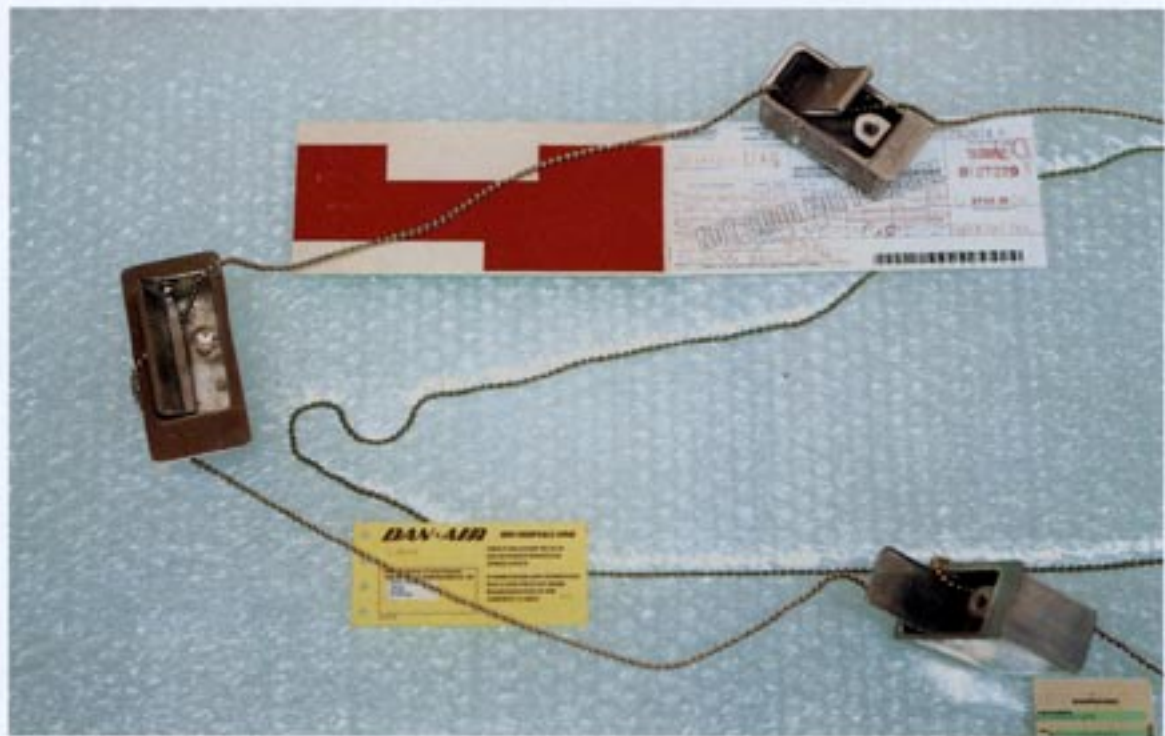


# DIRECTIONS

## JAC LEIRNER

DECEMBER 17, 1992 - MARCH 14, 1993



*Corpus Delicti*, 1992 (detail of previous version). Ashtrays, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 76 x 118 x 216 in. (19.7 x 299.7 x 59.7 cm).  
(Photograph by Pedro Franciosi)

**T**HE ACTIVITY OF COLLECTING IS the genesis of Jac Leirner's artmaking process. Her sculptures and installations are accumulations of such throwaways as plastic bags, envelopes, 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 sculptures 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 defenseless, 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 banknotes, 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 Titulo (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 advertisers 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 contemporary 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 incoming mail of a particular museum.



Fig. 1. Installation at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, with *Rita Pharr* and *Ghast*, 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 pliant works. Leirner's use of Brazilian currency as an art material can be traced to Meireles, who began using cruzeiros 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*

1. Jac Leirner, quoted in "Jac Leirner," in *TransMission* (Malmö, Sweden: Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, 1991), 96.



Fig. 3. *Naves*, 1989. Plastic bags lined with polyester foam; 118¼ x 47½ in. (100 x 120 cm).  
Collection Schain, São Paulo. (Photograph by Romulo Faldini)

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in São Paulo on July 4, 1961. Educated at the College of Fine Arts, Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado (FAAP), São Paulo, 1979-1981; Licenciatura, 1984. Lives and works in São Paulo.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 Petite Galerie, Rio de Janeiro; Galeria Millan, São Paulo.  
1989 Galeria Millan, São Paulo.  
1991 Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.  
1992 Galerie Hoffmann, Friedberg.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1982 *Acas Barras: Jac Leirner*, Tenda, São Paulo.  
1983 *17a Bienal de São Paulo*, Parque Ibirapuera, São Paulo.  
1984 *Proposta para os Anos 80*, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo.  
1985 *SP 3 Women: Jac Leirner, Go, Teresa Berlínck*, Petite Galerie, Rio de Janeiro.  
1986 *A Nova Dimensão do Objeto*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo; *V Bienal Americana de Artes Gráficas*, Museu de Arte Moderna "La Tertulia," Cali, Colombia; *Uma Virada no Sítio*, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo.  
1988 *10 Salão Nacional de Artes Plásticas*, Fundação Nacional de Arte, Rio de Janeiro; *Panorama de Arte Atual Brasileira/88—Formas Tridimensionais*, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo.  
1989 *20a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo*, Parque Ibirapuera.  
1990 *Transcontinental*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England; *Aperto 90*, 44th Venice Biennale; *Past/future/now*, Winnipeg (Canada) Art Gallery and tour.  
1991 *Correnti*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; *Viva Brasil Viva: Kunst from Brasilien*, Kulturhuset and Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm; *Brasil: La Nueva Generación*, Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas; *TransMission*, Roomum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden; *Les Coulures de l'Argent*, Musée de la Poste, Paris.  
1992 *Only Paper?*, Städtische Galerie Villa Zanders, Bergisch Gladbach, Germany; *Documenta IX*, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel; *Artistas Latinoamericanos del siglo XX/Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, Enciclopedia Plaza de Armas, Seville, and Museum of Modern Art (New York) tour.

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Silberman, Robert. "Jac Leirner at the Walker Art Center." *Art in America* 80 (February 1992): 124.

*Vivapoints: Jac Leirner*. Exhibition brochure. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1991. Text by Bruce W. Ferguson.

## CHECKLIST

*Blue Phase*, 1991. Brazilian banknotes, polyurethane cord, plexiglass, two parts, each 3 1/8 x 12 3/8 x 5 1/2 in. (8 x 30 x 15 cm). Jorge and Marion Helft Collection, Buenos Aires.

*Blue Phase*, 1992. Brazilian banknotes with anonymous graffiti, plexiglass, brads; two parts, each 11 1/8 x 16 2/8 in. (30 x 41 cm). Collection of the artist.

*Blue Phase*, 1992. Brazilian banknotes and polyurethane cord; 2 1/8 x 19 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. (7 x 50 x 20 cm). Collection of the artist.

*Corpus Delicti*, 1992. Ashtrays, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7 1/8 x 11 8/8 x 2 3/8 in. (20 x 30 x 60 cm). The Bohen Foundation, New York.

*Corpus Delicti*, 1992. Ashtrays, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7 1/8 x 11 8/8 x 2 3/8 in. (20 x 30 x 60 cm). The Bohen Foundation, New York.

*Corpus Delicti*, 1992. Ashtrays, boarding passes, airline tickets, chain, glass, bubble wrap; 7 1/8 x 11 8/8 x 2 3/8 in. (20 x 30 x 60 cm). Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.

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*Names*, 1992. Plastic bags lined with polyester foam sewn on buckram; five parts, each 11 8/8 x 11 8/8 in. (300 x 300 cm). Collection of the artist.



Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden  
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