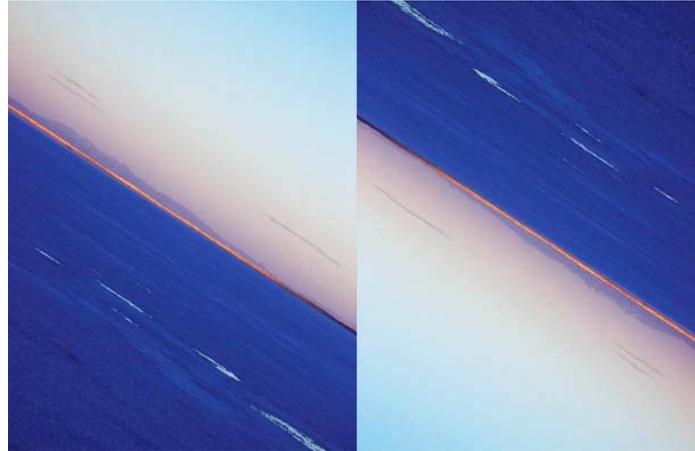


## Portrait of an Itinerant Investigator as told by a French Historiographer



Five years ago, I was browsing through the slides of *Women & Their Work* looking for artists to include in a show,<sup>1</sup> when I came across little sculptures made of white ceramic. I was strangely attracted to these beautiful but uncanny objects, and decided to contact the artist: Katherine E. Bash. She accepted my invitation and, to help me write the essay, sent me her resume: BA in biology, training at the Smithsonian, research trip in the Amazonian, and Fulbright in Ecuador. As a French historian with little sense for adventure, I was fascinated by the life of this itinerant researcher. I wanted to know more about her travels, and the experiences that led to the creation of her *Emergence* ceramics. But Katherine was then in Chile and I could only meet her the day of the opening. I remember our first conversation: Katherine was laboriously trying to explain me her work, randomly mentioning places, names and concepts I did not know. I remember asking many details. My Cartesian mind was trying to put order in the flow of her ideas and memories. This was the beginning of our ongoing dialogue. She is the dreamer, the inventor, and the poet, and I have become her co-conspirator and historiographer.

Five years later, Katherine is having her first solo show at *Women & Their Work*. On this occasion, I would like to share with you the story of Katherine E. Bash, as I was able to put it together from the pieces she gave me.

Born in Midland, Katherine Bash spent her childhood in West Texas, climbing trees and flipping on the trampoline. While studying Biology at the University of Texas at Austin, she spent a year in Italy as an exchange-student.<sup>2</sup> During the summer, she stayed in Venice, where she met many artists and writers. Guided by the stories of her Venetian friends and the books they gave her, Katherine started to explore the city as she used to explore the trees of her childhood. She would often start her promenades on the heights of the city to enjoy a panoramic view. As she walked down the streets of Venice, she would experience the transformation of what she had seen from above in what she was now walking through. These were the same palaces and canals, but a shift of perspective had transformed them and revealed unseen connections. This experience led Katherine question the nature of human perception, generating her first investigations into the link between intellectual knowledge and physical experiences – a question still today at the core of her reflection, as we can see in her panorama series, *Insites*, which invites us to locate ourselves through the process of dislocation.

After graduation,<sup>3</sup> Katherine participated in the Research Training Program of the Smithsonian Natural History Museum.<sup>4</sup> Working and discussing with the scientists of the museum on a daily basis, Katherine became aware of the limits of theory, and discovered an unsuspected creative dimension in the practice of taxonomy. She realized that to organize natural entities into species requires above all creativity, and that far from merely applying rules, taxonomists were constantly transforming them and creating new ones. The boundaries between scientific research and creative production seemed rather thin, and Katherine started imagining crossing them.

Back in Austin, Katherine was introduced to Regina Silveira, the renowned Brazilian artist and teacher,<sup>5</sup> who gave a talk at University of Texas and organized a workshop.<sup>6</sup> On this occasion, Katherine had the opportunity to work closely with Regina and to realize under her guidance her first artwork, *Emptiness*, a site-specific installation on the north façade of the Goldsmith Hall.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the workshop Regina asked Katherine to assist her installing her coming show at the Blue Star Gallery in San Antonio and, before leaving the United States, she invited her young assistant to join her in Brazil.

This invitation coincided with another one coming from a Brazilian scientist met at the Smithsonian to go on an insect-collecting trip across the Southern Amazon basin.<sup>8</sup> As she had been studying Spanish and Portuguese for some time and wished to learn more about South America, Katherine decided to combine both invitations. At the end of her research trip, she went to São Paulo where she spent her time reading books from Regina's extensive library, visiting exhibitions, and meeting with the community of artists and writers who gathered around Regina. Their conversations

introduced Katherine to a way of thinking that challenged Western definitions of art and artist. In Brazil, the boundaries between disciplines are more fluid than in the United States, as artists write poems and scientists make artworks. Likewise, artworks are less objects created by solitary artists in their studios than the results of collaboration between individuals of different background. Finally, in Brazil, being an artist is a socially respected and responsible way to interact with the world. Katherine could easily relate to such an understanding of the creative process and embraced.

While in Brazil, Katherine found that she had been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to conduct independent research in Ecuador.<sup>9</sup> At the time of her application, Katherine wanted to study the impact of petroleum industry on the eastern rainforests, in particular the sociological relationships of the people to this industry. But, by the time she arrived in Ecuador, her research interests had expanded to visual and textual communication. For almost a year, Katherine lived with several indigenous communities. This experience dramatically shifted her understanding of the world as she learned to see its manifestations through their eyes. At the end of her stay, she could not simply write an ecologic report, she had to find a way to communicate the complexity of her subject and to accommodate the diversity of her interests. Her final project, *What is home? How do they define home?*, presented a radical departure from traditional ecologic study, as she included the photographs, sound recordings, and creative writing, she had made during her stay with the rainforest communities.<sup>10</sup> In *What is home?* Katherine defined the multimedia approach that still today characterizes her work.



Upon her return, Katherine was invited to create a piece for the *Parque Escultórico Cementerio* of Putaendo, a sculpture park located in the Chilean Andes.<sup>11</sup> Without hesitation, she accepted this opportunity and traveled to Putaendo, where she built *Mirador de Estrellas*, a platform to observe the stars, and her first tool for observation. During her stay in Chile, Katherine had the opportunity to visit the Ciudad Abierta of the Universidad de Valparaíso, an architectural project created in the 1950s by a group of visionary architects and poets, whose ambition was to blur the boundaries between disciplines and to create a discourse specific to South American thought.<sup>12</sup> Katherine immediately connected with the ethos of the Ciudad Abierta, and literally fell in love with its site: open to the Pacific Ocean, the main buildings were built on an incline with active sand dunes, resulting in an ever changing landscape. This visit was important because it provided a successful example of cross-disciplinary practice and experimental inquiry that was to become Katherine's model.

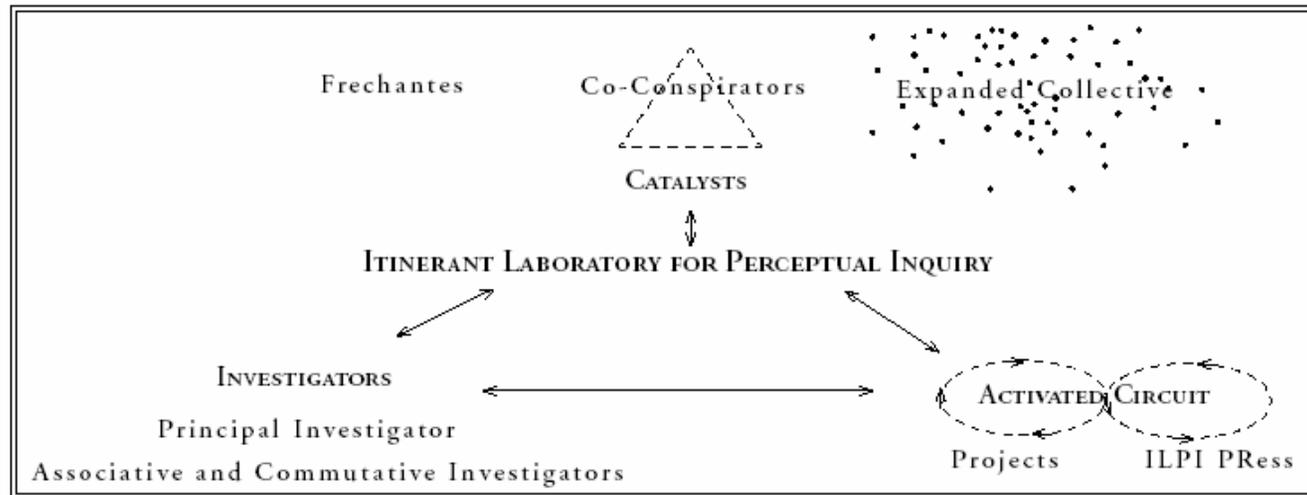
After returning from Chile, Katherine started an MFA in Design at UT. Design, a discipline at the crossroads of art and science, whose boundaries are extremely dynamic, provided her with the appropriate environment to develop her own discipline. In the framework of her MFA, Katherine participated in the Land Arts of the American West, a field trip through all the major sites of Land Arts.<sup>13</sup> During this trip, Katherine created several no-trace site specific interventions, such as *in (of) between* a video-installation she realized at the World War II airbase of Wendover. Her extensive filed notes were compiled in *Phase Change*, a set of concrete poems, each of them being devoted to a specific site.<sup>14</sup> *Phase Change*, a physical phenomenon in which a natural element undergoes a transformation such as that of water becoming ice, became the subject and organizational principle for a project in which sites become texts.



Fluent in several languages, Katherine had always been interested in the way direct translation from one language to another often reveals gaps of consciousness. For instance, in many languages, there is only one word for shade and shadow. I, a French speaker, cannot comprehend the difference English speakers make between the two, despite Katherine's attempts to explain it to me. This gap led Katherine to further question the concepts of shade/shadow and to identify the *Janus Shade* that is, the point when a shade can be perceived as a shadow, and vice versa. Pursuing her investigation at the intersection of language and consciousness, Katherine identified other daily phenomena that we rarely acknowledge, because we have no name for them, in an attempt to narrow the gap between unconscious and conscious perception. Among them, the *Lourndish of Leaves*, the organized patterns of live oak leaves as they trace in groups across the pavement inspired by wind, or the *Frechas*, the windows of opportunity that too often go underutilized. A selection of these phenomena was compiled into *A Field Guide to Observable Phenomena: A Tool for Aesthetic Practice*,<sup>15</sup> which also included a commentary on the role of naming and consciousness, and a list of tools for observation, such as the *Blink Chair* (a device she built for metastatic observation),<sup>16</sup> mirrors, cocktail parties, and of course walking.



After completing her MFA, Katherine established *The Itinerant Laboratory for Perceptual Inquiry (ILPI)*, an institution devoted to the observation and archiving of unnamed phenomena;<sup>17</sup> an institution of which Katherine is the Principal Investigator (PI) and I, the author of this text, am the historiographer.<sup>18</sup> The Laboratory aims at fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations between individuals affiliated with it, and at encouraging inquiry as a process of creating new methods and meanings. Since its creation, the ILPI has been traveling to Brazil, where the PI and Lilian Amaral organized a workshop titled *Revealed Landscape: Observation as Aesthetic Practice*;<sup>19</sup> to the *Center for Land Use Interpretation* in Wendover, where the PI collaborated with William L. Fox on the *Floating Point Operation* Project; and to Santa Fe where the PI attended a symposium at the Santa Fe Institute<sup>20</sup> and befriended Dr. Ole Peters and Dr. Jessika Tracik, two SFI Post-doctoral fellows in Physics, with whom she discussed symmetry, mapping and poetry. Presently, the Laboratory is located in London where the PI is working on a practice-based PhD at the Bartlett School of Architecture and collaborating with renowned vision neuroscientist, Dr. Beau Lotto, whose research and collaborations range between complex systems, vision science, and art.<sup>21</sup>



Today Katherine presents the result of her investigation on *Broken Symmetries*. For those unfamiliar with the term, things are said to be symmetric when they remain invariant with respect to an operation. For instance, a cube is described as symmetric, because when you rotate it, it still looks identical. But, if you cut off one of its corners and rotate it, it will look different – its symmetry will be broken. Katherine began referring to this concept while working on nearly identical/symmetric landscapes. During a snowstorm in Wendover, she took two panoramic photographs at fifteen minutes interval of the same site. This experimentation, now titled *Phenomena of Partial Illusion*, resulted in two different landscapes. This was the same site, but in between the shoots the clouds had moved, the shadows had shifted and the details had been transformed. To understand what she had done, and to link it to larger questions, she referred to the notion of Broken Symmetry. Broken Symmetries became the conceptual tool with which Katherine explores the patterns she is observing. The images of the *Perforations* series, for instance, started as a nearly symmetrical landscape of the ocean, the symmetry of which was broken by the poetic act of “perforating space with place.”<sup>22</sup>

Faithful to the idea of the Itinerant Laboratory, Katherine has asked the poet William L. Fox<sup>23</sup> and the physicist Ole Peters,<sup>24</sup> two of the Investigators associated with the Laboratory, to contribute with their respective expertise to this inventive and creative analysis. Their texts are not explanations of Katherine’s works. They are beautiful convergences of thought between individuals and disciplines - a successful example of cross-disciplinary collaboration, and I would venture to say, of broken symmetry.

With *Broken Symmetries*, Katherine Bash invites us once again to pay attention to the world around us and to make connections between its different elements. This is a *Frecha*; let’s enter!

Catherine Dossin  
Historiographer of the ILPI



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- <sup>1</sup> *Pink Perspectives*, Studio 107, Austin, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Junior Year in Italy, TASSEP, Università degli Studi di Bologna and Università Degli Studi di Pavia, 1996
- <sup>3</sup> In 1997 with a BA in Biology from the University of Texas at Austin.
- <sup>4</sup> *National Science Foundation*, Fund for Undergraduate Research, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, 1997
- <sup>5</sup> For more information on Regina Silveira, see: [reginasilveira.uol.com.br](http://reginasilveira.uol.com.br)
- <sup>6</sup> *On-Site Drawing*, workshop led by Regina Silveira, University of Texas at Austin. 1998
- <sup>7</sup> *Emptiest I*: ephemeral drawing installation, Architecture School, University of Texas at Austin, 1998
- <sup>8</sup> Field research on Lepidoptera supervised by Dr. Victor Becker, from Brasília to Porto Velho, Brazil, 1998
- <sup>9</sup> *J. William Fulbright Scholarship* to Ecuador, 1998
- <sup>10</sup> Thanks to its multimedia dimension, this work was published (“Tales from the Rainforest: Photo-essay.” *Q. The Magazine of Ecuadorian Life* 42 (July), 1999) and exhibited (*Jatun Huarmi (Great Women)*, Las Manitas, Austin, 2001)
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on the sculpture park, see: [www.putaendo.com](http://www.putaendo.com)
- <sup>12</sup> For more information on this Open City, see: [www.arquitecturaucv.cl/ead](http://www.arquitecturaucv.cl/ead).
- <sup>13</sup> For more information on this program, see: [landarts.art.utexas.edu](http://landarts.art.utexas.edu)
- <sup>14</sup> *Phase Change*, (Austin: Trustees of the CK Press, 2004)
- <sup>15</sup> *A Field Guide to Observable Phenomena: A Tool for Aesthetic Practice*, (Austin: Trustees of the CK Press, 2004)
- <sup>16</sup> *Blink Chair (metastasis) I*, itinerant public work administered by Katherine Bash since 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> For more information on the *Itinerant Laboratory for Perceptual Inquiry*, see: [www.itinerantlaboratory.org](http://www.itinerantlaboratory.org)
- <sup>18</sup> In addition to being in charge of writing the story of the ILPI, I am the Chairman of the Co-conspirators.
- <sup>19</sup> Workshop led by L. Amaral and K. Bash, SESC Pompeia, São Paulo, 2005
- <sup>20</sup> *The Unreasonable Orderliness of Life: Feedback, Hierarchy and Emergence*, Annual Trustees’ and Business Network Seminar of the Santa Fe Institute, 2005.
- <sup>21</sup> For more information on Dr. Lotto, see: [www.lottolab.org](http://www.lottolab.org)
- <sup>22</sup> Here place is understood to be the material. As Michael Heizer said: “Place is material. Material is place.”
- <sup>23</sup> William L. Fox, *echoes (for robert creeley)*, (London: ILPI Press, 2007)
- <sup>24</sup> Dr. Ole Peters, *Fragments of Symmetry*, (London: ILPI Press, 2007)