

In Conversation: Tina Rivers Ryan and Caroline Woolard

Tina Rivers Ryan, PhD, is a curator, historian, critic, and educator specializing in [art](#) since the 1960s. Her work focuses on the uses of new media technologies. She holds five degrees in [art](#) history, including a BA from Harvard and PhD from Columbia.

Tina Rivers Ryan (TRR):

While you've produced many projects focusing on social [practices](#) and relations, on a fundamental level, you're a sculptor, so I want to begin this conversation by [looking](#) closely at your use of materials. *The Meeting*, for example, is an installation-cum-performance site comprising a boardroom table and chairs; sculptures of [walnut](#), [nylon](#), and [rubber](#); and a single-channel video. I'd like to talk about how the objects relate to your understanding of social space.

Caroline Woolard (CW):

The Meeting ^{see chapter 1} started when I realized that I had spent a decade of my life in [meetings](#). In order to be in interdisciplinary collective projects, I had to spend so many nights and days in awful office spaces and community gathering spaces with fluorescent lighting and Formica [tables](#). And it suddenly occurred to me that, rather than thinking of those spaces as a way to get to a final project or long-term initiative, I could take the meeting itself on as a site to intervene in, both symbolically and structurally. I like thinking about the existing structures that influence behavior, maybe without people noticing or

thinking critically about those physical structures and the spatial politics that they imbue in our interactions. I then create objects that recommend entirely different behaviors, thinking about what could happen differently in a boardroom, for example.

TRR: That's clearly a throughline in your [practice](#): your work understands architectural or physical space as fundamentally social. Your sculptures poetically capture—in a visceral, material way—the way that we feel in these spaces. For example, at the table, participants can use wood, acrylic, and paper [spheres](#) to transfer the ability to speak and to determine what kinds of communication are going to transpire; their tactility and weight helps us understand that our verbal communication is very much embodied and informed by its physical and discursive contexts.

The Meeting ^{see chapter 1} also includes a bust made of [mycelium](#), the [mushroom](#) material that eats agricultural waste, which underscores your almost ecological concern with interdependence in group dynamics. It's suspended in a net that hangs on the wall, which really gives us a sense of [gravity](#) acting on the body. I look at these objects and I see echoes of [post-minimalism](#): you're building on the [legacy](#) of an artist like Eva Hesse, who similarly used netting to suspend objects from a wall, haunting abstract sculpture with reminders of the body.

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CW: I appreciate what you're saying about materiality and the corporeal experience so much. It's important to me that these sculptures, for example, could be carried by a [facilitator](#) to a meeting—so they have a functional purpose—but that they also can hang on the wall and refer to Eva Hesse's work as art objects.

TRR: In terms of the way that you build on the [legacy](#) of [post-minimalism](#), it seems to me that you're connecting the concerns of sculpture to our supposedly dematerialized information economy (which of course is tied to [meetings](#) that happen around boardroom [tables](#) just like yours). What would it mean to think about this installation, and the components that comprise it, as being new media art? For example, I wonder if your use of netting here refers not only to Hesse, but also to the [internet](#), which itself is a network of social relations?

CW: For me, yes, the netting is about the [internet](#), or a network, but it's also about trapping, about containment, about capture. It's about the expansive potential of a material to suggest such a disparate range of concepts, like a network, but it's also about a colonial net. It was important to me—even if very few people would understand this—that the net itself would materially speak to a core [tension](#) in the [socially engaged art world](#). When an

artist represents a collective [practice](#) in an art context, the artist instrumentalizes something that is deeply contextual. This has a [colonial legacy](#), taking something that is so contextual, like a [practice](#) of [facilitation](#) within a specific community, and appropriating it for the artist's own purposes, making it autonomous from its original context. This was my internal realization about what it means to present [facilitation practices](#). Working with Esteban Kelly, the director of the US Federation of Worker Co-ops, outside of art spaces but also in The Galleries at Moore and at the Rose Art Museum, how could I maturely speak to that core conflict and allow the object to symbolically hold that [tension](#)? It was a lot about that. This led me to thinking about colonial net making: the net here is actually a kind of landing net that was used in Philadelphia that I morphed into a square. The person who wove the net is part of a colonial reenactment group that makes landing nets as a hobby. In terms of extended [practice](#), it's important to me that the laborers identify with something conceptually that I am interested in.

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TRR: I love the way that your thinking engages the ideas that are central to "net" art, but from within a sculptural [practice](#). For example, you point out the fundamental paradox of trying to instrumentalize social [practices](#) that happen within a particular context as sculptural installations that inevitably are divorced from

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that context. This relates to one of the essential aspects of how information and ideas circulate on the [internet](#), right? The [internet](#) is basically a machine for generating content that then becomes divorced from its source.

I wonder how this connects with the way that a single project of yours can exist in different media. It reminds me of hypertext, which allows for a nonlinear, [non-hierarchical relationship](#) between ideas. There's something about the way that you are dealing with performance and social [practice](#), and translating these into installations or sculptures—these all become hyper-texted to each other, in a kind of horizontal way (for example, the objects don't become secondary to the performances, like relics). They all point to each other and refer to each other, in a constellation of [practices](#) and objects.

I was also thinking about hypertext in relationship to your work to the degree that your work is about [protocols](#). A lot of net artists focus on the [protocols](#) that govern how we navigate the web, and how information is distributed (e.g., through hyperlinks). Your work is also, in its own way, about the [protocols](#) that structure our communication. You're not dealing with uniform resource locators, but you are dealing with the ways we "address" each other, and the [protocols](#) that we use to determine our interactions. Your work

can help us understand how these [protocols](#) function, and how they shape our social space in the same way as, for example, the boardroom table that is at the center of this work. It's one of those objects that seems completely innocuous and designed to not draw attention to itself, much like the [protocols](#) of the modern information economy. And yet its form actually encodes values. The table identifies a community of people who are allowed to participate in this dialogue; it separates actors from bystanders. Even the rectangularity of it, with two "heads," implies that this is a space that may not be as egalitarian as it seems. And then the specificity of the chairs that you use—they look like Aeron knock-offs—points to a particular kind of [white-collar](#) (and racially [white](#)) space.

Speaking of communities: even the way that you work, which is through collaborations between networks of people that unfold over time, reminds me of early net art, which often was explicitly opposed to the individualism of the [art world](#) and/or credited to anonymous collectives.

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CW: It excited me when you said that the work can speak to [protocols](#) and the idea that you

can always link to something else. I cannot imagine a sculptural object without a long-term platform, like a multi-year collective, or a long-term initiative. Often these have online networks that I collaborate on with developers, computer engineers, and graphic designers. I never imagine that the first encounter with the object will be in a gallery space, which is still often the norm in sculptural [practice](#). So I love this idea that it is always already mediated in multiple ways. That's what I've been trying to tease out in this crazy process diagram about the flow of my mind from studying, for example, the [solidarity economy](#), to making a commitment, moving into a space of inquiry, choosing whether to be a short-term project or a long-term platform, experimenting, and then studying again. What I'm trying to show is that every aspect of the [mediation](#) or life of the object needs to be considered from the outside.

It feels important also to say that [mycelium](#) relates to the metaphor of the rhizome, which is also very present in the net itself. I think about every sculpture as a kind of fruit within a tree. It's the shiny and short lived thing, but then the tree is the long-term platform that really shapes discourse. The [practices](#) are like mycelial roots that connect all these other initiatives to one another, which is absolutely a net art kind of image.

This book itself holds that problem. I think in the worst case—the most boring case—it could be seen as a monograph. A monograph focuses on products rather than the process; in my mind, a book about an artist's [practice](#) is most interesting when it reveals behind-the-scenes [labor](#), so there's a lot of budgets and correspondences here. At the same time, this book examines my own working method, and it's the first time I've ever done something like this. While I want to share how I work, to do



so required checking in with [collaborators](#) to see if I could share our process. This points to a core [tension](#) in collaborative work: who gets to name their [collaborators](#), and who is the [collaborator](#) who doesn't have a book like this? It's been an ongoing challenge for me to figure out when to work collectively, which I always do for long-term projects because I think that shifting discourse requires that, and when to work individually, which for now I do when I'm making sculptural objects that are more symbolic and that can allow me to be with the quirks and [whims](#) of my own [aesthetic](#) desires for a short-term project.

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TRR: Maybe it helps to think about that core [tension](#) as being essentially a question of perspective. Especially with interdisciplinary [practices](#) like yours, the designation of the main [protagonist](#)—or the person who “gets to name their [collaborators](#)”—depends on who's

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telling the story. In the case of *Carried on Both Sides*, which looks at the history and future of the @ symbol ^{see chapter 8} I would say, as a curator, that you and Helen Lee are the primary **protagonists**. But if I was a **glass** blower instead of a curator, then Jason Christian and Daryl Smith, the master **crafts-people** at Pilchuck **Glass** School who fabricated some of your works, might be the main **protagonists** and you and Helen would be secondary.

As long as I brought up your work at Pilchuck, I want to talk about *Countermeasures* ^{see chapter 8}. You have included this description of the work in this book: “made of **glass** and filled with **mineral oil**, each object may reach a **level state** through the process of being shared, held, and manipulated. In gatherings facilitated by the artist, visitors are asked to remove these objects from the wall and reach a level with others in the space, whether friends or strangers.”

Glass is this incredibly evocative material with a very long history that you have explored elsewhere in your work. In the twentieth century, **glass** gained a powerful association with modernism and with the values of modernism, such as transparency and universality. There have been a lot of artists who have gone back to that **legacy** and tried to understand it and complicate it; I am thinking of everybody from Dan Graham to Josiah McElheny. But in the context of your **practice**, and your interest

in networks, I’m also thinking about how **glass** in fiber optic cables and silica in silicon chips have become literally the medium of electronic communications and computing. The world we live in now depends on the transmission of information through transparent mediums, which is ironic, as communication is not transparent, or disembodied, or universal—as this work points out. The intention is for the group to put their hands on the **glass** object and work together to make it level—but it’s an impossible task. So instead of a flattening of difference—a “**leveling**” of subjects—it enacts the constant recalibration of group dynamics.

This idea of **leveling** for me ties back to the work of Lygia Clark, specifically her stone and air sculpture from 1966, which was this plastic bag filled with air with a stone balanced on it. You would compress the bag with your hands and then release it, causing the stone to rise and fall into and out of the bag. She intended this to have a kind of therapeutic effect on the person using it (the work was inspired by the bag that protected the cast around her fractured hand). In your work, the **healing** is a kind of group **healing**, or group therapy.

CW: I love the work of Lygia Clark. What’s exciting to me about someone who leaves the arts, as she did, is that they say “yes, I want to be the **protagonist** of another story,” as you were saying. I appreciate that about

her [practice](#) and her object making. I think if you're truly interdisciplinary, you're up against that [tension](#) all the time. When is your work so far into another discipline that it might grow more in dialogue with that discipline? In terms of the idea of [leveling](#), I called this work *Countermeasures* see chapter 8 because it can't really be level. It's not flat, it's this sort of sensual clear [blob](#), and it droops in this shape that wants to be like a Martin Puryear sculpture, but it can be held and touched.

It's important to me to preserve the [formal sensuality](#) that I see in the artists whom I love who come from this [legacy](#) of modernism that resists social and political context, but also to activate my objects as hypertexts and countermeasures. Hopefully it can hold those contradictions of wanting to bring a group together while knowing the impossibility of doing that in any fully horizontal or fair way.

When is your work so far into another discipline that it might grow more in dialogue with that discipline?

TRR: The way you describe *Countermeasures* see chapter 8 also reminds me of the [legacy](#) parallel to modernism of avant-garde artists like Marcel Duchamp, who also worked with [glass](#), but who consistently resisted the rhetoric of transparency and emphasized embodiment, and even produced what we could call "countermeasures," like the *3 Standard Stoppages* or *50 cc of Paris Air*. Thinking of Duchamp and the conceptualism that emerged in his wake, your work is also

about understanding that the point is the process, right? That there is no end to it: it's a constantly unfolding act of engagement.

CW: Yes, you know what I love! While Duchamp took credit for the famous urinal, *Fountain*, when in fact it was made by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, I am obsessed with *3 Standard Stoppages*. The first project I proposed at MoMA was not Exchange Café see chapter 4, it was a project all about unconventional measures, including *Stoppages* and Robert Watts' and George Maciunas' *10-Hour Flux Clock*. Anyway, one reason I'm drawn to [glass](#) is that it can constantly be reused and recycled, especially if you use clear [glass](#) instead of colored [glass](#). You can literally throw this back in the furnace. So that's exciting to me as a material reality. But at the same time, there's a [political economy](#) here: it costs thousands of dollars to run a [glass](#) shop.

TRR: Speaking of economies: We have this fantasy that the exchange of information is frictionless, that our entire economy is frictionless. In reality, of course none of this is frictionless. Bitcoin mining, for example, generates heat and requires incredible energy resources. I wonder if a lot of your work is about exploring [friction](#). [Looking at Countermeasures](#) see chapter 8 in particular, it looks vaguely like a sex toy, which perhaps signals the idea of finding the pleasure in [friction](#), as opposed to in the frictionless. I wanted to talk about the shape of this because it has this strange, bodily connotation (perhaps another reference to Hesse): it's weirdly bulbous

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and could be read as phallic, but also could be read as sort of like pendulous breasts—an ambiguity that seems to demand an analysis of the work in terms of your own identity as a [queer](#) woman.

That said, I'm wary of a politics of representation that calls upon artists to represent themselves and their identities in their art. There's a [tension](#) between the demand for visibility, which for some people is the premise of political action, and the refusal to be visible, which for other people is the premise of safety. In terms of [queer](#) aesthetics, I think about the work of David Getsy on the minimalism of Scott Burton, and the way that Burton's sculptures—even his totally abstract minimal ones—can be read as being [queer](#).

CW: I just taught a whole class about that kind of [queer](#) minimalism, I love that writing and that work! I would be honored for my work to be read in relationship to the [queer aesthetics](#) outlined by Getsy. But, I agree, I question evoking my minoritized identities in the reading of my, or really anyone's work, as we do not see that happening with straight, [white](#), men. I feel torn in exactly the ways you outlined, between visibility as a trap that limits the reading of any work and visibility as a way of forming solidarity for artists who feel invisible and want a shared platform. I often talk at art schools to very young people who don't feel supported or loved, who might want to hear that I am alive, and even thriving at times, as a [queer](#) person.

But on the other hand, I think of Audre Lorde saying, "There's always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself—whether it's Black, woman, mother, dyke, teacher, etc.—because that's the piece that they need to [key](#) in to. They want to dismiss everything else." I go back and forth, because I'd say it's more important to think of myself as one person in the vast sea of history. You know, in the C. L. R. James and historical materialist way? As individuals, history shapes each of us far more than we can shape history. What I mean is that I just happened to be alive during the rise of web 2.0 and the financial crisis and because I was in New York City and went to Cooper Union, among so many things, including my identity, I was able to work with friends and make projects that were taken seriously and given opportunities to explore ideas in ways that other people absolutely do not get—and I wouldn't have had these opportunities, I think, if I'd been born even ten years earlier or later. I happened to ride a wave of history, to flow like a wave among my fellow waves.

TRR: Do we want to be meta for a second again and talk about the way in which the structure of the book that people are holding in their hands is itself informed by your identity, and your [practice](#)?

CW: There is a navigation structure that I worked on with the designer, Angela Lorenzo, that reflects my working process, so as you're moving through the book you can see where you are. There's also a kind of associational cartographic index at the end that's organized by [collaborator](#) or material or [tension](#) (maybe we should call it [friction](#) now). The idea is that you can move through the book in multiple ways, like you would online, while allowing it to still flow from cover to cover if you wish.

TRR: It seems like in the designing of the book you captured so many of the themes that run throughout your [practice](#): the importance of context; the question of [labor](#) and the material conditions of [labor](#); and what I call hypertext (although maybe there's a better word for it), or the notion of the interdependence or interrelation of ideas and people, which manifests in your index. I wonder if the design will help people see that there is a [tension](#) in your work between being very tight and internally consistent, and being very open and pointing to all these different associations, thanks to the amount of research into different bodies of knowledge and historical periods that you have done for a lot of your projects. (For example, this manifests in your use of netting to refer to the [internet](#) and networks of people and traps and colonial histories.) I think of your work as being almost like a [supernova](#), something incredibly dense but that explodes and goes in many directions.

CW: My friend Susan Jahoda, who I collaborate and work on pedagogical projects with, says I'm like the air. I'm zooming around like a balloon because I'm so interested in making associations and connections, in bringing in new people and doing wide-ranging research. I'm also, in that way, incredibly messy. So it's interesting to juxtapose that apparent [aesthetic](#) neatness with the lived material reality of constantly making associations. For example, my desk is a mess. I put everything

in different bags—it's like my net sculpture—because I see everything as possibly connected; I see patterns and potential all around. While it might not seem this way, it's very, very hard for me to get to a place of polish. Maybe your metaphor of a [supernova](#) makes sense in that way, with every object connected to infinite associations, [events](#), long term initiatives, and [websites](#).

Another thing your [supernova](#) reminded me of is this part in Robert Musil's unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities*, where he writes something like "believing in kings is like believing in stars that one sees even though they ceased to exist thousands of years ago." Maybe there's something about the [supernova](#) that I can relate to in that the moment this book is out it will already be ... past. Sure, we can believe in these [practices](#), but the conditions that allowed them to be possible are already like a star that you might admire but is long gone. So you have to invent your own narrative, ride your own wave in the sea of history—in other words, envision and work within your own material conditions—to be able to really make use of this book.

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