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Future Formats: How visionary nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix propelled video art in a pre-YouTube, pre-internet era.

Text and interviews by Tina Rivers Ryan Portraits by Alice O'Malley



From left to right: EAI's Technical Director Jon Dieringer wears t-shirt by **T by Alexander Wang**. Jeans by **A.P.C.** Sneakers by **Adidas**. Executive Director Lori Zippay wears dress by **Agnès B.** Distribution Manager Karl McCool wears shirt by **Simon Miller**. Jeans by **Levi's**. Director of Distribution Rebecca Cleman wears own t-shirt and shoes. Skirt by **Boss**. Photographed at the shared space with the Dia Center for the Arts in New York.

A bearded African-American man looks at us through his computer's webcam. He's decked out in a white t-shirt, a necklace with a gold pharaoh medallion, and a flat-brimmed baseball hat with the Muppet character Animal on it—a parody of the sartorial style of "urban" youth circa 2011. As he typically announces at the start of each of his "ART THOUGHTZ" videos, he's "your boy, Hennessy Youngman," a stage name that blends the preferred booze of rappers everywhere with the Borscht Belt comedy of Henny Youngman. With hysterical precision, "Youngman," aka the artist Jayson Scott Musson, drops some satirical knowledge about art for his internet audience. In this episode, "Beuys-Z," our affable tutor explains why Joseph Beuys is the Jay Z of the art world—and he's absolutely right (in a nutshell: they're both self-mythologizers).

Although Musson's videos were posted for all to see on YouTube and weren't necessarily conceived as art projects, they're examples of contemporary video art at its finest; with deft humor they prove that video's democratic format can render complex questions about art and information accessible, even fun. The "ART THOUGHTZ" videos soon caught the attention of the staff at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), the oldest existing nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting video art. Like a museum, EAI is responsible for conserving, sharing, and supporting scholarship on its holdings of more than 3,500 videos, which date back to video art's very beginnings in the 60s—and now include Musson's YouTube performances, too.

EAI was established in 1971 by gallerist Howard Wise, who mounted a groundbreaking survey of "TV as a Creative Medium" at his New York gallery in 1969. Having come into existence before "video art" was a coherent practice, EAI continues to define and redefine its terms. To that end, as part of the celebrations for its 40th anniversary in the summer of 2011, it hosted the evening program "Future Formats: Video in a New Decade." The audience was treated to the work of Musson, alongside videos by other artists working at the horizon where video art meets new media technologies, including Ryan Trecartin (another internet-spawned art star) and the digital animator Takeshi Murata. As EAI explains, these artists responded to ongoing "economic, political, social, technological and biological" transformations, including the expansion of the territory of moving images. Produced within the context of these changing conditions, the works screened that night were said to "offer a glimpse of where artists may take the medium in the coming decade as they harness new technologies and consider their complex implications."

Little has changed between 2011 and 2016: The world is still turbulent, the moving image is still evolving, and artists are still redefining the use of video as an artistic medium. For its 45th anniversary this year, EAI examined video art's shifting conditions of production, represented by the history of videos in "Edited at EAI." Founded a year after the organization began, EAI's editing facility was one of the first to give artists access to complex video editing for a modest fee. (EAI's distribution service, which generated income for video artists by renting their tapes to institutions like museums, libraries, and schools, was founded in 1973; its Preservation Program began in 1986.) Like much of EAI's programming, "Edited at EAI" pointed in two directions at the same time: not only backward, toward the history of video art, but also



Kalup Linzy, "Conversations wit de Churen Iv: Play Wit de Churen," 2005.

KALUP LINZY: This [past] summer I began experimenting with 360 Virtual Reality for upcoming projects and to incorporate it into my class at the School of Visual Arts in New York. The medium is new to me and it feels like I am starting over in a sense, but it also feels familiar: it is based on everything I've learned before. The disadvantage of media art is always having to keep up with the latest technological inventions and upgrades. It can be pricey and potentially handicap you. VR is new, so not everyone has advanced enough technology to experience it. However, the industry is behind it, and at some point it will be a part of the norm.

I create each video for a certain context. Some are intended for television and projection screens in a museum or gallery. Others are intended for the web. The reason I prefer the variety of contexts is because whichever you choose, the work is viewed through the historical lens of that space. It is my hope that the work be presented within that flow, even if the content might be challenging for some. In museum and gallery exhibitions, I prefer my work to be seen alongside all types of artistic media. The experience should still be about the visual relationships between the works, even if my work is on a screen.

Kalup Linzy's videos will be screened at AiOP: Art in Odd Places in Orlando, Florida, this November.



Artist Cheryl Donegan wears top and skirt by **Kenzo**. Shoes by **Nicholas Kirkwood**. Artist C. Spencer Yeh wears t-shirt by **Calvin Klein**. Jacket by **Alexander Wang**. Jeans by **Levi's**.

forward, toward a future in which new formats shape and reflect the conditions (economic, material, and social) under which video art is made, distributed, watched, and preserved.

Unlike the more unitary and stable mediums of painting and sculpture, “video art” is actually an umbrella term for multiple moving-image systems, typically utilizing the magnetic or electronic encoding of information on a physical tape or in a digital file. It encompasses works shown on broadcast television; single-channel videos, shown on a single monitor or as a single projection; and multi-channel sculptures or environments, around or through which the viewer moves. (Some of the more radical of these environments are made of closed-circuit “feedback” systems, emphasizing the immediacy that was thought to distinguish televisual media from other forms of art or communication.) Although most video art is designed to be viewed in one of these formats, technically, the digital videos produced today are medium-agnostic, in the sense that they can theoretically be viewed in a variety of situations, such as on a cell phone, computer, or tablet screen. And whereas video images formerly originated from either optical recording devices or analog electronic synthesizers, now they can also be generated digitally, whether by using animation software like After Effects or by recording within the world of a video game (a genre known as machinima).

While the technologies of video art are varied, its emergence as an artistic medium is usually tied to the introduction of Sony’s Portapak in the mid-60s, at a time when broadcast television had fully saturated American culture. Compared with making an independent film, recording a video was both less time-consuming and less expensive: Instead of having to pay and wait for film to be processed, video artists could almost simultaneously record and play back their footage on a monitor. This attracted post-minimalist artists like Bruce Nauman, who turned to the medium to document performances in their studios, giving rise to the first canon of video art. At the same time, young media activists seized upon the relative portability of video, using their cameras to produce documentaries on everything ranging from political protests to the secret world of advertising. These works are also archived by EAI, although they are not always included in histories of video art.

Another mode of video art emerged from a technophilic interest in the electronic modulation of video images. Unlike the laborious process of editing film by hand, increasingly sophisticated editing machines allowed artists to dissolve, wipe, enlarge, crop, copy, and change the colors of images with only the turn of a few knobs. This sophisticated video processing required access to large, expensive equipment, leading to collaborations between artists and local TV stations or arts organizations, like EAI. The Fluxus artist Nam June Paik—who is often credited as the “godfather” of video art, though others certainly share the title—installed TV sets as sculpture in 1963, and recorded a Portapak video in 1965; but he also co-invented a video synthesizer in 1969, reflecting the importance of image processing in video’s early days.

In the 80s, as computers expanded out of the ivory tower of military and industrial research and into offices and homes everywhere, computing became an increasingly graphic, as opposed to a text-based, medium. From the mouse to the graphics card, innovations in hardware made possible the revolution of Microsoft’s Windows, one of the first primarily graphic software platforms. A surge in programs for creating and editing graphic content soon followed, from MS Paint (included in Windows 1.0) to Adobe Photoshop for Macs, and the computer became a powerhouse for the creation of commercial visual media. Some enterprising video artists—Lynn

“This new generation brings the history of video art full circle, marrying the DIY spirit of the Portapak to the dynamism of early institutional video editing.”



Cheryl Donegan, "Craft," 1994.



Dara Birnbaum, "Fire!/Henrix," 1982.

CHERYL DONEGAN: I started out using a video camera, recording directly onto VHS. Back in the days of electronic tape, the big worry was losing generations through the copying process. I was terrified of the equipment and had terrible luck learning to edit in the "insert or assemble" editing suite. I swore I wouldn't learn this technology, while dreaming of a simple, drag-and-drop way to edit video.

When Final Cut Pro finally came around, I taught myself to use it. Even though digital editing opened up a freer range of editing options, I am still attracted to the DIY spirit that first led me to video. Even with advances in technology, I've been more stimulated by the visual artifacts of the distribution of imagery.

Commercial galleries have not been the most useful way to distribute video. But EAI excels at it: they protect videos physically and distribute them in ways that are important, like video festivals and public screenings. All my videos are also on ubuweb.com, albeit in small, condensed flash files, that look terrible when projected. But that is not the point—they are to be looked at on a laptop or in a classroom, by the adjunct, or young artist, or someone looking for the type of video content not found on Hulu or Netflix. The audience is out there...and to resist it on some arcane copyright grounds is to risk losing out on eyeballs in an attention-based economy.

A retrospective of Cheryl Donegan's works was shown at the New Museum earlier this year. In 2015, she began creating video art on her Vine channel YourPlasticBag.

DARA BIRNBAUM: I began my professional relationship with EAI around 1980. Hardly anyone wanted to handle video in those days, but Howard Wise took a leap of faith, showing and supporting the distribution of video with heart. Video was about seeing in the moment—immediate playback—mostly a more rough-and-tumble art.

It is harder to make relevant, or exceptional, video/media art work now, in our technologically-saturated society. There is such a proliferation of the moving image that it has become an overabundance. How does one create meaning when contemporary society has reached a point of exhaustion through saturation?

Given today's nearly uncontrollable distribution, I try to exert any control I can still exercise. One strategy is that I have chosen to adhere mostly to media installation artwork for the past 25 years. These installations, by their very nature, demand a chosen time and space for reflection; thus they are usually relegated to (the somewhat classical) sanctity of museums and institutional spaces. Our public television channels are mostly no longer able to present the degree of experimentation in the media arts and video as they did in the 70s, 80s, and into the '90s. Special screenings, as at festivals, can still be carved out; otherwise, distributors, such as EAI, provide effective access to institutions such as schools and museums. However, truly public programming needs to re-emerge in our culture.

Dara Birnbaum is an internationally recognized pioneer of video art. Her latest projects include the six-channel video and sound installation "Psalm 29(30)," 2016, which was shown at La Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris, this past spring.



C. Spencer Yeh, "Edition Inkjet 2003 Promo," 2003.

C. SPENCER YEH: I'd known about EAI for a long time, and it's really flattering to be chosen for their collection and considered alongside some really great work, both known and lesser-known. Certain moves or materials in my works—appropriation of popular culture, for example—may too easily be read as coming from a more ornamental motivation. Through my affiliation with EAI, my work enters into a dialogue with EAI's collection of works; it also benefits from the people at EAI working to keep video art going, which includes advocating for the work, trying to find contexts and opportunities to exhibit it, advising on artist decisions, etc.

The thing about YouTube (or any of these sites or apps) is—it's a platform, a dialogue, that's ultimately owned and controlled by a company. Not making a judgment here, just keeping that in mind. You have to draw a line somewhere I suppose, and do what you can to control the frame. I think the online distribution model EAI has been trying out is a step—rather than using someone else's public-facing platform, they are making their own. I see other institutions offering limited-time online exhibitions of moving-image works—it's a step, but chances are most people don't have their own black box to view the work in, and I really don't like watching stuff on a laptop.

C. Spencer Yeh has performed his sonic compositions at venues including the Walker Art Center, The Stone NYC, and The Kitchen.

Hershman Leeson comes to mind—were early adopters of this new technology; many were also interested in emerging cable and satellite networks. But it wasn't until the introduction of user-friendly "prosumer" software in the early 2000s—along with the remodeling of the "white cube" of the art gallery into the "black box" of cinema—that a critical mass of artists working with digital video emerged. This new generation brings the history of video art full circle, marrying the DIY spirit of the Portapak to the dynamism of early institutional video editing. At the same time, the rise of digital distribution platforms, from websites like Vimeo to apps like Vine, fulfills the most radical promise of early video art: to overturn the one-way communication of mainstream film and television and make moving images radically democratic, and even interactive. "Now a new generation is creating media works that engage critical issues around the mutability of identity and representation in the digital world," as Lori Zippay, EAI's executive director, observes.

When Howard Wise closed his gallery in 1970 to open EAI, he explained that he was committing himself to supporting artists whose work was transcending the confines of the traditional art gallery: Video art, he suggested, was bigger than the art world. Yet he hardly could have anticipated the art world today, which is enthralled with video artists, from Kalup Linzy to Cory Arcangel and Rashaad Newsome to Hito Steyerl. Following the precedent set by the rise of photography as a fine art, many of these artists edition their videos, turning them into unique objects or installations in order to transform an inherently reproducible piece into a scarce commodity with an inflated price. This is not without some justification: for example, the resolution of HD video encourages higher production values, and costs. But Wise's utopian vision of video art as something that should be accessible (not least because it lacks the historical baggage of the other arts) lives on through the increasing number of artists, like Cheryl Donegan, that insist on having it both ways, editioning their works for sale even as they also put them online for all to view for free. It also lives on through EAI, which collaborates with groups like High Line Art on programming in public spaces and allows free use of its screening room. Digitizing its videos has given EAI even more ways to share its collection, from creating an online preview service for researchers to developing an "Educational Streaming Service" that will transform its archive into a "digital textbook." As Zippay explains, EAI "was founded to support radical art that largely fell outside of the parameters of the commercial gallery and commercial television system," and "continues to occupy an 'alternative space' in relation to the art world and also to the larger digital culture; we're neither a traditional gallery that represents unique objects, nor an online platform for open access to video, although we embody and confound elements of both."

What will it mean to make video art in the future? How will it be produced and distributed, and under what conditions will it be viewed? Will it continue to be distinguished, however precariously, from other forms of video? What is to be gained and to be lost if video art is fully absorbed by the art world, or, conversely, if it dissolves into the ever-increasing stream of moving images? EAI's collection began with a set of single-channel analog artists' tapes, and now encompasses not only the YouTube performances of Hennessy Youngman, but also the glitch aesthetics of Net Art pioneers JODI and the sonic compositions of C. Spencer Yeh. Described by Zippay as a "living archive" that "honors the past while embracing the new," EAI ensures that as video art continues to evolve, its future formats will emerge in dialogue with its present, and its history. ◆

BORTRFOLIOS

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EAI Founder Howard Wise and Operations Engineer John Trayna in EAI's Video Editing Facility, 1972. Photo by Davidson Gigliotti.