
The history of video as an art form has been one of rapid change. Developments in media technology have offered artists a variety of aesthetic choices just as they have radically altered the public perception of video and its capabilities. Since the late 1940's, broadcast television has been dominated by the commercial networks. In recent years multiple options have emerged in the form of cable and alternative telecast systems, some of which now present very advanced video and television programming. Audiences not only have a wider selection of broadcast material, but also a new, more dynamic relationship with the medium: television is no longer a simple conduit for information and entertainment. If audience attitudes toward video and television have been revolutionized, artists not only mirror that change in their work but also interpret and influence those evolving perceptions by employing and transforming new image-making technology.

Artists began to appropriate the video medium in the mid-1960's when the portable video recorder and player were introduced. These inventions permitted the individual artist to take video out of the television studio and begin to explore this remarkably flexible means of image recording; the impact was similar to the development of 16mm film in the 1940's, out of which independent cinema and a renewed avant-garde film movement emerged. Video artists oppose popular broadcast television in the same way that avant-garde filmmakers took an oppositional stance to the standardized entertainment genres of movie making. While mainstream broadcasters saw the public as passive consumers, video artists sought to engage the spectator with a whole new set of narrative, image-recording and transforming properties that reveal the way video works. Since the early 1960's video art has informed developments in the visual arts, as well as performance, music and film.

The seven videotape programs of the 1983 Whitney Biennial Video Exhibition represent outstanding developments in contemporary video art which enjoin us to explore what video—and ultimately television—can be. Program I features three videotapes: Juan Downey's *The Looking Glass* employs new narrative and documentary forms to investigate the cultural role and formal use of the mirror in Western art; *Surveillance*, originally part of an installation by Bruce Charlesworth, presents a situation in which people performing surveillance activities are themselves being watched by the unblinking eye of surveillance cameras; Ken Feingold's *New Building Under the Water* takes randomly selected television news footage and refashions it through editing into a mysterious and disturbing text.

Program II opens with Edin Velez's *Meta Mayan II*, a haunting view of the people of Latin America practicing the customs of their culture against the backdrop of political oppression; *U.S. Sweat* by Shalom Gorewitz is a meditation on America and Israel via an image-processed journey full of fresh insights; *After Laughter* by Stan Vanderbeek is a thoughtful view of the threat of nuclear war as embodied in synthesized images of Muybridge's photographs. Program III is devoted to Bill Viola's *Hatsu Yume (First Dream)*, a powerful evocation of the land and culture of Japan involving a virtuoso display of video's new recording and processing capabilities.

Program IV features three works: Matthew Geller's *Windfalls* constructs and reconstructs an incident in a new narrative that plays with our interpretation and perception of an event; *The Speech* by Doug Hall is a perceptive view of the political speech as created for television; Howard Fried's *Making a Paid Political Announcement* sets up a situation in which people interviewed about their political opinions form their own

"paid political announcement," thereby placing the role of television and the political commercial in a radical new perspective.

Program V opens with Barbara Buckner's *Millennia*, a sophisticated and lyrical exploration of video image-making; *Videograms* by Garry Hill constructs abstract imagery out of the properties of the video process; Bob Snyder's *Trim Subdivisions* deconstructs houses of a suburban subdevelopment into formal compositions, rebuilding those structures into a video image. Programs VI and VII are both devoted to single videotapes: *Allan 'n' Allen's Complaint* by Nam June Paik and Shigeko Kubota is an evocative meditation on the relationship of artists Allan Kaprow and Allen Ginsberg to their respective fathers; Martha Rosler's *A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night* takes as its starting point a national news magazine article which argues the case for political torture, offering by means of an examination of that article an ideological critique of media and of oppressive political philosophies.

John G. Hanhardt
Curator, Film and Video
Whitney Museum of American Art

PROGRAM I (63 minutes)

The Looking Glass

Juan Downey
1981, 28 min., color

The Looking Glass is a videotape concerned with the use and meaning of mirrors in architecture and art. A sweeping travelogue through England, France and Spain covering the Renaissance to Picasso, *The Looking Glass* is an exploration of consciousness. This study on narcissism, stretching from water reflections to the medium

of television itself, was shot on 16mm film, transferred to videotape and manipulated by means of electronic effects.

Juan Downey, 1983

Surveillance

Bruce Charlesworth

1981, 21 min., color

Featuring: Bruce Charlesworth, Paul Benson

Two men (played by me and Paul Benson) pass the late hours attempting sleep, eating sandwiches, and discussing their job. Hired to watch someone in another building, they reveal their situation slowly through behavior that is both cryptic and routine. With carefully timed entrances, exits, sounds, and movement, *Surveillance* conveys the equivalent of edited scenes in one long, static shot. Lengthy intervals of silence and lethargy are exploded by abrupt activity and conversation. Performance is an essential part of all my video and photographic works, and it dominates *Surveillance*. The piece is propelled entirely by the two actors.

Exhausted and resigned, the characters they play are forced to adapt to paranoia-inducing circumstances. *Surveillance* is part of a larger story of accident, crime, and conflict begun in earlier works, and continued in more recent ones.

Bruce Charlesworth, 1983

New Building Under the Water

Ken Feingold

1982, 14 min., color

The visible reconciliation of opposites; a constructed framework. In the water, interpretation: Venus comes to earth in the form of rain (in this case, an invoked appearance), giving psychic powers. The dream of Beirut. In atomic space, men are running through the streets. As China invokes the Western economy, a deadly crash in Washington, D.C. Cut to death (silent). As transition, heat (the desert); the measurement of heat (science); swimming through (duration) allowing things to happen. Miner keeps things going. Infra: his actions (again, in the earth, in the heat) serve to insure the appearance of their opposite: the ocean (in this manifestation blue ocean, beautiful image) offers the sensation of perspective.

Ken Feingold, 1983

PROGRAM II (42 minutes)

Meta Mayan II

Edin Velez

1981, 20 min., color

Made possible with funds from the Jerome Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and CAPS.

Meta Mayan is a personal observation of the Guatemalan highlands during a two month journey in 1980.

Landscapes, textures, and gestures are balanced equally with succinct portraits of the people. Time and rhythms are heightened, resulting in a synthesis of structuralist, abstract, and ethnographic concerns.

Beneath the surface beauty of the imagery, the reality of a country undergoing social upheaval is underscored.

Edin Velez, 1983

U.S. Sweat

Shalom Gorewitz

1981-82, 15 min., color

Soundtrack coproduced with Greg Shifrin & Gail Turner at ABS Media Electronic Processing, the Experimental Television Center, Owego, N.Y. Edited at Electronic Arts Intermix, N.Y.C.

U.S. Sweat is series of observations and reflections about landscape recorded and processed using electronic imaging instruments. Irradiated strip-mined fields in Tennessee. A doomsday shrine in North Carolina keyed through pastoral farmland near Harrisburg, PA. Promised Land Beach on Long Island during a storm. Lower East Side, Manhattan. Houston, Texas, as it might appear after a neutron bomb explosion. Soldiers marching on Fifth Avenue digitally sequenced with the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant. Distant people; a pregnant woman washed through a swirling ocean/beach. Colorization, syntheses, computer graphics, soundtrack composition and other television-based techniques are used to communicate expressively a response to the environment.

Shalom Gorewitz, 1983

After Laughter

Stan Vanderbeek

1982, 7 min., color

Made possible with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts under a grant for experiments in video with KET Television of Lexington, KY

Experiments in video techniques combining animation and videography. Painted images were inserted by chroma-key, which enables the artist to add animation sequences into live-action scenes. The vision of the work is satiric and dark. A sound track of only human laughter accompanies the image: the distracting view of the symbolic man moving through daily acts to the unwitting final act of total self-destruction. It is the opposite of W.C. Fields' "it is funnier to break something than it is to bend it" theory of comedy.

Stan Vanderbeek, 1983

PROGRAM III (56 minutes)

Hatsu Yume (First Dream)

Bill Viola

1981, 56 min., NTSC color

Recorded/Edited while in residence at Sony Corporation, Atsugi Plant, Japan. Made possible with support from Sony Corporation of Japan and Japan/U.S. Friendship Commission.

I was thinking about light and its relation to water and to life, and also its opposite: darkness, or the night and death. I thought about how we have built entire cities of artificial light as refuge from the dark.

When staying out in the countryside, I remembered how difficult it always was to stay up late and to rise late. There, light is the sun and the fire. In the city, the sun is the electric lamp—and the original source of light, the flame, has become an enemy of destruction. Water gives both life and protection.

Video treats light like water—it becomes a fluid on the video tube. Water supports the fish like light supports man. Land is the death of the fish—Darkness is the death of man.

Bill Viola, 1983

PROGRAM IV (35 minutes)

Windfalls

Matthew Geller
1982, 21 min., color
Featuring: Ed Bowes, John Lee, Ellen Cooper, Micah Beck, Reese Williams, Alan Moore. Music: Jonny Dynell & The Dynells. Additional Camera: Jack Walworth. Recordist Engineer: Jack Walworth. Additional Editing: Karen Achenbach & Mark Fischer.

Windfalls, with its interplay of intersecting narrative lines, approaches story-telling in a new way. The tape's fragmented editing assembles disparate imagery to reconstruct perceptions. A saxophone player recounts his experience overstepping the bounds of musical protocol in a jam session. Tad tells about what led him to (and his feelings about) buying a hot TV; this is intercut with action sequences of the transaction. A computer expert describes signature coding systems while a professor draws diagrams; shopping in a grocery store with Tad, the professor explains cognitive theory. The separate dramas do not connect easily; they slide by each other; serve as metaphors for each other; tempt the viewer to compare and then defy comparison.

Matthew Geller, 1983

The Speech

Doug Hall
1982, 7 min. color
Produced at the University of California, San Diego; Production assistant: Chip Lord; Editing: Doug Hall & Jules Backus

The Speech examines the language of televised political speeches. Casting himself in the role of the "speaker," Hall suggests through gesture, camera angles, and editing both the absurdity and the authoritarian nature of such images. In an ambivalent and non-didactic way the tape focuses our attention on the manipulative aspects of media politics in which the content is obfuscated by the form. *The Speech* is a speech about the signifiers of speeches.

Doug Hall, 1983

Making A Paid Political Announcement

Howard Fried
1981-82, 7 min., color
Producer: And/Or, Seattle, WA

Making a Paid Political Announcement is a political message in which only promises are made which Fried reckons will win the favor of five specific citizens of Seattle, Washington. The citizens, previously unknown to Fried, were selected by associate producers trying to arrive at a reasonable demographic mix.

Art Metropole catalogue, 1982

PROGRAM V (25 minutes)

Millennia

Barbara Buckner
1981, 5 min., color, silent
Produced at the Experimental Television Center, Owego, NY

Millennia is a depiction of the evolution of geometry, animals, men, moons and the dead over thousands of years. In it, Soul—the immortal and unchanging essence—views aspects of physical life as finite and ever-changing phenomena in space/time.

Barbara Buckner, 1983

Videograms

Gary Hill
1980-81, 14 min., b/w

Videograms is a series of playful stabs at the image/language dragon that insists on chasing its tail. "Electronic linguistic" is used as a kind of syntax for discovering text/image constructs—reorganizations of the dragon's tell tale. *Videograms* are numbered intuitively from 0 to 99.

Gary Hill, 1983

Trim Subdivisions

Bob Snyder
1981, 6 min., color, silent
Camera: John Mabey

Trim Subdivisions is a rigorous study of space via special effects which incorporates delicate timing and formal approach. Snyder takes the imagery of a suburban housing tract as his vehicle. He uses the video wipe (in which one image is passed over another) as both a symbol for the passage of time, and a correlation to the conjoiners of architectural units in pre-fab housing... Structured as variations on a theme, the imagery moves silently and precisely. These visuals, created out of seemingly banal material, become subtly orchestrated color plans and patterns.

Marita Sturken
The Museum of Modern Art program notes
1982

PROGRAM VI (30 minutes)

Allan 'n' Allen's Complaint

Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota
1982, 30 min., color

This program highlights poet Allen Ginsburg and artist Allan Kaprow. The film tries to blow apart the myth of the domineering Jewish mother and instead concentrates on the influence that Jewish fathers have on their sons, especially those in creative fields. Both the senior Ginsburg (who is also a poet and a teacher) and the senior Kaprow (who is a British lawyer) were interviewed.

Press release for "Paik on the Air" retrospective, WNET, 1982

PROGRAM VII (60 minutes)

A Simple Case for Torture, or, How to Sleep at Night

Martha Rosler
1982-83, 60 min., color

As the world-wide depression deepens, we are told often that our security and economic well-being depend on our support of "authoritarian" friends abroad... Driven by a confusion between private and public spheres, we seek relief in the urge to impose grave punishments everywhere. To those tormented by fears and guilts, it seems safest to trade freedom for order, to greatly expand police power, to bring the terror home, however mildly... This tape is by no means a documentary but a programmatic reorchestration of the media's voices that lets the voice of the news authoritatively tell stories it simultaneously suppresses.

Martha Rosler, 1983