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# CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

## Video

The hundreds of tapes submitted every other year to Mexico's *Biennale de Video* (first held in September 1990 at the *Cineteca Nacional*), and the continued success of regional festivals (such as that held in León, Guanajuato) attest to the vitality of video as today's medium for experimentation. Each Biennale showcases a wide range of styles, including documentaries, short dramas, experimental work, and special series, such as environmental topics or, in 1992, a program on the Quincentennial. The accessibility and affordability of video offered many artists an otherwise unthinkable opportunity to work with moving images. Some video artists chose the medium after defecting from increasingly inaccessible super8, which for all practical purposes is now extinct in Mexico. Others came to video after considerable experience with more professional film formats. Rafael Corkidi, already recognized in experimental circles as both a film director (*Angeles y querubines*, 1971; *Anandar Anapu*, 1974; *Panfucio Santo*, 1976; *Deseos*, 1977) and cinematographer for Jodorowski (*El Topo*, 1969; *La montaña sagrada*, 1972), claims he "arrived at video out of desperation." ("Llegue al video por desesperacion"). For a younger generation, who may have grown up with the VCR and home video camera, their first exposure to moving images was for the most part through this format.

Mexico's pioneer in video was Pola Weiss, who began working with the medium in the seventies. While the history of both the commercial and the avantgarde film in Mexico has been overwhelming dominated by males (with a few notable exceptions), other artistic arenas such as photography have had more significant female representation. Tina Modotti, Lola Alvarez Bravo, and Mariana Yampolsky are chief among those photographers who

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have constructed the sensibility and figurative tropes of Mexican camera work. The strong presence of women in video art evolves out of multiple situations: feminist influence in literature and humanities, the more democratic shape of the *grupos* (active in performance and conceptual art in the seventies) and film/video collectives, and the relative accessibility of the "personal" medium of video. All these shaped the practice of Pola Weiss, one of the first artists to employ video in her performance pieces in the early seventies.

Only a few years after the artists Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vaselka began exploring the terrain of video processing with new Sony portapaks, Pola Weiss combined this hybrid aesthetic into her highly personal explorations in video (or what Jorge Ayala Blanco has called "video narcissism").<sup>49</sup> Calling the monitor "la puerta de cristal" (the crystal door), Weiss infused the spiritual and esoteric into this new media. In *Mi Corazón* (1986), the artist utilized video as gestalt therapy for dealing with the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Incorporating performance into a new form of expression that she labelled "videodanza," Weiss mixed movement research and layering of images into the body of her work. Her work has that sense of embodiment and freeform exploration akin to early feminist art (e.g. Carolee Schneemann's eroticized body in performance and film, Judy Chicago's deconstructed female in "The Dinner Party" installation). Weiss' works were extended "autoretratos" (self-portraits), taken to such an extreme that her final performance ended in the documentation of her own suicide.

Among other pioneers of video in Mexico in the eighties, Rafael Corkidi, primarily known for his leftist *indigenista* aesthetics, and Katia Mandoki, one of the directors of *Parto Solar Cinco*, were two makers who for economic reasons made the transition to video after years of filmmaking in the seventies. An emerging generation of artists in the eighties and early nineties documented urban subcultural scenes, indigenous struggles for basic human rights and land, and experimental narratives. These artists include Pablo Gaytán, Andrea di Castro, Sarah Minter, Gregorio Rocha, and Alejandra Islas. Silvia Gruner's work is triggered by contacts with conceptual art, associated with younger Mexican artists using materials and media as varied as toys, chiclets, and recycled plastics. These artists (among them Melanie Smith, Eduardo Abaroa, Pablo Vargas Lugo, Francis Alýs, Sofía Taboas, and Diego Toledo) use different formations of the

popular and the populist in sculpture,  
painting and installation.

Silvia Gruner's work is affected by her relation to forms and materials. The conscientious selection of objects and their manipulation via performative interventions and media inscriptions imbues these inanimate elements with a narrative function. Beginning with super-8 films made while she was in graduate school in Boston, Gruner spent over four years working only in performance and film. Although these pieces encounter the material elements of sculpture, most of the repetitive and obsessional acts are staged with her body as the centerpiece. Before her use of video, Gruner created semiprivate performances with super8 film, *Desnudo descende* (1986), *Sin Título* (1987), *Canción Gitana* (1987), and others.

Among these performances are filmic portraits of the artist as documenteur and private agent provocateur: Gruner as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Gruner as famous images of women from 16th century paintings, Gruner making reference to earthworks artists while tumbling down a sandy hill.

The super8 short *Pregunta* (1988) is a repetition of thought and image, quivering shots of a hand reaching out a window to scoop up the first snow in a glass jar. The interlocutor is stymied by the impossibility of keeping the form of the solid snowflake. The interrogations query the space of memory and the act of forgetting. *El Pecado Original/Reproducción* (1986/87) reposes the famous erotically tinged painting "Gabrielle d'Estrees with one of her sisters" (anon., Ecole de Fontainebleau, 1595). As Gruner often included the nude form in these early interventions, *Pecado* reworks the tableau and inserts her own body into the frame.

The work takes a perverse thrill in punning with composure and composed figures in the frame. As the artist poses coolly as Eve, the biting of the apple becomes a knowing gesture, long understood as a powerful and dangerous act.

*El Vuelo* (1989), a video performance piece, was shot after Gruner's relocation to Mexico City, after living and studying in Israel and the United States. The video begins with a sense of dislocation as Gruner spins with her arms extended like an aviator attempting to get off the ground with leaden wings. The contraptions Gruner uses in the performance, birdcages with contact microphones and speakers adjoined to her body, become instruments for interpreting sounds of fluttering wings against the backdrop of the cityscape. Black tar cutouts of birds are strewn

through the Zocalo, as they take flight if only for a moment, and ultimately end up lying with other piles of detritus. Visions of encumberment, vertigo and flight all provide insights on exile and return.

As the work moves out of the studio and apartment, the processes remain studied and ritualistic but the form takes on the shape of subtle objects: soap bars, spoons, architectural motifs, and *molcajetes*. The video and film employed in performance moves into the installation site and dialogues with works, sculptural and photographic (*El Nacimiento de Venus*, 1995 and *Inventario*, 1994). In *Inventario*, a man and a woman present the totality of all of their belongings. The video installation space becomes a forum for their extended monologue and magnifies the images of everyday objects to an almost sacral status.

Ximena Cuevas started out in commercial film, working for Arturo Ripstein and John Huston, before leaping into discrete collages and exaggerated gestures in film and video. Her highly stylized sensibility takes on the dramatic yet sparse vocabulary of noir, and employs any and all references to processed visual culture that it can possibly get on tape. Part of Cuevas' hyperlayer technique involves the negotiation of national symbols, especially those connected intimately to *Mexicanidad*. The performance of gender is an extended subject throughout Cuevas' work, both in personal examinations of the family and state (*Medias Mentiras / Half Lies*, 1995) and intimate reflections on sexuality (*Cuerpos de Papel / Paper Bodies*, 1997).

Body parts abound, with strong fixations on the dismemberment and remembering of surrealism, Cuevas' work is filled with the collage aesthetics of what she has referred to as "paper illusions." "My work is concerned with the lie, a longing for the nostalgia of something that never existed. It is a baroque world in mixed technique, isolated, enclosed, and terribly Mexican due to the flagellation, the syncretism, the deadend alleyways, the disguise . . . the dark laughter."<sup>50</sup> Her hybrid approach to film and video has attracted collaborators with similar sensibilities in performance art and cabaret, Jesusa Rodriguez and Astrid Hadad.

Jesusa Rodriguez, political cabaret wunderkind, owner of *El Hábito* and the theatre *La Capilla*, worked with Cuevas on *Víctimas del Pecado NeoLiberal*. Consisting of vignettes featuring Rodriguez's cabaret performers, the video segments begin with recycled film titles from the annals of Mexican movie making: *Una Familia de*



*Corazón Sangrante* (1993) by Ximena Cuevas



*Tantas, Nosotros Los Pobres*, and so forth.

Restaged assassinations from Luis Donaldo Colossio to Ruiz Massieu, a high ranking PRI official, dispute the claims of police reports. In the case of the PRI official, a police officer pursues the assassin who has dropped the weapon only to return it with a smile and a wink.

*Historia de un gran amor* is a sendup of Carlos Salinas' torrid affair and the intricate wiring of conversations that escalated private acts into a national joke. *Nosotros Los Pobres* spoofs the short fateful period before Salinas' exile. Taking shelter in a working class PRIista's humble house, Salinas takes momentary refuge in dreams of himself as a persecuted Christ alternatively being flagellated in the middle of the Zócalo and satiated by a merciful Veronica with an Evian bottle.

*Medias Mentiras* is made up of partial accounts of the Ximena in front of the camera and the Ximena behind the camera. Using vintage primers the video deconstructs the Mexican middleclass family, the duties of women, and cultural diversions. A quaint fifties family sits on a sofa in front of the television, their eyes blacked out with miniature blindfolds. Taking a limb off her family tree, Cuevas presents a glimpse of her *madrina* Irma Serrano a.k.a. *La Tigressa*. The irrepressible actress and aspiring politician doles out whippings to the machos and gives some brazen liberation politics to *Chiapanecos*.

The video incorporates memory fragments, associative images, and its structure is interspersed with commercial breaks. In one a telemarketer on the home shopping club offers "lovely" blouses made by *Chiapanecas* "to wear with leggings or jeans." Her father appears with a selfglorifying crown, one very different from the miniature crown that gets passed from female to female at a *quinceñera* that Cuevas documents. In a macabre variation on the primal scene, her mother is introduced kissing the wax museum sculpture of her father. The figure of her father is inducted into the collection, alongside Cantinflas and Lola Beltran.

*Corazón Sangrante* (1993) is a postmodern ranchera music video, a fusing of the intricate layering poetics of Cuevas with the multifarious presentation of performance artist Astrid Hadad. Hadad's work revels in the *cursi*, and take pleasure in the painful imagery of bleeding hearts and flagellating saints. The excess she quotes directly from ranchera singers like Lucha Reyes, whose unapologetic free-form expressions of sexuality and drunkenness incorporate the hyperbolic.

In reference to her lineage, Olivier Debrouse has said of Hadad: "On her shoulders she carries a baggage of myths,



*Corazón Sangrante* (1993) by Ximena Cuevas



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*Corazón Sangrante* (1993) by Ximena Cuevas



*Corazón Sangrante* (1993) by Ximena Cuevas



rites, and images of the Mexican people.

Once, somebody described Astrid as a 'walking museum of popular cultures.'<sup>51</sup> Cuevas and Hadad use the capabilities of computer animation to multiply the performer's image until she rains down from the sky in all her manifestations, from hyper-femme *China Poblana* to postmodern *Coatlicue*.

Aside from Cuevas and Gruner, hundreds of other artists, students and activists are working today in video.

Carlos Martínez has documented the ongoing conflict in Chiaspas as a confidant and an advocate. The *Canal 6 de Julio*, not a channel at all but a network of informally distributed videotapes denouncing corruption and violence, capitalize on the portability of videotape and the ubiquity of the VCR. Nor is this

to say that there is no longer experimentation going on in film. For those who have had the opportunity to live or study abroad, super-8 remains a viable option. Working in that format,

Miguel Calderon's short *Un Nahual Veracruz* (1994) tells a fantastic tale of urban violence and transformation that resonates in the contemporary climate.

Some makers, such as Adriana Contreras, prefer to work mostly in 16mm film, but

the choice of film stocks and the availability of processing has become more and more limited. Ariel Zuñiga

continues his deadpan investigations of the everyday and the extraordinary with films like *Uno entre muchos* (1981), a minimalist chronicle a disappearance, and

*El diablo y la dama* (1983). Other noteworthy productions have come out of the

film schools, including *Carmen Vampira*

(Sandra Luz Aguilar, 1987), a bizarre cocktail of myth, poetry and dance.

49. Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La Eficacia del cine mexicano: Entre lo viejo and lo nuevo* (Mexico City, 1994), p. 418.

50. Program Notes for Museum of Modern Art Department of Film and Video, *Video Viewpoints* October 6, 1997.

51. (Olivier Debrouse quoted in Astrid Hadad website)