



## A CONVERSATION ABOUT E-FLUX VIDEO RENTAL

**From: Frida Carazzato and Maria Garzia**

**To: Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda**

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**Subject: a conversation about e-flux video rental**

In a moment in which people tend to digitalize their VHS video memories to make them last longer, it is interesting to think that the videos part of the e-flux video rental project have gone through a diametrically opposite process and have been converted to VHS. EVR started in New York in 2004, at a time when cassettes and recorders had already been substituted by digital media, which in turn are now being supplanted by more developed media and, of course, the Internet. The charm of VHS (Video Home System) and video rental, the possibility of watching movies at one's will are some of the key features of EVR. However, in 2004, when you decided to question the idea of distribution, circulation and access to video art, launching your EVR project, you chose VHS instead of DVD. What are the main reasons that brought you to this choice?

**ANTON VIDOKLE:**

In part this had to do with copyright issues: when we started the project, a lot of people were concerned with the possibility of viewers just copying these video works and circulating them without permission from the artists. VHS tapes are low resolution and degrade further if they are copied, so this format did not present the same kind of worries for authors of the works as opposed to digital video format. Also, we were very interested in the obsolescence of a certain commercial technology: often the moment of obsolescence reveals much of the utopianism present at the birth of a certain technology so this was very appealing to us.

Lastly, I think it's important to keep in mind that EVR is an artwork, not a social service to make video art accessible to all. As an artwork it functions very much on the level of potentiality and can be paradoxical and contradictory. I suppose that's the beauty of it...

**JULIETA ARANDA:**

I think that we were both very attracted to the video rental store format, where the video enters the living space of the viewer, as opposed to the usual conditions of circulation which are determined by either the museum/gallery, or by the theater. The nature of film/video work demands that it is viewed (mass media) and yet, most of the works that are part of EVR are commodities (objects produced in limited editions). As Anton mentions, the choice of using VHS as the technological support for EVR, makes it possible for the free circulation of the videos to bypass the economical concerns that the artists or galleries could have.

Six years into the project, the opportunities of enjoying privately EVR material are quickly getting lower: what are your thoughts about this predictable technological limit and how do you face such a problem? How can these questions still be preserved and made available through EVR?

A.V.

We are planning to end traveling the project this year and donate it to a museum in Ljubljana. I think for us EVR was always meant as a temporary project, not a permanent solution to the problem of circulation of video works or a new institution. We are actually rather surprised that it continued for as long as it has...

J.A.

Above all, EVR has been an experiment on circulation, using film and video as a case study, since these formats end up quite trapped once they become art objects. As an experiment, it has lasted much longer than we anticipated (I think we originally thought it was going to be a project of only a few months).

EVR seems to be a mechanism that requires a constant re-thinking of the role of its participants. You as the creators of the project, the curators and the artists who have been the main agents in the development and growth of the EVR collection, every member of the public as home-curator of his/her own selection of movies to bring home: all these actors have a function and together they keep the project alive. Such a dynamic raises a question: who is the author here? When e-flux video rental was first launched in 2004 Brian Sholis had some questions on this topic: "Can we consider them (Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle) the authors of this artwork? What about the curators who selected the videos and the artists who created them? Are they all authors? Are none of them?" (in EVR catalogue vol.1, e-flux and Revolver, printed in EU, 2005, p. 8). At the time the project was still ongoing. How would one answer those questions today?

A.V.

It seems to me that the figure of the author and the question of authorship is something of a fetish in the artistic sphere. Maybe it has something to do with capitalism in the sense that you always need to know who to pay, or in the sense that the presence of a distinct author somehow confirms the value (both financial and artistic) of a work. I think this is largely an illusion. On the other hand, when collective authorship is mentioned, people always imagine some sort of an artistic commune where everyone participates in the same capacity and to the same degree. I think it does not always have to be like that. For example, film making is an interesting form of a collaborative activity where different people do different things and occupy different roles.

I am very interested in the kind of collectivity that allows for various individuals to come together and contribute what they do best to the extent that they want and can, while also retaining freedom to withdraw or be less involved, without ending the project itself. Like many other projects I have been involved in the past years, EVR is a collective undertaken along these lines: very many different people contributed to it in different ways. Julieta and I initiated EVR and maintained it, but it would not have been possible without all this other involvement.

J.A.

I can see how the attribution of authorship can seem complicated in regards to this project. The way I see it, EVR is an artwork conceived by Anton Vidokle and myself. But what I am referring to as artwork, is specifically the structure that we designed for certain material to circulate – EVR does not subsume the videos that are part of it, or the curatorial choices. The work is an investigation on circulation, and it manifests itself in the creation of certain conditions that make this circulation and redistribution possible. After determining this structure, we made the conscious decision of not integrating our own taste into the selection process, so that has been turned over to the many selectors and artists that have taken part in EVR.

and I like to think that the work has inhabited EVR's structure autonomously, without being absorbed and smothered by it. That is what makes the project alive, and collaboratively complex as an experiment, and much more than just an idea of Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda.

There is a regular agreement for borrowing, unusually without charge, EVR material; there are three identical editions of EVR, making it a non-unique art-product; there is the fact that this is a constantly moving project whose distribution can be thoroughly mapped. These three features concretely embody the concepts of distribution and circulation on which the project is based on. Suppose that EVR now ceases to be displayed, in what terms would it be appropriate to talk about EVR after its closure? Would it become a sort of archive? We know you don't like the project to be referred to as an archive though...

A.V.

We are worried about archives. Very often they are used as rather oppressive, authoritative structures by institutions. This is something that we discussed at length from the beginning: we do not want EVR to end up becoming of an authoritative, "important" archive on video art. We would much prefer for it to stay as something more subjective and ephemeral: its better as an artwork, an installation, a record of a project – something that does not have this kind of an institutional claim to represent history of video art, to validate things that are in it or invalidate things that are not included.

J.A.

I completely agree with Anton.

More often than not, archives become systems of exclusion – which is not at all what we set out to do with EVR. I think that EVR has more value as a sculpture / installation (the record of an itinerant circulation platform) than as a collection of videos.

At the very beginning of the project, in Lower East Side, EVR was experienced by the people of the neighborhood as part of their own lives. After that, EVR has been presented in many different contexts, institutions, contemporary art museums, and so forth: how can this displacement change its nature and the way people perceive it? Is placing it in a museum or a biennale – where people are there as "visitors" or as "art-experts" and EVR dynamics necessarily change part of a broader critical rethink of museum institutions themselves?

A.V.

We probably should not romanticize the sort of "neighborhood art project" aspect of this. Yes of course there are differences in doing something independently and in a museum or a biennial, but these are not as you describe: firstly, most people that came to EVR on the Lower East Side were actually artists, art students, curators, writers, academics, etc., in other words professional audiences. Our neighbors came by sometimes, but I don't think any of them actually was interested in watching art videos.

On the other hand, its very important to have such things present within the fabric of city life, even if the general public or community does not participate actively: it still offers some alternative to the standard urban, commercial, capitalist reality: where entrance to the space is premised on a possibility that you will purchase goods or services. So its very very important to create spaces where something else can take place, some other type of exchange or encounter, even if only potentially. It is also very important to try to take art outside of the space of "exhibitions".

Because contemporary artistic production is so de-skilled at this point, it often seems that the only possibility for people to experience art as art, is when it is presented in the institutions of art. This makes

one feel that what makes something art, is merely its inclusion in an exhibition. This is very unfortunate and we should try to create different ways in which art can meet its audiences.

During its first six years, the EVR project has circulated in several cities, many curators have been invited and lots of videos have been added. Therefore, now, you have gathered quite a lot of material and maybe that changed your earlier plans about the whole project. Where would you say that the project is going now, in which way is it developing? Also, would you like to comment on the reactions that this idea of distribution and diffusion caused in the people attending EVR exhibitions?

A.V.

We are still very surprised that the project grew and traveled so much, originally we imagined something much smaller in scale and duration. This probably points to the fact that the project touched some real needs in terms of dissemination and presentation of video work.

J.A.

I think that the best we can say is that the project has been very successful. We set out to propose a circulation model, and it happened to function well beyond the initial experiment.

Membership cards represent an act of responsibility of the borrowers towards the videos and the project, and also a way of "mapping" the project itself. Ever since its beginning, have you noticed any particular tendency in the borrowing process? Have you analyzed in which project editions and contexts people borrowed more videos and actually performed the "aesthetic act" of private home screening?

A.V.

Yes we have been collecting all the membership cards, but have not analyzed or studied patterns just yet, probably because EVR is still traveling. We hope to do this sometime this year and publish a small book based on these cards and information we can deduce from them. Boris Groys defines "autonomous art" as putting "truth and ethics over aesthetic pleasure. Autonomous art is a direct opposite of non engaged art that is made for a pleasure, to satisfy taste – be it mass-cultural pop, elite taste, or institutional taste" (B. Groys, *An Autonomous Artist*, in "Anton Vidokle. Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat", Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2009, p. 70). Can this definition apply to EVR?

A.V.

As usual Groys is quite accurate: while we are not against pleasure, aesthetic, sensual or any other type, it's interesting and important to think of art practices that are not about satisfying tastes, whether they are one's own or others. It's also important to think about needs

J.A.

The idea of placing EVR on one side of the fence – as favoring truth and ethics over aesthetic pleasure – makes me slightly uncomfortable. Autonomy is a big part of our projects, of course... but with EVR we have always thought in terms of the social poetics of circulation, and we have discussed extensively about the aesthetic function of circulation. I am not in favor of indulgent art, but I don't think that it is accurate to make an equivalence between aesthetic pleasure and non-engaged art.

Where will EVR be presented after Italy?

J.A.

We have no plans... After all our attempts at retiring the project, I think it may finally be over after this.

**FONDAZIONE GIULIANI**  
Via Gustavo Bianchi 1  
00154 Rome Italy

**W** [fondazionegiuliani.org](http://fondazionegiuliani.org)  
**M** [info@fondazionegiuliani.org](mailto:info@fondazionegiuliani.org)  
**T|F** +39 06.57301091