Paula Sibilia

The year-long lecture series, Women Art Technology, brought nine internationally and nationally renowned women artists and scholars to the University of North Texas. During the spring semester 2008, it was supported by a Hispanic and Global Initiative Funds award, which funded the visit of Paula Sibilia.

Sibilia was born in Argentina in 1967. She graduated in Communications and Anthropology at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), where she worked as a researcher and professor in The History of Ideas and in The Philosophy of Technology. In 1994 she moved to Rio de Janeiro, where she resides at present.

She continued her studies in the master program “Communications, Images and Information” from the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), and then completed two PhD theses, the first one on “Communications and Culture” at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (ECO-UFRJ) and the other one on “Public Health and Human Sciences” at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (IMS-UERJ).


As of 2008 she is a Professor in the Department of Cultural and Media Studies and in the Graduate Program on Communications at the Institute of Arts and Communications (IACS) of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). She participates in several congresses, gives courses and conferences in Brazil and Argentina, also in other countries, such as Colombia and France, and she contributes articles for local and foreign publications.

Sibilia visited the University of North Texas April 21-25, 2008. She presented a gallery talk at the Dallas Museum of Art entitled “The ‘perfect body’ as a masterpiece of plastic surgeons: from Frankenstein to Pygmalion,” and a public lecture, “The Digitalization of the Body: from the Robot to the Genetic Code.”

On April 23 she was interviewed by Lisa Nersesova, a graduate art history student assisting on the Women Art Technology project. Also present was project co-director Jennifer Way, Associate Professor of Art History. The interview was transcribed by Allison Kidd and Sarah Westrup, both University of North Texas Emerald Eagle Scholars working on the Women Art Technology project. Their transcription removes crutch words and some false starts from the transcript.
Lisa Nersesova: What role does technology play in your work?

Paula Sibilia: A central role because the subject of almost all my research work was new technology, increasing technologies, like the internet or even medical technology such as genetic engineering, neurosciences and plastic surgery are different ways that which we use artifacts and knowledge to transform the world and especially our values. So technology I would say that is the main topic together with value and subjectivity and ways of being and ways of inhabiting oneself and the world. So technology is the central role.

LN: What is your training? Were you ever enrolled in an art school or art program? If so, how did that age or develop into the scholar of contemporary culture?

PS: I studied communications and anthropology in Argentina, Buenos Aires. Then I moved to Brazil and I work for several years not only at university doing academic work like research or teaching, but also and mainly in journalism, media worker, especially written journals, articles, newspapers, and magazines. Technology was always the main subject of my writing that was my work. And then I stop with my academic work for several years but then I engaged in a master project in Brazil on communications. Then I held two Ph.D.s in these programs in Brazil, one in communications and culture, and the other one in public health. Public Health in a sense it’s a particular program. The teachers are from philosophy, anthropology, and medicine that in a sense what we have done is study of the body what it means it the body the historical creation. So it is the title is public health but its not exactly what we all understand is public health. It would be something like study the body in philosophical terms, anthropology terms, and sociological terms. So technology was again very important in this research because my main topics was genetic engineering, neuroscience, and plastic surgery. That is three types of technical intervention in the body. In the contemporary body. so my training was that. but the answer of the question of was if I was ever enrolled in an art school or art program and I was thinking was I or wasn't I? Because as you see my training and chaotic...and very too much. but in fact I am now working in a school of art. the department where I work I am a teacher now at... the department is called cultural media studies. the institution that this program is held is the institute of art of communications. So my students are specifically from the class room of media studies but also the students of the other programs of arts and communication. so especially cinema and also plastic arts and music. in fact I am now involved in an art program but as a teacher.

LN: How does location impact your work?

PS: Location…it is an interesting question because my subjects tend to be very global. the impact of technology ... and normally it is not the typical subjects that people from
other countries especially developed country like the states or Europe expects that Latin American researcher to work on. Because technology is not suppose to be a Latin American subject. We are supposed to be more... more important than technology. But anyway I don’t know why. I can’t answer exactly why but I can say what the impact of this in my career was. the view from outside is that Latin American researchers maybe should not study that because it is the topic of the states or Europe but technology is very present in our days in every day life too and the students don’t look at them as the Latin American all the time Latin American in the sense of the outside view. We use technology in every day life and the impact of technology in every day life is much sense very similar to the impact in your life. The location is not something that is not important. I think it is especially important because the technology is important. We appropriate this technology very easily in part of the population. At least not the part has access to these technologies. That is not a small part. Even if there is a very big part does not have access to a lot. Even those people who don’t have the access to technology they are in contact because they see others having and they see the advertisement television and in the magazines, the shops, and the streets. So a big part of them could like to have the access too. So the impact of technology in Latin America is very important in life like in the other part of the western world, but I think that it’s not a detail that we have to forget that we are in the margins of the world. Because one of the aspects of this factor would be that we have certain kinds of appropriation that are not exactly the same than in the mainstream countries and also its an opportunity to think how we are influenced by something that we don’t create. I think location is important in the sense that there is that big part of the population that does not have the access but would like to have it. When we say everybody now has access to the internet, everybody use mobile phones. Well that is not exactly everybody and that is something that normally academic researches that study this technology in Latin America tend to forget. But I think that it is important not to forget because that is a very important part of the problem, of the question, of the conflict. The fact that it is something that technology is also the products that we consume, that we buy, and the stimulation to have that and by having this access you have the access to paradise or the real world and the fact that not everybody can have this access. I think this a very important question. so that is the impact of the location.

LN: What or who inspires you?

PS: Let me think, in the big subject technology body and subjectivity that is my research what is common to all my research projects. What is interesting for me is the way in which the uses of new technology affect our bodies and the way we are. the way we present ourselves to others and the way we construct ourselves and connect with the others. And why the new technology will be different than the ones from the past. I think the role they play in the way we construct ourselves and effect of our bodies is very
important, but it’s not just the technology that does this to us that we also appropriate technology and we even in Latin America we DO the technology also. So, I wanted to say something about the location so wait a minute. I lost myself. So, what or who inspires me? what is contemporary world. our reality

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LN: Yes.

PS: What? What is contemporary world? Our reality, the way we are constantly surprised by novelties but also as we are used to our constantly surprised by novelties we are not so surprised and the novelties are so much novelties. So how this constantly tradition of novelties became something natural or something of everyday life and so what I learn I think during- of these years of researching this topic is an exercise, a methodological exercise that I think that is useful, I try to teach this to my students is to do an exercise everyday, exercise to denaturalize the thing, the other, to have a distance and maybe will the novelties are usual and we are very used to that… the Internet and finding everything, transform the body with plastic surgery, and to deprogram the genetic code, and all those things that we hear, we do or we don’t [do], but we know that the others do, or we could do. The exercise I tend to do is to have a distance and pick this, one of these examples, for example, and say, “Wait a minute, what we are doing exactly and why this technology? And why we invent this? And why we need before and something similar to this? And why should we use this? Or why now? And why not in another time? So this exercise of buying artificial is surprised by technology. So what inspires me is that and not only the technology that we serve for everyday, but as I am in
the communication area or Media Studies, I also do that with press notice, new, with the news. For example, with an article or a TV program, or a advertisement, but well we see it every where and we are so use- For example, I say, “wait a minute, what did he say exactly? The character in that advertisement?” So I pick that and show it to the students and I say, “Well, we live in a culture that is able to say that and then that ism and what could we say about our world that invented this and why? So what inspires me is that. That novelties that are not novelties because are this is all the time, but I try to do the exercise to see the novelty and also the contrary, to denaturalize that and to say, “Well this not natural, ha, this is, this is crazy.” So, and who? I don’t know is you are asking about authors.

LN: Anything that comes to mind.

PS: Well I have, I think all of us have some authors that are especially important and especially inspiring and that you have read something once and they sort of illuminate what you think and when you look at something you say, “yes the author is say that.” Well, I have some authors like this. For example, Michel Foucault, if you want them. Um, Walter Benjamin would, another one, um, Gilles Deleuze together with Michel Foucault, but Foucault I think is that he is even more important and Nietzsche also, like philosopher, that is always saying, for example, this method of denaturalizing things and suspect of everything. The philosophy of the suspect and you know how to say that in English, I am traducing from Spanish that is already traduced from German, this philosophy of suspecting everything that is Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze also rescue from him. And well, Walter Benjamin I think that every text of Benjamin I mean that I’ve already read, if I reread after 2 years or 5 years or 10 years later, I find other things and it’s special for researchers of technology. This is very good because he died 70, 80 years ago. I don’t know, he’s look, his way of looking to his reality and I think had this advantage that I was trying to describe, the look of reality trying to find the different legs of history and of culture and knowing and showing that this is not natural, that we’ve not lived in a natural world and not just because we are in the 21st century. I wasn’t true neither in the time that he … in the beginning of the 20th century, neither in the time that he studied in the 19th century, or never. So I think that this is what the social or cultural researchers should do, I think that this is the most interesting, for me, the most interesting work we can do. The question of the artificiality of out world and trying to show where it’s coming from. From history? Culture? And also why? I think this is the most difficult question, but the most important if we can not answer, at lest put the question. Whys is this happening now? What are the interest does it serve? Another question that I think is important at lest philosophers and thinkers put is, why is reality
like this, our contemporary world like this. The other question is how we would like it to be and this is an even more difficult question and even more … use I think than in the 19th and 20th century because it is becoming more what it is with no alternatives. With no other projects not in the present and not even in the future, like possibility of other worlds. And not even in fiction because fiction is also in crisis. I think it is with the non fiction section of reality, it shows that every thing should be real. So when … wrote when Foucault wrote in the 60’s and 70’s, when Deleuze wrote and when Nietzsche, there was an open future. The future was open, not only for the progress of technology or science or the advancement of knowledge, but also of the invention of other worlds, of other ways of living. Now it seems to me that especially with the contact that I have with young people, It seems to me that the future is not very open any more, it’s not open for us to create something. Its like this , this is what we have. We have all this gadgets and well what we can hope is that we come better and better and more gadgets so we can so everything in the internet and talk telephone with everybody and we have the world of computers and all those thing. Well that is what the future promises and not much more than that, So I think that what inspires me in that as the possibilities to introduce this question, show the artificiality, cultural, political, economical and open the question it could be possible to think and to do- to make another worlds. Philosophers and thinkers I think are very inspiring in that sense. So.

LN: Wonderful. Finally what do you hope your audience learns from your work?

PS: Hum, Ha,. Well I hope they learn anything. I don’t know, but if I get to show this, that I am trying to tell you, it would be great if this, after my talks with my class or my books, someone opens these questions, I think that I satisfied.

LN: Great.

PS: I don’t know if it’s the case. I don’t know if my audience really learns that, ha. Well I learned that from my teachers or from my readings. So thank you.

LN: Thank you so much.
Suggested reading


