

# In the Garden Heidi Howard & Liz Phillips



In Conversation  
with

# Gaby Collins- Fernandez

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Over the summer of 2018, Heidi Howard and Liz Phillips created and installed their massive, immersive installation at the Queens Museum, *Relative Fields in a Garden*. The mother and daughter team met Gaby Collins-Fernandez at Howard's studio in Long Island City, and later at Phillips' home and garden in Sunnyside, where they discussed the project and their work, from sounds to paintings, their garden to Flushing Meadows Corona Park.

GCF

I wanted to start out with a bit of the origin story of your collaborative process. How were you thinking about *Relative Fields in a Garden* as a collaboration, and how did you decide to work together?

HH We've collaborated a lot. I don't think of artists as these singular people that are geniuses and make things alone in a box. My artwork has a lot to do with giving credit to the people that inspire me, and about how community can be an inspiration.

LP *Relative Fields in A Garden* is our first official project that was funded as a collaborative project.

HH But, the whole time I was growing up, I would be thinking about installations that my mother was making.

LP If needed a dancer, Heidi was the dancer improvising in the piece. Even as a baby, I wanted to see if she could recognize and respond to the sound, even before she could talk.

GCF

Did she?

LP Yeah! We have video! She responded completely to the sound and changed it, and played it.

HH As a baby, I spoke really quickly because my father doesn't see. I must have been absorbing all these sounds and watching you both respond to sound. Anyway, the way we got started on this project is that our mutual friend, Ala Dehghan, who runs 17 Essex gallery, asked us to do a collaboration. At first I thought it was a terrible idea, because we can argue a lot. But then a lot of things fell together. My mom was using my grandmother's chairs in a piece that was up on Governor's Island called *Wave Crossings*, and I was using

my grandmother's scarf in this show called Woven Traits where I used and painted different fabrics. There seemed to be a connection relating to my grandmother, our relationships to her, and gardens.

LP It was a combination of celebration and mourning. Relative Fields In A Garden is a celebration of her life.

HH I don't know what she would think about it...

LP We don't even want to know! We can answer for her now.

GCF Well, it's your celebration.

HH Anyway, 17 Essex is pretty small, and this began to develop into a much larger installation, so we proposed it to the Queens Museum as part of the open call for their biennial, the Queens International. Sophia Marisa Lucas, one of the two curators of the show alongside Baseera Khan, contacted me and wanted to do a studio visit right away. I was in Amsterdam at the time, so I said, "Can you do the visit with my mom?"

LP So within like 20 hours she showed up with her motorbike on my door to see work. Which is not the way I usually function because I make sculptural sound installations, but I happened to have a piece up and running, and many of Heidi's larger paintings were up all around so she got to see those as well.

HH I Skyped in to that visit, and she said she had some really big walls that she wasn't sure yet what to do with.

LP She said she picked us for that wall because I had said that I wanted the piece to be sensitive to light, shifting in the space during the day and over the course of the year. It's pretty subtle, but if there are quick clouds passing or a wind, you can hear it.

GCF How did you organize the sound in Relative Fields?

LP 90% of the sounds are straight from our neighborhood, Sunnyside Gardens in Queens. We were commissioned in the late winter for the following summer, so there were some fall sounds that needed to be filled in. I'm always recording, so I had lots of stuff, but I had to focus on getting all the seasons in. Then we decided on what objects would transmit the sounds in the piece. For instance, bamboo is great for leaves in the wind, and the porcelain is better for bird sounds and bees. Some other bamboo plays birds and bees binaurally in the space. We had to tune everything to work in groups.

GCF That sounds wild, since it's such a big space.

LP I thought it was going to be much harder, that we would have to deal with a lot of the ambient noise outside the museum. But it's actually great! Our wall is curved, bowed out, and the ceiling is also curved, so you can get incredible focus even though you hear a lot of noise in that room. Especially once I got the bamboo up high enough, I could really focus the sounds, and have things move and fly in the space. It was surprising to work on that scale with objects making the sounds. I had tuned all the sounds, including ambient sounds we picked up in the recordings, to play right inside the objects.

When choosing the objects to radiate sound, some really neat things happened that were totally new. I didn't want to use regular speakers, I wanted the sound to emanate from the wall and the objects, so the objects became a way to replicate and enhance the recorded sounds. For example, the thin wood in the waterfall area was able to replicate the warmth of how the waterfall fell on stone surrounded by leaves. Originally we had wanted to bring in real plants, but then the museum said that they do not allow any natural things that might have bugs in the museum. I was very relieved because then I wouldn't have to take care of the plants all year and replace them. That's another piece, but more temporary. I've had several sound pieces that were activated by fish moving, and the New York Aquarium maintained the one in the World Financial Center for me. To keep an ecosystem living in a museum would be really tough.

GCF Heidi, you made all the objects. Were you thinking about how their shapes would refract sound as you were making them?

HH Yes, I totally made them as speakers. I didn't make the bamboo or the waterfall objects, the wood pieces under the stairs, although I cut and shaped them. One thing that worked well and quickly were the boards in the winter section that have a ceramic base. All of my painting is my memory of our garden and the seasons, rather than looking at a lot of visual sources or photographs. For winter, I thought about tree branches and snow, because that's what you see then.

LP There are arched branches outside my window, which I knew would be good to bring in because arches are often good for sound. So we shaped a lot of the sounds for the objects, and the objects for the sounds. Heidi did the final touches on all of the visuals. That was the agreement. Because I am a sculptor, I often make all my own objects. But not in this case!

- HH We had one big fight. There's a wire that crosses the path to the garden in the springtime section.
- LP There are two wires. An "X" across the path. And she stapled them up, and when I looked at them, I said, "What?!" It was never anything I would do.
- HH I wanted people to have visual cues about the sound. A lot of people don't understand the narrative of the piece, and how the visual and sound elements relate to each other.
- LP She was right. It worked. After Heidi put in the wires, very few people asked me what the sound had to do with it.
- GCF In a way, this is also kind of how Heidi makes portraits. You make paintings where a viewer can understand a system of layers, where the underpainting is not obscured and you show how it was made, and this becomes part of how we understand the person who is being painted. It's not just about rendering what they look like.
- LP But the subjects are very recognizable, too! Our other little argument was when Heidi was painting my profile and I realized that I would be larger than life on the wall. But I got used to the idea, and once I saw it, it really made sense in the room. Plus, it really looks like me, people recognize me when I'm near it! We were just at a Gala for the museum where people stopped me and recognized me. It's been that way with kids in the museum; if I happen to come in when there are classes, they'll point to me on the balcony and say, "It's her!"
- HH It was also funny because there was this summer camp of kids watching us make it, and one day this kid came up and said, "that's my mom!" He kept screaming, pointing at the painting.
- LP I didn't realize that there was a lot in common in the ways we work, at all, until we got into the space. I would add a little sound, and then Heidi would get up on the lift and shift a little image. She was as crazy about the balances and the strange details and how they interacted as I was. They thought I was going to stop, then she was going to start, and then I would go again, but neither of us really ever stopped working on it through the 30 days or so we had. But we were never the first to arrive or the first to leave—the people at the Queens Museum work incredibly long hours during installation, and the curators were also very accessible and present. They are all incredibly dedicated, and there is a wonderful and rare sense of community that they maintain there.

- HH The fact that it ended up being 8-hour days is not something that I would have chosen.
- LP I've been known to work for 16-hours straight, but I also had to teach, so I knew I had to maintain some energy. We went all day, though. The painting got a lot denser than I thought it would get in some areas. They wanted me to use the staircase, and I was happy to bring it off the wall, and that became the area with the waterfall with the bees and the water. It's something that was not in our garden, but my mother always lived near water. She always went to this waterfall, which I recorded, and sat by the river down below.
- Having her pass away right before this was very meaningful for both of us. It's an interesting thing, how different people mourn. There was an urn in the house with her ashes in it, and Heidi said, "Ok, let's get rid of these now and spread them through the garden, already."
- HH We did that right after we finished the show. There are these giant tulips that came up right where we spread the ashes.
- GCF Another interesting fact is that the piece represents the amount of time that it was supposed to be up for. The show opened in September and was going to come down in mid-August before it got extended until February 2020. So the piece itself both responds to the specific weather, describes a natural cycle, and is somewhat durational or performative in the way that it replicates its own timeline.
- LP Yes. Now it's spring, and when I go there, I hear the same birds that are in my garden. It was really wild in the middle of winter to hear crickets for 20 minutes, which really carried through the whole museum.
- HH It's been great to bring the park more into the museum, too. The park is such a part of the museum—when I ask people to come to the piece, I am also asking them to cross through Flushing Meadows Corona Park, which used to be the World's Fair grounds. I planned the performance for this time; the globe in front of the museum is surrounded by a ring of cherry trees and they all blossom at the same time.
- LP There are a number of different kinds of cherry trees, which extends their bloom, and the variety of colors. This is because they were planted for the World's Fair and they were donated by different countries, it is very neat. We also have a cherry tree in the backyard,

which Heidi painted. There's an aviary straight across the highway at the Queens Zoo, and I was really amazed that when you leave at sunset, you hear this cacophony of birds, just crazy wild sounds.

- HH The Queens Museum is a community museum, but also an art museum. All communities in New York are somewhat aware of art, but this audience is a cool mix because it attracts the most diverse audiences I have ever seen at a museum.
- LP And the Museum hosts all these different festivals for different demographic groups in Queens, and many movies film there, which end up using the piece as a background. The Museum really has a kind of public space feel, even though it is indoors.
- GCF Heidi also organized a performance in the space this spring.
- HH I wanted to create a scenario where people could both look and listen. Even during the opening, you couldn't really see all of it because all of the painting is responsive to the sound, which you couldn't hear at all during the opening. After the performance, some of my mom's students came up to me and asked if I had added anything to the painting, because they were able to look so much more closely.
- LP And similarly, I had people who came and listened and didn't say anything about the painting. I didn't prompt them because I wanted to listen to how they were responding.
- HH A lot of sound art work is so minimal and black, this palette which is very specific.
- LP When I showed it to Miya Masaoka, who runs the sound department at Columbia, and her class, she asked me if it was a Feminist piece because it has so much color in it. There's no other sound art that looks anything like this.
- HH I thought it was really important to make a space to have these conversations through the performance, which also featured an improvisational dance by Cynthia Koppe, and a saxophone performance by my Dad, Earl Howard. I hadn't thought yet about how my Dad would interact with the piece. His music is very composed and very specific and trying to break boundaries in new music.
- LP He improvises.
- HH Yeah, he'll play with the birds that are making sounds outside.

- LP Sometimes at home the mockingbirds mock both of our work. When our windows are open and they are mocking, I sometimes can't tell the difference between their sounds and my electronic ones.
- GCF Can you talk a little more about why you wanted to bring physical movement into the piece?
- HH When other painters look at paintings they think about movement; they imagine brushstrokes, and the conversation about time. This has been an interest of mine for a long time. When I was in college at Sarah Lawrence, I used to spend so much time making each painting that was the commentary, and now I deal with that sense of time as a record of my movement through gesture. Since I was very young, about 4, I was involved in modern dance. I did this Isadora Duncan improvisational dance class. We'd also see Merce Cunningham, who my mom worked with, and a lot of other contemporary dance.
- LP Elizabeth Streb, Yvonne Rainer. The whole contact improvisation school is very important to me.
- HH So, as soon as I saw Cynthia dance, I wanted to get to know her better. Even when she dances with other people, she does these things that really stand out. The relationship between a solo dance and the practice of painting was also interesting to me. It was related to how I made the mural, also all by myself! Usually when you are working on a project that big, you would have assistants. I painted the whole mural alone, with only Mark Sengbusch driving the lift.
- LP It was a real challenge for Cynthia, all that space by herself. She is a unique dancer because she has a sense of what I've always called elastic space. It's combining time and movement through space, with specific periods of time to move through space. She has an incredible way of managing that combination with her timing and responsiveness to sound. Even when she ran out of energy during the performance, she stayed on the floor and gathered her energy, making tiny movements, always responding to the sound and movements in the work. She really tuned into the space, the painting, Earl's saxophone and the natural sounds. I noticed that with the sounds of the leaves cracking underfoot, she was flexing her body. The top of her body and the bottom can move in very different ways, like two hands on a piano playing different parts.
- HH Cynthia's been working with Liz Santoro and Pierre Godard, who did a piece at the Kitchen called For Claude Shannon, that featured these black and white lines and how movement worked in relation to these. I thought a lot about the grid in my painting, and Liz's electronics are sensitive along lines.

LP They are plotted along lines: when you are on them, how long; when you are off them, how long; when you go near them, how fast. These were all things I tried to pick up with Cynthia's movement. I wanted it to be in counterpoint, with her responding to the sounds as much as the sounds responded to her. We marked the lines in pink tape along the floor.

GCF I'm really interested in the idea of elastic space. Liz, you've used it for many years in your work; and the way Heidi talks about gesture seems also to be very related to this concept of elasticity. Is there a specific sense of elastic space or elasticity that you wanted to bring to *Relative Fields in a Garden*?

LP My earliest work as an artist was sculpture, making pictures of nature as a kid, and I also built birds nests that birds would then inhabit. By the time I was in high school, I started to make installations, and I wanted them to be interactive, basically because I wanted them to adapt to different environments, like things in nature. I wanted them to shift shapes like sand dunes; I wanted them to constantly be sensitive to the environment. So, it was a goal based on walking around sculpture, how a viewer's size and scale shifted the sculpture. Space becomes elastic when it can sense people moving in space or the light or wind moving through a space. You're looking at physical space and the time it takes from one place to another, accumulating information about time and space, and proportioning how long, how fast, how many, all the relevant details.

GCF In a sense, it creates a shifting boundary. It makes defines a space as you apprehend it, and shifts it as you continue to engage.

LP Yes. In my interactive pieces, it is movement and stillness and speed of people that changes the sound, and that's what we did in the performance. But in the piece, we only use light shifts. So, the idea is that there are certain parameters that you could decide based on whim—John Cage would throw the I-Ching to decide these things—for me, these parameters are decided based on shifts in light or shifts in movement. It's also using a person's time in a piece to help describe space and give them time to hear all the different parts of a piece. In the beginning, when I was using pure electronic tones and oscillators (which was all that you could use, we couldn't yet use samples), in a piece that was continuous and filled the space day and night, the question was how to keep it variable enough. How to get people used to those sounds, how to make them describe natural processes and gestures, natural

movement, and use the sounds more as vibrations, which is what they were to me, and not as cool, weird electronic sounds. I felt like if people could go back and listen to them in their own time and listen to all the shifts and parts of a piece by moving around, they would have a much better sense of that sculptural space that I was describing. Like in visual art, when you get to go back and look over things.

Electronics have brought me as close as I could get to natural systems that could dynamically change. One of the reasons I first started using electronics was because they felt like a magical substance that I could really mold and shape, and shape shift.

GCF It literally is a way of allowing for sound to become concrete, to physicalize systems like light and movement that we normally experience as abstract.

LP Exactly. It helps you understand abstraction, too, because you are physically re-abstracting these events.

GCF Right, so this tension between physicality, nature, interpretation and abstract systems allows for someone's influence or participation to become subject matter instead of focusing on the representations of these on their own.

LP Then there's also the collaborative aspect and how this changes the sound. If everyone is working together and listening and being quiet, you get a very different kind of experience, which is a collective shifting of the space. People have to become aware of their distance to other people. In the piece with Heidi, this collaboration, I knew that people would be looking at least as much if not more than they were listening, so I knew we should have less interactivity with the audience.

HH Another element of the interactivity of the sound in the space had to do with the fact that the space itself is so large. In many of Liz's other works, the sound is really all around—

LP You just enter a room, it's all around you. This is very different. You go to one field, and you experience that season. You hear the others, but in a distant perspective. And then you get to the next one. Sometimes voices call out from the others.

HH You always have to move around to hear the whole installation, but in this case, the movement as you go across the installation is really specific.

- LP It's 100 feet long.
- HH It's more 2-D in a way, because of the way you travel across it.
- LP It's a vertical space. That's new for me. And it's high! 40 feet high! It was very cool to be able to get the bamboo up there, to the exact place where the sound of the woodpecker would resonate throughout the museum. Then people move toward it, like you might toward an animal making sounds in the woods, but when they arrive it's a different season. It seemed like an impossible request to put four seasons in the same space in the same time, but the space was so large that it wasn't a problem. There are things that happen on that scale which are so exciting! When you start to work with something crossing hundreds of feet versus two feet, there's a whole different experience. Sound travels very slowly compared to light and you can actually hear the difference when it travels through the space. You can get all those fantastic Doppler shifts.
- GCF As much as the piece is a depiction of a garden, I experienced the piece as a description of urban space as well. It seems to be governed by a lot of the same sensibilities that I experience wandering around New York, as opposed to being in the woods or having a "natural experience."
- HH Can you say more about the experience of the piece as urban?
- GCF It had to do with the logic of how things are layered. I had a sense of visually entering into a space which felt contained, because gardens in the city are not sprawling, they are, backyard gardens. It's a garden which is a room, almost. And then, moving through the garden, the sounds felt really connected to how I experience sound in New York, which is super transitory. Something will change totally when I cross the street. Because of how I move on the train, I can have one sonic experience that will shift drastically to another in moments. And, of course, there are the sounds of the train in the piece.
- LP Three trains if not four come through the piece. In our backyard, you can't even tell which direction they are coming from. It's a courtyard. We wanted that sense of an urban garden.
- HH I thought a lot about the panorama and the layout of the museum when I was planning the painting. There was a site visit in April, when we tested sound. I thought about the self-portrait being circular,

- the Globe, the cherry trees, and as a kid running around that panorama of New York City. That's definitely somewhere in my response to the architecture of the painting.
- LP The panorama was really important when you were young, Heidi, because you could see the whole city and go around it. Earl got to—were you there the day he climbed through it? They let him take off his shoes and he got to touch all the buildings and walk through it. This was when Tom Finkelppearl, who is now the head of Cultural Affairs, was Director of the museum. We both had installations there 14 years ago for that biennial. This was major, because if you're blind and you don't see that architecture it is fantastic to see the whole city together like that.
- We've had a long relationship with the Museum and park. I did a piece for the museum, called Ten From Queens at the PaineWebber building in midtown, 24 years ago, I think. And I did a piece at the Hall of Science when Heidi was little. She spent months in the park while I did a wind-activated piece there. She would take her naps on the wooden horses at the Carousel, she was so used to riding them over and over again. It was a fantastic Carousel. There were real horns and automated instruments that played in the middle.
- HH I was thinking a lot about the experience of our garden and the experience of nature in New York. You see a flower, or a butterfly. There's this romanticization here of nature as something that's separate from us, and it's been on my mind that that's not true. Both of our work deals with how humans and nature are really tied together, and not romanticizing that separated aspect of nature is a big part of this piece.
- LP We sort of chose our house because it had a garden. It's very open and bright, and we live with lots of plants, cooking from the garden. Sunnyside Gardens in Queens is really unique that way. The trees are way higher than the houses and they tilt over the street and houses. The first time I slept there, I was like, "Wow!" I was always told not to go under trees in a thunderstorm. But here we are living under and immersed in the trees.
- HH There's something similar about New York and the strangeness of electronics being a way of accessing to natural systems. Living in New York is a way to get close to nature because it is this human architecture of nature which has taken over the planet, definitely.
- GCF How is it that you started working with porcelain? You've talked about the bamboo and wood, and I also saw some aluminum.

HH Before moving to Amsterdam, my partner, Esteban Cabeza de Baca, got me a month at this place called the Sculpture Space, a ceramic studio. Then, at the Rijksakademie, we started collaborating on some pots for the house. It was a kind of accidental collaboration. People saw them at his studio, and he showed them during his first open studio there, then they went into a show at a gallery, at which point he needed to credit me as part of the installation.

LP I've also used bowls for years to radiate sound. Bowls are very contained and have a specific resonance, so they aren't great for natural sounds, which inspired a more open format.

HH The sound through ceramic is really interesting. It's something that we want to keep working on.

GCF So this isn't the end of the collaboration!

LP No, I guess not! We are making a lot of smaller pieces so they function in stereo and are portable, but are not too big. This is an experience I've aimed toward for many years.

LP The painting was so interesting to make, there's a level of abstraction at such a large scale. Gestures are always pretty abstract in my work, but at that size, they can be a reaction to the sound. I would love to work again at that scale. It would be great to be able to do the performance again, but be live painting and responding during the performance. Or finding a place to make Relative Fields again but this time make it permanent.

