

Sicardi Gallery

Magdalena Fernández Flexible Structures



2/000.017, 2017.

Iron spheres with black elastic cord, variable dimensions

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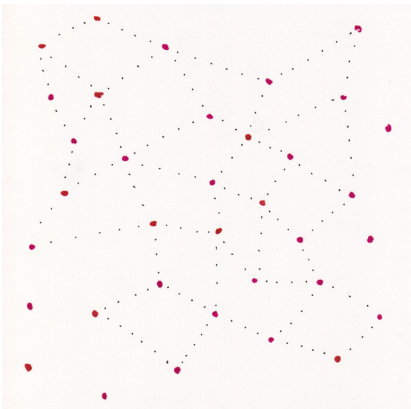
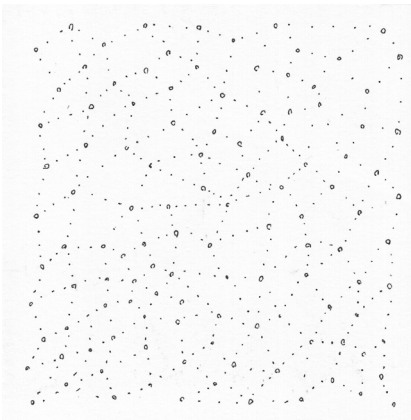
A white line traverses the dark wall in Magdalena Fernández’s video *10dm004*. Ambiguous as to whether it is a connection between two points, a slice cutting two spaces, or the trace of a vibration, the line gently undulates from right to left, occasionally resting flat during a fifteen minute loop. The 2004 video was created through the simplest of means by reflecting light on a pool of water then recording agitations on the surface.¹ What at first appears as a beautiful formal exercise thus implies a connective metaphor for water, one that is particularly appropriate for Fernández’s debut solo exhibition in Houston.

The Texas metropolis lies across the sea from the artist’s home in Caracas, and the two cities are united not only by an expanse of water but also their shared history of modernization as a result of the extraction and processing of fossil fuels. In the 1960s and 1970s, both Houston and Caracas grew exponentially in population and infrastructure as a result of skyrocketing oil prices. Houston refineries centered around the Ship Channel imported crude oil from OPEC countries including Venezuela and processed it for the US market, and the resulting profits in Venezuela led to the nationalization of the oil industry in 1976. By contrast, Houston’s low regulation encouraged energy companies to base their international headquarters in the city, including eventually the Venezuelan-owned Citgo. In 1950, Houston and Caracas had populations around 500,000, and by 1980, both metropolitan areas had approximately quadrupled in size becoming two of the most powerful cities on the Gulf of Mexico and the broader Caribbean.²

Studies of so-called alternative modernities typically describe modernity as an “original” invention of the Western world and Northern hemisphere, against which an “otherness” is located and contrasted.³ This view rarely recognizes *modernity* and its techno-cultural partner *modernism* as a worldwide phenomenon that is a result of multi-

ple networks and transnational interconnections. Moreover, *modernization*, the third term in the triad—*modernity-modernism-modernization*—assumes a universal model of development also established by the West that divides the globe into developed and underdeveloped nations.⁴ Houston and Caracas’s shared growth as a result of international markets contradicts this worldview and insists on a more complex account than a strict center-periphery connection.

Fernández’s videos, drawings, and sculptures point toward a nimble version of modernism, and by implication modernity and modernization. Alluding to the strict geometries of mid-century artists such as Piet Mondrian and Sol LeWitt as well as Gego and Carlos Cruz-Diez, she opens their fixed forms to movement, chance, and interaction. Fernández’s flexible structures come to life, more in the tradition of the “vital structures” of Joaquín Torres García, the Madi group, and the neo-constructivists, who incorporated elements typically beyond modernism’s parameters.⁵ Her exhibition at Sicardi Gallery and concurrent installation of *2iPM009* at Houston’s first underground water reservoir at Buffalo Bayou Park offer a comprehensive collection of her work over the past fifteen years. These combined works present a new take on the mediating role that seemingly ephemeral elements of water, wind, and light have on social and political patterns across the world.



4dp004, 2004.
Ink on paper, 3 15/16 × 3 15/16 in. / 10 × 10 cm.

15dp004, 2004.
Ink on paper, 3 15/16 × 3 15/16 in. / 10 × 10 cm.



10dm004,
from the series *Dibujos móviles*, 2004.
Video-loop, 15'05”

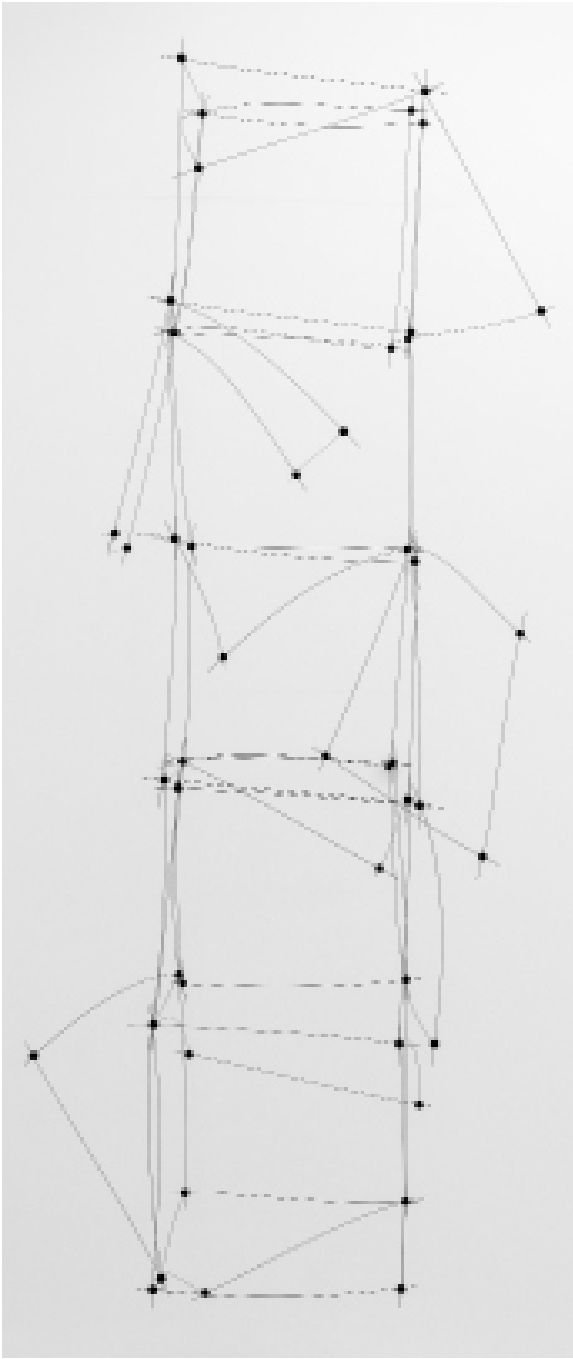
I. Off the Grid

As blueprints of *2i000.017*, Fernández’s installation at the Sicardi Gallery, two little drawings seem to challenge a *grid*—the emblematic structure of the modern. A series of red and black dots, linked by interrupted lines, can be seen as a cartography of the multiple movable positions of the forty eight black spheres that occupy the exhibition’s main space. Like in a nineteenth-century European painting, the grid—inscribed but concealed—functions as a matrix of knowledge, a structural apparatus that conveys what art historian Rosalind Krauss describes as “one of the basic laws of knowledge—the separation of the perceptual screen from that of the ‘real’ world.”⁶ In Fernández’s installation, this involves both the free movement of dots and lines through the gallery space as well as the memory or remnants of the original ideal structure. Likewise, in her two little drawings, the red and black dots allude to the spatial organization of a grid as well as the unpredictable movements of bodies and natural forces in the world beyond the artwork.

A grid has an inexorable will to repeat itself, to expand to the infinite. Within the grid, as Krauss observes, the artwork “is presented as a mere fragment” of a larger reality.⁷ Fernández’s work finds its *raison d’être* in its own incompleteness and instability. Creating multiple perspectives at once, the fragmentary nature of her drawings and installation becomes an instrument of resistance to narrative and temporal unfolding. It is not by chance that Krauss claims that the grid announces “modern art’s will to silence.” This hostility to discourse can also be seen in Fernández’s use of the grid, which specifically seems to resist development, the quintessential discourse that accompanies the emergence of modernism in Latin America.

This is where Fernández points toward a critical

understanding of modernity. Adopting the aesthetics and politics of the fragment, Fernandez’s work resists progress and embodies transformation, much like a ruin—that figure of a dialectical process, which obsessed the surrealists, a figure that, through its will to become nature, exemplifies both progress and regression.⁸ In fact, the precariousness and vulnerability of Fernández’s geometries embody skepticism toward both ideal geometries and modernist urban forms provoked by the oil boom in Venezuela. Rather than promise stability, her work opens the possibility for transformation. Its capacity to mutate is, at the same time, an instrument to re-frame reality and an incorporation of otherness.

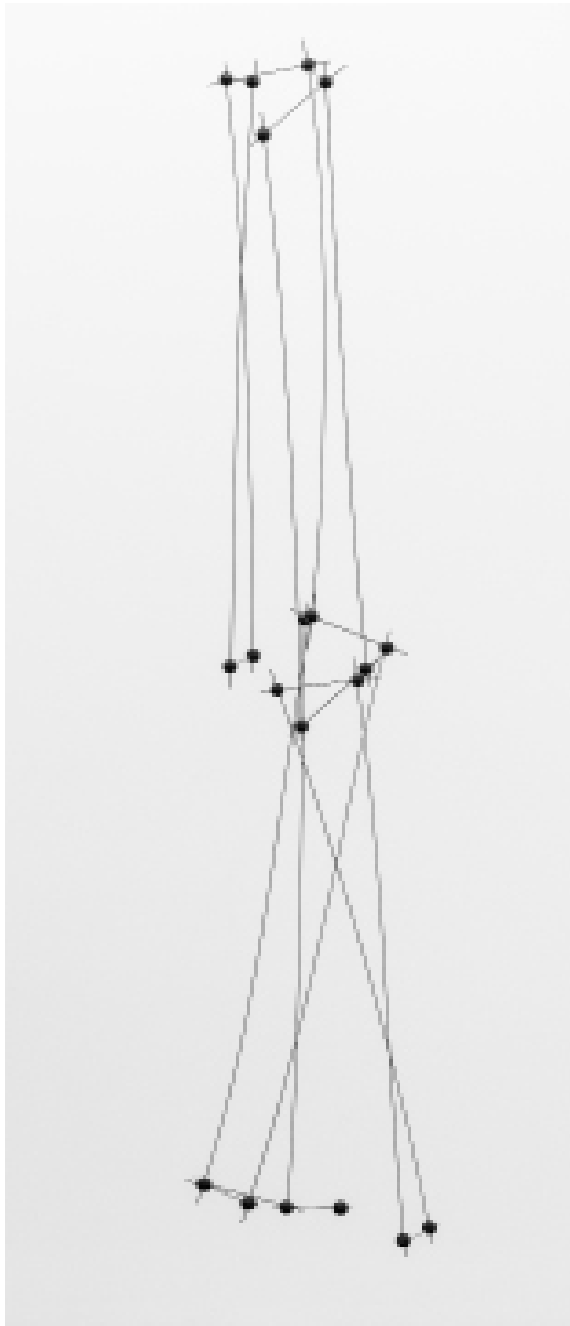


10ee016,
from the series *Estructuras elásticas*, 2016.
Steel, rubber.
© Peter Molick

II. Natura Naturans

Fernández’s most elaborate exploration of the grid and its discontents to date is her monumental installation *2iPM009*, currently reconfigured as *Rain* and installed by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston at the Buffalo Bayou Park underground cistern.⁹ The approximately two minute digital animation is projected onto the reservoir’s array of 200 slender concrete columns and casts reflections in a shallow pool of water below. The video begins with dots on a black background that become small clusters of intersecting, white, vertical and horizontal lines appearing with the sound of water drips. As drops slowly build to a torrential downpour, the lines grow longer and denser until the space is filled with an irregular white grid. The lines and sound of rain then gradually dissipate until all that remains are a few white marks and single drips of water. After a moment of silent darkness, the video repeats.

The immersive environment is a calm reflection on the rhythms and forms of the natural world. Artists from Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci to Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian have used their painting practice to discover theories



12ee016,
from the series *Estructuras elásticas*, 2016.
Steel, rubber.
© Peter Molick.

of the natural world, also known as *natura naturans*.¹⁰ *2iPM009*, which alludes specifically to Mondrian's *Composition in Line* (1917), uses the sounds of rainfall to activate the Dutch artist's composition. However, Fernández also implies that such a search is ultimately more introspective than explanatory as the sound of rain in her video is in fact made by a choir, Perpetuum Jazzile, as they rub their hands together, snap, slap their legs, and jump on metal and wood risers. "Nature" in this case is pure invention, much like the body was for Georges Canguilhem only quasi-natural and a product of human society.¹¹

Rather than discovering principles that govern the natural world, humans create those effects themselves. Indeed, the very idea of "nature" as something outside of human society and intervention is ironically a humanistic concept. Even as we marvel at the notion of an untouched wilderness or Mother Nature's secrets, our planet has been changed irrevocably by human activity. Scientists who study ice core samples and the fossil record verify that climate, biodiversity, and geography have all been shaped by human activity. While such findings are often linked to the devastating effects of climate change, Fernández's installation takes a more optimistic view of the anthropocene.¹² In her work, there is a beauty to the search for nature, no matter how self-reflective or contrived, accompanied by a sense of loss. For without a definition of "nature," how can we conceive of life on earth before us or without us? How can we comprehend the widespread effect of society through modernization and development without simultaneously conceiving of processes entirely apart from human intervention?

Another early video from 2004, *11dm004*, shows an even 8×10 grid of squares inscribed in white lines on a black background. The intersecting lines begin to gently undulate and then a thud,

produced by the artist herself, sets off ripples through the pattern. Lines converge, diverge, and lose their integrity all together as the artist strikes the side of the pool of water. As with *10dm004*, the 1' 52" loop was created simply by reflecting light on the surface of water, but the implications of such a gesture in *11dm004* are more complex. The formal precision of these videos and works such as *2iPM009* belies an ambivalence toward the modernist tradition it recalls. In invoking geometric abstraction, Fernández simultaneously calls for that which is lost when order, control, and a self-proclaimed sense of progress dominate the environment. Her message, conceived in Caracas, also powerfully resonates in Houston, where a place like the cistern comprises both infrastructure development and an almost spiritual sense of transcendence beyond practical construction.

Rachel Hooper and Fabiola López-Durán



11dm004,
from the series *Dibujos móviles*, 2004.
Video-loop with sound, 1'52".



2dmSLW004,
from the series *Dibujos móviles*, 2004.
Video-loop, 15'55".



Notes

1. It is one in a series of twenty videos created between 2003 and 2008 that the artist has titled “Dibujos móviles” or “Moving Drawings.” Each video uses an analog process of recording reflections on the surface of water to cause lines, grids, squares, and circles to organically undulate and seemingly move with a life of their own.
2. For population of Greater Houston, see United States Census Bureau. *Census of Population, Volume I: Number of Inhabitants*, 1950: 43-11, and *Census of Population, Volume I: Characteristics of the Population*, 1980: 45-37. For population of Caracas, see David F. Marley. *Historic Cities of the Americas: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, Volume 1: The Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America*. (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2005), 839.
3. This key strategy of colonial discourse, in which a “flexible positional superiority” circumscribes the “other” to a “fixed signifying position” to perpetuate the status quo, is still present in many analyses of modernisms outside the so called Western world, even when many of them argue for the opposite. Of course, we refer to Edward Said’s theory of Western superiority as elaborated in his book *Orientalism*; and Homi Bhabha’s concept of “fixity” in the “ideological construction of otherness.” See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 7; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 66; as well as Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed. *Alternative Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
4. From this partitioning, development became an hegemonic discourse among those in power, and a desirable and ethical imperative to be reached and replicated by the rest of the world. Fabiola López-Durán, “Modernist Architecture and Its Discontents: Brazil and Beyond,” in Alejandro Anreus, Robin Greeley, Megan Sullivan, ed., *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American & Latino Art* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, Forthcoming 2017). See also Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4.
5. We borrowed the notion of “vital structures” from Mari Carmen Ramirez. See Mari Carmen Ramirez, “Vital Structures: The Structure Nexus in South America” in Mari Carmen Ramirez and Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004), 191-201.

6. Rosalind Krauss argues that “no matter how absent the grid was in nineteenth-century art, it is precisely into these historical grounds that we must find its sources.” For instance, in the study of optics, which focused its attention on both the analysis of light and its properties independent of human perception and, on the contrary, the physiology of perception itself. Thus, for artists who wanted to understand vision and visuality (underscored as subjective) within the field of science the grid became a “matrix of knowledge.” Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 57.
7. Ibid., 60.
8. In the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, Andre Breton pairs the romantic ruin and the modern mannequin (evoking the remaking of the body as commodity) as “twin figures of a dialectic process: a modernization that is also ruinous, a progress that is also regressive.” See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 157.
9. The Cistern at Buffalo Bayou Park is a former drinking water reservoir built in 1926 for the City of Houston. As one of the city’s early underground reservoirs, it supported the municipal water system’s goals of fire suppression (water pressure) and drinking water storage. After operating for decades, an irreparable leak was discovered and after a few years, the reservoir was decommissioned in 2007, “Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern,” accessed January 9, 2017, <http://buffalobayou.org/visit/destination/the-cistern/>.
10. See Barbara Maria Stafford, “Introduction: The Taste for Discovery” in *Voyage into Substance: Art, Science, Nature, and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760–1840* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1984), 1-29.
11. Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers in Georges Canguilhem, *Writings on Medicine* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 10.
12. Timothy Morton rejects the Romantic notion of “nature” entirely and insists that “the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1. However, Fernández implies that there are redemptive elements to the concept of nature in her incorporation of water, wind, light, and other quintessential elements as active agents in her artworks.

Rain: Magdalena Fernández at the Houston Cistern, 2016.
 Video installation of 2iPM009 from the series *Pinturas móviles*, 2009.
 Video-loop, 1’56”.
 Digital animation: Marcelo D’Orazio
 Sound effect: Corporal percussion, courtesy of the Perpetuum Jazzile vocal group
 © Peter Molick

Magdalena Fernández

Trained as a mathematician, and later as a graphic designer under the mentorship of AG Fronzoni, the celebrated Italian minimalist designer, Magdalena Fernández began her artistic production in Italy in the early 1990s. From her early work in Italy as a graphic designer, she developed a rigorous familiarity with line and structure. She began making stainless steel sculptures in the mid-1990s, setting them into the ground and inviting viewers to activate them. Her work explores the tenets of modernism while, at the same time, investigating the mutable and flexible nature of physical phenomena. In the late 1990s, Fernández began using digital media to incorporate moving images to her work. She made a series of Moving Drawings (Pinturas móviles) and Moving Paintings (Pinturas móviles) in which Fernández references mid-twentieth century artists such as Piet Mondrian, Sol LeWitt, Gianni Colombo, Helio Oiticia, alongside with Venezuelans Jesús Soto, Gego and Alejandro Otero. There is, she argues, a dialectics of abstraction.

Her work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in Europe, Latin America and the United States. Fernández has also participated in important group exhibitions, including Contingent Beauty at the MFAH, Beyond the Super-square at the Bronx Museum of Arts, and Drawing Papers at the Drawing Center in New York; and her work is represented in major private and museum collections around the world, including the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in the US, the Centre d’Art Contemporain Frank Popper in Marcigny, France, and the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź, Poland. Fernández has represented her country Venezuela in various international biennials, including the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2016: Magdalena Fernández, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, CA, USA
- 2014: Magdalena Fernández, Instituto de Canarias Cabrera Pinto de la Laguna, Tenerife, Spain
- 2012: Grises: un proyecto de Magdalena Fernández, NC-Arte, Bogotá, Colombia;
- 2iPM009, Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), Long Beach, CA, USA
- 2011: 2iPM009, Frost Museum, Florida International University, FL, USA;
- Objetos Movientes: Atmósferas-Estructuras-Tierras, Centro Cultural Chacao Periférico Caracas, Venezuela
- 2010: 2iPM009, Haus konstruktiv, Zürich, Switzerland;
- Site specific 1i010, Residence of the Embassy of France, Caracas, Venezuela
- 2006: Superficies, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Caracas, Venezuela;
- Surfaces, Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), Miami, FL, USA
- 2000: 2i000, Galería Disegno Arte Contemporánea, Mantua, Italy;
- 4i000, Museo Alejandro Otero, Caracas, Venezuela
- 1997: 2i997, Museo de Arte Moderno Jesús Soto, Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela

Fabiola López-Durán

Originally trained as architect in Venezuela and Europe and with graduate studies in architecture and museum studies, Fabiola López-Durán earned her Ph.D. in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Art and Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Prior to joining the Rice University faculty, she was the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at the University of California-Berkeley’s Department of Art History. Adopting a transnational and interdisciplinary perspective, López-Durán’s research and teaching analyzes the cross-pollination of ideas and mediums—sciences, politics and aesthetics—that informed the process of modernization on both sides of the Atlantic, with an emphasis on Latin America. Her academic research has received prestigious recognitions from MIT and Harvard University, as well as from national foundations such as the Mellon, the Woodrow Wilson, the CLIR, the Dedalus, the Samuel H. Kress and the Fulbright Program.

López-Durán has participated as curator and exhibition designer in more than twenty shows in Latin America and Europe. She is the author of monographic books, such as *Felice Varini: Points de vue*, published in Switzerland by Lars Muller, 2004; and *Ana Maria Tavares: Atlântica Moderna* (co-authored with Nikki Moore) published in Brazil by the Ministério da Cultura and Museu Vale, 2015; as well as the author of numerous chapters and essays on modern and contemporary art and architecture published in various languages and countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Her forthcoming book *Eugenics in the Garden* investigates a particular strain of eugenics that, at the turn of the twentieth century, moved from the realms of medicine and law to design, architecture, and urban planning—becoming a critical instrument in the crafting of modernity in the new Latin American nation states.

Rachel Hooper

Rachel Hooper is a PhD candidate in art history at Rice University and a 2016-2017 Luce/ACLS Dissertation Fellow in American Art. She has written widely on modern and contemporary American Art in a transnational context, with a focus on the ways in which visual analysis critically intervenes in culture and politics. Her most recent publications include “Simultaneity 1970: Comparing Photographs of Conceptual Art Internationally” in *For a New World to Come* (Yale University Press and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2015), an essay on Andy Warhol in the edited volume *The Legacy of Antiquity* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), and an edited book on the Austin-based sculptor Andy Coolquitt (University of Texas Press, 2012).

Rachel was initially trained as a contemporary art curator in the master’s program at Williams College and as a visual arts curatorial fellow at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. From 2007-2011, she was associate curator and Cynthia Woods Mitchell fellow at Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, where she organized artist residencies and solo projects for artists such as the Tomás Saraceno, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Josephine Meckseper, and Amy Patton.