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Art critic and curator **Carles Guerra** in conversation with collectors **Emilio Pi** and **Helena Fernandino**, in the context of the exhibition **'VÍDEO RÉGIMEN. Coleccionistas en la era audiovisual'**

Carles Guerra: We are here to discuss issues around video art and the paradoxes related to the collecting of such a particular medium. For this purpose we have invited Emilio Pi and Helena Fernandino. They are both collectors and their collection holds almost 1000 pieces, which span the entire history of the medium from the late Sixties up until today (some of those works can be watched downstairs, among which are videos by Jenny Holzer, Marcel Odenbach, Rosemarie Trockel, Jürgen Klauke, Bruce Nauman). When we exhibited VÍDEO RÉGIMEN in Madrid, with a much larger selection of works from their collection, we included many pieces that I would like to refer to as the 'archival part'.

Video collection raises many issues, - some of them not easy to tackle. For this reason, I thought it could be interesting to spend a few minutes discussing these contradictions. Let's begin by addressing the idea that the accumulation of video does not necessarily create a collection, but it might as well create an archive... Which should then be the most suitable category to define the accumulation of video works? It would be interesting to discuss how we could name this heritage assets that you have been accumulating for years and that, in many cases, is much more similar to an archive than a traditional collection. Even some of your most recent acquisitions are not actually intended in traditional terms as objects, but are preserved in a 'cloud' and, eventually, you can download them by getting a limited permission/right to watch the piece. For this reason, Emilio and Helena are very good representatives of this particular form of collecting, which traverses different forms of 'objectuality' and property. Emilio would you like to start?

Emilio Pi: You have explained it really well! We should underline how the evolution of our collection has followed a path in reverse: we have started by collecting and acquiring very contemporary videoart pieces but actually, despite the virtual quality of these type of works, we found that they were pulling us back in history. Indeed, to better understand what we were buying and looking at, we had to take a few steps back and view much older works that perfectly complemented the language and history of the works by contemporary artists, to the extent that, eventually, we started by collecting contemporary pieces and we are now completing the collection with classical ones.

Helena Fernandino: The most important thing has been said: to track down the history of video starting from the late Sixties was our way to give the basis to the collection. We do own contemporary videos but, as Emilio said, by getting the "prehistoric" videos from the Sixties, we could better understand the contemporary reasoning and give an actual meaning to the collection. I don't really agree when people talk about historical and archival collections, though. It is our aim to try and find the meaning of the collection, but it's not at all question of archiving...

Carles Guerra: Well, it is true that video collection allowed for very personal ways of accumulation. For example, collector Teresa Sapei, who is an architect, envisions her collection as a sum of big video installations, that if she ever managed to put together, would look like the biggest museum one can imagine. But then, when you visit her

collection, you can watch all the works on a monitor or have them compressed on a hard drive. So this is one of the peculiarities of video: it can be both extremely compressed or fully blown, presented, enlarged, projected into spaces as to recreate the condition of a traditional museum or of a gallery. How do you then deal with your collection, giving the fact that you are among the few collectors who have actually accumulated a large number of works?

Helena Fernandino: We have fourteen screens at home, and it seems a TV store when there is no video running. But then, when people come visit, we switch them on, and everytime is like curating our very own exhibition.

Carles Guerra: So you have been also curating exhibitions within the space of your home!

Helena Fernandino: Yes, we have! And, by doing so, we have learned the job little by little. We own video installations too, but it is true that we have bought installations that we never got to see again later, as they travelled to so many different places...Indeed, one aim for us is to share our collection: people and institutions ask us to loan them our pieces for exhibition purposes.

Emilio Pi: Actually, when looking at our collection we realise that, maybe, we do not have too many installations. And there are two reasons for this: the first one is that we wanted works we could enjoy and not deposit in a warehouse, without the possibility to view them again. The second one is that we think this kind of large pieces belong to institutions. In other words, ours is a personal collection, domestic, put together by the two of us, and it doesn't aim to take the place of much more ambitious and large scale collections. Virtually, we can enjoy the 80% of our collection at home.

Carles Guerra: Actually, many of the works you own are one-channel videos, as if you were *cinephiles* who suddenly discovered video as a subsidiary production to cinema. It seems that the main thing that attracted you was the fact that video, as a medium, had gone through complex changes in a short time span – from the end of the 60s until the advent of the Cloud. It seems like your collection might be also compared to a library: the format of a video indeed allows for the possibility to concentrate the collection in limited spaces. And this is a condition that recurs in the majority of the private collections devoted to the medium: most people collect video because they can have it at home, without spending a lot of money in storage, restoration, preservation and maintenance. It really demands much more low-key logistic, when compared to others.

Helena Fernandino: We could talk of anthropological video collections, then! However, I don't really know how to understand the notions of 'archive' and 'library'...of all that I keep the sense of research. Because when I think of an archive or a library I think of something dead. Anyway, I think that research is definitely an important factor to our collection.

Emilio Pi: I think one of the characteristics of video has to do with exhibition rights. Collections are based on videos with public exhibition rights – either installation or single and multi-channel works. But another way is to keep the pieces in archival formats, a very common way in the US and Canada or the UK, pieces that hold a much more educational meaning, that are conceived to be exhibited at school, and that function as means to better understand the collection. Therefore, we do not only collect pieces that

we have bought as original editions in a gallery - as for the traditional way of collecting -, but we are also convinced that to complete a collection we need these kind of 'educational' works. Then I agree with you, when you say that we own 'archival pieces'.

Carles Guerra: Yet, many times the videos you collect are associated to an author, to the specific production of an individual (the artist), and it is something that gives them uniqueness, originality. Have you ever felt tempted to buy a piece not specifically related to an author – and I think for example of Bill Viola: he started his career not as an independent artist but as part of the Guerilla Television, where video was intended as a communitarian instrument – so to go about the intention of documenting and re-constructing all of the modalities of video as a medium?

Emilio Pi: You have explained it very well. Video started by having a social vocation, by being transmitted on television and it was intended as a specific form of communication, to a point which...it is happening the same now, as a wake-up call, yet through the Internet. It will achieve a dimension that we cannot even imagine. Institutions or private collectors will have to be particularly attentive to this matter – given the volatility of these pieces -, and make sure that what is stored in the cloud doesn't get lost.

Carles Guerra: Here comes a tricky question: how do you feel when you actually purchase an important work and you see that the exact same work can circulate through internet and be accessible to a great majority of people, in an open access form? Does it create a paradox, a contradiction in your understanding of video as a collectible?

Helena Fernandino: I don't think so, it doesn't really matter to us... One aim for us it to share the collection. So if other people, or the artist himself, share the video on bigger circuits, we have no problem with it.

Carles Guerra: But then that money you have spent...

Helena Fernandino: Yes, and there is also the question of property...

Carles Guerra: What I wanted to ask was how do you actually conceptualize that investment? Do you feel like you are acquiring the property of the video, that you are contributing to the costs of production? Again, how do you conceptualize the money spent in the acquisition of a work?

Helena Fernandino: At the beginning this wasn't really an issue: we were collecting for pleasure. Now we have started to focus on another aspects, too. Our collection is big, - though there are bigger ones -, yet people think that collecting only implies buying, watching and showing pieces! For me, collecting has many other aspects: the conception of the catalogue, the conservation...and the question of property is only important to certain extents. We have never thought of art as an investment. At the moment we are thinking about this collection as the basis for another project.

Carles Guerra: Considering the amount of works you have accumulated, how are you planning on transmitting this heritage? How can you bequeath these sorts of properties, assets? What is it to be transmitted once you have acquired a piece?

Helena Fernandino: Well, we are thinking about it but, as I told you, we think that our collection should constitute the engine to start another project.

Carles Guerra: Emilio, how would you 'editorialize' your collection? What was the driving idea behind your collection? When we interviewed Estefanía Meana, - a second generation collector - , she actually stressed the idea that she likes to collect works that express some kind of special concerns, and that she can value as having a personal, or political interest – namely the work of William Doherty...Then what is the 'editorial concept' behind your collection?

Emilio Pi: Actually, there is no precise driving concept. After looking at the collection, you can only establish an editorial line by exclusion: for instance, we don't have aesthetically beautiful videos; we have a very few videos containing dialogues (is not that we look for video that have no dialogues, but it something that happens). We are, indeed, much more interested in works that have to do with documentation and performance, pieces that hold a social meaning, pieces that use images in a provoking and suggestive way, - something that with other formats, such as painting and sculpture, is difficult to express. The artist really gets to exhibit, explain and emotion through Moving Image.

Carles Guerra: Yours is a collection where you can find works that are no longer in fashion. If you look downstairs there is a row of five videos (by Odenback, Holzer, Klauke, Trockel, Nauman), which have all been produced in the late 70s / early 80s and that are narrative, experimental and go against the grain of the contemporary pictorial turn, - instead so much predominant in contemporary video production. In some ways video has indeed gone through the same process that photography went through in the 90's, when it aimed to look like painting and to acquire its same value. So we can say that video is suffering from a similar process, trying to echo the value of a real painting, that once represented the main asset in the art market. But your collection runs against this idea. Your videos are really unconventional.

Helena Fernandino: The videos you have chosen for the exhibition are related with what you are saying, but we also have different works. What is curious about videos is that we look at them as if they were films. It is a curious evolution, but we come from a generation used to *amateur* films - I remember seeing a 5-hour long film by Akira Kurosawa with my dad, when I was 15, and thinking that it seemed prehistoric and curious. Anyways, we have a lot of videos that evokes essay films.

Carles Guerra: That is a nice idea! You cannot buy a feature length film, but you can purchase a bit of it!

Q&A

1- How many works of art do you have in your collection?

H.F.: I always stress how the number of works in a collection is not important. We are not interested in numbers but in the value of each and every piece. Anyway, taking into account archival pieces, original pieces, installations and short editions we have more or less 1000 works.

2- When you look at videos that you might want to purchase, how has the process changed compared to what it was when you first started?

H.F.: We have continued with the research. At the beginning we only bought pieces we liked, and now we are trying to build up a pedagogical area in our collection.

3- I don't think you made the difference between a 'collection', an 'archive' and a 'library' very clear. Does it have to do with the artistic concept, with the price of the works..?

H.F.: For example, think of the pictures and paintings you have here: maybe you don't have enough space to exhibit them all, but it doesn't mean that if you need to store part of the collection it automatically constitutes an archive!

C.G.: I think, in this case, the 'archive' refers to the very possibility of compressing the whole collection.

Audience: the content and the container!

E.P.: There is a difference that has to do with the format of the video itself. When we talk about historical videos (as those by Nam Jun Paik, for instance), they have never been sold, yet they have been preserved. And these videos are out of the market, out of the gallery circuits but you can still purchase them. In some cases they have exhibition rights, but you cannot buy them in a commercial gallery. However, they have been conserved and maintained by institutions. I think this is the main difference between archival and traditional pieces, i.e., pieces available for purchasing at a commercial gallery, as a limited editions of 3 or 5.

H.F. : And it has to do with the pedagogical mission, too, because it allows you to go over the history of videoart through pieces that are not in circulation.

4- What do you want to transmit with your collection?

H.F.: Good question! I don't know, really... When we started collecting we did not really think about it: we thought about pleasure, the possibility to give pleasure to other people. And now we are not so strong to constitute a foundation or "nice containers". The videos themselves have to transmit us something.

But you spoke about pedagogy...

H.F.: Yes, because I think it is important to establish a guiding line for people to better understand the collection, and therefore learn about the history of video itself.

5- Do you see yourselves as prophets? You spoke about the necessity to transmit a message and the history of video, of pedagogy...

H.F.: Well, we would like to call ourselves that way...but the collection is not yet complete. However, if I had to think of an institution hosting the collection, it would definitely be an institution with precise pedagogical objectives.

- 6- **C.G. What is sure is that video is a medium that implies the notion of 'sharing', as it freely circulates and it is freely possessed (we know that the same piece can lie in many different collections). How do you feel about the fact that video runs against the idea of originality and uniqueness?**

H.F.: I think that every collector has an ego. It is difficult to think of a collection that has only been shown in someone's kitchen!

- 7- **For me it is very difficult to differentiate between cinema and video art. Could you tell us something about it?**

E.P.: I think that it has to do with the artist will. And with the medium an artist decides to use. I think you can produce a very good video with basic means, but there are many artists who deploy a wide range of tools, and whose work is much closer to cinematic production. However, I think that collectors are not in the position to define what is closer to traditional cinema, experimental film or a video piece. I think the artists themselves are to locate their production – there are artists who have worked on short videos as well as more traditional feature films. I think is the artist that has to determine what he wants to say, by choosing the format, the medium, the duration of a work...

H.F.: And it is really funny because sometimes we see a video in a gallery and we wonder: "Has the artist been studying architecture, has he been studying cinema?" I think there was a moment when the line between video art and experimental cinema was very thin. I have seen some experimental films and videos that share similar qualities.

C.G.: Jean Luc Godard used to say that video thinks cinema!

- 8- **Have you ever thought of the possibility of being producers, i.e., of participating to the actual production of a video, before it is even born?**

E.P.: I think it is an irrepressible necessity for collectors. The 'last part of the circuit' – first you have the artist, the gallerist, the curator, then you encounter the collector – feels the need to be closer to the artist, and to directly participate to the creation of the work, to its evolution, genesis and production. We are thinking to a system of mixed production, through which we can help artists with the conception of the actual piece. And I want to stress this: the first thing that interests a collector is to be close to the artistic process; it is not the accumulation to be central, but the possibility to get closer to creation. Here in Spain it is a very complicated process, though, as opposed to the situation in the UK. However, we are thinking of starting some similar process in the next couple of years.

H.F.: Being a couple, we have different approaches to collecting. When it comes to production, I think there are already too many people making decision on

behalf of the artist: the gallerist, the collector... How can he / she really feel free to make a decision? That is my concern; to this extent, the collector might be a sort of imposing influence.

C.G.: On the other hand, someone like Han Nefkens is a convinced supporter of production. For instance, for this exhibition we have chosen a work from his collection, which resulted from the last award he gave to Asian artist Zhou Tao. Nefkens actually stresses how he likes to be there from the very first moment, and how he would later donate the work to an institution. He is a kind of collector that never holds the work even for a minute, he loans the piece to an institution to make it publicly accessible.

H.F.: And why not to directly buy the piece of one artista, then? That is also a way to support his work. BUY ART people, BUY ART!

Audience: A few months ago, I was visiting the studio of Melanie Smith in Mexico and she told me that the problem she had was to find the means to finance the production of her works. Every time she would package the whole thing, mount the movie, produce it, and then deliver it to the gallery that would in turn **mock it up by 1% and try to sell it**. And if the gallery do not sell it, she will never see the money for that work. So yes, to buy from galleries is an option, but it also poses the question of the artist, who is got to produce the work by himself. And there should be a solution to it: this whole situation is putting a lot of pressure on the medium.

C.G.: Yes, but for sure the role of collectors, producers is not so clear-cut. There is still a sort of blurriness.

Audience: I think there is also another way to support artist. We buy videos but we also have a foundation! And it is true that artists have many problems accessing funds. In the Netherlands, they can go to public institutions but they never get enough funds for the films. They always have to turn to private funds. We are also very happy to support very expensive films that we couldn't even buy otherwise; we do not influence the film, we just look at the quality of the project and see what comes out of it.

C.G.: This is the art of supporting!

- 9- **Everyone says that there is still a lot of confusion around the making of video art. Do you think it is due to the fact that the medium is still very young, not yet mature? Are there still a lot of things to build?**

C.G.: I think it is just the nature of the production system around video that invites people to collaborate; to produce a video implies also the recording, editing and distribution. You can conceive it as a multi-layered / open-ended process, in which the producer / collector should not wait 'till the end to intervene.

By saying so, you are implying a lot of similarities with cinematic production: couldn't it be a role model that video art could look at and try to mimic, or are they too different subjects?

C.G.: I would say that video art is a sort of Communist form of art, as it stimulates the cooperation of different parties or collectives, by also implying different forms of property. To this extent, I think that video is quite an "advanced" form of art. I also think that the possibility to intervene in the production of an image is something that goes as far back as the Renaissance, when patrons could actually pay in advance for a painting, in exchange of being included in it. Without being so objective, maybe we should also consider the possibility for other agents to become co-authors / active parties in the production of a work.

E.P.: I would like to make an observation around distribution, as I think it is a really important issue, - or one of the factor that differentiates this medium from other mediums in contemporary art. Video works is distributed in many ways: it can be completely free and uploaded on platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo; it can be made available online for a limited amount of time and later downloaded by paying a small fee, as happens in Canada or the United States; it can be diffused through distributors such as HAMACA here in Spain, or Art Intermix in NY... Not any other artistic discipline has had such a wide range of distribution modalities. There are even small pieces that are being distributed in documentary or commercial formats. And many artists find themselves working for different forms of distributions (for example, you will find artists who will never want their work distributed in a commercial gallery, and so on and so forth...)

C.G.: I think it is important to remember that video thinks its distribution and circulation. It is a medium to be circulated, and because of this it incarnates the paradigm of a very advanced economy.