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Extracting Art From Almost Nothing

A Conversation with

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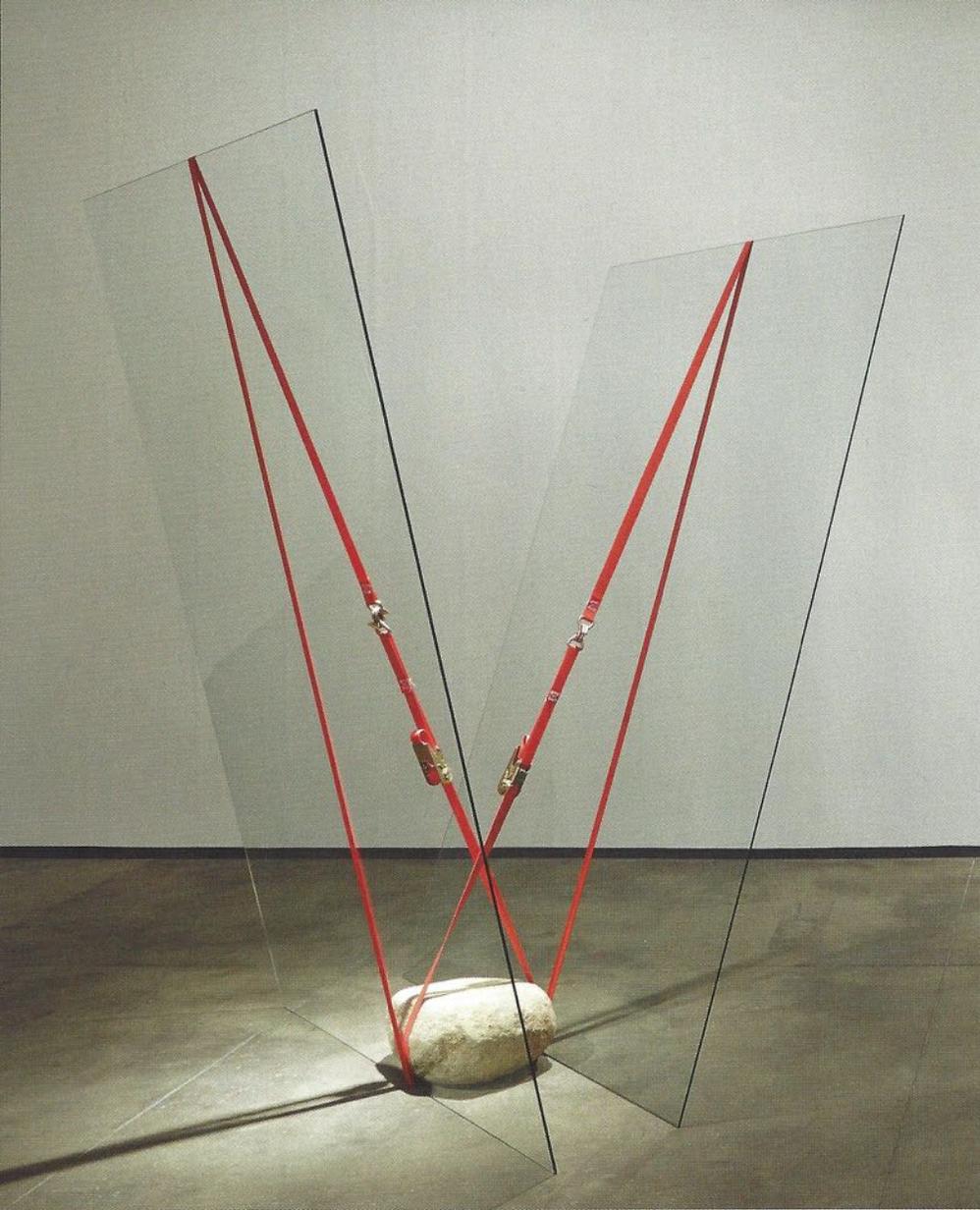
Jose Dàvila





Untitled, 2014. Glass, boulders, and ratchet straps, glass: 75 x 51 in. each, overall: 75 x 113 x 65 in.

JASON WYCHE. © JOSE DAVILA, COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NY



Joint Effort, 2014. Glass, boulder, and ratchet straps, 184 x 125 x 130 cm.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran: *You studied architecture—how did you transition into art?*

Jose Dávila: The curriculum I had (and I say “had,” because it doesn’t exist anymore) included collateral programs in painting, sculpture, and photography, which were not very common for an architecture school. I went into all of them, but a few things happened that went off script. One was that I got a present from my father—a darkroom and all the equipment (the trays, the chemicals, the enlarger) that you needed to do the process from scratch to final product, including a Pentax K1000 camera. That was a great toy for me to play with, and it got me very interested in photography. I even went to photography school for one summer in San Miguel de Allende. So, in an organic way, I was already very interested in photography. Parallel to that, I rented a house with a friend of mine from architecture school, who was a painter. We had studios for building architectural models and drawing plans, but we also had art studios. I put my darkroom there, and everyone was free to use it.

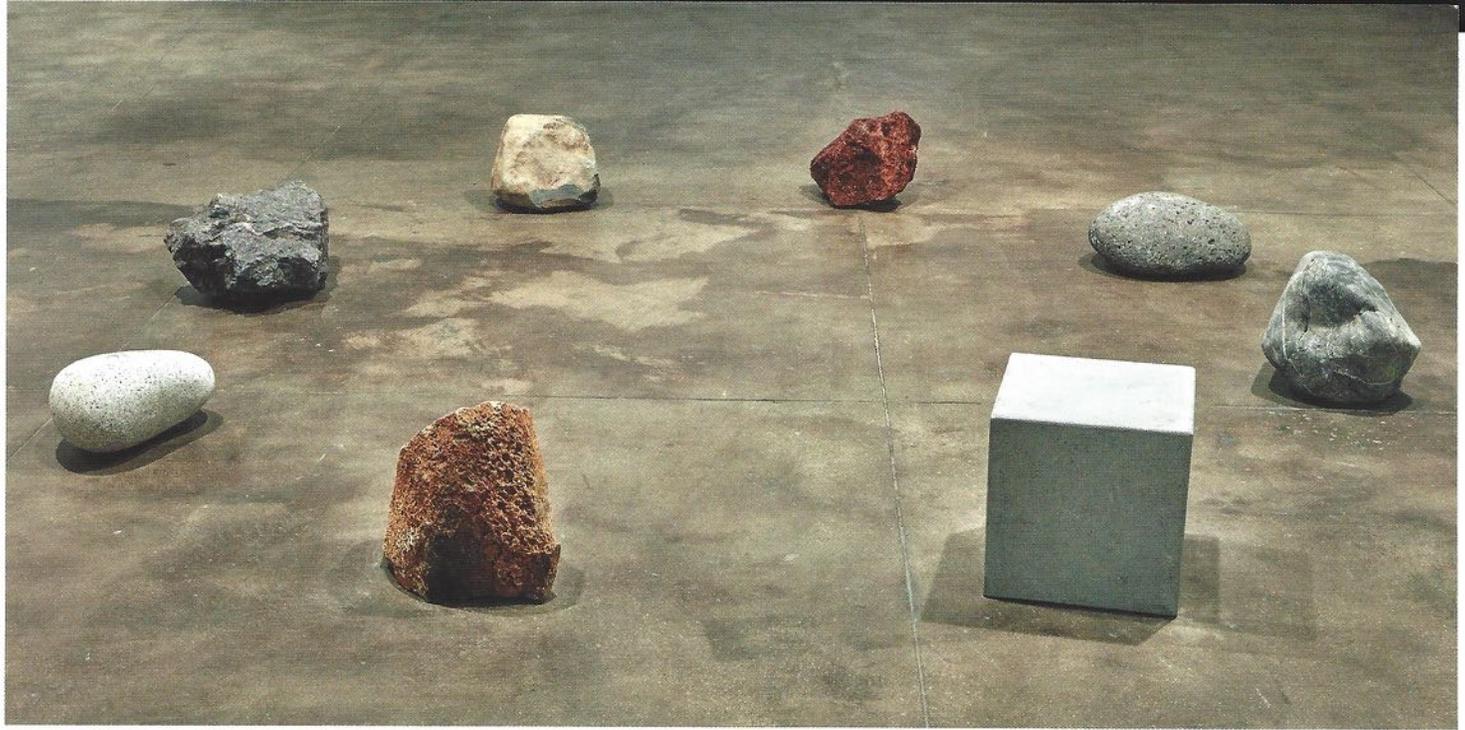
A curator from Mexico City came to visit my painter friend, and he was very surprised to find so many things going on in this house. They were not academic practices, because we were not in art school. He invited seven of us from the house to develop an art show with the premise of not hanging anything on the wall. It was almost like a school project. We embraced it with a lot of energy, a lot of illusion, and we loved it, all of us.

We formed a collective called Incidental, which gathered our interests in architecture and art, and we started to develop site-specific interventions in very peculiar contexts of the city. It was then that the process of being an artist really started—organizing and doing a show, thinking about how to intervene in a specific context with the mind of an artist, not with the practice of an architect. People started coming to the shows and began to invite us to other shows. One thing led to another, and by the end of university, I was already a practicing artist.

BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

Born in 1974, Jose Dávila was raised in Guadalajara, Mexico. While interested in art, he chose not to attend the classically focused fine art university, enrolling instead in the architecture department at the Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara. The results of this decision, which greatly affected his artistic practice, can be seen not only in his use of materials, but also in his frequent references to the most innovative architects and artists of the 20th century.

Dávila’s physical and academic distance from the traditional art world lends his work an admired freshness. His sculptures, installations, and photographic objects have been exhibited in solo shows at the Kunsthalle, Hamburg; the Jumex Museum in Mexico City; Marfa Contemporary in Texas; and the Camden Arts Centre in London, as well as in commercial galleries, such as Galería OMR in Mexico City, Sean Kelly in New York, Max Wigram Gallery in London, and Travesía Cuatro in Madrid.



RDC: *You were in Europe for eight years. Why did you decide to return to Guadalajara?*

JD: In Guadalajara, I am able to develop projects more easily. I find that suppliers and artisans in Mexico are willing to develop unconventional ideas. If I go to an aluminum builder who makes, for example, shower doors, and I tell him I need a certain aluminum construction for a sculpture, he's always willing to do it. That process is very productive. I found Europe to be more limited in that respect, because things have to be a certain way, and if you want to do it a different way, you have to do it yourself. They would not understand or just not do it, because they only do doors for showers.

RDC: *You don't like being labeled a Mexican artist, per se, but do you think remaining in Mexico has influenced who you are as an artist?*

JD: Definitely. Obviously, where you live shapes who you are, and therefore it shapes the work. I very much like living in Mexico. What I am opposed to is the idea of the folkloric and the exotic to be purposefully included. I see many of my sculptures as Mexican because, for example, Mexicans are very ingenious about how to fix something that is broken. Maybe we don't have the right tool to fix it, but we figure it out using something else. We come up with all these different strategies for building and constructing and repairing that are not exactly by the book. So, a lot of my structures are in precarious balance. For

example, you need to balance a piece of glass, so you need something heavy. What do you have available? Well, there's a rock. And maybe you need a piece of fabric, and you find something at hand. I think that is very Mexican, but not aesthetically folkloric or exotic.

Above: *Imperfect Circle*, 2016. San Andres stone volume, boulders, and rocks, 31.1 x 281 x 281 cm. **Below:** *Untitled*, 2016. Smoked glass and marble, 130 x 190 x 121.1 cm.



TOP: JASON WYCHE, © JOSE DÁVILA, COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NY / BOTTOM: AGUSTÍN ARCE, © JOSE DÁVILA, COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NY



RDC: *In 2003, you received a grant to explore, in your words, “a sort of alchemist’s process of destruction in order to create,” in which you cut, burned, pulverized, bent, stretched, broke, wrinkled, smashed, and otherwise manipulated various materials. That must have been an unusual experience.*

JD: *I wanted to explore what are apparently destructive techniques for creative results. I saw it not as destruction but as evolution of materials. I was interested in how the same material could go through the process of becoming something very different.*

RDC: *You don’t manipulate your materials very much in your recent work. You use them much as you find them.*

JD: *I think it could be a kind of reverse process. Instead of changing the material, now I am going to its origin, the source. It’s almost contradictory—before I was intervening with the materials as much as possible, and now, I’m intervening the least amount possible.*

RDC: *Many of your sculptures consist of things you might find at a construction site—glass, wood, tile,*

Open System I, 2016. Wood, plywood, and water paint, 3 views of installation in the exhibition “L’architetto illegal.”



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STUDIO DABBENI

Homage to the Square, 2016. Polished stainless steel, epoxy paint, and wire, 180 x 180 x 5 cm.

light fixtures, and marble slabs. Do you think your training as an architect has affected your choice of materials?

JD: Yes, definitely. When I was studying architecture, we would go to construction sites for class, and I was fascinated by their aesthetic aspect: the pile of sand next to a pile of cement powder, all the steel piled up in a corner, all the wood piled in another corner. To me, the construction site was an amazing sculptural experience.

RDC: *Your architectural training also seems to affect how you take on the physics of display, particularly in terms of gravity, scale, and volume.*

JD: I think gravity is the most important force there is, and it is very palpable when talking about three-dimensional objects in the world. We take it for granted in many ways, but it is something that we can't escape. We always fight against it. To have architecture, you need to have a roof, and to have a roof, you need to know how to support that roof. There is a trickle-down concept of how to support things in space. I discovered that if I listened to what gravity was asking, then I could find the area to develop sculpture. Obviously, the materials are of my personal choosing, but the choice is always in dialogue with the necessity of being in balance, of standing up, of making very clear that there is a force of gravity.

RDC: *You have a large body of photographic work in which you cut out the central subject and derive meaning from its negative.*

I see a parallel approach in your sculpture, as if you are interested in negative space, focusing on what has been displaced. Do you see them in a similar way?

JD: By cutting out the main character of an image, I let the surface beneath the paper come through and bring to the fore images stored in public memory. These are spaces outside the paper and the image itself, very much like in a sculpture, where the relation to walls, floor, and context play an important part in how we perceive the silhouette, the background, and the shadows of the object in front of us. The cutout flattens the body of the characters but shows the three-dimensionality of the paper.



RDC: *Your work always has a very human proportion and scale, which is something you also have to consider in architecture. I'm thinking, in particular, about your exhibition "L'architetto illegal" at the Studio d'arte contemporanea Dabbeni, where you built walls that intersected the space, some completed and some that could be seen through. Visitors had to navigate the intervention. Do you also consider how a physical body has to move through the space?*

JD: Yes, that's always been very important to me. If you position a chair in the center of a room, it has a certain meaning; but if you position it in the corner of the room, it does something different. Any object that is in the space is of great importance to me, and I am always aware of the things around us.

Open System I (2016) was based on my experience of installing works in other galleries and museums, where they often make temporary walls for exhibition purposes. Before they are finished, they are very beautiful sculptures in themselves. I took photos of some of these walls and developed them into sculptures in "L'architetto illegal." The walls were very much intended to intervene in the visitor's awareness and movements through space.



Joint Effort, 2016. San Andrés stone volumes, boulder, and ratchet strap, 141 x 40 x 45 cm.

When I am installing a show, I always ask for the fewest objects possible to be in the space. I'm talking about materials for installing—the toolboxes, the electrical cords, the ladders. I say, "Please get them away." I don't want them around when I am deciding where things go, because they are objects in space that interfere with what I am doing.

RDC: *At Studio Dabbeni, you painted some of the walls pink and yellow. They remind me of the colors at Casa Barragán, Luis Barragán's home in Mexico City. Was that intentional?*

JD: Yes, I think there are some very interesting aspects of how something three-dimensional can have a pictorial aspect. There is a story about Barragán asking his good friend, the painter Chucho Reyes, to paint a project he was doing in Switzerland. He offered his architecture project almost as a white canvas. The story, or the myth, says that Reyes proposed these wild pink and purple colors that he was using at the time, and Barragán let him go on with the proposal, which obviously Barragán internalized and developed.

RDC: *In addition to architects, you reference a number of artists in your sculptures: you've turned Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" paintings into sculptures and mobiles, repeated the patterns of Donald Judd's wall sculptures in cardboard, and used Dan Flavin's fluorescent bulbs in floor pieces. What draws you to reinterpret their ideas?*

JD: I think it is because I am a self-taught artist and I learned about art by studying, reading, and looking at books. The first ones I could get were about American artists of the '70s and '80s, and they made a big impact on me.

I have also, through later research, done works in relation to the Brazilian artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, but the majority of my references are American minimal artists. I'm very impressed by the big impact that their works achieve with the least means possible.



Temporality is a Question of Survival, 2001. Scaffold, wooden planks, acrylic paint, and color net, 2 views of installation at Camden Arts Centre, London.

RDC: I see their works sharing a similar sensibility to yours in how they interact with the space and, by extension, with the figure. The way that Fred Sandback can carve out a space with a single piece of thread is similar to what you described earlier with the chair.

JD: Yes, Fred Sandback is a perfect example of using basically nothing — one thread — for maximum effect. How that thread is located in space can have an immense impact on how the space around it is perceived — one single thread that can later be used just to sew.

RDC: The sculptures in your recent “Practical Structures” show (SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia) are similar in that the marble slabs will be returned to the distributor and eventually become someone’s bath or kitchen counter. I love the cycling of materials from ordinary use to artwork and back to ordinary use.

JD: Yes. In 2001, I did a project at the Camden Arts Centre in London that was very important to me. It consisted of creating a scaffold outside the building, and you could only access it through a window in the gallery. From there, you had some very interesting views of London. I changed what was a working struc-



ture into a viewing structure for people to be able to access certain spaces that pop up around London for five or six months and then disappear. They are like nomadic structures that move around the city, but people are normally excluded from them. I wanted to make them accessible. We rented the scaffold, and it became an art project for as long as it had this specific function at the museum. Later it was dismantled and went back to the company. It was not an artwork there, but it was an artwork at the Camden Arts Centre. What makes an artwork is not the object or the material itself, but what you can extract out of it.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a curator and writer based in Atlanta.