12-1-2014

# Video Art: Cultural Transformations

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## Abstract

In the 1960s, there were efforts to move broadcast television in the direction of the experimental video art by altering television's conventional format. Fred Barzyk, in his role as a producer and director at WGBH-TV in Boston, was uniquely positioned to act as a link between television and experimental video artists who normally would not have had access to the technology available at a major broadcast facility. As the leading innovator in the beginnings of video art, the Korean American Nam June Paik (1932-2006) deserves special mention. His work bridges the worlds of art, video technology, and television. The video works of Nan June Paik, Amy Greenfield, Peter Campus, Feng Meng Bo, Elizabeth Sussman and other video artists are considered in this essay as key contributors to the development of video art. The selection is based on my experience with the artists cited. Despite video art's growing popularity among contemporary artists in the 1970s and beyond, the museums were slow to acknowledge this development. One of the problems was deciding where, among the existing museum collections, to locate video art. In its 50 some years of history, video art has enjoyed a remarkable success in its artistic innovations while undergoing changes in formats virtually at the speed of rapid advances in electronic visual technology. Ironically, the legacy of creative television set in motion by Barzyk and his generation has been largely coopted by the television broadcasting industry, which mainly serves as a platform for mass media advertising.

**Key words:** Video Art, Video Dance, Video Installation, Video Games, Television, Happenings, Museum

## I. The Beginnings of Video Art

### 1. Video Art and Television

A discussion of video art in its infancy during the 1960s and 1970s invites a comparison with television its immediate predecessor. Television, unlike other media, has the power to give immediate real time and space access to what is special to a particular time or place and to events that have just happened or are in the process of unfolding. Moreover, through its accumulation of tapes, it documents images for future reference.

Unlike broadcast television, video art does not typically rely on the delivery of real-time live events, except with interactive installations. Like film, it is a product of post-production editing and composing (after shooting). Video art often relies on techniques developed by experimental filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century including *film noir*. As cool media, consisting of two-dimensional flat images, both television and video art differ from film. Film has a warm, three-dimensional quality that is missing from television and video art. In its focus on the medium itself, video differs from mainstream film where the conventions of screenplay, actors, and verbal dialogue have an important role. Both video art and television share an interest in exploring new ways of presenting or interacting with traditional art forms.

In the 1960s, there were efforts to move broadcast television in the direction of the experimental video art by altering television's conventional format. Fred Barzyk, in his role as a producer and director at WGBH-TV in Boston, was uniquely positioned to act as a link between television and experimental video artists who normally would not have had access to the technology available at a major broadcast facility. WNET in New York, KQED in San Francisco, as well as selected art galleries such as Electronix Art Intermix in New York were instrumental in advancing the development of video art at the institutional level.

Following the interest generated by these efforts, support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts provided funding for video art projects. For example, Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe received foundation support in 1969 to build the first video synthesizer and create video programs for broadcast in existing TV channels. Later in 1974 Barzyk founded the New Television Workshop at WGBH Boston with the participation of leading video artists.[1] The aim of the Workshop was the development of experimental video art. It's programming included dance, drama, music, performance and visual arts video and film. Out of this workshop came many of the innovative experiments of video art during the 1970s and beyond. In addition to the institutional support, the efforts of perhaps thousands of young artists working independently in the USA and other nations across the world contributed to the advancement of video art more or less independently of its connections to television.[2]

### 2. Nam June Paik

As the leading innovator in the beginnings of video art, the Korean = American Nam June Paik (1932-2006) deserves special mention. His work bridges the worlds of art, video technology, and television. In the words of John Hanhardt, curator of video art at the Whitney Museum in New York, "Paik sought to shatter the dominant language of television images and production… His videotapes convey a sense of process and improvisation in their quick edits, shifting points of view and wild mixtures of imagery and sources."[3] Alone of this group of innovators, Nam June Paik devoted his life to investigating and developing all aspects of video art and is largely responsible for its emergence as a major art form. Nam June Paik came to television as a composer and performance artist, trained in electronics and this training has given him the technical expertise to

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[1]   Carter, 2001a, 2001b.

[2]   For a history of early developments in video art see also Meigh-Andrews, 2006.

[3]   Hanhardt, 2000, p. 198.

invent, or participate in the invention of, many of the technical devices necessary to accomplish his visionary aims. His inventions elevated the medium to new heights. Paik reminds his viewers how revolutionary is the intrusion of modern technology into the human consciousness. He exploited the image-making potential of video while never failing to note its ironies. For example, his "TV Buddha" shows an antique Buddha sculpture viewing itself before a TV set. In "Cage in Cage" (1994), an homage to John Cage, Paik attached a dozen small video monitors, driven by three concealed laser disc players, to a Victorian style bird cage (Figure 1).[4]



Paik's later creations, which use digital, laser, and computer technology, together with his major earlier works, were shown in an exhibition organized by the Guggenheim Museum that opened in New York, in 2000 before traveling to Seoul, Korea and Bilbao, Spain. Even as the Guggenheim's monumental exhibition celebrated the range of Nam June Paik's work and signaled his transition to digital art, it affirmed his achievement as the inventor and chief proponent of video art's artistic potential. More than any other single individual, Nam June Paik grasped the revolutionary implications both for art and society of video art. His goal has been the creation of an electronic superhighway that is open and free to communities and individuals across the world and not dominated by a monopoly of broadcasters. Paik's aim for the creation of an electronic super highway, with the help of the Internet, is now close to being realized.[5]

▲Figure 1.
Nam June Paik (South Korean, 1932-2006), *Cage in Cage*, 1994, Wood and wire built cage, and video players, 94.14, Museum Purchase, The David C. Scott Foundation Fund, Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University

Like other significant figures in the story of video art's development -- Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Gary Hill, Bruce Nauman, William Wegman, and Bill Viola -- Nam June Paik came to video art from another art, in his case music. It was his association with the avant-garde composer John Cage and the Fluxus art movement that helped shape his and these other visual artists' conceptual approaches to video art. Fluxus, an anti-art movement of the 1960s, opposed imitative and illusionist as well as modern abstract and mathematical art. Fluxus championed lived experience over "dead" art. These explorations into video art were also nurtured and inspired in part by the aesthetic climate created by such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Allan Kaprow, creator of happenings. Also influential were the practices of the Constructivists of the early 1920s who worked at the junction of the arts and technology and pushed for the extension of the arts into new forms. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan and cybernetist Norbert Wiener were also part of the intellectual climate in vogue during the development of video art.

## 3. Video Art in the Museum

Despite video art's growing popularity among contemporary artists in the 1970s and beyond, the museums were slow to acknowledge this development. One of the problems was deciding where, among the existing museum collections, to locate video art. An example from the Museum of Modern Art in New York will serve to illustrate this problem. Barbara London, who founded the video art collection and exhibition program for video art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, recounts her efforts to find a place in the MOMA collection for video.[6] London first introduced video art as a part of the print department because none of the other curatorial departments were interested. In time, video was included along with photography and film in a Department of Film and Media Arts where it now enjoys a firm place in the institution. MOMA was in fact more open to video art than most museums because it already had a defined space for photography and
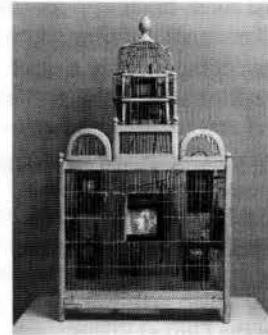
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[4]   Nan June Paik, *Cage in Cage*, 1994, video sculpture, Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

[5]   Hanhardt, 2000, p. 198.

[6]   London, 2001, pp. 54-60.

film. According to London, it was the first American museum to establish a dedicated space for video. By 1974, a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled London to devote full time to video. Also in 1974, the Museum hosted an international conference on the future of television, which brought some 50 video artists and experimental filmmakers together to debate the future of this new art form. Subsequently video art has become an on-going part of the Museum's exhibition program.

Even when museums are receptive to video art, a problem with presenting videotapes in the museum is the visitor's viewing time required. Most visitors are accustomed to viewing an individual work in short intervals, whereas most video installations required 15 minutes or up to an hour. The situation for museum presentations improved with video installations where the video image is one component in a three dimensional work that might include other elements such as assemblage, performance, or interactive components requiring participation of the viewers.[7]

## II. From Video Tape to Digital Installation

Included in this section is a discussion of video artistists encountered in my work as a museum curator and writer. The aim is to show through these examples a representation of changing aspects or stages in the development of video art from the 1970s to the present. All except Feng Mengbo are video artists from the United States. Feng is Chinese, but at the time he was showing his work in the United States.

My own encounters with video art began in reference to viewing New York videodance and performance art in the early 1970s. The discussion of the works cited is based on my participation with the video artists in presenting their video in a museum setting, or other public setting and viewing video exhibitions and performances over an extended period from the 1970s to the present. The discussion here begins with video dance and continues thru museum presentations of video installations.

During the 1970s and 1980s, dance was one of the principal topics of video art. The roots of videodance are virtually the same as for experimental television and for other aspects of video art, as they all drew upon the ideas of *avant-garde* musical composer/artist John Cage and Nam June Paik. Initially, video was seen as a revolution in the process of documenting the choreography of performances which otherwise might be inaccessible apart from photographs or film. The efforts of the WGBH Dance on Camera Series in Boston between 1972 and 1985 and the Dance for America Series out of WNET in New York attempted to preserve dances originally created for the theater and adapt them to the new medium. Among the choreographers participating in the development of new videodance were leading postmodern dancers including Mimi Seawright "The Medium is the Medium" (1968), Rudi Perez "District I" (1973), Daniel Wagner "George's House" (1976), Louis Falco "Collections" (1977), and Trisha Brown "Dancing on the Edge" (1978-1980) to mention a few.

During this period, the use of video had expanded beyond its initial use of television or videotapes as a means to document dance performances, to its insertion into the actual dance works. The shift is from television being about dance or video simply documenting performances to to video becoming engaged in the original dance work.[8] Indeed, introduction of the term videodance signaled the emergence of a hybrid art form linking dance and video.

In the early days of video dance, two versions of videodance emerged. One is video dance as exemplified in the works of Amy Greenfield and Doris Chase, which involves the making of video tapes. The other form of video dance is the live intermedia performance where real time live performance interacts with monitor playback systems that may include video tapes and/or live camera installations. For our purposes I will discuss Amy Greenfield to illustrate the work of a video-dance artist primarily using video tape. The second form, live camera installations, will be represented in

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[7]   For a fuller discussion of the problems of video art in museums see Manasseh, 2009.

[8]   Lorber, 1977, pp. 8-10.

the works of Robert Dunn and Paul Garrin later on in the text.

## 1. Amy Greenfield

Amy Greenfield is regarded as one of today's most important practitioners of experimental videodance. "Amy Greenfield developed a new form of video-dance, choreographing for the video camera and television screen."[9] Amy Greenfield is not a dancer in the conventional sense of the word. She would never have been picked for a ballet company, and possibly not for a modern dance group either. Determined to become a dancer in some notable sense, however, Greenfield made the camera an extension of her body. She uses video, film and holography to explore the dimensions of dance that are ordinarily treated by body movement on stage.

In the 1970s, Greenfield created videotapes, films, and holograms, which centered on the theme of movement and the nude female form. She "performed" in all three media in the sense that her own body was the subject of her presentations. "The video screen is an electronic field, capturing space-time in the field," says Greenfield. In video, "You can use the human body as an object, as does Doris Chase or you can take it as a very intimate dialogue between the camera and our sensibility coming through the body."[10] To illustrate these concepts, Greenfield presented three tapes. The first video showed her running, rolling, and frolicking through an open field; the second emphasized the sculptural qualities of a male and female exploring each other's bodies. While the shapes of the bodies are sculptural abstractions, the features are highly expressive. The interplay of the bodies is intimate but not sexual in character. Finally the third tape presented Ms. Greenfield spinning for 20 minutes with a sheet. Throughout the piece she spins faster and faster, eventually collapsing on the floor and panting. In the closing moments of the tape, the body form disintegrates into an abstraction, which continues to convey the energy generated by her whirling body.

Greenfield also creates films. Comparing the two, she remarks that although the films achieve a greater sense of texture than the video tapes, they lack the closeness and personal element more successfully rendered in video.

While not everyone would call what Greenfield does dance, it is clear she is expanding the concept of human movement as an art form with the help of the video camera. In addition, her work shows that the interpretive capabilities of the video camera offer as yet under explored possibilities to both modern and contemporary dance.[11]

## 2. Peter Campus

Peter Campus' *Three Transitions* (1973) moves video into the realm of psychology as he creates a meditation on a genre, the self-portrait. In the words of John Hanhardt, "Campus focused on specific setups in the studio to explore formal strategies for the reconstruction of multiple views of the self in real time."[12] Using a two-camera setup, the artist presents three variations on the self. As the points of view of the two cameras converge on the monitors, the artist appears to cut literally through himself. In the second transition, Campus applies blue Chroma keying to his face, and the result leads us to feel that he has removed his skin and revealed another self. For the third transition, Campus is seen holding a burning piece of paper on which his face is projected and the self-image then seems to disappear in the flames. Essentially, Campus' *Three Transitions* explores the implications of video for painting, sculpture, and photography. It seems to demonstrate how video alters the relation of artist and medium as well as that of medium and viewer. In effect, it beckons the painter and photographer to break through the limits of the two-dimensional canvas or the "frozen" still image.

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[9] Amy Greenfield, 2012.

[10] Interview with Amy Greenfield, by Curtis L. Carter, 1979.

[11] Carter, 1979.

[12] Hanhardt, 2000, p. 103.

*Three Transitions* was installed at the Haggerty Museum with a working version of the actual TV studio setup, which has been recreated under the direction of Fred Barzyk. Visitors to this work were invited to walk through a slit in a white sheet. Images from two video cameras mounted on opposite sides of the sheet and pointed toward each other then are superimposed on each other. As the visitor passed through the sheet, she/he see themselves transformed into a double image, as if the person were literally crawling through two selves, both of them his or her own. *Three Transitions* was the first of five major video pieces that Campus worked on over a period of four years at the New Television Workshop.[13]

## 3. Robert Dunn

In 1997, the Haggerty Museum presented *DanceFindings*, an original site-specific videodance installation based on the work of choreographer Robert Ellis Dunn.[14] *DanceFindings* represents Dunn's final contribution to videodance. His insights into the importance of video to dance are succinctly expressed in these words:

The specificity of the 'aesthetic' of videodance is
utterly different from that of live performance I like to
give a defining image of videodance as "a moving
meditation on dance and the human body." The
action of the camera and the current "sky's the limit"
nature of digital editing makes it possible to transform
visual patterning and rhythmic sequence in a way
that enhances and expands the perception of
human movement, even for dancers themselves.[15]

In *DanceFindings*, Dunn built upon the models supplied by the earlier videodance experiments especially of video artist Nam June Paik and choreographer Merce Cunningham. Dunn saw the video "eye" as a force in the creation and perception of movement and viewed the camera as "another dancer" multiplying the perceptual content of the visitor's experience.

*DanceFindings* consists of a three-channel laser videodisc bank of images projected over twelve monitors arranged in a wave-like pattern in the gallery. The images, consisting mainly of dancers in workshops Dunn conducted through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee dance program, were abstracted from over one hundred hours of raw video footage, and choreographed for the video dance piece by Dunn, with the assistance of videographer Matthew Chernov. *DanceFindings* has its origins within the context of a modernist *avant-garde* aesthetic, with connections to parallel happenings in the visual arts, music, and dance itself. Dunn often cited the Bauhaus visual arts movement, which emphasized experimentation, basic materials, and design, as an important influence. He also worked with the composer John Cage and adapted Cage's improvisational methods to his video works. As a practicing musician and composer, Dunn served as accompanist for Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and other modern dance innovators. He is widely recognized as the architect of contemporary postmodern dance through his connections with the Judson Dance Theater and the influence of his ideas on a host of choreographers who developed out of that project.

## 4. Paul Garrin

Paul Garrin is one of a second generation of American video artists whose work combines masterful technological innovation with pungent social critique. Garrin, who began working with video while at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York, served as assistant and eventual collaborator

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[13] Carter, 2001, p. 19.

[14] Carter, 1997.

[15] Robert Dunn, Letter to Curtis L. Carter, July, 1996.

with Nam June Paik beginning in 1981. His own videotapes, including *A Human Tube* (1986), *Free Society* (1988), and *By Any Means Necessary* (1990), have been exhibited internationally. Garrin's videotape of the 1988 Tompkins Square Riot in New York revealed to a national audience the violent police actions against demonstrators and spectators at the scene. Garrin himself became a victim when he was caught in the midst of the police actions while returning late one evening from his studio with video camera in hand.

Garrin's first interactive video installation, *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* (1989-1993) developed in collaboration with David Rokeby was premiered in 1990 at The Clocktower in New York and was subsequently presented in Germany, France, and Finland (Figure 2). It appeared at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York alongside his newest interactive video, *White Devil*, which premiered at Mediale, Hamburg, Germany in 1993 and was shown at the 1994 Sao Paulo Biennial. *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* was presented at the Haggerty Museum in 1994.

The equipment required to present *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* is instructive of the changes that video art is undergoing as a result of the new information and communication technologies. The equipment for mounting this work includes a Sony 10400 video projector, a Sony LDP1550 videodisc player, a 32 inch color monitor, a stereo amp with speakers; a Macintosh Ouadra 605 computer, an interactive control interface, a Panasonic surveillance camera and mount, and miscellaneous software and videodiscs necessary to program the electronic installation. Compared with emerging technologies, such a list might be considered elementary, but it nevertheless places new demands on the tools and training required to present video art in a museum setting. The advanced technology required to mount such video installations establishes a new agenda for museums accustomed to installing works of art in more traditional formats, such as painting and sculpture.

In this instance, Garrin's installation calls for a "realistic" three-dimensional set, in which the video elements of the piece are integrated. This "other," non-electronic component is comprised of a six foot high cinder block wall laced with razor wire, chain link fence, halogen security lamps, and piles of rubbish, including tires and other debris that can be seen along the neglected urban thoroughfares of almost any contemporary city. The walls are sprayed with graffiti, which further reinforces the confrontational atmosphere of the piece.

The formal structure of *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* requires that viewers participate more or less simultaneously in its multiple environments, one consisting of the material environs of urban violence suggested by the gallery installation with its



▲Figure 2.
Paul Garrin, *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog*, 1989-1990. Courtesy of the artist

graffiti walls, cinder blocks, and wire gate, the other a video simulation. The video simulation from *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* depicts partygoers inside a luxury dwelling, apparently oblivious to the threat of urban violence that surrounds them. Images of police confronting rioters are projected through the window behind them, thus creating additional tension between the yuppie cocktail scene and life on the street.

Garrin's video echoes the theme that people living in the twentieth century had become accustomed to viewing video generated images as an extension of their living spaces. Hence, it may not be so difficult for viewers to join together the two environments of his piece. The interactive features of this installation place further demands on the viewers. Their own movements cause the image of a fiercely barking German shepherd to advance toward them with increasingly menacing gestures. Now, it may take some getting accustomed to their new role as "actors" in the interactive process, particularly when the experiences become threatening, both physically and psychologically, as is the confrontation with Garrin's barking dog. Video footage documenting visitor reactions to *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* in a previous installation shows them involved, lunging at and retreating from the "video dog" as they might in real life. Judging from their responses-and my own, the experience is disturbing as well as emotionally engaging.

Garrin frequently makes use of systems designed for military intelligence and simulated battle environments. His interactive video also approaches the simulated reality of a Disneyland attraction. Recall, for instance, the threat of dodging bullets while passing through the battlefield of pirate boats at Disneyland. Given these similarities, what qualifies Garrin's project for presentation in an art museum? What makes his piece different from an environment made for mock war battles, or from a Disney theme park installation? Technological mastery, at which Garrin has been called a genius, would not be sufficient. Creative use of these tools in ways that stimulate the imagination and provide insight into the artistic, sculptural processes is evident here. His successful linkage of the gallery space with the virtual spaces of the video is particularly notable. On another level, Garrin uses his chosen medium to make a social statement. His successful involvement of the viewer in the interactive "theater" of the work forces contemplation and possibly action-taking account of opposing social polarities reflected in the work.

As the critic Eleanor Heartney has noted, "there is an unsettling ambiguity about our role."[16] Is the viewer to identify with the protesting outsiders of the street, or with the yuppie party goers that seem distanced from, or perhaps indifferent to, the world that is crumbling around them. This ambiguity points all too clearly to the moral issues rooted in disparities of wealth and power that threaten the stability of the world today. Garrin does not pretend to offer solutions to such complex problems. Yet there is in *Yuppie Ghetto with Watchdog* and his other works a distinctly apocalyptic tone that is alarming in its message, particularly in the light of growing urban violence that threatens the safety of every individual and advances surveillance to a higher priority for society than truth, beauty, or goodness.[17]

## 5. Feng Mengbo

As the story of video art has evolved, video has become increasingly integrated with digital computer technologies, video games, and other new technologies to generate new expressions of art, as well as a way to approach traditional media such as painting. Feng Mengbo's video art further exemplifies important aspects of the possibilities available in the 1990s and beyond for experimenting in these directions. Feng's experiments are driven by his fascination with video games. Like an earlier generation of post-modern artists in the West, he melds popular culture into his art. In doing so, he uses video and other artistic media to comment on contemporary life issues in the context of significant cultural and political transformations.

During the early nineties, Feng produced a series of video/computer-based paintings: *Taxi! Taxi!-Mao Zedong I-III*. In this series, he likened Mao's waving to the army of the Red Guards gathered at Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution to the way people wave to hail a taxi. In this work, Feng Membo copies Mao's image and places an ordinary yellow taxicab in front of it. With this act, Feng Mengbo quietly introduced a human scale to the mythical Mao. In a 1994 video work titled *Game Over: Long March*, he transformed stills from a video game into a series of 42 paintings reflecting on China's revolutionary past.[18] These images feature a Chinese revolutionary street fighter dressed in a blue soldier's uniform with a red armband. His weapons include the conventional artillery of grenades and bullets as well as crushed Coca-Cola cans referencing popular culture. In this work, a young Mao and heroes of the revolutionary operas created during the Cultural Revolution are interspersed with characters from the world of Intendo games including ninjas and dinosaurs.

Beginning in 1996, Feng Mengbo parlayed his interest in video games into a form of interactive art. His first interactive CD-ROM, *My Private Album*, was shown in New York at Holly Solomon Gallery in April 1997. A young Mao and heroes of the revolutionary operas created during the Cultural Revolution are interspersed with characters from the Internet video world including ninjas

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[16] Heartney, 1994, p. 101.

[17] Carter, 1994.

[18] Healy, 1994.

and dinosaurs. Initially conceived as a collection of slides intended to document family history, *My Private Album* consists of a study of the artist's life in the context of a multigenerational family including grandparents, parents, and his wife. This work juxtaposes history as seen from a personal, familial perspective with official history. The images are drawn from a wide variety of sources including the family photo album, old gramophone records, book pages, and sections of movies including his own digital movies, drawings, paintings, postcards, and other memorabilia depicting Chinese culture of the late twentieth century. The pictures mark life transitions over three generations, thus revealing the passage of time through the human cycles of birth, maturation and death.[19] The images are generated with an Apple Macintosh computer and are projected with a digital projector onto a screen surrounded by curtains to give it the appearance of a miniature theater. Viewers can manipulate the order of events appearing on the screen by using a mouse and keypad.

*Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy*, Feng Mengbo's second interactive CD-ROM video installation game, links the high-tech game aesthetics of the West and the traditional staging of the Beijing opera to explore the history and meaning of the Cultural Revolution in China (Figure 3, Figure 4).[20] It is based on mixing the video game *Doom* with the opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* from the Cultural Revolution era. It includes 42 clips from the film of the same title. In the hands of Feng Mengbo, the romanticized propaganda themes of the opera and the film are laced with gentle irony and wit. From the artist's perspective, both the opera and the film are "full of fighting about power, blood, and heroes" and hence are concerned with the same issues.[21]

The sources in this video-mixed media work are merged and adapted by the artist according to his own fantasies and imagination. Feng Mengbo believes that the video game is a source of art. This claim does not arise from any lack of training or knowledge of the fine arts. He studied design for four years at the Beijing School of Arts and Crafts and spent an additional four years at the Central Academy of the Fine Arts in Beijing. The video game is a very natural medium for him, probably because he spent many hours in his youth playing



▲Figure 3.
Feng Meng Bo, *Taking Mount Doom by Strategy*, 1997

video games. More than the previous *My Private Album, Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy* reveals the artist's youthful in-depth involvement with video games. While the aim of the former work, according to the artist, was to make a documentary, the aim of the latter is to make a game that is full of imagination and fun. In contrast to the slow, quiet pace of *My Private Album, Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy* is noisy and fast paced. And with a very different visual result. The work quite literally embodies the phenomenal character of the electronic world: "lightness, free mobility, and free play with



▲Figure 4.
Feng Meng Bo *Taking Mount Doom by Strategy*, 1997

dimensions and forms." Feng prefers to call the results of this process a game rather than art, but he has already conceded that the game is a source of art, so there need not be a division between the two for him.

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[19] Einzig, 1998.

[20] A modified version of *Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy* using two computers and projectors was presented at the 1998 International Symposium of Electronic Art at the Tea Factory in Liverpool, England during September 1998. The Haggerty Museum installation is the first version to present the full piece which requires three computer-projector stations.

[21] Letter from Feng Mengbo to Curtis L. Carter, 28 September 1998.

A primary reason for his choosing the interactive CD-ROM as a medium for artistic expression is grounded in the artist's strong commitment to democratic populism. Video games are a source of empowerment and participation for their youthful practitioners and also for the audience within the virtual world provided by *Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy*. The versatility of the digital medium gives the audience freedom to participate in the artwork itself, and the technical possibilities for interaction by the artist and the user help to free the process of making art from conventional linear narrative structures. For Feng Mengbo, new technologies offer new ways of exploring human concerns and returning to individuals the opportunity to imaginatively reshape their own cultural participation. Within the simulated realities of video games, the individual can create his or her own virtual world where the roles of heroes and villains can be altered at will.

Feng Mengbo believes that art is for the widest possible public audiences. It is not made just for critics and other specialists of the art world. He finds in the extension of video art into related media arts and contemporary culture a means to extent art to a wider population beyond the traditional art world audiences. In this respect, he is closer to Keith Haring (who began his career in the subways of New York and who expressed a similar populist perspective on art with respect to his desire to communicate with mass audiences) than to the Pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, whose manipulation of images from everyday life often failed to appeal to the public outside the art world.

### 6. Eve Sussman

Eve Sussman's "89 Seconds at Alcázar" (2003) first shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial in New York is a High-Definitiion video tableau, which takes its point of departure from Diego Velásquez's *Las Menias* painting (1656) at the Prado Museum in Madrid. Velásquez's painting shows the artist at his easel and features the Spanish Royal family, King Philip IV and Queen Mariana and members of the court. Sussman's video is an artistic re-visioning of an imagined unfolding of minute movements leading up to and directly following the approximately eighty-nine seconds when the royal family and their courtiers might have come together in the configuration shown in Velasquez's painting. To create this video piece Sussman assembled a team of 35 artists, which include an architect, set designer, choreographer, costume designer, actors, actresses, and a video crew who worked together in a Brooklyn warehouse studio for three years. The actual shooting of the 360-degree video using a Steadcam was accomplished in three days.

Although the video bears a baroque look, it was inspired by the artist's interest in the everyday. "By linking the singular scene of the painting with a continuity of events, I attempted to script and choreograph body language, instead of simply observing it in everyday life."[22]

Before making the move to High-Definition video in "89 Seconds at Alcázar" Sussman often used Super-8 cameras and simple, low-tech surveillance devices to pursue her interest in observing mundane relationships. As part of her process in creating video art works, she uses methods of observation used in zoological and anthropological sciences For example, for her video "How to Tell the Future from the Past," presented at the 1997 Istanbul Biennial, she "wired the entire Serkeci train station [in Istanbul] with surveillance cameras and combined the live-feed with narratives in Turkish and English. "The synthesis of the live action happenings in the present became the illustrations for the recounting of the past."[23]

### III. The Present State of Video Art

In its 50 some years of history, video art has enjoyed a remarkable success in its artistic innovations while undergoing changes in formats virtually at the speed of rapid advances in electronic

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[22] Carter, 2005.

[23] *Ibid.*

visual technology.[24] Ironically, the legacy of creative television set in motion by Barzyk and his generation has been largely coopted by the television broadcasting industry, which mainly serves as a platform for mass media advertising. What these early pioneers, whose contributions to video art helped launch this medium, had hoped would become the substance of television now appears mainly in commercials and in the logos used to identify broadcast networks and TV stations. Broadcast television continuously modifies its formats and content in ways that parallel the latest video art innovations. But this effort mainly supports commodification of visual culture rather than artistic aims.

If the hopeful efforts at WGBH and elsewhere in the public television industry were not entirely successful in altering the predominantly corporate structure of the broadcast television industry, they nevertheless succeeded in opening television to artists and provided help with the resources required for the innovative experiments in video art that followed. Lacking the patronage of a Medici, or significant state sponsorship, video artists can be thankful for this support that has helped to place video art at the forefront of the visual arts alongside photography.

Today, institutional programs to foster experimental video no longer reside at broadcast sites such as WGBH, leaving video art as well as other media arts without a sustaining system of production and distribution that a successful marriage with broadcast television might have provided. Instead, video artists in the United States often rely on their own independent production resources, support from media art festivals with a limited audience, and a modicum of corporate or public grant support. This situation has not prevented the commercial exploitation of the inventions of video artists for producing billboard commercials and other forms of advertising aimed at mass culture.

Hence, the centers for experimental video art have shifted from the shelter of pioneering television broadcast stations to specialized art centers such as the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, Elecronix Art Intermix in New York, and the Karlsruhe ZKM (Center for Art and Media Technology) in Germany. ZKM is a multi-media production center and exhibition space offering classes and an international festival. In addition to these major sites, there are many Internet websites providing access to experimental video, including the popular You Tube. Still much of the activity for producing video art has shifted to individual artist-producers who rely on their own efforts made possible by affordable equipment.[25]

Museums, though still not fully on board with video art, increasingly offer venues for its collection and display. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, and the Long Beach Museum of Art, among other museums, now hold substantial collections of video art. Representation for video art in the art museums throughout the world is on the increase, judging by the reports in the art press. The National Museum of American Art in Washington DC held an exhibition of video games as art in 2012 that drew the largest crowds of any recent exhibition that the staff could recall. Perhaps it a positive sign signaling a broader social acceptance of video art that dance clubs and sports arenas are as likely as museums to exhibit the latest experimental work in video art.

International art expos such as Documenta held every 5 years in Kassel, Germany and the Venice Biennale continue to feature significant quantities of video art in their exhibitions. The International art Expos in major cities around the world also find video art attractive, perhaps in part because it travels more easily than sculptures and paintings. In any event, it is clear that major and minor artists take seriously the importance of video art.

Not only do artists find interesting the possibilities of the video camera, it also seems true that there is a growing audience for this art medium. Today, affordable video and editing equipment of near studio quality has democratized video production by placing equipment not only in the hands

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[24] Hanhardt, 1986, 1987.

[25] See also The Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2012.

of artists, but in the hands of the people all over the world. It is fair to say that the video camera along with the pho-camera, are stock items in the every day experiences of ordinary people in most cultures across the world. What is not known is the full extent that video art thrives thru on-line patronage. But the popularity of online video games offers some indication that video in this particular format, is receiving substantial attention.

Whether or not the video camera in everyday life experiences leads to great art, it is clear that video is an important part of the aesthetics of every day life as it generates curiosity and the pursuit of creativity. For creative individuals wishing to extend their investigations with the video camera into the public realm, access to community based cable television stations in some areas often allows citizens free access to more advanced video equipment and opportunities for sharing their creations.

What is status of video art today? It is far different from the single camera video tapes, or even the early installations with live interactive sources of the 1960s and 70s. As video has become an integral part of the high tech art developments afforded by digital technologies such as the computer and Internet, and merged with performance, dance, film, and other forms of artistic expression, it is necessary to ask the question, has video art survived as an independent art form? Or should the results of its interim developments be regarded as hybrid forms of art? From the perspective of its identity as an independent medium, video art's history and current state pose challenges. Initially, as we have shown in the prior examples cited throughout this essay, video art functioned more or less on its own as a relationship between the artist and the videotape camera. Often, at this early stage in its development video art became narcissistic. For example, Amy Greenfield's early video-dance works focus on the artist's own body, and Peter Campus's *Three Transitions* (1973) focuses inwardly on the self. In contrast to the self-reflexive video art of Greenfield and Campus, the video installations of Dunn, Garrin, Feng, and Sussman show video art as a multifaceted hybrid art form embracing multiple technologies and a variety of arts media. Parenthetically, much of video art today is absorbed into performance art (not included in our discussion) but a topic for another time.[26]

So what does this mean for our understanding of the present state of video art? There are presently many important American video artists who employ the medium to advance the range of artistic expression. For example, Vito Acconci, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Matthew Barney, Helen DeMichiel, Martha Rossler, Bruce Nauman, and William Wegman, to mention a few. Their video creations often address profound philosophical and artistic questions with compelling visual Images. As well, there are many others among video artists in the United States with diverse voices: Asian, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, feminist and gay, contributing to the surge of interest in video as a medium for expressing artistic and other societal concerns. Every major art exposition from the Whitney Museum biennial to Documenta in Kassel, Germany and the Venice Biennale finds the galleries filled with video art. And now, even the tradition steeped Basil Art Fair in Miami and Switzerland, where art is valued mainly as a commodity, has been invaded by video art.

New challenges to the identity of video art afford opportunities. If we are willing to accept video games as a form of video art, we may well be able to claim the largest audiences ever for visual art in a museum setting. Judging from the recent exhibition of video games at the National Gallery of American art in Washington, DC (2012), the audience for this form of video art knows no age differentiation. Visitors to this interactive exhibition the youngest to the eldest were seen charging thru galleries eager to experience the various games on display.[27]

Judging from what we have seen here, the answer to our question concerning the state of video art today must remain open awaiting future developments. In a relatively brief period of historical time, video and related digital computer technologies have transformed every aspect of life from surveillance systems to ways of creating art. Given the substantial changes in video art that have

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[26] Cubitt, 1993.

[27] Melissinos & O'Rourke, 2012.

occurred in a short half-century, and the expectation of unforeseen technological developments of the future. It would be wise to hold to this answer.

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