

On using your work to understand systems of power



Artist Jill Magid explains the ways in which her work both involves and investigates complicated power structures, the complexity of trying to control your own artistic legacy, and understanding what permission actually means.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2504 words.

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You have done extensive work related to systems of control, surveillance, and analyzing power structures. You've trained as a spy, a police officer, and as a war journalist. After what you have seen and learned, do you think that individual agency exists?

Of course, but that agency can also be compromised, and not everyone has equal agency. How much agency can we carve out for ourselves and how much do we just find given to us? Agency is conditioned by social, economic, and political forces, and by differences of race, gender, and ability. In my work I'm really interested in understanding my position in relation to larger structures of control and power – sometimes the law, government institutions, or private corporations. I'm often looking for how to renegotiate and come to learn new ways of relating and communicating with those institutions. I always come back to questions of “who am I,” “where am I coming from,” and “what position am I speaking from?”

Can you elaborate on what you want to explore in your projects and practice?

My work starts with a question I want to understand better, or an institution I feel very small in the face of that I want to understand on an intimate level. For example, through my project [Evidence Locker](#) I created an intimate relationship with police officers who control Liverpool's city-wide surveillance system. I wanted to know what happens when you choose to communicate with a system like that. What new understandings can develop? Because the moment a one-way system of control communicates with you, rather than simply recording you, the power dynamic changes. So I went to Liverpool for 31 days and filled out the necessary documents to get access to CCTV footage I was recorded on. With the footage the police gave me, I edited four videos and wrote a book. The footage gets progressively more intimate as my relationships with the controllers does too, via the cameras.

My way of working is an earnest attempt to try to understand systems like these, and my evolving relationships with them. I try to be both critical and open. Because I don't know the system intimately before the project starts, it's impossible to know beforehand where I'll get to, and how the questions I'm asking the system will evolve.

What drove you to this curiosity about exploring these systems of control in your practice and creative work?

In college I was really interested in how society worked, how institutions of control worked, and where personal agency existed in the fabric of society. I explored how society was constructed and how I could become an active

part. I was really inspired by Marxism, or at least my perception of it then. I read some essentialist texts about how Marx - to oversimplify - was basically saying that artists, philosophers, and theologians didn't have an active part in driving social change. And I was like, "How can I be so moved by this theory that claims that as an artist, I don't even matter?" So my overarching question was always about how to participate meaningfully in society as an artist.

I started making work where I was using images to question systems of power. For instance, I made a series of video works with mirrors, playing with cameras and problems of focus. I held up a thin-cut mirror so that I caught the Empire State Building in it, and then trained my video camera on the mirror image. There was a moment where the focus was having trouble, so the edges of the mirror would disappear and it looked like I was holding the skyscraper itself and moving it. Which was only possible through the technology of the camera. So I was making these videos playing with moving structures around the city, like the skyscraper, that symbolized power.

Later on I wanted to go beyond a play of images. The first performance piece I made is called Lobby 7, in which I hijacked the informational monitor in the main lobby at MIT, where I was in grad school at the time. Inserting myself and my body into that kind of system changed its function and my relationship to it. It was really that experience that opened up the work I've been making since - opting for direct engagement rather than analysis from outside. The video documentation is how that work is shown.

***The Proposal*, your first feature film, explores the legacy of Luis Barragán, Mexico's most famous architect, and how his legacy is affected by the fact that the private corporation Vitra owns his professional archive and controls the rights in his name and work. Maybe Barragán had no intention of leaving his professional archive to a private company. As an artist, I think it is not common to think about what you want to happen to your work after you die. On one side art owned by corporations is something that artists might want to avoid for several reasons, but also art owned by a state seems to me not to be trustworthy or ideal. You never know if it is going to be shown or if the governmental institution is going to invest to keep the quality of the work. What recommendations do you have to artists about protecting their work and thinking about the future of it?**

I don't know that I could give advice to other artists because the needs of any specific body of work are so individual. Naturally artists and galleries sell work to corporations all the time. What is notable with Barragán's legacy is quite different, because it involves the trademarking of his name, as well as rights both to all images in the archive and any images of his buildings, even if these are *not* contained in the archive. A neon piece I made gets at the heart of that issue; the sign toggles between Barragán (the man), and Barragan® (how his name has been trademarked, by a corporation). So what I was interested in exploring was this very universal, and potentially very limiting, authority over an artist's work.

I'm fascinated by the separate life that artworks can have independent of the artist. Once you make a work and put it out in the world, you can no longer control it. That's the fear, but also the beauty of putting something you've made out into the world - it becomes only partly yours. Once it's in the public realm, people are going to argue about it and read it in ways you didn't intend. It's kind of a mystery.

And then there's this further question of the future of one's artwork. Something I wouldn't have thought about before deeply exploring Barragán is the possibility that after my death the rights to my name and work could be alienable from me in totally unexpected ways. With *The Proposal*, I was trying to understand how to represent Barragán's work when access to it is restricted and tightly controlled. I had to come up with new sculptural forms to do so. How is the original work impacted by those legal and institutional forces? The film is a visual and conceptual exploration of what that means, as well as an effort to actively push and pull at the limits of access to Barragán's work. I hope it offers questions relevant for other artists to think about, not only in relation to their individual work but also more generally to the relationship between the agency of the artist and the agency of the work.

I think talking about the film as a material, as an artwork in itself, is also very helpful to understanding these questions.

You have expressed how crucial it is to discuss how artistic legacy is constructed, shaped, and manipulated. What

are the elements to build an artistic legacy? Is having access to the artistic work essential to build and maintain it? And, is legacy something that artists need to think about and prioritize?

I don't have a single, general answer because there's no such thing as a fully comprehensive archive of an artist's work, and "legacy" is always unstable to a degree. With Barragán, even though I had great access to his house and personal archive, I never had access to his professional archive aside from published books. But what I did have access to really shaped my perception of his work. Now if I had had access to his professional archive and I had been able to touch his drawings and look at the notes he made in their margins my perception might have been entirely different. I say this in particular because when I was researching Josef Albers in conjunction with Barragán, I had direct access to his original material and there was a richness, a directness, and an intimacy that added greatly to my understanding of his work.

Another important layer is what you're able to share and communicate about another artist's work. For instance, if the image rights to an artist's work are privately owned and you can't afford to publish those images, then not only is your understanding of that artist affected, but your ability to communicate about that artist is affected as well. I do believe that seeing original works rather than reproductions can be really eye-opening for understanding an artist's practice.

In 1995, Rolf Fehlbaum, the Chairman of the Swiss furniture company Vitra, purchased Barragán's professional archive, including the rights to his name copyright and work, and gave it as a gift to his fiancée, Federica Zanco, as a wedding present in lieu of an engagement ring. Part of your project in *The Proposal* was to take some of Barragán's ashes and turn them into a diamond ring, and then give it to Federica in exchange for making Barragán's professional archive open to the public. I remember that what the local media picked up from your project was the part of taking Barragán's ashes and making them into a diamond ring. As far as I can recall, they did not mention the whole project and your intention. How did you deal with how the media portrayed your project and the overall criticism?

As I mentioned before, once you put an artwork out there, your control as an artist or producer is very limited - and you can't control the media. I think it's important that artworks challenge their viewers. I know that when a work irks me, once I'm over my initial knee-jerk reaction, I try to slow down and ask - why is this bothering me? I find deconstructing these reactions can be very interesting. What are my preconceived ideas, and what investments do I have that are either really important to me or need to be questioned?

I believe in the questions I'm asking in *The Barragán Archives* and *The Proposal* film, and in the forms I've used to ask them. And, as an artist, I also believe you have to have faith that the work will have its own life too. This means that the questions it poses will eventually be asked. This can happen at really different speeds: some people engage them right away, while some people might be shocked and only really engage later. Some people will dismiss them right away because of their artistic form. I feel that I'm responsible for making the work as best I can, and then my job is to relinquish control so it can take its time to be seen and questioned and debated.

On your website, you have a section dedicated to statements. Can you elaborate on what you meant by "What is considered banal or cliché might be hiding something"?

There are certain situations that provoke the response of, "Oh yeah, that's just the way life works." Where that response is an invitation to throw up your hands and move on. I'm really interested in what's lurking underneath these kinds of common acceptances. For instance, I did a piece called *Failed States* in which I was researching snipers. I went to Austin, Texas to do research, as I'd been asked by a museum there to make a new exhibition. And on my first day, I witnessed a shooter fire his gun into the sky from the front steps of the state capitol building. It was an amazing coincidence and I ended up making a body of work around this moment of witnessing.

When I told people, "Oh my god, I went to Texas to explore snipers and the first day I saw a shooting right at the capitol. And you can bring a loaded gun into the Texas state capitol!" everyone responded with something along the lines of, "Well, it's Texas". As if the fact that we associate Texas with guns explains the whole story and there's nothing else to consider. When actually, the story is far more complex. That's what I mean by a cliché, what makes me want to slow down and look at where the response is coming from. I'm always curious when

things get taken for granted as obvious or seemingly pointless.

What about "Permission is a material and changes the work's consistency?"

That idea is at the heart of my practice. It probably began with *Lobby 7*, the piece I mentioned earlier, in which I hijacked the informational system at MIT with my own surveillance camera and remote control. Before long the police showed up and there was kind of this cat-and-mouse dynamic with them, mediated by the system. And I started thinking about this established way of making art that assumes an oppositional role for the artist in contrast to the law or other institutions of power. As if those roles are very clear and cleanly separable. Of course though, they are not.

I became more interested in how to complicate those relationships between the individual and the institution. I started seeing that doing something without permission was actually one kind of consistency, while doing something *with* permission – so that both parties become vulnerable to one another – can create a totally different and more fluid engagement. Permission can involve an extended negotiation between people, like the writing of a contract, in which there's an implicit trust or absence of trust which then colors all of the work. And so it's very important to me that the process of gaining permission is seen as a material component of the work, because it informs everything I make and do that comes after.

Jill Magid Recommends:

Rachel Cusk, *The Outline Trilogy: Outline, Transit, and Kudos*

The OA on Netflix by Brit Marling

Cockpit by Jerzy Kosinski

News from Home and *Les RendezVous D'Anna* by Chantal Akerman

Coffee and your laptop (with an in-progress novel) at the Bowery Hotel Lobby in NYC

Name

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Vocation

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