



Jill Magid

Jill Magid is an American artist and writer whose work interrogates structures of authority and ownership. Spanning a variety of forms – including image, text, sculpture and film – her performance-based practice is frequently relational in nature and often involves making intimate contact with law-enforcement agencies and organisations. Here, she speaks with writer Claudia Steinberg on her body of work which includes the monumental project, *The Barragán Archives*, a multiyear excavation of the life and legacy of Mexican architect Luis Barragán.

Interview by Claudia Steinberg

From the beginning of her career in the early 2000s, New York-based artist, writer and filmmaker Jill Magid has fearlessly flirted with such seemingly hermetic entities as Liverpool's omnipresent surveillance system – unintimidated by anonymous scrutiny, she used the CCTV system to create an intimate diary between herself, the police and the city – and become a sought-after expert on observation networks. Driven by her deep interest in institutions that regulate our behaviour, she discovered poetry in the Dutch secret service's internal code language. She asked a New York subway cop to search her, and through a relationship initially based on mutual distrust, learned to write him notes in police code, while he ended up giving her a bullet from his gun.

Magid defines her work as a form of seduction, in Jean Baudrillard's sense of the term: a soft, playful alternative to societal pressures, a ritual with its own rules, charms and snares. When she first laid eyes on architect Luis Barragán's house – now a museum – in Mexico City, she instantly fell for its massive walls of undiluted colours (lemon yellow, magenta, rusty red), striking geometries and half-monastic, half-aristocratic elegance. She wanted nothing more than to sit and write in the late architect's former residence and when her wish was granted, wrote a personal guide to Casa Barragán. During her initial visit to the house-museum, she also learned from its director that in 1995, the chairman of design company Vitra had acquired the Pritzker Prize winner's entire professional archive and allegedly given it, in lieu of a wedding ring, to his fiancée,

Italian art historian Federica Zanco. Zanco had then moved her \$3-million treasure into an underground location in Switzerland, where, for the last 25 years, she has devoted herself to compiling Barragán's catalogue raisonné. Magid – along with almost every other researcher – has since been denied access to the displaced archive. Wanting to explore what it meant for the architect's legacy to be so tightly controlled by a single entity, she constructed a romantic triangle between herself, Zanco and Barragán, resulting in her years-long project *The Barragán Archives*. A series of installations, sculptures, performances, video and finally a film, the project hit a turning point in 2016 when Magid presented *The Proposal* to Zanco. To make the piece, Magid and the Barragán family gained permission from the Mexican authorities to exhume a portion of Barragán's ashes from the Pantheon of Guadalajara. The precious 525 grams (which she replaced with a silver horse she'd made of the same weight) were transformed into a 2.02-carat diamond set in a silver ring that was designed as a gift for Zanco in exchange for public access to Barragán's archive in Mexico. Magid's carefully constructed life and death romance became the internationally celebrated 2018 film – and real-life cliff-hanger – *The Proposal*. *The Barragán Archives* was recently followed by an equally ambitious project, called *Tender*: throughout all five boroughs of New York, Magid entered 120,000 pennies into circulation that she had laser-inscribed along their edges with the words "THE BODY WAS ALREADY SO FRAGILE".



Jill Magid, *Trust*, 2004. DVD, edited CCTV footage and audio, 18 min.
Courtesy the artist and LABOR, Mexico City

Claudia Steinberg After having previously infiltrated government agencies and institutions, *The Barragán Archives* saw you enter the sphere of private power. Were you responding to the unprecedented scale of individual ownership in our hyper-capitalist society?

Jill Magid Up until *The Barragán Archives*, my work had mainly explored federal and state power and its mechanisms. I understood those institutions as different from privatised power because they require a different kind of transparency – one that's demanded of a government in a democracy. Up to a point, the public has access to federal and state institutions, and to the laws that govern them. Don't get me wrong, those systems are also hard to enter: one of the most challenging institutions I worked with was the General Intelligence and Secret Service of the Netherlands, which commissioned me to make an artwork for its headquarters. But it wasn't until I started delving into the *The Barragán Archives* that the extreme power and personal whims of a private company revealed itself to me, because I kept trying unsuccessfully to take recourse in transparency. My usual strategy of finding a loophole in those systems that allows me to enter didn't apply in the same way. I was facing a Swiss corporation governed by Swiss law, and its non-profit foundation [the Barragán Foundation is run under the auspices of the Vitra corporation], which does not require the same transparency by law as a US non-profit.

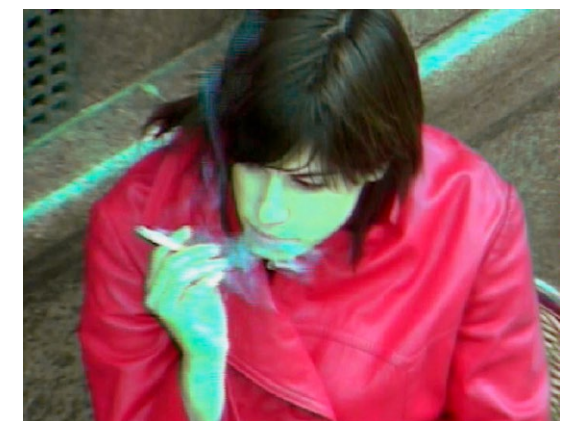
CS Your work tends to be subversive and healing at the same time. In your recent project, *Homage CMYK* [2020–21], for the Dia Art Foundation's outpost in the Hamptons, you played with layers of ownership and authenticity regarding copies of Josef Albers paintings that hung in Barragán's house. Your intricate process of removing these images further and further from the originals followed an earlier but related show you made, *Homage* [2014], involving historical and personal discoveries about Barragán and Albers.

JM The first chapter of *The Barragán Archives Project* explored intellectual property rights and copyright law, and Vitra's strict enforcement of it: I cannot reproduce a photograph taken at Barragán's house, for instance, without permission from Vitra and paying a fee. They don't own the architecture, but they own the rights to reproduce it. Copyright here becomes a form of property, and the author becomes alienable from his work. Rather than protecting authorial rights, copyright is being used in this case to limit access to Barragán's work – not by the architect, but by the purchasers of the rights to his work. Almost as a side note, the photographer in this scenario gets completely erased, although the way something is photographed introduces a whole

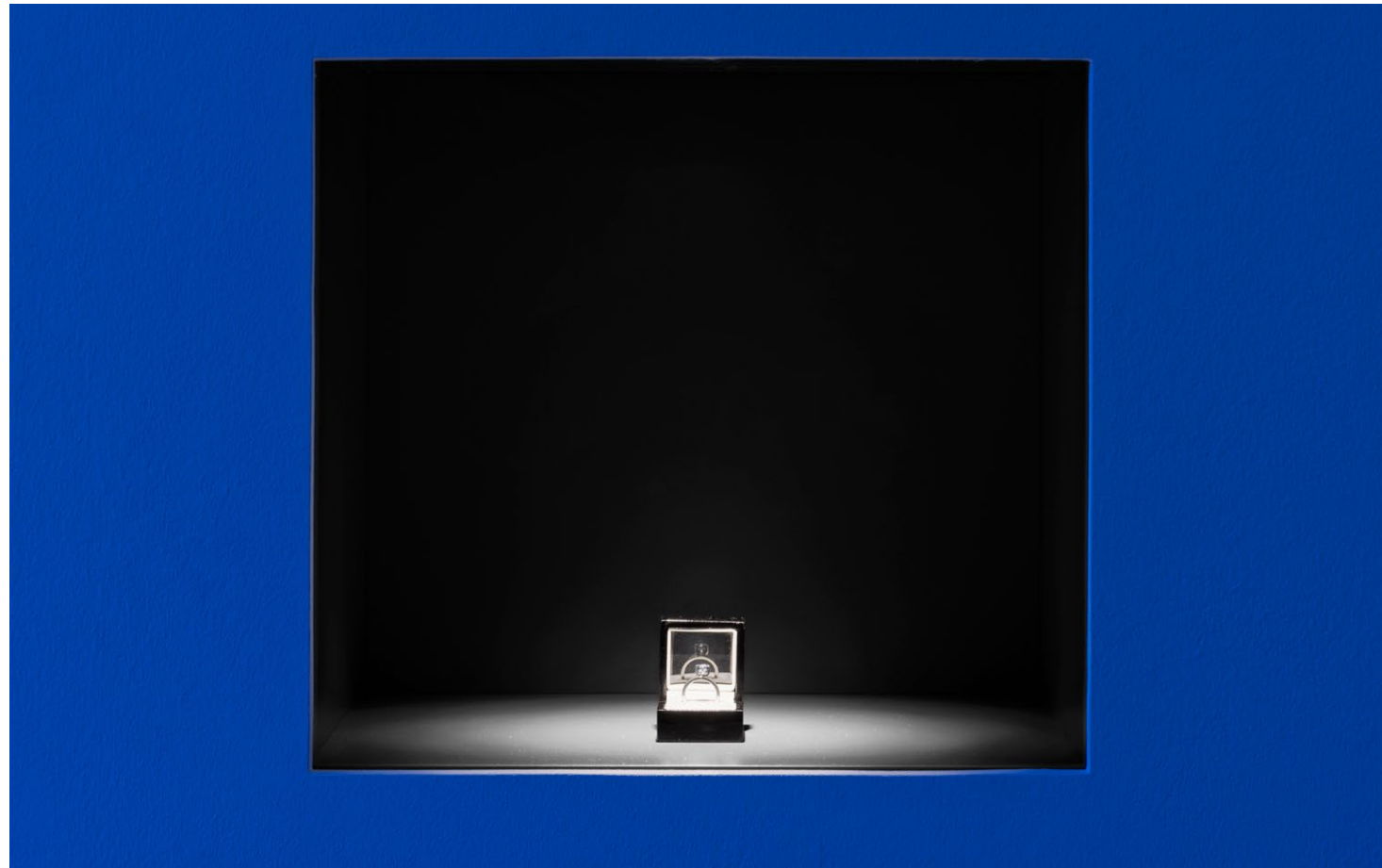
other layer of authorship. There were two Albers in Barragán's house: a yellow one in the living room, and a blue one in the library. Both are silkscreens, not paintings, and not forgeries either, because not only are they not signed but they don't reference any actual Albers' paintings – they just invoke Albers; one might say “inspired by”. Nevertheless, they are referred to as “the Albers”. I've been long interested in the strange place that those “Albers” hold because they're not real. Casa Barragán is full of reproductions because Barragán himself was not beholden to the original: if he loved a painting, he was satisfied with something that referenced that work. He wanted to live with it because it inspired him.

CS So he felt a kinship to that piece of art and just wanted to be reminded of it without owning the original. It speaks of generosity.

JM It seems so, yes! The notion of generosity is what kept me coming back to the “Albers”. Barragán never tried to fake it! His Picassos or his Modiglianis were not even the right sizes; he just wanted something to point him toward the real thing. Vitra approaches reproductions differently. They bought Barragán's archive and the rights to it, and even trademarked his name, without the accent. People immediately think of an object as property, but property is not a thing; it is a relationship among people through things. In our capitalist society, object and property have collapsed into one another, and it's very challenging to think of things divorced from how they're owned. Barragán apparently bought these Albers silkscreens for one dollar each. While they were valuable to him, they don't figure within the structure of Vitra's ownership of Barragán's archive. I became fascinated by the strange legal gap around these images, especially when I found out that Barragán and Albers knew each other. They had met through Clara Porset, a Cuban furniture designer living in Mexico who was very close to Josef and Anni Albers. Josef was aware that Barragán had these two fakes of his work in his house,



Jill Magid, *Control Room*, 2004. Two-channel digital video, 11 min. Courtesy the artist and LABOR, Mexico City



Jill Magid, *The Proposal* (detail, ring), 2016. 2.02-carat, blue, uncut diamond, ring box, documents. Photograph by Stefan Jaeggi, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen. Courtesy the artist, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, and LABOR, Mexico City

but he understood that Barragán loved his work, and he was OK with that. That kind of open-mindedness sets up a foil to Vitra's possessiveness. It became important for me not only to question Vitra's control over the archive and the difficulty they created towards accessing it, but to find an alternative. To me, a relationship between artists who respect one another and want to share their work freely between themselves represents an alternative.

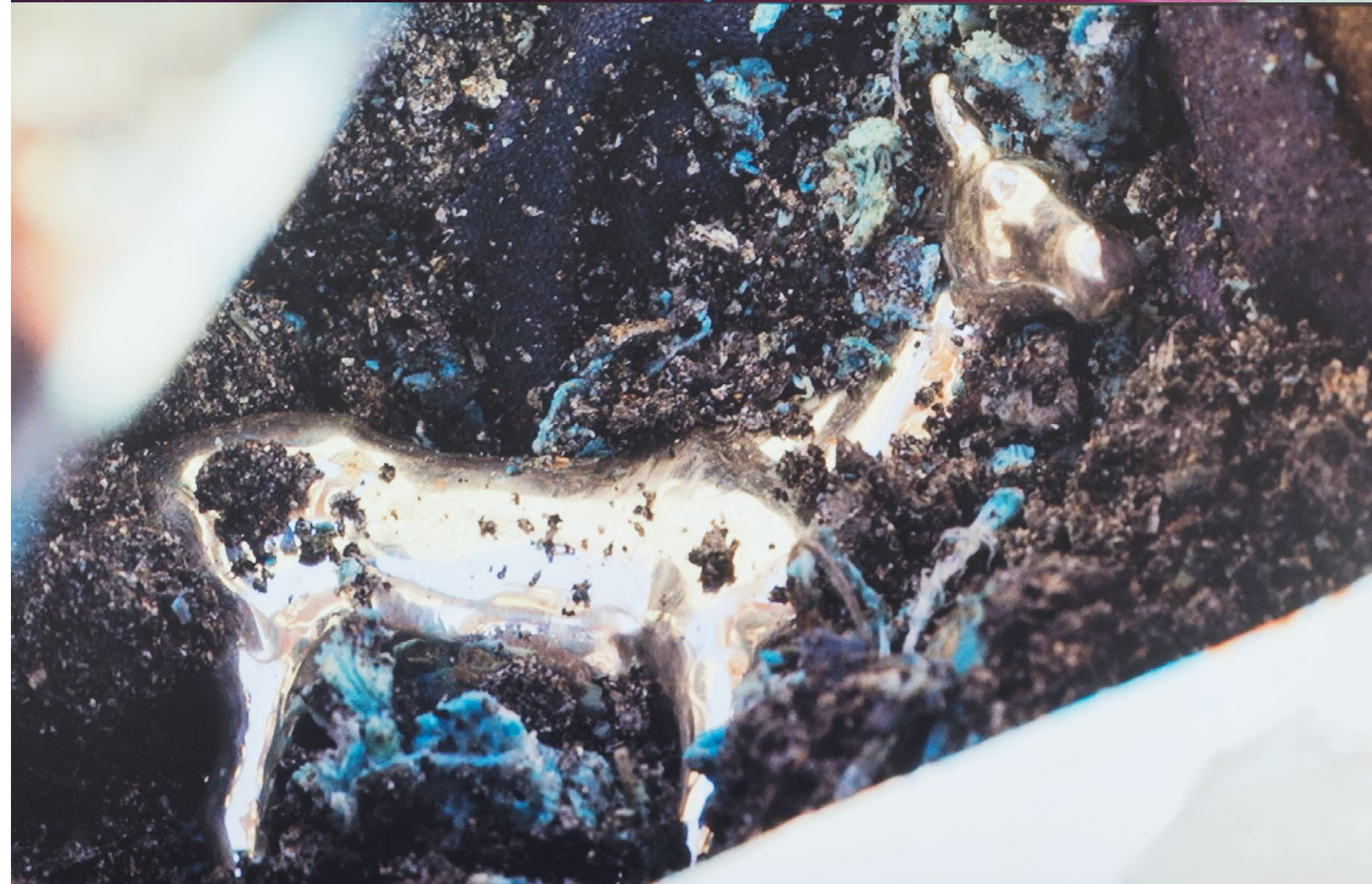
CS Generosity was a crucial aspect of Josef and Anni Albers, too, which also extended to their role as passionate teachers – they wanted to share and inspire.

JM In 2014, I made a gallery show in Switzerland called *Homage* about Albers and Barragán's relationship. After the latter died, the Albers estate organised an exhibition in Barragán's studio. I got the catalogue of that show and decided that I wanted to repaint all the Albers paintings in that exhibit, to enter into their relationship. I learned that Albers always put the recipe for his paintings on the back of them, listing each colour he had used as well as the brand of the paint. I went to the Albers estate in Connecticut, and they let me look at the back of each painting that had been shown at Barragán's studio. I eventually found each of those paint tubes through eBay and by calling the companies.

And when a specific paint didn't exist anymore, I had companies suggest to me the closest correlative, and then I repainted the originals using those colours. But the formula for those colours changes every few years, and a yellow painting would come out pink and orange. They were completely different, and I loved it: both that Albers had this whole instructional relationship to his work and that when I painted them they ended up being this totally different thing. At the root of this dilemma is this beautiful question, what is it that I'm doing: adding my authorship? Creating a fake? Or is it an homage?

CS Did that investment of time and energy make you feel closer to your subjects?

JM Yes, and it helped me think deeply about authorship. When I was at the Albers estate studying the paintings I discovered one of Barragán's famous Butaca chairs in the library, I said, "Oh, my gosh, why do you have a Barragán chair?" And the woman who worked there said with great conviction, "That's not a Barragán – that's a Josef Albers chair!" It turned out that Clara Porset had collaborated with Barragán on designing the chair (even though it is almost always exclusively attributed to him, and though I think it may have been she who actually made them). Josef saw



Opposite, Jill Magid, *The Exhumation*, 2016. HD Video, 6:07 min. Courtesy the artist and LABOR, Mexico City

the chair in Clara's studio in Mexico – and loved it. Clara said, “Why don't you copy it?” Talk about generosity! So Josef traced the chair and took the drawings back to North Carolina and produced one chair for every dorm room at Black Mountain College.[†] Those became attributed to Josef Albers. I went back to the Josef and Anni Albers estate, put a camera on the ceiling, and filmed myself tracing Josef's chair. I sent my drawings to a furniture maker in Switzerland and had the chair produced. That chair is attributed to me, and titled *Butaca Chair, After Josef Albers, After Luis Barragán, After Clara Porset*; it's important to me that her name is the final one in the sequence. The chair poses questions around generosity and inspiration. What happens when you share your ideas with others instead of insisting on your ownership of this work? If you let the chair have its own life? What if you take yourself out of it?

CS It seems to be a way of bestowing layers of history and personality on an object, of keeping it so very much alive in slightly different iterations over generations. For your ongoing exhibition *Homage CMYK* at the Dia's Dan Flavin Building in the Hamptons, you once again injected yourself into the Barragán-Albers relationship from the perspective of the surrogate paintings at the house in Mexico City.

JM In *The Barragán Archives*, I'd been framing photographs of Barragán's work published in books – attaching the frame right through the book – to avoid and highlight copyright infringement. I started focusing on the so-called Albers that were visible in the background of photographs of Barragán's library and living room, often skewed at an angle because they weren't the subject of the picture. The season or time of day when the photograph was taken could be read in the colour of the light and shadows in the room, and on the Albers. And, of course, Albers always talks about the relativity of colour.



[†] Josef and Anni Albers taught at Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 by liberal educator John Andrew Rice who believed in the centrality of artistic experience in all academic disciplines. Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Dorothea Rockburne are among the many famous alumni of the landmark North Carolina institution.

CS Which was Flavin's subject, too, in the medium of neon rather than paint on canvas.

JM I knew that I wanted to do something in this show with light in relation to Flavin, but I did not want to use light as a material. So I took all the books I had on Barragán and found the pages with photographs including the Albers “homages” and scanned them. The silkscreens had been photographed, then printed in the four-colour CMYK process for publication in a book, so already you have three transformations: the fake Albers, the photograph of it, the published page. I'm adding another layer by scanning it and bending it back into a square, and a final layer when I return it to a silkscreen. The result was astonishing; the new silkscreens collapse time and the surrounding architecture into them, almost like still frames of a film. The size of my new final “Albers” pieces is the exact same size as they are in Casa Barragán.

CS You do create interesting complications. And you're keeping the relationship with Barragán alive, even if the exchange of the ring for the archive has not yet happened. Is the play with Barragán's “Albers” and the questioning of ownership a gentle provocation aimed at Switzerland?

JM Maybe it is, but that's not my intention. I am asking different questions in *Homage CMYK* than in *The Proposal*. But I think they both investigate what is the thing versus what is the human relationship towards that thing? And what happens when you try to create some space between? Property-law informed the *Homage CMYK* work, as did myths of single authorship. What formal paths are available to me when the weight of property is removed? When authorship is expanded? What kinds of new forms arise?

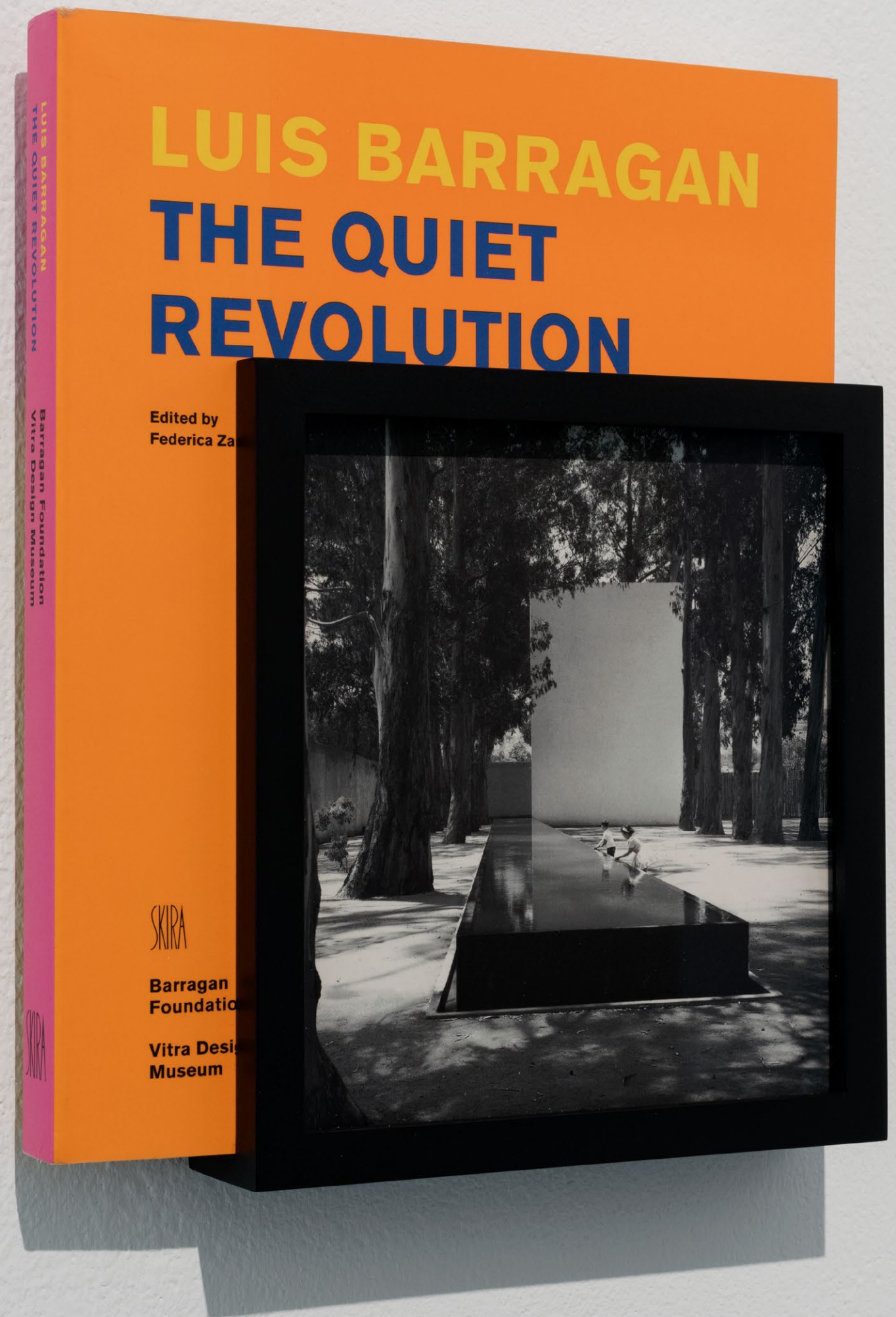
CS Are you still in communication with Federica?

JM I last wrote her in 2018 before *The Proposal* film premiered at Tribeca Film Festival but *The Proposal* artwork remains a gift offering for her whole lifetime. The questions the work pose remain open. She can choose to accept the ring and discuss with the Barragán family and a Mexican institution how to make the archive accessible to the public in Mexico at any time.

CS And who owns the ring in the meantime? Is it yours?

JM Partly. The ring is intended as a gift exchange for Federica, with certain conditions that the family and I agreed upon in *The Family Contract*. I don't want anyone to own the ring – it is a gift-in-waiting for Federica, only. Once the jewel was made, it had to be insured, but to insure something, it has to be property; it has to be owned by someone. We wrote a contract with the help of lawyers so that the ownership was a catch-22: the family owns 50%

Jill Magid, *El Bebedero at Las Arboledas by Armando Salas Portugal*, 2013. Book, frame 12 x 9.5 inches. Courtesy the artist and LABOR, Mexico City



People immediately think of an object as property, but property is not a thing; it is a relationship among people through things. In our capitalist society, object and property have collapsed into one another, and it's very challenging to think of things divorced from how they're owned



Jill Magid, *Butaca Chair, After Josef Albers, After Luis Barragán, After Clara Porset*, 2014. Wood, Leather. Courtesy the artist and LABOR, Mexico City

and I own 50%, but neither of us can sell it without the other's permission. That was meant to ensure that no one would sell the diamond. You can't sell it, but you can co-own it with these strict rules that keep it safe until she's ready to take it.

CS You've also said that as an artwork it must remain free of any expectation beyond its existence. I wondered whether this is something that you ascribe to or demand of every work of art.

JM I believe that artworks themselves are ways to ask questions – and an artwork succeeds when it continues to provoke questions. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect that the artwork can determine a specific result. When I approached the family with the idea of making the ring, I said to them, I don't know if this will open the archive to the public: you have to trust the work as a poetic gesture. This comes before you ask whether or not it will bring the archive back to Mexico, which is what the family wanted. We may not know until Federica's death whether the gift is accepted or not. There is something beautiful about this period of suspension, this very pregnant realm of the possible. My film ends on the ring and my voiceover saying, "I await your response." That's what I expect from a work of art over time: that it still begs questions.

CS The sociologist Marcel Mauss wrote that to refuse a gift is an act of war, demonstrates fear, or means a refusal of friendship. Did you sense any of those notions in your dealings with Federica?

JM I am thankful to Federica for engaging with me and the project for three years. But the questions *The Proposal* raises are not only to her. They are to all of us. How do we want archives to be treated or protected? Especially archives of those individuals or entities who have so much to offer to the public? When does protection become overprotection, delaying or even denying the construction of a legacy? Mauss said that giving a gift implies the expectation of getting something back – a gift in return. Gifts create social connections and networks. Accepting a gift results in a relationship of expectation, while refusing a gift creates another kind of tension or denial. Either way, the chess game is the chess game. It would be awesome for the public and for Barragán's legacy if the archive were to be made more accessible, but it can't be the artwork's responsibility to ensure that. The very fact that we are discussing these issues because of the work is a lot.

CS Your posthumous relationship with Barragán was also material in a most elemental way – you were in touch with his ashes. That was not the first time you dealt



with cremains: in 2006, you proposed a project called the *The Salem Diamonds*, a memorial that would have consisted of 3,489 diamonds created from the unclaimed ashes of 3,489 mentally ill patients stored at the Oregon State Hospital in Salem. Around the same time, you were looking at mortality – or a version of immortality – even more intimately with your thankfully unfinished work called *Auto Portrait Pending*, which anticipated Barragán's metamorphosis from flesh to stone.

JM Unlike *The Proposal*, *Auto Portrait Pending* [2005] is for sale. When I made that work, I was exploring my own legacy, and my body as art and commodity fetish. The piece entails that upon my death, a diamond will be created from my cremains: it will have a round cut, weigh one carat, and be set in a gold ring. Until the diamond's creation, the empty ring, and a series of documents constitute the artwork. The piece is designed to be purchased by a collector who agrees to receive the diamond after my death, and set it into the ring. For years I kept a one-carat Swarovski crystal in my wallet as a placeholder to help me come to terms with the idea.

CS With your investigations, you penetrate forbidding systems and institutions and find their human origin: by examining copyright law, for example, you uncovered the romantic notion of the *auteur* or the “singular creator” as its basis. In other words, the mythic image of the solitary artist is supported in these legalistic terms. Institutions seem less alien that way and more like a part of our cultural history.

JM Laws are written by those empowered to write them around what is valued – and what is not. Some laws may look innocuous, but upon closer inspection reveal themselves as ways to exclude people who are less empowered, or share different values. Likewise, the rules of a foundation or an institution are designed around its mission, and point to the intentions and the desires of that system. I try to understand the system and my relationship to it. I need the rules to help me to do that, and also because they help me formally, conceptually, and materially to create my artwork: I take some of the rules from the system that I'm interrogating, and then, with them, create my own visual and conceptual

vocabulary. I develop my own system based on what I've learned from theirs. I love bureaucracy. I love boundaries because they define the structure. Only when I can see the structure can I question or subvert it.

CS You also manage to romanticise and poeticise those rules.

JM That's the only way I can understand them. Surveillance systems, the Barragan Foundation, copyright law – we're talking about substantial entities, and for me to work with them, I have to humanise them. We must become vulnerable to one another.

CS You've said: “The most radical tool of pragmatism is poetry.”

JM The rigidity of bureaucracy leaves room for poetry. Poetry is essential to my contract negotiations, engagements with copyright law, and so on. Poetry allows me to interact with a system in a mode that is not only or primarily transactional, contentious, or self-interested. I try not to fetishise these systems, but I often eroticise them. Eroticism and perversion are two things that really interest me. While perversion is a transgression of boundaries, eroticism moves closely along their edges, with all the sensitivity that this movement generates. The whole process of making my work is a kind of eroticism, playing along those boundaries.

CS Your art is also very much concerned with keeping legacies alive, considering your interest in the archive and in mortality. You recently visited the archive of filmmaker Chantal Akerman who died in 2015, and you even recreated a scene from her feature film *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* where you step into the space of the main character. It felt like such a strong gesture of identification.

JM I was very moved by her film *News from Home*, which was the only film that Laura Poitras – the executive producer of *The Proposal* – suggested I should watch when I was making that film, because of its epistolary structure: Chantal is reading her mother's letters over scenes of New York. When the Dia Art Foundation invited me for one of its Artists on Artists talks, I picked Chantal. Her sister, who lives in Mexico City, said to me if you want to understand Chantal, write about your mother. I'm really close to my mother, but she's kind of perfect, so I don't have anything to write about. Instead, I just started watching a lot more of Akerman's work, and I began reading her: she wrote a piece about her father dying that is also about her mother. Chantal had read that small book at Dia, and I very much understood her voice. I was spending last summer in Amagansett [on Long Island], and



Above, Jill Magid, *Woman with Sombrero*, exhibition at Yvon Lambert, Paris, 2014. Courtesy the artist, Yvon Lambert, and LABOR, Mexico City

Below, Jill Magid, *Tapete de Flores Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen*, 2016. Installed in *The Proposal* at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2016. Artificial flowers, natural flowers, dyed sawdust, salt, glue. Diameter: 8m. Courtesy the artist, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, and LABOR, Mexico City



Jill Magid, *The Proposal*, 2018. Feature documentary, 83 minutes.
Courtesy the artist and Field of Vision. Distributed by Oscilloscope Laboratories

I decided that what I was going to do was listen to Chantal's reading about her father. I also was watching the film she made when her mother was dying. Eventually, I realised that while I couldn't write about my mother, I could write about being a mother. I was dipping into Chantal's world and then writing about my world in relation to my son. The second part of my talk was related to the film *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* [1978]. There's a scene where Anna, the protagonist, pulls back the curtains in her hotel room in Essen, Germany; I just loved everything about it – how she pulls the curtain by walking it to the end of the window, opening the world behind and in front of her. I loved that literally as well as figuratively, this world and this history opened up in front of her with that single gesture of opening the curtains: Anna is like the lost wanderer in post-World War Two Europe, embodying that feminist position of the lone woman who doesn't get married, who doesn't have children, and I was identifying with that persona. As an artist, I too am that way, but I'm also a mother, something that she stepped away from, a decision perhaps tied to her mother's experience during World War Two and the Holocaust. After my Barragán project, which questioned my position within an already

deeply established series of relationships with property and value, I was ready for a more intimate engagement with Chantal's work through an exploration of motherhood and Judaism.

CS *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is also about the transitory. There's never anything to hold on to, Anna is in constant motion, and the central role played by trains in a film set in Germany immediately brings to mind the Holocaust, and in this case, her mother's fate as a survivor.

JM Chantal conveys not only the instability of the present, but also that of the past, which is never set in stone: we keep creating it anew in our minds. I was also trying to figure out my relationship to the Holocaust. As a Jewish woman, I feel very connected to that chapter of history, and yet I feel uncomfortable and conflicted about engaging with it. Who am I to feel connected? I'm not like Chantal; my mother wasn't in Auschwitz; I wasn't born right afterwards. Chantal's sister talked to me about the inheritance of trauma, which many scientists have been studying, and I really believe in it. So I asked myself, how many generations can pass for someone to still feel affected by that past, to claim a lineage to that trauma? My grandfather had to leave Europe because of anti-Semitism, but he wasn't in the camps. Do I have jurisdiction anywhere?

Jill Magid, installation view of *Homage CMYK*, exhibition at Dia Bridgehampton, 2020–21
Courtesy the artist, Dia Bridgehampton, and LABOR, Mexico City





Jill Magid, *Tender*, 2020. 120,000 edge-engraved 2020 US pennies. Documentation image by Paul McGeiver. Courtesy the artist and Creative Time, New York

CS There should never be a limit on empathy.

JM Intellectually, I agree, but it was a real question for me: where am I in this historical line? Chantal gave Anna to the viewer as a proxy for herself, and for once I felt that there was a space for me to stand in: she gave me a layer of fiction that afforded me the freedom to imagine myself in both the trajectory of that history and the security of being part of her story. In the context of Chantal's film, I wrote about my son's issues with language processing; he has something like dyslexia, and suffers from anxiety. I have my own anxieties and at the very beginning of my piece, I described something very strange: when I was pregnant, my anxiety went away, but then my son developed anxiety and I was afraid that I might have passed it on to him. Did he relieve me of it? I don't know whether that's true or not or even on the spectrum of truth. My Akerman piece was a way to take all her works into my own experience and explore them.

CS Your most recent public artwork is titled *Tender*, a word that can refer to currency, a wound, and an emotion. The 120,000 2020 pennies that make up the work is the same amount of money as the \$1,200 given to Americans under the CARES Act as emergency help in the early months of the pandemic. You splintered

that check into minute objects of minute value that nevertheless carry a sentimental value: pennies are associated with luck and people pick them up from the pavement. Recently a study came out that showed how the lack of personal transactions in stores – the transfer of money and goods – has a major impact on civic engagement: online shopping and digital money make people feel less connected and even lowers their desire to vote.

JM These findings seem very beautiful to me, also in relation to gift giving, which is thought of as the opposite of financial transaction because gift-giving builds social obligations while paying for things supposedly frees you from them. Your findings give some social power back to in-person transactions. I put my pennies into distribution in bodegas throughout all five boroughs of New York. According to statistics, most people in New York visit their bodega at least once a day; I definitely do. And bodegas recirculate cash throughout their local community more than other stores do. I do think that paying with money creates a sense of community. And after these pennies are distributed in New York, then, of course, they'll move beyond it. Coins circulate on average for 40 years.

Once I started looking at coins, the complicated relationship between their intrinsic value and their symbolic value became evident. There's a shared belief that the money itself has value, but without a gold standard, money remains as a kind of trust or belief system

CS Your pennies might end up at these receptacles for coins of different currencies that you find at airports.

JM We forget about how money defines geographical boundaries. And because money is so ubiquitous, we forget that it's a tool of government propaganda. The coin's text and imagery are just like the layers of history I mentioned earlier: coins have been designed by government-hired artists who are tasked with representing the nation's official iconography. Once I started looking at coins, the complicated relationship between their intrinsic value and their symbolic value became evident. There's a shared belief that the money itself has value, but without a gold standard, money remains as a kind of trust or belief system. No one even looks at it; people just use it. Intervening on the coin edge between the official messaging on its faces, at this moment, when no one wants to touch anything, just felt very right.

FLASH FICTION

5

God almighty if Zofia and I were still together, and we were in this bed shagging and the rat appeared would Zofia actually die of fright or leap off so quickly that she might snap my penis? Does a snapped penis bleed? Does Zofia miss me? Will I ever get another girlfriend as clever or interesting as Zofia? Did the rat just shake his head or am I quaking? Would it help to give him a name? Would it lessen the revulsion? Take the sting out of things with some anthropomorphising? Make things a bit less ratty and a bit more human? Gordon? What the fuck, why would I give the rat my grandad's name? Is it because I've somersaulted through revulsion and I love him? Is that a little sip, sip, sip sound? Should I slam the rat and glass combo with a pillow in one smooth over-arm whack and hope to stun him? Or trap him, then jump on the pillow and glass and make a cocktail of broken glass and cut-up rat? In bare feet? Would the shards of glass penetrate the pillow?

RAT BY MAX PORTER

CS Look closely at your coins and you can read the inscription "THE BODY WAS ALREADY SO FRAGILE" on the edge, which you had laser-engraved on each one.

JM I appropriated the phrase from an article that compared the US economy since the 2008 financial crash with a body recovering from a heart attack – when Covid-19 hit, the already-vulnerable body finally fell apart. And I was struck by how casually the media keep moving between economics and health, constantly asking how the stock market is doing versus how many people are getting sick or dying: the relationship between financial health and mortality rates was ever-present.

CS You also said that coins spread like a rumour, which is such a compelling idea because rumours now travel electronically, just like most money. And just like a rumour, once they have started travelling, you can no longer contain them. The same analogy, of course, is valid for the way the virus circulates. The coins are also markers of time, minted in the plague year of 2020.

JM One hundred and twenty thousand is actually quite a lot of pennies. A box of \$25-worth of pennies is like a brick; I know because I distributed them myself to the bodegas in my neighbourhood, and via armoured cash-in-transit trucks to Manhattan and the outer boroughs. For a sense of monumentality, it was crucial to have a large mass of coins. I thought of them as one huge sculpture, all 120,000 of them, weighing almost a ton, even though each individual penny is so small, a mere 3.11 grams. I also thought of a hologram: if you remove one light, the whole thing collapses. However, there's never a moment when one could see all 120,000 pennies at once and watch them disappear. You know that they exist in that quantity, but you never see them in that form. The only way you'll encounter the sculpture is as a penny in your hand or maybe as a roll of a fifty at the bodega, wrapped in paper with the word "Tender" printed on it.

CS Maybe one day in the distant future, one of your pennies will make its way into your hand.

JM There always comes a moment when I let my work out into the public and it is no longer mine alone – when it might talk back to me as it would to anyone else. ☺

Tom Ray, Tierra, 1990



Visualisation of Tierra by Marc Cygnus

"Our concepts of biology, evolution and complexity are constrained by having observed only a single instance of life, life on Earth," wrote evolutionary biologist Tom Ray in 1993. "Because we cannot observe life on other planets, we are left with the alternative of creating artificial life forms on Earth." This was not a speculative proposition, but an introduction to Tierra, Ray's pioneering artificial-life system. He had created it on his bottom-of-the-range Toshiba laptop three years prior despite having no formal training as a programmer and having spent most of his career until then in the jungles of Costa Rica studying the slow creep of tropical vines (whose psychedelic virtues he appreciates). Ray had intuited that rudimentary self-replicating computer programmes needed only

an environment in which to live, mutate and reproduce for an evolutionary process to be set in place. This environment came in the computer itself: RAM memory provided the physical space for Ray's digital creatures, the CPU their energy source, and his operating system – which would allocate computational resources to different information-based organisms – the physics of their world. When Ray set his simulation running on 3 January 1990, he expected years of tinkering ahead of him, but within one night he observed the evolution of parasitism, sex and the social within Tierra. "My research program was suddenly converted from one of design to one of observation," he remarked, "I was back in a jungle describing what evolution had created, but this time a digital jungle." ☺