

# Afterall





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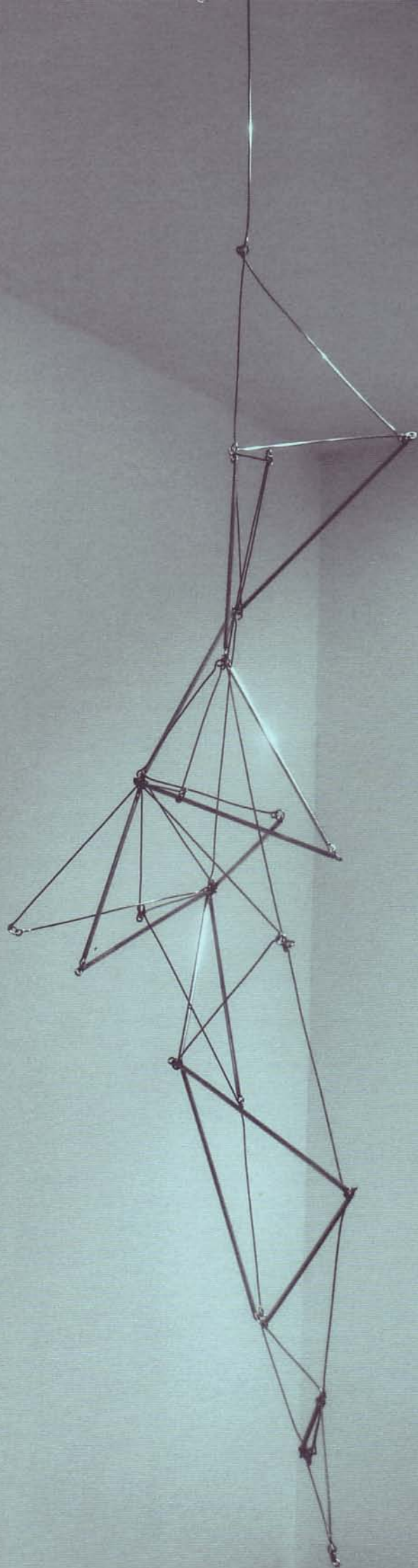
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Leonor Antunes,  
*modo de usar #18*  
(*how to use #18*), 2010,  
brass tubes, brass wire,  
lined wood box,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist

Of 'World Lines' and  
Other Forgotten Voices  
— Doris von Drathen

*Doris von Drathen finds in Leonor Antunes's work an attempt to extend the idea of 'measurement' to a dimension where it becomes — similar to writing or drawing — a tool of grasping the world.*

Among the absurdities of language, which we use against better judgement to describe the world as we experience it, is the substitution of infinity for what is immeasurable. Most people, for instance, articulate their perception of the horizon in terms that pretend to offer the possibility not simply of envisaging space- and timelessness, but even of physically observing it. Yet the average distance between observer and horizon is rarely ever more than thirty kilometres — the limit of our range of vision. So the habit of projecting our narrow frame of perception onto the world, in the presumption that the dimensions of existence are equal to the limited scope of our perception, induces us to imagine infinity at relatively close proximity.

As if, of its own accord, the act of measuring were a way of ascertaining the world, just as writing and drawing are, Leonor Antunes has developed a body of work in the space between that which is measurable and that which is not. It visualises the discrepancies between the existing and the calculated world, takes the phenomenon of measuring and its possibilities to absurd limits and, on the tip of a yardstick, catapults us out of reality.

Fragile shapes are suspended from the ceiling, shimmering and swaying. Sections of three-millimetre brass wire, flattened by hand into straight lines and bent at their ends into hooks and loops, trace out a system of triangles in mid-air. Leonor Antunes has produced five of these geometric sculptures, as fine as spatial drawings, laying each of them into one of her 'construction kits'. These kits are each named *modo de usar* (*how to use*, 2003–ongoing), as each one comes with its own list of instructions. The viewer/user is directed on how to remove the objects from the box and then on either how they should be assembled and placed on the floor or suspended from the ceiling, as in the case of the triangular forms. As with most works by Antunes, observation alone will not reveal how the wire sculpture should be grasped as an object. It is distinctive of her approach that each work appears constituted of a visible and an invisible dimension. On the one hand we encounter a tangible, albeit hermetically abstract object, on the other a covert yet profuse realm of imagery that is disclosed when one has the opportunity to read the journal-like commentaries she compiles on her works as documentary material in order to publish in catalogues. Frequently these annotations bring to light the veiled and immensely fertile narrative underlying her work.

In the case of the triangular shapes made of brass wire, one is dispatched by the artist into a long-forgotten episode of the French Revolution through which one learns about the particular relevance of the triangulation method developed between 1792 and 1798 by Jean-Baptiste Delambre and Pierre Méchain to calculate the meridional distance between Dunkirk and Barcelona. Delambre and Méchain's original technical drawings show five segments of an arched itinerary composed of triangles, copies of which now make up the five kits belonging to the work *Dunkerque–Barcelona* (2010). Accordingly, the brass wire plots the system of these triangular measurements in the air, reminding us of the French Revolution's endeavour to calculate a universal unit of measure dedicated to 'all men and all times' — the metre. In 1791 the Academy of Science in Paris defined the length of a metre as one ten-millionth part of a quarter of the meridian, seeking to end the archaic confusion and disputes over methods of measurement that varied from country to country and between regions and towns



throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a universally valid unit of length issued from the same *Zeitgeist* as the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Yet these swaying and, initially, arbitrary-seeming triangular forms made of glistening brass wire might also indicate the idea of error on a philosophical level. If one delves deeper into the background of the metre's origin, one learns that a mistake occurred in the process of surveying the distance between Dunkirk and Barcelona. The first 'true' metre bar based on this survey, used as the standard measure for over a century, was short by 0.2 millimetres. This discrepancy resulted from the miscalculation of the projected distance between the North Pole and the equator, which had not taken sufficient consideration of the erratic nature of the earth's surface.

Antunes alludes not only to this chapter of revolutionary history in her work, or to the standardisation of units of measurement, but also to the inconsistency between measurements of observed phenomena and the phenomena themselves. Nature and its living development are largely independent from our measurements of them and our choice of measures. Antunes, so it seems, evolves her works in the gap that opens up where the world deviates from our description of it. By stretching, as it were, and pushing to its furthest limit the phenomenon of nature's independence, the artist lends nature's separateness a palpable, graspable immediacy. Based on the measurement of things, her oeuvre builds a world of its own, a world which subsequently becomes detached from and loses almost all relation to the very things being measured.

Antunes carried out her first triangulation survey in the Tijuca Forest in Rio de Janeiro, the largest urban tropical park in the world, in 2008. The (re-)plantation of this forest was ordered by Emperor Pedro II of Brazil to counter the dramatic fall in Rio's water supply following the environmental devastation wreaked by coffee farming. The park's vast space spreads out like a jungle within the confines of a second, urban jungle. The object Antunes chose for her survey was a sprawling woody vine, the liana. With her interest in architecture and engineering she soon understood this vine as constituting something like the forest's infrastructure, with animals using its trailing creepers as bridges and viaducts. It was precisely these hundreds of impenetrable twining convolutions that Antunes sought to map. She found a group of topographers in Rio who went to work armed with sketchbooks, plumb lines, crampons and climbing ropes. Advancing segment by segment, branch by branch, the topographers looped plumb lines around the twisting stems of the vines, dangling their plummets to the ground. In a piecemeal fashion, the measurement of angles and medial axes – in other words, of triangular segments – allowed them to calculate a single, uninterrupted median line. Antunes re-plotted this line with six hundred threads twined together, and hung her stretched out 'meridional' extension of the liana in an exhibition space: a two-centimetre thick and thirty-metre long cable made of twisted threads. Emerging from the shadows and reflections on the floor is an abstraction not of the liana itself, but of its triangulation. We find ourselves standing before a mathematical result, a formula. The work's title, *architectura* (2008), evokes the forest's immense vegetational edifice; it also betokens the futility of measurement, as the natural 'architectura' of the wildly proliferating liana has long since left the artist's painstakingly compiled survey behind. Like a different form of photography, the triangular measurement of the liana is only capable of capturing a moment. Even as the measurements are being performed, the enormous creeper has invalidated the values registered by the plumbing lines. Yet Antunes's line of thread, although nothing but a *mise en scène* of the isolated moment of measurement and the product of measurements dissociated from the object under study, bears an affinity to the Kantian description of numbers which appear autonomously without relation to counted objects.

These numbers that do not count are absurd, and strike a vertiginous blow: thrust to the boundary of conceivability, it is severed from what Kant termed 'Realverknüpfungen', from connections with reality.<sup>2</sup> The trace made by the act of measuring is not by itself capable of offering orientation. On the contrary, it leads to the blankness of an abyss, to a scale of measurement that drifts towards infinity: once these measurements are disconnected from their real-world reference they morph into a dizzying void –

1 The meridian is the imaginary longitudinal arc over the earth's surface joining the North Pole to the South Pole.

2 Immanuel Kant, 'Realverknüpfungen', from unpublished notes, cited in the edition of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, N 4174.



similar to how the additions of columns of figures and dates in Hanne Darboven's century work (*Ein Jahrhundert 00/99*, 1971–73) are detached from any real occurrences they might once have been counting. Divorced from time itself, they resemble the vision formulated by Jorge Luis Borges in his revival of the ancient idea of a 'labyrinth of the straight line': 'I know of a Greek labyrinth that is but one straight line. So many philosophers have been lost upon that line [...].'<sup>3</sup>

Antunes's use of measurement as a means of departing from reality is evident in the large body of work *original is full of doubts* (2009), dedicated in its entirety to a house designed by the modernist architects Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici. In September 2008 the artist visited Gray's iconic villa E-1027 in Roquebrune on the Côte d'Azur. She paid particular attention to the elements that marked intervening spaces – the ceiling-high room dividers, windows and shutters and sliding panels which Gray designed to be movable, and which were capable of being folded, tucked away or in some way modified. Antunes set about measuring their dimensions and relative proportionality. Repeating the same motif of the folding screen's lacquered leaves four times, Antunes re-constructed a curtain from the house in a rhythmic pattern of rectangular brass rods. Similar to a sweeping musical score, the composition of threads traverses space, casting shadows on the floor. Responding to features such as the sliding panels, windows or



Leonor Antunes,  
*original is full  
of doubts*, 2008.  
Installation view,  
Le Crédac, Ivry-sur-  
Seine. Courtesy the artist

paving stones in the garden, each sculpture is twinned with a second component, as if doubled by its own echo. For example, what had been a black room divider made of fibreglass in the original villa here becomes a rectangular, folded leather form which, in one instance, is lying half-rolled up on the floor and in another is seen extending from the wall at a 90-degree angle. Similarly, the leather panels referring to the paving stones in the garden occur horizontally and vertically in the exhibition space. These pieces were made by a saddler in Lisbon, one of the last craftsmen in the city still running his own leather workshop and surviving on individual orders. From early on in her work Antunes has been interested not only in natural materials such as wood, leather and brass, but also in the skills involved in working with them. Thus, for instance, the floors in Gray's villa are echoed in a net made of rope knotted into squares that was produced by a fisherman in Lisbon who, before he died, was one of the last still performing this craft.

These works are not replicas or metaphors, nor are they architectural models of actual given objects. No theatrical references are made to a reality beyond the works.

3 Jorge Luis Borges, 'La muerte y la brújula', *Ficciones*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, S.A., 1971, p.162; in English, 'Death and the Compass', *Collected Fictions* (trans. Andrew Hurley), Harmondsworth: Penguin/Viking, 1998, p.156.





What they harbour is a broadly ramified system of reference to some object that already exists – such as the triangulation maps from the French revolutionary period, the liana in Rio’s Tijuca Forest or the architectural elements in Eileen Gray’s villa. Through her work process Antunes clearly and consciously emphasises that she neither believes in the possibility of an original, nor is she intent on creating one. The title *original is full of doubts* is itself a play on the title of an essay written by Gray: ‘From Eclecticism to Doubt’.<sup>4</sup> Antunes creates not a dialogue with the already existing object but something closer to an expedition to fathom and record subterranean veins of water, a search for correspondences linking everything together. This insistence that in their inner structure all things are deeply connected, that precisely this, and nothing else, is what spawns the meaning of their reality, reminds me of an old Persian legend: one day, a young man visits an old sage in the hope of purchasing the old man’s wisdom. Rather than a sale, the sage suggests an exchange – he tells the young man to procure a carpet, in return for which the old man will give him his wisdom. So the young man sets off to see a carpet seller, who instructs him to call on the weavers, who tell him to bring them yarn. The cotton spinners send him away to fetch wool, the shearers then dispatch him to the shepherd to get a sheep, the shepherd asks him to build a stable, the carpenters send him to the forest to gather wood. The woodcutter first demands that he marry his eldest daughter. From there the young man retraces his journey in the opposite direction. When he finally delivers the carpet to the sage, the old man tells him to keep it, since in the meantime the young man had accrued all the wisdom in the world. Like the man

Leonor Antunes, *modo de usar #4 (how to use #4)*, 2003, wood box, engraved (30 × 11.5 × 5cm); elastic rubber with variable dimensions; two gold hooks, engraved; two plastic plugs; instruction guide. Courtesy the artist

<sup>4</sup> Eileen Gray, ‘From Eclecticism to Doubt’, in Caroline Constant (ed.), *Eileen Gray*, London: Phaidon Press, 2000, pp.238–45.



seeking the carpet, Antunes plumbs the depths of an object, exploring the layers and the states of its reality: this is the dynamic momentum that surprises us whenever she relates how a work – which at first sight strikes us as so hermetic – gradually, step by step, comes into being.

As if intending to resuscitate the other voices inhabiting reality that in our fragmented perception we have long since forgotten, as if seeking to disinter the secret paths of the buried memory inhabiting things, Antunes commenced a five-part series of works in 2004 exploring the grafting together of East and West Berlin. When the two were suddenly reunited after the fall of the Wall, many people were surprised that, rather than just a pair of adjacent segments, two quite distinct cities had emerged after more than forty years of division. When Antunes visited the sewn-together city in 2004 she was struck by the number of public buildings in the West that had a *Doppelgänger* in the East, and vice versa. With the observational acuity of a visitor she discovered in one district – today still recognisable as erstwhile East Berlin – a second academy of arts,



Leonor Antunes, *the space of the window*, 2004/07, artist's book printed in offset, with white leather cover, linoleum floor, furniture made of walnut wood and formica, vitrine by Jean Prouvé, sculptures of plasticine. Installation view, Air de Paris. Courtesy the artist

a second 'Nationalgalerie', a second city library, a second television tower and a second museum of applied arts. Again, her investigation was essentially a land survey, except that in this case it traced and registered an oscillation between two sets of commensurate circumstances. From each of the *Doppelgänger* buildings in former East Berlin the artist selected an architectural detail – a column, a section of flooring or a piece of one of the prefabricated slabs which typically clad the outer walls of buildings in the GDR. Antunes faithfully reconstructed these architectural fragments in a one-to-one scale model, drawing the outline of each segment in the air with metal rods, as well as placing these rods together with wing nuts into a 'kit'. The viewer/user thus is able to assemble them and walk inside the ensuing 'air-space'. Each of these objects gives the forgotten *Doppelgänger* palpable presence, while their better-known 'Western' counterparts become an invisible absence. The boxes in which the metal rods are kept also contain, as their title promises, 'instructions', or, as the Portuguese titles says: *modo de usar*. Not only do the architectural segments relate to existing objects, the boxes themselves are also modelled on a prototype, on an old box of measuring instruments Antunes once came across in a flea market. The measurements she made record the forgotten voices of a repetition. The division of Berlin had spawned a twin city. In the figures of these Berlin *Doppelgänger* history is not merely inscribed, it is also built.

This series of *modos de usar* became the starting point for a sequence of further building 'kits' no longer centred solely on Berlin. One of her most recent works (*discrepancies with villa teirlinck*, 2009) – as well as *Dunkerque-Barcelona* – shows a clear correlation to her Berlin-based structural analyses constructed in the air. Asked to participate in the Beaufort Triennial for Contemporary Art along the Belgian coast,



Antunes chose to show work in the seaside resort of Knokke, where she observed how beach huts seem to 'arrive', occupy the broad sandy beach for a season, and then disappear again. At the same time, she was struck by the almost total dearth of modernist architecture among the mass of concrete buildings that within the last few decades had wrecked the coastline. One of the rare exceptions became her field of operation: the Cubist 'double villa' designed by the Belgian architect Victor Bourgeois.<sup>5</sup> Antunes focused on the villa's twin bay windows and took measurements of fifteen architectural details. From these she constructed fifteen beach cabins with bowed window fronts – white and otherwise hermetically closed wooden cubes that formed an ensemble of quasi-Minimalist sculptures that can all be entered and used. No two huts are alike, but each one is paired with another as a complementary counterpart in an oblique allusion to the twin bay windows of the villa, while also gesturing towards the old dream of injecting the aesthetic qualities of modernism into everyday life. At the same time, by being reduced to bare structures, it is as if the huts were measuring their relation to a *Doppelgänger*, which itself had been doubled, but here remains invisible.

It is in this relation to a pre-existing object of everyday life that, on repeated occasions, Antunes has succeeded in transgressing the boundaries of reality – or, to put it more appropriately, that she forges an awareness for its various tonalities and threshold ambiguities. In a few cases she directly inserts such an object of reference into a work, incorporating it as a visible element. This is evidenced in *the space of the window* (2004), an intermediate zone she created in her studio in Paris. She had mounted a metal shelf into the window frame from which, by creating a measure between her thumb and index finger, she began an examination of the featureless inner courtyard that her window looked out onto. Here a firewall, there a projection of a wall or a staircase, a ground lamp, the gable of a mansard window, perhaps a ledge as well, or a supporting pillar. With the gap between thumb and index finger she determined the dimensions for the miniature sculptures she then began making: an arsenal of geometric forms inspired by the second generation of modernist artists. The works of Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Robert Morris or Sol LeWitt functioned as references for her copies of these architectural segments of the courtyard, which Antunes formed in grey plasticine with discreet irony. One after another, the objects lined up along the metal shelf in the window, standing in exactly the same order as the real objects they reproduced.

Subsequently, she photographed reality and likeness in such a way that the details of reality were left as a blur, while the sculptures stood out in sharp focus. And this is where an unsettling change occurs: what had originally been reality appears in the photograph as an illusion, a distant echo of something observed. The imitation, on the other hand, in the form of the kneaded miniature sculptures, dons the appearance of sharply delineated, graspable reality. With their physical presence and ostensibly gigantic dimensions they supplant what had once been anchored reality. Here Antunes lends immediate pictorial expression to the reality of a work of art that is *looking at me*, whose intrinsic essence and palpable, inspired presence transport it beyond the reality of our observed everyday surroundings. With just a small amount of modelling clay she measures this phenomenon lodged in the intermediary space between the shifts of reality, and with such precision that it becomes almost impossible to evade. The title of the work points to the artist's field of operation: characteristically, she calls this arsenal of sculptures and her photographs of them not '*the space in front of the window*' but '*the space of the window*' (emphases mine) – as if the window were a space of its own. It is the very 'non-space' of the window, its threshold space, which Antunes addresses as her theme.



The works of Leonor Antunes not only explore the secret, hidden paths of various layers of reality; not only do they trace the inner threads of invisible correspondences and presences, but they also cast out a line which stretches on in an endless trajectory from one impulse to the next – as, for instance, when a viewer stands in a darkened room looking into a luxuriantly illuminated display case. Inside the case is a polished block of wood with a circular hollow moulded into its centre, in which nestles a massive clump of gold of slightly irregular shape, as though it had just dripped from a furnace into the cavity.

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5 Built in 1928 for Herman Teirlinck, an important Belgian writer, and Karel Maes in Saint-Idesbald.





Leonor Antunes,  
*discrepancies with villa  
teirlinck*, 2009, 15 beach  
cabins, painted wood,  
acrylic. Beaufort  
Biennial 03, Knokke-  
Heist, Belgium. Courtesy  
the artist

The gold, we are surprised to discover, is 14.3 carats, and the block holding it is made of precious Brazilwood, which has been a protected species for some considerable time. (The rarely available stocks of this tropical hardwood sell at high prices for making bows for fine violins.) The gold lump emits a mysterious gleam. How could one ever guess the story behind it if Antunes didn't tell it herself? In Rio de Janeiro she acquired a coin from an antique dealer. Stamped on one face was the year 1763. The coin measured 3.16 centimetres in diameter and was 1.13 millimetres thick. In her notes the artist describes how in the aftermath of the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 the Portuguese government issued a decree ordering all gold and silver coins found in the ruins to be bought up for a low price and melted down to mint new coins. At the time Brazil was a Portuguese colony; and Antunes has called this work *1763–2008* (2008) to mark the year of the coin's being struck, and the year she was given use of a jewellery workshop to melt down the old coin in the presence of the jeweller and some of her colleagues. (A certificate accompanying the piece testifies to the event.) The gold clump draws behind it, in the wake of its gestural form, the invisible presence of the melted-down objects from the earthquake.

This piece is emblematic of Antunes's practice as a whole. In its innermost invisible structure it brings to mind the vision of a 'world line': the continuous and measurable line that Hermann Minkowski, a scholar of experimental physics and once Einstein's teacher as well as his rival, postulated that every living being and particle left in space-time – while we continue to exist, to circulate, to meet others and to move on.<sup>6</sup>

6 Thomas Levenson, *Einstein in Berlin*, New York: Bantam/Random House, 2004, p.93; also see Hermann Minkowski, *Raum und Zeit*, Leipzig: G.B. Teubner, 1909.

Translated by Matthew Partridge.







Leonor Antunes,  
*the state of being possible*,  
2007, leather,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist

**Perturbing Vision:**  
**A Leonor Antunes Portfolio**  
– Nuria Enguita Mayo

*Nuria Enguita Mayo addresses the problems of duplication, factura and restriction as they appear in Leonor Antunes's work.*

Leonor Antunes's sculpture is configured in space by means of an extremely precise staging, which in turn generates and transforms the space it occupies. Her sculptures strike up a dialogue which constantly renews itself; a dialogue into which the spectator can furtively enter through its intervals – the spaces defined by the presence of the sculptures, between their shapes and their surroundings. Once inside, apprehension of her work necessarily entails abandoning the hope of any symbolic interpretation. Her sculptures are not rooted in any primordial origin, nor do they represent or document a reality that is outside of them. As a result, viewers are always perturbed by her work: in the first place by its density, its texture and its composition – the means by which it constructs its meaning. In this sense, the work could be said to be typically 'modern', as it vindicates its formal nature, its 'construction'. But the sculptures also recognise their historical and anthropological context. For Antunes, sculpture must be related to the way it appears and the way bodies gain access to it. All her work partakes of the silent anthropomorphism that Georges Didi-Huberman discusses in relation to Tony Smith and Robert Morris's sculptures (in opposition to Rosalind Krauss's understanding of Minimalism as lacking inner signification). Size, scale and proportion are key to her work; her sculptures focus on this connection, on the interval between us and the presence of the works. Disproportion, miniature and monumentalisation are lines of investigation for Antunes, but in her work the human scale, that 'silent anthropomorphism', is perturbed in many other ways.



*Modos de usar #1, #2 and #3 (how to use, 2003–ongoing)* are three measurement instruments made of rubber and copper, designed by Antunes for the space where they were to be used – the MARCO museum in Vigo, Spain, a former prison with a panopticon structure. Antunes called attention to the scale of the building by constructing on the floor a platform of the same measurement as one of the skylights in the exhibition room. Placed just below its model, the platform supported the tools that were made to measure it, the three *modos de usar*. Through this transformation of the vacuum of space into the solid of the platform, Antunes disrupts the objectivity of measurements and of its conventional instruments, proposing instead a new means of experiencing and observing that allows for a more intense relationship of bodies moving in space. *Modo de usar #4 (2003)* further explores this will to actively intervene in the space and unsettle the spectator, by giving him or her an eye-bolt screw, two golden nails and an elastic band with which to measure the exhibition space. Through this arrangement, space is marked and narrated, and each visitor's life is made manifest as an element the moment the action is executed – an act of archiving that also enables us to think of the present as an archive. When the visitor is finished measuring, the instruments are returned to their box – its sculpture – which is also a container. As in children's games, which create their own spatial reality, the sculpture lives exclusively in its use.

With this work, Antunes refers to Marcel Duchamp's *Sculpture de voyage* (*Sculpture for Travelling*, 1918), in its always temporary appearances, its transportability and its capacity to transform the spaces where it is installed.



Leonor Antunes,  
*the surface of a room*  
*on which one stands*,  
2007, brass, wenge  
wood, Scandinavian  
wooden lamp,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist

Antunes belongs to a genealogy of artists (Duchamp, Hamish Fulton, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, John Cage, Rodney Graham...) who, starting from a fixed structure, method and form, suggest that memory and imagination don't obey precise instructions or given concepts, and that measurement – despite or specifically because of its strict regulations – cannot avoid the immaterial. For Antunes, contingency is an integral part of any effort to measure or symbolically codify time and space, because, as Didi-Huberman says, 'space is not given when measured, when it's objectified. Space is distant, deep, inaccessible. It is always there, around and in front of us.'<sup>1</sup>

Duchamp's concept of the *inframince*, the potency of meaning derived from his readymades, and the writing of Oulipo members Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec in works such as *Exercises in Style* (1947) and *Life, A User's Manual* (1978) have already been mentioned elsewhere as possible antecedents for the *modos de usar*.<sup>2</sup> These are apparent in the artist's interest in measurement as an area of possibility (in relation to body and space) and in the material potency of pure gesture – as opposed to 'making' or 'playing'. Further, she takes a dialectical approach to shapes and forms from the past, both by duplicating the static (in reference to the object) and the temporal (in reference to the event). Like Duchamp or the members of the group Oulipo, for whom literary and artistic creation was not only practice and game but also labour, Antunes thinks of sculpture as work and, furthermore, as a tool, in its material and contingent nature.<sup>3</sup>

The literary experiments of Oulipo push to the limit the notion of 'restriction' applied to the literary work, while following the teachings of Stéphane Mallarmé, for whom language can (must) be treated as an object in itself – as matter. Starting from the belief that all literary work must follow a series of pre-established rules, these authors propose new restrictions, based on the importing of mathematical concepts or the use of combinatory principles. Surprisingly, in this strictly arbitrary following of the rule, where there is no trace of 'authenticity' and 'sincerity', a stimulus, freedom or subjectivity might emerge. Other masters in the use of chance, such as John Cage, also proved that the arbitrary and the aleatory, its mutations and combinations, allowed for a discipline without intentionality. (Here chance is not related to Surrealist automatism, which is always attached to memory and personal taste.)

This notion of restriction is fundamental to Antunes's work, and is apparent in her obsession for both measurement and duplication. Her focus is on the investigation or measuring of what is given, what already exists, and the examination of what happens when it is duplicated, when it is disturbed in the present. As Doris von Drathen has pointed out, each of her objects constitutes 'a reservoir of levels of appearance' – an appearance that is not related to the transcendent or to belief systems.<sup>4</sup>

*Modos de usar* #7, #8, #9, #10 and #11, all from 2005, are construction kits for geometrical structures that must be assembled by the audience, to reproduce, with the same materials and at the same scale, a fragment (part of the floor, a column) of some specific buildings 'duplicated' after the partition of Berlin – modernist icons built between 1961 and 1989, such as Hans Scharoun's Staatsbibliothek, Rolf Gutbrod's Kunstgewerbemuseum, the Fernsehturm, Werner Düttmann's Akademie der Künste or Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie. With these works, Antunes offers anachronisms, fragments that she has taken out of context and which therefore acquire a new reality. The sculptures, made of brass, copper, aluminium and stainless steel, do not suggest interiority, but are made accessible in the space in a way that subjectivises them, allowing for a productive access to the past and its memory.



1 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Lo que vemos, lo que nos mira* (trans. Horacio Pons), Buenos Aires: Ediciones Manantial, 1997, p.89.

2 For example, see Ricardo Nicolau, 'O futuro de ontem não é hoje', in Miguel Wandschneider (ed.), *Leonor Antunes* (exh. cat.), Lisbon: Chiado 8 Arte Contemporânea, 2008, p.25; and Doris von Drathen, 'The Inexistence of the Real: On the Utopian Sculptures of Leonor Antunes', *duplicate* (exh. cat.), Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2005, p.12.

3 The Oulipo group (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, or Workshop of Potential Literature) was formed in 1960 by writers and mathematicians who made works starting from constrained writing techniques. Founding members included Perec, Queneau, François Le Lionnais, Claude Berge and Jean Lescure, among others.

4 D. von Drathen, 'The Inexistence of the Real', *op. cit.*, p.10.











Leonora Antunes,  
'duplicate', 2005,  
Installation view,  
Kunstlerhaus Bethanien,  
Berlin. Showing *modos  
de usar #7-12 (how to  
use #7-12)*, 2007, each  
comprised of an engraved  
wooden box; book; two  
acrylic protractors;  
brass, copper,  
aluminium or stainless  
steel wing nuts; and  
brass, copper,  
aluminium or stainless  
steel lamp. Courtesy  
the artist

Recently, Antunes has focused her attention on the work of several modern architects from whom she has taken forms for her sculptural objects: Eileen Gray, Carlo Mollino, Robert Mallet-Stevens and Flávio de Carvalho, among others. The villa E-1027: *Maison en bord de mer*, built by Gray and Jean Badovici between 1926 and 1929, can be said to offer the fundamental grammar of forms active in Antunes's work, perhaps because Gray thought of architecture through a structural understanding of form, and consequently proposed 'a return to emotions purified by knowledge and enriched by idea', and by the sentiment provoked by a balance between exterior and interior.

In Antunes's work, constructivist details, forms, patterns and furniture from diverse buildings are removed from their original environment, their lived context, to become isolated objects. Each element, duplicated at a real-life scale and 'estranged', literally pulled from its context and moved away from its original, develops a hidden potential that generates a new perspective on it – a concrete perspectives that exist by function of actually lived time. *Original is full of doubts* is the title of a solo exhibition of Antunes's work that took place at Le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine in 2008, within which she presented *paving stones across the entire garden*, *spine wall suppressed all thoughts*, *avoiding mistral wind* and *the lacquer screen of E.G.* (all 2008). On this occasion, drawing closer to Russian formalism, modern architecture and Eva Hesse's post-Minimalism, Antunes defends the autonomy of their forms, both in terms of their material and their meaning – as the Russian Constructivist would say, their *faktura*, their texture and materiality, as well as the use of the inherent characteristics of their materials, chosen precisely because of their expressive abilities: their form, weight, texture and colour. Antunes also defends the organic nature of their form, understood as process and development. Lastly, and as mentioned earlier, these sculptures make apparent their means of construction (through repetition, seriality or geometry) and the gestures that lead to their assemblage (oftentimes elementary gestures, such as tying, folding, hanging, aligning or bending). Hanging from the ceiling or the wall, lying on the floor and illuminated in a way that creates perspectives and contrasts of light and shadows, the sculptures are inscribed within a bodily and temporal present. They refuse to be read through a symbolic content, but rather through the tension that is integral to their form and the extraordinary material density they display. Antunes's work, like that of Eva Hesse, but also Mira Schendel or Gego, turns sculpture into a space of possibility, a place of habit, the locus for constructing an experience.



Continuing her interest in reproduction and doubling, and the exchange between different systems, in 2008 Antunes (who is Portuguese) travelled to Brazil, a country into which the Portuguese language and architecture were transplanted, and specifically Rio de Janeiro, a city that lived through some of the most intense cultural and political developments of modernity – which has resulted in a rich and complex cultural heritage in architecture, visual arts, cinema, literature and music, thanks to authors such as Mário de Andrade, Flávio de Carvalho, Lucio Costa, Lina Bo Bardi, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Tom Zé, Caetano Veloso and Glauber Rocha.

*Architectura*, which she made during her stay in Brazil, focuses on the idea of an architectural nature, a designed nature, constructed as part of the utopic dream of modernity. The Tijuca Forest is a man-made, urban forest that was declared a nature reserve in 1861; it was planted in the second half of the nineteenth century under the rule of Pedro II as an attempt to bring back some of the natural resources that had been destroyed to make room for coffee farms. With the help of a group of architects and topographers, Antunes set herself the task of measuring a liana, a vine that for her 'represents a structure within the forest – an architectural space defined by a system of trees'.<sup>5</sup> To treat an organic structure (apparently chaotic, but in fact with a complex and precise internal order) as architecture – in an impulse opposed to architecture's naturalist tendencies – suggests a mental displacement in both the artist and the viewer that sparks off a heightened internal formal expressiveness of the object. The liana creates a habitat where movement can take place, much like architecture, which Antunes

5 Statement from the Beca de Artes Plásticas Award, Fundación Marcelino Botín, Santander, 2008.





Leonor Antunes,  
1763—2008, 2008,  
Brazilian/Portuguese  
gold coin dated from  
1763, Brazilwood,  
certificate.  
Courtesy the artist

About this work, Antunes has said:

*I think about the 'here and now', about physical existence and about taking place [...] about the way that objects and events merge in space and time, while events are occurrences that stir time up. I'm interested in the idea of the fourth dimension for objects, in the notion that they expand through time as well as space. In meta-physical terms, there is no distinction between the object and the event: both are forms of the same 'material that inhabits space and time'. Whereas events seem to develop rapidly in time, as [Willard Van Orman] Quine says, objects are relatively 'solid and internally coherent'. The javelin / object is a potential event and object, as its cutting or piercing action takes place in a period of time, while the end of its movement and its cutting of the space also acts in time....<sup>6</sup>*

*Apotoméus* is resolved through a gesture that is an action without aim. It is not the gesture of the actor who wants to be understood, or the writer who intends to be interpreted. It is merely matter in action, an event that doesn't mean anything. It only has a life within the spatial and temporal tension it unleashes, in the space it traverses and the time collapsed in imagination and memory – a transcript of that physical and malleable limit that Antunes mentions.

<sup>6</sup> 'A propósito de un dardo que vai ser largado para dentro da Cisterna da Casa da Cerca. Entrevista a Leonor Antunes por Catarina Rosendo', in *apotoméus: Leonor Antunes* (ex. cat.), Almada: Casa da Cerca, Centro de Arte Contemporânea, 2004, pp.55—56.



In contrast to this radical and almost invisible gesture, another of her works, *1763–2008* (2008), proposes a different approach to condensing time. Also made while in Brazil, *1763–2008* reflects Antunes's interest in history, the duration of the past and its possible reconstructions in the present in a manner close to Walter Benjamin's consideration of remembrance when he discusses the sparkles of history that, in the form of an image (here a sculpture), present us with new knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro Antunes bought a gold coin made in 1763, during the rule of King José I.<sup>8</sup> In an iconoclastic gesture, Antunes recast the coin in gold as if to restore it to its original state, and placed it on a wooden block made of Pau-Brasil (or Brazilwood), a type of wood that owes its name to the Portuguese 'fathers' (Pau), and which has almost become extinct. The work was completed by a certificate of purchase of the coin. Through the transformation of the coin into simple gold, the effigy as a trace that gave value to the coin and gave form to the economic transactions in the old colonies was erased. This erasure, this absolute denial, constitutes the work and overcomes the connotations of the initial object, placing the object in an expanded time and space.

Didi-Huberman has written: 'Benjamin understood memory not as the possession of what is remembered – a having, a collection of things past – but as an always dialectical approximation to the relation things past have to their place, that is, as the approximation itself to its *taking place*.'<sup>9</sup> Leonor Antunes's sculptures share these anachronisms, that transference of objects in time, these returns. Through her insistence on obsessive formal repetition and precise moments of appearance that outline a singular composition of spaces and times, her sculptures deactivate the routines that we assume in order to help us understand the proprieties and shapes of objects.

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7 Walter Benjamin, 'Tesis de filosofía de la historia', *Discursos Interrumpidos* (trans. Jesus Aguirre), Madrid: Taurus, 1973, p.180.

8 After the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, José I, ruler of Portugal and its colonies — including Brazil — ordered that the gold and silver found in the rubble be turned into coins.

9 G. Didi-Huberman, *Lo que vemos, lo que nos mira*, *op. cit.*, pp.115–16.

Translated by Pablo Lafuente.



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