Welcome to Episode 98: Video Art: Consuming Female Imagery

Together we will explore video as a medium in art. And the astonishing variety of ways female visual artists use video technology including the launching of Youtube which "dramatically leveled the playing field for anyone willing to post video online." Video art gives artists the freedom to situate their works outside the gallery to be their own producers and distributors. It follows artists out in the world sharing images and stories and documents performances that can live on. For female artists, "incorporating video art into their works becomes a means of rebellion, protest, satire, and self-expression."

The roots of Video art originated in 1965. Korean born artist Nam June Paik made his first tapes on the new portable Sony camera. "The Sony Port a Pack was battery powered and self-contained; both camera and recorder system could be carried and operated by a single person requiring neither studio or crew." (art assignment) Through this newer technology Paik found a whole new art form. It opened up avenues for artists to record and document their performances easily and cheap. He used the "recorded images as raw material, reimagining them into hybrid works "bridging video, sculpture, experimental music and performance." In his collaboration with cellist Charlotte Moorman, he created "TV Bra for Living Sculpture" (1969), featuring Moorman playing her cello wearing little more than a bra fashioned from miniature television sets. He filmed her running her bow across a stack of TVs that played pre-recorded images of her doing the same. American artist and early pioneer of video art Bruce Naumann used video to document and reveal "the hidden creative process of the artist by filming himself in his studio. Just him and the camera in his studio doing tasks or seemingly nonsensical movements like bouncing against a wall or walking atop a line on the floor balancing himself like a tightrope walker.

One of the world's leading video artists American Bill Viola gave the following explanation for why many contemporary artists prefer video as an art form. He wrote, "I first touched a video-camera in 1970 as a first year art student. In those politically charged times, making art took on a renewed urgency, and the new electronic communication technologies played a central role in re-imagining not only what a work of art could be but also how it could reach beyond the art world to engage life and society directly and transform the world. Video art exists somewhere between the permanence of painting and the temporary existence of music."

I experienced Viola's video work, "The Raft," 2004, at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut. Inspired by "art historical sources from ancient Greek and Roman friezes to Gericault's 19th century work "The Raft of Medusa," a monumental painting of survivors of a shipwreck, Viola's powerful video installation depicts a "group of ordinary people casually standing together. Suddenly they are struck by strong blasts of water that rushes in, overtaking them, and then, just as unexpectedly, the waters recede." Depicted at life-sized scale, we the viewer are left with the aftermath of the deluge as "the victims huddle together, seek protection, and help those who have fallen." The experience from the viewer's perspective is so immersive, you stand in a darkened room and all that surround you is the roaring sounds of water--it is meticulously captured in slow-motion--"we are aroused in a visceral experience that addresses human calamity and shared humanity in a response to a crisis." I watched it several times over--the life sized figures, the dark space, the roaring waters that toss the individual figures; you do not hear their collective voices, only the sound of the water, you too become tossed with them.

Let's look at a pioneer female artist in this medium, one of the most important figures to emerge in the New York scene of the 1960s and 70s, Joan Jonas. Her work, which brings together elements of video, dance, props, installation, performance, drawing, and audio, has been described as a kind of “collage of sound, visuals and emotion.” Her works draw from mythic stories from various cultures featuring fairy tales. She is in essence a storyteller who discovers alternative ways to retell these time-honored narratives, emphasizing potent symbols from the original texts. In her practice Jonas says, "I rehearsed my work only at night, and when I rehearsed, I stepped into another space that was not the same as my everyday space. You could almost call it a séance." In her earlier works, other artists were incorporated. Jonas set them up and gave them props or tasks. The performers both followed directions and played with the objects at sites in New York including Wall Street. It created a sense of playfulness.

Jonas credits growing up in New York, attending both operas and ballet performances with her mother--they "made an impression on me." As an artist Jonas says, "I wanted to develop my own language and the minute I started performing I began to invent in a different way through my body movements, through how I use music, sound and three-dimensional space. I was very interested in film and how to translate my work into another medium so that it would not disappear. One example, is her iconic video 1972 work "Vertical Roll," "is titled after the technological glitch common to TV at the time." Jonas explained, "it was a dysfunction of the monitor; by turning a knob you make the black line go down." Jonas structured a performance in front of the camera that accounted for the video rolling bar which fragments her body into disjointed frames. In the work we "see various parts of the performer's body, her masked face, her wheeling legs, her rotating, corset-clad torso. All are shot from a dizzying variety of angles, abstracting many of the body parts so they appear strange and unfamiliar. "Vertical Roll" also has a feminist aspect in its search for female imagery and concern of how women are represented on TV.

Another early video art visionary is Martha Rosler. In her film "Semiotics of the Kitchen," from 1975, Rosler dons an apron and appears in a kitchen in a cooking demonstration. In the six minute parody of television cooking shows, she "introduces the viewer to a series of utensils in alphabetic chronology. Her presentation of the objects becomes increasingly aggressive as she swipes the knife through the air, slams down the meat tenderizer or stabs the worktop with an ice pick." She does this "staring murderously into the lens." This contradicts society's image of the happy homemaker in a "decidedly passive aggressive fashion. Each physical kitchen object is a "physical manifestation of rage at the subjugation and domestication of women." Here Rosler engages us to the female experience and her interest in the female subject within patriarchy using the parody of the cooking show to address the implications of traditional female roles. Jonas and Rosler are important examples of "how early feminist artists co-opted the video medium to establish themselves as important new voices disembodied from the male art canon and its many years of more traditional artwork."

In the wake of YouTube artists like Jillian Mayer democratizes the medium further in her work, 2011, "I Am Your Grandma." The one minute performance work is an autobiographical video diary that Mayer records for her unborn grandchildren. By placing the video on YouTube, she conducts a phenomenological study of why people share their personal feelings with anonymous strangers, and whether this sharing affects the actual emotional significance of the piece. The work challenges notions of self-perception of mortality, celebrity, and even the universal impetus for creation and legacy. At the same time, the packaging of the work as a viral-friendly video raises metaphysical questions about artifice and reality.

"I am your Grandma" narrative begins with a then 24-year old looking straight into the camera saying, “One day, I'm gonna have a baby,” and then singing/speaking or rapping in a robotic, echoey timbre. “*And you will call her mom/And that baby will have a baby/And you will have this song to know that/I am your grandma*.” In the middle of these verses, edits in the images reveal transformations of Mayer, hair and makeup go from "basic to alien and cartoonish, a tacky futuristic vision defiant of contemporary style" In one of the personas Mayer is wearing a white Afro and black lipstick that is applied well over her lip line. In another she her head is covered in a blue head wrap, lips are exaggerated in blue, the upper part of her face is covered in a mask.

These exaggerated personas are not who Mayer, a white, woman with straight brown hair, brown eyes and non-descript features goes around looking like. She wanted to throw her future grandchildren a curve ball. Mayer says, “I thought more about the generations that would come after me and how we all try to convey our personalities and our essence and our humanness to them, and then I went a step farther by making it perverse by adding all of this additional information, like fabricated masks, so it was something that I thought would encompass more of a play on that, so it’s kind of like taking something sincere and genuine and then kind of subverting it or kind of transforming it into something else as entertainment for the next generation.” It is 63 seconds-- in the podcast notes I will include a link to the video. It's a wild ride.

"Technology is the imprint of the human mind onto the material substance of the nature world, says Bill Viola, "Like the Renaissance, today's technological revolution is fueled by a combination of art, science and technology and the universal human need to share our individual ideas and experiences in ever-new ways. The medium of video, where images are born and die every instant, has brought a new humanism to contemporary art. The digital image has become the common language of our time, and through it living artists are once again emerging from the margins of the culture to speak directly to the people in the language of their experience."

I only touched the surface of the tsumani of video works available and accessible to us. I encourage to seek them out in a gallery or museum setting like Viola's "The Raft" or from the comfort of your smart phone. Explore some of these video works of art, by both the female artists highlighted in the episode and male artists like Bill Viola. In what ways do these works speak directly to you? Email me at bernadine@beyondthepaint.net. I will share your thoughts in an upcoming episode

Thank you for listening. Resources for this episode include Jillian Mayer website, Martha Rosler website, PBS Art Assignment, Art21, Tate Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Miami New Times writer Hans Morgenstern, writer Emily Dinsdale. I also added links to the video performances in the podcast notes and you can see still images from these works at my website beyondthepaint.net or at beyondthepaintpodcast on Instagram. Thank you.