Video Art: An Historical Sketch

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As Martha Rosler pointed out during a 1985 panel discussion sponsored by the College Art Association, video art, like the major religions of the world, has its own myth of origins, shaped by numerous retellings. Hence, it seems appropriate to begin this article about the history of video art with a ritualistic invocation of this myth. In 1965, the Sony Corporation began marketing its newly developed consumer grade portable video camera/recorder in the United States. The Korean-born artist Nam June Paik rushed out to buy a machine from the first shipment. On his way home from the store, his cab got caught in a traffic jam caused by a procession to greet Pope Paul VI, who was visiting New York. Paik made an instantaneous tape of this event, which he showed later that evening at the Cafe a Go-Go.

Inspired by the example of John Cage's prepared pianos, Paik had already exhibited sculptures made out of electronically altered television sets in Europe, beginning in 1959. Several related trends in the art world had also paved the way for the introduction of video as an art medium. At the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, the Zurich Dadaists had presented their performances as popular entertainment. Marcel Duchamp had also obfuscated the boundaries separating art from life by exhibiting ordinary objects like urinals or bicycle wheels as sculptures during the same decade.

Artists like Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg, who had followed in this tradition by making assemblages out of junk, began to animate their environments with live performers in New York in the early 1960s. By making large-scale earthworks, Robert Smithson and other sculptors subsequently emphasized that the process of making art was as important as the end product. Concurrently, conceptual artists demonstrated that art would function as an idea, rather than a commodity. Several museums had exhibitions celebrating the merger of art with technology, and underground filmmakers appropriated film equipment to attack the formal and narrative conventions of Hollywood movies. Thus, many artists who had been experimenting with innovative forms of film, performance or sculpture, also began using video tools when they became available.

The general cultural climate was as important in fostering the early development of video art as was the art world. The 1960s were years of social activism, with the institutions of the establishment being challenged by the Civil Rights Movement, feminism and anti-war protests. With a shared concern for community access to the communications media, several video collectives formed, including People's Video Theater, Global Village, the Videofreex, Raindance, Optic Nerve and TVTV. Like the underground press, these groups were established to voice minority viewpoints. The "real time," minimally edited, low-budget video programs these groups produced challenged the myth of objective reportage perpetuated by commercial broadcasters. While covering the Republican Presidential nominating convention in 1972, for example, TVTV videotaped off-the-cuff remarks by the network anchormen about their role in shaping the news.

Some of these "guerrilla TV" groups subscribed to the technological utopianism espoused by social theorist Marshall McLuhan. They anticipated the advent of a "global village" in which everyone would be linked together in a two-way communication system, both sending and receiving messages. An alteration in government funding policies, along with a more conservative political climate in which such optimistic beliefs about the future became difficult to maintain, brought about the demise of the guerrilla television movement in the 1970s.

A few of the participants in the guerrilla television groups, however, put their expertise in operating video equipment to use by becoming video artists. In 1969 the Howard Wise Gallery in New York City presented an exhibition called "TV as a Creative Medium." One of the pieces included in this pioneering show was a collaborative effort by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette titled Wipe Cycle. Both Schneider and Gillette were members of the Raindance Corporation, which published a periodical about the novel uses of video technology called Radical Software. Wipe Cycle was a video installation composed of nine monitors with live-camera inputs so the viewer could see himself from various vantage points. These live-camera signals were mixed with television programmings, so the viewer could compare broadcast television with its locally generated alternative.

Other seminal exhibitions of video art were sponsored by the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University 1970) and the Finch College Museum in New York (1971). The Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, became the first major museum to start a video department in 1971. Its curator, David Ross, went on to establish a video department at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California in 1974. The De Saisset Art Gallery and Museum in Santa Clara, California, also made an early commitment to showing video art, beginning with an exhibition titled Fish, Fox, Kos in 1971.

Video art has not been produced in an economic vacuum. The workshops for artists that were started at three public television stations probably played a more significant role in shaping the growth of video art than the museums did, because they offered artists the subsidized use of video equipment. The Experimental Television Workshop at KQED-TV in San Francisco was established with an initial grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1967.

Four years later, WNET-TV in New York received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to start the Artists' Television Workshop. Boston's WGBH-TV began its New Television Workshop, funded through the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1974. Besides

offering artists access to sophisticated production tools, these public television stations put together anthology programs of video art for broadcast. For example, WGBH-TV presented a program titled The Medium is the Medium in 1969, prior to the inception of the New Television Workshop. WGBH-TV also provided Nam June Paik with the financial support necessary to build a video synthesizer that would electronically manipulate video signals.

Unfortunately, all three of these workshops have ceased or radically altered their operations, although KTCA-TV in Minneapolis began producing a program called Alive From Off Center to showcase video art in 1983. Regional media centers have taken over the function of offering artists access to video equipment at reasonable rates. Gerald O'Grady founded the first media center, the Media Study Center, in Houston, Texas, in 1969. It was later renamed the Southwestern Alternative Media Project. Other media centers include Chicago's Center for New Television, University Community Video in Minneapolis (now UCVideo), the Bay Area Video Coalition and Video Free America, both in San Francisco, and the Experimental Television Center in Oswego, New York.

Alternative spaces formed cooperatively by groups of artists who found commercial galleries unreceptive to their work became prevalent during the 1970s. Although these spaces are too numerous to provide an exhaustive list of them, some of the more prominent spaces who featured video were The Kitchen in New York City, LAICA and LACE in Los Angeles, New Langton Arts (formerly 80 Langton Street) and La Mamelle in San Francisco, and/or in Seattle and NAME Gallery in Chicago. Videotapes were also made available for rental or purchase by several distributors, including Electronic Arts Intermix and Castelli-Sonnabend in New York City and the Video Data Bank in Chicago.

What sort of video art was marketed by the distributors and exhibited at alternative spaces and museums? Three major genres soon coalesced. Video installations extended sculptural formats through the use of video technology. Several types of live and prerecorded video performance came into existence. The third genre, image-processed video, utilized synthesizers like the one developed by Nam June Paik and engineer Shya Abe at WGBH-TV to alter the video waveform electronically. I will describe some representative examples of each of these genres.

Video installations often incorporated several monitors to display a single channel of imagery. Sometimes each monitor had a different input, creating a multichannel effect. Time delay systems allowed the same visual information to be cycled through monitors at serially displaced, non-synchronous intervals. Extraneous sculptural elements were frequently used to disguise the familiar appearance of the TV sets in installations. For example, Shigeko Kubota's homage to Marcel Duchamp's painting, Nude Descending a Staircase (1975-76), features four 13-inch monitors inserted into the visors of a plywood staircase. A videotape loop repeats every three minutes the image of a woman descending a staircase. In Mary Lucier's Ohio at Giverny (1983), seven monitors of different sizes are framed by a white wall, which covers their dials. Landscapes shot at Lucier's own birthplace in Ohio are combined with images of Monet's garden in Giverny, France, to create a lyrical fusion that celebrates the resonances of color and light.

Whereas Kubota and Lucier's installations featured pre-recorded videotapes, Bruce Nauman's Corridor (1970) used a live closed-circuit video set-up. A monitor was placed at the end of a long hallway. After the viewer walked down this enclosed space, he would see himself entering the corridor on the monitor. However, the camera was positioned so that walking toward his image on the monitor screen took the viewer out of camera range, causing his image to disappear. Peter Campus' installations, mem (1975) and sev (1975) experimented with similar spatio-temporal dislocations, rendered via video projections which displayed larger than life representations of the viewer.

Rosalind Krauss' 976 essay, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," commented on video artists' tendency to use closed-circuit systems as mirrors with bizarre properties. Several artists who had previously been doing performances also began to use video as a tool to foster self-exploration. In Left-Side, Right Side (1972), Joan Jonas illustrated one of the ways in which video distorts a person's image: the left and right sides of the image are reversed, in comparison with a mirror reflection. An audiotape time-delay fed through earphones in Richard Serra's Boomerang (1974) was used to alienate the videotape's performer, Nancy Holt, from her own speech-formation processes.

Vito Acconci was one of a group of artists who made what was termed "body art": they used their own bodies as the site of their artwork. Acconci was interested in involving audiences in psychologically edgy, intimate confrontations. Some of his pieces implicated the audience as the uneasy voyeurs of his exhibitionism. In Claim (1971), he used live closed-circuit video to prevent the audience from entering the room he occupied by transmitting verbal and physical threats on a monitor located outside of the room.

The product of a decade of consciousness-raising, feminist art was equally introspective, and sometimes equally confrontational. Supported by institutions like the Feminist Art Program at California State University in Fresno and the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, the feminist art movement was particularly strong in California. Feminist performance artists frequently used videotape to document their performances, or produced performances designed to be recorded on videotape, rather than viewed by live audiences. Eleanor Antin created three alternate personas for herself, a ballerina, a nurse and a king. She documented the adventures of these alter egos on videotape. Linda Montano also assumed several different identities for the benefit of the video camera in Characters-Learning to Talk (1978).

No live audiences ever witnessed William Wegman's comic vignettes. A fixed camera on a tripod recorded his brief improvisational sketches. Like a deadpan stand-up comic, Wegman executed absurdist sight gags using simple props, or performed tricks with his dog, Man Ray. His unpretentious skits raised profound questions about the conventions of commercial television. Ant Farm, an

artists' collective that began in 1968, staged several performances that satirized broadcast television in a less oblique fashion. Their 1975 event, Media Burn, was designed to be covered by TV news reportage. In a spectacular visual display, a souped-up 1959 Biarritz Cadillac was driven through a wall of flaming television sets as an anti-TV protest.

Some artists also conceived of the development of image-processing techniques as a subversion of the seamless use of video technology by commercial television. Other artists viewed their work with video synthesis as a modernist quest to discover the intrinsic properties of the video medium. Even before the completion of the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer in 1970, Eric Siegel had invented a colorizer that transformed black-and-white video signals into variously colored hues. At KQED-TV in San Francisco, Stephen Beck was working on the design for what he called the Direct Video Synthesizer, which was finished in 1971. Rather than utilizing camera images like Siegel's machine, the Direct Video Synthesizer produced its own abstract imagery.

A more flexible machine was created by Dan Sandin at the University of Illinois at Chicago and dubbed the Image Processor. The Image Processor consists of a collection of metal boxes that are patch programmable, i.e., incoming signals are routed through the boxes via cables, which can be arranged in a virtually unlimited variety of configurations. Because Sandin provides his designs for this instrument free of charge to other artists, there are more Sandin Image Processors in existence than any other variety of non-commercial video synthesizer.

The Image Processor can colorize, mix, chroma-key, switch, fade and wipe images from several cameras. Another type of synthesizer operates through raster manipulation, changing the parameters of the display of the video signal on the monitor. Thus, images can be stretched, compressed, twisted, rotated, etc. Steve Rutt and Bill Etra collaborated to produce the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor, which can perform these functions, in 1973. Filmmaker Woody Vasulka purchased a Rutt-Etra Scan Processor to experiment with, but was frustrated by the impossibility of precisely controlling the effects it generated. In 1976 he began work on a digital video system that would allow a computer to alter images according to the functions of mathematical logic. Independent control of each pixel or element of the video picture, can be achieved with this digital device.

Although I referred to image processing as a genre, this designation is somewhat misleading, since image processing has been used in a wide variety of aesthetic contexts ranging from abstract animation to personal narrative. In Ed Rankus' Naked Doom (1983), image processing helps evoke a film noir atmosphere of dimly lit corridors, closeted skeletons, menacing gunmen and fateful throws of the dice. image processing is used more cerebrally in Gary Hill's Happenstance (1983). Shapes formed from alphabet letters are juxtaposed with geometric diagrams, generating enigmatic concrete poetry conundrums, and Bob Snyder invents formal tropes out of image processing techniques in order to recontextualize visual quotations excerpted from commercial television programs. Abstract patterns and shapes generated by oscillators rhyme with representational images of vegetation and explosions in his Lines of Force (1979).

Although the earliest image-processed tapes were made with the homemade video synthesizers I have described, some video artists began to use state-of-the-art commercial production tools in the late 197Os. Video art lost the "pleasantly shabby" look David Antin had alluded to in his 1975 essay, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium." Half-inch reel-to-reel recorders and black-and-white cameras were gradually replaced by 1/4" cassette recorders and color cameras. Editing systems became increasingly sophisticated; CMX controllers allowed the editor to store a list of editing instructions in a computer, so that the computer could then perform the edits automatically. Time Base Correctors made videotapes produced with low-budget equipment compatible with commercial television's technical standards for broadcasting. Special effects generators and video paintboxes made it possible to enhance images with mechanical precision.

Many of the artists who worked with video equipment in the early days of the medium were not interested in mastering the use of more complex technology. They had been attracted to video because of the simplicity of portable video equipment, and its capacity to generate an immediate product. Thus, they abandoned video to take up other pursuits, sometimes returning to an exploration of more traditional media. However, a new breed of artists sprang up who were comfortable with advanced technology. Some of them, like Max Almy, had worked in commercial video production facilities before they began making video art. In Perfect Leader (1983), Almy used her expertise in employing special effects to satirize the way media manipulators fabricate the images of political candidates.

The ubiquity of MTV and the cross-overs between "high art" and "popular culture" that resulted when several art bands signed contracts with major record labels also had an impact on video art. Whereas the older video artists had maintained a virulently anti-TV attitude, younger video artists sought ways to have their work aired on television. In a 1982 manifesto, "Performing Post-Performancist Performance, or the Televisionist Performing Televisionism," Carl Loeffler even recommended that the new breed of artists call themselves "television artists" instead of "video artists."

The rapid editing techniques and staccato rhythms of the pieces that comprise Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn's Interpolation (1978) were obviously derived from the rhetorical strategies of sports highlights and commercials. Thus, Interpolation works well when it is shown on broadcast television. "Entropy," the first segment of the Interpolation sampler, features intensely compressed and amplified images and sounds of a couple eating breakfast. These mundane phenomena acquire a heightened significance when orchestrated into intricate musical patterns of repetition and variation.

A new attitude towards narrative has also become prevalent in the video art of the 1980s. Like underground film makers, early video artists rejected the constrictions of narrative form. Artists who made sculptural or abstract video pieces considered narrativity

irrelevant to their perceptual and structural focus. Performance artists who employed video too!s viewed narrativity as a component of the traditional theater techniques they intended to subvert. However, artists like Dan Reeves, Tony Oursler, Juan Downey and Ken Feingold began to experiment with narrative structures as a way to engender a different kind of relationship with the viewer. Unlike early video artists who pursued their aesthetic quests with a purity that eschewed the seductions of entertainment, the subsequent generation of video artists have incorporated entertaining elements into their work to engage the viewer's imaginative participation. The suspenseful plot structures and complex systems for promoting identification with characters that narrative forms entail have traditionally been staples of entertainment.

Dan Reeves' Smothering Dreams (1981), for example, is a personal narrative about Reeves' experiences during the Vietnam War. Reeves employs narrative continuity to heighten the effectiveness of his antiwar statement by drawing the viewer in emotionally. Tony Oursler's videotapes may also be classified as personal narratives. His voice-over commentary in The Loner (1980) is redolent with adolescent melodrama and sexual obsession. The funky cartoon-like images of his Expressionistic sets are animated by the chimerical prose Oursler weaves around them.

Juan Downey, who began making video in the medium's early days, has evolved a unique hybrid of the structures of an autobiographical essay, a travel log and an art history lecture in his Thinking Eye series. He establishes spatio-temporal unities which he then undermines through fragmentation. His verbalized stream-of-consciousness reveries are illustrated with images shot in Egypt, Argentina and New York, and punctuated by interviews with art historians such as Leo Steinberg. Fragmentation is also the key to Ken Feingold's deconstruction of narrative form. Feingold appropriates scraps of documentary footage in The Double (1984) and arranges them in tantalizing juxtapositions that simultaneously stimulate and frustrate the viewers interpretative strategies. The image glut occasioned by the mass media is reflected in Feingold's montages of Cabbage Patch dolls, open heart surgery and Pie-eating contests.

The impact of recent post-structuralist discourse by theoreticians like Baudrillard, Derrida, Lacan and Foucault is evident in Feingold's work, as it is in the work of other contemporary artists who deal with postmodern issues, such as Data Birnbaum, Steve Fagin and Jeanne Finley. These artists have the advantage of being able to build on the accomplishments of their forerunners in the medium of video. Thus, their work exhibits increased sophistication in both form and content.

Having existed for more than 20 years, video art is becoming institutionalized. University art departments offer video art courses as a regular aspect of their curricula. The Whitney Museum held a Nam June Paik retrospective in 1982, and the Museum of Modern Art will mount an extensive exhibition of Bill Viola's masterful videotapes and installations in 1987. Concurrently, the constant influx of new developments in vi technology helps prevent video art from becoming stultified. As these developments occur, artists strive to incorporate them in their work. Nam June Paik is still pioneering new genres of video art. in 1984, he used communications satellites to transmit a program titled Good Morning Mr. Orwell, which emanated from New York and Paris simultaneously. The program was structured like a vaudeville show and featured New York break dancers, Parisian disco dancers, a guitar hootenanny and guest appearances by John Cage, Laurie Anderson and Allen Ginsberg.

Also in 1984, Lynn Hershman produced Lorna, the first interactive video disk made by an artist. Alternative branchings programmed by a computer into the narrative sequence of Lorna allow the viewer to intervene and make choices about what will happen next. The viewer encodes his choices by punching the appropriate buttons on a remote control unit, in response to printed instructions displayed on the monitor screen. Computer technology is also impacting video art in other ways. Three-dimensional computer animation can now simulate photographic realism, making it possible for artists to create imaginary scenes that look indistinguishable from their counterparts in actuality. Thus, the interface of computers with video art may complete Duchamp's project of merging art with life in a more technologically literal way than he could have imagined. A myth of transcendence has arisen to complement video art's myth of origins.

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