



NEW ARTISTS VIDEO

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

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TV Cello

tems from production to broadcasting. As coequals, working with a medium that has little traditional grounding, video artists (a term some consider derisive) find themselves involved in a generalized exploration of the nature of communication rather than the nature of the medium itself. Some artists may explore the relative qualities of illusion drawn between video and other forms of documentation, while others may work with the kind of light emitted by a television tube or with the similarities between video systems and neurological processes.

Whichever approach is adopted when working with video tape, the artist cannot ignore either the presence of the display monitor or the potential of indiscriminate anarchitectural delivery of the work to an isolated, yet comfortable and secure audience. Video works created with an understanding of the audience often seem out of place in the context of an art gallery—the works become filmic (in delivery) and their original intention is easily perverted. This is a problem that will persist until museum advocacy for this kind of artist-public communion reaches the point where it will be as commonplace for museums to have their own television channels as it is for them to house and maintain gallery spaces. Nam June Paik summed up the basis for this kind of thinking in a 1972 collage *Do You Know* (dedicated to Ray Johnson, one of the first correspondence artists). Paik added a few lines to an early 1940s magazine ad that queried: "How soon after the war will television be available for the average home?" His response becomes a leading question for the 1970s: "How soon will artists have their own TV channels?" The point to be made here is that in the midst of a deepening political, economic, and ecological crisis, we are witnessing a very real revolution in areas of communications and control—a revolution as powerful as that which followed the introduction of movable type. Communications systems have outgrown the need for mediating institutions; museums must stop translating and start transmitting. Artists have recognized their right and responsibility to create not only works of art, but the support and distribution system that serves as the context for the work as well.

I had a seven-channel childhood.
—Bill Viola, 1973

What exactly is meant by the term *video art*? We can attempt to define it as any artwork involving video tools: television cameras, video sets, videotape recorders or projectors, and a variety of image-processing devices or television systems in general. Sculptural works that make use of video tools are still primarily sculpture, dealing with spatial, temporal, and systemic problems and often with psychological and metaphysical attitudes as well. The term *video* might be applied to video tapes shown in the closed-circuit context of a museum, the commercial gallery, or a collector's home, while the same video tape shown through open-circuit transmission via broadcast or cable TV might be called television purely as the result of the basic socioeconomic difference between the two.

Though contemporaneous with the heyday of the somewhat fad-dist art and technology movement of the early 1960s, the origins of "video art" now seem far removed from all that activity. "Video art" did not develop only as a result of artists' fascination with the technology of video per se. It would seem rather to have resulted from the more or less random coalescence of a wider range of specific aesthetic issues that eventually led to the development of a generalized orientation away from the making of art objects.

The earliest artworks incorporating video were realized by Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, working in collaboration with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the experimental center of the West German radio network (WDR) in Cologne. Paik and Vostell were among a rapidly growing number of artists who brought musical and theatrical concerns with structured time and its obverse, randomness and indeterminacy, to the visual arts. These artists, who regarded Marcel Duchamp, cybernetician Norbert Wiener, and John Cage as somehow central to their concerns, formed Fluxus, a loosely knit group, in New York; it had first flourished in Europe. Paik, originally a composer/musician, began his experimentation with TV by distorting the television image mechanically, placing magnets on the screen and maladjusting components within the set itself, "preparing" the television set in an electronic analogy to Cage's prepared piano. Vostell and Paik first used prepared televisions in "de-collage" performances (Vostell's brand of Happening) late in 1959. By 1963 Paik was exhibiting his prepared televisions at the Gallery Parnasse in Wuppertal, and Vostell was displaying his own de-collaged (i.e., partially demolished) sets at New York's Smolin Gallery.

Paik himself had been in New York for barely a year when the Sony Corporation announced their intention to market a portable television camera and recorder at approximately one-twentieth the cost of all previous television-production equipment. Paik made arrangements to buy the first unit to be delivered for sale in New York, in late 1965, the same year that Marshall McLuhan published *Understanding Media*.

The situation that existed before the introduction of relatively inexpensive consumer-grade half-inch equipment was analogous to that of a culture possessing a tightly controlled radio industry and no telephone service at all. Until 1965 television tools were used almost exclusively by large corporations and major political parties for one-way delivery of prepackaged information; no provisions existed for the use of the same tools and delivery system for communications relating to the needs of the individual. The "half-inch revolution" not only led to the possibility of utilizing decentralized distribution systems such as cable TV, adapted to minority needs in a pluralistic society; it also greatly expanded the potential of video as a medium for making art.

By this time Fluxus events and the Happenings organized by artists such as Allan Kaprow, Charles Frazier, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, and Jim Dine had opened up new attitudes in American art toward interdisciplinary works, emphasizing the need for an art that was informed by the general culture as well as informing the culture. These early events in America—and in Europe and Japan during the crucial decade of 1956–66—are the precursors of most video and performance activity currently taking place in the United States.

The period from 1969 to 1970 saw the beginning of official art world recognition of artists' work in video. In late 1969, Nicholas Wilder, a Los Angeles art dealer, made the first sale of an artist's video tape in the United States—Bruce Nauman's *Video Pieces A–N*—to a European collector. In the same season, New York dealer Howard Wise (whose gallery was the home of a great deal of the kinetic art of the early 1960s) held an impressive exhibition of young video artists working in New York entitled "TV as a Creative Medium," including works by Paik, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Paul Ryan, Eric Siegel, and others. In contrast to Nauman's early video work, which was an extension of his body-oriented post-



Allan Kaprow: *Rates of Exchange*. 1975. Black & white, with sound, 45 mins. Courtesy Anna Canepa Video Distribution, Inc., New York. Photograph: Harry Shunk.

minimalist sculptural activities, the works in the Wise exhibition tended to be more openly involved either with the sociopolitical aspects of television as the dominant information system or with the technical possibilities of synthesizing television images with computers and similar electronic devices. The split between those artists who were primarily involved in the relationship between art and the culture, seeing television as a way to integrate the two, and those who merely adopted these newly developed techniques as yet another tool on which the artist might draw, seemed formidable at that time. Interestingly, in the past year or so that dichotomy seems virtually to have disappeared. Many more sociologically inclined artists such as Beryl Korot have found it necessary to tighten and expand the formal elements in their work, while a more formal sculptor, Richard Serra, produced the purely didactic *Television Delivers People* in 1973.

The Wise exhibition featured one work that remains interesting to date, though not for reasons that were obvious in 1970. *Wipe Cycle*, a multimonitor work by Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, was (as Schneider noted at the time) an attempt to "integrate the audience into the information." That integration included manipulation of the audience's sense of time and space, giving the work the combined impact of a live performance and a cybernetic sculpture. The piece consisted of a bank of nine monitors programmed into four distinct cycles including two prerecorded tape inputs, a live camera on an eight- and sixteen-second delay loop, a mix of off-the-air programs, and a unifying gray wipe that swept the field counterclockwise every few seconds. At the time, it was felt by critics like Richard Kostelanetz that the piece was an investigation into the nature of information, concerned primarily with the effect of shifting time orientation. Now the piece seems to underscore the peculiarity of the naïveté demonstrated by American video artists who saw the ability to produce video work on low-cost video equipment—divorced from any consideration of real distribution—as a revolutionary occurrence. *Wipe Cycle* can now be seen as a clear statement of the artist's continuing position well after the fact in relation to what may be television's most significant aspect and salient feature—indiscriminate transmission. Furthermore, the piece, by its elaborate structure (imitating industrial multimedia displays in form, but surpassing them in complexity) was one of the first to indicate

that in lieu of broadcast access and in consideration of the conditions imposed by the gallery, installation works involving technical capabilities of television not possible in transmission could be employed to somehow correct the out-of-placeness of television in such a loaded context.

By 1970 the first American museum exhibition of video art had been organized by Russell Connor and mounted at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University outside Boston. At that time, the predominant attitude of artists working with television can perhaps be summed up in a line from Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema*: "contemporary artists have realized that television, for the first time in history, provides the means by which one can control the movement of information throughout the environment." Partially in response to the rapid popularization of the work of Buckminster Fuller, and partially to the emergence of ecological consciousness in general, early video work tended to reflect an emphasis on and understanding of the environmental impact and capabilities of television in the broadest sense. The Brandeis exhibition occurred almost exactly a year after Gerry Schum broadcast the film *Land Art*, inaugurating his pioneering video gallery, which was less concerned with video than it was with broadcasting primary information about artists' work directly to the home. A year later the first museum video department was established at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, naming this writer as its first curator. The Everson opened a closed-circuit gallery specially designed for video viewing, and continues its series of video-oriented exhibitions, which offer a wide range of work.

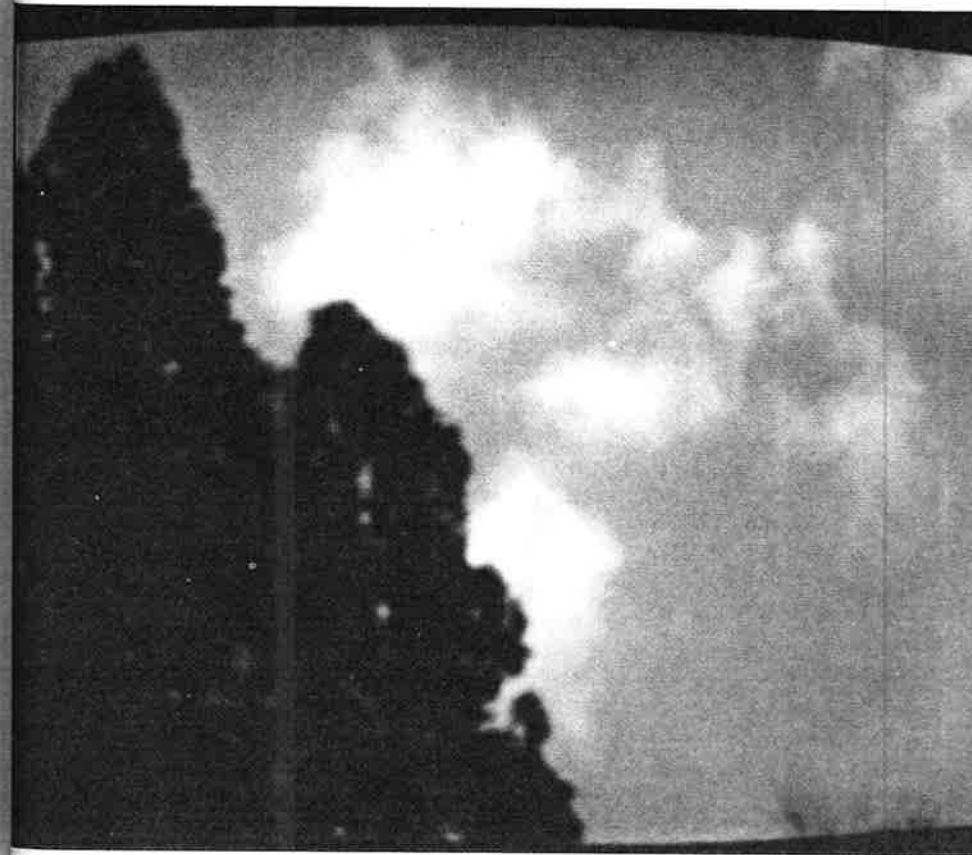
The phenomenon of museum involvement with television and video came about in response to two factors: the growing interest of artists in the medium, and the growing involvement of museums themselves with social issues beyond a purely aesthetic context—an involvement that has been prompting museums to reevaluate their role as a community resource. While the Everson Museum and the Long Beach Museum of Art in California are as yet the only such institutions with separate video departments, an increasing number of museums throughout the country have had at least a fleeting relationship with television in the form of closed-circuit in-house exhibits. Several larger institutions, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Cleveland Museum, produce edu-

cational television based on their collections, while the Boston Museum of Fine Arts continues to produce a series of broadcast programs on art initiated in 1953.

With the exception of the new Long Beach Museum, now under construction, museums have yet to extend their involvement with television to include their own broadcast stations, or cable television systems using low-cost equipment, in an attempt to redefine the basic elements of museum architecture broadly enough to include such an obvious feature of the environment. In this respect, museums rank far behind banks and theatres, which have at least figured out how to make their architecture responsive to changes in architecture necessitated by the American dependence on the automobile.

At the 1975 conference of the American Association of Museums in Los Angeles, the issue of validating modern art was discussed at length by a panel of museum directors representing some of the most prestigious modern-art museums in Europe and America. Although they differed on many points, most seemed to agree that museums do play a significant role in validating a small segment of the vast amount of art that is produced in the world today, by giving their tacit or indirect approval of a particular artist or a specific school. The point was never made, however, that the validating process is reciprocal: Artists validate museums and galleries just as collectors do, etc., etc. The character of much recent postobject art has tended, paradoxically, to intensify the self-referential and closed nature of this system, at the same time making its tautological aspects uncomfortably clear. Though this has not led so far to any significant change in the operation of the museum/gallery/collector system, it seems increasingly probable that the art itself will somehow obviate the entire validating process. Since video, like much conceptual performance work, is essentially uncollectable, its patrons must focus on the sponsorship of inquisitive rather than acquisitive activity. The role of the museum in regard to video art may well become that of a catalyst for the development of museum-operated art-specialized television channels, as well as an immediate though temporary physical location for the exhibition of the video work of Peter Campus, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Paul Kos, John Graham, et al.

If American museums are in a unique position to encourage this



Frank Gillette: *Muse*. 1973. Black & white, with sound, 26 mins. Courtesy Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films, New York.

kind of "disinterested" patronage, they can also contribute substantially to the much-needed task of defining and protecting the rights of the visual artist in relationship to the rest of society. In all the other arts, the artist's prerogative to maintain some degree of control over the way his or her work is used for the commercial or political benefit of other individuals or institutions is generally accepted; these rights are even defined by law. So far as video is concerned, the rights of the artist can easily be protected by a well-written contract not substantially different from those currently used in the recording and publishing industries. As for other kinds of visual art, including more traditional, object-based forms, the particular example of video art may help to focus attention upon the problem and to provide a model for the exercise of this urgent and significant responsibility.

Most of the video work being made by artists in the U.S. today can roughly be divided into three major categories: varieties of video tape, performance pieces involving video tools either directly or as secondary material, and sculptural constructions. These seemingly clear-cut distinctions are, unfortunately, significantly blurred by the fact that many works contain elements of more than one category, with economic and other contingencies determining the nature of any particular presentation. Frank Gillette's video tape *Tidal Flats*, for instance, was installed as a part of a complex installation (*Quidditas*) that featured twelve segments of tape playing asynchronously on three distinct video systems aligned to create a montage of three congruent images in constant flux. At another time, segments were seen in a single-monitor version, when all the work was broadcast on public television. Similarly, a number of tapes are either records of performance pieces or, like Vito Acconci's *Claim Excerpts* (1973), were originally simultaneous video documentations of performances where the action was visible to the audience, within which we pigeonhole the works of artists using video tools often purely for the convenience of critical discussion, and in no way reflecting a priori decisions by the artist.

Still, it is important to remember that the physiological phenomena of television viewing play a significant role in determining the relationship between the viewer and the work. The sociological implications of a medium designed and developed for casual home-oriented serendipitous access are in a way perverted when video

tapes are shown in a public gallery space. While these sociological and psychological factors are only rarely the subject of artistic inquiry into the medium, they often bear heavily upon the artist's primary intention. This nearly inescapable distortion of intention must be acknowledged and suffered, as the ideal situation for viewing artists' video tapes is yet to come.

The same is true in relation to ownership and the noncommodity status of much video. One of the most interesting uses of video has been to extend and intensify the experiences of performance works. Compared to the ephemeral nature of performance art—apart from "residue" such as documentary material or preparatory scores—video tape may seem to be a fairly permanent record of activities and ideas. In reality, however, the shelf life of video tape, as yet undetermined, is estimated at ten to fifty years. The video image, though recapturable and in a way objectified on tape, retains its temporary nature and is thus denied the status of a precious object. Its use, as the content for a broadcast (which becomes the complete work), is that of a relegated part of the whole.

Vito Acconci is an artist who uses video in conjunction with performance. A poet of the New York School in the early and middle 1960s, Acconci became widely known at the end of that decade for his increasingly personal performance pieces, then termed "body art." His emphatic use of autobiographical information, stylized into a near-violent exploration of his physical self, has been presented both as live performances and as sculptural installations. The latter pieces normally involved some kind of prerecorded narrative information. At first this was on audio tape or film; more recently, Acconci has come to use video tape and closed-circuit video systems. Like William Wegman, Acconci works with the particularly intense and intimate relationship that can be generated between a lone television monitor and a viewer, regardless of the surrounding context or lack of context. Unlike Wegman, however, Acconci does not explore the relationship that develops. Rather does he intensify it, turning it on full blast in an effort to transfer the full intensity of the experience. In *Pryings*, one of his earliest and least verbal tapes, the artist is seen trying to force open and gain entry into any and all of the orifices of a woman's face. His persistence outlasts the running time of the tape, as does the persistence of the woman under attack,