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Busting the Tube: A Brief History of Video Art

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Setting the Stage

The 1960s was a decade of sweeping social change driven by political confrontation and creative and ideological activism inspired by the civil rights movement, the Beat poets, the Vietnam war controversy, and the rise of a rebellious youth movement stimulated by politics, drugs, and rock'n'roll. As the decade progressed, tension increased between the traditionalist mainstream and the youthful counterculture that desired a more open and egalitarian society. This emerging and very politicized generation began to emphasize critical ideas and means of production that could be used to develop a new and more inclusive society, alternative institutions and accessible types of cultural production that reflected their social values. By establishing a new and often oppositional culture based on creative, and often low-cost production methodologies, they launched new tools and a powerful critique that influences activists, artists, and documentarians to this day.

Radical theorists such as Herbert Marcuse proposed that mass media had direct relationships to social control and created a "one-dimensional man" who lived in a bland world of conformity and had become too comfortable to engage in ideas that critiqued or opposed mainstream society in any way that could lead to meaningful social change.¹ Marcuse's Marxist call for the

end of social oppression and his support for all efforts of radical liberation inspired young activists to envision a new society based on alternative institutions and modes of thought that did not replicate social or economic oppression of minority or other disenfranchised groups. To drive this social change, Marcuse's concept called for a more engaged individual personally committed to political ideas that would lead to change. This individual could become a new subject by stepping out of the blandness of the 1950s to change his or her personal consciousness. A change in one's personal consciousness was seen as the starting point on the path to creating a new and better society. The concept took several other forms besides political awareness and activism during this period, including using drugs, free love, music, and mastering Eastern philosophical and disciplinary practices, such as yoga and meditation. All were efforts to create mind-altering states of consciousness to create a new, more enlightened self.

Feminist theory also focused on issues of personal consciousness. This can be seen in the famous slogan "the personal is the political," a perspective that required that one look inside through consciousness-raising to begin the feminist political process. Consciousness-raising was a process of gathering radical feminists together in small groups to study, and analyze the

personal situation of each woman, discuss the new feminist literature and strategize on what actions could be done to change the oppression of women in society. The goal was to create a mass movement for social change by helping women understand how they could alter their positions as objects (of male desire) to subjects that could determine their own future. The new subjectivity of the feminist movement demanded that its followers analyze power relations between the genders and how institutional structures enforce gender inequality or support economic or other forms of gender-biased exploitation. This critique merged with other anti-establishment ethos of the counterculture and other liberation movements that were focused on social change and working towards an expanded democracy that allowed greater equality and participation for all subjects, no matter what their color, gender, or class.

Armed with this new sense of subjectivity and political commitment, protests focused on institutions that supported unequal systems of power. Almost all centralized institutions were suspect, particularly the family, the church, the educational system, and corporations. Cultural institutions were also at the center of critique because they preserve dominant cultural canons that created closed and exclusionary systems of power based on standards and histories determined by white, male authorities. Meta-

narratives that privilege certain points of view, such as those created by religion, literature, and art history, were highly critiqued. The goal was to create a new type of cultural production and alternative institutions to support more egalitarian and pluralistic notions of political and cultural interaction:

The argument was not only about producing new form for new content, it was also about changing the nature of the relationship between reader and literary text, between spectator and spectacle, and the changing of this relationship was itself premised upon new ways of thinking about the relationship between art (or more generally "representation") and reality.²

Television was a primary target.

Throughout the 1950s, television had gained enormous power; more than 85 percent of American households owned at least one television set by the end of the decade. While the masses were increasingly mesmerized by television's presence, others, particularly intellectuals and media theorists, saw that it reinforced the status quo while simplifying, or omitting altogether, representations that did not fit consumerist demographics. Even Newton R. Minow, Chairman of the FCC, had expressed concerns over the negative effects of formula based television programming when he described television as "a vast wasteland." The issue was how representations on television not only created a market for products but also created social acceptance and rejection through conformity. Women, in spite controlling large amounts of money designated for household spending, were seen as manipulated and controlled by images from television; people of color and others who were not seen by advertisers to be important in the marketplace were mostly excluded from any television representations at all. Protesters also criticized news coverage of the Vietnam war, arguing that the media could not be trusted because it was biased as part of the consciousness industry³; the news was packaged for commercial television programming and

controlled by the government and corporate monopolies.

While television programming was heavily critiqued, Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan offered a new and creative interpretation of how new technologies could transform society. McLuhan outlined a new utopian vision for media that emphasized a new relationship between the medium and the human senses. This vision imagined that electronic communications were an extension of the human nervous system and operated in a binary kind of progression—as technology advances, so does the human sensory perception needed to receive it. This spoke directly to artists, media visionaries, and those in the counterculture that were already actively experimenting with altered states of consciousness:

Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.⁴

McLuhan's ideas placed technology at the center of human transformation and emphasized that the emerging technology not only would transform consciousness but also provide a very powerful path to social change.

In 1965, Sony marketed the first portable video recording equipment, providing the means by which artists, activists, and other individuals launched an era of alternative media, using television-based technology to record images of their own choosing. Prior to this time the government and corporate media giants exclusively controlled all television production, programming, and broadcasting. The new Sony portable camera and recording deck, called the Portapak, was designed for small business and industrial uses but was released precisely in the midst of the political turmoil of the '60s. Video immediately captured the attention of artists who saw its potential as a creative tool and

of social activists who saw it as "a weapon and a witness" to be used to create new types of representation that opposed the ubiquitous commercialism of the television industry.

In 1970, the Raindance Corporation, a collective of artists, writers, and radical media visionaries who were inspired by McLuhan, began publishing *Radical Software*, a journal for the small but rapidly growing community of videomakers. Presenting the view that power had shifted to those who control media, *Radical Software* proposed an alternative information order, outlining a visionary combination of technology, art, and the social sciences to revolutionize the world of communications. The masthead of *Radical Software #1* articulates the shift in power:

Power is no longer measured in land, labor, or capital, but by access to information and the means to disseminate it. As long as the most powerful tools (not weapons) are in the hands of those who would hoard them, no alternative cultural vision can succeed. Unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, other alternate systems and life styles will be no more than products of the existing process.⁵

Having laid out the ideological agenda for a new, de-centralized communications system, *Radical Software* goes on to identify video as the tool to create it:

Fortunately, however, the trend of all technology is towards greater access through decreased size and cost. Low-cost, easy-to-use, portable videotape systems, may seem like "Polaroid home movies" to the technical perfectionists who broadcast "situation" comedies and "talk" shows, but to those of us with as few preconceptions as possible they are the seeds of a responsive, useful communications system.⁶

While television was seen as the central force behind an increasingly consumerist



Verticle Roll, Joan Jonas, 1972



Stamping in the Studio, Bruce Nauman, 1968

society, concern over the commodification of culture was also affecting the art world. Artists rightfully felt the gallery system had begun to limit exhibition to only those artists and works that were highly marketable, thereby limiting art to the level of commodity. Although mostly limited to painting, the highly influential critique of Clement Greenberg also contributed to concern over the commodification of art by forbidding the acceptance of any art forms outside its formalist thesis. This thesis maintained the purity of painting by centering critical discourse on the unique properties of painting while simultaneously insisting on a complete separation between art disciplines as well as between popular culture and high art. Driven by a desire to create new types of art that defied both the modernist doctrine, as well as the commercialism of the gallery system, artists began working with materials and processes that challenged these boundaries. This shift in artistic practice began to destroy the modernist imperative of the gallery-based object and replace it with a more ephemeral version of art that emphasized process, critique, or experience over pure form.

These new, post-modernist works also blurred the boundaries between high art and the everyday world. John Cage and his emphasis on the importance of chance lead to the Happenings of the late '50s. Happenings were spontaneous art events occurring on the streets, made up of a combination of live performance and found

materials. Fluxus's anti-art events used irony and humor to mock the stature of art history and art institutions. Pop art of the early '60s filled the galleries with replicas of mass-produced consumerist goods thereby challenging the concept of the "original" in art. Earthworks, made far away in the western deserts and difficult to see firsthand, used the earth itself as material and could rarely be seen except in documentary photographs. Performances, an emerging art form, were ephemeral presentations often staged only once. The shifting notions of art practice and use of materials occurred precisely at the moment in which portable video equipment was released into the consumer market.

Early Video Practice

Immediately after its release, the use of portable video equipment exploded in many directions simultaneously. It was a brand new medium with no history of its own but with tremendous potential to carry out several different cultural and political agendas. Media visionaries like those involved in *Radical Software* saw it as a tool to be used in establishing a decentralized communication system and used to produce alternative media content for communicating countercultural ideas outside the restrictions of mainstream channels. Artists embraced video because it was new, had significant undeveloped aesthetic potential, and could be used as a medium for personal expression.

For a brief period in the late '60s and early '70s, the handful of early video practitioners enthusiastically embraced all the different uses of the new medium. Since everyone in this small community, artists and activists alike, was influenced in some way by the powerful politics of the counterculture, all videomakers had a very optimistic vision of how video could be used to affect change in art and the society at large.

Media activists saw handheld video equipment as a tool to document a new type of direct-from-the-scene reportage that was not manipulated, biased, or reshaped in any way to distort reality. Sometimes called "guerilla television" because its practitioners used video in a war-like operation against the domination of network television, the video verité method used technology in an unassuming way, going places where cameras had never been without drawing much attention. The attraction was that video "reversed the process of television, giving people access to the tools of production and distribution, giving them control over their own images and, by implication their own lives."⁷ Footage was gathered from underground clubs, "live" from the midst of street confrontations, or from major events of importance to the counterculture like the Woodstock festival or the Chicago Seven trial. The low quality, grainy, and shaky footage was usually black and white and unedited, which offered a new type of straight-from-the-scene authenticity that challenged the presumed objectivity



Baldessari Sings LeWitt, John Baldessari, 1972



Pryings, Vito Acconci, 1971

of broadcast television. One video collective, Peoples Video Theater, shot events in the streets on video and brought it back to a loft in lower Manhattan for instant playback meant to trigger discussion and "feedback" from the community. This is a micro-example of how video activists used video to increase a sense of participation in the televisual process, as well as an attempt to democratically respond to the unfolding social and political events.

In the artworld, video was initially used as a handy and low-cost tool to document live performances that had no mobility or permanence, thereby making these forms transportable and more accessible to audiences beyond the original site of presentation. These performances were solo pieces in which the artist performed with few or no props in front of a single camera. They presented a variety of conceptual or perceptual exercises investigating the body, self, place, or relationship to others and society itself. These performances were based on conceptual art that emphasized process and idea over form to analyze texts, language, and the image.

One of the two earliest video pieces in the Video Data Bank collection, Bruce Nauman's *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) is an example of early performance work. The artist continuously moves in a circle outlining the frame of the picture on the monitor for the full 60 minutes of the performance. The mindset of the viewer changes

very slowly through the duration of the piece—often from boredom to an almost reflective meditation kept in motion by the sound of feet stamping on the floor. The piece seems to be addressing the mental preparation the artist goes through upon entering the studio. Another prominent early piece, *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1972) is a humorous tape featuring John Baldessari singing *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, the widely read text that outlined the perimeters of conceptual art to different popular tunes, such as "Tea for Two."

Other artists used performance to investigate social and power relations between individuals or between individuals, audiences, and larger social systems. An example is Vito Acconci's *Pryings* (1971), a tape of a live performance, in which two performers are engaged in physical conflict—she (Kathy Dillon) attempts to keep her eyes closed while he (Vito Acconci) attempts to pry them open. This represents the continuous exchange of power between two individuals, in this case, a man and a woman. No one wins, and no one loses as the tape presents the audience with an uncomfortable exercise in power relations. These early performance pieces employ straightforward aesthetic strategies without the embellishment of any video effects, which were not yet available.

Quickly artists saw that the video medium rich with possibilities for aesthetic experimentation that included using the medium

as a window to the perception of time, space, and sound or as a mirror to the self, consciousness, or cultural patterns of subjectivity. It could function as a witness in the surveillance of observer and the observed; as a conceptual tool deconstructing language, text, or cultural apparatus. Eventually the video signal itself became a site for investigation into the intrinsic properties of the medium.

Access to advanced equipment was extremely rare and most early users of video had to work with a tiny selection of electronic equipment, usually just a black and white camera and recording deck. Editing equipment was expensive and very difficult to use; an edit could only be made through a laborious process of rewinding and marking points on each of the two reels tape, then hitting the edit button on the record and playback decks simultaneously. Since tapes were so hard to edit, the video art piece was often the same duration as the reel of tape, hence the name "reel-time" and the prevalence of 20, 30 and 60 minute pieces. Regardless of the limitations of the early video equipment, it did have specific characteristics that were used in creative ways and the limitations of the medium often became a resource for aesthetic experimentation beyond simply recording an event or performance in front of a camera. Feedback, the endless mirror effect that occurs when a camera is pointed directly at a monitor displaying its image, and instant replay are unique visual characteristics of video that

were available to any artist with a camera, monitor, and recording deck.⁸ These two effects were commonly used for experimentation until later when more complex visualizing equipment became available. Beyond the interesting visual quality these effects metaphorically represented aspects of a reconfigured and reciprocal interactivity between artist and audience. Instant replay, the capacity to simultaneously watch what the camera is recording provides an opportunity for immediate response to the recorded information, and feedback is the reciprocal loop of participation between the content and the audience. These two characteristics were used both to explore social issues or for purely aesthetic experimentation. Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972) is a performance piece re-scanned from an image on a monitor on which the vertical roll control was set off kilter. The visual effect is of an image continuously rolling vertically out of the frame that deliberately interferes with the visual pleasure of watching a woman on camera, yet Jonas creates a virtual performance that interacts with the unstable televisual signal.

Some video equipment new to the market in the early '70s allowed for more complex visualizing effects, such as keying, mixing, colorizing, layering, and input from multiple cameras, but access to this technology remained scarce. Artists who wanted to experiment with controls beyond what was commercially available needed to understand engineering. Such artists began to design or modify equipment that could utilize deeper parts of the video technology such as scan lines and signal manipulation. Influenced by the Moog Synthesizer, a modular audio synthesizer that was used in clubs by rock bands, these artists worked collaboratively with scientists grounded in electronics to design visualizing tools called video synthesizers to alter, control, and synthesize video signals to produce abstract and highly colorized images. Many different synthesizers, called "image processors" were designed and built by artists. Examples are Woody and Steina Vasulka's Digital Image Processor, Stephen Beck's Video Weaver, Dan Sandin's Sandin Image

Processor, and Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe's Paik-Abe synthesizer.

Working with synthesizers was difficult and somewhat unpredictable, requiring study and practice; therefore, the emphasis was on the artists' process rather than making tapes for distribution outside the performance event. Synthesizers were used in live performance events in which elaborate installations of several video processors linked to audio synthesizers created oscillating, abstracted, and often mandala-like images that transported the audience into a radically new sphere of alternative sensory experience that paralleled McLuhan's theory of technology as a means of expanding the human senses.⁹

Expansion of the New Medium

A seminal art exhibition launched great interest in the new medium of video art, *TV as a Creative Medium*, presented at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York City in May 1969. This exhibition leveraged interest in video while allowing those who were experimenting with the medium to take themselves seriously as artists. The exhibition brought together artists from a variety of backgrounds—music, painting, performance, kinetic and light sculpture, and electronics—and debuted several important video installations, including Nam June Paik's *Participation TV* and *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette's *Wipe Cycle*, Aldo Tambolini's *Black Spiral*, Eric Seigel's *Einstein*, and Paul Ryan's *Everyman's Mobius Strip*. The exhibition accelerated interest in video as experimental television, and this interest extended to public television stations such as WBGH in Boston, KQED in San Francisco, and WNET in New York City, all of which began workshops to support video projects made by artists on the station's state-of-the-art television equipment.

Leo Castelli, the most prominent art dealer of the time, embraced the new medium as early as the late '60s. His gallery purchased equipment for artists to experiment with video, and the gallery published the

first video catalog listing works by Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, John Baldessari, Lawrence Weiner, Lynda Benglis, Nancy Holt, Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, and others for distribution. The tapes were sold or rented to other galleries, museums, and organizations, thereby expanding the exhibition of video to locations beyond the major art centers of New York and Los Angeles.

In 1970, the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA) became the first state council to include video as a category in their funding guidelines. They offered funding for individuals, media arts centers, and media projects. The first funding cycle accepted all kinds of video works, including video installations and videotapes of performances, processed video art made on video synthesizers, and documentary footage from the streets. The availability of government and foundation funding had an enormous effect on the new medium of video. It allowed video artists to see themselves as legitimate artists, and the grant money allowed them to continue making new works. NYSCA also funded media centers, setting an example for other arts councils; soon many new centers sprang up across the country. This created a small but national network of exhibitors for film and video. These new non-profit media arts centers also offered low-cost access to film and video equipment for artists and individuals from local communities. These access centers reached out to youth, people of color, artists, women, Native Americans, prisoners, and activists to encourage them to make media telling their own stories, thus de-centralizing the existing communication system by establishing an alternative that focused on broadening representation in media.

Simultaneous to the development of the media arts centers, the '70s was also a period of tremendous growth in non-commercial artist-run spaces. Artists spaces were established across the country and contributed to a network of approximately 300 sites nationwide that made up the artists' space movement. Artists' spaces were also funded by state arts councils, founda-



Semiotics of the Kitchen, Martha Rosler, 1975

tions, and the National Endowment for the Arts. These non-profit galleries exhibited new and non-commercial art forms such as performance, installation, conceptual photography, and video art, forms that had not yet gained recognition in mainstream galleries but were of great interest to younger members of the art world.

Video screenings of new work expanded across all types of venues and presented many new opportunities for the exhibition of video art—from museums, galleries, alternative art spaces, and media arts centers to community-based centers. Soon colleges and universities began to add video and performance studies to the curriculum. The acceptance of video in the academy helped validate its use among scholars at a moment in which Jacques Derrida's theories of media and deconstruction were gaining influence. Derrida's interest in cultural production and interpretation of linguistic systems, signs, and the construction of meaning created a use for alternative renditions of cultural subject matter. His theories opened up a dialectical relationship between the art work and various other discourses; this, in turn, allowed video to be seen as another tool for analyzing the avant-garde, film theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, genre theory, post-modernism, and cultural studies from an alternative perspective. Since Derrida's work had also become prominent in the art world, his emphasis on hierarchies and oppositions offered a new focus for analysis and followed the

agenda established in *Radical Software*, which promoted a variety of uses of video as decentralized and more democratically inclusive of marginalized voices and content to reveal the biases and social inequalities of our culture. Video, standing at the edge of art, community, individual expression, and mass communications, was uniquely positioned to reveal layers of meaning as well as paradoxes and contradictions in the hierarchical constructions in art, media, and society. Video artists used the strategy of deconstruction to analyze issues of political difference in class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. A single video art piece, such as Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), could be critiqued through numerous different theoretical discourses: art, performance, feminism, cultural studies, politics, gender studies, philosophy, and psychology.

The cross-disciplinary interpretation of video art had clear advantages in terms of its use and value in academia. Although museums included video in exhibitions and often had ongoing screening programs for video and film, single channel video art was more problematic in the gallery system. For one thing, video could easily be mass-produced and was not an original object like a painting or drawing; therefore, it was hard to sell. Castelli-Sonnabend had already figured this out by 1985, when the gallery dispersed its prestigious collection to two non-profit video organizations, the Video Data Bank in Chicago and Electronic Arts Intermix in

New York. And with such a large range of content and working styles, it was difficult for the critical apparatus of the art world to get a grip on a single set of standards that governed video as an aesthetic form with clear concepts that aligned with other art forms. Many video artists also had ambivalence towards the art world. Some artists preferred to be aligned with filmmakers or documentarians, others saw themselves as emerging television producers.

This complexity is described by Marita Sturken, a prominent writer and critic of video:

What emerged from this complex set of events was not a medium with a clear set of aesthetic properties and cleanly defined theoretical concepts. Instead, one sees paradox, the paradox of video's apparent merging of (hence its negation of) certain cultural oppositions—art and technology, television and art, art and issues of social change, collectives and individual artists, the art establishment and anti-establishment strategies, profit and non-profit worlds, and formalism and content.¹⁰

Nevertheless, video practitioners continued to expand the medium's visual and conceptual potential. As time passed, patterns in types of work fell into relatively clear genres, and the beginnings of a historical map could be seen. Writers and critics who are inter-

ested in work examining social issues have a version of the history of video while the art world has a different version. Since critical writing on video art has been historically sporadic and fragmented according to the interests of the writer, a uniform and progressive critique does not exist. Nor does a standardized history of the medium.

The growing attention to media and technology throughout the whole culture meant that more video artists were being hired to teach college courses and more students were studying and producing video art tapes. Video had become an established practice and an artist or documentarian could achieve recognition and funding by working in video.

The Second Phase

By the 1980s many of the more visionary and revolutionary aspects of the video movement had passed. Video was still considered to be an alternative to broadcast television, but the alternative aspects shifted more to content and subject matter as artists sought to make their work as visually authoritative as possible. Video artists of the '80s had become very interested in mastering the powerful state-of-the-art technology and even showing their work on television. Since more funding was available for video, post-production equipment became more accessible to video artists. Yet, access was still very expensive, so several non-profit organizations—such as the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York; the Standby Program in New York City; and the Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco, among others—offered discounted rates for artists. The post-production studio, mostly used by advertisers and television production companies, offered a variety of dazzling visual effects. An artist typically worked with a professional editor for on-line editing to achieve broadcast-standard production values.

Many of the visual strategies in video of the '80s were based on post-production technology, such as multiple camera inputs, fades and wipes, slow motion, collage effects, scrolling text, and animation. The wide availability of VHS recording equip-

ment in the mass market also had an enormous effect on video art, allowing artists to record information directly from television to use in their work. Artists were no longer solely reliant on images made by themselves with a camera but could take images directly from television programming and advertisements, archival films, Hollywood films, or home movies. Appropriation became a new type of post-modern visual and textual critique based on uprooting images from their original contexts and proscribed new meanings determined by the artist. For example, in *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979) Dara Birnbaum uses clips from the game show *Hollywood Squares* to construct an analysis of the coded gestures of gender. The actors' close-up facial expressions, far from neutral and innocent, are re-positioned to exemplify the desire of television to achieve states of submission in the viewer. Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986) is a classic feminist deconstruction of the popular prime time soap opera in which the artist inserts herself on screen amidst appropriated images to analyze patriarchal elements of the narrative. Tony Cokes's *Black Celebration* (1988) juxtaposes footage of the riots in the black community of the 1960s with voice-over from the Situationist text *The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy* to interpret rioting as a refusal to participate in the logical apparatus of capitalism. These tapes are examples of how artists have recycled and combined existing texts to construct new and critical meanings and to shed light on how media reinforces cultural ideologies as a means of social control.

Deconstruction of media took on a darker and more urgent agenda as AIDS began to sweep through the country in the mid-'80s, infecting and killing huge numbers of people. Artists joined up with AIDS activists to fight against rising hysteria caused by ignorance, omission, and misinformation presented in mainstream media. Video affinity groups such as Damned Interfering Video Artists Television (DIVA TV) documented ACT-UP demonstrations, and this footage had a leveraging effect that maintained communication, community support, and enthusiasm in the midst of a long and strenuous battle. Activists were not just

fighting unfair representations in media but also strove to obtain government funds for research, access to medication and home care, and to spread prevention information through creative productions. Tom Kalin's experimental videotape *They are lost to vision altogether* (1989) is an example of the passion, rage, and commitment often seen in AIDS tapes that eloquently argues for a compassionate and humane response to AIDS without forgoing the gay community's passion and sexuality. Ellen Spiro's documentary *DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Upfront* (1989) features a hair dresser, DiAna DiAna, who teaches safe sex from her salon in Columbia, South Carolina, in frustration over the inadequacy of information on AIDS prevention. These tapes and many others demonstrate how artists and activists used video in grassroots campaigns long before mainstream media even acknowledged that AIDS was a crisis.

A natural outgrowth of AIDS activism was a unification of the gay community and the rise of a new queer cinema. Queer film and video festivals sprang up across the nation and screened all types of work by and about gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people. One very young videomaker, Sadie Benning, began using video in her teens and went on to produce a very important body of work made with a Pixelvision camera. Benning's intimate, diaristic pieces held a tight focus on her own face and were shot in her childhood bedroom. This work crossed out of the usual boundary lines of video art to touch audiences everywhere. Benning's work, while focusing on her emerging lesbian identity, forms a part of a larger genre of works made in the early '90s to examine political identity. Recognition and the need to establish specific historical and community identities organized around shared experience as the Other drove identity politics, and many important video works made from the perspectives of Asian, Hispanic, black, and urban youth artists.

Shifting Patterns

The late '80s and early '90s witnessed an era of culture wars, battles against the art and gay communities lead by right-wing politicians. Both artists and non-profit arts

organizations were under attack, and the effect was an overwhelming decline in funding for the arts. The funding that did exist became highly restricted and shifted away from individual artists and towards community and youth-oriented projects. Since the non-profit world had always provided the most stable home for single channel video art, the collection, exhibition, and preservation of video became more difficult to sustain. After almost three decades of growth due to government and foundation support, video artists were entering an era in which they would have to struggle to continue making and exhibiting their work. However, during the same period in which funding began to decline, other opportunities, particularly the advance of digital technology, began to energize videomakers in new ways.

The Sony Video 8 camcorder was released into the consumer market in the late '80s; because of its size, high quality picture resolution, and low cost, it was the era's equivalent of the Portapak. The Video 8 camcorder was closely followed by Hi8 camcorders that were the same size but had technically superior image quality due to more lines of resolution. The camcorder was popular in the consumer market, and so newer versions were released almost every 18 months until finally, in 1995, the first digital camcorders were marketed. Digital camcorders had superior technology and image resolution that meant that artists and other independent producers could finally make broadcast quality tapes on low-cost consumer equipment.

Equally important, digital editing software like Avid and Media 100 and later, Final Cut Pro, began to revolutionize post-production. Non-linear editing software began to replace older forms of analog on-line equipment used in post-production studios. The new digital editing software made it economically possible for artists to edit on computers rather than in very expensive post-production suites. This conveniently collapsed the cost of production/post-production during a time in which opportunities for funding were on the decline. Rapidly improving digital technology has energized and streamlined video production; it has

also narrowed the distinctions between film and video and offers tremendous possibilities for the distribution of media in a variety of new digital processes and formats.

Redefining Video

As long ago as the early '60s, Nam June Paik began exhibiting his modified television sets in galleries as the first video installations. Other artists such as Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci created notable bodies of work in video installation. Several videomakers, such as Bill Viola and Gary Hill, who began with single channel video shifted to making video installations and achieved great success in the gallery system. However, single channel video art was mostly overlooked in galleries until around 1995 when dealers introduced a concept coming from photography and printmaking, limited editions. Rather than exhibit single channel video in a monitor, galleries began to project the work onto the wall or other large surface. By presenting single- or multi-channel pieces as large-screen projections and calling them limited editions, video has been re-invented and popularized within the gallery system. Limited editions also resolved the problem of how to sell videos; they were now bought, sold, collected and auctioned like painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture. Since artists couldn't simultaneously be single channel artists distributing their work in the more traditional film/video venues and also sell the work as limited editions, this shift called for clear distinctions in the work. Gallery artists chose to make work with strict aesthetic strategies: repetition, scale, slow-motion, extreme close-up, sound and meditative or metaphoric content that speaks from an art-based experimental narrative position. This work has been very successful in attracting larger audiences (and collectors) to video art. However, the popularity of this new type of gallery-based video art attracted new curators, critics, and audiences who were largely unfamiliar with the rich but fragmented history of single-channel video art. In an era of decline of funding for screening programs, video artists now had a choice and could pre-determine markets for their works. Non-gallery based single channel works made prior to the mid-'90s

have been relegated to the sideline of the new definition of "video art." Yet older works still circulated, and younger artists continue making new single-channel pieces.

Video plays a very important cultural role as a kind of media trickster operating from the edge of several different but often overlapping systems of communication: personal expression, the art world, independent cinema, television, and academic studies. One of the strengths of video art is that it has never been absorbed by any one of these systems but remains peripheral to all. Video art uses this unique position to function as the research and development wing of media production, as the test market for new ideas and working styles in the festival market, as the avant-garde provocatively speaking out from an alternative perspective on social and cultural issues, as a town meeting on the concerns of the community, and as an artistic practice encouraging audiences to engage with creative forms of media.

Video art has achieved its greatest success when it parallels and articulates ideas coming out of contemporary cultural, art, and political movements. Whether it is AIDS activism, feminism, anti-war sentiments, racism, global trade, or other emerging issues, video is a medium engaged in questioning, stirring up, provoking, engaging, educating, inventing, informing, and articulating new ideas. While it did not achieve the visionary dreams of the '60s by creating a whole new society based on egalitarian notions of democracy, it did present new alternative models, offer support and encouragement, forge communal bonds, and dare to speak out in the fight against sameness and conformity in the midst of a world rapidly consumed by global media enterprises and corporate interests. Video presented the first, small-scale and closed circuit model of how a decentralized media could participate in challenging mainstream culture and continues to provide creative, alternative uses of the medium to this day.

Notes

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of the Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

² Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 56.

³ Consciousness Industry

⁴ Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image Processed Video" *Afterimage* 11:5 (1983). -get McLuhan quote from article

⁵ Beryl Korot and Phyllis Gershuny, editors, "Masthead," *Radical Software*, 1:1, 1970, p. 1.

⁶ *Radical Software*, 1:1.

⁷ *Radical Software* 1:1.

⁸ See Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976).

⁹ See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).

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