

James Coleman



James Coleman
Retake with Evidence, 2007
Proyección de vídeo. Interpretado por Harvey Keitel. Película 35 mm en proporción 4:3 transferida a vídeo HD. 47'. Intervalo: 2'
Cortesía del artista y Marian Goodman Gallery, Nueva York/París; Simon Lee Gallery, Londres; Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, Amberes
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- DATES:** 24 April – 27 August 2012
- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
Sabatini Building, A1, Sala de Protocolo and Sala Bóvedas
- ORGANISED BY:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
- CURATED BY:** Manuel Borja-Villel
- COORDINATED BY:** Rafael García

The work of James Coleman (Ireland, 1941) proposes a reflection on the construction and experience of reality and explores questions relating to perception, representation, memory and identity. Through his use of audiovisual media, Coleman situates the subject at the centre of his work inviting the viewer to consider how interpretation shapes our understanding of what we see. The “photographic” (still and moving image) plays an essential role in these investigations, which are articulated and accompanied by a certain poetic hermeticism and meticulous use of language.

Incorporating synchronized projections of slides, films, audio narrations and soundtracks, Coleman creates *mise-en-scène* with references taken from daily life, literature, painting, theatre and cinema. Proposing visual scenarios which remain open to interpretation (double images, repetitions, dissociation of image and text, different narrative rhythms and tempos, alternation of past and present) Coleman’s work solicits viewers to participate in the unfolding of meaning. This exhibition, the most comprehensive retrospective to be devoted to Coleman’s long and illustrious career, brings together a wide selection of his work that includes his early pieces from the 1970s, his work of the '90s like *Lapsus Exposure* and *I N I T I A L S*, and important pieces like *Fly, Box, Untitled: Philippe VACHER* and *Retake with Evidence*. A special selection of material from his personal archives is also on view to the public for the first time.

Early Films, 1967-1972

This group of films made in Milan and Ireland between 1967 and 1972 makes it clear that from very early on, Coleman’s explorations on the properties of “the photographic” were going to constitute the allegorical basis for his analysis of the photographic image as a psychic and social staging of the self. In *Pheasant*, the interplay of photograph and moving image presents us with an irresolvable reality between “death” and “life” through the image of a pheasant posed to look as though it realizes it is being watched. In *Clock*, he films an alarm clock with its hands stopped at 7:22. The filmic time passes yet the hour remains motionless, which gives the image a certain similitude with a still

photograph. *La Valle della Morte* presents the first few frames of a film, with the title superimposed on a landscape. However, the view shown is not that of Death Valley (California-Nevada) but Monument Valley (Navajo Tribal Park, Utah-Arizona border), an icon of the Hollywood western. In *Skull*, the film restores an enigmatic appearance of life to a ram's skull shown in isolation, subverting the *fascinum* attributed to the photographic gaze as that which petrifies life. In *Work-Apron*, a shot of a balcony in an Italian town assumes the character of a theatrical performance, reminding the viewer that the photographic or filmic image conceals the world behind the scenes.

Clara and Dario, 1975 (Exhibited in the Sala de Protocolo, Sabatini Building)

Clara and Dario is regarded as one of the artist's key works because it develops the unique format which characterizes his later creations: the projection of slides with a recorded voiceover narrating a story of intersubjective relations. Two synchronized carousels each project in continuous cycle a sequence of colour photographs of a face. On the left is the character Clara, and on the right, Dario. The alternate forward and backward movement of the images complements the play between the present and the past in the narration, a possible dialogue between two people who are indecisive about whether or not to go on a journey together to Lake Como, the place of their childhood. Meanwhile, a romance between two further characters, Elsa and Andrea, enters the picture, and the viewer becomes uncertain whether they refer to Clara and Dario's adolescent identities or to childhood friends. Two narratives thus cross and fold over each other like a Moebius strip. Through the voiceover and the tender gazes of the projected faces, the viewer is taken on a journey to an experience where personal identity is seen as a process in continuous flux, not wholly owned by the self, but inseparable from its shared intimacy with others.

Box (ahhreturnabout), 1977 (Exhibited in the Sala de Bóvedas, Sabatini Building)

This is one of the few works by Coleman based on documentary material, in this case footage from the legendary 1927 return match in Chicago between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey for the world heavyweight boxing title. It is also the work which implicates the body most intensely. A regular beat consisting of two components, a pulse and its reverberation resembling the systole and diastole of the human heart, takes almost violent hold of the visitor's body and turns it into the resonating chamber

of the artwork. At regular intervals, the images flash for a few fractions of a second, so briefly that it is impossible to follow the progress of the fight. With the heartbeat, the pulse of the visitor's own body and the staccato phrases that are heard, Coleman orchestrates a link between the visitor and the visual and acoustic apparatus. Not only does this generate the work's complex aesthetic configuration, in which subject, structure and effect are interwoven, but several temporal levels also intersect. The representation of a historic event and the presence of its perception become permeable to each other, as if the historic were not represented but present and at the same time suspended in the aesthetic experience, thus evoking a dialogue with Walter Benjamin's concept of history and experience.

Seeing for Oneself, 1987-1988

The dramaturgical elements introduced into Coleman's earlier performed works are here transformed into photographic *tableaux vivants* based on the visual codes of popular pictorial narratives, and presented as a slide projection synchronized with a recorded narration. *Seeing for Oneself* circulates around the paradoxes of the subject's formation ensuing from its attempts to reconcile the "truth" of rationalist logic and the "sense" of the phenomenal body, social conformity and individual agency, the self and its representation.

Charon (MIT Project), 1989

The work owes its title to the fact that it was produced during an artist's residency at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. It is a piece which combines and synthesizes all the aspects of his earlier work: the problem of perception; the dimensions of the psychological, the social, the cultural and the historic; dramatic and theatrical elements; and the search for the self and the impossibility of an irrefutable identity. It consists of a tape and slide projection arranged as a number of episodes. Each one begins with the description of a photographic image and the circumstances surrounding its creation. In one episode concerned with a 'Frankenstein' image, Franz Kafka is quoted: "...we photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds." Here, the work takes on the meaning of depiction as exorcism. In another episode, portrayal can be interpreted as a means of manipulating reality. Over a projected

image of a bedside table in a hospital, an invisible subject ponders the possibility of escaping death by the appropriation of a photographic image. If, at the final moment, it is true that one's whole life flashes before one's eyes, this final moment also has its image of remembrance, and that image its image, making up an endless series of images. Death would thus be eternally postponed, and the image included in a lived reality as a means of staving off death: photography as an elixir of life.

Untitled: Philippe VACHER, 1990

This piece, produced in an operating theatre in a hospital, shows an actor, Philippe Vacher, falling forward onto a surgical cart, and then righting himself and turning towards the camera. One imagines the entire action would take about three seconds, but in fact it unfolds over seventeen minutes. Time seems dilated. Certain images appear to linger longer to determine whether this is an objective peculiarity or a subjective perception. A second manipulation of the footage teeters on the edge of perceptibility. Not at all evident at first, it only gradually becomes visible in time. Its first sign is that by about five minutes into the piece, the primary colors are muted and start fading as if the filmstock itself had aged. Through the use of a black and white negative and a second process of rephotography, Coleman gradually leaches the color from the film.

Lapsus Exposure, 1992-1994

The work evolves around a nineties pop group who have assembled under contract to record a new album and have a group photograph taken for the cover, *Lapsus Exposure* delves further into the philosophical and social implications of the reproductive image.

INITIALS, 1993-1994

The clinical setting of this work, peopled by several characters, offers nothing that allows their relationships to be established with any certainty. They could be members of a family, hospital employees or even patients. In any case, there is a doubling amongst these potential roles. As the rooms in the hospital are painted and renovated, the occupants are also preparing, or "dressing up", for an occasion, which may be the

performance of a play. However, interwoven with this reading is a parallel narrative that relates to the hospital's earlier function, accentuating the sense that the past still haunts the present. The act of folding, which is alluded to visually as well as vocally, equates with the Deleuzian notion of enfolded multiple temporalities, for which the photograph becomes a primary metaphor.

Photograph, 1998-1999

The work consists primarily of projected photographs of a group of schoolchildren, predominantly girls, who are rehearsing a dance in costume. The projection is accompanied by a narration delivered by a young woman's voice. *Photograph* unites theatricality with poetic rhythm, rhyme and content. This theorizing of the staging of subjectivity takes the relationship between words and images as the site where meaning is negotiated between the semiotic "media".

Retake with Evidence, 2007

Retake with Evidence, an allegory concerned with issues of judgement from the perspective of the "Western subject", explores the origins of thought in Ancient Greece through its mythology and philosophy. The actor Harvey Keitel slowly makes his way through a sparse but dramatically lit set, reciting a text on guilt and governance, sightlessness and oblivion, retribution and beauty. The work shows that evidence is located at the nucleus of questions of representation. Evidence not only plays an important part visually in the setting of the piece, but also in its narration. Seeing the actor amid this scenery of broken Greek statuary and skulls brings *Oedipus Rex* to mind. Metaphors of vision and blindness make Sophocles's play a tragedy of enlightenment that dramatizes the heroic attempts of reason to fix the identity of the subject.

In addition to these works, the exhibition also includes *Fly* (1970), *Connemara Landscape* (1980) and *Ligne de Foi* (1991).

The Early Films will be shown in different cycles during the exhibition.

The following works will be shown over two separate periods:

- First period, from 25 April to 18 June: *Photograph*, I N I T I A L S.
- Second period, from 20 June to 27 August: *Lapsus Exposure*; *Seeing for Oneself*.

Biographical notes

James Coleman currently lives and works in his native Ireland. He studied in Dublin (National College of Art and Design and University College). Later on he was at the École de Beaux Arts de Paris and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan. Before moving to Milan, where he developed his artistic career for twenty years, he worked in London and Paris. In 1973 he represented Ireland at the Paris Biennale. He has also participated in different Documenta: IX (1992), X (1997), XI (2002) and XII (2007). His work can be found in important collections such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst in Gant, or the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne in Paris. Recently, three of his works have been incorporated to the Museo Reina Sofía's collection.

Catalogue

On occasion of the exhibition, Museo Reina Sofía has published a catalogue, both in English and Spanish, reviewing the artist's whole trajectory. The volume is completed with some four texts by prestigious art historians: *Three early works by James Coleman*, by **Rachel Haidu**; *Ghostly Medium: James Coleman's Charon (MIT Project)*, written by **Rebecca Comay** and **Michael Newman**; *'How Try Say' or the Experience for Seeing* by **Georges Didi-Huberman**, and the last one, *James Coleman: Retake with Evidence*, by **Benjamin Buchloh**. Furthermore, the catalogue will take in introduction texts —whose authors are **Manuela Ammer**, **George Baker**, **Mieke Bal**, **Lynne Cooke**, **Jean Fisher**, **Luke Gibbons**, **Kaja Silverman** and **Dorothea von Hantelmann**— for each of the **49 works** included in it.

Related activities

Conference and guided visit

Rachel Haidu (professor at the Rochester University, New York, and author of *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broothaers, 1964–1976*) will impart both activities, organised by the Museum around James Coleman, his figure and work. Under an attentive reading of certain key works by the artist, Rachel Haidu will talk on the importance of analyzing not only the *mise en scène* in Coleman's projects, but also the dramatic narratives and the actor's role in his works.

Conference

Date: 25 April

Time: 19:30 h

Place: Auditorio 200. Museo Reina Sofía. Free entrance until full capacity

Guided visit to the exhibition

Date: 26 April

Time: 19:30 h

Place: Edificio Sabatini. Exhibition. Free pre-registration indispensable via email: programasculturales2@museoreinasofia.es. 25 available places

FTP access data:

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