

## VIDEO ART: NEW VISIONS

Patty Nettles  
Colorado Video Incorporated  
Boulder, Colorado

Video is not a mirror, but a new set of eyes, a mind-altering technology that challenges us to evolve new ways of ordering our perceptions. The medium of television is fascinating; raster itself is hypnotic. When images occur on the screen, fascination intensifies and shifts to the concepts being juggled. Granted that all media interact with the artist/user to produce an expression, video is a dynamic partner in this process, instantly responsive and able to alter images in unexpected ways, thus stimulating perceptual change. On these pages are some of the newest visions.

I am not a technician and do not speak jargonese, but I am involved with video work and particularly want to share the inner experience of this medium. The equipment used to create these images was developed by engineers at Colorado Video, a 14-year-old electronics firm in Boulder, Colorado. The cover art and the first three photos were done by Dot McSherry, Colorado Video's graphic artist, with a Quantizer; pictures on the last two pages were created by me interacting with a Moving Window.

The Quantizer was originally developed to aid radiologists in the study of X-rays by enhancing subtle changes in grayscale. In video, everything relates to voltage. Black is zero, white is, say, ten. Grays between can be sliced in an arbitrary

2

number of levels (21 in this system), which can also be assigned colors. The resulting image is quite different from the way we're used to interpreting visual reality. Categorization is by light value. In the hands of an artist, the images produced range from simply interesting to provocative and archetypal. The male figure in the first photograph is an excellent example of the archetypal quality that can bloom from the commonplace; in this case, a friend with a towel on his head is transformed by the video eye to an heroic seeker out of time.

The system included the Quantizer, three cameras, a shading generator, and an image insertion generator.

The shading generator adds the effect of shining a light behind the image on the monitor. The user can control the shape, location, and intensity of the light to enhance or obliterate certain aspects of a picture, to halo a subject, or focus attention in a corner. The cover picture of the hand reaching out through the rippling light makes good use of this instrument, which also helped create the background for the rocketship needling the universe.

The image insertion generator literally opens windows in a scene displayed on a monitor, through which other images can be shown. Again, the operator controls the shape and location of the window, sometimes tying it to voltage values to create "drop out" in images. The collage of two faces and bird silhouette is a sophisticated use of this technique, employing three cameras to supply the images and the image insertion generator to blend them.

Dot has been a fine artist for many years and was an art teacher and supervisor in Chicago schools for six years, but had never worked with video or any kind of "machine" art before coming to Colorado Video in August 1978. Her background, training, and philosophy of art were strongly traditional. Working with video has challenged these traditional values.

"As a painter I taught myself 16th century techniques of preparing canvasses; they last hundreds of years. It takes a lot more work, but the results far surpass ready-made materials. My painting is precise and detailed, requiring a lot of time to complete. I never identified myself with computer art or video art; I was anti-machine, antagonistic to using instruments to create, and particularly hostile to anything promising instant results. There is a controversy around using electricity to create art. But electricity is a tool, as is a paint brush. The important thing in art is the idea of man and its expression. The tool an artist uses does not take away from the product."

The canvas and the video screen are both two-dimensional. The same art elements apply--line, shape, space, texture, and color. Where this artist is controlled and painstaking with her painting, video allows her a spontaneous outlet for her creativity, responding to the turn of a dial. Yet it is the artist's eye that determines the final judgment.

The Quantizer is a flexible instrument. It can produce a simple image with one camera and one color. Or it can be complex, using three cameras, overlapping images, and a fully saturated palette. From the Impressionist's pastels to Pop Art primaries. This makes it not only a delight for the artist, but also an effective teacher for the art student. For the graphic designer

who must produce eye-catching images for the marketplace, the Quantizer is an inventive accomplice.

The Moving Window is actually two devices--a line scan camera and a video memory. Developed by Glen Southworth and Wyndham Hannaway, it was intended for use in traffic studies and other work requiring motion detection and recording. I began exploring its creative potential a year ago and have elected to show stills from the first tape I made with it because the thrill of discovering a new point of view was very strong in that work.

Briefly, the camera sees only a narrow slit of reality which it constantly scans, top to bottom, and interprets as a series of points in varying shades of gray. The memory unit displays this vertical line at one side of a monitor and adds each new line behind the old, pushing the picture across the screen as it is built. Motion is recorded as shape. The images are still; the picture moves. It is like looking at a long, long tapestry, except that the imagery is only sometimes realistic, more often surreal, fantastic, even bizarre and distorted beyond recognition.

It is that distortion factor that opened the way in for me, particularly since I was working with my own image, twisting and recreating the face I present to the world. Identification with self expanded to include archetypal images, such as the swirling furies in the first photo, and playful psychological portraits, such as the intersecting faces vying for the same space. When my self image included a beauty, a cyclops, and a pig, I had to let go of old concepts completely because I now included all those faces in my awareness of my self. I watched this process evolve in a classically pretty, inhibited 8-year-old girl as

she played with the self image she saw on the monitor. Her inhibitions dropped and her creativity rose. She no longer had to look pretty or dainty or neat. She gave herself permission to look any way she could, and no other judgment mattered. This is valuable information for the growing self, and it depends on altered perceptions.

Other concepts were transformed by this experience--concepts of time and space, rhythm and motion, harmony and counterpoint. I am a dancer and I danced through the camera's vision to create these pictures, but the movements were frozen in time, caught in a surreal landscape. In the photo at the top of the last page, the twin figures float above a bare horizon, serenely uninvolved with tempo or gravity.

The final photo illustrates the more abstract sculpturing that occurs with this medium. The vertical figures in the foreground were made by my hand intersecting the scan. The background blur is my face and torso, moving very slowly, recognizable when the eyes are perceived. Quick motion produces skinny, well-defined images; slow motion, the kind of blur we usually associate with speed.

We are bending our minds with video. "Interactively 'playing' with contemporary technological visualization instruments to modify consciousness," according to Phil Morton of Chicago's Electronic Visualization Center. Video is a contemporary means to explore and express our selves, a departure from the expected reality.

VIDEO: Zoom Out / Zoom In

followed by

LET IMAGES REMAIN IMAGES

by Jean-Pierre Boyer

indent → Video is just one question inside larger questions. To present the problem of video is to refer implicitly to the technological dimension of a given historic society.

There is too often a tendency to reduce technology to its simple dimension of object or tool. Structurally, such an attitude is no different from that which produced the modernist technology, centred on the notion of progress. Now, it is precisely this notion of progress which permits capitalism to conquer progressively the area of its reproduction.

We live according to the rule of quantity: symbolic capital of the spirit of capitalism, which mediates as many words ordering production for the sake of production, property, accumulation of capital, centralisation, exploitation. The dominant ideology is no longer, as in pre-industrial societies, assured by immanent principles relevant to the historic tradition, but tends to be more and more legitimized in the world of objects and finalized systems whose logic consists essentially of obscuring the present invested to the profit of a mortgaged future. It is in the nature of our "empirical" societies to assure their cohesion on the basis of effects; their logic never carries over to the examination of causes.

In this perspective, technology no longer appears a neutral phenomenon, detached from the context that produces it and that it produces.

One is therefore led to ask if an alternative use of technology can contain the potential for change. No consciousness, no matter how sharp, is enough to undermine the work of the modernist ideology; it is still necessary to give meaning to our struggles. More specifically, it is important to understand video within a broader historic framework, considering the conditions of its introduction, its specific character, and its potential role in the ideologic battle.

Video is a means of practical analysis.

The importance of video, as a means of information and communication, resides in its potential for criticism towards the structures and dominant processes of information and communication. A person utilizing video should

first understand that video is not television. What we call institutional and commercial television is often unfortunately the only reference for the user of video; the novice starts out hoping only to become part of that system. In this circumstance, he is forced to subscribe unconditionally to the component mechanisms of the economic market. Then, inevitably, he must get used to the idea that the content of his broadcast is, as they say, the property of the sponsor,

What is not pointed out in the rationale of the mass media, is that this mechanism has permitted the economic market to have a terminal installed in each home. We must await the introduction of the computer into the communications system to move from an economy essentially of merchandise to one of information. We have already imagined the formulation of an electronic substitute for the credit card, to provide information services, banking services, and shopping in the home. Indeed, no small ambition, certain high priests of unilateral communication have committed themselves to the concept of a "university without walls" ... In short, their use of standardized techniques can only endorse an imperialist perceptual model.

Our portrait of the institutional perspective will serve on the one hand to demonstrate the operational character of the dominant information structure, and on the other hand, to make it clear that video can and must concern itself with the practical criticism of those mechanisms.

Video is essentially a breaking away from a unidirectional, univocal scheme of information and communication.

Video permits a decentralisation of the means of production, and by this fact makes possible a broader access to the means of information and communication. Thus, those who do not possess the technical expertise demanded (unnecessarily) by "communication specialists", can nevertheless find their own expression through the simplicity of portable video.

It is perfectly conceivable and desirable that different groups or individuals have divergent points of view for different problems, and furthermore, that those using the mechanics of feedback as a means of constantly reintroducing real-time (actualisation of content) into deferred time (the linearity of pre-recorded information) be given special importance.

In this regard, it is interesting to underline that institutional practice, essentially engaged in a process of distribution of pre-recorded information packages, on the one hand overdetermines the very structure of mass communication, and on the other hand, denies the notion of real-time

Inherent in the structure of electronic media,

Those who are called communication specialists too often have nothing to communicate.

We live in an age of super-saturation of information, where the mass-media universe takes on more and more the colour of an empty and uniform landscape in which the observer becomes more and more passive.

Video is an instrument of cybernetic guerilla warfare.

It is not our intention to create new stock slogans (the privileged aim of agents/clerks of the modernist ideology), nor to promote the computer commerce. Quite to the contrary; we are instead borrowing the expression of Paul Ryan in his book Birth and Death and Cybernation, of which the following is an extract:

"Inherent in cybernetic guerilla warfare is the absolute necessity of having the people participate as fully as possible. This can be done in an information environment by insisting on ways of feeding back for human enhancement rather than feeding of people for the sake of concentration of power through capital, pseudomythologies or withheld information ... because the portable video tool only enables you to fight on a small scale in an irregular way at this time (1970). Running to the networks with portable video seems rear view mirror at best, reactionary at worst. What is critical is to develop an information infrastructure to cable where feedback and relevant access routes can be set up as part of the process."

Many projects die in the egg from having had too much publicity; anticipation is a sign of the times.

We can no longer dream of a McLuhanesque global village, unless he was referring to a world with the machinery of government in the hands of the multi-nationals. Guerilla warfare is, it seems, an affair of patience (Vietnam). To the extent that one would hope to give a greater scope or effectiveness to video, one must think in terms of distribution. From this point of view, cable television has appeared an important tool, but only after relieving certain problems of structure and organisation. Cable is first of all a communication industry, of which the rules and conditions have been fixed by the state and by private enterprise. One must therefore consider the question of standards (1/2" / 1"), of timetables for distribution and of conditions for production.



Could one bypass such constraints? To what extent can cable be adapted to video, without necessarily giving it an institutional character? What are the conditions and mechanisms of a true participation?

It is difficult to reply categorically to such questions, given that the procedure of distribution is invested with attitudes and intentions that are often contradictory. Importance is given to the control of information and the predominance of critical perspective, yet too often an understanding of communication is overshadowed by simple enthusiasm and haste of production.

The make-do system of distribution and exchange of videotapes has appeared up until now as the most effective mechanism in the diffusion of productions and of information relevant to the medium. Video is not an institution; that is its importance with regards to freedom of content and flexibility of approach.

We have already insisted on the decentralised character of the video medium. Consequently, one should stress the importance of content of a non-institutional sort. However, is this new content being presented in a new and complementary format?

~~With this in mind, one must restore an experimental approach and to~~

Video too often depends on a filmic conception of form, linear and narrative. The television medium has been described as radio-with-pictures; this is an attitude too often repeated in work with videotape.

Video is first of all a visual medium. It is thus important to be aware of the specificity of the medium, using the image itself to express and reinforce the information content.

With this in mind, one must restore an experimental approach ~~and to~~ ~~the video medium, systematically exploring~~ the unsuspected potential of the electronic image.

We have lived only too long in ignorance of media; the genesis of the means of communication is none other than the history of <sup>its</sup> their growing autonomy. It is in this sense that bringing their mechanisms up to date will define for us their magic power, and more specifically, inform us about the role that they assume in the constitution of a principle of reality.

Consequently, we prefer an analytic approach shown more to clarify, rather than to hide, the themes and mechanisms of visual communication.

Our primary interest in video is in the element at once the most simple and the most complex of all mediated ~~xxxxxx~~ vision: the image. We must understand that what appears on the screen is not reality, but instead the image of reality. This is true even if one generally has the impression of being able to penetrate into the <sup>intimate</sup> space before us. Such a mechanism is none other than a learned vision, essentially conditioned by a normalised system of representation of three-dimensional space.

The notion of linear perspective, rationalised in the fourteenth century, has appeared as an inherent law in the transfer of a three-dimensional reality to its appearance in the construction of a two-dimensional surface. Our technology of communication, in its criteria of high-fidelity, has only reproduced these conventions in what we call: standardised vision.

The conventions of representation, cartesian space and linear thought, are becoming obsolete.

For many, these questions are only formal considerations. There remains no less historically an entire culture defined and constructed through mediated systems, ambiguous messengers of reality.

Our project appears ambitious, but it would be more so if we were to propose the rejection of the principle of "camera obscura" common to all processes of optical image information. We are not waiting for information science to form a memory bank of visual archetypes of reality. But whether we want it or not the computers are at work, ready to give us an encoded reality, the synthetic fruit of our wise classifications.

Consequently, the choice is only clearer for those who reject an existence dominated by stereotypes.

Now, we find ourselves confronted by two alternatives: the first, more theoretical, is a kind of symbolic death to the reductive world of appearances; the second, more practical, is the deconditioning of mediated vision, in the exploration of non-standardised constructions, in the margin of the forms of too-direct allusions to the principle of reality. <sup>(1)</sup>

(1) We shall have the opportunity to return in a more specific way to this question, of major importance to our practical work.

Paradoxically, we are researching "high-fidelity" in "low-fidelity", that is, there where we expect to find it.

Let images remain images ... life will be less dominated by illusion.

Images, technology, alienation, social life, cybernetics, information, everyday life, communication and the alternative: none of these can really be separated.

The intention of this text is not to create new norms; at most, it is to produce ideas midway between propositions and hypotheses; in short, to give birth to reflection ...

The question is posed: what is video?

Rewind please.

### Epilogue: On the World of Art

The final argument of the mystifiers of Art is precisely: the work as mythic structure.

Such an attitude, historically reactionary and by definition opaque, is nothing but the product of an intellectual oligarchy of the right and of its activity to justify its privileges.

Consequently, we think that such a situation can only mask the social, political and economic reasons for the existence of the Art world.

Without plunging us too much into rigid dogmatism, we will say only that the production of "knowledge" does not escape from the laws and rules of economic politics and that its exchange value responds directly to the artificial creation of needs. It is essentially a place for the setting up of hierarchic structures, based on the creation and appropriation of codes.

Furthermore, the Art world has made of Art an exceptionalised realm of existence, removed from the fundamental ambivalence of life. The Artists, socially unconscious, are nothing but "ideal subjects" enslaved by the promotion of immanent, ahistorical desires. These blind ambitions are at most the subtle vehicles of hierarchisation and of its corollary: the expression of power.

Since the world of Art has consumed and digested the principle of its abolition, the situation is even more evident. Why waste time in the labyrinths of "spectacle"?

There are many other things to do, first of which is the struggle at

7

all levels for the affirmation of life.

"To have your photo on the cover of TIME magazine is to receive the kiss of death."

William Burroughs

A word to the wise ...

Eventually, there are no more images.