

The least that can be said is that we have witnessed the death of video art in the United States. By "video art" I mean the formal category defined by discipline-specific Great Society arts funding, theoretical resistance to electronic mass culture, and the self-serving historiography of curators seeking job security. There are almost no "video" festivals in the U.S. anymore. The "blue-chip" video artists—Gary Hill, Nam

The End of Video Art (and Television)

June Paik, Bill Viola—have been absorbed by the traditional arts establishment, and now concentrate on creating collectible video installations. Decisions to produce film or video are dictated almost entirely by distribution issues and practical considerations; emerging and established video artists like Sadie Benning, Tom Kalin, Marlon Riggs, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto have sought salvation in feature film projects, planned or recently completed. It was said a decade ago that video art may have been the only art form to have a history before it had a history,¹ and now its history is history before we had a chance to mourn its passing.

Disestablishment of TV, the ultimate cause that united video artists and independent documentarians for years, no longer galvanizes the field for a variety of reasons. Distinct philosophical and stylistic

shifts have muted the dichotomy between video art and television, as artists and activists seek to participate in TV culture in order to revitalize the medium's modalities and pursue the illusive goal of cultural democracy. Media artists are making works for television²; television is making occasional opportunities available to artists³; and most work practicing media critique has not only abandoned repudiation of the medium, it now engages television's methodology as an efficacious vernacular, "playing both ends against the middle" to make a kind of television that presents and critiques itself.⁴ It is this

success of video art, and the cultural shifts it enunciated and evinced, which is partially responsible for its "failure" as a fine arts form in the current decade: the media revolution is to some extent being televised or looks like television, and the battle lines are completely blurred.⁵

Once the great punching bag for new theory, TV is presenting deconstruction with a moving target. In fact, television's critique of itself is more pervasive, and in some ways is more persuasive, than its critique by media art. Ranging from Gary Shandling's deft faux talk show hit *The Larry Sanders Show*, to John Kricfalusi's and Bob Camp's genre-mutating toons *Ren and Stimpy*, to *Mystery Science Theater 3000*'s sophomoric running commentary on bad

films, to Beavis and Butt-head's sneering adolescent interrogation of adolescent music videos, to the Eveready Battery commercials' ubiquitous ad parodies broken up by the cymbal-crashing pink bunny, the current wave of "anti-television" programs keeps television one self-critiquing step ahead of video art's best efforts to serve as the loyal opposition.⁶ After a decade of subjecting the talk show format to withering denigration, David Letterman has raised self-parody to the industry standard, as witnessed by his \$14 million-per-year contract to host CBS's new flag-ship talk show. Now, news anchors, sportscasters, MTV's VJs, and Nickelodeon's network promotions all make it a point to acknowledge the lameness and absurdity of the medium's formats, conventions, and protocols.

More than anything else, the friendly fire to which television has subjected itself has made guerrilla raids against the evil empire largely irrelevant, and like the U.S. now deprived of an arch rival's bracing threat, "alternative" video has lost its moral imperative. Add to this advertisement's—especially music video's—annexation of the entire history of 20th Century avant-garde film and video techniques for its flavor-of-the-week posturing of new consumer goods; the collapse of media art's secondary role as purveyor of experimental visualizations has deprived it of even the formal ground on which it once stood.

Convergences within the media arts field have also fueled its diffusion. In the last decade we have witnessed the merging of theory, documentary, and art making into new kinds of critical television,⁷ meta-critical media,⁸ and activist advocacy⁹ that make distinctions between criticism and art as irrelevant as distinctions between news and entertainment on television. Distinct formal categories are breaking down and strict adherence to genre—the self-enforced codes of "Documentary," "Experimental" and "Narrative"—is less and less the norm, as choices about approach and strategy are increasingly driven by the exigencies of



Monitor image from Bill Viola's single channel work
Reverse Television: Portraits of Viewers, Compilation Tape

personal content. Video art seems to have forecast its diaspora in the past several years through a wide range of hybrids and mixed modalities: artists are embracing documentary techniques, documentarians are manifesting experimental sensibilities, narrative works fluently mix modes, and activists advocate their views with any persuasive means available.¹⁰

So, video art is dead. So what? These changes in postmodernist media arts practices have hardly been noticed because they are dwarfed by their socio-cultural and technological surroundings. This merging of art and criticism and documentary and television and alternative video into a vestigial media arts field is a minor manifestation of a millennial vortex that is almost incomprehensibly large and powerful, a crush of convergences of the largest information systems in the world. Yes, video art has become a historical footnote, but television is in its twilight, too. At the on-ramp of the information superhighway, the movie studios, TV networks, cable companies, telephone companies, computer companies, consumer electronics companies, and publishers are poised to converge into massive new systems of cultural distribution based on digital technologies emerging in this generation." When fully implemented, this will complete the century-long relocation of the dominant site of cultural experience from the "proscenium arch" to the "home."

The Transition

The transitional window of 20 years into a digital system for the exchange of culture will be a crucial time for the new media arts. More than the limits of technology and economics, the limits of end-use demand will dictate the opportunities for the new media. When the U.S. converted from radio to TV in the late 1940s and early 1950s, almost all programs were versions of radio shows with the same stars—one of the early terms

for the technology was "radiovision"—and this relationship dictated TV's formats for the generation that followed and beyond. What are they planning to do with hundreds of slots soon to be available via DBS or fiber-optic cable? They are going to have pay-per view movies starting every 15 minutes taking up eight channels at once, to better compete with home video renters and retailers. Cable conglomerates know that people will pay to see movies and they aren't sure what else they'll want to experience.

Even if installation of the digital playback base speeds ahead of the delivery system installation, the market for products to "read" is not going to approach the market for products to "watch" for quite some time because of ingrained behavior patterns. The vast majority of people still see the computer as a work station in the office or the study, and the TV as the fun station in the living room.

Eventually all-digital delivery and playback will replace analog TVs, which will then share many similarities to computers. But it took 20 years to wire up for cable TV—and a sizable minority of the U.S. still isn't wired. It will cost hundreds of billions of dollars to rewire the country and fully convert the installed base of playback systems, so there is no way that the existing base of TV sets is going away for quite some time. For at least the next generation, the analog TV will enjoy a transitional window and a whole revolution will unfold in increments, a year at a time, a platform at a time, driven by what TV spectators learn to demand.

TCI Cable is doing something that is either entirely brilliant or massively stupid.

To a test market near their base in Denver, they are offering around 2,000 viewing choices on demand through remote control selection. What happens once a selection is made is laughably low-tech: an attendant has five minutes to scramble to a vault of tapes, grab the selection, and put it in a VCR. Why would one of the largest cable companies in America do this? Because they know that they have to seed demand for interactive programming before they invest in the hardware that will make it a large-scale reality.

The parallel for new media artists is to accept the limits of the authoring systems and capacity of the transitional technologies—all technologies are, after all, transitional—and envision hypermedia's future now. While a number of artists have experimented with emerging interactive technologies, these have been almost exclusively in the realm of institution-based installations. Artists must go to the new venues as they emerge, and make products and programming for the venues themselves. Key opportunities may open up in the next few years for a number of reasons.

There is a paucity of programming to fill a 500-channel environment (even with half the capacity given over to pay-per-view) and a lack of capital to produce for "narrowcasting" because TV production has been skewed towards mass advertising budgets. Artists must exploit their ability to create low-budget programming before infomercials, home shopping, and every TV show made before the present moment gluts the paths into America's homes.

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While a lot of work has been created for television by artists up to this point in relationship to existing media arts venues, the total wouldn't fill one channel for a year, and much of it has merely been attempts to use television to distribute production created for entirely different distribution contexts. A generation ago, the emergence of cable technology was rhetorically embraced as an important new artists' venue, but public funding and community access, extensions of the Great Society models, were the almost exclusive basis of "Guerrilla Television." What is required is a completely different approach to funding and programming and a takeover at the level of programming enterprises and production companies to recast entire venues via media arts-informed perspectives, but in a fashion that accepts who television audiences are, how television distribution works, and how it will be radically altered in the next two decades.

Simple multi-channel interactive programs—the use of several channels with viewer options to make content decisions, such as the multi-camera live sports program experiments in this country and Canada—may be one method whereby artists' intertextual strategies start to find their audience. Recent work by Van Gogh TV, such as their Documenta-based interactive television project of 1993, suggests how steps might be taken in bringing existing technologies such as phones, modems, video phones, and satellite links together into a dynamic tele-community bulletin board for the exchange of information and public art.

Those interested in combining critical and aesthetic strategies have an excellent opportunity to create demand for truly oppositional deconstruction by taking advantage of the limits of crude digital video over the next few years. With QuickTime and DVI only able to fill a small window on most personal computers, the screen must be occupied by companion content, so there may never be a better time to combine radical applications of literary criticism with film and

television, though this is not in and of itself sufficient to redefine the possibilities of the new media. Interactive products that support repeated use really demand a depth of construction that may help create a receptive audience for the density, ambiguity, and complex engagement afforded by artist-produced hypermedia. If people do learn to truly read media, they will become an empowered audience, ready for new experiences with a new kind of media art and criticism.

But if artists primarily respond to the emergence of the new platforms by repurposing existing artworks as hypermedia in the hopes of finally getting neglected work distributed, the opportunity will be squandered. New technology and distribution systems require new creative engagement; artists must make computer software product for the base of users who are supporting this production, or the formulation will fail. We must learn to approach marketing as audience development and not some egregious compromise of artistic principles.

None of these new production and distribution opportunities will dramatically change the role of art in culture—such shifts are always incremental—but they may ensure that the media arts legacy extends into the next century. This is not at all certain in the climate of recent setbacks

Freedom of Information Acts

If any single circumstance defined the transformation of art in the U.S. over the past decade, it was President George Bush's firing of National Endowment for the Arts Chairman John Frohnmayer in 1992, in anticipation of a radical right-wing political ad. Pat Buchanan's campaign spot featured a tantalizing glimpse of *Tongues Untied*, a publicly funded and broadcast experimental video celebrating black gay identity.¹² Here, the war on culture waged by the evangelical right and the war through culture waged by artists came into ecliptical alignment.

Distancing itself from largely apolitical formalism over the last decade or so, art has increasingly come to be defined by

the politics of its content, distribution, and cultural and sexual representation. Utilization of mass media modes of address have come to be seen as crucial strategies for social change. Heightened visibility has brought these confrontational agendas to the attention of the right—not otherwise entirely aware of alternative culture—and its unequivocally provocative content has threatened just about every cherished belief in the Bible Belt. Arts funding has thus become a political football, and a great issue with which the right can raise funds. Attacks on the Arts Endowment in the early 1990s became as much a part of any conservative's routine as attacks on abortion rights, equal opportunity measures, or school prayer prohibitions. This is a dramatic series of developments: that an assault on a President's arts funding position would be a key part of a challenger's campaign strategy, and that the firing of the NEA Chairman would be that President's most crucial defense of his right flank, were completely unthinkable five years earlier.

While the political tide in the U.S. has momentarily turned, the right is powerful enough to keep the Clinton administration in check: at this juncture Attorney General Janet Reno is moving forward with an appeal of a federal court ruling that a clause requiring publicly funded art to be "decent" was unconstitutional, an appeal initiated by Bush appointees.

The end of public funding is in sight, and most of the field's publicly funded centers are mortally wounded. Clearly, the new media arts must blaze its own trail and create self-sufficient private support through commercial distribution. In the private sector, controversy about provocative content can "sell,"¹³ but in the public sector, previous controversies have irreparably eroded the political base for arts funding and are hampering adventurous programming.¹⁴ Beyond turning the tables on recent content controversies, this process is an important step in developing new relationships between artists and their constituencies.

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End of Video Art *continued*

The fight for the future of American culture hasn't seen anything like the all-out war that will be fought by the radical right to keep provocative art and oppositional advocacy off the public utility master file servers of the nation in the fully digital future. Pornography will always have an audience on any platform, but truly transgressive work by artists openly challenging the boundaries of identity is under growing threat of suppression. As technology compresses the culture into increasingly more centralized storage, it is frighteningly clear that concentration of media power is the most important problem faced by whatever is left of the counterculture. It is imperative that artists, critics, curators, activists and other cultural workers seize opportunities early in the technological transition to create a community of readers in search of new ideas.

Forget about the death of video art: failing to understand what's at stake during what may be only a brief window of opportunity at the inception of a new media arts field could irreparably harm the vitality of American culture for generations to come.

Notes:

1. Bill Viola, "History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime," *Video: A Retrospective* (Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984), p. 19.
2. For example, videotapes by Mark Rappaport, Shelly Silver, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, all carefully configured as broadcast video art works, position themselves within television's stylistic terms and genre expectations. Their success hinges, in part, on being recognized as some form of television, however far-out. Helping mass media to become its own worst enemy, the Yonemotos have refined in *Made in Hollywood* (1990) a perpetually self-critical and self-mutating form of soap opera expertly grafting simulated media culture to conversational art theory. A travelogue poised perfectly within kitsch Americana, Rappaport's *Postcards* (1990) is an inspired marriage of postcard world view and television melodrama. Silver's *The Houses That Are Left* (Part One) (1990) is an ambitious film/video dramatic comedy pilot that also mixes in documentary and deconstructive modes with exceptional fluency.
3. Video art has occasionally found its way into the most adventurous programming of cable enterprises like MTV, USA, HBO, and Bravo, and public television-produced media art series like *Alive Television* (formerly *Alive From Off Center*) and *New Television*. These programs not only recycle existing art, but also help fund and, in the case of *Alive*, commission new work. There have been a few recent forays into the realm of commercial television by independent feature

filmmakers such as David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*, 1989-90) and Nicolas Roeg (a made-for-TV *Heart of Darkness* in progress for TNT), following up on '80s projects by Robert Altman (*Tanner '88* series, 1988) and Peter Greenaway (TV *Dante* series, 1988-). Various new forms of public television funding such as the National Asian-American Television Association and the Independent Television Service promise even more hybridization such as Janice Tanaka's moving one-hour personal documentary about the effect of the Japanese-American Internment on her father and family, *Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* (1992).

4. Steve Fagin's *The Machine That Killed Bad People* (1990) is a particularly cogent example: one of the leading exponents and practitioners of theory-inclined video art has created a self-described two-hour experimental TV mini-series, unabashedly engaging the television context as a working paradigm for the production of intellectual culture.
5. In 1985, the leading video art curator during the field's inception, David Ross, wrote of "the success of the failure of video art": while video art had not liberated television from monopolistic corporate oppression, some great work had been created on its own terms. David Ross, "The Success of the Failure of Video Art," *Video Art*, May 1985. As video art's ascendant star—he is currently Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art—Ross is another example of video art's absorption by the traditional art world.
6. A medium with a history of going its critics one better—this legacy extends back to the talk shows and specials of Ernie Kovacs in the 1950s and early 1960s, Mel Brooks and Buck Henry's *Get Smart* in the 1960s, *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s, and Andy Kaufman in the 1970s and 1980s—television is now effectively parody proof. See my "Parodying Parody: The San Francisco International Video Festival '84," "Andy Kaufman: Performance Provocateur," and "In the Beginning: Ernie Kovacs," *High Performance*, Winter 1984, for a historical context of this phenomenon. See also my "Andy Kaufman's Last Laugh," *Art Issues*, March/April 1990, and *Kovacs and Kaufman* (Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1989).
7. Works by Robert Beck (*The Feeling of Power: #6769*, 1990), Connie Coleman and Alan Powell (*Stat-ic*, 1989), John Goss (*"Out" Takes*, 1989), Alan Henderson, Richard Metzger, and Ann Magnuson (*The Power of Pussy*, 1991), Bob Paris (*Behold, I Come Quickly: The Strange Revelations of Reverend Swaggart*, 1990), and Elia Suleiman and Jayce Salloom (*Introduction to the End of an Argument* [Initiada]: *Speaking for oneself...Speaking for others*, 1990), all demonstrate illuminating refinements in the application of critical theory to the textual analysis of television by engaging the medium's modalities.
8. Spoken and written texts are being used to inject critical dialogue into the body of the work in a didactic fashion. This is partly an extension of the social and political commentary provided by contemporary art, and this tendency also indicates the growing need for cultural criticism of and via electronic media. But, what particularly distinguishes this new wrinkle is the extent to which video artists are now articulating cultural criticism, aesthetic theory and even self-critique as interventions into the work—often establishing a separate "voice" for this commentary—assuming the role traditionally reserved for the art critic. Examples of works employing self-criticism include Vanalyne Greene's *A Spy in the House that Ruth Built* (1989), filled with expository asides that present a running play-by-play of her motives in making a tape about her sexual and sociological obsession with baseball, concluding with an ex-post facto assessment of what the tape "means"; Jeanne C. Finley's *At the Museum: A Pilgrimage of Vanquished Objects* (1989), a dev-

astating critique of the museum as context for culture articulated by written texts that constantly counterpoint and undermine the narrator's tour of the Oakland Museum; and Erika Suderburg's *Diderot and the Last Luminaire: Waiting for the Enlightenment* (*A Revised Encyclopedia*) (1992), a presentation of re-invented meanings that simultaneously questions and supplants the role of order in knowledge.

9. Artists advocacy works are so numerous that whole categories of video festival competitions must be reconfigured: as a judge at the 15th Atlanta Film and Video Festival, my colleague and I had to create a separate category from documentary, narrative, and experimental, "Advocacy," to reflect the dozens of videotapes that used experimental techniques to comment on contemporary issues, works which made their own point of view so primary that they violated the cinema verité-dictated parameters of documentary practice.
10. This is what most impressed me about the survey of hundreds of independent film and video works submitted for review to the NEA Media Arts Production Grant review process in which I participated in 1991, and provided by the entries of the 15th Atlanta Film and Video Festival. These comments are revised from my statement in the festival catalog, *15th Atlanta Film and Video Festival* (Atlanta: Image Film and Video Center, 1991).
11. To get a sense of how visible this convergence is, see the cover story by Philip Elmer-Dewitt, "The Info Highway: Bringing a Revolution in Entertainment, News and Communication," *Time*, April 12, 1993, and Ken Auletta, "Barry Diller's Search for the Future," *The New Yorker*, February 22, 1993.
12. Over a "suggestive" but relatively tame thirty-second excerpt from *Tongues Untied*, Buchanan's spot declared: "In the last three years, the Bush Administration has invested our tax dollars in pornographic and blasphemous art too shocking to show. This so-called art has glorified homosexuality, exploited children, and perverted the image of Jesus Christ. Even after good people protested, Bush continued to fund this kind of art. Send Bush a message! We need a leader who'll fight for what we believe in. Vote Pat Buchanan for President." *Tongues Untied* (1989) is a widely acclaimed *tour de force* by Marlon Riggs, a Bay Area artist who makes experimental works and more conventional documentaries. It provides a remarkably rich assessment of the black gay experience through an arts variety show format that combines poetry and musical performance, personal narrative and ethnographic documentary.
13. Examples are numerous, ranging from banalities like Madonna's hyped-out book to artistic triumphs like Todd Haynes' homoerotic *tour de force* *Poison*, which was attacked by the radical right and did well theatrically and in home video.
14. Obviously, the public funding of art is now in perpetual jeopardy, but the more insidious effect may be in the self-censorship many art institutions implement to limit their individual liability. For example, Dennis Barry was perceived as being a major hero after the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati beat a pornography charge precipitated by an exhibition of the works of Robert Mapplethorpe. Within a year, Barry and one of his curators pulled a work by Andrew Krasnow containing an American Flag made from human skin from their "Mechanica" exhibition for fear that they would be subject to further attacks and loss of community support. Andrew Krasnow in several interviews with the author, January-March 1991.