

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

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*Step Up 09* is a series of six solo exhibitions open to emerging artists living in New England, New Jersey or New York. The *Step Up* open call series seeks to provide emerging artists in our region with an exhibition and publication at a critical moment in their careers. The *Step Up 09* jurors were Susan Cross (Curator, MASS MoCA); Andrea Grover (Founding Director, Aurora Picture Show); and Deborah Willis (Professor and Chair of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University).

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Real Art Ways is an alternative multidisciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work and creatively engages, builds and informs audiences and communities. As Real Art Ways grows, our commitment to supporting young and emerging artists remains a touchstone of the organization.

Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways celebrates its 35th Anniversary with events in 2010 and 2011.



On the cover: Installation view of *Limited Run* at Real Art Ways, 2010.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

# Laura Nova



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Real Art Ways visitors walk laps around the *Limited Run* installation.

## Laura Nova *Limited Run*

By Alise Upitis

Like a track in a stadium used by professional athletes, Laura Nova's *Limited Run* is an elevated indoor running structure, sloped at the curves, with a surface produced for use in elite foot races. White lines, the iconic demarcator of racing lanes, have been drawn with a commercial line-marking machine. It is competition-quality, but diminutive: the track is fit to a floor area of 297 by 369 inches, nested snugly within the inside dimensions of the interior gallery walls. The installation's combination of professional materials and dramatically scaled-down size beckons gallery-goer participation, and when the start-finish line is traversed, a sensor activates the sharp clang of a bell, the manufacture of which is used in schools and to warn of fires.

As a free time diversion, participatory sport is a mode of relaxation, leisure and entertainment. If one deems a useful activity something which contributes towards material accumulation, the recreational diversions of sport are literally useless. By focusing attention on that which is bare of obvious utility, sport becomes a form of protest against the everyday world of necessity, of material accumulation by means of labor, of the useful. Sport's mixture of fervor and insouciance around rules and difficulties contrived for the purpose of no ulterior purpose—call it its rather serious uselessness—means that sport can lay claim to a certain privileged autonomy within society.

According to certain leftist strains of theorizing during the 20th-century however, the pleasures of sport's leisurely uselessness have long been co-opted by work as its appendage. As that

Laura Nova uses a wide variety of media to explore concepts of public and private behavior and absurd moments of modern existence. She received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a BFA and BA in art and history from Cornell University and completed Associate Research at Goldsmiths College as a Rotary International Scholar. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally and was included in the Independent Curator International exhibition entitled *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art*. Nova is an Assistant Professor in the Creative Art and Technology program at Bloomfield College in Bloomfield, New Jersey. She lives and works on the Lower East Side in New York City.





Installation view of *Limited Run*, rubberflex, plywood and fire bell, 31'x26', 2010.

which can satisfy physical and social needs unmet by routinization embedded in the division of labor, sport has been seen a necessary activity in order to reproduce the capacity to labor. As Theodore Adorno offered, "Sport restores to mankind some of the functions which the machine has taken away from him, but only to regiment him remorselessly in the service of the machine."<sup>1</sup> Insert the adjective professional before the term sport, and claims of sport's uselessness are further destabilized. The idea of players engaging in a happy leisure activity are overwhelmed by the purposeful drive towards the goals of profit.

Marshall Sahlins has illuminated that affluence as meeting a society's material needs can be achieved by producing more or wanting less. A society's lack of material possessions can be considered an attempt to live with a minimal amount of labor, thus affording ample opportunity to play.<sup>2</sup> Nova's work contains a critical potential as it refuses to be only a means to an end of material accumulation. Her sport has rules (for

example, visitors: do not disassemble the track) and repetition, but without containing a necessary drive towards material accumulation, it evidences a sense of the ritualistic. Its participation in ritual serves to transcend dichotomies of use and useless to provide a certain unity between a world lived and imagined.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary artists such as Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, Harun Farocki, and Paul Pfeiffer have engaged with sport as subject matter, but primarily with images of professional sporting events as commercialized and totalizing spectacles. Unlike these artists' works, *Limited Run* has greater affiliation with the Environments of Allan Kaprow than Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Like Kaprow, Nova offers a simple, funny structure to the audience that provides an active experience that changes them from spectators to participants.

Although *Limited Run* offers no explicit political commitments, the active engagement of the audience, central to Nova's work, is consistent with the notion of participatory democracy. This does not mean that installation—neither Nova's nor other's more obviously political in content—serves to annihilate Modernism's closed autonomy and sovereignty. As Boris Groys has articulated:

To install a law is to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner—he installs the political order, but does not belong to it. He remains external to the order even if he decides later to submit himself to it. The author of an artistic installation is also such a

legislator, who gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules to which this community must submit, but does so without belonging to this community, remaining outside it.<sup>4</sup>

An artist can foster a space of democracy by providing a place for a community of visitors to constitute itself, but by providing the aesthetic conditions for this possibility the artist functions as external rule-maker, or sovereign legislator. There is then a paradox to such a community that functions democratically, an antagonism that provides for the very conditions of its existence. The possibility for conflict between participants is a necessary condition to its operation as a democratic space<sup>5</sup>—as is the conflict potential of sport one of its founding possibilities.

As an installation, *Limited Run* participates in this tension between sovereignty and democracy. At the same time the unresolved character of sport in the work reveals a parallel tension that operates between an individual player's joy in action and sport's utility within capitalist structures. In this context the repeating ping of the installation's bell



Crossing the finish line triggered a fire bell to ring indicating the completion of a lap.

takes on the mechanics of repetitive work, although this sense is simultaneously upended by its random activation by a user's movements in competition. When participants are in the conflict of sport's competition, they dramatize and reaffirm the democratic community's common value as a free society. To paraphrase Antonio Negri, through participation Nova's work is a means towards the common as an activity, not as a result.

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Children race around the installation.



<sup>1</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 76.  
<sup>2</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).  
<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.  
<sup>4</sup> Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal* 2 (1990), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/31>.  
<sup>5</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 1996), see esp. 115–120.