

“IDEAS ARE LIKE BRICKS”: “FERNANDA FRAGATEIRO INTERVIEWED BY  
GEORGE STOLZ

**George Stolz:** I am curious to know: how did it come about that you were asked to exhibit at NC-Arte? What is the background to the show “Stones Against Diamonds” in practical, basic terms?

**Fernanda Fragateiro:** I met Claudia Hakin, the artistic director of NC-Arte, two years ago in ARCO, in Madrid, when she bought the piece “An Archive That is not an Archive: Accumulation and Destruction in Printed Matter on Contemporary Art” for her personal collection. Claudia was very curious about my work, and when she realized that I was working with subject matter related to Latin America she immediately invited me to visit the gallery space in order to develop a project.

For “Stones Against Diamonds” the conceptual point of departure was the exhibition: “Josef Albers: Homage to the Square”, the first of several exhibitions organized by the International Council of MoMa for an expanded exchange program with Latin America. It was presented for the first time in 1964 in Caracas, and later traveled to Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Lima, Guayaquil, Bogotá, Santiago de Chile and Mexico City. I began to wonder -- what memories of this show were left in Latin America, and in particular within Bogotá’s artistic community?

Previously, I had done a series of works where I tried to establish multiple relations between the work of artists and architects who had built bridges between Western and Latin American culture, such as Joseph Albers, Anni Albers, Mathias Goeritz, Barragán and Clara Porset. I wondered what was the relation between Modernism and the pre-Columbian culture? What influence did pre-Colombian art and pre-Hispanic architecture have on artists working with abstraction?

**GS:** What was your process in the studio as you went about preparing for the show? Did you sketch, make models, work on computers, etc?

**FF:** Back into my studio, I wrote notes in a very fragmented way, and these notes worked as my first sketches. These first text-drawings were the result of my readings: Patricio del Real, “Building a Continent: The idea of Latin American Architecture in the early Postwar”; José Castillo, “Mexican Modernisms”; Pablo Leon de la Barra’s blog “Centre for the aesthetic Revolution”, among others. The books “Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys” and “Josef Albers: Formulation: Articulation”, Anni Albers’s “Select

Writings on Design” were fundamental to my research. I was also very curious to read Donald Judd’s essays on Albers’s work as a painter and as a teacher.

While preparing for the show, I also made two “Bogotá Notebooks” with writings, drawings and collages. A kind of personal archive made in a non-linear way.

I made a model of the space at 1:10 scale. This smaller scale helped me read the real space and allowed me to think about how to transform it.

After visiting the gallery it was very clear to me that the concrete floor of the main gallery space was what I wanted to work with. Using the floor was a way of “destroying the gallery walls”, of organizing the space in such a way that the interior becomes exterior, a landscape. The decision to introduce a large white piece on the floor also meant introducing light into the space -- introducing something that was not there before.

If you keep in mind that this white floor piece is a translation of a drawing Anni Albers made for a tapestry -- supposedly the only commission she had for Latin America, for the famous El Camino Real hotel, designed by the architect Legorreta in Mexico City -- and that the tapestry disappeared from the hotel and is now lost, perhaps you can understand that I am evoking two things that are absent in a dual way.

After the reading and writing process, I studied specific works by Josef and Anni Albers, and then I made sketches and models, technical drawings on the computer, and several experiments with materials, such as concrete, book cloth, brass, stainless steel and printed matter. I also bought several books in Bogotá’s old bookstores on pre-Columbian art, thinking I might use them as material for sculpture.

All that becomes a process of translation of a conversation with these two artists. Suddenly these two artists become contemporary presences.

I was playing with the zero degree of the geometrical and spatial form of Albers’s paintings “Homage to the Square” I wanted to know how the sculptures establish their presence in the first place, through the materiality of their volumes.

**GS:** What was your process in the galleries as you went about installing the show? How and to what extent did you adapt and adjust the work during the installation itself? Does improvisation play a part in your installation process,

and if so, to what degree?

**FF:** Usually I carefully prepare everything before I start installing. I always do a model of the gallery space. Even if the works have an existence independent of the particular space, I still need to put everything in relation. As Josef Albers remarked: you cannot put one color beside another without changing both. But I always leave some things open, some decisions to make *in situ*, I need to surprise myself, I need to let go. I'm conscious of the fact that an exhibition is unstable, incomplete and cannot contain everything. In the space of the gallery, the movements of the spectators are unpredictable, and this is something I think about. Changes may occur, based on the physical experience of my own body in the exhibition space, or from looking at others moving inside the space from one piece to another while the installation is taking place. People go to a gallery to have different kinds of experience, and I love to play with that. An exhibition is not just the pieces on display, but also the way you read them in relation to the exhibition space, and the way they change the perception of that space.

**GS:** What has been your own personal and artistic relationship to Bogotá and Colombia? And to Latin America in general?

**FF:** I went to Bogotá for the first time to see the NC-Arte gallery space and to meet the team, to visit the "Museo del Oro" and to experience the city itself. It was my first time in Colombia, and my curiosity was immense. I had already created several works that were meant to be conversations with artists who had a presence or an influence as foreign voices in Latin America: Warchavchik, Lucio Costa, Le Corbusier, Lina Bo Bardi, Mathias Goeritz, Clara Porset, Josef and Anni Albers. For NC-Arte, I wanted to work in relation to the specific context, but I also wanted to give continuity to my "Frente Común", a series of sculptures that share a set of related historical links and references, taking their conceptual point of departure the landmark exhibition work "Latin American Architecture since 1945" organized by Henry Russell Hitchcock at MoMA in 1955.

**GS:** A tradition of exchange of ideas and ideologies in realm of the arts exists between Latin America and Europe. Where do you see your work within that tradition?

**FF:** My love for modern architecture was born long ago during my daily visits to the studio of the architects Frederico and Pedro George, my neighbors next to my old studio in Lisbon. Frederico George was a very well-known

Portuguese Modernist architect who had a fantastic collection of modern architecture books. It was through looking and reading some of his books that I became more familiar with modern architecture, and I fell in love with the exuberant (cultural) modernism in Brazil and Latin America. On the same shelf, next to Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, I would find books about Artigas, Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, Barrágan, Lina Bo Bardi... I was very attracted to the way Latin American artists and architects work with an international language, but also with their own set of concerns, such as proposing social transformations, or contributing towards the development of a new culture, towards a cultural revolution.

In 2003, I visited Ciudad Abierta in Ritoque, Chile, to learn about this “utopian place”. I found a strange familiarity between my first sculptures and the architectonic projects there. I learned a lot about the idea of Amereida

Also, coming from a peripheral country that doesn't play a central role in Europe made me feel that my “artistic family” was not necessarily in Europe. I felt at home in Latin America.

**GS:** In your opinion and based on your experience, what role does national or regional identity play in today's highly globalized art world?

**FF:** Regional identity is a complex set of multiple narratives and productions: you cannot construct a canon. Regional identity is a cultural constructed reality. I'm interested in working from a critical point of view and with historical concepts. I'm interested in the disturbance of boundaries that has often been understood as a threat to identity, a loss of self.

When I started working on this project, I was interested in looking at Latin American culture through the eyes of Josef and Anni Albers. It was almost a way of looking at seeing, in a very nonlinear way, not referential to the past, not a “phantasmagoria” in any sense.

It was the desire to draw lines of connection between different places, between different times, between cultures, between past and present, between repetition and difference, in order to establish a crossroads, another landscape.

Even if the cultural process of Latin America is different from that of the so-called first world countries, it was where a lot of new concepts and revolutionary ideas first came from. Do you know that the concept “dematerialization”, a term used in 1968 in an article Lippard co-authored with

John Chandler to refer to movements in the Anglo-American art world, was used earlier by the Argentinean writer Oscar Masotta in 1967? Do you know that Lippard's political activism was triggered when she traveled through Argentina and Peru in 1968 and met the Rosario Group?

Maybe we live now in a very popular globalized art world, but artists that live away from the centers of power still have a need to work in a more organized regional network to get attention and not be lost in oblivion. Studying the trajectory of MoMa's engagement with Latin American architecture in the '30 and '40 and even now gives us a clear demonstration of who still tries to run the world and who still wants to delineate forms of inclusion and exclusion.

**GS:** Again, in your opinion and based on your experience, what role does gender identity play in today's art world?

**FF:** Today, in the USA and Europe there is a more balanced play of forces in the art world, but before the 70's there was a patriarchal, heteronormative and white society that ran the world and the art world. Feminism was crucial for the development of humanity. But the issue continues. You just need to look inside the past 200 issues of the architectural magazine *Domus* from the last 20 years to see that architecture is not a place for women. I'm working on a sculpture that incorporates these 200 issues of the magazine and incorporates that absence of women.

Each time you go back and research, you realize that there is something missing. Remembering is part of my work, and it incorporates the binary terms of memory and oblivion. Based on my experience as a young artist living in southern Europe, in a country that had a fascist regime until 1974, it was difficult to participate in the construction of reality because men controlled the art world. Public art collections and national and international exhibitions using public funds incorporated an extremely small percentage of women.. They still do, although maybe it's just not so evident now.

Also, I was always very engaged in politics. I joined the Portuguese Communist party when I was 11 years old and for 5 years I was politically very active. Then I began to study art and I began to understand art as a field for social change.

**GS:** How does feminist thought and theory affect or inform your work?

**FF:** The examination of the history of women artists, which is a history of discrimination, is very important in my work. I wonder why all-male exhibitions

are frequent and considered simply as art exhibitions, but an exhibition with only women artists is immediately noticed as a “women’s exhibition”. Just now I’m reading “From Conceptualism to Feminism - Lucy Lippard’s Numbers Shows 1969-74”, by Cornelia Butler and other authors, and I think that Lippard’s work in bringing political and artistic agendas together was crucial for gender equity.

I feel a sense of responsibility in raising the issue of the effacement of women artists and architects, such as the effacement of Eileen Gray as an architect. As Beatriz Colomina writes: “Eileen Gray’s name does not figure, even as footnote, in most histories of modern architecture, including the most recent, and critical ones.” The effacement of Lilly Reich as co-author of projects that are only attributed to Mies. The effacement of Anni Albers, whose work is unfairly unknown. And if the history of modern art in the West is full of gaps in recognizing the importance of the work of women artists, can you imagine what was going on with the recognition of Latin American women artists?

**GS:** The concept of repurposing -- to launch something into a new cycle of use, as opposed to recycling or re-use -- is one of the key concepts our time. Will you please comment on the role of repurposing -- in the literal sense of materials, but also in a more conceptual sense in your work and methods?

**FF:** I would say that repurposing generates an amount of critical work.

What you see and know as bi-dimensional work, to be looked at a distance, like the Josef Albers’s “Homage to the Square” paintings, is now, through my works, experienced as tridimensional, with haptic qualities. The same qualities that we recognize in books: objects to be read, but also to be touched. Even if you are not supposed to touch these sculptures, it works as a possibility. Like utopia.

I’m underlining the architectural quality of the works of Anni and Josef Albers in given them a new materiality: Anni Albers’s “Study for Camino Real”, a drawing for a tapestry, was transformed into a concrete floor piece in “Un camino que no es un camino”. , Once again, you cannot walk on it, but the idea of walking is present.

This tapestry becomes an inspiration for a whole series of Anni’s prints, establishing a strong relationship between textiles and architecture. Anni’s seminal text “On Weaving” is published in 1965 and is dedicated to the weavers in Peru, and she writes that if “we think of the process of building and the process of weaving and compare the work involved, we will find similarities despite the vast difference in scale”.

The piece “Continuo, construido e variable”, after Josef Albers’s “Study for Glass Construction” gives body to what was a project for a stained glass. I

fragmented his drawing, and built each part in metal, in a tridimensional way. At the end, each fragment looked like a model for a building. So, what was meant to be a small part of a building, is now a sculpture that looks like a series of models for buildings.

"Artists come from artists, art comes from art forms, painting comes from painting," Ad Reinhardt wrote. This is a beautiful thought -- but contamination and crisscrossing interest me more.

**GS:** In discussing your work, you have said you are interested in "probing" Modernist practices. I am interested to know more about what you mean when you say "probing" -- will you please elaborate?

**FF:** With modernity all boundaries started shifting. The modern "window" is now a window to consciousness. Maybe my interest in "probing modernist practices" means my desire to know more about it, to explore it in a very sensitive way. Looking without being sure of what is still there to be "seen". Reading its surface, through its deep layers, looking for signs of resistance. I'm not afraid of going back to that same excavation, to turn things over, knowing that only a careful investigation can extract what is worth bringing out and exposing to the light. I see Modernism not as a fixed reflection but as moiré pattern that changes as you change your position...

**GS:** Please tell me more about your specific interest in the work of Josef and Anni Albers. What is its genesis? What fuels it? What is the intersection between their work and your own?

**FF:** While I was working on my piece "Common Front" I became interested in knowing more about the relation between Anni and Josef Albers's abstract work and pre-Columbian art. "Mexico is truly the promised land for abstract art," Anni and Josef Albers wrote in 1936 to Wassily Kandinsky, "for here it has existed for thousands of years."

Both Josef and Anni's background was at the Bauhaus, where together they deeply studied contemporary art and design, folk art, and pre-Columbian art and architecture. Anni's weavings, drawings and painted studies illustrate her deep understanding of pre-Columbian textiles. Latin American culture was determinative for Anni and Josef's work. And they also had a strong influence on artists and architects in Latin America.

Looking at their experience I started thinking a lot about abstraction. I wondered -- what is inside abstraction? Why are abstract artists like Josef Albers so deeply interested in art history and treasures from distant cultures and distant times? Is abstraction a way of compressing an immense amount of information within the most succinct expression?

Also, at the moment of Modernism's affirmation, Europe was crossed by the World War II and everything that was solid disappeared -- this fact made me think that the relation between art and reality was something beyond a visible field. Abstraction was a reality more real than the materiality of the world. Maybe now that we live in a temporal compression, another kind of war reduces the world; maybe this time we live in was already predicted by abstract painting. The relation of abstract painting with the idea of a screen seems so perfect now.

In order to do this body of work I followed traces -- that is what I did, I followed the traces left by these artists. When I copy Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" paintings, using book cloth instead of painting, I'm also bringing to the conversation works by other artists, like Blinky Palermo, and José d'Avila, who recently did a series of works based on Albers's "Homage to the Square" paintings.

**GS:** What is the process involved in using someone else's ideas to create your own work?

**FF:** Ideas are materials. Ideas are like bricks. That's what I think when I'm using other people's ideas. I build a new thing with them. You look at a building and see how it is built -- what is the volume, the texture, the colors, what materials were used in the construction. But there are also a lot of things not visible. I work with these "other things", things that are not immediately visible in someone else's ideas. Working like an archeologist, I use my vision and my intuition in order to bring this material to a surface, not leaving ideas at peace... What happens when you disturb things that were asleep? What do we find if we are continuously alert, patiently researching and recomposing the fragments of destroyed theories? Using someone else's ideas to create my works is not a way of disguising myself; it is a way of pushing my own work to the limits.

**GS:** What is the difference between developing and exploiting someone else's idea?

**FF:** An idea cannot be exploited without being developed. In a way my work is also an homage to the art works I use to develop my own work: paintings, architectural models, buildings, texts, books. I think in terms of continuity; I look at the history of art and architecture as a landscape that is already there, in continuity, in a condition of permanent change. What I do is walk-through this landscape, walking and seeing through this landscape. Painting this landscape. Looking for traces left by others. Thinking about their work makes me rethink my own work.



**GS:** Sol Lewitt once wrote the following:

"I believe that ideas, once expressed, become the common property of all. They are invalid if not used; they can only be given away and cannot be stolen. Ideas of art become the vocabulary of art and are used by other artists to form their own ideas (even if unconsciously)...If there are ideas in my work that interest other artists, I hope they make use of them. If someone borrows from me, it makes me richer, not poorer. If I borrow from others, it makes them richer but me no poorer. We artists, I believe, are part of a single community sharing the same language.<sup>1</sup>"

How does LeWitt's thought, as expressed here, interact with your own thinking and your own work?

**FF:** Exactly. I have an obsessive interest in art and in art history and a strong feeling of belonging to the art community, sharing the same language. The language of Art. The vocabulary of art is there to be used and reinvented, not "frozen" in art history books. As an artist maybe I also work as an art historian? I want to bring back works of art, to summon these works, in order to have contact with them here and now, and to share this cultural material with others. It was amazing the way people related to my sculptures that, from a distance, looked like Albers's paintings. Some looked exactly like the paintings in Albers's catalogue "Homage to the Square" that was printed for his show in Latin America. I wonder whether those images are still present in the memory of people who saw the exhibition, or have they been forgotten? Today, time and memory is such a big philosophical issue. And the presence of things is still mysterious...

**GS:** On the other hand, there is commonly quoted phrase (often attributed to Picasso, but also to others, including Faulkner, T.S. Eliot and Stravinsky) that runs more or less as follows: "Good artists copy; great artists steal." How does *this* thought interact with your own thinking and your own work?

**FF:** There are no closed chapters in history; there is always something more to be said... I have something more to say, and this implies a form of appropriation, transformation and ironic reflection on other artists' works. I have to say that my knowledge of most of these works comes from printed matter, from looking at reproductions in books, where usually the color and the scale are not the real ones. By reproducing them, they become materiality. Isn't a photograph of an art work already a way of stealing the soul of the work? I remember going to China and not being able to photograph women because they accused me of wanting to steal their souls. Sometimes I

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<sup>1</sup> LeWitt, Sol, "Comments on an Advertisement Published in Flash Art, April 1973," *Flash Art*, June, 1973, republished in *Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts*, Libri di AEIOU, Rome, 1995, Adachiara Zevi, editor.

have a desire to get close to and to appropriate the most radical abstract paintings by Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Blinky Palermo, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin. This desire applies specially to monochromes. Maybe this is my way of painting. Maybe this is my way of doing sculptures that look like paintings.

Let me tell you a very ironic story that I read in "Anni and Josef Latin American Journeys". According to the architect Andrés Casillas, who worked with Barragán in early 60's, Barragán had found fabric printed with Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square " for sale in a department store on a visit to United States. He bought two pieces and framed them for his house. And the artist Sheila Hicks also mentions that "for a period Barragán hung a reproduction of Albers painting near the garden window and visitors thought it was an original". So maybe I'm just following Barragán's steps...

**GS:** Will you please comment on the interaction between the external references you frequently employ -- titles, visual quotations, textual materials incorporated into objects -- and the visual, formal and physical presence of your work?

**FF:** My first use of text occurred in my first installation, in 1990, at the Faculty of Science in Lisbon. It was a citation from Maurice Blanchot that I read in a text by Peter Eisenman, I don't remember the text or the citation anymore, but I still remember transforming the citation, a phrase, into an object: each word was converted into a white piece, like an empty shelf suspended on the wall, very much like Donald Judd's works. Not readable as semantic text, but as form. So my first encounter with Blanchot was through a text written by an architect. It was the start of a deep love -- not for Eisenman, but for Blanchot - - that I still return to. Maybe this first use of text was a prediction that influenced and anticipated future works. What I'm really interested in is thinking /working about space. Theory is so much a part of it that I cannot separate textual materials from other materials, as text is memory and also anticipation, and it participates in the construction of reality.

The titles are another element in all the relations that make up the works. Even the most poetic titles indicate a negation, an absence, or an act of destruction. My titles, like my artistic exercises, also indicate an aesthetics of no, which, rather than being a desire for negation, is unequivocally affirmative and positive. They destroy a minimalist tautology...

**GS:** Your work (as evidenced in this show at NC-Arte) moves freely among different scales, from the intimate to the large-scale public. What is the role of scale in your work? How does your creative process differ when working in different scales, particularly so as to avoid simply enlarging and reducing? Why and how do such shifts in scale come about?

**FF:** That is my way of understanding space. I have a strange relation with space. Not very conventional. I get lost all the time. It takes me a long time to understand how to move inside a city. I'm now obsessed with city maps that were published for a long time in *Domus* magazine and that show where to find works of specific architects. This is a very strange way of knowing a city.

Reality is made of different scales depending on your point of view and how close or far you are from an object. A city map could be an extraordinary abstract image. Walter Benjamin said that a book is a miniature of the world. For me a sculpture made with one book is not necessarily a small work when compared with a big installation. Whether large or small, there is always the presence of landscaping mode in my work.

The floor piece "Camino Real", made after Anni Albers's drawing for a tapestry (now lost) was about changing the original scale and material. I was thinking about Anni's drawing like a project for an architectural space -- a floor. If Anni Albers happened to live now, would she be doing architecture or installation art instead of textiles? Or might we consider her work with textiles as architectural also?

**GS:** In a similar vein (and again, as evidenced in the exhibition at NC-Arte) your work moves freely from wall pieces to floor pieces to more volumetric objects and installations. How (if at all) does your creative process differ when working in formats? Why and how do such variations occur?

**FF:** My favorite space is the floor. Only the sky is bigger than the floor. The floor is primordial and is the minimum we can use to build space. Walls came after the floor, and started dividing the space. The genesis of the floor is to be public space; walls are to divide space into private and public. Before walls there was no private space, everything was public space. A wall is a declaration of war.

The decision to do a big floor piece was a way to introduce a device that would transform the private space of the gallery into an "endless" public space. Even the big wall piece was like a skyline that reinforces the idea of landscape in the floor piece.

**GS:** Much of your work looks to and draws on other disciplines -- architecture, design, crafts, art theory, literature -- in order to arrive at something that is

firmly grounded in visual art *per se*, and is at the same time very much your own. Will you please elaborate on this process? Is it a kind translation?

**FF:** It's true. But the field of contemporary sculpture now contains many such border crossings between mediums and disciplines. I'm interested in dealing with aspects not only of art, but also of landscape and architecture, and of the social, the anthropological, the archive, and the performative. I also think that landscape and architecture and their representations are "texts" and as such are readable like any other cultural form. They express meaning. I work with meaning as material and use material as meaning. Ultimately, I see my works as sculptures, even if sometimes they are almost immaterial. For instance, my love for avant-garde folding objects, deck chairs, portable houses with social characteristics made me think of modern architects and designers as "the new magicians."

A chair is not a chair, a landscape is not a landscape, a building is not a building, when seen through the eyes of an artist. So maybe I use everything as "building materials" for my sculptures. More that a process of translation we can talk of a building process with many ingredients. But while using a "big mess" of ingredients, I want to play with a kind of zero degree of geometrical and spatial form, where my pieces establish their presence, in the first place, through the materiality of their volume and materials. We are talking about the cohabitation of characteristics that might otherwise be mutually antagonistic: the encounter of minimalist form, considered to its smallest detail, with the messy mobility of the human.

**GS:** Your work is peopled by historical artists, architects and designers -- Anni and Josef Albers and Lina Bo Bardi in this show, but there are many similar instances in the rest of your work. Do you have any such relationship with the work of any contemporary artists?

**FF:** Do you mean contemporary artists of my generation? For me it's easier to go back, to learn from the past. But as I mentioned before, I have long been an admirer of Agnes Martin, Donald Judd, Ad Reinhardt, Blinky Palermo, Gego, Eva Hesse and Lygia Clark, and all of them have a presence in certain specific works of mine. Just now I'm very curious about Morgan Fisher's works and I look forward to working in collaboration with other artist friends, such as Narelle Jubelin, Angela Ferreira. Carlos Bunga...that I very much like the work and enjoy being with. But that's another thing.