

BOMB

TV Personality

The legacy of Jaime Davidovich

by Rebecca Cleman



Jaime Davidovich, *The Live! Show* (April 29, 1983). Courtesy of the Estate of Jaime Davidovich, the Geo Global Foundation, and the Institute for Studies of Latin American Art (ISLAA).

Jaime Davidovich, an artist best known for his role as an avant-garde television host, was always quick to suggest "business" dinners at Arte, a self-consciously high-class Italian restaurant that flaunts its status with white tablecloths and mannered waiters. Jaime relished the gaudiness of discussing art at Arte—its dining room décor of heavily framed paintings and flower vases felt like a set for a satire about fine art pretensions.

I had many such dinners with Jaime, but most of our discussions were focused on his current projects or his plans to stage a daring conceptual performance in Las Vegas. There was a lot about his background that never came up. It was a bittersweet experience to belatedly discover the revelations in a new publication featuring Jaime's in-depth conversation with scholar Daniel Quiles co-published by the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros's and the Institute for Studies of Latin American Art. More than an insightful overview of Jaime's

career, the dialogue calls attention to the impact of his early life in Argentina during a turbulent political period in the 1950s and '60s, and reframes the nature of Jaime's often playful and entertaining projects to connect them to his passionate belief that artists have a social responsibility to be rebels.

Like many of his TV generation, Jaime began as a 2D artist grappling with the "isms" of Post-war painting. All the while, however, a certain glimmering box sat atop the china cabinet in his family living room—a prize few other neighboring homes had—and it couldn't help but call attention to itself, gathering viewers around to watch soccer matches and propaganda.

Jaime's art evolved under the influence of such figures as fellow Argentine Lucio Fontana, whose concept of Spatialism incorporated the effects of technology on human experience, and sought to depart from the static physical plane of painting. Meanwhile television technology evolved to become more participatory. Ahead, other glimmering screens beckoned, no longer just fanciful electronic furniture, but rather new tools offering an entirely different context for art-making, which would soon lure Jaime away from traditional art spaces into a more ambiguous public arena.

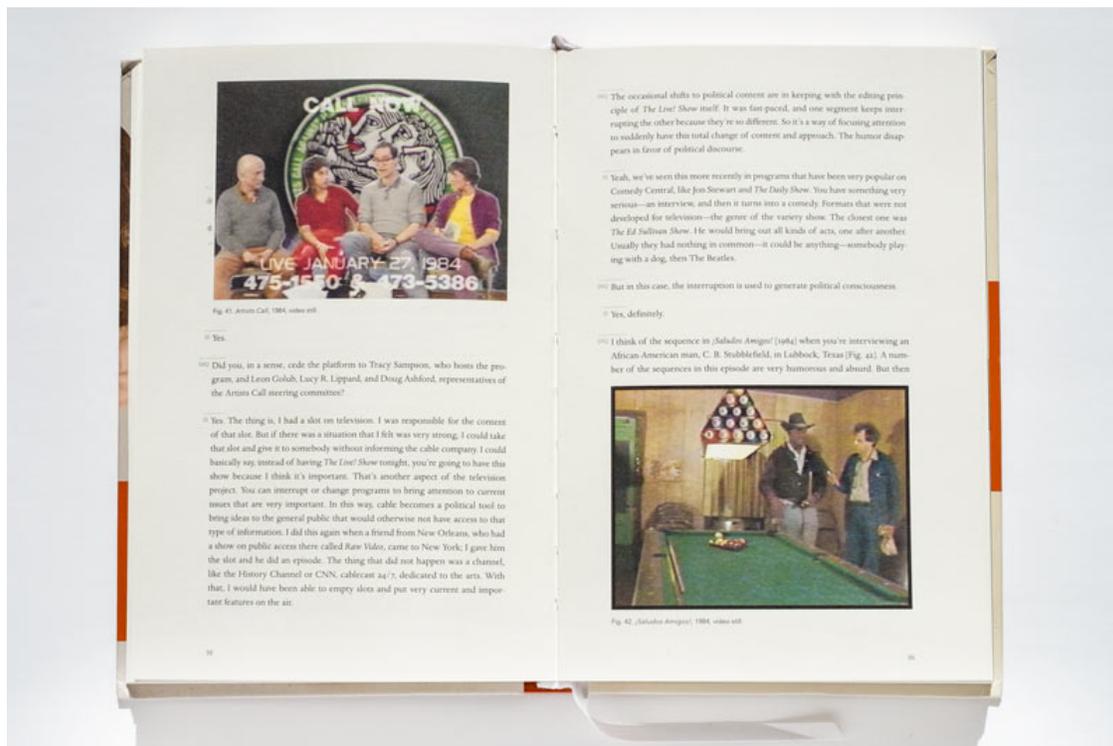
I knew Jaime was a rebel, but I hadn't fully considered how intrinsically his artistic identity was related to the unique circumstances of his self-discovery. Estrangement was an important aspect of this. He immigrated to the United States in an abrupt manner, when there was a coup d'etat in his homeland while he was visiting New York City in 1963. After living in New York for most of the '60s, part of it working as a designer for Alfred A. Knopf on Madison Avenue, Jaime settled in Ohio for a while, enjoying what he considered to be a relatively typical suburban life with a two-car garage. It was there that he began experimenting with video, introduced not via a gallerist or a SONY sponsorship (as was the case for some artists), but by way of an Argentine surgeon at a Cleveland hospital.

A technician gave Jaime access to the hospital's video equipment after hours, making the operating room his de-facto television laboratory. At this time, some public broadcast stations like WNET were sponsoring artistic experimentation with their high-end video equipment, a situation that tended to showcase the visual effects of gadgetry. In the setting of the hospital, Jaime's use of video was more clearly distinct from such aesthetics, in keeping with his use, already, of non-art materials like adhesive tape to create spatial interventions.

When he returned to the cultural hub of New York City, Jaime claimed his outsider position even when institutions invited him in. His participation in the Whitney Biennial of 1973 was an installation of adhesive tape in the stairwell. In 1975, he realized another important "installation" when he convinced a bartender in Midtown to flip the channel to a public access broadcast of his video *Baseboard*, replacing lively sports with a boring video pan of a room's baseboard: "For me it was the act of taking that tape and putting it in the public domain—literally—like a kind of Duchamp in reverse. Instead of taking the urinal to a gallery, take the piece from the gallery and put it in a bar."

This spectacle, a combination of earnest provocation and good humor, brought Jaime into the realm of his hero Ernie Kovacs, the variety show host who famously spent over \$10,000 on a single visual gag involving a used car salesman and a car crashing through the studio floor. He admired how Kovacs commandeered television as a stage for anarchic entertainment and saw this as a continuation of the legacy of the Dadaists' *Cabaret Voltaire*. In this spirit, he initiated his own variety television program. *The Live! Show* (1979–84) was

entertaining, but infused with his strong conviction that it was more radical to put art in the context of television than to bring popular culture into the museum.



A spread from *Jaime Davidovich in Conversation with Daniel R. Quiles*, published by Fundación Cisneros/Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Institute for Studies of Latin American Art (ISLAA).

Persona became an important strategy in Jaime's rebellion. His alter-ego, "Dr. Videovich," the Argentine psychoanalyst turned TV host, emerged as a satirical counterpoint to the art world's move toward commercialization and professionalism in the 1980s. A critic for *The New York Times* memorably characterized Dr. Videovich as a cross between Bela Lugosi and Andy Kaufman.

As it happens, Kaufman was another role model for Jaime, who adopted his deadpan elusiveness and shifting public personae to keep ahead of any attempt to pin him down. Resisting classification—and any stasis that might rust the forward-driving creative engine—was essential to Jaime's sense of the avant-garde. By the time I met him, Jaime had moved on from Videovich to other characters. Sometimes he was the European aesthete, with an ascot tied around his neck, other times he was the ambiguous celebrity in garish sunglasses. Recently he developed an impeccable impersonation of Pope Francis. The last time I saw him he was wearing a t-shirt he'd found on sale at the Gap, emblazoned with a video camera as revolutionary weapon.

It is so welcome to see Jaime's artistic contribution increasingly appreciated and historicized, but there is an inevitable shift away from the person in the process. In the vein of Kaufman, whose death some still wishfully disbelieve, I will hold onto the memory of his undimmed spirit, pursuing avant-gardism in the most unexpected places.

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