

Amanda Beech

## **Real Video**

More than other forms of artistic material, video has been understood as capable of delivering a 'deeper truth'. Video art has denoted a form of access to something that goes beyond the illusory nature of the image to the *matter* of 'material in itself': (the scratch, the celluloid). Its truth is therefore a form of freedom wrapped up in the moment that prefigures the image through video matter. This is a form of pre-political freedom from the image accessed in an empirical materiality.

Extending from this, that same tradition has emphasised another form of freedom as its complement, this one has been won through the mutable and ephemeral qualities of time-based media; the fact of its *immateriality*. Here, the video medium is taken to denote interchangeability, temporality and instability. Video as a media was useful politically because of its formal reproducible quality, and in line with Benjamin's Work of Art essay, the technological reproducibility of video, in its very abstraction of form was a way to intrinsically critique the dogma of hierarchical value systems and the essentialising of the authentic. Its innate multiplicity is often considered as essentially democratic.

To unpack that just a little, it is this double claim of a non-representational media that has defined and asserted the politics of this media. It is thought of as being both *all material and all ephemeral*, both specifically particular and radically abstract. And together these facets form a bundle of dialectical tensions that are believed to form these operations that claim an access to reality that other images could not hope for.

However looking more closely at this dialectic we can see that these two categories, one of materiality and the other of an abstract temporality are not capable of holding such oppositions and in fact do the same work as each other.

This is centrally because both schemas of the image are understood as being causally related to each other, as well as being causal to the production of a distinct and resistant occupation of space.

Well – what are the consequences of this critique?

If we can challenge the logic that makes up the dominant politics of video media in its making then so it goes we need to also re-think the way in which we contextualise, expose and bring these images to a public. What I mean is that these values that have idealized video for its special political qualities have been as central to those interpreters and curators of this media as its producers. It has informed the interpretative material that encompasses the work. If this logic is challenged then the structures that would ascertain and claim such value: Namely, the curatorial must also be put into question.

This is worth spending a little more time with: On the one hand, the materiality of video can only be there for us as a weak codifier, a representation of **an idea** of 'foundational material' and all that it signifies. Here the call upon its literality, its own materiality actually ends up pointing to some other place. It is poetic and it points beyond the material we encounter to a universal idea of materiality. On the other hand, when we look at the temporality of video, we know that similar problems arise in mirrored form. This is because temporality for us is always located in particular experiences, when we can only be face to face with what is there in front of us in the terrain of the *abstract now*. The idea of temporality is a concept, and therefore this can only be manifest as another form of representation.

Both matter and temporality are held here as abstract signifiers of the alterity of the image. This aims towards a materialism of the image that would offer us a face to face experience with an indifferent world of a time that exceeds us or a materiality that excludes us. However what we see here is a self-producing tension of the image, a torsion between these two positions that cancel each other out to form another totality. *This operates as a mixture of transcendent and empirical categories that together produce an ontology of media.*

As such, whilst the claim is that this couple designate a tension between two non-representational experiences, real material and abstract time, they in fact operate at the level of representation in a traditional sense. They are thus tied to media's ideal condition: a theory of video that in practice is a work of poetry. Here we see the same old problem, that of matching a theory to a practice, that of producing an ontology of the image that explains the image. That of doing philosophy *to* the image.

It's equally important to point out that this ideal condition is again one of alterity. Here the conditions of abstract time and local material interact in a suspended time and space of their own – strung together in the ether in another autonomous world. This attitude to video rehearses the very familiar problems that I talked about earlier and alludes not only to the production of autonomist fantasies of art but also how these fantasies have been manifest in the discourse of the curatorial.

Underlying this approach to video and its curation is the assumption that video is more political than other forms of work because its material is less substantial than say painting or sculpture – and as such it is free to play within and against the ideological terrain that art is embedded within, and by the same token, it offers a type of dynamic that enjoys its own dialectic of presence and absence.

This schema of dematerialization that I have outlined smuggles in a formal and hierarchical criteria for the judgement of a work's political power. It is here where we find the assumption that the more substantial things are, then the more they are conservative – this schema sets out a value system that goes from the monument to the flicker of a video projection as the poster boy of liberalism. This argument has been dealt with in Hito Steyerl's text *In Defence of the Poor Image* which has already been discussed in this terrain.

Here in the *Poor Image* she discusses these hierarchies of the image, from substance to dematerialisation. Although this text works through the complex account that the ephemeral copied image is also a part of the capitalist condition, and is a product of it, there remains a clear attraction to the impoverished, dilapidated, copied, thin, fuzzy space of the poor image. It is claimed as a clandestine peripheral material in which its power is its banality of existence as it constructs a separate sphere of mediation. The image changes hands, is compressed, expanded and moves in binary form from jpeg to tiff and back again. It is abstract material.

However, this commitment to poverty misses the point about how we can understand the politics of the image now. This is because Steyerl cannot help but locate politics in a form of aesthetics; the form of the recognisable bootleg, copy or trace of a once authentic image. This spatial understanding of the image cannot account for the mobility and dynamic terrain of images that Steyerl is actually interested in and the domain of exchange in which they operate. These images are poor says Steyerl not only because they are aesthetically unpristine but because they are marginalised by society.

In fact these two conditions of the image are causally connected by Steyerl: “Poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria. Their lack of resolution attests to their appropriation and displacement.” Here, problematically; the image attains its poverty through an assertion of a set of values that Steyerl actually seeks to problematise.

Now its important to point out that Steyerl recognises the fact that poor images are very much integrated into the privileged representational spaces of art and in the arena of mainstream cinema, however, her critique fails to think outside of these sets of relationships. She is also unable to think as to how the poor image transcends such an order of value. If her critique could hope to achieve this, it would be impossible to designate such images as poor, because this designation of the image as poor, relies upon a system of signification that supports a dominant nomenclature.

As such, we can detect a number of ironies in this argument. The first is that her case rests on the articulated, located and very focussed **concept** of the image despite the attraction to its abstracted and impoverished aesthetic. (formal and vertical relation where theory orders practice).

Secondly, these images are understood as part of a horizontal field of flux and exchange (they are as much a part of capital as not, but at the same time, they circulate at the edges of institutional structures in a space all of their own.) The establishment of this alterity of the image all the same imposes that heterotopic space that fantasises about its secret inner world “an alternative economy of images”. (spatial problem which observes plural conditions of the image but also argues for discrete territories).

Third; as we have argued; Steyerl is complaining about a hierarchy and then still employing the very same hierarchy as the basis for a critique. (Value problem).

This word poverty extended from the term 'poor' allows me to draw out the allegorical dimension that is smuggled in here – “ By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch”. This is a romantic tale that knows where politics is, how to find it and even how to make it. (Steyerl, Hito. (2009) 'In Defense of the Poor Image' in *e-flux* no.10)

The key problem with Steyerl's text is that she can't have her cake and eat it. The final contradiction is the commitment in the final part of her essay to the condition of the reality of the poor image, where she explains that is that is has in a digital culture, freed itself from a relation to an original. Unfortunately, however, the poor image cannot bear out *no relation* to the concept of the original where it is understood in its expanded sense as force, intensity, exchange and flow, but still be termed as '*poor*'. If we are to take images as producing the condition of our reality then we have to condemn all such habits, the habits that attempt to produce such ontologies of the image.

I'm more convinced by the inaccessible world of the image, that is a condition where the image does not provide us with access to any other condition.

I argue that video works allow us to open up questions about the force of form without thinking that either the material or immaterial qualities of video are the key to establishing political practice. In this sense as video talks less about its medium, video works establish themselves as places of force in the terrain of non-contradiction. These experiences are forceful – they establish a set of constraints that offer up both pleasure and violence. Upon such terms, this notion of the forceful, substantive and extensive architecture of video, its frame, the images that are presented to us, the gallery, the walls, the texts, the press releases, the invigilators, offer us a substantially materialist horizontal world rather than an idealised version of a horizontal world to comprehend.

This non-idealist horizontality does not mean that these objects bear out no relation, or that meaning is not possible. However it points us to the need to rethink the order of things, and the value of the systems we use and how we constitute meaning. This is to dispose of the habitual standards that we assert to envision and produce our freedom.

This question of the subject, image and force has led my practice where I've looked to the question of how art is conditioned through its own spontaneous philosophy, its own intuitive folklore, that is often founded in a principle of reason itself. What I have described here in these sets of relations that have delivered to use the politics of video are therefore the mark of a bad habit, a spontaneous philosophy of video, if you like.

It would seem that stability is required for any science, but this condition of objects does not offer any type of foundational origin or guarantee.

In this light; How can we reason the image space without any comprehension of stability?

And how can this exercise of reason be unshackled from its own bad habits?

(Adorno and Horkheimer enjoyed this as their defining dialectic, but here I am talking about another condition of reason, that does not share the same foundations).

In my work, I have focused on how images produce facticity – their place in the world as a form of which manifests truth. As objective truth, and as non-casual entities, art would no longer be subject to the priority of interpretation for its effects (the viewer), nor then perpetuate the assumption of the common freedom of the liberal-democratic subject that hermeneutic primacy supports. In other words, understanding contemporary art as contingent truth requires its political reorganization.

I'd like to take up Francois Laruelle's work on this point, and whilst he addresses the notion of photography, it is easy to see that this is a general work of thinking against philosophy and against the hierarchies of a kantian inspired reason.

He writes in the book *The Concept of Non- Photography*:

“The region of the image owes its cause, the cause of its image-power, to an identity that is ‘in ‘it’ only in-the-last-instance, but which suffices to identify radically all the oppositions of perception and to make of the photo this adequate or scientific knowledge. It is this that gives the photo its being as blind image, without objective intentionality, without ecstasis-to–World, image-without-refolding, objective-without object; its power-of semblance which does not found itself on any resemblance.” 98

So here, and rooted in Laruelle’s non relational underpinning of the image; my key question looks to the political potential of approaches to video and how its curation understood as an extension of its work, could respond adequately to this, as well as produce new contexts for it.

How we can continue to invest in the concept of arts politics when we recognize that a politics based on escaping meaning, or showing the limits of meaning, dematerialising form or the anti-monument, is not in fact capable of the politics we discuss and imagine?

This demanding context compels the curatorial to re-think its own systems of signification and the social and economic systems in which it finds itself. These are the political problems we face that are impactful on all curatorial projects, but talking about the curation and treatment of video in particular is useful since it allows us to highlight the moment at which both have made very special claims as being capable of a more political art over and above other forms such as painting etc. This championing of video exposes the ways in which we have correlated our media to certain modes of action, and produced schemas of aesthetic value in the name of a radical politics. I have hoped to show today that this politics is no longer available but is the curatorial capable of meeting such a challenge?

BIO:

Amanda Beech's art work and writing has focused on the *rhetorical force* of the image and how this generates a re-thinking of the terms by which we name art's critique in the context of contingency. Her art work in video, print and sculpture produces its own declarative power coagulating philosophical theory, noir-ish narratives of TV shows like *24*, *CSI*, the hard-boiled writing of James Ellroy and real political events. Her work examines and produces the condition of language as force – and the force of language.

Recent exhibitions include *The Church*, *The Bank*, *The Art Gallery*, Banner Repeater, London 2012 (solo), *The Edge of Luxury*, Fold Gallery London 2011 (group), *Sanity Assassin*, with accompanying publication (Urbanomic, Falmouth 2010) Spike Island, Bristol 2010 (solo) and *The Real Thing*, Tate Britain 2010 (group), *Predators and Pests*, collaborative installation with Diann Bauer, LoBe Gallery, Berlin 2010 and *Greetings Comrades*, *The Image Has Now Changed its Status*, Brunswick Arts Centre, Melbourne, Australia, and Arnolfini, Bristol, 2010. Recent writing includes 'An Exercise in Fatality', catalogue essay for Anthony Gross' *Burnt Wood Stories*, The Agency Gallery, London, 2010, and 'Curatorial Futures with the image: Overcoming scepticism and Unbinding the Relational', *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*, Volume 9.2: pp. 139-151, Intellect, 2010. She is currently developing an anthology of artist's projects and writing on Los Angeles, and *Final Machine*, a major new video project filmed in the Mojave Desert, Miami and the Dominican Republic will be exhibited in 2013.

Beech is co-director of the Political Currency of Art Research Group and Curating Video. She is Professor of Fine Art at the University of Kent.

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