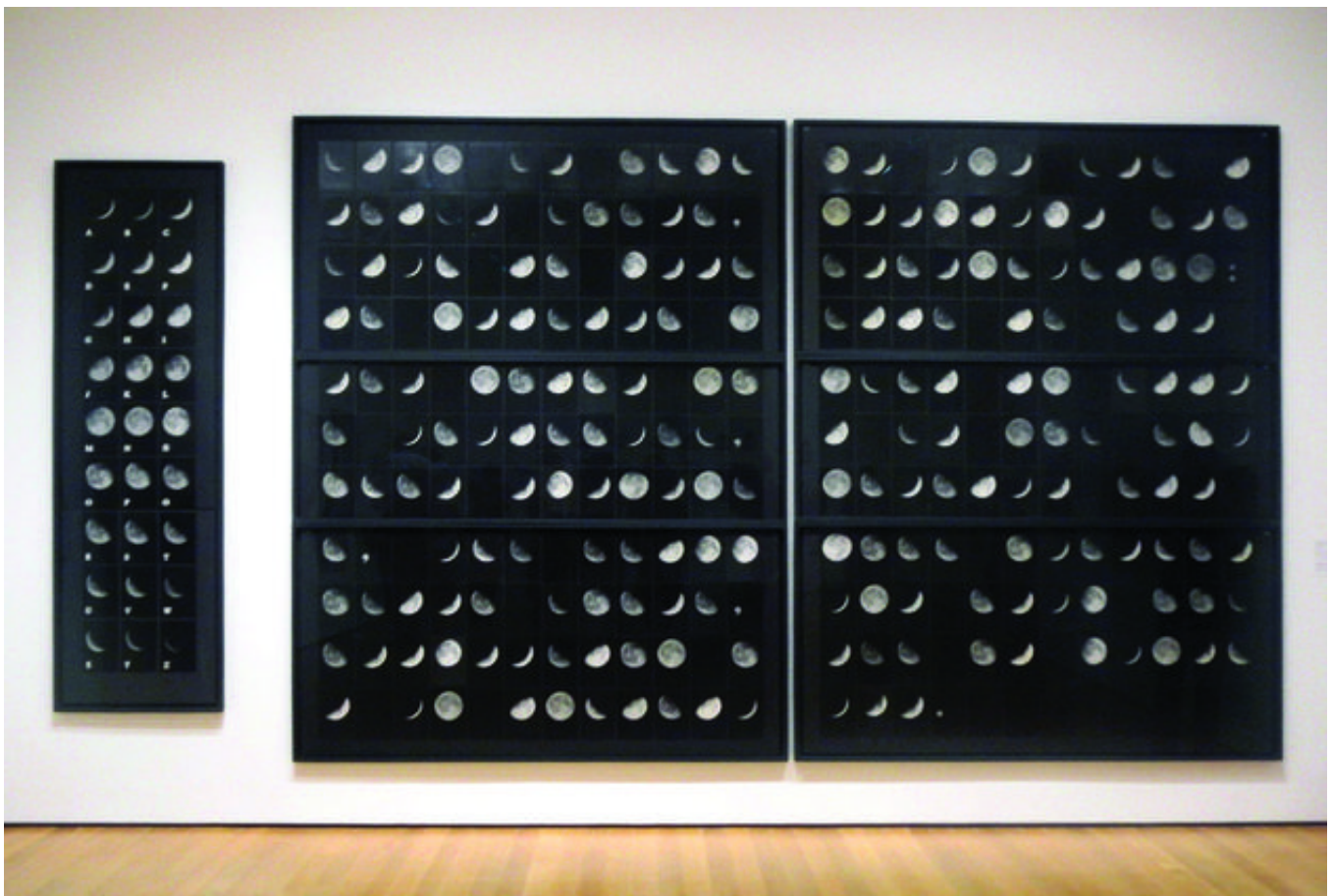


## Leandro Katz in conversation with Julia P. Herzberg

# arte aldía

The visual artist, writer, and filmmaker spoke with Julia P. Herzberg for Arte al Día about his work process, his interest in photography and its boundaries.

By Julia P. Herzberg (Nueva York)



Since the late 1980s, I have had the extraordinary experience of working with Leandro Katz, who creates art across the disciplines of photography, artist's books, objects, installations, and films. After the artist returned to Buenos Aires from New York in 2006, I visited his studio annually. In February of 2015, I first saw the artist's series *Lunar Writing* (1974). I proposed an article on those incredibly beautiful photographs, which had not yet been written about. Following a series of written communications, and a recorded conversation in February in 2016 in Buenos Aires, we focused on "writing with light" in the *Lunar Writing* series, and on two other works. The following conversation

illuminates some of the artist's thoughts.

**Julia P. Herzberg: How did you conceive of the notion of writing with light?**

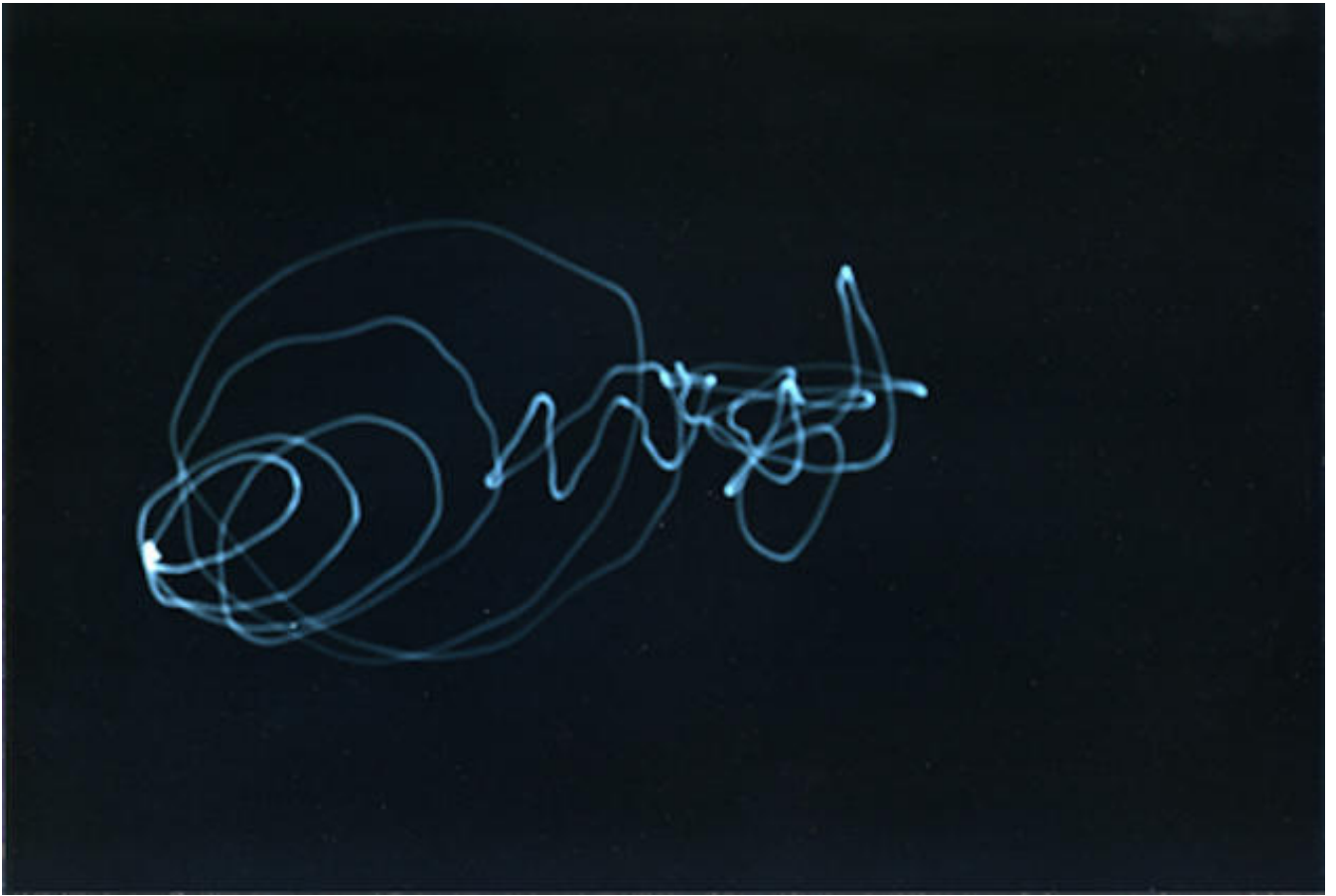
Leandro Katz: I have always been interested in experimenting with photography and going to the edges, where I try things that have not been done or have not been recommended beyond the manufacturers' specifications. When I had the idea of photographing the moon, the challenge was to figure out all of the technical aspects before proceeding. As I acquired technical control of night photography, it occurred to me that I could do different things such as expose film in ways that tested the technical limitations of the medium. I discovered several things. When filming the moon with time-lapse devices, I realized there was something very peculiar going on with the film emulsion, as clouds and haze were covering it momentarily. The process was comparable to the technique of solarization, which briefly exposes a negative in the darkroom to a flash of light. Something similar was taking place in real time due to the absence/presence of light. The film emulsion was reacting as it was being exposed to the rays of moonlight, expanding the mysterious behavior of the medium. Results such as these, with motion picture film, gave me the idea of writing words with a still camera.

**JPH: And that's how *Lunar Writing I* and *Lunar Writing II* developed? Did you hold the camera outside your window?**

LK: No, I had a terrace that literally became a workspace with tripods and a table. I waited for nights with clear skies. I consulted the Farmer's Calendar and the meteorological services to know the weather conditions of particular nights. When I was ready with my calculations, I set up the camera and film and photographed the moon. As you know, I also made four films of the moon: *Twelve Moons (and 365 Sunsets)*, 1976; *Moonshots*, 1976; *Moon Notes*, 1980; and *The Judas Window*, 1982. The thought of photographing the moon with a hand-held camera gave me the idea of writing, which is a paradoxical attempt. It is like moving a sheet of paper over a fixed pencil pointing at you.

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Lunar Writing 1 (1001, 1002, 1003), 1974, 16 blue toned black and white photographs mounted on museum board, 6.25 x 9.25 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and Henrique Faria New York & Buenos Aires. // Lunar Writing 1 (1001, 1002, 1003), 1974, 16 fotografías blanco y negro viradas al azul montadas sobre tableros de exposición, de 16 x 24 centímetros cada una. Por cortesía del artista y de Henrique Faria, Nueva York y Buenos Aires.

**JPH: Did you have certain words in mind?**

LK: I don't remember what I wrote because writing became like a magic spell, an invocation. I don't even remember to whom I was writing, but it was probably a love letter. I took the camera and wrote a verse or prayer or letter by simply moving the camera over the image of the moon.

**JPH: By using the camera to write, the sky itself became like a page.**

LK: Yes, the night itself. For me writing was a ritual, an intimate action that I sent to the universe. Writing with moonlight may seem as an innocent act but at the same time, it was a very calculated one, technically speaking. You had to know the film's specifications, the shutter speed, and the intensity of the moon light. In other words, there is an aspect in all photography of extreme calculation, even though it may be an impulse filled with personal emotion.

**JPH: When you did *Lunar Writings I*, for example, did you expose all the frames in one shooting, in one night? Or did you shoot the moon over a series of nights?**

LK: All in one night and in a single film roll. For each frame, it was a different word or set of words. I opened the shutter, moved the camera to write across the frame, closed the shutter, advanced the film, and then wrote on the next frame, and so on. I probably used an average of sixteen to twenty frames for the two writing attempts. There is another step in the process. After the film was developed and the results approved, I made black-and-white prints, and then I subjected the resulting prints to a further chemical process called blue toning, in which you dip the dry print in a chemical solution that replaces

the black silver nitrate emulsion for blue tone color particles.

**JPH: That's why we see the abstract, linear, and gestural lines of the moon in a blue color?**

LK: Yes, all the colors are bluish including the lowlights and the highlights. Everything that is silver is replaced by this chemical action.

**JPH: Were there any artists writing with a camera that you were aware of? Were there any precedents that were of interest to you in either modernist photography or perhaps in contemporary work?**

LK: Not really. I consider myself a kind of lone wolf. If I see that something has been done, then I am not interested in pursuing it. When something occurs to me, it has to do with the more metaphysical aspects of the medium. What is photography? What is a camera? What is black and white? How do we see things, and so forth? I am not interested in a dialogue with other artists. I am interested in a dialogue with the technology, with invention. The idea of the avant-garde, of doing something that hasn't been done before is important to me.

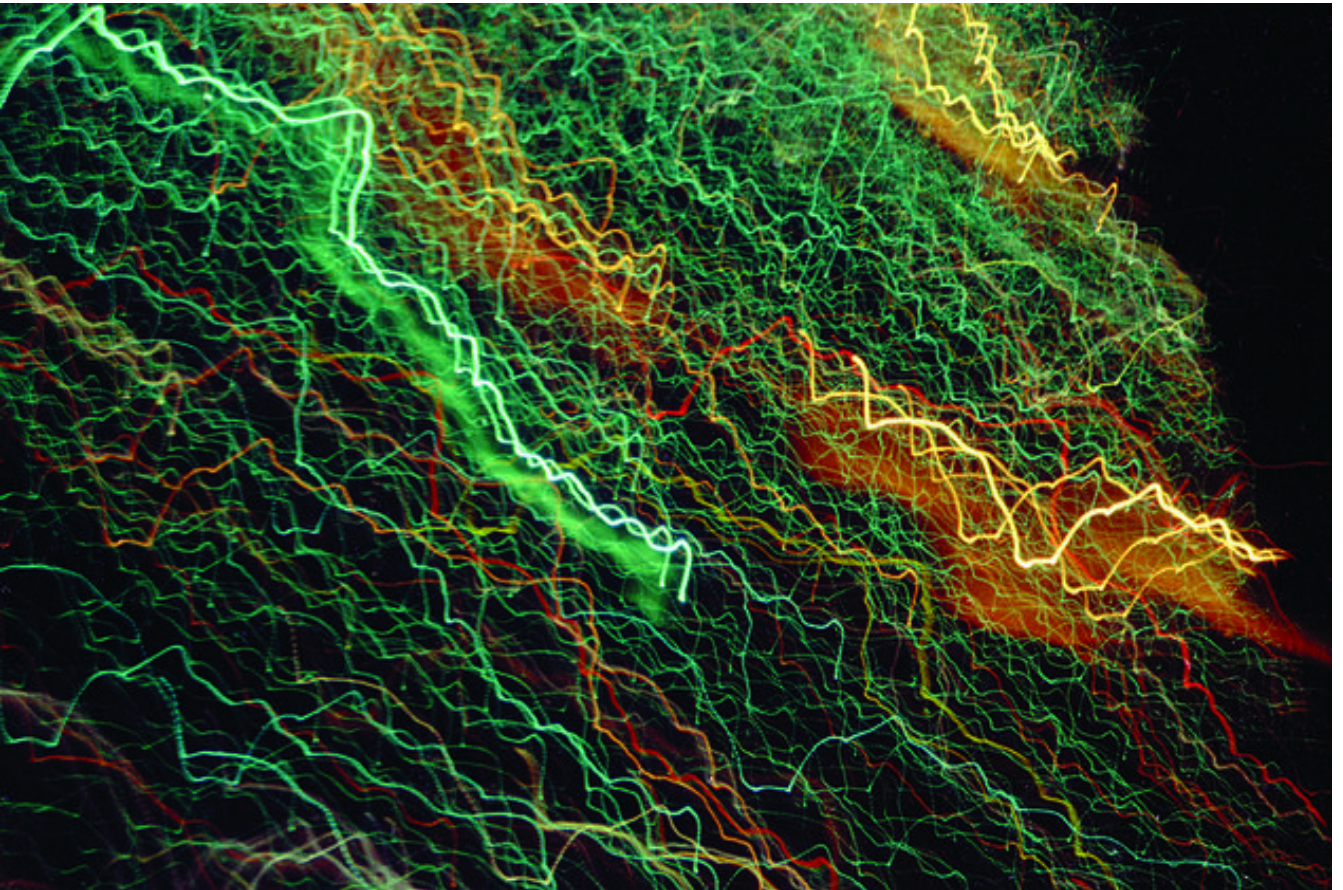
**JPH: The *Lunar Writing I* and *Lunar Writing II* of 1974 were completed a few years prior to the now iconic *The Lunar Alphabets* (1978-1980). What other works did you do by writing with the camera? Do you see those as antecedents to the *Lunar Alphabets*?**

LK: Well, yes, there were several years in between these experiments before I made the first *Lunar Alphabet* in 1978. In making that work, I collected twenty-seven transitions of the moon taken during many nights until the right shape of the crescent moon was perfect for a particular character of the alphabet. Some images of the moon had to be redone, which meant that I had to wait another lunar month before I could catch the particular angle that I was needed. In other words, even though these works, *Lunar Writing I* and *Lunar Writings II*, were done in 1974, there were films and photographs that I made on my New York terrace and in other places.

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Night Flights, A Diary, 1976, 15 chromogenic prints, 12 x17 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and Pelusa Borthwick. // Night Flights: A Diary, 1976, 15 copias cromogénicas, 20 x 43 cm. cada una. Por cortesía del artista y de Pelusa Borthwick.

**JPH: How does the *Night Flights: A Diary* fit into the larger context of *Lunar Writing*?**

LK: The *Night Flights: A Diary* series belongs to the group of photographs that I did by opening the shutter and photographing something very dark that has some sort of highlight. The idea came when I was flying between New York, Florida, and Texas at night time. I would hold the camera with the shutter open against the airplane window for a few seconds as the plane flew over towns or cities during take off or landing. The film sensitivity and the camera settings recorded a trailing view of the landscape lights that were quite lovely. *Night Flights: A Diary* suggest the idea of a diary, of recording something that is taking place on the spot.

**JPH: How were you able to get those marvelous colors in the series you did over time?**

LK: I think the colors are the result of different light sources. As you know, many cities have different light sources: mercury, sodium, and tungsten lights. They all rendered different colors.

**JPH: And these color variations became visible to you once you went into the dark room?**

LK: Yes, once the color film was developed. In other words, it is a surprise of photography.

**JPH: And I think that *Night Flights: A Diary* must have been very surprising to you when you first began to develop them. Tell me a little about how you shot a photographic roll.**

LK: I was doing one diary in one night in one flight. If I flew again, then I would do another roll. The photographs were not a mixture of different flights but a sequence of shots I took when the airplane was moving and the landscape changing.

**JPH: So the works that we have just looked at together were done on a given flight?**

LK: Yes, in one evening, in one roll.

JPH: You have done *The Vowels*, another inventively ludic series of photographs, using a match as a light source to write in the dark. But we will have to leave that discussion for the next time.

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Lunar Alphabet II, 1979-1980, 27 silver gelatin prints, 7 x 5 in. each mounted on museum board in three panels; over dimensions 74 x 25 in. // Lunar Alphabet II, 1979-1980, 27 copias de haluros de plata, de 18x13 cm cada una, montadas sobre un tablero de exposición de tres paneles; dimensiones generales: 188 x 63,5 cm.