

Chris Kraus, *How to Shoot a Crime*, 1987, still from a Super 8 film transferred to DVD, 28 minutes.



Of course, it is not immediately clear in what sense this impulse might in fact be female, and the recent show did not body forth a ready answer. Was it in the poetic take on sex and death in 1987's *How to Shoot a Crime*, which features interviews between Sylvère Lotringer (Kraus's then-husband) and two dominatrices, spliced with gruesome homicide footage from New York? Or perhaps in the very different *In Order to Pass*, 1982, Kraus's earliest film, a Super 8 tone poem shot in her childhood homeland of New Zealand, in which dreamy, repetitive Marie Menken-ish images of parks and people blithely wash by—and do we really buy these as indicative of feminine sensitivities anyway?

To understand what's really so *female* about Kraus's films, one should seek out her 2010 essay "Female Writing," in which an assessment of works by Elizabeth LeCompte and Kathy Acker brings to light her own complicated love/hate relationship with the issue. "There is always too much feeling in female writing, but feeling itself isn't the point. Female writing is compositional. It is intellectual vaudeville. It arrives at the moment of feeling, then leaves. It demonstrates something: itself." It's an entirely apt description of the dazzling films, one that finds an easy alliance with a constant questioning and transparency of the self, an ideal for many feminists—and one that, in its ambivalence, aligns with feminist artists and filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer, Su Friedrich, Tracey Moffatt, and Sadie Benning, to name but a few.

Kraus's insistence on presence in her films, which parallels the diaristic tone so often found in her writings, is most beautifully conjured in some of her later documentary-style pieces. Shot on Super 8, they express an immediacy that is wildly different from her earlier, more nostalgic work. Watching the schoolchildren interviewed on their class trip to learn about the Underground Railroad in *Traveling at Night*, 1990, or the dominatrices in *How to Shoot a Crime*, who speak vividly about their desultory lives, one wonders what Kraus would do with today's HD equipment—and whether we'll ever find out.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

## Catalina Parra

LUDLOW 38

During its exurban heyday of the early 1970s, Land art wasn't known for political critique. But by the 1980s, artists such as Agnes Denes and Maya Lin were tracing a different trajectory of its co-optation of Minimalism's

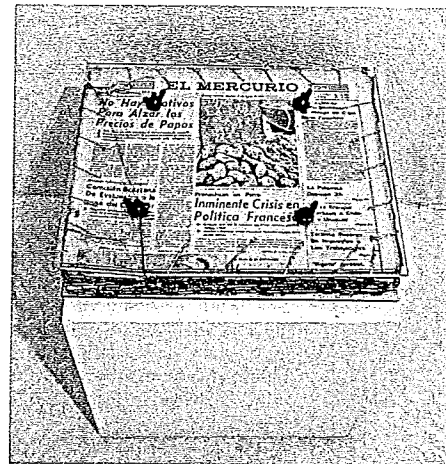
formal simplicity, understanding that Land art's monumental scale and extreme geometricization occupied an uneasy relationship to memorialization, histories of territorial dispossession, and the unequal distribution of natural resources among global populations. Like Denes—and also of the same generation as artists such as James Turrell, Robert Smithson, and Walter De Maria—Chilean-born, New York-based artist Catalina Parra adopts a language of abstraction to pointed political effect. In *FOSA*, 2005, Parra excavated a massive pit the size of a large swimming pool in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile (where Patricio Guzmán's 2010 film *Nostalgia for the Light* revealed relatives of the disappeared victims of General Pinochet's regime regularly combing the sand for human remains). It isn't too much of a stretch to see the work's resemblance to a mass grave.

Represented here as a short video, *FOSA* initially seems uncharacteristic amid the mostly two-dimensional collages in this small yet tantalizing presentation of Parra's semantically fecund output from 1970 to the present. But in fact, the artist's work evidences remarkable consistency: It is typified by an ongoing exploration of political violence, and a suturing of unorthodox materials to do so.

After spending four years in Germany, Parra returned to Chile in 1972 during the Allende presidency and remained there through the most brutal years of the Pinochet dictatorship until a Guggenheim award allowed her to relocate to New York in 1980. During this period, Parra's collage work, which had previously leaned heavily on John Heartfield and Hannah Höch's politically tendentious photomontage techniques, began to incorporate stitched twine and thread in lieu of Dada's glue-affixed cuts, and featured stacks of newspapers, rather than the images clipped from within them, as its prime material. In her *Diario de Vida* (translated as "Diary of Life" or "Newspaper of Life"), 1977, Parra manipulated issues of *El Mercurio*—long the newspaper of record in Chile and the only national paper in circulation at the time—by bastioning copies of several editions with coarse twine. Encasing the four-inch stack are two clear acrylic sheets bolted together with large metal wing nuts, through which the headline "Inminente Crisis en Política Francesa" (Imminent French Political Crisis) is legible (the original was lost for decades and a version the artist remade in 2010 is also on display). The displacement of political volatility onto liberal foreign democracies was common during this period in Chile, largely to mask Pinochet and other allied Southern Cone dictatorships' reliance on terror to stifle dissent. Parra's news brick, with its fragile, hand-sewn perimeter sandwiched between the tightly pressed covers, is an emblem of the fear, control, and impenetrable silences of Pinochet's terror.

Upon closer inspection, *FOSA*, too, uses seemingly incommensurate materials to compound its power as a monument to the murdered. The sense of the large rectangular ditch as a stand-in for the numerous undiscovered mass graves is supplemented, and complicated, by the video's depiction of workers filling bags with bone-dry earth from a heap of rock and dirt extracted from the hole, and then uncoiling barbed wire to grid over the pit. The precise geometry of Land art, troubled first by the connotation of the tomb, is troubled again by this

Catalina Parra, *Diario de Vida* (Diary of Life), 1977, *El Mercurio* newspapers, thread, Plexiglas, metal bolts, metal nuts, 12 x 6 x 16".



fortified pit, which is highly protected and therefore more precious than the tomb's implied victims. Yet perhaps Parra sees the dirt pile and the hole as possible forensic evidence—and FOSA as the coda to the era of Land art that used the scale of desert landscapes as a metaphor for history in its tectonic measure, not in its sociopolitical specificity.

—Eva Díaz

CAMBRIDGE, MA

## Juan Downey

MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

Juan Downey's video *Plato Now*, 1973, combines footage of the artist's early-1970s performance-installations with studio images, often shot through water. A motif that runs throughout his work, water's many potentialities—to flow, to mark time, to distort whatever is beyond or submerged within it, to signal its own mediating presence via ripples on its surface, and to reflect its viewer—echo the layered aims of this Chilean-born artist, whose formal training in architecture, abiding interest in cybernetics, and quixotic faith in combating late-capitalist alienation through technologies both high and low were readily apparent in this, his posthumous and first stateside retrospective. Curator Valerie Smith used Downey's concept of "invisible architecture" (which his notebooks describe as "the understandment [sic] of energy and the manipulation of this wave-material") as a linchpin for the artist's poetic and evolving oeuvre, touching on at least five interrelated phases: late-1960s electronic sculptures; initial explorations with video in the early '70s, resulting in his groundbreaking travelogues *Video Trans Americas* (1973–76); para-anthropological videos made between 1976 and 1977 in response to periods spent living in the Brazilian Amazon; sustainable architecture and design proposals from this same period; and several series of experimental pedagogical videos, including "The Thinking Eye," 1974–89.

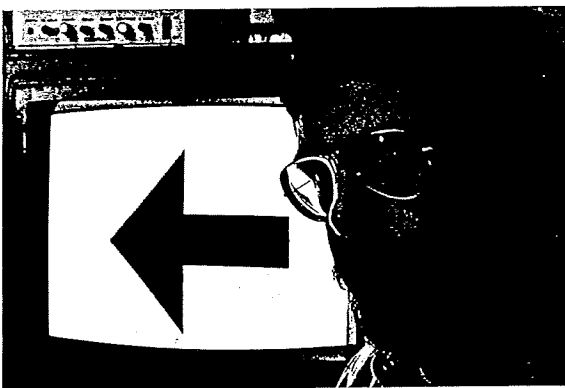
The body and machine and the organic and electronic were often linked in Downey's late-'60s interactive works, which he produced while a member of Washington, DC's New Group. In 1971, he would go on to join Perception, the New York–based video collective that also included Frank Gillette, Beryl Korot, Andy Mann, and Ira Schneider. With this latter community, his work grew more ambitious and complex, synthesizing a diverse mix of media, geographical sites, and modes of inquiry. For example, returning to *Plato Now*, among the work's many parts is the original 1973 performance-installation at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. This component featured nine meditating performers who listened, via headphones, to

individual Platonic dialogues generated by the electric impulses of their own alpha waves. Live feed of their faces appeared behind them on monitors, while shadows of the audience were projected on the wall they faced. Another component of *Plato Now*, a sketch of the 1973 performance that Downey drew by hand, served both as a record for that iteration of the work and a discrete piece in its own right; thankfully, Smith included many such examples of Downey's fantastical-yet-functional draftsmanship.

A frequent contributor to Korot's *Radical Software*, Downey took the journal's utopian hopes for feedback as an agent of global connectivity seriously. With *Video Trans Americas*, he explored the possibility of using video to link disparate modernized, underdeveloped, and effectively pre-Hispanic regions in the Americas. The project began with Downey, Gillette, and Willoughby Sharp making *Easy Rider*-esque trans-American trips (by car, by plane, by boat) and culminated in 1976 with Downey staying (sometimes with his wife and stepdaughter) among indigenous Guahibos and Yanomami of the Amazon. At the List, the early phase of this work was represented via a room-size, floor-bound map of North and South America with "dialectical" pairs of videos corresponding to respective regions; on the surrounding walls were "meditation drawings" and photo-collages related to Downey's pseudo-fieldwork. Elsewhere in the show, representations of his "media ecology" were less successful, as in the following two galleries where audio tracks from four simultaneous videos bled into incoherence. These included the masterful *Abandoned Shabono*, 1978, and *Laughing Alligator*, 1979, which recount his time in the Amazon by triumphantly inverting the anthropological film genre, repeatedly turning the camera back onto the artist and viewer alike and, in the case of the latter, introducing the advanced editing and graphics of his late work.

While Downey's outraged response to the 1973 Pinochet coup in Chile was only touched on in this show (via announcements for the televised protest works *Chilean Flag*, 1974, and *Corner*, 1985), his disgust with the dictatorship and with imperialism in general was still palpable in the many late videos on hand: dense, made-for-TV expositions on canonical works of music, literature, and painting such as *The Looking Glass*, 1981, *Information Withheld*, 1983, *J. S. Bach*, 1986, and *Hard Times and Culture, Vol. 1: Vienna fin de siècle*, 1990, produced prior to the artist's death in 1993. The very first of these, *Las Meninas*, 1974, offers a Foucault-inflected analysis of the eponymous Velázquez painting that tethers Downey's earliest and later concerns. By his account, the painting situates, in the very place of the enlightened viewer, the ruthless sovereigns responsible for the conquest.

—Daniel Quiles



Juan Downey, *Information Withheld*, 1983, still from a color video, 28 minutes 27 seconds. From the series "The Thinking Eye," 1974–89.

SALEM, MA

## Marianne Mueller

PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

The popular strategy of inviting artists to interact with a museum's collections has clear benefits for the institution, creating new and potentially unexpected juxtapositions among objects, and encouraging an audience for contemporary art to engage with historical holdings. It is also a situation in which an institution's eccentricities become a virtue. Marianne Mueller's sojourn at the Peabody Essex Museum gave her the opportunity to craft an installation in response to a collection that dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, when the East India Marine Society began to assemble natural and artificial curiosities derived from maritime trade, including a diverse array of ship models