



PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

ISSN: 2471-6839

Cite this article: Miguel de Baca, “It’s Making A Little Noise’: Video Art, A Radical Mess,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1685>.

“It’s Making a Little Noise’’: Video Art, A Radical Mess

Miguel de Baca, Associate Professor, Department of Art and Art History, Lake Forest College



Video 1. Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *East Coast West Coast*, 1969, single-channel video, 22 minutes. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL: <http://www.vdb.org/titles/east-coast-west-coast>

“Um . . . it’s making a little noise.”

“Turn the, um, I think you’re supposed to turn the voice all the way down.”

“Is it on ‘play’? No, no . . . the other thing.”

“‘Record,’ though. Is it on ‘play’ or ‘record’?”

This rambling dialogue between Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson, Joan Jonas, and Peter Campus begins Holt’s video *East Coast West Coast* (1969; video 1). One minute of ordinary chatter precedes the main action: an improvised conversation between Holt and Smithson about the East Coast versus the West Coast art worlds, with each artist playing stereotypes to the hilt. Holt takes the role of an uptight New York–based conceptualist (“It’s all about systems!”), and Smithson, the naive California dreamer (“I want to ride bicycles! I don’t care

about systems!"). Meanwhile, Jonas perches on a counter behind Holt and Smithson—the video was shot in her Grand Street studio—and Campus, entirely out of view, operates the rented camera.¹

Such marginal, preliminary speech could easily be forgotten, understood as the video equivalent of the sound of tuning up. It is, however, precisely the opposite: its appearance meaningfully serves as an introduction to the video as a whole and the framing device through which we first must pass as viewers. This small scene announces the medium, and therefore whatever happens next is meant to be understood in the context of the experience of video: an experience that, unlike other moving image practices, was available for instantaneous playback, erasure, and re-recording. As if to stress the informality of the situation, Jonas replies to Holt's concern that the camera is not functioning: "We can always do it again."

Such everyday casualness, when taken with the tone of Holt and Smithson's subsequent performance, seems to press subtly up against conventional artistic expertise despite that these artists were immersed in an art world in which they were also considered professionals. Smithson, for example, published his indictment of midcentury formalism (and justification of land art), "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," in the influential journal *Artforum* in September 1968, the same year Holt traveled the mid-Atlantic with him, the gallerist Virginia Dwan, and the Minimalist artist Dan Graham. The following year, Holt showed at Dwan in the group exhibition *Language III*.² Jonas, a performance artist, studied with the noted choreographer Trisha Brown in the late 1960s and broke out in 1968 with *Mirror Pieces* (1968–71). Campus's work in video, focused by an encounter with Bruce Nauman at the Castelli Gallery in 1969, would quickly set the bar in the field.³ Given the vital moment of these productions, at the end of the 1960s when video was brand new, we need to know more about the stakes of their performed amateurism, its importance to the development of the medium, and its potential messages to the viewer. In each of the examples studied in this essay, artists deployed an affected lack of virtuosity in their early video artworks to confront established hierarchies—in short, to establish video as a radical medium.

Video and Amateurism: A Paradox

In general, linking video to amateurism is an interesting paradox, since electronic media seem to beg for specialized technical knowledge instead of the other way around (for example, think of how a graphic designer uses a computer versus the rudimentary functions for which you use your own at home.) But what the beholder sees and hears in many early videos is a purposefully indeterminate aesthetic extending to Dada anti-art gestures of the 1910s: non-composition, chance, improvisation, and the rejection of the commodification of art. Charting a specific legacy for video, these qualities are frequently discussed in relation to the influence of the preeminent artist Nam June Paik, who was influenced by the avant-garde composer John Cage. In the 1950s, Cage's Dadaist sensibility famously made way for a radical order of music in which the practitioner appears to rescind specialized musical knowledge. Take, for instance, the famous example of Cage's *4'33"* (1952), which instructs performers to open and close a piano lid at certain intervals, creating punctuated musical silences that intensify awareness of ambient noise in the auditorium. By the end of the 1950s, Cage and his collaborator, Karlheinz Stockhausen, had turned to electronically mixed sound recording while working together in West Germany. There, it came to Paik's

attention, who centered his early-1960s investigations on adapting mechanical reverberation and looping, and their transposition to television—in essence, composing with video.⁴

Once Paik moved to New York City in 1964, he fully professionalized his process: access to consoles and cameras through public television furthered his interest and provided an audience for broadcast. It should be noted that many artists and historians have challenged the primacy of this Paik-centered genealogy of video art: Martha Gever, for instance, bitingly called it Paik's "coronation."⁵ Nonetheless, linking Dada to video is as important formally as it is conceptually. For both, trespassing formal integrity was vitally linked to revolutionary politics. As Tristan Tzara wrote in the *Dada Manifesto* (1918), "Is the aim of art to make money and cajole the nice nice bourgeois [*sic*]?"⁶ Many Dada artworks could accordingly not be commodified because of their unsaleable status—as precious objets d'art. Much early video also subverted the inviolability of the place of commercial television within postwar vernacular life—including the work of Paik.⁷

Concerning amateurism, what sets Paik apart from Cage is the extent to which his tapes relied on technical expertise. Although Paik's stated goal was to "make technology ridiculous," the complexity of his *mise-en-scènes*, the expertise required to achieve his special effects, and his frequent collaborations with accomplished musicians such as the cellist Charlotte Moorman, reveal the extent to which mastery—not naivete—was at the core of his practice. In fact, the criticism of Paik by Martha Rosler consists in his replacement of the banal, commercial messages of television with lush, symphonic entertainments equally lacking a distancing effect. Following Rosler, the critic Marita Sturken argues that Paik's highly technologized style recodifies, instead of critiques, the normalization of technology in contemporary bourgeois society.⁸

Stepping back to look at the rebellious 1960s as a whole, we can see many different movements that came up against traditional forms of artistic expertise. Certainly, it was a point of convergence between the leading styles of the decade—Pop and Minimalism. To take one highly visible example, Andy Warhol notoriously distanced himself from artistic genius. His infamous studio, The Factory, maintained the façade of the nonspecific and de-differentiated production of his art, although we also know that Warhol often protected the uniqueness of specific works by hand painting, manipulating the serigraphic process, and sanctioning accident.⁹ Perhaps more significantly, in paintings such as his *Do-It-Yourself Landscape* (1962; Museum Ludwig, Cologne), Warhol teased at the notion of painterly expertise. He equated formulaic painting (such as paint by numbers) with amateurism, punning on the rote formulas he celebrated in his own professional practice. That the rivulets of "DIY" paint resemble the edges of the sublime color fields of Morris Louis from the 1950s signal another repetitive—and critically successful—formula from the recent past. Warhol therefore revealed expertise as one of the enduring pieties of modernism.

In the 1960s, Minimalism styled itself after an anti-elitist, workingman's approach to fabrication, wedded to the withholding of the artist's subjectivity as a source of privileged inspiration. The fact that many Minimalists sourced complete sculptures from outside jobbers (for example, Donald Judd's specific objects), or assembled them from premade industrial materials in their studios (such as Dan Flavin's fluorescent light bulb works and Carl Andre's plains), challenged the beholder's sense of how to describe the artist's expertise. Their project was contemporary within the much broader turn into literary and artistic postmodernism, now virtually synonymous with Roland Barthes's foundational

essay, "The Death of the Author" (1967), that drew attention away from biography and intention as sources of meaning (its English publication was in *Aspen 5+6*, an eccentric magazine-in-a-box that was also a Conceptual art exhibition unto itself), not to mention Michel Foucault's many theses on low-ranking, amateur, and marginal experience in opposition to established scholarship and theory.¹⁰ Following these, Michel de Certeau wrote in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) that an expert's "competence is transmuted into social authority," and therefore, amateurism was one posture these artists assumed to bring art into a revolutionized relationship to cultural power.¹¹

Accordingly, some Minimalists embraced the ambiguity of skill as a radical gesture, questioning its importance to a positive definition of artistic production. By shining a light on an established correlation between expertise and value, these artists were able to critique the web of social relationships holding up the art market, including assumptions about intelligence, access to education and training, and the preference for saleable objects in galleries and at auction. The extent of skill to be an artist (as in an expert artist) would seem to rely on institutional contexts—museums, galleries, art history and criticism—and their power to confer legitimacy.

In an insightful study of radical art in the 1960s and 1970s, the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson focuses on strategies adopted by artists to flag their radicalism. For some, embracing the moniker of the art "worker" served to distinguish them from the art hobbyist, "to move away from taints of amateurism (or unproductive play) and to place themselves in the larger arena of political activity." But doing so was not a guarantee that the public would understand or appreciate the gesture, since at the very same historical moment, Bryan-Wilson notes, artwork of the late 1960s and 1970s increasingly refuted the standards of traditional expertise, "either because the labor in question is performed by other hands or because it is primarily mental," as in the case of Conceptual art. Art workers, then, sought to validate their intellectual work as true labor in defiance of hierarchies of expertise imposed by museums, galleries, and critics. It is now evident that video makes the story more complex, and it behaves both as a medium that requires specialized technical knowledge of the equipment, but which strategically unmoors itself from that idea to signify its countercultural potential.¹²

In their recordings, early video artists habitually referred to the process of making the video itself, describing technical functions, the experience of using the camera, or the experience of being taped. Arguably, the effect is most noticeable in amateurish work such as *East Coast West Coast*, since the visuals hew closely to private home videotapes and not to TV, in which the slick production values intentionally conceal the production process. Interestingly enough, the marketing of the 1965 Sony Videocorder, the first pushbutton recording technology available to the general public, benefitted from the slipperiness between personal and professional uses of the technology. According to an early story in the *New York Times*, a Sony executive used it to "take motion pictures" of his golf game. The same story, however, proclaimed that amateur recording was especially suited to politicians to practice speeches and to produce their own videos to distribute to local television stations.¹³ While that specific latter usage may not have been fully realized, the potential for self-broadcast had vast implications for the future creative uses of the new medium—and, as we will see in the case of collectives such as People's Video Theatre and the Videofreex, its radicalism.



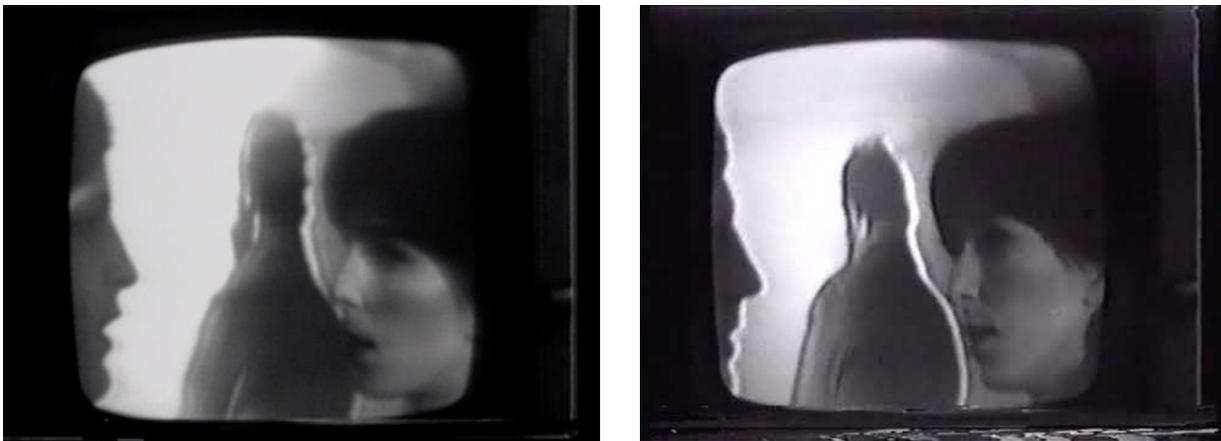
Video 2. Dan Sandin, *5-Minute Romp through the IP*, 1973, single-channel video, 3 minutes, 53 seconds. Electronic Visualization Laboratory, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qh6jRzjmcY>

On the other end of the production spectrum, some artists were building their own technology to manipulate and record video, often in collaboration with universities and public television stations. By the turn of the decade, media theorist Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* (1970) legitimized video as an art form, aligned it with Post-Minimal and Conceptual art practices, and introduced specialized vocabulary for monitor-based media. His book indexes the quick professionalization of video with abundant analogies to science; video artists are not "entertainers," but instead are "researchers" assaying the relationship between viewer and media.¹⁴ Despite the technical advancement of the medium, artists embraced the possibilities arising from approaching increasingly complex electronic systems with the spirit of a novice. An overt and entertaining example of this is Dan Sandin's *5-Minute Romp Through the IP* (1973; video 2), a video staged as a tutorial in which the pioneering digital artist records himself demonstrating the different but basic ways an image processor manipulates visual effects. Wearing a decorated miter, Sandin shows off his skill in creating various effects in color, value, and tone. Sandin ends the tape with a winking barb, "Complex enough?!" acknowledging that despite his particular dexterity with the image processor, it is not a technology for the uninitiated. What links Holt's amateurish *East Coast West Coast* and Sandin's stylized *5 Minute Romp Through the IP* is the semiotic flourish of hearing the artist describing or narrating how to use the equipment on the soundtrack and what the beholder sees on the tape.

Framing Video

The collapse of skilled and unskilled making of and viewing marked video from its inception. Seemingly innocuous, these earliest tapes subvert expertise, both the form and content of video, to estrange the viewer from the naturalness of watching commercial television, which masks the process of its making in order to preserve the unity of its content. These qualities occur in Nancy Holt's early practice with special force and will be

addressed. But to illustrate the deconstructive potential of video art, a well-known collaboration between the artists Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris is a prime example. In 1972, Benglis and Morris exchanged videotapes to construct a dialogue about one another’s studio practices, yielding Benglis’s *Mumble* (1972; video 3) and Morris’s *Exchange* (1973; video 4). Densely layered and using rudimentary videography to frame and mirror the subjects, the result is a centerless bricolage of video and sound. Characteristic of early tendencies of video to self-narrate, the opening shot of *Mumble* is a television set playing static, and after a few seconds Benglis’s recorded voice comes over: “This is a tape I made of Morris’s and my studio.” Throughout the video, Benglis describes what the viewer is or is not seeing or hearing—for example, “The figure that is talking is not on screen at the moment,” “The figure in the middle, who you can’t see now, is not there at all”—therefore undermining the veracity of her own narration. Morris’s *Exchange* is similarly lacking in directed focus. His narration throughout is more conceptual (such as, “She compressed him into an object; he projected onto her a landscape of his feelings”), but the video begins with Morris’s simple, fragmentary statement: “Comment on.” Morris clues the viewer into the idea that his video is a “comment on” another video, Benglis’s, which is itself a comment on the difficulty of arriving at clear visual meaning. *Mumble* and *Exchange* therefore provide compact examples in video of deconstruction in theory: there is no autonomous inside or outside to these works, but instead a commentary existing between the tapes as texts.

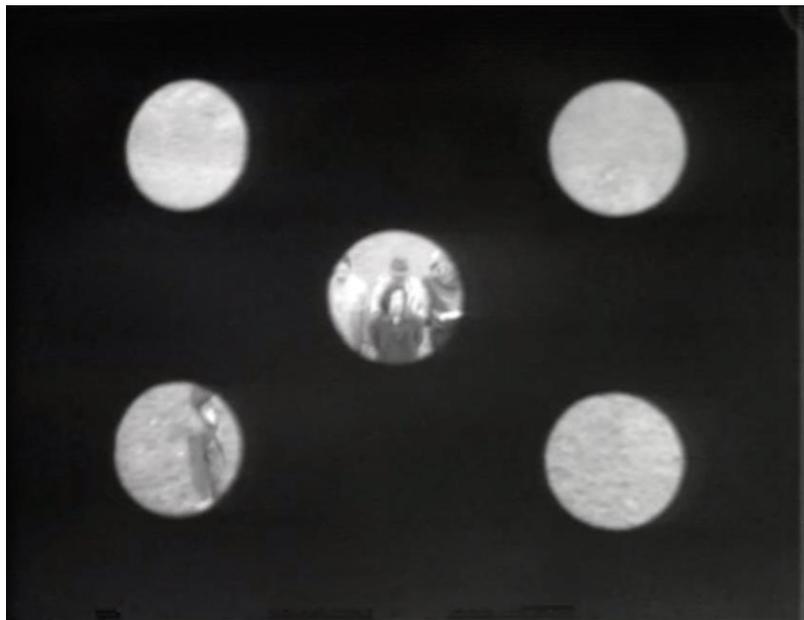


Videos 3, 4. Right: Lynda Benglis, *Mumble*, 1972, single-channel video, 20 minutes. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, <http://www.vdb.org/titles/mumble>. Left: Robert Morris, *Exchange*, 1973, single-channel video, 36 minutes, 2 seconds, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKS3iby2oVo>

What Morris would have us see is that video—not only his *Exchange*, but also the medium itself—is the “comment on.” In comprehending this trait, I have found Jacques Derrida’s metaphor of the frame (*passe-partout*) as argued in his influential *The Truth in Painting* (1978) to be useful.¹⁵ He opens with an analysis of a painting frame as a feature that traditionally defines the artwork because it delimits the work from the ordinary space outside. Deserving of his dedicated attention is the frame’s beveled edge. Looking at this sloping shape, it would appear that there is no hard break between inside and out; there are only relationships between images on the wall and the social and cultural contingencies of the viewer. As a classic poststructuralist writing, Derrida’s *Truth in Painting* demonstrates that what seems extraneous to the text may well lead back to it with new insight. To put it as Morris would instead, every videotaped image is a comment on another image sliding in and out of view. The fundamental feature of artists verbalizing their tentative approach to

operating the camera breaks the seal between representation and its immediate, real-life context.

We get an indication of Nancy Holt’s fascination with the frame through the revealing inclusion of the prefatory dialogue in *East Coast West Coast*—itself a boundary of sorts through which the beholder must pass at the start of the tape. Not only are Holt’s videos “comments on” in Morris’s sense; they also address particularities of video in which visual certainty is rendered tentative. In another example, Holt’s *Going Around in Circles* (1973; video 5) shows a black screen except for five apertures through which figures (art students who had volunteered to be taped) can be seen moving in an open field. Holt marked off the focal length between where her camera was situated and the places in the field where a figure or group would be centered within the apertures. While taping, she communicated with the students via radio, directing them to move from mark to mark. The soundtrack to the video is a later, off-camera discussion between Holt and the students as they watched themselves played back on the monitor. Significantly, the tape comments on the different systems of ordinary sensation masked by video recording: the largely discounted action of running from mark to mark, the heft of the video camera and holding the five-hole aperture up to its lens, and the disorienting experience of watching a video of oneself on playback.¹⁶



Video 5. Nancy Holt, *Going Around in Circles*, 1973, single-channel video, 15 minutes, 15 seconds. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, <http://www.vdb.org/titles/going-around-circles>.

The following year Holt made *Points of View: Clocktower* (1974), which further addresses the estrangement felt by the viewer when given only a fragmentary view through an aperture held up to a camera. In this tape, Holt features four pairs of art world “experts” (Lucy Lippard and Richard Serra, Liza Béar and Klaus Kertess, Carl Andre and Ruth Kligman, and Bruce Brice and Tina Girouard) attempting, and usually failing, to describe what they see through a moving circular opening, played back as the soundtrack for what is shown on the screen (we see what each pair saw and hear them talking about it). Each pair takes a different view from each of the cardinal directions. Like *Going Around in Circles*,

Points of View revels in speculation; sometimes it is clear what is being shown, but usually it is not. When it came to the critic Lippard, not knowing (the uncertainty of) what she was seeing was the main source of her intrigue. She took license to analogize it to the role of the critic, indicating: "I hate the idea of imposing what I'm seeing. It's a pain in the ass, but it's what I do for a living." To draw a comparison between Holt's *Points of View* and the passe-partout, the circular aperture at first seems to restrict what the camera might otherwise show but reveals itself as the quality of the whole tape—to use a Derridean phrase, the "presentation of the representation" that occludes even as it directs the gaze.¹⁷ Holt's deceptively simple setup yielded an uncanny relationship between the destabilization resulting from a partial view and the role of the critic (now rendered as an amateur rather than expert) as an artificial and partial interpreter.

Talking Back

Following on the beveled edge that collapses the barrier between the viewer's everyday experience and the narrower context of experiencing an artwork, a significant feature of the early medium is what historian William Kaizen calls "talkback," referring to opened channels of communication between video producers and the public. People's Video Theatre's multipart *Documentation of a Demonstration* (1971) is an early example, covering content such as a Native American demonstration at Plymouth Rock, a women's liberation march, and one of the very first gay pride parades, including on-the-street interviews of participants and onlookers. People's Video Theatre made use of the pushbutton ease of the camcorder to review and edit tapes quickly. Interviewees were even allowed to see themselves instantaneously through the playback function and to dictate how they would be shot. Tapes were later screened and discussed at public forums in their loft, which were also recorded. The dialogues arising among the documentations, interviews, and screenings were, according to Kaizen, a "participatory democracy for the Information Age"—negligible in terms of its impact on a national level, but significant to the emerging countercultural role of the medium.¹⁸

Like People's Video Theatre, the Videofreex (the "Freex") eliminated the division between television and its public. Established in New York City in 1969, the Videofreex moved to rural Lanesville, New York, to set up a television station of their own using pirated cable lines and an unlicensed transmitter. On one or two days per week, locals could tune in and call in with questions, items to sell or swap, and other information. Significantly, for many callers, it was the first experience of being able to hear their own voice on television. The three-part archival *Lanesville TV Overview* tapes (1971; video 6) document the experiment, including footage of their ramshackle studio set up within a regular house with rooms not only dedicated to monitors and wired connections, as might



Video 6. Videofreex, *Lanesville TV Overview I*, 1971, single-channel video, 32 minutes, 18 seconds. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, <http://www.vdb.org/titles/lanesville-tv-overview-i>

be expected, but also to socializing during programming. The specialized knowledge of the mechanics of television of Videofreex appears notably downplayed on tape; as one caller to their program was told, "We don't have everything quite together as you can tell." Their charming amateur aesthetic helped gain the public trust; Lanesville was not the subject of an exhibition but was instead a partner in the experiment. In that the local community was able to "talk back" to the Videofreex, which they did with surprising frequency, Lanesville TV was one of the most egalitarian televisual experiments of its time.



Video 7. Videofreex, *Women's Conference Rochester*, 1971, single-channel video, 18 minutes, 4 seconds. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, <https://www.vdb.org/titles/women's-conference-rochester>

The egalitarianism of the Freex was also its radicalism. Their *Women's Conference, Rochester* (1971; video 7), as the title suggests, is a documentation of an early feminist gathering at the YMCA in Rochester, New York. Like the People's Video Theatre, the Videofreex recorded countercultural movements that did not have regular expression on the broadcast news. Also like the People's Video Theater, they preferred a non-narrative format, wandering between episodes and themes. Their videography did not intrude upon the gathering by hierarchizing or interpreting what they saw—what de Certeau decried as the imposition of expertise.¹⁹ For example, a key component of the conference, and one that the Videofreex take pains to capture, is the exuberant performance of the women who showed up: drum circles, improvisations, skits, and impromptu songs about a range of civil rights issues, including women's rights. Not all of these vignettes related overtly to feminism, but the Freex lent them equal visual weight in the composition. Although at a significant remove from a tape like Holt's *East Coast West Coast*, *Women's Conference, Rochester*, also begins with a seemingly extraneous dialogue between Freex members Mary Curtis Ratliff and the cameraman (possibly David Cort) on how to use the camcorder's playback feature, before abruptly cutting to a drum circle inside the conference room. Equally as abrupt, halfway through the video, the camera cuts to the street outside the YMCA. The cameraman shot passersby and engaged them in spontaneous interviews. When asked by one suspicious interviewee, "What are you doing?" the artist replied, "I don't know, I'm just sort of playing," before cutting back again to the conference. By equating the action of recording

with playful experimentation, the Videofreex suggest deskilling as an important strategy within the activist intellect, at once employing technical knowledge but retreating from the professional and commercial contexts of both the art world and mainstream television.

Recording History

The *Women’s Conference, Rochester*, is just one example of video’s openness to second-wave feminism. The very mention of feminist video conjures Rosler’s essential *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), which typifies the rebelliousness of the movement against the stereotypical housewife role as much as the cooking show demonstration that constructs and reinforces it. As Gever has noted on the subject of video and feminism, there are “no aesthetic principles in common to artworks by women,” and, as I hope is plain, locating one single and totalizing aesthetic is as antithetical to the goal of this essay as to the medium itself.²⁰ But what about video as a gendered medium, in terms of form as much as content? Returning to Videocorder marketing of the mid-1960s—a technology available to perfect a golf swing or to help politicians make better speeches—the presumed operator was male. To push on the preceding discussion of artists who highlight their process in order to comment on it raises the question of video as feminist labor.



Video 8. Videofreex, *Knitting and Feedback*, 1970, single-channel video, 32 minutes, 54 seconds. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, <https://www.vdb.org/titles/knitting-and-feedback>

The Videofreex’s *Knitting and Feedback* (1970; video 8), like Holt’s *East Coast West Coast*, is an exceptionally early example and commentary on women’s creative work. It is a thirty-two-minute video that begins with a long montage of David Cort lounging on the floor of the studio, gently stroking his beard and rubbing his fingertips together to the dreamy soundtrack of psychedelic music. The video jarringly cuts to Mary Curtis Ratcliff, holding a camera, who briefly makes silly faces toward the first camera before cutting to her camera’s view of Carol Vontobel seated on the ground, knitting. The soundtrack then switches to a recording of President Richard Nixon’s speech delivered at Kansas State University in September 1970: a presentation railing against antiwar protest, which itself was spurred by

Nixon's escalation of the Vietnam War in May 1970. Vontobel fades in and out with kaleidoscopically radiating special effects. The opening image of Cort's (male) lassitude makes the labor of Ratliff's (female) camera work overt (silly faces notwithstanding—here, it could demonstrate her easy way around the equipment), just as Nixon's belligerent political oratory stands in pointed contrast to Vontobel's contemplative knitting. To again cite Bryan-Wilson, the category of domestic craft and women's work, to which knitting certainly belongs, was not only "shunned by many modernist critics for its taint of amateur decoration," it was also infused with new value by feminists in the 1970s as a symbol of resistance to conservative and patriarchal authority. As the title of the Freex video might suggest, knitting is also a crucial metaphor for the synthetic process of interlocking electronic video and audio signals that eventually produce a videotape recording. Both knitting and video represented important opportunities for an assertive feminist presence within the sphere of the fine arts.



Video 9. Hermine Freed, *Art Herstory*, 1974, single-channel video, 22 minutes. YouTube (excerpt), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vC1y6fLLYo>

After Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* and key exhibitions in the mid-1970s, video art was no longer experimental in the same way that it had been in its first decade. As William Kaizen perceptively notes, "in freeing television from the commercial limits of network broadcasting . . . artists opened the medium up to the commercial interests of [collectors]."²¹ And, with its entry into the mainstream, the force of its critique of commercialism concomitantly weakened. I will conclude, then, with Hermine Freed's video *Art Herstory* (1974; video 9), a brilliant and technically complex video, the aim of which was to issue a feminist voice within a different mainstream—that of art history, perhaps the most conservative. On the heels of Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking contribution "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" (1971)²², Freed inserts herself into numerous masterpieces from the Western canon using a blue screen, the predecessor of today's green screen. In bringing these paintings to life, Freed speaks back to the monitor: she complains about the discomfort of a pose and ventriloquizes the various female sitters and speculates on their thought processes. Her most disruptive action, however, is to hold a video camera up to her eye, interacting with other figures within the frame and the studio outside, self-consciously

bringing the process of making a videotape into tension with the male-authored artworks she adapts to hers.

The sophisticated production value of *Art Herstory* cannot be mistaken for an amateur endeavor. And yet in it we still perceive residues of framing dialogues we have seen in Holt, Benglis, and the Videofreex. Beyond that, the soundtrack is poignant for the contemporary questions Freed poses to art history, creating temporal oscillation: "The sequence of images on this tape is different from the sequence in which they were produced. Have I altered my history for the sake of world history? [. . .] Did the artists alter history to fit their own ideologies? Have we or they reinterpreted the past in order to have it fit . . . their own model of the present?" Freed's obvious point is to destabilize the patriarchal hagiography of art history. A second, prescient point is to present feminine identity as that which is predicated upon past and present expectations of how the female body ought to appear—an idea that would later be cemented in feminist theory with film critic Laura Mulvey's publication "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* in 1975.²³ For the purposes of this essay, however, I feel compelled to recognize Freed's subtext: that by its very design, video is a radical medium. Video upends the masculine hierarchy because it includes and sustains precisely the remnant images and acts of speech for posterity that traditionally would have been considered tentative and extraneous. From the perspective of *Art Herstory*, art history before video is remote.

Notes

¹ This article originally appeared as a paper I presented on video at "Organicism, Open Systems, and Technology in Feminist Art," a session at the College Art Association 105th Annual Conference (2017), moderated by Susanneh Bieber and Christine Filippone. I am greatly indebted to the colleagues who added texture to my thinking through their participation in a lively workshop, "Video Art and the 'Public,' 1968 to Circa 1980," held at LUX in London in June 2018, sponsored by the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Department of Art History at the University of Oxford. My thanks also extend to Abina Manning at the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for her helpful suggestions. The title of the article was inspired by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's artists' pages, "The Medium is the Mess . . . age," in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 242–48.

² Notably, Smithson's character in *East Coast West Coast* performs—exaggeratedly—the "turbidity of thinking" and thought processes dissolving into "stones of unknowing" that he writes about in his *Artforum* essay. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968): 82–91. A full list of Holt's collaborations is available in Julia Alderson's "Chronology" in *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, ed. Alena J. Williams (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), 265–83.

³ Peter Campus, interview with John Hanhardt, *BOMB*, July 1, 1999: <http://bombmagazine.org/articles/peter-campus>.

⁴ The nexus of influence between Nam June Paik, video, and the anti-art aesthetics of Dada and its reprisal by Fluxus artists is ubiquitous in the literature. I will, however, cite just one recent and especially helpful critical text: William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), 44–45.

⁵ Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik," *Afterimage* 10, no. 3 (1982): 12.

⁶ Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto 1918," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 480–81.

-
- ⁷ Kaizen, *Against Immediacy*, 46–50. See also Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" in *Illuminating Video*, 31–50, especially 44–48, and Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History" in *Illuminating Video*, 101–21, 105–6.
- ⁸ Rosler, "Video," 45–46; and Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form," 110.
- ⁹ Caroline A. Jones, "Andy Warhol's 'Factory': The Production Site, Its Context, and Its Impact on the Work of Art," *Science in Context* 4, no. 1 (1990): 101–31.
- ¹⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48. See also Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Random House, 1980), among other sources.
- ¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 6–7. I do not wish to imply that the critique of power of Minimalism—capitalist, patriarchal, art historical, for example—was fully fledged. As the feminist art historian Anna Chave has proven, Minimalism's phallogentrism and monolithic aesthetic frequently expressed, rather than repudiated, conservatism. See Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44–63.
- ¹² Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). See especially chapter one, "From Artists to Art Workers," 13–39. I am grateful to Justin Wolff's work on Alexander Forbes's amateur films, which similarly collapse distinctions between professional and amateur categories in order to make claims about changing perceptions of identity and temporality within a modernist episteme. See Justin Wolff, "A Strange Familiarity: Alexander Forbes and the Aesthetics of Amateur Film," in Martha J. McNamara and Karen Sheldon, eds., *Amateur Movie Making: Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film, 1915–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 71–94.
- ¹³ Gene Smith, "\$995 Home TV Tape Recorder to Be Introduced Here by Sony," *New York Times*, June 9, 1965.
- ¹⁴ Kaizen, *Against Immediacy*, 133–34.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1–13.
- ¹⁶ The frame is a recurring motif in Holt's lifelong practice, including her sculptural interventions within the landscape. The cylindrical concrete structures of *Sun Tunnels* (1976)—an artwork far better known than the videos under discussion in this essay—frame the space of the desert and celestial bodies in the night sky. The result is a condition under which the viewer perceives herself seeing. In Holt's words, "[Y]ou're always perceiving your own sight and your own perception relative to the structure, so there is a perceptual relativity which is also very physical and related to the level of the eye." Nancy Holt cited in Ted Castle, "Siteseer," *Art in America* 70 (March 1982): 87.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.
- ¹⁸ Kaizen, *Against Immediacy*, 90.
- ¹⁹ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 6–7.
- ²⁰ Martha Gever, "The Feminism Factor: Video and its Relation to Feminism," in *Illuminating Video*, 226–41.
- ²¹ Kaizen, *Against Immediacy*, 180.
- ²² Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews* (January 1971): 22–39, 67–71.
- ²³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.