



Solveig Nelson

The Whole World is (Still) Watching

“Not the 1960s”¹

Tom Kalin’s *They are lost to vision altogether*, 1989, juxtaposes some of the first broadcast news reports on AIDS with lyrical fragments of Hollywood films and early cinema recorded off monitors. In a critical scene, Kalin appropriates a news broadcast of an ACT UP (AIDS coalition to Unleash Power) protest at City Hall in New York, recorded by the activist video collective, Testing the Limits. Amidst demonstrators chanting and allowing their bodies to go limp in a ‘die in,’ a figure records the police with a portable video camera as they charge the demonstrators and so, too, the camera. The newscaster narrates that the protest displayed “raw emotion” that “recalled the era of the 1960s.” Moments later, text by Kalin appears over the scene that admonishes “Not the 1960s.” Kalin’s video considered the stakes of historical events in the context of a new direct action movement that was emerging in the face of the AIDS crisis. Writing in the catalog of *The Whole World is (Still) Watching*, the exhibition at Randolph Street Gallery from which this video program takes its name, Kalin describes this overlay of historical moments:

The sight of friends and loved ones being dragged, limp, into police buses at a recent demonstration on Wall Street inevitably linked back to vague memories of grainy newscasts and my sisters, shaken, returning from the Days of Rage... [However,] activism must now recognize its complicity and fundamentally contradictory relationship with the media.²

This program focuses on this form of double vision – seeing the 1960s through the lens of the 1990s – in American video art in the 1990s. It argues that the stakes of the 1960s in this later period corresponds to a sense of the unfinished political promise of nonviolent direct action, and in turn, the unfinished art historical promise of early video.

The videos in this program by Kalin, Gran Fury, Dara Birnbaum, Leah Gilliam, Tom Rubnitz (in collaboration with David Wojnarowicz), Suzie Silver (in collaboration with Hester Reeve) and Sadie Benning all move beyond mere ‘returns to history.’ While sometimes wary about the limitations of Sixties era social movements and urban policies,

each approach the 1960s as a site of innovation in media and as a site of innovation in politics. “The whole world is watching” was a chant made famous by the responses of activists to clashes between police and demonstrators at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention. Iterations of the phrase emerged earlier however, for example in the newspaper coverage of the Little Rock integration crisis in 1957, an event that is referenced in Leah Gilliam’s work, and in activist Medgar Evers’ 1963 televised speech that reversed the direction of the phrase to insist that black Americans were watching “what happened today all over the world.”³ I suggest that artists working in video in the 1990s picked up on the question of not only *what* was being watched, but *how*. I selected the title for this program because the question of media is central to both the activist chant and its invocation in art contexts. Further, I wished to quote from Randolph Street Gallery exhibition’s iteration of the “whole world is watching” because many of the artists (especially Suzie Silver) participated robustly in Chicago’s alternative arts institutions that highlighted the medium of performance. While “culture wars” debates about government censorship of the arts have

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² See the catalog and archival material for *The Whole World is (Still) Watching*, Randolph Street Gallery archives, John M. Flaxman Library, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My comments on Kalin’s work draw upon Solveig Nelson, interview with Tom Kalin for the Video Data Bank’s On Art and Artists interview collection, February 2016; Solveig Nelson, telephone interview with the author, July 2013; and Sarah Schulman, Interview with Tom Kalin, ACT UP Oral History Project, February 4th, 2004.

³ See for example, Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles over Mississippi TV, 1953-1969* (Duke University Press, 2004); Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), and Myrlie Evers-Williams, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers* (Basic Books, 2006).



Sapphire and the Slave Girl, Leah Gilliam, 1995



A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors), Suzie Silver, 1992

tended to foreground photographic work created primarily in New York, Chicago exemplifies a broader phenomenon of alternative institutions in cities throughout the U.S. that created the space for artists to respond to politics in real time, within their art works.

In these works made in the 1990s, the 1960s remains contested. Works by Gilliam and Benning address the failures of the Sixties and Seventies by tracing continuities – for instance, the after-effects of urban renewal policies that buttressed, rather than dismantled, racial segregation, the decisions to build communities on top of nuclear waste, and the limitations of group identity. On the other hand, Birnbaum, Kalin, and Gran Fury turn to the 1960s as a model for a type of action. There are different formal strategies of appropriation and ways of framing text/image relations. For Kalin and Birnbaum, text is layered on top of television images, whereas for Benning, text appears as graffiti or drawing within the fabric of the image. If some works ask about the performative effects of demonstrations, others record performance art onto videotape. Importantly, the crisis of the Nineties that makes the Sixties relevant is not in each case the same. For Birnbaum, it is campus activism against a culture of sexual assault that surged in the Nineties, as it had in the Sixties during the multiracial student movement to transform higher education. For others in

this program, it is AIDS and the culture wars. These political issues are not simply backgrounds for the art works in *The Whole World is (Still) Watching*. Rather, 'politics,' or the effort to call a new audience forth, entailed – or *required* – formal innovation, new modes of address and politicized engagement with a history of depiction.

More specifically, the artists in this program do not agree upon a single interpretation of the legacies of nonviolent direct action. However, they all see direct action as a set of visual and performative strategies for "dramatizing" injustice that changed over time. It is this understanding of direct action – as complex aesthetic strategy that involved the creation of new modes of address – that they bring to bear on their own moment. Many works in this program invoke fantasies and metaphors of "direct contact" while emphasizing multiple forms of mediation, including the transmission of live bodily acts onto television. In Rubnitz's *Listen to This*, direct action is invoked through the rhetorics of direct address, including in news broadcasting. Throughout the video, the artist David Wojnarowicz reads a text written initially for the exhibition curated by Nan Goldin about artists' responses to AIDS, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing." Rubnitz intermittently cuts to black, allowing the image to play out as a projection in the viewer's head. In the conclusion, Rubnitz imagines

the object of Wojnarowicz's desire in the form of a young man posing for the camera, personified as the artists' vision. "Maybe I just want to kiss his warm body... my face a camera, a moving camera," the voiceover states. The intimacy between Wojnarowicz and his object of desire, as imagined by Rubnitz, is translated to the viewer. *Listen to This* exemplifies a back-and-forth between political urgency and desire that is explored generally in works throughout the Nineties. It is also a particularly clear example of artists' grappling with the media's critical role as communication while questioning effects of immediacy.

One interpretation of direct action that appears throughout this program is found in sequences of kissing. For example, in *They are lost to vision altogether*, Kalin recorded interludes of friends and acquaintances at parties kissing, especially queer and interracial couples. This footage was re-purposed for a more didactic effect within the collective Gran Fury's campaign of videos and billboards, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990. In Silver's *A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors)*, the artist invokes the counterculture of the Sixties, including pornographic footage of women kissing. Silver's exuberant processing of this footage with special effects mines the potential of Sixties-era psychedelics to create a queer world-view. On the one hand, the kissing sequences in many of these videos document a performative innovation



German Song, Sadie Benning, 1995



They are lost to vision altogether, Tom Kalin, 1989

within politics, whereby the “sit-in” expanded to include the “kiss-in.” On the other, art historical concerns are central. In many works in this program, the “kiss-in” exemplifies artists’ embrace of a lyricism that refuses to choose between abstraction and figuration, action and desire. For example, halfway through Benning’s Super 8 work *German Song*, 1995, Benning and artist Gwen Biley kiss in an abstracted close-up, mediated by the Pixelvision toy camera’s Xerox-like movement of pixels. This intervention is not a provocation within *German Song*, which explores queer desire throughout, but rather a formal decision to fold one medium into another that produces its own form of beauty. Kalin has recently positioned his own kissing sequences as an imagined recreation of Andy Warhol’s film *Kiss*, 1963m which Kalin had encountered only as a still. In various ways throughout this program of videos, love emerges as central to social transformation.

If these works register different understandings of the aesthetic strategies and legacies of American activism, so too, these works exhibit different ways of understanding video. Artists such as Birnbaum reject the historical opposition between the personal, subjective vision associated

with the portable video camera and notions of collective action. This is underlined in *Canon: Taking to the Street* when Birnbaum juxtaposes footage from a Take Back the Night protest with a quotation from a special issue of the *Nation* about campus activism: “Between the distant world of national issues and the immediate project of self-transformation there has too often been a vacuum.”⁴ Gilliam’s *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* – a work that references films and novels about racial passing and cross-racial desire – links such questions of self-transformation to the discourse of virtual realities. Throughout the video, urban planning discourses of “open spaces” and “networks” from Sixties era television broadcasts are countered with footage about racial segregation. With particular prescience, Gilliam’s work broadens the sphere of political aesthetics to encompass the city as a whole. A voiceover asks, “have you ever kissed your kids goodnight from 500 miles away? Have you ever put your heads together, when you are not together?”

These seven artists and collectives thematize the promise of ‘early video,’ when experimentation with video was in its early stages and the relationship between television and video remained

ambiguous. By the 1990s, early video had accumulated a series of mythologies – chiefly, the narrative of the artist alone in their studio, turning the camera against their own body and initiating a return of figuration after the dominance of abstraction in American painting – that artists played with and against. In many of the works, alternations between black-and-white and color are the means of exploring the *representation* of media, as well as prompting the viewer to consider multiple historical moments in conversation. There is a shared sense that no media format is singular or operates in a vacuum. The videos in *The Whole World is (Still) Watching* do not add up to a single interpretation of early video. Instead, they advocate for a more robust, contested interpretation of video’s early histories – including its politics – than art historical narratives have allowed.

Tom Kalin, *They are lost to vision altogether*, 1989, 13:21 min

First presented in Tom Kalin’s thesis exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *They are lost to vision altogether* circulated to venues such as Group Material’s “AIDS Timeline,” (1989), and Video Data Bank’s “Drive-In,” (1991), an event

⁴ L.A. Kauffman, “Sexual Harassment: How Political is the Personal?” *The Nation* (March 26th, 1988), 419-420.



Kissing Doesn't Kill, Gran Fury/Tom Kalin, 1990



INFORMATION GLADLY GIVEN BUT SAFETY REQUIRES AVOIDING UNNECESSARY CONVERSATION, Tom Kalin, 1995

that introduced video art to large audiences by projecting onto giant outdoor television screens. *They are lost to vision altogether*, opening with an explosion projected in reverse, tropes upon modernist vision and its relation to reproductive technologies. The title was first used in an insert that Kalin contributed to the School of the Art Institute's *P-Form* magazine in fall 1987, which appropriated text from WWII magazines: "they are lost to vision altogether" referred to the experience of pilots watching bombs being dropped, in the moment before the high speed cameras recorded visual evidence in the form of an explosion.

In press releases, Kalin described *They are lost to vision altogether* as a procedure of "finding queer history where one can and making up the rest." Signaling such an effort, an Edison film of two men dancing, courtesy of the personal collection of queer film scholar Vito Russo, appears as if a refrain. Alongside broadcast television footage, *They are lost to vision altogether* appropriates clips from home movies and Hollywood films – notably of Bette Davis and Ronald Reagan in *Dark Victory*, a film in which the heroine goes blind. Kalin's emphasis on the lyrical or poetic aspects of the moving image was, at the time, questioned as oppositional to the necessity for action. Yet Kalin himself described *They are lost to vision*

altogether in the terms of action – as "an erotic retaliation against the Helms amendment" (a reference to legislation that prohibited educational materials from promoting or condoning Class IV drug use or "gay sex"). That said, Kalin pauses to ask the viewer/reader via text that appears on the screen over erotic gay porn shot off the TV: "why only white bodies?" Kalin's investment in direct action and its corresponding concept of "direct contact" is counterbalanced by the influence of feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger, Lyn Blumenthal, and Dara Birnbaum, who deconstructed the syntax of television and remained suspicious of claims about video's immediacy.

GranFury/Tom Kalin, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1990 3:50 min
Tom Kalin, *INFORMATION GLADLY GIVEN BUT SAFETY REQUIRES AVOIDING UNNECESSARY CONVERSATION*, 1995, 1:05 min

Kalin's interludes of kissing, a kind of photo-booth-within-a-film, were subsequently translated into his work with the visual collective, Gran Fury. This program includes four versions of Gran Fury/Kalin's *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which circulated as discrete 30-second television interventions as well as stills on buses and billboards. A collectively produced work, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* called *not* for a cohesive

group aesthetic based upon identity, but rather for "collective action" against indifference and government inaction. Tom Kalin's television spot, *INFORMATION GLADLY GIVEN BUT SAFETY REQUIRES AVOIDING UNNECESSARY CONVERSATION*, a work made in the mid 1990s from footage that Kalin recorded earlier, refers to an incomprehensible government message that circulated on trains in Washington, D.C. Utilizing bold monochrome color backgrounds, rapid editing, and direct address to the viewer reminiscent of MTV, *INFORMATION GLADLY GIVEN...* continues to explore notions of communication and/or intimacy across boundaries – a motif of 'contact' that might be traced to the Sixties. Yet in this work, recorded in multiple languages, Kalin emphasizes contact across national borders and complicates the very notion of the 'whole world' as an audience for a singular U.S. The video asks the question also voiced by David Wojnarowicz: what precisely is the "general public?" This is a formal question for art works, intertwined with a political question during a moment in which people living with AIDS were considered a risk to the public, rather than part of it.⁵

⁵ See the collection of interviews in *Gran Fury: Read My Lips*, 80WSE Press, January 2015.



Canon: *Taking to the Street*, Dara Birnbaum, 1990

Dara Birnbaum, *Canon: Taking to the Street*, 1990, 10:54 min

In 1975, Dara Birnbaum created conceptually tight and elegant works with portable black-and-white video cameras. The artist previously worked with Lawrence Halprin's landscape architecture firm, an influence upon her subsequent emphasis on installation. Birnbaum witnessed Halprin's use of video playback in workshops such as *My Neighborhood*, 1970, which paradoxically combined progressive goals of fostering interracial communication while utilizing video to contain social dissent against urban renewal.⁶ By the late 1970s, Birnbaum departed from both the Halprin model of the pedagogical workshop and the Sony Portapak narrative of the lone artist in their studio. *Television, Transformation Wonder Woman*, 1978/79 – the artist's foray into appropriating found footage from television, a procedure that Birnbaum called "television on television" – initiated a shift to the feminist "television art" of the 'Eighties and Nineties.

Canon: Taking to the Street returns to the figuration of the portable camera – this time, VHS footage recorded on camcorders by participants in a 1987 "Take Back the Night" protest at Princeton University. The video points to the global aspects of nonviolent direct action; graphics from May 1968 are intermittently interlaced with images of

the demonstration, itself manipulated into multiple layers. While the piece is shot through with references to the 1960s, Birnbaum avoids black-and-white newsreel. Instead, she saturates the footage in a purple tint. Birnbaum's post-production choices emphasize the mediation of the VHS cameras into the protest itself. Further, the slow motion playback amplifies light flares, as well as the movement of the figures through space. Thus, the "night" takes on the aura of an installation environment, counteracting some of the limitations of "Take Back the Night" and its divisions between inside/outside. *Canon: Taking to the Street*, questions how formal qualities of movement in time based media relate, or not, to the creation of "a movement"

Tom Rubnitz, *Listen to This*, 1992, 15:30 min

Camp, which Sontag described as "seeing the world in quotations," has largely been elided in art historical narratives. A corrective is found in the work of Tom Rubnitz (1956-1992). *Listen to This* departs from Rubnitz's prior focus on drag performance, visual puns, and fashion as a way of introducing mobile fields of color. Recorded mostly in black-and-white, *Listen to This* centers upon a performance-rant by artist David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), based largely upon Wojnarowicz's rhetorically brilliant essay, "Post Cards From America: X-Rays From Hell!"⁷ Footage from Wojnarowicz's films and televised audiences shot during political speeches are intercut with the performance.

Listen to This amplifies a motif in Wojnarowicz's oeuvre: television and televisual modes of perception. Staring directly into the camera as if a news reporter, Wojnarowicz begins, "I'm speaking to you from a little box

called television." The artist rebukes, "and yet you respond to me as if I am human, despite the fact that I am made up of tiny particles bombarding your TV antenna from some place in outer space." Appropriating the iconographies of zombies from B-Horror films, Wojnarowicz goes on to critique the infrastructure of media and social convention that allows Americans to abstract their own mortality. Throughout, Wojnarowicz performs subtle shifts in address whereby the viewer is prompted to consider their multiple roles as viewer, reader, lover, and public.

Suzie Silver, *A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors)*, 1992, 4:52 min

A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors), features Canadian performance artist Hester Reeve performing a lip sync of the Doors song, "I'm a Spy" (1970). Reeve dressed as Jesus and painted her breasts with angels looking upward in adoration, their mouths gaping open as if a bodily orifice. *A Spy (Hester Reeve Does the Doors)* was created for a program called "Bait and Switch" at Club Lower Link, curated by Silver and performance artist Iris Moore to address the lack of opportunities for women to perform drag within Chicago's vibrant queer performance scene. Notably, artist Suzie Silver co-created with Larry Steger "In Through the Out Door," a remarkable series of queer performance at Randolph Street Gallery in the early 1990s featuring artists Vaginal Creme Davis, Ron Athey, Eileen Myles, Sadie Benning, and many others.

Reeve performs against a blue screen upon which Silver keyed in footage from her own video art, including appropriations from Sixties countercultural films that are altered with color filters and computer-generated animation. One of the key but oft-

⁶ See for example Birnbaum's interview by Barbara Schröder and Karen Kelley for *Bomb Magazine*, Summer 2008, as well as their book-length catalog, *Dara Birnbaum: Dark Matter of Media Light*, Prestel, 2008; and importantly, Birnbaum's own writings and artists books, including *Every TV Needs a Revolution*, Gent, Belgium, 1992. My own research on the Anna and Lawrence Halprin workshops was partially published in Nelson, "Space Age," *Artforum*, January 2015.

⁷ "Post Cards from America" was published in the catalog for the exhibition curated by Nan Goldin at Artists' Space, New York, November 16th, 1989-January 6th, 1990, *WITNESSES: Against Our Vanishing*.

overlooked strains within 'early video' was the work made with audio and visual synthesizers. 'Image processing' was often considered a kind of formalist painting with electronics, rather than a politically charged critique. Yet as artist and critic Christine Tamblin has explored, pioneers such as artist Dan Sandin at University of Illinois at Chicago made his synthesizer plans available in a do-it-yourself ethos, and hoped that his tools might open up new ways for viewers to intervene in television's one-way system of broadcaster-receiver.⁸ Suzie Silver's early videos bring this rich history of the performative aspects of special effects into dialogue with video's long-standing role as a document for performance.

Leah Gilliam, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, 1995, 18:20 min

In *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, Leah Gilliam casts a series of actors, as well as footage of historical figures, in the main role of Sapphire. Gilliam's work is shot through with a fragmented journalistic reportage, left to the viewer to add up (or not) into a whole picture. Gilliam's title is a combined reference to Willa Cather's novel about the repressed interracial desire and violence of a white slave-owner, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), and the British thriller *Sapphire* (1959), a meandering film noir about the character Sapphire's perceived transgression of passing for white. If *Sapphire* (the film) unravels through a network of hallways, social relations, and repressed feeling, Gilliam takes this network into the conceptual architecture of her video in order to question reductive categories of race and gender that persist in the virtual spaces of information.

One of the most striking moments in Gilliam's work includes news footage of Elizabeth Eckford in Little Rock in 1957 after facing mobs while attempting to attend a segregated school. Sitting on a bench wearing sunglasses, Eckford

deflects with her silence the questions of a reporter thrusting a microphone into her face; this sequence underlines the fact that nonviolent direct action sometimes manifested as a refusal to participate or to move, and not only as movement.

Sadie Benning, *German Song*, 1995, 5:50 min

Sadie Benning's early videos utilize the unique qualities of the Fisher Price Pixelvision toy camera, which records onto audiocassette and produces a grainy, black and white image. Benning has stated:

Pixelvision is kind of its own medium. I mean, it is video, but it was designed to record on a cassette tape. And it's unstable, in terms of its signal – it's made as a toy more than even a camera. I like the way in which Pixel has an unreality to it. It's dreamy, it's blurry, and it's unclear.⁹

Outfitted with a fixed focus lens, meaning that objects could be photographed in abstract close-ups, and a capacity for handheld movement without strobing, Pixelvision was well suited for Benning's rhetorics of immediacy and direct address to viewers. Yet Benning also utilized Pixelvision to emphasize the ways in which our vision of the world is mediated. Taking this as a potential for transformation rather than only a limitation, Benning has asked, "With video, you can be an eyeball, or a thumb sucker, and what gender does that make you?" While Benning's early works have generally been framed as autobiographical performances staged in the isolation of their bedroom in Milwaukee, the artist was connected to the live performance scene in Chicago and Milwaukee, and had recorded demonstrations by ACT UP.

German Song, recorded in black-and-white Super 8, represents one of the first works in which Benning turned the camera

away – mostly – from the artists' body and interior environments. A collaboration with the band Come (formed by Thalia Zedek, Arthur Johnson, and Sean O'Brien), *German Song* utilizes the associative structure of the music video sans footage of the band. Instead, *German Song* offers a subtle portrait of artist Gwen Biley, who also appeared in Benning's *It Wasn't Love* (1992), as Biley poses silently for the camera or roller skates through empty swimming pools. Some of the footage is shot in Love Canal, New York, a suburb that was abandoned after nuclear waste poisoned an entire community. Biley is pictured in front of graffiti or drawings that reference social movements or popular culture, signaling that Love Canal was very much a part of an outside world and not an easy-to-dismiss anomaly. While mournful in its theme of environmental disaster, *German Song* also produces alternative forms of glamour. Confronting an absence, Benning decided, alongside every one of the artists and collectives in this program: "I'll make my own narratives, my own ideals of beauty, my own sex symbols, my own pop culture."

⁸ See for example Christine Tamblin, "Image Processing in Chicago Video Art," *Leonardo* (1991), 303-310.

⁹ "Sadie Benning: Early Videos," an interview by Solveig Nelson, Wexner Center for the Arts, 2004.