

**Land / Various Locations**  
**Jose Dávila: Sense of Place**  
Jill Moniz



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BY JILL MONIZ JANUARY 21, 2018

Jose Dávila's *Sense of Place* is a public installation supported by Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND) curator and director Shamim Momin, in conjunction with the Getty's Pacific Standard Time-LALA. The concrete artwork was unveiled in West Hollywood, then disassembled, and will be situated in site-specific installations to be continued in five self-contained "movements" reflecting an orchestrated migration around Los Angeles.

These movements are also improvisational, in that Dávila and Momin have not prescribed how audiences should interact with the works. "How the pieces function in those spaces is up to the people who encounter them," Momin said. People may use the work as benches, or tag it, or treat it with reverence like the concrete memorials in Mexico, Dávila's home.



Home and identity play critical roles in *Sense of Place*. The 40-piece cube is a visual translation of multiple languages and narratives of the city, one that explores the fluidity between aesthetic composition and these languages of representation. As a participant-observer in LA's fracture and complexity, Dávila plays with notions of insider and outsider, interpreting the social, cultural, architectural and geographic modalities that inform the city. He has become an artist in Mexico and yet he is engaging in the politics of subjectivity by activating a work that inserts itself into the continuum of migration stories in LA, even though he is not actually a U.S. immigrant. Through this installation, Dávila is appropriating material, narrative, form and identity to act as a mirror for the city.

At one layer of discursivity, *Sense of Place* highlights the elemental building blocks of modern architecture, as well as the concept of location as a symbol of communal awareness and identity. Dávila conceives his multipart concrete cube as an examination of minimalist architecture that, Momin notes, "is an ongoing injury to so many working-class Latin American neighborhoods." However, Dávila's interest lies in discovering the potential of the object, through its material and its form, to be more than its particular history. Momin and Dávila began this exploration by provocatively anchoring *Sense of Place* on a platform in West Hollywood Park. Here it takes on a majestic air, ennobling the quotidian and thereby rewriting its history from humble material to revered object, riffing on LAND's mission to elevate the transformative power of art.

Dávila unpacks the contradictions of place and expression by assessing the locus of the modest and flawed material with the social implications of situating elements of the object in neighborhoods whose locations represent specific cultural narratives. The viewer is forced to reexamine the moments where truths, fiction, stereotype and mythology intersect. This is not a white cube with a canonical cosmology. *Sense of Place* is an art object with its own narrative, and these public spaces provide opportunities to expose the paradoxes between language and visual subjectivity. Through this practice, Dávila creates a new, more useful episteme for understanding the aesthetic and conceptual considerations of his project.

*Sense of Place* is richly embedded in another layer of the language of materiality, specifically the connection of the movements of the piece—components of the cube will travel to multiple locations in five sets of movements—to historically important Latin American kinetic artists. Jesus Rafael Soto and others employed the visualization of three-dimensionality in order to dissolve the boundaries between art, architecture and design. In these works from the postwar period, as in *Sense of Place*, the viewer is engaged to grasp the meaning of the work beyond what is there. Dávila furthers this invitation with the expectation that viewers will join his ethnography, becoming participant observers themselves and intervening in the piece with their own uses and signifiers. The evolution of the work through audience interpretation and intercession expands its narrative resonance.

Dávila's considerations of motion also replicate the individual body and the body politic, whereby the elements are greater than the sum of their parts. This metanarrative challenges viewers to contemplate the performative and functional aspects of identity and the significance of intention. Los Angeles is composed of multiple stories and ways of seeing, reflecting the larger supposition of American consciousness, one from many, even while social stratification grows so disparate that many communities will fall apart, perhaps to be reconstituted elsewhere. *Sense of Place* suggests this cycle of building and reimagining is inherent in social agency, and Dávila's project offers a succinct and sophisticated visualization of this archetype.

Clearly, Dávila is a polyglot, excavating multiple social, historical and aesthetic allegories for public consumption. *Sense of Place* is a travelogue with which to educate participants, both engaged and encountered, about art and social agency. This discursive practice is readily accessible because Dávila is quite comfortable with the improvisational quality of his object's call and response with multiple communities. Accepting both the tension and the temporality of the experience, Dávila welcomes the appropriation into the cultural narratives of the spaces *Sense of Place* will occupy, in whatever manifestation it occurs, as part of the life of the object. It is this concept of building that makes it such a powerful metaphor, and such a powerful artwork.

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