

Living

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Juan Downey:

A Communication Utopia



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Artist Juan Downey went to live with the Yanomami tribe in southern Venezuela in 1976, designed a closed ecosystem complete with bees and chickens in his New York loft in 1970 and measured the brain waves of performers in a state of mediation in 1973.

"Juan Downey: A Communication Utopia," on exhibit at Mexico City's Tamayo Museum, puts the range of this eclectic artist's interests in perspective with a selection of videos and installations from the time he began his career in 1965 until his death in 1993. The exhibit reveals the many disciplines Downey drew on in his investigations into sustainability, the social injustices suffered by Latin Americans and the relationship between humans and technology.

Downey pioneered video art during the 70s and was interested in feedback. Feedback, for Downey and many of his contemporaries, was a new way for artists and the public to interact with one another and the artwork. In "Plato Now," originally presented in 1973, nine performers hooked up to monitors displaying their brainwaves meditated facing a blank wall. The public could see only their backs and the image of the waves projected on TV monitors. The performers could see the shadows of viewers on the wall in front of them. Like many of Downey's pieces, "Plato Now" explored "invisible" energies like brain and radio waves and electromagnetism. He was fascinated by the intersection between technology and humans. In his piece "Pollution Robot" rows of lightbulbs connected to a wooden base lit up as spectators' hands passed over them.

"The work of Juan Downey was

diverse and overlaps in many areas such as the relationship between society and technology, constructed environments (seen through a continuous reflection of architecture and modern urbanism), and the desire that art have a radius of action that went beyond the walls of the museum," Julieta González, the exhibit's curator, said at a recent press conference.

The 1973 overthrow of President Salvador Allende in Chile had a profound affect on Downey and his work. González said that Downey questioned foreign influences on Latin American politics. His 1973 "Map of Chile" was censored when it was first presented at the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York (now the Americas Society) because it featured a live anaconda slithering over a map of Chile in a horizontal glass case — a statement about the Rockefeller family, a major donor to the Center, and the activities of their copper mining company, Anaconda, in Chile. Allende's nationalization of copper was believed to be one of the reasons behind his overthrow.

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Perhaps Downey's most important political statement about Latin America was his 1973-76 Trans-America project. Downey, his wife Marilyn Belt and several of their children traveled from the United States to Patagonia documenting indigenous cultures threatened by the intrusion of Western civilization. "(This project) in one sense was a precursor to the political identity discussions of the 80s and 90s and contributed to the inclusion of artists on the periphery of the international global (art scene),"



González said.

The idea behind the trip was to record threatened cultures on video and to share those videos with the other indigenous communities the Downey family visited. "It was interesting to see the connection (communities) made. They would watch (the videos) and not understand what was said, but would see an insect or the leaf of a tree and be amazed because they recognized it. It was almost like recognizing a face," Belt told The News in an interview.

As part of the project, Downey, Belt and their 14-year-old daughter lived with the Yanomami tribe in the Amazon rainforest of southern Venezuela. Belt described their time in the Amazon as culturally and spiritually "intense." She said that the family entered the jungle on tiny canoes, weighed down by filming equipment and little else. "The only things we took from our culture were coffee and salt, and eventually we learned to eat without salt." For a year the Downey family experienced the life of the Yanomami. According to Belt, they are a fierce and generous people "whose lives are based around achieving personal spiritual centeredness." She smiled as she told stories, recounting how the Yanomami could identify tribes coming down the river toward their village by the sound of a motor — 20 minutes before Downey and Belt could hear anything but the

birds in the trees.

Belt and Downey had a cassette tape of Mozart that the Yanomami loved to listen to. One day, tribesmen stole the tape and took it into a clearing in the woods. They carefully unwound the entire tape and strung it on the trees, waiting for the wind to blow and the music to play. When nothing happened, the tribesmen, mortified by the theft, returned to Downey to ask forgiveness and tell him that the tape was broken. Even though Downey tried to explain to them what had happened, they insisted something was wrong with the tape. "They asked us if they could keep it anyways," Belt said. "They said that they could sit and watch the tape and hear the music in their minds. That is the kind of memory you have when your head isn't clouded by constant noise, you can remember an entire symphony."

The Tamayo Museum presents the Trans-America project on a circle of TVs playing videos of various tribes — a homage to the Yanomami's circular "shabono" dwellings and their communal society. Visitors to the gallery sit in the center, getting a small taste of the visual life of these communities.

Downey is now gone, but his impact on the contemporary art world remains. At the Tamayo's thought-provoking exhibit, viewers will experience a small window into his world.

