

The crossed 'signals' of MoMA's largest ever video show ARTDAILY July 10, 2023



Installation view of Signals: How Video Transformed the World, on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York from March 5 – July 08, 2023. Photo: Robert Gerhardt.
by Jason Farago

NEW YORK, NY.- Beauty is nice, elegance has its place, but sometimes I go to museums to be perplexed: to agree and disagree, to argue and reassess, to leave even less certain than I was before. I sure got my wish with “Signals: How Video Transformed the World,” which closes this weekend at the Museum of Modern Art —

and which, screen for screen, hour for hour, stands proud as the most perplexing exhibition of the year.

Maybe a dozen times since its opening in March, I have ascended to MoMA's top floor for this ambitious, irregular exhibition of video art, the largest this museum has ever put on. I've swum through its panoply of screens and projections, broadcasting more footage than any one visitor could ever take in. Did I like it? I still have no idea after four months, though my feelings about "Signals" have settled into some unholy mix of admiration, bafflement, intellectual provocation, political fatalism and (in the case of one work) absolute fury. Given the recent subtropical weather here in New York, this final weekend might be ideal for wrestling with "Signals" in MoMA's climate-controlled galleries. Go with a friend, and then fight about it.

"Signals," drawn from the museum's collection by curators Stuart Comer and Michelle Kuo, is decidedly not a history of video art. It aims instead to present video as a communication medium — transmitted by artist-citizens, through closed circuits or TV satellites or mobile phone apps, to document an incident or to rally a public. The focus on communication means it leaves out many of the medium's pioneers, from Bruce Nauman to Joan Jonas. (Fair enough: Nauman had a major retrospective in these same galleries in 2018, and Jonas has one coming up next year.) Nam June Paik still reigns as the father of video art, yet his most prominent work here is a later one: "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell," a live satellite broadcast of music and dance performances, whose soft-edged images beamed simultaneously from New York and Paris on New Year's Day 1984.

Rather than recording and playback, this show puts a premium on how video imagery circulates: through a network, through a society. It is thus almost cavalierly relaxed about video's technical properties and drifts without distinction from the Sony PortaPak to the Samsung Galaxy. Confusingly, one of the show's largest objects, Stan VanDerBeek's "Movie-Drome" of 1964-65, is not video art at all — but rather a work of expanded cinema, for which the American techno-optimist projected 16 mm films and 35 and 70 mm slides on the roof of a prefab aluminum igloo. (MoMA's media conservators have used some video projectors for their impressive reconstruction of the "Movie-Drome," but those are contemporary digital stand-ins for VanDerBeek's original film reels and slideshows.) VanDerBeek had imagined a whole world of Movie-Dromes, linked up into an "artist interchange."

The show is relaxed, too, about display conditions. Very few videos are screened in black boxes, and sound bleeds from one installation to the other, though the museum does make admirable allowances for visitors with hearing impairments: written descriptions of the audio tracks, headphones to borrow. I appreciated Comer

and Kuo's relaxed approach to display, and especially their decision to stream more than 70 of the show's single-channel videos for free at moma.org. Knowing you can watch later at home frees you from having to imbibe every video in one go, though online playback introduces a new idiosyncrasy: the high-speed scrubber bar, whose preview thumbnails and instant fast-forwarding kill once and for all the pretense of video art as an absorptive medium.

So this is not so much an exhibition of video art as an exhibition of video against: video against broadcast television, video against government censorship, video against corporate interests. This antagonistic pose has become a little reflexive at MoMA lately, and not always convincing. More than a few videos and installations here, such as an archive of queer interviews from Carlos Motta and an animation about colonial monuments from the collective New Red Order, come across as showcases of visibility that an elite institution can easily metabolize.

Whereas the best of the younger artists in "Signals" have real skepticism about the value of visibility and documentation. Tiffany Sia's "Never Rest/Unrest" (2020) shows the flip side of viral protest videos — presenting mundane imagery from Hong Kong's stifled pro-democracy demonstrations, which she shot in the same 16:9 vertical aspect ratio as every other protester's iPhone. For Sondra Perry's two-screen projection "Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II" (2013), the artist filmed two Black dancers, wearing white clothing, performing against white walls; she then used "context-aware" editing software (a dubious name) to dissolve the dancers' bodies into their environments. The digital effacement stutters, though. It glitches. The ghost haunts the machine; the Black figure defies elite capture in ways straight-on representation cannot.

For a naive trust in the screen can lead to myopia and even moral catastrophe, as it did here in six videos by Frances Stark. Her "U.S. Greatest Hits Mix Tape Volume I" consists of six iPads that each screen two other videos, playing on computers on the artist's desk in Los Angeles. One of the screens-in-the-screen plays an old pop song; the other plays YouTube clips of contemporaneous wars or disputes that, so we are told, the United States orchestrated. One of these videos implies that the U. S., rather than the Soviet Union, bears principal blame for the war in Afghanistan that began in 1979 (while playing Barbra Streisand and Donna Summer). Another simply transmits a speech by Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro, blaming "the empire in the United States" for the 2019 uprising against his rule (featuring Ariana Grande). The most appalling ascribes the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine to U.S. interference — a fiction often espoused in the

Russian media to justify President Vladimir Putin's initial invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

When I say MoMA spent four months relaying Putinist propaganda, I am not being excessive. The Afghanistan video incorporates footage from Russia Today, the Kremlin-backed cable network. The Ukraine conspiracy theory comes from a small-time YouTube channel that promotes Russian war messaging, which the “Western mainstream media is unwilling to say.” And if you thought Stark was making some distanced commentary on digital gullibility, MoMA thought otherwise. When I first saw the show in March, the wall texts stated outright that Stark's work “examines the history of U.S. military intervention in six countries” and outrageously listed Ukraine's democratic revolution as one of these U.S. military plots. The text was later changed in response to public complaints; it now accuses the U.S. of “alleged or covert involvement.” That introduces about as much subtlety as the Katy Perry song that plays in the background.

MoMA should never have acquired this bankrupt “Mix Tape.” But within the din of “Signals,” Stark's useful idiocy (to use the old Cold War term for Western dupes apologizing for foreign tyranny) may have an accidental value — as an admonition against the poor habits of streaming, linking, sharing and commenting, in which the last democratic potential of video seems to have drowned. In this show's catalog, art historian David Joselit observes how video in the 2010s became less about archiving events and more about perpetual renewal and erasure, and how our endless recording has ironically left us with “an eradication of history.” The best videos in “Signals” stand against that eradication, especially two you can watch in person or online this last weekend.

One is a classic: “Videograms of a Revolution,” from 1992, by German filmmaker Harun Farocki and his Romanian collaborator Andrei Ujica. In the last days before the 1989 overthrow and execution of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, pro-democracy demonstrators took over the headquarters of a Bucharest television station, kicked out the propagandists and started broadcasting for themselves: news from the front, reporting about the revolution, but also personal testimonies and even folk songs. Farocki and Ujica compiled hundreds of hours from Romanian free television and produced an invaluable archive of video's democratic potential in times of extreme upheaval.

One is newer: “Letter to a Turtledove,” a beautifully jagged video poem from 2020 by the young Ukrainian artist Dana Kavelina. Mixing stop-motion animation, camera-phone videos from Ukrainian soldiers, and backward-projected 1930s Stalinist footage, this wrenching recent work pictures the Donbas (the industrial,

predominantly Russian-speaking region of eastern Ukraine) as a territory of both historical and contemporary amnesia, erased here by propaganda, there by indifference. Like so many artists after the 2014 Maidan Revolution — which was not an American plot, as this show initially suggested — she found beneath the polluted Donbas soil the aquifers of a new Ukrainian art, grown only more urgent since the full-scale invasion. When Kavelina’s titular turtledove turns into a flaming fighter jet, when her whispered poetry gives way to air raid sirens, you remember whose signals need to get through and whose should be jammed.

‘Signals: How Video Transformed the World’

Through Saturday (Sunday for members). Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St.; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

This article originally appeared in [The New York Times](#).