

MABEL PALACÍN OR THE RULES OF TIME

William Jeffett

Based in Barcelona and Milan, Mabel Palacín (Barcelona, 1965) is one of the most inventive European artists working with video today. Yet it would be misleading to label her a “video artist,” because she has always looked beyond video to photography and film. Neither can we easily locate her within the strict limitations of “photography” as an isolated discipline, for her interests in film and cinematic use of video. Indeed these media are tools deployed by the artist, a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

At the beginning of her career, in the late 1980s, Palacín adopted photography as a means towards engaging with the contemporary problem of the image. The relation of photography to film, specifically narrative cinema, has been a constant in her video and photographic work. Another constant is working in collaboration. Between between 1988 and 1994 her photographic works were made in partnership with Marc Viaplana (Barcelona, 1962). Her recent videos involve the organization of groups of collaborators along the model more of theater or film production. Of particular importance are the contributions of Mark Cunningham, Mirko Mejetta, and Enzo Fumagalli.

Palacín situates her practice within a network of practices. She does this in a visual sense, so that it forms part of the meaning of the image. Palacín’s videos are outstanding for their capacity to connect with the spectator. Alongside her formidable engagement with theoretical issues, Palacín develops and adapts her video projects in the process of their making and seeks to construct a multi-layered approach to the image informed by sources such as popular narrative cinema (film noir, ciné-policier,³ new wave cinema, the road movie etc). Yet, despite their pointing to narrative, these works are peculiarly non-linear. Today’s viewers are sophisticated in the language of images and so each carries a vast archive of images in their mind. Palacín taps into this memory-archive as a means of communicating how the dissemination of images may be understood in terms of varying layers of meaning. In this way the spectator intuitively understands and engages with her her filmic practice. The use of layers of images, with enigmatic and fragmented meanings, demonstrate how our understanding of our immediate environment is often an artificial construction. In short, Palacín’s recent videos attempt to navigate how, in a media-saturated environment, we make sense of the world.

Video by its very nature is a hybrid form, intersecting with numerous disciplines. Some of the earliest “video art” derived from the documentation of performance art and conceptual actions. For this reason early video often was didactic; therefore it was interested in ideas. For example, it often attempted to situate a discourse in “real time.” Since its inception, video art has engaged with a myriad of positions informed by mass-media languages.⁴

For Palacín video is a means of exploring temporal relations and multiple forms of representation. An aspect of this is the placing of the viewer in a determined position in relation to the image as a means of conveying how images are artificially constructed in the contemporary context. Although this way of working is predominately visual, it is informed by theory and reflection.

There are works of art sufficiently inexplicable as to require an interpretation. The impenetrability of certain works is their fundamental value.¹

Mabel Palacín

The fact that I myself, at the moment of painting, do not understand the meaning of my paintings does not indicate that these paintings have no meaning...²

Salvador Dalí

1. “Mabel Palacín & Marc Viaplana,” in Manel Clot, *Trasbals: Espais de la memòria, espais de la ment* (Granollers, Museu de Granollers, 1993), pp.63-73, quote p. 65. “The are works of art which are sufficiently inexplicable as to require an explanation. The impenetrability of some works is their fundamental value.”

2. Salvador Dalí, “The Conquest of the Irrational” [1935] in Haim Finkelstein (ed.) *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 265. Salvador Dalí, La conquista de lo irracional,” In Juan José Lahuerta (ed.), *Salvador Dalí Obra completa volumen IV: Ensayos 1* (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 2005) , p. 407. “El hecho de que yo mismo, en el momento de pintar, no entienda el significado de mis cuadros no quiere decir que estos no signifiquen nada...”

3. This term refers to both the genre of police films in France and is the title of the 1959 film *Ciné-policier* directed by Pierre Goutas.

4. For a general discussion of the history of video see Françoise Parfait, *Video: un art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001).

For the Surrealists, and for Salvador Dalí in particular, works of art were a way of thinking. That is why writing was so important for many artists (Ernst, Masson, Dalí etc). For Palacín, photography and video are equally forms of thought: las imágenes generadas por una cámara permiten pensar la realidad de una manera particularmente intensa porque la cámara es un instrumento vivencial. Es como si nuestro ojo pudiese despegarse ligeramente de su lugar y trasladarse a nuestra mano, hombro, estomago... La cámara es un instrumento de investigación que mantiene relaciones peculiares con lo real, que obliga a establecer una pacto determinado con lo real. Un pacto que gestionaría como distribuir la ficción en lo real.⁵

Palacín, like most important contemporary artists, does not look back in a literal way to Surrealism, yet she engages with its ideas and her work powerfully embodies its legacy in contemporary art. For that reason the Salvador Dalí Museum presents her in the new work commission series Traces [of the Avant-Garde]. Dalí's ideas are as important for Palacín as his images, and she is clearly interested in how Dalí conveyed his ideas through the media of painting or film. Obviously because Dalí was one of the first artists to explore a wide variety of new media — photography, film and even video — he is a recurrent model for the current generation.

The relation of photography to film also engages with a temporal problem: What is the relation between the static image and the image in motion? The static image allows us to see things otherwise unobserved by human perception. Images in motion give the illusion of “natural” human perception; yet they are a construction based on the convention of 24 frames per second (the equivalent in format PAL is 25 per second and in NTSC is 29.5 per second, while Silent film was 18 per second). The cutting between sequences, or editing (*montage*) of images, in film and video is far from natural, though it has become a readable convention to which we are all accustomed.

DALÍ ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Dalí saw in photography an apparatus that in its instantaneity went beyond rational control. It was unconscious in the sense that it bypassed conscious intentionality. In cinema, Dalí rejected avant-garde experimentation. Often *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'or* are erroneously understood as experimental films, as examples of an austere modernist formalism. For this reason, Dalí's rabid humor is often overlooked. It is a sense of humor commensurate with that of the gestures of the silent film actor, one essentially exaggerated and comic. Dalí found popular comedy (early Italian Cinema, the Marx Brothers etc), what today we call mass culture, valid in cinema. Nor did he reject narrative and diegesis, as we can see in *Un chien andalou* and in his screenplay for *Babaouo* (1932). Rather he disrupts conventional narrative in order to introduce the gratuitous act,⁶ introducing within it unexpected surprises most often of a humorous and subversive nature. So Dalí understood popular cinema as “anti-artistic” and denounced experimental cinema as “artistic” by which he meant contrived and elitist. Further, photography transformed the phenomenology of experience, our perceptual grasp of apparent reality, because its mechanism isolated moments in time. This freezing of the flow of events allowed the viewer to grasp small details of ordinary experience otherwise mentally relegated to the invisible. So photography allowed a closer analysis of “real

5. André Hispano and Mabel Palacín, “Intercambio de prisioneros: un cadáver exquisito” in *Mabel Palacín* (Arles: Actes Sud / Altadis, 2003), p. 15-16. “The images produced by a camera permit thinking about reality in a particularly intense manner, because the camera is a living instrument. It is as if the eye could remove itself from its socket and move to our hand, shoulder, stomach... The camera is an experimental instrument that maintains peculiar relations with the real, it obliges an establishment of a given pact with the real. It is a pact that could dictate the manner of how fiction is arranged within the real.”

6. Dalí borrowed this idea of the gratuitous act from André Breton, who shockingly wrote, “L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule.» See André Breton, *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome I (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p.782-783

presence” and “pure objectivity” and opened onto an unconscious mental real embedded within that “physical reality.”⁷

Dalí's sustained interest in optics and all manner of optical viewing devices informed his later explorations of these questions. His studio in Portlligat contained a wide variety of such instruments. Most notable, from the perspective of Palacín's new project, is Dalí's interest in high-speed photography as practiced by the American engineer Harold Edgerton in 1936. Dalí appropriated the perfect image of a crown formed by a splash of milk captured by high-speed photography at 1/100,000 second,⁸ and began to deploy this crown alongside and as part of his signature around 1938-1939. For example, the crown-signature appears in the painting *Design for set curtain for “Bacchanale”* (1939), and a photographic still of the crown splash is reproduced on the invitation card to his March 1939 exhibition at Julien Levy Gallery. In his *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*, Dalí described this chance-derived structure as a perfectly-formed crown endowed with absolute value.⁹

Early in her career Palacín was interested in Edward Muybridge's use of multiple cameras to capture the phases of a running horse's movements. Likewise in numerous of her early photographic works, we can see examples of serial images suggestive of cinematic movement.

Palacín initially deployed still photography to suggest it was a film still. This can be seen in a series of large-format black and white works from 1990-1991, many of which depict guns or hands holding guns.¹⁰ Others represent a male figure holding a gun and often are fragmented into sections suggesting some detail of a more complex and enigmatic narrative, since the very use of multiple panels implies narrative sequence. These untitled works frequently were presented as triptychs (or polyptychs) with inset additional images. The multiplication of images, as well as their fragmentation, point to narrative and leave its coherence sufficiently



Salvador Dalí
Morphological Echo
Oil on panel, 1936
12 x 13 inches

7. Salvador Dalí, “Psychologie non-euclidienne d'une photographie,” *Minotaure* (Paris), N°7, June 1935, reprinted in Haim Finkelstein (ed.) *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 303 & 306. See also “La dada fotogràfica” [1929] in same pp. 68-69, and Salvador Dalí, *Babaouo: scenario inédit, précédé d'un Abgrégé d'une histoire critique du cinéma, et suivi de Guillaume Tell ballet portugais* (Paris: Éditions des Cahiers Libres, 1932).

8. Salvador Dalí (trans. Haakon M Chevalier), *50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship* (New York: The Dial Press, 1948), p. 171.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

10. See for example “Marc Viaplana, Mabel Palacín,” *Balcon* (Barcelona), October 1991, cover and pp. 183-192 and “Marc Viaplana & Mabel Palacín,” *Photovision* (Barcelona), N° 26, July-December 1994, pp. 24-25 and also pp. 14, 46-49.

open to allow the viewers to construct their own reading of the conjunction of the individual images. And yet these are photographs which give the illusion of film stills. Palacín also used grids of photographic images to suggest the language of segments from longer sequences of filmed images. For example, in *Norte* (1993), each image unit in the grid is a target (human silhouettes) punctured by bullet holes onto which is superimposed as a map celestial constellations. As Palacín explains, “*Norte* es la representación del acto de representar. De alguna manera es un dibujo, el apunte de una idea, no su desarrollo.”¹¹ Such works set the stage for her engagement with the image in movement.

Para M. (Séquence voiture/Nuit près du motel/Au petit cinéma) (1998)

Palacín has deployed photography alongside video, reinforcing the space between the two media. She has used the sequence shot in video to reinforce the dimension of time in the moving image but renders it monotonous like the static image. And photographic still images contribute to the construction of an implied narrative usually associated with the moving image. In addition, Palacín often places herself in the central role of the protagonist.

In Palacín's 1998 installation *Para M. (Séquence voiture/Nuit près du motel/Au petit cinéma)*,¹² a series of large format black and white photographs mounted on the wall complement a video a projection set against the same wall as the photographs. The register shifts back and forth between photography and the moving image. The photographs consist of close-up shots of the female driver wearing sunglasses and the figures in darkness illuminated by lights, the overall effect being one of movement. By contrast in the video the sequence shot represents the point of view of a car driver in a monotonous take which situates its relatively static image in the field of the photographic image. This point of view is artificially constructed and deployed as a fictional device. In this way Palacín pays homage to the road movie genre, a recurring motif in later video projects.

The installation reinforces the assumption that the photographs are film stills. In a number of these, a female figure wearing a wig and sun glasses is represented as driving a car, and this persona is played by the artist herself. But here self-expression is a secondary result of optical representation.

Clearly Para M. (Séquence voiture/Nuit près du motel/Au petit cinéma) grew out of the two 1996 projects *2 Second Movie* (Galería Alejandro Sales, Barcelona) and *La noche americana* (Studio Meyetta, Barcelona), titles rife with cinematic references. In *2 Second Movie*, Palacín filmed a card trick with two 16 mm cameras, one at 16 frames per second and the other at 8 frames per second. The photogram where the two time registers coincided was presented as a large format enlargement of the images on plates of glass, while the other two time registers were printed on smaller plates of glass displayed in two rows situated perpendicular to the enlarged images. The title of *La noche americana* refers to the technique of “day for night” shooting, and coincidentally the title of a famous 1973 film by François Truffaut. It consists of an internally illuminated light box, which represents a shadowy standing figure making a light drawing.

The question of constructing self-representation through photography and film was found in Cindy Sherman's film stills, or even in Andy Warhol's photo-based self-portraits, though there are other precedents for Palacín closer to home. The early work of Carlos Pazos (Barcelona, 1949), especially his *Models of Sculpture* and *Voy a hacerme una estrella* (from 1974-1975), frame the artist's self within the rhetoric of the representation of celebrity film and photography and predate

Cindy Sherman.¹³ Through the elaborate staging of the self in carefully constructed and deceptively plausible scenarios, Joan Fontcuberta (Barcelona, 1955) exposed the discourse embedded in photography and challenged its function as vehicle of documentary truth.¹⁴ Palacín's generation approached photography in “anti-documentary” terms, as the curator and photographer Jorge Ribalta explains: The photographic reinvention of a personality has its own genre in the history of photography: the staged self-portrait... This genre... is the root of the conceptual practice of performance... Mabel Palacín's work prolongs this tradition and links it to a formal approach with borrowings from cinema, such as the use of sequences, dramatic lighting, the artificiality of staging and film noir aesthetics... the events shown in the images are uncertain, and the action seems to be in suspension.. Her sequences explore an imprecise space between the still and the moving image, somewhere between photography and cinema...¹⁵

Name no one man (1997)

In Palacín's seven panel photographic work in black and white, *Name no one man*, a figure is represented as repeatedly crossing a space defined by light and darkness, white and black and shadow and illumination. These components point to the essence of the photographic mechanism and towards the logic of cinema. The figure is not only trapped in the indeterminate space of representation, but the installation of the work repeats the represented relationship with the panels installed in a corner so that the viewer follows a parallel movement in real space in engaging with the image. The work further points beyond the process of visual representation to reflect on the processes of how language informs our visual reading of the world. So in the two central areas of the white which obliterates the figure the enigmatic phrase of the title is introduced: “name no one man.” This is indeed a palindrome, and so it leads us to consider the nature of the image as a mirror in which images are doubled. As Palacín explains, the presence of the palindrome introduces in the work a space of revelation, priding the viewer with a key into understanding how the images function. Clearly this is as much a mental as a visual process, “En ese caso sitúa las imágenes en el espacio de una construcción mental.” (“In this case images are situated in the space of a mental construction.”)¹⁶

La pelea/el baile (1997)

In *La pelea/el baile* is a series of 69 black and white photographs representing a figure which appears to dance with its shadowy double in choreographed movements which approach the dance of boxers. *La pelea/el baile* achieves this strange effect through the old photographic technique of double exposure. The multiplication of images and their tight hanging in in 3 linear rows with variable spacings are deployed like punctuation to create the effect of writing and therefore the possibility of representing movements through still images. Further, the figures open up the representation of another “imaginary” real located in the mind. The figures are divided and doubled, the one creating a simulacrum of the other; as if rather than in real space, they inhabit a fictive, or more precisely mental space. Here the image deflects the idea of the linear narrative, despite the linearity suggested by the evocation of writing; it suggests an alternate, meandering structure approximate to the motions of a dance, a movement which doubles as confrontation with the fragmented and divided self.

13. Despite Pazos' uncanny anticipation of Sherman's practice, his work is more accurately in dialogue with Gilbert and George's living sculptures documented in photography than with Sherman's more filmic position. At any rate, Pazos and Fontcuberta's positions are intellectually closer to that of Palacín.

14. Of course, Palacín's work exists in a critical dialogue with a wide range of the art of the period and cannot be reduced to any one of these models. Equally one might place Palacín within the context of her peers, a particularly vibrant generation of artists dedicated to hybrid approaches originating in photographic practices. These include for example Jordi Colomer, Daniel Canogar, Jorge Ribalta and Eulàlia Valldosera among numerous others. Despite divergent approaches, these artists bring a conceptual approach to photography. Again for Palacín photography is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, so it is incidental that she tends to work with the medium. In this sense she is an “artist” rather than a photographer or video artist.

15. Jorge Ribalta, “Photographic Dramatics: Notes on anti-documentary trends in some recent photographic practices in Spain,” *Contemporary Photography from Spain: Daniel Canogar, Joan Fontcubertam Mabel Palacín, Sulàlia Valldosera, Javier Vallhonrat* (Düsseldorf & Madrid, Galerie Wolfgang Gmyrek & Galería Helga de Alvear, 1998), p. 52.

16. Glòria Picazo, “Entrevista a Mabel Palacín” in *Mabel Palacín* (Lleida: Ajuntament de Lleida, 1998), p. 15.

11. “Mabel Palacín & Marc Viaplana,” in Manel Clot, *Trasbals: Espais de la memòria, espais de la ment* (Granollers, Museu de Granollers, 1993), pp.63-73, quote p. 64. “North is the representation of the act of representing. Somehow it is a drawing, the notation of an idea, not its development.”

12. Georgina Bertolino, *Mabel Palacín* (Torino & Barcelona: Luigi Franco Arte Contemporanea & Metrònom Fundació Rafael Tous d'Art Contemporani, 1998).

Sur l'autoroute (1998)

Sur l'autoroute (On the Road) was Palacín's first ambitious use of video and as in subsequent works she deployed it in a filmic sense. The mono-channel video has three important conceptual phases. In the first the camera is situated inside a moving car which approaches a screen which represents shadowy rear-projected images in silhouette. Apart from the reference to the road movie, obviously reinforced by the title, this long sequence segment refers to cinema as perceived from the outside. And here Palacín deploys the artificial and filmic device of a car driver's point of view. The second phase is that of the chinese-shadow play represented on the screen, which now fills the entire projected screen of the video. And the third phase is when we (the spectators) metaphorically pass, like Alice falling into the Rabbit hole, to the other side of the screen to see the action which produces the chinese-shadow play represented on the screen. In Palacín's terms, referring to *Sur l'autoroute*, "Lo que vemos atravesar la pantalla es un mecanismo de ficción y mientras que la ficción cuenta una cosa, el mecanismo desvela otra."¹⁷ As we have seen, the spectator either consciously or intuitively understands this process, due to the greater sophistication of mass media and the exposure of viewers to an ever growing array of new technologies.

La distancia correcta (2003)

La distancia correcta (The Right Distance), by contradistinction, is a double-screen projection, where two side-by-side screens occupy the center of a large, open space. As suggested earlier, *La distancia correcta* begs the question of ideal viewing points in space. It is both filmic and concerns installation (physical space). Point of view is addressed both internally (within the images) and in the spatial positioning of the viewer in relation to the screens. At the same time, the spectator's ideal point of view is challenged by introducing the possibility of multiple, and therefore relative, points of view. As with *Sur l'autoroute*, there is a reflection on filmic modes of representation. Within each of the projected screens an action takes place, but it does so against the backdrop of other images appropriated from film history. These background images are achieved not through virtual processes, but through rear projection, effectively transforming them into a theatrical scenography.



Salvador Dalí
Surrealist Object Functioning Symbolically
Mixed media: assemblage with a shoe, white marble, photographs, a glass containing wax, a gibbet, a matchbox, hair, and a wooden scraper, 1931/1973
19 x 11 x 15 ½ in. (48 x 28 x 14 cm)
Signature: engraved on bronze plaque

17. Andrés Hispano and Mabel Palacín, "Intercambio de prisioneros: un cadáver exquisito", op. cit., p. 15. "What we see through the screen is the mechanism of fiction, and while the fiction tells us one thing, the mechanism reveals something else."

Within the narrative of *Distancia correcta*, Palacín directly addresses the dimension of time. The protagonist is dedicated to assembling an apparatus which appears as a ticking bomb scheduled presumably to explode as the conclusion of the narrative. This is a device borrowed from countless commercial films of the genre: thriller drama. For example, a similar dynamic appears in Imanol Uribe's well-known film *Días contados* (Running Out of Time) (1994).¹⁸ In a more metaphorical sense, in Palacín's *La distancia correcta*, the protagonist constructs the narrative as he builds his bomb, for it is both the start and finish of the narrative, as well as its motivation. Yet he does so unconsciously, as Palacín tells us: The actor seeks to strike the best attitude, the best interpretation possible... He gives sense to the images while managing to take them for what they are: images. However, he is not aware that his actions will be interpreted in the light of the images, that the immense offscreen world of the images will provide readings of his actions. Fiction confronts reality, but reality confronts fiction.¹⁹

Palacín argues that while *Sur l'autoroute* positions the viewer at the site of production, *La distancia correcta* shifts the production to the site of its interpretation. Here interpretation is understood as narrative and all of the factors which drive it — both in unmediated terms and in terms of fiction.

Collage

Arguably there is a collage logic which informs Palacín's production. Her characters exist in a multi-layered world of images, seamlessly interlarded together. And yet they are fragments, which point to narrative or more precisely narrative fragments, while escaping the one-dimensional logic of mainstream cinema narrative. In cinema the editing of sequences in what is termed *montage* is a central element of the internal logic of filmic representation. One of her interviews is tellingly subtitled "Cadavre exquis" (Exquisite Corpse). This refers to the collective Surrealist game, where a figure is drawn in different layered segments, defined by folding the paper so that each participant is not aware of the others contribution. The resulting figure (and they are almost always figures as the title of the game implies) is enigmatic and unpredictable, somehow produced beyond a single intentionality. Cadavre exquis drawings, in their re-construction of a new figural unity out of fragmented sections, may be understood as a variation of collage. Palacín works with a similar logic that is motivated by the internal structure of the image and is composed out of images (combinations and recombinations of images). Image fragments point to narrative and textual frames, but simultaneously they pull narrative apart so as to resist the audience's imposition of unilateral readings. The image is "arbitrary" in the linguistic sense of the word. So the logic of collage and filmic *montage* is one which re-contextualizes, or re-frames, images, situating them in an image or language context, in such a way that meaning is produced.

C'era una volta (rojo) (2000)

Palacín's internet photo piece *C'era una volta (rojo)* is an example of the collage logic in operation. It consists of a set of images based on the concept of red which were found on the internet. The unlimited edition was made available to the collector in a digital format where the images could be printed in a domestic context and displayed according to a set of instructions provided by the artist. Each image was treated as an icon and the relationships here introduced new readings and interpretations of the wide range of significations associated with the concept and image: red. The symbolic proliferation of meaning recalls art historian Aby Warburg's vast image archive, or the

18. This is only an example and by no means the specific one which Palacín was pointing to in her work.

19. Mabel Palacín, *La distancia correcta* (Alicante & Barcelona: Museo de la Universidad de Alicante & Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, 2004), p. 160 for English. "El actor busca la mejor postura posible: la mejor interpretación posible..., aquélla que amplía la relación y aporta una dimensión especulativa a las imágenes, la que no las deja quietas y no da una posición por definitiva. Imprime un sentido a las imágenes, a la vez que consigue tomarlas cómo lo que son: imágenes. Pero no ignora que sus acciones serán interpretadas a la luz de las imágenes, que el inmenso contracampo de las imágenes lanzará lecturas sobre sus acciones. La ficción tiene que vérselas con lo real pero también lo real tiene que vérselas con la ficción."

atlas *Mnemosyne* (consisting of photographs), which could generate multiple combinations of open meanings as an *aide-mémoire* for scholarly research.²⁰ In Palacín's *C'era una volta (rojo)*, because of the organization of the images in a storyboard-like arrangement, it is possible to speak of image collages or of filmic *montage*, with the latter understood in the Soviet sense of the word (Eisenstein's cinema). At the same time the mode of distribution and the new function attached to the images pointed to a Pop dimension.

Un/Balanced (2001-2005)

Palacín's video *Un/Balanced* begins with a series of three stills, each representing a different building. The main body of work consists of a group of characters, each associated through the lighting and by repetition with the three buildings introduced at the beginning. As the sequences unfold other characters in other places or outdoor settings are introduced. Visual connections are established between these characters through a series of close up shots of their faces, so that the direction of their gazes and the angle of their heads are the basis for the links between the shots. These implied, psychological relationships, expressed through the look or gaze of the actors, transcend the site of each shot, establishing psychological relations between people in unrelated spatial settings, and this is achieved in the absence of sound. Palacín's technique is a simplification of the more elaborate Hollywood convention of the "shot-reverse-shot," where it is the gaze which provides the bridge connecting the sequences. *Un/Balanced* takes the most essential unit of this convention as its basis to demonstrate the contradiction that film is made up of discontinuous units (here made visible through the repetition of the close-up shot structure) which are rendered invisible through the power of psychology during the editing process.

Una noche sin fin (2007-2008)

Palacín's new video production *Una noche sin fin* (An endless night), commissioned for the Salvador Dalí Museum, explores the most basic component of film (static image) and photography (image in movement): the photogram, through recording in high-speed (slow motion) and time lapse. By changing the time register of conventional filmic representation, *Una noche sin fin* demonstrates how images condition our comprehension of the contemporary world. It allows us effectively to see the world in a different way (much as the invention of photography changed our ways of seeing). Palacín shot *Una noche sin fin* in the latest High Definition technology, which she deploys, not for its novelty, but as another artistic instrument.

The lack of dialogue or any other form of speech brings to mind the silent film (which privileged gesture), though she has reintroduced sound through overlaying real time sound and the music track by Mark Cunningham. If in the image time is either slowed down or accelerated, then in the sound track real time is reasserted forming a slippage in and out of the two filmic times, one that is the diegetic equivalent of the viewer's sense of lived time in viewing the work. In the installation at the Salvador Dalí Museum, the ideal vantage point is between the facing screens, so it is difficult to view both screens simultaneously and the viewer consequently must choose one or the other of the synchronized screens. Though the sound track is recorded so as to pertain to both sets of images, its noises occasionally seem to correspond more to one screen than another, so the viewers are invited (provoked) to alternate their gaze from one screen to another. The music track provides another bridge joining both sets of images.

The double-screen projection consists of a series of different phases of sequences. These appear in both of the screens and in both time registers (slow motion and time lapse). Sometimes related images within a particular phase are present simultaneously on the screens; in other cases

different phases of sequences represented on the two screens overlap. In this way, relations are suggested between them. The phases are also expressed in different settings, and are therefore expressed not only in terms of time but of space. Each of the phases is based around the idea of time and the way the structure of time increasingly shapes our experience of the world, that is the intersection of time and space.

The first phase of sequences, the theater, is based on the idea of two hours, and the second, the factory, is based on eight hours. The leisure of the theater and its site as frame for cinema is contrasted with the time frame of the factory understood as site of production. The slow motion sequences suggest a suspension in time of the movement and allows the perception of details which would otherwise be beyond our grasp. The time lapse sequences, in a contrary register, seem to bring inanimate objects to life or represent the movement of the actors in speeded-up terms which approach stop action animation. At the same time, the workers in the factory, like the actors in the theater, no longer compose the machine parts to which they dedicate their efforts, they slowly disassemble them and pack their fragments in boxes for presumable shipping; this process offers a metaphor for the "delocalization" of industrial labor and a shift towards the cultural production suggested by the theater. The night worker filmed in time lapse, produces at an accelerated pace the equivalent production of the entire team of day workers represented in slow motion.



Salvador Dalí
**Nature Morte Vivante
(Still Life - Fast Moving)**
Oil on canvas, 1956
49 ¼ x 63 inches

The third phase is that of the shared dormitory bed in which the presumptive workers sleep in successive segments of eight hours. Here the space of dream is reduced by the imposition of rational timetable structures, though the fast forward sense achieved by time lapse. Sleeping is represented as subjected to the rhythm of work.

The choice of the theater as one of the principle phases of the film is similarly primitive and situates cinema and video in their origins in the burlesque theater. The looped presentation of the video begins with the double screens representing the two waving theater curtains, the one in slow motion, the other in time lapse. This is restated in the installation with the decision to paint the walls a deep red, thereby reinforcing the reading of the projection space as a theater.

Furthermore, red is an important part of the scenography and props (*attrezzo*). Not only is red the main color scheme of the theater represented in the video and the props which appear in it (the red wine which is spilled,

20. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002), pp. 452-505.

the red chair, the red metal chest, the red money box at the ticket booth etc.), but red is deployed significantly in the factory sequences, where for example the work surfaces, tools and many of the machine parts are red. In an opposite register both the factory workers and actors wear monochromatic, dark clothes, making the workers like productive actors. Here the scenography of factory and theater are conflated as equivalent sites where the two narratives are enacted. So are the factory workers also the spectators in the theater and the actors the producers (or proletariat) of culture?

Red again appears in the final, fourth phase of the table represented over seven days, where Palacín deliberately chooses to represent in time lapse (apart from the melting of ice in a glass) the decaying strawberries. Here the time lapse is deployed to accelerate the slow passing of lived time. Time-lapse serves a further purpose of connecting with the still-life tradition in painting (especially in the seventeenth-century). Earlier in the theater phase a fully set table is overturned in slow motion, while here the food on the table gradually decays in real time, but the process is speeded up in filmic time. Both of these sequences (and their respective time registers) represent objects and food (or wine) as indicators of human fragility and mortality. We too will die. Here Palacín constructs an image which approximates a number of Dalí's most powerful images. In his *Nature morte vivante* (1956) what would be otherwise inert objects are presented as in suspended animation, just as when the table is overturned on the theater stage, the objects seem to hover in space as they slowly cascade to be shattered on the floor. For Dalí decay (what he called "putrefaction") was a constant preoccupation. In *Un chien andalou*, Dalí draped the carcass of a rotting donkey over a piano on which there were also two priests.

Other scenes in *Una noche sin fin* summon up Dalí's images, as when one actress's shoe slips from her foot and is caught by one of the spectators, who then throws it at a cluster of bottles, some of which are shattered. The sequence is filmed in slow motion, so drawing our attention to every detail. The emphasis on the shoe, and the gratuitous throwing of it, recall Dalí's frequent use of women's shoes as symbols of erotic fetishism ("displacement" in Freud's terms), while the shattering of the bottles again points to the fragility of human mortality (again the still life tradition), or a reminder of death (*memento mori*). Is the theater then a factory of dream production where the great questions of life, labor, culture, desire and death are addressed?

There is a comic dimension to all of this, which reveals the mechanism or apparatus of the moving image. The actions represented seem to tell stories; at the same time they are often arbitrary, and do not seem to advance any linear narrative. The overturning of the table, the cascade of falling coins, the falling ropes and sandbags, and the falling shoe all introduce comic disruptions of conventional narrative. The actors in these accelerated or slowed down time frames are represented as if they are in another time dimension, where the objects become the principal protagonists of the scenario. This burlesque comedy is also infused with a laconic sense of irony, because we slowly realize that these structures shaping the contemporary rhythm of life are outside of conventional experience. Curiously, in the video the only exception to this transformed structure of time comes towards the end of the dormitory phase, when in one of the screens close up shots of cash purchases (economic exchanges) are represented in conventional real time, thereby setting this brief sequence off from the rest of the video, and suggesting rather alarmingly that the abstract relation of exchange is somehow more real than other social relations. In the final phase of the video, the objects on the table are filmed in time lapse and the actors become invisible. Similarly, again towards the end, in the final sequences of the theater, the actors are shown as sleeping in the audience's seats, as if they were the cultural equivalent to the workers in their shared dormitory beds. Slowly they, too, disappear to be replaced by the rearrangement of the seating furniture, represented in time lapse. Objects are substituted for actors, and the actors disappear in the gaps between the time lapse images. So the objects are invested with the marks of human presence, even as the latter is rendered invisible, through the passing of time. Does Palacín here stage what is in effect the comedy of life?

Una noche sin fin ends, again ironically, with the purchase of the theater tickets and so we arrive at the end (which is also the beginning of this ultimately circular, loop structure), with the two sets of red, waving theater curtains in slow motion and time lapse. Finally the narrative is revealed as both sequential and circular. The structure of the loop would suggest that narrative is an eternal return, where we end with the beginning and begin somewhere in the middle of an already unfolding theatrical spectacle. Of course, this is a theatrical spectacle within a wider filmic spectacle, which is the spectacle of *Una noche sin fin*, the one staged as an installation within the confine of a museum's walls. But what is the nature then of this meta-spectacle, which transports the viewer beyond the normal rule of time and space through its meditation on the filmic apparatus? We are both positioned within a determined architectural space, and this space is transformed into a theater. This is both conventional, in that works of art are displayed on gallery walls, and less conventional, in that these walls are transformed into another, distinct space of the theater, thereby denying their normal function as gallery. But *Una noche sin fin* is not a theater in any conventional sense, rather it is a theater understood as a mental space in which memory and dreams are enacted. For this reason, the different characters seem to cross from phase to phase and role to role, whether actors or factory workers or both, as if they are navigating a psychic unconscious. All exist in an enormous factory of dreams, which is the theater (and film), wherein time is so circumscribed that it is inevitable. In the end the actors are superseded, disappear and are replaced by objects with their own internal dynamics, which function as markers of the long passing of time. In *Una noche sin fin*, Palacín demonstrates that the ultimate filmic protagonist is time: the invisible actor around which revolve all actions in their inevitable repetition.

Dr. William Jeffett is Curator, Exhibitions, Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida