Sarah Lerner

April 27th, 2015

**Time Stamped Excerpts for Meta Data**

**Segment 1**

[00:12:47.0]

SL: Yeah. That’s awesome. Do you recall . . . So you were in Chapel Hill during a very pivotal time in history with Civil Rights. Was that a big part of your turning point with activism? When did you start outwardly like --

[00:13:08.1]

HL: I think when I was in college . . . it was sort of the rumblings of Civil Rights and I remember they were having, they were marching in Charleston when I was probably a Junior and I remember see the marches. And I remember sort of little -- and ya know it was really hard because you didn’t -- the culture that I grew up in there was very little entre, and because I was a girl you couldn’t be very adventuresome. But I remember with Hallie’s family, I would do things like we would be invited to black churches and we would go . . .Which was sort of like ‘You did what?!’ [Laughter] I think just you know I just sort of -- I guess my family although they were conservative they were just good people and they didn’t treat other people unkindly, and I think that was a real model. And they were also incredibly honest. You know, it was like . . . they would not be swayed by the crowd. I can remember my parents in like church meetings when everybody in the whole church voted for one person to be on the vestry and they didn’t. And it was like they weren’t going to go against their convictions, and I think that’s really important . . . and it’s an important lesson for a child to see.

[00:14:43.9]

**Segment 2**

[00:15:45.9]

SL: [Laughter] Cool! So now you’re Jewish --

HL: Right.

SL: -- and where did that transition --

[00:15:55.8]

HL: That transition came actually in my forties, its something that I always -- Interestingly enough Jay is *not* at all religious, he *never* goes to synagogue. He will occasionally go to a bar or bat mitzvah but he does go to . . . like he celebrates all the holidays wherever we go to eat or to go to Seder . . . He always goes to Seder. But philosophically he’s the most Jewish person I know. And it was always this really bedrock of good sensible value again, and so when I decided that I really -- when my mother-in-law died in 1985 -- and my mother-in-law was not Jewish, Jay and his sister were converted and brought up Jewish and had bar mitzvahs and I think at the time that they were bar and bat mitzvah age girls did not have . . . no I think Dina had a confirmation or something. But when my mother-in-law died, she died here, she was in Florida . . . she had retired to Florida several years after my father-in-law died, or she had moved to Florida. And we found out like one day that she had an inoperable tumor in her lungs and so we brought her up here and she died here. And when she died we didn’t know what to do because she was not religious, she had not stated any preference about whatever it was she wanted. My father-in-law was buried in an orthodox cemetery in New Jersey so she couldn’t go there, and it was a real -- we sort of had to make up our own thing and I actually made up what we did; we just invited people to come over and we talked about Anne and, ya know, I guess it was sort of like sitting Shiva in a way, although we didn’t do it in any formal kind of way of sitting Shiva. And after that, partly because I realized that I did not want my children to be in the same position, I wanted plans to be laid for them, because it was hard . . . it was *really* really hard. And partly because I had spiritual needs. Jay meets his own spiritual need. I had spiritual needs and so I went through the conversion process.

[00:18:52.5]

SL: Interesting. At Beth El?

HL: At Beth El. With Steve Seger.

SL: Cool! That’s who I did my conversion process too --

HL: Yeah!

[00:19:02.1]

**Segment 3**

[00:19:02.1]

SL: Awesome. Okay so what -- I’m going to switch over to talking about your art a little bit --

HL: Okay --

SL: On your website you described yourself as ‘a reflective generalist in an age of specialization’ and I was wondering if you could elaborate on that . . . or even, if maybe, you don’t identify with that anymore, just what --

[00:19:28.9]

HL: Well I think it’s still true; I think I said ‘reflective generalist’ because I’m willing to use any kind of materials, I don’t -- one of the things that really drives people— art critics nuts, is (not that I am subject to that many art critics) but is they like artists to do the same thing over and over again, so they can identify it and say ‘Oh, that’s a Hunter Levinsohn, or ‘That’s *definitely* a Hunter Levinsohn’ and I have never fit into that mold because I’ve always kind of used the materials of what I was interested -- what pursued . . . what fit into what I was doing, like the cigarette butts. And ya know I collected cigarette butts and did a whole show of art using cigarette butts, which was shown at the Town Hall. The big main piece . . . we had to dismantle and only show at the opening because it smelled so bad! [Laughter] But even after -- I was wanting to collect a mile of cigarette butts and I sort of figured there was a half inch to the cigarette butt so I needed something like sixty-three thousand, and I got up to about forty-five fifty thousand, which is *a lot* of cigarette butts. Oh I’d have to sort of --

[00:20:59.7]

SL: What did you keep them in?

HL: I kept them in my studio. And what I did, is I made these little bricks that were . . . I shaped it into a brick and then covered it with paper and palmer, and then I put another coat of the palmer and paper on it. And I put this piece in a breezeway where there were no offices, down on the bottom level of the Town Hall -- I don’t know if you’ve ever been in the Chapel Hill Town Hall . . . I was down on the bottom level, there was a door and then thru the door there were offices, but there weren’t any offices where I put it, and within eight hours they called and they said ‘Its making people sick, they’re having to go home from work.’ I mean the smell is so pervasive, even with all of that --

[00:21:52.4]

SL: What did it smell like . . . just cigarette?

HL: Cigarettes, yeah! The smell of cigarettes --

[00:21:56.2]

SL: So what was the . . . not necessarily the point . . . but what was your—the message behind that piece?

HL: Well, at the time Jay smoked and I was just really looking at smoking as a -- what it did . . . it destroys . . . all of the health problems and just who smoked, the idea of teenagers smoking and starting smoking without thinking about it -- because I smoked from the time I was fourteen till I was twenty and I only quit when I was twenty because I had a boyfriend who didn’t smoke and didn’t like it. But I was just . . . the idea that people . . . a cigarette butt is so small that people just toss it, they don’t consider it to be littering. Just toss it out of the car or throw it on the ground.

SL: But you collected like fifty thousand!

HL: I had around fifty thousand of them, and you know it would sort of . . . like I would be going and Jay would say to me ‘Hunter, just *please* don’t tell people what you’re doing!’ [Laughter] And I would go . . . but I would sort of steal myself and go out and collect. Ya know there were places like down by the post office on Franklin Street, that was a real good place. I figured out good places to collect cigarette butts, so I could get about a thousand at a time.

[23:25.9]

**Segment 4**

[00:28:36.2]

HL: And then I got cast out of the Botanical Gardens show for political work in 2013.

SL: For what?

HL: For that was two pieces, and I had been in that show for about twenty-five years. The Botanical Gardens has a sculpture show every fall, and it’s a great show to be in, its really fun and it’s a great place to show art. And I’d shown a lot of political work then, and had gotten people upset about certain things before, but nothing had really happened. And I had a piece, and I had planned a second piece . . . but I went over to the garden because my work is made out of alternative materials and I really . . . it needs to be . . . I have to be really careful about where it goes because if you put it next to something that’s a very traditionally made piece of sculpture it looks weird. And so I went over there in June to ask if I could look at some places where I might put my work. And I explained my work to the woman who was, I guess, the coordinator of the show. And um the one piece . . . and she said, ‘Well we really cant let you choose the place, were going to pick the place, but ya know tell me about the work.’

[00:30:07.3]

And so one piece that I’d been planning to do was an eight foot Klan figure called*, Blind and Unkind:* *North Carolina on Tea.* It had . . . the Klan guy was holding a big red teapot. And when I said that she blanched, and so I thought, ‘maybe that’s not a real good piece to but in there.’ So the other piece was *called North Carolina on Tea: A Bitter Brew,* and it was the Mad Hatter with the face of Governor McCrory and then the Cheshire Cat up on the branch was Art Pope. So Cheshire Cat, McCrory, and a big ole teapot with all of that horrid legislation that they had passed . . . the North Carolina Legislature passed the first session that they were a majority. So ya know I told her about that one, and then I came home and I said, ‘Well since I wasn’t going to do the Klan figure for the Botanical Gardens, I would put in another piece, and so I did this little raccoon made out of chicken wire . . . sculpted out of chicken wire . . . and he was holding a suet feeder, and in the suet feeder, which was spray painted red, and in the suet feeder was a map of the state of North Carolina. I had been having this battle royal with the raccoons in my yard because they kept ripping the suet feeder down and eating all of the suet. I’d been through seven rounds with them, and one of them was a draw, the six others they had won. So the statement for that piece was that . . . it was called My *Utter Frustration* and the statement said that, ‘I felt like that stupid republican majority in the State Legislature and the Governor had moved into my back yard. And how destructive the raccoons were and blah blah blah.’ So nothing . . . ya know I had to have images in by the first of July, and I put the images in fine -- nobody said anything. And then when it came time to hang the show I got this phone call and it said . . . a woman called me, and she said, ‘A senior member of the Gardens staff was looking at your pieces this morning… they might not be appropriate for our show -- But the directors going to decide.’ And so I said, ‘Okay fine, it’s the Jewish Holidays, I’m going to be offline so I’m not going to be communicating, so let me know as soon as possible.’ And so she emailed me and said, ‘Well don’t you want to put some other pieces in?’ And I emailed her back and said, ‘No.’ And then she emailed me again a couple -- And so the director was out of town, so she emailed me back and said, ‘As I feared these pieces have been deemed inappropriate for a state institution.’ And so I was -- I decided I was not going to answer her immediately, and I decided that really since the director had made this decision that I would really communicate with him. And so I wrote him an email a couple of days later because I really sort of wanted to think about it… get my thoughts together. And he emailed back and it was pretty clear from his email that he didn’t have a *clue* what I was talking about. So he had *not* made this decision. And he said -- he emailed me a couple of days later and said, ‘That he looked at is as an educator and I was looking at it as a creative person. And that they had always thought that the art that went in the garden should fit in with the garden theme.’ And I wrote him back and I said, well basically . . . -- and we should get together and discuss it -- And I said, ‘Well basically I looked through the perspective before I submitted this work and there was nothing in the perspectives that would say that this work was a problem. And that actually as an artist I thought one of my prime responsibilities was to have an educational aspect to my work. And that I didn’t really see any reason for us to get together and talk because we had basically disagreed.’

SL: Right.

[00:34:54.7]

HL: So I got kicked out. And I also old him that it was a very sad comment on the times. That on the fiftieth anniversary of the Speaker Ban Law, that the University of North Carolina had taken an one hundred and eighty degree turn from the actions of the university at that time.

[00:35:16.4]

**Segment 5**

[00:54:08.1]

SL: Yeah so what do you believe is your responsibility as an artist?

[00:54:13.6]

HL: I think that you need to tell the truth as you see it. I’ve always felt that when I create a piece of art that it should be -- that it should follow a certain aesthetic, it has to be, it as to work aesthetically. But it also has to work philosophically. And I think a lot about -- I used to say, because I started off as a writer, I used to always have to have a title for a piece before I could begin it . . . and I think titles and words in art are still really important to me. So its . . . ya know know I think you have a responsibility, just as a human being, to create positively.

SL: And that connects to your politics and the activism—

HL: Yeah.

[00:55:17.4]

SL: So do you have any passions outside of art?

HL: My family.

SL: Yeah?

HL: Yeah. My granddaughter for sure. I doesn’t look like it if you walk through my front yard now but I like to garden . . . I just guess living is what my passion would be. I really like -- ya know its really -- I like to take each day. Ya know there have been things in my life that happened, like my younger brother committed suicide, after ten years of being in and out of mental institutions, he was bipolar. And I think what he taught me was that the people who are the least loveable are the most in need of love. And I think that’s a philosophy that I kind of . . . I try to, I’m not always successful, but I try to respect that knowledge.

[00:56:40.1]