

About the Artist

Juan Downey was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1940 and died in New York, NY, in 1993. He received a BA in Architecture from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in 1961. He studied at Stanley Hayter's Atelier 17 in Paris from 1961-1965. From 1969 on, the artist lived and worked in New York, NY. He was an Associate Professor at the School of Architecture and School of Art and Design, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY, from 1970-92.

Solo exhibitions featuring Juan Downey's work include those at Howard Wise Gallery, New York, NY; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Centre del Carme, Valencia, Spain; Museo de Arte Moderno de Chiloé, Castro, Chiloé, Chile; 49th Venice Biennale Chilean Pavilion, Venice, Italy; and Sala de Arte Fundación Telefónica, Santiago, Chile.

Downey's work was included in numerous group exhibitions including those at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; New Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; seven *Whitney Biennial Exhibitions*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (from 1975-91); *Documenta 6*, Kassel, Germany; *Sydney Biennale*, Sydney, Australia, (1982); *Il Biennial de La Habana*, Havana, Cuba, (1986); International Center for Photography, New York, NY; Musée national d'Art moderne-Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; *Kwangu Biennial*, Gwangju, Korea; and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany.

Downey was the recipient of numerous fellowships, grants, and awards among them The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fellowship, (1971, 1976); CAPS, Creative Artists Program Service, New York State Council of the Arts, Grants (1972, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989); National Endowment for the Arts, Grants, (1974, 1975, 1976, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1992); Rockefeller Foundation, Fellowship, (1981, 1985, 1989); and the American Film Institute, Independent Filmmaker Program, Award, (1986).

Downey's work can be found in the collections of The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, NY; The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Centre Pompidou/ Musée national d'Art moderne, Paris, France; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Centre, del Carme, Valencia, Spain; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Museu Chileno de Arte

Precolombino, Santiago, Chile; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Tate Britain, London, UK; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

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Juan Downey: The Invisible Architect

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MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

Juan Downey: The Invisible Architect

The Invisible Architect is the first US museum survey of works by Juan Downey. Born in Chile, Downey lived for the major part of his career in New York City, and was a fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1973 and 1975.

"Invisible architecture" is a concept central to Downey's work that refers to in his writings from the early '70s. Downey wrote in 1973, "the invisible architect becomes one with energy and manipulates this wave material."¹ This idea entered Downey's imagination through his mother's memories of her childhood on the island of Chiloé in Chile, as well as from his studies in architecture, and his exposure to the magnetic, psychological, and optical work of other expatriates he met in Paris in the early '60s.

This exhibition covers several decades of Downey's work, including his early experiments in art and technology, when he began to shift from an object-based artistic practice to an experiential approach that combined interactive performance with sculpture and video. It also features Downey's video installations from the 1970s and '80s, in which he combined autobiographical and anthropological approaches to the documentary genre, one of his most important contributions to the field. Downey's later works are explorations of both the intellectual and historical myths of European culture and the roots of Latin American identity, realized in complex video works that utilize associative visual metaphors, collage techniques, and nonlinear narratives.

Early Communication and Electronic Drawings of the 1960s

Juan Downey's paintings and etchings from the early 1960s are inhabited by surrealistic, robot-like figures. These science-fictional forms soon would develop into electronic sculptures inspired by the work of Vassilakis Takis and Julio Le Parc, artists Downey met in Paris in the early '60s. While the anti-object movement was raging in Europe, expanded forms that combined art, science, happenings, and technology were gaining importance in the US. There were performances of art and technology in New York that inspired the formation of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in 1967; and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) was pairing artists with scientists to make collaborative projects. In 1973 Downey was invited to come to CAVS as a

visiting researcher.

Meditations on the Americas: Works from the 1970s through the 1980s

Between 1973 and 1976 Downey began a series of trips by car from New York to various nations in South America. These and subsequent journeys would have lasting effects on his artistic practice; and they led to the production of *Video Trans Americas*, the culmination of seven years of work.

Downey wanted to record on video "the commonly shared myths" of the various cultures of the Americas, and he also believed that populations in the Americas were isolated from one another. To create *Video Trans Americas*, he filmed the communities he encountered in Texas, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. As he travelled from New York throughout the Americas, he exchanged information through video "playing back one culture in the context of another." He saw himself as a "cultural communicant" and an "activating anthropologist" who presented "a form of evolution in space while enfolding time."

A second body of work includes videos, drawings, and photographic and audio recordings of life in the federal reserve of the Amazon. Downey travelled there with his wife Marilys and stepdaughter Elizabeth (Titi) Lamadrid, first visiting the Guahibos in Central Orinoco in August and September 1976, and then canoeing deeper up river to Mavaca and Tayari, where the family lived among the Yanomami communities between November 1976 and May 1977. He documented the Yanomami's life in the *shabono*, a natural structure that can shelter between 80 and 350 people. Invisible architectures were present everywhere in the social structures and rituals of these communities.

His recordings from this period and his meditation drawings (created after he meditated, a practice he began at age 19) reveal a profound desire to understand the "the very life principle." The drawings attest to Downey's interest in exploring the conceptual connections between the enclosed elliptical or circular architecture of the shabono, the shamanism of the Yanomami, which included endo-cannibalist rituals, their cosmology, and his private spiritual life. Gradually, in his attempt to make sense of these societies and the fragile balance in which they lived, Downey's search became an existential one, caught as he was between the European,

American, and Chilean cultures.

Reflections on Mirrors and Other Illusions: Works from the 1980s

Downey's love of painting, his obsession with Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, his play with mirrors, and his interest in the economical and political power of European empires, which he cultivated while living in Madrid and Paris in the early 1960s, found visual expression with an emphatic semiotic twist in his video series of the 1980s, *The Thinking Eye*. In these tapes a highly sophisticated visual language of video layering and image manipulation enhances the social relationships between people in the paintings and the power structures as represented by fin de siècle architecture. These combinations constitute the virtual and subliminal building blocks in his last incarnations of invisible architecture.

In these works, which include *The Thinking Eye* series and related videos as well as drawings from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and the *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51), one can see the effects of art history, semiotics, and structuralism on Downey's work. The videos are painstakingly worked over and built up into highly constructed essays on the themes of the gaze and reflection, illusion and reality, and identity and power, concepts that were central to art historical discourse in America and Europe by the 1980s. Downey used them to construct highly complex accounts of the political and economic forces at play during historical periods of intense creativity.

As video technology became increasingly sophisticated, Downey took the concept of invisible architecture a step further to demonstrate how the dynamics of pictorial space—the visual equivalent of linguistic strategies—subliminally reinforced the psychological pressure of social relationships within and outside the painting surface. There are moments in these videos in which the subject is lost in the pure pleasure of abstract space, similar to one's experience when looking at Downey's *Meditations*. If one were to enter into the work, one would find oneself in a virtual architecture.

¹ Juan Downey, "Invisible Architecture," *On Site* no. 4 (1973).