

The Fulcrum: TV as a Creative Medium

Ben Portis

In retrospect, one might naturally underestimate or misconstrue the catalytic moment of *TV as a Creative Medium*, a twelve-artist exhibition that opened in May 1969 at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. *TV as a Creative Medium* signaled radical changes at both the aesthetic and popular levels. It inspired a generation of artists (and non-artists) to take up the medium that soon came to be known as "video," revealed the need for new organizations and agencies to foster new modes of creativity, and provoked widespread comment extending well beyond the usual channels of art discourse. Although *TV as a Creative Medium* is renowned as the seminal video art exhibition in the United States, its subject was truly television, and, by "TV," that meant television at its most pervasive. As with other revolutionary exhibitions (such as *0-10, The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures*, Petrograd, 1915-16, which launched Russian Constructivism), *TV as a Creative Medium* was both the grand finale of an idea - the Kinetic Art movement of the 1960s - and an unresolved indication of the future - the impact of video and television in the hands of artists. It was transitional as well as formative. Near the heart of this transformation stood Nam June Paik, hailed not merely as the father figure of the video revolution but its "George Washington."¹ Paik had participated in two earlier benchmark exhibitions at Howard Wise Gallery, *Lights in Orbit* (February 1967) and its pendant, *Festival of Lights* (December 1967). As the names suggest, these exhibitions grouped various manifestations of light-and-kinetic sculpture. Paik's light emitted from phosphorescing television tubes. In a work such as *Electronic Blues*(at *Lights in Orbit*), a color television signal reconfigured itself, according to audio input, within an immobile TV cabinet. Television's paradoxical dynamism and stasis, the viewer's consequent engagement *and* passivity, were powerful master ideas in need of attention, away from flashing lights.

In *TV as a Creative Medium*, Paik exhibited two works that tumbled the contradictions inherent in the television experience towards unlikely states of clarity and release. The images on his *Participation TV* sets were unmistakably of the gallery visitors themselves, but unfixed from the governance of the scanning matrix. As Paik stated in the exhibition brochure, they appeared "as multi-color echoes, or fog, or clouds which are electronically produced. Sometimes you can see yourself floating in air, dissolving in deep water."²*Participation TV* was the second and final state of Paik's ongoing investigation into interactive closed-circuit television during the 1960s.³ A camera, trained on the spot where the viewer would stand, splayed and echoed a portrait into the constituent colors of the video palette (red, green and cyan), spectral repetitions of which appeared on adjacent screens in a closed system of televised feedback. A taped musical feed, which frequently changed, caused the radically disembodied visages to hover, a jarring riposte to TV's conventional framing of the "talking head."

Similar principals applied to his other work, in collaboration with Charlotte Moorman, the debut of their famous *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, where the by-now notorious bare torso of Moorman was clad in a see-through halter which encased a pair of miniature television tubes placed over her breasts. By bowing her cello, Moorman, oblivious to the particular program on her chest, sympathetically distorted the audio-sensitive picture. *The Village Voice* described its effect on a baseball broadcast: "with every vibration of the strings, the Yankees would quiver, jump, elongate, or undulate on their cushiony perch."⁴ This was the first "work for exhibition" in a string of collaborations between Paik and Moorman, which began in 1965 with *Cello Sonata No. 1 for Adults Only*. Their collaboration attained notoriety with a scandalous debacle, when the New York Police Department shut down *Opera Sextronique* in 1967, resulting in the arrest of both composer and performer. (Perhaps as a result of Moorman's subsequent court conviction, Paik made her a full-fledged co-creator and moved to the more permissive arena of the art gallery to shield their work from the vagaries of morality squads.) The vulnerable presence of a human on display amidst a phalanx of humming, glowing machines was an unexpected and provocative move, typical of Paik.

Other artists also carried over from *Lights in Orbit* (Thomas Tadlock, Earl Reiback) and Festival of Lights (Serge Boutourline, Aldo Tambellini) to *TV as a Creative Medium*. Tadlock's *The Archetron* was one of the stars of the show. It splintered a television broadcast (shown in its unaltered state on a smaller adjacent set) through a system of filters and mirrors, a kaleidoscopic organ on which the artist composed *in situ* during the exhibition. This could be taken wherever the airwaves reached - that is, anywhere - and become an instrument by which one attained creative domain over the incessant infiltration of broadcasting. Reiback's *Three Experiments Within the TV Tube* also inserted deviations from the standard function of television. In each "experiment," he tampered with the phosphor coating on the inner surface of the screen, which the electron beam energizes and causes to glow - removing it, doubling it up, or insinuating an intermediary layer. These imposed grids distorted an otherwise recognizable broadcast, crashing illusion against the undeniable objecthood of TV. In John Seery's *TV Time Capsule*, a television was "buried alive" in a clear plastic coffin until it suffocated under the confined heat of its operation, an obsolescent collapse of historic time. Works of this sort overtly disfigured and critiqued the dreary horizon of commercial television and all its accoutrements.

Visionary contributions came from individuals who barely identified their activities as artistic, as reminisced in the following 1981 conversation between interviewer Willoughby Sharp and Paul Ryan:

WS: Was that the first time you showed in an art gallery?

PR: Yes

WS: How did that happen?

PR: I was reluctant to do it. I didn't think of myself as an artist but ...

WS: How did you get involved? PR: Howard Wise called me at the suggestion of Nam June Paik, whom I had just met through his Bonino Gallery show, and he was interested in me, partly because I was working with [Marshall] McLuhan and partly because I had equipment in my home and was doing work. So Howard asked me to exhibit a piece. That put me in a quandary because I thought that showing in an art gallery was something not ...

WS: You hadn't done it before. And your work wasn't produced with that kind of installation in mind?

PR: No.

WS: So you had to decide what to do in that kind of a situation.

PR: Right. So what I constructed was this private booth, *Everyman's Mobius Strip*.

Ryan, who had early training as a Passionist monk, styled *Everyman's Mobius Strip* as a rite of the electronic age, in which any visitor could self-administer a secularized "confession" and "absolution" in utter privacy. A videotape feedback system captured and then erased (after immediate playback) a coached interview in which the participant was encouraged to project his or her true self through an empty TV frame. *Everyman's Mobius Strip* foreshadowed the democratic ethos and production methods practiced by new documentary collectives such as Raindance Corporation, of which Ryan would shortly become a joint founder. Two other future charter members of Raindance, Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, collaborated on another key work in *TV as a Creative Medium*, a watershed in the development of video art called *Wipe Cycle*. A stack of nine television monitors faced visitors as they emerged from the elevator into the gallery. On one set they might see themselves; on others the exact scene in delays of four, eight or six seconds, hence encountering their confrontation of the work (and the exhibition) all over again. On still other sets, they might see live broadcasts, however being interrupted and bounced

around. The installation utilized the basic studio techniques of the TV industry to create a seamless flow of programming. Gillette and Schneider turned these tricks of the trade inside out, unseating the "natural" presence of television with temporal elasticity, instability and, indeed, unreliability. (As an interesting aside, the fourth founding member of Raindance, journalist Michael Shamberg, reviewed *TV as a Creative Medium* for *Time* in its issue of May 30, 1969.)

Gillette, through his friend Ryan, had been closely connected with Marshall McLuhan (at Fordham University in the Bronx). The McLuhan effect hovered over the exhibition, despite artistic ambivalence to his global theories of television. In the opening sentence of his brochure statement, gallery director Howard Wise invoked the undeniable achievement of McLuhan's leading popular recognition to the immense power of mass media. This jargon would shadow the development of video art throughout its earliest years, especially as it became clear that funding support would come almost entirely from philanthropic foundations and public arts agencies. In those circles, McLuhan's rhetoric of electronic media as the ultimate social instrument was especially persuasive.

Eighteen months after the closing of *TV as a Creative Medium*, Howard Wise, convinced that these were the artists to whom he would devote the rest of his career, closed his 57th Street gallery and shifted his managerial acumen to a new type of arts organization. It would not rely on sales (which were virtually nonexistent) but instead was designed to interface with the social protocols driving the new funding of video. The foundations and agencies favored organizations, hence the flourish of experimentation at the public television stations WGBH, WNET, and KQED and, to an extent, the formation of collectives such as Raindance, Videofreex, TVTV, and Global Village.⁶ Certainly organizational structures suited the demands of television production; the collectives addressed the hegemony of the network culture with a radical, communal and strategically marginal counterpart. Wise, however, remained dedicated to the needs and politics of the individual. He noted that creative personalities were almost entirely shut out of the television industry.

Eric Siegel epitomized the individuality that emerged at *TV as a Creative Medium*. A prodigy, Siegel built a television set at age 15. He responded to the intrinsic experience of watching and growing up with TV, rather than bringing external aesthetic awareness or influence to bear on his activity. Of the artists in the show, Siegel most closely embraced what later proved to be the decisive creative release from the mechanics of television, the factor that determined the rise of *video*. This was the videotape. *Psychedelivision in Color* used prepared black-and-white tapes which Siegel processed and choreographed in his studio (engineered with a rudimentary new video synthesizer of his own invention) and which were then tinted at the gallery through a custom circuit in the color TV set. The look of Siegel's early tapes was completely estranged from broadcast TV, letting the mechanics of television technology itself generate pure forms of the medium.

TV as a Creative Medium profoundly effected many figures who had been moving in and around the confluence of mass media and art. It irresistibly inspired both Michael Shamberg and Douglas Davis, an arts journalist from Washington, to pursue creative television. Each actively guided the new video discourses throughout the next decade. Russell Connor, an educator and museum administrator from Boston who was involved with WGBH and its seminal 1969 video art production, *The Medium is the Medium*, transported major elements of Wise's show up to the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in 1970. *Vision and Television* became the first comprehensive museum show of video art. (Immediately after, Connor was hired to coordinate the New York State Council of the Arts' new TV/Media initiative, bringing the effect of *TV as a Creative Medium* full circle to the very economic conditions for which Electronic Arts Intermix was primed.)

In a promotional video for the EAI screening room (its library of artists' videotapes), Howard Wise stated that *TV as a Creative Medium* "shook up quite a few people, including myself."⁷ Television and video could be remarkably effective revolutionary tools from *within* Western society. Wise

viewed creative immersion in and inversion of electronic media as a powerful act of political integrity. Clearly the television artists would never be served by the traditional gallery system, and Wise, a man of independent means, did not require the mantle of the *dealer* for either livelihood or identity. "What do these artists need most now?" would be the probing question that drove and perpetually redefined Electronic Arts Intermix over the years. Within this far-reaching exhibition lay many issues which would test and try the contentious formulation of video art - private/public; individual/collective; process/critique; expression/communication; object/ephemera; performance/installation; closed circuit/tape; music/noise; aesthetic sophistication/social norm. Far more than a maverick event, *TV as a Creative Medium* could be characterized as a fulcrum upon which the ready spirit of one age pried and levered a new era.

1. Calvin Tomkins, "Video Visionary," in *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1976): 196.
2. Nam June Paik, from *TV as a Creative Medium* [exhibition brochure] (New York: Howard Wise Gallery, 1969).
3. Edith Decker-Phillips labeled the two states Participation TV I and Participation TV II in her study *Paik Video* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Barrytown, Ltd., 1998): 66-68. Participation TV I, which itself evolved variations as it was reexhibited, was first seen in 1963 at Paik's landmark debut at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. In it, a microphone into which the viewer spoke, sang or otherwise gave sound, hooked up to a television set would cause a condensed, immobile electron beam to erupt in florid, transient forms, according to the changing audio input.
4. Stephanie Harrington, "Awaiting a Genius," *The Village Voice* (May 29, 1969): ?.
5. Willoughby Sharp, "Paul Ryan: Video Pioneer," *Video 81* (? , 1981): 14.
6. Although the video collectives were not deliberately tailored to funding sources, they were the first artistic entities in the media realm to receive direct financial support.
7. *Electronic Arts Intermix, The Intermix Screening Room, Vol II* [videotape] (New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, 1976)
8. The intramural tensions within the Howard Wise Gallery in May 1969 foreshadowed competing alignments yet to come, when a number of established visual artists, such as Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, Keith Sonnier, Nancy Holt, John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci began to emerge around the Castelli-Sonnabend axis.

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