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Illuminating Video

An Essential Guide to Video Art

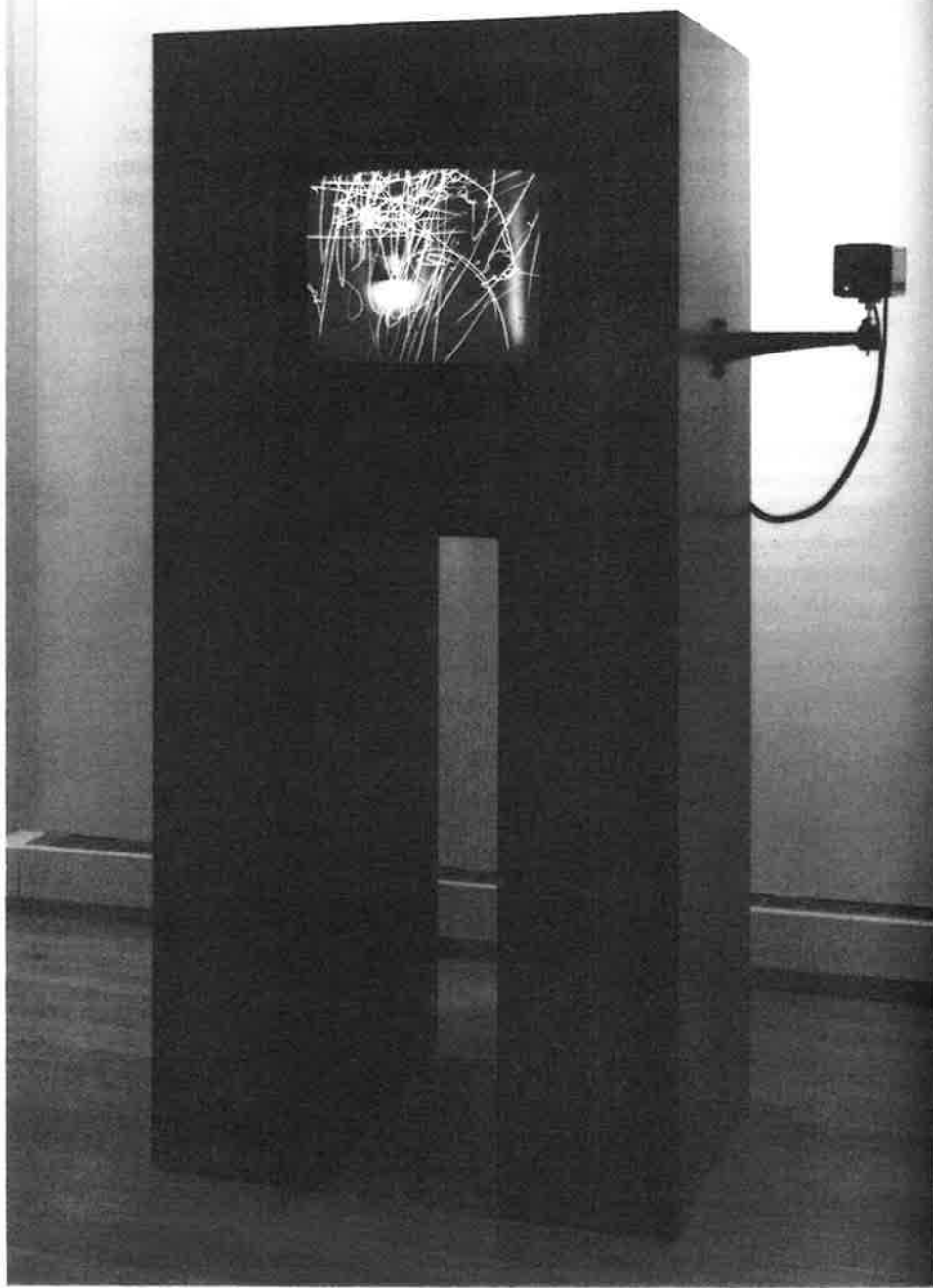
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Foreword by David Ross

**Introduction by Doug Hall and
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**Aperture in association with
the Bay Area Video Coalition**



Mary Lucier, *Untitled Display System*, 1975/87.

tion art is interactive, since the visitor chooses a trajectory among all the possibilities. This trajectory is a variable narrative simultaneously embodied and constructed at the level of presentation.

The Play of Apparatuses: Passages in Two and Three Dimensions

Television as a kind of primordial video apparatus already encloses the viewer within a virtual space of the monitor in several ways: light from the screen (as emphasized in the title of another group video installation *The Luminous Image*,) bathes surrounding space in shifting tones and colors.¹⁸ In addition, what is on the television screen typically begins by presenting itself as if it were a here and now actually shared by viewer and media presenters and personalities. That is, television has developed a mode of presentation that envelops the viewer and presenter in a virtual space of an imaginary conversation. This “fiction of discourse” or of presence is furthered by the habitual and distracted way in which we receive television.

If, however, the television apparatus were a video art installation and not a part of a habitual home environment, then awareness of the charged position in space in front of the television set (that is, the position of a virtual subject of address) would be part of the experience of the visitor. Furthermore, one would be aware of the television set itself as a object, with a shape and position in (living room) space. One could walk around the “news” and note the backside of the “window on the world”—the annexation of our own three-dimensional world by the two-dimensional image would be obvious not only to our conscious minds but a part of our sensorimotor experience.¹⁹

The development of video installation as an art form and the discovery of its parameters can begin, as in John Hanhardt’s work on Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik, with the use of the television set itself as sculptural object. To become aware of its sculptural aspects, this object had to be freed from its context, as in Paik’s displacement of the monitor into clothing for the (female) body (Charlotte Moorman’s *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1969) or as in his reorientation of television sets into *TV Clock* (1968–81),²⁰ in a literalization of the temporal order of television programming. The displacement of TV sets into a natural setting in *TV Garden* (1974–78), on which *Global Groove* (1973), tape compiled from all over the world was played, demonstrated an image world as natural and international environment. That is, our image-surround no longer represents a world apart; it is our world. The computer processing of images, in which Paik played a pioneering role, is another indication that images were now themselves our raw material, the natural world upon which we exercise our influence as subjects.

Rather than pretending to timelessness,²¹ these early TV sculptures were subjected to the processes of mortality, in a literal kind of deconstruction, sub-

mitting the object to destruction, decay, and disappearance as in the performance of physical burial in Wolf Vostell's *TV Dé-collage* (1961). The performance of Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975) comes to mind as well. Mary Lucier's closed-circuit installation, *Untitled Display System* (1975/87), displaying on a monitor the "live" image from a camera burned and scarred by light, is another example of the machine made mortal.²² The contrary process (to the death drive), of building sets into greater and greater unities, is exemplified in Paik's work, with his robot family, and continuing to such symbolic forms as *Video Flag X* (1985, in the collection of the Chase Manhattan Bank), *Video Flag Z* (1986, collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), *Flag Y* (1986, collection of the Detroit Institute of Art), and *Get-Away Car* (1988, collection of the American Museum of the Moving Image).

The physical arrangement of television monitors into sculptural objects continues to be significant in installation video, though when an artist wishes to suppress the immediate reference to the primordial American video installation—the home TV set—that TVs and even video monitors inevitably bring to mind, then how to mask or distract the visitor from these connotations becomes a problem. Then, various housings and sculptural enclosures for monitors are part of a strategy for allowing other apparatuses to emerge.

Developing the parameters of video installation beyond the monitor image/object itself, video sculpture can present an act of inverting what is inside to the outside: for example, in Shigeko Kubota's video sculpture *Three Mountains* (1976–79),²³ it is as if the TV image of mountains were emptied out, its contents taking geometrical shape in the pyramids surrounding the monitors. These pyramids are, then, no longer imitations of mountains, but processed, so to speak, through our image culture and offered to us again as image ghosts and mental apparitions in three dimensions.

But the act of inversion is not limited to image culture per se: Ken Feingold sees his installations as exteriorizations of his own interior, mental life. Alternatively, as I interpret an installation by Mary Lucier, *Asylum, A Romance* (1986), the symbolic map of our culture with its dated and inadequate oppositions and boundaries is made manifest and undermined as obsolete.²⁴

The interiority of such exteriorized images becomes most obvious, least anchored in materiality in video projections, such as Peter Campus's *Mem* (1975).²⁵ There is no monitor, only the visitor's body and perceptual system in relation to an image projection system, an interrelationship embodied in ghostly images, nothing but light. In contrast, this projection of interiority can be given massive form, equivalent to the very walls around the visitor in Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983).²⁶ The saint's imagination is projected as the visitor's overwhelming subjective view of a risky flight over mountain peaks. (Meanwhile an exterior surface of calm contemplation is pre-

sented within the interior of a hut with a still video image of a snow-capped mountain.)

There are also different degrees to which installation work occupies three-dimensional space, e.g., the video wall, the kinetic painting, the relief, the sculpture, and the installation. Insofar as spatial positions outside the two-dimensional field are charged with meaning that is an essential aspect of the work, all these levels partake of the poetics of installation. The spectator thus enters a charged space-in-between, taking on an itinerary, a role in a set in which images move through different ontological levels with each shift in dimension, in a kinesthetic art, a body art, an image art that is rather an embodied conceptual art.

Once multiple monitors and multiple channels of video were used, other parameters for comparison and contrast came into play. In Ira Schneider's *Manhattan is an Island* (1974), for example, an informational topographic map was created from video recordings taken at various height levels (a boat, a helicopter) and locations (downtown, midtown, uptown) of Manhattan.²⁷ In *Time Zones (A Reality Simulation)*, (1980), Schneider attempted the same on a world scale, displaying a circle of twenty-four (recorded, but ideally simultaneous satellite) images, one from each zone. These pieces are technologically complex, but conceptually simple elaborations of the notion of place.

In their collaboration on temporality, *Wipe Cycle* (1969),²⁸ Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider used nine color monitors around which pretaped material, live broadcast television, and live closed-circuit television images from the entrance to the gallery were subjected to time delay and switching. Here the possibility for an image track to migrate from monitor to monitor was exploited, as well as a series of contrasts between three different types of "liveness" and time delay. In his own work, however, the serial contrasts Frank Gillette makes are not restricted to the same conceptual realm. For example, in *Quidditas*, a three-part installation from 1974–75,²⁹ images and ambient sound were collected in Cape Cod, Vermont, and New Hampshire, in a display that compared three different rates of "nature time." (Here, rather than establish equivalent series, the camera could establish rhythms counter to that of natural process.)

Beryl Korot's *Dachau* (1974) was the first video installation to systematically explore the juxtaposition of the material on monitors, in a process that could be compared to serial music, or, as Korot noted, to weaving.³⁰ The spatial disposition of four monitors recreates a kind of broken proscenium space; it is the play at the temporal level that makes the piece, as intended, "impossible to put on television" (Korot) and that forces a viewer to watch the images differently. The ascetic, black-and-white video images show a rather banal tour of the contemporary concentration camp in Dachau, the Holocaust an absence

6. Film installations are rare. One example is Roger Welch's simulation of the drive-in movie apparatus, *Drive-In: Second Feature* installed at the Whitney Museum, 1982. However, there are video installations which use filmic constructions of space within the monitor image. Marie-Jo Lafontaine's *Victoria* installed at the Shainman Gallery, 1989, is one example. Slides with inserts of other (sometimes moving) image material are a more common reference to our frozen image culture, reminiscent of billboards, posters, and walls. See my "The Architecture of Representation: Video Works by Judith Barry," *Afterimage* (Oct. 1987), pp. 1, 8-11, for a detailed interpretation of two installations in this medium.

7. Dara Birnbaum's work has been the most directly related to the reworking and critique of the televisual representational forms per se, in such installations as *P M Magazine*. See *Dara Birnbaum: Rough Edits: Popular Image Video*, ed. Benjamin Buchloh (Nova Scotia Pamphlets: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987). In a very different vein, Judith Barry's *Maelstrom* (installed in the show *Video Art: Expanded Forms*, Whitney Museum of Art at Equitable Center, 1988), places the body of the visitor within a new construction of spatial representation seen primarily on television, the forced perspectival space of motion control and image processing.

8. Curated by Chip Lord, Mandeville Gallery, University of California, San Diego, 1987.

9. Language here is used in an inclusive sense to encompass all forms of expression, including the nonverbal and artistic. Emile Benveniste theorized about these two planes in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables: University of Miami, 1971). Gérard Genette extended this distinction to literary genres in "Frontiers of Narrative," *Figures of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 127-44. In subsequent writing on the subject, Genette has stressed that these planes of language are not massive and either/or distinctions, but rather coexist in subtle shifts even within a narrative form. These planes in art, undoubtedly as complex and co-present, are presented here in global form for the sake of introducing the distinction between them.

10. Ann-Marie Duguet in "Dispositifs," *Communications; Vidéo* 48 (1988), pp. 221-42 treats video installation at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s as a period in which the apparatuses of representation since the Renaissance were systematically explored and critiqued. She views the closed-circuit installation form of video as the privileged tool of this exploration, as it models representation itself. While this interpretation of the period is enlightening, it neglects the problem that the video camera and monitor actually introduce different rules into Renaissance representation. Cf. "Closed Circuits and Fragmented Egos."

11. The deconstruction of presence and identity is also the project of poststructuralist philosophy (Derrida and Foucault) and psychoanalysis (Lacan), as well. In "Talk, Talk, Talk: The Space of Discourse in Television News, Sportcasts, Talk Shows and Advertising," *Screen* 26 n.2 (March/April 1985), I introduce the notion of the fiction of discourse as it operates in American broadcast television. In my view, installation video deconstructs rather than furthers this fiction.

12. Martha Rosler critiques this predominant belief in the Utopian function of video art.

13. Cf. this writer's "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall and Television," in *The Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, in press).

14. In Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 116-47. The description of the sculpture as surrogate person and Smith's ride on the New Jersey Turnpike are addressed in this article as well.

15. My analyses of television representation show that it is discursive in this way as well, but not self-consciously or in a way that questions its own process. I have addressed the multiple levels of discourse in particular videos in several places: "Video Mom: Reflections on a Cultural Obsession" in *East/West Film Journal* June 1989; "Cyclones from Oz: On George Kuchar's *Weather Diary 1*," *Framework* (April 1989), and reviews of AFI Video Festivals of 1987 and 1988 in *Video Networks* (Jan. 1988 and March 1989).

16. Cf. John Searle's revision of Austin's theory of speech-acts.

17. The world created via interaction can be digitized on a computer screen, but it is not one that a visitor can enter bodily. Unless there is charged space outside the screen or a passage for the body, we have left the realm of installation art per se. To questions about how interactive interactive video actually is, again the analysis of experiential subjects is illuminating: the visitor interacts with what or whom? Is the interaction dialogic (i.e., between two subjects) or does it amount to a range of choices within a system of organization (who is the subject then)?

18. *The Luminous Image* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984).

19. Cf. "The Architecture of Representation," 20. Described in *Nam June Paik* (New York: Norton and the Whitney Museum, 1982).

21. Cf. Kraus, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 31-3.

22. A theme that continues in, for example, her installation, *Asylum, a Romance*, 1986. Cf. this writer's "Mary Lucier: Burning and Shining," *Video Networks* 10 n.5 (June 1986), pp. 1-6, and nos. 6/7 (July/August 1986), pp. 3-7.

23. A plywood construction with mirror, two 5-inch TV sets, and five 13-inch TV sets. The four channels were a Grand Canyon helicopter trip; a drive on Echo Cliff, Arizona; a Taos sunset and mirage; and a Teton sunset. Cf. the description in *Shigeo Kubota: Video Sculptures* (catalog published by the Museum Folkwang, Essen, 1982), p. 37 and its interpretation by John G. Hanhardt, p. 39.

24. "Burning and Shining,"

25. Discussed in detail in Duguet, "Dispositifs," p. 233f.

26. Described in detail in *Bill Viola: Survey of a Decade* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1988) and discussed in my "Interiors: A Review of *The American Video Landscape*," *Video Networks* (March 1989), pp. 15-19.

27. The piece had six to seven video and audio channels and from nineteen to twenty-three monitors on pedestals, plus a video camera when presented at the Kitchen, 1974, and the Whitney Museum, 1977.

28. Such was the hardware needed to make the serial comparison: to an audio loop add three half-inch reel-to-reel VHS recorders comprising two for pre-recorded playback and one live channel of input from a black and white camera, time delayed and displayed every four seconds. The live image appeared on the center screen alternating with four seconds of live broadcast TV. The switcher constantly changed the placement of the other channels of time-delayed, live images and pre-recorded playback (four of each) on the eight screens surrounding the center. Today, multiple-monitor, multiple-channel installations are commonly as complex.

29. Shown on three monitors set in a shallow 12-degree curve about two and a half feet apart.

30. Cf. the reproduction of her score in the description of the piece in *Video Art*, eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot. Her subsequent installation, *Text and Commentary* (1977), made this weaving metaphor explicit. *Dachau* was one of the three pieces in the Long Beach retrospective of 1988 and is also included in the retrospective in Cologne, 1989.

31. The recent retrospective, *American Landscape Video*, three of the seven installations, Mary Lucier's *Wilderness* (1986), with its strong narrative dimension, Doug Hall's *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described* (1987), and Steina Vasulka's *The West* (1983), exploited these poetic possibilities in very different ways. Cf. Morse, "Interiors."

Dan Graham Video in Relation to Architecture

Sections of this article are taken from my previously published writings: "Video-Architecture-Television," in *Writings on Video and Video Works 1970-1978*, edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Halifax, Nova Scotia, and New York: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1979); *Buildings and Signs* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago/Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1981); "Art in Relation to Architecture/Architecture in Relation to Art," *Artforum*, February 1979; "Signs," *Artforum*, April, 1981; "An American Family," *New Observations*, No. 31, edited by Barbara Kruger, 1985.