

Some notes on the influence and interrelationship between Experimental Film & Artist's Video

When any of my students return from a shooting session with a video camera, they inevitably tell me they have been out "filming". I stopped correcting them some time ago. These days to "video" something invariably means to engage in "time-shifting"-re-organising the broadcast TV schedule, whereas the activity of "recording" is almost exclusively reserved for sound. The distinction between video and film, something of vital importance when I was at film school at the end of the 1970's, seems of little significance to the next generation of artists working with the moving image.

The contemporary gallery experience of experimental film or artist's video seems inevitably to be via the ubiquitous DVD player ("Digital Versatile Disk") & data projector. In presentations that are neither "cinematic", nor "televisual", artist's film & video has become blended via a hybrid display technology that favours neither- a compromise that puts convenience and reliability before considerations of authenticity or aesthetic experience.

The other common and equally distorting experience of artist's film & video work is the "off peak" (and its usually very off peak!) broadcast television programme. Here artist's film and video works are blurred together, juxtapositioned, packaged, extracted and re-contextualised into a homogeneous *mélange*. Broadcast TV is really only interested in artist's film & video as budget TV. Even works especially commissioned for TV rarely get more than one airing.

The digital imaging revolution that is responsible for the convergence of these hitherto distinctly separate moving image media, seems to have already rendered them obsolete.

In the 20th century artists chose to experiment with film and video for a variety of reasons, but inevitably they sought, or were forced to come to terms with, aspects of the materiality of their chosen medium. Filmmakers explored the semiotic relationship between the image content and subject matter in relation to the frame, the emulsion, the projection event, the screen surface, the duration, the grain structure, the flicker, the relationship between the 'pro-filmic' and 'filmic' events, and the narrativity of so-called 'dominant cinema'. Video artists had to come to terms with "the TV box", the fields, frames & lines, the low resolution, the limited colour palette, the continuous flow of the signal, the instantaneity, the magnetic tape, the camera pick-up tube, and the broadcast context.

This paper is about the relationship between film and video as tools for the artist. I have highlighted some of the ways in which the two mediums are distinct and separate in order to discuss how they were influential and complementary. As a video artist who has been very influenced by experimental/avant-garde film, I have inevitably referenced work that has had an impact on my own practice. My focus is primarily on video artists who have made reference to the influence of experimental film on their work, presenting

extracts that demonstrate the interrelationship between the two mediums. I also compare & contrast work by artists who engaged directly with the film emulsion with those who worked directly with the video signal.

Broadcast TV & Cinema

The relationship between broadcast TV and the cinema is complex and interwoven. The current technological convergence enabled by the development of digital imaging is simply the latest manifestation in the history of the two media.

The phenomenon we are experiencing may be more accurately characterised as a re-convergence. Not only is the technology linked through its use of camera/lens imaging devices, but television, like the new digital imaging technologies, is itself a 'carrier' medium, blending and containing distinctly separate media, drawing on the aesthetics and conventions of radio, cinema, photography and print. Television is in many ways the precursor of digital convergence. For the first twenty-five years of its existence television relied on cinema to provide moving images produced outside the confines of the studio. Before the mid 1950's it was technically impossible to record the television image, which, since its inception in the 1920's, had been a completely live, ephemeral signal.

Experimental/Avant Garde cinema has a long and distinguished history tracing back to the first decades of the 20th century, whereas video art sprang out of the "Jovian Backside" (according to experimental film-maker Hollis Frampton) of television in the 1960's. In the early days of video many artists experimented with both mediums, exploring the similarities and differences. Some shot on film and transferred the results to video, some worked with video and transferred to film. Filming or recording images off the TV screen was a common strategy.

By the 1970's however, for many, video art had begun to forge a distinctive practice, establishing the foundations of its own history. Artists chose to work with video for a variety of reasons, many of which distinguished it from film. Emerging video art practice ranged from political activists such as Guerilla TV, and The Raindance Corporation in the USA and TVX in the UK, to performance based artists such as William Wegman, Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas in the USA, Gilbert & George, Kevin Atherton & Rose Garrard in the UK, to formal experimenters such as David Hall, Tamara Krikorian, & David Critchley and abstract imaging experimenters such as Peter Donebauer & Richard Monkhouse in the UK, Stephen Beck & The Vasulkas in the USA. Feminist artists such as Martha Rosler, and Tina Keene also embraced video with enthusiasm, attracted by its lack of historical precedence and its political and aesthetic potential. Many of these artists made a transition from film to video, bringing skills and sensibilities drawn from their experience of working with film.

From Film to Video

UK based video artist, Daniel Reeves took up video after initially working with film. After studying filmmaking at a Vietnam veteran's re-habilitation

programme, Reeves found work in the educational TV department at Cornell University. He describes the discovery of his affinity with video, and its suitability for the kind of work that he wanted to produce, whilst engaged on a film project:

There was a kind of "Eureka" situation when I was able to sit down with U-matic video editing. I transferred the film footage to video. It was precisely the plasticity, the spontaneity and the very smallish gap between inspiration and execution that was quite apparent to me. I...transferred all of this imagery, 3 or 4 hours of film material that I had researched and selected from the National Archives in Washington...I had never been able to make sense of this material. But when I transferred this material to Quad (2 inch video) I was able to modify the footage, change the contrast, add colour, solarise. I created lots of effects reels from the footage as well as the straight transfers... So by transferring this material to video I was able to explore a new approach. Footage could be modified in real time; merged- at that time I wanted nothing to do with cuts. Cuts have rarely occurred in my work since then. I have, I guess, an eternal notion of the fluidity that exists in the world. (Although occasionally you turn around and you feel that something has just been cut.)

...For me at that point, it became clear that the medium was going to allow me to make the work that I wanted to make.

...I became really enamored and encouraged by the feeling the video camera could be as direct a tool (within certain restrictions) as a pen, or a brush or a carving tool. ..Discovering that I could now go out with the camera, and although it was still a relatively clumsy 3/4 inch U-matic deck. But clumsy or not, it went on a back-pack, and with the camera you could just capture things right there, and look at them right there if you chose to...

The Vasulkas

Pioneering US video artists Steina & Woody Vasulka took up video in the late 1960's. Steina was a classically trained violinist and Woody studied film at the Academy in Prague. Immigrating to the USA in (1965) they soon abandoned film for video:

Woody Vasulka: I was not very successful in making films- I had nothing to say with film. This new medium was open and available and just let you work without a subject.

C.M-A: So taking up video freed you from the 'subject'.

W.V: Exactly. I didn't have to follow what was the strength of the movie- that intimate voyeur narrative system that was very successful. I like movies of that period, as you know, but I also knew well the avant-garde, the left Avant-Garde, and as I grew up in a socialist system that was something the regime couldn't forbid. So we were fed very much by these products of the avant-garde. Later, when I came here and saw what the Americans called avant-garde, I was very sceptical about it because we had this in Europe and that

was the true avant-garde. But then I gained a great respect for the American avant-garde because they did it from the belly of the beast-

Steina: That was why the American avant-garde was so much more interesting, because it lived in this hostile environment where the movie wasn't considered art to begin with.

W.V: But they had an ethical explanation for it. P. Adams Sitney, for example.

C.M-A: I have the impression that the so-called 'structural' filmmakers didn't like Sitney's formulation. Hollis Frampton, for example, felt very constrained by it.

Steina: Yes, but they were also flattered.

W.V: He never understood them. I think, that was the problem. But nobody could understand Frampton, he was too complicated. But Jonas Mekas did most of the footwork. He was the man that gave this movement total legitimacy by a simple ethical statement such as "this film is beautiful, just because it wasn't made in Hollywood". So he transcended the aesthetics through ethics. This gave a complete self-assurance to a whole generation, because they made their films as individuals outside of the industry- in fact, in protest to the industry. They had the same strength, in fact a greater strength- a moral right, than the film industry. This was a very much-cultivated opinion which I was very interested in, because coming from the other side, where film was the government- even if there were radical movements in film. At that time, even if there was any significant film made, it had the same ideology- forget the medium, forget the scratches, and simply deliver the ideology- fulfil the narrative system or whatever. Hollywood had the same interest.

S.V: That's why when we conceived of video as being the signal- the energy and time and all of that, we thought we were right there, smack in the middle of it. These were the radical times in experimental film and there were all these people starting up in video. We were all discovering this together..

'Structural' Film

In the early to mid 1960's North American film-makers including Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, Paul Sharits, & Joyce Wieland produced a number of films which were grouped together by critic and writer P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film*, his classic study of American Avant-Garde film. According to Sitney, the 'Structural' film is cinema in which "the shape of the whole film is pre-determined and simplified." Within the films of these artists Sitney identified an awareness and foregrounding of filmmaking's technical processes as crucial:

...the formal film is a tight nexus of content, the shape designed to explore the facets of the material...The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline.

Sitney identified four main formal techniques that characterised the structural film:

1. The fixed camera position
2. Flicker effect
3. Re-photography off the screen;
4. Loop printing.

According to Sitney three of these four defining characteristics were derived from the work of Andy Warhol, who in a rejection of Abstract Expressionism, produced "anti-romantic cinema" in direct contrast to the lyrical and poetic film work of Stan Brakhage, who believed that every frame counted. Warhol on the other hand "simply turned the camera on and walked away".

For Sitney, the fundamental challenge of Warhol's films for the structuralist film-makers was in the orchestration of duration: "How to permit the wandering attention that triggered ontological awareness ...and at the same time, guide that awareness to a goal." These films evoked meditational states through the mediation of the camera.

Artist's Video

These formal strategies, adopted by Sitney's American Structuralists, were influential on artists who took up video in the USA and the UK. Artist's working with video adopted parallel strategies. Long continuous takes, were if anything, even more prevalent in early Artists' video.

Video art, with its roots in Fluxism and performance art, via Nam June Paik, and Wolf Vostell, also adopted the fixed camera position for pragmatic reasons. The Sony "porta-pack, using open reel half inch video tape was capable of continuous takes of up to 30 mins. Initially this format was difficult if not virtually impossible to edit, a technical restriction that had aesthetic repercussions. Many early tapes were documentations of live performances, including work by American artists such as William Wegman, Vito Acconci & Martha Rosler .

Re-filming (or re-recording) off the screen was also a common strategy of early video makers. In the UK for example, David Hall's *This is a Video Monitor*, made in 1974 and remade for broadcast on BBC 2 in 1976, uses both re-recording techniques and a repeating loop structure as does Joan Joan's *Vertical Roll* (1972).

David Hall

British video artist David Hall trained as a sculptor, documenting his work using photography and film before abandoning both mediums to work exclusively with video.

Hall made his *7 TV Pieces* on 16 mm film for STV in 1971, thus ironically the earliest British video art was actually shot on film:

I thought that on the whole art had very little social significance and was really kept in its sort of annex. It was just for the initiated. I wanted to try and push outside of that, and it seemed to me that using film. i.e. like cinema, and using video, like television, or better still on television, seemed to me to be a much more appropriate place to be as an artist...

I was doing a bit of film and it occurred to me that TV would really be the ultimate place 'cause everybody had a TV, and that's what they were keen to look at- they weren't keen to go to a gallery. Some people went to galleries, but everybody looked at television, and this was significant.

'Scratch' Video

Once frame-accurate video editing became accessible in the early 1980's, the looping of image sequences and/or repeat editing techniques were quickly adopted by video artists. By the mid 1980's this approach had become synonymous with 'scratch': fast repeat action editing, often satirizing broadcast TV and with an overtly political content. Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, (1978) is often cited as an early precursor, but there are precedents in the canon of experimental film. For example Bruce Conner's newsreel collage films including *A Movie* (1968) was an important early influence.

'Scratch' video work was also characterized by its use of image processing. But the percussive montage of re-appropriated high contrast coloured images was not exclusive to scratch video. The early work of Len Lye for the GPO film unit, or his ill fated broadcast TV advert for General Motors have a similar look and energy.

Lye pioneered and developed the technique of drawing directly onto film, a resourceful solution to the funding problem that dogged him throughout his film-making career. This method of filmmaking has become a genre of its own, and many experimental filmmakers have explored and extended its potential. Although there is no direct video equivalent, video artists who developed and built their own video tools to generate and manipulate the video signal offer an interesting parallel.

Video Artist/Engineers

Stephen Beck's "Direct Video Synthesiser" designed in 1971 as a performance instrument, was intended to be used to produce video images without a camera. Beck saw his machine as an "electronic sculpting device" designed to generate four key aspects of the video image- colour, form, motion and texture. In a subsequent version, Beck extended the scope of the device to include circuits to generate the elemental images of air, fire and water. Beck's stated concern was to open up television as an expressive medium and to go beyond the manipulation of the conventional camera image to produce non-objective imagery.

In his essay "Image Processing and Video Synthesis" he explains attempts by a number of American artists including Nam June Paik, Eric Seigel, and Dan Sandin to exploit:

The inherent plasticity of the medium to expand it beyond a strictly photographic/realistic representational aspect which characterises the history of television in general.

Richard Monkhouse and the EMS Spectron

In 1974 British artist/engineer Richard Monkhouse, developed a video instrument called the "Spectron" for EMS, a London based electronics company. . This machine was capable of colourising a monochrome video camera signal with digital control of colour brightness.

Monkhouse was not simply interested in the technology for its own sake, but wanted to make creative use of the machine he had designed. Even before leaving EMS in 1975, Monkhouse had begun to use the Spectron to produce his own video work inspired by the computer films of John and James Whitney.

Peter Donebauer and the Videokalos Image Processor

Video artist Peter Donebauer, interested in the potential of the Spectron, visited Monkhouse at EMS, with the intention of finding a way to continue the abstract video work he had been producing using the colour TV studio at the Royal College of Art. Inspired by the films of Jordan Belson, Donebauer had initially worked with 16 mm film:

I started in film; there was no video when I first arrived at the Royal College... My starting point was an interest in music, because I noticed how film images were completely transformed once a soundtrack was added. I thought it would be interesting to bring that emotional aspect further up the film production chain.

At first I thought about this very literally- could music be interpreted visually? So I built a little device to vibrate a thin film of water over a loudspeaker. At first I filmed it, but this was both slow and expensive. Working with a black and white portapack allowed me to experiment and get immediate feedback of the results.

Forming a collaborative partnership, Donebauer and Monkhouse designed and built an instrument they called the "Videokalos Imaging Processor",

Donebauer's main intention in building the Videokalos was to gain the same level of control he'd had in the studio, but with simpler means. He also hoped it would bring him into closer contact with video:

"I felt that getting involved with the integrated circuits, chips and transistors and all the rest of it, would get me closer to the heart of the medium".

Donebauer's attitude to video was informed by working directly with the medium in a live and interactive way. This attitude was embodied in the Videokalos IMP, and was crucial to both the development of the instrument and to the subsequent development of Donebauer's video work.

Artist's Film & Video: Differences & Distinctions:

Any discussion about the relationship between experimental film and video art must include a reference to their differences. As mentioned at the outset, video has its own distinct and unique properties that set it apart from film, and many artists have sought to explore these. In taking a decision to work with video Woody Vasulka claimed "video negates film":

The idea that you can take a picture and put it through a wire and send it to another place- you can broadcast from one place to another- this idea of an ultimate transcendence- magic- a signal that is organised to contain an image. it was clear to me that there was a utopian notion to this, it was a radical system and so there was no question of deciding that this was it.

For the Vasulkas there was a crucial distinction in the relationship of the picture signal to the sound. Steina:

It was the signal, and the signal was unified. The audio could be video and the video could be audio. The signal could be somewhere 'outside' and then interpreted as an audio stream or a video stream. It was very consuming for us, and we have stuck to it.

I remember that Jonas Mekas didn't like video very much, and he said "why don't those video makers just make silent video? We all started with silent films." This was the biggest misunderstanding of the medium I've ever seen. Video always came with an audio track, and you had to explicitly ignore it not to have it.

Catherine Elwes: The Female Gaze

Feminist video artist and critic Catherine Elwes identified some of her reasons for taking up video as opposed to film in the late 1970's. Citing the both influence of Structural/Materialist film and Laura Mulvey's classic 1973 paper "Visual Pleasure & Narrative Cinema".

I think initially it was an impatience with painting....I needed a more direct and immediate way of communicating the stories that were in my head and that I was trying to get out.... For me the difference between film and video was like the difference between painting and drawing.

What put me off about film, principally, was the fact that I couldn't see it.... I also didn't like the waiting. ...Video was a bit like having a pencil with a rubber. I could put something down, and if I didn't like it I could just rub it out. To me it was much closer to drawing and that's why I felt an affinity with it.

...I didn't think much about television...I had absorbed a lot of theories ...that had come down from "Structural-Materialist" film...I started working with performance first, and then incorporated video into the performance, then abandoned performance and worked exclusively on tape....The only difficulty

was that having abandoned the history of art, you took on the history of film. You were suddenly doing battle with the history of film and television. It's a different set of problems, but just as difficult a set of problems. The things that Laura Mulvey talked about- the gaze of the camera, whether it was possible to appropriate the gaze, and what you needed to do. How you convinced your audience that it was a female sensibility that was being expressed.

Bill Viola / Stan Brakhage

Bill Viola's use of the video camera often seems to be almost anti-cinematic. He often uses the camera as if it were a kind of visual microphone. Viola has a particular notion of acoustic space and understands sound as both an object and a physical force. This concept provides a model for installations that are designed to engage the viewer both physically and emotionally. As a result, he speaks of scenes before his camera as 'fields' rather than 'points of view'. Thus Viola's concern to link physical and material existence to abstract, inner phenomena have evolved out of recognition of the unique properties of sound.

Viola's use of low light cameras, developed for surveillance purposes in *The Passing*, for example, provides a visual experience that sharply contrasts with the cinematic. Viola's murky low-resolution monochrome sequences of nocturnal desert landscapes and domestic interiors are further subjectivised by the employment of ultra close microphone techniques. But this subjective use of the camera/sound environment draws directly on the early work of Brakhage in which the gaze of the camera is tied in to body movement, subjective vision and human consciousness. Compare the sequence of Brakhage trudging up the hill in *Dog Star Man*, with Viola's shadow figure stumbling in *The Passing*.

It is interesting to compare Brakhage in his essay "The Camera Eye", from *Metaphors on Vision* written in 1963, with Viola, quoted in an interview made 30 years later.

Brakhage:..."the "absolute realism" of the motion picture image is a contemporary mechanical myth. Consider this prodigy for its virtually untapped talents, viewpoints it possesses more readily recognizable as visually non-human yet within the realm of the humanly imaginable. I am speaking of its speed of receptivity which can slow the fastest motion for detailed study, or its ability to create continuity for time compression, increasing the slowest motion to comprehensibility.....I am dreaming of the mystery camera capable of graphically representing the form of an object after it's been removed from the photographic scene, The "absolute realism" of the motion picture is unrealized, and therefore potential magic.

Viola: For me, one of the most momentous events of the last 150 years is the animation of the image, the advent of moving images. This introduction of time into visual art could prove to be as important as Brunelleschi's pronouncement of perspective and demonstration of three-dimensional pictorial space. Pictures now have a 4th dimensional form. Images have now been given life. They have behavior. They have an existence in step with the time of our own thoughts and imaginings. They are born, they grow, they

change and die. One of the characteristics of living things is that they can be many selves, multiple identities made up of many moments, contradictory, and all capable of constant transformation, instantaneously in the present as well as retrospectively in the future. This is for me the most exciting thing about working as an artist at this time in history. It is also the biggest responsibility. It has taught me that the real raw material is not the camera and monitor, but time and experience itself, and that the real place the work exists is not on the screen or within the walls of the room, but in the mind and heart of the person who has seen it. This is where all images live.

Conclusion

The boundaries and distinctions between artist's video and experimental film are fast dissolving. The reasons for this are not merely technological, but also social, economic, and aesthetic. It is certainly true however that the development of high-resolution digital projection, non-linear editing, and image-processing computer software have accelerated the process of convergence. New methods of distribution and dissemination are clearly also an important factor.

For artists who began working in the 1970s & 80's film & video have represented two distinct paths of related practice that share many of the same concerns and historical precedents. Many video artists have experimented with film, many filmmakers have explored the potential of video as a creative tool. From the mid 1960s until the beginning of the 1990's video and film were distinct modes of expression with different, though' related production techniques. Film practice has developed a considerable body of theoretical and critical discourse, which video lacks, has always envied and has more than occasionally drawn from.

It may eventually be perceived that the split between film and video in the second half of the 20th century was a kind of technical and aesthetic diversion in the history of the moving image, and that the convergence we are witnessing is simply the end of a brief, if productive detour.

Chris Meigh-Andrews, London, July 2003.

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