

DOCUMENTARY AND VIDEO ART: INTERFACE

Sara Diamond

The goal of this series is to provide a sense of the history of video art within the North American context. Keep to N.A. because of the intersection of new art movements in the late '60s and 1970s, the hegemony of television and the political revolt vs mass culture.

Specific perspective:

1) Raise a series of questions about the ways that the history of video as a medium is being written by some academics and critics. Ask: what should a history of an art form contain?

2) Challenge the separation of documentary and art in developing discussion of video by looking at the roots of the medium, at content and at form.

3) Take up issue of "is it art", or what institutions constitute as art, in answer to Luke Rowboat's cancellation of CONFUSED: SEXUAL VIEWS. How does this effect what is shown within the video art tradition...

4) Screen for you work that uses a variety of strategies in deploying the medium, that fits the broad characteristics of video as it matured and that (with a few exceptions) provides message as well as medium.

5) I will argue that a significant amount of video art and documentary are allied, even if some of the conditions of production differ and the forms vary.

Procedure: Present an abbreviated history with tapes. Look at video art, then documentary impulse. Then return to the present and examine both the real pressures on video as a medium and the ways that the history that we have covered is being presented by some art historians and why I think that this process is dangerous/important. Then schematically discuss formal qualities of medium: characteristics of art vs documentary and look at recent crossover work.

I. HISTORY OF VIDEO ART

WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT:

Provides sense of context of medium, deployment and potential. Empowering to know what other artists have done, to have traditions to draw upon or reject or transform. History needs to be written above all for artists and must be inclusive, not for curators as tool to know who is important and what to show...

of t.v. technique also relevant to understand sensibility of specific audiences.

Formal questions essential re: communication of message (still dominant element of video) in an effective way. Requires knowledge of video as medium:

Framing; depth of field; colour parameters; editing; special effects; viewing contexts

Recognize pleasure and value in working in abstract, visually and audio oriented way w/o narrativity. The problem is not with artists in these areas since there is ultimately a dialectic with their work and socially oriented video work--the problem lies in where value is affixed by the art system, a point I will return to soon....

A NOTE ON THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Strong federal funding for art; system artists created in 1950s (Massey Report--C.C.); still JURY OF PEERS/ARMS LENGTH; NOT MINISTERIAL INITIATIVE EXCEPT IN SOME AREA (DOC); NO RETURNS REQUIRED; ANNPAC; AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS PRINCIPLE

Definition of video section evolved as recognition of Canadian context; documentary and art recognized. Strong Quebecois influence important because of crossover work, melding fantasy and realism; SAME SOURCES for producers, not always same production and distribution contexts

Leaves us with issues: what differentiates independent video art and documentary in the history? Established that impulse and some of approach similar.

Jeremy Walsh: "While some commentators might adopt a particular stance that privileged a certain area of production, so that a theoretical, aesthetic or critical framework could be established in order to address that area of production, my contention is that such a position could not be desirable or helpful...We must consider the ways that the work is produced, the factors that are brought to bear upon production, the way that production is influenced by environmental factors, and the complex and multi-faceted relationships that video has with culture in general and the media in particular. We must consider the ways that technology is used as a primary determinant in the way that the work looks and behaves and we must consider the ways that technology is used to manipulate images." (video B4)

Refer to INTENTION; PRODUCTION CONTEXT; PRODUCTION PROCESS; AUDIENCE; CONTENT; FORM.

Intention

ROOTS OF VIDEO ART IMPULSE

Video art and documentary shared basic conditions of early life and in fact grew up together:

1) The social impulses of the 1960s and 1970s, which manifested on a socio/political activist level on a level of ideological challenge which included the art world. Central to this radicalization was a growing belief that the existing media peddled in illusion and that a different "truth" needed to be asserted. This "truth" varied from that of the traditional visionary inner space assigned to the artist in 20th century society and denied by a controlling mass culture, to the specific truths of groups who were either absent from the mass media or mis-represented (women, minorities).

These social impulses, Martha Rosler suggests took two directions, that of "utopian, populist, irrationalism" and that of "progressive, rationalist, antisexist, anti-imperialism"...Holistic impulse of post-war era and 1960s fragments into converging truths by 1970s: fragmented narratives emerge: Vera Frenkel, Colin Campbell, Kte Craig.

2) Artists were at the centre of making a social critique. Paris of 1968: slogans painted on the walls for art, images, and the same in the USA. Social movements such as feminism gave birth to new expressions and forms (~~feminism-art~~) and were profoundly concerned with deconstructing mass media.

3) Communications theory combined with advent of mass media hegemony. A profound consciousness about the importance of the media in asserting social control. A media consciousness that defined "information" as key. Spokespeople of the new left such as Marcuse emphasized the subversive nature of art, its potential to offer an alternative to mass programmed media forms. McLuhanism offered a belief in the supremacy of information--the importance of supplying alternative information and the ability of the artist to package this in a way that was accessible could transform social practice(artist as shaman).

4) On an objective level: portable video equipment, once used exclusively for surveillance was made available by Sony. The Rockefeller Foundation in the USA was willing to fund video experiments. Interest in a previously industrial technology allied with a strong belief in subverting such forms, availability and funds. C.C. Hopmann

5) At the same time, artists and critical documentary producers were excluded from the air waves. Artists were devalued and resigned to critiquing from the sidelines or media that were out of tune with the omnipresent mass culture.

7) Modernism entered a deepening crisis. Artists rejected the art object as goal, opting for communication and interaction. Different priorities emerged: exploration of self as creator and exploration of context of self. Narrativity returned. For some artists this took an individual form while for others group identity was tantamount. (Women especially)

Despite the radical roots of modernism it stood, in deteriorated condition in opposition to content. Strong opposition to object orientation of art world, let first to minimalism: the theatre of reduction and then to conceptual art: PROCESS over PRODUCT; CONTENT important; discourse within and without the art world.

theatre of the self

Issue of truth was major concern within modernism itself. Starting from 19th century realism, the realization that even realist work was constructed--the impact of photographic media on concept of what was real (essential) within painting and other forms. (Reorder reality to tell truth about it).

Artists looked to science, social science, cultural theory, self-criticism...not to the market system for art or the institutions of criticism, academia and museums. Established own production groups...Video Inn is 14.

Specific to concerns of other disciplines was time: issue of real time and subjective time vs t.v. time....

8) Artists sought to erase separation between self and audience. To fracture the passive relationship between viewer and image in mass culture and the exalted role of the artist in the art world. Video was ideal form to meld production/producer/reception because of its potential interactivity.. in turn subversive of t.v. Objecthood was at issue: all commodities and insignificance compared to mass media. Goal was not reform but to completely change the system. "redefine it out of existence". This suggests an "interventionist" role for the artist.

9) reaction vs technical rationalism: simple use of medium favoured versus complex manipulation of t.v. [At first (like photography) artists favoured forms not specific to medium (performance) and then began to adjust to medium, still critically. Now, as we will see later, less criticism, more medium. Invert technology ... beginning: surveillance and television.

ROOTS OF DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE

Important to say that these often precisely the same as with video artists, sometimes differ. Review to-day and give examples later on in presentation. *Both reaction & history.*

"consciousness industry", whose job it was to provide entertainment for a post-work, exhausted mass--entertainment that packaged hard-sell advertising. Specific coverage of events: the war in Vietnam and other imperialist ventures, the radicalization of Blacks and "riots" in American, treatment of Native Indians in Canada...triggered a desire on the part of young producers to provide a different set of truths. Vision of 1960s was one of holistic society, by 1970s fragmented into anti-hegemony (many truths form radical p.o.v.). Fragmentation of reality into converging subjective positions.

2) Perceived need to rebuild and assert a radical documentary tradition. In the 1950s and early 1960s documentary degenerated into "passive representation of the "other", that is a reassurance of continuity of one's lifestyle, (Martha Gever). NFB documentary: not engaged with its subject in this period. Interest in previous documentary tradition of 1920s and 1930s: Lisa Steele comments in "Oppositional Television" on the function of documentary: "James agee said with uncharacteristic restraint of his and Walker Evans project, NOW LET US PRAISE FAMOUS MEN, which documented white tenant farmers during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, 'Actually the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis and defence.' Last word critical. When return to documentary next week we will see how it moved from social realism to more specific-to-video (less cinematic) and more experimental forms. Nonetheless: collective instead of individual vision.

VIDEO ART: IN THE BEGINNING....

1) **VIDEO AND CONCEPTUAL ART:** Crisis of modernism and post-modernism: video addressed art issues that were similar to concerns in other media. Particularly, directness of address, unrehearsed quality (unpredictable), process, real time, cycles of history and process (ecological versus industrial time)... all shared by performance. Video was tool in conceptual art as a means of documentation. Less interesting than conscious use of medium.

Reaction vs technical rationalism: simple use of medium favoured versus complex manipulation of t.v. At first (like photography) artists favoured forms not specific to medium (performance) and then began to adjust to medium, still critically. Now, as we will see later, less criticism, more medium. Invert technology in beginning: surveillance and television.

Performance for the camera. Personal, intimate relationship. Direct, almost inadvertent relationship to t.v. with its huge crews, high production values and editing.

REAL TIME. SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY. Work virtually without

edits.

David Hall In STUDIO INTERNATIONAL: VIDEO ART: "What is most interesting is perceptual processes, most evident response is the intrinsic capacity for instant feedback: camera at monitor recycling image: Mirror analogy, "Video art seeks to explore perceptual thresholds, to expand and in part to decipher those narrow conventions understood on television."

This work becomes a celebration of the accessibility of the medium, its wrenching from corporate control. Also, issues of narcissism emerge: endless self portraiture: when is it justified??? Look at two tapes that raise these questions.

GARBO SYSTEM Dion Poloni.

Poppers. Commentary on indulgences or ... real time ability to watch artist push limits. Body art translated into video medium. Similar to Acconci, Burden's documentations. REAL TIME: SURVEILLANCE.

2) **Narrativity:** post-modernism at first rejected as being the continuation of concepts of artistic genius. Really shifted with advent of feminism and assertion by women that they had not had a chance to tell their stories, get celebrated and pass into history.

Narrative also derived from dominant packaging of t.v. Consciousness industry constantly packaging highly mediated version of reality. Time-based nature of medium forced decision about narcreativity (can work with visual layers for example instead).

BIRTHDAY SUIT: SCARS AND DEFECTS Lisa Steele

Work with female body image and sexualization of nude: demanticize. Courageous work in that it is excruciatingly honest. Steele is satirical: addresses issue of socialization, of media and of body art as celebrated form. Documentation of self as generalized statement about society. (Politicization of narcissism). Issue of self-representation by women had another dimension. Women traditionally not the image-makers, but the imaged. SO, rather than self-representation being narcissistic it operates to a point as a kind of reclaiming, operates more collectively (generiv self discussed).

Paradise Lost Tomczak

Commentary on the art world and on the social world. Looking back at the values that gave rise to video and radicalization and

trying to assess. In reaction to Big Chill and other "assessments" of the 1960s. Disjointed narrative: uses SIGNS of narrativity to pull the story together.

3) Found formats. Danger: Pop art sensibility. Problem with pop art is the depoliticization of work that was critical in the 1920s, becomes an acceptance and eulogization of mass culture and consumer society. Notion of the "found format". Borrow from popular culture in icons and in form of presentation: heroes, sex images, etc. and then soap opera, news, broadcast....

Other artists who do this include Terry Ewasluk, General Idea, Hummer Sisters.

LOSING: A CONVERSATION WITH THE PARENTS

Uses television jargon, conventions, etc. Based on a true confession mode: 60 Minutes interviewer style. Incongruity of age, note social class, conflict with information they have and appropriateness, audience desire for details, (Rosler is careful not to actually reproduce horrific images, but just insinuate...) Addresses social problem of anorexia at the same time as it indites North American luxury.

4) Video art centred on deconstructing the medium and the media. Goal was to disclose its manipulative effects. Richard Serra:

The product of television, of commercial television
is the audience.
Television delivers people to an advertiser.
It is the consumer who is consumed. You are the product
of t.v.
Television designs the world so as not to threaten
you.

This work again takes different directions, including disclosing the process of production of media, engaging in revealing the nature of television, either its production, technical effects or its selection and packaging of certain content. Affinity to information theory: if you lay it bare people will revolt, and to dada: working with ready-made concept.

THROUGH THE HOLES Liz Vanderzaag

Within the tradition of post-modernism...John Cage and the Black Mountain School. Discovery that what is interesting and subversive can be to show or concentrate on the information surrounding an event that is considered of cultural value: thus, the rehearsal not the concert becomes the performance. Another element in the technical deconstruction approach is McLuhanism: "The medium is the message", role of artist to reveal. This tape concentrates on the elements of the medium that allow it to communi-

cate (pixels) and then goes beyond these to examine what is behind...Nam June Paik tradition....Problem can be that "why" valued elements are valued is not always asked.

EXCERPTS AND EUPHORIA Ed Mowbray

Working within a tradition shared by many! Dara Birnbaum, Laurie Macdonald, Richard Serra.. FOUND FOOTAGE, "Arrest moments and reorder"(Birnbaum). Look at speed of delivery, lack of criticism, structure of manipulation, by reordering material force audience to see construction. T.V. as reference point: not pretend that simply in another medium with its own properties but deal with t.v. directly. This and the FOUND FORMAT traditions have been able to move into t.v. space directly: SCTV; rock video. Borderline if effective or simply reinforcing. PROBLEM WITH DECONSTRUCTION AS STRATEGY: incomprehensible, or restating with flexibility. Surrealism and dada failed: what was an effort to critique became definition of new formal movements (failure of old avant garde).

PART TWO: DOCUMENTARY/QUESTIONS OF FORM

Reiterate and sum up the previous overview of video art:

Video art is rooted in a social context of politicization of the 1960s and 1970s that effected artists as well as others. It included a frustration with mass media which was seen as exerting total and unchallengeable social control. It coincided with a disillusion with the art world that was present in other disciplines and expressed in particular by the conceptual art movement. Early Video art represented both concern with industrial uses of the medium: with surveillance and television, desire to undermine t.v.'s power; a desire for direct, unmediated communication with the audience; a desire for interaction with the audience; a desire to give voice to issues and groups previously unrepresented by art and a desire to explore the technical parameters of a new medium.

Artists used the following forms: direct performance, narratives, deconstruction of found formats; found footage, satire, exploration of medium.

Video was shown in the art context or the community context, not often in MUSEUMS or large PUBLIC GALLERIES.

Documentary as we stated had three central impulses: reaction against television's version of truth, the felt need to assert one's own or one's groups version (whether immediately personal or not) and a resulting desire to recreate a North American

as well as working with the intrinsic nature of t.v.

DOCUMENTARY

DIANE POITRAS: "Many feminists feel less pressure to-day because of an important bank of videotapes on a variety of women's issues and preoccupations. We have more time to explore the visual language. Current research tends to bring video art and social documentary closer together and this prospect is both appealing and full of promise."

"Instead of looking at specific social situations, I'm looking at those undercurrents that operate in society and that are very hard to identify...and all the myths and codes that are going on but are hard to point to." ANNE RAMSDEN

Move from linear documentary into more fragmented narratives.

In Canada these works tend to rely on narrative forms in order to communicate around an issue. Narrative is not simply straight forward dramatization of an event. It encompasses any material that tells a story through the way the medium unfolds through time--that story can be abstracted, it can be implied, it can involve the viewer, it can be circular, it can be deconstructive.

1) Personal Narrative

You Must Remember This by Marshajore
1979

Still being done! Ardele Lister, Paula Levine, younger artists. Often a beginning with work is to make a tape that is confessional in nature. Trick is to construct meanings that move beyond one's own experience (alienation or angst) to reach out to others. Humour is an important vehicle.

2) Medium Deconstruction

Working the Double Shift Steele and Tomczak 1984

Combines narrative with formal attack on television as system of control and a didactic, critical summation. Brechtian in technique.

3) Docudrama/Realism

A Couple of Changes Michael Goldberg 1983

Verges on the feature, which is now becoming popular in the USA (in part because of the cable access).

4) Dramatic Fantasy

Once Upon A Time Randy and Bernicci 1984

This work uses theatrics, pseudoanimation to talk about the terror of modern life. Other artists whose work has this quality are the Hummer Sisters from Toronto.

5) Pseudo-Documentary Style

Confused, Sexual Views

Heroics

a) Satire/Literary and Media Deconstruction

Jungle Boy 1985 John Greyson

3rd person narrative. Use of explicit gay porn, by way of warning. Moves between real events as reported in the news and their subjective resonance in history. Use of deconstruction (of porn, t.v., film, literature) as well as documenatary forms to comment on notions of believability. Questioning old narrative forms: CLOSURE. Story is left up to the viewer to end.

Summarize video art in 1980s:

Increased interest in narrative. Narrative takes form of critical commentary| story-telling, images, layered, narrative about narrative. (peggy Gale in Video's Voices). Evolution of self as subject to "others". (Rasden).

A NOTE ON HISTORY

Some authoritative video historians, particularly in Europe, writing of North America, are leaving many early artists out of the picture, centering on a few individuals who did essentially formalist work. Socially conscious artists, women and documentary producers are disappearing, despite their role in establishing the medium and its forms.

Art historians and critics allied with major galleries are currently rewriting video art and documentary as separate and separated traditions.

Issues in writing history|

Social history or art history| "great players triggering significant occurrences| separated from other arts...simplification of history| omissions and politics of omissions| confers genres to film and sculpture|

Video Art

Personal statement or social statement; explore medium, in specific; time (real or other)/motion; ambiguity of message for some artists, for others not; critique media; entertain, provide voyeuristic pleasure

Documentary

Social Statement to convince, reveal, inspire action, educate, facilitate, empowerment, to show unique (voyeurism)

Production Context

Art

Artist-run centre, school

Documentary

Artist-run centre; collective; organization; institution

Production Process

Art

One person's concept or close collaboration; hierarchical realization; medium-heavy (more and more); self funded or grant

Documentary

Individual or collective; collective production or hierarchical on contract; artists give up copyright sometimes; grants, org. funds or self

Audience

Art

Art community; parallel and museums; schools; some broadcast with some exceptions (community)

Documentary

specific interest groups; cable television

Content

Art

personal history; social history or stories or issues; parodies; structure of literature; art and media; broadcast issues; medium;

travelogues; dance; documenatation....

Documentary

personal and social history or issue; mass media; art or artist;
skill; documentation

Form

Art

repetitive; circular; narratives: linear, layered; dramatization;
fantasy; deconstruction; repetition; satire; found formats;
realism; interviews, cinema verite; real time

Documentary

cinema verite; interviews; docudrama; drama; real time;
deconstruction; non-linear presentation

3) THE PRESENT TENSE: For whom is History?

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WHERE DOCUMENTARY BORROWS FROM VIDEO ART:

- 1) Use of video time, space and framing
- 2) Use of narrative fantasy: Fight Back, Words and Wounds
- 3) Non-linear presentation: Words and Wounds
- 4) Time of video event: Concerned Aboriginal Women
- 5) Deconstruction: World's Largest
- 6) Subjective Voice: What's Normal

History and ideological interface allows for more room for artists and documentary producers to move back and forth. Which leads us to:

Form As Issue

Analysis of formal qualities of video of value to artists and audience, provides sense of tools; limits of medium at particular point of time. Conditions of access of particular elements of technology at point of time for which producers and development of t.v. technique also relevant to understand sensibility of specific audiences.

Formal questions essential re: communication of message (still dominant element of video) in an effective way. Requires knowledge of video as medium:

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documentary tradition. Traditional use at first: strong authoritative voice over. Authority of image.

New content added, but did not reorder how message conveyed. Therefore: authority of image(seamless); authority of image-maker (person is hidden); assumptions about social position of viewer/voyeur in tact; role is to educate (enlighten) not yet to activate; subject as victim; use of traditional authorities often. Viewer told HOW TO RECEIVE INFORMATION.

Led to BIG change: issue became empowerment of the subject. Video adapted to talking heads style, make interviewer and subject present or don't intervene.

CHANGE: SPECIFIC AUDIENCE AND VIEWING CONTEXT; INTERVENTIONAL AS OPPOSED TO EDUCATIONAL; EMPOWER THE PREVIOUSLY VICTIMIZED; TRAIN IN USE OF MEDIA; DECONSTRUCT MEDIUM BY ALLOWING PRESENCE OF CREW, JUMP-CUTS ETC.

1) AMELIA PRODUCTIONS TAPES

Concerned Aboriginal Women: 1981. Allow women to speak with their own voices, not let narration intervene. Situation of spontaneity and directness that would be less easy with film. Edit and produce for specific audience.

CRs on Strike: uses workers in the rank and file as authorities not the leadership. Critical of the leadership.

Documentary and feminism: both video art and documentary work from intuitive, subjective p.o.v. Same question addressed: identity of viewer/producer on the issue; i.d. with subject. e.g. Amelia worked from how producer feels or wants viewer to feel and sense of emotion of subject; employes tech., to get information and feeling (editing styles); some use of tactics, i.e. deconstruction, non-interference; validate women's experience; intuitive impulse. Annette Kuhn: crew shots; enclosure (Women's Pictures).

Issues of advocacy, groups initiate tapes and learn tech.

2) Demonstrate situation through cinema verite. Simply order footage to communicate information (still manipulation) but shoot high ratio. What's Normal, Norman a tape about disabled people, produced with their advocacy group.

3) Survey tapes: give overview of issue: used in video art and documentary: DISARMAMENT VIDEO SURVEY to establish popularity of p.o.v. Recently done: I AM AN ARTIST

4) Dramatization of elements of an issue. Quebecois has strong

documentary video tradition. Based on strong national identification in the 1960s/1970s; upsurge of art and culture. Interchange between art forms (realism) and documentary far more consistent than in English Canada. In Canada less crossing of boundaries originally: people (often the same) produced art and documentary but did not mix definitions and forms. Different in Quebec, movement between memory, dream, dramatic construction fluent. (E.C. exceptions are Ramsden, Steele and Frenkel).

THE WORDS AND WOUNDS OF SILENCE

5) the advent of independent docudrama: derive specific form from consciousness of audience.

Problem for documentary: ROSLER: "How to develop a coherent and informed political analysis in a society that subverts and distorts such attempts and then navigate a political course when political opposition is so fragmented.

How to narrow a work's meaning to convey a point without getting cornered into a bureaucratic instrumentalism that hardly acknowledges the problems of the representation w. experience and that betrays one's own subjectivity as well.

Conversely, how to generate an empathetic response without sliding into sentimentality and romanticism. How to keep a sense of the persons depicted without converting them into symbols and treading the narrow line between the metonymic and the metaphoric, the literal and symbolic.

How to respond within the art world and also stay in the world outside; how to evade the codes of fashionable irrationalism in the image without ossifying..." (AFTERMIMAGE)

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