

Is Video-art Becoming a Form of Popular Art? The case of Apple TV's Aerial Screen Savers

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Abstract:

In 2015 Apple unveiled its fourth generation Apple TV and presented a new screen saver with it, consisting of a collection of videos shot all over the world. A set of stunning slow-motion short videos depict aerial footage of some of the most famous skylines and landscapes from around the globe. This article looks at the question of whether these aerial videos represent a form of video art. If the answer is yes, then video art, which for more than half a century was struggling to find its place in popular culture (outside of high-brow contemporary art museums and galleries) is making an almost unnoticed entrance into millions of households, becoming a focal point in the endless number of living rooms. Given the adoption of larger LCD TV screens and the growing popularity of the Apple TV platform, aerial screen savers are becoming an art form that is dominating numerous interior spaces. Are we on the verge of the birth of a new kind of popular art?

Keywords: video art, screen savers, Apple TV, digital art

Introduction

In this article I will endeavour to demonstrate why and how Apple TV technology and its new feature – aerial screen savers – may be changing the rules of the art world and also disrupting the way people use their home TV screens for interior decoration purposes. I believe that this is an almost unnoticed change in both technological and artistic paradigms, bringing about a wider adoption and mass popularization of “new” media art (i.e. artworks that are created and exhibited with new digital media technologies – video, computers, Internet, etc.). These artworks are generally referred to as “new media art”, “electronic art”, or “digital art” (Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort, 2003; Catricalà, 2015).

My main hypothesis is that Apple TV represents a milestone in the development of a new form of popular art – video art as mass art. The Generation X and Generation Y consumers who were raised on TV and video content, primarily delivered in digital form (Prensky, 2013; Woodman, 2015), are more likely to better digest art images in motion rather than in a static form, and Apple TV with its aerial landscapes signifies a step in the direction of further development of mass art in a form of digital media, which is currently in the early phase of its development.

Screen Savers as an Art Form

Before proceeding to the question of whether Apple TV screen saver can be considered a form of art, the notion that screen savers can be works of art at all needs to be examined. That brings us to the discussion of what is and what is not art. In order to ascertain this, some basic concepts of art need to be revisited – namely, the way I will understand visual “art” in this paper. Visual art here will be understood as a visual object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination. “The term art encompasses diverse media such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, drawing, decorative arts, photography, and installation” (Encyclopædia Britannica).

It has been often said that art has no utilitarian value, it does not contribute to the material objective environment of human life. Traditionally it is thought that artifacts produced for the homeliest utilitarian purposes have formal properties but are not artworks. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012).

However, this statement may need to be examined more critically. Art has had a great number of different functions throughout its history, making its purpose difficult to abstract to or quantify as any single concept. This does not imply that the purpose of art is “vague”, but that it has had many unique and different reasons for being created. The different purposes of art may be grouped according to those that are non-motivated, and those that are motivated (Lévi-Strauss, 1968).

The non-motivated purposes of art are those that are integral to being human, transcend the individual, or do not fulfill a specific external purpose. In this sense, art, as creativity, is something humans are compelled to engage in by their very nature (i.e., no other species creates art), and is therefore beyond utility. Motivated purposes of art refer to intentional, conscious actions on the part of the artists or creator. These may be to bring about political change, to comment on an aspect of society, to convey a specific emotion or mood, to address personal psychology, to illustrate another discipline, to (with commercial arts) sell a product, or simply as a form of communication (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Besides, art, at its simplest, can be indeed

seen a form of communication. As most forms of communication have an intent or goal directed toward another individual, this is a motivated purpose. Illustrative arts, such as scientific illustration, are a form of art as communication. However, the content need not be scientific. Emotions, moods and feelings are also communicated through art. “Art is a set of artefacts or images with symbolic meanings as a means of communication” (Mithen, 1999).

Thus, purely utilitarian artefacts can also be works of art – as long as they satisfy certain criteria (of “conveying a specific emotion or mood” for example) and are directed towards another person. From this perspective, screen savers are an example of this phenomenon. Apart from serving as a means to protect screens from burning, they also serve as a form of expression. Besides, they fulfill another important function of art which it is necessary to mention here – entertainment. Art may seek to bring about a particular emotion or mood, for the purpose of relaxing or entertaining the viewer – and screen savers can and do do just that.

Screen-saver programs were originally developed to extend the life of computer monitors. If the same picture is repeatedly repainted, the light-emitting phosphors on the inside of a cathode ray tube can burn out, leaving shadowy on-screen artifacts (Mirapaulnov, 2000). The first actual screen-saver software was published in a 1983 issue of *Softalk*, a magazine devoted to the culture taking shape around home computers. *Softalk* then delivered coverage on programming, gaming, trade, and more. Readers of the issue in question would have turned to a page graced with a headline in a cataclysmic font – SAVE YOUR MONITOR SCREEN! – and an article with the same exclamatory tone: “At this very moment your video monitor or IBM Monochrome Display may be in danger!” Less exciting was the screen-saver code itself; after three minutes, the screen simply went black (Hatfield, 2017).

In later years two of the most popular screen savers were introduced for those who preferred Windows products – a brick maze but also the multicolored “three-dimensional” pipes, which repeatedly constructed and deconstructed in a manner that verged on Escherian imagery (Hatfield, 2017)). As choices expanded, they became “a way to splash a little colour inside a beige plastic frame” (Mirapaulnov, 2000).

Screen savers were created to protect monitors by constantly changing their images, but advances in display technology made screens less susceptible to “phosphor burn”. Today, computers now have optimised screen protection with a sleep mode. However, the disappearance of screen savers’ utilitarian function also signified their extinction from everyday usage, and some commentators associated this trend with a cultural shift:

The utilitarian function of the screen saver is dying out, which makes it even more interesting to transform into a venue for art ... What we abandoned with the death of screen savers—themselves testifiers of disuse—was a culture that could accept walking away from life onscreen (Hatfield, 2017).

The screen saver has evolved into a medium for public art, not unlike “the mural on an abandoned building's wall” (Hatfield, 2017). Visually mesmerizing, intellectually engaging, and nearly decommodified, the best screen savers achieve the virtues of multiple art movements:

They even make a damning statement: the faintest human touch breaks their spell. Websites like Screen Saver Gallery circumvent institutional gatekeepers by encouraging users to download a new artwork in the form of a screen saver each

month. I enjoy downloading these screen savers despite their poetic futility: today, any laptop that runs a screen saver is burning more energy than it's saving. (Hatfield, 2017)

This status of the screen saver as works of art was recognised when the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam in 2017 staged an entire exhibition devoted to retro screen savers, entitled “Sleep Mode.” The exhibition, curated by the artist Rafaël Rozendaal, incorporated a range of screen savers from After Dark, Apple, and Microsoft. Divorced from their natural habitat – the small screens of office cubicles and home offices – and projected onto large gallery walls, screen savers lose their smallness, but acquire a new dimension of immersive experience. Of course, another aspect of having been exhibited in a gallery space is an act of status assignment: an art institution by the very act of exhibiting screen savers in its space thus recognises the status of screen savers as works of art, or at least acknowledges their potential of conveying conceptual meanings which are beyond their purely utilitarian meanings.

Apple TV aerial screen savers are a different type from those old computer screensavers. From the very beginning, Apple TV screen savers have no utilitarian purpose, they fulfill exclusively decorative, aesthetic functions – these slow-motion short videos depict aerial footage of some of the most famous skylines and landscapes around the world. And as such they constitute an original phenomenon – screen savers that at the same time are objects of video art, which makes them artworks in both form and function.

Video Art Defined and Distinguished

Video art is an art form which relies on moving pictures in a visual or audio-visual medium. Video art came into existence during the late 1960s and early 1970s as new consumer video technology became available outside corporate broadcasting. Video art can take many forms: recordings that are broadcast; installations viewed in galleries or museums; works streamed online, distributed as video tapes, or DVDs; and performances which may incorporate one or more television sets, video monitors, and projections, displaying “live” or recorded images and sounds (Hartney, 2011).

Video art is named after the original analog video tape, which was most commonly used recording technology in the form's early years. With the advent of digital recording equipment, many artists began to explore digital technology as a new way of expression.

The first of them was an American artist of Korean origin – Nam June Paik – who took a camera and proclaimed that “the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas . . . artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk” (Paik, 1965). He worked with and in a variety of media and is considered to be the founder of video art.

Many of the prominent early video artists were those involved with concurrent movements in conceptual art, performance, and experimental film. These include Vito Acconci, Valie Export, John Baldessari, Peter Campus, Doris Totten Chase, Maureen Connor, Norman Cowie, Dimitri Devyatkin, Frank Gillette, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola, Shigeo Kubota, Martha Rosler, William Wegman, Gary Hill, and many others. There were also those such as Steina and Woody Vasulka who were interested in the formal qualities of video and employed video synthesizers to create abstract works.

One of the key differences between video art and theatrical cinema is that video art does not necessarily rely on many of the conventions that define theatrical cinema. Video art may not employ the use of actors, may contain no dialogue, may have no discernible narrative or plot, or adhere to any of the other conventions that generally define motion pictures as entertainment. This distinction also distinguishes video art from cinema's subcategories where those definitions may become muddy (avant-garde cinema, short films, or experimental films, etc.). Perhaps the simplest, most straightforward defining distinction in this respect would then be to say that (perhaps) cinema's ultimate goal is to entertain, whereas video art's intentions are more varied, be they to simply explore the boundaries of the medium itself or to rigorously attack the viewer's expectations of video as shaped by conventional cinema (Rush, 1999). Video art can be considered an extension of painting, a transformation of a static painting into a moving image.

Prior to the introduction of consumer video equipment, moving image production was only available non-commercially via 8mm film and 16mm film. After the Portapak's introduction and its subsequent update every few years, many artists began exploring this new technology.

The development of high-speed electronic components and circuits, the cathode ray tube, the video camera, and inexpensive video tape recorders enabled the development of video art. The development of small but powerful computers allowed systems to be developed which can give the video artist a new dimension of control over the video image:

Contemporary video art can be just about anything: abstract, literary, sculptural, painterly. It can be indistinguishable from experimental film, costume drama, hand animation, documentary, and everything else on YouTube. (Hartley, 2011)

In art galleries and museums, the diversity of the medium is evident in the large number of different screening apparatuses, which is usually determined by a gallery's relative resources. There are multiple ways to install a work of video art:

There are handheld DVD players, clunky TV sets with thick frames around the screens, tiny naked monitors mounted on the walls and sprouting wires, and the glowing eye of a projector focused on a screen in the middle of the room . . . flat screens are the preferred but by no means only display devices. There's a giant projection in a pitch black room, movie-style; a screen dangling in midair over a balcony; wall projections; and a large, complex built structure that acts as a wooden proscenium for three screens with a roped-off area of visible 'backstage'. (Graves, 2008)

In contrast to TV or motion pictures, which have traditionally relied on reaching mass audiences via mass media, video art utilised screens, monitors and projectors at unique happenings, demonstrating conceptual works and unique footage in special exhibition spaces. Some critics say (Isaev, 2002) that by the end of the 1990s video art had reached a kind of overproduction crisis with video art works getting too much exposure in international art fairs, converting them into “a series of movie theatres or an amusement park” (Isaev, 2002).

The State of Video Art

Despite a relatively simple definition and a rather understandable phenomenological status, video art is still often perceived as something eccentric and exotic – interesting, but not always

accessible and rather unusual. The general public is not used to appreciating non-static art-works – screens with constantly moving images. Being a part of the exposition and the sense of interactivity that video art usually evokes are still new to many spectators. For an unprepared audience, the language of museum video art is often too sophisticated and far from easily understandable (this notion is probably applicable to most contemporary conceptual art; however, until recently video art did not exist in any other form besides conceptual). An average spectator who is used to “consume” art as a simple pleasing and easy on the eye experience finds conceptual video art difficult to comprehend. Conceptual video art is widely regarded as a “complicated” art form that requires much contextual understanding and a certain amount of effort on behalf of the viewer, to find a meaning while non-conceptual (or popular) video art is rarely to be found, it did not seem to exist in a popular or mass form until recently.

I believe that there were two main limitations that slowed down the development and popularization of video art as a form of art: The first one is content related – although these art works definitely have their dedicated following and their connoisseurs go to museums and galleries to engage in some kind of an aesthetic experience, for mass audiences conceptual video art remained beyond comprehension (Manasseh 2009).

The second limitation is related to the problem of presentation which was traditionally limited to museum and gallery spaces. It is an art form that could not be displayed elsewhere and usually was purchased exclusively by museums and collectors. This kind of niche demand created a certain circularity – because only “high-brow” customers were in the market for video art objects, video artists responded by creating “high-brow” work. There was basically very little if any market for video art works outside professional institutions, artists oriented exclusively to target museums and galleries.

Online video art is extremely scarce, which is surprising given that this is especially a time-based media which is difficult to consume within the gallery, where time is limited. Arguably, the internet is the ultimate distribution model for this kind of audiovisual content, be it reality television or high art. Currently, many regular television programming can be found via on-demand services, but very little video art can be accessed in such a way. Mahoney (2001) suggests that there are various reasons why this is the case, and they are, namely, the dealers, the curators and the artists – in that order.

In the same way that the record industry is not keen to release its artists' work for free online, so the commercial art-world is reluctant to let its artists stream their video art online. Back in 1998, commercial galleries were cautious about allowing any reproductions of their artists' material in a digital format, but in general their fears have now subsided and thus for instance, almost all paintings and sculptures in the Tate Collection are now illustrated online as well. This was before broadband was widely available, and for several years accessibility commitments meant that even the audio and video pieces in the collection continued to be represented with a still digital image. Now, more households have broadband than narrowband internet services and it is increasingly viable to stream not just video clips, but entire films online. However, art dealers are still rather reluctant to release video art works online. Because the artwork is easily reproducible without any loss of quality or originality (which makes any digital and media art very different from other art forms), there are obvious concerns about copyright and the survival of the very business model on which galleries rely. While contemporary art museums may actually be willing to upload video artworks and make them available for free, galleries are in the business of selling these works, hence their reluctance for online exposure.

Museums and museum curators are also partly responsible for the limited availability of quality online video art works. Part of that could be a concern that people will prefer to watch these works from the comfort of their own homes and will no longer visit contemporary art museums, whose collections nowadays to a large extent are video art works. They would also argue (and perhaps rightly so) that streaming a work of video art on a computer screen does not produce the same impression as viewing it in a gallery or museum space, projected on a big screen or a wall, with professional equipment and the setting that is inductive to understanding the content of the work.

Artists are also partly responsible for the lack of available video art online (to be true, some amateur works can be found on YouTube, but institutionalized artists' works can be hardly found online). The motive of the artists are close to the ones of the curators and are to do mostly with copyright issues. Sometimes it is the fear that the piece will be copied for free and thus will not be sellable anymore (artist need to make a living too), sometimes it is a part of the contract of gallery-signed artists that clearly limits online distribution.

The direct outcome of these circumstances is that artists exclusively work with gallery and museum spaces in mind – their work until recently had no chance to be exhibited or viewed elsewhere. But creating with an aim for a museum exhibition obviously creates a whole new set of constraints on both the artist and the artwork. If a spectator cannot see an artwork anywhere else but in a museum or a gallery, if it cannot be “taken home” and “utilised in consumption” (used for some purposes, be it decoration or something else), reaching mass markets becomes close to impossible.

And yet, video art concentrated in museum and gallery spaces remains the provenance of curators and connoisseurs, with an almost total lack of a more approachable mass or democratic version of it. Such situation is unique since all other art forms that I can think of do have both an “elite” and “mass” content. Why the elitism of video art remains an exception is a question begging for an answer.

However, it does not have to be like this. The very idea of an art work that contains some moving images has nothing complicated to it. On the contrary, it is rather entertaining and attractive in its simplicity. The road to mass audiences should not be a difficult one – so, what exactly stops video art from reaching these mass audiences? My first guess is that until recently there existed no media to provide all the necessary conditions for storing and exhibiting video art objects in private spaces with the necessary convenience and sense of purpose. The reason for that is that the components of video art do not represent a single object. The content carrier (video) and the means of presentation (screen) are not parts of inseparable artistic object. Unlike, for instance, a painting, where a canvas is at the same time content, component, and means of presentation.

Although today a video art carrier is usually a video file that can be launched on a wide range of devices from a TV set to a computer monitor or a video-projector, none of these devices would completely meet the requirement for presenting objects of video art. The main reason for this is the users' behavioral patterns of content consumption associated with these devices.

Video art appreciation is different from watching a film or staring at a computer screen. Video art is similar to a painting, but a moving one. If video art is to make a leap from conceptual to decorative, it would need to remove the high involvement requirement and not expect viewers to pay full attention to whatever is happening on the screen. Like a painting in a living room,

it is something that “is there”, but does not require a total focus on it. Video art used for decoration would allow viewers to take their eyes away from the screen and return to it later, without any significant loss. To achieve this, the perception should not be overloaded with content - it should be mostly long frames with rather slow development.

Another requirement for adequate entrance into everyday life is convenience of interaction. Basically, it should be something that does not require a user to take too many actions – like loading a DVD into a player. Adequate presentation of a video art object should become a seamless extension of a user’s interior space experience. Of course, video has long been used for decorative purposes. One could argue that some bars or restaurants have TV screens showing Fashion TV or some other background video of purely decorative nature (a sequence of fashion models without any narrative). However, despite its visual appeal, Fashion TV and similar channels never developed their content for purely decorative purposes.

Apple TV Screen Savers – Decorative Video Art

A qualitative development towards bringing video art to the masses required a mass availability of devices that would create a seamless experience of presenting a video art object on a relatively large high definition screen without requiring any additional actions from the user. This device became available in 2015 when Apple unveiled its fourth-generation Apple TV.

Apple TV connected to a flat TV screen creates what in my opinion is a perfect device that converts a TV screen into a canvas for presenting video art works whenever the screen is not used for other forms of video entertainment. When idle, Apple TV launches its screen saver that consists of a collection of videos taken all over the world (see for example, Figures 1 & 2). A set of stunning slow-motion short videos depict aerial footage of some of the most famous skylines and landscapes around the world. I suggest that a consequence of mass usage of Apple TV and aerial screen savers leads to dramatic changes in interior design and in how people use TV screens for changing the atmosphere in their spaces using video images.

A flat screen, usually located in a central, focal point of a room and a screen saver with a high definition slow motion video becomes a very “moving picture”, available for consumption by mass users – and not just an art connoisseur. What is more, Apple perhaps never considered their screen saver as an object of video art. And yet I believe it is exactly that – video art brought to the masses, transforming a previously elite art form into a popular mass art form which is used as an element of interior decoration by millions of people all over the world.



Figure 1. Apple TV screen saver, 2017.

The mass availability and popularity of Apple TV that by default settings launches aerial video screen saver radically changed millions of interior spaces, creating a totally new atmosphere and developing a new mode of screen usage (Apple does not reveal exact sales figures, but some analysts give estimates of 24 million in 2016 only – see Hughes, 2015). Apple TV screen savers launching on idle devices (or while playing music) become a new form of an interior space element that, as I believe, can be referred to as the first example of decorative mass video art.

Being a form of decorative mass art, it meets some requirements that differentiate it from conceptual museum pieces. First of all, to be suitable for decorative purposes, it had to be technically professional in its execution. Unlike conceptual video artworks exhibited in museums, where content dominated over form and the quality of the image was mostly secondary to the conceptual idea, video art that people are exposed to in their living rooms on a daily basis is subject to different expectations. The image must be professionally filmed and of satisfactory technical quality (focus, exposure, composition, etc.). These tasks were rarely important to video artists of the past, but Apple created their aerial screen saver with an extremely high level of technical sophistication. A beautifully shot landscape becomes an easily understandable artwork itself.

A second important feature of decorative video art instantly applied by Apple in its aerial screen saver is its overall non-conceptuality. Previous works of video art, as noted above, were predominantly works of conceptual art. But the decorative function basically implies that form should dominate content. Video objects displayed at home should first of all create a certain atmosphere and only then, perhaps, transmit an idea.

Third, the video image itself had to meet certain requirements to fulfill its decorative function. These requirements included (1) a lack of narrative (by that I mean the absence of story-telling with a beginning, development, culmination and ending – which would mean that the image will not require a user to focus on it); (2) a lack of sound (decorative object should not be making any sound, video art used for decoration should not interfere with other activities, like

making a phone call or listening to music); (3) chronothopy (the unity of space and time, which is provided by shooting one long frame to create uninterrupted non-discretional video sequence).



Figure 2. Apple TV screen saver, 2017.

It is impossible to consume an Apple TV screen saver in an instant. It cannot be fast-forwarded or rewound. The genre, its own kind of endurance art, shuns immediacy. Fugitives from time, aerial screen savers are both immediate and endless. Their ouroboric nature is perhaps why they tend to evoke disenchantment. One does not watch them intentionally, and yet, like other forms of art, aerial screen savers depict human desires. Visual perfection of landscapes is linked to the escapism which is so central to the medium's imagery – the same way the earliest screen savers with their images played this role of escapism in bureaucracies where corporate disgust or indifference likely reigned, Apple aerial screen saver bring cities' skylines, perfect sunsets and exotic destinations home. There is a difference, however. Computer screen saver would materialize when users are away. Apple TV screen savers usually materialize when users use Apple TV for listening to music or as a silent visual backdrop, thus realizing purely decorative and entertaining purposes of video art.

Conclusion

What Apple TV did then was to give video art a new meaning by converting it into an interior object and giving it a decorative purpose together with an entertaining function. Besides, it made video art attractive to and approachable by a mass audience.

If we assume that this is just the beginning, then video art as a mass art form may start to develop further. There are multiple reasons for that. First, interior design is becoming a mass trend, with more and more home owners paying a lot of attention to creating intentional environmental spaces. The industry focused on home design and interior objects shows stable growth. Second, there is a growing interest in high technology products that can satisfy existing needs in new ways – Apple is a prime example of a company that uses this trend.

Currently Apple does not allow users to use their own videos as screen savers, thus limiting the choice to videos created by Apple. If there were a way to use third party screen savers, would it open a door for a market of video-art screen savers as a mass art form? Are we on the verge of the birth of a new kind of popular art that perhaps could become a multibillion industry surpassed perhaps only by the music recording industry?

That can be possible if screen savers that people run on their Apple TV devices are added by users. Then an industry of producing screen savers for different tastes is likely to flourish, given that for many households a big TV screen is a centerpiece of the living room and what exactly is displayed on it when no-one is watching anything in particular becomes an important issue. A black turned-off TV screen would look almost strange – why is it black, when it could be working to create an atmosphere, exhibit some video art in screen saver mode? And if the choice of screen saver is available to the owner – then why not reveal his/her taste, just like one's music collection does? There is nothing strange about considering such TV Screen savers art especially when today even lowly computer screen savers are considered an art form in their own right.

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