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Herman Rapaport, 160-179

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Rhode Island School of Design
2 College Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903



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David Garcia: An Interview

Herman Rapaport

In this interview, David Garcia offers his definition of video art, separating it from other related media such as television. Video art is more about light and time than it is about narrative. He discusses the role of appropriation and the collage element in video in terms of unpacking history. **A loose definition of what constitutes a successful video piece is another thread of dialogue running throughout the interview.**

Herman Rapaport *David, you are
vey closely connected with an
organization called Time Based Arts
in the Netherlands. When did you
become involved with it and what
was its evolution?*

David Garcia Time Based Arts was something which began when Annie Wright and I had gotten together the early 1980s. We were at art school in the south of Holland at Maastricht at the Jan Van Eyck Academy and at that time the most influential non-museum art organization in Holland was a kind of gallery called The Apple. It was one of the most important places for performance art. Many performance artists, both European and American showed there, for example, Laurie Anderson, but even people like David Salle who, in fact, did some important early drawings there.

But at a certain point The Apple began to change direction. It began to lose interest in video even though it had an archive of video work which included significant performances by Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Marina Abramovic, Ulay and others. The Apple wanted a place to house the video work; it wanted a sort of gallery able to sustain the video enterprise even though it was moving in a different direction, and so they conceived of a video space that was run or at least set up by artists. The two people responsible for this were Wies Smals and Gerharel von Graevenitz, two remarkable people who were among the best curators in Holland. Because they were both killed in a plane crash, the whole video art scene in Holland changed radically after they died. However, one of the last projects they did was to set up Time Based Arts. They invited video artists to form a

founding membership group, and Annie Wright and I were asked to join. Ulysses Carrion, Raul Marroquin, Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas are others who come to mind. We wanted Time Based Arts to be a business enterprise, distributing and forwarding video art, as well as a software laboratory, a place where one could try new ideas out with the medium. Because we did not want to restrict the organization to video, we called it Time Based Arts, an organization covering all the time based media: performance, sound work, film, video, though within the tradition of the visual arts. It has become an important place in the development of video in Holland.

Does Time Based Arts have contact with other museums in Holland on a regular basis?

Yes and particularly with the Staedlik Museum. In fact, Dorine Mignot is the Dutch museum curator with perhaps the most interest in video; she is on our board. In Holland, the Staedlik is really the one museum which is seriously committed to video art.

Perhaps one of the most frequently asked questions here in the United States about video concerns its definition, and I'd like to spend some time considering that. What, in your view, characterizes video art? Does it differ from other media like television, radio, etc.?

Definitions are problematic. As soon as you define one set of terms, you have to define others. At a certain point I think visual artists discovered that video was a tool that could be used in as many different ways as there are visual artists. I don't think there is anything so characteristic about video art that it could not be contradicted in practice. What distinguishes it from television or other media is tradition. You've got a tradition of

the visual arts that permitted video to exist under its umbrella.

Video art is defined by its context within the visual arts and the concerns which make up the artistic tradition.

What differentiates it from television is that television is one tradition and the visual arts are part of another.

Therefore video art takes place in terms of conventions and practices inherently alien to, say, broadcast television?

The only word I can use to describe this is discourse: video is a discourse. Our world is made up of numerous discourses which do not have anything but semi-autonomy, though each has its separate rules and regulations. Therefore you have television discourse and you have a visual arts discourse. At a certain point it was possible for video to live within the visual arts discourse and has become defined in relation to that. That's the only way of describing it that makes any sense to me.

But video art can bring its discourse into relation with television discourse. They're not separate worlds

Sure, various people bring them into conjunction; others reject that, as in the case of Bill Viola or Nan Hoover. Or Elsa Stansfield. They reject television with a vengeance and want nothing to do with it. While Nam June Paik or General Idea see their work in relation to television simply because it's the same box or technology. But we could think of it as the same type of difference you have between journalism and poetry. All writers use the pencil and paper, but their frames of reference are so different. The discourses are so separate.

*But how are the discourses
different? For example, doesn't
something like Music Television
(rock videos) blur some of the
distinctions between broadcast
television and the arts?*

I don't think you really have such a blurring. One of the incidental features of art is that one will have a spin off of something into the general culture. It's like the American space program: engineers are always discovering things which can be applied elsewhere. Teflon would be a case in point. Similarly, people weren't using primary colors generally in the commercial world until Matisse and the fauves encouraged such thinking. Art is an R & D branch of culture in a curious sort of way. And so I don't place much significance on the fact that MTV appropriates elements from the fine arts. Yet, it's there. Yet it reflects a function which artists have and that's it. MTV is artistic; it's not art.

The history of art has generated its own issues and problems. And this goes back to questions of what art is, the narrative about what it means to be a visual artist in Western liberal democracy. One inherits a whole narrative about what this means and different generations of artists emphasize various aspects of this narrative differently. People are often put off by video art because when they see it on the monitor they bring to it a different set of expectations unrelated to the visual arts. They see video art merely as broadcast television. But I recognize something as being artist's video simply because it addresses the issue of art rather than any other set of issues.

You might say that video art is described largely in terms of its intentions. Artist's video has intentions related to a field which is entirely different from that of rock video. The constrictions are different and are inescapable. You can't make a set of images in rock video which deviate seriously from the music. The image is there to perform a function; it's really an advertisement for the record. So it's applied art in that sense. Of course, I'm not dismissing it, but it is a very separate thing because it's there to do a certain job whose intentions are different from those of the video artist. One might think about designing telephones. When one designs a telephone, one is not doing that to design great sculpture.

In the 1960s there was a lot of concern about not making works that had signatures, which is to say, works whose styles were inimitable and identified with particular figures.

The signature was very much an ideological problem which extended beyond the visual arts. It was inherited from the 1960s in which people wanted to play down individualism. The issue does not play a major part in art of the moment. Powerful individual voices are something which are around now. But as I say that I can think of artists questioning authorship, though if you take the signature to represent authorship and identity you will see people are questioning it differently. Plagiarizing or simulating works would be an example of such questioning.

What attracts people to painting is the physical presence of the artist. What people want is aura. Video, since it is mechanically reproducible, gets one away from the fetish value of the work,

the physical presence of the artist. So video cannot help but engage the question of what you call the signature.

The video artist is also working at a

*remove in that (s)he manipulates
found materials, often, like a collage*

The history of art seems to split when we talk about the practice of collage. One group has a relationship to materials which is intimate, and another group is interested in the manipulation of information rather than materials. Those latter artists by definition place less emphasis on things like handwriting and valuing work from that point of view. Its value is not the physical presence of the artist.

But the history of art focuses

*traditionally on the transformation of
information into material, a
transformation stressing the expression
of the artist. Isn't that so? I'm
wondering about expression in the*

Yes. The artist is interpreting the world and the story of art through whatever medium (s)he chooses, and if the artist has an authoritative personality, then (s)he can persuade others and the interpretation has some validity. And then you've got a successful work of art.

*sense that a video work may well
express the consciousness of the artist.*

Given that video is a time based art,

*video allows for an unfolding of
temporality in terms of the progress of
thinking. So there is, in fact, a subject
who enters into an intimate relation to
video. One can intuit or imagine a
person who mediates what we see, some
consciousness with whom we can*

identify.

To get back to collage, though, how is

video art related to it as a practice?

Electronic ways of manipulating the image bring it close
to the malleability of those who work with found images.

The availability of ordinary home video equipment means,
for example, that television images are as available as magazine
images. One can just cut them out. Just because images have
become accessible in this way it means that people are probably
going to try collaging them.

If we think of the information/

material distinction, don't we find

that because video images can be put

into new relationships that layers of

meaning can be brought out of the

material once it has become

rearranged, that video can give back to

the image an immediacy and intimacy

which broadcast television suppressed?

Also, there's ideological repositioning,

for example, Dara Birnbaum's

Wonder Woman video tape Of

course, I can't speak for her. But what

I get from it is parody by repetition. It's

about dissociation by repetition. Klaus

von Bruch does this too. These people

make mind numbing sense of a visual

experience. They change its nature by

repetition.

How do you conceptualize your own

Annie Wright and I have a very different set of ideas about work?

what our work is about. And this difference makes the works

function. It's like positive and negative electricity. So a kind of

energy results. Anything I say might be contradicted by Annie

which is important to remember in this interview. But my initial

interest in video was related to my obsession with light. As a

painter I was interested in artists who made canvas give off

light as opposed to simply reflecting light. It's like considering

landscape at twilight as opposed to midday. At twilight and

dawn the objects give off light. Light does not simply land on

them. Turner and Casper David Friedrich were interested in

using color to embody and not merely represent light. Also,

stained glass interests me. There, powerful Biblical narratives

are told through the medium of a light emitting source,

something like video. The thrill of video for me is that it is a

light emitting source, and I found from the beginning that I

could do in video what had always frustrated me in painting.

I'm not saying one can't do it in painting, but the initial thrill of

video was its light emitting capacity and the fact that you can

use the camera like a paintbrush. You see the effects immedi-

ately. You can use the camera in a gestural way. You can

manipulate the screen light paper and communicate light in a

way that is hard to do in painting.

*I have been struck by how both film
and video have begun using light in a
very apocalyptic way. Everything is
bathed in a very white and harsh light
which is often coming directly at the
viewer.*

It's a kind of popular mysticism. I think it's like the vision of the mystics, the landscapes are always jewelled, aren't they? Aldous Huxley wrote of this in *Doors of Perception* in which he speaks of light as essential to mystical vision. The landscapes of the mystics have to give off light, like stained glass windows or as in the illuminated manuscripts.

We're supposed to flow into the light .
And the darkness as well.

*Well, generally, how do you see light
functioning in art? Mark Rothko, for
example?*

In Rothko light smolders. I think that in all art facts become art through love, crazy as that sounds, and for me the equivalent way it saturates is light. I think in that sense love and libido . . .

*Light is an ecstatic experience, it is
the ek-static . . .*

I think Freud's correct: it's love, you know, erotic love and maybe just erotic love.

*I'm wondering about light in relation
to time. What is that relation in art?*

That's an interesting question. I have no answer for it.

Bill Viola produced a visual answer, a sense of light and time.

*Maybe we'll come back to this. But
 already we've come a long way towards
 understanding that video art isn't, as
 some people like to think, just anything.*

Is it?
 Well . . . (laughs) what happens is that art has a way of mirroring and also leading culture. **Today we have pluralism: numerous conversations which are mutually incompatible.** And the triumph of the liberal democracies is that these mutually incompatible conversations co-exist in the same culture. So that's strange in that it hasn't happened very often in history. But it has happened in our history and I think that is a very fruitful thing. Now since we've got a self-critical culture which allows for these incompatible discourses, it is logical to think art would reflect that. **So if we want to define video art, we have to realize that it is going to be made up of these many mutually incompatible strands,** and that this will rule out the sort of definition you were asking about before. What it comes down to is this: I can describe what I care about, but I wouldn't pretend that this would describe the area as a whole. Such a description is not feasible. This is frustrating if one wants to write a book in which one searches for definitions.

Okay. But quite frankly I think based

on the sort of things we've been saying
*that you would use with any art work. That is, **how does the***
about video art that it's less pluralistic
than we might think. It has all those
work clearly communicate its own intentions? That's
number one.
strands going on, but it has an

expressive dimension, and I have the
feeling that if I were to push you on
the subject you would be able to make
a distinction between a good and a
bad video art piece. And what
interests me is how an artist like
yourself necessarily is going to make
this kind of discrimination.

So the work has intentions?

Of course. When you see the work, if you're familiar with art
and its language, you're immediately clear about what the
artist is trying to do. **Second, there is the question of**
whether the artist has succeeded in bringing that
intention to fruition.

So the video work has an aim or

Well, maybe not one, but a cluster . . .
purpose. There's a conception, an

execution of a conception . . .

Okay, fine.

. . . and this cluster of ideas or issues or obsessions are evident.

So that when you look at that piece of work the cluster of issues
is clear, and you say, well, this artist is clear about the meaning
that (s)he is dealing with.

Good. This is the kind of thing I

This work, yes. All works, no. The question is one of finding
wanted to get to: that there are
ways in which to stretch the bubble of meaning within which
meanings, a conception, an execution
I'm operating. If I remain in that bubble of meaning do I just
and that the work isn't just anything
pussyfoot around it or do I get inside it and try to stretch its
at all.
parameters and add to the pool of meanings of what culture is.

Like we said with Dara Birnbaum: she contributes to the pool
of meanings and keeps it from becoming stagnant. Sometimes
the artist has aims you could never even have thought possible,
and when the work gains momentum the artist is actually
pulled forward.

Actually this is not an unusual view
Richard Howard is translating *Proust in New York City* and is
of art, and I appreciate the fact that
contemplating another title besides *Remembrance of Things Past*.
you don't shy away from it, because I
In Search of Lost Time seems to be the title he wants to supply in
don't see how art could be otherwise.
English. The feeling that time is lost and that one wants to
Having said that, let's get back to the
salvage that and come into relation with time in a different
question of light and time, since I
dimension is something I find most interesting, and I don't think
would say that is very crucial for an
the analogy is pretentious when one raises the work of Bill
understanding of video.
Viola. In his most recent work there is a powerful manipulation

of time since he is able to slow down and speed up our

sensation of time.

You're referring to "I Do Not Know
It's not narrative in any traditional sense, no.
What It Is I Am Like." There image

and light, not narrative, govern

consciousness.

Right. And video really has the
And character identification.
possibility of structuring our

consciousness of perception in terms of

working with duration, light and

image without becoming bogged

down in story.

And you have no sense of beginning,

Yes, it succeeds in dissolving that. Also, there's a point in the middle and end determining the middle of the tape where after having been taken tortuously and slowly from the beginning, the tape builds up momentum and accelerates to the highest point which is a strobe light going from black to white at strobe speed. Now there really is an example of an intimate relationship between light and time, almost an astronomical concept in a way.

What works would you consider

One of the most powerful pieces was made by Klaus von Bruch. *among the stronger video art pieces*

that you have seen in your career? It's called *Das Propellorband, 1979* He takes a piece of film which shows the propellers of the Enola Gay being wound. You don't know it's the Enola Gay when you watch the tape — that's incidental information. Anyway, he just shows the people who are winding the propellers and just repeats that at different speeds and cuts in at different times. Occasionally you see his face, but again time is stretched. Considering what a limited set of images is being used, the tape turns out to be actually quite long. But you're drawn into a kind of mesmeric relationship to the images, where the colors even seem to change because the cuts are so fast that they seem to mix together and the motion of the blades and the movements of the men and the speed of the editing bring you into a trance-like state with a fragment of history or recorded history. It's just an incredibly powerful piece, like a work by Steve Reich, but with the added dimension of an image.

Of course. And one of the things that
 It makes you more critical and produces a door for you to go
video does is to reconstitute events. It
 through. To some extent the tapes which use a lot of repetition
reconstructs in such a radical way
 are like stuck records. I don't know if you're familiar with the
that one has a hard time separating
 Scratch Video group in England, people like George Barber.
this from the process of decomposition
 They set out to parallel what Harlem DJs were doing with
or decontextualization. We usually
 scratch records and would take material from television and use
take visual images like the winding
 repetition for political ends. The notion of an event would be
up of propellers on the Enola Gay as
 exploded. In fact, the fantasy nature of the event is prohibited
real and overlook them, almost, on
 by repetition, too. That's important in relation to Birnbaum's
account of that. It's just mundane. Yet
 Wonder Woman. In Viola's or Hoover's work the landscape based
these events are embedded in the
 pieces are prepared to move at times at a pace that feels almost
narratives such as those we would
 geological, that feels almost more like Proust: the feeling of
encounter on a newsreel about the
 entering into the experience by stepping out of time.
plane that dropped the first atom

bomb on Japan. So von Bruch is

unpacking something embedded in

that history. And in this way he

stretches that event's time. Maybe in

doing so he even stalls the event,

resists its destiny.

As if time and the event were being
 Particularly his most recent work. After I saw Hans Breder's
stretched. By the way, this happens in
 tape, I mentioned Klaus von Bruch to him, since the revolving
Hans Breder's video work too.
 heads in his tape reminded me of a revolving disk in Bruch, that

is to say, a satellite dish which receives information. Bruch uses a mixing of images, for example, the contracting and swelling of his chest in relation to the turning of the dish. The experience unfolds once again as repetition, as a feeling of cycle, and I felt that in Breder's piece too, since each repetition allows the moment to unfold further. This doesn't happen in the Birnbaum tape, since she is intentionally doing something else. She uses the stuck record approach in order to make a political statement whereas Bruch or Breder are more reflective, closer to minimal music in Reich.

Lastly, let's talk about collaboration.

Well, I've done a lot of it. All throughout the history of art *You've done work with Annie Wright* collaborations have existed. Rubens had a factory, for example. *and with others, and the issue of* But especially in mechanically reproducible media collaboration, *collaboration has been important all* it becomes a bit more of a possibility when the prime value of *during the 1980s and, one can only* the work no longer hinges on the distinctive mark which is the *suppose, will continue to be so.* physical fingerprint of an individual. When there are other values coming into prominence, then the door to collaboration is very much opened.

How do you and Annie Wright work

It's like working with any group, and remember I've worked *together when you're making a video?* with others too. It's one person who will have a kind of intention or general idea which makes sense to everyone. The idea might be a fundamental way of describing a narrative. For

example, you might imagine the most primitive form of a narrative, such as a walk or journey. Then you simply follow the consequences of that framework behind the camera. So that would be a way of describing the way we work together: we set up a framework for an idea and follow the consequences of that framework. Within this situation all kinds of discussions and arguments about how it should be done take place. But I think there is a sort of basic rule that allows us to collaborate without which collaboration would not be possible. For although we might disagree vehemently when we're discussing the idea, as soon as it is on the screen we always know whether it works or not and we always agree about that aspect of our work. It's not a forced agreement. That's an important part of collaboration: there has to be enough meeting of the minds so that at a certain point everything will naturally come together. Not through compromise, not through having to agree, but enough of a mental relationship to be able to know when something works or not when it's viewed on screen.

*One last question which takes us to
 some earlier points: what do you
 mean when you say that something
 doesn't work on screen? What isn't
 working when a video doesn't pass the
 test of viewing?*

There are those two requirements we talked about earlier. Is there a clear set of intentions? And are those intentions successfully realized? For me that implies that there is not only a question of whether the piece makes sense on screen, but whether it hits you below the belt. So that your body is affected. You have to be affected –