# WELCOME TO **VIDEOLAND:** JAIME DAVIDOVICH ONTAPE

than a house. It's a pioneer spirit.

People in public access are either very courageous or have egos bigger

Jaime Davidovich<sup>1</sup>

## WELCOME TO VIDEOLAND: JAIME DAVIDOVICH ON TAPE Brian Bentley, PhD

The arrival of cable television in SoHo in 1976 marked a watershed in the history of conceptual art.<sup>2</sup> The main protagonist of that story is Jaime Davidovich (1936–2016), an Argentine artist who relocated to the United States in 1962.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1970s and early '80s he assumed an eminent role as an advocate for art on television, helping catalyze a revolution in how art was produced and disseminated.

Davidovich was a founding member of Cable SoHo—a committee of artists and video organizations based in lower Manhattan that sought to transform the media landscape by experimenting with cable as an artistic medium.<sup>4</sup> Cable SoHo made waves, but its focus on video art was too narrow for Davidovich. He formed the Artists' Television Network (ATN) to harness the full capacity of public access, presenting a wide assortment of experimental art side by side with popular television.<sup>5</sup>

ATN publicized vanguard theater and music and produced interviews, lectures, and roundtable discussions. As executive producer, Davidovich granted a platform to eminent artists and critics including Laurie Anderson, John Cage, Gregory Battcock, and Annette Michelson. But it is when Davidovich stepped in front of the camera to host his own program that he realized the larger potential of public access. The Live! Show, which Davidovich billed as a "variety show of the avant-garde," was recorded in front of a studio audience and cablecast live on Manhattan Cable on Friday nights during its sporadic production from 1979 to 1983.6 It was the fulfillment of his dream to explore the artform of television itself, rather than to merely transmit art via television. To appreciate the originality and impact of that experiment, it is necessary to view it in the context of Davidovich's interrogation of form up to that point. Indeed, *The Live!* Show was not an endeavor separate from his creative production, but an artistic project executed within the public sphere of television.



1. SoHo, 1980

#### TAPE AS ART

Davidovich was a precocious artist in his youth. He shouldered a position at the forefront of Argentina's burgeoning Informalismo movement in the late 1950s and early '60s while still receiving a traditional artistic education in his native Buenos Aires and in Uruguay.7 His paintings from the latter part of that period are typified by expressive textural elements and linear allusions to the horizon. They are ethereal compositions inspired in part by his perception of the monotonous terrain of the Argentine Pampas as viewed out the window of a moving train at night [Fig. 2]. That landscape was one he came to know in 1961–62 during his appointment as art superintendent of the Escuela Superior de Artes Visuales in Bahía Blanca, a provincial city about a day's journey south of the Argentine capital.

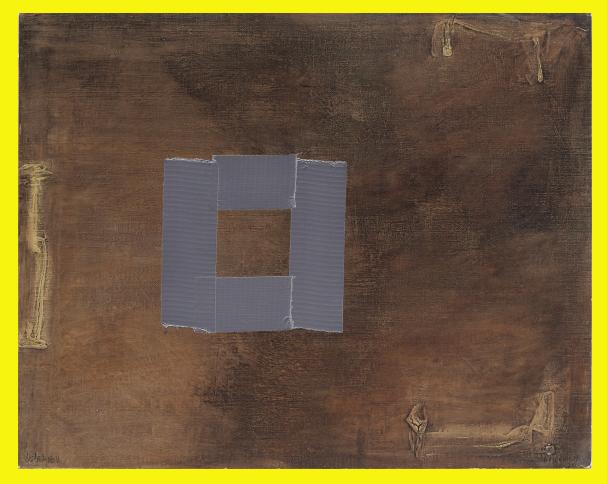
Neither entirely monochromatic nor wholly abstract, Davidovich's gestural paintings manifest his stated desire "to capture an instant in

painting that does not have a beginning or an end." He executed many of these works on unstretched canvas in order to suggest that their imagery was not restricted to their visible boundaries. For an artist whose methods of aesthetic inquiry would prove astoundingly consistent across various media, it is revealing that Davidovich has affirmed a conceptual affinity between the formal experimentation of those early paintings and the videotapes he later produced. His fascination with the durational capabilities of video echoes the limitlessness he explored through painting.

An even stronger link between his early work and his embrace of electronic media is Davidovich's signature use of adhesive tape. Having arrived in New York with a grant from the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Davidovich achieved a conceptual breakthrough in the mid-1960s in the form of this ordinary material. Tape entered his work as an irreverent means by which to affix his paintings directly to the wall—a gesture that has been described as a move beyond the "furniture' of painting." 10



2. Landscape Pampas I, 1963



3. Painting and Duct Tape, 1963-71

His abandonment of frames, stretchers, and supports was a deliberate affront to the sanctity of the art object. Yet the tape still emphasized the conventional materiality of the paintings.

Going a step further, he soon incorporated tape directly into his canvases. At first, he reworked earlier paintings, adding utilitarian strips of adhesive tape to his hand-painted compositions [Fig. 3]. The resulting assemblages monumentalize his aesthetic progression away from traditional materials and towards his iconoclastic dismissal of the discrete art object. In turn, Davidovich brought this investigation to its logical conclusion: he began assembling pictures solely out of tape. The neat overlapping rows that comprise the early tape paintings resemble exaggerated brushwork but efface the hand of the artist altogether. Suggestively, Davidovich would later compare these compositions to the gray bars that were broadcast on Argentine television before programming began each evening.<sup>11</sup>

Around this time, Davidovich relocated from New York to Cleveland where he lived from 1967–73 and came into his own as a conceptual artist. In 1969, he began expanding his tape paintings into room-sized installations, transforming the gallery itself into the subject of attention. He explained, "The concept is to create a visual experience without boundaries or frame around the artwork. The relationship of the subject and background is eliminated ..." In the following years, site-responsive postminimalist installations dominated his creative output. He applied tape to beams, ceilings, baseboards, stairwells, and other unexpected sites, either eschewing or engulfing the planar surface of the walls to which art was usually confined [Fig. 4].

His 1972 exhibition at the New Gallery inaugurated a more explicitly interrogative approach to institutional space. He moved beyond the walls of the gallery, adhering a fifteen-inch-wide strip of tape onto a stretch of sidewalk leading to the museum [Fig. 5]. Davidovich's professed intention was to "reverse the subject-object relationship." 14





5. *Tape Project (Sidewalk)*, New Gallery, Cleveland, 1972

By intervening directly in the built environment, he created new audiences out of unwitting subjects. Rather than confronting only those individuals predisposed to entering an art gallery, he confronted all passersby. The same generative confrontation later informed his enchantment with television, wherein anyone flipping through the channels at home could encounter his actions.

Many of Davidovich's works from the early '70s were executed on a scale that exceeds the viewer's power of perception. To achieve this within the gallery, he explored unused spaces such as the multistory stairwell of the Whitney Museum's Breuer Building. For the 1973 Biennial he executed a tape installation of approximately thirty-five feet that hung from the building's top floor down to its lowest level [Fig. 6]. His interest in investigating viewers' physical encounters with works of art led Davidovich to conceive of large-scale public projects divorced from institutional support. With Railroad Bridge Project (1973) he proposed through numerous drawings and photocollages the adornment of a railway overpass with a series of

fifty-eight eight-foot-tall plywood panels [Fig. 7]. The mural was to be painted in various gradations of blue and to act as "a seam" linking the steel bridge "with the unlimited space of the sky." What each of these works has in common is that they cannot be perceived in their entirety from any single vantage point. The same can be said of the videos that Davidovich was simultaneously producing. By nature of their temporality, they elicited from viewers a slower more contemplative encounter.

### **ART ON TAPE**

Through its capacity for self-recording and immediate playback, as well as its affordability and portability relative to film, video empowered artists to become independent producers. Given his refusal to acquiesce to institutional constraints, it is not surprising that Davidovich was an early adopter of the medium. Like many artists of his generation, he was anxious to find methods of transcending the objecthood of art. The advent of video



6. Taped Wall Project, Whitney Museum, 1972



7. Railroad Bridge Project, 1973

initially appealed to Davidovich as a means of documenting his ephemeral installations. His first videos date from 1970. They are performances for camera recording his application of tape to a wall. But Davidovich was also compelled to explore the technical capabilities of the medium itself—a fascination that he further explored via television.

Davidovich's early videos are predominately structuralist studies in which, like his earlier paintings and tape installations, content is secondary to form. *Road* (1972) is his conceptual breakthrough in exploiting the durational capabilities of video. Recording from above, the camera moves slowly along the center dividing lines of a road. There is an unmistakable resemblance between the linearity of the painted lines and Davidovich's tape projects. As he described, "the never ending lines become an autonomous image, independent of the actual road, and yet the sound and variation of textures are reminiscent of an actual journey." All illusion of depth is eliminated and the only discernible action is some intermittent street noise and the wavering of Davidovich's handheld camerawork.

The video essentially takes a single image and prolongs it over time.<sup>18</sup> That gesture signals Davidovich's aspiration to exploit the time-based properties of video and to investigate its unique capacity for suggesting the limitless forms that he was seeking since the 1950s.

Davidovich introduced television as a subject of his videos with *Blue, Red, Yellow* (1974) [Fig. 8]. In three consecutive segments, he methodically covers over a television screen with tape in these primary colors. As Davidovich's hands work their way from top to bottom, laying down horizontal strips of tape across the screen, the black-and-white static noise illuminating the monitor is gradually covered over by a vibrant field of color. <sup>19</sup> The transformation of the grayscale static into a monochrome composition (complete with the frame of the television set) reveals the creation of a painting in real time.

In 1975, a prolific year of video production for Davidovich, he began to embrace a broader range of discourses. The video compositions *TV Wall* and *Covered TV* continue his practice of applying tape to televisions.



8. Blue, Red, Yellow (still), 1974



9. Billboards (still), 1975

But in these videos the televisions are switched on to broadcast programming, including the accompanying advertisements. They are the first of his works to incorporate content gleaned from popular culture, which became a central theme in his work thereafter. Advertising was an explicit leitmotif in his *New York Project* series, also from 1975, in which tape montages overlay sites and subjects throughout the city, from buses and windows to street signage. Consumerism is the evident focus of the video *Billboards*, in which footage shot in bustling locales across lower Manhattan emphasizes the ubiquity of advertisements that promise stress relief: cigarettes, liquor, air travel, and even low risk investment in savings bonds [Fig. 9].

Simultaneous with such experiments, Davidovich made his first foray into cable television. His engagement with public access was radically democratic from the beginning. Davidovich managed to get his videotape *Baseboard* (1975) played on Manhattan Cable. A characteristically esoteric conceptual project, the video probes the durational capacity and closed-circuit capabilities of television itself. But it is certainly

not typical fodder for television. For precisely that reason, Davidovich delighted in watching the transmission from a midtown bar where he witnessed firsthand the intrigue and confusion it caused among unwitting patrons who expected to see a football game.<sup>20</sup> Instead, they were met with a thirteen-minute panning shot circling around the baseboard of a room. Eventually, the camera stops and begins slowly zooming out, revealing that the footage they had been watching was itself playing on a television that was sitting on the floor of the room depicted—an otherwise empty television studio [Fig. 10]. Davidovich later characterized his act of creative infiltration as being "like a kind of Duchamp in reverse. Instead of taking the urinal to a gallery, take the piece from the gallery and put it in a bar."<sup>21</sup> In presenting television as a readymade, Baseboard synthesized the formal investigations at the heart of Davidovich's experiments in video with the explorations of mediated transmission that quided his professional venture into television, first as producer and then as star.



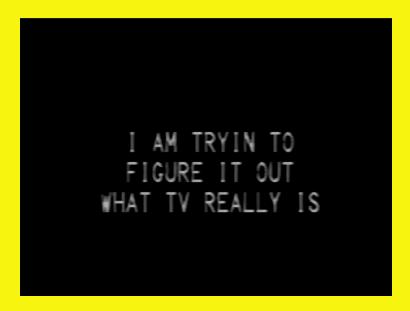
10. Baseboard (still), 1975

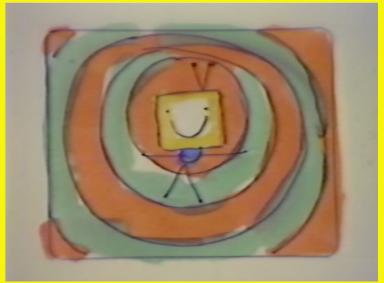
#### **TELEVISION AS ART**

The Live! Show featured appearances from and screened work by a remarkable roster of artists, including Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Tony Oursler, and Martha Wilson, to name just a few. Wilson's parody of President Ronald Reagan evinces both the social criticism and absurd theatrics central to the program. But the limelight was hardly limited to established artists or even those working in visual art. Davidovich took to the streets to interview common people, in California and Texas as well as New York. He incorporated an impromptu interview he conducted with the writer Jorge Luis Borges. He was also a consummate promoter of the unbridled multidisciplinary energy of New York's downtown vanguard. He infiltrated the studio with experimental theater performances and raucous rock concerts. Davidovich was in his forties but still tuned in to youthful subcultures like the nihilistic "no wave" scene—bands Youth in Asia and the Social Climbers starred in the show's frenetic inaugural episode.

But for all its forward-thinking, *The Live! Show* also looked back with nostalgia upon the first Golden Age of Television, from the late 1940s through the '50s.<sup>22</sup> Davidovich even called himself the "Ed Sullivan of the avant-garde."23 The late-night talk show persona he adopted was nevertheless a foil for his abiding critique of network television. His misgivings about commercial broadcasting were an explicit focus of many of his monologues. In one, he taught viewers how to deconstruct the nightly news.<sup>24</sup> In another, he editorialized (partly in Spanish) about a report criticizing the dearth of Hispanic representation on television.<sup>25</sup> He also conducted interviews with prominent television figures including entertainer Bob Hope and critic Les Brown. As the deceptive simplicity of his earlier work indicates, however, there was also an additional more embedded layer couched in Davidovich's reportage. To that end, *The Live!* Show can, in its entirety, be interpreted as a satire of broadcast television.

The proclivity for metareferences to television evident in earlier works like *Baseboard* is likewise central to *The Live! Show.*<sup>26</sup> It is unmissable





in "TeeVee: The Poor Soul of Television," a cartoon drawn by Davidovich that appeared regularly within *The Live! Show.* TeeVee is a talking television set whose existential doubt about their own identity personifies contemporary debates about television's dubious function in society. "I am tryin [sic] to figure it out what TV really is," TeeVee pronounces in one episode—"window to the world," perhaps, or even a source for self-help—before concluding that "probably TV is just good company maybe" [Fig. 11]. TeeVee epitomizes Davidovich's mix of deadpan humor with social commentary.

His reliance on wit as a vehicle for criticism is also palpable in the guise he adopted as an art instructor. The soft-spoken tutor is both an homage to and parody of wholesome TV art teachers like Bob Ross and his predecessor John Gnagy.<sup>27</sup> But Davidovich's art lessons also contained veiled mockeries of politics and contemporary art. In one lesson, the ostensibly innocuous "painting of a middle-aged man" he creates is a portrait of President Reagan. In another, he demonstrates how to paint

a scene of a girl praying on the "very fashionable material" of velvet. This is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the market-driven acclaim for Neo-Expressionist painter Julian Schnabel's massive oil on velvet paintings. Such self-aggrandizing and arcane modes of art were the antithesis of the experimental and popular approach to art that Davidovich championed.

Metareference is also key to the "Museum of Television Culture"—Davidovich's collection of television figurines and toys, which he frequently showed off on *The Live! Show* [Fig. 12]. His collection included mass-produced knickknacks and novelties like television-shaped piggybanks, cookie jars, and sunglasses. Lampooning the nascent home-shopping boom facilitated by television, Davidovich sold these "videokitsch" items alongside art object multiples by soliciting mail-order and telephone purchases. For Davidovich, these sales were not about revenue. Rather, they served to explore the capability of television to facilitate communication with a broad audience in ways that other artforms could not. Indeed, communication



12. *The Live! Show* (still), May 20, 1982



13. *The Live! Show* (still), April 29, 1983

was central to Davidovich's television fixation.<sup>29</sup> He constantly solicited phone-ins and letters from viewers. With the Boo-Boo Club, he promised a television pin to self-initiated members who wrote in to identify errors in the program. Such paternalistic conceits were discernibly comedic, especially considering Davidovich's late timeslot, but they also reveal his sincere desire to explore television's capacity for community building.

Interactivity was the crux of the most prominent of all *Live! Show* characters—Dr. Videovich, a self-proclaimed "specialist in television therapy" who wore a lab coat and a beret while fielding telephone calls from viewers [Fig. 13].<sup>30</sup> The doctor prescribed treatments for television addiction and other mass media maladies live on air. Doling out relatively nonsensical advice with a straight face, even when confronted by a steady stream of prank callers, Dr. Videovich epitomizes the amusing satire at the heart of *The Live! Show*. Still, the seriousness with which the doctor treated television betrays Davidovich's profound reverence for its consequence as an instrument of creative experimentation and social transformation.

If video made Davidovich an independent producer, cable gave him an audience. The limited regulation and low barrier to entry of public access (\$50 an hour minus ad revenue) liberated his creative endeavors from the whims of the art market, the constraints of established institutions, and the commercialism of broadcast networks and other "gatekeepers of culture."31 Cable was the culmination of his search across various media for an effective means by which to disrupt conventional forms of art, reach broad and diverse audiences, and encourage them to take note of the mass media landscape to which they were contributing members. Surveying his idiosyncratic trajectory and looking back on his contributions from the vantage point of our own far more interconnected media landscape, Davidovich's role as a media activist becomes unambiguous. He not only revolutionized how artists conceived of distributing their work and granted audiences the agency to react in real time, but he also expanded the limits of artistic production. Davidovich made television an artform and had a damn good time doing it.

- Leah Churner, "Un-TV: Public Access Cable Television in Manhattan: An Oral History," Moving Image Source, Museum of the Moving Image, Feb. 10, 2011. http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/un-tv-20110210.
- 2 Manhattan Cable Television extended one-way receiving facilities to the Kitchen, at 59 Wooster Street in February 1976. See "Art People," *New York Times*, page 68, June 4, 1976.
- Although Davidovich's arrival in the U.S. is often mistakenly dated to 1963, it was in December 1962 that he arrived in New York.
- The Cable SoHo committee included representatives from the Kitchen (especially Robert Stearns),
  Anthology Film Archives, Artists Space, the Clocktower, Cable Arts Foundation, Electronic Arts
  Intermix, Global Village, and individual artists including Davidovich, Douglas Davis, and Ira Schneider.
  See "Art People."
- Daniel R. Quiles, *Jaime Davidovich in Conversation with Daniel R. Quiles* (New York: Fundación Cisneros/Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and The Institute for Studies on Latin American Art, 2017), 74.
- Initially, *The Live! Show* was produced at the Community Film Workshop at 511 W. 54th Street. By 1983, production moved to Metro Access Studios at 110 E. 23rd Street.
- Davidovich attended the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires from 1954–58 and the Universidad de la República in Uruguay from 1960–61. For an analysis of Davidovich's abstract painting in the context of postwar art in Argentina, see Daniel Quiles, "From Sacrilegious Black to Chromatic System: The Argentinian Monochrome," in *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, ed. Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco (New York: Routledge, 2018), 191–207.
- William Grimes, "Jaime Davidovich, Artist Whose Videos Bypassed the 'Gatekeepers of Culture,' Dies at 79," *New York Times*, August 30, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/arts/television/jaimedavidovich-artist-whose-videos-bypassed-the-gatekeepers-of-culture-dies-at-79.html.

- Davidovich stated, "... the actual size of the painting could be maybe fifty miles wide. It's not just inside that rectangle." John Matturi, "Jaime Davidovich," unpublished manuscript (1979), 5. A copy of Matturi's manuscript is in Series 7, Box 2, Folder 23 of the Jaime Davidovich Papers, 1949–2014 at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 10 Roger A. Welchans, *Jaime Davidovich's 'Carroll Wall Project,'* John Carroll University *Fine Arts* 18, no. 867 (March 1972): 4–5. It is notable that Welchans related Davidovich's efforts to Argentine predecessors in the Grupo Madí and Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención who antagonized traditional easel painting in the 1940s with shaped canvases and three-dimensional paintings.
- Daniel R. Quiles, "Conversations: The Television Interview in Jaime Davidovich and David Lamelas," Revista Hispánica Moderna 72, no. 2 (December 2019): 198.
- Daniel Quiles has linked this development to the affordability of studio space in Cleveland. See Daniel Quiles, "From Sacrilegious Black to Chromatic System: The Argentinian Monochrome," in New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America, ed. Mariola V. Alvarez and Ana M. Franco (New York: Routledge, 2018), 196.
- Jaime Davidovich, unpublished lecture notes, January 19, 1971, location unknown. "Documentation of artworks, 1973. Includes clippings and images," Jaime Davidovich Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 43. Fales Library and Special Collection, New York University.
- Of this subject-object reversal, Davidovich posited that, "Instead of perceiving a segment of an imaginary environment, you are the segment and the environment becomes the subject." See Matturi, "Jaime Davidovich."
- The critic Carolyn Carr described Davidovich's Whitney Biennial stairwell installation as a manifestation of his "penchant for exploring the possibilities of wasted space, and more importantly, space where the viewer does not expect art to be found." See Carolyn Kinder Carr, "Jaime Davidovich," *Artforum* 12, no. 6 (February 1974), 62.

- 16 Elizabeth McClelland, "A Trip Into Space," Cleveland Guide (1973).
- Jaime Davidovich, "Jaime Davidovich: Videotapes Catalogue," unpublished manuscript, circa 1975.

  Jaime Davidovich Papers, 1949–2014 at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 7, Box 2, Folder 24.
- The only discernible change across *Road*'s nineteen-minute duration is some intermittent street noise and the wavering of the lines within the frame resulting from Davidovich's handheld camerawork.
- The work has also been exhibited as a three-channel installation, with each color constituting a separate segment played on its own monitor.
- 20 Quiles, Jaime Davidovich in Conversation with Daniel R. Quiles, 67.
- 21 Ibid.
- For further reading on this aspect of *The Live! Show*, see Sarah J. Montross, "Cartographic Communications: Latin American New Media Artists in New York, Juan Downey and Jaime Davidovich (1960s–1980s)" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2012), 223–34.
- 23 Steve Dollar, "Before the Web, It Was Public-Access," Wall Street Journal, February 10, 2011.
- 24 *The Live! Show*, April 29, 1983.
- 25 The Live! Show, February 18, 1983.
- As Davidovich has himself acknowledged, the early television star Ernie Kovacs was an influence on his deadpan humor and inventive characters. Less examined in the literature on Davidovich are the nuanced traits that Davidovich shared with Kovacs including his penchant for metareferences to the illusory nature of television and his winking incorporations of flubs and circumstance into his act.
- 27 It is notable that despite the obvious parody in Davidovich's art lessons, he stated in 2017, "I feel that Bob Ross is very avant-garde." Davidovich also sold Gnagy's drawing set on *The Live! Show* and called him "one of the special characters of early television." See Quiles, *Jaime Davidovich in Conversation with Daniel R. Quiles*, 95.

- Among the multiples Davidovich sold were objects produced by Wooster Enterprises, the stationery company he ran from 1976–78 with his then wife Judith Henry that was backed by collaborative support from George Maciunas and other members of the international Fluxus collective.
- Davidovich's fascination with the interactive capabilities of television was epitomized by SoHo Wants to Know (1980), a live broadcast from the studios of QUBE—an innovative cable television system launched by Warner Communications in Columbus, Ohio in 1977. QUBE allowed viewers to interact live with television programmers. Davidovich exploited QUBE as an artistic medium, inviting viewers at home to vote for certain onscreen operations via the polling function of their remotes and even direct the show by calling in to instruct the operators how to move, focus, and cut between multiple cameras.
- The frequency with which Dr. Videovich proclaimed his international credentials (he trained in Argentina with German professors) signals Davidovich's attention to the reception of his own accent on U.S. television, which he sometimes explicitly acknowledged, even halting the show to make sure viewers could understand him.
- 31 Churner, "Un-TV: Public Access Cable Television in Manhattan: An Oral History."



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