism of everyday auditory occurrences. In *A Bell for Every Minute* (New York High Line, 2010-2011), Vitiello's 59 distinct bell sounds added surprising richness to the existing ambient sounds of the busy urban park. Extraordinary sounds sometimes can also seem familiar and uncanny, as in *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd* (1999) where the eerie shifting of steel and glass in the skyscraper seemed to recall other more familiar and mundane sounds like wooden ships on a stormy sea.

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## fresh talk: stephen vitiello

september 12, 2013



Stephen Vitiello

**CATHY BYRD:** Stephen Vitiello is an electronic musician and sound artist who transforms atmospheric noises into soundscapes. One of his installations is now featured in *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Curated by Barbara London, this is MoMA's first-ever exhibition dedicated exclusively to sound art.

A lot of museums have been exhibiting sound art. Why is it suddenly in the news?

**STEPHEN VITIELLO:** Because it's at the Museum of Modern Art, that puts a much larger stamp of validation on it. It also puts it under a microscope. Even the little bits of press that I was looking at today are already questioning: is it really all that good? Or, is it going to succeed or fail? But this is what happens with major surveys, like the *Whitney Biennial*. People are usually ready to knock it down before they even take it all in.

Ideally, sound art will infiltrate the art world. Now, a large group exhibition might have one or two video works. My wish is that in the future there will also be a sound work. Sound art often gets bunched into these shows with the common technology of sound, but is not necessarily thematically connected.



Stephen Vitiello, *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, The Museum of Modern Art, 2013

**CB:** Now installed in MoMA's sculpture garden, *A Bell for Every Minute* was originally commissioned in 2010 for a year-long installation on the Highline in New York.

I loved how you described it as a cultural soundscape when it all comes together. Tell me about that.



Stephen Vitiello, *A Bell for Every Minute*, 2010, installation, High Line, New York, NY

**SV:** I recorded bells all over, every bell I could think of, and then I chose 59 of them. At the beginning of the hour, all the bells ring together: the cat's collar bell, the *Hare Krishna* temple bell, the *New York Stock Exchange*, etc. They are all ringing together on one even plane. After that, one bell rings each minute individually. There's also an aluminum 5-foot engraved sound map that traces what you hear on each minute, and allows you to follow where I recorded it.

**CB:** So your installation at MoMA is outdoors?

**SV:** It is, yes. The rest of the exhibition is on the third floor, but this is not a piece that belongs in a black box. I make other pieces where I want an immersive space, but this piece should be in harmony and in concert with the city. So I asked for the sculpture garden, where there's five speakers and the sound map.

**CB:** How does that differ from the installation on the Highline?

**SV:** There, you have people who know what they're going for, but you also have people who stumble upon it. They are surprised about reorienting their senses so that they're listening rather than looking. Sometimes they find they can listen for a much longer time than they might have looked if they were standing in front of a single work of art.

**CB:** I can see that would be the case for the Highline installation.

**SV:** It's interesting, you know. Sometimes I get feedback, like somebody who I didn't know emailed me saying that they jogged there every day. It took them a few days to even notice the bells, but then they stopped and read the sign. After that, they started to look forward to running by there each day, wondering what they were going to hear tomorrow. Somebody sent me a novel, a Wall Street thriller, in which the character goes up onto the Highline to listen to his favorite work of art, *A Bell for Every Minute*.

One of the beauties of going into larger public spaces is that you open yourself up to a wider audience and sometimes that audience that can catch you by surprise. I got a larger audience for that piece than probably anything I've ever done. The appreciation surprised me, because it came from children, joggers, art people, grandmas, and it seemed that the bells could speak to them. It didn't have to be my language. It didn't have to be an art language or an academic or a conceptual thing. They could interpret it in any number of meaningful ways, which is great.

**CB:** In 1999, Stephen recorded winds after *Hurricane Floyd*. That year, he was artist in residence on the 91st floor of the *World Trade Center*.



Stephen Vitiello, World Trade Center studio, 1999, photograph

**SV:** That piece ended up representing that whole residency. It's called *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd*. It was the second-strongest hurricane to hit New York in the decade.

We couldn't go in the building during the hurricane, but the morning after it peaked, I went in. The building was still so

wet, and the winds were still strong enough that you felt, and heard, the physicality of movement. I was told that this is called "beeping" in architecture. In the recording of mine, it's often said that the building sounds like an old ship, creaking and cracking in the wind.

**CB:** That's a haunting thought, really.

**SV:** It is. It wasn't until I could hear up there that I became a little afraid of heights. Everything felt very artificial until I got those microphones working. And then once you got the microphones working, you realized you were on the 91st floor and you were way up—in some cases above the clouds, above planes and helicopters, above people. There was a real vulnerability and fragility of being there. I'm not saying that in any way had anything to do with predicting the terrible things that came, but the physicality of being becomes much more sensitized when you can hear.

**CB:** You became aware that the building was actually a fragile being, in a way.

**SV:** Exactly, exactly. And I was often there at night. I don't know how many thousands of people occupied the World Trade Center, so it's not to say that I was alone, but in many ways I did feel alone because I was isolated in my studio. Most of the building's lights were off. And that fragility was amplified by that feeling of being in this weird little black box studio looking out over the city.



Stephen Vitiello, 2013, Captiva, FL

**CB:** During his 2013 residency at *Robert Rauschenberg's* island home on Captiva in Florida, Stephen made a profound discovery: Rauschenberg had recorded sound, too, with cassette recorders and an underwater microphone.

**SV:** I used my own audio recorders and microphones, but I loved being able to open up a closet and go, wow—there are Robert Rauschenberg's cassette recorders. I'd open up another drawer and there were these underwater speakers that were not fully functional. I dreamed of using my underwater microphone and his underwater speaker.

**CB:** And now you maybe have an awareness of what your own artifacts are going to be.

**SV:** I think that's true. One of my many backgrounds was working as an archivist. While I was in New York, I worked for **Electronic Arts Intermix**, which is a video art distributor. I worked for **The Kitchen** as an archivist. I worked for **Nam June Paik** over 12 years in all sorts of capacities. I'm not ever going to claim to put myself on the plane of some of the artists I've worked with, but I do try to value the work that I do and keep track of it, keep good records, keep formats migrated.

Going back to that World Trade Center piece, the Whitney bought it in 2002 and I came in and I handed them a DVD disc. And they said oh, we don't accept digital media for acquisitions. But I said it is a digital work. And we had to then negotiate what they were going to get. The format I was giving them, DVD audio, is actually now an obsolete format, so I also gave them data backup of the files that make up the six channels of that work.

It made me think, for future acquisitions, as other people buy pieces, who is going to take care of them? What are they allowed to do? What kind of backup files or equipment should go with the piece?



Stephen Vitiello, *The Sound of Red Earth*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, 2010, installation, Sydney, Australia

**CB:** You said that you are emotionally attached to sound. What do you mean by that?

**SV:** In film, for example, a lot of the emotional content is often created with sound. You can take a scene and make it happy, scary, sexy, sad, by changing the soundtrack. I have found that the connection I have to the world comes through listening. The physical impact of sound is very emotional to me.

I have found that in installations I can really play with the psyche of the visitor, or at least play to it, by the manipulation of sound in space. If it's done right, you will end up feeling first and thinking second. I think that with visual art you often look, you intellectually process, and then you might be moved or not. With sound, I think it's the opposite. That feeling hits you physically, the vibrations of sound into your body, and then maybe you process what you are thinking.

But I don't have a super visual eye the way so many of

my friends do. I don't always notice colors and design problems. I listen first and look second. If you close your eyes, sound suddenly seems much louder and richer and more finely detailed.

Probably my favorite photograph that represents my work is from Australia, a piece called **The Sound of Red Earth**, 2010. I told a group of schoolchildren, whose brilliance and sensitivity I'd underestimated, a little about my installation and then sent them into it. One thing I said was if you could close your eyes when you get in there, tell me if you hear the piece differently. They had all sorts of incredible questions after that.

Someone later gave me a photograph of one of the girls in the class with her eyes closed, listening to the piece. It seemed like she was listening with her entire being. That picture makes me feel like I've done something for one moment that mattered.

# 10 // agustina woodgate

(Argentina, b. 1981)

site sensitive: contemporary art with a sense of place // issue two // 2015

**Sound is important, and imagination is a very big component of my end result, always. I think that not having the visual, but just the storytelling, is something I wouldn't want to disappear.**

featured image: Agustina Woodgate, *AutoBody*, 2014, video, performance and audio, Giant Motors Building, Miami Beach, FL

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

Though artist **Agustina Woodgate** intended her trip to Miami in 2004 to be a visit, she has lived and worked there ever since. Woodgate engages with urban environments and communities to explore issues of politics, space, and temporality. Her work encompasses installation and site-specific art, textiles, radio production, and sculpture. She exposes issues of globalization, migration, and population distribution in striking and unfamiliar ways: the skins of discarded stuffed animals manufactured in Asian countries and consumed in the West become kaleidoscopic rugs (*Rugs* series, 2014), a room of sanded-down, out-dated globes rejects the artificial boundaries established by maps (*The Ballroom*, 2014), and a recurring hopscotch court drawn in chalk across multiple countries reminds us of our shared human connections (*Hopscotch*, 2010-ongoing). Woodgate stages her temporal radio projects as city-specific “happenings.” Established in 2011, **Radio Espacio Estacion** (REE) is a nomadic, online, event-based bilingual radio transmission. The artist’s most recent production of REE debuted in a former auto body shop during Miami Art Week 2014 and traveled to her native Buenos Aires as part of *Auto Body*, a carefully curated platform for female video and performance art. With a series of digital radio broadcasts recorded in an array of geographic locations, she is constructing a mobile audio landscape that complements her social practice.

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# fresh talk: agustina woodgate

may 1, 2015



Agustina Woodgate

**CATHY BYRD:** Agustina Woodgate is an artist based in Miami, Florida, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. In a recent project, she and her team produced an online radio show for four days during *Auto Body*, a performance-based exhibition featuring the work of more than 30 women artists. Her broadcasts and our conversation took place on Miami Beach during *Art Week in December 2014*.

On the coast of South Florida, her station popped up in what was once the office of a former car repair shop. She transformed the abandoned space into a studio by adding recording equipment and four bucket seats. One click and *Radio Espacio Estacion* was on the air.

**AGUSTINA WOODGATE:** It really blew my mind to find out that I can download an application on my computer, press a button, and be live to the world. A round table, some car seats, and some good conversation — though not every radio show is conversation. I think I have about 35 guests, one guest an hour, ranging from conversation to sound experiments to music and bands, and the topics are inspired by the location. Usually that's how the show works.

**CB:** Agustina's radio projects are site-sensitive. She designs her programming in response to exhibition themes and the environments in which they are presented. For Agustina, presenting a fluid bilingual show is critically important.

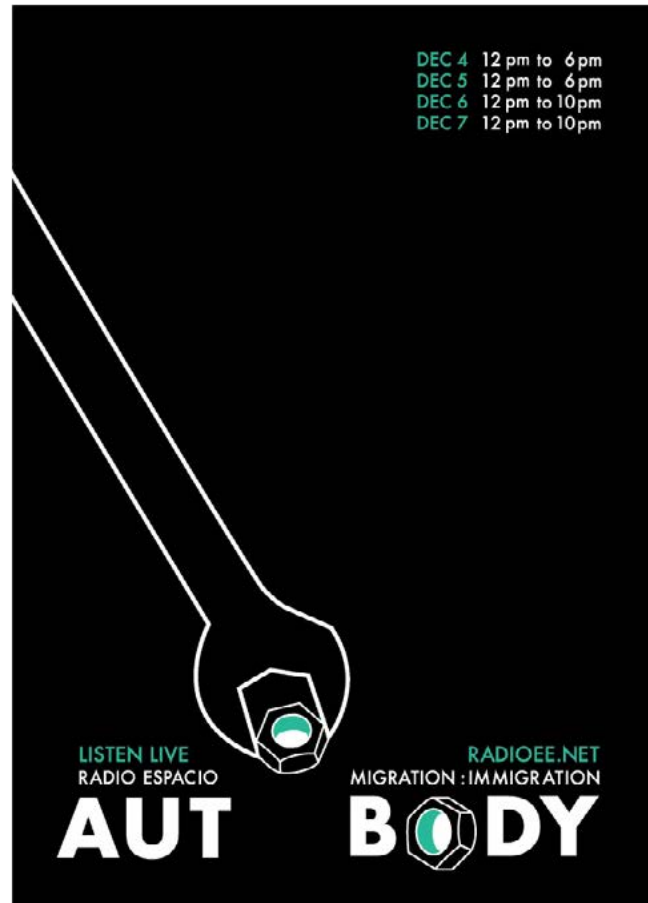
**AW:** This radio broadcast has a particularity in that it is bilingual. In this way, the broadcast happens in two languages at the same time. What this means is that at the same time *es que, de repente, hablo un poco en español, y la conversación sigue en español*. And then I flip to English again, and there is never a translation, just the idea. The experiment is integration.

**CB:** You've got this live broadcast—who listens?

**AW:** In every city that I broadcast, I somehow collect the locals and then they follow me to the next one and then follow me to —and on like that. I do a lot of online distribution, because it is an online radio show. I'd rather

keep the online distribution, the online promotion. Then you are just one click away.

It is also a conscious decision, a very thoughtful decision to do a radio show that only exists online. There is an intention of hosting an online event and somehow challenging what it means to gather online.



Agustina Woodgate, Radio Espacio Estacion, *Auto Body*, Miami art week, 2014

**CB:** Before going on the air, you do tons of research.

**AW:** Every time I put up a broadcast, I go to school all over again because I have to do so much research for every guest I am inviting, or the topic itself. And not only the topic itself, but also the branches [of information or thought] that might affect the topic, so that the show can be a healthy conversation addressed from different perspectives.

**CB:** Featuring women exclusively, her program captured the sound of *Auto Body* performances and the voices of local musicians, a transportation planner, an immigration lawyer, and a car mechanic, among others. Each day, she broadcast a series of hour-long conversations and streaming audio of art and music performances.

**AW:** The way that I have been building up the programming was inspired by movement. *Auto body* parts seemed right. When I say movement, I think about movement within Miami and in-and-out of Miami. When thinking about within



it, of course the car industry is at the base of it, where I am at right now. But then I also want to consider other ways of addressing the topic of movement in relationship to the automobile industry, labor, and the economy.

I have, for example, a guest from the [Underline](#) project, which is a new project that is about to begin. It's a proposal to be built underneath the [Metrorail](#). It's sort of like a [High Line](#), but an underline.



Augustina Woodgate, Radio Espacio Estacion, Auto Body, Miami art week, 2014

**CB:** Agustina has produced her event-based shows seven times in the U.S. and Europe. The broadcast before Auto Body was a 24-hour marathon in Washington, D.C. The theme: daylight saving time.

**AW:** The last one I did was commissioned by the [D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities](#). It was really an incredible experience. It was a 25-hour marathon, 25 hours nonstop, roving the geometry of the city. At every stop, I had a different guest.

The whole broadcast was on daylight saving on November 2, the day that actually has 25 hours. That is why I was broadcasting for 25 hours, and the topic was time: the politics of time, the policies of time, how time affects economy, how time affects astronomy, and the city itself.



Augustina Woodgate, Radio Espacio Estacion, Auto Body, Miami art week, 2014

**CB:** In Washington, D.C., one of the stops was at noon at the [National Cathedral](#), where a [society of bell ringers](#) was performing.

**AW:** They ring the bells every Sunday, but one of them came down to speak with me while they were still ringing so I would have the background noise while we were in conversation. They have nothing to do with the cathedral itself anymore. They just use the tower because it has the bells.

Historically, priests were the timekeepers of the town. They would use the bell to keep track of when to pray or when to wake up -- so that was one of the first timekeeping tools we have used. The monasteries would be the ones producing the watches, so the priest would have the clock, so then he would ring the bell.

And nowadays, the bells are not being used like that. But then you have these other groups that just get together every Tuesday to rehearse and every Sunday to ring the bells. They have these crazy mathematical patterns, and it's a whole society of ringing.



Augustina Woodgate, Radio Espacio Estacion, Auto Body, Miami art week, 2014

**CB:** RadioEE.net is that perfect fusion—a way to channel contemporary technology, the voice, and her imagination.

**AW:** This channel is not visual. Sound is important, and imagination is a very big component of my end result, always. I think that not having the visual, but just the storytelling, is something I wouldn't want to disappear.

**CB:** This May, Agustina follows the exhibition Auto Body to [Buenos Aires](#). Her recording studio will be set up near the Port Authority and the Department of Immigration. Visit [RadioEE.net](#) or [freshartinternational.com](#) to learn more about Agustina's live internet broadcast series.

# discussion questions

1. What determines a “site” in the works discussed in these conversations? Beyond the features of a physical place, what other factors, conditions, or issues are these artists reacting to in creating site-specific or site-sensitive works?
2. How has globalization affected the ways that artists and curators such as those featured here approach “site” as an idea?
3. In which of these site-sensitive projects does process become part of the content?
4. Sarah Hobbs and Tameka Norris both address the idea of “home” and what it means to be “at home.” How is home made visual in their work? What other common themes can you identify in the projects they describe?
5. In what ways have the artists and curators in this publication appropriated or intervened in the conventions of art movements such as Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Performance Art?

# FRESH ART

Launched in 2011, **Fresh Art International** is the innovative online media platform for Fresh Talk: Conversations About Creativity in the 21st Century, a challenging and provocative audio program. Featuring the voices of cultural producers from around the globe in conversation with independent curator Cathy Byrd, Fresh Talk's impressive archive of highly crafted podcasts will inform, inspire and entertain you. The ongoing series is accessible for free on multiple platforms including [freshartinternational.com](http://freshartinternational.com), [iTunes](#), [Stitcher](#), and [SoundCloud](#), and available for public radio broadcast on [prx.org](http://prx.org).

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