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Consuming Passions: The Video Art of Ximena Cuevas

If there is a unifying factor in our steadily globalizing world, it would be consumer culture. This insinuating ethos with its parasitic celebrity, branded distraction, and endless manufacture, engages the imagination as a great, desirous maw, constantly craving more. It is the chore of the culture industries to tease us with images that promise, however deceitfully, that our cravings might be staved, our yearnings sated.

In the more affluent corners of the globe, this ache toward acquisition can be fulfilled, at least temporarily. It is after all in the first world where the images originate and are then propelled outward as a vast flood of fawning fixations from Hollywood's dream machine, the tabloid cults, and lifestyle mavens. In the third world, the aspiration is there, but not the easy fulfillment. Yet the local cultures of the third world are often swamped by artifacts from the first, so, as actual material consumption may be thwarted, the imaginary distractions of the first world are everywhere to be seen (and felt).

And what money can't buy, the social infrastructure can often pirate as if its own. As a result, offshore nations—foreign to these consumerist images and impulses—create unique hybrids where local culture blends with the exotic imports. We see these renovated models as mash-ups that meld regional inflection with internationalist desire,

and promote local color with cosmopolitan come-ons. Thus indigenous platitudes are wed to iconic products, creating a site-specific craving for material accrual. Celebrity forms are caricatured, commodities counterfeited, media prototypes mimicked, resulting in an imitation of life, albeit one permeated with the pulse of product.

No country is immune to this, especially Mexico, rubbing up against the rear of the U.S., as it were. The hopeful flight to El Norte has always been driven by the lure of luxury, of a better life buoyed by affluence and ease. And *cultura popular*? A surprising amalgam of *imagenes tradicional* and *hecho en Estados Unidos*—Mickey Mouse rendered on gourds, velvet paintings of Britney, tabloid TV that would make Jerry Springer spring back. And even with the upsurge of Mexican film production, the theater circuits are inundated with American features and their preening mega-stars. In the gaseous gastronomic sector, Domino's, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut thrive while the consumption of tortillas, once the national staple, declines in favor of bread and other starch-based foods. Walmart, that great conquistador of the everyday, has built (or acquired) 500 supercenters in Mexico since the early 1990s, and cappuccino capitalism continues apace as Starbucks opens its hundredth store.

Despite the juggernaut of the new, *cultura tradicional*, often masquerading in mestizo

remix, persists with a tenacity that attests to its folk authenticity. So we see the maguey and the Mayan, the night of the iguana and the Plaza del Toros, the mezcál and the mariachis, los olvidados and Las Zapatistas, recycled, renewed, and resistant.

Which brings me to Ximena Cuevas, a remarkable Mexican artist who has surveyed the perimeter of popular culture, reporting back about the intrusions and erosions, about the colonization of the mass Imaginary.¹ But this is no mere slogging after material distraction that she detects, no hunt for *productos rojos* and other Bono bona fides. Cuevas observes the mechanics of consumer consciousness and how it shapes our leisurely lapses, but also the crux of our identity, our gender, the very *cama*² we lie in.

Cuevas' image-making began in the early eighties—it was a practice that originated with film, but was quickly transformed by the emergence of accessible video technology, an appropriately consumer-friendly apparatus. More importantly, you could say her style came-of-age in the mid-90s with *Medias*

Source: Video Data Bank's *Half-Lies: The Videoworks of Ximena Cuevas, 2009*

¹ This essay focuses on a specific aspect of Cuevas' work, not trying to reduce her interests to a particular pursuit, but singling out an important pre-occupation. Other concerns, such as autobiography, gender, and romance, are ultimately of equivalent consequence in understanding the totality of her extraordinary accomplishments.

² Cama translated is bed.



Antes de la Televisión (Before Television), 1983



Las 3 Muertes de Lupe (The 3 Deaths of Lupe), 1984

Mentiras (Half-Lies) (1995), a sly critique of the relationship between media and the everyday, composed of counter-touristic snapshots of the *Distrito Federal*³. But the few works that pre-date that seminal project, *Antes de la Televisión (Before Television)* (1983) and *Las 3 Muertes de Lupe (The 3 Deaths of Lupe)* (1984), already reveal Cuevas' decades-long fascination with the things of material culture.

A fable of domestic space in upheaval, *Antes de la Televisión (Before Television)* (1983) pictures the protagonist, Ximena herself, trapped in an apartment by a vacuum cleaner that seems demonically possessed. This short work recalls the famous "Twilight Zone" episode *A Thing About Machines* (1960) in which a businessman is sent fleeing from his home by an assortment of angry appliances. However, Cuevas' account places keen emphasis on the vacuum cleaner, a domestic appliance that represents empowerment, yet also enforces a form of stealthy servitude. The dutiful domestic then does not find liberation in household machinery, but rather a not-so-quiet defeat.

Based on the tragic death of actress Lupe Velez, who was known as the "Mexican Spitfire," the beautifully antiqued triptych *Las 3 Muertes de Lupe* imagines alternatives to her sad demise, a suicide of much notoriety. Each successive scenario, taking place in Hollywood, then Guanajuato, and finally

Barcelona, is an incremental rescue from celebrity oblivion, an oblivion also explored by Andy Warhol in the Edie Sedgwick vehicle, *Lupe* (1965). The "Spitfire" was a victim of her own myth, a celebrated Hollywood diva with a string of torrid affairs. Following a botched romance, her 1944 suicide was staged with candles and flowers surrounding the bed where she would sleepily o.d.

Using archaic iris effects and an airy operatic soprano on the soundtrack, *Las 3 Muertes de Lupe* unfetters Lupe Velez from her (historical) fate. In the first iteration, she simply rises from her bed, more nauseous than narcotized. In the second re-imagining, she meets a lover and as she approaches the threshold of *petit morte* she gets *grande* instead and expires. In the third, a pensive Lupe looks out to the Mediterranean, and on turning seems fascinated by the person holding the camera—Cuevas herself, we might ask?

But this is more than a resuscitation from a tragic end. Cuevas is considering the sorry fate of an actress bound to her downfall as a woman of Latin blood in a role circumscribed by the clichés of Hollywood melodrama. If *Las 3 Muertes de Lupe* can redeem Lupe Velez even for a moment then perhaps Ximena, the artist, can alter her own script for a life of a different design.

Ten years later, Cuevas had indeed written a new script with a jubilant, anarchic, and playfully defiant style. *Medias Mentiras*

(*Half-Lies*) is a post-modern tour of Mexican culture, launched by a guide requesting, "May I see your tickets, please... this way please." On our journey, we encounter such things as senatorial candidate Irma Serrano rousing voters in Chiapas, a quinceañera with a girl rising from a festive cake, Celia Cruz depicted as a dancing comb, and a Martha Stewart clone offering cold soup for the long hot summer; all this is punctuated by votive candles, beauty parlors, campesinos, cluttered streets, and language cards showing off idealized family customs.

Cuevas' refracting lens throws Mexican culture upon a screen of critical reflection to examine the half-truths, the "medias mentiras," of media construction. Political events, cultural intercourse, even social dalliances, are subjected to the distorting image machine.

Half-truths. Half-lies. Regardless, by definition, they lack legitimacy fifty percent of the time. And in the tape's inventive juxtapositions we sense that the ruptures of continuity are the necessary result of these breaches in authenticity. One thing no longer connects to another when they are forgeries, first and foremost.

But the postmodern pastiche of *Medias Mentiras* is anchored by Cuevas' overriding diaristic tone.⁴ Amidst the chaos of this tour,

⁴ This is made evident when Cuevas employs her own sketchbook as a visual passageway to other sections of the tape. Her drawings are like personalized portals into

³ The formal designation for Mexico City, national capital.



Calzada de Kansas (Kansas Avenue), 1999

we always return to her personal bewilderment about a culture on a collision course with modernity. We sense her puzzlement with the tumultuous city as it is enveloped by a spectacle penetrating every level of the Real. This is felt most profoundly in the fragments of film, radio, and television that whirl about like shards caught up in a media cyclone.

But this isn't Kansas. Or is it?

Soon after *Medias Mentiras*, Cuevas began a cycle of short works under the rubric of *Dormimundo*. "Sleep World," as it translates, is in actuality a Mexican franchise of mattress stores, aggressively advertised on television with a spinning globe logo. They are specialists in "descanso", in rest. They offer serene nights and posturepedic peace.

Cuevas' *Dormimundo* is more a narcoleptic globe blanketed in anesthetizing consumer dreams—more nightmarish than wistful. The pithy works in this series gaze through the sleep-inducing mist of consumer reverie to see its influence in the everyday. *Calzada de Kansas* (*Kansas Avenue*) (1999) begins with cartoon-like architecture poking out of an otherwise drab neighborhood soon supplanted by a young woman singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in a talent show.

The social gathering of middle-class women in *Hawaii* (1999) has them awkwardly performing the hula while idyllic postcards of the Aloha State substitute for their own nearby tropical paradise. In *Destino* (*Fate*) (1999), Cuevas herself is anxiously enduring a facial makeover until an appropriated audio clip declares "boring and conventional describes the sexual world of Aquarius." Cuevas' hopes of romantic rejuvenation are dashed by the pronouncement. In yet another short work, *Natural Instincts* (1999), a lifted cinema clip shows a woman in bed beside an infant. Unnerved by the infant's presence, the woman screams. This sequence is immediately replaced by advertising footage of hair dye turning a brunette blonde. The transformation is celebrated by an overly animated woman with long blonde pigtails belting out "That's why we should sing Hallelujah!"

This suite of works, *Dormimundo*, is an incisive look at the implanted yearnings that color the quotidian: the whimsy of Disneyfied buildings, ruby shoes and *The Wizard of Oz*, Polynesian paradise, the remake promised by simple beauty products. Yet they are all visitations, hauntings, brought on by the alluring (and heavily circulated) images of imported⁵ culture. And in Cuevas' vision the insinuation of these tantalizing images has reached a totality of saturation. We observe their presence in expected places—bill-

boards, television, cinema—yet in works like *Calzada de Kansas*, the colonizing icons are keyed directly onto the architecture, the very flesh of the city. And in the tart *Cama* (*Bed*) (1998), the bed we lie in is occupied by old-fashioned porn footage⁶—desire twisted into a concupiscent commodity we wield and negotiate.

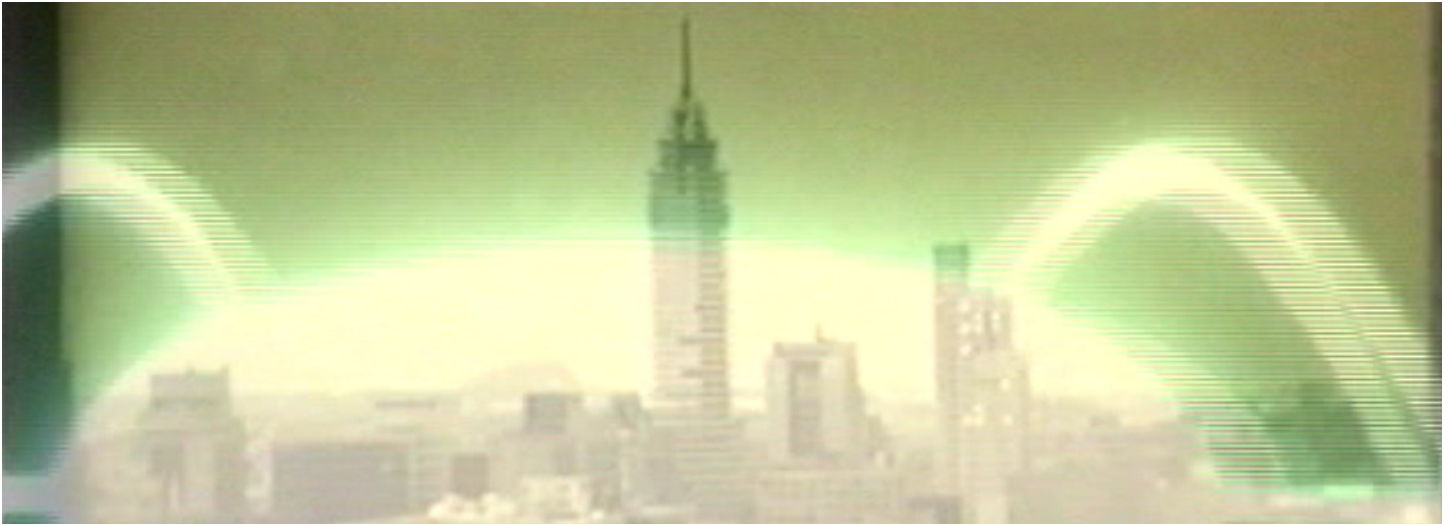
Cama is a fitting centerpiece for the cycle of *Dormimundo*. It is tinged with ire and an implicit demand that the sleepers awake, not just from their slumber, but from their acquiescence. Atop the porn footage, a voice, lifted from a fifties Mexican melodrama, asserts that this place of the bed is "a room sanctified by noble love." The aforementioned lurid footage proceeds; the "noble love" repeats until the insistence becomes a command and the command a given. Here, the bed is a site of supine behavior, the learned lethargy of a role played. This is not the sleep of the just, just sleep.

Cuevas returns to bed in *Colchones Individuales* (*Single Beds*) (2002), not a welcome site but a site of *desolacion*. Deeply autobiographical, the videowork is about the sleeper arisen to find the soothing dream replaced by nightmare. Playing computer solitaire, inspecting the mildew in a trash bin, a bed cordoned off by yellow

the disorder.

5 One could argue that even if not "imported," they would still register as corporate colonization.

6 This porn footage is keyed upon a bed, so that at times it appears as those the porn performers are occupants. In addition, a digital video effect is occasionally applied that makes the bed appear to undulate as though someone was beneath the sheets.



Cinepolis, La Capital del Cine (Cinepolis, the Film Capital) 2003

caution tape,⁷ cupboards filled with bare ramen packets, a township destroyed by some unnamed disaster, a woman (Cuevas' mother) bobbing in a pool as if suspended in time: ironically, these shards of experience represent the failed salve of the spectacle. Arrest time, as Kathy High⁸ has suggested, create "moments of pause, of inertia," and you can step outside the carny pitch of commodification to view our bargain basement reality.

Near the end of *Colchones Individuales*, Ximena stumbles down a hotel hallway dragging behind a magnum of champagne. The outsized bottle dwarfs her, seeming more like a burdensome anchor than a bottle of bubbly. She collapses. But elsewhere the dream continues: Santa Claus cavorts and on the soundtrack Terry Jacks's 1974 hit rings out: "We have joy. We have fun. We have seasons in the sun."

The persistent return of Dormimundo and the sleep of reason.

But Cuevas was not done with branding. Cinépolis, a sizeable Mexican chain of cineplexes, some two hundred multi-screens scattered throughout the country, found its logo deliciously lifted in the eponymous work from 2003. "The Film Capital", as it

⁷ No ordinary black and yellow caution tape, but a version in which the cautionary text reads "isolation."

⁸ This notion is developed by Kathy High in a letter to Ximena Cuevas.

translates, is a hyper-sphere of mediated experience; the chain's signature trailer itself a chilling and panoptic rollercoaster ride into the future. *Cinepolis, La Capital del Cine (Cinepolis, the Film Capital)* the videowork, forecasts an image-driven invasion of everyday life, picture-perfect and unnoticed. This alien intrusion comes in the form of a fully branded consumerscape that cheerily foists fast food along with the fantasy.

In one bristling sequence, a stereotypical Mexican vaquero, wearing a richly embroidered jacket with silver buttons, is voraciously devouring a McDonald's hamburger. We quickly grasp that this is a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a commercial in the making with the director's off-camera cues spurring on the vaquero's heightened appetite. Hamburgers are partially consumed, over and over again, their incompletely chewed remains spit into a waiting McDonald's bag. The trite replica of a Mexican folk character in a frenzy of serial consumption seems like a form of punitive behavior modification.

Celebrity sightings, studio tours, iconic logos, all come under the rubric of "Film life. Pure life" as *Cinepolis* treats us to the manufacture of social reality. Vintage film industry promos tout their ability to create believable weather effects, while in another purloined sequence, a model family of the fifties is watching television. But something is amiss—only a rolling image appears on the set, then a reassuring voice intones, "Don't worry. It's just a new program."

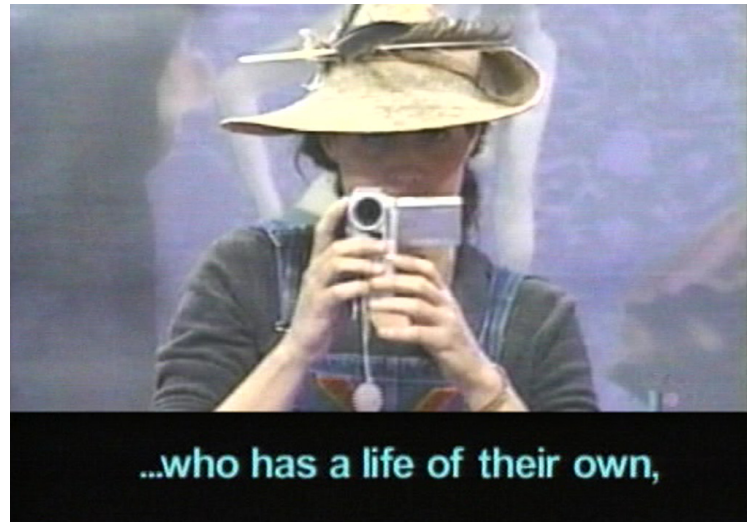
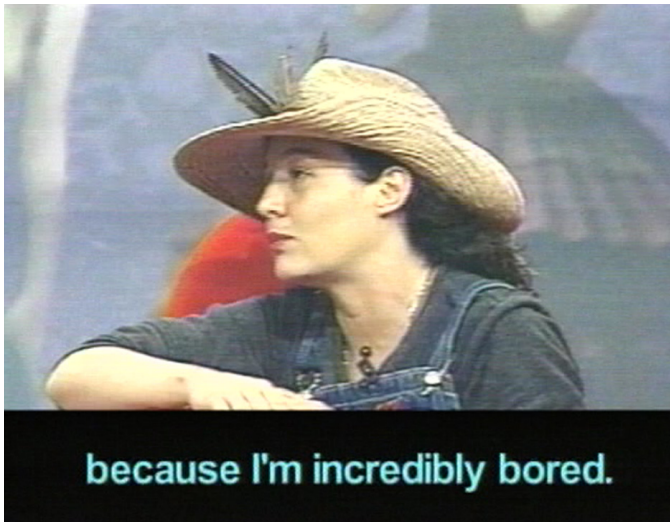
But the invasion doesn't stop here. Throughout *Cinepolis*, film fragments are strewn like land mines. Snippets from *Dune*, a Mexican remix of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and, most poignantly, *Mars Attacks!*, bear the sorry signature of military encroachment and cultural upheaval.

"We come in peace," intones the alien invader as vaporized doves drop from the sky. This same deceitful slogan circles back as oscilloscope waveforms undulate on the screen like rudimentary transmissions overlaying everything.

Here, the equation is complete: the diffusion of images is just another expression of power, military or social, winning our hearts and minds. *Cinepolis* is an all-encompassing saturation of image within image, transmission within transmission, an inescapable prism of pretend pleasure that would chill Guy Debord's situationist senses.

Even the artist desires escape from her own critical creation. Towards the tape's end, a pilfered scene from *The Wizard of Oz* has Dorothy yearning to return to Kansas.⁹ She clicks her ruby shoes together, repeating "there's no place like home." When we arrive in Cuevas' own private Midwest, it's her sparse bedroom we see; the artist, lying belly down, bares her feet to the green glow of an intrusive infrared camera. There are no ruby slippers, no magic apparel, for the

⁹ *Calzada de Kansas* once again.



La Tombola (Raffle), 2001

surveilling eye to see—just the artist stripped bare, vulnerable, and unaware, and the roving menace of the camera's gaze.

There is an answer, at least partial, to this consumer-encrusted vision—it is not all hopeless dystopia. In one daring and subversive work, *La Tombola (Raffle)* (2001), Cuevas points the way toward a plausible escape chute. *Tombola*, translated as raffle, is also an outrageously popular Mexican television show of the tabloid type that Cuevas infiltrates. With a peppy but insipid host, the program marches out a daily squad of low-lying celebrities and attention-mongers who offer themselves up for grotesque forms of humiliation. Spicy but tasteless, it is peppered with intramural banter between guests about rumored incest and sinful behavior, about tawdry relationships and ostentatious display.

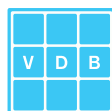
Amidst this squad of publicity vultures comes Cuevas, worthy of *Tombola's* time perhaps because of her famed father, José Luis Cuevas, the Modernist painter. When the host turns his attention to Cuevas, she complains of boredom, advising that they cut her from the show. Then in a plucky act of subversive performance, Cuevas takes out her camcorder and approaches the studio's camera, staring directly at the lens, repeating: "I hope that there's one person out there who has a life of their own... who is interested in their own life."

One person who is interested in their own life.

A stirring thought. The notion of a single person, perhaps more accurately a singular person, free of the delirium of massed images and internalized branding, a person of some, dare I say it, authenticity, interested in the zero degree of their own life. An artist of sublime patience, Cuevas would settle for just one.

And if we were to complete Ximena Cuevas' thought, follow to its final form this simple act of sabotage, we would turn off the TV and go about the lucrative business of being ourselves.

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