Now To the Future

Andrew Frost

- - -

paper presented at *Disappearing Video* Conference at MCA, Sydney, Nov 2008.

Published online by Teaching and Learning Cinema:

http://www.teachingandlearningcinema.org/2009/05/20/now-to-the-future-by-andrew-frost/

- - -

Video is everywhere. On line, in portable mobile technology, in the ever-present plasma-LCD display of signal, in the melding of television and cinema.

Convergence and proliferation are the truisms of 2008.

The sheer visibility of video is unremarkable, mundane in a way, yet the experience of the screen has worked its way into every aspect of electronic media and underwrites our fascination with the capture of moving image within the shifting frames of the thing we call - video.

To talk about the future of video, and the subset activity called video art, is to inevitably talk about its past. Video art has been in a perpetual state of emergence, securing access to the technology to make it happen, searching for ways to find an audience and thinking about how the moment of now is an echo of the past and prelude to the future.

My task today is to talk about some of the aspects of contemporary video art practice and make some bold predictions for the future.

One of the constants of the culture of video art has been an embrace of its seeming impermanence, an acknowledgement that its history is provisional.

Since video art is about a critical engagement with a shifting set of available technologies, there has been an acute awareness that the practice of making video is at the mercy of market forces. There is the always present probability that in ten or five years time the technology

that was used to make a video project will be defunct - the life of a video can be snuffed out as a decision is made in some far off South East Asian boardroom to switch production from ¾ Inch U-Matic to VHS to Hi8 to disc to Digital. One need only think of the difficulties of staging any sort of historical overview exhibition of video art, tracking down examples, finding machines to play the work, transferring to the newer screening formats, to realise the life span of many is limited.

In that sense, video isn't just in a permanent state of emergence; it's exists under a constant threat of disappearance.

Video art as is enraptured by technology, defined as a practice of making and as an act of viewing. The hold of it is undeniable. Pick up the catalogue of Video Logic and read through the name checks of ancient devices – the Sony Portapack, The Fairlight CVI et al – and consider the way video as an idea persists beyond the existence of the technology that achieves it.

The catalogue of The First Australian Video Festival held in 1986 is an important document in the history of video art in Australia. Bernice Murphy's Towards a History of Australian Video and Stephen Jones's Some Notes On The Early History of the Independent Video Scene In Australia are essential texts, describing video's evolution from an emergent technology in the hands of select technicians and academics to a medium that had become by 1986 accessible to a range of makers - from artists and documentarians to music video and drama producers.

The Festival and its catalogue was the establishment of a base camp for the future exploration of video. The mid-1980s had witnessed the release into the semi-pro market of portable colour video cameras and VHS editing suites that marked a significant shift in the availability of video making technology. Along with the already established public access centres this new, cheaper technology was a portent of the oncoming future – the later emergence of those now forgotten formats, but also the advent of home computer based editing, then later the ability to burn CD ROMs and DVDs, and then the ability to distribute and post work on the web.

One of the most illuminating essays in the First Australian Video Festival catalogue is for me a short piece by Annemarie Chandler with the title – Where Do We Go? Given the

unenviable task of trying to predict the future of video, Chandler reiterated the history of video up to that point – from Video Access Centres to video everywhere. Chandler wrote:

"In the '80s we allow video cameras and screens with their sophisticated ancillary computer equipment to penetrate our working spaces, to wallpaper our entertainment environments and to survey our activities, to "look in" close-up if necessary on all our transactions. In the 80s we have given permission for the equipment to be everywhere and anywhere, we have granted 'it' access into every area..."

Chandler then went on to describe the technology that was creating this Big Brother-esque world:

"The communication policy of the 80s is that the old familiar furniture, the 'box' in the corner of the living room which had sitting there quietly since the mid 1950s, has been allowed to create a hybrid of allies – our video recorders, cameras, discos, Super Stations, surveillance equipment, Big Screens, Teletext, Satellites, et all. "Video has been let out of the lounge room and allowed to roam freely over the landscape.

"The liberation of the video signal is complete."

So that was it – 1986 was Video Year Zero, not just as a category for creative production, but as a dissimulated mind-state permeating the electromagnetic force fields of Planet Earth.

Chandler's prediction was that video – so long the preserve of specialists and technicians- was being disseminated into consumer electronics. Although the name checks of 80s technology now sound like exhibits in a museum, the notion that video was about to seep from its frame was prescient.

Reading the 1986 catalogue is to be reminded that the culture of video art in this country has always been one of an assumed outsider status – a media art that paradoxically embraces the newest, sexiest technology yet craving a critical relationship to the means of production. The problem with this position has been that as proliferation has increased, the ability to assume difference is diminished. If video is everywhere, what exactly is video different to? And what is it outside of?

Over the last year and a half I have been working on a book on contemporary Australian video art, an alphabetically ordered survey of current practice. For the purposes of the book, it

became necessary to create a definition of video art since the use of the term is loose and imprecise, often used to simply denote anything that involves a screen. The definition of video art became for me any work that used video technology but did not involve interaction for an audience beyond looking, or perhaps walking around a space while looking.

To select artists I scoured video art exhibitions and catalogues, journal and magazine articles, web sites and festival show reels. Recommendations came from friends, art school lecturers, artists and galleries. I ended up with a final list of about 60 practitioners from a list of over 100.

Looking at the current practice of video this way was fascinating. It is simply staggering how much video art is out there.

And certain patterns emerged. The majority of new video work is being produced is by younger artists, and very few of them would fit the category of what was once called a "video artist" – the person whose main practice is engaged solely with the making of video art.

The three main strains of current practice appear to be performance video, video installation and single screen works. And the overwhelming majority of these works, despite the manner in which they are seen – be they single screen or multiple screen installations - are narrative-based – either through the deployment of a simple notion of duration or the use of conventional cinematic language.

The influence of artists such as Matthew Barney, Mariko Mori, Bruce Nauman, David Shrigley, Christian Marclay and Craig Baldwin are particularly notable, and to a lesser degree, the influence artists such as Philip Brophy or Tracey Moffatt can be discerned.

For those of you involved in the teaching of video, or in its study, or exhibition, this state of play is probably already apparent, but it was nonetheless fascinating to look at this broad spread of activity through an admittedly imprecise sampling methodology.

One of the aspects of this sampling that I hadn't anticipated was the appearance of a generational attitude change towards video and its practices. Proliferation of technology has undoubtedly put the ability to make video into more hands than ever before, but with it has come an accepting attitude that appears to not put a huge importance in the practice of making video – it is simply one of many choices. Where video art was once a career step

towards obscurity and a lifetime of outsider grumbling, it is now simply mainstream and unremarkable.

The question of video art's future is not so much about where the technology will take us – although that is undoubtedly important aspect – but more a question about how the institutional attitudes of video art culture are reacting to this change.

I was bemused to read Jacqueline Millner's assessment of the work of Soda_Jerk in the Video Logic catalogue. Millner characterised the Jerk's sample heavy practice as being akin to "to a fan's tribute that revels in the game of celebrity spotting and the technical possibilities of digital age manipulation" than a critically engaged, ironically discursive relationship with appropriated source material. Millner cites the video work of Tracey Moffatt as an example for this ironic engagement.

Such a notion I think is emblematic of an audience that needs its commentary euthanized and laid out, unable to recognise a critical relationship with the medium when it sees it. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the work of Soda_Jerk and their contemporaries is indeed partly fan fiction, celebratory, energised by popular culture and able to deploy new narratives that seems so confusing. The work of Soda_Jerk's is a good example of a new generation of thinking about video, promiscuously open to the possibilities of a collision between practice and theory, and one that speaks of the future of video – a practice with one foot in pop culture entertainment, the other in academic plurality.

Of the 100 or so artists and their work I viewed for my book, it was startling to note just how many of them – perhaps 50 percent – were either represented by commercial galleries, or had exhibited in them in group shows, or were involved with artist run gallery exhibitions. Whereas in 1986 a video festival was a welcome if rare opportunity to see contemporary work, the landscape of exhibition has changed profoundly over the last two decades.

I recall the mid-1980s as a time when the technology to make video existed but the chance to show it was rare. Only a handful of commercial galleries had in-house facilities to show work. The recent Performing for the Camera exhibition at Firstdraft is an example of how even modest art run spaces can engage with video practice on a significant scale. The show featured the work of more than a dozen artists and each artist's video was screened either by projector on to a wall or on a flat screen monitor, one monitor for each piece, creating a room

full of video. As anyone who regularly visits exhibitions in these sorts of galleries can attest, the technology to screen video has never been more available.

With the increased visibility of showing video in gallery exhibitions has come a new economic viability. The ability to edition DVDs has created a market and with commercial representation has come media coverage ignorant of the history of the medium but hooked by the notion of newness. One cog turns the next in a relationship of mutual satisfaction. Where artists wanting to make video could have once perhaps hoped for employment in a college or university, now commercially successful artists can enjoy all the lifestyle privileges of the independently wealthy – international travel and exhibition, sales in Euros and US dollars.

It could be argued that this commercialisation of video art has reduced what was once a more pure, speculative and critically engaged practice into a mere commodity, something to be traded and speculated upon, fuelled by decorative works uncritically recycling the tropes of Hollywood cinema.

The incorporation of video into the art market was perhaps inevitable. The market is always looking for something to sell and anything with an aura of newness sells well – it's the iPhone phenomena. But I think that this broadening of the practice and its commercial availability is actually a sign of maturity in the culture of video. If the commercial can co-exist with the fringe, then the only real question is whether artists can have a meaningful return for their efforts, not just as the makers, but as the distributors.

One last observation before we turn to the task of prognostication.

To look at the history of video art in Australia is to discover that the question of distribution has been a vexing one. Twenty two years ago television enjoyed a monopoly in the distribution of electronic imagery, and much of the debate and discussion was concerned with access. One reads the constant complaints of those forced into the role of media punditry, speculating on possible methods of distribution, alternative avenues into television broadcast, either by inveigling themselves into already extant models or perhaps by creating doppelganger alternatives to be funded by compliant government arts bodies. With the advent of the commercial video rental market at the end of the 80s it seemed for a moment that a viable alternative had emerged – perhaps video artists making tape could get in on it – but the scales of production, unit cost and access to commercial distribution meant that artists

productions were priced out of the hands of the public and into the collections of a few libraries, museum and art college collections.

The most profound difference about our now is the web. Distribution of video art over the web, as a nexus for the archiving and sharing of historical works, as a tool for the establishment of on-line communities is still very much a potential that is yet to be fully exploited. And it with this in mind we step into the next thing.

So now, to the future.

If the technology of video isn't constant, then there will be no allegiance to medium specificity. An image will be an image.

Video art will be an idea about visual data born into a world of almost instant and limitless distribution.

Video will embrace the possibility of a valueless commodity and seek out the most direct route to the viewer via iTunes, YouTube and all future iterations of user-generated content interface. Copyright is for wimps - so it will feel ok to give it away.

Video art will defend itself against the predations of the market. The market places false value on the commodity of the image. Money creates art stars, fame devalues ideas in favour of visibility, and visibility creates inoculated pervasiveness. This will be a popular tattoo.

The creation of video art will not be about providing content to content providers. There is nothing more ignominious than experiencing a work of art on a mobile phone.

The knowledge of the history of video art will not be necessary to make a video. But it will probably help.

Artists will demand re-education camps.

Creative Commons will be recognised as a waste of time since no one really wants to a make a work of art appropriated from elements so worthless an owner doesn't care who uses it.

It will be understood that there is ultimately no qualitative difference between viewing a work on the screen of a PSP or looking at an 80 centimetre flat screen LCD television set. When you're looking at video, it will be impossible to see the screen.

Video art will be unable defend itself against the predations of the market since the market is impossible to resist. Money creates taste and taste in turn creates connoisseurship, which in turn creates collections.

Video art will be the physical manifestation of data limited by proprietary software and usage agreements, restricted by internationally agreed distribution zones.
Creative Commons will be recognised as a vital strategy in the freeing up of restrictive and outmoded copyright laws. It will become an endlessly expanding grassroots movement that will liberate the end user from receptive vessel to active agent.

The technological nuances of video art will be recognised. Old and antique technology will be preserved while the relentless reinvention of already extant technology will be discouraged by fines and prison terms.

Building a history of video art will pay dividends to those who host it.