

an ALTERN ATIVE *moment*

with Artist Julianne Swartz

by Trevor Medeiros

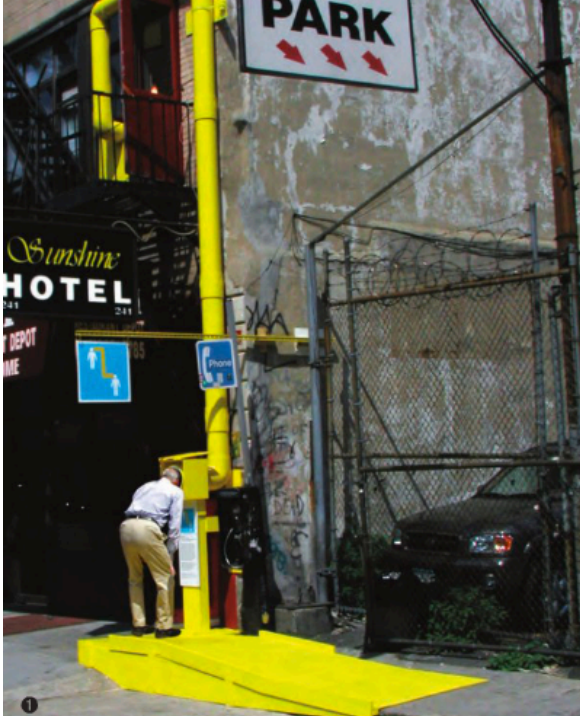
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ust like anywhere else, in the world of art, it's intriguing to play the "what-if" game. But fans of artist Julianne Swartz would probably dread to think of what would've become of her career had she decided to pursue a business education in the 1980s at the University of Arizona, where she originally enrolled in accounting and marketing classes.

"I started majoring in business, thinking that was the furthest I could get away from art," she said.

It's safe to say her fans, students, and peers are glad she had a change of heart. "It just wasn't where my talent was," she said. "I didn't enjoy those classes at all. I didn't do well in them."

She graduated from the Tucson, Ariz., school in 1989 with a degree in photography and creative writing. And the rest, as they say, is history. Swartz has



ABOUT THE ART

1. Can You Hear Me? 2004 39 x 10 x 15 feet Site-specific installation, The Sunshine Hotel, NY, N.Y. Commission, The New Museum, NY, N.Y. PVC pipe, mirror, wood, existing architecture and public phone, metal sign, participants. *Can You Hear Me?* is a site-specific interactive sculpture installed on the exterior of the building that houses The Sunshine Hotel, one of the last remaining flop houses (single residence occupancy) on the Bowery. The piece was created for Counter Culture, a show that the New Museum of Contemporary Art organized to inaugurate its new neighborhood. The parking lot next door to the hotel is the future site of the museum. I sited my piece at the Sunshine to explore the complicated social dynamics of the situation and perhaps create an opportunity for a person-to-person connection within an uncanny context. The sculpture is a functional alternative "telephone." It uses PVC pipe and mirrors to make an aural and visual communication link from the second-floor lobby of the Sunshine Hotel to the street below. Passersby on the street can call up through the tube and be heard in the Sunshine's communal lobby area. If a resident chooses to answer the call and engage in a conversation through the tube, the sculpture offers a space to have a face-to-face conversation over a distance of 36 feet. The natural acoustics of the PVC pipe amplify and carry the sound of each person's voice, creating an aural proximity. At the same time, a periscopic mirror system in the tubes carries the image of the person's face you are speaking to, but it appears very small and upside-down, visually emphasizing the distance between the two conversants. The title references the first message heard through wire transmission during Alexander Graham Bell's early experiments with telephone communication.

2. Elevator Music, 2005 Site-specific installation in an existing elevator; Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Commission, 5-channel soundtrack, shag carpet, light gels. Dimensions vary. The actual music was antiwar sixties songs that were sung by a computer. **3. Somewhere Harmony,** 2004 Site-specific installation, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, N.Y. Commission, 2004 Biennial exhibition. 1200 feet of Plexiglas tubing and plastic tubing, lenses, mirrors, light, wire, speakers, computer, soundtrack, existing architecture. A spatial layering of voices irrigates a five-story stairwell via a system of transparent tubing. Speakers hidden in a





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crawl space near the top of the stairs emit an eight-channel composition. Sound from each speaker is funneled into a separate tube to be transported to a floor below. At the end of every tube, spectators may listen to one of the individual voices that make up the composition. The soundtrack was made by recording 64 people singing, speaking and humming the song "Over the Rainbow" and four sentences of text from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. These individual voices were edited together to make the eight-track composition. **4. Open, 2007** Maple, hardware, electronics, recorded and composed soundtrack, 14 x 10 3/4 x 17 inches. A handcrafted, solid maple box invites viewers to open it. Upon opening, sound emerges from the empty box, numerous voices saying "I love you." These initially soft voices gradually become louder until they are yelling. The chorus of "I love you's" are silenced when the viewer closes the box. **5. Terrain, 2008** Site-specific installation, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Entry pavilion. Speakers, wire, electronics, computer software, 12-channel recorded and composed sound track. 12 channels of sound move through 208 speakers in orchestrated movements to make a landscape of gentle sound. The sound pans through 12 zones dispersed through the 3000-square-foot room, evoking a gust of wind moving through the space. The soundtracks were created from recordings of 38 volunteers breathing, whispering, and humming.



Marianne Swartz speaks to one of her guests after her lecture at Brown University's new Perry and Marty Grossi Center for the Creative Arts in Providence, RI.

photography by Lucki Schutz

“I was exposed to art at a young age and it made an impression. My mother took risks and made crazy and beautiful things. Ours was a very artistic household, and making things and thinking creatively was part of daily life. Both she and my father taught me to honor and listen to my creativity.”

gone on to a distinguished career as one of the top studio artists in the Northeast, specializing in a fusion of genres, including installation, photography, public projects, and sculpture.

Her solo exhibitions and projects have been displayed worldwide in venues ranging from the Mixed Greens Gallery and Artists Space in New York City, to the University of Sunderland in the United Kingdom, to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, to Angles Gallery in Los Angeles.

Currently she has an exhibit at Brown University's Perry and Marty Granoff Center for the Creative Arts in Providence.

The exhibition, curated by Natasha Khandekar and Jo-Ann Conklin (director of the university's David Winton Bell Gallery), focuses on Swartz's sound installations, camera-less video works, and a newly commissioned site-specific sculpture that will allow Swartz to leave her mark on the Granoff Center.

“I love the concept and design of the building, the interdisciplinary focus, and the belief that disciplines can and should influence one another,” said Swartz. “I also love the transparency of the architecture.”

Swartz's exposure to art came early and often, which may explain her short detour into the business world.

“My mom is an artist,” she said. “I was always exposed to art and had a love/hate relationship with it. It was the thing that made my mom different and took her attention away. But she was a great artist, and did some radical, outrageous work when I was growing up. I was exposed to this at a young age and it made an impression. She took risks and made crazy and beautiful things. Ours was a very artistic household, and making

things and thinking creatively was part of daily life. Both she and my father taught me to honor and listen to my creativity.”

Swartz's work has garnered several awards and grants over her career; most recently, she scored the Academy Art Award in 2010 from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York.

One of her more popular installations is “Terrain” from 2008. It is a 3,000-square-foot room set up with a landscape of 208 speakers hanging from the ceiling. The speakers carry 12 channels of soundtrack consisting of 38 voices breathing, whispering, and humming. The sound travels through several zones, creating a gust of wind that moves throughout the gallery. “Terrain” was created at the entry pavilion of the Indianapolis Museum of Art. At first glance, the intricacies and complexities make “Terrain” look like an exhausting project to create. But Swartz notes that this wasn't the case because she had sufficient funding to craft the installation.

“Some of the earlier projects I made were on a shoestring budget,” she said. “Those felt more labor-intensive to me because I couldn't hire anyone to help.”

Swartz has also crafted myriad sculptures. One notable sculpture from 2007 is “Open,” a handcrafted, solid maple box. When the box is opened, a sound emerges, consisting of different voices saying “I love you.” The voices start soft, then get louder as the box remains open, eventually reaching a climax of yelling “I love you.” The soundtrack is silenced upon closing the box. “Open” was selected as part of Swartz's solo exhibition at the Lisa Sette Gallery in Scottsdale, Ariz., in 2009.

What was the inspiration behind it? “I

wanted to make something that put the viewer in an unusual position,” said Swartz. “Part of the experience of the box is not knowing if you are allowed to open it. Somehow the sense that maybe you're transgressing something sets the stage for a kind of vulnerability. And in that scenario, when the voices come at you, how do you receive them?”

Swartz's installations and sculptures encompass a range of styles, and she insists she has no favorites.

“I deliberately cross genres because different mediums give different experiences, both to me and to my viewers. An installation is immersive; it takes time and commitment. A sculpture can convey something in an instant. The photos are great because I can send them somewhere and I don't have to install them. The installations are great because they absolutely need me to install them.” When she's not working on a project, Swartz is also an arts professor. She received her master's of fine arts in sculpture from Bard College in New York in 2002 and also obtained an MFA from Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. She has taught at Montclair State University in New Jersey, SUNY Purchase, and Illinois State University.

Today, she teaches sculpture at Bard, where she has been on the faculty since 2006. “I love teaching,” she said. “Teaching is one of the things that I feel makes art a more fruitful practice.”

Considering her success and her passion, it's hard to believe that Swartz ever contemplated a career in business. She is quite fond of the profession she ended up with, expressing her choice simply and concisely: “Art to me offers an alternative.” ★