

# CURATING VIDEO

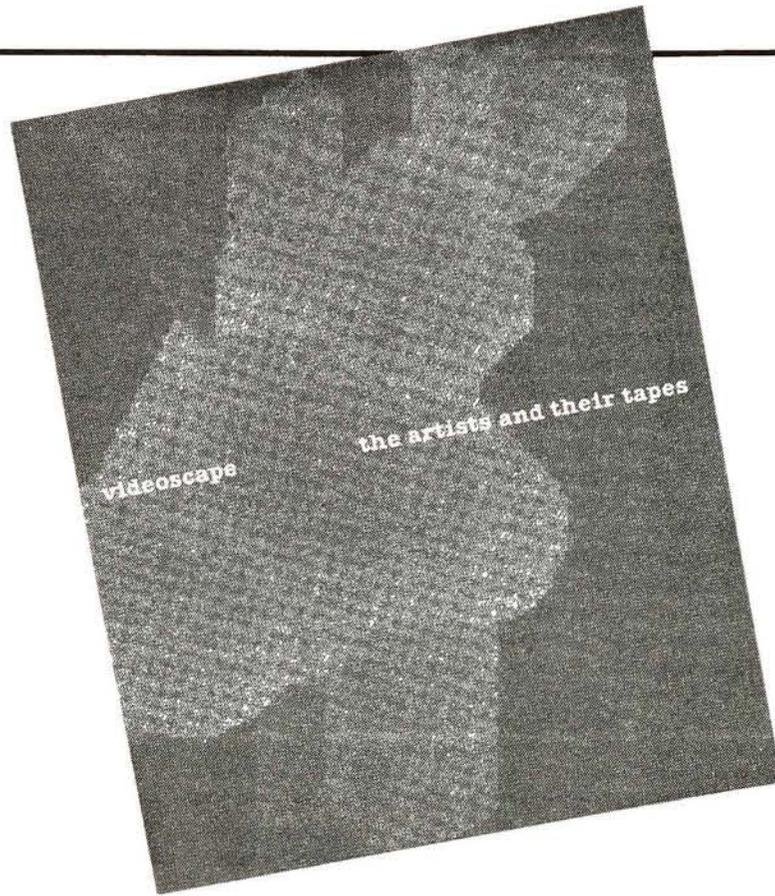
## Nancy Patterson

One of the most relevant media for contemporary culture, video has emerged as a significant art form despite the resistance of the mainstream art world. Contemporary video art, however, lacks a sociocultural context to validate it within the framework of contemporary art. Since the late '60s, when portable video became available, art critics have compared video to everything from home-movies to commercial television.

A constant dilemma for video artists has been their lack of collaboration to define their medium (a theory for their art and how it should be shown). The need for clarification has led to the suggestion that video art be classified according to genre: 'documentary', 'narrative', 'performance', or 'abstract'. It is also possible to classify video art according to method of presentation.

As a curator (and artist) of video and electronic art, I deal with video art in many forms. Video imagery is either real-time video (computer-generated or assisted images) or pre-recorded (computer-edited). Real-time video is most commonly exhibited within a viewer-interactive art work, such as an interactive optical disc installation. An example of this is *Lorna*, an art work by San Francisco artist Lynn Hershman. *Lorna* offers the viewer the opportunity to direct the actions and experiences of the main character, *Lorna*, a woman who is agoraphobic and suffers from a fear of aging. Pre-recorded video may be curated and shown in a variety of ways: it may be shown as part of a sculptural installation or in the form of a multiple monitor presentation which may involve computer switching.

*Video 84* (Montreal), *Video Culture Canada* (Toronto) and *Luminous Sites* (Vancouver) included sculptural installations which used video as well as multiple monitor presentations. The *Video Wall* at Expo '86 is an example of a multiple monitor presentation. This method of showing video is particularly compelling when an image appears to move across a matrix of monitors or when an image is enlarged so that each monitor displays a different part of one frame. *Luminous Sites*, curated by Daina Augaitis and Karen Henry in 1986, included installation with video, performance with video and even installation about video. A less expensive and more common approach to showing video is in the form of a single



screening or festival, as part of a video program.

The majority of video curators are connected to artist-run centres. Administered entirely by artists, artist-run centres are described as 'parallel galleries' because they occupy a position alongside major public galleries. These 'parallel galleries' are usually involved in programming which is more avant-garde than that of the more mainstream institutions. Video art is seldom curated by a main-stream gallery. A contemporary art curator at such an institution may show video installation, exhibitions or festivals, but these are usually packages circulated by artist-run centres. Even within artist-run centres it is usually the contemporary art curator who is also responsible for video. The issues and problems related to curating video for presentation in artist-run centres affect curating video for screening in a variety of settings.

"The close circuit presentation of video tapes in any gallery environment has always seemed problematic - the work doesn't hang on the wall or sit on a pedestal like traditional art objects."<sup>1</sup> To a great extent, the expectations and perceptions surrounding any video are determined by the method of presentation - by where and when it is seen. Video tapes may be made available through video archives or distributors for personal screenings or preview (for rental or retail); they may be shown on a monitor in a public space (Grand Central Station, for example), in an art gal-

lery or museum; they may be broadcast over cable, or via satellite; they may be widely distributed or made available only to a select audience. Video may be shown at specific times or may be available for viewing at any time at all; tapes may be shown continuously, intermittently, or at the discretion of the curator or viewer. The issues and problems related to how, when and where to present a multi-media performance which includes video, are problems and issues which face any performer; the content and parameters of the performance determine the method of presentation.

Specifically related to the medium of video, however, are the issues which face the curator of a video screening or festival. The arrangement of seating, the anticipated or desired size of the audience, the number, size and location of monitors in relation to the audience all figure in how the video will be received. Such decisions are generally left up to the curator of the event but may also be made by gallery staff. Unless they have a specific goal in mind, video artists seldom give much consideration to the presentation of their work. The content of the video and the attitude of the curator toward the issues of space and time (public and private) will then determine the method of presentation.

The debate between video for art's sake and video for broadcast is one manifestation of the debate between private and public ('high' and 'low') art. "Artists videotapes are works of art, in

fact, and as such, they should be enclosed inside official structures for the circulation of art; at the same time they are a product of the technology of communication, and as such should be part of the dominant information system, which is television.<sup>2</sup> Artists' tapes are more regularly shown on American cable television. *Paper Tiger T.V.*, a series of tapes which analyze mass media and culture, and which is broadcast on New York cable, has no equivalent in Canada.

Most video screenings or festivals in artist-run centres are scheduled for the evening. Serious and dedicated video viewers are attracted to such events. Unlike a large percentage of people who pass through a gallery space, they are not intimidated by the presence of video monitors and equipment. Admission is charged, refreshments are served and an informal atmosphere is encouraged.

In many cases the space is arranged to resemble a theatre, and may even include large screens in addition to video monitors. Or viewers may be made to feel 'at home' by limiting the number of viewers per monitor and providing more comfortable seating. Film, video and television occupy a length of time as well as an area of space. Unlike an art object, a video tape has a duration: a beginning, middle and end. This may explain why the presentation of video art tapes very often imitates the methods of presentation used in television and film.

The fact that video is a time-based medium also influences the choice of curatorial approach. "When you are a curator of painting or sculpture, you can look at thousands of works a day... the video curator has to look at thousands and thousands of hours of videotape."<sup>3</sup> The selection of tapes and the decisions involved in choosing a method of presentation, are part of a time-consuming process. Video as part of a sculptural installation has a context (within the work of art itself) which, for the purpose of a festival or screening, must be supplied by the curator. Few video tapes are feature length; a video program will usually consist of several tapes, a festival of several programs. A screening may be followed by a discussion and it is not unusual for a festival to include workshops and special events or screenings. The curator is in a position to relate the tapes within each program or festival to one another or to some common theme; the curator must provide the context in which the individual tapes are to be considered.

Basically, there are four ways of curating video art in the format of a video screening or festival: historically, by notion, thematically, and by commissioning works.

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**Historical**

The technological innovations which have improved the quality and quantity of video art have also affected the ways in which video art is shown and seen. In the case of video screenings and festivals, it has become possible, with the increasing availability of production and post-production facilities, to think and curate in terms of the history of the medium and subsequently, the careers of video artists.

*Videoscape* (1975), curated by Peggy Gale, was introduced as "the first major survey of video art in Canada". Taking advantage of the newly expanded facilities of the Art Gallery of Ontario, all of the tapes shown in the two evening programs, plus additional tapes, were made available on request in the Education and Extension Gallery. The catalogue produced for this event included useful suggestions for viewers new to video art: awareness of the theatrical element of video art, of how video may be used in performance, and how performance may be used in video; the exploration of the conceptual element in human experience (perception, perspective); the synaesthetic (electronic manipulation of the video image); and experiential (interactive environments of installations).<sup>4</sup> The catalogue and selected tapes provided a good introduction to the use of video by artists.

*The Second Link*, an international curatorial survey (1983), was organized by Lorne Falk and included guest curators from Canada, the United States, Holland and England. Each curator was responsible for choosing five tapes and the catalogue featured an essay by each curator examining video by artists in the '80s. Most of the essays discussed some aspect of the tension between video art and television. This project included a very successful international tour and lecture series.

An exhibition of video which used the historical approach was titled *Vintage Video* and was curated by Renée Baert for presentation in a Toronto artist-run centre. An ambitious project, this event presented a survey of artists' tapes from the early years of Canadian video production ending with 1974. This exhibition was not toured and thus did not achieve the circulation necessary for critical feedback and development.

Highlighting featured artists' work by showing two or more of their tapes, as Elke Town did at the 1986 S.A.W. Festival, is the most recent development in curating video for screening. Showing several works documenting the career of a video artist is a realistic approach since the 'early' video tapes of any given artist are no longer primarily a reflection of the early (less sophisticated) days of the medium of video. Unless such a screening presents a complete retrospective of each artist featured, however, familiarity with the career of

the featured artist must be assumed. This approach would seem to eliminate new artists, as well as new viewers, because new video artists have no substantial body of earlier work which would allow them to participate in such an event. An exhibition which shows several works by each artist tends to concentrate on internationally known video artists, rather than introducing new talent or exposing the previously unrecognized.

New work shows provide an opportunity to monitor the development and improvement of video by artists. Such events are usually annual events and are thus a good indication of recent video activity. *The Independent Video Open*, organized by Clive Robertson and other artists who wished to see a non-curated presentation of new work, took place in 1978 and 1979. Another precursor of *The New Works Show* (a Toronto event), was *Video/Video* organized by Randy Gledhill and Marien Lewis in 1981 and Marien Lewis in 1982 as part of the *Festival of Festivals*. *The New Works Show* (1984, 1986) has been organized by participating artists with the assistance of V Tapes, a Toronto video distributor: Rodney Werden, Lisa Steele, Kim Tomczak, Amy Wilson and Randy Gledhill have made significant contributions to the organization and success of these events.

**Nationality**

Organizing the artists in a program according to a shared cultural characteristic, the nationalistic approach has always been a popular method of curating video. Dividing artists by nationality is usually a reference to country of origin or the country which claims the artists as a cultural representative, rather than where they are currently producing art. Such organization is usually taken, if not intended, as a political statement.

'Cultural characteristic' is most often interpreted geographically by country, but curating according to city, region, continent, and even language, must also be included under this approach. *German Video and Performance* (1980), co-produced by Peggy Gale with Wulf Herzogenrath and Ulrike Rosenbach, with Rosenbach as the acting curator, and *Videotapes from Brazil and Chile* curated by Colin Campbell in 1985, are examples of this approach. Curators choosing tapes to represent cultural themes or developments, must be conscious and mindful of their own prejudices and the possibility that they may be projected, whether they are choosing tapes to be imported or exported. *The British/Canadian Video Exchange '84* organized by Jane Wright and Jeremy Welsh, and *The Montreal-Toronto Video Exchange* which I curated with Jean Gagnon in 1986 are examples of how this approach might be developed to encourage dialogue, an exchange or comparison of viewpoints and techniques.



**Thematic**

This approach has the most potential for attracting audiences which would otherwise remain unfamiliar with video as art. Examples of exhibitions directed toward particular audiences are those that concentrate on issues of interest and concern to feminists or those that illustrate the most recent developments in computer graphics and technology, etc. *Going Public - Three evenings of Videotapes by Women* curated by Lisa Steele (1984) is a good example of an exhibition curated in the style most challenging and also most satisfying (when successful). An engaging and well articulated theme determines the success of this approach. *The Phosphorous Diode*, curated by Karen Henry (1985) provides this definition of its theme:

"The history of video art is affected not only by the limitations of equipment access, but also phenomenal changes in the equipment potential over a relatively short period. The artists in *The Phosphorous Diode* are working at the vanguard of those changes bringing new visual potential into language and social critique of art."<sup>5</sup>

The thematic approach is often used in combination with one of the other approaches to curating video. For example, *Going Public* was divided into three programs: 1. wherein women view their roles from the inside out; 2. wherein women review social prescriptions; 3. wherein women 'divine' the future. The use of more than one curatorial approach may be used to advantage in order to more accurately define the context which the curator is creating.

**Commissioned**

An interesting approach to curating video, commissioning video for screening, is also the most rarely used. John Watt's *Television by Artists* (1982) is a commonly cited example of this approach. Six tapes were commissioned on unspecified themes for broadcast via cable television. Kate Craig, at the Western Front, is associated with an artist-in-residence program whereby, at least once a year, a video artist is invited to work for one month to produce a tape (on any subject) which will be shown. This is an interesting variation on the approach which, when strictly interpreted, results in presentations such as *Irony and Identity* which I co-produced with Ed Mowbray in 1982.

Five tapes were commissioned to illustrate the theme of the program: determining personal identity in a paradoxical system where reality contradicts or differs significantly from our expectations of it. Commissioned video screenings may be thematic, nationalistic, etc.

Approaches to marketing and distribution are linked to the ambitions and intentions of the artist producing the videotape. Rodney Werden of Charles Street Video (a major Canadian post-production centre) suggests there are basically three types of artists currently working with and producing video; other-media artists (sculptors, etc.) make 'art-video', often used as a marketing strategy to 'sell' the other-media concept discussed in the video; other artists working in video pursue television values and produce video that looks like TV or video that is meant to be shown on TV; and video artists, or those artists who work only in video. In the first two cases the curator is used to achieve the goals which the artists are clearly working towards. Video artists, however, are dedicated to the medium but have only a vague idea of how they want their work shown and seen. It is a definition for the medium as used by these artists which is lacking.

Curating video by artists has serious implications for the future of the medium of video in relation to contemporary mass culture. The use of video as a communications and information resource and as a marketing tool must be balanced against the use of video by artists. Video by artists looks at culture from within. Drawing upon other forms and methods of presentation, the artist and curator of video reach out to contemporary mass culture through contemporary mass media. The methodology of exposure, which is the concern of the video curator, is not simply a question of style; how video art is shown, and how video art is seen, determine how it will be understood.

1. Brian MacNevin, "... Viewpoints on Video...", *The Second Link: Viewpoints in the Eighties* catalogue. (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1983), p. 36.
2. Maria Gloria Biccocchi, from "Museum and Guerilla Television", by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, *Art, Artists & the Media*.
3. Nam June Paik, "Random Access Information", *Artforum*, September 1980, p. 46.
4. Marty Dunn, "Introduction", *Videoscape* catalogue.
5. Karen Henry, "The Phosphorous Diode: Synthesized Visions in Canadian Video Art", *Phosphorous Diode* catalogue, (Satellite Video Exchange Society: 1985).