

KM: I would like to start our conversation by addressing an almost automatic association one has when seeing textile work by women artists. It is often identified with a typically female field of activity, with warmth and homeliness, with certain arts and crafts traditions, and thereby also with the creation of social fabrics. Felt, your preferred working material, seems to be partly compatible with this set of associations, and yet it also goes beyond it. Not only because it directly refers to the history of conceptual art, but also due to its very specific material presence, being at the same time voluminous and abstract, organic and technical. How did you come to work with felt?

JU: To work with felt as sculptural material was at the beginning and at a very personal and basic level something like an encounter with a good old friend from childhood. I used felt (obviously a cheaper and simpler version of it) in many child day care activities and projects, in combination with other hand based techniques, such as embroidery and sewing. Looking back, these were very important tools for me and I like to think of them as survival kits: they kept me busy.

Later on at art school I concentrated on sculpture and there I pushed myself to experiment with non-classical materials because I did not feel comfortable with traditional mediums such as steel or stone, I liked the physicality of it but the ideas I wanted to express needed other materials. Besides, I was never too interested in the "big stone" or in the monumentality of public sculptures, which were very rooted ideals of sculpture at the time. On top of this I did not have my own studio to work in as university studios had limited access due to an increasing bureaucratic system that favored out-side students (the school ran something like an evening program open to the general public which brought in a lot of revenue). This is how I started to work with corrugated cardboard, which can be seen as a first important step in my material process. Another factor was that I always had the idea of not forcing the materials, to work with their own characteristics and possibilities. Cardboard I could cut, fold, and assemble pieces. With cardboard I also discovered I could transform this two-dimensional material into a three-dimensional object, and it felt like a magician's trick, like when the magician takes out the white rabbit from the hat. The fact that I could easily transport my work, put it in a suitcase and move around, was also wonderful. This became a very clean and economical way of working, both conceptually and formally.

Going back to felt, I have also always been interested in clothing and fabric design, I even had my own small line of designs some years ago, so when I found this particular German felt at the store/work place of an

Argentinian designer in Brooklyn I sort of had an illumination moment, I thought with this material I could keep working as I did with corrugated cardboard yet I could also sew it and it had a natural and warm presence that the cardboard did not have (which was more *povera*). It was important to me that this material could be used both in volumetric terms and also stay in the design and clothing territory, a sort of in between material and technique.

KM: Your reference to design, and to dressmaking in particular, becomes productive for me also on a more figurative level. I am very much reminded of concepts like camouflage or masquerade when I think of the in-betweenness of your materials on the one hand, and of the way you play with spaces, perspectives and visibility on the other. Your sculptures distort and transform space by deliberately confusing inside and outside, indicating exits or passages where there are none, or promising views into a nonexistent space beyond. There is a strong sense of humor in these works, although one with clearly uncanny undertones. It makes me think of Freud's reflections on the psychopathology of everyday life, where he uses metaphors like camouflage, distortion and disguise to describe how unconscious memories, fears and desires articulate themselves in jokes and humorous anecdotes. What role does the de-constructive, subversive energy of humor play for you?

JU: I love your second question! But before we go into the weird humor aspect I wanted to clarify something from your previous question. About the feminine connotation I can say that I really do not think of this when I work. Although it obviously contains this gender issue I prefer to think of my process as a constructive one, a process I enjoy but also a process that is effective and in some ways mechanical and precise. So it does have a quality of warmth - the process and the result - but at the same time it is part of a conceptual process, a way of working with and transforming a material.

Now responding your second question. For me humor is very important, and also camouflage. I believe these two things mix well. When I make a sculpture or an installation that is a sink or a series of pipes or a wheel barrel or a group of teacups my intention is to insert these ordinary objects into space but doing so in such a way that they become almost invisible. They sort of have a presence but at the same time they sort of melt within space. There is also the question of, why work with these ordinary objects, and maybe this is where humor kicks in, or maybe it is also in the way I present them. So it is the selection of the object (a sink?) and the way this "fake sink" is re-staged in space, hanging... almost falling apart. This hanging-floppy situation can be compared to Claes Oldenburg's sculptures but I think mine are definitively less spectacular, poorer... Also, we both work with ordinary objects, but a big difference would be in the use of space besides his use of popular American culture.

For me it is essential to put the object back to its possible original location, not in the middle or in the most prominent place in space. In this sense they are site specific but done in a sort of super literal stupid way, and maybe this is also the origin of the subversive humor you are talking about.

I have to admit though that most of the times the humoristic aspect is a result that I really don't control or have in mind when I plan a piece. For me what is important is the origin of the object or detail I am working with, for example that most of them come from the industrial history or architectonic day-to-day environments. Humor then is an integral part of the result, more than the planning... I think I work with it but in an uncontrolled way and this could be the reason for its uncanny-ness. Another element that could help in this humor discussion is how I work with the scale of the objects. Sometimes they are blown up, sometimes they are miniatures, sometimes the same size. This adds confusion to how the spectator relates to the object. I've always been interested in science fiction and in Jules Verne's 20.000 Leagues Under Sea where there is a great use of scale (and description of specific objects, their location, as a stage). Scale becomes the means in which the weird and strange is presented. The huge spaces with huge underwater animals etc., this might be a bit off target but I just like to comment on this.

**KM:** Jules Verne and early science fiction are a really interesting reference here. Not only in relation to ideas of the fantastic, but also in terms of their relation to modernity and notions of progress. A lot of the technical constructions that these authors dreamed up now seem dated or grotesque (precisely because some of their dreams have come true in the meantime), just like, for instance, the cooling towers and mine shafts Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed – the industrial sublime par excellence – which are now mere monuments to an almost forgotten past, precarious, dysfunctional objects. And yet they have an almost archetypal quality, they belong to “everyone,” which I think becomes very clear in the way you appropriate these images in your sculptures. Or when I think of your pipes, they seem anachronistic in the face of a global, networked society where “immaterial” communication prevails, and yet they remind us of an often invisible system of connections that rather efficiently creates and sustains (or divides) communities. They are communicating pipes in the most emphatic sense of the word. While the technical and the social seem to inspire each other in your work, they are always accompanied by a certain sense of nostalgia...

**JU:** I believe that at the time when science fiction started it was a basic idea of how the world would be in the future but it was probably very much rooted in the industrial revolution. So, Jules Verne is interesting to me because of the presence of the fantastic but also the heavy machinery. It is not the same as when I grew up and we imagined how the year 2000 would be... (Something more like Blade Runner). But of course what unites science fiction, early and later, is the idea of a crazy efficient system where

machines would replace human labor, do the work for us and then we could have the time to do what we "really want". The idea of this kind of utopia then is one where we don't have to do much but of course things can go wrong, like in Fahrenheit 451 or in 1984.

The relationship with Bernd and Hilla Becher and their registration of the pots-industrial landscape is very direct: the buildings are huge machines (and shapes) that hover over us, now dysfunctional and abandoned. This feeling is also amplified because the areas where these buildings are located many times are in the periphery of the cities or even abandoned or semi empty little towns, which again sort of make up a perfect setting for a science fiction story. So I see these buildings as huge sculptures in the middle of nowhere and when I see them I ask myself who is looking at them... What public do they have? What is their exact legacy? At least for me these sites are full of history and I constantly ask questions about the social issues around these spaces, both past and present, and of course I try to put these ideas or questions into each sculpture or installation I make. I would like to add that I have recently seen a couple of installations (at international biennials) that worked with similar ideas, of labor conditions and economy, and talking to some colleagues I tried to understand why I somehow disliked the way these subjects were being treated. I realized that the references they make could be more contemporary than mine, basically globalization, yet I also realized that most of the times that kind of work favored a spectacular and somehow more direct or literal work. For example a huge "sweat shop" factory inside an abandoned coalmine plant is somehow too obvious, in the sense of the past/local confronted with the present/global. I admit though that I also question myself when I see these works, would I work at the same scale in those conditions? Could this obvious spectacular way of working be critical, more effective than my small-scale work? Is my smaller scale a byproduct of my working conditions and not a structural subject? I do know that my work is much more nostalgic than these examples because in a way I am not accepting to get into the current work / economic developments, but at the same time I feel I am working in a less spectacular way that feels more in tune with the human aspects that interest me: when I make a sculpture I sort of become "a worker". Also, what is very important, when I talked about looking at the empty or abandoned industrial buildings I also look at them from a sculptural point of view, the forms and volumes have meaning and I like to work with that; the current global economic situation might be too immaterial for me to hang on to.

**KM:** When you say that making your sculptures you become a worker, how does this relate to your work in other media? I think this is the first time you are presenting your works on paper alongside your objects.

Like them, your drawings and watercolors seem to occupy an ambivalent position somewhere between draft and conceptual drawing. How would you describe your working process and the way they relate to your sculptural and installation work?

JU: Some years ago I didn't consider my drawings or watercolors independently from my sculptural pieces, so I really didn't see them as finished works. Although they were directly connected to a specific sculpture or installation I saw them mainly as just technical elements and as I considered them pretty much in a lower quality status, I just kept them for myself and never thought of showing them. Today the situation has changed as I think these drawings really have a value of their own. This change basically happened because the drawing process pushed me to experiment more with watercolor and less with simple pencil sketches on a notebook, in a way the same drawings pushed me to take them more seriously. Now they are still pieces that talk about other pieces, as my films do, and like my films they keep going back to the main sculpture-based subject but they also add new readings and layers to the whole, they sort of open the discussion to other areas. I think watercolor has helped me do this because I felt it also has a sensitive and warm quality, the way color is mixed and applied, and so on.

In what ways could these drawings be valued in relation to the work-labor idea involved in each sculpture piece? I think simply because they are part of the process, the search for building up the shapes and volumes. The felt I use comes in rolls and I need to cut and saw each piece so the material becomes a tridimensional object. In a way, I first mentally process this information (of how to transform the two-dimensional material into a tridimensional piece) and later I put this idea on paper. Each time I build an object this object is divided into parts and each part is then translated into a basic geometric form. In a way I de-construct and abstract the object, also its "qualities". A lot of times I like to think of the different skills one must use to develop a piece or an installation and in my case we could talk of some kind of very basic and primitive engineering skills. So on the one hand the drawings are part of a technical process yet they also fight to become something new, something of their own.

Finally the technicality of my pieces could be seen like this: the faucets I make, you can actually move the handle, if I make a wheel barrel I like to study the wheel and its structure and then when I replicate this wheel and how it is attached to the body of the barrel my wheel also moves. This reinforces the almost functional character of each piece and at the same time it is all technically very simple.

KM: I would like to come back once again to some questions we addressed earlier, relating to garments and camouflage. You made a series of felt hats, one of them in the shape of a house which covers the wearer's entire head, leaving only some slits at the front to see through. In your film *Autoretrato* you perform in, or rather, inhabit this hat. I really like this image of a house-mask moving around New York, trying to blend into the landscape but sticking out as unmistakably other, being protected and exposed at the same time. While on the one hand this walking *persona* (=mask) gestures toward a very personal experience of migration and cultural in-betweenness, it also seems to indicate in a more general sense the way you relate to, or use landscape in your work – as something which not simply *is*, but is *produced*. I find this very prominent in your reference to architecture and urban environments, but also in the fragments of “natural” landscape that appear in some of your pieces, which are always somehow manipulated or processed.

JU: This house-mask or house-hat (I refer to it in both ways) is an important piece in my work, basically because when I started using it I realized that in this use the piece had many possibilities. The idea of covering my face had more to do with the search of neutrality – within the performance – than with the act of hiding, it created a connection with the viewer as she or he could eventually also be that person behind the house-mask. I have used this house-mask in several performances and videos and in each one this mask sort of plays a specific-personal role and a general-open role, this fluctuation depends on in what circumstances and places I use the mask. For example, in 2007, during a residency at Capacete in Rio de Janeiro I made a video titled *Juana de Arco* where I jumped with a hang-glider from a mountain. The whole video looks like just another tourist video as what you see is a small hang-glider slowly approaching the beach, but when you finally see me in this situation, landing, you see that I have this house-mask on. So, at the very end of the video the whole piece comes together as a sculptural action. In the video you mention, *Autoretrato*, my intention was to capture a moment of my new life as a mother living in New York in a very basic situation: going for groceries to the supermarket... I also wanted to become somehow part of the collectiveness of the city, to be this person who is an individual yet also a part of the whole. The mask-hat created a very strange relationship for people as many looked at me in a strange way yet, as we live in the city of “tolerance”, they also had to accept me. This situation of doing something unusual followed by the same people ignoring you sort of describes the piece well, and it also falls in this in-betweenness we talked about before. In both cases I interact and become part of the city/environment yet in different ways, one is focused on the stereotype ideas we have about Rio de Janeiro and its beach/holiday life, a place for “adventure”, and the other is focused on a very personal situation of daily life routines, now that I say these they even seem opposite!

In more general terms, this project is also focused on the idea of expanding the possibilities and scope of my sculpture work. Through the performances and sculptural interventions (which are planned and captured by drawing, film and photo) I have searched to add my work to the environment... to the city as well as to the forest or countryside. This addition to what is constructed around us - both "artificial" and "natural" - I think creates layers of life and interpretations to the work. My pieces work in a specific way in a gallery space and in another maybe completely different way in a place such as a riverbank or a field of snow or in interaction with people on a subway train. In the end what is important is the object I produce and its mobility, which opens up the space where we can see and find art, how it can really interact with us, and our history. The idea of bringing fragments of nature into the gallery is related to this idea too.