

ARTS | WESTCHESTER

## When Counterculture of 1971 Got Its Hands on Video



Bill Jacobson. Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation, New York.

"TV Cello Premiere" (1971), by Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut, with Charlotte Moorman. The exhibition includes rarely seen activist videos along with other, iconic works that upended cultural assumptions.

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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BEACON, N.Y. — Nineteen seventyone was an eventful year in this country: Half a million people marched on Washington to protest the Vietnam War; riots broke out at Attica prison in upstate New York; the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of busing to achieve racial desegregation in schools; and The New York Times started publishing the Pentagon Papers, detailing a history of American political and military involvement in Vietnam. It is also the year Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) was founded in New York to support "moving-image" art, which, as shown by the 23 films and single-channel videos in "Circa 1971: Early Video and Film from the EAI Archive" at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, N.Y., was closely aligned with the politics and ethos of that moment.

Video itself was a radical medium in 1971. The artists featured in "Circa 1971" were the first generation to grow up with television and witness the mid'60s introduction of the Sony Portapak, a portable camera that put television technology in the hands of artists and activists. Like performance or experimental music and dance, however, video wasn't shown regularly in commercial galleries or museums, and EAI's founding coincided with the birth of many alternative, nonprofit spaces in New York in the early '70s.

"Circa 1971" showcases rarely seen activist videos alongside canonical works by John Baldessari, Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, Eleanor Antin, Nam June Paik, Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson. As the EAI executive director, Lori Zippay, who is guest curator, points out in an accompanying essay, the exhibition "presents a snapshot of a cultural moment — or, more accurately, a countercultural moment" in which "television had become pervasive, and radical political movements had upended longheld cultural assumptions."

Ms. Zippay also moves beyond the usual identification of artists as the sole or primary video pioneers, citing a “fluid mix” of “performance and visual artists, political activists, cybernetic theorists, filmmakers, Fluxus provocateurs, and self-described video freaks and electronic geeks.”

Among the lesserknown works on view is “Four More Years” (1972) by TVTV, a San Francisco guerrilla television collective (the actor Bill Murray was at one point a member), covering the 1972 Republican National Convention. Speaking with everyone from Walter Cronkite and Vietnam Veterans Against the War to Nixon’s enthusiastically supportive children, the young, bearded TVTV reporter offers a critical tour of the convention and a level of access virtually unthinkable now. David Cort’s “Mayday Realtime” (1971) serves as an instantaneous document of the May 1971 antiwar demonstration in Washington (video, unlike film, offered simultaneous transmission). “Raindance: Media Primers” (1971) is more conceptual: footage of a young William F. Buckley supporter is juxtaposed with footage of the Yippie Abbie Hoffman describing the United States operating under a version of “fascism” that he traces to an “airconditioned, neonlit” building designed by the modernist Mies van der Rohe.

If the activist videos upend cultural assumptions and engage in contemporary politics, the consciously artidentified ones do, too. Two works by the littleknown Anthony Ramos, who now paints in the south of France, were made in 1972, just after his 18month imprisonment for resisting the draft. “Plastic Bag TieUp” shows Mr. Ramos and another man being bound and encased in plastic — a reference to body bags, but also incarceration — while in “Balloon Nose BlowUp” Mr. Ramos pushes his own respiratory limits.

Some littleseen works by wellknown artists include Gordon MattaClark’s nocturnal surveillancetype video of downtown Manhattan, “Chinatown Voyeur” (1971); Dan Graham’s “Past Future Split Attention” (1972), a performance work in which the conversation of two acquaintances becomes a cacophony of simultaneous speech and interruption; Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt’s disorienting tour through a “Swamp” (1971); Carolee Schneemann’s “Plumb Line” (1971), a Rorschachlike grid of home 8 mm and 16 mm films; and Mr. Paik’s appropriated Japanese television advertisements, “Waiting for Commercials” (1966-72).

One of the things you notice in “Circa 1971” is how male and female artists were on more equal footing in newer mediums like video, as opposed to painting and sculpture, which were historically dominated by men. (Not so with racial and gay and lesbian politics, unfortunately; Mr. Ramos is the only AfricanAmerican in the show and, despite the Stonewall Riots of 1969, there isn’t much here in the way of gay video.)

Some of this feminist and genderparityconsciousness is addressed in works like Ms. Antin’s “Representational Painting” (1971), in which she applies makeup to her own face, and Mr. Acconci’s narcissistic “Centers” (1971), in which he gazes into and points directly at the video camera (a bit like the famous mirror scene with Robert De Niro’s unstable character in the 1976 film “Taxi Driver”).

Mr. Baldessari's "I Am Making Art" (1971), another video classic, challenges the figure of the heroic male artist, a concept that was being dismantled in the '60s and '70s. (The year before this video, Mr. Baldessari incinerated all his paintings made between 1953 and 1966 and turned them into a work titled "The Cremation Project.") Taped in his studio, with the artist repeating the title phrase, Mr. Baldessari comes across as a Beckett absurdity: a funnysad creature born to make art, but adrift in a transitional age.

Pathos is also the beauty of "Circa 1971," though. As Ms. Zippay points out, this was the moment when video was still improvised, raw and largely unedited. By 1974, production values had improved and many works were edited and in color. What you see here, then, reflects an era, which, with its ethos of upheaval, change and possibility, isn't so different from our own.

*"Circa 1971: Early Video & Film from the EAI Archive" is on view through Dec. 31 at Dia:Beacon, 3 Beekman Street, Beacon, N.Y. For further information: (845) 440-0100 or diaart.org.*

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## Circa 1971 Dia:Beacon

In 1975, *New Yorker* art critic Calvin Tomkins joked that the majority of the video art produced in the early 1970s could be attributed to a generation of artists who had grown up watching too much television. 'Most of the people who are trying to turn the cathode-ray tube into an art medium belong to the under-30, or TV generation,' he wrote. And since most of these under-30s had averaged around 15,000 hours – that's 625 consecutive days – of TV-watching, the next logical step would be to appropriate the medium for their own use. 'Television has been their landscape, in a way, and it would appear inevitable that they should want to make use of it.'

And make use of it they did, so much so that, after Sony released the relatively affordable Portapak video camera in 1965 – which allowed artists to edit in-camera for the first time, thereby avoiding expensive post-production – artists such as Nam June Paik grumbled that commercial television networks and unions were intentionally keeping production costs high in order to exclude them. 'Circa 1971: Early Video & Film from the EAI Archive' at Dia:Beacon presents a moving snapshot of this period. Curated by Electronic Arts Intermix's executive director, Lori Zippay, the exhibition marks the 40th anniversary of the film and video archive EAI.

There are 23 works in the show in total – not nearly enough to cover every one of the genre's many early incarnations, but enough to pick out the dominant concerns of the period and to survey the artists whose contributions to video art

and film would provide an inflection point in the larger trajectory of the medium. The logic behind many of the inclusions is clear. A study of early '70s video art would be incomplete without Paik's *TV Cello* (1971), Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972) or John Baldessari's *I Am Making Art* (1971), the first three works one encounters when entering the basement labyrinth where the show is installed. But many of the other works in 'Circa 1971' are unusual, either because their maker has fallen into obscurity in the intervening decades, or because they present an unfamiliar side of an artist we've come to associate with other types of media.

In the former case, we have Anthony Ramos, a virtually unknown African-American artist whose life story reads like fiction: a stint as Allan Kaprow's assistant at CalArts, after which he made the politically charged *Balloon Nose Blow-Up* and *Plastic Bag Tie-Up* (both 1972), in which he alternately inflates a balloon through his nostrils and escapes a sealed plastic bag by writhing around on the floor. Ramos had spent 18 months in prison for dodging the draft, acted as a video consultant to the United Nations, created video work in Beijing just prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre, filmed the end of Portugal's colonial rule in Cape Verde ... the list goes on. He relocated to France in the late 1990s and hasn't been heard from in the art world since; prior to 'Circa 1971', his work hadn't been shown for some 35 years.

Examples of the unfamiliar side of well-known artists include Robert Smithson's intimate 16mm film *Swamp* (1971), in which he guides Nancy Holt through the New Jersey wetlands, her field of perception limited to what she could see through the camera lens and Smithson's gentle instructions as he walked behind her. Or the strange little video by Gordon Matta-Clark in which the artist sweeps his camera over the rooftops of New York's Chinatown, occasionally lingering on a lit window and spying on its inhabitants, teasing out themes of perception, vicinity and space – themes we expect from his work, but articulated through spatial interventions rather than moving images.

For some of the artists in 'Circa 71', video was less an instrument for experimenting with perception and subjectivity than a tool for recording the prevailing attitudes and influences of the period. Ant Farm's *Dirty Dishes* (1971) is a document of the collective's life (including a topless talk show and various other drug-fuelled skits), and was certainly never intended for a gallery wall. Others took a more overtly political approach, such as David Cort's *Mayday Realtime* (1971), a jolting document of an anti-Vietnam War sentiment and an early example of citizen reportage.

As a locus for so many of these works, TV itself did not escape critique. For artists who took aim at the transience and/or anaesthetizing effects of television, the



**Clockwise from top left:**  
Eleanor Antin  
*Representational Painting*  
1971  
Video still

Joan Jonas  
*Vertical Roll*  
1972  
Video still

John Baldessari  
*I Am Making Art*  
1971  
Video still

Gordon Matta-Clark  
*Chinatown Voyeur*  
1971  
Video still

**Opposite page, from top:**  
Nam June Paik  
*TV Cello*  
1971  
Video still

Stein and Woody Vasulka  
*Delay I*  
1970  
Video still

go-to method was to film in real time or in some way emphasize duration and slowness (often at the price of tedium, intentionally or otherwise). In Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), to pick the most literal example, the artist points at his own image in the camera's monitor for 22:28 minutes, holding perfectly still as though sitting for a portrait, and the viewer gets to watch the subtle strain creep across his face as he tries to hold the pose in real time. Or Valie Export's *Facing a Family* (1971), originally filmed for Austrian television, wherein a camera is trained on a family as they watch TV, dead-eyed and robotic and seemingly oblivious to their roles in a uroboric system of watching and being watched.

'The often raw and open-ended works in "Circa 1971" speak from an analog world that has largely disappeared,' wrote Zippay in an essay accompanying the exhibition. '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.' Indeed, to view many of these works now is to be drawn into a pre-Internet world that can seem almost naive in its objectives. But many of their concerns – duration, surveillance and subjective perception – are today even more prescient than they were in 1971.

**Julie Cirelli**



## *Circa 1971* at Dia: Beacon Bullett Magazine December 2011

ART & DESIGN / CULTURE

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### 'Circa 1971,' Dia:Beacon's Latest Video Art Exhibit

December 14th, 2011

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by HENRY GIARDINA

EAI Executive Director Lori Zippay curates a yearlong show that delves deep into the nonprofit's diverse archives.



Let's just start off by saying that it's easy to be turned off by the '70s, with its somewhat terrible hair, over-earnest political movements, and films with a dusty color palette. For all the ugliness, however, it was also the beginning of a truly visible countercultural movement in America. Thus what one anticipates, and what one sees at *Circa 1971*, Dia:Beacon's year-long show in collaboration with EAI at the moment of their 40th anniversary, are wildly different things.

Guest curator (and Executive Director of EAI) Lori Zippay does not try to draw too many parallels between the artists displayed, which is refreshing. Equally satisfying is the fact that the works aren't romanticized, or forced into a "dialogue" with each other. Though some pieces are separated by theme—works that use sound in a bizarre way, works that are self-reflexive—the majority stand as originals in their own right, artifacts that give visitors the sense of being present at a series of intimate moments during a decade of questioning.

But the thing that really drew us in is the feeling that people weren't so serious. So many of the videos seem built on an impossible, or at least, previously untried premise, products of a decade-long game of Truth or Dare. In "Swamp," for example, videographer Nancy Holt substitutes her own vision for the more limited scope of a camera held directly up to her eyes, cutting off her peripheral vision. In order to move around, she must be guided by her male accomplice (Robert Smithson). TVTV's "Four More Years" takes on the challenge of documenting the on-floor drama of the 1972 Republican convention, while David Cort's "Mayday Realtime" is an uncut and uncensored visual account of a 1971 anti-war demonstration in Washington—all in real time. The curiosity about the possibility of non-narrative, experimental film is the thing that gives it life long after its period of freshness.

From the textually experimental (the feminist work of Eleanor Antin, whose "Representational Painting" uses the camera as a mirror in front of which she unselfconsciously applies her makeup), to the visually adventurous (Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut's "Video-Film Concert" and "TV Cello Premiere") and, finally, the documentary work of David Cort, Ant Farm and Shirley Clarke (whose "Tee Pee Video Space Troupe: The First Years" features cameo appearances by Jack Nicholson, John Lennon, and Andy Warhol), there is the spirit of challenge and activity, if not invention.