

3. Conclusion

The way the flagging system works now resembles a governmental democracy in which YouTube forms the government and flagging videos are our everyday miniature referenda. It's nowhere near the way it could work, an open democracy where the users decide for themselves what they want to see and what not. YouTube is still in denial of the workings and accuracy of the flagging system and tells it as if it's a success story:

(...) hundreds of thousands of videos are uploaded to YouTube every day. Because it is not possible to pre-screen this much content, we have developed an innovative and reliable community policing system that involves our users in helping us enforce YouTube's standards. Millions of users report potential violations of our Community Guidelines by selecting the 'Flag' link while watching videos.⁴¹

But if you've read this piece thoroughly, it is evident that they're not able to pre-screen 'thousands' of videos. But they are able to review/moderate those 'millions' of reported potential violations. In other words, they are actually openly admitting here that their flagging system is flawed.

Or did I miss something here? Either that or they did automate the reviewing process in some way, instead of having it all done by 'real-life humans'. Or could it be that flagged videos aren't reviewed at all by humans and the videos are suspended when they simply got flagged often enough – making the moderating part of the flagging system a numerical phase instead of a human one? And the mistakes it makes are excused as human mistakes. Which they are in a way, because it has all been flagged by human beings. If this were true, it really is 'an innovative and reliable community policing system that involves our users in helping us enforce YouTube's standards'.

41. YouTube Blog. 'Dialogue with Sen. Lieberman on terrorism videos' (See footnote 39).

VERNACULAR VIDEO

TOM SHERMAN

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 centralised, one-to-many broadcast medium. Television's centrality was splintered as cable and satellite distribution systems and vertical, specialised programming sources fragmented television's audience. As video technology spun off from television, the mission was clearly one of complete decentralisation. Forty years later, video technology is everywhere. Video is now a medium unto itself, a completely decentralised 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 decentralised communications tool for the masses has been realised, 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 diminish 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 slip-

page. 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 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'être*. 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, fetishising 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 characterise 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-utilised 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 choose to do so, digital video or a pencil?

Artists must embrace, but move beyond, the vernacular forms of video. Artists must identify, categorise 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 recognise 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. Deprofessionalised 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.

Venturing into the Broader Culture of Messaging

The culture of messaging is transforming art into a much more extensive social and political activity. The role of the individual artist is changing radically as complex finished works of art are no longer widely embraced enthusiastically by audiences. Attention spans have shrunk and audiences want to interact with the culture they embrace. Audiences are consumed by the compulsion to trade messages. Today, messaging is all that matters. Instant messaging, voice messaging, texting, e-mail, file sharing, social networking, video streaming and all manner of interactive synchronous and asynchronous communication are the order of the day.

The speed and pervasiveness of electronic, digital culture is erasing the function of art as we knew it. The world of top-down, expert-authored one-to-many forms of communication have given way to the buzz of the hive. The broadcast and auteur models, where control of content remains firmly in the hands of a few, have disintegrated. Speaking horizontally, one-to-one or many-to-many, now dominates our time. Our cultures are no longer bound together by the reception and appreciation of singular objects of thought, but by the vibrations and oscillations of millions of networked transceivers. Transceivers, those devices for receiving and authoring messages, the video enabled cell phones and laptop computers and PDAs with webcams, are erasing the differences between artists and audiences as both move towards a culture of messaging.

In the early 1960s the communications revolution, satellite-based telecommunications, made it impossible to maintain an art separate and distinct from the culture at large. Boundaries between art and the broader culture simply broke down due to increased communication. Abstract expressionism, the zenith of Clement Greenberg's high modernism (art for art's sake) was crushed by a deluge of advertising imagery. Pop art marked the beginning of the postmodern era. Postmodernism resulted from a technologically determined collapse of the

boundaries segregating and protecting the art world from a broader culture dominated by advertising. Chaos has characterised Western art ever since, as for five decades we have experienced the relative freedom of an 'anything goes' philosophy of expanding pluralism. Feminism and many previously unheralded Others (and content in general – the counterpoint to abstraction and formalism) took their turns in the spotlight of a postmodern era churned by the broad, alternating strokes of minimalism and the ornate. The formal properties of postmodern art and culture swing back and forth between the classic simplicity of natural forms (minimalism) and the playfully complicated synthetic hodgepodge of bricolage (neo-rococo).

If pop art essentially signified the big bang that commenced postmodernity, an era characterised by cultural diversity and hybridity, then we can imagine fragments of art mixed with culture flying away from the centre of a cataclysmic implosion. The postmodern implosion of the early 1960s resulted in an expanding universe where art and culture mixed haphazardly. Art remained as a concept at the centre of the postmodern implosion, recognisable only through art historical references. Art was pure and identifiable only if it quoted or repeated its past, an art history crowned by its highest order: abstraction - the zenith of modernism.

The Second Implosion: Postmodernity Itself Collapses

We have now undergone a second, even more violent and gargantuan implosion. The second postmodern implosion took place early in the millennial decade: 2002-2005. The cultural debris of the expanding postmodern cultural mix, the delightfully insane levels of diversity, hybridity and horizontality characterising late twentieth century culture and its fragmented, disintegrated pockets of contemporary art, had reached a density and weight so disproportionate to the vacuum at the centre of 'art' that a second complete collapse was unavoidable. In other words, after five decades of relative chaos, postmodernity itself has collapsed and imploded with such intensity that we now occupy a vast cloud of cultural disorientation.

If this exercise in cultural cosmology seems unreal and strangely rooted in a philosophical premise that art has an important function in creating, remaking and even maintaining order in our increasingly turbulent cultures, be warned that this text was written by an artist, a believer in the value of art. Artists believe strongly that it is their role to push cultures to change as a result of the imposition of their art. Art is extreme, twisted, marginal culture; a minority report. Artists believe they are agents of change and act accordingly. Artists ask embarrassing questions. Artists are ahead of their time. By simply embracing the present, thereby glimpsing the future, artists lead audiences reluctant to let go of the past. The principle tenets of the belief system of art are that art refreshes culture and somewhat paradoxically that the history of art can anchor culture during stormy times of disorder. We live in such stormy times.

Art is a belief system in crisis. At the centre of this belief system we find art chained to art history, to times before the dominance of computers and the emergence of networks and vastly distributed authorship. We find contemporary art that finds security in looking like art from the early to mid-twentieth century (modern art). While these historical references have been stretched to the breaking point by time and technocultural change, the broadest public persists in embracing an idea of art that remains antithetical to television, radio, cinema, design,

advertising, and the Web. The Web of course encompasses all of the media before it and stirs the pot to the boiling point with a large dose of interactivity. Art at the centre necessarily acquiesces to the parameters of art as have been defined by the history of art, refusing to be corrupted by interactivity, but for more and more thinking people art historical references are unconvincing and useless in the face of our collapsing cultural order. These anachronisms are security blankets with diminishing returns.

One thing for sure is that levels of uncertainty are up big time. The speed and volume of cultural exchange is undermining the lasting impact of 'original' ideas, images and sounds, and the economics of both culture and art are undergoing radical change. In the millennial period, everyone is looking for a foothold. Artists are just as uncomfortable with instability as everyone else, but the prevailing myth has it that artists seek and thrive on uncertainty. But there has to be some order before artists can break the rules. Seeking order and security, artists have been moving back and forth between two pillars of thought throughout the five decades of postmodernity: 1) the history of art is a source of order and content in a post-historical era, and 2) culture in the broadest sense (television, cinema, radio, newspapers, magazines, music, the Web), has its own mind-numbing conventions in formulaic programming, but provides access to broader audiences. Artists inhabit and straddle these opposing, negligibly conjoined islands of form and order and gaze at the turbulent universe swirling around, under and over them.

The Immediate Environment following the Collapse of Postmodernism

The immediate environment is a cloud-like swirl of fragmented particles and perforated strips of culture and art. The second implosion has been devastating; delightfully so if one is selling telecommunications transceivers. Isolation and alienation must be countered by real and potential social opportunities. MySpace, Facebook and YouTube come to mind. Digital, electronic networks provide the only perceivable order and stability in the immediate environment. Digital telecom is the lifeline. This is ironic as digital telecom and the horizontal, decentralised nature of internet communication has been the major factor in eroding institutional authority and order. Museums, universities, the press, religions and the family have all taken major hits. Internet communication, while having tremendous advantages in terms of range and asynchronous time, has serious shortcomings in depth, especially relative to a physical social world. On the other hand, a physical and social grounding through links with a virtual world are better than nothing. Nature, we are told, is on its deathbed. The autonomy of the individual has eroded psychologically to the extent that the body has become a fleshy temple. We savour our food, go to the gym, have sex and otherwise push ourselves physically, to the point of exhaustion, in order to feel our bodies.

The current environment favours messaging, the propagation of short, direct, functional messages. The characteristics of poetic art, ambiguity and abstraction, are not particularly useful in a messaging culture. We desperately seek concrete correspondences between our world of messages and the physical realities of our bodies and what remains of nature. While messaging can extend beyond our immediate physical environment, the body must remain in contact with the earth. Global telecom, the breakdown of space and time, is balanced by the emergence of microregionalism. Cities are redefined as manageable neighbourhoods. Nature

is attainable in specific places; say a clearing in a wooded area behind a graveyard. Messaging often coordinates physical meetings in particular spots at specific times.

Messaging differs from industrial culture (cinema, television, radio, newspapers, and the synthesis of these smokestack media through the Web) in its pragmatic referencing of the body and specific locales. The body is the last autonomous, 'original,' non-mediated physical object, at least until it is cloned, and its geographical position can be tracked and noted. A person, a body, may issue voice or text messages, but the body is referenced physically by photography or video to create a sense of the site of authorship. Messaging is tied down, given weight and actuality through references to the emanating body. Disclosures of place are also key to message functionality. 'I'm having a coffee at Starbucks on Marshall Street. (here's my image to prove it) Where are you?' This message from Starbucks differs from art and industrial culture such as commercial cinema in its brevity and simple goal of placing the body. Obsessive messaging interrupts longer, more complex objects of thought like cinema. Movies, television and certainly literature are perforated as audiences and readers are sending and receiving messages instead of paying total attention, thus breaking the continuity of narratives. Cultural objects are perforated by messaging, compounding their state of fragmentation at the hands of advertising. Longer, more demanding narratives are being blown full of holes by the apparent necessity of messaging.

Ambiguity and abstraction fare poorly under the siege of constant interruption. Explicit, pragmatic short message forms, repeated for clarity and effectiveness, may survive the perforation effect. This perforation analogy can be used to describe consciousness itself in the millennial decade. There is no such thing as an interruption anymore because attention is defined through the heavily perforated veil of our consciousness. We give away our attention by the split-second to incoming traffic on our cell phones, PDAs and laptops. Our observational skills have suffered as we have mastered multitasking. We now commonly send messages while we are in the act of receiving information.

The millennial environment is strangely similar to a premodern environment in that accurate description and literal representation tend to rule. The authors of messages (texting, voice, e-mail, webcam, clips for video file sharing networks...) have short-term, clearly defined goals. In this period after the collapse of postmodern industrial culture and art the environment is 'stable' only in the sense that it is unrelenting in its turbulence and incoherence. There is no room for small talk in this kind of environment. The behaviour of other species in environments and ecologies with high levels of uncertainty offers insights into our current situation. For instance, scientists think that birds only say two things, no matter how elaborate their songs at dawn and dusk. The birds say 'I have a really good tree,' and 'why don't you come over and have some sex?' Human messaging follows similar patterns in terms of directness. I have a body and I am in a particular place. Use your imagination to figure out why I am contacting you.

The medium of video, and in particular live, real-time video, is the heir apparent to the summit of messaging. No medium establishes presence and fixes position as well as video. The development and application of communications technologies forced the initial collapse of

modernism in the early 1960s. The coming of age of digital telecom in the millennial decade has created the conditions for an even more complete breakdown of the meaning of industrial culture and art. We now navigate within a thick cloud of shifting cultural debris, anchored by networks permitting us to interact. Most of the messages insist that we exist and insure that we can sustain ourselves (the business of water, food, companionship, amusement, sex, shelter within the broader concerns of economics and politics).

Given the reality and inevitable growth of such a culture of messaging, there are questions we have to ask about the future of culture and art. When will poetic work emerge again in a network-anchored culture dominated by straightforward pragmatic exchanges? And if ambiguous and abstract messages once again emerge, will there be anyone left with the strength of attention to read them? And finally if artists cling to a belief system that includes the potential for transforming culture through autonomous, strategic interventions, then how will they do so effectively in a culture of messaging that continues to diffuse the power of individual messages in favour of an increasingly scattered, distributed, collective authorship?

Acknowledgment is due to the art historian Arthur C. Danto for the clarity and utility of his analysis of postmodernity. Danto's After the End of Art (Princeton University Press, 1996) served as a springboard for my scan of the post-postmodern culture of messaging in 2008.

YOUTUBE MAGIC VIDEOS ON THE NET

VERA TOLLMANN

Translation by Helen Ferguson

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In a very short excerpt from a video interview to be found on YouTube, Paul Virilio recently explained that he has noted that the optically correct is becoming increasingly important on the Internet. The platform offering the scarcely one-minute snatch of Virilio himself is an example precisely what he means. Is he referring to the legal statutes of the largest video database? All the rights in the video are assigned to whoever runs the website as soon as a video is made public there. The line of argument put forward on the *transmission*¹ network's website makes sense, for it explains that the legal situation concerning proprietary rights on YouTube argues against publishing videos there. YouTube can re-sell or censor users' clips, as well as monitoring their tracks in the digital universe. In discussion at meetings regularly organised by *transmission*, operators of alternative video platforms curse YouTube as 'corporate digital vacuum cleaners'.

Wynne Greenwood describes her decision to put her new music video *Big Candy*² online temporarily on YouTube under the gallery's name as 'opening some spaces for myself.' She does not always want to be directly contactable via her artistic work and views her gallery as a firewall. Originally the video, which she recorded amongst the sculptures in her exhibition at the Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects Gallery, was planned to be part of her 'music world'. However, she then came to the conclusion that the clip would be the perfect finishing touch for her installation. Now a limited edition of the video is being sold by the gallery. 'I usually insist that videos should be accessible to everyone. However in my practice now I've reached a point where it is more empowering for me to make access more complicated. I can choose what I do for free and what I produce in order, hopefully, to be able to pay the rent.' *Big Candy* can be viewed on YouTube until the end of the exhibition. Greenwood even identifies potential for an online gallery here, even if her video clip is only on temporary display and is just one single artistic work that does not fill the digital non-space. Furthermore, the video is also online on her MySpace-Website; she always thinks of art and music in conjunction, one production overlaps with the other. You wonder: will users put her video clip online over and over again in the future? Can art videos also be so popular that viewers believe it is important for them to exist online? When Tom Cruise talked about being a scientist, there

1. Transmission, transmission.cc
2. *Big Candy* by Wynne Greenwood, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej6xIA6ofVE>