

Video Art Was Born Subversive

- Davision Gigliotti

Video art was born subversive, a product of people whose goal was to change America's mind and direction.

The instrument of power they chose to confront was television. The weapon they chose was half-inch reel-to-reel video.

Many were educated in art and at home in the realm of art and ideas about art. But most were clear that art just for itself was not the point.

They thought that interpreting video as an art exactly like painting or sculpture diminished its potential. Limiting video to an art world audience meant that the main part of video's power would be lost. "Don't bury us in the museums," David Cort, founder of the Videofreex, would say, "that will finish us off for sure."

Today ABC, CBS, and NBC are just three more contenders in the electromagnetic spectrum; big enough in their way, but no longer all-powerful shapers of opinion and purveyors of news. But in the sixties, when raster lines were replacing newsprint as America's primary news source, Americans witnessed the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Civil Rights Movement, the Kennedy assassination and funeral, the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald on live TV, the Vietnam War, all the game-changing events of the world, filtered through those Big Three. While the networks were marginally different from each other in outlook and audience, they were exactly similar in avoiding challenges to their sponsors – and colleagues – in the corporate world.

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On the other side of the equation was the audience: the listeners, viewers and readers. A large part of this was a white middle class of managers, proprietors, union members, farmers, and others who had made a provisional success of post-war America.

Already made nervous by the nuclear potential of cold war politics, and horrified by the wave of political murders, urban riots, and social unrest that marked the sixties, they watched as events they had never dreamt of piled up before them. Fearful of change, bewildered by the demands being made of them from blacks, women, students, anti-war activists, freaks, gays, poor people in general, and unsure how to best defend their eroding economic status, they watched as a war that they did not understand slowly devoured their young men.

Laced throughout all sectors was a stratum of people uneasy about the ease and skill with which large populations were manipulated. They considered how best to challenge what they saw as the corporate domination of culture. For some, video was a starting point.

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From the beginning, Paik, Vostell, the artists who saw *TV as a Creative Medium*, the video collectives and those who worked with them who sought to combine *Vision and Television*, understood that independent video art was a statistically minute, almost homeopathic, antidote, to the excesses of a culture dominated for more than two decades by cold-war politics, proxy war, and the growth of a society based on corporate wealth and power.

But they asked why the only possible information order was the one then existing. Clearly, there could be others, they thought, and wondered what they would look like and how they could work. Paul Ryan's *Birth, Death and Cybernation*, Gordon & Breach, 1973, contains a wealth of speculation on this, but, even earlier, contributors to the periodical *Radical Software*, (<http://www.radicalsoftware.org>) begun by Raindance in 1970, proposed answers to this insistent question.

The spread of portapak media into the universities and libraries, and into the alternate media centers that sprang up during the seventies, had enduring consequences. New generations of video artists claimed a large part of the art world. Just as important, the universities and alternate media centers gave birth to a new generation of video activists ambitious to develop programming for television, developing themes of feminism, gay rights, civil rights, and other change-inducing issues. Many found their way into the expanding television industry, bringing with them some of the values and techniques learned back in the portapak era.

The early video people of the sixties and early seventies pioneered the boundary between art, science, journalism, and philosophy, and between art and public communication of all types. They refreshed art by bringing to it a new set of tools, a new set of ideas, and programmatically interactive environments; and refreshed electronic media of all kinds by proposing a broad new range of choices and goals.

Today there are even more choices. Personal computers and digitalization, the Internet and the world it has opened have, for some, created a place to stand, a place from which to continue to exert leverage on the world order of the day. This was the dream of forty years ago.

And among many of us from that time the hope and conviction still exists that our project is still ongoing, and will be furthered by creative and bold young people implementing new media as they arise.

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