

Camila Sposati
Breath Pieces (Part II)

3.11.2023 – 4.2.2024

I. *Introduction*

Dissecting the Cultural Landscape

Camila Sposati's artistic exploration delves deeply into the realms of sound, the natural world and Earth itself as both physical and metaphorical bodies. Her work seeks to illuminate the intricate interplay between culture, history, science and politics, unravelling the tapestry woven by her creations.

Many of these themes found pronounced expression and discourse in the *Breath Pieces* exhibition at the ifa Gallery in Stuttgart. Now, in Berlin, the project embarks on a renewed investigation of such themes, guided by the artist's unique methodology.

One of the intriguing sources that informs Sposati's work is the anatomical theatre and the profound experience of dissection. Anatomical theatres, born during the European Renaissance in the late 16th century, were specialised lecture halls designed for the meticulous dissection and examination of cadavers. These venues played a pivotal role in advancing medical education and deepening the understanding of the human body.

These theatres typically featured circular or amphitheatrical designs, replete with tiered seating to accommodate eager audiences. Renowned anatomists took centre stage, dissecting cadavers while elucidating the intricacies of human anatomy to students and onlookers. These spaces held immense cultural significance, embodying the Enlightenment's reverence for empirical observation and the relentless pursuit of knowledge.

Nonetheless, a carefully choreographed dramaturgy was essential to elevate the experience. The anatomical theatre itself served as a dramatic backdrop, distinguished by its ornate details, amphitheatre-style seating and a central dissecting table, evoking a sense of theatricality. Audience engagement was sustained through rhetorical finesse, dramatic pauses and vivid descriptions, transforming the experience into an informative and emotionally resonant journey. Narrative and storytelling became pivotal elements, with the use of visual aids, such as drawings, charts and even paintings, providing crucial context.

For Sposati, the experience of dissection transcends a mere chapter in the history of medicine or architectural innovation; it represents a realm of thought that predates the theatre's physical construction itself. Dissection had already been a practice in the gardens of medical schools, with these ideas ultimately driving the creation of the anatomical theatre.

One could persuasively argue that Sposati's work itself functions as a form of dissection. Her dissection encompasses history, materials and elements, structured around the metaphorical areas of a body in dissection

as it can be observed here in the pieces on display: the Lower Cavity (crystals), the Middle Cavity (the fire in Darvaza, the anatomical theatre itself, the instruments) and the exploration of knowledge through observation and its sensorial experience.

These pieces are part of an ongoing research project by the artist, which encompasses the *Phonosophia* series, developed through an artistic exploration of the philosophy of sound. The artist places strong emphasis on understanding sound from its intrinsic nature. Sound embodies wisdom, existence and a unique point of view — a mode of communication that has evolved across multiple generations. Each era is characterised by distinct historical, social, political, material and cultural conditions.

In a coherent manner, in line with the essence of these elements of *Phonosophia*, the instruments begin to respond to new contexts. Through this transformative process, while in Berlin, they take on a new character, possessing different intrinsic qualities. They cease to be instruments and instead become enigmatic objects that challenge conventional cultural definitions. They position themselves in a manner in which they are not defined by the viewer but rather regulate how and under what conditions they can be approached.

Camila Sposati's methodology opens up this possibility by extending into the realm of cultural misunderstandings regarding objects, especially ethnographic ones. She advocates a shift in perspective, contending that objects should not be subject to regulation by the viewer. Instead, it is the objects themselves that should dictate the terms of their observation. In this paradigm, the objects assume an active role in the process, directing the viewer's interaction and unveiling hidden layers of meaning, as exemplified in the current context of Berlin.

Sposati's strategy not only encourages a profound comprehension of the cultural narratives and intricacies interwoven through these objects, it also serves as a potent challenge to preconceived notions. It fosters a deeper and more meaningful appreciation of these significance of these objects within the rich fabric of human culture. This process of dissection, as conceived by the artist, serves as a juncture where knowledge and performance seamlessly respond to each other. It transcends the confines of a physical space, representing a cognitive act: an unwavering quest for knowledge.

Consequently, the artist's work embarks on a journey through the domains of knowledge, observation and cultural dissection, beckoning viewers to embark on an exploration of the intricate interplay between elements, history and the human experience. Her art inspires us to scrutinise our own perspectives and understanding, ultimately revealing previously undiscovered layers of meaning.

II. *An Engagement with the World*

The historical process of dissection, when viewed through the perspectives of pioneers like Charles Estienne and Alessandro Benedetti, reveals not only a transformation in anatomical understanding, but also a fascinating evolution in the dramaturgy of anatomical study during the Renaissance.

Charles Estienne, whose era spanned from 1504 to 1564, brought a new level of precision to the practice of dissection. His contribution was more than a scientific advancement; it was a carefully choreographed performance. Estienne introduced a systematic approach that involved the precise division of the human body into three distinct cavities: the Lower Cavity, the Middle Cavity and the Upper Cavity. This meticulous breakdown served as a script, guiding the anatomist's performance on the stage of the dissection table. Estienne's approach transformed the act of dissection into a structured, methodical spectacle, captivating audiences and elevating the study of anatomy to an art form.

Alessandro Benedetti, who lived from 1450 to 1512, championed a different aspect of the dramaturgy of dissection. He emphasised the primacy of firsthand observation using one's own eyes — an act of viewing that became an integral part of the anatomical performance. Benedetti's approach echoes Sposati's, which values direct engagement with the subject matter. In the context of the anatomical theatre, where dissections were carried out, the act of seeing and understanding through personal observation took centre stage. This emphasis on direct observation not only enhanced the educational aspect of the performance, but also contributed to the emotional resonance of the experience.

The historical process of dissection during the Renaissance was not just an advancement in anatomical knowledge, it was also an evolution in the dramaturgy of science. Figures like Charles Estienne and Alessandro Benedetti, along with the architectural design of anatomical theatres, turned dissection into a structured and immersive performance. These developments marked a pivotal moment in history, where the boundaries between science and art and observation and performance were blurred, ultimately influencing the way we engage with the so-called natural world.

III. *Setting up a Situation – a Speculation in Space*

“My attempt is to discover rather than to explain – to reveal layers. Material is made up of matter, colour, structure and energy. I am interested in materials where these qualities are determined by process layers, such as crystals, and disciplines that engage with these layers, for example, archaeology, geology and etymology. It is the internal process that constitutes the material, and consequently defines the potential between materials.”¹

(Camila Sposati)

Uncovering hidden layers and the forces of energy and matter that make up these structures is at the heart of Camila Sposati’s practice. How do elements relate to each other to make up a form – a formation of materials, history, society, anthropology and psyche?

She orchestrates situations to reveal what has been buried, to set in motion for gaining insight with both mental and bodily engagement. You, the viewer, are now entering such a situation, built up as a performative process of dissection divided into three parts; three acts of incision to open up and transform.

The speculative stage you are entering is inhabited by a multitude of beings that are intended to reveal. These beings are made up of complex relational processes connecting with matters of historical time, scale and material bodies in a human and more than human perspective up to the present day. Within this setting you are not neutral, you are part of this formation and are forced to take a position, which is dictated by the make-up of the space – the habitat – as well as by the objects themselves. They make you move and thus they set a choreography in motion. Being set in motion and completely entangled in the process you are about to carve out is also part of the artists’ practice. Throughout her work, Camila Sposati’s practice embodies a process of radical becoming with each other, a process to give into otherness as being both physically and mentally involved in an exchange of energy, knowledge and experience. A highly relevant stance, as the anthropocentric fantasy of being an independent entity at a distance from nature, as staged since the early modern times of traditional Western thought, is one of the core factors turning this planet into a territory that we as humans and other fellow beings can hardly inhabit.

1 Camila Sposati: *From the Beginning*. In: *Stone Theatre*, 45–50, here 48.

How to become a crystal?

With the process of crystallisation we commence our movement into the realm of the Lower Cavity – the first cut. We dive deep into the beginnings of the history of Earth, starting with the accumulation of inorganic matter and its behaviour. Like the earth or our body, a crystal is made up by layers – transparent layers – that evolve in a process of crystallisation. It starts with nucleation, the first moment of atomic attraction. For growth, the relation of the components of temperature, pressure and saturation are key. A change within the composition of these components has a direct influence on the crystal in its material manifestation. Interestingly, the slower a crystal grows within a solution with low saturation, the sharper, more solid and more stable it is.

Sculpture of Sodium Sulphate (twin), 2023, cotton textile, rope, stones from Berlin

Crystal growth at the chemistry department at the University College of London

Courtesy the artist and Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna

“Materialization is a making and thinking process.”² (Camila Sposati)

From here the space unfolds as a cut in the Middle Cavity.

From the Inner Cove of the Earth

The front space is immersed in continuously changing nuances of red, orange and yellow, revealing the energetic origin of the exhibited objects as well as their secret life and vitality. The changing colours recall the fire of Darvaza, a burning natural gas crater in Turkmenistan, also referred to as the “Gates of Hell”, where the invisible forces of the inner earth manifest intensively in a fire rising from the depth of the enormous crater, a result of gas emanating since the 1970s. Back then, while drilling for natural gas, Soviet geologists punctured an underground cavern filled with gas. Fearing toxic emissions, the scientists decided to set the gas alight, creating a fire that is still burning to this day. Transformed into waves of colour, the vibrations emanating from here now unveil hidden connections between capitalism, worker exploitation and environmental degradation. Coal, gas and oil take centre stage in this exploration of energy and the environment, delving into unseen forces.

Prey and Predator

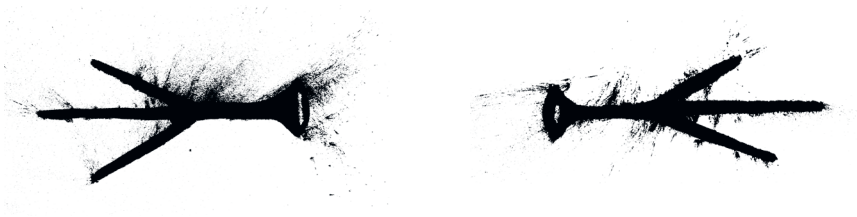
The *Balata* – creatures, objects, beings with long wooden extensions that bend in different directions and peculiar bodies that recall forms from insects to sea-shells and leaves – pose themselves in the front space of the gallery, inhabiting a transit zone between outside and inside. They change their appearance with the light cycle of day- and nighttime. The special material that shapes their bodies should be observed meticulously: balata. This most adaptable of material needs moisture to retain its form, much like rainforest life relies on dampness. In the rainforest, humidity pervades, as prey and predator coexist. The forest observes, whispering human and non-human secrets, each perceiving reality distinctively. Amazonian balata is a tough, rubber-like substance, created by drying the sap of the *Manilkara bidentata* tree, and found solely within a confined range along the equator. Balata defies capitalist extractivist monoculture plantations. Here, a dialogue of materials and craft techniques blends disparate cultural layers and traditions; balata forms a sound body, encountering the metallic organ-pipe lips crafted by Viennese organ builder Martin Parzer. How does sound transition from metal slickness to balata's porous dryness or stickiness in humidity?



Balata, 2023, rubber, tin, lead, and oak wood. Five unique pieces
5th Phonosphia generation, research in 2022, produced in Belém do
Para, Brazil, in collaboration with Mestre Balateiro Darlindo
Commissioned by ifa
Courtesy the artist

Two of the creatures in this group stand out, with razor-sharp copper claws pointing at us. It is the *Solua* that holds us at distance with a slightly aggressive gesture. To approach the pipes you need to stretch or bend down depending on your height – the object itself defines how it wants to be approached. Referencing Greek culture and mythology, the *Solua* instrument inverts the *aulos* – an ancient Greek wind instrument – establishing a link between the past and the present, and comparing various perspectives across time and space. The *aulos* comprises two pipes played simultane-

ously, producing different pitches that don't align with modern concepts of harmony. Conversely, the Solua has a piece with three mouthpieces, playable by up to three individuals. It doesn't focus on varying pitches or tonal virtuosity, but rather on the shared breath of the players. The challenge lies in coordinating breaths, resonating within the instrument and enabling communication.



Solua (copper), 2020, ceramic, glaze, copper, and steel

3rd Phonosophia generation, produced at European Ceramic Workcentre – EKWC, The Netherlands

Collaboration with EKWC, The Netherlands, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria, and Tabakalera Donostia, San Sebastian, Spain

Courtesy the artist and Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna

Spirals in Conversation

Influenced by the myth of Echo and Narcissus, the two spirals explore a capacity to move and flip seemingly fixed structures. The nymph Echo, unable to confess her love for Narcissus, can only echo others' words, while Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection. While Narcissus is captivated by his own reflection, Echo, who can only communicate with a limited set of repeated words, manages to communicate her own concerns by intelligent rearrangements. Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro considers an anti-Narcissus concept to introduce alternative methods in anthropology, challenging traditional Narcissus-driven Western thought. This approach critiques the tendency to see oneself in the Other and asserts that behind the Other's mask is a reflection of oneself, ultimately focusing only on self-interest. Echo points towards the potential to incorporate the impositions of the other and turn it into its own syncretic expression and form of being.



Spiral, 2020, ceramic, glaze, and steel. Two unique pieces
3rd Phonosophia generation, produced at EKWC, The Netherlands
Commissioned by EKWC, The Netherlands, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria,
and Tabakalera Donostia, San Sebastian, Spain
Courtesy the artist and Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna

The Echo

A serpent-inspired work from the second generation of Phonosophia delves into colour and amplification – another reference to the myth of Echo and Narcissus. The piece underscores the significance of mythology in comprehending human nature and our connection to the world.

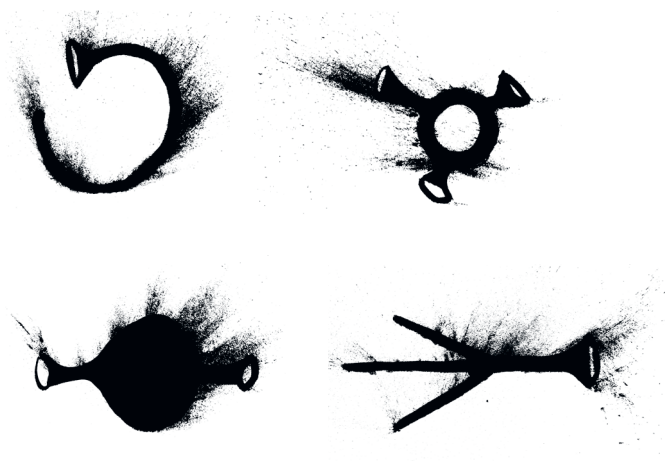


Echo, 2018, clay, glaze, and steel
2nd Phonosophia generation, 2018, produced at EKWC, The
Netherlands
Courtesy the artist

Phonosophia generations

Moving back towards the gallery's front space we encounter a formation of four objects positioning themselves as if in silent communication on a semi-circular stage. The power of silence echoes the Basque concept of "erantzun", which, as explained to Camila Sposati by sound researcher Xavier Erkizia to, means to listen before speaking. Listening becomes a political act, emphasising presence and attention in an increasingly distracted world. Silence, as described by Erkizia, is vital for genuine communication and connection, encouraging introspection and deep engagement. Set in the centre of the group we find a first-generation instrument: the *Tumbum Livre*. It is marked

by a significant concentration of gravity in a spherical form. The piece encourages contemplation of the human experience during Europe's Age of Discovery, which spanned from the sixteenth into the early seventeenth century. It raises the question of what could be seen or heard and the potential of a pagan instrument.



Ring (black), 2020, ceramic, glaze, and steel

3rd Phonosophia generation, produced at EKWC, The Netherlands
Commissioned by EKWC, The Netherlands, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria,
and Tabakalera Donostia, San Sebastian, Spain
Courtesy the artist and Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna

Trumpet Liber, 2018, clay, glaze, and steel

2nd Phonosophia generation, 2018, produced at EKWC, The Netherlands
Courtesy the artist

Tumbum Livre, 2015, ceramic and steel

1st Phonosophia generation

In collaboration with the 3rd Bahia Biennial and Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Brazil
Courtesy the artist

Solua (lead), 2020, ceramic, lead, and steel

3rd Phonosophia generation, produced at European
Ceramic Workcentre – EKWC, The Netherlands

Collaboration with EKWC, The Netherlands, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria,
and Tabakalera Donostia, San Sebastian, Spain
Courtesy the artist and Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna

Earth Anatomical Theatre

The invisible semicircular shape that directs the positions of the objects recalls Sposati's *Earth Anatomical Theatre*, a conical shape carved into the earth. It can be perceived as the initial moment for the emergence of the *Phonosophia* instrument series; a pre-Phonosophia instrument, amplifying sound and demonstrating knowledge of sound in relation to Earth's interior and the invisible layers of history it holds. Created for the 2014 Bahia Biennale (Brazil), it is linked to memory and Brazilian colonisation, exposing historical layers and traces that significantly impacted society and the scars of resource extraction that persist in Brazil's economy. Inspired by the 1595 Anatomical Theatre at Padua University, the *Earth Anatomical Theatre* departs from anthropocentrism, focusing on the earth's interior and reversing perspective. It creates a collective perception mode, connecting past and present, with audiences gathered around a central point, encouraging articulation and communication.

Parrot and Rabbit – The Spin of Paradox

The two tiles are replicas of an original faience tile that was found during the excavation of the *Earth Anatomical Theatre* in Bahia, recalling the time when Portuguese colonisers came to Brazil. The object pair confronts us with the fluidity of movement and the embodiment of life's inherent paradoxes, transcending mere cultural miscomprehension. The artist presents us with the double identity of the figure we face changing depending on our perspective. Initially we see a rabbit, but upon inversion the figure transforms into a parrot, thus revealing the mutable nature of perception.

The parrot and the Rabbit, ceramic based on quartz and blue glaze
Reproduction of the original blueware found during the construction of
The *Earth Anatomical Theatre* in Itaparica Island, Brazil, 2014
Courtesy the artist

This changeable nature of things and the decisive role of fantasy in the act of building up knowledge leads us to the Upper Cavity.

IV – *A Cabinet of Their Curiosity*

In this setting, the artist's practice engages in a dialogue with the *C& Center of Unfinished Business* reading room — an open and adaptable library structure that evolves with the contexts and situations it constructs and that currently inhabits ifa Gallery Berlin. It brings together an exceptional, at times perplexing, assortment of books associated with colonialism in diverse ways, ranging from German colonies and Congolese fashion to the capital markets of the 21st century. Making an incision at this point unveils specific moments in history that both captivate the imagination and shape our connection to Earth and the so-called “other”.

As a gesture towards expanding and executing knowledge production as a multisensory act involving the mind and the hand, one encounters not only reading materials but also images, brief video excerpts and objects that can be manipulated and rearranged in a dynamic method of engagement. This approach invariably involves a moment of dissection as a form of self-examination.

Camila Sposati is a visual artist and researcher born in São Paulo. She holds a Master's degree in Fine Arts from Goldsmiths College London and currently lives in Vienna as a fellow of the Academy of Fine Arts PhD programme. Her work has been shown, among others, at Kunsthalle Wien (2021), Tabakalera, Donostia-San Sebastian (2020), Pivô Arte e Pesquisa, São Paulo (2019), Goethe Institut São Paulo (2019), BAK – basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht (2017), 10. Mercosul Biennale, Porto Alegre (2015), CCBF Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro (2015), 3. Bahia Biennale, Salvador (2014), Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris (2012). She published the book *Stone Theatre* by Revolver (Berlin, 2016).

Her work investigates processes of transformation and energy, using methods that often come close to scientific research methodologies. She has transversely examined correlations on a microscopic and global scale. In her work, Sposati juxtaposes material and historical processes in order to challenge the material in its official time and its significance.

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V. Colophon

Camila Sposati
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