ArtTable Talks
A Conversation with Sarah Oppenheimer and Andrée Bober

Participants:

Andrée Bober, Landmarks Founding Director and Curator
Sarah Oppenheimer, Artist
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Haley: For those of you who are new to ArtTable, welcome! We are very excited to have you here today. ArtTable is the foremost professional organization dedicated to advancing the leadership of women in the visual arts through our membership network and community initiatives. We expand professional opportunities for women from diverse backgrounds and at all stages of their careers, supporting and fostering a stronger future for all women in the arts. You can learn more about us and our initiatives at ArtTable.org. I am now very excited to turn the conversation over to today's speakers: Sarah Oppenheimer, the artist, and founding director and curator of Landmarks, Andrée Bober. So, I will turn it over to you now.

Andrée: Haley, thank you so much. It is such a pleasure to be invited by ArtTable to have this conversation today. And, Sarah, welcome! I'm looking forward to our talk.

Sarah: Thank you so much. And, Haley, thank you very much for putting this together. It's wonderful to be here.

Andrée: I was thinking about how to kick off this conversation, and I realized that some people joining us might not be familiar with Landmarks. So, I thought it could be helpful to share a little bit of context about our program and how you and I came to work together. How does that sound?

Sarah: Perfect.

Andrée: Good. I guess you've gathered that Landmarks is the public art program of The University of Texas at Austin. We currently present about 50 works of art across UT's main campus, which occupies about 433 acres in the heart of Austin, Texas. About half of the works that we show are on long-term loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the other half are works that we've acquired either through purchase or commissions.

Our project with Sarah was funded through a building project at the Cockrell School of Engineering. Our funding comes through a percent for art allocation. So, when UT builds

a new building or has a major construction project on campus, we receive 1–2% of that construction budget for the purpose of acquiring art.

In the very early stages of planning for this project, I started thinking about artists that might be a good fit. At that point, Sarah, I knew your work and I had seen a number of pieces in different places over the course of several years. I always admired the gracefulness, the economy, and the sense of whimsy that they have. But it was our mutual friend, Ann Hamilton, who connected us and who encouraged me to take a deeper dive into your practice and work.

Reading more, and having those first conversations—that's really when I started to grasp the complexity of what you're doing. I began understanding the nature of your process, which I found pretty staggering because it relies on so much experimentation and collaboration. You've even registered patents for your discoveries, and then you use those in the different works you create.

Just getting to know a bit more about you and your process has been a revelation. And that's what I'd like to explore in our conversation today. So, would you like to start by talking a little bit about the work that you've created, or would you rather start with the video that introduces it? What would you prefer?

Sarah: I'd love to start with the video, Andrèe, but before we do that, I do want to just say a few words about my experience with Landmarks, which has been really extraordinary. I believe that this, for me, has been an amazing opportunity, not only to realize an incredibly ambitious and exciting new work but also to meet and collaborate with the Landmarks' team. This team has been extraordinary on every level and incredibly supportive and attentive. I just remain grateful to everyone at Landmarks and everyone who has worked on this project as well—the installers, the photographers, the conservators. So many levels of people and attention, and I'm incredibly grateful for those relationships.

Andrée: Well, the feeling is mutual. It has been an extraordinary journey these last years working together, and I'm eager to share it with our group. So, let's go ahead and start with the video and then we'll pick up the conversation there. How does that sound?

Watch the Sarah Oppenheimer Artist Video here.

Andrée: I love these very short, concise videos because they pack in a lot of information that would otherwise take a long time to explain. And in your narrative, I like that you talked about the co-authorship of location, and about how your work shaped spaces that we experienced together. I thought that might be a good starting point for talking about your practice and about this piece in particular.

Sarah: It's interesting to think about where we are at any given moment and to start to imagine the histories—the social histories, the material histories—that underpin where we are. Often we're so distracted that we don't pay attention to the specificity of our environment. My hope with this project was to bring into focus the immediate environment and our relations to others in an immediate environment, so that we could start to think about the co-authorship of the space, perhaps historically, how that sculptural apparatus comes to be there, but also to become sensitized to what's happening in our immediate surroundings. How are people making the space that we're immediately occupying?

Andrée: That makes a lot of sense. It's interesting to me, as I said in the beginning, that there are so many different layers to this idea of creating a new social experience and the chance of that. And then also, the incredible amount of precision and thought that goes into the actual construction of these pieces as well. You really lean heavily into architecture and engineering in your work, and it informs every aspect of what you do from the conceptual framework to the ways that you undertake scientific experiments, and ultimately the materials that you use to realize your pieces. Now your MFA is from Yale in painting, but I'm curious: how did your interest in and knowledge of architecture and engineering evolve and how did that become part of your work?

Sarah: I often ask that of myself because I think at a certain point as a student, as a graduate student, I wouldn't have been easily able to recognize what I do now as artwork. I didn't have the language or understanding of artwork as encompassing such an expanded field. And as that knowledge grew, I began to wonder, how could a picture pull within it a representation of the world around it? And how could our encounter with that picture be shaped by the encounter with the picture, so that it didn't simply freeze some segment of life and reflect it to us, but so that it would in some ways be magically transformed by our presence within that picture? As that started to happen, I became increasingly interested in the world that surrounds us as reflecting where we are. And each problem led to the next problem. But in the biggest framework, the question was really: how could the picture hold the world while we're in it?

Andrée: Right, and related to that is something I've observed throughout our time working together, which is that you have a tendency to reject artifice and decoration, and you like to get to the core of things. So, it's interesting to imagine you as a painter, as an emerging painter, discovering physical space and ways that you can actually use space to create more authentic exchanges than just a pictorial one. Do you think there's a relationship there?

Sarah: Yes, I think that in some ways, I suppose for me, it's not a question of artifice. Because artifice in some ways seems confusing. I think that it was more about a kind of immediacy, where the more immediate things in our environment are actually, generally, not very complex.

It's like if I'm looking down at the surface of the desk, or looking beyond the computer frame at the wall, and those things are very immediate, very sensorial, very present. And they are also pictures of these social relationships and of where we are. In some ways I feel that to add more stuff to that picture is a distraction. It desensitizes us to the world.

So, the simple myths of, let's say the geometry, or the form (and I'll say a little bit about the form itself in relation to this), but the simpleness of the form is important to allow space for being sensitive to it. These two pieces are each constructed of four pieces of glass. That was very important to the work that it wasn't made of many, many parts; it could simply be these four sheets which would connect in such a way as to create a kind of visual and material continuity between these different spaces.

Andrée: Well, it's interesting that you have this idea of simplicity. There's a juxtaposition between the simplicity that you're talking about and the actual complexity of your work. I've noted that through your process you're really inventing, creating these new problems that no one has thought of before and you throw yourself at them. You really want to figure out how to solve them. In this case, it was how do you get four pieces of glass to be suspended in a bridge. But in other cases, you've tackled things that people tend to take for granted, like how does a door work and why does it have to work that way? Or how does a screw work and why does it work that way? I'm curious, how do you identify problems like the one you've tackled here, or others that deserve your attention? And what drives you to try to find solutions to those problems?

Sarah: Well, this conversation is really interesting to me because it's touching on this idea of becoming sensitive to your environment. What seems like an obvious problem—like how a person opens the door—is actually a whole world. And inside that very, very simple idea, where you walk ahead and you grasp the handle and you turn the handle and the door opens, or it doesn't open, is a tremendous amount of complexity.

What interests me in a problem is to find something extremely simple, especially if that simpleness involves the bodily engagement of a person with the world; if it involves them touching the world or having a kind of close immersion in their immediate environment. Then if you untangle that problem, you have beautiful, beautiful questions. And you'll see in some of these videos and slides, there are some views where you're very deep in it and you can't entirely understand if you're inside, you're outside, where you are in that space and where someone else is in relation to you. And what I find interesting in the psychological and physical intimacy is that it's in those moments of closeness with other human beings, where we're most intimate with others, that we lose that larger contextual frame. That's true, also, when you walk through a doorway—you turn the handle and you feel the door come around your body and it's almost like you're inside the visual world. This work, I'm hoping, allows for being both inside that visual

world and also being very much outside of it. So, you can understand it as a diagrammatic universe.

Andrée: So, it operates as a sort of threshold. A threshold in the way a door is, but also visually seeing through it and seeing reflections across it.

Sarah: Yes. And it also operates as both a threshold and as a boundary. One thing that was exciting to me about this work and in conversation with you, Andrèe, was that I was imagining the wall as transparent. So rather than thinking of these two large, vertical planes of glass as opaque, cladding material as they've been in prior projects (such as in my permanent commission at the Baltimore Museum of Art), here the wall becomes a transparent glaze surface that still has what we think of as poshé, that thickness, that mass between the wall surfaces on either side.

Andrée: Right. So, this is your first standalone outdoor work of art that you've created. We've talked a bit about that challenge of not having architectural limits or boundaries once you're out in the open. So, when you're in a built space, there is a stable horizon defining your field of vision. But can you talk about how—when you're trying to conceive of a work of art outdoors—how do you define space? And how do you create that sense of intimacy when there are no boundaries?

Sarah: One of the really exciting aspects of watching this piece emerge over many years was thinking about location. Initially this piece was imagined in the interior of the building, and then we began to imagine it possibly outside of the building. And once it migrated outside of the building, I started to think about where boundaries, or where bounded spaces, might exist outside of the building. A bridge is a beautiful, beautiful boundary, because it bounds the area above the bridge, from the area below the bridge. And that's dynamic. Suddenly, it's almost as if you created these two exterior rooms where you have an upstairs and you have a downstairs. And these spaces then allow for a kind of dependency as opposed to autonomy, and a threshold in an exterior space that otherwise, I think, wouldn't be there if it was simply just dropped on the ground.

Andrée: Are there juxtapositions or things that you discovered seeing the piece realized that you hadn't anticipated?

Sarah: So many! It's so exciting to see this piece and it partially has to do with, well there's so many things! So, for example, when you stand below the piece you watch people walk toward the piece, they come into and out of reflection in different cadence. And similarly, when you stand on the bridge and you watch people walking down those stairs, they come into view at this different sort of pattern cadence, but you also start to catch glimpses of other people. And I think one of the things that was the most surprising and unanticipated was not the view of people, but the view of the sky.

Because suddenly from very, very far away you look at the piece and it's simply transformed into this monolithic slab of sky and it's actually really astounding.

Andrée: I might add that looking up and seeing patches of grass where you expect sky is equally disorienting and awesome.

Sarah: One more thing actually: this view—in some ways the piece, because it sits above the bridge and below the bridge—it was designed to be observed in certain ways from certain axial processions and also cross views. But there were these unexpected locations from which the piece suddenly had this incredibly exciting life, because you can see how that blast then penetrates the bridge. So, when you're off path, you're off script, you're outside of the paving that's been laid down by UT's master plan, it is so cool to just see the kind of relationships that are set up that are not expected. It's really interesting.

Andrée: I remember the last conversation that we had with some faculty members back in April. At that point you hadn't yet had an opportunity to really watch people interact with the piece or observe their relational patterns. So, I'm curious, what have you discovered since then and how has that shaped your thinking?

Sarah: So, this speaks to a bigger issue of my feelings about public art more generally. I've often wondered how public art—given all of the constraints of the site, of an institution of an urban environment—how public art can actually really do anything unexpected. I think one of the things that is exciting about this work is, when standing around and watching people, people really circle back. They're surprised at what's going on. And then they actually turn around and they sort of start to probe and inquire and look and then they go down, and it just creates like a massive hiccup or some kind of bubble in their general trajectory, which is unexpected. And it was so fabulous to be able to experience that outside of any sort of artistic frame, because they don't know that they actually understood they were looking at an artwork. It just did this thing and that was remarkable.

Andrée: And that is at the core of what you're trying to create—the unexpected. There are things that we do routinely throughout the course of every day: we walk across bridges, we open doors, we do these really basic things. And there's an anticipation that those processes are going to unfold in a very predictable way. So, in a sense, the core of your work is pivoting from that and saying, okay, there's going to be something unusual in what would ordinarily be a very routine walk across the pedestrian bridge. There's going to be something to encounter and something to discover. And I've seen it, too. I've seen people stop in their tracks, and I like to count how long it takes for them to pull out their phone to start snapping pictures of it, because they're trying to make sense of it. It's like they're thinking, "What is this thing, and why is it here?"

Sarah: Exactly. And it's almost as if they suddenly become aware they're walking down this bridge. They're trying to go from Point A to Point B. And there's this moment of just extreme slowing down. And I think that I would have not expected that as much as it's occurred. It's been a real gift. And I've also often thought of the art institution as a frame which allows for that to happen; a necessary frame. So just to return to the work at the Baltimore Museum, that piece—which in some ways is very much a cousin of this work—is framed within the institution such that it's all about slowing down and looking. And here there's no bracket—there's no architectural bracket—and it's really exciting that it doesn't need a bracket.

Andrée: That's such an interesting point because if this same work were situated on the grounds of a museum, then there would be an expectation that you would be encountering a work of art. But here, in this environment, that is not the expectation. And so it really does change the way that people interact with it and make sense of it. This also relates to another aspect of your work that I've heard you talk about a number of times: patterns. I know that you think a lot about flow and sequencing and syncopation and rhythm within your work. How does that play a part in this particular work?

Sarah: So, I'd say over the last 5–6 years, I've been very engaged in building networks of spaces where, if you touch something in one space, you change something that is not immediately connected to it. And that allows for a set of relations where if you touch something here, that it creates a rhythm, some kind of oscillation or a modulated change in movement elsewhere. That process, which is a design of phased patterns of motion, has made me incredibly aware of the phased patterns of motion that exist all around us, all the time.

I think this work really allows those phased patterns of motion to come into view in ways that are very exciting because the campus has its own life. There's a sense that students are constantly moving, but they're moving on a timetable and they're moving with purpose, and the faculty are moving with purpose, and they're often moving at the same time across campus. So suddenly, you start to have these flows of people and these rhythms of people with the buildings and the architecture and the schedule set into motion. And you start to feel those things and, not only that, you also have to change the kind of diurnal and nocturnal patterns that start to emerge. You see the change in light, you see the change in weather, and all of that is amplified and overlapping in the piece. And in some ways this piece feels like some sort of record or imprint of those patterns.

Andrée: And there was also an element of orientation involved: the east, west, north, and south. Could you talk a little bit about how you came to decide to orient them in this way?

Sarah: Yes. You'll notice that there's one access that is from the engineering building across a kind of secondary axis that runs underneath it. And the two pieces are situated so that they are also at right angles to each other where they're reflecting the two axes—the primary accents of procession—and they're also transparent on the opposite axis. So, I suppose, the simplest way to say this is that at every juncture, you're able to look down into the space below you, but you're also able to look through and that side of you is a diagram of a cross section of how you would look down.

Andrée: That makes sense.

Sarah: Perhaps a simpler way to describe this, which is a bit hard without a plan or view, is to imagine two paths that are at 90° and stacked on top of each other and that there are flows that are happening on both axes all the time. The works mimic and amplify those flows.

Andrée: Terrific. I thought we could also talk a little about our process of working together. We're not going to sugarcoat it—there were a lot of challenges with this project along the way. We found ourselves in this kind of Sisyphean loop of preparing and presenting a design, and then discovering an entirely new set of conditions that we were completely unaware of, and then going back to the drawing board and starting over. We did this again, and again, and again. I have to give you credit because despite all of those setbacks, you never seemed discouraged at all. In fact, I think in some ways the challenge energized you. But we've talked about constraints in your work and how you take an unusual view, in my opinion. You tend to welcome constraints and you have talked about how you view constraints as generative in your practice. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about that in relation to the overall development of this particular piece.

Sarah: Yeah, I'm thinking about it in two different ways. One way is that I do view constraint as a hugely generative dynamic, and it allows a space, a bounded space for creative thought that allows things to really push against the envelope. And in the case of developing this piece, one constraint that I think was extremely generative and will remain so for me moving forward was ADA code.

The reason ADA was so extraordinary is because it's actually a code that has to do with human motion and how the body or how our different bodies address space. So, it sets parameters by which we, as makers of space, or thinkers about space, have to modulate our system according to bodily motion. Those parameters really drove the shape and form of this piece. They also allowed me to think outside of more predictable ideas about barriers so people wouldn't fall through it. As a result, the geometry of that lower piece of glass is now hitting exactly at handrail height, which means that there is no additional necessary barricade around the work. In that way, I think constraints have been really an extraordinary thing.

Another thing I will say about this project is that there were many, many iterations of it, and the constraints kept being added on. But the iterations allowed me to notice something that was really important to this work, which is not simply that the constraint helps the work, but that constraint and boundary—the "boundedness" of this work—is necessary so that it can perform kind of powerful conditions in this situation. So it can perform as a switch in a certain way, a kind of optical perceptual switch. Because if it's sort of bled out in between the entire environment, you wouldn't have the ability to contain or intervene in a larger pattern.

Andrée: Fantastic! That's very helpful to understand. I know we're getting a little close to when we need to start wrapping up. So, let me ask you, is there anything else you'd like for us to understand about your work generally, or this piece in particular?

Sarah: I think something that's very central to this piece and often isn't talked about in terms of artwork in general is joy and play. And I think it's really important that a work invokes openness and playfulness in the world and creates a joyful sort of universe.

Andrée: You can see this even in the little clips in the video. You can see they're smiling and waving, and they're delighting in this unexpected relationship that they're seeing to each other and to the world around them. You've talked a good deal about play in your work, too. I think it's a minimal piece, but it's also a very playful piece when you get down to it.

Sarah: I think that's so undervalued actually. I think play and joy are very important.

Andrée: I agree, especially at a university where for so many of the students it's their first opportunity to have a meaningful engagement with art, when they step foot on our campus. For them it opens a world, the whole world. And I think to an extent that can be an engaging invitation and a welcoming threshold; I think that it's opening a lot of minds. We're so very happy to have this piece at UT, and really in this location, specifically within the world of engineering. You have made a lot of friends at UT engineering over the last few years. So with that, shall we move to any questions that the audience might have? Haley, do you want to join us and let us know where to go from here?

Haley: Yes, absolutely! So we did get a handful of questions in the chat during the discussion. Thank you both so much for your time. That was incredible and fascinating, and great to hear more about the process behind the work and the struggles that you went through to make it finally happen. I think we're all very glad that it did. So we had one question come in from Susan. She said the work reminds her of the Gwyneth Paltrow film *Sliding Doors* as well as works by Dan Graham. Are you familiar with either of these things, Sarah, these people or that film?

Sarah: I'm certainly familiar with Dan Graham's work. I'm not familiar with that film but thank you for the tip because I will definitely watch it. I do have a lot to say about the relationship of my work more generally to the work of Dan Graham. I'll just sort of briefly summarize: I think his work is fascinating. I also think that his work is often about a kind of media transposition where you're understanding yourself through a kind of media material, or media reflection, such as a video camera or a time-lapse display. And I think in some ways the glass operates as a signifier of those things. And this work is certainly playing with that kind of social overlap. But I think there's a real immediacy and sort of spatial inversion that is very absent in that work. And I think that you know, it's a trajectory in the conversation.

Haley: Great! Thank you, Sarah. We have a question from Kathleen. Sarah, how different is your approach to museum shows versus public art? Besides the obvious space considerations, what other things come into play for you?

Sarah: Well, I think there's multiple things that have happened. One major issue is the question of who is making the work, who is installing the work? A piece like the scale of Landmarks' was not made materially by me, and it was not installed materially by me either. So it set up a set of social relationships that were much more nested and required a very different sort of attention to how things were made and how things were processed. In some ways it was a much more remote piece. For a museum work generally, I will be very, very tactically involved in its manifestation and I will generally work very closely with the museum crew or staff, which is a part of that institution. So, I think that there's just a much greater immediacy in the work at a museum.

Haley: Excellent, thank you! And our next question comes from Nancy. Can you talk about your process? For example, do you start with drawings? Do you work with an engineer or others? She also would like to let you know that you have brought joy all the way to her today, so, thank you.

Sarah: I generally start with models, with physical models. I actually start with drawings of the site. I'll have many, many layers of the drawings, which are generally architectural drawings. My studio works primarily in CAD–based software. So we'll take whatever drawings are emerging in this case, but generally already exist in other cases, and overlay them with a set of proposed transposition of a place. And then those will become increasingly materialized.

But most important in this process for me was that everything is evolved at a 1:1 scale. So the studio floor became the grid, a taped-up 1:1 grid of those pavers. The profile of that glass became taped on the walls. We did a 1:1 mockup of the glass connection and a light. We had the lighting designer come from Chicago to build this very, very large glass section of the piece, so we could understand how light would behave in the

daytime, and would we want to illuminate this in the evening. So I think the process starts very abstractly, and it becomes increasingly concrete and materially present as it evolves, even if I don't actually physically make it in the end.

Haley: Great, thank you Sarah. And then we have a multipart question from Kathy. So the first part: Sarah, what thinkers, writers, or artists have influenced you over the years in your practice?

Sarah: I think that there are three amazing women that immediately come to mind as really incredibly influential. The first being Lygia Clark; I've been really interested in how the human gesture animates these architectural frameworks that she's developed and how the material itself becomes a form of interconnection. So, Lygia Clark has been very, very important. The other person I want to mention is the architect and designer Eileen Gray. I've been very interested in how Eileen Gray has created these deeply intimate relationships with objects, where they sort of mediate between you and others. And the last person I want to mention is Lena Bobardi who is an extraordinary person whose work is far more immediate than Dan Graham's in its deployment of glass. If you take a look at her glass easels, they're really extraordinary conditions for looking.

Haley: Excellent, thank you! And then the second part of Kathy's question: If budget was not an issue, what would be your dream project and where on this earth or what space would you like to create your dream projects?

Sarah: That's such an interesting question because I feel like the dream project is a question that assumes it has to do with a place. And I've never known how to answer that question actually. But this time, hearing this question, I have a slightly different response, which is, I don't think it would have anything to do with the place, but it would have to do with the problem. And the problem, I think I really would want to sort of take on, is the problem of the door handle. That simple problem: it has worlds of things in that problem, and I would love to just get in between that hand and the handle and make that happen.

Haley: I feel like we would all love to see that, so hopefully that comes to fruition one day. Amazing! We've addressed all of the questions in the chat. I just have one last thing, or if anyone has any other questions, please feel free to drop them in the chat. But looping Andrée back into the discussion, I would love to know a little bit more about the overall process of getting a work of public art onto the campus? How does it start from the beginning? Who selects the artwork or do the artists come to you? What is that process? And I know you said a lot of them are on loan, but I'm just curious from your side of things, how it looks.

Andrée: Well, Landmarks is a pretty young program, and we only launched in 2008. But from the outset we decided that it would be curatorially driven. We identify the artists

that we think are best suited for the collection. And we have a whole list of criteria that we look at. Essentially, we want the campus to become a kind of classroom for the entire university to have an entry point into the world of contemporary visual art. Each piece has to work on its own merits and exist by itself and have its own perspective. But we also try to create a cohesive whole within the entire group.

The process is really pretty simple. I reach out to someone, like Sarah, and we begin a conversation and we begin dreaming. And over the course of several years, we bring a lot of people into that conversation—the host of the building, our president's office, and a lot of other people along the way, like the project managers, and we build these teams. I joke that our list of thanks looks a lot like movie credits because there's so many hundreds of people involved, especially in a complex project like Sarah's. I do think this is technically the most ambitious project we've ever undertaken at Landmarks. And that's because the level of precision was so great that every little detail required so much thought and attention. So that's kind of how it happens. Does that answer your question?

Haley: Yes, that definitely provides some more clarity to the whole thing. I'm just kind of curious because I can only imagine how involved the process is. As you said, there's so many different people who come into the equation. It's just amazing to think about and to see it all come to fruition. The project is installed and it's there, it's happening. It must be so rewarding for you all! So congratulations!

Andrée: I hope anyone who ends up coming to Austin will visit Sarah's piece. Come visit us and take a tour of the collection.

Haley: Amazing! Well, if there are no other questions, we are going to wrap up for the day. Thank you both so much for joining us and for having this conversation. It was absolutely wonderful and I hope you enjoyed this conversation.