

Film in Spanish Contemporary Art Museums. A case study: "Tree* Movie", of Jackson Mac Low.

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Introduction:

Film and video artworks are part of the permanent collections of all Spanish Contemporary Art Museums. Despite this, their presentation is not always correct or adequate. Also, their integration into museum collections in Spain has been done in quite an erratic manner. While video has been exhibited soon after its emergence, it has taken almost a century for film to stop being considered as a document. This different management approach has resulted in a poor comprehension of the technical and artistic dimension. The consequent misunderstanding has got a real impact in terms of conservation and exhibition.

Material and methods:

1.1. Official thesaurus of the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

The first sign of this lack of comprehension is the fuzzy vocabulary used when cataloguing film and video art. The Spanish Ministry of Culture's official thesaurus is the main tool used to catalogue and identify techniques and materials. The edition dedicated to image and related techniques, coordinated by I. T. Lafuente (there is one for painting, another one for stone, one for drawings and even one for decorative arts) shows the absence of important terms such as "frame" ("fotograma" in Spanish), "master" or "loop" ("bucle" in Spanish). A direct consequence of this is the tendency to confuse video with film and film with video. Also, it presents several terms of this thesaurus as having the same meaning. The generic term "celluloid" can be confused with "cellulose acetate", "cellulose nitrate" and even as "cinematographic support", since it is used as a synonym for all of them. The same applies to "audiovisual", "videotape", "videodisc" or "video recording", which are generic terms used to refer, respectively, to any kind of image and sound technology, to any type of magnetic support (either analogical or digital), optical support or, finally, to the recording process.

1.2. Cataloguing procedure of the main Contemporary Art Museum in Spain.

If the official vocabulary used by the Spanish Ministry of Culture is, to some extent, diffuse, what happens with the Contemporary Museums and Exhibition Centres in Spain? The eight main Contemporary Art Institutions (Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo Artium, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Museo Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Español Patio Herreriano and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía) make the same mistakes when cataloguing film and video art. The use of the term "audiovisual" is widespread and it is usually applied to both film and video and even to complex installations. This practice could be acceptable if the rest of the cataloguing information was correct, but as previously mentioned, there are missing terms and there are some others which are used as synonyms when they actually have got different meanings. In fact, no reference is made to the original film materials because, in many cases, they have been migrated to magnetic tapes. The perfect example is the public catalogue text of the film "Tree* Movie", of Jackson Mac Low (displayed as part of the Reina Sofía Museum's permanent exhibition) which reads as follows: "Video (Hard disc and DVD)". The text is available at the Museum's website: <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/tree-movie-pelicula-arbol>

1.3. A case study: Tree* Movie, Jackson Mac Low.

The case of "Tree* Movie" is not an exception, unfortunately. It's very common to find this kind of mistakes due to the misunderstanding of the moving image's real dimension, as it's been shown in the previous sections. If the Spanish Ministry of Culture doesn't understand the importance of a term as "frame" it would be quite complex for Contemporary Art Institutions to use correct exhibition and preservation methodologies. "Tree* Movie" is a key piece for Fluxus movement as it is considered to be the first static film. The role of this piece within the permanent exhibition of the Reina Sofía Museum is, thus, relevant. The piece has its own dark room, with seats for visitors, and a long explanatory brochure. Despite this, visitors find a poor digital projection with a high proportion of pixels (see detail images 2 and 3). The image quality is very low; it doesn't look like a film. The reason lies in the fact that the preservation master of this Spanish Museum was migrated to a digital tape (Digibetacam, in this case) and there is no 16 mm polyester preservation master. This is the first and most common mistake: the migration to digital magnetic tapes. The second mistake is the low quality projection: its proportion doesn't fit the walls' width because the master preservation file has also a low image feature due to the compression used to reduce its size. The methodology of migrating film to digital magnetic tapes, as DigiBetacam, is widespread because they are seen as preservation materials, but this is only true when it comes to other magnetic tapes, specially the analogical ones. And this is the third mistake: a correct procedure, the migration of analogical tapes to digital ones, has been incorrectly used with film artworks, since film is being treated as video.

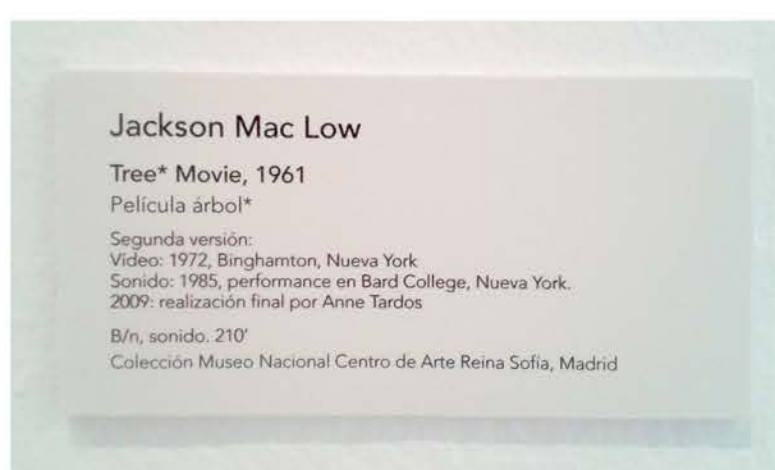


Image 6. Label of "Tree* Movie" at the Reina Sofía Museum.



Image 1. "Tree* Movie", Jackson Mac Low, at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid)



Image 2. Detail of the pixel distortion in the projected image.

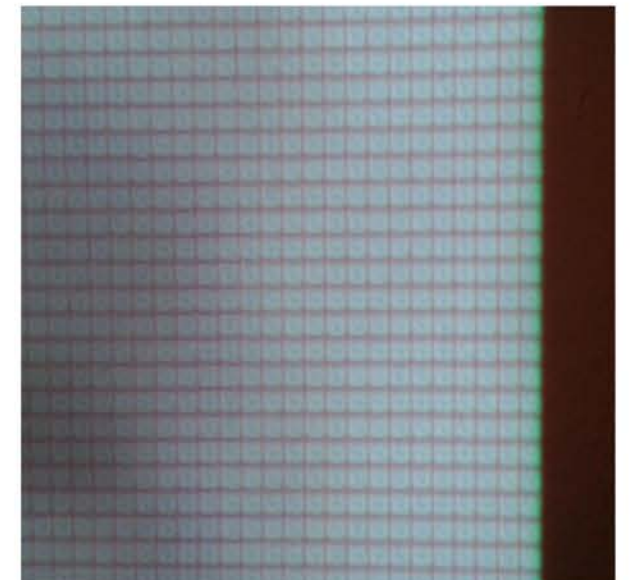


Image 3. Detail of the projection's pixel appearance.



Image 4. At the permanent collection of MNCARS. (Image available at the official Museum's website)



Image 5. At temporary exhibition "4/-1961 La expansión de las artes" at ground floor of MNCARS. (Next to a door for visitors and lights in the top of the wall)

Conclusions:

There is no doubt about the importance of the Contemporary Film Heritage in Spain. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding of its artistic and material scope has led to a problem in terms of management, exhibition and preservation. It is of utmost urgency to avoid, first of all, the use of magnetic tapes to create preservation masters for film artworks; the use of this material has to be limited to original magnetic materials. It's better to use a polyester preservation master. Secondly, the digital projection is not recommended for film exhibition, as it has a very clear pixel pattern which can alter the cinematographic image and confuse the public; it's better to use a cinematographic projector with a polyester copy. Finally, it's necessary to correct the official thesaurus for image and related technologies. This would allow the eight main Contemporary Art Institutions to correct the cataloguing mistakes identified in their official catalogues.

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