NEW
LANGTON
ARTS

VIDEO: INSTALLED

New Langton Arts is an artist-run organization operating in San Francisco since 1975 which continues to present contemporary work in a variety of media, including installations, exhibitions, performance, new music, video, poetry and more.

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NEW LANGTON ARTS

VIDEO: INSTALLED

PART I

SEPTEMBER 9–OCTOBER 4, 1986

DOUG HALL

STEINA

FRANCESC TORRES

PART II

OCTOBER 14–NOVEMBER 8, 1986

HOWARD FRIED

SHIGEKO KUBOTA

TONY OURSLER

VIDEO: INSTALLED

As the middle class retreated to the suburbs in the nineteen fifties, television programming—both the entertainment programs and the commercial advertising (which as time passed became increasingly interchangeable)—was coming to dominate American leisure and, it can be argued, American consciousness itself. In the art world of the time, heroic painters of abstract canvases were the centers of attention, although generally rejected by those fleeing to the suburbs as impossibly "modern;" I am almost certain that I saw a chimp painting a Pollack on Steve Allen's tv show, (anticipating the simulacra movement several decades in advance)....

In the nineteen eighties the children of that suburban generation are in large numbers returning to gentrify the neighborhoods their parents abandoned to light industry and to the poor, led by artists reclaiming the territory. Many of these artists are largely seeking to come to terms with their primary cultural heritage, television, and also with the increasingly problematic role of artists in this society, by making art that utilizes video and, it is hoped, is thereby more accessible to a larger audience.

New Langton Arts, founded as 80 Langton Street in 1975, opened in a commercial loft as a center of just such a growing urban artist community, in San Francisco's South of Market. Its first exhibition, by Peter D'Agostino, was a video installation consisting of monitor footage documenting a walk through the city by the artist, and a recreation of one of the sites in the tape, a chain link fence with various debris. This interest in video as installation and sculpture has continued at Langton through the years, and has culminated in *Video:Installed.* Looking back at D'Agostino's work, and at this show, one can abstract some elements of the genre and compare them to the two main interests at war in today's art world: those seeking to reaffirm the fifties' notion of artist as creative hero and object maker for the marketplace, and those seeking to deal with issues of production of language and imagery, particularly with attention to the roles of mass media.

Video installation is not video for television, not just more (if particularly artful) grist for the mill. It tends to be interdisciplinary, combining media art and visual art, at the least. Video installations are not a likely target for commercial speculation, nor are they readily collected by museums (although Torres' piece in *Video:Installed* is owned by the La Jolla Museum). There is a time basis to much of the work—both internally in the length of the video (e.g. the duration of D'Agostino's walk), and externally, in the poignant existence of the work for a specified time and then its dismantling (July 1975 and never again). Often using found materials (both sculpturally, as in D'Agostino's piece, and more recently in the video itself), the works may not be readily recognized as traditional fine art. Often they are not visually attractive in any but an intellectual sense. Most artists working in video installation do not use traditional pictorial and narrative technique, but rather prefer to have their audience work with them in discerning the significance of their visual juxtapositions and textual leaps.

What conclusions can we draw about this body of work as it gains increased acceptance in its second decade, and the number of visible practitioners increases? One place to start is to dismiss any attempts to tie video art to television, which is equivalent to linking Rothko and Dutch Boy because they both use paint. My understanding of why artists choose to work in video has to do with its potential as a fine art medium and not, by and large, with its broadcast potential; this is even doubly true in the twice removed installation genre.

What about the relationship between the artists and their works? There is a line of contemporary thought that in an age of instant mechanical and electronic reproduction of images accompanied by a glut of media imagery it is an anachronism for contemporary artists to add to all the output as their primary task. It seems to me that the pieces in this show sidestep this issue. While not wallowing in the sentimentality of reviving modernist movements, many of these artists (half the works in *Video:Installed* for example) are still firm believers in including original material, often in traditional genres—Steina's *The West* can be seen as a pastoral landscape. Others (the other half of the artists in this show in-

cluded) find more value in found materials, television and film, or in the use of a concrete video as in Howard Fried's installation. Video installation offers us the possibility of meaningful art accessible to a wider than usual audience because it embraces a thoroughly contemporary medium and formally extends it to the point that it is something entirely new. If the artists bring some elements into this new form which are held over from older notions of art making, such elements are both overwhelmed by the new form and revitalized by it—and they are usually only one element of a larger installation piece. Video installation artists are not in the inherently contradictory position of offering radical solutions within traditional forms: unlike those who find themselves painted into a corner, these artists have synthesized a new art form capable of containing their ideas.

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Doug Hall, *The Plains of San Agustin* (partial view), 1986. This piece is part of a larger project *Storm and Stress*, which is being executively produced by Contemporary Arts Television, a project of the Institute of Contemporary Art and WGBH Television in Boston. The principle photographer for this project was Jules Backus.

Part I

Artists working with installation begin with the premise that the environment of a space is their raw material —the light, temperature, smells, feelings of airiness or confinement, et al, are the basic elements they begin to consider before any other esthetic decisions or artworks are introduced. Doug Hall's installation, *The Plains of San Agustin* was set in a room totally devoid of light other than that placed there by the artist. A large (5 feet by 4 feet) video projection was the first element to come to the viewers' attention upon entering the room. With its succulent color in the darkened space, the tape's imagery of natural power—hail, lightning, thunder, enormous ocean waves throwing huge ships around, and an unforgettable tornado bowing at the waist—accompanied by a roaring soundtrack, was hypnotic. With the projector hidden away in the invisible recesses of the ceiling, the rectangle of light became a video relief, a transfixing window. To the viewer's right was a metal stool on which sat a tiny monitor taken apart, so neatly fileted that its electronic innards were visible and demystified. Its black and white imagery was of large scale man-made efforts to control or imitate nature—the most powerful computer in the world, a dam overflowing, a dynamo, a steel mill. The third element of the piece consisted of two chairs, of the same thin and rusted nature as the stool, of an exaggerated height and visual frailty, facing the monitor, and attached by wires to a bank of home-made batteries. These electric chairs gave off a considerable though safe shock if touched, bringing Hall's

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Francesc Torres, *The Dictatorship of Swiftness*, 1986. Originally commissioned by The La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.

musings on power back to the personal and intimate.

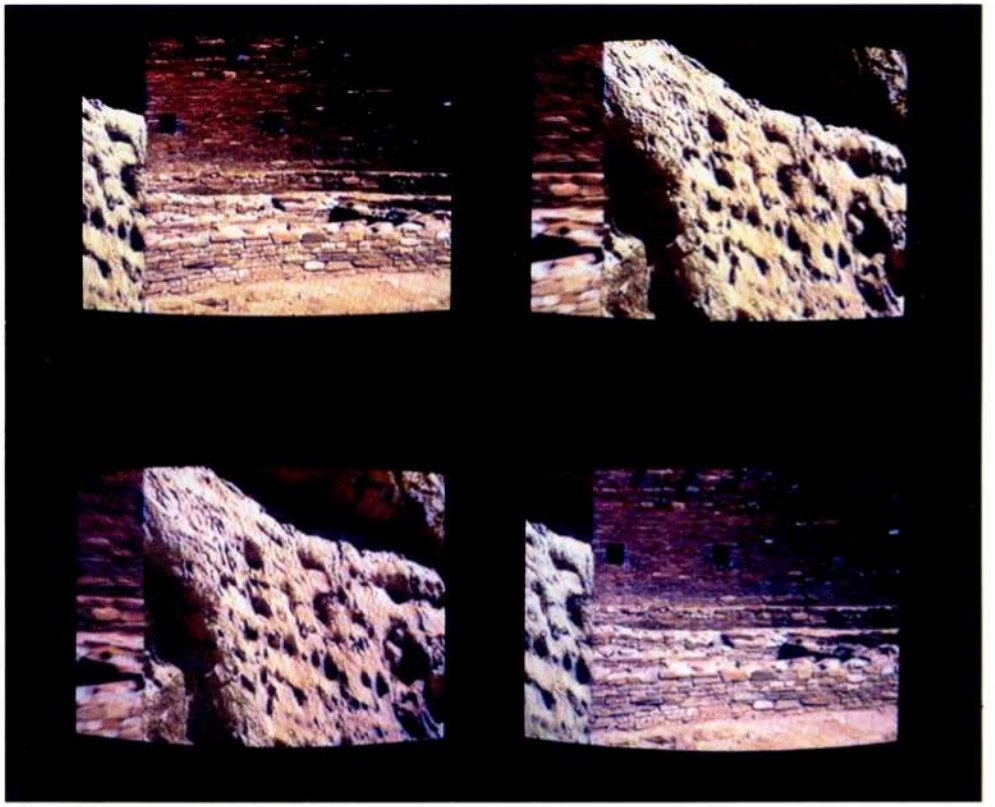
The subject matter of Hall's piece is his refusal to turn away from image gathering, his self conscious and wary neoromanticism. Hall literally has travelled around the country hunting for natural imagery to record, a preeminently archaic and heroic act, while at the same time having the intention of making art which is about questioning that act, and drawing attention to the tremendous power inherent in all image making, selection and distribution. Hall is aware of this contradiction—he wants the viewer to be tempted to reach out and touch his charged sculpture, so that they might be reminded of the fatal attraction that the powerful can hold for us. I would also suggest, for the purposes of this catalog, that the formal choice of utilizing video installation is not coincidental, but rather holds a certain art historical necessity for the most successful implementation of Hall's intention.

Francesc Torres' installation, *The Dictatorship of Swiftness*, consists of six monitors placed on top of five-foot tall rectangular plexiglas boxes, making for an impressive semicircular altar. Inside the boxes are small fluorescent lights of blue or red, underneath which are suspended army helmets. On the bottom of each box small devices, to which toy cars are attached by long poles, shiver every few seconds causing the cars to jump. Displayed on the floor in front of the monitors are silver buckets filled with water, and a large machine gun. The content of the video on the central four monitors is found war footage alternating with scenes of automobile racing. On the left monitor is a loop of a race car, out of control, spinning insanely on its nose. The right monitor shows another loop of a reclining soldier apparently passing out, in extreme closeup. Occasionally the image from one of the side monitors is picked up by the central four. The editing is precise and multi-levelled, if occasionally glib: the underside of a spinning car freezes revealing a highlighted crucifix shaped exhaust pipe, which is followed by a cut to a military graveyard. Similarly, after a tow truck drags off a disabled car, a cut is made to soldiers carrying off a dead comrade. A soundtrack of air raid sirens mixed with church bells sounds in the background.

Torres requests that the viewer consider the relationship between speed and violence in contemporary society on every level, from the literal wherein the worship of speed at the racecourse often leads to accidental violence and can come to resemble, perhaps not coincidentally, actual

military violence, to the more metaphorical extensions of such thinking in a skepticism about the reliance on high speed electronic information dissemination and the fear of technology's potential link-up with oppressive forces.

Steina's installation, titled *The West*, has been seen in various incarnations utilizing different combinations of monitors for this two channel piece, occasionally with a mirror to double the effect. At Langton Steina showed the piece in its four monitor alignment, with a synchronizing device to keep the two channels perfectly matched. Predominant in the imagery are the Chaco Canyon ancient Indian ruins, and the Very Large Array immense radio telescope in the middle of Arizona's desert wilderness. Both landscapes were often taped from a silver garden ball turning at a slow revolution, offering a perfect, mechanical and abstracted portrait through 360 degrees, in two dimensions. As many as four sources at once wash across the screen in Steina's painterly video, moving from the simple to the most complex during its thirty minutes. At first moving from left to right with a new image over the established shot, she then adds right to left movement, and up and down as well, so that at some moments four different sources can be tracked, as well as camera movements complimentary to those washes, so that an immensely complex system is established. A Woody Vasulka electronic soundtrack adds a flavor of sci fi menace, offering an aural relief for the intensely formal and rigorous visuals.



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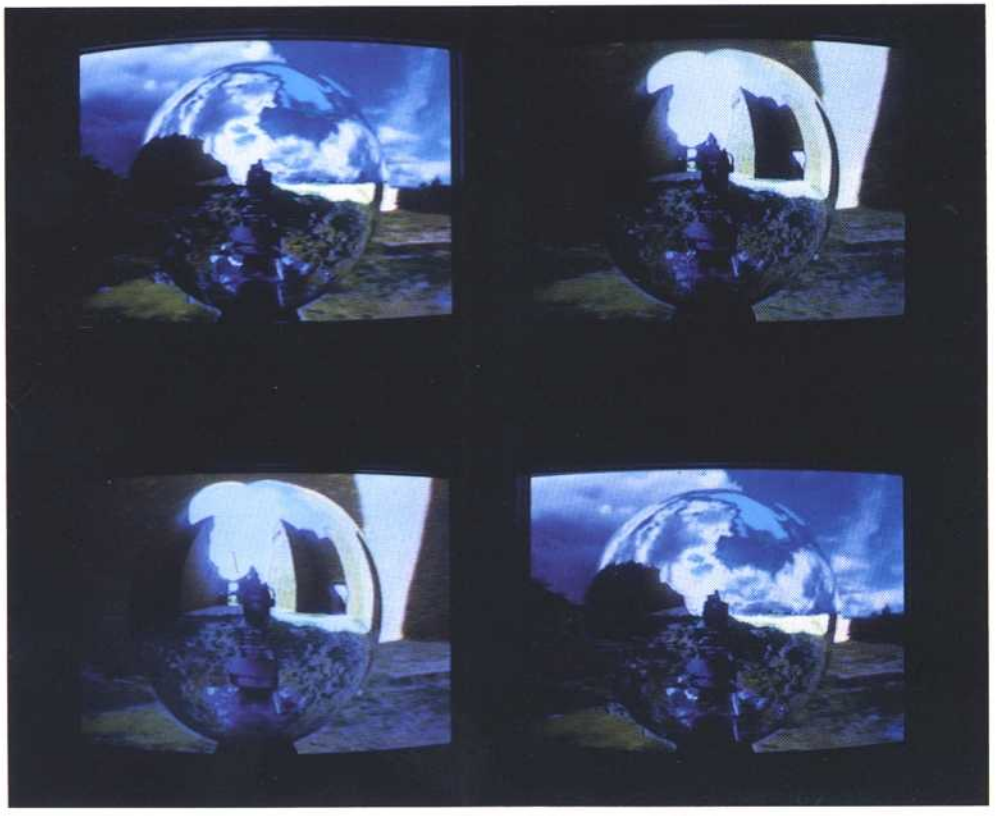
Steina, *The West* (detail), 1983. Audio by Woody Vasulka. Originally installed as a continuous 2 channel video and 4 channel audio environment at the "Video Attitude" Show at the University Art Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico in the Spring of 1983.

With her monitors installed to reflect light off of the floor and her video utilizing as intensely saturated a palette as has been seen, the chairs placed in Steina's gallery invited prolonged and even meditative attention by the viewer. In a curatorial coincidence, her piece offered a complement to Hall's consideration of the dynamic in nature by offering a portrait of the timeless and unchanging.

Similarly, as Torres addressed himself primarily to the political, and Hall to a politics of the natural, Steina completed the exhibition of Part I with a map of the relation between the observer and her natural environment.



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Steina, *The West* (detail), 1983.

Part II

For his installation, *Possession*, Tony Oursler utilized the same blackened room that Doug Hall had built, but constructed the only piece in *Video:Installed* that had a truly narrative orientation. It appeared to be the story of a family's history as stored in the walls of the house it had occupied for a generation, a case where speculation about "if these walls could talk" has come true. A loud audio narrative of processed sound and religious music—i.e. reversed, slowed down, etc.—alternating with whispered and threateningly intoned conversation on the edge of decipherability filled the space. Occasionally a visitor to the installation would walk in just as one of the clearer parts of the tape would emerge: "Hello? Is that you? Who are you?" would seem intoned live and just for them, doubling the disorientation already experienced in the dark room. Visually, such elements as parodies of growth markings on door jambs in the form of particularly obscene silhouettes occurred twice, as well as a pair of ghost-like forms from a child's point of view—painted sheets and empty clothing—hung on the wall, with their crotches and hearts respectively lit up from inside. A glass bird hung from the ceiling served as a fountain and a series of similarly suspended fetish objects in the center of the room added a suggestion of mysticism, evil and spell casting. Faces appeared on one wall periodically, projected from a hidden slide projector with dissolve unit. Two video components were seen through theatrical windows—a pixilated videotape of a large house being moved (the house we are in?) and a floating video image (actually reflected onto clear plexiglas) of an animated corporate logo in front of a day glo painting of an abstracted cityscape.

Possession continues Oursler's ongoing interest in the low-tech, highly personal end of the video spectrum, the field of activity which is obsessed with the subjective, psychological and hand made notion of what art can be. It is also an almost perfect illustration of the non-commercial, non-broadcast, found, homely and fractured narrative ideal described in Part I.

Shigeko Kubota presented two of her signature video sculptures, *Meta-Marcel: Window (1976-83)*, and *Rock Video (Cherry Blossom)*. The former is one of a series of early works by Kubota which by way of homage to

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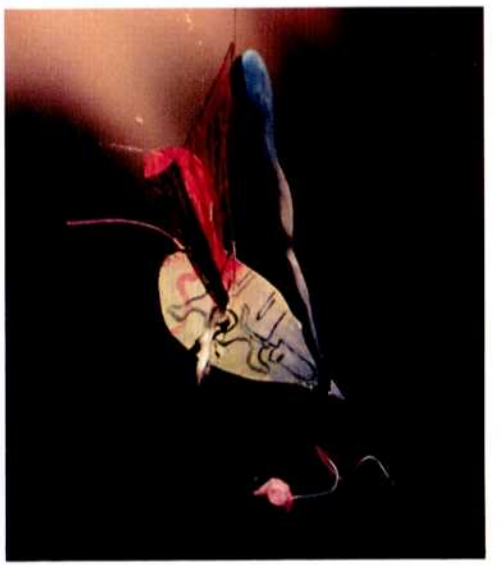
Tony Oursler, *Possession*, (detail), 1986.



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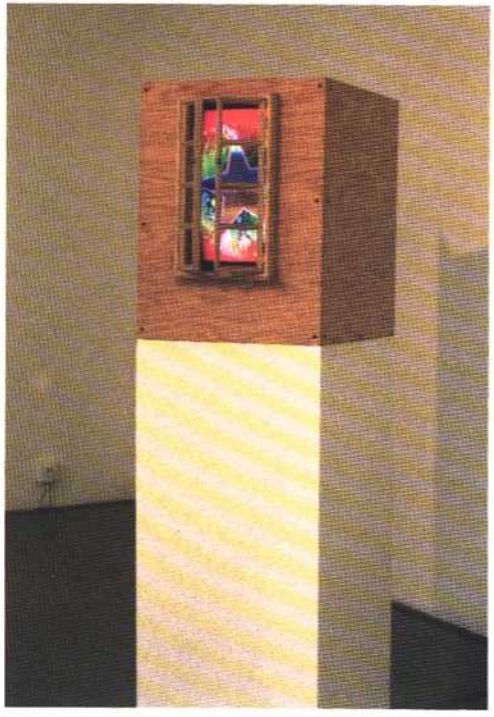
Tony Oursler, *Possession*, (detail), 1986.

Duchamp (in this case his work *Fresh Widow*) incorporate video into that ongoing tradition. The monitor was placed on its side behind the simple unfinished plywood window, which the viewer was free to open or close. The tape has three sections: it begins with static/snow, moves on to a parade of graphic design patterns, and ends with floral images. On the wall alongside the piece was the slogan *Video is Window of Tomorrow. Rock Video (Cherry Blossom)* was a new piece, one of the first by an artist using the new mini-tv technology. The piece consists of a granite boulder made of foam in which quartz geodes are imbedded, as well as the small monitor, which displays closeups of cherry blossom branches swaying in the wind. The boulder rests on the floor upon a smashed mirror. The title's linguistic pun (an artist's response to MTV) rhymes with the visual puns of the lightweight rock breaking the mirror and bringing on years of bad luck, (as MTV coopts the innovations of video artists), and the contrasting of the illusion of apparently realistic objects—the pseudo-boulder and the realism of video illusions—the pastoral documentation of cherry blossoms, echoing Doug Hall's epistomological warnings from Part I.

Howard Fried's piece, *Commercial Explosion*, was not installed in the gallery by the beginning of the third week of the show, and New Langton Arts' Board of Directors



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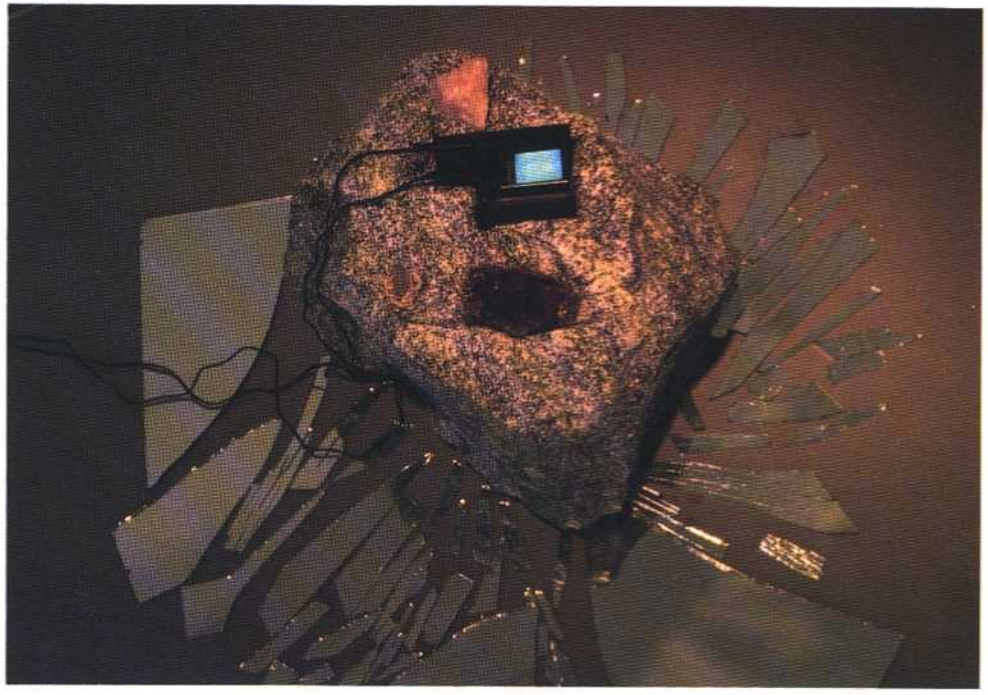
Shigeko Kubota, *Meta-Marcel Window*, 1976-1983.



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Shigeko Kubota, *Rock Video (Cherry Blossom)*, 1986.

chose to cancel Fried's participation in *Video:Installed* at that point. Fried responded with a written statement indicating that the cancellation had changed *Commercial Explosion* and that it was now either *Commercial Explosion #2* (containing "certain parts of the piece formerly known as Commercial Explosion"), which he proposed to install in his studio for public viewing subsequent to the closing of *Video:Installed*, or *Commercial Explosion #3* which he promised to install for the final week of the show at Langton. The Board of Directors chose to accept Fried's proposal to install the piece for the fourth and final week of the exhibition.

Fried's original conception, to install a piece totally self-contained and not site-specific, was exploded in its "3" phase to expose what would have been boxed up and invisible to the viewer in the original. Thus the elements now boldly confronting the viewer—a gasoline-powered generator with exhaust piped through the ceiling and three monitors powered by the generator—would have been contained in crates in *Commercial Explosion*, presenting an enigmatic and hermetic face. "#3" was augmented later in the week by a large outdoor tv antenna, enhancing the "inside out" theme, serving a reception function, being a striking found sculptural addition, and bringing a humorous, Chaplinesque umbrella/prop element to the whole. (Fried's written statement to the

Langton Board was also part of the piece, mounted on the door to the room, as well as a non-functional surveillance camera aimed at that door). While not truly site-specific the piece was aggressive and demanding, rather than cool and detached as in its original plans. The three monitors, each set to a different commercial network, were arranged facing a white gallery wall (containing a dozen unused wall sockets). The tvs' frequent image changes reflected jumpy washes of color around the otherwise unlit room, accompanied by the roar of the generator. Issues raised include the reductive use of broadcast tv, Fried's ongoing project of incorporating his personal interactions with institutions into his art works, and in the tradition of installation art, an insistence by the artist that his audience consider the esthetic choices he has made as his art regardless of the fact that what they see does not resemble what they have come to understand as fine art, beautiful objects, or comfortable cultural consumption.

Renny Pritikin
January 1987

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Howard Fried, *Commercial Explosion #3* (detail), 1986. Howard Fried is represented in San Francisco by Gallery Paule Anglim.

Biographies

Howard Fried has been working in a variety of media since 1969, including installation, performance and video. His work has been shown nationally and internationally at such places as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977, the Everson Museum of Modern Art in Syracuse in 1979, Video Roma in Rome and The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1979, University Art Museum in Berkeley in 1982 and 1983, and in 1985 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, among many other places. Fried was a recipient of a 1986 Interdisciplinary Projects Grant funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Interarts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Doug Hall has presented work internationally in a variety of media, including performance, installation and video. Most recently, his video installation, *Machinery for the Re-education of a Delinquent Dictator,* was presented at the Whitney Museum in new York and his *The Victims' Regret* at the University Art Museum in Berkeley in 1984. A videotape of his was included in "Video from Vancouver to San Diego" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and he was Artist-in-Residence at The American Center in Paris, both in 1985, among many other activities. He was the recipient of an Awards in the Visual Arts 2 in 1983, a National Endowment for the Arts Media Arts/ CAT Fund Production Grant in 1985-86 and an Individual Artists' Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1985-86, among others. Doug Hall currently resides in San Francisco and teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Shigeko Kubota has received National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in 1975, 1978, and 1980 and New York State Council on the Arts Fellowships in 1980, 1982 and 1984, among other awards. She spent 1979 in Berlin on a D.A.A.D. Fellowship. Her work has been exhibited internationally at such places as the Toyama Museum of Modern Art in Japan, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the University Art Museum in Berkeley in 1983, The Kitchen in New York and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1984, the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City and the Kunsthalle Mannheim in West Germany in 1985, and, most recently, at Piezo Electronic in Venice, California, among numerous other places.

Tony Oursler's videotapes have been screened widely, at such places as Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, A Space in Toronto, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the University Art Art Museum at U.C. Berkeley, the San Francisco Video Festival, The Kitchen and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. He has done installations at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, PS1 and the Kitchen in New York, among other places. In 1985 he was commissioned by the Centre Pompidou in Paris to complete a videotape and installation called *Sphere of Influence. Possession* was shown in September 1986 at the Banff Center for the Arts.

Renny Pritikin has been Co-Director of New Langton Arts since 1979. He is a frequent contributor to *Artweek,* writing about performance and installation. He is the author of two books of poetry, *Fourth Gear City Limits,* (Two-windows Press, 1976), and *All These Trees* (e.g. Press, 1984). He has also served as a consultant to the National Endowment for the Arts' Visual Art, Inter-Arts and Music Programs.

Francesc Torres has created video installation both in the States and in Europe, including at the Everson Museum in Syracuse and the Joan Miro Foundation in Barcelona, both in 1979, The Whitney Museum in New York in 1981, and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, both in 1983. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including a C.A.P.S. Grant in 1979-80 and two Individual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980-81 and 1982-83. Torres is currently working in Germany as a recipient of a D.A.A.D. from the Berlin Artists Program. *The Dictatorship of Swiftness* was commissioned by the La Jolla Museum where it was exhibited in July 1986.

Steina Vasulka was co-founder, with Woody Vasulka, of The Kitchen in New York City. She continues to explore the possibilities for the generation and manipulation of the electronic image through a broad range of technological tools and aesthetic concerns. Her tapes have been exhibited and broadcast extensively in the United States and Europe, and in 1978 she had an exhibit, *Machine Vision,* at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. She was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1976 and has received various other grants. Since moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980, she has produced a series of videotapes relating to the land.