

Title A Bill of Wrongs
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Publication *Jac Leirner*. São Paulo: Galeria Millan, 1989.

Author Guy Brett
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texto Guy Brett

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A BILL OF WRONGS

I first thought of Jac Leirner's work as sculpture. I picked up one of her long ropes from the floor. The form, the occupancy of space, the plasticity. But no: this was made of banknotes, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, threaded in a chain. Their nondescript colour, their thumbed look, their dinginess. The object became immensely heavy, lifeless, a parable of inertia. (Immediately obvious to any Brazilian, but to me only later, was that these were \$Cr 100 bills on the verge of extinction, of being rendered worthless by hyper-inflation). I suddenly realized I was placed on a fascinating, provocative borderline of thought, and of questioning. This was indeed a strange object. Why had it come into being? Where did it really belong?

It ridiculed sculptural formalism, and yet its power as a sign, as a revelation of a social and human reality, was inseparable from its sculptural mass. The illuminating 'shock' was achieved, not by reference, by description, by talking 'about', but by simply accumulating, amassing, in one spot, things normally dispersed in time and in space. The rope-like object seemed to embody an insight, an action combining material and thought, of a kind that only the 'visual' artist can make.

The wall-pieces belonging to the same work — *Os Cem* ('The One-Hundreds'), 1985-7 — introduced another dimension: the artist's discovery, while collecting the bills, of people's graffiti, drawings and defacements on them. At once the material passed from its official level and its official circulation, as an abstraction of social relations, to its unofficial circulation as a carrier of popular desires, frustrations, dreams. The artist began to sort the material and she constructed each individual piece as a generic type: one work referred to love, another to sex, a third to religion, a fourth to politics, a fifth was entirely of signatures, a sixth drawn by children, a seventh of indecipherable marks. The messages were also transcribed and printed as a remarkable poster covered in print from top to bottom, without order and without beginning or end. From 'the culture of silence', a stream of unending utterance.

For her next work, Jac Leirner brought somewhat the same methods to bear on her own life, or rather her own life was the point of entry to larger systems, relationships hard to comprehend. *Lung* (1987) was made at the time she gave up smoking. 1200 Marlboro packets (three years' smoking) were dismembered into their constituent parts; each part, massed together, became a distinct sculptural entity and metaphor for the lung. Together these made up the ensemble of the exhibition. One was made with the cellophane strips you pull off first, another with the foil inner-wrappings, another with the price-tags, and so on. Only the cigarettes were not there: they'd 'gone up in smoke'.

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From the poetry, economy and enigma of the action, ideas begin to flow. JL made the 'lung' (which we always carry within us) from the ephemeral packaging which we throw away. The units of industrial mass production — like the minutes of passing time, of life slipping by ("I have measured out my life with cigarette packs", JL might have said, echoing Eliot's Prufrock) — become the cells of the bodily organ, the dense knotted mass of our vitals, which lacks all linearity. In this way the 'time', and the growth/decay of the individual body — one's own time — is laid across the impersonal time of the massive social system in a startling metaphor in which the physical material is somehow poetically traded between these two worlds, belonging to both and to neither.

1200 cigarette packs were used in *Lung*, something like 70,000 banknotes in *Os Cem*. The repetitive, time-consuming labour involved in collecting, collating and assembling such materials is not the kind normally associated with artistic 'inspiration' and 'expression'. Jac Leirner's is a paradoxical strategy for approaching closer to reality. It involves making a certain kind of intervention in a process which is powerful and hard to grasp, which eludes the individual consumer, just as it eludes the individual, craft-orientated artist. This must be why, when commissioned along with other artists to design a page for the newspaper *Jornal da Tarde*, she bypassed (as Celso Fonseca has perceptively pointed out) the 'graphic resources' available in the editorial and art departments and went to the heart of the machine. She adapted the steel rollers of the press, which print 45,000 papers an hour, to come up with a perfectly blank page perforated with dozens of tiny holes.

Her page makes its *presence* felt by an *absence*. Is such a tactic purely aesthetic, or purely abstract? Speaking of contemporary Brazil, JL said recently: "Apparently this is a fictional country. Its values are not real. Morality is absent, inverted. That's why I crave so much for the real. "Uncertainty between the real and the fictional as a basic experience of the population in a country like Brazil, boiling down to the fictional value of the ultimate reality — money —, has been picked up clearly by a number of artists. JL had the sensation, when producing *Os Cem*, that "the banknote is almost an absence" ('cem' in Portuguese has the same sound as 'sem': 'without', 'those without', 'the destitute'). She is currently working on a second, or 'ghost version', of the piece. Cildo Meireles's *Zero Cruzeiro* (1970s), and Waltercio Caldas' *Dinheiro para Treinamento* (1977) — works also based, in different ways, on the currency—have expressed the same 'absence-void'. I think this movement, this particular understanding of the notion of the void (which has a significant history in the formation of modern art languages from, say, Malevich on) has been a powerful philosophical resource for a number of artists in Brazil. Among other things, it becomes a way of approaching reality by apparently inverting values: approaching the truth by means of the lie, the right by means of the wrong, the mistake, the folly, the 'error'. It is, perhaps, a tactic by which the artist attempts simultaneously to move closer to the experience of the mass of the people and further from the norms of academic and official culture.

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After making *Lung*, JL embarked on the *Errors*. Some relied on a sculptural strategy. *Error in Landscape* (1988) is made from polyurethane cord, colourless and formless:

"I repeated the attitude I had while making *Os Cem*, punching hole after hole, hours and hours and months of mechanical work... I wanted an action which would provoke a gap in my memory, a complex out of time and place, knot on knot on knot (almost ad infinitum), and then place them where they shouldn't be: under a table, at the top of a tree, a foreign body out of place in the familiar and the normal"

The *First Errors* is made from verbal text: a transcription, selection and re-arrangement of hours of publicity jargon from Brazilian TV and magazines. Perhaps it is more strictly a sculptural than a literary text. Whereas *Os Cem* took the very discontinuity of the anonymous popular graffiti and gave it visibility and continuity, *First Errors* disrupts the honeyed continuity of advertising while preserving its uninterrupted flow. The contrast between the two discourses is startling and they both, like all JL's work, raise questions by merely establishing themselves. Beside *Os Cem*, *First Errors* is an 'official' discourse. Knowingly, with ulterior motive, advertising creams off a kind of painless desire from human dreams. By disjoining it JL accentuates the seductive tone in which we are all today enveloped. In fact she sets up some fascinating tensions between universality and difference, since a foreign reader, such as myself, sees certain inflections and nuances emphasis on the body and sensuous pleasure, the drive to implant middle-class consumerist values whatever the economic level — which suggest a 'Brazilian' variant of a universal process. However, the work is not simplistically condemnatory: something magical is made by her out of kitsch, which in turn debunks the self-consciously 'literary' and the academic. Recently, Jac Leirner has been amassing, for a work I have not yet seen, plastic bags. Another ubiquity of planetary daily life, usually atomized as small 'packages' in time and space, another ideological murmuring. The bags will make an environment enveloping the spectator, like a padded cell. I've described JL as employing a 'sculptural strategy', in the sense of working with the physical properties of things. But it is in the word 'strategy' that the important difference lies. She is not amassing things to arrive at a finite, pre-existing image, or an 'abstract' aesthetic sensation. Her work makes such formalisms look unnecessarily bounded and narrow, like old etiquette and protocol. Along with a number of other artists today, Jac Leirner is proposing a new definition of poetics, a kind of intervention which modifies the patterns of space and time in which we, and objects, move. A new way in which life can vitalize art, or art can reveal life.