

On Hope Ginsburg
—Emily Sessions

Walking into Hope Ginsburg's exhibition at CUE Art Foundation, you are confronted with an array of objects that, like archaeological artifacts, seem to vibrate with significance. These books, mittens, trophies, and photographs don't reveal their meanings immediately, like the showier paintings and sculptures in other Chelsea galleries. They invite investigation, questioning. What are these objects, what are they saying?

This exhibition is a survey of Ginsburg's *Sponge* project that has been ongoing for the past five years. *Sponge* consists of a variety of workshops, classes, and performances that take place in different spaces and contexts. Each is a structured and well-documented event in which participants learn about a subject, anything from Mongolian craft to undersea ecosystems, through different media. Ginsburg acts as the leader of this learning process and the participants act as “sponges”, soaking up information. After learning, participants then switch roles and teach their fellow workshop participants, as well as Ginsburg herself, about a subject in which they have expertise. Finally, participants are encouraged to replicate the process by organizing their own events so that the project is continual and expansive. These participants—present in this exhibition in the form of a slideshow of photos—and their experiences are at the center of this work. Ginsburg explained, “much of the project has to do with people and celebrating people's engagement with things that fascinate them.” Thus, Ginsburg's artistic production takes the form of an encounter for which she acts as facilitator. She states, “My background is in sculpture and performance, and to engage in these event-based projects, I consider it a type of performance.”¹

This practice aligns her with a certain approach to art making which is known by different names, including Social Practice art and Relational Aesthetics. Artists in these practices do not necessarily create traditional objects; rather the experience of the people who see or participate in their actions constitutes their work. Ginsburg's work relates especially to feminist practitioners of this approach in the 1970s who critically examined how certain roles and jobs are devalued in our society. One of these artists is Mierle Laderman Ukeles who, in her work *Touch Sanitation* (1970 - 1980), set out to shake hands with every worker at the New York City Department of Sanitation while saying the words, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” By this action, Ukeles wanted to increase people's respect for the work these people did as well as to overturn traditional power relationships between the provider and the user of a disagreeable service. This mirrors how the roles of teacher and student are reversed over the course of a *Sponge* workshop. In both cases, this reversal takes place in a specially structured act and, like Ukeles, Ginsburg hopes that the effects of destabilizing roles will extend beyond this act and into the outside world.

Another artist who worked in this paradigm in the 1960s and '70s and whom Ginsburg calls an important influence is Joseph Beuys. Like Ukeles, Beuys believed deeply in the transformative potential of art. He felt that encouraging creativity and artistic sensitivity and increasing knowledge could bring about political and social change. These utopian beliefs are exemplified in pedagogical projects like his *Free International University* at Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977,

1 All quotes are from my interview with Hope Ginsburg in January 2011.

which included a variety of talks and discussions. It was accompanied by his sculpture, *Honeypump in the Workplace* (1977), in which two tons of honey flowed through the space in clear plastic tubing and symbolized the flow of knowledge between participants.

Not all Social Practice artists create environments for their actions, which might instead take place in the most ordinary settings like city streets or museum walkways. However, Ginsburg is committed to a setting's potential to enhance the transformative effect of the art action. She states, "I've always been married to the idea of preserving the visual. It's something that I feel is very important. And so this [*Sponge*] project, although it has a lot to do with duration work, has never lost sight of aesthetic material, of object-making." This visual element is present at *Sponge* events in everything from the decor of the Sponge HQ (headquarters), currently located at Virginia Commonwealth University where Ginsburg teaches, to special *Sponge* water bottles. These elements set the spaces apart, increasing the participants' awareness and allowing them to become more "spongy", more sensitive to information and shifting relationships. By presenting materials from previous events to us in the gallery context, what she calls "the wonderful challenge of walls and a ceiling and that mechanism of translating things that happened," Ginsburg has created a different type of charged space for our own unique learning experience.

Ginsburg also explores the ability of objects to frame and strengthen social and personal transformations in the *Sponge* felt workshops. In these workshops, she teaches participants how to bond wool fibers together using friction and water to create a new shape. This process symbolizes how people come together and change when they participate in *Sponge* events. Ginsburg has also displayed and sold objects made in these workshops for the past two years in a booth at the Maker's Market, a juried open-air market for crafted products at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. These booths also contained information about *Sponge* and gave Ginsburg an opportunity to interact directly with a wider audience. The objects from these booths included in this exhibition encourage us to imagine the effects of different environments on learning and again underscores the potential of non-traditional exchanges of knowledge to effect social change.

These same issues are raised by the materials in this exhibition from *Colablalab*, the name derived from the collaborative aspect of the two labs involved. In this project, Ginsburg and a group of Virginia Commonwealth University students took a class together in biological concepts and met at Sponge HQ to create artworks inspired by what they were learning. These artworks, along with information about the project itself, were then presented at the 2010 *Science Fair* exhibition at Flux Factory in Long Island City. The exhibition at CUE includes a trophy from this fair, as well as a *Colablalab* wall painting and documentation of the project, so it has become a presentation of a presentation of an experience, which was in turn a synthesis and presentation of information learned earlier.

This series of transformations and contexts mirrors the other personal, social, and informational transformations that occur in Ginsburg's work and that ripple out from participants into the world. These experiences are encoded in objects and information included in this exhibition. Like archaeologists, we are invited to examine these things and imagine what actions they came from and to gauge how we react to them in this new context. We become sponges ourselves, absorbing and filtering information about the history of this rich and complex project.