

Activ/ist: In the Studio with Laura Nova

September 5, 2019 by Marisa Malone
Photos by Nina Isabelle

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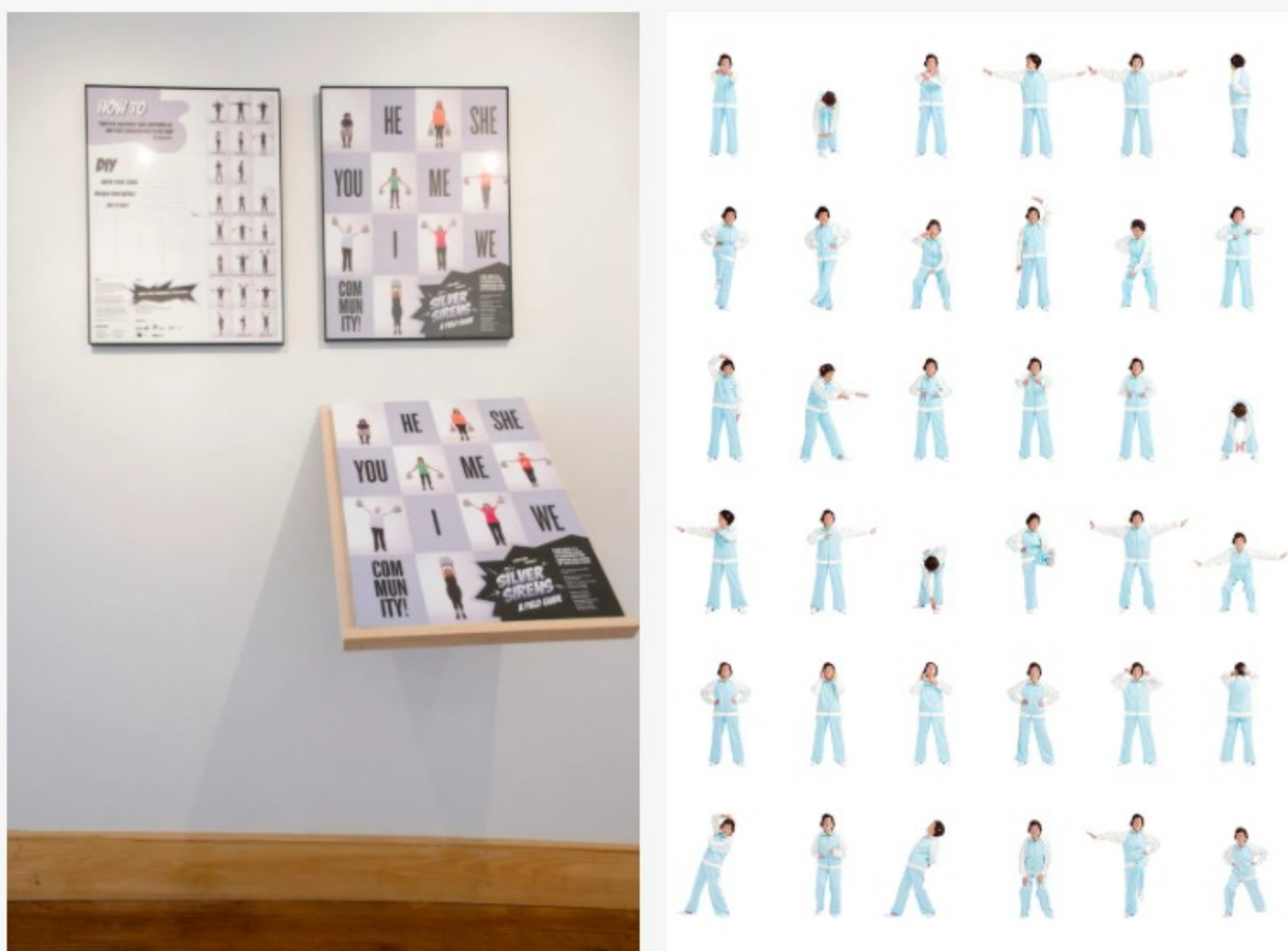
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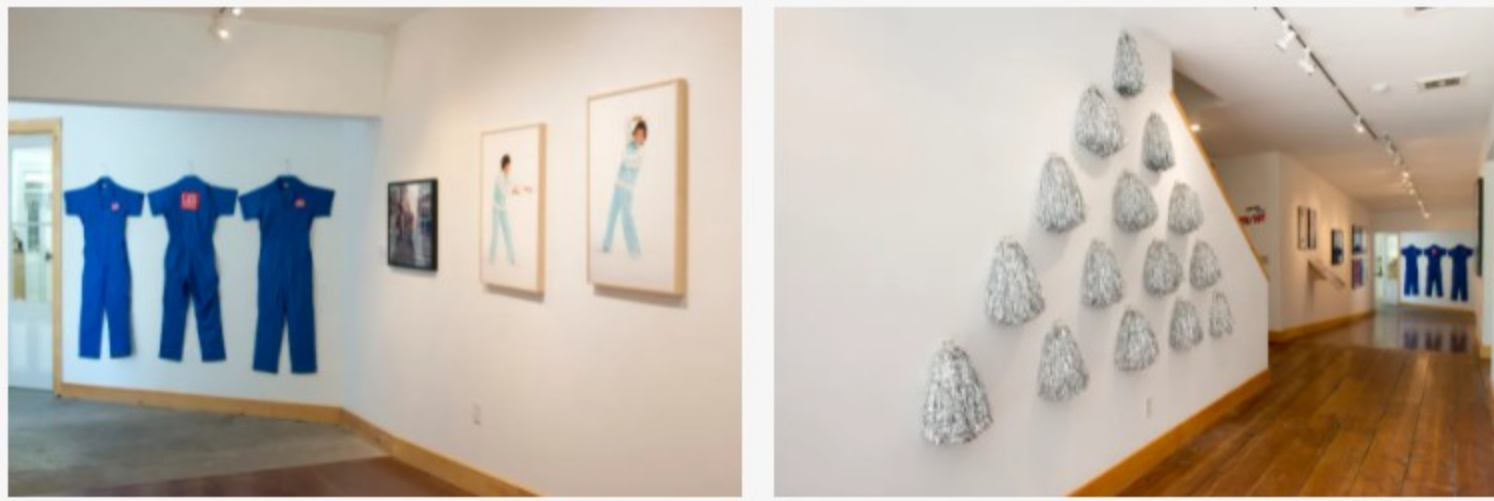


Rarely does one encounter an object intended solely for viewing in artist Laura Nova's work. Blending daily life with something a bit more extraordinary, viewers and participants are lifted out of routines and monotony and given instead a fresh awareness of their surroundings and themselves

Primarily working in performance and public art focused on activism and community, her work engages the public in direct ways and addresses topics specific to people and place. Her solo exhibition at Women's Studio Workshop, titled *Activ/ist*, highlighted just this. The exhibition featured ephemera of recent projects like *The Silver Sirens*, a cheer squad of older women rooting for and promoting healthcare and age justice, and *The Kung Fu Master*, a profile of Poa Shen Wong, a ninety-two year old woman who teaches martial arts at a community center.



Throughout this exhibition Nova continued to ignite participation from the audience. Video stills of *The Silver Sirens* hung on the walls of the gallery alongside posters of their cheers, and viewers were asked to participate by writing their own. An instructional poster of Wong demonstrating each move in her series of martial arts invited viewers to follow along. "I'm always concerned with how to socially engage people. I'm always thinking about that. I don't want to make work that is passive, I want to activate people."



Much of Nova's work features people that she knows from her neighborhood and creates platforms and performances that give visibility to their stories and passions. "A lot of the projects that were shown in the exhibition were ones that I collaborated on with my neighbors; I live in a very diverse building and [these projects] brought together community members who maybe didn't even know each other."



Nova lives in The Lower East Side, a diverse and evolving neighborhood in New York City whose economic and demographic changes have been addressed in many of her projects. In the LES Citizens Parade, Nova brought together members of this neighborhood to wear matching jumpsuits and carry empty moving boxes while performing and dancing in the streets. "This was an activist community procession of older adults and immigrants that related to moving and migration. The outfit was [modeled on] a mover/worker outfit and people carried boxes labeled with what they would take with them. People wrote things like *pictures* and *fragile* but also wrote *memories* and *respect*."



Looking across the spectrum of Nova's projects it's clear to see individual stories and participation is the bedrock of her work. She gets to know people, what matters to them, what they relate to, and builds projects with them. She gathers, listens, addresses, and expands on the needs and interests of those involved.

Currently, Nova is the Artist in Residence at the New York City Department of the Aging. She's working on creating a radio drama with the people served by this organization: "Being embedded in these institutions and communities, learning how people communicate and get things done is how I understand the structure of the system and how I create work that gets people on board. Part of the work is collaborative which gives people a stake in the project." This is a key aspect of Nova's practice, her integrative approach allows projects to take on the shape and ideas of others, reflecting the very thing her work is centered around.

Laura Nova is an artist, athlete, and activator who generates site-specific action-oriented projects which invite participatory energies of neighbors and strangers alike, particularly within the urban landscapes of older adult and migrant communities. She uses cardio, comedy and cooking to create activ/ist audiences who, in turn, reveal and preserve stories of both people and places. Nova has shown her work at national and international venues, including the New Museum's IdeasCity Festival, the River to River Festival, the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Real Art Ways, Substation Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa and the National Arts Center in Tokyo. Laura Nova is the 2019 New York City Cultural Affairs Public Artist in Residence with the Department of the Aging.

Marisa Malone is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been published in Selfish Magazine and BlazeVox Journal and she has self-published two chapbooks of poetry.