White Wall Magazine, Spring 2011

PROFILE

ALLISON FREEDMAN WEISBERG
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER OF RECESS ACTIVITIES
BY KATY DONOHUE, PORTRAIT BY STEVE BENISTY

WHITETEAL: What made you want to found Recess Activities, coming from a background of working in museums?

ALLISON FREEDMAN WEISBERG: I love museums, and I was lucky to work at some of the best in the world. I left the Whitney to start a space that would serve as a complement to the museum model. Preparing for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, I noticed that some of the most exciting projects extended beyond the museum and did not “fit” in the context of a clean exhibition space. As trends in contemporary creative practice moved toward a focus on process rather than product, Recess formed to embrace the liminal space between the artist’s studio and the white-box gallery, allowing artists to define the context of their work on their own terms.

WW: Why have “activities” in the name?

AFW: The “activities” part of the name follows the implicit playfulness of a space called Recess. Tackling on the activities highlights the process of play, the generative capacities of experimentation and meaning making, whether over the course of several months, or several moments. “Active” is a hot-button word at Recess. We ask our artists to maintain an active space, even when absent from 41 Grand, and to address an active audience. I tend to think of our storefront space as Recess, while I consider the nonprofit organization — the business entity, the online presence, and efforts throughout the creative sphere — as Recess Activities, Inc.

WW: Recess was founded in the spring of 2009 — during a recession. Was this an off a reaction to the bubble bursting or a reaction to the art market?

AFW: I was certainly conscious of starting at the bottom. I figured if we could make it during the recession, we’d have a better chance of longevity. In addition, the alternative creative practices I alluded to — those focusing on process rather than product — grew out of an underserved market and a general dissatisfaction with the power of the commodity. As a result, the traditional space and constraints of the museum or commercial gallery could not always respond to contemporary artists. Out of this predicament grew a flexible model for Recess that allowed the institution to respond to the conditions of creative practice rather than asking the creative practitioner to respond to the demands of the institution. I did not start Recess as a means for critiquing museums, but, rather, to create a complementary space for those impossible projects, that, through no fault of their own, museums cannot support.

WW: What do current art institutions not have that Recess Activities provides?

AFW: I think my favorite surprises are the small-scale, everyday encounters. Often, passersby duck into Recess wondering what’s going on. Since Recess is neither a studio nor a gallery, we often get the question, “What is this place?” The continually evolving answer, based on the project in progress, continues to surprise me.

WW: Recess Activities has now been open for over a year — what have you discovered about this new model that you have either learned from or didn’t expect when you first founded it in 2009?

AFW: I’ve learned a good deal about saying yes. One of the reasons I wanted to be the boss — besides my general pigtiedness — was to make affirmative decisions, rather than shutting down what I didn’t have time for, what wasn’t part of a strategic plan. Today, I still turn to Recess’s central mission for guidance when entering new territory, but I find I can say yes to exciting prospects at the spur of the moment, because they are, in fact, the essence of Recess’s identity.