Before and Besides Projection: Notes on Video Sculpture, 1974–1995

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Our contemporary surroundings and social interactions are defined by the ubiquity of screens, ranging from smartphones, computer displays, signage, and service announcements to television monitors in the home as well as in bars and airports. In galleries and museums, recent works by artists such as Haroon Mirza, Sondra Perry, Martine Syms, and others have featured ingenious sculptural arrangements composed of large flat-screen monitors and tiny cell-phone displays. Outside the white cube on small portable devices, dislodged from any stationary structure, the moving image has become completely mobile. We can watch films, television, and videos of our family and friends anytime, anywhere (or at least anywhere a cellular network is available). In addition, television has all but dethroned cinema as prime producer of sophisticated dramatic storytelling—to say that TV is going through a new golden age is by now a commonplace—and streaming services have fully transformed viewing conventions. In this world of glossy black screens, it is hard to remember that not so long ago watching television meant sitting in front of a boxy set on an appointed day and at a specific time. The cubic monitor was also used extensively in video installations throughout the 1970s and ’80s, a body of work that was largely consigned to oblivion—or at least the storage warehouse—before the flat-screen replaced the boob tube in our homes.

Yet for a time in the 2000s the projected image was everywhere. The preponderance of moving-image installations (including gallery presentations of films originally made for the cinema) in Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor and mounted in the summer of 2002, was widely noted at the time. The show was only one indication of a broader cinematic turn in contemporary art. In a roundtable discussion hosted by the journal October in the fall of the same year, art historian Hal Foster called the projected image the “default category” of contemporary art. Maeve Connolly’s 2009 book The Place of Artists’ Cinema discusses how “contemporary art practitioners have claimed the narrative techniques and modes of production associated with cinema, as well as the history of memory and experience of cinema as a cultural form.” Fifteen years and two Documentas later, black-box spaces and video projection are still a fixture in contemporary-art exhibitions, albeit no longer worthy of particular note, thus signaling that the form is now comfortably established in contemporary art alongside painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, and so forth. While the moving image as such is no less of a Leitmedium, this development indicates that the cinematic paradigm has waned vis-à-vis long-form narrative television, computer-generated imagery and virtual space, and social media platforms (all facilitated by digital


convergence). The resurgent preeminence of the small screen—both metaphorically as cultural bellwether and literally as carried in our pockets—provides an apt framework for this exhibition, which revisits an earlier moment in technology-based art. *Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974–1995* shines a spotlight on an underappreciated body of work in video: shown on monitors and to a great extent defined by and in opposition to television and cinema alike.

The show, which brings together artists Dara Birnbaum, Ernst Caramelle, Takahiko Iimura, Shigeko Kubota, Mary Lucier, Muntadas, Tony Oursler, Nam June Paik, Friederike Pezold, Adrian Piper, Diana Thater, and Maria Vedder, reevaluates monitor-based sculpture made during a roughly twenty-year period, i.e., after very early experimentation in video and before the arrival of projection in the gallery. This is, of course, a rather small window and a focused group of works. Numerous other artists could have been included in the exhibition. However, one of the goals was to place some canonical figures next to artists whose work has rarely been seen in the United States, which, especially given the spatial constraints of the List Center’s galleries, means that other well-known works are omitted. Rather than aspiring to comprehensiveness, this show aims to make a pointed proposition—more art-historical footnote than grand narrative. The titular “before projection” itself is a strategic conceit: projected art was made well before the advent of video projectors, and not just in filmmaking “proper,” as in for the cinema. The 2002 exhibition *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977*, curated by Chrissie Iles at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, eloquently asserted how slide, Super 8, and 16-mm projective installations formed an integral part of post-Minimal art practices as a whole. Moreover, monitor works developed in concert with, rather than in isolation from, single-screen tapes and projection. CRT (cathode ray tube) projectors were in sporadic use in the museum as early as the 1970s, notably in pioneering works by Peter Campus and Keith Sonnier, and the Whitney Museum organized the exhibition *Video Projection*, utilizing an early Advent projection system, in 1975. But projectors then were large, cumbersome, and expensive. As a result, presentations of video on monitors were the norm into the 1990s, a fact that has received little critical attention since. For *Before Projection*, I resurrected the somewhat outdated term *video sculpture* to clearly distinguish, for hermeneutic purposes, projective installation from multichannel works that employ the monitor or television set. The exhibition purposefully homes in on works that engage with the sculptural properties of the cubic monitor. It also deliberately excludes closed-circuit installations, as the show is only peripherally interested in the discourse around what were once considered the “essential properties” of video, i.e., instantaneity and liveness. Limiting the parameters of the project served a couple of objectives. It provided the opportunity to highlight certain technological developments and the availability of equipment in relation to the articulation of specific formal and thematic concerns. The other aim was to counter somewhat monotonous narratives, written mostly after

projective installation became standard, that either tend to describe the use of the monitor throughout the 1980s as a not-quite-there-yet solution rendered redundant with the rise of projection or to omit these works altogether and pole-vault from the 1970s straight into the '90s. In place of offering a similar teleological account, this exhibition instead proposes certain aesthetic claims these works might make in their own right.

The earliest work in the show is Ernst Caramelle’s *Video Ping-Pong* from 1974, made when he was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT. The work premiered in the List Center’s predecessor, the Hayden Gallery, the following year. Two monitors display footage of two Ping-Pong players in medium close-up, positioned on AV carts and in front of a “real” Ping-Pong table, in a playful juxtaposition of recorded game and live match, monitor and human figure. Nam June Paik’s *Charlotte Moorman II* from 1995 forms the show’s chronological, if not conceptual, conclusion. This video robot, part of a series of such works Paik began in the mid-1980s, is a portrait of his longtime collaborator Charlotte Moorman, replete with wire “hair,” and two cellos. The boxy monitors and vintage consoles, already decidedly quaint at the time of the work’s making, are the material used to construct an offbeat yet conventionally scaled figurative sculpture. Monitor sculptures produced between these two works, through the 1980s and into the '90s, pursued a range of thematic concerns that included the medium of television but also the still and the moving image, seriality, figuration, landscape, identity, and more. But although these artists thus participated in the various discourses of their time articulated across mediums, their work was relatively slow to be shown next to painting and sculpture, and its reception remained dogged by the monitor’s intractable association with broadcast TV.

The history of time-based art is also a history of technology. More precisely, developments in video as an art form can be tracked alongside moments when recording, display, or editing equipment become accessible for individual artists (and institutions), which may variously mean more affordable, easier to use, or available in consumer markets and outside specialized industry applications. The lack of critical interest in historical monitor works can be seen as part of this “progress in technology” account; it can also be read as a product of the ideological discursive frameworks of contemporaneous cinema and network television. The decisive role of the Sony Portapak camera to the mythologized beginnings of video art in the United States is, to say the least, well chronicled. Smaller than preceding professional television cameras, portable, and comparatively cheap, the device spurred an extraordinarily fertile period of artistic experimentation with the new medium in the following years. Much of this early work—and a flurry of writing that accompanied it—engaged the properties that set video apart from film: liveness (or real-time transmission), instantaneous replay (unlike motion-picture film, which had to be developed before playback), and duration

issues explored by artists from the beginning, whether implicitly or explicitly. 9

I do not mean to suggest that what would now be called “video installation” was necessarily a distinct, or even clearly delineated, category in the medium’s infancy. As has been widely discussed, the young field of video art was large and heterogeneous. 10 It included politically engaged work by video collectives such as Videofreex and TVTV, as well as tapes produced for public broadcast, like those created by Allan Kaprow, Otto Piene, Aldo Tambellini, and others for the WGBH Boston commission The Medium Is the Medium in 1969. Many video artists were making single-screen tapes while also experimenting with sculptural modes. In fact, the history of video is, as art historian Gloria Sutton has observed, also a “history of marginality.” 11 However unruly an arena, early video practices were somewhat united by a sense of opposition—as well as, for a while, a sense of utopian possibility—to broadcast television. The institutions of television developed very differently in Europe, the United


10. In the introduction to their anthology, Hall and Fifer write: “Conceived from a promiscuous mix of disciplines in the great optimism of post–World War II culture, its stock of early practitioners includes a jumble of musicians, poets, documentarians, sculptors, painters, dancers, and technology freaks. Its lineage can be traced to the discourses of art, science, linguistics, technology, mass media, and politics. Cutting across such diverse fields, early video displays a broad range of concerns, often linked by nothing more than the tools themselves.” Hall and Fifer, eds., Illuminating Video, 14.

States, and elsewhere (a history that far exceeds the scope of this essay), but the general gist of the arguments was similar: mainstream television functioned as a one-sided stream of entertainment in the service of hegemonic ideology. Media-studies scholar Marita Sturken describes the sense of anxiety around what was once dubbed the “idiot box” in the early writing of video art history:

The intense self-consciousness that pervaded this medium can be seen in many ways as . . . one that came out of the perception of video as marginalized—on the fringes of the art world, straddling the fence between art and information, defining itself against and in spite of the overwhelming presence of television.  

The sentiment of simultaneous challenge and promise extended to the field of art as a whole. Video art was uncharted territory, still outside established frameworks for the visual arts, which was in part why so many female artists—including Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Birnbaum, VALIE EXPORT, Nancy Holt, Nan Hoover, Jonas, Beryl Korot, Kubota, Lucier, Pezold, Ulrike Rosenbach, Martha Rosler, Lisa Steele, Hannah Wilke, and others—were drawn to the young medium. “Video was as close to a ‘master-free zone’ as one could get,” writes artist Vanalyne Green.  
The decisive role played by women in the history of video informed the selection of artists and works in Before Projection, which opts to eschew a paternalistic lineage of iconic “firsts” and highlight some lesser-known figures instead.

The dynamic Sturken outlines is at first glance somewhat at odds with the fact that video was embraced rather quickly by some art institutions, especially in the United States. In 1971 the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, established the first video-art series in the United States, curated by David A. Ross. He went on to found a video program at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1974 (later led by curator Kathy Rae Huffman), which became a major conduit not only for West Coast video artists but also for European practitioners. Significantly, the Long Beach Museum established a production facility giving artists access to recording and editing equipment, which put the museum in proximity to other early champions and producing venues of video such as Electronic Arts Intermix in New York or Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, launched an ongoing video program as part of its Projects series in 1974, helmed by curator Barbara London, and began to acquire artists’ video the following year. Also in 1974, John G. Hanhardt was appointed curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where work was exhibited in the dedicated Film and Video Gallery for the following two decades. Despite the trailblazing curatorial work of these institutions, however, it is crucial to


note that video art throughout the 1970s was by and large shown in discrete spaces, isolated from the traditional mediums—and most museums didn’t exhibit it much at all.

The benchmark for the works included in Before Projection is that they were made specifically for the gallery or museum. This criterion obviously involves an excision that removes video sculpture from the much larger and messier video landscape that included grassroots and political work, albeit one not intended to gloss over the importance of that context. Rather, the two-pronged objective was to parse video sculpture in relation to “traditional” contemporary sculpture on the one hand, and to projective, often large-scale and multiscreen video installation on the other. The question, then, is when video sculpture started to shed its outsider status and began to be shown “on the gallery floor,” on par with painting and sculpture. Large national and international recurring exhibitions, such as the Whitney Biennial in New York or Documenta in Kassel, Germany, serve as a good barometer. The Whitney Biennial, widely esteemed as being at the vanguard of developments in American art, included a selection of video artists as early as 1975, just two years after the museum had merged painting and sculpture and transformed from an annual into a biannual event. The next three installments all included a video section, organized as a series of screenings shown on monitors in the Film and Video Gallery or other ancillary galleries rather than on the “main” floors dedicated to painting and sculpture. The 1981 Biennial, heralding a changing terrain, was the first to present two video sculptures, Frank Gillette’s Aransas, Axis of Observation (1979) and Buky Schwartz’s In Real Time (1980), a closed-circuit work with two video cameras and four monitors. In 1983, two monitor sculptures were included under the “Painting, Sculpture, Installation” rubric: Shigeko Kubota’s River (1979–81), displayed in the museum’s Lower Lobby (and on view in Before Projection), and Mary Lucier’s Ohio at Giverny (1983), which critic and art historian Shelley Rice called the “popular and critical” hit of the exhibition. The 1985 edition again included two installations, Birnbaum’s Damnation of Faust (1984) and Bill Viola’s The Theater of Memory (1985); the latter was the first projective installation shown in a Whitney Biennial. In 1987 four installations were included on the main floors: First and Third (1986) by Judith Barry, a projection; two monitor sculptures from the Family of Robot (1986) series by Nam June Paik; Bruce Nauman’s Krefeld Piece (1985), comprising monitors and flashing neon; and Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman’s The Erl King (1986), an interactive, computer-controlled piece with monitors. The 1989 Whitney Biennial featured two moving-image installations (Julia Scher, Security by Julia IV [1989], with multiple monitors; and Francesc Torres, Oikonomos [1989], combining projection with installation elements).

15. Sturken and Martha Rosler have at different points criticized the institutional mechanisms that legitimized video art while largely ignoring the broader practices emerging the same time. See Sturken, “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form,” and Martha Rosler, “Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment,” in Illuminating Video, 31–50.

16. The film and video section in this installment, as well as each one following up to 1995, was organized by Hanhardt.

17. The show also included two film installations, by Benni Efrat and Paul Sharits respectively. Information on the works presented in these exhibitions throughout is drawn from the Whitney Biennial exhibition catalogues.
and in 1991 there were four (Nayland Blake, *Still Life* [1990], a small camcorder with a display window; Gary Hill, *Between Cinema and Hard Place* [1991], a multi-monitor installation; Nauman’s *Raw Material—MMM* [1990], comprising two monitors and a projection; and Alan Rath, *Voyeur II* [1989] and *Hound* [1990], incorporating cathode ray tubes stripped of their cases). Each iteration also had a video program shown in a separate space at scheduled times. The 1993 edition of the Biennial marked a turning point with respect to its inclusion of video, particularly in projective form.\(^{18}\) The show included half a dozen installations or room environments incorporating the moving image, by Matthew Barney, Shu Lea Cheang, Renée Green, Hill, Pepón Osorio, and the collaborative team of Bruce Yonemoto, Norman Yonemoto, and Timothy Martin. It also dispensed with separating the film and video section from painting and sculpture in the catalogue. However, given that there were only a couple more installations than there had been in previous years, most of which still employed monitors, it seems as though the change was not primarily due to numbers but perceived parity via occupied real estate. Notably, the show presented Hill’s monumental *Tall Ships* (1992), an interactive installation in which twelve moving images were projected onto the walls of a corridor. The work had premiered at Documenta 9 in Germany the year before in an even larger version with sixteen projections. In fact, the 1992 quinquennial in Kassel has been described as an international milestone marking the full arrival of video by film scholars Erika Balsom and Lucas Hilderbrand.\(^{19}\) Again, the salient issue here is not so much the figures themselves: out of 187 artists, twelve presented video installations. Rather, it was evident that video was put “on an equal footing with painting and sculpture throughout the many pavilions,” as curator London has noted.\(^{20}\) By contrast, art historian Caroline A. Jones identifies the decisive shift as occurring in 1995, when Viola presented a group of crowd-pleasing video installations in the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Jones also points to the connection between the rise of spectacular, immersive projection and the inherent pageantry of biennial culture).\(^{21}\)

This short chronology indicates that over the course of the 1980s, video installation incrementally entered the gallery space proper. This development was surveyed in two major exhibitions mounted in Europe. In 1984 the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam presented *Het Lumineuze Beeld/ The Luminous Image*, pairing practitioners like Brian Eno and Robert Wilson, better known for their respective work in music and theater, with video artists such as Max Almy, Hoover, Marcel Odenbach, Oursler, and others. In the 1993 Biennial, bringing identity politics and issues of representation to the fore, is also widely considered one of the most influential shows of the decade in general.

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catalogue, exhibition curator Dorine Mignot asserts that video art was here to stay and needed to be accommodated: “Video has come to be recognized as one medium alongside many others and we have gradually become accustomed to it as such.”

Wulf Herzogenrath’s comprehensive *Video-Skulptur, retrospektiv und aktuell, 1963–1989* (Video Sculpture: Retrospective and Current, 1963–1989) traveled from Cologne to Berlin and Zurich in 1989. The show included eighty international artists and charted video sculpture’s course from its beginnings. The catalogue essay by Edith Decker-Phillips (reproduced in this publication in English for the first time) sums up the state of the art at the end of the decade. Nonetheless, even as video installation was being brought into the fold of the gallery, the use of the monitor, and much of the discourse around it, was haunted by what David Antin, in 1975, had dubbed “video’s frightful parent”: television.

What’s more, video sculpture was only rarely installed or considered in relation to sculpture writ large. In 1982 art historian René Berger declared flatly that all video artists were “consciously breaking with the topos of television.”

And in the catalogue for *The Luminous Image*, museum director Wim Beeren, perhaps involuntarily, reveals a certain amount of antipathy toward his subject:


stands. Besides eliminating the plastic frame around her images of the sunrise, the screens towered above the viewer’s heads, underlining the sculptural quality of the structure. Made eight years later, Oursler’s *Psychomimetiscape II* (1987) makes the two miniature televisions it integrates almost completely disappear. This tabletop landscape comprises a cooling tower and castle tower, hiding one monitor in the latter and another one in the rocky terrain that forms the base, so that the sculpture effectively functions as model set for the abstruse dystopian story unfolding on the screens.

Media scholar Margaret Morse provides one of the few sustained analyses of (largely) monitor-based installation on its own terms, apart from television. Writing in 1989, she argues that two defining properties of this type of work are the occupation of three-dimensional space and, to varying degrees, sensitivity to the site of installation. She also mentions different categories she calls “the video wall, the kinetic painting, the relief, the sculpture, and the installation.” Morse contends that monitor works are decidedly not “proscenium art” but rather surround the visitor “by a spatial here and now, enclosed within a construction that is grounded in actual (not illusionistic) space.” Therefore, video sculpture was categorically unlike film, theater, or painting. Indeed, most of the works included in *Before Projection* are situated in the white cube of the gallery rather than the dark space of the cinema. Many of them can be viewed in the round, including the works by Caramelle, Paik, and Oursler. Like Paik’s robot sculpture, Pezold’s earlier *The New Embodied Sign Language* (1976) uses monitors as building blocks to assemble a female figure of approximately human height. Each of four monitors shows a close-up of a body part (eye, mouth, breasts, and pubic area), registering their variously funny and unsettling movements on screen. Fragmented, disproportionately enlarged, and rendered theatrical by black-and-white paint, Pezold produces an abstracted body that not only eludes the conventional sculptural vocabulary of the female form but returns the spectator’s gaze.

Some of the works in *Before Projection* do present frontally but are nevertheless not conducive to illusionism or immersive modes of reception. Lucier’s *Equinox* charts the sun rising above Lower Manhattan on seven consecutive days, displaying each morning’s footage on a monitor and pedestal arranged in a circular configuration. Her images of the identical scene, mainly distinguished by the increasing burn on the camera’s vidicon tube, unfold in sequence across different screens, distributing the viewer’s attention accordingly. While Lucier tackles classic painterly subjects—sunrise and horizon—her sequential moving images are rooted in conceptual strategies of seriality and repetition. In Kubota’s *River*, the monitor essentially becomes a projective device. Suspended from the ceiling, three monitors are mounted facing downward, pointing into a curved metal trough filled with water that is animated by a wave machine. Kubota’s exuberant images are reflected in the gentle waves, frequently distorted into pools of color, and thrown back onto the shiny sides of the basin, such that the work becomes a kind of light sculpture. Adrian Piper’s *Out of the Corner* (1990) consists of seventeen monitors playing footage of “talking heads” (including artists Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser and other art-world figures).

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28. Morse, 156.
who confront the viewer with a scathing critique of fantasies of racial purity, as well as sixty-four photographs appropriated from *Ebony* magazine mounted on the surrounding walls. Each monitor is placed on a pedestal, formally referencing Sol LeWitt’s cube sculptures, with an upturned chair nestled inside the open front. Piper thus constructs a sculptural tableau that viewers can walk into. Moreover, the work serves as an example of the fact that the development of video sculpture over the course of the 1980s parallels sculpture’s overall tendency toward installation during the same decade.

Certainly, given the persistent rhetoric around television, many monitor works were engaged in a critique of its apparatus, institutions, and ideology. Muntadas’s *Credits* (1984) assembles a sequence of television credits, stripped from their referents, on a loop. Shown on a monitor mounted above viewers’ heads, similar in placement to a television set encountered in a bank or at an airport, the work presents a blunt reminder of television’s incessant encroachment on public space. For *TV for TV* (1983), Takahiko Iimura performs the deadpan gesture of turning two televisions toward each other, effectively neutering the flow of images. Positioned on the floor, the anthropomorphized sets almost seem to be hugging each other. Maria Vedder’s *PAL oder Never the Same Color* (1988) considers the aesthetic and geopolitical implications of the broadcast standards established in Europe versus those in North America (PAL and NTSC, respectively) while embedding the subject matter of television in the larger framework of culturally determined color symbolism. The work employs one of the earliest video-wall systems, originally controlled by a then cutting-edge microprocessor, which alternates the choreography of the images, variously breaking them up into different quadrants or displaying one image across all twenty-five screens.

In spite of these varied sculptural approaches, the majority of the exhibited works engage with video qua video. Although artists were clearly asserting their autonomy from television in material and thematic terms, the medium of video for most practitioners was also unequivocally distinct from film. Describing the delineations of the field in the late 1980s, curator Bill Horrigan recalls that “it was not uncommon then for artists to refuse having their work seen via projection, an aesthetic principle maintained by artists whose use of video was allied precisely with the conviction that video was not cinema, i.e. not projected, not spectacle.”

It is thus no coincidence that the works bookending the time period at issue in *Before Projection* acknowledge the intersections of film and video at historical moments that were transformative junctures for these mediums. Birnbaum’s *Attack Piece* (1975), for example, which considers the relationship between the electronic video signal and analog photography, represents a transitional piece in the context of the show. The work consists of two monitors mounted at eye level and facing each other in a passageway with dark gray walls and carpet. One side shows a series of photographs of (mostly male) artists equipped

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29. Bill Horrigan, “Five Years Later,” in *Art and the Moving Image*, 294. In this essay, Horrigan reflects on the shift in the field brought about by projection and concludes, “In my view, the increasing dormancy of what had been generally understood as ‘video art’ is tied closely to the triumph of projection over monitor-based presentation, which had been the guarantee of video’s specificity within the gallery-based system” (294–95).

30. The work has more recently been shown on two projection screens facing each other.
with Super 8 cameras, while the other displays the film footage taken as they advance towards the seated photographer (Birnbaum herself); both film-based mediums were transferred to magnetic tape for monitor playback. As spectators enter the work, they are caught in a gendered, scopic attack-field between the protruding monitors. Thater’s *Snake River* (1994) examines one of the most iconic American film genres, the western (as epitomized by the films of John Ford). Three monitors positioned on the floor display footage of landscapes in the American West, filtered in red, green, and blue respectively, which are the colors transmitted by the three electron guns of a CRT monitor. Made at the time when video projection was displacing the monitor, Thater yokes the cinematic imagery to the small screen and foregrounds one of the distinctive technical features of video technology, staking a rare claim on the continuity and imbrication of different mediums and their forms of display.

The arrival of projection begins to dissolve the distinction between film and video as separate mediums. As outlined above, over the course of the 1990s projective installation took over the exhibition space. In 1996, Douglas Gordon was awarded the Turner Prize for *24 Hour Psycho* (1993). This double projection onto two sides of a large screen bisecting the gallery slows down Alfred Hitchcock’s eponymous 1960 Hollywood thriller to extend over a full day. The piece exemplifies a burgeoning interest in the aesthetic and narrative vocabulary of the cinema for a generation of artists emerging at the time, including Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Doug Aitken, Stan Douglas, Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, Jane and Louise Wilson, and others. Along with cinematic imagery and subject matter, the black-box space became a standard feature of contemporary art exhibitions as the display of projective works necessitated the construction of minicinemas within or adjacent to white-cube gallery spaces. These developments were facilitated both conceptually and technically by digital convergence. The new digital media superseded both film’s “frames” and video’s analog magnetic tape, and the image dramatically improved in quality. Artist and writer Chris Meigh-Andrews summarizes the shifting terms of the preceding decade in his history of video art, originally published in 2006:

> Technological change helped to transform video art, liberating it from the inevitable reference of television, and as the resolution and brightness range of video projection increased, video began to be (almost) indistinguishable from film!°

If in 1989 the quality of projected video was nowhere near approximating the brightness and definition of either film projection or monitor presentation, video technology improved rapidly in the following years. With the launch of first LCD (liquid-crystal display) and then DLP (digital light-processing) projectors, which are smaller and lighter

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31. It is important to note that much of the projective installation emerging in the 1990s took narrative feature films, and very often Hollywood movies, as point of reference, rather than more abstract modes of filmmaking explored in what is known as avant-garde or experimental film.


33. Bill Horrigan makes this point when discussing a Julia Scher exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, OH, in “Five Years Later,” 296.
than the older CRT models, projective video installations became much easier to install. Improving display technology was echoed by changes in film production, specifically editing. In commercial filmmaking, digital, nonlinear editing systems had begun to replace the practice of physically cutting and splicing celluloid by the late 1980s, a shift that was complete by the mid-1990s. In other words, the material separation of film and video collapsed, as big movies shot on 35-mm film routinely lived on video during the editing process before being transferred back to film. Many moving-image artists recorded using 16-mm film but edited and exhibited on video, all the while referring to the work as “film.” Curator Michael Rush identifies 1997 as marking another turning point with the introduction of the first handheld digital-video recorder by Sony, which, “like the Portapak over thirty years before, made digital moving-image recording accessible to a broad consumer public, including artists.”

So while video-projection technology and digital-media production developed in tandem, it is ultimately the latter that changed the very definition of film and video (in the wake of high-definition video and digital cinema projection, that development has recently come to its preliminary conclusion). Art historian Michael Newman characterizes the changes in the media landscape in 2009:

“It is largely the shift in the nature of remediation brought about by digitilisation that justifies us in speaking currently of the ‘moving image’ rather than film or video. Moving images today are not only ubiquitous, but also infinitely transformable.”

In spite of the mediums’ new ambiguity, there were none-theless patterns of reception that remained distinct. Projected works deployed in black-box spaces tended to allude to the medium’s historical relationship to cinema. Much writing around the cinematic turn drew on film history and theory, analyzing modes of spectatorship as well as filmic narrative. Although this direction is supported by the explicit engagement with narrative film and cinematic space in much work from the 1990s and early 2000s, it is illuminating that nobody asked the inverse—namely, what video projection might mean for television in general and the monitor in particular (we now know that “the flatscreen” is the answer to the latter). Projective video installation was not only a nearly instant popular and critical success, it also finally became collectible and hence viable on the art market (somewhat paradoxically so, as the projected image is entirely ephemeral).

Another conspicuous difference is in rhetoric. While the unpalatable stench of TV clung to earlier video art, much critical writing on cinematic installation took a decidedly enthusiastic tone. Projection is


36. Hilderbrand historicizes the different economic models of distribution versus editioning that facilitated this development in “Moving Images.” However, it is worth pointing out that although film and video are now routinely collected by major institutions and some private collectors, their market as a whole remains far behind painting, drawing, and other “traditional” mediums.
repeatedly described in the elevated terms of a “liberation,” as in Meigh-Andrews’s formulation quoted above. The opening salvo of art historian Liz Kotz’s analysis of video projection in 2004—echoing Beeren’s statement twenty years before—is particularly emphatic:

Monitors are awkward, badly designed and a constant reminder of the medium’s links to broadcast television, domestic furniture and all the degraded industrial uses of video technology. Mounted on the ubiquitous grey utility cart in institutional settings, monitors tend to disrupt the gallery or museum space. Is it no wonder video has so often been confined to the basement or the stairwell? Who among us would not prefer the luminous image freed from its ungainly technical support?

Now that AV carts are a rarity and boxy television sets hard to come by, the roundabout condemnation of these relatively innocuous display elements appears a little overwrought. It is particularly revealing that large projections, usually requiring the construction of a separate architectural structure, are considered more suited to the museum than monitor works, which can typically be accommodated by the white cube just fine. These sentiments reflect, I think, a number of ahistorical assumptions of cinema’s a priori cultural superiority vis-à-vis TV. But the alignment of film/cinema/projection and video/television/monitor is an institutional rather than intrinsic one. Clearly, these terms have shifted considerably over time. While television today is no less of an ideological megaphone than it was then, the medium has also evolved into a dominant purveyor of quality content. More important, as social media and the internet are now defining elements in our mediascape, the segmentation into television and the cinema itself is obsolete. Computer-generated imagery, rapidly improving in verisimilitude, is currently bringing about another dramatic shift in our relationship to images and materiality.

It seems clear that the success of cinematic projection over the monitor in the 1990s and 2000s split video installation into a “before” and “after.” In the process, “video art” itself was turned into a historical category, whereas after the digital turn, the moving image became part and parcel of contemporary art. This is not in and of itself a problem, except that the progress-inflected account tends to imply that the rise of projective installation marks the moment when video really comes into its own. My contention is that, in fact, it was a fully resolved form already. Before Projection aims to resituate monitor sculpture more completely into the narrative between early video and projection, but also to claim its relevance for the development of sculpture in the 1980s in general. A familiar process of, if you will, auratic investment follows each technology’s inevitable obsolescence. We have seen this with slide projectors and 16-mm films, for example, once workaday classroom equipment and now sculptural elements on their own. The cubic CRT appliance has become a similarly nostalgic object. It is under these terms that we can look past the “awkward” monitor and “ungainly” television set and reevaluate some of the sculptural strategies that video artists employed from the outset.
