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Pam Rosenblatt, arts editor

Letting go: Conversations with artist/ curator Heidi Reynolds

On one warm Tuesday afternoon in April 2012, WHLR's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt drove to Somerville's recently renovated Armory building to interview artist/curator Heidi Reynolds about her intriguing community collaborative arts project called "The Rolling Gallery Project" that had found a temporary place in one of the rooms inside the Arts at the Armory, 191 Highland Avenue, Somerville. The interview that follows developed from the conversations between Heidi and Pam on that April 3, 2012 afternoon. The conversations happened inside the Café at the Arts at the Armory.



WHLR: Today is April 3, 2012. And I am interviewing Heidi Reynolds. Hello! It's nice to meet you. Are you from Somerville, Massachusetts?

HR: I am not from Somerville. I am originally from central New York, near Syracuse. A small town. We had a little horse farm. I have been in Somerville for three or four years now. Six or seven years in the Boston area.

WHLR: What part of Somerville are you from? Union Square?

HR: Yes, right in Union Square. Yes.

WHLR: I read online that you're going to have a celebration in honor of "The Rolling Gallery Project"?

HR: Yes, exactly. Originally I wanted to end the arts project then, but I feel like it is just getting started so I am going to keep going for another year. But the celebration will still be in May 2012. The original plan was to take the ball apart at that time. And each thing that has been let go of can then be used as material for a new project, something that I still want to do but I think I am going to wait another year at least to do that

WHLR: How large is the rolling ball now?

HR: It is probably 4' in diameter. A hundred pounds, something like that.

WHLR: And when you first started, what was the size? Nothing? Literally zero?

HR: Yes, it was literally zero. And I had been in graduate school for a couple of years and made a lot of projects and was having trouble getting rid of them.

So they were piling up. And I realized I was weighed down by them and

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felt the need to rework them or display them in some way. But I was not really wanting to do that so I had this urge to start wrapping up old art projects in little balls, not really knowing what that meant or where that was going. But, for me, it was both containing them and protecting them but also putting them away in some way. And then I just had this vision one day of the gigantic ball that grew out of all this letting go and not just myself but of other people. And I thought what if I talked to other people about things they need to let go of and we can join in that process together?

WHLR: Have you heard of the Tabula Rasa project that took place at Out of the Blue Gallery, Cambridge in December 2007?

HR: No?

WHLR: A woman by the name of Kelsey Russell curated it. It was a community collaborative art project headed by Russell who was graduating from Lesley University. She was affiliated with Out of the Blue Art Gallery, in Cambridge, on Prospect Street. And what happened is there was a 6' x 8' canvas pinned onto a blue-painted wall inside the gallery. And she had members of the community come in, and she had professional and amateur artists come in and contribute a picture, a painting stroke, on it. I put a little smiley face on it. It was a community project and it lasted for awhile. And she planned to tour it around different communities.

HR: That's great! I'll check it out. I love projects like that.

WHLR: Is "The Rolling Gallery Project" a community collaborative work in progress?

HR: Yes. So what a lot of what I got thinking about in art school, too, was that in this time in our lives and in this economy, people do not have the luxury of going to museums or going to galleries. So my thought was why not bring the art to the people? And that's where I got this idea of this rolling gallery. And I think when people think gallery, they think formal, they think professional and finished. And I just wanted to throw that in the trash and have gallery mean a collection of important things – whatever that ended up looking like. And then something that could roll around and be a part of the community – and not live within four walls of the gallery or the museum. But, you know, it is an elite idea sometimes, so...

WHLR: This comes to the question of what is art, doesn't it? I saw you have a Charles Schultz book, you have a Bible, you have a regular book all wrapped on the top of what looks like imitation grass.

HR: Yes. And that grass was actually one of my art projects that I used on my studio floor and that was in response to getting in trouble for piling natural grass and leaves in my studio and making a little environment. I got in trouble for that. So I said "Okay, forget it. I'm going all synthetic!" And I bought that synthetic grass. I was ready to let that synthetic grass go so I used it as a holding mechanism for the ball.

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But what is art is a really good question. For me, I think it is a process and not about the product, about learning another language to communicate with yourself and to communicate with others.

WHLR: So art as a language?

HR: Yes, yes. So it is a visual language. And I think you learn to communicate with your own self parts that you may not communicate with yourself, that you may not communicate with in language – verbal language – and also with others. So it opens things up. But I do not think you have to be quote unquote “talented” or “skilled” to do art. I think anyone can do art!

WHLR: So you have told me how the idea for The Rolling Gallery Project developed. How it started out in Union Square, Somerville. On what date did the project begin?

HR: Late October 2011.

WHLR: Where did The Rolling Gallery Project go after Union Square?

HR: Well, it started in my garage. So I put a bunch of things in it. Then it went to the French Collective, which is in Somerville as well. And they added some things. Then it went to the Sherman Café. And then The Distillery – and that’s actually in Boston, which felt a little too far. I wanted to bring it back home. So then the Armory was next. But, in the meanwhile, I also have these little pods that I have been calling them. They are bags so if I travel or if a friend is going somewhere I can send a Rolling Gallery pod with them. This Rolling Gallery pod is essentially a mini-ball that they can collect (people in their circle, their network) things that people are letting go of. The Red Hill Gallery in Brooklyn was working on one of those and one of the girls ended up taking it to Costa Rica. So The Rolling Gallery Project has been around!

WHLR: On your website, I saw some photos of children. I think they were from Africa?

HR: Yes. And that is a volunteer thing I just did. Actually, I went in and was working with youth in Ghana. It was a cultural organization in Ghana, and what I ended up doing with them was thinking about this concept of letting go and how does that translate into a culture where many people have nothing. And it really is not something that they think about as a general culture as much as Americans do. And so what I decided to do was to take a Rolling Gallery to them. So it is a reverse Rolling Gallery ball. So I ended up doing a donation drive here. And I raised about \$700 to buy art supplies to take to Ghana so they could do things there. So that was pretty amazing.

WHLR: What is the connection that you have with Ghana?

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HR: I do not have any connection. I met a woman at a conference last year called 'Cross-Cultural Exchange'. So it is essentially an artists' residency. I have always been very interested in cultures that do not have what we have in the U. S. And this idea of letting go has a lot to do with me personally detaching from materialism and material items and trying to seek a more authentic life, more authentic connection. And so visiting a culture that really has nothing really drove home the things I have been thinking about and about really needing very few things. I met some of the happiest people I have ever met. They do not have running water. They do not have a lot of anything.

WHLR: What gifts did they give to the ball?

HR: Well, they mostly created art there. And I did not want to take anything back. So everything they made, we left there because I think it was us who had to let go to them. So maybe next time.

WHLR: How long did you stay?

HR: Three weeks.

WHLR: Was that in the spring?

HR: That was actually a week ago. So I just got back. March 2012.

WHLR: How was the weather there?

HR: Hot and humid. Just drawing with pencil and paper you would be dripping, dripping. But it was a wonderful experience. And it made me really excited to come back and keep doing this project.

WHLR: You mention on your website that you transport The Rolling Gallery in unique ways. How do you transport it?

HR: It is different every time. It just out grew its dolly. (I had a little four wheel dolly that I could roll it around on.) But just this week I am working on a trailer for my bike. It is a converted lawn trailer so it's meant to be pulled by a tractor. So I painted it. It is going to have The Rolling Gallery logo. So if people want to ask about it, I can talk to people as we are moving through the street. But I am still working on the hitch for my bike.

WHLR: What type of people in this area have shown an interest in this project?

HR: There are a lot of different types of people, which is nice. Here at the Farmer's Market, inside the Armory, I have had a lot of people who are



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artists or who are teachers who have been really interested. A lot of psychologists who work with especially hoarding. Diseases like that where people are really attracted to objects and it is really difficult for them to let go. There were some disabled adults who came through the other day. Young people and old people. Children actually are very drawn to the ball. I think that is because it is kind of messy and that is always fun. They can touch it. They can push it. And that is what I wanted for that as an art piece. There is nothing precious about it even though it is made from very precious things.

WHLR: I would say a Bible is pretty precious.

HR: Yes, yes. But it is also held together so it can be pushed and pulled a little bit.

WHLR: What objects make up the ball?

HR: There is a typewriter in there from 1919. There are journals. There are love letters. Art projects. Fabric. Let's see what else is in there...

WHLR: What type of fabric?

HR: Fabric from old projects, things that were weighing me down and I had been using that to tie them all together. I am trying to use recycled things to hold The Rolling Gallery all in place, along with a bunch of twine and duct tape. Let's see what else is in there ... some records. There is some videotape unwound. There is a doll. It is actually my mother's wedding doll, which is over 50 years old now. And I had a really good time photographing that. Beautiful old fabric. There are some newspaper clippings – important things that have happened in people's lives.

WHLR: Did mostly friends donate these items?

HR: They are friends. They are people whom I have met at the Sherman Café or here. They are some of my clients from my business, my personal training business, who have been really great about seeing my art side as well as my fitness side and wanting to engage in that. Who else? Old people; young people; family members; and then some people are anonymous. For instance, I left a bag at the Sherman Café and had people give their things to the bag. I do not know who they are!

WHLR: Did you take the photo of The Rolling Gallery Project's progression that hung on the wall of the art space inside the Arts at the Armory building in February 2012 and then again in March 2012? Are you a photographer, too?

HR: Yes, I did. Well, at the Museum School, it is a multi-disciplinary program. We study everything from video to performance to photography. So really you choose your idea or you develop your idea. Whatever medium you feel best expresses it, that is what you learn. So you teach yourself or you take the class that you need to complete that vision. We learn a lot of great skills that I think really opens your mind to different ways to express yourself. And that comes back to language again: having a photography language, a sculpture language, etc., because sometimes a painting isn't going to cut it. Sometimes the image needs to move. So the Museum School has been a really self-driven program. It

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encourages that process. But I also felt it somehow really important to document as I went along: the inventory, the size and what it looks like because it is changing so frequently. And I like this idea of creating a history of like a planet of these memories.

WHLR: You spoke a bit about the ball, about the changes of the ball. How it has advanced from small, medium, bigger. How have you changed from this project?

HR: It is been very easy and very difficult to let go. For me, it is always been a big theme in my life to learn how to let go and trust. And some things I really had to sit with for a day or a week or a month. Then I thought I was ready to put them in the ball. And sometimes I would tape them on and then take them back off again. For instance, I had a painting that I thought, "You know, this needs to go in the ball. I'm done with it." And then my best friend called, and she said, "Heidi, I can't believe you put that painting in the ball!" I said, "Oh, you're right!" and I took it out and then I end up putting it back in again. So I realized how complex and complicated this process is. And, then, is there ever really a full letting go? I'm not sure.

WHLR: Why do you want to let go? Is it so important to let go of these things that are so important to you? Sometimes people want to hold on to such things.

HR: Yes. Yes. And one of my Blog entries actually says, "Sometimes it's okay to hold on"! And I realized that some things aren't meant to be let go of. And that's okay, too. But I think what the project has really done for me that has exceeded my expectations and that I am really honing in on what these things are that I do not want to let go of, that are really important to me and everything else can just go. So it is a simplifying and focusing on now having the time to go to Africa and doing these things without being weighed down by all this other stuff.

WHLR: So what things have you held on to?

HR: Photographs. And one of the biggest things that I have not put in the ball is a giant map I made of my process of art. So it's probably 25' long and 10' wide piece of paper. And it has all my art projects I have ever done and how they relate to one another. Arrows and lines and notes and pictures and it is sort of a brain map of my whole art process. And that I have held onto because it really grounds me and reminds me why I am doing what I do. There are some other little sculptures that were somehow very meaningful and I thought, "I'm not done with this yet." So it is varied by object.

WHLR: And the process of letting go is a very difficult process to go through. A lot of times people have to let go of things – they have to let go of people; they have to let go of marriages; they have to let go of parents; they have to let go of grandparents; etc. So it is very difficult, especially if you have this material thing that you don't have that type of human emotional attachment to; yet, you do sometimes have an extreme attachment to it.

HR: Exactly. And I think you have to decide it for yourself. It is a slow process, too. Giving everything away that someone has given to you

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would be too much. It would be too painful. But maybe slowly giving one thing and another. And filling that void is really important, too, with something else. And I think that's the whole idea of making space. By letting go slowly, you can make space for something new. And we do not always know what that is. It is a little bit of trust and a little bit of falling.

WHLR: Are you ever going to take The Rolling Gallery apart? Or are you going to keep the ball as one unit? Are you going to bring it to a museum?

HR: I want to take it apart and I will tell you why. With most of the people I have talked to about what they have contributed to The Rolling Gallery Project, I say, "What would you like to see happen to this thing? You are letting it go. What would your ideal for it be?" And most people say, "I would really like to see someone else use it." So there is this real idea of connecting with an opportunity or with a chance at something new. And a new person and a new use. So my vision for the project is when I feel like it is big enough or the people involved feel like it is big enough – however big that might be. I want to put a call out to artists and anyone else who wants to participate to look through the inventory and if there is a piece that speaks to them I want to give them the opportunity to remake that item! For instance, the doll – someone may turn it into a sculpture of some sort. The papers – someone might cut out one word on each paper and make a painting out of it. So it is this new life and a connection that is important. In my dream world, the giver of the item and the maker of the new item would be able to connect on the Blog. And that would be the completion of the circle for me: the ball and seeing that new thing that someone has made.

WHLR: So it is a circular process. And the ball is going to be opened and the items removed from inside of it.

HR: Yes.

WHLR: How large are you going to allow the ball to become?

HR: When it is just too big to move anymore! And I like the idea of wherever it ends up that is where we will take it apart. I am not opposed to letting it sit awhile. maybe it does not have to be taken apart right away. Maybe I will want until every item is claimed – the material. But I think maybe 10', or something like that. But I think it is more about the content that is important to me.

WHLR: Do you have any plans for a future project?

HR: Yes and no. The Rolling Gallery Project is going to go on for awhile. I feel like it is just getting started. But my next overall project is actually combining my personal training business with a non-profit that uses those to find community art and wellness activities. So rather than being just about fitness, it will be more about a holistic approach to well-being. And a non-profit. I think the idea of a personal training company that is giving money to something good is new and no one has done that yet. So usually fitness is all about itself. But, yes, that is the next project.

WHLR: Is there anything that you would like to add? Has anyone helped you with this project that you would like to mention?

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HR: The Somerville Art Council. The Arts Union space in Union Square, Somerville is their space, so they are supporting the May 2012 celebration. And then, individual contributors are all noted on the website. Also, what would be nice to add is that we're still looking for submissions from people who want to contribute to The Rolling Gallery Project either in person or by e-mail, over the phone, and artists who want to remake the items. But the artists are going to have to wait until The Rolling Gallery Project ends!

WHLR: That about covers it. Thank you.

HR: I think so. Thank you.

