CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE

As is so often the case, we use technology without really understanding it, and when Charlemagne Palestine crashed into the video camera in the early 1970s, he did so in an infantile way. The medium itself was infantile. It was light. There were no credentials, no ancient blood, no education, no great declarations, and no passwords. It was an experiment, and Palestine came to it without the burden of understanding it. It never occurred to him to be Marshall McLuhan as well as Charlemagne Palestine.

Contemptuous of too much knowledge in art, Palestine forces it to wait outside. "I hate the intelligence in art sometimes, you know." The yield reflects this. The videos are raw performance documents that happened almost exclusively at the invitation of others, and were made against what we might call the constructivist approach. Done without rehearsal, premeditation, or scrupulous editing, they have none of the language of scripted video. The camera would turn on and Palestine would emote with all the stops out. In them, he is like a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn. He has confessed that when these performances ceased to be news to him, they ceased to come with a substantive, emotional self. Palestine, in order to repay the attention we might give them, needed to be as unknowing of what might happen as the audience.

The aesthetic fact of the matter is that the complete absence of any refinement makes the aesthete's experience of his videos jarring, if not grueling. This is not something exclusive to Palestine. In a culture deeply uncomfortable with direct emotion, any expressive content that is unmediated by conventional form feels barbarous. We even have a back up convention for mediating this feeling: the primitive or exotic, which Palestine's work has always been hazardously bundled under.

As introduced in *Body Music I* and *Body Music II*, the videos alternate between objective and subjective points of view, between performances for a camera and performances with a camera. In the former, *Body Music I*, Palestine performs for a camera. He is isolated and hysterical. In the latter, *Body Music II*, the camera is held by Palestine while he is running, grunting, and chanting in an empty room. Here the camera, (and later the screen) becomes an extension of his body, placing the viewer in the position of a voyeur, as well as a surrogate who sees through his subjective point of view. The image shakes underneath his heavy exertion. It is comfortless. He is an animal out of breath. He is working. Most of the work is internal—a definition of which we might find in Saul Bellow's *Augie March*:

> Hard, hard work, excavation and digging, mining, moling through tunnels, heaving, pushing, moving rock, working, working, working, working, working, panting, hauling, hoisting. And none of this work is seen from the outside. It's internally done. It happens because you are powerless and unable to get anywhere, to obtain justice or have requital, and therefore in yourself

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Body Music I, 1973–74, 12:54 min, B&W, sound; *Body Music II*, 1973–74, 8:09 min, B&W, sound; *Internal Tantrum*, 1975, 7:35 min, B&W, sound; *Running Outburst*, 1975, 5:56 min, B&W, sound; *You Should Never Forget the Jungle*, 1975, 11:09 min, color, sound; *St. Vitas Dance*, 1975, 8:50 min, color, sound; *Dark Into Dark*, 1979, 19:28 min, color, sound

Following pages: excerpt from Zippay, Lori. "Body Music: Charlemagne Palestine's Video Rituals." *In Running n Chanting n Falling n Ranting*, by Charlemagne Palestine. Milan: Alga Marghen, 2013.

Palestine's video works of the 1970s are suis generis—visceral, raw, urgent, cathartic. While his video works must be seen in dialogue with Palestine's music and performances (his signature objects—stuffed animals, cognac, scarves—appear across media), they also speak to the specific conditions of early video art practices and the wider alternative art scene and countercultural sensibility of the era.

Palestine's unruly, unpredictable performance videos emerged in the context of an equally unruly and unpredictable landscape of art making in the 1970s. As art practices moved away

from object-making towards an emphasis on process, the prevailing discourses of conceptual art and post-Minimalism were manifested in the dematerialized gestures of Body Art and performance, and in hybrid forms such as installation, experimental music, expanded cinema, intermedia art, and video. The nascent video art scene was further cross-pollinated with generative ideas and influences that ranged from technology and television to cybernetic theory and political activism. The presiding spirit was one of experimentation, ad hoc and collective processes, and improvisation, a renegade ethos tracked in the decade's underground arc from counterculture to punk.

Palestine's personal and art-making histories—and his formative involvement with video—chart an eclectic map of the international alternative art world of the 1970s, from the fertile and fluid creative mix of the downtown music, performance and experimental art scenes in New York's SoHo, to seminal European video production and alternative art spaces in Florence, Cologne and Amsterdam, with important early stops at CalArts (with Simone Forti, Nam June Paik, Stan Brakhage, Allan Kaprow, and others) and the intermedia art scene in Buffalo, New York.

The trajectory of Palestine's engagement with video is also marked by important encounters with a series of influential women who played significant roles in the international artworld and the alternative art and video scenes in the 1970s—and who served as instigators, inspirations or patrons for Palestine's video pieces. Key amongst them was legendary art dealer Ileana Sonnabend. Palestine's association with Sonnabend and her gallery at 420 West Broadway in SoHo, which focused on American and European conceptual art, began in the early 1970s. Palestine credits Sonnabend with "bringing him to video" while at the Festival d'Automne in Paris in 1973 with Simone Forti. (Body Music I was recorded that year in Paris.)

"TV is like a pencil," John Baldessari asserted in 1977—that is, just another art-making tool. Early video art stakes out a distinctive ecology of this new medium: Unlike film, video allows one to see instantaneously what one is recording, on a monitor, during the act of recording. This simultaneity has been so thoroughly absorbed into the vernacular of moving-image production (the omnipresent smartphone camera) that it may be difficult for current viewers to grasp how radical this notion was in the 1970s. Artists and activists were drawn to the rich formal, theoretical, conceptual and cultural implications of the medium's immediacy, instantaneous transmission, and ability to generate closed-circuit feedback. These characteristics drove the conceptual language and political underpinnings of early video practices, from performances for the camera and interrogations of the materiality of the medium to expressions of cultural activism.

Palestine was among the artists who were using the new medium of video as an extension of conceptual performance and Body Art in the early 1970s. The self-reflexivity engendered by video technology gave rise to direct, body- driven performances for the camera that investigated relationships between artist and viewer, public and private, subjectivity and objectivity. With a striking economy of means, artists used their own bodies as art-making material, creating performance actions and explorations of the self that were articulated through the emergent technology. The notion of the video monitor as a mirror is one of the most important and powerful tropes of early studio-based videos, which exploit the intimate space of video and the scale of the video screen. Such close-up, face-to-face encounters with the viewer drive the psychological intimacy and intensity of Palestine's performances for the camera, such as Internal Tantrum and Dark into Dark (1979).

The physicality of early video extended to the equipment itself: the 1/2" Sony Portapak, the first widely available "portable" video system, was heavy and clumsy: cameras weighed over twenty-five pounds; recorders and microphones were separate units, and all were saddled with thick cables. When Palestine runs while holding the camera, the viewer hears and experiences his physical exertion. This physicality extended to video editing, which in the early 1970s was a laborious process. Open reel tapes required two machines to be manually synchronized; the edits were measured, marked and "performed" by hand.

Produced outside of the commercial television industry, many early video works—created by artists who were among the first generation to have grown up with TV—adopt a critical position in relation to television and mass media. Indeed, many of the tropes of early video can be seen as oppositional responses to the conventions and content of television. Extended duration, "real time," and in-camera edits are not only by-products of the limitations of early video technology but are often deliberate counterstrategies to those of television: artist used the medium to "talk back" to the media.

Television directly haunts at least one of Palestine's video works: in the hour- long Andros (1975-76), which is shot entirely from a subjective point of view, a television plays in a darkened apartment as the artist mutters in agitation. (Palestine has called Andros his "early kvetching masterpiece.") He finally explodes in a rage ("I've had it! I don't want to fucking do it anymore!"), swinging the camera percussively with each vocal outburst, the television images lurching violently. Palestine turns the TV off abruptly before escaping into the streets of downtown New York.

The contexts in which these early video works were created, exhibited and disseminated also reflect the distinctive alternative artistic, cultural and political landscape of the 1970s. Many artists and activists were drawn to the notion of art that was variable and reproducible, that could circulate outside of conventional models. The decade saw the emergence of an international network of alternative spaces and support systems for artists working in nontraditional forms, including the emergent medium of video.

In 1970 gallerist and art patron Howard Wise closed his New York gallery, which focused on kinetic art, to found Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) as an alternative paradigm and support system for artists working in the nascent video medium. Among the earliest nonprofit organizations in the U.S. devoted to video as an art form, EAI provided editing facilities for artists and established one of first distribution services for the dissemination of artists' video works. The seminal EAI collection focused on artists experimenting with the electronic medium, such as Nam June Paik, Peter Campus, and Steina and Woody Vasulka, as well as activist video collectives. EAI continues to preserve and distribute artists' video today, representing a collection of over 3,500 media artworks.

Signaling the growing importance of video and film by visual artists to the discourses and systems of contemporary art, one of the most significant early initiatives for artists working with these media came from within the art world. In 1972 gallerists Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend founded Castelli- Sonnabend Tapes & Films to produce and distribute artists' video works and films by artists. With an emphasis on conceptual, post-Minimalist and performance-based art, Castelli-Sonnabend represented one of the most important and influential collections of early video and film by artists, including Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, and Vito Acconci, among many others. Many of Palestine's key works of the 1970s were produced through Castelli-Sonnabend, which continued until the mid-1980s.

Body Music I and Body Music II, Palestine's first video works, were created under the auspices of art/tapes/22 in Florence, another significant but less well-known locus for early video art. Founded in 1972 by the pioneering Maria Gloria Bicocchi, art/tapes/22 was one of Europe's first video production studios and distribution systems for artists' video. Between 1973 and 1976, a constantly shifting roster of European and America artists working at the nexus of conceptual art, performance and video came to Florence to create video and exchange ideas in Bicocchi's studio. More than 150 seminal video works by artists including Marina Abramovic, Daniel Buren, Jannis Kounellis, and Dennis Oppenheim, came out of this brief but fertile creative experiment. In the 1975 catalogue to the exhibition Americans in Florence/Europeans in Florence, Bicocchi wrote, "It is important to stress that video is a distribution of ideas and not an object—the very fact that it is unlimited is a victory over speculation in art..." In 1970 Howard Wise had written that video would enable art to "move out of the gallery and into the environment...even outer space." It is revealing to note that already in the 1970s, different economic systems governed the dissemination of video, a reproducible medium seemingly resistant to commodification.

Palestine's Body Music was sold in limited editions through Sonnabend Gallery, while organizations such as EAI and art/tapes/22 circulated artists' video as unlimited editions, outside of the art market.

In 1975 Palestine created his first color video works—You Should Never Forget the Jungle and St. Vitas Dance—with yet another major figure in European video and art of the 1970s: Ingrid Oppenheim, an art collector, patron of the arts, and gallerist in Cologne. From 1974 until it closed in 1980, her studio served as an important early video production site for artists and a bridge between video and the artworld. (Oppenheim produced over 150 videos and films by artists such as Klaus vom Bruch, Marcel Odenbach, Sigmar Polke, and Ulrike Rosenbach.) Color video production was still rare in the mid-1970s, and in the paired objective/subjective performances that Palestine produced with Oppenheim, his physical and vocal rituals and emblematic totems—stuffed animals, scarves and cognac—seem to vibrate with electronic hues. Palestine also collaborated with Wies Smals, the founder and director of the pioneering alternative art and performance space de Appel in Amsterdam. In 1977 he and Smals recorded Where It's Coming From, an intensely personal, extended video conversation. With Smals behind the camera, their candid, hour-long dialogue about art making evolves into a confrontation; they question the camera as mediator and catalyst, its relation to control and voyeurism. In a spontaneous echo of Palestine's objective/subjective performances, they briefly switch roles, with the artist commandeering the camera and turning it on Smals.

Palestine's final video piece of the 1970s, the psychodramatic performance Dark into Dark (1979), continues this charged inquiry into the relationship of the performer and audience. The piece begins in a completely blackened space from which Palestine emerges in close-up, his face illuminated with a startling magenta glow. He enacts a powerful monologue in which he confronts the viewer—"you"—face to face. He cackles maniacally, chants, drinks, rants, breaks glasses, and shouts explosively, finally receding back into darkness. His retreat was more than symbolic; in the years following, Palestine turned away from video, largely removing himself from art making and the artworld for two decades.

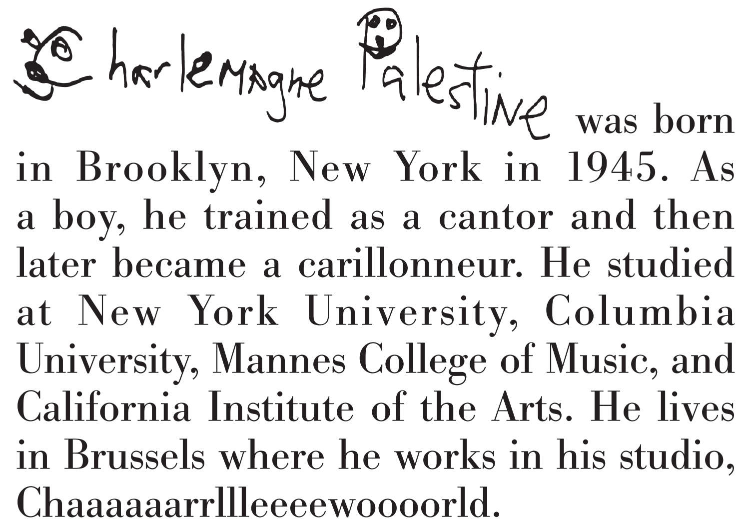
In 2001, after a pause of more than twenty years, Palestine again picked up a video camera to make Ritual in the Emptiness. Circling back to his very first video pieces, Palestine revisits the subjective point of view and hand-held camera techniques of Body Music II and other seminal performances of the 1970s. He moves through the vast spaces of an abandoned factory, vocalizing forcefully and rhythmically, breathing heavily, his voice resonating into the void. Again the viewer sees through the artist's eyes, moves with the artist's body. Although Ritual in the Emptiness echoes the earlier videos, Palestine ultimately departs from the past to update the psychological narrative: his performance is bookended by the almost ghostly presence of another, solitary individual (the artist's wife), who is glimpsed as the piece begins and before it ends.

Speaking of his renewed engagement with the medium after more than two decades, Palestine acknowledges his relation to and distance from his seminal body of video rituals from the 1970s, and perhaps signals his role moving forward: "I'm no longer the victim of that story," he says. "I'm the documentarian."

you labor, you wage and combat, settle scores, remember insults, fight, reply, deny, blab, denounce, triumph, outwit, overcome, vindicate, cry, persist, absolve, die and rise again. All by yourself! Where is everybody? Inside your breast and skin, the entire cast.

The impulse to perform like this is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only secondarily, in the way any compulsion tries to justify itself. For Palestine, the point in performing has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what he feels. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for diaristic behavior he may envy, but does not possess on camera. Instead, these taped performances give shape and habitation to what Palestine calls, “the vocal-physical responses of a species caught in a room.” The sounds and psychology of self-encapsulation are these videos’ primary subject and material. They have nothing to do with the external world. Palestine is aware, of course, that there is a world out there that functions without his art. There are the large-scale events of history—wars and elections and environmental disasters—yet his videos are actively not a part of that world.

Solipsism is so endemic to Palestine’s videos that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of his work. Solipsism is an unbearably complicated problem for the mind, and when its name is called in art it is usually done so in a derogatory way. I don’t mean it as such. To know this solipsism is to understand the limit and great fortitude of Palestine’s work. Alone in an empty room with the first technology that allowed for the simultaneous recording and transmission of an image, Palestine tries to assert his own existence, he tries to get the sounds not only out but down, trusting them neither to the insubstantial country of the mind nor to the transient nature of chords and air and ear. To assert one’s own existence, that is the hope of so much art, isn’t it?



was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1945. As a boy, he trained as a cantor and then later became a carillonneur. He studied at New York University, Columbia University, Mannes College of Music, and California Institute of the Arts. He lives in Brussels where he works in his studio, Chaaaaaarrllleeeewoooorld.

CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE

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Curated by Mark Lewis with the help of Lawrence Kumpf and Robert Snowden. These videos were shown as part of a series of performances by Charlemagne Palestine.

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