

ART

Monthly

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Jill Magid

Interviewed by Gilda Williams

Art as Evidence as Art

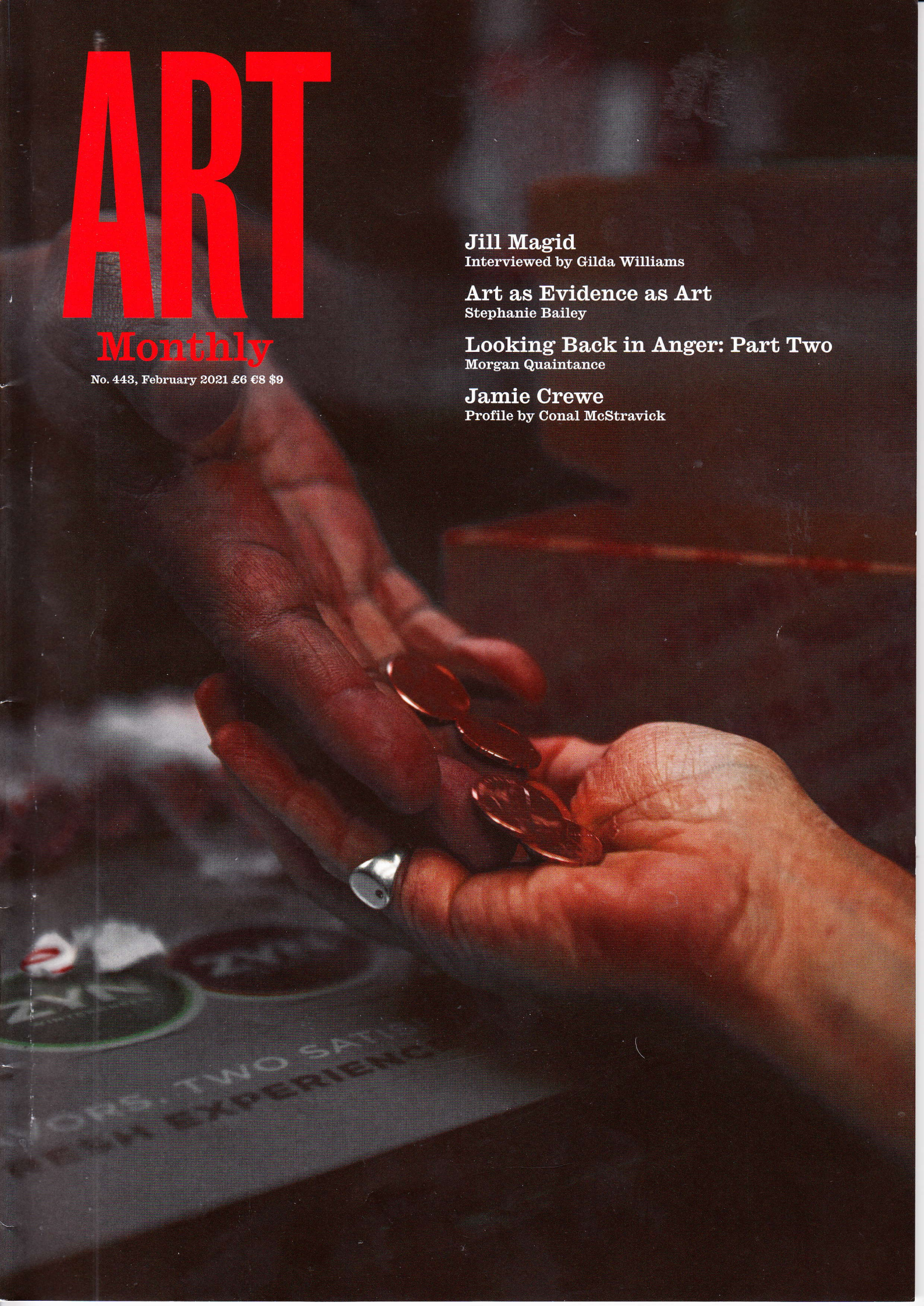
Stephanie Bailey

Looking Back in Anger: Part Two

Morgan Quaintance

Jamie Crewe

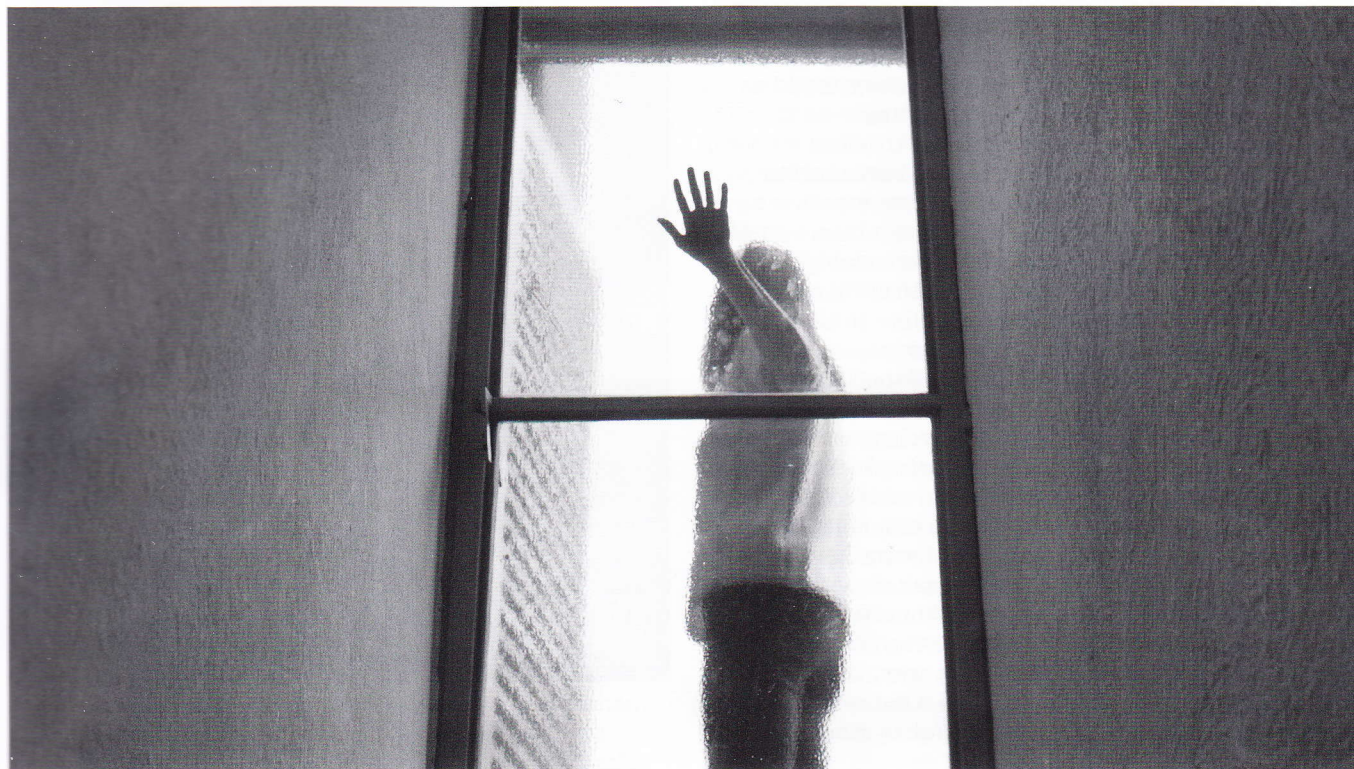
Profile by Conal McStravick



The Other Woman

A self-confessed romantic conceptualist, the artist discusses working closely with her chosen 'co-protagonists', who range from police officers to spies, in order to get under the skin of the pervasive systems of control and surveillance that control all our lives.

Jill Magid interviewed by Gilda Williams



The Proposal, 2018, film

Gilda Williams: I'll launch with an art-history question. You've been described as a conceptual artist, which seems apt since you update that history very directly. You've given instructions or delegated the making of artworks to others, much like antecedents such as Sol LeWitt (Interview *AM165*) or Yoko Ono. In *Evidence Locker* from 2004, for example, the Liverpool police were enlisted to film you via their citywide video surveillance system. In 2005 you made *Head*, where a forensic artist produced a 3D facial reconstruction of your likeness, captured in ecstasy, based on hospital CT scans. *Auto Portrait Pending*, also from 2005, an empty gold-ring setting to be filled with a diamond created from the remains of your body upon your death, seems a cover version of On Kawara's *I am still alive*, 1969–2014: both artworks are completed upon the artist's long-announced demise. And, just as in the 1970s when Mary Kelly (Interview *AM346*) countered stony-faced 1960s conceptual art by introducing motherhood as valid subject matter, you introduce into conceptual practice ideas around intimacy, seduction, love and safety.

Jill Magid: Your references are the ones I think about a lot, as well as Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Similar to Kelly, Ukeles too had a child but found a position of power within that, creating *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969. She chose to look at this under-recognised side of labour and label it 'art' – almost adopting a Duchampian approach – but brought in feminism and the family. Where Marcel Duchamp was working

strictly within art history, Ukeles opened up a backdoor onto messy private life, onto human relationships. The title 'conceptual artist' does fit me – but it's an uncomfortable fit. I think it was the curator Cuauhtémoc Medina who once, slightly humorously, called me a 'romantic conceptualist', and that feels better.

I teach at Cooper Union and start the year showing Sol LeWitt's *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* from 1974. I love how the artist gave himself a single structure to work on for a whole year, but I find imposing an arbitrary structure on my own practice unsatisfying. The institutions that I face provide the beginning structure, and I love working within and around them. Their boundaries help me understand their system: I build a formal-conceptual-visual vocabulary in each project that is informed by that specific system.

You test standard art-historical questions that Duchamp and others asked, such as 'what is the artist's role?', but your imaginative definitions make the standard earlier responses – the artist as ethnographer, poet, researcher, curator – sound so anaemic. The artist might be 'the other woman', as you described yourself in *The Barragán Archives* of 2013–16, where you were competing for access to the late Mexican architect with his archive's possessive owner, Frederica Zanco. I'm also thinking of *The Spy Project* from 2005–10, which was commissioned by the Dutch intelligence agency, for which you met with 18 willing employees and collected personal data about them, but which ended up with you – the artist – eventually being labelled 'a national security threat'.

I embed myself into systems to find a kind of mutual vulnerability. Pretty much all of my work – including my writing and my filmmaking – has this first-person perspective, in which I use myself as a tool, embedded in a system, which might be different to some earlier conceptual artists. I add a novelistic, first-person layer, which is also why I always foreground my writing in my work. I produce, as Norman Mailer described his work, ‘non-fiction novels’. It’s very important to me that my books, such as *Becoming Tarden* from 2010, based on my interviews from *The Spy Project*, circulate outside the art world and enter the literary world as well. I don’t like the term ‘artist’s writing’ – as if artists are excused from being held up to other writers.

I like manipulating language. I like bureaucratic language and legalese, which give communication a rigid structure or scaffolding where I can insert poetic or romantic language. Using a more personal kind of language when approaching an institution can open up or chisel away some of its walls – it allows me to peer inside and see with fresh eyes.

In *The Proposal*, I offered Federica Zanco a 2.02 carat diamond ring made from Barragán’s cremated remains in exchange for her opening up the archive to the public [Zanco, owner and director of the Barragán Foundation in Birsfelden, Switzerland, allegedly received the archive as an engagement gift in lieu of a ring]. Some people have said that’s absurd; if you want her to open the Barragán archive, why not just ask directly? The reason is that if you ask an expected question directly, you’ll just get back the same old answer. If, instead, you ask in an obtuse or an absurdist way, the answer will require consideration, and open a conversation. I pose the question in a new form so that others are able to hear it.

Many of your works are a kind of love story – *The Proposal* is complete with diamond ring and you ‘popping the question’. You have made me aware of how often, when we talk about art, we borrow the vocabulary of romantic love. We talk about ‘falling in love’ with an artist or with an artwork. A collector desires to live with a certain piece of art – may even say they ‘can’t live without it’.

Likewise, a CCTV system ‘holds’ your image, and copyright ‘protects’ a thing and makes it yours. Describing love is like describing beauty: ultimately it is about the level of concentration and focus you devote. I had these two inspirational South African teachers, Rose Shakinovsky and Claire Gavronsky, who helped me see this when I was briefly studying in Italy long ago. They brought art students out into the forest. The assignment was to pick the ugliest thing you could find in the woods, then draw it as naturalistically as you could. Mine was a rotting piece of wood. We all experienced the same thing: we found an ugly thing and at first were disgusted by it, but as we examined it closely and drew it, it became beautiful. Once you’re focusing on it, you experience every incredible detail.

The title ‘conceptual artist’ does fit me – but it’s an uncomfortable fit. I think it was the curator Cuauhtémoc Medina who once, slightly humorously, called me a ‘romantic conceptualist’, and that feels better.



Tender, 2020, public artwork

That’s an extreme example of how I want to look at the bureaucratic systems I encounter: look intensely and intimately, as a way to develop a more nuanced critique of it. I try to discern the human intentions and desires that organise the system, which can produce feelings of empathy towards it, eventually even a kind of love. But, in the process, I become implicated within the system. That’s a risky and ethically complicated position. I find that, once you begin to understand the human decisions behind and within the system, there’s something vulnerable, even tragic, about it. This is not a sugar-coated romanticism, it is a mode of investigation which leads to real entanglements. I become a player within an uneven hierarchy of power – and power is not stable.

You have said that you aim to discover ‘the question at the heart of an institution’. A common interview question that people ask you is, how on earth do you access these closed bureaucratic organisations? How do you penetrate the Dutch Secret Service or the Liverpool police and talk them into working with you? It seems to me you succeed because you really listen. You don’t reduce your collaborators to the badge they’re wearing – you connect as a fellow human.



Head, 2005

Yes, but the technical answer to both those two examples is that they came through commissions. I won those commissions by convincing them of my project. I'm really earnest when I approach these organisations - I sincerely want to understand how they work. Even if I have a preconceived idea about a system, I remain open to the possibility that I might be wrong. For example, I was surprised when Tate Liverpool told me that officers from the Liverpool Police Department were among the most frequent visitors to the 2004 Biennial - they loved *Evidence Locker* and kept coming back to see it. I am not absolving the police or the city's surveillance system, I'm just saying that it's more complex than at first glance. Not everyone is good or bad or right or wrong within that system. And what I often find is that the people who chose to collaborate with me are also questioning the system and their role in it. I'm interested in the subtleties there, to understand why these institutions were created and what their missions are, but also the human interactions happening within that framework too. I'm interested in what we think we need to be safe. How our need for safety manifests itself says a lot about our relationship with structures of power. What fears and whose insecurities is the system designed to protect against? Are we as a society comfortable with how this 'security' is provided?

In *Lincoln Ocean Victor Eddy* from 2007, I asked a police officer stationed in the subway in post-9/11 New York - who is entitled to 'search anyone' - to search me. I then convinced him to train me. I wanted to understand his job and what he was meant to protect us all from. I ended up accompanying this officer on his night-time posts, and turning my notes and photographs recording the experience into a novella. Everyone wants to be safe and live in a safe place. The police are meant to keep us safe, but of course are often agents of state violence, especially against people of colour and the most vulnerable. The cop in *Lincoln Ocean Victor Eddy* felt safe in the routine of his job - which was to look for terrorists - even though he also said he was sick of his life. He had never left New York. The safe spot of his routine was also a trap which dragged him back whenever I tried to move him outside it.

Negotiating is plainly one of your central artistic tools. You convinced the Casa Barragán to give you permission to sleep there - the only person ever to do that. With *The Spy Project* you convinced the Dutch Secret Services to give themselves 'a human face', as you put it - although they later got nervous about the information you were making public.

In order to propose an artwork to the agency, I needed first to understand how the AIVD - or *Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst*, the Netherlands' secret service and intelligence agency, the Dutch equivalent of the CIA - worked. I read everything about them and discovered that they weren't trusted because there had been information leaks and so on. There was no trust because they were this faceless institution. I proposed they hire me to 'find' their human face. Eventually they accepted - but it took me a year to convince them.

At first AIVD didn't want to hire an artist. But they were forced to when they moved into a new building and a small percentage of their budget had to be allocated for art, by law. They would have preferred an artist who just makes something pretty in the studio to decorate their premises, but instead I came along and said, hire me! I want to know what it feels like to be a spy! I want to understand the interior of your intangible structure! Of course they answered, 'No way! You'd be a security threat!' But, as is often the case with my projects, an initial 'no' doesn't spell the end - it's actually an interesting starting point. If the initial response is 'no', then I feel I have definitely touched on something they are uncomfortable with. For example, the AIVD explained that they couldn't reveal the names of anyone I spoke with. The only people working at AIVD whose names are revealed are the two press people who speak on television: Vincent something and Miranda something. I proposed naming everyone who met me 'Vincent' or 'Miranda': Vincent one, two, three, four and so forth. We all agreed to that, so that problem was resolved. Every time they brought up a new problem, I would come back with a way around it, a solution. Finally, they got to a point where I had addressed all their concerns, and they had to say, 'OK'.

In terms of 'giving an institution a face', your work often involves a kind of oblique portraiture. You have created oblique self-portraits too - not only *Head*, literally sculpted by a forensic artist, but also *Failed States* from 2010. That work centres on Fausto Cardenas, the man who fired six shots into the sky from the steps of the Texas State Capitol in 2010, which you were coincidentally an eye-witness to. The news-reels of you describing the incident on television and subsequent footage of you following Cardenas's trial become a found, made-for-TV 'portrait of the artist'.

Yes, that piece was also about the many ways that Cardenas was denied the opportunity to represent himself within the parameters of the law. The shots I witnessed him fire in front of the Texas State Capitol had the character of a seemingly absurdist act. Apparently, Fausto fired the shots after he was denied access to a Senator he had come to speak to. Because he never defined or explained his act - and because he ultimately accepted a plea bargain silencing himself in court - this left a kind of void around him, so the media shifted their attention to me. As his witness, first by accident and then by choice, I tried to testify to his inability to use or be served by the law.

Like all my projects, in *Tender* I subverted one element within a larger system. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, a coin shortage developed in the US so the US Mint began overproducing coins. The coin shortage, like the *Tender* coins, became an artefact of Covid.

An oblique form of portraiture exists in *Evidence Locker*, too, which saw me walking all over Liverpool. In that instance there were many boundaries to accessing my own image. Recorded CCTV footage cascades off the system after 31 days. To get hold of the footage, before it spilled off, I had to write a 'subject access request' which stated where I was, the time of day, what I was doing and what incident happened. I was willing to work within that set structure but then I asked myself, how can I push it to an extreme? I made myself visible in bright red clothing and provided the required information on the form, but I also wrote more: what I had dreamt the night before; what I was thinking about just then; what I was smelling. The recipient was forced to read all of it – in order to pick out the essential information they needed to find me on the footage – and this completely changed and opened up the police's relationship with me. They started taking care of me, walking me home at night through the cameras. The whole relationship changed to become more human and personal. I worked within the construct they gave me – just pushed it as far as I could. Finally, one day I closed my eyes and the police walked me blind through the city. In my mind, that's when the system exploded: at that point my body collapsed into their system, became one thing. It was a complete perversion of the system, and the system entirely fell away.

You introduce not only the language of love – composing your police reports almost like a love letter, for example – but the behaviour of love. A collaborator is asked to behave almost like a lover: following you around, reading your intimate thoughts, whispering in your ear, as in *Evidence Locker*. You accept the flaws and limitations of the systems you are involved with – the way you might with someone you love.

People sometimes ask me, is that a role you're playing in this project, or is it 'really' you? I'm always the same person – I don't take on the character of 'Jill Magid, Artist'. But being inside the work is different from being outside, that's the best distinction I can make. The work often requires something of me; in that sense I give the work agency. For instance, it was totally terrifying to meet Federica Zanco – and her partner Rolf Fehlbaum, who I did not know would be there – and propose to them. But the work required that of me. I service the work, I do what it asks. And Federica proved to be the best co-protagonist – the term I like – I've ever had. She did not agree with my beliefs, yet corresponded with me for three whole years, demonstrating a real willingness to engage.

In terms of an organisation behaving like a lover, I think it goes back to the example of drawing an object that seems 'ugly' – or, better, let's describe it as 'foreign' or 'strange'. A system or organisation becomes less foreign or strange when you come to really see it, recognise it, and when it actually comes to recognise you. No system is perfect. It is as flawed and messy as the people who design and perform it, and that's what

makes it so compelling. For me, engaging with a system becomes a romantic, sensual, erotic experience. Things can be awful and beautiful at the same time, or tragic and beautiful, and the recognition of that flawed beauty is to be alive.

You allow each project to manifest itself in a number of ways – there isn't just one singular artwork resulting from your process and the research, but many. For example, the Barragán project resulted in exhibitions including *Woman with Sombrero* from 2013–14, displaying objects from the Mexican architect's personal archive and artworks that formally challenged the copyright on his professional archive, and *Quartet* from 2014, at South London Gallery, which considered Barragán alongside Samuel Beckett and his teleplay *Quad* of 1981. *The Proposal* is a ring and a series of documents with which you proposed to Federica Zanco, and this later became the subject of the film *The Proposal* made in 2018, executive produced by Laura Poitras. You exhaust each research project by exploring different media through which the ideas can be presented, rather than formalise into a singular, definitive 'output'.

I like your word 'exhaust'. Some projects have larger possibilities than others; some are more of a single gesture, such as *Auto Portrait Pending*, in which I will become a diamond when I die. Once done, that system is complete and just needs to performatively play itself out (although its beneficiary might one day add another layer, after my death). Whereas with the Barragán Archives project, the many questions included: how do you represent an artist/architect's work when it's legally impossible to do so, because of hugely restrictive copyright? Two years later, the film *The Proposal* asked



Control Room | Evidence Locker, 2004, two-channel video

that question in another way, also adding new questions – challenging copyright law by filming the architecture, rather than arriving at a sculptural form that highlights its limits. I framed the question slightly differently because it's a different medium. I respect each medium; each allows me to pose the question in its own elegant way. I really want my film to be held up against other films, for a film audience, just as I want my books to read as literature.

You describe your writing as non-fiction that reads like fiction; in fact, there are many of these in-between states in your work. *Auto Portrait Pending* visualised a gap between life and death. The *Barragán Project* examined the ethics of preserving an artistic legacy, caught between promoting and protecting the work of a deceased artist. Elsewhere, your work straddles authenticity and forgery, like the 'fake real' Josef Albers silkscreens in *Homage CMYK* from 2020: life-size replicas of Albers's *Homages to the Square*, 1950-76, taken as they appear on the walls of Luis Barragán's home, complete with ambient lighting and shadows falling across the canvases.

Similarly, the engraved real pennies in your work *Tender*, made at the end of last year, are anonymous 'legal tender' but also tiny public sculptures by Jill Magid. In *Tender*, you circulated 120,000 US pennies – corresponding to \$1,200, the sum of a single Covid-19 stimulus check – whose edges had been professionally engraved with the words 'THE BODY WAS ALREADY SO FRAGILE'.

I chose the edge of the pennies for that very reason: it's a margin, an in-between. The coin's edge is the only site without an official message or state propaganda. I'm not defacing the coin – literally not touching the coin face with Lincoln's bust. To cut into the only untouched part of a penny – the edge – felt like breaking into skin. *Tender*, which was commissioned by Creative Time, is a dispersed monument. It was very important that after I altered the pennies I placed them back into circulation. I had a team of lawyers examine the project, and they confirmed the engraved pennies are still 100% legal tender. The coins continue on with this twofold identity: as 'ordinary' pennies and as marked pennies. People write me these really beautiful letters explaining why they need to find one, or who they need to find it for.

The proverbial magic penny. Your *Tender* pennies are literally trading in tenderness.

Yes. But *Tender* is not about tracking the pennies. I want my *Tender* pennies to travel like language, as a rumour. That became a 'rule' of the project. Museums have asked me to display some *Tender* pennies but I'm not going to hand them any: a *Tender* penny is one that has been placed in circulation. That's the rule. Of course, a museum can go ahead and find them then show them, but a public display of *Tender* coins in a museum, given directly from me, would make no sense.

It took a long time for me to get to *Tender*, which required a lot of research and reading, learning how coins even came into being. I read Richard Seaford's amazing book *Money and the Early Greek Mind* from 2004, which claims that Greek tragedy would not have come into being without the invention of coins. Seaford argues that the ancient Greeks' simultaneous invention of coinage, tragedy and a new philosophical tradition, all in the 6th century BC, collectively reflected the

transformation of the universe into an impersonal system – one in which an individual can be alienated from the gods. Coinage represents the introduction of abstract thought: a circle of metal became valuable because of a mark on it, and this was a total revolution in thought. Meaning was abstracted into a sign.

It's such rich and fascinating subject matter – the difference between intrinsic and inferred value; the way currency circulates; who has access to the economy and who doesn't, among many other things – and that enables me to see tangents which might grow into their own projects. In fact, at present, I'm making a film about *Tender*. Because *Tender* pennies sort of 'disappear' into the world, I wanted to present them in a slower and more physically present way, using film.

Like all my projects, in *Tender* I subverted one element within a larger system. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, a coin shortage developed in the US, so the US Mint began overproducing coins. The coin shortage, like the performance in court of the *Tender* coins, became an artefact of Covid. To disperse the pennies in public I distributed them through bodegas – ubiquitous in New York and considered essential businesses – and by employing a cash-in-transit truck. As I've learned, the only private-sector element of the US currency system is the private armoured car companies which circulate money. They bring the ballistic bags of coins from the Mint to the Federal Reserve, they pick up recirculated coinage: the whole system depends on these white cash-in-transit trucks to transport money. These trucks looked to me like the refrigerated white trucks parked at hospitals, and the ballistic bags of coins – each weighing about 2,500 pounds – stacked inside reminded me of body bags. So, this idea of the body's fragility could refer to both the fiscal or the economic body, or the body politic or the human body. I find these are really powerful metaphors.

The human body and the economic body – both 'already so fragile' – succumbed to decline in tandem this past year.

There are all these beautiful, visual metaphors and connections which I can ruminate on in the film – without being heavy-handed. It's too complicated, and unnecessary, to communicate all the ways coins are publicly dispersed. But the film has a different poetic: of contemplation, of the archival. Each medium offers a different way to think things through.

Film has become a way to follow the penny's entire path into circulation – from the Mint to the Federal Reserve, to the armoured cash-in-transit trucks, into the cash registers of bodegas throughout New York's five boroughs, and finally into the hands of the people who use it. By making the pennies into protagonists with a sense of their own agency, the film is also, in an almost perverse way, an opportunity to actually perform the uneven valuation of money over the people who create and use it.

Jill Magid is an artist living in New York. Her exhibition at Dia Bridgehampton continues to 6 June and 'Tender: Balance' opens at The Renaissance Society, Chicago in April.

Gilda Williams is an art critic who teaches art writing on the MFA Curating programme at Goldsmiths, London. Her book *How to Write about Contemporary Art*, 2014, is available in seven languages.