

## Essay by Thomas Beard, "Lost Broadcasts: Videos by Eileen Maxson"

is this on??  
thomas beard

In the summer of 1965 Norelco lent Andy Warhol a prototype of a video camera they were developing in the hopes that his association with the equipment would be a boon to the brand. And while the famously prolific artist left behind nearly a dozen half-hour tapes shot with the new system, today not one of them is viewable. The slant scan processing used to develop the product obsolesced more rapidly than the helical scan format favored by Norelco's competitors of the day, and the efforts of curators to find or build a device for playback proved futile, the record of Warhol's earliest work in the medium amounting to a heap of lost signals, an archive of the unknowable. Curiously enough, the only visible evidence that does exist of these early experiments in electronic art can be found in his 16mm double projection *Outer and Inner Space*. Both films star Edie Sedgwick sitting alone while her lo-fi visage runs on the television behind her, all four Edies apparently conversing with someone off-camera.

As Callie Angell has noted, the structure of the piece gives the impression that Sedgwick is engaged in a *tête-à-tête* with herself, her image and by extension, I would argue, with television, with video itself. More than simply an interesting or overlooked episode of art history, the anecdote about Warhol also gets to the heart of what's so compelling about the work of Eileen Maxson. Her videos evoke a world of faulty transmissions, moribund formats, and women under the influence of both. Each elegantly crafted tape conjures up a hidden history of media, one that emphasizes its most marginal and ephemeral forms, honing in on the strange powers and subtle pathos of, say, a botched broadcast, and celebrating the shifting material qualities of a medium that has remained in flux since its inception.

The title of one of her best-known pieces, *Tape 5925: Amy Goodrow*, reveals the VHS tape's importance as an *objet*, not as a precious, editioned, commodifiable object ready for the art market, but rather the opposite, overlooked and languishing with thousands like it in the imagined stacks. Taking the shape of a homemade audition video for reality television, where a young co-ed, played by Maxson, submits a tale of illicit love, she's effectively rescued this face in the crowd from obscurity by willing it into being. *Amy Goodrow* is, fundamentally, a work about transitions. On the one hand, it marked a new phase in Maxson's practice, her first significant performance for the camera, a hallmark that garnered her numerous accolades, from a major award like The Texas Prize to inevitable comparisons with artists like Cindy Sherman. Though on the other hand, and perhaps most crucially, it was the point where she began exploring the poetics of VHS, already on its deathbed and in the process of being phased out in 2002 when the tape was made. Traces of the format are everywhere apparent, from the block-lettered PLAY against the blue screen in the beginning, a flash of video snow, and the especially striking sequences when the tape is fast-forwarded,

slicing Amy's face into scrambled abstraction and obfuscating the confessional. Like most of her videos, like Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space*, there's more than one layer of sound at work, multiple dialogues, both literal and aesthetic. Here it takes the shape of a distracted casting executive, the sounds of his off-screen futzing audible throughout.

There's a temptation to consider *Amy Goodrow* as prescient of YouTube, the MySpace intro, a generation whose familiar relationship to vernacular media has made them all too ready to project themselves—or least their image, their formerly private narratives—out into the ether for an invisible audience, but in the end, Maxson's videos are far more interesting as markers of failure and uncertainty than mere blind exhibitionism. *DISED 2604: Prof. Catherine Poplar* finds her as a dowdy, ever-sighing distance education lecturer attempting to deliver the brilliantly titled talk "Existentialism and Stephen King: The Artist's Role in Society According to The Shawshank Redemption", but the taping is doomed from the get-go thanks to a loud constant hum, a mic dropping in and out. Though more explicitly playful and humorous than *Amy Goodrow* or *Your Weekend Forecast*, with Nora Gamble, where Maxson takes the role of a self-conscious meteorologist stumbling in her efforts to describe weather patterns while Top 40 and homeland insecurity fades in and out of an office radio nearby, all are imbued with the aura of a forgotten artifact.

They read like anxious dispatches from life at the dawn of a new millennium, where the limits of language have run aground upon the rapidly eroding shores of technologies past and present. More recently, in *A Protected Witness* and *Tonite (Reprise)* the words of Maxson's personae have not simply been muffled but obliquely replaced in their entirety with song lyrics, the latter also serving as a provocative riff on another online idiom—the cover video—re-situating the stuff of bedroom solos as a flashbulb-besieged press conference, and raising uneasy questions about what's at stake in offering ourselves up for public consumption.

This notion of video as a damaged, imperfect system that we nevertheless strive to communicate through and exist within manifests itself most profoundly in *Grand Opening*, a kind of poignant summation for her emerging body of work. Completely silent, it presents an exchange between Maxson, a stunned contestant, and an off-screen reporter that's relayed through closed captioning. "TELL US WHY YOU'VE BEEN WAITING HERE..." they ask, as the image falters and brightly colored swaths of static—green and blue and pink—bleed through. She laughs, "YOU KNOW I'M STILL NOT REALLY SURE." A pause, still slipping away:

I GUESS IT FELT  
HOPEFUL SOMEHOW

EVEN TO LOOK FORWARD

[ANCHOR] I THINK WE LOST HER