

Holly Rogers's video art primer

August 2013



Scott Snibbe

The musician and author curates a primer for The Portal, ahead of her talk on the history of video art at September's edition of *The Wire* Salon.

Robert Whitman, *Two Holes of Water*—3 (1966)

At first, video didn't constitute a genre on its own, but was included in the work of artists and musicians already working with other media. Whitman's piece was part of electrical engineer Billy Klüver's series of events, *Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering*, held at an empty Armoury in New York. Klüver wanted to bring together artists and musicians with engineers and invited Whitman, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, David Tudor and Merce Cunningham to host performances. Whitman's piece has become famous as the first performance art to include a video camera. It was a pretty mad night that used a brand new miniature fibre-optic video camera, alongside film and live performance relayed via closed-circuit television. It also made use of seven cars to create the feeling of a movie theatre. The sounds were also taken from the performance space and combined with the recorded voice of Bertrand Russell. Someone *has* to recreate this event. You can see a short clip and lots of pictures of the event at this link.

Vito Acconci, *Theme Song* (1973)

Vito Acconci was important to early video art for so many reasons. He constantly combined video with process art, events and music, although he hated the word "performance" because it "had a place and that place by tradition was a theatre"; an "enclosure" that could provide only "abstractions of the world and not the messy world itself." His early engagement with poetry developed into an interest in the combination of sound and image and lots of his single-channel videos show him singing to himself or to the camera. In this video, we see a close-up of his face as he listens to Bob Dylan, the Doors, Van Morrison and others while directing a persuasive monologue straight out the camera to us. You'll be glad you can turn this off whenever you want...!

Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, *Concerto for TV Cello* (1971)

This is my favourite video piece, I just love it. Paik trained as an experimental composer and made music the starting point for most of his video works. During the 1960s, he hooked up with avant garde cellist Charlotte Moorman and they collaborated on lots of outrageous video performances (they were both arrested in 1967 when Moorman stripped off during a performance of *Opera Sextronique*). For this project, Paik made a cello out of three TV monitors and strung them with a string (the later version had several strings). The screens showed a live, closed circuit feed of Moorman playing and people listening, combined with pre-recorded footage from different events. When the Moorman played the instrument, electronic "TV Cello Sounds" morphed and warped the images so that she could literally play her own image, like an early form of VJing. There's hardly any footage of the cello being played, but this is a little clip of a later performance in 1976.

Steina Vasulka, *Strange music for Nam June Paik and Violin Power* (2013)

Vasulka is another video artist who trained in music (she was initially a violinist in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra): "My background is in music. For me, it is the sound that leads me into the image. Every image has its own sound and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living. I apply the same principle to art as to playing the violin: with the same attitude of continuous practice, the same concept of composition. Since my art schooling was in music, I do not think of images as stills, but always as motion." In the 1970s, she developed a violin that could play video images taken from the performance space in a piece called *Violin Power* (1978). In the 90s, she updated the violin to make a MIDI instrument, which she uses to perform a tribute to Paik in this clip from 2013.

Bill Viola and Nine Inch Nails

Like Paik and Vasulka above, Viola has a long history as a musician. As a result of his participation in David Tudor's avant garde performance troop, *Composer's Inside Electronics* during the 70s, Viola learned to consider "all the senses as being unified. I do not consider sound as separate from image. We usually think of the camera as an eye and the microphone as an ear, but all the senses exist simultaneously in our bodies, interwoven into one system". Lots of his video installations use sound in immersive ways, but he has also completed several projects where music comes first. In 1994 he visualised Edgard Varèse's *Déserts* and in 2004 he collaborated with director Peter Sellars in a new production of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Here is a clip of Viola talking about his collaboration with Nine Inch Nails for their 1999-2000 *Fragility* tour. It's very beautiful.

Scott Snibbe

Scott Snibbe is a wonderful interactive media artist who is keeping the ideas behind early video art-music alive by creating participatory, site-specific and musical works that can exist in public spaces or on your mobile phone. He collaborated with Björk on her *Biophilia* project (2011) and with Philip Glass on his *Rework* album (2012). His website has some great clips of his different projects and gives a good sense of his interactive, audiovisual aesthetic.

The Hive Collective

The Hive Collective is a Liverpool based audiovisual community who initiate interactive and participatory events throughout the city. They've put on events in shopping centres, music venues and art galleries and are very cool indeed. If you are in Liverpool, look out for their next event.

Holly Rogers is interviewed in The Wire 354. She will present her talk, Visual Music And Sonic Images: Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman And Early Video Art-Music, at The Wire Salon at London's Cafe Oto on 2 September.

Artists

- 4AD
- Lucas Abela
- Jan Anderzén
- Arrington de Dionyso
- Asian Dub Foundation
- Atom
- Autechre

Contributors

- Jennifer Lucy
- Allan
- Knut Aufermann
- Andy Battaglia
- Ed Baxter
- Chris Bohn
- Marcus Boon
- Philip Clark
- Julian Cowley



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