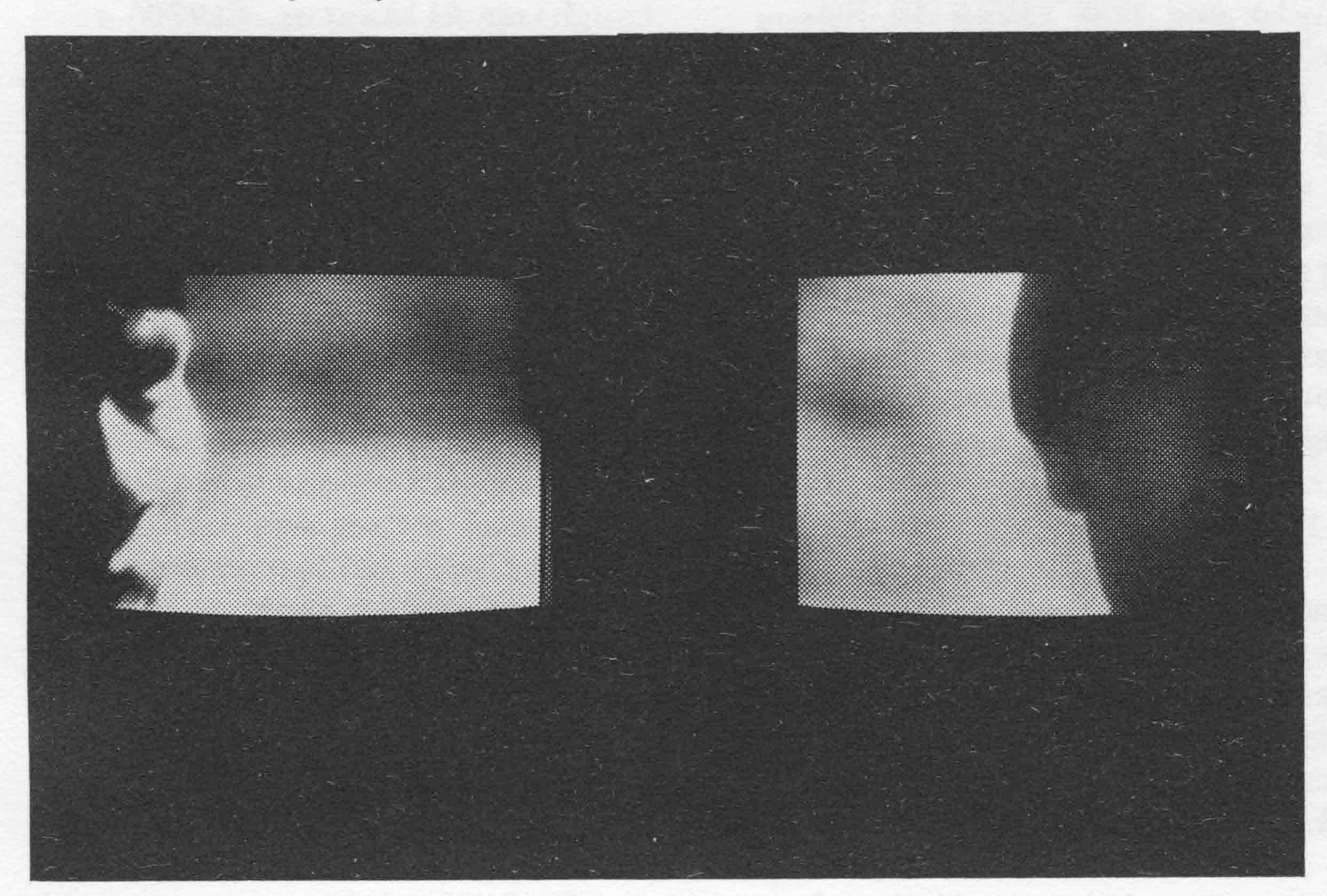
Yanomami Body Rhythms, 1978



Viewers of Juan Downey's "Video Trans Americas" tapes are confronted with the difference between documentary as art or as anthropology. The four tapes which comprise this MATRIX presentation document various rituals and moments in the life of the Yanomami Indians of Venezula's Amazonian rain forest. It's not simply documentation, though: Downey, a Chilean who studied art in Paris and Madrid and now lives in New York City, went to Venezuela to live with the Yanomami and to be "cannibalized." "I wanted to be eaten up by them," he says in The Singing Mute. In a recent UAM lecture Downey also stated that he wanted to develop an electronic form of communication with the Yanomami.

In The Singing Mute (1978) we see Downey describing a Yanomami drug ritual as if giving a lecture, but he is dressed in a business suit, standing in an office and speaking on the telephone. A little later in the tape we see a close-up of his face painted in traditional Yanomami designs, thus identifying himself with the Yanomami. The tape immediately establishes a complex dialectic of objective/ subjective, outside/inside, observer/observed. In viewing the tapes, however, these terms eventually become so complex that to reduce them to mere dichotomies would be unproductive.

For all the subjectivity of Downey's insertion of himself into Yanomami life, his relation to them goes beyond using their culture as a personal metaphor for his own consciousness. The work is dissimilar to the autobiographical narcissism of much recent video art, in that Downey's subjectivity

(while apparent) is not the focus of the work. Downey questions the place of the observer of another culture. Another critical niche into which Downey does not fit neatly is that of the minimalist/process-oriented video artist, even though his tapes are highly structured and in a sense formal. This is most evident in his use of simultaneous image/text/ voice-over/sound in The Laughing Alligator (1978) and The Singing Mute (1978) accompanying his suggestion that reality exists somewhere in the space between these ways of communicating. In Yanomami Body Rhythms, another formal concern is that the space/time and rhythms of the Yanomami are contrasted and compared with the space/time and rhythms of Downey's own aesthetic and the particular requirements of video technology. The real focus of Downey's work is not a concern with specificity of video as a medium, or an attempt to arrive at the essential properties of video as art, but rather the work concerns the question of who speaks and from where. This concern refers not only to Downey's position as an artist but also to the status of the technology he is using. In The Singing Mute we see an episode in which Downey walks through the forest accompanied by two Yanomami. One begins pointing a rifle at him and another a bow and arrow, but he keeps them at bay by "shooting" at them with his camera, alternately facing each one and zooming in and out. He reminds us that "the camera is also a dangerous weapon."

It is difficult to place
Downey in current video art
categories, but it is even
more awkward to determine

his work's status as anthropology because of Downey's personal interaction with the Yanomami and his obvious manipulations of the material. For example, in The Singing Mute he uses a color synthesizer and electronic sound manipulation to indicate hallucinatory states in his documentation of one of their drug rituals. Downey himself tends to denigrate the anthropological value of these tapes even though a good deal of anthropological information emerges from the project.

Downey's anthropological efforts parallel the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss which challenged the status of the "object" of anthropology and the position of the scientific observer. Levi-Strauss sees the anthropologist less as an "objective scientist in traditional terms and more as someone who often takes up the relay of the poet, the artist or the members of the culture under investigation, and who then constructs a logical and more conceptual equivalent system. This logical equivalent serves as a theoretical fiction which attempts not to compartmentalize man but to look for a type of explication which would reconcile art and logic, thought and matter, the perceptual and the intellectual.

The "Video Trans Americas"
project is perhaps closest
to the history of dramatized
documentary efforts in films
with an ethnographical intent
such as Flaherty's Nanook of
the North (1922), Cooper and
Schoedsack's Grass (1925)
and Chang (1927), Bunuel's
Land Without Bread (1932)
and Rouch's Chronique d'un
éte (1961). These films
range from using the life of
another people as "plot" for
a fairly conventional

adventure film (Chang), to imposing a completely Western metaphysic onto the life and rituals of another culture (Nanook of the North), to questioning the "objectivity" of the travel documentary mode and the position of the observer (Land Without Bread) to actually intervening in the life of the people being investigated in order to record their responses (Chronique d'un été). Downey's work continues this dialogue between fiction and documentary and combines it with structural anthropology's techniques for "extracting the secret architecture" (Levi-Strauss) of myth. Besides seeing myth as architecture, Downey analyzes the Yanomami architecture as myth: their basic dwelling unit, the shabono functions as the intersection of their social structure and their cosmology. Downey prefers to show these tapes on a circular bank of monitors which duplicates the plan of the shabono, thus once again using electronic means to extend and comment on Yanomami myth and social system.

The ambiguities in Downey's work are neither the ambiguities associated with autobiographical exploration of the "self" nor the ambiguities of a minimalist perceptual puzzle-solving game, but rather they embody the essential contradictions of the position of the observer and the fact that the observer is part of the culture which will eventually destroy the one it is investigating. For Downey, as for Lévi-Strauss, the tropics are sometimes sad (Tristes Tropiques) because what the anthropologist (and here, the artist) discovers are the roots of an eventual genocide.

Juan Downey was born in Santiago, Chile in 1940. He has studied architecture at the Catholic University of Chile and printmaking with Hayter at "Atelier 17" in Paris. He currently lives in New York City and is Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at Pratt Institute in New York.

## Constance Penley

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## Works in MATRIX:

Yanomami Body Rhythms, 1978 double-channel videotape, color, 5 minutes 39 seconds.

More Than Two, 1978, doublechannel videotape, color, 45 minutes.

The Laughing Alligator, 1978, single-channel videotape, color, 8 minutes 30 seconds.

The Singing Mute, 1978, single-channel videotape, color, 10 minutes 16 seconds.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Casa de las Américas, Havana, Cuba '65; Judson Church Gallery, NY '68; University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia '68; Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC '68; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC '69; Instituto de Arte Contemporaneo, Panama '69; Howard Wise Gallery, NY '70; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY '71; The Kitchen, NY '74; Long Beach Museum, Long Beach, CA '76; Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX '76; Whitney Museum of American

Art, NY '76; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Caracas, Venezuela '77; Galeria Adler/ Castillo, Caracas, Venesuela '77; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY '78.

Selected group exhibitions: Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris, Salon des Comparisons '65; Martha Jackson Gallery, NY '67; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Cybernetic Serendipity '69; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands '71; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY '72; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, New Learning Spaces '74; Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, Project '74, '74; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA, Video Art '75; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Labyrinth '76; Kassel, Germany, Documenta 6 777.

Selected bibliography by Downey:

Korot, Beryl and Ira Schneider, Eds. <u>Video Art</u> (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich '76) pp. 38-39.

Juan Downey Dibujando con los Yanomami (Caracas: Galeria Adler/Castillo '77).

"Architecture, Video,
Telepathy," Journal of the
Center for Advanced Television
Studies (Vol. 5 '77) pp. 1-4.

Selected bibliography about Downey:

Ross, David. "Paik, Gillette, Downey: Process and Ritual," Artscanada (Oct. '73) pp. 41-44

Wiegand, Ingrid. "More Than Enough," Soho Weekly News (Dec. 22-28 '77) p. 42.

Boyle, Deidre. "Juan Downey's Recent Videotapes," Afterimage (Summer '78) pp. 10-11.

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