

A MOUNTAIN IS A MOUNTAIN IS NOT A MOUNTAIN

Go on and watch your step.

Artist Sabina Ott invites the public to travel her immense sculpture by walking through the tunnels, caverns, and paths composed to navigate the large abstract mountain installation that she has been building in her mind for over a decade. The exhibition consists of four components that complete the installation: the foam mountain and boulder, video work, a mini-exhibition of more than 100 small works by various artists, and a soundscape that envelops it all created by Joe Jeffers in collaboration with Ott. The success of *who cares for the sky?* is dependent upon people traversing her openings and resting on her benches to experience her treasures and vistas. Hyde Park Art Center is proud to present this epic experimental project, which is the most ambitious project Ott has created to date.

The 2015/2016 Jackman Goldwasser Resident Artist at the Art Center, Sabina Ott has spent the year preparing for this momentous occasion. With an abundance of planning, the structural assistance of Chicago-based design and engineering firm SpaceHaus and a corps of over twenty volunteers, Ott built the sculpture directly in the gallery in 18 days. Close to 70 blocks of expanded polystyrene measuring 8x4x3½ feet were adhered together with industrial spray foam, sculpted with a hot wire cutter, and cladded with the cut-off fragments, treating the surface of the mountain as a structural collage. Ott’s extensive painting practice manifests in the attention to formal details that define the mountain’s surface. Wavy and puffy lines oscillate across the white plain and are broken up by episodes of artificial greenery that spill and sprout from crevices. Red, orange, green, and blue lights dust the crown of the mountain with color and create a comfortable space for conversation and contemplation.

The large-scale installation evolved from Ott’s ongoing fascination with the writing of Modern American poet and cultural figure Gertrude Stein. Many of Ott’s sculptures, videos, and paintings since the 1980s have incorporated references to Stein in some way, but never has Ott dedicated an 8,000 cubic-foot sculpture to this admiration. The title of the exhibition originates from the following passage Ott chose from Stein’s children’s book, *The World Is Round* (1938), where the main character Rose, decides to journey up a mountain to better understand the world and herself.

*Dear mountain tall mountain real mountain blue
mountain yes mountain high mountain all mountain
my mountain, I will with my chair come climbing and
once there mountain once there I will be thinking,
mountain so high, who cares for the sky yes mountain
no mountain yes I will be there. (33)*

Stein builds imaginary space through repeated and run-on language that guides the reader in constant circling motion. Similarly, play and repetition are important to Ott’s art practice and inform her work to foster a direct experience between the viewer and the artwork rather than encourage a passive gaze. This is made clear in Ott’s use of the video screen—a format that is commonly distancing and objective. Three video screens that contain the same visual content are presented at different scales and spread out in separate locations surrounding the installation in text. Simple words and sentences borrowed from Stein’s book detach and drift, rotate, or pass through skyscape and suburban

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landscape. Animation in a horizontal or vertical scroll draws attention to language by slowing down the process of word construction to the point of being unrecognizable. The movement of the text in combination with the upward view of the sky and a bird’s-eye view of roof tops enhances the vertigo-inducing quality of the video and installation as a whole. Both artist and poet bounce between micro and macro landscapes and concepts in their work, which resists conformity and inspires contradiction. As a result, we find ourselves in an otherworldly terrain liberated to find our own way.

Nature, architecture and the body are intentionally intertwined in *who cares for the sky?* to challenge our perception of landscape and its social construction. Geographical discourse has long used binary terms to describe Mother Earth that uphold power structures and bring the cultural understanding of landscape under feminist critique.¹ When creating the mountain, Ott considered the fantasy architecture/sculptures of French modernist artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002) that portrayed the reclining female body as a massive curvy white form with a vaginal portal allowing viewers into the sculpture.² Although the amorphous sculpture by Ott is not sexualized or anthropomorphic, the grottos and caves form orifices that move people through and inside the structure and suggest an abstract body. The radiant mound was engineered to bare weight, secure passage up and down the staircase, and support activity throughout the structure. The mountain-as-vessel is a metaphor for the idealized genderless body that is both an agent for uniting individuals and a source of energy to inspire audacious creativity. Ultimately, it is the artist’s intention to embed the large sculpture in a public park for all to enjoy within a landscape.

The topography of Ott’s mountain also acknowledges the larger art ecology—the community necessary for artists to thrive in Chicago. Nearly 100 artists responded to Ott’s invitation to contribute small pieces of their choosing to be displayed inside the mountain. Many of the artists are colleagues with whom Ott has taught, exhibited or who have exhibited at her house-gallery in Oak Park, fittingly named Terrain. The catacomb of small paintings, sculptures, sound, and works on paper create an intimate viewing experience. The meta-installation becomes a shrine to the relationships supporting Ott’s complex practice as artist, educator, and administrator.

Mountains are undoubtedly iconic symbols in most cultures throughout history and represent a proximity to supreme knowledge and realization, often following a perilous or painful journey. In *who cares for the sky?*, the proverbial mountain serves as an abstract springboard to non-linear thinking and provides an informal space to measure of the journey made as well as envision the world to come.

Yes mountain she said *yes I will be there.*

Allison Peters Quinn
Director of Exhibition & Residency Programs



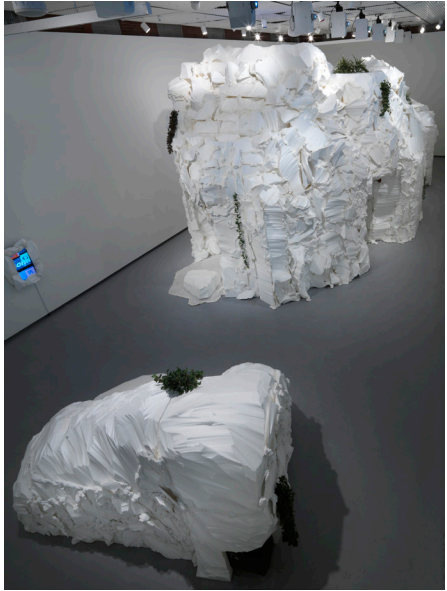
SABINA OTT has been nationally recognized for her outstanding and broad range of work—from painting to installation to sculpture—including her central role in the art world as educator, curator and founder of Terrain Exhibitions (2012). She received a Guggenheim Fellowship for 2015/16 and recently completed a public art commission for the Chicago Transit Authority.

Exhibiting since 1985, Sabina Ott has participated in over 100 solo and group exhibitions in Sao Paulo, Brazil; Auckland, New Zealand; Melbourne, Australia; and many cities across the US. Her work resides in numerous museum collections including The Whitney Museum of American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The National Gallery of Art, St. Louis Art Museum, and the Oakland Museum of Art, and has

been reviewed nationally in Art in America, Art Forum, and The New York Times. Ott received a BFA and MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, where was Director of Graduate Programs after teaching at Washington University (St. Louis). She is currently represented by Aspect/Ratio in Chicago and Professor of Art at Columbia College Chicago.

¹ Rose, Gillian, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993) p.87

² Niki de Saint Phalle's artwork titled *HON — en katedral' ('SHE — a Cathedral')* debuted at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden in 1966



who cares for the sky? includes artworks by: Nelly Agassi, Elizabeth Allen-Cannon, Kristine Aono, Claire Ashley, Joshua Aster, Karen Azarnia, Conrad Bakker, Brit Barton, Lynn Basa, Leslie Baum, Iris Bernblum, Deborah Boardman (courtesy of Sabina Ott), Adam Brooks, Judith Brotman, Jan Brugger, Tom Burtonwood, Paola Cabal, Kristin Calabrese, Kevin Carney, Diane Christiansen, Corinna Cowles, Andi Crist, Laura Davis, Makeba Kedem DuBose, Dana Duff, Meg Duguid, Jim Duignan, Jeanne Dunning, Assaf Evrons, Wilson Fo and Joel Mercedes, Victoria Fuller, Diana Gabriel, Judith Geichman, Rami George, Joan Giroux, Karolina Gnatowski, Zoe Gordon, Michelle Grabner, Macia Guerrero, Dan Gunn, Philip Hartigan, Cameron Harvey, Emily Hermant, Samantha Hill, Elisabeth Hogeman, Richard Holland, Holly Holmes, Jenn Kaplan, Juneer Kibria, Julia Klein, Barbara Koenen, Anna Kunz, Rosabel Kurth, Lu Junxi, Jin Lee, Kelly Lloyd, Angela Lopez, Dana Major, Victoria Martinez, Duncan Mackenzie & Joseph Trupia, Jenna Mazza, Bobbi Meier, Matt Morris, Judith Mullen, Meg Noe, Michelle Nordmeyer, Marlena Novak, Grace O'Brian, Josue Pellot, Tony Phillips, Lise Haller Baggensen, Caroline Picard, Mary Anna, Pomonis, Melissa Pokorny, Melissa Potter, Henri Preiss, Judith Raphael, Nina Rizzo, Eric Ruschman, Alison Ruttan, Luis Sahagun, Miriam Schaer, Mindy Rose Schwartz, Anna Showers-Cruser, Hardy Schlick, Mindy Rose Schwartz, Peter Skarva, Susanne Slavick, Deb Sokolow, Edra Soto, Scott Stack, Naava Stein, Catherine Sullivan, Alex Tam, Selina Trepp, Lan Tuazon, Eden Unulata, Allison Wade, Morganne Wakefield, Michelle Wasson, Rhonda Wheatley, Paula Wilson, Scott Wolniak, and Shanna Zentner.

Soundscape by Joe Jeffers.

Artist Talk:
Chris Kraus in conversation with Sabina Ott
Sunday, March 6, 2-4 pm

International filmmaker and writer Chris Kraus joins Sabina Ott to discuss the current sculptural project, *who cares for the sky?*

From the Mountaintop:
Open Mic with Writer's Block
Thursday, April 14, 5-7 pm

Teens participating in the Writer's Block program at Hyde Park Art Center muse on the mountain in public performances presented in/ on the sculpture.

The World Is Round
Saturday, April 30, 10-12 pm

Families are encouraged to create poems inspired by Gertrude Stein and Sabina Ott's installation with the Poetry Foundation.

Alternative Cartographies
Saturday, April 23, 2-4 pm

Join us for an informative conversation on gender, creativity, and topography. **Srikanth Reddy**, Associate Professor of English at University of Chicago, discusses his latest research on Gertrude Stein and her geographical imagination. Writer and curator **Daniel Orendorff** presents his studies on Fairy Mountain (a radical safe haven for gay culture in Tennessee) in relation to queer aesthetics. The social landscape of gender theory is examined by **Therese Quinn**, Professor at University of Illinois, Chicago, and contributor to *Rethinking Sexism, Gender and Sexuality* (2016).

Moderated by Ariel Gentalen

Rock Bottom
Sunday, May 1, 3-4 pm

Dancers and performing artists interact with the artwork by enhancing the installation's ability to be a stage of wander and wonder. Through their body, movement, and touch, artists **Madeline Kodat**, **Jessica Cornish**, **Ginger Krebs** and others challenge the stillness of the piece while encouraging the viewer to embrace the full scene. Their performances aim to expand the discussion on the individual's physical and metaphysical journey.

Visit hydeparkart.org for more info and the most up-to-date programming calendar.

SPECIAL THANKS to Peter Reese, Peter Skvara, Anna Showers-Cruser, Joe Jeffers and Jeroen Nelemans for technical video assistance; and the volunteers who built the mountain: Lynn Basa, Iris Bernblum, Dana Duff, Cameron Harvey, Jen Kaplan, Makeba Kedem-DuBose, Rosabel Rosalind Kurth, Ji Su Kwak, Ada Lu, Jenna Mazza, Michelle Nordmeyer, Melissa Pokorny, Will Thompson and Jessica Wolke.

Hyde Park Art Center is a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. As an open forum for exploring the artistic process, the Art Center fosters creativity through making, learning about, seeing, and discussing art—all under one roof. The Art Center is funded in part by: Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Field Foundation of Illinois; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Harper Court Arts Council; Harpo Foundation; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Illinois Humanities Council; Irving Harris Foundation; Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; National Endowment for the Arts; National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly; Polk Bros. Foundation; David C and Sarajejan Ruttenberg Arts Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

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Hyde ParkARTCENTER

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Sabina Ott
who cares for the sky?

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