Riley O'Neill

CA 436 Essay

Liquid, Not Gas

The Tangible Reflections of *Guadalcanal Requiem*
Recently I attended a screening of a feature-length movie, which was being projected on 16mm film. As the film rolled, the image on the screen felt mysteriously different on my eyes than the digital media that had saturated me throughout the day. The screen-image felt almost as though it was recuperating my eyes, lightly brushing them with a deeply coloured palette of oily varnish. My eyes felt relaxed, as though they had moved from the flickering black and white text of the printed word to the soft contours of a painted canvas. Within 20 minutes, I was fast asleep. From this experience, it is clear to me the affect of the film-strip: the bubbled and burnt emulsion slides by with organically slimy ease; the viewer glides amongst the grain without a great deal of active participation. The haptic quality of the plastic film strip is distinctly sensed, but the haptic quality of analogue and digital video seems almost paradoxical in relation. The film image is a smooth nebula; the video image is a striated grid. The artistic feat of producing a haptic affect from an electronic grid would seem equivalent to a table-turning séance, but it is in fact far more wonderful. In the mid- to late 1970s, Korean-American video artist Nam June Paik created a handful of works produced, funded and screened by the WNET-TV station in New York. Any of these works, from Global Groove (1973) to Merce by Merce by Paik (1978), could serve as an effective (affective) illustration of video’s haptic potential, each eschewing narrative for an isotropic form through which each instance is temporally indistinguishable. Each moment adheres to the same aesthetic format but contains enough difference to untie it from a linear context. Guadalcanal Requiem, from 1977 (subsequently re-edited in 1979), exists in a realm of its own—a collage-style “documentary” that upsets any notion of the term, centered around the Guadalcanal Campaign of the 1940s fought between the Allied forces and the Empire of Japan. As one of Paik’s most overtly political and least-represented works, it provides an authentically
experimental approach to “journalistic” video that still lies dormant without much further employment or consideration. Transforming “blurriness” from a lack of subjective differentiation to a mechanic extension of intimacy, Nam June Paik’s Guadalcanal Requiem induces the spectators to reflect their self-images and emotions through the flux of rasterized waves in a haptic video image.

The programmes Paik produced for WNET were each thirty minutes in duration and varied widely in form and subject matter. The connective tissue linking the programmes is Paik’s repeated employment of the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, a collaborative invention from 1969 between Paik and video engineer Shuya Abe. The synthesizer allows for digital (finger-oriented) manipulations of the video image. Chris Hill gives historical context:

In earlier Fluxus projects he had attacked and compromised pianos as icons of German culture. In 1969 with engineer Shuya Abe, Paik pioneered the construction of the Paik-Abe video synthesizer, an instrument that enabled an artist to add color to the standard black and white video image. In the production of video, both sound and image are determined by the same fundamental analog electronic processes. (10)

A tension arises: is Paik attacking and compromising video, as he did the piano? Or, was his “attack” on the piano actually an act of creative transformation? The artists’ intention is irrelevant; the tension between destruction and creation is vital—categories begin to shudder and melt. Audiovisualizers.com explains the general function of the Paik-Abe Synthesizer:

The basic synthesizer is a colorizer, but in keeping with Nam June Paik's method to create a "smorgasbord of video art", a scan modulator was often found adjacent to the colorizer. Combining video feedback, magnetic scan modulation, and non-linear mixing followed by colorizing, generated its novel style of imagery.
The capability of non-linear mixing is perhaps the most significant here, and it features through all Paik’s work. The “smorgasbord” refers to Paik’s trademark collage-aesthetic, in which variously sourced footages are connected and mixed. Gabrielle Gonipath describes:

The characteristic effects produced by this device include intense, saturated colors and an inversion effect in which contours of objects are emphasized and the color relationships and relative brightness values of images in the foreground and background are reversed.

(220)

While such an aesthetic may sound dated by today’s “special effects” standards, Paik applies the synthesisization in such an integrated and thorough manner as to create a language out of flow and abstraction.

Priscilia Marques examines *Global Groove* and a selection of Paik’s later documentary-like works for WNET:

These videos are first and foremost discourses on history and the importance of the interpretation and understanding of the past. They also demonstrate video techniques and the use of the medium by television. Paik does not consider his works to aver any message, but aims to liberate the spectator from the monopoly of conventional televisual productions. Conversely, the television becomes the means of taking art out of its formal framework to reach a larger public.

While so-called “art-cinema” was once “valorized” through its transformation into object, it was subsequently “vaporized” through its transformation into a television signal. In the lineage of film-as-art-object, Erica Balsom mentions Paik’s *Zen For Film* (1964-1966), which was available “on its own as a loop in a small plastic box for $3 (roughly $20 in 2010) or as part of a Fluxkit for $100 ($683 in 2010)” (105). This early distribution method demonstrates Paik’s wish
for a widely distributed image and provides contrast with his later television-based method of
distribution. Balsom continues: “at this time, the moving image provided a way of pursuing the
same dematerialization of the art object that was occurring in performance, happenings, and
conceptual practice alike” (105). While early efforts such as those of curator Julien Levy in the
1930s turned film into “material”, video (such as Paik’s) “de-materializes” the viewer and their
world. To adopt the concept of Merce by Merce by Paik, which repeatedly prompts the viewer
with seemingly random biological and mechanical phenomena and asks, “is this dance?”, video
mobilizes the world, making everything mingle and fluctuate. This fluctuation occurs through the
analogue video’s unique act of electronic translation—rendering the received light as a lineated
stack of light-lines that ripple with rising and dispersing intensity. On colour television, these
lines are projected through a screen of RGB triads, as light through a stained-glass window.
Catherine Elwes notes: “video has taught us to pass by images as nineteenth-century viewers
passed by lighted shop windows” (156). This tendency may extend from the image-making
technology of the medium itself aside from its capacity for widespread image-distribution. A
recent video titled These Are Not Pixels: Revisited by the YouTube channel Technology
Connections articulates: “in digital video, the pixels define the shape of the image logically. In
analogue video, the shape of the image defines which phosphor dots are lit.” These fluctuating
lines of through-light (light shone through) are key to the unique haptic capabilities of video.

Laura Marks defines the forms of hapticity: “haptic perception is usually defined as the
combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch
both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like
organs of touch” (332). The “special effects” of the Paik-Abe synthesizer become “special
affects” through their ability to collapse distinction. As Christina Ross notes: “video reduces to
almost nothing the distance between the electronic wash of the image, the filmed body, and the viewer” (618). The medium of analogue video upsets the filmic notion of light “on” and renders the viewer’s reality as one of light “through”. The light travels through the phosphor triads, and seemingly through the viewer themselves, comingling them in a world of travelling light, as opposed to a filmic world of surfaces. Marks knowingly invokes a familiar tendency: “it is commonly argued that film is a tactile medium and video an optical one, since film can be actually worked with the hands” (339). Almost as though in response, Paik explains the tactile basis of the Paik-Abe synthesizer in an interview for the movie My Mix ’81: “people always used to use their mouths to make television, so I said let’s use our fingers to make television”. Paik pantomimes playing a keyboard, underlining the distinct musicality of his approach to video editing.

Summarizing the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze writes: “The material universe, the plane of immanence, is the machinic assemblage of images-movement. That is an extraordinary leap forward in Bergson: it is the universe as cinema itself, a metacinema” (84). Paik’s video-collaage aesthetic renders all reality’s images (virtual and actual) as existing to a single plane of immanence. In a conference alongside Merce Cunningham and John Cage, Paik envisions a metacinema similar to Bergson’s: “if you connect all video tapes made by every artist . . . it will be about a hundred years.” Gopinath considers Paik’s methods:

to put this in art historical terms, the synthesizer effects the unexpected reversal of normal figure/ground relationships. As the art historian David Joselit has written, this figure/ground reversal was an important way in which Paik’s aesthetic found expression. Paik thought of his strategies as “viral” because of the way he altered and appropriated
found video material. His small-scale interventions into the corpus of broadcast television were intended to alter that host organically, from within. (22)

Paik’s work seems to function in relation to the notion of the metacinema; his fragmented, warped and multi-sourced collages contrast, reference and ultimately alter the existing canon.

*Guadalcanal Requiem* begins with a close up of a dark-skinned pair of hands lightly drumming a syncopated rhythm with tubular bone-like sticks against a smooth log. A slight tape fluctuation makes the pitch of the sound drop in a warped wave. The hands extend to forearms, the forearms meet a bare-chested black body, and a background of jungle foliage appears as the drummer uses his full body to violently whack out the last few hits. Suddenly a watch, very close, is pulled out to sea by a gentle wave as a typical triumphant war-time symphony blares loudly. The drumming hands establish a sense of time through their rhythm that is centered on subjective experience, the watch is merely a referential image devoid of its time telling function, far too mobile in the flowing water to be readable. Throughout the video, scenes of rural Guadalcanal life are interspersed with archival black-and-white film footage of the Campaign, photographs of carnage, alongside contemporary video footage of interviews, the jungle and staged cello performances involving a cello. Gopinath reflects:

![Image](image-url)

events on Guadalcanal possess the same curiously arbitrary relationship to sequential
order as the video medium itself. . . . Guadalcanal is a place where history cannot emerge: a place where past and present fuse and the notion of causality is undone. Paik follows the lead of many modernist predecessors by fetishizing primitive indigenous culture as modernity’s unchanging dialectic double, its essential counterpart and foil.

(227)

*Guadalcanal Requiem* may, fairly, be accused of using a distinction between a war-torn dystopia and a “primal” utopia, but it does so in order to dissolve many more distinctions. The contrast between the footage of the drumming local and the watch in the ocean expresses a multiplicity—it calls attention to the subjectivity of time, and the video medium’s own temporal perception. Footage is looped, re-used, reversed, colorized and sped up. These “synthesizations” construct a haptic quality; as Marks suggests: “rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling upon the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction and to be aware of her or his self-involvement in that process” (342). *Guadalcanal Requiem* is composed of *slight* images; things transient and wavering, derelict and salvaged. Marks’ quote can be compared with Hito Steyerl’s defence: “like the economy of poor images, imperfect cinema diminishes the distinctions between author and audience and merges life and art. Most of all, its visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, and full of artifacts” (6). The partial nature of *Guadalcanal Requiem* enables and encourages a mode of viewing that is centered on a continual act of creative construction on the viewer’s part.

An old man recalls ambiguously “it had an awfully strange haunting sound to it” as a monochrome bomb blows up a portion of a monochrome aircraft carrier. The roar of monochrome airplane engines mixes with the roar of blue waves crashing on a shore. The shore stretches back to a jungle’s edge, where a woman strokes a mournful melody across a cello. The
melody is abruptly replaced by the violent howl of a plummeting black airplane. It becomes apparent after a while that the music played by the cellist functions less as music, and more as something interrupted, part of the larger composition of the video itself. A woman’s voice accompanying a reflective blue river describes how mysterious accidents are happening to her location team and wonders “are we haunted by homeless ghosts?” This question appears in large text over the center of the image, white lines forming the contours of the letters, with transparent bodies. This contoured text, which appears throughout, is not something on the image, but rather something through which the image can be seen—echoing the form of the analogue television’s stained-glass window. The old man’s close face struggles to express a feeling: “you are in limbo, the world is splitting in half, it’s as if you are removed into another world.” His words are repeated and fractured and repeated again. Repetitions of specific phrases occur occasionally. “Your dreams become less and less” repeats the old man. The contoured white lines of “nothing” flash over an overgrown field of tall grass. Gopinath suggests:
Paik foregrounds repetition as a key component in blatantly transparent, self-reflexive montage sequences . . . . Most of the audio and video sequences selected for repetition seem to have been singled out because of the emotional affect they convey. Repetition functions, then, as a form of rhetorical emphasis. Such repetitions direct the viewer’s attention to sequences that the director must have deemed particularly significant. (223)

Even without considering the artist’s intention, it can simply be said that the repeated phrases are those that require a second listen—either because the words are hard to make out, or the exact meaning is hard decipher, or the feeling of what is expressed requires some attentive consideration to comprehend. Gopinath considers another affect:

These repetitions set up a rhythm and announce to the viewer that footage is being manipulated so as to represent time in a blatantly artificial, anti-naturalistic fashion . . . . Paik’s repetition of archival video clips does two things: it conveys a commitment to medium-specific transparency and makes reference to prior cinematic treatments of the same subject. (222)

This consideration can be taken further to express that Guadalcanal Requiem’s repetition of anti-naturalism becomes a new nature. Through its reflexivity, the blatantly artificial image eventually undoes any sense of ironic distance that might regularly be attributed to such an approach. Ross meditates on the potential of the haptic in a medium so seemingly artificial:

it is as if the body were using this normative distance not only to actively occupy the space that is granted to it, but also to bolster this distance, and to such an extent that those elements which serve to reinforce distance . . . manage to subvert the distance in question, to revoke and dissolve it” (619)
So-called “special effects” become “special affects” in Paik’s work; distancing procedures, embracing their own qualities in an extreme degree, lead to a haptic intimacy.

In the conference with Cunningham and Cage, Paik describes how “encyclopedia has random access, whereas video tape has sequential access . . . Videotape is changing the life-sequence-access . . . You freeze a time and you retrieve them . . . Abstract painters found abstract space, video artists are finding abstract time.” Paik subverts videotape’s form of sequential access, highlighting instead its unique ability to digest and manipulate all imagery in the global archive, shot before or presently.

Akira Asada proclaims of Paik: “he piles up signs and images, takes accumulation to its most extreme point, and when it has reached a kaleidoscopic climax, paradoxically, one becomes aware of a kind of void—a void full of images or the silence full of sounds” (126). In the case of *Guadalcanal Requiem*, this void is the realm of the imaginary, the no-longer-remaining. The void is highlighted by the flashes of “nothing” that close out the video, against a desolate landscape. As the old man struggles to fully articulate his experience in the Campaign, he says “It’s like trying to describe Rembrandt to a blind man.” There is a certain impossibility of representation that is especially apparent in regard to spaces and times such as the Guadalcanal Campaign, which leave a physical and psychological print that is at once unqualifiable and unforgettable.

In one moment the woman’s voice describes stumbling upon an area of jungle where long strands of nylon tape had been stretched between the trees and appear to be weeping a dewy condensation. The swaying nylon bands bring videotape to mind, calling attention to the mode of production in a reflexive yet affective manner. The haptic quality arises between the taught tension of the stretched tape, the light swaying motion and the pearls of condensation. Most
importantly, a haptic feeling arises from an evocation of the physicality of the medium itself, the thought of the videotape as something stretched, or aged, or crying.

This returns to the potential of the viewer’s creative intervention as a vital constructive element of the experience. Upon viewing Paik’s personal archive of collected media, John G. Hanhardt recalled a passage from Marx:

*A commodity appears* at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is
absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (48)

It is imaginative intervention which ultimately transforms the table and makes it more wonderful than if it took on actual mystical properties—imagination is more boundless than mystical phenomena. Out of its cathode-ray brain, television itself evolves an imagination, through which it makes things exist differently. The summary of Guadalcanal Requiem on the Electronic Arts Intermix website claims the video is an “assertion that global conflict arises as a result of cultural miscommunication”. This summary diminishes the depth of the work; what the work shows is how “miscommunication” can lead to global conflict but can also, more importantly, lead to a new globally-oriented view of aestheticism. In My Mix ’81, Paik affirms: “essentially what video is, is how to use non-gravity . . . if we solve video art problems, then we solve also space problems.” Guadelcanal Requiem, by revealing its own technological interference so thoroughly and in such an aesthetically integrated way, proposes a potential for a floating image-world, where images never assert a truth, but become liquid and travel forth as rivulets of inquiry.

Jameson writes:

I have tried to suggest that video is unique -- and in that sense historically privileged or symptomatic -- because it is the only art or medium in which this ultimate seam between space and time is the very locus of the form, and also because its machinery uniquely
dominates and depersonalizes subject and object alike, transforming the former into a quasi-material registering apparatus for the machine time of the latter and of the video image or "total flow." (75)

*Guadalcanal Requiem* takes the supposedly inherent affects of depersonalization and machine-time and, by making them transparent, subverts them and reveals a new potential for an expression of multiplicity. If I were to take an analogue television set and smash its window of phosphor cells (a-la Paik in the presence of a piano), the fluctuating lines of television-signal light would draw themselves directly onto my skin, rendering me a screen. Regardless, the affect of having the television signal projected onto my body still stands even if the window remains intact—it is simply mediated. The phosphor screen, in the process of projection, corresponds to a lens in the process of reception—the ocean’s lapping waves, anything translucent, becomes a lens in front of the camera’s sensor. The regard for “blurriness” that comes with any translucent screen is transformed by *Guadalcanal Requiem* from something obscurant to a distinctly haptic and self-reflective quality through its fully-incorporated reflexivity.

Works Cited


14. Nam June Paik, Guadalcanal Requiem (WNET, 1979)
15. “Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer.” *Audio Visualizers*,
    
    www.audiovisualizers.com/toolshak/vidsynth/paik_abe/paik_abe.htm


17. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image” *e-flux journal* #10 (November 2009)

    
    www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea6tw-gulnQ