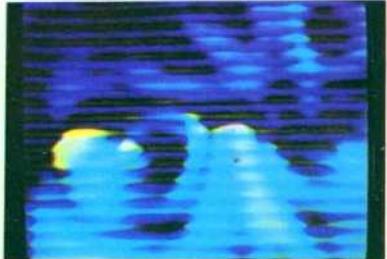
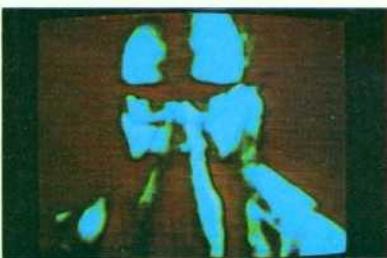
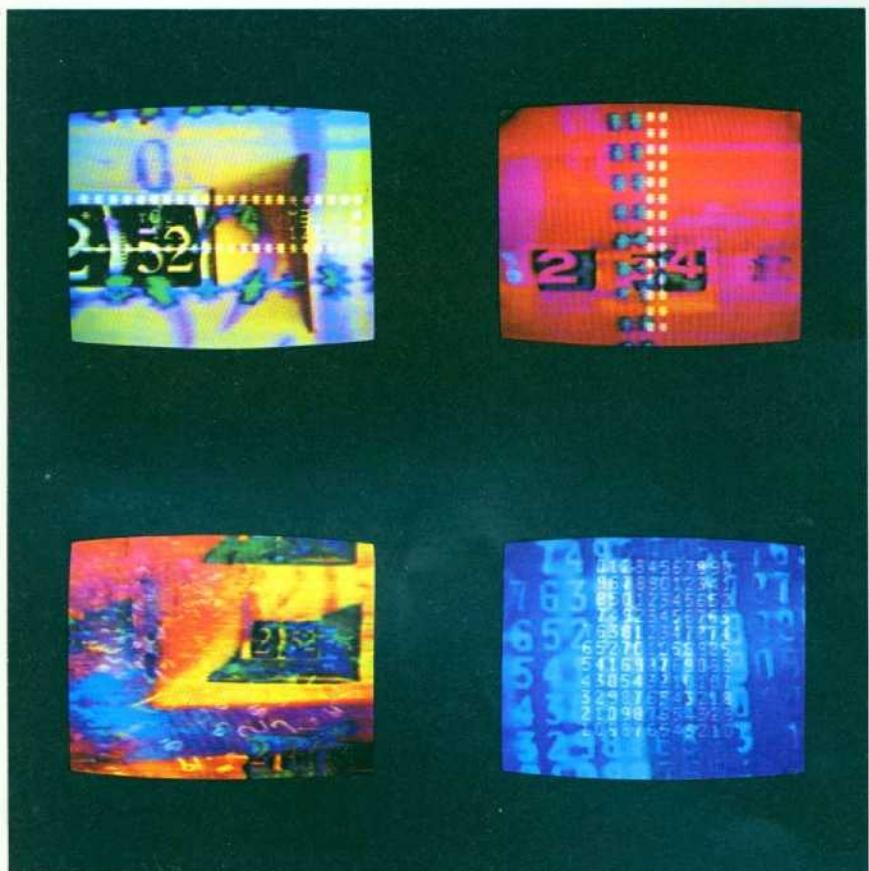




James Seawright, *Two Schönberg Pieces*, 1970. Produced at WGBH-TV.
(Photos: James Seawright and Mimi Garrard.) Courtesy of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

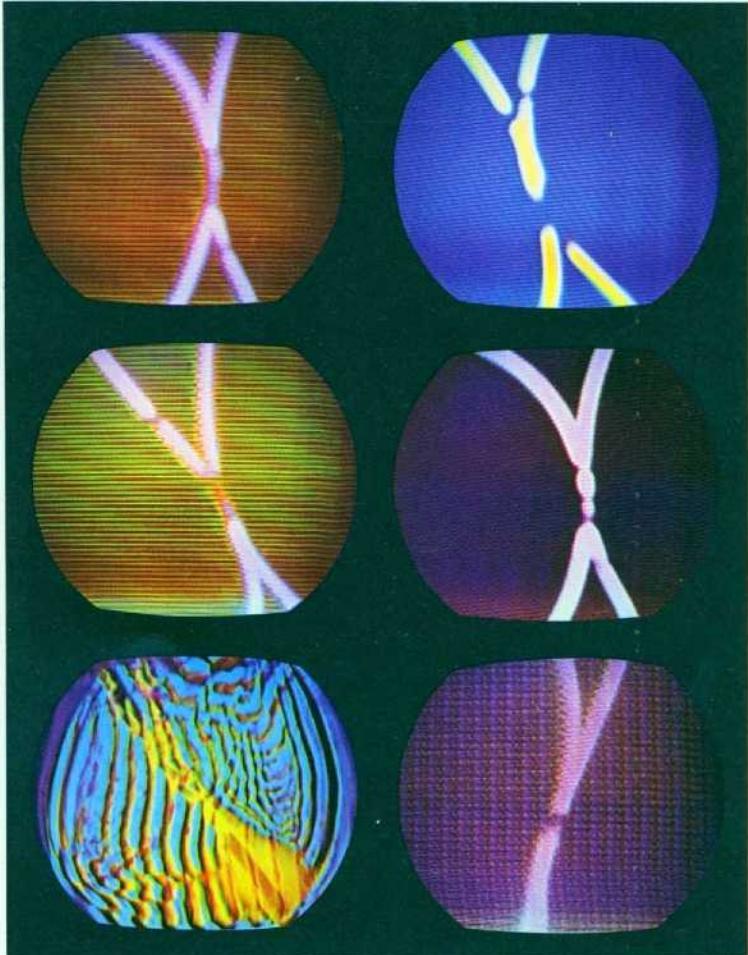


Nam June Paik, Selections from a videotape portrait of Allen Ginsberg produced on the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, 1971. (Photo: Peter Moore.)
Nam June Paik/Shuya Abe color courtesy Bonino Gallery



Douglas Davis, *Numbers: A Videotape Event*, 1970. (Photo: Peter Moore.)
Produced at WGBH-TV. Courtesy of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Nam June Paik/Shuya Abe, live synthesized imagery from Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, 1971.



Keith Sonnier, *Hybrid V*, 1971.



scant minute in the history of the medium the situation is existential. The major problem is our inability to look at video without the prejudice of film.

I have in hand a recent review by Jonas Mekas of a videotape festival held at the Westbeth (New York City) Community Center and an essay by Jonathan Miller in the *New York Review of Books*. These two pieces define the gap in all its scope. Both demonstrate a remarkable insensitivity to the video screen. Mekas is easily the more serious and direct. He watches, reports what he sees, and pronounces it dull. He is bored by the poor sound-video quality of documentaries taped on the streets by media groups and is unimpressed by synthesized, abstract television. First, he is looking at videotape incorrectly, in the "public" setting forced upon him at Westbeth, where a ring of monitors was installed in a theaterlike setting for a large audience. The small screen rarely works in this way, whatever the number of monitors. Second, Mekas clearly misses the aura of film, a properly public occasion. Jonathan Miller operates several cuts below Mekas. He cannot bring himself to recognize — seriously — the video fact. More precisely, he cannot entertain the possibility that television differs from other, analogous media. "The television image," he writes, "is simply a disturbance on the surface of a piece of luminous glass which has no existence apart from the reality that it represents." This is an incredible statement. Think for just a minute about the luminosity of electronic color — the brightness is there because the light shines through it, from inside out, making possible hues beyond either painting or film. The television image is a highly complex disturbance, one that creates its own reality.

Vibrant, nervous color is a unique video asset. I am not surprised to hear that Cartier-Bresson said he had never seen color like that produced by the Nam June Paik-Shuya Abe Video Synthesizer, when it was displayed last summer in Aspen, Colorado. There are other assets, which I will come to later, but immediately I should say that the electronic field/canvas is transforming itself as I write. The jumpy diffuse picture that McLuhan called "cool" and involving, because it required intense participation to finish, is warming, becoming more sensuous. The receiving sets are far better than they were two years ago, particularly with regard to color. The size of the screen is due for significant expansion, too. It is likely that by 1980 flat, wall-sized screens will be common. Most important of all, the spread of cable telecasting systems insures the arrival of steady, clear-cut images. I hardly need add that the use in the home of videotape recorders and cassettes will further sensitize the eye to the video image.



Peter Campus, *Double Vision*, videotape performance at Finch College Museum of Art, New York City, 1971.

Vito Acconci, *Remote Control*, videotape performance at Finch College Museum of Art, 1971.

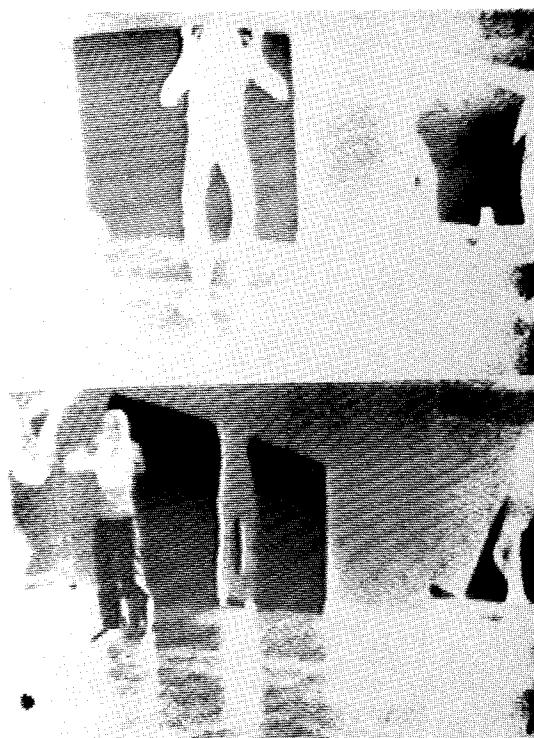


They will sensitize the mind, too. The arena of choice is expanding far beyond what broadcast television presently affords. Both cable telecasting and video cassettes can be programmed for small and decidedly esoteric audiences. Personal, fragmented control will be asserted over content.

Two separate and alternating threads, the one historical, the other esthetic, will come together and unite toward the end of this essay. I must begin with an attempt at telescoping history. The earliest creators of what might be called the "personal" videotape, made on portable equipment, away from the impositions inherent in broadcast television (prior to 1970), appear to have been Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Les Levine, and Stan Vanderbeek. Paik purchased the first portable videotape recorder (or "VTR") sold to a consumer in New York City in 1965, taped the scenes outside the taxicab window on his way downtown, and played the result at the Cafe Au Go Go in Greenwich Village. He distributed dittoed copies of a manifesto: *As collage technique replaced oil paint, he wrote, the cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas.*

The premise of video as art lies in the one-to-one relationship between the image and the viewer. Television is not suited for theaters. Television takes place in what experimental producer Brice Howard has called the "videospace," which is essentially private. It is also casual. We will never expect the grand things from video that we expect from theater and film. They come by surprise and indirection. Video is closer to life than its competitors. Video is mind to mind, not mind to public. The audience is potentially huge, but intimate.

Half-inch videotape represents the first authentically electronic form that art can take. The appearance of the television set as an image in painting and as an element in sculpture (in constructions and multimedia environments) was a preliminary step, nothing more. Bruce Nauman worked the most intensively upon this step in the late 1960s. Possibly he preferred videotape to film because it was less complicated as a system; he could turn the camera on and let it run while he worked or performed, then play it back immediately and either keep or erase what he saw. The videotapes he has made since are similar in form and content to his films and performances. There is little utilization of the medium's technical characteristics. Videotape obviously provided Nauman with the means to record and develop ideas with comparative ease. He grimaces into the camera, stretches his mouth, walks, plays with props, paints his genitalia. Often he turns the camera on its side or upside down. Lately he has made videotapes of empty

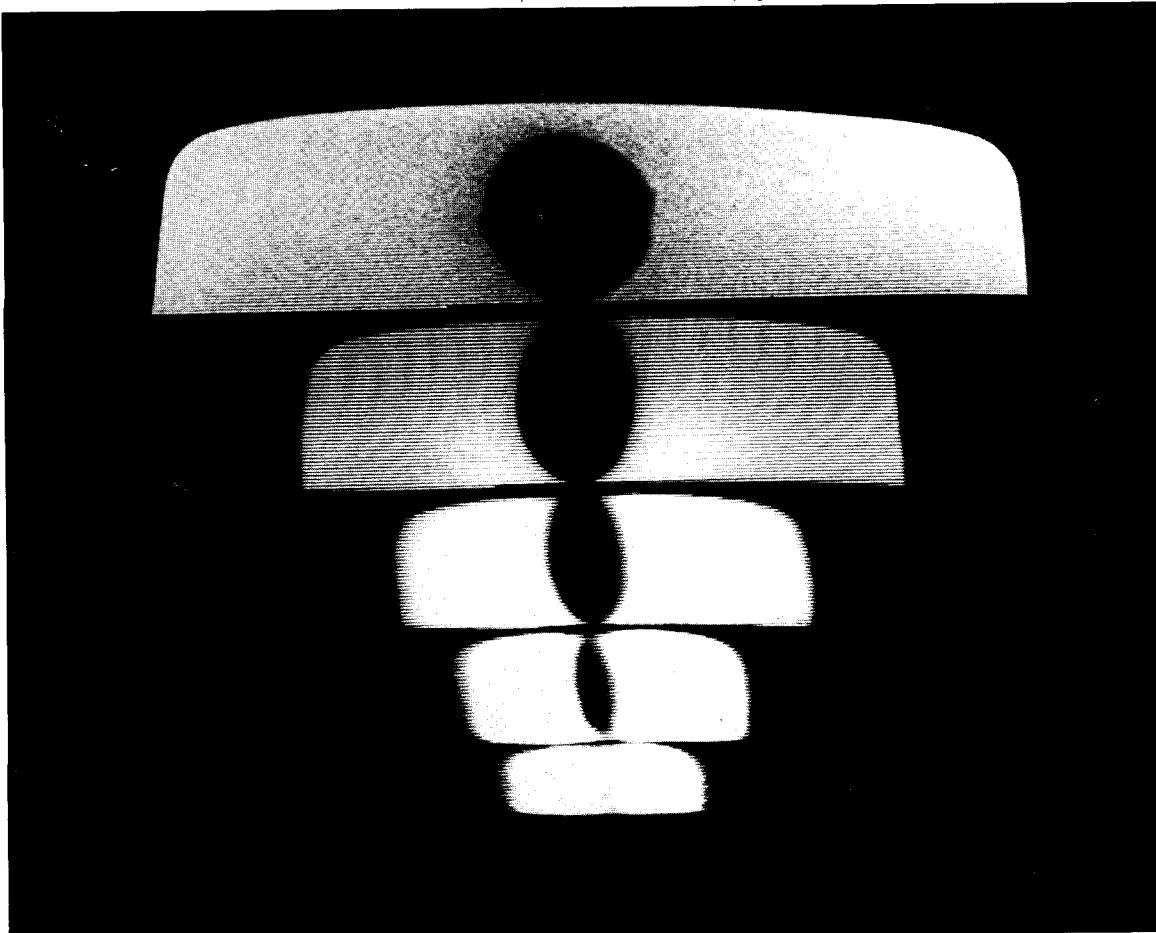


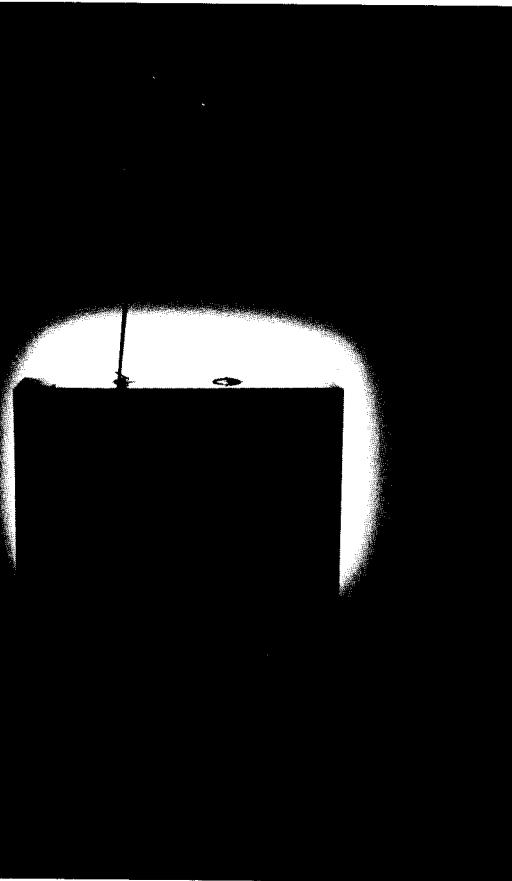
Keith Sonnier, *Dis-Play*, videotape, 1969.
(Photo: Richard Landry.)



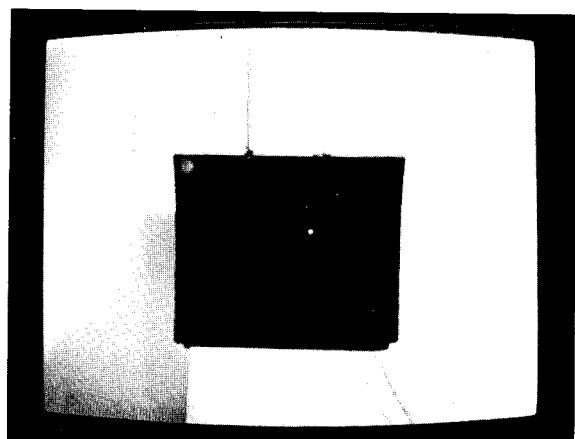
Keith Sonnier, *Positive/Negative*, 16 mm film based
on videotape, 1970.

Woody and Steina Vasulka, *Flying*, feedback videotape, 1971. (Photo: Bob Day.)





Douglas Davis, *Images from the Present Tense I*, television set, 1971.
(Photo: Robert McElroy.)



Douglas Davis, *Images from the Present Tense I*, documentary videotape, 1971. (Photo: Peter Moore.)

spaces and installed them in gallery environments. An extension of this idea into live monitor space occurs in certain of his "tunnels." The performer/spectator enters the tunnel space — bounded on either side by plywood panels — and walks towards two monitors. On the lower one he sees himself, from behind, walking toward what he sees. On the top monitor he sees an empty space.

Hans Richter, the Dada film maker, writes: "I see the film as a part of modern art. There are certain problems and sensations which are peculiar to painting, and others which belong exclusively to the film. But there are also problems where both spheres overlap and even interpenetrate." Video relates to film in precisely the same way as film relates to painting. Nauman came to video from painting and film, a studio situation. His tapes record private studio performances, in the manner of film documentary. The media groups observed by Mekas employ tape in the same way but over a broader slice of life and less successfully. Neither physical nor social scale fits the cathode-ray tube (or "CRT"), at least not yet. Video documentary is best focused in on a single image or idea.

The half-inch videotape is electronic in purpose as well as form: to transmit information on the CRT. So is broadcast television, which began to be a possibility for artists in 1968-69, roughly, in two places, KQED in San Francisco and WGBH in Boston. There for the first time, open access to the complete tool took place without restriction or imposition. Terry Riley made *Music With Balls* at KQED, and the Center for Experiment in Television produced *Heimskringla!*, a video play written by Tom O'Horgan. WGBH was visited by a stream of artists. Some of them collaborated on *The Medium Is the Medium*, produced by Fred Barzyk and broadcast in 1969, which included brief contributions by Paik, Otto Piene, Aldo Tambellini, Allan Kaprow, James Seawright, and Thomas Tadlock. One year later, WGBH gathered another group of artists to produce *Video Variations*. They included Barzyk, Paik, Seawright, Vanderbeek, Tsai, Constantine Manos, Jackie Cassen, Russell Connor, and this writer. *Video Variations* was broadcast early in 1972. A great deal of the experimental work undertaken in television stations has not been seen, except in closed circuit situations. There have been scattered collaborations between artists and the station structure in Great Britain, West Germany, Sweden, and in New York, at WCBS-TV and WNET, and the two CATV systems.

Working contact with a television station changes the attitude of the artist as well as the station. Until then, the artist tends to use the videotape recorder as another studio tool to impose upon video ideas generated in other conditions,

mostly related to static esthetics. The broadcast environment changes the artist perceptually and politically. The last change, the political one, I will explore later. The physical change occurs with electronic mixing. Most television stations are endowed with technical capacities that are rarely exploited or challenged. These capacities provide command over a total field of color, color change, field density, layering, kinetics, and more. The entire *Video Variations* hour is a study in electronic density, which includes the illusion of depth. I discovered this almost by accident in *Numbers*, my own work. I was trying to layer as many images as possible over each other, to give the viewer the sense of seeing separate activities together as one field. What we found instead was depth. The eye feels as though it is looking deep within the tube; the effect is "real" or visually "true," unlike the flat experience of illusionism that occurs in film.

I have already mentioned the special qualities of video color. Keith Sonnier, who has used bright tints in his media environments, extends that sense with an electronic colorizer. This device permits the artist to "paint" on a previously recorded black-and-white videotape with artificial hues. In one such case, Sonnier set up two television cameras in his loft and focused upon a couple changing positions in a bed, talking with each other about those changes. The basic field is sepia, flecked now and then with tiny spots of radiant color. Toward the end — the tape is 50 minutes in length — solid washes of pink, purple, and green obscure the activities, which then return to visual clarity.

Density again. As noted, the video picture cannot accommodate environmental scale, but it can encompass a broad complexity of abstract forms and activity. The work executed by Paik, Vanderbeek, Seawright, Riley, Richard Felciano, Richard Lowenberg, Hamid Naficy, and others is saturated with these forms. In *Music With Balls* the aural overlays, which mix four tracks with a saxophone and electric organ, are more than matched by the visual wipes and dissolves, as huge spheres sweep back and forth across the screen, on several planes at once, distorting color as they swing. In all of this work, from Riley to Paik, the evanescence of the image is the central fact. No form is static.

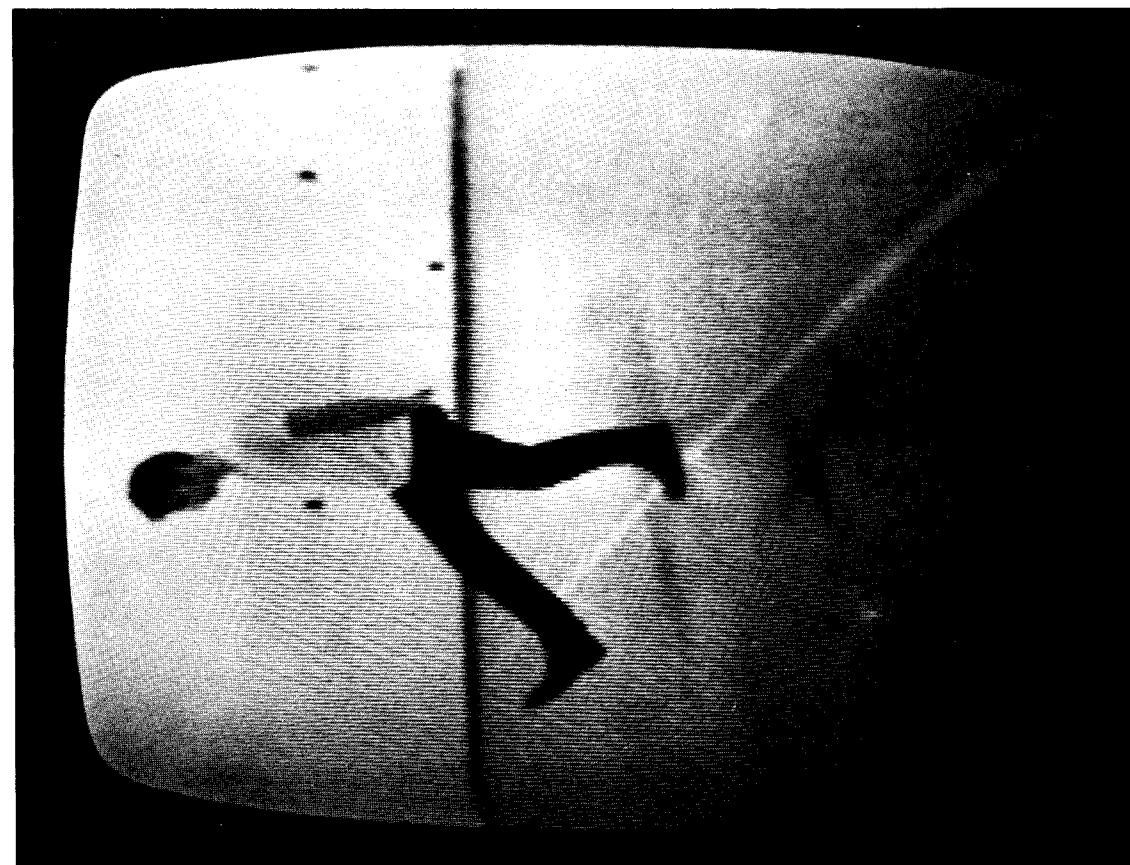
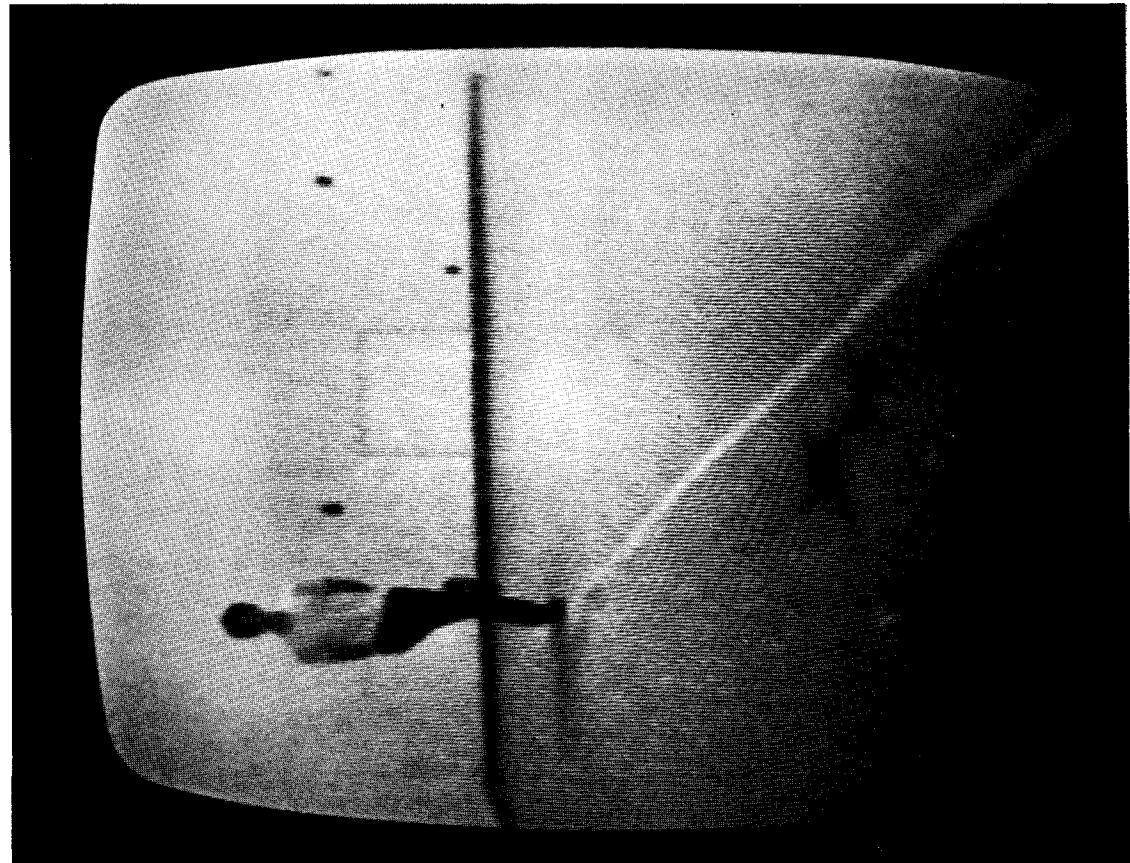
In *Two Schönberg Pieces*, James Seawright takes muted, controlled advantage of this evanescence. This piece, created for *Video Variations*, is built painstakingly on one principle: the order in which color signals are transmitted from the TV camera to the monitor. By spacing these signals out, Seawright turns each movement into a multiple of itself. The two dancers become a phalanx of

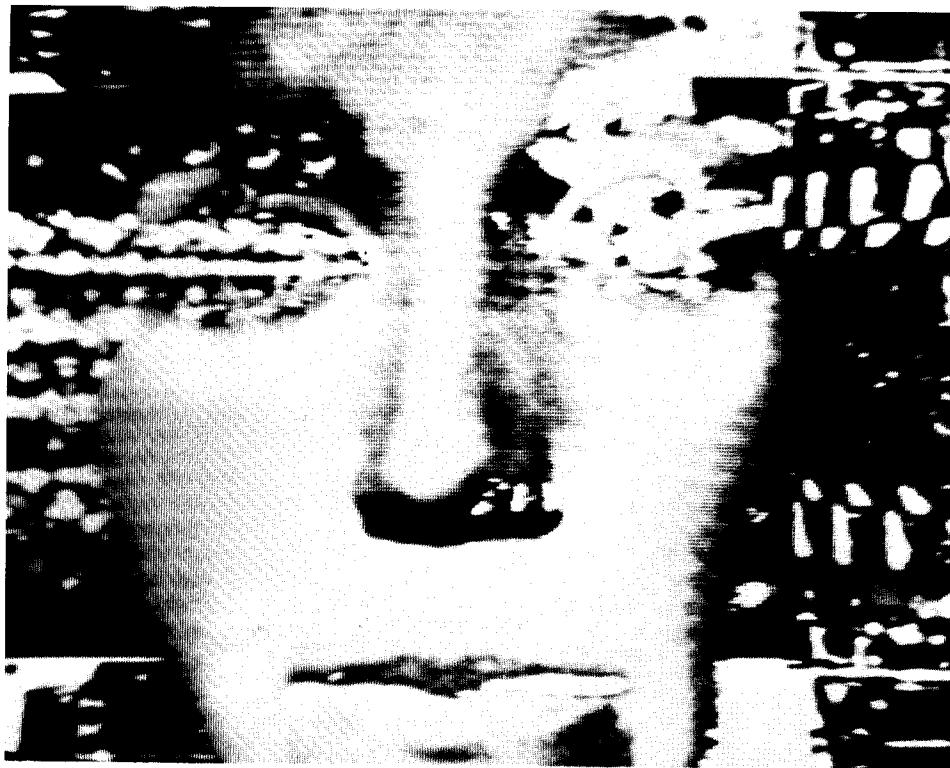


Bruce Nauman, *Slow Angle Walk*, videotape, 1968.

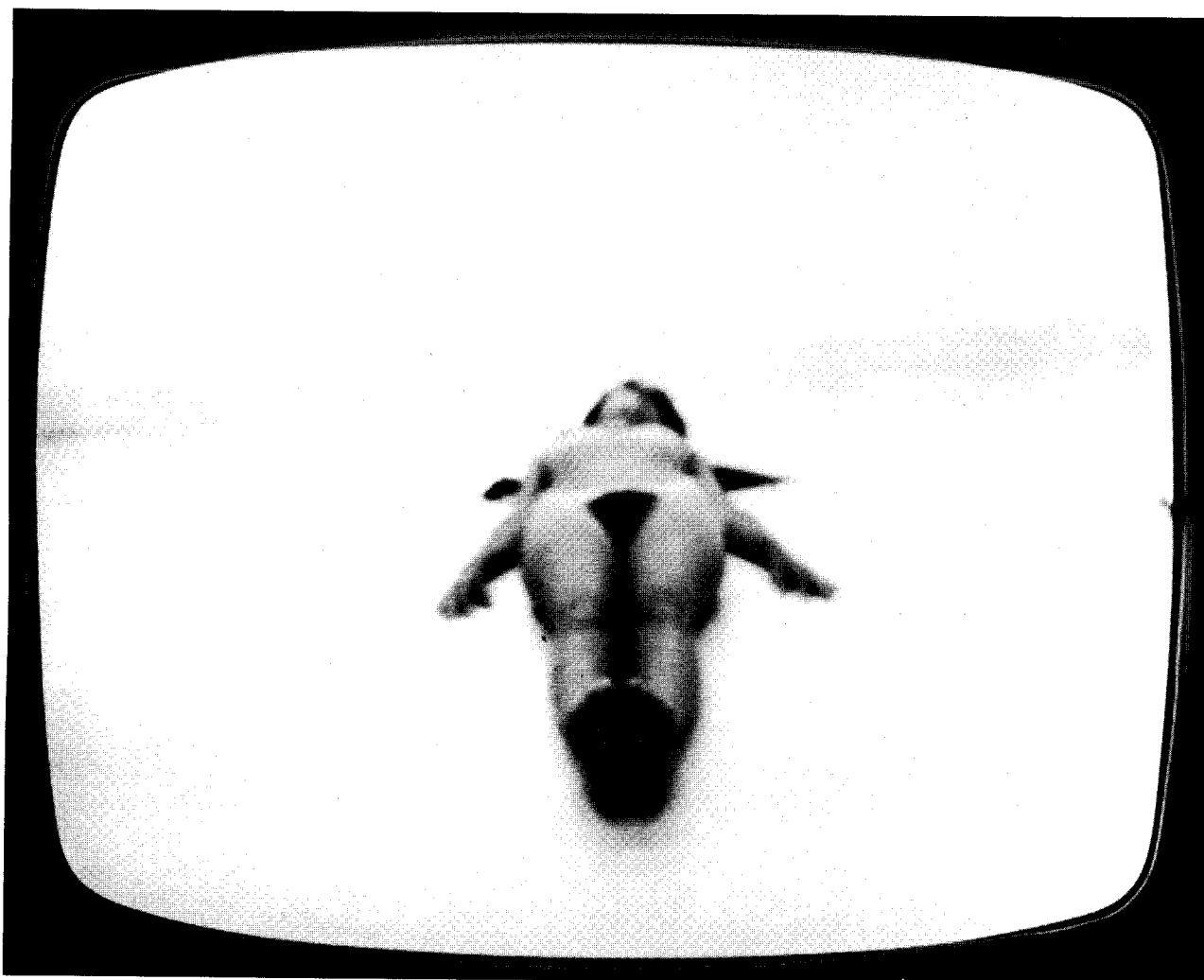


Dennis Oppenheim, *Air Pressure*, videotape, 1971.





Joanne Kyger, *Descartes*, videotape, 1971. (Photo: m d'Hamer.)



Gene Davis, *Video Puzzle*, videotape, 1971.

dancers. Their motions are waves of striated color.

Despite this sensuousness, social and political issues hover about the current usage of video. The possibility of personal production — through portable VTR equipment — first gained public attention through groups like the Video Freex, the Raindance Corporation, Global Village, and People's Video Theater. In varying degrees each believes that the dissemination of the production tool can change the social/political structure by providing alternate information. At the other end, the fine art end, politics hovers, too, like a discredited guest. If a painting can change consciousness slowly and grudgingly, videotape can effect perception on a widespread and instantaneous level. The privacy of Nauman's studio dissolves once it is taped. The most advanced thinking in contemporary art is public in potential. The Dadaists dreamed of bringing this about; Robert Motherwell says Dada was the first instance where the means of contemporary art were directed toward social change. The Constructivists were in fact more explicit. Dziga Vertov, the originator of the *Kino-Pravda* films, said of his medium: "My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world." In one of Paik's most successful tapes he expands the faces of politicians at press conferences, splitting the electronic image into black-white dots, while the voices are similarly distorted. I hope it is clear that I not talking about politics in any literal way but about perception which governs our choices, in art and in life.

The last attribute of video — immediacy — is the most difficult to define. No other medium allows it to such an extent. Television can happen while you watch, in real time. The future can be unpredictable, like life itself and unlike the live theater (where the next moment is predetermined). Yet video is better than life. The small screen focuses and intensifies real time experience. The first step I wanted to take with video was to contact the viewer in such a moment, and share it with him. This was achieved last year in Washington, D.C., through the Corcoran Gallery and WTOP-TV, in *Electronic Hokkadim I*. We allowed an entire city to sing and chant to itself, through the means of sets scattered about the videosphere. Their chanting modulated the electronic images they saw, while the images were forming. Film lacks this potential; it is edited and then rendered public. Another aspect of this inherent immediacy is the mechanics of the video picture itself, easily apparent in streaming feedback forms. The video image is created by light passing through the screen, a screen that paints and repaints itself continually, at a rate of 3,000,000 dots per second. The kind of immediacy I am discussing has to do with a malleable future. The sense that the next minute is open to every option, yours or the artist's. This is not an easy quality to

handle. It demands the acceptance of real time. The painter and the sculptor must confront a mind watching in sequence, not now and then, as in a gallery or museum space. The videospace is both linear and moving onward toward a future.

Three recent exhibitions in New York indicate the ways in which art is presently trying to deal with video. One way, intensely physical, was encompassed by the videotapes shown at the Whitney Museum and the appearance of the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer at the Bonino Gallery. Another approach was demonstrated in the performances videotaped at the Finch College Museum of Art. The Whitney exhibition was dominated by feedback and synthesized imagery, by all the means implicit in the system itself. The work of Woody and Steina Vasulka was at the esthetic core of this exhibition. In their tapes they sent wiry, writhing shapes moving rapidly from one end of the screen to the other. "We will present you sounds and images," they stated, "made artificially from various frequencies, from sounds, from inaudible pitches and their beats." Internal imagery, in brief. The synthesizers created by Eric Siegel and Stephen Beck turned this idea into machinehood. Siegel's images are clean and Constructivist in nature, Beck's diffuse and shifting.

The Paik-Abe Synthesizer is very different. It uses the outside world extensively. Images are fed from a battery of cameras into a complicated console, within which distortion and colorizing of all kinds is possible. At the Bonino Gallery the content was the audience, mugging and frowning to see itself distorted on television. The Paik-Abe image is expressionist in every sense of the word, stretching and extending the human face and whatever emotional content it happens to be indulging.

The Finch tapes, which included works by Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Dan Graham, Les Levine, Michael Netter, Dennis Oppenheim, Steven Reich, and myself, exploited the medium only in the subtlest sense. There are two tapes I want particularly to mention, by Campus and Acconci. In the first the artist videotapes himself from above. Campus placed the portable camera on the balcony of a gymnasium and dropped a rope down from it to the floor below. By holding onto the rope and spiraling around with it, he kept the focus upon himself. The effect — as he circles around the floor — is sharply vertical; at times it is almost dizzying. Vito Acconci's performance, *Remote Control*, differed greatly in mode but played with the medium just as casually. It is recorded on two tapes and requires two monitors. Each tape follows the conversa-

tion of one performer, seated in a box, trying to communicate with the other performer, similarly seated, across the room. The male performer attempts to persuade the female to tie herself up with a rope. Now and again he glances at the monitor to spy what she is doing. There is no more recognition of the medium than this. Yet neither work — nor any of the Finch performances — would exist without the casually conceptual structure that videotape provides.

Whether the content is feedback electrons or repetitive movement in the studio, the early video art tries to defy time. Rather than linear progression it moves in a circular fashion, with no beginning and no end. This presupposes a mind-to-public rather than mind-to-mind communication, a bored and formal audience rather than an intense and informal one. Painters and sculptors do not normally think in terms of moving time. Their images are both static and instantaneous. "Time has to do with seeing," Robert Morris told William Agee in a 1970 interview, "with behavior. . . . That gets into perception. You can talk about that: the necessity of time for perception. . . . Some things might remain static, but they might have their static, momentary, physical existence while you are there. When you came back, they might be different. Sometimes things fall down, for example. Objects in the world are in constant flux and changing and acknowledging that provides another way of dealing with things." In two of Morris' recent films there is a confrontation with time. *Gas Station* is a real time film. It depicts on two separate screens, from far and near, the activity of the station. *Neo-Classical*, made last year during his Tate Gallery exhibition, records objects in motion, objects made especially for display at the gallery: a rolling cylinder, a ball, a tightrope wire in vibration — all of them caught in the flux of time.

This represents a keenly different awareness and exploitation of time. It is neither fixed nor circular. It is progressive. It destroys static notions of art and life. No medium demands this progressive sense of time more than video, which is why — among other things — video is political in the deepest personal sense. The more fully we exploit the medium as art, the more completely we change perception. This will now become clearer if I summarize the inherent qualities of video: nervous, luminous color; the density and complexity of the picture field; the immediate, mind-to-mind contact between creator and perceiver. At its esthetic core video is art dematerialized. Its organic physical qualities are confined to the loop tape, the cartridge cassette, or live broadcast through the air. Therefore the result is political and esthetic at once: swift, intense communication, not possession. ■