

perhaps, in some darkened viewing room somewhere, there exists an indefatigable art historian prepared to spend the four and twenty years of monitor watching necessary to emerge with a definitive overview of video art.

Mick Hartney

Video is the default medium of the twenty-first century. It is everywhere, trapped on monitors and computer screens and projected, cinema-style, onto pristine gallery walls, across public spaces and onto the hallowed surfaces of national museums. The prominence of the moving image in contemporary art hides a forty-year history in which video played a vital role on the margins of the avant-garde. It began life in the mid 1960s, screening to small groups of aficionados in obscure, 'alternative' spaces. Then, in the 1990s, video art broke through into the mainstream of the museum and gallery system, taking up a central position as the twentieth century came to a close. The early history of the medium is only now coming to light and the present volume is devoted to reintroducing the work of pioneering video-makers while positioning their ideas as a prism through which to offer an understanding of contemporary video. I hope that my guided tour of the medium will prove an appropriate travelling companion to the reader's own discovery of video art and its sometimes baffling but always intriguing history.

The tour is, of necessity, a personal one. Dispassionate judgement is particularly difficult for me, given that I lived through and played a modest part in that story as it manifested in the UK. Everything I re-view is to a greater or lesser extent filtered through my own political affiliations, my aesthetic preferences and the personal and professional trajectory I followed throughout the period in which video art emerged and flowered. Rather than manufacture

some spurious objectivity, I have elected to tell the story as I witnessed it, read about it, gossiped about it, added to it and, in my capacity as a critic, attempted to make it accessible to a wider audience. Although my research has thrown up many interesting discoveries, I also encountered certain difficulties along the way. I have noticed striking similarities in works occurring simultaneously in different parts of the world. Mindful of the fact that great minds often think alike, I have chosen those videos that best illuminate the distinctive chronology I have tried to represent. The modest length of this tour is disproportionate to the size of the ever-growing archive of video art and I have been forced to become more selective than I would wish in the works I discuss. I occasionally lapse into contradiction, as I always do when I can see two sides of an argument. For example, I will never reconcile the desire to critique the mainstream with the temptation to reproduce what one set out to subvert. Sometimes, I speak from the inside where the passions I felt in the early days are still simmering, sometimes I step outside in search of a broader picture with continuities of formal and tactical strategies traceable across the generations. My tour is necessarily partial, analytical, engaged, informed and still fired by the excitement I felt in 1978 when I produced my first, flickering monochrome image of what I had trapped in the 'unblinking stare' of the viewfinder.

The tour begins in the euphoric iconoclasm of the 1960s when, on both sides of the Atlantic, artists questioned social and political institutions as well as the traditions of fine art, regarded as ossified around the practices of painting and sculpture. Once the plastic arts had been reduced to the blank canvas and the minimalist slab of concrete, there seemed nothing more to be said. Video, along with performance and experimental film, offered a way out of the conceptual impasse of high art practices. As the newest technology, video was soon harnessed to the counter-cultural imperatives of the age. Although predominantly exploited as an agent of change, early video shared formal concerns with mainstream painting and sculpture, then dominated by modernism and minimalism. Broadly speaking, video art in the USA concentrated on a kind of pared-down, self-reflexive investigation of the technology and its functions. In the UK, video artists were also embroiled in an examination of the specificities of the apparatus, or the tools of their trade, but saw the monolith of television as their main adversary. They concentrated on deconstructing televisual narrative conventions that were felt to produce a passive cultural consumer.¹ The empowerment of that spectator and viewer involvement in the creation of meaning became a key issue in both monitor-based, sculptural work and multi-screen installations and led to the electronic interactivity that we see today. Almost without exception, every generation and nationality has used video as a personal medium, an electronic mirror with which to investigate social identity – femininity, masculinity, ethnicity, and sexuality. The formation of identity has been linked to the influence of social

stereotypes promoted by television, print media and the cinema. These popular cultural forms produced a narrowly defined human typology that promoted social prejudice – racism, sexism and homophobia. Video artists from the 1980s onwards, appropriated and manipulated those same stereotypical images as a deconstructive strategy for exposing the distortions and iniquities of media representations. But in the 1990s popular cultural imagery was integrated into video art as part of a celebration of contemporary visual culture and superseded the traditional themes and preoccupations of fine art as well as the more political, deconstructive approach to the moving image.

The evolution of video technology remains the backbone of the story, with new developments such as colour processing, digital editing and image layering leading aesthetic and stylistic trends. From the beginning, video has been in dialogue with the institutions with which it shares its technology: television, surveillance, video games, promotional video and, latterly, the Internet. In this respect, the social dimension is always at play, however aestheticised the work may have become. This is the case even in video's new gallery-projected form, which recreates the spectacular and immersive experience of cinema. With the convergence of film and video in contemporary gallery art, it is interesting to see that many of the characteristics of video history still survive: the playfulness, the irreverence for art history and the commercial mainstream, the technical trickery as well as the social and political engagement. It has also preserved many of its earlier forms: the performance documentary, the auto-portrait and the polemical text. This volume is designed to put contemporary work into its historical context. I do so, not to denigrate the newer artists in the field with implications of plagiarism, but to show how continuities and commonalities exist across the generations. With the speed of technological development and a changing social and political landscape, video as an art form and discursive arena is constantly being renewed.

IN THE BEGINNING • MARKING OUT THE TERRITORY

Like many technologies, video was born of an alliance between military and industrial concerns in the West. The first portable equipment was developed in the early 1960s by the US army for surveillance purposes in Vietnam. The medium already existed in the form of broadcast television, an institution that was increasingly dominated by commerce and subjected to political pressures. Shot through with thinly disguised ideological messages such as the ultimate desirability of consumer goods and the 'natural' place of women in the kitchen, the new 'opiate of the people' was looking more like an agent of social control than a form of family entertainment. Video art came into being deeply opposed to both its progenitors and, when Sony Portapak went on sale in the mid 1960s, artists decisively reclaimed video as a creative medium capable of challenging

the military, political and commercial interests from which it sprang.² The aesthetic possibilities of the medium were crucial to the development of video as an art form, but like the artists of the Russian Revolution, North American and European practitioners in the 1960s saw the potential for their art to become an instrument of social and political transformation. They took up an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the dominant culture situating video art in the swell of a highly politicised avant-garde. Operating on the radical fringes, video-makers sought to expose not only the manipulations of mainstream entertainment but also the definitions and orthodoxies of traditional fine art practices to which video was now uneasily annexed.

Nam June Paik can claim the distinction of being one of the first artists to acquire a Sony portable recorder and camera when they went on sale to the general public in 1965.³ Paik's historic purchase coincided with Pope Paul VI's visit to New York. Armed with his new Portapak, the artist followed the crowds in a taxi and witnessed the papal procession, simultaneously recording everything he saw. Since the first recorders were reel-to-reel machines with a maximum recording time of one hour and no facility for editing, Paik just left the machine running. The work ended when he ran out of tape. That evening, at the Café a Go Go, Paik screened the unedited black and white video on a monitor, alongside the broadcast TV version of the same event.

Paik's video was a 'real time' work. It took the same stretch of time to view the Pope's procession in the gallery as it took to record the original occasion. Where the television coverage was heavily mediated by broadcast conventions, Paik's tape involved no editing, no dramatisation, no voice-overs, studio discussions, flashbacks or commercial breaks. Neither was there any attempt to disguise the technological process that was creating this *vidéo vérité* record of the procession. The work was determined only by the artist's eye and the serendipity of finding himself in the right place at the right time with the appropriate equipment.

Paik worked deliberately outside the Hollywood-dominated film industry and independently of the television networks and, at least initially, without commercial funding. In contrast to the briefly credited but essentially anonymous cameraman of the television broadcast, Paik and his reputation as an avant-garde artist were important elements in the work. His status as an artist allowed him to take a strong moral and oppositional stand, directly challenging the monopoly of mainstream media and what he saw to be the bourgeois values embedded in their programming. Paradoxically, he was only able to do this by calling on the privileged status of the artist and the singularity of vision, the lone voice of genius that was enshrined in post-war American art. In the context of fine art, he was able to lay claim to what his camera saw as an autonomous, creative agent in defiance of the invisible, corporate forces that silence the individual whilst homogenising humanity into a narrow

range of stereotypes for the television screen. The video was proof that Paik, the irreducible individual, the free creative agent had been there and made an authentic record of what he saw. This Korean artist did so while using the very same technology that would render him invisible in broadcasting owing to his membership of an ethnic minority.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back.

Nam June Paik

Paik's seminal work was perfectly in keeping with the interventionist climate of the 1960s when young people across North America and Europe believed they could effectively oppose and transform existing social structures. The hippie generation rejected the narrow aspirations and middle-class values of their parents and refused to participate in the capitalist treadmill that condemned the boys to white- and blue-collar servitude while the girls stayed at home in the prison of domestic drudgery and childcare. The liberation movements of the period gave us civil rights, black power, feminism and gay politics. The sexual revolution helped to cast off the social mores of the older generation and a new interest in eastern mysticism promised spiritual fulfilment and self-improvement. The most visible and unifying causes centred on the anti-war movement, with its 'Ban the Bomb' crusade and refusal to endorse the war in Vietnam. Environmental issues were soon as heatedly debated as militarism and western imperialism. The 1960s became the era of protest and Paik's work represented the first challenge to the hegemony of the mainstream media, controlled by its oligarchy of commercial, political and military interests. Following Marshal MacLuhan's vision of global communication, Paik and his contemporaries believed that they could harness the tools of mass media to awaken a new, alternative social and political consciousness. Video art was born at a time of high personal and political faith. Artists and activists alike believed that their actions could make a difference to society. Individual initiatives were framed by a recognition that everyone belonged to local and global communities. A collective identification was coupled with an individual sense of responsibility towards the future shape of the world, both social and ecological. In the radical ferment of the avant-garde, individuals were more interested in revolutionising art and society than pursuing personal success. However, the romance of poverty had a tendency to wear off in time and many artists, like Paik himself, saw the advantages of promulgating their views from a position of high visibility as opposed to crying in the wilderness on the fringes of the avant-garde. But Paik's sincerity is not in question and the early pioneers

of video art were intent on transforming both society and what they saw as the outdated conventions of the high art establishment.

THE ART CONTEXT • THE DEATH OF THE ART OBJECT

Video has the unique potential of conveying the aesthetic aspirations
of an entire generation.

Willoughby Sharp

For neither the first nor the last time, young voices rose up and announced that art was dead. Easel art, that is. By the mid 1960s, both painting and sculpture in the grand manner appeared to have run their course. Artists rejected the mediating role of what they regarded as an obsolete art object. Being once removed from the artist – its generating source – the conventional work of art was now accused of blocking the free flow of the artist's creative intentions towards a newly receptive audience. It was time to jettison the ponderous demands of museum patronage for large-scale canvases and monumental bronzes, even minimalist ones. Artists wanted to create an encounter with the viewer that was as immediate as the inter-personal and political upheaval going on outside the galleries, as instantaneous as Paik's encounter with the Pope's procession in New York. The dematerialisation of the art object had begun and artists looked for new forms of expression that reflected the urgency of their revolutionary ideas and the new direct relationship they were seeking with their audiences. They found video and performance art.

Performance art offered possibly the most perfect medium of artistic communion because life and art came together in a shared event or collective 'happening'. In live art, no artefact stood between the artist and audience and no object remained after the event to be collected, sanctioned and sanctified by the critics, historians and collectors controlling the art establishment. However, the canny 1960s artists carefully kept the detritus of their live work whilst protesting their leftist disinterest in the objects of performance, which are now increasingly collectable.

Video was also approved as a suitably ephemeral medium, existing only when animated by an electric current and capable of being copied, recopied and disseminated like any other mass-produced merchandise. In spite of now having to negotiate the more recent traditions of broadcast media, video artists felt they were working on a clean sheet of paper. Film too was caught up in the net of avant-garde experimentation along with dance and music, which were similarly appropriated from popular culture and reinvented as 'movement' and 'sound' by a new generation of radical artists. The very categories of the arts were dissolving with the creation of hybridised works involving any number

of media, technologies and performance disciplines. As well as evolving into an art form in its own right, video had the ability to pull together many of these disparate elements combining performance, sound and duration into documentary or fictionalised representations of artistic events. Video both crystallised and witnessed the proliferation of new ideas in the expanding landscape of cultural practice and reflected the revolutionary changes taking place in society at large. In its role as monitor to the avant-garde, video helped to fill the gaps left by the slow, but inexorable eviction of painting and sculpture from their dominant position in contemporary art.

THE NEW ROLE OF THE VIEWER

... art that allows us to enact our own closures, and not an art that is closed upon
arrival.

Jeremy Millar

Now that it was no longer possible to hide behind the reassuring buffer of the 'dead' art object, what did the living arts demand of the 1960s cultural consumer? Within the Enlightenment model, popularised in the eighteenth century by Kant and sanctified in the twentieth by modernist criticism under Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the art object contained intrinsic aesthetic properties that could only be discovered by the refined sensibilities and trained eyes of the art cognoscenti. Art lovers would enter the hallowed space of the museum and, isolated from the messy social realities outside, attempt to unlock the secrets of the art object. Once correctly tuned in, the viewer could use the work of art as a talisman and be transported to higher levels of aesthetic experience. The perceptual processes and particularised interpretations of the viewer based on individual history, experience, gender and other variables were not part of the picture. A visitor to the gallery needed to leave all idiosyncratic responses at the door and work towards a state of high cultural grace from which it was possible to access the essential meaning and beauty locked inside the unique art object. In the process, timeless and universal aesthetic principles would be grasped and the gallery visitor could go home safe in the knowledge of belonging to that section of the human race in which reason dominates and all baser animal impulses are safely under control. Invariably, it was the collectors, critics, commentators and other doyens of the art establishment who determined the precise nature of those universal aesthetic principles and the particular meaning of a work. This established a single, authoritative, 'correct' viewing and interpretive position that could be used as a touchstone to separate good art from bad and high art from lowly crafts and popular culture. Within a modernist conceptual framework, the art object was held to embody not only

higher, transcendental meaning, but also the intentions of the artist – what the cultural theorist Roland Barthes called the 'theological meanings'.

All this changed when Barthes published his influential book *Image, Music, Text* in 1977.⁴ Barthes argued that the meaning of a text or image lay as much with the viewer as it did with the creation, its creator and its advocates. The democratic principles underlying Barthes' analysis encouraged performance and video artists to dispense with the unique art object and transform the role of the viewer from passive recipient of received ideas to active participant in the creation of aesthetic meaning. However, rather than abdicate entirely the active role to the viewer, 1960s and 1970s time-based artists working in film, video and performance relocated the meaning of a work to the creative space opened up by the encounter between artist, technology, performance props and the audience. This constituted a unique socially and historically cohesive moment. No single element or individual held the key to the meaning of the 'text' or occupied the definitive point of view. Within a live performance, there were as many 'true' interpretations of the work as there were witnesses and participants. A non-hierarchical live event always contained the possibility that an individual could override the artist's intentions and directly influence the direction and outcome of the performance. In practice, this rarely happened although, in theory, artists were giving up their directorial powers and enlisting the audience in full participation. In a peculiar twist of logic, some performance artists took it upon themselves to democratise all works of art and specialised in hijacking other artists' events. This was perhaps a form of resistance to Barthes' notion that the birth of the active reader/viewer could only take place pursuant to the death of the author. At least within a new performance idiom, the artist could still be an active participant. In video, an unconscious fear of becoming eclipsed by the newly emancipated viewer may have been responsible for the widespread practice of the artist becoming the subject of her/his own work.

Whether literally active or active in the contribution of a creative imagination, the new role of the viewer in the production of meaning exploded the modernist myth of universality in aesthetic appreciation. The interpretation of art was now seen to be contingent on social, political and historical factors being brought to bear on individuals at the moment of reception as well as the intrinsic qualities of a set of objects or pictorial effects. Peter Kardia has observed that the central problem of cultural production was now 'the interaction between the position and place of the witnessing subject and the imaginative project embodied in the work'.⁵ The newly democratised space of art challenged the established authorities that had determined aesthetic value in art. At the same time, dialogic practices broadened the range of activities that could be considered art. Video and performance were now accepted as legitimate art forms.

With the person of the viewer now in a constitutive position, the canonical edicts of art history might be banished forever and everyone could make

art, each one of us become a critic. At least that was the theory. Artists were reluctant to give up their privileges and although they acknowledged the important role of the audience, they remained the principal instigators and directors of artistic events laying claim to authorship of the work for the cultural record. Even amongst the newly awakened audiences, some viewers remained more equal than others – critics, curators and funders taking precedence over the ordinary punter. The hegemony of the art marshals could not be broken so easily. Then as now, artists needed to be sanctioned by historians and critics to maintain visibility and ensure sponsorship, state, private and corporate. In spite of artist-run spaces and distribution networks offering alternatives to commercial galleries, performance and artists' film and video were never able to escape entirely their dependence on the art establishment and some, like Paik, always courted wide recognition. In recent years, the picture has changed again and the relationship between artist and audience has become more complex with commercial forces and popular culture claiming a stake in art and offering another source of funding. In the new century, there is little appetite for survival outside the various institutions that support the arts, but back in the 1960s, an honest attempt was made to break free and amplifying the role of the ordinary viewer was consistent with a determination to democratise art.⁶ In many of the strategies adopted by performance and video artists, the one-way flow of information in both fine art and broadcast television was reconstituted as a two-way process. The meaning of a work now lay in the creatively charged relationship between 'witnessing subjects', the materials in play and the imagination of the artist – that self-appointed visionary who speaks through the medium of art.

IN VIDEO VERITAS • VIDEO AS A DOCUMENT OF PERFORMANCE

There continues to be a strong link between performance art and video. In the early days, both courted a direct and democratic encounter between the artist and audience and both rejected the material and institutional traditions of fine art. In spite of their disdain for the art object, performance artists were also looking for ways of recording their work for posterity and the more immediate problem of disseminating their ideas beyond the performance itself, not to mention collecting support material for the next funding application. Documentary photography is capable only of capturing a series of frozen moments and is inadequate to the task of recreating a time-based event that is founded on flux, change and multiple points of view. With its ability to record long events and its status as a factual medium, video now took on the job of fixing performances that were, in essence, ephemeral. By the mid sixties, American artists like Eleanor Antin, Peter Campus, Linda Montano and Terry Fox began to use video as their chief medium of documentation. In Canada, Ian Baxter and the N.E.

Thing Co., Gerry Gilbert and Michael Snow were similarly enshrining their live work in moving image records. In former Yugoslavia, Abramović and Ulay made performances to camera and in the UK, Stuart Brisley, Rose Finn-Kelcey and Gilbert and George all taped their work.

These early performance tapes would rarely be seen in public and were regarded as documents, residues of the live events, though they were briefly collected by galleries along with other photographic and material by-products of live work.⁷ The aesthetic value was secondary to the videotape's ability to accurately record the events in real time. Commentators like the historian Amelia Jones have argued that the meaning of live performance is retrospectively formed by the documentation and the interpretations that historians and critics formulate.⁸ However, this view is contrary to the intentions of performance artists working in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For them, the experience of the event was the primary objective, with its cathartic and transformative potential mobilised in a live confrontation between artist and audience. They chose to use video to document their work because it came closest to establishing the time-based facts of an event. However, video had its own limitations. The picture quality was poor and with the technology pushed out of the way to avoid interfering with the performance, much of the detail was lost. To make matters worse, the camera was often restricted to a fixed, distant position and microphones were often placed so far away from the action that they were unable to filter out extraneous sounds. The resulting sequences took in everything and yet conveyed little of the impact of the live event in which the senses could be selectively tuned to elements that, at a given moment, were charged with meaning. It was too easy for writers like Amelia Jones to mythologise or impose their own interpretations on events that they sometimes hadn't seen and that were experienced quite differently at their point of origin.

Aware of the distorting lens of available methods of documentation and its interpreters, many artists now began to create actions and live events specifically for the video camera and monitor. Artists like Tina Keane and Sonia Knox in the UK and Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas in the USA began to use the video technology as part of the performance itself. The discrepancies between the mediated video image and the live presence of the artist created what Jonas called a 'parallel narrative'. In Germany, Ulrike Rosenbach made performances in which the camera was strapped to her body, the resulting image representing her point of view in what she called 'live video performances'. In *Dynamic Field Series Part 1* (1971), the American Peter Campus attached the camera to the ceiling by way of a pulley, so that he could make his image recede and expand by pulling or releasing the rope. Campus contrived to be both in front of and behind the camera simultaneously. These live video-performances combined the role of video as a recording device with its participation as an essential component of the work itself. The mechanism of video image generation and

the process of performance art documentation were laid bare and contrasted with the invisibility of technology in mainstream broadcasting.

Many of the early performance-to-camera works were held within the frame and three-dimensional container of a monitor, which served to heighten the sense of a shared vulnerability with the artist. The scaled-down human form, the miniature theatre of the box and the prison of the technology all served to endow the artist with the poignancy of a trapped animal. Without the filter of entertainment, character and plot, the compassionate realism of performance to camera is surprisingly powerful. In spite of the degraded resolution of early video, and the often-visible charade of artists' performances, it was possible for an emotional, corporeal connection to be made between two subjectivities across the time-lapse separating recording and viewing.

In 1970, Bruce Nauman made the most famous and minimal performance to camera. At first sight, *Stamping the Studio* is an unedited record of Nauman prowling his studio in a shuffling gait, a brooding evocation of the artist in the grip of creative frustration. Looking much like present day surveillance footage, the video (originally shot on film) is also a kind of mapping of the artist's agency within his chosen environment, unadorned by narrative and other forms of television fabulation. His neurotically repetitive action deviates substantially from socially accepted behaviour and questions ideas of madness and normality. The seeming artlessness of the performance is deceptive. The camera is carefully positioned, and Nauman's actions precisely orchestrated so that the path he treads delineates both the space he occupied in the past and the square boundary of the video monitor we are looking at in our present. In *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968), the artist's body, in more direct proportions to the monitor, seemingly struggles to move around inside the box. With the help of an invisible monitor, Nauman makes sure that he does not breach the edges of the picture frame and break the illusion of his containment in its actual, three dimensional prison.

Nauman used the authenticity of a pared down, performative action to point up the artificiality of television realism but also the constructed nature of art – any art. Anticipating Bill Viola, and the UK artist, Sam Taylor-Wood's later depictions of artificial emotion projected by actors, Yugoslav artists Abramović and Ulay made *AAA-AAA* (1978), a tape in which they screamed at each other to the limits of their vocal endurance. The American Teddy Dibble produced a persistent cough that never seemed to satisfy an off-camera instructor or doctor. In *Cough* (1986), we witness Dibble's repeated failures to produce the ideal cough. The artist looks straight into the camera whilst an out of frame director-doctor insistently corrects his coughing: 'No, make it harder. No, louder. Again. Again.' Like Abramović and Ulay's vocal excesses, Dibble's cough is clearly manufactured but the duration of the piece and the obvious physical discomfort suffered by the artist, induce in the viewer a somatic empathy. Clearly, the

success of this physical identification depends on duration. The coughing and screaming are agony to listen to only if they don't stop. If the tapes are turned off or can be walked away from before the action builds up sufficient empathetic agony in the viewer, the works cannot act upon the senses. We could not, in this case, suspend disbelief sufficiently to internalise the plight of the artists.

I once made a tape about a crying baby.⁹ It played on a looped compilation along with tapes by other artists. Each time my work came around, the gallery staff turned it down because they couldn't stand the crying. They got the point of the work and nullified it. This use of performed, embodied experience to induce a somatic response in the viewer finds an echo today in a recent video from Canada. In *Heaven* (2000), Lloyd Brandson and Jack Lauder point a fixed camera at an expanse of frozen lake separated from a dull sky by a thin, barely visible horizon line. This is Lake Winnipeg gripped by sub-zero temperatures in the depths of winter. The two artists run past the camera, naked but for some roughly made boots. They gradually disappear into the white horizon and nothing happens for an agonising 60 seconds. Just as we become convinced that they have died of exposure, the painfully vulnerable figures reappear and slowly grow back into men who have somehow survived the cold.

The ability of the viewer to both imagine and enter the bodily predicament of the artist depends on a shared time-space and a common physiology. It is the recognition of both similarity and a narrow difference that makes the empathetic process possible. The artist is me, and not-me simultaneously. With a widening of the species gap, the effect diminishes. If it had been an animal suffering from the cold in *Heaven*, we would have felt it less except possibly in England where animal suffering often inspires greater feeling than human distress. An insect depicted as a shivering spot on the horizon would be unlikely to cause any real anxiety in the viewer. Through a shared time-space, it is a species-specific empathy that video is capable of creating.

One could argue that, in its ability to conjure up another human being, video seeks to restore to mechanical reproduction what Walter Benjamin called the lost 'aura' of the unique art object. In video, the authenticating imprint of the artist's hand is evident and refers to the originating moment in which the subject interacted with the technology. In spite of being only a ghostly replica of what was once there, in its organisation around realism, video betrays the artist's and indeed the viewer's need to retrieve the severed connection with 'the absolutely unique and even magical quality... of his subject'.¹⁰ In videos like *Heaven* and *Stamping the Studio*, the artist and the subject are one and the same, the artist's uniqueness embodied in his electronic mark making. More than with any other medium, we are momentarily convinced that we are witnessing the moment of creation. And yet, video is the most duplicitous of all the media of mechanical reproduction.

WORKING WITH THE TECHNOLOGY • FICTION AND THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

In terms of single-screen, pre-recorded sit-and-watch video art, this sense of auratic presentness and direct involvement are, of course, an optical illusion. There is no real-time, face-to-face encounter with the artist nor can the viewer physically access the world the artist is revealing through the video image. In fact, neither the artist, nor the illusory world s/he inhabits exists at all in any concrete sense. The video image is a simple confidence trick. For many artists working at the dawn of video art, the fundamental illusionism of the image became a source of scrutiny, fascination and, in the UK in particular, of political analysis.

All pre-recorded moving image depends on viewers activating an irrational denial of absence. They suppress the obvious fact that the apparent presence of a person on the screen is nothing but an electronic fabrication. In spite of the clever mimesis, there is clearly nobody there. Through the suspension of disbelief, viewers ignore the apparatus that creates the illusion and, instead, imaginatively read the flickering screen as a faithful representation of reality. The audience and artist enter into a kind of credulity pact. The artist pretends to speak directly to the viewer from another space and time and the viewer tacitly agrees to accept the message as a concrete manifestation in the here and now. It is sometimes a shock to discover to what extent we enter into this game of fake-for-real. We have been doing it since childhood when fairy stories allowed us to take imaginative flight into fables that gave form to the chaos of feelings and conflicts that maturation blows in. As the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim pointed out, we have little need for more 'useful information about the external world' but respond instead to imaginative equivalents for 'the inner processes taking place in an individual'.¹¹ As Bettelheim observed, children generally know the difference between what is real and what is an illusion. They enter into the world of the imagination without letting go of reality. The process was once perfectly demonstrated to me when I spent some time at the BBC working as a make-up artist. The popular puppet character Basil Brush was available to meet his audience in his dressing room after the show. The puppeteer greeted the children in his shirtsleeves with the cloth fox sheathing the end of his arm. Making no attempt to throw his voice, the puppeteer slipped into character and animated the puppet to match his speech. The children ignored the man and spoke to the ersatz fox. It is a feature of our communication age that our ability to tell the difference between fiction and reality deteriorates with age. Within the conceptual ferment of the 1970s, the credulity pact we enter into both as children and as adults was itself interrogated by artists just as the verisimilitude of video was systematically undermined. As we have seen, artists attempting to recreate with video the immediacy of performance art have not been shy to exploit the credulity pact we make with the small screen. They took advantage of our gullibility even when their aim was to deconstruct our

notions of televisual authenticity. Performative artists have always capitalised on video's ability to imaginatively re-create the one-to-one encounter between an individual artist and a viewer who tacitly agrees to be truly foxed by an electronic optical illusion.

THE SPECIFICITIES OF THE MEDIUM • LIVE RELAY

You can take a picture and put it through a wire and send it to another place...

Woody Vasulka

If the verisimilitude of early pre-recorded video was not altogether convincing, then its credibility was dramatically enhanced by the medium's unique ability to deliver to an audience a live-relay image of an event happening elsewhere. The power of television to convince was based partly on the transmission of live images across great distances to millions of people simultaneously. By the mid 1960s, the technology became available to artists who could now make direct contact with viewers over short distances with cameras linked to monitors by long cables and eventually over greater distances with small transmitters. Today, this function of video technology has expanded exponentially on the Internet giving artists instant visual and auditory access to all four corners of the earth.

The first adventures with live transmission were more modest. One of the earliest examples is Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* (1966) in which she confronted the audience, not with her own body as she often did in her performances, but with the vastness of the sky above the museum. From a camera mounted on the roof of the building, a live image of the heavens was continuously beamed down to a monitor in the gallery. Viewers enjoyed the sense of being simultaneously inside and outside the space and the novel experience of contemplating an image that rarely emerged from its role as a backdrop to conventional narratives. Simultaneity had arrived in video bringing it even closer to performance art and the presence of the artist or the natural phenomenon being transmitted to the gallery was almost, but not quite, palpable.

THE TIME FRAME

In live relay, the image and the audience occupy the same time frame, and unless the video component is being recorded, neither would materially survive the event other than in individual memories and other documentation of the event. In the context of live relay, video is as ephemeral as performance. But a pre-recorded tape aspires to the condition of permanence. However evanescent it is in its electronic specificity, the video image represents a moment of history frozen in the aspic of the oxide coating on the surface of the tape. It exists in

suspended animation, in a continuous present that can be retrieved at any point in the future for the life of the tape or in reduced form, from copies. Like photography, but with the added verisimilitude provided by sound and motion, video acts as a time machine giving the past life in the present and allowing those occupying the present to travel back to recent and more distant historical moments. For the image of the artist, early video recording also offered a modest immortality – about 20 years depending on the quality of the tape and the conditions in which it was kept. Nam June Paik believed that video most resembled life in its material mortality: 'Video art imitates nature,' not in its appearance or mass, but in its intimate "time-structure"... which is the process of AGING (a certain kind of irreversibility).'¹²

Video has the ability to travel across space and time as well as offering a short-term, anti-ageing aid to vanity. It can also bring space and time together. In 1980, the American artist Ira Schneider showed 24 tapes on a circle of monitors. Each tape was shot in a different location in the 24 time zones that make up the geographical time frame of the earth. Where broadcast television has the capability of sending a single image to destinations throughout the world, *Time Zone* anticipated the ability of the Internet to do the opposite, that is, bring together lives that are separated nationally and geographically but, in ignorance of each other, are experienced simultaneously across the globe. The Canadian Lawrence Spero decided to witness the dawn of the new millennium as a continuous Internet present by visiting a succession of webcam-linked cities around the world as each time zone hit midnight. Trapped in a kind of groundhog day new year, it took Spero twenty-four hours to experience the first second of the new millennium with everyone on earth.

Before the advent of the Internet, both television and early video were able to link geographically disparate representations of the present in simultaneous recordings and live broadcasts. The present could be launched into a projected future through recording what the camera saw onto tape. With later technological advances, video matched the ability of film to speed up apparent time and slow it down almost to the point of a dreamlike stasis. Then it became possible to combine images shot at different times and places into a montage of simultaneously experienced realities on one screen. Even with old and new variations on simultaneity, the most consistently captivating trick of time that both film and video can play is undoubtedly their ability to play back, to summon the past into the present with the apparent effortless of a crystal ball.

However, in the crystal depths of video magic, things are not always what they seem. Since the medium was invented, it has been difficult to tell the difference between a pre-recorded tape and an image relayed live from another space. In the 1970s, time had not yet eroded the quality of the tape nor aged the people and places depicted. Video history was very recent. The American artist

Vito Acconci cleverly played on the almost identical quality of pre-recorded and live video. In *Claim Excerpts* (1971), Acconci mounted a monitor at the top of a spiral staircase. On it, viewers could see the artist climbing the stairs, cursing and brandishing an iron bar. An instantaneous judgement had to be made. Was Acconci really approaching or was this a pre-recorded joke on the viewer? Records suggest that most people erred on the side of caution and fled. The work exposed our unquestioning belief in the veracity of media information and the psychological process that enables audiences to routinely suspend disbelief before the flickering falsehoods of the video monitor. In Acconci's clever deception, the line between the real and the simulated became frayed, our sense of time past and present was unsettled. Believing ones eyes no longer seemed a reliable strategy for survival.

INSTANT FEEDBACK IN THE PRIVACY OF YOUR OWN STUDIO

Video was a medium for rehearsal.

Vito Acconci, 2003

In terms of audience reception and manipulation, video offered both advantages and disadvantages. As far as the working practices of moving image artists were concerned, the most revolutionary aspect of the technology was the instant access it provided to the image – something that film could not do. With the camera hooked up to a monitor and feeding back what it saw, an artist could work directly with the image, arranging elements in the picture frame to satisfaction before committing anything to tape. The American-born artist Dan Reeves still celebrates the plasticity and spontaneity of the medium, 'and the very smallish gap between inspiration and execution' that video allows.¹³ Writing in a recent issue of the UK journal *Filmwaves*, the artist Marty St. James vividly describes how he could never give up the immediacy of video in favour of the uncertainties of film: 'It would be like making a sculpture in a bucket, sending it off to the foundry and waiting for it to come back already fixed to the floor.'¹⁴ St. James further emphasises the existential experience of video: 'With video, there is no delay. As in a performance, you work in the present... With film, you wait for the postman to bring you something you made in the past, something you haven't seen for two weeks, something that's dead.' As St. James testifies, performance lives in the present, but at the moment of creation, it is a one-off, one-shot enterprise. If you get it wrong on the night, you can't press rewind and start again. The beauty of the first video recordings was that they could disappear without a trace, discretely disposing of many false starts. Sequences could be discarded by recording over them with a new version or erasing them with continuous black – 'blacking the tape'. It was like working

with a pencil and rubber where film and performance demanded the courage to create with indelible ink. Once the performance had taken place or the film exposed, the work was set and took on a certain material permanence. Even if it had been buried at the bottom of the garden, a film constituted evidence of the artist's activities that could not be denied in a court of law. An artistic statement that in St. James' terms would be nailed to the floor.

Like many of the plastic arts, pre-recorded video could be continually deferred. It was the ideal medium for the indecisive, the perfectionist and those who favoured the slow materialisation of an idea in the privacy of a painting or sculpture studio. The traditionally spontaneous medium could be highly rehearsed and constructed. Video was also the perfect medium of self-contemplation and offered views of the body that were normally inaccessible, such as the back of the head. This proved particularly useful to Vito Acconci who, in *Corrections* (1970), was able to burn away unwanted hairs on the back of his neck with the help of an off-screen monitor. The video also allowed the artist to stare into his own face, watch his own gestures, hear his own voice and observe those indefinable messages we all unwittingly transmit with our bodies. By means of live feedback, the video artist was able to see the self as it appeared to others. Gazing into the mirror of the feedback loop allowed entry into a locked-in world of self and self as other in the reflecting pool of the technology. No other crew or machinery was needed to create the image and natural light was sufficient to illuminate a scene. The camera would then record the encounter with the self without the pressures of having to negotiate the expectations and input of collaborators or the reactions of a live audience. As we will see in Chapter 3, feminists later exploited the ability of the video closed-circuit system to act as mirror-confessor in the autobiographical work they made under the principle that the Personal was Political. Other 'minority' groups, particularly gay men, found the intimacy and domestic nature of video the ideal vehicle for the exploration of social, racial and sexual identity.

THE ELUSIVE MEDIUM

Analogue video is capable of an apparently unassailable realism in spite of the crudity of the image in the early days, its harsh contrasts and its myopic, poor depth of field. However, this fugitive image doesn't materially exist other than as a series of invisible electronic impulses encoded on a magnetic tape that will disintegrate within 20 years or less. Its material base bears no resemblance to the image it produces and it depends for its existence on the smooth running of machines and electricity. In the early days of video art, the unreliability of video equipment gave the medium the reputation of being the only art form that was truly dematerialised. Owing to repeated technical breakdown, it frequently failed to materialise at all. When it did, its sensitivity to misalignment meant that it was often reduced to pulsating abstractions and visual 'noise'.

In spite of the clever tricks it can play, video has always been an ephemeral and delicate medium, susceptible to being wiped, destroyed by heat, moisture, trauma and vibration. Although it can be manipulated in the present through the closed-circuit system, video is essentially a hands-off medium. Videotape cannot be held up to the light like film, or painted and scratched to produce an image. Nothing is learned from handling videotape; in fact, it can only be imaged by touch. It is even susceptible to magnetic forces including those created on electric subway trains, or so we were told. When I was a student in London, Mike Stubbs, a fellow student at the Royal College of Art, failed to come to work with any work for a tutorial and claimed that his tapes had been destroyed by the magnetic forces pursuing the tube train to Kensington. Whether or not the underground was capable of wiping tapes, the vulnerability of the video image to magnetic forces was not in doubt and was perfectly demonstrated by Nam June Paik in 1965. *Magnet TV* consisted of a black and white monitor owned by a powerful horseshoe magnet. The force field created by the magnet derailed the image from its scan lines and drew it towards the top turning the representational image into sweeping, veil-like abstractions. If the magnet was moved, the patterns flowed into new configurations following the shifting magnetic field.

Paik's *Magnet TV* demonstrated the vulnerability of the video image to outside interference. Paik, among others, was to prove that the video signal could be accessed and transformed at the point of manufacture. For other artists, the remoteness of the image is the very quality to which they are attracted. Marty James finds video an ideal form of expression for an abstract mind that doesn't want to deal with the physicality of the world. Video offers a point of convergence where his thoughts and ideas can find immediate expression and be relayed to a local, then later with the development of the Internet, to a global audience. As Hervé Fisher wrote, 'a thought laid upon a videotape is a thought capable of being broadcast everywhere at once in naked communication.'¹⁵ This sense of the unpolluted artistic concept embodied in the ephemeral medium of video has been reiterated throughout its history. Like a thought, the video image is essentially an abstraction, a mirage that cannot be captured and held to account. Its workings are underground, transatlantic, global, unbounded. Contemporary Meme theory comes close to describing the elusive power of thought communicated in electronic phantasms. They pass through electronic systems and are replicated the way Meme theory describes cultural ideas spreading like forest fires from individual to individual across time and space. In common with thought, video is free of a permanent material host. And this sense of impermanence, of the fleeting, but occasionally profound effect of the video image is what drew the 1960s generation to the medium. In spite of their attempts to capture the image in short-lived recordings, the transitory nature of video reflected their philosophies of the here and now, the existential moment

of change and the spreading resistance to the certainties and grand narratives that art, religion and science had used to construct the narrow world-view of their parents' generation.

THE MILLION-DOLLAR PAINTBRUSH • A NOTE ON THE TECHNOLOGY

Apart from the philosophical appeal of this illusive medium, the easy appearance and sometimes-convenient disappearance of video had its practical advantages. Unlike film, tapes could be recycled and with small or one-person crews, video had relatively low production costs. Relative to film, that is. Even in the late 1970s, the basic video equipment was still very expensive for the average artist to buy and most people relied on colleges and artist-run production centres to lend or rent them the equipment at favourable rates. In 1981, with the help of several grants, Dan Reeves spent \$100,000 (US) on a top of the range three-tube camera and recorder. In the ensuing decade, with rapid improvements in the technology, he went on to spend a small fortune on the newest machines, each item virtually obsolete by the time it reached him.¹⁶ In 1982, my own bottom of the range Sony camera cost £1,000, the Portapak, a further £2,000. Editing equipment was beyond my budget. But 16 mm film was also very expensive in the 1960s and 1970s and most artists worked with cheaper, and lighter, super 8 equipment. The disadvantage of super 8 was that it allowed only three minutes of continuous recording time, where video extended the scope to 20 minutes in a portable system and an hour for the desktop variety. The technology has now evolved to the point of general affordability. Extended battery life, miniaturisation and portability have meant that video has overtaken super 8 as the preferred home-movie medium. In the increasingly popular realm of reality TV, subjects are now given small digital cameras to reinvent their life stories for public consumption.

Those early black and white recorders may have offered considerable advantages for real-time recording, but the machines themselves were not as portable as they are now. The combined weight of a Portapak recorder and camera was over 18lb. The now familiar image of Bill Viola facing the desert like some techno-cowboy, the equipment casually slung across his shoulders, was magnificent, but unrealistic for those of us blessed with female musculature. Even relatively strong men needed assistants to run with the equipment and, as a result, many pioneers of video either collaborated or chose to work with a tripod from static positions in a controlled studio environment.

ENTER THE IMAGINARY • THE IMPACT OF VIDEO EDITING

Nam June Paik's recording of the Pope's cavalcade was made in real time, partly because no editing was available to the artist at that stage. Later, in the

1970s, simple assemble-editing became accessible and video changed from a raw, performance-based medium to a vehicle of psychological and imaginative play. Editing also made possible experiments in fractured, non-linear narratives, compressing or extending time at will. The more accurate the editing, the faster the edits became and with the advent of digital editing, artists experimented with rapid-fire cutting that tested the edges of perceptual coherence. Slow motion heralded contemplative works aspiring to a spiritual dimension that in the work of Bill Viola was also a meditation on the cycle of life and death. When an array of special effects was introduced in the 1980s, there emerged a new painterly tendency that was built on early experiments with image processing that Paik and others had pioneered in the 1960s. Images became layered, surreal and the focus shifted to the tactile and mesmeric qualities of abstraction and surface patterning. The technology available to artists became progressively more sophisticated and production values soared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Artists like Sam Taylor-Wood and Matthew Barney now use digital video and create works that deliberately reproduce the high gloss and shallow ennui of adverts and fashion photographs. But there have been frequent nostalgic returns to the grunge aesthetics, the raw immediacy of early video. In the late 1980s, the American artist Sadie Benning chose a Fisher-Price toy video camera to record the trials and tribulations of a young lesbian growing up in middle America, while in the late 1990s the UK artist Richard Billingham used a light-weight digital camera to produce subjective, fly-on-the-wall portraits of his dysfunctional, alcoholic family. The brief, forty-year history of video can be written in terms of the rapidly evolving technology available to artists and, later, to the general public. Video artists have exploited each technological development and many of the aesthetic, political and philosophical ideas underpinning their work saw the light because, at a given moment, the technology made it possible.

In the following chapters, we will look in more detail at the various tendencies and movements that make up the story of video art. Woven into the narrative will be the progression of video from an unwieldy one-take, black and white recording medium, to an infinitely flexible means of social, political and personal documentation. Video, with its increasingly sophisticated digital manipulations, has also evolved into the vehicle for the most elaborate flights of the artistic imagination. As the story unfolds, we will see a shift away from the counter-cultural aspirations of political work in the early years towards a more complex relationship to popular culture coinciding with a renewed involvement in the commercial gallery system.

2

The Modernist Inheritance

Tampering with the Technology, and Other Interferences

Some day artists will work with capacitors, resistors and semi-conductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk.

Nam June Paik

Artists emerging from the revolutionary ferment of the late 1960s were quick to explore the potential of portable video technology, the first new moving image format to emerge since the invention of film. Over the years, this flexible and enduring medium was to be used by artists for a range of social, political and aesthetic practices. Although driven by revolutionary politics and a determination to dissolve established categories and definitions of art, at the point of conception, video art was profoundly marked by the modernist aesthetic concerns that dominated post-war American and later European painting and sculpture.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PAINTING AND SCULPTURE?

Once the nineteenth-century French Impressionists and their epigones had disrupted the smooth surface of representational painting and Picasso, Braque and the Surrealists defied the conventions of pictorial realism, artists began to explore the intrinsic qualities of traditional art materials and became less concerned with transforming paint, wood and bronze into faithful copies of the external world. By the mid 1950s, realism in art came under renewed attack and a modernist campaign for 'truth to materials' was launched – with an emphasis on surface, texture and the optical effects of pure pigment. Marble, wood and paint were no