Words and Images, Images and Words

Audio-Visual Rituals by Ernest Gusella

Davidson Gigliotti

Ernest Gusella
Ed Emshwiller
Anthology Film Archives
Nam June Paik
Tribute to John Cage
Channel 13 (Nov. 3, 11 p.m.)

Not all significant video art is perpetrated in the super-cool post-modern idiom. Ernest Gusella's processed-image video performances borrow from French Dada and surrealist poetry sources, and some of them are of unusual ferocity.

Last weekend Anthology Film Archives presented nine short tapes by Gusella in a program entitled *Black & White*. All were characterized in that they featured the often grotesquely processed image of Gusella himself. performing in various ways to synthetic and vocal sound tracks of his own devising.

Some of these tapes are blatantly art-historical. such as *Of The Rose* and *RRRRRose Selavey*. Others. such as *Vampire Video* and the titles, have an element of unnecessary facetiousness. The best of them. however. suggest an original poetic mind. a determined sense of rhythm, and bizarre but powerful imagery.

In *Wolf-Zooming* the camera is focused and centered on Gusella's slightly irregular front teeth. surrounded by moustache and beard. By pulling on the ends of a strip of masking tape passed around the zoom ring of the lens. he snaps the zoom rapidly back and forth, building up to a quality of rhythm that we will soon identify as typical. At a certain point we realize that the subject is the zoom itself rather than the images on either end. The result is an exciting tape that is actually a little terrifying.

Audio-Visual Rituals is really a collection of 15 one-minute sub-programs. featuring Gusella from the vertical center of his eyes to just below his chest, fully solarized. He is performing with his arms certain repetitive movements. accompanied by a syncopated synthetic score and occasional special effects. On his chest he wears a word. either tied or printed on his shirt. Each sub-program is characterized by a different word. different arm movements. and a different rhythm. The words are ordinary: tooth. school. needle. sundae, etc. The arm movements are seemingly unrelated to the words. and are always directed to the camera. making good use of the space between the body and the lens. giving it a real sense of depth. The rhythm of the arm movements is reflected in the accompanying score. Fifteen of these is a lot to watch. but the ones labeled *pound. rash* and *angel* are compelling.

In *Words* we see Gusella. from the chest up and waring a cap. standing motionless in front of a wall. On comes a humorously banal synthesized rhythm and blues number: and soon we hear Gusella's voice growling "words" at the beginning of each corny musical phrase. Gusella bows: and we see that he has "words" written on a piece of white paper pasted to the top of his cap. and "words" written vertically on the wall behind him. He straightens up. holding another sheet of paper with "words" on it under his chin. which he pushes toward the lens. filling the screen with it.

There is a wipe to another camera where we see Gusella from the side. where he has "words" written on white paper hanging from his shoulders. He turns around. and be has another one pinned to his back. The image is wiped back and forth from one camera to the other in time to the corny music. creating a syncopated montage of bowing. wiping. turning around. and pushing pieces of paper with words like "words." "thigh." "honk." and "icky" writter on them into the lens. The effect is of a maniacal children's program which purports to teach spelling while actually leaving deep pockets of irrationality in our psyches.

The last piece. the one that I liked the best. was *Arrows*. Gusella. his close-up face synthesized into that of an amiable. though possibly dangerous. cat-like extraterrestrial. grunts along to this growly synthesizer bass line. played in one of those rhythms that we now realize he is a master of. "Arrows. arrows. grunt grunt. arrows" soon degenerates into "a rose is a rose is a rose." and Gusella's art-historical sources are. of course. laid bare.

The lusty beat goes on. however. and a rose soon goes back to arrows and all is well again.

Discrete words are an important part of Gusella's performances. and whether he says them. sings them. or wears them. they often combine well with his singular sense of rhythm and his masterful use of the videospace just behind the screen.   ●

Edward Lucie-Smith

ART NOW

FROM ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM TO SUPERREALISM

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether conduct of this kind has any validity in the context of the industrial and technological society we know. It can be argued that the *faux naif* behaviour and apparent frivolity of the Zen philosopher have age-old roots in the culture of China and Japan. Zen is at once a refinement and an exaggeration of something which has always existed. But the modern artist cannot make his gestures meaningful simply by claiming that they are so. What he does has to mesh with the world around him.

Some artists have tried to achieve this through a passionate engagement with the things which seem to them to typify the times. In the Seventies one of the most active fields of avant-garde experimentation has been video. Video Art, as it has come to be called, already covers a very broad spectrum. The best definition of what artists have tried to do with the medium is supplied by Ernest Gusella's list of negatives. In reply to a questionnaire from the magazine *Art-Rite* he said: "My video is not:

"—Accompanied by a 'pink sludge' rock and roll soundtrack.

"—Documentation of a conceptual performance in which I jump out of a 13th story window to test the laws of chance.

"—Synthetic images created with rebuilt surplus World War I airplane parts.

"—Shot with two cameras attached under each armpit and one between my legs.

"—A group therapy encounter between the Neo-Nazi Anarchists and the Bowery Satanists. ·

"—An underground sex-opera starring all my beautiful friends.

"—A presentation about the 3rd coming of the Punjab of Mysore to bless his freebies in America.

"—Product with future marketing potential" (*Art-Rite*, No. 7, p. 11).

This baleful catalogue at least gives a good notion of all the things video has tried to be. They range from "alternative" politics masquerading as art to a prettier and more complex version of the old-fashioned kaleidoscope. The perils and pleasures of technically experimental video can best be sampled in the work of the Korean artist Nam June Paik. The *Paik-Abe Synthesizer* (Plate 364) delivers a flood of astonishing images which eventually become boring because they have no stability and therefore no point of rest for eye or mind. Further adventures, such as Paik's collaboration with the cellist Charlotte Moorman, who sometimes plays her adapted instrument bare-breasted (Plate 365), suggest a desperate search for novelty at any price.

VIDEO ART

Victor Ancona

ERNEST GUSELLA:
Pleasing Artists and the Public Alike

When video artist Ernest Gusella lectured at New York's Donnell Library last December, he showed 22 tapes ranging in length from ten seconds to five minutes. He chose the program with care, mindful of his audience made up of a small coterie of artist friends and the general public attracted by Donnell's publicity efforts. What characterizes a Gusella tape is the perfect blending of audio and visual elements into a harmonic whole. Gusella's music and imagers combine into powerful videotapes. Blandness is not one of Gusella's attributes.

On the program was his "Of the Rose," a five-minute poetic paean to surrealism with just a hint of shmaltz to make it a delectable art and literary spoof. "Hand in Head, Head in Hand" is a three-minute interlude based on a surrealist theme repleat with poetic overtones. "Wolf Zooming" shows Gusella's face rhythmically and ferociously zooming in and out. Gusella considers "Arrows," his lengthy five-minute tape, a cubist spoof.

Gusella's mastery of the medium is best exemplified by his "Audio-Visual Rituals;" a series of one-minute color tapes in which you see his synthesized mid-body fill the screen as he moves his arms to a different rhythmic beat for each segment. His use of a unrelated word on his chest creates a focal point of realism playing against semiabstract, fast-moving images.

Ernest Gusella makes a distinction between his work and what everybody else is doing in video. Working on the premise that the predominant aspect of 20th-century art is based on response to material as opposed to making material do something else, he uses the electronic medium as the subject of his art. His idiosyncratic approach results in tapes of high technical quality interwoven with his own reactions to humor, music and philosophy.

Gusella feels that the past ten years have brought a heavy intellectual approach to the arts where artists start out with a philosophical premise and hang their art on it. "It's weak thinking," he claims. "Conceptual artists go through the motion of collecting data which can be interesting . . . sometimes. Rarely is the data new."

Like Nam June Paik, Gusella's involvement with music makes him conscious of the element of time in video. "I've been trying to make my work shorter and shorter. It becomes a problem about how to end a work after building an emotional peak within myself as I work. Four or five minutes are enough for any audience."

Ernest Arthur Gusella, 36, a permanent resident of the United States, was born in the Canadian town of Calgary, Alberta. A concert-violinist cousin sparked his interest in music. He mastered the violin at an early age, and later could play any instrument at will. His interest in music and the visual arts did not coincide with the "respectable" career he was expected to follow. However, he studied medicine at the University of Alberta, and biochemistry at the University of Idaho where he received a B.A. Rejected by a number of medical schools, he gave up the establishment route and attended the Alberta College of Art. After three years, New York finally lured him. He attended the Art Students League, studying with Will Barnett, then went cross country to the San Francisco Art Institute where he copped a gold medal for undergraduate painting followed by a graduate fellowship. Gusella returned to New York "where the intensity, the action, the scene was at." He supported himself on commercial art assignments and teaching in various schools and colleges while painting hard-edge, abstract, shaped, canvasses.

In 1970, Gusella became interested in video after seeing the work of Nam June Paik and the Vasulkas. Because of his passion for music, he bought an audio synthesizer and began making abstract images using sound. He did this for four years. He experimented with mirrors, flipflopped images, inexpensive prismatic lenses and other devices in order to get and control the images he wanted.

Realizing the world through the self has been the subject of many an artist's work in the past, but today's literal video image tends to make some artists' work seem narcisstic and boring to viewers. Not so with Gusella. While using himself as the subject, Gusella's tapes are a blend of synthesized human imagery and synthesized sound, a combination that bombards our eyes and ears with perfect precision and arouses our emotions and intellect.

Gusella's background is a mixture of freedom and rigidity. His struggle to achieve Socratic moderation moves him from free-wheeling explorations to honest, deep and intense preparation. He rejects the slick, fashionable, successful approach taken by many of his colleagues in the art world.

Unlike many video artists, he works alone and requires no collaborators to produce a finished product. After a gestation period, he enters his studio and works spontaneously, confronting himself and his elaborate electronic sight and sound equipment without a script. He lets himself go, allowing one idea to lead him to another. And what looks spontaneous in the finished product has taken him weeks to set up. His trained visual sensibility and the manner in which he orchestrates the electronic gear to do his bidding results in substantive videotapes that are a delight to the eye and mind. Ernest Gusella is a serious artist who doesn't take himself or his world too seriously. He deals in juxtaposed ideas and objects not unlike the work of the surrealists. He presents us with a familiar world with new visual insights derived from his intellect and expressed through a visual medium he controls superbly. He insists that humor and serious art can co-exist. Today Gusella's videotapes are sought after both in the United States and in Europe. This spring, his pending exhibitions, one-man shows and lectures include such sites as New York, Paris, Basel, Liege, Brussels, Ghent, and Amsterdam. And these global shows bear testimony to his popularity and talent as a video artist.

EAR MAGAZINE

THE USE OF MUSIC IN VIDEO ART

An Interview with Ernest Gusella by Larry Kucharz

L.K.: *What is your particular background in art and music?*

E.G.: As a child in Canada, I had a cousin who played first violin with the symphony. Because of her prestige in the family, and my natural interest in music, I began studying the violin at the age of six. I continued until the time I was 13, at which time I gave it up for rock and roll. I took London Conservatory of Music exams every year until the time I quit. They would send an examiner over to Canada to conduct exams in sight-reading, theory, etc., and I reached the point where I only needed a couple of years of piano study to get my degree. Of course it was expected by my mother and teacher that I would be a great violinist, however the influence of Elvis and Buddy Holly proved to be a stronger influence. Needless to say, they have never forgiven me. After I stopped the violin, I picked up the guitar, saxophone, whatever interested me.

Insofar as art is concerned, after a couple of years of pre-med study in Idaho, I decided that what I really wanted was to be an artist. So, I attended the Alberta College of Art for three years, the Art Students League for one year, and I ended up in San Francisco during the summers of love, where I obtained a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from the S.F. Art Institute in 1968. The Art Institute was a very well-endowed, liberal school, and we had lectures by Steve Reich, John Cage and people from the San Francisco Tape Center. In fact my graduate painting adviser, Bill Wiley who invented funk art, did the cover for Reich's album "It's Gonna Rain", so music was always around. In fact, several teachers and students from the school quit art to play in rock groups like Big Brother, the Mystery Trend, etc. Which reminds me, Joni Mitchell was a student at the art school I went to in Canada, and all the English rockers like the Beatles, Clapton, The Who, Brian Ferry Eno, they all came out of art school. So there is a whole tradition of shifting back and forth between art and music.

L.K.: *Didn't you make a record yourself last year?*

E.G.: Yeah—I always wanted to do it, and since I had a four-channel recorder with sync and a couple of synthesizers, I figured why not now. Basically, I did it for fun and my friends. It's mostly rock and roll, and it's a kind of comment on the art world, with songs like "Andy Warhol, I Wanna Be a Star in the Art Whirl", etc. It's been very popular and I've sold a few copies in art book stores in the U.S. and Europe. I'm still trying to break even financially on it, but I'm working on another one. If you shop around, do the art work yourself, and get the pressing etc. done outside of N.Y., an album can be made fairly cheaply. 350 stereo albums cost me around $1000

(not including my time), and I've been selling them for $10 as a signed limited edition. It's a lot of fun, and the album has gotten into a couple of serious art shows—"Record As Art" touring the U.S. for the next two years.

L.K.: *How is music or sound used by video artists?*

E.G.: In a variety of ways—usually badly, however people are beginning to pay more attention to sound, as more markets open up for the distribution of video tape artists are beginning to pay more attention to the quality of the sound. However, my main question to the use of sound or music on a lot of work is that a lot of it is stolen from classical rock and other records, and it violates the artistic integrity of the work, not to mention copyright problems. I feel that it is better to make a sound track yourself, no matter how primitive, than to rip off someone else's art. It's amazing how many people regard their work as original, when it heavily relies on somebody else's work and aesthetic. Fortunately, some artists exist with a more highly developed aesthetic. Insofar as these people are concerned, a work is commissioned to provide sound for their tape, or they make it themselves like I do. Many of the video artists I know have synthesizers, tape-recorders, mixers, etc. and feel that sound is at least as important as the image.

L.K.: *What is your reaction to the contemporary music scene?*

E.G.: Well, as you know, Larry, we met in a music composition class of Cage, Feldman, Brown, in Buffalo. I found the graduate music students in the class to be more reactionary than the teachers, and a lot less avant-garde in their attitudes towards music than many artists I know. Insofar as people like Glass, Reich, etc., who have gotten a lot of attention through the art scene, I feel that their work is interesting and an alternative to the locked-in university scene—and they are getting concerts, attention, commissions, etc.—however, most of the people who are flipped out over the music are non-musicians who knew nothing about music. I think that the rock and roll beat of Glass's music is what grabs them. Personally, I find Roxy music, Eno, and some English avant-garde rockers like Fred Frisch more interesting. Most punk rock is a bore. Some film-maker friends are heavily into music from other cultures and every time I walk into their loft, I find myself asking: "Who is that playing?" Some African and Asian music sounds like the latest avant-garde jazz or contemporary music—and it's got soul too, whereas a lot of the Soho music is highly formal. Plus, what bothers me about it, it sounds like Muzak or the Swingle Singers.

L.K.: *What are some of the electronic techniques used in video?*

E.G.: I personally began using an E.M.S. synthesizer in 1970 to generate Lissajous patterns on an oscilloscope, which were then video-taped. The sound created the image, with sine waves, square, ramps, etc. creating Rorscha-like patterns on the video screen. Other video artists such as the Vasulkas (who started the Kitchen), used electronic sound to enhance their tapes, and to manipulate the image in some pieces, using some custom-built equipment. In 1974, a lot of video artists who were heavily into synthesis began building video synthesizers with voltage control of various aspects of the image—color, camera switching, etc. I personally could not handle financing this type of system at that time, so I got involved in performance, using the equipment I had. Since I've been doing a kind of Dadaist performance for the past four years, I've been doing things like running my voice through filters and ring modulators, using Rock and Roll echo pedals, tape delay, and engaging in things like Cubist chanting, repetitive statements and other things that are based on Dada, Futurist tradition. This past year I obtained a video synthesizer with voltage control on every aspect of the system, and I have been using oscillators to trigger color, camera switching, keying, etc. The engineer who designed the system has another module (which I don't have as yet), which will completely interface the system with an audio synthesizer. That module has three sequencers, envelope followers, etc., which would allow pretty complex analog control of the video image by music. I recently built an envelope follower to trigger video effects by voice or sound. The Vasulkas and other video artists who have been building computer systems to control the video image will undoubtedly utilize music in their systems once, their systems get fully under control.

L.K.: *How is music being used in conjunction with other art forms?*

E.G.: A lot of performers are definitely using music and sound, and in installation pieces. Again, it's a situation where artists who have some or no musical training, using sound as another element in their work. Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Laurie Anderson are a few names that come to mind. In some cases, music is the subject of the piece, in other situations, it's used as just another material to create an effect. Also, many performers are utilizing sound in narrative pieces or for its abstract qualities.

L.K.: *What about punk rock? Aren't a lot of artists starting punk rock bands?*

E.G.: That's true. As I said, since artists have always felt an affinity for music, it's a natural development. I think it's a fun thing for most people, however, I know that there are artists that have stopped everything for music. Also, in N.Y., Eno has gotten involved in producing some groups like Talking Heads. Punk is youthful rebellion, but I think that it also reflects a reaction to the sterile minimalism that we've seen for the past five years. In the visual arts, artists are becoming less doctrinaire and more eclectic—probably in an attempt to open things up. My personal attitude is that no area is too absurd to explore, and still make art that can be taken seriously.

L.K.: *What about the use of words in the visual arts? What about text sound word pieces?*

E.G.: The introduction of words into the visual arts is an old thing—Picasso, the Futurists, Pop Art—words have always been introduced as abstract elements. A lot of contemporary performers are using words—one is Arleen Schloss, who chants and stutters out the alphabet and short words. In the past five years many painters have been introducing words, both as formal and narrative elements, into their paintings. In my piece "Arrows & Words", words are used as abstract sounds, structural entities (cubist) and as absurd counterpoint to the visual statement.

L.K.: *How do you feel about the differences between sound and visual problems?*

E.G.: Sound strikes me as being a lot more complicated. Visual things you can see and change if you don't like what you see. But sound is all around you in space—it's simultaneous. Like McLuhan says, "To a blind man, everything is immediate." It's hard to analyze sound as it's occurring in time, it's hard to measure what is good or bad sound—when distortion is occurring. When sound is being used as a complementary element to visual ideas, the problem becomes more difficult.

Ithaca Video Festival: Vital Broadcast

By S.K. LIST

In discussing their medium, video people refer to "narrowcast," "cablecast" and, of course, "broadcast" to describe some ways in which programs are dispersed to the airwaves, there to reach the theoretical viewer in "Videoland." The term "broadcast" in particular also refers to a sweeping hand motion for distributing seed far and wide, to furrows of ploughed earth or flocks of hungry fowl. ("Broadcasting to the hens" calls up a fond vision of Arthur Godfrey crooning to the Rhode Island Reds.) Fertile minds and hungry, if unsuspecting, artgoers will have the opportunity to receive good seed from April 24-30 when the Fifth Annual Ithaca Video Festival premieres at Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.

The Festival has grown steadily until, this year, it has achieved a certain maturity of style and authority of content, noticeable even over the fine body of work which was presented last year. "For the first Festival, we had forty entrants," noted Gunilla Mallory Jones, one of the directors of the Ithaca Video Project (IVP) which sponsors the Festival, "and we chose seven tapes. We showed it one place, one night, in Willard Straight Hall."

This year the Festival will tour to sixteen museums, libraries and cultural centers besides the Johnson (through January,

1980), from California to Louisiana to New York City. Selections will be shown on WXXI in Rochester (PBS) and, on cable, in Manhattan. Applications numbered 223 and required three days of viewing by the judges (Gunilla and her husband, Philip Mallory Jones, IVP's co-directors; John Hanhardt of New York's Whitney Museum; and Richard Simmons of the Everson Museum in Syracuse) to narrow down to the final twenty tapes which will be shown.

"Not everything entered is good, of course," Gunilla remarked, "but a lot that is very good wasn't selected because of the 4½ hour limit in running time. A half hour is the longest any single entry can be." She described the criteria for choosing the tapes as, in part, "better than competent, more than beautiful," and went on to explain that, in the field of video, where previously artists were struggling to overcome the limitations of their equipment, equipment is now getting steadily better and better so that good work is abundant. For the Festival, the aim has been to identify superior work.

Ernest Gusella, represented last year by a strange, humorous, grating tape called *Deviated Septum*, is back once more, somewhat calmed down, with *Iris*, a related piece but so pared down as to be almost childlike and, in its simplicity, just that beautiful.

VIDEO ART

Victor Ancona

ITHACA VIDEO:
Margin Notes on A Moveable Feast

Video festivals are fun. Unless restrictions are placed on entries, festivals give the public an opportunity to get a quick overview of video as produced by independents working in every genre—from computer-generated pieces to documentaries and fictionalized work.

The only restriction placed on entries to the Fifth Annual Ithaca Video Festival was that tapes be no longer than 30 minutes.

"We can't make our festival package too long for museums, libraries and galleries," said Gunilla Mallory Jones and Philip Mallory Jones, co-directors of Ithaca Video Projects, sponsors of the festival since its inception.

"We have seen a vast improvement in both content and technique since our first festival," said Gunilla. "There used to be a leaning toward documentaries, but that has changed because ¼" equipment has become more available to independents. A lot of good documentarians make tapes that are longer than the half-hour limitation we set for submissions. These are tapes that are more television-oriented than they used to be, which is really not what we are looking for."

I see little difference between a tv-oriented work and a work shown on tv. The quality of the work should be the criterion. There was a time when artists decried the strictures of time placed on them by broadcasters. Global Village, New York, puts on a festival exclusively for documentarians who produce work of any length, whether or not planned for broadcast.

Ithaca's panel of judges, composed of John Hanhardt, Film and Video Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, Richard Simmons, Curator, Film and Video, Everson Museum of Art, and Gunilla and Philip Jones, sat through three days of screenings during which they selected 20 tapes from 223 entries from all over the United States. Twelve of the winners were from New York State, three from California, and one each from Massa-

chusetts, Ohio, and Colorado.

While there is a large concentration of videographers in New York, the disproportionate number of winners from that state may be due to the lack of national promotion penetration, the fact that it is the sponsor's home base, or the generous support of video independents by the New York State Council on the Arts. Since the National Endowment for the Arts is also a supporter of the festival, it is hoped that next year's entries will reflect a broader national interest in independent video.

Phil Jones believes that concepts are developing in many more directions than before. "Ambitions and intentions of the artist are changing," he said. "Of course, technique has improved tremendously over the years. Artists are beginning to understand the medium—its potential as well as its limitations." Despite the improved sophistication, Gunilla Jones feels very strongly that there is still a half-inch black and white portapak genre out there, and will be happy when "it is represented in our festivals."

With the purchase of more and more cameras by owners of home video cassette recorders, I predict that a relatively large body of work will emerge from those who never considered themselves "artists," but who nevertheless have the time, inclination, and innate or learned skills to experiment and create works of equal value to many of today's practitioners whose claim to video art stems from their competence in some other medium of expression.

According to its sponsors, the distinguishing features of the Ithaca Video Festival are that it does not favor a particular genre, it travels widely, it is highly selective, and it deals solely with video (not film) produced by independents. Besides the exposure accorded the winning videographers, each gets a small fee and is paid additionally if tapes are chosen to be broadcast or cablecast. Ithaca Video Projects makes every attempt to show and help sell tapes submitted but not accepted for showing.

Selected tapes from the festival are to be broadcast by WXXI-TV, Rochester, N.Y., and cablecast as part of the Artists Television Network's Soho Television program on Manhattan Cable, New York City. As a result of viewing the festival package, ABC News has compiled a short segment on video art for airing nationally.

Institutions scheduling the festival receive a prestige package to offer their constituency at the ridiculously low price of $50, the sponsors placing no restrictions of any kind regarding time, place, manner or number of showings. What a curatorial bargain!

The festival will continue its 17-location tour as follows: McKissick Museum, Columbia, S.C., September 1-30; Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, La., October 15-21; New York Library Association, Syracuse, N.Y., October 17-19; Northwest Film Study Center, Portland, Ore., November 1-7; University Community Video, Minneapolis, Minn., November 1-12; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Ill., November 10-December 30; Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, Ca., December 1-31; The Kitchen Center, New York, N.Y., January 5-31, 1980.

Herewith are my fleeting impressions of the individual entries as seen within a concentrated period of time. In such an instance, tapes compete with one another both negatively and positively, and one does not have the luxury of restudying a tape in isolation. A large dose of video is my excuse if I change my mind about several of the entries—but not all!

Ernest Gusella: Facial Treatments and Iris.

That art could also be fun is always apparent in Gusella's tapes. This time, with the help of his videographer-wife Tomiyo Sasaki, Gusella offers us two short subjects. While not taking himself too seriously, he manages to produce tapes of great interest to those who view them. The maker achieved a fabulous fluidity in Iris, in which we see his wife rubbing her eyes manipulated to become the rhythmic opening and closing of an iris lens. Superimposed images change their speed as one visual meshes with the next. In Facial Treatments Gusella again uses close-ups of Tomiyo to show us his virtuosity with the medium. I consider Facial Treatments a laudible exercise, Iris a visual gem.

Videography

Victor Ancona covers the work of independent videographers.

Tapes by 1979-80 Award Recipients in Video, Creative Artists Public Service Program in New York State

John Minkowsky
Buffalo, New York

THE EXQUISITE CORPSE
Ernest Gusella

Ernest Gusella, whose recent tape, *The Exquisite Corpse*, concludes this program, has been working in video since 1970 and has created a unique body of work. Gusella develops performances for the video camera, which usually incorporate video special effects such as keying, superimposition, colorization or, in the case of *The Exquisite Corpse*, rapid, real-time switching between two cameras. Gusella is self-consciously an art-world eclectic, his references extending from art-rock of the moment back to modern art movements of the past seventy-five years. His *"Dude Defending a Stare-Case,"* punning on Marcel Duchamp's famous painting, is Cubistic Video. He describes this tape:

"Beginning with Dadaist and Conceptual performances in front of the camera, images are manipulated with video and audio synthesizers and other electronic tools. The result is ¼ fornicalia funk, ¼ New York punk, ¼ European bunk, ¼ Canadian skunk."

The Exquisite Corpse, in fact, refers to a Surrealist technique of the same name in which a number of participants contribute to a collective collage - sometimes of words, sometimes of a human figure. Unlike his predecessors, Gusella's collaborator in this game of chance is not human; rather, it is the machine, the video system automatically switching between two camera views of the artist performing simple, effective gestures.

This rate of rapid alternation between the two camers is at a threshhold of the persistence of human vision. Thus, the formal strengths of the work derive from the fact that the alternating views are at once seen as distinct and overlapping. The merging of images in the viewer's mind creates a diverse, disorienting and entertaining array of visual relationships, such as the superimposition of the performer's head in his mouth, or fingers as multiple, insect-like limbs on his torso.

In a conversation with the artist, he has said that he considers *The Exquisite Corpse* not only a formal work, but also a work with strong 'social/religious overtones'. These are manifested in the symbolic evocativeness of the artist's pale, emaciated figure - suggestive at once of Christ and ascetic holy men of Eastern religions, of Primitive Man and, for Gusella, of victims of abnormal births, especially as regards the grotesque illusory reconstructions of the human form.

In its playfulness, the suggestive nature of its imagery, and its coupling of man and machine as collaborative entity, *The Exquisite Corpse* is a work of which Gusella's historical predecessors in art would have approved.

ERNEST GUSELLA

Ithaca Video Festival 1980

by Danny Speer

Ithaca Video Projects Presents
6th Annual Ithaca Video Festival

Philip and Gunilla Mallory Jones have done it again. Organized their sixth annual touring video festival, that is. Out of 375 entries (there were 225 last year), they, with two other judges, selected the four hours of material that will travel to twenty-four prestigious museums and libraries throughout the U.S. this year.

There are twenty pieces by video artists in the show, ranging from documentaries to computer-manipulated electronic-image works; with humor, pop culture, subjective realities, and new video techniques well-represented in between.

The emergence of video as art during the last decade is a positive effect of human evolution through technology. Video points to the art of the future with a beam of hope. Now if only some of the high-quality artistic effort demonstrated each year in the Ithaca Video Festival could find its way to network television. Don't hold your breath waiting for that, but by all means, attend the Video Festival at Cornell's Johnson Museum between April 2 and 16. Museum hours are Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The tapes will run continuously, and while four hours may be a long time to sit still, one can always attend in bits and pieces. This is recommended, for second viewings of any of the pieces will always provide additional insights.

Some of them, one might never grow tired of. It's a shame we only have the option of viewing these innovative and thought-provoking images for two weeks out of the year. A permanent collection would be gratefully received, but until we get one, don't miss the chance to expand your knowledge of modern art. Attend the show and make your feelings known. It's a grey old world, and the Video Festival casts some rarified light upon it and us.

Among the works which had a profound effect on this writer's first viewing were: "The Exquisite Corpse" by Ernest Gusella, a tour-de-force of state-of-the-art video editing techniques.

There's a lot more, and all of it well worth experiencing. Philip and Gunilla Mallory Jones, who themselves recently produced "Black, White, and Married," an excellent videotape whose title is self-explanatory, have again spent hundreds of hours on their Festival brainchild, and the audiences around the country will be much the richer for it. Ithaca gets first crack, though. This is a must-attend event.   •

The Grapevine

April 1-7, 1980

arts

MAGAZINE   MAY 1980

By SUSAN GRACE GALASSI

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Here, as throughout most of the century, indirect, symbolic, and ironic modes of depiction of the self are favored over straightforward studies of one's physiognomy.

The combination of work in painting, sculpture, drawing, prints, photography, and video allows one to compare the ways artists working in different media have dealt with their own images and to see the impact of work in one area on another. The most significant contributions to autobiographical art during the "me" decade appear to be in photography and video, where technical innovations and the emphasis on performance have led to the creation of startling new images through fantastic distortions and metamorphosis. In his pioneering work with an SX-70 Polaroid camera, Lucas Samaras manipulates the wet photo emulsion so that only fragments of realistic depiction are left within a distorted image. Here the artist, draped in a green cloth, seems to be transforming before our eyes. In Ernest Gusella's videotape, *Exquisite Corpse*, images of blown-up fragments of the head and body alternate with small pictures of the body in a pulsating rhythm. What emerges is a bizarre scene in which he appears to be devouring himself, an idea also seen in some of Samaras' work. In painting and sculpture, one finds similar representations of the self in a state of flux and change, and as in photography, serial images are often used. Robert Beauchamp's lush, expressionist oil studies of his face exemplify this, as do Marisol's deeply disturbing life masks in clay which have been squeezed and distorted, bearing the imprint of her hand and objects such as keys and cans, some of which are embedded in the surface. All of these works in different media suggest a sense of self pervaded and shaped by internal and external forces.

Aus dem Land der besseren Möglichkeiten

Video-Kunst aus New York in der Städtischen Galerie

Natürlich hat die Kathodenstrahlenröhre (TV) nicht die Leinwand ersetzt. Und noch immer arbeiten nur wenige Künstler so selbstverständlich mit Kondensator, Widerständen und Halbleitern wie mit Pinsel, Violinen und Abfall. Nam June Paiks Manifest von 1965 blieb also die Utopie eines Pioniers der Video-Kunst. Umgekehrt läßt sich ihre Krise in Europa sicher nicht der vehementen Rückkehr zur Malerei unterschieben. Was die europäischen Video-Künstler entmutigt, ist der Mangel an gut ausgerüsteten Studios, wie sie in Amerika fast jede Universität und viele Museen zur Verfügung stellen, ist das Desinteresse unserer Fernsehanstalten an Coproduktion. Hinlängliches Experimentieren, gegebenenfalls auch mit der Unterstützung eines qualifizierten Technikers, gehört aber zu den Grundvoraussetzungen beim Umgang mit diesem Medium.

Mit New York Video zeigt die Städtische Galerie dank des Einsatzes von Helmut Friedel nun zum zweiten Mal ein Wochenprogramm aus dem Land der besseren Möglichkeiten. Abgesehen von *Ira Schneider*, der seine oft geradezu stillebenhaften, ruhigen Beobachtungen von Landschaften, Tieren, Situationen, sein sanft ironisches Mit- und Gegeneinander von Bild und Musik auch mit den Mitteln des Films verwirklichen könnte, versuchen die sechs von ihrem Kollegen *Ernest Gusella* ausgewählten Künstler, die spezifisch technischen Variationsmöglichkeiten des Mediums künstlerisch zu nützen. Der Schwerpunkt liegt dabei einmal mehr auf seiner didaktischen Demonstration, bald auf einer mit Montage, Ausschnitt, Überblendung manipulierten, ganz persönlichen Realitätssicht.

Steina und *Woody Vasulka*, Mitbegründer der Kitchen (eines New Yorker Aktionsraums, vornehmlich für Video und Performance), gehen in ihrer künstlerisch eher biederen, an Computergraphik erinnernden Einführung „Artifacts" (1981) – für jeden Laien verständlich – vom Zeilenraster als Grundlage des elektronischen Bildes aus. *Gary Hill*, ein von ihnen entdeckter, gerade dreißig Jahre alter Künstler, dagegen führt seine wesentlich auf der Wechselbeziehung zwischen Sprache und Wort beruhende Video-Etüden mit geradezu taschenspielerischer Bravour vor. Von der Möglichkeit der Selbstbeobachtung im Monitor fasziniert, spulte *Juan Downey* dieses Motiv in die Geschichte zurück, zum Gebrauch von Spiegeln in der abendländischen Kunst, zum Phänomen des Narziß oder zur Metamorphose und Austauschbarkeit von Seinsweisen, etwa beim Anthropologen, der von den Indianern gegessen, zur „endgültigen Architektur" werden möchte, oder von Mann und Frau im Venusgemälde. Schwer fällt dabei, Downeys ungebrochene Freude am optischen und theatralischen Effekt immer als bewußtes Stilmittel abzunehmen.

Tomiyo Sasaki, eine in Kanada geborene Japanerin, gewann zwar mit ihrem „Bubbling" den ersten Preis des Videofestivals in Tokyo 1979. In Deutschland sind ihre beiden geradezu beispielhaft gelungenen Filme noch nicht zu sehen gewesen.

Bei „Made in Japan" (1979), einem 40 Minuten langen, beim ersten Besuch ihres Mutterlandes entstandonen Farbfilm, wirkt überraschend, wie hier mit einer bestimmten Collagetechnik immer wieder repetierter Bilder und Töne, von denen manche die Funktion strukturierender Leitmotive übernehmen, sehr viel mehr von der Mentalität dieses west-östlichen Volkes und seines Lebens sichtbar wird als in einem mit Fakten operierenden herkömmlichen Fernsehfilm. Ferne und Nähe der Autorin zum Land, manche eher episodenhaften Eindrücke übertragen sich mit seltener Unmittelbarkeit: ein Kübelwagen fährt in eine Kurve, dahinter ein paar Bauersfrauen. Das Bild kehrt mehrmals wieder. Doch schon beim zweiten, beim dritten Mal fühlt man den Schwindel der Bewegung. Wenn eine Westkunst-Postkarte kalauerte: „ein Mann steigt auf einen Berg, weil so viele Frauen im Tal Kunst machen", muß er dieser Entdeckung halber wohl unten bleiben.

Die Filme vom Miterfinder des Videosynthezisers *Nam June Paik* „Tribute to John Cage" (1972) und „Global Groove" (1973) an den Anfang des Programms gestellt, weil, so Friedel, Paik zwischen 1956 und 1958 in München Musik und Philosophie studierte, sind hier aber vor allem als wichtige, aber deutlich historische Filme am richtigen Platz, als Dokumente von Fluxus und den Anfängen der Videokunst. (In wöchentlicher Wiederholung bis zum 2. August.)   INGRID REIN

All Work and Some Plays

By J. Hoberman

"New Imagery," the rubric attached to the video show currently at the Museum of Modern Art, is something of a misnomer. The 11 tapes here have little to do with image synthesizing, processed video, or special effects. What links them is a concern for the thing current crit-jargon calls "narrativity." Narrative is a hot issue in avant-garde film as well, but while moviemakers like James Benning or Yvonne Rainer favor constructions based on extended tableaux (the big screen. encourages the savoring of detail), the video narratives here are more fragmentary—characterized by quick cuts and parallel editing, as though inspired by the home-viewer's itchy-fingered option of switching the dials.

Ed Bowe's 30-minute *How to Fly* (1980) presents moments from a small plane pilot's first day at work interspersed with a plethora of punkish gags involving cockroaches and rats, achieving a further discombobulation through the use of mannered sing-song dialogue. Similarly, Matthew Geller's 20-minute *Windfalls, or New Thoughts on Thinking* (1982) features Bowes as a lo mein-scarfing raconteur whose ill-fated pursuit of a hot television set is crosscut with a discussion on computer theory and a jazz musician's recollection of his most embarrassing moment.

Less claustrophobically precise, Toronto artist Susan Britton's 54-minute *Up Down Strange* (1981) raises the new wave quotient by including a femme gunslinger, a sinister airport, and an inexplicable mugging in its fractured narrative. There's an amiable emptiness to the tape that compares favorably to the compacted, jewellike fastidiousness of New Yorkers Bowes and Geller, until Britton decides to go playfully deconstructive and introduce an extended rehearsal of a noirish radio script.

Connecticut Papoose: A Morphology for the Middle Man (1981), a 55-minute tape by Ernest Gusella, is playful from the word go. However, for all his munchkin voices, fatuous Muzak interludes, deranged Dylan quotations, and militant surrealist slogans, Gusella has ambitions to pull off the sort of I-Hear-America-Singing psychodrama that Vito Acconci accomplished in *The Red Tapes*. The problem is that *Connecticut Papoose* is less funny than silly, more stoned than intelligent. Gusella's best stance is a kind of curdled counterculturism—at one point he gives us a strobe self-portrait accompanied by a droning rock song so smirkingly noble-savage it would have embarrassed the Fugs. At the very least, though, Gusella has a talent for canny eye-grabbing. Far more than the other tapes, *Connecticut Papoose* is just a succession of routines—a quality not unsuited to the random-spectator aspect of gallery video.

Two tapes from Los Angeles—John Arvanites's *American Male* (1982) and Bruce and Norman Yonomoto's *An Impotent Metaphor* (1981)—are relatively straightforward in their storytelling. The half-hour Arvanites tape, which begins with a quotation from Charles Olson and juxtaposes the musings of the artist's alter ego with those of his French mistress, is a pretentious, essentially humorless exposition of modern romance visualized as an Amtrak ride to the San Diego Zoo. *An Impotent Metaphor* is more naive and (at 40 minutes) more ploddingly sincere, but it's also more interesting in its attempt to fashion an artworld soap opera with protagonists displaying greater passion for their "concepts" than their relationships.

Both L.A. tapes suffer from erratic performances, but not all narratives require actors. *The Magnetic Tapes* (1981), an ongoing project by Australian artist Jill Scott, uses tiny props in miniature prosceniums to illustrate or counterpoint various dreamlike anecdotes—a methodology pitched between the fey fantasies of Rita Myers and the puppet povera of Tony Oursler. Oursler, actually, is represented in "New Imagery" with his 23-minute *Grand Mal* (1981). The tape, whose cast includes painted hands, parts of faces, and live worms, was described here earlier this year as a kind of primitive Ernie Kovacs version of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

●

ERNEST GUSELLA

(Born 1941, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Lives in New York, New York)

Art Punks (1979, color, 4:00)

Scale Flop (1979, b/w, 1:30)

Ernest Gusella is a parodist, a punster and a self-conscious artworld eclectic. His references extend from chic-rock and pop music of the moment, to contemporary trends in conceptual and performance art, to the modern historical movements of Surrealism and Dadaism. An example: his *Dude Defending a Stare Case,* punning on the title of Marcel Duchamp's famous painting, is a rare instance of Cubistic Video, and Gusella facetiously characterizes this, and other of his tapes in the following manner:

"Beginning with Dadaist and Conceptual performances in front of the camera, images are manipulated with video and audio synthesizers and other electronic tools. The result is ¼ fornicalia funk, ¼ New York punk, ¼ European bunk and ¼ Canadian skunk.".

In addition to his extensive body of video works, Gusella has released two albums on Earwax Records — *Japanese Twins and White Man* (1977) and *The Lone Arranger Writhes Again* (1980). In both cases, he played all the instruments, performed all the

Ernest Gusella, as depicted on the cover of his album, *The Lone Arranger Writhes Again*

VIDEO/TV: HUMOR/COMEDY

1983

Humor has played an increasingly important role in the visual arts in recent years. The powerful resurgence of comedic styles is related to the development of new media and expressive forms, especially those of video and performance art.

VIDEO/TV:HUMOR/COMEDY is a touring exhibition of videotapes created by Media Study/Buffalo to explore the forms and functions of contemporary Art Comedy. An eight-hour showcase of nearly 100 tapes by four dozen video and performance artists, VIDEO/TV:HUMOR/COMEDY is organized around specific themes that consider the new relationships between Art and Entertainment that experimental comedy has helped to bring about. The exhibition has been conceived and curated by John Minkowsky of Media Study/Buffalo, who will be present to introduce each program, and has been made possible with support from the National Endowment for the Arts' Film/Video Touring Program. The exhibition, which has already been presented at the Southwest Alternate Media Project (S.W.A.M.P.) in Houston, Texas; Video Free America in San Francisco, California; the Mandeville Gallery at the University of California at San Diego; and the Northwest Film Study Center in Portland, Oregon, will tour to an additional 10 sites throughout North America in 1983.

vocals and wrote all the songs, which include such gems-in-the-rough as "Andalusian Dog," "Andy Warhol," "Marcel Duchamp," "The Bride Stripped Bare," and "Star in the Art Whirl."

"Body Art Disco," a tune from Gusella's second album, spoofs the violent preoccupations of some infamous 'conceptual body artists,' and *Art Punks* is Gusella's version of the same song for video. Using a visual equivalent of audio multi-tracking — a video technique which has since become popular in the production of numerous Rock Promos — Gusella plays all the parts of a one-man pop band while singing about an artist engaged in various forms of self-mutilation for the sake of raving reviews from the art establishment, and fame, and money.

In *Scale Flop,* Gusella renders a familiar octave of notes, with a few comic interludes and diversions. A simple ditty, it is illustrative of the artist's predilection for visual and verbal puns, both in his choice of props and in the title of the piece itself.

Ernest Gusella received his B.A. in Biochemistry at the University of Idaho and his M.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he was awarded a gold medal for undergraduate painting. He began his work in video in 1970. Gusella has had solo exhibitions in Belgium, France, England, Germany and Holland, and his work has been included in group shows throughout Europe and the U.S., and in Mexico and Canada. In addition, he has recorded two record albums for the Earwax label — *Japanese Twins and White Man* and *The Lone Arranger Writhes Again* — both of which were post-produced during his artist-in-residencies at ZBS Media in Fort Edward, N.Y. Gusella is the recipient of a 1982 Guggenheim Fellowship in Video.

The Good Humor Men

"Video/TV:Humor/Comedy" exhibit at Mandeville

By RONA HU

In "Art Punks," a video performance piece by Ernest Gusella, the degenerate-looking leader of a three-piece band explains in a catchy little tune that he will do *anything* for a good review. He will jump out of twelfth story windows, crawl through broken glass, drown or generally maim himself, just as long as he can see his name in print. Gusella may not do all those things himself, but as a director/performer of video comedy, he certainly deserves the good reviews: his pieces are hilarious.

The same can be said of the rest of the exhibit at the Mandeville Art Gallery, "Video/TV:Humor/Comedy," now being shown until January 30. There are almost eight and a half hours worth of video humor, organized by John Minkowski for Media Study/Buffalo with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The selection ranges from slapstick to sophisticated comedy, from off-the-wall to downright bizarre. And though individual performances might not appeal to everyone, any viewer who stays for an hour or so will find something genuinely funny.

The eight-plus hours of tapes are divided into separate programs, according to general categories. The most popular of these programs is the one on Musial/Comedy. Most of the works are short, from about two to eight minutes, so this is an especially good program for sampling a variety of video artists.

The first piece on the program, "Guitar Piece" by Pier Marton, is two and a half minutes of a man smashing himself over the head with a guitar. When the instrument finally breaks, he then begins hacking at the little pieces, until he's left gnawing on a single string. "Ear to the Ground" by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn takes a more positive approach to music: it features a modishly dressed man, complete with tinted glasses and fedora hat, playing his drumsticks all over the city — on telephone booths, on gates and doors and signposts, and on the sidewalks and streets. He goes along, drumming out intricate rhythms without ever missing a beat, until he finally goes bopping off into the sunset — a cool, upbeat performance if there ever was one.

Some pieces had good music: "Selections from 360" by Julia Heyward, for example, or Twinart's "Instant This, Instant That," (Music by Taste Tests) which shows a set of identical twins going through a day of "push a button, processed food, turn a dial, instant mood" and putting Sugar Twin in their identical instant coffees. Followers of nouveau music may be familiar with the Residents, a San Francisco group who contribute four "Minute Movies": "Moisture," "Perfect Love," "The Act of Being Polite," and "The Simple Song." In Laurie Anderson's "Language is a Virus," a punk-looking person with a dubbed-in baritone voice promises some "Difficult Music"; "So sit bolt upright in that straight-backed chair! Button up that top button!" Then the voice delivers such profound lines as
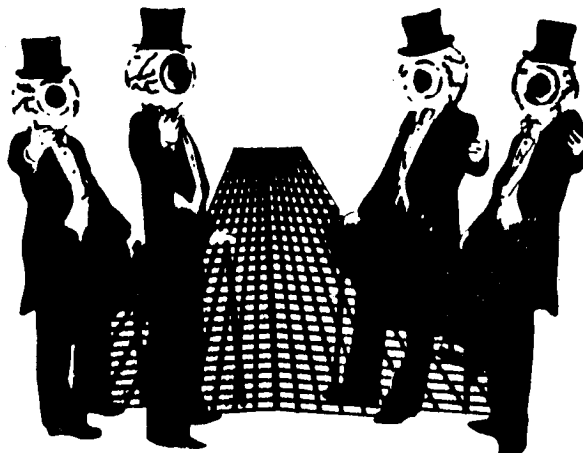
Ernest Gusella

Beim Betrachten der von Künstlern gestalteten Videobänder ist es Kritikern von Anfang an aufgefallen, daß eine beachtliche Anzahl von Künstlern sich auf die Darstellung des Künstlers selbst konzentriert haben. Diese Arbeiten mögen autobiographische Daten enthalten oder einen ästhetischen Standpunkt aufzeigen, aber die offensichtliche Lässigkeit und Amateurhaftigkeit des Ausganges hinterläßt immer wieder einen störenden und unbefriedigenden Eindruck beim Publikum, das an professionellere und traditionellere Kunstarten wie Fernsehen und Film gewöhnt ist.

Für dieses Phänomen gibt es eine Reihe von Erklärungen. Jeder Art von selbstbezogener Kunst liegt eine Untersuchung über Existenz und Eigenarten von Geist und Dingen zugrunde. Materialcharakteristiken, physische Aktivitäten und Aspekte der Phantasie spielen bei der Bestimmung der eigenen Beziehung zum Rest der Welt eine signifikante Rolle. Video entstand – zu einem gewissen Grad von DADA, dem Futurismus und den Happenings der 60er Jahre beeinflußt – als ein gesundes Kind, schreiend und um sich tretend, zügellos, narzistisch, in einigen Fällen bekennerhaft, aber keineswegs einverstanden mit dem Status Quo. Nam June Paik, anerkannter Urvater der Videokunst, begann in den 60er Jahren als Neo-Dada-Fluxus-Performer in Deutschland. Und es ist keineswegs Zufall, daß seine Aktivitäten auch in seine Video-Kunst mit eingingen und Einfluß auf zwei Generationen von Video-Künstlern hatten.

Als künstlerisches Werkzeug ist Video ideal für denjenigen Künstler, der alleine in seinem Studio arbeitet: Er kann das greifbarste Objekt (sich selbst) erforschen und gleichzeitig mit dem experimentieren, was alles möglich ist. Dieser Vorgang beeinflußt zwangsläufig die Arbeit selbst, da vorgefaßte Ideen für direktere Belange und Ideen beiseite geschoben werden. Während der »Ich-Dekade« in den 70er Jahren glaubten viele Künstler, daß Authentizität – gleichgültig, wie obskur oder langweilig – wünschenswerter sei als vorfabrizierte Realitäten mit überkommenen dramatischen Formen gewichtig zu machen. Aber jetzt, Mitte der 80er Jahre, ist diese Einstellung der einer neuen Generation – »genährt mit Fernseh-Commercials« – gewichen. Beim ersten Eindruck wirken diese neuen Bänder schneller. Entweder im großen und ganzen unbearbeitet oder technisch anspruchsvoll, zeigen sie ein neues Bewußtsein der Möglichkeit, Kunst als Unterhaltung zu betrachten (wobei sie vielleicht mit einem Auge auf den erblühenden Kabel-Fernseh-Markt oder den sich immer wieder entziehenden »Retter der Video-Kunst«, die Video-Bildplatte, schielen). Diese »New Wave« oder »New Mood«-Stücke reflektieren erlebte Langeweile mit dem Minimalismus und der Vereinfachung der Prozeß-Kunst und haben ihren Stellenwert als Elemente der populären Kultur (dieses Phänomen ist übrigens überall in der Kunst-Welt zu beobachten). Diese Bänder sind keine Teile des Lebens – Bilder explodieren und verschwinden, bevor sie aufgenommen werden können. Wechsel erfolgen schnell – und wenn man es am wenigsten erwartet, rasen sie ohne jede Synchronisation mit der Musik vorbei. Einige Bänder sind grob und roh wie die neueste »East Village Punk«-Musik, andere wiederum stellen die feinste 500-Dollar-pro-Stunde-Digital-Zauber-Zoom-Technik zur Schau. Es werden Künstler und Freunde in Rollen eingesetzt, die dem Dada-Repertoir entsprungen scheinen; dabei wird nur wenig gesprochen, doch ein Maximum an Musik muß dröhnen – manchmal Hard-Rock, meistens Intensiv und stimmungsgeladen, aber immer sonderbar außerirdisch und fremdartig. Es ist schwierig, irgendeine Beziehung zu einer der auf diesen Bändern projizierten Persönlichkeiten zu gewinnen. Diese Arbeiten vermitteln weder Wärme noch menschliche Emotionen; da lacht oder lächelt keiner, und wenn doch, dann spröde und schüchtern. Und es ist interessant, daß Werbe-Produzenten und Rock-Music-Promoter diese Art des Angangs sofort für ihre Zwecke vereinnahmt haben und damit den bizarren Kreislauf von Beeinflussung und Abweisung weitertreiben.

Was immer die Zukunft auch bringen mag – offensichtlich geben die Direktheit und die reflektiven Qualitäten von Video auch weiterhin einen Rahmen für künstlerische Analysen und Bemühungen ab – und es ist ebenfalls sicher, daß die Video-Kunst schon jetzt einige Nuancen mehr zur Bedeutung des Wortes »Narzismus« addiert hat.

Wolf Zooming; aus *No Commercial Potential*; 1976–1978
Die Kamera ist auf Ernest Gusellas leicht unregelmäßige Vorderzähne gerichtet, die von Schnurrbart und Bart umgeben sind. Um den Zoomring des Kameraobjektives ist ein Band mit zwei losen Enden befestigt. Gusella zieht abwechselnd an beiden Enden, so daß der Zoom schnell vor- und zurückfährt, was einen schnellen optischen Rhythmus erzeugt.

The Second Link

Viewpoints on Video in the Eighties

A Medium Matures: Video and the Cinematic Enterprise

Gene Youngblood

Let us begin by disabusing ourselves of myths. For instance, the idea of video art. I submit there is no such thing. In the first place, art is always independent of the medium through which it is practised. The domain in which something is deemed to be art has nothing to do with how it was produced. In the second place, the boundaries of video art are circumscribed by a much larger history — that of the cinematic enterprise in all its diversity — which contains video and defines its possibilities. Although video is usually identified with the fine arts tradition, its proper context is the tradition of personal cinema, outside of which its achievements cannot be assessed on any level more serious than that of artworld fashion or "sensibility". Video is a cinematic medium and the production of meaning through its unique properties is cinematic practice by definition, regardless of the artist's cultural allegiances. We can legitimately speak of cinematic art and visual art, although they are not the same. But the term "video", which we will certainly continue to use, refers only to craft, not to the object of cinematic desire that actually claims our attention. What we really mean by "video art" is personal cinema practised electronically.

Another myth is that video has anything to do with television as we know it today. It is apparent that video art is not television art. Yet the myth persists that video is somehow synonymous with television in either a partisan or adversary way — either that the mark of success in video is to be televised, or that its value lies in offering an alternative to, or critique of, television. Although we may find these arguments transparent, their purchase on video's public image is so complete that they deserve attention. In the first case, we need only remember that art and communication are fundamentally at cross purposes. Art is a process of exploration and inquiry. Its subject is human potential for aesthetic perception. It asks: How can we be different? What is other? In a basic sense, then, art is always non-communicative: it is about personal vision and autonomy; its aim is to produce non-standard observers.

Television in its present form represents exactly the opposite. Its goal is the production of standard observers through communication understood as a domain of stabilized dependency relations that maintain constant the cognitive domains of the population. Thus, the notion that video art "belongs on television" is both a contradiction of terms and a confusion of issues. Personal vision is not public vision; art is not the stuff of mass communication. The issue, of course, is specialized electronic publishing — that heroic promise of the Video Revolution implying an alternative form of television whose structures have yet to be realized. This begs the political question; but the critique of the mass media was already definitive and complete by the early seventies, and today there is really nothing new to be said. We know that mercenaries have invaded the language, that they occupy every image, every word. We know that the only alternative to their perceptual imperialism is continuous and pervasive access to counter-definitions of reality (the ultimate political meaning of video art) but those long dreamed-of channels still do not exist.

These reflections oblige us to acknowledge that video art remains, after eighteen years, both technologically and culturally immature. Technologically because as a cinematic medium it is still an industrial rather than personal tool; culturally because it is still primarily identified with a single special-interest group, the art world, whose academic and commercial venues constitute its only market. A tool may legitimately be described as mature only insofar as it is easy to use, accessible to everyone, offering high quality at low cost and characterized by a pluralistic rather than singular practice, serving a multitude of contradictory values. To paraphrase Susan Sontag, video, like photography, is not an art form the way painting and poetry are; and if photography lends itself most strongly to the notion of art which says that art is obsolete, then video surely stands as the paragon of that posture. It is truly a "medium" in the environmental sense, like language, like water, and it will have reached cultural maturity only when its ambient and pluralistic status is taken for granted. Only then will video art truly flourish.

To be sure, video does seem posed on the brink of realizing its potential. It is becoming ever more flexible as a cinematic medium, and there are entire

subcultures of enthusiasts for whom "video art" has nothing to do with the issues of the post-modernist fine arts tradition. These are encouraging signs, but the best is yet to come. Truly revolutionary developments loom large on the horizon of video's future. It has become apparent that two grand themes — one technological, the other cultural — will shape the medium in the 80's; and as we approach the millennium a third force, more political in nature, will propel video toward its historical destiny as the central instrument in the social construction of reality.

By far the most important development, on which the other two depend, is the imminent merging of video with computer technology. Among other things, this will abolish the distinction between professional and amateur insofar as that's determined by the tools to which we have access as autonomous individuals, and this in turn will precipitate a New Renaissance in the audio-visual arts. By the end of the decade, video will replace film as the universal medium of cinematic practice; as a result, the critical discourse presently struggling with issues of "video art" will merge with that of the cinematic enterprise, forcing a radical reconstruction of the theory of cinema.

The third great force to shape the future of video will be that long-heralded mythical transformation of culture and consciousness known as the Communications Revolution, which, for at least a generation, has seemed perpetually about to happen. It is not unreasonable to expect that by the mid-1990's we shall at last find ourselves on the threshold of a genuine revolution in communications, which will occur only after the computer-video revolution that is making it possible. A communications revolution is not about technology; it's about possible relations among people. It implies an inversion of existing social relations, whereby today's hierarchical mass culture would disperse into autonomous self-constituting "reality-communities" — social groups of politically significant magnitude, defined not by geography but by consciousness, ideology, and desire. It seems to me that wide-spread use of personal tools for simulation (computers) and conversation (two-way video) make the rise of such communities all but inevitable; and as their constituents we could produce models of possible realities (cinema) and also control the cultural contexts in which those models were published and perceived. I believe this is not only possible but essential for human dignity and survival. The continuous simulation of alternative realities within autonomous reality-communities would constitute a New Renaissance in which the artist-designer might address the profound social and political challenges of our time.

Artistic Trends

Two artistic trends directly related to the merging of video and computer technology will characterize video art through the end of this century. The new techniques will be extremely instrumental in meeting the challenge of a post-structuralist cinema which seeks to integrate two traditions previously regarded as incompatible: first, the cinematic tradition (including surrealist and mythopoeic traditions of avant-garde personal cinema, whether actor/dialog-based or purely formalistic) with its emphasis on illusion, spectacle, and external reference through metaphoric or allegorical narrative; and secondly, the post-modernist tradition in the fine arts, characterized by minimalism, self-reference, and a rigorous, didactic investigation of the structures and materials of the medium, with particular emphasis on deconstruction of representational schemes.

For several years now the post-structuralist movements in all the arts have sought to reconcile these two histories, and a powerful synthesis seems to have emerged: rich in poetic resonance, romantic, even spectacular in form, it nevertheless retains a poignant awareness of its own construction. In painting today it is represented by the New Image movement — Clementi, Salle, Fischl, Longo and the rest; in music it is Bowie and Byrne and the New Wave; in theatre, Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk and Laurie Anderson; in contemporary cinema it is Godard (still) and Straub-Huillet, Hans-Jurgen Syberberg and Manoel de Oliveira and, in quite a different way, Fassbinder. As yet, video art can claim no personality of this stature except perhaps Bill Viola; but it is video nevertheless that will ultimately articulate a post-structuralist cinema far more radical and robust than that which theatrical cinema has given us so far — precisely due to the plasticity and interactivity of cinematic image-events made possible by the computer.

The second trend, which could be regarded as a subcategory of the first, is what is currently being called "visual music" or "music image". I prefer the term "opera" or operatic cinema. In any case let me quickly distinguish it from movie musicals on the one hand and rock video on the other. Whereas these are trivial illustrations of popular music, the practice I have in mind would constitute an organic fusion of image and sound into a single unity, created by a single artist who writes and performs the music as well as conceiving and executing the images that are inseparable from it. Considering the awesome cultural forces represented by the cinema on the one hand and music on the

other, a fusion of the two would seem to possess unparalleled potential for emotional and intellectual discourse and poetic expression. To my knowledge the only North American artist who even comes close to satisfying these criteria is Ernest Gusella in New York, whose surrealistic, operatic songs and poems are beginning to define a new trajectory for the dialog of image and sound. In any case, I am convinced that the "electronic opera" will develop into a lasting cultural tradition through the integration of video and computer technology.

Communication versus Conversation

As video merges with the computer, and thus with user-controlled telecommunication networks, a communications revolution would seem all but inevitable, bringing with it the rise of those autonomous reality-communities I mentioned earlier — communities defined not by geography but by consciousness, ideology, and desire. Paradoxically, the migration to autonomous reality-communities will not be achieved through communication. Communication (from the Latin "a shared space") is interaction in a common context ("to weave together") which makes communication possible and determines the meaning of all that is said. The control of context is the control of language is the control of reality. To create new realities, therefore, we must create new contexts, new domains of consensus. That cannot be done through communication. You cannot step out of the context that defines communication by communicating: it will lead only to trivial permutations within the same consensus, repeatedly validating the same reality. Rather, we need a *creative conversation* (from the Latin "to turn around together") that might lead to new consensus and hence to new realities, but which is not itself a process of communication. "Do you mean this or this?" "No, I mean thus and such . . ." During this nontrivial process we gradually approximate the possibility of communication, which will follow as a necessary trivial consequence once we have constructed a new consensus and woven together a new context. Communication, as a domain of stabilized non-creative relations, can occur only after the creative (but non-communicative) conversation that makes it possible — communication is always non-creative and creativity is always non-communicative. Conversation, the prerequisite for all creativity, requires a two-way channel of interaction. That does not guarantee creativity, but without it there will be no conversation and no creativity at all. That is why the worst thing we can say about the mass media is that they can only communicate — at a time when creative

conversations on a massive scale are essential for human dignity and survival.

Simulation and Desire

What is important to realize is that in our conversations we create the realities we will talk about by talking about them, thus we become an autonomous reality-community. To be conscious observers we need language (verbal or visual). To have language we need each other. The individual observer, standing alone, is an impossibility. There is only the observer-community or reality-community whose constituents can talk about things (like art, science, religion) because they create the things they talk about by talking about them. As constituents of autonomous reality-communities we shall hold continuously before ourselves alternative models of possible realities. We shall learn to desire the realities we simulate by simulating the realities we desire, specifying, through our control of both medium and message, context and content — what is real and what is not, what is right and wrong, good and bad, what is related to what, and how. This is the profound significance of the computer-video revolution and the cinema, understood as simulation, not fiction. The purpose of fiction is to mirror the world and amuse the observer; the purpose of simulation is to create a world and transform the observer. As video art merges with the computer, transforming cinema into simulation, we shall gather in autonomous reality-communities and conspire to abolish once and for all the ancient dichotomies between art and life, destiny and desire.

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La Biennale di Venezia   Comune di Bologna   Provincia di Bologna   Regione Emilia Romagna   Mostra internazionale del cinema libero
Settore Cinema
e Spettacolo Televisivo   Porretta Terme

l'immagine elettronica

From TV to video
e
Dal video alla TV

Nuove tendenze del video nord-americano

New narrative/fiction and docu-drama
Whispers

di Caterina Borelli

ERNEST GUSELLA
What under the sun
60 min., colore, stereo, 1983

«È una visione personale del Messico e della sua storia, che prende spunto dai resoconti della conquista di Cortez fatti da Bernal Diaz, e che trasporta la storia nel presente. Oltre a quelli di Diaz, mi hanno influenzato gli scritti di D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Graham Green, Malcolm Lowry, Augustin Yanez, Octavio Paz ed altri.
L'ispirazione per questo lavoro mi è venuta dal desiderio di applicare quello che definisco «electronic stream of consciousness» (flusso di coscienza elettronico), che avevo già utilizzato in precedenza, all'argomento Messico».

«In questi ultimi dieci anni mi sono occupato della creazione di un nuovo linguaggio poetico attraverso l'impiego del video. Ho mirato alla comunicazione di una Gestalt attraverso metafore visive e di udito che utilizzassero il flusso di coscienza, e la tecnologia elettronica disponibile. Questa Gestalt è il risultato dell'integrazione di osservazioni filosofiche, elementi pittorici e sonori.
Lo scopo è di indicare una struttura informativa capace di coinvolgere lo spettatore su una molteplicità di livelli in continuo movimento».

Bologna, 25-29 febbraio 1984

In the early days of television, the majority of the programs were live. They then shared a common feature: the maintaining of real time. Is this what gave TV that aura of truthfulness, that fame of broadcaster of reality?
Throughout the evolution of its formats, this connotation has been always maintained: let's just think of the News, of the journalist « on the scene ». Naturally the Capitals, the advertizers, real owners of the media, recognized this factor and, seeing it as one of its most effective features, largely abused of it. How many spots have we seen, spying on innocent ladies while cooking or doing their laundry, catched, as it were, « on the scene » (just like in the News), pretending we believed we caught them in a fragment of « real life », a relevant moment because it will have brought us to understand that « this detergent is better than... »?
Video, contrary to TV, has tried to break the narrative sequence as real time structure. This had been already done by cinema, we ought to say that it is in fact the essence of montage (editing).
But it has been so deeply assimilated into the vision that the associative process behind it has become natural, it is not done on a conscious level. Video has characterized itself for its research towards a construction that will not follow real time structure.
Scene dislocation, anti-temporal development and « out-of-context »: artists' research has concentrated mainly on the displacement of timing (through repetition and slow/fast motion devices), and of sound image relationship (the breaking of the sinc).
It is when « real » timing is broken that single events get their own weight, single images become significant, as words in the sparing usage of poetry.
New composition criteria have been created, opposing traditional formats. The central issue is to present a sequence of image that will pursue the provoking of a sensation and of a reaction in those who are watching (and not the delivery of a message/ideology). It is a usage of ambiguity as activator factor, to remove the audience from the passivity that has been, so far, a central connotation of the TV medium.
The viewer is pushed to read between the lines, to use that automatic mental process intrinsic to inter personal relationships: the process through which the individual completes the information received, with his own personal experience.
The audience, getting into the creative process, finds and recognizes itself as active partecipating subject: not a hole to be filled by information/entertainment/consumistic excitement, but an alive point interacting with the image that are presented to him/her. It is up to him/her to imagine the cohesion and the development, to create the story and to make it significant. It is becoming an interaction between the author and another individul, through technology.
This partecipation could shake a lot of television structure and of its efficacy. We are still on a level of delicate tentative, whispers to an expanding audience.

Con il patrocinio del Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo

Video: Approaching Independents

by Michael Gitlin

Narrative

In discussing film as a mass medium, one is basically talking about the classic Hollywood narrative film. At a very early stage in its history, motion pictures began adapting stories from books or the stage for the screen. In retrospect it might seem to have been logical or inevitable, but as wave after wave of avant-garde filmmakers have reminded us, this is not the case. It was a coopting of an accepted and convenient structure for films, a structure that was familiar to the audience. As the decades have gone by, the narrative structures have remained, but the images have taken on a life of their own. The figure of the movie star was possibly the first icon to have meaning outside the framework of its narrative and it remains a very durable image today. But this is only one instance of a process which had been occurring since the advent of moving images as audiences absorbed more and the culture began to give common meanings to stylistic devices and images. The advent of television accelerated the process as it increased the visibility of the moving image and subtly changed its nature. The television advertisement with its short, staccato time span and desire to provide a wealth of marketing information acculturated audiences to watching television -- and even movies—with less reliance on narrative structure. Today, most children are more familiar with the television advertisement as a communication medium than stories either read or told to them. This is having a great influence on the programming of television and on movies. There is more movement and less plot. Many of Hollywood's new directors had their training in television advertisements and oldtime Hollywood directors bemoan the new movies' lack of dialogue and plot structure.

But in spite of this and the success of MTV (music video), there is no doubt that the classic narrative remains supreme in mass media. It and its variations continue to hold a fascination for independent videomakers as well. Almost without exception they have eschewed the conventions of the dramatic form which still dominates television and commercial film. While television has moved slowly—almost unconsciously—toward new modes of storytelling, independents have surged ahead. The nature of telling a story continues to hold them; but the question of how best to express it in terms of video is the locus of their aesthetic experimentation. To this end, there has been considerable ingenuity and innovation. Like the works discussed in the documentary section, there are two opposing trends: one uses a static camera with little or no editing; the other uses constant movement, fragmented sequences, repetition, and many other of the effects available through video synthesis and computerized editing.

These artists have discovered that conventional storytelling is an inefficient way of telling a story via video. The possibilities of piling on dozens of images and associations in a short time offer a rich vein of communication. The comparison of dreams to motion pictures has been made since its first days, yet video perhaps is a better medium in which to make this comparison. Its intimacy makes the force of its juxtapositions greater. The lack of detail suggests Jungian archetypes rather than Freudian individuals to the viewer and universal resonances come more easily from this personal material in this medium.

Ernest Gusella makes use of this aspect of video in his tapes. His style is ironic and his structure straightforward. It consists of one image, or one stylistic device per segment, set to a song or anecdote. Pictures from around the world mix with puns, songs, bits of ancient culture, literary allusions and pop culture. They are planted all together and set into an electronic dreamscape. The narrative strain in the works is the journey through a space which exists in Gusella's mind and is transferred to the video screen. The enormous reach of his allusions is reminiscent of Paik, but his vision is more idiosyncratic. There is more of the obscure, and the perverse, here. Popular culture mingles with the arcane. But the sense of spacing being transformed by video into a purely inner landscape is strongly felt. Countless visions are juxtaposed to decipher our environment. Gusella's two most recent tapes *Connecticut Papoose* (1981) and *Bending Diogenes* (1983) follow this line of thought. There is the suggestion of the classic narrative and a theme, but again we do not have the classic narrative line to follow. We have to work our way as if from the back waters of a dying civilization to gather evidence for a future post-mortem.

A somewhat more conservative narrative, but only slightly, is explored in Woody Vasulka's *The Commission* (1983). The wealth of effects capable of being generated by electronic image-processing is used to add resonance to a simple story. It's about the great nineteenth-century violinist, Nicolo Paganini (played by Ernest Gusella), commissioning the composer Hector Berlioz (played by Robert Ashley) to create a work. But it's hardly a story at all. It's an imagining of an event that may or may not have happened. And it's imagined not through period detail or long exposition, but through sharp characterization and a visual style that is striking in a way that is pure video. Vasulka works the effects and the narrative together in a provocative way so that the effects are, indeed, not effects but part and parcel of a complete entity, a finished work. By choosing one of the most eccentric characters in musical history, he allows himself a great deal of leeway in recreating him. Thus, Vasulka has devised a narrative, which like many of the previous tapes, is based on a succession of iconic images, the main one being the attenuated figure of Paganini who is further stylized by his graphically surrealistic language which he whispers into his son's ear in order that the boy can repeat it audibly. The shape of Paganini, his voice, the slowly moving camera that always photographs him, contribute to create an eerie presence. Vasulka's synthesizer allows him to create from within a huge range of images. The synthesized vision is a harbinger of possibility for video narrative. It offers a tremendous range of control as well as a way to humanize what otherwise might seem to be very cool and distant electronic images.