



## Video Art

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Video art is created by capturing images and sounds for playback on a video monitor or for video projection. Korean-born artist Nam June Paik pioneered the medium in the late 1960s, making it only slightly older than the gay rights movement. Although facilitated by Japanese technology, video art was initially developed primarily by American artists within the era's politically volatile social context.

The commercial availability and portability of the early video camera facilitated the medium's use by visual artists, including painters, sculptors, and performance artists. During the late 1960s and 1970s, video art was monitor-based and often politically charged to the point that artists formed collectives such as TVTV (Top Value Television), which infiltrated the 1972 Republican convention.

### Video Art's Popularity with Queer Artists

Early video art's "outsider" status enhanced its popularity among queer artists. Since 1980, advanced technology and the growing legitimacy of the form have allowed video artists to explore other forms of video presentation, including projection and installation, and to move from video tape to digital video.

In video, the prevalence of human performance or spontaneously recorded action centralizes and often politicizes the human form, an aspect of the medium that makes it particularly expressive for queer artists. Additionally, video art's opportunities for activism, personal revelation, and documentary have been seized by queer artists.

Glbtq video art falls into four major categories: AIDS activism (whose major practitioners include Gregg Bordowitz, Tom Kalin, and Alisa Lebow), confrontation (Sadie Benning, Cecilia Dougherty, Kathy High, Thomas Harris, Kalin, Lebow, and David Wojnarowicz), coming out (Benning, Bordowitz, Sandi DuBowski, and Richard Fung), and traditional documentary (Maria Beatty and Ellen Spiro).

### AIDS Activism

Video artists have engaged in AIDS activism in a number of ways, including through major projects such as Video Against AIDS (1989), The Estate Project's AIDS Activist Video Preservation Program (1989), and The Ashes Action (1996).

The focus of many AIDS activist video pieces is coping with HIV/AIDS, which often documents the artist's personal experience. Artists such as Gregg Bordowitz and Alisa Lebow explore how they personally contracted the virus.

Often an artist, Bordowitz for example, will video rallies and support groups in order to document movements such as ACT UP; Bordowitz also uses satire to indict mainstream attitudes toward HIV/AIDS. Lebow rejects the mainstream political approach and portrays an angrier, more confrontational, and unapologetic reaction to the virus.

Tom Kalin, like Lebow, is highly confrontational; however, Kalin rejects a personal method and frames his treatment of the crisis in an artful documentary of mainstream society's reaction to AIDS, *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989).

His voice-over dialogue is recorded directly from prime time news' coverage of the crisis, which describes AIDS as a disease affecting "gay men, intravenous drug users, and Haitians." The voice-over accompanies news footage of the early years of the crisis interspersed with vintage, early-twentieth century clips of accidents and disasters.

### **Confrontation**

Tom Kalin's art focuses not only on AIDS activism, but also on confrontational, taboo issues such as extreme sexual acts. Other confrontational artists include Kathy High, whose *Icky and Kathy Trilogy* (1999) explores incest and other forbidden forms of sexual desire.

David Wojnarowicz's most important video installation is *American Heads of Family, Heads of State* (1989-1990). It is a mixed media installation, containing macabre images (both from the media and created by Wojnarowicz), which incorporates his writings, sculpture, found art, and monitor-based videos. The piece is a personal and politicized reaction to his dying from AIDS.

Wojnarowicz's confrontational manner and personal concerns are mirrored thematically, if not stylistically, by Sadie Benning. Throughout the 1990s, Benning has been among the most acclaimed lesbian video artists; her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Biennial (1997).

Her *Flat is Beautiful* (1998) is a lyrical black and white piece concerning the rapid maturation and sexualization of a fifth-grade girl. Benning's work is stylistically diverse; she often works with puppetry, masks, and music video.

### **Coming Out**

Benning locked herself in her room for three weeks at the age of fifteen to create personal, revelatory video pieces. These pieces, from her career's infancy, document her early understandings of lesbianism. They constitute a personal coming out discourse, a concern of many queer video artists, particularly since 1980, as video art has moved into museum and gallery spaces and even private collections.

Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000) documents the artist's relationship with his dying sister, the only family member to whom he came out. Fung relates his sister's leukemia to his partner's battle with AIDS. Often glbtq artists, such as Bordowitz and Sandi DuBowski, focus on the decision whether or not to come out to family members.

### **Documentary Video**

A subcategory of both glbtq video art and mainstream video art is documentary. Some queer video artists go beyond the satirically artful work of artists such as Bordowitz to document important glbtq issues, such as AIDS awareness, or cultural expressions, such as performance art, in more straightforward documentaries.

Notable among these artists are Maria Beatty and Ellen Spiro. In *Party Safe with DiAna and Bambi* (1992), Spiro concentrates on safe sex practices for males and females, gay and straight. Specifically, she documents a national safe sex party tour by two women from Columbia, South Carolina.

### **Conclusion**

Queer video artists are not easily categorized because they explore diverse issues, often in diverse styles. However, because video art can be such a personally expressive medium, queer video artists frequently focus on subject matter directly concerned with the queer experience.

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