Sabina Ott: *everywhere there is a somewhere (a brief history of the artist and her work)*
Karen Moss

During Sabina Ott's 30+ year career, she has produced paintings, drawings, sculptures, digital prints, and videos, often combining these into cross-disciplinary forms of art that incorporate art historical, literary, and philosophical sources. In her own words: "I have melded the incongruous–Gertrude Stein's irreducible minimalism, aspects of Symbolist painting and sculpture, feminism, and Deleuzian thought-image, reflecting on the underlying commensurability of the sublime and the commonplace. 1 Embodying the quotidian and the transcendent, her production is *not* ordinary as this exhibition implies.[1] And Sabina herself was far from ordinary: everywhere *became* a somewhere when she was there with her provocative art, intense energy, quick wit, infectious laugh, and huge heart. This essay provides a context for *all that and not ordinary* following Ott's trajectory as an artist and educator, from her days as an art student to her late works.

As an undergraduate studying painting at San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) in the late 1970s, Ott admired Clifford Still, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella, but as a feminist, she also gravitated toward women artists like Jay DeFeo, Eva Hesse, Lee Bontecou, Judy Chicago, Linda Benglis, and Niki St. Phalle. Her paintings in both oil and latex hovered between figuration, as in *Landscape* (1978), and abstraction in her *Labyrinth Series* (1979-80). When she became a graduate student at SFAI, artists like Lynn Hershman, Yayoi Kusama, Bruce Nauman, and Hannah Wilke influenced Ott's experiments in installation, video, and performance.

After graduating, in the early 1980s Ott returned to Los Angeles where she was raised, lived in the artist community downtown, and taught in the MFA Program Art Center College of Design in Pasadena 1985 –1996 founded by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe.[2] At this time, she made thickly painted diptychs of everyday objects and landscapes such as *Nature Morte (*1985) that recall then-current neo-expressionist and new image painting.[3] Ott's titles underscore how these juxtapositions shifted the work's significance. In *Decoy* (1986), Ott painted a rose, an ongoing motif in her work influenced by Gertrude Stein, whom she admired for her idiosyncratic, disruptive use of language to construct new meaning.

By the 1990s, Ott's series of large encaustic paintings played off Stein's famous repetition "a rose is a rose is a rose…"[4] In *Disappearance and Return* (1990), blue-hued roses are built up in the waxy paint, which becomes even heavier in *Sub Rosa* (1992), where she punctured circles, incised roses and grids, and dripped on the surface. *Sub-Rosa II* (1995) was a full-room installation featuring paintings, video, and sculptures on pedestals and the floor. During a residency the following year in Melbourne, Australia, for *everywhere there is somewhere (the green, green meadow) (*1996), Ott installed low tables, video monitors, sculptures on the floor, and a painting on the wall, marking her first site-specific installation with poetic titles referencing space and place.

Ott became the Director of Graduate Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, 1996-2001. During this period, she created monoprints and brightly hued encaustic and enamel canvases featuring a plethora of flowers and patterns, as seen in *Loving Repeating is One Way of Being* (1999). Always toggling between abstraction and figuration, Ott also began to work with digital inkjet prints, where she employed a vibrant palette, manipulated

forms and letters, and incorporated scanned-in photographs, as seen in *Frequently the Woods are Pink* (2000).

In 2001, Ott returned to SFAI as Graduate Director, overseeing the MFA program while continuing to create installations that incorporated painting, sculpture, digital prints, and video. For 'What's Here Is Everywhere 1 – 8' (2003-04), she first produced a digital image from a topographical map of California, landscape photographs, and the text of Stein's "The Making of Americans." From this single image, she expanded into a series of eight progressively larger squares, starting from a small corner detail and progressing to a full overview, much like a Fibonacci sequence.[5] Ott then digitally printed and painted eight images and commissioned corresponding tabletop architectural models, which were displayed on a rolling pedestal. This vibrant mix of flora, floating letters, cartographic symbols, and altered photographs filled an entire gallery, creating new topographies in an imaginary landscape.

Ott relocated to Chicago to Chair the Department of Art and Design at Columbia College in 2005, and after 2007, focused on teaching and making sculptural environments. Her three-room installation at the Chicago Cultural Center (2014-2015) drew on transformative journeys in Dante's "Divine Comedy" and Gertrude Stein's *The World Is Round* (1938). In *here and there, pink melon joy* (purgatory), a central monument carved from polystyrene and painted in pastels, sat on a circular turf surrounded by plants and trees. In *here and there, pink melon joy* (paradise), a video projected loops of kinetic texts from Dante and Stein, accompanied by a sound work. This installation also included some works in *all this and not ordinary,* such as *being one being living* (2013), *why is pale white*

not paler than blue (2013), and *come near come nearly* (2014). These quirky sculptures made of found objects, polystyrene, and spray foam, then painted with pastel or metallic hues or covered with reflective surfaces, added a sense of play, magic, and transcendent quality to the project.

Ott's *who cares for the sky?* (2016) at the Hyde Park Art Center, an 8,000-cubic-foot mountain of polystyrene, plywood, and spray foam was an interactive installation in which one could go through a tunnel to explore art donated by 100+ artists in the community. Expanding upon her earlier *pleasure for the poor* (2013), a large-scale polystyrene sculpture/fountain installed at The Poor Farm in Manawa, Wisconsin, *who cares for the sky?* was also inspired by *The World is Round*. In Stein's only book written for children, a young girl named Rose struggles to climb a mountain, dragging a chair so she can sit at the summit and see from high above to better understand the world.[6]

Ott was diagnosed with cancer in 2014, yet like Stein's Rose, she tried to understand the world from a "higher" vantage point: ultimately, her practice of Buddhism and meditation allowed her to accept her terminal condition. In spite of this—or perhaps because of this– she still managed to produce some of her most ambitious work, as she continued to teach and run Terrain exhibitions, the program of site-specific public projects at her home in Oak Park.[7] Ott mentored countless artists and students from California to the Midwest, many of whom attended her "Lust for Life" celebration prior to her death, where she read her Ethical Will stating she had "lived to give."[8] Sabina Ott's legacy as a highly accomplished artist, a revered teacher, and dear friend to many lives on in her art.

[1] The title *all this and not ordinary*, from Stein's poem "Tender Buttons," (1914).

[2] In addition to Gilbert-Rolfe, among Ott colleagues at Art Center were artists Lita Albuquerque, Mike Kelley, and Stephen Prina, writers Richard Hertz, Chris Kraus and Sylvere Lotringer. Her students included now-accomplished artists: Lisa Anne Auerbach, Won Ju Lim, Sharon Lockhart, Jorge Pardo, Steve Roden, Francis Stark, Catherine Sullivan, Diana Thater, Shirley Tse and Pae White.

[3] Some of these works also became a grid with four different elements. This is when Ott started showing professionally: a solo exhibition (1983) and group show *Downtown Artists* (1985) both at Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and her first gallery exhibitions in New York at Charlie Cowles and Piezo Electric (1985). She received the prestigious New Talent Award from Los Angeles County Museum (1986) and exhibited in LACMA's *Avant-garde in the 1980s* (1987). Other solo exhibitions soon followed at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1989) and the Corcoran Gallery of American Art in Washington D.C. (1990).

[4] Gertrude Stein, "Sacred Emily," *Geography and Plays*, (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1922). She also used this repetition in *Operas and Plays* and in *The World is Round*, discussed later in this essay.

[5] A Fibonacci sequence in math is when each element is the sum of the two elements that precede it. This was visualized by designers Charles and Ray Eames's in their ground-breaking home movie, *The Power of Ten*. This project, was included in the exhibition T*opographies*, that I curated at the SFAI McBean Gallery, April-June 2004 and to the University of Texas, San Antonio Main Gallery in 2006.

[6] Ott produced this installation with the assistance of Space Haus, a Chicago-based art, design, and engineering firm. At that time, she said she was also thinking about Dante's description of heaven, purgatory and hell in "The Divine Comedy."

[7] Ott incorporated Terrain Exhibitions as a non-profit before her death. For more information, please see https://terrainexhibitions.org/

[8] This direct quote is from Sabina Ott's Ethical Will that she read at her celebration of life. It is a document from Jewish tradition that one expresses their ethics, values, and other ideas hey want to pass on to others.