

Panel Discussion on the occasion of Raquel Rabinovich's exhibition "Gateless Gates" at Y Gallery, New York, NY, November 21 – December 23, 2014
Raquel Rabinovich in conversation with Alex Bacon and Ann McCoy
Saturday 13th of December, 2014 at 2 pm

Y Gallery owner, Carlos Garcia Montero: Our conversation today is among Raquel Rabinovich, Ann McCoy, and Alex Bacon. Ann McCoy is an artist and art critic. Her most recent piece in the *Brooklyn Rail* interviews Raquel. Ann lectures at the Yale School of Drama on the history of images. Her work is in many American museum collections and she has received a Prix de Rome and a D.A.A.D. Künstler Award. Our other guest is Alex Bacon, who is a scholar, writer and curator based in New York City. He is a regular contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail* as well, has taught at The School of Visual Arts and has served as a guest critic in the graduate painting department at the Rhode Island School of Design. This past year he has curated several exhibitions including *Ad Reinhardt 100*. He is currently finishing up his PhD in art history at Princeton, with a comprehensive dissertation on the first decade of Frank Stella's career. Among his publications, Bacon is co-editor with Kyle Foster of a collection of essays by Richard Hamilton. He's also the author of texts and catalogs on many contemporary artists. Raquel Rabinovich was born in 1929 in Argentina, and has lived and worked in the US since 1967. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, most recently the 2011 Lee Krasner Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Other awards include the National Endowment of the Arts Visual Arts Fellowship in 1991 and another National Endowment of the Arts US/ France Fellowship in 1992, among many others. She had numerous exhibitions, so I am just going to name a few. She was the artist who represented the United States in the 10th International Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador in 2009. Her work is included in many public and private collections including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, The Foundation for Contemporary Art in New York City, the Miami Art Museum in Miami, and the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires. So let's start the conversation.

Ann: I first saw Raquel's work in the '80s at the Jewish Museum. I was a very good friend of Maureen Bells, so I was interested in large glass sculptures. So when I saw Raquel's work, I realized that this was a completely different animal. These were almost a kind of temple structures. This is when I became interested in the artist. And I sort of filed her away. Then I wrote an article on the show at The Asia Society, called "The Artful Recluse: Painting, Poetry, and Politics in the 17th-Century China" on painters who would practice seclusion. When I started writing that article Linda Weintraub, who's a wonderful art historian said to me, "I think you should know about Raquel Rabinovich. This is when I found out about Raquel's outdoor pieces. Then two things started happening simultaneously: one is Alex Bacon did his *Reinhardt at 100* show, with a wonderful volume of over 100 writers, writing about Reinhardt. This document was extraordinary, because I mostly write about archival things, I'm not quite a formalist like Alex is. I was really taken by this article. I was interested in Reinhardt's relationship with Thomas Merton, among other things, and it really helped to understand the black paintings in a way that I never would have been able to. Around that time I saw Raquel's black paintings, in a gallery that we won't mention, in a group show. I was just knocked out by them. I thought they were one of the most extraordinary paintings I had ever

seen. So, I rang Alex Bacon to say, "Alex, Raquel should have been in your show. This is an artist who you really, really have to see." So Alex went up the next day or week.

Alex: What is interesting is that we both connected, or reconnected, with Raquel's work in the context of Reinhardt. I worked at the Reinhardt Foundation for the last couple of years, doing the Catalogue Raisonne of *The Black Paintings*. This is when I found out that there was this Argentinian artist, living upstate, who has created her own black paintings that are really quite amazing, in the legacy of Reinhardt, but doing their own thing. I was of course intrigued as a connoisseur of black paintings. When this show was coming together, you called me up and said, "Now is a really great time, Raquel is having her own show. You should go up and visit her, and see what's going on. Maybe you could do something." So I did and we spent a lovely day together. I think this work in particular is interesting for the two of us to deal with because we both like it in a very direct, formal way. But I think our access points are very different. You have an interest in the literature and spiritual elements, whereas, I'm more interested in the people that Raquel knew in New York during the 1960s and also the art historical conversation about the monochrome.

Ann: From reading the correspondences and the catalogue with 100 writers, it really helped me to understand Raquel's work, because I saw many similarities between them. One is that Raquel has a meditative aspect of her work- the interior process, that happens over a very long period of time. Somehow, this goes into the work and is also very different from a lot of the younger artists who bring in the fabricator and say, "Ok, make up 50 black paintings for me." I think that you said that some of these artists are making more paintings in a week than Reinhardt did in his lifetime.

Alex: Actually then Newman created 120 paintings because Reinhardt did 1,000 paintings. Newman did 120. So, that would've been very impressive. A lot of young artists are working through ideas, through producing the reiterations. So there is a sense of the individual piece not being as important as the series. In that sense, Raquel certainly speaks to a very different impulse, one that consists of working on the same painting for a very long time and to imbue a lot in it. What is interesting about this body of work is that there are certain elements of text and even of linear divisions, which are not evident unless one spends time and allows them to kind of emerge from this murky darkness, which I talk about a bit in the text that I wrote that you all now have.

Ann: I think that to make a work of art requires a tremendous interior process, and I think that that's something that so many younger artists are missing. Like when I think of somebody like Francis Bacon, like Rothko, all of these people had a tremendous inner dialog going all the time, and went through an inner process and I don't see that in this sort of zombie abstraction or this mass produced abstraction. I think that if that process doesn't occur, somewhere in the psyche of the artist, it doesn't go into the surface of the painting, and the painting doesn't have a particular aura. One day I was really depressed and I had seen so much bad abstraction that I remember going into --- and seeing a Mark Tobey painting and I started crying because there was something from that surface that resonated so deeply and I think that that's one reason why I really love Raquel's work, because I really feel that her work is the product of a tremendous inner process.

Alex: I think that for a younger generation, there is the same level of intellect and experience being put into the work but there is just a different relationship to making and for me I don't necessarily think one should place a value on the single piece that's been

worked over even though Raquel has done amazing things with that and other artists like Reinhardt or Barnett Newman have, but I think that there is something interesting about seriality today and I think that it is very much speaking of people in my generation, people in their mid-20s, early 30s, it's just how we constantly operate, this idea of constantly uploading and downloading content. So for me I see a lot of artists putting the same level of input into the work that just happens to manifest itself in many panels of paintings. But I would be interested in hearing what Raquel has to say and why she wanted to have this particular painting, why for her it was important to spend that time and what kind of things she was trying to in view into the work through that relationship. We would like to know how what happens in the studio ends up in these final products, or if you even consider them final.

Raquel: I spend a lot of time in what I call incubation time, which is not a rational process of thinking. It's being in a space that is open and spacious, quiet and silent, mysterious and empty of thoughts. I don't decide I'm going to do this and then go and do it I don't go from A to B in a straight line. My process of working requires both intention and intuition at the same time. The idea of working in series, may be in a group of twenty paintings, is like having a conversation, a dialog, I can go from one painting to another. And just like in a real dialog, you never want to say too much because you will ruin the conversation. If I say or put too much in my paintings, I know they will be ruined. I look at them from a distance, then get close, maybe I don't look at them for a while, then I go back to them, back and forth. It's an ongoing dialog as I apply layer upon layer of paint, revealing and concealing the layers. Someone asked me once how I know when a painting is finished and when to stop. I think I know that a painting is finished when the ground becomes groundless and the surface dissolves into that groundlessness. It is not a rational decision, but a sort of inner knowing that the painting is complete.

Ann: Incubation is very important. Incubation was a concept that was known in the ancient world, in Greek it means a sleepy inn. It is always below the threshold of consciousness, and it's always a process, and it's something that has a life of its own. I think that it's interesting because Raquel was talking about going to Machu Picchu and seeing it disappear from view under the clouds before dawn, and then being slowly revealed as the clouds lifted. And how this process of Machu Picchu took 20 years to end up in another body of work. And I think that this is something that it's never really discussed, the idea of incubation or the idea of the inner process that happens, which is something that really attracted me to Raquel's work.

Alex: Raquel how do you feel about putting a show together, and what we are seeing is a body of work that you made in 1995-1997, to show a body of work that is almost 20 years old?

Raquel: Well, I think that time is never old or new, time is time. Actually, this body of work has never been seen, this is the first time for me to show it in public. At the time, this is the mid-90s, I was very involved with the idea of embedding text into the paint of the painting. The process of the viewer unearthing or digging out what is embedded echoes my own process of embedding. The title of the series, *Gateless Gates*, is stenciled and embedded into the paint at the bottom of each painting. I have been using text in my work since the 1980s. In 2002 I began using unwritten text, metaphorical text, in the ongoing series *River Library*. These are drawings on handmade paper in which I use mud from rivers around the world as my medium. Mud functions like a text, like the alphabet of yet unknown language. I would say that the text is the drawing and the

drawing is the text. Included in this exhibition are some recent pieces from *River Library*. It seems to me that there is an invisible thread connecting the actual written text in *Gateless Gates* to the unwritten text in *River Library*, and maybe this is what brought the show together the way it is.

Ann: I love the idea of the embedded text, that's another kind of mystical idea where a text will be embedded and then something would be painted over the top of it. The idea of embedded text is something that has always intrigued me. I'm always interested when art historians are restoring something and then they find something really interesting underneath it. I've been to Nepal and there will be objects embedded into a stupa and people and worshipers are circumambulating these things and really worshipping something inside that can't be seen. And I feel like your paintings are like that, like there is some sacred text or something embedded in that that can't be seen but that something in me is responding to and for me it's a sort of unseen element that attraction to something that is not always seen. There are so many ways of perceiving things and we live in such a pseudo rational society where other types of perception are poo poo. And I think that we do perceive things in that way, the way that the worshipers are relating something interior of the stupa and I think that with Raquel's pictures I certainly feel that, I feel that there is something quite profound embedded there that something in me that I may not understand rationally is really responding to.

Alex: I like that there's this embedded text; clearly there is a relationship to Jasper Johns in these paintings and I like that in his work when words appear they have this kind of ambiguity, like they're somehow neutral but not. And I think that what's interesting is that Raquel does give this a sort of spiritual spin but there's still this sense of, okay now you've unearthed this meaning but this meaning is this kind of impossible conundrum, it's not like oh and now the true meaning has been unearthed. But rather, like what you were saying as well in a different way but for me I like that, like I'm even seeing this now, having these paintings in front of me and having them go from monochrome to having these words emerge and then it have this possibility of meaning. They point up their own sign posting, like each piece has that experience but also speaks to the limitations of our own inability to process what we are experiencing. I think that for me they point back to maybe we should be at home rather than trying to put meaning on them or derive meaning from them in the more traditional sense.

Raquel: To me it is irrelevant whether there is a written or an unwritten text. It's not the written or unwritten text that gives meaning. The meaning is inherent in the painting itself. I think that the process of the viewer looking at the paintings and drawings is a sort of archeological experience in which they discover something they didn't know yet that emerges. That's what happens to me when I look at art that transforms me, that takes me to a place within me that deeply resonates with the innermost of the art I'm looking at.

Ann: I remember in your Reinhardt at 100 there is a wonderful discussion of how Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, had gone to school with Reinhardt, and when he joined the seminary he actually took one of Reinhardt's black paintings.

Alex: Reinhardt gave him the painting. They were at Columbia together as undergrads then they both went in different directions, like Reinhardt became an artist, Merton became a poet and a mystic as well, and then Merton joined a seminary and so actually like the calligraphy, Merton was writing letters a lot because of course there was a vow

of silence, in the Trappist community and so he would write a lot of letters and so their letters are amazing to read. And then at some point, I think it was in the late 50s, Reinhardt painted this painting, it's a very beautiful painting because it was painted specifically for Merton's cell in Kentucky.

Ann: I thought that it was really wonderful that Gethsemane, which is the name of the monastery where Merton was, that in Gethsemane there would be this Reinhardt painting and when I saw Raquel's paintings I thought this would make perfect sense, I could see a monastic having one of these paintings in his/her cell. There was something so wonderful about them that it made perfect sense to me.

1: I would love to have these at my home. I have always felt good with Raquel's paintings, but what I'm saying is that you are going to one part of Raquel that has nothing to do with Reinhardt, though they are great artists.

Ann: These absolutely have a wonderful aura, I spent three days in Raquel's studio and it felt like being in heaven.

Raquel: Maybe I should talk about work that it's not here but that I have been doing lately, parallel to the drawings, a series of stone sculpture installations on the shores of the Hudson River that are subject to the rising and falling of the river tides. The title of this series is *Emergences*. It is about how something emerges into view from concealment. Every time I completed one of the sculptures by the river, I would observe for many hours how the waters recede and then rise in a very slow motion, revealing from nothing to everything and from everything to nothing. And then I also began observing that the mud in the riverbed always remained covered and I became curious about it, how it was always concealed. I dug out mud from the Ganges River in Varanasi in India, and there I began making the first pieces of *River Library*. I would mix mud with water and an adhesive, submerge paper into the mix, let the paper dry, submerge it again and again, adding layer upon layer of my new medium. This process echoes what happens in the bed of the river itself where layers of mud accumulate gradually throughout time without mixing with the previous layer. I also layer the resulting pages, like a book. I didn't go in person to gather mud from other rivers, but friends and friends of friends would gather mud from rivers they encountered in their travels to different countries, and bring it to me or send it in the mail. Somehow it was what Marco Polo did, bringing to the Kublai Kahn stories of cities he visited in faraway places. So, when people bring mud to me from rivers in faraway places is like receiving an alphabet with which to write unwritten stories.

Ann: I think it's how I said in the interview with her that I like the fact that normally when you think of mud and linear A and linear B, and a kind of alphabet, but I like the idea that of mud being an alphabet. I grew up in a part of the country where mud plays a very big role because I grew up in a mud, an adobe house, so every year women would come and apply the mud, and so the idea of women applying layers of mud, I felt very much at home with that, and I like the fact that this was her alphabet. Because it's an alphabet that's before linear A, the first written language we know. It's a kind of alphabet that exists for centuries before that and I like that idea that this could be an alphabet that's much more timeless yet also contemporary. They are always dredging the poor Hudson to take out layers of polluted sediment so that's also part of this alphabet that these rivers have had these very long lives.

Raquel: To me it's extraordinary because most of the rivers are ancient, thousands of years old. So the accumulation of mud began before language came into existence. In ancient civilizations people settled alongside rivers, and everything ended up in the river. Embedded in the mud are their unwritten histories as well as the history of the earth.

Ann: I studied Geology in college, it also relates to stratigraphy, in geological time because that's what sandstone is, its mud and layers of mud and sand compressed with heat and pressure so this is also relates to a pre-human time.

2: Unfortunately I can't remember the poem but the ending of the poem, the spirit or the soul is that many rivers go to the sea and that's the feeling that I have of the movement, and we haven't talked about the movement of the rivers and what it means.

Alex: That's interesting because I wonder what you feel about, there are certainly things going on in the translation of these materials and these works. It's true the river is both this flowing water that changes the riverbed and then the riverbed reflects that change so it's both a kind of geological time but I guess geology is always shaped by weather and things like that but then also when you sort of freeze that in a way in these libraries, we talked a bit in the studio about how they are these books but there's no content again like in the paintings. Ultimately, I know you very specifically designed this presentation, of them to be a reading table at a library, but of course, strictly speaking there is no content for that to be derived from whether a stratigraphic content or a linguistic content. It seems like in the paintings you are trying to convey a kind of feeling, a sensation, a media relationship with the viewer rather than these kinds of books that have been made formal, in a sense that they're objects rather than devices to deliver content.

Raquel: It seems to me that the content is evoked, implied. Even when you go to a real library, all you see is the spines of the books. You have to interact with them for the content to emerge. There is no content in an unread book, but the presence of the book itself hints towards the content. The same with my *River Library* drawings. So, in a way, when you engage like that, you are co-creating the emergence of the content. It is interesting for me to remember that around 4,000 B.C., in the Mesopotamia region, the clay tablets were the Sumerians' paper on which they would incise their texts, while for me clay is the actual text. Those were supposedly the first books, and I hope that in our technological age we are not witnessing the end of books.

3: What you say about books disappearing, and also the clay, the way I interpret your work, the mud work especially, is that human beings have been developing cultures, civilizations and then being destroyed and new ones emerging and then they're destroyed, the holocaust is a good example of that, and I think that there's something deeply fundamental about the mud works. It's like getting to some truth or some essence below that holds all cultures together, that holds all civilizations together. That it's a language. Language is something that can be understood in different ways that different contexts will change it, it's not totally fractional, there are no clear answers. Everything can be interpreted differently, so that what somebody writes to somebody else will mean something different depending on their culture but there's something about taking the earth that is human that we all relate to no matter where we come from, and putting it together like that, that I think is very powerful.

Ann: That's a wonderful point. I was just thinking, linear A, I took this class one time on linear A and linear B and I was so disappointed because when they finally translated

they found out that they were all merchantless. There was no great epic poem, it was just merchantless. But I was thinking there's something wonderful too about text sometimes. I remember going to an Akhet museum in Cairo and seeing some wonderful brown books that could no longer be read, it was all glued together and you could not open it, it couldn't be deciphered in anyway and it still had some amazing presence and I think sometimes a language that one doesn't know, actually I prefer going to a religious service in a language that I don't know because in a wonderful way it removes you and I think that the same thing happens with these books, you are almost glad that you don't know what they're saying.

Alex: This leads me to wonder, in a more formal way, so there's the language that you talk about writing, formally it's a kind of field, a field of color. I wonder then in the kind of painting, which are built up out of brush strokes, do you have a kind of relationship or think of that in a way of writing or a relation to these things that we've been talking about? In both ways these things are very important. It's very important that you submerge the sheet and there's a secretion of mud which is similar to the secretion of mud in the river.

Raquel: I work with a brush in my paintings, and with my hands in my *River Library* drawings. Here my hand is my brush.

Alex: So then in these paintings when you are building up the field with all these small brush strokes do you have a sense of that as a kind of writing as well?

Raquel: Yes I do, absolutely. It's a kind of writing as well. I think it develops as I work, but its perception emerges long after the work is done. I mean, there is no deliberation or anticipation of what I am going to write.

Alex: And for me, observing the work that you have made, it seems to me that in a way, your relationship here is very much a conduit for this meaning and this language of the earth from other sources. And then in the paintings it's much more about you, and maybe again it's not you writing your life story or something but there's a kind of, you're making the mark, the marksman has a sort of relation to your body and your experience and there's a decision you are making to work in this way so there's some sort of gesture even if gesture is not the way we usually think of gesture, but nonetheless you haven't just made these, like someone like Reinhardt where every brush stroke has been removed and there's this even field, you're very much wanting, that even if it's monochrome, when you get up close there's this touch of the hand and it's actually very present, your hand.

Raquel: In that sense I don't think there's any difference. Every mark is left; even if another layer goes over the previous one, something always remains, and all of that contributes to what I call 'emergence' of everything that is present and absent. This connection is important because the viewer, in some way, is doing the same thing in reverse.

Alex: So in a way that time, and that labor and that energy, is what lends that painting its presence, that it wouldn't have if you did it quickly with one surface. But it would just feel very different even though if we broke it down into a discussion of the component parts it would maybe be the same but all of those things that you envision through time creates the presence of the work.

Raquel: Yes, the presence of the work. When you write a book, you also unfold thoughts and words. You would never put all the words at the same time. The process of unfolding is continuously present in my work and I don't try to hide it. Though the medium is different, the approach and the significance of the process is the same.

Ann: When I look at a work of art I always ask myself, if I had this in my house would I be able to live with this forever or for a very long period of time. I feel that the duration of her process, the meditative sort of aspect of her process, all of that is really in the work and so this is not something that you sort of just walk into the gallery and say next, next, next. I could live with anyone of these for a very long period of time. But I think that this is a really important aspect because I just came from Miami. I remember rounding this corner and there was this gallery that had this Francis Bacon. It was gorgeous to see this sort of real art after seeing all this junk. But of course there were some wonderful things in the Pulse section. This work really asks us to spend a lot of time.

4: I think it demands it. This work requires that you give it time, and galleries are almost the antithesis of that. Museums even, you want to go up to people in museums and say "look, look! Stop walking." I had a teacher that once said you have to give Rothko 40 minutes. A lot of people don't give a whole museum 40 minutes. You have to give Raquel 40 minutes. How many people are going to come off the street and look at this work and give it just one piece, 10 minutes, 15 minutes and really get into the depth of it? It's almost like you have to own this work so you can give it the time it deserves to get into it. It's almost a shame that people can't just spend the time it takes to really get into this.

Ann: We were talking about the fact that you are a Latina and you do come from Latin America. I feel like there's a wonderful kind of poetic quality of the way you describe the work, it's very much Latin American, I don't know if any Americans would talk that way and I was thinking of this as a sort of library, this kind of mysterious or mystical library.

5: It has been said, you were talking about the mud, all of a sudden I thought about us, in terms of what we are, we are layers, we are water and layers and if you think of the skin, that's where I feel so comfortable. As a child, how you discover yourself, and growing, growing and then you grow old and you keep discovering and that's all of a sudden I'm feeling here, at this very moment.

Ann: You were talking about being older and thinking in terms of impermanence and death and transformation and I see that timeless quality in your work.

Raquel: You said before that you feel like there's a wonderful kind of poetic quality in the way I describe my work. It's not a coincidence that when I work in the studio, I often stop and read a poem, I open a book, any page. I think it's the same language. It's also part of my working process, connecting with the beauty of poetry.

6: As a matter of fact as I was sitting here looking at the work, we have been here for a little less than an hour. Invariably, poets come up, language and all of that and I was thinking for instance Marmon, he went to Mexico and lived with the Mayans. As I was listening to you and looking at the work I was thinking about invisible cities and Kublai Khan and Marco Polo talking to him about these cities and what these cities looked like and who knows if they even existed. And then I was thinking about one of my favorite

poets, also a Latin American from Mexico, Vicente, and particularly his cantos. In the morning I always read a little poetry his canto segundo and it's really just mind blowing. You have to remember we low blow these modern poet before the modern poets were modern and at the end of his cantos he becomes concrete poetry, it was just these snippets of sound and so I also think about music in terms of this work, particularly the paintings. For me this is a total new experience, I hadn't seen your work in many years. I think that they are much more kind of grounded in the political and social issues of their time. It's not about this or about that, it's about knowledge, it's about self-knowledge, it's about culture.

Ann: What I found interesting interviewing Raquel is that what you said, self-knowledge, she was a political prisoner under Peron, she's gone through many different lives in many different countries, meditation practice, she comes from a very mixed immigrant family and I found that was really different, I've interviewed a lot of younger artists, 60's and 70's down, but Raquel is the first person over 80 I've interviewed and I found it really was a wonderful experience. She had tremendous self-knowledge and wisdom, it was calm interviewing her, it really comes out in the work. Part of it was from the meditation practice but part of it was just from a long life well lived and it's funny because many people who read the interview said to me that this woman is so wise, it's so wonderful and that is certainly reflected in her work.

7: I would just like to point out that from all I've heard today that there is clearly other layers embedded into the paintings and that seems to often be the center of attention. But there are also layers we are embedded in. And in so many ways looking at a painting could be like looking at a dream that we've had, or sometimes, it happens to me, I dream but in the morning I don't remember, there are no details, no structure, no messages. And in the end there's a beautiful feeling of fulfillment because I have touched those layers. It cannot be translated.