

Video art: dead or alive?

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"The least that can be said is that we have witnessed the death of video art in the United States." So writes Michael Nash in a recent and provocative essay on new technologies and the media arts, that appears, almost ironically, in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (1996), edited by Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg. *Resolutions* is just one of several new books dedicated to the critique and theorization of video art. Just as the death knell sounds for video, critical attention to the field - notoriously limited throughout video art's short history - has recently surged. If video is dead, how can we explain the recent proliferation of "video studies?"

My work on this essay began when recent observations led me to wonder if some videomakers, programmers, critics and others were giving up on video as an art form. At the same time, despite every cause for concern, there can be found an omen that video is alive and well; the rash of new publications that includes the aforementioned *Resolutions* gave me hope that video and its much beleaguered body of criticism were in fact just coming into their own. I would like to argue that Nash's claim that "video art is dead" overstates even his case; at the very least, it's a bit premature. But common sense dictates that we must acknowledge some of the factors that should have us, at the very least, checking its pulse.

The possible reasons for attrition from the practice of videomaking are many. Perhaps the field is simply experiencing a regrettable but inevitable downsizing in response to financial cutbacks affecting all of the arts and particularly threatening venues for public exhibition of video art - largely non-profit media art centers and festivals. Video distribution continues to be curbed by the difficulties of developing new audiences for work that may be considered "difficult" in a media-glutted world. The extent of video distribution is still constrained by a glass ceiling that corresponds more or less to the waning appetites of budget-slashing colleges and universities for buying and renting tapes for classroom use. (For a recent discussion of the current markets for experimental film and video, see "4 Distributors + 5 Curators=The Big Picture" in *The Independent*, July 1996).

Developments outside of what is sometimes referred to as "the video community" have also taken their toll on video art. For anyone working or willing to work in narrative modes, the temptation is strong to "cross over" into the arena of so-called independent feature film, with its promises of bigger budgets, critical legitimacy and the relatively vast audiences that can be reached in even modest theatrical distribution; a number of prominent and emerging videomakers have already turned to film, with varying degrees of success. Others are exploring the possibilities of new formats such as CD-ROM. Utopian visions of the Internet's potential as a conduit for presenting works of art are still running fast and furious, despite the "Web's" military origins and its ever-growing likeness to cable TV's home shopping services.

Of course, it would be a mistake to deride these artists for turning their backs on video; instead, these trends may be seen as healthy opportunities for innovation and the challenge of reaching new audiences. Nash's essay makes it inarguably clear that artists and independent media producers must stay abreast of developments in technoculture or risk unprecedented lack of access to new systems of production and delivery. At the same time, it bears disheartening (if anecdotal) mention that several friends who teach video in university art departments report that their students, caught up in the recent boom in independent filmmaking, favor traditional narrative structures over anything that smacks of the experimental, and are determined to utilize video not as a medium with its own characteristics but as a testing ground for hoped-for feature film projects.

While the recent wave of publications devoted to video may mark the greatest efforts in this area to date, video art's critical apparatus is widely seen as having been weakly supported by both the art press and a media press overwhelmingly devoted to film. Nevertheless, dozens of exhibition catalogs and scholarly books have been published on alternative video practices and video art; and such activity is perhaps not so insufficient when one considers that it was only about 30 years ago that videotape recording and playback equipment became available to individual consumers. Unfortunately, much of what has been published languishes in obscurity, as rarefied out-of-print titles never afforded subsequent printings, and many once-influential texts are in constant threat of being forgotten if not periodically reprinted in each new anthology of writings on video. (See side-bar for a brief and subjectively chosen chronology of published works on video.)

Resolutions, Mirror Machine, Diverse Practices, Rewind and other recent titles mentioned in the sidebar perform essential work in recording the history of video art and fill a discursive gap that has deepened as periodicals that have covered video art and alternative media in the past have shifted their focus toward commercial viability. With the exception of Afterimage, Felix and The Independent, few regular venues for serious inquiry of the field exist to this day. Moreover, coverage of video outside of these publications is overwhelmingly dedicated to multimedia installations, a wide-ranging practice that shows vibrant signs of life compared to single-channel work. Established artists such as Gary Hill, Alfredo Jaar, Shigeo Kubota, Tony Oursler and Bill Viola, as well as relative newcomers such as Matthew Barney, Cheryl Donegan and Diana Thater are garnering solo shows in major museums, regular exhibitions in commercial galleries, critical attention and prestigious awards. Jeanne Dunning, Hirsch Perlman and Tony Tasset have also incorporated video into recent work that employs bodily gestures and experiences, thus harking back to the efforts of a previous generation of conceptual artists who were among the pioneers of video art. Perhaps video installations have been gracefully annexed into the lexicon of visual art criticism because of certain of their ties to sculpture and other familiar practices. Single-channel works, on the other hand, present problems regarding equipment, exhibition design and scheduling in visual arts venues. Not surprisingly, museum catalogs frequently give short shrift to the video segment of exhibitions, as if included only as an afterthought.

A pragmatic reason for artists' aversion to single-channel video should not be overlooked. The bottom line might be the bottom line. As Martha Rosler noted in her remarkable essay, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" first published over a decade ago in *Block* and just as relevant today, "Video, it has been noted, is a field in which it is harder than usual to make money" No joke. While her sardonic truism may apply a little less harshly to a few blue-chip video installation artists, it is almost impossible to name any video artists who have actually earned their living from their work for any sustained period of time. In fact, lifetime accumulated royalties from the rental and sale of video art will probably never equal production costs. Only a few aspirants find teaching jobs at universities and art schools, or administrative or curatorial jobs at media art centers. Some may turn to "the industry" for gainful employment as producers, videographers and editors of television shows, music videos, or corporate video; and a rare few are able to turn aspects of their artwork into commercially supportable product (such as William Wegman's recent Weimeraner-populated fairy tales and ABC and counting lessons for Children's Television Workshop, which were also released on home video).

If video appears to be primarily a medium of young artists, it bears remembering that the easy access one has to equipment as a student evaporates upon graduation. Production grants, always scarce and usually scant, have been hard hit by recent cuts in state and federal funding. Innovations in analog technologies such as nonlinear editing, and the foreseeable obsolescence of familiar analog technologies (such as the venerable 3/4" system), are occurring at rates far too rapid and costly for most non-corporate consumers, be they individual artists, media-access centers or educational institutions, to stay on or near the cutting edge.

Still, apart from the nuts-and-bolts issues of financing, distribution, exhibition and technological innovation, there might be other reasons why the future of video appears so uncertain. In "Vision After Television" Nash suggests that one of the original impulses for videomaking has nearly evaporated: "Disestablishment of television, the ultimate cause that united video artists and independent documentarians for years, no longer galvanizes the field for a variety of reasons." He finds that media artists are far more engaged in "TV culture" and less in its critique than when the medium was new. Further, in reference to both the proliferation of self-reflexive forms such as talk shows and the current penchant for parodistic entertainment such as "The Larry Sanders Show" Nash maintains that "television's critique of itself is more pervasive, and in some ways is more persuasive, than its critique by media art."

Which is not to say that videomakers have not been engaged effectively or passionately in media critique (the longevity and astuteness of Paper Tiger Television and the dynamic if brief history of the use of video by AIDS activists are but two examples). At some junctures, the burdens placed on video to be topical, critical, political, even revolutionary, have superseded aesthetic development, sometimes at the expense of even moderate standards of technical quality - and this, despite the fact of poorly constructed tapes or those of substandard technique, limits access to many potential screening venues.

Video's lesser status - and perhaps, its identity crisis - is also maintained by its high profile as an amateur medium. The works of "accidental" video "artists" fill the weekly broadcasts of "America's Funniest Home Videos"; the former casual shutterbug now travels to foreign lands and attends family functions only to experience these events through the eyepiece of his camcorder (my use of a gendered pronoun is intentional). The 1991 beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers, taped by a nearby resident, George Holliday, who simply happened to have a camera handy, was shown innumerable times during television coverage of the legal proceedings that followed, turning a case of police abuse that might have otherwise been suppressed into an incident of national debate and impact. Few activist works reach beyond local communities, thereby lacking the attention garnered by the power of the international press.

Whether video is a medium that will continue to evolve and define its territory as an artistic practice - or whether it will become an irrelevant, antique practice remains to be seen. Its special status as an art form so closely related to the mass commercial medium of television, the unique problems related to its exhibition and distribution, and its ambiguous status as a commodity were once its charm and may now be its Achilles' heel. The current trend towards its exegesis may be a sort of academic autopsy that can finally be performed now that this once dynamic medium seems to be holding still - or it may reflect legitimate interest in contemporary video. Some 20 years ago, in a brief essay titled "(1) TV Is Like a Pencil and (2) Won't Bite Your Leg," John Baldessari wrote the following words of wisdom that pertain just as aptly to our perspective on video's past as to our hopes for its future: "For there to be progress in TV, the medium must be as neutral as a pencil. Just one more tool in the artist's toolbox. Another tool to have around, like a pencil, by which we can implement our ideas, our visions, our concerns."

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