

ART

Video Art: Television as Canvas

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

TECHNOLOGY affects art as it does so many other things. Creating with video is becoming increasingly appealing, and experimenters feel confident that a monitor screen can reflect an artist's decision as surely as a canvas.

Full appreciation, however, is a challenge for much of the viewing public. Those raised with television will be more readily receptive. Those firmly conditioned to the preciousness of the art object are resistant. All usually have first to overcome the handicap of overfamiliarity with predictable television usage and appearance.

Two new Long Island exhibitions are helpful, for they provide good insight into a number of aspects of the medium's visual potential. Hofstra's Emily Lowe Gallery and Suffolk Community College's Riverhead campus gallery both have video installations that include some of the country's best talents, and several of the pieces are definitely major works.

Hofstra's featured artists — Nam June Paik, Shigeo Kubota, Dan Graham and Dara Birnbaum — reveal a broad range of approaches, and this serves as a reminder that practitioners regard video as a visual technique to be mastered and shaped for individual expressive purposes.

In most examples there is a consciousness of images being conceived of in frames, or brackets, but unlike painting and photography there are

multiple opportunities to chose positions and boundaries. In most, too, there is an awareness of time's being used in novel ways as an additional creative language. Our attention is captured, then divided without our control into precise segments. A predetermined, very definite pace and rhythm becomes choreography for the eye.

In Nam June Paik's "Good Morning Mr. Orwell," for example, 30 minutes of electronic experiments form taped sections of celebrity performances into patterned episodes. We see George Plimpton, Merce Cunningham, Laurie Anderson, Salvador Dali, the Thompson Twins and Joseph Bueys, among others, in arbitrary colors, dissolving and reappearing in synchronization with Philip Glass and John Cage music.

Figures turn into bold outlines or silhouettes, surrounded by shifting geometric shapes. Edges become soft, then hard. Images overlap. Some take on new configurations. Seven screens repeat the same pictures simultaneously. Although the viewer doesn't know what to expect, the celebrities are real, the film lends credibility and therefore all seems plausible.

Bits of visual information from other contexts are also reused as content in Dara Birnbaum's "P.M. Magazine." And this offers a suggestion of video art's potential to function as political commentary. Here, however, the Birnbaum piece is more strongly sensed as a symphony of light, sound and images that constantly alter their framing and their

speed. Three screens carry different interpretations of the theme.

This installation has considerably more artistic merit than most, with three enlargements mounted on huge panels. Actually, Hofstra titles this show "Video Sculpture" and asks us to consider, too, the three-dimensional character of these electronic works.

Mr. Paik's "E.T. Buddha" measures up quite well by sculptural standards. Still, its major impact comes from its use of a camera and negative/positive reversal techniques. For this allows the viewer to place and activate his own image on the screen containing an E.T. likeness and watched by a seated E.T. figure. The intended hypnotic effect is rather successful.

Live action is important to video art. Dan Graham's "Two Viewing Rooms" (shown previously at the Museum of Modern Art) also allows the spectator to participate by means of a two-way mirror and monitor. Multiple reflections give a sense of surface and depth, yet the piece seems somewhat less interesting than others here.

It falls to Shigeo Kubota, a well-known maker of video sculpture, to demonstrate how an artist might use the medium to achieve a more subjective, personal content. She is particularly fond of incorporating autobiographical references into her designs, and she has also created a number of homages to Marcel Duchamp, the artist credited with bringing "ideas" back to an avant-garde that had been principally concerned

with abstract form.

"Meta-Marcel Window" — with video-generated images — refers to a Duchamp work, and to the window as a connection between the interior and the exterior. Another Kubota work comments on Duchamp's famous "Nude Descending a Staircase" (it caused great controversy at the 1913 Armory Show in New York) and seems to be referring to the importance of motion in video conception.

Motion is celebrated with elegance and refinement in "The West," a handsome, lyrical, six-screen video installation by Steina and Woody Vasulka, on view at the gallery in Suffolk Community College's library. The artists are among the most experienced in the field and are well known as the co-founders of The Kitchen, a center for video experiments in New York City.

"The West" explores the ancient and modern landscapes of New Mexico, including the ceremonial sites of an early Indian population, the ruins of a Spanish church and the tall metal structures of a massive, recently built space-age radio-telescope system.

The work gives a heightened sense of the drama and character of its settings. The treatment of desert color is particularly outstanding. Intense and lush, it has its own mesmerizing effect. Originally produced for "SUNY/The Arts on Television" last year, "The West" has since had a number of prestigious showings abroad, including one at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Both exhibitions will run through



"E.T. Buddha," by Nam June Paik

Dec. 20. Gallery hours at Suffolk Community College, off Route 51 in Riverhead, are 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. Mondays through Thursdays and 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. Fridays. Visitors should use parking field 2 for the library.

Gallery hours at Hofstra, in Hempstead, are 10 A.M. to 9 P.M. Tues-

days, 10 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. Wednesdays through Fridays and 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. weekends. There will be special screenings of tapes by other artists and Hofstra students on Tuesdays at noon and 7 P.M. and Sundays at 3 P.M. At other times the materials are available by request.