



Live Media



Hope Sandrow

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN

A flock of rare Paduan chickens cluck and flap in Hope Sandrow's *Open Air Studio*, an installation that she created in the backyard of her century-old home in Southampton, New York. Sandrow, known for intermingling an eclectic range of media, from photography to performance, is also quick to pounce on oddball happenstance, as she did when an exotic white cockerel followed her home from a morning walk, and then stayed. She named him Shinnecock, after the ancient Indian grounds where they met.

During one of their daily jaunts, Sandrow and Shinnecock stumbled on Gissu Bu (Mystery House), an old Scandinavian-designed lodge slated for demolition. They went in and discovered a carved rooster gazing toward a window bearing the manufacturer's metal stamp, "Hope's Lokd Bar" (Hope's Window). Sandrow, who believes in signs and follows them to see if they lead to a point worth making, researched the site and then roused her community to save the historic property from developers. She also identified her mysterious feathered muse as a Paduan chicken, a species coveted by breeders who raise them as show birds and alter their setting instincts to control their attributes.¹ Appalled, Sandrow purchased a pair of Eves for Shinnecock. They were fruitful and multiplied.

Today, Shinnecock and his progeny reside in *Open Air Studio*, along a property line once shared by 19th-century artist William Merritt Chase, whose paintings reflect the conservation concerns of his day. In Sandrow's case, cameras document restored Paduan setting instincts and stream live video on the Internet, inciting e-mail assaults from infuriated breeders. *Open Air Studio* takes its cues from its plumed inhabitants. Their daily interactions provide the figurative, emotive, and narrative element; their brilliant variegated feathers and spiky crests, the vivid color and movement; the call and response of their crowing, the libretto

Opposite: *Coop LeWitt South*, 2009. Plastic sheeting and wood, 5 x 5 x 10 ft. This page: *Coop LeWitt North*, 2009. Fence pickets and plastic sheeting, 7 x 7 x 10 ft. Both from the series "spacetime."

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Open Air Studio: Aerial View West, 2011. From the series "spacetime."

for a live canvas that takes the golden mean as its organizing principle. Like ancient Greek, Renaissance, and 20th-century masters, Sandrow has found embodied in its infinite whorl of mathematical logic, the secret of organic growth and the harmony and order stabilizing an otherwise messy universe.

Pythagoras, it turns out, was always nearby. Sandrow was flabbergasted to find him in the form of a 19th-century bottle of Johann Hoff's Malt Extract that she excavated from her yard. The bottle still bore the original label endorsement by Eugen Sandow (yes, the similarity to Sandrow's name is creepy), a popular body builder who muscled his torso to replicate the classical Greek ideal, the proportions of which derive from the golden mean.

The landscape of *Open Air Studio* replicates the mean's naturally recurring golden spiral with manufactured forms. San-

drow's inspired interventions also serve to eliminate predators, particularly hawks. To deter them in mid-flight, she placed spiral steel tomato plant supports among similarly curlicued deciduous bushes: winter light glints metal through sheaths of snow, and golden sparks fly through saffron carpets of fallen leaves in autumn. Taxodium, cryptomeria, and corkscrew rush, plantings chosen for their soft feathery foliage, camouflage the chickens, making them appear like plants when seen from the sky. The sculptural intermingling of natural and fabricated forms ranges from a bright blue hose, coiled on the ground like a snake ready to spit, to the smiling spirals that rise in a nearby puddle tickled by rain.

Paduans sip water from Sandrow's waterworks, pools cobbled from local stones. *Parallelogram Circle*, its proportions suggesting a golden rectangle, continuously ebbs and flows with water cascading from a spout

made from a small plastic fish tank. Vivid orange goldfish dart about in the water, while above, another predatory bird deterrent replicates their silhouettes. High up in the trees, Sandrow placed a network of wire, punctuated by colorful fishing lures that resemble small birds, butterflies, or fish in flight.

The enclosures *Coop LeWitt North* and *South*, where hens set and the flock spends the night, are startling works of architectural design, created by Sandrow in collaboration with her husband, photographer Ulf Skogsbergh. Inspired by Sol LeWitt, the structures transform his parallelogram drawings into three dimensions. The Museum of Arts and Design in New York commissioned a three-quarter scale model of *Coop LeWitt North* for the exhibition "Against the Grain: Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft, and Design."

Consummate models of form following function, Sandrow's coops support hefty political, historical, and ecological loads. *Coop LeWitt North*, constructed of recycled picket fence parts, recalls the homes of wealthy 19th-century scions who, in running roads and railroads to their summer playgrounds, decimated natural flora and fauna and displaced Native Americans. Sandrow's subversive use of materials symbolically returns the land to its rightful denizens.

In many ways, *Open Air Studio* transcribes the spiritual and social conflicts embodied in 19th-century Hudson River School landscapes. Like Sandrow, the Hudson River painters cherished nature and agonized over the incursions of modern progress. While gashes opened up by railroads and amputated trees seemed small against the grandeur of nature, they foreshadowed far greater catastrophe. The same sensibility permeates Sandrow's exquisite, protected habitat, simply by virtue of her need to create it. The sharp-eyed hawks marking their prey by day and the sleuthing raccoons prowling by night are not nearly as insidious a threat as humans who decimate the environment, and who, for vanity and profit, undermine the instinctive procreative rights of other species.



Lure/Lore, 2012, fishing line and steel-headed lures, dimensions variable; *Within a Golden Rectangle*, 2012, water, stone, fish, and chicken wire, 9 x 14.5 ft. Both from the series "spacetime."

Open Air Studio is the apotheosis of Sandrow's 40-year career. Intertwining a hard-lived life with creativity, her oeuvre pushes art's boundaries: a process beginning with photography begetting sculpture, then installation art and socio-political discourse, now spirals back to earth, where it becomes one with creation.

Sandrow grew up in an insular Jewish community, the only child left after two siblings died of cystic fibrosis. She says, "I was aware of life and death as a toddler; my parents always mourned. I later suffered physical and sexual abuse from people I thought I could trust." Mute about her pain, Sandrow expressed herself through art, sometimes throwing tomatoes against the house because "I liked the patterns they made."² Much later in the eco-reality theater of *Open Air Studio*, she realized her need to nurture and protect.

She studied photography at the Philadelphia School of Art (1972), but the camera was more a tool than a passion—an oculus into the real world, providing images to be deconstructed and re-invented as something else. Fueled by the feminist revolution, Sandrow's bold interactive series, "Men on The Street" (1978–82) involved "my picking up men and asking them to

Sandrow's motivation may be that of an environmental activist, but the soul of her work transcends the political, seeking instead to restore the kind of primal integrity that gives all creatures a fair shot at survival. At times, she channels the gravitas of the moon. Learning that 150 million years ago, setting Paduan primogenitors basked in a lunar glow, she intuited a connection between the 24 hours it takes an egg to spiral down an oviduct and the time it takes the earth to rotate on its axis. So, she covered a *Coop LeWitt* with waterproof trans-

parent material, enabling Paduans to again conjoin their life cycle to the moon's journey. The sight of cooing hens setting within this protective moonlit filter is downright surreal. *Untitled Observations*, a suite of stills and videos begun in 2005, further engages the moon, projecting its image through a telescope onto the artist's body. Sandrow has filmed the orb as an avatar egg, a rolling yolk, gliding across her forehead, probing her tongue, and slithering through her cupped hands as if she were separating it for some cosmic feast.

Fragments: Self/History, 1995. Silver print fragments, map pins, and boxes. From the series "Memories, Spaces, Time."



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assume outrageous poses on city streets. The landscape was a sculptural element; directing men empowered me.” Then, to further rattle the image of the dominant, ideal male and run photography smack into sculpture, she posed artist colleagues amid the classical statuary at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This series of diptychs and triptychs consists of disjunctive images cork-screwing through time and space. *My Dreaming Never Ends* (1985), for example, portrays a swirl of male bodies atop the head of a dreaming woman, her hair and torso spiraling toward an antique vase and an architectural grid.³

In 1988, Gracie Mansion, an avant-garde East Village art dealer who represented Sandrow, hosted a highly anticipated solo exhibition in which Sandrow advanced photography into the third dimension. She took a series of fragmented nature images, framed them separately in white frames, and then re-assembled them as sculpture in geometric patterns. Days into the show, Sandrow says, “Gracie called [to say] the images were disappearing. The bleach used to whiten the frames bled onto the ill-protected prints.” The work was destroyed. The framer denied culpability.

The trauma resonated with grim memories of abuse. “I thought my art was one thing that couldn’t be taken from me,” says Sandrow. “Now I wanted my work to be informed by social realities related to abuse. I went to a homeless shelter and met people who had lost everything.”⁴ At this point, Sandrow’s work took a decisive turn, driven by issues specific to a particular site. The homeless shelter informed her series, “Memories, Spaces, Time” (1992–98). The emotional river runs deep here, as Sandrow charts three stages of survival: dark memory, resolution, and renewal. Each work in the series formed the core and/or backstory for later works and installations.

Memories (1992) consists of mutilated black and white photographs depicting arm movements. “Arms indicate what the figure wants to say,” explains Sandrow, who painstakingly peeled away the emulsion of each silver print as if she were peeling an egg. She then pinned the pieces together, reconstituting the image as a shattered mosaic to express fragmented recollections of rape. In *Spaces* (1995), the arms hyperextend, suggesting archaic fertility statues or maimed classical figures. Sandrow handwaxed the print surfaces, smearing them so

that forms appear to dissolve and congeal like excruciating memories.

For *Fragments: Self/History* (1995), at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Sandrow extended the symbolism into three-dimensional space, pairing the *Spaces* photographs with collaborative installations done with students. Participants filled cardboard boxes (sized to the proportion of the golden mean) with personal memorabilia. Piled high in monumental columns and surrounded by the photographs, the boxes both protected and honored their personal life stories.

The cool blue images of *Time* (1997), the final section of the trilogy series, suggest renewal. The golden-rectangle-format prints depict swimmers photographed from under the water, so that they feel one with its flow. One day a sudden storm struck the Southampton coast, heaving thousands of moon snail shells onto the beach. Sandrow felt a mystical connection between her *Time* images and the appearance of these deli-

Installation view with *water life*, from the series “Memories, Spaces, Time,” 1998, monoprints, 15.5 x 25 in., and *Within a Golden Rectangle*, 1998, 93 cardboard boxes and 9,997 moon snail shells.



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***En Plein Air, On The Road*, 2008. Performance, from the series “spacetime.”**

cate shells with their “golden” spirals. So she carted the shells home by truck, almost 10,000 of them, where she numbered, boiled, and polished them until their pink, ecru, and golden surfaces gleamed.

She put the shells into 93 golden-rectangle-shaped boxes and exhibited them with the *Time* images in *water life* (1998), an installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris. Because the downtown venue stood on what was once marshland similar to Southampton’s Mecox Bay, Sandrow recalled that past by including sounds of trickling water, recorded at Trout’s Pond near her home. “The photographs and the shells in *water life* evoke not merely a place of extraordinary beauty in the natural world, but a place of personal significance where Sandrow can be born anew, whole and unbroken,” wrote curator Eugenie Tsai.⁵

Which brings us back to *Open Air Studio* and its off-site satellite venues—the numerous exhibitions, installations, and performances related to its core ecological and ethical issues.⁶ One offshoot, *On The Road*, consists of a set of outrageous performances. Shinnecock triggered the reality tableaux when he strutted to Montauk Highway one morning to cock-a-doodle at the trade parade—the caravan of mostly migrant workers en route to Hamptons estates, where Eden is exiled to bits and pieces of manicured sod.

The scene made Sandrow wonder about itinerant laborers, displaced from home. It also made her yearn to take a country drive without gagging on toxic emissions. But mostly, she saw an opportunity to make relevant site-specific performance art. *En Plein Air, On the Road* hilariously replicates Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, an iconic homage to art as an expression of everyday life. Donning a nude body suit and recruiting

colleagues to act out the picnic scene along the truck-clogged conduit, Sandrow videoed conversations with passing workers. Underscoring today’s polarizing immigration issues in this way also resonated with the plight of migratory birds who follow this now polluted Atlantic fly route in their seasonal search for food.

Sandrow’s recent solo exhibition “Genius Loci,” at the Parrish Art Museum, allowed viewers to experience the cosmic wonders animating the day-to-day life of *Open Air Studio* and underscored the happy ending behind this story. In her own backyard, Sandrow has re-gifted art to, and made it inseparable from, its primal source—nature. Shinnecock, now old and blind, enjoys his progeny in this place where birds fly free, breed copiously, and croon to the timeless two-step between chicken and egg.

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Notes

¹ Information about Paduan or Polish chickens is available at <www.polishbreedersclub.com>.

² All quotations from Hope Sandrow are from an interview with the author in 2012.

³ The Hirshhorn Museum featured Sandrow’s Met images in its 1986 biennial, *Directions*. Curator Phyllis Rosenzweig interpreted the works as contemporary incarnations of the 17th-century Baroque, focused on “a new kind of space, [where]...the work of art and the real space of the viewer broke down.” *Directions*, exhibition catalogue, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), p. 13.

⁴ After Sandrow founded the Artist and Homeless Collaborative, the Whitney Museum and MoMA collaborated on workshops. In 1995, Sandrow received the Skowhegan Governors Award for her work. AHC received funding from the

New York Foundation for the Arts, the Andy Warhol Foundation, Tesuque Foundation, and American Express.

⁵ Eugenie Tsai, “Hope Sandrow: *water life*,” exhibition catalogue, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, 1998), p. 5.

⁶ More information on *Open Air Studio* and its related projects can be found at <www.hopesandrow.com/live/openair>. For Mass MOCA, see <www.hopesandrow.com/Coop_LeWitt/An_Exchange_with_Sol_LeWitt.html>; for P.S.1/MoMA, see <www.hopesandrow.com/re_collecting/godt_tegn_ps1_moma.html>.