

The Early Video Project

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VIDEOSPACE/INTERFACE

By Jud Yalkut

Video is so pervasive in late twentieth-century life that many of its effects are taken for granted and rendered almost invisible. This paradox of invisibility is the height of irony as television was intended as a means of transmitting vision in its immediacy over potentially great distances. Television, with its propaganda and advertising, its prepackaged program segments, and its louder-than-real-commercials, becomes most vital when it fulfills its potential for real-time reportage and on-the-spotness. The Kennedy assassinations, the moon landing and Apollos beyond, the Watergate hearings, and the Iran-Contra investigations galvanized a population anesthetized by touchdowns, homeruns and excessive beer. But even Space Shuttle missions become narrated as though sporting events until we are stunned to momentary inaction by tragedy. The sense of immediacy in television is so inherent that we must be reminded when something "has been recorded previously especially for broadcast at this time."

The ubiquitous assimilation of video into contemporary life has become vastly accelerated by technological advances. As display screens increase in size, resolution and expense, recorder and camera ensembles have diminished dimensions and effectively merged into one as camcorders. Print media is still far from obsolescence, but for many the new home library is electronically impressed.

Nam June Paik, in West Germany in 1963, and again in New York in 1965 at the New School for Social Research and the Bonino Gallery, exhibited rewired and magnetically altered television sets effectively turned into electronic light machines. The Bonino gallery show ushered in simultaneously the new era of video art and its offspring - video installation art. Paik's conception of "Participation TV", was shown later in 1969 at the Howard Wise Gallery's seminal show, "Television as a Creative Medium."

"Color-separated ghost shadows mirror and re-echo one's gestures, one's dancing with light, with visual toys, with silence." - On "Participation TV from a review of "Television as a Creative Medium" in "Arts Magazine", 1969.

Also exhibited at the Howard Wise exhibition was a nine screen TV mural by former filmmaker Ira Schneider and former painter Frank Gillette, entitled "Wipe Cycle", in which camera-generated images of spectators were video switched, in both immediate and delayed playback, with broadcast and pre-programmed video in overlapping cycles based on four second increments. "You can watch yourself live watching yourself eight seconds ago, watching yourself sixteen seconds ago, eventually feeling free enough to interact with this matrix, realizing one's own potential as an actor," commented Schneider in 1969, in an interview with this author. Between the closed-circuit input of the viewer and the environment, and the architectural incorporation of the video display in the space, the parameters of video installation were thus initially broached by Paik, Schneider and Gillette.

Contemporaneous to these video manifestations, Les Levine turned from Pop-ish disposable and plastic art to video with two closed-circuit video sculptures "Iris" (1968) and "Contact: A Cybernetic Sculpture" (1969). In these "Teledynamic Environments", a term coined by Gene Youngblood in his 1970 book "Expanded Cinema", Levine employed multiple video viewpoints with lenses of differing focal lengths focused on the viewer and the environment. The re-wiping patterning of these images, and their re-imprinting throughout the information system was the conceptual glue that bound together Levine's vision.

A fair history of the evolution of video installation conceptions would fill several volumes. Examples of a few major early trends follow: Douglas Davis' "Images from the Present Tense I" (1971) where a TV with a phosphorous glow and white noise soundtrack from between broadcast stations was turned face to the wall; Peter Campus' use of low-light infrared video cameras and black-and-white video projectors conveying inverted, slanted and magnified images of the viewer/participant in three 1975 pieces, "sev", "cir" and "bys"; Woody and Steina Vasulka's horizontally drifting abstractions across aligned monitor displays at Max's Kansas City in New York in 1971; Shigeo Kubota's 1975-76 video sculpture of wooden steps enclosing four monitors displaying her video-processed version of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase"; Taka Imura's identity interactive video installations, "Register Yourself: Unless You Register you are No Person" (1972) and "I-You-He/She" (1974); and Susan Milano's "Video Swing" (1974) where you rush swinging towards yourself on three laterally mounted monitors.

"You will have a console in your room, and anywhere from nine to twenty screens, and with this console you would receive and program yourself via telephone or Xerox or whatever, a catalog of what's available in each computer bank, a constantly updated catalog. And you would dial into the computer bank to get anyone on your screen, and any number in conjunction. And that's how you would experience television." - Frank Gillette, in 1973, published in "Radical Software".

The proliferation of video installations in recent years suggests that museums and galleries demand a physicality to video presentations that single screen videotape alone cannot fulfill. The installation gallery becomes a shrine or a game room rather than a viewing situation. However, while galleries have sold editions of artists' videos, installations are rarely sold and tend to be either site specific or modularly packaged for touring exhibitions.

An example of the package approach to video installations is Mary Lucia's "Wilderness", produced in 1986 for the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts. It toured and appeared twice in Ohio, at the Columbus Museum of Art in 1988, and as part of the Dayton Art Institute's "A Certain Slant of Light" in 1989. Three professionally edited videotapes in color with original sound by composer Earl Howard were displayed on seven monitors. The images were drawn from the American landscape, as filtered through the 19th-century vision of the Hudson School of painters, with salt marshes, majestic icebergs, and unspoiled nature poised in the tenuousness of man's works in the natural balance. The poignancy of "Wilderness" was mitigated by the use of "classical" pedestal monitor stands of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian column design. Also referential to the art world are those taped moments when natural vistas freeze within the images of gilded frames.

Multi-monitor installation is demanded for the presentation of simultaneous tightly-edited multi-channel presentations, as in the burgeoning videowall phenomenon. On the other hand, the site-specific use of live closed-circuit video with multiple viewpoint cameras and monitor placements can truly bring a space alive. Building monitors into walls or sculptural shapes can help destroy the usually overbearing presence of the monitor as a piece of furniture. Isolating the screen, on whatever scale, heightens the sense of a new reality called "videospace".

Israeli artist Buky Schwartz exhibited the installation "Form of Detachment" at Cleveland's SPACES gallery in the spring of 1989. In this piece, Schwartz used closed-circuit placements to displace the viewer's perception of the phenomenology of space and one's relation to it. A triangle painted on the gallery walls protruded into the video monitor space and was completed by the apex of a pyramidal form recorded by a horizontal camera. This camera also captured the viewer's entry into the gallery on this apparently horizontal axis.

Also at SPACES was the interactive touch-sensitive screen piece, "The Erl King" by Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman. (This piece had been included in the 1987 Whitney Biennial.) Based upon interlocking fragments, centered around a Schubert lied setting of Goethe's narrative poem, "The Erl King" was programmed into three videodisc players controlled by a computer. The system operated on a "continuous response system... where a viewer can interrupt the flow at any moment." However, every touch does not produce change, or the same change at the same place, and thus redundancy appears to assume an aleatoric happenstance.

The advent of portable video equipment in the late 1960s tied in closely with the need for alternative information systems. Forbidden subject matter and the raw reality of self-satirizing pomposity became the soul of what was called radical software, and was exhibited in storefronts and other alternative viewing spaces. This biting political sensibility lives in the installation work of Spanish-born, New York artist Francesc Torres whose work has been exhibited nationally as well as in Ohio and Indiana. Pointedly, his piece for the 1989 Whitney Biennial, "Oikonomos" (Greek for economics) showed a black bronze reproduction of Zeus holding a video screen portraying poor Blacks washing car windows at New York intersections, and the statue with one outstretched hand and a raised baseball hat in the other. Smaller monitors hung from the god's loins and depicted images of Wall Street and expensive racing cars. The Zeus figure was borrowed from the Metropolitan Museum of Art which tried to close down the piece due to their outrage at the "trappings that have nothing to do with original!" ("New York Times, 18 May 1989) A replica of the Met's Zeus was flown to substitute from forth Worth, Texas on loan from a

local businessman.

Torres' touring installation "Belchite/South Bronx" was exhibited at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center in the spring and summer of 1989. Torres featured six channels of pre-recorded tape on twelve monitors interspersed throughout elaborate constructions, reworking allusions to the ruins of a fascist-bombed village in the Spanish Civil War and the burnt-out tenements of the South Bronx, complete with the shell of an automobile, basketballs and an ominously incinerated upright armchair. Torres has sought a "coinage of a synchronic, ahistorical, trans-cultural and paradigmatic urban landscape that exists in the elusive domain of human behavior and culture." He hopes for the day "when happiness can be pursued without constantly looking over one's shoulder." (From the catalog for "Belchite/South Bronx") Then, he says the piece and his statement can be destroyed.

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