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, How Lenny and Jackie Wang talking together about public sex. In the course of their discussion, held live last year in Glasgow as part of Anika Episdo B, Wang contributes a theory that’s not about Moore’s law – a 1970s computer 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 prices stopped getting smaller, and started getting bigger. As I made my way around 11 examples of video sculpture split across two floors I felt being 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 not heard of video sculpture as a category in art before, and only the names of three artists included in the New York iteration of this show – Oda Bilbaun, Tony Oursler and Anri Jabuka – were familiar to me. “Before Projection” was initially presented in spring 2018 at MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it doubtlessly benefited from the inclusion of an additional work by Adrian Piper; unfortunately, given the Conran, 1998, could not be accommodated within SculptureCenter’s galleries, or by scheduling requirements surrounding its loan.

According to Edith Decker-Phillips, 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-1980s development of portable video recorders. Among the reasons given by curator Henrieke Hulschies for showing this work now is the fact that it has been overlooked in the lights of the dominant lines in contemporary art. This apocalyptic caustication 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 hoax metaphor of the implied alienation running through the show (the colour is also incidentally that of Sebastian Hors’s fan-right anti-immigrant Austrian People’s Party, offering a possible soap dive 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 oneself as externalised 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, fixed or objectified? ‘Antarctica’ reflects on this by presenting a world swallowed by ice. Vita Brachukova and Tomas