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Behar unites the arts and technology

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I was always artistically inclined from the time I was small, and I think I was fortunate to have parents who were very supportive of me.” This is how Professor Katherine Behar begins her life story, but she doesn’t claim that her family had no doubts whatsoever. “What I enjoy is doing a lot of different things. This was one of things that my parents were most concerned about, how I was going to find a career where I would be able to do all of the different things that I like doing.”

She has fulfilled her life’s ambitions by making art, writing, travelling, performing and engaging in all kinds of different creative activities. This native of Boston entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with the idea of becoming a fashion designer, but then realized that instead of working under someone else she wanted to execute her own visions.

After obtaining a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in Chicago, she decided to move to the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University, where she obtained a master’s in arts and then to Hunter College, also in New York, where she was awarded another master’s in fine arts.

Behar, who today is an assistant professor of new media at Baruch College, became very interested in a new vehicle for artistic expression as soon as she graduated. “At that time, everyone was talking about cyberspace—it was like the virtual space that we were going to live in and communicate in and socialize in. I wanted to start to portray that in my work, so even from my day job doing web design, I started to think maybe there are ways I can incorporate some of these metaphors for technology into my artistic work.”

Her interest in technology would open new frontiers for her while allowing her to incorporate all the tools she had learned to use in college. “It opened up another space for performance. As a performance artist, you think about the body and space, and as we start to look at technologies, we can think about spaces that technologies provide as possible perfor-



Professor Behar in the classroom.

Photo by Yulia Rock

mance spaces. There’s such an influence of various digital technologies—computers and gadgets and things like that—in my work. I think about them as being the performers too.”

A common question put to artists is how they get inspired to do what they do. Behar has a very simple answer: “I tend to start with some weird idea in my head and look for the right medium, whether it’s a sculpture, a performance, a video, a photograph. I look for the right form to hold that together and to present that to an audience.”

As an artist and a human being, Behar is also very conscious about the way we perceive technology. “The way we treat our gadgets shows us something about how we think about people who do menial tasks. For example, Siri’s voice in our iPhones is a woman’s voice. They initially tried this out with a

man’s voice and discovered that people didn’t like taking driving directions from men, so they changed the voice. There are a lot of these subtle ways that gender shapes our technologies.”

This is another way to remind lay people of something that artists have known for centuries. “Art is an object or an event that provokes an experience in the viewer. A lot of art is in the eye of the beholder, so it could be that it’s the mindset or it could be that it’s triggered by something that an artist made,” says Behar.

Like many other artists, she feels exhilarated once she completes one of her projects, and she witnesses that exhilaration among her students too. “It’s the moment when it’s almost like you’ve given birth to this art object. It’s out in the world and it has a life of its own. I think that’s something that is re-

ally important for an artist to experience. Within the safety of the classroom, we can try various different things and be very experimental, but it lends a whole different level of reality that something is out there, that it’s in front of the Baruch community, it’s in front of the public, it’s in front of family and friends who come to the reception,” she says.

Behar also feels fulfilled by her one-on-one experiences with her students. “There’s something about a one-on-one experience with another artist, with an artwork, where you’re seeing it in unmediated form. I think there’s no substitute for that.”

The way she gets ideas for her art is also different from what most people would expect. “I don’t think that there’s any right way to do it. I’m usually more inspired to make work by reading theory than I am by going to a gallery and seeing other work,” explains Behar. “Lately, I’m reading the news and thinking about technological developments and sort of trying to understand. I think we’re at a very odd moment right now culturally and politically, and I think technology is playing a very important role in some transformations we’re seeing in the U.S. and in the world at large.”

This summer Behar is spending her time in South Florida working on a very interesting project. “I’ve been commissioned by the Vizcaya Museum in Miami for a project that will open in December as part of Miami Art Basel. It’s a group exhibition called Overload. My project is to think about other voices that populate this state. I’m interested in the voice of the water. I will be putting a hydrophone into the ocean off a barge, recording the sound of the water, boosting it into the human vocal range, running it through speech recognition, and displaying what the water is speaking.”

“I was there in March, and it was amazing. I saw about forty manatees altogether, just hanging out playing.”

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