

# NY ARTS

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## Telephoning From Skid Row: A Conversation with Julianne Swartz

By David Markus

As part of the New Museum's recent "Counter Culture" exhibit, artist Julianne Swartz was commissioned to do a site-specific work that would help introduce the museum to its new neighborhood—that segment of lower Manhattan formerly known as "skid row." In recent years, several upscale nightspots and boutiques more commonly associated with the Bowery's chic neighbors to the west have come to dapple the tedious stretch of restaurant supply stores that have been the area's distinguishing feature for over fifty years. Of the flophouses that originally gave the street its ominous moniker, few remain. One such residence, however, happens to be located directly adjacent to the parking lot upon which the New Museum will build its future homestead. It was here, at the Sunshine Hotel, that Swartz chose to install *Can You Hear Me*, a work allowing passers by to "telephone"—by way of a periscopic PVC pipe—the residents above. The device itself is but a slightly more sophisticated version of the old tree house favorite involving two tin cans and a piece of string, yet it holds the potential to open dialogue between past and present, between the marginalized inhabitants of a transient neighborhood and the cell phone touting SoHo crowd that betokens our city's perpetual gentrification. I recently met with Ms. Swartz at her Williamsburg studio do discuss her project.

David Markus: Why did you choose the Sunshine Hotel as the site for your work?

Julianne Swartz: I felt that the show was about getting to know the neighborhood, but it was also about the effect it would have on the neighborhood. So that was one impetus. Another was that this was a really interesting opportunity to merge two social groups that wouldn't necessarily have any connection with each other.

DS: To what extent does the piece distort as much as it catalyzes communication between those groups?

JS: I think the piece is more a symbol of communication. Most of the conversations taking place may not have been terribly meaningful, but what was meaningful to me was the possibility that person A could have a conversation with person B that would not otherwise occur. I was interested in bringing together these two very disparate social groups, but also turning the table on a social construct. In some ways the men who live in that hotel are the invisible men of our culture, and I wanted to make them seen and give them voice. There was a lot of controversy over the piece and people who read about it but didn't experience it, thought that it could be potentially exploitative. But my main goal throughout the process was empowerment of the residents of the hotel. And also to change the power dynamic in that the person on the street calling up was in some ways more vulnerable than the person at the Sunshine who could choose whether or not to engage in conversation.

DS: Being a resident of the neighborhood myself, I had the opportunity to witness the interactions of both random by passersby and larger groups—for instance the tour groups set up by the New Museum. I must say, your work seems to resist the participation of the latter.

JS: Well you're right. The piece is basically about intimacy. I can have this two-minute interaction with someone I don't know and probably never would have known. So in a group situation it doesn't work as well. It's not meant as spectacle per se, although the exterior of the piece has a certain look to it, and was visually spectacular enough to draw people to it; though really the piece is about that moment of one face seeing another face and one person interacting with another person.

DS: The design of the piece seems to riff on the institutional design of public facilities.

JS: I made the sign as an ironic nod to the phone booth—that public signage look. And I do want this to be something that's for the public, but also something that's fun. The piece is called *Can you hear me?*, which is a nod to the telephone, and the telephone being this device that we use every day, but really was initially invented and does exist to bring people closer and to create intimacy.



Julianne Swartz, *Can You Hear Me*, 2004  
New Museum of Contemporary Art -  
Installation for Counter Culture  
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Photograph by Jason Mandella

DS: Your project opens up communication lines with a segment of the community that might soon be exiled by the institution that is sponsoring you. What do you make of this irony and how aware was the New Museum of this irony?

JS: They supported my piece because it doesn't necessarily say that the New Museum is bad and the Hotel is good. It doesn't polarize. It makes the issues evident, but it doesn't necessarily take sides. The intention is to bring questions to the viewer's mind, to your mind, to the men at the hotel, to the people who work at the museum. So, I think the museum sponsored me because the work stimulates questions.

DS: How do the connections you made with the men at the Sunshine hotel influence your perception of the project retrospectively?

JS: I realized very early on in the project that in order for it to be successful it needed to be a collaboration with the residents. So I made it a priority to work with them and to have them feel an ownership of the piece, and I think they did.

DS: Is that part of the notion of them being empowered also a part of the piece?

JS: Yes, the residents have the keys to open and close the piece. They took care of it.

DS: Were there any residents who objected to the piece?

JS: There were some who said, "Oh I can't be bothered," but there were none who flat out objected. And there were many who really embraced the piece. There was one who really made it like his baby. This was a man who had been through a lot. And here were people talking to him, asking his name. But he bloomed in this context, because he felt desired in a social way.

DS: What is the future of the Sunshine Hotel?

JS: Some of the men have been there for years and they have squatter's rights. But I think they will eventually get bought out. I don't think it will stay. I don't think it can stay.

DS: Do you have a name for the device itself?

JS: We've just been calling it "the tube" [laughter].

DS: Are we going to see the tube in any future contexts?

JS: I'd like to, yeah.

DS: Can you think of any other local sites where it might work well?

JS: Well, I mean it would be great to have it, like, going from the Israeli Embassy to the Palestinian Embassy...that would be my ideal place to put it [laughter].

Ah, Wishful thinking.