Three Video Artists: Robbins, Clarke, Vasulka

By Amy Greenfield

At Robbins at Anthology Film Archives Video Series at the Holly Solomon

Gallery, New York City

Al Robbins 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 technique—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 Vortov 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 1976 Vineyard tapes, giving the 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 scheme 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 I 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, Robbins had apparently internalized the images of 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. Caught up, extended, concentrated, Robbins had apparently internalized the electronically greater tensions and abstraction. Tape followed tape, quickening in Robbins' camera "I":

I see some earlier tapes by Robbins at a private screening at Anthology Film Archives in 1977. That screening was also structured around a triad of equipment in many kinds of spaces, each new showing presenting Robbins with structuring of his material. Robbins' way of working makes post-production necessary and in-camera cuts .

I talked with Robbins, because his own talking at the Anthology showing 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 equipment in many kinds of spaces, each new showing presenting Robbins with structuring of his material. Robbins' way of working makes post-production necessary and in-camera cuts .

I talked with Robbins, because his own talking at the Anthology showing was provocative but needed clarification, and because I wanted to know more about his relation to words, but was "playing with the surface texture of video-textural video. And it is partly this 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. Caught up, extended, concentrated, Robbins had apparently internalized the electronically greater tensions and abstraction. Tape followed tape, quickening in Robbins' camera "I":

I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies. [Ind.]

The two different screenings show two different variations of Robbins' structural use of 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 necessary painstaking process of structuring-just which "takes" are selected, how placed in time and space, where the material takes us, how slowly or fast-are essential questions for Robbins in structuring his material.

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 make tangible this space through air as the real space of sculpting in video to attempt to act 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 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 time when you can show it, then that is true love . . . but you need someone to tell you the loneliness and pain is OK.

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The Love Tapes . A young girl who, because of the interactive situation, speaks to the video mike. This is the result of Wendy Clarke's The Love Tapes at the Museum of Modern Art

I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies. [Ind.]

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:

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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 each 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 inter- vention or statement or manipulation on Clarke's part, considering the pur-
"Yet, Clarke brings out the capacity of video to provide a non-dogmatic human language. In the Los Angeles tapes ("I'm in the Mood for Love"), the rhythm and sonority of the words went beyond the literal English meaning, in the sense of loss of love. The music used for the Los Angeles tapes ("I'm in the Mood for Love") seemed to express the rhythm and sonority of the words, and to provide the serious, deep human feedback that television so denies and works against. In the Los Angeles tapes, a middle-aged man (the American director) remembers lovers' words, but with a gentle joy. Then she says, "It is the 21st of December, the beginning of a new year." The song, "I'm in the Mood for Love," begins, and when she goes on, "there are still two weeks in the year." She might find that love again, and as she says this, she looks half-up, with such a light in her eyes, cheeks, and smile, that 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 word literally means "pregnant" in the Spanish the woman was speaking. The word of love is the same, everywhere. I don't understand Spanish, but I could see 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 instead said, I cried it as catharsis.

A man, black, maybe in his forties, distinguishes between divine love, derived from the heavens, from nature, and loving the eminently personal love, between people in a loving relationship, with nature. And then, in the Los Angeles tapes, a middle-aged woman (the American director), remembers what love is like, with a gentle joy. Then she says, "It is the 21st of December, the beginning of a new year." The song, "I'm in the Mood for Love," begins, and when she goes on, "there are still two weeks in the year." She might find that love again, and as she says this, she looks half-up, with such a light in her eyes, cheeks, and smile, that 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.

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

Alvision No. 2 [signifies] the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. The act of seeing, the image source and the viewer's consciousness so that the whole installation itself is transformed, and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanical performance.

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 mirror, 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 as part of the "imaginary" space 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 video art installation machine for transforming the soft "rectangle of the video screen into circular space." Now, in 1978-79, Alvision No. 2 is an elegant and literally eloquent depiction of that innovation, imparting a new sense of depth to the video camera, and the illusion of omnipotence.

Set on a white cube placed diagonally in the middle of the 27 foot, 7 inch cube between 24 inch, 6 inch gallery is the machine. The machine is a two-camera installation. One camera at the front of the cube was seated, and reflected in it—the room, everyone in the room, including oneself, and the machine itself. The other camera was seated in the room. When what each camera sees is transmitted to each monitor, all moving in distorted and circularly distorted in circular 360 degree space.

The sculpitonal aspects of Alvisions are trippy, a mystical structure of the machine itself, the plasticity of the video image, which gives the illusion of space-in-depth because of its complex combination of two independent layers, the illusion of omnipotence.
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—Shigeko 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.