

Tuesday 6 November 2018 | Jackman Hall

Territorio + Piensa en mí



PROGRAM

Piensa en mí (Alexandra Cuesta, 2009, USA, 15 min, 16mm)

Territorio (Alexandra Cuesta, 2016, Argentina/Ecuador/USA, 65 min, Digital)

After a series of exceptional 16mm short films, shot predominantly in the United States, Alexandra Cuesta turned to her home country of Ecuador and HD video for the fragmentary feature travelogue *Territorio*. Drawing inspiration by the travel diaries of Henri Michaux, Cuesta moves from the sea to the interior, reducing the film to a series of isolated, self-contained sequences.

With a talent for portraiture, as well as a refined sense of cinematic space and time, Cuesta's camera presents a compendium of patient, unassuming moments that build into an evocative portrait of her country. *Territorio* is preceded by an earlier representation of travel, *Piensa en mí*, that offers poetic glimpses of a pedestrian's Los Angeles, seen from concrete sidewalks and public transportation.

Next Screenings

Tuesday 11 December 2018

Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun? with Travis Wilkerson

Tuesday 15 January 2019

Ryan Ermacora and Jessica Johnson's *Uneasy Panoramas*

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VERTICAL
FEATURES

Stillness in Motion: The Films of Alexandra Cuesta

Program Notes by Almudena Escobar López

Alexandra Cuesta's films are like a long train ride with no direction in mind. A gaze that looks inside from the outside, and outside from the inside. There is a relationship of respect with those on the other side of the camera, and a sense of trust that can only come from a shared space of belonging. At the same time, Cuesta observes as an outsider, but without anatomizing. Her camera doesn't quest for knowledge; instead it wanders, in between meditation and reflection. Seeming straightforward, Cuesta's images and her uniquely intimate perspective invite a deeper critical reflection upon the politics of observation.

Piensa en mí—'think of me'—traverses Los Angeles from east to west inside of a public bus line, starting its route in the morning and ending in the evening. *Piensa en mí* is visual poetry composed of intimate moments in which the eyes cruise and the mind wanders. Los Angeles becomes a place of reflection and visual experimentation. The film combines images of individuals approaching the bus, close-ups of people waiting at their stop or of riders waiting for their chance to get off, and passing images of the urban landscape of Los Angeles seen through the vehicle's window. The glass reveals both the inside and the outside; there are glimpses of Cuesta's reflection while filming, water stains from the rain, and images of the street lights reflecting on the surface.

Cuesta is both observing but also being observed, she is inhabiting the space but also taking note. Aside from the ambient sound, we hear a conversation with a woman speaking in Spanish about her immigration experience, while the camera wanders and focuses on different details of her face. Once more Cuesta looks at the figure as an observer but also as a Latino immigrant herself working and living in Los Angeles. This intermediate position of belonging and alienation is again visible in the only full take of the inside of the bus, inserted about halfway into the film, that shows the inside seats populated by racialized working class women.

In the film we see the physical movement of walking, the immobility of waiting, and a third, hybrid state of both moving and sitting while in transit. Through the lens of Cuesta, these interstitial moments become a catalyst to reflect on questions of community structures and their boundaries. *Piensa en mí* is not a film about Los Angeles and its urban landscape, but a film made within and of the margins of Los Angeles. However, Cuesta is not making a humanitarian documentary to tell the story of minorities in Los Angeles, instead she is reflecting on an everyday reality—often invisible and ignored—from her intermediate position of both an observer and insider.

Cuesta's first digital feature *Territorio* is a tableau vivant of her native Ecuador which moves across its geography, from the coast to the interior. Being both from Ecuador but also an outsider who has lived abroad since a young age, her camera again takes the hybrid position, here in the form of the returned expatriate. *Territorio*—territory—has its origin in the latin word territorium and means "extension of land divided politically." Its root is "tierra" which means land and "orio" place or belonging. The film is not a full representation of what Ecuador is, instead it explores how land becomes territory and how the land belongs to the people that inhabit it. Cuesta investigates Ecuador as a land of belonging, and the possibility of imagining a territory that operates outside of the political and geographical concept of a State.

Throughout the film there are people who walk, eat, dance, talk, sing, work, observe and are observed. It is a drift full of rhythms, and movement: the movement both of those who inside the frame and the progressive journey inside the country. Cuesta is interested in the construction of space, what a territory is, how it is perceived, and what are the relationships between those who live within it. Furthermore, her static camera builds a contemplative cinematic space that intertwines with the lived space of those who are in the other side of the camera. *Territorio* steers away from focusing on a particular time and space and tends towards the recording of the eventless everyday.

Cuesta compiles fragments of distant remote areas of Ecuador, without ever suggesting a holistic portrait of the whole country; it doesn't show the contrast between its urban landscapes and its rural areas, and doesn't strive to represent the totality of the country's landscape or demographic. Far from such a pretension, *Territorio* is not about Ecuador but rather from Ecuador. the film an open poem from its populace.

Each section of the film is a fictional construction, produced in collaboration with the people that live in Ecuador. Each of the isolated stories is a intimate journey, where the characters make the territory of Ecuador their own. These fictionalized spaces emerge as a strategy to confront the political concept of territory, transforming it into a shared space of community.

Alexandra Cuesta's camera explores identity in relation to space, creating a continuous flow of images that breathe into each other. Her camera asks little of her subjects, instead inviting them to command their own images. It is an illuminative reflection that comes from spatial temporality and moves towards the interiority of the subject. Ultimately her films are about boundaries, how they are built, what they mean, and how they affect those who live within them.

Alexandra Cuesta is a filmmaker and visual artist who lives and works between the United States and Ecuador, her country of origin. Her films and videos combine experimental film traditions, documentary practices, and visual anthropology. Her most recent film *Territorio* (2016), premiered in the Official Selection of the FID Marseille Film Festival in France in 2016, and was selected among the 25 best Latin American films of 2017 by Cinema Tropical. Her award winning 16mm films *Despedida*, *Piensa En Mi*, *Recordando El Ayer*, and *Beirut 2.14.05*, have been presented at the New York Film Festival, Cinema Du Reel, Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes, Habana Film Festival, BFI Film Festival, Oberhausen, Courtisane Film Festival, FICValdivia International Film Festival, Anthology Film Archives, Image Forum Tokyo, among many others. Early on in her career Cuesta was included in 25 Filmmakers for the 21st Century by Film Comment Magazine. She was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacDowell Colony Fellowship and residency (2018).

Almudena Escobar López is an independent curator, archivist, and researcher from Spain. She is Curatorial Assistant at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, NY and is currently completing her PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. She combines her academic research and writing with her practice as a film archivist and curator having worked at institutions such as LUX Artists' Moving Image, The Academy Film Archive, and the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. She has written for publications including MUBI Notebook, The Brooklyn Rail, Afterimage, Film Quarterly, Little White Lies, and Desistfilm Magazine. She is member of the collective screening project On-Film, and co-programmed with Herb Shellenberger the Flaherty NYC series 'Common Visions' at Anthology Film Archives. She serves on the Board of Trustees of the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY; the editorial board of InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal of Visual Culture; and the Advisory Board of Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, Buffalo, NY.