



Robyn Farrell

The Electric Mirror: Reflecting on Video Art in the 1970s

In 1978, artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson wrote that, “Much of the urgency and inspiration of art video emanates from various types of commercial television broadcasting.”¹ Included in Gregory Battcock’s critical anthology, *New Artists Video*, Hershman Leeson’s essay “Reflections on the Electric Mirror” identified TV genres that influenced video artists, and declared video as “a manifestation of contemporary art.”² She went on to describe video as “the extracted film of television,” and pointed to the relations between the nascent medium and television as inextricably linked, citing former CBS news executive Sig Mickelson’s view that “television mirrors reality” to illustrate video’s simultaneous tie and revolt against “the electric mirror.”³ If mid-Century American television mirrored reality, then American video artists obscured and abstracted it. Taking inspiration from Hershman Leeson’s essay, this program concentrates on work from the first decade of American video art, and focuses on artists that were influenced by and who pushed against the televisual impulse. The works in this program – by Lynda Benglis, Keith Sonnier, Susan Mogul, William Wegman, Nancy Holt, John Baldessari, Simone Forti, Paul and Marlene Kos, and Barbara Aronofsky Latham – derive from television both technologically and culturally, and serve as a catalogue of early experimentation with and in the closed circuit system. This is not

to say that television was the sole antecedent of video art, but rather a critical relative to the developing medium. Representing the first generation that grew up with television, the artists included in this program were keenly aware of a viewer’s social and psychological experience while watching TV. Their collective works encompass the interests of this “TV generation,” and at the same time, the post-war, post-pop proclivities of a changing art landscape that ranged from minimal representation and captured action, to technophilic inquiry and appropriation. Together these videos represent artistic efforts that rechannelled a medium and its vapid promise of normative reality or neutral viewing.

By the 1970s, television programming had an established code. Programs were linear, with a distinct narrative structure lasting between 15-120 minutes. Soap Operas, Melodramas, Sitcoms, and Newscasts were joined by advertisements that followed a similar formula ranging from 10-120 seconds. The works in this program subvert these traditional formats by inserting humorous or political content, and by exploiting the medium itself. They do so in two primary forms. The first could be understood as a reflective and/or reflexive impulse. This includes manipulation of the action recorded, or exploitation of TV technology.

The desire to experiment with the electronic and visual capabilities of television dates back to 1963 with Nam June Paik’s first televisual manipulation in *The Exposition of Electronic Music-Electronic Television* at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany. Paik’s motivation to utilize the monitor and screen as a means to assault the image provided the aesthetic framework for practitioners in the following decade. Works in this program operate in this vein, illustrating how one could change a viewer’s perception through video tricks or props, while others exploit TV technology as a means of social critique. For example, Lynda Benglis explores the spatial ambiguity of video. Benglis’s *On Screen* shows the artist manipulating her body as well as the television screen. The video makes use of monitor-as-mirror to expose the viewer to the apparatus of video and the underpinnings of the device. Keith Sonnier and Barbara Aronofsky Latham layer overly processed imagery to advance Paik’s efforts against television’s hardware and electronic flow of information. Sonnier’s *TV In and TV Out* focuses on computer-generated possibilities, while Latham’s video essay centers on the fragmented aspects of the medium to drive her personal and political agenda.

The remaining works in the program address Hershman Leeson’s assertion that video art “emanates” from varying

¹ Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Reflections on the Electric Mirror,” in Battcock, Gregory, (ed.), *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Dutton, p. 36

² Hershman Leeson, p. 38

³ Hershman Leeson, p. 37



Lightning, Paul Kos/Marlene Kos, 1976



TV In and TV Out, Keith Sonnier, 1972

types of television broadcasting. A range of genres of television are reflected here, but in most cases artists emphasise the role of the camera, and inject humor or notions of the absurd to critique the common categories of TV programming. Here, informative and nonsensical address, observed documentary, and absurd sales pitches poke at the fabric of broadcast communication. Works by Susan Mogul and John Baldessari operate under a distinction I assign as “direct address.” As seen in a typical news segment or TV interview, this direction of interest shows artists who make few changes to their surrounding environment or technology, and speak directly to the viewer. Mogul – like her contemporary Vito Acconci – mastered this form of “face to face” action, while others push beyond typical TV time constraints. Baldessari provides a painstakingly detailed address for nearly thirty minutes that would typically last less than a few minutes for a news segment, while Wegman’s short video includes a wry sales pitch for a revolutionary massage chair, highlighting the ridiculous forms of television advertising and infomercials.

Because the Sony Portapak afforded the freedom to move outside the studio, artists could observe as well as interact with the public. Works by Forti, Holt, and Kos pursue observation and performance, demonstrating the spontaneity available through video that mimics a more experimental mode of documentary.

What defined video art, and how it differed from television, dominated critical discourse in the 1970s. Hershman Leeson’s take on video artists and their relationship to television was just one of many views on the subject during the early years of video. In 1974 John Baldessari said that, “For there to be progress in TV, the medium must be as neutral as a pencil. Just one more tool in the artist’s toolbox, by which we can implement our ideas, our visions, our concerns.”⁴ The following year, David Antin wrote that video in the 1970s showed, “What artists constantly revoke and engage with is television’s fundamental equivocation and mannerism, which may really be the distinctive feature of the medium.” He further explained that, “either by parodying the television

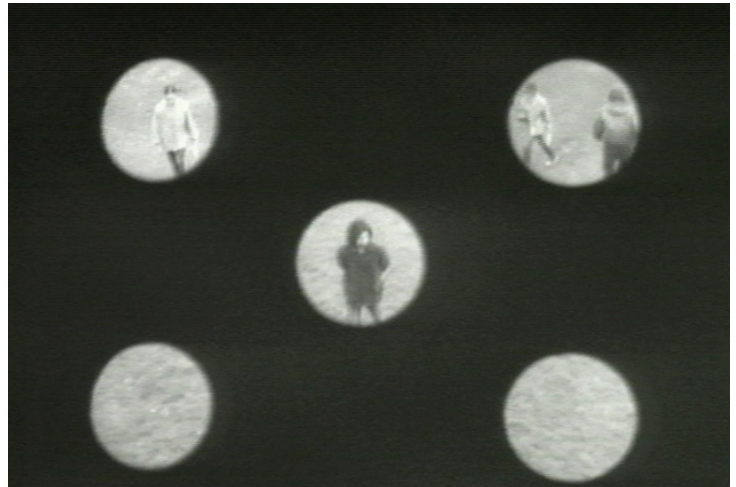
system and providing an amazing bubble or by offering to demonstrate how, with virtually no resources, they can do all the worthwhile things that television should do or could do in principle and have never yet done and never will do.”⁵ With this program, I place particular emphasis on what artists felt *should* or *could* be done when not beholden to industry constraints and commercial standards. It was clear that video artists had autonomy not available to commercial television, but at what cost? Independence provided artists with the means for experimentation, but lacked in means of distributing or broadcasting reach. Efforts by artists and curators at WGBH Boston, the Experimental Television Center, Long Beach Art Museum, and collectives like Videofreex and TVTV mostly began in the 1970s and subsequent decades, but the minimal funding and mercurial public interest never provided a stable option for disseminating art to the public. In selecting this group and their related lens on the video vs. television question, my intent was not only to reflect on Hershman Leeson’s view of the electric mirror, but also to

⁴ The statement was made at the Open Circuits conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. John Baldessari, “TV (1) Is Like a Pencil and (2) Won’t Bite Your Leg,” in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 110.

⁵ David Antin, “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium,” *Video Art: An Anthology*, eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1974), p. 70



On Screen, Lynda Benglis, 1972



Going Around in Circles, Tom Kalin, 1973

impress the importance of distribution organizations like the Video Data Bank, also founded in the first decade of the media arts movement. Indeed, this compilation of work does not present one, distinct definition of video in the first decade; rather it is meant to introduce the percolating ideas and tendencies that, forty years on, became a hybrid practice spanning from performance-for-video to webcam and smartphone, all now available online.

Program Notes

Lynda Benglis, *On Screen*
1972 | 00:07:45 | United States |
English | b&w | Mono | 4:3 | Video

First recognized for her work in poured latex and foam, cinched metal, and dripped wax in the 1960s, Lynda Benglis later used her own body/image to layer and multiply the seduction of the screen in many of her video works. In *On Screen*, we first see television "snow" or static on a television screen. The camera adjusts to show the entire TV set, and moments later Benglis enters the frame of the screen. The artist pulls at the sides of her cheeks and makes a face at the camera that is also seen on the monitor. Benglis positions herself so the image repeats

in an infinite manner. The repetition of image and sound creates a sequential order of information, albeit confused and muffled by the collaged feed of Benglis in a multiple layers on screen.

Keith Sonnier, *TV In and TV Out*
1972 | 00:10:00 | United States |
English | Color | Mono | 4:3

"The measure of Sonnier's color video tapes is not the extent to which he extends painterly values, though there is some continuity there, but the extent to which he defines the surface, space, and color of the material of video."⁶ *TV In and TV Out* superimposes images shot from network television and shots from a studio performance. This is a prime example of Sonnier's experiments with the formal properties of computer-generated video by using a Scanimate computer. This video lends itself to the desire of artists to exploit feedback and manipulate TV's technical system.

Susan Mogul, *Dressing Up*
1973 | 00:07:06 | United States |
English | b&w | Mono

Susan Mogul works in photography, performance, and installation art, but

is best known for her autobiographical and diaristic videos. *Dressing Up* is an early work by the artist, where she directly addresses the camera/audience with a monologue about her shopping conquests, while eating corn nuts. As the tape records, Mogul completes a reverse striptease, with incredible deadpan humor. The artist drew inspiration from her mother's penchant for bargain hunting, and produced the video as a student in the feminist art program at the California Institute of the Arts in 1973. In this video, Mogul offers a wry alternative to growing trends in video art and television. Like male counterparts such as Vito Acconci, Mogul presents herself to the viewer, revealing aspects of her body and identity, but offers an additional layer of social critique. The performance itself upends the typical television talk show format, mocking the norms of female conversation.

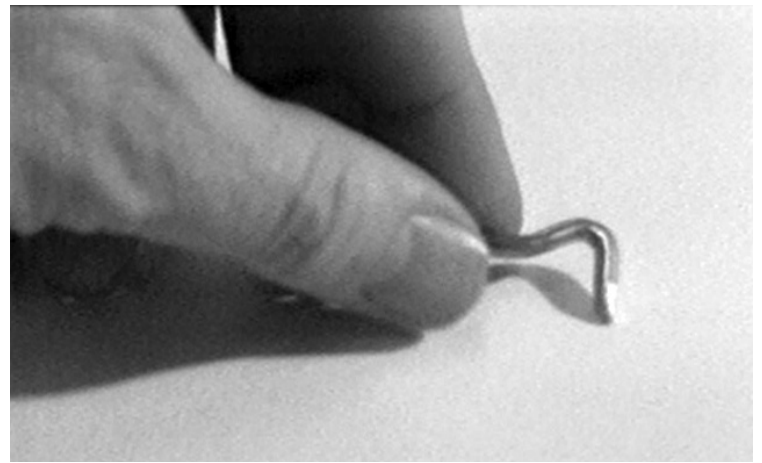
William Wegman, *Massage Chair*
1973 | 00:01:35 | United States |
English | b&w | Mono | 4:3

"I thought perhaps you'd like to see a demonstration of the new massage chair that we just got in. It – the reason for its – it looks revolutionary, it doesn't look really like a typical

⁶ Bruce Kurtz, "Video Is Being Invented," *Arts Magazine* (Dec./Jan. 1973)



Three Grizzlies, Simone Forti, 1974



Inventory, John Baldessari, 1972

massage chair, and that's because I think Mies van der Rohe had a part, or at least he was a consultant, to the firm that designed this...". William Wegman opens the video short titled *Massage Chair* with this grand statement to describe what looks like an ordinary plastic chair. At first the artist's head is cut from the frame, but he eventually sits down to "demonstrate" the extraordinary qualities of the chair. One of the works on *Selected Works: Reel 3*, produced during 1972-73, and remastered in 2005 when several newly available titles were added. Although this work does not feature his dog and video companion, Man Ray, it is a humorous example of the artist's penchant for skit parody, poking fun at television ads and infomercials.

Nancy Holt, *Going Around in Circles* 1973 | 00:15:15 | United States | English | b&w | Mono

Although best known for her earthworks and public sculpture, Nancy Holt contributed an immense catalogue of video work beginning in 1968. In *Going Around In Circles*, Holt placed a board with five circular holes in front of the camera. Throughout the video, Holt covers and uncovers the holes to reveal five people performing a set of activities that includes whirling around in circles

and walking between five points on the ground. Holt can be heard discussing the performed action with the actors on screen. Here Holt continues her interest in experience and perception, as controlled by the camera's point of view. Her use of props, performance, and playback mirrors studio productions of Joan Jonas, but enacting them live outdoors brings a sense of scale and spontaneity that artists' familiar with land art often explored.

John Baldessari, *Inventory* 1972 | 00:24:14 | United States | English | b&w | Mono

John Baldessari has demonstrated a lasting interest in language and semantics, articulating these concerns through the use of puns, or the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images and words. He has defied formalist categories by working in a variety of media – films, video, print, photography, text, drawing – most commonly associated with Conceptual or Minimalist art. "In Baldessari's wonderful *Inventory*, the artist presents to the camera for thirty minutes an accumulation of indiscriminate and not easily legible objects arranged in order of increasing size and accompanied by a deadpan description – only to have the sense of their relative

size destroyed by the continual readjustment of the camera [in order to] keep them within the frame. Who can forget Adlai Stevenson's solemn television demonstration of the 'conclusive photographic evidence' of the Cuban missile sites, discernible over the TV screen as only gray blurs?"⁷

Simone Forti, *Three Grizzlies* 1974 | 00:17:00 | United States | English | Color | Mono | 4:3 | Video

In this rare video, Forti remains behind the camera as she observes three grizzly bears in their cage at the Brooklyn Zoo. The bears roam around anxiously within their confined space while we hear children's squeals and tourists talking in the background. This juxtaposition presents simultaneous restriction and freedom provided by the camera frame. Forti first began watching animals in zoos while living abroad in Italy; she recorded them on videotape and later adopted their movements in her performances. This work not only shows an artist using the camera as a research tool, but plays on the genres of documentary and nature programs. The collected visual information becomes part of the basis for Forti's movements in *Solo No. 1*.

⁷ David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium"



Arbitrary Fragments, Barbara Aronofsky Latham, 1978

Paul and Marlene Kos, *Lightning*
 1976 | 00:01:23 | United States |
 English | b&w | Mono | 4:3 | 1/2”
 open

One of the founders of the Bay Area Conceptual Art movement in California, Paul Kos is recognized as a conceptual artist and early innovator of video art. Since the 1970s, Kos has produced a significant catalogue of video work; many of the works from his early period were made in collaboration with his then-wife, Marlene. In *Lightning*, we see Marlene inside a car with her back to the windshield and open road. She continually looks behind her, saying, “When I look for the lightning, it never strikes. When I look away, it does.” Like Kos’s other works from this period, this video focuses on observation of natural phenomena. This work and others ask if observation changes the course of events, or if they would happen anyway.

Barbara Aronofsky Latham, *Arbitrary Fragments*
 1978 | 00:12:44 | United States |
 English | Color | 4:3 | Video

Barbara Aronofsky Latham was a Chicago-based experimental video artist whose work traversed across autobiographical, narrative, and political content. Latham was on the board of directors at Chicago’s Center for New Television, and was head of the video department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1978 until her untimely death in 1984. With an interest in storytelling, female identity, and technological experiment, Latham worked against the standard role for video and television production. In *Arbitrary Fragments*, Latham suggests that video itself is inherently fragmented. To produce an effect of fabricated stories or “lies”, the artist layered manipulated and over-processed imagery, including an image of herself – what Latham referred to as “the construction of her video personality,” as an identity outside of herself.

VDB TV: *Decades* celebrates Video Data Bank’s forty years (1976-2016) of supporting video art and artists. This five-part series, programed by experts in the field, casts a distinctive eye over the development of video as an art form from the early 1970s to the 2010s.

Robyn Farrell is a Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Previously, Farrell was Assistant Director at Donald Young Gallery (Chicago) and Program Assistant for Conversations at the Edge (CATE), a weekly screening series organized by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in collaboration with the Video Data Bank, and the Gene Siskel Film Center. Farrell has spoken widely on contemporary art and time-based media at institutions and conferences, including the University of Chicago, New York University, and the College Art Association Annual Conference. She has curated exhibitions and screenings locally and nationally, in 2014 Farrell presented the first program of work by television and video art pioneer Gerry Schum at the Graham Foundation in Chicago and Electronic Arts Intermix in New York.