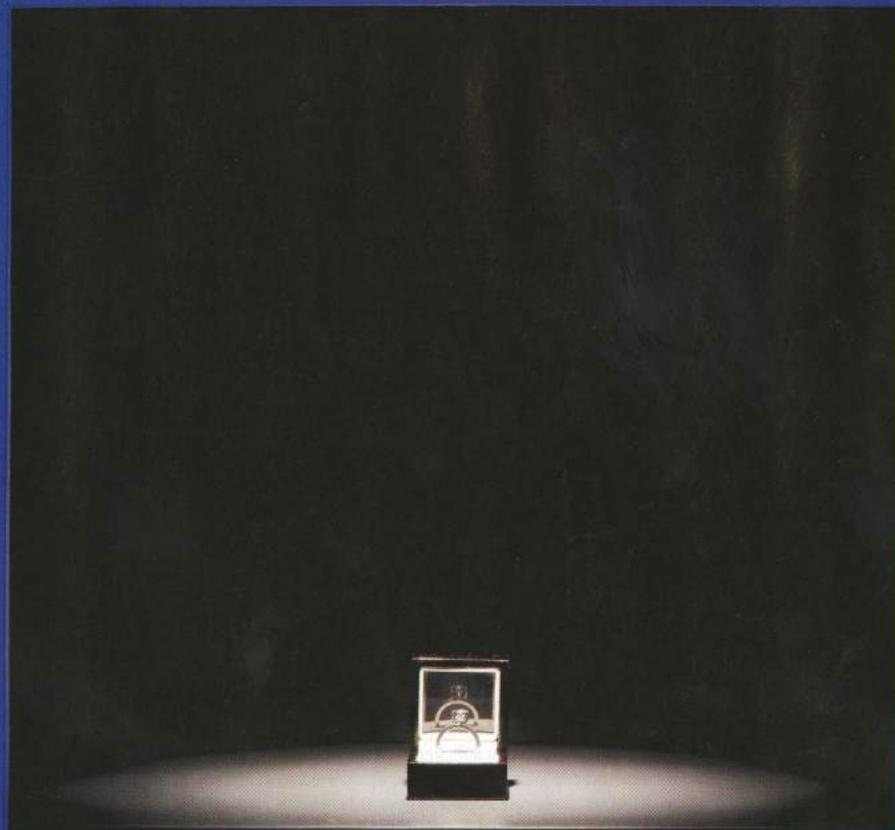


1000 WORDS

# JILL MAGID

TALKS ABOUT *THE PROPOSAL*

Jill Magid, *The Proposal*, 2016,  
2.02-carat blue uncut diamond with  
microlaser inscription, silver ring  
setting designed by Anndra Neen,  
ring box, documents. Installation  
view, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen,  
Switzerland. Photo: Stefan Jaeggi.



Right: Jill Magid, *Auto Portrait Pending* (detail), 2005, gold ring with empty setting, ring box, vitrines, letter, corporate and private contracts, dimensions variable.

Below: Jill Magid, *The Family Vitrine* (detail), 2016, vitrine, documents, 35 x 97 1/4 x 21 1/2". Center: *The Family Agreement*, 2015. Photo: Stefan Jaegg.



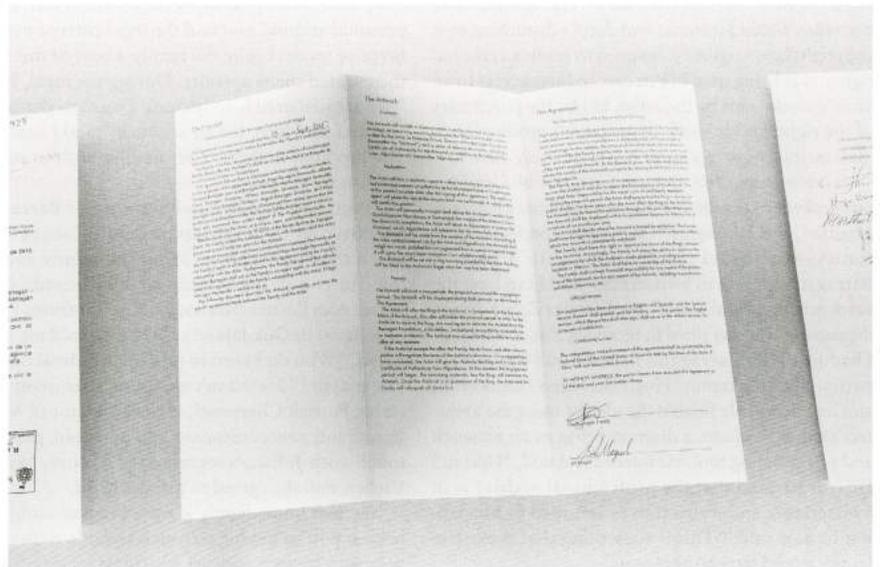
A DIAMOND is the outcome of compression. Once considered unique to the earth's mantle, the extreme heat and pressure that push carbon atoms into a crystal lattice can now be artificially replicated to manufacture diamonds on a mass scale. Most serve industrial needs, as abrasives for drill bits or semiconductors for LEDs, but a handful of companies have modified the process to unnervingly sentimental ends: converting the cremated ashes of loved ones into "memorial diamonds." In 2005, Jill Magid commissioned LifeGem to turn her future remains into a one-carat diamond, to be incorporated into her work *Auto Portrait Pending*, which for now consists of contracts, a letter, and a gold ring with an empty setting. The work introduces into the art market a discomfiting intimacy. By collapsing the distinction between an artist's body of work and her actual body—that is, by literally embodying the commodity fetish—Magid teases out the fraught impulses latent in both the collector's desire to possess and the artist's desire to be appraised.

*Auto Portrait Pending's* morbid audacity is mitigated by the simple fact that the body in question is Magid's own, which ultimately situates the provocation somewhere on the same spectrum of unusual requests as Timothy Leary's plea that his remains be launched into space. The same cannot be said of Magid's *The Proposal*, 2016, a diamond ring grown from one quarter of the cremated ashes of Mexican architect Luis Barragán (1902–1988). A performative utterance fixed in sculptural form, the piece—produced with the blessing of the architect's family—is an offer addressed to Federica Zanco, the owner of Barragán's professional archive and copyright. At any point in her lifetime, Zanco is welcome to take the ring, wherever it may be, but only if she in return agrees to relinquish control of Barragán's records and intellectual property to Mexico. Magid's decision to "propose" this exchange with a diamond ring is a wry reversal of how Barragán's archive purportedly first came into Zanco's possession: Rumor has it that her husband, Rolf Fehlbaum, then CEO of the Swiss design corporation Vitra, purchased it for her as a wedding gift.

The debut of *The Proposal* at Switzerland's Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen this past June caps off Magid's three-year investigation into the vexed history of Barragán's estate, which after his death was divided between the professional archive, held by Zanco at Vitra's corporate headquarters, and a personal archive, housed at Casa Luis Barragán in Mexico City. A series of exhibitions have documented Magid's repeated attempts to access the professional archive and to reproduce Barragán's work without violating Zanco's zealously enforced copyright restrictions. During the same period, she sought to exhume and obtain Barragán's ashes through clandestine negotiations with both his extended family and the Mexican government. The desires that motivated these disparate parties to indulge Magid's unusual requests are varied, some self-evident, others inscrutable. Zanco, for instance, could have simply ignored the American

artist peppering her with letters and e-mails, but instead, for no discernible reason, she kept up the correspondence. She even agreed to meet Magid in person prior to the opening at Sankt Gallen, without any forewarning of what, exactly, *The Proposal* would propose.

Obviously, *Auto Portrait Pending* and *The Proposal* share a common form: a memorial diamond and its attendant paperwork. More subtly, they ask a common question: What happens after the death of the author? Barthes's celebrated answer, the birth of the reader, falls short; it presupposes a world of freely circulating texts, devoid of the legal obstacles and financial interests that in actuality delimit and direct the course of an artist's legacy. *Auto Portrait Pending* confronts these complexities by staging a morally ambiguous dialogue between artist and collector. *The Proposal* involves an even larger cast of characters—lawyers,





Left: Jill Magid, *Tapete de Flores*, 2016, artificial flowers, natural flowers, dyed sawdust, salt, glue. Installation view, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland. Fabricated by Arte en Flores, Barrio la Asunción, Iztacalco. Photo: Stefan Jaeggi.

Right: Page from Jill Magid's *Proposal Letter to Federica Zanco*, 2016, ink on paper, four sheets, each 11 x 8 1/2".

patriarchs, government ministers, CEOs—each with competing claims and differing desires. Remarkably, Magid has compressed this intricate set of power relations into a single glittering stone.

—Colby Chamberlain

**WHAT WOULD IT MEAN** if somebody bought my name? What does it mean for a corporation to own and control an artist's legacy? I've been interested in these kinds of questions for a while, so when I first heard about the controversy around Luis Barragán's archives and the rights to his work, I was intrigued. This was in 2012. I was in Mexico City and had visited Barragán's house, which is now a museum and UNESCO World Heritage Site. The director, Catalina Corcuera, told me about the inaccessibility of Barragán's professional archive at the Barragán Foundation in Switzerland. She also told me that Rolf Fehlbaum and his wife owned the rights to everything that he'd ever built—including all the images of his work—and that they'd even trademarked his name. I found it ironic and deeply disturbing that copyright law, originally designed to protect authorial rights, was being used in this case to limit access to an artist's work—not by the artist, but by the purchasers of the rights to his work. If an artist's production is inaccessible, how can his or her legacy stay alive?

A few months after my conversation with Catalina, I was asked to contribute a piece to Art Basel's Parcours program, and I thought, "OK, this is a perfect opportunity—Art Basel can help me gain access to Barragán's archive in Switzerland, and I can base the work on what I find there." But Federica Zanco denied the request. The day prior to receiving Zanco's refusal, I had met with Barragán's nephew and the current patriarch of the family, Hugo Barragán Hermsillo, and had nervously floated the idea of using the architect's ashes to create a diamond ring as an artwork and a negotiating tool. He listened and said, "I like it." He is frustrated that the professional archive is in Switzerland, and wants it to be returned to Mexico. But he also said, "This is something that the entire family would have to agree on."

After a series of exhibitions in the US and Europe that dealt with the issues of copyright, as well as with Zanco's continued refusals to collaborate with me and her warning against the reproduction of any of the Barragán materials she owned, I was offered an exhibition at the Museo de Arte de Zapopan in Guadalajara for summer 2014. I realized that the show could provide an opportunity to bring the family together. I asked museum director Viviana Kuri Haddad whether I could create a piece that would take the form of a private, formal dinner and that would need to be kept secret until some unknown date. We called it "the secret dinner" between ourselves, and flew in eighteen family members from three generations. It was the night before the show opened, and there was no one in the museum but us. My exhibition was on one floor, and *The Family Dinner* on the floor above. We'd installed a long, elegantly dressed table and painted the walls in Barragán's signature colors. I made the ceramic dishware and the invitation, printed the napkins with photographs of brides from Barragán's personal archive, and had the meal catered with his favorite foods. I gave the family a tour of the show, then seated them upstairs. During the meal, I said, "We are gathered here because I want to share with you an idea I have for an artwork," and I described *The Proposal* to them. They unanimously expressed support for the work.

Hugo had signed custodianship of Barragán's remains over to the government of Jalisco in 2002, when they were moved from the family vault at the Panteón de Mezquitán to the Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres (Rotonda of the Illustrious People of Jalisco) in Guadalajara. When he told me this, I asked, "Who do I need to talk to? A federal official? The mayor?" He wasn't sure, but after many false starts, Patrick Charpenel, former director of Museo Jumex and now curator at Casa Barragán, put me in touch with Jalisco's secretary of culture, Myriam Vachez, and she agreed to meet with me.

She was immediately supportive and said, "The reason you're having so much trouble with this is because it's unprecedented. No forms for this exist, so

imagined Barragán peering down at us from the top of his stairs in an elegant suit as he is photographed by Sabes Portugal on the 284<sup>th</sup> page of your book. How do he mock our efforts or is he charmed? You pondered the same about your feelings towards me. Is it possible for you to know the necessity of my intentions? It was my desire to know him that first intrigued me as to your complete ownership of the rights to his name and work. Now, I contemplate at what lengths you and I individually stand from him in our triangle. I wonder about the script of the lines that connect us, and if their lengths are variable.

As an artist I have imagined what it would be like for a corporation to purchase the rights to my name and work after I have died. It frustrates me that my identity and authorship could be co-opted and reduced to a singular interpretation, or that access to my work would be denied. I am reminded of something the poet Frank Scheck once said to me, after one of his many books of poetry had just been published. I held the book in my hands admiringly and said, "Look! It is yours. No, he responded. It no longer is."

As I wrote above, Federica, I thank you for leading me to Barragán. I only wish I could have had access to his work in the way that you have. At each point, I have tried to find a represent<sup>ion</sup> him. I have encountered you.

I'm going to have to make a new form." It later turned out we needed the approval of Congress. It was a long process, but we managed to get it, and then we had to negotiate with the local government to actually open the rotunda. To add to the drama, the government was about to change hands. If that had happened before the opening could take place, we would have been back at square one. The date we were given was less than one week before the changeover.

Finally, everything was in place, and we were able to open Barragán's tomb within the rotunda and remove his urn. It was a very moving ceremony. I was there, as were Hugo and other members of the family, officials including Myriam, and two public gravediggers. The process was filmed and notarized, and I was given 525 grams of Barragán's ashes, which I immediately flew to Chur, Switzerland, and handed over to the diamond-fabrication company, Algordanza, to have them made into a two-carat stone.

I designed my exhibition at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen with Zanco's passage through the space in mind. The show was intended as a platform for the proposal—in almost a nuptial sense, to aesthetically and emotionally prepare her to consider the ring I am offering her. The installation followed a narrative path, beginning with the *Tapete de Flores* [2016] as the site over which the living and dead commingle, the video *The Exhumation* [2016], and then color-coded vitrines filled with documents and correspondence between myself, the Barragán family, the Mexican government, and Algordanza. The last room was



Luis Barragán, *Casa Luis Barragán*, 1948, Mexico City.  
Photo: Armando Salas Portugal/Barragán Foundation/ProLitteris.



Jill Magid, *The Family Dinner*, 2014. Performance view, Museo de Arte de Zapopan, Mexico, July 19, 2014.  
Barragán family and Jill Magid (center). Photo: José Villalobos.

I have always seen the owner's possession of the archive as erotic. She has treated it with care, perhaps even love.



Two stills from Jill Magid's *The Exhumation*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 6 minutes 7 seconds.

devoted to the ring and a facsimile of a letter I'd given to her a few days earlier, on Vitra's campus.

While I'm deeply questioning what Zanco has done with her power over the archive as well as how privatization in general affects the manner in which artistic legacy is created—or obfuscated—through history, I'm also impressed by how thoroughly she has possessed the archive and the rights over Barragán's work. I have always seen this possession as erotic, and imagined the archive as a kind of lover. She has treated it with much care, perhaps even love, though also with excessive control, refusing access to most researchers of any kind, including other artists.

I invited Zanco to come to the show in Sankt Gallen with a "save the date" card, the design of which I based on an allusion she'd made in one of her previous letters to the film *Day of the Dead* by Charles and Ray Eames. On the back I essentially wrote, "It's very important that I show you what I made before what I made becomes public, because I made it for you." She could not come to Sankt Gallen but suggested we meet at the VitraHaus Café on Vitra's campus. Unexpectedly, she brought her husband to the meeting. The first half of our lunch, which was quite friendly, did not touch on *The Proposal*. Toward the end of the two and a half hours we were together, as the food was taken away, there was a pause. I had brought the ring with me, as well as the letter I'd written to Zanco, in which I introduced and explained the proposal. I had intended to read it aloud to her, but the casual atmosphere of the cafeteria and Rolf's presence

made doing so feel inappropriate. I laid the letter on the table and said, "Well, I think it's important that I talk to you about why I'm here."

I reached into my purse and took out the ring box. I opened it up and put it between the two of them, facing Zanco. I told them that this ring was a gift for Zanco, made from the cremated body of Luis Barragán. I explained to them how that was possible, the complicated story of the work's realization, and how my gift would require a gift in return. They said they thought it was fascinating. Zanco wanted to know where the archive would go if it went to Mexico and why the family had agreed to have the diamond made. Picking up the letter, I said, "Federica, I was going to read you this letter, but..." She made a joke: "It's hard to propose to me when my husband is sitting next to me." We both laughed. I did not expect an answer to the proposal then.

In all of my projects, there's a series of noes and impasses. I've learned that *no* doesn't mean the project is over, but rather that it is beginning. *No* needs to be unpacked. Why *no*? No what, exactly? No this? No that? What law or deeper issue does *no* reveal? What do I have to do so that *no* becomes a *yes*? It's an exploration of those boundaries, an investigation of what it means to navigate a system and seek permission rather than to simply transgress. □

*The Proposal* was commissioned by the San Francisco Art Institute, where it will be on view Sept. 9–Dec. 10.

Visit [Artforum.com](http://Artforum.com) for a video interview with Magid and to read Pamela M. Lee's essay on Jill Magid and Trevor Paglen (May 2011).