



Video Art in Central America: precarious archaeology of a short and personal history
by Ernesto Calvo

Confessions and methodology...

To narrate processes, above all, if they are very recent, has a great advantage, that at the same time can become a disadvantage: to relate first hand facts, the information can be richer, broader, more complex; however, maybe being so fresh, one loses the essential critical distance (weighed up? objective?) what one is supposed to possess in order to analyse such phenomena.

So, still with this lack of "distance", I will try at least to tell (cambialo según creas mas acertado) a brief and very personal account- from personal experiences - through the most recent years of video art in Central America. For this task, I'll apply Foucault's methodology (1), that I believe runs through all my reflections: to begin with, "archaeology", as expressed by this thinker, studies, in a sometimes precarious and ambiguous manner, the marginal and hidden facts...and on the other hand the concept of "institution". Therefore it is exactly from this platform that I have tried to influence the consolidation of video art in Central America (2).

First steps: making it visible...

During the year 2001, we organized, through the invitation of the Cultural Center of Spain in San José, an exhibit of Central American video art, however, the panorama didn't appear encouraging: it was difficult to get together the 14 artists that participated in this event. For this reason, I decided to label the exhibit review with a question mark, and at the same time, a hopeful answer: Video Art in Central America? : But it moves. (3)

It interested me to continue giving visibility to Central American video art, and so from my position as chief curator at the Costa Rican Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MADC), I promoted the undertaking of a kind of multiple experiment. This event coincided with the First Central American Video Art Contest: Inquieta Imagen/Anxious Image, together with an international exhibit, Contaminados: (Ex) Tensiones de lo Audiovisual/ Contaminated: Audiovisuals (Ex) Tensions, and a show of video projections, Espacios a la Experimentacion 1/ Experimental Spaces. (4)



In this first competition the amount of participants -43- surpassed our expectations, although the presented videos were very diverse, in their production as well as in their aesthetic quality. This first experience demonstrated that not only Central American video art "moves", that's to say, was already in motion, but, in addition, it was producing some impressive proposals and results.

(foto5) The confirmation of this arrived when the awarded 'first place' of the above mentioned event -Aria, by the Panamanian Brooke Alfaro, also won, shortly afterwards, the First Latin American Video Art Contest of the Inter American Development Bank; and then the same artist later obtained first prize at the Central American Visual Art's Biennial (Nicaragua), from which video art, almost non existent beforehand, started to be a dominant factor in the Central American contemporary art scene.

Continuing this search, in the years 2003 and 2004, the second and third Inquieta Imagen competitions (5) were carried out, with the financial support of the Spanish Cultural Centre, the Embassy of France and the HIVOS Foundation, from Holland. For this event the participation was not only bigger than the first time, but also the technical quality of the productions, the themes and concepts had reached considerable maturity.



As a result, in order to consolidate and amplify support for technological-artistic production in Central America, presently in 2005, the MADC (Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo) decided to include in the Fourth Inquieta Imagen, a selection of different aspects of digital art in the region, from which these new languages (fotografía y pintura digitales, propuestas interactivas en internet, virtuales, etc) will establish an enriched dialogue alongside video art proposals.

Some Video artists: proposals, themes, searches...

Rather than providing a rundown of the artists of each country- that in my understanding-have achieved with major

expressive and technical efficiency the theoretical management and practice of video art, I will provide instead a run down of some of the theme affinities.

I wanted to start this with the artist Brooke Alfaro (Panama), that despite having had for some years a successful "career" as a painter, started to approach video art at the end of the nineties, taking as the focus of his investigation through art, marginal people with whom he has maintained an direct and very open approach. From *Click, Click, toc, toc* (2000), to *Cortés* (2001), to the exquisite *Aria* (2001), or the impressive video-performance *Nueve* (2003), Brooke Alfaro has proved to be one of the most solid and consistent video artists of Central America.

From another perspective, Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso (Costa Rica), an artist who has recurrently explored different languages - painting, etching and drawing, installation and video art - has also produced diverse works with the choreographer Mariamalia Pendones, since the late nineties, including themes from anthropological-peripheral reflection (*Exotica. The Ultimate Otro*, 1997), to poetry (*Agua, Viento, Piedra*, 2000) to the subjective (*Ultimo round para Viernes*, 2003).

In a different vein, from a neat and formal approach, from 1998 to 2000, the recognised artist Priscilla Monge (Costa Rica) has produced a trilogy, structured as a series of "lessons", linked to the theme of violence carried out on the feminine figure (*Lección de Maquillaje, Como (des) vestirse, Como morir de amor*) however, she hasn't maintained a continuity with her video art production.

From another perspective, but also female, the artist Lucía Madriz (Costa Rica) has produced simple, but very precise videos related to the theme of violence and symbolic or real manipulation that women are subjected to within their social and intimate relationships, through the production of videos like *Tell me when to Smile*, (2002) and *Head Ache*, (2003).

In addition, the North American, residing in Panama, Donna Conlon, has also produced simple, although very efficient exercises of documentation, where the principle theme has always been the ecology and the co-existence of the human experience, (*Singular Solitario*, 2002; *Convivencia*, 2003; *Desatado*, 2003).

From the documentation of their own performances, other artists like the Guatemalan Sandra Monterroso (*The Essence of Life*, 2002; *Tus Tortillas mi amor*, 2004) and Regina Galindo (*Autocanibalismo*, 2002; *Lips*, 2003), approach, in a poetic manner, although sometimes very crude, the (de)limited spaces and functions that are assigned to women in our patriarchal societies. In the same fashion, the Costa Rican, Natacha Pachano, living in New York, has explored in a playful way the theme of the feminine image (*Lipstick*, 2001), together with other themes related to dislocated identity, or cinematographic appropriations (*Un chien appropriated*, 2003).

From a more formal and conceptual approach, the Spanish artist, residing in Costa Rica, Ana de Vicente, has approached metaphysics, anthropologic and natural themes (*Chakras 1.0; El Sembrado*, 2001; *Dis-continuo*, 2004), as well as spatial and social themes (*The Light*, 2003; *Popular Mechanics*, 2003). Somewhere between conceptual reflection and political or aesthetic reference, one also finds the video installations of Edgar León (*Memorias del porqué*, 2003 and 1, 2, 3, 2004).

This formal and conceptual simplicity is also evident in the video installations of the Costa Rican, residing in Switzerland, Cinthya Soto (*Una Flor (no) es una Flor...*, *Neptuno, Llo-ver*, all works from 2003), where the artist plays with the diffused frontiers between reality and representation.

In the digital animation environment, recognised for their technical quality and suggestive character, are the Honduran, Alan Omar Mairena (*Gravedad*, 2004), the ingenious *Dolls* (2002), from the Guatemalan Alvaro Sánchez, as well as, the more intimate and surreal *Sophia* (2004), from the El Salvadorian Danilo Girón, or the more committed to identity issues, *El Tiempo de Crear Nuestra Propio Imagen*, (2001), also from the El Salvadorian Diego Barraza.

Getting closer to considerations between animation and metaphysics, is the Honduran Hugo Ochoa, in *Cuentos de Honduras y Cegueras* (2002); and exploring the co-existence between painting, performance and audio-visual image, (*La Vitrina Nativí*, 2002); and the links between anthropological documentation and literature (*Como se Llama la Obra?* 2004).

The Photographer and designer José Alberto Hernández (Costa Rica), has made a clean and impressive reflection about sickness, birth, life and death, in video installations like *Auto-opsis* (2002) and *280 days or 40 weeks* (2003).

Another artist, who has carried out interesting exercises around the audio-visual with diverse implications, is the Panamanian Jonathan Harker, using *Panama City (Metropoli)*, (2001), and the magnificent short film *El Plomero*, (2002), parodying the political (*Tomen Distancia*, 2004).

From a more experimental-fiction genre, the Costa Rican Clea Eppelin and the Panamanian Ana Luisa Sánchez, have recreated attractive and beautiful examples of visual narrative, in works such as *Un Cuarto de Corto* (2002), *Zona Pasaje* (2002) or *Fábula Alemana en Rojo* (2003). Equally, linking the political critique with the memory, video and cinema, historic documentation and intimate reflection, the Panamanian Enrique Castro has produced exceptional material in *Memorias del hijo del Viejo* (2003). In the always polemic and hard field of direct political critique, several artists have produced strong commentaries about the habitual mediocrities and repression of power in our countries. For example, *Nos Vale Verja* (2002), a sarcastic animated documentary produced by Regina Aguilar and "Los Artistas de la Gente", is one of the best examples that has been produced in this vein.



Also connected to the subject of the politics, but seen of an effective metaphoric and ironic way simultaneously, is the video of Dario Escobar (Guatemala) "*Made in Taiwan*", where the artist reflects about the imaginary violence and 'kistch' of our countries.

Very suggestive proposals of public intervention have been produced by the artist Alejandro Ramírez (Costa Rica) who has explored, ironically, the paradoxes of "calm and peaceful" Costa Rica (La Patriótica, 2001, Canción de cuna, 2002); also ridiculing the national position on the Iraq war (Mi querido pueblo ambiguo, 2003), or playing with the relationship between graffiti painting and traditional and patriotic songs (Acción vandálica en mi Linda Costa Rica, 2003).

The photographer Jorge Albán (Costa Rica) has also explored different public spaces, like monuments (Conversaciones en el Parque, 2003), or the more globalised spaces of consumption and entertainment (Caída libre, 2003), being adventurous, creating in the interactive fields of videogames, and the Internet (Kennedy and Cia, 2004).

From the experimental documentary, the Nicaraguan Ernesto Salmerón has been working with found audiovisual archive material (Documento 1 al 4/29), with which he recovers and re-signifies documents concerning Nicaraguan History.



Another recurrent theme in some of Central American video art is that of migration. The Nicaraguan, residing in the U.S.A., Patricia Villalobos, has approached the fundamental fractures of the migrant's experience in video installations that mix painting, the audiovisual image and performance (Snow, 1999; Corto Circuito, 2000). Other artists, like the Honduran Naufus Ramírez residing in Canada, presents playful and at the same time ludicrous performances related to migration (Skin Changer, 2002; Original Banana Republic, 2002; Doing other People's Cleaning, 2003); and the Panamanian, residing in England Humberto Vélez (El Guachimán, 2001), who has also referred to the traumas and strangeness of the migrant's experience.

An ending, which is not the End...

All these very diverse and enriching individual approaches within video art- including others that I haven't referred to here, and many more that will gradually appear- have been favoured by a continuous effort of regional and international exchange (6), that have permitted Central American video art to continue moving slowly but surely forward...

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Notes:

1) Reference: Michel Foucault. The Archaeology of Knowledge. Siglo XXI, 1985.

2) This text doesn't try to be, neither can it be, a historical account of video art in Central America, because that's an investigation still to be done. For this reason, I will present only some of the artists and works that, in the last few years, I consider to be some of the most representative of the emergence and consolidation of video art in Central America as a visible and meaningful movement.

3) The exhibit was undertaken as a result of the invitation of the former director of that Center, Mrs. Lidia Blanco, in coordination with the artist Priscilla Monge. The participants were: Brooke Alfaro, (Panama), Andrés Carranza (Costa Rica), Marco Chia (Costa Rica), Darío Escobar (Guatemala), Jonathan Harker (Panama), José Alberto Hernández (Costa Rica), Priscilla Monge (Costa Rica), Alejandro Ramírez (Costa Rica), Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso (Costa Rica), Karla Solano (Costa Rica), Jaime-David Tischler (Costa Rica), Ana de Vicente (Costa Rica-Spain), Patricia Villalobos (Nicaragua-USA.) and Manuel Zumbado (Costa Rica).

4) In this first contest, the first three awarded were: Brooke Alfaro (Panama), José Alberto Hernández (Costa Rica) and Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso (Costa Rica). The artists who took part in the international exhibit Contaminated... were Fabián Marccacio (Argentina), Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Mexico-USA), Karin Schneider and Nicolás Guagnini (Brasil and Argentina), Santiago Echeverri (Colombia), Andrés Tapia (Chile), Fernando Llanos (Mexico), Txuspo Poyo (Spain), Takehito Kogenasawa (Japan-Germany), Ken Feingold (USA.), Regina Galindo (Guatemala). The exhibit Espacios a la Experimentación combined historical films and contemporary aesthetic experiments, with Latin American and international video art.

5) In the second competition, there were around 80 artists who participated and in the third, approximately 70. The winners of the second event were Lucía Madriz (Costa Rica), Edgar León (Costa Rica-Mexico) and Ernesto Salmerón (Nicaragua-Colombia); and in joint third place Enrique Castro (Panama), Alan Omar Mairena (Honduras) and Sandra Monterroso (Guatemala).

6) Besides the competition Inquieta Imagen and the exhibits Espacios a la Experimentación, two selections offered a greater promotion and visibility to video art in the region. The first exhibit was El dinosaurio todavía estaba allí. Videocreación más allá / acá de Centroamérica, which participated in the 2002 Bienal L.A Freewaves, in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA) (curated by Tamara Díaz Bringas and myself); also Hybris. Estética, cuerpo, política y cultura en el video arte de Centroamérica (curated also by me), invited to the VII Muestra y Coloquio Internacional de Arte Digital, in Cuba. Both exhibits have been circulating through Latin American countries, the United States, Europe and Australia.

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Biography - Ernesto Calvo

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