

HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist's Plot to Unlock Luis Barragán's Archive with a Diamond Made from His Ashes

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Still from Jill Magid, “The Exhumation” (2016), video commissioned by Field of Vision as part of a larger project in collaboration with the artist (photo by Jarred Alterman; all images courtesy of the artist; LABOR, Mexico City; RaebervonStenglin, Zurich; and Galerie Untilthen, Paris)

MEXICO CITY — In a multiyear project that has exploded beyond any one gallery space, New York’s [Jill Magid](#) has reactivated the legacy of Mexican modernist architect [Luis Barragán](#). Beyond a call for access to a one-of-a-kind archive, Magid’s work with Barragán is literary stagecraft that implicates

a cast of characters involved in mysterious multinational negotiations, as well as legal and narrative ambiguity. Magid's unsuccessful attempt to access the architect's professional archive — cryptically stored away in the basement of a Swiss corporation's headquarters — culminated in Barragán's ashes being made into a blue diamond and set into a wedding band. The artist created an action much bigger than herself in which viewers don't know where the truth ends and fantasy begins. In exhibitions at the [Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen](#) in Switzerland, Mexico City's [LABOR](#) gallery, and soon at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#) (SFAI), Magid weaves a spellbinding web of documents, letters, sculptures, and near-copyright infringements.



Jill Magid, "The Proposal" (2016, detail), uncut, 2.02 carat, blue diamond with micro-laser inscription "I am wholeheartedly yours," silver ring, ring box, documents; setting design by Anndra Neen (photo by Stefan Jaeggi for Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen) (click to enlarge)

The story of a one-of-a-kind blue diamond made from the cremated remains of a Pritzker Prize-winning architect being offered in exchange for a trove of documents held by a mysterious Swiss corporation may sound like the plot of a [James Bond movie](#), but this is one of those allusive moments when reality is stranger than fiction and life imitates art.

Magid's obsession with

Barragán began with a visit to his personal archive and [home](#) in Mexico City, which happens to be located across the street from

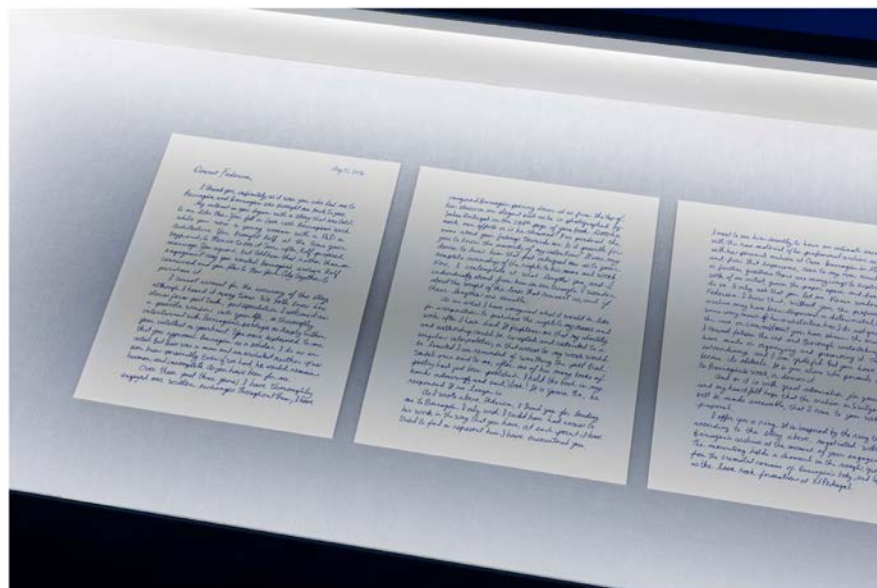
LABOR gallery. After being drawn in by his personal effects, which the artist came to use as material for a performance — barely staying within the realm of legality by imperfectly reproducing personal letters from the architect to mysterious lovers — Magid soon learned that Barragán's professional archive is owned by Rolf Fehlbaum, founder of the Swiss design firm Vitra, and controlled by his wife Federica Zanco. Fehlbaum originally purchased the archive as a gift for his then-fiancée, in lieu of an engagement ring — hence the symbolism of the diamond set into the wedding band.



Jill Magid, "The Offering (Tapete de Flores)" (2016), artificial flowers, natural flowers, dyed sawdust, salt, glue; 20 ft in diameter (photo by Stefan Jaeggi for Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen)

Zanco guards the archive at the corporation's headquarters and runs a non-profit organization, the [Barragan Foundation](#) (with the accent conspicuously absent from the architect's name), which isn't open to the public. Naturally, Magid put in a request to visit the archive, only to be rejected by Zanco. It turned out that many people in Mexico, including the family of the deceased architect, felt strongly that the archive should be in Mexico and available to the public.

Meanwhile, Zanco sees herself as the savior of the archive, according to a [New York Times](#) article from 2013, protecting it from being sold off piecemeal. Zanco, an academic and historian by trade, also controls all of the intellectual property rights to Barragán's work. She has the last word about any reproductions or images of his architecture, drawings, or writings, including his personal archive and home in Mexico City.



Jill Magid, facsimile of the "Proposal Letter" to Federica Zanco, 4 pages; 35 x 58.5 x 21.5 in (photograph by Stefan Jaeggi for Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen) (click to enlarge)

Magid developed a proposal to trade the archive in exchange for the diamond ring — “Exchanging the body for the body of work,” as she put it in an interview with *Hyperallergic*. Through a series of negotiations and meetings with representatives of Barragán’s family in Mexico, the artist developed a list of agreements, signed by her and the family, in which they agreed upon the exhumation and transformation of the architect’s remains into a diamond. The exhibitions on view in Mexico City, Switzerland, and soon in San Francisco include a video that shows Barragán’s crypt being opened, his ashes being removed and replaced by a silver horse (horses being Barragán’s obsession).

According to Magid, the ring will come to Mexico, as stipulated in the agreement, after the exhibition in Switzerland moves to SFAI, which helped to commission the artwork. However, for the artist it was important that Zanco had first access to the ring in order to consider the proposal.

“I wanted the ring to be physically accessible to Frederica, so it was very important to me that the initial gesture happened in Switzerland,” Magid explained. “It was important to me that she was the first viewer.”



Jill Magid, "Ex-Voto: Miracle of the Diamond" (2016) (photo © Diego Padilla) (click to enlarge)

The exhibition at the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen in Switzerland, *The Proposal*, was just that. By extension, the show in Mexico City is also a stage for potential action, which becomes performative when the artist reads her proposal to Zanco aloud in the exhibition space. "I don't see the exhibition as an artifact," she said. Nevertheless, through the exhumation of the

architect's remains, the artist becomes an archeologist. Magid's role as an artist affords her a more playful space for exploration, where she isn't bound by scientific truth and can create an alternative narrative, one of many possible solutions for Barragán's legacy.

"I had once naively believed that if you are a great artist and you produce great things, you will leave a great legacy, but I have learned that isn't true," said Magid. "A legacy has to be not only cared for, but continually engaged. That can only happen through its accessibility."



Jill Magid, "The Family Agreement" (2016), 97 1/4 x 21 1/4 x 35 1/2 in (click to enlarge)

The demonization of Zanco — perpetrated in large part by arts writers — is actually counterproductive to Magid's mission if her goal is the eventual release of the architect's professional archive. During our conversation, the artist reiterated her respect for Zanco, who in turn has

expressed interest in collaborating with Magid. But it's unclear whether either woman has considered the actual exchange of the professional archive. The artist is in the business of using the

legal legend surrounding Barragán's work as her studio material. Inadvertently, she is creating an alternative Barragán archive and, at some point, the realization of the exchange becomes irrelevant because the architect's legacy has been reactivated through Magid's captivating theatrical project.

Magid's project about Barragán, along with other long-term projects where she seeks to dissect and conquer systems of power, brings to mind [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's](#) work. His machines are often created as critiques of surveillance or power, all the while compiling their own databases of viewers' personal information, heartbeat rates, or images. For both artists, the project is dependent on the same power structures that it challenges.



Still from Jill Magid, "The Exhumation" (2016), video commissioned by Field of Vision as part of a larger project in collaboration with the artist (photo by Jarred Alterman)

Magid's proposal, like her project, is inherently problematic, but cannot be shied away from because of the awkward questions it poses. She puts herself in a difficult position and brings others into a multinational drama that she then displays in public. For example, despite considerable efforts to gain access to Barragán's remains through legal means and with the written consent of the architect's family, other family members have spoken out against the disturbance of their relative's resting place. Then, there is the vilification of Zanco, which I don't think the artist wanted or intended, but for which she nevertheless created the conditions. Finally, there is the neocolonial savior complex perpetrated by both the Swiss and the American agents, who are acting as champions and guardians of the Mexican architect's legacy.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of affection and generosity churned into the ongoing saga of the architect-turned-diamond. Giving Magid the benefit of the doubt and credit where credit is due for her tremendous undertaking, the professional archive of Mexico's preeminent modern architect should be in his home country and accessible to academics, artists, and burgeoning architects looking for inspiration. Beyond the unlikely possibility that Magid's proposal will be accepted, her project has taken on a life of its own. It is full of potential energy for dynamic and unruly art forms that function as much more than static objects in galleries.



Jill Magid, still from work-in-progress film (2016), commissioned by Field of Vision as part of a larger project in collaboration with the artist (photo by Jarred Alterman)

Jill Magid's Ex-Voto continues LABOR (Gral. F. Ramírez 5, Daniel Garza, Mexico City) through September 3; The Proposal was on view at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (Davidstrasse 40, St. Gallen, Switzerland) through August 21 and will be on view in the Walter and McBean Galleries of the San Francisco Art Institute (800 Chestnut Street, San Francisco, California) from September 9 through December 10.