

Out of sync

Electronic Visions

at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, N.Y.
July 24-Sept. 4

MARITA STURKEN

THE EXHIBITION of video in museums has been the subject of some debate since the demands of video works are often incompatible with traditional viewing habits. Many curators argue that we should treat video with the same care and installation concerns as painting and sculpture, yet the exhibition problems of video, especially installation, can be more complex than those encountered in displaying such silent, static media. What are the best conditions for the exhibition of video installations—a closed room, a thoroughfare, alone, with other works? How can video screenings be incorporated into a museum setting where people are accustomed to looking at a work for a few seconds and then moving on?

"Electronic Visions" at the Hudson River Museum, an exhibition guest-curated by John Minkowsky, the video/electronic arts curator at Media Study/Buffalo, raised many of these questions. The show was a survey of the relationship between video and computer technologies that included installations by several prominent video artist-engineers: Steina and Woody Vasulka, Dan Sandin, and Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller, as well as a large installation by Gary Hill. There was also a program of single-channel tapes including works by Peer Bode, Barbara Buckner, Ed Emshwiller, Nam June Paik, and Jane Veeeder. Above all, it was important to see a group installation exhibit in the New York area, where the established video showcases (the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, P.S. 1, and the Kitchen) generally exhibit only one installation at a time. While "Electronic Visions" demonstrated how video installations can suffer from exhibition problems, a context was created for a group of related works to be seen together, giving an indication of some current directions of the medium. In a group show, interrelation is, perhaps, the most important factor, creating a dialogue which in "Electronic Visions" was more like a loud family argument than a subtle cross-referencing of ideas.

In his introduction to the show, Minkowsky acknowledged the tentative relationship of video and computers:

By virtue of their access to and understanding of computer technology, many designer/technicians have produced graphic works for which they have been heralded as artists. Often their visions have focused largely on the capacities of the machine in question. Needless to say, the resultant products have been more demonstrative of a playful naiveté with new, albeit powerful and engaging toys than of important works of art.

This conflict of art and machines has always been part of any discussion of video's artist-engineers, whose works usually serve as documents of their image-making devices' output. However, after more than a decade of experimentation, some artists appear to be

moving beyond documentation into new realms of electronic narrative and other forms which apply the complex effects of these devices—with their digital and multiple images, and somewhat surreal results—to wider concerns.

It is ironic that in a show which featured new technologies in video art, the most successful work involved a mechanical, rather than computerized, system. Steina's *Machine Vision*, which has been shown in different versions for several years, is a viewer-activated installation which explores contained space and perspective. The piece consists of a large mirrored ball which rotates on top of four monitors, arranged in a square with one on each side. Two rotating cameras point at opposite sides of the ball, and their images alternate on the monitor screens. From any given angle, one sees several simultaneous views of the gallery space, oneself, and other viewers—the reflection in the mirrored ball and the two conversely rotating scenes on the video screen. The effect is a graceful, choreographed motion which contains and recontains the surrounding space, controlled yet self-propelled. The advantage of *Machine Vision* over other works in this show was largely due to its involvement of viewers as well as its compatibility with other works. It was situated in the most crowded room of the exhibition, sharing space with prints and videotapes by Woody Vasulka, Ralph Hocking, and Sherry Miller, as well as a small viewing area for single-channel tapes. While these other works seemed to compete with one another, *Machine Vision* responded to and absorbed them all.

The translation of electronic imagery into still pictures was an integral part of the work exhibited by Woody Vasulka and Hocking and Miller. Vasulka presented a series of wall panels, sequences of images describing his "Syntax of Binary Images," along with stills of multiple images derived from the footage used in *The Commission*, his most recent videotape. The didactic nature of Vasulka's binary images—progressions from a simple image of a hand to complex digitized renditions—make this atemporal treatment appropriate. Similarly, the geometric shapes composed of groups of images from *The Commission*, layered and superimposed so that they appear like mysterious configurations, created a tension between abstraction and a recognizable figure. In addition, Vasulka screened excerpts from *The Commission* at a panel discussion at Hudson River.

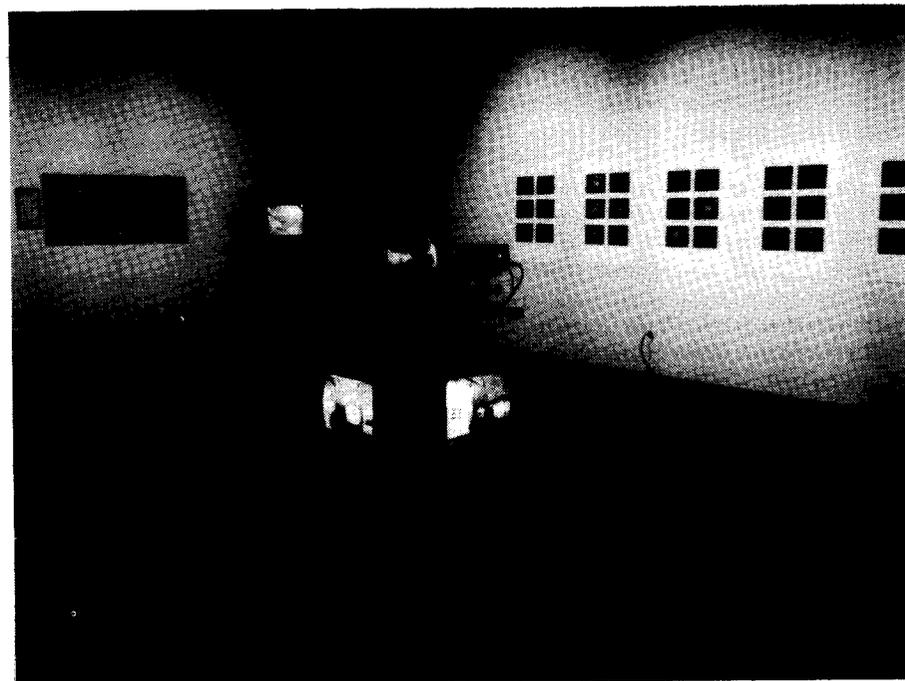
The tape represents a turning point, as it is the first major piece he has done shaping his earlier technical explorations into narrative form.

Hocking and Miller take a female nude as their point of departure for studies in color, form, and sensuality. According to Minkowsky's notes, they use a computer system "for drawing on paper images initially recorded on videotape." This might be an interesting technical feat, but the still images in this installation did not indicate the advantage of their process. The images are small, faintly blurred, sepia-toned nudes—many reminiscent of early pictorial photographs. Multiple imagery is certainly the application of this technique with the greatest potential, combining a still format with the myriad possibilities of computer effects. Hocking and Miller create dense superimpositions which become abstract as the delineations between figures are obscured, but, compared with Vasulka's stills, these pictures look timid because of their lack of definition and miniature size. Hocking and Miller's accompanying videotape, *The Tub* (and, I assume, the source for their images), contains some very fine moments of exquisitely rendered sensuality. It is a very gentle study of a woman in a pool of water, which moves from very simple black and white to increasingly manipulated

color images that become digitally fragmented and totally abstract. The color in Hocking and Miller's work is exceptional, especially in image-processed video; they create very subtle hues suited to their delicate subject matter. It would be more challenging, however, if they employed their electronic devices for making something beyond pretty pictures.

The exhibition of videotapes together with video-derived still pictures can provide a kind of visual relief, not unlike the effect of stop-action, allowing contemplation of a particular frame. Both Woody Vasulka—who situated a monitor continuously playing several of his and Steina's tapes in front of his stills—and Hocking and Miller thus encouraged a comparison between their still and moving images, but in both cases the placement of the monitors hindered the dialogue. The monitors sat on stands which intruded on the photographs, so that one had to walk around them to look at the pictures. Both monitors were significantly larger than the still images—an important consideration which seems to have been ignored. Had the dimensions of Hocking and Miller's pictures been the same, or at least close to the size of the monitor, the correlation between the two would have been strengthened. In Vasulka's case, his monitor was less obtrusive—in a

Above: installation view of *Machine Vision*, by Steina, at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, N.Y.
Below: computer-generated images from the videotape *The Tub*, by Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller.



MARITA STURKEN is a videomaker and critic of film and video in New York.

corner—but the selection of videotapes appeared somewhat haphazard, with glitches and color bars appearing between tapes. The most unfortunate aspect of this installation, however, was the conflict between Vasulka's soundtracks and the audio from the program of videotapes being screened on the opposite side of the room. Each distracted from the other and frustrated viewing.

Like the Vasulkas, Hocking, and Miller, Dan Sandin is one of video's most prominent electronic pioneers. Sandin has been working for the most part with real-time, image-processed tapes and performance, using his self-designed and -built Image Processor. His presentation of computer-generated holograms in "Electronic Visions" marks yet another technological push. Sandin's holograms consist of simple geometric shapes: a group of spirals, a series of cubes, and a pattern of concentric rectilinear forms. Each appears startlingly three-dimensional and moves in an animated way as one walks past it; the spirals elongate, the cubes orbit, and the rectangles shift position. These are, however, simplistic designs for such a complex technique, maybe necessarily so. Is Sandin a "designer-technician" according to Minkowsky's definition? More importantly, will he take this medium of computer holograms into interesting new territory? It often seems that holography is a process for which few artists, if any, have found a subject which really exploits the potentials of three-dimensional representation.

Out of the group of artists who showed installations in "Electronic Visions," Gary Hill is the only one who did not spend years building his own image-making device, but he is an adroit and perceptive user of computer and image-processing tools. Hill constructs systems which incorporate text, spoken language, and sculpture: His most recent work, *Happenstance (Part One of Many Parts)*, which was shown at Hudson River, reflects

yet another step in his textual explorations; he literally builds word sculptures on the screen (which are graphically very similar to Woody Vasulka's wall panels of *The Commission*) and then dissolves, reconstructs, and remolds them.

Hill's installation *Glass Onion* occupied a large central location in the museum, which made it appear almost a centerpiece. (I suspect this was the product of exhibition problems rather than hierarchical intent.) The piece is a study of feedback and the concept of a rectangle which has so many layers that it is difficult to determine which of these contains its primary content, hence the onion metaphor.¹ While the effect of *Glass Onion* seems deliberately obscured, it simultaneously engages and bombards the viewer with spoken, written, and moving texts.

Hill and Sandin's work benefited in this show by having separate exhibition spaces. Why the remainder of the pieces were crammed into a third room in unclear. "Electronic Visions" violated so many simple exhibition criteria that it is amazing how much of the work still managed to remain interesting and provocative. In any exhibition, certain considerations are necessary to prevent unintentional competition. Audio separation between works with soundtracks or intentionally silent tapes is essential. Works which are intended to create a very specific kind of atmosphere should not be exhibited within the same space as works that conflict with that intent. When exhibiting stills and videotapes together, the relative size of the images and monitors should be taken into account. When exhibiting flat images on a wall, the bulk and intrusion of a video monitor should be taken into account so that it does not appear overtly sculptural in relation to the two-dimensional work. The exhibition of single-channel works in conjunction with installation pieces presents another exhibition puzzle. If tapes are not shown in a separate space (which they



Frame from *Happenstance (Part One of Many Parts)*, by Gary Hill.

should be) the very act of setting up chairs in a quasi-theatrical environment amid installations creates a conflict for the audience. A seated presentation negates the idea of walking through and around installations.

In a recent essay about exhibition and distribution problems in video, Bill Viola points out that most exhibition problems in video art are not technical problems based on limited resources; they entail the "lack of information, expertise, and experience of the people involved in showing the work."² The technology displayed in "Electronic Visions" is advanced and well-researched, representing some important video artists. The exhibition problems in this show were not the result of curatorial intent or the quality of work pre-

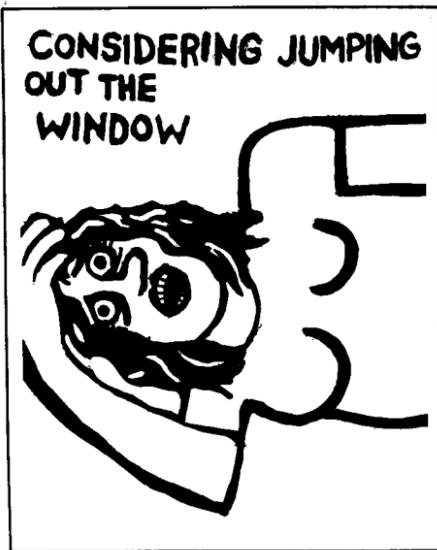
sented, but the way in which it was arranged.

Many of the premises presented in "Electronic Visions" deserve further investigation. The exhibition of videotapes and stills, for instance, merits elaboration. And, as Minkowsky put it, the "sublime yet troublesome" relationship of video and computers, as well as the complementary roles of the designer-technician and the artist require more attention and further exploration.

NOTES

1. For a thorough description of *Glass Onion*, see "A Manner of Speaking: An Interview with Gary Hill," by Lucinda Furlong. *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, No. 8 (March 1983), pp. 9-16.
2. *The Media Arts in Transition* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1983), p. 50.

The Birth of the Child of Choice, by Susan Baker. (Available from the author, 11 Brewster St., Provincetown, Mass. 02657)/25 pp./\$3.00 (sb). Each page of this slender book images an activity or moment in the pregnancy of a woman: waiting ... brooding ... eating ... blaming ... timing ... considering jumping out the window.... At first glance the pictures seem deceptively crude, a blend of new wave and fifth-grade painting. They are also skillful caricatures that transform the boredom and trauma of pregnancy into something both poignant and amusing.



Page from *The Birth of the Child of Choice*, by Susan Baker.

Sometimes the poignancy comes from the contrast between the pictures' humor and the bleak titles. For example: "Blaming." Blaming is not exactly a nice word, connoting wrongdoing and guilt. However, when placed above a picture of a seated, pregnant woman, pointing to her huge round stomach and glaring with eyebrows aslant at a hapless man, the tension is released. Elsewhere the poignancy comes from the sequence.

The contributors to this column are: Lisa Bloom (a graduate student in museum studies at the Visual Studies Workshop and the Rochester Institute of Technology), Ruth Cowing, Martha Gever, Melanie MacLennan (an artist/writer in New York City), and Rebecca Lewis.

RECEIVED AND NOTED

The moment grimly described on the next to the last page is "as close to death as you can get." Facing this, the last page is titled "Ellery Paul Jan 27 1983," and pictures for the first time the smiling face of the mother, and a full frontal view of a naked, squalling baby boy.

Susan Baker is an accomplished artist who uses her own life as material for her work. This is, perhaps, the most eloquent and complex birth announcement ever devised. —RL

Nicholas Nixon: Photographs from One Year (Untitled 31), introduction by Robert Adams. *Friends of Photography and The Institute of Contemporary Art/48 pp./\$16.00 (sb)*. In the summer of 1981, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art commissioned Nicholas Nixon to produce work for exhibition one year later. With funding from the New Works program of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, Nixon traveled throughout the U.S. photographing groups of people, concentrating on, in his words, "their skin, their stances, and the space around them." Nixon, who first gained prominence as a photographer of large format cityscapes, clearly has a knack for organizing disparate elements into a unified compositional whole. But here it's not enough. Though Robert Adams claims in his introduction that Nixon's photographs "depict complex events in progress," page after page shows groups of adults and/or children posed statically within the confines of an 8x10 in. frame. Adams postulates that Nixon's placement of his subjects into "stable visual relationships, creat[es] the equivalent of a completed plot." Yes, but what's the story? The photographs appear stagey, in contrast to the loose, fluid vibrancy hinted at by the cover photograph.

And finally, what of these "strangers," as Adams puts it, "from economic and racial backgrounds different from [Nixon's] own"? Adams lauds the warmth and beauty of these people—but what does *that* signify? Are we to come away with the notion that "poor people have dignity too"? Context is always important, especially in this genre of quasi-social documentary work, but without a clue from the photographer, we are left with an at-

tractive but meaningless package of masked personas. —RC

With Eagle Glance; American Indian Photographic Images, 1868 to 1931, introduction by N. Scott Momaday. *Museum of the American Indian/63 pp./\$6.95 (sb)*. *Hopi Photographers/Hopi Images*, compiled by Victor Masayesva Jr. and Erin Younger. *Sun Tracks and University of Arizona Press/111 pp./\$25.00 (hb); \$14.95 (sb)*. There is a poignancy here greater than that ordinarily engendered by old photographs. The majority of the photographs in *With Eagle Glance* are of Plains Indians, and were taken before 1910. Most of the images are studio portraits by Jackson, Curtis, Rinehart, and others; there are also a few landscapes by O'Sullivan and pueblascapes by Hillers. The images were made—and later collected by Warren Adelson and Ira Spanierman—in a spirit of romantic idealization of rare and strange objects.

The short introduction in the catalogue recognizes the distortion inherent in such idealization but excuses it through a similar romanticization of the photographs themselves and the illusions they perpetuate. The Plains Indians, with war bonnets and tipis, have become a metonym for vanished Native American culture. These images manifest the continuing fascination with our particularly American "other."

The Hopi were also photographed by Curtis and Hillers at the turn of the century, though this tribe is not represented in *With Eagle Glance*. In *Hopi Photographers/Hopi Images* Erin Younger offers a more critical history of the practice of photographing Indians in the course of environmental surveys sponsored by the Government and railroad companies. She also describes tourists' desire for photographs of Hopi rituals and the consequent tribal decision in 1915 to restrict photography by outsiders. That decision was consistent with Hopi concerns for preserving tribal and clan secrets, group identity, and harmony. Unlike the Plains Indians, Hopi culture has endured.

The texts in this book charge the images with significance that is not evident in the photographs alone. An essay by Victor Masayesva deals with the "delicate place

and ... dangerous time" in which Hopi photographers find themselves today. Many have gone to art schools and are not immune to the currents of contemporary photography, but they are also committed to the Hopi community, and sensitive to cultural conscience. Younger discusses the current Hopi attitude towards portraits, i.e., they are rarely sold, and strong community reaction against commercialization of Hopi portraits persists, probably stemming from the history of profit-making by outsiders from similar images. She recognizes that to consider Hopi photography as "categorically different" from non-Hopi photography is problematic. The distinction might simply be similar to differences between non-members and members of any community.

In the section titled "Photographing Ourselves: Images from Hopi Photographers," seven photographers—Jean Fredericks, Owen Seumtewa, Freddie Honhongva, Merwin Kooyahoema, Fred Kootswatewa, Georgia Masayesva, and Victor Masayesva, Jr.—are represented by portfolios of various lengths. As in *With Eagle Glance*, most of the photographs are portraits with a few architectural and landscape images. The dominant style is art-documentary.

I would not be able to recognize the photographs as Hopi-made without the accompanying biographies. That there are personal connections between some of the photographers and their chosen subjects, and that all are committed to community service is clear, but in light of the paucity of published Hopi photographs and the emphasis on contextual information in Younger's essay, it would also be interesting to know how these photographers and this book fit into contemporary Hopi culture. —RL

The World of Allah, by David Douglas Duncan. *Houghton Mifflin/279 pp./\$40.00 (hb)*. Duncan writes in the preface: "Leaving prayers and religion—and oil and politics and wars—in the Moslem world to others who wish to address those subjects in depth, this book is offered as the log of a wanderer's romance with an anchorless life..." You can guess this will be a formulaic romance: large color "pics" of exoticized peoples (in fact, they were originally taken for *Life's* "Great Religions" series), a text that reads like the bed-time adventure stories of heroes who always return to tell their story, and a theme so large and so stereotyped that any meaningful discussion is foreclosed. —LB