

## Interviews

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# Andrea Blum

## Parallel Lives

June 11 –  
September 26 2021

The work of New York artist **Andrea Blum** (b. 1950) falls between sculpture, architecture and design, exploring the relationship of the sociopolitical world to the private psychological one.

Since the 1980's she has built permanent and temporary projects in Europe and the United States, and has exhibited in museums, galleries and numerous exhibition venues. Blum has had one-person exhibitions at La Conservera Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, SP; Stroom Center for Art & Architecture, NL; Henry Moore Institute, UK; and Le Crestet Centre D'art Contemporain, FR, and has made special projects for the 51st Venice Biennale; Maison Rouge, Paris; MUDAM, Luxembourg; l'Observatoire, Marseille, and the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris where she was the set designer for the Opera, *La Favorite* by Donizetti

Blum is the recipient of Fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Graham Foundation, Art Matters Inc., the New York Foundation for the Arts, the SJWeiler Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and was named Chevalier, Order of Arts and Letters, by the French Minister of Culture.

She is a Full Professor of Combined Media and Associate Chair of Studio, in the Department of Art & Art History at Hunter College in New York, and frequently lectures on the relationship of Art and Architecture and the social interface between the two.

For her exhibition at Kunsthau Baselland, Blum will transform the annex of Kunsthau into a space that examines our connection to the natural world, mediated by the exhibition design's use of furniture and media. *Parallel Lives* at Kunsthau Baselland is her first comprehensive exhibition in Switzerland,

# Parallel Lives

## Andrea Blum in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

**Ines Goldbach:** We began this conversation in spring 2020, when we talked about your project here at the Kunsthhaus Baselland and about your artistic language in general. It couldn't be a better time to dive into your artistic approach in more depth. Within your work, you often realize artworks — both inside and outside — that are situated somewhere between architecture, sculpture, and design. Some of them — or some parts of them — can be used, such as by sitting, standing, or lying on them, while others can't. Inner and outer space is by definition the place where our existence, social relations, and perspectives are shaped.

**Andrea Blum:** From the time when I was a student, I felt that art should be more accessible. As a sculptor, with an interest in architecture and design, I saw that by merging the three I could find a way of working that would dissolve the line between art and daily life. When I began making art for public space, I wanted to approach monumentality in an un-monumental way, and found that the only way I could work at such a large scale was to insert functional amenities, like benches and fountains, to distract from the more socio-psychological interventions I wanted to impose. Whether indoors or outdoors, I have always designed my work to respond to the specific site.

**IG:** If we consider your layout, your subtly deceptive, and your works within the exhibition space here in Basel, where visitors can either move around or sit and look at the whole configuration, I wonder whether you see the space as an active place where different views can be mobilized?

**AB:** The annex at the Kunsthhaus is long and narrow, with large windows on one side and an interior wall that divides the space in two. Viewed from the outside, the reflective surface

of the windows blends the exterior and interior reflections, flattening the spatial divide and confusing spatial proximities. In response to the design of the building, the four furniture-like objects that constitute the core of the exhibition are installed to resemble a furniture showroom. Like a showroom, the works are to be looked at, sat on, and wandered through. One object resembles a psychoanalytic couch, another the Tower of Babel, the third is a sculpture that doubles as a desk, and the fourth is a lounge I will use to display publications by the Kunsthhaus. Each is paired with something from the natural world, shifting the focus away from the art object to the particular species. Together they form a tableau that is accessible to exhibition visitor and visible to passerby on the street.

**IG:** Let's focus on your initial idea and concept of integrating living plants and animals into your installations, which have formed part of many of your installations for years. The current situation and stricter regulations made it impossible to have live animals in the exhibition, and so you had to use plants and substitutes for the animals instead. As you often work with nature, I think it's important to understand that it is not about "exhibiting" living plants and animals but to make us aware of a sometimes absurd attitude or behavior — or perhaps even desire — to bring nature into our homes, without realizing that this means the animals being in cages, far away from their natural habitats. And I think it's illuminating to see that because of an extreme version of caging animals, we are now the ones being caged. Could you say something about the birds (canaries), the lizard, and the cactus being living "elements" of the installation and idealized "images" of nature at the same time?

**AB:** Twenty years ago, I began incorporating other life forms in my work to act as a human substitute, a social divider, and simply as an optimistic presence. The babble of birds, the frozen movement of a lizard, and the symbiotic relationship between aquatic species were used as metaphorical device to mirror our own social behavior. Designed to be observed from a distance, in a cage or vitrine, a protective barrier was established between species to species, and "us" to "them". With the addition of plants, one was able to daydream about being in a different landscape without leaving home. With the current restrictions that prevented the use of live animals, it was necessary to re-examine

the natural components of each project and find adequate substitutions. Overall, the installation is designed to point to the fact that we, and a hugely diverse range of species briefly share *Parallel Lives*, the title of the exhibition.

**IG:** What understanding of the everyday objects that furnish and shape our daily lives do we have from looking at them now? Is looking at our daily surroundings and personally furnished homes or the architecture we are living in always an expression, not only of taste, but of social conditions, of daily strategies?

**AB:** It is a privilege to live in a space that corresponds to one's own way of life and aesthetic tastes.

**IG:** That brings me to another question: Can you tell me more about these kinds of zones and systems that you have been working on for such a long time? Each of your works seems to inhabit the different zones and definitions of art and life, the everyday and the extraordinary — a very interesting perspective, especially at this unique moment in time, when many homes have had to be transformed into temporary offices, and the separation of private and public doesn't seem all that clear.

**AB:** For most of my life, my home and studio have been in the same location, in a space with no walls. Because of this choice of lifestyle, I divide my space into zones where I can work, sleep, eat, and socialize. The question of how to live in the social conditions one lives in, is an ever-changing design problem, filled with the complexities of the particular context. This question has motivated my work as an artist from the very beginning, whether I am designing a space, a house, an installation, or a piece of furniture.

The merging of art and daily life is different now than it was twenty years ago, when art's intervention in public space was more in response to the social and functional attributes of a site. Now, Art is more attached to economy and ownership. In public space, the form it takes reflects a more ephemeral way of life, like music and fashion. In a way, it has become more populist, which is a good thing.

**IG:** You were talking about special relations, and the fact that doors and especially windows are thresholds between the inner and outer world. These days, it feels as if digital media is the

new window between the inner and outer world, without the physical experience generated by the presence of an architectural element such as a door or a window as well as the act of opening it. Do you think that we have lost our spatial sensibilities, not only now but in general?

**AB:** Media has mediated our relationship to real space for a long time. The boombox and walkman eliminated ambient sound, then the iPhone and laptop eliminated place. Recently, meetings can be held on Zoom with a background image of outer space, a tropical island, or one's own living room — we can choose to reveal our private lives or invent fictional ones. The computer is now the threshold that straddles our inner and outer worlds.

**IG:** Are these situations that you are creating also places of retreat, then?

**AB:** If art can provide a retreat from one world into another, then it is a success! I think of my work as a tool to recalculate where we are.

**IG:** Let me ask you a final question. As a political person on the one hand and an active artist, teacher, and professor on the other, how did this political, social, and public health situation affect your work and perhaps your actions?

**AB:** As an artist, I look at history and the present as the groundwork for imagining a future. As an educator, my mission is to give students the tools to do the same. It is a responsibility I take very seriously, and I believe that the more we know, the more empowered we become.

# Anna Maria Maiolino

In the sky I am one and  
many and as a human  
I am everything and  
nothing  
June 11 —  
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Anna Maria Maiolino (b. 1942) is one of the most significant women artists working in Brazil today. The Italian-born Brazilian artist's first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland will feature a selection of her early videos, films, photographs, poems, and texts, spanning a narrative arc through her artistic work and life from the 1970s to the present. The exhibition brings together a selection of works from the past fifty years. Her oeuvre encompasses a wide range of disciplines and media while managing to develop a strong poetic language in each. In it, she explores her identity as a woman, a woman artist, and an immigrant, especially under the military dictatorship in Brazil from the 1960s until the 1980s. As her work has influenced generations of artists all over the world, reconsidering it today is a great opportunity for opening up new perspectives on life and living together. The work confronts us with the power of the artist's imagination and her own sensibility towards human conditions, but also her acute awareness of social and cultural deficiencies in daily life.

Maiolino has participated in numerous international exhibitions. More recent solo exhibitions of her long artistic work include *Por um fio* (By a Thread), SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, US; *Anna Maria Maiolino. O amor se faz revolucionário*, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, IT; *Anna Maria Maiolino: Making Love Revolutionary*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, GB; *Em Tudo - Todo*, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, BR; *Errância Poética*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, US; *Anna Maria Maiolino*, The Museum of Contemporary Art - MOCA, Los Angeles, US;

*Matrix 252*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley, US; *Affections*. Premio MASP Mercedes-Benz, MASP, São Paulo, BR; and the *Retrospective itinerant exhibition*, which took place at Malmö Kunsthalle, Malmö, SE; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, Santiago de Compostela and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, ES.

She also organized several performances such as *AL DI LÀ DI*, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, IT (2019), and *In Atto*, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan, IT (2015), and was awarded several prizes including the MASP Mercedes-Benz Prize of Visual Arts, São Paulo, BR (2015).

# In the sky I am one and many and as a human I am everything and nothing

Anna Maria Maiolino  
in Conversation with  
Ines Goldbach

**Ines Goldbach:** I'd like to start by talking to you about language, which plays a central role in your work: language as a source of identity, as a way of expressing yourself, and as a malleable material at the same time. You were born in Italy, emigrated to Brazil with your family when you were young, spent a few years in New York, and then returned to Brazil, where you still live today. Your exhibitions around the world have always brought you back to certain places. We speak Italian and English together. Your catalogues and books, as well as the titles of your works, are in Portuguese and English. What does this form of multilingualism mean to you? In which language are you most at home? Is there a language in which you can think, speak, dream, or even find titles particularly well? How do the languages differ for you?

**Anna Maria Maiolino:** Speech and language have always stoked my imagination, my fantasy, in a particular way, despite the dilemma and difficulty I have faced learning the languages of each new country in which I have lived as a foreigner. As time has gone by, I have learned to value the meaning of each spoken word as a reflection of a thought. That is why I began to use them together with graphic and pictorial signs to construct artworks and write poetic texts. Without a doubt, I can say that my language represents me and reproduces what I am, as it is the instrument of communication my tool to communicate my emotions and feelings, especially if we consider all the different media I use to construct my art. Portuguese has been my main language since 1960. However, my erratic speech, far removed from traditional syntax, seeks to evade

grammatical rules and insists on being close to the use of other languages—a daring aspiration—as an “exercise of freedom.” Learning each new language always put me back to the start, to the beginning: to the sounds of the alphabet and consonants. I believe that my nomadic life experience, encountering different cultures and territories, is a solid presence in my spirit, like a metaphorical mirror: “the return to the start.” In a text from many years ago, I wrote: “Whenever I am confused, lost in my artwork, I go back to the start, to the beginning. This movement of constantly returning to the start is present in my works and processes, such as the series of drawings *Marcas da Gota* (Drop Marks) from 1994 and in the collection of basic shapes modelled in situ that compose the *Terra Modelada* (Modeled Earth) installations from 1994/2021.” I enjoy naming works. They suggest concepts, ways of thinking that, in a way, precede the construction of the work and, far from being symbolic, are enough to indicate and signify the works.

**IG:** There are times when you use certain languages and texts—times when you are perhaps writing more than creating sculptures in your studio, or working on videos or drawings, and so on.

**AMM:** The texts emerge for all sorts of reasons. We must bear in mind that I have worked with art for sixty years and the extent of that time and my curiosity have enabled me to produce work in different media, with a variety of resulting works. I don't prioritize or value one medium over any other. But, well, the choice depends on which medium would be suitable for the execution of the work to be constructed. Often, just a few words are enough for me to compose a short poem, which might reverberate or stimulate me to develop another different work. In recent years, I have started to create audio works by recording myself reciting my own poetic texts and composing audio landscapes with pre-verbal sounds that feature in exhibition spaces. Some of these works are incorporated into sculptures, such as *Estado de Exceção* (State of Exception) from 2009/2012, and *Dois Tempos* (Two Beats) from 2010/2012. I even dare to define the audio works and some of my videos from the series *Apreensões* (Apprehensions) from 2010 as self-portraits or self-documentaries.

**IG:** Your multi-layered work, which has grown over many years and decades, includes drawings,

photographs, videos, performances, texts, installations, sculptures, and so on. For your exhibition here in Basel, we will display excerpts of texts and poems in the center, alongside films, photographs, and performance documentation, because I believe they contain everything that is in your work. Your clay sculptures, for example, take the form of a thought, a word, a pause, or a phrase. Is this impression true?

**AMM:** It's true, to construct my work I have used various media, and I tend to say that my work is developed in continuous spiral movements, now moving outward, now moving inward to the central points of interest that nourish the work, such as aspects of everyday life, nature, matter, earth, the body, sounds, concepts, the transcendental, the infinite, and the part. Works emerge that suggest digestion, defecation, the inside and the outside, and the political, all of which is also manifested by the body. One clear example of my sociopolitical works is the photographic series *Fotopoemação* (Photopoemation) from the 1970s, and the performance *Entrevidas* (Between Lives) from 1981. These works present metaphors based on experiences, and underline the possibility of a reality consisting of ideas through the use of a body of senses connected by a variety of techniques. A web of meanings is thus formed, creating multiple alphabets of language.

**IG:** You were born in southern Italy and, after emigrating to Brazil, you returned to Italy much later, in the 1960s, for an exhibition. In the 1960s there was a vibrant artistic moment in Italy: Arte Povera. Artists who were active under this umbrella term included Jannis Kounellis, Marisa and Mario Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, and many more. It was only in Rome that someone like Kounellis, who came from Greece, could find his language of choice (Italian) and develop his first works from there.

Was there never an attraction or a desire for you to return to Italy, especially in this creative environment? Your work would certainly have been an important source of inspiration here. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when Brazil was suffering under military dictatorship, and freedom of speech and simply being free were both particularly difficult. Why did you prefer to stay there?

**AMM:** I was born in Calabria in 1942. Unfortunately, I am a daughter of the war and of fascism. I was the youngest of ten children

in a big, noisy family, typical of southern Italy. My parents were learned people from other times, who had benefited from a great humanist education and valued knowledge and art highly. My father was born in the late 1800s and my mother in the early 1900s. In 1948 the family moved to Bari, in the Puglia region, so that my elder brothers could go to university. I remember my childhood and the post-war years before emigrating to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1954. The first twelve years of my life in the south of Italy were certainly fundamental to my development as a person and an artist. I would even say that most of my work results from reminiscing about the cultures of those lands, such as the preparation of food, working in the fields, the harvests, the singing and music, the rocky landscape with its caves, the bright blue sky and sea, split by the horizon. I say that my most primitive reactions and my character are Calabrian, but that I am far from knowledgeable about Italian art. I have lived most of my life far from my country of birth. After emigrating, I did not return to Italy until 2010, when I started to participate in collective exhibitions. I have always stayed there for just a few days at a time and have never had the chance to travel as a tourist, so I still don't know that country. Finally, 2010 was also the year that I had my first exhibition with the gallery I work with, Raffaella Cortese. A few years later I started to work with the Hauser & Wirth gallery, which has its main headquarters in Switzerland. Then, in 2018, I had the privilege of assembling a retrospective exhibition, *O amor se faz revolucionário*, at PAC in Milan, curated by Diego Sileo. I have since returned numerous times, always for work, and always for just a few days at a time. Without a doubt, it was my art that reconciled me with my motherland, although I feel torn for having been so far away for so long.

The São Paulo Art Biennial is an important institution for the whole of Latin America. It afforded me the opportunity to see all kinds of art from around the world and from Italy. This was how I became familiar with the works of important Italian artists of the 1960s. From 1964 to 1981, Brazil was going through dark times under military dictatorship. Despite the censorship, I—like many artists—was able to work and resist. Today, our means of communication have made all countries neighbors, and the COVID-19 pandemic has currently equalized everyone under the threat of death. It concerns me to see the rise of far-right politics spreading around the world. Right now, Brazil is one example of this.

However, my art owes a lot to my shared experiences with Brazilian artists. I think that Brazilian modern art is very strong and relevant, and the contemporary art there is extremely vibrant in its experimentation. My assimilation into Brazil has been a long process, but I can say that working with art has been a curative process for me in many respects. I arrived in Brazil at the age of eighteen, with the heavy and painful baggage of an immigrant. I cherish my strong ties with this country that welcomed me, where my two children were born, and where I built my home.

**IG:** You just mentioned the situation in Brazil under the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1981. I can imagine that for someone like you, being an artist, a female artist, an immigrant, a woman, and a mother, the situation was not at all easy. Did you never think of leaving? Or, to ask this question in a different way: What made you stay, besides family reasons? Was there an inspiring context, some fellow artists, or friends that provided this kind of exchange despite the political situation?

**AMM:** In 1968, my then husband, Rubens Gerchman, was awarded a grant and we decided to move to New York where he could use it. The grant allowed us to leave Brazil during a difficult period of military dictatorship, where the threat of repression and censorship loomed over us. It could be said that we exiled ourselves. Rubens and I were entirely unknown artists to the art world and the New York art market. There was nothing strange about that: as well as being new arrivals, we were Latin American, which back then meant the same as being nothing. We did not matter at all to American and European art circles. In a text from 1997, I wrote: "I decided to assume all the possible destinies towards which I had been traced, without leaving anything out. Being an artist and a woman has been part of one and the same repertoire since the start." I also felt a duty to address political and social issues. Indeed, the feeling of duty has heavily guided some aspects of my life. I was still very young when I had to take a stance on reality, to strike a balance between my obligations as a woman and a mother and my desire to create art and discover who I was.

Spending almost three years in New York left a permanent mark on me. However, it was hard for me to not be able to participate in the cultural life of the city with two small children and other difficulties exacerbated by everyday life and financial hardship. This situation led to the

breakdown of my marriage, and in 1971 I returned to Rio de Janeiro with the children, separated from Rubens. Shortly after, we divorced.

Back in Rio de Janeiro I had to start over from square one. The dictatorship was at its worst point. I felt impotent in the face of that repression and the thought of leaving Brazil with two children became impossible. I urgently needed to find a way of earning a livelihood. Nevertheless, I put my energy into building my oeuvre. Despite the difficulties I had encountered upon returning to Brazil, this was one of the most prolific periods of my artistic career. It was a time of great experimentation, especially with drawing and the so-called new media: Super-8 film and performance.

**IG:** Your artworks are also instruments of communication for your emotions and feelings, especially regarding the different media with which you construct your art. Do you work with different media at different times, or in parallel at the same time, depending on the topic, or as I previously mentioned, your emotions? Has your artistic approach changed, or perhaps the way you work in general now in times of crisis?

**AMM:** Ever since I left my country of birth, my heart has become one of a nomad, always ready to set up camp in any hospitable land. This is a good metaphor to explain my craving for freedom and my diverse oeuvre. Indeed, the choice of medium to be used for each work depends on my emotions and feelings. At the moment, in this global humanitarian crisis, it is difficult for my aggrieved and saddened heart to nurture my emotions and cite any preferences. However, as an artist, I have the self-conscience that I need in this crisis to find ways to create works that might interpret my feelings in the face of the serious issues that Brazil and the world must tackle.

**IG:** Within the whole exhibition layout here in Basel we are going to show videos and performances from the 1960s and 1970s as well as more recent works such as *Eu sou Eu*, which you presented at documenta 13 in Kassel. Reflecting on what you mentioned about Brazil and the dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, I was wondering how it was possible to work with performers and realize these performances in public space, as well as to produce them and show them within the country afterward? And as a follow-up question, at that time, it was generally quite early to be working with video and doing performances, too. Was it



difficult to acquire all this know-how during this time, to find other performers to participate in them, as well as the possibility of showing them and starting a conversation with them? Most of them are quite strong statements regarding the political situation in Brazil and the role women play within that context.

**AMM:** Art, like every discipline, is selective and very rarely reaches the entire general public. An artist's work bears multiple readings and there is always ambiguity in how it is perceived by observers, since when regarding an artwork each individual will appreciate it through the lens of their own intellectual, artistic, and political experience. In most cases, this experience does not coincide with the premises of the artist who created the work.

We must bear in mind that, in the 1970s, the arts were renowned around the world for groups of artists who carried out profound renovations of languages through video, photography, and performance. A key role was undoubtedly played by female artists in particular, who also created artworks with political undertones, expressing resistance and challenging the establishment. Visual artists during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964 to 1981) produced works that used metaphors to avoid direct, explicit political pamphleteering. We found ways to sidestep the censorship, motivated by the drive to resist it. However, these agencies of repression gave surprisingly little importance to certain artworks, such as my installation *Arroz & Feijão* (Rice and Beans) from 1979, and *Entrevistas* (Between Lives) from 1981. Both of these works are heavily charged with social and political meaning. Fortunately, I don't think the national security law, the dictatorship's bible, considered artists and their works as dangerous. After all, at that time, access to museums was limited. I believe that the agencies of repression failed to understand the subtleties of the metaphors used in these works. I also think the poetic and metaphorical creative process is not written in the military codes and, therefore, visual artists enjoyed a relative degree of freedom, despite the fear. This was quite different to what happened to actors and composers of popular music who directly and verbally expressed resistance and a rejection of the government in power, and were heavily censured as a result. From the 1980s onward, in the wake of the dictatorship, efforts were made to raise the profile of museums and large numbers of people visited exhibitions. Consequently, even contemporary

art productions enjoyed greater exposure to and understanding by the public. However, over the past two years, a growing number of Brazilians, especially intellectuals and artists, are concerned about the increasing dismantling of education, culture, and art by the government.

**IG:** Many of your videos, photographs, sculptures, and texts reflect this period of trauma, of living in a dictatorship and its latent violence toward human beings and especially women. There is one thought that I have had during these months of the crisis, where I keep asking myself if the pandemic will really change our perception of what we see. Here in Europe, for example, and especially in Switzerland, most of us have never had the experience of being locked up before, of being forced to stay at home, being isolated, and so on. Perhaps this crisis will now usher in a kind of empathetic experience that helps us to read many things differently from our current perspective, including, perhaps, your performances, texts, and artworks. Do you think this could happen?

**AMM:** History repeats itself. However, we need to make the right choices in the present that can point us toward a more humane future, away from violence and barbarity. Nature repeats itself in diseases, in natural disasters. It just is, it exists. Humans have not learned how to behave adequately with different natures, both their own and that of their surroundings. We are certainly in times of profound change. The COVID-19 virus is constantly mutating into new variants. The earth has also become a mutant in its geographic and climatic configurations. Only humans remain fossilized in their prevalent conformism and beliefs of profits and progress at any cost. Humans are responsible for the misery spread around the world and the violence committed by humans against other humans. Finally, as artists, we are left to take responsibility for the truth of the creative act as political action. I believe we urgently need to go back to the start and revitalize the overarching forces of sustenance, those immutable values in the natural dimension—water, air, fire, and earth—and retrieve the culture of nature, the naturalization of culture that enables, as Edgar Morim says, the foundation of a universal equilibrium.

**IG:** How is the situation for you now, despite the current crisis—do you have opportunities for exchange with other artists when needed?

**AMM:** My move to São Paulo, leaving Rio de Janeiro in 2005, had a deep effect on my closest relationships with artists from Rio. When I arrived in São Paulo, I was sixty-three years old, at the peak of my professional career, which led me to do several exhibitions and trips abroad. The time I spend in the city is dedicated to developing my work. I enjoy spending hours in my studios, but then I am away from the social life of the city, which has made it difficult to meet new generations of artists.

Now, with the scourge of increasingly far-right politics in Brazil, and in the face of the violence in the country, where so many young people and women are being murdered every day, it has become imperative to be with others and to establish dialogues. The social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has without doubt brought to my mind all these questions related to this huge crisis. In an attempt to establish dialogue with the young critic Paulo Miyada, we proposed a quarterly digital publication that we named *PRESENTE* (PRESENT).

I consider this online project, which is to be published in Portuguese and English, an important endeavor. It will consist of correspondence, texts in other formats, and productions generated through dialogues between two or more people. The main focus is the field of visual arts in Brazil. This collective project takes on other senses, such as mapping our feelings. *PRESENTE* will be launched online on April 21, and you will be one of the people invited to access it.

**IG:** This project is incredibly strong, and while doing this interview, I was able to read the magazine and also discuss with you how to best integrate the publication into the exhibition here in Switzerland. On the other hand, looking at the situation in Brazil right now from a political, public health, and ecological perspective, being separated and at a distance from each other, where people cannot meet and art cannot be perceived, perhaps a magazine, free of charge and accessible to everybody, is best placed to explore language through texts that reflect, in a very direct way, the thoughts and concerns of this exact moment. Do you see these texts — which are conversations, articles, and poems at the same time — as part of your artistic approach, since they are just as political, poetic, artistic, and informative?

**AMM:** The project *PRESENTE* was born in late 2020, the first year of the pandemic, with

thousands of deaths despite social distancing. This situation further exacerbates the ecological negligence and abandonment of culture and art by our government. This quarterly digital publication came about from my need to escape from enforced isolation, and my desire to be and communicate with others.

At the start of 2021, while replying to a wonderful letter from Paulo Miyada, I realized that letters between friends and artists could represent a strong means of expressing our feelings, forming a kind of art. Thus, together with Paulo, we kick-started this publication in Portuguese and English. It features correspondence, letters, other texts and productions created in dialogue between two or more people in the field of visual arts, primarily in Brazil, but we are also open to submissions from abroad. The word *PRESENTE* refers to now, the subject matter of the content, but it is also a synonym for a gift and, as such, the digital format of the magazine can be accessed free of charge.

The conversation was conducted between mid-March and mid-May, 2021

# Marina Rosenfeld

## We'll start a fire

June 11 —  
September 26 2021

*We'll start a fire* is the first major solo exhibition in Switzerland of the artist and composer **Marina Rosenfeld** (b. 1968), who lives and works in New York. Rosenfeld's works concern themselves with acoustic and perceptual architectures, intervening into sites through the media of sculpture and sound, musical performance and notation. Often taking the form of sound systems on the verge of feedback, Rosenfeld's recursive networks propose a temporal logic derived from computer music and other machinic reproductions of the body. The exhibition includes new works that revisit the traces of one of the artist's iconic early all-female orchestras; performances within the exhibition in June and September will seek to reactivate one of these transient gestures.

Marina Rosenfeld has created works equally within contemporary art and music platforms, including solo projects for the Park Avenue Armory, the Museum of Modern Art, the Kitchen, South London Gallery, and the Fondation Serralves. Her work has been included in numerous international surveys and biennials including the Whitney Biennial (2002 and 2008), Liverpool Biennial (2012), PERFORMA Biennial (2009, 2011), Biennale de Montréal (2015), Aurora Biennial (Dallas, 2020) and the radio program *Every Time A Ear Di Soun* of documenta14 (2017). Solo exhibitions in recent years include *Deathstar* at Portikus Frankfurt (2017), *Music Stands* at the Artist's Institute (2019) and *After Notation* at Bard Center for Curatorial Studies (2015). During 2021 she will participate in the group exhibitions *Hotel de Lièvre* at Campoli Presti, Paris, and *Seeing Sound* at the Kadist Foundation, San Francisco.

Social practice and collaboration have also been an important part of Rosenfeld's practice since the 1990s; her all-female 1993 performance work *Sheer Frost Orchestra* had its first Australian

performance in 2019 at *Dark Mofo* (Tasmania), and was performing in Geneva, Switzerland, in May as part of *Memoire d'espace* by Ensemble Vide. Other recent performances and productions include Musica Strasbourg, Donaueschinger Musiktage, and Ultima, Borealis, Holland and Vancouver festivals, among many others. In the category of improvised electronic music, her activities have included performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company between 2004 and 2008. She has also composed and staged solo works for musicians Okkyung Lee, Marino Formenti, Annette Henry aka Warrior Queen, and created scores for choreographers Maria Hassabi and Ralph Lemon. Rosenfeld's recordings are published by the Room40, Shelter Press and iDEAL labels, with forthcoming releases on INFO and 901 Editions. Rosenfeld was on the faculty of Bard College's Milton Avery School of the Arts from 2004 to 2020 and is currently a research artist with Experiments in Art and Technology at Bell Labs in the US.

# The Composer and the Composed

## Marina Rosenfeld in Conversation with Ines Goldbach

**Ines Goldbach:** As a composer and visual artist, you work with a range of sonic and material configurations. I would like to start our conversation by asking you about the start of an exhibition project like the one here at Kunsthaus Baselland. As the whole exhibition will be a site-specific installation, I'd like to know what your starting point for this project is, as well as for the other projects you get invited to do?

**Marina Rosenfeld:** In previous works I often started with a question: What does an amplified signal—such as a voice, or my voice—sound like in this space? This question has had a lot of valence for me—it's about more than the physical acoustics of a given architecture, although that is never uninteresting. But for me, the initial question is a way to begin to ask what is brought into being and what is destabilized by the transformation of a site from a neutral container into an amplifying volume. (As someone who has also been making improvised music for many years, there is some relation to another foundational question: How do I sound in this space?)

Sound people call the negative space of an architectural structure a soundfield, which is a beautiful term that always reminds me of the high-minded aspirations of a past moment like Land Art, calling to mind, for instance, Walter De Maria's Lightning Field, which was essentially a very composerly formalization of the state of anticipation. The event structure of sound is waiting—a soundfield is always only emergent. As my works have a certain modularity at this moment, I think I have been less interested in site-specificity or defining what I do as "sound art," which again has certain aspirational connotations of poetic gestures realized by wrestling with sound's materiality or something like that, and more interested in what art can do with the rigid temporal mechanics of music. Or what music

becomes as it moves into the register of static and inert forms, or into the register of image production.

In the case of *We'll start a fire*, the postponement of the exhibition due to the pandemic has resulted in, among many other things, a certain amount of isolation and space in which to consider my own history of production and praxis. I found myself gazing at images of collectivity, especially the early all-female orchestras I used to mount. Some of the newer work in the show has something to do with confronting the traces—mostly pre-internet—of these quite monumental events, which brought incredible groups of artists together (Laurie Anderson, Jutta Koether, Josephine Meckseper, Kaffe Matthews, Okkyung Lee, Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir, the collective Threearfour . . .), and yet exist outside of what would be considered a minimum degree of documentation today. The work *Curtain* is both a view of this particular live action in New York in 2003—a 30-woman performance staged in a vacant car showroom near the Lincoln Tunnel—but also perhaps a kind of theatrical curtain, a scrim between then and now. It could be seen as either opening or closing, as a monument or a proposal. In that two-way sense, the scale and blur of the image to me also points toward the possibility that we might equally imagine ourselves there as audience or performer—as the composer and the composed, to put it another way.

**IG:** One of the elements of your layouts, perhaps the most important one, is that the visitor's passage through the space is somehow amplified by your works. How do you work with this (social) factor, when the actions and movements of each visitor cannot be anticipated?

**MR:** The first exhibition I did where an excessive amount of overhead amplification combined with a looping or recursive signal flow produced a sound-system permanently on the verge of feeding back was the exhibition *Deathstar* at Portikus in 2017. Visitors' high heels, passing geese, and cars were all picked up by the microphones as long as they were above a certain threshold in volume and fed back into the system. A network of digital delays kept things stable most of the time, though there were moments of explosive buildup—not feedback so much as radical accumulations of sound. This was kind of a revelation, because I realized that the transient noises of life in the gallery, which of course included any and all noise made by visitors, would be continuously

registered in the work, potentially destabilizing it. One became aware of oneself as a body, possibly a node, in a matrix. The implicit subject matter of all sound systems—the flow of power and relationality through an amplifying network—was made slightly more explicit. I continued to explore this operation in subsequent works, like *Music Stands*, which is a network of microphone-bearing sculptures that are closer to the ground and, in the sense of proximity and scale, more volatile and more vulnerable to touch, abrasion, exuberant vocality, and so on. The works do operate with a certain sociality, though I would say it is one largely oriented around the body and its absorptive or reflective capacities—the body as an aggregate of materials and automatic processes—more than a conversational or discursive space.

**IG:** There will also be works in the exhibition here in Basel that seem to be both notations and drawings at the same time. Do these notations document various sound performances that have already taken place, or do they perhaps call for future actions?

**MR:** The works on paper are called Annotations. They reproduce instances where I found marks in pencil, pen, or highlighter left by collaborators or participants in the scores to earlier pieces. A few also reproduce incomplete or partial photographs documenting the staging of performances. Quite a few reflect the creative intelligence and care the pianist Marino Formenti brought to performing transcriptions of the sound environment I generated as part of the *Deathstar* project. (Both the text scores and the “notes” belong, sometimes tangentially, to this body of work.) But they could also be the marks of any musician who decodes a score and arrives at a plan of action.

**IG:** Are they therefore also reflections on performances per se?

**MR:** Yes, in a way. I’ve been thinking a lot about what performance means right now, especially in this time of hyper-performative politics, where one might imagine performance as a modality of art to have to respond to the performative conditioning of all public discourse, or something like that. And performance in the context of visual art does seem eager to relinquish its status as performance, preferring a quick conversion to object or commodity form in some cases, or to discourse or a kind of nostalgic LARP in others. If I adopt the vantage point of the composer,

things look a little different: a very particular kind of functional relationship already exists between sound as an event, let’s say, and its object form—which, traditionally, has been the score. Of course, I’m not interested in notation that represents a kind of perfected abstraction in opposition to praxis. (Music history is already full of this stifling idea about genius and order and so on.) But I am interested in notation as a system—in the way notations and the events they call into being circle each other, call each other into and out of existence. To me, the annotations aim for the ambiguous status of both drawing and score: they reference the traces of events and are also speculative productions of new events. (I hope they will contribute something to the live performances we will realize within the exhibition in September.) I think you could say that, like all notation, they are a form of postponement, if you address them through the prism of the temporal. To notate is to postpone, to plan for, to open up a distance between the idea and its enactment. If a notation is also a drawing, it is a drawing that is not wholly mimetic, but instead gets in the way of description or reproduction, like an insertion in a line of code.

**IG:** Earlier we were discussing how complex it is to ascribe something like success or failure to a work, especially to the outcome of a performance that is called into being, so to speak, by a notation. Would you mind specifying in what sense a work can be a failure or a success?

**MR:** I have moments where I imagine lofty goals for these pieces—for instance, the reinvention of pleasure in aurality inside the abstract, hyper-relational networks we currently call home. I think we can say these efforts are not guaranteed to succeed . . . I see my work aiming for an intervention at a lower rung of the ladder: tinkering with the API instead of the (dreaded) user experience could be a fun way of putting it. Another metaphor could be an intervention along a sort of vector of sensual or sensorial events, especially at the moment of their decay, their aftersound. I assign shapes to these aftersounds: there is a flare-up of a “hot” signal in a mostly quiet sound system, and the structure of the work is that there will be another, and another. There’s an event to listening as there is to seeing, yet paradoxically, the introduction of time into the equation when you’re dealing with a temporal medium like sound can almost be counterproductive. I think the stillness and

atemporality of looking at painting, for instance, can be an easier ground for a viewer to interpolate temporal experience into—to experience a sustained or suspended kind of reception before a still object, if you will—whereas the dynamism and entertainment of a sound event can actually obscure the speculative and self-inventive nature of listening, the “composition” of the listener, if you like, which is a seductively beautiful possibility that is, once again, always emergent and unstable.

**IG:** The sculptures within the exhibition, Music Stands, were developed from 2019 onward and have the capacity to be objects within the space, bodies within an architectural structure, while simultaneously being able to react with sound—sending and directing it, reflecting and projecting it. Could you tell me more about these series of works that will be also an essential part of your layout for Kunsthau Baselland?

**MR:** I think these works imagine a different, more speculative relation to geometries of perception than that of my late colleague, the composer Maryanne Amacher, who devoted a significant portion of her research to analyzing and cataloguing the physical perception of sounds according to frequency and interval; she was an important inspiration and influence for me. I am still grappling with the specificity of Maryanne’s perceptions, which she catalogued in the name of a kind of science. In my own project, I make a more speculative claim about form: that we can intervene or tinker with the mechanics of reception, not just at the level of bodily processes but through suggestion, context, adjacency, image. The Stands and Music Stands borrow their forms from notations, they play with and pun on two- and three-dimensional forms, sound and aftersound, and enlist the body of the listener in a kind of machinic circulation.

**IG:** Thinking about the entire concept you developed for your exhibition project here in Basel gives me the impression of a kind of substrate or synthesis that brings together and extends your artistic approach of the last twenty-five years, if I am not mistaken. On that note, I would like to learn more about a project that you realized right after you graduated and that has now become a kind of key to your work—the sheer frost orchestra and your work with orchestras.

**MR:** Yes, an important part of my history, my first serious idea, was to create temporary

“orchestras.” They were quasi-performance art, quasi-musical gesture. The most well-known of them was, as you mentioned, the sheer frost orchestra, which I staged for the first time while I was still in art school in California in the 1990s. This was an all-female electric guitar orchestra of untrained musicians; I invented and taught everyone a music-making method of striking and rubbing electric guitar strings with nail polish bottles, which come in many shapes and textures of glass, to make a variety of sounds. The guitars were laid on the ground and were never touched except through the mediation of the glass: it was an explicit rejection of the “hot” masculine history of the instrument in favor of a “cold” anti-eroticism. It was also an entry in a history of feminist music-making whose main actors and events were almost completely unknown to me at that time, since they were not mentioned in any of the education I had received. I mean, in 1993 I knew about Marilyn Monroe’s all-girl band, Sweet Sue and Her Society Syncopators, from the movie *Some Like It Hot*, but it took me another decade to learn about the Feminist Improvising Group in 1970s Britain, for example. At the time, out of frustration and political animus, I wanted to make music with other women, and that was one of the reasons I organized the first sheer frost orchestra. In the intervening twenty-five years, I have not maintained this particular exclusion (female-only performances), but the work and its social orientation still resonates. I could have never predicted this, but I’m invited to remount this piece all the time; I usually decline, simply because the work was never meant to become a “work”—it was an action, an aggressive, ironic, comedic, sincere and unapologetic negotiation with ourselves and our ambivalence about the publicness of our female bodies, our desire for collectivity, and perhaps the possibility of some kind of glory.

Coincidentally, there will be a Swiss premiere of this piece in Geneva this spring, with members of Ensemble Vide and local musicians; due to the pandemic, it will be filmed instead of performed in front of a live audience. And so it continues. And I’m very happy if it takes its place in a history of feminist music-making that was hidden from artists of my generation.

**IG:** Do you feel that the perception of sound works has changed over time? Is making sound visible a concern for you?

**MR:** Not really. I do think that we associate visibility with knowledge, with legitimacy, with power and the law—like the police demanding, “Show me your hands” or “Show me your papers.” It’s a deep-level association, it’s epistemological, and, as a demand, it’s also an instrument of authority and control. All of our dominant metaphors are about lucidity, transparency, and so on.

I think it’s worth asking if there is not some way to subvert this operation with regard to sound, to look for modes of agency or knowing that do not put visibility above the many other forms of presence or sensuality. Not because there is something contaminating about the visual, but because this operation is maybe just too obvious and can have the overly literal character of something like social science. I prefer math, in the sense that I prefer a beat to a graph. I’m joking, slightly, but I’m also trying to signify a different, more ambivalent relation to the address of bodies moving through social space. Visibility as a concept, in other words, seems inadequate for the politics of the experiences that I’m interested in.

**IG:** Let me end with a final question, focusing again on your exhibition project here at the Kunsthaus in Switzerland. As you have referred to both your early orchestras and your more recent—and even very new—works, does the exhibition give the public a kind of overview of the last twenty-five years?

**MR:** I would say that the forms in the show point to different moments in my history, which has been organized around a series of negotiations with collectivity and listening, and divergent histories of modernism. But all the work belongs to the present and the way I am working now. I’ve tried to preserve the temporal character of the trace, as a register of uncertainty or non-certainty, through diverse activities and materials. I’m not trying to squeeze music into exhibition space. But maybe I am interested in how an idea of music, particularly the almost quaint notion of “computer music”—a sensual collaboration between bodies and machines—might still be a viable framework.

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