ABSTRACT VIDEO

The Moving Image in Contemporary Art

EDITED BY
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Foreword by Kate Mondloch
A scholarly consensus seems to have emerged that the Korean artist and composer Nam June Paik is the formative figure for our understanding of abstraction in video art. I don’t contest this, as far as such narratives go. But the art-historical investment in linear, great-name histories leaves women artists in the margins when it comes to “origins” and establishing “genealogies.” In contrast, the idea of the trajectory suggested in my title is intended to be more speculative; it marks the path of a projectile that is thrown across space and time and looked back upon from a later point. The trajectory, in this account, is provisional and tentative—one among several possibilities; it is the occasion for the exploration of an apparent contradiction: how can we reconcile feminism as a social critique, typically understood as a “materialist” mode of inquiry, with the question of abstraction, its apparent philosophical antithesis? Indeed applying the problematic of abstraction to feminist video practice might seem at the outset to be a rather eccentric trajectory, since debates about representation and identity—feminism’s social address—have typically been at the forefront of established scholarly accounts. But I begin this essay with Paik because his work provides us with an entry point, a staging of the aforementioned contradiction, with his address to questions of abstraction alongside the imaging of female sexuality. If, as we will see, the Paik example seems to establish the relationship between sexual difference and video in terms of an opposition between femininity-as-representation and abstraction-as-form, how, then, do feminist-engaged video artists address and critically displace these terms?

Right from Paik’s earliest beginnings in Germany, what we now group unproblem-
atically under the curatorial heading of “video art” was in fact an engagement primarily with television. Before the now-familiar museum experience of the black box with its emphasis on the large-scale projected image, video practices entered the art world in the guise of televisual transmission. Take, for instance, the ubiquitous TV set (e.g., Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider’s *Wipe Cycle* [1969] and Paik’s *Magnet TV* [1965]), the space/time dynamics of the closed-circuit TV system (e.g., Bruce Nauman’s *Live-Taped Corridor* [1970] and Dan Graham’s *Time Delay Room* [1974]), the mock or alternative TV show (e.g., Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* [1975] and Richard Serra’s *Television Delivers People* [1973]), and a staple of the late 1960s and 1970s, the various experiments with interrupting or repurposing television transmission itself.

WGBH, a Boston radio station that in 1955 began television broadcasting, was at the forefront of artistic collaboration with televisual broadcast, or what we might more accurately refer to as “Television Art.” A particularly controversial work by Paik, *Electronic Opera #1* (1969), raises the question of sexual difference and female sexuality alongside the interruption to the transmission of televisual content, that is, the abstraction of the television broadcast. *Electronic Opera #1* is a layering of transmissions from three different cameras and the distorted visual manipulations applied to this footage that produced intense coloristic effects. But the controversy at the network about this work did not arise from Paik’s use of “warped perspectives,” to use Gene Youngblood’s phrase, but rather from a more conventional kind of interruption: his insertion of studio footage of a topless female dancer into the visual layers, distortions, and time-delay effects of his television art. Shot with three studio cameras, the footage from two of the perspectives was subject to the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, or “The Wobbulator,” that turned the black-and-white television image into deeply saturated color. The final effect is a simultaneous layering of images showing three perspectives on the same figure: the archetypical classical female tri-nude configuration, the three Graces, rendered in psychedelic moving color.

On the one hand, the nude figures, like the representation of “three hippies” and the “national political figures”—the other visual motifs featured in *Electronic Opera #1*—can be understood as distinctly non-abstract elements, and the iconographic invocation of the three Graces only further reinforces this view. On the other hand, as Raymond Williams has put it: “Unike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content” [italics in the original]. Although the development of cinema was defined by production and its distribution networks came much later, the technical potential for television broadcast and the investment in the structure of dissemination, the form, came well before the production of content. Williams again: “It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content” [italics in the original]. Thus television as a technological formation is bound up with the question of abstraction.

As we have already noted, Paik took the question of media transmission—and its
disruption—as the primary field of his artistic inquiry in the 1960s. Although *Electronic Opera #1* does not reach the same kind of zero degree of transmission as works like *Magnet TV*, its representational elements are put to work so that we must constantly confront the question of transmission itself. This is transmission, following Williams, as an abstract form. Indeed after the first short sequence of *Electronic Opera #1* showing the dancing woman, a voiceover announcement states: “Please follow this instruction: turn off your television sets.” If, in the only remaining act of participation that television allows, we do indeed switch off the set (and as an announcement had already stated, “this is participation TV”), the blank screen would provide us with a certain exemplification of abstraction-as-negation, a telesvisual equivalent, perhaps, of the blank monochrome painting.

The first video art practitioners of the late 1960s and 1970s took up the Portapak camera after having established an art practice in another medium, so it should come as no surprise that the question of abstraction in relation to video practice would be bound up with current debates related to other established art forms. Furthermore, in the case of Vito Acconci, Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, and Lynda Benglis, their engagement with video was relatively short-lived, so, rather than serving as a hiatus from their other practice, it might be seen as a means of exploring related issues in another form. Take for example Benglis's *Female Sensibility* (1973), which shows fixed-camera head-and-shoulder views of Benglis and a female companion tongueing and kissing each other to a montaged soundtrack of right-wing Texas radio broadcasts. Susan Richmond, in her excellent close reading of this work, analyzes the absence of sensuality in the actions of the figures (for this purportedly lesbian scene) and suggests that Benglis treats her companion less as if she were a lover and more an abstract sculpture in formation: “Their fingers and tongues appear to ‘form,’ ‘press,’ ‘penetrate,’ and ‘smooth’ out surfaces and crevices—in other words, they imply artistic activities. In a ‘sculptural’ fashion, the two women foreground the female body as both source and product of their creative gestures.” Furthermore, the phrase “female sensibility” used for the work’s title was a feminist leitmotif of the period, and Richmond suggests Benglis used it parodically to explore her own ambivalence about the gendered analysis of her abstract sculptural practice. In contrast to the overdetermined representation of the female body, the idea of a “female sensibility” suggests that a feminine mode of expression might be discernably at work at the level of form. Moreover, even though this feminist discourse was about discerning a gendered dimension within artistic form, with a focus in particular on abstract elements, the reference to sensibility (i.e., the sensible) suggests the antithesis of abstraction. This alerts us to the complex entanglements of abstraction and representation when sexual difference comes into play.

Benglis is featured as a negative example in an early critical essay on video art, Rosalind Krauss’s “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” Krauss argues that reflexivity is a
central issue for early video practitioners. Indeed, the discourse of abstraction in 1960s art was focused on conflicts over the critical significance of reflexivity. Reflexivity, the reference to and exploration of the formal properties of a given medium to generate a critical tension between a work's form and content, had displaced the founding antithesis of representation versus abstraction that underpinned early-twentieth-century debates. In Krauss’s account, the stakes in early video practice, a decisively representational form, lie in the manner in which it negotiates the art world discourse of reflexivity in relation to its mediatric parent, television. While Krauss acknowledges that television broadcast is the “support” for video art (as the canvas is for painting), she places a greater emphasis on the effect of the temporal loop than on the empty distributive form of television itself. In fact she might be said to abstract the temporal structure of television in her framing of video practice. As a result she does not refer to practitioners such as Paik, who worked closely with broadcast technology, or Rosler, whose work so insistently foregrounds the TV show format, but rather with video art made and presented within an autonomous art world context.7

Video art’s reflexive mode, for Krauss and subsequent critics, is temporal.8 The structure of televisicn transmission, of both recorded and live materials, allows for a temporal loop of instantaneous feedback that Krauss understands in psychological terms: “The medium of video art,” she argues, “is the psychological condition of the self split and doubled by the mirror reflection of synchronous feedback.”9 She uses the psychoanalytic term narcissism, suggesting that it is “so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of the entire genre.”10 Krauss parses her artists in terms of their critical and uncritical relation to the question of reflexivity (with television as the implicitly negative term). The latter she condemns as merely “parodying the critical terms of abstraction”; falling short of reflexivity, these artists are instead only reflective, like a mirror. The mirror reflection is the production of symmetry, Krauss explains, whereas reflexivity, by contrast, “is a strategy to achieve a radical asymmetry from within.”11 With negative reference to Lynda Benglis’s Now (1973)—showing Benglis being taped in a seemingly autoerotic interaction with her prerecorded double—the work, she argues, stages a closed feedback loop that is “bracketing out the text [i.e., history] and substituting it for the mirror-reflection.”12 No past, no history, and, most alarmingly, no subjectivity—Now, as Krauss reads it, presents a darkly cynical “displacement of the self . . . transforming the performer’s subjectivity into another, mirror, object.”13

In this essay Krauss articulates the codependences between the work’s invocation of the abstract feedback loop of television and the representational depiction of the human body, typically the artist’s body on the screen. The accusation of narcissism, clearly used as a negative term, is thus determined just as much by what is depicted as it is by the temporality evoked. “The body” she writes, “is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer’s image with the
immediacy of a mirror." While "the body" in Krauss's essay is not directly addressed in gendered terms (she discusses in equal measure both male and female on-screen bodies), the question of narcissism is, however, bound up with the issue of sexuality and the "riddle," as Freud puts it, of sexual difference.

First addressed by Freud in relation to homosexuality, narcissists, he suggests, take someone like themselves as their object-choice. This notion soon evolves into narcissism understood as a "stage" in sexual development where subjects take themselves as love object: self-love. While this is not the place to gloss the history of psychoanalytic theories of narcissism, a complex and fraught terrain, it should be noted that narcissism, as it is explored in Freud's writings, seems to be, or becomes, a particularly feminine condition. This is all very peculiar, given that the mythic figure Narcissus, in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, was a boy, not a girl. Adored and desired for his beauty by youths and nymphs alike, Narcissus refused all in a denial of sexuality—until, after rejecting the nymph Echo, he finds himself transfixed by the beauty of his own image reflected in a pool of water. Unaware he is looking at himself, he therefore is perpetually unable to attain the object of his desire. Sexuality as such remains beyond his reach. Furthermore, the story of Narcissus includes a female counterpart: Echo. He is trapped by sight, and she by sound, since Echo is condemned to repeat the words of others (in a fragmentary, incomplete form) and never to speak her own. While Freud and later Lacan (whose theory of the mirror stage is a rewriting of Freud on narcissism) do not attend to Echo, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested that a feminist reading might yield something valuable from the part she plays. According to Spivak, Echo "is obliged to be imperfectly and interpectoratively responsive to another's desire." Reading for sexual difference in relation to abstract video, I want to suggest that, following Spivak, we should also look for Echo, not only Narcissus. The story of Echo will help us to unhook the analysis of video from the primacy of the visual, so as to displace the opposition between femininity-as-representation and abstraction-as-form with which, in reference to Paik, we began.

Given that video is a visual medium that also includes sound, we might pay attention to the place of Echo, to the place of sound as well as image in our reflections on sexual difference. In doing so, we will find that the myth of Narcissus is not the "closing of a parenthesis" (and denial of history) that Krauss describes; rather, the repeated partial vocals of Echo keep the parenthesis open at one end. Like the empty, abstract form of televsual transmission, Echo repeats without being able to control the content of her speech. As Spivak argues, Narcissus is caught in a visual trap of "obstinate choice," whereas Echo, ensnared by the other's speech, is subject to "absolute chance." An asymmetrical counterpart, then, is he enslaved to desire without knowledge, and she to knowledge without desire. An instrument of broadcast for an unwitting other's words, Echo, however, gives us repetition with a difference. In echoing only the final portion of a speaker's phrase, each repetition generates a singular statement. For example, when, rejecting her advances, Narcissus cries out "Desist!—hold off thy hands;—may sooner
death / Seize me, than thou enjoy me." To her mortifying shame, she echoes only the final words "enjoy me," and thereafter "gaunt famine shrivels up / Her skin" and her body perishes, as a result of her sexual rejection by Narcissus, leaving "nought but sound." Within the abstract form that is her mimetic fate, Echo nonetheless adds a complexity to our structure of abstract transmission, making each repetition at once a singular instance of difference.

Joan Jonas's *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1973–79) (fig. 4.1) calls out for consideration in terms of the gendering of sound and image. Furthermore, the reverberating, asymmetrical relationship between sound and image in this example brings the question of sexual difference, representational forms, and abstraction-as-transmission (repetition and difference) into play with each other in a particularly rich way. Moreover, sound and imagery are carefully articulated in this work as distinctly different kinds of representation that likewise have their own modes of abstraction. *Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll* is a videotape of a performance from 1972 that only later became available in the form of a video work itself. Jonas includes video equipment as part of a theatrical set; monitor and camera are used as a kind of prop to catalogue the interaction between various representational forms (pictorial, aural, and theatrical performance) and their abstraction through (partial) telesub visual transmission. As we will see, Jonas gives us transmission as repetition and difference because the vertical hold on the TV monitors has been altered, fragmenting all transmitted images into a "vertical roll." According to Ina Blom, early video practices with their use of "snow on the screen, uncontrollable vertical rolling of the picture, and the collapse of the image into horizontal bars across the screen testifies to the realm of unmagnetized particles and signaletic slippage." This is the norm of video as an inherently unstable temporal medium that appears as a coherent image only when all the parts of the relay—camera, recorder, and monitor—are aligned.

Elements of *Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll* are known independently as individual works, including the opening scene, otherwise titled *Mirror Check* (1970). Nude, Jonas stands before the live audience examining the surface of her body methodically, from top to bottom, with a small vanity mirror. The title, *Mirror Check*, places an emphasis on the visual, on the self-conscious staging of the performer’s body, under examination. Femininity-as-display is put into tension with the invocation of an everyday self-conscious personal “checking” in the mirror to ensure a flawless mask of femininity for the world. At the same time, an aural framing overwrites this visual training in the maintenance of femininity: *Mirror Check* suggests the technical “testing” of sound equipment, the “sound check” that precedes a musical presentation. “Check, check, one two, one two” is part of the preperformance preparations often conducted in front of the live audience. Furthermore, the soundtrack for *Mirror Check* is the low hiss of white noise. Although we see a visual image, transmission is simultaneously also empty, or, in Williams’s terms, without content: abstract. Like Paik’s various attempts to disrupt the
transmission of televisual content on a visual level, the failure to achieve an aural connection draws our attention to sound-as-transmission—the realm of Echo—and this at the same time marks the emptiness of transmission as a form. Thus the female nude is, at the outset, juxtaposed with abstraction-as-transmission in an asymmetrical staging of image and sound. On completing her Mirror Check, Jonas walks off stage; the camera shifts stage right to reveal a large television monitor. Two other performers then carry around the stage a mirror that has the same dimensions as the TV monitor; it is walked across the stage facing outward to reflect the audience, before a cameraperson, Babette Mangolte, appears on the stage.

For the rest of the performance, Mangolte films Jonas in different costumes, and the visuals are fed live into the large monitor. Later an additional smaller monitor is also present on stage, and this doubling of the transmitted materials evokes the multiple reception of television as a structure. The mirror is another kind of surface for visual
imaging; together with the drawings, photographs, a mask, and various costumes, its representational mode, the shimmering reflection, is subject to the unifying logic of the gray televsual feedback. But transmission is interrupted because of the constantly flickering “vertical roll.” Again we are made aware of the question of transmission as the fragmented imagery scrolls and jumps up the screen. All of this appears as an incomplete, partial echo flickering again and again, up and down in the rhythmic folds of the vertical roll.

Rather than Narcissus’s mirror, then, I want to suggest that Organic Honey teaches us that the logic of video is in the unthinking repetition that is Echo’s fate. The partial reiteration of the image in the form of the fragmented vertical roll is also like Echo’s repetition in that, as Ovid recounts, she reiterates only the last part of the other’s sentence. This is repetition with difference. Furthermore, the end section of Organic Honey includes the staging of a clash between Narcissus and Echo. As the notes for the script put it, “Honey hits mirror obsessively with large silver spoon, trying to break her image.” This harsh, rhythmic thwacking of metal on glass is visualized by the regular jumps of the monitor’s vertical roll. The flickering roll of the image echoes the repeated beat of the discordant, violent sound like an iteration of the trap that Echo is in. With this emphasis on the sonic staging, the feminine in Jonas’s video is articulated at the level of form as the open parenthesis of repetition and difference.

Most accounts of the proliferation of video art in the late 1960s and 1970s are underpinned by a casually techno-determinist logic. After the Portapak camera entered the commercial market around 1967, video production became more readily affordable to artists. Artists made videos, it seems, because the equipment to do so sat waiting for them in stores. Like most historical accounts of the social development of television, this suggests that the technology, as Williams puts it, is a “self-acting force.” Williams also suggests an alternative, social-historical approach that asks how TV fulfills “known social needs, purposes and practices to which the technology is not marginal but central.” Attending to the social function of television at the point of reception suggests another important dimension to the gendered coding of video art: the domestic family context. This is the modern theater for the formative experience of sexual difference, Freud’s so-called family romance.

Keeping in mind our gendered division of image and sound, Narcissus and Echo, I will draw upon an example by Martha Rosler that evokes sound and femininity in a significant way. Again the question of transmission as abstraction is brought to the fore and bound up with sexual difference. Moreover, Rosler is an artist centrally engaged with TV as the dominant visual technology of the time, one that mediates and produces the political world through the experiential everyday. In this particular example, Domination and the Everyday (1978) (fig. 4.2), she reveals the extent to which the home is a complex site for the construction of sexual identity in relation to a broader political context.
Although the development of television can be traced back to communication technologies of the nineteenth century and is one part of the complex social changes brought about by modernity, it did not enter American homes as a domestic commodity until the 1950s. If it were not for the interruption of the Second World War, television would have proliferated a decade and a half earlier. It therefore appeared at the tail end of the radical social transformations brought about by modernity. "An increased awareness of mobility and change, not just as abstractions but as lived experiences," says Williams, "led to a major redefinition, in practice and then in theory, of the function and process of social communication." Television "served as an at once mobile and home-centered way of living; a form of mobile privatization" [italics in the original]. Seen through the lens of sexual politics, Williams's mobile privatization becomes Betty Friedan's "feminine mystique." Privatization is psychologized and politicized in this classic second-wave feminist text into a critique of the social isolation of the middle-class American housewife. The motif of the home as a figure for women's social oppression is especially evident in West Coast feminist practice. In installation art, Womanhouse (1972) is a good example; in relation to video art, Martha Rosler is a central figure. Of all the early video practitioners, Rosler is the most thematically engaged with the gendered televisual con-
tent, Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975) and The East Is Red, The West Is Bending (1977) are staged as mock cooking shows; Losing: Portrait of the Parents (1977) evokes the television documentary of family tragedy; and Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained (1977) operates like an alternative game show. While these examples animate different genres of television, Domination and the Everyday (1978) engages most directly with television as a form in relation to the domestic context as the domain for gendered-subject formation.

The soundtrack of Domination and the Everyday is a recording of Rosler and her infant son at home going about the quotidian routines of a mother and child. This “maternal” everyday contrasts with the “paternal” image-track, which is governed by photographs of masculine political and commercial authority figures and family groups and a scrolling text of political analysis. The relationship between the textual and verbal levels—one analytic and the other not—is complex, and the video turns upon the gender differentiation established between sound and image. The dialogue between mother and child envelops the whole videotape, from the opening color bars (a figure for transmission interrupted) at the beginning to the same color bars at the end. The audio seems to be a completely unedited section of domestic soundscape, a fragment from the continuing flow of everyday life. This maternalized “feminine” realm of sound contrasts with the horizontal scrolling text that demands our intellectual attention: word as logic, analytic, rational. Viewing means reading and comprehending, and in the process Rosler's unremarkable conversation with her son begins to fade into the background: words become noise, a murmuring babble without significant meaning. To follow and comprehend the text renders the soundtrack an aural abstraction of the domestic. The visual domain is disembodied, authoritative, and masculine, and the auditory realm is an embodied sonic space of maternal care. Meaning and cognition are put into a relationship with abstraction as continuous transmission into the domestic space, or as Williams first put it, televisual “flow.” In doing so, Rosler raises the question of sexual difference as the backdrop for our process of meaning making. This is abstraction understood as a philosophical question.

“Gender,” Spivak has suggested, “is our first instrument of abstraction.” “To theorize in the abstract,” she explains, “we need a difference. However we philosophize sensible and intelligible, abstract and concrete, etc., the first difference we perceive materially is sexual difference.” This insight fundamentally displaces the contradiction with which we began. Although feminism as a form of social critique seems to exist at the other end of the spectrum from abstraction, Spivak suggests that gender, as the first perceivable difference, is “our tool for abstraction.” Kaja Silverman connects this idea specifically to sound. The mother’s voice, she argues, “provides the first axis of Otherness” but, so we do not see this as only a senseless blanket of sound, she goes on to say that it “first charts out and names the world for the infant subject.” In Domination and the Everyday, Rosler gives us both. Listening to the mother-child conversation, we note her didactic role as parent, but the insistent demand made by the scrolling text also estab-
lishes a gendered contrast wherein the maternal voice becomes an abstraction. Susan Hiller’s video installation Belshazzar’s Feast, the Writing on Your Wall (1983–84) (fig. 4.3) also emphasizes the domain of televisual reception and a different, spectral, interruption of transmission. The television monitor is part of an installation that includes the bare bones of a living room space—couch, armchairs, rug, and cushions—all oriented toward the dominant presence of the television set. The wall includes a series of photographs that have been overpainted with abstract scribbles: the sign for writing, but without content or meaning. As in Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll, in Belshazzar’s Feast representation and abstraction—both visual and auditory—are put into relation with each other. The screen shows imagery of a fire, evoking the idea of the TV as the new hearth in the modern family home, the center that all of the family members are oriented to. Although the crackling sound of the fire is part of the sound track, it is soon interrupted by an official-sounding voice announcing, “What the fire says: Take One,” and three other vocal modes ensue. The first two oscillate between abstract vocal improvisations and a child’s faltering explanation of the biblical story of Belshazzar told through reference to Rembrandt’s painting of the subject. Jean Fisher describes this shifting back and forth between abstraction and representation as “a lilting glossolalia, or ‘speaking in tongues,’ . . . and the efforts of a child to relate the fragments of a story into a meaningful whole.” Having transgressed God’s law, Belshazzar, during a dinner, receives a mysterious, untranslatable message inscribed on the wall by a hand in light. The mystic prophet Daniel later interprets the meaningless words as a premonition of Belshazzar’s death. The form of the message is referenced in the video soundtrack through voice and image: the abstract vocals and the illegible scribble, or abstract marks on the images attached to the wall. The biblical myth of a senseless message in light becomes a metaphor for the third vocal mode: contemporary accounts of viewers receiving messages from extraterrestrials through the TV screen after broadcast had shut down for the evening. Like the writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast, these accounts—found in newspapers and described in whispered speech—also predict coming disasters. The relationship between sound and sense, abstraction and sexual difference is a central component of this work. “There is something archaic, regressive about sound,” Hiller has noted. “We hear in the womb before we see.” For Hiller, the abstraction of sound into the human voice without meaning—glossolalia, for example—touches upon this early unknowable experience.

Mona Hatoum, in Measures of Distance (1988) (fig. 4.4), takes this feminist trajectory into the space of cultural difference and diasporic separation. In this video, Hatoum, a London-based Palestinian artist, describes a period when she was separated from her family because of the Lebanese war. The soundtrack is drawn from the mother’s and daughter’s letters to each other. These letters, written in Arabic, have been translated into English and are read out by the artist, but the voice of Hatoum as the English-speaking narrator is set against a background recording of female voices (hers and her mother’s) chatting in Arabic, her mother tongue. Like Rosler and her son, the domestic
FIGURE 4.3
Susan Hiller, Belshazzar’s Feast, the Writing on Your Wall, 1983–84. Video installation; 21 minutes, 52 seconds. Copyright Susan Hiller and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London.

FIGURE 4.4
everyday becomes abstract voice to non-Arabic speakers (the implied viewer for the piece). For such “foreign” spectators, this sound is abstract; it marks the viewer as an outsider to this intimate mother-daughter relationship. But it also animates the abstract quality in voice as such. As Mladen Dolar has put it, “voice,” understood as “the extra linguistic element which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discernable through linguistics,” is “the material element recalcitrant to meaning.”

My final example, a provisional end point for this trajectory, is Lorna Simpson’s 2002 video installation, 31 (fig. 4.5). Unlike her other moving image works—highly filmic in visual codes, large-screen, high production values—31 maintains a relationship to quotidian televisual transmission. Furthermore, this work brings us back to the question of repetition and difference—to Echo. Laid out in a calendar-style grid of thirty-one flat-screen monitors, 31 shows the same number of different twenty-minute sequences of everyday footage of an anonymous young black female office worker in New York City going about her daily life. With clothing continuities, each monitor suggests that we are viewing segments from the ongoing flow of a particular day in differing combinations of rising, commuting, working, eating, socializing, running errands, and sleeping. No narrative arc is given; instead 31 suggests the repeatable temporal loop. The grid formation of thirty-one black boxes provides the structure for a temporal cycle of abstract transmission. Filled not with notable events or with any sense of character development, instead
we barely see the face of the protagonist as she goes about her life. Recalling Krauss’s idea of the feedback loop, Chrissie Iles suggests that in 31 the “simultaneity of space and time is given a concrete form in the temporal and spatial grid, within which Simpson’s female subject moves purposefully, contained and closely observed.” Each box repeats the shape of an unremarkable day, but with a difference. The abstract form of transmission does not produce Krauss’s closed parentheses of repetition, but instead, repetition, like Echo, with difference.

As Gary Hill has described, with reference to Robert Smithson, video art is “the non-site of TV.” Anne Wagner elaborates this compelling concept: “Television, in other words, is the site—vast, unmarked, unedited—that video and its attendant mediated performances picture and articulate by negative reversal, as a broken piece of an absent whole.” Just as our understanding of video art has transformed with digital technologies into something closer to cinema, TV is no longer seen as the visually impoverished version of film. Furthermore TV exists not only in the home but also on tiny screens for mobile viewing, and in the era of HBO it is no longer the domain of the “surrendered gaze” that was long assumed the hallmark of its mass “distracted” appeal. The parasitic relationship between video practices and TV that I have been tracing in these few examples, as a possible feminist trajectory, thus probably ended at some point in the early 2000s. Since then the social condition of “mobile privatization” that once characterized television has intensified beyond recognition, calling out for other feminist trajectories, other mediatic constellations, redirecting the relationship between sound, repetition, and abstraction that I have tracked in this essay.

NOTES


5. Williams, Television, 25.


7. For an early essay on video’s relation to television, see David Antin, “Video Art: The


22. Williams, Television, 14.

23. Williams, Television, 14.


25. Williams, Television, 22.


31. Hiller has presented two slightly different versions of this piece, a “living room” version and a “campfire” version. I am describing the former. The latter includes a series of monitors in a circular arrangement; the wall imagery is not present, but the video footage—as described in my text—is the same. For images of the latter version, see Susan Hiller and James Lingwood, *Susan Hiller: Recall: Selected Works 1969–2004* (Gateshead, U.K.: Baltic, 2004).


