

November 29, 2018
online

Reviews

Be a Body: Shows Around New York Take Up the Materiality of Screen-Based Work

On 'Before Projection,' 'Programmed,' Sara Greenberger Rafferty, Sarah Lucas, and more

By Rahel Aima

Long live the new flesh, I imagine they chanted as they poured out of theaters in 1982, bemuddled and bleary eyed in the sudden sunshine. They had just watched David Cronenberg's techno-erotic body horror flick *Videodrome* and they agreed: video was inescapably bodied now. I didn't see the film until much later, but I have never been able to forget the television scene, where scummy programmer protagonist Max Renn pops in a videotape. The casing seems to ripple, rising and falling as if it's breathing heavily. Veins pop and the monitor becomes a literal boob tube, bulging out of its frame like a mound of flesh. This past fall, a number of exhibitions in New York extended this sentiment, and considered the materiality of screen-based works.

"As collage technique replaced oil paint, the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas," Nam June Paik said in 1965. It didn't quite work out that way, projection having long since superseded the CRT as the technology became affordable for museums and galleries alike. Still, those early years of video art were a time of thrilling foment, when bulky cubic monitors were ubiquitous and artists experimented with the materiality of the medium itself. At SculptureCenter, "**Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974–1995**" presented a tightly edited look into this time when video was sculpture. The exhibition was organized by SculptureCenter director Mary Ceruti and Kyle Dancewicz, and conceived by Henriette Huldish of the MIT List Visual Arts Center, where an expanded version of the show was originally staged.

At times in the exhibition, video stood in for flesh. In Ernst Caramelle's *Video-Ping-Pong* (1974), eye-level monitors at either end of the tennis table depict footage of players. Coupled with the sounds of paddles and bounces, these absent bodies felt uncannily corporeal. In Takahiko Iimura's *TV for TV* (1983), meanwhile, a pair of monitors face each other, screens touching in a tender embrace redolent of Magritte's lovers or a whispered, stickey assignation. There was also a Paik robot assemblage depicting his longtime collaborator, the experimental cellist Charlotte Moorman: in an inversion of Paik's TV cello, the wooden instrument forms Moorman's torso, and TV cabinets looping footage of her performing serve as a blocky delineation of her head and limbs. And Friederike Pezold's *The New Embodied Sign Language* (1973–76) deploys the feminist strategy of self-portraiture as a counter to objectified depictions of women. Four stacked monitors display close-ups of the artist's eyes, mouth, breasts, and crotch like a set of sexual chakras; theatrical makeup provides some anonymity and even armor, but viewed today, the work seems to collapse gender and genitalia.

Perhaps it's unfair to read the past through the politics of the present. Similarly, it is important to recognize that works that feel reductive—such as Diana Thater's *Snake River* (1994), also in "Before Projection," which separates cowboy Western footage into its red, blue, and green layers like a physicalized chromatograph—were important interventions in their time. (Ditto, **Pati Hill**'s sweet-but-snoozy solo of Xerox art at **Essex Street**.) This is true of any historical show, but something about the immediacy of video, or perhaps the prevalence of screens in our lives today, not to mention the current trash fire of a political climate, makes this feel especially urgent.

Considering the video works at SculptureCenter in terms of contemporary digital technology, too, can be rewarding. Take Maria Vedder's rather brilliant *PAL oder Never the Same Color* (1988), in which an assemblage of 25 monitors shows test footage comparing European (PAL) and North American (NTSC) color standards. As the title indicates, there's quite a bit of variance in each monitor's rendering. As they cycle through shades of red, green, and blue, the installation invokes nothing so much as a Google Images search loading artifacts over a poor connection: each image's colors get averaged to their dominant shades. At **Karma**, colorist **Paul Mogensen**'s rule-based paintings furthered this sensibility into the digital realm, especially in smaller works that resemble home printer test sheets, and several marvelous others that alternately suggest Morse code and disk usage graphics. Entirely analog but no less charming were **Daina Mattis**'s "Test Swatch" oil paintings at **High Noon** that set color swatches against marble. Their palette is littoral, moving between light seafoam and the near-black of the deep ocean at night. But here, the screen is not plasma or liquid crystal or even CRT but stretched linen; cutouts in a number of these works make the artifice apparent.

Far and away the most exciting test prints were in **Sara Greenberger Rafferty**'s appropriately named "Testing" at Rachel Uffner. A sprawling inkjet-printed wallpaper of digital files lined the gallery's long entrance corridor, like the sponsor backdrop at a red carpet event or a particularly cluttered computer desktop. They were loosely clustered by a dominant color—a black background in one section, a yellowy-green lower third in another, a sort of jaundiced curtain—almost as if they were the result of the same Google Image search. Found imagery, much of it pulled from discarded eBay film negatives, is encased like prehistoric plant or insect matter in fused glass sculptures that are both screen and device. Color fidelity makes an appearance in old promotional color cards, along with imagery of zipper parts, magnifying glasses, X-rayed baggage, flora, body parts, and contact sheets that are delightfully footnoted with the artist's name—all wonderfully tongue in cheek.

Although it's worth pointing to the achingly spare **Stuart Davis** drawings at **Paul Kasmin**'s oil paint-by-number pixelated skulls and kooky canine standees at **Miguel Abreu**; **Alex Dodge**'s wonderfully tactile paintings at **Klaus von Nichtssagend**, where oils are manipulated to suggest both textiles and thermoformed plastic; and **Danny Lyon**'s disarmingly sincere and frankly humbling photographs at **Gavin Brown's Enterprise**, I was surprised to realize that all the shows I really wanted to spend time with were from women. One of the season's best was "Hysteric Signs," **Katya Tepper**'s four large wall sculptures at **White Columns**. Plungers, bricks, eggshells, felt, sealant, fabric, and multicolored spools semaphore bodies in disarray—the show built on the artist's experience of living with a chronic illness—where the rib cage might be intact but the organs it protects are all askew. Viewing them creates a visceral sensation of being all powdery inside or of having a mouth full of cotton wool.

But back to those gridded stacks of monitors. Do they even exist outside of cinema, in that familiar plot device where characters and audience alike learn about breaking news from an electronics shop window? We talk about secondary and tertiary screens (when you divide your attention between phone, watch, and computer or TV, for example) as a new phenomenon, but have we always lived like this? Take another Paik installation, the gargantuan *Fin de Siècle II* (1989) a megastack of 207 monitors that forms the centerpiece of the Whitney's exhibition, "**Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965–2018**," which runs through April 14. Drawn from the museum's collection, the exhibition presents a very broad—perhaps too broad—overview of art and code, from the Conceptualists through algorithm-generated works, and a newly commissioned augmented reality app.

Of interest here are a number of works that tease out the fleshy politics of the digital: code is never neutral but bears all the biases, however unconscious, of its programmers. Mendi + Keith Obadike's HTML and JavaScript work *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002 and 2018) turns online systems of racial classification on their head to create a spoofy skin color check system. It finds a plus-ça-change historical analogue in **Paul Pfeiffer's** mesmerizing video installation *Goethe's Message to the New Negroes* (2001), which addresses the racialized fetishization of ball players: it comprises a metal armature supporting a small LCD screen mounted high on the wall, like a basketball backboard.

Monitor-based sculpture gets a showing here too, in yet another Paik, *Magnet TV* (1965), which does exactly what the wall text says: a heavy magnet on top of a black-and-white monitor's casing creates a gorgeous moiré sculpture onscreen by interfering with the TV's electronic signals to distort the broadcast image. Especially seductive in this line is **Earl Reiback's** *Thrust* (1969), a phosphor-coated screen mounted perpendicularly to the face of a cathode ray tube altering the translation from electron beam to image, making it look like a phosphorescent, bisected iris and pupil. Or perhaps that's just our brains on television.

But hey, did somebody say boob tube? There's a preponderance of stocking-stuffed mammaries in "Au Naturel," **Sarah Lucas's** first American survey, a remarkable retrospective at the **New Museum** that runs through January 20. And plenty of penises, too, most memorably the very big concrete ones, *Eros and Priapus* (both 2013), drooping over crushed cars. They sit in a junkyard that also boasts a newly commissioned sculpture, *This Jaguar's Going to Heaven* (2018), a burnt-out sports car collaged with unlit Marlboros. (Between this show and Andra Ursuta's penis-studded climbing walls a few years ago, I would venture that the New Museum has the highest DPI, or dicks-per-inch of any American art institution.)

And there's eggs, so many eggs, whether cracked and smashed onto Lucas's partner's body in the video-documented performance *Egg Massage* (2015) or intimated in the yellow-painted door of *Washing Machine Fried Egg (Electrolux)*, 2018, or in the daffodil-and-white setting it shares with the orifice-stuffed plaster women and white goods of the "Muses" series. Unfortunately—and perplexingly, for an artist whose career has been characterized by a sustained evisceration of gender norms—there's some unsavory gender essentialism here too, in the performance-installation *One Thousand Eggs: For Women* (2017–ongoing), a collective action painting in yolk and albumen that seems to TERF-ily associate womanhood with ovaries.

Listen, the shock value of the YBA has long expired and we can probably all agree that genitalia are supremely boring. But still, there's a kind of irreverent insouciance to it all, particularly in the videos of Lucas chowing down on sausages and bananas, and the many blown-up images of the artist over the years. Despite its problematics, it is absolutely the right banner show for the current climate. At a societal nadir of attacks on bodily autonomy and reproductive rights—not to minimize the generalized uptick in xenophobic violence—and in a week where it seemed inevitable that a man accused of attempted rape would be elected to the nation's highest court, "Au Naturel" was just what we needed.