The Luminous Object:
video art/video theory

Visible Language 29:2

A special issue guest edited by
Hans Breder and Herman Rapaport

Advisory Board

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The Luminous Object: Video Art and Theory

Hans Breder
Herman Rapaport

The Luminous Object consists of interviews and essays of various lengths, whose purpose is not to historicize or classify video definitively, but to bring together a sampling of diverse approaches by video artists and critics that enable us to glimpse the scope of video art and the issues which it raises. In the essays and interviews, video is considered from multiple perspectives and disciplines. This reflects the transitive nature of video which crosses numerous borders, among them, broadcast television, computer animation, painting, sculpture, literature, film, autobiography, history, ethnicity and critical theory.

Since the inception of video art, only a few anthologies have appeared on the subject, among the more recent, "Video," a special issue of the Canadian journal *Artexts* (1986), *Video Culture* (1986), the "Video" issue of the French journal *Communications* (1988) and *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (1990). Such anthologies have attempted to sketch video histories, though only *Artexts* recognized the need to offer plural histories which traced the development of video art in a number of different countries: the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Belgium, Japan, etc. In Hall and Fifer's *Illuminating Video*, by contrast, a number of the essays are devoted to critiquing the idea of doing video history, maintaining that an official or master narrative would be in and of itself problematic given the spirit of video art. Nevertheless, that anthology is devoted to outlining the various types of genres of video art and contains essays by critics and artists. Exlporing the relationship between art and technology, *Video Culture*, edited by John Hanhardt, historicizes and critiques the concept of video in its most expansive sense.

No doubt, the most important single study of video to have appeared so far is Raymond Bellour's *L'Entre Images: Photo, Cinéma, Vidéo* (1990), in which video is defined as a transient medium that crosses or transgresses the border of photography and cinema, the static image and the moving picture. Of the three media, Bellour states that

only video can integrate and transform the two others. As such it is a medium of liminal passages across and between images, a rite of passage that impedes us from assigning stable borders to the image per se. It is particularly in terms of the video installation that the viewer undertakes this rite of passage as he or she transgresses the boundaries of the image. Bellour's main point, echoed in the remarks of many American video artists before him, is that video cannot be defined as a singular field or entity but, rather, has to be defined at the level of what Gene Youngblood, early in video art's development, called *intermedia.*

To know the range and scope of video art, however, it is not enough to dub video an international practice that occurs between or in the midst of images. We will not be helped by reducing video art to genres, movement or histories (local or global), approaches which are largely suited for those who want to simplify a difficult and diverse field. The fact is that especially today, video art is undergoing rapid development with the introduction of new electronic technologies and that in large part much of the medium we know as video has as yet to be fully explored, interrogated or experimented with.

It is our belief that video is especially exciting from the standpoint of merging visual practices with visual theories; instead of trying to package video art within already available theories of representation, one should allow the theory to develop from the practice of making video art. This is different from the usual view that to analyze a visual work one doesn't have to know very much about how it

tion, one should allow the theory to develop from the practice of making video art. This is different from the usual view that to analyze a visual work one doesn't have to know very much about how it is made. However, it ought to be especially evident in the case of video art that the message is entirely mediated by the many diverse practices which make up what we call the medium.

A second belief, which motivates this effort to illuminate video art, is that another, more synchronous critical tactic — one which avoids master narrative — is a site specific approach. In our anthology, all the contributions come from figures who have visited the University of Iowa's Program in Intermedia and Video Art. Founded by Hans Breder in 1968, the program was one of the first to nurture the conceptual and experimental arts within a university setting. Through the Intermedia and Video Art visiting artist's program, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts, over the last twenty years numerous conceptual and experimental artists — often early in their careers — found their way to Iowa City. Since the late sixties, performance artisits like Robert Wilson, Allan Kaprow, Karen Finley and Mary Beth Edelson as well as critic/curators such as Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, John Hanhardt, Ann-Sargent Wooster, Willoughby Sharp and Nicholas Zurbrugg joined us. Many video artists have also visited, produced and presented work: Nam June Paik, George

Kuchar, Vito Acconci, Jaime Davidovich and his Artists' Television Network to name just a few.

This anthology brings together aspects of their work and the work of others who have been visiting artists at the University of Iowa's Intermedia and Video Arts Program. No doubt the "site specific" synchronicity of this juxtaposition of theories and practices illuminates particular moments of other sorts as well. The anthology consists of interviews, short essays, and longer, more formal articles. While the anthology intentionally provides little closure on the subject of what video is, it provides those interested in the field a range of insights characteristic of the field's breath and diversity.

Hans Breder, professor of art at the University of Iowa and director of the Intermedia Studios, has been exploring the margins of painting, sculpture, video and performance since he came to this country from Germany in 1964. He has work in the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art and the Roy R. Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Pur-chase.

Herman Rapaport is professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Iowa. He has published numerous essays on philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature and art. His most recent book is *Between the Sign and the Gaze* (Cornell University Press, 1994).

Nam June Paik:
An Interview

Nicholas Zurbrugg

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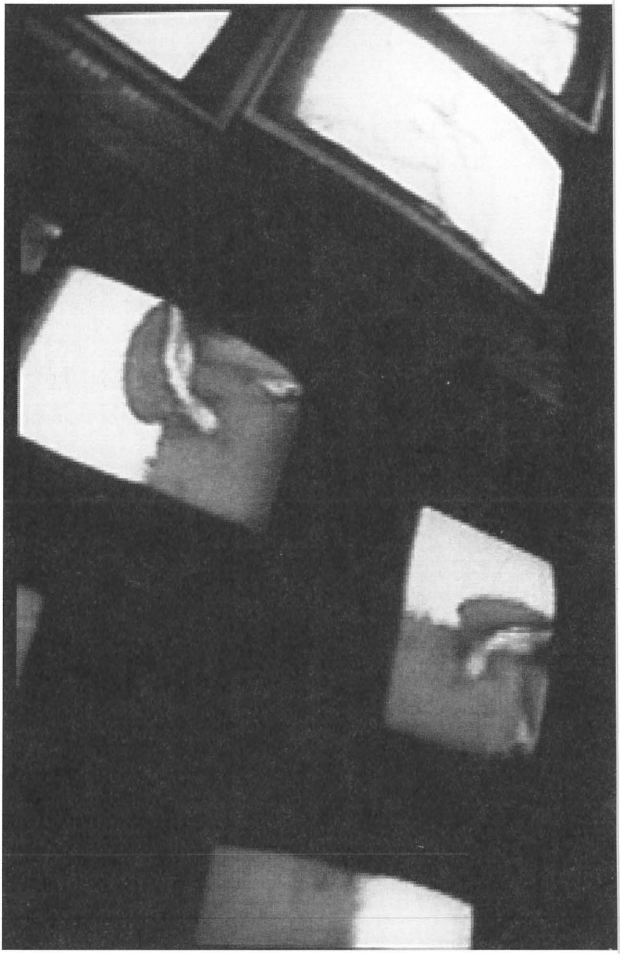
Nicholas Zurbrugg, 122-137



Nam June Paik, *TV-Wall*.

Nam June Paik, a seminal figure in video art, candidly discusses his working processes and values in this interview. He goes on to comment on such diverse problems as technology, cost, collaboration, MTV and the artist's ego. Fluxus, its values and the artists associated with this movement, becomes a central thread to his discussion.

Perhaps I could begin by asking you about your installation at *Documenta 8* entitled: *Beuys' Voice*. What sort of things were you trying to do with that footage of Beuys' performance? Were you interested in registering it *as* a performance?

That's a good question. But artists, generally speaking, don't really set out to do any concrete objective. So, in my case, when I make an artwork, I start from a few given conditions. One condition was that I was invited to do a big work by Documenta. And then, we had just finished a performance with Joseph Beuys in Tokyo, where I played a piano and he — he kind of screamed. It was quite an interesting performance — he liked it very much. Also, Beuys is popular in Germany, he's popular everywhere, but this piece was for Germany! So I thought, I'm going to do something with Beuys on that performance. So first I tried to use multiple projectors, but it didn't work out so well. Then there was a new technology available — multivision, or the so-called "TV Wall." It's quite expensive — they were renting it for ten thousand marks for three days. So I gave up for a long time. But after all, Documenta is a big opportunity to excel and you don't get too many offers, and by that time Beuys had died, so the information had become more dramatic. Through our friends, we inquired how much a couple of companies would charge for three months in the summer. And because in summer there are no trade fairs, they gave it to us for $100,000. So it became more or less feasible. Documenta gave me $40,000 or DM40,000 (I forget) and I raised maybe $60,000 (I forget)! So we did it. And that was a kind of process. Artists, generally, have no profound theories, we have instincts and then practical methods afterwards. The main channel was normal Beuys, undecorated. There were two channels, left and right, where I and Paul Garrin, did some computer processing. It was really successful like that. It went very well. So that's the inside story.

I think I saw another version of that piece at your retrospective in London, at the Hayward Gallery. It seemed a more complicated piece, because there were not only monitors which showed your work with Beuys, but other screens which seemed to show a lot of unrelated images going by at tremendous speed. I found it more difficult to understand or to read what was going on. Was there any reason for this difference between the installations?

Yes, that's an interesting question. In both shows we used identical tapes, because we didn't have any money to re-edit them — we just copied them. However, in the Hayward show we didn't have any money to rent that TV Wall system. So we used the Documenta main channel which went into the TV Wall undecorated — you know, natural Beuys — as one channel. The other two channels were decorated, computerized video. So, without the TV Wall, the proportion of decorated, computerized tape became bigger. Whereas at Documenta, most likely, most people just watched Beuys' undecorated tape. They didn't pay attention to the left or right, which is computerized tape. So everything most likely looked more complicated to you.

Which version did you prefer yourself?

I don't care. But the computerized version was more expensive — that's all I care!

All the same, you seem very much committed to work with the new media and to the significance of the new media arts. This serious motivation seems to be overlooked by some of your critics, such as the American theorist Fredric Jameson, whose catalogue essay for the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art's "Utopia" show, in 1988, suggested that there was no point in expecting your installations to offer coherent art. He argues elsewhere that video is a mobile medium, which may only generate superficial, ever changing effects. Taking this argument one step further, Jameson likes to argue that post-modern culture as a whole consists almost exclusively of superficial effects without any special meaning. What is your response to that kind of argument?

Where did he write that?

In an essay entitled "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-text" in an anthology entitled *The Linguistics of Writing.* Also in Fl*ash Art* in December '86/January '87, there's an interview with him, in which he's fairly dismissive about video.

Yes — the so-called semiotic people, you know, they don't like video!

Why do you think that is?

I don't really know. I don't understand semiotics. Most likely semiotics is quite highly regarded in non-French speaking countries, like England, America and also Japan, because it's difficult to understand. Academic people know they have to deal with complications. They think McLuhan is too much talked about, and is not academic enough. It's very hard to make a science out of communications because it is changing very fast, and in a way, it's too large. So French — and also Labor-left British people — made these kinds of post-Marxist theories. For some reason semiotic people like to be very manneristic — they hang on to very little things. They're basically sort of French-based people who kind of missed the bus of revolution, and who want to make a rear-guard critique about it. I respect theory when it is bold and something new. Cybernetics I respect, because you can learn something from it. I think I read one book by Foucault and then one book by Barthes, and one by one more guy. But when I study how much time I spent, I didn't get too much out of it. So I thought I would keep a respectful distance from it, and then I will use my time more productively, that is, making video-tapes and computer-tapes and computer programming.

My work is rather popular in France, so I asked my French friends whether they think I should spend x number of hours to study semiotics or not, and everybody laughed, and told me, you are much more advanced than they are — why should you spend your time studying semiotics? So that is my relation to semiotics. If somebody has a PhD and gets a teaching job in semiotics, that's fine! However, I have no time for that.

Going back to the notion of content in video, would you say that you're interested in communicating some general sort of message or content? Or are you most interested in exploring new sorts of process? Or would you say that it's a combination of the two, or perhaps something else?

You know, I am an artist — and I work with intuition — so I have, maybe, a higher rate of metabolism. I get tired of it very quickly. In 1960 I did some performance art, it was very nice at first. I got

known in fluxus circles in Germany. And then I met Beuys, who was not yet known. Then, when I was approaching thirty-one, I got tired of performance art. At the same time I also needed to make some money and so I started to make some objects sonores — you know, sound objects. Then, slowly, slowly, I got attracted to television. I thought, well, you know it's kind of nice to do the first video art. I said "electronic television art" at that time, since I was doing electronic music art, which was not doing too well.

The first show was a hit, and then the second show was a hit and the third show was a hit, so I stayed with this medium. And when I came to America, it was easier to raise money in television, because official television was so bad. If you said, "Oh, I'm working with television," — everyone was throwing money at you! Also, we have to be written up in the newspapers and have stuff in gallery shows and museums. So you speculate — oh well, I did this, next I did this, next I'll do this. In the case of so-called important visual artists, painters, for example, they get their style fixed up by their mid-thirties — numbers, silkscreens on canvas, dots and enlarged comics and so on. I don't say that they make compromises. But other artists get fixed with styles which become successful. Some artists change and have two or three styles. At most you can have three styles in your lifetime.

Of course, everything in video is in one style, but in my case, I think I changed that a little more. Because number one, my work was not profitable until three years ago. So I had no reason to hang up on one style. And secondly, the electronic industry here progressed very much. Think — at the time when I was doing video, it was 1963, before Sony had even introduced their video recorder. The only home video available was Grunwig's camera. So for the last thirty years video technology has changed. When new hardware combinations came up, either in home video, or more importantly, in computer programming in industry, I had more opportunities to try out new combinations of hardware and software. Hardware-software combinations are very, very rich, almost inexhaustible.

Then, obviously, I was not that bad in that application — there are other guys that are worse. So, for two reasons, because I did not make much money until three years ago, and because hardware keeps changing, I keep changing. So your question is almost irrelevant. Art-making is for anybody like breathing — luckily we don't have to go to the post office and use stamps. We are a kind of privileged class — we don't have to work very hard. So we don't have to set up any objectives.

I suppose your explorations of new media are like swimming in an endless ocean.

A tabula rasa, you know a white paper. Video is a white paper.

Are there some pieces that you think have worked particularly well, not only as a new process, but as a new way of saying something about something beyond video?

I get bad reviews still — *Art in America* recently wrote one. But I survive. If we think deductively, then certainly *Beuys' Voice* was successful. And another very successful piece is *TV Garden*, where you see lots of TVs among the leaves. That was very successful for two reasons — three. One is that people look down at TV here, so it was kind of a new position. And in a way, you are fixed into one TV generally, but you look around. And I deliberately made the piece so people would look around, but when you watch TV your eyes get fixed. And most likely, the human instinct, the human nerve which controls the eyes' nervous system, is very happy that they are liberated from the one TV position, so that you can look around. And obviously, the optic nerve likes that electronic impulse too, but also likes the natural habitat of looking around. So these two combinations make the people happier to watch *TV Garden*.

And then, of course, many people had thought that television is against ecology, but in this case, television is part of ecology. It had nice color, nice rock n' roll music and it was dark with light flowing from leaves in various greens and various rhythms. People were leaning onto railings in comfortable positions and could talk to their neighbors, whereas when you are watching TV or going to a movie, you don't talk to your neighbor. But in this case, all that discipline is out and you can go in and out at your leisure, like at a John Cage concert. I think that basically speaking, the use of natural leaves and television — that paradox — was important for people.

Well, I think you've said that you're interested in humanizing television and video.

That came from *The Human Use of Human Beings* — a book by Norbert Wiener. He was a fifties scientist — I think he was a genius. Although it was corny, I used the phrase "How to humanize technology" in the press release of the Howard Wise Gallery in 1969. I thought it was very corny. But, for some reason, everybody quoted it and even now they keep quoting it, twenty years after! It was exactly in 1969 that I wrote that press release, anonymously. So, obviously, that rings a bell for many people.

It's probably the reverse of Andy Warhol's claim that he wanted to be a machine, whereas you want machines to be human.

Yes. For some reason this kind of quotation becomes famous, so people must need that.

And what do you think of contemporary culture as a whole? Would you say that we're living in a corny culture?

Contemporary culture? As a whole?

Well, that's a very big question and probably a silly one.

Yes. As you know, I am not Henry Kissinger — I am just a little player. I am generally optimistic about the human future, because of the Soviet crumble. For instance, Milan Knizak, the Czech artist, was arrested three hundred and sixty times. He was in New York when the tanks rolled in 1968, but he chose to return to Czechoslovakia. So he had a hard time. But he is now the president of the Royal Academy there. He was a real vagabond, a fluxus artist. All intellectuals are against technology and all are for ecology, which is very important. But we are inventing more pollution-free technology. Intellectuals don't like cars and television, but we have to admit that compared to Charles Dickens' time, we are living better, no? So we must give up certain parts of our intellectual vanity and look at the good parts of so-called high tech research. For instance, hydrogen power, which nobody's talking about. It seems that people are getting smarter and also that in the Western world people are getting less aggressive. When I look at the art world, they are playing games very harshly, but still they're not as bad as corporate games. Australian, Japanese or Korean artists — or whoever — who are not playing games in New York shouldn't pay so much attention to the New York art world. If you make your own art work and can make a

living, then that's good — if you're happy and don't have to dig ditches.

When I started out to become an artist, I didn't aim or even think about becoming a famous artist. To take fame out of art, well that's the most important thing. Let's make that the closing statement for today. *"To take fame out of the art world."* That was the spirit of fluxus.

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At the end of our discussion the other day, you said that the fluxus movement attempted to take the idea of fame away fom the idea of the artist.

Yes — we hope so! Yes, whether fluxus has any common aesthetic or not, one thing which is remarkable about fluxus is that for thirty years many different egos — twenty, thirty different artists — remained quite good friends and collaborated — which is remarkable. We must be very proud of it, because it is one of the very few anarchistic groups which has succeeded in surviving. Because with anarchists, by definition, the strongest guy becomes the dictator. In our case it didn't happen.

Would you say that there are any special differences between fluxus in America and fluxus in Europe?

Hardly any. For instance, George Macunias, George Brecht, LaMonte Young, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles were cool people — they wouldn't go out and shout "I am not typical of fluxus." Fluxus is a kind of minimal aesthetic and a minimal aesthetic, by definition, is not easy to succeed in. However, in Europe, we did have a fairly good political base. When George Macunias came, the European neo-dadaist aesthetic already occupied a major forum. So we could incorporate very quickly. American and European fluxus both needed each other. Of course, Europe had its own idea and its more aggressive attitude. It was more arty — or more wet and not quite dry — more dirty and not quite clean. And if we include Joseph Beuys, whom we should include, because he worked with fluxus many times, then we have excellent artistic talent. So we don't owe everything to Americans either.

George Macunias, since he was an international Marxist, always paid attention to Eastern Europe. He was also a Japan-worshipper. He discovered Takeshisa Kosugi, and some unknown Japanese at that time, who became known. He also had a very strong Dutch connection. He had the idea of an "united artists" front, like Karl Marx's idea that all workers should unite. So he was very international from the beginning. There was really no elbowing for national hegemony or personal hegemony. I think that's the record we are most proud of.

Didn't Joseph Beuys argue at one point that fluxus wasn't giving sufficient attention to political and practical problems and lacked a "clearly marked goal"?

Yes, around '65 or '66 he went his own way. But from '62 to '66 he called himself "fluxus" many times, So, knowing what he achieved in the art world, we must be proud of him.

Could you tell me a little more about the development of your work? You started out as a composer, didn't you?

I think I made three performance pieces that can survive. And then I do notation work and video. I wrote two piano pieces which will survive absolutely my death. I'm 58, so you have to think — even healthy Ben Vautier had a heart attack not long ago. Fluxus is still a kind of step-child in the art world, so if we don't care about our legacy, we will be very quickly wiped out by commerical interests. We have to be vigilant about what we did!

Are you carefully trying to document this work?

Not document. My music was not recorded. I refused to record it because you need a certain kind of excited consciousness, and if you record it, it looks very empty. I thought when I was young that it was better not to leave any records, rather than leave a false record. But now I know how to record those things!

Was John Cage one of the people you enjoyed working with?

Of course! His ascetic, ego-less way of life influenced lots of people. Also his kind of west coast, semi-American Indian aesthetic — his un-dense — not dense — aesthetic — influenced many people. I admire these west coast people very much — they are still very underrated. People think they are influenced by oriental zen — that's true too, but I also think they're influenced by electro-magnetism coming from the earth. You know, geographical magnetism, which defines American Indians as involved with an ego-less, nature-bound lifestyle. I think that comes from an electro-magnetic sphere that we haven't discovered yet.

How do you find living in New York? Do you find that conducive to work and survival, or would you prefer to live in California?

I'm in New York two-thirds to three-quarters of the year. The very practical reason is that computer-time is very, very cheap in New York — almost one-quarter of California or one-tenth of Germany. A certain kind of computer I use for video is not only cheaper — its a fraction of the cost elsewhere. The Media-Alliance program finds the empty hours of computers for artists, and uses them as a training ground for the new computer operators of that company. It's a very good mixed economy — capitalism and socialism. I have to be in New York for that reason. There's no other place. Also there's a certain density of communication in New York, so that you meet people in the street and talk. We're all regular human beings so you work harder if there's an incentive. You say, ah, this guy's not really as talented as I am, but he's now getting bigger space in the *New York Times* and you tend to work harder for that week! You have to admit that happens.

What general directions would you like to see video-art move toward yourself? Are there any particular possibilities which interest you, or which you'd encourage?

I'm lucky to have access to high-grade computers very cheaply, which Germans, Japanese or French don't have. So I need to handicap myself

and do some low-tech video. Or I need to make the best use of my resources. Because computers change very quickly, things that we can do this year, we may not do next year, because that computer may be junked! Many of my early technological pieces are unplayable now. So I will continue with what I have access to. Because I've got assistants who are much better than I! For example, I work with Paul Garrin, he's about thirty-one — he's a genius. His computer programming operation is about twenty times better than mine. He may quickly get rich and never have time for me, so I want to make good use of this opportunity to work with him. I also have another assistant my own age in Japan.

Do you enjoy collaborative work?

Yes — with high-tech you have to collaborate. There's no other way. I work not only with these two guys, but when I go to the computer studio, it's the chance of that day that such a person is there. But that doesn't mean that only high-tech art survives. For example, last year I made a Living Theater video tape, *Living with the Living Theater*, which is not high-tech video, but a documentary. As you may know, the highest rated TV show is an anthology of home-video — a thing called America's Funniest Home Video, it's the ultimate documentary. It's the very show that I've been preaching about — everybody makes video!

Turning from high-tech art to low-tech art, are you still doing performances yourself?

I'm getting old, so I conserve energy, you know. I don't want to imitate young people when I'm old, because I didn't imitate old people when I was young.

What do you think of the recent development in multimedia theater? Have you seen any of the productions of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson?

Oh yes — *Einstein on the Beach* was so good — I was really jealous. It's one of the most unforgettable experiences of my lifetime.

I suppose that's not really the sort of work that you'd be tempted to do?

No. It needs a lot of labor and a lot of energy and organization. I did television shows, but I'm not really that sort of a perfectionist.

What about installations? Are you interested in them?

Yes, because they're easier to make. That means there's more net contribution to humanity there. Because the combination of changing space and time on that rather big scale, computing that much information, is like a combination of grand opera and big exhibits. At the Whitney Museum I had a piece called *Image Wall*, 28 feet wide and 20 feet high. And I think that I was able to create in that limited space the sound and the power of a space five times bigger than that.

So it's a sort of condensed art?

Yes — inch by square inch — it has more power, I must say. *Art in America* said it was like the Palladium disco in New York — but the designer of the Palladium said he was influenced by my other work. The Palladium has fifty monitors going up and down. It looks like a spaceship landing and going up — it's great.

What do you think of MTV?

I think MTV is great. The first two or three years of MTV were very good — it was a big cultural phenomenon. And we video-artists must take credit for that, because two key persons in MTV were from our lab. You know, their vice-president in technology was practically my engineer. We had what was called the Television Laboratory. And two key persons — the first program director and the first vice president in technology — came from our organization.

I get the feeling that some of your pieces — such as *TV Buddha* — seem quite contemplative. One's reaction is to look at them for quite a while.

Maybe.

By contrast, MTV usually seems to offer a constant flood of images. Do you have any preference for rapid images or slow images?

Generally, I might make it either very rapid or very slow. For example, *Living with the Living Theate*r juxtaposes a very rapid style and normal tempo. It's my newest video piece. We're trying to get airtime for it in New York this summer, but it's not easy.

I think you've also exhibited computer-generated images of various artists like Laurie Anderson. How do they relate to your work?

When I did that big *Image Wall*, which I'm very proud of, I made four big television worldwide global shows, with various degrees of satisfaction. So I was able to attract big name composers and performers in the show. One of them was Laurie Anderson, and as I'd raised the money, I made some computer-varation images from the show. Others included Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Philip Glass and also Rebecca Allen, she's a UCLA computer professor. We used her computer-video from the German rock n' roll group Kraftwerk. It made a real difference to my last piece — it made it really very strong. All the newspapers wrote that it's my work. It's my work, but her work is a very essential part of my work. In a way she works under my name, which is unfair to her. I was more well known, so they associated it with my name, so she was not very happy. I constantly used her name on the screen because she spent eighteen months of full-time work producing four minutes of tape. Can you imagine — that's a very important part of a young woman's life. So it's unfair to use somebody's life-time's work without credit. I didn't make much money either — money isn't really part of it, But the star-system is made so that there are only a few stars.

Fluxus was fighting against that system. We never limited the numbers of fluxus. Anybody who said "I am fluxus," was fluxus. But luckily, not many young people said they were fluxus. So we got back to the start: how to deal with the star-system in the art world. The human being's artistic instinct is very contrary to our idea of the star-system. In a way, being a star physically shortened Joseph Beuys' life. He was a friend of the homeless, so he could not say, "I won't see you." He tried to be a friend of everybody.

When he succeeded, I bet it shortened his life. He had to create artwork and he had this instinct to make more art, but he was constantly talking. I think it's a problem of so-called post-industrial society. Vanity becomes important for everybody. Aristocrats had diamonds — not for any real use but to show they had power. That becomes "I know John Cage," "John Cage knows Henry Kissinger," and so forth. It's this kind of thing — vanity's evil cycle — that's the problem.

Nam June Paik, independently, or in collaboration with scientists, has explored nearly every facet of video art. He is best known for his video sculptures, synaesthetic video tapes and closed-circuit environments. He produced television projects such as *The Medium is the Medium* for WGBH-TV in 1969 and *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* in 1984, a "satellite spectacular" between the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris and WNET-TV New York.

John G. Hanhardt

John Hanhardt interrogates the interrelation between video art and the history of abstraction during our century. His thesis is that a specific body of film and video works has explored the issue of abstraction as a means to define their respective media. This has been done, Hanhardt points out, "by choosing the basic temporality of the moving image and the material basis of the image itself as sites for an epistemological inquiry into the viewing experience, thus exploring the perceptual transaction between spectator and text." Whereas critics like Kuspit and Jameson have seen video as marking an epistemic break with modernism, Hanhardt shows some of the fundamental interconnections between video art and the history of avant-garde abstractionism, for example, as reflected in the work of experimental film-makers like Stan Brakhage.

Film Image

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Electronic Image

The Construction of Abstraction, 1960 - 1990

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Visible Language 29:2
John G. Hanhardt, 138-159

The past three decades have witnessed remarkable changes in our thinking about film and video as art forms. The avant-garde cinema enjoyed critical acclaim during the 1960s and 1970s, one of the greatest periods in the history of independent film in America. In the 1980s, filmmakers, critics and historians, who viewed the artists of the previous two decades as creators of the canon of works defining avant-garde film, increasingly began to question definitions of contemporary avant-garde film practice. At the same time that avant-garde film was undergoing this self-analysis and self-critique, the new electronic medium and aesthetic discourse of video art, which began in the 1960s, had

Film Image / Video Image

firmly established itself as an art form. Today, the dialogue between film and video artists has increased as the electronic medium has become more pervasive and artists have begun to work in both fields, while at the same time acknowledging the unique properties and differences that distinguish these media.

The questions facing the writing of the histories of both art forms are background to the examination of the issue of abstraction in film and video over the past thirty years. In both art forms there are a variety of genres and styles which would compose any history of American film and video art; these include the models of abstract expressionism and other lineages within art history (minimalism, conceptual and fluxus art) as well as genres such as character and abstract animation, image processing and techniques such as hand-painted film and colorizing in video. Such a catalogue of techniques and image making phi-

losophies is certainly required as the basis for any history of this period and for any codifying summary of abstraction.

I have chosen to examine the issue of abstract image making in film and video in a transitional period during which video's rise to prominence stimulated efforts to redefine both this new medium and film as art forms. My thesis is that a specific body of film and video works has explored the issue of abstraction as a means to define their respective media. This has been done by choosing the basic temporality of the moving image and the material basis of the image itself as sites for an epistemological inquiry into the viewing experience, thus exploring the percep-

tual transaction between spectator and text. A historical subtext to this argument is the fact that the American, avant-garde cinema had for a variety of reasons become, like surrealism and fluxus art, an art-historical movement defined by a period and body of work.

Therefore, even though one continues to see new avant-garde films and fluxus works by the same artists or by artists working in a similar vein, these genres are no longer functioning as the "avant-garde." A further part of this argument is that there has been a reexamination of the original avant-garde impulse within the emerging discourse of video art; throughout the 1970s and 1980s the arguments of avant-garde film have been carried out and renewed within the differing practices and possibilities of this electronic medium. It is within the issue of abstraction that this argument bears particular interest and rewards. Through a

reexamination of specific film and video projects, including installations, we can identify specific strategies and practices which reveal a poetics of abstraction emerging out of the artist's effort to redefine these media as aesthetic discourse.

I want to begin my reexamination by going back to 1958 and a work by Stan Brakhage entitled *Anticipation of the Night*. With that film and in related writings, Brakhage proclaimed a new kind of filmmaking guided by a camera liberated from the constraining logic of bourgeois cinema. *Anticipation of the Night* rejects drama and the notion of a narrative representing a coherent and stable point of view. Instead, cascading, fragmentary

images of color and light filter through scenes from the artist's life; the editing and camera movement, through a new and radical appropriation of filmic space, form a constant inquiry into liberating the film from the narrative constraints of shot-to-shot continuity and a single vantage point. Brakhage urges the liberation of the camera from the linear language of narrative to an intense, personal space of evolving forms created from light and color and mediated by "metaphors on vision," the title of his manifesto published in 1963 by the journal *Film Culture*. The camera lens refines and distorts reality, collapsing perspective into an abstract two-dimensional plane and then opening it up into an illusionistic space; the film frame becomes a single space as foreground and background are joined into a continually shifting field of action. Variations in camera speed, from eight, to sixteen, to twenty-four frames per second, and the use of different film stocks create subtle changes and modulations in the image.

The aesthetic stance in *Anticipation of the Night* prefigures many later developments in independent film. In his interplay of camera movements with editing, even scratching directly on the film surface, Brakhage manipulated the tensions between the recognizable photographic image and the abstraction of the film frame. He strove to erase the surface and boundaries of illusion and create a new language of filmmaking.

Anticipation of the Night provides a convenient overview of various aesthetic strategies which sought to break through the logic of a cinema constructed as illusionistic space and dramatic narrative. Brakhage articulated that quest directly in *Mothlight*

(1963) where the bits and pieces of moths, creatures attracted to the beam of the projector's light in a darkened theater, are literally captured on the strip of celluloid. Like Brakhage's hand-painted films — *The Dante Quartet* (1987) and *The Glaze of Cathexis* (1990) — which acknowledge the materiality of the image in the strokes of the paintbrush across the frames of film, *Mothlight* ignores the boundaries of the film frame through the chance assemblage of the fragmented moth wings directly applied to the film. In *Mothlight,* Brakhage rejected the film and camera as the basis of the film image, as what we see appears by the chance application of material to the continuous surface of celluloid.

Brakhage, as is the case with all filmmakers, does not see his films until the laboratory processing and printing of the film negative is completed or, in the case of film which is painted, scratched or collaged, until the film is projected onto the screen.

Through the radical exploration of film in the terrain of the abstract image, Brakhage revels in the imaginings of the artist exploring and exposing the apparatus of cinema as celluloid and projector. For Brakhage, film does not exist as a still image but as movement, and so the final ingredient in his films is the viewer whose eyes complete the film experience. *Anticipation of the Night* is emblematic of strategies which create abstract images from the recorded image, the moving camera and through editing of single and multiple frame sequences; the disruption of the film frame in *Mothlight* represents the use of the strip of celluloid as a means to make new forms of abstract image. In both of these works, Brakhage is manipulating time and ac-

still image

knowledging the passage of film through the camera and the projector.

The articulation of the single frame has been a conceptual and compositional element in work by Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits and many others. It is animation, the filming of single frames of hand-drawn images, that perhaps best represents this strategy. The work of Robert Breer is exemplary in its carrying forward of an aesthetic of abstraction through manipulating the speed of alternating images. In *69* (1969), Breer constructs a visual tension as he moves between hard-edged geometrical forms and freely evolving line drawings. What I want to focus on here is Breer's exploration of depth illusion and his exposure of the mechanisms of creation. Objects appear to gyrate in and out of frame, images alternate with sequences of color frames, graphic and object animation alternates with live

action shots, a variety of techniques all coalescing around the distention of filmic space and the breakdown of illusion. Our perception of a three-dimensional off-screen space is suddenly broken as Breer acknowledges the boundaries of the frame. Sound adds another dimension as visual associations and perceptual cues are played with on the audio track. As Breer himself notes, *69* was a synthetic film: "I mean frame by frame synthesis . . . I was analyzing the construction of the film. That's part of my idea about concreteness and exposing the materials of the film itself."[1]

1 American Federation of Arts. 1976. *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema.* Catalogue. New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 144.

My selection of artists and artworks in this investigation of abstract image making in film focuses on those works which do not treat abstraction as the illusion of something else (the interior of the mind, the mystical pathway to a new consciousness) or as a way to illustrate a narrative. Rather, the focus of my presentation is on "process" or conceptual works which anticipated and then in the 1970s became identified as the "structural film." I would define these films as having as their primary goal the anti-illusionistic treatment of film. Unlike Brakhage's mythic, poetic ideology of the self of the artist, which grew out of the paradigm of abstract expressionism, or Breer's affiliation with neo-plasticism and his painterly concern with the limits of the canvas (frame) of the screen's surface, other artists in the 1970s and 1980s turned to the material of celluloid — of its meaning and imagery projected onto the screen. This is a concrete cinema of abstraction, an abstraction which negates the

cognates of language in a cinema of the unsayable. As Gehr writes, "Most films teach film to be an image, a representing. But film is a real thing and as a real thing it is not an imitation. ...Film is a variable intensity of light, an internal balance of time, a movement within a given space."[2]

2 Whitney Museum of American Art. 1983. *Ernie Gehr.* Program Note No. 9. New American Filmmakers Series. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, n.p.

The totally abstract image, tearing away the recorded image and treating the beam of light as the means to expose the grain as the basis of the recorded image, exposes at the same time the apparatus of the cinema, showing the projector and the screen not as neutral elements but as active ingredients in the hermeneutics of film reception and composition. Paul Sharits' installations are an

extension of his single-frame films, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968) and *Color Sound Frames* (1974), into the exhibition space. In *Episodic Generation* (1979), four aligned loop projectors present a continuous sequence of moving images on the gallery wall. The images of rephotographed strips of celluloid, each frame colored and rephotographed, compose alternating panels of color and movement. The images were projected on their sides with their sprocket holes visible on the top and bottom of the image. Sharits scratched the surface of the celluloid so the solid colors appeared to be torn and stretched as the fields of color rhythmically play off each other. Accompanying the installation of projectors/films was a display of the actual strips of film, called "frozen film frames," which showed the compositional material of the projected images and how the artist worked with the celluloid.

Sharits further explored the destruction of the film celluloid and the scale of the image within the gallery space in his installation *Third Degree* (1982). Here the three projectors were each placed at a different distance from the wall, creating projected images of different scale in relation to each other. He synchronized the movement of the three films through the projectors in order to develop visual relationships between the projected images. Because the two larger images are successive refilmings of the first, layers of time are created, disrupting and expanding the temporal dimension of the original footage. In *Third Degree* Sharits confronts the material basis of the film medium by burning the individual frames. The exploding, overheated film alters the

material medium, the recorded image is torn apart to expose raw colors and textures through the abstract layers of burning celluloid. The chemical properties of the celluloid and the light of the projector remove film from its traditional setting and transform it into a plastic, abstract field. Within the space of the gallery, the viewer is able to move about in front of the beams of light from the projectors, touch the screen surface and become engulfed in the abstract play of light and color.

The engagement of the viewer becomes total in Stan VanDerBeek's *Steam Screens* (1979) which he created with Joan Brighan. In this project he sought to break down the two-dimensional surface of the filmic screen and further explore his animated and computer generated abstract imagery. Presented in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Sculpture Garden in

the dark of an autumn evening, it was an installation which encouraged the active participation of the viewer. A grid of piping was laid out on the garden floor; compressed steam from a truck was pumped into the piping and released through tiny holes to create sheets of steam which filled the space. VanDerBeek's films were then projected into the sheets of steam from half a dozen projectors. Moving three-dimensional abstract images suddenly appeared to float within the immaterial, fluid and constantly changing "steam screen." Viewers caught the images on different parts of their body as they moved within and through the filmic space and three-dimensional fields of VanDerBeek's abstract patterns and constantly changing imagery.

[redacted]

[redacted]

I have chosen to highlight those artists and approaches in film which create their abstract imagery directly from the properties of the medium — whether it is by exploring camera movement (Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night*), applying materials directly onto celluloid (Brakhage's *Mothlight*), hand-drawn animation (Robert Breer's *69*), film installations treating celluloid as compositional material (Ernie Gehr's *History* and Paul Sharits' *Episodic Generation* and *Third Degree*), or the opening up of the screen surface to further abstract the image as an intelligible experience (Stan VanDerBeek's *Steam Screens*). These are not narratives which can be retold or images which can be easily reproduced. They are works which must be experienced, which engage the viewer in the fragility and temporality of the projected image and its instruments: camera, celluloid, projector, screen. The abstract image in the hands of these artists is not a

representation of another school of imagery but is created out of the resources of the artist and the sources of the medium. In focusing on this particular body of work I have ignored many artists (Marie Menken, Tony Conrad, Jordan Belson, Ken Jacobs, John Whitney, Len Lye, Sandy Moore, Nathanial Dorsky and many others). However, by highlighting this work I hope to demonstrate how film is different from video and yet how, through an engagement with abstraction, they come to share certain principles. Film is a handmade art form, it is a strip of film which can be held up to the light and must be manually edited. In the works I have discussed, artists have consciously sought to explore these physical parameters and directly engage

the viewer in the reception and completion of the work when it is shown. In their abstract play of light, color, black and white, sound and image, these works test both our language of description and the language of filmmaking. This engagement in the temporality of the screening process and the direct acknowledgement of the viewer also come into play in the work of artists working in video from the early 1960s to the present.

In a publication accompanying his one-artist exhibition at the Smolin Gallery in New York and his concurrent performance in the Yam Festival in New Jersey in 1963, Wolf Vostell wrote this *décollage* performance instruction: "Throw a big whipped cream cake to the TV and smudge it on the surface of the TV while the program is going on...."[3] Here Vostell enjoins the viewer to participate in disrupting the flow of television entertainment by

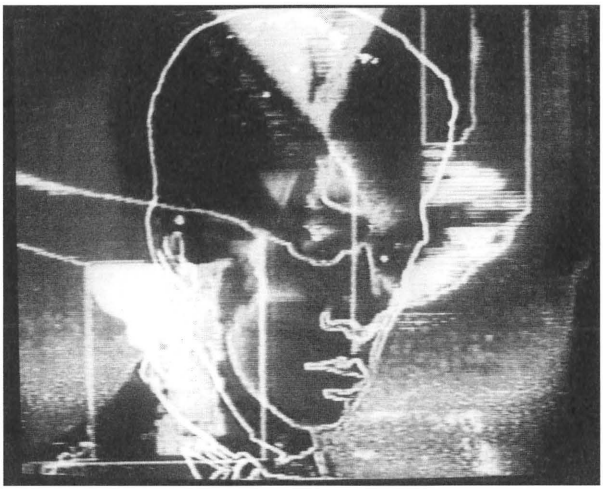
3 Vostell, Wolf. 1963. *Television Décollage & Morning Glory/2 Pieces by Wolf Vostell.* New York: 3rd Rail Gallery, n.p.

covering the screen and making it into an abstract, fractured image. Fluxus and happening events in the early 1960s, when artists first appropriated the television set into their artmaking, also extended to altering the electronic patterns of the cathode ray tube. Nam June Paik's celebrated *Magnet TV* (1965) does not employ videotape or broadcast images but shows a moving abstract pattern created by a large magnet moved about on the surface of the television set. Here Paik, a seminal figure as artist and activist in the history of this art form, was able to fashion a new abstract, kinetic image from the unique capacities of the television set.

In the 1960s Nam June Paik created a number of videotapes based on electronically disrupting the received broadcast signal, changing both sound and image to create an abstract alteration of the recorded image. An example is *Variations on Johhny Carson vs. Charlotte Moorman* (1966), in which we see Moorman on the Johnny Carson television show in an impromptu performance which Paik transforms into a chance event through a video image which constantly breaks down. These works predate Paik's own image-processing and colizing system, the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer and the various other image-modifying and synthesizing tools created in the early 1970s.

As in the case of my discussion of abstraction in film, I have chosen to highlight a specific body of works which focus on the chance occurrences and unique properties of the electronic medium unmediated by image-processed or post-production technologies; thus, I have not included the Rutt-Etra Synthe-

sizer, the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer or the works of Shalom Gorewitz, Stephen Beck, Eric Siegel, Ed Emshwiller, Barbara Buckner, Peer Bode or Mathew Schlanger, among others. As in the case of film I have chosen to focus on a specific selection of artists and video art works which explore the medium itself, the very quality of the electronic image, and do not employ image-processing and post-production technologies, computer graphics



Nam June Paik
Edited for TV, 1976,
courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix.

or the array of artists' tools, commercial and quasi-commercial resources used to create a more processed and produced language of abstraction. These works, predicated on chance and the abstract imagery that emerges from the impermanent electronic image, disrupt the normative codes and production processes to discover within the chance operations of the video imaging system a challenging abstraction which resists codification.

An important distinction between film and video is that the video image is immediately viewable as it is recorded: the image is created on the cathode ray tube, onto its own screen and does

not have to be processed and projected before the image can be seen. This creates an active dialectic between artist and process and viewer, a profound cognitive relationship which allows an abstraction unique to the medium. The artists I am discussing here — Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Woody Vasulka and Al Robbins — have each created work which explores issues related to those I have discussed within the avant-garde film. By relating to the unique properties of the medium and engaging the viewer in the reception of the work, these artists deconstruct the technology of their art form by playing with and creating a unique set of possibilities out of their respective medium.

Video

In 1973 while working in a studio, Bill Viola chanced to make a videotape entitled *Information.* Like Nam June Paik's *Variations on Johnny Carson vs. Charlotte Moorman* it is a work predicated on chance, the unexpected occurences that create a unique art work. *Information* is the product of a breakdown in a video system. "It is the result of a technical mistake made while working in the studio late one night, when the output of a videotape recorder was accidentally routed through the studio switcher and back into its own input. When the record button was pressed, the machine tried to record itself."[4] This process created patterns of noise and interference. Unlike videotapes made for broadcast, which are processed through a time-based corrector to make the image fit into the window of the broadcast signal, *Information* has a non-conforming signal and plays back differently on every monitor. It is never seen the same way twice. In other words, the video remakes itself when played, the image is always decoded differently.

4 London, Barbara, editor. 1978. *Bill Viola.* Catalogue. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 24.

The chance operations that composed Viola's and Paik's early abstract image making projects also informed the explorations of the pioneering video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka. Instead of determining what inputs would create what effect, they sought to create not synthesizers but "opened ended boxes"[5] in which abstract imagery could be freely developed through a self-exploring technology. In such works as *Noisefields* (1974), what we see is the visual representation of an audio signal; through the use of an audio synthesizer the Vasulkas were able to manipulate the electronic wave forms of the audio and video signals. Thus the imagery is entirely electronic. "They have all been made artificially from various frequencies, from sounds, from inaudible pitches and their beats."[6] These visual images then flowed from the temporal dimension of sound. As Woody Vasulka noted, "At the time, I was totally obsessed with this idea that there was no single frame anymore. I come from the movies, where the frame was extremely rigid and I understood that electronic material has no limitation within its existence. It only has limitation when it reaches the screen because the screen itself is a rigid time structure."[7] Thus, like the filmmakers discussed earlier, the Vasulkas sought to break through the parameters of the medium and discover the chance combinations that would emerge from its basic materials.

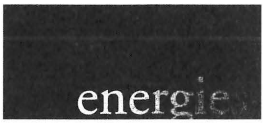
5 Furlong, Lucinda. 1983. "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka." *Afterimage, 2:1,* December, 14.

6 Furlong, "Notes Toward a History . . ." 15.

7 Furlong, "Notes Toward a History . . ." 14.

Perhaps no artist was as dedicated to freeing video technology from the imposed systems of the manufacturer than the late Al Robbins. The experience of Bill Viola in making *Information* was the operating challenge in all of Al Robbins work. It was not

created out of synthesizers nor did it go through a time-base corrector to make it suitable for broadcast; it was a raw work which existed only in the time in which one experienced it. Robbins' installations and videotapes did not exist as copies permanently preserved in an inviolable construct; instead, their random abstractions, energies and bursts of color, shapes and noise were creating and destroying themselves in the very process of their presentation. Robbins' struggle to purify the signal and image, to let it speak the poetry of its own raw imagery, occupied his life. As a poet and artist, he made work and wrote tirelessly of his quest to get through the toils to realize new outputs.



Robbins' installation such as *Anticata/Strophe* (1980) placed cameras and monitors throughout the gallery space so that images circulated according to the triggering of sequences through the "glitch" sound of the camera. As Robbins wrote, his installations extended "the act of shooting, to evoke a dynamic fluid and intricately expressive as shooting/activating space between images and between image and viewer, as speaking with each other, involving the perceiver in these speakings."[8] As the camera played off each other and the viewer activated the installation by walking through the "installation space mixed with the like qualities of the videotape. predetermination of recorded tape image is broken by the perceiver's effect. his position when the installation space is intensified: active, physical/kinesthetic, and self reflective. the installation space is carved according to the world where the tapes were shot and the position of the specta-

8 Robbins, Al. 1980. *Al Robbins Anticata/Strophe*. Program Note. The New American Filmmakers Series. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, n.p.

tor is brought closer to the posture of the act of shooting."[9] Robbins' abstract images convey the optics of real sight, not the "realism" we draw or photograph nor the safe boundaries we create around our world.

The process of discovery through the optics and electronic recording process of video led Bill Viola to gather abstract images from the desert lanscape in *Chott el-Djerid* (A Portrait in Light and Heat), 1979. In a sequence of remarkable images recorded through a special telephoto lens adapted for video, Viola shot the mirages that formed during the midday sun in the Tunisian Sahara desert. The colors of light and heat and the uncanny mirage effects create abstract images of real and imagined scenes. Here the landscape gives up images of lyrical and mysterious abstraction created out of natural phenomena. Viola's camera and his ability to create abstraction from the real-time process of image recording convey an immediate sense of discovery, not the distance created through film processing. The light emerging from the screen of the monitor gives a tactical impression of light and color; the abstract electronic image from the world around us has a soft and pointillistic impression. This work offers an interesting contrast to Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* and its probing and jabbing abstraction; the flow of video and the editing of film form two very different abstract image compositions. Robbins, Vasulka, Viola and Paik sought to discover in the abstract image the expressive, constantly present but impermanent possibilities of video as an artist's medium.

9 Stedelijk Museum. 1984. *The Luminous Image*. Catalogue. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 153, 155.

Looking back over the past thirty years of avant-garde film and video art production it is clear that the artists I have discussed sought to transform their media through chance occurrences and the transaction between their eyes and the world around them. This impulse originated within the film avant-garde and has been carried forward in the video art movement. I have suggested that abstraction, as it came out of either medium, film or video, became a purfying act which saw an idealism within the image wrested free of the logic of capitalism and the production of entertainment. Too often our histories of video art and film approach these media in terms of conventional narratives of mainstream entertainment or as mirror images of the other visual arts. The work of these artists struggling with the abstract image has sought to return technology to the *techné* of radical simplicity and renovation. As these artists pushed the media of film and video through the dimension of the abstract image, they sought to reinvent a poetics of image making.

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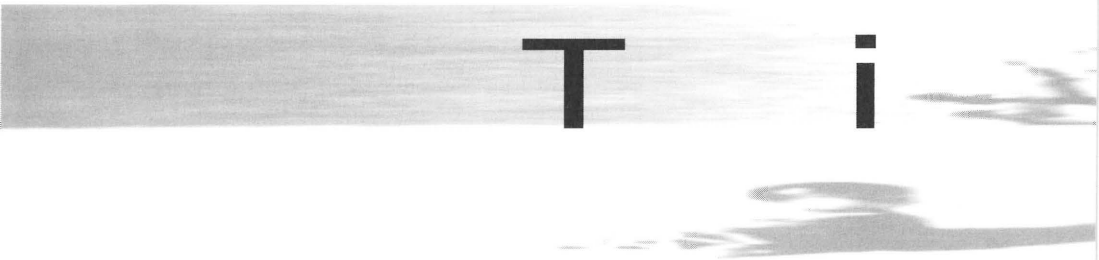
John G. Hanhardt, curator of film and video and head of the department, has been with the Whitney Museum of American Art since 1974. In 1982, he was the curator of Nam June Paik at the Whitney Museum, the largest retrospective exhibition ever devoted to a single artist. Mr. Hanhardt has written and lectured extensively. His anthology, *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, appeared in 1986.



Comparative Literature
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Visible Language 29:2
Herman Rapaport, 160-179

m e and *Light*

David Garcia: An Interview

Herman Rapaport

In this interview, David Garcia offers his definition of video art, separating it from other related media such as television. Video art is more about light and time than it is about narrative. He discusses the role of appropriation and the collage element in video in terms of unpacking history. **A loose definition of what constitutes a successful video piece is another thread of dialogue running throughout the interview.**

Herman Rapaport *David, you are very closely connected with an organzation called Time Based Arts in the Netherlands. When did you become involved with it and what was its evolution?*

David Garcia Time Based Arts was something which began when Annie Wright and I had gotten together the early 1980s. We were at art school in the south of Holland at Maastricht at the Jan Van Eyck Academy and at that time the most influential non-museum art organization in Holland was a kind of gallery called The Apple. It was one of the most important places for performance art. Many performance artists, both European and American showed there, for example, Laurie Anderson, but even people like David Salle who, in fact, did some important early drawings there.

But at a certain point The Apple began to change direction. It began to lose interest in video even though it had an archive of video work which included significant performances by Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Marina Abramovic, Ulay and others. The Apple wanted a place to house the video work; it wanted a sort of gallery able to sustain the video enterprise even though it was moving in a different direction, and so they conceived of a video space that was run or at least set up by artists. The two people responsible for this were Wies Smals and Gerharel von Graevenitz, two remarkable people who were among the best curators in Holland. Because they were both killed in a plane crash, the whole video art scene in Holland changed radically after they died. However, one of the last projects they did was to set up Time Based Arts. They invited video artists to form a

founding membership group, and Annie Wright and I were asked to join. Ulysses Carrion, Raul Marroquin, Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas are others who come to mind. We wanted Time Based Arts to be a business enterprise, distributing and forwarding video art, as well as a software laboratory, a place where one could try new ideas out with the medium. Because we did not want to restrict the organization to video, we called it Time Based Arts, an organization covering all the time based media: performance, sound work, film, video, though within the tradition of the visual arts. It has become an important place in the development of video in Holland.

Does Time Based Arts have contact with other museums in Holland on a regular basis?

Yes and particularly with the Staedlik Museum. In fact, Dorine Mignot is the Dutch museum curator with perhaps the most interest in video; she is on our board. In Holland, the Staedlik is really the one museum which is seriously committed to video art.

Perhaps one of the most frequently asked questions here in the United States about video concerns its definition, and I'd like to spend some time considering that. What, in your view, characterizes video art? Does it differ from other media like television, radio, etc.?

Definitions are problematic. As soon as you define one set of terms, you have to define others. At a certain point I think visual artists discovered that video was a tool that could be used in as many different ways as there are visual artists. I don't think there is anything so characteristic about video art that it could not be contradicted in practice. What distinguishes it from television or other media is tradition. You've got a tradition of

the visual arts that permitted video to exist under its umbrella. **Video art is defined by its context within the visual arts and the concerns which make up the artistic tradition.** What differentiates it from television is that television is one tradition and the visual arts are part of another.

Therefore video art takes place in terms of conventions and practices inherently alien to, say, broadcast television?

The only word I can use to describe this is discourse: video is a discourse. Our world is made up of numerous discourses which do not have anything but semi-autonomy, though each has its separate rules and regulations. Therefore you have television discourse and you have a visual arts discourse. At a certain point it was possible for video to live within the visual arts discourse and has become defined in relation to that. That's the only way of describing it that makes any sense to me.

But video art can bring its discourse into relation with television discourse. They're not separate worlds . . .

Sure, various people bring them into conjunction; others reject that, as in the case of Bill Viola or Nan Hoover. Or Elsa Stansfield. They reject television with a vengance and want nothing to do with it. While Nam June Paik or General Idea see their work in relation to television simply because it's the same box or technology. But we could think of it as the same type of difference you have between journalism and poetry. All writers use the pencil and paper, but their frames of reference are so different. The discourses are so separate.

But how are the discourses different? For example, doesn't something like Music Television (rock videos) blur some of the distinctions between broadcast television and the arts?

I don't think you really have such a blurring. One of the incidental features of art is that one will have a spin off of something into the general culture. It's like the American space program: engineers are always discovering things which can be applied elsewhere. Teflon would be a case in point. Similarly, people weren't using primary colors generally in the commercial world until Matisse and the fauves encouraged such thinking. Art is an R & D branch of culture in a curious sort of way. And so I don't place much significance on the fact that MTV appropriates elements from the fine arts. Yet, it's there. Yet it reflects a function which artists have and that's it. MTV is artistic; it's not art.

The history of art has generated its own issues and problems. And this goes back to questions of what art is, the narrative about what it means to be a visual artist in Western liberal democracy. One inherits a whole narrative about what this means and different generations of artists emphasize various aspects of this narrative differently. People are often put off by video art because when they see it on the monitor they bring to it a different set of expectations unrelated to the visual arts. They see video art merely as broadcast television. But I recognize something as being artist's video simply because it addresses the issue of art rather than any other set of issues.

You might say that video art is described largely in terms of itsintentions. Artist's video has intentions related to a field which is entirely different from that of rock video. The constrictions are different and are inescapable. You can't make a set of images in rock video which deviate seriously from the music. The image is there to perform a function; it's really an advertisement for the record. So it's applied art in that sense. Of course, I'm not dismissing it, but it is a very separate thing because it's there to do a certain job whose intentions are different from those of the video artist. One might think about designing telephones. When one designs a telephone, one is not doing that to design great sculpture.

In the 1960s there was a lot of concern about not making works that had signatures, which is to say, works whose styles were inimitable and identified with particular figures. How do video artists deal with this issue?

The signature was very much an ideological problem which extended beyond the visual arts. It was inherited from the 1960s in which people wanted to play down individualism. The issue does not play a major part in art of the moment. Powerful individual voices are something which are around now. But as I say that I can think of artists questioning authorship, though if you take the signature to represent authorship and identity you will see people are questioning it differently. Plagiarizing or simulating works would be an example of such questioning.

What attracts people to painting is the physical presence of the artist. What people want is aura. Video, since it is mechanically reproducible, gets one away from the fetish value of the work,

the physical presence of the artist. So video cannot help but engage the question of what you call the signature.

The video artist is also working at a remove in that (s)he manipulates found materials, often, like a collage artist.

The history of art seems to split when we talk about the practice of collage. One group has a relationship to materials which is intimate, and another group is interested in the manipulation of information rather than materials. Those latter artists by definition place less emphasis on things like handwriting and valuing work from that point of view. Its value is not the physical presence of the artist.

But the history of art focuses traditionally on the transformation of information into material, a transformation stressing the expression of the artist. Isn't that so? I'm wondering about expression in the sense that a video work may well express thec onsciousness of the artist. Given that video is a time based art, video allows for an unfolding of temporality in terms of the progress of thinking. So there is, in fact, a subject who enters into an intimate relation to video. One can intuit or imagine a person who mediates what we see, some consciousness with whom we can identify.

Yes. The artist is interpreting the world and the story of art through whatever medium (s)he chooses, and if the artist has an authoritative personality, then (s)he can persuade others and the interpretation has some validity. And then you've got a successful work of art.

To get back to collage, though, how is video art related to it as a practice?

Electronic ways of manipulating the image bring it close to the malleability of those who work with found images. The availability of ordinary home video equipment means, for example, that television images are as available as magazine images. One can just cut them out. Just because images have become accessible in this way it means that people are probably going to try collaging them.

If we think of the information/material distinction, don't we find that because video images can be put into new relationships that layers of meaning can be brought out of the material once it has become rearranged, that video can give back to the image an immediacy and intimacy which broadcast television suppressed? Also, there's ideological repositioning, for example, Dara Birnbaum's Wonder Woman *video tape Of course, I can't speak for her. But what I get from it is parody by repetition. It's about dissociation by.repetition. Klaus von Bruch does this too. These people make mind numbing sense of a visual experience. They change its nature by repetition.*

Well, I had an interesting conversation with Dara Birnbaum about appropriation. She told me that she met a student in America who had used her tape in a piece. And Birnbaum said, "I had found her and she had my Wonder Woman." And I said, "But Dara what do you mean by your Wonder Woman; she who lives by the sword of appropriation should be prepared to die by it."

How do you conceptualize your own work?

Annie Wright and I have a very different set of ideas about what our work is about. And this difference makes the works function. It's like positive and negative electricity. So a kind of energy results. Anything I say might be contradicted by Annie which is important to remember in this interview. But my initial interest in video was related to my obsession with light. As a painter I was interested in artists who made canvas give off light as opposed to simply reflecting light. It's like considering landscape at twilight as opposed to midday. At twilight and dawn the objects give off light. Light does not simply land on them. Turner and Casper David Friedrich were interested in using color to embody and not merely represent light. Also, stained glass interests me. There, powerful Biblical narratives are told through the medium of a light emitting source, something like video. The thrill of video for me is that it is a light emitting source, and I found from the beginning that I could do in video what had always frustrated me in painting. I'm not saying one can't do it in painting, but the initial thrill of video was its light emitting capacity and the fact that you can use the camera like a paintbrush. You see the effects immediately. You can use the camera in a gestural way. You can manipulate the screen light paper and communicate light in a way that is hard to do in painting.

I have been struck by how both film and video have begun using light in a very apocalyptic way. Everything is bathed in a very white and harsh light which is often coming directly at the viewer.

It's a kind of popular mysticism. I think it's like the vision of the mystics, the landscapes are always jewelled, aren't they? Aldous Huxley wrote of this in *Doors of Perception* in which he speaks of light as essential to mystical vision. The landscapes of the mystics have to give off light, like stained glass windows or as in the illuminated manuscripts.

We're supposed to flow into the light.

And the darkness as well.

. .

Well, generally, how do you see light functioning in art? Mark Rothko, for example?

In Rothko light smolders. I think that in all art facts become art through love, crazy as that sounds, and for me the equivalent way it saturates is light. I think in that sense love and libido . . .

Light is an ecstatic experience, it is the ek-static . . .

I think Freud's correct: it's love, you know, erotic love and maybe just erotic love.

I'm wondering about light in relation to time. What is that relation in art?

That's an interesting question. I have no answer for it.

Bill Viola produced a visual answer, a sense of light and time.

Maybe we'll come back to this. But already we've come a long way towards understanding that video art isn't, as some people like to think, just anything.

Maybe it's like painting, it's anything you want to do with a paintbrush, colors and canvas, isn't it?

Is it?

Well . . . (laughs) what happens is that art has a way of mirroring and also leading culture. **Today we have pluralism: numerous conversations which are mutually incompatible.** And the triumph of the liberal democracies is that these mutually incompatible conversations co-exist in the same culture. So that's strange in that it hasn't happened very often in history. But it has happened in our history and I think that is a very fruitful thing. Now since we've got a self-critical culture which allows for these incompatible discourses, it is logical to think art would reflect that. **So if we want to define video art, we have to realize that it is going to be made up of these many mutually incompatible strands,** and that this will rule out the sort of definition you were asking about before. What it comes down to is this: I can describe what I care about, but I wouldn't pretend that this would describe the area as a whole. Such a description is not feasible. This is frustrating if one wants to write a book in which one searches for definitions.

Okay. But quite frankly I think based on the sort of things we've been saying about video art that it's less pluralistic than we might think. It has all those strands going on, but it has an expressive dimension, and I have the feeling that if I were to push you on the subject you would be able to make a distinction between a good and a bad video art piece. And what interests me is how an artist like yourself necessarily is going to make this kind of discrimination.

You bring to bear all the kinds of equipment for assessing video that you would use with any art work. That is, **how does the work clearly communicate its own intentions? That's number one.**

So the work has intentions?

Of course. When you see the work, if you're familiar with art and its language, you're immediately clear about what the artist is trying to do. **Second, there is the question of whether the artist has succeeded in bringing that intention to fruition.**

So the video work has an aim or purpose. There's a conception, an execution of a conception . . .

Well, maybe not one, but a cluster . . .

Okay, fine.

. . . and this cluster of ideas or issues or obsessions are evident. So that when you look at that piece of work the cluster of issues is clear, and you say, well, this artist is clear about the meaning that (s)he is dealing with.

Good. This is the kind of thing I wanted to get to: that there are meanings, a conception, an execution and that the work isn't just anything at all.

This work, yes. All works, no. The question is one of finding ways in which to stretch the bubble of meaning within which I'm operating. If I remain in that bubble of meaning do I just pussyfoot around it or do I get inside it and try to stretch its parameters and add to the pool of meanings of what culture is. Like we said with Dara Birnbaum: she contributes to the pool of meanings and keeps it from becoming stagnant. Sometimes the artist has aims you could never even have thought possible, and when the work gains momentum the artist is actually pulled forward.

Actually this is not an unusual view
of art, and I appreciate the fact that
you don't shy away from it, because I
don't see how art could be otherwise.
Having said that, let's get back to the
question of light and time, since I
would say that is very crucial for an
understanding of video.

Richard Howard is translating *Proust in New York City* and is contemplating another title besides *Remembrance of Things Past.* *In Search of Lost Time* seems to be the title he wants to supply in English. The feeling that time is lost and that one wants to salvage that and come into relation with time in a diffferent dimension is something I find most interesting, and I don't think the analogy is pretentious when one raises the work of Bill Viola. In his most recent work there is a powerful manipulation of time since he is able to slow down and speed up our sensation of time.

You're referring to "I Do Not Know
What It Is I Am Like." There image
and light, not narrative, govern
consciousness.

It's not narrative in any traditional sense, no.

Right. And video really has the
possibility of structuring our
consciousness of perception in terms of
working with duration, light and
image without becoming bogged
down in story.

And character identification.

And you have no sense of beginning, middle and end determining the whole.

Yes, it succeeds in dissolving that. Also, there's a point in the middle of the tape where after having been taken tortuously and slowly from the beginning, the tape builds up momentum and accelerates to the highest point which is a strobe light going from black to white at strobe speed. Now there really is an example of an intimate relationship between light and time, almost an astronomical concept in a way.

What works would you consider among the stronger video art pieces that you have seen in your career?

One of the most powerful pieces was made by Klaus von Bruch. It's called *Das Propellorband, 1979* He takes a piece of film which shows the propellers of the Enola Gay being wound. You don't know it's the Enola Gay when you watch the tape — that's incidental information. Anyway, he just shows the people who are winding the propellers and just repeats that at different speeds and cuts in at different times. Occasionally you see his face, but again time is stretched. Considering what a limited set of images is being used, the tape turns out to be actually quite long. But you're drawn into a kind of mesmeric relationship to the images, where the colors even seem to change because the cuts are so fast that they seem to mix together and the motion of the blades and the movements of the men and the speed of the editing bring you into a trance-like state with a fragment of history or recorded history. It's just an incredibly powerful piece, like a work by Steve Reich, but with the added dimension of an image.

Of course. And one of the things that
It makes you more critical and produces a door for you to go
video does is to reconstitute events. It
through. To some extent the tapes which use a lot of repetition
reconstructs in such a radical way
are like stuck records. I don't know if you're familiar with the
that one has a hard time separating
Scratch Video group in England, people like George Barber.
this from the process of decomposition
They set out to parallel what Haarlem DJs were doing with
or decontextualization. We usually
scratch records and would take material from television and use
take visual images like the winding
repetition for political ends. The notion of an event would be
up of propellers on the Enola Gay as
exploded. In fact, the fantasy nature of the event is prohibited
real and overlook them, almost, on
by repetition, too. That's important in relation to Birnbaum's
account of that. It's just mundane. Yet
Wonder Woman. In Viola's or Hoover's work the landscape based
these events are embedded in the
pieces are prepared to move at times at a pace that feels almost
narratives such as those we would
geological, that feels almost more like Proust: the feeling of
encounter on a newsreel about the
entering into the experience by stepping out of time.
plane that dropped the first atom

bomb on Japan. So von Bruch is

unpacking something embedded in

that history. And in this way he

stretches that event's time. Maybe in

doing so he even stalls the event,

resists its destiny.

As if time and the event were being
Particularly his most recent work. After I saw Hans Breder's
stretched. By the way, this happens in
tape, I mentioned Klaus von Bruch to him, since the revolving
Hans Breder's video work too.
heads in his tape reminded me of a revolving disk in Bruch, that

is to say, a satellite dish which receives information. Bruch uses a mixing of images, for example, the contracting and swelling of his chest in relation to the turning of the dish. The experience unfolds once again as repetition, as a feeling of cycle, and I felt that in Breder's piece too, since each repetition allows the moment to unfold further. This doesn't happen in the Birnbaum tape, since she is intentionally doing something else. She uses the stuck record approach in order to make a political statement whereas Bruch or Breder are more reflective, closer to minimal music in Reich.

Lastly, let's talk about collaboration.
You've done work with Annie Wright and with others, and the issue of collaboration has been important all during the 1980s and, one can only suppose, will continue to be so.

Well, I've done a lot of it. All throughout the history of art collaborations have existed. Rubens had a factory, for example. But especially in mechanically reproducible media collaboration, it becomes a bit more of a possiblity when the prime value of the work no longer hinges on the distinctive mark which is the physical fingerprint of an individual. When there are other values coming into prominence, then the door to collaboration is very much opened.

How do you and Annie Wright work together when you're making a video?

It's like working with any group, and remember I've worked with others too. It's one person who will have a kind of intention or general idea which makes sense to everyone. The idea might be a fundamental way of describing a narrative. For

example, you might imagine the most primitive form of a narrative, such as a walk or journey. Then you simply follow the consequences of that framework behind the camera. So that would be a way of describing the way we work together: we set up a framework for an idea and follow the consequences of that framework. Within this situation all kinds of discussions and arguments about how it should be done take place. But I think there is a sort of basic rule that allows us to collaborate without which collaboration would not be possible. For although we might disagree vehemently when we're discussing the idea, as soon as it is on the screen we always know whether it works or not and we always agree about that aspect of our work. It's not a forced agreement. That's an important part of collaboration: there has to be enough meeting of the minds so that at a certain point everything will naturally come together. Not through compromise, not through having to agree, but enough of a mental relationship to be able to know when something works or not when it's viewed on screen.

One last question which takes us to some earlier points: what do you mean when you say that something doesn't work on screen? What isn't working when a video doesn't pass the test of viewing?

There are those two requirements we talked about earlier. **Is there a clear set of intentions? And are those intentions successfully realized? For me that implies that there is not only a question of whether the piece makes sense on screen, but whether it hits you below the belt. So that your body is affected. You have to be affected –**

physically and emotionally. There has to be a feeling of revelation. The video has to hit you like a thunderbolt. That's what I mean by whether "it works" or not.

Annie Wright/David Garcia "Callisto" c1984.

David Garcia is co-founder of Time Based Arts in Amsterdam, the most important center for the distribution and the promotion of artists' video tapes in the Netherlands. He organized the Talking Back to the Media Festival in 1985 and Students on Cable, a monthly program showing the work of European art students specializing in video, film and performance. His work has been exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, Tel Aviv; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Kunsthaus, Zurich; and Kölnischer Kunstverein, Koln.

public

nature

technology

C U L T U R E

environment

education

Sherk's project concerns the development of an interactive living library that promotes greater understanding among people and allows for the integration of diverse cultural and ecological forms around the globe. Her project has been to locate such a library in a site specific public land, and in so doing, to conceptually transform and transvalue the use of urban space. Sherk is especially sensitive to something that is easily overlooked, namely, that in our society we have a limited cultural repertoire for what public space can or ought to be. Especially in America, public spaces are often meant to be vacant zones that surround buildings like moats. Reclaiming these urban deserts is central to her work as an artist.

A Living Library:

New Model for Global Electronic Interactivity and Networking in the Garden

Bonnie Sherk

Visible Language, 29:2
Bonnie Sherk, 180-185

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Two key concepts to emerge with the new communications technologies of video, computers and other electronic forms are interactivity and networking. These terms relate to the importance of the human's role with the hardware and software through some form of creation, choice, user manipulation or linked participation.

We sometimes think of the cliche of a computer-dominated, digital world — a cold and inhumane place with little room for human warmth and passion. Yet the possibilities that these new communications technologies afford are rich in diversity and potential for many kinds of experiences including those that can help us reach our potential of greater humanity.

Interactivity and networking as modes for experience have also become increasingly important in other fields such as: education, community and international relations, urban planning and open space design and many other art forms from theater and dance to some forms of painting and sculpture. Through scientific discovery, we're also seeing the multitudes of connections and interactivity between all elements of the universe.

In terms of our everyday life, simple reasons to understand our seemingly new interest in interactivity and networking may be because of our deepened awareness that being involved with choice creates greater interest in our lives, promotes a higher quality of learning, and in the process, helps us to develop our self-esteem. It's also an efficient

way to get things done and have some fun, too — whether it's talking on the videophone, banking, maintaining a public community garden or learning about the geography of the world. There are obviously many reasons for us to explore and develop new applications for interactivity and networking, especially when they promote positive human communication.

environmental

One such evolving project that explores new potentialities for interactivity and networking is A Living Library. It's an idea to create a network of international culture parks in different cities of the world using new communications technologies on-line in a garden setting. This network would promote greater understanding among people and diverse cultures around the globe. Each Living Library would bring the humanities, sciences and visual and social sciences to life through plants, lectures, demonstration and video, computer and on-line performed artworks, programs of satellite (or other) capabilities.

CULTURES

The park, plaza, school-yard or other public open space would become a living learning laboratory, a magnet, bringing together many sectors of the community — all in celebration of learning, creating and maintaining the environment.

Initially inspired and designed for a site in the middle of

New York City, Bryant Park, adjacent to the main branch of the New York Public Library, a Living Library here, would have gardens of know-ledge arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System. There would be a Generalities Garden, Religion Garden, Philosophy Garden, Social Sciences Garden, Language Garden, Science Garden, Technology Garden, a Garden of the Arts and History and a Geography Garden — each with its corresponding plants, artworks and other programs.

Because each locale is unique, the participating communities — some large, some small, would have their Living Libraries designed in a site specific and situation specific way — highlighting and integrating the local features and resources of the area — human, ecological, historic and economic. As such, each separate "life frame" or Living Library would be unique. At the local level, the resources would be integrated to work better together. The curricula of the schools, for example, could be linked to the park and maintenance for the environment would become part of the program. While at the national and international level, communities would be exchanging and sharing vital cultural information that promotes understanding, connectedness and peace.

As a model for the urban park of the future, A Living Library is part of a larger concept of park and urban design that formulates creative cost-effective solutions to traditional problems plaguing not only parks, but society-at-large, through integrating diverse human, technological and ecological resources.

Bonnie Sherk is an environmental sculptor and planner. She creates unique artistic, ecological and educational environments integrated with programs, called "Life-Frames." Her new work operates on a global scale and demonstrates the connections between multicultural forms and international styles with other life systems.

The issues that A Living Library addresses are:

Healing the fragmentation of modern living and *education*

Promoting a more profound understanding and appreciation of other CULTURES around the world

Creating a sensitive balance between technology and non- mechanized *nature*

Developing new approaches to civic management, park maintenance, problems of vandalism and inappropriate behavior

Creating innovative solutions for locating monies for the operation of public-oriented projects such as parks

Proposing alternatives to the "business-as-usual" approach to environmental transformation, which is often merely cosmetic and overly expensive.

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Television and the Unconscious

Donald Kuspit: An Interview

Herman Rapaport

Donald Kuspit proposes that television is a technology that involves a certain self-hypnosis by the viewer. Television is disintegrative if for no other reason than that the image is inherently broken up much like a mosaic. The image we see is only virtually unified; in fact, it consists of a delicate interplay of atomized bits that are not integrated. The unconscious, Kuspit argues, receives or picks up these monads independently of the unifying horizon that makes up the integrity of the virtual television image. Central to this view is the understanding that television exploits a gap between sensing and understanding an image. Particularly in the case of television, the viewer's libidinal investments are involved, because the image itself has an ersatz unconscious made up of suggestive fragments which are resonating at a level that the eye does not register. Television allows for conditions approximating Freud's depiction of memory in which objectified experiences are made up of smaller fragments whose logic obeys a different law during sleep, namely, that of "drives" as opposed to that of the "real." Watching television, then, is much like dreaming in that the viewer encounters a free flowing of highly charged semiotic fragments that are libidinally connected. What makes the image hypnotic, however, is that the image as a totalizing field has the authority of the real behind it which directs or dictates something to the viewer to structure unconscious perception. How this dictation from without is inscribed into the narcissistic relation we have with the televized scene was a major point Kuspit elaborated and certainly marks a very original and profound insight in the study of video.

Kohut relates the question of narrative to the stage in child development where the child's absence from the mother is punctuated by the mother's "refueling" of the child upon her return. The mother's absences encourage the child to discover a separate sense of self. If one is engaged in a primary process world of the video image, one is not involved in this separation and reunion. How then does one develop this separate sense of self and how can narcissistic injury be healed?

One carries the video image with one all the time; the irreproachment is done by the fact that the image is constantly there. One can no longer make that distinction between absence and presence, and the kind of narcissism I have described is the creation of a mosaic mirror which is itself internalized. There is no longer a sense of an autonomous self, except for that supplied by the mirror we carry within us. The new narcissism is defined by its lack of separation. It may be another disfunction, but it is the only way of ending the narcissistic injury Heinz Kohut describes — that is, by internalize the authoritative video image. Of course, one can adjust or refit this image to suit one's self, but the vibrating mosaic field is constant. Image splitting, by the way, has been very successful recently on television. Not only does this make more images possible, it also creates simultaneity within the image field.

Video is a prosthetic narcissistic device. It is a mental crutch. It is an artificial self, an artificial imagining tool which repeats rapprochement without separation, because separation no longer exists. The old idea of being stranded no longer exists. The old idea of being stranded on a desert island with one's favorite book has been replaced: one would not take a book anymore — one would take a television.

Rudolf Arnheim describes video as having effects which are both specific to the medium and necessary for any use of the medium. In your lecture you describe video as creating a dependency in the viewer on the television set, an effect which I inferred to be negative. If video has intrinsic negative effects, how can you point to the positive effects of the medium?

I may have been ironic, but I did not intend to characterize these effects as negative. Indeed, video is the analyst. It is impossible to live today without some analytic "other" — not necessarily a tabula rasa — but video does function in this capacity. The positive effects of video allow one to function in the world, somewhat as in this analogy: In *The Ugly American*, the "Ugly American" becomes a nuisance for trying to force the French Consul into giving up his cocaine habit. Albeit an idealized description of cocaine, I would argue that video is a mass cocaine or opiate. Baudelaire deems a good work of art one that allows the viewer to see the world as if one were on opium. It is as though the world were hyper-real, hyper-sensory, hallucinatory. But at the same time, one is fully "with it" in this world of vibrating senations. Marx said

that religion is the opiate of the masses, and I submit that video is another kind of opiate of the masses. It satisfies their need for feeling and for having a sense of narcissistic unity. This is the positive effect of video. A world without video would be impossible now, just as a world without opium would have been impossible for Baudelaire.

Why this addiction to video? George Broom, a psychologist who treats addictive behavior, argues that particular addictions, such as alcoholism, are hereditary. Apparently tests can determine whether the child of an alcoholic will also become addicted to alcohol. There is a social addiction to television, which is necessary in order to make up for the narcissistic crippling resulting from our upbringing. Television is a reparational device, and as such, it is much more complicated than telling stories around the so-called campfire.

On the other hand you argue that the mosaic television image produces this libidinal charge, while on the other hand you discuss the effects of different types of narratives. What kind of distinction do you make between the need for romantic and technical fiction, both of which are fulfilled in television serials?

In the beginning of my talk I addressed the inherent quality of the television image as an iconoic mosaic within a vibrating luminous field. I also pointed out that television was not being used properly, that it could be reduced to a mechanical means of documentation. In the recording of the senate debates, for example, television becomes another demystification device for presenting information. On television, characters are experienced more as unconscious images than as figures standing in the space of the Senate Rotunda amphitheater and so on. Even though I consciously know that this figure has to do with this issue, I convert the narrative into an internal, unconscious event. The figure becomes an unconscious form of articulation. A good television romance presents its characters to us not only as introjectible and identifiable to our narcissistic selves, but it also activates this libidinous energy instantaneously and spontaneously. When we read a book or see a film, on the other hand, there is a discursive mediation through the printed word or the projection apparatus. Despite the presence of characters, this mediation undermines narcissistic identification psychology. I can still tell myself, "It is just a book." I can leave a movie and say "It is just a film." One cannot say this about video. Thomas Mann was once said to have left a movie in tears. He said to his friends, "Oh, but it's not art — with art you don't cry." In video there is neither laughter nor tears. Instead one introjects both the image and the narrative to a primary process level. The two fuse together in a stream of fantasy whose ultimate purpose is narcissistic completion. The

danger of being made infantile by television arises from the fact that we may never exit this so-called primary process level. Whereas with the movies we are aware of the medium (i.e., the projection apparatus) it is the opposite with video. Video has become a fixture in our homes. Like a wristwatch it is an "internal device."

You base your inquiry on the subject and its internal objects, but you do not place any emphasis outside the subject. Post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorists, such as Baudrillard, discuss the subject as part of an objective social or cultural group. Could you comment on that?

This is a difficult question, but at the heart of these arguments is the theory that schizophrenia has become a social structure. I believe that these theories present an overdeterministic view of our present social structure, and they also assume that the unconscious is not an inherently critical or receptive apparatus.The unconscious, in its bisections, in its restructuring of appearance, and in its working through association, is critical as well as assimilative. The theorists you mention turn the self into a mere reflection of social relations and social reality. They ignore the mystery of "upbringing" — that is, the fact that relatively similar experiences produce different responses. In Baudrillard's schizophrenic network society, one is not a victim, simply because each individual will network in this society in a different way. That difference, which Deleuze would argue is socially produced, is actually the result of subjective unconscious processes. These theorists are trying to override the uniqueness of subjective unconscious processes in favor of social determination. Freud, for example, in his discussion of hysterics argues that a childhood seduction would lead to hysteria if it occurred up to the age of three or four. By age seven or eight such an episode would be traumatic, but it would not result in the same severe neurosis. The outcome of the seduction for the most part, however, is not entirely predictable from the external event, and this variance is due to subjective unconscious processes. Perhaps society is schizophrenic and disjunctive, but I would argue that speaking of the self, a certain methodological distinction must be made. First, the self is not a coherent structure.

Second, we cannot function unless we act as if the self were a coherent structure on an individual basis. The latter distinction is omitted in certain post-Freudian studies.

What difference do you see between a televised recording of a string quartet performance, and the experience of seeing it in the auditorium? In the auditorium the performers are physcially present. One senses the rest of the audience stirring or remaining still. In short, there is a sense of contingency to the event: the performer may make a mistake or something might go wrong. (I might add that this is characteristic of the film image as well.) In the television image of the string quartet, whatever happens is all right. There is no right or wrong about the image: it is simply a flowing fantasy. The television image becomes like a John Cage silence in that we have an interesting noise — the object image, the players, the music — breaking through a consistently flickering iconic mosaic. If on the other hand, you watch a concert on television and you are tuned in on the music, your conscious mind refuses to let your self be hypnotized. You are rejecting the television experience and using it simply as a medium for information. You are not immersing yourself in the medium.

It seems to me that every age has its art form which does exactly what television is doing now. Decades ago, my grandparents would have been shocked by someone going to the movies, because the movies were highly criticized then as television is now for catering to the "masses," but not to the "educated." I do not see any difference between what television finally achieves and what sitting around a campfire once did. Each provides its spectators the same kind of emotional narcissistic experience, just as public statuary provided to the society of fifteenth century Florentine Italy. I accept what you are saying with the following qualifications: You point to narcissistic problems through the ages, which I am willing to accept as a larger problem. But television is also a medium with a specificity of its own. When I look at art television in universities, not just average television

shows, I do not think that the medium's full potential has been released. Suppose people had decided that the potential of nature painting had been exhausted after Giotto? Giotto only started something which was completed in the nineteenth century by the impressionists. Television too, has started something and I hate to see it ended by what passes as television now. In order to point to possible new directions for television, we have to talk about the medium in a different way. Just as Giotto's painting brought us new insights about nature, a subject which everyone had taken for granted, so video could offer us new insights about the unconscious processes.

I am always disturbed by the interference of the camera when I watch television. That is why I would prefer seeing a live recital to watching one on television. There I can select what I want to look at and listen to, whereas television is dictated to me by someone else's point of view. I cannot see the violin if they are showing me the saxaphone.

That is your consciousness operating, not your narcissim. Your intelligence is whatever you see through. The image by its very nature turns into a narcissistic thing in the concert environment, so it does not really matter if you focus on a violin or some other instrument. What matters is the quality of the psychological transformation taking place. When I focus on an instrument on television, I see it both as a violin and as a partial internal object. I am partly hypnotized by it. Perhaps television's task is to combine both conscious focusing on the object with the hypnotic effect. In addition I would add that each age since the Renaissance has tried to make the invisible visible within its own particular art medium.

In our age — that is, the last century and a half — extraordinary symbolic codes have been developed which seek to externalize the invisible. During the Renaissance, portraiture attempted to create a likeness that revealed inner character. This is not to suggest that all Renaissance portraiture succeeded in revealing the inner self the way that Rembrandt did. Many other Renaissance portraits with the same format and the same style did not achieve that character or sense of self that we see in Rembrandt's work. In our age, the concept of the "inner" or the "invisible" has become much more sophisticated. I think that television could give a truly free seeing and free representation by experimenting with the layering effects, types of density and could offer us the potential to explore this latter day inner self. I do not believe that a "high video art" will establish itself just as a "high film art" has; we cannot leave video up to the mass media people. In Meyer Shapiro's famous essay on abstract art, Shapiro argues against Alfred Barr's assertion that abstract art was exhausted. According to Barr, now both types of art are exhausted and some other mode should arrive. Shapiro contends that representation is far from exhausted. Art does not operate according to the principle of a mechanical pendulum. There must be certain conditions such as intellectual awareness and theoretical development in order to effect any change in artistic production. I can see television going completely to hell, to mass media, just as radio has. There is no such thing as high radio. My opinion about television is basedupon the expectation of people who are involved in the medium itself.

I would like to propose that television viewing is a performance of the unconscious done by the superego rather than a dream in which the id rules over the unconscious. What happens in the viewing experience when the inhibitions are lifted by the id, versus when the inhibitions are lifted by the superego masking of the id?

That's a wonderful argument. Certainly this seems to be the case with the unconscious versions of id, libido, energy, love and death that we see on mass television. I would hope that "high television," if I may continue using that term, would give a truly free seeing and free representation by experimenting with the layering effects, types of density and light structures one can achieve by working with that two dimensional mosaic. Presumably, these would not be performed by the superego; however, as you know, there is never any complete freedom from the superego. One might say that television must discover its own discontentiveness.

My question concerns the methodology you use when you are looking at a piece of video work. Since you are talking about primary process in the unconscious, would your criticism stimulate the imitation of dream analysis or would psycholanalysis have to be reinterpreted in order to fit in this new class of representation?

This is a type of dream interpretation in the sense that it deals with the old symbolist problem, but it would have to be extended to include problems such as why a weeping willow is seen as a weeping willow. The question becomes not one of pathetic fallacy, but rather of why we invest emotion in certain forms. Why do certain video images engage us in a particular way or seem more interesting than others? This would be the starting point of video criticism — an examination of the texture of the medium itself. On a more practical level the next step would involve looking at the kind of symbolic structures articulated in the narrative. This type of psycho-formal analysis would require the synthesis of Greenberg's division between the literal order of effects and the preconscious/unconscious order of effects. Video offers the critic

a special opportunity to unite this division because of the internalization situation which is operational in the medium from the start. the great appeal of video on the popular level is its anaesthetic and hypnotic effects. One flicks on the television, one knows it is there and these are reminders of its power.

What happens to your argument if, through technological developments, the mosaic quality or definition of the grain in the video became imperceptible? I have seen a certain type of high resolution video image which is already being produced in Japan, yet even in that image a certain flickering intensity remains. If there were such a thing as total resolution in the video image, then we would have something like film, and that would be a different problem. I would still maintain, however, that the vibrant sensation within the iconic mode is specific to television, even if its presence seems to become subliminal through higher image quality. In addition, no matter how high the resolution of the image, it still emanates from the apparatus. Perhaps, with the VCR, the division between television and film is becoming narrower, but watching a film on television is still a televisual experience. It is possible that someday there may be a convergence of film, photography and video into a universal medium. I imagine that in the future, receivers will be available where one can stop the action as it is happening, play back the images and splice them right on the set. That would present an interesting opportunity for creating one's own narcissistic resolution. Yet this does not take into account what will happen to the scale of the image. I do not know how television would respond to the issue of scale. I have watched large screen television, and in my opinion, it looks like a bad film.

Perhaps film, photography and video, each have a limited life in terms of use value for our narcissistic purposes, eventually will fuse and become multimedia. The major issue that remains is the reparative function of art. Since Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in the nineteenth century, we have a theory which posits art as a means of recuperating from the nausea of existence. This function of art has been revived by certain psycho-analytic theorists who see in art a potential healing device for the injured self. Perhaps society is becoming so administrative that we need not worry if we are injured or repaired. The conscious perception of ourselves as neurotic may be an elite privilege. Just as in *1984* there was, on the one hand, this wonderful world of well-adjusted hard-working people, and on the other hand, there was the slum filled with people who wanted to have sex outside. Our world may one day be divided between those who work for a giant corporation and the shabby people who turn to art or to universities. Perhaps art is simply an elitist way of treating elistist problems. After all, the majority of people in the West seem to solve their problems with Oil of Olay — and watching a lot of television.

Donald Kuspit, professor of art history at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, received the Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism, presented in 1982 by the College Art Association. He is the author of *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* and *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*. His numerous articles have appeared in such journals as *Artforum, Art in America* and *Vanguard*. He is an editor of *Art Criticism*.

Kostelanetz's remarks concern "literary video" as a genre in which text and image are brought into new relationships and are not kept separate as in broadcast television. The fact that video can distort images much more radically than film means that the merger of text and image promotes a more extensive exploration of visible language than possible in many other media.

Richard Kostelanetz

literary

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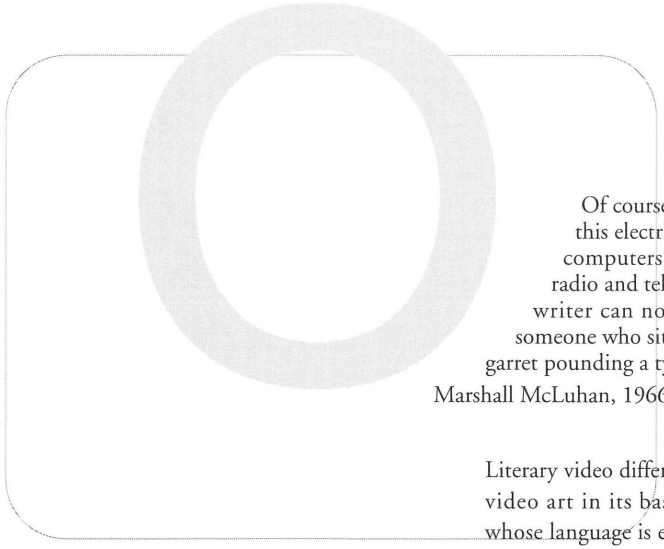
New York, New York

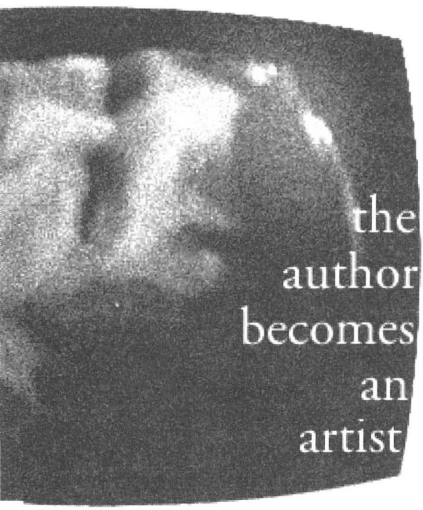
Visible Language, 29:2
Richard Kostelanetz, 198-203



Of course, in
this electric age of
computers, satellites,
radio and television, the
writer can no longer be
someone who sits up in his
garret pounding a typewriter.
Marshall McLuhan, 1966

Literary video differs from other video art in its base of a text whose language is enhanced, rather than mundane — a text that is conceived within the traditions of literature and a contemporary sense of verbal possibilities.

Literary video differs from video literary-reportage, in which, typically, a poet is interviewed or is seen reading aloud; for in literary video, the author becomes an artist, exploiting the indigenous possibilities of the new medium — instant playback, overdubbing, image distortion in live time and so forth. In literary video, the screen is intelligently active, the author-artist visually enhances his own language; in video reportage, the camera as an eye is visually dumb. Literary video draws upon both literary materials and video possibilities



and integrates them, rather than keeping then separate; so that word complements image and vice versa.

The video medium itself is closer to books than film, because the television screen is small and perceptually distant, like the printed page, rather than large and enveloping, like the movie screen; and literary video is customarily read like a book, in small groups or alone. (Most of us feel no qualms abut interrupting someone watching a tele-vision or reading a book, while people at the movies remain undisturbed.) Yet another similarity between video and book is that an artist making a video tape may, unlike the filmmaker, examine his finished product immediately upon completing it; the process resembles rewriting at the typewriter.

Because the video image is less precise than the film image, and the former's light source is behind the screen, video is conducive to antirealism, but that perceptual distance between the viewer and the screen inhibits the experience of dreaminess. Video offers an arsenal of techniques for producing instant distortion — a surrealism that, because of the screen's size, is more painterly (if not literary) than filmic.

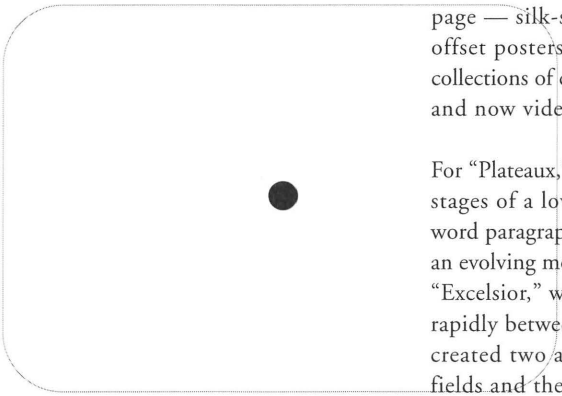
Because the video screen is much smaller than the movie screen, video is not effective in re-producing proscenium theatre; even conventional films look ungainly within such a tiny frame. It is conducive to individuals rather than choruses, to faces (and parts of faces) rather than milieus, to one or two voices rather than several. The video image tends to be more flat (two dimensional), more tightly structured, and less cluttered — less like a film than a book.

Literary video should transcend the familiar representationalism or conventional syntax of familiar literature; it should also transcend those constraints of subject, theme and truth that constrict the story telling of commercial television. The video medium lends itself to the presentation of continuous movement and, thus, not to poetry, but to prose and to narrative.

Television is a mass medium; video a private one. Television

is treasured for its incredibility. Literary video is destined for an audience that is ideally both visually sensitive and literate; television for an audience that is neither.

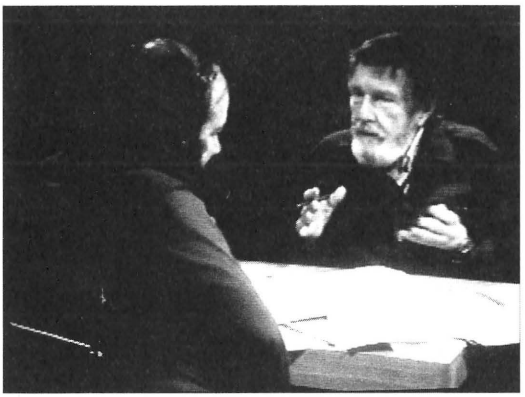
My own video work is simple in certain respects and complex in others. So is most writing. However, I make simple what others render complexly, and make complex certain dimensions that others render simply. As a full-time writer, I bring language, with which I am familiar, to video, which I have scarcely explored. Although I won't abandon one art to do another — a 1960s fashion — I am, as a creative writer, currently experimenting not just vertically, within literary art; but horizontally, with media other than the small rectangular page — silk-screened prints, offset posters, ladderbooks, collections of cards, audio tape, and now videotape.



For "Plateaux," which relates the stages of a love affair in one word paragraphs, I introduced an evolving moiré pattern; for "Excelsior," which switches rapidly between two voices, I created two abstract kinetic fields and then swiftly alternated between them. The central work in *Three Prose Pieces* (1975) is "Recyclings," in which nonsyntactic prose texts are read by several nonsynchronous voices, all of which are mine. The color image consists only of pairs of lips (mine), moving synchronously with the audible speech. The first section has one voice and one pair of

lips; the last (and sixth) section has six audible voices and six pairs of visible lips.

For another tape, *Openings & Closings* (1975), a collection of single-sentence stories, which are alternately the openings and closings of hypothetically longer fiction, I instructed the engineer to alternate between color and black-and-white camera crews, and then instructed each crew to make its current visual image of me reading as different as possible from the one before in order to realize visually the leaps of time and space that characterize the prose text.



John Cage Interviewed by R. Kostelanetz ©Artists' Television Network (1978).

Remarkably few writers have made creative video, although an army of poetic eminences have had their faces and voice memorialized on half-inch, black-and-white tape. It is surprising that no literary funding agency has ever, to my knowledge, supported literary video, for reportage, that artistically lesser form, rips off all the available funds. Intelligent literary video is less lucrative than dumb. Literary video will not supercede the printed page but will become yet another possibility for heightened language exploration.

Richard Kostelanetz lives in New York City and is widely recognized in both the fields of art and literary studies. Among the many publications to his credit are: *Beyond Left and Right: Radical Thought of Our Times, John Cage, Assembling Assembling, Conversing with Cage, Merce Cunningham* and *Booknotes, 1958-1993.*

Carole Ann Klonarides: An Interview

Herman Rapaport

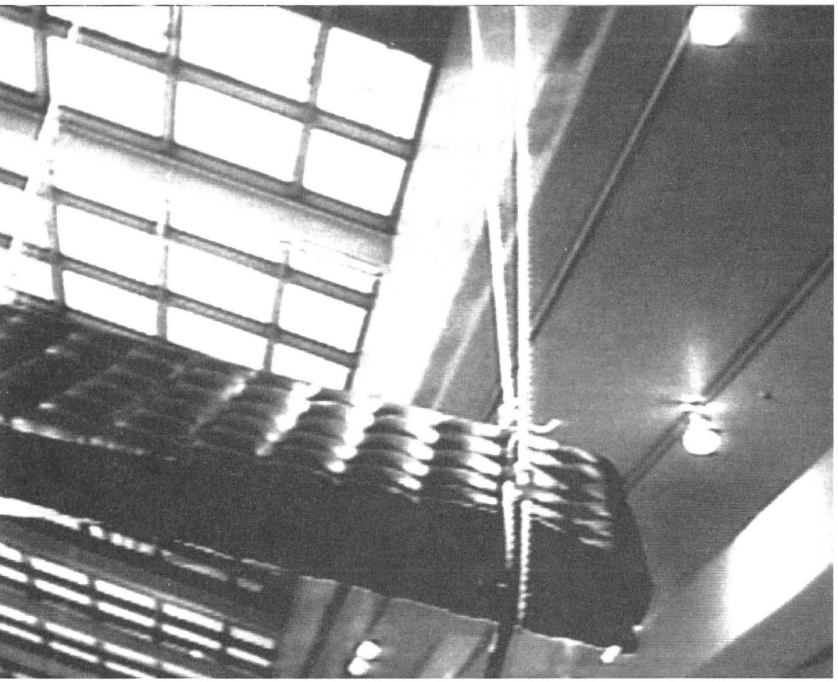
An interview with Carole Ann Klonarides explores the videographer's manipulation of space, time and visual texture which often results in an altered sense of history. Her goal to create believable sequences together with her desire to move beyond the stereotypical uses and formats of contemporary television show the conflict in her work. She discusses *Cascade: Vertical Landscapes* as an example of these ideas.

Television is a flow, of course. A continuum. It doesn't stop. But what matters is how you enter the flow.

Carole Ann Klonarides

Long Beach Museum of Art
2300 East Ocean Boulevard
Long Beach, California 90803

Visible Language, 29:2
Carole Ann Klonarides, 204-213



HR: Given the number of temporalities which video can articulate, I wonder about the question of presence in video versus film. It seems to me that the film image appears to be much more present or there, whereas the video image better reflects different registers of temporality, their non-simultaneity, for example. We notice that with respect to how black and white can be manipulated in relation to color. Or the way in which one can seamlessly insert anachronistic events, images, voices, etc. Because of how video can be edited there is a historicization or temporal layering of the image one doesn't often see in film.

CAK: I think it's all about layers of believability. With video you can create different kinds of reality. It's like going beyond the notion of something that's a wish, that comes over you, that you succumb to, that video can become something much more than that. And that is travelling through the layers of different kinds of realities. You begin to think about digital storage, you know, actually putting something in a microscopic space and building upon that to create a reality that's completely impossible in real time. There's just no way you can have Gorbachev and Bush in the Amazon jungle and Marilyn Monroe singing to them. But with video technology you could easily create that in a seamless way so that one would have to assume it could be believed. I feel that television is a surreal medium.

So what we're talking about is a succession of disparate temporal signifiers out of which a new temporality of the image can be constituted?

Yes. If done successfully you can transport the viewer into reality that has nothing to do with any kind of time or place that one has ever experienced before. Now some people may say this is dangerous: I've never been able to quite understand why this should make us numb or fall into some sort of pit.

Well, it's going to make you forget the real historical and existential conjunctions.

But what "really" exists? And are books any less fabricated? I mean, history is already falsified. There's always questioning, and it's just a question of how you want to enter into experience. Do you want to go into it saying "it's going to take me over completely and I'm going to believe everything I see?" There are some people who would do that with everything. But you can enter into it and say "it's a different interpretation; it's a different way of simulating information, images, experiences." Anyway, history is a souvenir, isn't it? It's a security. It's about believing that something happened that had meaning and worth and that will affect us. As a woman, I'm always wondering what really happened in history with all these women that just didn't exist, and I'm sure minority people feel the same way. It's not a subject I really want to discuss, but media has totally altered

our sense of history, for example, in terms of how events are collectively experienced on broadcast television. Now Nancy Burson deals with some interesting temporal concepts in video. She's the one who uses computers to age people; for example, she used this technology to try to find a missing child through the reordering of time.

Along the lines of different temporalizatons, we could question how television accompanies other things that people do. For example, television can accompany a performance someone does. Whereas film is itself the work, video may be merely a document or recording of what happened. Whereas time in film is present to itself as the authentic temporality of the work, in video the temporality of the work itself isn't necessarily fully disclosed.

For a long time I wasn't interested in the idea of video as another way of experiencing television. I didn't like the notion of presenting it in galleries. I didn't like the idea of video installations, you know, making it into sculpture. And then I began to see that video was becoming more involved in architecture and in our daily environment: in bars, malls, supermarkets. I'm not thinking about demonstrations, but about the way people have consciously or unconsciously started to use the media within the environment. So I'm beginning to realize there might be interesting ways you can interface into the architecture and the viewer can interface into the video. As far as video relates to performance, I think it can be an enhancement. It can also be a sidebar. It really depends on how you use it. I just did an interview with Raoul Ruiz, the film maker, and he just made his first video installation. He says that there's this moment when you're doing a film in the night and you have to set up the lights in a very particular way and they're testing them when all of a sudden the wrong light comes on and there's this magical light that bathes the darkness and it creates a moment that's only experienced when you're on a film set. Some photographers have tried to achieve that by using flashes in the night. In theater this moment might happen in rehearsing when something just happens and it's like a complete catharsis of the entire play. Ruiz said these two moments can be achieved in a video installation; that is, you can actually stage and set it up, and the viewer can enter into that space. You could never do that in film or theater.

Television can also function as radio, of course. It's a medium that brings other media into relationship.

Well, a lot of television is still radio. Television started out as radio with pictures. And the emphasis was really still on the audio. Ernie Kovacs was the first one to try manipulating the image. Television, today, is still very dependent on music, text and audio in general. The following example is telling: I used to work in a rock club and there would be a big switchboard and I'd be in a box and put out video and audio separately. Occasionally I'd push the wrong button and maybe there would be only pictures or only audio out on the floor. Nobody ever objected when there was no picture, but they always objected when there was no audio. So I think audio is still a crucial element, because it's like a presence. It's like a known. There are a lot of people who just turn the tube on all day, while they're doing their chores. They like having the voice there. For those of us who are trying to get beyond the familiar image of television, one must try to get beyond the audio, and therefore lots of artists have experimented with it — turning it on and off. Today VCRs and home television cameras still marry image and sound, but the new technologies will allow everyone to experiment with the desynchronization of sound and image.

And people are already experimenting at home with what VCRs can do.

With film and theater, of course, you can't search, rewind or freeze-frame. You have no control over what you see. I enjoy renting films on video because I can go back and replay and deconstruct and reconstruct. One of the great things about the home unit is that people are now making their own videos. People are starting to tape the part of the television program that they want or they interface their own tape with a program.

Video is like a book; you search through it and skim.

In Hans Breder's class I was looking at some students' work and upset them when I put the playback machine on search, going back and forth that way. And one of them said, "What are you doing?" You know, they were startled. And I said, "I'm looking at how you made your piece; don't you ever look at your own video work on fast forward?" It's about how you read video.

What does it means to *read* video?

It's breaking apart and dissecting, deconstructing image and sound — reading is editing.

But there's this question of asking what we want from film or video when we read it. Let's say we look at a film or video piece and we put it on fast forward. It's like wanting to see it, but not wanting to give ourselves over to the time it takes to watch it. I mean, there are these two desires: to see and not to see.

But the only way you see the whole of the work is to see it very quickly. Because video is about so many parts, so many bits, that you have to scan it and then go back. Only in that way can you see the holes, the places where something falls through.

What do you mean "falls through"?

In *Cascade: Vertical Landscape* the structure is a continuous flow of information that's seamless; it's a vertical read. In television there aren't many vertical reads. There are credits, but not actual reads of an entire piece, of a whole program by means of this vertical movement. People use vertical pans, but they don't build an entire piece on a vertical structure. To make a vertical read work, you can't have any holes, because what happens is that if you're shooting an architectural landscape and you hit a sky, well, we always think of skies as moving, but on video it becomes dead. It stops everything; it's just blue. You're on a blue field without movement. So that would be a hole. You just go bong — and stop. All of a sudden, then, you are faced with having to fill the hole — you have to keep things going. We had to be careful within that structure in terms of speed, color, image and pacing; if any of those things don't work at any time, the whole piece fails. In fact there are two places where it doesn't work, but fortunately, they're so instantaneous that the normal viewer doesn't see it, though I, having looked at it many times, am upset every time I see it, because I know that it doesn't quite work.

What do you mean by "work"?

That gets technical. The Marlboro box in *Cascade* would be exemplary. We couldn't afford the technology used in advertising to make an object fall, in slow motion. So we had to fake it. We shot 35mm film and got a strobe lighting system and tried to multiply how many frames we could simulate slow motion with a strobe. Then we put it into video format and multiplied those frames to get the effect of paying three to four thousand dollars an hour for the proper camera and lighting system that would automatically do that. We managed to succeed on several levels, but the box, because it wasn't really moving, just looked dead. You could see the video pushing it, and it bothers me because I can see that it's an artificial movement with minute halts. I can see the video just struggle to push it, to animate it through space, whereas the french fries and the coke bottle work beautifully. Also the lobster is kind of dead. It too is going chug chug chug. But we had to put something in that big blue hole. It was hard; nothing else seemed to work.

So you're extremely concerned that the tape look absolutely smooth and seamless.

It had to. It wouldn't be credible otherwise. When seams are shown, we should make it very obvious. The car transition to Radio City was artificial and we wanted to make that artificiality completely visible; it supports the architectural structure in the tape. Plus we wanted to suggest rides within rides. We also tried to pick words which don't read: rendezvous. People don't know how to spell rendezvous and when they see it, they see it as an object. Maybe that's just my impression, but I felt that rendezvous was a word that people didn't actually read, that it's more like a graphic element.

Architecture as sign...

Architecture as brochure architecture — architecture as made to be photographed.

An issue I want to get back to is when you use the word believability, for example, you say the work has to be believable. I might be tempted to say that this is always true for any work of art — that this is really a very traditional idea.

I meant in terms of experience.

Okay, then, it has to ring true in terms of experience. We maintain that all the time. We go to museums and see works that have a certain credibility or authenticity for us. Exactly what that means in terms of the work is often difficult to explain. For example, does it mean that everything is balanced, properly synchronized, achieved as a convincing totality, etc.?

For me it's an intuitive timing. When I say believability, it's almost like the believability of the surreal — a whole other kind of experience. It's not about fact. It's about entering into an other sort of experience which has different levels of believability which influences the way we feel comfortable with different types of representation. Why do producers use the same video formats over and over again? Why is *Twin Peaks* getting so much attention? Because Lynch changed time and structure. He's dealing with different kinds of flatness, different kinds of response, different kinds of contrast. People just like that. I mean, they see it in other places, but on broadcast television? It's like . . . something else, causing everyone to re-evaluate things. The more we have of this the better. When Europeans come over here and comment on our news programs, they say. "Your news is fantasy. It's totally unreal. You don't have real news." Then I go over to Europe and I see what "real news" is...it's gore.

Is it a suspension of disbelief? Is that what believability is in the arts?

You know what it is? It's bits. I'm a news junkie and I like having the twenty-four hour news channel on. I like minute-to-minute reports. Similarly: journals, periodicals, newsformat shows, talk shows. One can elaborate on the information. If you rely on it as your only source of information, that's not good. But if you treat it like another form of information to be processed, then it's interesting.

The idea of bits relates to questions of texture in video which we've implicitly been talking about.

In graduate school I used to watch *Charlie's Angels* because they used to shoot all the outdoor action in video and the interior shots in film. The jump between mediums fascinated me. The way the camera is held and differences in its movement also contribute to textural changes. Sports shows have their own ways of articulating textures, sitcoms and news are different yet again.

There's also the difference between black and white versus color.

Today it's almost impossible to find black and white video tape stock. You can find black and white monitors, but it's very hard to find black and white footage tapes. In John Torreano's *Art World Wizard* the texture is the 60's Telstar look versus Andy of Mayberry. The plodding black and white with its paternal guide segues into the colorful technology of artifical synthetic technology. Video makers are becoming more adept at manipulating the difference. You see a lot of black and white and color going in and out, in and out.

You see that in painting too, for example, David Salle.

But painters are getting it from commercial photography. I think it's definitely about trying to understand how to signal a response. In the 60's the Italian filmmakers were physically changing the color of the film. Rossolini and Pasolini deal with different textures. This influenced me. I was interested in filmmakers who were informed by television postmodernists like Alan Rudolph and Jonathon Demme who are dealing with fiction and different kinds of what I call video truths. And today with paintbox technology you have such a wide palette that it's overwhelming, a seductive toy, particularly when you come out of a painting background. As far as coding the viewer to a certain response in video, of changing the context, having the color read in a different way, there just hasn't been that much done.

On broadcast television we're invited to feed or graze on images. The image is not meant to be systematically interpreted within a fairly homogeneous context as in, say, the film of Godard or Duras.

I think it's like calligraphy. Everyday you make a mark on a piece of paper and you keep making it and making it and you make all these different marks, but there's a certain mark that keeps coming back. I think that people identify with certain images no matter how many images you give them. They're going to pick-up on those images. And those images become their vocabulary and create a uniqueness within the vocab- ulary of images. So certain images have poignancy and others do not. I think there's a repetition of images because there are certain agendas that have to be addressed at certain times. But I can't really say what it would be like without that, because I was born in the 50's, and since I was a child I had *Life, The National Geographic,* television and just about every access to photography.

This takes us back to *Cascade: Vertical Landscapes* because there's a falling into image, the emphasis on falling into an architectural flow as the discourse of brochure art. What would it mean to enter into the image in this context?

I would say that in video there are only thresholds. But when I enter in it's not in the same way as with architecture. There's a big show in Japan where they've invited theorists and architects to define the idea of the threshold.What I talked about was that with video you can eliminate the threshold because with digital technology you can change the entry point in every way.

Enter at will.

Enter at will. Or redefine the whole idea of entering.

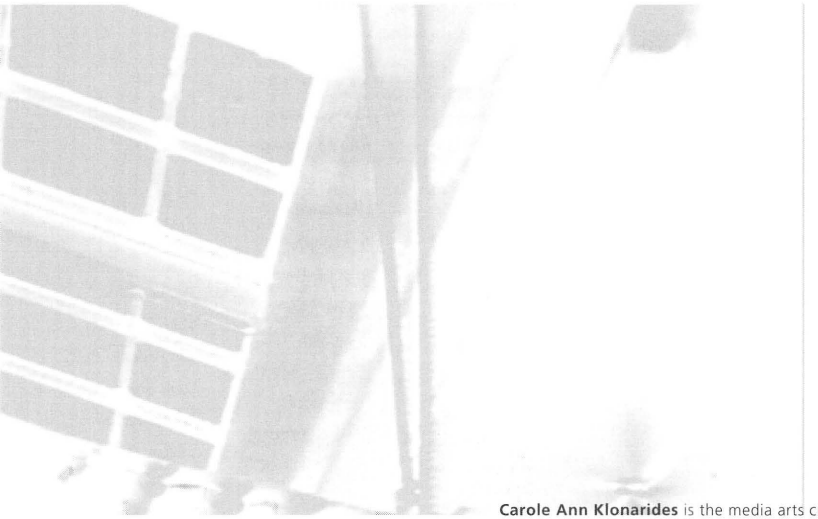
That may explain Hans Breder's interest in liminal icons in relation to television since the thresholds are so ambiguous. But that's an important point, that in video you can enter wherever you want to. This is also true with books.

Except there's an important difference. With the book there's a preconceived notion of picking it up and starting at the beginning. With television you change the channel; you're constantly moving it.

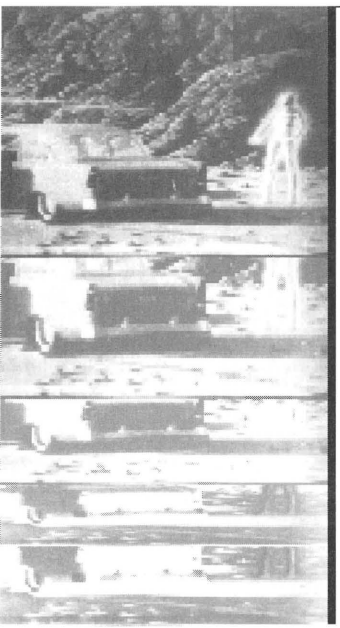
It's almost like being in front of a vertical roll; the stuff just comes out like paint from a tube or like a film or paper which stretches seamlessly forever. And one never really enters the space. One is always before the scrim, the electronic wallpaper.

Cascade: Vertical Landscapes started out as an idea about verticality — recreating a structure for television. But the artist, Dan Graham, began explaining the notion of the corporate atrium and how the viewer is led to the sources of power and thereby manipulated. Then too, there is a notion about how the landscape enters into the structure of the corporate atrium and how the relationship between the two is one of mirroring, of constantly flipping one over and back, putting one behind and in front of.

We vertically superimposed onto the landscape a reading of all the different kinds of corporate logos and signs. We began to think of merging all of these different kinds of urban environmental stimuli into a tape and began to experience it ourselves this way while shooting it. We passed on escalators through a mall surrounded by environmental muzak complete with plants, mirrors, glass elevators and concrete slabs. We found it amusing that at the end of *Cascade* it's like you're entering into a cathedral as you walk into the hotel lobby. It's like going dow to the depths of hell . . .



Carole Ann Klonarides is the media arts curator at the Long Beach Museum in California. She melds ideas and techniques of television and video art to make widely accessible work and to educate viewers about her media. Her work has received much recognition from Europe in festivals including Documenta in Germany. In addition to producing her own tapes, Klonarides has been curating video shows for clubs, public spaces and cable television.



Jameson's Complaint:

Video-Art and the Intertextual "Time-Wall"

Nicholas Zurbrugg

Fredric Jameson
Raymond Williams
László Moholy-Nagy
Nam June Paik
Charles Jencks
Jean Baudrillard
Roland Barthes
Luis Buñuel
John Cage
André Breton
Robbe-Grillet
Alexi Gan
Laurie Anderson
Hans Haacke
Robert Rauschenberg
Rosalind Krauss
Vito Acconci
Mona da Vinci

Peter Campus
Charlotte Moorman
Gregory Battcock
Heiner Müller
Marc Chagall
Paul Klee
Louis Aragon
Robert Wilson
William Burroughs
Stefan Brecht
Kasimir Malevich
Richard Wagner
Anders Stephanson
Renato Pogiolli
Jean François Lyotard

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Visible Language, 29:2
Nicholas Zurbrugg, 214-237

A rejoinder to Fredric Jameson, *Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video Text*.

Fredric Jameson has argued that television is entirely superficial and flat; hence, it is incapable of haunting the mind by leaving afterimages or traces. Jameson calls this a "structural exclusion of memory" endemic to the medium of video.

He also has reservations about what Raymond Williams called the "total flow" of broadcast television: whereas "programming" cuts up the flow into convenient temporal segments, Jameson's complaint is that one no longer has any "form" which can be objectivized or set apart as something particular to be remembered.

Television, in short, is too close to an ordinary mode of perception in which everything is experienced as the succession of fleeting moments. This means that television is connotative rather than denotative; impressionistic rather than objective.

Television reduces everything to a flow and in so doing effaces difference, whereas art can arrest or disrupt the ongoing temporality of moment-to-moment experience.

In critiquing Jameson, Zurbrugg argues that video art encourages self-analysis and allows for a critical examination of culture.

Video art is polemical in that it creates strategies whereby the viewer is disoriented and required to think about his or her own processes of perception and cognition.

That postmodernism offers exciting new discursive spaces is central to Zurbrugg's outlook and contrasts with the gloomy pessimism of Jameson.

autonomous art
video installations
multimedia
performance
Travels in Hyperreality
objective literature
precession of simulacra
observable dreams
Silence
TV Bra for Living Sculpture
modernism
postmodernism
constructivism

Art may often appear bare of ideological clarity
in the sense of a social program.

However, the artist is not a propagandist
but more than any other person,
a seismograph of his time and its direction,
who consciously or unconsciously
expresses its substance.

László Moholy-Nagy

Moholy-Nagy

As Moholy-Nagy suggests,[1] innovative art appears most significant as a 'seismograph' of the directions of its time. More than any other practices, video-art and its multimedia corollaries point to the new directions and substance of present times, challenging familiar cultural expectations.

Video's fulfillment of modernism

Benjamin

The general impact of video is at least twofold. First, as Walter Benjamin virtually predicted, video realizes modernism's vague aspirations toward "effects which could only be obtained by a changed technical standard."[2] Video *is* this changed technical standard. Second, as a specifically postmodern technology interacting and intersecting with other older genres, video precipitates an increasingly prevalent multimedia sensibility.

Video, multimedia & postmodernism

Arguably, the most compelling examples of distinctively *post*-modern creativity emerge within video-art and its multimedia adjuncts. Any understanding of contemporary culture would therefore seem to necessitate examination of both video's authorial taped works, its more impersonal installations and of those new modes of multimedia performance combining live and technological materials or redefining theater in terms of video's special qualities.

Multimedia & generational break

Eco

Ironically, as Umberto Eco points out in his articles on the new media, those "trained by the texts of twenty years ago" often seem quite helpless before multimedia art. By contrast, younger generations born within the welter of the new media "instinctively... know these things better than some seventy-year-old pedagogue," having "absorbed as elements of their behavior a series of elements filtered through the mass media (and coming, in some cases, from the most impenetrable areas of our century's artistic experimentation)."[3]

Modern & postmodern

Paik
Wilson
Jencks

At its most positive extreme, postmodern creativity exhibits identical virtues. Absorbing and internalizing the lessons of modernism's most impenetrable experimentation, and at the same time mastering the more "impenetrable" advances in late twentieth century technology, postmodern video artists such as

1. Moholy-Nagy, László. 1947. *Vision in Motion.* Chicago, Theobald, 352.
2. Benjamin, Walter. 1955. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Reprinted in Zohn, Harry, translator. 1979. *Illuminations.* Glasgow: Collins, 239.
3. Eco, Umberto. 1987. *Travels in Hyperreality.* London: Picador, 147, 149, 214-215.

Nam June Paik and postmodern multimedia artists such as Robert Wilson create the quintessentially late-twentieth century art that conservative critics such as Charles Jencks have incredulously characterized as that "strange even paradoxical thing": an "art more modern than modern" and "more avant-garde" than the modernist avant-garde.[4]

Theories of postmodernism

Jencks
Jameson

At its most misleading extreme, the postmodern cultural theory of critics such as Jencks and Fredric Jameson dismisses contemporary technological creativity in far more negative terms. Postmodern culture, it seems, coincides with the "deaths" of authoriality, originality, spirituality, monumentality, beauty, profundity – everything, in fact, except apocalyptic cliché. According to Jencks, for example, postmodern culture subverts the ideals of the modernist tradition in "a series of self-cancelling steps"; reduces art and music to the "all white canvas" and "absolute silence"; and transforms its public into "lobotomized mass-media illiterates."[5]

Mass–media illiteracy

Baudrillard
Paik

Jencks' concept of the "mass-media illiterate" has an unexpected double-edge. On the one hand, it obviously refers to those nurtured on televised kitsch, incapable of reading anything more challenging than comic-book captions. But as recent discussion of postmodern video-art suggests, the same formulation also applies to theorists nurtured on the printed page: those who vaguely sense the significance of video-art, but who find themselves incapable of deliberating upon it in anything other than derisive terminology. Jean Baudrillard, for example, hails video as "the special effect of our time," but in the next breath rather ambiguously applauds and deplores video for its "intensity on the surface" and its "insignificance in depth."[6]

In much the same way, Fredric Jameson emphasizes the central priority of video, and half-heartedly acknowledges that video artists such as Nam June Paik have "identified a whole range of things to do and then moved in to colonize this new space."[7] Thereafter, Jameson damns Paik's work with extremely faint praise. Apparently

4. Jencks, Charles. 1987. Post-*Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture.* London: Academy Editions, 12.
5. Jencks, *Post-Modernism...* , 12.
6. Baudrillard, Jean. 1986. *Amérique.* Paris: Bernard Grasset, 74, author's translation.
7. Jameson, Fredric. 1987. interviewed by Anders Stephanson in *Flash Art,* 131, December/January, 72.

alluding approvingly to Paik's "quintessentially postmodern dispositions." Jameson adds the scathing afterthought, "only the most misguided museum visitor would look for art in the content of the video images themselves."[8]

Surely the reverse obtains. Only the most misguided or the most cynical museum visitor would suppose that Paik's work consists solely of discursive self-referentiality. The lines above typify the way in which Jameson's deliberations upon postmodern video-art, and upon postmodern culture in general, project their own conceptual confusion upon such subject matter. As I shall suggest, Jameson appears the victim of two afflictions: his tendency toward premature exasperation and his more general disadvantage as one of the many contemporary intellectuals who appear trapped behind what one might think of as the intertextual "time-wall."

Reading without Interpretation & its sources

Barthes
Baudrillard
Buñuel
Breton

These complaints become most explicit in Jameson's recent article entitled "Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text"(1987);[9] an essay fatally informed by over-literal responses to Roland Barthes' provocative overstatements in "The Death of the Author"(1968).[10] Parisian polemic has long perfected exaggeration and heuristic hyperbole into something of an artform; a tradition which culminates in Baudrillard's seductive "fictionizing."[11] One thinks, for example, of the impossibly inflexible imperatives of surrealists such as Luis Buñuel or André Breton. Declaring that "nothing" in his film *Un Chien andalou* "symbolizes anything," Buñuel relates that this work's scenario evolved according to strict adherence to principles determining that:[12]

When an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it immediately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern, or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation.

8. Jameson, Fredric. 1988. *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography.* Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 18.
9. Jameson, Fredric. 1987. "Reading without Interpretation: Post-modernism and the Video-Text," in Fabb, Nigel et al, editors. Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Manchester: Manchester University Press. All references to this essay appear as parenthetical page numbers in my text.
10. Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text.* Glasgow: Collins, 142-148. where all subsequent references to this essay appear in my text.
11. Baudrillard, Jean. 1986. "L'Amérique comme fiction," an interview with Jacques Henric and Guy Scaparta. Art Press, 103, 41; my translation in *Eyeline,* 5, 24.
12. Buñuel, Luis. 1978. "Notes on the Making of Un Chien Andalou," in Mellen, Joan, editor. *The World of Luis Buñuel.* New York: Oxford University Press, 153.

As Buñuel observes, his fidelity to the articles of surrealism proved supremely impractical. Faced with the possibility that the supposedly subversive *Un Chien andalou* might become a public success, and confronted by Breton's astonishing question: "are you with the police or with us?" Buñuel "suggested that we burn the negative on the Place du Tetre in Mont-martre, something I would have done without hesitation had the group agreed to it."[13] Jameson's pursuit of Barthes' early ideals leads to much the same kind of self-destructive logic as that born of Buñuel's dedication to surrealism's pope.

Buñuel's and Jameson's conclusions offer a pleasing asymmetry. While the former defends authorial insight and scorns cultural convention, the latter reasserts Barthes' claim that texts contain no other content than a "performative" function. According to "The Death of the Author":

The fact is... that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction'... rather, it designates exactly what linguists... call a performative... in which the enunciation has no other content... than the act by which it is uttered.(145-146)

Authorship & denial

Barthes
Wilde
Dickens

Taken to its extreme, Barthes' argument pronounces:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered, the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking), at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath. (147)

Somewhat as Wilde protested that only those with hearts of stone could resist laughing at Dickens' description of the death of Little Nell, one suspects that only the most fossilized structuralist could fail to smile before Barthes' contentious diagnosis of the "death" of the author. Jameson takes this hypothesis very seriously. Recycling it some twenty years after its initial formulation, he defines video as:

a structure or sign-flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of themes... and which therefore systematically sets out to short-circuit traditional interpretive temptations. (219)

13. Buñuel, Luis. 1983. *My Last Sigh.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 108, 110.

Authorship & "objective literature"

Robbe–Grillet
Barthes

One reads Jameson's account of video's exclusion of themes with considerable nostalgia. In almost identical terms, Barthes' early essay on the *nouveau roman* – "Objective Literature," of 1954 – insisted that Robbe-Grillet's novels were not composed in depth; did not protect a heart beneath their surface; and contained no thematics.[14] Rather, they apparently assassinated the classical object in "a well-planned murder which cuts them off from... the poet's privileged terrain."[15] It is scarcely surprising that Robbe-Grillet subsequently dissociated his work from Barthes' oversimplisitic exegesis.[16] Nor indeed is one startled by Barthes' shift of focus from "studium" (or anonymous, general codes), to "punctum" (or idiosyncratic, personal responses), in both his essays on photography in *Camera Lucida*,(1980)[17] and such diary entries as the following observations: August 5th, 1977:[18]

Continuing War and Peace, *I have a violent emotion, reading the death of old Prince Bolonsky, his last words of tenderness to his daughter... Literature has an effect of truth much more violent for me than that of religion.*

Video versus meaning

Barthes
Robbe-Grillet

Perhaps Jameson will one day discover that video may similarly evoke truth and violent emotion. At present, nothing seems further from his mind. Having declared video to be "a sign-flow which resists meaning," Jameson makes the extraordinary suggestion: *Whatever a good, let alone a great videotext might be, it will be bad or flawed whenever... interpretation proves possible, whenever the text slackly opens up... places and areas of thematization.*(219)

Format and flow

Barthes
Williams
Baudrillard

Jameson's argument appears to generate this strange definition of video by combining Barthes' theories of intertextuality with a number of concepts and metaphors borrowed from the writings of Raymond Williams and Jean Baudrillard. His hypothesis that video becomes flawed whenever it permits thematic interpretation stems from Williams' suggestion that television evinces "a situation of total flow... streaming before us all day long without interruption."(202)

14. Barthes, Roland. 1972. "Objective Literature." Richard Howard, translator, in *Critical Essays.* Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 14,16.
15. Barthes, "Objective Literature... ", 16-17.
16. Robbe-Grillet dismisses Barthes' conclusions as "a simplification" of his work, in 1986, "Confessions of a Voyeur," interview with Roland Caputo in *Tension,* September/October, 10-11.
17. Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Wang, 22-27.
18. Barthes, Roland. 1986. "Deliberation." *The Rustle of Language.* New York: Hill and Wang, 366-367.

Applying this concept of total flow to video, Jameson argues that video-art should only exist and should only be apprehended as a vague, uninterrupted flow of superficial fragments. Accordingly, he concludes:[19]

Video-viewing... involves immersion in the total flow of the thing itself, preferably a kind of random succession of three or four hours of tape at regular intervals... What is quite out of the question is to look at a single 'video work' all by itself. (208)

Freedom, spirit & postmodernism

Jameson rapidly establishes the reasons for his hostility to the acknowledgment of the single work of video-art. So far as he is concerned postmodern culture demarcates – or *ought* to demarcate – a cultural revolution or terror eliminating all traces of original creativity. Rejecting both the rhetoric and the reality of cultural innovation and refusing even to contemplate individual video-works, Jameson warns his reader:

To select – even as an 'example' – a single video text, and to discuss it in isolation, is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical text. (208)

Jameson's morbid fear of masterpieces coexists with his suspicion that the postmodern revolution may not have exterminated *all* traces of the modernist aesthetic. Rephrasing the warning in the lines above, Jameson cautions:[20]

The discussion, the indispensable preliminary selection and isolation, of a single "text"... automatically transforms it back into a "work," turns the anonymous videomaker back into a named artist or "auteur," opens the way for the return of all those features of an older modernist aesthetic which it was in the revolutionary nature of the newer medium to have precisely effaced and dispelled.(209)

Mechanism & enlivenment

Cage
Gan

There is no special reason why the new postmodern media should by its very revolutionary nature *efface* the modernist aesthetic. As John Cage remarks, "Machines... can tend toward our stupefaction or our enlivenment."[21] To be sure, revolutionary aesthetics usually proclaim the victory of new enlivenment over past stupefaction. But in Jameson's case, revolutionary practices are taken as evidence not only of the effacement of the past, but – by deft movements

19. My italics.

20. My italics.

21. Cage, John. 1971. Letter to Paul Henry Lang, May 22, 1956. In Kostelanetz, Richard, editor. *John Cage.* London: Allen Lane, 118

of retrospective re-definition – as proof that the past never really existed save in terms of present, revolutionary arguments. Thus, whereas the Russian con-structivist, Alexi Gan, writing in 1922, entertained the distinction between modernist "industrial culture" and pre-modernist art, "indissolubly linked with theology, metaphysics and mysticism" which "arose naturally, developed naturally and disappeared naturally," [22] Jameson denies even this natural contrast. Apparently there never were, never are and never could be any positive alternatives to what Jameson identifies as mediated culture informed by the "deep underlying materiality of all things."(199)

The hypothetical extinction of the spiritual

Jameson's hypotheses pivot upon his assertion that the post–modern age coincides with the extinction of the sacred and the spiritual"(199) Dominated by Jameson's alternative to the deep underlying spirituality of all things – the deep underlying materiality of all things – the present appears tobe a time when "there are no more masterpieces, no more great books," and "even the concept of good books has become problematical."(208) Adding what one might think of as retrospective insult to contemporary injury, Jameson announces that culture "always *was* material." From this it would appear to follow that older forms or genre and "older spiritual exercises and mediations... were also in their different ways media products."(199) Viewed with Jamesonian hindsight, all cultural practices become redefined as material and as mediated products. *Everything*, it seems, is material, in its own way.

Fabricating non-communication

Barthes Baudrillard

At this point, Jameson equates the material with the textual. Reaffirming Roland Barthes' argument that everything is intertextual, in its own way, he advises the reader:
Everything can now be a text... while objects that were formerly "works" can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or yet again, sheer process (henceforth called textual production or textualization).(208)

22. Gan, Alexi. "Constructivism". in Bann, Stephen, editor. *The Tradition of Constructivism.* London: Thames and Hudson, 35-36.

Barthes, of course, argues that this sort of textualization could at least be followed and disentangled, if not deciphered.[23] Unwilling, it seems, even to credit postmodern video-art with this kind of tangible coherence, Jameson turns for inspiration to Baudrillard's apocalyptic assertion that "The Mass-media are antimediatory and... fabricate non-communication."[24] Reconceptualized in such rhetoric, postmodern video's noncommunication appears to evince a "logic of rotating conjunction and disjunction"(221) resisting both thematic analysis and sustained structural investigation. At best, the viewer simply perceives: "a ceaseless rotation of elements such that they change at every moment, with the result that no single element can occupy the position of 'interpretant' (or that of primary sign) for any length of time."(218)

Depersonalization of the subject

Baudrillard

Taking up another of Baudrillard's provocative phrases: his suggestion that the postmodern era witnesses "the dissolution of life into TV,"[25] Jameson similarly surmises that video somehow dissolves both its viewer's and its author's sense of identity and subjectivity. Adopting surprisingly subjective rhetoric in the circumstances, Jameson confides:

I have the feeling that mechanical depersonalization (or decentering the subject) goes even further in the new medium where auteurs themselves are dissolved along with the spectator. (205)

This, as one might suspect, sweeping feeling derives from extremely general meditation, rather than from selective study of specific examples of his subject matter. The weakest trends in postmodern culture – be these modes of video-art or modes of post-structuralist theory – certainly drift into vacuous "rotating conjunction and disjunction," dissolving both their author's presence and their audience's patience. It is to such "degraded"(230) material that Jameson turns his attention.

23. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 147.

24. Baudrillard, Jean. 1987. "Requiem for the Media." Hanhardt, John G., editor. *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation.* New York: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc, 129.

25. Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. "The Precession of Simulacra." Foss, Paul and Paul Patton. *Simulations.* New York: Semiotext(e), 55.

Selective viewing

Apart from his sporadic asides to the "unimaginable informational garbage," polluting the "new media society,"(210) Jameson considers only one specific video composition: "a twenty-nine minute 'work' entitled *AlienNATION*, produced at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago."(209)

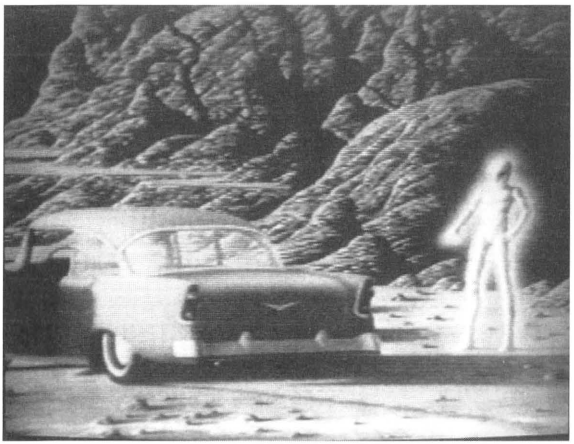


Figure 1. Barbara Latham: AlienNATION

The case of the "meaningless" sample

Anderson
Latham
Marx

Likewise, he only considers one specific multimedia performance: Laurie Anderson's *USA*, which also contains the word "alienation." Noting that neither of these works deploy or distinguish the implications of the former's "obliging title" with anything approximating to the analytical rigor of "Marx's Early Manuscripts," Jameson summarily dismisses the thematic potential of video-art and multimedia performance in yet another supremely subjective speculation, deliberating: "one has the deeper feeling that 'texts' like *USA* or *AlienNATION* ought not to have any 'meaning' at all, in that thematic sense."

Video and authenticity

Marx

This is surely one of Jameson's most unfortunate imperatives. One scarcely imagines that the creative logic of what he terms the "strongest and most original and most authentic"(223) video-art would replicate that of "Marx's Early Manuscripts." Nor indeed would one necessarily turn to Marx's early writings for premonitions of video's particular effects.

But one might well expect Jameson to substantiate his deeper feeling with more careful reference to video-art and multimedia performance. This is not to be. At best, he languidly delegates detailed research to the reader. Despite his earlier prohibition of this kind of specific study and self-observation. Jameson counsels: *This is something everyone is free to verify by self-observation and a little closer attention to those moments in which we briefly feel that disillusionment I have described experiencing at the thematically explicit moments in* USA.(218)

Jameson belatedly – and somewhat ineffectively – acknowledges the confusion and contradiction in his argument, when he concedes that he is the victim of "the hegemony of theorists of textuality and textualization"; a set of presuppositions that he finally criticizes as a "vicious circle" or "double bind."(221) Despite this insight, Jameson appears compelled to acquiesce to these theories, insofar as he believes that "your entry ticket to the public sphere in which these matters are debated is an agreement, tacit or otherwise, with the basic presumptions of a general problem-field."(221)

Rules & artistic independence

Lyotard
Stephanson

Jean-François Lyotard rather more convincingly posits that critics and artists should think and create more independently, by "working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done."[26] Initially, Jameson also determines to define video "afresh… without imported and extrapolated categories."(201) As he remarks to Anders Stephanson, his hypotheses approximate most closely to Lyotard's ideal when they work with allegories, inventing what one might think of as fictional systems and landmarks in order to encompass "what will have been done:"[27]
In trying to theorize the systematic, I was using certain of these things as allegories. From this angle it makes no sense trying to look for individual trends, and individual artists are only interesting if one finds some moment where the system as a whole, or some limit of it, is being touched.

26. Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984. "*Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?*" The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 81.

27. Jameson, interview with Anders Stephanson, 72.

Theory limited perception and "what will have been done"

Jameson's allegories display two fundamental weaknesses. first, they depend upon reductive intertextual theory. Second, they consistently neglect those crucial individual artists and trends which more clearly exemplify "what will have been done." As Jameson admits in his essay on "Postmodernism and Utopia"(1983), his overly systematic allegories and paradigms take no account of artists such as Hans Haacke, whose work he acclaims:[28]

Haacke Rauschenberg

as a kind of cultural production which is clearly postmodern and equally clearly political and oppositional – something that does not compute with the paradigm and does not seem to have been theoretically foreseen by it.

As becomes increasingly evident, Jameson's accounts of postmodern video and postmodern multimedia performance leave far too much *unforeseen* – and far too much *unseen.* While Jameson modestly prefaces the following account of his responses to Rauschenberg's work with the confession: "I don't know how great Rauschenberg is," his subsequent comments reveal the way in which his impatience before unfamiliar postmodern art leads him to dismiss it almost by very defintion as inconsequential, sub-monumental and so on. In this respect, one might respond that Jameson *always* seems to have known that Rauschenberg's work could never be great. For according to Jameson, *all* postmodern art resists prolonged examination and meditation, instantly becoming out of mind when out of sight. He explains:[29]

I saw a wonderful show of his in China, a glittering set of things which offered all kinds of postmodern experiences. But when they're over, they're over. The textual object is not, in other words, a work of art a "masterwork" like the modernist monument was. You go into a Rauschenberg show and experience a process done in very expert and inventive ways; and when you leave, it's over.

The logic of post-modern masterworks

Given the historical and technological character of postmodernism, it would be naive to await postmodern masterworks which were *literally* like the modernist monument.

28. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Utopia," 16.
29. Jameson, interview with Anders Stephanson, 72.

The critic's task then, is to attempt to identify the cultural logic informing new modes of postmodern monument: an eventuality that Jameson's hypotheses discredit from the very beginning of their inquiries.

As he points out in "Postmodernism and Utopia," and in his earlier essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism",(1984) such dogmatic assumptions invariably fail at the very point at which they seem most likely to succeed, because the critic "paints himself into a corner" where his critical sensibility becomes "paralyzed... in the face of the model itself."[30]

Mediation, extermination, & the video art process

Krauss
Paik
Acconci
Morris
Da Vinci
Cage

Throughout his essay on video-art Jameson's critical sensibility appears to be paralyzed by his assertion that postmodern culture coincides with the death of the author, the spectator and any kind of meaningful creativity. Having painted himself into a corner in which the concept of "mediated" appears to be synonymous with "exterminated," Jameson has no other option than to reiterate the tired complaint:
The autonomous work of art... along with the old subject or ego – seems to have vanished, to have been volatized. Nowhere is this more materially demonstrable than within the "texts" of experimental video.(208)

As Rosalind Krauss reminds us, most video-art produced on tape employs "the body of the artist-practitioner" as its "central instrument."[31] One thinks of Paik's *Self Portrait* (1970); of Vito Acconci's attempt to frustrate this process in *Face-Off* (1972); in Robert Morris' multiple self-portraits in *Exchange.*(1973)[32]
The more one examines such video-works, the more obvious it becomes that it is post-modern intertextual theory – not postmodern multimedia art – which conspires to short-circuit "traditional interpretive temptations." (219)

30. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Utopia," 16; and 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, 146, 57.

31. Krauss, Rosalind. 1978. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." Battcock, Gregory, editor. *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology.* New York: E.P. Dutton, 45.

32. Paik's Self Portrait, 1970, is illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video...* , 122; Acconci's Face-Off, 1972, and Morris' Exchange, 1973, are illustrated in the same book.

For Mona da Vinci , video is a medium "encouraging self-analysis."[33] Far from neutralizing authoriality and meaning, a tape such as Paik's *Nam June Paik, Edited for TV* (1976) appears to be a highly personal contribution to explicit cultural debate. Wittily juxtaposing the image of Paik's frowning face with the caption: "But then I thought: Actually Zen is boring too,"[34] this work almost certainly responds to the celebrated passage in *Silence* in which John Cage defends the teachings of Zen, observing:[35]
In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting.

Dramatization & the body of the viewer

Cage
Krauss

Paik's tape then, seems best understood as a very personal dramatization of his riposte to another specific subjectivity: John Cage. In somewhat the same way, viewers examining video installations might be said to dramatize their analysis of the cameras, monitors and mirrors making up such works, as they walk within them, modifying their understanding as they modify images of their movements. To quote Krauss again, "the central instrument" of such video installations "has usually been the body of the responding viewer."[36] At the same time though, video installations also correspond more than any other kind of video-art to Jameson's claim that the genre is primarily a self-referential practice, evoking "reproductive technology itself."(222)

Medium & content as modes of perception

Krauss
Magritte
Campus
Battcock

Paradoxically perhaps, video installations activate and accelerate two quite different modes of perception. As Jameson postulates, they invite the impersonal analysis of their technological structure and construction. But as Krauss reminds us, this analysis is itself born of the viewer's extremely personal experience of performing and observing successive physical gestures monitored and mediated by an installation.

33. da Vinci, Mona. 1978. "Video: The Art of Observable Dreams." Battcock, Gregory, *New Artists Video...*, 17.
34. Paik's Nam June Paik, Edited for TV, 1976, is illustrated in Battcock, Gregory, *New Video Artists..., 22.*
35. Cage, John. 1973. *Silence.* Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 93.
36. Krauss, Rosalind. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." 45.

In this respect, the viewer's physical and cerebral participation are interlinked with unprecedented intimacy and immediacy. Contemplating a painting like Magritte's *Reproduction Prohibited (Portrait of Mr. James)* from 1937, one responds from without to an image of exterior perception: Magritte's paradoxical reiterated image of Mr. James' back, standing before and reflected within, the mirror before him.[37] By contrast, installations such as Peter Campus' *Shadow Projection* (1974) reveal video's capacity to place the viewer within precisely this kind of situation; in this instance, doubling evidence of self-awareness by superimposing images of both the spectator's back and the spectator's shadow.[38]

The same kind of intensified subjectivity emerges in another variant of video-art: the multimedia performance, in which actions upon stage and actions upon screen intermingle. At its most amusing and most provocative, this quintessentially postmodern mode of performance culminates in works such as Paik's *TV Cello* and *TV Bra.* According to the artist, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969) a performance installation requiring Charlotte Moorman to play a cello connected to two screens adorning her breasts, exemplified a more "human use of technology,"[39] in the sense that it allows the performer to wear and to play video; a historic victory as it were for subjectivity over the electronic media. Commenting upon the way in which "the performer caused images on the screen to change" in this work's companion piece, *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes*(1971), Gregory Battcock enthusiastically observed:[40] *It was an extraordinary conception and a theoretical masterpiece, because instead of 'being on television,' the televisions were, in fact, on Charlotte Moorman.*

Video-art, subjectivity & delight

Battcock
Paik
Moorman

Battcock's rhetoric offers a refreshing alternative to Jameson's gloomy generalizations. While the lines above delightedly acclaim Paik's *TV Cello* as a masterpiece, Jameson's fidelity to anti-authorial theory leads him to dismiss the very possibility of video artists

37. Magritte, René. Magritte's Reproduction Prohibited (Portrait of Mr. James), 1937, is illustrated on the front cover of Ades, Dawn. 1974. *Dada and Surrealism.* London: Thames and Hudson.

38. Campus' Shadow Projection, 1974 is illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video...*, 101.

39. Paik's TV Bra for Living Sculpture, 1969 and Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes, 1971, are illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video...* , 124 and 126. Paik's comments on TV Bra appear in his essay (coauthored with Charlotte Moorman), "TV–Bra for Living Sculpture," in Battcock, *New Artists Video...* , 129.

40. Battcock, *New Artists Video...*, 133.

or video masterpieces. Bewildered by video's multiplicity of new forms, and incapable of making any sense of their exceptions to his rules, Jameson rather plaintively confides: "one is tempted to wonder whether any description or theory could ever encompass their variety,"(203) before once again intoning his familiar litany of disbelief:[41] "there are no video masterpieces, there can never be a video canon, even an auteur theory of video... becomes very problematic indeed."(208-209)

Jameson's myth: the decline of the referent

Trapped by his own theoretical prejudices within an analytical double bind asserting that all postmodern texts are superficial, sub-monumental disappointments which "all turn out to be the same in a peculiarly unhelpful way,"(222) Jameson attempts to evade his unhelpful anti-authorial assumptions by recourse to the authorial fiction that he describes as "a kind of myth I have found in characterizing the nature of contemporary (postmodernist) cultural production."(222) According to this mythology, the moment of modernism witnesses the decline of the referent, or the objective world, or reality, to "a feeble existence on the horizon like a shrunken star or red dwarf."(222)

Graphing modernism's cultural decline

In the wake of this precursor, postmodern culture demands definition as an era of total crisis, when reference and reality disappear altogether. Elaborating this apocalyptic fiction, Jameson concludes: *We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers... which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type, but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistant texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage; metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.*(223)

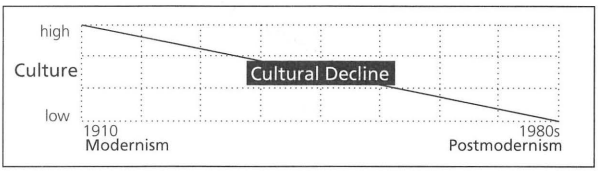
Interpreted in this way, the mediated reality of postmodernism appears to represent the deadend of modernism; its ceaselessly recycled, sub-monumental fragments, bereft of all prior value.

41. My italics.

Viewed diagrammatically, this reading of the transition from modernism to postmodernism (or the sad story of cultural decline from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties), might be represented by the falling hypotenuse of an erstwhile lofty triangle (*figure 2*).

While one may have many reservations and doubts about many aspects of postmodern creativity, it is absurd to dismiss present times as an era of post-mortem culture, devoid of authorial or aesthetic life. Such anti-authorial and anti-aesthetic speculation is still more misleading than the authorial and aesthetic mythologies which it purports to correct. Viewed more carefully, the decline of modernism – or the existential and aesthetic confusion of the thirties, forties and fifties – leads not so much to the terminal dead end of creativity, as to the painful transitional process separating modernism's demise from the rise of postmodern creativity. Briefly, the three decades from the mid-fifties to the present are best understood as a period of intense cultural rejuvenation and innovation marked by the live-ends of what one might think of as post-modern techno-culture.

Figure 2. Postmodernism & cultural decline



The "time-wall"

Müller

For one reason or another, Jameson and many other theorists appear incapable of looking beyond the crises of the mid-twentieth century. Or put another way, in terms of a paradox outlined by the East German writer Heiner Müller, Jameson seems to be trapped behind a "time-wall," unable either to enter or even envisage postmodernism's positive new discursive spaces. Introducing the concept of the "time-wall" with reference to the way in which this kind of obstruction may have protected Moscow in the last war, Heiner Müller comments:[42]

42. Müller, Heiner. 1982. "The Walls of History," interview with Sylvere Lottringer. *Semiotext(e)*, 4:2, 37.

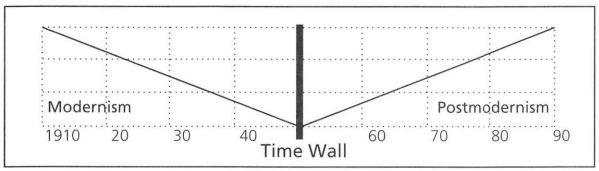
I was very impressed by the remark of a young man who was writing an essay on my work. He remembered that he never quite understood why the German Wehrmacht *didn't succeed in entering Moscow during the Second World War. They just stood there. They couldn't go further. He didn't believe in geographic reasons. He didn't believe in ideological reasons. There simply was a time-wall. They were not on the same track.*

Jameson's time-wall

Müller
Baudrillard

Heiner Müller's image of the time-wall proves particularly helpful. While one would not want to argue that entire nations or generations are trapped behind such barriers (as Baudrillard proposes, when suggesting that the "abyss of modernity" separates French intellectuals from America),[43] it would certainly seem to be the case that an overdose of intertextual dogma and of apocalyptic mythology prevents Jameson and his fellow thinkers from coming to terms with the rise of postmodernism.

Figure 3.
The 30s-50s time-wall



Charted diagonally, the transition between modernism and the first three or four decades of postmodernism begs representation in terms of two equally monumental aesthetic eras separated by the crises and the time-wall peculiar to the decades between the mid-thirties and mid-fifties.(*figure 3*)

Surrealism without the subconscious

Chagall
Klee

Trapped behind the thirties-fifties time-wall, Jameson compulsively contrasts the apparent inauthenticity of the now with the authenticity of modernism's then. Veering ever closer to self-parody, his most recent pondering upon the newer "painting" dismiss this development as:[44]

Surrealism without the Unconscious... Chagall's folk iconography without Judaism or the peasants, Klee's stick drawings without Klee's peculiar personal object, schizophrenic art without schizophrenia, 'surrealism' without its manifesto or its avant-garde.

43. See Baudrillard, *Amérique*, 146. Fur further discussion of Baudrillard's use of this concept, see my article, "Baudrillard's Amérique and the "Abyss of Modernity," in *Art and Text*, 29, 40-63.

44. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Utopia, 27-29. Jameson's conclusions elaborate the overstatements of the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva. For further discussion of Bonito Oliva's conclusions see my article "Postmodernity, Méta-phore manquée, and the Myth of the Trans-avant-garde, *Subs-Stance*, 14:3, 68-90.

After us, beyond us

Aragon
Breton
Wilson

Jameson's cultural obituaries are surely premature. As the veteran surrealist poet and novelist Louis Aragon rather unexpectedly proposes, crucial aspects of the surrealist dream appear alive and well in that most recent of postmodern practices: the multimedia performance born of what one might think of postmodernism's positive "mediatic" sensibility. Writing an open letter to André Breton about the first Paris production of Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance*, Aragon recalls:[45]

I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born. Never has any play come anywhere near this one... Bob Wilson's piece... which comes to us from Iowa, is not surrealism at all, however easy it is for people to call it that, but it is what we others, who fathered surrealism, what we dreamed it might become after us, beyond us.

"*After us, beyond us*": in four brief words, Aragon pinpoints the essential difference between positive variants of postmodernism and modernism. Postmodernism is something that is not modernism; that comes after modernism; that is radically separated from modernism; but which realizes modernism's aspirations in terms of its own subsequent technology and sensibility. As I have suggested elsewhere, American postmodern creativity appears to assimilate and legitimate modernism's innovations and discoveries, employing and extending them in a matter-of-fact, unselfconscious way, rather than announcing them as some sort of excursion into the surrealist realm of the "marvellous."[46]

Surrealism without friction

Wilson
Burroughs
Freud

Not surprisingly then, Robert Wilson's multimedia performances resist definition in terms of familiar surrealist categories. What one witnesses here is not so much neutralized surrealism, or "surrealism without the unconscious," as *surrealism without friction* in an age in which its mysteries are public knowledge. As William Burroughs remarks, "the unconscious was much more unconscious in Freud's day than in ours."[47] If automatic writing and collage composition were novelties in the twenties, this is no longer the case. To quote Burroughs once again: "The basic law of association and conditioning is known to college students even in American."[48]

45. Aragon, Louis. 1971. "Open Letter to André Breton, June 2." In program to Wilson's production of Heiner Müller's *Hamlet machine*. London: Almeida Theater, 1987, unpaginated.

46. See my article "Baudrillard's Amérique," and the "Abyss of Modernity," 56.

Robert Wilson's multimedia performances typify the ways in which video-art precipitates some of the most interesting postmodern creativity of the eighties. Translating video's digital editing techniques and luscious color into dazzlingly rapid or excruciatingly prolonged fusions of familiar real-time theater and multi-mediated *son et lumière*, Wilson's works for the stage offer a litmus test to the spectator's sensibility, frustrating prior expectations but also affording the delight of new, emergent conventions to those willing and able to look beyond the time-wall of habit. Not surprisingly, one's first experience of Wilson's work is very much a process of examining and defining it as self-referential "reproductive technology itself."(222) But thereafter, more positive post-Jamesonian categories come to mind.

A sign flow which generates meaning

Wilson
Brecht

The more closely one examines Wilson's work and the more time one attends a particular example of Wilson's work, the more evident it becomes that his multimedia theater is not simply a surprising "structure or sign-flow which resists meaning,"(229) but rather a sign-flow which generates meaning, although not, perhaps, the kind of meaning to which one is accustomed. As Stefan Brecht reports, Wilson seems most interested to create conditions in which one senses "a non-verbal, arational communication taking place... by harmonious vibration."[49]

Wilson as postmodern author

Wilson
Eco
Cage
Lukács

At times, this kind of "arational communication" emerges between the lines and the gestures of traditional theatrical performance. But at its most forceful, the impact of Wilson's imagination reaches us through the utterly postmodern state-of-the-art technology that Eco associates with "a series of elements filtered through the mass media."[50] Considered in terms of the unfashionable concept of the author, Wilson's vision might also be said to be filtered through his correspondingly postmodern state-of-the-art sensibility, born of and attuned to video's capacity to accelerate, decelerate, fragment, superimpose, juxtapose and generally transmute sound, image, color and movement with unprecedented immediacy and precision.

47. Burroughs, William S. 1986. "On Freud and the Unconscious." *The Adding Machine.* New York: Seaver Books, 89.

48. Burroughs, William S. 1964. *Nova Express.* New York: Grove, 93.

49. Brecht, Stefan. 1978. *The Theater of Vision: Robert Wilson.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 271.

Faced with such shifts in creative technology and sensibility, cultural critics tend to suspend or assert disbelief, entrusting themselves to new developments beyond the time-wall of familiar discourse, or distrusting and denouncing new unfamiliar practices. Writing to *The Village Voice* in 1966, John Cage memorably exemplified the former option, announcing: "Nowadays everything happens at once and our souls are conveniently electronic (omni-attentive)."[51] At the other extreme, Jameson argues that postmodern video-art and multimedia performance "ought not to have any 'meaning,'" (217) somewhat as Lukács claims that "modernism must deprive literature of a sense of perspective."[52]

Art in a changing environment

Pogiolli
Gan
Malevich

Neither modernism nor postmodernism ought to deprive art and literature of meaning and perspective. On the contrary, innovative art inaugurates new ways of representing meaning and perspective by enacting practices which only seem to neutralize reality insofar as they present alternative conventions awaiting theoretical legitimation. In Pogiolli's terms, they are not so much anti-art as ante-art: something surpassing prior expectations and prior definitions and requiring equally new, unprecedented definition.[53]

As post-revolutionary Russian experiments demonstrate, innovative creativity does not so much extinguish old values and old debates as rekindle them in new contexts. Creating predominantly similar geometrical compositions, constructivists such as the aforementioned Alexi Gan, associated "industrial culture" with the death and disappearance of "theology, metaphysics and mysticism," whereas suprematists, such as Kasimir Malevich, entitled their work with such self-consciously metaphysical definitions as *Suprematist composition conveying the feeling of a mystic 'wave' from outer space.*[54] History repeats itself in the eighties. While Jameson argues that postmodern culture brings about the extinction of the sacred and the spiritual, (199) Robert Wilson discusses ways of conveying the sacred and the spiritual with technological symbolism. Referring to his projected production of Wagner's *Parsifal*, Wilson speculates,

50. Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*, 213.

51. Cage, John. 1966. Letter to *The Village Voice*, January. In Kostelanetz, Richard. *John Cage.*

52. Lukács, Georg. 1963. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism.* London: Merlin, 33.

53. Poggioli, Renato. 1968. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 137.

54. Gan, Alexi. "Constructivism," in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 36-35; Kasimir Malevich, title of painting of 1917, cited by Aaron Scharf, "Suprematism," in Richardson, Tony and Nikos Stangos, *Concepts of Modern Art.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 139. As Scharf comments, Malevich's suprematist compositions appear to aspire to "the final emancipation: a state of nirvana."

for example, that vertical beams of light might evince a more authentic religious attitude than the fake and sacrilegious detail of naturalistic acting.[55]

Conclusion: old values in new contexts

Wilson
Wagner
Barthes
Baudrillard

To discuss Wilson's art in this way is obviously to cite it as what Jameson would term a "privileged exemplar"(219) of postmodern creativity. Writing on emergent media, one necessarily gestures in the dark, attempting to identify the most significant examples of new, unfamiliar practices, in order to delineate their most varied traits. As I have suggested, Jameson's meditations upon video-art and upon multimedia performance select far too few examples and focus upon weak examples which confirm rather than challenge his over-systematic prejudices and presuppositions.

Trapped behind the time-wall of Barthesian and Baudrillardian overstatement, Jameson's writings appear to function most profitably as privileged exemplars of the dangers of reacting over-literally to such "imported and extrapolated categories."(201) To be sure, authorial essentialism and the excesses of "traditional interpretive temptations"(219) may also prove counterproductive, but they do at least have the virtue of directing critical attention toward innovative creativity, rather than prompting denial of its existence and its authenticity.

Adequate exegesis of postmodern video and multimedia performance requires the critic to look beyond intertextual essentialism and apocalyptic cliché, and to return to the rather more daunting tasks of *observing, analyzing, interpreting,* and *evaluating* the new arts of the eighties.

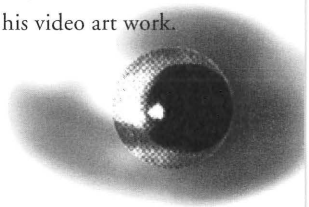
All the rest, one might say, culminates in peculiarly unhelpful textualization and allegory, signifying... nothing.

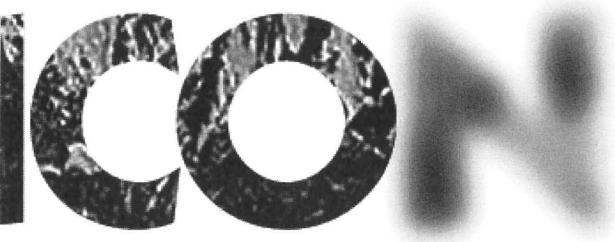
55. Wilson, Robert. 1980. "Robert Wilson: Current Projects." Interviewed by Laurence Shyer. 1984. *Robert Wilson the Theater of Images.* New York: Harper and Row, 113, 111.

Liminal Eye

Herman Rapaport

This short paper concerns some interrelations between painting and video art. It also reflects an ongoing collaboration between the editors of this volume, since the piece is based on a remark by Hans Breder in conversation, namely, that one should think of the surface of the painting in relation to the membrane of the eye as if the painting's surface were part of the eye itself. If we thought of the surface that way, the painting's surface would have to be thought of as a membrane of visible excitation that is hard to separate from vision. Vision therefore would not be something we simply brought to the work, but to the contrary, would be indistinguishable from or part of the work itself. The eye and icon therefore enjoy a much closer relation that one might ordinarily assume. At issue are Breder's *Liminal Icon* series of paintings and his video art work.





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Visible Language, 29:2
Herman Rapaport, 238-254

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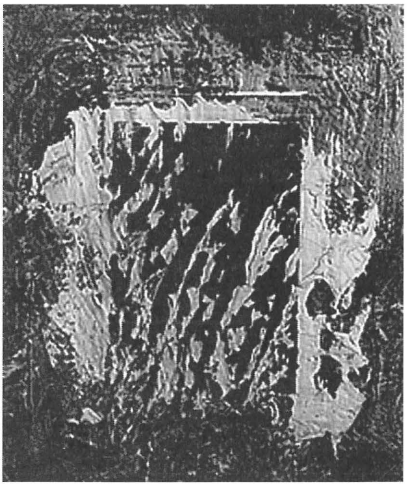
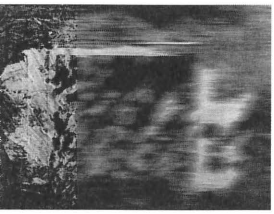
Hans Breder "Liminal Icon CCIII" (1993) Acrylic on Board.



It would not have been considered odd by some seventeenth century Dutch painters to imagine that a painting's surface could be considered a part of our visual apparatus or system of perception. For them a painting might not have been something one merely looked at, but something with which one could see. This is what the painter, Hans Breder, was pointing out to me in his studio, when he said that maybe one should think of the surface of the painting in relation to the membrane of the eye, as if the painting's surface were part of the eye itself. If we thought of the surface that way, he suggested, the painting's surface would have to be thought of as a membrane of visible excitation that is hard to separate from vision. Vision therefore would not be something we simply brought to the work, but, to the contrary, would be indistinguishable from or part of the work itself.

If we were to improvise on a word like icon from this perspective, we might think of substituting the word "eye," as in the eye with which we see, for the word's letter "i." In that way we would be able to get the word "icon" to mean something else than a detached image or object of devotion. Instead it would have to be understood as an illumination that is indistinguishable from what we call seeing. The surface of the painting, then, would be the site where the visible is not just present to be seen, but has a visualizing capacity.

We could say that this visualizing might be part of what one should imply when a simple word like *showing* is used. And we could ask ourselves what it means for a work to show itself to us? Here some synonymous formulations come to mind, age old subjects like how a work can be said to present or disclose itself



to us. In yet other terms, we could say that we're talking about no more than how a work appears, or to take the long way about, how the work comes to pass as appearing and as appearance. We know, of course, that when these issues came up in antiquity there was a Platonic tradition which quickly dispatched them by talking about shadows in caves. It never occurred to this tradition that the visual arts might be considered in terms other than false appearance. The Aristotelian tradition was somewhat kinder to the visual arts, but it also had the disadvantage of making sharp distinctions between appearance and reality, as in the difference between the real world of life and the golden world of art, or the structure of works in comparison to the universalizing truths to which they pointed. In art criticism such divisions still exist; people usually end up talking about the sign instead of the the gaze.

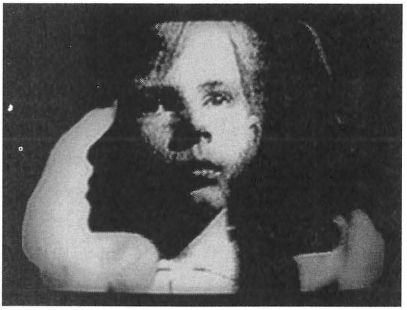
When I refer to the icon as eye-con, therefore, I do so in order to imagine a notion of appearance that suggests exposure or exposing rather than *the merely exposed.* Here the history of the nude or nudity in art suggests itself as an analogue to a notion of exposure. After all, a nude has the ability to metaphorize the painting's surface or membrance as a site of erogenous excitation which is imbricated in seeing. Art critics who have thought about the representation of flesh have no doubt discovered this for themselves. Similarly, art historians of the Renaissance know that the female nudes in Correggio (*Mercury Instructing Cupid Before Venus*), Titian (*Venus With Mirror*) and others figure an interplay between the visible and the invisible which is supposed to be related to the viewer's ability to construct beauty, truth and goodness in the mind's eye. That this construction is not purely literary —

in other words, merely a matter of signification or symbolism — is what many historians fail to point out, particularly Gombrich and Panofsky who don't think it gentlemanly to allow the icons to excite them in a certain way. What is overlooked is that the surface of the painting could be considered a membrane or tissue where excitation is not only depicted, but embodied or somaticized as quality, light, color and, of course, as brush stroke or touch. That there are many examples in which one might well ask where seeing ends and sexuality starts is obviously where such works become quite radical in their mode of appearing.

In the case of abstract expressionism we are sometimes awakened into visualization without ever fully being able to objectify the painting as a representation. This is not to say that critics have not assigned cultural

meanings to even highly abstract works, as if they were representations that corresponded to some idea, but that these cultural assignations efface the work's awakening us to a visibility which is more or less pure since it is not encumbered by its forms. Although an artist may employ images, this does not obscure recognition that the visibility or appearing of the work is not reducible to image. If one wonders why the artist does not turn away from the iconicity of the work altogether, the answer might be that in doing so one would be abandoning the bodily or concrete aspect of the work required to awaken vision as an excitation without limits. Painters who come to mind are De Kooning, Morris Louis but also Jules Olitski in whose work the trace of iconicity is always somewhere to be found.

Hans Breder "Under a Malicious Sky" 1988.



More recently, Hans Breder has been exhibiting paintings that are also neither encumbered by their forms nor willing to simply reject iconicity. The outline of a door, passageway or aperture could be taken as a simple form, abstract device or hierophantic symbol. But as such it cannot be divorced from what in a Heideggerian way we could call the coming-to-appear-of-what-shows-itself-as-the-showing-of-the-work. The door or frame is not to be seen merely as a copy or expression of some thing in the world, but should be considered a partitioning or differentiating of what shows itself in the showing of the work. Without this differentiation the work could not come into appearance as an interplay of relationships involving quality, light, color or stroke that is indistinguishable from the showing of the work as visualization. The form or governing icon

structures the interplay without objectifying it necessarily as a thing. This means that the structuring is not just a formal procedure for mapping out relationships to be seen, but is that differentiating or partitioning which is internal to showing or exposing.

Television with its electronic images and fast edits has mobilized the differentiation or partitioning of the figure in ways that construct vision often more from the side of the sign than the gaze, in that television is usually something that we are asked to read as if it were a comic strip, or *bande dessiné*. Video artists have been wise to the fact that video icons come pre-loaded with cultural meanings that are so excessive that they excite us no end and that this excitation cannot be divorced from the deployment of media generally. It isn't so much that the image is disseminated

(or sent) by the media. In other words, these icons are not the mere signs of cultural capital; they are also complex sites of excitation (enabled by dissemination) which do our seeing for us by awakening or exposing us to a vision which we could never achieve or even endure independently of them and their apparatuses.

While we have been encouraged to see popular icons as banalized or depleted signs estranged from any referential ground (Baudrillard's thesis), we have not been encouraged to think of these icons as eye-cons that exceed representation and, as such, have the ability to awaken an excitation of visibility without limits. This, it seems to me, is what some artists like Ed Paschke have exaggerated, but here video art may have a leg up over painting, in that the medium of video is a

powerful conduit for the icon, the television set itself being a kind of devotional object or alter of consumer culture (i.e., home shopping network). As we know, video, like film, structures the gaze and no doubt the video icon is conditioned (disseminated, fissured) by edits, tempo, special effects and the like. But, it would be a mistake to see the icon as something that is merely presented or conditioned to be a thing-in-itself, a ready-made image ripe for identification and glorification. Rather, the icon, precisely because it is mediated by a large number of technical broadcasting interventions, is sutured. This means that whereas the image of someone or something famous may appear unified, fluid and extraordinarily smooth, the unconscious picks it up as morcellated: cut up and re-pieced together.

The commercial video icon, I would like to suggest, is unstable from this point of view, because while we see it as whole, we sense that it is inherently disarticulated and, in that sense, bodiless. To put this another way, despite all appearances, the sutures don't seem to hold anything together that we could call coherent or unified. The icon is therefore always nothing but what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls "reassemblage." Therefore, while icons like Madonna or Elvis may excite us as seamless radiance and sexual power, they disturb insofar as we know these icons have been tampered with like bodies that have been surgically opened and closed numerous times. As if to follow Oscar Wilde's dictum that life imitate art, we are finding that media stars like Michael Jackson have increasingly come under the plastic surgeon's knife as if to physically literalize the very sutured image created for

them by television. Just as the viewer is trapped or fascinated in the disjunction between the visible and the invisible, the star literalizes this capitivation by physically disarticulating himself or herself as icon. Again, the recent fascination with drag queens, as in the film *Paris is Burning*, has a little bit to do, certainly, with how gendered reassemblages literalize and perform the videotaped suture. The migration of that suturing from video, to drag runway, to film is a good instance of how sutured icons may migrate from one site of dissemination to another.

Of course this is but one instance in which the televised turns into the concretized. Indeed, this migration — or trans-iconization — might extend to Breder's *Liminal Icon* series which re-enact the sutured icons of his video work, for example, *Under a Malicious Sky*,

where media and history are sutured iconically as images of devotion and destruction. It is here that I would locate a certain excitation — really terror — which is and is not visible, an excitation that concerns less what the image literally expresses or says than how its membrane, surface or skin exposes itself as a sensation rather than a representation. Here we are back to the matter of how the image differentiates or partitions and how that enables the excitation of an image to take to the side of visualization rather than the side of the merely visible. In *Under a Malicious Sky,* the vision's relation to the apartheid of the death drive is quite detectable. But in the *Liminal Icon* series it is really a question of genesis, which recalls a well known verse in the Old Testament about how in the begin-ning light was separated from dark. Religious implications aside, this separation marks the primacy

of perception, which is to say, that moment in which the cosmos makes itself capable of being visualized, since in order to be shown, it had to first produce the conditions in order for visualization to become phenomenologically possible. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a famous essay called "Eye and Mind" summarizes what I think is second nature to many artists but not to many critics: "The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being."

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