DIRECTIONS

JAC LEIRNER
DECEMBER 17, 1992 - MARCH 14, 1993

Corpus Delicti, 1992 (detail of previous version). Ashtrays, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7⅝ x 11⅝ x 2⅜ in. (19.7 x 29.7 x 59.7 cm).
(Photograph by Pedro Franciosi)
THE ACTIVITY OF COLLECTING IS
the genesis of Jac Leirner’s artmaking proc-
ess. Her sculptures and installations are accum-
ulations of such throwaways as plastic bags, enve-
lves, and museum brochures. Individually, these
objects are meaningless, yet assembled and organized
into a work of art, they become significant and valuable
for what they suggest.

One material that Leirner has amassed in great
numbers is devalued paper currency. Because the rate
of inflation in Brazil has been high, the cruzeiro has
been devalued many times. Attracted by the paradox
of worthless cash, Leirner began collecting devalued
cruzeiros in 1985 and using them as materials for
sculpture in 1987. At the core of her works made with
money is the absence of meaning. Leirner called her
earliest works made with cruzeiros “Os Cem”, which
means “the one hundreds.” The title is a pun in
Portuguese, for it is pronounced the same as sem, which
means “without.” As Leirner has stated, “To buy with
money art made of banknotes is a confront[ation] with
the meaning of value, that big ghost.” “Blue Phase,”
1992, a new work similar to one of her previous money
works, is a ring made of one hundred cruzeiro bills. An
unassuming sculpture that lies on the floor, it relates to
the phenomenon of hyperinflation that renders legal
tender, the most tangible symbol of value, valueless.
Leirner transforms the worthless money into a precious
commodity: art.

Also fashioned from banknotes, Blue Phase, 1991, is
a two-part work that snakes languorously across the
floor. Its form recalls Carl Andre’s Minimalist sculpt-
ures of the 1960s, rows of wood, bricks, or metal plates.
This work, however, has a vulnerability Andre’s works
lack. Made of paper, it is flexible, seemingly defense-
less, and its components refer to social interaction and
fragile social structures. Leirner has also created similar
floor pieces composed of plain white paper that mimic
the money pieces. She calls these works “Ghosts,” and
the bankruptcy of meaning is obvious. Works from the
two series are often exhibited together (fig. 1).

Leirner’s currency works have taken many forms,
including wall pieces. As Leirner collected the bank-
notes, she noticed that many contained scribbles and
began sorting the bills by type of graffiti (fig. 2). She has
created works made entirely of cruzeiros covered with
love notes, children’s drawings, and political doodles,
among others. All are group drawings of sorts, where
the artist acts as a collaborator with anonymous would-
be artists. The public and private co-exist as Leirner
exposes a form of protest or defacement, to which the
viewer acts as voyeur. Leirner sees the banknotes in
formal terms, however, as a material with particular
properties of color and shape. Those aspects of her
works are important to the artist, as can be seen in a
work like Sem Título (Untitled), 1990, a wall piece
made of identical plastic bags lined up in a curve so that
the blue design elements compose a wave-like form that
seems to parody the work of the American artist
Ellsworth Kelly.

The Names installation in this exhibition is the
newest of a continuing series of works in which Leirner
uses plastic shopping bags. The earliest works in the
series, from 1989, were fashioned from countless bags
from throughout the world. Leirner fills each bag with
polyester and stitches them shut to form pillow-like
units, which she sews together onto fabric and then cuts
into sheets like wallpaper. She staples these sheets onto
the walls in rows, sometimes lining every inch of a room
and even the floor.

The resulting environment confronts the viewer
with an astonishing array of bright colors and often
familiar snappy logos and patterns, designed by adver-
sisers to attract the eye. These works deal with the
obvious issues of consumer desire, accretion, and waste.
The ultimate in recycling, they transform garbage into
art into value. Like the graffiti money pieces, they also
expose an anonymous form of artistic activity, in this
case commercial art and design. The bags in the
Hirshhorn installation, like those in Names, 1989 (fig.
3), are from various museum shops, where art and
money mingle and one can buy the evidence of one’s
-cultural experience.

Leirner’s shopping bag installations can be compared
to the works made of plastic fragments by the contempo-
rary British artist Tony Cragg. Cragg also assembles art
from cast-off items, but his plastic works are more tied to
an aesthetic of “junk” sculpture, in which different
types of obviously used, often broken, objects are used.
Leirner’s method is more compulsively deliberate.
Rather than accumulations of disparate materials, her
installations are serial arrangements of similar items.
The modular units have a particular significance and
determine the form of each work. Carefully collected,
categorized, prepared, and presented, her materials are
precious to Leirner. Her works are also more personal
than Cragg’s in that the choice of materials is determined
by her experience. As Leirner has begun to exhibit in
more museums, she has looked to those institutions for
inspiration. Thus she has produced art made from
exhibition brochures, collection labels, and the incom-
ing mail of a particular museum.
Fig. 1. Installation at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, with *Block Phaze* and *Ghost*, November 1991-February 1992. (Photograph by Glenn Halvorson)

Fig. 2. Devalued Brazilian banknotes with graffiti.
Corpus Delicti, 1992 (cover), Leirner's most personal recent work, is one in a series of sculptures originally shown in the recent Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Each consists of two sheets of glass that ride on a cushion of air made from bubble wrap. Through the glass, one can see carefully placed airplane boarding passes. On top of the glass are ashtrays from the seats of airplanes, threaded together with a metal chain. Leirner has been amassing these ashtrays, increasingly useless since the advent of no-smoking rules, for many years. The allusion to criminal activity is clear in the title of the work, which literally means "body of the crime." In legal terms, it refers to the "the substantial and fundamental fact or facts (as, in murder, actual death and its occurrence as a result of criminal agency) necessary to prove the commission of a crime," according to the dictionary. The reference to the body (corpus), continues in the second definition: "the material substance (as the body of the victim of a murder) upon which a crime has been committed."

The autobiographical content is explicit in the boarding passes, which identify the artist as the passenger and link her to the stolen ashtrays. The "corpus" upon which the crime has been committed can refer to the different airplanes or the body of the artist, in which case the assault could be that of smoking. An avid smoker, Leirner produced a series of works in 1987 entitled "Lung." She temporarily quit the habit but had accumulated three-years' worth of cigarette packs, which she meticulously de-constructed and re-organized into different works, including a lung-shaped wall piece made entirely of cellophane pull-off strips and a sculpture made of stacked clear cellophane wrappers encased in a plexiglass box.

The "Corpus Delicti" series exhibits many of the same characteristics of Leirner's other works. The strong graphic quality of the floor money pieces and "Ghosts" are echoed in the meandering line created by the chains. Her working process, evident in the sewing, stacking, and threading, is clear in how the ashtrays are linked together as well as in the collection of boarding passes, which trace the working travels of an increasingly exhibiting artist.

Many sources in recent art have fueled Leirner's investigations. The malleable, tactile qualities in her work have an antecedent in Eva Hesse's influential sculptures from the 1960s. To the Minimalist strategies of seriality and repetition then current, Hesse added a sense of touch, reference to organic form, and highly personal imagery. In contrast to the Minimalist practice of using industrial materials and impersonal methods of fabrication, Hesse chose soft, elastic materials such as rubber, latex, and rope and produced her own work, employing more "feminine" activities such as sewing or tying. Leirner's process is similarly labor-intensive and involves sewing and stringing together modest, supple materials. Like Hesse, Leirner combines content and primary shapes, but her use of found objects connects her art more directly to the social world.

Within the vital context of contemporary Brazilian art, Leirner has acknowledged the importance of several prominent artists: Waltercio Caldas, Tunga, José Resende, and Cildo Meireles. She shares with Caldas the use of simplified forms, and a quiet, understated aesthetic. Tunga's organic, serpentine sculptures and Resende's paraffin and leather pieces provide models for her plant works. Leirner's use of Brazilian currency as an art material can be traced to Meireles, who began using cruzados around 1970 as an explicit form of protest against the dictatorship of the time.

With formal sophistication and wit, Leirner merges personal biography with social content in works that are sparingly elegant yet reveal their maker. Her art is an attempt to salvage the ephemeral, constantly circulating, seemingly meaningless articles that are the testimony of human existence and invest them with meaning and value.

Amada Cruz
Assistant Curator

Fig. 3. Namezz, 1989. Plastic bags lined with polyester foam; 11⅜ x 47⅛ in. (300 x 120 cm). Collection Schain, São Paulo. (Photograph by Romulo Fialdini)
BIOGRAPHY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1987 Petite Galerie, Rio de Janeiro; Galeria Millas, São Paulo.
1989 Galeria Millas, São Paulo.
1992 Galerie Hoffmann, Friedrich.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1983 17a Bienal de São Paulo, Parque Beirupera, São Paulo.
1984 Proposta para o Ano 80, Penaos da Estada, São Paulo.
1985 SP 3 Women: Jac Leirner, Go, Teresa Berlinc, Petie Galerie, Rio de Janeiro.
1989 20a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo, Parque Beirupera.
1990 Transcontinental, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England; Aperto 90, 44th Venice Biennale; Pastafuturense, Winnipeg (Canada) Art Gallery and tour.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHECKLIST

Blue Phair, 1991. Brazilian banknotes, polyurethane cord, plexiglass; two parts, each 34 x 121/4 x 51/2 in. (8 x 310 x 15 cm). Jorge and Marion Hefft Collection, Buenos Aires.

Blue Phair, 1992. Brazilian banknotes with anonymous graffiti, plexiglass, beads; two parts, each 11 x 16/2 in. (30 x 41 cm). Collection of the artist.

Blue Phair, 1992. Brazilian banknotes and polyurethane cord; 24 x 191/4 x 7/4 in. (7 x 50 x 20 cm). Collection of the artist.


Corpus Delicti, 1992. Ashtorns, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7 7/4 x 11/4 x 23/4 in. (20 x 300 x 60 cm). Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.

Corpus Delicti, 1992. Ashtorns, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7 7/4 x 11/4 x 23/4 in. (20 x 300 x 60 cm). Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.

Namez, 1992. Plastic bags lined with polyester foam sewn on buckram; five parts, each 11 7/4 x 11 7/4 in. (300 x 300 cm). Collection of the artist.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
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