Circa 1971: Early Video & Film from the EAI Archive

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Celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), “Circa 1971” brings together early single-channel video and film works from one of the world’s most comprehensive collections of video art. Taking the year of EAI’s founding as its point of departure, the exhibition sets in dialogue a series of diverse works created in and around 1971, which are linked by the alternative artistic and activist impulses that drove the early video subculture. Focusing on a specific window of time, 1970–72, “Circa 1971” presents a snapshot of a cultural moment—or, more accurately, a countercultural moment—and the fertile political and artistic landscape from which these works emerged.

Over the previous decade, contemporary art practices had moved away from object making toward an emphasis on process, the influence of television had become pervasive, and radical political movements had upended long-held cultural assumptions. Arising out of these shifts, the artists in this exhibition created moving-image works that drew from and expanded on the fields of visual arts, television, and cinema, while staking out a distinctive ecology of video as a medium. Performance and visual artists, political activists, cybernetic theorists, filmmakers, Fluxus provocateurs, and selfdescribed video freaks and electronic geeks all contributed to the fluid mix—and creative friction—of the emergent video art scene. “Circa 1971” exposes the generative encounters among these artists and influences and initiates unexpected correspondences between seemingly disparate works.

TV Cello Premiere, Jud Yalkut’s 16 mm rendering of avant-garde cellist Charlotte Moorman playing Nam June Paik’s video sculpture *TV Cello*, which itself synthesizes performance, electronic processing, and pop-cultural content appropriated from television, implicitly exemplifies this eclecticism and plurality. Open-ended and irreverent (Moorman blithely plays a cello made of monitors showing televised images of Janis Joplin and a concert pianist), *TV Cello Premiere* is a celebratory multimedia hybrid.

Film—particularly Super 8 and 16 mm—was taken up as a medium in the late 1960s by a number of visual artists who would soon turn to video as it became more readily accessible, including Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and Vito Acconci. For Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, the 16 mm Bolex camera became an instrument with which to explore perception—and the limits of perception—via the camera eye in *Swamp*, an exercise in process, vision, and point of view. While many artist’s films, such as those by Dennis Oppenheim, are thematically and conceptually linked to performance video works from the same time period, others, like Carolee Schneemann’s autobiographical collage *Plumb Line*, with its echoes of the “home movie,” should be seen more directly within the context of experimental cinema. The short, color films in this exhibition are distinctively medium-specific, standing in formal contrast to the black-and-white, largely durational and often unedited videos produced with half-inch open-reel equipment. (Color video cameras were not widely available to artists until the mid-1970s.)

TV may be like a pencil—that is, just another art-making tool—as John Baldessari asserted in 1977, but the distinctive characteristics of video technology were catalysts for material and conceptual explorations, as well as political interventions.1 Unlike film, video allows one to see instantaneously what one is recording, on a monitor, during the act of recording. This simultaneity has been so thoroughly absorbed into the everyday vernacular of moving-image production that it may be difficult to grasp how rich for metaphorical and technical experimentation this notion was in 1971. Artists and activists were drawn to the formal, theoretical, and cultural implications of the medium’s immediacy, reproducibility, and variability. Video’s instantaneous transmission and its ability to generate live, closed-circuit feedback impacted both the political underpinnings and conceptual language of early video practices and incited not only activism but also performances for the camera and interrogations of the materiality of the medium.

Many of the video and film works in “Circa 1971” emerge from and engage with prevailing contemporary art movements of the period, particularly Body art, Process art, Minimalism, and Conceptual art. In Bruce Nauman’s highly influential series of video exercises (a number of which are currently on view at Dia:Beacon), the artist’s performative gestures and actions interrogate the very process of making art. By 1971, these movements were even prime for parody and homage, as Baldessari’s deadpan (and dead-on) *I Am Making Art* evinces.

As much as they can be seen in relation to parallel art discourses and practices, these works are also defined by their complicated relationship to the industry with which video shares its technology: television. As first-wave baby boomers,

artists who matured during this period were among the first generation to have grown up with television as their primary mass-cultural reference; their works assume a critical position in relation to the mass media and the television industry. Indeed, many of the tropes of early video are oppositional responses to the conventions of commercial television. For example, extended duration, “real time,” and in-camera edits not only are by-products of early video technology but also became deliberate counterstrategies to the pacing and fragmented “flow” of commercial television.

Artists embraced video’s oppositional potential as a medium through which to “talk back” to the media and the dominant culture by means of critical and creative interventions. Paik irreverently engaged in direct media intervention, disrupting the electronic signal as well as television content: in *Video-Film Concert* he playfully applies a distorting magnet to a television image of Marshall McLuhan, the era’s reigning media theorist; in *Waiting for Commercials*, Paik appropriates and re-presents a series of advertisements from Japanese TV, a strategy that was to become one of the most enduring in video art. Many early artists’ videos interrogate the relations of television, video, and the act of viewing. The viewer of Valie Export’s *Facing a Family*, originally created for broadcast on Austrian television, observes a family, in real time, watching television in a domestic space. Directing the camera’s gaze from the outside in, Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Chinatown Voyeur* is a surveillance-like rendering of the buildings and rooftops—with voyeuristic glimpses at individuals inside the windows— of downtown New York, circa 1971.

The works in this exhibition were created within a heated cultural milieu characterized by the ongoing Vietnam War and corresponding antiwar demonstrations, the civil rights and feminist movements, and a countercultural mise-en-scéne of “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.” In the United States, 1970–72 saw the Kent State shootings, the release of the Pentagon Papers, the reelection of Richard Nixon, and the Watergate break-in. While this intense political climate may be present as an undercurrent throughout the exhibition, it explicitly pervades works such as the charged video performances of Anthony Ramos, who served eighteen months in federal prison for evading the draft and whose early video works address race, marginalized communities, and the media.

Alternative collectives and radical media activists deployed the recently available battery-powered Sony Portapak video system as a weapon against broadcast television and as a tool for community engagement. This convergence of political activism and portable video equipment fueled alternative documentaries such as TVTV’s guerrilla television coverage of the 1972 Republican Convention, *Four More Years*, and *Mayday Realtime*, David Cort’s unmediated “real-time” recording of an anti–Vietnam War demonstration in Washington, D.C., in May 1971. Countercultural media collectives such as Raindance (who also published the seminal video journal Radical Software) translated cybernetic theories to video making, creating free-form media critiques, which drew on sources that today serve as touchstones of the era, ranging from video footage of the Rolling Stones performing at Altamont to Abbie Hoffman awaiting the verdict at the Chicago Seven trial. *Ant Farm’s Dirty Dishes* (the first tape—#001—to be catalogued in EAI’s collection) is a Portapak sketchbook of the collective’s communal life, circa 1971. Shirley Clarke’s *Tee Pee Video Space Troupe: The Early Years* is a verité diary of the downtown New York art scene, with a cast that includes Andy Warhol, John and Yoko, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Chelsea Hotel.

Even those works more concerned with formal or conceptual exploration than social engagement can be seen as emerging from a distinctly countercultural sensibility, as articulated through this emergent technology. The self-reflexivity engendered by video technology gave rise to direct, body-driven performances for the camera that investigated relationships between artist and viewer, public and private, and subjectivity and objectivity. With a striking economy of means, artists used their own bodies to create performance actions for the camera or to initiate face-to-face encounters with the viewer. The video monitor as mirror is a potent, recurring trope of early studio-based videos, which exploit the intimate space of video and the scale of the video screen. Vito Acconci’s early performance videos force psychological relationships between the artist and viewer, subject and object, “I” and “you.” In *Centers*, Acconci, facing the camera in close-up, points straight ahead at his own image on the video monitor. In pointing at himself, Acconci is also pointing directly at the viewer; he has written, “I’m looking straight out by looking straight in.”2 In *Representational Painting*, Eleanor Antin employs the monitor-mirror as the site for a feminist inquiry into the representation of the female body in the context of making art, literalizing the notion by using the monitor as a makeup mirror.

Writing about her pivotal work *Vertical Roll*, Joan Jonas stated: “The monitor is an ongoing mirror.”3 In a collusion of the conceptual, the technical, and the political, Jonas disrupts the materiality of the medium: the relentless “vertical roll” of a television, a technical error, becomes a powerful formal and metaphorical device, fracturing an image of the female body and manipulating and layering space and time. Lynda Benglis, in her video works of the early 1970s, employs video recursion and distortion as metaphors for consciousness, layering monitors within monitors, recordings within recordings. Similarly, Dan Graham’s early single-channel video works, which play with closed-circuit feedback loops and time delays, launch an investigation of the phenomenological and psychological implications of the medium. In a sign of the times, Graham has related the extended timeframes and temporal distortions of much early video to the effects of pot smoking.4

Other artists, in inventing a grammar for electronic image making, sought to return the technology to the hands of the individual—to "humanize" machines and interact with them. Process-based, playful, and improvisational, the early electronic experiments of artists such as Paik and Steina and Woody Vasulka employ analog tools that were often designed and built by the artists themselves. The implications of electronic feedback and interactivity are key to these early experiments with electronic synthesis and processing. One sees in these videos the interwoven threads of live performance— the "hand" of the artist—and the mediation of electronic technology. For example, Paik's *Video Commune (Beatles Beginning to End)* documents an interactive television "performance" at public television station WGBH in Boston in 1970. Images generated directly by Paik through the Paik/Abe Synthesizer were mixed in real time with prerecorded material and broadcast live: true "Participation TV."

Like these early works themselves, the contexts in which they were produced, exhibited, and disseminated reflect an ad hoc, renegade ethos. In a shift away from the conventional model of the work of art as rarefied object, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the development of a network of alternative spaces and nonprofit support structures. Video—easily reproducible, potentially widely accessible, and seemingly resistant to commodification—circulated largely outside of the art market. EAI, one of the earliest nonprofits in the United States dedicated to electronic art, was founded by gallerist and art patron Howard Wise as an alternative paradigm to support this burgeoning form that could not—or would not—fit easily within commercial gallery or commercial television systems. In 1970, when Wise closed his eponymous gallery on West 57th Street in Manhattan (which had focused on kinetic art), he wrote, with an almost utopian optimism, that video would enable artists to expand their practices "out of the gallery and into the environment, the sky, the ocean, even outer space."5 The idea that video's reproducibility and mutability would allow for new modes of creative production, exhibition, and circulation was philosophically, even politically, embedded in the spirit of the times, a notion that has more recently regained currency around digital and Internet art.

The often raw and open-ended works in "Circa 1971" speak from an analog world that has largely disappeared. Revisited at a time when video is ubiquitous in the market-driven art world and when electronic information proliferates in the culture at large, these moving-image works are resonant artifacts from a pre–social networking, pre–digital era. Perhaps most striking to current viewers, artists' video and film from this period force an analog—that is, slowed-down—experience of time. They embody the provocative gestures of artists who transmuted time, process, bodily actions, and the electronic signal into art-making material and who saw video as a tool for social activism and cultural transformation.

Significantly, many of the key themes introduced in their nascent form in "Circa 1971"—artists' critical engagements with the production, reception, and circulation of mass media images and information; one-on-one encounters with the televisual mirror to explore notions of identity and self; and social communications—have been reactivated by subsequent generations and refracted today through digital culture. Indeed, the generative ideas that propel these early single-channel works are key to understanding much of current moving-image art, which in its mutability and fluidity adopts forms ranging from immersive environments to distributed media and digital source code, and which moves among multiple platforms, iterations, and screens. This anniversary exhibition offers a framework for reconsidering the manifold histories, artistic investigations, and cultural contexts that have informed our readings of moving-image art for more than four decades.

notes

1. John Baldessari, "TV (1) Is Like a Pencil and (2) Won't Bite Your Leg," in The New Television: A Public/Private Art. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, in association with Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, 1977), p. 108.
2. Vito Acconci, "Body as Place—Moving in on Myself, Performing Myself," Avalanche, no. 6 (Fall 1972), p. 12.
3. Joan Jonas, "Panel Remarks," in The New Television, p. 71.
4. Dan Graham, remarks during "Dan Graham: Video-Television-Architecture," a talk at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, April 10, 2007.
5. Howard Wise, in letter to Howard Wise Gallery artists, December 10, 1970.