

## Exploring Video Art of Decades Past

By Neil Chiragdin, September 27, 2018



PHOTO BY NEIL CHIRAGDIN  
Nam June Paik's "Charlotte Moorman II" is named and styled after a cellist friend. The sculpture uses a cello for its torso and contains monitors throughout.

What do you stare at for hours on end, but never really look at? What's made you laugh and cry, but has no idea when it does the same? What do you shout at, but has never seen or heard you do it? The television occupies a sacred space in our homes, and is often the focal point of our living spaces. Before digital projection became a mainstay of the art world, some artists lent a similar rarified air to the displays for their video art, dreaming up creative modes of distributing their content.

"Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995" is a new exhibition at SculptureCenter in Long Island City which focuses on the methods used to show video art before digital projection became ubiquitous. "The medium is the message" is an implicit theme throughout the exhibit. Its underlying concept is that the means — a letter, a painting, a news broadcast — used to convey a story or idea and the idea itself are inextricably tied to each other. It helps explain why a blockbuster action film can soar before movie theater audiences but fall flat on an airplane seatback screen. The artists shown at SculptureCenter did not merely think of creative means for displaying their pieces, they made

them primary features of the artwork.

Some of the pieces have the effect of alienating the viewer, instilling in them a mild level of concern or confusion. Ernst Caramelle's "Video-Ping-Pong" consists of two television sets mounted on AV carts, positioned in front of a mock ping-pong table, approximately where the players would be standing. Each of the sets shows one of the players in a pingpong match, recorded and played simultaneously, their volleys and serves heard through the speakers. The players are like apparitions, and it's somehow unsettling that the paddles on the table remain still, while we have this window into a game-that-was.

Takahiko Iimura's "TV for TV" puts two television sets beside each other, face-to-face — or more appropriately, screen-to-screen. It's nearly impossible to make out what is playing on the screens except when looking from a few specific angles, and even then, you are only able to glimpse the outer half-inch of the screens. Depending on the timing of a visit, the television sets will either both be playing static or be tuned to different broadcast stations. The idea that the streaming video is visible only to the other television creates a sense of being displaced, as if "this is not for me." It allows the viewer to think about the television-viewing process objectively, and is meant to call to mind the incessant and simultaneous qualities of television streams. The placement at the far end of SculptureCenter's central basement corridor heightens the "outsider" effect.

A few of the artists represented in the exhibition have created wholly unique presentations for their videos, diffusing the focal point of the piece from the screen outward, to include the housing for it. Viewers must change how they watch the films in accordance with this. Tony Oursler's "Psychomimetic II" creates a whole world to house the artist's monitors. Viewers approach a small tabletop-sized landscape composed of a medieval tower and a nuclear cooling stack, all set upon a bleak landscape. Within the medieval tower, an extremely small screen visible from only a few angles plays a video with a madcap narration. In a sort of whirlpool within the landscape, footage of fireworks, which figure into the other video, play on loop. In Nam June Paik's "Charlotte Moorman II," 11 monitors are embedded into a humanoid sculpture, whose torso is a cello and appears to be playing a violin. Playing on the monitors is footage of the piece's namesake, Charlotte Moorman, the artist's collaborator.

Shigeko Kubota's "River" is a complex sculpture with several independent elements working together to deliver a unique viewing experience to the visitor. It's composed of three television monitors hanging at eye level, their screens facing downward toward a curved, reflective metal basin full of water and a wave-making turbine which pushes the water at regular intervals. The televisions' screens are placed just out of reach of easy viewing, so the gaze is cast downward, into the basin. The videos show the artist swimming, intercut with a montage of brightly colored graphic shapes. There, the moving water makes for a dreamlike distortion of the images cast down from above.

Other pieces within "Before Projection" play with the positioning of the screens, as in Friederike Pezold's "The New Embodied Sign Language," which positions a camera each over the artist's eyes, mouth, breasts and pubic area, here each represented by a television screen stacked atop one another to approximate an average human height.

"Before Projection" transports viewers to a recent past, in which video art had a much more physical presence than it often does today. Visitors may change the way they think about the screens in their lives before leaving.

**'Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995'**

**When: Through Mon., Dec. 17**

**Where: SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves St., Long Island City**

**Entry: \$5; students \$3. (718) 361-1750,**

**[sculpture-center.org](http://sculpture-center.org)**