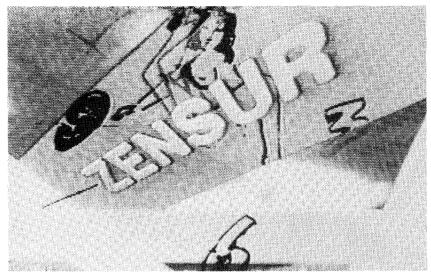
PUBLIC IMAGES AND IMAGES OF POWER

Peter Weibel



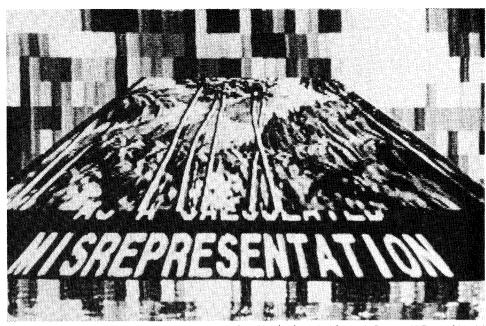
Petr Vrāna - Medienpornesie

Contrary to public belief, public images are no longer produced by the art world or by individuals. Public images have become the domain of media: print media, street signs, posters, film- and TV-images, covers, billboards, logos, etc. Most of the time public images are media images produced by corporations, agencies, and political institutions. The goal of the public image is propaganda for commodities and ideologies. Therefore public images have not only become the promotional support for commodities and ideologies, but the very structure of commodity and ideology itself. Advertising images have become an essential part of the production process. Advertising a product, which means to establish an exchange value and a need for a product through a campaign of public images, is sometimes more cost-intensive than the production of the product itself. Therefore public images have become a glamorous commodity in themselves.

Images produced by painters rarely enter the public domain at all. Traditional pictures like paintings only invade public space if transformed into media images. Traditional images like paintings have lost their historical quality of being an image at all. They have become pure commodities.

The subversion of the commodity structure of the image is only possible within media images, since media images are the core of public images. Media images by artists can play the art of noise in the music of plutocracy. One of the strategies of subversion is to acknowledge that the three classical categories of sign have lost their function. We do not live any longer with signs which relate directly to objects in our environment; we don't act any more according to icons, indices, or symbols which relate to objects through visual analogy, physical dependence, arbitrariness, or conventional coding. Since all objects are replaced by commodities, we have a new category of signs which relate to commodities instead of objects. This new class of signs is called logos. We are living in a logo-culture, a substitution for the historical iconographic and symbolic culture. In this logo-culture, the institutions producing the public images, and the products and logos for products, have become the frame of reference. In former times inner experience or visions functioned as the point of

Modern image making therefore deals with the social, institutional and political elements which are constructing the image. In that sense the visual artist can subvert the framing and representation of the image by deconstructing the constitutive elements of the image. Are the social and institutional powers constructing the world and are they using artists as well-paid slaves to represent the world as they have constructed it? One of the few strategies of a power-less class, to which artists belong, is to deconstruct and reconstruct images. Between representation and construction of the world — the classic dichotomy between powerlessness and



Sara Hornbacher - Anti-Scenes in Panama (A Tropical Movie)

power, between art and politics — between scylla and charybdis there is another way: deconstructing and reconstructing. Instead of representation, which is always a form of adaptation, which is always a form of affirmation, the aesthetic system and the social system can be a coupling system for deconstruction and reconstruction. The comtemporary artist therefore has to reconstruct and deconstruct above all public images, the images of power, in an effort to remake history, to reinvent the present, and to restock the real. Have the media turned reality into a club — the reality club owned by lawyers, politicians, companies, corporations, the military? The artist and each individual has the chance to reinvent reality through deconstructing media images. Most people experience real life only through media controlled by power. Mediated life is the fate of most people. Mediated life as a substitution for real life has become a private club only for members, the members of the power class. Paintings are a kind of ticket to this club. Media images can turn into dirty tickets, false tickets, and therefore subvert the logic of the membership. Public images are media images. Media images are images of power. Public images are therefore also images of power. To deconstruct power is the true intention of deconstruction: to make the system inconsistent with what is represented in media images.

Instead of an ontology of the image built on the triple relation of object-sign-truth, we need an epistemology of the image built on the triple relation of sign-power-truth. In this new relation

and foundation of artwork we have the chance to uncover the power, to discover the truth by reconstructing, deconstructing, recoding, and decoding the chain of signs, and by redefining the signs. This shift from ontology to epistemology is already announced by the shift from production to post-production typical of the electronic image, the media image. The ontology of the image is based on the myths of old production modes. The epistemology of the image is based on the new modes of production which are post-productive and tele-deviced. Local topological production modes are replaced through spatially and temporally diversified post-production modes. This shift from production to post-production, which characterizes fully the transition from the cinematographic image to the electronic image, happened essentially in the seventies, and was naturally experienced in the beginning as a devaluation of the image. Since then any bad image could be saved in post-production, and the constructive elements of the image have become the subjective of the image itself. The most technically constructive elements of the image have become the subject and the content of the image itself.

Through post-production both the availability of the history of the image and the dispossession of the image have become an awareness. The inflation of images has been a second wave, generated by the emphasis on post-production. The first wave, the logical antecedent, was the debunking of the image, the extinction of the historical qualities of image making, which now,



Ardele Lister - Zoe's Car

in a third restorative wave, are again simulated — as a drive, a hunger for the image, in painting as a nostalgia for a lost cause.

The process of image making is historically definitive and finally separated from (local) production and related concepts like ownership. etc. The traditional parameters of time, space, and socialization linked with production are equally transformed by post-productive tendencies. In post-production images tend to show new social, temporal and spatial modes, and utopias of dispossession, etc. Appropriation is the catch-word which tries to describe the productive and social consequences following the shift from production to post-production in image making, repeating the general tendency in economics of the production of products. The discourse of appropriation is therefore not only one of using foreign-found images, image banks, or dispossessing images — which often does not avoid the danger of historicizing the present and neohistoricizing history — which happens in the cases of the new art movements (from neoexpressionism to neogeo). The real appropriation would be to disown, dispossess the apparatus in power — the apparatus of representation as we know it. Dislocation or teleproducing in postproduction does not mean distancing history or diachronic approaches but rather distancing the history of power, the history written by power. Dispossession means only to disown power.

Becoming ahistorical and apolitical are the results of a superficial capitalist adaptation of

appropriation as revealed in the neo-movements of art, where rather appropriation, understood as dispropriation, could mean rewriting history, remaking the world by historical and social deconstruction of the constituents of the image, the image making process, the representation mode of the image.

The image in its frame and configuration of representation is supressing the real. This supression is linked to a specific function, which comes from the neglected fact that the stable image (e.g. painting) is not the last value, has not its real value in itself. The image needs its support from other values — from history, from social acceptance and from money. The value of money is the real value of the image. Money is the last denominational value. Without this support an image has no value and does not exist. Public images therefore are images which support money, which support this constitution of society, this empire of values, where money is the last value, the founding value. Public images are therefore propaganda images for these values. Public images don't generally tell the truth; they are strategies of seduction, glamorizing commodities. Like money, so also the image, above all the public image, tends to suppress the real.

On this basis we can see that art cannot incorporate the last degree of freedom as it is proclaimed. Just the opposite is true. Free trade and free media have not become free exchange of information, but transformed information into



Axel Klepsch - Augen Zu

an exchange value on the free market. By commodifying information, information itself has become obscured to such a measure that revealing the truth about important social facts and events has become nearly impossible, as we all know. It is a ridiculous lie that there is a free press or that there are free media in any country. The news value of information is not important, but rather its abstract free exchange value.

Everything has become liberated, has been set free — the arts, the media, the signs — at the very moment of history and only under the condition that freedom has no meaning anymore, at least not in its historical meaning. Freedom today means freedom of abstraction, abstraction of anything in to an exchange value, into an abstract free exchange value. Money is an abstract exchange value. It is the telepresence of objects and values. The image as the telepresence of the object repeats this logic of the capital.

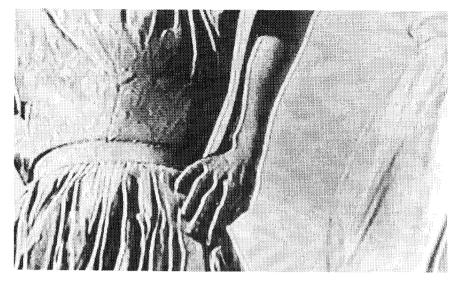
This freedom of art representing the abstraction of the free exchange value is another reason why art is not dealing with the real, especially not with the third world which only can be immune to our arts or colonized by our arts. Epidemics are detractors, showing our culture as black holes, as implosion.

Media have become a way to colonize not only other nations but also one's own nation. The empire of colonization, in the sense of colonizing continents and peoples, is finally broken down. Evidence in culture for the vanishing of spatial colonization is the nostalgic discovery of

colonial splendor or misery in the commercial film, the colonial exploitation film. After the breakdown of spatial or racial colonization, the people in power started to colonize their own or foreign countries temporally and mentally. Television is the way to colonize one's own nation. Print and public media mastermind, colonize. exploit, and subordinate one's own nation. The mental colonization of one's own country, this brutal prolongation of a historical mode of exploitation and suppression, is the colonization of desire, of consciousness, of needs and values, of styles and minds, of attitudes and goals. A weak form of awareness of this problem, a weak form of protest and opposition, is the contemporary practice of appropriating and deconstructing images of mass media, the media of colonization. Decolonizing media is the task of a contemporary artist. Built on the power of representation, the institutions of power colonize the people with representational images which follow the morphology of desire. After ruining representation, the next step is decolonizing media, reappropriating media images and reclaiming reality. Decolonizing media is a way to deconstruct and destroy the empire of power.

CATCHING UP TO VIDEO AT HOME AND ABROAD

Tony Conrad



Julie Zando - Hey, Bud

CALCULATING EXPOSURE: VECTOR PRODUCTS.

Technology has been mutating so fast that our "software" is always playing catch-up — Gilles Deleuze says that technology is de-territorialization. Paul Virilio comments that

"All current technologies... produce shorter and shorter distances... The field of freedom shrinks with speed. And freedom needs a field. When there is no more field... there will be nothing left but absolute control, an immediacy which will be the worst kind of concentration."

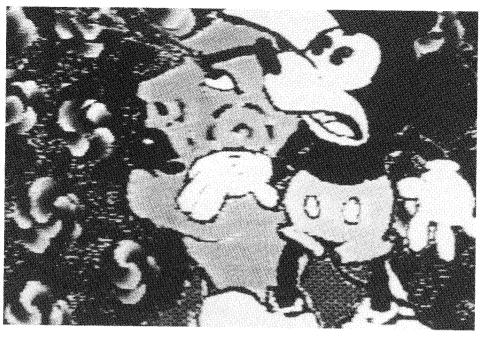
Four works bear upon distance and transportation in competing ways: Peter Callas's Kinema No Yoru (Film Night) (Australia, 1986), Daniel Minahan's Aesthetics and/or Transportation (USA, 1987), Karl-Heinz Hahnemann's Kaspar Hauser Stirb (Kaspar Hauser Dies) (GDR), and Olhar Eletronico's Varela In Xingu (Brazil, 1985).

Peter Callas' work was created during a residency in Tokyo at Marui Department Store. Its visual material is from 1930's Japanese cartoon figures; they have implications, for Japanese, of imperialist fantasy. When this work appeared on the huge screens in the square outside, facing one of Tokyo's busiest districts, the imperialist themes were muted only by the formalization and decontextualization of the images. This presentational strategy in turn functioned to emphasize the space of the screen and the formal energy of the video medium itself — and in

consequence, Callas' topic of address became, legibly, the **endo**-colonization (by imperial Japan) of the space of the TV screen.

He had observed how "television in Tokyo was earnestly engaged in the process of constructing an expansive mental terrain for a city [with]...rigorously cramped living conditions and intolerably long and impossibly crowded commuting distances," and saw Japanese society responding in turn by implementing "[t]he idea of technology, particularly image-transmitting technology, as territory (in the sense of something to be traversed, lived in or off, colonised...)"²

"Aesthetics and/or Transportation" is a prescient essay by Gregory Battcock which appeared in Arts in April, 1974. In Daniel Minahan's videotape with the same name, an intertitle explains how "Vicky Aliata" appeared as Battcock's surrogate (or other?) at the Museum of Modern Art; in the tape, we see "Vicky" reading the essay while Gregory lounges about his hotel room in Puerto Rico with his juicily muscular young traveling companion. The source text emanates a hauntingly post-modern aura; the tape is replete with structural figures that forearound Battcock's thoughts while doubling his (writerly) voice. Overall, Minahan's tape functions as a demonstration of radically diminished distance — not shrunk by technological means. but by shifting the means of measuring: the distance between text and utterance, between idea and culture, between death and life, the mental



Peter Callas - Kinema No Yoru

and the physical, representation and narration — all are telescoped onto collapsing atomic equivalences by the measuring rod of the distance between Battcock's text and Minahan's tape.

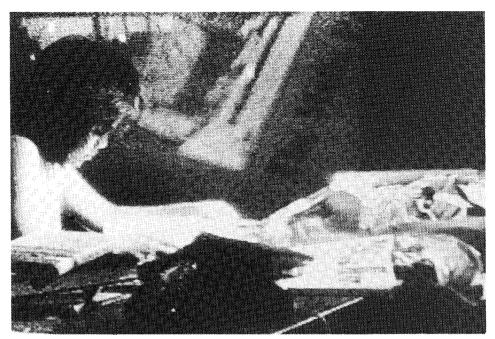
The other two tapes, from the German Democratic Republic and Brazil, respectively, both span cultural and political terrain which expands with the viewer's distance. The Finis of Kaspar Hauser Dies is a mock-heroic tableau of the three principals congratulating one another; we know from this gesture how impossibly distant these artists find themselves from making a "real" movie. By contrast, "Varela," the parody Brazilian newscaster, is superficially so convincing that we (who speak no Portuguese) (and who expect to find Brazilian TV alien anyhow) are prepared to take this as television, so that the encounter which ensues is doubled for us in its otherness. As we discover that our Indian interviewee sports what may be the most extreme and curious adornment on earth — and as we ponder whether everyone watches the lips as people speak — our point-of-view as spectators is swept up in widening oscillation.

Kaspar Hauser Dies also oscillates before us, but for other reasons. The costuming accourrements, stylised poses and costumes, and an unstudiedly faltering realism (as when the sheet is put down for the assault scene to play on) snicker to us that this thing is all pretense; yet the childish naughtiness of these guys going without pants in the country does not mesh with their patent

dedication to the portrayal ... What it adds up to is a painfully sweet and insouciant jadedness; a strident contradiction that plays havoc with our sympathies, and leaves us at a loss: what did their audience in Berlin look like? How did they understand this? Our suspended ambiguity is surely as fulfilling as was their self-absorption.

For me, not only does Kaspar Hauser Dies falter continuously in its maintenance of narrative distance, but it does not even establish any clear relation to the Kaspar Hauser story. In this absence, another certainty appears: these guys have left the city far behind, and are out in some unlocatable place, far from...Like Xingu, we don't really know where this is, or where we came from. Both works rest on their material representations of the actual procinematic space; each team of makers has traveled to this place according to an alien plan.

This says nothing to address the crisis of Brazil's Indians, whose welfare is as imperiled as it has been for five hundred years. Ruby Truly's "...And The Word Was God" (Canada) is looking for this address, starting from an ikonic pose, in which her role is balanced and ambiguous: part teacher, part pupil, but perhaps more and more a voice over the viewer's shoulder, "Is this real?" "Did they really do this kind of teaching? (brainwashing?)" "What right does this person have to make up a text like this, if it's made up? What right does this person have to use this text like this, if it's not made up?" Self-answering



Ruby Truly - ... And the Word Was God

Truly's vocabulary of technical devices is sophisticated without being glitzy; articulate without being overbearing. The need for a media palette which is pervasively Native American is very great; this need is measured by the urgency of the message which requires it. "The sickening fact of the United States of America hunting down and murdering our women, children, and warriors is still fresh in our minds." ³

II EPIDEMIOLOGY: VOICING OTHERNESS

The independent individual voice is fascinated by the voice of Otherness (witness the contrasting reflections of physical alterity in Paula Levine's Mirror Mirror (USA, 1987) and Paul Sharits' Rapture (USA, 1986)); our technological colonization of Death "can itself be divided into three different subjects: first, the difficulty of expressing physical pain; second, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and third, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or, more simply, the nature of human creation."

In Mark Wilcox's Celebrities (England, 1985) the three of these "subjects" are articulately and intricately interwoven — in a tapestry whose warp is life in the public eye (television), and whose woof is disease and death. Wilcox exploits completely the structural functions of alterity, of the double — his key stitch, with which the viewer finally unravels this thanatopsis. Also remarking on (or in) pain, otherness and loss, Carl

Wiedemann's Illiteracy (USA, 1987) and Helge Leiberg's Ferne Gegenden (Distant Adversaries) (GDR, 1984) foreground anxieties in different but distinctive ways.

The most microscopic Death is the one which insinuates itself into the understanding of narrative gesture — which television has learned to capture. In **Dennis Day's Oh, Nothing** (Canada, 1987), synecdochic and apostrophic constructions accentuate fixations of attention, fluctuations in social ritual, and lost moments of arbitrary reflectiveness; and the "plastic" colors and the simple, "set-up" look of the shots meanwhile pretend to a moderno-postmoderno-modishness...

To invoke a more essential figure, the tape engages in a logic of trance: fixation; manipulability of the sensorium to serve attentiveness. Julie Zando's elegantly original Hey, Bud (USA, 1987) discovers and opens out an unexpectedly gravid conjunction, among sexuality, audience manipulability, and the viewer's (resultant?) conception of self. Michaela Buescher's Flirting TV (Germany, 1987) is an inadvertent inversion of Hey, Bud; it is implicitly, albeit humorously, asking us to experience the manipulative effect of the viewer on the medium. Advertising, it might be said, has forced (like a backstage mother) the sophistication of media devices which manipulate our attention; if any epidemic can bring us to the point of a microscopic Death, it could be driven by advertising. A sunnier side of the advertising "pathogen" is to be seen in Ardele Lister's



Boris Jochananov - Afrika as Gagarin

Zoe's Car (USA, 1986), which delicately pivots the viewer back and forth between disgust and delighted complicity.

The descriptive mechanics of **Shawn Usha** and **Ilana Scherl**'s **Brasil** — **External Debt** (USA, 1987); the germane colonial reminders (of U.S. TV imperialism) which spring unbidden from **Karen Ranucci**'s Cross Section One Afternoon Of Mexican TV (USA, 1985) (along with the echoing stains of passion and loss which comprise the forgetfully effusive balance of its content); and the insistent logic of **Grupo Chaski**'s **Miss Universe In Peru** (Peru, 1984) — all display how the politically damaged tissue of South American culture has annealed itself tensely to each of the functioning organs of the social order; their shared surface a single tautly featureless cicatrix.

AIDS, whose course seems to us unusually decisive, is in the balance numbingly familiar; for most of recent time, many millions of humans have "fought" uncomprehendingly against devastating odds...like the North African hunger epidemics, AIDS has struck the defenseless. On the other hand, the peculiar etiology and communicability of AIDS do yoke the problem of its defeat together with the project of media-ted civic behavior control. The collectively produced Testing The Limits (USA, 1987) is an independent effort in this modality.

III. Exposure, contagion, mutability.

This year *Intermental 7* will engage a gamut of challenging expectations — from its viewers, its producers, and its makers — as world political conditions and *Infermental's* own ontogeny have conspired, at a stroke, to secure *Infermental's* function as a major global cultural pipeline. With this year's edition, *Infermental* is for the first time both AT HOME in the U.S. and an expected guest in the Soviet Union.

The youth culture in today's USSR is vividly animated; however, "despite the similarities in fashion and their interests in American music and the latest Western films, young Soviet people today are more reminiscent of the Western generation of the sixties than of their contemporaries in Italy or the United States." 5 A technological aspect of this generational asynchrony is a comparatively greater engagement with independent film (rather than video) by comparison with western Europeans. Valie Export's appraisal is "that the Americans...still do experimental film work while the Germans and Austrians stopped it. There is hardly any German experimental film existing." German and Austrian video art is in abudant evidence: its vitality and strength are clear from the limpidly sarcastic conceptualism of Paula Coerper's Die FFF Show (The FFF Show)



Armin Heurich - Last Rites



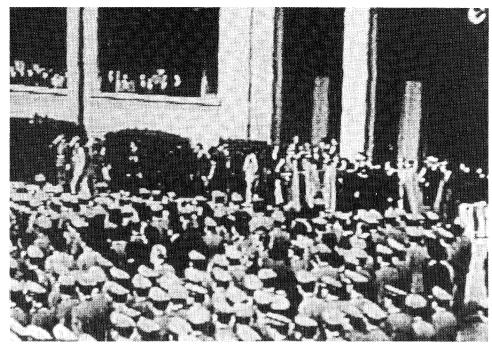
Afrika (in Boris Jochananov's Afrika As Gagarin (USSR, 1987)) is the assumed of Sergei Bugaev, a Moscow artist who has become sensationally visible; his paintings share the primitive sexy splashiness of the other Moscow "New Painters," who often work with collage and on temporary surfaces. The New Painters are young; they play in rock groups, do acting; they have made magic marker films. "This movement has coincided with the new possibilities for Soviet rock-culture in the last two years. The resulting phenomenon is not unlike that of the East Village, and has produced a...younger generation the likes of which Russia has never seen...

"The New Painters and Popular Mechanics function more or less as the pop stars of the Soviet Union." Sara Hornbacher's Anti-scenes in Panama (A Tropical Movie) (USA, 1985) might help us to remember what New York's art world is like, by comparison. Are these tapes translations of one another? "Peter Nagy as Alan Shepard," and "Land-Skates in Karelia (a Figure-Eightive Film)," as it were?

IV. Conversation as communicability

What is new in the West is the unprecedented counterpressure that has been built up in late years by the companies that manufacture production equipment for consumers. This sector happens to include some of the most aggressive and unregulably novel industries of recent times, whose (independent) consumers are involved in things like computer self-publishing, video production, home music studio production, and interfacing via telephone lines.

The front of this wave of energy is hardware anxiety. Imagine the video makers — beset by unfulfillable production ambitions, incomprehensible technological complexities, equipment frustrations, simplistic audience expectations. Like lovers' jokes about sex, and soldiers' jokes about guns, their ironic tapes twist the world on the spit of the makers' preoccupations. Manfred Neuwirth's Experten (Experts) (Austria, 1986) takes revenge for the power of knowledge, Volker Anding's Kelvin (West Germany, 1987) lets itself lance the viewer. Gary Hill's Mediations (USA, 1979/86) assaults and obliterates the hardware directly, and Axel Klepsch, the Tati of tech, in Augen Zu! (Eyes Closed!) (West Germany, 1986), puts us side by side with the maker.



Juan Downey - La Madre Patria

In describing Pre-Columbian America, Tzvetan Todorov concludes that "the necessary memorization of laws and traditions imposed by the absence of writing determines, as we have seen, the predominance of ritual over improvisation. 118 Television, of course, dispenses with writina, requires eidetic interpretive sophistication, and achieves audience empathy through devices of recognition, of ritual. Perhaps this is to say that writing (reading) is technologically superior to television — though the praxes of each entail parallel trances, analogous social traces. Some works (e.g. David Smith and Lee Murray's Continuous Entertainment (USA), Petr Vrāna's Medienpornesie (Media Pornetics) (West Germany. 1987), City Group's Valvearind (New Zealand, 1985/6)) incorporate specific ritual, performance, or quasi-shamanistic elements, which serve to emphasize the works' distance from social norms, or more specifically from text, from writing. Steina's Lilith (USA, 1987) uses focalplane shifts and frame-grabbing to enthrall our gaze, to transfix and hypnotize us; then her protagonist, cobra-like, darts across the paradoxical landscape (that has become Steina's signature), with a sibilant and ambiguous voice; her image inscribes, indelibly, the fact of presence, but — ironically and impossibly — without the content or context of presence.

Woody Vasulka's The Art of Memory (USA, 1987) is strikingly analogous in its aims, if not whatever in its strategies. The linchpin of the work is his title's invocation of Ad Herennium (Anon., ca. 86 BC) — the founding text for the memory techniques of Roman rhetoric — and (more particularly) of Robert Fludd's Ars Memoria (1619), which introduced the "Memory Theater."

Juan Downey's La Madrepatria (The Motherland) (USA, 1987) is an intimately personal yet "traditionally" artistic (balanced, elegant, judiciously articulate) echo of his Chilean homeland. Here, the interplay between surrealist/psychological elements and formal design rhythms is translated into a reciprocal but immiscible flow between the intimacy of home and family relationships, on the one hand, and formal societal contexts, on the other.

Armin Heurich's Last Rites (USA, 1987) "colonizes" technology — demanding "my tools," over and over, in an overbearing and theatrically authoritative tone — a gesture focused more pointedly by the decontextualizing device of his continuous swish-pan — an invasive gesture that makes of "tools" an Other. This fascination with claiming the terrain of tools functions as a decentralizing mechanism, since it implies ownership, either personal or collective. Heurich has



Olhar Eletronico - Varela in Xingu

written on the "democratization of the distribution of art tools," with particular (and enthusiastic) attention to the recently-introduced Pixelvision system by Fisher Price (of East Aurora, NY). This complete portable video system, which records on audiocassettes at very low resolution, sells as a children's toy for about \$230., monitor included.¹⁰

John Cage once advised, "Don't write music that you can't have performed." Given the choice of a select but tiny *audience* or "getting on TV," there are reasons to go the Pixelvision route. Valie Export again: "The taboos are increasing. There is always the question if you change it or not. I don't have to change it, but then they wouldn't have broadcasted it or there would have been problems with the contract. On the other hand they can simply cut it out since they own the rights."

- 1. Virilio, Paul, and Sylvere Lotringer, *Pure War*, tr. Mark Polizotti. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983. Pp. 68-9.
- 2. Callas, Peter, "Technology as Territory/Video and Desire in Japan." Fremantle, Western Australia; Praxis: 1987. Exhibition catalog. Emphasis added.

- 3. Heap of Birds, Edgar. "Sharp Rocks," in Wallis, Brian, ed. Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists. New York, Cambridge Massachusetts, London: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, MIT; 1987. Pp. 170-3.
- 4. Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1985. P. 3.
- 5. Kagarlitsky, Boris. "The Intelligentsia and the Changes," tr. Brian Pearce. *New Left Review* 164, 1987. Pp. 5-16.
- 6. Sommer, Ines. "Valie Export Interview." Chicago: Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter 4:2, June 1987. P. 3.
- 7. Caley, Shaun. "To Russia with Love," *Flash Art* 137, 1987. Pp. 86-8.
- 8. Todorov, Tzvetan. The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other, tr. Richard Howard. Harper & Row, 1987. Pp. 156-8.
- 9. See also Yates, Frances A. *The Art of Memory*, 1966.
- 10. See Heurich, Armin. "Quakervision." Buffalo: *The Squealer*. Dec 87/Jan 88 P. 6.
- 11. Sommer, Ines. Op. cit., P. 4.