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## Aesthetics, Video Art and Television

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# AESTHETICS, VIDEO ART AND TELEVISION

Curtis L. Carter\*

**Abstract**—The author reviews two symposia: 'The Video Arts: Demonstration and Discussion', The American Society for Aesthetics, New York City, 28 Oct. 1978, and 'The Aestheticians Look at Television', National Association of Education Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., 30 Oct. 1978. He also presents an evaluation of the current state of video art in terms of philosophical aesthetics. Furthermore, he attempts to make a clear distinction between television and video art. The differences cited include corporate studio efforts vs efforts of individual artists, commercial vs artistic purpose and the substantial differences between production methods. Other issues considered are style, intimacy and narcissism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In an era of television in the U.S.A. dominated by situation comedies, detective stories, violent thrillers and advertisements, aesthetics and television appear to represent opposite poles, the one representing the interest of the arts, the other what is assumed to be popular culture. The answers to the question, Can television be an art medium?, vary. Robert Lewis Shayon asserts a qualified negative by saying that, to a degree, television is viewed merely as a type of mass media '... where psychological sensations are deliberately produced for nonimaginative ends, where audiences are created, cultivated, and maintained for sale, where they are trained in non-discrimination...' and, therefore it is severely limited as an art [1]. In support of Shayon's view is the domination of television by the subjects mentioned above. Opposing his view are those who find significant aesthetic developments in video art and scholars who argue that television in the U.S.A. and in other advanced technology countries is the most popular art medium [2]. Both commercial and public television in the U.S.A. do pay some attention to aesthetics by including a small number of programs on the fine arts and by showing video art productions with a high degree of aesthetic interest. Ironically, many innovative contributions to television as an art medium appear first in advertising. Producers of advertising material have made use of artistic developments in video art and cinema, including video synthesizers and film animation [3]. The emergence of art critics who sometimes comment on television and on video art indicates a growing interest in the application of aesthetics to

these media. Despite these beginnings in commercial and public television, video art, like the cinema, has the most obvious connection with philosophical and empirical aesthetics. (I shall comment in Part III on the meaning of the term *video art*.)

## II. REVIEW OF TWO SYMPOSIA

In this article I review the results of two recent symposia convened to discuss video art and television aesthetics in the U.S.A. Following the review, I present an extended discussion of my evaluation of the current state of video art in terms of philosophical aesthetics.

Meeting in New York City on 28 October 1978, The American Society for Aesthetics held a plenary session on The Video Arts: Demonstration and Discussion. This session was intended to generate interest among aestheticians in video art. Participants included video artist Nam June Paik, art critic Richard Lorber, gallery director Joyce Neuraux and myself. I acted as organizer and chairman of the session. The agenda called for discussion of these questions: 1. What are the likely directions for developing video as an art form? 2. What changes, if any, does the emergence of video art portend for the traditional concepts and theoretical analyses of art? Other topics suggested to the participants for discussion included: 1. Reflexive narcissism in video art, video as anti-art, video as meta-critical art and video as environmental art (its uses in sculptural installations, conceptual performances and dance). These subjects were addressed in part by the speakers but, more often, by some of them merely showing a sampling of recent video works produced in the U.S.A., leaving the audience to infer the implications of this new art medium.

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Neuraux gave a concise background lecture, locating the origins of video art in the context of a personal selection of works in other media undertaken previously by Moholy-Nagy, Léger, Fantana, Kluver, Kepes, Piene, Burnham, Tombelini and Cage. Neuraux, who teaches a course on the history of video art at the School of the Visual Arts in New York City, cited a growing trend in the U.S.A. toward integrating video art installations in exhibitions of other types of visual art.

Lorber provided taxonomies of the form and content of video art as a means of characterizing the medium. His taxonomy of form distinguished three types: video art on tape, as live gallery presentations and video art tapes in combination with performances of dance and of theater. His taxonomy of content distinguished three modes: documentary, psychological-narcissistic and aesthetic formalist. The latter type is concerned with the examination of the properties of video art as a content of itself. He also showed a 20 minute tape entitled *Contemporary Video Series II*, with scenes from a wide selection of tapes, made available by the New York Electronic Arts Intermix video cassette company. The selections, representing works of numerous video artists, provided an overview of the present state of video art in the U.S.A., augmenting the historical backgrounds covered in Neuraux's lecture.

Paik spoke briefly and anecdotally on the broad philosophical themes he finds surround the development of television and video art. The aestheticians might have preferred to engage Paik in a conceptual dialogue concerning his subject, but, instead, he chose to spend the bulk of his time showing three tapes of his own work. These works entitled 'Media Shuttle: New York-Moscow' (produced with Dimitri Devaytkin), 'Merce and Marcel' (produced with Sigeko Kubota and Merce Cunningham) and 'You Can't Lick Stamps in China' (produced with Gregory Battcock) show his attempt to deal with themes such as world peace, things in motion and the psychological aspects of time.

The aesthetics session at the National Association of Education Broadcasters Convention held in Washington, D.C., on 30 October 1978, examined aspects of television aesthetics. Topics discussed included expression, perception, visual literacy, style and the link between video art and television. Participants and their subjects in the session called *The Aestheticians Look at Television* were the following: Curtis L. Carter (Marquette University), *Television: A Medium for Aesthetic Expression*; Arnold Berleant (Long Island University), *Television and the Aesthetics of Intimacy*; Donis Dondis (Boston University), *Content in Form of Television*; Richard Lorber (New York University), *Experimental Direction in Television: Video Art*; and Thomas Olson (Southern Illinois University), Chairman. Berleant spoke on the perceptual features of television: a small screen, dream-like images, informality and intimacy. The key concept in Berleant's paper was 'intimacy'. (Intimacy has previously been applied to television in

the writings of Horace Newcomb [4].) Philosophical clarification of 'intimacy' is especially welcome, because the term as it is currently applied to television can be interpreted in several ways. It describes relationships between a television set and viewers, and it refers to the manner of treating the subject matter of television programming. The television experience is intimate in the sense of being a one-to-one relationship between viewers and a set, and it usually takes place in the intimacy of viewers' homes. The experience of viewing a television screen offers an experience of scale that contrasts with viewing a large cinema screen. Techniques, common to video and cinema, such as the use of zoom lenses and attention to selected dramatic details, may be especially effective in providing an experience of intimacy. Berleant did not attempt to analyze the effects of intimate television viewing, but his comments provide a context for such an analysis.

Dondis commented on television from the point of view of her research on visual literacy. She views television as an extension of human perceptual abilities linking the mind and the world because of its ability to isolate and detach visual information from its context. The significance of her message for aestheticians becomes clear when one realizes the potential stifling of innovative artistic uses of television and the manipulation of viewers that is effective because they lack visual literacy. Her remarks augmented the points of view proposed earlier by McLuhan [5] and by Birdwhistell [6]. McLuhan said that a medium has become more important than its message. Birdwhistell holds the view that television involves visual and verbal conventions that are shared by producers and audiences. The better both artists and viewers understand these conventions, the better they can become aware of being manipulated.

I discussed the problems of transmitting expressive qualities of subject matter and the absence of style in presentations made by television productions. Although feelings, moods and other qualities are essential to the visual interpretation of live events, their high concentration in artworks not prepared for television compounds the problems of their presentation. Since television and video cameras, as such, have no particular affinity for expressive qualities, their successful rendering on a cathode-ray tube depends mainly on the artistic sensitivity and skills of those who control what the cameras record. The absence of individuated artistic styles in television productions contributes to the essentially smooth, flat and cool characteristics of television programs. These characteristics are antithetical to transmitting a wide range of expressive qualities. Visual artists possessing acute aesthetic sensitivity should be suited to learning how to manipulate the elements of television involved in producing and in camera recording of artistic expressive qualities. Therefore I suggested that television producers make more use of trained visual artists in the production process.

Lorber contrasted the approaches of television and video art production. He said that up to the present time video artists have pursued a course of taking revenge on television producers as a protest against the unrealized artistic potential of the medium as they have developed it for commercial purposes. Furthermore, government and corporate control of television has led to restrictions that hamper the artistic development. Video artists have made available, by means of tape cassettes, productions for individual exploration. At the present time, according to Lorber, video artists generally follow the aesthetics prevailing in contemporary visual media of art in their adherence to the concepts of reductionism and self-criticism. Reductionism refers to the practice of stripping down a work's content to its barest essentials, as in hard-edge nonfigurative artworks. Self-criticism refers to the tendency of artists to have a medium reflect on its own properties.

Taken as a whole, these two sessions on aesthetics, video art and television represent the beginning in the U.S.A. of fruitful conversations on the topic, laying the groundwork for future studies. Only some of the major issues were identified, but some important ones did emerge: (1) perceptual features of the television experience, (2) the need for a visual literacy of television, (3) ways to transmit expressive qualities by means of television, (4) the question of artistic style in television production and (5) the potential utilization of developments in video art for the enrichment of television as a source of aesthetic experiences. Even more important is the fact that the two meetings suggest a useful methodology for advancing both scholarly studies into the aesthetics of video art and of television and ways to encourage producers to think more about aesthetic considerations in the future. A major point made was to keep aestheticians, video artists and television producers in contact for the purposes of informing each other for the benefit of their respective tasks. Such cooperation may also contribute to a better understanding of aesthetics.

Aestheticians have barely begun to address the issues of video art and television. This is explained partly by the relative newness of these media. Aestheticians' activity consists of speculative and empirical analyses of the arts and they require longer gestation periods than critical commentaries and factual reports for the mass media. This first meeting of the National Association of Educational Television Broadcasters dealing with aesthetics signals a mutual recognition of the need for aestheticians to take account of video art and television.

### III. A NOTE ON VIDEO ART

The marketing of portable, less costly video cameras that began in the 1960s has resulted in the introduction of *video art*. In a way, it can be considered a complement in the U.S.A. to cinema and to commercial and public television.

Video art shares with the cinema commitment to

artistic over commercial aims. There are, however, differences. The technique for producing a video image differs from that for projecting an image on a cinema screen. Film, as opposed to video tape, involves a time lag in production. Both video tape and film can be edited or stored for future presentation but by different means. Beyond these technical differences are artistic and perceptual ones. I recently had an occasion to experience these differences by viewing video and cinema productions of the artist Amy Greenfield. The nude figure in motion was a common theme in both of them. I found the video production to be more sensitive to the flowing qualities of body movements and also a more personal experience. By comparison, the film displayed a greater capacity for dramatic and lyrical expression and provided a more distant, removed response to the theme.

Video art denotes the work of individual artists who, while using the same basic medium as television, use it primarily as an artistic means of expression. On the other hand, television is used primarily to inform and to entertain a mass audience. Television has followed the broadcast model established in the U.S.A. earlier for commercial radio wherein advertisements at frequent intervals interrupt programs, except on a few occasions, such as a speech by an important politician and special prestige programs (opera) sponsored by large corporations. Video artists make tapes for gallery exhibitions and other public demonstrations and also for private viewing. In commercial television the content generally does not make demands on intellectual and artistic capacities. Video art productions tend to be, in comparison to television and the popular cinema, unconventional and provocative in content and style. Numerous artists who began their work in another medium, for example Nam June Paik, composer; Merce Cunningham, choreographer-dancer, and Ed Emschwiller, painter-film maker, now use video as one of their media. Commercial television producer Peter Campus employs it to further his work. There is also a growing number of individuals who devote their efforts primarily to video art, for example Douglas Davis, Vito Acconci, William Wegman and Bill Viola [7]. Amy Greenfield has combined dance with video to introduce what she calls 'video-dance'.

Most of the above-mentioned artists work in New York City. In Milwaukee a group of nine video artists, called 'Amalgamated Video', have received financial support from the Milwaukee County Arts Development Council. There are also well-established video artists on the Pacific coast of the U.S.A. including Billy Adler, Paul Steinmetz and Eleanor Artin [8]. For developments in Argentina, Japan and Europe see Ref. 9.

Art dealers, galleries and major museums in the U.S.A. have contributed significantly to the development of video art. The Los Angeles art dealer Nicholas Wilder is credited with the first sale of an artist's video tape in 1969. At about the same time, gallery director Howard Wise presented an exhi-

bition in New York called T.V. as a Creative Medium [10]. Wise has subsequently established a center for the distribution of artists' video tapes called Electronic Arts Intermix. A major force in supporting video art has been the Castelli-Sonnabend gallery project in New York City. Museums are often the last to recognize new developments in art, but in this case they are supporting video art in increasing numbers. The Everson and the Long Beach Museums in California and the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City have been leaders in this support.

An overview of the work of individual video artists in the U.S.A. reveals no future directions for the medium. There are presently two main strands: individual artists, in the art tradition of the past working with minimal equipment and resources and those with an eye on larger-scale productions that require a linkup with public or with commercial studios possessing expensive equipment and facilities. The M.I.T. Center for Visual Studies has access to the Institute's television studio. Major public television stations, such as WNET in New York City, WGBH in Boston and KQED in San Francisco, host experimental workshops where video artists can work with equipment that they could not individually afford.

In spite of these various approaches to video art, I find that there is an absence of style differentiation. Style, which refers to the choice of the artistic conventions for the presentation of subject matter, is considerably more evident in the other arts of the 20th century. In dance, for example, there is a clear difference between the styles of the various choreographers. Dances of Twyla Tharp are technically demanding, speed-oriented and composed of quick jerky movements, while Meredith Monk is known for flowing psychodramas incorporating the ordinary movements of people in daily life. Perhaps the absence of distinctive styles in video art reflects the fact that artists using the medium have not learned how to master it. Further innovations going beyond familiar camera techniques now employed, such as close-up, zoom, panning and the use of synthesizers, might in time lead to distinct stylistic variations. But one must take account of the fact that in comparison to the dance, which has developed over thousands of years, the video medium only became available less than 20 years ago.

Although there are not as yet distinctive video-art styles, there are broad categories into which one can divide current works in the U.S.A. On the Pacific coast, artists, such as Billy Adler, incline toward commercial television as a model of style [Ref. 8, p. 67]. By contrast, more individualistic stylistic approaches can be found in documentaries embodying social commentary, artists' explorations of their own self-images and video parodies of television programs. I must draw attention to one more category of video art. It is based on the use of electronic synthesizers and other means of manipulating images to produce video productions that

are suggestive of 20th-century nonfigurative or abstract painting and lumia-type kinetic art. One might think that some of this type of video art is the result only of the malfunction of the transmission of a tape, but this is not so, since the production of the tape was under the control of the artist. But, perhaps influenced by the strong trend in the U.S.A. for visual artists to return to figurative pictures, video artists seem to be less interested in nonfigurative productions. Perhaps they also believe that figurative art has richer social and psychological aspects than nonfigurative art. Nevertheless, in the U.S.A. the style of video art is essentially dominated by the style of commercial television. Video artists often parody it, but I find that video art and television differ more in intent than in style.

Intense preoccupations of some video artists with the human psyche as it is mirrored in video images has led Rosalind Krauss to posit the thesis that psychological states, particularly narcissistic ones, are an inherent characteristic of the video medium [11]. Narcissism refers to the fact that the performer's image, often an artist's own image, is reprojected on a cathode-ray tube with the immediacy of a mirror. Her thesis suggests that video art styles might be construed as variations of psychological processes of a narcissistic type. Given the lack of video styles based on different conventions for the presentation of content, Krauss' thesis is tempting. But the narcissistic aspect of video art represents only one aspect that is current, and it is not necessarily the dominant one. It has little to do with video productions whose content deals with the external world and probably nothing to do with these that deal with kinetic nonfigurative art. Krauss's thesis reflects a particular phase in video art where the role of an artist as a maker of an artwork and as a self-exploring subject are obscured. Narcissism may have a role when an artist initially interacts with video equipment, but it need not persist, as, evidently, there are many other possible psychological states to which artists respond.

In their role as subject matter, these psychological states act as the mediated content of the video medium. The question becomes, then, Do the roles of psychological states in video art differ significantly from their role in the other arts? Krauss believes that they do. Her argument depends on claiming that the instant feedback characteristic of video requires that the narcissistic psychological state assume a primary role. But instant feedback is not unique to video art. Many types of current arts that resort to improvisation provide instant feedback. Improvisation in traditional music is heard immediately in electronic and computer-aided music, and in the dance and the theater instant feedback is present [12].

The seeming absence of narcissism in electronic music and in the improvisation present in the performing arts, where instant feedback is present, establishes moreover, that instant feedback and narcissism are not necessarily causally related. By

contrast, certain traditional art media provide the optimum conditions for narcissism, because they require substantial reflective interaction between an artist and an emerging artwork. If Krauss' argument is valid for video art, would not painting, sculpture and the novel provide an even more important role for narcissism, requiring a re-evaluation of these media?

In opposition to Krauss' thesis, I maintain that there is a difference between the video medium and narcissism. Her attempt to identify the medium of video art with a psychological state is another reemergence of idealist aesthetics. Philosophers from Hegel to Croce have sought a way to discount the role of a medium in art. Hegel characterized the ideal state of an art as one in which its medium is subsumed under the dominance of the subjective consciousness represented in a viewer's mind and feeling. Croce at first went even further, denying significance to any aspects of art other than what takes place in a viewer's mind. In the end, both Hegel and Croce restrained their initial attempts to discount the role of a medium, because to do so would eliminate the basis for distinguishing differences between the various arts. Perhaps Krauss will also reassess her thesis.

At the present time there is really only one partially developed video 'language'; it functions as the basis for both television and video art. This video 'language' is not well understood in relation to the workings of the human mind. Consequently, the establishment of a fuller understanding of video styles requires a clarification of the relationships between the functioning of the human mind and the image-producing capabilities of video. Out of this new understanding may come the knowledge necessary to develop a variety of video art styles.

Earlier in this article I attempted to define video art in opposition to television as practiced in the U.S.A. The differences I cited were: corporate studio efforts vs efforts of individual artists; a commercial vs an artistic purpose and substantial differences between commercial and public television productions and video art. During the formative years from 1965 to 1979, much of video art has been a critique of television in that video artists provided productions that are the antithesis of television entertainment directed to an anticipated mass-audience judged to be insensitive to aesthetic matters.

Recently, however, there appears to be evidence of change in both domains. As a practical matter, galleries and artists have run into difficulties in their attempts to sell video tapes. Tapes require video equipment that at present is too expensive for most

private individuals, consequently, video artists are attempting to sell their tapes for presentation by commercial and public television. At the same time, there is a growing recognition that artistic television has a wider mass-audience appeal than producers have assumed.

The fact that at present there is little difference between video art and television productions becomes evident when tapes of video artists are shown on commercial and public television. Art critic Richard Lorber describes the situation today in these words: 'Fewer artists today seem interested in perceptual explorations of the unique technical features of the medium, while more have taken to parodying the content of, or providing serious programming alternatives to commercial T.V. Economics and social consciousness notwithstanding, in the evolution of its adversary position artists' video has come much closer to becoming artistic television' [13].

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2. H. Newcomb, *T.V.: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Press, 1974).
3. Children who interrupt their play to gaze in fascination at these advertisements, while reacting indifferently to the main programs, confirm their success.  
Public television in the U.S.A., in principle, does not show advertisements, but its promotional spots, for its own support and for other projects, are indistinguishable from commercial advertisements. Julia Childs, for example, appears on public television to 'sell' viewers on the benefits of public television and radio by telling them that you do not have those noisy commercials on these public media.
4. H. Newcomb, *Toward a Television Aesthetic*, in *Television: The Critical View*, H. Newcomb, ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 273-289.
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9. Information available from Jorge Glusberg, director, Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC), Elpidio González 4070, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
10. D. Ross, *A Provisional Overview of Artists' Television in the U.S.*, in Ref. 8, p. 142.
11. R. Krauss, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, in Ref. 8, p. 44.
12. Composer Yehuda Yannay reminded me of the parallel of instant feedback in electronic music to video art.
13. R. Lorber, *Review*, in *Art Forum*, p. 81 (Sept. 1978).
14. This article has benefited from suggestions made by my University colleague William E. Dooley and the Editor of *Leonardo*.