Experimental Television

by Peter Crown

Why do we refer to "video" art rather than "television" art? Television refers to broadcast television, the media distribution dinosaur, with its highly predictable styles, formats, and content, and to the conditioning we have been subjected to by thousands of hours of viewing. Video, on the other hand, refers to the work of artists and other image innovators who are exploring the expressive, artistic and communicative possibilities of the medium.

Video technologies provide a unique visual vocabulary which in many instances is too expensive, difficult and often impossible to utilize in film. Occasionally broadcast TV gives us a glimpse of imagery from the video synthesizer or a tricky chroma key, but these are part of

In "Pierre", a negative camera image is keyed over a movie of the World Trade Center as part of a sojourn from New York City to Tucson, Arizona.

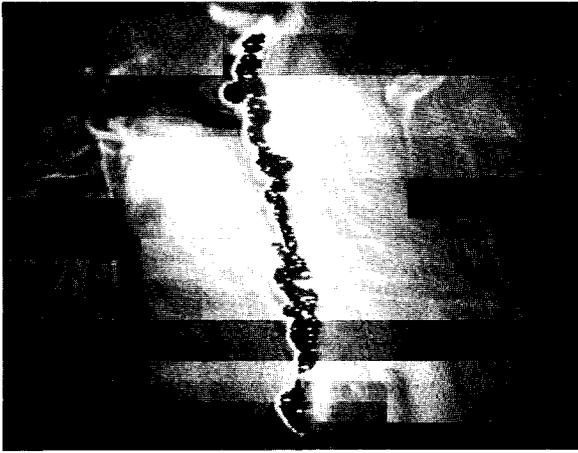The Video Mask. Keying allows one to "wear" another person's face. Camera 1 looks at the face which is to be the mask, and keys it over the face of the second person on Camera 2.

commercials and logos (e.g., "ABC Wide World of Entertainment") and not part of regular programming. As aggravating as commercials can be, they are often the most visually interesting part of broadcast TV.

In an experimental video class, we attempted to step outside the realm of broadcast formats, pushing a conventional TV studio to its creative limits. There were many failures, but there were also some gratifying results.

We spent several weeks working on a piece called "Video Milk." This imaginary substance "comes from cows in Mexico which were raised on TV and milked by VTR's (video tape recorders)." When consumed, video milk makes your inner thoughts manifest themselves visually, so no matter what one says verbally, the true message is revealed visually.

The "shaving cream key" ended up looking like its name.

A paint-out key surprises Rob Manning with the revelation of what is behind him.

One of the techniques employed in creating the fantasy piece is called "keying." A key is similar to a mat in film, whereby you cut out a hole in the picture and fill it with another image (e.g., a fantasy sequence). The shape of the hole can be determined by a third source, such as in image on another video camera. Some examples of keying are shown in the illustrations.

The use of high technology in the creative process produces both excitement and frustration. The thrill of a piece finally working makes the frustrations of technology worthwhile.

Fantasy sequence from "Video Milk".

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