**Allison Freedman Weisberg** is the Executive Director and Founder of **Recess**, an artists’ workspace in SoHo that’s also open to the public. Recess invites artists to make new, experimental work and embark on long-term projects in their storefront, which functions as both a studio and exhibition space. Their current project, **Volumes for Sound**, is a 2-month collaboration between artists **Melissa Dubbin and Aaron S. Davidson**.

**Arthur Peña:** Was there a specific event that sparked the fire for what was to become Recess?

**Allison Freedman Weisberg:** One of the initial seeds for Recess came from a close look at a single artist’s rigorous pursuit, and we continue to look to our artists for guidance. When I was working at the Whitney, Corin Hewitt, first Session artist and current board member, had a show called Seed Stage. Inside of the Whitney’s lobby gallery, Corin built another four walls that would serve as his studio. The walls were open at each of the four corners and invited viewers to peer in and share the artist’s time and productive space. Inside this literal open studio, Corin took on the life of objects, organic and inorganic, in a full-on dissection of process. He cooked grilled cheese, photographed it, grew plants, recombined and fried the mixture, made clay replicas of it all, and buried bits and pieces in a bucket of dirt. (Forgive me, Corin, this truncated description does a disservice to the project!)
I thought, this is the kind of unwieldy, complicated, messy project that makes viewers stop and reflect on their own position in relation to an artist’s critical investigation of things found and made. I wanted to create a space where artists could experiment free from institutional constraints, and explore the incremental developments of their own work in partnership with their public.

To clarify, I’ve never been interested in audience participation for participation’s sake. I dislike the relational model that asks visitors to contribute to a work as a simple gesture that forms a cumulative mass of disconnected players and offers no substantive or critical content. Rather, I believe that contemporary audiences—even those unfamiliar with art—are capable of a lot, and I wanted to encourage an active, qualitative approach to serious art. And I found artists and audiences shared my enthusiasm for process-based investigations and creative risk-taking.

**AP:** There is a heavy pedagogical approach to the overall program. Does Recess consider the educational environment when choosing what programs to implement?
AW: I come from a background in education so perhaps I’m biased, but I believe all rigorous art that poses questions of creative or critical relevance to be educational. I think of Recess, first and foremost, as an educational institution—both for artists as well as audiences (and, of course, for me and the rest of our staff). But education at Recess rarely comes in the form of traditional classes or lectures. The projects we support are selected because they challenge their makers and receivers and pose questions that don’t necessarily find answers. In the same way that new art seems to beg a new context outside traditional galleries and museums, new ideas need unconventional classrooms.

AP: Obviously there is something to be said that Recess offers so many free events. Is it challenging to engage the NYC public even with this generous approach?

AW: It’s not so tough to engage the public once they’re in the door. Our artists create complex, active spaces that speak for themselves. And they speak loudly (our current project Volumes for Sound echoes through my brain long after I go home at night).

Getting people to take the risk to enter an unconventional space, that isn’t recognizable as a traditional gallery or private studio can be a challenge. Luckily, once people come inside, they often stay, and usually return. So, four years later, our audience is increasingly diverse and growing.
AP: There is so much transparency to what artists are doing in the space, in particular I’m thinking of the ‘photolog.’ Where does this dedication of displaying process stem from?

AW: I spoke about this a little bit when describing Corin’s work, but Recess’s interest in process is in direct response to artists’ interest in process. Many artists are working in ways that privilege their works’ development rather than a final, polished object. Of course, this kind of work is created outside the traditional market, so Recess hopes to support artists (financially and otherwise), making work that prioritizes critical inquiry. This kind of work often directly calls upon its audience to play an active role in articulating difficult concepts.

The photolog is a way of capitalizing on the change and developments that happen in our spaces throughout the project. For those who can’t come in every day, this is a chance to see ideas and materials come together. We’re so used to being presented with polished objects, in pristine, white boxes, that sometimes we forget the grit and labor involved in their realization. We’re not scared of failure, and encourage our artists to put forward their unsuccessful moments as well as their triumphs.
AP: Recess seems like such a large collaborative production. In order to pull open the curtain a little bit, what does a typical day running Recess involve?

AW: We all do a little bit of everything. For an organization with a full line-up of programs, we do a lot with a small staff and minimal resources. On a typical day, I might meet with an artist to work through an impasse, or write a grant proposal, or clean the bathroom. Each member of our staff (three full-time, one part-time) each has her own area of focus, but we all help each other edit documents, patch paint, grab coffee, evaluate programs... Each of our priorities, every day, is working directly with our artists to ensure their projects are meeting their ambitious goals. On an ideal day, Recess resembles an artist rather than an institution.

AP: What’s in store for the future of Recess and how has the program been modified to further engage the public?

AW: When we started in 2009, our main program Session, took all of our time, space and resources. Now we have a full line up of programs that compliment Session, which remains at our core. A critical writing program happens in conjunction with each Session, and Analog, our online residency reaches our virtual audience. Performance series and collaborations with other organizations—some big, some small—help us meet new audiences. As we look toward the fall, we’ll work with Performa on a new project, and collaborate with a British outfit in a new context. We’ll continue to develop our online program and continue to collaborate with organizations that share our commitment to experimental new works.

Celebrate Recess’ four years of ambitious artists’ projects at Four More Years: Recess Benefit 2013 on May 28th at (Le) Poisson Rouge. The evening will feature a musical performance by TECLA, DJ sets by DJ Marty McSorley and DJ AJ Slim, artist performances by Elia Alba and Jacoby Satterwhite, artist installations by Zach Gage and John Miserendino, and an editioned benefit print by David Horvitz. Purchase tickets here.

Arthur Peña (born 1982, Dallas, TX) is a painter and contributing writer to New American Paintings, ART HAPS, and curbsandstoops.com. Peña received his MFA in Painting from RISD in 2012, his Post-Baccalaureate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and his BFA from the University of North Texas. His work has been exhibited in Chicago, Providence, New York, Massachusetts, Detroit, Philadelphia and Dallas and he is represented by Oliver Francis Gallery. Peña is currently teaching at UNT as well as Mountain View College where he is organizing a group show, Working Space, for October, 2013. Peña currently lives and works in Dallas.