

DESBORDAMIENTO DE VAL DEL OMAR



FUEGO EN CASTILLA
(Tactilvisión del páramo del espanto), 1958-1960
Fotograma de la película

DATES:	5 October 2010 – 28 February 2011
PLACE:	Edificio Sabatini, 3 th floor (D-E-F)
ORGANIZED BY:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
CURATED BY:	Eugeni Bonet
CURATOR'S ASSISTANT:	Javier Ortiz-Echagüe
COORDINATED BY:	Belén Díaz de Rábago Soledad Liaño

José Val del Omar (Granada, 1904 – Madrid, 1982) was described as an “extraordinary camera artist” by Luis Cernuda, who knew him through their shared commitment to the Pedagogical Missions during the Republic. And he was later called a poet of film, of technique or of communications media by others. The present exhibition focuses on his *sin fin* (without end)—an allusion to the characteristic words that close some of the few films he completed, but also to the repercussions his fragmented and unfinished work has had. His is a work of attempts, a term he used with considerable frequency and resignation to refer to his tenacious activity with images and their overflow. It had less to do with the pursuit of a final goal than with a constant process of exploration running from photography and film to electronic media, and his vision of a syncretic approach he called PLAT (Picto-Luminic Audio Tactile). Moreover, he never lost sight of a culture of the blood he discovered through his countryman, Federico García Lorca, which he combined with technical innovation and the pursuit of a highly unusual language of tremors. So a Val del Omar exhibition involves the challenge of charting his steps and ideas, above and beyond a personal oeuvre already outside the customary cloistered sense of the term, because it also covers his machines, the remains of interrupted or incomplete projects, and the writings, graphic work and collages that reflect his overflowing inventiveness. There is also a reproduction of the setting in which he lived and worked until the end of his life, when he finally began to obtain the recognition that had eluded him until then.

José Val del Omar cannot be pigeon-holed, despite the fact that his deepest roots are in film. He belonged to a generation that believed in film as a full-fledged art, rather than as the new opiate of the people. Moreover, his ties to film are those of an outsider artist with very few works—at least, very few surviving works. An rarity in the context of Spanish filmmaking, which is hardly given to experimentation, he has gradually become a cult figure whose reputation and stature continue to expand.

Val del Omar spent much of his time exploring technology related to the innovations in film in his time (sound film, color, wide screen and so on), as well as other fields including electro-acoustics, radio, television and the educational applications of audiovisual media. Some of his inventions sought to offer practical solutions, especially in the threadbare economy of Franco's Spain, which depended largely on imported technology, film stock and other resources. Others explored the idea of the comprehensive artwork with a rare and visionary instinct—all the more so when we consider that he made many of these ideas public between 1928 and 1944. They include *Screen Overflow* and the quest for acoustic and visual cubism using enveloping diaphonic sound and tactile vision, with its blinking, pulsating light. Moreover, Val del Omar stayed up to date on the latest media and technology and even glimpsed the possibilities offered by cybernetics, laser, digital video and mixed media.

The Period of the Pedagogical Missions is the first area of the exhibition. It offers documents and images related to Val del Omar's activity during the Second Republic, especially his ties to the collective experience of the Pedagogical Missions. It includes a broad selection of photographs from various archives as well as the films that have been recovered: *Estampas 1932* and the documentaries he shot in Murcia, Cartagena and Lorca.

Here it is not a matter of authenticating his signature on the images being exhibited, but rather of reflecting his participation as one of the missionaries in a public project that favored anonymity, shared experiences and knowledge and the free circulation and reproduction of such images.

Special importance is given to a series of photographs of the faces of entranced viewers watching the screen during the Missions' traveling film projections. Other images and documents are organized around the different activities or sections of this culture and literacy project—the Traveling or People's Museum, the People's Choir and Theater, the Puppet Theater of Rafael Dieste—and the different places that Val del Omar visited and photographed in Andalusia, Galicia, Segovia, Las Hurdes and elsewhere.

Other documents in the exhibit relate to some of Val del Omar's other activities under the Republic or during the Civil War. Then a leap of over twenty years brings viewers to the partially recovered archives of *Festivales de España*, a series of short documentary films on which the author worked in 1963 and 1964 (without finishing the editing and sound). With them, Val del Omar felt he was renewing the spirit of the Pedagogical Missions, and he was not alone.

The Poetry of Technique tracks Val del Omar's dedication to technological invention in the areas of image and sound, as well as the poetic spirit underlying all his activities and the concept for which he invented the term *mechamystic*, or "mechanics of the invisible." Here, spirituality meets science in a way that underlies his peculiar manner of expressing himself—even in his most technical writing and bureaucratic correspondence—and his way of visualizing the characteristics of his proposals with diagrams, graphic compositions and collages.

Val del Omar conceived various systems for sound recording and reproduction and various fixed or portable image mini-projectors for both educational and leisure use. During the 1960s he developed various film formats (BiStandard 35, Intermediate 16-35 and others) in his quest for a better use of film, both for wide-screen systems and for the new demands posed by television. He also developed the necessary technology for applying his techniques, including diaphony, tactile vision, *picto luminics*, and so on. Along with his original inventions, he improved or adapted various devices commonly used in audiovisual production or exhibition.

This section offers various documents covering those aspects: patents, photographs, graphic work, collages, demonstration models and so on. In contrast to his mechanical progeny, it also includes a "home movie" from the

1930s in which Val del Omar portrays his wife and daughters in Granada, Madrid and Valencia.

The Elemental Triptych of Spain is Val del Omar's best-known work and a crucial part of the present exhibition. It consists of three short films shot over the course of about ten years (between 1953 and the mid 1960s) in his native Granada, Castile and Galicia. Each is based on the symbolic use of a specific element as a motif—water, fire and earth, respectively. This work exemplifies his particular conception

of film on “the border between reality and mystery” in three intense films he called free cinegraphs, abstract documentaries or simply elemental [films]. While he conceived them for exhibition in movie theaters, in his notes from his final years, Val del Omar considered the possibility of other versions or reconfigurations of this Triptych or Portrait of the Magic of Spain, but he never imagined that, beyond those specific techniques he invented to turn their projection into an event, one of his overflows would ever be shown in a museum space.

Each of these “three longings to communicate the ineffable” is presented in its own space and accompanied by various graphic elements and objects, including press books, stills from the film shoot, discarded footage, slides made from extra frames, sound recordings and other documentation.

Aguaspejo granadino (la gran siguiya) (Water-Mirror of Granada) is flanked by other multiple projections, creating a juxtaposition of some of the elements appearing in all of the different filming carried out by Val del Omar in his eternal return to the land of his birth. From *Vibración de Granada* (1935), which somehow prefigures the astonishing fluidity of his lyrical cinegraphs as well as the color images he shot in the 1960s and 1970s in both 35 mm (and in his BiStandard format) as well as Super-8. These are laid out here in two series of images assembled according to some of the motives and treatments appearing in his notes for a hypothetical Granada Triptych which was never carried out.

Fuego en Castilla (Tactilvisión del páramo del espanto) (Fire in Castile) has a second subtitle: “sleepwalking essay in the night of a palpable world.” It fills the entire space with blinking light and percussive sounds that are the result of a memorable collaboration with dancer Vicente Escudero from Valladolid.

Acariño galaico (de barro) (Galician Caress [Of Clay]) was never finished. The present exhibition reveals what underlies his difficulty completing it and the sources on which Javier Codesal drew for his posthumous and scrupulous editing of this third link in the Triptych.

The PLAT Laboratory: the exploration of Picto Luminic Audio Tactile presents various techniques and experiments carried out by Val del Omar in his final years, with a panoply of mixed media that include all sorts of projectors, lenses,

polarizers, filters, shutters, mechanisms, electronic components and laser pointers. These gadgets include his bionic cyclotactile optics, his tetraprojector adiscope for picto luminics, various modified Enoscope transparency projectors and a surprising selection of multiple optical and electronic devices that make up what he called his *truca*: which was a conglomeration of machines for processing and composing images in which different sources converge on a rear-projection screen in order to be shot by a film or video camera.

All of this has been kept in his laboratory since his early but foreseeable death. Thanks to the present exhibition, this group of mechanisms has been reassembled and made visible. When not actually running, it is surrounded by multiple projections in a setting that recreates the original PLAT laboratory: the workspace that Val del Omar also used as a Spartan living space.