

Three Video Artists: Robbins, Clarke, Vasulka

By Amy Greenfield

Al Robbins at Anthology Film Archives Video Series at the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York City

Al Robbins strikes at the physical center of video with the extension of his organism, the handheld video camera. He deals with video energy, one of the most basic aspects of video, so basic and dangerous that very few video artists deal with it directly. In his showing at the Holly Solomon Gallery (Anthology Video's home until Anthology finds a new building), I came in a little late, and entered with the room dark, while a triad of monitors sent out the image of an intense velvet black and phosphorescent white ocean seen closeup, then from far, violent and then calm, the movement, light, textures of the ocean entered into by a moving camera, in shots which were interrupted by the irregular, angular rhythm of the camera "cuts" (edits made in the camera). It seemed as if I were immediately placed into the center of a mass of swirling waves which came bursting out of the monitors—not an ocean image of pretty picturesqueness, but an elemental energy and motion which seemed an extension and abstraction of some personal violence—a nature internalized by the reactions of the human mind/gut through an image/sound forming instrument—an internal video ocean. I do not wish to make a direct comparison, but I am reminded of the way Van Gogh entered nature with the violence of his brush strokes.

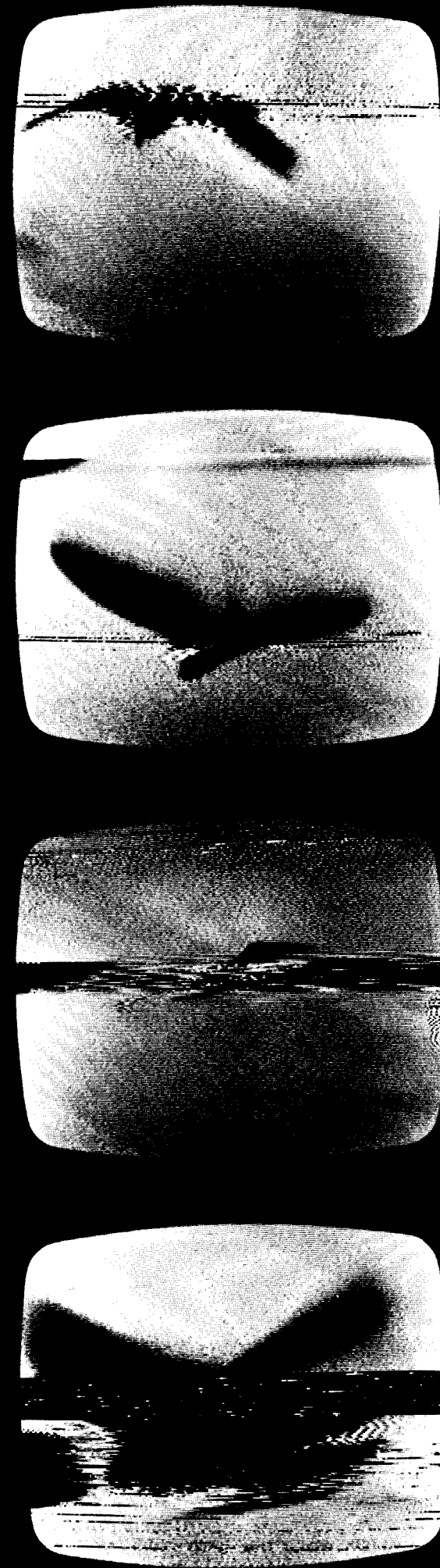
But as with Van Gogh, the seemingly gut reaction is accomplished by a dynamic use of craft so organic that it is hard to analyse. We could say that these means were accomplished by close-up camerawork in relation to the ocean's light and mass or a bird's wing; by swirling camera moves now in relation to the ocean's movement, then which circle around a bird's flight; an intense perception of light which catches up the sun's points on the water at just the right angle. But while these means are used, the total is larger than the techniques—a gestalt arrived at through knowledge of the instrument—the black and white video portapak—which allows complex participation in and communication of interior forces of nature. I think Dziga Vertov best describes this kind of camera "I":

This is I, apparatus, maneuvering in the chaos of movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. ["The Manifests of the Beginning of 1922," quoted in P. Adams Sitney, ed., The Avant Garde Film. A Reader of Theory and Criticism.]

To return to the surface actuality of the tapes: they were made this past summer and early fall at Martha's Vineyard, the latest installment of such tapes made by Robbins. While the ocean is the central image of these 1978 Vineyard tapes, giving them a chaotic heroism only latent in Robbins' past work, there are contrasting images of the flight of birds slicing through strong air and the motion of tall grasses, like unsheathed spikes wafted. Again, images are taken not as "subject" but as vehicles reduced to basic form and motion to be transformed by Robbins' camera-as-organism extender. Nature becomes an "actor" in the internal drama of motion-sensing, extending from within to without.

After my immediately subjective absorption in these realities, I notice that in addition to a triad of monitors, a camera is pointing at a fourth monitor, and that it is this camera which is carrying a slightly reprocessed image to the side monitors, so that these two monitors show an image which is slightly more abstracted and closer up than the central monitor.* This emphasis on slight shifts of perception is the formal means for the whole evening, creating subtle tensions and varying degrees of physicality and abstraction in the material. And it is through the attention to electronic manipulation—of camera edits, camera and monitor transforms, that the energy-violence is subverted and what could lead to catastrophe—deluge—is turned into intense meditation. The danger of total submergence, the entering into nature via the ecstasy of the camera, is continually interrupted by those rational punctuation marks of the camera clicks and glitches, signalling conscious decisions continually made. And what could have been unbearable repetition became (if one was willing to give in to the intensity) a series of variations on a physical base. (For instance, just how the light hits the waves, never hitting the same way twice with the same rhythm or spacing in the frame, resulted in a kaleidoscope of changes.)

* Robbins also intended a sound reprocessing to set up sound vibrations between the monitors.



After a tape of the ocean experienced close, far, close, released, caught up, extended, concentrated, Robbins had apparently internalized the image/energy/motion/light to such an extent that he did his next tape with his eyes closed. In this too we become aware of the most inward sense-sound. The white noise of ocean is interrupted by the camera's clicks and stops, and we "see" the motion of Robbins' closed-eyed black sensing as the camera's own swirling motion attached to no recognizable image. From this motion inside obliterated vision, we start to see light, lightness, though where this light space comes from is unsure, as we have no spatial orientation. Then the light becomes attached to some dark moving specks, and the camera attaches itself to these specks, trying erratically to find their rhythm. Robbins must have opened his eyes, for the camera starts to move more regularly, until we see a flock of birds as the camera catches more and more closely their swoops, hoverings, and glides in its own winged motions. Again, the erratically flowing motions of nature are disturbed and opposed by the interrupting camera cuts, which wound the clear video-surface of the sky with their staccato and prick our longing for epitomal flight out of too-easy fantasizing. The human being needing the machine to fly and a machine to meet the ocean on equal terms. Again, Vertov on the camera "eye" describes Robbins' camera "I":

I free myself from today and forever from the human immobility. . .
I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar
together with falling and rising bodies. [Ibid.]

After this tape the evening returns to the main theme of ocean, which becomes progressively more manipulated electronically, producing simultaneously greater tensions and abstraction. Tape followed tape, quickening in tempo, until the ocean turned to jewels of black and white phosphorescent signals, and camera glitches came as quick as orgasm. As the ocean becomes more and more punctuated by camera glitches, the disturbance and interruption overtakes lyricism. Then the screen surface is consumed in a texture of erotic camera glitches and the ocean itself is inside us and existing as an invisible presence behind the electronic surface.

I saw some earlier tapes by Robbins at a private screening at Anthology Film Archives in 1977. That screening was also structured around a triad of images, the central one a video projection, with two small monitors on either side. Sometimes the images clearly contrasted (i.e., water vs. birds) and sometimes they nearly coincided. Instead of ocean, the main image was birds, the main motion flight—a lyric tape of circlings, wings up, swoops and glides, a hovering-in-the-air, but always underlined by Robbins' intensity and in-camera cuts.

The two different screenings show two different variations of Robbins' structuring of his material. Robbins' way of working makes post-production structuring difficult, both technically and aesthetically. The use of in-camera edits makes the tapes electronically difficult to duplicate, and the organic shooting process makes calculated editing difficult. Yet it is this writer's opinion that Robbins' recent presentations are bringing into play the necessary painstaking process of structuring—just which "takes" are shown, how placed in time and space, where the material takes us, how slowly or fast—are essential questions for Robbins in structuring his material. And the material is so flexible it can be shown in many combinations of equipment in many kinds of spaces, each new showing presenting Robbins with a new possibility for communicating his work.

I talked with Robbins, because his own talking at the Anthology showing was provocative but needed clarification, and because I wanted to know more of the development of his thinking. Since 1967 Robbins has taken motion as his base, and has, as sensed strongly in his tapes, linked motion with the exploration of chaos. In 1974 he made a conscious shift in perception and since then has dealt not only with motion, but also directly with the physicalness of video, through perception. It is this single-minded focus which makes Robbins' ocean scintillate with flashing gashes, points of light and caves of thick darkness, going beneath the slick surface of video. The latest conscious concern of video "physicalness" for Robbins is the concern with the surface texture of video—textural video. And it is partly this devotion which makes us feel flight in his strong birds winging out, and feel growth in his spikey tall grass, and makes his tapes bristle with life.

Robbins said that in his 1977 screening he showed tapes which had a definite poetical "line" of development, and that in the 1978 tapes, he had not been specifically involved with a relation to words, but was "playing the instrument." Perhaps this is why the techniques he uses "took off" and started to become an electronic metaphor for the process of ecstasy.

Robbins said that, for him, the clean video edit is a throwback to film, and that the camera's unclean, visible and audible "glitched" edit, is more integral to the medium. He uses it consciously as a rhythmic "stop" to motion—and in the 1978 tapes, the more violent the motion, the faster he stopped it, setting up extreme tensions. He said, after taping, that he had to ask himself which was the truer commitment, to enter into the ocean with the camera, keeping himself behind the camera, or to leave that work process, and enter in with his own body, as an uncompromising act.

Robbins described for me his latest showing on December 3, in Queens, at P.S. 1 (also sponsored by Anthology Film Archives), which I missed. It was, apparently, his most complex and structured presentation to date (at the 1977 showing he had four hours to prepare, at the Holly Solomon show only one hour, and at P.S. 1 twelve hours plus a helper).

The P.S. 1 Anti-Catastrophe show was a one-day, all-day installation molding the total of two or four hours of tape into what Robbins calls "dynamic video sculpture." Three monitors were placed high for the birds/sky tapes—a 23 inch, a 5 inch hung from the ceiling, and a 9 inch. Two monitors, 23 inch and 12 inch, were placed on the floor for the water/ground tapes. A camera reprocessed sound and image as at the Solomon Gallery show, and a reflector project the whole down the P.S. 1 hall. But Robbins' own writing states his intentions and the effect of the installation more accurately:

in the P.S. 1 show, i have treated instalation
as an extension of the act of shooting

installation being an act of sculpture
(ultimately to be as fluid and as intricately expressive
as shooting)

regarding the tapes not as image surface of
monitors placed in space,

but rather concentrating on the space between the monitor images,
and between those images and the viewer

attempting to fill this space with travels of light,
electricity, sound

to make tangible this space through air

as the real space of sculpting in video

to attempt to set the monitors speaking to each other

and involve the viewer in this speaking

Wendy Clarke's The Love Tapes at the Museum of Modern Art

I think solitude is love, because without anyone you have yourself, because that's really all you have . . . and when there comes a time when you can show it, then that is true love . . . but you need someone to tell you the loneliness and pain is OK.

In a small room on the lower level of the Museum of Modern Art, many people, each seen singly, each alone in a room, looking into a TV monitor at themselves as they are looked at by a video camera, and simultaneously look out at us, talking about what love—the experience, the feeling—personally is to them. As they look at themselves they start to look into themselves, into those secret places which we keep covered up most of the time. And the video medium transmits their words and transforms their facial expressions into a subtle mirror for their hidden feelings. As they look at themselves, we see them change inwardly, confronting a central aspect of life—love. And they, looking out of the monitor, look into us. They speak to us as they speak to the video mike. This is the result of Wendy Clarke's The Love Tapes.

The words at the head of this review are from a teen-ager talking in The Love Tapes. A young girl who, because of the interactive situation Clarke has set up and because of the power of the medium itself, reveals to us that a young woman, perhaps many young women, contain the wisdom we attribute to philosophers. Clarke and video have allowed people to reveal themselves and reveal an intelligence which formerly was reserved for the famous, the scholarly, the philosophers, or poets. Here is a tape which taps that capacity, if only for a moment, in the audience itself, in the anonymous people, and gives these people a sense of their own value. This is remarkable.

Probably the most remarkable and important thing about this seemingly simple black and white tape of "talking heads" is that it deals directly and articulately, without cliché, with the subject which is perhaps the most sentimentalized in twentieth century popular culture and perhaps the most taboo in twentieth century "high" art—the subject of love. One of the reasons the tape deals with the subject effectively is that Clarke does not censure or moralize. She sets up a structure for people to face themselves, think and feel, then withdraws and lets them speak for themselves on video as an act of discovery—a series of articulate revelations about the very personal and individual definition of love we each have within us, no two quite alike.

The process of producing the tapes is important, as important as the result. In the winter of 1977-78 Clarke did shows of her interactive video environments in Los Angeles. At these shows she set up a new situation for people who came to see them. For individuals who volunteered, she played a tape of herself talking about what love has personally come to mean to her, a tape out of her on-going Video Journal. She then asked each person to go into a room alone, face a video monitor which gave the person back his/her own face and, while looking at their monitor image, to talk into a microphone about what love is to them, personally, for the length of time of a piece of music, "I'm In the Mood for Love," played on a tape recorder in the background.

Back in New York she expanded and varied this method, wanting to contact as many kinds of people as possible, different age groups and cultural groups.

For the Museum of Modern Art installation, Clarke put together one hour of these "love tapes"—from the Los Angeles group, from a black group of mainly middle-aged adults, from a Spanish-speaking workshop, and from a group of teenagers. Clarke, by making just the right decisions as an interactive video artist, has allowed people and video itself to come up with what Suzanne Langer rightfully finds dangerously lacking in our society—a language for feeling. And not just any feeling, but one of the most central, essential, and socially neglected feelings—love.

What is a "language for feelings"? In this tape it operates on two levels: the direct level of words, which are simple words, words we all know, but which are somehow gathered into meanings by personal, felt, combination, so that they strike deep into just those places of hurt and hope, frustration and ecstasy, that we all have and that we must consciously articulate if we are to live creatively. And then the tape works on the level of facial expression, as each person's face goes from a self-conscious mask, an awkward "subject" looking at a video monitor, then to a direct confrontation with this "self" looking back, until the mask dissolves and the facial musculature becomes mobile and transparent, anticipating connotations and feelings which the verbal words cannot convey. For instance, a young black man's face starts to unfreeze, and puckers of hurt start to form on his forehead, though he is hidden (from himself and us) behind reflective sun glasses. Then he says (no one is in the room, yet he knows that this video box is a communication machine), "I'm going to tell you a secret that I've never told anybody. I'm afraid of people. I'm afraid of being hurt."

That is a direct language, so simple, yet if it were paraphrased, it would lose its truth and sound trite. And this young man sums up the revelation having to look at himself when he says that love for him is like his sunglasses—he can give it, but he can't get it back. And finally the pain inside him shows all over his face.

Clarke has made a clear statement of communication to an audience out of what is normally reserved for some of our most private moments, or for a therapy session. Although the tape is cathartic and has a therapeutic effect, it is not the private self-convoluted, language of therapy. But like a good therapist, Clarke sets up a safe structure for the revelation of feelings, and then retreats non-judgementally. The tape has no "point of view," never says "love is this" or "love is that," but simply lets each person let down barriers and speak verbally, and visually. It is direct video, basic video, confessional video.

Of course Clarke is the one who has carefully chosen an hour of tapes out of the hundred-and-one she has recorded. And I feel that this selectivity is in the interests of giving as clear and varied a communication as possible, and not a judgement or point of view. Except for this selection, none of the words or facial expressions, which often play as important a part as the words, are in any way edited.

The only aspect of the tape which I felt was perhaps too great an intervention or statement or manipulation on Clarke's part, considering the pur-



pose of the tape, was the choice of placing music in the background. The music used for the Los Angeles tapes ("I'm In the Mood for Love") seemed to increase the alienated melancholy, and was an almost sardonic comment both on the song and the feelings expressed. Yet the music served the necessary function of giving each person a definite time-limit, and in the memory, the people themselves transcend the music.

Clarke brings out the capacity of video to provide a non-dogmatic human language and to provide the serious, deep human feedback which commercial television so denies and works against. In the Los Angeles tapes, a middle-aged woman (very beautiful), remembers past loves wistfully, nostalgically but with a gentle joy. Then she says, "It is the 21st of December, the beginning of winter," then she goes on, "there are still two weeks left in the year." She might find that love again, and as she says this, she looks half upward, with such a light in her eyes, cheeks, and smile, that in this little romantic dream for those last two weeks of the year, we hear and see her becoming young with hope. Then, in another tape, placed just right by Clarke in this sixty-minute segment, a woman, her face tight with unhappiness, looks and looks at herself as her expression goes from tightness to anguish, trying to speak, but remaining silent until the song is over. In this silence, the bare eloquence of black and white video articulates with ruthless clarity the woman's inner struggle with the anguish of lovelessness, more clearly than words. It is very moving.

In another moving moment, a Spanish woman (speaking Spanish, with English subtitles on the tape), talks of love as a universal quickening,* a reawakening and a renewal. I don't understand Spanish, but it seemed that the rhythm and sonority of the words went beyond the literal English meaning, like music or lyric poetry. When the woman couldn't speak any longer, but cried, I felt it as catharsis.

A man, black, maybe in his forties, distinguishes between divine love, which is good, always feels good, like when he plays the drums. And then human, sexual love, which for him means hurt. A woman with a wonderful round open hat to match her round, open face, smiling loudly at herself, overflowing, says (to herself, and to the hat) something like, Esther says, "I'm beautiful, how talented I am, what a child of God I am . . . I can do anything I want to do." Then the music ends, and when she thinks she is "off" she says, "That was baaaaad." She was a performer, she wanted to come off beautiful, and did. But by undercutting her own performance, that edge of humor keeps the whole thing from being "too much." It is this subtlety, blocked around a basic core, which is the "art" in the tapes and which begins to weave an easily accessible language for love in the 1970s.

Clarke wants to keep doing these tapes until she has tried her method in as many places in the United States as possible, and in other countries. But already there is an aspect of the tape which is anthropological. There seem to be certain patterns within each group, and there are, of course, exceptions to these patterns. I myself haven't studied the totality of the tapes in any way which would merit definitions, and the following generalizations are too pat. But, if Clarke continues to make the tapes with enough people in enough cultures and sub-cultures, anthropological extraction will be part of the tapes. From the MoMA showing and my viewing of other of the "love tapes," the L. A. group were generally white, intellectually educated, middle-class, perhaps people who had moved to L.A. They seemed to express love as a difficult search—often painful. Some denied love, or expressed a sense of loss of love. The Afro-Americans from New York, who all seemed over thirty, often talked of a definite, intimate, knowledge of love of God for them and they for God, which is entirely positive, and then a physical love between the sexes, completely different from divine love, which often involved hurt. And the woman in the hat found divine love through her friend, Esther. The Spanish-speaking group spoke of love between parents and children, and of a universal love associated with nature. And then there were the most individualized statements, like the teenager, who couldn't be categorized.

I learned and enlarged my own sense of what love is, from all of the people in the love tapes. In committing their words and faces to video, they went beyond the privately personal and became actors, communicators of the privately personal for the duration of the music placed on the record. They remain real after the tape is over, as actors in our own internal memory of experiences centered around love. The tape becomes a communication, not a series of self-indulgences, partly because of the tapes Clarke has selected,

* The word literally means "pregnant" in the Spanish the woman was speaking.

partly because the people aren't just talking to and for themselves. Through the objectifying mechanics of video, they are talking to the "you" beyond or inside the video monitor—the invisible audience.

I said that The Love Tapes are "direct video" and while it in no way diminishes Wendy Clarke's accomplishment, I cannot help tracing certain roots back to Wendy's mother, Shirley Clarke, and her film Portrait of Jason. We are all influenced by our forerunners, and it is a tribute to them both that Shirley's work has been an influence on Wendy and that Wendy has made works out of this influence, works that stand in their own right as significantly different and very much her own. And I find the differences as striking as the influences. Shirley Clarke's Portrait of Jason was a stark, pioneering direct cinema work of the 1960s. For the length of a feature film, one person, Jason, a black man living on the edge of society, let down barriers and told his story for the camera—a man who was a chronic, colorful failure, becoming for the length of a whole night in front of lights and camera, a virtuoso actor, going from obscure failure to successful performer for the Clarke film. Shirley Clarke was the director, pointing her camera at him mercilessly, egging him on. This was the opposite strategy from Wendy Clarke's Love Tapes. I was devastated at the technique and at Jason's life, his horrendous self-revelations and cover-ups. Wendy must have absorbed this film most intimately. But Wendy, instead of being the Director is the Non-Director, instead of focusing on one person, a unique "freak," for an entire film, gives such a wide variety of people who we might call "normal" (if there is such a thing) a brief moment. Instead of film digging into the subject, video lets the subject dig in on his or her own. And instead of one person's "insane" story, we find many people's strong hold on sanity. Shirley's is the more pioneering work, Wendy's the more life-affirming—or are these irrelevant and subjective comparisons in the end? Shirley manipulated Jason into just that place where he would have to open up, and Wendy chose not to manipulate the many people in her tape in order to allow each one to open up on his/her own.

Steina Vasulka and Allvision No. 2 at The Kitchen Center in New York

Allvision No. 2 [signifies] the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. The act of seeing, the image source and the kinetic resources come from the installation itself, choreographed and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanical performance. [Steina Vasulka quoted in a Kitchen press release]

Two cameras are mounted on the ends of a slowly revolving axis with a perfectly spherical mirror at the center of the axis. On the monitors, viewers see an artificially created 360 degree image. While the viewers are part of the "real" space, they can at the same time see themselves in the "imaginary" dimension created on the screens. [from a Kitchen press release description]

In 1975 Steina Vasulka (with her husband Woody one of the early pioneers of video art) started to develop her mechanical/electronic remote video machine for transforming the soft "rectangle of the video screen into circular space." Now, in 1978-79, Allvision No. 2 is an elegant and silently eloquent kinetic video sculpture, imparting to the eye of the video camera the illusion of omnipotence.

Set on a white cube placed diagonally in the middle of the 27 foot, 7 inch, by 24 foot, 6 inch gallery is the machine. The two cameras at either end of a 4 foot motor-powered boom look at and revolve around the spherical mirror. What each camera "sees" is the globe and everything reflected in it—the room, everyone in the room, including oneself, and the camera "looking" at itself, plus the real room and the "real" people in the room. What each camera sees is transmitted to each monitor, all moving in dislocated and circularly distorted in circular 360 degree space.

Therefore the sculptural aspects of Allvision are triple: the mechanical structure of the machine itself, the plasticity of the video image, which gives the illusion of space-in-depth because of its complex organization of circular form and motion, and the total configuration of the installation, which includes all the parameters of the room in its sculptural organization. It is this multi-levelness which makes Allvision such a rich piece.

Allvision simultaneously dislocates reality and resynthesizes it into a highly organized harmonious art-reality. This synthesis involves by my count eight different levels of the same reality reorganized and retransformed mechanically and electronically.

The sculpture was impeccably installed in the small gallery at the Kitchen (from December 15 to January 4) so that the piece seemed designed for the room and the room existing for the piece. Although Allvision must

have this effect on many spaces, its "at homeness" at the Kitchen is particularly pertinent, as Steina was one of the founders of the Kitchen.

Hopefully, the words of this piece, meant to describe, are actually somewhat hard to decipher, mystifying. Because for all its centered simplicity, the piece is mysterious, and takes real concentrated deciphering on the part of the viewer to figure out just what is happening—what the cameras are doing there, what they are seeing, what we see on the monitors, what each monitor is seeing in relation to the cameras, how we seem to get into the picture in different ways, just how many different ways we are being seen, what happens when we move in relation to the whole thing.

Even after I had "figured it out," I still had a sense of mystery, and deciphering turned to a kind of philosophical meditation, until the piece asked the kind of philosophical questions such as "if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there, does it make a sound?" Since the space-time are the space and time of a compressed infinity organized out of immediate daily realities, we are able to relate ideas of infinity, paradox, riddle to ourselves and our surroundings, especially because ourselves and our surroundings are precisely the apparent subject of Allvision's imagery. Allvision is the land of meditative art being cultivated by artists seeking sanity and a profundity in a more-than-often hectic society which mainly cultivates the superficial. The whir of the machine, the sounds of distant footsteps, doors opening and closing, which accompany Allvision (the actual sounds of the piece and the environment), remind me of Susan Sontag's essay "The Art of Silence," its language of not-words, not-images, produced for a kind of positive endlessness.

Allvision to me relates to the history of twentieth century sculpture as much as it does to video art. The revolving machine reminds me somewhat of Tinguely's self-destroying machines, though Allvision's function is to organize and synthesize rather than disrupt and destroy. And the spherical video image is perhaps in the tradition of Arp sculpture.

It is this writer's opinion that video sculpture such as Allvision is one of the most vital and relevant forms of sculpture in the 1970s, and should be regarded as such by established museums. Video sculpture (all the artists I have written on for Field of Vision—Shigeo Kubota in the last issue, and Robbins, Clarke, and Vasulka here, make video sculptures) distill the positive electronic energy-field and the feedback properties of our twentieth century electronic technology into concentrated, highly charged art of processes, structures, and imagery.