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MINIMAL MUSIC GAVE US MAXIMAL VIDEO. The frenetic pace of early MTV might seem removed from the extended duration of phasing or ambient drones, but sensory assault and perceptual slowness are far more closely intertwined than we might think. Indeed, the short form of the music video seems to contain within it both pop decadence and avant-garde asceticism. Now that the music video has in many ways become the signature form of *all* media—migrating away from MTV toward YouTube and scaled down to iPhones—it is worth considering the genre’s relationship to experimental, interdisciplinary activities of the 1960s and ’70s.

A dense yet twisted braid of connections ties video to music during this period. Such a composite history is all too often treated as a series of separate strands: Video, for example, has been considered largely in the province of the visual—whether as a continuation of documentary photographic practices, of textual communication, or of pictorial abstraction. But the aural and temporal aspects of video are, of course, no less important; despite a spate of exhibitions focusing on the tradition of “visual music” in recent years, divisions between media and the senses seem as rigid as ever. To understand these continually latent links and

interactions, we must turn to the plane of technology: not as a deterministic engine of innovation, but as a common platform where music and video were treated as translatable signals or codes.

[video]

Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth, *Synchromy No. 4: Escape*, 1937.

In the '60s, advanced, room-size computers were the focus of collaborations among engineers, musicians, and artists. Under the auspices of technical research or groundbreaking residency programs, artists were invited to such high-tech corporate enterprises as Bell Laboratories in New Jersey and the Siemens studio for electronic music in Munich. Much of the experimentation in electronic and computer music was directly related to the rise of minimalism and automated compositional structures: Artists illustrated common sounds, repetitive words, and unhurried actions, often for long intervals. These intermedia endeavors owed as much to John Cage's embrace of ambient noise and chance operations and David Tudor's use of signal processing and feedback as to the work of film-sound pioneers such as Mary Ellen Bute, who based many of her intricate film animations on oscilloscope patterns or on mathematical formulas for transposing music into graphics. Bute's works had actually screened as shorts preceding feature films in regular movie theaters (such as Radio City Music Hall) in the '40s and '50s—deploying sophisticated technology and arcane notational systems simultaneously to induce a timely pause or break in mainstream entertainment.

Others in the decades following Bute would continue to explore the tempo, distribution, and production of mass media, taking up electronic instruments that came on the consumer market at the same time as the first portable video cameras. Many of these artists, such as Tony Conrad and

Steina, were engaged in developing distinct personae through recorded actions. They might extend time, repeating an action for the length of an open-reel videotape, either thirty or sixty minutes. Or they might opt for succinctness and make work that adhered to the length of a pop song or a one-minute television commercial. Rooted in the historical exploration of slowness, the intersections of music and video began to traverse technology's exponentially increasing upgrades, from high-end equipment and broadcast television to lo-fi improvisation.

[video]

Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut, *Beatles Electroniques*, 1966–69.

WHILE NAM JUNE PAIK later became known for his rapid-fire editing style, he, too, started out slowly. In the early '60s, after having met both Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen in Germany, Paik drew on his background in classical music and Buddhism to enact “action music” works. In these performances, after a whimsical foreplay of slowly moving about the stage, he would typically conclude with one mesmerizing note, usually played on a piano.

Paik famously obtained one of the first portable video cameras to reach New York and began making short minimal pieces. But these spare events and compositions soon appeared in other contexts, marked by sensory profligacy rather than reduction. In October 1965, Paik screened his first videotapes as part of a series of “happening nights” at the Greenwich Village nightclub Café au Go Go—a venue that included Lenny Bruce and the Grateful Dead among its roster of performers. The young Japanese composer Takehisa Kosugi, who had recently immigrated to the city, provided live accompaniment. *Beatles Electroniques*, 1966–69, made with the experimental filmmaker Jud Yalkut, is nothing less than an early black-

and-white music video. Paik grabbed bits from the mock documentary *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), refilming and further distorting the footage through his video synthesizer (developed with engineer Shuya Abe). Snippets of the Beatles' faces are caught in a loop of warped abstraction. To accompany the endlessly folding imagery, Paik created a sound track with Kenneth Lerner, which featured fragmented Beatles songs recited again and again. Whereas the original film is an upbeat paean to Beatlemania, Paik's strategies of appropriation and repetition are conceptually closer to Andy Warhol's silk-screened paintings of celebrities, such as *Marilyn Monroe*, 1962, and Steve Reich's phasing of spoken words from a publicized racial incident in his sound composition *Come Out* (1966). Like these works, *Beatles Electroniques* brought seriality into the realm of sensory overload.

[video]

Promotional Video for Captain Beefheart's 1970 album *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*.

THE ARRIVAL OF PORTABLE VIDEO GEAR meant that artists as well as garage bands with homegrown agendas were equipped to play with image and sound—and to entertain the dream of democratic and total media distribution as well. Yet this anarchic enterprise simultaneously paralleled the rise of the short-format music video as a promotional tool for musicians and record labels. In 1970, Captain Beefheart (aka Don Van Vliet) garnered free time on public-access cable television in Los Angeles and aired the promo he had made for his new album, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. Within a scant ninety seconds, a TV announcer refers to band members by their oddball names as he performs clownlike madcap actions. A hand tosses cigarette butts through the air, and then, sporting a fez, Beefheart's bandmate Rockette Morton paces, winding an eggbeater. Echoing William Wegman's concurrent short vignettes made in his studio with his dog,

Beefheart's prototypical music video draws on the contingent rhythm of slapstick. Just as his musical sound was an eclectic sampling of shifting time signatures (influenced by free jazz) and Frank Zappa (Beefheart's close friend and collaborator), this initial video exploration resonated with the surrealistic character of psychedelic environments, such as Joshua White's well-known light shows at the Fillmore East in New York, which accompanied the pitch distortion and feedback of Jimi Hendrix and others. Akin to Bute's insertion into the Hollywood film screening, Beefheart's videos introduced a bizarre instance of both interruption and continuity into broadcast-television programming.

Beefheart got in early, and musicians paid attention: As the nascent music video slowly emerged as an effective marketing vehicle for the recording industry, its forms and outlets were left wide open. Following Beefheart, the Residents (based in San Francisco), for example, were anticipating a broad audience for music videos and believed that they could shape the format—less to sell records, though, than to infiltrate systems of television and radio promotion. The cover of their famous 1976 album *The Third Reich 'n' Roll* features Dick Clark in an SS uniform holding a carrot. De-skilled tracks started out with pilfered clips of classic rock and funk songs that were spliced, overdubbed, and layered with new instrumentation. To accompany the songs, the group immediately produced brief music videos (after having attempted, from 1972 to 1976, to film the first long-format music video; this was never released in its entirety). These shorts were shot on film and initially screened in art-house theaters and in film festivals. Once the Residents began to perform live in 1982, however, the videos also began airing on the newly launched channel MTV and the influential late-night television program *Night Flight*. Like the group's aural pastiche, their “expressionistic” videos drew on the dark montage of John Heartfield as

well as that of fellow Bay Area artists Bruce Conner and Wallace Berman. But the Residents' samples and cut-ups managed to enter wider and more diversified streams of circulation, flouting institutional boundaries that the art world was just beginning to breach. The interlude became the centerpiece.

[video]

David Bowie's 1972 music video *Space Oddity*, directed by Mick Rock.

MUSIC VIDEO AROSE as an interstitial arena in which to toy with popular modes of distribution—and it was also the perfect field for testing new kinds of televisual celebrity. Paik had already presaged this with his audiovisual deformations of the Beatles, yet perhaps it was David Bowie who most forcefully exploited the music video to turn the subcultural into the iconic. As Thurston Moore has observed, Bowie “burst into the psychosis of the young and restless intellectuals around the world” with his outré art school look and mannered androgyny. And music video was the catalyst: Bowie’s canonical single “Space Oddity,” recorded and released to coincide with the first moon landing in 1969, uses this persona to tell the story of Major Tom, an astronaut who becomes lost in space. The five-minute video, made in 1972 (and originally shot on 16-mm film) for the track’s US release, opens and closes with what appear to be abstract waveform signals and extraterrestrial sounds of static; in between, a very young and colorfully lit Bowie is seen in close-up. Directed by Mick Rock (the photographer-filmmaker best known for his legendary shots of ’70s glam rockers), the clip would have been shown on Scopitone apparatuses—primitive 16-mm film jukeboxes—housed in bars and clubs. This precursor to the latter-day music video was, then, a kind of privatized conduit for rock-star fame, superseding rock magazines as the place where fans could connect with their idols. It

should come as no surprise that at precisely the same time as the *Space Oddity* video, Bowie would assume the larger-than-life character of Ziggy Stardust, complete with what Moore has called his “alien rooster cut and spaceman glam gear.”

[video]

Devo's 1976 music video *Secret Agent Man*, directed by Gerald Casale.

ART VIDEO AND MUSIC VIDEO thus met in an unruly fashion in the '70s, but they would soon arrive at the type of conjunction we think we know best: MTV. The advent of MTV was a no less heterogeneous affair, its beginnings stirring in both the celebrity-driven commodification of music and the aesthetic testing of perception. The station actually presented brief “Art Breaks” that it commissioned from artists such as Jenny Holzer or Dara Birnbaum. But other videos not labeled as such were equally vanguard: Think of the wittily mordant Devo, or of Laurie Anderson, who made her renowned music video *O Superman* for Warner Bros. Records in 1981—just in time for the launch of MTV. Multimedia artist Perry Hoberman (who had been turning obsolete technologies such as 3-D slide systems into droll animated narratives) joined Anderson as artistic director. Accommodating the consumer TV set's small scale, they concentrated on close-up shots of Anderson, exaggerated silhouettes of her shadow-puppet hands, and her glowing face, illuminated by a tiny pillow speaker placed inside her mouth that emanated a prerecorded violin solo she modulated with her lips. Anderson's video aired in rotation in between both “Art Breaks” and “mainstream” videos—the long duration and sustained sensations of past sonic and visual experiments now a series of fast gaps and fills.

If artists have historically been attracted to music for its dream of a universal language, a latter-day harmony of the spheres, then music video is perhaps

the inverse incarnation: a particulate and fragmented form that mapped the individualized and diversified paths of media today. What is most dated to us now—the fleeting, analog sounds and images of the small screen—is also becoming more familiar again.

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