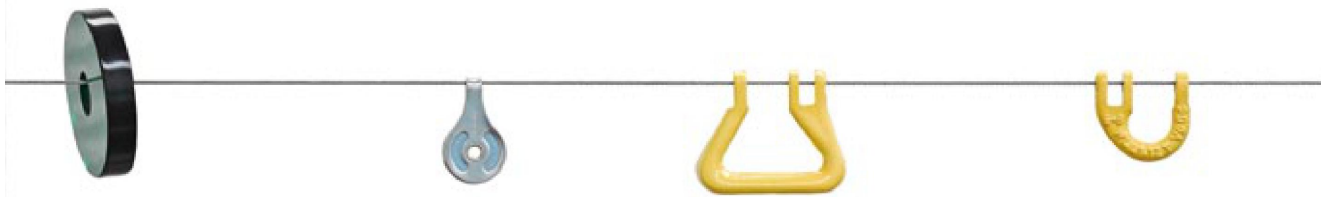


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NEITHER OBJECTS NOR COLORS: EXPERIENCES

A conversation with Jac Leirner

MARLON DE AZAMBUJA



About four years ago, when Omar-Pascual Castillo told me about his idea for a curatorial project Art X Artists conceived as a series within his program at the CAAM, in which an artist curates another artist, the name of Jac Leirner quickly came to mind. As I understood the proposal, in which the artist “curator” would choose another artist with whom he had or has a relationship of admiration and exemplary dialogue—in my case, someone who was influential in my learning, in the sense that his or her ideas reverberate in my practice and my artistic thoughts.

I’m a great admirer of Jac Leirner, there is no doubt. Her universe is unique and particular, her way of resolving spaces, of transgressing with elegance impels one to think and enjoy. But I think what I find most inspiring in her work are two points: first, the sense of resistance; to see how an artist can follow her own path separate from what would be the trends of the moment (and make no mistake, that is very hard to do). Jac practiced a warm minimalism in a time when others all around her forged the other way. It is true that she had success quite early, but this came as a confirmation that an artist who listens to herself is on the right path. Another thing that has been very influential on me is her way of accepting the nature of materials, that their colors are always right, their sizes too, and that any object or matter emits presence. It is a simple and powerful way of perceiving things, one that transcends art, and it opens doors to another way of relating to the world.

Detalle | Detail

HARDWARE SILK 3
2013

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The “*Weights and Measures*” project, after more than three years of conversations, dialogues and mutual seduction, culminated in this exhibition and publication. We spent three weeks in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria gathering materials and information, visiting ports, nautical and hardware stores, and megastores. The artist selected materials connected with people and places, and she worked a lot. My role as a curator was that of building a bridge, of creating a confluence between artist and city, encouraging the artist so that her passage throughout the island, her thoughts and the works she’d create, would echo in both its citizens and herself. The intensity of that relationship cannot be predicted yet, but I suspect that this meeting will be very important to many; for me at least it already is.

During this arduous and fruitful period we have had intense and extensive discussions among all of us, a small part of which some I would like to share with you a brief interview aimed more towards the artist, her positions and processes, more so than the specific works, and this is because I believe that although Jac’s work is physically very attractive, she as a person and an artist, has much to tell us.

Vista de sala exposición | Exhibition view
Hardware silk, Edgewood Avenue Gallery, Yale University School of Art,
 Connecticut; EE. UU., 2012

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MA | I know you've answered this question many times, but as time passes our perception also changes. I would like to start our interview by asking you about your origins, when and how you realized you were an artist.

JL | The pleasure to work with materials and colors, master techniques, decipher languages, comes long before the awareness that languages are complex and full of universal values. We do things because we like to, before we understand that this is the start of something much bigger. That pleasure in the doing and the enjoying remains almost intact, it's pure and genuine. The realization that everything is part of a larger scheme is what shapes our will and the results we seek. This is when we become artists. I am part of a family that has always adored languages, and to the extent possible, not in the academic way, I have embraced many of them. I always frequent museums, concert halls, cinemas. Books and records have always had the weight of rare gems. That is how I grew up and I have no reason to deny that gift. But throughout my life I have had aesthetic ecstasies that were independent of my education and have been definitive in my choices. They occurred by chance and unexpectedly, and came through various languages, such as music, poetry, film and painting, from infancy through adolescence. But when we are all growing and learning, we want everything. I was an athlete at age 14, but I had been fortunate enough to enter a university in fine arts at 17 and realize that I was in the right place. It is possible that if I had studied mathematics I would be fulfilled and happy.

MA | Your earlier practice focused more on collecting materials over a long period of time that you'd use in your work, and now we see a series of works in which, while they are fundamental materials in your procedural practice, they are new materials that you specifically buy for your work. How does this change arise and what does this new relationship with the materials imply for you?

JL | These materials were imposing themselves forcefully over time; they would emerge as structures that became visible, in the case of precision levels that appear under the methacrylate and the adhesives in 2001, or explicitly *Little Light* from 2006 where I use the copper thread, bulb, and socket. Also, as with the works with ashtrays in 1992, they arise as a constituent part—the bubble wrap, glass and chain are as important there as the ashtrays or boarding passes. All materials are always taken into consideration. I had already made works where strings were linked with ribbons and threads of various materials such as *Quilometro Amarrado*, which was in 2004. But it was during my stay in New Haven in 2012, when I was doing a residency in the School of Fine Arts at Yale University and preparing an exhibition at their gallery that I succumbed to consumption as inspiration from materials that could be transformed into art almost immediately. For the first time I went shopping with the intention of resolving aesthetic equations based on shops and large superstores. Not to mention that the United States is the consumer paradise, here I could find merchandise that came with the same function in different and extraordinary colors and models. I was focused on materials that were always dear to me, in the sense of their importance, such as levels, metal hoops, rulers, chains, etc. It was an enormous pleasure to buy things so marvelously elaborate and produced for specific purposes. Things for biking, climbing, and special materials for fishing

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boats. It was also from that experience in New Haven that I ended up finding second-hand materials and packaging goods for immediate consumption in which I was interested. I made works from these packages also, *Yale Days* and *Yale Nights*.

MA | Part of your work explores crime and its thrilling nature. How do those sentiments exist today? Do you continue to steal?

JL | Yes, *Corpus Delicti* continues. But I keep talking to the flight attendants, showing them catalogues of works previously made from paraphernalia that we see on all our flights. And there is a new item from these flights, but also a material that I have used in other series: adhesive signs. I can hardly wait to make these works! Also, over the past two decades I've continued to work on a series very connected to transgression, which is already well underway, relating to recreational drugs like cocaine and marijuana.

MA | Sometimes your formal solutions for works clearly reveal an immediate logical construction, such as *Nice to Meet You*, but others seem more an exercise in free composition. How does the process of formalizing an idea lend itself; is there system?

JL | Quite the contrary. The series, *Nice to Meet You*, was one of the hardest for me to formalize. How to transform those cards into sculptures, since after all, they are small squares of paper with inscriptions? Then, after thinking for years and years, I put the cards in situations of true metamorphosis, bringing them to the most absurd circumstances, mixing them with totally unexpected materials. I ultimately arrived at the straight line, and the technique that it's composed of: an aluminum frame with wood filler so that the methacrylate sandwiches with the cards could be fixed with pins in a straight line. Each card had its own pair of acrylic plates; minimum differences in sizes were taken into account.

QUARAQUAQUÁ
2014



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When I started buying those materials to construct the works almost immediately, I did not develop a technique. They were already highly processed, they are the result of great inventions: precision levels, rules, alpine carabineers, steel cables used for monumental loads—these materials arrive ready into my domains and they are articulated within themselves. And it's almost as if the colors don't need much to be in perfect harmony with each other. These synthetic materials have impressive strength and beauty.

MA | The color is always right, but you choose the use of colors very precisely. You accept the nature of materials but you also compose them with extreme care. How does this duality come about?

JL | I imagine it's like editing a text or a film, or a symphony—the parties must be in accordance with each other; they must make sense, have rhythm, must create tension with grace and wisdom. The nature of things is accurate. That precision is the key to finding new matches. For example, musical instruments are open to each other; religions naturally repel one another. We can force the materials to find new alliances. The artist Erika Verzutti recently mixed papier-mâché with bronze in several of her sculptures.¹ They're materials that at first have nothing in common, but they can be thought of as collaborations with unique and special results, often in perfect harmony.

MA | I confess that looking at your work, especially the more recent production, I had the impression that your way of working was a very direct experimentation with materials, as if the work only started once you had the material at hand, but from my experience in this exhibition, I've noticed that the time in contemplation is very important to you. I would like you to talk a little about your work routine and the importance of this mental space in your practice.

JL | I often say that when I work, I devote 90% of my time thinking, and I spend the remaining time experimenting and doing things. In a way that's true. I spend time imagining links between things and materials, thinking problems to be solved in practice and in accordance with the visual qualities of things with which I deal. The more time I have to think of its expression the better the result of a work. But each case is unique. The development of a drawing or watercolor is different from making a long-term project. I like to start projects without time to finish, with an open horizon for alterations and deviations. There is no routine, except for the bureaucratic issues that a work requires: answering emails, working with archives, talking with the teams of professionals at galleries and institutions with whom I work.

MA | Talk about *Weights and Measures*. Where did that name come from, what are the ideas behind this show and what are your conclusions about this experience and the works you developed?

JL | I remember the exact moment that the name "*Weights and Measures*" came and was here to stay: I was standing at the entrance to a building supply store watching the hectic movement on a central street in Mexico City. I was waiting for an attendant to ring up my purchase of precision levels for a piece I was producing, and I thought of our

¹ Jac Leirner is referring to the exhibition *Painted Ladies*, which Erika Verzutti presented at Peter Kilchmann Gallery in Zurich in June 2014.

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exhibition, of its imminence, the urgency of defining the name, or possibly none. I thought fervently. Weights and measures fit like a glove for what I would come to experience in Las Palmas, I knew the materials with which I would work, I knew their plastic qualities, their differences and what they have in common. Weights, measures, colors, are recurrent issues in all that I do; the name was ready and precise.

I had decided to work with ropes, chains, steel wires, wire wool, possibly fishing nets and nautical instruments. Rulers and precision levels were also on my wish list—they're materials that from some time ago remain ahead of my decisions, I work for them, to make them the stars of the show. It is an enormous pleasure to find them everywhere on the shelves of specialty stores, with differences in quality, price, from the most diverse backgrounds. But each one is perfect and defines the results I find. The proposed spaces are presented with precision. They are full of unexpected details, they have their unchangeable qualities. Dealing with the very low height of the rooms is quite challenging, but I like challenges, outlining problems and utilizing them in favor of the works.

MA | In several of your interviews, I have the impression that you do not like and that you flee from conceptual readings that approach your work from more political or even autobiographical angles. Is it that they try to decipher and lead the meanings (thus killing the possibility of discovery by the viewer) that bother you, or is it more that you do not think of your work in this way?

JL | In conversations and in the work, I prefer to leave the first person aside. I deal with presences of things that are mundane and belong to everyone, such as business cards or cigarette packs and so on. But the fact is that these same mundane things are full of my experience and this presence is resounding. I cannot abstain from it, and in the end I accept this aspect of the work. I prefer that it not be that way, but in fact much of what I've done is loaded with autobiographical data.

MA | In Robert Storr's text for the Cisneros Foundation publication², he says that when he saw your work *Pulmão* for the first time, he understood it intuitively and then upon later reflection, he made a multitude of connections with the world that your work offers—that makes me think of the spectator's role in your work, how does this relationship come about and what do you expect from the viewer? Do you work only for yourself or does the other matter? Are there readings of your work that you dislike or don't agree with?

JL | A work that is in the world, outside the domain of its author, is open to different readings and interpretations. Its presentation is absolute and every view on this work will be unique. Readings and interpretations are all genuine once they stem from real, individual experiences. In that sense there are no "wrong" readings. When I think of a work or experiment with a given material, it doesn't occur to me what they will think. The focus is on the work itself and how it is presented in a world contaminated by other presences, other languages, other materials. Artists of all times invade my thoughts—notable young artists, historical masters, my own masters, all who inspire me. I think of art that keeps reverberating originality, which makes it

BRUCE, JOSEPH
2013

² Jac Leirner in conversation with Adele Nelson, Fundación Cisneros, 2010.

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become in a certain way part of what I do. I don't think about what "others" will think, but rather I think of what the artists who occur to me have already thought. I find that the work makes this mechanism quite clear once the references are explicit, that is, the descent of the work is quite clear. But I cannot expect that a large part of the public that sees my exhibitions will be aware of that ancestry to which I refer. Although certainly it perceives a body that has been articulated, it notes rhythm, construction, engineering. It identifies with materials that are deeply known, whether or not it has knowledge of the work's origin, the reading will be correct. There is no right or wrong in what is experienced through languages, experience has no rules and enjoying art is pure experience.

MA | We've talked a few times about the problems of photography and you've said that photography is also body, matter, and you rarely feel that this is taken into account. Have you always had a difficult relationship with the image?

JL | When the picture comes to reproduce nature it is providing a service so we can see what exists in distant lands, look at the details of leaves, bugs and stones, see hidden villages, social situations, political, anthropological, accompany the steps of humanity, remember our steps and our affairs. All that is divine. It's great to record our experiences, our days, our preferences, our peers, our meals and pets, just as nothing is more beautiful than nature itself. But when the subject is art, I have a deep respect for that which is original; that which does not play something that is or has been there, whole, with all parts already incorporated or resolved. Undoubtedly, there is no way to compete with nature—it will always win. So I think it is cowardly to utilize it and reproduce it as art. Minimalist and Arte Povera made great use of nature. There yes, photography was a means that kept this art alive. But it is just that: a record of what happened, a record of pure language, often times in a masterful form. But what matters there is the art itself, not the reproduction of something in an image. Photography is ultimately printed paper and ink, it is a technique like all other, one has to consider size, color, everything that constitutes its presence, frame included. What troubles me is that all this is rarely thought about; and only in the reproduction of reality, even if unfocused or constructed, is taken into consideration.

LEVEL SILK
2012



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MA | Normally you talk about the impact that some artists have had on your early career—Tunga, Cildo Meireles, Eva Hesse, Fontana, Bruce Nauman, etc. Does this continue to happen? Has meeting certain artists moved you to a degree that it can still influence your work?

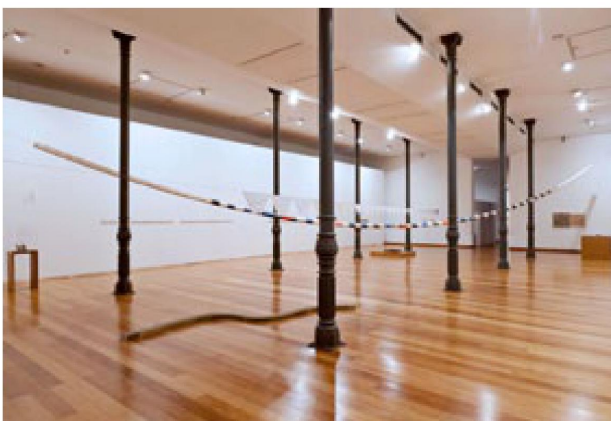
JL | Certainly Marlon, you are a living example of this response. Discovering an artist that stirs my knowledge, stretching and shaking it is always a great pleasure. Pure food for the soul and the will. But I am still moved by old operas, symphonies and sonatas.

MA | How do you see the new generations of artists in Brazil and elsewhere in the world? Are you in touch with the more recent practices of these new artists?

JL | Each year generations are formed in well-equipped art schools, often with leading artists and professionals. There are hundreds of kids full of energy and sometimes with interesting ideas and strong work. The challenges young artists face in carving out their own path and finding ways to develop their work end up generating results with artistic force and sometimes originality. The difficulties of early adult life eventually catalyze creativities. Young people are pathfinders; they need to make their conquests. The discovery of the world is always rich and comes with booming energy and charisma. Being young is almost synonymous with embracing the world and having the world as their own, ready to be articulated with absolute freedom, no rules, under their own feet, which ends up generating a reflection of all that: the possibility of growth, cells in expansion, enchanting newness. Whenever I can, I look at the works of those who assume their condition as artists enthralled by a world where we all fit.

MA | As an artist, you had a very full experience and one that puts you in a privileged position because you have known the international art scene since early in the '80s, bearing first-hand witness to all the growing interest in Brazilian and Latin American coming from Europe and North America. How was it to be a Brazilian female artist then? Do you notice changes in that perception nowadays? Does being a Brazilian artist suppose a difference? Does Brazilian art even exist?

JL | Issues of ethnicity, minorities, gender differences, religions, neighborhoods, and so on were never relevant within my range of interests in regards to art. The boom of Russian, Brazilian or Latin American art, Chinese art do not, nor have ever, concerned me. I have not devoted even a minute to these issues. On the contrary, I think they divert my focus from what really matters in the end, which is art itself and not the socio/political/economic context. That context is often somehow present in the oeuvre of an artist, which is a different situation that should be thought carefully. Look at Goya, or *Guernica*... Obviously I am proud of the success of my peers, it is great to see our masters occupying major museums and galleries around the world, showing why we're here. It's sad to see within exhibitions mistaken readings of unique and untransferable poetics, and that's very common. The artists and their works are often used for the purposes of illustrating curatorial wills that do not take their poetics into consideration, but rather have political arguments, or the will to show off a "discovery" in a field where discoveries are a "must". The institutions adopt and create trends, recognize and then forget productions that are serious and consistent and have specific and not general developments.



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Those topics generalize what is unique, and even more so: they steal the scene once they are much more full of stories and anecdotes to be told. The fact that I'm a woman carries endless associations that can be exploited at length, but they don't necessarily move my work. I have participated in numerous exhibitions of women artists of Latin American artists, Jewish artists, young or middle-aged artists. Other artists were inserted into presentations relating to sexual preferences, etc. Everything can be a reason to think about art, and it is much easier to present larger issues in order to mount an "idea" to determine one poetic or another. And also places. Art occupies whatever place, it always has. But today I think that places are occupying the art. It is used to make sense of specific situations, the subjects of the Biennials and their ethnical and geographical tendencies give me goose bumps, I really run away from these issues.

MA | Although you're an artist who travels a lot, I think your relationship with São Paulo is marriage for the rest of your life, is it not? What is the importance in this city for you? What does São Paulo give you that no other city in the world can offer?

JL | I was born and raised in São Paulo, my roots are super tangled in that megalopolis. I was able to go through many other parts of the world but I made my circle there. In this megalopolis with characteristics of other megacities, with the friends that, in the same way that I stayed, also stayed or came from other places, with my little and beloved family we largely live in the same neighborhood where I have always lived. My grandparents forged their stories in São Paulo and I have stayed there. In one straight line, school, first jobs, college, loves, family, taking part in the small art circuit that has been growing and now is getting mature and in full ascension. Museums, galleries, institutions, I've seen it all grow and flourish. I know much of this scene, I find the gems that appear in each new generation, I see the movement of construction and destruction so inherent in our culture. I am present in the movement of our history and participate in this movement with a notion of cause, but I keep wanting to spend some time in the old world, or even in the center of the world. I think in European cities and in New York. I like big cities, but I also love to stay by the sea, forgetting time and the issues addressed in large cities.

MA | Finally, let's talk about modernity. Is it possible to be modern today?

JL | I am an assumed heir to the modern. If I could, I'd say I'm Dada, I'm Constructivist, or that I am even before those, I am romantic, existential, classic. What to say towards the times and to those who created their mirrors? History moves in accordance with those who use it.