

## BROAD SCOPE

### Narrowcast: Reframing Global Video 1986/2008

Pitzer Art Galleries

Pitzer College

Claremont, California

September 25–November 23, 2008

The premise of the show “Narrowcast: Reframing Global Video 1986/2008” is simple: pair five videos from a 1986 exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) with five more recent internationally focused works. Then allow the viewer to assess the relevancy and place of video art today.

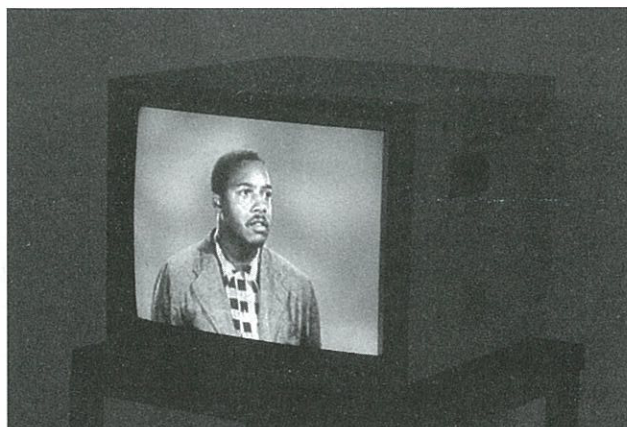
LACE has proven a strong commitment to showing video art. In 1986, LACE supported two major exhibitions devoted to video and media arts. The first, titled “TV Generations,” was assembled by artists and curators John Baldessari and Bruce Yonemoto. The selected artists addressed the significance of television as a source of iconography in various formats including video, sculpture, photography, installations, performance, and poetry. The second exhibition, and the inspiration for “Narrowcast,” was broader in scope but narrower in medium. “Resolution: A Critique of Video Art” was an attempt to provide a critical survey of video art practices in the United States from 1979 to 1985 and included works by twenty-seven artists.

In contrast to “Resolution,” “Narrowcast” deliberately drew attention to the global nature of the art form and the international concerns of artists today. Whereas all the artists in the 1986 exhibition were based in the United States, most of the artists selected for “Narrowcast” were born outside of this country and all exhibited concerns that were global in nature. From a formal standpoint the exhibition confirmed that video art continues to concern itself with linear and non-linear editing, media critique, sampling and the slippage between fact and fiction. How the videos were displayed (projections now vs. monitors then), the proportionally greater participation of women in the exhibition (in 1986 only a handful of the selected twenty-seven artists were women), and the global and occasionally overtly political and courageous content of the contemporary work chosen were the points of greatest differentiation.

The exhibition, assembled by Pitzer Art Galleries Director/Curator Ciara Ennis with Ming-Yuen S. Ma, an associate professor of Media Studies at Pitzer College, exuded relevancy particularly in the framework of the economic and political climate of November 2008. A selection from the 1986 exhibition, *Political Advertisement 1952–1984* (2004) by Antonio Muntadas and Marshall Reese, was timely to re-examine given the 2008 presidential election. Their idea was simple: a non-judgmental re-screening of American political television advertisements between 1954 and 1984. This is a project they have since updated every presidential cycle since 1984—the latest version premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in October 2008.

Also germane and emphasizing the global nature of the nation’s dependency on oil is filmmaker Mark Boulos’s two-channel video projection *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (2008). Projected at opposite ends

of the same room, Boulos’s documentary-style films clash and challenge the ideology of the opposing projection. Gestures of commodity traders on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange are paired with footage of Nigerian delta guerrillas as they employ ritualized prayer practices before waging guerilla war against the corporations that mine oil from their land. The dialogue between the two videos explores the sense of exploitation, futility, and anger exhibited by the guerrillas and pairs this with the remoteness and esoteric world of commodities trading. At first sight, the gestures of the commodity traders appear intense, but it is a



feeble intensity when contrasted with the words and gestures of guerilla fighters who appear willing to die for their cause.

The restaging of political history is the intent of Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo in her 2003 video *Who Can Remove the Traces—Quién puede borrar las huellas*. The camera follows Galindo as she walks toward the National Palace in Guatemala City wearing a black dress and carrying a large metal basin of blood. Every few steps, she ritualistically dips her feet into the blood and then continues on her way, leaving a

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**Above: top**

Installation view of “Political Advertisement 1952–1984” (2004) by Antonio Muntadas and Marshall Reese; photograph by Max King Cap

**Above: bottom**

“Political Advertisement 1952–1984” (2004) by Antonio Muntadas and Marshall Reese

**Following page**

Still from *Who Can Remove the Traces* (2003) by Regina José Galindo





line of bloody footprints as a sign of political protest for the thousands of indigenous Mayan people the military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt is accused of killing. The video is both evidence of an act of protest and also an act of bravery: in 2003, when this performance took place, Ríos Montt was running for President of Guatemala.

Despite representing a contemporary contribution to the exhibition, the meaning of Artur Zmijewski's *Game of Tag* (1999) has probably shifted over its brief lifespan. In this short video, projected large in the main room of the Pitzer Gallery, a group of naked men and women of varied ages embark on a game of tag in a concrete cellar room. The implications of the video constantly change as the acts of participation are at varying times feverish, polite, embarrassing, and suggestive. Gender roles of sexual domination are heightened, particularly when accompanied by the slightly breathless sounds of slapping and bare feet skidding across the floor. The meaning shifts again when the game of tag morphs to another cellar location, this time an abandoned Polish gas chamber. At this new venue, four naked men of similar age are playing tag. Ennis writes in her curatorial essay: "[this video] pulls at the scab of our collective guilt regarding Nazi genocide." For a contemporary viewer, the implication of this game can be ominous. The imagery of naked men undergoing some form of staged behavior—no matter how lighthearted—becomes reminiscent of staged images of naked prisoners in the utilitarian concrete cellar rooms from Abu Ghraib, even though Zmijewski's film was created before those photographic images became so ubiquitous.

In the framework of an exhibition that asks us to reflect on video art then and now, Natalie Bookchin's mining of YouTube videos is relevant.

*Trip* (2008), Bookchin's seventy-country assemblage, challenges the seemingly ubiquitous nature of the videoed road-trip. Countless bite-size clips of video footage shot through the windshield or from the back seat are amassed to form a bizarre travelogue. Connections are made as one rear-view mirror charm melds into the next and scenes are coupled through the integration of snippets of conversation, music, or the radio. The constantly changing and challenging point-of-view makes us wary. Are we a tourist, a soldier, a lorry driver, or a voyeur?

Whereas YouTube is a source of inspiration today, artists practicing in the 1980s were part of the generation shaped by television and were interested in critiquing its content and its effect on the audience. Michael Smith's humorous video *Secret Horror* (1980) takes us on a journey of the wide-eyed protagonist as he responds passively to a variety of complex situations. His reactions are formed by the slack-jawed response of a television-numbed soul. Lyn Blumenthal's *Doublecross* (1985) is concerned with the effect of media-endorsed sexual norms. Her non-linear collage of black-and-white film footage, still images, laughter, and music evoking a sexually charged cocktail hour are interspersed with the confessions of a child who feels excluded.

Creating a deliberately confusing linearity of time, location, and generations, Pablo Pijnappel's 16mm projection *Walderedo* (2006) mixes fact and fiction with archival and new footage as he examines the life of his grandfather, a renowned Brazilian psychoanalyst, and Pijnappel's biological father, an artist who lives in Tokyo and suffers from depression. Memory, stories of travel and familial expectations are interwoven in such a way as to suggest personal dislocation and cultural displacement.

Bill Viola's *Light and Heat—Chott el-Djerid* (1979) employs a number of lens manipulations to imply a constant re-focusing of self, place, and meaning. Among the hazy landscape of the largest salt pan in the Sahara, the viewer searches in vain for something to recognize amid the heat distorted images. The accompanying ambiguous but evocative soundtrack supports this sense of seeking. In "Narrowcast" this video was screened on a monitor with headphones in a manner faithful to the original staging of this work.

In her curatorial essay, Ennis paired works from the 1986 show with current works using descriptive linkages. However, when viewing the

respective videos these descriptive relationships were less relevant. Regardless, because of the global nature of the work and the courage of some of the videomakers, "Narrowcast" is a particularly thought-provoking show. The curators are to be commended for bringing an excellent suite of international and refreshing videos to California.<sup>1</sup>

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*NOTE 1. The show will continue at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions through March 1, 2009.*

