

THE 30-SECOND DILEMMA: THE FALL AND RISE OF VIDEO ART

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In autumn 2003 the left-wing critic Dave Beech published in *Variant*¹, a controversial and provocative article seeking to explain why “video art wants to be boring”. In this article Beech noted video's “low and threatening status within art”, and claims that the very convenience and availability to video as a medium has made the “art world” insist on 'purifying' video as an art form, to free it from any contamination from its status as a popular culture medium related to home video and television. In short, video art is deliberately “boring” (defined by Beech as “not entertaining or not taking pleasure in popular pleasures”) in order to place it within the category of “high art.”

While this article did find the controversy it rather desperately sought, it launched many heated conversations among video artists and gave rise to often-worried predictions of the future of video as an art form. Because the inescapable fact was that, as evidenced by the work chosen for a number of high profile exhibitions and presented in major galleries and biennials, much of what passed for video was in fact, if not exactly boring, unengaging, uninteresting and, compared to other uses of the technology (such as music video or advertising) technically poor. Worse still, a simple analysis of audience's responses to video art seemed to show that Beech, if not correct, had exposed some truths about how the medium is perceived.

So, does video art “want to be boring?” Certainly sometimes it seems that way. During a single day at the at the Tate Modern, which included an exhibition of “recent film and video art”², I conducted a simple observational-research project to see how long most visitors spent looking at the video work. While the main gallery's works by Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood and Bruce Naumann attracted much visitor interest, in the “recent film and video art” show I noted³ that the amount of time most visitors spent with each work was 30 seconds or less⁴. Given that this exhibition had a hefty admission charge and was specifically about moving-image art, one must assume that most of the visitors had a serious and possibly educated interest in video art and expected to see a range of engaging and provoking works. With this in mind, ten works at 30 seconds each is not great value for either the admission charge or the time expended in getting to the gallery.

One can certainly claim that most visitors to any gallery will not spend more than 30 seconds looking at any painting or sculpture and this may be true. However it was clear that all of the works in this [and any] video show, being time based, were meant to be experienced in terms of *being* time based. Yet most people did not take the time. The point however is not that this was a particularly bad or uninteresting exhibition but that somehow the audience was not engaged by or with the work enough to spend more than 30 seconds to watch it unfold. As an observer, I was horrified. Later, discussing my findings with other artists and gallery visitors, more than a few expressed, confidentially, that they “don't much like video art” because “it all looks the same.”

Did this mean Beech was right, and that video art *is* meant to be boring, or deliberately made to be boring, and chosen by curators for its adhesion to the rules of boringness as so-called “high art”?

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- 1 *Variant* is an independent arts and culture magazine published 3 times a year out of Glasgow Scotland. It is available on <http://www.variant.randomstate.org>
 - 2 *Time Zones: recent film and video*, Tate Modern 6 October 2004 – 2 January 2005 The show consisted of a range of ten diverse single-screen, monitor-based, projected, narrative and installation works.
 - 3 This was a research project I undertook in response to Beech's article.
 - 4 The exception being Yang Fudong's 14 min narrative BW film, *Liu Lan* 2003, which most visitors watched

Is this then the “problem” of video art? Is it true that much of what we see, much of what is chosen for exhibition, particularly in the Anglo-American art world, has not progressed much in style and substance from the pioneering work done in the 1960s and 1970s? Even though the technology has moved on so much that “video” means something entirely different to what did two decades ago, are we artists still churning out the same kind of things? And if we are, is this a problem? And, assuming this is all true, is the problem that video art is trying to be “high art” with all the fundamentalism - predominantly expressed as the rejection of pleasure – that “high art” demands?

And yet – the evidence shows otherwise. It is possible to see contemporary video art that is both definitely “high art” - that is, complex, thoughtful and expressive, unafraid of tender or controversial issues – and manages to be technically well-developed and innovative, as well as engaging.⁵ To experience such work is exciting. The duration of a video loop is an invitation to immerse, extract and re-immense oneself in the art work, moving in and out of the work's own time frame, experiencing a peculiar shift of time and space, where any point can be a beginning, and the end is merely the point before the beginning resumes. This is a unique essence of video as art, it is immersive and envelops the viewer in the experience of time, but the experience of time is mutable and can be shifted and manipulated by the viewer who can move in and out of a video screening.

At the same time, is not cinema's poor and cheap cousin. The advantage of video in its early days was its facility to create intimate and personal works not easily made with traditional film, as well as durational works that would have been prohibitively costly using film. The peculiarities of the medium created its own aesthetic separate from cinema. While the line between experimental cinema and video may be blurred, it is predominately cinema which has moved into the territory of video and not vice versa. And presently of course the distinction between “video” and “film” is dissolved into the medium of “digital”, so the distinction now is aesthetic and intentional – no longer shaped by the medium.

How then do we account for what Beech and others perceive as the incipient “failure” of video art to engage audiences? Largely, video seems to be a victim of poor curatorial practice, a tendency that is being exacerbated rather than amended by the increasing academicization⁶ of the curatorial profession. At the same time, often it seems that artists are not demanding enough, do not insist of having their work exhibited in a particular way, possibly don't think through the work to the final point of reception. Agreeing to have one's work shown on a monitor rather than the planned projector is hardly going to show the work in the way it was intended, and vice versa. Not only that, curators and exhibition organisers need to be aware that video is a medium that needs *proper* tech support: equipment needs to work sound levels need to be monitored and acoustics and light sources carefully managed. Surely this is self-evident, yet how many times have we seen these simple provisos utterly disregarded?

While those of us practitioners working with video, together with other artists across the art forms, have not yet concluded that there is “problem,” there is indeed unease. Why is video so often presented badly in gallery exhibitions? Why is video art exhibited at film festivals as the poor cousin of the main event? Why is it exhibited at *film* festivals at all?

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I come to this dilemma as an artist trained in classical film-making and photography, who moved into

5 Ignoring for a moment the big well-known names, I can mention here as examples the UK's Tracey Holland and Breda Beban, and Italy's Elisabetta Benassi. Over the past year I have seen new work by these artists.

6 In the UK at least.

video art just as the medium was changing to a fully digital environment. The excitement of the burgeoning technology, together with my interest in alternative screening practices and experimenting with media, led me into producing work that increasingly fell into the formless category known as “video art” - though these categories hadn't actually occurred to me as I was engaged in making.

The excitement of video in the digital age has been the site of video as a medium capable of containing so many different formats and presentation possibilities. The flexibility and mutability of video is its greatest strength. An artist can record and manipulate sound, film directly with the video camera, or digitise and use traditional film stock, use images taken from any source whatsoever and endlessly reconfigure my source material into different variations. On another tangent, video clips can be separated into frames and then used as still images. “Video” can be projected as large or as small as wanted, can be shown on anything from a state of the art plasma screen to a salvaged 1970's TV set or a massive monitor-wall. The work can be built into an installation, or screened against a bare wall in a gallery or a garden shed.

A possible response to poor mainstream gallery practice and jejune curatorial practice is the artist-as-curator and the artist-run space. In theory at least, projects and exhibitions featuring video and run by practicing video artists should be able to understand and work to overcome these potential problems, and take an artist-centered rather than a curator-centered approach. In practice, this does happen, but is under threat from a perceived need to adhere to criteria set out by the “professional” or academic curatorial caste.

Another possibility alongside this is to locate video art *within* other art practices, that are outside or alongside the traditional gallery. While not specifically a video collective, Luna Nera⁷ has from the start used video in a number of different ways in the group's site-responsive projects. Video is a tool that the artists use to create site responsive works and also to create narrative and experimental works which document or discuss particular sites or ideas that arise out of the practice. The artists in the group use video to document the environs and work processes, which are then used to make short documentary films of each project, as well as making video works that are exhibited in the site itself and elsewhere.

Each project as a whole is about exploring and responding to the site, which takes place over a period of time. For example the artists may use found footage, audio or photo-material [old films, records, archival data], or separately record audio material and put this into the video. The artists use video as a container for different kinds of media, and the aim of the individual artists is to push forward or experiment with the medium to create a variety of different works, sometimes using the same source material. Thus the work produced is both collective and individual, and out of the project can come a number of different works some collectively authored and some individual.

The artists are also deeply concerned about how the video is presented: works are only designed for particular methods of presentation; for example, large scale outdoor projection, AV room installation, projected onto objects, immersive multiscreen narrative etc. The common aim is located within the practice of site-response rather than that of “video art.” This relationship of video to site-responsivity is as a primary tool of investigation and process, which has encouraged each artist to examine and question the medium within their practice as a whole.

Conclusion

⁷ See www.luna-nera.com for examples of video work and description of Luna Nera projects.

In considering video's future as an art form, or as a tool for creative expression, we are faced with the reality that video art differs from the other art forms in that it is not rooted in any "traditional form" such as painting, drama, music or even film. Even the technology has changed so much from its 1960's incarnation – changed even more than, say, drawing or painting have changed since the days of the Lascaux cave drawings. Today's digital video technology has little in common with the old portapak – or super-8 or 16mm production - other than being time-based. And the technology is still in flux, expanding, developing. It is far too early to proclaim the death of video art; in fact we are still experiencing its birth throes.

Thinking pragmatically, maybe video is a medium with which we can create a wide variety of art works rather than an art form in itself. However this depends on how or whether we choose to define the idea of an "art form," which is perhaps an outdated notion in any case.

The artist Tracey Holland⁸ notes that "For me video was a next logical step with the work. I moved into it in just the same way I've moved into other mediums along the way ... to me video is a tool just as the still camera or the paintbrush is a tool. Video allows me to combine still images with moving, overlay images, use sound which intensifies the emotion of an image, how wonderful is all that!"

Therefore, the "boringness" of video is nothing to do with video as a medium, but is perhaps indicative of the dearth of ideas and lack of visual development of curators and art academies. Carping about this all-too-real issue in terms of the value of video is a dead end, and can lead to no real change in the actual problem. Instead, let artists use video to create truly marvellous works, and let visionary curators push them out into the world, make it visible in a plethora of ways, freely mix and subvert materials, genres and ideas, take charge of the medium to set agendas and challenge criteria. Let us challenge institutions that disrespect video by founding our own, or cause revolution in those that are moribund. Video is an opportunity with few limits.

The work of art has become, like language for Wittgenstein, a tool to allow us to do a job. It wears its methods on its sleeve, attempting to make transparent the assumptions that lie behind its production, engaged in the production of knowledge and understanding, delivered as an experience-giving rise to pleasure and the construction of desire. [Ian Robertson]⁹

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⁸ See <http://www.traceyholland.co.uk> for Tracey Holland's work.

⁹ "what work does the artwork do?" Ian Robertson 2003, copyright the author.