

# Unsettling bodies

Video essay as embodied research

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a fundamental new understanding of videographic research as an embodied practice and of the video essay as a “mingled body”: Not only does the video essay fuse multiple film materials and diverging artistic and scientific methods into a new body of media. The video essay also engages the bodies of both its makers and viewers in new and unsettling ways. Via a theoretical discussion of the video essay’s body as well as via two concrete examples of embodied video essays the potentials of videographic research for a more vulnerable, non-normative academia of the future are outlined.

**Keywords:** videographic research, embodiment, performativity, vulnerability, mingling

“What it meant to make things with my body... All the things...”  
Katie Bird

The video essay is unsettling. The video essay unsettles the academic classroom as well as the spaces of cinema. It does so because its own place is not settled, not within the humanities, nor academia as a whole, nor within film history and audiovisual culture at large. The place of the video essay is not settled, I would claim, not simply because it is a somewhat young form which still needs to find its place within these respective fields. Rather, and more fundamentally, the video essay, as I try to understand and practice it, lives in different disciplines and methodologies at once and thus resists the logic of defining positioning.

### 1. Forces of the video essay

Christian Keathley in one of the earliest assessments of the video essay situated videographic practice on a spectrum between explanatory and poetic modes of expression (2011), and more recently Jason Mittell added the “exploratory impulse” as a third mode of expression (2024). Expanding from this dynamic yet, in my opinion, still too linear understanding, I propose another model in which the video essay is not so much defined by certain modes of expressions but rather by different orientations of interest. Thus, I see the video essay vibrating within a multi-dimensional tension field with the theoretical, the experimental, the personal and the historical as its different gravitational attractors and orientations. (fig. 1): video essays, by using existing film material, engage with the material’s

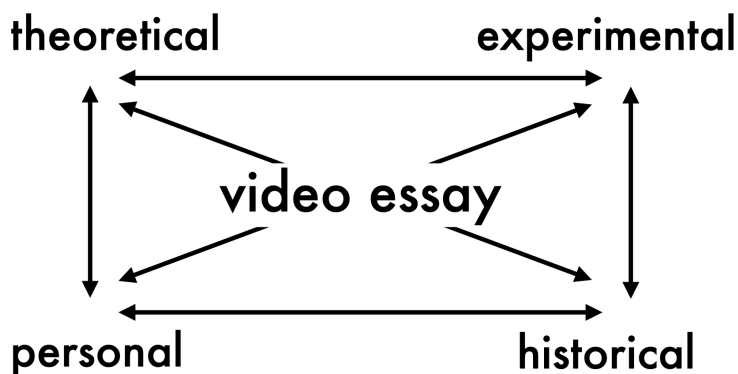


Fig. 1: The video essay tension field

specific *histories*, while the selection of the material is most likely guided by certain *theoretical* interests. Yet, by remixing the existing film material I turn it into my own footage with which I *experiment* and in doing so, I am inevitably *personally* involved.

The advantage of such a diagrammatic approach, despite its obvious simplifications, is to render visible how video essays are traversing both what is usually understood as proper academic methodology as well as what we are accustomed to in artistic practices. While having recourse to theoretical arguments and working with historical data can be seen as skills highly typical of academic training, the exploration of the personal and the engagement in free experimentation is something we would rather associate with artistic practice (fig.2).

Instead of a mere traversal we witness what could also be called a “queering” of methods thought of before as separate. (As a general introduction into “queering” as critical practice see Hall (2003, 1-16), while I am particularly indebted here to Sara Ahmed’s project of queering phenomenology (2006).)

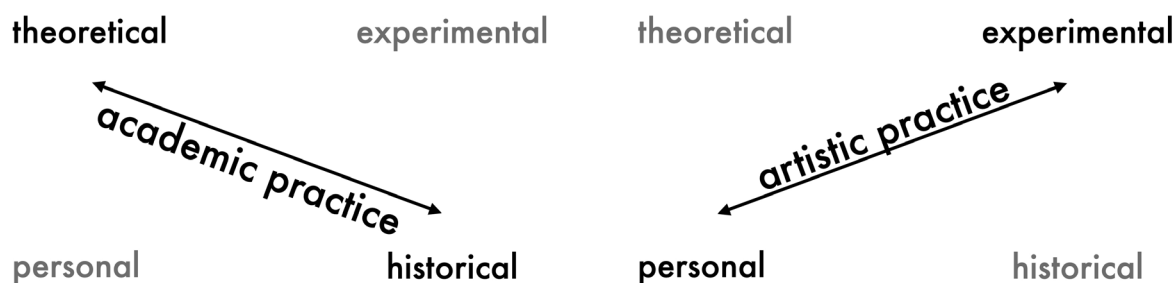


Fig. 2: Axes of practice

The proposed diagram could be used to distinguish different styles of video essays by how they gravitate more to one corner or axis than to the others. However, the true potential of the video essay, as I see it, is in how it can fold these opposing pulls into one and the same videographic work. Furthermore, I think it is precisely this mixture of diverging forces and orientations that explains certain reservations video essays will face with specific audiences. It has happened to me more than once that the same video essay when screened at an experimental film festival was appreciated for its visual language while its inclusion of quotes and references to theo-

retical texts seemed surprising and provoked the criticism that I “did not fully trust the power of film”. Yet when shown at an academic conference it was, unsurprisingly, rather the video’s historical-theoretical axis that was appreciated while its audiovisual experiments, and in particular the fact that I would include my own physical body in these experiments, seemed to make some of my academic colleagues rather uncomfortable. In both reactions I see a binary opposition at play which tries to pit embodied practice against analytical thought – a false yet still powerful binary which seems oblivious to the fact that every practice is always already entangled in abstract reflection, while every analysis is inevitably performative, never just taking place in some ideal realm of pure thought but enacted in, through, and with concrete bodies.

While all this is true for artistic and scholarly practice in general, I believe that the video essay makes particularly striking use of this complex entanglement. The video essay as a form of “material thinking”, as Catherine Grant has called it, “a form of understanding with the hands and eyes” (2014, 50) inextricably merges physical interaction and analytical reflection. And it does so not as a stable method, but in constantly changing new ways.

## 2. The video essay as “mingled body”

The video essay as unsettled and unsettling practice does not arrive at a clearly delineated form but is rather what Michel Serres called a “mingled body” – a body in which separations are constantly overstepped, shifted and remapped, be it the separation between different parts of a body, between inside and outside, between human and non-human, between delayed contemplation and instinctive reaction.

Consciousness belongs to those singular moments when the body is tangential to itself. I touch my lips, which are already conscious of themselves, with my finger. I can then kiss my finger and, what amounts to almost the same thing, touch my lips with it. The I vibrates alternately on both sides of the contact, and all of a sudden presents its other face to the world, or, suddenly passing over the immediate vicinity, leaves behind nothing but an object. In the local gesture of calling for silence, the body plays ball

with the soul. [...] There is no end to it, the only limit is your own suppleness. Metaphysics begins with, and is conditioned by, gymnastics. (Serres 2008, 23)

The body in Serres' project of anti-cartesian metaphysics is not just a metaphor. Instead, physical bodies, our own, as well as the bodies of others, and the bodies of different objects and materials are to be taken as topologically folded spaces of both experience and analysis. Obviously, this mingled body is also one in which the different gravitational forces and axes of the diagram above cross and queer each other.

I would claim that it is this insistence on the body which is also one of the main challenges (but also promises) that the video essay poses for academic research. As bell hooks has argued in her theory of radical liberatory pedagogy, the bodies of scholars and students pose a threat to the self-understanding of academia: "Once we start talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we're automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space. [...] Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits" (hooks 1994,136-138).

Following this call for an embodied practice of teaching, I believe that the video essay as a mingled body could also challenge (and reshape) what we understand as academic research. The video essay as such a form of embodied research and "epistemology of practice" (Spatz 2015, 23-70) has in the last years become the main focus in my own videographic work; most notably so in my video essay series "Practices of Viewing" in which each video experimentally explores a specific media technique and its complex entanglements with both our own personal history, as well as with the history of cinema, with the materiality of media and that of our own bodies.

In the following, however, I would like to sketch out the potential of video essay as an unsettling mingled body and the potential it holds for academic research via two video essays which put the physical presence of the scholar as a mingled body even more directly on stage, asking the questions: How do video essays unsettle

the body of film? How do they unsettle our own body? And how do they unsettle how bodies interact?

### 3. “Crossings”



Fig. 3: Screenshot from “Crossings”  
<https://vimeo.com/412879847>

The video essay “Crossings” from 2020 interweaves two research interests, which on first sight seem to be located in completely different realms. One is the phenomenon of the so-called Freak with its ambivalent cultural history of both horrible exploitation as well as potential empowerment and visibility for non-normative bodies. The other is a media theoretical interest in glass surfaces in films as not only a common visual motif but as a self-reflexive trope for the cinematic medium in general.

While having taught and written on both topics separately I see them come together in Ulrike Ottinger’s classic of queer cinema *Freak Orlando* (1981) – a film that itself is constantly crossing and combining different contexts (most notably, as already the title shows, Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando* with the phenomenon of the Freak show). I see these interests fusing in one scene in particu-

lar, where two bodies touch – the body of Freak/goddess Orlanda Zyklopa (played by Magdalena Montezuma) and the body of department store announcer Helena Müller (played by Delphine Seyrig). However, the two bodies do not touch directly since a glass door is between them. And as if to highlight this separation, paint is spilled onto the glass. Yet paradoxically, the paint, as it is dripping down the transparent surface, becomes an interface for haptic encounter: Seyrig’s hand spreading the red paint across the surface with each wiping motion constantly reconfigures what can be seen and what cannot. She handles the partition between her own and the other body not as a clear boundary but rather as a semi-opaque painting surface that can be continuously reshaped. The visible and the invisible literally flow together in the movement of hand and paint on glass. Limits become fluid.

Not only does this scene seem to reflect on cinema’s own paradoxical mediality (the sheet of glass as an analogy to the lens of the camera and to the invisible fourth wall of the cinema screen as a screen which renders visible while at the same time hiding (“screening off”) something else); but it is also in this very concrete and visible liquefaction of separations that I see the topic of non-normative bodies addressed. The freakish body exists, according to Elizabeth Grosz, “outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts of and modes of self-definition” (1996, 57). Thus, I would argue, the film scenes enacts – not just in its narrative, but also in its audiovisual form – a media philosophy as well as a reflection on the queer body and combines these two concerns. The scene itself can therefore already be read as a complexly mingled body.

While already having published a short written essay on this (Binotto 2018), making “Crossings” turned out to be something very different than just an audiovisual adaptation of a previous article. While all the discourses outlined above are still present within the video essay, more aspects found their way into the video, some intentionally and some accidentally. My analysis became a re-enactment: Instead of simply inserting Ottinger’s original footage into my own video I captured it by filming its projection onto a sheet of glass behind which I then posited myself, thus repeating the very situation within Ottinger’s film. In doing that, not only is the scholar becoming a filmmaker, but, even more crucially, instead of remain-

ing on the position of an outside observer, I insert myself as participant into the very film scene I am analyzing. The scholar's/film-maker's body blends with the body of the characters in the film as well as with the body of the film material itself. To me, the most satisfying moments of the video essay are then those instances when it is no longer clear what we are witnessing: Are we seeing the paint in Ottinger's film, or the paint that I apply on my glass sheet? Are these the bodies in Ottinger's film or is it my body? Instead of clearly separating all these different modes of existence they begin to intermingle, like in those moments in which my hand seems to touch the hand of Delphine Seyrig or when our faces merge.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that these precious effects were not really visible to me while I was performing: Since the projector was directed at me, I could not see the projected image. Instead, I had to perform "blindly" with the projection only becoming visible to me when applying paint onto the glass in front. However, by applying the paint I became myself less and less visible – yet another re-take on the above outlined dialectics of visibility and invisibility in cinema. Finally, the resulting blurry and unclear images of my video essay could be an example of what Alan O'Leary more recently has called a "nebular epistemics", a form of videographic practice that is "speaking from a condition of immersion in a phenomenon" (2023).

Thus, the dense complexity of these mere four minutes – a complexity I feel unable to fully understand or describe – was the result of a mostly "blind" and unrehearsed performance. Very much in opposition to the scientific principle of reproducibility, I can neither repeat this video essay nor was it possible to fully prepare for it. Instead – and very much like the film scene it is engaging with – this video essay functions as a stage for the elusive and uncontrollable to manifest. Still, the spontaneous performance is grounded on years of research into this particular film and its manifold topics. Thus, the performance, for all its unpredictability, is very much connected to, resulting from, and again pointing to theoretical arguments such as those outlined above. Performance and reflection, iterable argument and non-iterable event surround and cross each other mutually, like the topological figure of a Klein bottle. Adding to this paradoxical mingling of iterability and non-iterability is the fact that the video, while showing a non-iterable performative act is



presented to us not as a single performance, but rather as a video that can be shown repeatedly.

Paradoxes such as these have of course been thoroughly discussed in the context of performativity studies and in regards to questions of embodied research (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2012, Spatz 2015, Spatz 2020). Yet their implications are still not fully recognized when it comes to videographic practice in an academic context. The resistance to do so, I suspect, has to do with how the video essay seen as an experimental performative approach puts into question the notions of academic scholarly expertise and authority. To take the example of “Crossings”: In a very literal sense I present myself in this video essay, but I present myself not as I would normally do when standing as a scholar in front of an academic audience. Rather than just presenting theoretical arguments, I am “doing” them – experimentally, gingerly, not pretending to be in full command. And as in the video my body is mingling with the film body, so too does the mingled body of the video essay disintegrate the body of scholarly authority.

As I argued elsewhere, the scholarly practice of video essay is thus revealed to be a “parapraxis” – a practice that does not claim complete control but which is opened up to disruptions, deformations, and contingencies, seeing them not as mere accidents but as critical encounters and forms of thought (Binotto 2021). Accordingly, “Crossings” allows for a crossing of scholarly knowledge and accidental event, not only within the video essay but also within my body and perception, as well as within the body and the perception of the audience. And what the video essay asks of their makers and viewers is a form of engagement that does not end with cognitively understanding the video’s argument but tries to decenter our bodies and perceptions within and through the video.

#### **4. “gestures of thought: hold”**

This video essay from 2023 is the first in a new series on bodily gestures as forms of thought. The topic of the first video in the series, the gesture of holding, is ubiquitous and banal, but also foundational: just think of how we were all first carried and held as not yet born children. We hold something, we hold each other, we hold ourselves as much as we are held by others, by structures, by gravity. Not surprisingly, moments of holding in cinema are common-



[Fig. 4: Screenshot from “gestures of thought: hold”]

<https://vimeo.com/858392950/8773b09f74>

places – but understood not just in a deprecating but also literal sense of a place of and for the commons, as something we all share and which *holds* us together.

Thus, we could reflect on the rich meaning gestures of holding assume in cinema – a topic discussed repeatedly by Alain Bergala in his collection of texts *La création cinéma* – a book which I then hold in my video (Bergala 2015), (see also the video essay “Tensions” by Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin using Bergala’s concept of the interval for their film analysis). However, from film moments showing holding gestures I move to myself holding film objects: a camera, a film can, finally asking the question how to hold a film. Indeed, the paradox of holding gestures in films is that they are given to us not as an image held still but as moving images. Actually, things are even more complicated: the moving images, although never holding still, are also not continuously moving; rather, analogue film cameras and projectors move the film strip not continuously but intermittently. We thus recognize film as rather a combi-

nation or mingling of slipping and holding. It is this combination of stillness and movement, as it forms the basis of cinematic illusion, that I then enact by recreating a classic of experimental cinema, Gary Beydler's *Pasadena Freeway Stills* – a film that itself is a mingled body, as much experimental performance as it is a media theoretical lesson on the technology of film (cf. Minas 1989, 249-250).

But while Beydler uses views of the Pasadena freeway to present cinema's dialectic between still and moving images, the images I work with come with more film historical baggage. They are from Robert Wiene's 1920 classic *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and more specifically from the scene in which the sleepwalking Cesare is first introduced and brought to life by his oppressor Caligari – a moment therefore that itself is torn between control and letting go. This seems even more poignant when we consider how much this film and this scene in particular have been discussed in relation to questions of the control and destruction of human bodies (cf. Kaes 2009, 45-86).

Here I become part of the cinematic apparatus, enacting what otherwise a camera would do and thus performing and explaining film technology at the same time. Instead of the scholar as a "talking head", I become a "doing body" (whose head is not to be seen). Still, the actions of the body are as much theoretical as they are physical.

In doing so I not only reference Beydler and the tradition of self-reflexive experimental cinema. But I also react to the research of fellow videographer Katie Bird on filmmaking labor. In particular, I react to her desktop documentary video essay "With a Camera in Hand, I Was Alive" and the introduction to this piece in the journal NECSUS (Bird 2023). Both in her video essay and the introduction Bird highlights the physicality and embodiment of camera work, while also connecting the holding of a camera to other practices of holding, like – most notably – holding a child. Obliquely, but all the more movingly, Bird thus crosses the personal with the professional, the mechanical with the breathing, the feminist intervention with economic analysis. And eventually, when she claims that her video will remain an unfinished piece, she asks the question how to continue a scholarly research project while letting it go. That we can hold onto something by letting it go, is an idea in which Katie Bird's work resonates with me both professionally and personally, and which I take as a productive artistic method as well as a radical

scholarly position. It touches me to an extent that I cannot really fully express, and it is this to which I try to respond, performatively and analytically, in my own video essay.

### **5. Towards videographic vulnerability and a more vulnerable academia**

The idea of holding on through letting go should also have major consequences for how to think of scholarly practice. It could be taken as a plea for letting go of a certain kind of “scholarly performance” which is often concerned with proving established knowledge and control, and instead dare to show yourself and your argumentation as vulnerable. It is such a “videographic vulnerability” (Kreutzer and Binotto 2023) that I see at work in Katie Bird’s video and to which I would want to expose both myself and my audience through video essay work. With that I try to make a plea for a more vulnerable academia, an academia not so much of competition and ratings but of unsettling exploration. A plea for space within academia open for the individual and collective vulnerabilities of those engaged in its institutions. A video essay practice of unsettling embodied research that allows the personal and the theoretical, the historical and the experimental to mingle and cross could play an essential role in this project.

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