

Video and the Self: Closed Circuit | Feedback | Narcissism

Introduction by Peter Sachs Collopy (Guest Editor)

The relationship between video and the self has been one of the central concerns of video theory. Prominent artists such as Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, and Bruce Nauman have organized their artistic practice around mediated self-observation, either using video to document and complicate their own expressions of self or building installations with which viewers can see and experience themselves in new ways. Such self-portraiture is the subject of the most widely cited essay in this volume, Rosalind Krauss's 1976 "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," and of several essays responding to it.

Even before videotape became an artistic medium in 1965, though, video, self-observation, and narcissism were already the subjects of a theoretical literature produced by psychiatrists and psychologists. If patients saw how disordered they appeared to others, some psychotherapists suggested, they might be motivated to change. Other clinicians rewatched sessions with patients so that either could pause the video to discuss emotions or experiences which they hadn't articulated, essentially putting themselves back into a moment in the conversation. Some of the most prominent artists and theorists working with video were directly influenced by this video therapy tradition.

Video Therapy

Video therapists followed in the footsteps of predecessors who had adopted photography as a therapeutic intervention. In the 1850s, English psychiatrist Hugh Welch Diamond claimed that some patients improved after they had examined and discussed his photographs of them and other patients.¹ A century later, Boston State Hospital psychiatrist Floyd Cornelison and psychologist Jean Arsenian used Polaroid instant photographs and moving image film to reinvent this technique, which they termed "self-confrontation." They also gave it an explicitly psychoanalytic interpretation which was widely cited by video therapists:

Since self-confrontation focuses perception upon an external image of self, this may bring a psychotic individual into better contact with the realistic self. In psychoanalytic formulation, psychosis is a withdrawal of libido from the world of external objects. The photograph of self may be a means of redirecting libido outward. Whether it is surprising, reassuring, or shocking, the image does present a familiar object. It is almost a part of self upon which cathexes have reverted, yet the image is external to the person, and thus is a part of reality to which others can respond, as well as the patient. It is an object that potentially has safe investment value, and the experience it generates may initiate further libidinal investments toward the outside world.²

Seeing oneself, argued Cornelison and Arsenian, was an opportunity for patients to invest emotional energy in an inviting external object—their own image—and thus begin to cure themselves of the narcissism, or investment in the self, underlying their mental illness.

Cornelison and Arsenian's research, suggested Columbia University psychiatrist Milton Berger, was a "historical breakthrough and stimulus to other workers to use photographs, motion pictures, or videotape for self-image confrontation with patients."³

Psychiatry and other fields of medicine were among the first disciplines to employ videotape: Ampex demonstrated educational videotapes of surgery in a 1958 meeting of the American Medical Association, only two years after they began manufacturing the first videotape recorders for television broadcasting.⁴ Psychotherapists first used videotape as a pedagogical technology, watching tapes of practice sessions with their students. Soon, some watched these tapes with patients as well.

Among the first to do so were University of Mississippi psychiatrists Floy Jack Moore, Eugene Chernel, and Maxwell West, who in 1963 videotaped conversations with eighty patients admitted to their neuropsychiatric unit. Citing Cornelison and Arsenian to explain their results, they found that the mental health of patients who viewed tapes of their own sessions improved more substantially and that they were discharged more rapidly than those in a control group.⁵

Moore and his colleagues introduced to video therapy both the methods and the rhetoric of scientific objectivity. They opened and closed the article in which they reported their results with a phrase from Robert Burns's 1786 poem "To a Louse" that would become a commonplace in the writing of video therapists:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!⁶

Video, suggested the researchers, would provide patients with knowledge based on shared rather than idiosyncratic observation, the sort of awareness which historian of science Lorraine Daston has termed *aperspectival objectivity*.⁷ This objective knowledge of self would motivate patients to change.

Video therapy could also be a more meditative exploration of self. In "Some Aspects of the Significance to Psychoanalysis of the Exposure of a Patient to the Televised Audiovisual Reproduction of His Activities," Lawrence Kubie recounts

an experiment in which a subject—apparently himself, based on the biographical details he provides—conversed with his own live video image.⁸ Kubie, a prominent American neurophysiologist and psychoanalyst, served as president of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, editor in chief of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, and professor at Yale University and the University of Maryland.⁹ According to “Some Aspects,” when Kubie watched himself on a monitor, he experienced a deep awareness of his family’s roles in forming his personality. With this technique, Kubie suggests, a patient can “speak to himself” and develop self-understanding without the external influence of a psychotherapist.

Feedback

To describe this process of taking in one’s own output, Kubie borrowed the word “feedback” from cybernetics, a new science which he had a hand in founding. Although the idea of feedback had a long history in the engineering of control systems, mathematician Norbert Wiener, in collaboration with physiologists Arturo Rosenblueth and Walter Cannon, began to apply it in the human sciences of physiology and neurology for the first time in 1942.¹⁰ In the 1940s and early 1950s, Kubie and these men were among those who met in the Macy Conferences to build the discipline of cybernetics on the premise that similar systems of circular causality and flows of information could be found in minds, machines, organisms, societies, and ecologies.¹¹

The art and technology movement of the 1960s, in which video art was incubated, was one of the communities in which the ideas and rhetoric of cybernetics circulated. Video artists were so enthusiastic about feedback that they applied the term to two distinct phenomena: One was the psychological feedback of seeing oneself on a video monitor, which formally involved a flow of information from a human body to a camera to a monitor and back to the person. The other was the optical feedback produced by pointing a camera at its own monitor, which formally involved a flow of information only from monitor to camera and back and which was often used to produce a kaleidoscopic or psychedelic effect by artists such as Eric Siegel, Nam June Paik, and Skip Sweeney.

Both these forms of feedback produced circular causality. They differed, though, in the role of the human, who was integrated into three-party psychological feedback but peripheral to two-party optical feedback, which indeed was attractive in part because the chaotic and emergent visual effects it produced seemed to defy control by the person actually holding and moving the camera.

Infolding

When video art and video therapy encountered each other, then, they both spoke the language of cybernetics. In 1968 Paul Ryan was a former Catholic monk serving as a research assistant to media theorist Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan was fond of quoting Ezra Pound to the effect that “artists are the antennae of the race,” so when Ryan met

painter Frank Gillette in 1968, he loaned him McLuhan's video recorders.¹² Gillette was shooting a documentary in New York's East Village when he in turn met Adelphi University philosopher-sociologist Victor Gioscia working at a drop-in drug treatment center there.¹³ Gioscia had first been introduced to video feedback—"turned on, as usual, by a hip student"—in the Queens College video studio in 1962.¹⁴ Together, the painter and the philosopher "experimented," in Gillette's words, "with the effects of videotape on kids with bad trips—15 to 19 year olds—burnt-out acid cases—let them use the cameras on me, themselves, as a means of expression."¹⁵

Ryan also collaborated with Gioscia. In one experiment, the two men imitated each other's videotaped movements in order to understand each other better. "When I woke up the next morning," recalled Ryan, "I felt like I was wearing his body."¹⁶

In 1969, New York's Howard Wise Gallery mounted the pioneering exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*. Gillette and psychologist-turned-filmmaker Ira Schneider exhibited *Wipe Cycle* (Figure 3.1), an array of nine television monitors playing what Gillette referred to as "live and delayed feedback." They cut between live images of the viewers, images from several seconds before, broadcast television, and pretaped footage of cows, the earth from space, and the exhibit itself being constructed. "The general reaction," said Schneider, "seems to have been a somewhat objectifying experience, and also a somewhat integrating experience in terms of one's place in the Universe."¹⁷

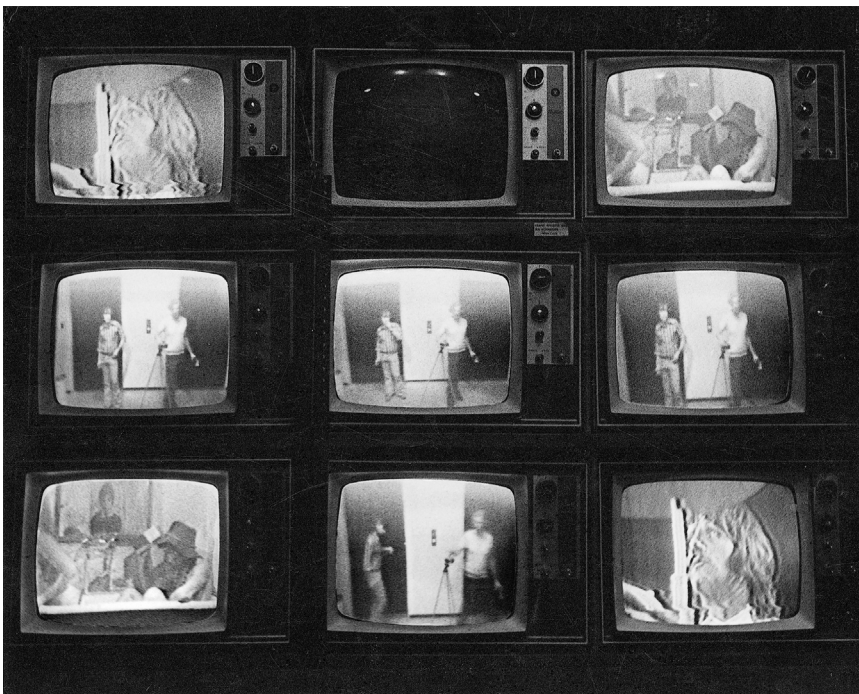


Figure 3.1 Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *Wipe Cycle*, 1969. Photo: Allen Frank.

With such installations, artists grasped for experiences of mind as shared rather than individual. “Videotaping with friends is like having a collective consciousness,” wrote Michael Shamberg, who participated in the video collective Raindance along with Gillette, Schneider, and Ryan.¹⁸ The ideal end of such experimentation was a kind of cybernetic panpsychism, a universal experience of a single mind shared through information circuits of community, society, and ecology. This was the phenomenon which McLuhan and art theorist Gene Youngblood—both inspired by French paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the *noosphere*, an evolving global consciousness—respectively called the “global village” and the “videosphere.”¹⁹

Ryan’s essay “Self-Processing,” published in the second issue of Raindance’s magazine *Radical Software*, traverses the range of relationships between video and the self.²⁰ The essay begins with Ryan’s own contribution to *TV as a Creative Medium*, a translation of self-confrontation to the medium of video installation entitled *Everyman’s Moebius Strip*.²¹ When an individual entered a curtained booth, they found a video camera, a blank monitor, and an audio recording prompting participation, a cybernetic confessional. After two minutes of this guidance, an attendant played a videotape of the viewer back for them.²²

In the remainder of the essay, Ryan draws on the theories of his mentors McLuhan and anthropologist-therapist Gregory Bateson—another participant in the Macy Conferences who Ryan and Gillette met through Gioscia—to suggest some ways in which one could use video to develop an awareness of the interconnectedness of being, rather than a narcissistic “zooming in on ‘self.’” As in his earlier “Videotape: Thinking about a Medium,” Ryan marks a continuity between self-observation and communal awareness by using the term “infolding,” which Teilhard had coined to refer to humanity evolving into a single mind, to also describe the individual experience of watching oneself on tape.²³

In his later essays, Ryan built on the triadic “calculus of intention” of neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch—yet another Macy participant—to develop new topologies which modeled interpersonal and interspecies relationships.²⁴ Ryan also applied these abstruse theories by founding a “utopian video community,” Earthscore, which would “decode the ecology and feed it back to a local community over cable TV.” Although it never grew beyond three members, over three years in the 1970s Earthscore “produced shelves of videotape interpretations of natural and built environments . . . as well as 45 hours of triadic tape (tape of people interacting in three-person combinations).”²⁵

Paul Ryan’s influence is perhaps most evident in the work of American conceptual artist and curator Dan Graham, who has cited Ryan as a source of his interests in both video and topology and has described him as “one of the great video philosophers and pioneers.”²⁶ In “Two Consciousness Projection(s),” Graham analyzes one of his first video works, which used the medium to embody the abstract psychoanalytic theory of projection.²⁷ In his “Essay on Video, Architecture, and Television,” Graham describes how manipulating one’s experience of time with a brief video delay allows a viewer to compare intention and behavior, integrating internal and external selves as Ryan had described through the metaphor of a Möbius strip.²⁸

The Gendered Aesthetics of Narcissism, Subjectivity, and Performance

The discourse around video and the self was already a rich one when American art theorist Rosalind Krauss published her influential “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism” in the debut issue of art criticism journal *October*, which she cofounded in 1976. Focusing not on video therapists or the countercultural communities around *Radical Software* but on artists working at the intersection of video and performance, Krauss argued that “video’s real medium” was not the material apparatus of video but “a psychological situation” in which artists engaged with their own selves as mediated by it. Though she too drew on psychoanalysis, Krauss presented an interpretation of video diametrically (or perhaps dialectically) opposed to those of psychotherapists; where Cornelison, Arsenian, and others suggested that self-confrontation could draw a narcissistic patient out into engagement with the outside world, Krauss concluded instead that it typically led artists “to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self.” Far from a formalist exploration of the unique affordances of new technology, argued Krauss, video art was—with a few exceptions—a concession to neoliberalism’s demand that artists market themselves as brands.²⁹

In “Video Art, the Imaginary and the *Parole Vide*,” British composer and video artist Stuart Marshall also critiqued video art for its narcissism. He related the two forms of video feedback to each other, describing a process through which artists first pointed cameras at their own monitors and then inserted their own bodies into the feedback loop. This self-observation, suggested Marshall, recapitulates the encounter with one’s mirror image as an infant, an encounter which, according to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, precipitates the formation of the ego, an identification with an image which is both self and other. Marshall rejected not only self-oriented video art but also video therapy for fostering “an indulgent video narcissism.”³⁰ He also acknowledged elsewhere, though, that “within the women’s movement . . . such work gathers a political insistence, . . . drawing the viewer into a bracketed structure of viewing which then collapses problematically with the introduction of facts of sexual difference.”³¹

In the decades since, most artists and theorists who have engaged with the relationship between video and subjectivity have done so from this feminist perspective. “Although Krauss used the term ‘narcissism’ pejoratively,” wrote artist and art historian Ann-Sargent Wooster, “this so-called narcissism had a positive aspect. Video allowed women artists to put themselves in the picture for the first time because they became the producers of their own images.”³²

American artist and critic Micki McGee’s “Narcissism, Feminism, and Video Art: Some Solutions to a Problem in Representation” was an early response to Krauss and Marshall. Feminist video artists, argued McGee, had developed several methods for including their own bodies and experiences in their work in order to represent part of the experience of women as a class, rather than succumbing to narcissism.³³

McGee paid particular attention to the 1977 video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Observed*, in which American artist Martha Rosler also used video, and her body, in a feminist critique of objectification. Rosler made herself an object of scientific

measurement and judgment in order to critique the imposition of aperspectival objectivity, the coercion of women to “see herself as others see her,” to which video therapy had contributed a decade earlier.³⁴

The video *Vertical Roll* (1972), in which American sculptor and performance artist Joan Jonas performed around the scrolling horizontal bar created by a maladjusted video monitor, tapping a spoon to produce an industrial rhythm, has also been a recurring subject of debate about narcissism in video. Despite its status as self-portraiture, Krauss saw *Vertical Roll* as an exception to the dominance of narcissism in video art. She interpreted the work formally, analyzing the effects of the bar on a viewer’s perception of time and space, and as a metaphor for the materiality of the video apparatus itself.³⁵ McGee, in contrast, perceived *Vertical Roll* as essentially narcissistic, writing that it “reproduces the characteristics of narcissism unintentionally, neither critiquing the cultural sources of the condition nor investigating its prevalence among women.”³⁶

More recently, scholars have disagreed with both and interpreted *Vertical Roll* as a feminist work. “What Krauss’s analysis fails to recognize in Joan Jonas’s piece is the specific manner in which it theorizes how the ‘personal becomes political,’” writes media scholar Krista Geneviève Lynes in *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits*, a study of how feminist experimental media refract multiplicities of identity into emancipatory unities. To Lynes, *Vertical Roll* is “not only a rich exploration of the mediating function of video’s closed circuit, but also of the process of subject constitution, especially for women.”³⁷ Jonas “disrupted the pleasure of viewing . . . aggressively,” writes art historian Jayne Wark, turning her body and the apparatus of video into a single disorienting experience and challenging the routine objectification of women.³⁸ Revisiting several of the works Krauss examined, art historian and critic Anne M. Wagner evaluates them as interactions between artist and spectator rather than solo exercises. “Their self-absorption (what Krauss called narcissism),” she writes, “is conjoined with an especially aggressive—we can rightly say coercive—posture toward the viewer, by which a new awareness and mode of vision might be urged. (Perhaps an artist needs narcissism to get aggression across.)” Such art demanded a new form of spectatorship, concludes Wagner, in which viewers need “to see actively, to see critically, to see suspiciously. To see themselves doubled, maybe duped, by the artist who is the object of their gaze. . . . To see that art’s summoning of selfhood is compromised by what we might call a ‘media effect.’”³⁹

A Mirror with a Memory

This new, skeptical spectatorship is no longer so new. That our expressions of self are performative and intentional has become a commonplace in art and criticism. And yet, although mediated self-observation no longer plays a central role in either video art or video therapy (a term which now usually refers to remote counseling using internet video), it remains culturally present.

Many of the video experiments discussed in this chapter involved simultaneously observing an image of oneself on a monitor and recording it on tape. This “copresence

of recording and representation,” a phenomenon which Angela Krewani terms “isochronism,” now distinguishes the smartphone selfie from other modes of portraiture. “The complex relationship between self and image” constructed by both video and the selfie is, Krewani concludes, “divergent from photography and . . . from television as well.”⁴⁰

Czech-born philosopher Vilém Flusser had this dynamic in mind when he described video as “a mirror with a memory.” Video, he argued, was therefore uniquely suited to philosophical visualization, to “render visible our most abstract concepts, and thus deliver us from alienated speculations.”⁴¹ From this perspective, the medium was not (or not only) a cultivator of narcissism or objectivity but a tool for thinking about them—and many other things—deeply and intensively.

Danish media scholar Tobias Raun examines how transgender vloggers use simultaneous self-observation and recording to construct identities and new presentations of self, rendering visible the abstraction of gender identity. Watching oneself on screen has continuities, writes Raun, with memoir and film depictions of trans people recognizing their transitioning or transitioned selves in literal mirrors. But internet video also displays the same image to distant others, and being seen can foster “self-validation” and “healthy narcissism,” as Carson, one of Raun’s research subjects, suggests. “It is the image,” Raun writes, “that allows the self to love the self.”⁴²

Following Flusser, each work of video art discussed in this chapter can be read as a work of philosophy, as can each experiment in video therapy. It is only fitting, though,

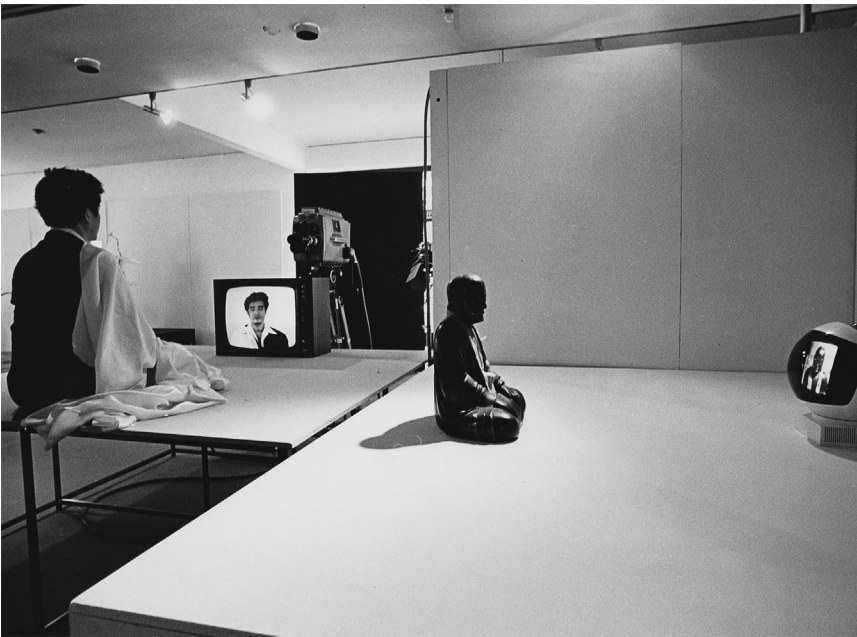


Figure 3.2 Nam June Paik, performance with *TV Buddha* at Projekt 74, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne 1974. Photo: Joschik Kerstin, © Archiv Herzogenrath.

to end this introduction with a video installation which is particularly assertive about its embodiment of a philosophy of the self, so much so that philosopher Tae-seung Lim writes that it “expresses ‘visualized ideology.’”⁴³ *TV Buddha* (1974; Figure 3.2), by Korean-born artist Nam June Paik, presents an ancient Buddha statue meditating not on a blank wall, as was traditional, but on his own video image.⁴⁴ “The meditating Buddha image,” writes Walter Smith, “represents *nirvana*, or enlightenment. . . . And so, the Buddha contemplating himself is contemplating, or absorbed within, his own *nirvana*.”⁴⁵ For the rest of us, then, is Burns’s “giftie” one of self-knowledge, self-realization, narcissism, shared subjectivity, or a new path to enlightenment?

Notes

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- 3 Milton M. Berger, “Confrontation through Videotape,” in *Videotape Techniques in Psychiatric Training and Treatment*, ed. Milton M. Berger (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1970), 19.
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- 6 Robert Burns, “To a Louse, On Seeing One on a Lady’s Bonnet at Church,” st. 8.
- 7 Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” *Social Studies of Science* 22 (1992), 599.
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