



# Collaborative Disruption: Video vs Object vs Video

Joan Truckenbrod

Professor Emeritus  
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

[jtruckenbrod@saic.edu](mailto:jtruckenbrod@saic.edu)

## Abstract

Video sculpture is disruptive, both to the behavior of an object, and to the linear sequence of the video imagery. Objects have a vital impetus that acts upon the video as it permeates the object. This is an assemblage of unlike material and ephemeral forces combined in an interactive collaboration. Artists like Tony Ourlser, Joan Jonas, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Bill Viola have inspired this artwork. Confronted with an emotionally distressed facial image peering out from under an overturned chair is a highly charged experience for the viewer in a art gallery. Tony Ourlser's installation *Stone Blue* projects this distressing video imagery with a confrontational dialogue, into a large ordinary pillow shaped like a body, disrupting the neutrality and passive character of the white pillow. Krzysztof Wodiczko projects facial imagery on to exterior of the dome on the Centro Cultural de Tijuana, disrupting the role of the building or architecture. Other artists including Ann Hamilton, Susan Collins and Anti VJ in the architectural projection "Desherence" have incorporated video projections to disrupt the flow or narrative in their installations.

## Keywords

Video Sculpture, Physicalizing the Image, Chinese shi, African aale, Memory Work, Vigilant Things, Vibrant Matter

## Introduction

Digital imagery occupies a precarious position between flat surfaces and material objects, between simulated three dimensionality and the physical world. Mostly the image is inseparable from the page or membranes which are not involved in the meaning, emotion or expression of the content of the imagery. In video sculpture images are propelled into objects which are embedded with social, cultural, economic and even political issues. The narrative of the video projection, and the visual tactility of the imagery radically shift the presence and character of the object. Objects take on new meanings with the costuming of video imagery and sound. However objects are actants and play a powerful role in transforming the interpretation

of the video narrative as it is given physical form by the shape of the object. Video projection disrupts the static

being and cultural framework of the object, simultaneously the three dimensionality, materiality and agency of the object disrupts the meaning and experience of the video.

## Power of Objects in Video Sculpture

We imbue personal belongings with meaning and preciousness because of the role they played in our lives. Powerful social, economic and political signifiers are inherent in all types of artifacts. Objects carry "thing power" according to Jane Bennett in her book *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*. She proposes that objects embody a vibrancy of their own. They display a meaning and are active in creating the context of that meaning. Ms Bennett theorizes that materiality is as much a force as an entity and as much energy as matter. There is no fixed stability of materiality as there is a vital impetus embedded in objects. They have an intrinsic vitality with agentic capacity which disrupts the experience or interpretation of the video imagery. Things become actors with a vital impetus. However the theory is that actants never really act alone. The efficacy or agency of the an object always depends on the collaboration, cooperation or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. [1] The power of video sculpture embodies this assemblage.

Consider the Chinese tradition of "shi" in which the idea of congregational agency is an assemblage that owes its agentic capabilities to the vitality of materials that constitute it. The potential of this assemblage originates not in human initiatives but instead results from the very disposition of things. "Shi" is defined as the style, energy, propensity, trajectory or élan inherent in a specific object. According to this philosophy, this originates in the vitality of materials that constitute the group of objects or constellation.

In indigenous cultures objects embody the power of sacred, spiritual or ancestral rituals. Ritual objects are believed to cause actions as they possess an agency. For example the Power Figure in some African indigenous tribes are believed to heal people, or protect people when activated by a Shaman in a ritual ceremony. These and other hand carved objects are highly charged as they can connect people to other dimension of existence such as the spiritual or ancestral realm. In the Yoruba culture, constructions of ordinary objects become “vigilant things” embedded with power for protecting places, people or objects. Shards of pottery, discarded shoes, seed pods and sticks are combined into “ase-impregnated sculptural constructs”. Ase has the “power to make things happen”, transforming spirit and matter alike. These protective assemblages called “aale”, emit strong emotional resonances. A black plastic bag filled with an implied potent substance is tied and hung from a stick over a pile of recently cut green branches, signifies ownership. Anyone who steals the protected things is warned by these aale and will suffer a great calamity. They are believed to have spiritual powers that will punish anyone taking the protected items, or invading the protected spaces. [2]

Another example of the agency of objects is discussed by Norwegian architect, Sverre Fehn in his approach to designing a museum that displays objects. His perspective is that the context of the museum exhibition injects a new personality into an object, including its existence over time rather than being static. He says that in a museum the object may demand a new place, and in fact the object will signal that a new placement is necessary. Its placement and corresponding journey identify how it can be the embodiment of an object's essence. The object is strong enough on its own to signal “come live inside of me” to the viewer. When the dialogue between the architect and the object evolves into an expression, the object and the way it is exhibited will demand a dialogue with the viewer. [3]

Designing the museum structure in dialogue with the objects to be exhibited, illustrates the power the object brings to the interaction in this case, of environment and object. This has a unique connection to creating video sculptures that engage time-based video imagery and sound, with an assumed static object. The object plays an active role in creating the gestalt of the artwork.

### **Power of Video Narrative**

My installations of video sculpture were inspired by envisioning ritual and ceremony in indigenous cultures. Sacred symbols are painted on the nude body, concealed by darkness, and then revealed by undulating firelight as the person danced around a fire in the center of the ceremony.

The symbols taking the form of the body, are visible in the flickering firelight as the person twists and turns in performance around the fire. With sound, imagery, motion and rich aromas, this creates a visceral experience.

In the video installation titled *Lightening in My Blood*, two videos are projected into a hand-made fiber chrysalis symbolizing a transformative space. The two different video sequences were projected from opposite sides of the translucent organza chrysalis, visually mixing within the form. Depending on the character of the imagery, sometimes one video would become prominent, followed by the other. The two videos had different lengths so they did not repeat their visual combinations. The intent was to create a transforming space that embodied the stages of life, and the rites of passage into the experience of later life. One video was a slow walk through a nursing home captured from the position of a wheelchair. The opposing video projected imagery of small baby fish obsessively jumping at a metal grill in a fish hatchery. Neither video is visible in its entirety, yet images of each meshed together within the large seven foot high chrysalis, suspended from the gallery ceiling. Both ends of life participate in this dissonant assemblage, the chrysalis acting to bring them together. Documentation of this installation is at: <https://vimeo.com/128735895>

The suspended cocoon is the actant, the operator creating the assemblage for the video sculpture. The collaboration, collision, or confrontation of video imagery projected into an object disrupts the visual narrative of the video simultaneously disrupting the implied metaphor represented by the object. Artifacts carry cultural, scientific, economic and political meanings. With their materials and form, together with individual, personal experiences, like stories, histories and memories, they are highly charged. Pair this with ideas, issues and events portrayed in video, and emotions are sparked. The power of video sequences is enhanced when it intervenes in the agency of an object.

### **Disruption**

The video sculpture *Spirit Site* bears the resonance embodied in an empty white model house suspended on a platform from the gallery ceiling with clothes line. Video of a salmon run is projected into the open side of this house, filling the rooms with images of salmon swimming upstream against the current and jumping up waterfalls. The continuity portrayed by the life cycle of the salmon is mapped onto the lives of people who lived in this house as the video imagery also goes through the cutout door and windows of the house, onto the back wall of the gallery where it washes over photos of elderly people behind small window frames on the wall. The video imagery and sound

awaken the memories residing in the house and in the lives of the people included in this installation. The video projection of the salmon run disrupts the architectonic character of the house, transforming it into the bed of a rushing stream. The emptiness of the white house is filled with a salmon run. Simultaneously, the reference of this home and the photographs in window frames separated from the house, disrupt the cyclical flow with the implied cycle of life in the video. Documentation of this installation is at: <https://vimeo.com/128730064>

## Collaboration

Traces of memories are embedded in and evoked by this model house activated by the salmon run. Objects like this have the power to trigger remembrances of events and people. Remnants or traces of social practice are left behind in objects, similar to those uncovered in archeological research. Artifacts are excavated, reconstructed from pieces and studied in order to provide insights and understanding of social and cultural practices of extinct civilizations. Material practices of these cultures leave deposits which are traces of various material practices. The book *Memory Work: Archeologies of Material Practice* by Mills and Walker discusses the memories possessed by objects, and the premise that materiality is a portal to understanding the connections between people through time, and diverse geographical locations. [4] Another video installations titled *Asymmetric Bodies* included a seven foot irregular shaped figure created with stiff pellon fiber. Three video projections engulfed this figure creating a mysterious *journey* moving around the figure. This trajectory was a passage through a mystical forest experiencing dark areas and lighter areas with a ominous figure appearing along the way. The video was created using a small wireless color video camera inside of the front car on an HO toy train which ran around a figure eight track on a platform in the forest. The video imagery was communicated wireless to the computer for recording and editing. The three video projections were synchronized to create the synthesis of the video journey and the fiber figure. The sound included the wind through the trees with periodic sound of the train moving on the track. [5]

Video sculpture is disruptive, both to the behavior of the object, and to the linear sequence of the video imagery. Each intervenes in the other. These installations create an assemblage of dissonant elements. An ephemeral component infuses resonance and meaning into a physical artifact with its own agenda and agency. Both powerful on their own, together create a “interactive interference” pattern of fluctuating materiality and transient forces.

## References

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## Author's Biography

Professor Truckenbrod began working with mainframe computers in 1975 creating a series of computer drawings expressing invisible phenomena in the natural world. Using Fortran Programming Language and a Calcomp Pen Plotter, she explored the creative potential for digital artistic practice. In addition to writing and developing code, she used computers to create computer imaging, digital painting and to develop interactive installations. This artwork has been exhibited internationally. In 1988 she published a book titled *Creative Computer Imaging*. She was on the faculty in the Art and Technology Program at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago for 25 years. Currently she is creating *video sculptures*, juxtaposing video and sound with objects. This work is documented in a book published in 2012 titled *The Paradoxical Object: Video Film Sculpture* that includes installations of artists who have inspired her work.

[www.joantruckenbrod.com](http://www.joantruckenbrod.com)