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The Measure of Modernism:

A Conversation with Leonor Antunes

by Robert Preece

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NICK ISH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES AIR DE PARIS, PARIS, AND KUPMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK

Installation detail of
"joints, voids
and gaps" at MUDAM,
Luxembourg, 2020-21.

leonor antunes

THIS PAGE:
Detail of "Vazios,
Intervalos e Juntas,"
MASP and Casa de Vidro,
São Paulo, 2019.

OPPOSITE:
Installation detail of
"Resonating Spaces,"
Fondation Beyeler,
Riehen/Basel, 2019–20.



Leonor Antunes engages the history of 20th-century art, architecture, and design in large-scale, abstract installations that fuse physical, measurable experience with the effects of memory and time. Inspired by Modernist outliers (from Carlo Scarpa, Anni Albers, and Lenore Tawney to Lina Bo Bardi and Egle Trincanato), Antunes follows extensive research into their work with acts of extraction and artistic translation. Rescaled, recombined, and reinterpreted, architectural details, furnishings, and the patterns of prints and fabrics become the formal building blocks of her sculptures. With a deep sensitivity and layered richness, she embraces vernacular craft traditions from around the world, employing materials such as rope, leather, cork, wood, brass, rubber, and looms of handwoven cotton threads to challenge mainstream narratives with what she calls "transversal" histories. Her meticulously handcrafted objects, which find sculptural form as vertical or horizontal demarcations in space or as woven, transparent nets and grids, deliberately blur the line between past and present, objective and subjective experience, real and imaginative space.

Robert Praeger: Your work frequently refers to under-recognized female Modernist artists, designers, and architects. What keeps you coming back to this?

Leonor Antunes: My vocabulary is cumulative and extensive, searching for an engagement connected to a specific environment, context, or history that the work absorbs. I feel that my role as an artist is also to talk about the relevance of other people's work. I want to make my work part of this trajectory of thought. I often investigate the history of Modernism in connection to a particular place. I am interested in transversal histories outside of the canonical histories, and those are often connected to work developed by women artists and designers who have been edged out of the mainstream.

RP: You titled "joints, voids and gaps" (2020–21), your recent exhibition at MUDAM, Luxembourg, with reference to Lina Bo Bardi's design for the Museu de Arte São Paulo (MASP), where you previously exhibited. Could you talk about the concept behind these connected shows and your use of Lygia Clark's painted volume studies for the floor designs?

LA: I wanted the two exhibitions to be related, even though they were very different. At MASP, I made a floor piece in rubber, the same material that Bo Bardi



THIS PAGE: NICK ASH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY LUISA STRIN, SÃO PAULO / OPPOSITE: NICK ASH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES LUISA STRIN, SÃO PAULO AND MARIAN GOODMAN, NEW YORK, PARIS





THIS PAGE: NICK KISH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES AIR DE PARIS, PARIS, KURIMANZUTO, MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK AND LUISA STRINA, SÃO PAULO / OPPOSITE, LEFT: NICK KISH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES KURIMANZUTO, MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK / OPPOSITE, RIGHT: KATHERINE DUTELLE SPINNA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KURIMANZUTO, MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK

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used on the upper floors of the museum; it had three colors and completely covered the room. The pattern was derived from one of Clark's 1950s "superficies modulares" paintings, its geometric motif blown up to fit the room, like the linoleum floor that I did for MUDAM. Clark's abstract compositions were based on the idea of movement and the rotation of the same element. What strikes me most is the relationship she creates with expansion, as if the painting could eventually continue outside the frame. For MUDAM, I decided to change the colors from the painting, but it was still a good rule set to work with. Because the space is not orthogonal, everything got confused in terms of perception; the floor covered not only the pavilion, but also the passageway leading into it. It was very important to have this first encounter with the work.

RP: How did "vazios, intervalos e juntas" (MASP and Casa de Vidro, São Paulo, 2019) work across two sites? What happened at MASP?

LA: When I lived in Brazil in 2007, I saw a lot of Bo Bardi's work, and I also spent a lot of time in the archive and visited private collections to see her furni-



ture. I was waiting for the best moment to fully revisit her work. MASP—by far one of my favorite museums—was designed by Bo Bardi as a democratic and plural place, as opposed to the canonical and Eurocentric format. Working there is a huge responsibility—I had to figure out how to feel like a guest not an intruder.

I wanted both shows to reflect my interest in Bo Bardi's work indirectly. The show at MASP was very object-based, with sculptures that made links between Bo Bardi and Franco Albini, an architect with whom she collaborated. Everything in the space was generated by a certain idea of enlargement and rotation, using elements from both their works and merging them in space. There were elements like figures, as if their presence were re-activated in that room. I was interested in a kind of

OPPOSITE:
... then we raised the terrain so that I could see out,
2017.

Murano glass, brass, electrical cable, stainless steel cable, light bulbs, leather, nylon yarn, and cork. Installation view.

THIS PAGE,
FROM LEFT:
Installation detail of "discrepancies with C.P.," Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, 2018.

Installation detail of "a spiral staircase leads down to the garden," SFMOMA, 2016.

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domestic, hybrid environment—a chair leg becomes a sculpture, a painting becomes a floor.

Other sculptures related to Indigenous objects that I have been collecting in relation to my interest in materials and particular ways of making. I am interested in how such skills are translated by economic factors, environment, culture, and geography. I made sculptures based on objects like collars, as well as more shamanic pieces, which I enlarged and transformed into other materials; these proliferated around the space, either hung on sculptures or directly from the ceiling.

RP: And at the Casa de Vidro?

LA: There, I wanted to work closely with the archive and restore some of Bo Bardi's memories to the site. She designed the house for herself and her husband. Since Pietro Bardi was the last person to leave the house—she died first—and I wanted to talk about Lina, I removed the objects that he had collected and brought personal items of hers. She was an avid collector, passionate about new engineering solutions and crafts from the complex ethnic and racial demographics in Brazil, including Afro-Brazilian culture. I displayed her furniture where she had originally placed it and removed all the curtains to open the house to the outdoors—an important element of Bo Bardi's aesthetic.

I wanted my work to coexist with her things, her presence, her world. I made a group of sculptures based on the poles supporting the metal and glass shelves that she had designed. The shelves are no longer there, so I positioned my four polished stainless steel sculptures in the same place, stretched between ceiling and floor. Each one is wrapped with a spiraling element, also made of stainless steel, in a kind of parasitic gesture. The steel reflected everything around it, both inside and out, establishing a connection and merging with the garden outside.

RP: As part of “sequences, inversions and permutations” (The Box, Plymouth, England, 2020–21), where you used rope, leather, and other materials associated with maritime trade, you created a permanent work in homage to the naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian. How did that happen?

LA: The city of Plymouth had offered the museum the old Protestant church of St Luke's to use as a contemporary art gallery, but its original window was gone, given to another church in the city. Nicoletta Lambertucci, who invited me to do an inaugural project for the space, proposed that I design a new one. I had never done a window before and thought that it could create an interesting link to my exhibition while relating, at the same time, to the museum collection. Thinking of the site as an institution, I wanted to connect my work to an object in the collection that wasn't easy for people to see. So, I first thought of the window as something that one is given access to.

The museum houses a beautiful collection of rare books, the Cottonian Collection (first formed in the 17th century), whose volumes are kept inside specially built cabinets. For me, those are precious, somewhat mysterious relics; they are fragile, so they require special handling and cannot be exposed to daylight. During one of my visits, I noticed *The Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname* (1726), by the German naturalist and explorer Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717). I had seen reproductions, but nothing compared to looking at this edition. Merian was one of the first naturalists to observe and paint insects directly, and one of the first entomologists to study and record the plant and insect life of South America. I wanted to enlarge a detail of the marbled endpaper commissioned by the collector who had acquired this copy. I chose a faded and damaged segment and blew it up proportionally to fit the window. All the marks of time in the book became part of *Sibylla*.

“I am interested in transversal histories outside of the canonical histories, and those are often connected to work developed by women artists and designers who have been edged out of the mainstream.”





Installation detail of
"Sequences, Inversions
and Permutations," The
Box, Plymouth, 2020-21.



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RP: In 2019, you represented Portugal at the Venice Biennale with “a seam, a surface, a hinge or a knot,” which draw on the work of Carlo Scarpa, Franco Albini, Egle Trincanato, and Franca Helg, as well as the patronage of Savina Masieri.

LA: The choice of protagonists involved a history of Italian design, specifically thinking of Venice. Trincanato, who was also the director of the Museo Ducale, is one of the few female architects to have built in the city; she designed the INAIL building with Giuseppe Samonà. I faced a very complex project, which was further complicated by the fact that Portugal does not own a pavilion but has to find a location each time the Biennale is held. That year, it was at the Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, constructed in the 14th century, but rebuilt in the 17th century.

I was interested in Venice as the city of craftsmanship. I worked with the same carpentry workshop that Scarpa used and had lamps—suspended sculptures as well as functional lights—made by a Murano glass factory to replace the old chandeliers. On the ground floor, leading to the Grand Canal, I placed two wall lights designed by Trincanato, borrowed from the INAIL building. To obscure a terrible renovation of the palazzo, I created a kind of paneling for the walls based on one of Trincanato's display designs for the Palazzo Ducale. These white, powder-coated aluminum panels partially hid the walls with their undulating formation, and more importantly, they introduced a different time to the site. Placing a Modernist element inside enabled me to coexist with it. This kind of nomad existence, as Briony Fer put it in her text, allowed “the work to simply build on a logic of intrusion or of what it means for things to belong in a place—as its starting point.”

RP: Two years earlier, you contributed ...then we raised the terrain so that I could see out (2017) to the main exhibition at the Biennale.

LA: This also involved lengthy research into Italian postwar museum displays, particularly the work of Scarpa and Albini in Venice and Genova. I visited many of the spaces that they designed and interpreted the experience, taking measurements of things I could extract from several different projects and then merging it all together. I was given a very challenging space; the only way to deal with it was by hanging the work directly from the ceiling beams and playing with the height of the space. The other important aspect was to



make a floor piece that united the suspended works; otherwise, the installation would have been lost. I had to negotiate with engineers and architects since the site is protected, but I like working with limitations. I asked to remove anything that wasn't part of the original building, like metal bars placed on top of the wooden beams. I wanted people to look up and see the construction of that amazing ceiling.

RP: Anni Albers was the inspiration for “Resonating Spaces” at the Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland (2019–20).

LA: Later in her life, when she was no longer weaving, Albers turned to prints. The pattern of the linoleum floor piece was taken from one of those prints and blown up to fit the room. I wanted to reunite different works in that same room—works from different exhibitions and contexts—and I thought that only Anni Albers could unite everything with the singularity of her print. Another work installed there (now in the permanent collection), made of tiny brass tubes and wire, was based on one of her weavings, but repeated life-size. I thought it was interesting to have the relation between the works and scales.

RP: Your SFMOMA project, “a spiral staircase leads down to the garden” (2016), took a mid-century

OPPOSITE:
Installation detail
of “the pliable plane,”
CAPC, Bordeaux,
France, 2015–16.

THIS PAGE:
Installation detail
of “I stand like
a mirror before you,”
New Museum,
New York, 2015.

OPPOSITE: NICK LISH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES AFRE DE PARIS, PARIS; KURIMAZUTO, MEXICO CITY; NEW YORK AND LUISA STRIN, SÃO PAULO / THE PAGE: BENJAMIN FALLER, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES KURIMAZUTO, MEXICO CITY; NEW YORK AND LUISA STRIN, SÃO PAULO

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design by the Swedish émigré Greta Magnusson-Grossman as its starting point. What was the relationship of your work to her design?

LA: I was living in Los Angeles at the time, looking at a lot of architecture, and I discovered Greta Grossman. She wasn't trained as an architect, so she could not stamp her projects. Only one or two of her houses remain today. I visited one of them, which was being sold by the son of the original owner. He offered me photographs and a series of her drawings for the house. I measured several elements—partitions, window frames, parts of the floor, a balcony—and used them for a series of sculptures. How I translate those things is really about my relation to them—that is how I can transform them into the language of sculpture.

RP: Could you talk about “the pliable plane” at CAPC Bordeaux (2015–16), which took its title from a 1957 essay by Anni Albers? The space is massive. Was scale a problem?

LA: The building was originally a warehouse, built in 1824 to store products coming from the colonies like sugar, coffee, cotton, and spices. It was renovated by Andrée Putman in the 1980s. I struggled very much with this space, not because of the scale, but because of the colonial content. I made a huge, fabric-like piece with the measurement of that part of the space—around five by 30 meters—and hung it in the same location where fabric hung when the space was still a warehouse. It took many months to fabricate, since it was made with very small brass tubes that repeated the pattern of a fabric designed by Anni Albers. We re-created the pattern life-size and hung the piece with rope (as in a photo of the site taken in the 1960s). It appeared as if it weighed nothing, but it was extremely heavy and fragile. I didn't want to add many sculptures to that space, so I covered the entire floor with cork inlaid with brass. The pattern was taken from another Anni Albers weaving, enlarged to fit the scale of the space. I was also thinking of the Nazca lines in Peru and wanted the floor to be seen from an aerial perspective, viewed from the mezzanine above.

I added a few additional sculptures to give a more human scale—floor lamps at head height and very small, low works, made of cement and brass, that almost looked like tables sitting on the floor. Those pieces combined patterns from woven mats that I cast in the cement with window shapes from the SESC Pompéia

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designed by Bo Bardi. The windows, which look almost like cutouts in the cement, have organic shapes; Bo Bardi used them in an interior room as a way of reconnecting human beings with nature, allowing sun, rain, and wind to penetrate. I was thinking of her as someone who dealt ethically with questions of the vernacular, and I was also thinking about what it means to cast—not in terms of sculpture, but in engineering terms, which is even more powerful. There is a huge tower in the SESC Pompéia complex, with beautiful patterns in the cast concrete, like irregular lines on top of each other. Bo Bardi achieved this surface by placing fabric on the concrete, layer by layer. She was inspired by the skirts worn by the Baianas in Bahia, descendants of African women who were unpaid domestic workers for Brazilian families during 400 years of enslavement.

RP: Alexa Lawrence, writing in *Architectural Digest* about “I stand like a mirror before you” (2015) at the New Museum, says, “There is no clear start or finish here, no single path through—only space and its infinite possibilities.” Do you agree with this? Why is it important to keep your work this open?

LA: For that project, I was thinking of the filmmaker and choreographer Maya Deren, particularly her relation to the body moving in space and her unfinished film *Witch's Cradle* (1944). I was also looking into the work of Lenore Tawney; I love the series of weavings that she did related to the idea of expansion and contraction. I wanted to make a transparent exhibition, very flat with strong light, that one could experience like a vitrine by standing on the outside; then, when entering the room, the relation with the works would completely shift. Transparency and opacity were very important, as were the rigidity and the softness of the sculptures. It was really about your relation to your body moving inside that narrow space, but also about how those sculptures were made, with all the twists and the knots. ■■■

Installation detail of “a seam, a surface, a hinge or a knot,” 58th Venice Biennale, Portuguese pavilion, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, Venice, 2019.

NICK ASH, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE GALLERIES AIR DE PARIS, PARIS, KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK, LUISA STRINA, SÃO PAULO AND MARIAN GOODMAN, NEW YORK, PARIS

