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Author(s): Ina Blom

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The Autobiography of Video: Outline for a Revisionist Account of Early Video Art

Ina Blom

*K. O. Götz once said: "I made a number of experiments with cathode ray tubes in Norway 17 years ago. Funny images appeared, but unfortunately they could neither be controlled nor held on to." Held on to! . . . The words hit me like a bolt of lightning!*¹

1

This is the composer Nam June Paik writing, and the year is 1963. The wartime radar experiments of the German painter Karl Otto Götz were recalled at the moment of the unveiling of an artistic invention Paik had developed in deep secrecy in a special atelier close to his usual Cologne studio:² twelve television sets whose internal circuits had been modified so that the transmitted images were truly out of control, subjected to the principles of indeterminacy that Paik had struggled in vain to realize through the then-available technologies of electronic composition.³ This was one of the first aesthetic celebrations of the peculiar speeds of television signals, a volatile audiovisual material that confronted artists with forces they could in a sense only submit to—in the way that made John Cage suggest one should learn to accept rather than control the world.⁴ All of a

1. Nam June Paik, introduction to *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* (Wuppertal, 1963), n.p.

2. See Edith Decker, *Paik Video* (Cologne, 1988), p. 31.

3. See Susanne Neuburger, "Terrific Exhibit: Time Art Alias Music in the Exhibition Genre," in *Nam June Paik, Exposition of Music Electronic Television Revisited*, ed. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Neuburger (exhibition catalog, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, 13 Feb.–17 May 2009), p. 31.

4. See John Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," in *A Year From Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn., 1969), pp. 3–20.

sudden, television signals appeared as the perfect technical corollary to the avant-garde idea of undoing authorial mastery. Yet, as befits the ambivalences that inform such questioning of authorship, the celebration of the lack of technical control was accompanied by a quest for new modes of technological mastery—for instance through the development of video synthesizers that allowed for a far greater degree of predictability in the production of video images. The history of early video art is written at the intersection of these two modalities of adaptation to signaleptic speed.

But what if this history could be written differently? What if the critical question were no longer that of artistic control or lack of control? What if signaleptic speeds could be seen to have purposes of their own, powers to unfold within an artistic setting whose actants were different from those in the realm of television production? What if we could in fact imagine an opening up of the type of narrative where all agency or power of effectuation is automatically assigned to artists or works of art as they negotiate the larger social, technological, and economic frameworks that are understood to lie outside of the sphere of art itself?⁵

The main tenets of the artist-centered history of video are well known. Increasing familiarity with a social, technological, and economic phenomenon named television—technologically feasible since the late 1920s and installed as an increasingly powerful communication medium after World War II—propels artists to take media power in their own hands, using televisual technologies for the noninstrumentalist purposes of art. These aesthetic-critical modes of televisual deployment are in turn expected to affect the sections of the public spheres named, respectively, art and the media—if only through the *détournement* of key features of these institutions. However, like any historical narrative, this one hides as much as it reveals. What it does reveal is essentially the changes in the concept of the work of art as it exposes itself to new media technologies in a way that also redraws the boundaries between art and something that is often roundly

5. The concept of the actant is adopted from Bruno Latour's sociology of associations. An actant is understood here not as an original source of action but as something that is made to act by many others; see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005).

INA BLOM is a professor in the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo. Her fields of research are modernism/avant-garde studies and contemporary art, with a particular focus on media aesthetics and the relationship between art and technology. Her most recent book is *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality, and Media Culture* (2007). Her email is ina.blom@ifikk.uio.no

referred to as the social. The result is a particular association between art and media technologies that ultimately identifies the work of art with the immediacy and urgency of signaletic technologies; art is identified with media events, performative operations, and interventionist strategies. The agency of the work of art itself (its powers of effectuation and construction) is, in other words, radically strengthened in such accounts. No longer the passive objects of traditional art history, artworks now figure as performative forces to which are attributed heightened capacities for critical action. In other words, art is seen to gain a specific kind of social empowerment from the productive deployment of new technologies—in this case televisual speed.

For all their merits, such art-centric accounts tend towards a rather generalizing approach to the technologies that inform new art production. And this, in turn, leads to an equally standardized account of the sociality that figures as art's new sphere of operation. Since the 1960's revival of constructivist and dadaist strategies, it has generally been acknowledged that a prominent aspect of contemporary art is its creation or manipulation of social situations or contexts. There is little doubt that the rapid development of new media technologies during the twentieth century has been a key factor in this development. Such technologies do not just provide new forms of visual expression but also new modes of production, distribution, and public presence—in short, new social surfaces. Hence the increasing level of reflexivity in art's handling of the social—a fact that made itself felt in the early days of video art when the simple feedback mechanism of closed-circuit television was deployed as a general model for artworks orchestrating social-feedback situations.

However, the standard assignment of agency does not really account for the increasingly dramatic changes in social memory effectuated by so-called real-time technologies. Today, the archive is in motion; a culture of storage, preservation, and classification is transformed by constant updating and transfer functions, as well as live interaction and communication.⁶ The effort to see video's historical implication in this development is, I believe, obstructed by the social ontology underpinning most accounts of performative artworks. One still tends to posit a boundary between art productions and the social in which art as such can only intervene. But if we subscribe to the Durkheimian idea that society is memory, significant changes in the dominant technologies of memory must necessarily affect the definition of the social itself—including the sociality of recent art

6. See Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Gesetz des Gedächtnisses: Medien und Archive am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2007).

forms. In relation to such a scenario, an art-centered privileging of one standardized boundary—between art and the social—simply presupposes what in fact needs to be explained. To get beyond this impasse I want to propose an experimental opening: a reversal of the art-historical attribution of agency. Rather than using the performative powers of artists or artworks as a point of departure, I would like to trace the powers of effectuation of an audiovisual technology that, among other things, deployed artistic frameworks and art-related materials, personnel, and competences as part of its exploration of its own potential. What is key here is how video forges associations or alliances with other objects, perceptual systems, and subjectivities so as to both explore and expand the temporalizing powers that are among its key features. From such a perspective, the powers of video go beyond that of a standardized operational system that remains more or less hidden under a familiar cultural layer based on theatrical, literary, journalistic, visual, and actionist modes of narration, presentation, and intervention. Not only do the explicitly temporalizing operations of video create a number of new associations or social links—to the extent that its temporal contractions may be compared with mental operations and understood as a form of thought—video also produces a *reflection* on the new forms of social memory whose ramifications have to be thought beyond the framework of machine memory in the more limited sense of the term.

Briefly stated: Works of art—understood as monuments that persist over time and that both influence and are influenced by the construction of the present—are key instances of what Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory.”⁷ Yet, as a result of the media-technological revolutions of the twentieth century, the representational and monumental functions of painting and sculpture were radically weakened and the work of art itself (as well as any notion of its social function) seemed to exist only in a state of perpetual crisis or negativity. By actively foregrounding the *mechanism* of memory—that is, the technical condition under which the past is conserved in the present—video seems to present us with a definition of memory that does not *locate* memory in this or that monument, representation,

7. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992). The precise relation between the past and the present in Halbwachs's theory of collective memory undergoes a significant change in the years between the publication of *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) and the posthumous collection of 1932–44 writings published as *La Mémoire collective*. In the first book, the materials of the dead past are reanimated according to the interests of the present, whereas in the later writings the material of the dead past is seen as impinging on and forming the present moment. See Marie Jaisson, “Mémoire collective et mémoire des musiciens chez Maurice Halbwachs,” *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 2 (2007): 65–72.

or practice. Memory is quite simply a force of retention that is at work in all perception and that makes it possible to carry past materials across the temporal divide that installs itself even in the articulation of the syllables of a single word. This force, which also carries with it an all-important element of indeterminacy or difference, is not given by the social institutions that Halbwachs saw as the frameworks of collective memory; on the contrary, they depend on it for their functioning.⁸ With this rethinking of the very concept of memory, video technology emerges as the actant that bypasses the modern identification among art, negativity, and crisis, opening up new social horizons for art production.

The agency of video, in this account, has a limited lifespan. It starts around the time when television producers could for the first time choose to record their transmissions on videotape and ends when analog video is made obsolete by the digital platforms that reduce the difference between film and video to a question of rhetorical (as opposed to technical) formatting. With videotape, a proper system for the storage of televisual time was invented, a form of televisual memory that could be seen as analogous to the ways in which cinema and sound recording store past time or real durations. Yet, video recording and playback also challenge any conventional archival ideas of storage and memory, defined as the inscription of permanent marks that exist as frozen units of past time. For unlike the stable photochemical imprint of film and photography, videotape governs a flow of signals that are always live and that may be modified at any moment. The fact that predigital television was generally framed as being live even when it was, very patently, a transmission of recorded material, attests to this fact as do the philosophical discourses that see video as a paradigmatic technology of radical temporalization. The most distinct voice here is that of Maurizio Lazzarato, who draws on Henri Bergson's nonpsychological account of memory in order to theorize contemporary time-crystallization technologies—from electronic video to digital networks. Video and digital technologies are not understood as image-technologies based on optical principles but as time-technologies whose ability to contract and distribute temporal material within an unfolding now-time could be seen to share certain rudimentary features with the functioning of human memory. This idea is grounded in a Bergsonian ontology in which perception is not the specific product of the human senses but the constitutive element of the material world itself. In such a world, the human brain is essentially an interface that creates its own cuts and delays in the flow of

8. See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Puissances de l'invention: La Psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre l'économie politique* (Paris, 2002), pp. 216–23.

unmodulated perceptions, translating one speed or movement into another for the purposes of bodily action. Hence, memory is defined in purely temporal terms. It is not a storage system but a delay between action and reaction, as well as a force that exploits and expands on the moment of indeterminacy within this delay. The real-time operations of video—made ever more sophisticated with devices that allow you to manipulate the signaletic flow in numerous complex ways—alerts us to the fact that video is an analogous type of interface, producing temporal intervals that allow for a specific machinic organization of the relation between chaotic uncoded luminance patterns and the organization of frequencies into arrangements of coded signals. Video even seems to replicate Bergson's distinction between habit and conscious memory. On the one hand, the speedy electronic operations recall the automated memories of sensory motor reactions that move too fast for our conscious registration, and on the other hand the real-time manipulation of recorded material evokes the creation of conscious memories or images that continuously splits time itself into past and present, with a view to future action.⁹

As is clear, video is here judged solely on its capacity to act, and the mode of memory it articulates is based on the genuinely creative or indeterminate elements within its capacity for action. This is a far cry from a more traditional archival model of memory based on the idea that images are stored in the brain, just as human cultures store and preserve particularly significant objects, artifacts, and documents. The fact that video and digital networks technologies may be seen as the key to contemporary social organization necessarily also opens up different perspectives on the very concept of social or collective memory. Halbwachs allocated the study of collective memory to institutions and habits whose objective and material character were positively contrasted with what he saw as an overly idealist focus on individual memory and its fleeting impressions. Yet a model of social memory informed by the new time technologies and their foregrounding of memory as a mechanism of retention not just obliterates the technical distinction between individual and collective memory (the idea of the brain as interface clearly posits its interconnected nature) but also ontologically repositions the concept of the social that the Durkheimian tradition defines in terms of memory. The material reality of institutions, languages, and works of art is not limited to what can be felt and represented; it resides as much in the differentiating aspect of all sensation and perception—that is, the eventlike character of memory. From such a

9. Lazzarato, "Machines to Crystallize Time: Bergson," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 24 (Nov. 2007): 93–122.

perspective, society and its institutions cannot simply be posited as an object for study but must be concretely explained *in terms of* the differentiating operations that in fact constitute it. Such a linkage between time-technologies and social ontologies may, again, be traced in the work of Lazzarato—at least to the extent that certain fundamentals from his Bergsonian reading of signaletic technologies are transposed onto his later work on Gabriel Tarde and his sociology of imitation and differentiation. Tarde's achievement, Lazzarato claims, is to have made memory the constitutive element of a social or economic quantity and to have understood memory as a *production* of time and of difference. Time here is not a measure, as with Karl Marx, but a constitutive force, and the social is not a thing to be represented, as with Durkheim.¹⁰ Hence, the task of the sociologist is to work alongside this radically dynamized concept of time and memory—that is, to follow the emerging associations of all sorts of agencies or powers of effectuation.

If video technology presents itself as something approaching a paradigm of such agencies or powers of effectuation, a renewed attempt to describe the art-historical trajectories of this technology may affect our understanding of the way in which the social emerges as a key figure of reflection and experimentation in art after 1960. Where W. J. T. Mitchell's provocative question—what do images want?—staged a productive encounter with suppressed dimensions of fetishism and animism in our contemporary handling of images, the question of what video wanted does not indicate its otherness in relation to a specifically human rationality.¹¹ Rather, it evokes a broader scene of investigation and a more pragmatic approach; the question of what video wanted is here basically a function of what video did, where it went, and with what or who it mingled or allied itself. To trace the lifespan of video—that is, the lifespan of an agency involved in the reconfiguration of social memory—is then in many ways to attempt to write the biography of a technological object. This is a relatively well-established method; in recent years, the question of the biography of objects has become something of a mini genre within anthropology and cultural studies. In *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*, Scott Lash and Celia Lushy argue that rather than working with the mediations

10. See *ibid.*, p. 246. In this work, Lazzarato also notes how Halbwachs misread Bergson as a theorist of individual memory whereas there is no fundamental distinction between individual and collective memory in Bergson's attempt to understand how the mind prepares and expands the ground for corporeal action by introducing an element of indeterminacy and choice; see *ibid.*, pp. 219–20.

11. See W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures Want?" *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 28–56.

at play in representations cultural studies should pay attention to the mediation of things—a defining trait of a global culture industry where movies become computer games and games become environments and where media objects themselves come to rival manufactured objects. This is a world of operability, where the critical axis centers on issues of navigation rather than interpretation. In such a world, it makes sense to trace the biography of objects—that is, to trace the changes in objects and the changes effectuated by objects as they circulate through networks, trajectories, cycles, or lives of production, promotion, and reception.¹² The underlying premise here is an anthropological preoccupation with the peculiar relations between persons and things, where objects often appear as or function as persons—a premise that delivers a useful defamiliarization of the very notion of person and the point of view from which something appears *as a person*.¹³

However, for reasons having to do with the specific association between signaletic technologies and memory functions, I will introduce a twist in this biographical scenario. As it turns out, video's temporalizing forays into the materials and methodologies provided by the art context very often seem to explicitly open up issues concerning social memory; art seems to provide video with a set of frameworks through which it is able to enact a particular kind of reflection on its own capacities as a technology of memory. For this reason, the attempt to write the biography of an object with agency should be supplanted by an effort to trace the *autobiography* of this object—that is, to trace the way in which it writes its own life story and the way in which this act of self-memorizing comes to figure as one of its key operational or navigational modes. The emphasis on autobiographical reflexivity rather than biography has two related reasons. While the biography-of-objects tradition deals primarily with the circulation or exchange of commodities (that is, an economic perspective), the autobiography of video takes as its point of departure Gilbert Simondon's notion of the individuation of technical objects—notably the way in which technical objects produce their own worlds or environments as a consequence of their specific ways of operating.¹⁴ And while the biography-of-objects tradition is based on a notion of narrative that tends to simply assert the existence of life and history, the autobiography of video questions such assumptions, taking its cue from the fact that video—a deeply biopolitical technology—served to open up the very definition of life itself and hence

12. See Scott Lash and Celia Lushy, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge, 2007).

13. See *ibid.*, p. 20.

14. See Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris, 1989).

the notion of life's story. As it happens, the question of a technical object's life is more than a purely methodological perspective when it comes to early video. The experience with live signals quite obviously evoked the electrical sparks that animate a number of natural phenomena, including the human brain, and hence early video discourse (which also took cues from the new science of cybernetics) is brimming with ideas about the continuity between biological and technical modes of being, as well as nascent ideas of artificial life. In fact, the specific association between life and time brought out in the realm of early video art recalls Eugene Thacker's concept of superlative life—one of several competing definitions of life identified in his recent critique of the ontology of life in Western philosophy. This is the tradition whereby life is defined in temporal terms, as generosity or overflowing, as change, dynamic process, and as propensity for creation and production; life can here be thought only in terms of those actual instances of the living that it produces.¹⁵ To the extent that such a tradition somehow sidesteps the notion of life as origin, it does not easily support notions of the *history* of life—a point that appears to have been intuited by Nam June Paik when he pointed out the way in which the new time technologies would come to challenge historiography. History, Paik said, should be supplanted by a new inscription of time named “videory.”¹⁶

The extensive engagement with the genre of autobiography during the past decades seems to support precisely this type of questioning of the connection between life and history because autobiography paradoxically enough tends to undo rather than fortify the representational stability of its subject. As Jacques Derrida has shown, neither the biographical nor the *autos* of the autobiographical are adequately thought with the notion of a self-enclosed system that would be read independently from any external empirical information; both attest to the productive dynamics of the borderline between narrative and life. Interestingly, Derrida used the neologism “otobiographies” and the concept of the “ear of the other” to highlight the systematic self-othering of autobiographical writing. Apparently the listening ear that picks up frequencies—purely temporal phenomena (frequency notably measures the repetitions of an event within a specific time frame)—is the most apt metaphor for the fundamental connectivity of autobiographical operations.¹⁷ A medium or technology whose

15. See Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago, 2010), pp. 25–95.

16. Paik, “Letter to Radical Software Jan. 8, 1972,” *Nam June Paik: Videa 'n' Videology 1959–1973*, ed. Judson Rosebush (exhibition catalog, Everson Museum of Art, New York, Jan. 1974), n.p.

17. See Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” and “Reply,” in Derrida et al., *The Ear of the Other: Otobiographies, Transference, Translation*, trans. Avital Ronell (New York, 1985), pp. 5, 51.

every representation is but an ephemeral effect of frequency modulation would then seem to have a specific purchase on the problems and pleasures of an autobiographical take on the question of life, memory, history, and relationality. The reflexivity of autobiography might, quite simply, be a better framework for tracing the life of objects defined in terms of the speed of signalletic events.

As is well known, the association between video and reflexivity is hardly new; in fact it has been a staple of critical analyses of video art since the 1970s. Yet, the issues at stake in the autobiography of video shows its difference from the most influential art-historical accounts of video reflexivity. The most-quoted text on the subject is—even today—Rosalind Krauss's 1978 essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism."¹⁸ Presenting Vito Acconci's well-known 1971 work *Centers* as a paradigm, Krauss focuses on works in which artists use the video camera so that the resulting monitor image appears to be a mirror, demonstrating interaction with a real-time self in a feedback situation. Video is therefore seen to foreground a particular psychological model—a state of narcissistic self-encapsulation in which the body or psyche produces its own surround in a kind of infinite regress. Video feedback and *mise en abyme* effects (prominent in early video art) were in other words associated with mental regression. In fact, the larger question here is linked to the debate about the critical potentials of artistic formalism, and in Krauss's analysis the self-enclosed circuit of video feedback compares negatively with what she sees as the self-differentiating processes at work in radically reflexive 1960s formalist paintings. While Jasper Johns's *American Flag* at once affirms and undermines its own painterly support, using reflexivity to establish a fundamental destabilization or asymmetry between the terms *picture* and *painting*, Acconci's interaction with his own "video self" represents, in Krauss's view, a dubious suppression of difference that ultimately attests to the culture of the self in late capitalism. Self-reflexivity in video art is here a simple effect of a technical-ideological apparatus vested in the production of subjectivity.

The most ambitious recent approach to the subject of video reflexivity is Yvonne Spielmann's *Video: Das reflexive Medium*.¹⁹ Here, the question of critical formalism versus a late capitalist culture of the self is replaced by a

18. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (New York, 1986), pp. 179–92.

19. See Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: Das reflexive Medium* (Berlin, 2005).

preoccupation with the representational capacities of media images. In analog video, the indexical or physical/causal relation between images and representational content that characterizes film and photography has been obliterated at the expense of an iconic difference in which the electronic screen image becomes the material presentation of the *image* of a photochemical recording. The recording of light in analog video still retains some trace of the similarity-relationship characteristic of film and photography, at the same time as video images are immaterial and infinitely modifiable, just like digital simulation images. And it is this ambivalent position between analog recording and digital simulation that makes video a reflexive medium, constantly reflecting the troubled issue of the factual veracity of its visual output. Video reflexivity is then implicitly associated with a postmodernist discourse centered on the simulacrum as a problem for social description in art—a mourning of the loss of a representational *connection* between art and social reality that one imagined existed before the ravages of a late capitalist media age when an overarching emphasis on pure sign-values seemed to instigate an effacement of the reality of use- and exchange-value.

While questions of subjectivity-production and representational modus may be highly relevant for studies of art, technology, and social memory, the fact remains that both Krauss and Spielmann are primarily preoccupied with the crisis of images in general and of artistic images in particular. And it is also along this essentially visualist axis of investigation that both authors treat the social as a general ground against which art and art's various modes of reflexivity seem to emerge as (difficult) figures. The relation of video technology to time—arguably the single most significant factor when considering the issue of memory—has no real purchase on their analyses of video reflexivity. Yet there is good reason to question or displace this predominantly visual focus when dealing with a signaletic technology where the emergence of images is incidental—just one among several potential effects of frequency modulation (sound is equally likely to occur). Here the media archaeological line of research taking inspiration from the work of Friedrich A. Kittler and Siegfried Zielinski (among others) is a useful frame of reference because it rejects the phenomenological bias of screen focus and zooms in on the material processuality of finely grained technical properties and engineering events that never address human consciousness as such. The insistent techno-mathematical and microtemporal focus in the work of Wolfgang Ernst leaves us with a vivid picture of the agency or operability of modern information technologies, particularly since such agencies are seen as forms of memory or tech-

niques of the contemporary archive.²⁰ And yet the question of the wider connective or associative powers of such agency—the key element in the sociology of difference that takes its cue from the work of Tarde—is not really pursued. To pay attention to the ways in which the properly technical agencies of video reflects on its own temporalizing powers *through* its explicit associations with other objects or forces is then, above all, to trace the emergence of new social topologies—in fact, the outline of new forms of social life.

2

And so it is a matter of returning to the technological sources of early video. Or, more precisely, we need to return to those sites where the range of technical features available under the term *video*—the signaletic and electromagnetic materials, the genuinely audiovisual character of the video signal, the possibility for transmission and modification without recording, the immediacy of recording and playback, the potential for real-time and closed-circuit operations, the use of lo-fi, half-inch videotape versus the broadcast standard two-inch tapes (to mention but a few)—forge new associational events. The specificity and diversity of such events become important once one recalls the wholly incidental nature of a televisual medium whose key features seemed irrevocable for at least four decades, as well as the divide between a video art focused on signals and frequencies and a television format that never really cut its connection to film and cinema. In fact, the significance of video's unfolding through other agents and connections than broadcast television is underscored by the fact that shooting on film stock for a cinematographic feel and style has only increased in modern television production—a development that paradoxically goes hand in hand with the digitalization processes that today obliterate the very distinction between video and cinema. In the 1920s and 1930s, televisual technologies seemed to suggest a vast range of possibilities, including facsimile systems, radiophotographs producing paper prints, visual newswire, and video phone systems. It was only through a distinct industry decision that television became a theatrical and cinema-

20. See Wolfgang Ernst, "Media Archaeology: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley, 2011), pp. 239–25. See also Parikka, "Operative Media Archaeology: Wolfgang Ernst's Materialist Media Digrammatics," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 28 (Sept. 2011): 52–74.

like medium that soon made all the other equally viable options seem like failures.²¹

On a practical level, video's autobiographical sites may have different modes of articulation. They may emerge through analog videotape works or closed-circuit camera and monitor set-ups that may or may not include recording or signaleptic manipulation by means of video synthesizers. But they may also be discursive, in the sense that video technology operates as a body of knowledge that imposes its parameters at the level of textual reflection so as to produce a new sort of video thinking or what we might perhaps call a videomatic inscription of thought itself. A number of such textual sites seem to turn around the associative force of the phenomenon known as real time—a technical function that allows a machine to respond to its environment within a time frame that is often perceived as immediate, reinforcing the impressions of the live quality of a technical set-up. One such discursive site is a 1968 text by the personnel researcher Hal Sackman of System Development Corporation of Santa Monica—a RAND Corporation spin-off that was charged with developing the systems software for the SAGE air defense project and that recruited or educated thousands of computer programmers in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The text reflects the macro concerns of an employee in a company said to have trained the computer industry—that is, a concern with the way in which interaction with real-time systems change the object and impact of knowledge itself.²² In fact, the text establishes a new type of circuit between technocratic and ethical/political concerns that depends precisely on a new form of recognition of technological agency. Sackman's intimate familiarity with the speed and immediacy of real-time technologies passes into a concern for the lag between the speed of technical events and the much slower human cognition of change. But (in sharp contrast to the later and more dystopic descriptions of philosophers like Paul Virilio) machinic speed is here at once the problem and the solution. The lag can be handled if human cognition is properly integrated in, made to operate alongside, real-time systems.

A real-time information system is here primarily defined as a set-up that allows you to monitor events in a specified environment with the intention of controlling the outcome of those events in a desired direction; it is at once an early-warning system and a system for corrective regulations.

21. See John Thornton Caldwell, "Modes of Production: The Televisual Apparatus," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London, 2004), p. 293.

22. See Hal Sackman, "A Public Philosophy for Real Time Information Systems," in *1968 Fall Joint Computer Conference*, vol. 33, pt. 2 of *AFIPS Conference Proceedings* (Washington, D.C., 1968), pp. 1491–98.

The salient political/ethical point derives from the technical integration of knowledge and action. Older media systems (books and films, traditional archives, and even new mass-distribution media like radio and to some extent television) are based on a model that separates storage and retrieval of knowledge from the passage into action. With a real-time system, the technical collection, organization, and storage of information lead directly to action. Such systems are not just passive spectators of their own events but active agents that mold a partially plastic environment in accordance with a preconceived image. In other words, in Sackman's account technology no longer figures as an instrument; it is explicitly presented as a form of agency. And it is only by properly acknowledging technological agency and its specific and autonomous forces that humans will remain political players in a world that is no longer their own. Politics is here defined in terms of a certain type of democratic effectiveness: notably, the power for social change as self-change (as opposed to change imposed from without). Significantly, this properly videomatic inscription of political thought is retroactively identified with the one philosophical tradition that consistently links knowledge with action—notably the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James.

Recognizing the technological agency of real-time systems (as Sackman concludes) opens up social experimentation on a scale not seen before and in "a bewildering variety of forms."²³ Real-time collection, reduction, and analysis of social data introduces a new temporal dimension to social reflexivity to the extent that it would seem as if social ontology had been reconfigured in terms of the duplicitous temporality of the event of inscription (in Derrida's account, the trace is a piece of the past constantly split apart as it opens onto a here and now). As it happens, the technological agency of video enforced almost exactly the same type of inscription of social/political thought within an organization that saw itself as the radical or underground mirror of the RAND corporation—notably the Raindance video collective and their publication *Radical Software*. In the multifarious writings of this collective and their many affiliates, generally seen as one of the theoretical and organizational cradles of video art, there is an almost astonishing lack of interest in the visual aspects of video and its iconographic and narrative potentials. Instead you see, over and over again, the forging of associations between technical time and social reflection. In a 1970 text by philosopher and family therapist Victor Gioscia, video is defined in terms of what Gioscia calls "chronetics" and discussed from the perspective of Alfred North Whitehead's critique of the fallacy of

23. Ibid., p. 1497.

such key archival notions as place and location. “There is no Universe anywhere, ‘at’ any instant, for there are no instants. Better—*there* isn’t,” Gioscia asserts before claiming that he wants to understand “the chronetic laws of that accelerating process of which electronic software is the current mode.”²⁴ The accelerating process referred to here is, again, the impact of time technologies on the notion of human centrality; exposure to the pure temporalities that we call frequencies also alerts us to the fact that the human sense apparatus can only tune in to an infinitely tiny specter of universal frequencies. And, once more, the emphasis on human limitation does not open onto dystopic visions of loss but onto alternative social ontologies—first of all through a critique of what Gioscia calls the sociology of expectation or prediction. The sociologist’s desire to anticipate recurrence and periodicity so as to be able to generalize will have to be done away with if humans are going to politically mediate the eventlike temporalities of frequencies that displace their self-proclaimed centrality in the social world. Hence, as Gioscia puts it, any software system that sets the outer limits of its responsibility as fostering the synchronicity of present human wavelengths could be guilty of a reactionary nostalgia. Once more, the agency of video technology occasions a radically temporalizing mode of reflexivity that overturns a social memory based on the concepts of recurrence and place as well as the standards of sociological reflection that go with such concepts. It is interesting, also, to note that both Sackman and Gioscia, from their different institutional backgrounds, are less interested in the material effects of ideas and ideologies than in the ideological and ideational effects of technological agencies.

These videomatic inscriptions of social and political thought may be seen in light of the specific alliances between signalethic speeds and human collectives that emerge in a number of early video artworks. For these are sites where you get a distinct impression of a certain signalethic accessing of human bodies in collaborative action. It is, in fact, as if the signal instigates a revision of what is otherwise known as specifically human relations based on the eventlike powers of the video signal. Initially, such revision registers in terms of an effective undoing of certain routine associations between sociality and the concept of the image; these associations are brought out for ritual inspection in almost every single art situation where social issues are at stake. Take for instance the case of *Mumble* and *Exchange*, two closely related videotapes that resulted from a 1972 collaboration between Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris. From the habitual anthropocentric perspective, the tapes could be seen as the documentation of an evolving

24. Victor Gioscia, “Frequency and Form,” *Radical Software* 1, no. 2 (1970): 7.

antagonistic-erotic relationship between two actual, identified persons (Benglis and Morris)—the final result of an exchange of videotaped messages and responses in which some twenty generations of tape were passed between the two artists for ever new additions and modifications. Video could here be understood as a communicational channel connecting two persons (like the telephone or the postal system) and as an indexical medium tracing a real-life relationship. And both these options would attest to well-documented aspects of the social turn in 1960s art: on the one hand, the artistic accessing of new communications technologies in networklike systems of collaboration and, on the other hand, the evocation of the real through a variety of deictic marks.

Yet, a closer look at the works also complicates these perspectives. For, increasingly, whatever relationship there is between Benglis and Morris seems to emerge as an effect of their equally intensive alliances with frequencies, electromagnetic tape, TV monitors, feedback mechanisms, and closed-circuit set-ups. The specific features and dilemmas of their interpersonal exchange have no meaningful frame of reference beyond the specific affordances of this technical realm. A little drama is taking place here in which a specifically human relationship is staged in terms of a pictorial model that is undone by video's temporalizing regime almost the moment it is established. For the recurrent visual motif of the Benglis/Morris tapes—two dark profiles (a man and a woman) facing each other and framing a lighter background where a third person (Morris) is standing with his back turned—is an almost too-obvious evocation of the famous Rubin vase illusion, a key demonstration piece in the gestalt psychology theory of figure/ground relationships that was habitually evoked in discussions of modern painting. Rubin's model shows the allocation of attention in perception. Since attention has to single out a figure from a ground, you either see a vase or two human profiles, never both. In accordance with this idea, the voice track on *Exchange* seems to translate the competition, attraction, and antagonism between Benglis and Morris to the terms of figure/ground relations. Benglis is accused of suppressing Morris's speech and obscuring his image behind faces, and Morris, for his part, is said to have suppressed Benglis's image while retaining her voice undistorted. (Benglis is heard on the soundtrack, but never seen.)

Relations of domination and submission between actual persons are thus initially mediated through issues of visibility, that is, the organization of a delimited optical field according to the rules of human visual perception. The key question here is the way in which the seen depends on the suppression of something not seen or not perceived; the division within the optical field becomes a model for the distribution of power in terms of

the having or not having of power (visibility). Modern painting may have had second thoughts about the attributive powers of vision; as Krauss has pointed out, what was at stake in the complex figure/ground ambiguities elaborated in much painterly work of the postwar years was not really the question of grasping figures but a self-reflexive exploration of the immediacy of vision itself.²⁵ Yet, to the extent that it is precisely the immediacy of the visual decision that gives authority to the attribution of power, such self-reflection remains within an ontological framework in which the very question of power is, fundamentally, a question of attribution and where the critical moment of visual decision must more often than not be the effect of habituation, formation, and memory.

With Benglis and Morris, video clearly accessed the capacities of two artists who were routinely grappling with the question of vision in the social field. In his 1964 performance *Site*, Morris had notably attempted to transpose the formal/visual problems of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* to a real-life setting—that is, to actualize, in social space, the very mechanisms subtending the painting's provocative politics of vision. For video, however, accessing the problems of modern painting was just the first step in an undoing of the very priority of vision within a social/technological framework that was at times presented as a new electronic form of painting. For if *Mumble* and *Exchange* evoke the optical field of figure and ground, this field is immediately displaced by more fundamental processes of temporalization. All sorts of chaotic speeds seem to take over; so-called snow on the screen, uncontrollable vertical rolling of the picture, and the collapse of the image into horizontal bars across the screen testify to the realm of unmagnetized particles and signaletic slippages. As long as all the sync pulses and timing references are aligned among camera, recorder, and monitor, video may well present us with the illusion of being an image medium. But the sync pulses—the invisible hooks that hold the video frames in place as they run in place—are, as Barbara Buckner so poetically put it, “a prison in the way that natural day and night are,” attesting to a “necessary division of activity.”²⁶ Every time synchronization slips, the truly temporal basis of video—the continuous work of coordinating signaletic events—shows up in its raw state. In *Mumble* and *Exchange*, synchronization keeps slipping, and alongside this undoing of images an explicit discourse of mobility, speed, and action-oriented preconscious perception invades the very terminology through which relationships are

25. See Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 1–33.

26. Barbara Buckner, “Light and Darkness in the Electronic Landscape: Some Aspects of the Video Image” (1978), www.experimentaltvcenter.org

now configured. In fact, video stages a social world that cannot be defined in terms of pictorial relations—in the sense that with the pictorial model everything turns around the attribution of power/visibility to the elements of a given field, as if power were an original resource for distribution and redistribution. Once overtaken by the specific technical features of video recording and playback, the Morris/Benglis exchange emerges as a case of what we may perhaps call speed relations—a mode of social description where power is not something you have in various quantities or degrees but a purely momentary effect of forces of alignment and temporal synchronization that are instantly ready for reconfiguration. Any impression of endurance over time is simply an effect of a repetition of procedures under similar-seeming yet always different conditions.

If video needed the figure/ground scenario—if, in fact, it returned to it repeatedly, obsessively—it was then in order to assert its difference from a regime of specifically human seeing focused on visual overview, identification, and recognition. To assert a fundamental difference in relation to an optical discourse underpinning dominant models of social thinking and organization demanded hard work and could only be achieved through a constant search for allies, milieus, or zones of activity through which video could develop and promote its special perspective. And so the Rubin vase/face illusion was already evoked in a 1970 work produced in the video studio of the medical school at the University of California, where two large studio camera areas were set up to frame the head of a performer rotating full circle. Through live mixing of the two camera feeds, the complementary views of the rotating head were seen on each side of a split screen, one in positive and the other in negative. During very brief instants the positive/negative versions of the head face each other across the split screen like the profiles in the Rubin diagram, but again this is only a fleeting nod to a displaced visual paradigm. The constantly rotating double action—deepened by the effects of solarization, wipes, dissolves, and superposition—undercuts the association between attention and identification of figures. Attention is here subjugated to the demands of action within a realm of multiple speeds.

In fact, Keith Sonnier's *Positive-Negative* was one among a series of early video works (*Color Wipe*, *Dis-Play*, 1–2000, *TV in TV out*, *Channel Mix*) presenting an inverted world in which the attentive humans ostensibly at the controls of the various televisual machineries now emerge as their accessories, parts of their working components. In these tapes, humans (like Benglis in *Exchange* and *Mumble*) are heard but rarely seen. No longer faces or figures, they are essentially voices emerging from the depths of the studio situation, where they seem submerged in a sort of protracted oper-

ational dialogue with a number of technical personae—relays and wipes and switches, mat keys and machine clocks, Scanimate and Kodalith effects, to mention but a few. These are, for all intents and purposes, the real protagonists of these tapes. Presented as the key functions in the milieu of the television studio, they are also the operative forces or agencies of these technomorphic tapes. Only the most stubborn anthropocentrism would elevate the somewhat distant human presences in these works into sovereign subjects, intentional makers, and users of technology. In fact, by accessing humans as voices rather than figures, video not only captures a particular mode of everyday intimacy and intensity in man-machine interactions that could not be further away from the awkward and alienated robot bodies normally brought on to demonstrate such exchange. As voices, humans are here in fact defined *as* frequencies and in this sense quietly appropriated as parts of the electromagnetic spectrum that is video's particular sphere of operation. Video translates human action into signaletic phenomena and—even more pertinently—into the intensities of physical events whose sphere of activity radically exceed the normal frameworks of human perception. What is taking place in these works is precisely that type of expansive technical recontextualization of human capacities that made Gioscia call out for a new social ontology, one moving alongside the speed of events rather than anticipating recurrence. In fact, the studio situation that unites voices, wipes, keys, switches, clocks, and a host of new electronic signature effects (the stark black-and-white contrasts of Kodalith, the glowing light pulses of Scanimate) emerges as the self-conscious paradigm of a new kind of collective memory: a collectivity moving to the beat of the experimental openings that appear thanks to all the highly particular resistances to preformatted patterning enacted by these volatile electronic agents.

A sense of the original drama of this situation is recaptured in a short 2009 YouTube clip of computer graphics expert Joe Mullen, who returns to one of the few remaining Scanimate analog computers in search of retro video effects. It is almost touching to watch the puzzled respect with which he tries to relate to the complex array of wires, knobs, and controls of this huge piece of equipment, his awe at its capacity for discovering “the unexpected,” the “serendipity” of its operations. “When you do things digitally, . . . you know exactly what you are going to get,” he says, with a half-regretful smile.²⁷ No more of an actant than any other thing in the world, analog video still seems to stand out through its apparent ability to

27. Joe Mullen, “Joe Mullen Talks about Using Scanimate to Make New High-Def Graphics for the Got Milk Campaign,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe_bByV3eGw

present itself as a distinct form of agency, to impose and promote and argue its status as a subjectlike actant vis-à-vis its various human collaborators. The autobiography of video is the story of this evolving self-presentation, as it made its mark on the demonstratively social terrains of 1970s art production. To trace this autobiography is to rethink the concepts of collectivity and sociality at work in the art production of that period—and beyond.