

# From Radical to Mainstream: The Evolution of Video Art<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

It is difficult to imagine a world today without cameras recording all kinds of events and screens broadcasting them. This culture of screens has also shifted the art world towards the production of works created from moving images. This paper aims to provide a perspective on the historical background of video art, born amid the crisis of modernism: how and under what conditions did video art come into being and evolve, or what is its place in the art world? I will present the historical outlines of the genesis and evolution of the genre, without forgetting the search for an encompassing definition, if one exists, for the artistic practices of video art. Consequently, this research will pave the way to talk about the aesthetic and social implications of video art. As the aim of this paper is not to trace the history of video from its beginnings to the present day in detail, (which is beyond the scope of this paper) but to see its own aspects as a specific type of image, I have tried to present the artistic and political conditions that prepared its birth, the cultural context in which the works are produced and the artistic and theoretical developments specific to this medium.

## 1. Introduction

According to the French theorist Françoise Parfait (2001), the history of video is complex because it was born amid the crisis of modernism, inheriting both formalist considerations from the previous generation and new techniques through its hybrid (cinema), its imitation (television) and its becoming (digital). Parfait (2001:13) continues: “It is, therefore, a history

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that has nothing autonomous, but which nevertheless constitutes, if not a specific territory, a zone of exchange, circulation, transformation as much of images as of genres, conceptual domains, relationships.”

So, during these zones of exchange, circulation, and transformation, do we know what we are talking about when we talk about video? Are we talking about a technique, a set of processes by which a function is accomplished? Just as the function of locomotion is accomplished by walking, flying, or swimming; are we talking about the function of recording moving images through video, cinema, or digital technology? Or is it a language that we talk about when we discuss video? Are we thinking about the processes of a certain art form, about some sort of visual aesthetic? In other words, is video a process or a means of communication, or an art form?

Almost every theorist who thinks about video art agrees that video art is the most difficult medium to define. Even though it is a new medium that was born only about fifty years ago, it has undergone quite radical technical and artistic changes. I argue that when we talk about video, we are talking about all the above: It is both a recording technique and an art form with its visual aesthetic. It is a means of communication and artistic work at the same time. So, we see it as a zone of exchange. To better understand video art, we need to look at the conditions in which it emerged, its technical and artistic development, and its place in today’s art world. Therefore, I will trace a brief history of video art while aiming to see its status as an image and I will try to define its singular aspects.

## **2. The Emergence of Video Art: the 1960s**

As the history of video art is part of a more comprehensive history of moving images, it can be argued that the birth of video art is included in that of cinema. The latter, considered to be the fruit of a long series of discoveries and innovations to set the photographic image in motion, was officially invented at the end of the 19th century. The artists of the early 19th century (such as Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Rene Clair), seeking formal concerns and singular narratives, turned away from traditional cinema for rather avant-garde experiments.

According to Stuart Marshall (1984:5), a British video artist, it is the influence of this so-called experimental or avant-garde cinema that plays a significant role in video practice in terms of its production, distribution, and organization. Experimental cinema has developed outside the culture industry and the commercial system. It did not obey aesthetic norms and predefined rules such as the need for a narrative or a 120-minute duration.

It has placed itself outside the considerations of industrial, economic, and commercial concerns. So it is in this sense that experimental cinema is significant for video production: With the technical progress of the 1960s, the same artistic and social needs gave rise to video art.

The development of video as a medium of communication was and still is dependent on technology. The activity of artists is inevitably dependent on similar advances. The first portable video recording system Portapak, marketed by Sony around 1965, provided the technical and financial means (such as lightness, handiness, and low cost) for artists to record their actions and performances.

Writer and curator Jon Hanhardt (1990) argues that video art in the US was formed concerning these two issues: opposition to commercial television and the intertextual art practices of the 1950s-1960s such as Fluxus. Hanhardt moreover notes the introduction of Sony Portapak in 1967 as a key event where the tools of the medium were owned by the artists. He adds that the practices of artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell before 1965 also influenced future generations of video art and played an important role in establishing the video as an art form.

Other critics, such as the museum curator Marc Mayer (1996:26), point to the major political changes that took place in New York in 1965 to explain the birth of this new medium: the peak of the war against the communist regimes, the city as the center of the anti-war and feminist movements, civil and minority rights. For example, in the United States, just after the assassination of Kennedy in 1967, the American people witnessed great historical events such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, which seriously influenced the fundamental values of society. At the same time, a section of the art world had begun to produce works that criticized severely the growing dependence of American society on the media. For example, in the video, *The Eternal Flame* (1975) by the San Francisco-based art collective Ant Farm, images of the Kennedy assassination are repeatedly shown on TV screens and become more important and popular than the assassination itself.

Therefore, we see that video art is a medium that can serve as a platform for social criticism. Video art develops an alternative political discourse even if it is at the same time a tool owned by the media world. The videos of artists like Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Antoni Muntadas, Michael Smith, Julia Scher, and Nam June Paik, create an alternative discourse to the media world while being part of it. Because video can transform reality by archiving/recording and interpreting/resuscitating it, the artists mentioned

above chose to use video as a tool for political demonstrations. In terms of their productions, they had placed themselves in a critical position towards the political mainstream.

Since then, artists have shown a great diversity of intentions and plans for video. Amongst this first generation of video artists, some have grasped the political power of the medium. As mentioned above, artists used the medium to criticize the world run by the mass media. Others have experimented with video to deconstruct popular images. The first installations of this kind were produced by avant-garde artists using the plastic potential of moving images. According to Parfait (2001:26), these early artistic gestures were part of an aesthetics of deconstruction of the television, like that of Ant Farm, to attack commercial television and its mode of communication.

Amongst the artists involved in the aesthetics of deconstruction, Nam June Paik is known as the 'father of video art'. He is famous for parasitizing the television image with electromagnetic systems (Belloir, 1981) and questioning the viewer about the power of the television image, as he did with *Electronic Television* (1983). His productions focus on the deconstruction of the image rather than its creation. His early works focus on the transformation of television from an object to be consumed to an artistic production. His title 'father of video art' comes from his recording of the Pope's visit to New York with this new portable video recorder, namely Portapak. For many critics and art historians, this event marks an important moment in art history. The newly available and relatively inexpensive portable video recorder has enabled artists, individuals, and politically active groups to fight against the monopoly system of media broadcasting.

### **3. Does the Modernist Video Art of the 1970s Exist?**

The American art critic Clement Greenberg defines modernism in his essay *Modernist Painting* (1961) as the tendency to self-criticism. In art, this kind of self-criticism involves questioning the nature of the medium of each art. In the case of video art, such self-criticism involves the search for one's own identity by questioning what makes video different from other artistic media.

The first generation of video artists mentioned above was succeeded by the so-called 'modernist' video movement of the 1970s, which was characterized by a search for identity. Although the artists were influenced by revolutionary politics and determined to dissolve the established categories of art, at the point of conception, video art was deeply influenced by the modernist aesthetic concerns that dominated American and European painting and

sculpture after the Second World War. By questioning the unique aspects of video, the modernist aesthetic becomes rooted in the definition of video, and it becomes a practice that perpetually seeks to define the identity of the image and the identity itself. (Tezkan, 2014:20)

From a modernist point of view, more traditional arts such as painting or sculpture and even cinema offer a surface to be painted, scratched, erased, etc. Thinking about a modernist painting is to think primarily about the canvas instead of what is painted on it. So, these mediums might insist on their material, non-representational state. In the same essay, Greenberg (1961:2) writes: “Each art had to determine through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.” So, these mediums could insist on their material, non-representational state. He continues: “The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art, any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.” (Greenberg, 1961:2)

The technical possibility of editing with these first video recordings gave rise to an artistic interest in highlighting the intrinsic properties of this new technology such as immediacy, transmission, closed circuit, or synthesizer manipulations instead of experimenting with more traditional techniques such as editing (Patridge, 2006). It follows that video art could not be reduced to what preceded it but, on the contrary, it appeared as a new image of reproduction, capable of attracting and mixing all the previous images like painting, photography, cinema, etc. (Bellour, 1999:20).

On the other hand, Stuart Marshall (1984) in his essay *Video: From Art to Independence-a short history of new technology* notes that modernist ideology has failed to integrate itself into video art. Although artists like Norman Perryman, Steina et Woody Vasulka, J.C. Avery, and Thierry Kuntzel invented machines (such as video synthesizers generating figures from electronic constituents) that would interfere with the mechanical and electronic processes creating the video image, the medium offered no surface to play directly with the image. Marshall (1984) explains that this state of video art suits a break between modernism and postmodernism. The modernist artists who worked with video sought to discover a pure language of the medium and they failed because they excluded the purely representational character of video. For him, the modern ambition to develop a language for this technological practice failed because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of what is essentially meaningful. In this essay, Marshall argues that meaning is produced only by the superimposition of codes and conventions on a material medium, as in the case of artists

belonging to the feminist movement of the same period: the modernist approach that favored reflexivity gave way to the practices of deconstruction theory, moving from an analysis specific to its medium to an investigation of dominant representational practices and seeking to construct an oppositional approach. Thus, the feminist movement enabled those who saw themselves as outsiders or marginalized seeking to criticize the status quo to produce work that destroyed dominant modes of representation.

#### **4. The Feminist Movement and the Camera**

This shift from the modern to the postmodern mind and ultimately its relationship to feminism can best be explained as follows: The modern mind, since the Enlightenment, had created grand narratives that made human history a long road towards emancipation. The questioning of these grand narratives or more accurately structuralism, phenomenology, and Marxism (Lyotard, 1979) had begun to be integrated into the cultural and artistic fields since the early 1970s. As a result, the voices of identities left out of these grand narratives until now were immediately raised in society, including the voices of women. Parallel to this social and cultural atmosphere, women artists were fighting for the demystification of male genius and against the representation of femininity in the media.

Besides making their presence visible in the art world, women artists also made use of alternative media such as video. As the representation of the female body as an object was disappearing thanks to women artists, women regained sovereignty over their bodies through video. Their camera was not only turned towards their bodies but also towards groups long defined as the other by power, such as minorities, blacks, and LGBTs. Thus, the video in the hands of women artists continued to form an archive of history and an alternative image to that of the orthodox authority.

Apart from the transformation of the *zeitgeist*, the political preoccupations of the 1970s also gave way to searches for identity and boundaries: the LGBT communities, Hispanics in American society, the AIDS crisis, and consumer culture. During this period, Middle Eastern artists began to enter the Western art market, especially artists who produced around the theme of identity such as Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum from Palestine.

In terms of the placement of video art in art history, the 1970s are still distinctive. In the early days of video art practices, artists worked with both video and film, often exploring similarities and differences. By the mid-1970s, video art began to establish a distinctive practice that created the foundations of its own history. Artists chose to work with video for a variety of reasons,

many of which are different from cinema practices. Artists who worked with video included political activists (such as Guerilla TV and the Raindance Corporation in the United States and TVX in England), conceptual artists, and those who experimented with abstract images. Feminist artists attracted by its political and aesthetic potential also enthusiastically embraced video art, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

Although the early years of video practices were mainly focused on developments in Western Europe and North America, video art was still seen as a medium in which multicultural influences and approaches characterized by the free flow of ideas and experimentation could be found. Artists, curators, and critics were increasingly interested in the medium and its potential to reach new audiences.

The British Turner Prize, known internationally as the most prestigious prize in contemporary art, is evidence of the integration of video art into the mainstream of contemporary art. Presented annually at Tate Britain since 1984, the Turner Prize exhibition often features videos by the shortlisted artists, the first video artist to win the prize being Douglas Gordon in 1996 with the video *24 Hour Psycho*. And over the past twenty years, the prize has been won by video artists, and one of the nominees was Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman in 2004.

## 5. Towards a Theory of Video Art

Film theories or even the philosophy of cinema date back as early as the 1970s. *The Photoplay* by Hugo Münsterberg, professor of philosophy and psychology at Harvard, or *The Art of the Moving Picture* by Vachal Lindsay are considered the first examples of elaborate theories of cinema, questioning the aesthetic aspect of the genre. At that time, these theories sought to establish a conception of cinema as art. However, it was not until about ten years later that the theory of moving images was institutionalized. It was in the 1980s, thanks to the pioneering efforts of Gilles Deleuze in France and Stanley Cavell in the United States, that the theory of moving images was institutionalized under the discipline of social sciences and humanities.

Video art as a new theoretical movement, both as a part of the theories on moving images and as a specific field of study of its own, had its own aesthetic theory: during the 1970s and part of the 1980s, the aesthetics of video was sought to be founded in theory as well as in practice, as a theoretical movement inherited from semiology and structuralism. Philippe Dubois (2011:97) explains it as follows: “There were codes and systems, combinations of forms, the meaning was

an effect - just as much as in the contradictory jolts of phenomenological thought: it was a question of thinking the experience, the device, the act of experiencing it as a phenomenon (perceptive or sensory). To decipher all this - form, meaning, and phenomenon - presupposed that one gave a nature to the medium or an ontology to the support.”

The following example may help us to better understand Dubois' argument: In 1976, Robert Stearns, the director of *the Kitchen Center for Video*, pointed out that viewers experienced a sense of disruption particularly in works of a repetitive and self-reflexive nature because the artists, instead of seeking to manipulate the time, were showing it directly intending to make the viewer directly aware of the time. So, a new theory was needed that could think about the experience of a device that was the time itself and should gain an ontological status of its own.

Therefore, in most of the image theories on video art, the temporal aspect comes to the fore. By temporal aspects, I mean, on the one hand, the construction of durations and on the other hand the construction of narration. As for the construction of durations, video images are composed of a material that allows artists to play with frames, pixels, mosaics, mixing, speed, etc. On the other hand, the construction of the narrative is not always linear as in cinema and often does not exist. The images in video art can follow each other without there being a narrative relationship, as in abstract or conceptual art.

As for the criticism of video artworks, there are two major currents: The first makes use of classical film analysis. That is to say, the analysis is based on semiotics or psychoanalytical theories, themselves derived from literary methods. The other draws on traditional art criticism by describing the video images as plastic objects in the same way as paintings or sculptures.

## **6. The Age of New Technologies**

Technological advances in the field of computing and the democratization of access to computer equipment have precipitated the use of technological tools in the field of art, which is called the digital revolution. With this digital revolution, over the last two decades, video has become a global phenomenon and the range of artists has been expanding ever since. Video art departments were inaugurated in museums and art schools and video art festivals began to be organized. The advent of color, the digital revolution, and the democratization of editing and modeling software have continued to open up new plastic dimensions to the production of video art. Today



video art can be produced by the latest innovations or conversely, revisit their history by exploiting old technologies.

The terms ‘digital art’, ‘computer art’, ‘multimedia art’, ‘new media art’, ‘media art’, or ‘technology art’ are often used interchangeably and refer to projects that use emerging media technologies. In short, this new art is defined as art that uses computers as a technique for production, presentation, and creation (Christian, 2008). With the technological advances in personal computer art in the 1990s and the curatorial exhibition of this form in galleries, digital art has officially entered the art world. The work is now created in research laboratories rather than in artists’ studios and some digital artists begin to train as engineers to collaborate with programmers, scientists, or graphic designers.

Although the word new refers to anything new, these new artistic and cultural forms are not developed outside of art history. They feed on different media such as film, television, video, video games, and the internet. And the images produced are considered in the same family as film and video images under the title of moving images.

## 7. Conclusion

The multi-formality described above explains why it is impossible to place video art under one all-encompassing definition. The variety of definitions found in the literature on video art is a consequence of the specific subjects of the various publications. In his essay *Moving Images: On Video Art Distribution* published in 2012, Lucas Hilderbrand defined video art as technology-based electronic signals, which suggests that there is still a specificity to the category of video art. This explains why some authors prefer the term ‘media art’, as the boundaries between video, film, and digital have become increasingly blurred over the last decade.

As the aim of this paper is not to trace the history of video from its beginnings to the present day in detail, (which is beyond the scope of this paper) but to see its aspects as a specific type of image, I have tried to present the artistic and political conditions that prepared its birth, the cultural context in which the works are produced and the artistic and theoretical developments specific to this medium.

In the literature on video art, two axes emerge in terms of interpreting its history: The first emphasizes the distinction between the analog video art of the 1970s and the contemporary digital video art of the early 1990s to the present (in the middle decade of the 1980s, artists seemed less interested in video art). The other axis focuses on the continuous development of

video art from its birth, emphasizing the broad lines formed which can be characterized, for example, as a critical response to TV or film, as socio-political documentaries, or as a medium of spatio-temporal interaction with the viewer. These two axes do not contradict each other but differ only in the emphasis placed on the technology used by the image recorder.

I consider that whether analog or digital, the evolution of video as an art form in the same way as theatre, painting, or cinema must be interpreted in a chronological context. Analog or digital, the video image shares commonalities with other moving images while retaining its own identity. I defend that this identity is singled out by its temporal aspects.

It is here that the function of art comes to light: it is neither to entertain nor to educate but to produce an opportunity for transformation. In the case of video art, the images have more direct, complex, and general access to time.

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