

The Impoverished Image: Online Video Art Exposure

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Abstract

Curatorial trends in contemporary digital video art exhibition practices are very much reliant on both the standards and restrictions of digital art preservation, as well as new forms of art production and distribution. This paper assesses current approaches to the exhibition of video artworks that were either created for online distribution or first exhibited via online content sharing platforms. Often politically charged, these online works voluntarily take a marginal position in opposition to institutional exhibition modes. This paper addresses the specificities of online video art exposure and distribution, such as distributed aesthetics within contemporary cultural economies. We claim that online distribution and access are manifested in the digital video itself, through critical aesthetics of noise, compression and precarity as defined by Fetveit (2013). From our viewpoint, the act of commissioning online video artworks, as well as the preservation of online-generated aesthetics, is a mode of inquiry in contemporary digital culture and critical curating. We further discuss four curatorial models that expose online video works by contextualizing them in the art space. In this paper, we present case studies of video artworks that both demonstrate expressive or political use of noise and are distributed through online video sharing platforms. We analyze how the aesthetics of these videos—their poverty—operate in the conditions of cultural economy and how these videos circulate in between online and onsite exhibition modes.

Introduction

Recent discourse on the exhibition of new media art is increasingly reliant on the concept of authenticity and artist intent, where any loss or change to the original artwork is understood as “compromising the integrity of a unique object” [1]. Referring to Laurenson, Jones cites Stan Douglas’ video installation *Nu*tká* (1996) as an example where the deviation from any artist’s specifications changes the meaning of an artwork. This discussion of authenticity is tied to the challenges of network-based art preservation and exhibition modes. While original network-based artworks were considered ephemeral, many of them have now been archived. Among these websites – online platforms for software-based art preservation such as Turbulence.org, Runme.org, dam.org, and more. However, this contextual change in the archiving network-based art affects the discourse manifested in the video aesthetics. Many video artworks discussed in this paper adopted the

online aesthetics¹ of image poverty based on the intentional use of noise and image degradation, which in its turn contributed to their meaning.

Apart from artist’s intentionality, the fluidity and mobility of media, video files in particular, challenge the approaches to video art exhibition and preservation [27]. Digital image can move between various platforms, from the HD screen, to iPhone and projection [27]. We are curious to know how the meaning of a video artwork changes when it is moved from one platform to another? What are the cultural implications of this change?

Most of the early discussion around the curation of art on the Internet was dedicated to net art as it was the first art genre that emerged with the expansion of the Internet, which augmented the web artforms through experimentation and involvement of an audience. The affordances of early net art works - mainly, their ability to generate reciprocal feedback - are fundamental for understanding of their communicative mechanisms as well as Internet-based art works per se. The reciprocity of online environments and access are one of the reasons for online artworks distribution. However, digitization of analog works and preservation of ephemera strives to reach the same goal: to ensure access to the artworks.

Online databases such as Rhizome, Video Data Bank, Electronic Arts InterMix, ADA [23, 24, 25, 26] represent both online and off-line forms of digital artworks. All of these video and media art archives have curated collections. In the case of Rhizome, the online-curated exhibitions usually coincided with on-site exhibitions at the New Museum, in New York, where Rhizome.org acts as an affiliate organization.

Hence, it is important to distinguish two categories of inference that define online video art preservation:

1. access (i.e. Rhizome, Video Database designed for unlimited access by cultural and educational institutions, art galleries);
2. preservation (VDB, ADA and more).

While these two categories are linked, the former questions online distribution as potentially open and free zone for content access. Declared in the “Introduction to Net Art” manifesto, all networked-based art was defined as “maintaining independence from institutional

¹ Here we refer to Bolter and Grusin’s concept *hypermediacy* of new media, online environment augmented by computer technology and manifested in user interfaces, text, online images and images (Bolter J, Grusin D., 1998)

bureaucracies... working without marginalization” [6]. Yet what is more important is how this economic and cultural perspective of network-based art has changed in the past few years. YouTube, in particular, as “the world’s default media archive” has proved to be a challenge for archivists and curators [7]. According to Prelinger, the primacy of YouTube questions the importance of classical archives and their relevance as YouTube offers free access and circulation.

Both institutional approaches mentioned above aim at transferring analog files to “uncompressed or “lossless” digital video files, thus ensuring that the digital archive can be made available for online distribution [24]. Negotiating between offline and online, this paper discusses the works whose online aesthetics is central to its reception and exhibition. Therefore, we look at the current curatorial approaches to present and conserve artworks that are *compressed* and that *lost quality* to preserve its artistic, political and social value.

It is therefore important to highlight the difference between what is usually referred to as *online exhibition* vs. exhibition of online-based art. We define *online exhibition* as an online version of the onsite exposition such as exhibition documentation and supporting texts.

In this paper we look at several curatorial approaches to present online artworks. A good example to illustrate this distinction is monthly online exhibition of online art projects presented by New Museum, NYC. *First Look: New Art Online* is an *online-only* exhibition featuring series of live screenings and presenting the latest commissions of the New Museum². Curators present online works without keeping the site (i.e. online platforms) that are central reception methods preservation. Ann Hirsch produces online works analyzing the issues of female sexuality in socio-political context. The exhibition presents Hirsch’s video originally posted on Vimeo. Therefore, the context of the artwork presentation has not changed keeping its original aesthetics that affect audiences’ reception.

In this paper we address the concept of *the imperfect image* manifested in noise, image degradation and precarity and its expressive use. We then analyze video artworks by VOINA and Philip Huang to argue for the social use of noise. We continue discussing video and its poverty affected by online distribution to analyze the video by Martin Kohout. Apart from the videos on YouTube, we discuss those distributed through the marginal online platforms such as BEFNOED by Eva and Franco Mattes. We close our discussion with analyzing the video artworks by Lisa Byrne and the Valie Export Society that mimic online amateur aesthetics of online-distributed non-professional videos thus using this imperfection as an expressive technique.

Impoverished Image

Noise as phenomenon in digital culture represents the limitations and deficit in communication signal [28, 31]. This aesthetics of technology failure - “precarious aesthetics”³ - draws attention to the opaque as opposed to the transparent thus pointing at the limitations of the technology [3]. Precarious aesthetics is characterized as “an aesthetic style or artistic strategy, which is reliant upon compromising this perceived transparency associated with visual and aural recordings” [3]. It can be due to disturbances during the recording process or technology failure such as motion blur, capturing street noise, or glitch. Elements of noise and diverse aspects commonly thought of flaws can in some cases create “a work of art’s allure” rather than alienating the viewer from it [5]. Fetveit [3,4] argues that these factors position the viewer “at a threshold of knowledge”, thus generating “unique rhetorical and affective powers”.

The potential of *poor image*⁴, as discussed by many scholars, lies in its fundamental complexity and ability for affective powers [8, 9, 3]. Video artists voluntarily exploit the expressive use of noise that demonstrates the liminalities of digital technology and demand of the purity of information. In this paper we provide examples of video artworks and the significance of the online noise preservation.

First, we should distinguish the following video aesthetics categories based on the context of noise and distributed networks protocols⁵ [28]:

1. expressive use of noise (consciously producing failure, generated failure through the experimentation with technology and longing for analog physicality, mimicking analog errors of the video art)
2. unexpected errors and failure of technology during the recording process (artist intentionality to keep the errors and poor quality of the artwork)
3. online-generated noise (media marked by compression, re-shared, fragmented media)

In terms of media production, digital video implies the availability of digital tools that allow for theoretically infinite reproduction with no loss of quality [14, 31]. The loss of quality and any kind of noise, according to Shannon and Weaver are defined as all changes in the message. Instead of looking at noise and precarity of the video as a phenomenon that should be eliminated, we

³ A term coined by Fetveit A., 2013a

⁴ Here we refer to Hito Steyerl’s essay “In Defense of Poor Image” (2009)

⁵ Galloway’s concept of protocol and distributed networks, the economy and politics of the information flow and participation. (Galloway, 2014)

² The latest series can be viewed on the New Museum website <http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/online>

look at it as a social and cultural marker [31]. As an example, we analyze politically-charged videos “No One Gives a F* about Pestel” (VOINA, 2008) and “Lunar Homosexual Agenda” (Philip Huang, 2010) that intentionally preserve the poverty of the image for the online distribution.

Motion Blur and Technology Failure in Activist Video Art of VOINA and Philip Huang

As Marks notes [11], some artworks purposefully mimic digital errors like “skipping of a CD” or abrupt cuts. Some artists are doing this intentionally, experimenting with hardware and looking for analogue touch for the digital works. Within the activist performance domain, such technology flaws celebrate its political and social marker. The disturbances during the recording process and interruptions in editing point to following aspects of this art genre: ephemerality, its immediacy and constraint conditions of the recording process.

Decemberists Commemoration or No One Gives a F about Pestel* by Art-Group VOINA (2008) combines the viscerality of the performers’ bodies with the abrupt cuts, glitch and intricate changes of view. Art-Group Voina is an art collective whose work is based on socio-political critique of the current regime in Russia. They use radical approaches such as provocations of authorities as well as mockery and performance, street art, video. This performative video exemplifies the use of performative intervention as tactics that both attracts the attention of police forces and security and to creating the politically radical situation, and that also experiment with the public space familiar to a random viewer. Visually dense, the multiplicities of the layers can roughly be differentiated by 1) those arise from cameras mobility, and 2) low resolution. The former are represented in shaky camera, motion blur and opaque framing and motion noise. The latter - dither, glitch, artifacts and motion noise. These disruptions in the flow reveal the following conditions. First, the performance was recorded in restricted conditions (ephemerality of performance, security and police forces). The artists were, most likely, unable to use more professional equipment due to the activist nature of the performance. Furthermore, these interruptions point to certain media qualities of the technology used: its low-fi resolution, portability, ease of use. One of the reasonings for artists to keep the video mostly unedited and not try eliminating this noise is because it is easier for a viewer to contextualize this video aesthetics as long as it invokes certain level of familiarity on the aesthetic level as the viewer has encountered the home-video footages and, most likely, produced it [18]. Juhazs points out that much of the content on YouTube is produced by non-professionals [17]. Davies suggests that the popularity of YouTube is explained by the appeal of amateur aesthetic many viewers can relate to in their everydayness [18]. Interestingly, the connection between the amateur production and online platforms has been widely

discussed, apart from media art, in computer music. Cascone, while reflecting on the notion of *post-digital*, argues that composers use noise as a response to contemporary commercial music production. Referring to McLuhan, Cascone discusses specific tools and affects to produce computer music rather than digital technology in general [36].

Art-group VOINA occupies a marginal position within the institutional art domain. VOINA’s video artworks are not exhibited onsite mainly due to the artists’ political views. The official video posted on YouTube by the official art group VOINA account has a description in English. It was posted in 2012 while the actual performance took place in 2008. The original video posted in 2008 was banned by YouTube as mentioned in the artists’ blog. Therefore, the audience for this version is mostly English-speaking, which is evidenced by the comment thread. This video was re-shared by the channel targeted for English-speaking audience RT⁶. The



Fig 1. *Decemberists Commemoration or No One Gives a F About Pestel*, 2008. Art-Group Voina, video, Copyright Alex Plutser-Sarno.

re-shared video has a logo of RT channel and the links to RT official social networks. Interestingly, the video is shorter than the original and the first 3 seconds are in black and white.

The Russian version of the same performance, though, posted in 2008 has a different title. It does not contain any description and soundtrack. The video is marked by the noise. It is not the recording noise while filming, rather the digital noise that one gets when filming with no sound on a very low-end equipment. Presumably, the official version was intended to be with soundtrack but this one leaked online. Interestingly, this version has much more views (187, 741 in comparison to 9,855).

Philip Huang is a Taiwan-born performance artist whose art practice explores gender and sexual discrimination throughout public interventions and provocations. The *Lunar Homosexual Agenda* by Philip Huang (2010) also uses unedited footage to preserve the ephemerality of a performative intervention into an anti-

⁶ RT (originally Russia Today) is a state-funded TV channel launched in 2005.

gay protest by the Westboro Church, Kansas, USA. While it would be possible for curators to exhibit this work in a gallery setting, its online circulation is reliant on its online amateur aesthetics. Similar expressive techniques can be found in both citizen journalism and amateur participatory news making by using personal digital communication technologies [16].

Overlooked Networks

High resolution ensures that a digital video can be accessed in any format without loss of information from the digital image [29]. Considering the disturbances during the recording process and devices used, the resolution in the majority of the artworks discussed in this paper is relatively low (854x480, 2000 Kbps). Steyerl [11] categorizes poor images as “copies in motions” affected by free distribution, slow digital connections, compression and reproduction [11]. Her influential essay on the poor image touches upon an important theme on the “class society of images”: how do we differentiate images? High end from poor? Resolution is attributed, hence, to market and class structure. Activist art videos, including VOINA and Huang, voluntarily took on the marginal position eliminating themselves from elite world of the institutional art market. When circulating online, their low-end quality and marginality become even more apparent.

Unlike the political economy of YouTube, the distribution mechanisms that have become possible with Internet on video blogs has provided multiple opportunities for self-exposure beyond professional contexts. The amount of amateur and everyday footage is beyond available despite YouTube’s aforementioned monetization strategies.

Much scholarship of video on YouTube looks at phenomena self-referentiality [21], documentation and memorialization on YouTube [22] and more. Grusin [15] proposes to look at YouTube to analyze the participatory paradigm of contemporary culture. He suggests that the popularity of YouTube as a video sharing platform is explained by the fact that it provides users with more mediation events that are easily shared and distributed [15, p.65]. Following Jenkins’ concept of convergence [20] Grusin sees YouTube as bridging the old and the new. Similarly, Michael Wesh suggests looking at the distributed through the YouTube media from an anthropological perspective [32]. Media transmitted on YouTube shapes the communication modes and the exchange of information in particular.

While acknowledging its proliferation of diverse media forms and network environments, Grusin [15] highlights the notion that YouTube is fragmentary and niche-oriented, unlike the network television in 1950-1970s. [15, p.66]. Almost half a century later the situation has not changed much. Alternative non-governmental channels are only available to a small

minority. TV still dominates as a lead information source. While YouTube positions itself as a user-generated platform, the media corporation privileges major companies as its clients rather than nonprofessionals. Various techniques and monetization strategies are adopted by the site to privilege one content over the other [33].

Another important aspect to discuss is how the marginal position of the networked video art contributes to their reception online. In particular, we are interested in the transformations of the digital video when distributed online. Steyerl notes [11] that video resolution is a mark of class and market structures. Similarly, low-resolution encourages faster distribution [34]. Digital images, as well as digital video, proliferate online due to the ease of diffusion. Put differently, the videos’ agency is as important for the viewer’s engagement as the context in which the video was produced and the content of the image [35].

Marks [19] referring to media artworks based on the algorithms, suggests that many political systems operate through compression of the circulated information, thus provoking artists to be interested in the break-down of the code rather than in it running flawlessly. She refers to the video *Probleme 5* by Mohsin Harraki (2009). In this short video the artist is breaking down the genealogical diagram. While the video is aesthetically similar to the artworks discussed above, Harraki doesn’t have online presence on the video-sharing platforms and is only represented by the institutional art spaces.

Affected Image. 010010111010101.org and Martin Kohout

According to Willis [14] in terms of media production, contemporary digital video tools allow for infinite reproduction with no loss of quality that, in its turn, contributes to the participatory art production such as remix [14]. Videos, both analog and digital, lose resolution when re-shared, copied, re-mixed [14]. It is especially evident when videos migrate from one platform to another. Marks points out that compression, used to get the best resolution, is an economical strategy to store and distribute data avoiding redundant details [14]. This model is used in the countries where the bandwidth is low. Low resolution, she claims, diminishes individuality, while compression forces the signal to conform to filters [14].

The resolution of peripheral video-sharing platforms is lower than YouTube (480 maximum, while YouTube allows viewers to distribute HD videos). Aesthetically hybrid videos capturing the physicality of the performing bodies stress the politics of distributed aesthetics and how these mechanisms function. The work by Eva and Franco Mattes, known as 010010111010101.org, questions the dominance of YouTube. “Performances By Everyone For No Every Day” is a participatory online performance by Eva and Franco Mattes. The collective crowd-sourced anonymous non-professional performers

and gave them instructions for performance and recording. All performances were recorded on webcams and mobile phones and posted to Vimeo and many of the more obscure social networks around the world such as LiveJournal (Russia), YouKu (Japan). The distributed aspect of this piece – that is, introduction of alternative social networks - indexes the socio-political qualities of the video and its production.

“Watering Fish” (Figure 2), one of the “instructed performances” can only be accessed on YouKu through getting the client certificate. If the user is denied the certificate, instead of the performance video the commercial of HSBC plays. Distributed aesthetics is simultaneously dealing with the asynchronous production and multi-user access [12]. This social level of distribution is marked by the way users engages in conversation online. In this particular project, we see tendencies in the aesthetic usage of cameras and how cameras capture the ritual.



Fig 2. *BEFNOED* 2014, Eva and Franco Mattes, Video.

In 2014-2015 the work was commissioned by the Postmasters Gallery (NY), Philip Feldman Gallery at PNCA. Videos were screened at the gallery and presented as a video installation. Performance “The Rude Dude” was presented at the LISTE – Young Art fair (2010).

Another example of the “affected image” is Martin Kohout’s *Moonwalk* (2008). The video (Fig. 3) replicates YouTube’s interface infinitely unfolding on the screen multiple times eventually blurring when the video ends. While the video was shortlisted in the YouTube Play exhibition at the Guggenheim (2010), it is still questionable if the artwork can and should be shown on the platform other than YouTube and small screen. On the other hand, the display mode used by the Guggenheim curators amplifies the video’s reference to the YouTube and the mass media omnipresence.

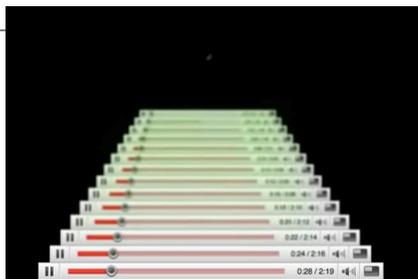


Fig 3. *Moonwalk*, 2010, Martin Kohout. Video

Mimicking Digital Errors

Valie Export’s famous performance “Touch Cinema” (1968) exploits female body as an interface, though giving the artist a leading role in controlling the time for interaction. The artist performs on Munich’s crowded Stachus Square. She uses a cardboard box located on her body. A box represents a mock-up of a cinema theatre where the viewer is invited to open the box and touch the artist’s body. Another performer is inviting the audience to participate in this activity. It is the dichotomy of the vulnerability of the nude female objectified body while the artist stays in control of the time one is allowed to touch the artist’s body. An integral aspect of documentation is to capture the crowd, show the live audience the chaos of the performance surrounded by crowd. Camera captures a close up of a young woman walking; it follows a man approaching the artist and zooms in the megaphone. The editing is very basic and plays an arbitrary sequential role.

Remakes of “Touch Cinema” as well as “Homomeeter 2” (2000) performed by Valie Export Society mimic the aesthetics of the original video. Following Marks’ argument, it becomes obvious that the video looks as if it was produced in 1968. In “Touch Cinema” (2000), camera captures the performers walking in the streets of Tallinn, approaching the passersby. Recorded at night, the images are quite poor and grainy which, in this particular case, adds to the feeling of alienation. The presence of megaphone in the empty dark square loses its meaning as well as liveness of the act compared to the original performance of 1968. In one sequence (5:42 min), the camera captures a crowd of people approaching the performer. Shaky camera, blurry image and audio disturbances combine the liveness of the performance with “the shock of indexicality” [11]. This sequence emphasizes the evocative and thrilling appeal of bodies materialized in front of the cameras and the conscious use of degraded aesthetic to capture those.

Videos by the Valie Export society are available on YouTube and have 2520 and 8539 views for the “Touch Cinema” and the “Homomeeter 2” accordingly. Apart from YouTube, the videos are available on dailymotion.com, video hosting available in 35 countries. At the same time, videos are available for registered members of artifacts.net, a professional database featuring more than 25 thousands artworks.

The Poverty of Video Art Documentaries

Nina Gerlach in her discussion of museal exhibition of online videos refers to the *intercity and post-digitality* of the video [10]. While we suggest to not analyze the intermediality of video per se, this approach leads to a discussion of genre aesthetics appropriation. Referencing documentary, contextually and aesthetically, Lisa Byrne's "Taxi III - Stand up and Cry Like a Man", 2007, is a collage of short interviews with taxi drivers in Ireland. Similar to Martin Kahout's video, Byrne's artwork was selected by the YouTube Play jury and screened at the Guggenheim [10]. Byrne's work is one of the examples how the poverty of image is a reference to certain social conditions and events.



Fig. 4. *Taxi III. Stand Up and Cry Like a Man*. 2007. Lisa Byrne.

The video (Fig.4) features the interviews with taxi drivers, sharing their memories about the paramilitary attacks in Northern Ireland. Building a bridge from the past to present, Byrne uses low-fi digital camera to capture the drivers in their cars from various angles, sometimes partially or completely hiding their faces. The style replicates both the documentary and amateur genres. The YouTube version is only 480p resolution. However, it was screened on the huge HD displays during the YouTube Play showcase.

Conclusion

Exhibition and reception of online video art is still a challenging theme for curators and conservators. While the change towards online video curating has been undertaken in the last several years, it remains neglected by the majority of institutions. HD video is a dominating mode both for the production of video and for museum acquisition of these works [25]. Sharing an aesthetic similar to that of amateur footage that flourishes online, the artistic and cultural value of online-based video art is thus questioned. What is referred to as self-inventing, online video art distinguishes itself from other media imagery, thus forming a self-distinctive area of aesthetics [10]. Online video imperfections are crucial to understanding this area. Poverty of the video particular to the media and distribution mechanisms require

curators and media theorists to come up with strategies for apprehending, producing and distributing online-based video art. The importance of preservation of the online-generated aesthetics lies in its fundamental self-referentiality. Precarity and poverty of networked digital videos point to the conditions of contemporary economy when the boundaries between life and art are merged, thus creating fertile soil for amateur image production and consumption. The key concepts and affordances of the online video art include imperfect image manifested in motion blur, technology failure, poor image as an expressive technique, and image marked by the distribution and compression.

BEFNOED by Eva and Franco Mattes emphasizes digital video properties and active viewers participation both conceptually and contextually. Therefore, the exhibition strategies for curators are very limited. Moving the videos from online platforms to onsite distorts its cultural complexity. The use of low-fi technology makes videos easier to produce, edit and embed. Instead of attempting to clean the image and eliminate the noise, its offsite presentation often distorts its meaning and decreases its validity. Similar to *BEFNOED*, videos by Philip Huang and VOINA represent the complexity of camera work by preserving the videos' authenticity and using minimal editing techniques. This complexity lies in the socio-political demarcation of online-based video art. Precarious aesthetics of online-based videos is the aesthetics of the socially invisible. Precarity and imperfections of these videos represent the fragility of the cameramen and performers and exposure to social and political contexts.

Moonwalk is a critique of YouTube as a dominant video archive through objectification. Showing the familiar to the spectator YouTube control bar, the video is a metaphor for the obsession with the mass media production and distribution mechanisms.

Video artworks we have discussed in this paper position themselves in between contexts and domains thus making a critique of contemporary exhibition and exposure strategies, and the digital culture within which they are embedded.

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