

EUGÈNIA BALCELLS: AN ARCHEOLOGY OF TIME

*Yet a permanence of stone and word,
the city like a bowl, rose up in the hands
of all, living, dead, silenced, sustained,
a wall out of so much death, out of so much life a shock
of stone petals: the permanent rose, the dwelling place:
the glacial outposts on this Andean reef.*

—Pablo Neruda (*The Way to Macchu Picchu*)*

A central concern of Eugènia Balcells' art is how time and images construct our relationship to the world around us. Her installations situate the viewer in a dynamic interplay with the means and forms of representation as she heightens our awareness of the sources upon which our real and imagined worlds are fashioned. Balcells' exploration of the interrelatedness of our multi-cultural world has led to a series of installations that constitute a special voice in today's artworld.

Born in Barcelona, Spain in 1943, Eugènia Balcells first followed her father and grandfather in the study of architecture. Although it was the visual arts that she was to pursue, her architectural studies influenced her appreciation of the ways cultural forms and functions are transmitted through the built environment. In the late 1960s, she visited the United States and completed her graduate studies at the University of Iowa. She continued to live in New York City and Barcelona through the 1970s and produced a number of films which

were exhibited extensively including participation in the 1978 Avant-Garde Festival in London. In 1979, she settled in New York, where she lives today. This brief survey of her early career is meant to serve as only the barest outline of a personal journey of artistic growth. It highlights a self-knowledge fashioned between two worlds, her native Spain and the United States, her adopted home, and the intercultural transaction across time and space that she was to record and interpret in the mirror image of film and video.

It is the reflection of this multi-cultural world in the media arts that Eugènia Balcells first addresses in her use of found film footage. The cinematic illusion is constructed out of individual frames of celluloid that pass through the projector. The memory that we carry away from that viewing experience is often of a still image. Film begins as a strip of celluloid. In a kind of cultural anthropology, Balcells retrieves the actual pieces of film that have become the physical basis of our cinematic memories. Two Super 8 films from 1977, *Presenta* and *The End*, are actually based on an audio-visual installation from 1976 entitled *Re-prise*. The installation consisted of eight slide carousels of eighty slides each. Eight projectors projected onto different surfaces of the gallery a typology of images from commercial movies. These included: *Titles and credits*; *Female characters*; *Male characters*; *Action: hand gestures*; *Relationship: the couple*; *Situation: by phone*; *The masses*; *The End*. The actual frames of film serve as the

to follow the thread
and to weave finely

to learn to walk
among the signs
hidden under the stones
and
the asphalt
of cities

to flow

hearing subways
while looking
at airplanes

survival

through all this
places
lots of joy
and
so much
sadness

night
after day

counting seconds
again
and again
sixty
times
sixty
times
twenty four
86,400
days
weeks
months
years
- that's it -
where is everybody going?
are you looking
for something?
can I help you?

structure a series of installation projects in video: the circle forms a system for composing the relationships of images to each other and of the viewer to the work as a whole. In 1981, in collaboration with the composer Peter Van Riper, Balcells created *Indian Circle*, a single-channel videotape in which the hand-held camera circles about a loft space. Like *Fuga*, *Indian Circle* is a meditation on an environment. Also in 1981 she produced the music score *Xerox Music* with the musician Malcolm Goldstein. Multiple xerox copies of the sheet of music created this score, at once abstract and mysterious. All ninety-nine sheets were placed in a circle. The musician improvised in a musical and physical interaction and transcription of the imaginary score.

In the 1985 work *TV Weave*, Balcells sought to address the screen of the television set in such a way as to manipulate the received broadcast image. In versions of this work ranging from five to forty-two monitors, the individual screens are covered so that thin horizontal lines are all one sees of the broadcast image. Thus the information of television becomes a minimalist display of moving color and light which emerge from the whole image hidden from view. Here Balcells erases the illusion of television and weaves an hypnotic pattern of abstract patterns across the surfaces of the television screens. The compositions of Peter Van Riper create a tonal environment that has become a signature of her installations. In this project, Balcells effec-

tively overcomes the presence of television and refashions its media technology into her own distinctive art form. She acknowledges and yet transforms the broadcast image with a bold and brilliant strategy by which she appropriates it for her own aesthetic purposes.

In *From the Center* (1982-1983), Balcells molded the medium into the form of the circle in such a way as to transform the medium and give full voice to her aesthetic. The project synthesised all of the elements which Balcells had been exploring in her previous films and videotapes. She achieved this by fusing formal images with a personal transcription and interpretation of the world around her. That world was New York City as seen from the rooftop of a building in lower Manhattan. In her hands, the video camera fashioned a representation of that built environment as a personal space that expresses the fundamental signs of life.

To Balcells, video is our «newest mirror», a «mirror with memory». Both of these metaphors suggest that the glass of the camera lens holds a record of reality, re-presents the illusion of reality. Behind that lens is the video production process in which the recording of images in real time allows the artist to develop the image as it is being recorded. This phenomenon, unique to video technology, allows the artist to look through the viewfinder and see the video image as it is being shot. This fundamental property of video allows for a direct response and transaction between the «I» of the artist and the

3 *Circles of Time (East)* The sun appears in the lower left corner of the screen, crosses the screen slowly ascending in a diagonal and disappears in the upper right corner. The music is the continuous circular ringing of a Buddhist bell. The resultant standing wave pattern fills the space with shimmering sound.

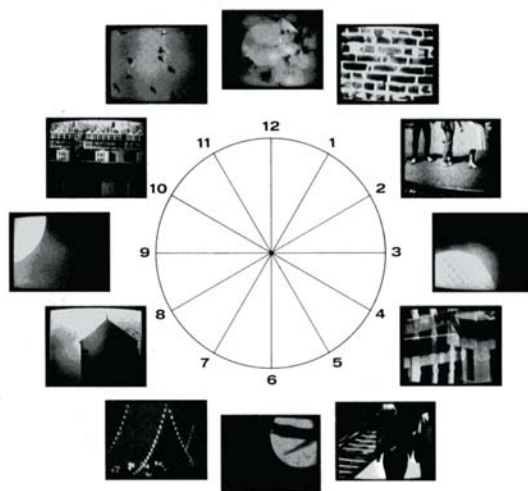
light steps
soft
almost no sound

basis for *Presenta*, a sequence of opening titles, and *The End*, made up of concluding shots from movies. This presentation of cultural iconography is given added force by the artist's attention to key structural elements within the cinematic narrative. *The End* is one of a series of Super 8 films that decoded and made material our relationship to the myths of the cinematic spectacle. Balcells explores other resources in such works as *Album* (1975–1978), which consists of postcards from her grandmother's album and a reading of their messages. Again, she uses individual photographs that served as a means of remembering where we have been to examine how we communicate.

Balcells' fascination with contemporary mythology extends through her films of the late 1970s. This concern reflects the artist's own personal quest as she was negotiating different cultures and coming to understand how popular culture created its own systems for representing the everyday world. In 1979, in *Fuga*, Balcells placed the film camera in the center of a room and rotated it 360 degrees. The film was exposed up to five times and each layer recorded four persons performing daily routines. The single fulcrum point from which the camera recorded the space and its activities, serves as both the physical and temporal locus of the film: physical, in the fixed point of view of the camera; temporal, in that each action became a layer of time and image within the multiple strata of the completed twenty-five minute film. Balcells here employs a strategy that was to

In the installation of *From the Center* the 12 video tapes and interrelated music tracks all play at once in a big circle. The central point is marked by a stone.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 High and Low | 7 Night |
| 2 A Corner | 8 The Tower |
| 3 Circles of Time (East) | 9 Circles of Time (West) |
| 4 Into One Another | 10 Layers |
| 5 Between | 11 Flight |
| 6 Moons | 12 Windows to the Sky |



it is
all
the same place
this center
in time

here
and there
all over the world
perspectives

territory



12 Windows to the Sky Two complementary sequences of the sky at different times of the day form the inside and outside of a circle. While the images inside the circle go from light to dark, the images on the outside go from dark to light. A male voice parallels the inner sky with descending tones while a female voice ascends with the brightening sky outside the circle.

dwelling

in that place
house/casa

open spaces
wilderness

land
nation
kingdom
barrio
downtown
midtown
uptown
nest
cave
wigwam
igloo

“eye” of the camera and its electronic image. The image we see on the screen is not composed of individual frames, as is the case in film, but is a constantly changing flow. This feature of video informs Balcells’ works as she explores the medium to create her compelling installation.

As one enters the gallery, one views above the entryway a sequence of slides that project images, collected from diverse cultures, that describe the shape of the circle. Thus the circle becomes the cultural and formal paradigm of *From the Center*. This encyclopedic sequence of signs and alchemical, tantric, and magical symbols embraces all cultures and conveys the circle as a primary emblem of the world. It reinforces the primary, and primal, force of the circle in human history and consciousness. Within the darkened gallery space is a circle of twelve monitors, each housed by a structure that, in its monolithic totality, evokes the primal quality of primary forms and images. At the center of this circle is a spot of light which falls on a single rock. The center is anchored by geological bedrock, by the earth.

Each of the monitors has a separate channel of video which is seen continuously and whose sequencing in relation to the others changes during the exhibition hours. Accompanying the images is a sound-track composed by Peter Van Riper together with Eugènia Balcells, which adds another layer and dimension to the experience of the images. There is no single and exclusive focus for each channel; they



10 Layers The speed at which the camera moves and the use of simple optical prisms change our perception of space. Sounds from the Brooklyn Bridge, accelerated and slowed down, parallel the work of the camera.

refer to certain elements which make each coherent and distinctive.

There is, on the one hand, a sense of place and environment, the natural environment on which the city is constructed and through which it cycles through time and space. Thus we can group six of the channels along the axis of the environment. *Channel 3 Circles of Time (East)* follows the sun as it moves diagonally across the screen accompanied by the constant circular ringing of a Buddhist bell. *6 Moons* follows the moon in the night sky accompanied by the everchanging sound of the sea. *7 Night* shows the city at night with its own patterns of light which constantly change, combined with the sounds of a wind chime and selected found objects. *9 Circles of Time (West)* describes another trajectory of the sun that complements channel 3, as the sound of a large bell fills the space. *11 Flight* looks at the flight patterns of pigeons as they circle about the rooftops of the neighborhood, accompanied by the sounds of sheets of film flapping in the wind and various whistles and bird calls. In *12 Windows to the Sky* a circle in the center of the screen holds two complementary images of light and dark from different times of the day; the soundtrack contains two voices, male and female, that parallel the changing tones of night and day, dark and light.

Another group of three channels focus on time and change. *Channel 4 Into One Another* is about the constantly changing environment. Here, through superimpositions and juxtapositions of images,

the city constantly metamorphoses to create a real and surreal environment where time and change are constant and as one. The sound is of the hum of traffic crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. *5 Between* consists of over one thousand rapidly edited shots of a cascading and changing environment. The sound is that of the environment mixed and overdubbed. *10 Layers* works with our changing perception of space caused by moving the camera at different speeds and using optical prisms to effect subtle transformations of that space. As the camera accelerates, it conveys, through the metaphor of the eye of the camera, another sense of how our world changes. The soundtrack is of the continuous hum of the Brooklyn Bridge as traffic flows over it. That harmonic is manipulated to parallel the acceleration of the camera.

The final three channels elaborate on the area as a place observed. In *Channel 1 High and Low*, there is a slowly descending pan from the top of building to the street level. The sound of objects and materials emphasises the camera's recording of architectural detail and the material components of the city. *2 A Corner* focuses on a street corner and the daily life of the community that happens around it. We hear on this channel a reading of the text of «From the Center». *8 The Tower* shows water towers as elements within this intensely urban landscape. They become extraordinary objects as the light of the sun shines through and suffuses the space. The soundtrack is from a live performance of Alvin Curran's music with Van Riper playing

at
in
on
by
near
next to
with
among

5 **Between** is a juxtaposition of over 1,000 short segments, all parts of a larger picture in time. Recorded sounds of the environment are mixed and overdubbed.

10,000 million years
the age
of the universe

in the same performance space, the *Anchorage* inside the Brooklyn Bridge.

The above *clustering* of the twelve channels into different groups is only one interpretation, or ordering, of the videotapes. The point of view of the beholder is a constantly shifting one as he or she composes and recomposes the images and sounds as they mix and interplay with each other. The result is a City Symphony that links the viewer, through the images of New York City, to any built environment. All cities echo and resonate with the sources and history of human society and rise from the profound springs of a natural environment—an environment which remains no matter how much we try to cover it up.

Eugènia Balcells' plans for the future include a twelve-channel video installation which will further develop her notion of geography as a metaphor for history and consciousness. In this case the place will be Cape Creus on the northern coast of Catalonia, Spain. In returning to her native Spain, Balcells is furthering her research into the cultural archeology of her own past as she seeks to «get close to an alchemical vision of reality that is coherent with the scientific, philosophical and spiritual views of the world today.» Twelve monitors, housed within structures that allow only the screens to be visible, will be placed in a circular configuration. These totems will rest on sand and a luminous circle will be suspended at eye level

within their circle. The primary form of the circle once again provides the artist with the architecture to house and retain the multiple points of view that will be articulated among the twelve channels of videotape. The compass and the clock are the two coordinates holding together the video units and the images themselves. In this project, Balcells is charting new territory. The images and the twelve separate soundtracks, all performed by Peter Van Riper, explore the relationships between nature and the cultural forces of the manmade environment. As Balcells notes in her proposal for this work, «Historic images will coexist with contemporary images to suggest the role that cultural memory plays in our concept of reality.»

This proposed installation, in its physical manipulation of the video images, affords the possibility of reconstructing the multiple realities of Balcells' discourse. Through the temporality of the multiple images and the impossibility of seeing all twelve images at once or hearing all the sound channels clearly and individually at the same time, it posits an exploratory position for the viewer not dissimilar to that of the artist. As one spends time within a Balcells installation, each viewer discovers personal and unique trajectories through the geographies of images and memories. In a sense, Balcells creates a simulacrum of her imagination. The result is a dynamic transaction between ourselves and the artwork that makes reseeing it a constantly renewing experience.

stillness
in movement

spinning galaxies

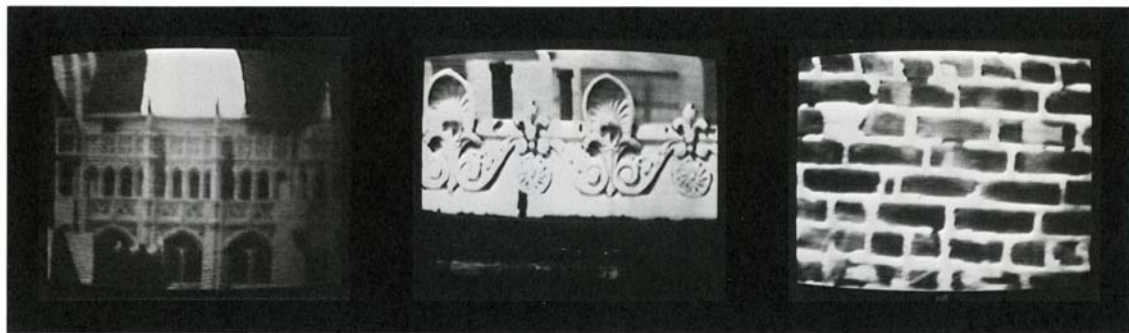
several
thousand
miles per second

curved space

collision

an act

joy



1 High and Low
is a slowly descending pan
of the environment from
the top of a building to the
street. The camera moves
constantly with a long
telephoto lens meandering
downward, closely looking
at all kinds of architectural
elements, details and
textures. The music is
concrete sounds of many
objects and materials.

In reflecting on the art of Eugènia Balcells, one is reminded of Pablo Neruda's magnificent poem *Macchu Picchu*, in which language evokes a quest for an understanding of this Incan site and the people who built it high in the Peruvian Andes. Echoing through Neruda's linguistic excavation of this place are the unseen memories, the powers of the mythic imagination, and the human effort that constructed its timeless presence.

It is as a visual poet that Balcells selects and makes the images which compose the space and place of her installation projects. As we stand within *From the Center*, we enter a tangible yet imaginary space that catalogs within a non-linear, non-hierarchical play of images the continuing construction that deposits on the past a hope for the future. As Neruda recalls the voice of pre-Columbian civilization in his rich and complex cantos, Balcells' circle gives expression to the often anonymous visions and voices of the present and the forgotten past, and joins the past to the future.

John G. Hanhardt

**Pero una permanencia de piedra y de palabra:
la ciudad como un vaso, se levantó en las manos
de todos, vivos, muertos, callados, sostenidos,
de tanta muerte, un muro, de tanta vida un golpe
de pétalos de piedra: la rosa permanente, la morada:
este arrecife andino de colonias glaciales.*

(Alturas de Macchu Picchu)

*Translated by John Felstiner. Translating Neruda. Stanford,
California: Stanford University Press, 1980.*

to eat
and
be eaten

the sea
breathes
beaches

into one another

new meanings