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Julianne Swartz uses magnets and pipes string and mirrors to connect with her audiences

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Julianne Swartz



A passerby outside the Sunshine Hotel on the Bowery speaks with residents through a pipe in *Can You Hear Me?*, 2004.

Julianne Swartz has swiftly and quietly insinuated herself into the nooks and crannies of galleries and museums onto the streets of New York, Berlin, Madrid and San Francisco, among other places.

Dedicated to giving physical form to intangibles—light, sound, and air—Swartz has shaped through sound pipes and sculpted space with strings and magnets. “Science is like a magic we have access to,” says the artist, whose fascination with its everyday manifestations plays into her eagerness to make connections—among things, places and people.

This was evident in “Speculative Mechanics,” her fall show at Josée Bienvenu Gallery in New York, where visitors entered a forest of white PVC pipes and fiber-optic cables. The pipes were speckled with mirrors, magnifiers, and periscopes offering curious viewers surprising vistas, while a magnetic rainbow extended from the wall.

The slender, gentle-mannered, 37-years-old New York-based artist shares some of the conceptual concerns of her mother, Beth Ames Swartz, known for feminist earthworks and explorations of light and spiritualism. But Julianne’s work is more concrete and dependent on her audiences. Swartz studied poetry, not art, at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and then entered the M.F.A. program at Bard College, where she developed an approach to art that blended science, psychology, sociology, and poetry.

She began showing in 1993 and had her first solo exhibition, of suspended glass casts that created shadows of houses, in 2001 at New York’s ricco/maresca gallery. She is represented today by Josée Bienvenu, where her work sells for between \$4,000 and \$15,000. Current and upcoming shows are at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine (through February 19), and at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College (through mid-April).

The magnets for Swartz are both a medium and a metaphor for what she does. In 2000, on a fellowship in France, she recalls, “I was wandering around a hardware store in the south of France and saw some magnets, and the name was *aimants*, which is the word for lovers in French. And I was in love with a Frenchman.”

But while the physics of it all excites Swartz, what has most affected her was a 2001 project for the Susquehanna Art Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. For the work, *Link/Line*, she ran a red thread through the city, extending from the museum and passing through businesses, synagogues, churches, shops, and homes, ending up at a Jewish community center four and half miles away. The project, Swartz explains, was a “response to a series of hate crimes in the city and suspicious circumstances surrounding the burning of a synagogue.” Community members agreed to “host” the thread and watch over it, inspired in part by the Jewish tradition of the *eruv*. “It was the first work I did where the participants were as important as the materials,” she says.

Swartz relates her art whenever possible to its surroundings. At last year’s Whitney Biennial, she worked in counterpoint with architect Marcel Breuer’s gruff structure, installing soft transparent tubing along the grooves of the stairwell walls. Walking up the stairs, visitors could hear different voices singing “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” from the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Swartz had tape-recorded people in her life—her grocer, her family—performing the nostalgic song. “When you ask people to sing,” she explains, “it makes them vulnerable, and you can respond to that with empathy.”

This past summer Swartz created a project in a flophouse, the Sunshine Hotel, on New York’s Bowery. Titled *Can You Hear Me?*, it involved pipes with mirrors that led from the hotel to the street, where passerbys could speak and look up at the people inside. The residents could choose to use it or not. “I wanted their end of communication to be private—in the hotel—while the viewer speaks in public,” Swartz explains. “These invisible men see the viewer better than the viewer sees them.”

Sunshine resident Nelson Castro, the piece’s self appointed custodian, says of the project, “It kept my mind occupied.” Swartz recalls, “He always started conversations through the tube by asking: ‘Can you see me? Can you hear me? Can you see the flowers?’”