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**REGINE
BASHA**

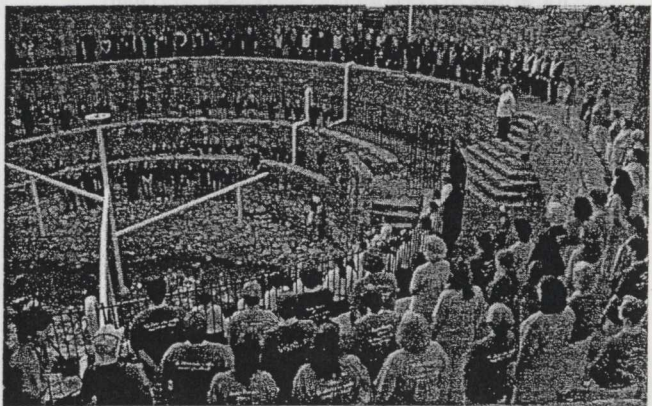
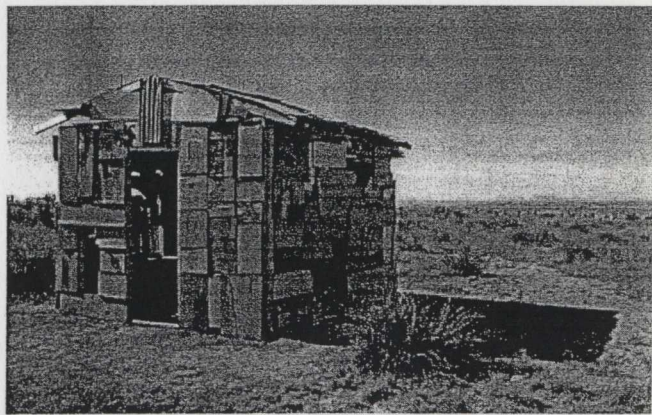
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CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

REGINE BASHA

APRIL 21, 2008

Regine Basha is an independent curator, currently based out of New York City, whose work focuses on realizing context-specific situations for the production of new work in both public and private space, as well as considering alternative curatorial practice. In the mid-90s, she was a part of two collective, Mayday Productions and The Brewster Project, each of which realized temporal and experimental projects throughout New York City's parks, hotels and neighboring townships. Basha lived for a number of years in Austin Texas, where she produced numerous special projects, exhibitions, screenings, symposia and residencies for artists in conjunction Arthouse, and with Fluent-Collaborative, an organization she co-founded with Laurence Miller. Her writing has appeared in numerous artist catalogs as well as the publications Art Lies, Art Papers, Bidoun, Cabinet, Modern Painters and Performing Arts Journal.



CYRUS SMITH Since we're here on a college radio station, let's talk about your education a little bit. You were part of the first graduating class at Bard College in the Curatorial Program there, but I know you also started in studio. How did you end up becoming a curator?

REGINE BASHA Well, I was at NYU in my undergrad, and I started in studio, yes, painting and drawing, the traditional studio art course. But, I think it was after an experience in this one particular class during a study abroad program in Italy that I decided to switch over.

CS What happened there?

RB Well it was a class that was taught by these two women. They team taught. And one was an art historian and artist and writer, and the other was a studio artist. They were actually a couple. They called themselves Rosenclaire. Like R-o-s-e-n-claire, one word, and they had this form of teaching

IMAGES // Top: Steve Roden + Stephen Vitiello, *From Perfect Cubes to Broken Trains. The Marfa Sessions*. Curated by Regine Basha, Rebecca Gates and Lucy Raven. 2008. Bottom: Daniel Bozhkov *Cantata For Twelve Choirs and Several Salamanders*. 2006.

that was very much about debate, and inserting history into the studio sessions. I found that really effective, and noticed that I was veering more toward interpretation and analytical ideas in theory, than I was making my own art.

CS So it wasn't a difficult turn for you? It came naturally to be presenting rather than creating?

RB To be honest it was more about writing rather than making art, so it wasn't that I knew at that time that I wanted to be a curator. Because even at that time, around 1991, the field of curating was so different. Not as visible as it is now. It was still sort of open ended in terms of what a curator can do. Which was interesting, to get into the field when the field itself was questioning what a curator does.

CS And then you got in on a brand new program, and were part of that shift, where the curator does have a forefront role, it seems, in contemporary art today.

RB Yeah, I mean, when I got into that program I had been working for about four years in Montreal at a non-profit space. We did exhibition after exhibition, like ten a year, and after four years I realized I know how to do this, I just want to know how to talk about it, and meet my peers. And the program was proposing to be a cross between museum studies and art history, so it was production and theory together, or practice and theory together. And the way they set it up was so that you come in contact with other working curators who would share their challenges, problematics, what they were working on, you know, with the class.

CS I think maybe a lot of people think of big exhibitions, kind of like blockbuster exhibitions in terms of curation. But I know you work really differently from that, and on a smaller scale, definitely. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you see yourself as a curator, coming out of that program.

RB Well, certainly it did have an effect on me. A lot of what we were exposed to through

the Center for Curatorial Studies at the time was what was going on in the mid-nineties in contemporary art production as well as curatorial production, cause there were a lot of blurring of lines between the artist's role and the curator's role. You had figures like Hans Ulrich Obrist, in Europe who was carrying around exhibitions on a suitcase on an airplane, and who was also reviving the histories of earlier curators like Seth Siegelbaum, who also operated more like an artist. So, there was this awareness of how the curatorial role was perhaps less backstage, maybe more connected to the spirit of the production of contemporary art. And there are varying degrees of this. I would never call myself an artist/curator, curator/artist or anything like that. I'm certainly interested in being involved in the research based practice that artists are interested in. Also developing particular contexts with artists for the exhibition, and for the dissemination of their ideas. So it's sort of interpretation, production, dissemination, exhibition. That whole operation for me is all part of the curatorial role. And just one more thing if I'm not rambling.

CS No, that's fine.

RB Also, I guess, after that program I realized that it's really not just about putting up exhibitions, it's very much about being point and counterpoint with an artist. In many ways I find myself in situations where I'm kind of a sounding board, and I really enjoy the conversation of working out ideas with artists, and helping write about it. It's the minor events that interest me as well, you know, not just this sort of exhibition format.

CS And working directly with an artist does definitely change things. Usually curators are working with the things that artists produce, but you're working with artists who are working in such a way that really you need to be involved directly with the artist, which I find to be interesting.

RB I guess that came out of the thesis that I did at CCS. It was about the act of drawing, and how drawing can be a form of writing, or how writing is actually kind of a form of drawing. And I became interested

in artist's journals, and foregrounding those kinds of process oriented materials as part of the understanding of an artist's work; bringing to the public the process behind the making of work, so that the public's in on it from the beginning, rather than at the object level of it.

CS So you're acting as sort of a megaphone for the artist and their intentions?

RB Yeah, or like a mesh screen, maybe.

CS You're also an independent curator. You're not necessarily tied to any one institution. What does that afford you as far as ways of working?

RB You know I sort of fell into that really. I do enjoy it. I don't know that it means I'll never work at an institution. Early on, from twenty-two to twenty-six I was working at a very traditional institution, so I got it out of my system in a way. Then after CCS, I started becoming interested in collectives and the collaborative model, and started producing more self directed projects, and

public art events like the Brewster Project. So, it just turned into a practice. I fell into it, but also, it chose me, because the field itself was turning in that direction as well. But yeah, I certainly seem to have cobbled together something of an independent life of some kind.

CS Can you imagine an institution that could still maintain that sort of flexibility for you, where you could be part of an institution? Be part of a locale?

RB Sure, It did happen in Austin in fact—Art House where I worked for about five years as adjunct curator. And at the time they couldn't hire a full time curator, so it worked out perfectly that I worked there part time and could work on other things outside of Austin. It became a really holistic kind of job, cause I wasn't curating the occasional film screening, exhibition, or lecture, but became part of a conversation of the future of the place itself. It became really exciting for me to actually be involved in an institution that was questioning itself. I think any institu-

tion that is open to reinventing itself, or that is open to new formats, I'm there. That's actually the most exciting thing to be involved with.

CS So, do you see that as a necessity, for an arts institution? That constant re-invention?

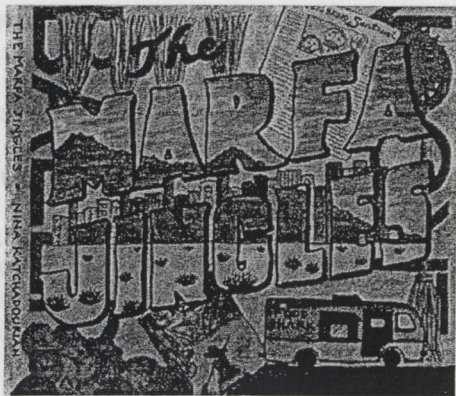
RB I do. For a contemporary arts institution, yes. I mean, that's what I respect and I admire, is to have that risk-taking factor built into the place. Because art is continually changing, and as a result institutions have to change. I mean, I'm all for the change every five years model rather than to calcify an institution. Now that I've moved back to New York, it's been very difficult to find places that are willing to take that risk, because the reality of it is, they have to establish themselves with the funding bodies in a way that is counter-intuitive to that flexibility.

CS In a way that proves a kind of stability, maybe?

RB Yeah, it's an ongoing struggle I think.

CS We were just listening to some audio from a show you did called Treble. I was looking into that show, and what I found interesting was that it existed on so many levels. You had live performance, you had a conference, you had a radio portion to it also, which makes sense for an audio show, but then it was also part of a larger initiative called *New Sound New York*. I was wondering if you could talk about how you're able to navigate so many different levels in one single project.

RB Well it was a result of a fruitful engagement with the Sculpture Center as well, and that space being, for better or for worse, a really challenging space to work with. It's an enormous industrial, early 20th century industrial space that was a trolley car repair shop. So, it's actually not ideal for sound, as you can imagine. But it was an interesting challenge offering many of the artists, to address the architecture sonically. Then I worked with Anthony Huberman, who was there at the time, and we produced the symposium and the performance schedule and the radio



program, as satellites around the space. And for this show it worked just wonderfully, not only because the medium, but the Sculpture Center is in Long Island City, so it's kind of a trek to get out there and I think, part of it was to spread the programming around town.

CS Easy access.

RB Yeah, but I think that was the first time I was able to work on so many different platforms and spread the material around. And sound is so ephemeral you can do that. It actually spawned the next project that I'm working on regarding sound.

CS Yeah, you mentioned a project in Marfa, Texas, correct?

RB Exactly, yeah.

CS I was hoping you could explain what Marfa, Texas is for people who might not know.

- RB** Yeah, it's Marfa, M-a-r-f-a, not Martha. I might sound like I'm saying Martha. But Marfa is a small town in West Texas, the population's like 2,000. It's known for various reasons, one of them being that it's the center for the Chinati foundation, which is actually where Donald Judd originally arrived from New York and took up base in this remote desert town, just to escape New York actually. So the Chinati Foundation, which was also called the Judd Foundation, houses Donald Judd's collection, as well as a series of military barracks that are shells for various works of his. Kind of a site-specific installation, much in the way that the lightning field is for Walter De Maria.
- CS** In the form of a small Texas town.
- RB** Yeah. And the other side of it, of course, is that there is the very real town of Marfa, which is mostly hispanic, you know, it's a working class town. Also the border patrol for West Texas is based in Marfa.
- CS** Oh wow, I didn't know that.
- RB** The station is actually next to the Chinati foundation.
- CS** Strange bedfellows there.
- RB** Yeah, and as I mentioned before, the structures in which the Judds are housed are military barracks, because it was a site for POW camps in World War II. I find Marfa almost like Berlin in that way. It has all these layers that are colliding, and are a very short distance from each other.
- CS** So how is it that you got involved there?
- RB** Well, I'll tell you, one more thing about Marfa, so much of the art world visits Marfa either during open house when the Judd Foundation is open, or you know, they make a pilgrimage to it. I was always a bit irked by the fact that everyone goes there just for the Judds, and yet there's all of these stories, all of this kind of folklore. And, also, physically, it's a remote place, so you actually feel like you're in the middle of Australia or something. The land is extremely overwhelming. It's just one

horizon. So, working together with two other curators, Lucy Raven and Rebecca Gates, we are inviting artists working with sound, both traditional sound artists and performers as well as visual artists who have created projects that will be specifically placed in and around the town. So you know, City Hall, or the post office or in the streets, or in the desert, or at Ballroom Marfa. I should mention we're doing this in conjunction with a fabulous space, called Ballroom that's been open now for about five years. So they're hosting us, but it's spread around.

CS So you're spreading it around the town, and maybe bringing to light this living ghost town.

RB That's exactly it, yeah. It's not going to be visible, so it's going to be this kind of sonic portrait of the place, and your experience of it. And I think being in a desert your hearing is enhanced. It's a very strange condition that you feel out there. But we're going to turn the gallery itself into a kind of desert visitor's center park, and send people out with maps.

CS You did bring some noise from the Marfa project, correct?

RB I brought a little clip, yes. This is from Julienne Schwartz, who has a piece that we're going to place in the Marfa bookstore.

CS You're taking over the bookstore also!

RB Yeah, it's an unlikely site for sound works.

CS Everywhere but the gallery I guess.

RB Exactly. And the track is called "Whisper Affirmations."

CS A little sneak preview of what's happening in Marfa, Texas.

(break for music track)

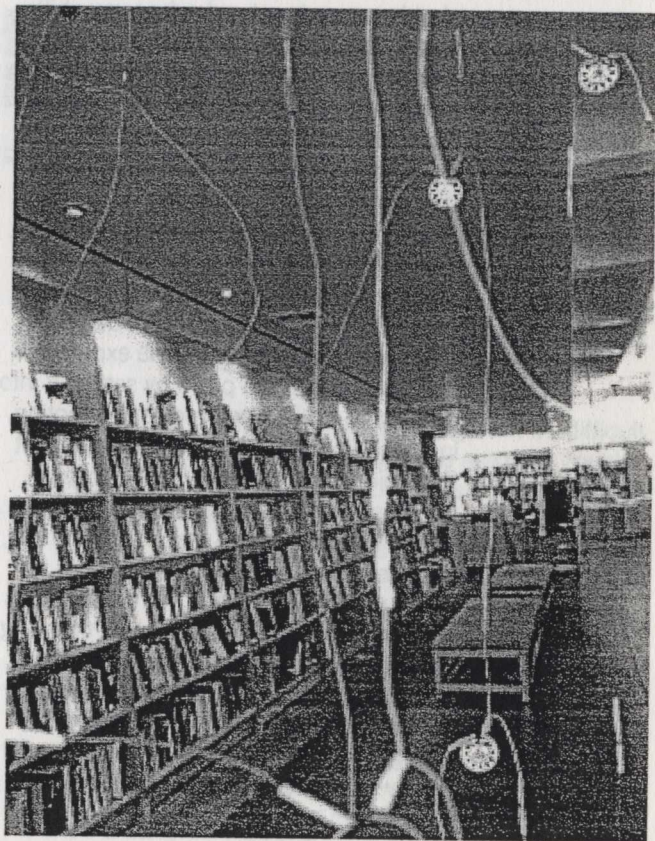
CS So, talking about anywhere but the gallery, you're kind of using the gallery to redirect people, and we were looking at a quote here. It's a quote from you quoting somebody, from quite a while ago, but I thought it still fit here. It's from Miwon Kwon, and

it says, "Many critics and artists argued that autonomous signature-style art works sited in public places functioned more like extensions of the museum, advertising individual artists and their accomplishments (and by extension their patrons' status) rather than making any genuine gestures toward public engagement."¹ Something that's been close to how you've been working. I was wondering if you could talk about public engagement through the framework that you have to work with as a curator.

RB I think that, like anything else, it's difficult to give it a homogenous moniker, "public art," because it depends on the work that you're working with, the artist that you're working with, and on the context you're working with. I've always approached it as, what does the work want to do? I always approach it from the artist's intention, rather than targeting an audience, or trying to figure out how to address an audience. I'm much more interested in

what happens to artwork when you shift it out of its context. I'm interested in the idea of pushing a boundary, or flipping the public and private domains. And now we have the domain of the internet as well, as another domain, which is both public and private as well. It's a strange conflation of something that's anonymous, and something that's private at the same time. And I'm interested in those ideas within an exhibition, or project, where all you're doing really is heightening the experience of engaging with the piece by setting it into a space or context that provides attention, in a way. So, I think that what happens at that point on, in terms of public engagement, is the big mysterious question mark. I don't know that I can assume, or control, or dictate what might happen, or that I would want to. So, often I work with artists who are interested in just, almost throwing the dice and seeing what happens, rather than designing a piece that would actually dictate a particular kind of end in public engagement. Closer perhaps to situational history or the happening in that sense.

NOTE // *Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity.* MIT Press, 2002



CS But then again, working primarily in reality. Working with artists who are out in the world, and interacting with real people...

RB Well, I'll give you an example, an artist named Daniel Bozhkov who we brought to Austin, who was part of a project which he engaged with a local environmental group in Austin, and produced this sort of event that ended up becoming a film. And the event was bringing together various choirs from around town to come together in this pool, and sing to an endangered salamander. There's a much longer explanation to this, but essentially, what we had to do with Daniel was seek out choirs as diverse as the gospel choir, the gay and lesbian choir, the children's choir, the Baptist choir, you know, various denominations who do not necessarily sing together. Various groups that do not even recognize each other. So what was interesting is that project, we like to say, was not so much about bringing together a community,

IMAGE /// Julianne Swartz, *You*. At Marfa Book Company. The Marfa Sessions. Curated by Regine Basha, Rebecca Gates and Lucy Raven. 2008.

because one would assume, "Oh, choirs, a choir is a community singing." But in fact these were choirs that never came together, so in a way we were disarticulating community, breaking them down in a way.

CS Re-introducing them to each other.

RB Yeah, re-shuffling them. And having them sing together was a big event for them. It's not always about good intentions, sometimes it's really to stir the status quo. And that was quite difficult, because yes, you have to explain what it is that you're doing, but that's the most satisfying challenge of them all, rendering this idea comprehensible to someone who may not necessarily know about art. I don't think the word art ever came up even, in any of our discussions with anybody involved with this, but I think they understood that it was art by the end, absolutely.

CS Which is an interesting twist in itself. And, you talked about stirring rather than providing a solution. That's something that

comes up with this kind of engaged public art practice, whether or not you're providing a kind of moral compass. I don't know if that's anything that you could run with, or anything that you've run into?

RB I think it is something to be aware of, that perhaps this kind of art making is wrapped up in the moral good of society and public space and so on. Perhaps going back to, let's say, the utopian communities of Bauhaus, you know, this is nothing new. This kind of discourse is very much about social progress. But within that, again, one has to keep the alarms ringing in case that becomes status quo, or a comfort zone within itself. You can certainly run into lots of traps I think.

ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
KPSU RADIO 2008-2009

Book 2 of 10

This interview took place April 21st, 2009, live on KPSU, in conjunction with the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

All audio available for download at arttalkam.blogspot.com.

ART TALK AM 11 ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
KPSU RADIO 208-5029

Book 3 of 10

This interview took place April 21st, 2007 live on KPSU in conversation
with the TRU MFA Museum-right across the street

All audio available for download at www.kpsu.com

