2015

Performative Appropriation of Video Art on Youtube, Vimeo and Dailymotion

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WEB REVIEW

PERFORMATIVE APPROPRIATION OF VIDEO ART ON YOUTUBE, VIMEO AND DAILYMOTION

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A quick Google search reveals a breadth of re-creations or appropriations of film and video-based artworks. These works are ‘shared’ online through platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo and Dailymotion, where they are then ‘liked’ and ‘commented’ upon by members of the digital community. What is particularly fascinating about this phenomenon is that non-professionals, art students, or amateurists comprise the vast majority of videos. Most take as their source material 1960s and 1970s autobiographical film and video artworks that centralize the artist’s physical body in some way; namely, because these works rather straightforwardly allow individual uploaders, as I will call them, to either physically or conceptually substitute the artist’s body and narrative for their own. In other words, uploaders employ the artist as a productive template for their recorded performances.

Autobiographical film and video art is instrumental in reconceptualizing intersubjective relationships with viewers and therefore maintains a strong relationality. For curator Diana Nemiroff, the most compelling performances before the camera engage the viewer conceptually and provoke physical or psychological participation with the work (2005: 42), which functions as both a call to community and action. Much in the same way that the Sony Portapak and 16mm film technology revolutionized the production of video and film-based art in the 1960s and 1970s, over forty years later online video-sharing platforms have ruptured traditional forms of individuation by transforming how society determines self-representation, cultural appropriation, and interpersonal communication. Although scholars do not often acknowledge it,
video-sharing websites have dramatically altered the very idea of the public’s involvement with art, specifically with art criticism and art appreciation.

Here exists a heterogeneous digital discourse with complementary and divergent influences that relate to aspects of participatory culture, art therapy, appropriation, aestheticism, art theory, and art history. In effect, the videos are bound up in a DIY aesthetic that circumvents traditional exhibition venues by self-exhibiting video art online, and, as a result, establishes different social connections and communities rather than relying upon an establishment that may exclude them. Such forms of self-representation, according to literary theorist Nancy K. Miller, are a record of an experience in search of community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity during postmodernism (2001: 14). Following Miller’s logic, then, online video-sharing platforms generate participatory frameworks to forge a digitalized community. On the other hand, there are also videos that feed the machine of participatory culture. Media theorists Joshua Green and Jean Burgess have appropriately noted that participatory culture offers individuals previously relegated to the role of ‘passive’ audience to become cultural producers thus becoming active collaborators (2009: 82). However, they also acknowledge that participatory culture can facilitate intimate and (often) narcissistic social expressions that are then distributed and engaged with online. For many, it seems, the knowledge and meaning generated from the original artwork is no longer enough to satisfy the intellect or emotion – it must be scrutinized, embodied and recreated to fully grasp its meaning.

Dutch-born conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader and US-born, Canadian multidisciplinary artist Lisa Steele are two of the most widely appropriated artists on video-sharing websites. In the early 1970s, Ader produced a testimonial series of photographs, postcards and films titled *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*, which represents an experiment with the semiotics of emotional pain. The most notable piece in the series is a 16mm black-and-white silent film approximately two and a half minutes in length recorded in 1971. Like the photographic work, the film features Ader in close-up weeping and explores what historian Dominick LaCapra calls structural trauma or everyday trauma, defined as trauma that can appear in different ways in all societies and all lives (2001: 77–78). Here, Ader’s physical body operates as a kind of prosthesis for the viewer that opens potential for the viewer to project their own memory and suffering.1

In the video on YouTube *We Are Too Sad to Tell You*, a young woman recreates *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* while attempting to identify with Ader through a diptych visual structure. A critical issue is that the video is clouded with over-identification, which art theorist Lisa Cartwright defines as an ethically precarious response that spectators encounter when they attempt to imagine themselves in the place of another, to feel like another, and to draw comparisons between another person’s suffering and their own (2008: 24). The important distinction here is between replication and appropriation. The issue is further problematized when one considers that Ader held a lifelong preoccupation with his father’s death at the hands of Nazi occupiers in 1944, leading to the artist’s disappearance (and presumed death) at sea while performing the work *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975). Ultimately, in its naive oversight of the historical

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1. This relational manoeuvring is made possible because the film is entirely silent.
context and personal relevancies of Ader’s original conceptualization, videos such as these question the ethical limitations of this practice.

There are other posted re-creations that avoid ethical concerns and instead demonstrate a constructive potential. Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974) was recorded on the occasion of her 27th birthday. She presents a cosmology of scars and defects upon her body as a political weapon aimed at the systemization of idealized female beauty. The online participant’s embodiment of this intersubjective reality holds the potential to break off into fascinating possibilities. The video *Scars* featured on YouTube represents the quintessential example of how transmedial video art forges meaningful and complex relationships with viewers and holds a potential for innovative aesthetic trajectories. Here participants offer up physical scars and related narratives to fellow YouTubers; however, unlike most other re-creations, they are executed anonymously without the visual reference to the original work by Steele. *Scars* approximates the chronological structure and narrative organization of *Birthday Suit* in order to actualize self-discovery and expunge emotional trauma through acknowledgement and vocalization. It would seem that videos such as these are a means of visualizing catharsis that approaches a form of art therapy.

Influential artists have had their work reproduced for centuries; however, the Internet has transformed how these works are published and circulated. The two strands of video re-creation and appropriation discussed above concern a desire to better understand the self through the artist’s work; that the artist’s physical body represents a prosthetic apparatus that encourages ontological examinations of the self. Yet there are also videos that represent an uncritical self-reflection for the purpose of producing online content and generating more ‘likes’, ‘subscribers’ and ‘shares’. Even so, the videos introduce the work of visual artists to wider audiences and offer new and innovative modalities for discourse while reinterpreting viewer dynamics as relational and collective. The uploader’s re-creations of Ader’s and Steele’s work in the context of their own personal lives represents a radical turn towards the embodiment of the original artwork as an interpretive tool.

References


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