

**Rita Barros interview Thursday, 4/18/13, at the Chelsea Hotel,  
222 West 23rd Street, New York, NY**

RB:

Oh yes, 1.2.3

RB:

Do you want me to close the window with the bbzzzzzz, ggrrrrr?

AM:

I sort of feel like it's fitting.

RB:

ok

AM:

Here you try to talk.

Do you want me to hold it, I'll just. So you can have your hands free.

AM:

Is this ok?

RB:

Good, ok. I'm going to close this. It won't....

AM:

Look at you on your, you're on your books. Oh Rita, do you need help?

RB:

I'm good. It's a little less actually.

AM:

OK, yeah, that is true. Perfect.

RB:

It's intense the ggrrrr..See when we don't have the ggrrrr here we have the grrrr there. grrrrr.  
laugh

AM:

Can we get really close? I think we've sat this close before. OK, here we go.

RB:

laugh. You don't have to be that close, ajajaj.

AM:

With the carpet, I just slid with the carpet. This is so perfect because you can look here too - alright. I've never done an interview this close, I kind of love it.

RB:

laugh

AM:

Oh my goodness, ok. This is so unprofessional of me. OK, so. Rita, are we too close? Is this ok.

RB:  
I'm good.

AM:  
Fantastic. Where are we Rita?

RB:  
Where are we, we are at the Chelsea Hotel, in my apartment, which happens to be the apartment where Arthur C Clark wrote the script for 2001 Space Odyssey.

AM:  
Yes he did and his book is right up there. Would you mind introducing yourself, Rita?

RB:  
So my name is Rita Barros. I was born in Lisbon, Portugal and moved in 1980 to New York. I started photography in the late 80s and that's what I've been doing since then. I started more on the journalistic path and then moved on to my own projects.

AM:  
And one of your projects was 15 Years: The Chelsea Hotel. You were capturing the energy of the building to the characters living inside and now, about 14 years later, you're doing a different series, which was just show in Lisbon, called Displacement II. Do you want to describe what that current series is about?

RB:  
Basically what I have done early on from moving on at the hotel is that I met different neighbors and I love the way, the coherence between how people lived and their own artistic endeavors. So that's what I was interested, so I photographed a lot of people during 15 years, that's the title of the book and I mean it was fascinating to see the creativity expressed within the environment of the living, the way people lived so that was my angle. And I came across quite amazing people through the years, then once the book was published I kind of, I thought I was going to be free of photographing in the in this building. But when the building was sold in 2011 I was somewhat called in, that's kind of how I, I don't know if that's the way I can express it, but the renovations started and we started living in a real terrible atmosphere and I had to kind of document what was happening here because it was a bit of a shock and it was my way of dealing with that shock and trying to understand how such an amazing bohemian funny place became this almost terror place. (4:29) And I had to deal with it emotionally so I start photographing and that's the series called Displacement. Displacement meaning that the new owners were trying by very harsh way to displace us from the place where, in my case I have been in my apartment for 30 years. All kinds of floodings, demolitions, dust, I mean it was pretty tough. So I had to emotionally deal with it so I did that first series called Displacement. (5:06) And then Displacement II, which is the series that is being shown now in Lisbon, it's about the interventions I did myself in the building and they have a certain tone of irony. Inspired by Beckett about the absurdity of so many situations, so I did interventions though the building that were normally an answer to what was happening.

AM:  
And your laugh is the best, ok.  
I'm going to go back. So, how did we meet, Rita?

RB:  
Well, we actually met at school at NYU. Graduate School, didn't we?

AM:  
We did, and I don't remember what class it was, but we had a few together and I love.

RB:

It was John Torreano's class maybe?

AM:

I don't think I ever had a class with him, even though I love him to death. He was never my teacher, he was a mentor, but never a teacher.

Maybe the lighting class at ICP with Frank Franka.

RB:

That's right. That's right.

AM:

And you've seen every movie that he had seen and those discussions were the best.

RB:

Laugh. See, I went back to graduate school a little bit later than most people. So I had already a full, you know, experience, life and so on and it seemed.

AM:

We all felt we could never catch up.

RB / AM:

Laugh.

RB:

But you know there were embarrassing moments, like you know when one teacher asked - they were talking about a performance - and so on and I mean I had seen it.

AM:

Live

RB:

Live and even the teacher was like so, "what year did you see that?" and I was like "you know." So, you know, there was some moments that I felt a little bit like, grandma or something.

AM:

Oh please you can never be grandma! So, I know you moved here in the 80s so can you describe the Chelsea area or even NYC on a grander level, when you first moved here?

RB:

Well, I moved here exactly January 1980. It was quite fun, it was a lot of clubs, not bars, it was mostly clubs and it felt, a city much freer. But, I am not sure I was also younger, so and pretty much I was studying, working and studying so it was so much fun. But I don't know, maybe it has to do with I was also quite young and ready for any adventure possible so a lot of things were happening. The one thing I feel, maybe from now, is the city seems to be looking the same. That all the neighborhoods don't have anything special, they all look the same. Rents are very expensive, so it's a little bit hard to survive. When I moved in it was (2:51) quite easy to work a little bit and have enough money to just do whatever I wanted. So, yeah, I think the city changed.

AM:

Yeah, i think - I remember some of the conversations we've had at dinners here or where ever about how the city has changed and this apartment is rent stabilized?

RB:

This apartment is rent stabilized and that's the big the big issue with how do you get rid of rent stabilized people - you can charge outrageous rents, but I mean New York is, I hope it still is, but it seems it was - the city where young people came to experiment - to do crazy things, that's how the arts came through that you know young people came out of school from other towns, other countries and just played with the materials, played with whatever they could gather. And it just doesn't seem to be possible right now, that kind of energy because things are too expensive. And the apartments are outrageous.

AM:

And salaries are going down, especially for those jobs that artists can get. Or maybe they are not going down, but they are not increasing with the proportions that are necessary for living expenses. So, I guess, one of my questions is, do you think, because I guess the difference between then and now is there are rising costs to live in NYC, do you think that's affecting - you might have already answered this to the best of your ability, but - Do you think the rising costs of NYC affects the future of artists living and creating here in NYC?

RB:

Oh, absolutely. I mean most of the non-profit spaces, which were the breeding ground for so many talents, they are closing. I read, like even yesterday in the paper there's a number of places that have closed and that's the places where you test the material, you go and you do an exhibition and you figure out, you're not in the market. So, if all these places close you only have the commercial galleries that don't take that kind of experimentation. So it becomes just a big shopping mall for very expensive taste that other range that's where you start, everybody's closing and nobody can afford the rents. So, it's not very good for New York. I mean, yes, tourism is good but the city is full of tourists already. And what would the tourists go and see, you know it's.

AM:

The tourists go to see what sells because there's such a huge pressure of the market that nobody can give a young artist the chance.

RB:

But that's the next generation that will go to the museum. So if you don't have that generation experimenting the next generation will not have those talents that in NY I mean we are talking 70s 80s, that is what we see now in the museums. So, I don't know, let's just be optimistic.

AM:

I am trying to be also. Laugh

AM:

Alright, Rita - we talked a little bit about it - about the construction issues you are dealing with here and the legal issues. I know you have a court date on April 25th and I suppose part of that reason I know that is because I saw it on Facebook and also we had a conversation about it. But, a lot of the work that you are doing here meaning your subject matter is here, is the Chelsea Hotel, is on Facebook. And your sharing it with people. And you just had a show in Lisbon. Can you describe the construction issues and the legal issues and your work as, all as one?

RB:

There's a lot of...

AM:

There's a lot of questions here, let me start over....

AM:

OK, so - Can you describe the construction and legal issues you are dealing with at the Chelsea Hotel?

RB:

Not really. There's, I mean the building was sold, there's renovations that the new owners want to do which is absolutely fine. We are 80 almost 90 people living here with kids that go from the age of 2 months to you know 10, 12 and then there's older people that go from 80 and something. So there's a wide range of people living in the building. And renovations should be done within a frame of legal work and protection to the tenants living here - to their health. And it hasn't been done so that's been quite tough for us here and we tried to make the owners understand that there are people living here and we are humans and not some kind of species that can be dealt with in a weird way. So, we have used the courts to try and bring some legality to the construction that has been done without permits and so on. It's kind of serious, but most of the people that are here, I would say all the people that are here, we've been here for a long time, this is our home and we are basically defending our rights to live like other people live in the city, with hot water with heating with basic service, we are not asking for more than what is standard. That we have, don't have dangerous dust floating around, etc. So it's a real, it's a weird situation.

In terms of Facebook, which I am jumping...because it's

AM:

Jump around, please.

RB:

In terms of Facebook, it's been quite interesting because Facebook, being a social media that's where I've been, kind of on a daily basis, putting up whatever images I think are keep people informed of what goes on inside the building and there's a lot of people interested, so I've been keeping this almost like a diary that I try to make it fun. Because it's really absurd what goes on and so I keep that going there's a lot of people that are following and that's that keeps me going. Because most of the newspapers have not touched this subject so it's just my way of keeping the outside world informed and you know I do interventions like you know there's a follow-up situation where the marble floor of my corridor. I wake up and there's a huge machine making a hole through that marble floor, then later on there's two holes (4:26) that one can see through to the 9th floor so I take another photo, I always put big captions so that people understand what I am talking about then you know a couple of days later there's pipes coming out of that, of those holes. Then the pipes get covered with a piece of wood and right now what I've done is that I've created an altar in that using the wood that is covering the pipes I've created an altar with all kinds of decor from Easter egg to candles to whatever comes across my way, flowers, a cock from the northern town of Portugal, I also put a baby Jesus from the 17th century in marble. In marble no, in ....

AM:

-----

RB:

In ----- . oops

AM:

We will edit that out. In erp.

RB:

In erp. So, a baby Jesus. Beautiful antique piece. So I've created this altar so this way we that cross that the corridor and see that ugliest thing on top of it that was done illegally, can smile and have a little bit of a sense of humor about what we go through, so this is the kind of stuff that we put on Facebook is that I follow the hole that was first created then what happens through the whole then at the end there's nothing, but there's the piece of wood. (6:15) And so I created that and it's my way of kind of lightning up something that in the end is not really funny. But let's have some irony.

AM:

I love your use of humor, because I read some of those Facebook posts and I just laugh out loud.

So you don't necessarily collaborate in making your work. Sometimes you do with Rene, perhaps - and your collaborations are sometimes a bit of use of other people's support too. So you have a support group here at the Chelsea Hotel so all of you can sort of band together and support each other, but do you collaborate with them in any other sort of way?

RB:

Not really, I mean I get inspired by so many things and you know the work that I have been doing here like I mentioned before is always like an answer to something that happened so I was taking care of my upstairs neighbors garden last summer and one day as I go and water the plants I see this - the workers destroying the garden so that created one answer to a series that is in Displacement II so I get, I am inspired by different events happening and then I'll have my own answer. With Rene he has been a support in all these projects and I discuss with him sometimes the best way to do or not do a certain way. He helps be my assistant for on one hand. In the video that I did called Chelsea house wife. It started as my, Caroline, my upstairs neighbor that she wanted to do a gangam video with all the neighbors doing a dance through the hallways which was going to be really fun. Then I decided to do a pilot for that and Rene came with a song of the Zigfield follies that he sings so I did a pilot. (8:51) Coming down the staircase with the bucket, the plastic bucket, a plastic , rubber gloves a dustmop or something like that and as I am walking down the staircase Rene is singing his adaptation of the Zigfield follies coming down the staircase.

So there's a mix of help if one's collaboration that it's quite interesting and it's also, we all feel we are in the building we all have the same difficulty in understanding sometimes what goes on, and mentally and emotionally, so we kind of get together and there's always something that inspires me to do the next version.

The last one I did was the rattling tea cup. I mean we have no cooking gas in the building and there's one microwave oven for 87 tenants so. I decided to film the time it takes, let's say, to heat up some water - to go downstairs - to go down 10 floors, take the elevator, put the cup in the microwave oven and bring it back up. Which is, of course it's going to be cold. But it's the point of view of the tea cup. So, you know it's funny, you saw it.

AM:

I loved it.

The tea cup was rattling so the tea cup actually looked scared. Scared to travel the distance, scared to be stuck in the microwave, scared to come back up and be cold and told it was disgusting.

RB:

And insulted.

AM:

And insulted. I'll play the video on the website if you would let me.

RB:

Sure.

AM:

It's a really great video. There's a lot of great pieces that have been made. The pieces are actually photography, video and then the hallway piece and your entryway piece have become pieces. I call them pieces already, but the decorations has become an art piece. Do you want to talk about that?

RB:

The decorations...

AM:

The accumulations...

RB:

The accumulations. That started, it's amazing, because I have been living here for almost 30 years I almost never did any decorations outside my door. And as this new owner started creating, I mean it's really been amazing, the floodings, the holes in the walls, it's just anything goes, literally, it's more...

AM:

And not even just floodings, but floodings over electricity, gas leaks that could blow up the whole city block. Very intense scary things, yeah.

RB:

Very intense. I don't know how it I can not even, I don't know how it started. But I know with Carloline, my neighbor upstairs, I don't know the more it got ugly.

AM:

Due to their construction, so the boxes, attempting to prevent dust from going everywhere, plastic sheeting everywhere, new pipes being put in, holes being put in the walls everywhere. Your door was actually covered with an X was it not?

It was X'ed.

RB:

Was it X'ed

AM:

Were they Xing doors at one point?

RB:

Oh! Yes yes yes, no they were Xing doors but that is from empty apartments, so that was a way to show to workers, I don't know - to whomever - what they did is when they moved in they bought the building and started figuring out - you know whatever construction they were going to do, they whitewashed the empty apartments and put a black cross on the door which was extremely creepy.

AM:

Yes

RB:

Very creepy, that was the first thing they did and then on and on and on, so. I don't know as things got uglier I started going to the 99 cents with Caroline and literally stapling all kinds of weird flowers, every, St. Patricks, it was Christmas, it was Halloween, it was - what is it called the boyfriend day?

AM:

Valentine's Day

RB:

Valentine's Day. All I mean anything was an excuse to be more and more and more stuff and it started on the arch entry to my apartment and it moved on through the corridor and it was like you said an accumulation of chachkas, literally.

AM:

But you document all of these and you post them to Facebook. We giggle, it's very funny. You're very funny, I mean the baby jesus out there...protecting the apartment that is covered with a zipper door. I mean that's, when I first entered here, I came back from Spain, I first entered and I went, I have to go through a zipper door? Which side is the bad side? You know, what's happening here?

RB:

And the zipper doors were put because we did ask them to get some protection from the dust of construction, I mean that was a good thing. If you know what I am saying. Because before we didn't have the plastic we had even more dust. I mean I know I came back from I think Portugal, opened the door, and as I am moving my luggage in I see the trail, everything was white. But I mean white, it was unbelievable. So, well you know, but anyway, coming back to the decorations, so then we started on one wall and then we moved to the wall that I actually see when I go out of my apartment. And we worked kind of nice and hard at it. People, other neighbors bringing stuff in, bringing more and more and then when that wall got demolished all the decor that was still in the walls, so boom we got that one was gone. But then I started in the other wall. And it got intense, it got intense and then I got informed by management that if I wouldn't remove my decor from the walls, that it was going to be considered garbage. So I decided after much thinking that I would remove it myself and keep it for further usage. Which I am doing again now.

AM:

And the accumulation has begun again. So, do, can you describe the hotel atmosphere before, just how everybody got along, the neighbors and. Describe....blurgh///  
Describe the hotel atmosphere before the new hoteliers came in.

RB:

The Chelsea Hotel has been, I mean for me now, it's almost like one could say Paradise Lost, in the sense that it's always been a small town. There's people like in any small town, there's people you like and people you don't like. But there is a sense of community of people helping each other. Doors, you know the people that are your friends, which I mean not everybody is your friend, but the ones that are your friends it was a very free you now call people up and go talk for a little bit, get ideas, show something, what do you think, what you don't think, what should I do? You know it's like that kind of food for your brain and inspiration what people are there and the same way they would come to you and there was that kind of exchange of different ideas that were moving around and people that helped you. And also the one thing that I always loved at being in the hotel, there was an influx of people from all different parts of the world. and that created energy around because there were people that were coming here because they heard of the hotel. There were well known writers and film makers and so on that were coming and staying here so you'd come across a range of people that was quite interesting. Also the staff that worked here was part of the family. And that was one thing that we all miss is we would be welcomed, you know open the door and I felt really welcomed here there was always like always you know hugs and smiles, then "How are you? How was your day?" And that was so important to - you know you walk in - you feel you belong there. So that created a little bit of a cocoon. Where you felt like, "Oh my god, I'm safe here." So I do miss all of that, I miss the staff that worked here for years and years that were, that would come if I would do a birthday, they would come and celebrate. They were part of the family. And that's - they were fired and it was quite shabby the way they were fired and they were treated. Which is so sad. And I don't know I mean the people I am sure they have great ideas for everything but I don't know where they are.

AM:

Right.

AM:

Can I ask you what the current rent of your apartment is?

RB:

No

AM:

I didn't think so. Could you rent or would you rent elsewhere in NYC and would you consider renting a studio in addition to your apartment? If you weren't living here?

RB:

I would consider all of the above, but I can't afford any of the above. So, my apartment is rent stabilized and that's one reason I can afford to live in NY. If I would have to go and find an apartment and find a studio, I can't afford it.

So, I suppose that would be my answer.

AM:

We are in your apartment right now and there are 5 million books and they are all wonderful, I have borrowed some of them. We've shared books.

RB:

We even had a book club. Remember

AM:

We did have a book club. For a little while, it was a good book club. It went overseas unfortunately. What does your space mean to you?

RB:

It means a lot. A lot. It's the first apartment after having lived in many different places that I felt totally comfortable. That I feel that I am safe, that I belong here. And there's something about these walls that I feel that they protect me. And I've lived here for 30 years so it's a long time. It's like I know the walls. But let's hope, let's hope that the future us good.

AM:

I am hoping for your sake.

Who, being that this is your home, who do you let in your home?

RB:

Everybody.

AM:

Yes, ok.

Who do you let see your work.

RB:

Who do I let in my home, mostly friends. Mostly friends I would say. But that works I would say like most people. You let in your intimacy people that you like. And you know I have a lot of visitors from Portugal that people come and visit me, but I know them. They are friends from over seas. I don't normally open my door to people I don't know, because you just don't do that.

AM:

Right

RB:

laugh.

AM:

Who do you let see your work? Will you bring it out and show your work to just anybody who comes in here? If they are, so clearly you are inviting your friends or your family in here, but do you have studio visits? Or, I don't know if I can say that. Do you have.....

RB:

No, I don't have studio visits.

Also because these days the work gets shown through the internet, if people are interested it's mostly, you do all the contacts and only at the final talk back and forth they want to actually see your work. But mostly things are done over the internet. You know you send the proposal, people like it, don't like it, you bring the images if it's an exhibition so I don't actually do visits to people that I don't know.

AM:

OK.

What do you listen to while you are here.

RB:

Music wise?

AM:

Music, radio, tv.

RB:

Right now, I went through listening to music and then always had music playing, a lot of jazz that's what I was listening mostly, and then one day I just threw away the radio and kind of wanted silence. That's kind of where my concentration was, so I don't really listen too much and I enjoy just, you're going to laugh but - I enjoy like just starting at the ceiling.

And a lot of ideas come to my mind and I like, I like to be in that kind of subconscious feeling where you actually feel like a little bit floating and there's a whole world that lives in there. And I love to just be in that space, so I don't really hear music, TV gets on my nerves because the voices tend to be a little bit high pitched so I even stopped watching TV and I read, that's what I like to do, I read a lot. And look at the ceiling.

AM:

What are you reading right now, Rita?

RB:

I'm reading this Fernando Pessoa who is a Portuguese poet, 20th century, and he's absolutely brilliant and there's a couple of stories that were found and were just published or I got the book when I was now in Lisbon and he's absolutely brilliant. He wrote under the 4 or 5 different names.

AM:

I'm reading The Book of Disquiet.

RB:

You are?!

AM:

Yes

RB:

That's him.

AM:

I love him.

RB:

You know that the film, The Book of Disquiet, done by a Portuguese director, were just shown at Moma.

AM:

Of course I missed it.

RB:  
I should have told you.

AM:  
How were you supposed to know?

RB:  
I mean, I didn't know you were reading it, but ok, so you know Pessoa.  
He is absolutely, I mean, he's fabulous. And there's something about Beckett, which I, you know Beckett has been a huge inspiration for all this series in the hotel and he has a little bit of that tone but I mean he adds a very Portuguese thing so - it's special, it's special, so that's kind of where I'm right now.

AM:  
I know you read the New Yorker every week.

RB:  
Yes. The New Yorker every week.

AM:  
And

RB:  
I mean it's the New Yorker, some weeks is better than others, but there's always something interesting..

AM:  
I agree

RB:  
Very good writers and it's in depth so it's not like I mean these days I go into the internet and because it's the internet I tend to only read the titles so you think you know everything because you read the titles. Because you don't have the patience to go through the whole thing. ANd the New Yorker has that, you sit down and you read from A to Z and you have an idea of what happened verses this very ....

**It's in the details!**

AM:  
Surface

RB:  
ADD kind of reading which you just kind of zig zag all the information and you know bug deal.

AM:  
Right.

RB:  
And you can discuss about it you know it's just but I suppose that's the new thing, is everybody's just scanning things.

AM:  
It is the new thing. But I just mentioned that you read the New Yorker because you read so much, you read books and magazines and Aperture and everything. You know everything that's going on out there in the City.

So Rita, you're Portuguese, I know we've talked about this. English is not your first language. Does that have anything to do with your artwork? Or New York's affect on you? The fact that you don't speak - or well you speak English, clearly.

RB:

What do you mean I don't speak English.

AM:

Jesus, what a mess. I'm such a mess, it's been a long day. So you speak English. Is New York special to you because you are not from here? Let's start there.

RB:

laugh

Is New York special because you don't speak English?

No, you don't understand anything. No.

In terms of what I do which is really, that's really interesting. Is that I've used, I've been, people have said that the photos I do are very American. Which I don't think at all. I don't know why and I had that now in Lisbon when I did a visit that I, a guided visit to my exhibition. Somebody asked me about that question. I was like what is American photography? I don't know how to define it.

But, so in Portugal, you know people can, somebody said that. On the other hand the alter that we mentioned before and I did the photos have all the symbols of a Portuguese person, which is the cock from this town called Berselous? in the north of Portugal, which is completely Portuguese, I use candles with saints, and so on and somebody had mentioned how always in the work that I do there's a touch of Portugal. So, I suppose it's the condition of immigrants of people who are born in one country and live in another that you fuse the, both. And on one hand the symbols of my country are there as well as the American so I suppose it's the fusion between the two.

Personally, I don't know but I've noticed that and I think it's kind of interesting that yes, it's a fusion maybe. I don't consider what I do American or Portuguese, but that's what people say.

AM:

Your photos don't look American to me, per se.

RB:

No. Me neither but, I don't even know what American means in that sense.

AM:

What does that even mean?

AM:

Why because it's in color?

RB:

I don't know. laugh

AM:

Because it has energy, I don't know, I don't even know how to speculate that. I think that's all I have Rita. For now.

RB:

If you need more, we can always do more.

AM:

That's awesome. Yeah, we are done.

Wait, so Rita, thank you very much for letting me interview you.

RB:

You are welcome, my pleasure. laugh

AM:

See you at the next dinner, ok, bye.