Hold Up

Mapping the Boundaries between Music Video and Video Art

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The synesthetic combination of music and moving images has a considerably long and more diverse history than that of music television, and certainly of MTV, a diversity that is beginning to be increasingly recognized in the field of contemporary audiovisual studies. However, its position in global culture has been firmly cemented since the arrival of MTV, and it is currently experienced in many ways through various technologies. As its popularity and proliferation thanks to digital technologies have grown, a surprisingly small and distinct focus on its formal analysis by media and culture scholars has developed, as confirmed by such volumes as Vernallis's *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) and Railton and Watson's *Music Video and The Politics of Representation* (2011), *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Richardson, Gorban and Vernallis 2015), and *Digital Music Videos* (Shaviro 2017).

Yet music video has long been a problematic and controversial form. It has been characterized as residing somewhere between commerciality and art and between creative expression and promotion. The music video in its early incarnation as a promotional tool was always both tangible and ephemeral, and this aesthetic tension certainly persists in the digital era. It may be that its boundaries are perhaps vaguer and fuzzier than ever before. The music video continues through both itself and something other as an expression of audiovisual creativity and commerce, even if it has become less clear exactly what this commerce is trading beyond the music video itself as a kind of vital currency.

What is yet to be fully addressed is how the form of music video can be mapped onto a range of other audiovisual aesthetic practices. As Vernallis puts it in her key text, *Unruly Media* (2013), "At one time we knew what a music video was but no longer . . . We used to define music videos as products of record companies, in which images were put to recorded pop songs to sell songs. But no longer" (Vernallis 2013: 10–11). As I have written elsewhere (Arnold et al. 2017), there is an evolution from Vernallis's unashamed celebration of music video aesthetics as a distinct format in *Experiencing Music Video* (Vernallis 2004) to her later work *Unruly Media*'s discussion of the music

video in the context of a "mixing board aesthetic" (Vernallis 2013: 4) of YouTube clips and new digital cinema which for her have become inseparable from music video itself.

Yet despite the music video becoming increasingly intrinsic to contemporary digital culture, scholarly work in this area has not grown much further and has not fully considered how it maps onto other audiovisual forms. This chapter then will explore how the music video net may be cast wider, not only in terms of connections with broader histories of audiovisual studies but also in terms of practices from video art to global popular culture. It will address how music video can be situated in terms of an "audiovision" or "audiovisuology" that can destabilize what we thought we knew about the music video, even in its "classic" MTV period. It will then examine how specific forms of music video and video art are shaped by this very culture themselves and vice versa.

One way to approach the art of the music video would be to focus on the use of digital video techniques as can be explored in the work of Vernallis (2004) and Shaviro (2017) where they examined such techniques as compositing, motion control, morphing software, and other digital special effects as well as their remediation of media forms such as experimental cinema or video art. Yet this approach is limited, and this chapter will attempt to explore the aesthetic dynamics that stem from the hybridity of music videos and video art and how these aesthetically hybrid forms could be described as discursive devices that shape contemporary culture.

Re-popularizing the Music Video

As Feisthauer states:

> After a period of stagnation and disinterest in the early 2000s, music videos nowadays are much more than just an advertisement for a specific song and even more than just a visual product to accompany the music. The music video has become an independent art form with a vast and interactive audience, making it a, if not the, most democratic one. (Feisthauer 2022)

While the notion of democracy in music video production remains somewhat debatable, the music video's popularity and vast hybridization have propelled it into a complex form (with much more porous boundaries) which is constantly influenced by other forms.

Music videos are currently a hugely efficient method of consuming music. According to YouTube's Global Head of Music, Lyor Cohen, more than two billion logged-in YouTube users are now playing music videos on the platform each month (Ingham 2020). Given such statistics which show no sign of slowing, it is reasonable to suggest that they remain a primary means through which music is consumed worldwide.

In terms of the aesthetics of the music video, they continue to push boundaries. As Blessing Borode states in *New Wave Magazine*:

> Music videos continue to innovate new ways for people to tell their stories. It has become more than just a part of our consumption of music, art, and entertainment but a tool that's used to add another dimension to projects. With different elements of animation, design, and effects we can spend a few moments in a world the artist has created, where the story told becomes more than something we listen to but a moving concept. Every detail put into creating these visuals - from the location and design of the set, the styling of the artists and extras, the way each shot transitions into the next, down to the colour grading - all play a part in our overall experience. (Borode n.d.)

Borode is, of course, discussing the music video, but one would be forgiven for thinking that these words are describing other forms of audiovisuology. The idea of the music video as an ever-shifting concept is now so closely linked to video art that the boundaries of each form appear to collapse into each other. It is only the means of exhibition that may differentiate the two, and even this is not clear cut in contemporary culture.

The Rise of Video Art

As has been widely documented and discussed, the accessibility of cameras for self-documentation took place around the time of the emergence of Sony's Portapak cameras in 1967. This democratized the moving image, as the camera was no longer confined to the film studio, and it quickly became subsumed into everyday life. This handheld camera led to the rise of video art. The form is said to have begun when Nam June Paik used his new Sony Portapak to shoot footage of Pope Paul VI's procession through New York City in the autumn of 1965. Later that same day in a café in Greenwich Village, Paik played the tapes and video art was said to have been created.

Because cameras were relatively low in cost, this allowed mass consumption and usage of the technology to become widespread, giving individuals the ability to shoot and experiment with creating their own filmic experiences. Artists quickly embraced this new technology and used it to comment upon societal issues of the day. Many artists of the late 1960s and 1970s post-Paik used video to create artwork that parodied television and advertising, highlighting what they saw as television's insidious power. As stated in *Art Miami Magazine*,

> For its time, video art was radically new, which is why some artists felt it was an ideal format for pushing limits in contemporary society with art. For example, during the Feminist art movement, many women artists who were trying to distinguish and distance themselves from male artist forebearers chose video for the opportunities that hadn't been widely established or tapped. Also, many artists with a social or political cause who wanted to spread the unexposed and important

> information, video came across as a medium conducive to both affordability and broad distribution capabilities. (Art Miami Magazine n.d.)

Alongside this, the distinctions between art and popular culture were beginning to blur, just as the boundaries between low- and high-brow art were growing more porous from the 1950s onward. Similarly, movements in performance art and installations found a new outlet through the video camera as artists sought to find new ways of presenting the themes and issues that they desired to explore. For many artists, there was much less of an emphasis on storytelling via linear narratives as is often seen in the music video, and much more of an increased focus on the creation of imagery and sound which interrogated sociopolitical issues.

Video art became known for creating often disjointed and enigmatic fragments of imagery that offer innovative ways of processing and reflecting on societal issues. In a contemporary context, video art is now an established means of artistic creation taking numerous forms—from recordings of performance art to stand-alone installations that incorporate vast and numerous screens to works created for digital distribution only.

Where Music Video Meets Video Art

The establishment and increasing popularity of both music video and video art as a means of creative expression for artists are now firmly cemented in popular culture and contemporary art contexts. Video art is now considered a highly influential medium in the art world. What is clear is that the connections between video art and music video are even more present than at the height of the MTV era.

Holly Rogers, in her book *Sounding the Gallery* (2013), suggests: "While musicians and artists have long sought conceptual interaction, the materials available have restricted practical realisation and few examples of such communication exist. Previous audiovisual practices, such as lantern shows, music theatre, opera, synaesthetic experimentation, early direct film, and so on, were intermedial primarily at the level of reception" (Rogers 2013). Today, however, this interaction seems closer than ever at the level of creation, where musical artists borrow from and use the form and function of video art to express new audiovisual concepts.

To explore the aesthetic dynamics that emerge from the hybridization of music videos and video art, we must consider some examples before we can explore the close alignment of both forms.

The work of artist FKA Twigs provides a key example of where the music video form moves ever closer to video art. Her visual work continually pushes the limits of what music video can be, particularly in terms of the interrogation of feminist ideas. In the video for her first single, *Water Me* in 2013 on YouTube, the skills of visual artist Jesse Kanda were employed, making an immediate statement about FKA Twigs's ambitions as an artist. It was clear that mainstream popularity may be an ambition, but her aesthetic and messaging lay somewhere within a video art tradition.

In the self-directed music video for *Pendulum* (2014) we see a close-up of FKA Twigs's mouth, and a slow zoom-out reveals her suspended in bondage ropes made of her hair. She is hanging from the ceiling, staring directly into the lens of the camera; she moves to immerse her face in liquid mercury, tries to vocally express herself but is unable to do so. She then moves to emerge from the liquid, unshackled and dances defiantly as a pendulum swings. This set of imagery reveals a vulnerability and self-expression that appear rarely in a context where complex emotions and nuanced manifestations of female identities, particularly related to sexuality, are not often portrayed in mainstream music video. Her work may offer a fresh perspective on how female artists are allowed to visually represent their own identities in audiovisual cultures. Indeed, how FKA Twigs presents herself throughout her work points toward an attachment to the tenets of contemporary feminism that appears much more complex and nuanced than that of many other high-profile female performers who have thus far publicly declared their attachments to feminism.

FKA Twigs has consistently created imagery that challenges idealized womanhood as is routinely portrayed in the music video, particularly in a mainstream context. Her work may provide a more open space through which issues surrounding feminism may be played out, given that the edges of her work map onto a video art sensibility in that linear narrative is often absent, fragmented imagery is present, and a critique of mainstream ideas is often at the forefront. Her work presents a deeply introspective and personal vision that lacks any sense of aspirationalism—unlike many of her celebrity feminist contemporaries, such as Beyoncé.

The audiovisual aesthetic FKA Twigs displays appears somewhat problematic to the mainstream media in that she possesses an image that is difficult to comprehend. She is not easy to pigeonhole and effectively presents a conundrum in that she appears complex because she presents a sense of a deeply introspective identity, yet she is also an accessible celebrity. The popular media appears to find this difficult to decipher given the complexity of her audiovisual presentation, which acts as a disruption to the postfeminist regulatory framework that is frequently presented in popular culture. This is due to her exploration of her own relationship and response to reductive representations projected onto women through her visual imagery and performance style. FKA Twigs's video work is concerned with obliquely critiquing the representations and misrepresentations in popular culture as well as reflecting a deeply personal perspective. Her videos interrogate issues of rape, pregnancy, female fantasy, and desire in a way that moves toward intelligent explorations of liberation and empowerment through female creativity and self-expression.

As FKA Twigs's work illustrates, the music video is an important discursive register of the transmission and reiteration of feminist ideas and appears to challenge the discourses surrounding famous women and how their bodies are scrutinized, celebrated, and denigrated. Her body is still aestheticized, but what appears different is that its visual representation seems to be deeply personal and self-controlled. *M3LL155X* (a variant of Melissa, a transcendent spirit she refers to as her "personal feminine energy") is FKA Twigs's third EP and consists of a sixteen-minute accompanying video comprising four self-directed music videos. In this work,

FKA Twigs presents often sexually charged performances and utilizes dance and performance in a way that is acutely expressive and appears to document her own feminist identity. Her performance style allows her to transform both the media-constructed horrors and fantasies that young women must negotiate in mainstream culture and remixes them in such a way that may point toward a form of resistance that may signal a feminist identity.

Music critics almost unanimously praised *M3LL155X*. Anupta Mistry of Pitchfork stated: "As a creative package the EP is unimpeachable; a high-concept, intellectually curious project that's evocative, accessible, and transgressive enough to satisfy the competing demands of a newly broadened fan-base and her existing audience of Tumblr-educated aesthetes. *M3LL155X* builds on her previous work, exploring ideas of dominance and submission and drilling down almost completely into the self" (Mistry 2015: 22). The *NME* prefaced their review by stating: "In an age where a poor-taste Rihanna video promo can launch multi-thousand-word think pieces, Twigs has conceived (and directed) a daring and provocative piece of capital-A Art" (Nicolson 2015).

M3LL155X presents a sense of the documentation of a deeply personal perspective on representations of women in popular culture while offering a distinct message that being a famous woman does not preclude her from exploring her subjectivity in a specific way. It appears to espouse a message that suggests she is creating work that is deeply personal and is not directly catering to a mass audience (which, of course, it is as a product of the commercial music industry) or indeed to any fan base. She often appears unconcerned with creating work that would appeal to anyone except herself, a sensibility which aligns her closely with a tradition of female video artists. It is through her imagery that this is most apparent. Her work moves well beyond the idea of female pop stars "owning" their sexuality and subverting conventional expectations. While her music videos are often sexually charged, FKA Twigs embodies her celebrity feminist identity on her terms. Her music videos often ask the audience to routinely engage with imagery that comments upon conventional representations of women in more complex ways than are often presented in the mainstream music video. In this way, her work moves much closer to video art in its aesthetic and thematic presentation.

The video for the song *I'm Your Doll*, a key section of *M3LL155X*, is a blunt statement on rape culture. Dressed like a pigtailed schoolgirl, FKA Twigs dances in front of an older white man which leads to a situation in which she has no power; FKA Twigs's head is then attached to a blow-up sex doll which the man penetrates. The scene is constructed as a ritual rape and one that FKA Twigs has knowingly entered into. It can be read as a commentary on the patriarchy of the music industry, where female artists must literally become detached from a manufactured body that is not theirs to own. At the end of the sequence, her body is deflated and she is left on the bed, trapped in the same position.

Some elements of *I'm Your Doll* and FKA Twigs's work more widely recall the work of Björk—another artist whose audiovisual work is closer to video art than music video—in that they present a deeply personal, erotic, and sensual sense of self that appears uncontrived and unmanufactured. The visual representations FKA Twigs uses seem to emanate from a resistance to rebrand or change for the sake of attaining mass success

and widespread celebrity status. Her work is nuanced and presents a more complex critique of the representations of women and their sexuality in the music industry. Its complexity lies in the fact that it is contextualized by mental rather than physical desire. Whereas for many female artists, artistic freedom and feminist expression must still be signed off by figures of patriarchy with endless power, it would appear that FKA Twigs has been afforded a certain amount of artistic freedom by her record label, Young Turks, allowing and encouraging her to challenge prohibitive boundaries and idealized representations. This may well be related to the fact that like Björk, FKA Twigs's work emanates from a more independent electronic musical context rather than a mainstream pop music arena—from a place where notions of freedom and independence appear rather more possible for female artists.

Media coverage has tended to downplay FKA Twigs's role as a music video director and producer of her own video work, predictably preferring to focus on her physicality, image, and relationship status. Yet she resists commenting and instead uses her work to express her views on the existing reductive structures that women in music must still negotiate.

The last section of the video *Glass and Patron* is concerned with self-empowerment. It most readily resembles a music video of any of the four segments. In one interview, FKA Twigs suggests that it is a comment upon the need to step outside of digital culture to connect with one's sense of an authentic self. Here FKA Twigs is located in a forest with her dancers, the forest representing a reconnection with nature and the body, far away from technology. A white van is visible disrupting the tranquility of the scene. Often, FKA Twigs's videos begin with extreme close-ups. Here she is revealed upside down, singing "hit me with your hands, double-knot my throat, mother." The camera moves out revealing her heavily pregnant form, pulling colored scarves from her vagina. The music changes pace and the scarves begin to fall away to reveal her dancers, elegantly swimming through them. The camera cuts to a catwalk in the forest, FKA Twigs sitting on a silver throne with her dancers voguing in front of her, awaiting her approval. The video is a celebratory 2015 version of a 1990s dance festival in which FKA Twigs's dancers are gloriously celebrating their art and their community. The voguing represents a kind of re-establishing of their connections to their bodies as a marker of their self-expression. Here, FKA Twigs is the leader of the group and echoes Madonna's use of voguing in the 1980s where a heterosexual woman appropriates a marginalized culture in order to enrich her own cultural cachet—but in a much less obvious manner. This, of course, is part of audiovisual culture and FKA Twigs presents the fine line between appropriation and appreciation as a knowingly blurred one. *Glass and Patron* is ultimately celebratory and respectful of the subculture which she is utilizing. *M3LL155X*, and FKA Twigs's work more generally, is attempting to marry several disparate cultures from performance art to hip-hop and voguing. This melding of styles is presented as a way of documenting her own explorations into more ephemeral and complex representations of female identity and moves away from universal, definitive, and rational understandings.

Much of what makes FKA Twigs unique is the varied and complex presentations of herself put forth through her music videos. Her commitment to exploring how

technology can be manipulated and used to manipulate the female form presents work that can be perceived as feminist without overtly labeling it as such. She presents a contrary quality that addresses a culture where human interactions are so heavily mediated that a search for real connection is futile and redundant. Her work challenges this notion and speaks to the complexity of contemporary celebrity and digital cultures where her femininity and feminism are difficult and contradictory. Yet, this is precisely where her authenticity is written across her works so explicitly.

FKA Twigs provides a sound example of a musical artist who is producing music videos that sit so closely to video art that it seems redundant to attempt to make a distinction between her and other female video artists. Aside from the machinery of the music industry that buttresses the production of her work, the differences are moot. The showing of her work at Manchester International Festival in 2015 attests to the fact that music video can be exhibited in a contemporary art festival and has found a place in the cultural landscape alongside video art.

We can trace the connections between the music video and video art quite easily if we then look closely at the work of a well-known video artist such as Pipilotti Rist, best known for creating video installations and immersive video-based environments, often characterized, and influenced by music video and popular culture as well as the early historic video work of feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann and Joan Jonas. Rist presents work that critiques popular culture, comments on the objectification of the female body, and presents a rich visual language that is often as accessible as it is strange.

1997's *Ever Is Over All* is one of Rist's first large-scale pieces of video art which consists of the use of large screens offering an immersive spatial dimension to her rich visual language. In this piece, Rist presents imagery interrogating female sexuality via hyper-saturated images of the everyday. The work is filmed in a single take using widely available camera technology and emphasizes the painterly qualities of standard-definition video, which can be considered a fundamental part of the imagery. Accompanied by a musical soundtrack that is closely related to the dreamy electronic soundscape of FKA Twigs, the piece consists of two large overlapping projections. On one huge screen a woman (Rist) confidently walks down a city street, smiling to herself. She carries with her a tall flower of a species that is seen on the other large screen, seen blowing in the breeze in a field. Both videos are presented in slow motion**.** Then in a maniacal burst of violence, the woman swings the flower at the window of parked cars. The windows smash immediately upon impact and the flower is now a weapon strong enough to break glass. A police officer is also walking down the street, and we expect the woman to be apprehended; however, the officer smiles in approval and continues walking past. This destructive behavior then becomes a cathartic feminist statement.

The piece is so close to being a music video that it is easy to forget that its place is in the gallery. It uses the tropes so effortlessly that its edges blur into what we understand as the music video form. As Ted Snell states:

> Rist has been extremely successful in merging high and low culture and the art world. Her lush videos and multimedia installations mesh together notions

> of female sexuality and music video pop culture, with an imagined optimism presented in contrast to our everyday reality. This feminist intervention provides a powerful and ebullient critique, which is in turn having a powerful effect in re-shaping popular culture. (Snell 2017)

As is now well documented, musical artist Beyoncé paid direct homage to Rist in the video for *Hold Up* as part of the visual album "Lemonade" in 2016, where a new generation was able to experience video art for the first time. The homage to Rist's visuals for Beyoncé chimes with her own call to action, not only concerning betrayal within a relationship but also for feminist values to be embedded firmly into American society.

Rist's work sits within the liminal space between music video and video art alongside FKA Twigs's. Rist is particularly notable in the canon of female video artists. Her work has been shown in public spaces such as Times Square in New York City, where sixty-two video screens displayed a loop of her face smashed up against a window critiquing the spectator's gaze on femininity. The piece gained worldwide attention for its placement within one of the most well-known symbols of capitalism.

Conclusion

As has been illustrated here, it is difficult to disentangle the form and function as well as the relationship between commercial video and video art. Of course, there has been debate between the two forms and the lines distinguishing both have since become blurred in the digital age, giving reason to consider the music video as an art form rather than solely as a tool of commerciality. As Jody Berlan stated in her essay "Sound Image and Social Space: Music Video and Media Reconstruction" (1993), the video "present[s] a particular mode of cultural cannibalisation, in which the soundtrack has been digested lifetimes ago, in fact consumed by the image, which appears to be singing" (Berland 1993: 3). While this statement is decades old, it deserves to be reconsidered in this context.

Today it seems that both forms have collapsed into each other rather than held their own as this chapter set out to explain. What we are left with is a very close relationship between the two forms, with video art being influenced by the tropes of music video and with music videos featuring ambiguous imagery that operates in ways strikingly similar to video art. It is evident from the examples discussed here that the aesthetic dynamics stemming from the hybridity of music videos and video art are collapsing into each other in interesting ways that demand further analysis. Music videos and video art are shaped by the same ideas, and there is much less to separate them than in the past.

As Cassie da Costa states:

> Increasingly, the music video format offers a platform to video artists whose work is usually played on loops in sparsely populated gallery spaces. Beyond those

> white walls is a YouTube-driven visual culture where songs serve as housing for far-fetched world-building. Recently, the artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa collaborated with Kanye West for his song *Wash Us in the Blood*, a commentary on police murders of black people. The video splices together found and filmed footage and animation to create a visual collage, adapting the methodology used in Jafa's well-known film *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* from 2016 (which he set to Kanye's gospel-inspired track *Ultralight Beam,* creating in effect an unofficial music video). And last year, for musician Solange's visual album When I Get Home, multimedia artist Jacolby Satterwhite used 3D animation—partly inspired by drawings his mother made during schizophrenic episodes—to create a black Southern take on the Panathenaic Stadium, hovering over Houston's Third Ward. Solange herself directed and choreographed plenty of the visual sequences in the 41-minute film, and has, over the last several years, developed her own visual art practice around and within her music. (Da Costa 2020)

These two examples from well-known artists speak further to the blurring of the boundaries between video art and music video. In order to understand how artists use music video today, we need to look to the gallery—not only in terms of connections with broader histories of audiovisual studies but also in terms of practices from video art to global popular culture. The music video should be situated in terms of an "audiovisuology" in that it does have the capacity to destabilize what we thought we knew about the form. It is clear that in a culture where borrowing from other forms to create new work is standard, we must examine how music video and video art are themselves shaped by this very culture.

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