

First Generation

Art and the Moving Image, 1963-1986

First Generation Art and the Moving Image, 1963-1986 was born with the intention of presenting to the public, in a contextualized manner, the historic core of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía's video collection. It has been built up in recent years with the goal of laying solid foundations upon which the collection could grow. Curated by Berta Sichel, director of the Museum's Audiovisual Department, the exhibition aims to reconstruct a history which has been neglected for a long time via the acquired works and with the support of a small yet significant group of works on loan to cover existing gaps. The exhibition has been organized around the different approaches and ideas of the artists who worked with video during the first 25 years of this medium. These include the influence of Fluxus, the critique of commercial television, the relationship between the medium and the viewer, feminism, performance and the legacy of minimalism and conceptual art.

Not a thematic exhibition, it does not try to follow a strict chronological order either. Rather, it is a vision of how and why a technology of recording, broadcasting and reproducing sound and images, which emerged in 1950—and technically different than cinema—became an artistic medium; a "study" of the influence technology and mass culture had on the social and artistic changes of an era, at a time when cultural acceleration and the cross-pollination of ideas was beginning. In this sense, 1968 marks a before and after in this history: for that was the year in which a portable, relatively affordable television set appeared on the market, opening this medium up to a vast new group of people.

The original exhibition design by Ángel Borrego challenges the traditional concept of "black box" when showing media-based works. The show starts out with a work in the spirit of Fluxus: the documentary *Fluxus Replayed* (1991) by Takahiko iimura, which reproduces some of the key performances of Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, George Brecht and Allison Knowles, among others. Behind this video, a unique document from 1979 is projected, created and re-edited by Joan Logue, who describes it as a "portrait" of a day in the life of Paik.

The first room of the exhibition features a group of pioneer works: *6 TV Dé-coll/age* (1963) by Vostell, six works from the series *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television* (1963-65) and *TV Rodin - The Thinker* (1976-78) by Paik, plus *The Bathroom Sink* (1964), an installation by Robert Whitman which, shot in 16 mm, is a good example of the decisive years in which the moving image was being introduced in the art world. Upon exiting this room, we find *Manhattan is an Island* (1974), the work of Ira Schneider, one of the first artists who explored the possibilities of multimedia installation. This particular piece examines how the fact that Manhattan is an island conditions the physical reality and experience of New York City. It is followed by *Face/Ings* (formerly known as *Back to Back*), from 1974, made by Takahiko iimura with a closed-circuit video camera. In this work—just like in others in which he uses the closed-circuit video he had invented—the artist explores the notion of feedback.

The next group includes all those works related to television as a physical and immaterial body: information, manipulation, time and light. This is the case of *TV Interruptions*, by the pioneer in English video, David Hall. Made for Scottish television and aired in August and September 1971, the interruptions appeared in the middle of a typical program without prior warning. This work is regarded as the first example of the intervention of British artists on television and the formative moment of British video art. Today it is shown as an installation, *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces): The Installation*, which can be seen in this exhibition. Another piece is *The Live! Show*, a compilation of the weekly "anti-television" program presented and produced by Jaime Davidovich for cable television and broadcast by Manhattan Cable from 1975 to 1984.

The critical attitude towards television and the media industry and the manipulation of televised information as a strategy to challenge our perception are also represented by three Spanish artists: Antoni Muntadas, with *Between the Lines* (1979), Joan Rabascall and Benet Rossell with *Bio Dop* (1974) and Eugènia Balcells with *TV Weave* (1985), which subjects television images to processes of abstraction and manipulation to expose culturally-coded ideas. Muntadas' piece reveals how the process of editing information for television manipulates the news, as well as what a tiny difference there is between news programming and advertisements. *PM Magazine* (1982), by Dara Birnbaum, borrows the name of a famous, very popular television show. Taking music and images from real broadcasts and transmitting them on five monitors, the artist seems to suggest that the viewer is willing to watch anything that appears on television, no matter how banal. *The O. J. Simpson Project*, by Roger Welch, takes its title from the name of the American football player. The installation situates the viewer between images of Simpson—the star—and the spectacular image of a huge crowd of anonymous fans during one of his games.

First Generation also shows works by an international group of women who made significant contributions to the development of video as an artistic language. The importance of this female presence in the so-called "alternative" media and artistic forms (performance, artists' books, video, etc.) is undeniable. During this period of artistic exploration and political explosion, a large number of extremely coherent and inspired works were produced, acting as a link between modernity and post-modernity. Artists such as Hannah Wilke, Mary Lucier, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, Ulrike Rosenbach and VALIE EXPORT are represented in the show; most of them exposed their body and their nude self as a way of claiming control of their own bodies. Another woman who contributed to the aesthetic transgression of the Seventies was the Vice President of Fluxus, Shigeko Kubota, who applied the Fluxus concept of performance and event to video. *Duchampiana. Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976) is inspired by the famous, transgressive painting by Marcel Duchamp to provoke, in turn, another transgression. This broad selection of works shows how women found their own voice against discriminatory policies, inside and out of the art world, and makes clear the very different use they gave to video with respect to their male counterparts.

Next to the work of these women, there are pieces by internationally-recognized artists with very diverse influences: painting, film and minimalism. Peter Campus, Gary Hill, David Lamelas, Thierry Kuntzel, Bill Viola, Juan Downey, Rafael França, Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman address themes ranging from perception to performance.

The exhibition closes as it opens: Paik and Vostell. *Mirage Stage* (1986) by Paik and a video recording of his performance with the cellist Charlotte Moorman made by Otto Piene that same year; and *New York Stuhl* (1976) by Vostell, which immerses us in a state of total amnesia about the origin of information.

A reference area consisting of 80 single-channel videos in a database complements the content of the show. This format allows visitors to make their own connections and discoveries, to interpret and reinterpret the history of the first generation of video artists, and to arrive at a new understanding of video work from its beginnings up to 1986.

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