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Regine Basha on curating, zig-zagging, and taking time to reflect

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As told to Willa Köerner, 2286 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Curation](#), [Beginnings](#), [Education](#).

This interview is part of a Pioneer Works series that includes:

[Toni Dove on technology as subject matter](#)

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You're a curator and, right now, the director of Pioneer Works' residency program. How'd you end up doing what you do?

I started out as an artist. I went to art school at NYU doing drawing, painting, that kind of thing. About two years in, I went on a study abroad program in Florence, Italy. That experience allowed me to bleed over from my studio practice into art history, theory, and writing. By the end of the year, my teachers were like, "Honey, you're really quiet in the studio classes, but in art history, you're the most talkative person. Clearly you need to think about why this is happening?"

At that point, it occurred to me that I really liked interpretation, writing about art, and talking about art. But when I was making it myself I was totally intimidated. I just didn't feel like my path was going to be becoming an artist. So I decided to change courses, and went into art history.

Was there a pivotal experience or job that you've had, or someone you met, that helped you realize you wanted to be a curator?

Yeah, absolutely. After working in a gallery for many years, I went to grad school at Bard College. This was in the mid '90s, and there was a moment in the air that was all about bringing art outside the museum and gallery walls. I came out of Bard really interested in doing that kind of curating. Not knowing how exactly to pull it off, I got together with a couple of other artists and we formed a little collective called Mayday. It ended up being about three years of us conceiving of these short-term actions with artists. Sometimes they'd happen as a show with 30 people out in a public space, like a park. Sometimes it would happen in hotel rooms.



Rita McBride, Mayday Productions, Cold Spring 1998

Those early actions informed my process of working directly with artists, and working site-specifically or context-specifically. So when I started to become more professionalized, that process still came into play—I was just doing it at a larger scale.

When you were getting started with Mayday, and making your own curatorial platform from scratch, how did you figure out how to do everything?

It was so easy. We weren't thinking about, "Okay, how are we going to get the funding?" It was more like a collective or a cooperative, you know? Since the activations were so short-term and temporary, it didn't put us into debt or anything like that. It was a community-based, fly-by-your-instincts kind of thing.

The hardest part of Mayday was really just figuring out when to end it. Because we really all could've kept going. There was a point at which, after three years, we were like, "Okay, we have to grow up. Does this have another level?" Everyone had different ideas about what it should become. We couldn't really all agree on the same things, so we just disbanded.

To get where you are now, did you mostly go with the flow? Or did you do a lot of strategic analyzing of your career path to know if you were headed in the right direction?

There was a lot of analyzing. Some of that had to do with life events—things like moving to different states, like my move to Texas. I did a lot of work there, then came back to New York and realized, "Oh, New York doesn't really care what you do in Texas." I had to remake myself. But I'm really glad I had the opportunity to do that, because it's a good muscle to flex, and because I never want to be resting on laurels from my past. In contemporary art, it's really all about being in the here and now, and being responsive.

While that was difficult for me career-wise, I was never that person that was just like, "I'm going to take the curatorial assistant job at MoMA. And then I'm going to rise to assistant curator at MoMA. And then I'm going to be the curator at MoMA." You know, the institutional curator who sets their sights on the highest job position. I feel a sense of claustrophobia around that. Also, I learned along the way that my curatorial career aspirations needed to change, because the higher you go in the institutional art world, the less involved with artists you are. It just becomes about fundraising and institutional politics, which turns me off. So, at one point, I just had to figure out, "What can I do horizontally?"



Deborah Fisher and Paul Ramirez-Jonas, from *When You Cut Into The Present, The Future Leaks Out*, at the Old Bronx Courthouse No Longer Empty

Previous to this job I was working independently and juggling about three different contractual situations. It was wonderful, but unstable. Then I had a kid in the middle of that. So, of course, stability needed to be more of a theme. Luckily, now I'm a residency director. It feels so natural to me because it's almost like this is what I was doing anyway: Taking care of artists on a one-to-one basis. For me, that has always been very satisfying.

You know, I think it's really cyclical. I don't see my practice as a linear path, where something was in the past, and I've left it behind, because now this other thing is happening. It's a process. You tap into certain things you keep returning to, whether or not you even realize you might be repeating yourself. I often find when I plan things out—when I say to myself, "I want to do this"—it doesn't really ever happen in the planned way, but it somehow often does manifest in its own way. I don't know if that sounds weird and esoteric, but I think I zig-zagged my way to where I am now. If I had to give it a shape, it's definitely zig-zag.

What's a skill that you now make use of all the time, that you never thought you'd need to know how to do?

Probably being a kind of life coach to artists. It's a way of listening, really. I used to do this naturally, but then I became conscious of the fact that there's a way to both listen, and also be a sounding board. a way to steer things in a certain way so that the artist can focus and be productive. It's a kind of therapy, I guess.

Another skill I've had to develop is time management. I wish I really thought about time management in a serious way 10 years ago. Now I do it, and I feel like it's a practice. You have to practice time management.

What do you mean by time management, exactly?

I learned along the way when to say "yes," and when to say "no." There's so much that happens in the art world that can take up enormous amounts of your time—so much that sounds interesting and fun and exciting. The amount of events that you go to, the amount of what they call "grey labor." It's unpaid, but it's your time. Or you get invited to do things but there's no pay, but you're interested anyway because, you know, this, that, or the other thing. I did a lot of that, as most people do. But as an independent curator, it got to the point where I was just like, "This is all smoke and mirrors."

But on the other hand, a lot of grey labor falls into that hazy arena where connections are made and friends are also professional contacts and things get done. You know, it's like when the party's in the kitchen or something. It's those off moments where you're not working where things can really happen.

Do you feel like there's one resounding piece of advice that you notice yourself continually giving to artists?

There's often the conversation about applying to things, and how it's really hard, especially in New York, because the competition is so high. The more seasoned artists know that you just keep applying. You have to almost be automatic about it: If you don't get it, you keep applying. At earlier points of their career, artists can get really discouraged when they hear a lot of "No"'s. They could apply to six things in a month and it's all "No." You could be a really good artist, and that can still happen to you.

What I tell them is, "It's actually just really arbitrary." When the time comes for the jury to meet, how the meeting pans out can depend on so many other things. Who gets a "Yes" depends on the applicant pool that they get, what they need to fulfill their own mission, diversity, etc. So if you don't get a "Yes," it doesn't necessarily mean the jury didn't like the work. It's just hard to be resilient around that.

I also often tell artists, "New York's not the end-all, be-all." If any one of these artists went to another state where there's just fewer people, they would get further much faster. It's a numbers game.

How do you find new artists to work with? Do you go out and find them, or do you wait for them to come to you? Or, to rephrase this question, how might an artist get someone like you to notice them?

When I was curating much more actively, I would do studio visits constantly, even if there was no real reason to do them. Residency programs for me were a big source for discovering new artists. Word of mouth is also a big one, when artists refer other artists, and MFA programs.



Basim Magdy curated for Cecilia Brunson projects, London.

What seems to catch your eye in an artist when you look at their work?

While I don't really have a specific type of work I look for, I would say that I get very interested when the artist is not only very good at what they do, but also willing to risk everything and try something new. I think it's very healthy when an artist challenges themselves. I often tell the artists [at Pioneer Works], for instance, "You're very good at doing this, but just be careful that that doesn't become the only good thing that you can do."

You have to make it harder for yourself somehow, because then it shows. A curator can always tell when you're just falling back on a cool skill that you can do, right? It's really complex now to be an artist. Today's artists are using all kinds of bodies of knowledge for references. They're investing in science, and in social and political situations. They're doing really research-oriented work, and I'm excited by that. I'm excited when there's a full intelligence around a project—that it's visually exciting, but that there's also this intelligent matter that rotates around the project, allowing you a glimpse into a new way of thinking and seeing.

What do you think makes a really good studio visit with an artist?

Good snacks. [Laughs] It's such a personal thing. I find it to be a very intimate environment, and I take it really seriously that the artist is opening up. I'm not in there to judge or threaten. I like to find out about the artist's trajectory a little bit. I'm always like, "How did you get here? Tell me your five years previous to here." I'm often really surprised at how they got there, which helps me lay down my assumptions about what I'm looking at.

If there's is one thing you could go back and tell your younger self, what would it be?

It would be to create a space for myself that's practically sacred, and to reflect more on what has happened before. I moved so fast through so many different scenarios, and we all continue to move very quickly, maybe even more quickly than before. I kind of blazed through, you know? And I never really looked back to just surmise what just happened, and evaluate. Now that I work with institutions more, I've become more comfortable with this process of evaluation, where you actually have to sit and fill out a form and think about what's happened. I never did that, and I think it would have been a good thing to do for myself. So yeah, I would tell myself to slow down a little, and be thankful for what just happened. To be grateful. To look back to see what I learned, and then go. Like a dance, you know?

Ayurvedic knowledge (it changed the way I think about health)
Listening sessions (music or sound listening with a group of friends)
Tea dances (dancing at 6pm like it's 3am)
Italo Calvino's Six Memos for the Next Millennium (timeless!)
Krista Tippett's podcast, On Being

Name

Regine Basha

Vocation

Curator and Residency Director



