# The Relationship between New American Cinema with the American and European Video Art Movement: A Flow of Ideas

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In 1962 experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas established the New American Cinema Group and The Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York, while in 1963 two significant events took place from an artistic point of view, but above all geographically. In one event, Nam June Paik, a South Korean musician who was experimenting with electronic music and the first electronic image production systems in the studios of the WDR radio broadcaster in Cologne (where he met composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, the artist Joseph Beuys, and the architect George Maciunas, who had recently founded the Neo-Dadaist art movement Fluxus), inaugurated the exhibition *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* (DE) at the Parnass Gallery, Wuppertal (Germany). Two, the German painter and sculptor Wolf Vostell, co-founder of the Fluxus movement, inaugurated the *6 TV Dé-coll/age* (US) exhibition at Smolin Gallery in New York.

From one year to the next, New American Experimental Cinema and Video Art were officially born. In 1964, Nam June Paik moved definitively to New York, having become a very active member of the Fluxus movement but paradoxically contributing to the organization of the event that provoked an irremediable break within the group: the "scandalous" concert held in 1964 by Karlheinz Stockhausen in New York, *Originale* (DE, 1961), opposed by George Maciunas, who shortly after sent a postcard to Nam June Paik with the message, "Traitor. You left Fluxus." Nam June Paik, once the experience of the Fluxus movement was over, became within a few years the reference point of the American Video Art movement. Nam June Paik was not the only video artist active: around him there was already a rich and dynamic environment

made up of many artists, such as, among others, Dan Graham, Aldo Tambellini, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Eric Siegel, Frank Gillette, and Ira Schneider, and soon Video Art would find its home in the United States between Boston and New York. The birth of American Video Art can be placed in 1969 with a double event: the broadcasting of the anthological program *The Medium Is the Medium. Video Visionaries* (US) of Boston-based WGBH-TV and the exhibition *TV As a Creative Medium* (US) at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. In 1970, Wolf Vostell, who had never permanently moved to the United States and who had a rich artistic activity in Europe unrelated to the initiatives of Fluxus, decided to settle in Berlin.

All these events lead us to reflect on the fact that between the 1950s and 60s there was an intense proliferation of ideas from Europe to the United States. This process was the consequence of a phenomenon that spanned the entire History of Art from the Second World War onwards, a period in which there was an intense migration of European avant-garde artists, musicians, poets, writers, and choreographers who decided to settle more or less permanently in the United States, especially in New York. This migration included, to name a few, Salvador Dali, Fernand Léger, the definitive return of Man Ray from Paris, Hans Richter, Robert Sebastian Matta, André Breton, Max Ernst, André Masson, Yves Tanguy, Louise Bourgeois, Piet Mondrian, Arnold Schönberg, Hans Hoffmann, Josef Albers, Moïse Kisling, Kiki de Montparnasse (Alice Prin), Georges Antheil, Georges Balanchine, Hanya Holm, Le Corbusier, Jean Cocteau, Paul Bowles, Marcel Duchamp, Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Kurt Schwitters.

But there was also another unstable geographical front: Eastern Europe. Igor Stravinsky, after the October Revolution, emigrated from Russia to Europe and then, before the Second World War, settled in the United States. Many Jewish families from Eastern Europe fled to the United States, such as Maya Deren from Ukraine, Mark Rothko from Russia, and Hedda Sterne from Romania. From Nazi-occupied Lithuania came George Maciunas and Jonas Mekas.

The group of Surrealist and Dadaist artists who emigrated to the United States due to the Second World War was welcomed by the art collector Peggy Guggenheim, who through her Gallery promoted the diffusion of this avant-garde art in the United States. One artist in particular became an essential point of reference: Marcel Duchamp. The idea that a work of art could be the result of a process dominated by chance inspired the activity of many American artists, from John Cage to choreographer Merce Cunningham to Jackson Pollock. When Peggy Guggenheim was involved in the project to create an American art that materialized with the birth of Abstract Expressionism, within the group of the "New York School" (called the "Irascibles") there were still artists from

Europe, especially Eastern Europe, including the aforementioned Mark Rothko from Russia and Hedda Sterne from Romania, joined by Jack Tworkov from Poland, Arshile Gorky from Armenia, Hans Hofmann from Germany, and Willem de Kooning from Holland. All were still heavily influenced, some more or less, by the European avant-gardes. For example, Jackson Pollock's dripping technique originated from some of Max Ernst's experiments.

Between the mid-'60s and '70s this flow of ideas gradually began to change direction. As evidenced by the alternation of events described above between Germany and the United States, there was a veritable proliferation of two-way ideas, a proliferation that continued to attract artists from Europe, especially from the East,—such as Icelandic musician Steina and the Czech filmmaker Woody Vasulka, who in 1965 (a year after the arrival of Nam June Paik) moved from Prague to New York—to quickly become important video artists. There is a significant difference between the migration of European artists in the '60s compared to that of the Surrealists and Dadaists of the Second World War era: they were not European artists who arrived in the United States to spread their native avant-garde aesthetics, but artists who settled in New York because this city was perceived as the privileged place of contemporaneity, a space of experimentation par excellence, and, as a fundamental factor for video artists, a place where technologies were available. From this moment on, the flow of ideas inevitably began to reverse: from the United States towards Europe.

One of the first seeds of this process, together with the birth of Conceptual Art, was the founding of New American Cinema. The decisive innovative factor of this movement was not constituted by the word "New" but "American." The New American Cinema was the American avant-garde rebelling against the old European avant-garde, a process evidently represented by the events that provoked its birth: Amos Vogel, experimental filmmaker who emigrated from Vienna to New York before the Second World War, founder of the Club Cinema 16, the only place that showed avant-garde cinema, refused to screen Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (US, 1957). From this moment on, New American Cinema and the American Video Art movement became two parallel streams of deeply intertwined linguistic innovation, where the first greatly influenced the second, to spread further in the production of European Video Art.

Jonas Mekas could number among many avant-garde filmmakers who had reached their artistic maturity—such as Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Gregory Markopoulos, and Kenneth Anger—with an already considerable amount of works. By the time New American Cinema was born, the movement was already in its period of greatest creative ferment. Unlike New American Cinema, which in 1962 presented itself as a diversified movement within it but compact in pro-

posing different kinds of experimental languages, thanks to already widely recognizable authorial currents, Video Art of the 60's was a fluid movement that experimented with a series of rather sudden linguistic mutations, mainly due to the fast technological changes involving the video technology. The electronic image was born as a phenomenon of pure transmission, and in black and white: the Video Art of the early years investigated the concept of process, thanks to the transformation of the monitor into an exhibition object (the video installation), working mainly on the manipulation of the television signal or on the real-time image. It would take a few years, and the availability of television studios open to experimentation such as WGBH-TV in Boston and Thirteen/ WNET in New York, before video artists were allowed to experiment with color and all the various possibilities of editing and manipulating the image in real time or recorded, offered by the most advanced electronic technology, which would be available in a more widespread way starting from the '80s.

In the American Video Art productions of the 70's, the reference to some aesthetic trends of the New American Cinema filmmakers, such as Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage, could already be traced, first of all with the presence of the artist's image. Within the Video Art, a performative movement immediately developed that identified the monitor as a physical mirror within which to reflect one's own image: it was the "narcissistic" age of early Video Art.[1] The desire to represent oneself and to consider one's body as a work of art affected the Conceptual Art in its performative and, above all, photographic declination, where the self-portrait returned in a significant way.

Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage very often staged themselves in their works, both to express an urgency that is not only merely autobiographical, it's the effect of the total osmosis between art and life. For Jonas Mekas it is essential to occupy the space of images with his body because it is an integral part of the flow of memory, the technological extension of which is the small camera he holds in his hands. His personal gaze is responsible for his imagination, and therefore his body has to enter the shot. For Stan Brakhage the approach is similar but with only one apparently subtle difference, because his image embodies the mood of a man who lives radical experiences with the amazement of a child: the birth of a human being, the heroic ascent and tiring of a snowy mountain, the primordial fear of natural events. Stan Brakhage transfigures everyday events, and with them his own image, into something metaphorical and archetypal. The artist's image represents Man with a capital M, mankind.

Self-representation in American Video Art was a long thin thread that connected many artistic experiences, starting with the works of performers and video artists such as Vito Acconci. Unlike other performance artists who used video as a simple documentation of their actions, Acconci dialogued with

electronic technology, enhancing the possibilities of live performance especially in works such as *Centers* (US, 1971) and in various episodes of *The Red Tapes* (US, 1976), where the artist often looks the viewer in the eyes and talks to him, thus using the monitor both as a mirror and as an instrument for combining his own gaze and body that are catapulted directly into the audience, an enhanced mirror reflecting a "conceptual body."[2] Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage also look at the camera (and so at the audience), but it is a meeting of glances that determines a contrary effect, because it invites the viewer to enter the film, to participate fully in it.

Also the musician and video artist Steina Vasulka used the self-portrait trend, totally immersing it in the technological environment: her body, present in videos such as *Violin Power* (US, 1970–78), *Orbital Obsessions* (US, 1975–77), and *Summer Salt* (US, 1982) is nothing more than a vector of a technological process. Her figure is shredded by the speed of the video, offering fleeting moments of recognizability, fragments of an image that cannot be stopped. This also happens in *Vertical Roll* (US, 1972) by performer and video artist Joan Jonas, with a radically different meaning, because in this work the shattered image of the artist transmitted by the monitor is compared with her real face in profile, technological process against reality, for a reflection on the image of the female. This video was only part of a more complex performance strongly related to the aesthetics of performer and experimental filmmaker Jack Smith.[3] Canadian painter, musician, and video artist Ernest Gusella in his work *Exquisite Corpse* (US, 1978) mixed two typical aesthetic trends of New American Cinema: the self-portrait and the adrenaline-pumping editing typical of many works by artist and experimental filmmaker Paul Sharits: the video technology is able to freely mix different aesthetic references. In this work Gusella quickly alternates the full figure with a close-up of his body, offering a hyperkinetic self-portrait in movement. The result is not an editing work made after the shooting—and this is a very important aspect for the video artists—but made by the fast alternation of two viewpoints obtained in real time through a video mixer connected with two cameras. Paul Sharits's structuralist cinema can become a technological real time performance, thanks to video technology.

Nam June Paik appeared as himself in some sequences of his work *All Star Video* (US/JP, 1984): in this work dedicated to music and performance, he plays the role of the double of another musician younger than him, protagonist of the video itself, Ryuichi Sakamoto. Paik wants to represent two radically different artistic generations, yet assimilable in certain aspects. Sculptor and video artist Gary Hill became the protagonist of his video *Incidence of Catastrophe* (US, 1987–88) where his presence embodies the metaphor of the obsession with reading that can lead to madness.

The aesthetics of self-representation also involved European Video Art, determining further stylistic variants such as that of disguise, a trend not particularly used by New American Cinema or American Video Art but which spread from the end of the '70s thanks to the work of American photographer Cindy Sherman. The Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist in almost all of her works, such as *I'm not the Girl who Misses Much* (CH, 1986) and *You Called Me Jacky* (CH, 1990), proposed variants of herself supported by simple scenic elements such as wigs or costumes as possible variables of the exposure of her naked body. The Norwegian-born German video artist Bjørn Melhus reinterpreted himself through elaborate costumes with a science-fiction flavor that transformed him into childish alien creatures, as in *No Sunshine* (DE, 1997): if in Pipilotti Rist the transvestism does not totally erase the original figure of the artist, in the work of Bjørn Melhus an interesting passage takes place, because in this case the artist interprets real characters. This last trend was found in the work of the American performer and video artist Matthew Barney, especially in the *Cremaster* cycle (US, 1994–2002), a work halfway between experimental cinema and Video Art, where he interpreted specific roles, becoming a performative actor without the use of the word.

An artist who most of all inherited many stylistic trends from New American Cinema, including the use of self-portraits, to immerse them in the world of Video Art is Bill Viola. In his works, from *The Reflecting Pool* (US, 1977–79) to *The Passing* (US/DE, 1991), he performs simple actions up to a sort of performative static (sitting on a chair intent on reading, immersed in water like a dead body, asleep on the bed) that transforms his body into an even more abstract conceptualization of Brakhage's topic of mankind.

Bill Viola is deeply connected to the aesthetics of New American Cinema in many other respects. The radicalism of the gaze used by Brakhage in his work *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (US, 1971), a real manifesto that calls for the overcoming of consolidated taboos through an act of revelation that puts a strain on the eyes of the audience, can be found in some sequences of Bill Viola's work *Anthem* (US, 1983), where scenes of bodies undergoing surgery suddenly appear, and *I Don't Know What It Is I Am Like* (US/JP/DE, 1986), where Viola shows the corpses of animals in a state of putrefaction. In these works, Stan Brakhage and Bill Viola do not want to attack the sensitivity of the viewer but wish to represent a virgin, and therefore radical, gaze—an important theme for all of Stan Brakhage's filmography—on the things of the world, including the concept of death and the subtle balance between life and death. But also, of course, life; and so the sequences of the birth of Bill Viola's son in *The Passing* cannot fail to recall the similar scenes in Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (US, 1959), with one substantial difference: if Brakhage creates

a sort of subjective documentary, emotional and realistic at the same time, Viola, through the use of infrared cameras, offers a surreal and dreamlike vision, immersed in a dimension poised between sleep and wakefulness.

Bill Viola in *I Don't Know What It Is I Am Like* used rather particular shooting styles: shots with a fixed camera, as if they were photographs, slow zoomed shots, and a very complex POV shot where the camera emerges from the water of a lake to fly in the sky and stand on a meadow. The references to Canadian experimental filmmaker Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (CA/US, 1967) and *La Région Centrale* (CA, 1971) are evident, as well as the stillness and long duration of some shots that recall the cinema of experimental filmmaker George Landow and artist and filmmaker Andy Warhol. The mechanized movement of the camera is also found in some episodes of another work by Bill Viola, *Ancient of Days* (US/JP, 1980), while in *I Don't Know What It Is I Am Like* there's an explicit homage to *The Flicker* (US, 1966) by musician and filmmaker Tony Conrad, here converted as a short alternation of colored patterns. Much of Bill Viola's work produced from the '70s to the early '90s appears as an exemplary model of "video transformation" of the aesthetics of New American Cinema.

Michael Snow's cinema was mentioned in many Video Art works, thanks to the presence of a theme that ran through all the different avant-gardes of the twentieth century: the autonomy of the machine. From *Kinoglaz* (RU, 1921) by Dziga Vertov to the fascinating movements of the camera in Snow's *La Région Centrale*, the topic of the enhancement of the human gaze was transformed into the much more radical one of the autonomy of the gaze of the machine. In *La Région Centrale* the camera is given extreme freedom to offer his point of view on things: the filmmaker activates a technological process dominated by chance (Duchamp, again), and he watches the result. This attitude was typical of many experimentations of early Video Art that investigated the ability of video to produce abstract images starting from technical incidents, such as feedback. But in particular, the mechanized management of the camera, capable of offering points of view impossible to the human eye, and the spherical vision of reality—an intuition experienced already by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy in *Le Ballet mécanique* (FR, 1924)—were investigated respectively in *Orbital Obsessions* (US, 1975–77) and *Summer Salt* (US, 1982) by video artist Steina Vasulka in a continuous dialogue between the avant-gardes of the past and of the present. If Michael Snow exploits natural space, Steina Vasulka examines her own body inside closed and mainly natural environments, demonstrating, as the title of her work states, an "obsession" with circularity, which leads to the production of a complex video installation with a significant title, *Machine Vision* (US, 1978), a device that directly involved the viewer's body.

The relationship between natural or urban landscape and artificial gaze is

a topic that runs through European Video Art above all, thanks to the work of the French photographer and video artist Robert Cahen. The tendency towards subjectivity typical of American Video Art was not translated into the work of the French video artist through the formula of the self-portrait but rather of the subjective travelogue, a geographic journey, but above all existential, dominated by emotion and memory, elements that allowed Robert Cahen to electronically treat the images of natural or urban spaces as if they were moving paintings. In *Juste le temps* (FR, 1983), *Le 2ème jour* (US/FR, 1988), *Hong Kong Song* (FR, 1989), *Voyage d'hiver* (FR, 1993) and *7 visions fugitives* (FR, 1995), the landscape is reinterpreted from the gaze of video technology.

If some video artists are particularly attached to the cinema of Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow, Nam June Paik looks to the visual universe of Jonas Mekas as a point of reference. The topic of memory, interpreted as the ability of video to build an archive, has always been very important for Paik. In his artistic production, electronic elaborations that create abstract shapes alternate freely with moments of reflection where interviews with artists build a sort of Pantheon of references, full of almost mythical figures. Referring to different "stages" of memory: the long-term one (the sedimentation of the audiovisual archive) and the short-term one (the emotion of memory in progress), the encounter with these personalities is stylistically expressed in two consciously opposite ways: on the one hand, with the classic television formula of the interview with a fixed camera; on the other hand, with shots taken with the camera by hand and with fragmented and chaotic edits, using a deliberately amateur and ungrammatical language, typical of the confused and emotional style that Jonas Mekas used to build his portraits of personalities such as Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, and George Maciunas.

Nam June Paik produced a series of video-essays in the form of subjective audiovisual portraits where the same personalities obsessively appear: John Cage (*A Tribute to John Cage* [US/DE, 1973–76]), Merce Cunningham and Marcel Duchamp (*Merce by Merce by Paik*, in collaboration with Charles Atlas and Shigeko Kubota [US, 1978]), Allen Ginsberg and Allan Kaprow (*Allen and Allan's Complaint*, with the collaboration of Shigeko Kubota [US, 1982]), the Living Theater (*Living with the Living Theater*, with the collaboration of Betsy Connors and Paul Garrin [US, 1989]), and the more contemporary musical world, such as Laurie Anderson and Ryuichi Sakamoto (*All Star Video* [US/JP, 1984)]. In these works, Nam June Paik freely used original footage together with contributions made by other artists, all rigorously quoted in the end credits, constantly recycling audiovisual sources that are often electronically reworked. The game of mirrors established with Jonas Mekas's cinema is more evident in *Living with the Living Theater*, a work where Nam June Paik reuses, speeding

them up, some sequences of Mekas's *The Brig* (US, 1964) and inserts the video documentation of the performance *On Bakunin's Grave* (US, 1985), stylistically shot by Paik himself using the same approach as Mekas, with the camera by hand and as if he were watching the show for the first time. A double homage to New American Cinema transformed into a work of Video Art.

Found footage was one of the most original stylistic trends developed by many filmmakers of New American Cinema—from painter, sculptor, and experimental filmmaker Bruce Conner to Ken Jacobs. Bruce Conner was a particularly interesting artist because with the work *Mongoloid* (US, 1978), produced for the band Devo, he spread the language of found footage in a field that would voraciously assimilate avant-garde audiovisual aesthetics, that of music video. In addition to the methods of audiovisual reuse present in Nam June Paik's videography, another important video artist enhanced this technique through electronic and already digital technologies: Woody Vasulka who, with his work *The Art of Memory* (US, 1987), at the moment he wants to transform the topic of memory into images, inevitably made use of that audiovisual archive that has become archetypal: the films of the Second World War. If in cinematic found footage the renewal of the original material consists, in most cases, of an editing that contextualizes the reused sources in an original way, Woody Vasulka builds a pre-digital electronic universe, inserting the original films in three-dimensional objects that create an artificial environment embedded in the natural landscape of New Mexico, in the attempt to create what the artist defines a "new epistemic space."[4]

Video artist Dara Birnbaum produced *Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman* (US, 1978), where in a radical way the found footage meets the loop modality. Brief fragments of the television series are replayed obsessively to reveal the compulsion to repeat television language that causes a zeroing of meaning. But perhaps the most rigorous electronic transformation of the found footage technique is that present in the works of educator and video artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who mixed found footage with Paul Sharits's "epileptic" editing technique, as in the video *Dance Number 22* (US, 1993). The work consists in deconstructing a sequence of the famous work with the Marx Brothers *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, US, 1935), adopting an almost mathematical method, with an editing precision that is already digital: a specific amount of frames, sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing, is played alternately in reverse and forward. The result, absolutely tough for the audience, is the progressive disintegration of the original action that causes the creation of a totally artificial added choreography: a digital dance number created from an old movie. The longevity, even in the digital age of the trend of found footage that exploits the cinematographic imaginary, is evidenced by the work of the

Canadian filmmaker and video artist Marco Brambilla, who in the trilogy of video installations *Civilization* (US, 2008), *Evolution* (US, 2010), and *Creation* (US, 2012) elaborated complex digital landscapes (like Woody Vasulka) constructed through intricate collages of short loops of famous movie scenes.

In Europe, found footage was experimented with in various ways by different artists, first of all the German video artist Klaus Vom Bruch, who combined this trend with that of self-representation. In *Das Duracellband* (DE, 1980), *Das Softiband* (DE, 1980), *Das Alliertenband* (DE, 1982), and *Charmantband* (DE, 1983), the German video artist quickly alternated the image of his own face with excerpts of war movies and television commercials. The figure of Klaus Vom Bruch becomes a paradoxical, sometimes dramatic, sometimes comic, intrusion of a subjective dimension in the original movies. The work of the Italian video artist Gianni Toti was a constant electronic homage to the avant-garde of the past, in particular Russian Futurism. The electronically reworked found footage was a stylistic trend used in almost all of his works. In *Incatenata alla pellicola* (IT, 1983), he reworked the only remaining fragments of a movie by Nikandr Kurtin. *Закованная фильмой* (*Chained by the Film*, RU, 1918,) that featured the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovskij and the actress Lilja Brik. And in *SQUEEZANGEZAÙM* (IT, 1988), a work dedicated to Russian Futurist poetry and heavily influenced by the style of Woody Vasulka's *The Art of Memory*, Toti reused a considerable number of Russian movies from the early days of cinema history, mainly by Dziga Vertov. Hollywood movies became the main subject of video installations by Scottish photographer and video artist Douglas Gordon, who in *24 Hours Psycho* (UK, 1993) slowed Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 movie to last twenty-four hours, completely disintegrating the perception of time in the original movie.

For Conceptual Art, the written text took on a particular value: many New American Cinema filmmakers had a particular interest in producing works with texts only, such as Paul Sharits's *Word Movie* (US, 1966) and Michael Snow's *So Is This* (CA, 1982), or to recover fragments of writings in a world invaded by textual signals, as in photographer and experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* (US, 1970). The written text on the image was a very important element in Nam June Paik's videography but even more in the early works of Gary Hill, a video artist very attached to the aesthetics of Conceptual Art. In *Happenstance* (US, 1982–83) he creates a dialogue between written texts and electronic abstract images in black and white, to reaffirm the closeness between image and word, especially in a technological world. In European Video Art, the role of the written word was fundamental in the work of the British experimental filmmaker and video artist David Larcher; in *Videovoid* (FR/UK, 1993) the representation of the emptiness of the electronic

and digital dimensions were constantly confronted with the presence of texts that appear on the screen.

As mentioned before, the tendency to use long shots, often aided by the fixity of the easel, ran through many filmmakers of New American Cinema. The attempt to represent the concept of temporality,[5] through the experimentation of long duration, involved all the arts of the '60s: cinema, music, theater, dance, with results that paradoxically immersed the viewer in timeless dimensions. Andy Warhol applied and deepened this intuition to transform films into exhibition objects: the suggestion was that of a moving painting. Video Art recovered this modality with the single-screen video installation: a video installation built around a single point of vision, and it is no coincidence that once again (like the birth of Video Art), the official birth of this trend took place in the same year, 1995, in two different places: in the United States with *The Greeting* (US) by Bill Viola and in the United Kingdom with *Brontosaurus* (UK) by the British photographer and video artist Sam Taylor Johnson (formerly Sam Taylor Wood). Thanks to the advent of flat monitors, the video image can be truly hung on the wall like a painting, so even the images conform accordingly: Bill Viola produced a series of works in which, with a single slow-motion shot, pictorial works of the past are recalled through the presence of performers and specific sets. Even Sam Taylor Johnson, who in *Brontosaurus* represented with the fixed camera, in the manner of Andy Warhol, a naked male body dancing in an attic. In later works, she recovered an imaginary more linked to the pictorial tradition, as in *A Little Death* (UK, 2002), a radical still life where a hare and an apple are shown decomposing in time-lapse.

American experimental theater stage director and video artist Robert Wilson is the most consistent interpreter of this trend in the contemporary world, through a series of single screen video installations titled *Voom Portraits* (US), a project started in 2004 and still ongoing. Robert Wilson, unlike Andy Warhol who created his superstars, looks to the media Pantheon par excellence, Hollywood, to transform actors such as Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Winona Ryder, Steve Buscemi, Isabella Rossellini, Alan Cumming, Robert Downey Jr., and Willem Dafoe into real moving portraits. Wilson not only exploits the world of cinema but also that of music—with personalities such as Lady Gaga—dance, and literature. Wilson, on the one hand, goes back to the origins of Warhol's cinema, producing works that show bodies performing simple actions, while on the other hand, he represents surreal and, in some cases, comical atmospheres using paradoxical and kitsch scenographies, sets with special effects and inevitable references, such as Bill Viola, to the iconography of the paintings of the past. In these performances nothing is improvised: everything is rigorously prepared.

The stars chosen by Robert Wilson become accessible gods: you can buy them, take them home and hang them on a wall.

Artist and experimental filmmaker Harry Smith's various and fragmented cinematic production certainly had the merit of having cleared the technique and aesthetics of animation from its original environment. His favorite technique, stop-motion, entered fully into a field that is no longer represented by the authorial panorama of animation cinema directors but by a wider area of experimentation that involved the world of contemporary art. The American Video Art field was profoundly influenced by the animated works of this artist and filmmaker, so much so that we still find traces of it even in very recent experiences, such as that of video artist Larry Carlson, who in a work like *Darkstar Transmissions* (US, 2006) transforms Harry Smith's esoteric-psychedelic aesthetic into a digital world. In European Video Art, the pioneering works of the French digital video artist Bériou (Jean-François Matteudi) such as *Exmemoriam* (FR, 1992) and *Tableau d'amour* (FR, 1993) were strongly influenced by the aesthetics of Harry Smith.

An even more interesting aspect about the relationship between New American Cinema and American Video Art is represented by an event that could be defined as the transition from film to video. Important filmmakers such as Jonas Mekas, Ken Jacobs, and Michael Snow began to use video technology rather later than its entry into the world of art, and with a linguistic approach characterized by continuity: video was the most convenient and inexpensive substitute for film. For other filmmakers, however, the encounter with video represented a real change or enhancement of their aesthetics: they were filmmakers who entered the movement of American Video Art.

Experimental filmmaker and video artist Jud Yalkut was an exemplary figure as a sort of bridge between New American Cinema and American Video Art: his cinema that investigated the possibilities of abstracting concrete and luminous objects met Nam June Paik's first experiments in manipulating the television signal, leading to the birth of hybrid works, signed by both, such as *Turn Turn Turn* (US, 1965–66). This work is particularly significant for various reasons, first of all its structure: it is in fact composed of two distinct parts, the first by Yalkut and the second by Paik, to emphasize the idea of a technological transition. Yet this transition hides an underlying continuity: Yalkut transforms concrete objects in abstract shapes, while Paik deforms images broadcast on television. Film transforms the reality we see; video distorts images of reality mediated by television. So the techniques are different, but the aesthetic method is the same, since electronic images for Paik are artificial by their nature; they do not correspond to any actual reality.

Ed Emshwiller, unlike Jud Yalkut, was not in the balance between the fields of cinema and video but made a real transition, becoming one of the most interesting American video artists of the '70s. Thanks to the profound influence that Maya Deren's cinema had within New American Cinema, the relationship between dance and the moving image was a theme that underlay a lot of American experimental film productions. Ed Emshwiller came from a particular background: he was not originally a filmmaker or experimental artist but an illustrator of science fiction magazines who, when he discovered the moving image, infused his works with a very elaborate graphic style obtained thanks to particularly demanding, from a technical point of view, visual treatments. The trilogy of film works produced in collaboration with Alwin Nikolais's dance company, *Totem* (US, 1963), *Fusion* (US, 1967), and *Chrysalis* (US, 1973), but above all *Film with Three Dancers* (US, 1970), produced with the collaboration of dancer Carolyn Carlson, are a compendium of how film technology can transfigure the image of the body and its relationship with space.

But it was with the discovery of electronic technology, and above all of chroma key, that Emshwiller's aesthetics was able to best express itself, with video works such as *Scape-Mates* (US, 1972) and *Self Trio* (US, 1978). In *Scape-Mates*, Emshwiller experiments with the combination of real bodies shot in chroma key, complex electronic processing, and primordial digital images, articulating a very advanced work for the technology of that era, where his usual skill in graphically compositing the individual visuals builds an aesthetic related to science fiction imagination. In *Self Trio*, Emshwiller recovers the illusionistic imagination of George Méliès and in particular of *L'homme-orchestre* (FR, 1900) to triple the body of Carolyn Carlson who performs in a series of electronically reworked solos. A further step towards digital animation is represented by *Sunstone* (US, 1979), the first work of Video Art made almost entirely in non-abstract computer graphics, in which appear figures connected to esoteric iconography reminiscent of the aesthetics of Harry Smith. Much digital art in motion of the 70's was involved in an "eruption of magic"[6] that brought back alchemical and esoteric imaginations. This work appears to the viewer as a real hymn to the elevation of consciousness, thanks to the advent of a new (techno)vision, a sort of homage to the concept of "expanded cinema" by Gene Youngblood.[7]

Ed Emshwiller's aesthetics and the relationship between dance and moving image had a profound influence on the European Video Art movement. The stylistic complexity of works such as *Scape-Mates* can be found in the works of the French video artist Alain Escalle, who in works such as *Le conte du monde flottant* (JP/FR, 2001) or *Le livre des morts* (FR, 2010) transformed the practice of compositing (today totally digital) into an art form able to

combine heterogeneous visual elements, creating a unique graphic style. Unlike in the United States, in the '80s in Europe, especially in England and France, what was called Videodance became a genre that quickly gained its autonomy from Video Art, mainly because of the interest of many European television broadcasters. The main promoter of the process of spreading the language of Videodance in Europe was the aforementioned French video artist Robert Cahen with works such as *Parcelle de ciel* (FR, 1987) and *Solo* (FR, 1989). Choreographers or Dance Companies were born, such as DV8-Physical Theater in England and Philippe Decouflé in France, which were already contaminated with the moving image and which indifferently produced both dance performances and Screendance works (as we prefer to define Videodance today). In England, the case of the Welsh experimental painter and filmmaker Peter Greenaway was particularly interesting. He, in a similar way to Ed Emshwiller, discovered the electronic image and produced a series of works totally linked to the aesthetics of Video Art, such as *A TV Dante* (UK, 1989) but, above all, *M is for Man Music and Mozart* (FR/UK/NL, 1991), a Screendance work that featured complex digital graphic elaborations. Peter Greenaway wanted to transfer this electronic-digital aesthetic in an ambitious project, *Prospero's Books* (UK/NL/FR/IT/JP, 1991), a pioneering movie shot both in film and in electronic high definition, where most of the electronic and digital treatments (experienced in the two works already mentioned) were present. Due to budget problems, Peter Greenaway abandoned this research in his subsequent films, to fully take it up again when digital high definition spread after the 2000s within movie production. In Europe, many filmmakers, such as Derek Jarman, Jean-Luc Godard, and Wim Wenders, began to use with interest the new electronic and digital technologies intended as a possible technological enhancement of their more experimental stylistic tendencies, inevitably related to the language of Video Art.

Another significant transition, and the last for this essay, also and above all because it is surprising from an aesthetic point of view, is represented by the passage from cinema to video by American experimental filmmaker and video artist Stan VanDerBeek. His cinematic work was characterized by the skillful osmosis between found footage (especially photographs), live action footage, and simple animations, capable of producing caustic and paradoxical collages in motion, all strictly in black and white, explicitly referring to the Dadaist aesthetics of John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld) and to the cinema of Hans Richter. The mutation of aesthetics that VanDerBeek operated when he met new technologies is rather surprising and demonstrates the attitude for free experimentation of many New American Cinema filmmakers. *Newsreel for Dream part 1* (US, 1963–64) is a work, still produced in film, in which color

explodes unexpectedly and where abstract electronic elaborations typical of early Video Art research appear.

The turning point came in 1965 when VanDerBeek met programmer Ken Knowlton of Bell Labs who invited him to use his digital animation language BEFLIX (Bell Labs Flicks). From 1965 to 1967 VanDerBeek produced a series of works, some totally in digital animation, others in mixed media, entitled *Poem-field* (US), parallel to the work of the great pioneer of abstract computer graphics John Whitney, who collaborated between 1966 and 1971 with programmer Jack Citron at the IBM Labs. Unlike Whitney who investigates the delicate two-dimensional geometries of his "Digital Harmony"[8] (Whitney, 1980), Stan VanDerBeek's works are explosive digital animations of written texts: once again the word considered as an image becomes the absolute protagonist of the screen. The basic idea of the collage remains: it is simply applied, with the new digital tool, to the typographic shape of the written text. Stan VanDer-Beek ended his collaboration with the Bell Telephone Company laboratories to start another equally important one with NASA Johnson Space Center and Lockheed Electronics to produce, in collaboration with programmer Richard Weinberg, one of the first pioneering videos in abstract 3D computer graphics: *Euclidean Illusions* (US, 1979–1980), influencing the aesthetics of the British computer artist William Latham who produced for IBM (UK) Scientific Centre *A Sequence from the Evolution of Form* (UK, 1989), a work where colored generative abstract 3D patterns fly on a black background.

Stan VanDerBeek in the meantime also produced abstract videos totally aligned with the experimentation of early Video Art, such as *Color Fields Left* (US, 1977). Stan VanDerBeek 's work is the most exemplary of the ability of New American Cinema filmmakers to adopt technologies that are also very different from each other, exploring in depth and with curiosity the languages suggested by the tools adopted, and maintaining an aesthetic exactness that makes them stylistically very recognizable.

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