

THE AESTHETICS OF PRIVATE FOOTAGE AND YOUTUBE WITHIN AVANTGARDE VIDEO ART

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"Video art is a subdivision of home-made video" _Vito Acconci

Looking at the early video works of fine artists in the 60s and 70s the connection to today's aesthetics in Youtube is more than obvious. Often the tapes have been documentations of performances and it is stunning to see the connecting of reoccurring standards. Today these works have become cultural classics, shaping the identity of one of the youngest art forms.

Despite the ongoing commercialization of youtube by Universal's Channel Vevo, one of the most popular titles on the online video platform remains "Evolution of Dance" [1], which was uploaded almost five years ago and has since received over one hundred million views.

Judging this video from its purely aesthetic qualities, it is presented in a rather unprofessional manner: Its camera position and resolution as well as sound quality are modest, there is no sign of editing and the performer leaves the frame of the recorded picture at least partially on various occasions. The work's only distinguishing quality is its focus on the performer's body and action and the absence of any formal commentary.

Although one can only assume that this video's performer does not consider himself a video artist, it is still striking to see how this and the most popular works among the other consumer-created content on youtube feature many standards and conventions of artists' tapes created in the 60s and 70s: documentations of performances, use of a fixed camera (today's webcam), little or no editing, the focus on the performer and his or her body. The works of Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and the Vienna actionists have by now become cultural classics, shaping the identity of one of the youngest art forms.

Technical limitations and the lack of professional training forced many of these video pioneers to compromise their works. They often produced their tapes in one shot because there was simply no way to edit the footage. On the other hand the unique aesthetic they produced originated from deliberate choices, such as the direct manner of the documentation of their performance pieces or even the attack on viewers' expectations of video as shaped by conventional cinema.

Today the average producer of homemade video footage is probably far more experienced in terms of visual consumption and has access to means of production exceeding by far the possibilities of these artists, as high definition cameras are by now included in every smartphone and free basic editing software comes with every new computer. One could therefore assume that most user-generated content would mimic popular Hollywood films or pop music videos, using fast camera movements and a high-tech editing as well as a lot of visual effects.

While many such videos do exist, they are not always particularly popular. The most obvious reasons are the economic gap between a home video and a professional MTV production and the exploitation of visual ideas by generations of innovative talents long before youtube was created. Still the question remains why videos of people dancing in their apartment or playing their favorite pop hit on a guitar receive million of hits, thus gradually entering and shaping our perception of a contemporary cultural canon. [2]

Looking at this phenomenon from an elitist perspective could lead one to initially dismiss videos featuring pretty girls, house pets or heavy reference to pop content as having no deeper cultural function apart from offering easy access to the lowest forms of entertainment and the public humiliation of others. Yet this view ultimately overlooks a crucial point in the aesthetic of many of these works, in which the performer directly faces the camera, the picture does not move and there is no sign of editing. The consistent repetition of these strict aesthetic elements suggests that these recurring phenomena have hidden function. What if million of consumers watch these clips exactly because of their minimal formal language and the consequential realistic elements within them? A viral consumer-created video is “screening the real” and therefore “functions as the screen that separates us from the Real [...] When a screen intervenes between ourselves and the Real, it always generates a notion of what is In-itself, beyond the screen (of the appearance), so that the gap between appearance and the In-itself is always-already “for us.” [...] the Thing in itself is ultimately the gaze, not the perceived object.”[3] Consumers sitting within their limited haptic reality stare at their often-embarrassing digital doubles exactly because they depict traumatic experience within the seemingly removed and unlimited realm of the virtual.

Images that receive such widespread attention penetrate society in various ways. Especially when private footage and recording methods suddenly become means to operate politically in public, striking similarities to video art become apparent. For instance videos produced by Osama bin Laden or suicide bombers’ statements feature the exact means of aesthetic representation invented by early video artists and brought to widespread fame by youtube consumers.

According to Boris Groys these similarities occur because Islamic terrorists “have gone through the western system, have enjoyed western education, operating with western techniques and media and therefore possess a knowledge of the western symbolic economy.” He also mentions the videos produced by the wardens of the Abu Ghraib prison to document their torture of Iraqi prisoners, analyzing them as symbolic answers to the threat of terrorism towards western civilization and pointing out their connection to art history: “It is extremely strange that most of the supposed sexual excesses were staged especially for photo and video recordings. They were first and foremost art – just typical contemporary art. [...] the intellectual and artistic revolt of the 60s and 70s succeeded in undermining the traditional values and the conventional dignified image of humanity in the West and exposed the truth of the acephalic, sexualized body hiding under the humanistic surface [...] American soldiers grew up in a culture in which the exposure, exhibition and derision of the human body is normal...” [4]

Another recent example in this war of images is the US government’s immediate publication of private footage after the assassination of Osama bin Laden...together with a note that pornographic images were found among the captured data. The footage shows an old man kneeling and rocking in a blanket while switching the channels of a tiny TV set with a remote control. This video too is shot in the aesthetic conventions mentioned above and has attracted millions of viewers on youtube. [5] This publication not only superficially destroys the image of a man who presented himself as a dignified freedom

fighter, but also fully integrates him into the language and traditions of fine arts. After all it is easier to deal with a dead artist than with a martyr.

While video artists have further developed early aesthetics towards more sophisticated, psychological and sometimes narrative scenarios, these contemporary videos still refer to or even mock earlier products of the genre and change forms of transgression into calculated shock reactions. The early "Heidi" from 1992, for instance, represents a milestone in this shift of focus. [6]

Today's successful videos often exhibit poor quality and deliberate imperfections not out of a lack of resources but due to deliberate aesthetic considerations. Critical statements and social debates have become less important, while "shock and delight that is second to none" [7] find contemporary critical acclaim. Today's artist is "floating on the surging crests of the digital boulevards, and his sole intention seems to be enjoying the dynamic complications of hitherto unprecedented experience. Going along for the ride is a pleasure." [8]

Video art reflects both the success of its own tradition within mainstream consumer culture while at the same time longing for a transcendental field of expression. Images no longer function as an illustration of intellectual discourses, but use the visualization of "the Real [...] insofar as it lacks any possible mediation and is the essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail". [9]

References and Notes:

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