

Manhattan short cuts

Lawrence Weiner/Plowman's Lunch

and *Passage to the North*, at the James Agee Room, Bleeker Street Cinema, April 9; *Joan Jonas/He Saw Her Burning*, at the Whitney Museum, Feb. 22-March 13; *Amy Greenfield/Retrospective*, at the Museum of Modern Art, March 21; *Anita Thacher/Anteroom*, at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, March 10-May 15; *Video and film of the sixties*, at P.S. 1, Jan. 16-March 13; *Woody Vasulka/The Commission*, at The Kitchen and Anthology Film Archives, Feb. 17; *Jack Walworth/The Point of Consumption*, at The Kitchen, February; and *Nam June Paik/Tricolor Video*, at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris, Dec. 15, 1982-April 10, 1983

ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER

A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST who also makes films and videotapes, Lawrence Weiner has historically used film and video to make his dry, ironic, theoretical texts more accessible. Sex is often added as a sweetener. In his two most recent films, *Passage to the North* (1981) and the short feature, *Plowman's Lunch* (1982), Weiner's analytical propositions take a back seat to the erotically charged action. *Passage to the North* revolves around a reverse Ibsen dialogue (Ibsen's people would have longed for the south) about the necessity of the various characters—including two hard-faced young women in black leather coats and a soft man—going to the north. Domestic scenes of inquisition and conflict are intercut with black and white photographs and movies of a fire being put out on the blackened remains of a ship. Weiner inserts his texts more adroitly and humorously than usual: at one point, he sensuously sucks a woman's toes while placing a telegram that spells out various verbal "actions" or situations to take place in a Northern Art Center.

Plowman's Lunch—with its allusions to both a plowman's lunch (pickles and cheese) and a "hot lunch" (sex for lunch)—is the adventures of a group of deliberately casteless people of various ages and sexual persuasions who embark on a voyage or quest which is taken to the point of failure. Class, nationality and personal relationships are kept ambiguous in the search for "the man without qualities." There are echoes of Robert Altman's films, as there are of Eric Rohmer's movies, but Weiner's characters are particularly aimless and amoral. Their freedom from the responsibilities of daily life suggests they belong to the fringes of society, either the underworld (prostitution is evoked) or the artworld. Their freedom not only makes them homogenous but leaves them riddled with *angst* and *ennui*. When one

of the characters—Weiner's daughter, Kirsten—talks of her need to return and go to school, she is thrown overboard and killed. The characters have a great deal of charm—the Fellini-esque transvestite, Joop Vriend; the serious older man, Beno Bremela, who in real life is the head of the Dutch homosexual union; the two women murmuring together (Ingrid von Alphen and Eva Damave); or Alice Weiner (AZW Bentley in the credits) as the sleazy prostitute/mother.

Weiner's analyses of society and his own propositions are threaded throughout in a far less didactic or overwhelming form than usual. At one point a young girl (Kirsten) and a young man (Lorenz Van Der Mey) have a discussion about style and politics. Using style as a metaphor, Kirsten argues that conservative-reactionary politics impose on the younger generation: Van der Mey endorses the conservative view. At another point, Alice, dressed in one of her deliberately tawdry outfits, states Weiner's propositions about film in a kind of Platonic dialogue with a female companion in the kitchen.

FILM IS NOT A METAPHOR ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS BUT A REPRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL EXISTING FACT

Although Weiner's ship of fools has been faulted for male chauvinism (Weiner would argue this reflects the dominant culture) his success lies in his increasing skill in the craft of moviemaking, the dynamism of the encounters between the characters, and the charged performances he is able to elicit. Naked intimacy and the other contacts that rage between these characters have great appeal in this world where casual remarks can breed casual murder. With *Plowman's Lunch*, Weiner comes closest to abandoning art film for real filmmaking.

In *He Saw Her Burning*, Joan Jonas returns to solitary performance, but a performance embellished by the presence of other

characters on film and television, a prominent feature of *Lunar Double Dogs* last year. Jonas uses found stories as the grit necessary to form her pearl—a structure filled with her drawings, sculptures, and dances. *He Saw Her Burning* is an almost ritual enactment of two unrelated stories (both rewritten for these performances by Shawn Lawton). In one, a soldier inexplicably steals a tank in Manheim, Germany. After taking it for a joyride, he crashes it in the water. In the other, a woman for no apparent reason bursts into flames. Using props and other toys, Jonas enacts both parts—wheeling a large cardboard drawing of a tank, dancing the flame death with a giant red lacquered fan and streamers, or imitating the action of fire with a sheet of black plastic. She uses multi-media not only to extend and deepen her performance, but also to set up an opposition between the rational and the irrational, between authority and the circumvention of authority.

Television becomes her weapon. She employs its credibility to "swear" to the reality of her stories, to supply alter-egos, to extend her one-woman band, and in one sequence, to provide on-the-spot animation of drawings. TV becomes the voice of authority. Early in the performance Shawn Lawton appears on the screen, commenting on current events: "Today a woman burst into flames. An American stole a tank." He is paired with a woman (Y Sa Lo) on an adjacent monitor wearing a flame-colored dress and executing a private, sultry fire dance. Later, both appear on the screen as eyewitnesses to the two crimes. Television is used interactively with the performance, especially in the section where the male character imitates a talk show host, saying, "We would like to interview our special correspondent on berserk affairs." He then asks Jonas questions. Wearing a mesh mask with a mustache drawn on it, she mimes answers but doesn't speak. Video and film are also used to posit an unlikely love interest between the two berserkers. A Super-8 film showing them romantically intertwined is shown on floor to

ceiling strips of white paper. Seated on the floor, Jonas manipulates the streamers, breaking up the image to underline its nature as synthetic or created reality.

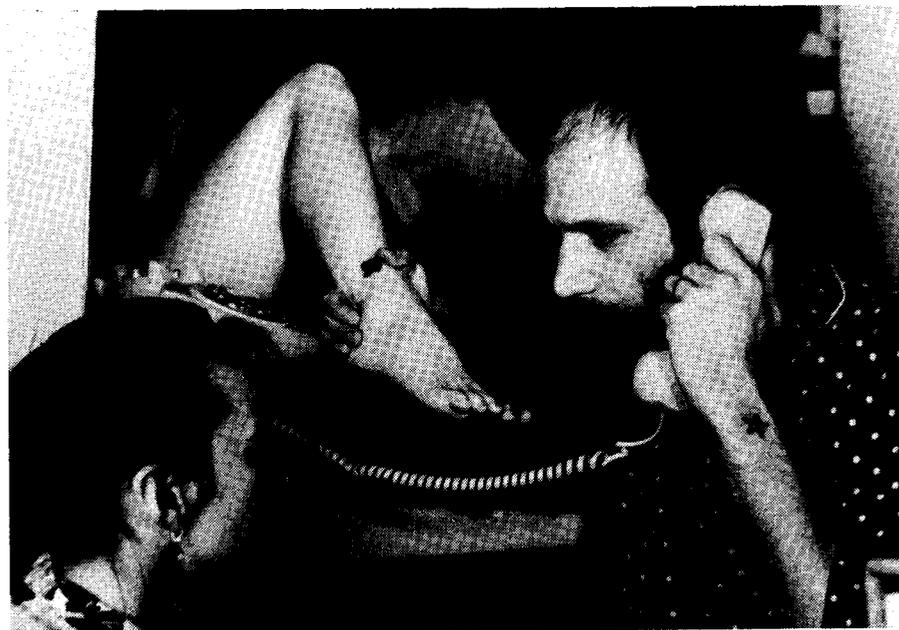
During the question period following Amy Greenfield's retrospective, she was asked why she called herself a choreographer. The question reveals the problematic radical elements in Greenfield's "dances" for film and video. She eschews traditional notions of dance to concentrate on what often appear to be natural movements. With the exception of two turn-of-the-century dance films Greenfield showed as historic references, her selection of her own tapes and films abandoned traditional choreography for a graphic celebration of the body and senses.

She began her long *Videotape for a Woman and a Man*, a nude *pas-de-deux*, at the point where the man (Ben Dolphin) slaps the woman (Greenfield), galvanizing them into a violent wrestling match. Except for the lyric passages set outdoors (repeatedly jumping off a cliff or rolling in the waves), the nudity and the intimacy of the camera (an excellent collaboration between the cameramen, Hilary Harris and Pat Saunders, and the performer-director) puts viewers in the position of voyeurs at a private sex act. Distanced by clothes and performed on stage this improvisation would be interpreted differently, but the tape shocks by its apparently graphic portrayal of sexual union in a context where you would not expect to see a blue movie. To a certain extent the tape is a tease, promising climax but providing instead a tantric ballet of tenderness and violence. Greenfield protests (me thinks too much) that what you see is pure and difficult dance, forging new ground in the history of the *pas-de-deux*. Her pursuit of the portrayal of the frontiers of ecstasy is limited not only by her denial of real closeness with the male dancer, but also by the fact that this kind of performance can only exist in private and cannot, by its very nature, enter the language of dance at large.

In Greenfield's other films and tapes the human body collides violently with the elements. In *Dirt* (1971), newly set to *Structure* by Glenn Branca, an anonymous faceless woman (Greenfield) is dragged, thrown, and lifted above rough earth—generally treated like a limp rag or the classic female victim. Greenfield's intention appears to have been to treat the body as an earthwork or process art, but the body always carries an emotive charge. Thus, instead of seeing a symbolic or abstract representation of the body's response to matter, what we come away with is an image of deliberate, almost new wave (because of Branca's music) brutality.

In the film *Elements* (1973), shot by Hilary Harris, Greenfield appears as a primordial creature, perhaps a swamp monster or the symbolic enactment of the evolutionary path from water to land. Barely nude under her coating of mud, Greenfield interacts with a slurping, semi-liquid plain of mud in a series of lifts, flops, and crawls. She calls attention not only to the limitations the mud imposes on movement, but to its extreme sensuousness. Although made before female-mud wrestling was a common male spectator sport, the film has that kind of tactile eroticism coupled with a sense of strength and defilement.

Still from *Passage to the North* (1981), by Lawrence Weiner.



Tides (1982), Greenfield's most recent tape (also shot by Hilary Harris) builds on the water section of a *Videotape for a Woman and a Man*. It is the most problematic of Greenfield's film-video dances, in part because it is the least abstract. Because Greenfield's face is wholly revealed, we are acutely aware of her individuality as she plunges repeatedly into the zone where waves break. Like the rictus often produced at climax, Greenfield's face reveals the conflict between pain and pleasure. Also, because of the presence of her face and our clear identification of her as a mortal woman—albeit a muscular and powerful one—the sense of mystery and universality is lost. Instead of seeing a foam-born goddess, we see a woman almost masochistically struggling with the waves. Here, the war-like aspects of Greenfield's work finds its ultimate adversary in the waves, which will soon forget Greenfield's challenge and reassert their hegemony over the shoreline.

Anteroom, Anita Thacher's movie-like, slide installation set to music from the *Catharine Wheel* by David Byrne, was the crowning gem of the Hirshhorn's "Directions 1982," an exhibition that combined painting and sculpture with film and photography. Thacher's work has consistently dealt with magic and transformation within ordinary circumstances. Here she presents a metaphoric space washed with deeply moving light. *Anteroom* consists of dissolving photographs of a small room furnished with simple props—a giant fan of dried grasses, a coffee pot, a mirror, and a chair. The room is entered by a door (a real door knob is placed on the wall) on the back wall. A young woman—the solo performer—enters and leaves the space. The constant tides of her presence or absence activate the space, which is further enlivened by the poltergeist-like movement of objects. Freed from gravity, the chair and coffee pot turn the space into a three-dimensional collage. There are suggestions of Robert Wilson's theater of images, especially in the floating chair, but instead of Wilson's icy stasis, Thacher's objects come alive and seem suspended in a fluid if viscous medium. Thacher's unique concept of space, time, and reality is deepened by her use of colored shadows. She begins to treat her illusionary deep space as if it were a three-dimensional painting, stripping the changing tableaux with free-form colored shadows, like strokes of paint in a new wave painting. Thacher's phantasmagoria go beyond sheer visual pleasure to posit a particularly female dream space enlivened by a sensuous appraisal of the beauty of domestic life.

Unlike the cool abstract paintings of the period, the collection of '60s film and video work curated by Bob Harris for P.S. 1 (with a catalogue essay by Davidson Gigliotti) is raw and emotionally charged. The tapes seem eons older than the 15 years that have passed since they were made. The work ranged from Bruce Nauman's monotonous private performance, *Lip Sync* (1969) to the experiments with technology sponsored by Boston's WGBH in the *Medium Is the Medium* (Aldo Tambellini, Thomas Tadlock, Alan Kaprow, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Nam June Paik) or undertaken independently by Eric Siegel in *The Symphony of the Planets*. Also included were Jud Yalkut, whose film work looks like image processed video, and personal and documentary video by the Videofreex, Global Village, Les Levine, and Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson.

The Videofreex collective produced the most sophisticated and engaging work about the world of the '60s, especially that inhabited by videomakers when to be involved with independent video was like being a member of a special race capable of living on the moon. Although limited to simple black and white equipment, their work went well beyond home movies to capture raw truth. An interview with a poet-convict who in turn interviews the interviewer about his ambivalent sexuality is particularly striking. In looking at early video, I am repeatedly struck by how much it came out of the hippie movement, psychedelic drugs, and the concept of world-love-peace that engendered. This is especially true in Jud Yalkut's *Aquarian Rushes* (1969, film transferred to video) and his black and white, silent film of John Cage mushroom hunting. In both, a hand-held camera, as well as sweeps and tilts of the ground, create visual equivalents to the disorientation and euphoria produced by drugs and breaking societal conventions—the sub-

ject of both works. This is not to deny their validity as art. The tilting planes, the blurred vision, the sudden edits, and the generally messy look (typical '60s avant-garde) are formal devices that best express the inner content of the Woodstock experience or Cage's Hudson River School, wild-man-of-the-woods escapism.

Woody Vasulka's abstract and difficult machine-based art is well-known for its formalist purity of means. With *The Commission*, Vasulka turns to narrative for the first

nini's hands, Vasulka creates a striking black and white grid with hands in altering positions that lies somewhere between Muybridge's movement studies and animating of a sign language alphabet. When he details the difficulties surrounding Paganini's death, Vasulka creates streaming, ghost-like web forms to suggest Paganini's *post mortem* entanglements. A spiralling, vortexical camera movement draws the viewer into the action and generates emotional excitement. This works extremely well both in the enactment of the

an electron telescope, or watching a leopard change its spots. The visual splendor is brought to earth by Ashley's mundane remarks. If Vasulka's *Commission* proves anything, it is that evil is more exciting than good.

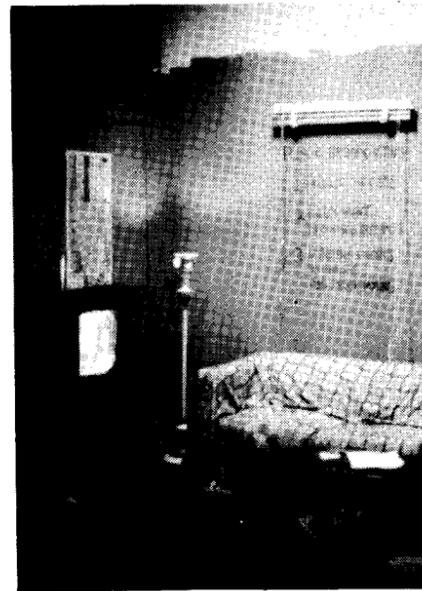
Jack Walworth's installation, *Point of Consumption* sets out to be a self-reflexive commentary on the structure, content, and process of television production. It is shown within a simulacrum of a lower-middle-class domestic interior—the site of most TV viewing. The set is a one-room apartment with a kitchen containing shelves filled with Tang, Jollytime Popcorn, Skinner's Raisin Bran, and Pepsi. It is further furnished with a bed dressed in orange sheets and a gray crocheted spread, miscellaneous beat-up furniture, and a TV set on a TV cart scattered with back issues of *Soap Opera Digest* (a reference to Walworth's earlier work on soap operas). This drab interior provides the setting for its jewel, its *raison d'être*—an intimate view of actors shooting the tape appearing on the TV set. Walworth emphasizes the conditions of production in voiceovers that announce, for example, "Scene two will be shot at another location ... we are too poor to finish [the tape]." Walworth also comments politically on this tape's content—the work of independent producers. The tape asserts: "We independent producers, solitary workers and technicians, rather than Hollywood producers, in organization for free speech ... TV workers for free speech in solidarity with workers of the world..." And later, "I just watched the organizations go crawling back to PBS, with the independents whining about all the money they don't make..." Walworth's not-so-hidden message is the triumph of non-funded producers in creating their product. Yet, unlike Godard, the tape offers little visceral satisfaction. Instead of giving the viewer a new (or old) political art form, we see a home movie hampered by poverty commenting on making a home movie.

Like the Guggenheim Museum, the architecture of Paris's Centre George Pompidou competes with anything placed within it and usually wins. In this huge industrial barn of a space, the main floor is always jumping with activity. Nam June Paik's mammoth sculpture, *Tricolor Video*, placed in a sunken pit in the floor, does gladiatorial combat with the space and wins.

In his original proposal, Paik wanted 300 or 400 TV sets arranged in a five-channel, three-color flag. The exact number of television sets in the final version is difficult to ascertain, but the effect is abundance. The monitors were placed in four-part pinwheel clusters raised on cinder blocks, forming modules that gave the individual sets greater presence. Scored to Stephen Beck's 1971 performance of *Electronic American Flag* this panoply of ricocheting images is simply a large-scale version of *Global Groove*. In a form of self-ancestor worship, Paik recycles sections of that tape, *Guadacanal Requiem*, *Suite 212*, and *Olympic Games*, as well as work by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, Shalom Gorewitz, Woody and Steina Vasulka, and others. The subject of the images is unimportant. They appear simply as the hearth-like flicker of television sets seen through other people's windows. Sequences of images seem to have been chosen because of their predominant tone—nominally the red, white, and blue of the American and French flags. These strong hues have been radically pastelled by light. The colors are arranged in twinkling, ever-changing patterns, rippling across the giant field in diagonal stripes and other configurations, at one moment speeding like a bobsled, at others slowed to the geometry of a courtly dance.

Like many of the pieces stemming from *Global Groove*, *Tricolor Video* is a commentary on the world phenomenon of television, which has become even more diverse and universal with the advent of satellites and cable. I agree with Jean Paul Fargier, who states in his poetic catalogue essay that *Tricolor Video* becomes a dissolving spectacle, paradigmatic of the phenomenon of television—seductive, glittering movement, often appreciated without careful attention to content.

Fargier believes that it is possible to enter into Paik's dance of images and strike to the heart of a mystical experience based on the visual splendor of television. But to me, it seemed as if the viewer was left on the outside of the difficult-to-see images. The piece has the presence of a half-time spectacle in a football stadium, but ultimately lacks the sense of purpose that gives it a deeper reality than that of radiant kinetic spectacle.



Top: Joan Jonas performing in *He Saw Her Burning*. (Photo: Francene Keery). Middle: *Anteroom* (1982), a slide installation by Anita Thacher. Bottom left: *Tricolor Video*, by Nam June Paik. (Photo: Adam Rzepka.) Bottom right: *The Point of Consumption*, an installation by Jack Walworth.

time, partially—as he revealed in remarks made after the screening at Anthology Film Archives—because he wanted to produce more accessible work. The tape is based on an imaginary commission the violinist Count Niccolò Paganini gave Hector Berlioz; Paganini is played by Ernest Gusella, Berlioz by Robert Ashley. Each man essentially defined his character and wrote his own material, which accounts for the radical differences in style and content in the sections featuring each of the musicians.

The parts with Paganini/Gusella are the most interesting, for Vasulka responded magnificently to Gusella's portrayal of the demon violinist who was both a popular performer and a pariah. Vasulka invents and processes images that enhance and embellish Gusella's character. In the opening section, to symbolize the importance of Paga-

delivery of the commission and in a scene where Paganini, dying and sinister, must whisper into the ear of his innocent looking son. Here the spiralling camera movement generates a cocoon of intimacy between the boy and his father.

The scenes with Ashley/Berlioz lack the verve of those with Gusella/Paganini, but in the final Ashley/Berlioz section, Vasulka's visual pyrotechnics transform Ashley's laid-back character. Berlioz/Ashley is shown, dressed in a white suit and seated out of doors, fitfully playing a harmonica and talking about breakfasts at the Holiday Inn. He seems to occupy the kind of earthly paradise the Impressionists excelled in. Digital processing is used to fracture his image into tiny squares that resemble Seurat's pointillism. Watching the squares alter and change is like staring at the movement of molecules in