

Juan Downey

Video Trans Americas (1973–76/1997)

Juan Downey (Santiago de Chile, 1940 – New York, 1993) worked from art's approach to life, steering his work closer to experience than the production of objects. His installation *Video Trans Americas* brings together a selection of videos he recorded on the first stage of a trip around the American continent, carried out from 1973–76, in which he sets out a journey with stops in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia and Chile. Downey sought to identify the common values in different American cultures in the project, taking stock of his own Chilean identity whilst offering the viewer of his images an interconnected map of America and a mirror to discover part of the communities on it.



"Many of the cultures in the Americas exist today in complete isolation, unaware of their variety as a whole and shared myths. This road trip was formulated to develop an all-embracing perspective of the diverse peoples that currently inhabit the American continents via a video-recorded account. From the cold forests of the north to the southern tip of the Americas; a form of evolution in space that shrouds time, viewing a culture in its own context and in the context of others, and, finally, setting all interactions of space, time and context in a work of art. The cultural information will be exchanged primarily in videos filmed on the road, and screened in towns so that people can see themselves and other people. Here the role of the artist is conceived as a cultural communicator, an activating anthropologist with a visual medium of expression: video."

That was how Downey started his account – in the spring of 1973, in New York – which he wrote over the course of his travels around America from 1973 to 1979. The quote encapsulates his primary concerns and the techniques that were implicit in his work: the obsession with a culture tied to its socio-political context and the problem of intercultural identity; nomadism as a mental state in the permanent search for strategies to establish communication between culture and biography, and video as a medium to facilitate the ideas and as a mirror through which the artist is reflected at the same time as he is projected on to society.

After spells in Barcelona, Paris and Washington, Downey settled in New York at the end of the 1960s, the place in which discovered video and joined the "post-'68" community of artists, who employed it as a medium because of its potential to analyse and critique mechanisms of

societal control. He stood apart as one of the pioneers in the use of video, defining themes to develop collective identity, and conceiving it as a tool for developing an interactive experience, including the public/viewer, the protagonists of images and the artist. "Video has brought my aesthetic efforts closer to social and political issues with more clarity than any other type of material or artistic process."

Pinochet's coup d'état and the death of president Allende in 1973 were events that would have a profound affect on him at the outset of his journey, and would see his output take on new interpretations governed by the political situation. Despite the feeling of dislocation he experienced and the dualism shared by exiles and immigrants, Downey remained strongly bound to his own identity as a Chilean and maintained close contact with the artistic and socio-political reality in his country.

Bibliography

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