

# Exhibitions

## Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995

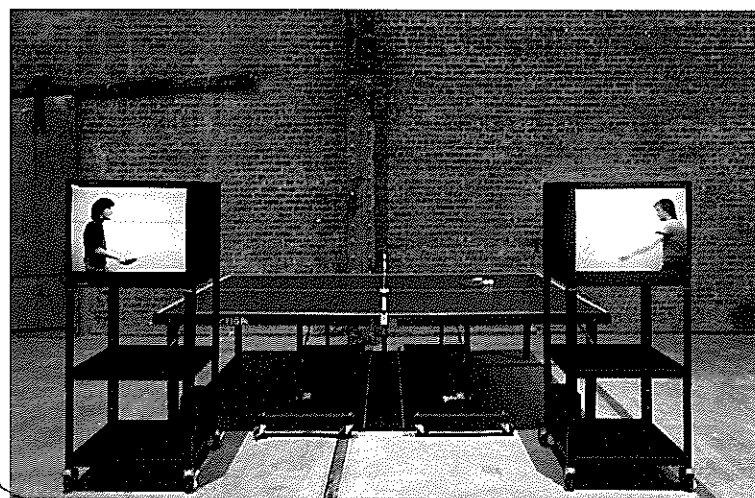
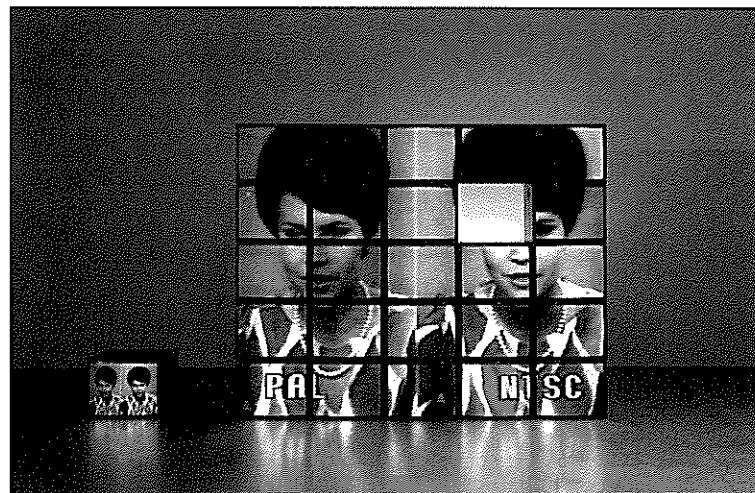
SculptureCenter New York

17 September to 17 December

Just before my visit to SculptureCenter's compact survey of mid-1970s to mid-1990s video art, I had listened to a recording of Samuel R Delany, Huw Lemmey and Jackie Wang talking together about public sex. In the course of their discussion, held live last year in Glasgow as part of Arika Episode 9, Wang contributes a theory that is 'not about Moore's law – a 1970s computing term predicting the doubling of information processing speeds every two years – but porn's law: when you started to be able to get porn on your phone the phones stopped getting smaller, and started getting bigger'. As I made my way around 11 examples of video sculpture split across two floors I felt was being

**Maria Vedder**  
*PAL oder Never The Same Colour* 1988  
installation view

**Ernst Caramelle**  
*Video Ping-Pong*  
1974 installation  
view



asked to consider the images we encounter in time and space, as mediated by the rate at which different historical eras have allowed us to communicate, by means of which technological devices, and to what effect. I was also led to reflect, since all artworks met a 'benchmark' criterion of having been produced for a gallery or museum context, on the role and quality of exhibition time as a relative constant, exerting a slowing effect on life otherwise accelerated.

I had never heard of video sculpture as a category of artwork before, and only the names of three artists included in the New York iteration of this show – Dara Birnbaum (Interview p1), Tony Oursler and Nam June Paik – had been familiar to me. ('Before Projection' was initially presented in spring 2018 at MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it doubtless benefited from the inclusion of an additional work by Adrian Piper; unfortunately, *Out of the Corner*, 1990, could not be accommodated within SculptureCenter's galleries, or by scheduling requirements surrounding its loan.) According to Edith Decker-Philips, writing in a 1989 essay translated for the first time from German into English in the exhibition catalogue, video sculpture is that which confronts us with 'the element of time turned into space', often by means of installations displaying different images simultaneously across multiple monitors, and it emerged thanks to new possibilities afforded by the mid-1960s development of portable video recorders. Among the reasons given by curator Henriette Huldtsch for showing this work now is the fact that it has been overlooked in the light of the dominant tendency of the early 2000s to turn the gallery space for artists' film and video into something approximating cinema.

Moving around a video sculpture, the phenomenological experience in terms of the relation between one's own body and the artwork as a body is enhanced, sometimes in overly literal and gimmicky ways that combine a surrealist aesthetic with a saving-grace inversion of traditional Surrealism's gender roles. In SculptureCenter's brick-walled basement, *The New Embodied Sign Language*, 1973-76, by Friederike Pezold breaks the body down and reassembles it as a person-height stack of four monitors showing the slight movements made by the artist's eyes, mouth, breasts and crotch. I'm not convinced she helped her project of bodily abstraction by painting her skin white and blacking out her pubic triangle, nipples and lips. Upstairs, Paik's giantess 'robot' *Charlotte Moorman II*, 1995, is made in the crude image of its notoriously topless cello-playing namesake, taking a big cube monitor with a circular screen as its head and two antique TV cabinets per limb. A cello fitted with mini TVs positioned as breasts takes the role of substitute torso and a further cello extends to one side as if being played. The moving-image displays flash frenetically between news, rural landscape imagery and something that looks like a horror film extract. The male body also appears as if being played: in snatches of performance footage Moorman's cello keeps transforming into the body of a man. The bow makes violent strokes across his back.

Although these works sometimes felt outdated, such challenges to gendered terms of representation were an intrinsic part of summarising the promise of a medium that had no patriarchal canon. Huldtsch quotes Vanalyne Green to summarise a point she wants to make about the feminist potential of the nascent technology: 'Video

was as close to a "master-free zone" as one could get.' I walked from Paik's homage to Moorman, via Shigeko Kubota's elaborately lit and motorised *River*, 1979-81, – reflecting graphic starts in the disturbed surface reflection of water contained by a steel trough, to view Birnbaum's *Attack Piece*, 1975. Caught in the cross fire of a camera shootout between the artist on one head-height monitor and a sequence of four male artists on the other, I neither recognised nor did it occur to me to ask who these men were; I spent much longer facing Birnbaum, infected by her smile in the brief moments where she let her camera drop. Maybe I was prey to a mere reversal of power play.

Addressing urban space, shining pink, gold and lens-flare white in a darkened ground-floor alcove of its own, Mary Lucier's *Equinox*, 1979/2016, follows the trajectory of enlargement that 'porn's law' describes: delivered on a row of seven monitors increasing in display size and mounted on incrementally higher plinths from left to right, it condenses two weeks' worth of sunrises filmed daily from the 31st floor of a building in Lower Manhattan. Since Lucier was optimistically engaged in late-1970s experiments in showing video in New York public spaces, I read this work as one of longing and lament for a city with which it is hard to keep pace – whose compulsion to profit keeps shutting down outdoor play, whether public sex or artistic activity. Nonetheless, the anthropomorphic impulse of Paik and Pezold's work kicks in my contemplation of *Equinox*'s startling skyline. Since Lucier loved Romantic poetry, I read the progressive burn that *Equinox* tracks (the effect of inflicting sun damage on the recording tube of the camera used to produce the work) as a metaphor for getting burned by a relationship, casting the city as a cruel lover.

Taken together, the works assembled in 'Before Projection' stand to remind us that the image always comes from somewhere and always has some kind of physical support. We can scarcely see the live image streams in Takahiko Jimura's *TV for TV*, 1983; the twin monitors they're playing from are turned inwards face to face. *Credits*, 1984, by Muntadas is uniquely composed of the rolling lists of supporting cast and crew, sponsors etc that follow the main event of TV productions, and Oursler's *Psychomimescope II*, 1987, speaks through symbols to things that ordinarily defy representation: a voice-over emanating from within a 1-cubic-metre model factory tower accompanies video animation on two mini screens, one resembling a well spewing fireworks and flashes of the Statue of Liberty, the other featuring guns, coins, an employee's plot to poison his boss, and a bell. The bell swings towards us, and we hear of 'the force to strike, the striking shape, the shape of the bell, the shape of hard work, the shape of the vox pop'.

However, because it is absent, I am left wondering what Piper's *Out of the Corner*, with its Sister Sledge soundtrack 'We Are Family' and its demand that the viewer interrogate her self-identification as white, might have added to this

exhibition's iteration. Although I'm wary of projecting a weight of representation onto this one inaccessible work, I ask if it would have allowed for parallels to be drawn between fantasies of racial purity and the way that art history once cleaved to the notion that different media had different essential characteristics, which were purifying over time. The greater achievement of 'Before Projection' may be that, in its bringing together of a sort of family of artworks under the banner of video sculpture, it demonstrates how video dealt a blow to concepts of medium specificity and patrilineal avant-garde progress at the same time; one that reflects on our post-media context and new ways to obliterate essentialisms. ■

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## Antarctica: An Exhibition on Alienation

Kunsthalle Vienna

25 October to 17 February

'Antarctica: An Exhibition on Alienation' opens with an address to coldness: 'The Antarctic glaciers are moving in our direction at a rate of three-millimetres per year. Calculate when they'll reach us. Anticipate, in a film, what will happen.' This apocalyptic quotation by filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni pictures a world frozen over, and 'Antarctica', a group exhibition with 20 artists, is an attempt to make manifest both what that coldness is – implying alienation and its psychological costs – and to hint at what lies beneath its surface.

The first thing one notices is the floor of the museum. Painted turquoise, the supposed colour of coldness and hostility, it also reads as a hokey metaphor of the implied alienation running through the show (the colour is also incidentally that of Sebastian Kurz's far-right anti-immigrant Austrian People's Party, offering a possible snide dig by trampling on it). Yet one might look beyond the metaphor of depth and surface. Alienation is described by Karl Marx as a process of separation, occurring through work: the more one produces, the less one becomes. Through this process, one's labour becomes an object, one begins to see a part of one's life as separated from oneself. The life bestowed on this object turns hostile, leading to the feeling that one doesn't belong to oneself. Considering this within the premise of the exhibition – expanding glaciers, alienation, subterranean depths – what does it mean for something to be frozen, fixated or objectified?

'Antarctica' reflects on this by presenting a world swallowed by media. Viltė Bražiūnaitė and Tomas

**PRISM**

The art and science of light

Curated by Chris Clarke and Fiona Kearney until 10 March 2019

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