REVIEW

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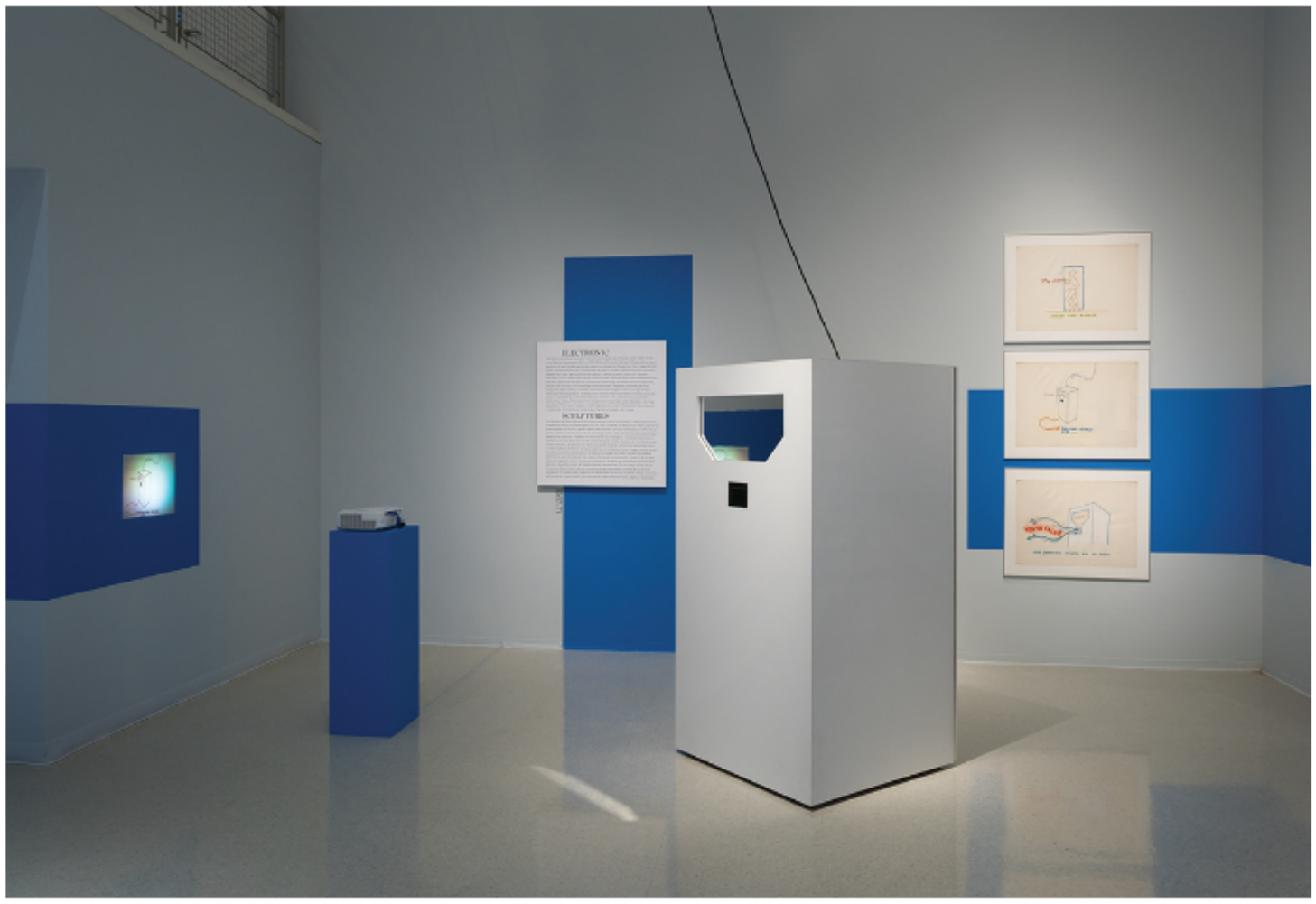
Phenomenology of a Cyborg: Biological and Technical Systems in the Art of Juan Downey

Juan Downey: Radiant Nature
Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA
September 9–December 8, 2017

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
September 13–December 3, 2017

—Anuradha Vikram

A massive gray box stands at the center of the Nichols Gallery at Pitzer College. The work, Juan Downey's *Pollution Robot* (1970), was recreated for the exhibition out of melamine and plywood from original drawings and sparse documentation. At eye level, a darkened sheet of one-way glass obscures the view inside. At the rear, a hinged door allows one to enter the robot's innards. Where one might anticipate a tangle of wires is instead an empty space. Stepping in, visitors are encouraged to use handles to clumsily navigate the bulky vertical box around the space. Below the viewing screen, which affords a partial view of the surroundings from within, is a vintage 1970s hair dryer mounted to a vent. Its power cord trails upwards to the ceiling, acting as a tether that limits the box's trajectory. "POLLUTION ROBOT," reads the title card of a low-fi documentation video playing nearby. "Follows people…and breathes stuffy air on them." The simple mechanisms of this absurd structure epitomize Downey's technological ambitions and the grounding of his interest in the actions of the human body and our earthly habitat. Downey's interest in humane and sustainable ecological and political systems, evident in his later, better known works, such as *Video Trans Américas* (1976), is already apparent in Radiant Nature's collection of performances and objects, which were all created between 1965 and 1974.

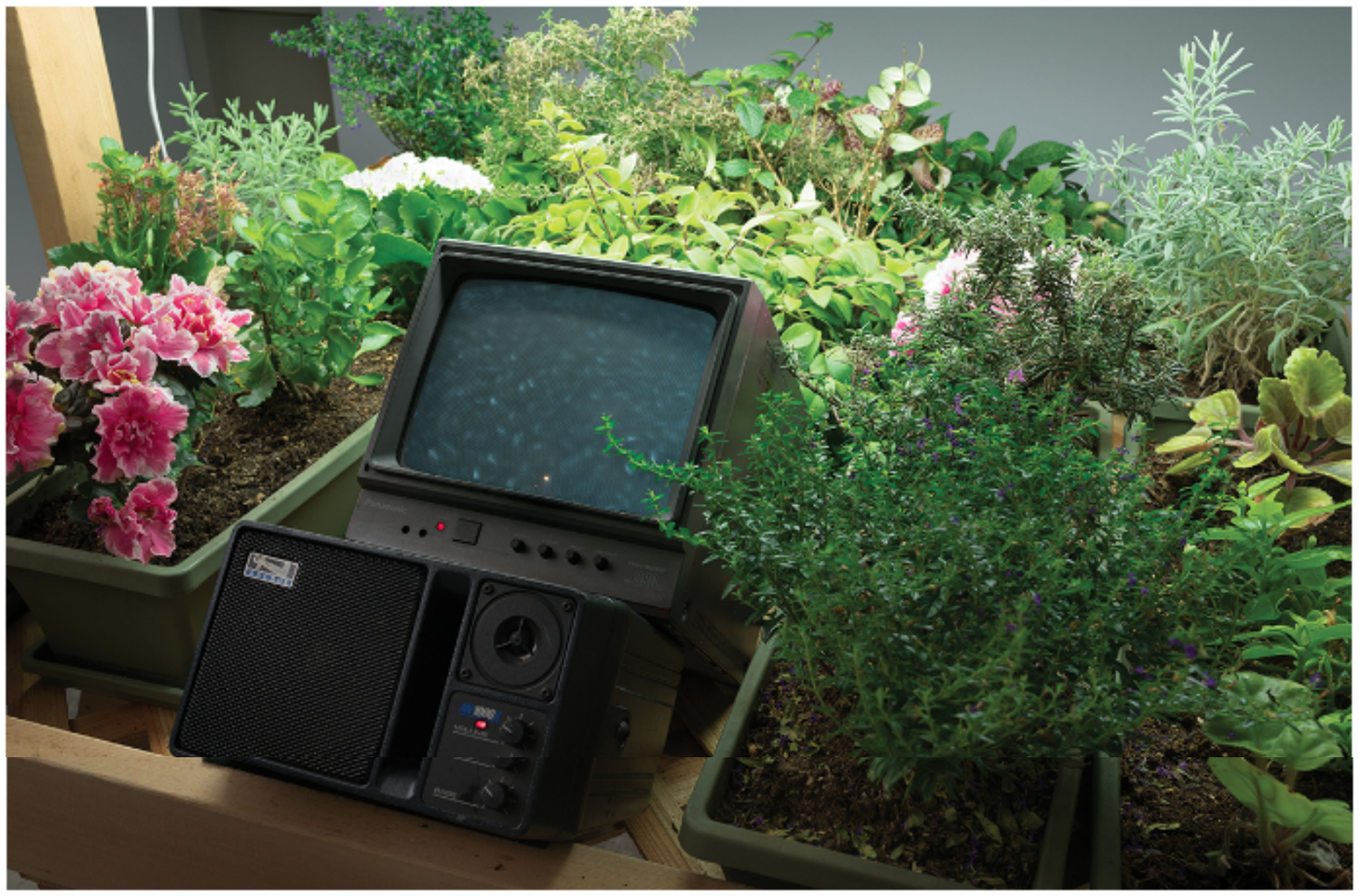


Juan Downey: Radiant Nature, installation view, Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA, September 9–December 8, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Though Downey's work has many affinities with the techno-utopian culture of the West Coast, it has been little seen in the region. Radiant Nature, which is presented as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, seeks to redress this absence. Curated by Robert Crouch and Ciara Ennis, with cooperation from the artist's estate, the exhibition is divided into three sections: Electronic Sculptures (1967–71) and Life Cycle Installations (1970–71), at the Nichols Gallery and the Lenzer Family Art Gallery at Pitzer College, and Happenings and Performances (1968–75), at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Downey's recreated installations at Pitzer College manifest his enthusiasm for merging the cybernetic with the biological. The concurrent presentation at LACE emphasizes the artist's interest in theatricality and bodily integration, as manifested in his collaborations with performers in Happenings. The multi-part exhibition encapsulates Downey's distinct and influential aesthetic, which is set apart by its humility and its playful energy. In these works, the artist's abiding impulse to seek liberation through hybrid technological and organic systems extends beyond humans to other organisms, including bees, plants, and the ecosystem of the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Downey proposes that political fascism and environmental destruction are to be equally opposed, not by resisting technology but rather by rethinking our expectations about what technology is meant to do and for whom.

The Chilean-born Downey, who was active in the United States from 1965 until his death in 1993, attained a bachelor's degree of architecture in Santiago before emigrating to Europe to study in 1961. He settled first in Paris, where the collective Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) was a formative influence. GRAV, known for immersive installations that responded kinetically and optically to the viewer's presence, inspired Downey to apply his architectural knowledge of space and social interaction to artistic practice. Downey's early artworks, developed after he arrived in Washington, DC, in 1965, exhibit the participatory ethics and utopian ideals of French intermedia art.

The artist's concern with a responsible ethics of participation in his work offers an alternative to the often-perfunctory online engagement of today, which has replaced the lucid dreamscapes imagined by the first generation of artist-technologists with whom he interacted. By 1969, Downey had moved to New York and become involved with the community of artists and performers affiliated with the Judson Church. This influential avant-garde performance movement informed his works of the period, which extended the bodies of humans, animals, and plants into technologically enhanced space through direct means.

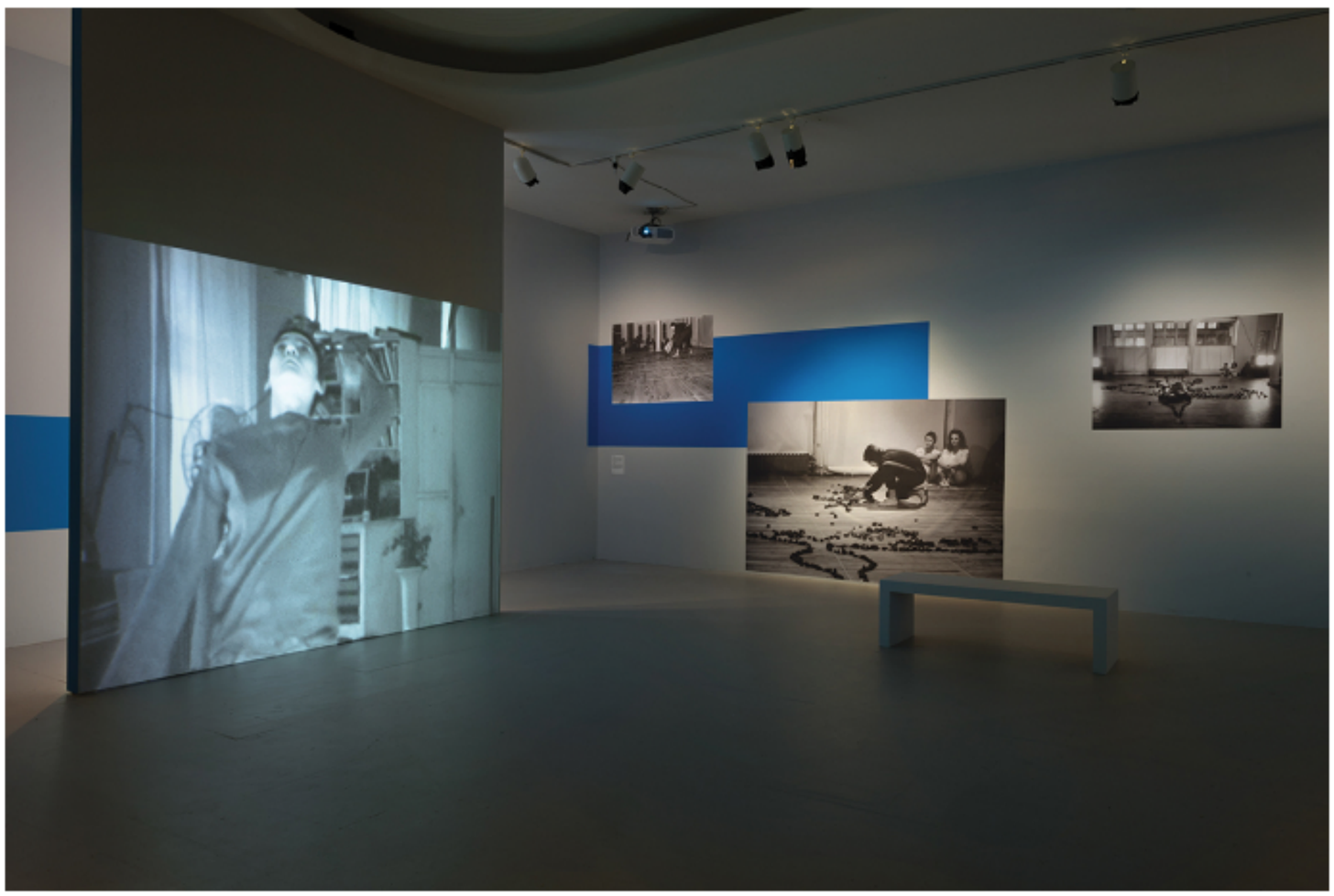


Juan Downey, *Life Cycle: Electric Light + Water + Soil → Flowers → Bees → Honey* (detail), 1971/2017. Hives, lavender, rosemary, red apple ground cover, flowers, video camera, video monitor, retro grow lights, and bees. Installation view, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA, September 13–December 3, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Circuits of systemic feedback between organic and inorganic sources of input became Downey's focus. At Pitzer College, curators Ennis and Crouch commissioned reconstructions of a number of Downey's foundational kinetic artworks from this period, in consultation with the artist's estate. These systems might incorporate a human hand, motion sensors, and illumination, as in *Information Center* (1970/2017), at the Lenzer Family Art Gallery. Or they might incorporate a living philodendron, photosynthesis, and biosensors, as in *A Vegetal System of Communications for New York State* (1972/2017), at the Nichols Gallery. *Life Cycle: Electric Light + Water + Soil → Flowers → Bees → Honey* (1971/2017), also at the Nichols, is a symbiotic work in which bees travel from a hive to a flowerbed; their activities are observed and simulcast via closed circuit TV. For the utopian Downey, his artistic mediation of animal-human relations through technology represented a potentially emancipatory space for both. Against the backdrop of political upheaval in his native Chile and labor uprisings among arts and culture workers in New York and Latino farmhands in California, Downey, with characteristic idealism, imagined that his bees would be metaphorically liberated through the self-awareness enabled by media visibility. This expectation, which aligns with a liberatory Marxism that Downey saw in the striking laborers of the Art Workers Coalition and the United Farm Workers, goes beyond the promise of acknowledgement by the powerful, which "visibility" implicitly suggests, to

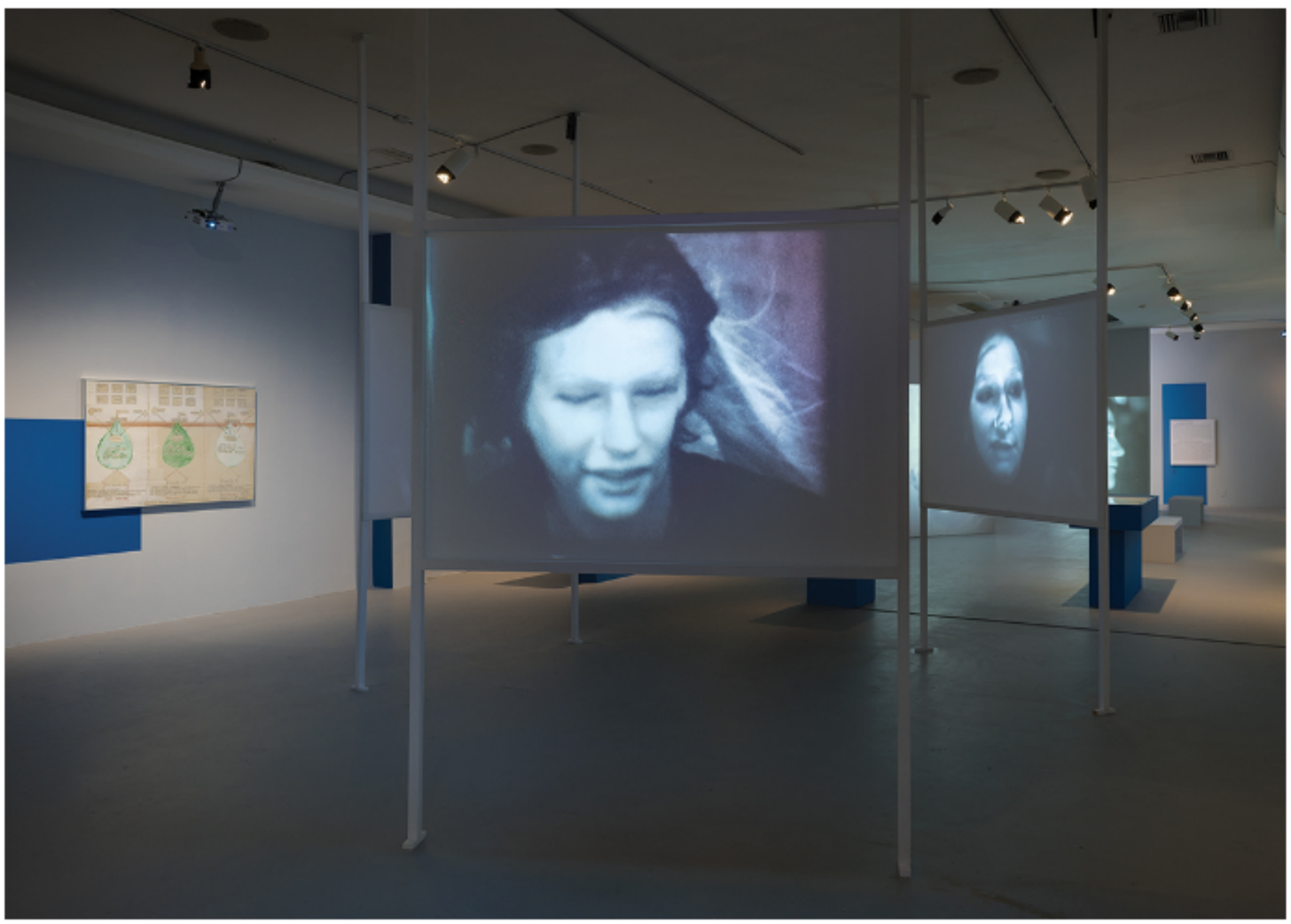
propose an idea of emancipation through self-recognition that aligns with Lacan and his inheritors, such as Jacques Rancière.

Downey's *Life Cycles* series prefigures recent tendencies in socially engaged art, from Rancière's conception of "the emancipated spectator" to Pierre Huyghe's use of live animals and insects in his environmental works. While these French examples share the utopian impulse that Downey took from GRAV and his Parisian years, they address ideas of liberated time and ecological decay within a discourse circumscribed by Western universalism. *Radiant Nature* covers a period in Downey's practice when he began to connect his attempts to liberate contemporary life from the rages of capitalism to indigenous philosophies and ways of life. This line of inquiry would become more overt in *Video Trans Américas*. As is often the case with artists of his era whose practices integrate performance, technology, and language, Downey has been omitted from the established lineage of artists working with a social and performative framework for art and relegated instead to a separate, parallel "new media art history" that severs his connections to the body-based performance practices of his era. This is particularly egregious in Downey's case, because his work addresses a key blind spot in the prevailing approach to socially engaged art—its tendency to instrumentalize participants in the service of an agenda set by artists and institutions, while promising liberatory experiences in exchange for their participation.



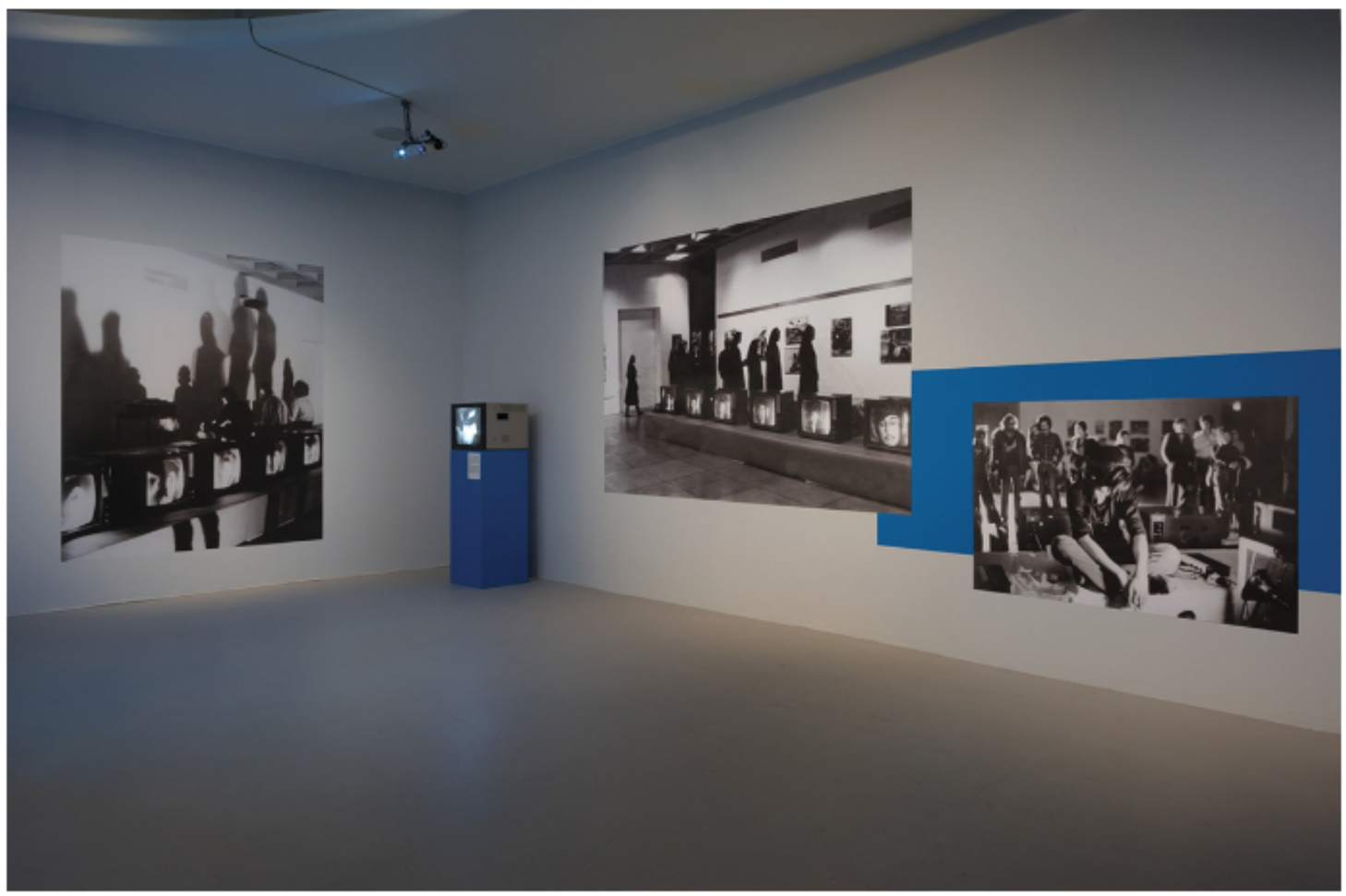
Left: **Juan Downey**, *Energy Fields*, 1972. Portapak video transferred to digital media; black-and-white and sound, 14:25 min. Right: **Juan Downey**, *Nazca*, 1974. Enlarged photographic documentation of video-performance, The Kitchen, New York, February 1974. Installation view, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA, September 13–December 3, 2017. © Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, New York. Photo: Peter Moore. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

The performance works shown as video and photographic documentation at LACE center on Downey's involvement with the Judson Church, which had been germinating experimental body-based art and movement since the early 1960s.[1] His arrival there at the decade's end resulted in collaborations that were ongoing through the 1970s, such as with the choreographer Carmen Beuchat, who appears in much of the documentation in *Radiant Nature*. Her approach to movement mined the vein struck by epoch-making choreographers such as Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown, the latter of whom appears alongside Beuchat in documentation of Downey's *Energy Fields* (1972). Like the foundational performance artists, including Allan Kaprow and Yvonne Rainer, who had emerged from this community of artists, Downey adopted the categorical term *Happenings* to describe an improvisational, experiential mode of performance incorporating installation art and conceptual poetry. In keeping with his times, Downey's performance works preserve the mimetic theatricality of the 1960s Happenings but address overtly political themes in a more pointed manner. The artist's political and ecological awakening is evident in Nazca (1974), a ritualistic event performed at The Kitchen in New York, in which Downey and two white-faced female performers re-enact the destruction of ecosystems across Latin America resulting from the construction of the Pan-American Highway, which links the region's industrialized cities with trade partners in the United States and Canada. In enlarged black-and-white photographs, Downey is shown outlining the shape of a bird in black lumps of coal, then placing his prone body within the form. His collaborators, Beuchat and Suzanne Harris, slowly shuffle across the space, dragging white chalk dust in parallel tracks behind them. Their marks mimic the impressions that heavy machinery makes with its wheels and tracks upon the earth. The documentary photographs suggest a contrast between Downey's constellational gestures, which emanate from his intuition, and the linear pathways of the two women, which are precise, organized by efficiency alone. At the end of the sequence, the straight white tracks have run through and bisected the bird form, which the artist has connected metaphorically, through his movements, to both his own body and to the land. The machine here is synthesized with the body of the colonizer, its totalizing power reflected in the performers' whitened faces. The dynamic between organic and inorganic modes of being is the central conflict of *Nazca*, which represents these elements as oppositional while moving toward a ritualistic resolution—a tragic peace. Such themes are at the heart of Downey's oeuvre.



Juan Downey, *Three Way Communication by Light*, 1972. Video installation with three monitors and three Portapak videos transferred to digital media; black-and-white and sound, 31:01, 32:29, 35:55 min. each and colored pencil, acrylic, and graphite on Bristol board, 39 3⁄8 × 59½ in. Installation view, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA, September 13–December 3, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

In addition to performance, Downey built interactive objects that engage haptic feedback loops triggered by living stimuli as another way to contrast and ultimately merge organic and inorganic elements in his work for a phenomenological effect. Works in this vein include *Information Center* (1970/2017) at Pitzer College's Lenzer Gallery, a large low box outfitted with motion sensors that generates visual and auditory responses to viewers' movements. In this respect, the artist can be situated within a techno-Romantic tradition more commonly associated with West Coast experiential artists such as Stewart Brand, Larry Harvey, and Gary Warne. In particular, Brand's promotion of an environmentalist ethos gleaned from interactions with indigenous communities but achieved with high-tech solutions is contemporaneous with and echoed in Downey's practice, while Warne's adventuresome spirit finds parallels in Downey's explorations of the Venezuelan rainforest. Nam June Paik, another artist of Downey's generation, shares his concern with integrating organic and inorganic systems. Paik's interest in incorporating live performance with real-time broadcasts or simulcasts parallels Downey's *Video Dances* (1974) and *Energy Fields* (1972). (Both works are included in the LACE show.) A pronouncement repeats throughout *Energy Fields*: "For the only existing thing capable of intelligence we must call soul, and soul is invisible, whereas fire and water, earth and air, are all visible bodies." Downey's interest in invisible metaphysics and visible physicality is shared with Paik, who questioned and problematized embodiment. The artists share as well a curiosity about invented life forms, such as artificial intelligence (AI). At Pitzer, Downey's text work, *A Novel* (1969/2017), pursues the possibility of AI while humorously highlighting its failures. The artist engages in a kind of reverse Turing Test, in which the novel's plot is determined exclusively by questions that collaborators ask of him and the artist's own yes or no responses. The ensuing drama stems from a recurring human desire to project inner feelings, such as infatuation or anxiety, onto others.

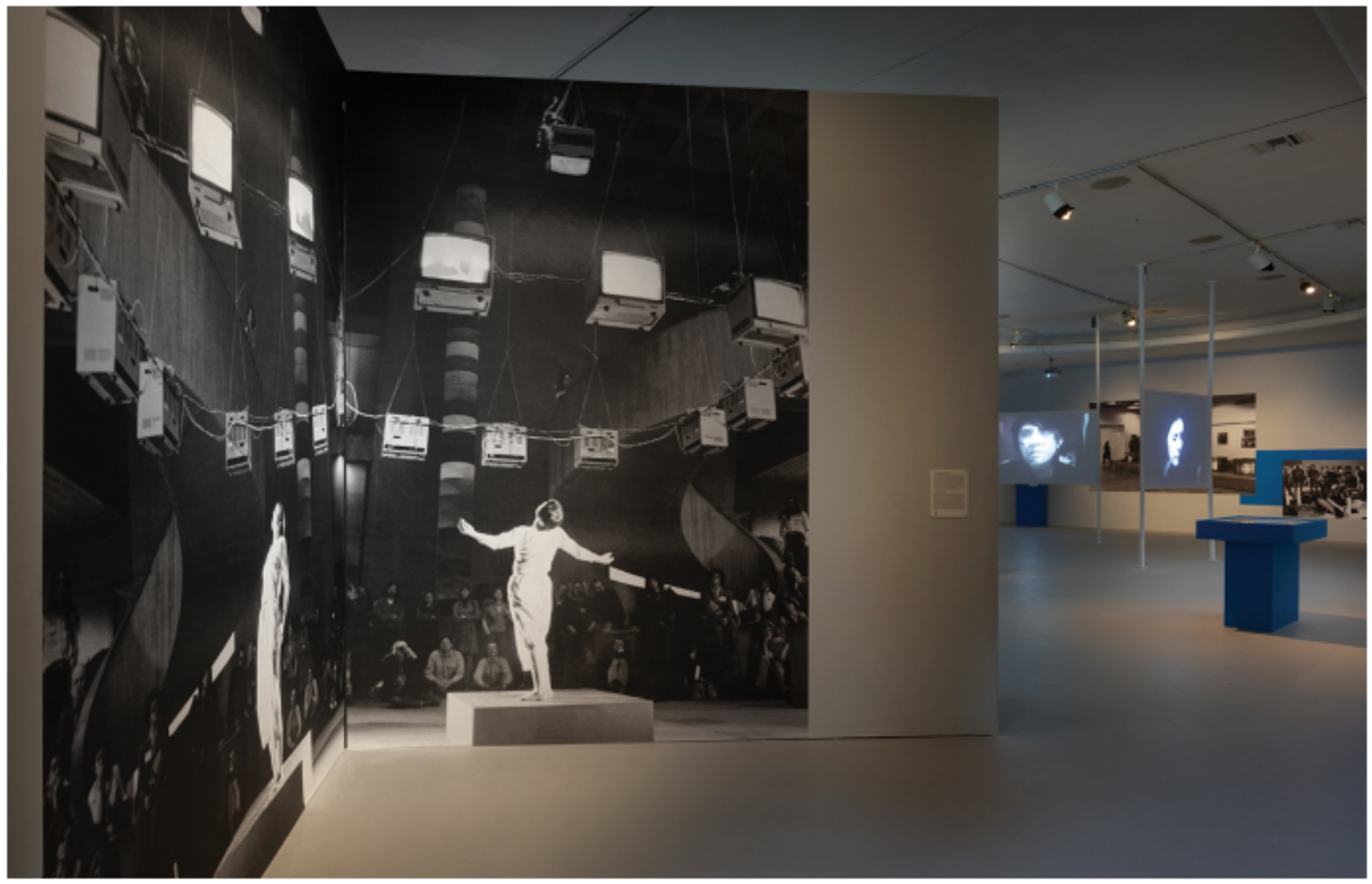


Left and right: **Juan Downey**, *Plato Now*, 1973 . Enlarged photographic documentation of video-performance at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, January 6, 1973. Center: **Juan Downey**, *Doing Things Together: Imperialistic Octopus*, 1972. Portapak video transferred to digital media; black-and-white and sound, 58:27 min. Installation view, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA, September 13–December 3, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

In *Three-Way Communication by Light* (1972), at LACE, three participants serve as both performers and screens, their visages and voices projected onto one another in new and strange combinations. *Plato Now* (1973) takes the human-machine integration of the other performance works in a more philosophical direction. A group of students wearing headphones, on which play excerpts from Plato's *Dialogues*, is enlisted to silently meditate, with their backs to the audience. They sit atop monitors on which their own facial expressions are simulcast. Enlarged documentary photos show the students' faces broadcast toward the audience, with the spectators seen standing behind. Captive in their contemplation, the performers introduce biofeedback into the system such that the video feed is altered by the participants' states of consciousness, and the original stimulus (the *Dialogues*) begins to cut into the loop. This metaphysical cyber-action both humanizes broadcast technology and anticipates our contemporary era of mediated emotions and televised spiritual connections.

As the political situation in Downey's native Chile worsened throughout 1973, and as working-class Latinos in his adoptive country of the United States agitated for improved labor conditions, the artist began to introduce more overtly activist content. At LACE, works such as *Chilean Flag* and *Publicness* (both 1974) explicitly address the aftermath of the assassination of Chile's president Salvador Allende and Augusto Pinochet's CIA-backed coup d'état. *Chilean Flag* depicts the artist mimicking military displays of fealty: marching in place, singing patriotically, and waving a large flag to the point of exhaustion. *Publicness*, which originated as a program for Manhattan Cable Access broadcast, restages the flag-waving gesture with a different performer. The subject's Chilean-style military dress and the video's patriotic soundtrack underscore the violence underpinning the whole system. Both works embrace lo-fi broadcast media as a channel for communicating messages of freedom and solidarity in a politically restrictive environment. Downey's grainy protest seems to propose that freeing the airwaves is a necessary step to freeing the people.

Debriefing Pyramid (1974), documented in enlarged photographs at LACE, features Beuchat surrounded by an inverted pyramid of television sets. The sacred geometries of the ancients, represented by the structure in the form of the Great Pyramid of Giza, are married with the communicative power of the present, as 14 televisions broadcast video imagery of ancient pyramids in Mexico and Guatemala that the artist had visited. Beuchat performed at the center of the pyramid while a video feed recorded and played back her actions from a monitor on the floor, allowing her to adapt her movements on the basis of her video self-awareness, which activated the pyramid's energy flows. The simultaneous presentation of related iconography from disparate corners of the globe recalls the worldwide interplay of cultures enabled by the Internet. This decolonial action is complemented by *Doing Things Together: Imperialistic Octopus* (1972), a work represented by video documentation that takes the form of street-based direct action to engage artistically with collective human activity. In the video, participants surge through the crowd at John Lennon and Yoko Ono's April 1972 peace march, each manipulating a long octopus tendril. An accompanying text panel explains that each tentacle equates to a corporate or state bad actor meddling across the US border to support Latin America's then-proliferating right-wing ascendancy through undemocratic means.

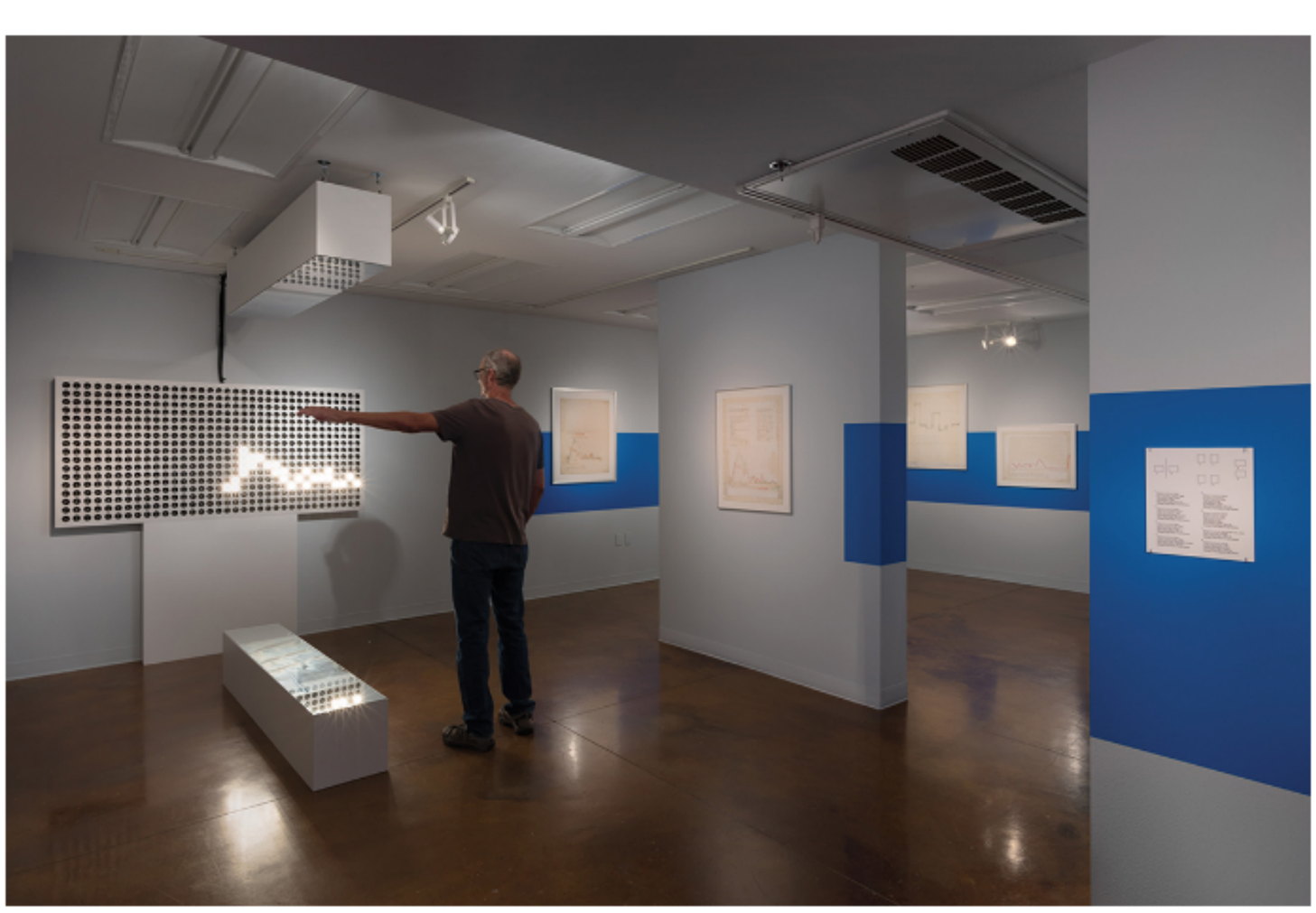


Juan Downey, *Debriefing Pyramid*, 1974. Enlarged photographic documentation of video-performance, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, April 1974. Photo: Harry Shunk. Installation view, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA, September 13–December 3, 2017.

If the works in the exhibition at LACE seek to liberate a public through embodiment and open communication, another kind of politics pervades the installation at Pitzer, which highlights Downey's ongoing concerns with global sustainability on ecological and creative terms. Here, ecologies of nature and of labor are placed in dialogue with one another. In addition to the *Life Cycle* works, the two-channel video work *Monument to a River, Cambridge* (1973), commissioned by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), considers the interplay of human, non-human, organic, and manmade elements within an ecosystem. The work was originally intended to be four channels, but Downey was unable to complete his epic study during the period of the fellowship. Still, his ambition to chronicle every aspect of the river's life is evident in the two video streams that depict activities including commercial shipping, sport rowing, and wildlife behavior. In 2016, Kerry Tribe similarly used video to narrate an urban ecology centered on water, in *Exquisite Corpse* (2016), which chronicles each of the 51 miles traveled by the Los Angeles River in a single minute apiece. This recent work confirms the prescience of Downey's approach. An adjacent work, *A Vegetal System of Communications for New York State* (1972/2017), further develops the artist's interest in ecosystems while adding a twist reminiscent of Hans Haacke's infamous *MoMA Poll* (1970), in which museum-goers were invited to cast votes voicing their opinions on the ongoing war in Vietnam. Downey offers a vote instead to the trees of New York State, whose welfare is seldom considered when decisions are made about land use or air quality. A copper box, roughly three by three feet square, contains a live ficus tree wired to receptors that cause the box to emit a sonic frequency, like a theremin. Viewers can attempt to affect the sound by touching and breathing on the box to influence the sonic feedback from the plant.

In 1970, Downey engaged in an informal quantitative survey of his fellow New York artists and arts patrons, asking about their income, their working methods, and their collective art holdings. The results, in *Research on the Art World* (1970), take the form of a series of graph drawings based on

survey forms the artist mailed to one thousand artists, collectors, and critics. The survey questions reflect concerns about influence, livability, and patronage also being raised by other artist-activists, such as the Art Workers Coalition. In her essay for *Radiant Nature*, Pitzer College Art Galleries director Ennis describes how the Art Workers Coalition reflected both the broad international, anti-war concerns of the time and the much narrower demographic makeup of the insider art world among the activists themselves.[2] Downey, like many artists of his era, struggled to reconcile his own feelings of solidarity with indigenous cultures and causes with his relatively privileged position as a member of the educated, upper middle class of mostly European descent. Though Downey's work emerges from artistic movements based in Europe and the United States, he shares this concern with other Latin American artists working with conceptual and performance forms who were also in New York in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, such as Cuban-American Ana Mendieta[3] and Brazilian émigré Hélio Oiticica.[4] Downey, Mendieta, and Oiticica were known for integrating audio/visual media into performances that reconfigured the audience-performer relationship, and they were concerned with the repercussions of industrialized human activity on marginalized and indigenous peoples and on global ecosystems. Their works also share a certain resistance to being categorized, as their practices transgress conventional boundaries between historical and material approaches.



Juan Downey: Radiant Nature, installation view, Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, CA, September 9–December 8, 2017. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Downey. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

Radiant Nature includes work that precedes *Video Trans Américas*, which Downey shot in the Amazon jungle while living with his wife Marilys Belt de Downey and his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter Titi Lamadrid alongside the native Yanomami people of Venezuela and Brazil. This later work marks another turning point for the artist because it directly takes on the politics of indigeneity and autonomy that his earlier works addressed only metaphorically. In *Video Trans Américas*, Downey must confront his own expectations and assumptions about indigenous people, while attempting to counteract the structural imbalance of power that is implicit in the traditional observer-subject relationship inherent to ethnographic films. As with the bees in *Life Cycle*, Downey's approach to video here is to turn the camera over to the one being documented as much as possible, and in doing so, to destabilize his own authoritative position. During the course of the narrative, conflicting anthropological narratives about these "uncontacted" people (who had by that time become

Throughout his artistic output, Downey resisted the traditional hierarchies that situate artists above audiences, directors above performers, and scientific observers above the observed. His entire project aspires to be egalitarian, and he uses technology to level the playing field across individuals, races, and entire species. His approach to social interaction, as demonstrated by the interactive works in *Radiant Nature*, employs technology to enhance the attributes that participant-individuals already possess: their cognition (*Dialogues*), their locomotion (*Octopus*), their visages (*Three-Way*), and their revolutionary potential (*Pyramid*). That potential is cited by the majority of socially engaged artists working now, but it remains a rare occasion that such an artist's intervention actually feels revolutionary, as Downey's quiet reversal of the accumulative, excessive values of modern capitalism often does.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Jack Anderson, "How the Judson Theater Changed American Dance," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1982, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/31/arts/how-the-judson-theater-changed-american-dance.html?pagewanted=all.
2. Ciara Ennis, "The Politics of Play in the Early Work of Juan Downey," in Juan Downey, *Juan Downey: Radiant Nature*, ed. Ciara Ennis and Robert Crouch (Los Angeles: LACE, and Claremont, CA: Pitzer College Art Galleries, 2017).
3. Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 54.
4. Cynthia Canejo, "The Resurgence of Anthropophagy: Tropicália, Tropicalismo and Hélio Oiticica," *Third Text* 18, no. 1 (2004): 62.
5. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Helena Vilalta, "Yanomami, Let's Talk," *Afterall* 37 (Autumn/Winter 2014).