

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# ARTNEWS

## BACK TO THE FUTURE: 50 YEARS OF VIDEO ART AT THE BROAD ART MUSEUM, MSU

BY [Barbara Pollack](#) POSTED 02/12/16



Andy Warhol, *Outer and Inner Space* (still), 1965, black-and-white 16-mm film transferred to digital files, sound, double screen, 33 minutes. Broad Art Museum.

©2015 THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM, PITTSBURGH, A CARNEGIE INSTITUTE, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED/COLLECTION OF THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM, PITTSBURGH, CONTRIBUTION THE ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.

‘**A**ttempting a history of Video art is a complicated venture,” wrote Michael

Rush in his landmark volume *Video Art*, published in 2000. “The origins of the form were too multifaceted to be indentified with one or two individuals, no matter how influential they may have been,” he went on to explain. Rush, curator, critic, and most recently director of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, passed away in March 2015, several months before the exhibition “[Moving Time: Video Art at 50, 1965–2015](#)” opened. While his spirit and insights could be felt throughout the show, which was initially conceived by Rush and organized by Caitlin Doherty, curator and deputy director at the museum, the exhibition felt peculiarly caught in the moment of his book’s publication.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Video art has become far too big a phenomenon to be encapsulated in a single history, since the term by now encompasses projections, installations, films, sculptural forms, interactive projects, and digital media. It has had an omnipresent impact on contemporary art, often taking star turn at museums, galleries, performance festivals, and biennials (where its ability to deliver both scale and portability makes it especially appealing), if not so keenly felt at art fairs, where its salability comes into question. As such, it is virtually impossible to summarize this art form's development into a singular narrative, even one that incorporates several tendencies and trends. This was already the case when Rush first presented his thesis. It is even truer today, now that the tools to make a video and upload it are as close as your iPhone.

So it perhaps would be unfair to criticize “Moving Time” for what was left out of the exhibition, a slim anthology featuring only 22 artists. Rather than offering an encyclopedic overview of video art, Doherty honored Rush's original insights with a select array of historic material—all loaned for the show—then brought the exhibition up to the present with a selection of five contemporary artists whose debt to video history is clear.

But herein lay the very problem with the show, signaled in the first paragraph of its press release: “With affordable cameras and editing equipment readily available along with ever increasing platforms, especially over the Internet, it is more important than ever to keep a watchful eye in the history and progress of video art as *an art*” (emphasis added).

## CRISTIN TIERNEY



Nam June Paik, *Button Happening* (still), 1965, black-and-white sound video, 2 minutes. Broad Art Museum. COURTESY ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), NEW YORK

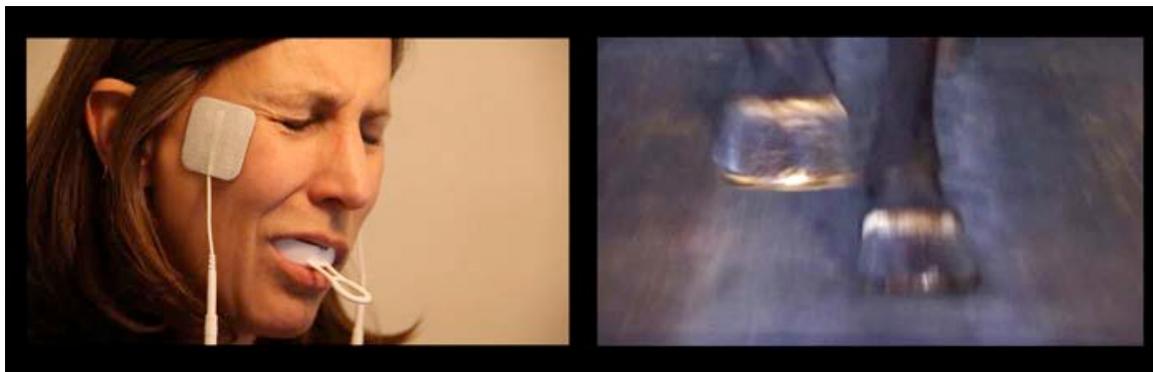
Simply put, the curator's choice of what contemporary works to include indicated an unwillingness to explore the overlaps between life and art that—in the first “Net Aesthetics” panel organized by Rhizome, in New York City in 2006—artist Cory Arcangel described as the essence of his work: “I call it the 14-year-old Finnish-kid syndrome. Basically there are people doing things on the Internet right now that are above and beyond.... In a way, my daily battle is just to try to, when I make something, make sure that it not only fits in an art context but that it also fits in online. Generally, when I put something on my blog, no one knows that I'm an artist. As soon as it gets copied and pasted to another blog, I cease to become an artist. It just becomes another piece of information on the Net. And so I like to do both.”

This is all the more strange considering that the exhibition opened with works by Andy Warhol and Nam June Paik—two artists celebrated in Rush's text who, each in his own way, dissolved the boundaries between art and life. Paik's *Button Happening* (1965)—one of the first examples of video art known to exist—documents the artist buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket. It is a rudimentary work that, in keeping with the Fluxus movement of which Paik was a key member, breaks down the division between gesture as an aspect of Abstract Expressionism and gesture as a fact of everyday existence.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Surprisingly poignant was Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space* (1965). In this work, Factory star Edie Sedgwick is seen talking to her prerecorded image on a video monitor, a scene doubled by a second view of the encounter projected on a second screen. With two live Edies and two recorded Edies, the work—created just two years after Warhol's *Double Elvis* (1963)—continues Warhol's fascination with fame as something achieved and promulgated through the multiplication of media images. This work is the only extant example of Warhol's use of video, effectively preserved on 16-millimeter film.

As Callie Angell, an authority on Warhol's films, put it in her 2002 essay in *Millennium Film Journal*, "Warhol is particularly fascinated by the ability of video playback to double the image of his subject—to place a person in the same frame with his or her own image. And it seems to me this doubling of a person's image would naturally have reminded Warhol of his own paintings, in which he often silkscreened multiple images of the same face onto the same canvas. And once he had doubled the image of his subject, Edie Sedgwick, by filming her in the same frame with her video image, it would seem an obvious step to further multiply her image by adding a second film screen to the first, just as he often multiplied the repeated images in his paintings by adding on additional panels or canvases. So, I think that is what you see happening in this film—the medium of video provides Warhol with a link back to his own practice as a painter, and his practice as a painter then suggests ways to further expand his filmmaking into the new formats of double- and multi-screen projection which will dominate so much of his later film work."



Janet Biggs, *Written on Wax* (still), 2015, two-channel HD video installation with sound, 16:9 format, 5 minutes, 35 seconds. Cristin Tierney.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CRISTIN TIERNEY GALLERY, NEW YORK

**T**he 1970s were the decade of women artists, according to “Moving Time.” In a single gallery, videos by Marina Abramović and Ulay were projected larger-than-life on one wall, while works by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Joan Jonas, and Valie Export played on monitors. These were the years in which video’s usefulness as a way to both document and extend performance art made it particularly attractive to feminist artists. In *Body Tape* (1970), the earliest video in this section, Valie Export performs a series of actions—touching, boxing, feeling, hearing, tasting, pushing, and walking—focusing on individual body parts. In Joan Jonas’s *Vertical Roll* (1972), Jonas performs as a belly dancer in a video that stutters, rolls, and repeats, obscuring her face.

Far more explicitly political and straightforward is Adrian Piper’s *The Mythic Being*, from 1973, an excerpt from a documentary about Piper’s male alter ego and her public actions in this guise on the streets of New York. Hyperarticulate and ultra-annoying, the artist presciently speaks about taking art actions into the real world while addressing class, gender, and racial stereotypes through her performances. Part slapstick and part theory lecture, Martha Rosler’s equally barbed video from the same era, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), shows the artist moving through an alphabetical list of domestic tasks, often violently wielding knives, rolling pins, and graters.

In addition to the ease with which video could be edited and its narrative structure altered, it also had an immediacy perfectly suited to addressing political topics and reaching mass audiences. Film auteur Jean-Luc Godard, a favorite of Rush’s, collaborated with fellow filmmaker Anne-Marie Miéville in 1976 on an unconventional and overtly political television series, *Six fois deux/Sur et sous la communication* (Six Times Two/On and Below Communication). Godard and Miéville bifurcated each two-hour episode so that the first half presented a visual essay on a broad topic or theme, such as the power of the mass media or work, while the second half took the form of an interview—with a watchmaker, a dairy farmer, or even, in one segment, Godard himself—that addressed the same theme from a more subjective viewpoint.

Similarly, Chris Marker delivered an exposé—now more relevant than ever—of the lives of refugees in his 1993 *Prime Time in the Camps*, which records the efforts of

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Bosnian immigrants living in the ruins of army barracks in Slovenia to launch their own television station. Influential German filmmaker Harun Farocki, who died in 2014, left a legacy of over 120 films on contemporary life and its discontents, especially warfare, surveillance, and capitalism. Largely created from found footage, they underscore how public images shape society. Farocki's 1995 video *Workers Leaving the Factory* weaves appropriated clips from a century of films, beginning with the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), into a meditation on the subject of labor.



Rachel Rose, *Everything and More* (still), 2015, HD video.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON

Here, the show would have greatly benefited from the inclusion of more contemporary storytelling, such as Omer Fast's brilliant 2009 installation *Nostalgia*, which interweaves an interview with a Nigerian refugee with a science-fiction film about a white escapee trying to make his way to a fictional African country. Instead, the exhibition yielded significant space to *Asylum* (2001–2), a nine-channel film installation by Julian Rosefeldt, a Berlin-based artist whose latest work, *Manifesto* (2015), is currently showing at the [Hamburger Bahnhof Museum für Gegenwart](#) in Berlin and the [Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Israel. For *Asylum*, Rosefeldt filmed nine groups of members of ethnic minorities in Germany performing mundane tasks in gorgeously staged surroundings. A group of Chinese women polish hundreds of Buddha statues, and gypsy women ride an antique carousel while east European laborers try to collect newspapers strewn

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

throughout a space by a gigantic fan. Intermittently, each group bursts into song, creating a surround-sound cantata as they all sing together. Uplifting as this is to experience, the installation basically aestheticizes what is currently Europe's most pressing problem, the migration crisis.

On the ground floor, removed from the rest of the exhibition, a show-within-a-show paired five contemporary video artists with five pioneers of their choosing, underscoring their works' link to the past. Michelle Handelman, who contributed *Dorian, the Wallpaper Collection: The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (2012), a series of still images of a woman's face decorated with ink markings strung together in an upbeat animation, picked Charles Atlas, whose film *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* (2002) captures the frenetic energy of London's club scene in the 1980s. Angolan artist Nástio Mosquito, delivering postcolonial rhetoric in a self-mocking fashion with *3 Continents (Europe, America, Africa)*, 2010, more ironically chose a BBC documentary about humpback whales. Other pairings included Mexican artist Luis Felipe Ortega with Bill Viola, Brit Sam Jury with Canadian Michael Snow, and Chinese artist Wang Yupeng with a 1978 work by Godard and Miéville.

**D**espite its advertised scope, this exhibition presented a narrowly defined

slice of the history of video art, excluding such genre-stretching figures as Matthew Barney, Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, William Kentridge, or Ryan Trecartin, not to mention the even less easily described output of artists making their names today. The degree to which video art has gone beyond the parameters defined by Rush and Doherty can easily be seen in a quick survey of three artists—John Russell, Janet Biggs, and Rachel Rose, all of whom had work on view in New York in the past few months and all of whom take the medium into new and unexplored territories. Rose's video projection at the Whitney Museum, *Everything and More* (2015), takes viewers into outer space using few special effects beyond a Milky Way conjured up by the artist in her kitchen using oil, flour, and milk. With an audio soundtrack of astronaut David Wolf recounting his experiences, Rose interweaves footage of a NASA weightless training center, an electronic music festival, views of Earth from space, and her own experiments with iridescent liquids to make visceral what Wolf is describing. Underscoring this collage is a barely audible track of Aretha Franklin's nonverbal harmonics.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Biggs as well often engages scientists and specialists when creating her lavishly filmed videos, which examine subjects ranging from memory loss and the onset of Alzheimer's to human endurance in the face of extreme climate conditions. In her new work *Written on Wax* (2015), she literally put herself in the hot seat by undergoing shock treatments to instill negative associations with one of her favorite activities, horseback riding. We watch as Biggs submits herself to shocks while watching a stream of various videos from her oeuvre, intermittently interrupted by the disturbing image of a horse's hooves galloping on a treadmill. (It's clear that when this image appears she is experiencing the most pain.) The work resolves itself with the liberating scene of Biggs standing on top of a horse in motion, an athletic feat performed only by highly skilled riders. Titled for Plato's description of memory as "written on wax," the video was created in collaboration with a neurobiology lab, yet it is strangely poetic.



**CarlEe sits sipping coffee.  
195 years old.  
Forty-five body allocations  
Since the Starvation Wars of 87<sup>22</sup>**

John Russell, *SQRRL* (screenshot), 2015, web artwork, archived by Rhizome. [webenact.rhizome.org/sqrll](http://webenact.rhizome.org/sqrll).  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BRIDGET DONAHUE, NYC

Finally, British artist Russell's 45-minute animation *SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS* (2015) utilizes text, illustration, animation, and GIFs to tell the improbable tale of a

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

futuristic society where humans extend their lifespans by downloading their consciousnesses into smaller animals. This is science fiction that is definitely not high-tech, with a whispered storyline and jumpy animations based on drawings by the artist. Despite its preoccupation with such up-to-the minute topics as right-wing Christianity, capitalism, and global warming, the film reads more like a children's book.

All three pieces exemplify the transformation that video has undergone in recent years, one allowing for much more idiosyncratic works to emerge even as the technology becomes ever more accessible. Rose, Biggs, and Russell each combine strategies of the past—appropriation, performance, fractured narrative, deconstruction of the spectacle—to come up with big creative visions that defy categorization.

It is just this combination of accessibility and ambiguity that lends works like these—often lumped together as “post-Internet” art—their power. To me, video's ability to blur the line between art and utility, to remix history, and to confront us with entirely new visual and narrative idioms—in short, to bewilder, unsettle, and finally to exhilarate—is what gives it strength as a medium. Unfortunately, “Moving Time,” in its determination to reify video as an art form, neglected some of the most challenging art being made today. Mired in the past and in antiquated categories, it failed to point a way to video's future.