

FRESH  
ART  
now

smart guide to contemporary art

# spatial interventions

EXPERIMENTAL PROJECTS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE



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

issue 3 // 2015



## FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW

The Voice of Contemporary Art

**Fresh Art International NOW** is a digital publication featuring themes embedded in Fresh Talk, the audio podcast that independent curator Cathy Byrd produces for the online media platform **Fresh Art International**. Linked to more than 100 research references, each issue includes a set of transcriptions from our audio archive.

**issue 3 // 2015**

**Spatial Interventions**

Experimental Projects in the Public Sphere

Contemporary artists, curators, architects, and filmmakers talk about projects that transform the individual experience of communities, institutions, and environments around the world.

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## discussion

# about issue 3 / spatial interventions

What happens when public space is given time to take shape organically, in response to individual and communal desires? How are communal performances and temporary installations exploring new territories and deepening our experience of the public sphere?

In this issue of Fresh Art International NOW, we present a set of Fresh Talk podcast episodes with a shared focus on spatial intervention. These contemporary artists, curators, architects, and filmmakers are involved in projects that transform the individual and collective experience of communities, institutions, and environments around the world.

Historically, art in the public sphere reinforces existing structures of belief and power. In any given context, didactic or propagandistic art—for instance, an equestrian monument or the relief of a saint on a church exterior—communicates and perpetuates political, religious, and/or cultural ideologies. Architecture and urban planning have often been complicit in this persuasive agenda, inevitably affecting how we experience public space. Cultural flashpoints, including the AIDS epidemic, and more recently, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, have provoked contemporary artists to respond in the public sphere. Likewise, global economic, environmental and social concerns have sparked a range of public interventions. Some of these creative actions and installations have strengthened communities and forged or legitimized new relationships.

William Pope.L, an American artist known for addressing social issues through endurance performances, reached this positive outcome in New Orleans. For the Prospect.2 biennial exhibition, his poetic community intervention captured the collective imagination and energized residents in a city still struggling with loss, six years after Hurricane Katrina.

Though American architect Jack Sanders and Peruvian artist Cesar Cornejo have never met, they share an interest in responding to the history and everyday needs of the neighborhoods in which they work. Building relationships is the essential first step in the collaborative interventions that Sanders realizes in Marfa, Texas, and that Cornejo has produced in his home country and in Cuba.

Italian artist Marinella Senatore erases the line between us and “the Other” by immersing herself in the complex social hierarchies of communities where she choreographs public performances. She deliberately ignores preconceptions that would normally distance those that join together to realize her elaborate processions and intimate performances. Israeli artist Naama Tsabar aims to broaden the shared experience of art and eliminate gender barriers through public performance. Her commitment to accessibility and equal opportunity, motivates her actions, and in one case, compels her to transform her exhibition space in an international art fair into the stage for a free outdoor music festival.

British curator Helena Reckitt generated meaningful encounters with temporary public art when she selected artists to create projects for Toronto’s 2012 Nuit Blanche art event. For a 12-hour performance cycle, she instigated looping spatial interventions—digital and analog, passive and interactive—that sparked a range of sensory experiences for the festival’s diverse audience.

Through systematic research in built environments, American artist architect Sarah Oppenheimer disrupts our perception of everyday architectural encounters by using negative space and reflective surfaces. Her surprising permanent intervention inside the Baltimore Museum of Art intertwines art and architecture.

German artist Agnes Meyer-Brandis conducts her experiments in volatile contexts, pursuing whimsical fields of inquiry on location, at sites as varied as tents, islands, zero gravity airplanes, and glaciers. She reinterprets the historical narratives of built forms and natural environments, inviting the public to witness the results of her investigations.

Americans Scott Stulen and Katie Hill curated the first-ever Internet Cat Video Festival, or catvidfest, relying exclusively on social media to relay their call for the world's best cat videos. What began as an experiment in

virtual public space was realized during a one-night festival that drew 10,000 participants to a green space at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

American artist Mary Mattingly's environmental concerns motivate her portable public projects. Establishing healthy ecosystems inside the geodesic domes she constructs in the U.S. and abroad, she involves communities in upcycling and organic gardening. The two domes that she created with collaborators in Havana remain in public spaces as emblems of sustainability.

In their brilliant transcontinental project, Polish artists Joanna Malinowska and C.T. Jasper achieved a profound spatial intervention. Taking the Polish National Opera to a remote mountain village in Haiti for the performance of an opera that they filmed for the Polish Pavilion at the 56th Venice Art Biennale, they brought Haiti into full view on the global contemporary art stage.

As public experiments, these spatial interventions are extraordinary achievements. Acknowledging their vulnerability, yet unafraid to test new ideas, these artists, architects, and curators alter our experience of the world.

#### Cathy Byrd

Fresh Art International Director/Producer

## reading list

Jennifer Barrett, "Art History and the Public Sphere" from *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 63-80.

Maria Rosario Jackson, *Building Community: Making Space for Art*(ITALIC), *Leveraging Investments in Creativity*; Urban Institute (October 2011).

Robert Klanten, *Going Public: Public Architecture, Urbanism and Interventions* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2012).

Robert Klanten and Matthias Hubner, *Urban Interventions: Personal Projects in Public Spaces* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2010).

Miwon Kwon, "Sittings of Public Art: Integration Versus Intervention" from *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

For an extensive list of activist art sites across the web: "Art Activism," from *Social Movements & Culture*, culturalpolitics.net, 2015.

# 01 // cesar cornejo

(Peruvian, b. 1966)



More important even than the place to me is the people; finding the neighbors that actually can be good partners for the project because that is the key to succeed.

## biography

Working in sculpture, installation, drawing, and photography, Cesar Cornejo interrogates the role of art in the public sphere, challenging existing understandings of the gallery space, and drawing attention to diverse sociopolitical issues. Often inspired by his native Peru, Cornejo's cultural awareness is also informed by the time he spent living and working in Japan, London, and New York. Described by some critics as an "antiarchitect," Cornejo's work evokes that of radical architectural interventionist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978), whose work was recently exhibited in Peru, and artist Mary Miss (b.1944), who blurs the lines between architecture and art. Additionally, Cornejo's installations often engage traditional, vernacular building practices, such as with *Menhir I* (2001, Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal) and *Menhir II* (2008, APEC Naru Park, Busan, South Korea), where the artist worked with local brickmakers to construct permanent public sculptures. His ongoing initiative, Puno Museum of Contemporary Art (Puno MoCA), began in 2007 in response to particular conditions in the eponymous Peruvian city and expanded to become a global initiative, presented most recently at the 2015 Havana Biennial. Offering free renovation help to the owners of damaged or dilapidated homes in exchange for the opportunity to display art in their dwellings, Puno MoCA transforms low-income neighborhoods into informal museums that invite community engagement and elevate social consciousness. Its realization in Havana took the form of an installation of metal and wood, attached prominently to the side of a house in the Casa Blanca neighborhood. Evoking the swooping, metallic curves of architect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum (1997) in Bilbao, Spain, what might be taken as a critique of corporatized museums might also be seen as a positive homage to Gehry's provocatively adhoc reconstruction of his own home (1978). Cornejo is highly motivated to engage and challenge the public, as suggested by *Public Sculptor* (2010), a work that involved the artist placing himself inside a brick tower on the grounds of the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, New York, to stimulate an open conversation about public art.

## reading list

Marilena Alivizato, "Museums and Intangible Heritage: The Dynamics of an 'Unconventional' Relationship," *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London* 17 (November 15, 2006).

Jan Garden Castro, "Art Futurecast: Merging Object with Subject," in *The Next Thing: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Pablo Baler (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013).

Tatiana Flores, "Preemptive Resistances: Critical Pointers in Latin American Art," *ArtNexus* #73 (June/August 2009).

Jenny Gill, "In Focus: Cesar Cornejo's Puno Museum of Contemporary Art," *Creative Capital: The Lab*, November 28, 2011.

Benjamin Waldman, "13 Historic Houses Converted into Museums in Manhattan," *Untapped Cities: Rediscover Your City*, October 14, 2013.

# fresh talk: cesar cornejo ↗

october 9, 2015



Cesar Cornejo

**CATHY BYRD:** This is Fresh Talk with Peruvian artist César Cornejo. We meet in Cuba during opening days of the 12th Havana Biennial. Our conversation begins on the street in front of a small house in Casa Blanca, a community near the entrance to Havana Harbor. The neighborhood is perched on a hill beneath the eighteenth-century fortress that serves as a Biennial venue. As do most locals, we reach Casa Blanca by taking a ferry from Old Havana.

Cornejo is one of a dozen Biennial artists creating site-specific works in Casa Blanca. In a local family's home, he continues an experiment with art, architecture, and community that he began in his home country.

**CESAR CORNEJO:** I had been invited to represent Peru at the 12th Havana Biennial, and I was invited to present a version of a project that I am developing in Puno, Peru called Puno MoCA, which stands for Puno Museum of Contemporary Art. It's a project that proposes to create an alternative museum model that is based on Latin American reality, let's say, or Third World reality.



Donna Huanca and Roy Minten, *I was you and Never knew it* (after Rumi), 2011, Installation for Puno MoCA, Puno, Peru

**CB:** The original project began with home improvements.

**CC:** What we have done is go to homes in low income areas of Puno and offer people to repair some spaces in

their homes for free with the condition that they allow us to exhibit art in those spaces that we have repaired. After the exhibition ends, the works are withdrawn and the spaces remain for the owner to enjoy them as part of their home. I, as an artist, benefit from the opportunities that develop from there.

**CB:** A few months after we meet, I called Cornejo to talk about why he chose what he calls a poor and ugly city to launch this experiment. Far from the metropolis of Lima where he grew up, Puno is a jumping off point for a global tourist destination, Lake Titicaca, 12,000 feet above sea level.



Lake Titicaca in Puno, Peru

**CC:** It was really one of the less likely places to create a museum.

**CB:** When Cornejo went to Puno for the first time, he found that construction had never been completed on 70% of the houses.

**CC:** The first time I went to Puno, it really marked in my memory how there were so many unfinished houses. Instead of bringing Western or First World country models of the museum, which require lots of investment and magnificent buildings, this project proposes that we use our buildings. This is our architecture, and I thought we can create a model by which they benefit and also we benefit.

**CB:** Achieving such a project involves many dimensions of engagement.

**CC:** There are aspects that have to do with finances and business, aspects that have to do with location, aspects that have to do with environmental research and development of environmentally friendly technologies. I started working small scale, because I didn't have money yet to do any significant work, but still, that's meaningful.

**CB:** This concept is portable. The artist could create a mini museum in any number of small neighborhoods around the world, but building the necessary partnerships is essential. And connecting on a personal level is not always easy.

**CC:** More important even than the place to me is the people; finding the neighbors that actually can be good partners for the project because that is the key to succeed. Because there has to be this trust between them and me, a good relationship, to be able to have a happy ending and a good experience for everyone.

**CB:** The project turned out to be a perfect fit for the theme of the 12th Havana Biennial: *Between the Idea and Experience*.



César Cornejo, Chinique family house, XII Havana Biennial, 2015

**CC:** For the Havana Biennial, we have been introduced to the family of [Alberto Chinique](#). The house belongs to that family, an old family here in Casablanca. Mrs. Mary Saltero also lives there with her daughter and her son, and they have been extremely helpful also all along the process. In this house, we have repaired the entrance, where there was some structural damage due to weather conditions. Cracks have been repaired, the structure has been repaired, the lobby and bedroom walls have been painted and glass has been put in the windows. We have an exhibition of two Colombian artists at the moment who are also guests of the Biennial.

**CB:** The Biennial's organizational structure and financial support allowed Cornejo to expand on the Puno MoCA model—to move his idea to the next level, with an exterior spatial intervention that involved the family and their community in a new way.

**CC:** Havana has been a step forward, with me being involved in creating a sculptural statement on the façade to show that this is a museum. That's an idea that I have been thinking about for a while, but until all of the circumstances come together, it's really hard to do.



Chinique family house before and after Cornejo's intervention, XII Havana Biennial, 2015

**CB:** Cornejo's team transformed the entrance of the hillside home into a temporary/contemporary landmark visible from the ferry landing below. The sculpture tells the family's maritime history. A great-grandfather had operated a ferry boat service for Casa Blanca before the Cuban Revolution. With elements that the artist had built in his Florida studio and shipped to Havana, they erected a shimmering monument: four curving, crescent shapes made of laminated plywood and surfaced in aluminum, suspended at different heights and angles from a central column. The faceted reflective form evokes architect [Frank Gehry](#)'s design for the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in Bilbao, Spain. Where do you go next with this idea?

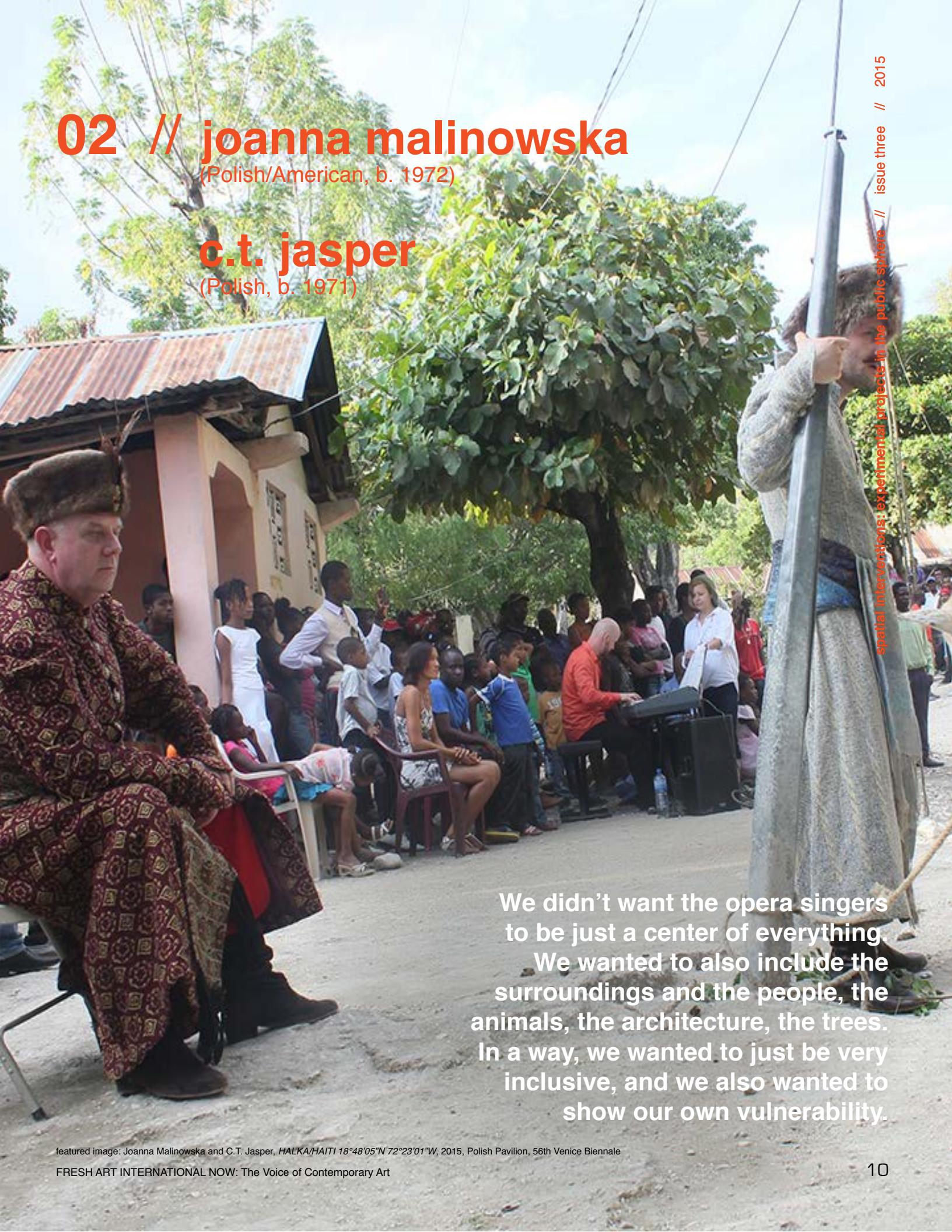
**CC:** I feel that making something that's significant like we did in Cuba, in Puno, would be very, very important. That would complete the idea of Puno MoCA not being only a project that deals with architecture and art, but also that's integral to the fabric of society. That's the next work, I would say. It's less material and more spiritual.

## 02 // joanna malinowska

(Polish/American, b. 1972)

## c.t. jasper

(Polish, b. 1971)



We didn't want the opera singers  
to be just a center of everything.

We wanted to also include the  
surroundings and the people, the  
animals, the architecture, the trees.  
In a way, we wanted to just be very  
inclusive, and we also wanted to  
show our own vulnerability.

# biography

## JOANNA MALINOWSKA

Polish-born artist Joanna Malinowska often uses music in tandem with video, sculpture, and performance art to draw attention to social and cultural tensions. Invested in art history and anthropology, Malinowska's works frequently point out the potential pitfalls and biases embedded within these fields by critiquing, parodying, and re-imagining canonical works and ideas drawn from both disciplines. For example in *From the Canyons to the Stars* (2012), a piece for the Whitney Biennial, Malinowska played off Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Bottle Rack* (1914), creating a similar structure out of faux mammoth and walrus tusks. Early European modernists, including Duchamp, were intrigued by what were then deemed "primitive" cultures. Reexamining this legacy and the influence of "primitivism," Malinowska sheds new light on the origins of the modernist movement. Celestial or cosmological themes are often woven into her more overt cultural commentaries, such as in *On the Revolution of Heavenly Spheres* (2009), a video that follows a group of male friends, all members of the Polish diaspora living in United States, drunkenly representing the orbits of planets in the solar system on a basketball court. Remaining deeply invested in her own national identity, Malinowska attributes her artistic explorations to a desire to find an alternative to "monolithic" Polish culture. With her partner and collaborator C.T. Jasper, Malinowska created a work for the Polish Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale that proposed just such an alternative. The video entitled *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05"N 72°23'01"W* depicts the staging of the renowned Polish opera *Halka* in a contemporary Haitian village with historic Polish ties.

## C.T. JASPER

Polish-born video and multimedia artist C.T. Jasper currently divides his time between New York City and Ulan Bator, Mongolia. Often, his work intervenes in existing films, examining, what he describes as "the variety of contexts in which it can function." Beyond film, Jasper also professes an interest in architecture, which drives him to create provocative, three-dimensional video installations. For example, in *Erased* (2012-2013), Jasper digitally removed characters from the cult films *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch and *The Tin Drum* by Volker Schlöndorff to reveal the architectural interiors. Jasper recreated elements from the sets of French director Jacques Tati's classic film *Playtime* (1967). Transforming viewers into participants, Jasper tracked museum-goers' movements through the space, creating a "state of confusion and curiosity," as described by critic James Voorhies. Jasper has collaborated with Malinowska on several occasions. In addition to *Halka/Haiti*, the pair recently presented a joint exhibition entitled *Związek rozwiązk/Relations Disrelations* (2015) at Muzeum Sztuki ms1 in Łódź, Poland. This self-aware exhibition explores the work of both artists as individuals and as a pair, charting the congruences and discontinuities in their art. This side-by-side exhibition also reflects on their shared Polish nationality and the nature of artistic practice broadly.

## reading list

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"Halka/Haiti - Joanna Malinowska, C.T. Jasper," *Culture.PI*, 2015.

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Elisabeth Sussman, "Joanna Malinowska in the Studio," *Art in America*, February 1, 2013.

# fresh talk: poland takes venice to haiti ↪

november 12, 2015



Joanna Malinowska and C.T. Jasper

**CATHY BYRD:** This is Fresh Talk with Polish artist Joanna Malinowska. We meet on the steps outside the Polish Pavilion during preview days of the 56th Venice Art Biennale. I've just viewed a stunning panoramic film project that Malinowska produced with her partner C.T. Jasper and curator Magdalena Moskalewicz. What the artists achieved is truly unique. Early this year, they brought the Polish National Opera company to Haiti. With Polish performers, a Haitian orchestra, local dancers, a generator, an electric piano, and a goat, they presented the opera known as *Halka*. Their audience? Polish descendants, the inhabitants of Cazale, a mountain village 60 kilometers from the capital Port-au-Prince. This project introduces a little known connection between Poland and the island country.

I knew that Haiti was once a French colony. What I didn't know was that Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte had dispatched more than five thousand Polish soldiers to Haiti in the 1800s. He sent them to quell a local uprising that became the country's war of independence from France.

**JOANNA MALINOWSKA:** We chose Cazale, a village in Haiti. The village was established by the Polish soldiers who were sent to Haiti under Napoleon to fight against the rebellion of the slaves. The historical records differ on the exact numbers, but we know that at least some of them changed side and joined the rebels and fought for the independence of Haiti, and then they stayed.

**CB:** Today there is still evidence of this surprising chapter in history.

**JM:** The people who live there are still very connected to the past. They identify with those people and among some of them you can see still some Slavic features—blue eyes and blond hair.

**CB:** I am wondering why you think you were selected for this Polish Pavilion? What's the importance for Poland that this would be seen in this Biennale context?

**JM:** This proposal was written in the context of national representations—the way nations identify themselves

and present themselves to others. So this opera *Halka* is considered a national opera and it is probably considered one of our treasures and something that we would like to export. We are just sort of playing on the notion of national representation.

**CB:** Another spark of inspiration is the title character in Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a man with a crazed plan to build an opera in the tropics. These artists subvert the colonial narrative.

**JM:** The project has so many layers that it's sometimes hard to talk about everything. Of course the historical background is very important—the place we chose. We didn't want it to be in any place and we didn't want it to be the colonizers who come with the opera that is a form favored by the European elites.



Dance rehearsal for *Halka/Haiti*, Cazale, Haiti, 2015

**CB:** Luring Polish opera singers to perform in Haiti wasn't easy. Can you tell me a little about the process?

**JM:** It was quite complicated actually because opera singers are more sensitive than the people of other professions. They are afraid of climate change and other things. So it was not easy at first. Then when we came to Haiti, we were also looking for the collaborators from there. The orchestra from Port-au-Prince had agreed to work with us. For them, it was very unusual to do something in Cazale, a village that is not too far from the capital, but where they don't go too often [laughs].

**CB:** Let's talk about the opera itself that you chose to perform in this place.

**JM:** It's not the first opera written in Polish, but it's an opera that was written around approximately the same time when the Polish soldiers were sent to Haiti.

**CB:** *Halka* tells a universal love story.

**JM:** Another tragic love, but it also has some social undertones. It talks about struggles between the different social classes. *Halka* is a peasant girl who is seduced by the landlord. He marries another woman of his same social ranking and *Halka* commits suicide at the end.



Halka/Haiti performance, Cazale, Haiti, 2015

**CB:** They staged the opera outdoors in the heart of the village. The audience sat in folding chairs beneath the trees.

**JM:** We didn't want the opera singers to be just a center of everything. We wanted to also include the surroundings and the people, the animals, the architecture, the trees. In a way we wanted to just be very inclusive, and we also wanted to show our own vulnerability. It was done in one shot. So it was a very vulnerable situation. We wanted to have that somehow recorded on the camera.

**CB:** So the wide perspective is intentional?

**JM:** We are also referring to the nineteenth-century paintings of panoramas that were also popular during this same period as the fight for independence in Haiti and when the opera was written. So there are lot of historical connections.



Halka/Haiti, 2015, multi-channel video projection, installation view, Polish Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale

**CB:** The film is much more than the recording of a performance.

**JM:** What is interesting about this film is that it is a documentary essentially, but it doesn't look like one. It could be perceived as an ethnographic film in a way, but we are sort of rebelling against ethnographic film and some misconceptions about it. Because, for example, when you take *Nanook of the North*, which is considered one of the earliest ethnographic films, and you do the research, it turns out that this film is actually full of lies. The costumes were made; the tools that were used in that film were already outdated and not contemporary to the time when it was made. So what we are doing was shooting something that

happened in real life in front of us. In a way, it's a truth that looks like fiction.

**CB:** And what was the response of the village to the opera descending?

**JM:** I think overall the response was quite positive, but it took us several months of building the relationship with the community. So it didn't happen just overnight.

**CB:** Can you tell me about your big plans for your return to Haiti?

**JM:** We are definitely going to show this film to the community where so many are also trying to do other things. There are some people who are involved in this project from the Polish side who are interested in going there again and working. For example, the theatre director and the conductor from the opera really want to work with the local musicians. And, we are thinking maybe of getting scholarships for people from the village to study. So, I feel like this is just the beginning.

# 03 // mary mattingly

(American, b. 1978)



**The work that I do is about ecosystems, either documenting them or making them and then trying these experiments. The experiment here is putting these in public spaces and seeing what happens.**

## biography

In artist [Mary Mattingly](#)'s work, issues of human labor, political systems, environmental conditions, and technology collide in surprising and provocative ways. Throughout her career, Mattingly has explored marginal, ephemeral, and fragile landscapes marked in subtle or explicit ways by human interventions. Earlier works such as *Nomadographies* (2007-2009) and *On the Margin* (2008-2011) presented ethereally beautiful photographs of [subaltern](#) or environmentally degraded spaces, aestheticizing the natural world's susceptibility to [Anthropocene](#) alteration. Currently based in New York, Mattingly has continued to address these concerns through more recent projects, in which she creates and documents temporary structures in the public sphere. These structures join an impressive genealogy of experimental architectural projects, including the geodesic domes of [Buckminster Fuller](#), the psychedelic visions of [Archigram](#) and [Superstudio](#), and the early exhibition work of [Coop Himmelb\(l\)au](#). Dubbed an "apocalyptic artist," Mattingly proposes nomadic, flexible, and pre-fabricated structures in response to turbulent economic, social, and ecological situations. In a recent three-part series, which included the portable *Flock House Project* (2012-2013), *Triple Island* (2013), and *WetLand* (2014-ongoing), Mattingly suggested sustainable forms of human habitation. Whether situated within the space of a museum, on an urban street, or floating on a barge, Mattingly's work directly engages the public sphere, inspiring diverse audiences to consider the future of human habitation, food-sourcing, and waste-management. Her interventions extend beyond the physical to the online realm, where she maintains an ongoing project, [Own-it.us](#), which serves as a digital repository for material items the artist has decided to part with. With the same rigorous environmental awareness as her built projects, Mattingly painstakingly catalogs each item's personal history alongside the natural resources and human labor that went into its creation.

## reading list

Jonathan Beer and Lily Koto Olive, "Artist Interview: Mary Mattingly," *Art-Rated*, September 5, 2013.

Heather M. Davis and E. Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).

Kareem Estefan, "Mary Mattingly" (exhibition review), *Art in America*, December 13, 2013.

Eleanor Heartney, "Art for the Anthropocene Era: Four Artists Take on the Challenges of Our Environmental Crisis," *Art in America*, February 6, 2014, 76-81.

Greg Lindquist, "Life of Objects: An Interview with Mary Mattingly," *Art in America*, May 23, 2013.

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# fresh talk: mary mattingly

september 10, 2015



Mary Mattingly

**CATHY BYRD:** This is Fresh Talk with artist [Mary Mattingly](#). Our conversation begins in Cuba during the first days of the [Havana Biennial](#). She is here because of a new partnership between [The Bronx Museum of the Arts](#) and the [National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana](#). Her residency is part of [Wild Noise](#), the first in a series of exhibition exchanges between the two cities. During her time in Cuba, she created two spherical ecosystems with local partners. The domes are 10 feet in diameter; one is perched in a park and the other inside a museum.

Tell me about your project. It's so beautiful and exciting.

**MARY MATTINGLY:** Thanks. Well, there are two spheres, one in [Parque Central](#) and one inside of the museum. They are meant to "talk" to each other in a way; they look the same from the outside, but inside the living systems supplement each other. It's been a year in the planning, and for the last two months approximately I have been here working with builders and architects and students and teachers to make it come to life.

**CB:** Mattingly is deeply interested in materials with past lives. She gathered components for the two spheres from all over Havana and New York City.

**MM:** I have felt it's very important to repurpose stuff from the U.S. Army, so some of the fabric that's covering the structure and the tubing is from surplus army stock. I'm trying to translate it into something that's about interdependency. But the project has changed a lot, having been here for so long. It's really been influenced by songbirds and things I never would have thought.

**CB:** [Pull](#), the project's title, represents the tensions of reopening relationships between Cuba and the U.S., but there's a literal meaning too. It's how the domes get around.

**MM:** We have been moving them from place to place with whomever wants to volunteer. We have been literally dragging them to the park and then the museum, and we don't know where next.

**CB:** The two spheres are constructed as habitats for local flora and fauna.

**MM:** You walk up a set of stairs that leads you to this platform that looks like floating barrels are underneath of it, and then there is a sphere. You walk into the sphere, it's made with aluminum drywall studs and it's lit underneath. Then there are lots of food plants growing inside and there are many tubes that are forcing the water into the next planter. There are fish, songbirds, and butterflies, all kinds of living off of the things that are inside.



Mary Mattingly, *Pull*, 2015, installation and performance, Museum of the Revolution, Havana, Cuba

**CB:** And how does this fit with your philosophy about art and the ecology?

**MM:** The work that I usually do is about [ecosystems](#), either through documenting them or through making them and then trying these experiments. The experiment here is putting these in public spaces and seeing what happens. Other times I have tried to inhabit them myself—thinking about recontextualizing a [geodesic dome](#) or making something that combines something that looks futuristic with things that remind us of the past.

**CB:** Ever since we met, I have been thinking about this project. I call Mary Mattingly to learn more. Remember those songbirds, that she said changed everything?

**MM:** While I was in Cuba I lived in an apartment in [Vedado](#). In the shared space in the center of the apartment complex, a few people were keeping songbirds. For a while I didn't know that they were songbirds, and I thought one in particular was this boy who kept crying for his mom from about 4 to 5 PM every day. I was pretty surprised when a friend came over and told me that it was actually a songbird, not a boy. I then realized that this was great, everybody in the apartment complex knows the songbirds, this is a very sweet relationship. It really made an impact on the work, because we ended up including songbirds in the sculpture. I think the songbirds transformed it.

**CB:** That's kind of an amazing discovery to make.

**MM:** I was thinking about the work that I have made up to this point. In retrospect, it occurred to me that a lot of the work that I have been making has to do with a frustration or an anger about something, whether it's housing, whether it's food, something like this. But right alongside that comes the deep love that you have to feel for something to even feel anger for that thing. So I think that's something that I was finally able to really understand, having this time in Havana where so much of the experience for me ended up revolving around love; around love of non-human creatures, non-human things, even the plants, even strangers.

**CB:** It's interesting what you just said, since I've also read and heard you described as an *apocalyptic artist*. This Cuba experience sounds like sort of a turning point.



Mary Mattingly, *WetLand*, 2014-present, installation view, Philadelphia, PA

**MM:** I think I am still discovering so many things about the experience there. Not too long ago I was able to go with The Bronx Museum and the State Department to the Philippines. I think that both that and the Cuba trip have made me acutely aware of the U.S.'s impact around the world, and in a not so positive way, to put it mildly. That changed my perspective on life, on my responsibility as a U.S. citizen, what I see happening around me, and what I have ignored more than I like to admit. I am at a point where I am feeling a love for my country and an anger about it. That's definitely been something that I have brought home with me.

**CB:** Cuba's green revolution was another big takeaway.

**MM:** One of the highlights for me was being able to learn about the organic farming in Cuba. That's something that I definitely wanted to show in *Pull*, to highlight this organic type of farming on a much smaller scale inside these sculptures.

**CB:** The gardens are just one element of the ecosystems within the domes.

**MM:** People could go inside of them and see them working to one extent or another. The birds were able to eat some of the food that we were growing, but we also supplied

them with food from outside the sculpture. We collected the rainwater in the sculpture in Parque Central. We also had some butterflies and some chickens that were actually donated to the project soon after it opened. People really loved the chickens, I think more than anything in the sculpture [laughs].



Mary Mattingly, *Flock House Project*, 2014, installation view, Omaha, NE

**CB:** What happened to the domes?

**MM:** One of them is coming back to The Bronx Museum, and hopefully be installed outdoors. The other one, in my understanding, is going to the *U.S. Embassy in Cuba*. So I think that they will both be on more permanent display, and in spaces that are in one case prominently political and the other case prominently art-centric.

# 04 // agnes meyer-brandis

(German, b. 1973)



We started with eggs, which we named directly after astronauts....

Thirty days later, eleven Moon Geese hatched. We started with our astronaut training three days after hatching, and it took place over a whole year.

## biography

Through her installation and performance art, Agnes Meyer-Brandis interrogates the history, myth-making, and contemporary practice of scientific research. Based out of Berlin, Germany, Meyer-Brandis has created works in the United States, Russia, Brazil, Switzerland, Austria, Argentina, and Australia, from the ocean bottom to 8,500 meters above Earth's surface. With an academic background that straddles science and art, Meyer-Brandis has studied mineralogy, sculpture, and audio-visual media. Meyer-Brandis's intricate explorations are inspired by her own curiosity and engagement with the everyday world, provoking elaborate research activities in consultation with specialists from a wide spectrum of scientific disciplines, including oceanography, climatology, hydrology, speleology, and astronomy. Often, the act of research is translated into the final installation, inviting viewers to participate in the process of discovery through interactions with tools, devices, and control panels. Although Meyer-Brandis has exhibited her works in museums, many of her pieces are installed in public or unconventional spaces, such as an airport control tower. The founder of FFUR—Institute for Art and Subjective Science, Meyer-Brandis is perhaps best known for her film *The Moon Goose Colony* (2011-2012), documenting the breeding, raising, and training of a flock of geese as astronauts. The artist also recently collaborated with the German Aerospace Center (DLR) to create the *Cloud Core Scanner* (CCS) (2007), "an artistic experiment in zero gravity." Her *Global Teacup Network* (GTN) (2014 - ongoing), an "array of cybernetic teacups" installed across the globe, measures the unique microclimates that hover over vessels of tea in a creative reimagining of contemporary international environmental research stations. A site-specific installation currently in development, the *Large METEOR T-R-A-P* (Terrestrial Rerouting Array Pad), uses a field of antennae to explore the possibilities of bringing a meteor safely to Earth. One array has already been installed in Marrakesh, Morocco and another is planned north of St. Petersburg, Russia.

## reading list

Regine Debatty, "Interview with Agnes Meyer-Brandis," *WorldChanging*, November 7, 2006.

Katherine Brooks, "Somewhere Out There A German Artist Is Preparing to Send Geese to the Moon," *The Huffington Post*, August 27, 2013.

Kathrin Busch, "Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009).

Anna Kesson, "Subterranean other(ed) worlds: Elf Scan," Biennale of Electronic Arts in Perth, BEAP Sept 10-Nov 14, 2004.

"The Moon Goose Analog," *The Strand Archive*, BBC World Service, September 12, 2011. (Meyers-Brandis section begins at 4:00)

Pau Waelder, "On Art and Subjective Science: Interview with Agnes-Meyer Brandis," *Fundación Telefónica*, VIDA: Art and Artificial Life International Awards, June 4, 2014.

Stephen Wilson, *Art + Science Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

# fresh talk: agnes meyer-brandis

january 14, 2013



Agnes Meyer-Brandis

**CATHY BYRD:** Today I'm in Berlin with [Agnes Meyer-Brandis](#). She's a German artist who explores the intersection of science and creativity in a way that fuses fantasy and technology. Agnes conducts research and presents her projects in cities and remote sites across the United States, Europe, South America and Russia. I met Agnes last week when I visited her installation in the control tower at [Tempelhof](#), an abandoned airport at the edge of the city.

Tell me about your [Institute for Art and Subjective Science and Research](#).

**AGNES MEYER-BRANDIS:** In earlier days, I founded the [Institute Research Raft](#) to explore and confirm subterranean phenomenon mainly, but in the last five to six years I have also been investigating into the opposite direction. For example, I studied the subterranean icebergs below ice-skating-rinks, but in 2007, I realized an artistic experiment onboard a research flight with the [German Aerospace](#) agency where I was able to work in weightlessness to investigate cloud cores.



Agnes Meyer-Brandis, *Cloud Core Scanner*, 2013, film still

So actually, we are exploring realities very deep down, but also very high up. Also, we are studying the parallels between insiders and outsiders. They are very interesting

parallels. For example, if you look into an Antarctic iceberg hole, which can be 1200 meters deep, you can see these ice horizons. I had always associated ice with light colors. But in subterranean ice you see only a small, small area near the spot at which the probe is lighted, and all around is black. When you pull out the probe, then you see these ice horizons passing by and some of them are transparent, some of them are milky, some have frozen debris inside, and actually it looks like outer space. We have these cleaner ice horizons passing by with frozen debris inside, which could be like asteroids, and really it looks like travelling into space. So that was my first space travelling. But let me get back to the Research Raft. The Research Raft is this small institute focusing on these hidden worlds inside the earth, outside the earth, and in between.

Depending on the research focus and the project, we work together in teams. People with different backgrounds work together. So we can develop tools for research, which are really functional also. Our teams consist of experimental computer scientists, geophysicists, biologists, artists. It's really very mixed, and depends on the project.



Agnes Meyer-Brandis, *Control Room*, 2013, installation view, Tempelhof, Berlin, Germany

**CB:** And one project team even included geese breeders.

You've presented your projects and done your research in a number of different settings. I've noted tents, islands, zero gravity planes, a conference, and a glacier.

**AMB:** The glacier, for example, was in Argentina, in [Patagonia](#) [[Perito Moreno](#)], which is the largest ice field apart from Antarctica. I was investigating the moving ice and [cryoconite](#) holes on the glacier, below the glacier, inside ice caves in the glacier. I brought my microscope to investigate these ice crystals, but these glacier ice crystals are so bold and so large that...

**CB:** There is no way you can look at them in a microscope.

**AMB:** They're too big!

**CB:** They're the size of your hand!

**AMB:** [laughs] Well, I was investigating cryoconite holes, which are formed when dirt on the white glacier surfaces, which is dark, attracts more sunlight than the white ice. The dirt gets warm and then it melts slowly into those areas. When you see it from the side—the way we did inside an iceberg—it's like a fall which takes place over several hundred meters. It's really beautiful; you have these small islands slowly melting into the ice. There is also a theory that the genesis of life can happen inside these because you have dirt, water, and so on.

**CB:** Can you tell me about what it was like to produce your weightlessness project with the German Aerospace Center?

**AMB:** Getting the funding together for this project was a big challenge. On one side, there was the German Aerospace Center, which invited me to realize the experiment onboard the airplane. It was a scientific flight, so it was full with scientific experiments from different areas, and I realized the only artistic experiment onboard. The other part was to build the experiment, which was very expensive due to many security rules. I couldn't just make something with hot glue, for example, because everything needed to follow so many security rules. It was incredible. Everything you wanted to build was very difficult. It was really a big challenge to get security demands, finances, and artistic demands under one umbrella.

**CB:** Agnes did get funded to create her aerospace project and also to launch a 2008 experiment involving *Moon Geese*.



Agnes Meyer-Brandis, *The Moon Goose Colony*, 2011-2012, film still

**AMB:** The Moon Geese are a very special migratory bird, first mentioned in a book by an English Bishop, *Francis Godwin*, written in the early 1600s. Within this book, the main character is travelling to the moon with help of Moon Geese. Moon Geese are migratory birds who travel annually, but unlike other migratory birds who go from Spain to Africa, Moon Geese migrate annually from the earth to the moon. I stumbled upon this book when I was preparing my project in weightlessness, because Francis Godwin was the first to describe the phenomenon of weightlessness in this book (which is really interesting because it was before Newton defined gravity). I was wondering, what happened to the Moon Geese in the twenty-first century? Do they still exist? Do they still migrate to the moon or have they been stranded like many other migratory birds? Did they ever fly,

and do they still fly? So I started the first experiment with Moon Geese, which took place in 2008 during the total solar eclipse in Novosibirsk, Siberia. There, we reenacted the flight setup of Francis Godwin with Moon Geese on a small island in the river up near Novosibirsk. Of course, finding Moon Geese in Siberia wasn't easy at all, but that's a story on its own. Anyway, we were able to realize the experiment during the total eclipse and it was really interesting. But of course, it raised a lot of questions. Since then, I have continued my observation of Moon Geese. In 2011, I started to breed my own Moon Geese. I started this on a farm in Italy called Pollinaria. We started with eggs, which we named directly after astronauts or other space related names, and bred them in an artificial breeding machine. Thirty days later, eleven Moon Geese hatched. We started with our astronaut training three days after hatching, and it took place over a whole year.

There are several training methods, such as the Mobile Moon training, or with a V formation, which is very important so the birds can save energy for travelling long distances. Anyway, there were several astronaut methods we used in training. At the end of last year, the next training step was the analog training. Analogs are places on earth or in space which contain similar characteristics. There are places or situations here on earth where astronauts train and where they can get confronted with conditions they will face when they travel to space. We built a Moon Analog for the geese. It's like the lunar landscape and habitat, and also contains several experiments. Moon Geese have been living there since last year November. There is also a control room, which is within a gallery space we have had in Liverpool and New Castle. It's a big control room, like the one from the Apollo Missions, and the control room is connected to the farm. You can communicate with Moon Geese. They have special communication devices. They send Morse code about their general well-being and so on.



Agnes Meyer-Brandis, *Teacup Tools*, 2014-ongoing, installation view

**CB:** Agnes conducted research for the Laboratory of Applied Falling before she created the installation I visit at the airport. Since Tempelhof closed to commercial traffic in 2008, it has been the site of festivals, performances, art fairs, and exhibitions, but Agnes is the first artist ever allowed into the control tower.

**AMB:** Within my artistic work I have already developed several control rooms, like for Moon Geese, or for humans, and so for me the control room is more of a method. In Berlin, I was very interested in looking to realize my work inside a real control tower, so I was very lucky that it was possible there. It was not easy because there are also some security rules again, about the weather radar and so on, but I am happy that it was possible to finally install my control room there.

**CB:** The installation was quite impressive—the console, the chairs, the array of monitors, and radar equipment, and a simulated experiment with immediate replay. Very ambitious. And I went up the spiral stairs that lead to the control room. I don't know how you did it.

**AMB:** Well, we had to bring small pieces up and put them together on site.

**CB:** The installation displays current results from your Laboratory of Applied Falling, which I found quite interesting. You cite *Apollo 15*, an experiment done on the moon.



Agnes Meyer-Brandis, *Feather and Hammer*, 2013, film still

**AMB:** Yeah, in 1971, astronaut *David R. Scott* did an experiment on the moon where he dropped a hammer and a feather to prove *Galileo's thesis* that all objects fall at the same speed in a vacuum. He had felt the moon would be a good place to prove Galileo, and so he brought a hammer and a feather. I really love this experiment. For me, it is like space theatre. I took the hammer and a feather, and I took it as a method to develop my own gravitational measurement tool. So I studied how a hammer and a feather fell to measure gravity situations. I also went to several places and let the hammer and feather fall to observe the place where I was. I went to several analogue places where astronauts were training and everywhere I let the hammer and feather fall. And now I built a Fall Tower, which is on display at the control tower. There, the hammer and the feather fall automatically, on an endless falling routine, to observe the gravity situation on site. The fall takes place so speedily you cannot see it, so we have also developed a special slow motion camera. With that, we can observe the fall and its specialties in detail during this slow motion.

**CB:** So what are your initial findings in this experiment?

**AMB:** So far I can say that gravity is not everywhere the same. It varies, and I am investigating these gravitational anomalies. Sometimes the feather falls more speedily than the hammer. I think there are lot of things still to discover, which are not so clear.

**CB:** You show video footage in the monitors of amateur rocket launches and also professional video documents of scientists who are exploring the birth of planets?

**AMB:** Yeah. Planet formation—

**CB:** How do scientists respond to your work?

**AMB:** In general, I have had very good experiences. For all my projects I have had a lot of contact and exchange with scientists. Of course, in the end, it's always a human question, but in general I have had really good experiences. I was working in this laboratory for extraterrestrial physics at *Braunschweig University of Technology*, because they also have a drop tower there. They supported this show with their footage, and for them it has been interesting and they all plan to come to visit the show this weekend. So they will come by bus, a whole department of extraterrestrial physicists.

**CB:** The way that you took over the control tower for your installation is brilliant.

**AMB:** The control room was flexible, so it is an installation; it's a poetic archive, a very flexible meta-installation, let's say. I can also connect other experiments now at the control tower here in Berlin. We have already connected with Fall experiments, but it can be expanded and can grow and develop. So for me it's a very flexible, and always changing sculptural method.

**CB:** What other hidden worlds are calling you?

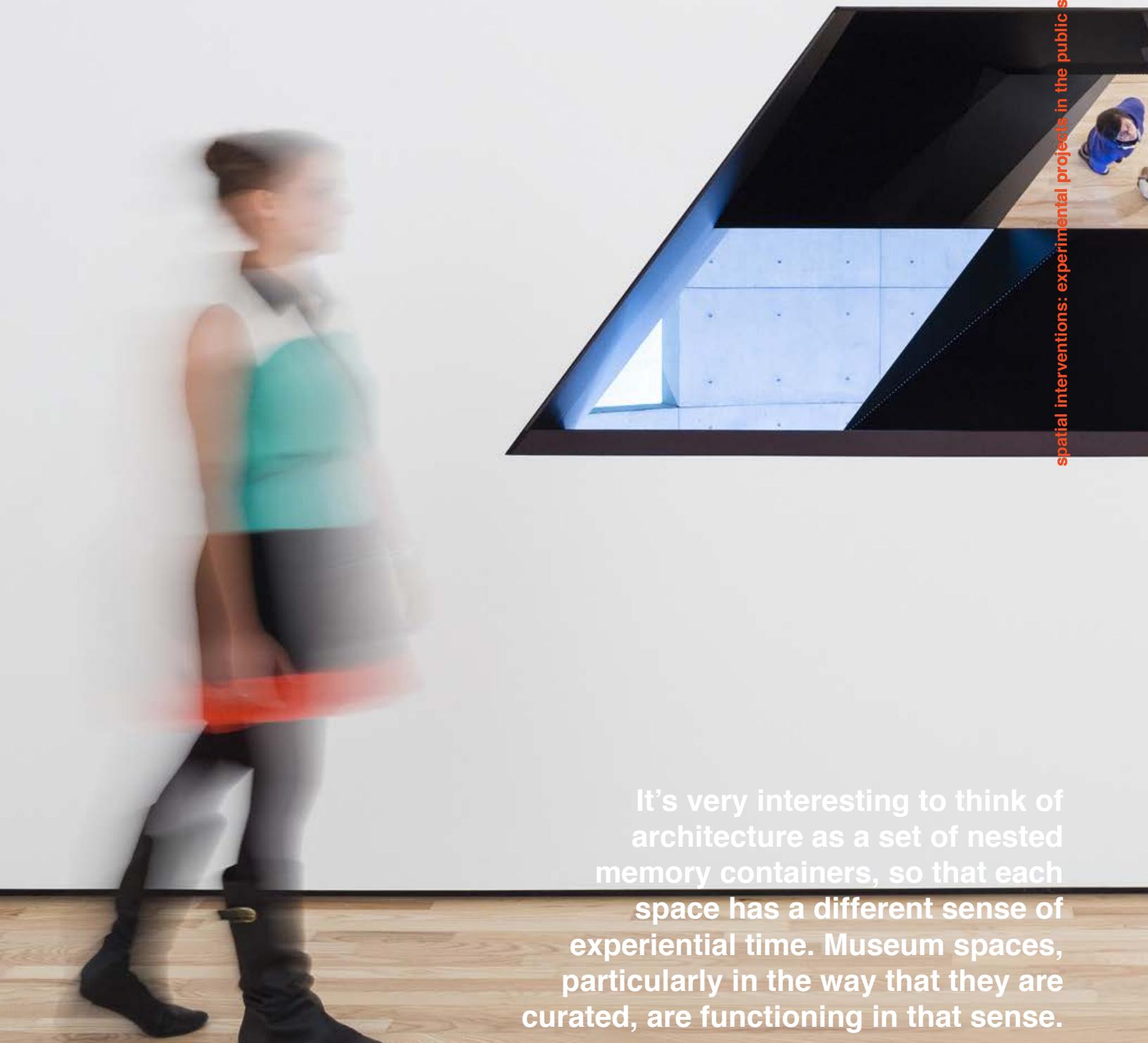
**AMB:** That's difficult because I cannot say—they are still hidden, unable to be seen!

Archival audio: *The Apollo 15 Hammer-Feather Drop, Commander David Scott, live demonstration performed for television cameras, 1971*:

Well, in my left hand, I have a feather; in my right hand, a hammer. And I guess one of the reasons we got here today was because of a gentleman named Galileo, a long time ago, who made a rather significant discovery about falling objects in gravity field? And we thought that where would be a better place to confirm his findings than on the Moon. And so we thought we'd try it here for you. The feather happens to be, appropriately, a falcon feather for our Falcon. And I'll drop the two of them here and, hopefully, they'll hit the ground at the same time...how about that?

# 05 // sarah oppenheimer

(American, b. 1972)



**It's very interesting to think of architecture as a set of nested memory containers, so that each space has a different sense of experiential time. Museum spaces, particularly in the way that they are curated, are functioning in that sense.**

# biography

Critic [Walter Benjamin](#) famously described architecture as an art that the masses experience in a “state of distraction.” Through her architectural interventions, artist [Sarah Oppenheimer](#) shakes us free from the habitually passive way most of us experience the built environment. Like Benjamin’s writings, Oppenheimer’s work often draws parallels between filmic and architectural space. In *Horizontal Roll* (2008) at the [Saint Louis Art Museum](#), incisions from one wall into an adjacent gallery framed a series of views that recalled film shots, what the artist termed “active cinema.” Though her interventions can at first appear straightforward, the depth of their experience conjures an array of artistic and architectural precedents, provoking comparisons to Tudor-era half-timber construction or German Expressionist film. Trained as an undergraduate in semiotics at Brown University, Oppenheimer has often found inspiration in scientific methods of quantifying and describing the built environment. For example, *W-120301*, her 2012 installation at the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) draws on the empirical modeling of American urbanist [William H. Whyte](#) (1917-1999) and cognitive psychologist [James Jerome Gibson](#) (1904-1979) to create a “generative” spatial array that compresses and distorts conventional experiences of architectural space. This manipulation of space invites the audience to experience the museum as institution in a new way. Just as artist [Hans Haacke](#) (b. 1936) has plumbed the mysteries of museum finances and real estate holdings through his installations, Oppenheimer’s cuts and distortions of museum architecture call into question conventions of visuality, objecthood, and temporality in the museum setting. For example, with *D-33* (2012) at [P.P.O.W. Gallery](#) in New York, Oppenheimer constructed a single wall with several cuts to create a series of rooms, the thresholds of which were edged with dark, matte aluminum. Viewed from a distance, the hard edges recalled geometric abstract paintings, but as visitors moved through the space, the sloping walls became, as [one review](#) suggested, a kinetic, bodily adventure, turning the very act of traversing the gallery into a kind of performance.

# reading list

Kelly Crow, “A Baltimore Museum Becomes the Art Object,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2012.

Ines Goldbach, “Sarah Oppenheimer, Artist,” ed. Detlef Bluemler, *Künstler—Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, Munich, 2011.

Nana Last, “There and Not,” *Von Bartha Quarterly*, Basel, Switzerland, 2010.

Sarah Oppenheimer, “The Array,” *Art in America*, May 2014, 40-41.

Giuliana Bruno and Robin Clark, *Automatic Cities: The Architectural Imaginary in Contemporary Art* (Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2009).

Julian Rose, “Mirror Travel: Julian Rose On Sarah Oppenheimer’s W-120301, 2012,” *Art Forum*, April 2013, 240-243.

# fresh talk: sarah oppenheimer

november 19, 2012



Sarah Oppenheimer

**CATHY BYRD:** Today, I'm in Baltimore with artist architect Sarah Oppenheimer. The Baltimore Museum of Art commissioned her to do [two new pieces](#) for the reopening of their contemporary wing and she just gave me a tour. The physical experience is just stellar. This is brilliant work, Sarah. I'm curious about what kind of conversation led to the positioning of these interventions.

**SARAH OPPENHEIMER:** When I was approached by the museum, they asked me to come take a look at the space. In particular I was asked to take a look at this triangular wedge space that bridges an older wing of the museum—not only with an older construction date but housing an older collection—and the new or contemporary wing of the museum. I was asked to create a work in that wedge-like atrium that bordered the two zones of the museum. One thing that was extremely interesting to me is that the atrium space in some ways invited a massive, space-filling sculptural intervention, and it was precisely that which I wanted to avoid. I was very interested in thinking about how one could deal with the boundary without having to deal with the seeming presence of mass. I started to look at the porosity of the boundary on the edges of this wedge-like space. The space is notable because on one side you have this very thick limestone wall and on the other side you have a concrete wall with a set of pre-existing openings in it. Given the scope of the project, it became quickly apparent I couldn't radically change either the limestone façade wall, which was a previous façade of the building, or the concrete cylindrical structure which remains the boundary space of the atrium zone. So I started to look for spaces within the zone that were porous, and specifically porous spaces within those edges and would border on other spaces in exciting ways. Ideally, it would not be simply a one-to-one condition where you have one space touching on another space, but where you might have one space touching on two other spaces or one space touching on three other spaces. That was really how those locations were developed.

**CB:** I know you talked to [Tyler Green](#) last week about how you view each project as investigating a problem or solving a problem of the space.

**SO:** One of the things I was referring to in that conversation was that, as a template for the work, I imagine zones of space having a degree of adjacency. I think of a way to catalyze the potential between the zones as summarizing the idea of “a hole.” But, a hole need not be an enclosed opening. So when I referred to a set of problems, I meant the kind of stacking of spaces that is so common and familiar in architectural space, and how one catalyzes or shifts the passage or flow between those spaces. That becomes the problem in any given condition.

I have been very interested over the last several years in [Richard Artschwager's \*Locations\*](#) (1969), particularly because that piece calls attention to the location, and also the presence of an artwork by its irregularity and its re-marking of space. I think that, in a very different way, these projects are speaking to that condition as well.

**CB:** You have said that your work relates to cognitive science and I know I experienced that just now. I definitely had a bodily impression and a psychological impression of the work. Talk to me more about that relationship with your interventions.



Sarah Oppenheimer, *W-120301*, 2012, installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art

**SO:** I find cognitive science to be a very rich field in terms of instructing and investigating questions regarding bodily perception and experience in a space. It also removes actually any sort of—what I am not sure I would call spiritual or phenomenological questions—but it very much concretizes these in an empirical investigation. I find that to be a much clearer way to think about and to anticipate how people will experience something than to leave it to the fuzzy logic of perceptual presence. There are several different writings on the perception of the ground plane from one space to another, questioning how to regard an occluding edge and how the body will move around an edge and find a changing limit from one space to another space. I think a whole host of articles and essays have informed my understanding over the years of how one can think about the possibility of opening adjacent spaces into each other.

**CB:** You talked with Tyler about the idea of doorways having something to do with forgetting.

**SO:** It's very interesting to think of architecture as a set of nested memory containers, so that each space has a different sense of experiential time. Museum spaces, particularly in the way that they are curated, are functioning in that sense as well. Each room becomes a marker of a certain historical period or a certain conceptual moment and I very much like the idea of playing on or troubling that boundary.



Sarah Oppenheimer, studio, 2012

**CB:** Since you studied semiotics at Brown University and then studied art after, I wonder what is the relationship between your studies of semiotics and the work that you produce?

**SO:** In thinking about semiotics I was introduced to a whole set of questions regarding the relationship of language to the world and the relationship of language to itself. The relationship of language to itself seems both fascinating and very enclosed, and the relationship of language to the world seems almost forgotten in some sense or too readily summed up. In thinking about those questions, I was really drawn to something like cognitive science that poses a very different and potentially richer foundation for thinking about how language and representation more generally touches on the material and the mental qualities of the world, as if those things are totally separable. This is the big argument. I think the titling and also the typology more generally, which isn't solely the titles, raises this question for me of how I represent the problems and variables that are implicit in each project. In the titles, each number and every title stands for a variable that I have isolated as significant such as whether you can see from space A to space B, or how many spaces contact one another in any given instance. In some ways, the titles both call attention to the most important aspects of the work, but they also erase everything about the work that isn't systemic. I think that's kind of a fascinating contradiction.

**CB:** The second intervention is more of an incision. I am curious what effect that particular cutting through space had for you.

**SO:** One of the things I have been interested in the past two years is how spaces are demarcated not only by the quality of the surfaces that surround them, or the quality of the volume or air temperature or sound, but also very specifically by light. One of the most striking things to me

about the space near this limestone wall was that on one side you had this Dan Flavin and on the other side you had this very subdued, warm lighting that illuminated the Cone Collection. I was thinking about not necessarily opening a sight line, but opening a diffuse lighting condition that allowed for a light-based glow between these two zones of space.

There were two aspects about that, that I am very excited about. First of all, the works in the gallery that are immediately surrounding the piece in the Cone wing were selected in conversation with the work in a number of ways that I found very surprising. Additionally, in the next adjacent gallery where you actually have a longer sight line towards the work and you see this long magenta glow in the wall, there is this extraordinary Henri Matisse with a very similar color, although in that case it's a painted color as opposed to a light-generated color. That set of color relationships is really exciting to me.



Sarah Oppenheimer, W-120301, 2012, installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art

**CB:** I notice that there is a sound art piece [by Susan Philipsz] that comes and goes through the incision.

**SO:** Yes, that's very exciting. That was definitely a very unusual and exciting decision by Kristen to use the opening not only for light and sight to pass through, but also to have sound filtered up through the galleries into the upstairs of the contemporary wing.

**CB:** I think it's fascinating. I love it. I experienced a haunting moment in the space with the glow on the Flavin side in particular and that voice! It seems almost like you're in a chapel of some kind.

# 06 // william pope.l

(American, b. 1955)



**People have their memories, and the images they take are imbued with those of the past. I think that's how people 'carry on,' as they say. We are all dragging something around and *Blink* is like that, because there is this four-ton truck, pulled by actual people.**

## biography

Whether crawling along a major metropolitan thoroughfare, hauling a portable video installation, or violently deconstructing the set of a performance space, artist William Pope.L provokes discussion and spurs controversy through his public interventions. Over his more than four decades of artistic practice, the Chicago-based artist has defied viewers and critics to fully comprehend his nuanced, often political works. With a copyrighted slogan that proclaims him “The Friendliest Black Artist in America©,” his work aims not only to pillory outright racism but to discomfit and unsettle the well-meaning white liberal elite. Pope.L grew up poor on New York’s Lower East Side, an experience the artist told one interviewer helped him to accept life’s inherent contradictions while regarding the simple and straightforward with suspicion. In addition to a childhood that mingled moments of startling deprivation with those of poetic beauty, Pope.L cites existentialist playwright Samuel Beckett as a key inspiration. Pope.L’s embrace of incongruity has informed everything from his seminal “crawls” (1970-2000), in which the artist called attention to homelessness by dragging himself through the streets, to *Trinket* (2015), a work at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles, which features a tattered American flag whipping in an artificially-created wind. Pope.L has used media as non-traditional as mayonnaise to shed light on the cruel reality of race relations in the present-day United States, enacting an artistic civil disobedience with roots in the American Civil Rights movement. Like his crawls, more recent works such as *Blink* (2011) and *Pull!* (2013), its Cleveland follow-up, have transformed the urban fabric into a performative canvas, as massive vehicles are dragged manually through the streets, disrupting normal use-patterns and calling attention to issues of labor, community, and memory.

## reading list

Samuel Jablon, “William Pope.L on “Acting a Fool” and Alternative Futures,” *Hyperallergic*, July 10, 2015.

Ross Simonini, “William Pope.L,” *Interview Magazine*, February 6, 2013.

William Pope.L, Helen A. Molesworth, Iain Kerr, and Clément Dirié, *Black People Are Cropped: Skin Set Drawings, 1997-2011* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012).

William Pope.L and Mark Bessire, *William Pope. L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

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# fresh talk: william pope.l

october 26, 2011



William Pope.L

**CATHY BYRD:** I am Cathy Byrd, Fresh Art producer, and today I'm in New Orleans speaking with [William Pope.L](#) about his project for [Prospect.2](#), the 2011 U.S. Biennial. A performance artist based in Chicago, Pope.L is presenting a magic lantern show titled *Blink*. *Blink* features a film made of more than a thousand photographs to be projected through the back of an old ice cream truck. At dusk tonight, volunteers will begin pulling the truck along city streets from the [Lower Ninth Ward](#) to [Xavier University](#).

William, you have been here off and on for the last 18 months, in New Orleans?

**WILLIAM POPE.L:** Yeah, more like a year, maybe fourteen months.

**CB:** Preparing for a project you're calling *Blink*.

**PL:** Yes.

**CB:** Tell us: what does *Blink* mean? What is this about?

**PL:** Well, I think of three things: struggle, community, and dreams. Basically, what you have is a four-ton ice cream truck painted black, equipped with a rear projection screen and a projector inside. The truck looks like an old turn-of-the-century locomotive, and the projector looks like this old eighteenth century projector. It starts one slide at a time, and it projects a movie. The movie is made up of over one thousand images that were donated by New Orleanians.

**CB:** And where did you go to get these images? How did you get them?

**PL:** There was a call for images. The call said: "when you dream in New Orleans, what do you see?" "When you wake up in New Orleans, what do you see?" People could respond to those two questions with an image.

**CB:** And did a lot of the images have to do with their memories of [Hurricane Katrina](#)?

**PL:** That's interesting. People responded in all kinds of

ways. There are some images of empty houses, or houses that are gone. There are images of babies. There are images of people cooking. There are images of bands playing. There are images of their favorite car. There are images of the sunset.

**CB:** So these are the things they are thinking of when they wake up or when they fall asleep?

**PL:** I guess. I mean, it was their response. That's the whole thing. *Blink* is this matrix that allows different kinds of responses to enter into one picture.



William Pope.L, *Blink*, 2011, performance, Prospect.2, New Orleans, LA

**CB:** Did you have a lot of people handing you images or were they mostly digital?

**PL:** A lot of digital. That was the way in which we could best use them, but we did some scanning. A lot of people lost their images, so many of the images were new, but people don't lose their memories. People have their memories, and the images they take are imbued with those of the past. I think that's how people carry on, as they say. We are all dragging something around and *Blink* is like that, because there is this four-ton truck, pulled by actual people.

**CB:** How are they pulling it?

**PL:** We have a harness system we got from [Mardi Gras](#). They used some of these, because some of the Mardi Gras floats are actually pulled by people.

Or donkeys or something like that. Many of them are motorized now, but some of them still use people power.



William Pope.L, The Black Factory Truck, 2011, Prospect.2, New Orleans, LA

**CB:** How many people at a time will it take to move this?

**PL:** There is a crew of ten, but we have alternates who walk along with those ten and they help each other.

**CB:** And the project will start at dusk and go until?

**PL:** Twelve hours later, or until people drop and are bleeding! No, no, no! [laughs] We have shifts of people, twelve to fourteen in each shift, and there are six shifts, ending at sunrise the next day.



William Pope.L, *Blink*, 2011, performance, Prospect.2, New Orleans, LA

**CB:** And why do you think people are getting involved with your project? What's making people want to pull your ice cream truck?

**PL:** To work with their friends. I think people want to take time out of their schedules to do something different, to do something different with friends. Something to set up a relationship, a new relationship. Because it's so hard to do something new, to go out of your routine, to take a risk. I think in a way that's what this offers, and I like to offer the impossible to people. Banks, they want to offer the possible, you know, do you have any collateral for this experience? I have no collateral for this experience. What I can offer you is a possibility to create your own collateral.

**CB:** Is someone documenting this?

**PL:** One of the guys who is coming is a student of [Dan Cameron](#), the organizer, and he has a helmet camera. He is going to push and record simultaneously.

**CB:** So all of the people that you are passing by, he is going to have a vision of...

**PL:** I hope so, unless he collapses. My energy is like...I'm just very excited, kind of tired, but very excited about this... you know, like Cervantes's [Don Quixote](#) tilting at windmills, because I don't know what's going to happen, and there are so many people involved. Just to get the event to happen tomorrow, we are going to need at least 150 people.

**CB:** And I heard you saying that every time you do a project like this, afterwards you ask yourself, "why did I do this?" and "I will never do it again!"

**PL:** Never again! Never...

**CB:** It's like going out into the ocean after you have been in a storm.

**PL:** Yeah, yeah, it's like "forget it," and "what do I do?" Maybe Tuesday. Maybe it will be Thursday. You know, "Oh gosh, yes indeed, I must."

**CB:** And so you will.

**PL:** Yeah, [laughs] I guess. Yeah.

# 07 // helena reckitt

(British, b. 1963)

I'm fascinated by what a communal event of this nature opens up. What does it mean to go to an event like this, a big art event, where you are seeing art with hundreds and hundreds of other people?

## biography

Helena Reckitt is a critic and curator of contemporary art. Currently a Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, Reckitt has curated numerous international exhibitions. Previously, she has held senior curatorial positions at Toronto's Power Plant (2006-2010), the Atlanta Contemporary (1998-2005), and London's ICA (1990-1998). Her own research interests center around issues of authorship, identity, and the critical context of contemporary art. In 2000, she edited the seminal survey text *Art and Feminism* which, in its revised and updated edition of 2012, continues to be the foremost reference book on feminist art. Using digital tools to further make the objectives of feminist art and curation accessible to a wider audience, in 2014, Reckitt co-founded Feminist Curators United, a "network of curators and scholars dedicated to developing feminist curatorial practice."

Spatial intervention played a key role in Reckitt's curatorial projects for Nuit Blanche Toronto 2012 and Atlanta's 2013 Flux Night. Though differing in scale and scope, the one-night art festivals represent Reckitt's fascination with "embodiment, liveness and performativity." In one zone of Toronto's city-wide event, *Once More With Feeling*, animated themes of repetition, remaking, renewal, and revolt. In Atlanta, Reckitt brought together works by fourteen local and international artists in the neighborhood known as the Old Fourth Ward. Whether in the museum or on the street, Reckitt's work balances an understanding of spectacle and public access with a critical perspective that challenges and sometimes undermines viewer expectations.

## reading list

"Dialogues on Conflict—Feminist Perspectives and Art Practice," *Artes Mundi*, April 1, 2014.

Helena Reckitt and Joshua Oppenheimer, *Acting on Aids: Sex, Drugs & Politics* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2012).

Stephanie Cash, "Preview: New Guest Curator Helena Reckitt to Give 2013 Flux Night an International Spin," *ArtsATL*, April 10, 2014.

# fresh talk: helena reckitt ◀)

september 24, 2012



Helena Reckitt

**CATHY BYRD:** Tonight, I'm speaking with Helena Reckitt about her curatorial project for *Nuit Blanche* in Toronto. *Nuit Blanche* is an all night art event that animates the cities in which it is held from dusk to dawn. It originated in 2002 in Paris and it has travelled to many cities since then. Helena is curator of Zone C at *Nuit Blanche* on Saturday, September 29th this year. Her zone is titled *Once More With Feeling*. She is working with a number of artists that she believes embody, or their works embody, this concept.

Helena, you've stated that, for you, the project explores the desire to repeat and remake, evoking circuits of renewal as well as movements of revolt. I'm wondering—why do you think this theme is one that's important to explore?

**HELENA RECKITT:** Part of the idea behind the theme *Once More With Feeling* is that I have seen quite a few *Nuit Blanches* in Toronto. It has been going since 2006, and it started off as a real experiment, nobody knew whether it was going to work. It took off extraordinarily, and has really taken the city by storm—about a million people come out to *Nuit Blanche*, which is about one in four people who live in Toronto. But there is also a sense of the events reaching a certain repetitiveness, and perhaps a certain ennui has entered in. So when I was asked to put together one of the zones, that was a part of my interest: how do we do this again, with feeling? How do we put the sentiment back into it, put the emotion back into it? I'm also fascinated by what a communal event of this nature opens up. What does it mean to go to an event like this, a big art event, where you are seeing art with hundreds and hundreds of other people? How does that make you feel, both as part of the group, and perhaps also as not part of the group at all? And it's a 12 hour event, it begins at 6:59 in the evening and it ends at 6:59 in the morning, so there's a sense of the minutes passing, the hours passing, the night passing, and the cycles of a night. An art project like this can feel very different at 7 pm, when moms and dads are taking their kids around, than at 5 am when people are exhausted, stoned, drunk, cold. So I was thinking of the sort of looping repetitive nature of the event. That is quite compelling to me.

**CB:** And which of the projects that you are presenting literally revolve, repeat, or feedback?

**HR:** In some ways, almost all of them. I chose the theme because I thought it was an open enough brief, I didn't want to be scrabbling around looking for art that illustrated a specific theme. My initial idea was that all the pieces would involve sound, so the repetitive nature of music, the refrain, made this idea of repetition very easy. At a certain point, I decided that making it all about sound was a bit limiting, in terms of forcing me to just work with certain artists. I also started to think about the logistics of an event with almost a million people, and realized subtle sound works might get a bit lost. So I dropped that as an insistence. But I kept the idea of the refrain and the loop, and when I was looking at works, I would ask: does it in some way have a looping structure? It's going to be repeated for 12 hours. My biggest project is by the *Trisha Brown Dance Company*, a fabulous, iconoclastic choreographer who came up in the mid-sixties. This is a work from 1968 which hasn't been shown very often and I was attracted to it partly because it is a very spectacular work. The façade of a building is covered with dancers who make their way across the sheer face of the building. This is spectacular but it's also unspectacular because their movements are quite everyday. So it is not *Cirque du Soleil*; it's almost anti-*Cirque du Soleil*. It's very understated. That will be repeated by successive waves of dancers throughout the night. There are some works that revolve in a much more sort of literal way, an artist that you remember from Atlanta, Dan Walsh.

He goes by the artist name of *JD Walsh*. He is animating an underpass with video projections which turn every day architectural motifs into a record player, or a cymbal, or a trumpet. So it becomes a visual as well as audio orchestra.

A lot of the works have this sense of a haunting, things that come back to us. One of the pieces, which is a few years old now but I just couldn't resist putting it in, is a piece by the Scottish artist *Katie Paterson*. It's called *Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon)*. I've installed it in this stunning nineteenth-century theater space, a very elegant theater. When you go in, you see a player piano just playing itself, and what you think you're hearing is "Moonlight Sonata," but something is a little bit off. There will be a wall-text to explain that Katie worked with amateur radio enthusiasts to bounce a recording of "Moonlight Sonata" that's been translated into Morse code off of the Moon and then record what was bounced back.

They then transcribe that into a scroll that is played by this automatic piano. So, it's sort of "Moonlight Sonata," but not, because it is missing certain notes. As Katie puts it, a set of notes has been trapped on the surface of the moon or lost on its way back to Earth, so there's this very evocative idea that sounds never die, but just reverberate around the universe. This is similar to a concept that *Marconi*, the inventor of the radio, put forward.

**CB:** Which of the artists that you selected, engaged specifically with sound, has created what you would call a haunting or hallucinatory effect?

**HR:** Probably the most clear example of that is a piece by a couple of artists who live in Berlin, originally from Vancouver. They work together and call themselves **Hadley+Maxwell**. They have a piece about the “cultural haunting” of Kurt Cobain. Their piece is called *Smells Like Spirit*, and it’s actually installed in the loading dock of the same theatre that I just mentioned that Katie Paterson has her piece in. As you approach the loading dock, there are roadies hanging around, there is a trailer, there is obviously some kind of concert either being loaded in or loaded out, and from inside the theatre, you can hear a band rehearsing, and the sound of one of Kurt Cobain’s last concerts. But, they’ve also done a much more complicated soundtrack to go with that where you hear Cobain, but you also hear the crowd. It’s really thinking about the role of the crowd in both propelling Cobain and Nirvana to superstardom, but also ultimately in his opting out and not being able to cope with that degree of adulation and that degree of pressure. It’s about how his voice, his image, him as a sort of classic, romantic male artist, haunts us, and the haunting idea that we might have contributed to his self-annihilation.



Katie Paterson, *Earth-Moon-Earth*, 2007, installation view, Nuit Blanche, 2012, Toronto

**CB:** Are there works that have a positive take, in terms of the body’s memory with music, that would make you want to dance or make you feel good?

**HR:** Absolutely, absolutely. I was very keen that there was an exhilarating element to my zone because I do think Nuit Blanche is about this communal experience and catharsis through communal experience. So one of the very fun pieces is called *Body Xerox*, and it’s by a couple of artists who live in Berlin called **Yngve Holen** and **Simon Denny**. *Body Xerox* is a disco—they don’t even call it an art club, they just call it a party. There will be DJs and it’s in a tent and you go in and there’s dry ice and loud music and people having an ecstatic time of it, but instead of disco lights we have Xerox machines. People obviously are creating their own light show through the Xerox machine. They are photocopying themselves, they are photocopying bits of their bodies. Paper is piling up and chaos is ensuing, and I like this idea. Nuit Blanche always teeters on chaos and I partly wanted to court some chaos and revel in it!

**CB:** That is going to be wild!

**HR:** [laughs] We have technicians on hand!

It’s a lovely piece. One of the things that is quite challenging as a curator of Nuit Blanche is that, in addition to the pieces you choose or commission, you’re also asked to select from an open call, which can be a bit random. Fortunately, one of the open call pieces that was submitted was perfect for my zone. It’s called *Young Prayer* and it’s by a young artist in Nova Scotia called **William Robinson**. The piece is an electric guitar installed in a church which constantly is lowered and then smashes to the ground and makes these crazy sounds and it taps you into **Jimi Hendrix**, the origins of rock and roll, and ecstatic religious experiences. It’s the kind of stuff that **Dan Graham** wrote about when he wrote about **Patti Smith** and altered states. That’s a piece that I was really thrilled to come across through the open calls, and we’ve got a lovely church for that.

In my zone, there are very few works that you just stand and look at. Most of them you connect to on a very sensory level because that to me is what Nuit Blanche is about. One of the pieces that also involves music, and I really think is beautiful for this project, is by a sound artist called **Susan Stenger** who is from Buffalo and has worked with **John Cage** and her work is very Cage-y and it’s called *Full Circle*. We are installing it in a bandstand, and it will surround the visitor with speakers. You’ll be enveloped in these waves of sound which are based on various musical and temporal systems at play, and there will be swelling and receding sounds, and you experience it on a very bodily level. Although I didn’t commission the piece. It was in a festival in Newcastle, [England]. It’s a 12 hour cycle and it takes you through 12 hours with a very different quality. So, to me, that was just a no brainer, and I was thrilled to be able to do that.

**CB:** So, this is a project that actually marks the time that’s passing. I attended Nuit Blanche in Toronto a few years back and I really appreciated the arc of energy in that 12 hours...seeking out energy in the wee hours of the morning, and not necessarily finding it.

**HR:** I am not really a big night owl. For me, going to Nuit Blanche has always been a very frustrating experience because I know there is really good work out there, but there is so much work. There is the curated stuff, but there’s also the open calls and the independent projects, and then everyone and their mother puts something on in their front yard. You have this sense of overwhelming, because there are over 3,000 artists this year. That’s about 2,800 too many in my opinion. You can’t deny the sort of exhaustion of Nuit Blanche and that struggle of Nuit Blanche. So, some of the works do riff on that. Through open call, I found a very fun piece by a couple of Toronto-based artists, **Julian Higuerey Núñez** and **Adam Svec**, that’s called *Nuit Blanche Survey and Critical Race*. The two artists have a race with each other to go and see all the pieces, tweet about them, and do a podcast about them, and their comments will be broadcast in a central location. Who can make it back to the finish line having crossed off all the projects is the aim of the piece.

**CB:** That sounds totally insane! It doesn’t sound like anything I would choose to do, but I appreciate that they’re going to do it for us.

**HR:** Another artist is making a piece around the idea of queuing, because as you may recall, queuing is probably an inevitable part of Nuit Blanche. As I was thinking about my pieces, I didn't want anything that would require somebody standing for an hour in a queue, to then go into a gallery or a church or an office and see something for five minutes. To me, that's really unfair on the viewer as well as on the artist.

So, artist [Oliver Husain](#) has made a piece called *Moth Maze* and it's a piece about a queue system. It's a film, a very lovely poetic film, that was filmed in a lamp factory, but it takes you through a labyrinth and that labyrinth queue structure was repeated in a sculptural device that he has set up for where you actually see the film. So you can only see the film by queuing. This is sort of making a positive out of the negative with this work.

**CB:** Which of the projects creates what you call "a sense of time outside time?"

**HR:** I would say the piece I mentioned earlier, *Full Circle*. It creates a sense of time inside your body where you feel connected to something bigger than yourself and bigger than the place you are in by this swelling, the sense of a force of sound and then sound withdrawn. There is also another piece from the open call by a group called the [Kirtan Collective](#), and essentially it's a group improvisation, a music and dance communal piece. There's drumming, dancing, clapping, and they're making video projections from the ambient heat that comes from the crowd. There's a sense of being lost in...well, lost in a group.

**CB:** I guess in the media saturation that is contemporary art in general, the world in general, the most surprising media that these artists work with might be the Xerox machine?

**HR:** Maybe. The Xerox machine is sort of anachronistic, isn't it? Now that we all have scanners and phones that do Instagram, who needs a Xerox machine? I would also say that perhaps slightly anachronistic is that two of the pieces involve pianos.

There's the piece by Katie Paterson, *Earth-Moon-Earth*, but there's also a work with two artists, [Ruth Ewan](#) and [Maeve Brennan](#). Maeve is a very skilled pianist with terrible stage fright, to the point that often she can't perform in public. The piece involves her going to try to play a piece of music, which she may actually fail to do. It's a piece about the pressure on the performer, on the artist. There's the pressure of a 12 hour event at Nuit Blanche, and maybe one option is for the performer to say, "No, I am not going to do it, I am not going to play the game," which connects back to Kurt Cobain's idea of opting out. The audience would be seated. They would wait for her to play or not.

It's a staged event, and it could be a staged event of playing, it could be marvelous playing, it could be faulty playing, or it could be no playing. I will tell you, this is the piece that the Nuit Blanche people are most worried about.

The whole idea is to produce spectacle, something for people to ooh and aah over, but part of me wanted to change that up a little bit.

**CB:** I see! That's why you wrote that you chose to embrace "the potential of mistakes."

**HR:** Yes, likely! [laughs] I was just covering my ass with that.

**CB:** I like that [laughs]. Tell me now about the relationship of your idea to the [Mayan end of days](#) that's prophesied for December 21st. How does this come into play?

**HR:** It's again working with the idea of repetition because, of course, "the end of days" has been prophesized ever since there have been days. [Frank Kermode](#) wrote about "[the sense of an ending](#)" in every era. Every era sees itself as an era in crisis, and there is always somebody who says the apocalypse is nigh. To be honest, when I set up this zone, I wasn't really thinking about the Mayan end of days, but there are two pieces where the artists are really interested in that. So [Dave Dymet](#), an artist in Toronto, is making a piece called *The Day After, Tomorrow*, and he is sampling end of the world footage from 200 disaster movies which play on this massive bank of monitors.



Dave Dymet, *The Day After, Tomorrow*, 2012, installation view, Nuit Blanche, Toronto

**CB:** That's a cheerful piece! I bet it will be fun. There is some vintage film, right?

**HR:** He has identified every disaster film and he says he is: "representing pretty much every land-based disaster film ever made, I don't want viruses as they are non-visual." So he has created these sort of arbitrary criteria, and I think the fun will be going, "oh god, I know that movie!" There will be iconic movies, but then there will be completely forgotten, rubbish B-movies.

**CB:** What do you hope to be remembered about Zone C?

**HR:** I don't actually think that the viewers really give a damn which zone they are in. There's a curatorial kind of fantasy where people are so attuned to your vision, but I hope that people can get lost in this zone. What I don't want is people zipping around and crossing off—"oh I've seen that, seen that." I hope that there is something about the experience of being out in the middle of the night with a load of other people, many of whom probably wouldn't be looking at contemporary art normally, in the middle of the city. I hope something happens to them that wouldn't happen to them in their everyday. What more could you ask for as a curator? That's a very exciting prospect!

# 08 // jack sanders

(American, b. 1976)

spatial interventions: experimental projects in the public sphere // issue three // 2015



They trust us to do this...it's not going to happen overnight and it's not going to happen with one sketch. The solution comes out with a little bit of time and getting to know each other.

## biography

In an often-quoted article of 2012, Scott Timberg bemoaned the state of architectural practice, lamenting in particular the fact that an estimated 99 percent of design services are commissioned by one percent of the global population. Architect Jack Sanders, the founder of [Design Build Adventure](#), is one of the growing number of design professionals who seek out that other 99 percent as his clients, practicing a socially-aware architecture rooted in community engagement and human relationships. As a second-year architecture student, Sanders stumbled into [Auburn University](#)'s much-lauded [Rural Studio](#), a program founded in 1993 by the late [Samuel Mockbee](#) (1944-2001). Rural Studio combines vernacular building methods with an awareness of readily available materials to bring architectural services to the citizens of [Hale County, Alabama](#), one of the most impoverished counties in the state. By using recycled or reused materials and forming close, personal connections with their clients, Rural Studio students gain hands-on experience as "citizen architects." Sanders is deeply influenced by the experience of designing a backstop for a local baseball club, the Newbern Tigers, as his thesis project. He carries what he terms his "sandlot philosophy" into his more recent endeavors in [Marfa, Texas](#): "Get to know each other. Take your time. Make something happen. And have fun." Marfa, formerly a sleepy railroad town, has transformed over the last four decades into a hip mecca for established and aspiring artists and collectors, following in the wake of minimalist sculptor [Donald Judd](#), who moved to the area in 1971. Sanders's work has certainly capitalized on the influx of artistic creativity, as in his work for the trendy "nomadic hotel," [El Cosmico](#). Yet he has never lost his social awareness, using his Design Build Adventure workshops to help create community spaces while teaching attendees and collaborators the basics of design and construction.

## reading list

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "Cardboard Houses with Wings: The Architecture of Alabama's Rural Studio," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44.3 (2010): 16–22.

Laura Fenton, "The Rise of Marfa: How a Texas Town Came to Rule Design," *Curbed*, October 22, 2014.

Penelope Green, "Lessons in How to Play with Fire," *New York Times*, May 1, 2013.

David Hinson, "Design as Research: Learning from Doing in the Design-build Studio," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 61.1 (2007): 23–26.

Neda Ulaby, "Marfa, Texas: An Unlikely Art Oasis In A Desert Town," National Public Radio, Special Series: Destination Art, August 2, 2012.

Keep up to date on the latest work of Rural Studio on their [Blog](#).

# fresh talk: jack sanders

july 16, 2012



Jack Sanders

**CATHY BYRD:** Today I'm in Austin, Texas, with artist Jack Sanders. Jack is the founder of [Design Build Adventure](#), a company offering services including design, construction, and project management, but also he includes in his list of services "public art, adventure planning, storytelling, and dreaming."

I love that description. I noticed that you studied with [Sam Mockbee](#), and everything you do from what I have learned about you so far seems to be profoundly influenced by the time you spent with him and the [Rural Studio](#). You have even co-produced a [documentary film](#) about him.

**JACK SANDERS:** Well, I am just one of those people that wasn't real clear on what I was going to do and ended up at Auburn University, without a lot of direction. I think a guidance counselor who I had told I wanted to study art suggested architecture. So I ended up in an architecture program and was asking a lot of questions about whether I should be there and contemplating film school. It ended up, that without knowing it, I had landed at Auburn University at a really amazing time, not many years after Samuel Mockbee had started the Rural Studio. I get to leave campus and go to this small town in Alabama, in one of the poorest counties in Alabama, and work with Sambo Mockbee and with [Hale County, Alabama](#), and the residents there. Just immediately it was like, I don't care what degree is going to come of this. This is what I want to be doing for sure, and I was hooked.

I went back and did my thesis work out there. I spent a good portion of my architectural education at Auburn in Hale County, Alabama. And for the most part, Design Build Adventure, and all the work that we have been doing since then, has been trying to maintain the spirit, the excitement, and the enthusiasm that we all had at that time. It was kind of a running joke in our program that it was all downhill from there. Even Sambo would joke with us about that because he knew how much fun we were having. It just was a joy to work. Maintaining that sense of wonder that he had

created for us as 18, 19, 20 year-olds has kind of been a challenge for me personally. I think the "adventure" part of Design Build Adventure, that's 100% what it's related to. My particular story was leaving the main campus as a second year architecture student, leaving the bars and the football games and the Greek life, and moving to a town that really had the type of poverty that probably most of us didn't know existed. And we moved directly into that community and started to interact with people and use the energy that we had to design and build.

On the weekends, the building would slow down and you would just try to find things to do—get invited to church with somebody or go to somebody's house for dinner or go to a local club —whatever you could do to become a part of the community. After being there for several months, I stayed there for the weekend, and on a Sunday, I met a guy at the Piggly Wiggly, the local grocery store, and he said, 'would you like to go to a baseball game?' I went to the baseball game with this guy, and with two other classmates of mine.

You know, we were only second year architecture students and we get taken down a dirt road that ends up being maybe two miles from where we were working and living at the university program. Just back through the trees and down this dirt road was an all African American sandlot baseball club that had been operating on this piece of land for 75 or 80 years, and they played a high level of competitive baseball with teams from neighboring towns. Four hundred people would be there, in this town of two hundred people.

I went in and basically knew that I was going to come back to this ball field and do my thesis project, and we didn't tell anybody about it, either. The backstop was chicken wire and cedar logs that had been cut down right there. Some of the posts were probably trees coming out of the ground. People kind of built their own benches and seats where they sat every week. It was a really interesting experience because it was designed, a design that grew over 75 years and we were really timid about pulling some of that apart to build something new. When it finally came down to it, they [the community members] are like, oh, that old thing, let's go! I tore it down in four hours and then there we were; we had a project to rebuild over the next couple of months.

**CB:** And that project ended up in the [Whitney Biennial](#).

**JS:** Again. I was just there at such a great time. Sambo had been sick with leukemia and was in recovery. But with the paintings that were coming out of him and the projects that he was willing to take on, he won a [MacArthur grant](#). All this great energy was out there, and every weekend it was another film crew or a magazine or Oprah. We knew what we were doing was being appreciated and it was exciting, and at one point the curator from the Whitney had called and wanted to talk to Sambo. We didn't know if it was Sambo's artwork or the Rural Studio. What was it? And they ended up saying they wanted to show three projects that represent the Rural Studio's work and one of them was

the Newbern Baseball Club's backstop. So we all got to go to the Biennial and it was quite a moment in our young art careers, for sure [laughs]!



Camp Design Build Adventure, 2012, Marfa, TX

**CB:** I know you are collaborative and you had that experience with Sam. On your website you mention that you have a rule about working with clients — “we have to get to know each other”—is what you write. What’s behind that philosophy?

**JS:** It's rooted in the Rural Studio philosophy for sure, but the real joy in it for me is getting to know the client and their aspiration for what they need to do in their life. And I think sometimes we hope that it just kind of comes out and that we can design it real quickly and just nail it on the first try. But, what we learn is that it just tends to take a lot longer than that, and comes out much more through the development of the relationship between, not just a client and the designer, but also the client, the designer, and the site that they are going to be working on.

I think the most direct story from Rural Studio that comes to mind was that, while my teammates and I were at the Newbern Baseball Club, we were cranking out designs for the first several weeks of the project: paper, paper, paper... model, model, model. Over and over, and just not really getting anywhere. We were trying to hold meetings with the team and ask questions and they would give us pretty general answers about what would be this and what would be good for that.

I don't think the real breakthrough came until the day that I was sitting in the bleachers and one of the teams was short a player, and they called out to me to come play right field. And, then I remember having a moment, seeing my partner Marnie who was braiding hair in the bleachers, and my friend James had made a friend who he was drinking beer with, and I'm out playing right field. Then suddenly there was a breakthrough in our confidence as designers as okay, we can do this. They trust us to do this and they trust us to find what the right answer is, and it's not going to happen overnight and it's not going to happen with one sketch. You can look back at the sketches and might find some of the roots or important stuff in there. But the solution comes out with a little bit of time and getting to know each other.

**CB:** Really, it's like slow architecture.

**JS:** Absolutely.

**CB:** Design Build Adventure was deeply involved in the creation of [El Cosmico](#), this very interesting lodging opportunity in [Marfa, Texas](#), which involves vintage trailers, yurts, tepees, and an outdoor bath house.



Camp Design Build Adventure, 2012, Marfa, TX

**JS:** At some point during my graduate school education, I had the opportunity to meet [Liz \[Lambert\]](#) and she had told us about the work she was doing in Marfa with this El Cosmico project, and I think I had just started to talk about Design Build Adventure. Kind of as a tryout, I was one of the producers of the first party out there which was called “See it before it is there.” And the same weekend of the El Cosmico festival, we all went out there and set up a little camp and had a party. For the most part, that was what began the relationship with me and Liz and [Bunkhouse](#) and El Cosmico. It was a good opportunity to exercise a lot of the Rural Studio beliefs out there. And, one of those is what we at Rural Studio would call design, build, design, build, design, build, which means even though we think we are going to design and then build, about halfway through the build, we realize there is some more designing to do. And I think at El Cosmico particularly, because of the pace and the way that things go out there and the situation that the project was getting started in, that worked really well.



Design Build Adventure, project timeline, artist's studio, 2012, Austin, TX

We weren't just going to go out there and just pave it and build a hotel. It actually had to be much more organic than that, to be an alternative lodging concept. While we were building El Cosmico, I would end up taking a lot of interns or young people with me. We would pack up the van, the trailer, the welder, lay all the tools out, and pack our bags. We'd make a real trip, a pilgrimage out to Marfa and work for two weeks. And every day at noon we would go to the Food Shark. We would be dirty—bandanas, dust, sweat—and everybody said "what the hell are y'all doing," and we would tell people we are here building. And a lot of people would say, "I want to come work with y'all, this sounds fun."

I think that really led to a bigger discussion of the things that were going to happen at El Cosmico and happen more organically. There was always a concept of events and workshops. But this workshop grew very organically out of that. It's really a learning vacation. **Camp Design Build Adventure** is anybody who wants to sign up, no matter what background. We go and stay at El Cosmico, and over four or five days work really closely with an organization called the **Dersu Collective**. So they came to me and said, we got this project called the **East Side Play** that we want to do, taking this piece of land and turning it into a little pocket park for this group of kids that was playing football in the street, and the land was kind of donated for that purpose.

We knew we needed to build a shade structure and so last year we built one, with eighteen participants. We designed and built a shade structure in this park, and amenities: some benches and some landscaping and a tetherball. This truly is a Design Build Adventure where we are given the opportunity to design the next stage of this park. So we might determine that it is another shade structure, or that it's a basketball court, that it's more furniture, that it's a fence. The discussion of what's next is a conversation that the participants in the camp will have really intensely with the group of people, the Dersu members, and people that maintain the park, and the kids that play at the park. Then we'll design, come up with some real quick intervention that we think is the right idea and then execute it.



Camp Design Build Adventure, 2012, Marfa, TX

**CB:** And that's all in five days?

**JS:** All in five days. So it's pretty quick. I have a pretty good idea of what's available in terms of materials around there. So I am able to take them one day and show them the kind of materials, and that's a big conversation again about what materials are available in this area and why. There is not a lot of wood in that area and I think that's probably because there is not a lot of trees growing.



Camp Design Build Adventure, 2012, Marfa, TX

**CB:** I was going to say, there is no shade either. I vote for another shade structure.

**JS:** That's right. Yeah. All the hardware stores sell this oil pipe that is recycled from the oil drilling industry, which is near Midland and Odessa, Texas. They bring that pipe down to West Texas and that pipe is used in everything from corrals to sheds to fencing, and in the ranching industry, so that material is abundant. And **adobe**. We go and visit adobe structures and talk about adobe. We probably are not going to stack adobe while we are there, but we can talk about it and be inside it.

So the whole workshop is basic construction techniques, but we also acknowledge at the very beginning that we are not here to save the world. We are here to work, but we want to learn a little bit about construction techniques, basics, layouts. I teach everybody how to use the **transit**, and really try to read the site and interpret the site. It's just a real basic introduction to design/build, and the adventure aspect is just all the great things that there are in Marfa to do. We have this wonderful access to **Chinati**, a great bookstore, **Ballroom Marfa**, and also to just tremendous, tremendous artists and talent.

# 09 // marinella senatore

(Italian, b. 1977)



**Every time I have to conceive a new work, I have to live for a while in the place where I would work, especially because I have to be part of the communities for a while.**

featured image: Marinella Senatore, *The School of Narrative Dance: Little Chaos I*, 2013, performance

FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL NOW: The Voice of Contemporary Art

## biography

In Italian artist [Marinella Senatore](#)'s work, public participation is an unfolding creative force with the potential to enact social change. Based out of London and Berlin, Senatore orchestrates inclusive events that welcome participation and authorship on the part of the public. Working across a variety of media including photography, drawing, video, and installation, Senatore's creations often have a performative aspect, drawing on her background in violin performance and filmmaking. Recognizing the importance of storytelling in creating community, Senatore's early work focused largely on [micro-narratives](#). Her recent work has expanded to more ambitious forms of participatory performance. Her 2012 screen opera, [Rosas](#) was created in three acts during Senatore's residencies in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom with the help and collaboration of 20,000 volunteers. Taking on the role of the "conductor" or instigator, Senatore's projects purposefully cast voluntary participants in authorial roles, as in [Nui Simu \(That's us\)](#) (2010), where 450 citizens of Palermo, Sicily, came together to tell the autobiographical story of local retired sulfur miners through video. Initiated in conjunction with exhibition [Public Secrets](#) (2014) at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, Senatore's ongoing [Estman Radio Project](#) invites listeners around the world to share their own "radio dramas, lectures, music, speeches, debates, interviews, sound art works, stories, ideas." Significantly, Senatore's works not only reify existing and recognized communities, but reveal previously unseen or hidden connections, as in [The Word Community Feels Good](#) for the [2015 Biennale de Lyon](#), where the artist brought together communities from affluent and transitional parts of the city to bond over the shared experience of reading.

## reading list

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Meg Floryan, "Interactive and Participatory Art," [Art21 Magazine](#), June 3, 2010.

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# fresh talk: marinella senatore

october 2, 2015



Marinella Senatore

**CATHY BYRD:** This is Fresh Talk with Italian artist **Marinella Senatore**. She is known internationally for producing vivid community performances. **Ralph Rugoff**, curator of the 13th Lyon Biennial, invited Senatore to create a local performance project for the exhibition **La Vie Moderne**, or Modern Life. During her residency, she discovered enough talent in Lyon to generate more than one project.

We're speaking today about three public performance projects that you are producing for the biennial. What is your background in terms of your education and your experience as an artist that connects you with performance?

**MARINELLA SENATORE:** I am a trained classical violinist, and I have played in orchestras since I was very young. It is important that my practice, as a structure, is very connected with the metaphor of an orchestra, as I am the conductor very often. I also attended the national film school in Rome, **Cinecittà**. I had the privilege to work with very important directors of photography, directors, and camera operators. I learned a lot of things.

**CB:** Senatore is thoughtful about her work. In the title of this three part project, she quotes sociologist **Zygmunt Bauman**, "the word community feels good." The phrase represents the artist's approach to life.

**MS:** I always say that I like very much several words which portray what I have in mind, what is important for me. First of all, "inclusion." Secondly, "compassion," and third, "emancipation." These three are words very important for me, and the fourth is "empowering." And I strongly believe in this kind of project, because I have experienced it since 2006. So far, I have worked with over 60,000 people around the world. I have a huge experience with people and communities completely different one from another. These words are in my head all the time, they make me feel that I am doing the right process, doing something that could benefit the community and me.

**CB:** Working in the public sphere is the heart of everything.

**MS:** Well, for me it's amazing. It's amazing to go out from the studio and it's absolutely a privilege because I understand a lot about the society, about the history, personal memories. I have a portrait of humanity in front of my eyes every time, which is incredible.



Marinella Senatore, *Narrative Dance*, 2014, performance, Rome, Italy

**CB:** Wherever she goes, Senatore builds a sense of community through performance. She is in demand by curators and museums around the world. Ralph Rugoff, the curator of this exhibition was very drawn to your work before he even experienced what you created.

You mentioned to me that curators are drawn to how you work because of how you connect the museum world with the real world.

**MS:** Exactly. I have commissions from museums all around the world. I work with illiterate people very often, with dyslexic people, with people not able to write and read, with people who are unemployed, with people who don't fit in the social rules of the society. I can have every kind of participant. A side effect of my work is that I make smaller the gap between people not connected with art and the museum, but I do not force this.

**CB:** Exploring the character of the city is the first step in the process.

**MS:** Every time I have to conceive a new work, I have to live for a while in the place where I would work, especially because I have to be part of the communities for a while. I have the need to know the different groups, associations, individuals and so on. In my work, you can find a lot of the social issues because very different people from age, background, are all together making something. After this month of working, trying to know the city better through the people, together we decided to collaborate with a choir of blind people and with a group of readers in two parts of the city, a very wealthy part, and the outskirts. We are working with rappers and musicians from the conservatory, but also young rappers that work on the street.

**CB:** On opening day of the Lyon Biennial, a local choir representing the visually impaired community sing "Le

“Chant des Canuts,” or “The Song of the Silk Workers.” The lyrics tell the story of the 1831 factory workers’ uprising in Lyon. For Senatore, the contemporary performance of this song is a social and political act.



Marinella Senatore, *Le Chant des Canuts*, 2015, performance photograph, Lyon Biennial, France

**MS:** They introduce the city for what, in my opinion, is most important, the city of revolution. The word revolution is extremely important. Lyon is well known as a very pleasant place, a touristic city, but the social importance of this city in the past was that they started a revolution.

**CB:** In this city, Senatore brings together two distinctive reading groups.

Let’s talk about the readers. That was a very interesting project that you have actually referred to as “Babel.”

**MS:** Yeah [laughs]. During my meetings, I discovered that in the wealthier part of the city, and poorest part of the city, there are two reading groups. People in the library meet at



Marinella Senatore, *Babel*, 2015, performance, Lyon Biennial, France

least once a week, and they read together.

**CB:** The readers’ performance takes place within a dedicated space at the Biennial exhibition venue known as *La Sucrière*. The installation is an active reading room with different shelves holding the books read by Lyon’s richest and poorest citizens.

**MS:** In the exhibition, we show their books. The difference is incredible, because the wealthier part is reading just in

French and often bestsellers.

**CB:** In contrast, readers that live at the edge of the city speak many languages.

**MS:** They read in Persian, in Italian, Portuguese, Spanish. They are mostly immigrant. They read in French of course, but they read *Dostoyevsky* in Russian because there are a lot of Russian immigrants. There are a lot of Cambodian, Creole, Latinos. It’s very compelling and very interesting. During the entire period of the Biennial, these readers are going into the space of the *Sucrière* and are reading their books for the people, like an ongoing performance. As always happens, or often happens, people from the wealthier area, *Saint-Cyr-au-Mont-d’Or*, and the less wealthy area, are now friends. They have respect and compassion for the other people because they had the chance to meet each other and to listen to the story of the others.

**CB:** The artist gathered a spectrum of local musicians to



Marinella Senatore, *La Vie Moderne*, 2015, performance rehearsal, Lyon Biennial, France

create a very special theme song.

**MS:** I found an association that takes people from the street, literally, and introduces them to music to try to develop their skills. In this case, they focus on hip hop, rappers, and street cultures which are very close to this kind of people, as well. I mixed them with people that have completely different backgrounds, the people trained in conservatory. It will be amazing to experience what they can do together. The third performance is a song called “*La Vie Moderne*” or “Modern Life” that rappers wrote together with classical musicians, and it’s the official song of the Biennial.

# 10 // scott stulen

(American, b. 1974)

## katie hill

(American, b. 1983)



I think what is interesting is the tension between how you tap into something that's obviously a phenomenon online, and then translate that over to a real world experience.

# biography

## SCOTT STULEN

Currently serving as the Curator of Audience Experiences and Performance at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Scott Stulen is also a writer, artist, and musician. Stulen describes his curatorial work as anchored in notions of “personal and shared cultural memory; the repetition and meditation involved in nostalgic remembering and partial truth recalled as authentic experience.” Images drawn from popular culture sources, including Star Wars, Disney, and Old West Americana, often form the basis of his artistic creations across a variety of media. This same involvement with mass culture and collective memory has also motivated his curating and public interventions. For example, he recently introduced a project entitled *The Office of Art Grievances* that invites the public to file formal complaints about “art” either generally or specifically. These complaints are permanently filed, creating what Stulen terms a “feedback loop between audience and institution.” As the Project Director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota from 2008 to 2014, Scott was a co-curator of the Center’s Open Field, an outdoor summer initiative that brought together the public and local artists for events including the Internet Cat Video Festival (2012-ongoing) and mnartists.org/FieldDay.

## KATIE HILL

As an audience engagement specialist as the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA), Katie Hill’s job is to simultaneously welcome the public into the museum world and extend the museum out into the public sphere. For Hill’s curatorial practice is a family affair; her father was the longtime director of the Minnesota Museum of American Art (MMAA). Despite this historical link to museum curation, Hill is on the cutting edge of public outreach, viewing museums as institutions that must necessarily change with the times. Before arriving at MIA, she interned at the Walker Art Center, where she and Stulen pioneered the wildly successful Internet Cat Video Festival, an event that acknowledges and celebrates the populism of the digital age to bring the public into a non-traditional museum context. Most recently, she has spearheaded a year of weekly surprises to celebrate MIA’s hundredth birthday. Museum-goers during 2015 may be astonished to see a rarely-loaned Vermeer on display, a culinary pop-up shop inspired by the recent Ferran Adrià exhibit, or a new piece of “crop art” influenced by Van Gogh. Her fresh, relevant, and digitally-savvy events seek to open museum doors to new generations and previously underserved demographics.

# reading list

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Hilde S. Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006).

Radha O’Meara, “Do Cats Know They Rule YouTube? Surveillance and the Pleasures of Cat Videos,” *M/C Journal* 17.2 (April 2014).

“Not-so-guilty pleasure: Viewing cat videos boosts energy and positive emotions, IU study finds,” *IU Bloomington Newsroom*, June 16, 2015.

Follow #catvidfest on Facebook and Twitter.

# fresh talk: catvidfest ↞

april 29, 2013



Scott Stulen and Katie Hill

**CATHY BYRD:** In August 2012, the renowned [Walker Art Center](#) in Minneapolis, Minnesota staged a one-night [Internet Cat Video Festival](#) that drew 10,000 people to the Center's [Open Field](#). Today, in Austin, at South By Southwest, I'm speaking with [Scott Stulen](#) and [Katie Hill](#), the curators of that legendary project.

What questions led you to the concept of a cat video festival?

**KATIE HILL:** It all started with the platform of Open Field at the Walker Art Center, which is an experimental public programming space meant for creative expression of all kinds. Working there opened up our brains to the possibility of almost anything happening on the field. Having a secret passion for cat videos myself, we thought it would be a lot of fun to project some at the end of the summer on Open Field. From there, the program sort of skyrocketed into a much bigger experiment about taking an online phenomenon offline and seeing if people would like to watch the videos together. And they did! All ten thousand of them!

**CB:** Scott, can you tell me about Open Field, the outdoor program space where CatVidFest took place?

**SCOTT STULEN:** Open Field is about having an opportunity, not only for artists and the museum institution, but also for the public to participate and create programming. Over the course of the last three summers, we had over three hundred projects presented on Open Field, as small as a book club and as large as ten thousand people for the Internet Cat Video Festival. What I think was great about the Cat Video Festival is that it brought together a lot of those components into one very large event and crowdsourced the content for it. It had a social component and was also an experiment, which was what we were after with Open Field. This became the event that kind of took it to another level.

**CB:** Katie, can you describe the selection process and tell us a little about the aesthetics of the winning cat videos?

**KH:** Basically, I posted a blog on the Walker website asking people to nominate their favorite cat videos on the internet. It was really simple to Google them; you could just put in your favorite video. We were expecting maybe a couple hundred entries, and then a month later we had about ten thousand. So, we called in some extra help and created a jury of curators, artists, cat lovers—a little bit of everybody—to help us make the first cut through that massive number of cat videos.



CatVidFest, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2012

**CB:** What did you identify as the aesthetics of the cat video genre?

**KH:** This is a hard question. We decided everything boils down to whether or not the form and the content seem to fit. A shaky cell phone video that's low quality and blurry but captures a hilarious cat fall or silly happening unexpectedly can be just as good as a highly produced, edited video with a voiceover and very clever film tropes applied to it. They can both be equally good and it is hard to compare that range of quality. But at the end of the day, we asked, is there an element of surprise? Does the form match the content? And, are there cute cats in it? Obviously!



Kittens Inspired By Kittens, 2008, video still

**CB:** Scott, in what way do you think this project tested the boundaries of online communities?

**SS:** I think what is interesting is the tension between how you tap into something that's obviously a phenomenon online, and then translate that over to a real world experience. That was really core to this experiment, because you know a cat video is something people share around. You see it on your phone or you might see it on your computer at work, but it's usually a solitary experience. It's very obviously different seeing this cat video that has been seen many times before, but with ten thousand other people.

**CB:** Scott, can you reflect on the potential outcome of curating projects with broad public appeal?

**SS:** What's interesting is finding different ways you could reach out to an audience. As a curator you know part of what you're doing is selecting things, but also presenting them in a way that may be different for an audience. It is interesting to really think about the audience that attends CatVidFest as being as valuable as the audience who is coming to the museum and seeing a regular exhibition. There isn't hierarchy there; they are both valuable. The one nice take-away from this event is that there were a lot of people who came to this event who may not have come to anything else. They went away with a sense that the Walker was important and valuable to them and a sense of pride in the community; this event happened in Minneapolis and they were part of it. Anytime you can make something like that happen as a curator or programmer or at least set up the possibility for that happening, that's successful. I think that's what drives us to want to do this type of work.



Internet Cat Video Festival, 2012, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

**CB:** So channeling that audience energy into your space for more serious projects would be a goal?

**SS:** Absolutely. I think there is some crossover with it, and if there isn't, that's okay too. What surprised us a little is that in the aftermath of the event, we had a lot of requests for restaging it. I think it is probably to our credit in positioning it in the right context. Nearly every single one of those requests has come from other museums or other non-profits, and not from more commercial venues. So people really got it, and they got it in the context we wanted to present it. That's something we didn't necessarily anticipate, but has been a nice outcome.

**CB:** What is the future of the cat video festival in Minneapolis?

**SS:** It's still going. We have tours lined up that are traveling around the country this spring.

**CB:** It's touring?

**SS:** Yes, it's on the road. It has already been to four or five cities and we have a few more including Oakland, San Francisco, and Portland this spring. This summer, we announced that we're going to do a second version of it. Due to some construction happening at the Walker, it's going to be changing venues to the [Minnesota State Fair](#), which in Minnesota is a big deal. It's going to be at the [Grandstand](#), which can hold thirteen thousand people for the event. Now there is a challenge! How do we top it from last year? There is an expectation now that we didn't necessarily have the first time.



CatVidFest, Walker Art Center, 2012, Minneapolis, MN

**CB:** But you only have room for three thousand more people.

**SS:** Yeah. We could always do two screenings. [laughter]

# 11 // naama tsabar

(Israeli, b. 1982)

# mindy abovitz

(American, b. 1979)



spatial interventions: experimental projects in the public sphere // issue three // 2015

FRIEZE  
PRO



I wanted to make a comment regarding the art world and the music world, and the inequality in both. Because this project is also a mirror held out to the art world, specifically what's going on inside that big tent.

# biography

## NAAMA TSABAR

Rock music is the platform and the inspiration for many of Brooklyn-based artist Naama Tsabar's explorations of gender, sexuality, and power. A former punk band member and bartender, the Israeli-born artist uses her personal experience to invert or reimagine how and by whom music is performed or presented for a public audience. For example, in a series called *Work on Felt and Paper* (2012 - ongoing), Tsabar uses large rectangles of heavy-weight felt or thick artist paper to create improvised string instruments using piano wire and guitar tuning pegs. Presented in a museum context, these works blur the line between sculpture and music, inviting audiences to experience her art in a uniquely sonic and haptic way. In the performance of *Untitled (Babies)* (2008), Tsabar reversed the trope of the male rocker smashing a guitar onstage by using her own guitar to destroy the structure of the stage, transforming an act of male aggression into, as her website describes, a "powerful independent act, with a separate, inner logic." In a similar act of subversion, for *Without* at the 2014 Frieze New York art fair, Tsabar excised the floor from her artist booth within the Frieze tent and transformed the removed piece into a public stage that was placed outside the exclusive, ticketed sphere of the art fair. In collaboration with Mindy Abovitz, Tsabar curated a public music festival on the outdoor stage, bringing together bands from across the globe.

## MINDY ABOVITZ

The founder of *Tom Tom Magazine* and a formidable percussionist, Mindy Abovitz is beating out a resounding call to arms to other female drummers. Abovitz started *Tom Tom* as a blog, to address a neglected niche audience—female drummers who wanted to read and learn about other female drummers. Today, the magazine highlights fierce women musicians while raising awareness of the underrepresentation of women in the music industry. In its political aims, Abovitz's work recalls that of the art world's *Gorilla Girls*, the feminist collective who deploy "facts, humor and outrageous visuals" to call out sexism on the part of museums and collectors. Abovitz happily admits that she is blissfully ignorant when it comes to male drummers, a knowledge gap she has no plans to remedy. As she explains, "I like to think, read, consume music and music media, made by, about, for women." In addition to editing, Abovitz has played with a variety of ensembles, including *Taigaa!*, *Hotbox*, *More Teeth*, and *Chica Vas* and taught other aspiring musicians at the *Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls* and *viBe Songmakers*. Her engagement with Tsabar's *Without* project gave her the opportunity to further her agenda by foregrounding seventeen bands with female drummers and beat-makers.

# reading list

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Emily Prado, "Tom Tom Magazine Celebrates Five Years—And Founds a Drum School," *BitchMedia*, February 6, 2015.

Naama Tsabar, "Without," *ART HAPS*, from the series "Artists On\_\_\_\_\_," August 9, 2014.

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# fresh talk: naama tsabar ↪

may 22, 2014



Naama Tsabar and Mindy Abovitz

**CATHY BYRD:** Today we're on *Randall's Island*, standing in front of a small tented performance space on the great green lawn outside the North entrance of *Frieze New York*. We have come to meet Israeli artist Naama Tsabar and *Tom Tom Magazine* publisher Mindy Abovitz to learn about their collaboration for *Frieze New York*. Theirs is literally an outsider project: a free four-day outdoor music festival featuring seventeen bands. You're about to hear how the artist and the publisher brought music to meet an art fair.

It's so great to have a chance to talk to you here at *Frieze*, and to participate as an observer of your project here on the lawn outside the fair. Tell me what gave you the idea to do something called *Without*.

**NAAMA TSABAR:** Well, even though the live part of the project is outside, it was generated from the inside. *Frieze* gave me a booth inside the fair, but then I cut the floor out of it, leaving a three foot hole in the fair, exposing the grass underneath. This brought the outside in, brought the scenery into the fair, and then I took that floor and put it outside, in a different landscape, different location. That floor shifts from being a floor to display art on, to being a stage to perform on. Then that floor became a stage for a music festival. Once I understood that sculptural, or architectural, dynamic of taking something out of the fair and rendering it for another use, for another kind of cultural expression, I approached Mindy Abovitz of *Tom Tom Magazine*. *Tom Tom* is the only magazine in the world that's dedicated to female drummers, and I asked her to create the festival that would be on this fair booth floor because I wanted her to put her agenda on stage. For me, it was about the inside and the outside. The inside is about showing art objects, something that's the aftermath of an action, of a sculptural act, of a painterly act. But outside, it is actually happening in real time. So it is performative, it is durational, it has a start and an end and that tension between those two worlds is really interesting for me to explore. And without the borders of the art fair tent, it's also something that is there, and not there, at the same time.

**CB:** How does this connect with your previous projects?

**NT:** A lot of my art explores overwhelming, all-encompassing environments, specifically nightlife and musical environments. I zoom in on the materials and objects that serve a functional purpose within these environments, but are many times hidden; they are kind of behind the scenes. Here I took out the floor from inside the fair, which is this all-encompassing environment that you go into, and you get sucked into it. It's a very specific world. Without a floor you can't show art, it's very basic. It's cutting the floor beneath your feet. For me, sculpturally, that made sense within my practice to use that element as the stage for the festival.



Naama Tsabar and Mindy Abovitz, *Without Festival*, 2014, *Frieze New York*, Randall's Island, NY

**CB:** How is it unlike everything you have done before?

**NT:** I have never had a music festival with seventeen bands. It's overwhelming. It's ridiculous. It is everything that I felt I could never do. So it's in a way like a dream that I never dared to dream happening. I think it tells a lot about *Frieze*, as well, that they are backing this. It is outside of their comfort zone in terms of having live bands here, which brings a different kind of aesthetic, a different kind of sound aesthetic. It's bringing in another world that's really different from the art world—although it is a cultural world—into its playground. It's the most ambitious project I have done to date.

**CB:** What is your history with art fairs?

**NT:** Professionally, I did my first art fair in 2007 in *Basel in Switzerland* with a very big project, an art statement called *Encore*. From the get-go, it was a very big, hard-to-sell project, which made it ambitious. Through the years, I have been showing in art fairs in a regular booth, doing things that are more market-oriented, and then also projects that are a bit bigger, thinking about the context of the art fair itself. This again is by far the most specific project I have done in an art fair, for an art fair, about an art fair.

**CB:** And how did you meet Mindy?

**NT:** I came here from Israel, six years ago, in 2008, and very early on I met Mindy. I love what she is doing. I love her magazine. I love her agenda. I love what she is

promoting and that she is promoting it wholeheartedly. And we started collaborating very early on. She put a piece of mine in her magazine, one of my earlier pieces that deals with the drum kit and the drum case. Then, very naturally and organically she became a musical collaborator with me. A lot of my sculptures can be musically activated, and I work with musicians to activate them. Specifically, Mindy is part of a band I call the Felt Band, which is the activation of big felt sculptures that I make. The Felt Band plays them, performing in galleries, in art fair settings. It's an ongoing collaboration.



Naama Tsabar, *Without Festival*, 2014, Frieze New York, Randall's Island, NY

**CB:** Mindy, how did you get to New York City? And why is this a good place for you to be?

**MINDY ABOVITZ:** I got here via a van, in 2002. I got here without realizing why I belonged here, and that has been unfolding since I got here. I'm here because I am a musician, I am an artist, I am a media maker, I am a freak. And that's who I think makes up New York. So I am in the perfect place.

**CB:** I'm wondering about percussion. Why *Tom Tom Magazine*? What is your goal with the publication?

**MA:** I am a drummer and I am feminist, and I was a **riot grrrl** when I was a teenager. I took for granted that that movement would have made enough changes that by the time I was in my mid-twenties I would be in a more egalitarian music world. I have worked in the music industry since I was given a bass guitar when I was fourteen years old. I remember just being surrounded by music. I have worked at **Main Drag Music, East Village Radio**, I did live sound recording. I was at this point in my late twenties where I looked around and realized that there was still a large disparity between men and women in the music world. Being a drummer, I could see the disparity in drummers the most. I set out to change that by starting the magazine, both online and print. Through events, through talks, and workshops, we try to increase the number of girls and women drummers worldwide. That's my goal. Period.

**CB:** And how is it going?

**MA:** It's going really great. In the four and a half years that I've been working on *Tom Tom*, I've had the ability to collaborate not only with artists, but also with many music industry movers and shakers. They are all helping make the

changes that we need to, so that one day everyone can play whatever they want and not think twice about their gender when they do so. That's my goal.

**CB:** And are you meeting that goal through this festival, the way you curated the projects here?

**MA:** Every single thing we do within the magazine is to promote women and girl drummers. So in that regard, yes. But also, this is a place for me to be creative and to do what I do every day. With the magazine, the promotion is usually very pragmatic, and here at Frieze, with Naama, I am able to step back a tiny bit and use it as a place to comment on the work we do within *Tom Tom*. So yes, this is promoting female drummers, but usually we do so in a very straightforward way. This is in a way in which people can contemplate it a bit more.



Naama Tsabar, *Blood Makes Noise*, 2014, performance, Guggenheim Museum, New York

**CB:** Do you feel like you're going to get the attention of fairgoers?

**MA:** Yeah, we already have, and we will continue to. We are presenting really great music and all the bands happen to have female drummers in them.

**NT:** And in fact, there is an echo of the project inside. Even if fairgoers don't come to hear the music specifically, the content is there already. Or is not there.

**CB:** Naama talks about the disparities she sees in the art world and how they are represented inside the art fair tent.

**NT:** I also wanted to make a comment regarding the art world and the music world, and the inequality in both. Because this project is also a mirror held out to the art world, specifically what's going on inside that big tent.

Whereas we are displaying around 70% female musicians, inside they are presenting probably 70% to 80% male artists, because that's what dominates the art market. Also, this is a free festival that anybody can come in and listen to, while the fair requires a paid entrance. I think all of those kind of dividers— invisible dividers, yet so present—these are things we are touching upon and we are taking small steps and big steps to change. I think this is one of the steps.

# discussion

1. The conversations in this issue deal with works consciously created in the public sphere. How do the various projects described here conceive of the “public?” Who counts as the “public” in the context of these works, and in what ways do these artistic interventions engage the public?
2. A number of these works engage deeply with the notion of “community.” In what ways do they create, strengthen, or re-invent community relationships?
3. Cesar Cornejo’s *Puno MoCA* turns private domestic space into public museum space, while Naama Tsabar’s project *Without* turns a ticketed/private art fair booth into a public music festival. What other surprising or provocative inversions do the artists in this issue facilitate? How do these transformations create new experiences for public artistic or architectural practices? Do they undermine or thwart entrenched power relations—race, class, gender, etc.—and if so, how?
4. Many of the artists in this issue blur the lines between art and architecture, including Jack Sanders and Sarah Oppenheimer. How do their projects challenge, disrupt, or unsettle your preconceptions about the built environment? How might architecture as a profession benefit from the experimentation and unconventional thinking that characterizes this “artistic” work?
5. Kristen Hileman, Katie Hill, Scott Stulen, Helena Reckitt, and Ralph Rugoff are among curators playing an important role in the spatial interventions we introduce in this issue. In what other ways do you see curators working behind the scenes with museums, biennials, and public art projects to bring experimental art into the public realm?

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