The Nine Lives of Video Art:

Technological evolution, the repeated near-death of video art,
and the life force of vernacular video…

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See also
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TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION

The medium of video continues to be revitalized by advances in technology. Video art, as a genre of activity by artists, has been pushed around and roughed up by technological evolution from the earliest days. In video's short forty-year history, things have been turned inside out by the digital revolution. Everything analog is now digital. Camcorder evolution and proliferation has been incredible. Industry studies indicate there are over 150 million digital camcorders worldwide. Computer-based non-linear editing is easily accessible, having become a standard feature of nearly every computer. Recent advances in display technologies have been phenomenal. LCD (liquid crystal displays) and DLP (digital light processing) projectors are bright and sharp and coming down in price. Plasma screens offer new degrees of sensuality. LED (light-emitting diode) and OLED (organic light-emitting diode) technologies promise the continued spread of paper-thin, energy efficient screens from laptops and cell phones onto virtually any surface, including clothing and walls. The medium of video, now practically everywhere, is about to explode into hyper-saturation. The energy and scope of the digital video revolution cannot be exaggerated. Prepare to be overwhelmed by video data.

Video is now the primary node of the publishing industry. The DVD, a transitional form of video memory, distributes motion pictures and every other form of AV information. The entertainment and educational sectors rely on the DVD for the secure distribution of their products. Web streaming is coming on fast as broadband networks open up to more and more traffic and text communications begins to yield to Web-AV. Video-capable cell phones will push video-clip transmissions to an unprecedented commonness.

Video's evolutionary benchmarks are clear. There has been a complete transformation from analog to digital, linear to non-linear. Videotape is being replaced by disk and hard-drive, and this will continue to solid state. There have been vast improvements in capture and display. Web streaming and file sharing have transformed distribution and exhibition. Transmission, once the exclusive function of television (a centralized, one-to-many wireless video-based medium for the delivery of cinema, live performance, and video), will soon be completely decentralized (one-to-one, many-to-many) through videophones.

Prosumer technologies

Sony's early 1980s strategy to develop prosumer (PROfessional conSUMER) electronics has been largely realized. Today's consumer electronics are sophisticated enough to satisfy the needs of a wide spectrum of users. HD (high definition) camcorders are now affordable to the

professional amateur (ProAm). Any individual with a top-of-the-line, consumer-level camcorder, can work with images and sounds compatible with professional, corporate and institutional standards. High fidelity gear is accessible to an increasingly broad spectrum of information providers and the quality of image and sound reproduction continues to advance.

With all this talk about technology, one might ask if video is a tool or an art medium? The answer is video is *both*. Until the video medium actually obsolesces, or evolves into something else, video art will remain an obscure footnote to the far more extensive and pervasive phenomenon of video as tool. Video is not an obsolete communications medium like painting. Nobody would consider running a political campaign using oil painting as his or her primary medium. Oil paint is for making art, and art alone. Video, on the other hand, is a multi-purpose medium. Video art is a small niche of activity when considered in the context of music video, video gaming, video conferencing, video surveillance, video dating, video-assisted kinesthetics, video real estate, video instruction, etc. Video is first and foremost a tool, a medium for making messages in video with synchronous audio. Artists also use video as a medium for making art. This practice of using video to make art is constantly challenged by all other uses of the medium. The medium's ubiquity and utility both enrich and continuously undermine its suitability as an art medium.

Semantic erosion

Many of the challenges to video art are semantic in nature. For instance, "digital cinema" describes video used by filmmakers. Filmmakers are practitioners of cinema. Technological evolution has dictated that they must work primarily in video. Rather than adopt video as a description of what they do, filmmakers choose to call video something more akin to what they wish to do (i.e. "digital cinema"). That is, they are seeking ways to describe their attempts to advance cinematic practice in video. Video, as a term, fails to adequately describe their history and current intent. "Video cinema" or "video film" doesn't work for them, although it might be more a more accurate description of their current activity. 'Cinematic video' would probably suit the filmmakers better. The problem with the word video is its emptiness, its imprecision. Video is an empty word like information or art. It describes a particular 'species' of technology, but this technology is liquid and ubiquitous and it has attached itself to practically everything. The term video is spread way too thin. When a single word like video can be used to describe so many different things, semantic inflation occurs.

Pushing semantic inflation aside for a moment, video, the technology, continues to spread. Video art, as a practice, as an idea, will continue to be undermined as video, the medium, proliferates, and is used effectively for everything under the sun. A wide spectrum of diverse video applications dwarfs video as an art form. With this said, it is always preferable to work with media alive with possibilities and potential. Video is white hot in the 21st century. It is the peoples' medium. Artists must pay attention to the vernacular use of video technology. Audiences will come to video art with their own video experience and literacy. Personal communications and media technologies based on video in its material, electronic, digital form, will determine how people make and relate to video messages in the future. Vernacular video will determine a complex set of expectations for video.

THE REPEATED NEAR-DEATH OF VIDEO ART

The earliest manifestations of video art took place between 1968 and 1972. Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell had modified television sets in the early 1960s in Germany, and Paik had made video with a Portapak as early as 1966, or so the myth goes. But video art didn't emerge as a discipline until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when hundreds of independent producers and artists began making tapes. Video art was very nearly stillborn during this initial period because the technology was so primitive and unattractive. While the quality of the first black and white video images produced by vidicon tube technology were occasionally quite beautiful, with high contrast and a liquid brightness, video's early imagery was mostly flat and grayish and unimpressive, and the synchronized audio was uniformly horrific. Automatic gain controls surged with noise and frequency limitations (there was zero-dynamic range) made everything sound muddy and irritating. Analog video recordings degraded quickly as they were edited and copied. In the early days recordings were technically erratic and often wouldn't play back consistently from one machine to another. In short, the medium was unimpressive, even ugly, on a sensual level, and totally unstable technically. Despite its primitive qualities as a new technology, video's hands-on instant replay was mind-blowing. You could feel the power at the first occurrence of instant replay. Video's instant feedback altered behaviour. This was a powerful new technology. Video was absolutely stunning in its *potential*.

From 1972 to 1978 was video's hey-day. The technology quickly improved as colour was added, video camera lenses improved, and engineers started to pay attention to audio. 1/2" reel-to-reel video was superseded by the 3/4" U-matic cassette-based format, as analog video began to stabilize and mature as a technology. Recordings still degraded as they were copied, and video was a poor substitute for 16mm film in terms of resolution, but video art as 'multiple' (like printmaking), and as a sculptural medium for installations, was beginning to flourish. The equipment was costly, but tape stock was dirt-cheap and could be erased and recorded over. Video was clearly about process (not product) and video's instant replay accelerated changes in behaviour. This technology energized and altered everything it touched. Institutions, from television to cable networks to museums, were jumping on the bandwagon left and right. Non-profit, artist-run media centres were starting up everywhere, fleshing out the medium's social dimensions. Video art was very hot. Painting and sculpture and the other traditional, material art forms were still reeling from the implications of conceptual art, and looked liked they might not recover. Video art was a superb sculptural form as it could puncture, multiply and radically alter space and time through the installation of multi-monitor arrays. Closed-circuit video (live, real-time video without tape—also called CCTV) was at the forefront of a developing systems aesthetics. Important gains in civil rights, feminism and environmental awareness in the 1960s were amplified by guerilla media in the early to mid-seventies. Performance art had found its perfect form of document in video. New narrative forms were explored and creative and political voices were refined, amplified and distributed far and wide.

Television had been unchallenged from the late-1940s until video came of age in the late-1960s. Throughout the 1970s artists made video art critical of and antithetical to television. Television as a mass medium, a corporate-controlled, top-down (one-to-many) broadcast and cablecast medium, was being assailed with every anomalous, creative gesture in video. Television programming, with its conventions and rigid, redundant formats, was aped, torn apart, cajoled, and sometimes completely ignored by artists working in video. Some artists even made television art, taking their place in the broadcast spectrum through cable access and the public television networks. There was so much work to be done because television, with its fascistic degree of control, had been accepted without a whimper by the masses for over twenty years.

Sure, intellectuals were concerned about television's challenge to print media, and how television made viewers passive. But for television's first two decades, from 1948 to 1968, there were no alternatives, as video hadn't yet arrived. Independent video producers and video artists were the first people to challenge television's complete dominance of culture and politics.

By the early 1980s, institutional support for video art from public broadcasters and museums began to wane. Video art's hey-day was over. The hot new medium was cooling off. Video artists, for all the rocks they had thrown, hadn't made a dent in television. Museums by this time had done so many group video shows, surveys that featured waves of artists under the influence of video and its cybernetic ideology, and its curators had grown tired of paying AV companies for the necessary equipment and expertise to exhibit video art. Museum staffs did not have the necessary expertise to mount video shows. Private galleries couldn't figure out how to commodify video art? Collectors were slow to embrace this immaterial form. Public broadcasters were now losing interest in experimentation, as a global recession in 1981 forced cutbacks. Video art was on its deathbed as music video and personal computing were being born. In 1981 MTV began cablecasting music videos and IBM released its first PC (personal computer). Video art appeared to be history.

In the 1980s there was hope that video artists might be able to cross over into the margins of the entertainment industry. In other words, it was thought that the energy and success of the music video scene might open up a little room for performance and video art to move into mainstream media. Performance artists began to associate with musicians and everyone seemed to be trying to make their work more accessible, to make their art look a little more like popular culture. The strategy was to inhabit the forms of popular culture to gain a broader audience, and then to twist these forms into art that was critical of entertainment and the status quo. In other words, a little compromise was necessary to expand the range of art to include the margins of popular culture. This romance with pop culture was fueled by the expansion of media into vertical, more specialized media channels (early pay-TV) and the potential audiences of these delivery mechanisms, and rationalized through the illuminating texts of theorists like Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida, intellectuals who were fond of carving up the facades of industrial culture. Artists like Laurie Anderson in the USA and General Idea in Canada were making inroads and proving that art could be framed as quirky, 'difficult entertainment.'

By the mid-1980s museums were retrenching, investing once again in painting and sculpture. Video artists continued to look for opportunities in the entertainment industries and public broadcasting. Video installation was moving into the territory of public spaces. Video projectors were expensive and limited in their intensity and resolution, but the scale of installations was increasing from video sculpture to trade-show inspired spectacles. Video art festivals, while most had collapsed by the mid-1980s, were beginning to embrace the idea of "new media." Overall the idea of inhabiting the intellectually empty forms of entertainment and industry was very big in the 1980s. Artists were dressing up as a new kind of entertainer. Instead of criticizing and attacking predominant media forms, artists were attempting to embody these forms in hybrid enterprises. Art was subsequently being dumbed down and softened around the edges, and being marketed as difficult entertainment. In the end this attempted migration from the art ghetto to the outskirts of popular culture was unsuccessful. Audiences looking to be entertained did not embrace art, which even when shaped to engage a broader audience, was too difficult and not easily consumed. Ultimately, video art always remained critical of television (the new 'entertainment art' was steeped in irony and satire), and since television exists to deliver

audiences to advertisers and governments and is not a medium hospitable to art, video art dressed up as television simply ended up criticizing the very audience it was trying to reach. Television audiences rejected video art as 'difficult entertainment'. By the end of the 1980s, it appeared that video art was dead.

By the early 1990s, nearly twenty-five years after video art's origins, video artists were seriously embraced by museums and galleries. The era of the group video show was long gone, except maybe as a historical exercise. No curator would continue to speak of video as phenomenon in terms of "the medium is the message," to quote Marshall McLuhan. The World Wide Web was about to explode onto the scene (1994-1995). But as the "new media" era was dawning, video art did have a definitive history. It was time to single out the video art masters. In the United States Nam June Paik continued to have retrospectives, as did video artists Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Tony Oursler, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Dara Birnbaum and Mary Lucier. Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and Paul McCarthy were recognized by museums for their early, significant work in video. These three affirmed the value of video as document of performance. In Canada the video masters club was not quite as exclusive, or as lucrative for its inductees, as Canadian artists focused less on installation and continued to invest in the single-channel form. The video installation phenomenon really never got rolling in Canada. Colin Campbell, General Idea, Lisa Steele, Paul Wong, Tom Sherman, John Watt, Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin, Lorraine Dufour and Robert Morin, Vera Frenkel, and Jan Peacock were singled out as the essential pioneers of Canadian video art. But video art was never seriously commodified in Canada. Private galleries never entered the mix. As museums around the world collected video art as installation (video as sculptural objects marketed in limited editions), working with galleries to develop a base of institutional and private collectors, American and European artists have dominated the video installation business.

By the mid-1990s museum interest in the single-channel work had completely dried up. Video programming for the single monitor or screen had always been problematic in the museum or gallery. Audiences remained uncomfortable with the idea of watching television-like displays in the public galleries of museums. Either the video display had to be integrated into something that made sense in terms of sculpture and painting (installation), or video would find itself in a closet with didactic videos *about* painting and sculpture. Luckily, cinematheques and videotheques in museums and artist-run spaces continued to screen single-channel video art along side of experimental film, a genre abandoned and left for dead before video art. By the end of the 1990s museums had shifted their interest to group shows in "new media." Group shows featuring artists working with the Web and other "information technologies" had replaced group shows organized around the medium of video.

The phrase "new media" was, and still remains, problematic for a number of reasons. First, it says nothing. It is too general a designation. Another problem is it is a business term being used deviously to extend the reach of converging broadcast, publishing, communications and security industries into our communities, our homes and our personal gear. Saturation is the name of the game. There are only so many hours in the day. The 'new media' are designed to bridge the gaps between movies, live performances, and recordings of all kinds. Academic institutions and government granting agencies adopted the 'new media' designation because they didn't want to continually update their curricula and criteria with each new twist in digital media. In seeking an open-ended category for evolving digital forms, the 'new media' designation was a pragmatic compromise. New media also describes activity that highlights interactivity. Video gaming is the highest-profile category of new media. It is of course largely a commercial form that now rivals

film in terms of audience. Interactivity guarantees involvement and to a certain extent, addiction. Such dependencies can be exploited commercially. In fact, the 'video' designation of video games has consistently blurred the definition of video, from the 1970s on. In summary, hardware firms are seeking to extend communications, information and entertainment media into every minute of our lives through new media. Video art is an old form of new media, and in a technology-driven culture, only the latest things are hot.

In the millennial decade, beginning in 2002, filmmakers and cinema's advocates finally conceded reluctantly that video was film's technical and material substrate. Video shot in '24p,' at 24 frames per second, progressively scanned, instead of video's inherent 30-interlaced frames per second, and high definition (HD) video, have, for all practical purposes, become the default media for filmmakers. Super16, 16mm film shot with a wide, 16/9 aspect ratio, has enjoyed a resurgence as an economically competitive capture-medium for HDTV, but basically 'filmmakers' will work in video from here on out. Filmmakers, insensitive to their new medium, simply call video 'film.' They 'film' video and their final product, often a video recording projected in video, is called a film. Video art takes another serious hit.

Experimental film has been totally eclipsed by video art. Experimental film is now a polite category for film festivals, a form characterized by montage, broken narrative and abstraction. A neo-Luddite movement called 'hand-made film' remains as a grievance against an inaccessible film industry. Let's face it; it costs millions to work in independent, *photochemical* film today. Artists wearing gas masks develop their own films using bleaches and acids to stain unexposed super8 and 16mm film stock in sinks and bathtubs, celebrating their independence from the commercial film industry. This is all very romantic, retrograde, and unhealthy.

Meanwhile, narrative, commercial cinema, the translation of script into drama for the screen, has become more monolithic and predictable than ever. Feature films, produced by multinational corporations, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, control the screens on a global level. This has necessitated the emergence of a growing independent sector--a vast professional, semi-professional, and non-professional territory where films, often produced in video, compete within the independent domain for screen time and audiences. As video has become the technical base of independent cinema, it should come as no surprise that script is being displaced by the cybernetic methodology of video. Action is recorded, instantly replayed, responses are recorded, performances are shaped through feedback, and so forth. In other words, positive and negative feedback governs the development and shape of the narrative.

To get a good sense of how the discipline of cinema will be affected by the medium of video, all we have to do is take a look at reality programming on television. Reality TV is simply television discovering its inherent characteristics as a video-based delivery system. Just as cinema had transformed the novel and the live drama of the stage to the big screen, television's primary role was to deliver cinema, movies and sitcoms and all forms of feature length and episodic drama to its audiences in their homes. Live television, video without tape, offered the real-time bite necessary for news and other contests like sports, politics and game shows. Reality programming took a while to emerge from the shadows of cinematic television, but now that it has been unleashed, it is here to stay.

The first reality shows were *Candid Camera* (1948) and *Truth or Consequences* (1950), which both used hidden cameras, then 16mm film cameras, to create narrative via the cybernetic model (control—i.e. light-hearted humiliation via feedback). *Top Value Television* (TVTV), a guerilla television cooperative introduced true video documentary form to television with their groundbreaking Portapak-coverage of the Republican National Convention in Miami in 1972.

PBS's huge success with *The American Family* (1973), where cinema verité was used to expose the Loud family, is widely touted as the beginning of reality programming. Then of course there were programs like *COPS* (1989), *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1990), and MTV's *The Real World* (1992), which unleashed the flood of reality programming we are drowning in today.

With reality programming, script is thrown out, because prescribing what will happen with a cybernetic system doesn't make sense. Instead, a context for behaviour or performance is set, and video as an instrument is used to provide feedback and record responses. Changes in behaviour are shaped and ultimately controlled through feedback. What video has done for television, liberating it from script and fiction in the literary tradition, it will do for cinema.

Video, from its onset as a medium, has always been understood to be a personal, intimate medium. From the first Portapaks to today's miniature digital camcorders, video has always been low to the ground and potentially private, and intimate in use. This is why artists authored so much confessional, narcissistic video over the course of video art history. Video artists were way out in front of reality programming, but now Reality TV has colonized the personal---and how much more problematic can that be for video artists? This is another serious challenge to video art.

VIDEO ART'S ONGOING LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS:

Besides chronicling all the assaults or threats to video art over its history, another way to track the relative health of the medium is by reviewing the state of video's support structures as an artistic medium.

Educational institutions: Video art has always been supported by colleges and universities through regular classroom screenings, visiting artist gigs, and through teaching positions. Video art screenings in classrooms have steadily increased over the years. Despite this activity, there are very few professorships defined exclusively as video art positions. These positions are defined as new media or digital media arts positions today.

Festivals: There are very few video art festivals in 2005. Festivals are mostly commonly defined as film and video festivals (and from the sprocket holes on their websites and brochures, film sensibilities dominate). New energy in festivals exists for new media and digital media festivals.

Museums and galleries: Installations rule as a form akin to sculpture, and often film is transferred to video for DVD-based projection in these 'video installations.' Cinematheques, attached to museums, program single-channel works in evening screenings.

Television, network cable, and the Web: There is still occasional interest from public television and pay cable, and more and more Web-streaming, and file swapping of video art via the World Wide Web.

Video publishing: DVD, DVD-ROM, and still some VHS are used for direct mail sales to individuals and institutions. Video publishing creates low-cost multiples for private collectors.

Collectors: A small number of people interested in the history of video art collect single channel tapes and video installations. More recently a market has developed for video art as sensuous

content for plasma and LCD screens in upscale living environments.

Governments and foundations: Video by artists is supported by grants, especially in nations concerned with the health of their indigenous media environments. Foundations have trans-governmental concerns, although governments and foundations are generally interested in supporting art that aspires to improve society.

Nightclubs, music video and video culture hybrids: Music is irreversibly connected to visual image in the 21st century, and music video is a major cultural phenomenon. Cross-over opportunities (art always nourishes popular culture) drive activity in this vital sector. Live video mixing, by VJs, is all the rage.

VIDEO ARTISTS—PROFESSIONALS OR PROFESSIONAL AMATEURS?

From 1968-1992 the idea of the professional video artist was invented and substantiated. State, provincial and federal arts councils funded professional video artists, and museums cultivated audiences for professional video artists by showing and collecting their work. Galleries stepped in by the early 1990s and video art, in the form of installations, was selling. Video art had finally been commodified into art objects and was being sold in limited editions or as unique object. Promotional literature was distributed as art magazines featured video artists and thick catalogues were published and video art history books were authored, bound and distributed to university libraries and limited trade sales. Broadcasters continued to periodically dedicate time for video art on television. All these institutions and organizations played a role in professionalizing the video artist.

By the mid-1990s only those artists who tied their work firmly to visual art and cinematic art history were supported by museums. The use of video by artists was exploding as a form of software with numerous applications, but museum curators had decided that video installation was the only form of video that made sense in their institutions. As was previously stated, museum interest in single-channel video had evaporated. Cinematheques were used to review video's art history and to survey contemporary trends in film and video art as a sideshow to the main galleries. But if an artist was not deemed part of the small, exclusive group of masters (i.e. Viola, Hill, Oursler, and more recently Shirin Neshat and Sam Taylor-Wood) that quoted visual art or cinematic art history and worked hard to embed their video in the objectness of sculptural forms, he or she was facing a free-fall into the realm of the professional amateur, the pro-am. In short, museum curators became very conservative as their resources became dependent on the market for video installation.

Japanese video equipment manufacturers (Sony, Panasonic, Canon) and American computer firms like Apple continued to pump professional-level video equipment and software into its vast consumer electronics markets. Just as the 'new media' or 'post-media' era was erupting with the emergence of the World Wide Web, video as an artistic medium was in full bloom, but disappearing from sight. Toward the end of the 1990s there wasn't an artist worth their salt that wasn't working in video. Artists were seldom committing to working exclusively in video, but most saw the medium as a ubiquitous, versatile form capable of functioning as object or document or index or as an extremely valuable personal communications form (an excellent way to create personal profiles—very important for publicity and celebrity status). With literally everyone using the medium there was of course a form of medium-specific inflation as the

complete range of video forms became more and more common. Video art, as a genre of activity, became devalued, as everyone became a video artist.

Of course this total access to the tools of video did not mean that everyone was doing interesting and sophisticated work in video. But the sheer numbers of artists working in video guaranteed that a number of very good video artists would emerge during a period of deprofessionalization. Without adequate institutional recognition, these artists would join the increasing ranks of professional amateurs, a sophisticated sector with all the tools and a very good sense of where the video culture is heading, but with very little status in the art world. To make an analogy, and a sports analogy no less (let us probe the complete disdain for competitive sports in the arts, even though the arts are fiercely competitive and not dissimilar from sports), college athletes pay very good basketball, but they do not benefit from the superior money and publicity afforded to professional players in the NBA. The NBA is a rather exclusive club of a few hundred players, while the college ranks number in the thousands. Basketball fans know the NBA is show business akin to professional wrestling, and that college basketball is much more spirited, fluid, dynamic and beautiful. To complete the analogy, the deprofessionalized video art sector is like college basketball. There are thousands of interesting artists working in video without the support of museums and galleries and broadcasters, and their efforts are certainly worth the attention of serious audiences. But curators, the gatekeepers capable of professionalizing the sector, have decided they only need a handful of masters, and not surprisingly these masters all work in the physical manifestation of video objects.

Video art is everywhere but apparently it doesn't exist

In 2005 in New York, Toronto or Los Angeles, video is called installation, new media, film, photography, and even painting, but rarely video art. Artists on the way up, or in mid-career or on the plateau, have figured out that the video art sector is being deprofessionalized. This deprofessionalization is largely the result of the proliferation of sophisticated video tools, and by the massive, collective contributions of an immense population of artists working in video. 'Video art,' as a designation for art made by artists working in video, has become dead weight in semantic terms. Semantics, like physics, govern behaviour.

More profoundly, video, as a medium, has gone from total opacity to complete transparency in less than forty years. Video is the predominant medium of the 21st century. Video's power and relevance stem from its unparalleled capacity for mixing and dissolving into other media. Video embodies film, television, performance and surveillance, and has become the ultimate living and breathing, matter-of-fact medium of all forms of advancing digital telecommunications. High-resolution, real-time video streaming, with synchronous, spatially rich digital audio, is the immediate destiny of wireless digital telephony. Text messaging and still-picture phones are paving the way for full-motion, video-based personal telecom.

Video is a liquid, shimmering, ubiquitous medium that absorbs everything it touches. This liquidity makes video synonymous with intermedia, the art of filling gaps between media. Today's media culture and media art are composed of complex, hybrid forms of multi-sensory information. Nothing is very pure and one-dimensional these days.

VERNACULAR VIDEO

Video as a technology is a little over forty years old. It is an offshoot of television, developed

in the 1930s and a technology that has been in our homes for sixty years. Television began as a centralized, one-to-many broadcast medium. Television's centrality was splintered as cable and satellite distribution systems and vertical, specialized programming sources fragmented television's audience. As video technology spun off from television, the mission was clearly one of complete decentralization. Forty years later, video technology is everywhere. Video is now a medium unto itself, a completely decentralized digital, electronic audio-visual technology of tremendous utility and power. Video gear is portable, increasingly impressive in its performance, and it still packs the wallop of instant replay. As Marshall McLuhan said, the instant replay was the greatest invention of the twentieth century.

Video in 2008 is not the exclusive medium of technicians or specialists or journalists or artists--it is the people's medium. The potential of video as a decentralized communications tool for the masses has been realized, and the twenty-first century will be remembered as the video age. Surveillance and counter-surveillance aside, video is the vernacular form of the era--it is the common and everyday way that people communicate. Video is the way people place themselves at events and describe what happened. In existential terms, video has become every person's POV (point of view). It is an instrument for framing existence and identity.

There are currently camcorders in twenty per cent of households in North America. As digital still cameras and camera-phones are engineered to shoot better video, video will become completely ubiquitous. People have stories to tell, and images and sounds to capture in video. Television journalism is far too narrow in its perspective. We desperately need more POVs. Webcams and videophones, video-blogs (VLOGS) and video-podcasting will fuel a twenty-first-century tidal wave of vernacular video.

What Are the Current Characteristics of Vernacular Video?

Displayed recordings will continue to be shorter and shorter in duration, as television time, compressed by the demands of advertising, has socially engineered shorter and shorter attention spans. Videophone transmissions, initially limited by bandwidth, will radically shorten video clips.

The use of canned music will prevail. Look at advertising. Short, efficient messages, post-conceptual campaigns, are sold on the back of hit music.

Recombinant work will be more and more common. Sampling and the repeat structures of pop music will be emulated in the repetitive 'deconstruction' of popular culture. Collage, montage and the quick-and-dirty efficiency of recombinant forms are driven by the romantic, Robin Hood-like efforts of the copyleft movement.

Real-time, on-the-fly voiceovers will replace scripted narratives. Personal, on-site journalism and video diaries will proliferate.

On-screen text will be visually dynamic, but semantically crude. Language will be altered quickly through misuse and slippage. People will say things like 'I work in several mediums [sic].' 'Media' is plural. 'Medium' is singular. What's next: 'I am a multi-mediums artist'? Will someone introduce spell-check to video text generators?

Crude animation will be mixed with crude behaviour. Slick animation takes time and money. Crude is cool, as opposed to slick.

Slow motion and accelerated image streams will be overused, ironically breaking the real-time-and-space edge of straight, unaltered video.

Digital effects will be used to glue disconnected scenes together; paint programs and negative

filters will be used to denote psychological terrain. Notions of the sub- or unconscious will be objectified and obscured as ‘quick and dirty’ surrealism dominates the ‘creative use’ of video.

Travelogues will prosper, as road ‘films’ and video tourism proliferate. Have palm-corder and laptop will travel.

Extreme sports, sex, self-mutilation and drug overdoses will mix with disaster culture; terrorist attacks, plane crashes, hurricanes and tornadoes will be translated into mediated horror through vernacular video.

From Avant-Garde to Rear Guard

Meanwhile, in the face of the phenomena of vernacular video, institutionally sanctioned video art necessarily attaches itself even more firmly to traditional visual-art media and cinematic history. Video art distinguishes itself from the broader media culture by its predictable associations with visual-art history (sculpture, painting, photography) and cinematic history (slo-mo distortions of cinematic classics, endless homages to Eisenstein and Brakhage, etc.).

Video art continues to turn its back on its potential as a communications medium, ignoring its cybernetic strengths (video alters behaviour and steers social movement through feedback). Video artists, seeking institutional support and professional status, will continue to be retrospective and conservative. Video installations provide museums with the window-dressing of contemporary media art. Video art that emulates the strategies of traditional media, video sculpture and installations or video painting reinforces the value of an institution’s collection, its material manifestation of history. Video art as limited edition or unique physical object does not challenge the museum’s raison d’etre. Video artists content with making video a physical object are operating as a rear guard, as a force protecting the museum from claims of total irrelevance. In an information age, where value is determined by immaterial forces, the speed-of-light movement of data, information and knowledge, fetishizing material objects is an anachronistic exercise. Of course, it is not surprising that museum audiences find the material objectification of video at trade-show scale impressive on a sensual level.

As vernacular video culture spins toward disaster and chaos, artists working with video will have to choose between the safe harbour of the museum and gallery, or become storm chasers. If artists choose to chase the energy and relative chaos and death wish of vernacular video, there will be challenges and high degrees of risk.

Aesthetics Will Continue to Separate Artists from the Public at Large

If artists choose to embrace video culture in the wilds (on the street or on-line) where vernacular video is burgeoning in a massive storm of quickly evolving short message forms, they will face the same problems that artists always face. How will they describe the world they see, and if they are disgusted by what they see, how will they compose a new world? And then how will they find an audience for their work? The advantages for artists showing in museums and galleries are simple. The art audience knows it is going to see art when it visits a museum or gallery. Art audiences bring their education and literacy to these art institutions. But art audiences have narrow expectations. They seek material sensuality packaged as refined objects attached to the history of art. When artists present art in a public space dominated by vernacular use, video messages by all kinds of people with different kinds of voices and goals, aesthetic decisions are perhaps even more important, and even more complex, than when art is being

crafted to be experienced in an art museum.

Aesthetics are a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty. For the purpose of this text, aesthetics are simply an internal logic or set of rules for making art. This logic and its rules are used to determine the balance between form and content. As a general rule, the vernacular use of a medium pushes content over form. If a message is going to have any weight in a chaotic environment--where notions of beauty are perhaps secondary to impact and effectiveness--then content becomes very important. Does the author of the message have anything to show or say?

Vernacular video exhibits its own consistencies of form. As previously elaborated, the people's video is influenced by advertising, shorter and shorter attention spans, the excessive use of digital effects, the seductiveness of slo-mo and accelerated image streams, a fascination with crude animation and crude behaviour, quick-and-dirty voice-overs and bold graphics that highlight a declining appreciation of written language. To characterize the formal 'aesthetics' of vernacular video, it might be better to speak of anesthetics. The term anesthetic is an antonym of aesthetic. An anesthetic is without aesthetic awareness. An anesthetic numbs or subdues perceptions. Vernacular video culture, although vital, will function largely anesthetically.

The challenge for artists working outside the comfort zone of museums and galleries will be to find and hold onto an audience, and to attain professional status as an individual in a collective, pro-am (professional amateur) environment. Let's face it, for every artist that makes the choice to take his or her chances in the domain of vernacular video, there are thousands of serious, interesting artists who find themselves locked out of art institutions by curators that necessarily limit the membership of the master class. Value in the museum is determined by exclusivity. With this harsh reality spelled out, there should be no doubt about where the action is and where innovation will occur.

The technology of video is now as common as a pencil for the middle classes. People who never even considered working seriously in video find themselves with digital camcorders and non-linear video-editing software on their personal computers. They can set up their own 'television stations' with video streaming via the Web without much trouble. The revolution in video-display technologies is creating massive, under-utilized screen space and time, as virtually all architecture and surfaces become potential screens. Videophones will expand video's ubiquity exponentially. These video tools are incredibly powerful and are nowhere near their zenith. If one wishes to be part of the twenty-first-century, media-saturated world and wants to communicate effectively with others or express one's position on current affairs in considerable detail, with which technology would one chose to do so, digital video or a pencil?

Artists must embrace, but move beyond, the vernacular forms of video. Artists must identify, categorize and sort through the layers of vernacular video, using appropriate video language to interact with the world effectively and with a degree of elegance. Video artists must recognize that they are part of a global, collective enterprise. They are part of a gift economy in an economy of abundance. Video artists must have something to say and be able to say it in sophisticated, innovative, attractive ways. Video artists must introduce their brand of video aesthetics into the vernacular torrents. They must earn their audiences through content-driven messages.

The mission is a difficult one. The vernacular domain is a noisy torrent of immense proportions. Video artists will be a dime a dozen. Deprofessionalized artists working in video, many sporting M.F.A. degrees, will be joined by music-video-crazed digital cooperatives and by hordes of Sunday video artists. The only thing these varied artists won't have to worry about is

the death of video art. Video art has been pronounced dead so many times; its continual resurrection should not surprise anyone. This is a natural cycle in techno-cultural evolution. The robust life force of vernacular video will be something for artists to ride, and something to twist and turn, and something formidable to resist and work against. The challenge will be Herculean and irresistible.

Tom Sherman is an artist and writer. He works in video, radio and live performance, and writes all manner of texts. He has exhibited widely, including shows at the National Gallery of Canada, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, Wiener Konzerthaus, and Ars Electronica. He represented Canada at the Venice Biennale. He was the founding head the Media Arts Section of the Canada Council. He was awarded the Bell Canada Award for excellence in video art. He performs and records with the group Nerve Theory. His latest book, *Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment*, was published by The Banff Centre Press in 2002. Sherman is a professor in the Department of Transmedia at Syracuse University in New York, USA. *twsherma@syr.edu*