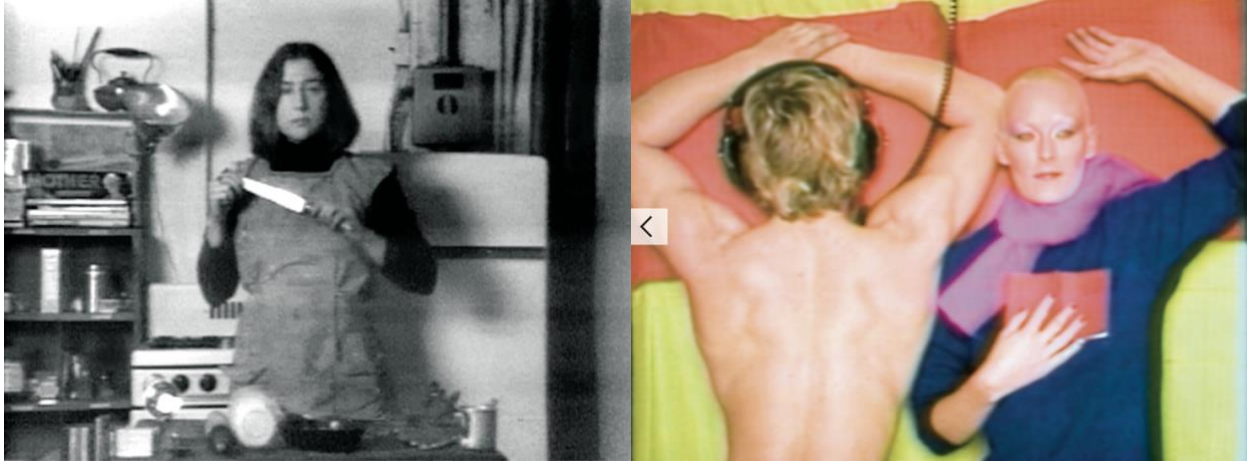


ARTFORUM

NO RESOLUTION: VIDEO ART IN AND AROUND THE CONTEMPORARY

Alex Kitnick on video art's elusive past and tenuous future

Alex Kitnick | May 1, 2023



Left: Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, video, black-and-white, sound, 6 minutes 9 seconds. Right: General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979, video, color, sound, 28 minutes 15 seconds.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT VIDEO ART that calls for grand theories and epic summations, wild pronouncements and heroic declarations. It's exciting to see a new technology appear in one's lifetime and to feel some kind of ownership over it, to see it for what it is or, even more importantly, what it did—how it cut through the world. And since video is, or was, so closely related to television and what used to be called the mass media—it was either its intimate underbelly or a guerrilla weapon made to combat it—its value seemed to go unquestioned. The most important artists wrestled with it (Lynda Benglis, Dara Birnbaum, Nam June Paik, Ulysses Jenkins, Joan Jonas, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson); some of the best writers took it on (David Antin, Allan Kaprow, Rosalind Krauss, Anne Wagner). But when television went from a weekly calendar to a massive database that viewers could scan wherever, whenever, something changed; as video's hardware flattened out and flooded the world, grafting itself onto automobiles and gas pumps—not to mention phones, bus stops, and airplanes—something gave way. ("In the mid-nineteen sixties people started moving television sets away from the wall," Gregory Battcock wrote long ago. "The implications of this phenomenon . . . are enormous.") It was as if every surface in the world had suddenly come throbbingly, pulsingly alive. Production also transformed. If the shift from film camera to Porta-Pak cut down on crew, the leap to phone and personal computer offered advanced editing techniques to almost any amateur—so video changed not only the world's texture but also how we interact with it. For a number of years—let's say, from the early aughts until now—it seemed like this massive influx of screens and swipes would bomb video art into extinction, not because art had fused so entirely with life but because video suddenly seemed like such an evident thing to make art from. Obviously, it was the visual regime of our time, and so to make video art was simply redundant. While video still maintains a steady hold on the art world—in the blur of biennials, as well as in the publicizing of performance—video art no longer seems to be debated as it once was. In many ways, video lives today as simply another tool in the artist's studio. And yet several exhibitions about video art—at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and London's Raven Row—have recently opened, encouraging us to reconsider video once again. Just send me the link, I think, but then, of course, I remind myself that we're dealing not simply with video here but video art, something staged and installed, couched and curated. I wish that I could see all these exhibitions, even if there is something inherently maddening about not being able to control video, to pause and hold it in one's hand. Video art—it sends one into tailspins.

Artists took the new conventions of "content delivery" as the raw material of their work.

I WONDER IF VIDEO ART was always a theory of video, though what video is, of course, has never been particularly clear: The term remains deeply amorphous, fungible, nothing more than a visual complement to audio, and this amorphousness has only increased as video technology has evolved. A videotape is not a TikTok post; an LCD

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screen is not a projection, nor is it a monitor hooked up to a VHS player. But perhaps video's inherent undecidability is what demanded all the theorizing. Video art launched a thousand anthologies; deep inside them burned the promise of relevance.* Video was to be the contemporary art par excellence, connected to power and capable of controlling eyeballs, if not hearts and minds. It was a slippery art that might sneak outside art, slither through culture, enter the club, the mall, the living room, the electronic billboard, or the train station, turn people around (maybe even on), and then deliver them to some not-yet-quite-defined third space that would be neither life nor art but some heightened consciousness, a cybernetically inflected world-sphere never imagined before.

But for all its ostensible radicality and promise of the new, video art also turned out to be the last episode of modernism, dedicated to defining the specificity of its medium: video. This holds true as much for Nam June Paik's magnetically contorted cathode rays as for Bruce Nauman's closed-circuit installations, even as the latter opened up onto space. Almost all video art was about the stuff it was made of—the phalanx of camera and screen and the circuits connecting them—and it doggedly tried to ascertain its fundamental properties and potentialities alike. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan remains the key figure here: The medium—and the way it works us over, its “effects”—ultimately played more of a part in defining video's identity than any content it might contain. Video art understood itself physically, in other words, in terms of its light and pixels and ability to transport things—live or delayed—across distances and the concrete outcomes it encoded on our sensoria. If the film screen rendered the viewer invisible, the video monitor made her part of the show. While McLuhan rarely attended to the ideological powers that control media, he did suggest that artists could wield its technologies more beneficially than corporations, not because artists tell better stories but because they are more adept at worldmaking and formal play. Video artists with a utopian bent—from Paik and Stan VanDerBeek to Marta Minujín—took this as their charge.

Another way to understand video, of course, would be to focus on its internal conventions. Philosopher Stanley Cavell understood film in roughly this fashion, though for him devices such as slow motion and the freeze frame were only worthwhile when they carried narrative significance; otherwise, they remained so many empty gestures. To point to similarities between film and television, however, is not to equate the two; it is simply to say that something happens inside video, after all—that it can be analyzed, that it does not simply affect us. While the earliest video artists, people like Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, opened their work to network TV, Dara Birnbaum “talked back to the media” by launching a systematic inquiry into its parts and clichés, creating compendiums of reverse shots, two-shots, and special effects. (Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 1978–79, remains Birnbaum's best-known example, but any number of artists have offered postscripts: Stan Douglas's 1996 Evening, for example, reconstructs episodes of nightly news “happy talk” from the 1960s.) Martha Rosler did something similar in her ersatz home-cooking demonstration Semiotics of the Kitchen in 1975, while the Canadian collective General Idea built on these investigations of media codes in their half-hour talk shows, such as Pilot, 1977, and Test Tube, 1979, which might have aired during prime time if they hadn't been telling the media to “shut the fuck up.” (“Pablum for the pablum eaters,” they said.) General Idea wasn't only cataloguing conventions, in other words, but was putting them to work. Agitprop outfits like Videofreex and TVTV (TopValueTeleVision) did the same, as did Jaime Davidovich, whose public-access The Live! Show (1979–84) featured ads for video-editing services and droll reviews of the Whitney Biennial. Today, however, as video has cleaved from TV, formulas have changed. We now live in the age of the talk and the tutorial, the dance and the clip, raw footage and live stream, and artists have taken note.

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IN THE EARLY 2000s, a handful of artists emerged who made works that just happened to be video, which is to say they didn't make the grand ontological claims of their forebears, but rather handled the technology in a flat, almost deadpan fashion. These artists took the new conventions of “content delivery” as the raw material of their work, just as their predecessors had imagined new futures for cable and public-access television. Gone were the investigations of identification initiated by Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, and Joan Jonas (Krauss famously dubbed them “narcissistic”), as well as the darkened rooms harboring Bill Viola's immaculate installations; Mike Kelley's demented fun house Day Is Done, 2005/2006, may have covertly issued a verdict on the whole genre of art: that it was done for. The single screen soon overshadowed the multipart installation. While Ryan Trecartin transposed screen and set to create allegories for contemporary identity—his Four Loko'd teenage bedrooms positioned themselves as everyone's primal scene—suddenly we had streamable series that made little to no use of the gallery, among them Melanie Gilligan's über-timely four-part Crisis in the Credit System, 2008, and her subsequent Popular Unrest, 2010, which deftly mixed body horror with Marxist theory. (Alex Israel's 2012 miniseries As It Lays, a social-climbing pyramid scheme seen through rose-colored smog, occupied the other side of the coin.) Frances Stark, who up until that point had made much of her art

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from paper, created a digital animation with the freely available software Xtranormal that also took the serial as its structuring principle and called it *My Best Thing*, 2011. (A series of recent works by Stark, U.S. Greatest Hits Mix Tape Volume 1, 2019, patches together politics and pop songs, iPads and power cords, in collagelike fashion.) Mark Leckey, who often collaborated with Stark, delivered smartly edited lectures that skimmed the space of the TED Talk and anticipated the fact of the MasterClass, as Seth Price has in his ongoing excursus *Redistribution*, 2007–. Performance quickly became shorthand for pedagogy. Edging into edutainment, Hito Steyerl's epoch-defining video essays offered intelligent instruction on topics ranging from airplane junkyards to duty-free art, while Tony Cokes created videos that function like reading machines—spazzy, colorful Kindles that syncopate texts with beats for those with wavering attention spans. The how-to and the capsule history offered video art a clear mandate, adopted to spectacular effect by Camille Henrot in her *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, a Smithsonian Institution-backed and Windows-powered history of the world. Recently, manuel arturo abreu, a founder of Portland's home school, offered another take in their nearly two-hour-long PowerPoint-driven *An Alternative History of Abstraction*, 2020, one of the most engrossing examples of free video education yet. Here we see another paradigm shift: Unlike many video projects of the '70s, abreu's does not seek to create a feedback loop between teacher and student. Rather, it is radical because it releases a truly other art history into the world, and it can be seen for free and on demand.

Of course, one of the most powerful and popular works of art produced in the past decade was also a video—Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* dropped in 2016. In a strange way, *Love* proved that video art could be a popular art only if it challenged every tenet that had previously been used to describe its potential. If video's democratic ethos was chalked up to its relatively low cost, its promise of interactivity, and the ease with which it could be shipped, Jafa premiered his supercut of *Black life*—a spitfire montage of heroes and harassment, beauty and brutality—on a massive screen at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, the color perfect (even if much of the material was pilfered and watermarked), the Kanye soundtrack immaculate, pristine, blasting loud. In making a single-screen video and not only not uploading it to YouTube but intentionally keeping it off free file-sharing sites, Jafa made a clear claim for the power of a particular kind of cinematic presentation. His video—in a sense, the best music video ever—has to be seen in mint condition, in limited release, almost at IMAX scale, and in that way, it shares something with Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, 2010, which is shown exclusively in institutional settings because it must be synced with the time of day. To garner attention, art need not be widely available, these artists make clear; privacy and pilgrimage produce their own brand of prestige. This is all to say that video art may only be successful today when it simultaneously embraces what Walter Benjamin described as art's cult value and its exhibition value. It must be infused with aura and experienced collectively at the same time. The result is not unlike history painting at the end of the eighteenth century, when for a few short years it not only held the public's imagination but helped create it as well. Now as then, few artists figured out how to do it.

One of art's defining features is that it refuses to get with the program, that by shooting for—and missing—the contemporary, it teaches us a lot about today.

ASIDE FROM once-in-a-generation wonders like Jafa's *Love*, the fate of video art today would seem to have more to do with the impossibility of its being contemporary, of sparking genuine cultural debate. While certain recent artworks, such as Ken Okiishi's *Vital Behaviors*, 2019, have managed to parry social media's mandates without lamely critiquing its ideology, others, such as Lucy Raven's 2014 *Curtains*, have literally pulled apart the contemporary (3D) image so as to reveal the labor beneath. Meanwhile, certain video artists, such as Martine Syms, have moved away from the gallery in search of theatrical release (see Syms's real-deal—and really good—feature film *The African Desperate*, 2022). But for the most part, video artists have taken leave of the times, if for no other reason than there's not much pleasure to be had in keeping up with the corporate Joneses (you're always going to be underfunded and understaffed) or constantly running behind something and picking up its pieces, pointing out what's wrong. While the preponderance of History Channeled three-screen video epics long for a golden age of cinema, the high-tech violence of artworks by the likes of an Ed Atkins often makes a point that we all already know: Contemporary technology is creepy and messed up. Rather than double down on the uncanny valley, in fact, one might instead turn away in order to investigate earlier histories of artmaking. New Red Order's high-speed wide-screen epic *Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality*, 2020, for example, examines western sculpture (the cowboy variety, not the Renaissance kind) to create a visceral, high-tech reversal of Manifest Destiny. Narratives of empire and progress fast-forward into bloody horror. This is video art not as virtuosic thrill-seeking, but as breakdown from everyday patterns of use.

A few months ago, I visited the studio of the artist David Levine, who used to work in theater before pursuing other methods of launching bodies and words into space. In the past, Levine asked actors to repeat monologues in white cubes, whether or not anyone was watching, but this time he was working on something different. Collaborating with a

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company in Australia that makes a yet-to-be-adopted technology that can present 3D animations in the form of holograms—which is to say, popped up in real space—he'd created a twenty-minute looping monologue of a woman in some kind of vertiginous, natively digital video-gamey metaverse. The monologue is nutty and futuristic, but the technology itself is dangerously rudimentary—a sheet of glass jumps up and down at a terrifying rate, bringing a 3D file into bodily orbit and threatening to slice the finger off any wandering hand. The contraption, which cost a fantastic amount of money, was largely paid for by Harvard University, Levine's employer, and engineered in part by a team of freelance animators and coders. Visible only in the darkened setting of the black box (the image itself is just a few inches high), here was a "popular" form so extreme in its desire for newness that it had effectively exited the possibility of having an audience. (So far, it has been shown only in a group exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.) The piece, to my eyes, is a joke about futurity because it explains the world to come in the most rickety fashion imaginable (as do the conjurings of most visionaries), but also because, in its effort, and failure, to meet its historical moment, it becomes a work of art; one could go so far as to argue that one of art's defining features is that it refuses to get with the program, that by shooting for—and missing—the contemporary, it teaches us a lot about today. By contrast, consider the art of Jordan Wolfson and Ian Cheng, whose use of cutting-edge technology, whether AI-enabled or iPhone-involved, often feels indistinguishable from other experiences in consumer life. Indeed, it is too successful. The seamless functionality of their video work—the spectacle of those tools in motion—can make it feel like an extension of an already-extant PR-fueled culture industry, to use a term that, despite its postwar patina, still offers the best diagnosis of our current situation. Though it might sound old-fashioned, I think that art's strangeness, its semi-autonomy, is still something we need, and that a smooth show about the weirdness of the latest VR technology is something we don't. So perhaps the protocol for video art now is to become not a hit single but, like Levine's hologram, a very possibly overheating, unwieldy, and lonely machine.

Levine shares this insight with others. Nicole-Antonia Spagnola's exhibition last year at New York's Artist's Space, "Anti-Genesis," an array of dining-hall seating, each chair displaying a twice-transferred YouTube video of an Italian hardcore song on a slouching flatscreen, made an adjacent point—that video art, and wide swaths of video at large, can create only subcultural space, and that the "alternative space" might be one of its sites. Nina Könnemann's exhibition "at" the Queens gallery Gandt, perhaps the loneliest art show in recent memory, took things even further: The German artist closed the gallery in order to fashion Neolithic tools from broken toilet seats, posting pictures on a scanty followed Twitter account in a formidable example of "dumb" distribution and McLuhanesque "retribalization," while Trisha Donnelly has doctored projector lenses to create abstractions as opaque and inscrutable as her etched marble sculptures (and that, in an uncanny way, call back to Paik's manipulations). Painfully incapable of competing with the claims made upon it by the streams of video in the outside world—from TikTok to Xbox to the 24/7 news cycle—video art now officially joins the ranks of the museum. If we're lucky, it will do the work art has always asked us to do, which is consider the conditions of our world and help carve out the requisite space for contemplation. Now comes the audience's critical project: finding the time to take it all in.

*See, for some examples, *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (1976); *Video by Artists*, ed. Peggy Gale (1976); *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (1977); *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (1978); *Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television*, ed. Peter d'Agostino (1985); *Video by Artists 2*, ed. Elke Town (1986); and *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (1991).