

# SFAQ

Volume 2 | Issue 1  
Tania Candiani  
Elaine Cameron-Weir  
Lynn Hershman Leeson



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SFAQ



ISIS 1944 Oil on canvas 65 x 30 inches

# KURT SELIGMANN

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SATURDAY, MAY 9

Roundtable Discussion—4:00 pm

with the authors of *Kurt Seligmann:  
First Message from the Spirit World of the Object*  
a hardcover book published to accompany the exhibition

SUNDAY, MAY 10

Sunday Salon Series—1:00 pm

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Beginning of the New York School*, in conversation about the artist

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Lava Thomas in her studio, 2015, credit: Jennifer Noland

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Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834* (detail), exhibited 1835. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The John Howard McFadden Collection, 1928, M1928-1-41





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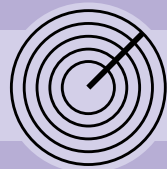
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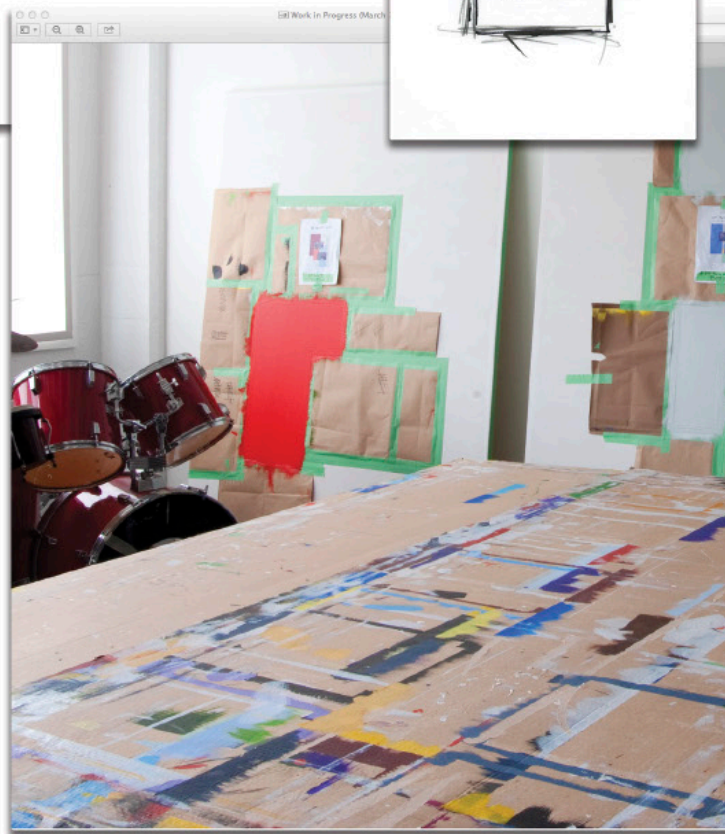
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#### SFAQ Features

**Tania Candiani**  
In Conversation With Julio César Morales  
Pages 8-11

**Elaine Cameron-Weir**  
In Conversation With Alex Bacon  
Pages 12-15

**Lynn Hershman Leeson**  
In Conversation With Terri Cohn  
Pages 16-17

#### Contributors

**Julio César Morales** is an artist, educator, and curator. He is the founder of Queens Nails Annex/Projects (2002–2012), an artist-run project space in San Francisco. He was adjunct curator for visual arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Morales was a contributing curator for the Japanese pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale and is currently curator of visual arts at Arizona State University Art Museum. Morales's artwork has been shown at La Biennale de Lyon (France), the Istanbul Biennial (Turkey), Los Angeles County Art Museum (United States), and in New Orleans at the Prospect 3 Biennial (United States).

**Alex Bacon** is a scholar, writer, and curator based in New York City. A regular contributor to *The Brooklyn Rail*, he has taught at the School of Visual Arts and served as a guest critic in the graduate painting departments of the Rhode Island School of Design and AKV/St. Joost. His most recent exhibition is *The Subjects of the Artist* (Michael Thibault Gallery, Los Angeles). He is currently completing his Ph.D at Princeton University with a dissertation on the first decade of Frank Stella's career.

**Terri Cohn** is a writer, curator, art historian, and fine art consultant. Her research and writings focus on conceptual and performance art, technology, public art, and socially engaged art practices. She regularly contributes to various publications including *SFAQ*, *Art Practical*, *Public Art Review*, *Art in America*, and *caa.reviews*. Terri conceived, co-wrote, and edited *Pairing of Polarities: The Life and Art of Sonya Rapoport* (Heyday Press, 2012), and curated exhibitions of Rapoport's work for Kala Art Institute and Mills College Art Museum. She teaches core and interdisciplinary art history courses for the University of California, Berkeley, in their Art and Design Extension program, and for the San Francisco Art Institute.

Please visit

# SFAQ.us

#### A Note From The Publisher

Dear reader,

Some things never change and some things always change. We are somewhere in the middle. Please enjoy the new format of SFAQ.

Warm regards,  
Andrew McClintock



*Cover Image:*  
Tania Candiani  
*Reinterpretación de Paisaje*, 2008. Action with regiment bands and volunteers at the border fence between Mexico and U.S. Courtesy of the artist.

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# Tania Candiani

## In Conversation With Julio César Morales

*One of the last times I saw Tania we drank a bottle of Blanton's Kentucky Bourbon and laid on the floor in my living room in Phoenix listening for hours to music tracks by The Electric Light Orchestra, David Bowie, and Pérez Prado through a 1980s sound system with a pair of amazing vintage Bose 901 speakers and really listened intensely to the sounds coming out from every angle of the beautiful wooden boxes. The next morning (I don't even remember calling a cab for her) we nursed our hangover and went for a hike at a local site called Papago Park and there, in the middle of the park, laid the most magnificent natural red sandstone formation called Hole-in-the-Rock. Tania immediately thought that this hill had some of the same characteristics of the Bose speaker design with its unique shape, openings, and curves and asked me, "How can we convert this six-million-year-old sandstone hill into a sound system?"*

*This type of inquiry draws me to her work and artistic process. Her research methodology can be regarded as an artist-anthropologist, questioning conventional notions of sight and sound through experimentation in sculpture, sound, language, and science. A prime example is one of her recent projects at Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City entitled *Cinco variaciones de sobre circunstancias fónicas y una pausa* (2012), which explored the relationship between machines and language, and the potential of sound, speaking/listening, and writing/coding as materials for art.*

*Tania's work has been shown around the globe from Mexico City to Lithuania, Madrid, San Francisco, Bogotá, Warsaw, El Paso, and New Delhi, among many others. Her work is in the collections of Deutsche Bank and the Centro Cultural Tijuana, the Mexican Museum in San Francisco, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Latin American Art in Los Angeles amongst others. She is a recent Guggenheim Fellowship recipient and will represent Mexico with Luis Felipe Ortega in the 2015 Venice Biennale.*

*We are still figuring out a way to transform the Hole-in-the-Rock into a sound system through the cultivation of piezo crystals that can be played by experimental musicians as part of a large-scale public project for the ASU Art Museum. Perhaps next time we need to drink Jamaican rum and listen to some Mad Professor dub music?*

**A renaissance happened in Tijuana in the late-1990s, and the city experienced a new sense of ownership for a border town that was only known for its sinful past based in American tourism. Part of this cultural movement was founded in the music of Nortec and the arts collective Torolab. Eventually, in 2001, Tijuana was featured on the cover of Time magazine. What did it feel like to be part of this movement, and how did that fuel your growth as an artist?**

During the time that I lived in Tijuana, the city was an unprecedented space of freedom for artists to work outside of academic boundaries—it had no fine arts school—which triggered a particular creativity and eloquent language about the present. There was a pushing desire to create that grew organically without institutions in a collective fashion that allowed for interdisciplinary

collaboration. And it was not just within traditional fine arts techniques—there was an exchange and enrichment among people doing graffiti, popular music, video, literature, and many other forms of expression, and we were working together. Moreover, Tijuana has a particular aesthetic that awakened my sensitivity to text as form and shape as text, as in the work of taggers and graffiti creators who are the calligraphers of our time. I was interested in working with and thinking about transgression, the subversion of systems, and questioning what art and vandalism are, what is damaging a city and what is giving it life, how to resist the marginal conditions of a border-city and to how transform it into a creative hub.

Tijuana was important to my artistic career. It was full of opportunities and it gave me the platform and the space to start exhibiting my artworks and understanding that everything is valid and it is possible to archive artistic ends.

Finally, what was happening did not go unnoticed and there were a couple of international festivals, such as inSITE, that set the focus of the art world on "the north" and the amount of powerful works we were creating, and how different it was from what was happening in Mexico City.

**Your approach to public art in the late-2000s is quite unique, with projects occurring between Tijuana and Mexico City, such as *Habitantes y Fachadas*, and your collaborations with the graffiti artists that bombed the posh Hotel Habita and the National Library. Do you consider this the beginning of your interest in code and the aesthetics of language? What was the public reaction to seeing these iconic buildings—or, in the case of Tijuana, one of the first planned housing developments—overwhelmed with graffiti?**

I would approach it the other way around—it was because of my ever-present interest in language and narratives that *Habita Intervenido* and *Writers y Escritores* were possible. *Habita Intervenido* had an unexpected reaction; it was very successful and appreciated in the high-class neighborhood where it was placed, but to me it was very interesting how changing the context of the same action can turn vandalism into art. In the case of *Writers y Escritores*, the effect was different due to its location. It was not obvious to the press that it was an artwork, but to the people that lived around the library, that used to feel intimidated by it and by the space of a library in general, the work somehow helped them approach it and understand it as theirs.

**Your interest in music, sound, and technology has been very prominent in your artistic production. Can you talk about the various influences that drove you to this work? Also, what about the lack of female representation within this genre in Latin America?**

I was driven to sound through my interest in time, and technology came as an answer to a research need and an expressive need. An exhibition at Laboratorio Arte Alameda, a museum dedicated to media arts, was a great chance to explore those realms and their potentials to address the topics I am interested in researching. The lack of female representation is related to the still very pronounced gender difference in Latin America, with fixed roles that are emphasized in education, and games and toys, resulting in an exclusion of girls and women from the technological sphere. But it is a reality that will gradually change.

**Your breakthrough 2012 project *Five Variations on Phonic Circumstances* and a *Pause at Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City* was a phenomenal leap in your artistic practice wherein you experimented with antiquated media and new forms of technology in order to create a "phonic circumstance." What was your motivation for this body of work?**

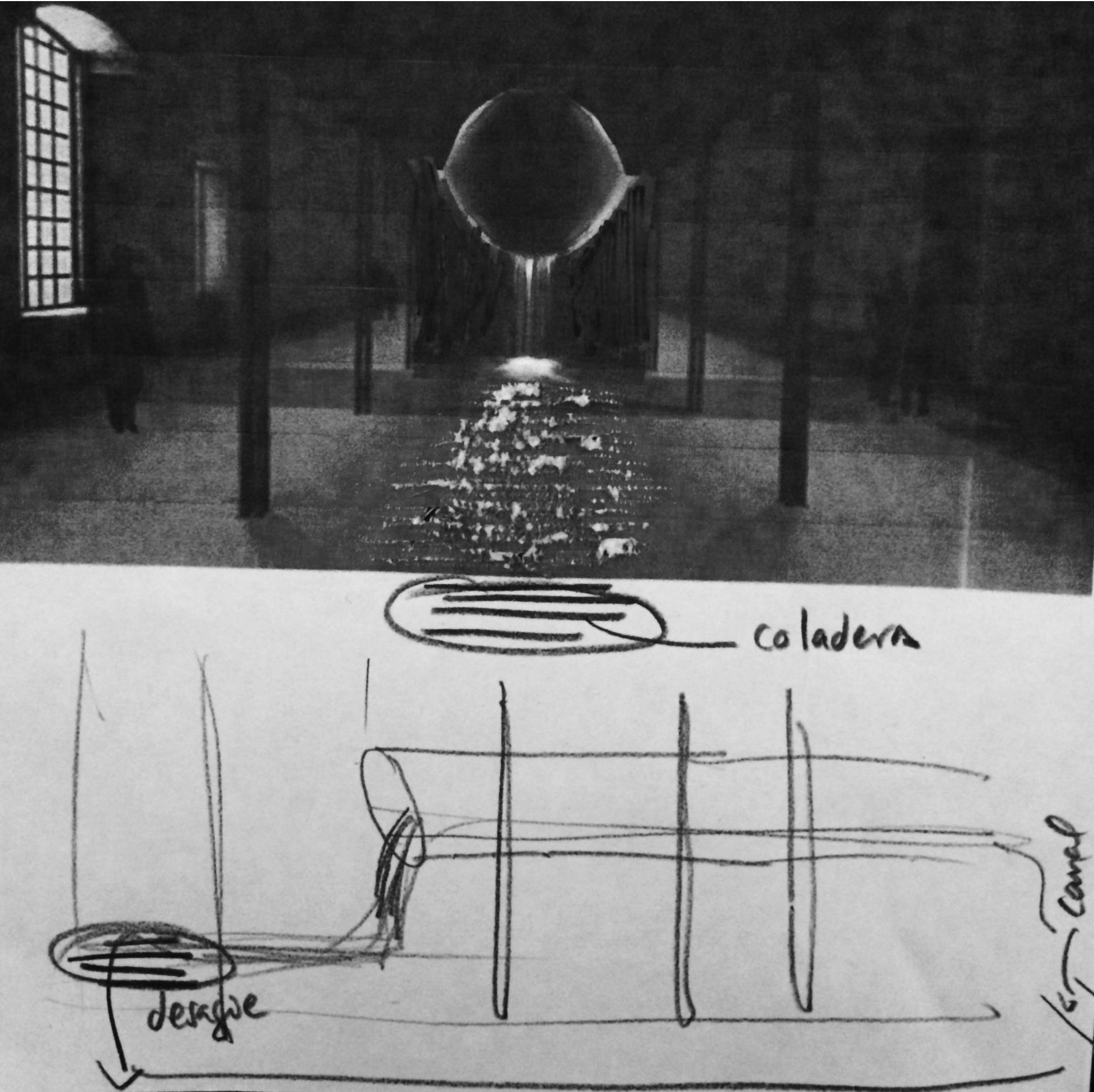
It was an interest I already had, but it was the chance to work in an art and technology museum that triggered a wide-range exploration of media. My motivation was to explore media archeology, not to work with technology as "the new," but to understand the deep time of the media; to rethink the past of the machines we live with now. I found automats appealing; our desire to emulate life and human actions and the amazement that these phenomena provoke. The exhibition also continued my interest in embroidery and used graffiti as a cryptic language. It was the beginning of an interest in the obsolete and in technologies that are disappearing. I was trying to bring them to life again, and, in the meantime, to propose a richer understanding of them and what they meant to our societies. I also wanted to think of the process of translation, and the relationships between scores and words, sounds and stories, punch cards and music, and even between what is said and what is understood and written.

**Can you describe the importance of "nature" in your work and its impact on the current projects, such as the *Boom Rock* that we are currently developing together in Arizona with the cultivation of Piezo crystals?**

I work to resist the appropriation and subduing of nature in destructive ways, to question standard discourses and the normalization of these processes. And I work by linking science and art, appreciating both nature and culture as sources that lend their power to aesthetic proposals. Reactivating those moments of intense dynamism between science and art can only leave us with questions that depart from superficial layers or simple empirical observations in order to act as generators of creativity and promoters of new aesthetic experiences. That was the premise for *La Magdalena*. I was exploring the methods of observation and empiricism to expose a human desire to contain nature in a *wunderkammer*. In the case of the *Boom Rock*, this whole approach is turned into wonder for nature. It is a technological piece based on the possibility of cultivating a speaker, and in the end a return to nature.

**You and Luis Felipe Ortega are representing Mexico in the 2015 Venice Biennale; can you give us a sneak preview of the project and collaboration?**

*Possessing Nature*, as the title suggests, is about a desire to own and control that has proved destructive and catastrophic. It is a very critical work that builds metaphorical and physical lines with the recent history of Mexican pavilions in the Venice Biennial. It approaches both Mexico and Venice as "amphibious cities"—it reads their public policies and the results of the life of their inhabitants and nature. It departs from the simple gesture of tracing a route and raises it to make it present in the Venice Arsenale. It is the shape of a canal, and is a metaphor of a useless system that feeds itself from the lagoon and throws the water back again. It refers to monumental scale. It works through sound. It reverberates as a critique to the obsession of control and possession of nature.



Tania Candiani/ Luis Felipe Ortega, Sketch of *Possessing Nature*, 2015. Forthcoming installation at the Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the artists.





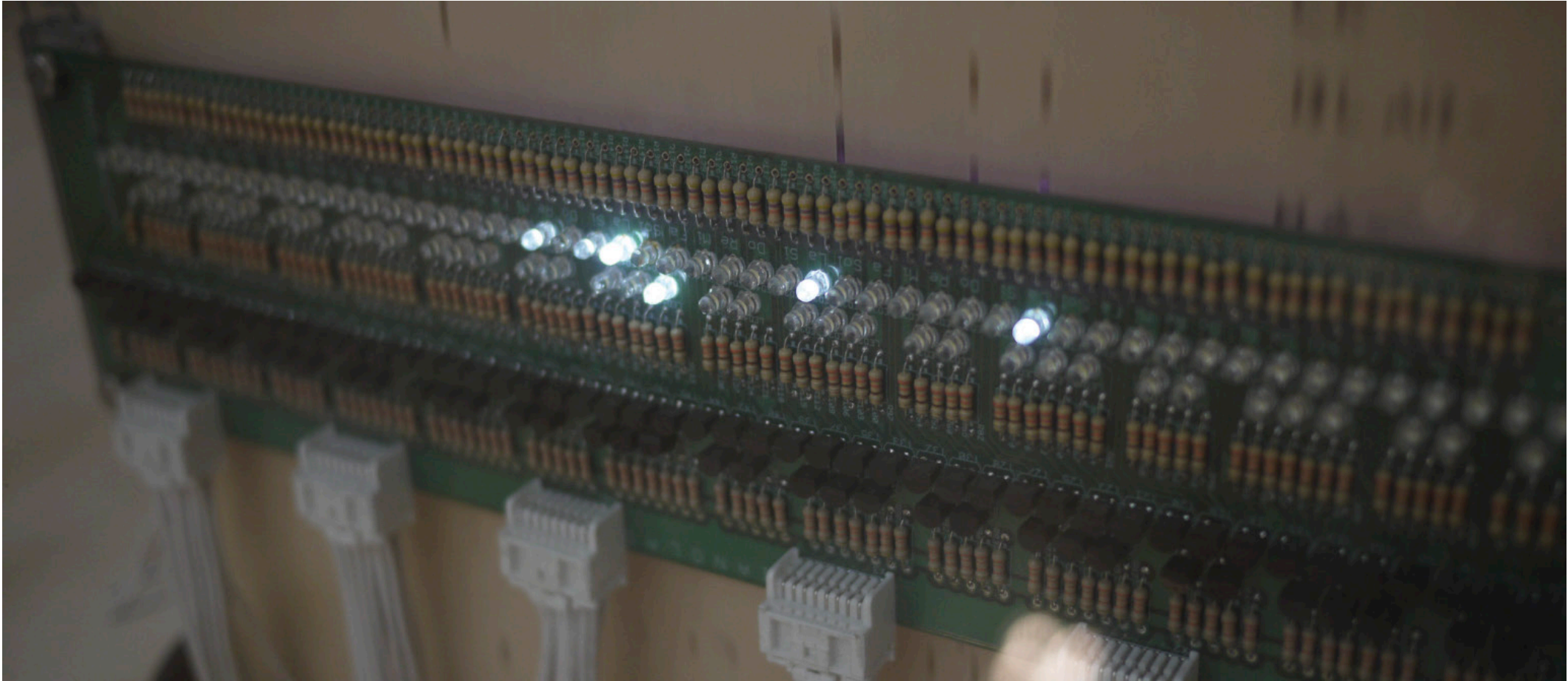
*Órgano/Organ*, 2012. Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City. Photograph by Jaime Navarro. Courtesy of the artist.



*Pianolas/Player Pianos*, 2012. Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: *Five Variations of Phonic Circumstance and a Pause*, 2012. Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City. Photograph by Jaime Navarro. Courtesy of the artist.



*Telar* (Detail), 2013. El Cubo del Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT), Tijuana, Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.





Reinterpretación de Paisaje, 2008. Action with regiment bands and volunteers in the border fence between Mexico and U.S. Courtesy of the artist.



Campanario. Belfry, 2012. Laboratorio Arte Alameda. Mexico City. Courtesy of the artist.



Replica Campanario / Belfry replica, 2012. Laboratorio Arte Alameda. Mexico City. Courtesy of the artist.



Habita Intervenido 2008. Stencil and spray paint on glass. Hotel Habita, Mexico City. Courtesy of the artist.





*Sobre el Tiempo*, 2007. La Salada Desert, Baja California, Mexico. Single channel video. Courtesy of the artist.



*Reinterpretación de Paisaje. Cierre Libertad*, 2008. Installation with junkyard materials. Tijuana, Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.



*Wooden Trumpets*, 2014. The Glenfiddich Artists in Residence program, Banffshire, Scotland. Installation and video. Courtesy of the artist.



# Elaine Cameron-Weir

## In Conversation With Alex Bacon

*Alex Bacon met with Elaine Cameron-Weir in her Brooklyn studio to discuss some of the issues at play in and around her work. Structured less as an investigation of Cameron-Weir's biography, the iconography of her work, or the physical processes that create it, this text captures instead the wide-ranging discussion they had of the issues behind, raised by, and surrounding the work. They move through a plethora of topics that came up along the way, including New Age aesthetics of symbolism and telepathy, the role of politics and discourse in art, and visual versus spoken language.*

**How do you come to make a sculpture? Is it that you've encountered a material and you're excited by it in some way, or do you have an idea and then you find the appropriate material?**

A combination of those two things. I used to play around with materials a lot more. I don't do it as much now, but I still do it sometimes—for example, the show that I did with the clamshells and the neon. I didn't know what those were going to be before I bought the shells.

**Did it come to you as an idea, or did you see a clamshell somewhere?**

I knew that I wanted an object that could hold something. The whole set up for the sculptures in that show came to me while I was doing something else. I was actually sawing metal, thinking about another show. I had already ordered these giant clamshells and I got this fully formed idea for them and thought, "I'm going to go with that." That doesn't happen too often for me—that something just enters into my head when I'm not necessarily thinking about it—but that's one way that it does happen. Or sometimes I have dreams about something, like the desk piece I recently showed at GAMeC in Bergamo, Italy. That was based on a dream that I had while I was in Istanbul.

**Would you say you set up situations through which this kind of thinking could happen? As a writer, I often find that in writing or talking, ideas happen. Not that it's intentional, but there's just something about those kinds of activities that can get the cognitive motor spinning.**

That's definitely true. Most of intuition is learning how that works for you—how you can setup situations that induce ideas. An automatic task can let you think about something else. Sometimes it's hard to sit and just stare at a wall even though that's the kind of mindset that might be conducive to this type of non-focused thought. You have to find an activity that allows you to get the staring-at-the-wall brain.

**So when you're doing a banal task that just has to be done, like cutting metal, you're also thinking?**

It's definitely combined. It's not like I go into a trance. When I say I'm thinking about work, it could be while doing something super mundane, like with the sawing example, but I'm usually focused on it in my mind somehow. I might be thinking about what a piece would do perceptually for a person looking at it, or it could be "how do I order that part off of the Internet?" It's all mixed together.

**That makes a lot of sense. I think that today the fetish of the artist as worker has been updated. We've become so alienated from labor—especially the classes that are involved in buying, writing about, and exhibiting art—in a very particular way having to do with, among other things, the mediations of technology and the outsourcing endemic to late capitalism, that there becomes a discourse about artistic process that is not intellectual, but rather steeped in a simplistic, nostalgic fascination with how things are made. I feel like there is this dual fantasy of either the artist as genius, an old idea, or this more recent one of the artist as salt of the earth, somehow laboring like a latter-day David Smith in the foundry, soldering steel together. Today a lot of people**

**don't necessarily need there to be a spiritual aspect, as long as there is a sense that something is being done that requires effort, even more than talent. Or perhaps those things have been collapsed together in the popular imaginary.**

I think they're combined in a lot of ways. I don't like when people play off of that idea of process as a way to put content in their work when it's not there. It's often done that way, and I feel like, as an artist looking at another artist's work, and then hearing that they did this and that, it can be really disingenuous, because sometimes you can see through it. But a certain audience might not.

That's why I only really mention the process I use to make things when people ask me how they're made. But for me it's not part of the overt reason for those things existing. For example, I don't explain alongside the cast aluminum works that they're made by me and my dad in his backyard using salvaged metal from an oil industry junkyard. If those pieces were to have wall text and press releases about North America going to war over oil, it would seem to fill it with content and it would be easy to write and talk about, because you could explain it. But it would simplify them to the point that they're just boring. It's also not true. That's not the sum point of them.

All that said, with the aluminum pieces, I also don't want to say that these have *nothing* to do with wars over oil. As an artwork I'm not trying to have them talk about it directly, but they probably wouldn't exist if it weren't for the larger situations in the world. Obviously I'm not working in a vacuum—nobody is—but the materials are mainly industrial waste from oil fields, so everything is connected, but I don't want to exploit that for content. Doing so feels like an art school assignment where you need to have something to say in a group crit so people aren't confused.

**It makes me wonder then what the role or interest, if any, is for you of the histories of these materials. In the case of the aluminum works there is this very particular history that we're talking about, one that is charged, and one that has personal relevance to you based on growing up in rural Canada. Are the histories and larger contexts of the other materials you use important in the same kind of way?**

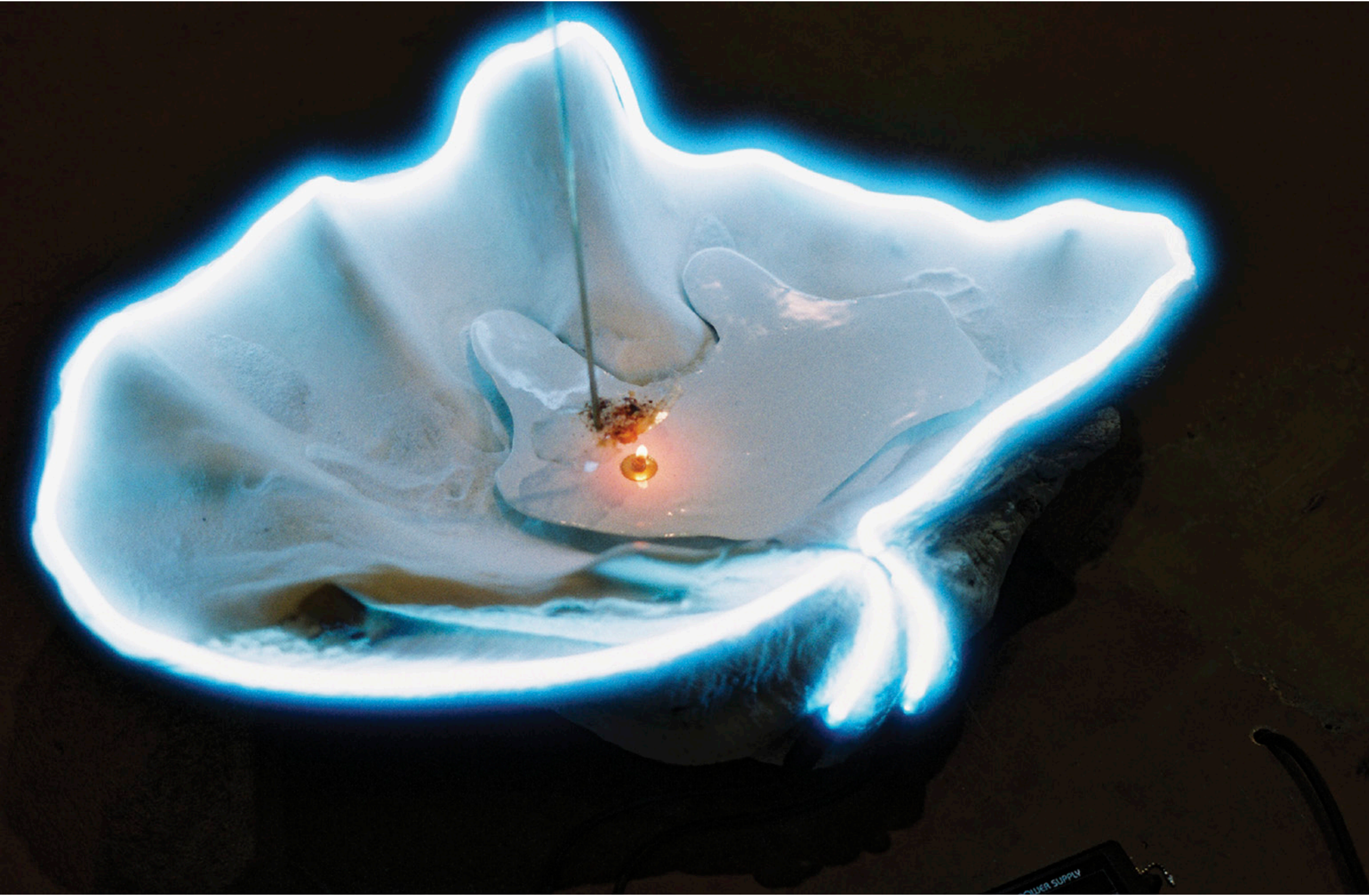
They are definitely important, but in a more general way that is not necessarily meant to be specific to me or my interpretation. I think all materials have some kind of association, almost like a symbolism; sort of like a consensus or agreement in culture. Marble has one, and brass has one, and obviously I understand these materials through these lenses too. To go a bit New Age, it's a shared association or unspoken, almost psychological understanding of a material as an element, as if you took things apart, because most work has discernible elements. Like a leaf—what does it mean in a dream rather than what this particular leaf means to me right now because I'm holding it, looking at it. So there are two ways that these things can exist, and I think one is very specific to a direct experience and one is tied to a broader meaning. It's always dual; it always exists in two phases at once.

**It makes me think that the brass leaf in your work is both of those things. You're creating this image of the leaf, but then when it's cut out, and it's this shape, and it's put in this piece of marble, it could also be considered the leaf in our hand, because it's present before us. But in this context, it's also, depending on the person, the leaf in the dream, because it's a symbol of something, rather than a functional leaf that grew out of a plant. So it operates in both those ways.**

Exactly, and that's why I mostly make sculpture, I think. Because it's hard to do that with painting—with painting it's always the leaf in the dream. It's a different mindset or something. I love looking at paintings, but I'm more drawn to making sculpture, for sure, because of the duality. With sculpture it's real, it's in the world of the human body in space in a more literal way than the picture/screen of painting. It always looks like something. It's not ever truly abstract, I don't think, which I love, but it can be a marker for the abstract—perhaps if it was only something that was not physical, like a scent or something, which I use in some of my work. You can have an abstract scent, but maybe we can only say that because scent hasn't been categorized in these ways yet; not as many people can pick out as many easily understandable, shared characteristics. It's like a cloud of sensory information. But sculpture, it's always real in some sense; we all know how objects are in the world.



Venus Anadyomene, (pictured at Ramiken Crucible), 2014. Giant clam shell, sand, neon light, transformer, ceramic olive-oil burning lamp, mica, brass, incense. Shell approx, 32 x 18 x 8 inches, other, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



Venus Anadyomene 5, 2014. Giant clam shell, sand, neon light, transformer, ceramic olive-oil burning lamp, mica, brass, incense. Shell approx, 32 x 18 x 8 inches, other, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.





Plate 13, 2014. Aluminum. 20 x 12 x 0.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Plate 4, 2014. Aluminum. 20 x 12 x 0.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Plate 42, 2014. Aluminum. 20 x 12 x 0.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Group of Plates, 2012. Aluminum. 20 x 12 x 0.75 inches (each). Courtesy of the artist.

**The found object is not part of your repertoire, I've noticed.**

Obviously I can appreciate it in art from the past, but I don't think the found object can be subversive anymore on its own. Or at least I haven't seen anything in recent years that I would consider interesting or subversive that has to do with just putting a found object in a gallery or museum. But I could think of the giant clamshells as found objects, or other elements I've used in combinations. But maybe they're just materials?

**That makes sense, and I would have to agree. As Daniel Buren noticed already in the 1960s, the ready-made, by being readable as aesthetic, revealed that the gallery space itself operates like a painted tableau, and the ready-made as a still life of sorts within it.**

It's interesting. That sentiment makes a gallery into something much nicer than it is, like an impression, or sort of like a stage. It's like the support of a painting. I think those things come and go, those conversations, but I'm wondering if, maybe, it's happening now. Maybe the gallery is neutralizing itself in a way?

**Like you're not aware of it?**

Or that it's something that is more of a mute standard, like a painting's stretcher. Which I'm not saying is good or bad, but maybe it's not so definitive anymore. This is something I think about all the time in a general sense in relation to my work, how things could intimate existence beyond or without the present context in which they are seen, while still inhabiting that context.

**I like that idea. Something we were talking about earlier was the material sense of the work that you put in such a space. You used the term modular, and the way that the work in all cases is a set of components that come together, so this wholeness that is suggested in images is not so much the case in the physical experience of the work because you see how the different components come together.**

**Even in the way you discussed the works you installed, first in an industrial space in Cleveland, and then shipped to a commercial gallery in Brussels, as being the same, when of course, technically speaking, they're not visually exactly the same. Nonetheless, they contain all the same components as one another, which I suppose is what you're referring to when you say that. So, in a certain sense, one is looking at multiple variations of the same object, or interchangeable components arranged in different ways. I wonder for you what the interest is in retaining that situation, rather than simply fabricating a singular object.**

I've always been attracted to modularity, and visible modularity especially, which can be something as simple as stacking similar parts together. In this case it's all adjustable. I think that part of what you said is a very good point. I say they're the same, but they're physically different because the parts are re-arranged; the difference is something I really like—the idea that they will never be the same as they once were, but they retain their wholeness as a group. I don't know why I'm drawn to that, but I also think that, when things appear to be modular, they appear to be provisional, which a lot of technology is. You can swap out a part that broke on a machine, or repair, replace, or change the pieces of a high-tech device. The most sci-fi thing is a smooth chunk that *does* something, you know? Or scientists working on computers operated with gas. Something that has nothing visible you can manipulate.

**It's become almost a hierarchy indicative of a class system. If you think of the visual fantasy of something like an iPhone versus a cheap phone, Apple products are all about creating this illusion of a seamless, singular object, whereas with cheaper technology you can see where all the parts come together.**

That's generally true, but I also think that underneath this slickness that you're talking about there's a hidden modularity, and it's not just physical to the technology itself—applications, programs, and all the component parts of the device, really. And it's always been that way with technology, even with something as simple as a hammer, and the question of visibility has more to do with the political side. The connotation of the chunk being something that mysteriously works is the iPhone: it's flat, it's shiny, it's smooth, and it's using that illusion of having no moving parts, having no components, to project the feeling of it being technologically advanced. The politics of technology are wrapped up in its aesthetics.

**I really like the balance you are striking between the known and the unknown in your discussion of your work, its referents, and the larger context out of which it arises. How much of your work do you feel is visible and easily ascertained by the viewer who encounters it?**

I think that a lot of what goes on with my work is really private, and that's the way I like it. So to talk about these issues is more a conversation that we're having. My relationship to the work is completely different from yours, or from that of other viewers'. A lot of the time I know that I'm just making work to get myself to think about things that I want to be able to spend large amounts of time thinking about. The motivation is not that complex, but the output could be, and a lot of the thoughts that I have when I'm working on

things are really exciting to me, and I never share them with anybody. That's just how it is. I don't know, there's no other way for me. I still think the most interesting things about my work are things that I cannot tell anybody else because I can't quite communicate them with language.

**Is the work for you, and the act of making it, some sort of machine for thinking, as in what we were talking about it at the beginning of our conversation around the productivity of a "staring-at-the-wall" mentality? By manipulating these materials, or by placing them in a certain way, you are constructing this interaction between object and viewer, which may be based on ultimately private experiences and thoughts. But it seems like, if it was a machine for thinking for you, then it also could be for someone else, and in the same way, where maybe my experience with the work is just as private as yours—but but is necessarily different.**

Yeah, totally. That would be the most ideal thing that I could imagine, if somebody had that, because how often, realistically, does that happen looking at art? I love it, but sometimes it's few and far between that you have a really meaningful experience. Maybe it's different for other people.

I think, though, that I'm not necessarily thinking about destruction or an absence of the capability of saying something. It's a different way of communication, so it would be like speaking versus psychic communication, where sometimes there are words, but a lot of times it's pure emotions, or just sensations, that people cannot describe. It's a form of knowledge, and it's a feeling, so it's almost like hyper-communication. It's something that doesn't fall back on language because it's beyond it, not behind it; it's not absent. I wonder what would happen to language if we could communicate psychically all of a sudden without interfacing through words.

**Psychic communication and there was no other communication involved?**

I guess any communication that avoids spoken language. Like a sensation of immediacy, the kind that avoids the part of the brain that filters information for us so that we can survive. And you get that when you do psychedelic drugs, or a little bit when you're in a sensory deprivation tank, strangely enough. Also, maybe when you have a spiritual experience. I'm not operating under the illusion that someone is going to walk into the gallery and be like, "My brain started working on another level when I looked at this thing." But, hopefully, I'm maybe doing something that could add to the suggestion of that possibility in the world, instead of taking away from it, or blocking it. Or, at the very least, just doing so for myself.





*A day dream about the authority of a heavy desk, about other vocations spent behind one ordering certain men around, about domineering and maybe reclining slowly, exhaling, 2014. Terrazzo, stainless steel, laboratory hardware, neon lights, transformers, paraffin lamps, mica, frankincense, sterling silver Tiffany dish. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.*







*Medusa* (pictured at the Medusa Cement building in Cleveland, OH), 2014. Brass, stone. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



*Medusa* (pictured at the Medusa Cement building in Cleveland, OH), 2014. Brass, stone. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



*Sharp points lower the required voltage, electric fields are more concentrated in areas of high curvature, phenomena more intense at ends of pointed objects,* (pictured at Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, BE), 2014. Brass, marble. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



# Lynn Hershman Leeson



Lorna, 1983. Interactive videodisk. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

## In Conversation With Terri Cohn

**When did you become or realize you were a conceptual artist?**

I think it was probably in the late '60s when I wanted to push the boundaries of traditional painting and sculpture. This included incorporating sound, space, light, emotion, and context. Much of the experimental work I was doing in those early days became the armature for future work.

**What does being a conceptual artist mean in your terms? What is your definition?**

Process rather than finish, perception overriding artifact. The artifacts convert into leftovers that are often ephemeral, temporary, and fragile.

**It has been said that a lot of conceptual artists come from sculpture rather than painting or other disciplines. Would you agree with that and, if so, why or why not?**

The only training available until the late 1970s or early 1980s was traditional. I think everything evolved eventually and therefore extended from those forms.

In the '70s I was experimenting with site-specific work—the context of the work—and used sound and identity to create fictional personas. I made a hotel room in 1972 with the hotel room being the context that people moved through for a period of almost a year.

**Was that The Dante Hotel?**

Yes. *The Dante Hotel* (1973–76). The ambience of the place and fragmented identity of people who lived there were part of the work. I did a number of projects that grew out from the Dante, including the *Roberta Breitmere* project, which was a 10-year performance, and the windows of Bonwit Teller. I was also associate project director of Christo's *Running Fence*, and started the Floating Museum, which was a museum for artists who used non-traditional methods to create their work. The Floating Museum existed outside the format of traditional museums, because museums in the 1970s wouldn't even show photographs of artists like Cindy Sherman, Gordon Matta-Clark, Doug Davis, Eleanor Antin, and a number of others. I also did a performance called *Lady Luck: A Double Portrait* in Las Vegas in 1975 in a casino. In fact, I did several site-specific performances in a number of places including development homes in Australia, San Quentin prison, and even a needlepoint store in San Francisco. Then, in the end of the 1970s, I started my first interactive work, *Lorna* (1983).

**Can you talk more about Lorna as the first interactive video artwork?**

*Lorna* grew from the hotel rooms and the experience of flowing through that architecture, seeing something from all sides, and then negotiating the possibilities of multiple experiences, like a cubist painting, by incorporating technology.

**You did a huge amount that seems to have been related to identity explorations, which was an important part of the art of the 1970s. Can you talk a little bit more about that?**

I think women in particular were searching for their own history, and their own identity. In the projects I have done specifically about identity, there were female protagonists like *Roberta*, or the characters in the *Dante Hotel*, or the characters in the four hotels (The Chelsea, the Plaza, and the YWCA in New York and Circus Circus in Las Vegas), or *Lorna*. They're all females searching for a sense of who they were—of their place, of their time, and of the things that made them real. The feminist movement, which simultaneously started in Chicago, Fresno, and Southern California, revealed how a lot of those artists were also trying to find a place for themselves. There was no available history of women artists. It was all underground. I think that was a big factor for women in the 1970s—we needed to come to terms with who we were, and how we *could* insert ourselves into history.

**I think the artists of your generation did a really good job establishing a canon, and in looking at what younger women are doing now I think that there's finally a tribute being paid to that period of time. But it has taken a while for the history to be documented properly, or to be documented at all. In terms of the work that you have done since the '70s, would you say that there's been some kind of steady path that you feel you've been on in terms of ideas that you were exploring then?**

The work takes different forms, but it's really about the projection of media on women's identity, and how you define reality and defy marginality. My work has taken the form of interactive photography, of books that deal with the Internet, or performance-based pieces. But it's all really about how we're seen, how voyeuristic society has become and how we can become victims of this scopophilic surveillance through ignorance. I'm interested in reshaping perception to help move an individual out of the victim role into one of empowerment.

**Have you taken that work out of the context of art and into the world? It seems like it has tremendous social implications.**

Just in my films, which have been independent so far and so they have kind of a limited audience, but a bigger audience *than only* the art audience.

**Can you talk more about your own identity exploration? What was it about the 1970s that prompted such an exploration for you?**

After completing *The Dante Hotel* work, I assumed and constructed identities based on the context of that particular location. Items were placed in the rooms and became sociological evidence of their lives, economic realities, and statuses. That evolved into liberating an invisible identity, *Roberta Breitmere*. Roberta was a fictional identity who would interact with real life by placing ads in newspapers, by answering the ads, and by having various adventures for almost 10 years, each one growing out of the other and building her reality through these real interactions over time. She would see a psychiatrist, she would have her own handwriting, she would have checking accounts and credit cards, a driver's license, and all the things that identify you in society as real and also create a history where you can track that person. I mean, if you went back to the 1970s Roberta would be more real than me because I couldn't get credit cards. There would be a track record of her that was more substantial than mine.

**How was that for you? Did you have feelings about living with this alter ego?**

For me she was objectified. I saw her as an entity in the tradition of Antonin Artaud, of living theater, of sculpture. But nobody else understood that and they thought I was schizophrenic and doing this weird thing. Nevertheless, I was holding on to my belief in the importance of this project, the complexity of it, and its relevance in time as a kind of tracking. I just do things. My projects are usually rejected at the point of time when I do them and criticized or made invisible—which is the same thing—until many years later.

**Perhaps it's part of being an innovator; perhaps you've just been ahead of your time consistently.**

People do say that. Ellie Coppola says, "When you're pushing the edge, you know it gets lonely and it's tough because you're out there pushing that, but that just seems to be my fate. I see things clearly and I think everybody else is seeing the same things, but they're not." Or the language hasn't existed to talk about things.

With the interactive works, I remember I had to write the language for people to understand what it was or what we were doing, including the idea of being a user if you were a voyeur. I wrote all those things to send out to explain the work that I was doing during the 1970s. I had to make little booklets to explain each work theoretically, or to put it in a context where people could see what I was trying to do.

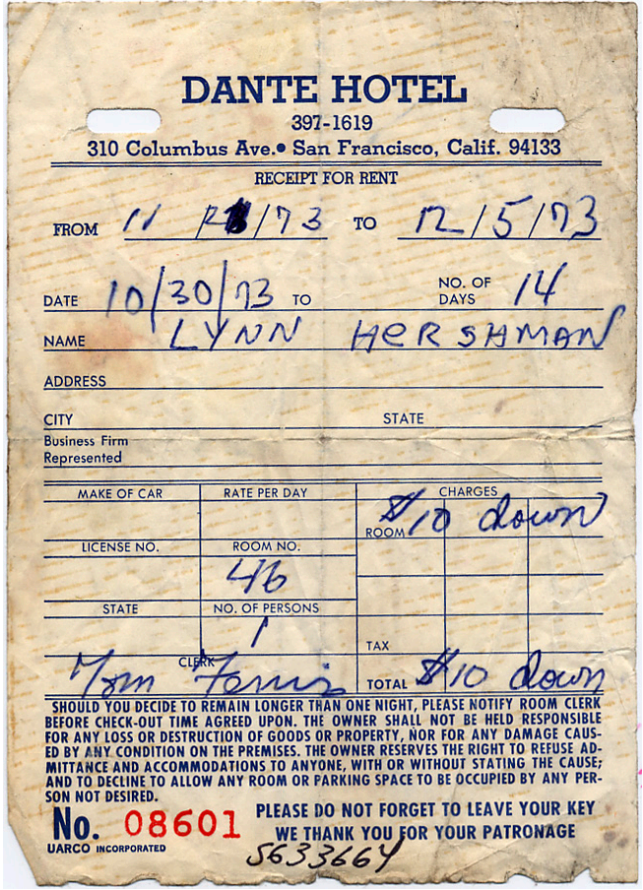
People don't understand totally the ramifications of the work I'm doing, but I figure in time it'll play out. I'm not doing something for the first weekend's box office. People will look back and they'll eventually collect *Lorna*, which was really a disaster when it was released. People hated it. I just have that as kind of a reference that you have to hold on to your belief of what you're doing and your belief that you're right and you need to listen to your intuition. If you don't, then you're lost.

**Can you talk a little bit more about Lorna? Have attitudes toward this work changed over time?**

When *Roberta* seemed to have a series of difficult adventures in her life, I made her into a multiple because I was afraid I was projecting onto her. With *Roberta*, the ritual became the symbolic burning of her ashes and rebirth into a new being. That's when I came up with the idea of *Lorna*. *Lorna* lived in a single room in *The Dante Hotel*, with no contact with the outside world. You're able to access different elements of *Lorna*'s life by clicking onto objects in her room. So you could click on the fishbowl, you could click on her bed, on her chair, and they would tell short vignettes that had three alternative endings. There were also two different soundtracks that really used the media in what I thought was a sculptural way. It related to the *Dante Hotel* project as a kind of walking through rooms, which revealed things.

**There seems to be an intersection of identity and place that occurs with this work. Can you talk about why you came to San Francisco, and whether San Francisco, or being here, has supported you as an artist?**

I came first to Berkeley to go to graduate school, but I couldn't figure out how to register, so I quit. I was married at the time and moved to Los Angeles and came back to San Francisco because my husband at the time got a job here. I don't think San Francisco has been friendly at all. I think it has really been hard and filled with rejection of my work, and me, and this continues still. For instance, in San Francisco, the last review of one of my art exhibitions was *in 1993*. Thomas Albright, in fact, said I was "the worst disaster to ever hit California!" Kenneth Baker said he had nothing to say about my work. There is an insidious prejudice that I have talked



Receipt for payment from *The Dante Hotel*, 1973. 3 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



about in *!Women Art Revolution*. How do you counter it? To me, that kind of invisibility is a kind of murder. It symbolizes the erasure of one's history. I work in Europe and New York mainly. I've had a show every other year in the last 10 years and the works have been bought by major museums including the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Canada, and by Donald Hess, to name a few. They've been written about all over the world, except in the Bay Area.

**It seems impossible to believe that you would be left out of any history of this area because you've done so many important things that have had an influence on the direction art has taken.**  
I won the Hamptons International Film Festival Sloan Award for writing and directing *Teknolust* in 2002, a major award given for film directors. I won the Prix Ars Electronica in 1995 for *Difference Engine #3*, and was the first woman in 20 years to ever win. I also won the Siemens Media Art Prize in 1995, a Lifetime Achievement at ACM Siggraph in 2009, first prize at the Montreal International Festival of Films on Art for *!Women Art Revolution* in 2012, the Women's Caucus of the College Art Association's first Media Award in 2012, so many ... nobody in San Francisco would publish that I won these awards.

**It's an interesting contradiction to your career and your profile because you want your hometown to acknowledge you and at the same time there's an irony in the fact that you're being acknowledged in larger markets around the world. With that in mind, why didn't you go to New York?**  
I was a single mother for a while, so I didn't have the resources to move with a child.

**It also seems that your work during the '70s was about the place you were living, which was San Francisco.**  
I think that the idea of context and site-specific work certainly stems from that time, and it was a political era, just after the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley during the 1960s. In 1968 in Europe, my work was about empowerment of an individual and understanding the context of the site and all the ramifications that place has.

**Can you talk a little bit about the scene in San Francisco during that period?**  
I always felt that I was an outsider. But the fact that I was a struggling single mother made me self-directed in particular ways. I also think that other artists involved in the performance art world at the time didn't really understand what I did or consider what I was doing as art.

**Even though a lot of what they were doing had tremendous affinity with your work?**  
It was a club. And I still have never been invited to one of Tom Marioni's beer parties. So I didn't really have much of an interaction with other artists in that group. Women weren't considered artists in the 1960s and '70s, plain and simple.

**Little did they know!**  
Hopefully they found out!

**Was there anything about the politics of the 1970s that influenced your work?**  
I think it was the idea of autonomy. When I was at Berkeley, and all the uprising was happening, the idea erupted that an individual could change something, and that you didn't need institutions. Without that structure invading my thinking I would not have gone into *The Dante Hotel*. I thought I could take on the world. And the thinking of the time was that an individual could really make a difference. Once again, you have that personal empowerment that was so idealistic. It permeated.

**Who do you feel influenced you, your work?**  
Marcel Duchamp, and meeting Arturo Schwarz and learning from him. I like to also say Cézanne for the idea of looking around things. For me, it's any artist who really has shown courage in their work, who has not gone the traditional way. Artists I admire are the ones who have taken their own risks and beliefs, and pushed them to an edge, and did it despite the odds and despite the consequences, just because they felt that they had something that was so important that they went towards it.

**I'm fascinated by what you said about Cézanne—his way of looking around things. Do you mean the way in which he used multiple perspectives?**  
Yes. We can't separate our own history. At the end of the third grade, I was separated from my class and sent to college. I think that that kind of displacement, of being the odd person, enabled me to peer at situations from the outside, like a witness. And I think that was kind of a profound experience, as was being in Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement, feeling that it was kind of a parallel for your family dynamics growing up; elements that you deal with in order to individuate.

**Did you ever write a manifesto?**  
I wrote a manifesto of every piece I did!

**Do you still?**  
I do. They're shorter, but I still write something every time, kind of basing it in history and practice.

**It would be interesting to hear you talk more about the continuity of your work between the 1970s and now; the development and direction you've taken.**  
I really think that it's pretty much the same. I think especially *Teknolust* (2002) relates very much to *Roberta*. *Teknolust* is about a biogeneticist who creates three clones of herself—Olive, Marine, and Ruby. This biogeneticist was called Rosetta Stone. I made three Robertas, and the three Robertas went out in the world as multiples, trying to individuate, just like these three, who go out and escape and try to grow and have experiences. The difference with *Teknolust* is that they have happy endings. Roberta's character has a tragic ending. There is an exorcism with all the negativity: her purse getting snatched, all the things that were happening to her. The latter characters, Olive, Marine, and Ruby, fall in love or find fulfillment, find art, find love, find beauty in the world. I think that that kind of difficult angst of the 1970s has shifted to having a strong sense of humor and resolution.

**It seems that it must somehow also reflect your changing experience between the 1970s and now.**  
Yes. The 1970s were pretty tough for me. I think Howard Fox has called it redemption! I think my work now is much more mature and resolved. And it is finally being seen, after 50 years, in my retrospective currently up at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, and also at Bridget Donahue Gallery in New York. Rudolf Frieling recently included me in two shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Paule Anglim Gallery will show some older, as yet unseen, pieces at the Frieze show in May. In 2011 the Museum of Modern Art, New York acquired 42 of my works for their permanent collection, and during the summer of 2015, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will determine whether or not to add several of my works to their permanent collection. It is quite gratifying to see these works finally appreciated. I feel like I've come into the arc, and will be floating with much less chaos into the arc of history and time.



Hilaire Dufresne and San Quentin inmates in front of mural produced by The Floating Museum, 1976. Archival digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

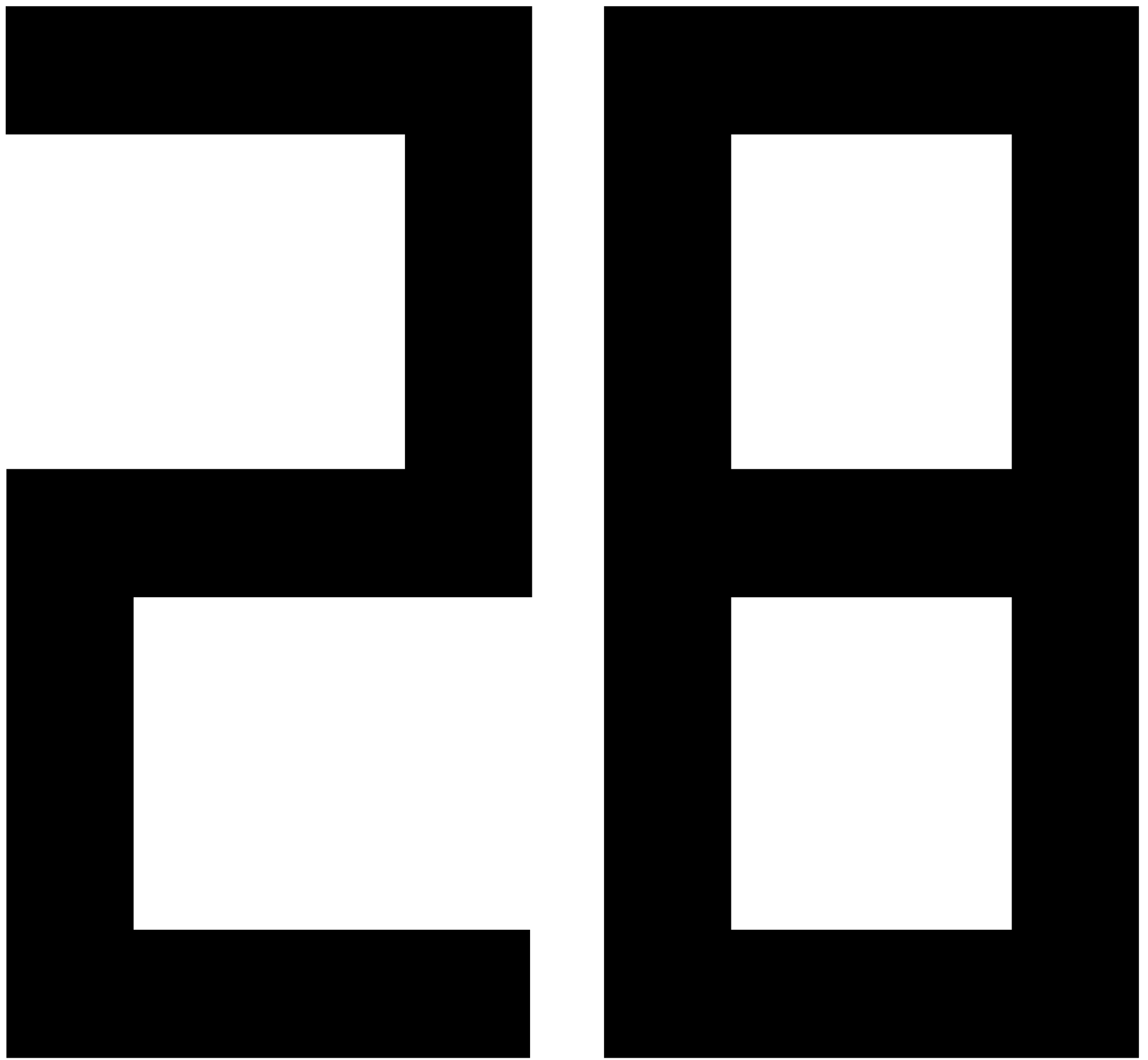


Film still from *Teknolust*, with Tilda Swinton, 2002. Feature film, 24p high-definition video, 83 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.



Contact sheet from *The Dante Hotel*, 1973. 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist





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