

Vernacular Terrain

Video in 2007 is not the exclusive medium of technicians or specialists or journalists or artists - it is the peoples' medium. The potential of video as a decentralized communications tool for the masses has been realized, and the twenty-first century will be remembered as the video age. Surveillance and counter-surveillance aside, video is the vernacular form of the era - it is the common and everyday way that people communicate.¹ Tom Sherman

With the introduction of YouTube for the distribution of video and Flickr for the distribution of photographs the sharing of digital content to a large audience is accessible to many. The presence of this technology and its affordability has contributed to the medium shifting into the popular domain via software and portable electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptop computers and PDAs. This has marked a democratising of the communication networks of sorts but also the popularity of a particular type of content characterised by point-of-view perspective of personal video, fuelled as it is by passion and sometimes advocacy, and can be the antithesis of traditional expectations of balance and objectivity.² The commonality and accessibility of this visual language has seen this genre termed vernacular. This exhibition recognises that the realm of digital technology has moved into the vernacular and that in turn the dialogue generated through this visual language has influenced not only the content of artist's work but the very context of its reception.

There are distinct parallels between how contemporary on-line vernacular producers and early video art pioneers approach the medium. In the late 1960s and early 1970s video technology became accessible to artists through the release of portable video equipment. They worked against established conventions, questioned the nature of art at the time, were critically aware of the power of the media and succeeded in bringing art closer to the public. Vernacular digital works commonly investigate similar forms to these early artists – performance documentation, expanded narrative possibilities and autobiographies exploring personal, cultural and political identity. The similarities are many. Contemporary digital artists enter the public arena with an historical awareness of the past and a present-day understanding of popular culture.

Early uses of video saw artists address the camera directly [Vito Accouni's *Undertone* (1972)], parody the works of others [John Baldessari's *I Am Making Art* (1971)], appropriate popular music [John Baldessari's *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1972)] and television [Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79)], and use diary like modes of communications [Joan Jonas' *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)* (1974)]. In *The Vernacular Terrain* we lay witness to questions about narrative meaning [Michael Roulier's *Sub Memory Check* (2005)] appropriation of cultural currency; news, adverts, music and toys [Andrea Innocent, *Daily News illustrated* and *Otaku* series (2006-07)] and Computer Games [Anita Johnson, *CuteXdooom* (2004), Jason Nelson's *game, game, game and again game* (2007)], and new modes of expressing the contemporary global landscape [HFRLab's *Cityscan* and *Bit-Scapes* (2006) and Missingham and Sudmalis, *Die Eigenheit* (2007)]. Be it the artists from the 1960s and 1970s, the producers of vernacular video and photography or the

artists in Vernacular Terrain the digital has been used as an electronic mirror to reflect the social and the political, the public and the personal dimensions of the worldiii.

Globalisation has seen the world metaphorically shrinking due to electronic media. Within this environment we have seen a compression of time and space bringing into closer contact images, meanings, ways of life and cultural practices.³ Jean Burgess' discussion around vernacular 'relational aesthetics' describes modes of social connection that are both made possible by and flow through images within the network. Those social connections are used to collaboratively construct, negotiate and learn visual aesthetics and techniques, where technologies and aesthetics of the 'professional', art and everyday life collide, compete and coexist to produce new forms of intensely social and playful cultural production.⁴ Within this environment the artworks reception has transformed as the audience becomes familiar with an alternative visual language via the network. Artists are attracted to new forms and new modes of production. Visual arts language begins to encounter vernacular form. Within Vernacular Terrain we begin to see the entwining of art, history and popular culture.

The ubiquity of the digital technologies of video and photography has moved its content towards the vernacular form of the present. This form has not just entered the virtual terrain via the home but has invaded the ever-present screens of the urban environment where the virtual and real have begun to interweave. Drawing on diverse influences such as contemporary art, film and advertising the artists in Vernacular Terrain are fluent in a visual language that adopts aspects of both mass media and the visual arts. This exhibition represents a collective response to a contemporary vernacular form that has an ever-growing presence in the televisual terrain.

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¹ Tom Sherman, 'Vernacular Video', accessed 16 July 2007, available from http://blog.wired.com/sterling/2007/01/vernacular_vide.html

² Pat Aufderheide, 'Vernacular Video', accessed 19 July 2007, available from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3613/is_199501/ai_n8726562/print

³ John Storey, 'Popular Culture as Global Culture' in *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p108

⁴ Jean Burgess, 'Vernacular Photography 2.0: Flickr, Aesthetics and the Relations of Cultural Production', accessed 18 July 2007, available from <http://creativitymachine.net/category/vernacular-creativity/>