



Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

The CPPC fosters international dialogue about Latin American art and ideas



The Avant-Garde Videos of Jaime Davidovich

APRIL 19, 2017

Jaime Davidovich was an integral part of the SoHo-based experimental art scene of the 1970s and 1980s, and worked in a broad variety of media throughout his long career, including video, painting, and installation. He is perhaps best known, though, as a pioneer in public access cable television, as exemplified by his creation of *The Live! Show* (1979–1984).

Below is a selection of video works that were discussed and accompanied by selected stills in the book *Jaime Davidovich in conversation with/en conversación con Daniel R. Quiles*, published in 2017 by the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros as the tenth volume in its bilingual *Conversaciones/Conversations* series about contemporary Latin American artists.

Full-length versions of nine of Davidovich's videos are accompanied here by excerpts from the conversation he conducted over time with art historian Daniel R. Quiles that were published in the above-mentioned volume. In his discussions, Davidovich recounts his early years in postwar Argentina, the coup d'état in 1962 that led to his relocation to New York City, and his fascinating career in which he was often at the forefront of innovations in art and mass media.

Daniel R. Quiles: And indeed one of your first videos is *Road*, 1972. It treats the median strip of a road as a thick vertical line, while street noises play on the soundtrack.

Jaime Davidovich: This piece was part of an installation at the Akron Art Museum. The main space had a large adhesive tape work, and at the entrance to the exhibition, there was a monitor on the floor showing a 20-minute video of the road outside of the museum. It was like bringing the outside space into the inside space.

DRQ: How did you come to know Gordon Matta-Clark and begin working with him on *The Fake Estates*?

JD: Gordon lived across the street. This is number one. Number two, he was half-Chilean; he spoke Spanish. Like me, he was going outside the gallery spaces. He was not showing photographs or drawings in galleries at that time. Instead, he was going to the piers and cutting pieces of the pier with a saw. It was very subversive, very anti-architectural work. When he learned that I was using video, he said, "I'm buying these slivers of land in Queens," and I said, "I'm very interested in that." He went and got the blueprints and he gave me three; they were maybe ten dollars each. He said, "Let's go to Queens to find my pieces," but the guy who owned the rest of the property would not let us in because the piece of land was inside his warehouse, in a corner. The size of that little piece was maybe one foot—he didn't even know that it wasn't his! It belonged to the city. In other places, however, we were able to go and see the pieces. I went there with my Portapak and made a video

DRQ: Your videos from this period make clear shifts between indoor and outdoor locations—from the controlled, seemingly neutral studio environments of *3 Mercer Street* and *Baseboard*, both 1975, to the space of the city in *Walking SoHo*, 1975, *Sidewalk*, 1975, and *Two Windows*, 1976. They analyze or investigate these spaces, tracing surfaces with straightforward camera movements. In *3 Mercer Street*, it is as if a street scene gets collaged within the space of the gallery when the artist Stuart Sherman periodically appears with his signature table, objects, and ambiguous movements, in this case performing his *5th Spectacle*.

JD: In 1975, I had a show at 112 Greene Street called 116 Greene Street. I covered the whole space, including the art on view, with adhesive tape, as a way to draw attention to its volume, contours, and the fact that it technically reaches all the way to the 116 Greene Street building. I also made a videotape documenting the work. Within the space, I showed a piece called TV Wall, which expanded on my Cleveland video installations. In general, I was very active. I showed in the Project Room at the Museum of Modern Art, the New Filmmaker Series of film and video at the Whitney, and 3 Mercer Street Store, where I was a regular. I had a one-person show at The Kitchen. I made an effort to show in both established institutions like the Whitney and MoMA, and completely alternative spaces.

JD: I was actually watching when the death of [President Juan] Perón was announced on television; I saw it on the set that my parents had in their living room. When I came back to United States, I started making *La patria vacía*, because for me, it was the right metaphor to describe how Perón had left the country in sudden and complete anarchy. There was no system in place. It was completely chaotic. The people in charge were not qualified to do their work; there was a lot of corruption; an incompetent president, and behind her, López Rega. It was a formula for either civil war, or the cessation of the country as an entity; it would cease to exist.

DRQ: The video follows a trajectory from Manhattan to the Argentinean neighborhood in Queens. A small section of adhesive tape is affixed to the lens so that it blocks out part of the view—for me it reads as an obstruction to vision, a blind spot. A photograph of Perón lying in state is then covered with tape; the tape is removed to reveal a map of Argentina that reveals the title. For much of the video, we hear your voice intoning, over and over again, “Perón...Perón...Perón...” and after a while, it starts to sound like the French word *parole*, or “word...”

JD: There are also a lot of audio clips taken from the *Montoneros* and other leftist groups. I felt very strongly that the whole thing was unsustainable. I didn’t make the piece with the intention of showing it, because there was not much interest in the United States about Argentina, and video art was basically unknown in Argentina. I don’t think there were many works of video art produced in Argentina at this time. I made *La patria vacía* with the support of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts that came with no strings attached. With that money, I was able to produce the piece with my own equipment in my own studio. I showed *La patria vacía* very rarely. It’s not a tape that had distribution or was shown in many festivals, but a personal tape that came from a need to express my feelings about that particular period.

JD: In 1964, I came [to New York] with zero—and zero jobs. When we returned [to New York from Cleveland, Ohio] in the 1970s, I caught a good break and received some of the video grants that were being given to artists at that time. I got big grants from the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] and CAPS [Creative Artists Public Service Program, funded by New York State Council on the Arts]. These grants were quite rare, and allowed me to buy the latest equipment. I bought the color Portapak as soon as it came onto the market, and made *Views of SoHo*, 1977.

DRQ: You made *La patria vacía* in 1975, before the first Cable SoHo meetings. In 1984, following the end of *The Live! Show*, you made another discrete video: *Evita: A Video Scrapbook*. At that moment, Argentina was undergoing its transition to democracy. I'm curious why these two videos about Peronism and the Argentinean situation bookend the period in which you were very closely and consistently involved with television.

JD: I felt that 1975 was a historical moment, and when I made *Evita: A Video Scrapbook* in 1984, it was another. *Evita* had turned into a Broadway show [in 1979] with huge success. But that is not the real story of how the media was manipulated after *Evita's* death. I felt that these things had a lot to do with my work, and I also felt that she was a tremendously important historical figure, whether you are for or against her. At the end of *Evita: A Video Scrapbook*, the last words in the piece are, "we are still living in a historical intermission." *Evita* and Perón were very much on the minds of the Argentinean people living during that intermission.

DRQ: How did contemporary events in Argentina have a presence in your life?

JD: In *Evita*, the video begins with me sitting watching a TV, watching from the outside. I'm viewing the events of that country from a distance, not a part of the events there. Yet even though I don't live there, I am there, in the sense that I make work about events that happen there. So in 1983, I called it a "video scrapbook" because it was about my memories of *Evita* in the context of living in the United States, seeing the Dirty War and the transition to democracy on television, and now coming full circle to this freely elected official, Raúl Alfonsín, whose party was not Peronist. His "radical" party was not literally radical. It was center left, sometimes a little bit right. It was a major force—the opposition during the Peronist years.

More *Cite, Site, Sights*

Morazán, or how to delve into a place as a strategy for regeneration after the Peace Accords (1992)

Luisa Fuentes Guaza

Sweden and Latin America: possible dialogues around geometric abstraction

Sofía Frigerio

Documenting the Visual

Building a Latin American Collection at the MoMA Library

Milan R. Hughston