

# RESOLUTIONS 3

Global Networks of Video

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# 26 Video Art on YouTube

Alexandra Juhasz

## Video Art (Writing) on YouTube via the Book and the Web

In this essay I draw several distinctions between old and nouveau art video given the fact of YouTube and how it alters the production, distribution, and consumption of video (art) via Web 2.0 technologies and a corporate architecture. But not only video has been changed; our new technologies affect our writing about video in equal measure. Just so, this essay was first posted as short but inter-related blog posts about video art on YouTube, always also anticipating their place in an essay in this edited volume. And this essay pales and fails in all the ways old technologies now must: there is no place for video here; it is not interactive; it is slow and outdated. I hope you will excuse this clunky exercise in translation from new to old media because it so concisely demonstrates my analyses about video's new forms through form. Without its original links (to videos), there are places you just can't go, so I've signified the place of video (a major part of the writing in my blog) through the addition of frozen and unyielding frame grabs. Of course, this paper version also evidences the particular strengths of our quickly vanishing and outdated forms: how a book, such as this one, can create context, breadth, focus, and the build of intertextuality allowed by the collected efforts of experts authorized by elite institutions like an academic press. Even so, whenever possible I prefer to publish my YouTube writing on the Internet (see my video book about YouTube, published online in 2011 by the MIT Press), where it points to (if not yet achieves) promises that had similarly compelled (old) video artists: of people-made, networked, multimodal, community-produced, and community-producing media culture.<sup>1</sup>

Video Art on YouTube: A Matter of Vetting and Consumption  
*October 26, 2009*

I have been commissioned to write an article about video art on YouTube for the forthcoming scholarly anthology *Resolutions 3* (in the next few months I'll be testing fragments of the article on my blog). The third in a trilogy, this anthology will embark on an "analysis of the third decade of video

as marked within and outside the margins of art production, broadcast interventions, festival codification, projected spectacle, museum entombment, digital tracing, 24/7 streaming, activist tool, essay and camcorder document.”<sup>2</sup>

As you can see, *Resolutions 3* engages the common usage of the term *video art*—one used rather unselfcritically across the art world, community media, and academia since the late 1960s—to refer broadly to two of the major strands of nonindustrial uses of the medium that quickly emerged after the invention of the Portapak: video that speaks to and against the art world and/or to activist communities and goals. In this rather rarified usage, *video art* carries assumptions about method, form, and audience. The term refers to varied uses of the medium that nevertheless succeed at demonstrating (1) some self-awareness of previous forms (of art, media, or evidence) and an attendant attention to craft and (2) some manner of non-industrial funding, production, and distribution often in clear defiance to those models that organize industrial television, advertising, or film. Those (already) aware of this tradition understand how it loosely includes a wide variety of work that receives its authorization not within the text itself but via display or consumption: installations and single-channel work that circulate and are sold within museums, galleries, and other venues of the art world; another body of video that is sold or at least marketed by distributors so as to be bought/rented and screened primarily within institutions like libraries, universities, and nonprofit organizations; work that circulates in festivals and other nonindustrial exhibition settings; and work that the artist self-circulates as art to these audiences.

Video art has been given a bad name, and rightly so, by the sort of chi-chi experimentation that goes well with brie and white wine and mauve-walled art galleries and designer hair dos. Video is cheap enough to produce, by feature film standards, and yet its very cheapness and accessibility has created a contradiction: video-making is within the financial reach of many, and yet, like most modern art, it’s surrounded by a noxious aura of elitism.<sup>3</sup>

In Peter Rainer’s 1986 essay for the first *Resolution(s)* book, video becomes art only when it is vetted, circulated, or consumed as such. Thus, it is not immediately evident what this term might mean when applied to the millions of videos that circulate for free “outside the margins of art production” on YouTube, neither made nor seen as video art even if they are about “art.”

The project’s focus is not, therefore, on “video art,” as that term is commonly understood, or on video as an autonomous medium

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top, the YouTube logo is on the left, and navigation links like 'Home', 'Videos', 'Channels', and 'Shows' are in the center. On the right, there are links for 'Subscriptions', 'History', and 'Upload'. The video title is 'Street Art: Joshua Allen Harris' Inflatible Bag Monsters'. The video player shows a street scene with a large, dark, inflatable bag monster in the foreground. Text overlays on the video include 'STREET ART', 'Joshua Allen Harris', and 'Are you our Winterless Weather Forecaster?'. Below the video player, there are 4,023 ratings (represented by stars), 1,089,320 views, and sharing options for 'Favorite', 'Share', 'Playlists', and 'Flag'. There are also links for 'Send Video', 'MySpace', and 'Facebook'. On the right side of the player, there is a 'New York Magazine' logo and a 'Subscribe' button. Below that, there is a small text block: 'Call us boring and simple-minded, but before we saw the work of street artist Joshua Allen Harris we never once considered the artistic possibilities of subway exhaust. Using only tape and garbage...'. At the bottom right, there is a 'More From: NewYorkMagazine' link.

*Street Art: Joshua Allen Harris' Inflatible Bag Monsters*, 1,089,320 views, by *New York* magazine, July 22, 2008, sponsored by Jergens. Accessed June 5, 2012. This video had been seen 1,089,320 times when I submitted this article in 2009.

possessing essential features, but on video in relation to ongoing cultural, aesthetic, and political agendas and activities—video as a source and as a medium for contemporary expression that is allied with and paralleled by myriad cultural and critical discourses in specific and sometimes surprising ways.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the video on YouTube (I speak of that made by people and not corporations) is home video, the third major strand of common non-industrial uses of the medium. This tradition has been only sporadically understood to be within video art (most typically when it is used as a formal strategy by an already known video artist) because it by definition must fail the vetting and the circulation standards of the art/political strands of video art—that is, until YouTube began to change that. Home video is by definition made by one who is not formally trained and speaks neither to histories or theories of meaning making (outside the very real conventions of home video and YouTube itself) nor to larger communities but rather quite literally to oneself (and family and friends and all of YouTube).

Circulation without vetting. Access without training. Video without funding. Image outside traditional tradition. Video art on YouTube? Pole Art.



*Pole Art—First Pole Dance Video—Pole Art Practice (This Is a Video Response to Winner of Miss Pole Dance Australia 2006 & 9 Felix Cane), 1,285,166 views. Accessed June 5, 2012.*

### Video Art on YouTube: The Name Is Equivocal

October 27, 2009

VIDEO ART. The name is equivocal. A good name. It leaves open all the questions and asks them anyway. Is this an art form, a new genre? An anthology of valued activity conducted in a particular arena defined by display on a cathode ray tube? The kind of video made by a special class of people—artists—whose works are exhibited primarily in what is called “the art world.”

—David Antin, “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium”

Have you tried to find an equivocal name like *video art* on YouTube? Searching for anything is never the best way to find it (random, happy surprise loosely calculating the flow all the while inventing terms by channeling the zany, half-baked logic of a teenager is the only method I know that gets you anything near like what you want). I’ll attest that you can’t find much video



Konad Nail Art Video [www.designurnails.com](http://www.designurnails.com), 701,347 views. Accessed June 5, 2012.

art there by using that or any other term, like the other common one, *art video*—that is, if one is looking for the practices already heralded as such by the authorities of the art world, academia, or independent media.

As proves typical of the site, what you *do* find gives some indication of regular people's understanding of both things and the words that define them, signifier and signified all mixed up, of course, with corporate and individual's shenanigans as terms are gamed hoping to achieve higher hits.

A search under *video art* finds videos about art—little of it high, most very low—as well as things with the word *art* in their titles: whether that be the man's name, the antiquated use of *to be*, or industrial crafts repackaged in hopes of better sales.

As ever, the populist ways of YouTube dominate. The everyday practices (and crafts) of everyday people—making coffee and doing nails, skateboarding and pole dancing, painting with sand or trash bags—snatch the term from its home in the realm and things of experts, professionals, and artists, reattaching it to products and activities understood and loved because they are easy to make and ready to buy and consume.

## Ad Hoc, Piecemeal Video Art

*October 30, 2009*

Towards the end of the middle decade of the twentieth century, a perplexing and complex form emerged in Europe and the United States. Various called video art, artists' video, experimental video, artists' television, "the new television," even "Guerrilla TV," the genre drew on a diverse range of art movements, theoretical ideas, and technological advances, as well as political and social activism. In this period of dynamic social, economical and cultural change, much new art was formally and politically radical.

—Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art*

(Traditional) video art on YouTube is (1) hard to find, (2) ad hoc in its inclusion, (3) made more accessible because it's there, and (4) not made for that place and, thus, is ill suited. (Nouveau) video art on YouTube is made for (and probably therefore about) online, people-made, corporate-hosted media.

## Everything on YouTube Is Video Art . . . Nah

*September 10, 2009*

Again, I am moved to respond to Virginia Heffernan's intelligent analyses of YouTube. She made some provocative claims about YouTube and the avant-garde this weekend in the *New York Times*—"It's a place for art"—scooping me in the process, at least in regard to the claim by which I am starting an essay about video art on YouTube (to be published in the scholarly anthology *Resolutions 3*), currently in draft form. There, I make the claim, "Let's imagine that everything on YouTube is video art."

In my draft writing, I had decided that although all the people-made stuff *could* be considered art—in the sense that it had been carefully crafted by somebody and then consciously distributed with the intention of the public communication of self-expression—I didn't want to consider the volumes of clearly unconsidered work on YouTube to be art after all. In its self-aware isolation (I made this in my room or in my backyard using my butt and with my wrestling buddies), it doesn't consciously connect to other bodies or theories of video or to other artists; it doesn't show enough care or community. I suppose there could be a scene of butt catchers, as Heffernan suggests, but toward what project, with what beliefs, and in the name of what end, other than another derivative video? You need a shared





*Guy Catches Laptop with His Butt*, 2,475,826 views. Accessed November 30, 2009.

vocabulary, agenda, history, and set of goals to make an art scene or an art video.

Of course, as I often suggest, art video can be found on YouTube (like every other marginal form or desire) sitting precariously on the edge of NicheTube, and I believe that Heffernan is right to characterize Manhattan Bridge Piers in this way.<sup>5</sup> I remain unconvinced, however (even as I'd like to dream), that this presents the possibilities of an art vernacular; most of what people are making on YouTube can not be so easily traced back to the aesthetic or poetic preoccupations of art traditions or even alternative culture—in fact, quite the opposite.

Heffernan begins with the beginning and suggests that the first YouTube video, "Me at the Zoo," sets a standard for YouTube: "visually surprising, narratively opaque, forthrightly poetic." I find, however, that most of the videos on YouTube are neither surprising nor poetic, falling as they so easily do into the quickly consolidating vernaculars of either "good" corporate production or "bad" people-made videos (a case I have made in regard to her previously published euphoric read of Susan Boyle). While DIY video may provide us with the lovely surprises she goes on to convincingly

detail in the *haul-fail* genres (linked, I think, to what my students and I have called flow videos), these are all, at the end of the day, quite similar spectacles highlighting the outrageous talent or odd behaviors of regular people made to be mocked, adored, or both. Of course, dominant television is already dominated by reality media that mocks and rewards the talent and aspirations of regular people. I would suggest that professional media looks more and more like the (worst) of people-made media and that this is at least too bad, if not surprising.

### Everything *off* YouTube is Video Art

*October 31, 2009*

I recently wrote on this blog (October 26, 2009) that for video art “authorization needs to occur via display or consumption. Video becomes art when it is vetted, circulated or consumed as such.” So what happens to real video art found on YouTube, hidden among the mayhem? If it can’t be vetted, can it be video art?

Like classic video art, people-made video on YouTube speaks to the traditions of video (on YouTube), which mostly speak to conventions of dominant media. And whether the video is good or bad, people construct YouTube work using the craft at their disposal. Furthermore, such video, like its old-school precursor, is made outside (but eerily congruent to) dominant modes (including video art).

But sitting as it does on YouTube and, thus, only authorized by numbers (of hits)—itself a mark of populist mediocrity—and never understood as art in the first place but construed through a logic of everyday practice, home production, and consumer fun, it can really be art only if it moves *off* YouTube.

### Video Art(ists) of the YouTube Archive

*November 2, 2009*

The many types of video art have been made with a variety of intentions, ideas, working styles, and structures. Some address pure aesthetic concerns, where others prioritize content in less formal but still original and more deeply personal ways.

—Kate Horsfield, “Introduction to the Video Data Bank Collections”

(Here, you should see Kate Horsfield interviewed in the 1970s about video, but Google video won’t let me embed to this blog. You can also see my interview with Horsfield for the 1990s *Women of Vision* here.)

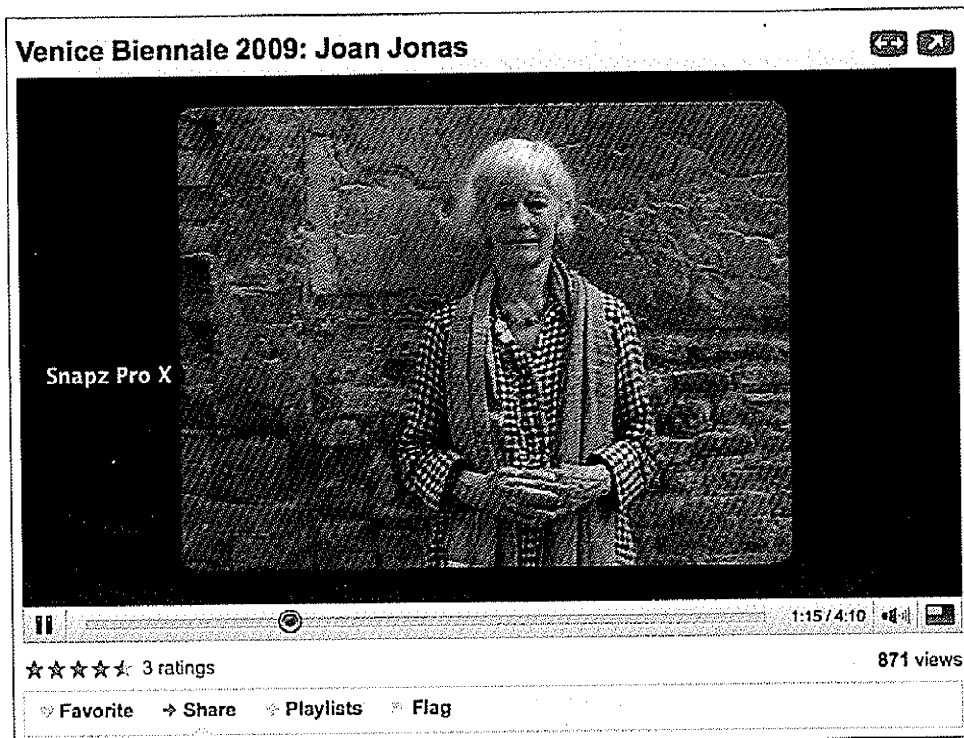
If everything on YouTube is video art (at least the stuff made by individuals and not corporations) but very little of this art can ever truly be understood as such because it wasn't really made to be art and cannot be recognized as such, either (and even if it were, it wouldn't gain sanction, context, or community unless it went off YouTube), then it is the archivist (the curator, the choreographer, the tour guide) who becomes the final, visible, verifiable YouTube video artist herself by making visible the links (to other forms, communities, ideas) that the artist alone might once have made (offline, in a place, on a box, for an audience). See the YouTube work of Natalie Bookchin, for example. In *Me Dancing* (2009) she composes the solo programs of hundreds of YouTubers into a pageant of lonely, high-kicking, routine-repeating hoofers, making meaning (about YouTube) from a sea of found, undifferentiated, repetitive, pop culture rip-offs.

#### Looking for Video Artists

*November 3, 2009*

The easiest way to find (established) video art on YouTube is to search the site using the name of an already famous video artist. What you will find, then, is one of three possibilities: (1) their work is not on YouTube, (2) an interview with the artist is on YouTube, or (3) their work has been (badly) scanned and anonymously and probably illegally posted, in fragments, probably without the artist's permission. These three truisms have some associated corollaries: most established video artists do not put their art on YouTube, because it undermines the already highly tentative (and quickly collapsing) underpinnings of the (dying) form; it is (was) at least partially financed by sales; it is (was) confirmed through institutional sanction; it needs to be viewed in and through controlled contexts and formats (in a white room with a specified duration on a black box without ads and surrounding text).

Though the interview of the artist does contribute some sort of sanctioning function, its appearance on YouTube (as is true of everything there) follows much the same distorted logic of authorization already in place in the dominant culture that is recorded on YouTube: the more famous you are, the better chance that you have actually already been interviewed, that your interview can be found, or that a viewer would think that she might want to watch it.



*Venice Biennale 2009: Joan Jonas*, 6,364 views. Accessed June 5, 2012.

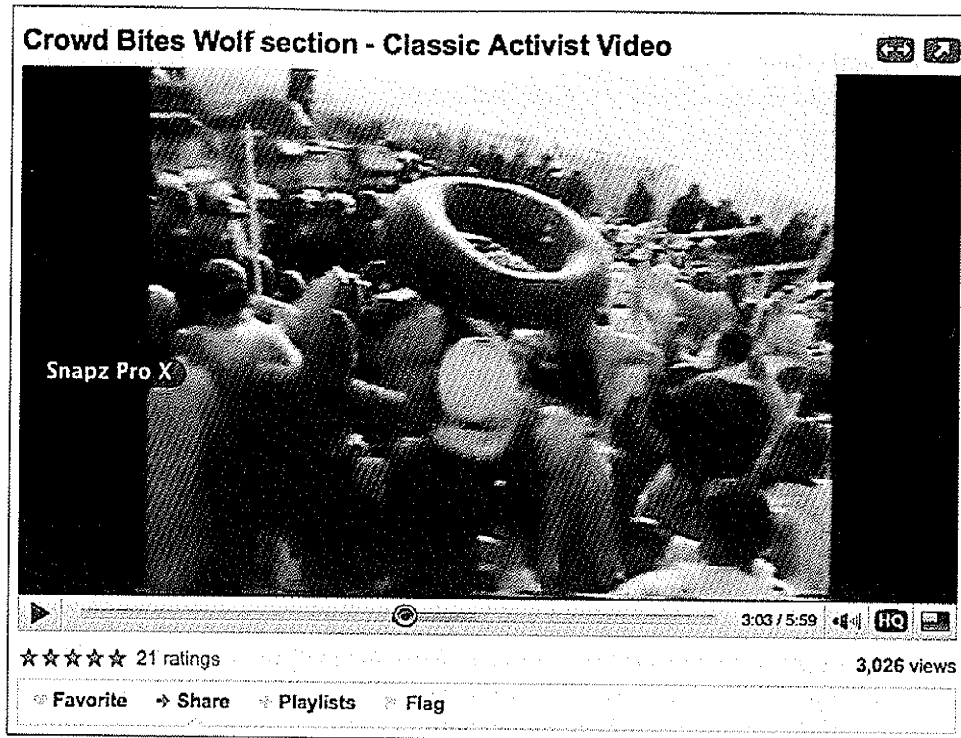
### Video Art: Does Access Matter?

*November 4, 2009*

The promise held by video, that it could create “personal media,” that normal people could control the production of video imagery and bypass the tightly controlled corporate structure of commercial media, seemed like a revolutionary and democratic advance. Video was seen as a potentially radical political tool that could subvert the relationship between dominant media structures and audience, eventually allowing artists and anyone else to directly address the public without the need of a support structure of broadcast television, museums, galleries, or other forms of distribution.

—Glenn Phillips, introduction to *California Videos, Artists and Histories*

Though a certain strand of video art was made with the distinct purpose of reaching an audience so as to express opinions, ideas, analyses, images, or ways of being usually left unexpressed through dominant media, it seems important to note that only a small portion of this has since been posted



*Crowd Bites Wolf Section—Classic Activist Video*, 5,327 views. Accessed June 5, 2012.

onto YouTube, making good use of this newly available tool to expand audience, using video and YouTube as a “radically political tool . . . to directly address the public” by using this (new) tool to allow for expanded exposure to these (old) radical ideas and images.

Why? As a “video artist” myself who has often used the medium to expand the reach of my voice—or my community’s (see my work on AIDS activist video for example)—in the name of a cause, I’ve only chosen to put one of my videos on YouTube (RELEASED: *5 Short Videos about Women and Prison*); while *SCALE*, about my sister Antonia, was loaded onto YouTube by the corporation that distributes it [snagfilms] against my better wishes.

The reason(s) are clear: activist videos are made to be shown within organized settings where context, dialogue, community, and continuing actions (see my sister Antonia Juhasz’s recent protest “Marching on Chevron,” organized along with the screening of the Yes Men’s new film) need to be as carefully engineered or constructed as is the video text itself. In fact, radical contexts for screenings are often understood to be as much a part of activist video (art) as is the videos themselves. Since this is impossible on YouTube, the lack of context and community trumps the power of

access, and old-school video activists choose to stay home (or march without the help of YouTube).

### Loving the Archive, Controlling the Archive

*November 5, 2009*

The archivist brings work to visibility by seeing it, knowing it in her way, and connecting it to other video and viewers that will frame and hold it: giving context, making friends, building arguments, forming associations. Unruly archives need curators. Their holdings are nothing but inconsequential detritus until they are loved and repurposed by someone.

I have been criticizing YouTube for a few years, which is easy enough to do given its perplexing gaps in capability and coherence—all the things it won't let you do like find things, surround them with meaningful stuff and people—not to mention all the crap videos on it. Could I repurpose the site to succeed at functions I require for video art? To better prepare for this nouveau art video project, I first considered what comprises YouTube's strengths and unique powers: the capability to update and version; to allow the audience (or users) to participate and even for the subjects (of traditional documentary) to become producers of their own stories; to create communities within media who can speak for themselves and to each other. Then, I thought about what I don't like about YouTube: how strong feelings, voices, and ideas remain siloed, individuated, unlinked, going nowhere and powerfully alone. I wanted to construct a YouTube page, instead, as a collaborative, interactive, communal work with a singular and defined set of purposes, a commitment to hard ideas, and a sense of safety and intimacy that is definitive of community and allows for the kind of video art that matters to me: personal, intellectual, political, and artistic.

I have proposed a feminist video archive love fest. I want to take the dead work of the LA Woman's Building (recently archived at the Getty's Research Institute) and repurpose it online. Bring it back to life. Make it relevant. Make it visible and reusable. Put it on YouTube.

A proposed (pending funding) continuation of my work with the Getty's Pacific Standard Time Project, I hope to move old tapes online—linking this inspiring (and too invisible) retro-video vision to the hyper-mediated now. I am eager to repurpose YouTube as a productive archive of video art that addresses some of the contradictions engendered by this unique “process archive.” Women's Building video was made and saved by countless (often anonymous) women who were mutually developing and enjoying a uniquely feminist theory and practice of video fundamentally informed by a consciousness raising that was itself conversant

with contemporary art and primarily engaged with video at its inception. Throughout feminist art education at the Building, (video) process was valued and itself documented, as well as being document, and all of this was meant to be made public (often through video) and then saved for history (as video) even counterintuitively as it was also, most critically, marking something entirely internal and ephemeral.

In videos from the Building, there is a consistent and self-aware project that evocatively links video across this archive to both feminist process and preservation. I would continue their past project on YouTube by selecting videos from the archive and with the artists' permissions putting them online and producing prompts, frameworks, and tools for their contemporary reuse. In so doing, I would be attempting to make this archive newly usable for present-day digital (video) processes, thus unmooring it from its obscure, frozen, and misunderstood place as feminist history and encouraging it to better engage with our feminist present (which was once its undertheorized future) and in the meantime allowing past work to remain relevant, become active, and embark in dialogue with the present.

[Author's note (June 2012): Like so many activist video projects, this never came to pass, although my feminist efforts online continue to develop on my blog, [www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com), on my website, [www.feministonlinespaces.com](http://www.feministonlinespaces.com), and in my Massively Distributed Collective Learning Experiment, *Dialogues in Feminism and Technology*, [www.fembotcollective.org](http://www.fembotcollective.org).]

### Video Dada

*February 1, 2010*

From the start I realized that dealing with YouTube videos called for an approach different from the ground usually covered in art criticism: artist's oeuvre, aesthetic strategies, links to current tendencies in exhibition, comparisons with other artists' work.

—Martha Gever, *Video Dada*

I drove out to UC–Irvine with the kids to catch the *Video Dada* show (“dealing with intersections of video, art, and the internet,” according to the exhibition catalog).<sup>6</sup> Martha Gever, the show's curator, was kind enough to also drive out and chat with me afterward. The show puts into action and onto the wall many of the concerns I have been expressing here about video art on YouTube by transforming curating into the real video art practice and allowing YouTube work to become art by surrounding its three hundred

unruly videos with to-be-expected, large-screen, flat, chic monitors. Gever also provides thrift store couches and big, scrawled, messy handwritten quotations from media/cultural theorists as varied as Marcel Proust, Geert Lovink, and the *New York Times's* Virginia Heffernan on the gallery's walls. Without their raucous, ugly YouTube pages to frame them (ads, other videos, comments, tags), the projected videos looked pretty, like nothing other than honest-to-goodness video art in all its varied polyphony: cut up, hand painted, home video-like, music video inflected, found ads, and so on. It was that frame that did it, making art out of madness—slick screen, black box, curator's stamp of approval. The wall demands respect, as does the hushed room with the guard. And unlike YouTube, the quotes create context.

Gever formally enacts many of the contradictions of video art on YouTube through the fitting design of her show. The Dada reference marks the play between art production and popular/capitalist consumption as definitive of YouTube video as it was of Duchamp's urinal. Furthermore, Dada suitably organizes the cacophony and distraction of undifferentiated material—"All the objects in the [YouTube] archive have equal weight. . . . They are de-contextualized and flattened," proclaims Robert Gehl, written on the wall—that defines both YouTube and the show (there are three hundred videos playing, almost randomly, on something like ten monitors, with nothing but typed lists of titles and authors to anchor them; you never really know or care what you are seeing). Gever notes in her catalog that although the order of the videos is not important, she carefully and rigorously selected all of them (as "artful: carefully constructed, inventive, mindful of technique, and infused by sophisticated cultural intelligence") through a painstaking, multiyear process of looking for video art in the sea of crap that included the additional looking labor of several TAs, as well as Gever putting the names of hundreds of contemporary artists into YouTube to see if anything might come up (it did . . .).<sup>7</sup> Refreshingly and tellingly, I recognized only a few names from the video art pantheon. When I went to find things to review on YouTube, however, I couldn't (like LaToya Ruby Frazier's *A Mother to Hold*, which I watched all the way through its grueling home movie-like interaction with the artist's crack whore mother or Guthrie Lonergan's *Office Party* or *Kids*). While I couldn't refind them on YouTube, Gever had located both of these YouTubers through searching from the New Museum's *Younger than Jesus* show.)

It seemed important for me when I noted that I didn't really want to watch most of the videos. Unlike on YouTube, I couldn't fast-forward them, cut them off when bored, or jump to something else vaguely related.





[1926—DADA—Duchamp] *Anemic Cinema*, 13,007 views. Accessed June 5, 2012.

The myth of audience participation is completely denied here, and the work suffers from it, proving an affront to another definitive quality of YouTube video, but not in the best Dada sort of way. Gever writes, "The non-hierarchical, uncurated organization of YouTube provides a fitting venue for videos that are fleeting, provisional, rowdy, rude, epigrammatic, overtly political, or otherwise unruly in the themes that govern more disciplined precincts of art."<sup>8</sup> With this I agree, which allows me to see how YouTube can't be as radical as Dada hoped to be. Upon leaving, my twelve-year-old daughter remarked that the show wasn't really Dada enough in that it didn't feel like much of an affront, nor did it inspire strong feelings, since a lot of the video was simply fun or funny, and more so, in the end, the sheer undifferentiated totality of it quieted one, as YouTube always seems most wont to do.

NOTES

1. Alexandra Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?tttype=2&tid=12596>.
2. Ming-Yuen Ma and Erika Suderburg, "Resolutions 3: Video Praxis in Global Spaces," prospectus, September 16, 2008, [http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/teaching/MS71/reading/res\\_3.pdf](http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/teaching/MS71/reading/res_3.pdf).
3. Peter Rainer, "Captain Video," in *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art*, ed. Patti Podesta (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1986), 105.
4. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, introduction to *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xvi.
5. See Alexandra Juhasz, "Learning the 5 Lessons of YouTube: After Trying to Teach There, I Don't Believe the Hype," *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2009), <http://ijlm.net/knowninganddoing/10.1162/ijlm.2009.00002>.
6. Martha Gever, *Video Dada*, exhibition catalog (Irvine: University of California, 2010), 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.