

W O M E N



# CINEMA MAKERS

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**OLGA GERMAN  
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SONIA GUGGISBERG  
VRON HARRIS  
ESTHER VÖRÖSMARTY  
ZOË IRVINE  
PERNILE SPENCE  
PHYLLIS GRAE GRANDE  
CARLOTA CALDEIRA  
RAND BEIRUTY**

**INDEPENDENT  
WOMEN'S  
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Rand Beiruty

# Sonia Guggisberg

Lives and works in São Paulo, Brazil

The short film "Partir" is a documentary organized by layers of time.

Mounted with old files, videos and musics, Partir shows the story of a family.

Current images of the demolition of a family heritage, are joined to the super-8 files made by the father in the seventies and the soundtrack is organized by lyrical songs sung by the mother between 1970-2005.

Between demolition scenes and scenes shot in the 1970s, children play and dance with their mother's songs.

The songs are made by the sincere voice of a woman, a mother and a wife who spent her life caring for her family keeping her talent locked indoors until the end of her life.

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An interview by **Francis L. Quettier**  
and **Dora S. Tennant**  
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**Hello Sonia and welcome to WomenCinemakers: before starting to elaborate about your artistic production, we would invite to our readers to visit <http://www.soniaguggisberg.com> in order to get a synoptic idea about your artistic production and we would start this interview with a couple of questions about your background. You have a solid formal training and after having earned your Master of Arts from the State University of Campinas, you nurtured your education with a Ph.D. in Communication and Semiotics, that you received from**

**the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo: how did these experiences influence your evolution as an artist? Moreover, how does your cultural substratum due to your Brazilian roots direct the trajectory of your artistic research?**

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 focuses, 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 rhizomic 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. To talk about my Brazilian roots I would like to talk a little about my personal artistic trajectory, which began 25 years ago.

At the beginning of my work, in the 1990s, one can clearly see this 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 were supported on the ephemeral quality of their forms. The material took shape when handled, as it allowed itself to be attached and moved around. 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. After using different flexible materials I started my way with inflatables and water. There was a deeper question in this experimentation with materials, in the manipulation and relations. The question was, how can water be modeled? How can giant pieces of plastic be modeled? Everything was possible through the interplay of tensions and the balance generated. The collision between the "vigorous materials and the delicateness of soft forms" led me went on to occupy bigger spaces like old ruins. In 2006, I began a work proposal that would result in my master's dissertation. This was the ***Bolhas Urbanas*** (Urban Bubbles) Project, elaborated with large-scale works made of transparent plastic filled with water. "Amorphous and ready to take on shapes, the Bubbles presented themselves to the geographies of the different spaces as living elements." Historical ruins were chosen to carry out this project, for through their abandonment they revealed memory chastised. The project was a construction of various different levels in which the main object was the relationship the object was able to establish with the place. In the ruins, the time gave rise to a social landscape sculpted by wear and tear showing the accumulation of different times.





The issue of movement was already part of the 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 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 Center*, 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.

A paradox led me to develop the project *(I)mobilidade* ((I)mobility) 2007-2010 at the same time, in which a series of video installations were carried out. In them, swimmers, always 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 moroseness of the socio-cultural condition of the contemporary world. Perhaps this is an attempt to highlight fluidity as a metaphor for current times. Next, with the (I)mobility concept still in mind, I began researching the undoing of urban space through demolitions, its re-design and what this means for citizens.

In recent years, I've begun to think about new possibilities for documentary video and its extensions, the subject of my doctorate. Besides the political concept, my research became too more focused 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 analyze 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 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 documentary.

**For this special edition of WomenCinemakers we have selected *Partir*, a stimulating experimental short film that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory**

**pages of this article. What has at once caught our attention of your insightful inquiry into *the relationship between time and memory is the way you provided the results of your artistic research with allegorical and multilayered qualities. When walking our readers through the genesis of *Partir* would you tell us how did you develop the initial idea?***

My research is thought by the relationship between testimonies and memories with the question of time comes mixing them in layers.

The witness tells stories based on cuts of reality; but the report carries the power of reflection on what has been silenced. Testifying implies activating memories and understanding the fragility of the binding capacity of them concerning to time passage. Full of false



impressions on memories veracity, reports present themselves in a permanent changing state, for time puts memory in movement, transforming it at every new report. One of the possibilities of activating the past is the artistic production in its documental format, because it develops testimony difficulty, questioning the empty, the silence and the gap, those being reality indicators. To build documentaries we need to unveil testimonies and files, recover the memory and reality connection points, and relate them.

My documentary proposal is that of recovering connection points between memory and reality, working on the difficulty of testimony and questioning the emptiness that accompanies it. The production of films shaped by a collage of diverse references is capable of generating documents as well. Documenting is also a way of

reviewing a past that invades the present, presenting possibilities to think on a future elaborate from reflexive criticism and activation of memory by files and testimonies. It is an imagistic construction that generates in the viewer ideas maps, because during remembering memory is not passive. It constructs itself in a bounding, perceptive action, elaborated by emotions, relationships that activate the senses, reasoning and ideas.

The ecology of knowledge in my work means renouncing existing rules on a given subject and proposing another mode of organization. It's also a mode of organization 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. 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.

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 to emerge.

In the 2013 I started working with the demolitions and I did two works, ***Cachoeiras Urbanas*** (Urban Falls) and ***Last Dream***, they were based on observation of the urban redesigning of the city of São Paulo and the redesigning of the citizens.

In cities without planning, neglect of public space seems accepted and almost institutionalized as something that is part of a path of no return. In them, I found a large number of depersonalized spaces that had their stories stolen by constant demolitions. It can be said that witnessing the constant process of replacement of historic buildings for modern, over the years, citizens no more recognize their own city. They are subject to deformation in terms of possibilities and expectations to integrate the space they live in. Now, citizens who grew up and survived in this context have their answer. What I witnessed was a social landscape carved by wear, full of anesthetized and almost powerless citizens in relation to the space where they live.

It is a process that triggers the deconstruction of urban space, with a society forced to participate in this game, a game built through manipulation of capitalist interests. Here, the testimony is in a way the city itself. In a process of no return, citizens daily witness the erasure of their history and experience a city full of gaps. They are ruins that explicitly reveal a void that bothers, where we see the erasing of the past, apparently forgotten.

***Last Dream*** is a work whose images were captured during a demolition and which 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 images focus on the movement of the smoke and dust caused by a felling, the remains of the remains. The dust is the final fragment of the demolitions 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 reproducing old songs captured inside my family house. 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.

After my mother died, on July 2016, I decided to use her old archives and do *Partir*. The film was made with her voice singing, with scenes shot by my father, in Super 8, before his death on 1974. In 2013, when my father office was sold to be demolished, I decided to capture the scenes. With this material I did *Last Dream* and 4 years after, *Partir*(Leave), 2018.  
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The short film *Partir* is a documentary organized by layers of time. Mounted with old files, pictures and music, *Partir* shows the second part of my family's history.

Current images of demolition of a property, family patrimony, are united and files in super-8 recorded by the father, in the seventies, and mounted with a soundtrack with lyrical songs executed by the mother between the years 1970 and 2005. In the middle of the demolition scenes, the children play and dance with their mother's songs, recorded inside the house. The songs are made by an incredible voice of a woman who spent her life caring for her family keeping her talent locked inside the house until the end of her life.

*Partir* in its attempt to show a positioning on artistic production presents an ecology of different languages and times 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.

**We have particularly appreciated the way you sapiently combined images from the demolition of a family heritage with archival super-8 files made by the father in the seventies to trigger the viewer's perceptual parameters in order to question the relationship between**



**memory and experience. How was your editing process and how did you structure the flow of images in order to reach such powerful and moving narrative? And what were your aesthetic decisions when combining footage from different sources?**

As I told before, one of the possibilities of artistic production in its documentary format is the one of researching and working the difficulties of testimony, before the effort of revealing an event, of putting together a puzzle with many missing pieces. Gathering files, inquiring witnesses and questioning them oppositely is a way to resist to erasure of tracks, to dedicate to the construction of a possible reality, a new gesture, admitting precariousness of inevitably constructed truths.

In the creation process, files and testimonies are collected data that precede the work and end up structuring it physically and conceptually. The work, in turn, is a testimony which comes as a deployment of such information, mediated and translated by the author. It may present in its project the past social and political values review proposal. History is constructed not only through historical facts, but also by speeches from the lived and perceived world.

***Partir*** was not a technological but a sensible challenge that works with a time gap (42 years) between the losses of my father (1974) and my mother (2016). It was a way to understand my past and put them together in these 7 minutes.

**Partir seems to reveal a cultural curiosity with real people and their perspectives: how does everyday life's experience fuel your creative process? In particular, does your artistic research respond to a particular cultural moment?**

If ecology of knowledge is a flexible system, its existence condition consists in movement possibilities, and the speculative capacity. I'm always opened to new movements, new ways of thinking because this is the place of the creation.

In that case, conditions of existence are: reality, traffic, and possibilities of action. We conclude that there is no static file, because an event, even when documented, filmed and photographed is always opened to new mediations





and connections.

We have to bring ecology of knowledge for practical thinking about image and sound, including the sounds and silences, events and gaps. The strength of image in its immediacy is shown as the alleged intention to expose truths, while it hides not only the functioning of technologies, but its uses, its aesthetic and personal choices, among others.

Performative Documentation of Knowledge considers documentary as performative movement, as an action, an active voice that can prepare statements that speak and have repercussions, performing in act and reverberating in the environments where they become explicit. Documentary never represents only reality, it is a dialectical combination of real space and video-makers that invade it, the truth presented is the one chosen by them.

**We really appreciate your successful attempt to develop an experimental language for documentary film and we dare say that *Partir* walks the viewers to the thin line that divides reality to dreamlike dimension: how much important is for you to address them to elaborate personal associations?**

I think it's not important but it can happened sometimes.

**As an art researcher particularly interested in developing new kind of languages, how do you consider the role of technology paying withon your creative process? In particular, do you think that the role of the artist has changed these days with the new global communications and the new sensibility created by new media?**

I can say that through the dynamic process of experimentation along with technological evolution, the entry of technology into the art is inevitable. It is a way of expression connected with contemporary way of living. In my way of seeing it is only one more way to open your creativity, to grow and expand your mind in another way. It is not an obligation, it is only one more possibility.

**Your experimental practice deviates from traditional videomaking to question the unbalanced relationship between everyday life's experience and the realm of memory, reminding us of Sondra Perry's approach to the interstitial point between cultural issues and the digital**

**technosphere. Especially in relation to your editing decision, how do modern digital technologies affect your creative process?**

The modern digital technologies can improve reality in some concepts or ideas and also in creative process. In my research I can talk about *Lost Sounds* as an example:

In 2014, I produced the work *Lost Sounds*. Conceived as an ecology of sounds and noise, *Lost Sounds* presents the result of extensive research on the local history of a public incinerator. Its objective is to recreate passages about the "day-to-day experience" of the burning of waste and the bustle around it. This work brings the audience a sound experience about the past, an opportunity to activate memory through sounds and to reconstruct a possible local history in its own imagination. 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 organizes 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.

For the realization of *Lost Sounds*, a digital sound system was programmed so that six speakers associated with three independent stereo audio channels, could reproduce 388 sounds prepared in six groups..

I can not talk about Sondra Perry's approach and I prefer not talking about the career of other artists.

**Over the years your works have been showcased in several occasions and one of the hallmarks of your practice is the ability to establish direct involvement with the viewers, who urged to**

***evolve from a condition of mere spectatorship. So we would like to ask a question about the nature of the relationship with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception? And what do you hope Partir will trigger in the spectatorship?***

I believe that elaborating upon issues in art and bringing answers to the audience also means extending possibilities of sharing visions on their time. The most important is stimulating reflection and building thought to the public. 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 fulfillment of its political role, in due proportion, it can denounce destructive schemes that penalize society, it can destabilize corrupted socio-political structures that work against the real development of society, and it has the potential to operate freely. Art fulfills its role when it continues to violate organized structures generating strategies, building autonomous compositions and presenting tools through which society may rethink itself.

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

**We have appreciated the originality of your artistic research and before leaving this conversation we want to catch this occasion to ask you to express your view on the future of women in contemporary art scene. For more than half a century women have been discouraged from producing something 'uncommon', however in the last decades there are signs that something is changing. How would you describe your personal experience as an unconventional artist? And what's your view on the future of women in this interdisciplinary field?**

As I mentioned in the beginning of the interview, there is a reason in making art that the reading of certain topics, little by little, explained that the work builds a path for growing and getting





stronger, independent of the gender. In this sense, the work builds a path for growing, independent of the gender.

I can say that I had to expand my artistic research in unexpected ways and I was open for it. I understood the ecology of knowledge as a kind of transformations operator able to promote public discussions and I started using as a personal strategy to improve my work. All persons needs to understand personal strategies, as triggering networks of knowledge, to opening spaces of otherness in creative processes.

As for the work of art, for me, it gets important when considered as a testimony that generates contact zones capable of translating the discourse and knowledge porosity, pointing to new possibilities of thinking. They enlight latent issues and this is the most important. It is not easy for the women artist, used to translate sensibilities, convictions and questions on images, to test new organizations and new ideas today, however it is an exercise that is in many ways surprising. Talking about ecologies and the rhizome artistic thoughts, we are talking about mobilityof knowledge, allowing to understand better passages of our own life.

**Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Sonia. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?**

About my future projects or the projects that I'm involved today I can say that my research goes more and more to the discussion and art in political terms.

I came from a research on the cities redesign, using demolition falls as a metaphor to talk about the dismantling of the city and subject's memory, and about political and institutional power. Nowadays I'm very interested on the redesign of the identities. Nothing is given or ready in documentary poetics. Memories and testimonies are starting point of this constant listening, always focused on the voice of the others, always facing images of others and their singular embodiments. In 2014, together with the ***Last Dream*** documentary I started ***Migrant Dream*** project.

In order to talk about the refugees, we need to understand their place in today's society; we need to consider them as members of a community of those who don't belong to any community. After crossing the Mediterranean, trying to save their own lives, they turn into a group of excluded people that happens to exist because of the nuisance they cause where they arrive. Their

inclusion in new countries takes place under a deeply hard way that is by exclusion. People of different origins, religions and ethnicities are joined by the fact that they crossed an ocean and entered countries that don't recognise them.

It is important to understand that the refugee crisis in Europe is considered the biggest humanitarian catastrophe since the Second World War. Thousands of people deprived of their own lives. They mourn their families, with no money, without a state and are at the same time unwanted in almost every place they go to. The question is: how to react or promote the rethinking of a society that has been founded on the politics of fear? The politically used "control mechanisms" are based on the fictional idea of safety which also authorizes and institutionalizes the "security mechanisms" to protect society. Seen as non-citizens, mute, they are bodies that speak through their living conditions, speak through impossibility and shout through the silence of their pain. In this connection, we have to understand Art as a political gesture of activation and social reflection capable of generating "work-testimonies", objects and documents that present sensitive reports inserted in their right time context. It is a way of resisting the erasing of trails, of attempting the construction of another reality, of a new gesture, even if this is not able to produce an absolute truth. The goal is the awakening of the spectator and citizen in an effort to induce him/her to a conscious attitude. In fact, the spectators rebuild their conscience when trying to understand Art and its reflections. My research called **Migrant Dream** it is not only an artistic research, but also a channel to challenge the silence of the intellectual comfort zones that camouflage the contemporary migrations reality. The main idea is to shed light to underlying processes, like the constant redrawing of human identities. Under such conditions, the deconstruction of their identities followed by the need of transforming it is inevitable. The research project proposes an approach to these identities that are forced to adapt. It presents the 'redesign' of identities, focusing on their dreams and their losses since the crises until the long waiting inside the Camp.

