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## Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation | The 8th Floor Interview for 10xCommunity: “By Addressing Real Life in our Work, There is More Potential for Change”



**ANTE Mag** is focusing on ten projects that span creative disciplines and seek to build wider community ties between creative disciplines in our new series of interviews *10xCommunity*. Featuring artistic projects, community-building initiatives and interdisciplinary platforms, ANTE is sharing these interviews on the mag and across social media that spotlight these endeavors through the current social crisis to pivot to sharing positivity and uplifting creative news to our audience. **Shelly & Donald Rubin Foundation, The 8th Floor** is a platform for socially engaged exhibitions and programs featuring artists of diverse backgrounds involving communities in dialogues around a range of social issues. ANTE contributor Mariel Tepper touched base with Executive/Artistic Direction at The 8th Floor, Sara Reisman, in order learn more about what types of initiatives they are enacting and following during CoVid-19.

*(Lead image credits: Jane Benson. A Place for Infinite Tuning, 2014. Plywood, steel, mirrored plexiglass, wooden vase, latex paint, hand-cut artificial flowers, hand-cut oud and viola Photograph by Matthew Johnson, courtesy of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation.)*

***ANTE mag. How did The Rubin Foundation's The 8th Floor get its start? What was the initial vision for how The 8th Floor could explore the intersection of art and social justice?***

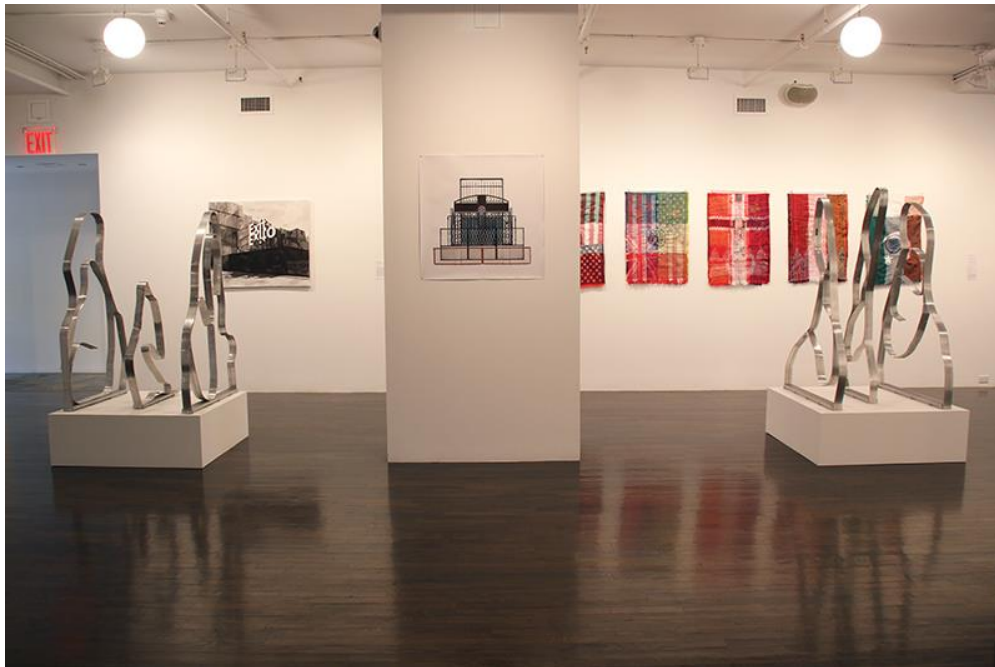
***Sara Reisman.*** The 8th Floor was founded in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin to showcase their private art collection, which, at the time, was focused on contemporary Cuban art. When I started at the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, as Artistic Director, in 2014, part of my charge was to help refine the mission of the Foundation, which was founded in the mid-1990s. The Foundation had supported arts and cultural organizations – ranging from visual arts presenters in New York City, to Himalayan art projects – as well as social justice organizations advocating for freedom of expression, gun control, and access to health care. In the process of identifying that the mission could be more precise in its support of organizations in New York City that were bringing art and social justice together, we determined that The 8th Floor could become a platform for art and dialogue around social justice themes. Initially, I thought there would be a few shows to articulate the Foundation's interests. The first show I curated at The 8th Floor in 2015 was *Mobility and Its Discontents*, which included artists Jane Benson, Ángel Delgado, Lan Tuazon, and Javier Téllez, whose projects expressed the impacts of borders and strategies for transcending them. As we – my colleagues George Bolster, Anjuli Nanda Diamond, and I – continued to develop ideas for exhibitions, it became clear a series of shows on social justice themes, building upon one another, could be ongoing. In addition to the exhibitions, public programs and workshops are integral to providing audiences and the communities we serve with a discursive environment that is both communal and supportive of free expression. Without public programming, I think the effect of the exhibitions would be very different, less engaged.

***ANTE mag. The COVID-19 crisis has deeply impacted our society and the art world in unprecedented ways. What are some ways that the Rubin Foundation will stay connected and active in the arts community during this time?***

***SR.*** We recently launched a virtual series called *Performance-in-Place*, which we thought of as a way to engage with artists, providing them with support and a platform, to present new performances generated by the new social distancing measures (whatever that might mean for each of them.) *Performance-in-Place* will happen every third Tuesday evening (times depending on where the artists are located), our first event was led by Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful Espejo, in the Bronx, with two collaborators Anna Recasens, and Laia Solé, who are based in different parts of Spain. Their conversation, *On Art and*

*Friendship*, also showed excerpts from a new video piece they began working on in February to document the aspects of art praxis, that are often not shown in art spaces. For our team, it was moving to see how the three artists facilitated a discussion of sharing and connecting with a group largely consisting of individuals who are often in attendance at The 8th Floor. Forthcoming performances include presentations by Alice Sheppard with Kinetic Light (June 9), *From the Collection of Eileen Myles* (June 30,) Maria Hupfield (July 11,) a new piece titled *Hotline* by Aliza Shvarts (September 1,) and Latasha N. Nevada Diggs (September 22.) To complement the performance series, we are hosting monthly talks online as well. On May 28, I will moderate *Places of Isolation and Healing*, a conversation between Edgar Heap of Birds and Douglas Miles, and on June 18, I'll be in conversation with artist and activist Carmen Papalia on facilitating accessibility in virtual spaces.

Initially, I felt that the pressure to generate programs for virtual experiences was uninspiring. But two months into this, I'm realizing there is great potential to connect people internationally, across geographies. Of course, more than ever, the notion of the digital divide is an issue, but I can see that as we learn to operate virtually, there is an opportunity to approach accessibility in new ways, online and eventually as we make the shift back to doing programs in person.



Mobility and Its Discontents, installation view at The 8th Floor From left to right, works by Alberto Borea, Jorge Wellesley, Lan Tuazon, Jane Benson Photograph by Matthew Johnson, courtesy of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

***ANTE mag. Your organization’s past exhibitions explore pressing social issues and concepts, from healthcare to mass surveillance to “different modes of resistance” in the series Revolutionary Cycles. Why is art and culture necessary in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic?***

**SR.** *Revolutionary Cycles* was conceived as a series of six exhibitions to examine the instruments of social and political transformation. In the first exhibition *Revolution from Without...*, which opened in January 2019, artists featured in the show – Chto Delat, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Dread Scott, and others – expressed how change often comes from those on the margins of the polity, and the condition of being without – without rights, without representation, and without capital. It’s clear to me that in the current climate, a crisis of a failing health care system, capitalism run rampant, and rights being stripped away in the name of national security, art is essential for its capacity to communicate conditions that would otherwise be obscured. I also believe that even as the decision to make art is perceived by many to be one of privilege, being an artist is a precarious existence, and yet, artists constantly take risks in representing unpopular ideas, that question authority, that challenge the status quo. The next exhibition in the *Revolutionary Cycles* series, *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow* (originally scheduled to open on May 14 and postponed until at least the fall) is focused on entrenched forms of misogyny in our culture, and will feature works by Betty Tompkins, Joiri Minaya, Yoko Ono, Tracey Emin, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Aliza Shvarts, among others. With support from the Italian Council (a funding body of the Italian government) we are commissioning Maria D. Rapicavoli to make a new film, *The Other: A Familiar Story*, about immigration based on the life of a close relative. The project charts the oppression of a woman who emigrated to the U.S. from Italy, forced to leave her children behind, surviving an abusive relationship in the process. *A Familiar Story* becomes more timely given the immigration crisis we’ve been witnessing over the last decade, and now with the pandemic in which domestic abuse is compounded by quarantine. The logic behind Rapicavoli’s film demonstrates how artists are often thinking about what is below the surface.

***ANTE mag. What have been some of your organization’s narrative goals with past exhibitions and programming, and how might those narratives come into play after this crisis?***

**SR.** We obviously have no real idea what the outcome and conclusion of the pandemic will be, but our exhibitions together present a narrative in which questions of equity and human rights – whether they be LGBTQi rights, disability rights, or to do with reparations – are at the forefront. Regardless of what happens

after this crisis (if there is a distinct ‘after’), I hope politically engaged art discourse can continue to be more grounded – as I feel we have been since the pandemic took hold – in the realities we face as cultures, as communities, as a country. And to understand that reality is not always pleasant, or fair, or aesthetically digestible – but that by addressing real life in our work, there is more potential for change.



Betty Tompkins Apologia (Caravaggio #1), 2018 Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P.P.O.W, New York

***ANTE mag. Public events and programs are a vital aspect of The 8th Floor, with frequent artist talks accompanying exhibitions. During this time is your organization considering any alternative types of programming such as virtual talks or exhibitions?***

**SR.** As I mentioned, last week (on May 19) we launched *Performance-in-Place* as a virtual series, and monthly talks, which right now feel like a good alternative to the fact that we can't gather people in real time and space. With that in mind, if the pandemic means we can't return to doing in-person programming in the fall, or by the end of the year, we will have learned how to conduct virtual programs. We are taking the time to do certain projects that are less immediately visible. For the last year we've been hosting a series of closed conversations called *Access Check: Mapping Accessibility 2.0*, which actually started with a public program

last July at The 8th Floor. Organized in collaboration with choreographer and artist Jerron Herman, the talk brought together a group of artists, activists, and educators who have consistently advocated for disability rights and access in the cultural sector. We quickly realized there was a need to continue the discussion, and now we're in the process of finalizing a survey for the field, split into two tracks: one for artists with disabilities about what is needed from institutions in terms of accessible and equitable programming; and another geared towards organizations and institutions, to understand what their capacity is in terms of facilitating accessible cultural programs. We hope the survey raises awareness about what institutions can do to become more accessible, while helping to formulate tools and language for artists with disabilities to advocate for what they need, similar to the way in which WAGE guidelines provide artists with talking points about payment for their work.

***ANTE mag. Are there any current projects, funds or resources you would like to promote for artists or fellow organizations who have been impacted by COVID-19 shutdowns?***

**SR.** There are so many incredible efforts that have emerged in response to the pandemic. Here are a few that have impressed me in their concern for vulnerable communities:

COVID-19 Dance Relief Fund – [Linked here.](#)

Tri-State Relief Fund to Support Non-Salaried Workers in the Visual Arts – [Linked here.](#)

Artist Relief – [Linked here.](#)

The Crip Fund – [Linked here.](#)

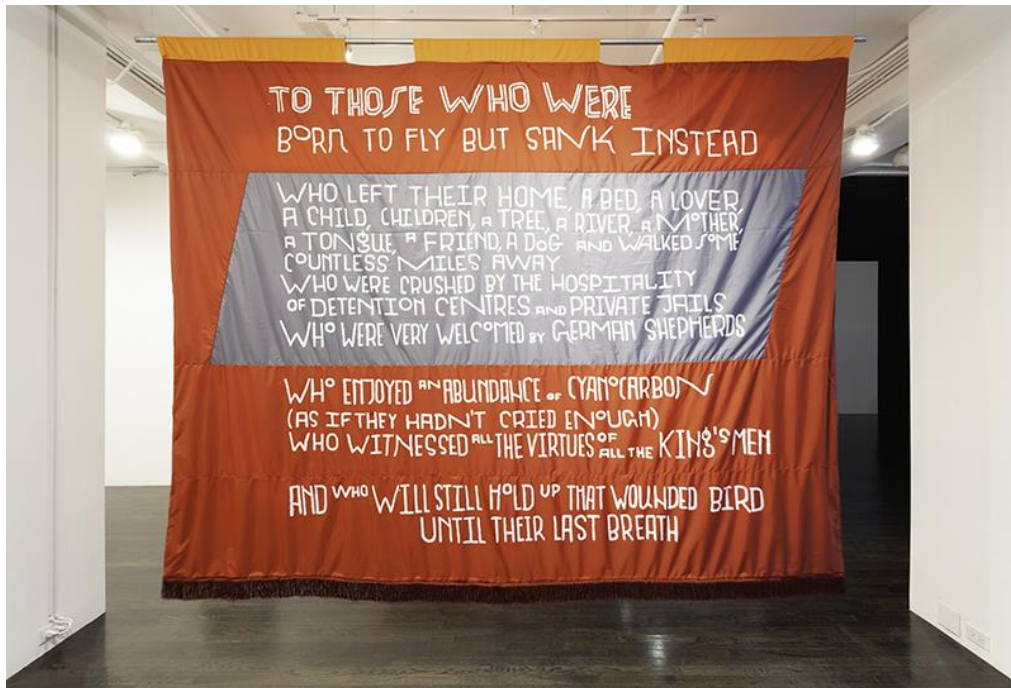
I'm also impressed by mutual aid efforts that have emerged. The Sunview Luncheonette set up a fund for workers at the Met foodmarket in Greenpoint – [Linked here.](#)

***ANTE mag. Can you tell us about your recent initiatives and what projects may be in store for the future of The Rubin Foundation?***

**SR.** After *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow*, we will stage the fifth exhibition in the series, titled *In Kinship*. The show will look at alternate family structures over the last 30 years, expanding the notion of family beyond heteronormative, nuclear, or government mandate, in the contexts of queer culture and immigrant



communities. The sixth and final show of *Revolutionary Cycles* is *After the Fall*, which will reflect on the political moment to consider methods for the societal change needed to move beyond the political binaries that currently shape U.S. culture. The exhibition is conceived to anticipate various outcomes in our collective political future as articulated by artists and cultural producers, while simultaneously recognizing the need for spiritual transformation in times of crisis. Originally, *After the Fall* was meant to open around the time of the next presidential inauguration, with ‘the fall’ being open to interpretation. It makes me think of one of Dread Scott’s artworks featured in *Revolution from Without...*, titled *Overthrow Dictators*, which was made as part of the J20 inauguration protest in 2017. It’s a stencil with the phrase: by reading this, you agree to overthrow dictators.



Chto Delat, *To those who (Migrants)*, 2019. Photograph by Julia Gillard. Courtesy of the artist and the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection.