

Some of my best friends are video artists

Far be it from me to tell you what is good or bad, what to look at or what not to but... having spent an ungodly amount of time staring at the screen, I have come up with a treatise of sorts on how to look at video art.

I suppose a definition or two might help with the communication part of this exercise.

Video art is any moving image on a screen in an art gallery (sound is an optional extra). It is a perfect definition because 'video art' is completely redundant term. Nobody uses video any more if they can help it. DVDs and computers do it all now. And this redundancy means that it can apply to all moving images in an art gallery without worrying about how it gets there.

'Video art' does not apply to video projections with clear and accurate starting times and adequate seating. This is a film, whether it is on video, DVD or computer it is still a film.

Here are a few basics:

Do walk past video art

It is good to walk past a piece of video art, like you would a sculpture or painting or any other static display. If it doesn't move you to stop, don't stop. It is not inherently worth more of your time just because it moves.

I think most of the problems surrounding people's professed views on 'video art' stem from a basic misunderstanding here. There is a lot of guilt fueled by people who think they should have stopped and watched all the footage before making a judgment. This is impossible for two reasons:

Firstly, if you don't like something on first impression there is no way you are not going to sit through it for 1 1/2 hrs with no seat just so you can say you really don't like it.

Secondly, sometimes it is actually impossible to see a whole piece of video art; i.e. 'They shoot horses don't they?' by Phil Collins (not the 80s pop genius behind Easy Lover, another Phil Collins), a 7hr long video installation of a disco dance marathon, which is often switched on before the gallery is opened and off only after everyone is kicked out.

The guilt of feeling you should have sat through a piece of video art is to blame for most professed loving or hating of 'video art'. Note the parenthesis these are important.

Hating: as the frustration builds at the backlog of missed possible artistic experience builds, 'video art' cops the intellectual side swipe: "I never liked video art anyway." Which gives the viewer the intellectual peace of mind they need to get through the gallery traumas, past present and future. Don't worry, soon I will show you another way to sleep at night.

Loving: as the frustration builds at the backlog of missed possible artistic experience the viewer notices that all their intellectually inferior friends can't cope. They then realise that they can gain an upper hand in the art discussion cockfights: 'I just love video art. I can just spend HOURS standing in a gallery staring at it.' This inevitably leads to the horrible conversations where two professed 'video art' lovers try to out torment each other. 'Exhibit A: I sat through Andy Warhol's Empire (8 hours) the other night. It was a visual extravaganza. Exhibit B: Well I sat through Douglas Gordon's 24-hour Psycho the other day and the trauma of no sleep and mind numbing slowness was so aesthetic.'

It is very important not to come back for the start of the video

(Disclaimer: this does not apply to projections with clear and accurate starting times and adequate seating, these are films.)

I have three points to my reasoning:

Firstly, if a video has a start it is not your job to stand for 3 1/2 hrs waiting for the start and then feel obliged to watch the full 3 3/4 hour piece through. Again, it is not inherently worth more of your time just because it moves.

Secondly, if a video has a start and it is not listed with clear and accurate starting times and adequate seating then the artist is obviously willing to make their audience suffer. I know this sounds harsh but I have seen exhibitions with a total of over 18 hours of video, all to be seen by standing on a hard floor. This is a hugely presumptuous act by artists and curators and it has a very detrimental impact on the audience's ability to enjoy or even cope with the work they are presented with. It is your prerogative if you want to stay and entertain this sadistic fantasy but it is by no means an obligation.

Thirdly, the tradition of visual art has been one of superficiality, showmanship and instant gratification. Visual art is supposed to instantly grab your attention. Its job in an art gallery is for it to arrest you - not for you to piss about waiting for it to get around to you. You are more likely to be hit by a car in the gallery than to see a looped video from the first frame by accident. Here is a quick proof:

A piece of video art around a of 3m11s (191s)
At 24 frames per second
That makes 4584 frames (24 x 191)
Giving you a 1 in 4584 (or 0.02%) chance of catching the first frame.

If you have walked past a work of video art, it is OK to comment on it.

You do not have to qualify how long you stood in front of a sculpture to say you hate it. Why would it be any different with video art? The context of an art gallery is not based on the community service hourly rate.

It is OK to sit through a piece of video art, and even wait around for the start.

I just felt I had to say that, because sometimes it is fun and somehow rewarding to do so. This however is not in any way better than the briefest impressions by someone else. Time spent does not make you in any way aesthetically, intellectually or morally superior to your fellow gallery visitors.

Now go out and enjoy video art and sleep well.