

The Paradox of Isolation

Roberta Lima

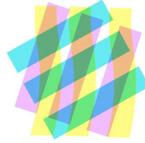
I've always looked into my surroundings as a starting point of my practice. They have also served as guide for positioning myself politically and affirming my identity. In Brazil I started to explore with body modification subculture in regards to architecture; in Vienna I sought to acquire more academic knowledge and to be inserted in the body and gender chronology of Austrian arts. Since I moved to Finland, my atelier was expanded outdoors.

If in one hand, my migration to Finland has resulted in innumerable possibilities of expansion, on another, I was faced with social and cultural limitations. In Vienna, I lived in a central area, within a walking distance to my atelier and to the Art Academy, where I studied and later worked. On my way to those spaces, I met friends, passed by Mariahilferstrasse (one of the busiest streets in Vienna), saw people seating at cafes and socializing.

Here in Finland, I live in a small island in Helsinki, facing the center and across the Baltic Sea. I am surrounded by forest and water. If I want to see more than a few people, I have to drive to the center.

I noticed quite quickly that Helsinki differs a lot to Vienna and its structures. I also realized how urban morphology and the way people interact are intertwined. Vienna's 23 districts are distributed in a spiral shape around a central core. Most cultural activities occur in the center, and in the districts closer to the "inner" city. Helsinki is divided in west and east areas. Whereas the south (where the island I live in is located) faces the sea and the so-called Helsinki Archipelago, the northern areas spread all the way to the neighboring cities of Vantaa and Espoo. If one doesn't live in the center, all movement must be done by either public transport or car. A big part of the shops are concentrated in malls. Underground parking spaces spread as a "city underneath a city" connecting streets through a huge bomb shelter carved in rocks. These buildings are a reflection of historical and geographical ideas of protection: from the war, from the cold.

It is a myth to think that Finnish don't socialize. They obviously do, but in a very unique way. I believe the Finns have a very special bond to nature and that they cherish the "small things". I noticed that Finns like to keep it simple, by reducing the contact to their family and closest circle of friends. Perhaps due the winter and long dark hours, Finns are more used to staying indoors and isolation. Not only Finns, but foreigners who live in Finland also behave differently in this environment. Even before the pandemic



started, I found myself isolating. I struggled with making friends, in networking, and in finding opportunities to show my work in Finland. But looking from a more positive side, it was in Finland that for the first time in my life I was able to fully dive into my practice and in the privilege of having time and freedom to work in my art. It is like living in a utopic landscape: contrary to the country where I was born, where I never felt completely safe or free.

In my recent works, I explore with the body as energy source and the element that challenges and redefines structures. I also search for alternative forms of communication. Working remotely has been my reality before the Coronavirus crisis.

One could argue that certain protocols in Helsinki, such as hygiene in sauna culture, or almost mathematical calculated distancing in waiting lines, also precede the virus.

 Funny · 17 Mar 17

How to wait for bus finnish style

4,233 points · 181 comments



Next Post

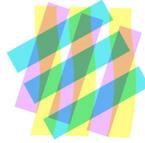


 Share on Facebook

 Share on Pinterest

DEBORT

There is an obvious difference between the way Finnish residents have handled the pandemic situation, when comparing to other countries such as Brazil or Austria. I wouldn't say that things in Finland are normal or better, but there is no doubt for me



that Finnish communities have handled the situation in a different way, which allowed most shops and private sports facilities to stay open during the holidays.

Keep
Helsinki
open.



Thanks for wearing a mask. Helsinki

Let's take care
of each other.



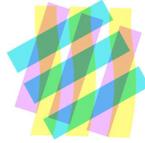
Helsinki Keep Helsinki safe.

Since I live in an island, I don't really notice many changes in the urban space. When I visit the center, I still experience a surreal feeling of almost a "post-pandemic or apocalyptic" city. Days before the holidays, malls were empty and restaurants closed earlier. The city wasn't empty because of a lockdown or restrictions, but because most people were following the rules. This resulted in many people choosing to work remotely, and even more people minimized social contact.

Since I wasn't able to visit art shows or couldn't really make any connections through my work, I decided to stay on the island and focus on my practice. I kept myself super busy throughout 2020 with my last work, called *Ghost Plant*. The outcome of this one-year project was a revelation: not being able to travel as planned, all images were then produced in my atelier and in the area where I live. Later, when the time for mounting the art shows came, I had to rely on people in Vienna, and trust them fully. That was super new and it surely changed my way to make and think art: for better. In my future works, I intend to keep issues like sustainability and mobility as central. Moreover, I wish to continue questioning how artistic production can contribute to necessary changes in today's society and strength the fundamental value of art in times of restriction.

In *Ghost Plant*, I refer to the concept of "The Wood Wide Web" to elaborate on a visual representation of systems of support and connectivity. In the forest, trees of different species have been thought to fight for light, but in reality, they benefit from one another when sharing the same space. Their intertwined roots and a symbiotic relationship with fungi create an underground economy based in cooperation.

Solidarity became an important tool for me for thinking the ways we communicate and operate within the art system. I used different technologies of support for making and showing *Ghost Plant*. I also explored with the paradox of isolation: the more I isolated, the more I felt connected: to my body, to my environments, to other people.



But I kept asking myself if I was ever going to be able to make friends and to feel “at home” in Helsinki. Most Finland residents travel abroad to escape winter, including me. Last year, people chose to stay in the country and sought for alternatives inside Finland. In October, I went to a tiny island off the Finnish West Coast (2 hours distance from Helsinki). There were no cars, no shops, only a few cottage houses. The access in and out of to the island was strictly by boat. There, I met a group of persons who changed my perception of Finnish people. I am not sure if it was the virus, or the fact that neither of us could go abroad to look for “something else”, or if it was just the right moment and the right place, but those people became my friends. Back to Helsinki, the city felt almost too big, too crowded. However, it felt more like home.

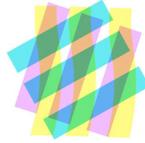
I started to embrace the cold, as opposed to run from it; I socialized, and no longer isolated. I’ve started to experience Finland and Finnish culture in a completely different way.

In 2019 I read a book called *Finding Sisu* written by a Finnish-born author called Katja Pantzar, who was grew up and studied in Canada. After Katja moved to Finland she discovered “sisu”, a Finnish expression used to describe a special kind of resilience and courage. In her book, Katja describes her trajectory in experiencing physical activities that take place in nature as healing and transformative. It was Katja’s book, which encouraged me to stay in Finland and explore with different perspectives. I remember the first time I entered cold water as invigorating. I sought for more contact with nature. During the research for *Ghost Plant* I attended a mushroom foraging workshop. It took place nearby Helsinki area and it was held in English. We were a small group of people and we started to chat. It didn’t take long for me to realize that Katja was there. She told me she was a writer, and that her book was called “Finding Sisu”. I told her “I read your book! It was the reason why I stayed in Finland”.

Recently I went ice swimming again. Along the Helsinki coast, there are several clubs dedicated for the practice of swimming in cold or frozen waters during wintertime. They provide changing rooms and facilities for a humble annual fee. And since the pandemic they also offer hand sanitizers and masks to be used in collective areas. I noticed that the more I enjoy the Finnish “small” things, the more solidarity I encounter.

I still miss Vienna a lot. It has been my home for the past 20 years. It was the city I lived for the longest uninterrupted period in my life. I miss my systems of support, the friends I made along the years. I miss being able to complain and to be grumpy at times. I miss confrontation and exciting discussions. And I surely miss not being the only one who breaks or questions the rules. I am sad that my trip there was postponed twice and that I wasn’t able to mount my own shows. I haven’t even seen them yet.

**CIUDADES
POSPANDEMIA**



**POST-PANDEMIC
CITIES**

But having to stay in Finland in 2020 made realize that I don't have to wait for a special event or for the "right time" for doing my work. That has been the biggest lesson that I leaned from the pandemic. My aim is to keep living in the present and continue exercising Finnish sisu. Who knows? Perhaps with time, Finland may also learn something from me.