



# resolution

A CRITIQUE OF VIDEO ART

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*edited by* Patti Podesta

**L A C E**

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

cover:

*Chott el-Djerid:*  
*(a portrait in light and heat)*  
*a videotape* by Bill Viola  
© 1979

*photograph* by Kira Perov

## RESOLUTION

### A CRITIQUE OF ART VIDEO

an exhibition, symposium and publication  
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symposium May 3, 1986

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## acknowledgements <sup>the</sup>

Since its inception in 1977, LACE has been a champion of what was not so long ago considered "new genres" of Contemporary Art (i.e. performance art, video art, installation work.) This orientation has not faltered - in fact it has strengthened in the midst of the commercial emphasis on art we are experiencing in the 80's. This commitment is manifested in LACE's new facility, opened just two months at the printing of this catalog: the "New Improved" LACE houses a video screening room, equal size exhibiton space and performance spaces and a bookstore which maintains a full selection of theoretical books and artists' books, supplementing our programs. Together these illustrate our commitment to content over any prejudice of form.

Although not an education institution per se, I feel that an organization such as LACE has an obligation to encourage a dialogue between artists and their audiences and to interpret as well as present work. A well defined critical voice is a necessity to any significant art form, furthering the public's appreciation of the art's process, intent and importance. *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art* is the most ambitious effort to date to succeed at stimulating criticism of video art.

It is through her understanding of the genre and insights into its process that artist and writer Patti Podesta, who directed the project, has accomplished this deed. She deserves many thanks for her ability to help bring video art to the forefront of the contemporary art world. Thanks must also go to LACE staff members: Anne Bray, LACE Online Coordinator, Weba Garretson, Performance Coordinator; and to the VideoLACE Committee; Peter Kirby, Chip Lord, Tim Martin, Branda Miller, Scott Rankin, Bruce Yonemoto, for all the time and effort they have given to video programs at LACE. The critics and writers who have participated in this project deserve thanks for their perceptive study of this work and their subsequent essays.

We are grateful to the Commisariaat for International Cultural Collaborationship (Belgium) and Mrs. Diane Verstraeten for making Chris Dercon's visit to the United States for the symposium held in conjunction with *Resolution... possible*.

The video distribution organization Electronic Arts Intermix in New York City has been especially helpful in the organization of this project, acting as liason between the many artists they represent and LACE. Their assistance has been invaluable and we thank the staff, and in particular, Robert Beck. The Video Data Bank in Chicago also assisted in this way and we thank them as well.

A number of companies graciously contributed the services necessary to transform a book originally budgeted for black and white into a state-of-the-art color representation of video. They are: Dun Instruments, Inc., of San Francisco, who computerized camera system provided remarkable reproduction directly from the videotapes; thanks to Dave Haddock, Joao Leite and Willie Villarente. VCA Teletronics in New York helped with this process; thank you to Brad Lewis. Color Service, Inc., of Monterey Park, provided the laser-scanned color separations for the book and cover; thank you to Pat Seholzer. Bay Printing Company in Los Angeles underwrote a portion of the printing costs; an ongoing thank you to our friends Ann and Rod Ochoa. Most importantly, we are indebted to the artists whose videotapes are represented here; their work was the project's catalyst and their cooperation in lending it for the compilation reel and the catalogue has made *Resolution... possible*.

Joy Silverman  
*Director*

## introduction

Images have their own mysteries and pleasures; artists examine these, animating them. The beauty of video leads joyously to a new visual language and, simultaneously, back to the untranslatable. Video not only fulfills desire and uncovers the naked heart, but announces the future. Video is, at its highest point, a question of imagemaking and all that denotes (the window on the world, the shattering of reality, the creation of reality with form ...); It is a question of enchantment - of the eroticism of images and the eroticism of logics.

But one cannot leave other discourse at the door. It also has importance, the most apparent being that video is constructed with the same tools as television, which is no less than popular culture itself. Video made by artists can overleap this, but only in discrete measures of time. Or else it can exist as a *voice*, to rupture the audience/television relationship: either a transgressive experience or a critical tool. Some work manages to do both these things (these are cogs in the televisual machinery); what frightens, moves and sustains us is given a presence and we bend forward to recognize it.

Without a resonant critical language, an imagemaking form is little more than blind gestures signalling one another. It's simplistic to merely construct an imaginary scale of TVness and place imagemakers along it. But, to measure, as opposed to analyze, yet an intriguing notion. Foucault rejects analysis of dreams in favor of their measurement by spacial dimensions, atmospheric pressures and by their infusion of light, within the *frame* of imagined experience. The three axes he suggests pertain both to form and text: horizontal axis (near to far, either travelling inward of projecting outward); chiaroscuro (tonalities of light and dark; lyricism); vertical access (ascention and fall). This quote from his essay *Theatrum Philosophicum* speaks (abstractly) to both video art and its criticism:



To liberate difference we must attain thought without contradiction, without dialectic, without negation: a thought which says yes to divergence; an affirmative thought in which the instrument is disjunction; a thought of the multiple — of the dispersed and nomadic multiplicity which neither limits nor regroups the constraints of the same; a thought which does not obey the scholar-model (which fakes the ready-made response) but which addresses itself to insoluble problems; that is to say a multiplicity of extraordinary points which are displayed accordingly as conditions are distinguished in them...

Video art is a multiplicity and as such is unmade by analysis. Its Ideal criticism is a text full of sensation, that directly embraces, intimately gauges and then boldly offers itself.

Since the inception of *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art* in early 1984, my desire for such criticism has been paramount. I feel that somewhere between the excellent body of critical writing in experimental film and the current flowering of critical language about broadcast television there should be a way to talk about video. Deconstruction-of-cinema criticism (la nouvelle vague) cannot directly apply to the art video question - television must enter into the examination, as must art criticism. Yet, besides formal criticism of the art work, I envisioned a constellation of orientations to the matter of video art, synthesizing a diverse discourse. To make a project, an *event*, to delineate the state of things, to signify an affirmation, to consolidate then project new meanings.

Working with the VideoLACE Committee (then Bruce Yonemoto, Joy Silverman, Peter Kirby, Branda Miller, Timothy Martin, Scott Rankin and Ilene Segalove), I structured *Resolution...* to include an exhibition of video tapes and a full-day symposium with artists, writers and critics at LACE, coinciding with the publication of this book. It brings together a representative

group of influential video work, gives critics time to study this work and draw their conclusions and finally presents a body of writing and discourse that is both critical of specific work and affects the way we look at media images in general. We wanted the project to be contemporary, not historical, and chose the time frame 1980-1985; we limited the project to work made in the United States; we limited the number of tapes to 25-30 (thinking realistically about the amount of work we could ask anyone to watch). It is important to note that we see these as completely provisional limitations, merely parameters set for this particular study. Our intention was not to assemble a hierarchy of artists, but to produce a dynamic project within the limitations of our resources. The VideoLACE Committee made the initial selection of tapes, taking into consideration the suggestions of video curators and artists around the country. The final direction of discourse was left up to each critic (to give them as much free reign as possible), and some requested specific works we had not originally listed. This includes the work of the artists on the VideoLACE Committee. We selected the critics to represent various important viewpoints: Beverle Houston, Director of Critical Studies, USC School of Cinema and Television; Peter Rainer, film critic for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*; Lane Relyea, editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Art*; Amy Taubin, video curator at The Kitchen and writer for *The Village Voice* and *AfterImage*; and Chris Dercon, a Belgian video curator and critic. I asked David James, film scholar and writer, to moderate the critics' panel at the symposium and to contribute his own overview of the subject for this book. The book includes the five critics' articles as well as selected writings on imagemaking. The essays here by Jean Baudrillard and Jon Wagner thrill me. They are a kind of text both specifically relevant to video work and inspirational in a broader sense. Bill Olander's article on women in media presents a cogent view of feminist media deconstruction. There are five articles by artists about their own work; five very different voices: Doug Hall, Dara Birnbaum, John Sanborn, Lyn Blumenthal and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto.

Taken together, these writings express a variety of responses not only to the Idea of video but also to the possibilities of its language and form. I didn't realize until I read the essays, that I had chosen a group which collectively expresses my own ideas and questions as well as reflecting video's state of impurity.

I must personally thank a number of people to whom I am indebted for the success of *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art*: Joy Silverman, director of LACE, whose enthusiasm and commitment to contemporary art in Los Angeles cannot be matched. The VideoLACE Committee, who gave me the opportunity to direct this project, spent a great deal of time on its initial organization and then trusted my vision for its realization.

Carol Solomon, who undertook the delicate job of editing the Artists Catalogue and generously helped me with the rest of the project. Laurent Charreyon, who acted as liaison between myself and M. Baudrillard. Through his help I was able to print this previously unpublished piece. I thank him as well for providing the major part of the translation.

Adams Douglas connected LACE with Dun Instruments. Because of him, this book contains superb reproductions of the videotapes. Out of their love for the medium, many people kindly involved themselves: Robert Beck and the staff at EAI, Tony Labat, and Bill Viola and Kira Perov, who collaborated with me on the cover art.

To Amy Gerstler and my friends who helped me and put up with me during all this I owe a debt of gratitude. There are two people whose friendship and never-ending intellectual interchange has supported and inspired me: Bruce Yonemoto and Timothy Martin. Finally, the video artists themselves, the prime mover of this project.

Patti Podesta



## Beyond Right and Wrong Or The Mischievous Genius of Image

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

What I would like to evoke, about Image in general (the media-image, the technological image), is the perversity of the relationship between the image and its referent, the "supposed real," it is the virtual and irreversible confusion of images and of the sphere of a reality, whose principle we can grasp less and less.

There are all sorts of modalities to this absorption, to this confusion, to this diabolical seduction of images. What should be questioned here, radically, in regard to Image, is the principle of images' reference, this stratagem by which it always seems to refer itself to a real world, to real objects, to reproduce something that would be logically and chronologically anterior to itself. None of this is true. As a simulacrum, Image precedes the Real in that it inverts the logical, causal succession of the Real and its reproduction. In his essay "De l'oeuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproduction technique" ("On Artwork in the Era of Technical Reproduction") Benjamin already emphasized this, the modern revolution in the order of production (of the Reality, of meaning) by the precession, the anticipation of its reproduction.

It is precisely where it appears to be most truthful, most faithful, and best conforms to the Real (and our technical pictures, photographs or cinema as well as television, are in the vast majority much more "figurative" and "realistic" than all images of past cultures)—that Image is precisely most diabolical, it is in its resemblance (not only analogical anymore, but technological), that image is most immoral and most perverse.

The mirror and its apparition have already introduced in the world of perceptions an ironic *trompe-l'oeil* effect, and it is well-known what evil spells are linked to the apparition of the double. This is also true of all images that surround us, in general one analyses them as a function of their value of representation, that is as a medium of a presence and a sense. The vast majority of current images—photographs, cinema, television—are supposed to witness the world with a naive resemblance, a touching fidelity. We spontaneously trust them because of their realism. We are wrong. They pretend to resemble things, the Real, events, faces. Rather, they really conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.

One could find a sociological and political equivalent to this diabolical conformity, to this mischievous genius of conformity, in the modern behavior of the masses which, themselves, know so well how to obey the models they are offered, know so well how to reflect the models imposed on them, and by so doing absorb and annihilate them. There is, in this conformity, a power of seduction in the literal sense of the term, that is a power of "detournement," distortion, captivation, and of ironic fascination. There is some sort of fatalistic strategy of conformity here. (A recent filmic example would be Woody Allen's *Zelig*.)

More generally, it is not in its role as a reflection, as a mirror, as a counterpart to the Real, as a representative form, that image is interesting, but as when it starts to contaminate the Real and make it into a model, as when it conforms itself to the Real in order to deform it better; that is when it deceives the Real to its own benefit, when it anticipates the Real to the point where the Real has no time to produce itself as such anymore.

In the dialectical relation between the Real and the Image (that we would like to believe dialectical, that is readable in the sense of real to Image and visa-versa), the Image for a long time has been victorious, and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral, immoral logic, without profundity, beyond right and wrong, beyond good and evil—a logic of extermination of its own referent—a logic of implosion of meaning where the message disappears from the horizon of the medium. On this point, we collectively remain incredibly naive; we still pretend to find a good use of the Image, that is a moral usage—sensible, pedagogical, informational—without seeing that *image somehow revolts against this good usage*, that it is not conducive to sense, nor common sense, but on the contrary, of an implosion, a denial of sense (of event, history, memory, etc.). Let us recall *Holocaust*, this TV show about extermination camps . . .

For all these reasons I do not believe in a pedagogy of the Image, neither in cinema, or of course in television. I do not believe in a dialectic of the Image and the Real, nor, speaking of image, in a pedagogy of message and its meaning. Hence, the secret of the Image (we are still talking about technological contemporary images, here), should not be sought in its distinction from the Real, and therefore in its representational value (aesthetic, critical, or dialectical value), but on the contrary in its collision with the Real, in its short-circuit with the Real, and finally in the implosion of the Image and the Real; there is for us a definitive indistinction of Image and the Real, *which allows no room for representation anymore, as such*.

This collusion of Image and life, of the screen and of daily life, is the most natural thing in the world, you feel it every day. Particularly in America, where the fact that outside of movie theaters the whole country is cinematographical, is not the least of its charms. You can travel through the desert like in a Western, you can travel through metropolises like in front of a continuous screen of signs and formulas. Life is a tracking-shot, it is a continuously kinetic, cinematic, cinematographical course. In this, there is the same equality of pleasures as in Italian or Dutch cities where, coming out of a museum you find a city that looks just like (a l'image meme) its painting, as if it sprang from it. There is a sort of miracle here, that returns, even to American banality, a kind of aesthetic form, of idealistic confusion that transfigures it as in a dream. This is where cinema does not take on the exceptional form of an oeuvre (even of a genius), this is where it invests all of life with a mythical ambiance, this is where it is really thrilling. This is why star idolatry, the cult of Hollywood idols is not a media pathology, but a glorious form of cinema, its mythical transfiguration, probably the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely in the same way that the idol represents nothing, but surrenders like a pure passionate contagious image, that erases the difference between the real Being and its assumption in the imaginary.

Stars are not a "romanesque" support, they are a violently realized ideal. People say: they make us dream, but dreaming is something other than being fascinated by images. Yet, screen idols are inherent to the unrolling of life in images. They are a luxurious pre-fabrication system, shining syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. *They are a single passion (incarnate): the passion for Image*, and the immanence of desire within the Image. They don't make you dream, they *are* dream, of which they have all the characteristics: they produce a strong effect of condensation (of crystallisation), of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and above all: they have this characteristic of instantaneous visual materialisation (Anschaulichkeit) of desire, which is also peculiar to dreams. Hence, they do not lead to "romanesque" or sexual imagination, they are immediate visibility, immediate transcription, material pasting, precipitation of desire in Image. Fetishes, Fetish-objects, that have nothing to do with the imaginary, but with the *material fiction* of image.



All these slightly savage considerations come from the savage amateur that I am, and that I want to remain — that is, in a way, uneducated and fascinated. There is a primal pleasure of the image, an anthropological delight (*jouissance*), a raw fascination which does not encumber itself with aesthetic, moral, social or political judgments. This is immoral and this immorality is fundamental.

This raw fascination, here and there, with all moral or social determination, is not one of dreams or of the Imaginary — in the traditional sense of the term. Other images knew how to make us dream or imagine: painting, drawing, theater, architecture and other means of expression (probably language makes us dream better than the Image). There is something else to that, which is peculiar to our modern media-images: if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are a place of production and representation of sense, but on the contrary because they are the place of disappearance of sense and of representation — a place that lets us off of all appreciation of reality, thus the place for a fatal strategy of denying the Real, of the very principle of reality.

Here we come to the paradox in the Image, our images, the ones that overwhelm our everyday life, that invade our life and whose proliferation is potentially infinite (when the extension of sense, itself, is precisely always limited by its end, by its finality, then image itself has profoundly no finality and proceeds by radical contiguity, demultiplying itself according to an irresistible epidemic process, that nobody today can control anymore; our world has truly become infinite, *or rather, exponential through image*; it is caught in a mad race for Image, in a growing fascination that is only accentuated by video and digital computer graphics) hence, we progressively come to the paradox that these images describe for us the equal impossibility of the Real and the Imaginary.

Between the Real and the Imaginary, and upsetting the balance between both, the medium, the image-as-medium, has imposed on us a sort of fatality, which has its own logic. I say, there is a fatal process, meaning: a definitive immanence of Image, without possible transcendence of sense, without possible dialectic of history — also fatal because exponential: not a linear unfolding of images and messages anymore, but an exponential folding of the medium on itself. Fatality is in this endless racing of images, the result being that *there is no other fate to Image than Image*. Today the same thing happens everywhere, when there is no other goal to production than production — overdetermination of production by itself — when there is no other fate to sex but sex — sexual overdetermination of sexuality. This process can be identified anywhere today — for the best and the worst. This is when, in the absence of rules-of-the-game, things are caught in their own

game—that Image becomes more real than the Real—cinema itself becomes more cinema than the cinema, in a sort of vertigo where the only thing Image does is look like itself, flee in its own logic in the perfection of its own model.

From this comes, I think, the erotic dimension specific to our recent imagery. In many cases this erratic and pornographic imagery, all this advertising panoply of breasts, buttocks, and sexes, the displaying of the naked body and sexual body has no other meaning than this: not the arousal of some desire, but the representation of the useless objectivity of things (when seduction is a *challenge* to the useless objectivity of things). The sexual, the nudity in advertising and elsewhere has no other use than being just a special effect, an effect of credibility and a desperate attempt to underline the existence of something. *The sexual is nothing but a ritual of transparency.* It, that had to be hidden, paradoxically has no other use than to mask all that is left of truth, all that is left of reality, and of course it, too, partakes of this disincarnated passion.

But where does our fascination for these erotic or pornographic pictures come from? Certainly not from seduction. We don't even watch them, correctly speaking. For the Regard to exist, the object must veil and unveil itself, disappear at every moment; this is why there exists in the Regard this kind of oscillation. On the contrary, these naked images are not caught in a game of emergence and disappearance. The body is already there, like any other object, without the spark of a possible absence, in a state of radical disillusion that is the state of pure presence. In a real image certain parts are visible, others not; visible parts make others invisible; there is a sort of rhythm of emergence and secrecy is established, a flotation line of the imaginary. Although everything is of equal visibility, everything shares the same focusless space. Fascination probably comes from there, from this disincarnation, the aesthetics of disincarnation about which Octavio Paz speaks. Fascination is this disincarnated passion of a Regard with no object, of a Regard with no Image. It has been a long time since all our mediated spectacles, including the one of the body, including the one of sex, have broken the stupefaction barrier. Stupefaction of a vitrified exacerbation of sex, of an empty scene where nothing is happening anymore, and yet of which the Regard is filled up. It is not only the exacerbation of sex, it is also the scene of information or of politics: nothing happens there, yet we are saturated by it.

Do we desire this fascination? Do we desire this form of pure presence, do we desire this *pornographic objectivity* of the world? How to know? There may be a collective vertigo of fleeing forward in the obscenity of a pure and empty form where at the same time the disappropriation of the sexual is played out, and its dis-



qualification, the disappropriation of the visible, and its degradation is played out. Because this fascination — which is also a sort of magic of disappearance, is in pornographic images as well as in the whole of modern art, whose objective, whose obsession is literally to be no more watchable, challenging all seduction of the Regard. Modern Art is not at all an art of seduction, neither is modern sexuality.

On the other hand, this obscenity, and the indifference that characterizes it, do not inevitably lead to neutrality. They may possibly become collective values again, bankable values, besides, one can see new rituals reconstituting themselves on these values, rituals of transparency. Moreover, we certainly tease ourselves with the comedy of obscenity, the comedy of sexuality, as other societies tease the comedy of ideology, as for example Italian society plays for itself the comedy of confusion and terrorism. In advertising one plays the comedy of the naked and prostituted feminine body (consequently the naivete of recrimination against all this "prostitution" of the feminine body, and the naivete of all virtuous legislation). Sexual liberation, omnipresent pornography, including pornography of information, of participation, of free expression — if all this were true it would be unbearable. If all this were true, we would really be into obscenity, that is, into naked truth; primal, with no make up but not without pretension: the crazy pretension of things to express their truth. Happily we are not there yet, because, above all things, at the moment things are about to prove themselves true, they always reverse themselves, and this reversability protects their secrets.

Of sex, none can say whether it has been liberated or not, none can say whether the incidence of sexual pleasure has increased or not. In sexuality as in art the idea of progress is absurd. On the contrary, obscenity, itself, like transparency belongs to the order of progress. And it progresses ineluctably, precisely because it does not belong to the order of sexual desire anymore, but to Image frenzy. Solicitation and voracity for images is growing immeasurably. *They have become our true sexual object*, the only object of our desire. And it is in this substitution, in this confusion of desire and its equivalent, materialized into Image (and not only of sexual desire, but of the desire for knowledge and of its equivalent materialized into "information," of desire for dream and its equivalent materialized into all the Disneylands in the world, of desire for space and its equivalent programmed as holiday transit, of desire for games and its equivalent programmed as the multiple forms of telematics), it is in this promiscuity, in this ubiquity of images, in this viral contamination of things by images, that is the transparency and obscenity of our culture.



And there are no limits or controls over this, because images — as opposed to the sexual animal species, on whom some kind of internal biological regulation keeps watch — are preserved by nothing from infinite pullulation, since they are not sexually bred and ignore sex and death. This is probably why we are so obsessed by them, in this time of recession of sex and death, whose place they take. Through them maybe we dream of the immortality of protozoa, which infinitely multiply themselves by contiguity, and know nothing else anymore than an asexual chaining.

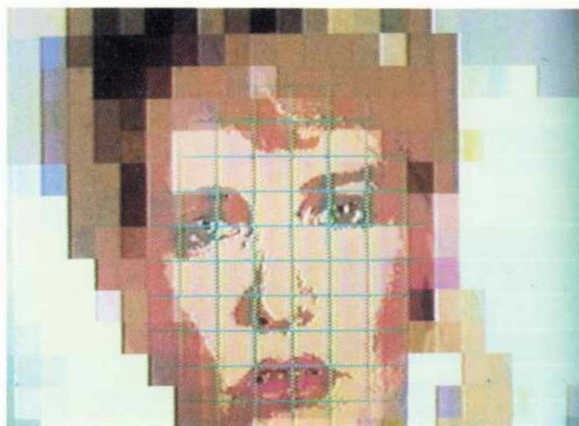
*translated by Laurent Charreyron and Amy Gerstler*

## Artists Catalog

1983 17 minutes

written, produced and directed by  
Max Almy  
CMX editor Jim Haygood  
composed by Gregory Jones

*Leaving the 20th Century* is a trilogy of experimental videotapes which call attention to the fact that we are approaching a point of departure in history. The exciting concepts and technologies which will define the future are already emerging. But at the same time we are clinging to social, psychological, economic and political ideologies that could in the worst case prevent the continuation of life into the 21st century. *Leaving the 20th Century* takes a pointedly satiric look at the realities of the 20th century and raises some serious questions about the possibilities of the future.



## Leaving the 20th Century

MAX ALMY

1980 8:00 minutes

produced with support from the  
National Endowment for the Arts

In *Quarks*, once familiar aspects of television—its actual sounds and the essence of its time structure, the 30-second interval—are incorporated into unfamiliar settings where a blind man serves as a guide to unknown passageways. Three layers of information—sound, image and written texts—are presented within a series of juxtapositions that give new meanings to the term “quark.” (Originally a “craok” or “trifle” from *Finnegans Wake*, this term is now used to denote elemental particles in nature.)



## Quarks

PETER D'ANGOSTINO





**Damnation  
of Faust:  
Will-o'-the-Wisp  
(A Deceitful Goal)**

**DARA BIRNBAUM**

1983 5:40 minutes

*Will-o'-the-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)*  
produced and directed by  
Dara Birnbaum with Kaatje Cusse  
camera by Dara Birnbaum—  
CMX editor Rick Feist  
music by Mike Nolan and Paul Jacob  
production facilities at Matrix Video,  
N.Y.C., Standby Program  
funded in part by the Massachusetts  
Council on the Arts and Humanities,  
New Works Program and Dara  
Birnbaum in association with the  
Contemporary Art Television Fund,  
a project of the Institute of Con-  
temporary Art, Boston and WGBH new  
Television Workshop  
shot in the South Village, NY and  
dedicated to its history and a trip  
to France

*Will-o'-the-Wisp* portrays a woman in the  
absence of a man. Centering on the female  
character from the Faust legend,  
Marguerite, the work interlaces fragments  
of dialogue, visuals and sound to enact a  
woven construct of deception and aban-  
donment.

1985 8:00 minutes

*edited by* Rick Feist  
*sound by* A. Leroy

*Doublecross* is a tape drawn from the strange history of our "true sex." It is based on the pretrial testimony, or rather memories, of a young girl trapped within an indeterminate sexuality. That story is not unique, but rare enough. Part testimony, part case history, *Doublecross* introduces the complex of biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, and current psychoanalytic theory, all of which seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted.



## Doublecross

LYN BLUMENTAL

1980 29:00 minutes

*directed by* Ed Bowes  
*produced by* Ed Bowes, Tom Bowes  
and Karen Achenbach

A series of not-so-unrelated-as-they-may-seem scenes about the literal or metaphoric meanings of the phrase "How To Fly." Something about the biology of the food chain may also be relevant. At any rate, no less continuity than you might find on any TV talk show.



## How To Fly

ED BOWES



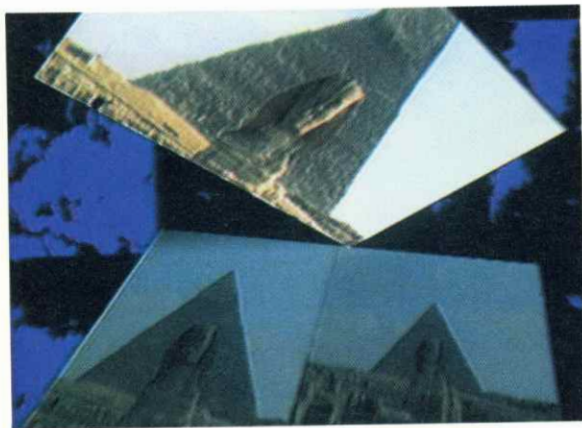
## Tongues

SHIRLEY CLARKE, SAM  
SHEPARD & JOSEPH CHAIKIN

1982 20:00 minutes

*directed by Shirley Clarke*  
*written by Sam Shepard and Joseph Clarke*  
*performed by Joseph Chaikin*  
*executive producer Women's Interart*  
*Center, Inc.*  
*photo by Bruce Hudgens*

*Tongues* represents the collaborations of three distinguished American artists: Shirley Clarke, Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin. Through innovative use of language, a transformational style of performance, syncopated direction and editing off music text and image, *Tongues* tells the dreams, stories and recollections of one man.



## Shifters

JUAN DOWNEY

1984 28:00 minutes

*produced and directed by Juan Downey*  
*Art History essay by Leo Steinberg*  
*engineered by Rick Feist*  
*rastar effects by Dorit Hyman*  
*sound mix by Bob Schot*

*Shifters* is the third video program in the series *The Thinking Eye*. It combines six parallel narratives by means of contemporary T.V. language. It is inspired by the linguistic principle shifters meaning interpretation, translation and transposition.



1984 8:47 minutes

*video, computer graphics and music by*  
Ed Emshwiller  
*performed by* Carol Emshwiller,  
Cindy Pedilino, Denise Svayko, Marsha  
Carrington and Megan Butler  
*produced at CalArts in association with*  
*the TV Lab/WNET/13*

*Skin Matrix* is a video collage/tapestry of energy traces including electromagnetic (light), inorganic and organic textures, flesh, personality (faces) and imagination (art, robot and angel). In it, video and the computer combine patterns of man and nature.



**Skin Matrix**  
ED EMSHWILLER

1984 29:00 minutes

*directed by* Ken Feingold  
*song sections and performance by*  
Kate Johnson  
*library system and reading by*  
Vito Acconci

As if it were an index of Otherness, this work draws the viewer into its language of splices and chasms, precipitating waves of recognition, narrative possibility and the understanding that "Complexity is a game of the visible to attract the invisible."



**The Double**  
KEN FEINGOLD



## Episode

KIT FITZGERALD &  
JOHN SANBORN

1982 3:14 minutes

*video by Kit Fitzgerald and  
John Sanborn*

Boy meets girl. Girl meets boy.

They come together.

They come apart.



## Windfalls

MATTHEW GELLER

1982 22:00 minutes

*written, produced and directed by  
Matthew Geller  
performed by Ed Bowes and John Lee  
technical editing by Mark Fisher  
assistant technical editing by  
Karen Achenbach*

*Windfalls*, a graceful interplay of intersecting narrative lines, is a new approach to storytelling. The tape uses fragmented editing and the assemblage of disparate imagery to reconstruct our perceptions.

1983 8:00 minutes

*camera, processing and editing by*  
Shalom Gorewitz

*soundtrack and performance by* Shalom  
Gorewitz and Brenda Hutchinson

"...*Subatomic Babies* paints a sensuous continuum of distinctive images... Using an image processor, Gorewitz pushes video's aesthetic limits. Documentary footage is transformed with washes of color, often in deep hues of browns and purples which challenge the standard fluorescent look of television..." -Rene Tajima



## Subatomic Babies

SHALOM GOREWITZ

1983 17:00 minutes

*director of photography* Jules Backus  
*performed by* Gannon Hall, Doug Hall  
and Kathy High

*Produced in part at* Media Study,  
Buffalo, New York

*off-line post production at* Ideas in  
Motion, San Francisco

*on-line post production at* Bay Area  
Video Coalition, San Francisco

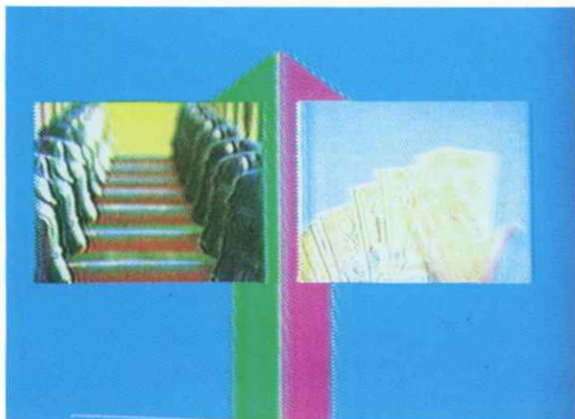
Based on a series of performances, this tape consists of five episodes that are unified by themes of displacement, anxiety and constraint. These metaphors for contemporary political and social tensions are elegantly realized through a series of video techniques such as slow motion, rapid stacatto editing and extending dissolves.



## Songs of the 80's

DOUG HALL





## Primarily Speaking

GARY HILL

1981 & 1983 18:40 minutes

*produced and directed by Gary Hill*

the fixation moves from left to right as  
time goes on it becomes clockwork you  
will have your way and i will make  
do in the end we can double back or  
play the field i don't want to deny you  
your own flesh and blood who am i  
but a figure of speech free standing in  
advance of a broken arm



## Kikiriki

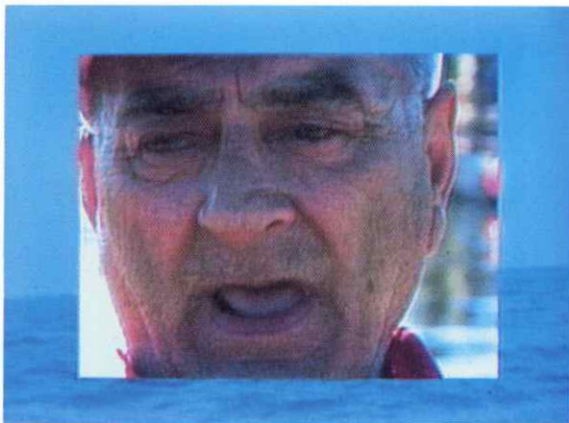
TONY LABAT

1983 10:00 minutes

In *Kikiriki*, Labat extends his narrative form into a nonlinear style that interweaves seemingly disparate elements replete with metaphor and veiled references. An assortment of individuals, animals and places, juxtaposed by a split screen form a composite portrait of the alien, the outsider and the displaced, underscored by a subtext of struggle and frustration.

1982-1985

In these dynamic 30-second "commercials," Logue selectively applies video effects and a unique sense of scale to create precise and intimate portraits of artists and celebrities, New England fishermen, and the city of San Francisco.



Spots  
JOAN LOGUE



## Perfect Lives, Episode 5

JOHN SANBORN &  
ROBERT ASHLEY

1983 25:50 minutes

*written by* Robert Ashley  
*directed by* John Sanborn  
*produced in collaboration with*  
Carlotta Schoolman for The Kitchen  
(New York City) *in association with*  
The Fourth Channel (Great Britain)  
*music composed in collaboration with*  
"Blue" Gene Tyranny and Peter Gordon  
*associate producer/associate director*  
Mary Perillo  
*videotape editor and post-production*  
*supervisor* Dean Winkler  
*starring* Robert Ashley, "Blue" Gene  
Tyranny, Jill Kroesen and  
David Van Tieghem

*Perfect Lives* is a 3½ hour opera for television: seven episodes each conceptually based on a visual template which are a structuralization of the seven bardos described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The opera tells an abstracted story of two travelling musicians in the midwest who alter the lives of those around them. In Episode 5 of the comic-opera, *The Living Room*, the solution of a crime is discovered by the Sheriff and his wife in a life-long dialogue. Visual template: *equal volumes*. Oh boy!



1980 13:30 minutes

*written and conceived by Michael Smith  
directed by Mark Fischer  
performed by Sasha Stollman, Nora  
Schwartz and A. Leroy  
camera by John Heller  
costumes Michelle Butchko*

Michael Smith's videotapes and performances center on "Mike," Smith's alter ego/protagonist, an innocent and unassuming guy who is constantly beset by circumstances beyond his control. In this comic narrative, Mike is visited by a host of ghost-like creatures who whisk him off to an absurd version of the TV show *This Is Your Life*. In satirizing both television and suspense films, Smith's wry humor and familiar pop references allow Mike to emerge as a modern-day underdog hero.



**Secret Horror**  
MICHAEL SMITH

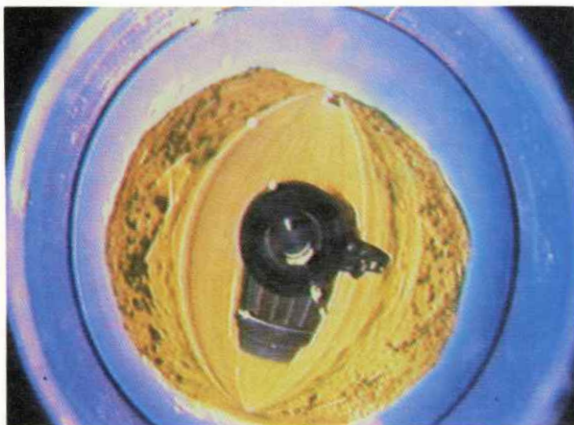
1982 20:00 minutes

*produced and directed by John Sturgeon  
"Purification By Abstraction" original  
concept by Aysha Quinn  
camera direction, location and costume  
collaboration at Yellowstone by  
Aysha Quinn  
digital programs and processing by  
Michael Lyon*

*Spine/Time* has much in common with a type of performance which is unquestionably the oldest in existence and which many performance artists in recent history have gravitated towards: ritual. John Sturgeon's unique contribution in *Spine/Time* is in bringing ritual together with video technology in such a way as to imbue the latter with religio-spiritual transformative powers.



**Spine/Time**  
JOHN STURGEON



## Summersalt

STEINA

1982 18:00 minutes

*a videotape by* Bradford Smith, Steina  
and Woody Vasulka

*Summersalt* is a five minute segment from *South-Western Landscapes* in which Steina incorporates mechanical and electronic devices to physically explore the New Mexico landscape, a phenomenological exploration that allows the viewer to enter this environment from new perspectives. In *Summersalt*, Steina has the mirrored globe and camera somersault around her, allowing it to calmly view the surroundings.



## The Commission

WOODY VASULKA

1983 45:00 minutes

*text and character of Berlioz by*  
Robert Ashley  
*text and character of Pagannini by*  
Ernest Gusella  
*performed by* Cosimo Corsano, Ben  
Harris, Andrea Harris and David Ossman  
*camera by* Steina  
*videotape editor* Peter Kirby  
*special electronic tools by* Harald Bode,  
Jeffy Schier and Rutt/Etra  
*funded by the* New Mexico Arts Division  
*and the* National Endowment for the Arts

Applying for the first time his complex imaging codes to a narrative, Vasulka explores issues of art-making and sacrifice in this electronic opera. Centering on the personalities of violinist Niccolo Paganinni (played by video artist Ernest Gusella) and composer Hector Berlioz (played by composer/performer Robert Ashley), the tape is a pivotal work in developing a narrative language of electronic image processing.

1979 28:00 minutes

Chott-el Djerid is the name of a vast dry salt lake in the Sahara Desert, Tunisia, where mirages are most likely to form in the midday sun. Here, the intense desert heat manipulates, bends, and distorts the light rays to such an extent that you actually see things which are not there.

Ultimately, the piece is not so much about mirages as it is about the limits of the image, i.e., at what distant point does the breakdown of normal conditions, or the lack of adequate visual information, cause us to re-evaluate our perceptions of reality and realize that we are looking at something out of the ordinary—a transformation of the physical into the psychological.



## Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)

BILL VIOLA

1979 52:00 minutes

*performed by* Liba Rossi, Philippe Silvain, Pere Jean-Pierre and Patrice Lerident *with* Helene, Michael, Berthe, Antoine, Benedicte, Syril *and* Aragon u.v.a.

*set design by* Elisabeth Tavernier

*costumes by* Christine Lambert

*makeup by* Joel Lavan

*produced in connection with* I.N.A./

Centre Georges Pompidou

*Video 50*, a work for television by the noted theater artist Robert Wilson, consists of 100 thirty-second episodes which can be viewed separately or in groups, with a playing time ranging from 30 seconds to 50 minutes. These programs can be used to fill short time periods in regular television schedules.



## Video 50

ROBERT WILSON





## Vault

BRUCE AND NORMAN  
YONEMOTO

1984 12 minutes

*directed and edited by*  
Norman Yonemoto  
*produced by* Bruce Yonemoto *in con-*  
*junction with* "TV on TV," Texas Tech  
University and Art Com.  
*camera by* Nick Ursin  
*music performed by* Carl Stone  
*performed by* Kim Claybough, Brian  
Rosewell, Chad Cooper and  
Elizabeth Hustoles

In *Vault*, the Yonemotos reconstruct a traditional narrative of desire—boy meets girl, boy loses girl—that knowingly employs the melodramatic syntax of Hollywood movies and commercial television. They illustrate the psychoanalytic subtext of advertising, film and TV language through the recurrent use of Freudian symbols and flashbacks to the characters' childhood traumas, humorously underscoring the power of these devices in creating personal fiction.

# Thoughts on Landscapes In Nature and Industry

DOUGLAS HALL



from the videotape  
*Storm and Stress*



*New Mexico Storm*  
(1 panel of a 5 panel work) 59"x73" oil on canvas  
Diane Andrews Hall, 1985-86

I am currently involved in production on a new work, which will have two versions, one for the CAT Fund and the other a large installation which incorporates images from the tape with sculptural elements which extend ideas contained in the tapes. The title of this work, both the multi-channel installation and the single channel tape is *Storm and Stress*, a title borrowed from pre-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* of early 19th century Germany. The title is important and has a double meaning. First, there is a stated relationship to the aesthetics of the irrational contained in the ideas of *Sturm und Drang*. I use the title to imply an historicism and to take part in the rationalism/irrationalism debate which has appeared in intellectual history from the Middle Ages to the present. Secondly, the two words, *storm* and *stress*, accurately describe the tone and content of the work in a literal sense, since the tape deals with storms of various types (the ecstatic landscape) and, simultaneously, with technologies which either harness this kind of power (hydro-electric plants, steel foundries, for example) or which attempt to mimic it for purposes of research (wind tunnels and tesla coils, etc.). In the finished work, the interconnection between the architecture and landscapes of the two domains, natural and industrial, suggest complex contradictions, conjunc-

tions, and analogies between the two. The idea of this work is not to take a moral or self-righteous position emphasizing the nature/industry dichotomy; it is, rather, to present the images and to suggest relationships between them which are historical, emotional/metaphorical, and structural/formal.

Jules Backus, the photographer for this project, and I have been filming storms throughout the United States: our footage includes dramatic sequences from electrical storms in New Mexico and Oklahoma, forest fires in the Sierra, wind and waves on the Bering Sea. Certainly within the history of painting and, more recently, of photography, there are instances where artists have gone out into the landscape or onto the oceans to experience and capture dramatic light and weather. This obsession with the tumultuous in landscape is central to the work of many 19th century painters; Turner in England and Thomas Moran and Frederick Church in the United States are just a few. What is being described here is, of course, the Romantic spirit, which has been aligned with the fevered landscape. In other words with the Sublime as it is evidenced in nature. The idea of the Sublime (which has, by the way, not been given much attention in the art world since the 50's) gained importance during the 18th and 19th centuries through the philosophical writings of Kant and, later, in the aesthetics of Edmund Burke and others. This concept which had so much to do with defining the aesthetics of the Romantic period has a long history stretching back to Longinus, the Platonic philosopher of the third century A.D.; but it was in the mid 19th century that it became most clearly manifest.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>1</sup>

At this point it makes sense to apply the brakes so that I can waggle a warning finger at Romanticism. Without equivocation I believe that Romantic meanderings, if left unchecked, are a dangerous path to wander, filled with the most unctuous connotations associated with the worst aspects of post-modernism and, even worse, they are smugly reminiscent of the rebirth of dangerously reactionary states of mind which have, historically, gone hand in hand with facism. One need only look at the destruction of the avant-garde in Hitler Germany and the emergence of National Socialist genre painting, or look at the Social Realism of the Soviet Union to know that Romanticism with its yearnings for nostalgia, a mean deceit, is a dangerous aesthetic to be flirting with.



Having cleared the air of that disagreeable bit of business, I would say that as a contemporary artist I do not stand alone in my growing interest in landscape and, since these attitudes have emerged from the ashes of the once proud avant-garde, they are tempered and shaped by the present and, as a result, are neither deceitful nor reactionary. This rediscovery of the landscape can be found in the work of numerous artists, many of whom have arrived there from extremely different routes and who may represent opposing positions on the aesthetic mobius strip. It can be seen in the tumultuous seascapes of Diane Andrews Hall's large tryptichs; or in Joan Jonas' recent performance, *Volcano Saga*, which utilizes in projected video and slides the mysterious scenery of Iceland as metaphors for her personal narrative and as a chthonic backdrop to Nordic myth; and, again in painting, in the recent work of Christopher Brown and Robin Winters. The list is long and varied. The point isn't that there are strong formal similarities between this work (which there are not) nor that they all share interest in the sublime (which, clearly, they do not); but they are all alike — and I include myself in this — in that they are attracted to the landscape because it is there that one finds images of strong emotional content and, at the same time (and I think that this is very important) images which are outside the self, that are both externalized and expressionistic without being solipsistic. To this extent, the "new" interest in the landscape is a movement away from figurative work and towards abstraction. I admit that, for painting at any rate, there is a sense of *deja vu* in all of this. One can easily imagine a new generation of artists rediscovering the aesthetics of Rothko and Still, painters who combined the 19th century notions of the sublime with the modernist demand for abstraction. One can only hope that history need not be so cruel as to repeat itself to that extent; in fact, that new abstraction will demand new content. In video, of course, the situation is different since its history is short and, at this juncture anyway, it is incapable of repeating itself. It is true, however, that the long tapes of the artist alone with the camera in the studio are a thing of the past and that one of the avenues that the artists have taken to free themselves and the viewer from this endless narcissism has been landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Up to this point I have been discussing the tape, *Storm and Stress*, in terms of its broader historical issues. I would like, now, to discuss its history in microcosm, that is in terms of my own past work, and, in the process, to touch on the metaphorical and emotional aspects of images. As one part of me revels in the awe that one feels when in the presence of violent weather and technology — this is the Wagnerian side which I try to keep in abeyance since the dangerous romantic lurks here — the other is more distanced and is fascinated by the language of images; their sign system. I am attracted, in other words, to the powerful image not simply on a visceral level (the aesthetic experience transmitted through the



*Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator* installation view  
Whitney Museum 1984  
photograph by Peter Aaron Esto

bowels) but, more importantly, I am curious about the nature of these images; the means by which they're transmitted and, once received, by their ability to affect. After all, it doesn't take Roland Barthe to tell us that a painting of a tidal wave or that a videotape of a tornado are not those things at all, but are abstract facsimiles (pictures) which we allow to stand for a physical reality (the actual wave or funnel cloud) and, through some mysterious associative process, to illicit particular ideas or emotional states. There is a long history of interest in "power images" which pervades my work and which can be traced from the videotape, *The Eternal Frame* (T.R.Uthco and Ant Farm, 1975) which deals with the idea of the "image president" as mediated through a reenactment of the assassination of JFK; to *The Speech* (video tape, 1980) which is about the posturing and signifiers of political speech making; and, more recently, to *These Are The Rules* from the longer work *Songs of the 80's* (1983, videotape) which again depicts a type, in this case the demagogue. These concerns are not limited to tapes but can be found in installations and drawings as well. What I believe is significantly different in the new work, however, is that there is a move away from the self as a vehicle of expression and from the idea of human gesture as content. The result of all this is that there is a concomitant movement toward abstraction and, perhaps, toward a more universal language of images.



from the videotape  
*Songs of the 80's*  
 photograph by Michael Darowski

*Storm and Stress* connects to my past work in its concern with the "pictures" of power but the difference lies in what is being pictured. Now power is being shown as natural and industrial and no longer as political and didactic. Since these images are, in all cases, mediated, the concern is not so much with the things themselves (although the physicality—the notion that these things actually do exist in the same world that we populate—is not denied) but more with the *idea* of the dramatic landscape and its relation to the industrial landscape and to the *idea* that one can use them to illicit particular internal, largely emotional, states. I have, in this sense, substituted the snapping flag of *Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator* (installation at the Visual Studies Workshop; 1983 and The Whitney Museum, 1984) with the tumultuous landscape and the aggressive technology of *Storm and Stress*. In all these cases I am understanding how images stand for things and how the internal language of ideas and emotions are triggered by pictures of things that are external to us. I am, of course, talking both about images as phenomenon (physically being close to a tornado, for example, and the means by which that actual experience translates) and images as language (how the idea of the tornado as seen through the matrixed screen of the television illicit and stands for certain emotional states). I guess I'm circling back on myself when I say that violent landscapes and extreme forms of technology, on the one hand, and that political spectacle (the screaming despot, the snapping flag) on the other, rely on similar image systems and that part of the reason that they function as they do (sharing a coding and decoding method) can be found in the aesthetics of the sublime.



The Sublime? A paramount consideration in my studies and work from my earliest student days. In essence, it is most elusive of capture or definition — only surely found least in the lives and works of those who babble of it most. The dictator types have made a cliché of “sublime” concepts throughout the centuries to impress and subjugate the ignorant and desperate.<sup>3</sup>

— Clyfford Still

Finally, I would like to say something about the more formal elements of *Storm and Stress*, which are based on a series of analogies drawn first, and most importantly, from the physical relationship that exists between storms and technologies that either harness or create energy and, secondly, on the purely structural similarities between the two (such as the horizontality of running water versus the verticality of rising steam). I need say nothing more about the second instance other than to point out that comparisons can be made between two dissimilar (or similar) phenomena based solely on visual or structural grounds. In the first instance, however, formal relations are established not according to how something looks but are based on what it is that it does. This is an old game that we play all the time: fire to fire; water to fire; dynamic to quiet, etc., etc. “Paper wraps rock; scissors cut paper; rock breaks scissors . . .”

In *Storm and Stress*, storms are viewed as machines which, instead of being powered by fossil fuels, are motivated by heat and ice.

Man has constructed a thing-nature. The painter makes one see the entrails of this thing: stochastic bundles, dualism of sources, winking fires, its material entrails, which are the very womb of the world, sun, rain, ice, clouds, and showers. Heaven, sea, earth, and thunder are the interior of a boiler which bakes the material world. At random.<sup>4</sup>

Technology is seen as a kind of zoo for natural phenomena, where the forces of nature are caged and controlled. The tape focuses as much on the cages as on the beasts themselves. Industry objectifies that which is subliminal in nature by creating machines which echo the natural world and, more specifically, which reflect ourselves. They are our extensions into space and, like a mirror, cast back our own image and our attitudes to the world around us. The idea of machine as man or as beast exists in the modernist technologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries where the creatures breathe and cough and belch, filling the air with their

foul excretions. These are monstrous mechanical devices based on the human form. The machines of the late 20th century, however, the "post-modernist" era reflect not our mechanical natures but our neurological. They work in silence and are not glorious to view, existing in the pristine formicaed enclave. The sublime machine of the past has been replaced by the subliminal machine of the future.

Finally, the rain stopped and a warm sun ate through the clouds. Everyone in the neighborhood came out and stood in front of their houses. Steam rose up off the pavement, thick and heavy, almost like smoke. The buildings. The people. The cars parked in the driveways were all like apparitions. Not made of real stuff at all. Like a dream, really.<sup>5</sup>

#### Footnotes

- (1) Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 39
- (2) Conversation with Diane Andrews Hall.
- (3) Kynaston McShine ed., *The Natural Paradise, Painting in America 1800-1950*, p. 123
- (4) Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, p. 60
- (5) Doug Hall, text from the performance, "Songs of the 80's," 1980.

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## Doublecross

LYN BLUMENTHAL

(Signs of suffering): The Doublecross

Daughter: *What do you and Daddy talk about when I'm not around?*

Mother: *Oh, I don't know, everything.*

D: *You do a lot of laughing . . . I hear you sometimes.*

M: *You shouldn't be listening.*

D: *What do you laugh at?*

M: *Oh, little things, jokes . . .*

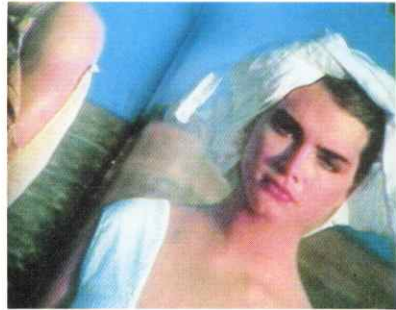
D: *Do you love Daddy better than me?*

M: *Well, that's a different kind of love. You'll find out when you grow up.*

D: *Well, when I do I hope that I won't think it's silly . . .*

The preceding exchange which are the opening lines in *Doublecross* was lifted from *The Women*, a haute forties movie extravaganza with a script by society bitch-queen and former Times Inc. President, Clare Booth Luce. The movie features a cast of women trapped by their broad distrust of each other and bonded by their collective inability to hold onto or stand by their men. Within this social body Luce places the *perfect mother* and her *adoring* preteen *daughter* and then sadistically sets out to rupture their relationship. This is tough stuff . . . and should be enough to send the kid running for the nearest couch. But, a sympathetic ear is hard to come by in analysts' land when it comes to reenforcing the daughter's desire to merge with her mom. For psychoanalytic theory is in direct alignment with the cruel assessment of Luce's social body that demands separation. (Ditto current sexual difference that sees sexual preference as separate from sexual difference.) What is implied of course in the daughter's question "Do





from the videotape  
*Doublecross*

you love Daddy more than me?" is her desire to jettison daddy from the picture which by these standards would be illegal at worst (illegitimate sex is illegal in 24 states) and chaotic at best.

*In eighth grade . . . if you wore green on Thursdays, they called you a dyke. If you wore a black sweater any day they called you a whore. Somehow I forgot and wore green on Thursday and black sweaters any time I felt like it.*

Within this economy the world is divided between 'his' culture and 'her' nature. My own resistance to this demands that I am forever dodging his projects of representation, of reproduction . . . of his grasp. That this resistance should all too often take the form of a death struggle between two consciousnesses does not alter the fact that at stake here, somewhere, evermore insistent in its deathly hauteur is the risk that the subject (as) self will crumble away. Also at stake, therefore, the 'object' and the modes of dividing the economy between them. In particular the economy of discourse. Whereby the silent allegiance of the one guarantees the auto sufficiency, the autonomy of the other as long as no question of this as a 'symptom' of historical repression is required. But what if the 'object' started to speak? Which also means beginning to see etc. What disagregation of the subject would that entail?

Plaintiffs Attn: *Note my objection to the question and the form of the question. Ask her a question. Don't make any statements, Counsel.*

Defense Counsel: *What was your intention in obtaining a diaphragm?*

Plaintiff: *Can you be more explicit?*

DC: *What did you want it for?*

P: *I wanted it because I wanted to be safe in case I ever slept with another man again.*

DC: *Had you already had intercourse with a man at that time?*

P: *Yes, I had.*

DC: *Had you had any homosexual experiences at that time?*

P: *Not explicitly sexual. Certainly erotic.*

DC: *Do you speak of fantasies?*

P: *Yes, I do.*

Now I know that it is important not to imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one . . . but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that come into play in various strategies. And while sexual difference is not the most intractable element in power relations, it is one, that is endowed with great instrumentality. It is therefore quite troubling to watch . . . while the theory mongers attempt to reduce sexual difference to its heterosexual form, implying matrimonial legitimacy and reproductive function.



from the videotape *Doublecross*



# Made In Hollywood: A Treatment for a Video Feature And Discussion of Aesthetic Strategies

BRUCE & NORMAN YONEMOTO



*Bicycle Thieves*  
film still, director: Vittorio De Sica (1948)



*The Rag Picker*  
photograph, Alfred Stieglitz (1893)

The Hollywood Dream factory has long been a source and interpreter of American cultural mythology. For decades media makers, writers and actors have been seduced by the possibility of fame, fortune and the inevitable happy ending Hollywood perennially promises. In recent years, Southern California has witnessed an influx of fine artists with screenplays under their arms risking their concepts in favor of glamorous money-making "formulas."

Like many American progressives, he believes in popular culture. Unlike the intellectuals of the left who returned to academia and tried to find in semiotics, psychoanalysis and political theory the reasons for the failure of '68, those who believed that progressive content could be packaged in traditional forms found the mass media a possible arena.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these progressive artists venturing into the mass media arena of Hollywood are overwhelmed by the forms and structures laid down by the Hollywood studio system. Instead of integrating basic art concepts and perspectives into these cliché structures, structures that have reached the status of "reality" in our continuous and pervasive mass media environment, many of these artists view traditional Hollywood narrative formulas as "alternative" art structures. Instead of altering and re-interpreting Hollywood myths in the spirit of the European Nouvelle Vague of the late-fifties and sixties, they (in the spirit of the Hollywood of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg) reconstruct and thus embrace and perpetuate the same monolithic mythology without contemporary perspective, perspective we feel is vital if a work is to be considered a complete work of art.

No longer satisfied with the familiar recycled performance art audience of New York, Spalding Gray, the star of *Made In Hollywood*, decides to make a mid-career move to Tinseltown. He scratches the fake tinsel's surface and discovers real tinsel underneath.

Painstakingly emulating the various conventions and formulas of the studio system, Spalding finds the factory not filled with dreams but with appropriated simulations and hackneyed "B" movie formulas.

He finds a world where " 'B' movies have become 'A' movies. So there's no point in looking at 'B' movies anymore."<sup>2</sup>

Engulfed by a tide of big money projects and stock show biz caricatures, Spalding begins to lose his grip on his initial goal to package progressive content in traditional forms

However, before he is able to completely buy his way into the system, Spalding meets a mythic American primitive from Texas, Tammy, who enables Spalding to once again gain perspective and remember his initial motivations.

In the American tradition of Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain and Will Rogers, Tammy uses colloquialisms to communicate a sophisticated moral code of values. She is a studied "noble savage" whose innocent "backwoods wisdom" acts as a catalyst for a contemporary analysis of Hollywood. Tammy's *modus operandi* is a satirical projection of the mass media's tactic of utilizing Freudian psychoanalytic

technique to support "normal" consumer behavior in the public.

Her iconoclastic advice to Spalding echoes the Hollywood deconstructive elements presented in the *Cahiers du Cinema* and the European conceptual attitude that artists should take responsibility for the contextualization of their work (the production, distribution and interpretation of their art). Tammy represents an "independent" outside of Hollywood and all that it has come to represent. Thus she becomes "a unique vehicle for unencumbered creative expression."

Spalding in his search for a reconciliation between artistic contextual motivation and Hollywood mass media realization, finds in Tammy the perspective needed to package progressive content in traditional forms. The obligatory happy ending of *Made In Hollywood* will be on the deepest level a deliverance from the tyranny of the Hollywood myth that demanded the happy ending in the first place.

*Made In Hollywood* is an exploration of Neo-realistic cinematic techniques applied to Hollywood hyperbolic narrative structures: a wedding of late Douglas Sirk and early Vittorio de Sica with a touch of the social propagandistic techniques inherent in the glossy highly successful formula films of Delbert Mann and Ross Hunter.

*Made In Hollywood* is a unique project. Funded by independent sources it is a serious critique of contemporary mass media using as its language mass media forms. The cost and complexity of media art demands the cumulative effort of both artists and financial resources—in effect the creation of alternative forms of media production. How a work is produced becomes as important as what is produced. If this perspective (both creative and economic) is not integrated into the mass media structure; personal, eccentric vision in the public arena is in danger of extinction.

#### Footnotes

(1) Amy Taubin, "Independents' Daze" *VOICE*, September 11, 1984, page 45

(2) Quote from Roger Corman





*Tammy Tell Me True*  
film still, producer: Ross Hunter



Benjamin Franklin surrounded  
by ladies of the French court,  
engraved by W.O. Geller, © 1840,  
painted by Baron Jolly, Bruxelles

## Talking Back to the Media

DARA BIRNBAUM

*"While many people responded to Evocation\* as a radical departure from her previous video tapes, there are many elements of continuity. Gone are the character-generated words of Kojak/Wang and PM Magazine, replaced by images from books, pages packed with words. As in her earlier work the musical score and repetition of imagery plays an important part in Evocation. Rather than using popular songs for her deconstruction of popular television imagery, Birnbaum builds on the rhythmic pacing and timing she developed earlier to evoke a sense of ritual in her latest work. Playing with street chants and adolescent rites of passage, Evocation conveys a sense of alienation, of the difficulty of an individual fitting into a group. . . . Just as Faust risked a pact with the devil at a crucial juncture of history, Birnbaum is willing to take similar risks with the exploding technology of video and those who control it."*

Michael Perri, Editor, *Art Papers*, 1984

The use of television imagery began in my work with the first exhibition at Artists Space, NY, in 1977. That work was composed of twenty five photographic images taken from prime-time TV and a super-8 film loop. However, it was at an exhibition at The Kitchen, NY, in 1978, that I first decided to use this "medium on itself," making a firm commitment not to translate the imagery into a different form or material. This became the approach for those works which followed (1978-1982); works which had in common the basic intentions of revealing the relationships existent within the medium of video/television and defining the industry of television as the root of video art independent of the traditional arts into this medium. In the 1960s and 1970s video has been largely developed as the extended vocabulary of painting, sculpture, and performance—completing its task through a necessary denial of the very origin and nature of video itself, TV. By the mid-seventies, I believed that by giving this medium back its institutional and historical base, new forms of artistic expression could be developed.

Much of the videowork completed from 1978-1982 attempts to slow down the "technological speed" attributed to this medium; thus "arresting" moments of tv-time for the viewer. For it is the speed at which issues are absorbed and consumed by the medium of video/television, without examination and without self-questioning, which at present still remains astonishing. Earlier works make direct reference to this "speed," as in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978), when psychological needs are visually expressed as physical transformation—in a burst of blinding light. Or, as in the work *Kojak/Wang* (1980), where the needs of a young fugitive immediately trigger in Kojak a cool, non-hesitant response:

"No! No! . . . Listen, I did wrong . . . I'll take the blame for that. Just don't ask me to give you this name . . ."

"I'm asking."

The earlier works are all composed of TV-fragments; structured on the reconstructed conventions of television. I see them as new "ready-mades" for the late twentieth century—composed of dislocated visuals and altered syntax; images cut from their original narrative flow and countered with additional musical texts. It was my desire that the viewer be caught in a limbo of alteration where she/he would be able to plunge headlong into the very *experience* of TV.

There is a cohesive effort throughout these works to establish the possibilities of manipulating a medium already known to be highly manipulative. I had wanted to establish, and set as a representative model (before the onslaught of media by-products for the home), the ability to explore the possibilities of a two-way system of communication—a "talking back" to the media.

The growing network of video distribution in the 1970s made working with and within this medium all the more tempting; a new map with points of "access" to a public previously uncharted within our designation of "art audience." A new parameter emerged: could this new accessibility allow for a critical stance and new perspectives which challenge the dominant form?

By 1985, the growing distribution of "software," matched with a growing industry of consumer hardware, changed the accessibility of "media imagery" for the public. In order for me to produce my first videowork, *(A) Drift of Politics* (comprised of TV imagery from the popular show, *Laverne & Shirley*, 1978), its appropriated material had to be obtained by "having friends on the inside." Source





installation view  
*Damnation of Faust*  
 Dara Birnbaum  
 Whitney Museum of American Art 1984



installation view  
*Technology/Transformation:*  
*Wonder Woman*  
 Dara Birnbaum  
 M Hair Inc, 1978



from the videotape  
*Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*  
 Dara Birnbaum  
 photograph by Dara Birnbaum

material was gathered late at night in commercial studios through friends, or through sympathetic producers of local cable-tv. Whereas in 1985, all it might take to gather "off-air" imagery, for works similar in nature, would be a simple phone call to a friend with a home video recorder (VCR). If that person is not out, running to their local video distribution store to rent yet another overnight video-movie (for as little as \$1.95), they will most likely record the program for you. In addition, alternative spaces to view the "software" of the new technology were spreading in all directions—from the home arena of large-screen projection to video game arcades and new societies of rock clubs to other large-crowd "spectacles," such as baseball and other sports. In 1978 it had been nearly impossible for me to have direct access to television's imagery; in 1985 it is nearly impossible for me *not* to have that access.

I view my last two years of production as being initiated and carried through much in the same way as the earlier "appropriated works" of 1978-1982. The gathered footage (now from life and not television) is, as with the earlier material,



from the videotape  
*Damnation of Faust*  
 Dara Birnbaum  
 photograph by Dara Birnbaum

subjected to minute examination — opening its composition and revealing its hidden agendas. Editing is still a highly refined process revealing the subtlest gestures — whether they be from the opening shot of a nearly-forgotten star in *Hollywood Squares* (*Kiss The Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979), or a teenager in the streets of NYC (*Damnation of Faust: Evocation*, 1983). For endemic in both “characters” are the forms of restraint and near suffocation imposed through this current technological society; pressures which force a person to find the means of openly declaring, through communicated gestures, their own identity. These “looks,” produced in part by mass media, require us to maintain the ability to scrutinize those projected and communicated images surrounding us. This necessity furthers itself everyday in a world which is bound by its technology — seemingly rational yet simultaneously giving rise to its irrational underside. For me, all the works completed from 1978-1985 are “altered states” causing the viewer to re-examine those “looks” which on the surface seem so banal that even the supernatural transformation of a secretary into a “wonder woman” is reduced to a burst of blinding light and a turn of the body — a child’s play of rhythmical devices in-



served within the morose belligerence of the fodder that is our average daily television diet. I consider it to be our responsibility to become increasingly aware of alternative perspectives which can be achievable through *our* use of media — and to consciously find the ability for expression of the “individual voice” — whether it be dissension, affirmation, or neutrality (rather than a deletion of the issues and numbness, due to the constant “bombardment,” which this medium can all too easily maintain). In the 1970s it seemed best to approach this task by directly appropriating imagery from the mass media — imagery which had made itself unavailable for redirected use within the public’s domain while still being allowed to issue itself *at* the public. In the 1980s, I feel that it is a better strategy openly to re-engage the issue of possible new forms of representation, image, and meaning through *our* own use of the tools and by-products of the industry. We could approach these tools as possible “folk instruments,” creating works which would allow new issues to surface and engaging in a practice which could reveal new “views and values” — while created through a dominant language and form.

## The Warning Track: Just Before You Run into the Wall

JOHN SANBORN

*It really is a game, a creative one. And like any other creative endeavor it's the rules, and the bending thereof, that's most interesting.*

Bob Ashley has said many times that "Television is like baseball . . . you can't play baseball by yourself and you can't make television by yourself." And no one knows this more than me. I'm interested in collaborations and metaphors, the kinesthetic and rhythmic, technology and art, art and entertainment, narrative and abstraction, and video and television.

### *Perfect Lives*

My involvement with Robert Ashley's opera for television *Perfect Lives* is at once a triumph and a disappointment. The process of the project, from concept through production and distribution has inspired me and established a true beachhead for the advancing forces of change.

It is, to my chagrin, the only work I have been creatively involved with that is still "ahead of its time." Misunderstood but imitated, broadcast in Europe and shunned here ("I loved it, but it's . . . too odd" said one PBS exec to me recently in Washington), pace setting and constantly provocative—I will for the life of me never understand why people don't see it as clearly as I do.

When I asked some friends up at the ZBS Media audio farm, back in 1978, what composer Robert Ashley was up to (having much admired his *Music With Roots* series), I was told that he had written an opera for television. Up until that point I thought that among so-called serious media artists, only I, and then partner Kit Fitzgerald, were interested in creating art for television. Much to the scorn of our peers, I might add, we imagined ourselves creators of both art and an audience for that art. And now here was a respected composer daring to enter this battleground.

I asked Pat Anderson and Greg Shifrin what Ashley had in mind, and they replied that he was to perform live at the Kitchen, standing in front of chroma-key paper, and have midwest farm scenes inserted behind him.

No way, I said. Didn't he realize what could be done, storytelling wise, with the video tools which were just then coming on the market-place. Why, you could layer and "multi-track" images much in the same way musicians could mix sounds. Why present something creative in such a stiff manner? Back in New York I met with producer Carlota Schoolman, whose reputation before (as producer of *Vertical Roll* and *Television Delivers People*) and since (Tom Bowes' *Two Moon July*) was unquestioned. What were they planning for this project, then called *Private Parts*? Was what I heard true?

Yes, essentially, but would I like to come to a preview that Bob and "Blue" Gene Tyranny were giving to show off some of the episodes of the opera? So I sat quietly in my chair while Bob and "Blue" Gene played two or three episodes of *Private Parts*.

Afterwards I wrote a 13 page letter to Bob and Carlotta, describing what I saw in my mind's eye while listening to the piece. Complete with drawings, I detailed the possible jokes, visual puns and multiple imaging techniques possible with the nascent Quantel DPE-5000 (the first frame-store based, digital video tool).

This is the first inning of the game; gathering the players. From there we planned and raised money. At the time no one really wanted you to make television. With the exception of some visionaries (such as John Hanhardt and Howard Klein) interaction with the established culture was frowned upon. It was certainly not politically correct to create for the mainstream. Grants were restrictive and pigeon-holed so that you could only gather so much momentum before running out of cash. I feel that even from "established" experimental centers artists were not taken seriously as television makers. Ever.

In 1980 we spent two wild weeks in the midwest, in and around Galesburg, Illinois, shooting background imagery for the eventual production of the seven-episode opera. Working from clear plastic overlays (which fit over our portable monitor's screen) of the seven "Visual Templates" Bob had theorised and I had concretized, we collected thematic and metaphoric snippets of local life, which would mesh (we imagined) with the final production. In the meantime this footage would become an on-stage "video-set" for live performances of the work.

Here the themes of death and reincarnation, of alienation within yourself and from the rest of society, and the split between mind and body, first took literal forms. Translating something ephemeral and literary into something real;



creating a visual metaphor for some abstract idea, in terms of characters in costume on location in a shopping mall in the American mid-west was a crash course in overcoming the mushiness of most video art, and stepping directly into the "professional" production line.

The next opportunities we had to realize any part of the piece were two isolated instances, each of which was to give us a foothold on convincing funders that we knew what we were talking about. For no matter how convincing our descriptions, no matter how beautiful the text, no matter how involved our production ideas, no one wanted us to produce the opera. They all said, "Show us when you've finished." That's part of the game. No one wants to invest in you until you're a "sure thing." But getting to be a sure thing can bust your balls. And as soon as you establish credentials for funding (cause all anybody wants is to keep working) your peers are ready to stab you in the back.

Opportunity 1. Bravo, the cable arts concern gave us some seed money to complete two short demos (for their own cablecasts) of two segments from two episodes. Fragments of *The Bar* and *The Backyard*, using footage shot live in Paris and mixed with elemental video techniques—at bargain-basement budget level, were scratched out to "prove" that the ideas Ashley had written, and I had imagined, were possible and thrilling. These were completed at Nexus Productions at around the same time we were creating the first stage of *The Lessons*.

For *The Lessons* we shot for a full day at Right Track studios, with "Blue" Gene doing 28 very intricate variations on seminal (for the opera) piano techniques (modified by my instructions based on camera placements worked out in harmony with the seven "visual templates" which govern the images in the opera), which expound the character of "Buddy" the world's greatest piano player. We were creating, in an abstract form, the *boogie-woogie lessons* which are often referred to in the opera. These 28 fragments later became the basis for the full corollary to "Perfect Lives" called *Music Word Fire and I Would Do It Again: Coo-Coo, The Lessons*.

*The Lessons*, in its full blown, four-part version was created thanks to a grant from the Television Laboratory at WNET/13. Adapting the original concept, we restructured the *Lessons* as portraits of Isolde, "R," Buddy, and The Captain of the Football Team, the main characters of *Perfect Lives*. Utilizing the 28 one-minute boogie-woogie lessons executed earlier (which were piano miniatures assaulted by video overdubs), and grouping them so as to have four shortened ver-

sions of the opera's structure, we then treated them as representative of one character."

Peter Gordon then remixed and expanded the tracks from the boogie-woogie lessons (which were very plain, demonstrative and abstract, using prepared piano and deliberately stilted musical gestures) to create a pop-influenced blend of text fragments, David Van Tieghems's drumming, and "Blue's" piano fragments, from which I started to draw the first complete storyboards of my career. Complete down to the last detail, concerning effects, pacing and edit style, the *Lessons* project was a challenge for me to describe in abstract terms the scale and visual impact of the final opera. This included articulating the emotions and ideas bound into the text of *Perfect Lives* by purely visual means.

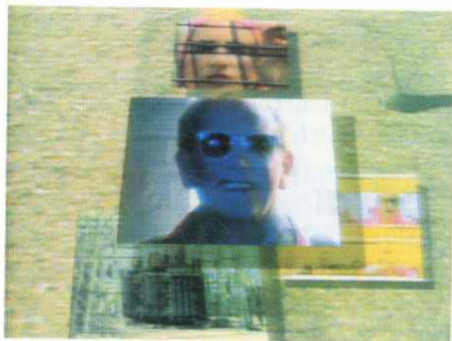
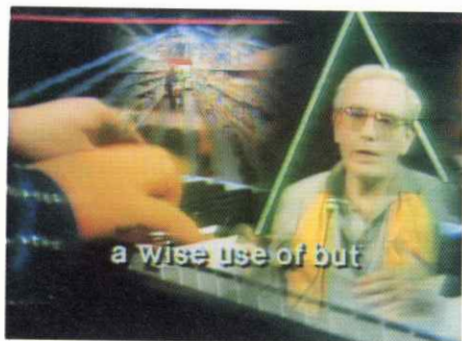
I worked for several weeks, off-lining time-code display copies of piano playing, Galesburg locations, and specially recorded segments (of Bob, Jill and David speaking and "posing") away from any effects devices, and incorporating the first "paintbox" I had ever encountered; a pen and tablet set-up hooked into an Apple IIe. With this and a great deal of manipulation of effects-building with editors John Godfrey and John Zieman at the WNET/13 T.V. Lab, I was able to construct an ever evolving digital landscape, across which the icons of *Perfect Lives* drifted.

Like the shards of a splintered hologram, where each fragment is a hologram unto itself, this "serialization" of the characters, shamelessly derived from structural and numerical purity, really rocked out.

Instead of being recognized as the blueprint of a new visual language, *The Lessons* scared the shit out of almost everyone (except for Merle Ginsberg, writing in the *Soho News*). Everyone over-reacted, and wondered if the entire three and a half hours would be as psychedelic and frenetic.

Opportunity 2. Our next attempt to create a "version" of the piece was an aborted combination of live recording in Paris, and post-production in Liege, Belgium, under the auspices of RTBF. After many weeks of struggle we carried away a half-completed mix of elements for *The Bar*, which although technically a failure, was a dry run for the actual production, funded finally by Channel Four, England.

Before anything more could be shot or even serious pre-production could commence it was necessary for Bob Ashley and I to sit and pour over the text, mean-



ings and potential imagery of the piece, and for me to further develop the intermix between the character recordings (Bob as “R,” “Blue” as Buddy, each creating a character who os both performing in the “Perfect Lives Lounge” and a participant in the fractured narrative of the perfect bank robbery, the combination wedding/funeral, etc.) and the flow of metaphoric images in which the emotional tone of the work would be conveyed.

Far from serious, the work has an undercurrent of black humor which we constantly tried to stress. The balance of the intellectual “terror” and the absurdity of the mad visions in *The Church* for example, are part Bob Ashley’s performance as “R,” the narrator of the opera, and part Ashley’s thoughts about music, written while composing the last third of the opera. All this flows out in stream-of-consciousness narration, the floating viewpoint of which essentially underlines the alien nature of the musicians (“R” and Buddy as well as Ashley and “Blue” Gene) intrusion into genteel society.

Using a segmented libretto as a page reference, 40-70 page storyboard books were prepared to aid in recording assembly of the effects and general post-production. Each template dictated camera shot, camera move, and final visual form was well drawn out in advance, often remarkably resembling the final video frame. Of course at times (due to our relatively low budget or a simple lack of time) whole sections had to be revised: It proved impossible to move the camera in the elaborate arc I had described for the last portion of *The Backyard*; in order to define the arc the camera would have to pass directly through “Blue” sitting at the keyboard.





Central to understanding the opera is the metaphor of the keyboard as both instrument of change and landscape of desire. As Buddy, “Blue” would have to create a character entirely through piano stylings. In order to enhance the surreal mood of each episode, different mirrors were placed above the keyboards, make-up was applied to his hands, and various ways of shooting the keyboard and his “voice” were devised to represent the character’s articulation—a powerful, if abstract, element in the opera.

Sets were created using a bare light bulb (changing color for each episode), a set of mirrors into which we could shoot without the camera being seen (to give the split inherent in “R”’s character a physical reality), and very elegant neon templates to give this “Perfect Lives Lounge” a semi-seedy appeal.

Work started in early May (shot on 3/4 inch, with simultaneous 8-track audio recording in Ashley’s loft on Beach street) with live videotape of Bob and “Blue” performing to pre-recorded backing tracks. Location recordings for both supermarket and church sequences were tricky but finally accomplished. We had to create our own bank (or approximation thereof) due to a lack of friendly banks. Perhaps they thought we were the cover for a perfect crime?

After four weeks of shooting, four months of day and night editing began. Working with Dean Winkler (who along with VCA Teletronics would form the technical core of the project) and Mary Perillo (with whom I now collaborate constantly) we transferred the tapes through an elaborate noise-reduction system (originally designed for film to tape transfers) to one inch video. Then we started off-line work, which included re-sync sessions in which Mary cut three versions of the opera, one to re-cue "Blue," one for Bob, and one for Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem's chorus parts.

Two weeks of effects building with Dean, using a one channel ADO, an ancient Quantel DPE-5000, and the Grass Valley 300 series switcher, culminated in four weeks of on-line editing. We created, as pre-built inserts, seven different electronically rendered "storms"; a "collision" of Venus and Mars; an ultimate zoom out from landsat photos of Galesburg; multi-image 3D cubes which reflected both metaphysical and romantic concerns; a "ferris wheel" lifeline of "R"'s life; a moving roadway reconstructing the perfect crime; and "lightning" striking Sears.

Conducted all at night, we became the hermits of Teletronics' edit room "C," emerging into the blinding sunliight of summer mornings, wasted but progressing towards our all consuming goal.

In order to best maximize the small amount of time we had to "conform" the episodes during our time at Teletronics, Dean, Mary and I constructed timeline displays of how we would build "A" and "B" rolls, detailed down to the frame the exchanges between single frame images, title and graphic inserts, pre-built effects, and on-line ADO and Quantel manipulations. We then built complete versions of all seven works, gathering pace and detail from the "spirit" of each episode, changing speeds and adding individual flourishes during assembly. At the same time, the (now defunct) computer animation facility Digital Effects, was creating the opening graphics logo for the series. As per my storyboard they executed a simple wireframe of an ultimate camera move which profiled a "camera" completing all of the opera's seven moving templates. Impossible, due to the "camera's" leaving the ground to show the planet on which the original roadway is situated, but possible accomplished through computer generated imagery. "Pencil tests" of the seven scene openings were modified with the final results arriving two days before the final assembly process.

Final passes, during which the on screen text, the above mentioned titles (modified for each episode and laid over a series of idiosyncratic intro's—each en-



ding with "These are stories about the cornbelt and some of the people who live in it, or on it."), and final credits were added, consisted of a "live" mix of pictures and words, with each episode lasting exactly 25:50, the time needed for Channel Four's broadcasts.

Broadcast to acclaim in England, Germany and Austria; shown to applause at festivals world-wide, the work remains "unseen" by American audiences. Why?

Perhaps the most critical issue, overlooked by funders, artists and programmers, is how dynamic, defiant "post-modern" work can bridge the gulf between "art" and entertainment, and still define that chasm at the same time. How do you cross that bridge, while you're building it? How is it possible to create work for an audience which is (supposedly) being developed to accept that work at the same time? Do you cheapen your "act" and put on fancier clothes and wear more make-up?

The KTCA series *Alive From Off Center* is a strong example of the straddling act carried to its logical extreme (in this year's second season, with the bulk of the programs being new commissions). Keep working.

Perhaps *Perfect Lives* was stranded by its own brilliance, both in writing and execution.





*Episode 4. THE BAR*

The instruction booklet with the video tapes  
Says the following  
In small type. An apology of  
Sorts, one thinks,  
For the isolation one feels  
In learning,  
Exaggerated or just amplified  
By the actuality of isolation  
In the airstream, locked in the plane of intent,  
On which . . .

Markings of the history of boogie woogie  
Stretch out in all directions,  
(I think that's the way history stretches out)  
Quote:

Television is neither true nor false.  
It's industry.

*/Seven/Five/Three/Two/*

Television made without industry . . .

Alone, in a word

*/Six/Four/Three/Two/*

Can cause a sinking feeling

There can be a loss of trust

/Six/Four/Two/

Fear not darkness, i.e.

Not industry.

Nor your own . . .

Desire.

Everybody works to be a part of industry.

To be a part of industry is to be real.

/Six/Four/Three/

If you're a part of industry, both in your

Industriousness and in the nature of your work,

There is a chance that everybody will like your work,

Because it is a part of industry.

And the things that are not a part of industry

Are not possible to like.

/Seven/Five/Two/

Likeability is less important than

Recognition by the industry.

/Six/

N that's a reason to be serious.

Unquote.

*Episode 5. THE LIVING ROOM (The Lifeline)*

/one two three/four/five/five/

/one two three/four/five/T

/seven /eight/M-one/recess/difficulties

/the home/smells/ /ten /D

/ /fourteen/fifteen/M-two/

/manhood/guns/ /fifteen/B

/football/ /back seat/ /twenty-one

/business/thrills/ /twenty/D

/twenty-two/M-three/recess/more difficul/ties

/the flaw /in him/ /twenty-five/G-one

/ /twenty-eight/twenty-nine/M-four/the room

/sleep/and words/ /thirty/G-two

/the young married/ problems/thirty-five/ H

/ M-five/systems/ out-/side/  
 /questions/ of/things/forty/N conscious-  
 /forty-two/forty-three/M-six/ the city/food  
 / ness two/never heals/ /forty-five/P  
 / / /forty-nine/fifty/M-seven  
 /third party feel/ings second/ thoughts/fifty/S  
 / /the end/or/ / /  
 /the transfer/ / /one more time/ /  
 /five /T / the home/smells/  
 /seven /eight /M-one  
 /ten / D /manhood /guns/  
 / recess/difficulties/ /fourteen  
 /fifteen/ B /business/thrills  
 /fifteen/M-two/football/ /back seat  
 /twenty / D /the flaw /in him  
 /twenty-one/twenty-two/M-three /recess  
 /twenty-five /G-one/sleep/ and words/  
 /more difficul/ties / /twenty-eight/twenty-nine  
 /thirty/ G-two/the young marrieds/ /problems  
 /M-four/the room/ /confusion/  
 /thirty-five/ H /questions/ of 1/2 things  
 /thirty-five/thirty-six/ M-five /systems/ out-  
 /forty/N conscious-/ ness two/never heals/  
 /side/ /forty-two/forty-three/M-six  
 /forty-five/ P /third party feel/ings second/ thoughts  
 /the city/food/ / /forty-nine  
 /fifty/ S /the transfer/ /  
 /fifty/M-seven/ the end/ /



## The Post-Spectorial Sublime

JON WAGNER

How do we watch television? Its distracted delivery and the perceptual demands of its appalling supertext would seem to defeat the historical project of spectatorship, at least as it is positioned by cinema. Have the identificatory strategies of cinema, its imaginary seduction and secondary satisfactions, simply failed to negotiate the transition to television, or have they ceased to appeal? Is television a pleasurable text, or do we take pleasure from its irresolute unpleasure? If so, why? How can spectatorship endure an address so directly in the face of *dure*, in the face of the subject's determination to resist and to survive the continuous onslaught of shattered experience mirrored in television programming and against which our image of desire is historically coordinated? Has a long and systematic deregulation of our gaze produced a spectator who is an Other?

There seems to have occurred in cinema practice a long and developing moment when its function as a training device against the horrors of a libidinal and political economy of excess began to unhook itself from the symbolic practice of the spectator. If it has been important for symbolic representation to reflect the egoistic desire to control, to resist, and to subject the erotic dalliance with excessive complexity, then this idealism of tragic recuperation, of tragic *realism*, has begun to exhibit irrelevance, a derealization. A kind of Hegelian mastery, an absurd perspective on itself enslaved, has apparently transformed spectatorship in its crucial intentionality into a rhetorical fallacy of critical exhibitionism. Increasingly, as it already has been, cinema is about having to watch, is an ironic, even mocking narrative of spectatorship, and as cinema becomes us, we will leave the screen.

This exit of voyeurism from the brazen poetics of late cinema does not, however, accomplish a transference to television. The kind of subjectivity that cinema classically triumphed in projecting, one that made the Other spectacularly available to imaginary signification, has as a result of this training called desire into crisis. "Terminal" cinema presents the scopophilic intention of subjectivity so thoroughly to its own investigation that the traditional pleasure of the gaze, its voyeurism, is quite literally shamed. Voyeuristic exhibitionism is a collision of discourses which resolves itself in the irresolution of the ego; it is the irresolute ego which watches, which sees and recognizes the resolute irrelevance of television.

In her 1983 article "King of Comedy: A Crisis of Substitution," Beverle Houston writes, "television, unlike cinema, does not offer its own viewing as the fulfillment of the circuit of desire it opens up."<sup>1</sup> This fulfillment is probably a plenitude of negative control, an alliance of hidden address with secondary presentation which allows the ego to disavow the limitless *Yes* of Eros in a spectacle of closed presence. Jean Laplanche in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* suggests that the proper function of the ego is precisely this "propping," this subjection of delirious demand to lack. The ego functions to return libidinal instinct upon itself in a metaphor of driven sexuality recuperated as desire, desiring that its formal properties be recognized, that *meconnaissance* neither destroy the subject in quest nor that the destructive quest simply overwhelm the subject. As Laplanche says, the organism must not simply want to die, but die in its own way.

Classical cinema is lethal in so far as it affords this negative presentation and offers an end, a suture, to the ruptured circuit of desire. Within the formal decadence of classical cinema I refer to as "terminal," this suturing of desire—spectatorial positioning—sexualizes—props—itsself, submits the ego to a spectacle of its own mastery. Intentional lack organizes its own absence beyond negative presentation toward a *syntagmatique* of continuous zero, the "vital homeostasis" Laplanche identifies as the death drive. Terminal film exhibits and distributes a triumphant willfulness, a sophisticated capacity to oversee the endless signification of desire as endless. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), for instance, takes this Kierkegaardian sickness, this despair of the self's symbolic relation to itself, into "replicant" parody, to an apocalyptic reproduction and retirement of scopophilic drive. It deranges its own unified derangement. It despairs. It cripples its signifiers.

Houston writes that "In this respect, [the] will to representation is 'pure,' offered without psychological explanation or motivation, a fact of culture rather than of personality or individuality . . .," that it is possible for the televisual subject "no longer to struggle unsuccessfully to become the desire of the Other, but, finally, to become the Other who initiates desire for the world, as it was initiated for him in television."<sup>2</sup> The possibility of an identity in Otherness suppurates the classical text by the otherness of desire, a regime of external initiation that has overcome the internal necessity to assault desire with lack. With terminal film, the vulnerability, the masochism of the classical cinema text—its openness to closure—pivots metamasochistically in a certain sadistic address to the spectator: the Sadean sexuality of "alienated commotion" is now spectatorship positioned in the diegesis as its own text. That this pivot or prop could be experienced as pleasurable reflects the essentially traumatic sexuality of this resexualization: a masochism of the spectator who is now witness to the unpleasure of his own desire.

Television spectatorship is beyond the pleasure of unpleasure. It positions a *supratext* inured to the lethal and/or sado-masochistic joys of cinematic subjectivity and transfers, as Houston indicates, this historic cult of individuality to the culture at large, to the civilized discontent of the supra-ego.

Television spectatorship in this way occupies a post-spectatorial position, one that rescues desire in both apparatus and nihilistic identification from the spectacular annihilation of desire by cinematic positioning. Yet this rescue which is not a recuperation inscribes on the lethal dialectic of difference toward plenitude, of Other toward identity and recognition, a gratuitousness, a derealization that is perhaps equivalent to the transfer of individuality to culture, of the privatization of capital.

Unleashed from the romanticism of self-reflexive instruction, television exceeds the rules of the cinematic endgame and plays self-reflexivity in terms of non-self, non-sense, a "foul" play of subjective dissolution, of the ego propping its own amputation. The irrelevant product of this program scandalizes the subjective primacy of Otherness and predicates its displacement as direct object of subjectivity, or its transitive identity. Spectatorship stylized as object through the paradigmatic despair of the Other begins to structure television beyond *langue* in a realm, a civilization, of pure product, pure speech. It masters, it privatizes, it mutilates its own ideality. It is a self-reflexivity without reserve. Television inhabits a civilization in ecstatic discontent, sublimely dispossessed.

In "Pleasure: A Political Issue," Frederick Jameson asks,

What if we substituted for this fragile menaced individual human *body* . . . a threatened menace to and dissolution of that other entity . . . which is the psychological subject, the *ego*, the personality, individual identity? Is it possible that the interiorization, the Nietzschean choice, the work of enjoyment, of that second type of fear might well approximate what Barthes designates, in terms that deliberately avoid any suggestion of banal pleasurable, as *jouissance*?<sup>3</sup>

I have been attempting to demonstrate that the presentation of the ego to itself on its own terms and then beyond this subjective double negative to its gratuitous objectification in culture *is* the culture of television and its spectator. Certainly from the point of view of classical spectatorship television induces a fear and loathing ecstatic at the heart of driven subjectivity. The "bad" objectivity of televisual



practice, its insouciant or even banal entertainment of the conditions of *jouissance*, describes in many ways the perverse metaphysic of late capitalism. The privatization, deregulation, subordination and dispersement of libidinal energy throughout society will always create a civilization sublimely discontent in the very practice of pleasure: entertainment as consumption. Butchering its children on our sets, capitalism commits the *gaucherie* of broadcasting its threat to subjectivity through simulacra of desire, commodities of civilized derealization which it must eat, as it eats history, by swallowing its own ideological tail — the production of subjects.

Capitalism is continuously revolutionary. It radicalizes the real in blatant substitutions of the reproducible and the consumable for the "authentic." Jean-Francois Lyotard writes in "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" "But capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions, to such a degree that the so-called 'realistic' representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction."<sup>4</sup> That capitalism possesses the subversive power to subvert individual subjectivity is hardly conditional, in Jameson's sense, nor does it require extensive speculation to conclude that the derealization of the authentic through nostalgia is Barthes' *jouissance*, the pleasure of unpleasure sexualized as the egoistic ego, i.e., its menaced dissolution. Thoroughly negated presentation as entertainment makes television an organ of capitalist subversion in so far as it is capable of endlessly subverting spectatorial demand beyond, as I have said, even the pleasure of unpleasure. Nostalgic, if at all, for nostalgia, television returns the structure of aggressively delivered demand, of gazing toward identification, as a fully available, recognizable — recognized — demand, the same one we made in exchange for ourselves.

A pleasure unhooked from the imaginary, the material absolute of televisual delivery absolutizes our own relativity by behaving likewise. Television is not voyeuristically consumed, but we are — made consumable on our own terms by the "mockery" of an apparatus which mimics the full structural — subjective — necessity of having to look. A desiring machine infinitely capable of reproducing our own desire, television mirrors as a matter of consensus the impossibility of erotic integrity. To quote extensively from Lyotard:

The sublime sentiment, which is also the sentiment of the sublime, is, according to Kant, a strong and equivocal emotion: it carries with it both pleasure and pain. Better still, in it pleasure derives from pain. Within the tradition of the subject, which comes from

Augustine and Descartes and which Kant does not radically challenge, the contradiction, which some would call neurosis or masochism, develops as a conflict between the faculties of a subject, the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to 'present' something. Knowledge exists if, first, the statement is intelligible, and second, if 'cases' can be derived from the experience which 'corresponds' to it. Beauty exists if a certain 'case' (the work of art), given first by the sensibility without any conceptual determination, the sentiment of pleasure independent of any interest the work may elicit, appeals to the principle of a universal consensus (which may never be attained).

Taste, therefore, testifies that between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept, an undetermined agreement, without rules, giving rise to a judgment which Kant calls reflective, may be experienced as pleasure. The sublime is a different sentiment. It takes place, on the contrary, when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it.<sup>5</sup>

Lyotard goes on to situate the sublime as a sentiment of the postmodernist deconstruction of necessarily inadequate realizations of the modernist attempt to put forward "the unrepresentable in presentation itself." As he says, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern."<sup>6</sup>

That television is, then, modernist is a conclusion irresistibly dependent on the postmodernist designation of spectatorship, that positioning in regard to representation which is already hopelessly convinced of its sublimity, of its post-spectatorial status. Having paid the price of death in life in cinematic counterfeits for a whole, the post-spectatorial precipitates the televisual discourse as a continuous and continuously fragmented Imaginary becoming, in Hegel's sense, Absolute Subject: "Pure self-recognition in absolute otherness," a process of sublime self-consumption which in "pure, simple negativity... produces its own double and opposition, a process that again negates this indifferent diversity and its opposite..."<sup>7</sup>

The Hegelian postmodern, Lyotard's sublime, the televisual spectator: in successful excess they signal an evolution of knowledge set loose from having, from

having to have, from the unconscious. Beverle Houston concludes her article "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption" by positing the possibility that:

...the spectator of television is not so barred from producing a knowledge of his or her position even while taking television's pleasures. Indeed the link between the level of the economic base and television's role in furthering it seems deceptively clear in comparison with that of cinema. Yet since it is based on a mechanism of desire in which both the dream and its interruption seem to power the viewer toward consumption, it is difficult for a knowledge to be effective.<sup>8</sup>

What Houston's conclusion stops short of is the possibility that this knowledge *is* consumption, its economic base a sublimely capitalist co-option of the empty, endless, modernist presentation of obsolescence, an obsessively ironic repetition of vitality in its tendency toward, its pleasurable unpleasure in, zero. When Lyotard announces that we have had "as much terror as we can take," then perhaps this knowledge will triumph over the subjective capacity to endure it, to conceive of its presentation. Like terminal capitalism, perhaps television accedes to what Derrida refers to as the monstrous invasion of discourse into the universal dialectic, a dialectic of desire currently driven after the gestural, grasping, gutted nature of the imaginary supertext toward an exceedingly pleasurable solution it knows is never going to work.

If this "solution" were to become co-extensive with an aesthetic practice whereby pleasure is resolved in a depiction of post-spectatorial positioning as aesthetic, then we might begin to describe the anti-erotic of avant-garde video. This anti-erotic consists in a certain collision of discourses: the contemplative tradition which avant-garde video brings with it as an *art*, as a modernist presentation of the failure to present a concept, in collision with the sublime or post-modern position of a spectatorship which abandons conception, for which presentation not only fails, but fails *as* presentation. That the avant-garde or art video can be watched at all, can participate in the apparatus of televisual delivery of unpleasure as pleasureable, presumes, then, that the classical or metaphoric sexualization of the image through identification is made metonymic, that spectatorship reflect its own intent as text. Yet if that spectatorship is already beyond the pleasure of unpleasure, beyond, say, the traditional erotic challenge of avant-garde or even terminal cinema, beyond a subjectivity produced by television in the face of its own subjectivity, then perhaps the art video eroticizes only this



gratuitousness, simulates an erotic in a presentation re-eroticized as simulacrum, a simulacrum of dis-eased subjectivity. Perhaps more accurate than an anti-erotic aesthetic for avant-garde video is an aesthetic of negative eroticism, a strategy of consensus or "taste" for the sublime failure to conceive of a presentation as that very conception it presents as failure.

The art video may not be a "text," but it's sublime impossibility. Its art consists in a contradictory capacity to present as conceived, however inadequately, the inconceivable, irreconcilable spectator as performance. The dialectic of this capacity to conceive versus the capacity to present is "entertained" televisually in the artistic, even "beautiful" cultivation of a taste for this impossible contradiction, the impossibility of a universal, unified subjectivity, a taste for an apparatus and a medium of irresolute presentation, a retrieval, really, of the sublime spectator in his own image.

Only the spectator is sublime, absolute in the Hegelian sense of abstract or pure negativity. Any text is always already modern: corrupted through its attempt to present, text becomes language. The art video by approximating the post-spectatorial achieves an avant-garde of "anti-text" propped on the post-modern sublime. Edge enhanced in a limbo where its *langue* assumes the discontent of pure *parole*, an appreciation of the art video assumes an articulation of a subjectivity unleashed in accusation of its own symbolic productions, a meta-egoistic practice speaking unpleasure under the *sign* of pleasure. The anti- or negative erotic aesthetic of the art video or its "text" might be conceived in this way as a selling of the spectator back to his own de-realizing site, an abstract pornographic sold as unwatchable, but watching.

Nietzsche claims that if you look long into the abyss—or, I would venture, the sublime—it looks into you. If it is the post-spectatorial into which the avant-garde video looks, but as a result of the spectator's extended televisual gaze into his own gutted, or "sublimated," imaginary, then video, this anti-text, delineates textual loss, recovers itself as an object lost to spectatorship *as* spectatorship. Exhibited as unwatchable but watching, video is the sublime spectator who looks back through looking into video. Video, a spectatorial medium of a spectatorial art or artist, exploits the televisual apparatus as a site ideally suited for its presentation, a modernist re-presentation of the post-spectatorial sublime and takes advantage of the televisual spectator in order to achieve its high modernist status as art.

The art of avant-garde video, this co-option and re-subjugation of the sublime

sentiment, that sentiment which in itself abstractly deconstructs formal presentation, accomplishes for video a curious chic, a fashion or fashionability of formal abstraction which assumes nostalgically or, as a function of camp, its spectator as a function of its delivery. Its information of its spectator must vertiginously deconstruct its spectator in a double negative of sublimating the sublime.

Watching the avant-garde video is integral with its production, an interface of post-modern subjective despair with an attempt to conceive of the unrepresentable presentation: a solution which will not work, but a resolution of narrative recondeconstruction which may characterize video form and its appeal. If, as John Simon claims, camp is nostalgia laced with contempt, it could be video's longing for a spectator and an aesthetic which is Other to itself and its concomitant contempt or despair of itself as that Other which contextualizes video in televisual camp.

Television has made its viewing that vital zero, that homeostasis of fatal pleasure the ec-stacy of which is an empire of consumption. The avant-garde video views this consumption and its cultural context with the now cool eye of a classical spectator, as spectacle, but only formally. It re-subjugates a spectator beyond classical subjectivity and in that movement consumes itself, commodifies its narrative contempt as subjective melodrama. Said otherwise, the campy elegance of avant-garde video is a conception commensurate with the imperial abyss it presents. The eye with which I see video is the same eye with which it sees me.

#### Footnotes

(1) Beverle Houston, "King of Comedy: A Crisis of Substitution" *Framework*, 74-92 (Spring 1984)

(2) *ibid*: 82

(3) Fredric Jameson, *Formations of Pleasure* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1-14, 1983

(4) Jean-Francois Lyotard "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" *Innovation/Renovation*, eds. Hassan and Hassan, University of Wisconsin, 329-341, 1983

(5) *ibid*: 336-337

(6) *ibid*: 338-339

(7) Walter Kaufmann, "The Preface to the Phenomenology" *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 28, 1966

(8) Beverle Houston, "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 183-195 (Summer 1984)

## Women and the Media: A Decade of New Video\*

WILLIAM OLANDER

*...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.<sup>1</sup>*

The forms of media, though dominated by the film, television, and recording industries, still include the older, more traditional forms of printed matter—illustrated magazines, tabloids, newspapers, novels, advertising on a massive scale, all designed for mass consumption—and the newer, high technological forms of video games, recorders, cameras and cassettes, cable television (from the corporate-controlled pay-TV companies to alternative public access programming), computer hardware and software, equally designed for mass consumption but for an audience ranging from the lower middle class (if that) to the highly affluent and well-to-do. Indeed, it is these newer, high tech developments and their attendant production capabilities that have captured, within the last decade, the most attention, not merely within the artworld, small as it is, but more significantly, in the larger, corporate-run entertainment industry, which, in a large part is now constructed on the profits of video. Even in the area of video art; however, distribution through television, whether broadcast or cassette, is a much discussed and sought after possibility. Since the late 1970s, many artists and apologists have proclaimed that the future of video rests not in the arena of art but in television; one of the most devoted has even posited that "a 'pure' television art is forthcoming," which "will lead artists [renamed "populists"] back to the popular audience now severely alienated by avant-garde art practice."<sup>2</sup> How much this attitude has backfired can be seen in a recent series produced by the Corporation for



Public Broadcasting—"Alive From Off Center" was supposedly devoted to the "most innovative video being created by the country's most adventuresome artists." What was actually presented, however, though occasionally significant, was too much a rehash of standard downtown New York fare, which, in some cases, had been on the circuit for over a decade.

The marketing of video by the television industry, in a curious twist, has had a reverse effect on the relationship between the medium itself and the institutions of art. This has resulted in the museumification of video as the institutions have attempted to close in and claim it as one of their own, even though they have displayed little prior interest.<sup>3</sup> Utopian dreams of alternative programming on whatever level (the visions of the 1960s, whether "guerilla" television or just local cable TV) have been subsumed by either increasingly powerful monopolies (Time, Inc., for example, owns not only *Time*, *Life*, *People*, *Fortune* and *Money*, but also, among others, Manhattan Cable, Home Box Office, and American TV and Communication) which produce primarily entertainment on a massive scale for a society constructed as homogenous, classless, and ethnically-balanced or by the institutions of high culture themselves. The "global village" has become a reality but in an anti-utopian fashion: the colonization of most of Western society and much of the Third World by mega-corporate broadcasting, movie-making, recording and even print media. The success of American television around the world as a genuine money-maker has been accomplished, of course, only at the expense of indigenous programming worldwide. Thus, it remains an ever more pressing task for artists, rather than merely capitulating, to develop and shape their own community and cultural alternatives to what is becoming increasingly a single, converging commonality—the homogenization of global markets and global taste.

Since the mid-70s—the result of a coalescence of feminist ideology and feminist practice, new technologies, and disillusionment with the traditional avenues and venues of art production—many women working in video have developed just such alternatives to the domination of the media by the forms of corporate capitalism and its attendant representations, and mis-representations. The latter have been addressed not only within the terrain of images of women (though women still tend to be represented prominently). Indeed, new feminist production, in contrast to the first wave of feminist, or women's art, seldom provides the expected pleasure of female identification with a positive narrative about women or with an heroic female character.<sup>4</sup> Second generation feminist artists have resisted specifically the creation of "woman as sign," or woman constructed as a

commodity, of which, obviously, there is no lack in Western society. Rather, their aim has been to investigate the means by which a female subject is produced and to effect the "ruin of representation" precisely on the grounds of what has been excluded, of the unrepresentable object, creating a significance out of its absence.<sup>5</sup> Nor are the images and texts which comprise many new feminist works any longer those with which we are most familiar from the media itself as "feminist" or which bear the stamp of the media as falling within the territory of "women's issues"—woman-as-victim (rape, pornography, abortion) or the more generalized women's rights. Rather, issues of sexual difference, politics, and power—class, gender and race—have enlarged the feminist agenda to the point where some feminist works are now unsympathetically received even by the female spectators for whom they are most obviously intended. One reviewer, writing about the video portion of an exhibition devoted to issues of sexuality flatly stated that seen together, the tapes "hardly combine to further an understanding of the difference in representation and sexuality... After establishing the relationship of camera/subject as one of fetishism and female subjugation, where do we go from here?"<sup>6</sup> One answer is to move out to the arena of the culture and consciousness industries at large.

I have no desire to attempt a review or even abbreviated history of feminist video engaged in this direction; as a male spectator it seems pretentious to attempt to speak for women and the issues generated by their work. It does seem possible, however, as a gay man who is also a victim of the corporate-produced systems of representation which define who we are in terms of sex, class, and race, to examine some of the more overt works of feminist artists, which have dealt specifically with the forms of the media through the "master" form of video, in radical attempts *not* to work within the construct of the media but to work *against* it—to break through, criticize and deconstruct its ideological apparatuses and hidden agendas, in order to reopen the field for new, discursive practices, specifically by and about women, which are able to function in-between the forms of high culture and mass culture, as neither television nor video, but something other—a genuine alternative to the corporate-controlled systems of representation that produce and control not only what we know but who we are—how we represent ourselves to ourselves and how we are represented.

For finally it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. It was the first to practice deter-



rence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialisation, etc.; and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value, of every real equivalence, of production and wealth, in the very sensation we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. Now, it is this very logic which is today hardened even more *against* it. And when it wants to fight this catastrophic spiral by secreting one last glimmer of reality, on which to found one last glimmer of power, it only multiplies the *signs* and accelerates the play of simulation.<sup>7</sup>

The forms of the mass media, despite their appearance of reality, their statements which pretend to fact (a news-cast, for instance, which today is so transparently entertainment), are constructed literally and figuratively upon fabrication and simulation. An advertisement, whether produced photographically for the print media or electronically for television, is a fictive construct, intended not merely to sell a product but to promote desire and promise wish-fulfillment. It sells an entire lifestyle which, despite its emphasis on individuality, is most often aimed at shaping the imaginary consciousness of a single population. The London-based public relations firm of Saatchi and Saatchi, for example, has observed (and promoted): "as demography is converging, television and motion pictures are creating elements of a shared culture. And this cultural convergence is facilitating the establishment of multinational brand characters. The world-wide proliferation of the Marlboro brand would not have been possible without TV and motion picture education about the virile rugged character of the American West and the American cowboy — helped by increasing color TV penetration in all countries." This kind of advocacy, of course, is not limited to the advertising industry; increasingly, economists promote a similar vision of "the general drift toward world homogenization," where "nothing is exempt" and the differences that remain are only "vestiges of the hardened inherited past."<sup>8</sup>

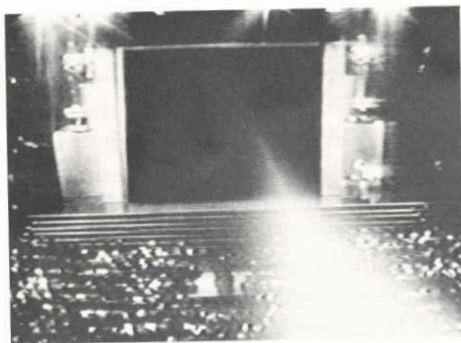
Within the population, or within this "general drift," women — simultaneously as consumers and objects of consumption but never as subjects — are a primary target of the media's discourse, of its will to dominate the field, to inscribe woman into a masculine frame of reference and to render her an inactive, passive victim to the male command of language: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."<sup>9</sup> That this is true can be proved easily by considering almost any



representation of woman produced by the media (or the male imagination), from the obvious subjugation of women by the pornography industry to, in some ways, the more perverse and insidious campaigns to capitalize on the "new woman" by promoting a mythology of "You've come a long way, baby" (significantly the male speaking voice with a possessive diminutive tacked on to the end) while simultaneously inscribing this new mythology into safe, conventional stereotypes—working mother, wife, girlfriend—and thus, producing a double negation of takeover and reinscription into the familiar: "... the significant issue here is capitalism's relentless search for areas within the culture that can be colonized. . . . You take whatever the women's movement has accomplished and you colonize it, you sanitize it and you make it safe. In purely capitalist terms, it's extremely successful."<sup>10</sup> Of course, woman can possess her own image, but to do that, she must become it and in becoming it, she can no longer possess it. "For the female spectator, the image is *too* close—it cannot be projected far enough," and thus, she is left with no other choice than to accept or reject the image offered to her.<sup>11</sup> One option, most advocated by feminist theorists, remains: to masquerade or to pose as something altogether other (false or fake), and thus possess the power to satirize or critique—to infiltrate and to subvert.<sup>12</sup> The artistic strategy of appropriation, developed over the last decade, approximates most closely this strategy of masquerade, and it is no surprise that feminist artists have developed their own discourse by appropriating the mask, the pose, of the media itself.

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.<sup>13</sup>

It might seem contradictory that the feminist voice, in all of its diversity, can speak through the media, in all its homogeneity. Consider, however, some of the most significant video tapes of the last decade which have employed the media against itself in order to produce counter-narratives, which are resistant to the point where they are, in the words of Jacques Derrida, "undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term. . . ."<sup>14</sup> Max Almy's hallucinatory *Leaving the Twentieth*



from the videotape  
*Social Studies II*  
Lyn Blumenthal  
photo courtesy Video Data Bank



from the videotape  
*A Simple Case for Torture*  
Martha Rosler  
photo courtesy Video Data Bank

*Century* of 1982—a disturbing look into the future, in which a voice-over says “Relax,” while the images and soundtrack present an overloaded barrage of simulated effects, masquerading as a futuristic reality; Judith Barry’s endlessly circular *Casual Shopper* of 1980, where the twentieth century shopping mall replaces the nineteenth century arcade as the site of our desire, where what we see is a continuous “redoubling, a mirror reflection, an immediate relation between the subject and its other in which each term passes immediately and is lost in a play of reflections. . . ;”<sup>15</sup> Dara Birnbaum’s *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* and *Kiss the Girls/Make them Cry* of 1978 and 1979, where, in the latter, footage from television’s *Hollywood Squares* is used to point to the media’s creation of its own female protagonists as literally boxed-in celebrities who possess no true reality of their own; Lyn Blumenthal’s *Social Studies, Part I*, 1983, in which the scripted narrative from a Cuban soap opera is made to reveal more about life in Cuba than any media report produced in the U.S.A. could possibly represent; Nancy Buchanan’s *See I A . . .*, of 1980, and *An End to All Our dreams*, 1982, where the former manages to convey in extremely condensed form, information that links McCarthy-style witch hunts, the role of “black propaganda” produced by the C.I.A. in the 1973 takeover of Chile, and the current struggles in Central America; Margia Kramer’s *Freedom of Information Tape: Jean Seberg*, 1980, in which a life is destroyed by F.B.I. fabrications planted in the national press (film star Seberg’s alleged pregnancy by a member of the Black Panther party and her subsequent suicide); Martha Rosler’s *Domination and the Everyday*, 1978, and *A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night*, 1983, both densely layered works exploring political oppression in Latin America and the more subtle oppres-

sion of media domination in the United States; and Lisa Steele's *The Damages* and *Makin' Strange*, both of 1978, in which a welfare mother, acted by Steele, is victimized repeatedly by the system which is supposedly there to assist her.

This list, of course, is far from complete. Additional examples could include any number of tapes from the extensive archives of the collaborative groups Paper Tiger Television in New York or the Miners Campaign Tape Project in London, to name just two. Yet, the list does suggest where to begin to discover how the feminist voice speaks—jamming, overloading, and short-circuiting the male discourse of the media with the heterogeneous female, denying the pleasure of the familiar, whether it is the familiar conventions of television itself or the seductive clichés produced therefrom. What is produced, instead, is a severe case of disequilibrium—a rupture in the visual and aural orders that opens a space of desire into which a female spectator can enter, and which is not regulated or contained but placed in self-conscious circulation. The works cited above, and others, are a significant departure from the conventional modernism of early video, whose insistence on its real time character was only an extension of 1960s formalism and whose rhetoric was still linked to a negatively motivated split with tradition. In many ways, these tapes, along with their current counterparts in still photography and film, positive expositions of new propositions in which tradition no longer plays a role; for what tradition can art, constructed from the spectacular, hyper-reality of the media, possibly be in rebellion against? And what tradition can be cited as that against which the feminine and feminist content of these works has rebelled. It appears that we have moved from modern to postmodern terrain, where experimentation is seen not as a decline, or a symptom of decline, but as a thoughtful advance, interrogating the very nature of seeing, desire and discourse. This is among the achievements of the last decade, in general, and of feminist video, specifically: to have decentered the subject to the point where there is neither outside nor inside but rather, a very conflicted and powerfully dynamic relation to both outside and inside, dependence and independence, high culture and mass culture, art and nature, and finally, to what is real and what is not.

\*Portions of this essay first appeared as "Women and the Media: New Video," in the *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, v. 41, Supplement, 1983-84, 3-13.



## Footnotes

- (1) Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, New York, 1972, 224 (originally published in 1936).
- (2) Carl E. Loeffler, "Television Art in the Eighties," in *Watching Television: A Video Event*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983, 10, 11.
- (3) See Patricia Thomson, "A Tower of Babel: 'Video 84' in Montreal," and Shelley Rice, "The Luminous Image: Video Installations at the Stedelijk Museum," *Afterimage*, v. 12, Dec. 1984, 3, 22 and 12-15; Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," Unpublished Mss., 1984; and another review of the Stedelijk exhibition, Anne-Marie Duguet, "The Luminous Image: Video Installation," *Camera Obscura*, No. 13-14, Spring-Summer 1985, 28-49.
- (4) Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Film Practice and Pleasure: A Discussion" (with Dee Dee Glass, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Williamson), *Formations of Pleasure*, London, 1983, 157. Craig Owens also discusses the negative effect of so-called "positive" images of women in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism," *The Anti-Esthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, 1983, 71.
- (5) Joanna Isaak, "Women: The Ruin of Representation," *Afterimage*, v. 12, April 1985, 6; and Mary Kelly, "Desiring Images/Imaging Desire," *Wedge*, Winter 1984, 7.
- (6) Marita Sturken, "Feminist Video: Reiterating the Difference," *Afterimage*, v. 12, April 1985, 11 (a review of the video program, organized by Jane Weinstock, for the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984).
- (7) Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Art and Text*, Spring 1983, 28 (originally published in 1978).
- (8) Theodore Levitt and Saatchi and Saatchi, quoted by Martha Rosler, "The Opportunity for World Brands," in *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1985, 40-41. This text, published as well as a hand-out, accompanied Rosler's 3-channel installation entitled *Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses*.
- (9) Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, v. 16, Autumn 1975, 7.
- (10) Dee Dee Glass in *Formations of Pleasure*, 160.
- (11) Constance Penley, "A Certain Refusal of Difference: Feminism and Film Theory," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, 385. Also see Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, London, 1982.
- (12) See Craig Owens, "Posing," in *Difference . . .*, 7; and Maureen Turim, "What is Sexual Difference?," *Afterimage*, v. 12, April 1985, 4-5.
- (13) Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Mark and I. De Courtivron, New York, 1981, 253 (first published in 1975).
- (14) Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, 1981, 43.
- (15) Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination," *Discourse*, No. 4, Winter 1981/82, 26.

# inTerVention: the contexts of negation for video and its criticism

DAVID JAMES

*"Okay," Ian managed to murmur, gripping his jug. But what happened? he wondered. I don't quite understand. This woman isn't really Nicole and even worse there is no Nicole anywhere; there's just the TV image after all, the illusion of the media, and behind it, behind her, another group entirely rules. A corporate body of some kind. But who are they and how did they ever get power? Will we ever know?*

Philip K. Dick, *The Simulacra*

*They became what they beheld.*

William Blake, *Milton*

*Moi qui vends ma pensee et qui veut etre auteur.*

Charles Baudelaire, "Je n'ai pas pour maitresse . . ."

For the climax of the pre-game special of Superbowl 86, television viewers were able to visit the White House where, like Mike Smith, President Reagan was about to settle down before the set. Despite Tom Brokhaw's urging, he refused to call the game, though he did ask time to recount an incident that bridged his own career in athletics and the media. He described the final seconds of a game of his college days in which, though he missed an important block, the quarterback saved the day with a winning touchdown run. Later, the President recalled, when an interviewer for his first job as a sportscaster had required him to narrate an imaginary game, he had used that one—but with the difference that when he told it over it was his successful block that made the winning touchdown possible.

I found the anecdote quite interesting, but CBS took us quickly back to New Orleans where our game was about to get underway. Only the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Wynton Marsalis remained. Marsalis took the first chorus of the plodding melody straight, but he played the second in the style of a modern jazz soloist, against the beat. And then, instead of building the last chorus up to a rousing patriotic climax, he muted it, ending with an understatement that



*Network newsmen, from left, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Peter Jennings and Roy Neal report shuttle tragedy.*

deflated the rhetoric of the lyrics. I couldn't believe my ears. Was Marsalis really fucking with the national anthem? . . . with *An American Celebration*?

Since television is so insistently fecund in generating metaphors for itself—its specificity indeed is supposed to lie in its resistance to any passage through the text to a real outside—we should be wary of taking any moment within it as more than usually holophrastic; nevertheless, I will propose these two moments in the Superbowl broadcast as emblems respectively of the general condition of the medium and of the possibility of intervention within its hegemony.

In the first case what is at issue is not the collusion between the media system and state power, nor yet the mendacity they jointly authorize; rather it is the insistent flaunting of collusion and mendacity, and the split it generates in the t.v. spectator. Once we might have thought of this split as a tension, enacted psychologically, between good and bad faith; now, its systemic operation having invalidated such antitheses, we accept it as a peculiarly modern irony, where a doubling self-cancellation in the message induces in us a vertiginous dispersal of identity with what we believe, or would like to believe, or even of what we are. In the second instance, a form of montage that allows the forbidden to be publically spoken, we note with surprise that at the very apogee of the imperialist spectacle, its codes may be turned against it, setting in play a different kind of irony. Rather than echoing to oblivion between the parallel mirrors of mutual negation, this irony is able to imply a positive, to endorse a mode of music-making and by that an experience of life that is not entirely administered. (That this implication depends on social circumstances, which, except in highly controlled circumstances, are excluded from television, we must temporarily put aside, even as we must put aside our recollection that in the babble of postmodernism, you can always say anything at all, as long as it's not class.)

We inherit this polarization between the mass media and resistance to it—a primary figure in aesthetics in the period of industrialization—as a distinction



between the broadcast television industry and video art. During the latter's struggle over the past two decades to disentangle its singular social processes or technological or formal qualities from sculpture, performance, painting, film and the other arts that supply its hybrid plenty, it has generated many vocabularies for itself; not just the adaptations of those of its parent disciplines, but others that speak to its specific pleasures. Subsuming these with its more extensive analytic leverage is the question of video's relation to the economic and political processes that intersect at broadcast tv. Whether its aspiration be understood as the reproduction of the negation and estrangements of modernism's attempt to find in art itself a surrogate for the values destroyed by capital, or as the transcendence of the modernist paradigm entirely in some new praxis which would destroy the autonomy that art has claimed as the condition of its authenticity, video increasingly finds that the terrain of its contestation is already occupied by its other.

Though the kind of visual information instanced by film appears as only a subdivision of the total aural and visual processing of television technology, the ability to photograph motion shared by the mediums made it logical for the relation between tv and video to be initially proposed via the analogy of the relation between Hollywood and the various non-industrial film practices of the sixties. Reflecting video's institutional affiliations with the art world, stylistic parallels between early artists' video and the minimalist films of the late 60s New York art world — artists' film — justified this analogy, even as the gradual supplantation of avant garde film by video in the seventies sustained it. Despite art video's substantial dependence on formal devices developed in avant garde film, the analogy is only provisionally useful.

As the voice of capital and itself a capitalist industry whose function is the reproduction of capital and its ideological preconditions, tv completes the dissolution of popular art into industrial consumer culture and completes the colonization of leisure and fantasy — the industrialization of the mind. Reality is at best only another metaphor for tv. As the totalized form of consumer society, in which the autonomy of the aesthetic is eradicated in a dystopian parody of liberation, it marks an integration of art and industry qualitatively different from that of any other time. More directly than any previous art form, video finds itself confronted not merely by an industrial usage of the same medium, but by the political process as a whole, now indistinguishable from the operation of that medium. Given the extensiveness of these contexts — they are, to be sure, "The World" — and the impossibility of preserving the aesthetic as such against them, it continuously slips into manufacture. Video's allegiance to the principles of art formulated in the bourgeois period, the principles which constitute it as art, require it to construct

itself in opposition to the political order, while the conditions of its production ensure that it is simultaneously constructed *by* that order.

This contradiction is present at the center of the notion of video art and in all the registers of its operation. Since it depends on advanced technology and on technological systems integrated at the corporate level, it is always possessed by the corporation, always besieged by its values. Its dependence is on the one hand logistical, a matter of maintaining access to (always developing) technology, and on the other formal, the pressure to internalize that technology as production values, special effects and the like which fetishize its operations. The soft erotic sheen of that display becomes a pure defamiliarization, in which content as such is transcended and all that can be narrated is love for the apparatus. The umbilical dependency these effects allegorize is not incidental to video but, at the present at least essential to it—despite the rhetoric that has continuously predicted the demotic decentralization of the technology.

Its glitches and overall technical crudity signalling its virtue, the early black and white ½-inch portapak had a promise that was both aesthetic and political, that of providing complete control over the art work and also the possibility of alternate media systems for its circulation. Inheriting the aspirations of both the counter-cultural cinemas and the radical Newsreels, early video recognized the interdependence of alternative forms and alternative systems of production and distribution. Collectives like Global Village, Raindance and Videofreex (all founded in New York in 1969) and Video Free America (founded in San Francisco in 1970) were established to support different formal uses, communicating with the dispersed video subculture through magazines like *Radical Software*. After 1972 when the time base corrector made it possible for ½-inch tape to be brought up to broadcast quality and so removed technological inhibitions to public access, occasionally video artists penetrated commercial stations, notably WGBH in Boston. But of such alternative social formations, the most comprehensive remained the network of museums and galleries, of dealers and grants, that comprises the art world. As 60s activism evaporated or itself became industrialized, this increasingly became video's context, the social retrenchment it involved exacerbated by the concurrent developments in the art world itself, where the vestiges of aesthetic utopianism were depleted in neo-expressionism and other new wave market styles. By the mid 80s then, rather than being able to sustain critical alterity, video adds to its intrinsic contradictions those of the art world.

In this sphere, where fine art and corporate capitalism sustain each other, and the aesthetic is inhabited by real estate, fashion and similar industries as well as by



material and ideological reproduction generally, art depends on what it would deny. Its most radical gestures reduced by their institutional context to more or less impotent formalisms, it legitimizes and supplies the renewal of these institutions and of the culture industries generally (Enzensberger, 1974: 14). Even the most rigorous critiques like Michael Asher's strategic recontextualizations in fact replenish the hand they bite. "The Michael Asher Lobby," a recent installation at MOCA, for example, may mordantly expose the museum as a lackey to finance capital (c.f. "The J. Paul Getty," "The Norton Simon"), but ends by sanctioning MOCA's location, where the couriers of real estate, banking and the communications industries switch and change under the shade of the corporate high-rises.

Different art establishments are of course differently situated in respect to these interests, but none is free of corporate responsibility; housed in them, video's attack on commodity culture and its attempt to transform the detritus of mass culture into an organic artworks fall prey to the same contradictions. Nowhere are they plainer than in the best video, in Michael Klier's *Der Riese*, for example, a remarkable assemblage of surveillance footage from banks, supermarkets, airports and even sex shows. Illustrating Foucault's assertion that ours is not a society of spectacle but one of surveillance, the tape documents the arbitrary, erratic, but comprehensive gaze of a perfected panopticon, demonstrating the continuity between "entertainment" tv and other mechanisms of social control to which the apparatus is integral. Justifying extended duration, unmotivated camera movement, chance operations and other tropes of unpleasure that are not generally sustainable in contemporary video (many of them with parallels in previous art film from Godard to Ernie Gehr), the recontextualization produces resistance to optical consumption as an ethical resistance. But the power of the unassimilated residue of the non-aesthetic, undergoes a secondary aestheticization in the institutional presentation, where it becomes merely beautiful, a collection of textual properties. Popular distribution of artists' tapes, attending the very fortunate success of home rentals over the control of cable, may eventually reverse this. But until then, except in the two hardcore and crucially utopian instances of domestic erotica and Southern California punk video fanzines, the interpenetration of the larger administrations in the administration of video short-circuits attempts to create alternative communities around it, and so displaces the oppositional moment almost entirely to the level of form.

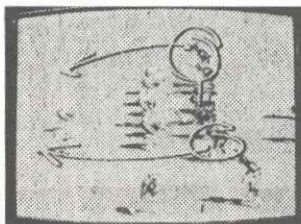
The pre-occupation of the message by the system defines the context of what has been understood as video's formal project, the critique of the codes of broadcast tv as an intervention in the latter's ideological function. Here the adduction of the



stylistic strategies generalized as those of a transhistorical avant-garde, but most appositely instanced in 60s film, is most crucial, but also most precarious. The parallel with film breaks down because no single constellation of codes constitutes the tv message in the way that the narrative feature exemplifies industrial film. Industrial tv consists of a plurality of message forms and the limits of its "programs" proper are fragmented by interposed material, none of which can be excluded. This "supertext" (Browne, 176: 1984) is organized not by narrative or formal principles, but by those of its commercial function and its insertion into the work schedule of the audience (ibid). As a consequence of this dispersal and its general ideological work, broadcast tv is semiologically unstable and invertebrate, and in fact itself manifests the textual qualities typically associated with the avant garde.

The fragmentation of the unified diegesis, the redistribution of narrative codes, the direct address of the text to estrange imaginary identification, and the display of the physical properties of the medium itself in the avant garde did allow it to be counterposed against "classic" Hollywood in the 70s' revival of the modernism/realism debate of the thirties. But any attempt to re-engage that polarization finds the modernism position already occupied by broadcast television. Socially denigrated as the "bad object," formally the opposite is the case; it is the "ideal" text. In the terms of Barthes' summary of the literary form of the polemic, it is a writerly rather than a readerly text, "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminate" (Barthes, 1974: 5-6) — tv exactly! Itself pandemically ironic, un-present and anxiogenic, it pre-empts any intervention constructed in the vocabulary of modernism. It is always more avant garde than the avant garde.

In order to demonstrate this one would not have to point to the hottest moments in broadcast television, to the wholesale incorporation by MTV or commercial advertising, for example, of the devices of avant garde film. Consider merely a televised football game. Typically considered a reductive, mass-audience accommodation of tv instantaneous *verite*, it in fact fragments temporal and spatial integrity in ecstatically hypertrophied Eisensteinian montages of formalist defamiliarizations, without closure, without suture: the doubling, looping and retardation of time in the various playbacks; the multiple (cubist) points of view of the multiple cameras; the casual cut-aways to autonomous diegeses, the non-matrixed close-ups and reverse angles; the interweaving of performance and commentary, of text and analysis; the foregrounding of all these devices that



*Super Bowl overkill: announcers, diagrams and even President Reagan.*

transform fable into plot—let alone all the metaphoric embellishments of the protagonists in the various trucks, engine oils, computers and investment analysts with which their conflicts are (poetically, “vertically”) elaborated. The game, itself not continuous but segmented into inter-advertising sections, is formally as well as economically merely a *pretext* for the television activity that can be organized around it. It is thus constitutionally supplementary, subordinated to a constantly deferred presence—for even if you go to see the game live, you will still watch it on either the small set you bring with you or the large screens that dominate the stadium, or, the better to sustain the dispersal of perception, on all at the same time.

Providing at the touch of the remote-control a cornucopia of the a-logical juxtapositions that the surrealists sought in their journeys from one movie theater to the next, this temporal and spatial tessellation of the tv narrative into gems the size of a 30 second commercial spot dissolves the boundary between different kinds of program and between the commercial and the non-commercial activity. The interdependence of these functions, by which as Richard Serra noted in his 1973 tape we become the product of tv, delivered to the advertisers is reproduced, as it were, laterally in the mendacity illustrated by President Reagan. Here the optical lack of materiality in the electronic image is reciprocated in an ontological insubstantiality that loosens its implication dispelling signification and re-routing it round to some other, equally indeterminate, moment in the (super)text itself. The “double image” of the self-presentation of tv personalities obliges them to establish a distance from their persona, to quote it, and in that to aspire to the condition of sublime non-identity achieved by Johnny Carson and Connie Chung.

Establishing disbelief and denial as the normative response, this deferral of the authentic, we all agree, characterizes the tv we don’t like; but it is also present in



what we do, in what we salvage from the anxiety and boredom of the field as a whole. Such moments, *punctums* of (erotic) pleasure, are always idiosyncratic (for me they include Kung Fu movies and the discontinued Marie Osmond "Hawaiian Punch" commercial) and always self-consciously recognized as such. We turn our pleasure into a spectacle, and contemplate it with a mixture of affection and contempt.

The hyperreality of the field of broadcast tv, diagnosed by Baudrillard as the substitution of "signs of the real for the real itself" (1983: 4), must not however be understood on its own terms as making the actual death of the social, but rather objectified, so that the work it does may become clear. The ontological evacuation entailed in the unceasing representation of "the thing which is not," is only a strategic function of an all too real political struggle. Thus, the duplicity that takes the form of the popular belief that tv is an opiate, its anodyne pleasures making all thought impossible is tv's own ideology. More sophisticated phenomenologies of tv spectatorship suggest that it always defers whatever dreams of plenitude it invokes, supplying only (modernist) unpleasure and anxiety; "it keeps the ego at a near-panic level of activity. . . [offering] something like pleasure in the terror of desire itself" (Houston, 1984: 183-184). Similarly the shredding of logic and rationality, the sterile promiscuity with which it fragments all (previous) visual syntax, certainly prohibits Cartesian rationality; but it also supplies a more sophisticated anti-logic that discerns in any image of untruth yet a further dimension of truthlessness and, like a biofeedback machine, teaches a serene poise against codic instability and disintegration.

The ability to sustain mutually negating positions, to understand that two and two are four only sometimes, and that sometimes they are five or three or even all at the same time, has typically been understood as the condition of the subject in totalitarian societies, and its production by tv is doubtless the form of the latter's instrumentality for the contemporary corporation. It is worth remembering however that the language strategies that produce it are similar to those proposed as exemplary resistance against the oppressive orders of western history. Against the semiotic rigidity understood as phallogocentrism, the languages of tv show an affinity with the ideologies of textuality and Japaneseness, but also with cultural practices understood as progressive by homosexuals and post-structuralist feminists (e.g. Irigaray, 1985).

Confronted with this plurality, in which to be (post)modern is to be like television, video has had two strategies. The first, instanced by the early 70's work of



Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Lynda Benglis elaborated a minimalist aesthetic, which contested the kaliedoscopic fragmentation of industrial tv by a form of realism, an assertion of real time duration, instituting boredom as the therapy of detoxification. This is the moment preserved in David Antin's seminal argument that the apparent lack in video of the features that define television in fact conceals "a very definite and predictable inverse relation" (Antin, 1976: 177). The eradication in the 70s of the social and ideological context that sustained this alternative lead video increasingly to adopt a second strategy, and to approach the codes of commercial television in processes we recognize as forms of montage.

Again this parallels developments in painting, the return to imagery and narrative on the one hand and the appropriation of existing works on the other—projects which when applied to video lead to the same result. In this mode—Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's soap operas, or Dara Birnbaum's "deconstructions" of popular television shows like *Wonderwoman* are exemplary—subtle (in the case of the Yonemotos) or glaring (in the case of Birnbaum) modification of industrial codes cues distancing and so recognition of insidious qualities supposed to inhere in the industrial forms. Like all parody, such strategies are always precarious in that their irony is finer the closer they approach their objects. But since television is always a parody of itself, the point where their release of insight and pleasure is most acute is where their codic mutations are barely perceptible, where they can also most readily pass for the real (ersatz) thing. Like the languages of the colonized, generally they can never identify with themselves; rather, as two languages within the (not)one, they appear different only to different viewers. The (dis)advantage of this is that the intervention in the popular sphere they are supposed to mobilize may be invisible. Did I really hear Marsalis, or was I only hearing things?

The tendency for video to become party to a premature reconciliation and so a function of what it would abjure is all but irresistible in periods like the present when the absence of social alternatives makes participation in or on the edges of the hegemonic industries inevitable; it marks the specific hyperbolic way in which video artists live the cultural conditions of the present. But lest the fear manifest in this diagnosis appear to privilege video-criticism, it must be recognized that the same aporias inhabit it. Like intellectual work in general, it too has to confront its relations with the conditions it describes.

The reciprocation of the interdependence of critical and creative work on the level of marketing is especially clear in the art world and, as if in defence against it, the

crystalization of "theory" in the 70s often included elements reminiscent of modernism's own resistance to mass consumption. But this relocation of cultural negation from art to theory is itself tracked by social functions. The economy of the excitement, the sexiness even, of the practice of theory is part of the economy at large, however its determinations are diffused through the theory subcultures and through the academy and the quasi-academic branches of the culture industries. In the present these determinations often appear in the slippage by which accounts of a cultural situation turn into apologies for its inevitability, if not into celebrations of it, a process which appropriately first became visible in respect to McLuhan's theory of television.

Canonical postmodernism itself supplies a logic for this in its axiom that cultural cartography in fact constitutes the territory it would map—that which in another country might be thought of as the autonomous and real. This "precession of the simulacra," to use the phrasing of Baudrillard, who along with Lyotard seems most vulnerable to the confusion between description and prescription, leads finally to the collapse of the world into the text, of the real into the simulacrum. The hortatory vigor of jeremiads like these promotes your run-of-the-mill postmodernist as a latter-day hipster, sardonically denigrating life apart from convulsive consumption as irredeemably unhip. The function of this defeatism, the processes of its own compromises and collusion, can become clear only with materialist theory of theory and its journalistic extensions—such as the present text.

#### Footnotes

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## Untitled

### CHRIS DERCON

The first time I sat down to look at a videotape by an artist must have been about 1976. Dutch artist Livinus van de Bundt showed me some of his image-processing experiments involving concern-like patterns to an off-beat guitar sound. His home-made "abstract video" then had no attention at all, although he had been one of Holland's leading kinetic artists. As a result Livinus was very eager to have shown his work, especially because we had both attended a lecture by the late Wies Smals, director of De Appel Foundation, showing "performance-video" by Marina and Ulay, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden a.o., then considered hot "video art". Wies Smals and De Appel have never shown the works of Livinus van de Bundt. This antedote which happened only ten years ago illustrates clearly enough the "confusion" which still reigns in the field of video, especially now the field is becoming even wider with different "genres" coming to the foreground.

Because video was accepted as real art it took on an early art-history consciousness. Its extremes and boundaries were therefore quickly exposed. However both supporters of Livinus van de Bundt and Smal's video-artists accepted Rene Bergers definition of "video art" as being "mezzo television". This kind of "confusion" was even more clearly exposed when Wulf Herzogenrath put together his "video-package" for Documenta 6 in Kassel, stating that video "was a new medium, but not a new style", quoting a Rene Bergers untenable dictum.<sup>1</sup>

Now, ten years later, no one would still come up with such definitions. Labels such as "abstract video" and "performance-video" have been replaced by "non-narrative video" and "narrative video". The term "video art" itself often being replaced by "independent video". However, "confusion" is here to stay. In 1984, Anthology Film Archives in New York organized a panel in which illustrious video-pioneers discussed questions like "Why did video art not develop any outstanding critics?" Did they mean by that that "independent video" provoked particular or "outstanding" theoretical concerns? I do not hope so. Paradoxically enough, because video lost its art-history consciousness, video-criticism now looks more than ever like a couple of footnotes underneath a text. Often the text itself is absent, however.

One has difficulties positioning video, certainly after hat-stands of social and



technological Utopia have also vanished. Instead we finally get the chance to see the meaning of Godard's conjunction/disjunction between cinema, television and video: "Cinema = Cinema + Television = Video." However, where do we get to see it? Probably not in the "video department" or in the "video festival." Instead we have to look to the boundaries of film and tv festivals or at regular television itself. However, most of the video-criticism is indeed still looking like a leak in a dike; the dozens of "footnotes" brought together with only criterium, IT IS VIDEO, having to prove that the medium still exists, that the electricity didn't fall out.

To put it bluntly, the most interesting video-criticism of recent years have been efforts to reconstruct or to reconsider the history of video itself as writers such as Lyn Blumenthal, Lucinda Furlong, Peggy Gale, Martha Gever and Marita Sturken have<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly enough these writers happen to be all the more concerned with feminist deconstruction theory and are therefore sympathetic to documentary or narrative video. However only a few of their efforts can be found in recent anthologies of video-criticism such as those edited by Peter d'Agostino or John Hanhardt<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of how more coherent these anthologies may be, they look as if almost nothing has been changed since the challenging but highly anecdotal manifestoes of the mid-seventies<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, how can one offer a truly critical basis for contemporary video if the early works seem to be understood in this way?

One has only to consider the works of William Wegman which still challenge the field of video-criticism. Certainly after the "P's" also invaded video-criticism: post-modernist post-structuralism and its off-shoots appropriation, parody, pastiche, psycho-analysis...<sup>5</sup> What else do we find about his video-work? Not that much, but worthwhile to look at. From "They are narrative! They are narrative! It's not art! They are narrative!"<sup>6</sup> to more civilized but equally inefficient "descriptions" variations on "A collection of short funny vignettes that demonstrate why Wegman has been called the Buster Keaton of video"<sup>7</sup> -in the best case culminating indeed in "Wegman's works are a parody on the cliches of television".<sup>8</sup> These kind of "descriptions" typical of the seventies, are themselves characterizing the nature of the video being produced at that very moment. From the "high art" strategy - "modernist thought cornered video into an incredibly early self-consciousness about its essences"<sup>9</sup>, to the "low art" strategy - "to cut up is considered more dangerous than heroine"<sup>10</sup>

Almost no one paid further attention to the interesting struggle of Wegman



from the videotape  
*Born With No Mouth*  
 William Wegman

himself with narrative structuring: "I think narrative came out more when I bought an expensive microphone and just got carried away with it or when I changed to a better kind of camera...I don't think the dog had anything to do with my more developed narrative period"<sup>11</sup>. It is as if material conditions still prove to be an interesting entry for reconsidering video's history...

Besides these implications of references as "Buster Keaton" - read: the history of cinema seems equally to overlook in the case of Wegman and his colleagues who put themselves in front of a camera during the early years. Only very recently some Cahiers du Cinema and Camera Obscura supporters started to do so in a more thorough manner.<sup>12</sup> French writers such as Raymond Bellour, Serge Daney and Jean-Paul Fargier understood very well Godard's comparison in "Sauve qui peut (la vie)" between Cain and Abel and cinema & video: they apparently like each other, but why do they fight each other? Their writings led European video-criticism into a well to do "antrophological" phase.

Such an "antrophological" attitude has been so far denied by most of "cynical"

works of Dan Graham in the field of video and television attract so little attention in the U.S. So what if Barbara Kruger's "TV Guide" happens to be more influential than the exclusive anthologies mentioned earlier? I am sure that will be, because most of recent video-works are by no means singular phenomena. They need "a story" to be appreciated...



## Footnotes

(1) See cat. Documenta 6. Kassel 1976.

(2) See for Lyn Blumenthal, cat. National Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles 1985; Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video:..." in *Afterimage* Vol. 11 nos 1/2 & 5, 1983; Peggy Gale "The Use of the Self to structure Narrative", cat. Western Front Video, Montreal, 1984; Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik", *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, no 3, 1982; Marita Sturken, "TV As a Creative Medium: Howard Wise and Video Art", *Afterimage* Vol. 11 no. 10, 1983.

(3) Peter d'Agostino, *Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics*, New York 1985; John Handardt, *Video Culture*, Rochester 1986.

(4) Gregory Battcock, *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, New York, 1978; Douglas Davis & Allison Simmons, *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, Cambridge 1977; Ira Schneider & Beryl Korot, *Video Art: An Anthology*, New York, 1976.

(5) Patricia Mellencamp, "Postmodern TV: Wegman and Smith", *Afterimage*, Vol. 13 no 5, 1985.

(6) William Wegman quoting a curator looking at his video work in 1970. Chris Dercon, interview with William Wegman, 1984. (to be published in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Summer 1986.)

(7) in cat. *Electronic Arts Intermix*, New York 1982.

(8) Jeff Perrone, "The Ins and Outs of Video", *Artforum*, Summer 1976.

(9) Amy Taubin, "Talking Through Customs at the Video Border", *Alive*, Vol. 1 no 2, 1982.

(10) Peter Wollen in lecture, Leuven, 1985.

(11) Chris Dercon, interview with William Wegman, 1984.

(12) Peggy Gale, "Colour Video/Vulgar Potential", *Parachute* no 29, 1982-1983.

(13) See for instance Raymond Bellour, Serge Daney & Jean-Paul Fargier in *Actes du Colloque Video Fiction et Cie*, Montbéliard 1984.

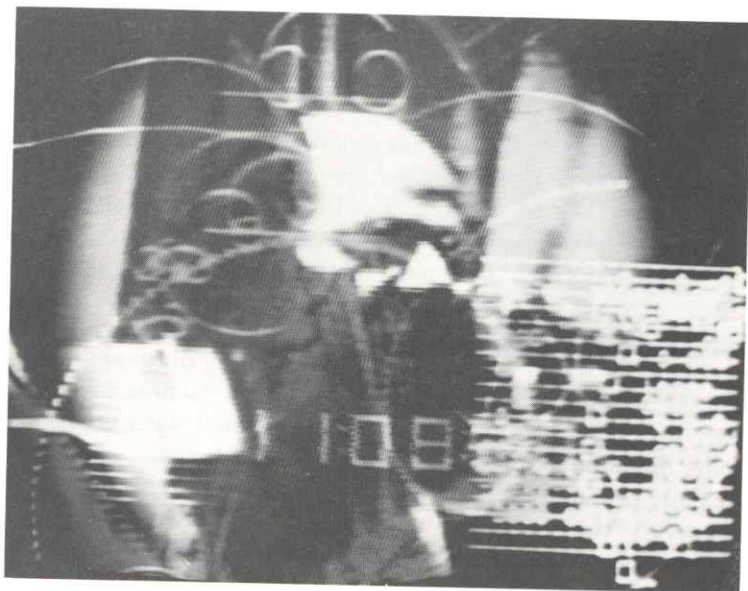
## For Nam June: Notes on an Oversight

AMY TAUBIN

The difference between video and all other contemporary art making mediums is that video has no history within modernism. Do not leap upon this as a fact of any great significance. Video's difference would have been significant specifically within modernism because modernism was concerned with defining, through their mediums, the essence of mediums; but it is only because video was *not* a modernist medium that it is different. This is a pleasant paradox, but irrelevant for post-modernism, and like it or not, video is a post-modernist development. In post-modernism, the differences between mediums are subsumed in their intersections. And not only the differences between high art mediums, but the differences between high art and popular culture as well. What matters for post-modernism is that video "art" shares the technology of television. Post-modernism aspires to the condition of television, albeit a television for intellectuals and aesthetes.

In 1965, Sony released a cheap portable video recorder in the U.S. and Nam June Paik, an electronic composer and conceptual artist who had been mixing it up with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, rushed out to buy one. Paik's first tape, shot as he returned home with his new hardware, was of the Pope's visit to New York. The Beatles, who the previous year had made their American debut on the Ed Sullivan Show, were claiming a popularity greater than Jesus Christ's. Paik's ambition: to put Cage and Cunningham on television.

Cage and Cunningham, and a few others, had already put the wrench into modernism by attending to Duchamp, who had planted the seeds of post-modernism some forty years earlier. Cage wrote that "he [Duchamp] moved the retinal boundaries into a field where language, thought and vision act on one another... He has changed the conditions of being here." Sounds like TV, Paik must have thought. And indeed, in the mix of live and "prerecorded" images that are delayed and relayed through them, Duchamp's *The Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even)* (1915-23), and even more strikingly, *To Be*



from the videotape  
*Allan n Allan's Complaint*  
 Nam June Paik  
 photograph by Marita Sturken

*Looked At (From the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, For Almost An Hour* (1918) are astonishing pre-figurations of television.

Duchamp's project, to put it crudely, was to blur the boundaries between art and life. Paik's is to blur those between art and TV. As for blurring the boundaries between TV and life, TV itself has accomplished that in ways more encompassing than Duchamp could have imagined. Through the demands he made on the viewer, Duchamp emphasized the receptive act, a cognitive position which could be employed at will in other areas of life. Television, on the other hand, demands not our will, but our subjugation. ("With television, you become its subject," says Jean-Luc Godard, "like the subject of the king"). The Duchampian trickster in Paik installs TV sets in museums, turning TV into art, and programs Cage and Company on TV, thereby achieving the opposite. (Paik knows that anything you put on TV becomes TV and nothing else, all of Public Television's "Programming in the Arts" notwithstanding.)

But perhaps more than with making art or television, Paik is obsessed with televi-



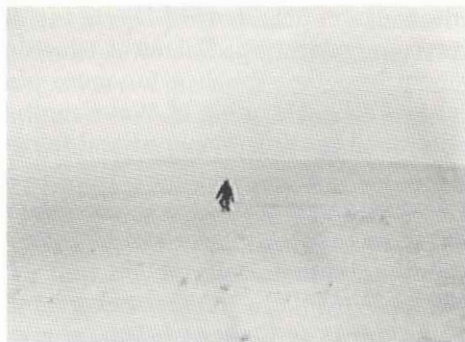
sion as an aspect of global telecommunications, an arena where he is permitted a critical position but no practical power. This on-going struggle with institutional power gives resonance to the entertainer's mask.

Like Paik, Jean-Luc Godard has produced an extraordinary body of work on tape, significant both in terms of television and post-modernism. Godard's tapes, which he seems to use as breathing spaces between his films, share their essayistic structure, but whereas the mise-en-scene of the films has, in recent years, become more and more elaborately fictional, the tapes are sparingly documentary.

His most recent, *Soft and Hard*, made in collaboration with Anne Marie Mieville, is a blatantly stagey, but nevertheless revealing diary or "home video", a meditation on the problem of making art in a world where television has transformed daily life. Godard has always been fascinated with media but in his house in Rolle, this summer of 1985, there are no newspapers, magazines, or comics, only the daily ration of TV. It was, narrates Godard in his opening channel switching voiceover, "the time of famine in Africa...of daily massacres in Beirut...of the the glories of the Venus and Mars space flights...of the dollar's rise...of McEnroe's defeat...of private television's triumph...of the fifth generation computer...when all the waters could not wash away intellectuals blood..." Against a background of Beethoven's last string quartet, between nature on the outside and TV on the inside, between occasional borrowed images from theatrical film and the TV news, a conversation, about art and aesthetics and about television and politics

which is also a muted struggle of sexual politics, slowly unrolls. The video images are astonishing, moving and singular, unlike any other in film or television. Not incidentally, the tape was obviously cheap and technically simple to produce. What it required was a few thousand dollars, an idea about how "language, thought and vision act on one another" and a frame of reference that doesn't start and stop with "video art".

I've opened with two independent artist/producers, neither included in this exhibition because their work is most striking when read from a post-modernist position—for its exploration of the relationship between art and television; between aesthetics, politics and telecommunications; between art mediums; and for its breath of cultural and historical reference. To situate them within a "video specific" critical framework would regulate them to some last outpost of high modernist essentialism. That kind of closed-circuit, ahistoric analysis is unfortunately standard practice, resulting in superficial or dismissive readings of demanding or edgy work while serving as a prop for work which, in a more expan-



from the videotape  
*Chott el-Djerid:*  
 a portrait in light and heat  
 Bill Viola  
 photograph by Kira Perov

sive frame of cultural reference, would be remarkable only for its singularity. If there is any use in conceptualizing "video art" as a field, it is only to circumscribe the problems of production and exhibition characteristic of the medium. While these issues are not exclusively technological—they have economic, political and aesthetic implications—they are not in and of themselves sufficient to define a form, a history or an aesthetic.

Bill Viola's *Chott El-Djerid* is easily available to a modernist reading. Viola's tape foregrounds formal issues such as scale—the irony of framing a vast desert expanse within a monitor screen—and the relativity of size to camera position (In one shot a figure who suggests a category of animal from Borges' "chinese encyclopedia," those "that from a long way off look like flies" seem simultaneously to be moving forward in the depicted space and swelling on the screen). Viola's image hovers between representation and pure abstraction, between appearances of mass and transparency, substance and mirage. By collapsing atmospheric fluctuations, visible to the naked eye, into 'distortions' in the electronic image, he draws attention to the electronic recording process and material. *Deja vu?* Indeed. The terms of this analysis are precisely those applied to avant-garde film of the sixties and early seventies. The only difference is a shift of reference from the mechanical and photographic to the electronic. And the analysis is not unjustified. It is impossible to look at *Chott El-Djerid* and not think of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* and *The Central Region* and Stan Brakhage's *Text of Light*. Had Viola simply replayed in video the issues of modernist film, his work would be attractive but academic, too

little, too late. But *Chott El-Djerid* can also be viewed as intervening in one of the primary regulatory programs of television—the weather report. (It's irresistible to note here that this is a far more plausible reading of *Chott El-Djerid* than Manny Farber's reading of *Wavelength* as a documentary about a loft in which many small businesses opened and folded.)

At frequent regular intervals, television reports information on atmospheric conditions, so that the viewer can be informed, prepared and reassured. Television treats the weather as a problem with which it helps us to cope. The reporting is abstract (symbolic)—numbers, charts, maps, and stills. In *Chott El-Djerid*, subtitled *A Portrait in Light and Heat*, physical properties of weather and atmosphere are not only represented with extraordinary lyricism, they are transmuted into the physical properties of the electronic image. The electro-magnetic field becomes an index of wind, heat and light; and the maker, not simply a reporter, but an alchemist.

Exhibition is a primary problem of video as a medium. Not only is the resolution on the monitor wanting, but the monitor itself, even used closed-circuit, can never be disassociated from TV. It looks like, and often is, in fact, identical to your TV set. (On the other hand, the monitor is also the display used by computers, making it a suggestive frame for the interface of "art" and "information.") The limitations of the monitor at the present moment enforce a semi-private status on video—somewhere between books on the one hand and film or theatre on the other. A very useful study could be made comparing the codes of reading and watching television with respect to privacy. Certainly more people close a book when someone else enters the room than turn off the TV. Reading over someone's shoulder usually elicits a hostile response by violating both proprietary interests

(books are bought or borrowed) and conditions of solitude. Yet we let people watch TV over our shoulders. Now imagine a screen that could be held like a book, how you would watch it, and what you would want to see on it. *Romance*, a narrative made on videotape by Ed Bowes in 1976, would best lie in your lap on just such a screen, having more in common with 18th century novels than with the fictional forms of television. *Romance* deals with the fear of violation and intrusion (the hero's consciousness is being tapped and returned to him in the form of anonymous letters) and with the anxiety originating in the discovery of sexual difference which eventuates here in total narrative breakdown.



After *Romance*, Bowes became involved in two projects specifically made for television. The second of these was *How To Fly*. Bowes' continuing interest in television was fostered in the public television labs of the seventies which, for all their limitations, encouraged independents to intervene in established forms of television programming and to envision a new television (this in contrast to the current flashy know-your-place-in-the-art-ghetto programming of a series like *Live From Off Center*. *How To Fly* was intended as a pilot for a fictional series based on a typical television science documentary subject, "the food chain." Its casual form has as much to do with the fact that it was collaboratively conceived and produced as with its budget—roughly \$3000. A series of seemingly unrelated scenes are organized around the literal or metaphoric meanings of the phrase "How to Fly." In terms of narrative fragmentation, ellipses, and lack of closure, the program has much in common with game shows and talk shows where participants are hustled on and off almost before we know what happened to them and; to news programs with their rapidly shifting scenes and fantastic juxtaposition of events. Unlike for example, Ken Feingold and Lyn Blumenthal, Bowes does not traffic in images purloined from television and film, nor does he work with essay structures *a la* Goddard. *How to Fly* was designed to infiltrate daily television programming by keeping, as touchstones, familiar fictional situations locations, and personalities. It is interesting then that among those personalities are five or six important "postmodern" artists. A sign of the conjunction of two worlds? At any rate, a question with which to end.

## Captain Video

PETER RAINER

Video criticism parallels video art—both are in their infancy. It's not often that a new arena for reviewing opens up; for a critic such as myself, whose work has been self-limited primarily to dramatic and documentary feature films, the domain of video art is infuriating, bracing, nettlesome. Infuriating because so much of the material that I've seen is pokey, wan, arty in the worst eye-swimming, experimental-film sorts of ways; bracing because even the worst of the work operates in an aesthetic zone that is as far removed from most narrative films as concrete poetry is from Elizabethan sonnets; nettlesome because a new critical vocabulary must be invented to accompany the new aesthetic.

Allow me to admit a few biases. I have never cared much for most of the video art I've seen. I've stayed away from it. The video screen is scaled to the intimacy of home furnishings; that intimacy—familiar yet chill—is basic to the medium's iconography, in the same way that the big screen is integral to the iconography of movies. I favor the larger-than-life, wrap-around qualities of film, the pictorial and aural richness. I also favor narrative film over avant-garde image-clustering—not that all video art tends towards abstraction. But most of what I've seen does. And the abstraction, while it can occasionally be exhilarating, is too often without emotional tone; the video artists have gone gizmo crazy, they're hammerlocked by their own technique. Video art has been given a bad name, and rightly so, by the sort of chi-chi experimentation that goes well with brie and white wine and mauve-walled art galleries and designer hairdos. Video is cheap enough to produce, by feature film standards, and yet its very cheapness and accessibility has created a contradiction: video-making is within the financial reach of many, and yet, like most modern art, it's surrounded by a noxious aura of elitism.

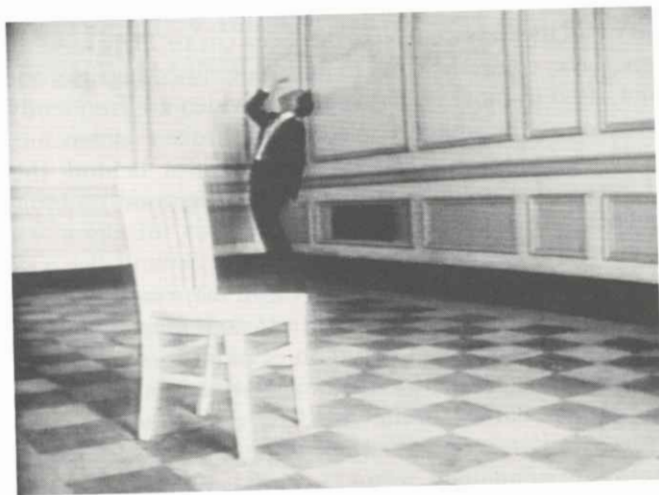
Still, video presents a challenge to the film critic; it challenges his assumptions about the nature of the visual image, and how it can be manipulated. It challenges the critical territorial imperative that states that the only good and lasting work comes from the narrative tradition, that there may be ways for film to tingle an audience's soul that video can only approximate. It may not be fair to compare the plasticity of the film image to that of video. (It's like comparing hallucinations.) Video, at its best, represents a new way of seeing. Of that much

I'm convinced. And I'm fascinated by the visual textures of video; by its colors. Video hues are often primary and incandescent, like deep-sea coral. They have an irradiated lustre. I've seen these colors before, in paintings by Magritte and Hockney and others, but not often in movies. The sounds in video are frequently as abrupt, partial, and abstract as the imagery. Words are broken down into notes, syllables; the familiar becomes privatized. The impulse behind this visual/aural abstractionism seems the same: to destroy all but the most essential components of sight and sound.

Many of the videos I've seen that have excited me, or enraged me, emphasize the medium's capacity for abstraction. Their scenarios and stratagems involve stylized movements, where the actors are reduced to blips and blurs and fragments of torsos, textures of skin, hair. The hues seem inner-charged — light does not seem to affect their tonality. Settings are often darkish, penned-in. The spoken voice verges on flat, tone-dead recitation — the voice "purified" of emotional levels. Of all visual forms, video, by virtue of its technology, seems the most capable of imprinting "real" life; the home-movie, to take the simplest example, has a present-tense quality that is freezing in its matter-of-factness. This quality may account for the video artist's desire to snap time in his work; to give the illusion of a *resonance* in time. Video is a domain where, because of the present-tenseness of the imagery, death seems impossible. It is always more shocking to see a violent act in video than on film, just as it is more puzzling to watch a deceased actor, or any now-deceased person, in video. One can't imagine that this person, so startlingly, so matter-of-factly *there*, no longer exists. The success of the video artists' struggle to re-shape their medium — their way of seeing — may have much to do with their sensitivity to video's damned present-tenseness; the sense that things are happening on the spot. These artists are attempting to void that currency in order to give the medium what can only be termed a tragic quality — one that can accommodate the dimensions of death.

Doug Hall's *Through The Room*, one of five short segments of his *Songs of the '80s*, might have been made in response to this problem; it works against the sheer immediacy of the video format by trying to create levels in time. Its temporal sense appears to issue from the center of a dream: long-takes and *longeurs* alternate with flash-cuts from parallel time-zones, flash-forwards that only acquire meaning when the video has ended. The video's final effect is a paradox: jumpy stasis. Its elements are spare and strikingly delineated, like pieces in a child's toy kit: a bone-white chair in what looks like a large, empty tenement lobby; a man in a rumpled suit, his hair shocked into vague, flame-like wings on either side of his head. First we see the empty lobby, then the flash of a chair, then milli-second

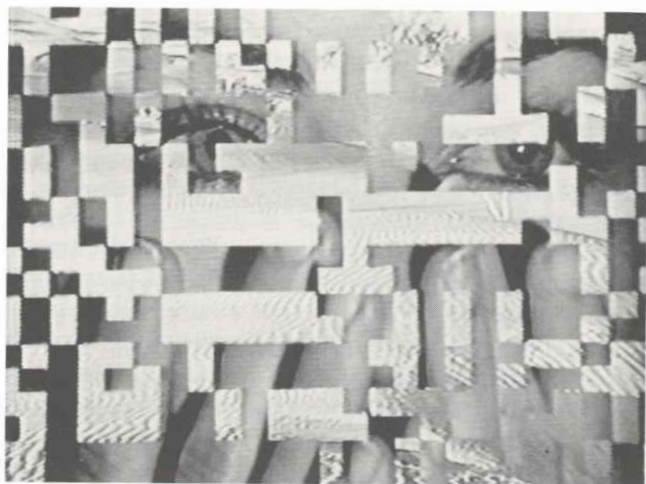




from the videotape  
*Song of the 80's*  
 Doug Hall

cuts to a conflagration; the man appears, disappears in a blink, reappears in held, frozen poses, disappears, snaps into space again, cautiously approaches the chair, is zapped, reappears astride the chair, freezes in imploring, back-arching, positions in the corner of the lobby, as a major choral chord—a plea? an annunciation?—crescendoes on the soundtrack in irregular waves. Then a slow fade into a wide-open-plains vista; the white chair reappears, then the man, gazing into distraction, stationed like a sentry around the chair, is repositioned, in slow staccato symmetry, closer and closer to the horizon. Blank empty vista fades back into the empty lobby, then the chair pops into place; the man, seated, flames out, as he does a slow-curl of horror into oblivion.

This brief recounting of *Through The Room* can't avoid inadequacy. One of the problems of video criticism is that, as the work under consideration approaches abstraction, one's critical vocabulary becomes dependably less and less evocative. One might as well try with words to convey a piece of music. What's missing from these accounts is the tang of the event. The power of *Through The Room* comes directly from the very elements of film and video—the time-sense, the counterpoint of image and sound—that are most indecipherable. And yet those elements are the soul of moving pictures: it's what makes the mundane inexplicable, haunt-



from the videotape  
*Skin Matrix*  
 Ed Emshwiller

ing. Criticism is supposed to elucidate our feelings: to explain *why* we are moved in a certain way, or why we weren't, or how we could have been. But abstract video is, perhaps by nature, inexplicable. That doesn't mean it's above criticism but, rather, that it's at the heart of criticism, which finally is concerned with what can only be intuited. To be moved without consciously knowing why is maybe the profoundest emotion in the arts: a great artist, and that includes the few great video artists, mainlines that emotion. *Through The Room* is emotionally moving out of all proportion to what we are being shown. Even its clearest description—it's the story of a man who can't escape the fix of his obsession, and burns—doesn't quite capture its quality. But it comes close enough; it implies the tragedy that Doug Hall reaches for—the sense that something vital has perished.

Ed Emshwiller's *Skin Matrix* is a further explosion into abstraction. Emshwiller, first in film and now video, has been doing some of the most inventive work in the visual arts for over twenty years. His discovery of video has an ecstatic quality: unlike many video-makers, Emshwiller seems to be working in the field by choice, not necessity. *Skin Matrix* is one of the very few computer-generated videos that doesn't leave one feeling like a machine for watching it. Patterns of skin and

beard, zig-zagged and thicketed, give way to faces cubed and sectioned, wiped horizontally by a rolling bar, fractured into a mosaic, then a sort of peeling wall-painting portrait—like a flaked face on the vulcanized walls of Pompeii, or, sometimes, a Mayan mask, with liquid eyes blinking in the deep-brown armature. The colors are like rich, phosphorescent acrylics. Emshwiller impinges his faces with textures of wood-grain, snow scapes that may be desert scapes, sea-stones, algae. The luminescence is ambiguous—these must be the colors of radioactive decay. That sense of decay, of something fundamental expiring, is what makes *Skin Matrix* moving. Although its style couldn't be more different from *Through The Room*, it shares that video's deep sense of loss.

Emshwiller is, however, far less fatalistic than Hall. He even gives us a final image, a blue phalanx soaring high above mountain ranges, that is ineffable: it's the image the video has been working up to, without our conscious awareness, all along. Emshwiller confronts aesthetic problems in his work that are central to video, especially computer-generated video. How does one create a work that is plangent and ambiguous and lyrical from techniques that seem to duplicate the inner coils of machine-think? Film has always been a medium born of the sophistication of science, but video takes that sophistication one step further: its computer-generated techniques represent the exposed circuitry of science. The hyper-precision of grid-lines and pulsing, expanding geometries is not what most of us have been led to believe art should be. It's joy-buzzer art: its highest station is to be rinky-dink. At least that's what bad practitioners have made it. But the excitement of the video arena is that its laws are in constant flux; artists change those laws as they go along. Emshwiller is working in the most exciting and dangerous area of video, because he risks being gizmoed into high-tech heaven. But his visual conceptions are so inventive that he flabbergasts you. And Emshwiller, at least in *Skin Matrix*, puts the human face at the center of his film. He's delirious with the possibilities of what can be done with faces, the way the Cubists must have been. There's an avidity in the way he devolves facial conformations into skeletal road-maps; he transposes eyes, lips, teeth, noses. Computer-generated video is potentially the least "representational" of mediums, but, by inserting his faces in *Skin Matrix*, Emshwiller sets up an aesthetic torque. The human factor keeps reasserting its primacy amidst the gimerackery. His soundtrack is resonant with creepy-movie music, and no wonder. The video itself is haunted—by the human face.



## Television and Video Text: A Crisis of Desire

BEVERLE HOUSTON

The appropriation of television as an object of study by cinema history/criticism/theory (away from departments of sociology, journalism, communications, etc.) was made possible by the movement of the young discipline away from the text-and-author based humanism of its founding fathers in English departments into a period of interdisciplinary high theory. Since my purpose in this essay is to examine "personal," densely worked texts of the video avant-garde, it is entertaining to note that it was, in fact, the de-throning of the "quality text" in cinema studies that enabled people like myself to turn our attention to television in the first place.

At the same time that the French lent us the New Wave and allowed intellectuals and their institutions to identify a legitimate "cinema culture," they also gave us "auterism," which legitimated a certain canon of American mainstream films. After that, the door was open to study, not only Hollywood texts, but the institutions through which the exchange of money, text, and pleasure specific to cinema is accomplished.

Then the European explosion of theoretical studies blew apart the epistemological and ideological structures of traditional humanism (at least for those who were paying attention at that level). With the introduction of structuralist, semiotic, psychoanalytic, and ideological analysis into the study of cinema texts, the "quality film" (usually foreign) became one object of study among many, in no way co-extensive with field. In fact, the larger a film's audience (its "popular appeal"), the more productive its study might be as the field began to conceive its object as "visual culture" rather than "the text." Any individual film text had to be positioned in a world-wide system of economic, discursive, spectatorial, and ideological relations—in other words, in systems of cultural production. Now if we're talking cultural production, we're talking television. Thus the aesthetic and class-based barriers against putting television on the critical studies agenda had been substantially weakened by a movement whose beginnings involved importing the European "quality text."

But it was certainly not only scholarly changes that made cinema studies people eager to get their hands on television. The institutional structures of both in-

dustries—cinema and broadcast/cable/satellite television—are in a highly unstable moment of transformation to ever more diffuse and interchangeable modes of production, delivery, spectatorship, relations among corporate structures, technological innovation and government policy. It has become clear that it is impossible to teach film history and criticism without teaching television (whatever that is), and vice versa.

Since so much scrutiny had been devoted to television in other departments for years, what could cinema critical studies see as its unique goal? A shorthand version of the answer is "culture criticism." After World War II, American sociologists rose up and refused the analysis by German culture critics (the Frankfurt School) who saw television and "mass culture" as creating a passive, fragmented population ready to receive debased values and fascism directly from media as if by injection. They mounted a campaign of empirical studies designed to "prove" that our responses were still mediated by local social groups and "opinion leaders." They were out to revalidate American pluralism and, by no small coincidence, to begin a long, symbiotic relationship with the broadcast industry itself. Twenty years of theorizing such concepts as spectator pleasure at the unconscious level, ideology, hegemony and discursive structures make the "open forum" pluralisms of the fifties seem like a nostalgic dream.

Cinema critical studies is determined to talk about culture and texts, systems and utterances, in the same field of study; it has developed theories of enunciation, and of institutional and especially spectator relations in order to do so. With the introduction of television, the crisis of close textual analysis was intensified in trying to think hitherto unexamined cultural/textual relations. Thus I have chosen to examine texts that I see as exploring in one way or another a relation between avant-garde video and mainstream television in culture; especially *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, *Green Card* and *Vault*, with some discussion of *Spots* and *Quarks* as well.

One of cinema studies' first questions turned around the issue of cinema pleasure at the psychoanalytic level. Why do people like movies? Why should they pay their money, again and again, for this particular kind of "entertainment." What, indeed, was "entertainment?" How did the culture at large (besides the movie companies) "benefit" from this popular activity? Theoretical analysis soon developed a picture of American classical cinema—from the thirties to the sixties—as having a fairly rigid enunciative regime in which the goal was to efface the source of address, to present a narrative as if it came from nowhere. Formal strategies such as eyeline match, shot/reverse shot, cutting on action, etc. were

designed to smooth over the medium's play of absence/presence at all levels to assist the ego in constructing positions for identification, ways to become "one" with itself and with the text in a comfortable and pleasurable Imaginary unity. This sense of unified personal identity, fostered in cinema by everything from the Renaissance centering of the apparatus to the closure of the narrative, is the position of Imaginary knowledge and control for the spectator. It is the reward of cinema and the ideological basis of bourgeois life.

But television structures a very different relationship between the Imaginary of unconscious longing and the language of the Symbolic realm of culture, between a dream of wholeness and the lack, the fragmentation, that motors it. Institutionally and formally, television refuses to fulfill that dream. It insists instead on a repetitive of that reopening gap between desire and its satisfaction, a constant reiteration of the unpleasure of desire as it is experienced by the subject of cinema who has been taught that pleasure is the imagined wholeness of fulfillment. The goal of television is not to provide a closed and finished pleasure that will return the dollar to the theater. Rather, television's regime is to maintain a level of dissatisfaction with itself that first teaches an endless consumption of itself in the hope of a satisfaction it will never deliver since its work is to send its viewers out to close the gap of desire by consuming something in the real world. Mainstream American television is structured to teach its spectators to watch it in a way specific to this function in culture, a form of watching that returns the spectator and her dollar to culture, to the world of language and money. The goal of television is not to deliver program to viewers, but to deliver viewers to advertisers.<sup>1</sup> In evolving this immensely successful structure, television has been creating a new spectator who can find a way to call this activity "entertainment."

As "entertainment," television offers rhythmic, obsessive mitigated positions for the spectator, dependent in part on taking something like pleasure in the terror of desire itself. Of cinema we say: I want it again as I had it before. Of television we say: I always want it as I have never had it. This process is motored by American broadcast television's primary contradiction. With its twenty-four hour a day, uninterrupted filling of air time, it promises an endless, sourceless, "natural" flow of text, coextensive with psychological reality itself, suggesting the first flow of nourishment in and from the mother's body. Yet at the same time, this promised unity of flow is repeatedly blocked and interrupted for the spectator as the symbolic world of time and money breaks up the dream-of-flow to suit the precise, demographic demands of advertising, which creates, not only commercial interruption, but the television schedule itself, which plays a key role in both shaping and reflecting the shape of work and leisure in American everyday life.



There are also a number of commonly noted formal characteristics of the television apparatus at home which make it impossible for it to function like cinema as the object of the fascinated gaze. The picture is small and offers little or no basis for primary identification. The image issues, not from a powerful source coming out of the back of the spectator's head, as it were, so that she/he may identify with self through powerful lines of looking. Rather, the image appears on the front surface of a box in the living room, not so much authored as it is *provided*, benevolently available in its promise (even when it's off). The television addresses us directly, as well, leaving no basis for us to imagine ourselves in the fiction, or as its divine author, though programming often uses closed narrative and invisible enunciation to give us enough "cinema satisfaction" to keep its promise alive, especially during prime time. And the presence of the apparatus in the home means that it is susceptible to all kinds of viewing modes from simulated theater-going (turn off the light; take the phone out of the wall; watch the movie you chose and paid for on purpose) to auditory wallpaper where image and sound flow into an empty room. And everything in between, of course. But "interruption" is the key to textual delivery. Now even cable channels interrupt for an "intermission." All forms of American television are moving to what many think is the real hang of it: blind channel changing based on rhythmic pleasure having little to do with the unity of the signified.<sup>2</sup>

Yet it must be recognized that ontological claims such as these about television's pleasure or its status as a "bad Object" are politically dangerous in themselves. They construct the very monolith that implies no space for intervention, no openings for alternative making or reading practices. Mine is no such intention. Recent work on soap opera argues convincingly that contradictory positions of identification, awareness of isolation, and provision of certain kinds of thematic support exist *at the same time* that these texts put forward hegemonic values working against women's knowledge of themselves.<sup>3</sup> In addition, strategies of reading make it possible for the spectator to refuse dominant codings and relocate herself in relation to textually inscribed positions, no matter how smooth the enunciation may be.<sup>4</sup> I'm also aware of alternative creative and delivery spaces in the extended TV institution (galleries, clubs, PBS, some foreign broadcast TV, etc.) that have been opened up by artists, philanthropists, and public servants. Given the way I have described the social/economic goals of mainstream television, these spaces may indeed be the only means by which it is possible to place primary value on the video text itself in a context where that assignment of value does not become totally irrelevant. Nevertheless, even given the need for an avant-garde constantly to refuse and reformulate, no matter where located; given the power of the reader to refuse and transform coding; and given again the mixed nature of every text in (re)pro-

ducing dominant ideology, it *still* seems necessary and useful to spell out as clearly as possible a general analysis of the social work of American mainstream broadcast and cable television, showing the work of this structure and the televisual apparatus in the formation (reeducation) of the American spectator of visual culture at the present time. Remember! No one ever stops watching television. We have learned to love the phantasmagoric hope of improvement and control on which obsession is based; we have come to depend on the endless play of the signifier, the constant reopening of the gap of desire. To our dismay or glory, we act out this transformation in the organizing principles of our various life practices ranging all the way from clothes to romance.

So we come finally to the question: how do the texts I have chosen respond to the conditions I have been trying to describe, as analyzed through the perspectives of my discipline? Like the theory itself, many of these works are concerned with relations between the new viewing taught by television, the formative circularity of viewer and viewed. These concerns are articulated around enunciative codes (*Vault, Leaving the Twentieth Century*—the densely worked avant-garde surface); the cultural impact of narrative codes (*Green Card: An American Romance*, returning to the spectator the will to power of the signified); and the viewer's role in creating meaning (*Quarks*—the textual refusal to inscribe a passive viewer).

The opening images of Max Almy's *Leaving the Twentieth Century* share with certain cinema texts a hypodermic theory of television's effects; it invades, destroys, and replaces traditionally valuable aspects of inner and cultural life. For example, David Cronenberg's fascinating piece *Videodrome*, opens with almost exactly the same situation as *Leaving*. The central character (played by James Woods) opens his eyes to a TV wake-up call (CIVIC TV—"The one you take to bed with you.") A woman addresses Max by name, and notes his first appointment. It then evolves that every aspect of his life is shaped by television: not only the visual life of his mind but his very hold on "reality" (he hallucinates) and, finally the actual configuration of his body as he grows new, deadly "organs." Spielberg's *Poltergeist* also opens with someone asleep in front of a television set, which is broadcasting only snow. This leaves the channel open for a transmission from TV's "other scene" that is readable by a small child. The transmission wipes out her budding subjectivity at both levels. It removes her into its own world on the wrong side of the screen, so she can't continue her movement into the Symbolic world of social life and language. At the same time, it wipes out her own Imaginary and unconscious desires, which would construct dreams of romance, family, and social harmony to power her Symbolic life. Television replaces all this



with the dead's wish for utter stasis—the death wish. So Spielberg generates large amounts of pink plastic parapsychology to recuperate her subjectivity. In both these films, television takes its spectators to a place where “after death” seems to stand in metonymically for “before birth” or before subjectivity, substituting fragmented body parts and organs for the orderly, whole body; offering through the figure of the television a wildly excessive dream of re-incorporation, which effaces the difference between the longed-for authentic “being” and its sign or representation on television.

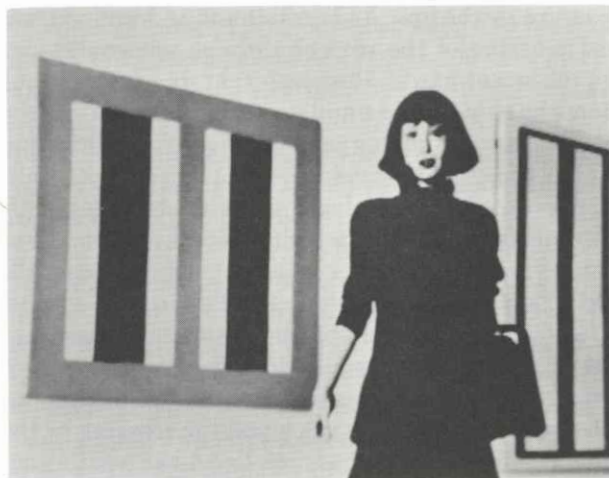
Scorcese's *King of Comedy* also opens with a television image —of a talk show hosted by Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis). When an image recognizable as televisual fills the cinema screen from edge to edge, the cinema is putting itself into spectatorial crisis. The late-night “snow” of *Poltergeist* opens a movie of that budget with an image that its audience cannot read for several seconds. And then, when the national anthem comes onto the sound track (or is the “theater” playing it?) you can feel the panic (your own as well). *King of Comedy*'s opening image sends its spectators hanging over the abyss of absent enunciation. S/he knows that this TV image is not what s/he is really supposed to be watching and please god, somewhere inside the diegesis let there be somebody watching this TV image whom we in the theater can watch watching, so we know we're at the movies! If television screen and spectator are not present in the same frame, we can only wait till the cut to watch the watcher and reestablish our centered identification with the absent organizer of this relay. But in *King of Comedy*, the cut is not to a spectator, but to a street full of people who turn out to be fans, rushing for an autograph or a sighting at the stage door where Langford will soon exit. In this way, the “problem” of TV is figured, not as a threat to the orderly social subjectivity of the individual spectator formed in a world before TV, but as an excessive display of unfulfilled desire practiced by thousands who have left their sets and houses to try to get what they want. The other works, including Almy's, try to figure the destruction of the old subjectivity by television. Scorcese tries to present the *new*, the product of television's re-formation.<sup>5</sup>

To return to *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, we must ask ourselves: what is uniquely made possible by the fact that Almy's is an “avant-garde” text, a work of “video art” examining these same issues. The freedom from realism (itself an avant-garde convention) allow the witty and attractive inset of the speaking lips and news images inside the third eye of the viewing subject. But the position of the red and luscious lips (long a symbol of fetishistic pleasure in mainstream cinema) provides nothing difficult to read at the level of presentation, nothing unfamiliar around the concept of “effects.” In viewing the piece, the spectator can use little



s/he has learned from viewing television except a casual disregard for the familiar content of the images that appear inside the lips. And even this is undermined to a certain extent by the technical working of the surface through chromakeying, speeding up, and other signs of avant-garde "density" that reprimands our casualness. In the second section, the chic couple simulate with their presence the mirroring effects of software symmetry, implying an exchange of qualities between technology and persons. The direct address voiceover of television, its ability to hang printed words in its space, the ironic displacement of the technology offered by the couple, and the minimalist technology which peels off each image as it "leaves" after its analytic comment—these function as an intelligent, essay-like analytic gesture enabled by the experience of television. The last section with its beautiful close up soap opera head, so lovely in shape and cosmetic surface, her beauty so dilated, so enhanced by diffusion and pixillation, begins to introduce some of the poignance and nostalgia for other televideo texts which is the less obvious signified of the piece. The near failure of the voice and the freezing of the partially worked head bring us finally to the subject of televideo possibilities themselves. Like the maker of the piece, the beautiful woman within it cannot realize a new set of relations, a true set of interactive transmissions, through the apparatus of her art. The empty console of the failed transmission seals the piece in a closed structure of unity and nostalgia, the technology of its non-realism seeking a traditionally "expressive" formalist doubling of its signified. In a way, the three mainstream cinema representations of the "problem of television" are closer to the pleasure/pain of Lyotard's post-modern sublime<sup>6</sup> as they present their own inability to conceive of television's "effects," its transformations of culture and subjectivity. Given their apparatus and historical language, the films can only figure their concepts through wild inconsistencies, excesses and absurdities. Almy's piece could find a home in the filler slots on pay cable as they have become ever more welcoming to pleasurable violations of bourgeois realism that television has taught us to enjoy. I doubt that the key moments of textual crisis and spectator disorientation I've described in the films, if they were somehow extracted and reorganized into the short, non-linear format, could be read as unified, quality texts, even under the sign of the avant-garde. Aspects of these texts are too disturbing, too out of control as their makers try to fictionalize a new spectator of another medium, let alone address such a one.

I should now like to turn to a piece that is also focused on the power of mainstream visual culture—both cinema and television—to shape subjectivity, though not specifically the ways it is being transformed by television: *Green Card: An American Romance*, by Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. The Yonemotos refuse the dense working of textual surface through technology, which, intentionally or not,



Sumi, from the videotape  
*Green Card: An American Romance*  
 Bruce and Norman Yonemoto  
 photograph by Kira Perov

is often seen as a necessary and definitive distinction between “television” and “video art.” Consensus around this point tends to stabilize the technically dense surface as a set of modernist forms or “language,” which, in turn, must be refused for experimentation, especially for the television spectator. The use of what looks suspiciously like “pre-modernist” or “realist” or “mainstream” forms themselves involves constructing or exposing a refusal, and assertion of the incompatibility between “stable” avant-garde forms and the task of analyzing the reformation of a certain historical subjectivity or spectatorship. I understand that many people were happy to find that *Vault* worked its surface technically to a far greater extent (though still quite modestly). The following passage of current avant-garde video theory engages these issues. The essay as a whole offers cautions and advice on what *technological* goals and practices will function progressively in forming video art (and not inadvertant “television”):

Most video that attempts to be directly critical of television has trouble constituting an effective level of metacriticism and successful irony. Re-edited sequences of broadcast television or mild satires of television style remain closely linked to the concerns and forms of commercial television. Though they accelerate or interrupt the flow of broadcast imagery, although they poke fun at its forms, it is



Kyoko, from the videotape  
*Green Card: An American Romance*  
Bruce and Norman Yonemoto

ultimately unclear what sort of commentary on television such works propose. Any formal innovation in the image can be used to create promos for rock stars or sell products as “scientific,” or the “latest in technology,” exaggerations, acceleration, technical exploitation of television as a video art form too often gesture in a manner that is less critical than mimicking.<sup>7</sup>

What interests me here first of all is the assumption that “direct” attempts to be critical of television will be carried out technologically, probably even those of “mild satire.” While the author might be happy, if pressed, to acknowledge a kind of a “direct criticism” that functions in some other register, it is not explicated here. Secondly, the lack of clarity in attitude that may result is seen as inherent in criticizing *television*—growing somehow out of the ontology of television—and, it is seen inevitably as a flaw in the work, a failure of irony. I am reminded of another, older case of a similar problem. *Could* Swift’s *Modest Proposer* *actually* have been suggesting that the Irish fatten and sell their children to be eaten by the English? *Can* the Yonemotos actually be making mainstream melodrama? Such “trouble” in “constituting an effective level of metacriticism” can imply a textually inscribed disruption of “knowledge,” a disturbance of security, which is a crucial aspect of its project.



The problem of reading *Green Card* is that it focuses, not on the enunciative level of mainstream melodrama (as *Vault* will) but on its diegetic conventions, the forms of "realist" narrative fictional discourse which are dominant in cinema; the very different regime of television is propped on these cinematic forms as a promise of unified pleasure, which it constantly offers and withdraws (through interruption, lack of primary identification, etc.) Diegetic conventions such as: the duration of narrative unfolding with its effects of character revelation, motivation, and transformation; the creation of fictional characters through performance; the relation between character and performer; the delivery of long stretches of dialogue by characters.

Late in *Green Card*, its heroine, Sumi, makes the following plea:

*HELP ME BREAK THE CAGE OF THIS MELODRAMA.*

Both *Green Card* and *Vault* have as their goal the exploration at a number of levels—formal, semantic, historical, ethnic, political, psychoanalytic, comical—the problem of being trapped in the coded ideology of romantic personal subjectivity. Only later in Freud's work did he see clearly a relationship between fulfillment and death, between plenitude or unified identity and death-as-stasis, as a wished-for return to a pre-organic state of existence. To achieve the dream of bourgeois love and harmony is to be dead? Can this be right? This is the problem of reading *Green Card*, of constructing its proper "metacritical distance." The Yonemotos fictionalize and narrativize these issues because they believe it is through narrative that they achieve their power in culture. As the character Kyoko makes long speeches on love and personal unity and rushes about creating character confrontation in the name of these values, we must create a relationship between a lifetime's familiarity with these values and the fact that she is a cripple "foreign" dwarf who despairs of such fulfillment for herself, urging it endlessly on the "normals" around her. How can I hate a cripple Japanese dwarf who is often seen in long shots swinging her useless little legs in front of her crutches as she moves toward the camera? Yet ten minutes into *Green Card*, that was how I felt and by the end of the piece, not a single qualm remained. Kyoko had become the ever more articulate, ever more helpless yet death dealing mouthpiece of a set of values designed to mire everyone she encounters in hopeless yearnings. Ideology as a world of yearning cripples who want company, its identity as ideology effaced by the special belief—the intense disavowal—evoked by fiction and narrative. Words in the mouths of motivated characters are *true*, not suspect like some author's opinion.

The story is told from the point of view of Sumi the artist when she is very old, looking back perhaps fifty years to life in Los Angeles in the 1980's:

We only dimly realized we were living on the edge during those transitional years. My friends and I lived increasingly fragmented lives, simulating the past, existing within the reality of reruns.

Included in the series of reruns is another Japanese hopelessly in love with Sumi and dying of an unknown disease. Yet another is Sumi's final loss of innocence as she encounters her beloved Jay in bed with her best friend and movie star who will only work for the "majors." ("Like so many of us, she worshipped dinosaurs.") Along the way we meet the existential longing of the California surfer, the emotional emptiness of the successful in business and fashion, punctuated by endless pleas from Kyoko that they give up all this absurd unhappiness since they are all normal and could, if only they were sensible, see the future with hope and love. Though satire is not typically required to provide a programmatic solution to the issues it examines, the ending of *Green Card* doesn't offer much to work with as an alternative vision. Its conclusion provides a pristine vision of de-carnation where the same couple, young again, cross a featureless, windblown desert *without* holding hands.

The typing, repetition and performance style involved in this satire of fictional conventions exaggerates them only slightly in a subtle and "readable" manner, somewhat like they are handled in the most excessive daytime soaps as *Santa Barbara*, but with self-conscious control of patterns of exaggeration. In this similarity lies their power and their challenge to the viewer. To provide a worked surface of "author-ized" style and display of technical skill would fetishize the very personal excess or dream of a unified self that romance (and authorship) validates—the belief in the power of persons to transform the givens, to provide hope through individual presence, the very values that lie at the center of the Yomemotos' satire. Effacement of the satiric work of the signifier does not preclude an extraordinarily original intelligence and almost unbearable sense of humor at work with these conventions, nor the creation of highly original images. The special shallow space of taped fiction, which hangs its people right up against the front of the box, makes possible a particular kind of spatial satire, which the reader may recall in certain images from *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. Remember her leaning across a cavernous kitchen waving her admonishing finger through years of space to explain to the five year old preacher what a freak he really was. In *Green Card*, such images include the close-ups of Kyoko's intolerably earnest face and the increasing grotesquery of her size relations; the thousand-year-old-mask

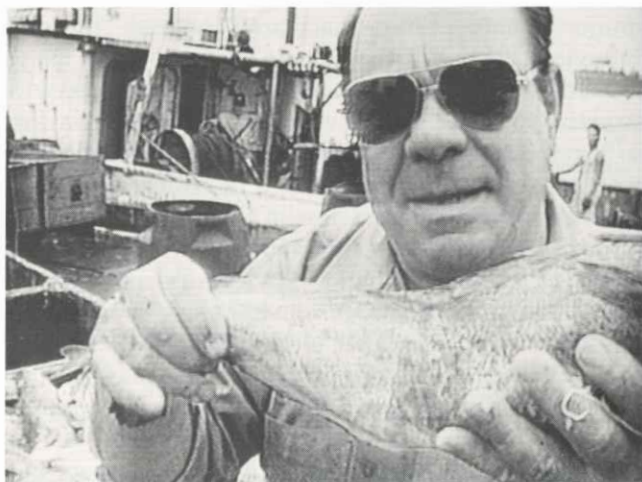
of Sumi's face, excessively close to us, overflowing the small frame with a simulation of presence as she launches the flashbacks; the image of the "new" Sumi, standing fully articulated in gallery space, refusing the close-ups of melodrama out of which she has just been reborn, returning to a world where a certain kind of distance is allowed its power.

The Yonemotos' later work, *Vault*, focuses on certain formal characteristics of the genre. Casting and make-up give us the comic pleasure of smoothness, high sheen, rich color, glints. Every time the hero makes a rilly *major* declaration of love, there's the heroine, floating in some edge-enhanced space against a city skyline or against a bright blue sky streaming with whitest clouds, taken out of history, hanging there for love. Even the larger structure of television melodrama is worked over in that the first half of the piece gives a quick summary of history and motivation, the narrative reprise that often precedes today's new episodes in daytime soaps.

The parody of seamless-smooth narrative is constructed through cuts-on-action. Here are a couple of my favorites. In one of the heroine's main flashbacks about a childhood surgery, after her father has made her a promise he can't keep, the ether mask descends toward the child's face. Simulating the mentality of an editor who can take the gesture at its most literal spatial level, the Yonemotos' shoot it from the child's POV and simply use the movement in to her face for a dissolve to bring us out of the flashback to her radiant, cello-playing face in the present. In a similar action match, when she comes out of the ether and daddy's not there as promised, she grips her pillow. Cut to her little hand gripping her lover's sleeve in the present. Flashback plus cut on action = motivation.

The whole piece is edited as if narrative held nothing but moments of highest intensity. The music is developed in the same way. It offers a series of repeated crescendos with tiny spaces of development. It rolls over the images like speeded up clouds, historicizing a lifetime of spectatorial gasps—that involuntary intake of breath, that rush of wetness to the eyes. (*Green Card*: "There aren't any choices but the ones that already exist.") *Vault* is not mainly interested in the coding of the signified of liberal love, but in the specifically enunciative codes of its dominant forms in film and television. Perhaps that's why this piece is often seen as a "breakthrough" for the Yonemotos. In fact, *Vault* explores the same problematic as *Green Card*, but its characteristics provide a better match with other works read as avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> It's short (twelve minutes); it offers a more densely worked authorial surface with keying, superimpositions, dissolves; it is repetitive and non-linear; it offers the intertextual eclecticism (its visual reference to *Giant*, for exam-





from the videotape  
*Spots*  
 Joan Logue

ple) that is usually said to mark post-modernism; and above all, its wild editing pace marks its technological difference from "television," though the Yonemotos report that they were following what is said to be the unwritten law of television—a major camera move or edit every five seconds. Because of these characteristics, the piece may be said to offer a more trenchant critique of realism, a more clearly marked "metacritical distance." Actually, what is at stake may be the values involved in discursive relations. This piece may refer more readably to stable codes of art (thus it moves toward being a "modernism," Lyotard would say). Yet for a medium like televideo, I doubt that it is more "advanced" than *Green Card* in its reference to and subtle transformations of the popular fictional discourse.

It may very well be that to insist on privileging the level of the worked surface is to deny television itself and everything it has done in transforming spectatorship during the last forty years. (The issues don't seem to be the same for installation or multi-channel video presentations. They are engaged in a somewhat different set of problems.) Joan Logue's work, *Spots*, engages television spectatorship in the thirty-second duration of each piece, in lining up serially spots with very different surfaces and subject matters, and in her latest work, in engaging television's

unique promise of immediacy and "lividness" (if not "liveness") in the fisherman interviews. If one of them doesn't seem to work for you, how astonishing it is to learn that you are now capable of becoming bored within fifteen seconds; how instructive to notice your new habits of looking away and looking back so casually, so "irresponsibly" in terms of the spectator of cinema avant garde work — in other words, to recognize yourself as a television spectator. Peter d'Agostino's *Quarks* also returns you to yourself as a television spectator but through a far more aggressive (*progressive?*) intervention. Unreadable images, inconsistent sound-image relations, and spatial puzzles construct a playful, but deadly serious exercise in shocking self-recognition in being shown a particular kind of flickering attention, a disengagement, of being teased back into participatory attention. As each mistaken choice of possible readings has to be corrected, new information, always partial or tentative, engages the spectator in an interactive televideo game, figured primarily as spatial mapping, presided over by a blind man explaining in voice-over how he and his cane interact with space in order to read it. What seem to be the familiar strategies of the avant-garde ("difficult") images, non-narrative, etc.) return you, not to an older language of text for the fascinated gaze, but to the culture of broadcast television in its demand that you negotiate unpredicable, unchartable juxtapositions and possible directions. All the while that same television programming is teaching you to disavow your own spectatorial work by sending you outside itself for satisfaction in forms other than constructing coherence through reading choices.

Thus all the pieces under consideration here imply that in positioning itself as avant-garde art work, televideo must engage television. It can and must be watched by spectators being taught to recognize themselves returned to themselves *as* televisual spectators. From the point of view of critical studies, television's dismantling of certain forms of reading at both the cognitive and unconscious levels; its special project of turning the spectator away from the inner, Imaginary gaze of satisfied subjectivity outward into culture to close the obsessively reopened circuit of desire; its project of forming a more diffuse, public model of identity — all these command the attention of the avant-garde and offer to it possibilities for certain kinds of intervention so new and important that they can barely be conceived, but which probably cannot be presented in any other way than televideo.

## Footnotes

- (1) Nick Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television Supertext," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 9.3, (Summer, 1984)
- (2) As these comments imply, the place of the television in the home means that it has family work to do as well. As other essays in this volume will suggest, television is, in the opinion of many, effecting basic changes in the formation of human subjectivity itself and may, indeed, be rendering obsolete certain models of subjectivity based on primary repression and the formation of the unconscious. Remember that viewing habits and enunciative regime described above are being practiced by millions of nursing mothers even as we read these lines. In all those bedrooms, tiny eyes are drawn to that shimmering square of light which provides nodes of verbal and visual signification as powerful and as available as those that used to come into the infant's life only from the family, and with particular force from the father. For further discussion along these lines, see "KING OF COMEDY: A Crisis of Substitution," *Framework*, 24 (Spring, 1984) where I try to develop some of these implications around the claim that *King of Comedy* can be read as exploring this crisis.
- (3) See especially Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Connecticut: Shoe String Press, 1982).
- (4) See David Morley, *The NATIONWIDE Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) and Robert Deming, "The Television Spectator-Subject," *Journal of Film and Video* 37.3 (Summer, 1985)
- (5) See Houston, "KING OF COMEDY."
- (6) Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in Hassan and Hassan, eds., *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities* (U. of Wisconsin Press, 1983)
- (7) Maureen Turim, "Video Art: Theory for a Future," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Regarding Television* (American Film Institute Monograph II, 1983), p. 131
- (8) *Episode* by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn explores these same relationships (as *Vault* and *Green Card*) In fact, in its hanging of language across the drama it asks questions central to *Vault*, *Why do we want the things we want. Why do we do the things we do?* But in its "jump cut" editing and action on New York streets it is very much nonconnected to television's promise — its liveness, its sense of urgency — in presenting narrative as news.



## Concerning the Horn of Plenty and Especially How it Appears to Spiral

LANE RELYEA

The t.v. tube is shaped like a bullhorn. And like a bullhorn, it propels a voice. That voice speaks continuously, without end, in both words and images, whether anyone listens or not. And when somebody does listen, even then not everything t.v. says can be heard. For t.v.'s voice is not one, but many. Never just one program, t.v. is rather the voice of all of programming, the sole means of articulating at any given moment an entire range of camera transmissions sent simultaneously. So that, because a person can listen to only one voice at a time, listening to t.v. means also not to listen to t.v. Just as a person can't be everywhere at once, or can't read every book at the same time.

Which is not to say that the only thing a person does when reading a particular book is not read all other books. Since books do not exist mutually exclusive of one another. On the contrary, books serve the purpose of helping to separate out voices and preserve each until their consumption through the process of reading. And that process is a determinant one, if only in that it conforms voices to a temporal ordering. Which is why books can speak but one at a time, even when shuffled into a conversation in the mind of a shared reader. And in the mind of a reader who also writes, only then do their voices become fully intergrated, in the form of a new book that, by replying to those preceeding it, creates their synthesis. Which is how the separation between voices that is retained by books also allows each to sustain through succeeding generations, by engendering a discourse in which the latest instance, rather than excluding all other literature, instead embodies its accumulated effect. And, in this way, charts the extent of its history, to which it adds only a slightly more distant horizon.

All of which the operation of a t.v. tube circumvents. Since a t.v. tube does not house programs the way a book does words, or a library does books. Neither storing nor preserving them, a t.v. tube instead exhausts programs concurrently and at a rate continuous with their production. Which is how a t.v. tube, unlike a book or a library, facilitates the ceaseless and uninterrupted flow of broadcasts, from their simultaneous production to their simultaneous consumption. And not their moderation, their temporary separation and their suspension on which is predicated their disposition in discourse, their amenability to its various acts of sorting, discerning, assimilating, incorporating, and so on.

Which is why it would be a mistake to think of t.v. as providing a means for the consumption of programs by a viewer. Since t.v. alone determines the fate of all programs, when each will air and how many at once, regardless of who is viewing and when. And especially without regard to a person's reasons for selecting what program to view. Since every selection of a program on t.v. is made in relation not to the next program viewed, or the program viewed before it, but rather to all those programs not viewed in the meantime. Which are consumed by t.v. nevertheless. And whose consumption, therefore, the viewer is forced to ignore. So that a comprehension of t.v. programs is made impossible as the motive for viewing them. As long as t.v. accommodates a schedule for the consumption of programs that comprises far more programming than any one person can possibly comprehend. Which is how t.v. inversely defines the selection of programs by a viewer, as constituting not a determinant act of inclusion, but rather a compulsory act of exclusion.

So that with every view afforded by t.v. there comes an ever greater degree of blindness. Not to what is displaced by viewing, what then can only precede or follow it, but to what accompanies viewing in its act, and exceeds it. An excess, then, whose invisibility fills each view from inside its range, and in turn flushes out that view to its nearest, most visible margin. So that only the most marginal difference comes to distinguish one view from another. Since never is one view so much constituted as constituent to this shared, darker aggregate. Which trails like a blindspot behind every program viewed on t.v., and dilates with the addition of each new program produced. Each new cable network, new community channel, new home movie cassette, and new artist's video. All contributing in equal part to the scope of their own general obscurity. Since no matter how many programs are invested into t.v., its viewing can never yield more than one at a time. Each new program, therefore, realizing only an added length to its own shadow. Which it never casts alone, but concurrently with those of every other program, all converging together like pie slices toward a vanishing point lying at the center of a single, collective eclipse. All programs, then, revolving around a common axis in the image of a glowing penumbra. Its rotation described by each turn of the t.v. dial, and its radius vascillating in relation to the flow of broadcasts. And the slope of its glow traced and continued outwardly by the shape of the view it demands, by the ring that results from the fanning of a viewing audience. Each component, then, moving in orbit around the other, moving together in the form of a spiral, whose every turn is echoed by all those before it and all those that follow, in perpetual and tireless repetition. Like the ripples that echo one another in a fountain of water. Just as the crackling of a blaze is reflected by the roar of the crowd.



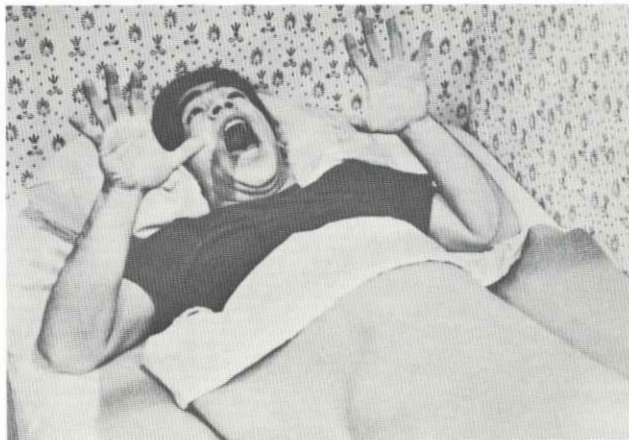
Which may explain why a comparison is so often drawn between viewing t.v. and watching a fire burn. In that both attract a similar, mesmerized gaze. Not just by the lure of their mutual glow, but moreover by what that glow seems to signify. Which is an unrivaled passion for expenditure, an insatiable, indiscriminant need to endlessly consume. A need that desires only one thing from production, but desires it always. Which is more of the same.

So that perhaps it's inadequate to speak of t.v. in terms of a bullhorn alone. Since t.v. not only propels, but absorbs as well. Since it operates as much like a cyclone as it does a megaphone. Or, like both at once. Both propelling and compelling, dispersing and absorbing, all together through the motion of a single coil. A coil that turns both outwardly and inwardly, entwining both production and consumption and reducing the two to a common focal point. Where t.v. serves as a concave lens. Not converting the one into the other, but rather inverting the image of the one into its opposite likeness.

Which is the only function t.v. is built to perform. And it is, at the same time, the reason why t.v. is so incapable of change, so impervious to development. Why it is unable to either mark a progress or advance a history. Why its trajectory can neither aim at resolution, as in a conventional narrative, nor branch out into a genealogy, as in a discourse. Why t.v. instead can only mirror and repeat itself endlessly. By uncoiling and recycling, by forever reflecting and reduplicating. And while this may describe the mechanical conduct of t.v., it characterizes equally as well the similar premise of its most popular shows. As, for example, in the way the same voyage is constantly retraced by *The Love Boat*, as it sails incessantly from one port to another and back again. Or in the way *Fantasy Island* floats in physical isolation amid an ocean of water, disconnected geographically from the events of the rest of the world. And evidenced as well by the incest prescribing every plot twist that unfolds on daytime soap operas. Or even by the incestual relation between daytime soap operas and nighttime ones. The way weekly dramas, sitcoms and variety shows all recur in cycles, in episodes, constantly overlapping into reruns, never going anywhere except for around in circles. To the point where repetition itself is elevated by t.v. to the level of a genre, while its programs are reduced to the condition of a tautology. Until, finally, watching one program on t.v. comes to feel like watching them all.

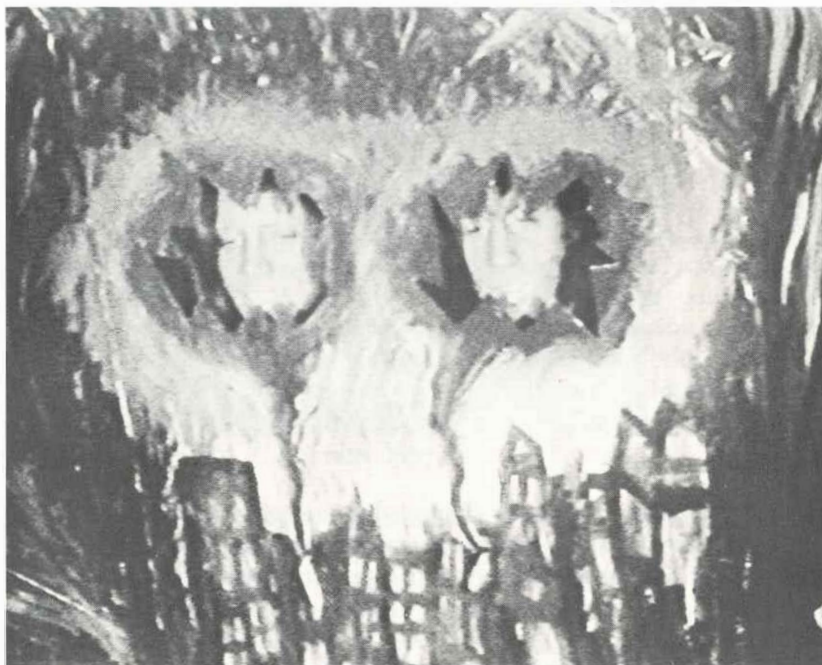
So on it goes. Another new turn in the spiral only reiterating the whole. Every new program on t.v. articulating a difference that is only a further reticulation of its sameness. Like the different coordinates that reticulate across the image of a





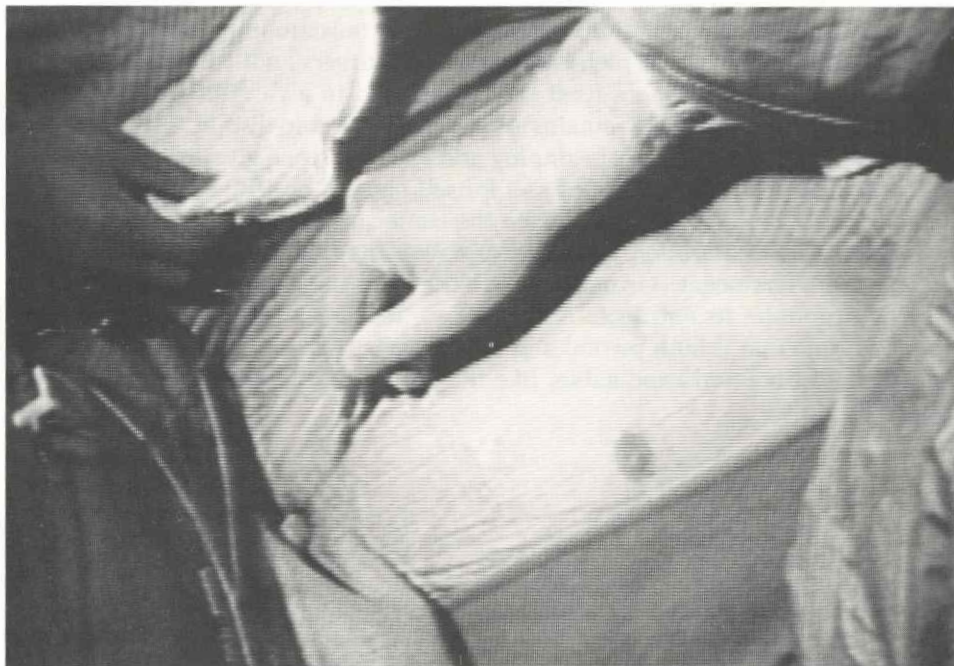
from the videotape  
*Secret Horror*  
 Michael Smith

grid. And whose resulting design thereby shares with the spiral its neutrality, its profound indifference, and its insistence on a monotony that verges on silence. Which may explain why, for instance, the image of a grid renders Michael Smith speechless in his video tape *Secret Horror*, 1982. In which Smith stars in the role of "Mike," an average guy content with living amid the humble accommodations of a living room stage set. A set consisting of a floor and two adjacent walls, and such props as a chair, a phone, and, of course, a t.v. set. And which also affords Mike those conveniences that can only be found in a stage set, such as voice-over, lip-syncing, and a musical soundtrack. These in particular help Mike through a series of distressing encounters, involving crank phone calls, a ubiquitous game show host, and an uninvited troop of spooks who stalk around his room draped in white bed sheets. All of which Mike seems to take in perfect stride. Since what truly confounds Mike instead, what leaves him wide-eyed and dumbstruck, is what he sees when he looks up, toward the boom-mike and the stage lights, and beyond. Which, for a television character, is like rolling your eyes up into your head. Where Mike can discern the figure of the grid, as it appears mapped across a lattice-styled drop ceiling. A ceiling that, in fact, literally drops, in a slow descent lasting the entire length of the tape. So that, by the end of *Secret Horror*, the grid lies spread out across the floor beneath Mike's feet. Where he stands above it, in a better position to cope with its existence. Which brings *Secret Horror* to its heart warming conclusion, as the music turns to a more triumphant beat, and Mike starts his slow and victorious walk into the sunset. Although, as the credits finish rolling, Mike has yet to leave his living room, remaining there though continuing to walk, following the grid and therefore walking in circles.



from the videotape  
*Grand Mal*  
Tony Oursler

And eventually getting no place. Since any excursion within the grid has as its destination a point identical to its point of departure. Which subsequently leaves only one place to go, one direction to take. Which is always a return, both an embarkment and a coming back at the same time, a simultaneous advance and retreat. A move, without aim or bearing, through an inescapable maze that is the grid's graphic implication. Like a house of mirrors in which each path appears both doubled and negated. Which is the same path taken by the story that roves through Tony Oursler's video tape *Grand Mal*, 1981. In which is told the tale of a boy and a girl who go in search of what they feel is missing from their lives. An absence they are unable to name, but which they imagine resembles a misplaced puzzle piece. Their story, likewise, is recounted in pieces, stitched from fragments and vignettes, told in short parables and abridged allegories. But never do these pieces add up to a sum, follow in a coherent sequence, nor do they carry the sense



from the videotape  
*The Double*  
 Ken Feingold  
 photograph by Michael Danowski

of detracting from a whole. Rather, they remain individually distracting, successively disorienting. Each retains the condition in which it was found, as being something missing, lacking in context, incomplete and needy. And together their need produces a contagion, leading the story itself to become hopelessly lost.

Which is a loss generic to all instances of retelling. And which is itself an echo of the sacrifice shared by all acts of doubling, mirroring, and reproducing. A sacrifice of a portion to the axis of all symmetries, a surrendering of something essential, namely the center. And it seems to be to this martyrdom that Ken Feingold offers reverence in his video tape *The Double*, 1984. In which a barrage of edits culled from documentary t.v. footage is spliced together in a violent storm that encircles a more quiet, ominously calm eye. Borrowing clips from televised assassinations, sporting events, religious ceremonies, parades, high-rise fires,



natural disasters, big game hunting, and much more, *The Double* creates a kaleidoscope of equally breathtaking imagery that fans around a single, infinitely more breathtaking scene. Which is of open heart surgery, not edited like the rest, but holding, as if the camera itself were paralyzed in awe. Yet, in all its unapproachable power, the scene remains also irretrievable and distant. Fitted precisely halfway between the tape's beginning and end, the scene gives pause to the images that precede and follow it just as it is itself paused, or delayed, by t.v. So that it shares with t.v. its placement at the center of the act of doubling, and in turn suffers the obliteration within the crease of its fold. Still, it stands, as does t.v., as the effervescent, virtual image that claims the surface of reflection and thereby negotiates its entrance. And like t.v., it holds an ultimately ambiguous pose, in a role that is both pivotal and, at the same time, estranged and emptied. At once indistinct and irreducible, like the period that stands at the center of a spreading elipsis ...



*LACE* is devoted to fostering experimentation in the fields of video art, new music, new dance, multi-media work, performance art, artists books, painting, sculpture, installations, and all new art forms; and to serving the artists of our time. *LACE* is committed to paying honoraria to all of its presenting and exhibiting artists; to giving artists control over the presentation of their works; and to giving artists serious involvement in the organization itself through membership on our Board of Directors, staff, and various selection committees. *LACE* is dedicated to taking the risks which are often necessary when presenting the newest and most uncompromising art currently being produced.

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