ARLINDO MACHADO discusses the origins of video art in Brazil.
His topics explore the impact of emerging technologies, dominant socio-cultural issues and also, artists' responses to the repressive political regime.
This audio-only interview with Vivian Ostrovsky, produced by the BFVPP in October 2018 in São Paulo is organized into four sections, with a total length of 64 minutes.

A selection

1st part:
Arlindo Machado: I am Arlindo Machado, I'm a professor at USP [University of São Paulo] in the field of Radio, Film and Television, but which also includes video, video art, experimental cinema, media in general. Everything that is created using electronic means. I was someone who was very interested in cinema, but then I thought cinema is too obvious, everybody discusses cinema. And there was an art form emerging that nobody was talking about, which was video art. It was something different. And the video artists made a point of marking the dividing line: "We're not making movies, we're making video art. It's another experience, also audiovisual". I got into it because I thought it was interesting to talk about Ingmar Bergman, about [Michelangelo] Antonioni, and it is, but it's so obvious! And I got into video art, right at the beginning. That's when I met Sonia Andrade, and Letícia Parente, well no, because she was already dead, but others, like Fernando Cocchiarale, Paulo Herkenhoff, Rafael França... I was very good friends with Rafael França, who lived in the United States for a long time and died of Aids, he did very interesting work on the subject of homosexuality.
02:07
AM: So I started to think that there was potential there, a new field, there were a lot of people working with it. Here in São Paulo we had ASTER [Study Center (1978-1981)], which was a video art center – it was sort of like a school and also a gallery. There were a lot of people involved in video art, and then I realized that it wasn't a small field, no, it was a big field.
When does video art begin? Technically, in 1974.
Vivian Ostrovsky: What was the first video that you saw?
AM: Sonia Andrade's, her series. We invited her to come to São Paulo, she came and showed us the videos, we discussed them...
VO: And who was the audience?
AM: It was a university crowd.
VO: And where was it, at ASTER?
AM: No, I did that one at PUC [Pontifical Catholic University] of São Paulo. I organized several exhibitions, real exhibitions, like, every week an artist, every week an artist and their work on display. Then Sesc [Social Service of Commerce] opened up their space, the auditorium. That was better, there was a larger, more diverse audience.
03:45
VO: Did you have monitors at PUC?
AM: Television. It wasn't very sophisticated back then, it was television and VCRs. I really

don’t think it’s the size of the screen or the resolution of the image matter, it’s the ideas.
04:12
VO: There's an issue today, because the video was originally made for the shape of monitors and TVs made at the time, and today, when it's projected wherever it is, in museums or rooms, the format changes. What do you think about that?
AM: The format can be programmed, with these current screens, you can set it to use a traditional TV screen format. The problem is the resolution. The resolution seems strange, because it's low, and people who are used to high resolution find it strange. I think low resolution is beautiful. It's a draft. It's like an engraving. An engraving is not a painting.
VO: It's like the relationship between a Super-8 and an HD image, too. I think Super-8 is more attractive than HD.
AM: I think so too. I think that a low resolution image is more interesting than a high resolution image, because it's more conceptual. If the image doesn't have an appeal, doesn't have enough beauty, you're not looking at the quality of the image, you're looking at the idea behind it. It's more of an epistemological question. You pay attention to what the artist is trying to say, and not to the embellishment they make of the image, with the quality of an overdeveloped camera. Sometimes the video has nothing to say, but it's beautiful. The image is fascinating, but that’s all it does.
06:30
AM: That's why I like the first video, the first video art made with extremely rudimentary means. The image from a Portapak camera was of extremely poor quality. It was black and white and had very low resolution. You couldn't edit it. You either did everything in one shot, or you cut it and taped it together (laughs). So, it was rudimentary. 07:17
VO: And there is one thing in common, in any case, among what we call The Pioneers. Almost all of them showed performances in intimate situations. Do you see a reason for that, for that group of videos of performances, often about the body and in situations at home?
AM: Basically the first video was performative. But it was performative as a document. Sonia Andrade, for example. She worked with a kind of self-torture. She wrapped her face in thread, she nailed her fingers to boards. All of her work is based on personal performances. But they are recorded performances, not performances that are directly related to the context, although Sonia Andrade has also created pieces in which she works with unrecorded performances. She has this piece that I find fantastic: she places a television, usually at the entrance to an exhibition, and she appears on the television and says: "Please turn off the television, turn off the television". And she keeps talking. “I beg you, please turn off this television”. She keeps begging until somebody turns it off.
09:20
VO: It's like a mantra.
AM: Until somebody goes over and turns it off. That’s it. The performance is over.
VO: But she says no one turns off the TV.
AM: Nobody has the guts.
2nd part:
Clarisse Riveira: Could you comment on Anna Bella Geiger's work as well, please?
Arlindo Machado: I don't know Anna Bella Geiger's work very well... I know her better than I

do her work. She's a personality in Brazilian video art. She helps people, she contributes to their work. I just like that piece with the stairs.
Vivian Ostrovsky: Passagens (1974).
AM: Passagens. That work with the stairs is interesting, but I don't think she's on the same level as Letícia Parente and Sonia Andrade. I think they were both radical. What I think about Anna Bella is that she has a small body of work as a video artist - not that it's bad, it's interesting - but she was a central figure in the articulation of the group. I remember that in Rio de Janeiro she would bring people together. I once went to a gathering at her house and she brought the video artists together. I think she played a kind of a curatorial role.
01:30
VO: Also with São Paulo.
AM: Also with São Paulo. She was always here. I've been to dinner with her. She wasn't prejudiced against São Paulo or against the artists from São Paulo, whom she loved and sought out. Anna Bella is a very spontaneous, giving character. And she was a charismatic figure in video art, unlike other artists who did very powerful work, but were difficult people. Anna Bella, on the other hand: she tried to gather, appease, that's the side of her that I find most interesting, a more curatorial side, more of a "let's organize an exhibition, let's not refuse".
VO: And there was Analivia Cordeiro's first video dance, which was very different.
AM: Analivia Cordeiro is a dancer, she does dance and choreography. She developed a piece for television, specifically for that medium, and with the resources of TV Cultura. But that was very early on.
VO: According to your book, it was in 1973.
AM: Yes. It was the year before.
VO: With equipment from her father's lab, Waldemar Cordeiro.
AM: No. It was with resources from TV Cultura. She's Waldemar Cordeiro's daughter. But she didn't use...
VO: But I thought she did, because he had the computers. I know he never saw the work, she never showed it to her father.
AM: No, but she used the resources of the TV station.
04:31
AM: Well, there's some confusion in the world of Brazilian video art about when it started because we don't really know what video art is. What is video art? It's art made with electronic means, not with photochemical means, as in cinema. The origin of Brazilian video art is considered to be in 1974, when a group of artists from Rio made a series of works, including Letícia Parente, Sonia Andrade, Paulo Herkenhoff, Fernando Cocchiarale, Miriam Danowski... They did a show of Brazilian video for an exhibition in Philadelphia. So that's considered to be the origin of Brazilian video art, but it's all relative, because, for example, Analivia Cordeiro had already done a video dance piece a year before, with graphic resources, also computer graphics, that was designed for television, but before that, many Brazilian artists had used the television set as an aesthetic resource. The television as an object. So we wonder. Is this video art? Tunga, for example, or I don't know... Or... Several artists used television as an aesthetic resource in their work, but television as such, like

programming as such... Like Nam June Paik also did some installations, put in some TVs, turned them on to any channel... And left them all on at the same time.
06:58
VO: What was the role played by Walter Zanini, here in São Paulo?
AM: Fundamental. He was the one who introduced a lot of things besides video art, working with microfiche, working with teletext... He experimented with all kinds of technologies. He was really innovative. The best phase of the Biennial and the... Museum of Contemporary Art was under his direction. He made an impact. There are several people writing dissertations about him, about his role in Brazilian art. He wasn't an artist, but he supported everyone who had different, innovative projects. He wasn't afraid, and he didn't stay in the dungeons of traditional art. He moved forward. One of his assistants was the first collector of Brazilian video art, Cacilda Teixeira da Costa. It's rare, this idea of collecting. You collect paintings, but to collect videos is something rare. I have everything. I have everything by Sonia Andrade, everything by Letícia Parente, everything by Rafael França. I managed to get his work, which was..., then, when he died, it was deposited at the MAC and was stuffed in a closet, forgotten. I went there and said: no, I want it. I copied everything. So I have his entire oeuvre, including one that only I have, even they don't have it anymore. There's a piece of his that was brilliant.
VO: But not everyone was enthusiastic. Tell us a little bit about the negative reactions. Because it wasn't so easily accepted.
AM: The negative reaction was from movie buffs, who thought that video was flimsy, that the image was third-rate. Video art never tried to tell a story, they went to a different place. Video art experimented with everything, including technology: chromakey, solarization and all kinds of technical interventions on the image. So it wasn't about telling a story. Video art presented a situation. For example, when Letícia Parente embroidered Made in Brazil on her own skin, that was video art. A personal performance. And there was also a concern on the part of the video art people to differentiate themselves from cinema. To go against the grain and do something different.
12:03
VO: Against the grain of cinema and also against the grain of television.
AM: Yes. Video art, even though it worked with the same technology as television, was a kind of anti-television. It was against television. But lately I've been writing a lot about television. And it surprises me how video art has entered television, and how it has been absorbed by television. If you watch television today, especially good television, you'll see that a lot of video art resources are on television, and also in the movies.
VO: But I don't think it's just on good television, but even in MTV music videos, you can see a lot of influence too. AM: A lot of influence. A lot of the clips almost look like video artwork.
13:17
CR: There's an artist we haven't talked about yet, Regina Silveira.
13:41
AM: I love Regina's work, I'm friends with Regina and I've written a lot of texts about her work, although she's not a video artist. She did some video work back in the 1980s, but she does more installation work, fine art work. Now she's working with virtual reality. She's

versatile, she works on the assumption that there is no such thing as a visual artist, or a video artist, or anything else. What there is, is an artist, and to make her art, she uses

whatever she has at hand - computer, video camera, videotape, it doesn't matter. She's one of the greatest Brazilian artists, one of the most creative. Her video work is minimalist. She tends towards nothingness. Her rule is to erase the image to the point where you can no longer see anything, but she's not an exponent of video art. Her best works are installations.
3rd part:
Vivian Ostrovsky: In those years of 1973 until 1980, Brazil was a very isolated country because of the dictatorship. What were the first works of video art that arrived here? Was it the Biennial, with Nam June Paik, or were there other ways of seeing what was being done in other countries?
Arlindo Machado: Well, during the time when Zanini was running the Biennial, we saw everything. We saw Paik, we saw Bill Viola, Fluxus, Vostell. I think that's when the idea was born that art could be something else. I remember seeing Paik with an advertisement for ice cream. But I don't think it went that way. I think Brazil found its own way. It wasn't based on Paik. And the fact that Brazilian video art was made under the military dictatorship gave it a different power. When you see Sonia Andrade with these videos of latent self-violence that look like self-torture... And Letícia Parente...
VO: Letícia also, when she goes into the closet and tries to hang up her blouse, it is very reminiscent of scenes of torture.
02:00
AM: I think that they are indirectly addressing the violence of the regime. It's not pretty, flowery video art. It's not Bill Viola discussing the question of being; it's not Gary Hill discussing the meaning of life. Brazilian video art in the 1970s refers indirectly to local violence. It's violent, it's sad, it's not flowery.
VO: But it had the advantage of escaping censorship at the time, didn't it? Because nobody was paying attention to video art...
AM: No, because video art is completely independent. You have a camera, you shoot, you edit at home, you don't have to develop... These things, which are generally surveillance fields, are surveillance fields to find out what people are producing. And the departments, the developing and enlarging laboratories, were all connected to the police. And video art was completely independent. It didn't depend on anything, on any agency, on any laboratory. It would leave home completely finished and go to the exhibitions. So there was no way to control it, no way to censor it. That's why no work of video art was censored, even if it was violent, from the point of view of military confrontation. There's that famous work by Paulo Herkenhoff where he eats newspapers...
VO: Estômago embrulhado (1975).
AM: He eats the news that's banned, all the news that's banned, he swallows it, he eats it.
05:48
VO: What about the circulation of the videos? Because Anna Bella, for example, complained about the fact that, after a certain moment, in order for the videos to be seen in other countries, they had to send a reel or, later, a VHS copy. The copies were sent, but they didn't always come back, and the artists weren't always able to reproduce them. That... So how did

these works circulate within the country?
AM: It was difficult, since there wasn't an established scheme, like with movies you have a distribution system. It was shown in art galleries, or in museums, in special sessions, but it never had a distribution system.
06:52
CR: What about the issue of reproducibility?
AM: That's also the artists' fault. Artists aren't willing to give their work away for free. Like today, for example, putting your work on the Internet and making it available. They were very attached to their work. The artists are also to blame. They could have created means of distribution. They always saw themselves as visual artists, like a Tomie Ohtake, an artist who creates a piece, and that piece has a value in itself. And they thought that a video art piece was like a Tomie Ohtake painting, so they wouldn't let it leak out. It would be easy to distribute.
VO: Yes, because it's part of the DNA of video that it can circulate.
08:48
AM: Here in São Paulo, we had this phenomenon take place. An art gallery, Vermelho, it's very avant-garde and it sells not only paintings and prints, but also photography and video art, but they sell it at gallery prices. And they had an opening there once, to launch their new phase, and a group of kids contacted artists and asked for permission to release their work on a system called VCD, which can be read by any DVD player, but is simpler and cheaper. Because the image is recorded on a normal CD. And they put a huge catalog right outside, they set up a stall in front of the gallery and sold video art for the cost of the disc, R$3.00, something like that. The gallery owner was furious, but there was nothing he could do.
10:33
CR: I was reminded of the Filé de Peixe Collective, have you ever heard of them? It's a collective of artists in Rio de Janeiro who have a project called Piratão. And they have, I think, more than a thousand video artworks from all over the world, and they have a jukebox to watch this video art. And then they also sell it for that price, a cheap price, and call it Piratão.
AM: But are they really pirate copies?
CR: Yes, real pirates.
AM: Because pirates don't ask for permission, they just go and copy. It's different in the case of these kids, who had contacted the artists and asked for permission to do this, explaining the project. And the artist, if they're open, accepts. A real artist isn't in it for the money. They want to see their work distributed. They want to be seen, talked about, discussed.
4th part:
Vivian Ostrovsky: What do you think makes those first videos, Letícia's, Sonia's, so fresh and powerful today?
Arlindo Machado: What is immortal is immortal. Why do you see a Leonardo da Vinci and get excited? Why do you see Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and you're still fascinated by it, even today? Why do you see the Battleship Potemkin, which is from 1925, and get excited? Or Dziga Vertov. What is good is immortal, timeless. 01:02
CR: Still on the subject of reproducibility, we're encountering some resistance. The same resistance that artists had to distributing their work freely, they have to preserving it. Our idea is to clean the pieces, restore them, give them to the artist, she'll have a new master, in high

resolution, and also migrate to current technology. I was wondering if you had any suggestions on how to handle this.
AM: I once worked for the Vitae Foundation, which was an international foundation, and Sonia Andrade proposed a collection of video art from the 1970s, including not only her work, but also the work of Anna Bella Geiger, Letícia Parente. Sonia wanted restoration, the works were deteriorating. The question the foundation was asking was: fine, we'll restore it, we'll save it, but then what? What do you do with it? Give it back to the artist? Is society going to spend money to restore a work, and then give it back to the artist? What do they do with it? Put it in a museum? Put it somewhere where everybody can access it? They said, “Restoring is easy, we have the money to restore, but we can't spend money on an individual. This work, once restored, has to benefit people, it has to be available to the public in some way, because if not, it's not worth restoring. Restoring in order to give it back to the artist, who becomes the sole owner, and who continues to own their work? In the end, they refused, because Sonia Andrade didn't agree to make her work available. A filmmaker doesn't think that way. If they want to copy his work, distribute it on DVD, CD, put it on the Internet, he doesn't care, he wants his work to be seen.
05:21
VO: Do you think that the evolution of this media art, from the fringes of the fine arts world, to..., has become mainstream? Do you think that this evolution of technology, more accessible, cheaper, is a threat to video art or, on the contrary, a positive influence?
AM: I think it depends on who’s doing it and who’s using it. Today there are very cheap audiovisual courses available. It all depends on the intelligence of the people who are working with it. Sometimes you see amazing things being done with a cell phone camera. But it's not common. People use these cameras like they used to use cameras in the past, to take portraits, to photograph landscapes, without any intelligence.
07:28
CR: I've got two questions from a friend of yours, Solange Farkas. In your book The Art of Video, you say that the electronic image, through video, distills a different sensibility, at the same time as it poses new problems of representation, shatters old certainties on an epistemological level and demands the reformulation of aesthetic concepts. Almost thirty years after the publication of this book, which is fundamental for understanding the history of video in Brazil, how would you analyze this reflection?
AM: Today everything has changed. Before, there was a divergence between analog and digital. Cinema was analog and video was electronic, at first, then it became digital. Today, what isn't digital? Cinema is digital. It's shot on a digital camera, it's edited on computers and it's shown digitally, through digital projectors. So the old cinema as we knew it is gone. You could say that cinema today is video.
VO: Because even the old classics have been transferred to video.
09:15
AM: You see Murnau, Eisenstein, everything on DVD. So it's hard to think about this issue today. That digital and electronic have changed people’s perception. Today everything is digital, everything is electronic. The change was radical. Although cinema, even though it's totally digital, is still figurative, narrative, as if it were made with film. It hasn't changed because of the new.... Except in the field of digital effects, electronic effects. You see a movie today, a romantic story, it's the same as it was in the 1950s, it doesn't change much. So the fact that technology changes doesn't necessarily mean that people's minds change

too... In the case of video art, that has happened. The transition from analog to digital or electronic created a huge revolution in audiovisual media, but today, where everything is digital, you don't see major differences. This means that a change in technology doesn't necessarily mean an epistemological change, a different way of looking at the world.
5th part:
Clarisse Riveira: We have two questions regarding the pioneers, which are the 1970s generation and the next generation. One, we were wondering why there hasn't been a rapprochement. The 1980s generation, the so-called independent video generation, started making videos. Why didn't the 1970s generation, the pioneers, get closer to it? And also trying to understand this bridge from 1970 to 1980. And also trying to understand that transition from 1970 to 1980.
Arlindo Machado: I don't think there was a contradiction. The 1980s generation wasn't hostile to the 1970s generation. I spent a lot of time with people from the 1980s, they respected it, but they wanted to do something different. And they also knew very little about the 1970s generation. Because the works weren't distributed, they weren't shown. It's difficult to have contact with these works. It's not that they were hostile, no. I think that when they did know them, they respected them. For example, they were very attached to a figure from the 1970s, [José Roberto] Aguilar. And Aguilar continued to be a source of reference for them in the 1980s. So there's no opposition, there's change, but without hostility.
02:10
CR: And the 1970s generation had difficulty making videos, distributing and watching their own videos. From 1980 onwards things became less difficult, there was more access to cameras, editing software, and there was no interest from the 1970s generation in getting closer. There are people who continued to make videos, but in their own little nucleus, in their own corner. And there was no exchange.
AM: Yes, the difference is that in the 1980s artists moved toward the masses, they went to television, to... They went to television, they went to the movies, and they distributed their work on video, they had exhibitions. Then the video festivals began to appear. Videobrasil, first, and then PHZ Vídeo, in Belo Horizonte, and others in Porto Alegre. The second generation wanted to show their work, they wanted people to see it. They had a completely different attitude. They didn't have this problem of value, of having a copyright, of owning the work. They wanted the work to be seen, the more it was seen, the better, which is what gave it prestige. That was the difference with the second generation, to the point where one of the video directors became one of Brazil's greatest filmmakers, Fernando Meirelles. He started out making videos. He had a small production company called Olhar Eletrônico, and they made brilliant videos! There was no jealousy, no opposition to the first generation, I never felt that, on the contrary, when they saw some of the work of the first generation, they were delighted. It was just so hard to see it! The first generation held on to the work, they didn't let it be seen; the second generation showed their work, released it into the world, went on television to show it, went to the cinema to show it, [...] showed it at festivals, a series of video festivals emerged in Brazil. So they were where you could keep up to date, you could see everything that was being produced, it's a different concept.
05:40
CR: Solange's other question is: does it make sense to you to say that the 1980s generation was characterized by a much more intense debate against television, generating new

alternative aesthetics to relate to this medium, than the generation of 1970s pioneers, who established a resistance to television with a more critical confrontation?
AM: The first generation had no connection to television. If they did, it was only in a metaphorical way. The second generation, on the other hand, was critical of television, but they were on television, they came in to make a change. They were critical of a certain kind of television, because they thought television could be something else, something higher, more aesthetic, more innovative. And they went into television for that. They weren't against television, they were against bad television.
07:05
CR: Sonia's work is also critical of television.
AM: But it's a metaphorical critique. She doesn't engage with television, I don't think she even watches it.
CR: She always has her back turned to it.
AM: (laughs) Yeah, there's a video of hers in which she eats feijoada and throws the beans at the screen. It's a bit of a childish attitude towards television, I think. The second generation wasn't so childish, they thought television was an important medium, but it was mismanaged. And they went into television and tried to do something intelligent, something sensitive. Because television and video are the same thing, it's the same technology, it's the same staging, it's the same format, only one is broadcast and the other is not. So, what they wanted was to be broadcast, to reach the masses, not to be stuck in the art gallery ghetto. They wanted to spread their ideas as far as possible and the best medium was television. That’s not to say that they weren't critical of television. Television can be highly criticizable. But it's not a technology thing. You can do some really great things with television. I've just published a second book on television, which is just an analysis of very good, intelligent, apocalyptic, violent television shows, and that show the world we live in very accurately. There are very intelligent people making television. You don't find it easily, you have to look for it. You have to be informed, you have to read, and then you have to look for the shows. That’s how I watch TV. I find information, then I go and look for the programs, but it's interesting when a group that used to make video art decides to go into television and decides to participate in video festivals. It's a different mentality, of circulating your ideas, no hiding, no shutting down, it's open.
10:50
CR: Is there anything else you want to say that we haven't asked you about and that you think is important? The question of time, the timing of the videos, for example?
AM: It varies from artist to artist. Nam June Paik worked at an absurd speed, he would cut away all the time and make a real palimpsest. Another artist, Robert Cahen, for example, from France, can spend five minutes showing a landscape and people crossing through it. So the question of timing is each maker’s style. It's style. When we watch American TV, it's so fast! It's punches from here, punches from there. And gunshots, and people running, and cars crashing into each other. Then we change the channel to a French movie - it's so different! The pace is so different! Everything is so slow! But it's a beautiful slowness, it's not boring. So timing is relative, it depends on who's doing it.
12:40
AM: In short, I think that the whole video art thing is over. Since everything has become video, I don't know how to differentiate anymore. Because, in the old days, video was video, it was made with Portapak or U-matic, unlike cinema, which was made with 35mm film.

The aesthetics were different. Now, especially with computer graphics, with the possibility of intervening in the image, altering the image, I wonder: what is video art today? In my opinion, Jean-Luc Godard's most recent films are works of video art. I think video art was a phase, we've moved on to a different phase.
CR: And what phase are we in?
AM: Audiovisual, which can be intelligent or stupid.
13:58
CR: Would you give any advice to any artist or student who wants to start making audiovisuals that are intelligent and that raise awareness, that touch people?
AM: Don't copy any models. Find your own way, discover your own style and your own theme. The great video artists were like that, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, they had a vision of the world, they had an aesthetic conception. Find your own way, but don't copy anybody. See a lot. It's very important to see. Read, too. Look at the work that has been done, so you know what not to do. There is a certain stereotype of video art, a certain model, at a certain time. In fact, there was a video art fad and everyone was doing the same thing. Video art was something slow, sometimes even in slow motion, on subjects that were generally intimate. Anyway, it became a model. Then everybody started making video art, and video art started to look the same. The important thing is that it doesn't become more of the same, that everyone contributes a different vision.
THE END

with Arlindo Machado, Vivian Ostrovsky, Solange Farkas, Clarissa Rivera