

Video painting: A hybrid between the still and moving image

Christin Bolewski; Loughborough University, School of Art and Design, UK

Abstract

The use of new technologies has almost inevitably led to the blurring of established definitions, roles, and taxonomies of visual art. The 'video painting' is a new form of contemporary video expression based around the latest developments in High Definition Video and flatscreen displays providing a high-quality platform for the presentation of the moving image. It is a hybrid concept between the still and the moving image using traditional patterns of film narration and painting practice, quoting different genres such as the still life, landscape, portrait or the abstract painting. As Jim Bizzocchi of Simon Fraser University in Canada suggests, 'It is a smooth temporal flow, always changing, but never too quickly. The piece is an exploration of concepts of ambience, time and the liminality of image and of narrative'. Importantly, one of the most interesting questions it poses is with regard to how time is performed in these video paintings.

As an example, I present my project 'Still life in motion', which I created in 2005 as a German media artist in cooperation with SONY Germany as part of the SONY BRAVIAmotionart project. The canvas is replaced by a large high-resolution flatscreen expanded by perspectives of time and space, simultaneously reconstructing and deconstructing the issues of the still life genre. Other examples will discuss video works by artists such as Bill Viola, Robert Wilson, Sam Taylor Wood, etc., who have downplayed the temporal nature of their images so much, that they often become nearly static in their effect.

Keywords

Video Art, Remediation, HDTV Technology, Visual Arts, Time-based Media

New video technologies constantly change the aesthetic capabilities of the moving image, and the latest developments in High Definition Video and flatscreen displays provide a high quality platform for the presentation of the moving image. Only within the last few years, new affordable technology has been developed to deliver High Definition Video as a new standard for commercial and artistic moving image expression. Flatscreen technologies such as plasma and LCD displays are being steadily introduced to our domestic and creative cultural spheres and will be part of our everyday lives in the near future. Bill Buxton, University of Toronto, principal researcher at Microsoft, maintains that gel, thin film, and painted surface video technologies are the inevitable next step in this development, and that massively large scale moving images, beyond anything we have experienced, will be part of our everyday lives. As a result our domestic and public visual spaces will be profoundly transformed, representing a great challenge for future visual and time-based art and design practice.

As part of this development the technological setting of flatscreen and HD video has already created the new ambient video genre of the 'video painting' in fine art practice. It is a hybrid concept between the still and moving image using traditional patterns of film narration and painting practice, quoting different genre such as still life, landscape, portrait or the abstract painting. Topics and concepts come both from the areas of film and painting practice, and one of the most interesting questions it poses is with regard to how time and narration are performed in these video paintings. As Jim Bizzocchi at Simon Fraser University in Canada suggests, 'video paintings are video works, which are presented on LCD panels. They are wall-mounted in the same manner as traditional paintings. Content in this emergent form is designed to work at all times as either a highly aware foreground experience or as passive background. Therefore a video painting emerges as a supremely pictorial form. It creates a visual aesthetic, which relies on high visual impact, the subtle

manipulation of image, multiple layers, and the play of gradual, complex transitions. It is a smooth temporal flow, always changing, but never too quickly. The piece is an exploration of concepts of ambience, time, and the liminality of image and of narrative.’ (Bizzocchi 2005)

Video paintings have been increasingly accepted as a viable and progressive artistic practice and have started to be exhibited in museums and galleries within the last few years. A lot more ambient video paintings are exhibited in international digital media art festivals and exhibitions, which represent cutting edge artistic work on the crossroads of sound, image, media, design, cinema and performance art. The genre has been much better explored in the US and in Canada, simply because HD video technology is available and more commonly used there. Jim Bizzocchi and other artists working in the area of the video painting, who are addressing this clearly within their work, come mostly from the US and Canada. Visual artist Jeffers Egan, for example, has been working with the video painting medium for some time, producing works described as references to Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. One of the early participants in the growing ambient video genre, DetourDVD have been designing ambient video since 2003 and sell their work commercially via their website. Their main focus is to explore the ambient character of video paintings in reference to the tradition of abstract painting practice to create work with a strong emphasis on the slow near-imperceptible evolution of abstract video content, and to explore the development of software specialized for the production of slow morphing animation.

From 2000, the American Bill Viola, being one of the most influential video artists, began using plasma and LCD screens in ‘The Passions’ series that feature silent, slowed down, moving pictures exploring the human emotions, a theme that Viola has continued to develop. The composition and sensibility of these works were influenced by well-known paintings in the western medieval and renaissance traditions. He chose, for example, Hieronymus Bosch’s ‘Christ Mocked’, using it as a departure point for something quite different: ‘The Quintet of the Astonished’ is the first work of ‘The Passions’ series. By making use of slow motion and mechanically repeated ‘loops’ Viola deliberately downplays the temporal nature of his images so much so that they often become nearly static in their effect. Patient watching reveals subtle shifts and ambiguities of emotion. The formats of the original artworks range from laptop-sized screens to wall-sized projections. Another example is ‘The locked Garden’, a color video diptych in two free standing hinged LCD flat panels, representing a video version of the hinged portrait on the mantel piece in every American home.

Robert Wilson, one of this era’s most important figures in theater, opera and art, has created a series of video portraits of celebrities, ordinary people and animals called ‘VOOM Portraits’. The recent developments in HD technology have allowed Wilson to create something like a precise hybrid of still photography and motion pictures playing with the notion of a documentary video portrait – a conceptual idea, which has been explored in the traditional video format and in reference to the medium of photography by the British artist Gillian Wearing in her work ‘Sixty minute Silence’ in 1996. One other important example of a European artist still using the traditional video format is the work ‘Still Life’ by the British artist Sam Taylor-Wood. Created in 2001, it reworks the still life in a moving picture. This work is not created within the framework of making a contribution to the new genre of the video painting, but it is referring to the same idea: It is a DVD-projected film set in a traditional wooden frame as though it were, in fact, a painting. The work explores the irritation that occurs between a still image and a slow changing moving image of a bowl of fruit, which decays at an accelerated pace. Over almost four minutes the time-lapse film continually observes the fruit slump and rot until everything ultimately collapses.

How can the fascination for the paradox of stillness in moving image practice that these artists share be explained? The strong affection between the still and the moving image has been addressed in other art works prior to the technological setting of the video painting, but with its wall-mounted

high quality presentation of the moving image it seems to have created a very strong analogy to the representation of a painting. 'Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia 1932', created in 1998 by the Belgian video artist David Clearbout, is a good example: it refers to and expands upon Clearbout's interest in filmic and photographic picture strategies to create works that experiment with notions of temporality. The piece is made from an archival photograph and shows a group of children at play during their day at kindergarten. In accordance with the characteristic of the medium photography, the living situation appears to be frozen. It stands for a past reality emphasized by the year stated as being 1932 in the title. Yet closer examination reveals gentle movements in the large projected 60 min video installation. Whilst the figures remain static the foliage of the trees moves softly in the wind. With this minimal intervention the artist brings together film and photography in interesting and thought-provoking ways, and the absence and presence of time emerges as the main theme of the work.

In the pivotal book 'Remediation - Understanding New Media' published in 2000, the new-media specialists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the word 'remediation' to refer to the ways in which any new medium is always both a refashioning of an earlier medium and a novelty understood through previous media. They note that earlier media have also refashioned one another: 'photography remediated painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville, and radio.' They come to the conclusion that 'for our culture, mediation without remediation seems to be impossible'. (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 271) Any new medium develops step by step from the emergence of a novel technology and through the articulation of a specific media language and semiotic system by reworking, remodelling and sampling various elements of differing other media into newly converged forms to successfully establish its own aesthetic vocabulary. Once such a media-specific set of means of expression is established, it becomes a medium that can be distinguished from other, already existing media, presenting itself as an improved version of other media.

One of the most interesting questions in relation to the video painting is, if the technological setting of flatscreen and HD video is capable of creating something new, which is so different from other existing media that it is not only a new moving image aesthetic but creates a new medium in itself according to the theory of 'remediation', then the question for the future will be whether or not there is a development from technology to medium taking place? Therefore the aim of my research project is to explore the basic characteristics of the video painting, how it reworks traditional themes, not only from painting but also from film practice, and if there is the potential for it to develop into a new medium. In 2005, I created my first video painting 'Still life in motion' as a German media artist in cooperation with SONY Germany as part of the 'SONY BRAVIAmotionart' project. SONY in Germany has a long tradition in supporting video artists to promote the innovative potential of their newest technologies. 'Still life in motion' connects the tradition of still life painting with the moving image. The canvas is replaced by a large flatscreen expanded by perspective of time and space, reconstructing and deconstructing the issues of the still life genre at the same time. I chose the subject of still life, because the absence of the dimension of time seems to be particularly evident in an arrangement of still objects. Often the presence of the absence of time is the subliminal dominant subject of still life! Often there is a slice of lemon nearly falling out of the frame, and there is a fly in the centre of the painting waiting to be discovered. It irritates the perception of the viewer, because he cannot decide for a moment, whether it is part of the picture or sits on the linen about to fly away within the next second or two. The work seems to be similar to the 'Still life' of Sam Taylor Wood, but there are major differences: To create an analogy to cubistic painting practice and to deliver different perspectives and viewpoints simultaneously within one image, digital techniques of collage, split-screen, and video layering are applied. The motif of the still life gets fragmented through a collage of established traditional film codes and shot sizes. Time is heavily manipulated in this process and emerges as the main element

of the work. First the slow decay of a still life is filmed over a period of several weeks from different shot sizes and perspectives. Then the real-time video and sound footage is manipulated through fast motion effects so as to speed up the rotting process to a visible level. During the editing process several stages of the rotting process get arranged in a narration determined by the movement within the image and the accompanying sound patterns and rhythms. Different parts of the image are arranged running simultaneously forward and backward, in fast motion, at different speed, or being looped – and the still life starts to ‘breathe’. Growth gets confronted with destruction, aesthetic beauty with rotten ugliness.



Figure 1: Still life in motion 2005. Copyright: the author.

Although the work seems to focus on reworking a traditional theme from painting practice, it is equally interested in exploring how specific visual codes of film and video practice are remediated in video paintings. How are traditional and contemporary patterns of narration and montage transformed by using a collage of multilayered video streams within one frame? Time is treated and performed very differently from current moving image practice. Instead of presenting different shot sizes and perspectives in the linear fashion common in temporal television montage, the concept of spatial montage is used. This is common practice in traditional cinematic montage, because the larger and richer screen of cinema prefers the carefully composed and detailed image to deliver an experience where the viewer can explore the image by himself, and his eyes can wander around and pick up whatever he wants. The increased picture size and quality of the video painting supports this pictorial cinema in the same way, and subtle details can be observed much better. More time is needed to explore these rich images, and editing pace needs to slow down. This is in opposition to the temporal acceleration in contemporary video narration and brings more ‘stillness’ into its aesthetic. Television screens are small and deliver a low quality image. ‘Therefore story tends to be presented and staged through sequencing of tighter images rather than through the visual dynamics of a single rich image - temporal montage displaces spatial expressivity. The standard viewer is accustomed to the fast speed of television narratives, and his ability to take in visual information has increased enormously with the fast editing norm.’ (Bizzocchi 2005) This has been now for more than 20 years the dominant characteristic of moving image practice starting with the development of music television and the short clip format, which has been commonly titled as ‘clip aesthetic’. The ambient video painting seems to be a return from this long tidal wave of fast moving, low quality

images and ‘rediscovers the use of the cinematic composition-in-depth, and a slow editing pace using more layered transition instead of the hard and fast video cut.’ (Bizzocchi 2005) This means, that the dimension of time in video narration, which has been divided up and sequenced in small units of fast moving and continuously changing key visuals, can now return to a slow flow of evolutionary nature. HD video is privileged to perform real-time events due to its high-resolution quality and realistic impact. In ‘Remediation’, Bolter and Grusin discuss the phenomenon of ‘transparent immediacy’, which is defined as a ‘style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation.’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 272-73) According to Grusin and Bolter all media seek immediacy and a perfection of technology, which will make the medium invisible. ‘Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality.’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 53) HD video satisfies the desire for immediacy much better than traditional video formats, and nature sequences and the play of landscape in real-time are very suitable topics. The viewer seems to enjoy the irritation of the imitation of a real experience in a very slow time flow, probably as a welcome experience in contrast to the omnipresent fast flow of the current moving image dogma.

‘Still life in motion’ does not perform in real-time, but like most video paintings, it has a slow flow of manipulated time, which provokes irritation in the viewer’s perception, whether s/he sees a real, still, or moving image. Like the still life painting, it can confuse the viewer. Will the fly move or not – in reality or on the screen? The perception of the viewer is a very important aspect in explaining the sensation of the meditative character of the video painting. The ideal viewing situation is one where the viewer can sit on a bench or a couch to contemplate the video painting. A meditative ambient atmosphere must be provided to seduce the viewer into a longer and closer examination, and then the viewer is able to experience his own individual time flow. The video painting invites the viewer to increase his or her own visual sensibility. Being in an irritated state between observing a still or moving image emphasizes the time flow even more and delivers an experience which seems to be not only relaxing but actively proffers relief amidst the fast pace of contemporary society.

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Biographical Notes

Christin Bolewski is a media artist and filmmaker from Germany. She studied at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, Germany. She exhibits regularly and has taught in Universities in Europe and America. Currently she is a Lecturer and Researcher at Loughborough School of Art and Design

UK. The application of new media technologies to art and design practice is an ongoing aspect of her research and teaching activities.