

Guggenheim Museum

"Passage Sets/One Pulls Pivots at the Tip of the Tongue" (1994-95), an interactive installation by Bill Seaman in the "Mediascape" show at the Guggenheim Museum Soho.

ART REVIEW

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NY Times, June 18 1996

A Museum's Metamorphosis: The Virtual Arcade

By ROBERTA SMITH

The Guggenheim Museum SoHo is back, all teched out and ready for the art of the 21st century. After a five-month renovation, the museum has reopened with "Mediascape," an often dazzling display of 14 multimedia works, interactive and otherwise, that veers from fun-house madness to high, even pretentious, seriousness.

The show includes the latest in interactive computerized video art as well as a historical sampling of older, garden-variety video work, the kind you experience without

Artworks straining to outdo movies and television.

pressing buttons. It conveys a sometimes striking sense of contrast and technological progress. The opening work is "Megatron," the laest eye-wrenching extravaganza by Nam June Paik, one of video art's founders and, more and more, its Busby Berkeley.

The 215-set work, with its enormous cartoon figures made on a computer and documentary images that swirl and dance in an array of scales and patterns, overwhelms "Passage," an earlier Paik effort installed nearby.

The show has works by such art world figures as Jenny Holzer, Bill Viola and Bruce Nauman, as well as artists from the less familiar realm of multimedia technology, including Ingo Günther, Toshio Iwai and Jeffrey Shaw. It raises questions about the ways technology is changing the cross-fertilization of high art and popular culture, but it provides few substantial answers.

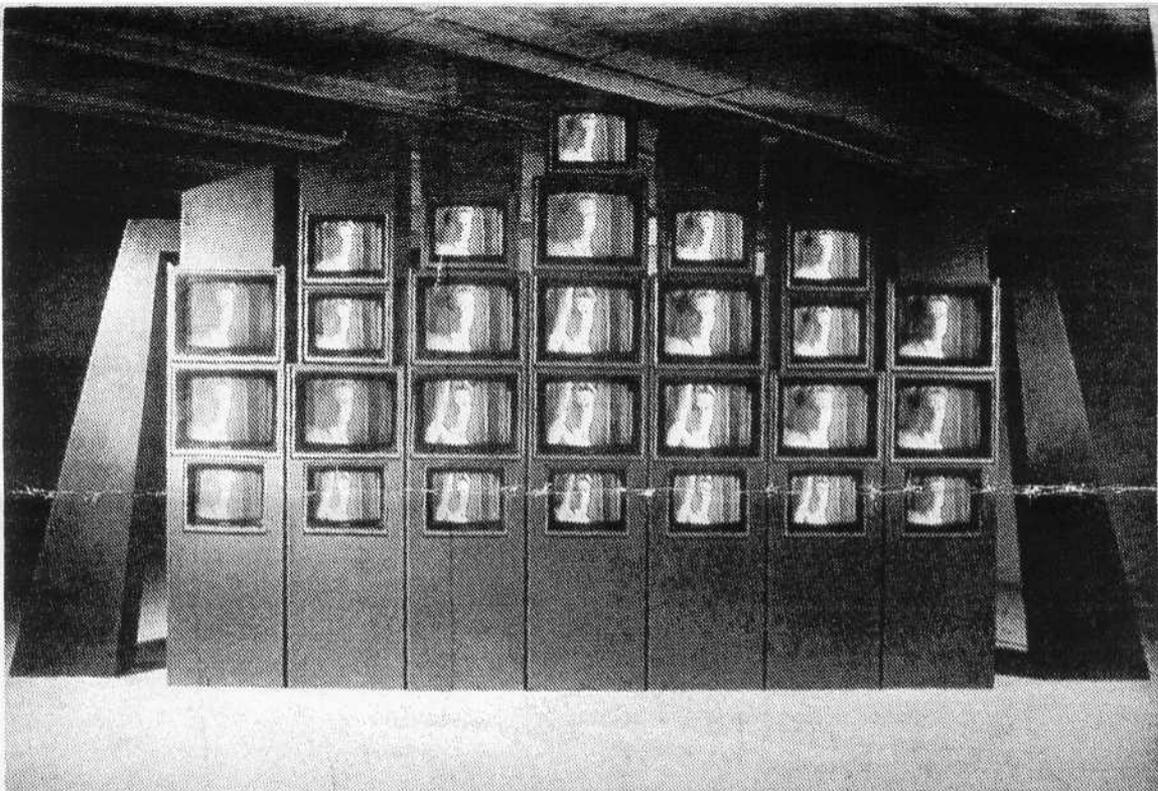
In addition to the exhibition, the Guggenheim

is also inaugurating its virtual reality and CD-ROM galleries and its new partnership with ZKM Karlsruhe, a state-supported institution for art and media in the Rhine Valley south of Frankfurt.

ZKM, which is seven years old, includes a media museum and institutes for visual media, music and acoustics, and theater. It both commissions and collects multimedia art, much of it of a sophistication that the art world is only just beginning to discover. It owns or has produced 10 of the works in the exhibition.

Of course, there is no free lunch. As usual,

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Guggenheim Museum

Marie-Jo Lafontaine's 1987 "Tears of Steel," on display at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo.

The Museum as Virtual Arcade

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the museum seems to have sold a bit of its soul to deliver this particular slice of future shock.

For example, the Guggenheim SoHo now includes the first galleries in a major New York museum dedicated to corporate sponsors.

Its four ground-floor galleries have been named the Deutsche Telekom Galleries, after the German telecommunications corporation that is financing the Guggenheim-ZKM partnership; they will primarily be used to display multimedia art from the two museums' collections.

Flanking the Deutsche Telekom Galleries are the new ENEL Virtual Reality Gallery and ENEL Electronic Reading Room, financed by ENEL, the largest power company in Italy and a leading developer of computers.

Although small, these galleries represent a Faustian low point in museum design: each has a completely superfluous floor-to-ceiling décor of shiny metal, fancy hardware, black rubber and kinky chairs created by Lartestudio, a design firm in Rome that works regularly for ENEL.

In these trendy, overwrought rooms, it's hard to know whether to dust off your Luke Skywalker costume, get out the exercise equipment or just sit tight until young Dr. Frankenstein arrives.

Of course you can also play "Quest for the Holy Grail," a virtual reality game that takes one through flattened facsimiles of well-known Italian churches and piazzas.

Or you can punch into a CD-ROM that details the contents of the Guggenheim's 1994 exhibition, "The Italian Metamorphosis, 1948-1968," which ENEL helped sponsor. A more extensive CD-ROM art library is planned.

In ways both good and bad, the ENEL experience, as it might be called, sets the stage for much of "Mediascape." One of the worst works in the show is "The Legible City," a virtual reality effort by Jeffrey Shaw in which one pedals a real bicycle through monotonous versions of Amsterdam, New York and Karlsruhe, all made of big blocky letters and not nearly virtual enough.

Also problematic is Marie-Jo Lafontaine's 1987 "Tears of Steel," a ziggurat of video monitors buttressed by big black columns redolent of Fascist architecture and featuring images of muscular young men pumping iron to snippets of music including a Bellini aria sung by Maria Callas.

The piece, a perfect match for the ENEL décor downstairs, has not aged well, its combination of slick imagery and classical music having been so thoroughly co-opted by television advertising.

Similarly, Mr. Viola's overly seri-

ous of computers.

One can make music and abstract images on Toshio Iwai's "Piano — As Image Media," a kind of electronic player piano whose syncopation of image and sound, while enormously complex, evokes the early years of avant-garde film.

Or one can ponder the simple spatial conundrum of Bruce Nauman's "Video Surveillance Piece (Public Room, Private Room)" of 1969-70, a work involving a live-feed video image of an empty sealed-off room.

The piece is the equivalent of a horse and carriage among the surrounding pyrotechnics, and his more recent, hauntingly abrasive "Raw Material: Brrrr" from 1990, is equally rudimentary in its use of technology.

Along with an untitled work by Ms. Holzer, a room in which her relentless adages circle the walls on LED signs, "Brrrr" is one of the few pieces in the show to stress psychological content over pure form.

Where pure form is concerned, the relatively austere patterns and quiet beauty of Woody and Steina Vasulka's "Matrix I" from 1970-72, possibly the first excursion into analogue imagery, offer a refreshing contrast to Mr. Paik's brashly high-tech brilliance.

Too often "Mediascape" operates in the gap between art and entertainment without quite being either. And so it remains to be seen if the Guggenheim SoHo has simply converted its lower level into a highbrow video mall.

The main challenge of much of the work here is to be better than movies or television or one's own on-line computer, and to establish the intensity of experience that is more art and less everything else. There's a lot of everything else in this exhibition. It's fun, its exhilarating, but it's mostly technique. No matter which century you're in, from the Egyptians and the Greeks onward, technique or, now, technology, has never guaranteed lasting esthetic power.

"Mediascape" will be at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 575 Broadway, at Prince Street, Manhattan, through Sept. 15.

A display that veers from fun-house madness to high seriousness.

ous "The City of Man," a contemporary altarpiece composed of three unchanging images supposed to evoke heaven, hell and everyday life, merely resembles scenes from the evening news. This may be the artist's point, but the viewer's attention is not held.

The most impressive of the interactive works, because it provides a glimpse of the CD-ROM's artistic potential, is "Passage Sets/One Pulls Pivots at the Tip of the Tongue," by Bill Seaman, a 40-year-old artist who teaches at the University of Baltimore.

The piece involves a wall-size projection in which the viewer can select words and phrases from changing streams of language and explore different avenues of imagery.

It's a fascinating experience of simultaneity, like being surrounded by a poem that's writing itself, an apotheosis of the image-text formula of Conceptual art.

Through its many contrasts, "Mediascape" often gives a good idea of how far video art has come, and how much farther it may go with the help