



Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975.

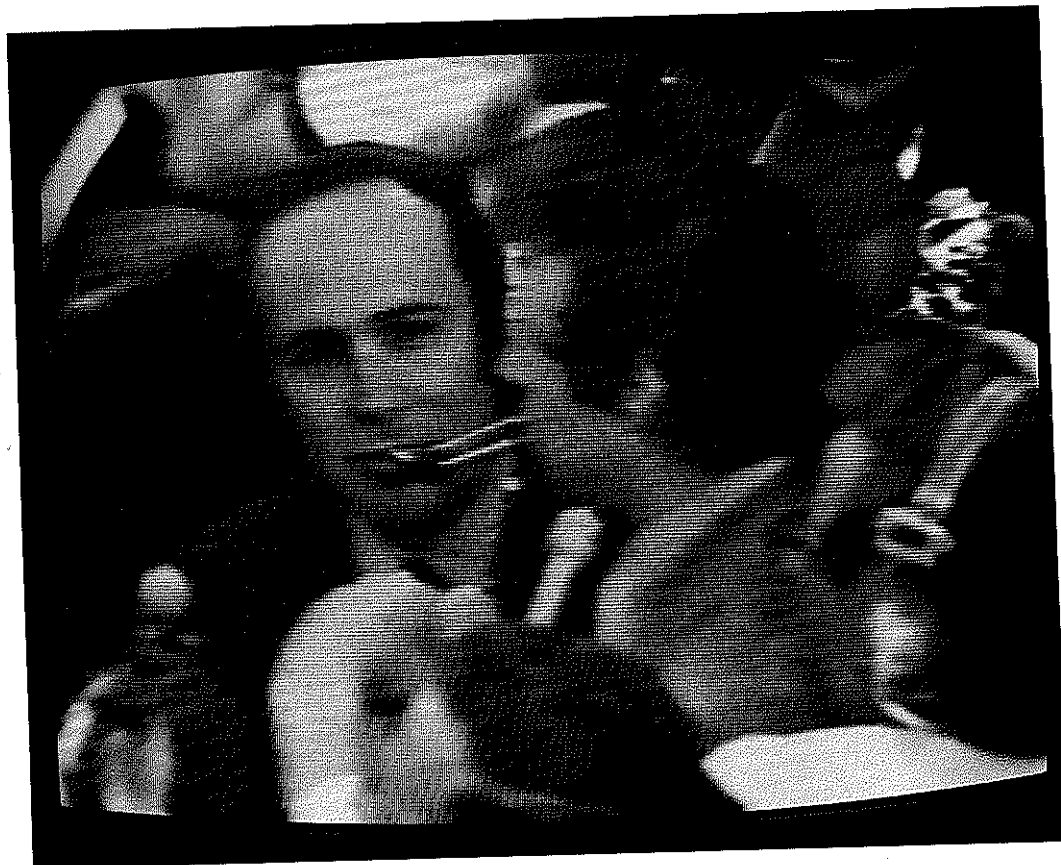
## Video: Shedding The Utopian Moment

MARTHA ROSLER

What we have come to know as *video art* experienced a utopian moment in its early period of development, encouraged by the events of the 1960s. Attention to the conduct of social life, including a questioning of its ultimate aims, had inevitable effects on intellectual and artistic pursuits. Communications and systems theories of art making, based partly on the visionary theories of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller, as well as on the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss—to mention only a few representative figures—displaced the expressive models of art that had held sway in the West since the early postwar period. Artists looked to a new shaping and interventionist self-image (if not a shamanistic-magical one), seeking yet another route to power for art, in counterpoint—whether discordant or harmonious—to the shaping power of the mass media over Western culture.

Regardless of the intentions (which were heterogeneous) of artists who turned to television technologies, especially the portable equipment introduced into North America in the late 1960s, these artists' use of the media necessarily occurred in relation to the parent technology: broadcast television and the structures of celebrity it locked into place. Many of these early users saw themselves as carrying out an act of profound social criticism, criticism specifically directed at the domination of groups and individuals epitomized by broadcast television and perhaps all of mainstream Western industrial and technological culture. This act of criticism was carried out itself through a technological medium, one whose potential for interactive and multi-sided communication ironically appeared boundless. Artists were responding not only to the positioning of the mass audience but also to the particular silencing or muting of *artists* as producers of living culture in the face of the vast mass-media industries: the culture industry versus the consciousness industry.

As a reflection of this second, perhaps more immediate motivation, the early uses of portable video technology represented a critique of the institutions of art in Western culture, regarded as another structure of domination. Thus, video posed a challenge to the sites of art production in society, to the forms and "channels" of delivery, and to the passivity of reception built into them. Not only a systemic but also a utopian critique was implicit in video's early use, for the effort was not to enter the system but to transform every aspect of it and—legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde project—to redefine the system out of existence by merging art with social life and making audience and producer interchangeable.



TVTV, *Four More Years*, 1972.

The attempt to use the premier vernacular and popular medium had several streams. The surrealist-inspired or -influenced effort meant to develop a new poetry from this everyday "language" of television, to insert aesthetic pleasure into a mass form and to provide the utopic glimpse afforded by "liberated" sensibilities. This was meant not merely as a hedonic-aesthetic respite from instrumental reality but as a liberatory maneuver. Another stream was more interested in information than in poetry, less interested in spiritual transcendence but equally or more interested in social transformation. Its political dimension was arguably more collective, less visionary, in its effort to open up a space in which the voices of the voiceless might be articulated.

That the first of these streams rested on the sensibility and positioning of the individual meant, of course, that the possibilities for the use of video as a theater of the self, as a narcissistic and *self*-referential medium, constantly presented themselves. And, indeed, the positioning of the individual and the world of the "private" over and against the "public" space of the mass is constantly in question in modern culture. Yet this emphasis on the experience and sensibilities of the individual, and therefore upon "expression" as emblematic

of personal freedom and this as an end in itself, provided an opening for the assimilation of video—as "video art"—into existing art-world structures.

A main effort of the institutionalized art-delivery structures (museums, galleries, and so on) has been to tame video, ignoring or excising the elements of implicit critique. As with earlier modern movements, video art has had to position itself in relation to "the machine"—to the apparatuses of technological society, in this case, electronic broadcasting. Yet the "museumization" of video has meant the consistent neglect by art-world writers and supporters of the relation between "video art" and broadcasting, in favor of a concentration on a distinctly modernist concern with the "essentials of the medium." This paper, in Part I, attempts to trace some basic threads of artists' reactions to nascent technological society and marketplace values in the nineteenth century, using photography as the main example. The discussion invokes the dialectic of science and technology, on one side, and myth and magic, on the other. In considering the strategies of early twentieth-century avant-gardes with respect to the now well-entrenched technological-consumerist society, it asks the question: movement toward liberation or toward accommodation? Part II considers historiography and the interests of the sponsoring institutions, with video history in mind. Part III considers the role of myth in relation to technology, with a look at the shaping effects of the postwar U.S. avant-garde and Marshall McLuhan on the formation and reception of "video art" practices.

### Part I: Prehistory

Video is new, a practice that depends on technologies of reproduction late on the scene. Still, video art has been, is being, forced into patterns laid down in the last century. In that century, science and the machine—that is, technology—began to appear as a means to the education of the new classes as well as to the rationalization of industrial and agricultural production, which had given impetus to their development. Although the engineering wonders of the age were proudly displayed in great exhibitions and fairs for all to admire, the consensus on the shaping effects that these forces, and their attendant values, had on society was by no means clear. Commentators of both Left and Right looked on the centrality of the machine as meaning the decline of cultural values in the West. Industrialization, technology's master, seemed to many to rend the social fabric, destroying rural life and traditional values of social cohesiveness and hard work that had heretofore given life meaning.

Central to the growing hegemony of the newly ascendant middle classes, bearers of materialist values and beneficiaries of these new social dislocations, were the media of communication—not excluding those physical means, such as the railroads, which welded communities together with bands of steel—and incidentally added to the repertoire of perceptual effects. Although the new

mass press aided communication among classes and factions vying for social power, its overweening function was the continuous propagation of bourgeois ideology among members of the still-developing middle classes and, beyond them, to the rest of society. And it was this ideology that accorded science a central position. "Science," as sociologist Alvin Gouldner had noted, "became the prestigious and focally visible paradigm of the new mode of discourse."<sup>1</sup> One need hardly add that this focus on science and technology incorporated the implicit goals of conquest, mastery, and instrumentalism responsible for the degradation of work and the destruction of community.

The new technologies of reproduction, from the early nineteenth century on, were not segregated for the use or consumption of ruling elites but soon became embedded in cultural life. Perhaps the most public examples are the growth of the mass press, as previously noted, and the invention of photography, both before mid-century. The birth of the press in the previous century has been identified with the tremendous expansion of the public sphere, inhabited by the cultured, including the cultured bourgeois tradesman alongside the literate aristocrat. The growth of the mass press coincided with the pressure for broader democratic participation, to include the uncultured and unpropertied as well. The erosion of traditional authority, which had emanated from the aristocracy, helped bring the previous ruling ideologies into crisis.

Thus, conflict over cultural values and the machine stemmed from the aristocracy and from the newly proletarianized "masses" as well as from traditional craftspeople, tradespeople, and artists. Artists' revolts against the technologization and commodification of "culture" and its ghettoization as a private preserve of the ebullient middle classes took place in the context of the artists' own immersion in the same "free-market system" that characterized those classes. Thus, opposition to technological optimism was located in diverse social sectors, and for diverse reasons. Both cultural conservatives, such as John Ruskin, and political progressives, such as his former student William Morris, sought to find a synthesis of modern conditions and earlier social values. It might not be stretching a point too far to remark that the centrality of instrumental reason over intellectual (and spiritual) life is what motivated the search of these figures and others for countervailing values. The romantic movement, in both its backward-looking and forward-looking aspects, incorporates this perspective.

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours . . .*

—Wordsworth<sup>2</sup>

To some the political struggles of the day, the growth of turbulent metropo-

lises housing the ever-burgeoning working classes, and the attendant depletion of rural life were the worst aspects of nineteenth-century society. To others, like Morris, the worst aspect was the situation of those new classes, their immiseration of material and cultural life, and its deleterious effect on all of society, which he came to see as a matter of political power. Technological pessimism and an attempt to create a new "humanist" anti-technological culture marked the efforts of these latter critics.

The American history of responses to technology differs, if only at first. Initially mistrustful of technology, American thinkers by mid-century looked to technological innovation to improve the labor process and develop American industry, while safeguarding the moral development of women and children. The American transcendentalist poet and minister Ralph Waldo Emerson was initially one of the supreme optimists, but even he had turned pessimist by the 1860s.

Despite the doubts, stresses, and strains, there was, of course, no turning back. In cultural circles even those most suspicious of technological optimism and machine-age values incorporated a response to—and often some acceptance of—science and the technologies of mass reproduction in their work. The impressionist painters, for example, placed optical theories drawn from scientific and technical endeavors (such as the weaving of tapestries) at the center of their work, while keeping photography at bay by emphasizing color. They also turned away from the visible traces of industrialism on the landscape, in a nostalgic pastoralism. Photography itself quickly forced the other visual (and poetic!) practices to take account of it, but strove in its aesthetic practices to ape the traditional arts.

As Richard Rudisill has demonstrated, visual images, which were a mania with Americans even before the invention of daguerreotypy, went straight to the heart of the American culture as soon as the processes of reproduction became available.<sup>3</sup> Rudisill notes that Emerson had referred to himself as a great eyeball looking out during his moments of greatest *insight*. As John Kasson observes, Emerson was "most concerned with the possibilities of the imagination in a democracy" and "devoted himself not so much to politics directly as to 'the politics of vision.' . . . For Emerson, political democracy was incomplete unless it led to full human freedom in a state of illuminated consciousness and perception. . . ."<sup>4</sup> The identification of the closely observed details of the external object world with the contents of interiority, landscape with inscape, and with the ethical and intellectual demands of democratic participation, provided a motif for American cultural metaphysics that we retain.

Just before photography appeared, the popularity of American art with Americans reached a zenith with the art clubs, in which ordinary people, through subscription or lottery, received American artworks, most of which were carefully described in the popular press. The decline of these clubs coin-

cided with the rise of the new photo technologies, which rested far closer to the heart of private life than did paintings and graphics. Artists took note.

It is worth noting that the person who introduced photography to America not only was a painter but also was the inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse, who received the photographic processes from Daguerre himself. While they chatted in Morse's Paris lodgings, Daguerre's diorama theater, based on the protofilmic illusions of backdrops, scrim, and variable lighting, burned to the ground. This is the stuff of myth. Despite their conjuncture in Morse's person, it took close to one hundred years to get the technologies of sound and image reproduction together.

The subsequent history of Western high culture, which eventually included American high culture as well, included efforts to adapt to, subsume, and resist the new technologies. Although artists had had a history of alliance with science since the Enlightenment (and despite their market positioning vis-à-vis the middle classes, as previously described), even such technologically invested artists as the impressionists, and even photographers, were likely to challenge the authority of scientists often by stressing magic, poetry, incommensurability.

The powers of imagination were at the center of artists' claim to a new authority of their own, based on command of interiority and sensation or perception, notwithstanding the fact that the formulation of those powers might be based on the methods and discoveries of the rival, science. Sectors of late-nineteenth-century art practice, then, pressed occultist, primitivist, sexist, and other irrationalist sources of knowledge and authority, spiritual insights often based not on sight per se but on interpretation and synesthesia, and a rejection of "feminine" Nature. The dialectic of these impulses is the familiar one of modern culture, as Nietzsche suggested.

John Fekete, in *The Critical Twilight*, has called symbolism, whose genesis occurred during this period, "aesthetics in crisis, protesting hysterically against commodity pressures."<sup>5</sup> Fekete refers to its attempt to shut out all of history and the social world as "the sheer despair of total frustration and impotence."<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth's lament about "getting and spending" is transformed into aesthetic inversion and mysticism. Fekete, notes, significantly, the transformation from the formalism of Rimbaud's insistence on "disordering of all the senses" to that of more modern versions of formalized aestheticism, which "make a fetish of language and [embrace] its principles of order," promoting "the unity characteristic of the contemporary ideologies of order."<sup>7</sup> Including social order.

The capitulation to modernity is associated with cubism, which identified rationalized sight with inhuman culture. We should note that rejecting realism, as cubism did, allowed painting to continue to compete with photography, partly by including in a visual art analogies to the rest of the sensorium, and partly by opposing simultaneity to the photographic presentation of the

moment. The sensorium and its relation to form remained at the center of artists' attention. Futurism's apologia for the least salutary shocks of modernity and urbanism featured a disjointed simultaneity that abolished time and space, history and tradition. Its perceptual effects were composed into a formal whole in which figure and ground were indistinguishable and ideological meaning suppressed. Although futurism handled modernity through abstraction and condensation, Picasso's cubism incorporated African and other "primitive" imagery as a technique of transgression and interruption, signifying, one may speculate, incommensurability and mystery, a break in bourgeois rationality. Both cubism and futurism rejected photographic space.

So far I have cast photography in the role of rational and rationalizing handmaiden of bourgeois technological domination. There is another side to it. By the turn of the twentieth century, photography was well established as a rational and representational form, not only of private life and public spectacles of every type, but as implicated in official and unofficial technologies of social control: police photography, anthropometry, urban documentation, and time-and-motion study, for example. Photographs were commodities available to the millions by the millions. But, as previously noted, aesthetic practice in photography was interested in the model provided by the other arts. European aesthetic photography after the middle of the nineteenth century was associated both with the self-image of the intellectual and social elite (through the work of Julia Margaret Cameron) and with an appreciation of the premises of painterly Realism, though in coolly distanced form (P. H. Emerson).

The first important art-photographic practice in the United States, Alfred Stieglitz's photo-secession, was modeled after the European *fin-de-siècle* secession movements, with which Stieglitz had had some firsthand experience. Stieglitz melded symbolist notions with the aestheticized pictorial realism of his mentor Emerson. The sensory simultaneity of symbolist synesthesia appealed to this former engineering student, who also revealed his enthusiasm for the mechanical reproduction of sound offered by the wireless and the player piano.<sup>8</sup>

The photographic example provides an insight into the choices and silences of aestheticism with respect to technology. In addition to the use of a camera—a still-confusing mechanical intrusion—this new art photography depended for its influence on the latest technologies of mass reproduction. In Stieglitz's publication *Camera Work*, which helped create a nationwide, or worldwide, art-photography canon, current and historical photographs appeared as gravures and halftones, the products of processes only recently developed for the mass press. Thus, an art apparently hostile and antithetical to mass culture, preserving craft values and arguing against "labor consciousness," in fact depended on its technologies: a seeming paradox worth keeping in mind. The camera and print technologies were perceived as neutral, tool-like machines to be subsumed under the superior understandings of an aesthetic



elite. The aesthetic sensibility was an alchemical crucible that effected a magical transformation.

Still, by 1916 Stieglitz had so thoroughly acceded to the photographic modernism of Paul Strand that he devoted the last two issues of the moribund *Camera Work*, specially resurrected for this purpose, to his work. After Strand, the camera apparatus and its "properties" prevailed, displacing the negative-to-print handiwork at the center of art-photographic practice. For Strand and others, the camera was an instrument of conscious seeing that allowed for a politicized "cut" into, say urban microcosms, peasant counterexamples, and the structures of nature. Photography was, for them, mediation toward, not away from, social meaning. For others, of course, photographic modernism meant a new abstract formalism or, through the rapid growth of product photography, a corporate symbolism of commodities.

Thus, photographic modernism accepted science and rationality but also allowed for an updated symbolism of the object in a commodified world, a transformation that advertising made into its credo. Whereas photographic pictorialism had suggested a predictable alliance of aestheticism and elitism as a noble bulwark against the monetary measure of the marketplace and sold proletarian labor, formalist modernism united the high arts with the mass culture of modern entertainment forms and commodity culture. Modernism, in Kantian fashion, favored the material artwork while remaining vague about the meaning it was supposed to produce. Formalist ideologies were furthered by such Bauhaus figures as László Moholy-Nagy, who propagated a scientific vocabulary of research and development, therapeutic pedagogy, and experimentation. In art and architecture, formalist modernism promised a healthier, more efficient and adaptive—and liberatory—way of life, for all classes. The possibly revolutionary intent, to pave the way for democratic participation, could quickly turn into accommodation to new—technocratic—elites.

It has been observed that postwar American modernism, despite its strict separation of the arts from each other as well as from the social world, and with its fetishization of materials, nevertheless institutionalized the avant-garde. To discover what this represents for our concerns, we must look at the aims of the classic twentieth-century avant-garde movements, dada and surrealism, which appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, when modern technological society was already firmly established. The use of, or transgression against, the media of communication and reproduction was on their agenda, for the avant-garde saw art institutions as integrated into oppressive society but as ideally positioned nonetheless to effect revolutionary social change; this was a reworking of the symbolist effort to disorder the senses, perhaps, but with new political intentions. The aim of dada and surrealism was to destroy art as an institution by merging it with everyday life, transforming it and rupturing the now well-established technological rationalism of mass society and its capacity

for manufacturing consent to wage enslavement and rationalized mass killing. Peter Bürger has described the activity of the avant-garde as the self-criticism of art as an institution, turning against both "the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Duchamp's *Readymades*, which, through their validation of despised objects by the agency of the artist's signature, exposed the real operations of the art-distribution apparatus. Bürger writes:

*. . . the intention of the avant-gardists may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that Aestheticism developed. What most strongly conflicts with the means-end rationality of bourgeois society is to become life's organizing principle.<sup>10</sup>*

The disruptive efforts of expressionism, dada, and surrealism intended to transgress against not just the art world but conventional social reality and thereby become an instrument of liberation. As Bürger suggests, the avant-garde intended on the one hand to replace individualized production with a more collectivized and anonymous practice and on the other to get away from the individualized address and restricted reception of art. But, as Bürger concludes, the avant-garde movements failed. Instead of destroying the art world, the art world swelled to take them in, and their techniques of shock and transgression were absorbed as the production of refreshing new effects. *Anti-art* became *Art*, to use the terms set in opposition by Allan Kaprow in the early 1970s. Kaprow—himself a representative postwar U.S. avant-gardist, student of John Cage—had helped devise a temporarily unassimilable form, the "happening" a decade or so earlier. Kaprow wrote, in "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I":

*At this stage of consciousness, the sociology of culture emerges as an in-group "dumb show." Its sole audience is a roster of the creative and performing professions, watching itself, as if in a mirror, enact a struggle between self-appointed priests and a cadre of equally self-appointed commandos, jokers, gutter-snipers, and triple agents who seem to be attempting to destroy the priests' church. But everyone knows how it all ends: in church, of course . . .<sup>11</sup>*

As Kaprow plainly realized, the projected destruction of art as a separate sphere was accomplished, if anywhere, in the marketplace, which meant a thwarting of avant-gardist desires. But nothing succeeds like failure, and in this case failure meant that the avant-garde became the academy of the postwar world. The postwar American scene presented a picture of ebullient hegemony over the Western art world. Stability and order seemed to have been successfully erected on an art of alienation and isolation. High culture appeared to have conquered the "negative" influences of both politics and mass culture by

rigorously excluding—or digesting and transforming—both through a now thoroughly familiar radical aestheticism. Art discourse made updated use of the dialectic of scientific experimentation on technique and magical transformation through aestheticism and primitivism, veering toward an avant-garde of technical expertise.

This hegemonic condition lasted about as long as “the American century” it seemed to accompany—that is, until the new decade of the 1960s. The rapid growth of television and the cybernetic technologies, which had gotten a big boost from the war and American militarization, hastened the crisis. Television had no difficulty building on the structure and format of radio, with pictures added. Radio had established itself in a manner like that of the mass press and photography in the previous century and had played a vital role in disseminating the new ideologies of consumerism, Americanism, and the State. Like photography, radio depended on action at a distance, but with the added fact of simultaneity. It appeared to be a gift, free as air. The only direct sales came through hardware—which took on the fanciful forms of furniture, skyscraping architecture, cathedrals, and the hearth, the mantelpiece, and the piano, all in one, with echoes of the steamship. Bought time appeared as free time, and absence appeared as presence. Radio had the legitimacy of science (and nature) and the fascination of magic.

Television was able to incorporate into this all the accommodations of photography and film, though in degraded form. As with advertising, the all-important text was held together with images of the object world, plus the spectacle of the State and the chaos of the street, and voyeuristic intrusions into the private lives of the high and the low, the celebrity and the anonymous. Television was like an animated mass magazine and more. As commentators from Dwight Macdonald and Marshall McLuhan to Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard have observed, the totalizing, ever-whirling and -spinning microcosm of television supplanted the more ambiguous experience of the real world.

Alvin Gouldner comments on the war between the *cultural apparatus* (using C. Wright Mills’s term) and the *consciousness industry* (Enzensberger’s term). Gouldner quotes Herbert Gans’s essay of 1972 that “the most interesting phenomenon in America . . . is the political struggle between taste cultures over whose culture is to predominate in the mass media, and over whose culture will provide society with its symbols, values, and world view.”<sup>12</sup>

This struggle, the reader will immediately recognize, is the continuation of that of the previous century, which appeared at that juncture as a conflict between the culture based on aristocratic values and that based on new, middle-class-centered, scientific values. Abstract expressionism had followed the path of an impoverished bohemian avant-garde with strong aestheticist elements, but neither as dismissive of proletarian sympathies as the Stieglitz set

nor as comfortably situated. With relative speed, abstract expressionism found itself blessed with success—or cursed. Suddenly these artists, used to a marginal and secessionist existence, were producing extremely expensive commodities and bearing highly fetishized biographies. Jackson Pollock appeared on the cover of *Life* and was shown in poses bearing some similarity to James Dean, another rebel figure and beloved prodigal son. Artists’ enshrinement as mass-media celebrities inverted their meaning. The dominance of the distribution system over the artists who stocked it was proved again to those who cared to see. Others have also demonstrated the way in which this elite art, an art that suggested doubt and abstraction, freedom and impoverishment, an art that dismayed populists of the Right and the Left, become the ambassador of the American empire.<sup>13</sup>

Pop art followed a logical next step, a public and ritualized acceptance of the power of mass culture through an emphasis on passivity and a renunciation of patriarchy, high-culture aura, and autonomy. It was mass culture and the State, after all, that had made abstract expressionism a “success,” made it a *product* bearing the stamp Made in the USA much like any other product. Warhol’s pop was a multifaceted and intricate “confession” of powerlessness, accomplished through productions, entourages, modes of production, and poses, that mimicked, degraded, fetishized, and “misconstrued,” in slave fashion, the slick, seamless productions of corporate mass culture, especially those of the technologies of reproduction. The slave’s ironic take on the relation between art and technology was to retain the older, craft-oriented media of oil paint and silk screen, but to use them to copy or reorder the reified icons of the photographic mass media. The apotheosis of the avant-garde was its transmutation into the servant of mass culture. Aura had passed to the copy.

As Kaprow wrote about the social context and *art consciousness*, as he termed it, of the period:

. . . it is hard not to assert as matters of fact: that the LM {Lunar Module} mooncraft is patently superior to all contemporary sculptural efforts; that the broadcast verbal exchange between Houston’s Manned Spacecraft Center and Apollo 11 astronauts was better than contemporary poetry; that, with its sound distortions, beeps, static, and communication breaks, such exchanges also surpassed the electronic music of the concert halls; that certain remote-control video tapes of the lives of ghetto families recorded (with their permission) by anthropologists, are more fascinating than the celebrated slice-of-life underground films; that not a few of those brightly lit, plastic and stainless-steel gas stations of, say, Las Vegas, are the most extraordinary architecture to date; that the randomness, trancelike movements of shoppers in a supermarket are richer than anything done in the modern dance; that the lint under beds and the debris of industrial dumps are more engaging than the recent rash of exhibitions of scattered waste matter; that the vapor trails left by rocket tests—motionless, rainbow-colored, sky-filling scribbles—are un-

*equaled by artists exploring gaseous mediums; that the Southeast Asian theater of war in Viet Nam, or the trial of the "Chicago Eight," while indefensible, is better than any play; that . . . etc., etc., non-art is more art than ART-art.<sup>14</sup>*

Apprehending the collapses of public and private spaces, Kaprow, too, representing the aesthetic consciousness, could only bow before the power of science, technology, the State, and the ephemera of modern urban-suburbanism, especially as orchestrated through television. The "antihegemonic" 1960s also brought a different relation to issues of power and freedom, more populist than avant-gardist, more political than aestheticist. Students rebelled against the construction of what Marcuse termed one-dimensional culture and its mass subject, while the politically excluded struggled against the conditions and groups enforcing their powerlessness. The iron hand of science and technology became a focus of agitation, particularly in relation to militarism and the threat of total war. The twin critique of technological and political domination helped beget a communitarian, utopic, populist, irrationalist, anti-urban, anti-industrial, anti-elitist, anti-intellectual, antimilitarist, communitarian counter-culture, centered on youth. Hedonic, progressive, rationalist, antisexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and ecological strains also appeared. The severe stress on the reigning ideologies also put models of high culture in doubt, not least among its own younger practitioners.

Artists looked to science, social science, and cultural theory—anywhere but to dealers, critics, or aesthetics—for leads. New forms attacked head-on the commodity status of art. "Objecthood" was an issue not only because art objects were commodities but because they seemed insignificant and inert next to the electronic and mass-produced offerings of the mass media.

## Part II: History

At last, video. This is well-worked territory. In fact, video's past is the ground not so much of history as of myth. We could all recite together like a litany the "facts" underlying the development of video art. Some look to the substantive use of a television set or sets in altered or damaged form in art settings in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Others prefer the sudden availability of the Sony Portapak in the mid-1960s, or the push supplied by Rockefeller capital to artists' use of this new scaled-down technology. But the consensus appears to be that there is a history of video to be written—and soon. I would like to consider the nature of such histories, and their possible significance for us.

Historical accounts are intent on establishing the legitimacy of a claim to public history. Such a history would follow a pattern of a quasi-interpretive account of a broad trend activated by significant occurrences, which, on the one side, are brought about by powerful figures and, on the other side, determine or affect what follows. Video's history is not to be a *social* history but an

*art* history, one related to, but separate from, that of the other forms of art. Video, in addition, wants to be a major, not a minor, art.

Why histories now? Is it just time, or are the guardians of video reading the graffiti on the gallery wall, which proclaim the death or demotion of photographic media? (Like those of color photos, video's keeping, archival, qualities seem dismal, and the two are liable to vanish together without a trace.) If video loses credibility, it might collapse as a curated field. Or perhaps the growth of home video and music television has made the construction of a codified chain of *art*-video causation and influence interesting and imperative.

Some fear that if histories are written by others, important issues and events will be left out. Others realize the importance of a history in keeping money flowing in. The naturalization of video in mass culture puts the pressure on to produce a history of art video, or video art, that belongs in the art world and that was authored by people with definable styles and intentions, all recognizable in relation to the principles of construction of the other modern art histories.

Sometimes this effort to follow a pattern appears silly. For example, one well-placed U.S. curator made the following remarks in the faraway days of 1974:

*The idea of the video screen as a window is . . . opposite from the truth in the use of video by the best people. Video in the hands of Bruce Nauman, or in the hands of Richard Serra, is opaque as opposed to transparent. It's an extension of a conceptual idea in art. It enables the audience—again on a very subliminal and intuitive level—to return to painting, to look at painting again, in a renewed way.*

*. . . In the future, most of us who have been watching video with any amount of attentiveness are going to be able to recognize the hand of the artist in the use of the camera. It's possible to know a Van Gogh as not a fake . . . by a certain kind of brush-stroking; very soon we're going to know the difference between Diane Graham {sic?} and Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci because of the way the camera is held or not held. Style in video, that kind of personal marking, is going to become an issue. And it's going to subsume information theory with old-fashioned esthetic concepts.<sup>15</sup>*

Ouch! I suppose it is not Jane Livingston's fault that in 1974 video editing had not yet imposed itself as the style marker she thought would be the analogue of the "brush-stroking" maneuver. As absurd as her remarks (should) sound, she was right about the role of "old-fashioned esthetic concepts," for aestheticism has been busily at work trying to reclaim video from "information" ever since. It is the self-imposed mission of the art world to tie video into its boundaries and cut out more than passing reference to film, photography, and broadcast television, as the art world's competition, and to quash questions of reception, praxis, and meaning in favor of the ordinary questions of originality and "touch."

Historiography is not only an ordering and selecting process, it is also a process of simplification. Walter Hines Page, editor of the turn-of-the-century magazine *The World's Work*, liked to tell writers that "the creation of the world has been told in a single paragraph."<sup>16</sup> Video histories are not now produced by or for scholars but for potential funders, for the museum-going public, and for others professionally involved in the field, as well as to form the basis for collections and shows. The history of video becomes a pop history, a pantheon, a chronicle. Most important, the history becomes an *incorporative* rather than a transgressive one. And the names populating the slots for the early years are likely to be those of artists known for earlier work not in video or those of people who remained in the system, producing museumable work over a period of years or at the present. And, of course, they are likely to be New Yorkers, not Detroiters, or even Angelenos or San Franciscans, not to mention San Diegans. Some histories do recognize the contribution of Europeans—perhaps mostly those histories produced in Europe—or Canadians or even Japanese, always assuming they have entered the Western art world. Finally, the genres of production are likely to fit those of film and sculpture. Codification belies open-endedness and experimentation, creating reified forms where they were not, perhaps, intended. This even happens when the intent of the history is to preserve the record of open-endedness. And so forth.

Thus, museumization—which some might point to as the best hope of video at present for it to retain its relative autonomy from the marketplace—contains and minimizes the *social negativity* that was the matrix for the early uses of video.

### Part III: Myth

At the head of virtually every video history is the name Nam June Paik. Martha Gever, in her definitive article on the subject upon the occasion of his unprecedented exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, referred to Paik's "coronation."<sup>17</sup> I prefer the word "sanctification"; for Paik, it would appear, was born to absolve video of sin. The myths of Paik suggest that he had laid all the groundwork, touched every base, in freeing *video* from the domination of corporate TV, and *video* can now go on to other things. Paik also frees video history from boring complexity but allows for a less ordered present. By putting the prophet at the front, we need not squabble over doctrine now, nor anoint another towering figure, since the video-art industry still needs lots and lots of new and different production.

The myth of Paik begins with his sudden enlightenment in Germany—the site of technical superiority—through John Cage, the archetypal modernist avant-gardist, at a meeting in 1958. Martha Gever relates that Paik later wrote to Cage in 1972 "I think that my past 14 years is nothing but an ex-

tentation of one memorable evening at Darmstadt '58." Paik came to America around 1960, affiliated, more or less, with the Fluxus movement. Fluxus was a typical avant-garde in its desire to deflate art institutions, its use of mixed media, urban detritus, and language; the pursuit of pretention-puncturing fun; its de-emphasis of authorship, preciousness, and domination. Paik participated in some events and, we are told, showed his first tape at a Fluxus event. Again showing the rest of us the way, this time to funding, Paik supposedly made this tape with some of the first portable equipment to reach U.S. shores, equipment he bought with a grant from the John D. Rockefeller the Third Fund. According to the myth, the tape was of the pope(!).

The elements of the myth thus include an Eastern visitor from a country ravaged by war (our war) who was inoculated by the leading U.S. avant-garde master while in technology heaven (Germany), who, once in the States repeatedly violated the central shrine, TV, and then goes to face the representative of God on earth, capturing his image to bring to the avant-garde, and who then went out from it to pull together the two ends of the American cultural spectrum by symbolically incorporating the consciousness industry into the methods and ideas of the cultural apparatus—always with foundation, government, museum, broadcast, and other institutional support.

And—oh yes!—he is a man. The hero stands up for masculine mastery and bows to patriarchy, if only in representation. The thread of his work includes the fetishization of a female body as an instrument that plays itself, and the complementary thread of homage to other famous male artist-magicians or seers (quintessentially, Cage).

The mythic figure Paik has done all the bad and disrespectful things to television that the art world's collective imaginary might wish to do. He has mutilated, defiled, and fetishized the TV set, reduplicated it, symbolically defecated on it by filling it with dirt, confronted its time boundedness and thoughtlessness by putting it in proximity with eternal Mind in the form of the Buddha, in proximity with natural time by growing plants in it, and in proximity with architecture and interior design by making it an element of furniture, and finally turned its signal into colorful and musical noise.

Paik's interference with TV's inviolability, its air of nonmateriality, overwhelmed its single-minded instrumentality with an antic "creativity." Paik imported TV into art-world culture, identifying it as an element of daily life susceptible to symbolic, anti-aesthetic aestheticism, what Allan Kaprow called "anti-art art."

Gever discusses the hypnotic effects of his museum installations—effects that formalize the TV signal and replicate viewer passivity, replacing messages of the State and the marketplace with aestheticized entertainment. In some installations the viewer is required to lie flat. He neither analyzed TV messages or effects, nor provided a counterdiscourse based on rational exchange, nor



made its technology available to others. He gave us an upscale symphony of the most pervasive cultural entity of everyday life, without giving us any conceptual or other means of coming to grips with it in anything other than a symbolically displaced form. Paik's playful poetry pins the person in place.

The *figure* of Paik in these mythic histories combines the now-familiar antinomies, magic and science, that help reinforce and perpetuate rather than effectively challenge the dominant social discourse. Why is this important? The historical avant-garde has shown a deep ambivalence toward the social power of science and technology. Surrealism and dada attempted to counter and destroy the institutionalization of art in machine society, to merge it with everyday life and transform both through liberation of the senses, unfreezing the power of dissent and revolt. Although this attempt certainly failed, subsequent avant-gardes, including those that begin to use or address television technology, had similar aims.

Herbert Marcuse spelled this out back in 1937 in his essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture."<sup>18</sup> Marcuse traces the use of culture by dominant elites to divert people's attention from collective struggles to change human life and toward individualized effort to cultivate the soul like a garden, with the reward being pie in the sky by and by—or, more contemporaneously, "personal growth." Succinctly put, Marcuse shows the idea of culture in the West to be the defusing of social activity and the enforcement of passive acceptance. In the Western tradition, form was identified as the means to actually affect an audience.

I would like to take a brief look at a sector of the U.S. avant-garde and the attempt to contain the damage perceived to have been wrought on the cultural apparatuses by the mass media. Consider the notable influence of John Cage and the Black Mountaineers, which has deeply marked all the arts. Cage and company taught a quietist attention to the vernacular of everyday life, an attention to perception and sensibility that was inclusive rather than exclusive but that made a radical closure when it came to divining the causes of what entered the perceptual field. This outlook bears some resemblance to American turn-of-the-century antimodernism, such as the U.S. version of the arts and crafts movement, which stressed the therapeutic and spiritual importance of aesthetic experience.<sup>19</sup>

Cage's mid-1950s version, like Minor White's in photography, was marked by Eastern-derived mysticism; in Cage's case the antirational, anti-causative Zen Buddhism, which relied on sudden epiphany to provide instantaneous transcendence; transport from the stubbornly mundane to the Sublime. Such an experience could be prepared for through the creation of a sensory ground, to be met with a meditative receptiveness, but could not be translated into symbolic discourse. Cagean tactics relied on avant-garde shock, in always operating counter to received procedures or outside the bounds of a normative

closure. Like playing the strings of the piano rather than the keys or concentrating on the tuning before a concert—or making a TV set into a musical instrument. As Kaprow complained, this idea was so powerful that soon "non-art was more Art than Art-art." Meaning that this supposedly challenging counterartistic practice, this anti-aesthetic, this noninstitutionalizable form of "perceptual consciousness," was quickly and oppressively institutionalized, gobbled up by the ravenous institutions of official art (Art).

Many of the early users of video had similar strategies and similar outlooks. A number (Paik among them) have referred to the use of video as being against television. It was a counterpractice, making gestures and inroads against Big Brother. They decried the idea of making art—Douglas Davis called *video art* "that loathsome term." The scientific modernist term *experimentation* was to be understood in the context of the 1960s as an angry and political response. For others, the currency of theories of information in the art world and in cultural criticism made the rethinking of the video apparatus as a means for the multiple transmission of useful, socially empowering information rather than the individualized reception of disempowering ideology or sub-ideology a vital necessity.

Enter McLuhan. McLuhan began with a decided bias in favor of traditional literacy—reading—but shifted his approval to television. With a peremptory aphoristic style McLuhan simplified history to a succession of Technological First Causes. Many artists liked this because it was simple, and because it was formal. They loved the phrase "The medium is the message" and loved McLuhan's identification of the artist as "the antenna of the race." McLuhan offered the counterculture the imaginary power of overcoming through understanding. Communitarians, both countercultural and leftist, were taken with another epithet, "the global village," and the valorization of preliterate culture. The idea of simultaneity and a return to an Eden of sensory immediacy gave hippies and critics of the alienated and repressed one-dimensionality of industrial society, a rosy psychedelic wet dream.

John Fekete notes that McLuhan opposed mythic and analogic structures of consciousness—made attractive also through the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss—to logic and dialectic, a move that Fekete "says opens the door to the displacement of attention from immanent connections (whether social, political, economic or cultural) to transcendent unities formed outside human control."<sup>20</sup> Fekete then rightly quotes Roland Barthes on myth (here slightly abbreviated):

. . . myth is depoliticized speech. *One must naturally understand political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world; . . . Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them inno-*

cent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. . . . In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essence, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves!<sup>21</sup>

This is the modern artist's dream! McLuhan granted artists a shaman's role, with visionary, mythopoeic powers.

McLuhan wrote that art's function is "to make tangible and to subject to scrutiny the nameless psychic dimensions of new experience" and noted that, as much as science, art is "a laboratory means of investigation." He called art "an early warning system" and "radar feedback" meant not to enable us to change but rather to maintain an even course. Note the military talk. Art is to assist in our accommodation to the effects of a technology whose very appearance in world history creates it as a force above the humans who brought it into being.

McLuhan gave artists a mythic power in relation to form that fulfilled their impotent fantasies of conquering or neutralizing the mass media. By accepting rather than analyzing their power, by tracing their effects to physiology and biology rather than to social forces, artists could apply an old and familiar formula in new and exciting ways. The old formula involved the relation of the formalist avant-garde to the phenomena of everyday life and culture.

I do not intend to trace the actual effects of McLuhanism on video art, for I believe that artists, like other people, take what they need from the discourse around them and make of it what they can. Many progressive and anti-accommodationist producers were spurred by the catch phrases and rumors of McLuhanism to try new ways to work with media, especially outside the gallery. Clearly, though, McLuhanism, like other familiar theories, offered artists a chance to shine in the reflected glory of the prepotent media and cash in on their power over others through formalized mimetic aestheticization.

### Conclusion

Some new histories of video have taken up this formalized approach and have portrayed artists in the act of objectifying their element, as though tinkering could provide a way out of the power relations structured into the apparatus. Reinforcing the formalist approach has brought them—inadvertently—to bow, as McLuhan had done, to the power of these media over everyday life. In sepa-

rating out something called video art from the other ways that people, including artists, are attempting to work with video technologies, they have tacitly accepted the idea that the transformations of art are formal, cognitive, and perceptual. At the very least, this promotes a mystified relation to the question of how the means of production are structured, organized, legitimated, and controlled, for the domestic market and the international one as well.

Video, it has been noted, is an art in which it is harder than usual to make money. Museums and granting agencies protect video from the marketplace, as I remarked earlier, but they exact a stiff price. Arts that are marginally salable have shrunken or absent critical apparatuses, and video is not an exception. Video reviewing has been sparse and lackluster in major publications. This leaves the theorizing to people with other vested interests. In the absence of such critical supports, museumization must involve the truncation of both practice and discourse to the pattern most familiar and most palatable to those notoriously conservative museum boards and funders—even when the institutions actually show work that goes beyond such a narrow compass.

To recapitulate, these histories seem to rely on *encompassable* (pseudo-) transgressions of the institutions of both television and the museum, formalist rearrangements of what are uncritically called the "capabilities" of the medium, as though these were God-given, a technocratic scientism that replaces considerations of human use and social reception with highly abstracted discussions of time, space, cybernetic circuitry, and physiology; that is, a vocabulary straight out of old-fashioned discredited formalist modernism.

Museumization has heightened the importance of installations that make video into sculpture, painting, or still life, because installations can live only in museums—which display a modern high-tech expansiveness in their acceptance of mountains of obedient and glamorous hardware. Curatorial frameworks also like to differentiate genres, so that video has been forced into those old familiar forms: documentary, personal, travelogue, abstract-formal, image-processed—and now those horrors, dance and landscape (and music) video. And, of these, only the brave curator will show documentary regularly. Even interactive systems, a regular transgressive form of the early 1970s, appear far less often now.

Perhaps the hardest consequence of museumization is the "professionalization" of the field, with its inevitable worship of what are called "production values." These are nothing more than a set of stylistic changes rung on the givens of commercial broadcast television, at best the objective correlatives of the electronic universe. Nothing could better suit the consciousness industry than to have artists playing about its edges embroidering its forms and quite literally developing new strategies for ads and graphics. The trouble is, "production values" mean the expenditure of huge amounts of money on produc-

tion and postproduction. And the costs of computerized video editing, quickly becoming the standard in video-art circles, surpass those of (personal) film editing in factors of ten.

Some of the most earnest producers of art videotapes imagine that condensation of the formal effects of this kindly technology will expose the manipulative intent of television. The history of the avant-gardes and their failure to make inroads into the power of either art institutions or the advancing technologies through these means suggests that these efforts cannot succeed.

Alvin Gouldner describes the relation between art and the media as follows:

*Both the cultural apparatus and the consciousness industry parallel the schismatic character of the modern consciousness; its highly unstable mixture of cultural pessimism and technological optimism. The cultural apparatus is more likely to be the bearer of the "bad news" concerning—for example—ecological crisis, political corruption, class bias; while the consciousness industry becomes the purveyors of hope, the professional lookers-on-the-bright-side. The very political impotence and isolation of the cadres of the cultural apparatus grounds their pessimism in their own everyday life, while the technicians of the consciousness industry are surrounded by and have use of the most powerful, advanced, and expensive communications hardware, which is the everyday grounding of their own technological optimism.<sup>22</sup>*

We may infer that American video artists' current craze for super high-tech production is a matter of envy. It would be a pity if the institutionalization of video art gave unwarranted impetus to artists' desires to conquer their pessimism by decking themselves out in these powerful and positivist technologies.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, as the examination of the Paik myth suggests, it would be equally mistaken to think that the best path of transgression is the destruction of the TV as a material object, the deflection of its signal, or other acts of the holy fool. The power of television relies on its ability to corner the market on messages, interesting messages, boring messages, instantly and endlessly repeating images. Surely we can offer an array of more socially invested, socially productive counterpractices, ones making a virtue of their person-centeredness, origination with persons—rather than from industries or institutions. These, of course, will have to live more outside museums than in them. But it would be foolish to yield the territory of the museum, the easiest place to reach other producers and to challenge the impotence imposed by art's central institutions. Obviously the issue at hand as always is who controls the means of communication in the modern world and what are to be the forms of discourse countenanced and created.