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ARTICLES

5 Old-School NYC Video Artists You Should Know (and Follow)

Jason Varone April 18, 2014

Peter Campus, still from "Kiva" (1971) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Most written accounts of the origins of video art trace the medium back to the Sony Portapak, the first affordable, battery-powered, portable video-recording device that could be operated by a single individual. The resulting democratization of video was quickly seen as having radical potential. Artists could challenge the rising influence of broadcast media. All of a sudden, the barriers to working in this time-based medium were removed.

Looking at the work of a few pioneers, specifically those on the scene in New York City, it's obvious that technology was a catalyst for a new type of electronic art; these artists were trailblazers in both fields. And this remains true of their current work, 37 years after the first Portapak hit the market.

Here, then, are five old-school NYC video artists whose work you should know about and (still) be following.

Mary Lucier



Mary Lucier (b. 1944, Bucyrus, OH) burned [vidicon](#) tubes with lasers and pointed the video camera directly at the sun, testing the limits of technology in her pieces from the 1970s, such as “Dawn Burn” and “Fire Writing.” She’s also known for telling subtle but powerful human stories in multichannel video installations, and the natural landscape is featured prominently in her current work. While the documentary impulse in her video practice has remained strong, she has consistently demonstrated a mastery of technique and a desire to “take time and make it spatial,” in [her words](#). As she continues to tell stories in a nonlinear format, she’s used increasingly sophisticated tools to refine her aesthetic and create beauty more often seen in cinemas than in galleries.

Recommended reading: Phong Bui’s 2007 interview with Mary Lucier in [The Brooklyn Rail](#).

Jaime Davidovich

Jaime DavidovichTHE LIVE! SHOW PROMO 1982.mov



Jaime Davidovich (b. 1936, Argentina) created and produced an early cable television program, a kind of art variety show, called *The Live! Show*, which ran from 1979 to 1984. Artists working in video at the time were fixated on broadcast television as a technological reality, as well as the politics of those doing most of the broadcasting. Looking back at Davidovich's videos, it almost seems like the "videokitsch" style that he developed laid the groundwork for what we now call the "new aesthetic." In a review of Davidovich's 2013 exhibition *Museum of Television Culture*, *New York Times* art critic [Holland Cotter](#) remarked: "It has been said that the art world, like American culture, from which it is inseparable, is so extreme in its crassness and cluelessness as to defy satire. This is not so. Mr. Davidovich brilliantly nailed it 30 years ago and in terms every bit as pertinent now as then. And he made it look like fun, which remains a heroic accomplishment."

Recommended viewing: ["How to paint Ronald Reagan,"](#) from *The Live! Show*.

Beryl Korot

Beryl Korot (b. 1945, New York, NY) was a founder of the magazine *Radical Software*. Issue #1 stated: “Power is no longer measured in land, labour or capital, but by access to information and the means to disseminate it.” The magazine operated like a quasi-website before the internet existed, acting as an information exchange for people challenging the influence of broadcast television. And it tried to build a community working towards social change with the new tools of visual communication. Korot later moved on to multichannel installation works like “Dacau 1974.” She often included physical textiles and weavings in her installations to represent the loom, an important conceptual trigger for her. She was the subject of a 2010 retrospective at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, *Beryl Korot: Text/Weave/Line—Video, 1977-2010*. Korot’s current videos are innovative in their use of editing software and the layering of content.

Recommended viewing: Beryl Korot talks about *Radical Software* on [Art21](#).

Peter Campus

Of all the artists on this list, Peter Campus (b. 1937, New York, NY) is the one with whom you’re most likely already familiar. His closed-circuit installations and [single-channel works](#) from the 1970s helped define video and are an enormous influence on many artists working today (including this author, who, in full disclosure, currently works as an assistant to Campus.) Looking deeper, however, you’ll see a focus on psychology and nature in his work, which is often a thoughtful rendering of what it means to be a human being in the contemporary world. It’s also rare that we talk about the surface quality of video art, but Campus’s screens are as luscious as paintings. He currently has a [solo exhibition](#) on view at Tierney Gardarin Gallery in New York through April 19th.

Recommended reading: Bill Viola writes about the “master” and how he almost became the man who electrocuted Peter Campus in [Art in America](#).

Joan Jonas

Joan Jonas (b. 1936, New York, NY) is perhaps best known as a performance artist, but she was also quick to incorporate video into her practice and made seminal single-channel videotapes. “Vertical Roll” (1972) looks simultaneously at the phenomenology of video as a medium and the female body — two seemingly disparate concepts that seem to be born together in this work. “I found myself continually investigating my own image in the monitor,” Jonas once said. “I bought a mask of a doll’s face. It transformed me into an erotic seductress. I named this TV persona Organic Honey. Increasingly obsessed with the process of my own theatricality, the images fluctuated between narcissistic and a more abstract representation.” Her first video work, “Wind” (1968), was one part old cinema, one part 1960s Minimalism ... and Peter Campus was the cameraman. Jonas is currently a professor emerita at MIT and was recently chosen to represent the US at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Recommended reading: “Video Art Pioneer Joan Jonas On Her Upcoming Performance Piece, YouTube, Cooking And Bees” in the Huffington Post.

It’s instructive to see how the influence of these artists, and other video art pioneers, spread throughout the globe over time. I helped generate this interactive map, developed as a digital humanities project for the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU, with which you can explore the works of these artists, and others, through their exhibition records. Zooming in on New York City, you’ll see an overwhelming density of exhibitions, but it’s also clear that institutions such as the Everson Museum in Syracuse, the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, and others around the world mounted important shows. The site helps illustrate how a new art form took hold. And

in many ways, the early days of video are informative when looking at today's art market and electronic works like animated GIFs and Vines. Perhaps they're all part of the same lineage.

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