

# Vernacular Video

Tom Sherman

Video as a technology is forty years old. It is an offshoot of television, developed in the 1930s and a technology that has been in our homes for nearly sixty years. Television began as a centralized, one-to-many broadcast medium. Television's centrality was splintered as cable and satellite distribution systems and vertical, specialized programming sources fragmented television's audience. As video technology spun off from television, the mission was clearly one of complete decentralization. Forty years later, video technology is everywhere. Video is now a medium unto itself, a completely decentralized 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 2006 is not the exclusive medium of technicians or specialists or journalists or artists — it is the peoples' medium. The potential of video as a decentralized communications tool for the masses has been realized, 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 everyperson'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 video-phones, 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 be shorter and shorter in duration, as television time, compressed by the demands of advertising, has socially engineered shorter and shorter attention spans. Video-phone 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 slippage. 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 and laptop, 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, fetishizing 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 characterize 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-utilized screen space and time, as virtually all architecture and surfaces become potential screens. Video-phones 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 chose to do so, digital video or a pencil?

Artists must embrace, but move beyond, the vernacular forms of video. Artists must identify, categorize 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 recognize 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. Deprofessionalized 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.

Excerpted from *The Nine Lives of Video Art*, a longer text by Tom Sherman.

Tom Sherman (twsherma@syr.edu) is an artist and writer and professor in the Department of Transmedia at Syracuse University in New York. His latest book is *Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment* (Banff Centre Press, 2002). Sherman's writing and voice work is currently featured on a weekly radio series, Nerve Theory's *H5N1: there is no privacy at the speed of light*, broadcast on the Austrian national broadcasting system. Nerve Theory is the collaborative identity of Tom Sherman and Bernhard Loibner, a Viennese media artist. Listen online; for MP3 and podcast access check out: [www.kunstradio.at/2006A/H5N1en.html](http://www.kunstradio.at/2006A/H5N1en.html).