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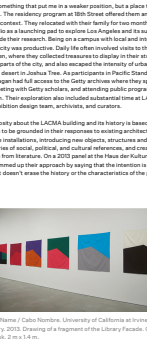
Talking Back at Architecture: The Work of Zinny and Maidagan

"Acto de Autores." Museo Juan B. Castagnino, Rosario 1993. A replica of the artists' studio butted against the Museums entrance. Black fabric and metal frame. 10 x 5 x 5 m.

***In partnership with 18th Street Arts Center** is an artists' residency program that provokes public dialogue through contemporary art-making.*

Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan have been producing large-scale installations for over two decades as a means to investigate architecture through the history of a site, challenging traditional notions around exhibition space, and creating new meanings. The collaborative duo has roots in Argentina and is currently based in Berlin. They are the first of 9 artists to complete residencies at 18th Street Arts Center in 2015-16, representing the initial research phase for later commissions to be featured in a joint exhibition between 18th Street and LACMA. The exhibition, curated by LACMA's Pilar Tompkins Rivas, Rita Gonzalez, and José Luis Blondet, is a project of **Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA**, an initiative of the Getty with arts institutions across Southern California in 2017.

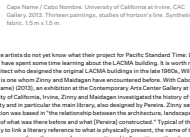
Zinny and Maidagan began working together in Rosario, Argentina, where they both studied at the National University of Rosario. As artists, they were coming from distinct backgrounds -- Zinny in fine arts, and Maidagan, in medicine. Zinny describes how an interest in theatre brought them together: "Juan left medicine and at that time was teaching acrobatics. I was interested in installation and theatre of objects, performance. And we were both interested in Tadeusz Kantor, this Polish theatre director. He was like a bond that put us together on the same page." An early piece in 1993 called "Acto de Autores" or Author's Act in Rosario introduced a line of questioning around the traditional white cube gallery space, along with placing the artists within a lineage of site-specificity. The artwork consisted of a replica of their studio butted against the entrance of the Museo de Juan B. Castagnino, a museum whose large collection focuses on Argentine painters, sculptors, and printers from the 20th and 21st centuries. Zinny describes this piece as representative of their early themes, which explored their "positioning as young artists in front of some cultural institutions." While the piece was realized by invitation from the museum, they chose to make their artistic process visible by literally bringing their studio to the museum's door. Because the studio technically sat outside of the museum's walls, the artists were also asserting their autonomy from the institution through architecture.



Curtain Call For Graz. Steiniocher Herbst. 2008. Utopia and Monument. Curator: Sabine Breitweiser. City Hall, Graz Silk, metal structure. 10 x 13 x 1.50 m.

Since then, Zinny and Maidagan have worked in a variety of spaces and cultural institutions, including in the public realm, and largely outside of Argentina. The Whitney Museum of Art's Independent Study Program brought them to New York in 1994, where they were based for eight years, before moving to their current home in Berlin where they live with their two children. Zinny recognizes that their "professional life was almost all developed outside of Argentina," and that these experiences have been significant in shaping who they are and what their practice is today. Leaving Argentina was an opportunity to grow and learn in a new place. "You have, not a lack, but something that is enriching, not something that put me in a weaker position, but a place that I chose to be," Zinny maintains. The residency program at 18th Street offered them another occasion to discover a fresh context. They relocated with their family for two months and have used their live-in studio as a launching pad to explore Los Angeles and its surroundings, and allow that to guide their research. Being on a campus with local and international artists in an international city was productive. Daily life often involved visits to the nearby beach with their children, where they collected treasures to display in their studio. They enjoyed seeing different parts of the city, and also escaped the intensity of urban life by spending a week in the high desert in Joshua Tree. As participants in Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, Zinny and Maidagan had full access to the Getty archives where they spent time researching, meeting with Getty scholars, and attending public programs at the museum and around town. Their exploration also included visits to artist-run at LACMA, where they met with the exhibition design team, archivists, and curators.

The artists' curiosity about the LACMA building and its history is based in a practice which continues to be grounded in their responses to existing architectures. Zinny and Maidagan create installations, introducing new objects, structures and environments, integrating a series of social, political, and cultural references, and creating a narrative that often draws from literature. On a 2013 panel at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Zinny summed up their approach by saying that the intention is to "give a reading of the space that doesn't erase the history or the characteristics of the place where it is shown."



Cape Name / Cabo Nombre. University of California at Irvine, CAC Gallery. 2013. Drawing of a fragment of the Library Facade. Oil pastel and ink. 2 m x 1.4 m.

A series of works in the last decade reflect these ways of engaging, utilizing curtains and other fabric covers to evoke the stage, performance, and what is concealed and revealed therein. Their early interest in performance is still present, but today they are creating settings where the audience is set up to perform rather than to witness the performance. Works like "Curtain Call," 2003, and "Curtain Call for Graz," 2009, both set a stage, the former at the 50th Venice Biennale, and the latter at the entrance of the Graz City Hall in Austria. In the artists created a gigantic metallic fabric curtain, bearing stripes of gold and silver, measuring approximately 33 x 43 x 5 feet. Any citizen entering the building first traversed the curtain, clearly passing the division between the street and City Hall. LACMA curator Blondet, who has long followed the work of Zinny and Maidagan, describes the shift the curtain creates in a 2014 essay written for the artists' monograph published by Galerie Sabine Knust in Munich. "The curtain invokes a stage, an audience and a representation in a theater larger than life." By creating the sense of a stage, the curtain adds drama to what some might consider the mundane task of visiting or using a municipal building. Blondet continues, "To deepen this baroque take in the public sphere, the curtain of Zinny and Maidagan functions also as a membrane able to tease out the theatricality involved in performing citizenship." Everyday citizens are transformed into actors, heightening and highlighting the rights and duties involved with being from a place. While "Curtain Call for Graz" invokes the politics of a city institution, the earlier "Curtain Call," organized for the exhibit Strategies of Survival, is concerned more with gallery space. It also asks viewers to encounter a kind of curtain, in this case, a set of fabric folding screens sitting facing each other at two ends of the gallery. The title "Curtain Call" is important, Zinny says, because "it's not referring to the curtain, but the act of the curtain call. Curtain call is when the actors come to the public, and the work is finished. They can be applauded or…they are judged." This curtain then presents the gallery space as one the audience can respond to and judge, the way they might a performance or play they have just experienced. Zinny and Maidagan's use of narrative finds breadth in their careful choice of language as well as form.

Cape Name / Cabo Nombre. University of California at Irvine, CAC Gallery. 2013. Thirteen paintings, studies of horizon's line. Synthetic fabric. 1.5 m x 1.5 m.

While the artists do not yet know what their project for Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA will be, they have spent some time learning about the LACMA building. It is worth noting that the architect who designed the original LACMA buildings in the late 1960s, William Pereira, is one whom Zinny and Maidagan have encountered before. With Cabo Nombre (Cape Name) (2013), an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center Gallery at the University of California, Irvine, Zinny and Maidagan investigated the history of the university and in particular the main library, also designed by Pereira. Zinny says that the exploration was based in "the relationship between the architecture, landscape, and context of what was there before and what [Pereira] constructed." Typical of the artists' tendency to link a literary reference to what is physically present, the name of the exhibition comes from the name of a cape mentioned in Argentine author Juan Saer's El Río Sin Orillas or A River Without Shores. Saer's fictional narrative tells about the conquest of South America and describes the Spanish conquerors' system of naming the region that is now Tierra del Fuego in Argentina. Zinny references the "generic gesture" by the conquerors to allot more and more abstract names as they traveled south. "They start using names like Conical Hill, Pyramid, all these abstract names until they arrive to Cape Name," she explained at the 2013 panel in Berlin. Similarly, the UC Main Library held the generic name of "Main" library until 40 years after it was built, when it was renamed after major donor Jack Langson. The artists saw a link between the vast landscape the Spaniards encountered, and the farm landscape that Pereira built upon. They observed a parallel approach in Pereira's choice to build onto the landscape something altogether new, and not necessarily in relationship to the site's history or geography. Likewise, the Spanish conquered Latin America by constructing onto the land their own institutions and architectures, without preserving the natural environment or consulting the original inhabitants. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a large-scale multi-panel drawing of the façade of the library building, measuring 10 x 23 feet, prominently featuring its cast concrete pillars which were characteristic of the architecture of that period. Running across the entire drawing is a thick dark line, which actually follows the silhouette of the mountain landscape that sits behind the building. The building is present in the drawing and in a series of architectural fabric studies of the horizon which cement the relationship between past and present, landscape and architecture. Writing in the 2014 monograph, Juli Carson, Director of the UC Irvine Art Galleries, explains: "In either case, be it in the mosaic or fabric drawings, this imaginary horizon line - at once scar and suture, a cut and a connection -- reifies an invisible crack in the distinction between then and now, land and building, image and site." Carson discusses how through the drawing and fabric studies, Zinny and Maidagan managed to foreground the history behind the building of this important Southern California institution, UC Irvine.

For "Cape Name," the artists traveled to Irvine for the first time to complete the work, without a previous site visit or any knowledge of the place. For their next project in Los Angeles, the residency at 18th Street has given them the space and time to experience and contemplate many possibilities for Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. Whatever emerges from their investigations will undoubtedly reflect both the specifics of this city and the criticality and formal clarity of their earlier works, which synthesize history, literature, and architecture in inventive ways.

This residency is supported by the Getty Foundation as part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles taking place across Southern California from September 2017 through January 2018.

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