**“Betwixt and Between” Worlds:**

**Spatial and Temporal Liminality in Video Art-Music**

Holly Rogers

The first wave of video art, which began in 1965 in New York, was highly interactive. The newly available technology enabled artists and composers to produce intermedial spaces in which image and music were created, projected and received simultaneously. As a result, pieces were often site-specific and performative. In May 1969, The Howard Wise Gallery in New York opened “TV as a Creative Medium,” one of the first American exhibitions given entirely to television and video work. Although it included work by Nam June Paik and Aldo Tambellini, it was *WipeCycle* by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette (Figure 1) that best embodied the interactive proclivities of early video work*.* Nine monitors, stacked three-by-three, were positioned in front of the elevator that brought people into the gallery. The screens presented a mixture of pre-recorded video footage and live closed-circuit images taken from a camera videoing the visitors as they stepped from elevator into exhibition space: “[t]he most important function,” wrote Schneider, “was to integrate the audience into the information.”[[1]](#endnote-1) After eight seconds, the newly recorded image appeared on two screens and, after sixteen, on two others before the delayed images switched axes. The outer four screens showed pre-recorded images and, according to a predetermined cycle, the monitors were intermittently wiped blank and the process began again.

*Wipe Cycle* embodied many of the aesthetic tropes common to early video work. Used as raw compositional material, visitors were drawn into the center of the video sculpture, and thus became both receiver and creator. The work became site-specific and resistant to commodification, as it only existed so long as it was being performed (and was thus difficult to “collect”). Nevertheless, although visitors were physically immersed in the work, they were not transported *into* it as the materiality of the artform was constantly in sight: the video apparatus, the speakers and the gallery walls were a vital part of piece.

More recent work demands a more complex process of identification. Emerging from a period of radical technological, aesthetic and institutional change, contemporary video work from the early 1990s is less sculptural and more cinematic than its forebears. *Ocean Without a Shore*, Bill Viola’s contribution to the 2007 Venice Biennale, for instance, was conceived for the tiny sixteenth-century Venetian chapel, the Church of St Gallo (figure 2). A triptych of plasma screens surrounded by six speakers were mounted on the three altars, each showing a black-and-white image of a person walking in extreme slow motion toward the camera. Viola describes the screens as a “cross between a tomb and an alter”: “these alters, actually, are a place where the dead … reside and connect … with the living”. The figures on each of the three screens remain calm until their approach brings them to a wall of hitherto invisible water. As each form passes through the “invisible threshold” (Viola), water cascades around them and the images transform into high-definition color, a change that propels the characters into the visitor’s space with alarming acuity. The wall, explains Viola, indicates “the fragility of life: the borderline between life and death is not a hard wall, it’s not to be opened with a lock and key, it’s actually very fragile, very tenuous …you can cross it … in an instant.” [[2]](#footnote-1) The fragility between borders is also articulated within the passage of each character, who represent various ethnicities and ages; one man emerges from his watery baptism in drag, for instance, a faint smile of relief on his face.

Although this piece thrums throughout, both visually and audibly, with the ambience of the chapel, the type of site-specificity activated by the architectural fusion is very different from that produced by *WipeCycle*. The audience of *Ocean Without a Shore*, although feeling thoroughly immersed in the work and its context, is not asked to participate physically. While the work is certainly influenced by its audience, as is every performance, it is not *performative*; instead, its narrative is predetermined, enabling the installation to be recreated with great accuracy at the James Cohan Gallery, New York, in 2007. Projected onto flat screens, often in darkened rooms, more recent pieces such as *Ocean Without a Shore* tend toward the physically self-contained, initiating what Claire Bishop has described as a process of “mimetic engulfment.”[[3]](#endnote-2) While context is vital to both styles of video work, then, the activation of space and the audio-visual relationships enabled within it is nevertheless articulated and activated in very different ways. These differences, I suggest, can be productively theorized in terms of two contrasting forms of liminality.

With its roots in the Latin *Limen*, the idea of the liminal was introduced in anthropology (in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep, and later popularized by Victor Turner) to refer to a sensory threshold, or an intermediate stage.[[4]](#endnote-3) The term was first used to describe a rite of passage, a ritual that Gennep split into a period of separation, a liminal period (or what Turner refers to as a “gestation” period), and the act of reassimilation.[[5]](#endnote-4) During such a ritual, a person hovers “betwixt and between” (Turner) different social and existential spaces, and it is here that the person becomes acutely aware of his or her social and cultural positioning.[[6]](#endnote-5) This temporary “gestation” period, writes Turner, is characterized by a “fructile chaos,” acting as “a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms.”[[7]](#endnote-6) As a result, Turner points out that “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”[[8]](#endnote-7) The liminal has also been used to describe other transitional phases, such as the process of self-realization in Jungian theory, a period characterized by the breakdown of the persona before individualization is initiated; it can also refer to concrete places of indeterminate status, such as borders, crossroads, or disputed territories. However, the authors of *Mapping Liminalities* point out that “although the underlying metaphor is spatial, liminality is about process, it is always dynamic and is diachronic as well as synchronic. Liminality entails doubleness and is ultimately fluid and unfixable.”[[9]](#endnote-8) When bluesman Robert Johnson made his mythical pact with the devil at the crossroads, for instance, he mapped his physiological transformation—the moment he was able to exist physically in this world, while temporarily seeing into and conversing with the supernatural one—onto a physical space of equal directional ambiguity. His pact was such that he remained suspended in a “fluid and unfixable” liminal space, unable to reintegrate into society once he had severed his ties in exchange for unusually dextrous fingers.

Characterized by fluidity and a lack of stability, liminality can take many forms. In video work, these forms vary greatly between early and more recent practice.

Early work can be read as occupying the transitional, “gestational” phase in the evolution of video practice: a temporal, historical threshold. The technology first became available to the general public in 1965 and was quickly appropriated as a creative material by artists seeking to sound their images, and by musicians eager to visualize their sounds. Set against a historical backdrop of intense experimentation that ranged from the conceptual work of Duchamp and the performance-based practices of Allan Kaprow on the art side to the heightened spatialization of Stockhausen and the aleatoric procedures of John Cage in the arena of music, video technology provided a new means to expand traditional practice. As an electromagnetic technology, video enabled music and image to be recorded and transmitted simultaneously for the first time, allowing a level of creative syncreticism and audio-visual synergy never before possible. Previous audio-visual practices, such as lantern shows, music theater, opera, synaesthetic experimentation, early direct film and so on, were intermedial primarily at the level of reception. Although early experimental filmmakers such as Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger and Stan Brakhage had already explored the possibilities of single-authored visual music, film stock demanded a period of “deliberation” (Belton) between musical and visual creativity.[[10]](#endnote-9) Video enabled those working with the medium to produce sound and image tracks concurrently, at the moment of a work’s inception, its electromagnetic scanning process ensuring that the image was continually “in the process of coming into being,” as we saw in *WipeCycle*.[[11]](#endnote-10)

Because it was so immediate, early video work could easily be combined with other disciplines: Carolee Schneeman included video in her performance art, for instance, and Joan Jonas with her dance. The easy reproducibility of the video format, together with its capacity for instantaneous projection, offered these artists a way not only to articulate current creative concerns, but also to do so with sound. In a similar way, video’s ability to record and transmit simultaneously music and image offered musicians an easy way to visualize their music. As a result, those working with early video were often musically trained: Nam June Paik (experimental composer), Steina Vasulka (classical violinist), Robert Cahen (electro-acoustic composer) and Tony Conrad (member of the *Theatre of Eternal Music*) are just a few examples. Initially, then, the use of the medium as a creative tool produced a unique moment in audio-visual history: the video practitioner, newly equipped to produce a form of visual music at an intermedial level, could become an artist-composer.

Given that artists could thus use video to sound their visual work, while composers and performers could visualize their music from within their immediate acoustic space, the first wave of video can be considered the coming together of music and art spaces, the physical audio-visuality of the medium allowing these two histories to meet. At a material level, the technology was able simultaneously to digest and project music and image: when received, this duality was situated in the intermedial space between music, sculpture, painting, drama and film. Importantly, this space could be navigated by a single person, the artist-composer, who had to engage at a performative level with both audio and visual tracks.

Much of Steina Vasulka’s work demonstrates the capabilities of video’s audio-visuality. After graduating from the Prague Music Conservatory, she became a violinist with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, leaving in 1965 for the life of a freelance musician in New York. It was here she became interested in visualizing her performances and turned to the video camera for help:

My background is in music. For me, it is the sound that leads me into the image. Every image has its own sound and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living. I apply the same principle to art as to playing the violin: with the same attitude of continuous practice, the same concept of composition. Since my art schooling was in music, I do not think of images as stills, but always as motion.[[12]](#endnote-11)

From her earliest work with her artist husband Woody, Vasulka’s installations were concerned with imaging sound. Initially, the Icelandic artist fragmented the traditional gallery area not only by bringing music into the normally silent space, but also by replacing the fixed viewpoint of an artwork with a rotating table. In *Allvision* (1976), for instance, two video cameras and a mirrored sphere revolve on a turntable in the middle of the space. Their scanning images are transmitted to four monitors, initiating an immediate fragmentation of the performance area. William Judson, the curator of the 1982-3 installation at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, described the piece in terms of the physical and temporal expansions it enabled:

Upon entering the gallery, one is presented with three versions of space: the three dimensional gallery space which one shares with the machine and monitors as sculptural objects; the space which one sees mirrored in the sphere; and the ‘whole’ space which is taken in by the cameras and presented in flattened version on the monitors. These versions of space correspond to three quite different ways of understanding ‘reality’: as a physical material presence verifiable by touch; as a visual perception, in which the material world may be rearranged or distorted but which is nevertheless comprehensible as an optical entity, like a painting or photograph; as a concept, in which an abstract system must be taken into account before the reality it presents is understood.[[13]](#endnote-12)

In *Allvision*, the focus was on the physical processes of video recording and projection and its ability to shatter the gallery space. Such emphasis on process resulted in a work that was site-specific and highly transitory, less an artefact on display and more of a performance that used space, time and the audience as its raw material, yielding a contextuality that Catherine Elwes has described as a “dismantling [of] the box itself.”[[14]](#endnote-13) A similar aesthetic was promoted in numerous other works of the period, including Paik’s *TV Cello* (1971), in which a performer (Charlotte Moorman) bowed an instrument made from three television monitors (figure 3). Connected to the monitors, the strings, when sounded, distorted and fragmented the images, creating a visual music that includes performer, artist, audience and the space in which they interact. As in *Allvision*, the focus lay beyond the screen, as context was the primary material for each performance.

The multi-disciplinary possibilities afforded by video led many to believe that the format would open up a new era for creativity. And yet it is a tricky business to locate the “birth” of the new medium. Although the term “liminal” has not been used in this context directly, several theorists have arrived at ideas that evoke this sense. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, for instance, use film to illustrate their thesis that a new creative practice must establish itself in relation to pre-existent disciplines before it can articulate its own media specificities: that it must define itself contextually before developing into a discrete artform.[[15]](#endnote-14) According to their theory, only when film developed its medium-specificity could it do this: “[i]t wasn’t until cinema’s practitioners arrived at a reflexive understanding of the medium and until the cinema achieved a certain degree of institutionalisation that the medium became autonomous.”[[16]](#endnote-15) The first wave of video work is an excellent example of this theory, as it was particularly slow in consolidating its media specificity— a protraction that Yvonne Spielmann argues may more productively be referred to as its “integrating birth.”[[17]](#endnote-16) Site-specific, performative and structured around sound, early video repelled the easy commodification of art: as transient acts, the works could be neither repeated nor collected. Hans-Peter Schwarz, one of the founding directors of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM, Germany), described their ephemerality as setting off an “explosive charge” at the gates of traditional art establishments.[[18]](#endnote-17) At first, this “explosive charge” was blocked by major galleries for reasons that include curatorial problems (how to include sound and performance into a gallery space, temporal modes of perception fundamentally at odds with the traditional gallery experience); aesthetic issues (video’s relationship to mass media such as television and untraditional modes of artistic discourse); and financial concerns (how to sell or keep something that is unrepeatable).[[19]](#endnote-18) Artist Lynn Hershman Leeson articulates many of these problems when she recalls that “in 1972, the University Art Museum in Berkeley closed an exhibition of mine because I used audio tape and sound in a sculpture entitled Self Portrait as Another Person. The museum curators claimed that electronic media was not art and most certainly did not belong in a museum.”[[20]](#endnote-19) These ideological incompatibilities were also acknowledged by many video artists and composers themselves, who rejected the methods of funding and exhibition favored by the larger institutions, preferring instead to perform their work in alternative spaces, such as people’s houses or lofts, public spaces, or small, privately-owned galleries. Two major exhibitions in the early ‘80s signaled a change in the relation between video artist-composer and institution. The Whitney Museum of American Art became the first American gallery to exhibit video work with a retrospective of Nam June Paik in 1982; and this was followed, five years later, by a Bill Viola retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Clearly, video has now gained institutional acceptance, with the Tate Modern currently constructing a multi-million-dollar wing that will house video and performance work.

Initially used as a component of other creative events, such as happenings and multi-media performance art, then, video was first used to bring together other disciplines, and it was not until the 1980s that the format could be considered an “aesthetically independent genre” (Spielmann), or to return to the anthropological model I described at the outset, a *reassimilated* mode of audio-visual discourse. Viewed in this way, video’s “integrating birth” can be mapped onto the “gestation process” of the rite-of-passage ritual. The audio-visual possibilities of the technology initiated a “withdrawal from normal modes of socialization,” or artistic discourse, and hovered for almost a decade in a state of intermediality “betwixt and between” disciplines, audiences and modes of expression. Put another way, video enabled music and art practices to leave their established arenas and to enter a period of intense flux. During this threshold stage, artists and musicians converged at the metaphorical crossroads, looking, like Robert Johnson, in two directions. It was only once these two histories became fully integrated that video became an “aesthetically independent genre.” But how has this institutional acceptance—or video’s re-assimilation—manifested itself in terms of creativity? What are the “media specificities” that have developed since the “emergence of the video image from its cuboid container,” and how have these changed the nature of video’s audio-visuality? Now that the rite-of-passage is complete, in other words, how has video’s temporal liminality transformed into a spatial one?

We can find examples of “aesthetically independent” video work in pieces by younger video artists and composers who, working from the late 1990s onwards, developed the cinematic, self-contained style that articulates the more subtle audio-visual relationships in *Ocean Without A Shore*. As noted, these pieces were often projected onto flat screens. At first glance, the different levels of performativity, interactivity and site-specificity activated by the two waves of video work are vast. If we understand the first wave as musicians visualizing their work with a heightened sense of materiality and contextualization, we can see the second wave, although often still installational, as moving towards a more sutured cinematic mode of discourse that attempts to blend with its environment. But despite the initial performative and material changes between the two waves, is there a common aesthetic thread that connects early and recent work? Should we read contemporary pieces as simply a more polished way of articulating the same audio-visual problems?

Recognizing that the differences stem from the different ways in which each wave of video interacts with its environment, let us take Spielmann’s reading of early video one step further. During video’s liminal “integrating birth,” the audio-visual synergy enabled by the new technology allowed music and art to move into each other’s realm, as we saw in *TV Cello*. Once an “aesthetically independent genre” emerged during video’s second wave, however, practitioners reworked audio-visuality into a more immersive, insular and self-reflexive style, as articulated in many of Bill Viola’s installations. It was here that a second form of liminality was initiated. This time, the threshold did not exist as a temporal and historical period of confinement, because as we have seen, video was by now thoroughly assimilated into the art world. Rather, the historical “gestation” period was replaced by a conceptual liminality that operated not temporally but spatially. More recent video forces its audience, in other words, into a state of critical self-awareness that positions them in the *existential* space of Gennep’s transitional phase. But what happened between these two instances to make the two sets of sensibilities between early and more recent video work so radically different?

**Spatial Liminality**

The answer is twofold, and lies somewhere between technological innovation and institutional acceptance. Rapid developments in video technology have blurred the distinctions between media specificities. Rather than being used contextually as part of a Happening or site-specific event, video worked towards, not against, the syncreticism of the cinematic. Whereas Paik was preoccupied with the television monitor as a sculptural object, the later work of Bill Viola and others repositioned attention from the apparatus of display onto, or rather into, the two-dimensional screen, which was enjoying rapid gains in resolution through the 1980s and 1990s.[[21]](#endnote-20) Viola now works predominantly with high-definition video that is shown either via rear-projection onto a screen, as in *Emergence* (2002), or on wall-mounted plasma displays, as in his *Two Women* (2008). Elwes has articulated this shift between “contrasting spatial dynamics” as “[t]he emergence of the video image from its cuboid container.”[[22]](#endnote-21)

The move back from context to content has been hailed as “a new beginning” for video work.[[23]](#endnote-22) Although practitioners continue to refer to themselves as video artists, it is clear to see that those working with the medium have outgrown the technological confines inherent in the name. (Viola has been particularly vocal about his concern over the material emphasis of the term “video artist,” for instance, insisting that his work emphasizes content rather than the materialities of display.) Not only has the quality of video improved so much that it is difficult to distinguish it from film, but by the turn of the twenty-first century, digital technologies had all but destroyed the divide between video and film, prompting a move into what Michael Rush describes as a post-medium world.[[24]](#endnote-23) The ready interchange between media can be seen in the various sections of Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* *Cycle* (1994-2002), which were shot on different video systems but later transferred to 35mm film stock. Michel Gondry demonstrated a similar post-medium sensibility in his recent installation with Pierre Bismuth, The All-Seeing Eye (The Hardcore Techno Version) (2005), in which video footage is transferred to DVD and shown on a television set.

For artists and composers working with video from its earliest days, technological advances have allowed them to expand upon their initial ideas while resisting the temptation to re-assimilate into art culture. Paik, although initially expressing reluctance to embrace technological media (“I use technology in order to hate it more properly”), moved from work with video and tape technology to satellite extravaganzas in the 1980s even as his underlying aesthetic remained consistent.[[25]](#endnote-24) *Wrap Around the World* (1988), for example, a video work seen by more than 50 million, celebrated the forthcoming Seoul Olympic Games. Using satellite technology, Paik mixed live performances by David Bowie, La, La, La and Human Steps in America with contributions by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Merce Cunningham, the Viennese Art Orchestra, an Irish car race and an elephant football match in locations as diverse as Thailand, Brazil, France, Germany, Israel and Japan. The synchronous manipulation of image and sound introduced in *TV Cello* also lay at the heart of *Wrap Around the World*, albeit on a globally- magnified scale. The aesthetic and conceptual basis remained the same, in other words, but the method of voicing became more spectacular.

Vasulka also embraced technological innovation to hone and intensify the intermedial connections that informed her earliest experimentation. Working with her husband in 1978, she embarked on a series of works known as *Violin Power*, which explored the possibilities of sending audio signals directly into a video recorder without using a camera. As she played her violin, the sounds were channelled directly into the video signal, enabling her to manipulate her own image that was being projected onto a screen via a closed-circuit feed. Unlike Paik, whose similarly performative works, such as *TV Cello*, were performed only several times before he abandoned them, Vasulka continued to work on *Violin Power*, describing it as “an ongoing continuous project with an ever increasing ‘repertoire.’ So far I have made five videodisks and I change the program for every performance.”[[26]](#endnote-25) From 1991, she replaced video with computer technology, which allowed her more precise control over the visual manipulations as she performed:

In 1991, after having experimentally interfaced my acoustic violin with a variable speed video cassette player, I bought a MIDI violin and a Pioneer Disk Player. Interfacing these instruments with a computer gave me an instant access to any frame of video on the disk as well as access to fast/slow and forward/backward movements.[[27]](#endnote-26)

Developing software that was later utilized by VJs looking to merge sound and image, the Vasulkas’ electric ZETA violin could assign specific functions to different strings or individual notes. This enabled Steina to change the speed or direction of a visual sequence, repeat pre-recorded progressions, or control the actions of other performers. The computer technology used in *Violin Power*, then, enabled a more versatile form of audio-visuality, as a single idea could be continually re-voiced in a variety of contexts.

While both *Wrap Around the World* and *Violin Power* retained their emphasis on context that was common to the first wave of video artist-composers, the younger generation have used the technological advancements to move attention away from the edge of the frame and into the diegesis. It can be argued that the move towards two-dimensionality in recent video work simply reflects technological advancement, as the use of multiple screens to create multidimensional narrative spaces mirrors the emergence of technological “non-places” promoted by new media expansions of “simulation, immersion, telepresence and surveillance” which, as Alison Butler has argued, has had “profound anthropological effects, breaking down distinctions between local and global, interior and exterior, here and elsewhere, and, ultimately, self and other.”[[28]](#endnote-27) Anne Friedberg has been more specific in her understanding of the reasons behind the profound “paradigm shift in visual address” towards a more complex form of audio-visual engagement, arguing that it is in response to the proliferating virtual windows found in most digital interfaces over the last thirty years, windows that encourage engagement with multiple screens and activate distributed attention.[[29]](#endnote-28) Interestingly, Dennis Waskul has described these “proliferating virtual windows” of the internet as “a natural environment for liminality,” as they suspend the ordinary life that surrounds the computer screen: it follows that the user is prevented from engaging too fully in any one virtual world.[[30]](#endnote-29)

Bishop has reformulated the opposing spatial dynamics identified by Butler and Friedberg in terms of audience engagement, suggesting that the first wave of video art-music encouraged an “activated spectatorship.” In contrast, more recent, flat-screen works promote a more cinematic “mimetic engulfment,” as they operate through what Liz Kotz describes as a “seductive immateriality.”[[31]](#endnote-30) Although “seductive immateriality” initially seems to suggest a compatibility with the illusory modes of discourse commonly found in cinema, video actually entails a very different form of engagement. Like Paik and Vasulka, many second-wave video practitioners use *themselves* as raw material, yet unlike earlier video artist-composers, their audio-visuality has been re-voiced in terms of contemporary music culture. During the 1990s, for instance, the inclusion of popular musical elements into video self-portraits became increasingly popular, ensuring that the relationship between sound and visuals remained at the forefront of both creation and reception. In *I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1996), Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist’s delivers a parody of the John Lennon song that can be read as a commentary on the (particularly visual) representation of women in popular music. But as she delivers the song directly to the camera, her own voice and image are fragmented through fast-forward and extreme slow motion, distortions that highlight the materiality of the video medium. Anne McGuire’s nostalgic *I Am Crazy and You’re Not Wrong* (1997) articulates a different relationship between technology and sound. Here, the San Francisco-based artist performs Kennedy-era lounge songs to a disinterested camera. Highlighting what Elwes has described as a “struggle for self-expression within the mimetic confines of the musical vernacular,” the video style moves away from the performative intermedialities of *Violin Power* and *TV Cello* towards the pre-recorded style of music video. In *I’m Not Crazy*, the “hysteria, drug addiction and madness that were always simmering under the performances of iconic figures like Judy Garland and Billie Holliday” (Elwes) is suppressed by pre-existent musical structures, producing the opposite effect to Rist’s energized performance, which manages visually to break apart Lennon’s song.[[32]](#endnote-31)

A similar preoccupation with visualizing music can be found in the work of Young British Artists Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood. Wearing’s 1995 piece, *Dancing in Peckham* (a 25-minute video shown on a television monitor), for instance, shows the artist dancing in a shopping center to a soundtrack that remains to us unheard (figure 4); the silence could be read as a nod to the much-theorized “inaudibility” of many film scores. With no music to suture viewer to screen, the performer’s movements appear unsettling and ensure a distance between visitor and work. Taylor-Wood’s *Killing Time* (1994) articulates a contrasting form of audio-visual rupture by presenting four people miming badly to arias from Richard Strauss’s *Elektra*. Out of time with the recording and frequently distracted from their task, the miming characters again emphasize the materiality of the medium by critiquing the “realist” audio-visual synchronicity of film. The flat-screen projection can be considered as seductively immaterial, as attention is placed *within* the frame rather than on its mode of display: and yet at the same time, the self-conscious and reflexive audio-visuality produces a ruptured depiction of reality that prevents the visitor from feeling fully absorbed into the fictive space. This duality activates the hinterland between the location of display and the “seductive immateriality” of the video. These single-screen videos, then, use different strategies to produce similar effects. In each piece, sound and image are pitted against one another: the artists mime or sing from within a restricted technological or aesthetic framework, producing disquieting audio-visual fissures very different from the intermedial procedures found in *TV Cello* and *Violin Power*. The visitor, at once lured into and repelled by the diegesis, hovers in the liminal space “betwixt and between” gallery and video world.

This relationship between work and viewer can also be found in recent installational video works. In the Tate retrospective of Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila (30 April-28 July, 2002), videos were spread through a series of blackened rooms, each with a multiple-screen installation. Most of the pieces were in triptych formation; Ahtila described them as representing “human dramas.”[[33]](#endnote-32) With the exception of *Consolation Service* (1999), none of the works had a timed entry, as the “human dramas” unravelling in each darkened room resisted linear and cumulative trajectories. Of course, many examples of narrative fragmentation can be found in mainstream cinema culture as well--either through multiple storylines, as in *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), in which several tales unfold as the result of a single event, or through the actual split screen of television series *24*, in which four segments of activity are sutured together by the ticking of a real-time clock. Despite the split narrative and screens, however, shot-reverse-shot sequences and offscreen audio position the audience safely within the diegesis. In both examples, the music (by Mark Isham and Sean Callery respectively) succeeds in dispelling the potential rupture that such multiple viewpoints could cause by smoothing the boundaries between frames and the geographical distances between concurrent events. Isham’s insistent electronic score for *Crash* is particularly successful in drawing attention away from the materiality of the editing, to ensure that filmgoers remain fully engrossed in the fiction.

As we have seen, recent video pieces often reject such suture. Although Elwes refers to contemporary video as operating within a “newly radicalised cinema space,” the aesthetic intentions of both film and early video have been challenged by the spatial ruptures of recent pieces. In Ahtila’s piece *Anne, Aki and God* (1998: Tate Modern 2002), a large screen, framed by television monitors, shows five men auditioning for the main part. The installation is based on a true story. The artist explains: “Aki V resigned from his work as a computer application support person at Nokia Virtuals, became schizophrenic and isolated himself in his one-room flat. His mind started to produce a reality of its own in sound and vision....”[[34]](#endnote-33) This “reality” included an imaginary girlfriend called Anne, the hearing of voices and a vision of God that hovered above his bed. Ahtila’s piece, installed as part of her 2002 retrospective, was divided into two sections: one “passive” space that includes Aki’s bed, five television monitors and a large projection of God, played by both a man and a woman; the other an “active” area, in which a chair, reading lamp and table are positioned facing another large projection screen.[[35]](#endnote-34) On the television monitors appear five different men “auditioning” for the part of Aki. Each is seen and heard reciting the same lines, which describe, at varying speeds, the character’s relationship with the imaginary Anne. “The simultaneous delivery of the same lines by different voices,” explains the exhibition catalogue, prevents the viewer “from attaching identity to any single young man” and thus emphasizes “his schizophrenic state.”[[36]](#endnote-35) The large screen in the “active” area is more documentary-like, as it presents seven women auditioning for the part of the imaginary Anne, explaining how they feel about the character and why they want to play her.

The result is rather overwhelming: fragmented visual representations are accompanied by a dislocated audio track, a cacophony of voices that coagulate into a nonlinguistic mode of signification, or noise-music, preventing absorption into any one screen: wherever we look, the voices, out-of-sync with one another, provide a constant reminder of the edge of each screen, of other characters competing for attention and of the space that the installation occupies. In this spatial sense, *Anne, Aki and God* resembles early video pieces, such as *TV Cello* and *Violin Power*. However, although thoroughly immersed in the multi-dimensional and intensely audio-visual work, the audience is no longer an *active*, inclusive participant. They are not used as visual or audio material and remain unable to change the physical progression of the piece, only their place in relation to it. At the same time, the installation rejects the fictive immersion common to cinema as, meaning and narrative become increasingly ambiguous.

At first glance, the recent spatial dynamic apparent in Ahtila’s work appears to promote a move away from the experiential interactivity of the 1970s. In actual fact, however, the move is towards an immersive, sensorial experience that demands a different, but equally radical, type of audience engagement from that of earlier video pieces. The visual “mimetic engulfment” of *Anne Aki and God* is countered by its multi-plane soundtrack, which prevents full immersion into the competing dialogues. As a result, audio-viewers experiencing the work remain suspended between gallery space and the video’s diegesis. Dislocated from the gallery by the numerous portals into Aki’s mind--yet prevented from identifying with any one strain of thought due to the antagonistic musical syntax of the babbling chorus--we find ourselves held in a *spatial* liminality, rather than sutured absorption, between work, gallery and audience. Butler’s distinctions between “interior and exterior, here and elsewhere, and, ultimately, self and other” do not dissolve, but rather coexist with one another. Like Robert Johnson, we are able temporarily to look into both worlds.

During its “integrating birth,” then, video work occupied a historical, temporal liminality as its practitioners temporarily left their artistic or musical backgrounds and moved into a transitory arena of intense intermedial experimentation. This gestation period is characterized by the merging of art and music histories that, like the physically, perceptually and conceptually re-imagined gallery space in Vasulka’s *Allvision*, exists in a state of high instability. Once video became established as an “independently aesthetic genre” through a process of technological change and institutional acceptance, it entered into a process of “reassimilation.” It is here that temporal liminality has been replaced by a spatial one. The flat screens create a “newly radicalized cinema space” in which works negotiate the aesthetic divide between film and early video installation, between being sutured into the diegesis and retaining an acute sense of self. The recent works discussed above promote a transitional, spatial liminality, a temporary “fructile chaos” of distributed attention that asks the visitor to reassess her relationship with artwork, music, fellow spectators and the arena in which they collide. The visitor is then free to leave, to re-assimilate into society, perhaps not with a new social role or status as suggested by Gennep, but hopefully with a refreshed understanding of intermedial discourse and her own position within it.[[37]](#endnote-36)

Early work, by contrast, exists in a state of perpetual liminality, rejecting reincorporation into the social structure or the institutional fold. In 2010, The Tate Liverpool hosted Paik’s first major retrospective since his death in 2006, an elegantly curated collection of his most famous and radical pieces. Among the works assembled was *TV Cello*; however, in the absence of both Paik and Moorman, the instrument reclined on a pedestal, separated from the visitor by a thick white line. On its screens were not live, closed-circuit images of the audience, but pre-recorded footage from other events, and from its speakers came the sound of old news footage rather than “TV Cello Sounds.”[[38]](#endnote-37) The refusal to let the Cello play—to let it fragment and recreate its environment—brought Paik’s piece to the end of its historical gestation period by defusing its “explosive charge” at the traditional gallery and its modes of display. The moment the performative, interactive intermediality of its threshold stage was removed—once it was transported into the traditional gallery arena—it became an artefact; its “fluid and unfixable” nature silenced and immobilized.

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1. Ira Schneider quoted in Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness,* ed. Edward A. Shanken (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bill Viola, “Bill Viola: Ocean Without a Shore—Venice Bienniele 2007”, online. Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-V7in9LObI> (accessed 4 March 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), ch 3, 82-101. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1960; repr: London: Routledge, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 96 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Turner, “Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols*, 93-111. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience,” in Turner and Edward Bruner (eds.), *The Anthology of Experience* (Illinois: Illinois University Press), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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10. John Belton, “Looking Through Video: The Psychology of Video and Film,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov, Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Belton, “Looking Through Video,” 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. Steina Vasulka quoted at <http://www.vasulka.org/Steina/Steina_Orka/Orka.html> (accessed 29 March 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. http://www.vasulka.org/archive/ExhFOUR/Carnegie/Carnegie.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: University of the Arts), 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, “The Cinema as a Model for the Genealogy of Media,” in *Convergence*, 8:4 (2002), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Gaudreault and Marion, “The Cinema as a Model for the Genealogy of Media,” 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (Cambridge Mass.; London: The MIT Press, 2008), 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Hans-Peter Schwarz, “Discourse 1: Media Museums,” in *Media Art History*, ed. Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stöckmann (New York: Prestel, 1997), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. The similarity of video’s communicative strategies to the easily-consumed domesticity of television, combined with the format’s technological and spatial requirements, challenged the aesthetic (and ideological), financial and physical operations of institutional exhibition. Although all three challenges are interlinked, the ideological concerns were voiced most strongly by curators, concert promoters and, significantly, artists themselves. Ten or so years after the first use of video as artistic material, for instance, Allan Kaprow assessed the form, arriving at a less than encouraging conclusion. Video environments, he claimed, were little more than “a lavish form of kitsch” that resemble “world’s fair ‘futurama’ displays with their familiar nineteenth-century push-button optimism and didacticism.” Allan Kaprow, “Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle (1974),” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996; expan. 2003), 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. Hershman Leeson quoted in Pierre Restany, “San Francisco and the Grand Dame of Digital Art,” in *Domus* (June 1999), 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. As with all attempt at categorization, the edges of definition are blurred: for instance, instances of the expanded screen aesthetic that characterizes the second wave of video can occasionally be found in earlier work, such as Vito Acconci’s almost televisual single-screen *Theme Song* (1973). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Elwes, *Video Art*, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. Elwes, *Video Art*,153. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. Michael Rush, *Video Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. Paik quoted in Elwes, *Video Art*, p.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. Vasulka quoted at <http://www.vasulka.org/Steina/Steina_ViolinPower/ViolinPower.html> (accessed 29 March 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. Vasulka (cf. note 23.) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
28. Alison Butler, “A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation,” in *Screen*, 51: 4 (2010), 306. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. Anne Friedberg, The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. Dennis Waskul, “Ekstasis and the Internet: Liminality and Computer Mediated Communication,” in *New Media and Society*, 7:1 (2005), 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. Liz Katz, “Video Projection: The Space Between Screens,” in Tanya Leighton (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 379. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. Elwes, *Video Art*, 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
33. Eija-Liisa Ahtila quoted at <http://www.paolocurti.com/ahtila/ahtila.htm> (accessed 29 March 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
34. Ahtila quoted at <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/ahtila/room9.htm> (accessed 29 March 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
35. Terence Riley, *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Cinematic Works* (London: Crystal Eye, 2003), 136-139. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
36. Riley *Eija-Liisa Ahtila*, 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
37. Thomassen, Bjorn , “Liminality”, in Austin Harrington, Barbara L. Marshall and Hans-Peter Müller (eds) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 322. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
38. Charlotte Moorman describes the sounds of the installation as “TV Cello sounds” in an interview in 1984: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9hTdaFz36c [↑](#endnote-ref-37)