TORN IDENTITY
Rodrigo Alonso

INTRODUCTION

Jaime Davidovich has made artwork in the tumultuous years that span from the end of the 1950s to the present, principally in Argentina and the United States. These are the essential coordinates to begin to tackle his artistic career. Although his work has been characterized by the use of a variety of media and formal resources, this variety becomes coherent when placed not only in an artistic context, but also in the social and political contexts of those years.

Davidovich grew up in the thriving Argentina of the years just after the Second World War. The relations between Buenos Aires and the world were growing closer, and artists were nourished by this contact; a fruitful dialogue with the major international aesthetic tendencies began, particularly with the European post-vanguards. Informalism would be one of the most influential movements among young Argentine artists and, shortly, it would find many followers interested in exploring material beyond the impositions of form. Among these artists was Davidovich who, in addition, took an interest in tachism and North American abstract expressionism, a trend that he had come to know on an early trip to Rio de Janeiro.

The post-War period was also the moment when two key figures broke onto the Argentine political scene: General Juan Domingo Perón and his wife Eva Duarte de Perón, known around the world as Evita. Inspired by Italian fascism, Peronism took root by means of an uncommon use of the mass media as well as a major public propaganda apparatus. Indeed, television came to the Argentine Republic thanks to the foresightedness of Eva Perón, who after a trip to Europe understood the importance of this medium in publicizing the government's acts and, as a result, decided to encourage it. The first television transmission in Argentina was on October 17th, 1951, the anniversary of the popular protest that had brought General Perón to power six years before.

Peronist politics was based on mass public action and intense propaganda. It was a politics of spectacle, which the media recorded and propagated throughout the country. Jaime Davidovich masterfully sums up these years in a statement at the beginning of his video *Evita, A Video Scrapbook* (1984): "When Evita was in power, it was like watching television all the time". Television screens were overflowing with the presence of the First Lady and her voice resounded tirelessly on the radio broadcasts. Newspapers and magazines never stopped publishing accounts of everything she did and school children had to read her autobiography, La Razón de mi Vida.

It is not by chance, then, that Davidovich's work tends towards a systematic questioning of the media from a contemplative, analytic and conceptual perspective. His first videos are decidedly anti-spectacular and his later work in television is critical, based on parody; it is cultural resistance that lays bare the ideological mechanisms on which television discourse is built.

After a period of visual investigation that leads directly to conceptualism, his work takes a radical turn and, through video, delves deeply into the universe of the mass media. Nonetheless, a thorough observation of the artist's career undeniably demonstrates his permanent interest in probing the fundaments of the construction of images, both in terms of their relationship to the environment and in terms of the way their circulation binds them to a social and cultural context.

His recent work confronts the discursive homogeneity of globalization in an intimate and meditative way. Once again, the work is resistant in nature, but this time it achieves this

resistance through a return to both the artistic and media sources which have solidified his work during these decades.

FROM FRAME TO CONTEXT

As is the case with many artists of his generation, Jaime Davidovich's first paintings demonstrate informalist influences. Textures, produced by brushstrokes or the frottage technique, play a leading role, as do compositional elements that accentuate the spatiality of the canvas. This is the *Pizarrones Negros* period, when he made paintings with large black planes and highly textured surfaces on which, eventually, horizontal lines would appear. Davidovich has related these lines to the undefined horizons of the Argentine Pampa and his first approaches to video. "What I wanted to do", he says in an interview, "was to capture an instant in painting that does not have a beginning or an end...when I began to work with video, this translated into the delimiting of a frame for something that keeps moving but never ends." **1**

In the early 60s, Davidovich had a show at the Lirolay Gallery, the space for vanguard art in Buenos Aires; in those same years, he was fascinated by a show of spatialist artists held at the Bonino Gallery. That show, especially the work of Lucio Fontana, would exert a profound influence on him.

The *Pizarrones Negros* series was followed by a *Pizarrones Blancos* series. The artist made this second series in the United States, where he moved in 1963 thanks to an academic fellowship. There, he discovered that the frame constituted an arbitrary limit to his undefined spatial representations and, as a result, he decided to eliminate this limit by incorporating the work into the exhibition space. Thus, he got rid of the stretchers and began to place the canvases directly on the wall. To do so, he used double-stick tape.

The next step would be to eliminate the pictorial surface itself, replacing it with tapes. With this, he put an end to all demarcation between the art work and its environment and, thus, arrived at the environmental pieces characteristic of his work in the late 60s and early 70s. The use of tapes made from different materials (canvas, paper, vinyl) allowed him to keep investigating textures, but soon his interest would shift from the materiality of the work to its process and its relations to space.

The elimination of extra-pictorial references and the incorporation of the work into its surroundings constituted a radical shift in the artist's production. That turnaround coincided with a similar rejection by the minimalists of the relational properties of their work —that is to say, those that bind the viewer to a piece's formal qualities; this shift in minimalism emphasized a piece's connections to its surroundings and, as a consequence, the position of the viewer in relation to both the work of art and its context. **2**

It also coincided with the moment at which conceptualism rejected traditional artistic forms in its attempt to question the very fundaments of artistic production. "Being an artist today", maintains Joseph Kosuth, "means questioning the nature of art. If one questions the nature of painting, one is not questioning the nature of art...This is due to the fact that the word art is general, while the word painting is specific..." **3**

Conceptualism rejected traditional categories for a new category, that of "art in general". According to Thierry De Duve "Something without precedent in art history comes to the surface in the 60s: it begins to be legitimate to be an artist without being a painter, a poet, a musician, a sculptor, a novelist, an architect, a photographer, a choreographer, a filmmaker, etc. A new artistic category appears —art in general or art in extension— that is not absorbed into the tra-

1. Cited in John Matturri. Jaime Davidovich. Unpublished Monograph 1979.
2. For information on these characteristics of minimalism, see: Rosalind Krauss: "Overcoming the Limits of Matter: On Revising Minimalism", in John Elderfield (ed). *American Art of the 1960s*. New York: Museum of Modern Art/Abrams, 1991; Hal Foster: "The Crux of Minimalism", in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 1996; Frances Colpitt. *Minimal Art. The Critical Perspective*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997 (1990).
3. Joseph Kosuth: "Art After Philosophy", in *Studio International*, October, 1969. Reprinted in MEYER, Ursula. *Conceptual Art*. New York: Dutton, 1972.

ditional disciplines." **4**   Art ceased to be bound to manual skills and centered, instead, on thinking. All work that conveyed an idea was artistic, regardless of the medium used to transmit it. The materialization of this idea came to be irrelevant. For Sol Lewitt, "Only ideas can be works of art... (however) not all ideas need to be materialized." **5**

Davidovich's work was clearly headed in this direction. The abandonment of painting and the emphasis placed on the relations between the work of art and its space and viewer set off a conceptual cycle that could only be completed by the experience of perception and by the intellectual activity that that experience entails. His denial of painting's formal values and, later, the rejection of central and institutional spaces for exhibiting art work led the artist to question the nature of art in general. This coincided with the intellectual life of the times, which demanded that artists redefine artistic practice.

THE TAPE PROJECTS

The final shift from the canvas to adhesive tape gave rise to the Tapes Projects. The project's early pieces are reminiscent of the earlier pictorial stage: the materiality of the tapes and the occasional placement of paint on them reflect the same interest in textures that characterized the artist's anterior work. Nonetheless, the size of these pieces shifts the attention from aesthetic considerations to the piece's surroundings.

The first major *Tapes Projects* pieces were made with the support of Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT), a group founded by artist Robert Rauschenberg and engineer Billy Klüver. In 1971, Jaime Davidovich covered a wall at Lake Erie College Painesville in Cleveland with different sized pieces of tape made from paper, fabric and fabric painted with white acrylic. That same year, in another EAT activity, Davidovich did an installation that involved placing white and yellow paper tape along the stairways leading to the gallery at John Carroll University.

In these pieces, the artist's desire to intervene in the viewer's space is evident; the viewer ceases to be a passive observer who contemplates the work of art from a space that the work

imposes **6**, and becomes, instead, an integral and vital part of the artwork itself. The magnitude of the pieces demands a decentralized experience. It is the viewer who, in his or her wanderings, guides the reading and who, in the end, must reconstruct the original plan in his or her mind. At the same time, the pieces began to be placed in unusual spaces, far from the white walls of museums and galleries.

The next year, Davidovich created a piece in a public space, the two blocks of sidewalk between the Cleveland Museum of Art and the New Gallery, which commissioned the project. The sidewalk was divided into two sections: in the first, Davidovich emphasized the negative spaces between the concrete blocks by filling them with a thin tape; in the second section, he emphasized the blocks, placing thick tape across them. The piece lasted almost a year until it was destroyed by the daily use of the sidewalk and the weather.

A curious paradox is produced by this piece, one that involves the medium and the objects on which it is applied. The tapes cover, that is to say hide, the surface that holds them. Yet, in this intervention, the tapes dis-cover, that is to say, reveal or make evident, surfaces unnoticed by the viewer due to the indifference imposed by daily use. In this sense, the tapes effect an estrangement of reality similar to that sought by Bertolt Brecht in his critical dramatics; they cause a renewed and contemplative observation of the urban environment.

That same year, in a project for the Akron Art Institute, Davidovich covers a wall (a false wall **7**, actually) with transparent

4. Thierry De Duve. *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 1996.
5. Sol Lewitt: "Sentences on Conceptual Art", in *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, N° 1, 1969. Reprinted in Ursula Meyer, op.cit.
6. Following Panofsky, this is how Craig Owens puts it when he assures that "the relation of the viewer to the work of art is prescribed, previously assigned, by the representational system". See Craig Owens: "Representation, Appropriation and Power", in Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
7. The false wall was an imposition of the gallery to protect

vinyl tape. The material used accentuates another aspect, one that, in reality, had been present since the first tape pieces: mainly, the production process. The tapes reveal imperfections in the wall and their placement on the wall produces super-impositions, air bubbles, wrinkles and stretches in the material, thus calling attention to the process by which the piece was made. This emphasis on process is another link between Davidovich's work in those years and conceptualism. This connection arises not only from putting in evidence the production process, but also from the viewer's active participation in creating meaning.

Taken together, the *Tape Projects* can be considered systematic phases in an exploration of the multiple possibilities of acting on viewers and spaces starting from an unchanging premise (material). Thus, these pieces are in keeping with systemic conceptualism, which is characterized by the use of systems or series as an anti-formalist method of composition, one which tends to avoid the imposition of an expressive ordering. 8

In 1973, Jaime Davidovich was invited to participate in the Whitney Biennial. This time, he chose to install a piece next to the stairway that connected the various floors, outside the exhibition spaces that held the rest of the show. The piece was a vertical layout of tapes that went from the basement to the top floor. To see the piece in it entirety, the viewer had to go up or down the stairs. As in the earlier pieces, the activity of the viewer became essential.

That same year, Davidovich presented a similar layout of tapes along the central space of an internal stairway at the New Gallery, as well as a project that covered with tape the sides of a nearby railway bridge.

FROM TAPES AS ART TO ART ON TAPE

At the height of the Tapes Project, Davidovich moved towards a new medium: video tape. His decision did not simply involve the incorporation of a new type of tape, but rather the use of an entirely different tool and the challenge of taking on a medium completely unknown by the author (and by most artists at that time, given that video technology had just been put on the market).

The use of video as a medium entailed a return to the figurative image that had gradually disappeared in Davidovich's work. It also involved the use of an image framed by the limits of the monitor, a re-centering of the perceptive experience and an explicit channeling of the viewer's gaze.

Nonetheless, Jaime Davidovich's early videos are a systematic attempt to transcend all the false premises of the electronic image. To achieve this, the artist often resorted to video installation or video performance in an attempt to overcome the limitations of an image enclosed in a screen and to redirect the aesthetic experience towards an active reception on the part of the viewer.

In truth, the Tape Projects were not replaced by video; for a long time, the two media coexisted and engaged in constant dialogue. From this dialogue, the project *Tape as Art and Art on Tape* emerged. Here, Davidovich set out to confront the experiences produced by these two media.

Road (1972), the first video made by the artist, is a twenty minute long recording of the dividing lines on a highway taped in a continuous traveling shot. The actual sound of the place where the black-and-white image was recorded is heard in the video. The extreme fragmentation of the recording makes the image into a geometrical pattern of complementtary lines that can be interpreted either as white bands on a gray background or vice versa. The abstraction of the image stands in contrast to the environmental sound which is highly referential in relation to the title of the piece. This sound relates the image to a space outside of it, one that transcends the limits of the television screen. In this external reference, *Road* opposes an open space to the enclosure of the monitor. At the same time, as there is neither a beginning nor an end to the camera's movement *stricto sensu*, that open space appears like a prolongation of the traveling shot's unending course.

their wall, but Davidovich was interested in the idea of covering with tapes a wall that, at the same time, was covering another wall.

8. For further information, see: Robert Morgan: "A Methodology for American Conceptualism", in *Art Into Ideas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

It is impossible not to see a direct reference to the tape pieces in the images from *Road*: the screen seems to be crossed by vertical lines that bring to mind the ordered figurations of those pieces. Yet in *Blue, Red, Yellow* (1974) these references become even more explicit. The video begins with the "electronic rain" characteristic of a television without images. Suddenly, a hand appears on one side of the screen and begins to cover the television (the one the camera is recording, but also the one we are watching) with blue adhesive tape until the screen is completely hidden. Once this process has been completed, it is repeated with red tape, and then yellow tape.

The apparent simplicity of this piece contrasts with its multiple readings. First, in the selection of colors, a dialectical play is set up between the codes of painting and those of video: in painting's process of chromatic addition, blue, red and yellow are the primary colors; electronic images, on the other hand, are based on chromatic subtracting, and the primary colors are green, blue and red. Second, there is a confrontation between the hand that covers the television in the image and the recording that shows this procedure. Another reading comes from the contrast of two time frames. While the electronic sound follows no apparent time pattern, the hand that covers the screen performs an act that takes a specific amount of time. Finally, there is a performance act that transcends the recording and reoccurs each time the video is seen: by framing the shot so that it coincides with the borders of the television screen that is being recorded, as the performer covers that screen he is also covering the television screen on which the viewer is watching the recording. This produces the simultaneous disappearance of electronic noise both on the screen and off of it, which is reinforced by recording the action in real time.

The works *Interior* (1976) and *Blue, Red, Yellow* are closely related. The first image in Interior is of a section of an empty room. A hand appears and begins to cover the monitor with adhesive tape, but on this tape the image of another section of the same room is inserted by chromakey. The process is repeated until the four walls, the floor and the roof have all been seen on the screen. Each image contains such scant information about the section it shows that a considerable effort is necessary to identify each fragment. Once again, the recording in real time means that the screen seen in the image and the television on which the viewer perceives the piece are covered simultaneously with the tape used by the performer.

While in *Blue, Red, Yellow* there are two levels of recording the image (the electronic noise and the activity of the performer), in Interior there are three: the image of the recorded television, the action of the performer and the image placed on the tape. This fact implies another temporal phase in the production of the piece; now, there is a pre-production stage (the recording of the different sections of the room), a production phase (the recording of the performance) and, finally, a post-production phase (when the images are placed on the tapes).

VIDEO AS AN EXPLORATION OF SPACE

In his first video installations, Jaime Davidovich uses the fragmentation of the video image as a counterpoint to the extension of the exhibiting space. *Baseboard* (1975) is one of the pieces most representative of this strain.

This piece focuses on a very simple image, a baseboard at the bottom of a wall. In the piece, a monitor plays a video of a baseboard shot from very close up to resemble a straight path. The recording does not have a clear beginning or end. It is displayed in the exhibition space on a television placed on the floor, against one wall, directly in front of the baseboard.

The reading of the piece depends upon a series of relations that the viewer must set up by means of the scant elements that comprise the piece: the connections between the static space of the room and the mobility of one of its parts, the complete experience of the whole space and the fragmentary one of the baseboards, the free perspective of the viewer versus the unchanging angle of the video, the finite setting that holds the visitor and the infinity projected by the image. A piece's integration into the space that it occupies is an important theme of the environmental pieces from the *Tape Projects*. This relationship is strongly emphasized in a similar piece, *Corroboree* (1979) in which the monitor is linked to three different spaces.

Three adjacent exhibition spaces are identified through pieces of colored tape that are stuck to the baseboards in the corners which are lit by spot lights: the first is green, the second red, and the third blue. The monitor is in the middle of the last of these rooms, the one that the viewer reaches last as s/he walks through the piece. The image on the monitor shows a traveling shot along the baseboards of each room in the same order in which the viewer has passed through them. The color in the corners serves to set up the relations between the image and the physical space, which does not possess any other identifying features.

This is also a video version of *Baseboard* that is related to *Interior*. The piece begins with a traveling shot along the baseboards of an empty room. The relatively tight frame, along with the visual fragmentation, makes it difficult to recognize the image. After covering the whole room, the camera pulls back, revealing a television screen which was the true source of the image, and showing the room in its entirety, with the monitor resting on the floor in a corner. Just as in Interior, it is a piece of information, in this case the monitor, which proves that what the viewer is seeing is not just an image, but an image of an image. Once again, the status of the video image as a register of reality is questioned by revealing that the image is, in effect, an additional video generation removed from reality.

Media's construction of reality is a key line of investigation in Davidovich's work. Although he would take on this concern more assiduously in the pieces linked to the mass media (especially television and internet), it is interesting to note how, in these early works, there is a confrontation between the spatial perception of the viewer and the version that the video image emits about that setting.

In addition to the pieces where the medium gives itself away as a transformer of reality, there is a series of pieces in which the artist intervenes in the recorded situation so as to produce uncertainty in the viewer. In *3 Mercer Street* (1975), the camera engages in an endless pan shot around an empty room. Sporadically, a performer (Stuart Sherman) who does incomprehensible things appears, but always in a different place. The video is recorded in real time, which means that it is the performer who moves about the space, changing his position with respect to the camera, which stays in one place as it rotates.

Of course, for a person present in the space itself, it is very easy to follow the strange character's actions. But for the viewer of the video, it is practically impossible to do so, due mostly to the fragmentation of the frame. Although it might seem obvious, it is important to note that the entire performance has been designed with that very limitation of vision in mind and that, although the performer seems absorbed in his inexplicable actions, the true explanation of them is that they are done for the camera.

The presence of the performer serves to emphasize both the position of the camera and the artifice of the supposed documentation. At the same time, it is enigmatic that the camera does not stop to show the man's actions and, in fact, chooses to keep scrutinizing a space that is unchanging. But it is in this game that the complicity of the viewer is sought, as s/he, like the camera, can anticipate the characteristics of the space, but can not foretell when the performer will appear.

In the video *Surveillance* (1976), the screen is divided into two parts. In one of them, on the left, we see the artist spinning around and looking at his surroundings; on the right, we see images from a pan shot of the room. The relation between the images suggests that the recording on the right is what the artist actually sees. Nonetheless, the size of the frame used to film the interior of the room (it is a very tight shot) makes that relation practically impossible. What's more, while Davidovich does not change the position from which he rotates, the things in the room get closer and closer until they are so close that the image is not compatible with the position of the artist, who is recorded in a neutral space without objects around him.

This lack of connection between a situation and what seems to be the result of its recording was explored by Davidovich in a video installation at the Lorain County College in 1973; at this point, Davidovich's work was at the juncture of the *Tape Projects* and video. A rectangular panel made from adhesive tape was hung from, or rather, glued onto a wall; a few meters away, a television showed a hand placing adhesive tape as had been done on the panel. A closer look, however,

could determine that this was not a recording of the making of the piece; judging from the relation between the tape and the hand recorded in the video, the pieces of tape in each instance were clearly different sizes.

A similar power of observation is necessary in *Two Windows* (1976), a video that shows two identical windows from each of which hangs pieces of paper that move with the wind. With time, it can be seen that the pieces of paper do not necessarily follow the comings and goings of the wind, since sometimes a piece of paper from one of the windows behaves differently from its neighbor. In addition, the camera jumps at certain moments (this is difficult to perceive due to the still camera), but there is no discontinuity in the sound, which is a recording of the urban setting around the windows.

A POOR SOUL ON TV

Despite the success of his videos and video installations (for which he was given grants from the Creative Artists Public Service Program and the New York State Council on the Arts, an invitation to produce in the Synapse Studios in Syracuse, and numerous exhibitions in the most prestigious spaces in the United States), Jaime Davidovich decided to change directions, convinced that the natural place for video art was not museums and galleries, but rather public access television.

At that time, video tapes were seen on televisions set up in small rooms in museums and art galleries with chairs available for viewers. Davidovich noticed a great contradiction in that practice: if viewers at museums looked at pieces in the same passively receptive position that they did at home in front of the TV, it made no sense to take them from the comfort of their houses. On the other hand, distribution through conventional art circuits made video art into an updated variation of traditional art forms, thus hindering access to a wider audience.

The popularization of cable broadcasting in the seventies made it possible for artists to gain access to television space at a reasonable cost. In 1976, Jaime Davidovich and other artists founded Cable SoHo, and became its first programming director. One year later, he was a founding member of Artists Television Network (ATN), an institution aimed at using television to disseminate the arts and works by artists; he was the director of that institution from 1977 to 1983.

In 1978, Davidovich produced *SoHo Television* for ATN, and the program was broadcast by Manhattan Cable TV and Teleprompter Cable TV. The next year, *The Live! Show* began; this was a weekly program on Channel J, a public access space 9 belonging to Manhattan Cable TV.

SoHo Television was a program of informal interviews where the invited artists spoke to an interviewer about their work. In general, the guests belonged to the North American art vanguard and worked in performance, video creation or alternative television. Guests included artists of the magnitude of John Cage, Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim and Les Levine, to name a few.

Often, the artists showed their work or composed live for the audience, as John Cage did one of the times he appeared on the show. Other times, the guest was not an artist but a group of artists, a critic or a representative of an artistic circle. Discussions involved the issues faced by contemporary art. Of these programs, the ones dedicated to analyzing the *Concepts of Time and Space* (moderated by Dora Ashton), the Perspectives of the Vanguard (led by Robin White) and The Changing Role of Art Museums (led by Gregory Battcock) were particularly outstanding.

Just from the description, it is clear that Soho Television was aimed at a specific audience. The programs sought to generate a space to speak seriously about the artistic activity of the times and it did not underestimate the intellectual level of the viewers. Each program was an effort to bring to the public the most current discussions in the field of aesthetic creation and to provide a space where artists could reach a broader public; it also implied a renewed attempt to increase the role of art in mass media.

9. Public access television emerged in New York in 1971 as a consequence of a city regulation that, in keeping with the First Amendment that guarantees freedom of expression, obliged the two cable channels to reserve spaces for citizens who wished to express themselves on them. A more detailed

In general, the programs were divided into long blocks recorded in real time, without effects and with a minimal variation in the camera's position. The presence of the guest, the exhibition of his or her work, and the discussion were always privileged. With this structure, the program sought to meet two objectives which Davidovich himself described in these terms: "What we try to do is give artists from the vanguard a first class display window and, at the same time, generate an audience that can appreciate their work." 10

The Live! Show was a program quite different from, and in some sense almost the opposite of, its predecessor. Like a variety show, it consisted of independent segments in which a series of characters took on the task of formulating a sharp criticism of commercial television. If *SoHo Television* was television looking at artists, *The Live! Show* was a group of artists looking at television.

All of *The Live! Show* programs showed a great sense of humor, principally due to the histrionics of the characters who appeared. The fact of having to formulate a critique of television from a television space meant that most of the segments were satires of the most classic TV formats- extremely subtle satires executed with an intelligent sense of humor.

One of the essential characteristics of *The Live! Show* was that it was taped "live". For this reason, many of its ideas involved viewers' participation by telephone, a technique that was further developed some years later in an experimental program made using QUBE technology (see below).

Since television is first and foremost a service, here are some of the "services" *The Live! Show* offered its audience: a rock-and-roll psychiatrist (played by musician Paul McMahon) who diagnosed and treated the problems of the viewing public through songs; "Dr. Videovich," a doctor (played by Davidovich himself) who specialized in problems of television addiction and was a "graduate of the University of Buenos Aires where he studied how to manipulate the media with German professors"; the humorous editorials of painter John Torreano on recent occurrences, both relevant and irrelevant, in the art world; a "videokitsch" telephone sales section, offering a complete line of products based on the television apparatus; art classes under the direction of Jaime Davidovich who often described a drawing and how to do it, and

other important and useful services. In addition to these permanent sections, there were sketches by visiting artists and, occasionally, works of video art. The segments were divided by commercials that advertised different "video-kitsch" products or by *Tee Vee, The Poor Soul of Television*, a cartoon starring an anthropomorphized television set who frequently felt misunderstood, frustrated or not fully integrated into the family. The use of visual effects like colorization or the insertion of images was common and often commented on by viewers when they called in.

Audience participation gave the show freshness and dynamism. At times, it led the characters to unforeseen and hilarious situations. "I am used to watching television in the bathroom, but I still don't know how to avoid electric shocks when I take a shower," one television viewer complained, while another made public his concern about Mary Tyler Moore's possible overdoses. The answers were no less delirious than the questions: "Do anything with your television set just don't break it, because if you do you will have to buy a new one and the production companies will make even more money and television programming will rise due to an increase in demand," advised Dr. Videovich on another occasion.

In 1980, thirteen episodes of *Soho TV* were aired in Columbus, Ohio, a city that was experimenting with a television system known as QUBE 11. This was an interactive system designed to encourage the participation of television viewers.

description of the television systems in those years can be found in Eugeni Bonet: "TV USA: The Dinosaur of the Empire" in *Video Actualidad*, N° 26, Barcelona, September, 1983.
10. Cited in "Video Tape Review", *Video Data Bank Catalog*, 1986.
11. "The name QUBE does not mean anything; it was chosen because it rhymes with tube": declaration of the president of QUBE, Lawrence B. Hilford, in "Can't Stand the Show? Budgets Lets Viewers Rule" in Detroit Free Press, December 1, 1977, cited in Peter D'Agostino: "Proposal for QUBE", in *TV Magazine*, Pilot Issue, New York, 1980.

It consisted of a console with five buttons in addition to a channel selector; these buttons emitted signals to the broadcaster. When a button was pushed, the signal was processed in a computer and transmitted in the air, and then translated into a percentage of the overall participation. In this way, viewers were able to directly respond to multiple-choice questions formulated by the programmer, and their feedback was then seen in real time on the screen.

When *The Live! Show* was no longer on the air, Davidovich went to QUBE studios to collect the public's opinion of the program and to attempt a new type of interaction with the viewers. The results of the QUBE processes were broadcast in a show entitled *SoHo Wants to Know*. With this show, Davidovich sought to use QUBE as a creative tool as well as to demonstrate the limitations of this voting system, a "zero degree democracy", as the French critic Jean-Paul Fargier would call it ironically [12].

To achieve his first objective, Davidovich designed two ways of participating: "The first entrusted to the audience the basic decisions about the video- image, sound effects, main color- while the technicians added certain visual effects. The public voted that Carole Stevenson (host of the program) be in the image, that the background color be blue and that there be classical flute music in the background. All of these decisions were made from a set of options. The second experiment consisted of a television viewer giving instructions by telephone to studio technicians on the use of the lenses and camera movements, while the rest of the audience voted on which camera should be used." [13]

In the second experiment, Davidovich tried to prove that "QUBE works with percentages, not quantities... (so) its polls are hardly scientifically rigorous. Furthermore, the questionnaire comes from the broadcaster, hence it is not difficult to select the responses that facilitate the previously desired result. For example, to the question 'What do you think of *Soho TV*?', the viewer is helped along by the following five responses: 'I like it,' 'I like it a lot', 'I like it quite a lot', 'I don't dislike it,' and 'It's not bad.' The poll could never produce an opinion like 'I can't stand it, it is awful', because such an answer is censured from the beginning." [14]

Although the program was mostly shot inside a studio, *The Live! Show* did tape outdoors on a few occasions. When it did, in episodes like *The Gap* [15] or *Saludos Amigos: Dr. Videovich Goes to Texas*, the interest in public participation meant interviews with passersby on issues related to television, the arts and the use of video by artists.

The Live! Show was an alternative space in television that critically used that medium's format until 1984. It was a vehicle for artists who sought to question both the limited distribution of video art in artistic circles and the standardized production of commercial television indifferent to artistic work. "These were the beginnings of cable television," Davidovich points out, "and as such probably the first and the last chance to be able to participate in the cultural process in its entirety. It gave us a small window to the outside world that allowed us to show our work, creating a truly alternative television." [16]

A HOT CONCEPTUALISM

Since the seventies, Jaime Davidovich's art work has been clearly conceptual. Like many conceptual artists, Davidovich uses his work to express ideas; his work is oriented towards a dematerialization that emphasizes the creative process, encourages the reflective participation of viewers and rejects institutionalized spaces, searching for a wider audience.

Nonetheless, his approach to conceptualism is not limited to the linguistic-tautological or the analytic-systemic ones so fa-

12. Jean-Paul Fargier: "Jaime Davidovich, Le Câble et le Qube", in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, N° 337, June, 1982.
13. Quoted in "SoHo Wants to Know" in *TV Magazine*. Pilot Issue, New York, 1980.
14. Jordi Torrent: "Against the Giant Marble: ATN" in *Video Actualidad*, N° 26, Barcelona, September, 1983.
15. For an analysis of *The Gap*, see Herman Rapaport: "On Television / Off Television". *The Live! Show* (catalogue). New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1989.
16. Quoted in *The Live! Show* (catalogue). Op.cit.

vored by his North American colleagues [17]. The political events that ravaged Argentina during the 1970's –a violent military dictatorship murdered thousands of intellectuals and political activists– led Davidovich to adopt a critical attitude shared by other Latin American conceptual artists of the period [18].

Davidovich took part in numerous exhibitions of Latin American artists in those years [19]. Through his participation in these shows, he developed a political discourse where he contemplated not only the situation in his native country, but also his status as an Argentine artist living in the United States. This line of work anticipated his concerns about the effect of globalization on regional identities, a topic which he would explore further in the next decade. Perhaps the earliest explicit political reference in his work is *Press Freedom* (1974), a project from the Tapes Project that was presented at an exhibition at the International Cultureel Centrum in Antwerpen, Belgium [20]. Here, he covered pages from Latin American newspapers with pieces of adhesive tape. The next year, Davidovich made *La Patria Vacia* (The Empty Homeland) 1975, a documentary-like video based on an interview with an Argentine exile in New York. In this piece, he analyzed the repression and social insecurity that characterized the last Peronist government.

The video was not a simple documentary in terms of image or the weight of the subject's words; it made formal contributions that referred to the rest of the author's work. For example, in one of the scenes, a hand covers with adhesive tape the central strip of an Argentine flag that is being shown on a television. A different camera angle on the television show turns that strip of tape into a gag placed directly over a speaker's mouth. Towards the end of the piece, a hand covers with adhesive tape a television that is transmitting images of Peron's funeral; when the monitor is uncovered, it shows a map of Argentina crossed by the words of the piece's title. In *The Empty Homeland*, Argentine symbols —the national anthem, asado (a typical Argentine barbecue), tango, Eva Perón, maps— appear for the first time; these symbols would appear frequently in Davidovich's later political work. Indeed, there is a complex system of symbols throughout this entire stage of the artist's production that

contrasts notably with the *Tape Projects* and the rest of his extraordinarily bare and ascetic videos from that earlier period.

TORN IDENTITY

From 1978 to 1984, the weekly demands of *SoHo Television* and *The Live! Show* meant that Davidovich put off production of his own video work for a few years.

At the end of that period, he made *Evita: A Video Scrapbook* (1984), an investigation into the historical and mythical figure of Eva Perón. In this piece, the opinions of Argentine emigrants to the United States unsupportive of the Perón regime are combined with a reflection on Evita's historical transcendence and the role of the media in constructing the public figure of a popular leader.

The beginning of this video is similar to that of *Evita*, the Broadway musical: images from *Pampa Bárbara*, an Argentine film by Lucas Demare, are suddenly interrupted to announce the death of the spiritual leader of the nation. Throughout the video there are references to the commercial ends to which Evita's figure was used, such as an advertisement for a line of cosmetics that bears her name. The video ends with another fragment from *Pampa Bárbara*: this one refers to the creation of Argentina as a consequence of the secret destruction of the native population, and it reinforces

17. See, for example, Robert Morgan. "A Methodology for American Conceptualism". In *Art Into Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

18. For information about the development of conceptualism in Latin America, see: Mari Carmen Ramirez. "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980". In *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s - 1980s*. New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999.

19. Mainly in shows organized by the founder and director of the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) (Center for Art and Communication), Jorge Glusberg, in different art institutions around the world.

20. Organized by Jorge Glusberg through CAYC.

the opinion of one of the people interviewed in the video: mainly, that Argentine history has been constructed on ignorance of the facts and the acceptance of its "versions."

As the name suggests, *Evita: A Video Scrapbook* is a sketch, not only of the figure of Eva Perón, but also of the historical context that gives her power, a context that is endlessly rewritten and reinscribed on the memory of Argentines. For Davidovich, Eva Perón is an ineludible symbol in the formation of a national identity with respect to history and the image of Argentina abroad. Perhaps that is why the figure of Eva appears again in a video installation from 1990 entitled *Eva Perón, Then and Now*, part of the *Ideas and Images from Argentina* show.

Gradually, explicit references to Argentine history and politics come to form the fundaments of an incomplete and fragmentary identity. The 1990's debates on globalization lend particular relevance to Davidovich's work, which sets out to think the local in the face of a unified global perspective.

Torn Identity (1992) is a video that resolves that conflict through a divided screen. The video begins with the image of a parade of Argentines through the streets of New York. The parade is led by a float that carries two tango singers and a couple of dancers. The float is escorted by official vehicles identified by their American flags. The images of the parade interact with two other images: some from a butcher shop and some from recent Argentine history: military parades, The Falklands War, political demonstrations, elected and de facto presidents, etc.

The comparison of the Argentine military parade and the parade in New York brings the question of legitimacy from there to here: just like the military parade, the one in the streets of New York offers an image of Argentina that hides more than it reveals. This lack of correspondence between the visible and the invisible is present throughout the piece. The alternation between the two sectors of the screen produces a critical exchange between the past and the present, between national ambiguity and national stereotypes.

La Isla del Tesoro (1989) (Treasure Island) extends this reflection on stereotypes and one's identity in the world. The installation involves two basic images: the image of an Argentine map that has been cut up and reassembled incorrectly, and the image of an Argentine street musician. The image of the musician, who is playing the *bandoneón*, an instrument typical of tango, is seen on a monitor that lies within the apocryphal map. The video focuses on the relationship between the musician and the money that passersby have left in his case. This relationship encapsulates a larger economic reality where national identities are hardened into cultural stereotypes.

FROM NEW YORK TO CYBERSPACE

In Davidovich's work from the nineties, his reflections on national identities take a different path. If at the onset these reflections involved amplifying discourses previously silenced by the "grand stories" of modernity, they slowly came to exemplify cultural resistance against the homogenizing attempts of economic globalization.

These cultural issues permeate the video installation *Forces/Farces* presented at Exit Art in 1991. For this piece, Davidovich uses six television sets on six painted panels; each one constitutes a different conceptual environment. The names of these environments are *We The People, Media Blackout, Globalism, Do Not Pass/Do Not Enter, Overexposed* and *Seduction and Desire*. The images on each panel are generic ones common to most contemporary metropolises. *We The People*, for example, contains images of streets crammed with people from different places on the planet; *Do Not Pass/Do Not Enter* shows streets and highways from around the world; *Seduction and Desire* shows merchandise displayed at a shopping mall and *Globalism* visits different Mc Donalds around the globe. Towards the end of the installation, the public is invited to participate by answering a questionnaire about the effects of globalization on their daily lives. These opinions are recorded on video and included in the piece on a daily basis, making it a true work in progress. Thus the work becomes a question, an occasion to think about the present, stimulated by the flow of images. The commentaries of the artist combine with the opinions of the viewers to produce the final meaning of the piece. As in the television programs, the audience once again constitutes the nucleus of the aesthetic proposal.

Similar images form part of another piece, *Los Pueblos Quieren Saber De Qué Se Trata* (The People Want to Know What it is about) (1992), presented at the Banco Patricio Foundation in Buenos Aires. The title refers to a founding event in Argentine history, when, during colonial times, the people gathered in front of the government house to inquire about the possible replacement of Spanish officials by the first national government. In this installation, a tall stack of newspapers holds up a monitor with images relating to globalization. As in colonial times, the people are left out of important decisions affecting their future. This distance is emphasized by the height of the monitor, which makes seeing the images difficult, and by the wall of newspapers that constitutes a true barrier against the viewers' approach.

Three years later, in an exhibition entitled *La Tierra Prometida* (The Promised Land) (1995) at the Buenos Aires Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, Davidovich presents *Yo, Errancia* (I, Wandering) a series of digital compositions in which national symbols are integrated into images from global culture. The use of the digital medium is significant. Not only does it permit a better integration of the images, it also embodies one of the major causes of globalization in the media: digital technology.

This technology has been responsible for the almost infinite expansion of communication networks. Davidovich used the most important of these networks, the World Wide Web, to explore the possibilities of cultural regionalization in a media universe where there are no borders. The piece is called *Haciendo Dulce de Leche en Cyberspace* (1996) (Making Dulce de Leche in Cyberspace), and it is one of the pieces in *Digital Diaspora*, an Internet site that Davidovich designed with another Argentine emigrant artist, Alejandro Fogel. The piece is an astute reflection on that regional-universal problematic. It reworks an Argentine symbol par excellence (dulce de leche) in the creation of a new virtual space on the information superhighway.

PAINTING IN REAL TIME

Jaime Davidovich's Internet art is a logical extension of the concerns that have always been central to his work. His acts of communication have always had a clear and constant target: the viewer. From the *Tape Projects* to his recent installations and his television programs, his work has often comprehended the need for feedback from the audience.

The Internet, however, has become a largely commercial and de-personalized environment; it has lost the experimental and mysterious quality that attracted many artists in its early years. This may be why Davidovich moved away from the Web to embark on a new type of work, one more finite, relational and intimate.

The *video paintings* that he has been producing for the last few years are an attempt to transcend the limitations of traditional paintings by combining them with electronic images. These pieces are the result of a reflexive look at the work he has done throughout his career and, at the same time, another step in pushing the limits of two media that have been historically connected to his work. Generally, these pieces are small format abstract paintings onto which Davidovich projects or through which he emits a video image; usually, the video image is an almost unedited recording of a landscape or group of objects.

It is impossible not to see immediate reference to the artist's own pictorial work (the black and white board series, for example), or his electronic work, especially his early videos. There is also a clear reference to television, inasmuch as each small painting emits a framed image like the one on a home television set.

At the same time, it is a curious coincidence that television has now come to offer real time as one of its products. The most characteristic example of this is the reality shows that have flooded screens in the past few years. Davidovich's proposal, however, is radically different from the objectives of mass media. In the current discourse on technology, real time now has maximum value. No practice, no connection, no action is valid if it is not done "in real time," if there is no "immediate response," and if it is not as instantaneous as possible. In the current language of the media, real time seems to be an antidote to the growing unreality of experience due to the very same media profusion. Reality shows present themselves as non-fictitious experiences whose truth is based on the temporal immediacy of their

recordings. In truth, however, they are nothing if not another step towards the fictionalization of life where instantaneousness and a direct relation with things are constructed as rhetorical effects.

In his *video paintings*, Jaime Davidovich employs real time and representation but from an altogether different perspective. Because here, the real time to which he returns is not derived from digital culture, but rather from the beginnings of video when that term meant capturing the world as it unfolded before the camera, without fissure or manipulation. This image is now an occasion for meditative contemplation. Without effects or distracting editing, objects, actions and situations demand a slower appreciation, creating associations and reawakening the evocative power of images. What resoundingly differentiates these pieces from television, if not from Davidovich's television, is their almost private and intimate nature, which once again establishes direct contact with the viewer.

Painting now provides a context for video recording. This association calls into question the supposed antagonism between these two media. By combining them, Davidovich sets up many levels of dialogue.

Although he cites themes and classical genres from art history, Davidovich does so in a reflexive manner. On the one hand, he makes evident video's definitive assimilation into that history and its undeniable participation in contemporary art. On the other hand, he tests the limits of representation, working on the perceptive vacillation between the projected video recording and the image on the pictorial support. This perceptive vacillation is responsible for activating a novel sensorial quality in video, a media traditionally associated with the coldness of the electronic pulses.

Furthermore, landscapes and still lifes are motifs in the revival of a more humanistic artistic practice. The Video paintings exude a clear impulse to capture the vital, the daily, traces of a time that changes quickly but that, in its flux, leaves images that cannot be erased.

The first pieces from this series make explicit reference to the painters from the Hudson River School 21 and to pictorialist photographers 22 from the end of the XIX century. The Hudson River School is evoked mainly through Davido-

vich's landscapes (recorded in the Hudson River Valley) and atmospheres; the pictorialist photographers are evoked through the iridescent shine of the surfaces, which the artist produces by using a special varnish, one reminiscent of the silver plates favored by North American pictorialist photographers.

The epicenter of the series' new landscapes is New York. In general, the format continues to be the individual painting, although the artist has explored multi-screen projections and even the use of sound. In *View From Above* (2000), an installation made at the Deep Listening Center, for example, the artist works with images captured from the 91st floor of Twin Tower number one, where he did a residency. With the same distant and contemplative attitude characteristic of his video paintings, this installation brings together views of the Hudson River, the Brooklyn Bridge and the park beneath the Twin Towers, as well as music by Reynols, which creates a subtle and meditative auditory atmosphere.

His most recent work along these lines explores another pictorial genre: the still life. In some pieces, the television set, a key object in contemporary daily experience, appears. The image is full of ambiguity. On the one hand, it offers a slower, resting look at an apparatus characterized by the speed of the news. On the other, here the television is linked with a format from the history of composition, one that resonates strongly in the past, perhaps implying that television already belongs to that historical tradition more than to the strictly

21. The River Hudson School was a group of American painters led by Thomas Cole that worked from approximately 1835 to 1870. Their paintings focused on a romantic rendition of landscapes from the Hudson River Valley area; they used pictorial effects that emphasized the luminosity of the composition, which is why they are also known as the Luminists.

22. Pictorialist photographers sought to produce photographic images with a pictorial quality. To do this, they either used lenses that dispersed the light or manipulated photographs in order to make them look like the impressionist paintings of the times.

contemporary (without a doubt, the icon of the present is the computer; it is not strange, then, that the television has been relegated to this place).

Most importantly, though, the television once again appears in Davidovich's work as it did when he first used it: as an object. Just as in the Tape Projects where the tapes called attention to the television set as an object, the video paintings take up that same perspective to invite us to reflect once again on the technological support, to move us out of a fascination with the media and call our attention back to the world that unfolds beyond its windows.

EPILOGUE

To revisit Jaime Davidovich's artistic career is to pass though the primary veins of artistic thinking in recent years and to understand intimately the importance of the new media in contemporary art. An abandonment of painting for installation and video, and a movement from traditional artistic cir-cuits towards the public space of media are occurrences that today we consider natural, but at their time they embodied deep schisms, radical ideological stances and a commitment to the artistic practice that left deep marks on XX century art history.

In his current production, the artist once again opts for a non-conformist attitude. In the face of the spectacular electronic production that characterizes biennials and other mega-exhibitions, Davidovich insists on a reflexive and intimate experience that resists the pressures of commerce and the semantic annulment of global politics. He insists, fundamentally, on an ethics of the artistic practice that which, according to Catherine David, trusts that art will keep being "a vital source of symbolic and imaginary representations whose diversity is irreducible to the (almost) total economic domination of the real" 23

23. Catherine David: "Introduction". In *Documenta X. Short Guide*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1997.