



WAR

Blurred Material in Howardena Pindell’s *Video Drawings*

It’s as if Howardena Pindell could somehow anticipate the 21st century fervor of the 24-hour news cycle, where domestic politics and global crises share the same broadcast time as celebrity scandals and sports statistics. If we expose ourselves to this multi-hour drone of “Breaking News,” we begin to notice that all of these seemingly disparate events are leveled into one, shared system of (partial) equivalence. Worlds of images circulate without distinction. Reduced to clip and soundbite, these images are compressed to ease the viewer’s consumption. On a more generous note, it might rather be that pop culture and athletics are places where one looks to recharge. Some of us find the idea of a traditional work week of 9-5 a near extinct privilege, as flexible schedules, service industry jobs, endless email access, and the emergence of “freelance” and “work campuses” makes it so that we’re never entirely disconnected from our labor. TV during our time “off” stands in for the highest form of Americana decompression, where building in leisurely spectatorial time feels like the only way to escape the darkness and exhaustion of politico-economic chaos.

Pindell’s *Video Drawings* series is a meditation on the hegemony of the (tele)visual, one that forms a critique by way of the blur. In Pindell’s hands, blurring the image becomes a way to slow down the pace of image consumption in order to consider the multi-layered impacts of televisual images in everyday life. For these works, first Pindell drew an intuitive composition of lines and arrows onto sheets of acetate. These transparencies were then placed in front of a television screen, where the sheet would stick due to the static electricity that emitted from the screen. Sitting away from both the television and the camera propped in front of it, she would “watch” TV through the acetate, and decidedly take photographs with a cable release when she felt the image on TV compelled an interesting relationship with the drawn acetate composition.

This final image yields a “drawn” composition of a material meditation on the formal processes of image transmission and translation across media, coupled with then-current events, which also hauntingly remain relevant to the contemporary viewer. These works focused on sporting events in the mid-1970s and Pindell turned to images from war-torn countries throughout the 1980s.¹

Video Drawings move away from the clarity presupposed by the photographic, and instead make room for the generative processes of televisual translation as a signpost of contemporary life. If, as Guy Debord would have it, the “society of the spectacle”—an endless loop of mediation and image-consumption where our leisure time is merely another form of work—best characterizes post-WWII life, then Pindell’s particular mode of photographic capture asks us to rethink the influence of televisual in our everyday lives. We can situate Pindell’s series, which began in the mid-1970s, within a history of video art, which emerges earlier in that decade. Many early video artists were particularly interested in how television reshaped what could be considered “art,” in many of the same ways that photography had done in the 19th century.²

The populist ideal embedded within the television as a social object—that everyone theoretically had access to at-home news and entertainment at will—opened up access to the realm of representation promised by the moving image. Video artists in the 1970s undoubtedly had to contend with this ideal. Many early experiments took the form of television broadcast, while also upholding a contemporary, artistic commitment to the experimental and abstract. Works like Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut’s *Video Tape Study No. 3* (1967-1969) and Nancy Holt and Richard Serra’s *Boomerang* (1974) best embody the spectrum of social and formal concerns within the history of video art.

Paik and Yalkut manipulate news conference footage of then-President Lyndon Johnson and New York Mayor John Lindsey with tracking lines that produce interference, and thus obscure a clear picture. With the Vietnam War raging on, and domestic uprisings taking hold, this footage would have originally been broadcast widely in homes across the nation. Paik and Yalkut take this footage and move it into the realm of the experimental and abstract, thus calling into question the relationship between the televisual and the explicitly political. Holt and Serra, on the other hand, take on the formal qualities of the media. In this work, Holt sits with headphones in the center of the frame, where she begins to speak. Her words are immediately looped back into her headset, where she begins to describe the experience of hearing the delay of what she’s previously said while she continues to speak new phrases. This feedback loop causes an audio delay, which forces Holt to keep stalling her words. The viewer is given this awkward feedback loop, where we can hardly track what has been said and what is being said and what will be said by Holt. This “boomerang” effect thus calls attention to the technological processes of televisual mediation and the self-reflexivity implicit in both television broadcast and contemporary art.³ Pindell’s series best activates the entirety of this spectrum by blurring the lines between video and photography, the formal and the political.

The emphasis on the blur in Pindell’s work is sharply attuned to her viewer, who is tasked with the kind of critical looking practices that expose the impacts of contemporary media culture. As Lowery Stokes Sims has lucidly noted, Pindell’s general interest in visual deconstruction is at play in *Video Drawings*.⁴ These works “emphasize the graininess of the electronically transmitted image” and in so doing asks the viewer to “focus on the structure of matter transmitted as impulse.”⁵ Take Pindell’s *Video Drawings, Baseball* (1976), both of which encapsulate the artist’s adept ability to invite her viewer into an sustained and engaged looking practice. Looking for clarity, one might at first notice the numbers and lines in each image are clearly marked, though, as the artist notes, their meaning has no direct correspondence to their application. “I just dealt with numbers on a visual, visceral level,” Pindell notes in a 1980 interview.⁶ The television’s grain sits like a layer of static, such that one might have to squint to make out the details of the figures presented: baseball players, mid-game, focused and heads bowed towards the field. Bodies are hold a particular kind of sturdiness, also seem to exceed the bounds of a body captured in stillness, with what look like visual echoes of limbs, clothing, and light trembling from each subject. The environment around each player takes abstract form. In one image, the space where an audience should be looks rather like a bundle of of flourishing shapes, an ambiguously nondescript backdrop for the two players featured. In the other, a singular player is swallowed in darkness, with technicolor tracking lines popping out to make clear that the image is mediated.

As Sims notes, Pindell’s intervention with these works is primarily material, as she turns attention towards transmission itself, asking us to take into consideration the process by which images take shape on the screen. Building off Sims, I would take this observation one step further to note that Pindell mobilizes this graininess such that its obfuscation is materialized by taking a moving image and attempting to pause it in such a way that accounts for its motion. Photographed at 1/15th of a second⁷, the graininess of these images might better be accounted for as a *blur*. Each still image is motion filled; blurriness becomes its most defining characteristic, motions captured in flight.

This attempt is heightened by the lines and numerical annotations that Pindell draws on the transparencies overlaid on each of the original photographs. These marks, while they mean nothing in particular, heighten the sense of motion and capture precisely because we cannot help but think of the doubling of curves and lines in the image. Even more importantly, these marks gesture to the movements of the artist’s hand who drew them. The relationship between the moving and still image is one of temporality—the philosophies of time that separate and connect both forms. But temporality also links the marks Pindell graphs on each transparency, as those represent the motion and time of the artist; a considered time of illogical yet intuitive annotations, of attention and response. If Pindell can draw her own intuitive lines across the bodies, texts, and images on the screen, then the viewer too can draw her own conceptual connections. In these works, Pindell mobilizes motion through the blur as a way to theorize the rapid modes of media consumption endemic to contemporary life. In so doing, she invites the viewer to slow down the pace of consumption, and to consider the ways that one might draw her own critical looking experience, one that deconstructs, and quite possibly, dismantles.

—Sampada Aranke

Sampada Aranke (PhD, Performance Studies) is an Assistant Professor in the Art History, Theory, Criticism Department. Her research interests include performance theories of embodiment, visual culture, and black cultural and aesthetic theory. Her work has been published in *e-flux*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *Equid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, and *Women & Performance*. She has written catalogue essays for Sadie Barnette, Kambui Olujimi, and Zachary Fabri. She’s currently working on her book manuscript entitled *Death’s Futurity: The Visual Culture of Death in Black Radical Politics*.

1. Howardena Pindell, “Video Drawings,” Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings, Roland Gibson Gallery, New York, 1992, 32.
2. Madeline Burnside has noted that Pindell’s drawings resemble 19th century motion studies which were early experiments on exactly how much detail and range of motion the camera could capture. See Madeline Burnside, “New York Reviews: Howardena Pindell,” Art News 77, no. 1 (1978): 146–47. Additionally, I would press us to think about these 19th century experiments as also engaging the question of the documentary versus the aesthetic impulses within the photographic medium, while also opening up how the technology itself opened up the category representation to those who were disenfranchised from it, particularly the poor, women, and nonwhite subjects.
3. For more, see: Krauss, Rosalind. “Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism.” October. 1 (1976): 51-64; Marisa Olson, “boomerrangangbooboomerranrang: Nancy Holt’s networked video,” Rhizome, March 3, 2014, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/mar/03/nancy-holt/>
4. Lowery Stokes Sims, “Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell, 1972-1992,” Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings, Roland Gibson Gallery, New York, 1992, 13.
5. Ibid, 15.
6. Judith Wilson, “Howardena Pindell Makes Art that Winks at You.” Ms. Magazine 8, no. 11 (1980): 66–70
7. Madeline Burnside, “New York Reviews: Howardena Pindell.” Art News 77, no. 1 (1978): 146–47.