

IMAGES IN MOVEMENT:

NO TIME FOR WORDS

Mabel Palacín

in conversation with

William Jeffett

WILLIAM JEFFETT: You started with photography and then moved onto video. Can you say something about the relation between photography, film, and video in your work and explain how have you moved from using static images to moving images?

MABEL PALACÍN: The truth is that I began with video, I first began with moving images. It was video and photography at the same time, but it was easier to exhibit photography. One can say that the photographs I made at the beginning have something to do with cinema, not only because in some cases they borrowed some elements pertaining to cinema, but these were works composed of more than one image, and this is proper to cinema. Cinema is constructed through the relation between a series of images and the effect of some images on others. I remember in one of the first exhibitions that I made, *Snapshots*, there was a piece that referred to Muybridge's *Human in Motion*, but the title, which was inscribed above the image, had been changed to *human e-motion*. To relate movement and emotion also has something to do with cinema.

At the beginning I worked a lot with 16 mm film; video is distinct, it is much more flexible than cinema. As the technology of working with video evolved, it became more accessible, and this allowed me again to take up working with moving images. But most of all, what is decisive is how the digital technology that surrounds video can welcome almost anything; practically any form of the image seems “conquered” by movement. This opens many possibilities for the creation of contexts, from those related to understanding images and constructing meanings.

wj: Did you arrive at video from a cinematographic point of view?

MP: Cinema is photography in movement, but it is based on something distinct from photography; after adding a second image, you cease to refer to the reality that the images represent and pass to present another reality, pointed in another direction, which already is not the reality from which the images were taken, but something that is produced by uniting two images. Almost all of the projects that I have carried out, even though they address photographs, put more than one image in relation, I suppose that this is the cinematographic point of view to which you refer.

Cinema is the reference model for the moving image. Later other technologies appeared, which have had an effect on cinema as much as cinema influenced them, but in this mutual contagion, everything seems to have the same status. There are differences in recording in video, with the distinct systems and formats now available, or in cinema (film), but not so many. More and more the different systems of the moving image converge, just as photography moves closer to cinema. From the moment in which all supports end up digitalized, in a computer, they infect each other. The digital universe creates a context in which the images are images; they lose the trace of their origin to pass to a kind of *tabula rasa*, in which they have to begin to perform in another mode. Digitalization impels images to mix with each other, to reconstruct themselves, thus changing their meaning. Cinema is a reference, a model, but any approach cinema can give right now has inevitably to consider this technological frontier; just like the other technologies of the moving image.

wj: *Sur l'Autoroute* was one of your first videos. I want to ask you to describe the use of the screen that is represented in this video, as a permeable surface that demonstrates the levels of representation, between the action and the shadow play and the cinematographic representation.

MP: The idea of *Sur l'Autoroute* was to put the spectator in the place of the production of images, and this is why the screen appears as the place of the images. Around the screen we see the people, objects and mode in which they are represented in the form of a shadow play. The shadow play is very useful for differentiating two types of images because they assume a stylization close to drawing. But, since they are also shadows, they maintain a very strong connection with the body that casts them. This makes them closer to photography than to drawing. The shadows are absolutely a stylized image of reality, but they pertain to reality; they are simultaneously separated and connected with reality.

In *Sur l'Autoroute*, on the one hand is the story which takes place on the screen, presented through the shadow play, and on the other hand, by passing through the screen, we see the way in which they are produced in a more “natural” way. This second part that happens after each scene opens up what we see happening on the screen, expressing the differences between an image and that which

originated it, because behind the scene we discover that the characters and objects that form each scene are not where they seem to be, neither are they even together, nor does the scene exist. This raises some questions: on the one hand, images are separated from reality, as two distinct things, but, on the other hand, the more realistic representation that we see behind the screen does not negate the value of the images, so that fiction appears as a powerful element in negotiating the real.

The screen is permeable also through the way in which the video is presented, the screen is positioned at ground level and the figures that appear in it maintain a relation of scale with the spectator, so that this can perfectly have the impression of being the origin of the figures that appear. The screen that appears in the video is identical to that which appears in the exhibition gallery, so the identification is produced in a particular manner, almost a sensation that one can have in moving around the space. Besides, I like the fragile quality that the shadows have. They vanish with facility, they resemble cinema and they are temporary and fragile.

w: In *La distancia correcta*, your last video, the two screens construct the relation with the viewer in two senses. The first places the viewer in a specific position in relation to the ideal point of view suggested by the two screens; and in the second, the viewer can seek his or her own position, his or her own “right distance” in relation to the two screens. In this sense, the two screens determine the physical space around the viewer, at the same time the viewer can construct his or her relation with the image.

MP: *Sur l’Autoroute* and *La distancia correcta* maintain a certain relationship: the two videos put the spectator in particular situations with respect to them. In *Sur l’Autoroute* the characters that we see on the screen are behind the screen, and in *La distancia correcta* the character that propels the story is always in front of the screen. Behind the screen are the “makers,” and in front of it are the public. In *La distancia correcta*, the idea was to place the spectator in the place of the interpretation of images. In fact the protagonist performs as a character between the spectator and the screen— the screen with which he coexists in the set where he moves. The actor moves in the space in front of a screen and goes looking for the best possible position in the axis of the camera and in front of the images; he looks for the physically right position in relation with the camera and the screen. But the question is asked as to the nature of this distance: is there only one distance or various distances? The distance that he occupies before the images is an interpretation that drives them in one sense or another, and it is also an ideological value. It creates a curious argument because the actor is a spectator who performs, and so the

Mabel Palacín
La distancia correcta, 2002-2003
 Videoprojection in two screens
 and two stereos, 8’ 30”



Mabel Palacín
Sur l’autoroute, 1998-1999
 Videoinstallation, 11’

public that looks is trapped in a situation similar to that of the actor: the public also moves, in this case, in front of the two screens.

The two screens make the vision of the piece more complex, obliging the viewer to choose a physical position in the space. One can circulate in front of, behind and around the screens, but one almost always finds oneself in a fragmented universe that obliges one to choose. The two screens contribute to the idea that the right distance is not singular and unique, that we can consider others and that there are possibly many distances, all provisional, depending on each of the individuals who, like the actor, interpret the images, but also the moment, contingency or situation. Like the actor, each of us brings images to make sense in relation to our own vision.

w: Two observations. One is that I have the impression that when people see your videos they understand them, in one way or another they can enter into it, because there is a dimension linked to a cinematographic logic with which people are familiar. Another question is about the role of sound in these two videos: *Sur l’Autoroute* and *La distancia correcta*.

MP: The sound in *Sur l’Autoroute* is simpler. It is a sound track made by Mark Cunningham, who worked on the two projects, and who, by the way, was educated in St. Petersburg, with other musicians who were there in the 1970s at Eckerd College. I commissioned a series of musical pieces with a loop structure, giving him some specific time measurements. For my part I only left four or five inserts of direct sound in the video, *wild tracks*, which in some way suture the music to the screen. In *La distancia correcta*, the sound is more elaborate and has the function of declaring what is, in each moment, the distance that really is maintained by the camera, actor and screen. The sound describes the space that we seen in the video. The piece is constructed by two stereos and the speakers must be arranged in a specific way in the space, so that from the sound, the spectator can manage to reconstruct how is the space that the character inhabits, which is very difficult to determine if you are guided by the images that are constantly in movement, forming a complex mechanism, in which the camera movements on screen provoke camera movements on set and vice versa. The sound is very elaborate, very precise with the distances of the objects, a freight elevator to the right that situates the scene in a kind of basement, a tall window to the left... The sound track that Mark Cunningham made, together with Silvia Mestres, in this case, is a theme divided in two and contributes to the configuration of a fragmented universe in which it is necessary constantly to reconstruct the lines of continuity. In the installation of *La distancia correcta*, perhaps it is the sound which most pushes one to move through the the space, instead of fixing oneself in one or another position, in the middle of the two screens.

w: It seems that you show how we construct images... I see that people can enter in this logic in an interesting way. It is not obscure... in some way the viewer can understand it.

MP: I think so. I know that what I told you about the sound in *La distancia correcta* demands an unusual effort from the spectator, but one perceives enough so that those who want to can choose this path. People understand some elements at least, because the work is supported by a strong visuality, what you have called a certain link with the logic of cinema. At any rate it is about the relation we maintain with images, which especially involves the public. The works are not closed; they set in play a series of elements with which we are familiar, but these elements are arranged in an unfamiliar way, and in any case they provoke a certain strangeness that reinforces the possibility of seeing in another way. I consider images an important component in the construction of reality, and in this sense my work is concerned with this relation, not only how we construct images, but how we relate to them and if they are capable of proposing alternate realities.

w: The last project *6”* produced in film is a book, but a book with a very clear logic. Can you say something about this work and how you arrived from this project to your new work in progress, *Una noche sin fin*?

MP: *6”* is cinema in the sense that it considers the basic unity of the still. It is a six second film made to be a book, with each page occupied by a still, so that it is converted into a 144-page book, the time necessary to carry out the represented action. In *6”*, 144 characters participate in the same action: throwing a

stone. Each one of them occupies a still: so that the action is finally performed by 144 people. I was interested, and here began the links with *Una noche sin fin*, in the relation between photography, static images and moving images, which almost always, today, gives preference to moving images. I was interested in the tension between the fixed still and movement, the capacity of breaking narrative and the image's capacity to resist a narrative offering various possible routes. Finally I was interested in the idea that a series of individuals carry out a collective gesture. The people are united in an individual action, like a single body, and what is important is that they maintain the continuity of action.

Some of these elements appear in *Una noche sin fin*, which departs from the idea of uniting two concepts of time represented by two extreme methods of recording reality: on the one hand a high-speed camera, and on the other photographs or time-lapse takes. There is a consideration of the image at the moment of digitalization when it is forced to erase the difference between the static image and moving image, because the culture of the computer tends to combine images, and thus to eliminate photography as we understand it. As achieved with the high-speed camera, slow motion photography in particular tends to suspend narration, to slow it down, and show us aspects of reality that we do not see, to transform the matter that is intimately connected with time, and so it moves towards photography, which proposes a philosophy of contemplation. On the other hand time-lapse photography tends towards narration, but clearly separates what is narration from what is photography, so that all we see in movement is narration or cinema, but what appears, scarcely for a moment, and almost subliminally, reveals its more photographic nature, because it only appears in the still. In this way the technical image appears linked to the idea of time, and in this way photography has proposed the first rupture with the traditional concept of time.

Furthermore, in *Una noche sin fin* there appears another idea that is in *6"*: this is the idea of the collective, in which time is also a question of scale and long time is the time of the crowd. An action carried out by many individuals requires slowing down, applying the brakes. In *Una noche sin fin*, we have the factory, the time for performing work, the theatre that also needs this collective element of the public mechanism and matter; time is interpreted through this relation with the collective.

wj: *6"* was made for the Museu de l'Empordà (Figueres) and the new project, in progress, is produced by the Salvador Dalí Museum in Florida. What aspects about Dalí and his work provided you with points of departure for this new project?

MP: Visually, and already we are speaking about time, soft watches, but also there are other scientific questions



Mabel Palacín
6", 2005
Artist book. Cru 011, Figueres



Mabel Palacín
6", 2005
Artist book. Cru 011, Figueres

that surround Dalí's work. I remember the principle of indetermination, which, if I am not mistaken, says of a molecule that we can know with precision either its position or its velocity, but never both at the same time. From this, Dalí deduced that the observer determines the observed, and he came to interesting conclusions for art. This made me think that an image acquires a distinct value when combined with others, and that this combination renders visible things that we do not perceive directly in reality, elements latent in images. I am also interested in the consideration of the double nature of images that always has concerned my work. Besides, there is the idea that the camera reveals a different reality than the one we see, and how this depends on technical possibilities. Dalí was fascinated with how slow motion was capable of revealing forms that the eye cannot see, and many of the figures that appear in his paintings enormously resemble those provided by the high-speed camera. I refer to these figures that seem made in material states that we do not know: liquid forms that are converted into solids, solid forms that become soft, weightless bodies, etc. The reality registered with a high-speed camera acquires this unusual aspect, the world ceases to behave as we hope, and everything we have learned seems useless. It is as if we can see the secret life of matter.

The moving image is linked to time, but nearly always when you want to explain time you have to eliminate movement, because movement is action and it distracts us. So if we eliminate action, the image cannot be understood or explained in language, because it is necessary to perceive it. The form of the modern story is fragmentation; we only see pieces of reality, never the totality. The fragmentation that is employed in *Una noche sin fin* connects distinct realities like the factory and the theater or representation, intersecting with other human activities like eating, sleeping... which invade the order of production and representation itself. Time and perception are set into play measuring one image through another.

wj: In Dalí's brilliant essay "Non-Euclidian Psychology of a Photograph" (1935), he fixates on the marginal presence of a spool of thread in what otherwise appears as a normal photograph of two women standing in a doorway. One point of his analysis is that photography phenomenologically isolates objects which would not otherwise be consciously noticed and therefore opens new avenues of thought. As he wrote, "This thread-less spool indeed cries out loudly for an interpretation, for this most exhibitionistic object, because of its 'imperceptible existence', and through its character and its invisible nature, which lend themselves to the sudden irruption peculiar to 'paranoiac apparitions'... this object, I say, appeals, once it is visible, once it is discovered, for a

logical solution that would allow a deduction, for a logical solution that would allow a reduction, even a partial one, of the flagrant and incomprehensible delirious phenomenon it embodies.” (Salvador Dalí, edited and translated by Haim Finkelstein, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dalí*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 303). It seems to me here that Dalí introduces a meditation on the relation of the static and moving image and how they shape our understanding of the world, and in this way it opens onto an issue you are exploring in *Una noche sin fin*. How do you see the connection between Dalí’s ideas on photography and this new work?

MP: It is an idea that forms part of the nature of photography. It has to do with something we mentioned before: that photography, in stopping time, opens up the possibility of a philosophy of contemplation, fixing an image so it can be seen, as we have never been able to see reality, because we live immersed in time. Photography has the capacity of isolating objects, elements of reality, so as to observe them better, placing that which is unknown at the disposition of thought. Dalí was aware that the camera revealed a different reality, that photography and cinema had introduced a new way of seeing. Now the digital universe proposes other ways of seeing, and it seems interesting to explore them. *Una noche sin fin* was recorded with a camera capturing reality at variable speeds, either high-speed or distinct time lapses, in a way that permits us to see what we do not see or, better said, aspects that we do not see in what we see, or we think we see. The high-speed camera, rendering the effect of slow motion, moves towards photography because in the slowness that is imposed the image is frozen, fixed, suspending for a time the relation of cause and effect, suspending narration and opening up a space for observation that belongs to the nature of photography. The time-lapse image does the contrary, it begins as photography, but is pushed towards temporal development, eliminating some aspects and revealing others. In its way of working there is a special tension between what is photography and cinema, since elements appear that escape continuity, that were only there for a moment, like subliminal stills that inscribe the action in contradictory circumstances. In the time-lapse image there is a paradoxical aspect that allows us simultaneously to see a double nature in the image: what does not have continuity in it is photography, and what maintains continuous movement is narration. That which does not have continuity is like the thread-less spool in Dalí’s photograph.

The extraordinary manipulation of the digital image propels images to combine themselves with other images, which permits the exploration of the photographic roots of cinema. In this way the “unknown aspects” that the work proposes arise not only from the technique employed in recording, but also through the combination of images.

w: Can you speak about the role of time and photography in relation to the spaces of the theatre and the factory represented in *Una noche sin fin*?

MP: In *Una noche sin fin*, I was interested in the tension between the static still and movement, the capacity of breaking narrative and the capacity of the image to resist narrative in offering various possible paths; for this purpose I wanted to use 2 techniques of recording traditionally associated with scientific research: the recording of images in high speed and the recording of images in time lapse. Both generally have been used with analytical aims for the scientific study of transitory phenomena, but in this case they helped me to ask questions in relation to time, regarding the difference between the nature of photography and the moving image. I basically wanted to join 4 stories about time, understood in the sense of duration: a day in a factory with a duration of 8 hours; a theatrical performance with a duration of 2 hours; three people who sleep during 8 hours, in turns, in the same bed, until they reach 24 hours; a story of 7 days that introduces the natural time of matter through the means of a plate of strawberries abandoned on a table after a dinner that, with the passing of the days, become moldy until they nearly disappear. The four blocks of time have been recorded to equalize their duration to around 3 minutes, sometimes with high speed, others with distinct time lapses, even though afterwards they are combined and complicated, according to a certain lack of discipline that distances the method from scientific intention.

The idea was to construct a fragmented story that connects distinct realities, and for this reason there is no protagonist in *Una noche sin fin*, but rather an elevated number of actors

who participate in one or another role with concrete instructions, so for some they only sleep. Altogether they form a kind of unconscious collectivity.

In the factory, a series of line workers are recorded during their work with a high-speed camera. They work during the day, but during the night another character, recorded in time lapse, catches up with them and performs the work of all of them. The repetition of the movements penetrates every small gesture that the characters mechanically repeat. The factory never stops. In the theater the performance is set conventionally to two hours and, it seems, at first, is clearly divided in its mechanism of stage/public with each one respectively occupying a screen. At the same time as the theater is compared to the factory as mechanism, the factory is related with the theater, as the condition of the public escapes the concrete space and is extended to the other activities of life. The appearance of the radio goes beyond physical space, extending the spectator’s condition to any place and any moment.

In this system of life, sleep is also organized as in the factory in work shifts and sleeping shifts, as in immigrants’ shared beds where renters sleep in shifts, sub-renting beds, with shifts often determined by the working schedule. 24 hours of sleep recorded in time lapse with three persons who each sleep 8 hours. The sleepers are separated in space and time; they perform as a single body, moving themselves according to an unconscious coordination. Their accelerated movements are recorded in time lapse, with the camera positioned above, like a security camera, or like in dream clinics, converting sleep into an intense activity. Here, sleep is not rest, but an organized activity.

But it is also time as something concrete, which is united with the temporary nature of matter; in a garden, after a dinner, a plate of strawberries is left on a table that is recorded during 7 days until mold covers them. This “natural” time, united with matter, is filtered into the theater, in the ice which melts into a glass of whisky, into a plate of strawberries, etc. But through the recording system it seems dispossessed of this “naturalness,” because an artifice that approaches the idea of performance is required to see it. Time is, then, in the apparatus, the recording apparatus and the projection apparatus, one might ask to what point we have also been conditioned by this time.

Only a small part has been recorded in normal speed. This is where we see the hands of the character who buys a series of objects, in which only money moves at normal speed. Even though in the place occupied by these sequences, it gives the feeling of being dreamt by one of the characters who sleeps. It is as if the normal speed only takes place in the space of the dream... although the sound also functions at normal speed.



Mabel Palacín
Una noche sin fin, 2006-2008
 Videoprojection in two screens, 23'

The industrial revolution generated a culture based on a highly stratified regulation of limited quantities of time available for production. The factory is the clearest example of the division and organization of time, of the standardization of time. The organization of time in the factory extends to all levels of human activity and performance (theater, concerts, cinema) introduces a standard duration to the conditions of visibility, so it follows that there is also a time relation between reality and fiction, that fiction is shortened to a specific time and that if it lasts too long it spills over into reality. The factory as much as the theater has been, in part, recorded in high speed, because the functions that both spaces assume have inundated other aspects of life to the point that now it is possible to find traces of them in nearly everything.

The high-speed recording relates the factory and the theater as two specific places where time is interrupted and interpreted in a particular manner, either for the purpose of production or the purpose of representation. High speed is capable of breaking the relation of cause and effect, so that, in the combination of images it turns out that we often see the effect before the cause, thus creating a strange form of ellipsis. In *Una noche sin fin*, time is treated in relation to perception through the use of cameras that do not see reality as we see it, which recalls the definition that Bresson gave to cinema: to show what you see through an apparatus that does not see the way you see.

w: In *Una noche sin fin*, you present two screens facing each other, which represent motion in the two different registers of slow motion and fast motion. Between the two time frames is the viewer in a real space and time. In addition, the sound was recorded in real time, so it exists between the time represented in the images. Furthermore, this real “auditory” time draws attention to the nature of video installation and to how shifting modalities of time in the projected images shape the viewer’s phenomenological experience. Finally, there is the music laid over the sound. It seems to me that the sound is used in a deliberate manner. Can you explain how the sound contributes to the larger issues explored in the video?

MP: We hear the sound in real time, but it is tied to the images, which is to say it has voids and abundances that we could not perceive in a circumstance of normal speed. In the images which function at high speed, the sounds that correspond to what we see, sound *in*, are separated by the silences that the slow motion imposes, a kind of suspension of time that is also a suspension of sound. For example, in the theater, when one of the characters throws over the table, the real sound recorded is a crash that does not allow us to perceive the specific sounds as separate. In slow motion we see more details and this is also translated into listening to more details; in particular, each of the elements of the dishes clatter and shatter on the floor when they fall. Sometimes a strange effect is created, in that the sound does not seem to correspond with the image. When the actors leap from the stage to the stalls, for example, the sound of the leap does not seem to correspond to the image, the image is too slow for the specific sound.

Something similar happens in the sequences recorded in time lapse, but in a distinct way: we hear things that we do not see, even though they belong “inside the frame.” Sometimes the sound is not synchronous with the speed of the image, it cannot be. In the play that is performed in the theater, we hear the actors’ footsteps moving, though without seeing them move; we only see them here and there, in the space of the stage. Also, as the time lapses become longer, the characters practically disappear because they move. We do not see them but we hear them, we hear their footsteps when they shift the seating in the theater, or the plates, table settings and glasses, when they dine, in the sequence of the table outside of the theater. In order to synchronize the sound in the time-lapse sequences it is necessary to eliminate most of it, including the words— there is no time for words. So in the theater the actors see themselves dispossessed of the text; the speed pushes them to make of a series of movements, displacements and gestures that only leave a place for the most concrete and most precise sounds, which are tied to the material world.

To the sound is added the music, complying with the most classical condition of *over* sound. The theme is an archetypal film score that is repeated with variations and distinct durations. It is like a code that does not seem to have a natural relation with what we see, but rather inscribes it with a kind of generic artificiality. There is the theme as such at the center of the video, the version that we hear

in the factory with the night worker, and four variations that correspond to the daytime factory, the theatre, the sleepers and the table. All of the versions are separated by pauses and transitions. Like a film score, it is sometimes supported by the sounds in the video so as to acquire dynamism. Sometimes very few sound elements are conserved, and repetition with variations does not resolve the action but brings suspense to it through generic elements, leaving all of the options open.

You are right that there is only one sound track for the two screens. It can be situated in the middle of the two times, but in a particular manner because through it, the sound could sometimes pertain to two screens, come from one or the other screens and reach a distinct condition depending on whether you watch one or the other. This is the case of the sounds in the theater; at the moment in which the structural elements of the scenery fall, they are incorporated in the factory as if they formed part of its environment, as if they were part of the same activity; they pertain to the space of the theater, but they can be part of the factory. The sound is on both sides and works to break the spatial category, or, at least, to introduce a certain ambiguity in it. When the last worker throws the pieces of an already completely dismantled motor into a box, the last of the pieces sounds different from the others. Without the reverberation in the large space of the factory, the last piece sounds like it is in a smaller and fuller room, in the room of the sleepers and the change of location takes place through the sound. The sound contributes to giving unity and, as you say, it explores the nature of the installation of the piece, breaking the spatial unity of the scenes, because where the sound really is found is in the position occupied by the spectator, who has to choose between one or the other screen. What is “heard” in each screen is not really “heard” in either, but is only “heard” in the head of the spectator.