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Video/Media Culture of the Late Twentieth Century

John G. Hanhardt and Maria Christina Villaseñor

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The opportunity to edit an issue of the College Art Association's *Art Journal* provides yet another chance for the academic art history community to rediscover the roles of video in today's culture. As we prepare this issue, we are looking forward to a veritable catalogue of major video representation within the art world: Bill Viola's representation of the United States in the 1995 Venice Biennale; the Henry Art Museum's touring Gary Hill exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum; Bruce Nauman's Walker Art Center—organized traveling retrospective and Barbara London's international survey of video installation art, both at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio; a Joan Jonas retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; new media galleries and flexible exhibition spaces at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; video installations by Mary Lucier and Shigeo Kubota in the Whitney Museum of American Art's permanent collection (with a survey of Kubota's new video sculptures also scheduled); Nam June Paik's touring exhibition *The Information Superhighway*; and finally, the preparation of a large-scale historical video exhibition by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England.

Along with these exhibitions we are witnessing an increasing acquisition of video installation and single-channel art for the permanent collections of such museums as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Private collectors are also increasingly wanting to represent the history of video art in their own collections, among them Richard and Pamela Kramlich of San Francisco, while such private foundations as Fredrick B. Henry's Bohemian Foundation use innovative means to actively acquire or support new video projects. The expansion of international rentals and sales of artists' videotapes by Electronic Arts Intermix and the distribution initiatives of Video Data Bank reflect an increased attention focused on the work of independent media artists.

All of this current activity—and this is just a sampling—follows upon a long-term production, over the past thirty years, by artists working with video in the United States. Within the video arts community, the prominent position of such artists as Paik, Peter Campus, Nauman, Francesc Torres, Julia Scher, Hill, Antonio Muntadas, Chip Lord, Alan Rath, Jim Campbell, Adrian Piper, Juan

Downey, Terry Berkowitz, Rita Myers, Matthew Barney, Buky Schwartz, Peggy Ahwesh, Leslie Thornton, Willie Varela, Renee Tajima, Steve Fagin, among others, can be seen in relation to the complex history of an aesthetic discourse that has lent itself to a variety of distinctive bodies of work within multiple genres, styles, forms, and formats of multimedia presentation, as well as within performance-based work and in videotapes created for television broadcast and for private, gallery, and theatrical distribution. This much-abbreviated list of artists and events alludes to a nonlinear history of video, a history that does not unfold within a sequential logic of developments defined by technology, nor does it lend itself to a reductivist and essentialist reading of video as a medium uniquely created by one sole community of artists.

At a time when video production is increasingly common in all aspects of media and multimedia production, the status of video art remains on the margins, its recognition and support largely contained within a small media arts community. The film community itself often chooses to ignore works produced in video, shunning it in film festivals and in the process losing the opportunity to discover a body of strong, innovative works. If videowork is considered, it is most often presented as a subcategory, as in the case of the renowned New York Film Festival's sidebar offering, the little-recognized poor relation, the New York Video Festival.

Despite the future's clear move toward multimedia and interactive growth, and such looming possibilities of huge mergers by media and communications corporations, the impact of video fails to be widely examined. Several questions about the role of video must be raised at this point: Where are the various written histories of the medium? Why is there not a sustained critical discourse on video in place in the literature of the arts? Why is video-based work relegated to being regularly re-discovered? Why is video not examined in terms of its dynamic relationship to the other arts? Why are video's impact and large role in an increasingly digital future not being scrutinized?

Part of the answer to these and related questions lies in video's representing fundamental changes in media occurring in the late twentieth century, changes that are not sufficiently absorbed or theorized. The expansion of art practices to include new technology as artists' media, including the use of video, challenges the defining paradigms traditionally relied upon in the historiography and theo-



FIG. 1 Installation view of Nam June Paik's exhibition *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television*, 1963, at Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, West Germany.



FIG. 2 Wolf Vostell, *TV-Décollage*, 1963, installation at Smolin Gallery, New York.

retical examinations of art practices. A reluctance to directly engage the challenge posed by video is evident even in such professional programs as the College Art Association's annual meetings, which feature perhaps at most one panel discussion that engages video-based art practices and historical developments, and the Society for Cinema Studies, whose conferences and publications are largely, when video is discussed, given over to an examination of mainstream television studies.

Video as a technology and as the basis of a complex aesthetic discourse has played a key role in both facilitating and critiquing the circulation of media images and ideas between the worlds of art and popular entertainment. Since the 1960s the rapid expansion of the cultural industries of movies, television, music, and radio has been paralleled by an attitude toward mass media that is undergoing a transformation, as artists moved from a modernist disdain of mass entertainment to a postmodernist appropriation and transformation of popular culture as a new discursive strategy. Today, new electronic image and information technologies are being deployed through the formation of information superhighways, whose capitalization and control have further transformed the public sphere into a network of privatized conduits for the global expansion of consumer capitalism.

The history of video art offers powerful critiques and insights on the nature, possibilities, uses, and abuses of the medium, providing an essential primer for an increasingly digital, media-based culture. The following are highlights from that history drawn from the late 1960s and early 1970s. These observations are early indicators of video's complex history and focus on its relation to television, offering how the developments and initiatives taken by artists describe a varied and complex discourse.

In the mid-1960s, both in this country and in Europe, artists made use of practices developing in the avant-gardes to engage in a direct confrontation with the institution of television. Within the questioning, adversarial, and anti-high-art project of Fluxus, two key figures in video's early history, the Korean-born Paik and German artist Wolf Vostell, turned to the television set as a means to explore the fashioning of a new media-based practice within a redefined media culture. In 1963 at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, Paik filled a gallery space with televisions, in which the reception and the positioning of images distorted the viewers' accustomed relations to the receiver, reorienting their preconceived expectations of the medium (fig. 1). In this way Paik extended his object-making, performance, and compositional strategies to incorporate the television receiver. At the Smolin Gallery in New York in 1963, Vostell placed modified televisions alongside his "décollaged" magazine covers, thus relating his visual art practices to his modification of the received broadcast image (fig. 2).¹ In effect, Paik and Vostell reframed the discourse of television, disrupting its commercial flow of messages and images, and positing the television as an artist's medium.

Paik was to take a leading role in removing television from its context of corporate control and privatized entertainment and turning it into a tool for creative image making (fig. 3). With the introduction of the portable video camera and player in 1965, the electronic moving-image recorder was available to artists and virtually anyone who wanted access to this new technology. This availability made it possible to build an alternative production, distribution, and exhibition program out of video, once the exclusive domain of commercial broadcasting. An example of this practice is Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* (1973). The videotape consists of critical statements drawn from texts on the expansion of commercial

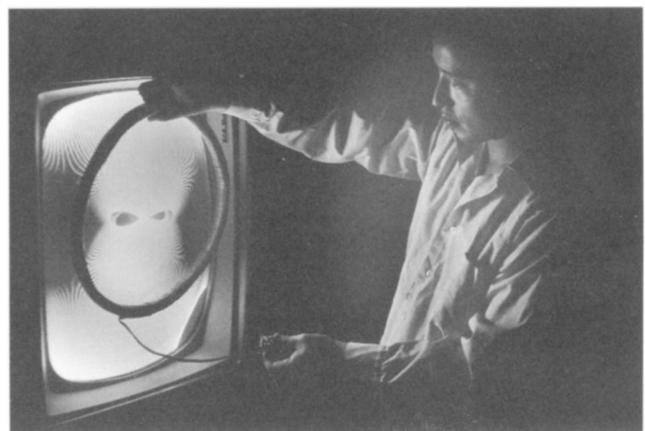


FIG. 3 Nam June Paik, *Distorted TV*, 1963. Collection of Dieter Rosenkranz, Wuppertal, Germany.



FIG. 4 Ant Farm, *Media Burn*, 1975, color video, 25 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

television. Statistics on the impact of television on American life and on TV as a selling tool roll up the screen like the credits at the end of a show. This text is seen against a blue background, a color employed by producers because of its presumed soothing effect, and is accompanied by Muzak on the sound track. Together these elements create a seductive frame that sells Serra's critique, ironically a critique that subverts the ideology of commodity television. Serra's textually based work reflects his interest in a materialist and structural examination of society and the construction of knowledge.

Ant Farm, a collective of artists and architects living in the San Francisco Bay Area, gave one of its most celebrated performances on and for television. *Media Burn* (fig. 4) was a public event staged on the fourth of July 1975, which climaxed with a specially designed Cadillac driving through a wall of televisions. A key aspect of this performance was a talk given by an artist/president who was made up to resemble John F. Kennedy. His speech, a condemning critique of corporate capitalism and television, was ignored by local television news reports of the event, which focused instead on the spectacle of the car crashing through the TVs and avoided the critical message altogether. Ant Farm's video documentation of this event and its coverage on TV serve as an ironic and pointed criticism of broadcast television, revealing television's sensationalistic coverage of events and the media's recording and presentation of events as distorted and partial. A fundamental aspect of all Ant Farm projects is this strategy of presenting the manipulation involved in media constructions. The work of Ant Farm bears an interesting relationship to the study of documentary and narrative genres as well as to the history of performance art.

Several projects throughout the late 1960s and 1970s engage the viewer by employing the real-time property of video, through which one sees instantly on the monitor what the camera is recording. Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette's installation *Wipe Cycle* was first shown in the Howard Wise Gallery's seminal exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, in 1969. A wall of nine monitors mixed live transmissions from local television with what the camera recorded in the gallery (fig. 5). By intermixing these images on different channels, the installation highlighted the difference between real time and television's prerecorded and edited point of view, a difference

emphasizing the frame of the monitor and camera as manipulated and fabricated points of view.

In a work titled *Zenith (TV Looking Glass)*, 1976, Paik reconfigured a television set by replacing its picture tube with a video camera that could be seen through the television screen. The camera lens was pointed through a window behind the television. By looking into the television screen, one could see through the video camera to the outside world. Thus Paik collapsed the material object of television into a metaphor for the production process, a process that offers limited and specific views of the world around us. Through this strategy Paik questioned the notion of television offering a window onto the world, a window with its carefully delineated frame, offering a view onto predetermined and very specific parts of the world.

The nature of television performance and our perception of television personalities were the subject of William Wegman's performance pieces for video. With Man Ray, his trained Weimaraner dog as collaborator, Wegman assumed a variety of roles in short skits that mimicked and playfully manipulated the roles of salesman, talk-show host, and newscaster. Related to the pioneering television performances of Ernie Kovacs on 1950s television, Wegman's work offers itself as an interesting resource for television and performance studies as an examination of the construction of narrative within the history of television.

At this same time, such artists as Jonas were manipulating the video camera within their performances and extending the space of their actions through the closed-circuit camera and videotape. Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (fig. 6) reimagines the performance space as it plays with the viewer's perception of the performance, rearticulating the dancer's body and movements on video. Campus, in an extraordinary period of production, created the work *Three Transitions* (1973), a videotape that extended the convention of self-portraiture and the illusions of representational image making through the unique properties of the medium. His video installations, including *mem* (fig. 7), which employed a closed-circuit video camera and projector to manipulate the viewer within the exhibition space, were

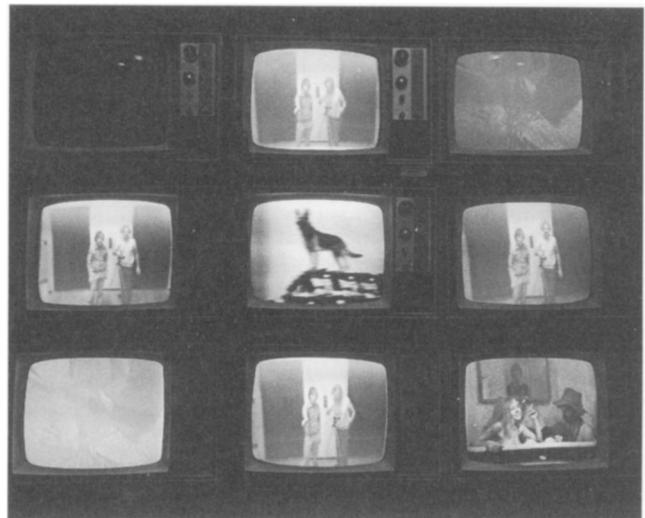


FIG. 5 Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *Wipe Cycle*, 1969, nine-channel video installation in the exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, Howard Wise Gallery, New York.



FIG. 6 Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972, black-and-white video, 19 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

to have a profound influence on a new generation of artists. Jonas and Campus display the complex movement between various discourses including performance, installation, and other forms of art production that characterized this period.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a generation of feminist artists who created a powerful body of art and theory directed as a critique of mass media. Dara Birnbaum in her installations and videotapes explored the construction of the television image and the exploitation of the female body as a commodity framed by a dominant male gaze. *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978), one of a series of videotapes based on popular television shows, employed image and sound manipulation and the repetition of image sequences as formal strategies to expose the fabrication and strict control of the television narrative. In her later installation *PM Magazine* (fig. 8), Birnbaum juxtaposed footage from a television commercial for a futuristic office that nonetheless retains the traditional role of the female secretary, with a segment of entertainment-style news. The result is a revealing look at how both scenes are packaged to effectively complement each other in their exploitative strategies. The multiple channels of video are played on monitors masked within large photographic blowups of scenes from the videotape. This conjunction of imagery emphasizes television as spectacle and illusion that conveys limited information and entertainment through the ideology of commodity culture. Birnbaum, in her movement between single-channel videotape and installation, further highlights a distinctive feature of video art's history as artists explore different formats to treat the issues they wish to explore.

Another aspect of the early history of video has been the role that artists as activists have played in forming institutional supports for the production, distribution, and exhibition of their work. An alternative space movement emerged in the early 1970s along with public funding on a federal and state level, and private foundation initiatives all involved media artists. Artists were among the initiators of the movement to establish cable and low-power television networks and alternative collaborations. Seizing the potential within cable television and public access, artists sought to realize a socially viable and political alternative through a practice that would create a

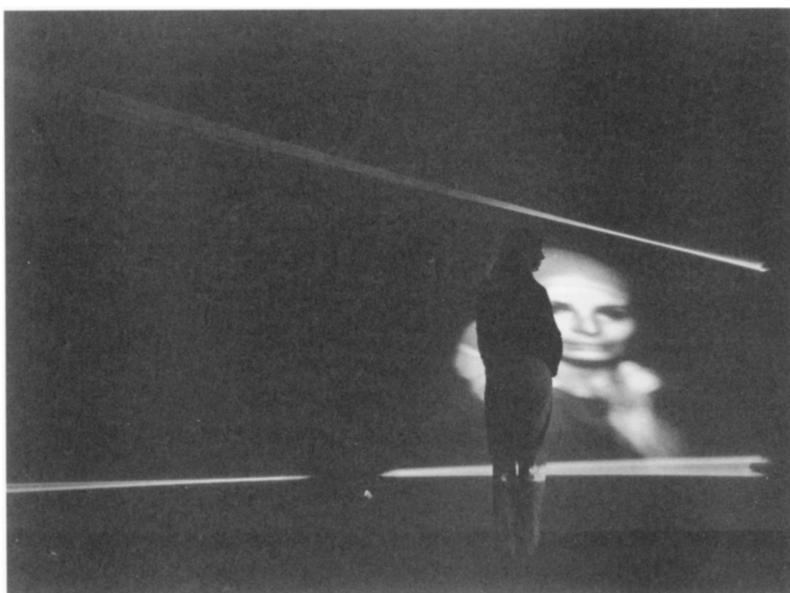


FIG. 7 Peter Campus, *mem*, 1979, video installation.



FIG. 8 Dara Birnbaum, *PM Magazine*, 1982, video installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1984.

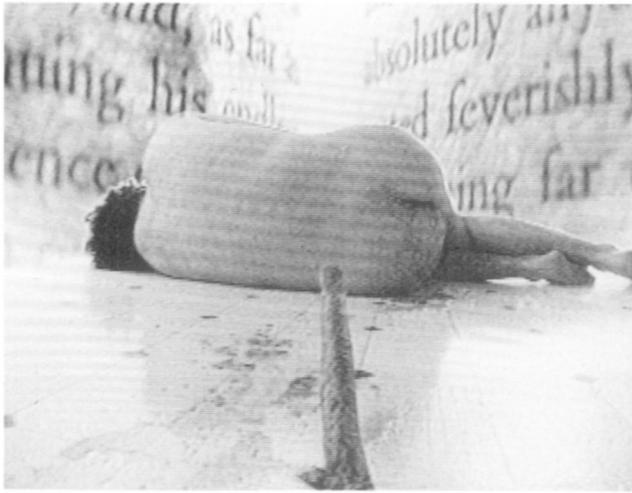


FIG. 9 Gary Hill, *Incidence of Catastrophe*, 1987–88, color video, 45 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

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link between communities, utilizing programs that would turn the camera onto everyday life and to cultural possibilities outside metropolitan centers. Such groups as the Alternative Media Center and Media Bus worked on marginal budgets and used available technology to give voice to the audience seen as a homogeneous mass by commercial television. Public demands to gain a space in the new cable technology resulted in public access television, and Paper Tiger Television was formed, taking advantage of this new means of broadcasting independent video productions. Deep Dish Television, a later initiative of the collective, rented space on a satellite dish to broadcast to an even wider audience.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the popularity of cable had skyrocketed, with attention deflected from cable's local and public access channels by the high production values and commercial sheen of corporate-controlled stations. Yet the popularity of corporate media, as seen in the example of MTV, was due in large part to the mass media's appropriation of avant-garde techniques pioneered by independent video- and filmmakers. While video as media intervention was largely ignored, video installation would find its place in the museum in a grand manner, with such large-scale exhibitions as *Nam June Paik, Image World, Dislocations* and such artists as Viola, Nauman, and Hill (fig. 9) gaining widespread recognition. The omnipresence of VCRs in homes and classrooms and the independent distribution of videotapes made work available to a much wider audience than ever before.

Yet despite this rich history and continuous output of video production, the medium still finds itself on the margins of art history. The latest updating of H. W. Janson's *History of Art*, a primer for beginning art history students, fails to even acknowledge video within its discussion of contemporary art. One is left wondering, despite video's preponderance, why its impact and presence are so rarely directly addressed.

It is critical that an end be brought to the phenomenon of the rediscovery of artists' videos, to be replaced by an ongoing examination of a medium and discourse that have been steadily produced and practiced. Video as a technology must be examined not merely

as a determining set of constraints, but examined in form and content as in any other critical study of an art medium. Perhaps, as we are again on the brink of a whole new set of technological advances in which video imagery is integrally linked with a computerized, multimedia environment, scholars will learn to get past their fear of technology and realize that video transmission involves much more than an electronic transmission, and also that it continually transmits and draws from a history that affects all aspects of art and media production.

New technologies for image making and processing systems were being developed by artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The works of Paik, Woody and Steina Vasulka (figs. 10 and 11), and Ralph Hocking were seminal efforts to design image-making tools that made possible a vocabulary of production and postproduction possibilities. This early history of community-based and image-making technologies needs to be reexamined in the light of the industrial development of new technologies today.

In addition, this history should be placed alongside the conceptual, performance, installation, community-based, documentary, broadcast, and narrative movements, including the formation by artists of institutional and production collectives and initiatives all taking root in this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a climate of right-wing backlash, in which public television and NEA media arts grants are cut and threatened with elimination, recognition must be accorded to independent video productions that have not and will not be supported by the commercial media sector. In the United States, the world's largest producer and exporter of mass media images, the study and support of critical media production is essential.

The entire video history of the past thirty years at any moment is marked by a multifaceted complex of initiatives with their roots grounded in this history. These new initiatives, informed as they are by a history of activism, should be more fully brought into a complete history of independent video and developments in film as well as the visual, performing, and literary arts. The defining tropes of the art world, which rely upon a modernist aesthetic and ideal, need to be expanded and reexamined to accommodate new practices and media that should not be made to conform to a previous model, but rather should challenge and transform it. This becomes particularly important today, as the movements between media and materials, art forms and traditions, are collapsing under the weight of a new multimedia context, and as fundamental changes are taking place in our visual culture and the institutions that mediate and house it. What will the future of exhibition and distribution be for independent media artists? Will the model of broadcast television continue to be used as a skeleton for the development of the information superhighway, in which the market determines the programming? Will free or low-cost access be implemented? What shape will the proposed National Information Infrastructure take?

Also much needed in the reexamination of video history is a focus on the often ignored developments and practices of media artists created within African American, Latino/Latina, Native American, and Asian American communities. A new generation of artists has produced a complex set of texts on cultural histories, informing

image and narrative strategies that have challenged the historical paradigm and aesthetic strategies of the European avant-gardes. This is also true of the new generation of feminist and gay/lesbian artists and queer theorists working and living within various communities and offering a powerful examination of traditional texts in addition to fashioning challenging and important bodies of new works.

The academy should be a center for the historical consideration of the complex relationship of video to the media. Specifically, attention needs to be given to videos in relation to independent film; the expansion of installation and sculpture through the introduction of video; the role of video in influencing fundamental changes in photographic practices; video's challenge to conventions of narrative with regard to political, community-based, and gay and lesbian issues; how video practices influence the relationship of the visual arts to popular culture; and the roles of video in negotiating those dialogues and representations. The teaching of these histories and issues can only enrich our understanding of the changes that are influencing our visual culture. The development of video and media studies can also contribute to preparing a new generation of scholars and curators conversant in the histories of film and the media arts who through their expertise and knowledge can contribute to art, media, communication, and literature departments and inform museum curatorial practices and decision making, effecting a transformation in institutions to create sophisticated and innovative sites for representing contemporary developments in the arts.

In inviting our authors to look at individual artists, we have sought to show the complex issues raised and embodied within an



FIG. 11 Steina Vasulka, *Lilith*, 1987, color video, 9 minutes.

artist's career and the work they have created. Each artist and author's interpretation constitutes individual core samples of a complex and multifaceted history. This selection of artists does not constitute a canon, rather the aim is to identify the variety of directions and accomplishments embodied in individual careers. Also presented are texts examining the current critical issues of institutional funding for video, video's dissemination in and out of arts institutions, and the pressing concern of video preservation. A number of texts dealing with video's many aspects are reviewed, including examinations of historical anthologies, theoretical texts, and exhibition catalogues. Finally, we have assembled a resource guide that includes books, periodicals, distributors, and a list of videoworks represented in the Whitney Biennial exhibitions since the medium's first inclusion in 1975. It is our hope that this issue of *Art Journal* will encourage and offer the challenge to produce additional biographies and essays to critically examine the large and expansive history of the media arts.

The questions raised here in our introduction and through the individual essays and articles attempt to describe some of the distinctive features of the history and current directions of the media arts, issues that are described through a variety of critical languages, theoretical models, and creative approaches taken to video production and its history. This selection of writings and artists, partial as it has to be, indicates something of the excitement of what further research will reveal of the history of video and the media arts that awaits a new generation of scholars.

Note

1. See John G. Hanhardt, "Dé-Collage and Television: Wolf Vostell in New York, 1963–64," *Visible Language* 26, nos. 1/2 (1992): 109–24.

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FIG. 10 Woody Vasulka, *Art of Memory*, 1987, color video, 36 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.