

Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film

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Video Installation in Europe and North America: The Expansion and Exploration of Electronic and Televisual Language 1969–89

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A conventional interpretation of 'cinema' suggests a medium with a number of particular and specific properties relating to the experience. For some, the term still conjures up a single, large-scale projected image viewed from a fixed position in a darkened, purpose-built space; spectators, arranged in orderly rows, are immersed and passively engaged in a narrative spectacle of sound and picture. However the term has more recently come to have a wider and less medium-specific connotation, and this shift has come about partly because of the phenomenon of media convergence, but also because of the pioneering work of artists who explored the potential crossovers, interrelationships and interdependencies between film and video.

Some innovative artists – particularly those exploring the formal and aesthetic boundaries and conventions of the moving image during the 1970s and 1980s – sought to challenge and expand on the rigid definitions and demarcations between these two closely related media. Artists in this period experimented with a diverse range of forms and configurations, seeking a wider and more radical potential for cinema, and this approach included an

exploration of the possibilities of the electronic moving image. This essay will focus on some key works by artists in the United States and continental Europe who sought to investigate the capabilities and potential of video as an art form during the early formative period that began in the late 1960s, in light of a renewed interest in the work of the period and in particular an expansion of notions of the cinematic and the convergence of the filmic and the electronic.

Although many artists working in the modernist tradition tended to concentrate on the specific formal properties of their chosen medium, the similarities and relationships between film and video were often of considerable fascination, particularly to artists interested in the potential for a wider and more radical redefinition of the cinematic and the televisual. By the mid-1960s, moving-image artists working with video were drawing on concepts from a diverse range of art movements and approaches, political ideologies, theoretical and conceptual ideas and technological developments. In this period of social upheaval and economic and cultural change, much so-called 'new art' was aesthetically, formally and politically radical. Artists interested in exploring the potential as a medium of video in its early stages were highly influenced by procedures and ideas from art movements including Fluxus, Performance and body art, Arte Povera, Pop art, Minimalist and Conceptual art, avant-garde music, contemporary dance and theatre, as well as other cross-disciplinary cultural activities and theoretical discourses. Video art was a distinctly international phenomenon and artists working with the medium not only drew from these diverse cultural and political influences, but also imported and transported ideas and attitudes across national boundaries, enriching and nourishing the wider fine art practice, reappropriating concepts, discourses and approaches from many other disciplines and media. Although this essay concentrates on work made by artists in North America and mainland Europe, the works discussed should be considered in relationship to video installations and expanded electronic image works produced by artists based or working elsewhere, particularly in the UK, Japan and Australia.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, experimentation with mixed media and multi-screen was widespread. Artists sought to develop strategies to challenge more traditional viewing conventions, particularly with respect to the role and position of the spectator, as well as to open up the art gallery and museum to the potential of time-based and expanded moving images. Although the term 'video installation' is a later addition to the lexicon, a number of artists on both sides of the Atlantic were experimenting with the sculptural and spatial potential of video. Artists working with video were also naturally interested in opening up new territories for the electronic medium, and this included a challenge to the hegemony of broadcast television, with its one-way flow of propaganda, mass entertainment and advertising. They were also seeking ways to expand its boundaries beyond the limits of the TV 'box'. Video artists working with installation often sought to explore spatial and physical relationships in relation to screen-image content, frequently including interactive elements. This 'participatory' dimension – engaging

the audience directly with the work at a physical, intellectual and emotional level – was of paramount importance in video installation. In many video installations this physical engagement produced an awareness of a radical new space for art spectatorship beyond the confines of the gallery, conventional cinema or the narrative linearity of television broadcasting.

In the early days of video art, video projection was a rare occurrence. This was not simply because the equipment was notoriously unreliable, scarce and expensive, but also because the projected image was of such poor quality, especially when compared with film projection. Video projection in the 1970s and even in the early 1980s provided a low contrast and a comparatively dim image, and due to the relatively poor resolution of the television image it was also of limited use. In this period artists who sought to explore notions of scale and/or the spatial characteristics of the medium invariably resorted to the use of multi-monitor, or, as they were more often called at the time, 'multi-channel' works. Viewers confronted with a bank or array of monitors in a gallery or exhibition space were immediately required to assess the implied relationship between the images on display. A multi-channel work challenged the viewer to engage with the work on a spatial level; she/he was deliberately left free to make decisions about the order of priority of the images and the relationship between the multiple screens and the viewing position, and to consider the space between the monitors, their relative size, and even the method in which they were mounted or displayed. A further potential level of signification could be articulated by the artist who had control of the images across the multiple screens as well as within the electronic space of the single screen, and this was of course in addition to any manipulations of the soundtrack, including the possibilities of sound projection.

In the United States and Europe, a number of artists explored the potential of a mix of closed-circuit, live and prerecorded video images. For example, Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider developed the multi-screen video work *Wipe Cycle* for Howard Wise's seminal New York gallery show *TV as a Creative Medium* in 1969. *Wipe Cycle* consisted of a bank of nine monitors, with four screens displaying prerecorded 'off-air' material and the other five showing 'live' and delayed video sequences of gallery viewers. Gillette and Schneider sought to present an experience that would break the conventional single-screen TV perspective by providing a complex mix of live images and multiple viewpoints.

Around the same period, the Austrian artist Peter Weibel produced a number of significant sculptural installations exploring the potential of closed-circuit video systems to allow the viewer to reflect on and interact within the electronic and signifying spaces that were produced. In *Audience Exhibited* 1969, video recordings of gallery spectators were simultaneously presented in adjacent rooms of the gallery, turning the spectators themselves into the subject of the exhibition. In *Beobachtung der Beobachtung: Unbestimmtheit* (*Observation of the Observation*) 1973, cameras and monitors in a three-channel CCTV system were arranged to prevent viewers from seeing their own faces from any position they occupied, highlighting the ability of the