

Jeanine Oleson  
by Alanna Martinez

*Voice, objects, collaboration, and audience participation in a new exhibition at the New Museum.*



Installation view of *Hear, Here* at the New Museum, New York. Courtesy of the New Museum.

For her first institutional solo exhibition, artist Jeanine Oleson, who is currently in residence as part of the New Museum's R&D (Research and Development) Season, inhabits the roles of artist, curator, moderator, and performer, among numerous others that are equally ambitious but perhaps unquantifiable. On view at the New Museum through June 7, Oleson has prepared a full program, which include an opera in the style of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, building movable sets for an experimental opera, hosting a seminar on the residency's thematic focus on the voice, and inviting numerous collaborators for a series of workshops and events, all orchestrated with voice as the common denominator.

Not easily categorized, Oleson's practice incorporates performance, photography, film and video, installation, and rigorous investigative research, all of which are present in the various elements of her fifth floor exhibit

+ Share <sup>ear</sup>

her work to answer looming questions about identity and social politics, often straddling the line between what is a personal and collective conversation. The disparate forms that *Here, Hear* takes bounce the viewer between playing on stage and baring witness from the audience. How to fully engage visitors is a challenge that artists who create participatory work often face, and one Oleson confronts head on with playful transparency by revealing moments of artifice while simultaneously manipulating it through sharp paradox.

As collaboration factors heavily into Oleson's residency, she has participated in curating parts of this conversation by creating a complimentary video playlist that corresponds to key points in the text. The reference material is meant to spur contemplation, pique the reader's, and carry our conversation beyond the interview.

**Alanna Martinez** How are you thinking about the show?

**Jeanine Oleson** I'm treating it as a staging that will be located within the museum's basement theater (to be used as part of a performance), but in the exhibition space it's more a setting for things to happen. Objects are catalysts for things to happen in that setting, or the objects are catalysts themselves.

**AM** What kind of objects are there? How is it set up?

**JO** I'm playing a lot with the idea of paradox. It's been set up almost like you're entering a theater and going through a curtain. The major set piece is a mountain that turns around to reveal a cave on the reverse side. The mountain is constructed in the tradition of minimalist sculpture. I was thinking a lot about the mix you might see in the work of Martin Puryear, because I love his use of craft so much. The inside of the mountain is in some way the opposite of that though; it's a cave and it's not so much about the line and the surface as it is about a kind of porousness. I'm playing with externality and a very craft-based interior of hand-made felt.



Installation view of *Hear, Here* at the New Museum, New York.

**AM** How big is it?

**JO** It's twelve feet across and eight feet high—it's big, and it's on casters. It's made for people to walk into, move, and be around. There are also things like the brass horn I made; it's based on a trumpet, but also on the interior of the ear—inner, middle, and outer ear—and though it looks like the structure of an ear it's a paradoxical object because it creates a very loud noise. I'm just calling that the *Aurihorn* at this point. Another object on view is a light fixture that looks like an eyeball with a lens to focus light outward, so again, another kind of paradoxical object. I've been thinking a lot about this with regards to the setting. I have these sense-oriented objects, and the set is very much an epic theme of a landscape because of the cave and the mountain. To me, it doesn't get much more epic, really.

**AM** When you perform, how do you feel about your own voice? Do you feel like you inhabit a different version of yourself, or take on a different voice all together?

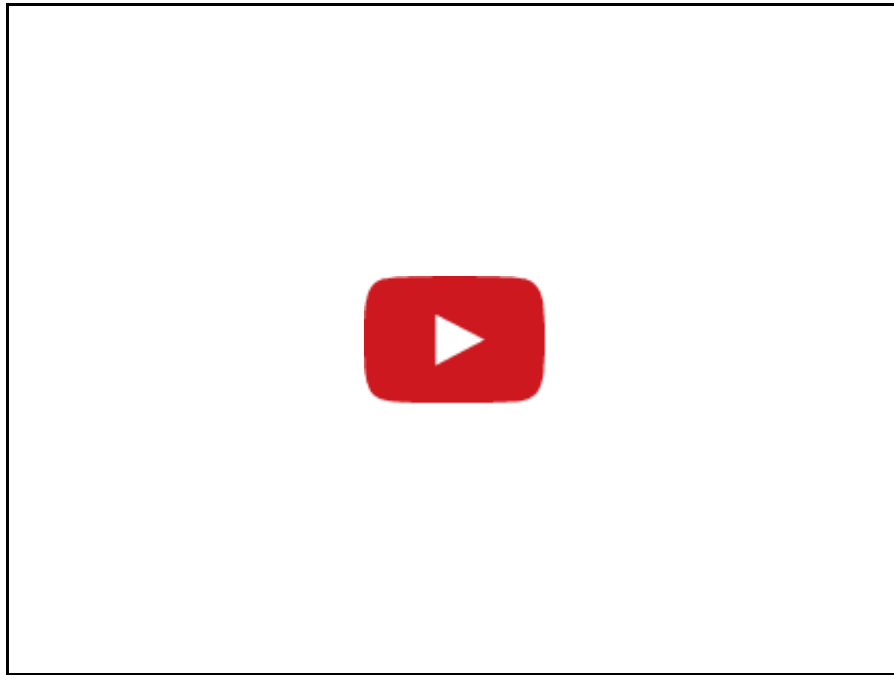
**JO** I thought about that a lot when I did the *Greater New York Smudge Cleanse*. I felt there should be no acting in presenting that. I told myself I wouldn't act, meaning I wouldn't "inhabit a character" other than myself. I didn't want that artifice there at all. What's the need to do that? When you do, it becomes a performance, which I was just not interested in for that work. I wanted it to be

completely mundane. I've done other performances where both others and myself are speaking, signing, and singing. Singing in particular is terrifying. Sometimes I'm terrified for singers when I see them, especially if I'm close to them—it embarrasses and terrifies me. And I deal with that, and I think that's the magic of vocality for me.

**AM** How natural do you consider the voice in opera, or musicals that are sung in their entirety? Is it weird to deal with the whole scope of human emotion through song?

**JO** It's like the artifice of communication, and of emotion, through that very trained framework of voice. There are specific ways that you define emotion, depending on all the different schools and periods. It is a distinct form; it's like a language in itself and I certainly don't do that faithfully when using voice in my own work. When I did the performance at La Mama [in 2010] I had two people come in and sing a song that I had written and was presenting as a karaoke video. It was Allen Frame, a photographer and secret-ish actor, who has this amazing very low, baritone voice, and an amazing accent—it's sonorous, I love that word. I've also worked with Juliana Snapper, a classically trained soprano from whom I've learned a lot about opera and the body's production of sound, which then translates into this other register of communication and sonic-ness. Back to your question, I really do think well-done opera is amazing and completely affects me as I simultaneously criticize it.

*Artist's Playlist: Maria Callas singing the Habanera from Carmen in Covent Garden, 1958.*



**AM** What has it been like to create a stage or platform for people to come and do things within? What are you hoping people will do with that space?

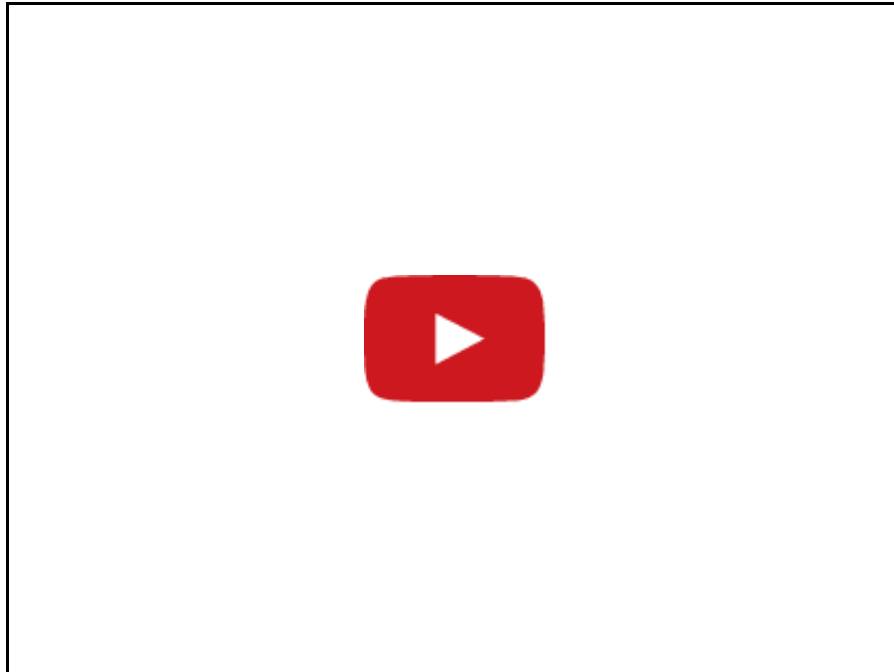
**JO** I'm really interested in other people's work, which is why I invited them. I get tired of artists giving other people platforms as a completion of their own work, and I question that in terms of one's own practice and what their work becomes then. I *am* however interested in complicating the terms that my exhibition exists in by placing other thought alongside it—that's what I hope for the space and that's why I invited them.

**AM** Do you mean that the word "platform" implies boosting someone else up "physically?"

**JO** No, that's not what it means in the contemporary parlance. That's why I didn't really want to use it. We can just call it a space. It's about people bringing in their own specific research; what does it mean for them to do something about the idea of voice and the act of listening, or producer and audience—that kind of paradox—inside of a show? I'm really interested in what they're doing, and so I hope that other people are as well. For this, it didn't seem like something where I had to do be producing something myself the whole time. Since I'm interested in what these other people are doing as well, I'm offering this as a space to continue and complicate that kind of interaction. I also think that since it's a lot of people that I know, most of whom I've had ongoing conversations with about specific ideas, it's an ability to work that in too, and not have to be singular in thinking

about those issues. It's not, not at all. But, it's also not necessarily a platform; it's not necessarily a community either. It's varied, but I like that.

*Artist's Playlist: I love this—a shepherd's hook leaves the field to control the stage.*



**AM** Are you doing any collaborations over the course of the residency?

**JO** Yes! I've been working with an amazing artist, Kim Charles Kay, who makes amazing fiber-based work. We collaborated on costumes for the March 7 *Rocky Horror Opera Show* and the handmade felt interior of the mountain/cave set. Also, for the performance, I've participated in a research and development writing group; it's a theater group called The Civilians, made up of theater directors and playwrights. I'm kind of the oddball in there, but it's been fantastic and something that I really like about theater is that there are such defined roles for who does what, and where those relationships exist with each other. I've been working with a musician named Rainy Orteca composing music for the performance. We're figuring out how to incorporate live loops, a traditional "pit band," and writing a score for the *Auricorn* to be used in a performance. I also collaborated with Cori Ellison, an opera dramaturge, in staging the *Rocky Horror Opera Show*. There are other people who have helped so much to make the work and are instrumental to the process, like Chuck McAlexander at The Brass Lab who was crazy enough to fabricate the beautiful brass *Auricorn* for me. There are also the dear friends who have answered my various calls for help in critical craft

moments with costumes and felting—they really, really made this project happen.

*Artist's Playlist: Videos by Kim Charles Kay in Chehalis, Washington buying wool for the felt from Mountain Niche Farm. Courtesy of KCK.*



Chuck McAlexander and Jon Natchez with the *aurihorn* at The Brass Lab.  
Photo courtesy of Jeanine Oleson.



The way the piece is scored is going to necessitate someone interacting with it and figuring out how they want to interpret it, so this is a total collaboration. Every person is going to do it completely differently and they're going to do it



differently every single time. That's something that I think is so interesting about music: a composition is a framework that happens differently each every iteration. There's this idea that it doesn't, and you can place certain controls around it for what you want it to be, but it is really just a framework. Just like having a space with objects, what happens to someone's expectations when they come encounter that? We're all going to interpret things differently, and we're lucky people to be able to interpret art, and have an opinion.



*What?*, performance on January 14, 2010 at X Initiative with Juliana Snapper and Emma Hedditch. Photo by: Khaela Maricich.

**AM** Do you see differences between individual voices versus collective voice?

There are elements to your work that are extremely craft-based, which are obviously all you, but how do you find your own voice when working collaboratively? Or do you feel that collaboration is a further extension of your voice?

**JO** Usually, if I've sought out collaboration it's because I'm interested in what they're doing, and think of our work together as pastiche. I'm pretty interested in being transparent and having a stake in collaboration with people. I want to take responsibility in forming those collaborations and be responsible for the way that I see it happening, or the way I want it to happen. This is why I hate the word "platform." I don't hate it, but I feel critical of it as a neutral thing that's just "there," which suggests you "just get on it," but it still has its own subjectivity and so I always feel like I have to take responsibility for it and what I've created. For instance, when you go to a panel and there's no central point and everyone's just kind of splaying off in different directions, it's boring; no one can actually engage and talk in interested ways. Someone has to think about that, and that is the responsibility you take on when acting as the head organizer of such an endeavor.



Jeanine Oleson, *The Greater New York Smudge Cleanse (West Village event)*, Fall 2008, public performance. Pictured: Oleson and Leah Gilliam in front of Stonewall Inn. Photo by: Khaela Maricich.

**AM** Like the responsibility of an exhibition curator?

**JO** Or the curator, absolutely. If you go to a show and ask, “Why are all these works in this show?” Unless the statement specifies, “there is no central point except the color blue,” then that is itself probably a political act of refusal against curatorial premises, and a certain overtaking of content, which I’m not sure I agree with. Someone needs to take some risk.

I wouldn’t say I’m a control freak but I like to do a lot of different things all at once. I like to have my hand in a lot of the things that I’m doing, and I don’t turn over very easily to other people. I also think it’s very important to defer to others’ expertise and vision. When working on *Rocky Horror Opera Show* with Cori Ellison, she knew exponentially more about opera than I did. I deferred to her knowledge in so many ways, and then she deferred to my ideas about how I was trying to play with that form, since that’s something she’s interested in too. It’s about letting people have roles and allowing them to fully inhabit them. It’s really exciting to work with people.

**AM** That facilitates an exchange of knowledge and skill too. Do you find the same challenges teaching?

**JO** I used to work curatorially, and I kind of hated it because I felt like the transmission was one way. Teaching can be problematic in terms of hierarchy, but, you can also run a classroom where your agenda is “I want you to be here, I want you to be alive, I want you to be engaged, and if you’re smart you’ll do that now because that’s what you’re going to have to do from here on out.” It’s the biggest thing to learn: not to stand in front of students and lecture all the time, but to figure out how to get them engaged in themselves, each other, me, and the world.

**AM** With regard to creating a space, how do you go about taking responsibility for what gets produced there?

**JO** In this case it’s in a museum, which is a huge privilege, and in another way it’s something associated with what I’m doing, so why wouldn’t I want to take responsibility for it? Unless it’s a position where it’s about the disconnection of contemporary life within neoliberal capitalism, which we’re all fucked up because of, and which is something I think a lot about. I think about the effects of that on us as subjects, and so if there are incursions against that I’m for all of them, but that’s also a responsibility to think about and actively pursue, as someone who is listening, caring, and speaking. This season, in a way, is about that idea, that little

kernel of “well, what do you do then?”

I did a work on this island called Svalbard where the Global Seed Vault is located. The landscape there is supposed to be this untouched Arctic landscape, but in reality it's affected by oil exploration and a number of external global forces. The seed vault is basically neoliberal policy in the form of corporate mono-agriculture; made possible in part by companies that are may be causing a global demise. When I visited, I was struck by thinking about how a photograph can never represent that. My task with the work was to not let it be just photographs. So, I ended up cutting them. I tried to blot it out, with black cloth, and perform all of these actions, subsequently rupturing them. In some ways it's very formal, but it was, as I saw it, action against this landscape that represented a position that I felt really powerless against. I thought about myself as an agent in that.



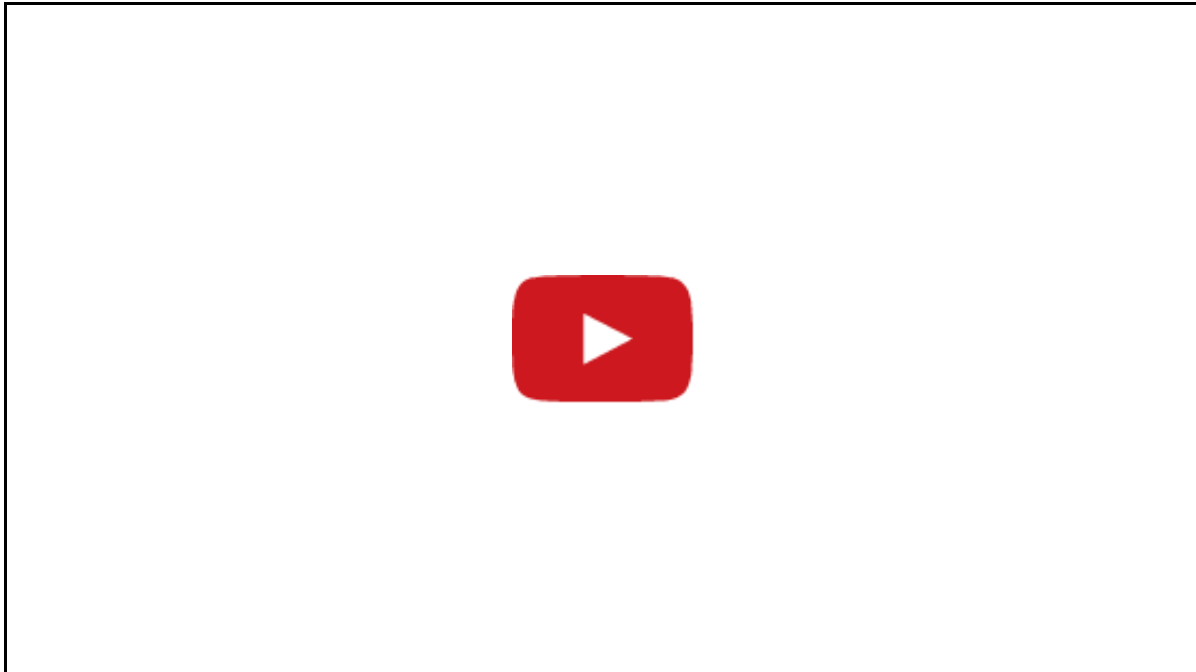
Untitled from “The shore is still in the sea” project, 2012, archival inkjet, 40x50in. Courtesy of Jeanine Oleson.

**AM** The existence of something like a global seed vault is very imposing, and implies an inevitable implosion. What is there to be done really?

**JO** In a way, that's based on a very linear notion of time, it's nutso. The idea of that functioning scientifically, in an end-time schematic, doesn't really pan out, but it does pan out in another way if you're thinking about storing heritage seeds, for countries, nation states, and corporations. To me, that's the terrifying underside of that. And, it's not terrifying in only that circumstance; it's terrifying

in all of the circumstances that we just live with every day. With that project, I was thinking about powerlessness and what art can and cannot do.

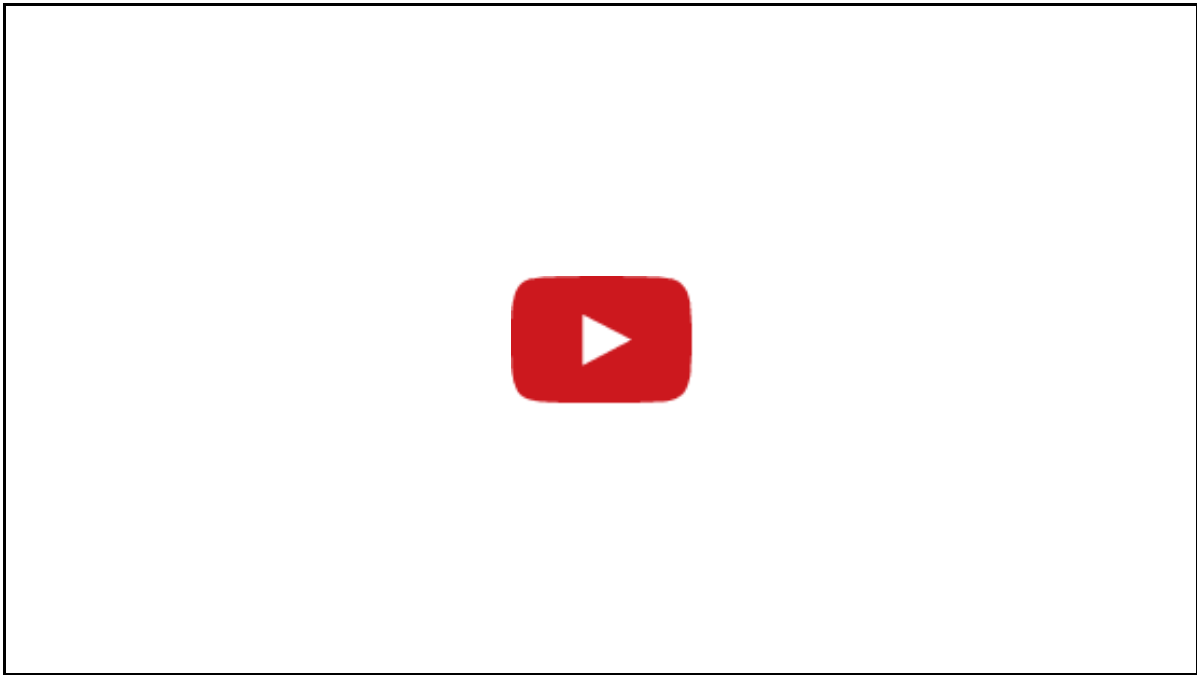
*Artist's Playlist: "Doomsday Vault Protects Seeds of Life." (Courtesy Associated Press.)*



**AM** The voice of the artist is very unique and can be powerful; do you feel your voice is louder as an artist?

That comes with the power that artists get. I could say that I grew up in very working class circumstances, but because I'm an artist I have a way to move through the class structures rapidly, and my position can change constantly. To not understand that production, and what it causes, and the havoc that wrecks on other people or on other situations, is an ethical question that's not really a question.

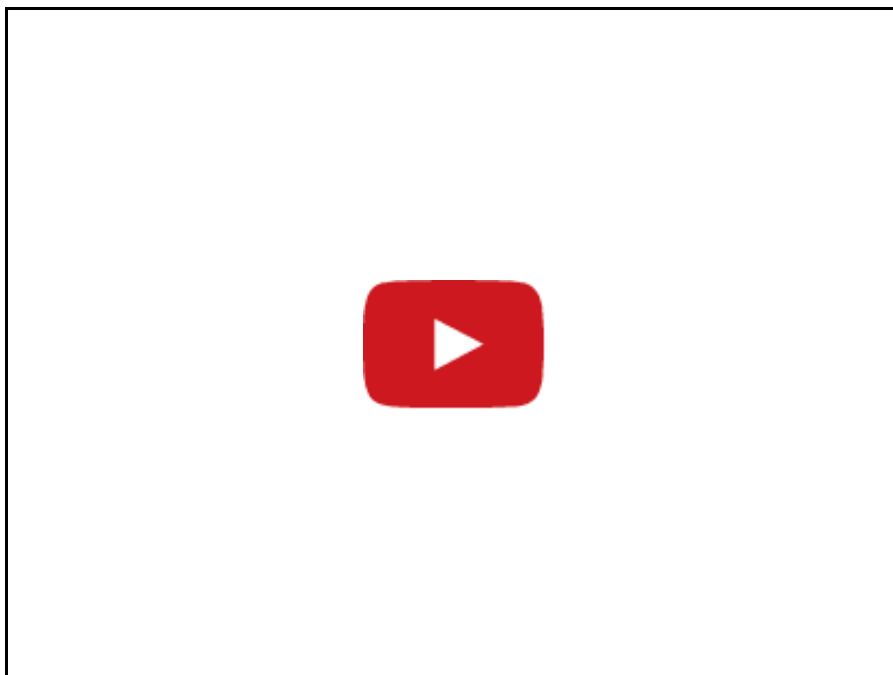
*Artist's Playlist: Female vocal cords vibrating during a stroboscopic rigid laryngoscopy exam. Normal amount of secretions. Small posterior gap between the vocal cords. (Courtesy of James P. Thomas, MD, Voicedoctor.)*



**AM** Do you feel as an artist that you can do a lot?

**JO** That changes every day. Yes and no. I think that we have some real problems of audience, and the way audiences engage with visual work, as well as the ways artists are trying to “do” things.

*Artist’s Playlist: Opening sequence from the HBO documentary Public Speaking, directed by Martin Scorsese.*



**AM** They can be limited.

**JO** Yes, the circumstances of showing work are pretty limited, but the engagement with making work for me is hugely life changing every time; there is all of this vibration and momentum from making a set of things that I have to react to, which is a lot. When you come up on a writing deadline, you have to grapple with all the things you've been thinking about to make that story, right? On a personal level you have to engage. I think that art can do that when it's affective. It's about making something that produces external empathy, or an externality for human culture, and learning to understand that external set of circumstances as a kind of representation, which has a clear function. I don't think art, opera, or dance is dead, but the crisis of what we want from them is present.

*Alanna Martinez is a writer, editor, and visual artist based in Brooklyn, and currently managing editor of Artinfo.com. Her work has appeared in Art+Auction, Modern Painters, and Williamsburg Greenpoint News + Arts.*

Tags: Installation art, Performance art, Exhibitions

---

About  
Advertise  
Contact  
Donate  
Events  
Follow  
Newsletter  
Shop