

In Search of Labor or What's Labor got to do with it? Or Labor of Love

By Valerie Smith

JU: I was never very good at drawing.

VS: I am looking down on Johanna's work table, which reminds me of an architect's or engineer's drafting table. Hanging from the wall around it are various tools of the trade: pattern templates, stencils, protractors, and interlocking shape-segments—shapes vaguely reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *Stoppages*—camouflaged among the house plants, crowding the window for the Sun's rays.

My first drawings are very graphic, flat and symmetrical. I have never been satisfied with this.

Why not? Johanna's intricate drawing perforated with a delicate pattern of pinholes is blooming before me. *I would like to get inside it...* I think of the turn of the 19th century, **Wiener Werkstaette**, Gustave Klimt, and *Emma Kunz*. A drawing of colored lines and holes delineate symmetries and asymmetries, vegetal, entomological, mammalian, etc. Are these drawings or diagrams? The look of the diagrammatic with its intersecting vectors of electromagnetic fields, auras of bodies drawn in hyper-focused minutia, is more about mechanical processes than any one thing. The process *is* the object, the realization that we are born into an ever-expanding and contracting life, where the tiniest choice can change a living trajectory.

I don't think of drawing as a piece going on the wall. It is a body you can walk around not a flat thing. I was never happy with the flat idea. Now, my drawings are sandwiched between Plexiglas and stand fixed in a block of recycled wood, like Lina Bo Bardi.

Lina Bo Bardi's famous display solution for the Picture Gallery of el Museu de Arte de São Paulo (*MASP*) was inaugurated in 1968. Johanna began to use it in 2017-18. "One of Bo Bardi's intentions was to present artworks as products of labor, desacralizing them and getting rid of the churchlike, reverential atmosphere of the traditional museum. A closer rapport is established between the viewer and the works. The visit assumes *experiential* contours and becomes more humane, democratic, accessible."¹ Is Johanna "desacralizing" drawing by presenting them as "products of labor"? Was that what Bo Bardi was doing with art? She spoke of "flexibility" and "roughness." Does placing them in a Brazilian wood pedestal make them less flat, or more "democratic"? How ironic that the pedestal was a radical gesture in the late '60s Brazil and just the opposite in the United States and Europe at the same time. Has it become radical again?

Most of the time, the front and the back are dyed with pigment with one side busy with lines of the drawing, and the other, dye texture with subtle pinholes that also form lines which the viewer has to find. I think of them as sculpture, not only drawing. The idea is to walk around it. All my objects are installations in space.

Sculpture that is body-sized or bigger, as Johanna has installed hers, has an inescapable phenomenological aspect. Certainly, anthropomorphizing drawing in an independent presen-

tation makes it more physically present, not necessarily more visually accessible. Does the drawing's relationship to the viewer constitute a more social interaction, than if it was a picture on the wall? Are freestanding drawings more accessible to the public than pictures, is the labor in it visually more comprehensible as a sculptural figure?

In 1999, I was in the countryside near Temuco in the south of Chile, when I first learned how to work with plant dyes from a Mapuche woman. She taught me how to weave and use natural dyes from onion skins, beetroot, and other plants. Later, in 2015, I had the experience of learning traditional dyeing techniques in Antigua, Guatemala, specifically using the plant, *añil*, to make indigo. Since then, I've started to dye all my papers. The overall composition is created with embroidery hoops and other oval or circular shapes, sometimes, in combination with my own shapes made from paper templates, some as big as two meters (*very much like a seamstress*). I don't use rulers, I actually use my hands and fingers, or other parts of my body to measure and I calculate their relationships by eye. I didn't read art books, the designs are influenced by what I see, science, physics, and botanics, using the history of these craft skills in my work. I apply color, sometimes metallic pigments, and perforate pinholes through which you can see the Indigo and Fustic dyes. There are many ways to work with Indigo, but it is tricky and can't be forced. I don't follow rules, I experiment, which can take weeks to allow the color to change over time and has an organic aspect I like.

Every aspect of Johanna's drawings is intentional. The history of her materials is implied and the process inferred when the dyes are identified on the labels. Intensive labor, slow viewing. Labor's relationship to nature is lost to many city dwellers: where our food comes from, what our clothes are made, and by whom; to say nothing of how our lives are positively affected by nature, while we destroy it by hundreds of acres every day. Thinking about Indigo congers up slavery in this country. By 1747 it was a major, but relatively short-lived, cash crop, surpassing cotton. Its demand necessitated the importation of more slaves from Africa and more land from First Nation Peoples for its exportation to Britain's wealthiest. Used to dye uniforms during the Revolutionary War (like Fustic dyed khaki pants in the First World War), Indigo caused a revolution in Bengal, when production and labor moved to India in 1859. Today, those of us who can afford it buy jeans made with a synthetic form of Indigo, oblivious of its fraught history.

I was 13 years old during the dictatorship and I wanted to participate in the oppositional movement. So, I joined the Socialist Party youth group, Elmo Catalán, to paint murals.

Johanna's expanded practice from wall drawings to murals with relief elements in 2015, must have been tinged with some sense of a return to her early adolescence (minus the state of emergency). Murals, particularly in mid-70s Chile, were the visual symbol of collective resistance. They necessitated collaboration to exist and this effort, in turn, built communities around political alliances, of which Johanna was embedded due to her father's Socialist sympathies. Mural brigades all over the disenfranchised world construct a social imaginary, which unifies their voice.²

Everything I'm doing now began in my childhood, I have been working with textile since I was five. I grew up working with my hands. My mom always said I learned to weave and knit before I learned to read and write. Hands are tools for me and I can't disconnect that. But, when I draw, I don't think of textiles, yet, the drawings morph on that.

At a certain point, Johanna realized the patterns and design details in her drawings were reminiscent of textiles, which, in turn, connected the different aspects of her work. Textile's global industry with its long and complex labor history is, to a large extent, hidden in her drawings. She has shifted from overt "Industrial Sculptures" in corrugated cardboard, felt, and now recycled denim uniforms to the contemplative and solitary activity of drawing and painting on fabric. Yet, labeling the drawings based on the time and the place of her labor may be a reference to "clocking in and out" that would bring the industrial concept home. More importantly, the prehistory of textile, the haptic, and, by extension, piecework (in decline in Western countries since the end of WWII), is invoked. The contemporary art world has experienced a renaissance in the interpretation of traditional materials and crafts. While artists have always been inspired by and collected hand-worked objects, the encouragement of the market in the "craft turn" has increased its visibility. Michelle Grabner's 2014 Whitney Biennial and the recent Anni Albers at the Tate Modern and *Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf* are two of the most prominent exhibitions, which are sure to anticipate further scholarship and displays of textile and crafts in the future of contemporary art. 1,122

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FM: I wanted to study architecture. But, for various reasons, I went to the Academy of Fine Art in Santiago with a conditional transfer into architecture, but I stayed with art. It was practical and formal studio work until I took a Post-Studio seminar with Eugenio Dittborn. He pushed us to work collaboratively in common spaces: the street, supermarkets, hair salons, or even our parent's house. At this time, I co-founded with my friends, Diego Fernández and Joe Villablanca, an art space, Galería Chilena (1997-2005) and we worked with many artists in different situations in the city. Later, in 2006, and already living in New York, I had a show in a garage where I experimented with sound and video. Space needed to be darker, but I didn't want to hang a boring black curtain, so I made a design for the installation. It was a fortuitous accident that started my work in fabric.

The origin of post-studio practice in the early-1970s Los Angeles was entirely individual and conceptual, producing minimal acts that pointed to life's absurdities. In the late 1990's Santiago, resourcefulness outside art institutions was a staging of collective resistance, which had inbred political connotations, lingering from 1973, that simply did not exist for North Americans in quite the same way. While New York's 1980s Collab and Group Material, etc. were hardcore alternatives to the establishment, similar nomadic organizations like Galería Chilena in Santiago was an exercise in survival on a playing field where the mainstream was relatively non-existent. The consequences for those that stayed and those that left in the late 1960s are often lined with envy, regret, or righteousness; by the 1990s, globalism had largely swept that away, replacing them with other sentiments.

I have always been interested in working with systems. I create designs based on grids like Sol LeWitt, and other artists working with geometry. If you arrange a set of formal rules then drawings appear out of random, spontaneous, and unexpected configurations, which is a fantastic idea. I experiment with open and closed designs. For example, if it is a rectangle, each side is divided into four to make a grid, which allows me to endlessly play with different possibili-

ties in horizontal, vertical, diagonal lines. The process starts out in this formal way and then fabricators get involved, and happy accidents begin to happen. The main idea is to expand the formal into the social in the production process, in the occupation of space, and in relation to the public.

LeWitt's Positivism is a perfect model. He successfully pushed it to a point where the work ended in default absurdity, occasionally stepping into the decorative. Felipe seems to want to go there. The thin line between the concrete and the unknown, the rational and the irrational yields abstractions produced from a limited set of options selected by others or communal decision. The beauty of it is its infinite mathematical outcomes and bizarre chromatic optics, which also spin off of a mixture of video games, the Russian avant-garde, and Latin American modernisms from the 1940s - 1970s: Grupo Madí, Movimiento Cinético, Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, and the mammalian architectural designs of Valparaíso's Open City.

Why did you choose the concept of labor for this exhibition?

Labor in relation to how we incorporate manual or craft practices into our works, and how fabricators understand that their knowledge and skills can be incorporated into art. When I invite them to work outside of their usual system, and they see their talents used in a curtain that interacts with the public in space, they become curious and we discuss it, which I see as an exchange. For each exhibition, I interact with communities to find people to work with me. It could be one person or a collective of 10 to 20, who have specific knowledge of handmade work. For an early black and white piece in Chile, I asked the seamstress, Myriam, to improvise in her selection of different machine stitches on a linear design. The result was a completely pleasant surprise. In 2016, I asked a cooperative of embroiderers in São Paulo to sew by hand the stitches. These are just two different examples of how fabricators make decisions on the technique, stitch, thickness of the line, and color combinations of my curtains. The look of the curtains is influenced by their knowledge, and I adapt this knowledge to the architecture of the space.

Fabricators make suggestions, but also curators. For the 2014 Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador, the curator, Manuela Moscoso, proposed I work with a local studio. She suggested a traditional fabric, *Lanilla*, with very bright colors that the Cholas use to make their dresses. The background of the curtains was masculine grays, blues, and browns bought in New York City and in a tailor shop for men's suits in Cuenca. I used *Lanilla* for the shapes and the dark colors for the backgrounds. I worked with Laura and Nancy, who decided the color combinations on their own, and sometimes by consulting me. I was interested in the element of chance that arose from allowing the project to be affected by others. This was the first time I used open designs, which are unfinished sketches with no fixed color combinations, just the shapes, for the curtains.

The role of the "agent" has become more predominant and a viable means of production in recent artistic and curatorial practices. Using the expertise of outside professionals is an executive decision akin to the relationship between director and film crew. In relinquishing key aspects of curtain production to fabricators, Felipe encourages the variable choices of

human nature. In relation to object and space, Felipe leans in the direction of the architect, Oskar Hansen's Open Form Theory. The human element is emphasized in the production of the work through choice, error, and chance. Although these three aspects may be hard to perceive at first sight, embedded as they are in the process, they appear in the arrangement of the curtains, and when placed in nature, they connect the outside with the inside. For Proxyco, Felipe's curtains and Johanna's drawings shape space, or function as open spatial elements in the gallery's architecture, whereby the visitor/viewer/actor moves through space, causing the curtains to move, or actually manipulating them. The curtains act as flexible frames for these events of collective participation and circulation, open to a certain indeterminacy.

The origin of some curtains shown at Proxyco were the product of a 10-day residency in the Dominican Republic, where I worked with Juan Carlos, a mural and advertising professional painter. He hand-painted the curtains in a fuzzy and Rothkoesque way. It was the first time I have worked with a painter, and by taking this opportunity the work opened itself into a different direction. The geometries are fading now and the curtains are becoming more organic. Also, decisions are made according to the materials available in a given country. This year, I produced work in Mexico, where a richer craft culture, than in the Dominican Republic, exists. I like these cultural differences, they shape the work.

This is a political and economic situation. The Dominican Republic is separated, isolated like Puerto Rico, they don't produce anything related to fabric.

They were colonized by the Spanish and later occupied politically and economically by the French, English, and Americans. They don't produce cotton, most of the available fabric is cheap and synthetic, nevertheless, I used it. I am interested in how the ideas are affected by all those sequences. I appreciate the results. I don't think of the work as less than what I would find in a more natural material. It is just a different reality, a different set of rules, labor, and conditions.

I have also tried to convey this in a book, featuring the vernacular architecture and painted houses of the Dominican Republic. The main part of the book, which is black and white, is a textured visual diary of my journeys between two neighboring towns, Las Terrenas and Sanchez. It shows the idyllic vs the contaminated side of its people, environment, even the beautiful and ugly side of its beaches. Color prints inserted in between the black and white images show the curtains in relation to decorated houses where I had approached each owner with a request to hang a curtain on their house in order to record it. Their popular knowledge and experience of design, color, and color combinations are revealed in short interviews with homeowners.

If your interest is collaboration, why not use a medium that brings out the best of what that culture has to offer?

The medium is fabric, because of its economy: you can fold it, travel with it, it opens up in space, it is very effective. The final goal is to place it in architecture, which can be nature, a museum space, a sidewalk, or anywhere. If I changed the medium, I don't think it would produce the same effect. Fabric

has a flexibility that allows for different techniques from different contexts and cultures. It is a surface like a piece of paper.

Then could the medium be paper, too?

No. Paper doesn't hang or behave the same way in space.

I learned how a curtain could relate to architecture and to the public when I made my first one for the entrance of a gallery and saw it gently move in the breeze. Sometimes the curtains are in a fixed position, other times they hang on a cable so people can move them, or they hang by a thread and move with the air currents. Gradually they became more adaptable and interactive, behaving differently depending on their placement in space. Often, I like to hang them near windows, because the colors affect the interior of spaces. I play with the idea of their functionality. For Proxyco, I will work it out when I'm there.

Or, we will decide together.

Why do you want to show together?

We grew up together as artists at the Academy of Fine Arts at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago. We help each other with our work, technically and with methods, which affect our individual work. For instance, between 2007-2013, I worked with Johanna to produce my curtains at home. While we maintain separate practices, we have done many shows together. The latest was in 2016, when Chilean dancer and choreographer, Carmen Beuchat, invited us to collaborate with her on a recreation of *Two not One* (1975) in the Le Corbusier building of the Carpenter Center. We took cues from the building's colors and light to produce a piece where Johanna's design, hand embroidered and machine sewn, is split into five parts.

Does the direction of influence flow back and forth?

Could be. There has been so much exchange since the beginning.

It is easy to be influenced. We have known each other for 25 years and we pass information through.

Notes:

1- Adriano Pedrosa on Picture Gallery by Lina Bo Bardi, Mousse 61, <http://moussmagazine.it/adriano-pedrosa-picture-gallery-lina-bo-bardi-2017/>

2- https://www.academia.edu/27810398/2016_The_Murals_of_La_Victoria_Imaginaris_of_Chilean_Popular_Resistance