

MEDIUM WITHOUT A MEMORY: AUSTRALIAN VIDEO ART



Above: Monika Tichacek, *Lineage of the Divine* [video still], 2002
Photo courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne

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Video is now part of the practice of many, if not most, of Australia's best known contemporary artists. Few, however, would call themselves 'video artists'. Many of the high-profile names included in this exhibition – Patricia Piccinini, Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon, Lyndal Jones and Philip Brophy – are at least as well known for their work in other media. Indeed, they each bring their very different approaches to their video-based work, from digital media, sculpture, filmmaking, photography, performance and sound backgrounds. There is nothing particularly unique about this. Just as video is the dominant form in the international art world of biennales and large-scale exhibitions

such as *Documenta*, there is no longer anything unusual or radical about Australian artists using the medium of video.

Of course this hasn't always been the case. To understand how we have arrived at this point, we need to look back at a history of Australian video art that is now over three decades old. And despite the promise of accessibility and dissemination thought to be contained in the package of the video tape, its history is relatively poorly documented and subsequently little known. Our collecting institutions have been reluctant to build permanent collections of an artform that has appeared too technical, time-based and

difficult to catalogue compared to conventional object-based works of art. With local histories buried in a few magazine articles and catalogues, the result has been a kind of cultural amnesia. Already in 1986 Bernice Murphy pointed to 'repeated gaps in transmission', and sure enough Australian video art has developed in spits and starts, with groups of isolated artists and critics forced to reinvent the medium without a memory. But if the history of Australian video art remains to be written, this is also because video is not, and has never been, one thing. If we look briefly at the relevant preceding decades in turn, we see that its identity has always been plural.

THE 1970s: EXPERIMENTATION

Australia does not seem to have an equivalent to international video art's myth of origin – Nam June Paik's early experimentation with a Sony Portapak in New York in 1965. A variety of creative energies from the areas of sculpture, performance, filmmaking and documentary converged to produce video art in Australia in the early 1970s. So-called 'experimental video' emerged out of the environment that produced conceptual art. In this sense it was part of a general shift away from traditional media in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, certain qualities of the medium such as real-time time immediacy drew performance artists such as Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr to video.¹

A lot of early video art was produced in an oppositional dialogue with television. Indeed, the most distinctive quality of video production by artists in the 1970s was 'video as an agent of social change'. It is important to note the social context: in the 1970s, the Whitlam Labor Government established free Video Access Centres, which saw more socially engaged works produced. As the artist Peter Callas recalls, video "became part of a brief period of social experimentation in the mid-'70s and the tapes which originated in Australia at that time from a series of government-sponsored community video access centres were mostly documents of, or confrontations with, social problems".²

In contrast, video art was more formal, personal and self-indulgent – influenced by American artists like Vito Acconci, who often used the self as a key subject. Video appeared as an analogue of human consciousness. A surprising number of the most influential American video artists also visited Australia: Nam June Paik came with Charlotte Moorman in a John Kaldor project in 1976, Les Levine came in the same year, and Bill Viola in 1977.³ A smattering of video art has been included in the *Biennales of Sydney* since the second exhibition in 1976. By 1980, Bernice Murphy and Stephen Jones could gather together a round-up of Australian video work for an exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, covering the spectrum "from socially and politically oriented tapes to documentation of performance art and related activities, and to the more electronically preoccupied area of image-processing and synthesising".⁴

THE 1980s: CONSOLIDATION

The early 1980s saw the emergence of music video clips as a vital commercial force, and the appearance – first in music – of the aesthetics of ‘sampling’. Video technologies were changing at an ever-expanding rate, with VCRs rapidly penetrating the home market, and computer graphics rushing in.⁵ At the same time as an economic recession meant reduced funding opportunities for political artwork, video artists were becoming increasingly professionalised in their approach, utilising video-specific effects such as colourisation and chroma-key to manipulate images. Stylistically, the 1980s saw an almost obsessive emphasis on the playful refiguring of pre-existing media imagery. Peter Callas embodied this trend, part of a broader set of ‘postmodern’ devices such as of pastiche, and the language of interrogation and deconstruction.⁶ Always interested in ‘the disruptive energy of montage’, Callas claimed that: “Australians born since the mid-fifties might well be far more ‘at home’ in the media landscape than they are in the real Australian landscape”.⁷ Callas’ longstanding interest in the graphic quality of images was consolidated by an extended residence in Japan in the 1980s and a shift away from lens-based imagery towards Manga-inspired animations.

If the 1970s can be characterised as a time of utopian experimentation, the 1980s was a time of consolidation for video art in Australia. The Art Gallery of New South Wales led the way in retrospective exhibitions of Australian video art. In 1981, Murphy curated a number of video works into the first Australian *Perspecta* exhibition, where video moved out of its ghetto and stood alongside sculpture and painting. With seed funding from the Australian Film Commission, the first of several Australian Video Festivals was held in 1986, with Jill Scott as President. Ultimately called the Australian International Video Festival, it always had a strong international focus [with American and Japanese artists especially favoured], and significant guests, including Whitney curator John G. Hanhardt. Looking back at the catalogues one gets the sense of an enormous energy and optimism – a concerted effort was made to bridge the gap between the film, commercial and art worlds. By the time a special issue of *Artlink* magazine on art and technology was released in 1987, the Sony Corporation were supporting video workshops while community-based video was a distant memory.

THE 1990s: THE NEW MEDIA THING

Despite the flurry of activity in the late 1980s, by the early 1990s Callas remarked that “video art has become an anachronism”.⁸ As if to prove that video is an essentially hybrid medium, many erstwhile video artists had now become video *and* computer artists, or more broadly ‘media artists’. Sydney’s hosting

of the Third International Symposium on Electronic Art in 1992 was a crucial moment in video’s hybrid mixing with electronic arts. Presented by the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts [ISEA], and organised locally by the Australian Network for Art and Technology, the event captured the expanding dynamic world of the ‘new media arts’ [then very sexy, and eminently fundable]. In Melbourne, the Modern Image Makers Association held the exhibition *Experimenta* [which was to become their name, as they focused on digital arts and moved away from their experimental filmmaking roots]. The term ‘experimental video’, meanwhile – used to distinguish art video from the conventions of television – dropped out of artistic vocabulary.

In retrospect, it is possible to understand that video’s versatility lies in its flexible interface with other representational systems. As the artist and critic John Conomos remarked in 1994, the computer has subtly transformed the whole sphere of moving image production: cinema, video, television and photography have all contaminated one another, creating new ‘in-between’ artforms.⁹ In similar terms, media theorist Scott McQuire has described the importance of video in “the movement from the chemical-physical image of photography and cinema to the ubiquity of digital effects”.¹⁰ He suggests that “video has been a laboratory for the information society to come”, an intermediary technology for cultural shifts that are now underway. Large-scale immersive installations from the late 1990s can be seen in this light.

THE PRESENT CONTEXT

The fetish for digital media did not consume all artists in the 1990s. On the contrary, many artists have reacted against the demand for high-tech polish and produced grungy video works. Destiny Deacon’s raw aesthetic, in this sense, almost seems to resemble that of community-based art from the 1970s. The period since the mid-1990s has been marked above all by diversity. It appears that video is the perfect medium for the post-media condition ushered in by postmodernism and the universal fluidity of digital data. For example, video today invariably refers to the DVD storage medium. With the various videotape formats now banished to oblivion, left to rot in sculpture departments that rarely know how to conserve or present it, the ‘digital versatile disk’ symbolises the close relationship between video and the computer. Again, video’s immersion in computerised media reveals its malleability.

The context for the display of contemporary video art is also extremely diverse. The default black Sony monitor of the 1970s and 1980s is now itself an art gallery artefact. Contemporary

video art is more often part of a sculptural installation, with projection-based presentations the norm. Yet, as the current exhibition demonstrates – with its carefully designed uniform interface – video can be flexible enough to appear in different ways in different spaces, as single, multi-screen, installation, monitor-based and so on. While Australian galleries and artspace have struggled to keep up with artists’ continual innovations of the form, modest artist-initiated carpentry has often resulted in surprisingly effective semi site-specific installation works. Meanwhile, the opening of the purpose-built Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2002 was a landmark event, with curated film, video and interactive installations spread across an entire building.

Recent years have seen fresh approaches to questions of specific content, form and spectatorship relating to video-based art practice. Some artists, such as Patricia Piccinini and Lyndal Jones, have shown an interest in forms of embodied interaction in the space of the image. Others infiltrate and recast popular media forms such as international pop videos and lifestyle magazines in order to produce an intensification of affect. Meanwhile, the dominance of the projection mode reflects a widespread interest in cinematic-style narratives, often carefully condensed to work in a gallery context. The film critic Adrian Martin recently suggested that gallery artists deconstructively redistribute elements of cinematic references into a redemptive aesthetic.¹¹ Today, there is little of the technical talk about production prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s – the process of making video is comparatively easy, and access to quality digital video and computer-based editing software is widespread. In a survey of Australian video art prepared for the Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2002, curators Stuart Koop and Max Delany observed that due to video’s ubiquity, we now look to content above all: “The singular, novel characteristics of video have ceased to enthral us and the medium has become increasingly transparent. We look more directly to the subject of video than to the ‘textures’ and ‘feedback’ that fascinated a ’70s vanguard”.¹² Nevertheless, we still want the form to complement the content.

Is there anything specifically Australian about Australian video art? In 1983, Callas suggested that “Video appears to be the least ‘Australian’ of all contemporary art forms”.¹³ He was referring to our penchant for landscape painting. The Australianness of Australian art has tended to be seen in terms of the remote perspective. But the national frame is clearly inadequate to explain contemporary Australian art, which develops in artistic communities based in cities that are at least as cosmopolitan as their counterparts in the Northern hemisphere. The crucial, often haunting,

addition of indigenous stories and perspectives serves to remind us of white Australia’s vacuous hold on the national imaginary. In a round-about way, this suggests one of the continuities of video art: its relative immediacy and intimacy for both artists and viewers. Video is cheap to produce, and doesn’t need to make big statements. If it has become part of the regular toolkit of artists, and seems especially useful to internationally mobile artists working without studios, it is not because it ‘explores’ this or that issue, or the self. Video art is more performative. Following the lead of minimal and performance art, video art is part of a broader shift from the representation tradition of visual art to one engaged in the more presentational modes of the ‘theatrical’, incorporating the sense of the here and now, of the viewer participating in the very space of the object, images or action.

Notes

¹ Bernice Murphy, ‘Towards a History of Australian Video’, *The Australian Video Festival 1986* [catalogue], Sydney: Australian Video Festival, 1986: 19

² Peter Callas, ‘Australian Video Art & Australian Identity – A Personal View’, *Continuum ’83: The 1st Exhibition of Australian Contemporary Art in Japan* [catalogue], Tokyo: Japan-Australia Cultural & Art Exchange Committee, 1983, unpaginated

³ See Stephen Jones, ‘Some Notes on the Early History of the Independent Video Scene in Australia’, *The Australian Video Festival 1986* [catalogue] Sydney: Australian Video Festival, 1986: 22–28

⁴ Murphy, ‘Towards a History of Australian Video’: 19

⁵ In 1986 as part of the first Video Festival, the Australian Centre for Photography held an exhibition of computer video graphics, which appeared to be an important area of emerging practice

⁶ Callas was trained in film editing at ABC studios and took his first ideas about the manipulation of imagery from working in the news department. He then studied print making at art school, an influence in the graphic use of imagery in his later videos. He was drawn to video for its malleability [increasing in the late 1970s with editing suites such as Fairlight and AVID and the instantaneous results]. See *Peter Callas: Initialising History*, Sydney: DLux Media Arts, 1999

⁷ Peter Callas, ‘Interviewed by Nicolas Zurbrugg’ in *Electronic Arts in Australia* Special issue of *Continuum* 8.1, 1994: 115, 92

⁸ Callas, ‘Interviewed by Nicolas Zurbrugg’: 112

⁹ John Conomos, ‘Rethinking Australian Video in the Nineties’, *Electronic Arts in Australia*: 136

¹⁰ Scott McQuire, ‘Video Theory’ *Globe E-Journal of Contemporary Art* 9, 1999: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/visarts/globe/issue9/smtxt.html> [Accessed May 3 1999]. [Transcript of a lecture presented in the ‘Videor’ lecture series at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne in 1998]

¹¹ Adrian Martin, ‘A Cinematic Fable’, *Art+Film* [catalogue], Melbourne: Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2003: 6–14

¹² Stuart Koop and Max Delany, *Screen Life: Videos from Australia* [catalogue], Madrid: Museo Nacional Central de Arte Reina Sofia, 2002

¹³ Peter Callas, ‘Australian Video Art & Australian Identity’