

INCONVERSATION

SARA REISMAN with Kara Rooney

Sara Reisman is an accomplished independent curator and former Director for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs' Percent for Art program, the city's only legally mandated art-commissioning program fully funded by city capital projects. In April, Reisman joined the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation as their new Artistic Director, a position in which she is charged with the enhancement and implementation of the Foundation's newest initiative, *Art and Social Justice*. Reisman sat down with *Rail* Managing Art Editor, Kara Rooney, to discuss this transition, as well as the politics that surround working with public and private institutions, aesthetic agency, and the potential of artist-driven activism.

Kara Rooney (Rail): You earned your B.A. in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago in 1995, after which you participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program as a Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow from 2002 – 2003. Since then you've had quite an extensive curatorial career, most recently completing a six-year stint as the Director for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs' Percent for Art program and now, as the Artistic Director for the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Given your academic background, how did you first become interested in curatorial work, particularly in regards to its role in the intersection of art, politics, and activism?



Portrait of Sara Reisman. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
From a photo by Zack Garlitos.

Sara Reisman: Well, I started out thinking I wanted to be an artist, but at the time, the art department at the University of Chicago was not as developed as it has become, so I decided on studying languages. Like art, languages, specifically Hebrew and Arabic, would be my currency. That had a lot to do with having lived in Israel the year before going to college, and, I believe, directly informs a kind of political perspective that emerged from that time. I was living on a kibbutz which was idyllic in terms of collective living, but that was against the backdrop of the first Gulf War, which raised questions about how to reconcile collectivism and socialistic values with the politics of statehood. Studying Hebrew and Arabic was a personal response to that. I continued to make art but upon moving to New York, it became clear that the economic landscape of going to art school was not going to be financially possible for me, at least not for awhile. So I started working in the art world. One of my first jobs was as gallery manager at Artists Space, and in that role I realized just how many artists there were out there, that maybe there was a more functional role for me as a curator. This was around 1997. I was also compelled by the interdependencies of working with artists,

as opposed to making objects. Some years later I applied to the Whitney Program.

Between graduating from college and the Whitney Program I'd done fundraising and grant writing at the New York Foundation for the Arts, as well as at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), working with individual artists doing public projects, in addition to larger projects outside of the gallery system. I worked at LMCC during 9/11 so after that I decided I needed to refocus on what I really needed to be doing, and it wasn't fundraising [*Laughs*]. This realization was tied to what was a strange triangulation of art, downtown real estate development, and patriotism, in the context of LMCC having been in the World Trade Center. I also lived about five blocks from the Trade Center at the time, so, my attitude was that I had to get as far away from this agenda as possible—it was a heartbreaking time—and think about art for its own sake. The Whitney Program seemed to be a good antidote, an outlet away from that.

Rail: You've worked with dozens of artists over the course of your career, at Percent for Art alone commissioning over 100 projects, along with having mounted independent solo exhibitions by artists such as Christopher K. Ho, Peter Rostovsky, and Claudia Joskowitz, to name a few. What drives you as a curator, and which projects have been the most compelling for you to pursue?

Reisman: Well, there's that bipolar dynamic of solo shows versus group or thematic exhibitions. As a curator, both of these offer different kinds of access and pleasure—what you can learn from an individual artist, versus what you can learn in the development of a group or thematic exhibition. The connections to be made between artists are quite exciting. One of the earliest group shows that I curated in a gallery, not in a public space, was *The Book as Object and Performance*. It was at a space that doesn't exist anymore called Gigantic ArtSpace, or GAS [*Laughs*]. They had Gigantic branding, Gigantic synergy, like a record label, and other things, a film production company, on Franklin Street where several galleries are now. Curating there was an opportunity to think about artist books, which as an artist I had been interested in doing and making because of portability. There's an interesting relationship between artist books and public art, in the sense that it's about the circulation of art beyond art spaces. So, I would have to say that the thematic was probably more compelling to me initially as a curator, although my work on more recent solo exhibitions has maybe changed this perspective.

When I was guest curator at Forever & Today, between 2012 and 2013, a

close friend-artist, Claudia Joskowicz, had done this piece called *Sympathy for the Devil*. It's a piece about the phenomenon of Jews and Nazis who had left Europe during World War II. A lot of them, from both sides, relocated to Latin America. The piece is a reenactment based on an anecdote that a relative in her family described: two people living in the same building, one was Klaus Barbie (a Nazi leader who was nicknamed the Butcher of Lyon), and one was Claudia's relative. These two individuals would encounter each other every day in the elevator. It's a two-channel piece that we stacked vertically it so it was like the two floors of an apartment building showing the architectural relationship of their parallel lives. If it had been installed in a group show, I don't think it would register in the same way as entering into a space devoted solely to the project. I've heard curators further along than I was at the time say: "Solo exhibitions are much harder than group exhibitions." [Laughs] I don't know if that's true, I think the difference is you're just much more involved in a dialogue with one artist, so if you don't agree on something, it's a different process of negotiation. There's a different type of push and pull.

Rail: Earlier this year, the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation announced it would be spearheading a new programming and funding initiative called *Art and Social Justice*. Tell me more about the foundation's vision for this project and what role your position will play in its evolution.

Reisman: The foundation has a history of supporting art on one side, and social justice on the other. In thinking about the foundation's future and legacy, it was important to the Rubins to try to focus the mission so that, going forward, there's more structure in terms of how grant-making is considered and how grants are made. Some of it does tie to Shelley Rubin's work with A Blade of Grass, an organization which is separate from the foundation. A Blade of Grass supports artists who do socially engaged work. Programmatically, we at the Rubin Foundation just announced our first open call for grants for organizations, with specific guidelines designed to promote access to art, with a deadline of November 1. Early in the new year we'll announce the first group of grantees with this focus, and over the next few months, we'll also be hosting a series of weekly, half-day meetings on a thematic basis to help inform our grant making. We're collecting data from a group of organizations that do arts education, community-based museums, public art, and artistic activism. This list of themes is based on the areas that we're funding but it keeps expanding. We're gathering intel from these groups in order to determine whether we can help support their efforts as well as acquiring recommendations about who we should be speaking with and talking to. It remains to be seen what kind of impact we can have with the amount of money we're going to be giving away, but

hopefully it's effective, particularly in regards to smaller organizations that can benefit more significantly from the kind of support we can offer.

So there's the grant-making side, and then there's exhibitions and public programs. My role, as Artistic Director, is to guide the grant-making and to curate exhibitions, to generate dialogue around issues related to art and social justice so that we understand how they intersect. I think there's often confusion about to what degree art should play a role in social justice. Is it a social justice project first? Or is it an art project first? And, which side is in the service of the other? I think there's tension around that. With my public-art background at Percent for Art there was definitely a constant negotiation (at least in my head and with colleagues there) about whether these projects were first just about community, and then if art was the proper tool. One of my goals being a curator and facilitator is to make sure that art and artists have agency in what they're making, what they're doing, and that it's not programmatically driven. What's exciting is to know that more and more artists are thinking in this way.

My only worry about working with organizations to support artists in the social activist sense is whether or not artists are responding to opportunities because these are the opportunities they can get. Do you become an educator as an artist because you have to, for example?

Rail: Or is it driven by something else?

Reisman: Right. We all know the economics around art are pretty tough, so I don't blame anyone for responding to a demand for certain kinds of services, like arts education. It's more about how we can advance this kind of work without having a top-down impact on what artists do. I, personally, don't want to drive that. This was always a question with Percent for Art commissions. We didn't want to be too directive in guiding the artist in designing the artwork. Of course you're dealing with anywhere from five to thirty people who are involved in the artist's commission within a new construction or architecture project, and you very quickly realize there are people in the room who do want to dictate how the artwork is made, if only for the sake of expediency.



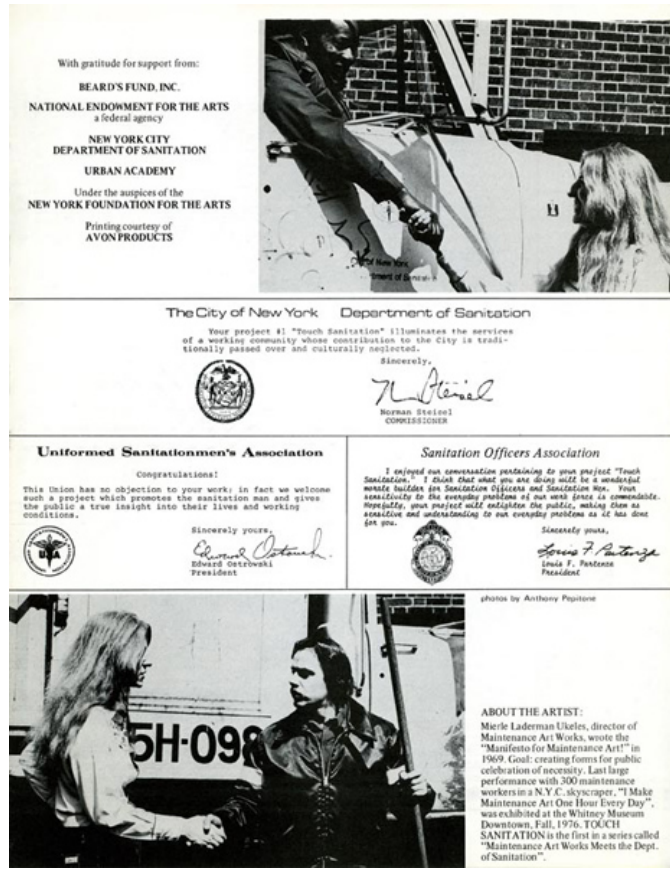
Claudia Joskowicz, *Sympathy for the Devil*, 2011. Two channel digital HD video; 8 minutes total running time; color; sound. Courtesy of the artist and LMAK Gallery, New York.

Rail: The inimitable artist, writer and activist, Coco Fusco, in connection with the upcoming release of her latest book, *Dangerous Moves: Politics and Performance in Cuba*, states that “art and politics go hand in hand, and art has been vital for challenging the state control of the arts.” Based on your experience, do you agree with this statement and if so, how have the various positions you’ve held reflected this idea?

Reisman: I agree with the statement. I think that art and politics often do go hand in hand. Art is often a space where certain kinds of ideas can be communicated. And as you may know, the Rubins have an extensive contemporary Cuban collection. So, in traveling to Cuba recently for the Biennial, I had some conversations with people, many in which I realized that art is viewed as this sacred space. It may be censored at times, but it’s less censored than other things, I think. Take, for example, Tania Bruguera’s re-staging of *Tatlin’s Whisper*. The first time it was performed in 2009 it was maybe less dramatic, less punishable because it didn’t come on the heels of the softening of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States. But the idea that art can whisper something that can’t be heard otherwise, that art can communicate ideas that simply can’t be received in other sectors of society, is extremely interesting.

In terms of challenging the state, I think that art should play that role when it makes sense for the artist. In my role working for the city, I came to realize that I was dealing with art in a political system, rather than “political art.” The role that the art played in Percent for Art situations was kind of flipped in a way. It wasn’t that it was top-down necessarily, but think about commissioning art for a public school, a streetscape, a plaza, a park, or a detention center like Riker’s Island. One of the first, bigger commissions I worked on was Erwin Redl’s *Diamond Matrix*, a six-story light installation for the Police Academy in College Point, Queens, commissioned in 2009, installed in late 2014. This police facility is the size of an airport [*Laughter*]; it’s the centralized training center for all police in the city. It has a museum, a fitness center, an auditorium, and we were being told during our tour “you can use this auditorium if you want to do programs.” In my head I’m thinking, “I don’t even think we can Instagram or post about this, because, right now, given recent events, how do we explain this project to the public, or even talk about this?” For me, Erwin’s work was the perfect solution for public art in a contentious space because it changes your perception of space without being that specific. It aligned itself seamlessly with the history of integrated design, something in public art that I never understood before working for the city. “Integrated” could mean a collaboration where the artist and architect really do something together, that fuses their sensibilities, or, it could mean that you’re answering to the architect’s aesthetic. It also could mean the art work is barely visible as anything, something very subtle that then doesn’t announce itself as art. Whereas in my opinion it should announce itself as art, otherwise why put so much effort into the endeavor? It doesn’t apply to all such commissions, but there certainly is artwork that can subvert the existing power structures within.

Rail: That’s a great way to segue into your role in successfully facilitating the first artist residency with the New York City’s Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), inviting Bruguera to be the inaugural participant. Can you tell me more about this visionary and rather unprecedented collaboration between art and public office and how it evolved?



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Artist's Letter of Invitation Sent to Every Sanitation Worker with Performance Itinerary for 10 Sweeps in All 59 Districts in New York City, 1979*. Printed brochure. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc.

Reisman: Well, while I was still at Percent for Art at the Department of Cultural Affairs, Tom Finkelparl became commissioner. I've known him since working at the Queens Museum in 2008. His vision, as many people know, is that he wants to integrate artists into city agencies. We had spoken quite a bit over some months, asking if there was any way the Rubin Foundation could help. And so we received the proposal for their first residency that we funded as part of a larger plot, to demonstrate to the city the value of having artists at the table. Part of Tania's role will be to help roll out the IDNYC, the municipal ID cards. The foundation felt strongly about supporting that residency in conjunction with the city, because its spirit totally captures this intersection between art and social justice, particularly as one of the issues that came up when we agreed to give the grant was that she was still stuck in Cuba.

Rail: Under house arrest, having had her passport confiscated.

Reisman: Right. So she couldn't leave Cuba when we agreed to make the

grant. I asked my former colleagues at the Department of Cultural Affairs what happens if she can't travel? How do we enact this residency? And the response was: Immigrant Movement International, which is this storefront community space she set up for the long term in Corona, Queens in conjunction with the Queens Museum. There are people working there who could carry the residency out on her behalf if she wasn't able to travel. One of the compelling arguments for the grant at that point was that this was an opportunity to support freedom of expression of this artist. Luckily Tania can be here for the project, since there is such an important aspect to having the artist present.

Rail: Having worked so closely with civic institutions, I would imagine you've encountered considerable opposition to a number of projects and curatorial proposals. If so, how have you mitigated those obstacles and what were some of the inroads taken towards resolution?

Reisman: Yes. [*Laughs*] I think what's interesting is that there are different, let's say, phases of "How do I resist? How do I challenge something structural?" One example is the optional cap on the budget for Percent for Art works. It's written into the original language of the Percent for Art law (Local Law 65)—\$400,000—no city agency had to spend more than that on a single artwork. That was something that was set in 1982. Obviously, the problem there is that construction costs go up and up with inflation and then you have the incredible shrinking artwork in relation to the public school, the park, or the police facility. In that regard, I was advocating for a couple of years that the cap needed to be adjusted for inflation, let's say on a mayoral term basis, so every four years when the mayor's elected, the idea is that you adjust that cap. While I was still working for the city, there wasn't much interest in changing this. I didn't discuss this directly with the Cultural Affairs Commissioner at the time, but my sense was that if we drew attention to the subject of how much money is being spent on art, that people were going to get upset—that money was spent on an artist rather than art in schools, that money was spent on an artist not from my neighborhood, an artist not of the right cultural background—those politics around cultural representation could get very heated and they really did.

It's a lot about advocacy, weighing in with different people about what can work. There were projects that on the community level were rejected and they were rejected for reasons that had nothing to do with what the artwork was. It might have been who made it, the perception of where that person was from. This is a complicated aspect of public art, the way in which the identity of the artist can become more important than the artwork. There's a

kind of multidirectional racialized dynamic. Within a selection panel, sometimes artists' proposals were questioned for their cultural specificity. Panelists might want a more universal or neutral aesthetic. I'm not sure if this idea of what is universal or less culturally specific has to do with a culturally white sensibility or not. What's hard for me to know is if there's racism embedded in how communities regard an artist as a symbol of something much larger, or if the panel process was biased in some way, or both. This is not meant as a critique of city government or local community interests, more about how power is exercised and with what kinds of awareness. That, for me, is something I may never really resolve. I certainly learned my fighting skills in those situations.



Brendan Fernandes, *As One I*, 2015. Silver gelatin print, 15 × 9 inches. Comissioned by the Seattle Art Museum. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: In 2014, you curated a group exhibition at La MaMa Galleria called *Still Acts*, which explored the political potential of stillness in performance and choreography.

Looking at *Between History and the Body*, the second in a series of exhibitions you've curated for the Foundation's programming space at The 8th Floor, there appears to be certain recurring threadlines that connect the two shows. Can you speak about those connections, for example, how do

these artists' practices contribute to the conversation surrounding the body politic?

Reisman: That's interesting. I never really thought of them as being connected, but there are certainly some connections between them. *Still Acts* was co-curated with a curator named Ian Daniel. I had been part of a reading group (that actually first met at the *Brooklyn Rail*) where we read André Lepecki's book, *Exhausting Dance*. The book looks at the political potential of stillness, or slowing down in a performative context. To me, that was a great thing—thinking about slowness in relation to life or work or art or not art. For example, having worked in the context of public art for a long enough time there was a sense of, “Oh this isn't entertaining enough.” Like if you get a group of people around a project who are helping to commission it, who cares that it is an artwork, they might want something that's fun, or something that's easily resolved and sort of consumable.

Rail: Right.

Reisman: So, the idea for *Still Acts* was to highlight what can't be understood at first glance. What takes longer? In what way does the artist not deliver for the audience? All of these ideas are drawing on Lepecki's writing. The connection with *Between History of the Body* and *Still Acts*, I think has to do with, for example in Shaun Leonardo's work, his own body as a site for ideas of personal struggle, masculinity, and the expectation in our culture that men of color are to perform their masculinity on demand, and how to resist that. In his case the resistance is maybe less obvious but there is a series of performances he's done where he's wrestled the invisible man. There's a drawing in the show—a self-portrait of him fighting the invisible man—paired with artworks he made after Eric Garner was strangled to death and Michael Brown was shot. Shaun felt strongly that by pairing those drawings with his work as a performance artist, he was linking himself to them in a kind of unity. This is tied into his work on a project called, *I Can't Breathe*, a performance he did at Smack Mellon for the *RESPOND* show this past winter, which is being re-performed this month as part of *Between History and the Body*. The piece is a performative workshop in which participants learn how to put someone in a chokehold, and participants in the chokehold are taught how to survive it.

Brendan Fernandes, with his pieces *Foe* and *Performing Foe*, explores accent and enunciation as a critique of Colonialism. Brendan is of Goan descent, grew up in Kenya and then went to Canada, so he's had to learn to speak in English in different dialects and accents. In *Foe* he's working with a speech therapist who's guiding him in the correct Canadian- and Indian-

English accents, using lines from J. M. Coetzee’s book by the same name, *Foe*, which revisits Robinson Crusoe. There are these lines about—they cut out his tongue, “Is he an imbecile,” which play on the idea of how somebody speaks and what the accent and lilt of voice—not the words—can communicate.

Rail: —The history of colonialism and classist aggression.

Reisman: Exactly. He critiques this by reducing the gesture, the action, to the smallest form, the smallest measure.

Rail: In your view, how do the artistic platforms of social practice, performance, and activism dovetail with one another and do you think they possess the ability to effect political change, particularly in the realm of civil rights? I suppose I have the same question about curatorial work in general. Do you believe it can catalyze political action and cultural production or does it have its limits?



Shaun Leonardo, *Self-portrait (Arena 3)*, 2014. Graphite on paper, 22 × 30 inches.
Courtesy the artist.

Reisman: Well, they both have their limits, art making and curating. I think curatorial work is often done in support of art, so the answer ends up being about what art can do, and how curators like myself or others can support that.

The ways in which social practice and activism are linked are very closely intertwined at this point. Social practice—at least the way we talk about social practice in relation to what A Blade of Grass is doing, for example, say, is about the way in which artists can reframe a problem or an issue that’s understood in a certain way by a community or in a context. Take Dread Scott, who is doing a reenactment of a slave rebellion with support from A Blade of Grass. A number of projects he has staged in the last few years are interventions that push up against the public’s comfort regarding issues associated with United States’ political history. The possibility of stating something that has an unclear outcome is really integral to the art-activism overlap. In a way that’s always, for me, what makes it art. I think activism has relied on that as well, in terms of agitprop interventions. The question I often ask is, is there a point when art for its own sake will no longer be enough? I don’t know that I’ll ever believe that but I think the question can get somewhat muddled, can we still have art for the sake of reflection, or art for pleasure? This is somewhat rhetorical since art can be so many things.

Rail: With such wide generational gaps existing between artists working in these fields, do you find newly coined labels such as “social practice” appropriate and if so, how do they contribute to or alter public perception around the work? I’m referring, in a certain context, to Claire Bishop’s now infamous critique of participatory aesthetics, or its lack thereof.

Reisman: I think a great example of this is Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who I met maybe ten years ago when I worked at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. She had been commissioned by NYC’s Percent for Art program in 1989 or 1990 to do an artwork for the Fresh Kills Landfill. Many people who read the *Rail* will know that she’s the artist who did *Touch Sanitation* and has been the artist in residence at the Department of Sanitation since 1977. She said something along the lines of, “I was doing this before there was even a term for it.” I remember thinking, it’s strange because I don’t think her work is about relational aesthetics or it’s not necessarily relational in the way that relational aesthetics is. To me, the distinction is that relational aesthetics—and this might sound overly simplistic—is more about a social exchange, but in a limited subset, at a dinner at a gallery for example, whereas Ukeles engaged with the entire sanitation department in public space.

Rail: It occurs, most often, within an institutional context.

Reisman: Yes, but the distinction is that the subset in relational art is much tighter; it might be about who is invited as opposed to social practice,

which I think often happens in a more public or less controlled context, so that the aesthetics are also much less controlled. It follows that one of the things one can be critical of in social practice is that it often isn't recognizable as art. I'm most interested in a kind of art practice in which that social practice exchange can happen and has an effect, but there is also some material culture that is produced along with it. For me, that becomes more interesting because it still keeps its foot in the space of art in a way that can't be disputed.

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