Jeffrey Shaw's "The Legible City" *uses street plans of Karlsruhe, Germany; Amsterdam, and New York, to create "virtual cityscapes" in which the buildings are replaced by computer-generated block letters that form words and sentences.*

Art *By Edward J. Sozanski*

Exploring outer edges of electronic art

The Guggenheim's SoHo branch is featuring video and computer art.

NEW YORK — Visit the SoHo branch of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum during the next five weeks and you might think you've wandered into a video arcade by mistake.

On the ground floor, just past the shop, you run into an enormous video billboard — 215 television monitors organized in two contiguous arrays. *Megatron*, as this monster is called, is the creation of Nam June Paik, the godfather of video art.

Megatron is driven by several computers that control the output

"City of Man" *by Bill Viola consists of three large projection planes set up side by side to form a triptych.*

of a battery of laser-disc players. Like most of Paik's video works, it delivers a nonstop barrage of quick-cut images, in this case seemingly at random.

It doesn't require much experience with video technology to realize that despite its apparent visual incoherence, *Megatron* is a stunningly complex bit of electronic wizardry. The rapid fragmentation and recombination of images across such a large mosaic is mesmerizing by itself.

The "content" of this piece is another matter. It would be easy to conclude that *Megatron*, like much electronic art, embodies an elemental message — that the process itself, the torrent of flickering flashes of colored light distilled from a variety of sources, is what the piece is all about.

Welcome to "Mediascape," the Guggenheim's voyage to the outer edges of electronic art. This exhibition, which includes both video and interactive computer art, announces the reincarnation of the SoHo branch as a museum space devoted to the genre.

In its new configuration, Guggenheim SoHo will devote the first-floor galleries to electronic art. This transformation is being subsidized by Deutsche Telekom AG, the German telecommunications company, reportedly with a subsidy of $10 million over five years.

"Mediascape" itself represents a similar collaboration, between the Guggenheim and the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. The center is one of the largest institutions in the world devoted to the development and application of electronic and media technologies in cultural contexts.

The center owns more than 1,000 works of multimedia art, including pieces by Paik, Bruce Nauman and Bill Viola. The 14 works in "Mediascape," by 10 artists, come from this collection and that of the Guggenheim.
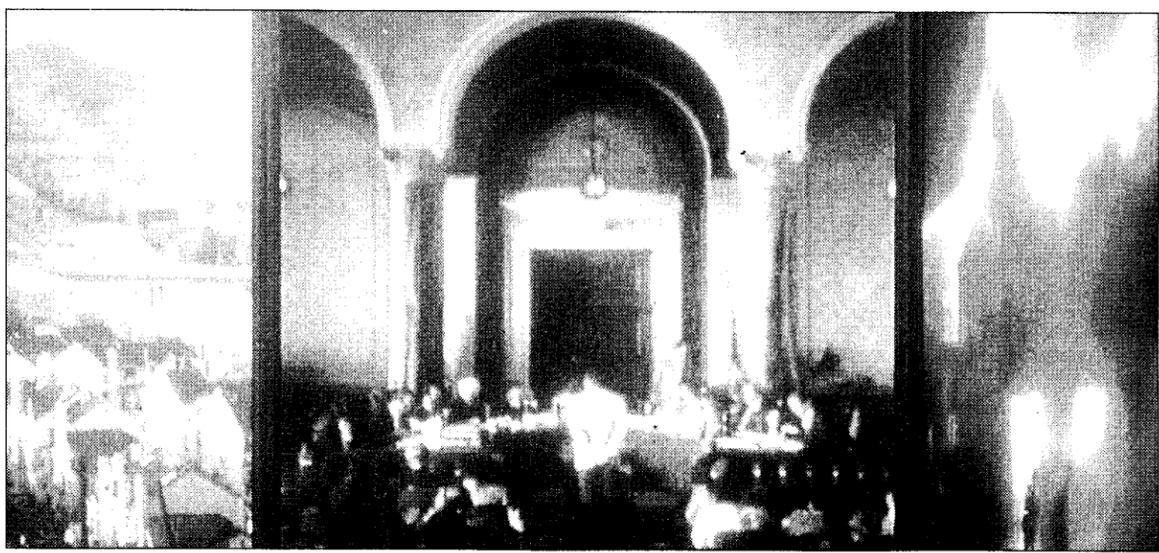
"Mediascape" divides into two sections. One consists of conventional video works — pieces shaped entirely by artists that are viewed passively. The video section also includes an electronic signboard installation by Jenny Holzer that defines its own category.

The other part of the show involves computer-driven installations in which viewers participate actively by altering form and content.

It's these "interactive" pieces that represent the furthest frontier of electronic art, not so much because of their technological complexity but because they fundamentally alter the rules by which people engage art. And in doing that, they call into question the nature of art-making and the concomitant viewing experience.

Conventional video art doesn't go that far. It does force art viewers to recognize that moving images require a different perceptual framework than static ones. With a static image such as a photograph, all the information is available all the time. Furthermore, the image is immutable; the viewer has all the time in the world to contemplate and digest what is being seen.

Moving images exist in time. They change continually, and require a continuing synthesis of information that has been received with that being presented at the moment. This is more difficult for the observer than looking at a single frame, but not impossible for anyone accustomed to watching films or television.

So after 30 years of Paik & Co., the video section of "Mediascape" seems old hat. The pieces range in complexity from Nauman's *Video Surveillance Piece* of 1969-70 to *Borealis*, a four-screen, two-video-channel projection by Steina and Woody

Vasulka of 1993.

Nauman's piece is conceptual. The part you see consists of a gallery that contains only a video monitor on the floor and a camera mounted on the wall. As you stare at the monitor, you realize that it's not showing what the camera is obviously seeing, because the screen always depicts an empty room.

The camera feed is being displayed on another monitor in a hidden room inaccessible to the audience. The message: As you surveil, so ye are surveilled.

The Vasulka piece combines images of turbulent water with rock formations, accompanied by the roar of the water on loudspeakers. *Borealis,* which is projected on two-sided screens in a darkened room, is a visceral, enveloping experience about nature's constant, energetic flow.

With each of the video works, no matter how complicated the technology or the installation, the traditional relationship between artist and viewer remains in place. But with the interactive pieces, artist and viewer become collaborators. Each piece is not only reborn for each viewer, but the switch from spectator to animator alters the viewer's experience.

Instead of absorbing information and considering what has been seen and heard, the viewer becomes occupied with programming the work. He or she must keep the piece moving by choosing options and executing them rapidly. Such activity doesn't allow for contemplation, only for reaction.

The nature of such an experience is easy to grasp with a piece such as *Piano — As Image Media* by Toshio Iwai. This is an imaginative and visually enchanting work that involves a grand piano and a moving screen that scrolls up to the keyboard.

By manipulating a computer trackball, the animator (formerly the viewer) creates square dots of light on the moving screen, which carries them to the keyboard. When a "note" strikes a particular key, that key depresses and plays its sound. As the "notes" move beyond the keyboard and travel up toward the ceiling, they become transformed into colored star shapes.

The animators are supposed to be creating music, but it would take hours of practice to achieve anything beyond the cat-on-the-keys effect that most of them generate.

Jeffrey Shaw's piece, *The Legible City*, demands an even more active role. Using street plans of Karlsruhe, Amsterdam and New York, Shaw created "virtual cityscapes" in which the buildings are replaced by computer-generated block letters that form words and sentences. The animator pedals a stationary bicycle, an action that propels him

or her through the virtual "city." The cyclist's route changes as he or she turns the handlebars left or right.

The animator is supposed to read the computer-generated text while pedaling. The text, a fictional monologue, makes up the content of the piece — as ye pedal, so shall ye learn. But it's hard to pedal and think deeply at the same time, especially if you're not in great shape for pedaling.

These two pieces define the problem with interactive electronic art. The process is so demanding of the animator's concentration that it subverts intellectual engagement. And if, as with the Iwai piece, it's unusually seductive, then content becomes immaterial.

So is this stuff art? Not for me, not yet. "Mediascape" is supposed to be exploring the use of technology to create art. But with these interactive pieces, the technology is so dominant that aesthetic considerations become irrelevant. These pieces are too game-oriented for anyone to worry about art.

There's another problem, too — money. As with Paik's *Megatron*, complex interactive works are expensive to build. To realize such pieces, artists and institutions must turn to corporate benefactors, such as Deutsche Telekom; ArtView, an art-related online network; and Wired magazine, all of which are involved in "Mediascape."
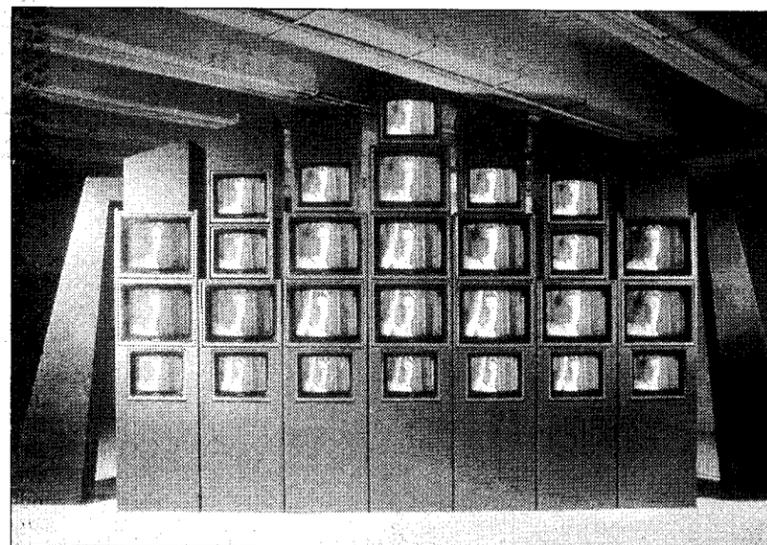
Corporate sponsorship, always a delicate balancing act for any museum, becomes more so when a medium with so many commercial applications is involved. So the question then becomes: Will interactive and video art become increasingly susceptible to corporate influence and commercial tie-ins?

It's too early to say. But based on this example, it's not too early to realize that the interactive art produced so far is more entertainment than art.

Museums may find that quality attractive because of the potential to reach new and younger audiences. However, if they embrace the medium wholeheartedly, they risk turning their institutions into video arcades. They need to remember that a museum should be a refuge, not a carnival.

In "Tears of Steel," *by Marie-Jo Lafontaine, three athletic young men doing power-training exercises are shown on 27 monitors.*

If You Go

■ "Mediascape" continues at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 575 Broadway, through Sept. 15. The museum is open Sundays and Wednesdays through Fridays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission: $6 general, $4 for senior citizens and students. Telephone: 212-423-3500.