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Retroactive Dystopias

Wipe Cycle and the Antioch Interactive Experiment

Robin Oppenheimer

“Video Installation: Characteristics of an Expanding Medium”

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When I search *Afterimage*'s indexed articles online, I find six separate articles referencing *Wipe Cycle* (1969), a video work by artists Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider that was first displayed in the seminal 1969 exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, curated by Howard Wise for his New York City gallery. *Wipe Cycle* is sometimes described as the first piece of interactive video sculpture, and it remains a pivotal and often-referenced work of

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media art over fifty-four years later. As Robin Oppenheimer wrote in the essay “Video Installation: Characteristics of an Expanding Medium” in *Afterimage* in 2007:

Wipe Cycle is often mentioned in the historical writings about “TV as a Creative Medium” as the most successful and intriguing work in the show. It represented the artists’ view of video as “a cultural machine to be deconstructed” and was one of the earliest uses of video surveillance in an artwork to incorporate the viewer directly into the real-time imagery of the piece. (14)

In this essay I look back at *Wipe Cycle*—one of the best-known works from the first era of video installation—alongside an earlier work by the same artists (the piece is variously titled *An Interactive Experiment* and the *Antioch Experiment*; going forward I will refer to it as the *Antioch Interactive Experiment*¹) that is barely known, even among the early video cognoscenti. I consider both works in terms of how they were received at the time of their first construction and presentation, as well as how *Wipe Cycle* was considered sixteen years ago, in 2007, when Oppenheimer’s essay, defining and analyzing the meaning and impact of video installation on the art world, was published. I also consider how we can think of these two works today in the context of our contemporary environment.

Wipe Cycle consists of a stack of nine monitors, originally black and white, which was the only commercially available format for video at the time (a single later version did include color²). Prerecorded broadcast television footage, as well as footage shot by the artists, is cycled at set intervals through the screens alongside footage from a hidden camera pointed at the viewer in front of the installation, sometimes live and sometimes with a delay. The screens with footage are interspersed with a single blank screen, which cycles through each of the monitors in turn. This is the “wipe cycle.” Thus, the viewer is confronted with multiple images of themselves, at various recent points in past time, interspersed with random video footage from newscasts and the like. The camera being hidden is key, or at least it was in the past.³ This gives the sense of integrating video’s individual subject surveillance function with the mass image distribution function of broadcast television. Are these functions in fact actually connected? Critics at the time suggested that might be an interpretation; Richard Kostelanetz wrote in the *Chicago Review* of the piece: “The spectator feels caught in an intelligent, watchful, oblivious system whose incessant and variable observations remain compelling and mysterious even after their operation is explained.”⁴

Recently, the piece was displayed as part of *Signals: How Video Transformed the World*, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)’s wide-ranging video art survey exhibition

1. Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, “An Interactive Experiment,” *Radical Software* 2, no. 5 (Winter 1973), 13.

2. *Wipe Cycle* was first presented in *TV as a Creative Medium*, Howard Wise Gallery, New York City, May 17–June 14, 1969. The color version was displayed at *Video-Skulptur, retrospectiv und aktuell 1963–1989*, Kölnischen Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, 1989.

3. More on this later.

4. Richard Kostelanetz, “Artistic Machines,” *Chicago Review* 23, no. 1 (1971), 124.

mostly drawn from the museum's own permanent collection.⁵ At the opening, visitors gathered around this work and interacted with it—posing or waving their hands around, then waiting for the images of themselves to cycle through the monitors. In this version, the non-surveillance footage was a black-and-white version of what looked like a recent golf game broadcast, as well as video documentation of video art from *TV as a Creative Medium*, including a recursive video version of *Wipe Cycle* itself, circa 1969. Oddly, MoMA chose not to hide the surveillance camera in this iteration of the work. It was clearly visible above the stacked monitors, which meant that visitors could immediately identify and play to the camera. It occurred to me that perhaps surveillance apparatus has become so ubiquitous and so integrated into daily life that a hidden camera no longer has the eerie and unheimlich effect on the observed subject that it did in 1969. Surprisingly, people still seem to be interested in playing around with their own reflected image on the monitor, despite the fact that everyone (or surely at least, everyone at the opening of a MoMA video art exhibition) holds in their pocket the capacity to record and play back their own image. As Schneider explained to Judy Yalkut in 1969,

The most important function of *Wipe Cycle* . . . was to integrate the audience into the information. It was a live feedback system which enabled the viewer standing within its environment to see himself not only now in time and space, but also eight seconds ago and sixteen seconds ago. In addition he saw standard broadcast images alternating with his own delayed/live image. And also two collage-type programmed tapes, ranging from a shot of the earth, to outer space, to cows grazing, and a “skin flick” bathtub scene.⁶

Oppenheimer's essay discusses *Wipe Cycle* in terms of the political and philosophical moment in which it was created:

Video art also emerged out of a turbulent era defined by a larger set of radical social and political issues in the late 1960s. Just as Sony was marketing the Portapak video recorder in the mid-1960s, the political landscape in the U.S. was exploding with antiwar protests, counterculture be-ins, civil rights actions, and new theories of media introduced in the popular press from the writings of Marshall McLuhan and others. (14)

Marshall McLuhan was more than just a philosophical touchstone for Gillette and Schneider; he was also a direct conduit to the technology itself. Gillette had been lecturing on McLuhan as part of a free university in New York City, which led to a meeting with Paul Ryan, McLuhan's then-assistant. An introduction to McLuhan followed, and he lent Gillette a set of Portapak video cameras as well as some studio cameras and editing decks. McLuhan had recently received the cameras directly from his contact at Sony Corporation Japan. These were among the first portable video cameras to

5. *Signals: How Video Transformed the World* was on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 5–July 8, 2023.

6. Ira Schneider, in Jud Yalkut, “Interview with Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette,” in *Expanded Cinema*, ed. Gene Youngblood (New York: EP Dutton, 1970), 341–3.



Installation view of *Wipe Cycle at Signals: How Video Transformed the World*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 5–July 8, 2023; photograph by Liz Flyntz.

be circulating in the United States, certainly in private hands, not to mention among young Columbia University dropout artists like Gillette.⁷

Today, video surveillance has become so ubiquitous and so fragmented that we often don't even register the presence of watching cameras—we can (and usually do) just

7. Author interview with Frank Gillette, conducted by video call, July 4, 2023.

assume that we're being watched, listened to, and recorded—certainly in public, and often even in private. It's perhaps worthwhile given this contemporary ubiquity to contextualize the origins of the surveillance camera. Although video surveillance via closed-circuit television (CCTV) was theoretically possible in the US starting in the 1950s, it had to be live-monitored full time due to the lack of video recording technology. Although videotape did become commercially available in the late 1960s, it was still not possible to record continuously on reel-to-reel (because the reels had to be switched out), and multiplexing (presenting multiple images on multiple monitors), alongside digital recording (as opposed to magnetic tapes) did not become widely commercially feasible until the mid-1990s, which saw an enormous boom in commercially installed video surveillance (and subsequent counter-activism by groups like the Surveillance Camera Players⁸). The advances in multiplexing, digital recording and compression, wireless transmission, and ever smaller cameras created the surveillance ecosystem we live in now, with police bodycams, dash cams, nanny cams, and doorbell cameras linked directly and simultaneously to multinational platforms and local police departments.

Wipe Cycle is presciently investigating the phenomenon of surveillance via the aperture, viewing one's own condition of "being surveilled" via the closed-circuit tv screen, and displayed to all. This is one dystopia that video as a medium makes possible: the dystopia of surveillance, the machine eye that sees and distributes, making the subject available to law enforcement, or encouraging citizens to self-police. *Wipe Cycle's* version of this phenomena allowed users the ability to see themselves reflected and to observe others who had confronted the same camera recently, in phased time.

The other dystopia that video has produced, more tangentially perhaps, is the dystopia of self-representation, reflecting versions of the individual into the public sphere, making life a hall of mirrors endlessly reflecting the self, and making the labor of producing as well as the shock of confronting these self-presentations an inescapable part of daily life, embedded in sociality and necessary for economic relations. Surveillance has become much more ubiquitous, while shifting fundamentally away from an aperture model, in which a camera sends an image to an unseen observer. Contemporary surveillance tends to involve fragmented data—massive, but opaque, sets of biometric, location, identity, or behavioral information distributed, and aggregated repositories destined for mysterious potential future viewers and uses.

Not only does this kind of surveillance technology not attempt to reproduce the eye, not having an aperture to gather information, it also doesn't attempt to produce images that can be perceived by the eye. Data surveillance collects data in the dark, so to speak, disaggregated and de-individualized, and presents that information in such a way that it must be synthesized in order to be apprehended by the humans tasked with making use

8. The Surveillance Camera Players were formed in New York City in 1996 in response to a meteoric rise in video surveillance throughout the city. A rotating cast of performers presented specially adapted plays and performances for the titular surveillance cameras (or perhaps more specifically for the security guards or police observing the cameras). Since most surveillance cameras are silent, the plays would make heavy use of title cards and pantomime. Performances included adapted versions of George Orwell's *1984* as well as other on-the-nose commentary. See "The Surveillance Camera Players," NotBored.org, www.notbored.org/the-scp.html.

of it. Despite the fact that we never see it happening, we are all familiar with how individual consumer data is scraped from every interaction and aggregated for resale to advertisers. Every moment is surveilled, not just the ones in which potential malfeasance might occur, but every instance of interaction between the individual and the state, the organization, or the point of commerce. Even this—data visualization and other means of representing aggregated information for human use—could go by the wayside as AI becomes more capable of collecting, synthesizing, and making decisions based on data streams, without any human intervention. Surveillance becomes more computer-to-computer, and the human subject becomes more objectified.

Wipe Cycle is usually perceived as being “about surveillance” and perhaps also about the embodied state of the subject being captured and “virtualized” inside the screen by outside forces. As the video camera fades from view as the primary mode of surveilling bodies, supplanted by massive tracking of highly abstracted data points, invisible to the human eye, the retroactive critical reception of *Wipe Cycle* may shift again in response.

On the other hand, the *Antioch Interactive Experiment* presents a video installation work in some ways more prescient in its vision of how video would come to affect human relations, and human relations affect video. In January of 1969, before the collaboration on *Wipe Cycle* was conceived, Gillette and Schneider were invited to go to Antioch College in Ohio by David Brooks, a filmmaker who was teaching at the college. They drove from New York City with the two Portapak cameras and an editing deck provided by McLuhan himself.⁹

As described by the artists in a 1973 issue of *Radical Software*, the work consisted of a

room 20 feet by 20 feet equipped with four remotely operated auto-focus, auto-zoom video cameras, four subjects . . . seated on chairs each facing one of the cameras. A single monitor in the room was viewed directly or from reflections in mirrors placed in the room. Feedback of a single channel of video from one of the four camera inputs was alternately presented on the monitor or blacked out.¹⁰

“Subjects” (who were student volunteers) were supposed to communicate solely through camera and monitor feedback. The work was panned by Allan Kaprow in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*:

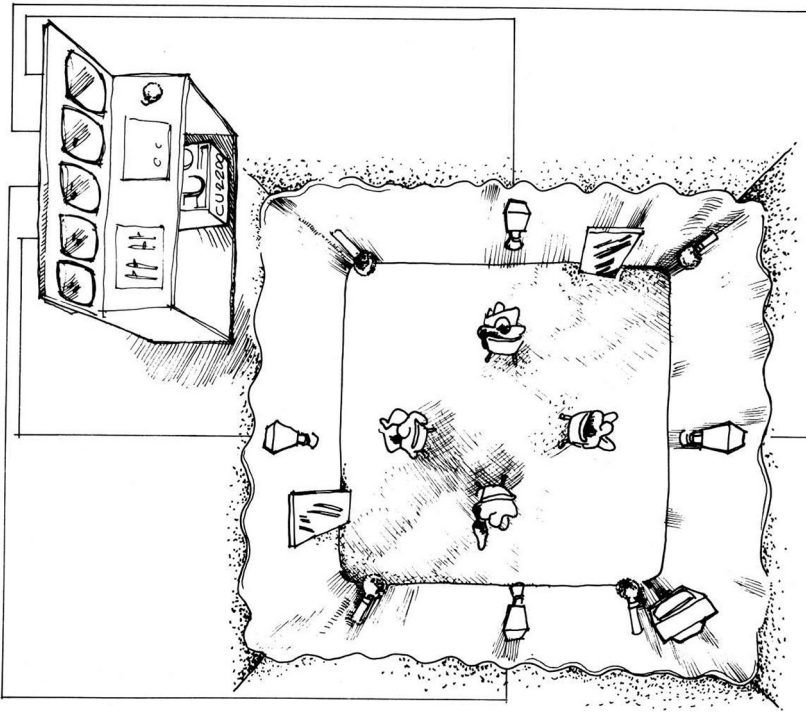
As the artists describe it, “after an initial period of self-consciousness, the subjects began to generate their own entertainment. During the session, the subjects played with their mirrors and cameras, read poetry, drew, rapped, did somersaults.” Playing around? Poetry? Rapping? Somersaults? All that expensive technology, care and work, for helpless behavior that has been predictable in every so-called experience-chamber since the eighteenth century! That is hardly experimental.¹¹

Kaprow goes on to blame both “utopian convictions” and “progressive education” for this failure of the artists to achieve what he considers true experimentation in their

9. Author interview with Frank Gillette, conducted by video call, July 4, 2023.

10. Gillette and Schneider, “An Interactive Experiment,” 13, www.radicalsoftware.org/volume2nr5/pdf/VOLUME2NR5_0015.pdf.

11. Allan Kaprow, “Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (Summer 1974), 47.



AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIMENT

In a room 20 feet by 20 feet equipped with four remotely operated auto-focus, auto-zoom video cameras, four subjects were seated on chairs each facing one of the cameras. A single monitor in the room was viewed directly or from reflections in mirrors placed in the room. Feedback of a single channel of video from one of the four camera inputs was alternately presented on the monitor or blacked out. The subjects were instructed to attempt to communicate with each other through their cameras. Microphones suspended from the ceiling recorded sound and a speaker in the room allowed for communication with the subjects (this was kept to a minimum).

After an initial period of self-consciousness the subjects began to generate their own entertainment. During the session the subjects played with their mirrors and cameras, read poetry, drew, rapped, did somersaults.

A one-hour edited tape of this session is available from the Reindance Foundation, Box 135, Ruby, N.Y. 12475. Price on request. The original tape was recorded in January, 1969. The edited version is available on EIAJ I standard.

This environment was designed by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette and recorded in the Antioch College Library in Yellow Springs, Ohio with students from the college, January, 1969.

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Illustration (1969) by Uri Shiran for "An Interactive Experiment," in *Radical Software* 2, no. 5 (Winter 1973), 13.

interactive environment. "There is also the very utopian conviction . . . that if people are given a privileged place and some sophisticated toys to play with, they will naturally do something enlightening, when in fact they usually don't."¹² Kaprow might be right about

12. Kaprow, "Video Art," 47.

the banality of the subjects' performances. It's impossible to say, since the tapes of the event have apparently been lost, but it is telling that these young students, who'd very likely never before seen simultaneous video feedback and transmission, were able to get such an immediate and haptic handle on the self-performance angle. As humans we are communicating machines, and our deepest desire is to project and communicate some presentation of the self.

In this work, Schneider and Gillette presented a totalizing (albeit temporary) environment in which the participants are immediately confronted with themselves as simultaneously both performer and viewer, with the performance directed primarily at themselves and their peers. The immediate feedback and the structure of the room necessitated and narrowed the scope of communication to the channels allowed by the surveilling and self-reflecting camera. The self in that space is constructed by the performance for the camera. If *Wipe Cycle* was about the camera as observer, inserting the audience/participant into the intersecting network of televisual streams, the *Antioch Interactive Experiment* was a truly "social" piece of media, presenting the camera as mirror, a reflective pool for immersive play with the goal of constructing the self for others to consume.

Oppenheimer correctly identifies *Wipe Cycle's* longevity as a video-art touchstone as stemming from the extended cultural centrality of television, and the rise of aperture-based surveillance. The *Antioch Interactive Experiment's* obscurity, on the other hand, might be attributed to its prescience—instead of reflecting the contemporaneous rise of a new technology, this piece prefigured a new kind of relationality that wouldn't be activated in mass culture for another four decades—the construction of the consumable social self through video. ■

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