

# Still Here – the moving image in the static gallery

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## **Abstract**

My paper interprets the theme of stillness as one of stasis, connoting tension rather than understanding stillness as a quality of quiet or calm. Stasis is a useful lens through which to consider the three components of the video installation experience: the static gallery; the ambulatory audience; the moving image. I explore stasis through the video installation work that makes up my own PhD research, placing it in the context of historical and contemporary video installation practices.

I begin with the tension between an audience's expectations of the moving image and the conventions defining contemporary video installation practice. Video art has a long history of defining itself in contrast to the dominant codes of television and cinema. Through its initial rejection of linear narrative and its use of repetition, video art has historically challenged mainstream notions of screen time. Movement and stasis are discussed as defining properties of video art's unique temporality.

Video art's rejection of television began to shift in the late 70's, with increasing co-option of popular televisual and cinematic tropes. Experiences of video outside the gallery have come closer those within it, however there remains a schism between the two modes of spectatorship. I frame this schism as a taut moment, a point of stasis, between two possibilities that can be prised open by artists to elicit a dialectic response from audiences. I discuss ways of creating a critical relationship between the ambulatory engagement with the static gallery and the sedentary engagement with the televisual screen.

## **Key words**

Video, installation, audience

The gallery is not going anywhere, or if it is, it is going there very slowly. For all its 20<sup>th</sup> century hangovers of avant-gardism, it is a conservative space: it quite literally conserves. The gallery presents, protects from decay, and in so doing privileges art objects and experiences for the purpose of exchange, both cultural and commercial. The gallery markets artists and their work to an audience. As a market driven space, it is politically conservative, invested in the culture of property rights and social hierarchies that belong to the free market fundamentalism that is the prevailing wisdom of our time. The gallery is not only static culturally and politically but as an environment it privileges the object over the viewer, the sign over the experience, calling upon its audience to walk quietly upon its polished floors lest they disturb the art.

There is a perversity to the fact that video has wound up in the gallery at all. Video emerged in the 1960s when artists were turning their back on galleries, critiquing both art institutions and the commodification of the art object. Forty years on, art is still being bought and sold. However, video remains relatively difficult, or at least unsatisfying, to commodify and collect. Whilst often expensive to produce, video is eminently re-producible, which lessens its value (video editions being just a case of 'me-too'ism). More importantly, video is not an object. This fact is crucially important, a defining quality to be exploited for critical gain rather than ignored through pretending video is a kind of photograph that moves. Whilst the gallery has come up for a great deal of critical re-thinking, paradoxically video, in its current renaissance, is all too often treated as though there had not been an explosion of the apparatus of the gallery with video art present as a significant participant. We see too much video presented with no consideration for the spatial specifics of the gallery and the manner in which it is to be viewed. Often there seems little reason for such work to

be seen in the gallery and the most cynical analysis would ask whether much of this work could survive selection for film and video festivals or broadcast.

Clearly for some, the gallery is the lounge room of the slacker artist, a place to let it all hang out. Over the last fifty years, the gallery has been increasingly conceived as a vacuum of sorts, an architectural plinth with pretensions to a neutral supporting role, a type of non-space where all bets are off and art can be considered from first principles (O'Doherty, 1976, p.11). Given the space the gallery has occupied socially and culturally the last thing it can be is neutral, however art has always had the capacity to enter into contracts of suspended disbelief with its audiences. We can behave 'as though it were the case' that vampires exist and not let their non-existence get in the way of our identification with them or their victims, and so too we can behave as though the gallery is a non-space, a fertile void. Like a town in a western film, the gallery is all façade, indistinguishable from the last one, a medium whose message speaks of meaningless mutability. It is a conceit, but a critically useful one.

Video is also a void. Electronic rather than mechanical, when I turn it off there is no "there" there, and even when turned on it is depthless, flat. Video space, however, is elastic; a single image can create physically impossible spaces which morph in infinite variations. Video time is also elastic, and this potential was immediately recognised by artists. Video art began by asserting itself in contrast to the dominant codes of television and cinema. As outlined in Jon Burris' insightful analysis, the first generation of video artists deliberately defined themselves in opposition to the linear narratives of television, in a mode reminiscent of an angry teenager rejecting the parent (Burris 1996). The rapid uptake of video technology by artists was arguably a response to the ubiquity of television, a completion of the communication cycle. But artists chose not to respond in kind, not to adopt the language of television. That would come later. Instead, early video artists rejected not only the content of television but also its formal conventions. Instead of fast-paced, diverting narratives, artists experimented with tempo, rhythm and duration. Whilst such experimentation was alive and well in the hands of the post-war film-making avant-garde, video technology's immediacy obviously gave artists something they had been looking for: a 'real time' responsiveness in the material combined with a range of sculptural, or spatial, possibilities.

Bruce Nauman seemed to really 'get' this about video straight off. His closed circuit installations, like those from the *Performance Corridor* group (begun in 1968), offer a meditation on the possibility of a real-time system amplified through the psychology of the viewer. Nauman offers more than a set of perceptual experiments. He adds a playful paranoia to the mix by sending the audience back upon itself, looking over its shoulder to catch a glimpse of the just past, 'surveiling' some spaces whilst cutting off access from others entirely. These works are profoundly still, yet full of narrative and metaphoric content the moment they are encountered. Similarly, Dan Graham created contained and perversely static works. He added temporal dislocation to Nauman's spatial dislocation of the image's input and output. In Graham's six variations on the *Time Delay Room* (1974) he plays with an 8-second delay between the recording of the image and the audience seeing the image played back. In two rooms with two monitors each, audiences encountered a real-time view of the other room on one monitor and a view of themselves from 8 seconds previous on the other monitor. In cascading feedback relationships, these perceptual rat mazes make unwilling performers of audiences, confronted by video's potential to amplify the self-consciously performative nature of social space.

Artists like Dieter Kiessling continued in this vein with installations such as *Two Cameras* (1998), a work in which two cameras video each other with their respective outputs fed to two adjacent monitors. The cameras 'hunt' focus in the low light and the constant noise of their auto focus motors are amplified as a soundtrack. Kiessling continues the work of defining the formal

parameters of video, shutting the system down further to exclude participation of the audience. Cameras function as surrogates for the audience, trying, but failing, like Graham and Nauman's audiences, to 'see' each other. Rendering the frame even more static, Darren Almond's *A Real Time Piece* (1996) relayed a live video feed of his empty studio to London's Exmouth Market. Passing time stands still as there is nothing to 'fill' the moment, nothing propelling the work forward, nothing to see here.

Closed circuit works offer a Greenbergian distillation of video's formal properties, but video's attraction must also surely lie in its potential to bring a critique of broader moving image culture into the gallery. To this end, early video artists utilised the greater flexibility brought about by video's electronic malleability. They could easily slow down and arrest the flow of moving image time, bringing it down to the ponderous 'speed' of the gallery. The timing of the emergence of video installation as a medium is critical, offering a profound example of technological innovation and culture coinciding to provide a response to the historical moment, perhaps combining to create it. Whatever the causal relationship, at the precise moment when McLuhan posited the embedding of the meaning of a medium within its technological infrastructure, so appeared video installation to prove his case eloquently (McLuhan, 1994. P.7-22).

The demands of intersecting the static gallery with a time-based medium simultaneously provided not only a potent formal challenge but re-stated a philosophical position over and over...and over. For just when modernism's grand narrative was looking shaky so emerged the video installation loop, a formal rejection of the notion of development inherent in the cause-effect progressions that propel linear narrative. Video installation has embedded within it the structural kernel of existentialism, an endlessly repeating and thus timeless moment where existence precedes meaning because of an inherent incapacity to build patterns of developmental progression. The video loop thrusts us into the midst of a work at the moment we enter it; no status quo is assumed and no resolution can last. Video installations deny dramatic development, rejecting not only the form but the possibility of linear narrative.

In a perverse, if rather limited, rendering of this potential Douglas Gordon's 24 hour *Psycho* (1993) with a loop time of one day presents the audience with narrative time stretched beyond their capacity to perceive it. Whilst comparisons may be made to Warhol's 'Empire' it is the fact of installation's loop that sets the two works apart. Gordon's work is not a feat of endurance for there is no need to stay - it doesn't end and so there is nothing to stay for - indeed one may argue that there is nothing to arrive for. Gordon's work does not seem to be 'about' cinema in the same sense as works like Isaac Julien's *Baltimore* (2003) or Pierre Huyghe's *L'elipse* (1998) which seem not to critique or question so much as celebrate, or indulge in, the spectacle of cinema. To take Isaac Julien's *Baltimore* for example, does the device of the 3 screens really expand this 'cinema' beyond the multiple screens of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966) or Scorsese's edit of *Woodstock* (1970)? The danger inherent in utilising the language of cinema is that artists succumb to diversion as the key function of the moving image, allowing an audience to fall into a passive mode of spectatorship.

Much tougher, albeit humorous works that de-railed the flow of television were Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79), *Kiss The Girls: Make Them Cry* (1979) and *Pop-Pop Video* (1980) which collectively comprised 3 of the 4 channels of her installation for Documenta 9 in 1983. Their critique of the gender politics of 1970s broadcasting and the tropes of TV was made possible through her arrest of TV time. Birnbaum used appropriation and repetition to stretch and abstract the televisual moment, like repeating a word until it falls apart in the mouth. Then as now, quotation helps to bridge the gap between experiences of the moving image outside the gallery and those within it. But there remains a schism between these modes of spectatorship that often leaves audiences with an unsatisfying experience. Perhaps video art, in its current

emphasis on narrative and quotation, can be seen as sliding into a more populist attempt to co-opt or 'be' cinema, leaving behind the more difficult work of 'not being' TV.

Audiences come to the moving image with formal expectations around pace and narrative development. When viewing conventional narrative or documentary works, the revelation of information is managed in conventional and regular ways. Audiences' formal expectations are based on this experience outside the gallery, with number of hours and visual literacy hugely outweighing their experience within the gallery. Some art audiences are overly generous, searching and scanning video work for all manner of significance. However, the general audience is not fooled: they judge video art next to cinema and TV and find it wanting, and fair enough. How many of us have been in the gallery watching time-based art and had other audiences wander in and back out within 30 seconds of arriving, sometimes less. There are several factors that may account for this. Galleries are uncomfortable places for many people, historically the province of the elite and the privileged. Combine this with the strong strain of anti-intellectualism that runs through Australian culture and you are on the back foot to begin with. But the popularity of venues like ACMI indicates that audiences are indeed interested in video art. The schism between what an audience expects of a gallery and what they expect of the moving image leaves them hovering at the gallery door between two possibilities. This static moment can be prised open by artists to elicit a dialectical relationship to video installation.

In my own creative work I have employed a variety of strategies for re-invigorating and re-complicating the three-way relationship between audience, moving image and gallery. My work has led me to isolate and exploit the physicality of gallery experience as the point of differentiation from more familiar viewing environments and modes of spectatorship. The gallery is a space in which audience members are self-conscious, both of themselves and their bodies. This is the opposite of the cinema, the darkened space in which the audience becomes immersed, and as such disembodied, with their usual cues for spatial orientation all subjected to audio/visual re-direction. Television's mode of spectatorship is disembodied in a different way: it takes place within our homes, where one lets go of the social self to a far greater extent than is possible in the gallery. Video installation gives us an audience in a heightened state of self-consciousness in the presence of the moving image.

In the work *non/un* (2001) I created an installation that floated, a white field whose edges matched exactly those of the wall on which it was projected. Floating white within the white cube, it played with an audience's sense of depth and the location of the screen. For the subject matter I appropriated all the movies I could find that utilised the white void, whether it be in a depiction of heaven, the mind, a dreamscape or a whited out snow field. Using this *ganzfeld*, or undifferentiated space, I proceeded to combine the appropriated images together in a fashion that emphasised the lack of any point of registration or orientation. In its installation form, the work segued seamlessly between different configurations of figure and non-ground, all of the characters caught in endless disorientation. This was the first work in which I began to utilise figures as means of drawing out an empathetic relationship from the audience, attempting to create parallels between the disorientation of the audience and those of the figures within the work. Whilst this was partially successful, I felt the quotation of cinema also kept audiences at a 'safe' distance and offered an illustrative echo, or compounding, of screen space rather than a real re-direction of the audience's experience. One of cinema's most profound capacities is to edit space and elide time, but this also serves to place the viewer in a physically 'unreal' situation, detaching the viewer from an embodied, haptic sense of physical location. I became interested in making the audience corporeally implicated in the work, rather than safely disembodied.

It is a given that the body is elaborated and re-constituted through technology, as articulated by Causey (Causey 1999 p.384). But perhaps at a moment when digital malleability means the indexical relationship of image to reality is no longer possible, there is reason to re-inflate time and space, to re-inhabit the material body. In “*OW!*” (2004) I used three monitors to split not only the space of the gallery but also my body. The use of monitors, ‘boxes’, gave the work a physicality that began to locate it in the gallery more firmly than a projection could. Two of the monitors ‘contained’ a life-sized image of me cut in half and trapped within a giant air-conditioning vent. The architecture of the gallery was linked to the space within the screen such that the air-vent in the monitor appeared to come from the gallery’s bulkhead. This spatial linkage was emphasized by the third monitor, depicting an image of the bottom of the door that was immediately behind it in the gallery, again represented at life-sized scale. The time depicted is ‘real-time’ with an invisible looping that further ‘traps’ the figure. The work achieved a greater confluence of the body of the viewer and the body on the monitors, creating a televisual magician’s box with the artist not only confined but also cut in half.

*Tragic* (2004), is the next work in which I attempted to make apparent the schismatic gap between world and image by pushing them closer together. In *Tragic*, once again utilising one-to-one scale and ‘invisible’ edits to achieve the appearance of real space and time, I dispose of my own body and then clean up afterwards. As with “*OW!*” there is an additional monitor on which nothing happens, simply displaying the bracing arm of the shelf supporting the monitor’s weight. This monitor was placed between two windows to further subvert of the illusory function of video. These sets of echoes and destabilizations between video and physical space were extended for *Drama* (2006). For *Drama*, the audience was drawn more completely into the work through the use of a mirror and the soap opera convention of the ‘2 shot’ in which both characters face the same direction whilst speaking to each other. By projecting an image onto one wall at life size and then providing a mirror on the wall opposite with footprints as a guide for where to stand, the audience was drawn into an endlessly rehearsed melodramatic confrontation with the self or other, a nemesis, a twin or lover. The endangered ‘self constructed as other’ in the various doublings of “*OW!*” and *Tragic* was now projected on to the audience as they were dragged into the mirroring psychology of the protagonist. Further, the convention of the loop, like scale and time, were also made ‘real.’ That is, rather than looping a single take of the performance, 9 subtly different takes were chosen and linked together in a longer loop.

In echoing the audience’s own discomfort at how to ‘be’ in the gallery, my work seeks to activate a consideration of the language and function of screen, gallery and viewer. I hope to create a dialectical response in the audience, a re-direction of their own self-consciousness into an identification with my body locked in stasis.

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## Biographical Notes

Dominic is an artist and academic based in Melbourne where he is a senior lecturer in Media Arts at RMIT University. In addition to his art practice and teaching he is actively involved in his

community, working with West Space from 2000 to 2004 and undertaking committee work for Gertrude Contemporary Art Space and Arts Victoria. In recent years his work has been seen at Sydney's MCA; Melbourne's ACMI; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Museum of New Art, Detroit; Art in General in New York; the Interface Festival, Sparwasser HQ and Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin; Kunsternes Hus, Oslo; in the UK at Norwich Gallery and S1 Salon, Sheffield; at Platform, Istanbul, Turkey; and Signal in Sweden. His work was part of the 'Move on Asia' program which screened in various locations in Korea and Japan as well as the 'Sun Stroked' program that played in Rotterdam and Berlin.