Liliana Porter: Three Realities

Table of contents

Porter, in 2013, shown with *Untitled (Line)*, 1973, at Laumont Labs, a fine art printing studio in New York.

About the Artist

Liliana Porter was born in 1941 in Buenos Aires, Argentina and has lived and worked in New York since 1964. She works across mediums in printmaking, drawing, painting, photography, video, film, installation, theater, and public art. Her work is represented in numerous collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires. Her works explore the ambiguous area between reality and representation.

About the Authors

Niko Vicario is Assistant Professor of Art and the History of Art at Amherst College and the author of *Hemispheric Integration: Materiality, Mobility, and the Making of Latin American Art* (University of California Press, 2020).

Lisa Crossman is Curator of American Art and Arts of the Americas at the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Mead Art Museum's staff for supporting this project. A special thanks to digital projects coordinators Carolyn Gennari and Emma Vecchione and curatorial intern Hannah Zhang.

Liliana Porter: Three Realities

Liliana Porter has persistently explored the fluid and often paradoxical relationship between what she describes as "virtual reality," or representation, and "the real thing." Over the decades, Porter's practice has spanned media from printmaking to installation, selectively engaging technologies like photography and video that expand and complicate experiences of these realities. The exhibition *Liliana Porter: Two Realities* (February 22, 2022–January 8, 2023), organized by curator Lisa Crossman at the Mead Art Museum, extends this dialogue about representation in Porter's art to consider the porous link between physical and online spaces. During the spring 2022 semester, Amherst College students in Professor Niko Vicario's course, "Curating between the Virtual and the Physical: Liliana Porter," created four online curatorial projects in conversation with the artist and with the support of the Mead's curatorial team. These projects (*Porter and I*, *The Viewer as Curator*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and *Two Materialities*) were designed as part of a website that connected the course and the Mead exhibition, including online content that could be accessed from the physical exhibition via QR codes. The students' curatorial projects, available through the run of the Mead exhibition, explore different aspects of the dynamic between conventional museum space, online exhibitions, and Porter's work. The publication you hold in your hands, *Liliana Porter: Three Realities*, bridges the museum exhibition and website using a third medium—print—for thinking through and about Porter's work. Featuring short reflections from participating students, excerpted texts from their online projects, and brief essays by Vicario and Crossman, it can be disassembled and rearranged by the reader and embodies yet another way of engaging with the act of curating and with the playfulness of Porter's work.

Porter, in 2006, creating the video work *Fox in the Mirror / El Zorro en el Espejo*, 2007.

Amherst College
Mead
Art Museum

INSTITUTE FOR
STUDIES ON
LATIN AMERICAN ART

Porter and I

I wanted to be a visual artist in the ways Borges is a writer: clear, intelligent, and humorous.
—Liliana Porter, 2022

"I do not know which of us has written this page," ends Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges's famous autobiographical short story "Borges and I."[1] The story deals with the philosophical question, Who are we? He makes the distinction between Borges the narrator (himself) and Borges the writer, "the one things happen to." Borges's interrogation of his identity is, by extension, a question of authorship.

Drawing on this theme, *Porter and I* is an interactive exhibition inspired by Porter and the way she has questioned strict boundaries and rules in her career as an artist. The virtual and the physical—the representation of a thing and the real thing, respectively—are two realities that animate Porter's art. Using kitschy toys and cunning photographs, she makes playful yet sharp commentaries on time and space.

Our project seeks to emphasize how the audience can challenge the boundaries between these two realities. Instead of writing didactic labels to guide the viewer's interpretation of Porter's art, we created a series of interactive activities designed to allow individuals to form their own interpretation of the artist's works.

The Square / El cuadrado, 1973, printed 2013. Series of five gelatin silver prints. Each: 8 ½ × 11 in. Limited edition of five prints plus two artist's proofs. Printed and selenium toned by Chuck Kelton on Ilford Multigrade paper under direction of the artist.

«Yo quería ser una artista visual en la manera que Borges es un escritor: clara, inteligente y graciosa».
—Liliana Porter, 2022

«No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página», termina el famoso relato autobiográfico de Jorge Luis Borges «Borges y yo».[2] El relato trata de la pregunta filosófica ¿quiénes somos? En él, Borges hace una distinción entre el narrador (él mismo) y el Borges escritor, que es «a quien le ocurren las cosas». El cuestionamiento que hace Borges sobre su identidad es, por extensión, una cuestión de autoría.

Al hilo de este tema, *Porter and I* es una exposición interactiva inspirada en Porter y en la manera en la que se cuestiona los límites y las reglas estrictas en su carrera artística. Lo virtual y lo físico, o la representación de una cosa y la cosa en sí misma, son dos realidades que dan vida al arte de Porter. A través de juguetes *kitsch* y fotografías astutas, la artista hace comentarios juguetones pero agudos sobre el tiempo y el espacio.

Esperamos resaltar cómo el público puede cuestionarse los límites entre estas dos realidades. En vez de utilizar cartelas que guíen su interpretación del arte de Porter, hemos creado una serie de actividades interactivas diseñadas para permitir que cada individuo haga su propia interpretación de las obras de la artista.

1   Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I," in *Labyrinths*, trans. James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), amherstlecture.org/perry2007/Borges%20and%20I.pdf.

2   Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges y yo," Facultad de Ingeniería, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, https://www.ingenieria.unam.mx/dcsyhfi/material_didactico/Literatura_Hispanoamericana_Contemporanea/Autores_B/BORGES/yo.pdf.

"Porter presents an incisive refutation of the idea that the aura of art degrades through repeated copies or through its virtual representation, instead toying with the very idea of originality and reality. It was especially exciting to share her work in the digital sphere, moving the line from paper to skin to screen."
—Gabrielle Avena

"Porter was the perfect artist to work with for this project. Much of her body of work ultimately boils down to humor and surprise through contrast."
—Nichole Fernandez

"We can take inspiration from Porter's work, inviting curators and viewers to contemplate their own roles, and the points at which they begin to intersect."
—Kate Hur

"Curating an exhibition relating to Porter's philosophical interest in the virtual and the physical extends naturally to the internet, which is a master of decontextualization and recontextualization."
—Abner Aldarondo

"Porter's artwork is subversive, challenging our conceptions about what time and space should look like. Throughout her expansive career, she has centered a spirit of interactivity."
—Maya Ledesma

Images of toys used by Porter in varying artworks and included in the interactive online exhibition *Porter and I*, "II. Diálogos" (Dialogues), 2022.
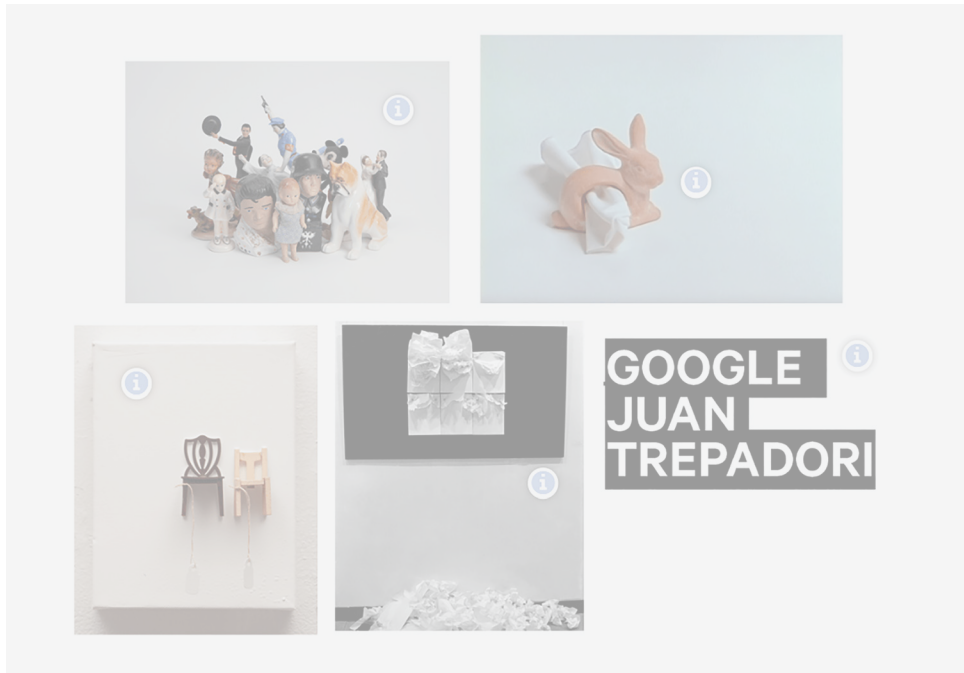
The Viewer as Curator

Curated by Madeline Clinton, Sophia Fikke, German Giammattei Urrea,
Brooke Harrington, Milo Woods, and Sofia Zavatone-Veth

Porter's work powerfully leverages formal simplicity to encourage the contemplation of profound connections across objects, concepts, times, and artistic mediums. In this same spirit, we encourage you to contemplate connections across decades, thematic foci, and media. We invite you to engage with our prompts outlined in the curatorial projects online, to download images of artworks, and to share images or text documenting your interactions.

Screenshot from "Sample Curatorial Project 2: Consumerism," *The Viewer as Curator*, online exhibition, 2022. [The online exhibition also included "Sample Curatorial Project 1: Representation." The sample projects featured a selection of archival images, references, quotes, and images of Porter's artworks.]

"In my research on *Forced Labor (rope)* (2006), I have become fascinated by Porter's attention to and appreciation of the 'empty space,' and how this may impact the translation of her works from the physical to the digital."
—Madeline Clinton
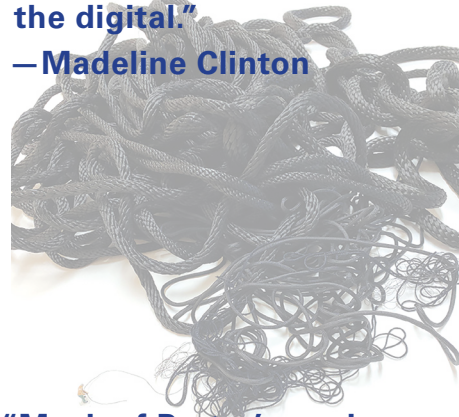
"Much of Porter's work involves humor, time, and the idea of representation, which provokes conversation between viewers. She also challenges the concept of the 'white cube' as some of her works extend onto the white museum walls or include noises that are atypical for a museum."
—German Giammattei Urrea

Forced Labor (rope) [detail], 2006. Various ropes and metal figurine. Dimensions variable.

"Porter's work—take *Dialogue (with Penguin)* (1999)—is, paradoxically, formally simple and conceptually profound, encouraging the viewer to draw connections across seemingly unrelated objects."
—Sophia Fikke

"Porter provokes philosophical questions surrounding the divisions and layers of reality, as well as a critique of social and artistic institutions. Much of her work subverts conventional conceptions of, and relationships between, artist, art, and audience."
—Sofia Zavatone-Veth

Dialogue (with Penguin), 1999. Cibachrome. 35 x 27 in.

"In videos like *For You* (1999) and *Drum Solo* (2000), Porter grants childhood toys new life as a dynamic ensemble of whimsical performers. Yet, the seemingly humorous antics of these kitsch toys conceal dramatic portrayals of violence and hard labor that demand deep viewer introspection."
—Milo Woods

"Presenting Porter's work in an online format provides us student curators the unique opportunity to explore the nuance of her large and diverse body of work and continue conversations spanning many decades. By taking the time and space in an online format to explore a limited number of her artworks more closely, we encourage viewers to slowly unpack each work, thereby breaking down the rushed museum paradigm."
—Brooke Harrington

Drum Solo / Solo de Tambor (still), 2000. 16mm film converted to digital video. 19 min.

Through the Looking Glass

Curated by Lawrence Duncan and Kalea Ramsey

Porter's use of figurines in her work invokes an array of cultural associations and themes of memory and playfulness. With that in mind, we approached the digital reality of her exhibition as a game through a demo video that models an interactive experience. We used the 3D computer graphics software Unreal Engine to attempt virtual world-building. The digital environment that we created contains a model of the Mead's physical exhibition *Two Realities* and an invented domestic space filled with renderings of furniture and figurines from Porter's actual studio.
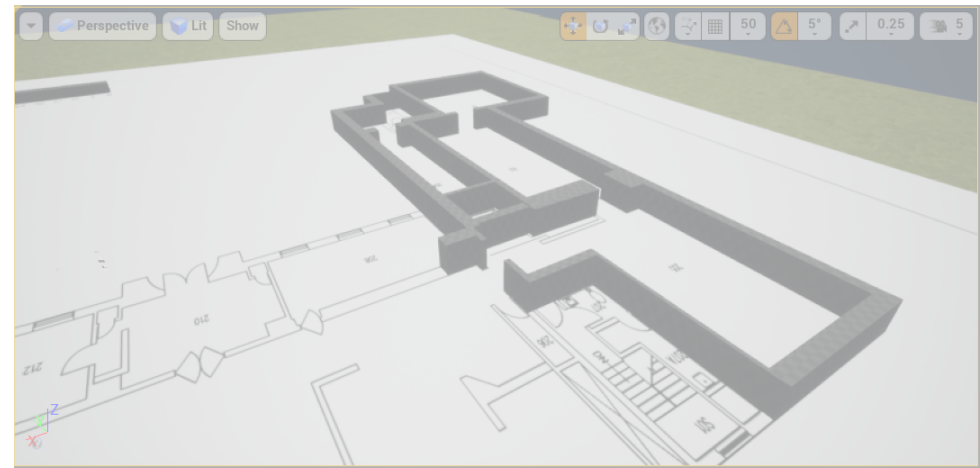
The model designed for the online exhibition *Through the Looking Glass,* 2022. The model is based on the blueprint of the Mead Art Museum. The group built a duplicate space and connected the two sides with a mirror threshold.

Image of a cabinet from Porter's studio (left) and a 3D model (right) created for the online exhibition *Through the Looking Glass,* 2022. [The image appeared in the "Behind the Scenes" section of the project's web page.]

"Porter pushes the boundaries by blurring the line between artist, preparator, and curator. *Untitled (geometric group)* (1973) is my favorite example of this because, although it exists as part of a traditional 'white cube' exhibition, Porter breaks tradition by having the preparator extend her illusion onto the exhibition wall."
—Lawrence Duncan

"The idea is to break the traditional 'white cube' structure of art galleries, bring life and interactivity to the digital exhibition, and showcase a glimpse of Porter's process. By including studio elements, we hope she finds this digital world familiar and welcoming to her as an artist."
—Kalea Ramsey

Untitled (geometric group), 1973–75. Wall installation of three laminated gelatin silver prints with ink drawing and graphite. Each photograph: 11 x 8 ½ in.; height from floor variable.

Two Materialities

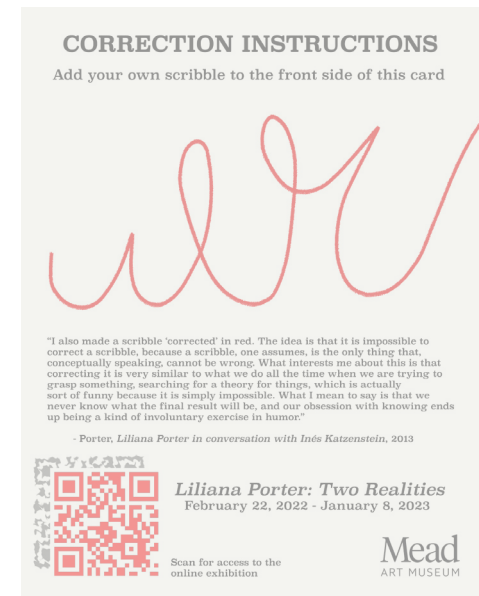Curated by Matthew Ezersky, Lily Krakoff, Yuanzhe Ouyang, and Jenna Wyman

Porter's artistic practice has many exciting elements, but our group was particularly fascinated by her mail art. There are a wealth of Latin American artists' takes on mail art that range from examples intended to circumvent the censorship of the region's oppressive political regimes of the 1960s–80s to works meant to challenge conventional modes of art circulation. Porter used mail art in various instances, such as on the occasion of her 1969 exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In this piece, Porter engaged recipients by requesting that they place an object near the cast shadow in the printed work in order to complete the illusion.

Our group was inspired to create a work of mail art using *The Correction (red)* (2007), which we selected in consultation with Porter. Sent to all Amherst College students' mailboxes, our postcards invited community members to contribute to Porter's work by adding their own scribble (i.e., their own "correction") to the work. To relate the physicality of mail art to the virtual quality of this online exhibition, we also invited our audience to access this page via QR code.

We know how overwhelming emails and online communication can be; most days, our inboxes are oversaturated with information. By providing members of the Amherst College community with a carefully crafted piece of physical mail, we hoped to cut through this excess and communicate intentionally. The psychological effect of holding a work of art (even a reproduction) in one's hands and engaging with its intricacies is powerful, and we hoped to provide our community with an interactive and meaningful experience guided by Porter's art.

The Correction (red), 2007. Drawing on paper. 14 ¾ x 11 in. [This artwork was featured on the front of the postcard mailed by the curators of *Two Materialities* in May 2022. The image also appeared as a GIF in the *Two Materialities* online exhibition.]

CORRECTION INSTRUCTIONS
Add your own scribble to the front side of this card

"I also made a scribble 'corrected' in red. The idea is that it is impossible to correct a scribble, because a scribble, one assumes, is the only thing that, conceptually speaking, cannot be wrong. What interests me about this is that correcting it is very similar to what we do all the time when we are trying to grasp something, searching for a theory for things, which is actually sort of funny because it is simply impossible. What I mean to say is that we never know what the final result will be, and our obsession with knowing ends up being a kind of involuntary exercise in humor."

– Porter, *Liliana Porter in conversation with Inés Katzenstein*, 2013

Liliana Porter: Two Realities
February 22, 2022 - January 8, 2023

Scan for access to the online exhibition

Mead ART MUSEUM

Back of postcard, designed by the curators of *Two Materialities*.

Shadow for a Glass (Sombra Para Un Vaso), 1969. Card: 4 ¼ x 5 ⅜ in.; envelope: 5 x 6 in. The work was mailed from the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, Florida 936, Buenos Aires, Argentina, in June 1969.

"Porter has always troubled the dichotomy between the real and the copy. In a time in which the art world has gone virtual to maintain and expand accessibility, we thought mail art could provide both the accessibility of the virtual and the immediacy and intimacy of the physical."
—Matthew Ezersky

"Porter's assemblages have a curatorial dimension in and of themselves, as the artist creates stories that make the viewer smile and laugh—but also think."
—Lily Krakoff

"Porter's dramatic vignettes represent the possibility of humor and pain, mediocrity and meaning."
—Yuanzhe Ouyang

"Engaging with Porter and her prolific body of work is a true delight, especially in the context of curatorial work. The main struggle of virtual curation has been to find digital assets that can approximate the physical experience."
—Jenna Wyman

Pay No Attention
Niko Vicario

In late 2020, when Lisa Crossman approached me about teaching an art history course at Amherst College in connection with her upcoming exhibition *Liliana Porter: Two Realities*, I remembered two encounters with the artist's work. The first was in 2008, when I came across Porter's online project *Rehearsal*, presented by the Dia Art Foundation on its website, which I accessed from a laptop.[1] The second occurred in 2014, when I saw her large-scale installation, *The Man with the Ax and Other Brief Situations*, at Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA). Could these experiences have been more different? Both involved the figurines that the artist has deployed for decades, and both elicited a response of existential tenderness, but one appeared on my screen as a video of toy chicks singing "La donna è mobile" from Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*, while the other immersed me in a scenography composed of precisely arranged found objects, from a massive piano to very small ceramic pieces, in various states of intactness and fracture.

The wide gulf between my phenomenological interactions with Porter's works suggested a parallel with experiences my students and I were having during the pandemic. To be sure, transitioning between screens and in-person interaction was nothing new, but since 2020 many of us have felt a type of whiplash amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as we've had to move between a Zoom grid of faces, sometimes with "camera off," and a classroom of masked people. I have suggested to students who expressed some disappointment about online learning that art history can be translated better than most subjects to a virtual format; even in the classroom, we are usually looking at reproductions that have been remediated, from whatever material the artist used, to a digital image. Like the digital image, we have had to be *adaptable*.

The course we developed, "Curating between the Virtual and the Physical: Liliana Porter," was an opportunity to think through the dynamic between the virtual and the physical in exhibitions and, more specifically, to consider the ways in which Porter's work allows us to see and scrutinize this dynamic. Like academic institutions, art institutions have moved, since the arrival of COVID-19, between presenting "content" online and reopening their doors; the public expands when exhibitions and programming move to the internet but the aura of art's presence in a specific place and time is, to paraphrase theorist Walter Benjamin, degraded.[2] We have discussed the possibility that perhaps all curatorial work, and all art for that matter, is a translation between the virtual and the physical, in one direction or another. The blurring between reality and representation, original and copy, image and thing in Porter's work playfully materializes this idea.

Exploring this translation between the virtual and the physical requires attention to the technical, a dimension of both teaching and exhibitions that we often seek to obscure or even erase. Most curators, in collaboration with other museum staff, try to hide the wires so that nothing distracts or detracts from "the work itself." While teaching, I sometimes joke to students that the projection in an art history classroom is "the great and powerful wizard" and the professor merely the fumbling technician at the edge of the image ("Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"). Certainly, I felt that way often in teaching this course, and, fighting the urge to gloss over or

downplay errors, I tried to foreground the dysfunction even while wishing it would stop. This came up with Zoom visitors who dropped in to our in-person class, including our most frequent visitor, Porter herself, who sometimes couldn't hear us due to a poor connection. She and others were simultaneously intrigued and alienated by the Owlcam, an endearing robot—not so far removed from Porter's figurines—we began using to communicate with our remote guests thanks to the congenial improvisations of the college's IT department. When feedback made our first meeting with Porter sonically painful, I panicked behind my KN95. When a laptop overheated and fried the connection with professor Fernando Domínguez Rubio, I cursed the internet gods. The janky tendencies of our Zoom connections might be obstacles to overcome, but they also make available to our senses what Domínguez Rubio calls "digital fragility,"[3] and I am increasingly aware that to acknowledge the imperfections of our technologies may also be a path to forgiving our own.

In addition to such glitches, an unforeseen *hitch* came when the Stearns steeple (a fragment of a nineteenth century cathedral that no longer exists), sitting near the entrance to the Mead, was deemed unsafe during a routine inspection. It could fall into the museum and cause harm at any time. And just like that, no staff, faculty, or students were permitted into the galleries. *Liliana Porter: Two Realities*, which had opened only recently, would become virtual to us again—until an unknown date. We would rely on our memory of the one or two visits we had made. By this point, students had already been assigned the task of forming groups to create online curatorial projects in dialogue with the Mead exhibition. Between a pandemic and a steeple, the virtual/physical dynamic—with its disappointments

and frustrations but also with its opportunities—endured and mutated. Porter's work, with its sad but generous humor, keeps me open to the poetic potential of such absurdity.

1   See "Liliana Porter, *Rehearsal*," Dia: Exhibitions & Projects, November 6, 2008, https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/liliana-porterrehearsal-web-project.

2   See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.

3   See Fernando Domínguez Rubio, *Sill Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), especially "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Fragility," 301–24.

Notes, from Interactivity to Avatars
Lisa Crossman

Framing is already fragmenting. Fragmentation is also a way to de-contextualize. Exhibition is a re-contextualization.
—Liliana Porter and Ana Tiscornia, "An interview with Liliana Porter and Ana Tiscornia, conducted by Amy Eva Raehse," March 8, 2011

Porter explores the longing and impossibility of fully defining what is "real" and the desire to escape this {reader, I invite you to add your own description here} reality.

For a moment, let's linger on this desire for escape.

Let's consider "escape" in relation to the spaces of museums, the internet, college classrooms, and Porter's work.

And then, before I put limits, a frame around these ideas and the thoughts that may be surfacing in your mind, let's expand this list of reflections to include words that center action and invention: play, make-believe, alter egos, and avatars.

During the spring 2022 semester, students in professor Niko Vicario's course regularly noted the playful nature of Porter's art. A word that surfaced again and again in discussions about the goals of their online projects was "interactivity."

Interactivity describes communication and an open pathway between two things or people. This word gets at the essence of the nature and parameters (the action and context) that were established in the course. It also describes the boundary-crossing and collaborative nature of the project, which not only included physical, virtual, and hybrid modes of communication but also group work and movement between the classroom and the museum (when

possible). Within this model of working, students made parallels between their projects and Porter's practice, noting Porter's collaborations with the New York Graphic Workshop (1964–1970)—as a founding member—and with individual artists like Ana Tiscornia.[1] The course's student curators used digital tools to invite participants to play, to assume the roles of not only viewer/user (in one instance through the use of an avatar) but also artist and curator. In a sense, they engaged with Porter's work by playing her own games of imitation, and their projects offer a chance for everyone else to do the same.

Porter's work is tricky—simple and complex, manipulative and earnest—as she plays with representation and reveals her hand. Her evolving cast of "them"—the toys, tchotchkes, and tiny figurines—offer familiar and inviting surfaces, poised as they are in suspended animation, for narrative or emotional association that can reveal things about art, culture, life, and our own and Porter's subjectivities. Sometimes we can perhaps even find aspects of the artist in the guise of recurring characters, namely the traveler and the rabbit. (Notably, the rabbit, a simple outline of a bunny standing upright on two feet, has also been seen in *Disguise* [2000].) Within her corpus and mix of characters, consider that Porter has created a unified body of work over the past decades, while also producing art as other, imaginary artists.

At the New York Graphic Workshop, Porter and her co-conspirators, artists Luis Camnitzer and José Guillermo Castillo, created the Trepadori project. This elaborate ploy included the production and sale of prints by a fictional artist, Juan Trepadori (born in Paraguay; lives in Portugal), whose work has been described as technically good, aesthetically pleasing, but otherwise unremarkable. The funds were

used to support other artists, and other artists were invited to play Trepadori, which, according to Porter, they seemed to enjoy.[2]

Decades later, Porter and Tiscornia created Alicia Mihai Gazcue (born in Uruguay; lives and works in Romania), whose work is conceptual and addresses political themes. This make-believe figure exposes an industry eager for the discovery of a new, overlooked artist. Most entertaining of all is their creation of historical work by Mihai Gazcue, using hindsight to game the system. Trepadori and Mihai Gazcue, as characters, are engaging because many of us appreciate a good con, especially when it exposes the limits and biases of a system.[3] These examples also align with a history and continued practice of artists inventing pseudonyms and alter egos that allow for an escape from the constraints of one's own identity and legacy. Furthermore, the play with collective authorship mirrors the relational quality, the emotional or psychological draw, of Porter's characters and her long exploration of the interplay of the real and the fictional.

To me, the students' curatorial projects and Porter's work reveal an eagerness to play, even to role play and copy, to try to make sense of philosophical questions tied to the representation, experience, and interpretation of art, virtual and physical. The students' projects and the process of their creation also embrace connection online and off. The virtual and the physical each offer opportunities and limits, ways to represent our environments and selves, and, perhaps, even the means to escape them.

Through the storytelling and shapeshifting, I was resurrected. I claimed my range.
—Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, 2020 [4]

1   Porter founded the New York Graphic Workshop with artists Luis Camnitzer and José Guillermo Castillo. The Workshop explored printmaking as a conceptual practice, beyond its technical and aesthetic dimensions, and invited dialogue with other artists.

2   Porter has stated, "The incredible thing, every time an artist started to do a Trepadori, he or she really got involved and would say 'oh, look how beautiful!'" Liliana Porter, Interview with Gina McDaniel Tarver, September 25, 2008. Quoted in McDaniel Tarver, "The Trepadori Project," in *The New York Graphic Workshop, 1964–1970,* ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Ursula Davila-Villa, and Gina McDaniel Tarver (Austin, TX: Blanton Museum of Art, 2009), 76.

3   Google "Alicia Mihai Gazcue" for more information. See also "Oral history interview with Liliana Porter, 2012, June 27 and 28," Smithsonian Archives of American Art, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-liliana-porter-16121.

4   *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* is among the readings assigned to students in "Curating between the Virtual and the Physical: Liliana Porter."