

Bruce Nauman, still from *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.*, 1969, single-channel black-and-white videotape, 60 min. (artwork © Bruce Nauman/SODRAC (2006); photograph provided by Electronic Arts Intermix)

The Temporalities of Video: Extendedness Revisited

In an article written for *Artforum* in 1980, MoMA video curator Barbara London situated the uneasy reception of early video art in its protracted temporality: “Video, more than any other medium, has been criticized for being tedious and self-indulgent. In the early ’70s this was a valid criticism, because the length of many artists’ . . . works were dictated by standard videotape length—30 to 60 minutes—which in some cases was much too long.”¹ During the same period,

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Nam June Paik, one of the key pioneers of electronic arts, made his most famous claim: video is time. Although this suggests that Paik supported the first generation of video artists, whose work effectively conveyed a sense of extended duration to the viewer, he reproved it for its poor understanding of time: “What Godard says about cinema (‘truth 24 times a second’) does not hold in video. Because in video, there is no space (delimited frame) there is only time (lines without thickness). To produce color in video one has to translate color in time. Colors in video are millionths of seconds. Video is essentially time. And this explains why the works of the first video artists were so boring: coming mainly from visual arts, plastic arts, conceptual art, they had no experience with time. Video will make progress if people coming from cinema, dance, theater, and music start to experiment with the medium.”² These assessments are just a few examples of the generally ambivalent reception of early video, a practice that sought to investigate the making of time—the consideration of time as a material—through its exploration of extendedness, delay, boredom, banality, nonproductivity, and repetition.

Contrary to London’s and Paik’s arguments, however, these experiments were not seen by most artists as shaped by technological determinism (i.e., the standard videotape length) or by their lack of experience in time-based arts, but as unique means to disrupt dominant conventionalities of time, notably acceleration and temporal linearity. As early as 1976, the curator, writer, and video artist Willoughby Sharp, referring to Bruce Nauman’s 1968–69 sixty-minute video performances, which showed the artist in his studio engaged in the repetitive, seemingly banal, and futile actions designated by their titles (*Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.*, 1969), argued that his work in fact “took advantage of the actual length of the tape” to transmit actions with no beginning or end, according to a structure of redundancy that would not only allow the spectator to “come in at any time” but also render editing ultimately unnecessary.³ Supporting video’s exploration of real, unedited time, the media artist Davidson Gigliotti contended that the sense of temporal extendedness emerging from such practices was a means of countering the compressed time of TV and radio.⁴ Similarly, Bill Viola spoke of the need to counter accelerated culture: “Our society has evolved such a warped sense of time. As technology accelerates everything into a higher and higher velocity, and our dreams become centered on becoming more efficient, we are

1. Barbara London, “Independent Video: The First Fifteen Years,” *Artforum* 19, no. 1 (September 1980): 41.

2. Nam June Paik, “L’Arche de Nam June,” *Art Press* 47 (April 1981): 7–9. My translation.

3. Willoughby Sharp, “Videoperformance,” in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 253.

4. Davidson Gigliotti, “Observations on the Scope of Multi-Channel Video Work,” in Schneider and Korot, 215.

finding that we actually have less and less time. Lack of time is one of the greatest problems haunting the video field and our modern institutions. . . . The central problem of the day is how to maintain sensitivity and depth of thought (both functions of time) in the context of our accelerated lives.”⁵ In Viola’s own video production, this has meant favoring seemingly uneventful actions to increase the spectator’s sensorial, attentional, and cognitive faculties, so that “one might liberate oneself from the habit of viewing objects as we see them.”⁶ Expanded time thus became for some an aesthetic strategy that could problematize the opticality of the image. As Les Levine subsequently put it, inasmuch as the “main issue that television deals with is time,” the “way that perception relates to time and space is very important in considering why the artist is involved in television.”⁷ Perception, cognition, and memory are all “timing devices.”

In this article, I want to briefly examine the ways in which the electronic making of time has been and still is one of the most substantial contributions to contemporary art’s investigation of the image, to the development of aesthetics per se. Video has been from the start a practice on and about time but, as will become clearer below, this practice articulated itself along a split between defenders of extendedness and eventfulness, duration and immediacy. Why this debate still matters is what the present essay seeks to explore by briefly situating the discussion in the context of research of the last forty years that claims that the acceleration of history is one of the key symptoms of modernity and that this pace has meant the progressive absorption of time by space as well as a growing disconnection between past, present, and future. One can only hope here to refer succinctly to some of these studies on the waning of time, but I do want to show that video art is a significant player in that reflection.

In *The Production of Space* (1974), the sociologist Henri Lefebvre argues that “with the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space,” stating more precisely that the apprehension of time has ceased to occur within space.⁸ In an era that values the economic and political uses of space, Lefebvre contends, time becomes an isolable and isolated category, fragmented for the sake of profit, recorded exclusively on measuring instruments, subordinated to itself, and destined to be disposed of without leaving any trace. More recently, the new-media theoretician Sean Cubitt has confirmed Lefebvre’s conclusions by showing how postwar cinema (through slow motion, freeze-frame, and Steadi-cam techniques) and digital media (through the spreadsheet, which “organises a temporal process . . . into a spatial form”) articulate the spatialization of time.⁹ One decade after Lefebvre’s study, however, urban planner Paul Virilio published his pivotal *L’Espace critique* (1984), which maintains that the exhaustion of time should not be understood solely in economic terms (as a consequence of capitalism) but as the effect of the expansion of technologies of communication. Since the implementation of television, it is not so much space that absorbs time as time

5. Bill Viola, “History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime,” in *Video: A Retrospective* (Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984), 22.

6. Bill Viola, “The European Scene and Other Observations,” in Schneider and Korot, 277.

7. Les Levine, “One Gun Video Art,” in *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1978), 77.

8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 95.

9. Sean Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), and “Analytic of the Dimensionless; Towards a Prolegomena for any Future Materialism,” paper presented at the “What’s Left of Theory?” conference of Australian Cultural Studies Association, University of Tasmania, Hobart, December 8–10, 2001, available online at <http://neme.org/main/303/analytic-of-the-dimensionless>.

itself—the instantaneous time of electronic transmission—that erodes the temporality of delay. The subordination of time to itself identified by Lefebvre here reaches another stage: after its detachment from space, time is now postulated as abolishing its own existence as interval, duration, and retardation. For Virilio, the predominance of speed and instantaneity over delay can only be highly problematic, for it tolls the knell of perspectival viewpoint and the sense of criticality that this viewpoint made possible.¹⁰

The historian François Hartog and the anthropologist Marc Augé have equally concurred on the waning of time in contemporary societies, although this loss is understood more in terms of presentism than spatialization.¹¹ In his book on *Time in Ruins* (2003), Augé stipulates that ruins—and here lies their productivity—enable the observer to experience the passage of time, a temporality that cannot be completely equated with historical time. Augé's emphasis on the temporal dimension of ruins, however, sets out to critique the disappearance of ruins in contemporary culture: not the lack of preservation of ruins but culture's current inability to produce ruins. The presentism of contemporary architecture (its ephemeral and substitutable dimension) and the communicational function of information technologies that seek to dissolve the obstacles of time and space through a logic of instantaneity and transparency are two key instances in which the production of ruins is fundamentally blocked. Indeed, if the prevailing regime of historicity characteristic of our times, as Hartog as recently argued, is *presentism*—the turning of the present into an absolute value, whose absolute-ness now means a real disconnection from the past (perceived as lost) and the future (perceived as increasingly uncertain)—the temporal productivity of ruins appears substantially jeopardized. While the preoccupation with the present can and must be seen as a critique of modernity's consistent dismissal of the present and as a need to counter problematic modern conventions of time based, notably, on progress, chronology, and permanence, in such a regime, it is in fact the possibility of history which is claimed to be on the threshold of loss.

While these studies, to say it bluntly, do succeed in demonstrating how durational time has been increasingly manhandled and fragilized in (post)modernity, it is also clear that it is not time but specific forms of temporalities that are being lost, transformed, enforced, and negated. Further research is required to fully understand such a mutation. Video art must be seen as contributing to this inquiry, as a practice that produces both temporal extendedness and instantaneousness.

Indeed, it was not only duration, which Fried in his critique of Minimalism called the beholder's inclusion in a situation that goes on and on, which created a problem for early critics but also its reverse: the immediacy of the image, more precisely the property of the video camera—as soon as it is switched on and in contrast to photography and cinema—to instantaneously produce an image that

10. Paul Virilio, *L'Espace critique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1984), 37. My translation.

11. François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité, présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003); Marc Augé, *Le temps en ruines* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 45.

is de facto visible on the screen, the monitor functioning as a mirroring device for any object or subject located in front of the camera at the moment of shooting.¹² This criticism, based on the perception of time (of video per se) as a predicament, stands at the core of Rosalind Krauss's famous dismissal of video art as a narcissistic practice. For Krauss, narcissism—the absorption of the other by the self—finds its cause specifically in the performer's failure to detach him- or herself from the instant feedback provided by the simultaneous reception and transmission of the video image. Focusing on Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), in which the artist films himself pointing his finger at the center of his own image on the video monitor for the whole twenty-two minutes and forty-three seconds of the tape, the art historian sees a "sustained tautology" traced by an axis of sight starting at Acconci's plane of vision and ending at its double diffused by the monitor: "Consequently, the body is as though centered between two machines which are the opening and the closure of a parenthesis. The first is the camera; the second is the monitor that re-projects the image of the performer with the immediacy of a mirror."¹³ The result is a collapsed present, the deployment of a present time "severed from a sense of its own past," of history per se.¹⁴ Even as late as the 1990s, the immediacy of video—not only its feedback and instantaneity features but also its production of images made from the ceaseless flow of electrons scanning the surface from left to right and top to bottom—would become the basis on which the cultural critic Fredric Jameson deprecated video and associated it with yet another temporal incompetence: the failure to produce memory. "But memory," he writes, "seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise (or, I am tempted to say, in postmodernism generally): nothing haunts the mind or leaves its afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film . . ."¹⁵

Yet, as was the case with the debate around video extendedness, this criticism was far from unanimous and was also blind to the fact that, in the 1970s, artists and critics stressed the importance of experimenting with the indexical quality of the video image, guaranteed by the medium's simultaneous production and projection of images, because it enabled a unique relation of copresence (void of any delay) between the image and its referent. Such experiments were a means to be attentive to the here and now or to the otherwise fleeting present. Although Krauss was right in identifying how Acconci's work stages processes of confusion between the self and the other, she was not attentive to its relational dimension, the fact that in tapes such as *Recording Studio from Airtime* (1973), for example, the artist was interpellating his partner to make the point about a love relationship successively evaluated, confessed, and condemned. It is also significant that Acconci speaks of his work as a practice that seeks to establish a "face-to-face relationship" between himself and the viewer via a monitor perceived as "a middle-ground, a depository for objects—an area where I, off-screen on one

12. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 124.

13. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in Battcock, *New Artists Video*, 45.

14. *Ibid.*, 48.

15. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 70–71.

side, can hand things over to the viewer, off-screen on the other side.”¹⁶ This emphasis on the now of the viewing relationship also underlies the art critic and curator Bruce Kurtz’s argument that “the most powerful aspect of the medium is its ability to transform even the events of ancient history into the flowing present, whether or not what is being telecast, or what appears on the monitor, is actually live, taped, or filmed. . . . Newness, intimacy, immediacy, involvement, and a sense of the present tense are all characteristics of the medium. Even in prerecorded programming on commercial television, the present tense prevails in the idiosyncrasies of our sets, in the ‘disturbances’ which constantly occur in the image. . . . Film, with its twenty-four complete still frames per second, is an illusion of movement, while television, with its constantly changing configuration of dots of light, is an illusion of stillness.”¹⁷

Krauss’s and Jameson’s condemnations of video are condemnations of the instantaneity (presentism and flow) otherwise defended by Kurtz and Acconci, or any artist using the feedback capacities of the media. But in video art this dichotomy between extendedness and instantaneity is often more apparent than real. Even in works that engage with extendedness and real time—let us think here of the work of Nauman, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Viola, Thierry Kuntzel, Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield, Gary Hill, Lisa Steele, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Michèle Wauquant, Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, and Craigie Horsfield, to name just a few—the durational is never simply a negation of instantaneity and acceleration. In Viola’s *Passions* series of video projections and LCD transmissions (2000–01), for example, the extendedness of emotional waves enacted by different actors is made possible by the technical hybridization of cinematic acceleration and video deceleration. The scenes were shot on 35mm film, as single takes and at very high speed, at rates of up to three hundred frames per second, then transferred to digital video, radically slowed down, edited, and played on flat screens. Video art, especially in its recent developments, is thus not without complications in the opposition between space temporalization and time spatialization, duration and immediacy. Its temporal investigations must be seen as significant contributions to reflections on the waning of time, the fragilization of the sense of history, and the contemporary reinforcement of presentism. To understand these aspects, I want to focus here on one of the latest international exhibitions to have shown renewed forms of video extendedness while overtly manifesting the victory of video over its “dark age” of uneasy acceptance and near condemnation: the Fifty-first Venice Biennale.

In continuity with but even more so than the previous two Biennales, video was present everywhere in the 2005 Venetian display of technological heterogeneity, from the simple video projection to the more hybrid video or film screen projection on DVD (digital video disk), notably in Rosa Martinez’s

16. Vito Acconci, “10-Point Plan For Video,” in Schneider and Korot, 8–9.

17. Bruce Kurtz, “The Present Tense,” in Schneider and Korot, 234–35.

Arsenale exhibition, *Always a Little Further*, where video comprised nearly half of the exhibited works. But in all sections of the Biennale, circulating through the rooms and pavilions meant moving around large screens or entering rooms solely occupied by one-, two-, six-screen or -monitor installations; it meant walking on floors or alongside walls illuminated by video representations, lying down under a ceiling transformed by the kaleidoscopic display of electronic landscapes (Pipilotti Rist, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, 2005), or looking inside cardboard boxes with video images projected within (*Blue Noses, Quest*, 2005), often accompanied by the soundtrack of the next video work further down. The Biennale showed how much, at this point, any surface can suffice for projection, from screen to architecture to water (Rebecca Bellmore, *Fountain*, 2005) to train wagons (Xu Zhen, *Shout*, 2005), and how the present field of video art includes both established and younger artists from everywhere. Initially disparaged (but also revered) for its exploration of border-temporalities, marginalized both by art institutions and television, the *parent pauvre* of cinema, video is now widely accepted by the art system. It has been proliferating increasingly since the 1990s, to the point of becoming a pleonasm for contemporary art.

In light of the 2005 Biennale, three observations can be made to explain the quasi-tyrannical proliferation of video and the depreciation of the history of video related to this proliferation, which risks remarginalizing the medium as a significant art practice. First, the event confirmed Martha Rosler's anticipation that the "museumization" of video has meant the acceptance of video installation or large-screen projections, which "can only live" in spacious and well-equipped exhibition spaces, to the detriment of single-channel pieces known for their community-activist orientation, social negativity, and lighter use of technology.¹⁸ Second, the generalized integration of DVDs also made palpable the impact of the digital revolution on the burgeoning of video, the digital becoming—because of its malleability, immutability, and precise coding of data—the predominant mode of support for both video and film, suggesting, as already noted by media theoretician Philippe Dubois, that video, in its "pure" electronic form, only came to occupy a fragile, transitory, and marginal position between two strongly established image-and-sound technologies, cinema and the digital.¹⁹ While video represents information as a continuous flux of analogue data to be displayed on an electronic screen, digital sensors transform luminous data in a temporal succession of calculable binary digits (bits) that can adopt the value of 1 or 0. Hence, as André Rouillé has argued, although there is a material continuity or contact between things and images at the moment of capture, the recorded image is made entirely from mathematical symbols to be administered by programming systems that disconnect the image from its material origin.²⁰ The mathematical coding means that data remains the same from one transmission to the other, while the analogue signal weakens in time. The digital,

18. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York and San Francisco: Aperture and the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 44 and 49.

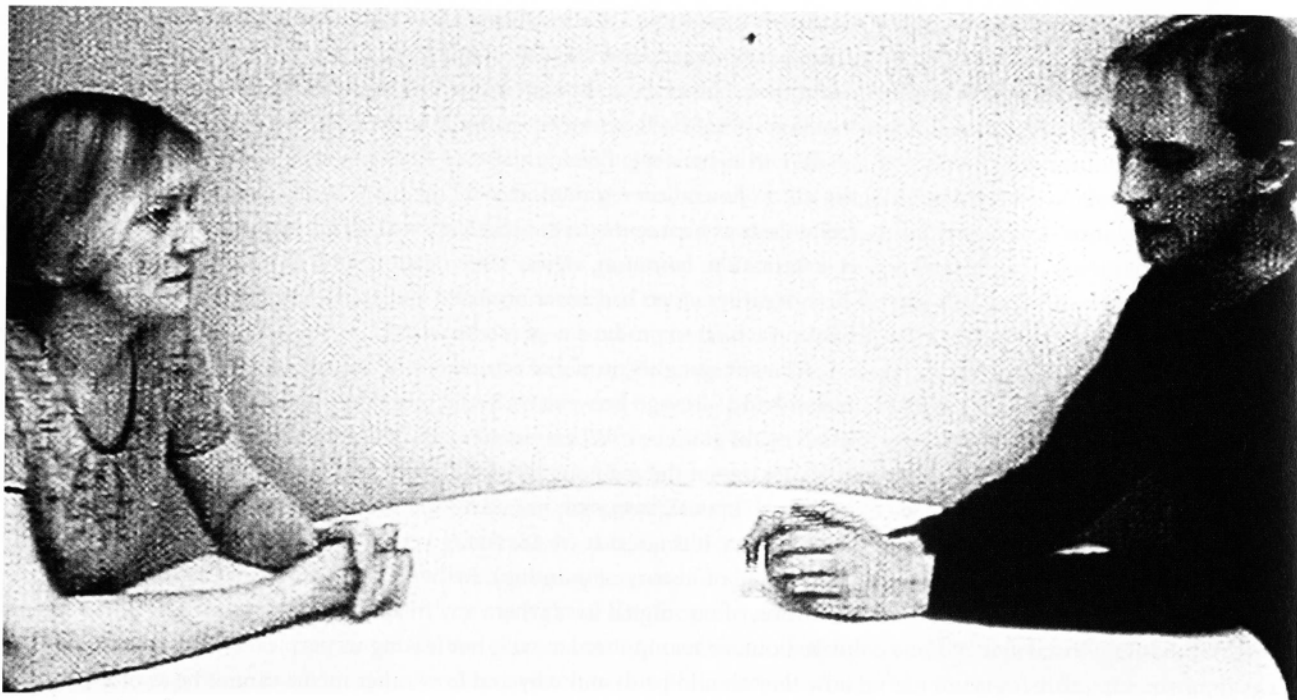
19. Philippe Dubois, "La question vidéo face au cinéma: déplacements esthétiques," in *Cinéma et dernières technologies*, ed. Frank Beau, Philippe Dubois, and Gérard Blanc (Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, and Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: INA and De Boeck Université, 1998).

20. André Rouillé, *La Photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 614–17.

moreover, introduces a malleability which surpasses analogue imagery: not only can the images now circulate, endlessly and rapidly, from one digital site to another, inasmuch as these are related by digital links, they can also easily be modified (retouched, reframed, partially suppressed, fragmented, or reassembled). The in-between, fleeting status of analogue video—and this brings us to the third observation—is reinforced all the more by the extensive use of digital technology as a mere media support deprived of any critical questioning of representation, narration, viewer interrogation, and, more significant, time, as though earlier video had never occurred and could not thus be the historical basis on which to produce new media works.

The sweeping institutional acceptance of digital video installation has established a cleavage between early and recent electronic arts, a depreciation of historical awareness. When video reaches this stage of omniscience, when it becomes one of the main media of art, used mostly as a support from which structural, optical, temporal, narrative, and sound investigations are dismissed, it disappears. It is not that we are facing yet another “end” (following the alleged end of history or painting). Rather, video art becomes merely a digital extension of our digital lives where any image, sound, or word can be processed, played out, or manipulated at will, but leaving us perplexed as to why and how they should be so and why and how other media cannot be as or even more legitimate.

In this context, one could better appreciate the Biennale’s video works that put the screen into crisis not to abolish it, but to articulate a form of silencing that made the viewer aware of the critical necessity to think about the whys and hows of the screen. Matias Foldbakken’s one-minute DVD video projection, *Black Screen* (2005), which activates a camera that films the inside of a cinema theater and ends with a shot of a blank, black screen, was pivotal in this regard, as was Mark Raidpere’s video projection *Shifting Focus* (2005), showing himself with his mother, first adjusting the camera for focus, then slipping into a confessional mise-en-situation in which he attempts to share what seems to be a painful, intimate secret. The actual scene of confession was cut out during the editing process, frustrating the viewer’s expectation shaped not only by the scenario but also by reality TV and Internet Webcams that *Shifting Focus* partly reproduces. These are instances when video succeeds, despite its progressive reduction to a support among others, in keeping in touch with its historical development to affirm itself as a practice in mutation that still has something to say about time and representation. Entering its digital phase, video is destined to be hybridized more and more with other media—be it film, painting, photography, computer-generated images, or architectural components—and to be interwoven with any (administrative, scientific, artistic, popular) image, sound, or digitally assisted activity. As such, there is no point in trying to single out the specificity of video

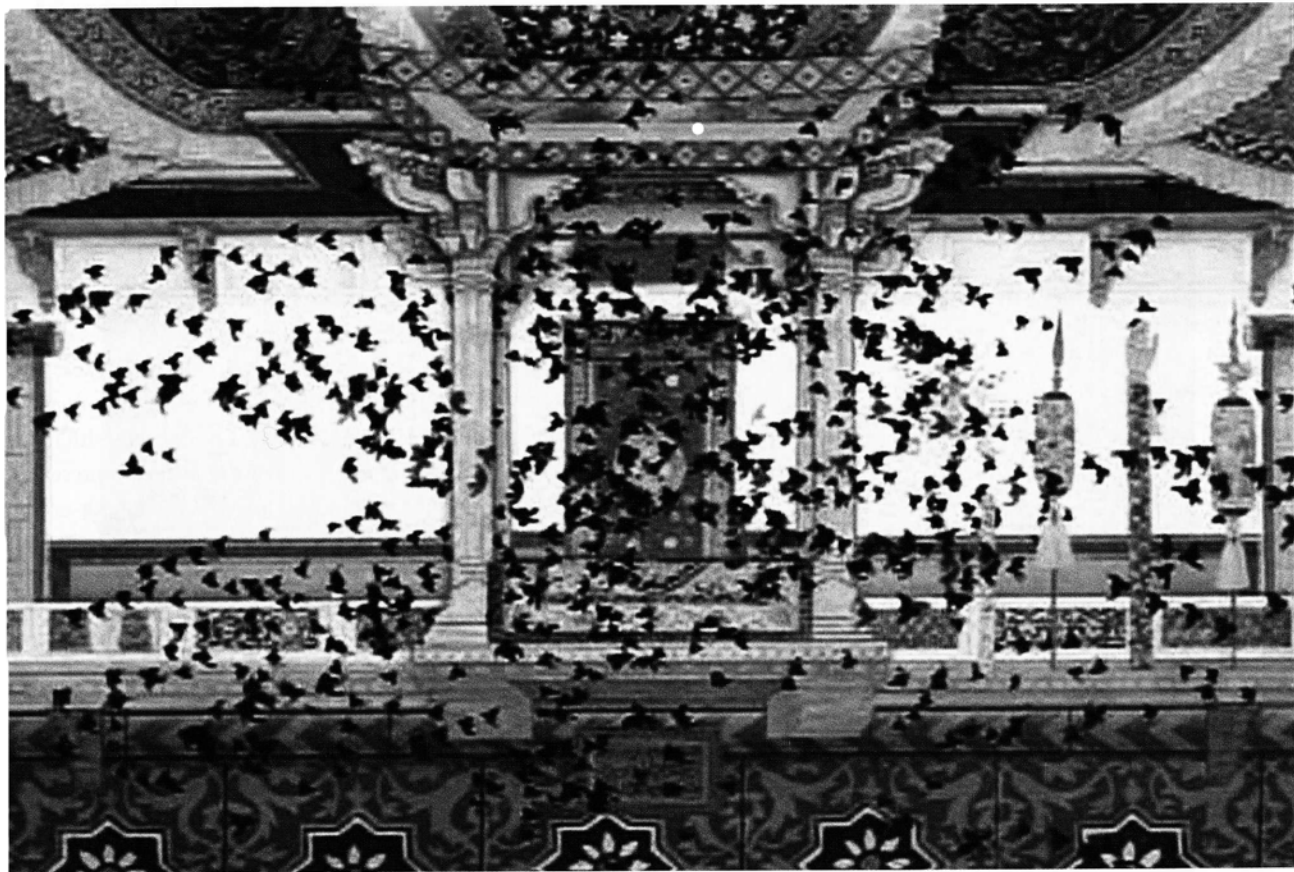


Mark Raidpere, still from *Shifting Focus*, 2005, video projection, 9 min. 30 sec. (artwork © Mark Raidpere; photograph provided by Centre for Contemporary Arts, Estonia)

art except to notice that video can be made not to disappear in the digital, can inform it in specific ways through its own history.

In a pivotal book published in 2000, the new-media specialists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the word “remediation” to refer to the ways in which any new medium is always both a refashioning of an earlier medium and, as Marshall McLuhan had already observed, a novelty understood through previous media novelties.²¹ This field of research is crucial in that it not only recognizes the remediation at play in any evolving new medium (i.e., the historical debt of new media toward earlier media) but also experiments with the aesthetic possibilities at play in the meeting of temporal and nontemporal media. The use of the digital is crucial here since it opens up video to other media in a way that can potentially renew all media involved. Such is the case, notably, of Shahzia Sikander’s *SpiNN* (2003) wall painting and DVD installation, which show both how much painting can gain aesthetically through activation by the layering, loss, and reemergence of electronic images, and how video art can be complicated when it is interwoven with rich pictorial traditions known for their sustained and powerful development of narrative forms of representation of identity, sexuality, and the intercultural—areas that have occupied video since its beginnings. Temporalized by video, Sikander’s painting is as much about the perception and interpretation as the recalling of the tradition of Indo-Persian miniature painting.

21. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).



Shahzia Sikander, still from *SpiNN I*, 2003, digital animation with sound, 6 min. 38 sec., dimensions variable (artwork © Shahzia Sikander; photograph provided by Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York City)

The tradition is enlivened by the undecided tension between a Wasli wall painting and a digital animation projected onto that surface, the projection setting into play an uninterrupted flow of images of imps, lovers, and birdlike flying shapes (the black hairdos of the evanescent nude *gopis*), sampled both from traditional imaginary and mass media, that emerge from and dissolve against a gradually changing background of a Mughal throne room and a landscape. The projection veils and reveals, adds and retracts as it also reads and transposes one scene with another to alter our perception of the whole and suggest a sense of temporality in the construction of meaning. The 2005 Biennale showed that new media art, when it is embedded in a critical understanding of media history, does provide vibrant experimentations that both inscribe themselves and renew video art's investigation of time. As I hope to show through further examination of some of the key works of the Biennale, when engaged in such investigations, video art can still provide strong insights as to the evolution of the image. It is when it addresses time, interestingly, that it succeeds in doing so. To demonstrate

Candice Breitz, stills from *Mother*, 2005, six-channel installation, 13 min. 15 sec., dimensions variable (artwork © Candice Breitz; photographs by Alexander Fahl, provided by Galleria Francesca Kaufmann)

this, I will focus on two temporal aesthetic strategies—decontextualization and the loop—that best disclose how video art endowed with historical awareness provides a sense of futurity to the image.

Decontextualization

The Biennale presented several works which show how the field of video art is currently engaged in original investigations of what I would call, for lack of a better word, *decontextualization*. This aesthetic procedure substantially redefines the mimetic understanding of the image. It does so by connecting three types of temporalities—instantaneity, extendedness, and mutability. In the late 1970s, Dara Birnbaum produced a series of single-channel tapes, including *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) and *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979), which devised an aesthetic strategy of appropriation to deconstruct televisual representations of femininity. The works appropriated short sequences from soaps, sit-coms, and quiz shows and replayed them by repeating selected fragments to disclose discursive constructions of gender otherwise impalpable in the narrative flow. Candice Breitz's twin six-monitor video installations *Mother* and *Father* (2005), presented at the Biennale, inscribe themselves fully in Birnbaum's strategy of appropriation but move toward linguistic reorchestrations of the pirated material. Appropriating from Hollywood films not sequences or fragments but mere instants of statements or phonemes uttered by famous actors (including Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts for *Mother* and Steve Martin and Dustin Hoffman for *Father*), Breitz digitally cuts these instants from their initial contexts, sets them against a black, neutral background, and then replays, repeats, and finally relocates them in the new context of the installation, where plasma screens are arranged in "dialogue" with each other. Although the process of appropriation does have the effect, as in Birnbaum's work, to disclose discursive constructs—here, American fantasies about motherhood and fatherhood—it can never be read merely as a critique in that the isolation and orchestration of the statements become the means by which a new version comes about. These versions are made from too many syncopes to function as smooth narratives but are the equivalent, in visual terms, of DJ pirating and sampling, a way to reactivate the excerpted instants and turn them into talking heads that reply to one another and create, in this reorganization, new possibilities of meaning. Instantaneity, which Kurtz designated in 1976 as "the most powerful aspect" of video ("its ability to transform even the events of ancient history into the flowing present") is explored here in its narrative potential, as a way to reinvent narrative through the practice of sampling.

The concept of representation as a sampling procedure also discloses the role of the image in the increasing interdependence of fiction and reality in (post)modern societies. What Gilles Deleuze has said about the time-image of



post-Neorealist cinema—that it articulated the direct representation of time by reversing time’s subordination to movement, and that one of the main effects of this reversal was to abolish the distinction between the real and the imaginary—is not so much transposable to as problematized in video art when representation is investigated in nonmimetic, nonoptical terms.²² Fiction and reality can still be explored to substitute for one another, but can also be made to chase one another in a critical tension, and this brings us to Antoine Prum’s HD video-35mm single-screen projection *Mondo Veneziano: High Noon in the Sinking City* (2005). A narrative of the Venice Biennale itself, the work stages—in the city of Venice—four specialists of the field (a curator, a critic, a painter, and a “convivial” artist) engaged in a debate about contemporary art. It proposes a fictional world that looks real but whose artificiality progressively becomes manifest and whose high level of fiction raises the question of fiction’s relation to a reality it can never completely absorb. The debate is structured by the sampling and assemblage of readymade statements on art and culture. But although they are uttered by the protagonists, who often read their lines as though in a rehearsal, the assemblage is so logical in its interweaving that it is only the credits at the end that reveal the appropriations of the statements. “Venice” is also gradually exposed in its fictionality: empty and dry (without inhabitants or water), the city is a fake Venice—a large stage set situated in a southern town of Luxembourg, used for the making of feature films. Prum’s images are inserted in a continuous logic of the confusion of fiction and reality, a logic that is inseparable from the digital revolution. As Rouillé has observed, digital malleability implies that the image can easily be and is even expected to be modified—further fictionalized—by any amateur producer with the help of a variety of image-processing techniques. While this leads him to conclude that the truth function of the image is slowly dying, *Mondo Veneziano* shows on the contrary that this truth effect persists, albeit substantially transformed. This becomes even more manifest toward the end of the work. As the artists continue to search for the definition of art, one actor performs a dissection on an apparently live body, in a state of complete indifference. This projection does not end the blurring of fiction and reality, but does succeed in challenging it by bringing into contact art and the body, the latter as the element through which the fictional and entertainment value of art (the persistent laws of transgression that support the consecration of the artist) are disclosed and called into question.

The process of decontextualization at play in the sampling procedure, which I argue is significantly tied to investigations of temporality, also has the effect of abruptly separating the image from its referent or the represented action from its cause. Nikos Navridis’s looped video projection *Difficult Breath no. 41* (2004) makes that rupture explicit in its brief deployment of a group of female performers who drink water and then spit it out at the very moment when the camera

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2—L’image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), 15, 93–94, 108.

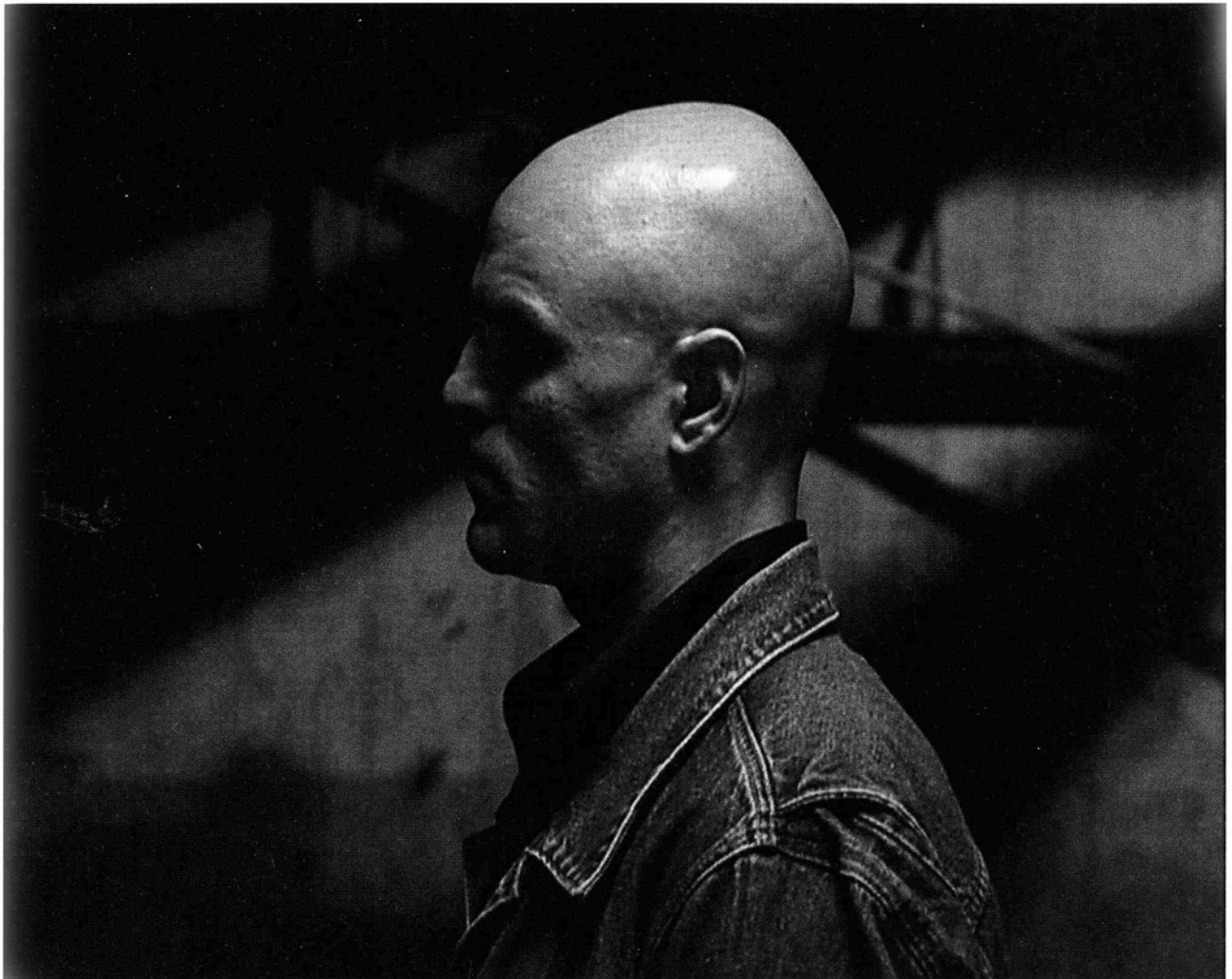


Stephen Dean, still from *Volta*, 2002–03,
video-DVD loop, stereo sound, 9 min.
(artwork © Stephen Dean; photograph
provided by Galerie Xippas, Paris)

removes them from the frame. The remaining, quite poetic sequence—sparkling water slowly moving in mid-air—cuts the event from its source, as Rouillé would argue about the digital, not so much to negate the source as to provide an autonomy to the event, favoring the act of forgetting to focus on what is otherwise invisible and impalpable: the evolution of breath in time, its power yet inevitable ending, together with the choreographic dimension of droplets of spit in space. *Breath* is, as such, an extended instant. Stephen Dean's three one-screen video projections, *Pulse* (2001), *Volta* (2002), and *Bloco* (2004), also proceed with decontextualization by cutting not the cause but the referent from the image, flooding the screen with images of dense crowds in motion, which makes it impossible to detach the representation from the materiality of the screen. While these are strong documentary images of mass events (a religious rite, a soccer crowd, a carnival), the crowds remain abstract and their units tend to merge with the electronic signals, so that what becomes important is not the explanation of the events but their existence as a pixelized chromatic unfolding that conveys the unpredictable passages from euphoria and ecstasy to disappointment and silence. Showing no interest in providing a sociological, anthropological, or psychological understanding of crowds, Dean's work conveys aesthetically the sensuality and unpredictability of crowds by focusing on their affective mutability. Hence, the disruption of the cause-and-effect or image-referent relation becomes yet another temporal strategy: a way to disclose the imperceptible mutation of things (be they breaths or affects). Extendedness here doesn't come from the extension of duration, as in early video, but from the very practice of decontextualization.

The Loop

The Biennale made manifest how much the loop has become a key mechanism in the task of addressing the viewer through time. It was certainly the privileged structure for all DVD projections, usually merely as an exhibition device, but sometimes as a genuine part of the temporality of the work. In a recent interview, the performance artist Marina Abramovic, who made extensive use of video to record her performances with Ulay in the 1970s and 1980s, underlined how the loop has introduced a temporal paradox in video, both shortening and extending the length of the work: "These days the young generation of video or performance artists excessively uses the video media in loop form. It's interesting to see how from the 90s until now that these loops have become shorter and shorter. From 7 minutes to 3 minutes, and now from one and a half minutes to 30 seconds. Time has become condensed more and more. What really is different is that the artists of the 1970s made long duration performances, but the artists of today by constructing video loops are producing the illusion of the long process



Willie Doherty, still from *Non-Specific Threat*, 2004, video projection, 7 min. 46 sec. (artwork © Willie Doherty; photograph provided by Alexander and Bonin, New York)

performance without going through the experience themselves.”²³ The loop both inscribes itself in and substantially changes early video’s exploration of extendedness and repetition. It extends an action, but only through repetition, one to be perceived by the viewer but produced by the computer and not through the actual performance of the artist. This means that phenomenology is now solely on the side of the viewer who observes a scene through its digital repetition. It also means that the extendedness of time initially explored as an aesthetic strategy to disrupt its linearity (the beginning-and-end logic) and to favor the mentalization of the image (its move beyond the optical) is articulated now not so much to destroy representation (as Hal Foster argues in relation to Minimalism) or to disclose myths (following Roland Barthes’s definition of the critical mythologist, creatively explored by Birnbaum, among others) but—and here I follow Giorgio Agamben’s own definition of repetition—to reconstitute the past with the possibilities it had and make these possibilities available again to renewed repetition.

Willie Doherty’s one-screen, seven-minute-and-forty-six-second video projection *Non-Specific Threat* (2004) articulates a looping that plays an active part—a necessary role—in the renewal of the viewer’s perception. Presenting a motionless man standing in a dark, deserted warehouse but filmed by a camera that slowly and insistently rotates around him, the projection stages a male voice-over that seems, at least at first, to express the protagonist’s thoughts in relation to the viewer. All statements are about a relation to an “other” and power over this other (“Your death is my salvation. . . . I am the face of evil. I’m self-contained. There will be no music. I’m your victim. You are my victim. There will be no newspapers. I share your fears. I know your desires. . .”). The threatening awe of these statements is nourished both by the site and the skinhead, gangster look of the white man—elements that suggest malignancy. But as the camera circles and circles around the body and, more important, as the loop repeats and repeats the scene to make the viewer aware of the initially imperceptible expressive movements of the body, the orientation of the words becomes less and less settled. These expressions appear gradually to be reactions to the words which might not after all be referring to the man’s thought but to the viewer’s. Slowly disclosed, therefore, is the viewer’s attempt to define the face of evil in an age of generalized terrorist threat, as well as the ways in which this attempt is marked by how media (and the politicians using media) define evilness. Along with this disclosure comes a loosening-up of our initial reading of the man and the incitement to reinterpret that past and let it signify differently. The loop—which has become one of the most important modes of presentation in video, a fact made manifest in the *Loop* exhibition at P.S. 1 in 2001–02—allows for a temporal processing that can, if we follow the findings of recent cognitive research, lengthen duration experience precisely because the observer is solicited to attend to the

23. Marina Abramovic, quoted in Klaus Biesenbach, “Interview with Marina Abramovic,” in *Video Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and the New Art Trust*, ed. Biesenbach et al (New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002–03), 14.

passage of time and to allocate more attentional resources to processing time-related information.²⁴ In other words, the loop, the potentially endless repetition of a short scene, may lead to an extension of time, at least at the level of judgment, perception, and experience.

These recent works show the importance of establishing a historical connection between analogue and digital video art, a connection without which—and this has been my claim—recent experimental video becomes either remarginalized, misunderstood, or simply absorbed by the digital, erasing in effect the original contribution of video art to the aesthetic investigation of the image. Although the analogue and the digital seem to be worlds apart, video persists in its exploration of duration, but now focuses on the instant or the looping of short sequences, reclaiming the instantaneity of the video image to extend it and introduce mutability in the video situation. Lefebvre, Virilio, and other investigators might well be right in their observation that technologies of communication have absorbed duration, spatialized time, or contributed to the reign of instantaneity and presentism. Experimental video sometimes succeeds, even in its digital permutation, in producing temporal extendedness from within this realm.

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24. See, notably, Richard A. Block, "Models of Psychological Time," in *Cognitive Models of Psychological Time*, ed. Block (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 1990); Harvey Richard Schiffman, *Sensation and Perception: An Integrated Approach* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2001); and *Time and Mind II: Information Processing Perspectives*, ed. Hede Helfrich (Cambridge, MA, and Göttingen, Germany: Hogrefe & Huber, 2003).