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Vampire Video: Time in the Art of Aïda Ruilova

Barry Schwabsky

For many aficionados of video art, the work of Aïda Ruilova might require a serious revision of expectations. When it first emerged by way of the performance art of the 1960s and 70s, video was most typically what one veteran of those days has described as “a pure document of the performance, without cutting or editing” meant to “present the real time of the performance.”¹ It’s true that, for some artists at the time, video did become an active element in the performative work, creating a sort of feedback loop within a piece by becoming a medium for the performer’s own self-perception. Nevertheless certain conventions remained constant: a static camera (or one whose movements were highly circumscribed); an avoidance of “cinematic” editing in favor of what might be called a submission to the readymade character of the material (so, for instance, the length of a work might be dictated by the length of a reel of tape—say, sixty minutes); and perhaps most importantly of all, a sense of temporality that was quite distinct from dramatic or cinematic time. This new form of temporality had been anticipated in such works as the films of Andy Warhol: a neutral, extended, thin, and uninflected time—a dead time, really—that might well be experienced by viewers as boring, even excruciating.

By the ‘90s, of course, all of this was ancient history. Video art was becoming a different kind of spectacle. Large-scale projections in darkened gallery spaces were now taking on some of the characteristics of both cinema on the one hand and mural painting on the other. In contrast to the practices typical of the early days of the medium, video showed itself as self-evidently a fictive artifice, often with high production values and elaborate editing; the link to live performance had mostly been severed. And yet one thing had pretty much remained constant: video was what was often referred to as a “time-based medium” – an expression that functions as a fairly transparent euphemism for what might be better expressed by the phrase “time-consuming medium.” Video time was rarely speeded up but very often slowed down, sometimes to the point of approaching stillness, as in so many of the remarkable works of Gary Hill (for instance, *Hand Heard*, 1995–6). Bill Viola, too, trades in extreme slowness, in his case all too often allied with a New Age-y religious grandiosity. In a work like Viola’s *The Greeting*, 1995 (based on a painting by the Italian Mannerist Jacopo da Pontormo), the impeded temporality of video is no longer distressing or uncomfortable, but rather enriched with the drama of faith – uplifting, if your taste runs that way.

Given a context in which Viola had arguably become the most honored practitioner of video art, stumbling on Ruilova’s work for the first time, as I did in late 2000, when four works she had made over the preceding year or so were shown at the New York alternative space White Columns, might be best compared to an experience like hearing a band like The Ramones or Wire for the first time after years of exposure to prog rock ensembles like Yes and PFM. The



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short, sharp shock has rarely been quite that short, sharp, or shocking. The harsh, abrasive quality of early video had suddenly returned, but with different means and for different reasons. And above all, Ruilova was working with a conception of time that was quite alien to most previous video art. Here is how I described one of the four pieces at the time (first impressions, though they may lack a certain nuance, often remain revealing): “*Oh No* (1999–2000) is built up around shots of a young woman’s face as she variously grunts, moans, shrieks, or murmurs the phrase that gives the work its title, intercut with view of (presumably her own) bare legs and feet as she walks on the necks and bodies of a series of electric guitars lying on the floor and with close-ups of the instruments themselves – all accompanied by the agonized sounds of scrunching guitar strings. Through repetition the sense of angst or trepidation reveals an underlying longing for destruction.”² Keep in mind that this all happens in less than forty-five seconds. By my count, the piece has been constructed from about thirty-five shots – I was about to write, “different shots,” but that’s obviously not right since the repetitive structure of the piece means that many of the shots recur more than once. But in any case, the upshot is that the average length of each shot in *Oh No* is little more than a single second.

Structurally, then, there is a great deal going on in the piece – and yet it also pervaded by a sense of blankness and emptiness not unlike that familiar from early video classics by the likes of Bruce Nauman or Vito Acconci. The repetitiveness of the work may be reminiscent of the video incunabula, but since all this takes place in, perhaps, one fiftieth or one hundredth of the amount of time one might expect such works to devote to their deadpan doings, there is an entirely different sense of temporal scale in operation. *Oh No* – like the other works Ruilova showed with it, *Beat & Perv*, 1999, *You’re Pretty*, 1999–2000, and *Hey*, 1999–2000 – operates on a microcosmic scale. Somehow, in such a work, time is at once compressed and stretched out. In part, this has something to do with the cinematic structure of the work – with its basis in montage. The repetition in an early video work will typically inhere in the gestures of the performer: Someone does something over and over again. With Ruilova’s works, by contrast, it inheres in the representation of the action, in its image: not that the gesture is repeated but that the shot showing the gesture is repeated. In a work by Nauman or Acconci, the performer may seem to be a prisoner of his own obsession or neurosis, but in a work by Ruilova, the performer appears instead as a prisoner of time itself and of the representational medium in which he or she has been trapped. This repetition seems to open up the possibility of an endlessly redundant duration, for while the repeatability of any performer’s gesture is limited by some approximately knowable limit to his or her physical capacity, and must always end at some point of exhaustion or, at the most extreme limit, at death—and in principle, this sense of limit is something shared by any given viewer—the capacity of a piece of video imagery to be reproduced and re-presented without any noticeable physical deterioration outstrips that of any viewer to watch it. The fact that Ruilova’s works are presented as loops underlines this: not only is repetition an internal structural feature of the pieces, but it is also part of the condition of their viewing, since their brevity makes it as easy as their content makes it compelling to do so.

But have I neglected to mention that there is something funny about all this? In a work like *Oh No*, the famous and all-important distinction between funny/strange and funny/ha ha no longer seems quite as possible to maintain as it usually does. The whole thing creates a



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sensation that is unpleasant and irritating in a non-specific way. And that lack of specificity, the fact that there is no particular meaning that can be in any obvious way assigned to this unpleasantness and irritation, leaves the viewer with his or her thoughts wrapped around an emptiness. There is a sort of void where the object of one's reactions ought to be. The result is what might be thought of as an internal and unexpressed equivalent of nervous laughter – nervous laughter with the laughter left out, so to speak. All the more so in that the cries and gestures in Ruilova's early works, in counterpoint to the intense but distancing formal structure that's been imposed on them, are typically overstated, melodramatic—in a word, hokey. This contradiction between structure and content creates the condition for humor.

In some of Ruilova's subsequent work, she seemed bent on taking the minimalism of *Oh No* to an extreme. Possibly this is most evident in *Tuning*, a work from 2000 that was not included in the White Columns show. *Tuning* consists of a single static shot: To the accompaniment of some strumming on an untuned electric guitar, a completely blurred image is gradually brought into greater focus, only to be cut off just before attaining sufficient sharpness for the viewer to be able to scrutinize the scene of a young woman and an older man sitting on a couch, holding hands but at a distance, with a large poster hanging on the wall behind them. Who is this couple? What is the poster that takes such a prominent place in this image – what might it signify about the people over whom it looms, or about their relationship or lack thereof? The image comes into focus quickly by any ordinary measure of time, a matter of just sixteen seconds; and yet those seconds seem agonizingly slow to the inquisitive gaze, avid as always for knowledge of its objects—again, Ruilova manages both to compress and to expand time simultaneously. As the image disappears before the gaze's hunger can begin to be satisfied, one is left with a sort of pang, momentarily assuaged, to be sure, by the blur that replaces the almost-legible image as the loop starts again. This blur is soothing precisely because it promises nothing in the way of more detailed information, yet of course it inexorably begins to seduce the eye into wanting to see more as it once again begins its Sisyphean shift toward clarity.

An untitled work dated 2002 may likewise have been made from a single piece of footage, but at the same time it partakes of the cut-and-paste montage aesthetic of *Oh No*. In this piece we see a movie camera on a long boom that protrudes into the visual field from the right. The background is a beach scene and on the end of the boom, near the camera, we can make out (despite her very small scale within the frame of the image) a prone woman facing away from us, her long dark hair hanging down away from the camera. With jerky movements, the boom moves toward and away from the position of the viewer, each movement accompanied by a harsh, hoarse breathing sound. As one looks the thought occurs that all these bits of movement have probably been cut from different portions of a single shot of smooth motion, and that this motion only occurred in a single direction—either the movements away from the viewer are merely the movements toward the viewer shown in reverse, or vice versa. But it does not seem possible to verify this conjecture simply by carefully observing the work itself; indeed the more often you watch the loop recapitulate itself, the more you find yourself in a sort of hypnotic state in which any clear-minded and precise judgement seems unattainable. Combined with the panting in-and-out breathing sounds, the boom and camera's fitful back and forth movements take on a distinctly masturbatory overtone – but this is a frustrated



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masturbation, without climax, without release. At the end of the loop, the crane and camera withdraw off-screen, defeated, perhaps, rather than satisfied.

Some of Ruilova's more recent works, such as *Let's Go*, *Uh Oh*, and *Um*, all 2004 (and all about 20 seconds long), seem to synthesize the reductionism of *Tuning* and *Untitled* with the more obstreperous, thrashy, and clattery effects of her previous work. Here the number of repeatable elements has been reduced to just a few, rather than simply to one or to different segments of a single continuous source; and these are used with a kind of mechanical, clockwork regularity that sacrifices the wildness of the pieces from 1999–2000 on the altar of a more broadly comical effect. Although the characters' words express hesitation, startled surprise, or impatience, they now seem more self-contained, almost deadpan. And yet another work of the same year, the two-channel projection *Countdowns*—a second version of this piece, reduced to a single channel, was screened in New York's Times Square from late 2005 to early 2006—returns to Ruilova's previously more frenetic rhythms. *Countdown* works its way through the numbers from nine to one by using images of what would appear to randomly noticed instances of numbers in one's daily environment—a birthday candle, a carving in a tree trunk—along with some that seem more pre-planned. Once again, however, the expectation of completion is frustrated: the sequence never reaches zero, never indicates lift-off; instead the loop recommences with nine.

Whether any of these works will turn out to have been pointing toward Ruilova's next work, currently in progress, remains to be seen. What's clear is that she means it to be her longest work yet—an epic, by her standards, of ten to fifteen minutes. This film centers around a figure who has fascinated Ruilova for a long time, the French film director Jean Rollin. It is Rollin, in fact, whom we so fleetingly glimpse on the couch in *Tuning*, and the woman whose hand he holds is Ruilova herself. The setting of that work was Rollin's Paris apartment, the poster behind them for one of his films. This same apartment is the setting for the current work-in-progress, though this time the artist herself does not appear in person. Rollin is the director of a series of films, made between the late 1960s and the 1990s, of which some of the typical titles are *Rape of the Vampire*, *Requiem for a Vampire*, *The Living Dead Girl*, and so on: a kinky, stylized blend of horror and erotica made on low budgets and stronger on atmosphere than narrative coherence. Ruilova has said of Rollin, "What's interesting about him is the idea of a director doing the same film over and over again for thirty years."³ The connection with Ruilova's own compulsion to repeat is clear enough, but from the rough footage I've seen, the fascination she feels for Rollin is permeated with ambivalence: In her take on Rollin's typical vampire theme, the young woman who seems to function as the artist's onscreen surrogate appears to be the vampire rather than the victim. Or is it that the vampiric obsession is itself a form of torment, of victimhood?

The questions don't end there. Is Ruilova's meditation on Rollin primarily concerned with sexual difference? Or with the difference of generations, even something along the lines of what Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence? I suspect that neither of these is really the most urgent concern, although neither is irrelevant. I won't know until I experience Ruilova's final edit, but given the artist's work up until now, I expect the real theme will turn out to have more to do with the difference between the lively and dramatic temporality typical of cinema and the dead time of video. The medium itself may be the vampire.



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¹ "Interview with Marina Abramović," in Klaus Beisenbach, *Video Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and New Art Trust* (exh. cat.), New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2002, p.14.

² Barry Schwabsky, "Aida Ruilova at White Columns," *Artforum* XXXIX 4 (December 2000), p.148

³ Karen Rosenberg, "The Whitney Biennial: Favorites," *New York* (1 March 2004), online at <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/arts/articles/04/whitney/7.htm>.