

MEMORY OF A TELLURIC MOVEMENT

"Jose Dávila in Conversation with Sabine Schaschl"
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Sabine Schaschl: You said something that really impressed me—that wherever you exhibit, no matter what the conditions are, you will always make something. I consider this a huge freedom, when an artist arrives at this point in their work and their process of working. How did you come to this point? Did you just say, "Whatever I find, I will manage to create a work or an exhibition?"

Jose Davilá: As an artist, you are trying to establish your own language, your own voice that channels your interests. But I have found that if you go deeper into art-making, every single object that constitutes your surroundings is an element in terms of language. As a puzzle, it must join the way you work, the way you translate the world into your work. That's why the art-making process that I am subject to is a practice that is malleable and flexible, applied to very specific situations or materials. At least the intention—though I may not always arrive there—is to try to make that practice the actual language, rather than a technique-based language. It's more about a certain kind of procedure that can be applied to any kind of material; to make that the goal, and not the objectivity or the materiality.

SSc: What I find interesting in your work is that there's a lot of media involved, and I wondered how this all comes together. Where is the thread through the painting, the sculpture, and installation? When you think of installation or construction or a painting, do you create a sketch?

JDa: Yes, I always start with a sketch, from my personal practice in the studio, and then for certain needs in the construction of an exhibition. I have a very precise methodology of keeping and organizing the sketches, because they become my source, a guide to know what I'll produce next. I never present them as artworks. I've never exhibited them, but they are an essential part of my practice. It's been a pivotal aspect of my work, trying to explain how to consolidate so many different lines of work that are apparently very divergent from each other. The way I see it is as the mind of a writer who might have a practice of writing novels, but also does some journalism, maybe also poetry, and at the end even historical research.

I want to go back to this word you mentioned, freedom, as a very important cornerstone of art-making. The idea that you are free to follow different interests is what I believe as an artist you must protect, because otherwise, you might be protecting a construction of language that has commercial interests but not real art-making interests. I tend to follow these different lines of work, like painting, sculpture, installation—very in-situ work—and then sometimes later find crossroads between them. But I'm not looking for these ideas to collide, because I believe that each line of work has its own nature. For example, I work in separate spaces, separate studios. I have a studio that is specifically for painting and graphics, the cut-outs, and I have a different studio that is for sculpture-making and installation planning. On the same street, but apart from one another.

SSc: And then you literally walk through the studios, and you combine one thing with the other.

JDa: Yes, and then after that I must do the work in my own private space in the studio, building the narratives of the exhibitions, with the work I have produced under different mindsets and in different spaces.

SSc: And there's another studio where you have art history books maybe, because I find that art history, for you, is also a material. There's an architectural connection, and then there's the material coming from art history, these very interesting sources that somehow come together.

JDa: I have quite a good library of art books, organized according to the Dewey system. It's absolutely a source of inspiration for me. I guess the fact that I'm a self-taught artist, which made me develop a precise way of studying art, informed my work. It is definitely a very important source, art history—almost as if it was another raw material in the studio. In many ways it is. It has a precise space in the language I work with, in terms of the stones and concrete blocks and glass and straps and all these different things that I call my ecosystem of objects.

Then I work on my sketches, but always leaving a door open to improvise in the actual moment of making. Objects that have been sitting there for a while come into play, because I try to find what the sculpture needs me to do with it. Sometimes working with gravity and balance, you have very specific needs, like a counterweight or something that holds or something that supports. I find that need is rooted in the actual force of gravity. I use what I have on hand. Selecting and storing that material is super important, because at some point, it will construct the actual language of the sculpture I'm making.

SSc: I think about gravity as the real red thread of your work. I think that even the cut-outs have a connection with gravity, and the sculpture, constructions, and installations as well. When I see the sculptures with the glass ratchet straps, I think there must be a moment when you decide “This is the moment where I let go.” There must be a very short moment in between knowing if the glass is going to fall and break, or if the glass is going to hold. How do you know it will work?

JDa: I find it very important that the balance in the sculpture I work with is a real balance. I'm trying to push the limits and the boundaries all the way, until I can't go further. To do that, I need to do it in a very real sense. Sometimes I must push a rock one centimeter at a time, until it falls, so then I know exactly, by mapping, where the last point is that the rock can stay on without falling. But I anticipate the fall, and it's part of the process in the studio. The moment where I release the glass, for example. Now I have the experience, I know what is going to happen, but in the beginning, it was a very much a choreographed moment. It was almost like a balletic moment, with people helping me. I think that notion of gravity brings you to a notion of presence. You must be there in that moment. And that makes a very interesting connection to the cut-outs, because they are a connection between presence and absence, something that is there and is not there, and you imagine it or not.

SSc: You mentioned the word “choreography” and letting go of things. This made me think there are some installations in which you have a stage. You have this fantastic painting, which I like a lot, *Memoria de un movimiento telúrico* [“Memory of an Earthquake”]. Then in front of the painting you have positioned an ensemble consisting of a large mirror, wood, metal, concrete, boulder, and strap. It's called *La voluntad ha movido montañas* [“The Will has Moved Mountains”; figs. 2 and 3]. The pedestal acts like a stage for the sculptural installation, and behind it you have placed the painting, which becomes a scenic painting. So, when you talk about choreography, I have this idea of sculptures and installations being actors on a stage, moving along to their script.

JDa: While I was studying architecture at university, I took a special class on theater stagecraft, and I really got into it, doing some projects in that sense. Sometimes the way I see it, when you end up installing the works in a space, it somehow becomes a stage. In a way, a museum is a stage. The way these materials react, you must find this idea of movement frozen in time. You must freeze them. It's an object in a precise moment in time that tries to arrest your respiration when you see it.

SSc: The movement is in the head of the spectator. The movement is frozen in time in your sculpture, but when you move around it, you have another experience in time by really being in the space with the sculptures.

JDa: In that sense, now that we are talking about the stage, I could imagine experimental theater in which the audience has to be moving around the play. As the playwright, you will have to organize that movement as part of the composition of the work.

SSc: Sometimes I feel your works evoke something like a cinema in the head of the spectator. We've talked of finding the limits of your sculptures. Where is the moment that, let's say, a beam hits the apple like in Newton's Fault [figs. 3 and 4]? Even though the beam is not meeting the apple, there's a very tiny distance between them; but in the head of the spectator, we already know that if the beam moves two millimeters, it will hit the apple. This is something that gives a lot of emotion to your sculptures. What fascinates me is that the sculptures are hard and heavy in material, yet they bring out all these emotions. They can be seen as dangerous but also fragile, as dancing or simply emotional at the same time.

JDa: I like the capacity of a sculpture to be able to make you imagine a future event that is only suggested. In that way, when you see it, you are compelled to imagine this event that has not happened, but somehow happens in your head, in your imagination. It involves the viewer who imagines the future, what would happen, and the very subtle line between a catastrophe happening or not happening.

That opens a wide range of possibilities. The sculpture, in that sense, can portray or communicate many things that are not there physically—events, situations, sounds. This kind of sculpture resonates with the viewer because the viewer must trust that this beam will not fall on their head. I think there's a complicity that strengthens a bond between the viewer and the sculpture. I have this memory from when I was a kid, maybe five years old, of the kitchen where there was a pile of eggs. My mom had asked for a basket of twenty-four eggs, and I took them and started dropping them on the floor one at a time. I ended up breaking the eggs all over. I just wanted to see how the eggs looked when they fell, and suddenly there were twenty-four broken eggs on the kitchen floor. I got quite the punishment.

SSc: Your interest in gravity really revealed itself there! You also have a great sense for titles for your work. They describe a little story. There are several paintings titled the fact of constantly returning to the same point or situation, which is super dark. Especially after we've experienced all these lockdowns and essentially returned to the same point. You have another one, which is perfectly fitting the context of Museum Haus Konstruktiv, which is the most famous problem in the history of mathematics is that of squaring the circle (fig. 6). How do you find your titles?

JDa: I very much enjoy titling the works, because I do feel and understand that it's the final stone of the narrative of the work. It's a moment I enjoy a lot, and I find these titles in my library by having a certain concept of what I want to talk about in the work or what I want to add through the title. Then it's a little bit of a research project to find the right title for the given concept. For example, "the point of always returning to the same place" is the actual dictionary definition of circularity. I was thinking about paintings that use circles painted by other artists in the twentieth century, and by me using them in this copy-and-paste way, but in a different composition, mixing circles of different artists in different moments together. It was about circularity in history, history repeating itself. So, I develop this narrative through a certain concept and then try to come up with something that helps me, through the books I have in my library.

SSc: I think there's a lot of humor in your work, but one must gain a sensitivity to it.

JDa: Humor, perhaps, is the most difficult thing to introduce into art somehow. Some have done it gracefully, like Duchamp, whose work has a lot of humor and wit, or Ad Reinhardt. There are many great examples. It's difficult, and some people like to think it's not possible or should not happen, because art should be a very serious thing. But in fact, humor is very serious. Good comedians are very clever, and it's very difficult to write an important comedy, because making people laugh is very complicated. To be able to grasp a little bit of this in artwork seems very difficult, but we should at least try sometimes.

SSc: With your work there is a relation to construction and Constructivism. You are not sculpting in the sense of giving shape by eliminating material, you are adding materials, constructing them together. This is like Vladimir Tatlin or Alexander Rodchenko. Have you ever researched the Russian Constructivists?

JDa: I was very much interested in Constructivist theory, in the logical way of constructing knowledge, rather than passively taking information in. I was always interested in this notion of constructing situations, rather than just consuming objects. I think for me, Constructivism is one of the most important Western art and Western knowledge movements about creation of meaning and advancing ideas.

SSc: At Museum Haus Konstruktiv, one concept often encountered is geometry. Geometry very often serves as a tool for artists working with systems, which helps to create forms in several variations and repetitions. So geometry is not the issue per se, but it is a tool and becomes part of the research, just like you have pointed it out in the two titles we mentioned. You are also toying in a playful way with this idea of circling the square. Geometry is not the main theme of your work, but it comes along with the material you use or with constructions you are creating.

JDa: Absolutely. In my way of working, for example in painting, you have this very basic geometry of the circle as a platonic form, as it has been used—and then somehow incorporating it in a Constructivist way in my own composition. I have also used graphics in the past from Kazimir Malevich, from Tatlin, from Rodchenko, because I don't see that just as geometry, but as a complete shift on the meaning of painting in the West. That is a pivotal thing in my work. As a self-taught researcher, this was a particular movement that caught my interest, and you can see that clearly in my own painting. I think it was very important that this movement made us understand rejecting creation as the idea of geometry, and using geometry to create knowledge.

SSc: When Malevich made the black square, and his fellow artists also went into a nonfigurative language, they wanted to construct a completely new form of art for a new human being in a new society. They had this huge impulse for change, for making visibility for a different humankind. I think it's very difficult for contemporary artists to refer to Russian Constructivism, because it was born out of a completely different societal need and, therefore, people often mistake the geometric quality as key. Formality came because of geometry, but it was not always geometric.

JDa: Exactly. Instead of a formality, it was almost a procedure to reject a line that was there and allow them, with that procedure, to construct a new world or a new way of understanding art or a new way of communicating. The world we created can be different, can change radically, and you can reconstruct the world into an idea that you propose. I think it was way more than the formal aspect of geometry or the architecture or Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (fig. 7). I think it was a movement about changing the social order as we know it and creating a new one—which in a time of pandemic is a question that is lingering. How much should we change things, and what for?

Figure Illustrations

In order, all works Jose Davila unless otherwise specified



Fig.01 Memoria de un movimiento telúrico, 2020



Fig.02 La voluntad ha movido montaña, 2020

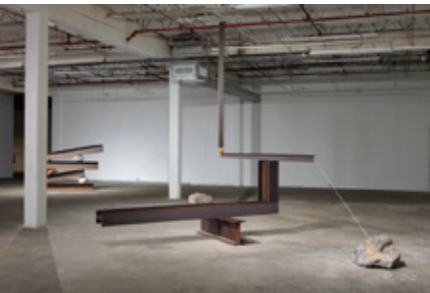


Fig.03 Newton's Fault, 2019



Fig.04 The most famous problem in the history of mathematics is that of squaring the circle, 2019



Fig.05 Vladimir Tatlin, Monument to the Third International, 1919-20