

12. ART AS AN ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

I'd like to begin by asking you about your formation as an artist and researcher. Where did you study art, and which artists, authors or teachers would you single out as being most influential on your career and ideas?

I was first trained in industrial design. Today, I have a doctorate in Communication and Semiotics from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and a Master's degree in Arts from the Federal University of Campinas in São Paulo. I work as an artist, videomaker and researcher, and have been participating in collective and individual exhibitions, lectures and workshops since the 1990s. I think it's important to mention that I only began my work with images and video installations in 2006.

My return to academics was a way of expanding my research and rethinking the huge network of interwoven connections in the art world. In my opinion, the research artist seeks a multiplicity of perspectives and other conceptual foci, activating his or her work and the expansion of critical knowledge. We know that the vision of artists who go into academics has its specificities. The very difficulties they experience reveal a rhizomatic thinking-process that is often hard to understand. Understanding this non-linear and non-narrative way of thinking has become fundamental, for it was where I began to reflect on the idea of the ecology of knowledge developed by Boaventura Sousa Santos. It's a theory based on plurality, it's where knowledge from the most varied of sources meets with the objective of ushering in new forms of thinking.

At the beginning of my work, in the 1990s, one can clearly see the influence of Brazilian neo-concrete artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. The work I produced was about objects that could permit the establishment of malleable and constructive relations, and, as such, I devoted myself to the elaboration of works structured on the folding of flexible materials (canvas, felt and rubber). These works in a permanent state of modification relied on the ephemeral quality of their forms. The material took shape when handled, as it allowed itself to be attached and moved around. I chose felt because of its density and the ability to structure the folds. In this way, the flat space of the felt took on depth, transforming pieces of cloth into soft three-dimensional objects. The order was to handle the surfaces and the verb was to fold. During this period, the instability of soft works of art brought the concept of mobility versus immobility to my work, and this began to be a recurring subject in my research. From felt and rubber I moved on to flexible tubes, only to make my way to inflatables and water later.

INTERVIEW WITH SONIA GUGGISBERG

There was a deeper question in this experimentation with materials, in the manipulation and relations. The question was, how can something that cannot be modelled be modelled? How can pieces of felt or rubber be modelled? How can water be modelled? How can giant pieces of plastic be modelled? Everything was possible through the interplay of tensions and the balance generated.

The issue of movement was already part of my earlier work. In the next stage, the interplay of tensions presented by the soft and unstable structures ended up being substituted by the image in movement. In 2006, the video-installations began, and these, through projections on the ground, moved across the hard surface of the ground, generating virtual holes. From this moment forward the ground became mobile and unstable, and surface became a matter of interpretation. I can say that through the dynamic process of experimentation along with technological evolution, the entry of technology into my work was inevitable.

The next step in this perpetual motion machine was the choice of water as material. Water, as an asset of life, drew me onto the surface of the ground and then to its place



Figure 34. Sonia Guggisberg, Swimmer, 2009, series (I)mobilidade, looped video installation, Exposição Tempo 'buscar', SESC Piracicaba, Piracicaba, São Paulo (Photo: Sonia Guggisberg)

of origin – in other words, into the earth, where underground reserves are found. At this time I produced the video installation *Nascente* (Source). With the projection of a source in a water mirror inside the former vault of the Banco do Brasil Cultural Centre, I presented a reflection on the relationship between natural springs and the country's financial reserves. In this way, political weight was given to the work.

At this time it was impossible to ignore the desire to investigate the city's underground areas. As such, I turned my attention to the city, moving from the aquifer to urban space. A paradox led me to develop the project *(I)mobilitade* ((I)mobility, 2007–2010), in which a series of video installations were carried out. In them, swimmers in pools have their movements contained by confinement, by a contrary force, a situation with no way out. They swim to exhaustion without going anywhere, they swim against the current or remain stuck and confined. The proposal consists of a reflection on the immobility of the citizen and the sad state of the socio-cultural condition of the contemporary world.

Next, with the concept of (I)mobility still in mind, I began researching the undoing of urban space through demolitions, its re-design and what this means for citizens. Not without reason, I incorporated photography and video images into the works, but these resources did not change the concepts guiding the research.

In addition to the names cited, the artists who most influenced me were Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and Christo. If I think about questions of images and different narratives, I would also name Bill Viola, Sophie Calle, Francis Alÿs and Olafur Eliasson. Of course there are many other important artists I'm not citing, but those I mentioned have made an impression on me since I began producing.

In recent years, I've begun to think about new possibilities for documentary video and its extensions, the subject of my doctorate. My academic advisor, Christine Greiner (a researcher in Bodymedia theory), was fundamental in supporting me in my research and in the discussion and expansion of my works in political terms. My research became more focused not only in this sense, but also in the realities captured by the camera, in the construction of clippings, in technological and sound manipulation, and in aesthetic and sign-related issues.

The objective of the thesis was to analyse the process of documenting memories and testimony, using different languages, presenting experiments that would test what the research proposes as a performative documentation of knowledge. The theoretical mesh dealt with a mosaic of theories, crossing a number of epistemological borders in an interdisciplinary manner. In order to justify the discussion, I brought together authors such as Boaventura Souza Santos, Arlindo Machado, Christine Greiner, Diana Taylor, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Henri Atlan and Gilles Lipovetsky. The main themes discussed refer to documentation, translation and the constitution of images, and the meaning of terms such as witness, archive and memory.

The main hypothesis is of a practical theoretical nature, based on the concept of the ecology of knowledge, extended to the universe of the media and performance. The corpus of the thesis consists of the very works created as an integral part of the

INTERVIEW WITH SONIA GUGGISBERG

research. They are the documentary *Subsolos* (about what lies underground below São Paulo's Paulista Avenue); the video installation *Cachoeiras Urbanas* (Urban Waterfalls), which liquefies the structures of the city in a continuous movement of scenes whose violence is expressed in terms of image and sound; *Castelo de Cartas* (Castle of Cards), which constructs testimony on disintegration in the city in a mosaic of nine simultaneous screens; and the *Sistemas Ecos* (Eco Systems), which elaborates a collective proposal of sharing of artistic vocabularies and original works conceived by a group of guest artists. These experiences were the main result of the research.

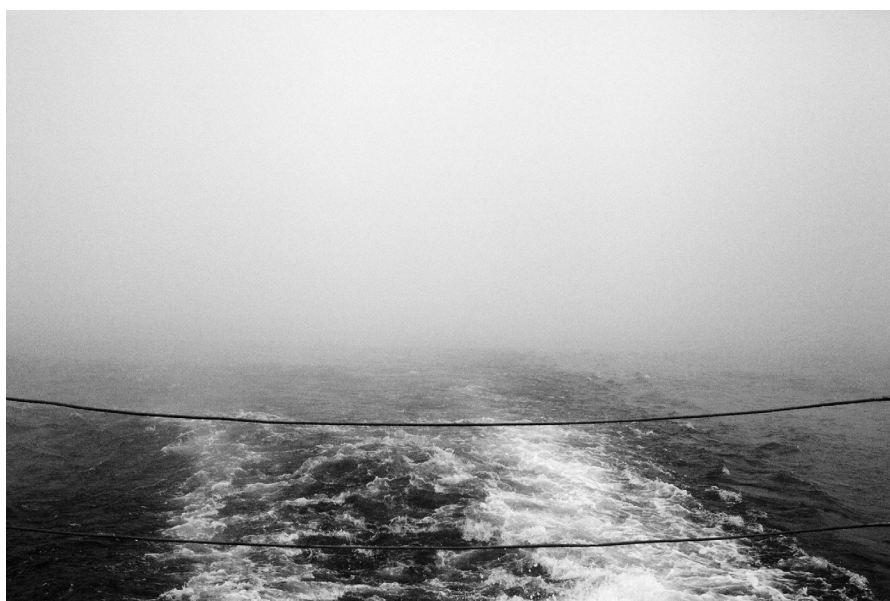


Figure 35. Sonia Guggisberg, *No Horizon*, 2015, photograph, 80 × 120 cm

What, in your view, are the main challenges that an artist faces in São Paulo? How have you tried to overcome these challenges?

São Paulo is a cultural metropolis. It presents a gigantic ecology of exchanges and opportunities, as well as major problems and challenges. With the appeal of a city that is alive around the clock, artists have to understand this movement and learn how to move together with it. We know that advancements in technology resulted in an increase in knowledge and communication, but at the same time brought us a complex system of uninterrupted information. They imposed a new way of life, a non-stop, no-time-to-take-your-breath *modus operandi*, and they are fed by excess and saturation. The city of São Paulo is a strong example in this sense. It's a

metropolis in which time has been swallowed up by excess. It's worth remembering that the speed of technology, far from the speed of human nature, is a part of our everyday existence, accelerating the logic of socio-cultural life.

I understand that in order to exist alongside this city, it is important to keep in mind new strategies of undertaking actions in work and in personal life. We can say that every neighbourhood is a city and that each interest group is a quasi-ghetto. A way of overcoming this way of life is by building strategies of international exchanges to overcome the local process, overcome the entanglement that the excess of information in transit associated with the problems of the city faces us with.

With regards to the system of culture in Brazil, it is important to say that a project for the private support of culture has been in place for more than twenty years and that this system is very strong in São Paulo. For this, the government created incentive laws in which artists and curators from various different areas seek the financial support of private companies through bureaucratically complex calls for applications. This has become a common and essential procedure in artistic life in order to carry out projects. Through the laws, the companies financing them are able to deduct from their taxes when they sponsor artistic events. Of course this system has also turned into a marketing tool for the companies, but this isn't the place to expand upon this subject right now. In this sense, it's very common for us to find cultural centres within financial institutions. As an example I can cite the banks that run their own cultural centres promoting large-scale exhibitions and events (Banco do Brasil Cultural Centre, Caixa Foundation, Itaú Cultural Institute...).

In my opinion, one of the most important strategies for artists in terms of surviving and adapting in today's world is understanding the need to be a kind of entrepreneur as well. In addition to creating and building their oeuvre, artists need to generate strategies to display their work. There is definitely no comfort zone in a large, complex city like São Paulo. It has become fundamental for artists to delve intensely into their objectives and organise themselves. We know that numbers and spreadsheets can be complicated, but it's a necessity. It's a way of adapting to incentive laws and looking for financial support to expand your work. My *Sistemas Ecos* project, for instance, was carried out through the government's incentive laws and the mobilisation of private funds. Even if it's gratifying for artists to be able to live off their art, in Brazil this is something that's almost impossible, and most have side jobs to improve their income.

The *Sistemas Ecos* project also had an educational dimension. You are not a teacher in the formal, institutional sense, but *Sistemas Ecos* involved artist-tutors working with students on an exhibition that brings together buried narratives, sounds, urban issues and collaborative thinking. Can you tell me how the whole project works in practice?

The conceptual basis of the project is the idea of the ecology of knowledge presented by theoretician Boaventura Souza Santos. The ecology of knowledge is a solution

for the apparent impossibility of co-existence of different forms of knowledge. It means renouncing existing rules on a given subject and proposing another mode of organisation. It's a mediation of distinct areas, a way to administer a system of different singularities. It's also a mode of organisation of thought and of interpretation of differences as a political act. It has to do with reformulating procedures and finding points of convergence for different languages and vocabularies.

Based on this concept and focused on the individual and collective production experience, the *Sistemas Ecos* project arose with the objective of generating a system for the exchange of different forms of artistic know-how. In practice, the project presents multi-disciplinary characteristics, consisting of the intertwining of the EcoLabs (the *Sistemas Ecos*' artistic production laboratories) and the contemporary production of art. Artists from the areas of live cinema, sound sculpture, video installation and photography were invited to participate in the EcoLab groups. The groups worked intensely over the course of a month with the objective of building practical interaction, valued by the transit of various different technologies, seeking to establish connections of exchange and collectively producing works that would reflect the huge metropolis's urban issues. The artists were chosen precisely with the idea of distinct forms of thinking and artistic production in mind. In this sense, the guests, groups and tutors developed new works in various different vocabularies to be included in the exhibition.

Installations were developed collectively in the EcoLab under the tutorship of experienced artists. The other works were interventions or site-specific works, dreamed up exclusively for the exhibition and carried out by other guest artists with individual projects. The occupation of the space was aimed at fostering a direct relationship between the public and contemporary artistic production, in which the public would observe the onset on various different urban issues.

The choice of Victor Civita Square as the site for the project is a crucial part of the proposal, given its uniqueness in São Paulo. It was built in what had previously been a degraded area and has now been given back to the population, with various interesting cultural possibilities on offer. It's worth mentioning that, for the construction of the square, an architectural project was developed that included an enormous suspended wooden deck so that the public could visit the space without having direct contact with the contaminated ground. Along with the production of the project, a building that once served as an incinerator was duly treated, decontaminated and restored and, in late 2008, Victor Civita Square was opened to the public.

Given the fact that art is a potent form of mediation between people and the space they inhabit, it is able to reinvent itself and multiply. This is why I believe that art lends potential to senses when associated with places loaded with meaning. The *Sistemas Ecos* project began with a belief in the potential of this process and in the possibility of bringing other interpretations to the urban and artistic universe. It is, basically, a matter of experiencing an ecological system of connections, proving itself able to expand realities in terms of creation and production.

What do you think students take away with them from *Sistemas Ecos*?

In terms of community and space, *Sistemas Ecos*' partnership with Victor Civita Square has been an important example of integration. I consider the vocation of the space to be ideal for the purposes of the project, for in addition to its historical significance, the square is a meeting point open to the public, features rooms specially prepared for workshops, and has good indoor and outdoor exhibition spaces. It is a collective and multicultural environment of social exchange and learning. It is a place where individuals may relate to their surroundings and to their city and understand what is being shown. The *Sistemas Ecos* project is a system, a network of relations, as is the square, which is why it is a part of public space.

EcoLab consists of stages of meeting and discussion not only for the intertwining of ideas but also in recognition of gaps in research, seeking joint solutions for the production of works of art. As such, the workshops constitute a field of research in constant movement in which the networks of relations and information lend impulse to collective experiences while at the same time widening individual knowledge.

Based on a proposal that brings together numerous areas of study and traverses different circuits, the EcoLab develops technological and experimental works providing a sort of aesthetic biodiversity. The works of tutor artists with their groups and of guest artists are set up side by side with the same technical conditions, size and quality. It is an opportunity and a challenge for the groups. It is a design aimed at seeking to stimulate not only the cohabitation of different artistic languages, but also dialogue between different generations.

It's not simply a workshop that can be summed up in the experience of a few days. The development and production of works of art is seen with great interest and has brought good learning opportunities not only in the execution of the work but in the entire process, up to and including conclusion and the exhibition. I think it's important to stress that the students are not simply students but rather artists of different ages, interested in different forms of expression. The participants share their visions of the city, local history and their personal production in order to come up with propositions. They are part of the process with the idea of generating an environment conducive to expanding their artistic knowledge and that brings them closer to the experience of a more experienced artist in a given area.

How can an artist-teacher working on a collaborative piece with a specific community or small group balance his or her own ideas with those of the people working with him or her? What would you consider to be the signs of an authentic artistic collaboration?

The interweaving of formats and different artistic visions is not only a strategy for the production and expansion of knowledge, but also makes the continuous emergence of other languages and other forms of thinking about and building art possible. We believe that based on a procedure of interpretation and knowledge exchange,



Figure 36. Sonia Guggisberg, EcoLab, 2014 (Photo: Sonia Guggisberg)

it is possible to identify common issues, but also counterpoints and intertwining differences of art production systems while also looking at social and political issues.

Gathering archives, inquiring propositions and questioning them in a collective manner is a way of devoting oneself to the construction of a different reality, of a new gesture, even if this gesture is unable to make a full, entire truth emerge. In its attempt to show a positioning on artistic production, *Sistemas Ecos* presents an ecology of different languages in order to propose a reflection, a construction and a space for discussion. It is a question of investing in a hybrid proposition, instead of simply insisting on the eternal repetition of existing systems. The project does not intend to channel only political issues, but also to point out, signal and elicit attitudes and reflections, working with socio-cultural difficulties through the production of works of art.

The issue of authenticity is not a matter that worries the tutor-artists, as this is a game in which all hands are shown. All understand that the tutor is fundamental in order to guarantee the maturation and fulfilment of the final work. The dynamics are different in each group, but all agree with the rules of the game, bring their proposals and share ideas. Normally the project begins out of the tutor's research, and the tutor opens it up to the group, accepting collaboration and interaction. I consider

this part of the project perhaps the most interesting. Tutoring by artists with an established career is a challenge for everyone, and this process is understood with great responsibility by the participants, for they know that they'll have their works displayed along with the other guest artists.

What roles do communities and localities play in your video projections and installations? How do you think your work communicates with them?

I believe that elaborating upon issues in art and bringing answers to the public also means extending possibilities of sharing visions, stimulating reflection and building thought. As I see it, art doesn't get stuck in concepts, it doesn't allow itself to stop the movement or the development of discussions that permeate society. On the contrary, in fulfilment of its political role, in due proportion, it can denounce destructive schemes that penalise society, it can destabilise corrupt socio-political structures that work against the real development of society, and it has the potential to operate freely, with the ability to disclose actions that function as mediators of social problems. Art fulfils its role when it continues to violate organised structures, generating strategies, building autonomous compositions and presenting tools through which society may rethink itself.

I present my answers in video installations and site-specific works, aware that every work of art is an open testimony that transits and expands through the public. I can say that these works have been welcomed with great interest and curiosity, which reassures me as to the fulfilment of their role.

I believe you also presented a few of these personal works in *Sistemas Ecos*. Can you expand a little about this?

In 2013 I presented two works, *Mercúrio* (Mercury) and *Samarina*, in *Sistemas Ecos*. *Samarina* (Last Dream) is part of a series of video installations based on my observation of the urban redesigning of the city of São Paulo.

Samarina is a work whose images were captured during a demolition job and shows the end of a family history. It presents a personal situation, but one that is nevertheless common in a city like São Paulo. The video focuses on the movement of the smoke and dust caused by the demolition, the remains of the remains. The dust is the final fragment of the demolition and floats in the air until everything is over. It's footage that literally shows the end not just of yet another piece of real estate in the city, but the crumbling of the history that was built there. The soundtrack was made using sounds from the demolition, but in the background we hear the voice of a child singing old songs. The sounds of the collapsing of the building's walls and structure are presented alongside the sincere voice of a child insistently playing a guitar, evoking the destruction of the childhood dreams that have definitively come to an end.

Mercúrio arose out of research on land contaminated by waste deposited where Victor Civita Square now is. The waste is made up of chemical elements that gradually

INTERVIEW WITH SONIA GUGGISBERG

infiltrated into the ground as a result of the operation of the city's incinerator over the course of forty years. The objective was to bring visibility to the issue of ground contamination, which we know exists but we don't see. This contamination, which is different from that of visible refuse, cannot be confined in a given space. At times diluted and often invisible, it seeps into the soil but also into living beings without them noticing, and in the long term can cause illnesses and deformations.

For this work, I placed a certain quantity of mercury into a wooden children's educational game and took a series of photographs. The images were enlarged, cut out and taped onto the wood to form a big puzzle on the floor of the exhibition space. The result was an eight-by-four-metre work in which you can observe the simulation of the virgin mercury, a highly contaminating metal, creeping in between the pieces of wood.

In 2014, I produced the work *Lost Sounds* as part of *Sistemas Ecos*. Conceived as an ecology of sounds and noise, *Lost Sounds* presents the result of extensive research on the local history of the incinerator. Its objective is to recreate passages about the day-to-day experience of the burning of waste. The work brings a sound experience to the public, an opportunity to activate memory through sounds and to reconstruct a possible local history. The sounds represent the remains of what was incinerated, the buried ashes, seeking to reconstruct the memory of what took place. The old trees are the real connection with the contaminated ground and its past, which is why the work was conceived for that space. Six speakers with independent channels and a technological system that organises all of the sounds in a specific way were hung from an old tree, which not only touches the contaminated ground, but grows from and lives on it. Sounds of machines, noises of fire, sounds of bodies but also of hospitals, of walking and of various different movements form an ecology of sounds. The result, a sound history, can be compared to a body of hidden voices.