

EDUCATION RESOURCE

Sense of **PLACE**



About This Resource

This resource has been produced by dLux MediaArts and Museums & Galleries NSW as an educational guide to accompany the *Sense of Place* screening program.

It is intended to assist school students and teachers of a secondary education level in the understanding and enjoyment of contemporary video art, but can also be adapted for primary and tertiary studies. The resource offers information regarding the history and development of screen based art, focus questions and practical activities. The resource can be used before, during or after viewing the works featured in *Sense of Place* and aims to facilitate an engaging experience with the exhibition.

Foreword

Sense of Place is a screening program of contemporary video art curated and developed by Cash Brown from dLux MediaArts and toured by Museums & Galleries NSW. The exhibition features the work of eight Australian artists united in their exploration of cultural identity, and showcases the innovative and diverse nature of screen based media – exemplifying how artists today are employing digital video as a vehicle for communication and expression.

dLux MediaArts and Museums & Galleries NSW are delighted to offer this touring exhibition to arts organisations and their communities across Australia, and hope to encourage broad appreciation and engagement with contemporary screen media.

Front cover:

Laith McGregor

Matured

2008

single channel digital video

30 minutes

Image courtesy the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf Fine Art

About dLux MediaArts

dLux MediaArts is one of Australia's key screen and media arts organisations, committed to supporting the development, engagement and experience of contemporary screen and digital media culture. Stemming from this objective, dLux MediaArts' programs and activities include research into emerging technologies and media arts practices, supporting Australian new media artists in the development of their work, fostering partnerships between the public and private sector, curation and touring of digital media arts exhibitions.

dLux MediaArts is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW

About Museums & Galleries NSW

Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) is the peak body supporting a dynamic mix of museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres in both metropolitan and regional areas throughout the state. M&G NSW generates services that improve program performance, capacity, sustainability & networking across the sector, and seeks to advocate and communicate the value of sector wide programs and activities to stakeholders and communities.

As part of the National Exhibitions Touring Support Australia network, M&G NSW is committed to the delivery of best practice touring exhibitions of contemporary visual culture to remote and metropolitan communities throughout NSW and Australia.

Museums & Galleries NSW is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW and by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Sense of Place

Sense of Place is an eight-part screening program Australian video, featuring the work of eight artists unified by their investigation of cultural identity. Shown as individual exhibitions throughout the year, *Sense of Place* takes viewers on a fascinating journey into the world of screen art.

Sense of Place presents works featuring the artists themselves as the protagonists, characters or as self portraits. Stepping beyond simply recording performances, the artists engage with screen based media on a variety of levels, exploring identity, historical positioning, reportage, cultural propriety and social paradigms.

The exhibition examines what constitutes an Australian identity. What is Australian? How does the physical landscape affect the social landscape and sense of place as locals, visitors or international viewers with no direct experience of this country? What is a domestic landscape and how do Australian artists reflect their experiences and sensibilities through screen based mediums?

As multi-faceted works of art, the videos contain clear references not only to painting, sculpture and performance art, but also to film making and theatre, with set and costume design, staging, lighting and special effects all playing vital roles in the overall production.

The eight video performance artists featured in the exhibition explore notions of Australian-ness and a sense of self both inside and outside their island home - using digital video as a means of not only recording, but sharing stories and communicating with audiences.

Darren Sylvester
I Was The Last in The Carpenters' Garden
Special Edition 1/6
2008
single channel digital video
13 minutes 14 seconds
Image courtesy the artist and Sullivan and
Strumpf Fine Art

Cash Brown
Curator
Sense of Place



Kate Murphy
Cry me a future (Dublin)
2006
single channel digital video
12 minutes
Image courtesy of the artist and BREENSPACE



A Brief History of Video Art

Liam Benson
I Believe in You
2007
single channel digital video
3 minutes 30 seconds
Image courtesy the artist and Arterreal Gallery



Video has become the default medium of the 21st century. Over the last ten years, video art has found a new popularity and validity in the context of international biennales, private collections, private galleries and public museums. The production and exhibition of video art works is more widespread and legitimised in the contemporary art world than ever before. In galleries and museums around the world, projection spaces, plasma screens, and sculptural video installations are now common. According to Australian artist and critic, John Conomos,

“video art has shifted, over the last three decades, from being an avant-garde medium of representation located in the margins of our art world to now being at its centre.”

The widespread presence of video can be attributed to a number of aesthetic, cultural, historical and technological factors. According to Australian curator and writer Russell Storer these include

“the growing sophistication and economic accessibility of video recording, editing and projection technology; the dominance of the moving image in everyday life and culture; and the art world’s constant desire for the new.”

Yet the medium of video is hardly new; it has a history dating back some 40 years. The emergence of video art in the 1960s, while sparked by the availability of new technologies, was also informed by particular social conditions. The launch of television in the 1950s thrust the mass media into most people’s living rooms, providing an unprecedented way for political and commercial messages to be promoted via advertising, news and entertainment. And so, early video art was often a response to this rapid expansion of corporate culture into private space.

The introduction of portable video equipment into the domestic market in 1965, most notably the Sony Corporation’s Portapak, made it possible for individuals to produce their own videos in contrast to the controlled and centralised information of broadcast television.

According to video historian Michael Rush, this meant that people were

“no longer bound by the constrictions of Hollywood power brokers and mainstream television producers, [and] those with a vision were able to participate in the visual communication revolution that was rapidly changing social and cultural life throughout the world.”

Video brought ease, mobility and affordability to the art of the moving image and presented an alternative to traditional studio disciplines. Artists could leave the studio behind and use the camera to instantly record, comment and reflect on events of the time. Or they could simply turn the camera on themselves and explore the artistic process. Artists were able to make use of the spontaneity that video provided to directly critique the processes, content and effects of television. Korean-born Fluxus artist and musician Nam June Paik is regarded as the pioneer of the video art genre. The birth of video art is often cited as the day in 1965 when Paik took his newly purchased Sony Portapak out onto the streets and captured footage of local activity.

Australian Video Art

Unlike international video art, Australian video art does not have a beginning that can be traced to one person. Rather, a variety of creative people from the areas of sculpture, performance, filmmaking and documentary began to produce the first video experiments in the early 1970s. Conomos suggests that the early developments of Australian video art were centred around a “complex cluster of different artistic personalities, art forms, energies and discourses.” As with American and European histories, early video art in Australia developed alongside other forms of conceptual practice that were engaged in critiques of modernist art and ideas, such as performance and experimental film.

Australian art historian Jacqueline Millner notes that in the early 1970s there were two broad approaches to video making in Australia, “namely sociopolitical commentary and personal experimentation.”

Sarah Goffman
Big in Japan
2009
single channel digital video
15 minutes
Images courtesy the artist



The first stream consisted of video artists who were interested in documenting communities and social issues. These artists were often connected to grassroots organisations and the free video access centres established under the Whitlam Government in 1974.

The video access centres provided video facilities and encouraged individuals and communities to turn the camera on themselves and tell their stories. The centres became associated with activism, as communities that had been unable to access art or film funding used video to speak out about issues that concerned them. Video artist Peter Callas recalls that:

“video became part of a brief period of social experimentation in the mid 1970s and the tapes which originated in Australia at that time from a series of government-sponsored community video access centres were mostly documents of, or confrontations with, social problems.”

Other video artists—influenced by American artists such as Vito Acconci and Chris Burden—followed more personal, formal approaches and were often engaged in performance and conceptual art. For many of these artists, video was used as an extension of performance. This practice was largely based around two Sydney artist-run spaces, Inhibodress Gallery and later at Central Street Gallery. Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy, who established Inhibodress in 1970, were drawn to the real time immediacy of video and used the camera to document their performative experiments, both in the gallery and outside in the landscape. As Australian artist and video historian Stephen Jones observes, these tapes were the first in the country to use a conceptual art framework.

Video art in Australia continued to gain momentum, helped along by a number of exhibitions of video art, the development of the International Video Art Festival (1986-92) in Sydney, and growing institutional and commercial interest. From the late 1970s, video artists such as Nam June Paik, Bill Viola and Les Levine visited Australia and introduced local artists and audiences to new forms of video practice.

The Biennale of Sydney has included video art since the second Biennale in 1976 and video has continued to be a presence in the subsequent Biennales in varying degrees ever since. In 1979, Stephen Jones and Bernice Murphy curated Videotapes in Australia, a diverse selection of Australian video works, which travelled to America and Canada before being presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1980.

By the 1980s, Australian video art had become an art form rich in diversity and elaborate technological experimentation. Artists became increasingly influenced by the aesthetics of music video clips and ‘sampling’—the practice of taking cultural artefacts such as music or film and combining them into a new creative form. Video technologies were changing at an ever-expanding rate. Artists were able to use new editing and effects technology to manipulate the image as never before. Australian art historian Daniel Palmer notes that the 1980s “saw an almost obsessive emphasis on the playful refiguring of preexisting media imagery.” Video artists such as Peter Callas, Ian Haig and Ross Harley were among many that embodied this trend.

The development of ‘new media arts’ in the 1990s meant that video art became quite a different hybrid medium. New media arts encompassed artworks created with other recent technologies, including: film, video, digital art, computer games, animation and internet art. According to Palmer, “many erstwhile video artists had now become video and computer artists, or more broadly ‘media artists’”.

Video Art Today

In the last decade, the content of the work has become central to video art in Australia and elsewhere, largely due to the prevalence of video in contemporary culture and the need to engage our attention. This is in marked contrast to the 1970s and 1980s where the technical production was the main focus for artists. This has meant that contemporary video art is marked by diversity—in both the production and display of work. Video has become just one of the many available options for the younger generation of artists in

John A Douglas
Strange Land Vol 1 The Miner
2010
single channel digital video
9 minutes 30 seconds
Image courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse





Australia and overseas. Palmer observes, “video is now a part of the practice of many, if not most, of Australia’s best known contemporary artists.”

Today, Australian artists use video for a diverse range of aesthetic, cultural and conceptual reasons. Some do so to explore the space of the interactive image, others do so to work with popular music forms, and still others do so to work within the broader cinematic, conceptual and performance traditions of visual arts. Artists as diverse as Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon, The Kingpins, John Gillies, Kate Murphy and Shaun Gladwell are now choosing to work with video because of its immediacy, its everyday familiarity, and the increased availability of quality digital video and computer based editing software.

The recent explosion of online video platforms, such as YouTube and Vimeo has meant that artists (and non-artists) are now easily able to upload their videos and disseminate their works to a wide audience with the click of a button. Video art is no longer the countercultural medium that it once was, critiquing fine arts and television; it has moved from the marginal to the mainstream and to a position where it is an integral part of artists’ spaces, galleries and museums.

Diana Smith
2009

Diana Smith studied Fine Arts (Time Based Art) and Arts (Film Studies) and completed Media, Film & Theatre Honours (Class 1) at the University of New South Wales. She has worked at Performance Space, Sydney, advised on the Board of various artist-run initiatives and has curated several video and performance based exhibitions.

Justin Shoulder
V
2011
single channel digital video
7 minutes
Video still: Amy Gebhardt
Image courtesy the artist

Questions and Activities

1. Why do you think video art has become the 'default medium' for artists making contemporary art? Research how technological advancements have influenced these developments.
2. In many ways the term 'Video Art' could be considered misleading. Why do you think that this might be?
3. When you go to the cinema to see a film, it has a start or 'session' time. This differs from videos shown in galleries. Why do you think that is?
4. Australian arts writer, Daniel Palmer has noted the 'immediacy' and 'intimacy' of the medium of video for both artists and viewers. What do you think he means by this? Consider how technology can be immediate and intimate.
5. Some artists upload their video art to YouTube, while others create a limited number of editions for people to buy and own. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of each of these methods of distribution?
6. Some artists display their work on plasma screens and monitors, while others create projection-based installations. How do these different presentations affect the way you view the work?
7. At each turn in the history of video, artists have taken an interest in 'time' as a medium in video. In the early days, it was 'real time' that interested artists; video, unprocessed and unedited, could capture time as it was being experienced. Today artists are interested in manipulating time, breaking the barriers between past, present and future.

Make a list of all the ways that the artists in the exhibition play with time through their video works. Compare and contrast the different methods and discuss why you think they have done this in each case.
8. Look at the methods and materials used by the artists in the show and make a list of all the different technologies you could use to make a video art work.

Brendan Lee
Bogan Proof Fences
2011-2012
single channel digital video
44 minutes
Image courtesy the artist



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Liam Benson
True Blue
2009
single channel digital video
3 minutes 42 seconds
Courtesy Arterreal Gallery