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An Introduction to VIDEO ART

What is it?

Video is the name given to the entire electronic medium, of which "television" is the programming we are used to seeing. But the medium can be programmed in virtually limitless ways, just as there are almost no limits to what can be done with a piece of paper. *Video art* is the process and result of the medium as put to various uses by creative people with a fascination for the visual potential of electronic circuitry. Video art is today still in its infancy—the creative obsession of a relatively few men and women working alone, in small groups, or in experimental laboratories. There is little doubt, however, that over the next few years video art will emerge as a highly visible and influential component of the arts in the U.S. and Europe—and possibly as a small part of everyday life.

A Brief History of Video: The Medium is You.

The first thing to keep in mind when you begin to think about video is its immense flexibility as a medium. It is not only TV, that standard piece of American living room furniture; it is also a material for making electronic graphics, the surveillance system in the neighborhood supermarket, the training tool that shows all-too-instantly what kind of teacher or tennis player you are, and a means of documenting almost anything from the SLA burnout in Los Angeles to a grandmother's memories of her childhood. In other words, the video world is much larger than the art world, and people who eventually wind up making video art can have very diverse backgrounds in the medium. Consequently, the term "video art" does not describe any single unified style; it indicates a shared medium.

Another thing to bear in mind is that most video art-making began to happen in 1968-1969. The social and artistic ferment of those years had a great deal to do with the way the medium was first used. 1968 also marks a technical watershed: it was the year portable, relatively inexpensive television equipment came on the market, thus opening the medium to a vast new group of people. Although these people were interested in the equipment for many different reasons, most of them shared an acute dissatisfaction with broadcast television. They were unhappy with the monolithic nature of TV, with the way three major networks control what a whole country must see. And they were fed up with the quality of programming—the lack of diverse content and the routine visual sameness of it all.

So some people made a point of taking their new lightweight cameras out into the streets and into the countryside, recording people and social situations broadcast TV

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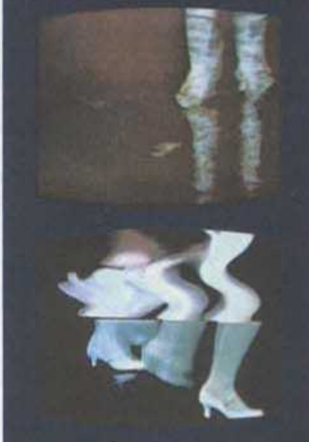

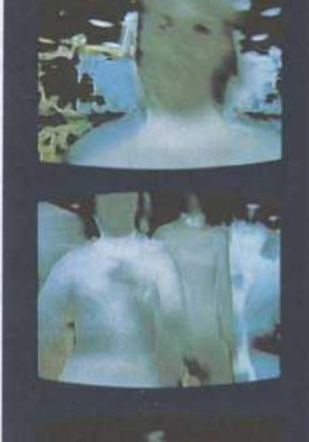

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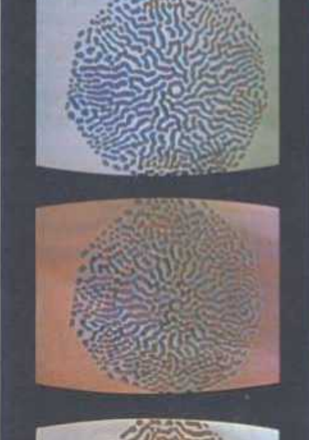

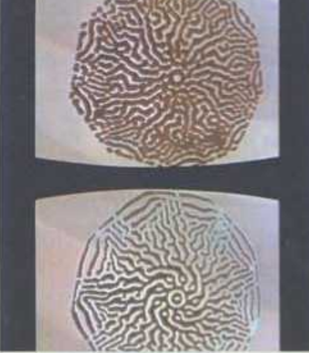

would never have bothered with. They were not supported by advertising; they couldn't have cared less about ratings. They were free to focus their cameras on anything, even things that would interest just the people living in a single neighborhood.

Others concerned themselves with electronics research and development. Some of these experimenters come from a strong 20th-century graphic tradition of exploration with light imagery going back at least as far as the Futurists and the Bauhaus. People who had been looking for a medium of moving colored light were overjoyed to find that television could produce abstract images just as easily as it could a newscaster's face. They built new electronic circuitry to produce different imagery. These people are among the real pioneers of the medium. They are fascinated with the role technology plays in our society and are constantly searching for new ways to make this role visually manifest. They feel that the structure of electronic tools reflects as well as informs our thinking; by using tools that produce visual patterns they hope to reveal to us our social and technological directions.

Still another group reacted away from the one-directional flow of broadcast TV, the way it streams day after day into the homes of millions of people without providing the means for them to talk back

AT THE GROWING EDGE

Foundations like to think that supporting the gifted pioneer working at the growing edge of things is their special province. And sometimes it is. Nine years ago, the RF became the first foundation to take a systematic interest in video art and artists. "It has been the good fortune of The Rockefeller Foundation to have played a small but perhaps key role in that rarest of cultural phenomena—the development of a new art form," says Howard Klein, the RF's director for Arts. More than $2.5 million has been appropriated since. The creative person is always the ultimate beneficiary of such grant-making, but, says Klein, "our particular contribution has been to help establish experimental centers at WGBH in Boston, WNET in New York, and the National Center for Experiments in Television in Berkeley, California."

equally directly. They point out that we have only receivers in our homes, not transmitters. Sometimes these people set up small closed-circuit environments containing both cameras and monitors: one could see one's own image on monitors—next to others showing programs coming off the air. These people were interested in the nature of visual and aural information, in how we receive and digest it and in how it affects us, both consciously and unconsciously.

The Art Market: Say It, But Don't Sell It.

Interestingly enough, at the same time that this reaction against broadcast television was going on, the established art world was facing some challenges of its own. Many artists felt that the traditions of painting and sculpture had arrived at a cul-de-sac and were searching for other means of expression. During the same period (1967-1970) the commercial art world was involved with escalating prices and wild buying, a situation further confused by a prevailing indecisiveness about the relative merits of different kinds of art.

One result of all this was that some artists reacted against the production of art objects, preferring to work in non-buyable, non-possessable media partly in an attempt to free themselves from the art market as it was then functioning. Video fell into this new art world very neatly. It could be used to record all kinds of performances and actions, enabling them to be repeated again and again. It could be either abstract or representative in its imagery (since it was not inherently one or the other) and so sidestep certain critical dilemmas. A few galleries and museums began

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to collect tapes, hire curators, and organize exhibitions.

To summarize: "art making" has occurred in three video areas: electronic research and development (synthesizer tapes and graphic effects), documentary making (an area currently of much interest to historians), and the complex field of information-perception pieces which expand our ability to perceive ourselves in a high-technology environment.

Who are They?

The father of them all may well be Nam June Paik, an avant-garde musician whose first video exhibit took place in Germany in 1963. Paik's work takes many forms—tapes, performances, installations—reflecting his interest in process rather than product. He became famous as the co-developer of one of the first of the video synthesizers—instruments that can do for form and color what the moog synthesizer did for sound.

Paik's basic style (strips 3 and 5) is one that has become familiar in this century, a collage of juxtaposed pieces of information wrenched out of their original contexts. His taped work constantly reshuffles bits and pieces of material from all over the world—a Korean drummer in action, Japanese Pepsi commercials, go-go dancers, tapes of his own performances with cellist Charlotte Moorman. He has spoken of how we live in an age of information overkill; his fast-paced, disjunctive, percussive tapes heighten and intensify this barrage of image and sound. The effect is jolting.

Ed Emshwiller (strip 1) is a filmmaker known for his technical expertise and willingness to explore new visual effects. His work typically includes the human figure, and indeed seems like a special kind of dance. He was one of the first to marshal special effects in video and computer animation and to structure them into finished work.

Hermine Freed (strip 2) usually makes tapes which explore in some way the ambiguities of visual perception. Art Herstory uses special video effects to recreate famous paintings dating from the Middle Ages to the present, superimposing Freed's own image as contemporary woman over that of the women in the paintings.

Skip Sweeney (strips 4 and 7) is the co-founder of Video Free America in the Bay area. He is one of the handful of people to have mastered feedback, the electronic whirlpool obtained by training the camera on the monitor.

In some ways the work of Stephen Beck (strip 6) is the most traditional of the abstract color video artists. He takes painstaking care with the structure of his works—they tend to be short, precise, and rich with references—just as he was methodical about his choices when building his synthesizer. This structured approach to abstract art is not new in this century. Beck speaks of his respect for the painter Kandinsky.

Woody and Steina Vasulka (strip 8) are among the most thoughtful people working in video and their work is central to the basic concerns of the medium. Steina is a violinist from Iceland and Woody is a filmmaker from Czechoslovakia; both have been interested in electronic arts of all kinds for a long time. There is no dramatic structure in their abstract work; the tapes have fast-moving rhythms, but shifts occur according to permutations in the way the image is structured, not according to any dramatic plan.

Johanna Gill

WORKING PAPER: VIDEO ART

A detailed account, artist by artist and city by city, of what is happening in video art in the U.S. and Canada will be available soon. The report (from which this short article was adapted) was prepared by Johanna Gill, who is presently completing her Ph.D. dissertation on video art in the Art History Department of Brown University and who also teaches 20th-century art history at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. The unusual photographs were taken by Jock Gill with the special assistance of WNET, New York. Single copies of this Working Paper are available free from The Rockefeller Foundation.

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