

# 1989 WHITNEY BIENNIAL VIDEO EXHIBITION

## The American Federation of Arts Film/Video Program

The 1989 Whitney Biennial film and video selections offer dramatic evidence of the media arts' vital position in contemporary American culture. Driven by neither the art marketplace nor the commercial television and motion picture industries, these works articulate aesthetic, theoretical, and ideological propositions crucial to our modernist and postmodernist concepts of representation and interpretation.

This year's Biennial presents short and feature-length films within the genres of narrative, documentary, animation, and the avant-garde. Such independent cinema—personal, poetic, and oppositional—continues a rich vanguard tradition begun nearly one hundred years ago when the first moving images were recorded on celluloid.

The program of films is complemented by single-channel videotapes—documentary, narrative, and abstract image-processed works—which deal with issues related to film and the other arts yet are uniquely determined by the electronic medium and its conduits of distribution and exhibition. Such works continue a practice that dates to the early 1960s, when artists first appropriated the technology of television within a culture that was reexamining the material basis and definitions of art and art making. Created for the television set, video art posits a radical alternative to broadcast television and proposes to build a sophisticated video culture for the late twentieth century.

The 1989 Biennial has as one of its subtexts the growing dialogue between film and video

generated by the increasingly active movement of artists between the two media. Equally significant is the impact on these historically distinct forms of the changing technologies of information processing and communication. Moreover, the selection seeks to acknowledge the multiplicity of cultures which informs recent developments in American independent film and video art. The privileging of traditional art forms is being challenged today as art is introduced into the public sphere through the media of our time. The challenge of this and future biennials is to chart and interpret these changes within an expanding media culture.

John G. Hanhardt  
Curator, Film and Video  
Whitney Museum of American Art

### PROGRAM 1 (89 minutes)

#### **Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$ M**

Martha Rosler  
1988, 35 min., color

#### **Production Notes: Fast Food for Thought**

Jason Simon  
1987, 28 min., color

#### **Out of the Mouth of Babes**

Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen  
1987, 26 min., color

### PROGRAM 2 (57 minutes)

#### **Blues for Piggy**

John Arvanites  
1987, 12 min., color

#### **India Time**

Ken Feingold  
1987, 45 min., color

### PROGRAM 3 (69 minutes)

#### **Motorist**

Chip Lord  
1989, 69 min., color

### PROGRAM 4 (57 minutes)

#### **Ritual Clowns**

Victor Masayesva, Jr.  
1988, 18 min., color

#### **Lilith**

Steina Vasulka  
1987, 9 min., color

#### **Living with the Living Theater**

Nam June Paik with Betsy Connors and Paul Garrin  
1988, 30 min., color

### PROGRAM 5 (96 minutes)

#### **Inside Life Outside**

Sachiko Hamada and Scott Sinkler  
1988, 57 min., color

#### **Belchite-South Bronx: A Trans-Historical, Trans-Cultural Landscape**

Francesc Torres  
1987, 39 min., color

### PROGRAM 6 (81 minutes)

#### **Art of Memory**

Woody Vasulka  
1987, 37 min., color

### Incidence of Catastrophe

Gary Hill  
1988, 44 min., color

### PROGRAM 7 (76 minutes)

#### **Joyride™**

Tony Oursler and Constance DeJong  
1988, 17 min., color

#### **Hitchcock Trilogy: Vertigo, Psycho, Torn Curtain**

Rea Tajiri  
1987, 15 min., color

#### **Under a Malicious Sky**

Hans Breder  
1988, 10 min., color

#### **Peggy and Fred in Kansas**

Leslie Thornton  
1987, 11 min., color

#### **Peggy and Fred and Pete**

Leslie Thornton  
1988, 23 min., color

All videotapes are ¾" NTSC U-matic videocassettes.

## PROGRAM 1

### **Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby S M**

by Martha Rosler and Paper Tiger Television. 1988, 35 min., color

Feminism has been one of the most powerful theoretical and ideological discourses to emerge in the past two decades. Within the fields of cultural and media studies, it has become an effective tool for understanding the patriarchal forces that control the major media and other dominant forms of cultural production. Many media artists use the critical methods of feminism to fashion images that question the ideological foundations of mechanical reproduction and increasingly appropriate television to deconstruct the meaning of the narratives of news and information.

**BORN TO BE SOLD: MARTHA ROSLER READS THE STRANGE CASE OF BABY S M** is Martha Rosler's most ambitious work to date and represents a return to her earlier performance-based videotapes, such as **SEMIOTICS OF THE KITCHEN** (1975), in which she performed and mimed the attitudes and roles forced upon women by society. In this new work, produced in collaboration with the Paper Tiger Television collective, an alternative media group that makes videotapes for public-access cable television, Rosler fuses her interest in the politics of information and representation with an examination of the roles imposed on the surrogate mother in the Baby M case. The result is a witty and highly sophisticated analysis of television and print media and the impact of this case on biological and ideological definitions of woman as mother and wife.

### **Production Notes: Fast Food for Thought**

by Jason Simon. 1987, 28 min., color

Since the early years of video art, artists have made television commercials a topic in their work, often incorporating actual commercials into their analyses of television advertising to fashion an aesthetic and political discourse on the nature of the mass media in our society. Just as Hans Haacke and others have made political and economic forces the subject of their art, media artists have often directly appropriated material from programming in order to foreground a materialist critique of the exigencies of production.

In **PRODUCTION NOTES: FAST FOOD FOR THOUGHT**, Jason Simon strings together a series of seven popular television commercials. After watching each commercial, we view it again in slow motion, while on the soundtrack the advertising agency's production notes for the ad are read out loud; we hear what the agency was seeking to sell and how and to whom. The result is a cogent decoding of the strategies that are subtly, and usually invisibly, played out in the commercial.

### **Out of the Mouth of Babes**

by Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen. 1987, 26 min., color

Sherry Millner employs film and video to create imaginative works whose central strategy is the exposure and interpretation of the complex ideological forces at play in American lives. She enlists economic analysis and theory to tackle tough issues that too often lie hidden from view and to reveal how they affect us.

In **OUT OF THE MOUTH OF BABES**, Millner and her collaborator, novelist Ernest Larsen, reflect on the power of language and establish a metaphor for the acquisition of language as a form of domination. By extending their appropriation of popular media to video graphic techniques, such as animating words over images of President Reagan, they literally apply another layer of analysis to the visual and linguistic discourses that obscure the ideological forces of power and control in our culture.

## PROGRAM 2

### **Blues for Piggy**

by John Arvanites. 1987, 12 min., color

John Arvanites' early videotapes are distinguished by their conceptual strategies, particularly by the use of black and white videotape and minimal camera movement and editing to record through direct observation the changes in our perceptions of objects, such as an ice box, and processes, such as the movement of sand. **BLUES FOR PIGGY** joins his earlier minimalist strategies with a sequencing of contrasting imagery that conjures up narrative links. The individual shots in **BLUES FOR PIGGY** were all taken in the vicinity of the artist's Los Angeles home and evoke an oblique but powerful reflection of the southern California landscape. In one such sequence, a burning house, shown backwards, is juxtaposed with a shot of a reptile staring languidly out at the world around it. Contrast also occurs within a single take, as in a shot of a mural depicting an ideal landscape of grazing animals that covers the wall of a slaughterhouse. In **BLUES FOR PIGGY** images of destruction amid bucolic suburban vistas convey the disorder and irony that coexist in our daily lives.

### **India Time**

by Ken Feingold. 1987, 45 min., color

The work of Ken Feingold has situated itself in the spaces between the authoritative images of television and the artist's own image-making. His installations and videotapes place his own images among those gathered from the flow of television information. In recent years, Feingold has become involved with documentary, extensively traveling and recording images in Asia.

In **INDIA TIME**, Feingold confronts the problem of representing daily life in India. This 45-minute videotape has no voice-over narration telling us what to look at or how to interpret the material we see. Rather, Feingold sets up his camera to follow actions—a woman sweeping a street, a man moving rocks in a field—and lets them develop in real time. The sequences unfold as an acknowledgment of the everyday processes of living, with Feingold stationed behind the camera, in a position not of authority but of wonderment.

## PROGRAM 3

### **Motorist**

by Chip Lord. 1989, 69 min., color

Chip Lord, a founding member of the West Coast artists' collective Ant Farm, has been engaged in issues of American popular culture since Ant Farm's celebrated satirical expose of television (**MEDIA BURN**, 1975) and of the media representation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy (**THE ETERNAL FRAME**, 1976). Since the breakup of the group, Lord has created a series of videotapes and installations which examine the iconography of American lifestyles.

Lord's latest videotape, **MOTORIST**, tells the story of the sale of a 1950s Thunderbird to a young Japanese investor in American memorabilia. The narrative follows the seller as he drives the antique American "dream car" through the Western landscape from San Francisco to Los Angeles. En route, the story mixes personal reminiscences with 1960s advertisements for what were then the latest Detroit fantasies of consumption. Lord effectively weaves a bittersweet commentary on the American industrial dream as expressed in its disposable car culture. The tape ends with the car's new owner driving through downtown Tokyo, an ironic comment on the fetishization of the past as a means to create renewable myths and consumer objects for a contemporary global capitalism.

## PROGRAM 4

### **Ritual Clowns**

by Victor Masayesva, Jr. 1988, 18 min., color

The art and culture of Native Americans have held a precarious position within mainstream European-American culture. Existing on the margins of media institutions, the Native American has usually been seen as an exotic other or vanquished opponent within the myths of popular culture. The appropriation by Native Americans of the tools of these same media institutions has resulted in the establishment of both communication links via television and a sustained body of cultural production that provides the Indian community with new forms of expression and the means to preserve its past and interpret the future.

Victor Masayesva, Jr. is on the leading edge of Native American artists working with media. His latest videotape, **RITUAL CLOWNS**, explores new technologies of image making to restate the oral tradition in interpretive graphic forms. **RITUAL CLOWNS** applies computer graphics that evoke conventional imagery and the narrative and documentary genres to a traditional and self-renewing cosmology, and thus propounds an aesthetic which is both a challenging worldview and a call for true intercultural expression.

### **Lilith**

by Steina Vasulka. 1987, 9 min., color

In New York in 1971, Woody and Steina Vasulka, along with Andres Mannik, founded

The Kitchen, an alternative space devoted to video, film, music, and performance. They have also had a long-term involvement in the media both as artists and as developers of new forms of electronic image processing. In 1975, Steina Vasulka began *Machine Vision*, a series of installations and tapes that joins mechanical systems of image recording and transformation, through the use of mirrors, prisms, and camera movement, with post-produced electronic image manipulation.

Vasulka's latest videotape, *LILITH*, uses the techniques of focal plane shift (altering depth of field) and frame grabbing (which produces a succession of frozen images) to manipulate the surface of the image. The face of a woman, whose speech is distorted, appears to move in and out of the natural environment. In this constantly shifting articulation of the visual field, the woman becomes simultaneously absent and present in a genuine fusion of human figure and landscape.

### **Living with the Living Theater**

by Nam June Paik with Besty Connors and Paul Garrin. 1988, 30 min., color

Nam June Paik's art and career involve a complex network of relationships with visual artists, composers, technicians, and performers as well as associations with several different art movements. His wide-ranging interest in all forms of art making and in the exploration of visual and scientific ideas has shaped his aesthetic discourse, bringing multiple resources and concepts to his individual performances, compositions, videotape projects, and video sculptures.

Paik's art is about memory, his recollected affection for the people and events of his life. Paik's latest videotape, *LIVING WITH THE LIVING THEATER*, made with the collaboration of Paul Garrin and Betsy Connors, is a loving tribute to the late Julian Beck, founder of the avant-garde Living Theater; his widow and collaborator Judith Malina, and their family and life in the theater. Using a dazzling array of video-processing techniques, Paik becomes a magical trickster who plays with the images to vividly recreate the anarchic life and idealism of The Living Theater. In his mix of theater and family, words and images, Paik links this theater with the ideas of the nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin about the utopianism of art. As Paik perceives it, The Living Theater remains a vital exemplar of the hope for social change that art can express.

### **PROGRAM 5**

#### **Inside Life Outside**

by Sachiko Hamada and Scott Sinkler. 1988, 57 min., color

The struggle to live with dignity in a world with little compassion is the subject of Sachiko Hamada and Scott Sinkler's *INSIDE LIFE OUTSIDE*. These two artists have created a compelling portrait of a community of individuals living in makeshift housing on a vacant lot in the East Village of New York City. In the most

authentic ethnographic tradition, Hamada and Sinkler actually lived for extended periods of time in squatter's housing with the subjects of their videotape. As we watch arguments, the reunion of a father with his son, and fights with the city authorities, we do not feel like voyeurs but, like the artists, become concerned and frustrated with what is happening to these people. This is not a sentimental or melodramatic record; Hamada and Sinkler do not force an agenda onto their subjects but let them speak their own words and express their own emotions. The result is a vivid portrait and a powerful social documentary.

#### **Belchite-South Bronx: A Trans-Historical, Trans-Cultural Landscape**

by Francesc Torres. 1987, 39 min., color

*BELCHITE—SOUTH BRONX: A TRANS-HISTORICAL, TRANS-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE* is a videotape based on Francesc Torres' 1987 video installation of the same title. This project is a continuation of Torres' interest in expressing human drives and desires. In both the multimedia installation and the single-channel videotape, the cultures and histories of two places—the town of Belchite in Spain, which was destroyed during the Spanish Civil War, and the South Bronx in New York City—delineate different battlefields of human existence.

Torres uses archival footage of the destruction of Belchite as well as videotape he shot both there and in the South Bronx to juxtapose the histories and cultures of these two communities. Belchite was destroyed in a war against oppression; in the South Bronx, footage of youths playing basketball offers a metaphor for combat and suggests the strength of their resolve to exist within and perhaps prevail over capitalism. These are not monumental and romantic images but mundane and realistic views of the results of different forms of political warfare.

### **PROGRAM 6**

#### **Art of Memory**

by Woody Vasulka. 1987, 37 min., color

Woody Vasulka was represented in the 1985 Biennial by his epic videotape *THE COMMISSION* (1983), loosely based on the life and death of Niccolò Paganini and his dramatic meetings with Hector Berlioz. In Vasulka's new work, *ART OF MEMORY*, he has moved from the stage of opera to that of history. The videotape develops as a broad pageant of images that interweaves the history of war-torn Europe with the landscape of the American Southwest, where Vasulka lives. The result is a haunting memory play of the spectacle of war as represented in the cinema and in photographs of our collective past. There is real poignancy in hearing the voice of J. Robert Oppenheimer talk about the destructive power of nuclear weapons while Vasulka superimposes a ribbon of powerful wartime footage over vistas of the American landscape. The artist collapses history and memory into a

moving electronic commentary on the mythology of politics and war as expressed in the history of the cinema.

#### **Incidence of Catastrophe**

by Gary Hill. 1988, 44 min., color

Gary Hill's art is an expression of his fascination with the relationship between image and language. In a series of videotapes and installations and through new image-processing techniques, Hill has sought to synthesize the very texture and shape of language as spoken and written word.

Hill's latest videotape, *INCIDENCE OF CATASTROPHE*, is a spectacular representation of Maurice Blanchot's *THOMAS THE OBSCURE*, a central text of experimental philosophical fiction by one of the great stylists of the modern French novel. The story is a poetic inquiry into the meaning of narrative and image making in which the central character is caught up in an epistemological inquiry into the meaning of consciousness. Hill manages to inscribe himself into this text by translating its language into the ontological space of the videotape.

### **PROGRAM 7**

#### **Joyride™**

by Tony Oursler and Constance DeJong. 1988, 17 min., color

Tony Oursler and Constance DeJong's *JOYRIDE™* is a virtuoso movement through the imaginary space of the corporate logo, the trademark which is a symbol of both the product and the consumer fetishization that determines the marketplace of American capitalism. As in Oursler's spectacular video installation *SPHERES D'INFLUENCE*, this new videotape employs his handmade and painted sets, a visionary vernacular architecture that expresses a childlike fascination with the bizarre, using computer generated graphics. The primitive, hand-crafted quality of the theatrical sets is transformed through the joining of props with human figures and the addition of computer image-processing effects. Wit adds an extra edge to this roller-coaster ride through a dreamlike circus of popular consumer culture.

#### **Hitchcock Trilogy: Vertigo, Psycho, Torn Curtain**

by Rea Tajiri. 1987, 15 min., color

In cultural studies and critical theory, the history of the cinema plays an important role in the understanding of cultural practice and the development of narrative. Rea Tajiri's videotape *HITCHCOCK TRILOGY: VERTIGO, PSYCHO, TORN CURTAIN* exposes the components of Hitchcock's cinema to ironic reflection by juxtaposing soundtracks and other aspects of the films in ways that play with our expectations of narrative. With sophisticated understatement, Tajiri manipulates the conventions of film melodrama by combining her own written texts and scenes from earlier Hollywood films with Bernard Herrmann's original

music for Hitchcock's films to create an ironic intertextual commentary on popular culture as commodity and discourse.

### **Under a Malicious Sky**

by Hans Breder. 1988, 10 min., color

In the 1987 Biennial, Hans Breder was represented by *MY TV DICTIONARY: THE DRILL* (1986) and *MY TV DICTIONARY: THE HELICOPTER* (1986), two videotapes created from images recorded from cable television. By re-editing footage from commercial movies, he explored the relationship between the home viewer and commercial television. In their compact and highly synthesized form, these videotapes convey the violent and sexist subtext of the twenty-four-hour-a-day mix of cable television and thus become a potent metaphor for our times.

*UNDER A MALICIOUS SKY*, Breder's latest and most complex work, takes its title from a poem by Paul Celan, a Jewish poet whose work and life expressed the agony of the Holocaust and its aftermath in memory. Breder's videotape is a personal, autobiographical work, which uses appropriated footage from movies broadcast on television to explore the first ten years of Breder's life in Germany, from 1935 to 1945. Like Celan's words, the images mix fragments of the real and imaginary in a hermetic effort to express Breder's quest for a visual text that is at once personal reflection and cultural criticism.

### **Peggy and Fred in Kansas**

by Leslie Thornton. 1987, 11 min., color

### **Peggy and Fred and Pete**

by Leslie Thornton. 1988, 23 min., color

The mixing of genres and styles to destabilize the authority and meaning of any one tradition is at the center of Leslie Thornton's provocative series of videotapes. The radicality of Thornton's approach begins with her use of media: she shoots on film, transfers it to video, and then edits and exhibits the works on videotape. The very look of the black-and-white film on videotape is grainy and adds an atmosphere shaped by her deliberate manipulation of the media. On another and more profound level, Thornton's work places us within a disturbing and unsettling *mise-en-scene*. The children whose actions we follow in these pieces live in an environment cluttered with the debris of our culture and the technology of communication. Television, games, packaged junk food, popular songs, news, and entertainment seem to circulate indiscriminately through the chaotic life of these children. Thornton keeps their actions unplotted, which gives the children a special vulnerability that could not be imagined in a linear, narrative form.

The *PEGGY AND FRED* tapes are not stories in the conventional sense, although they play with the conventions of narrative. Rather they are Postmodern journeys into an imaginary universe made perilous with the detritus of reality.

## **Whitney Museum of American Art Film and Video Department**

The Film Department of the Whitney Museum of American Art was established in 1970. *New American Filmmakers Series*, as the exhibition program was called, quickly established itself as a leading outlet for independent filmmakers working in all modes: avant-garde, narrative, documentary, and animation. In 1976, in recognition of the accomplishments of artists working with video, the Film Department became

the Film and Video Department and, under the direction of John G. Hanhardt, made video an integral part of its exhibition program. The *1975 Whitney Biennial Exhibition* was the first to include videotapes, and the *1979 Biennial* was the first to include film.

The *1989 Whitney Biennial Exhibition*, which included video installations by Francesc Torres and Julia Scher, as well as performances by Eleanor Antin and Constance DeJong, was funded by the Lila Wallace—Readers' Digest Fund and Emily Fisher Landau.

## **The American Federation of Arts Film/Video Program**

The American Federation of Arts is a national, non-profit, art museum service organization, founded in 1909 to broaden the knowledge and appreciation of the arts of the past and present. Its primary activities are the organization of fine arts and media arts exhibitions that travel throughout the United States and abroad. In addition, the AFA offers a fine arts insurance program, reduced rate air freight and van transport programs, an annual graphic design competition, educational institutes and workshops, publications, and other services designed to benefit art museums. The AFA also administers the Museum Management Institute, a program of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

The AFA's Film/Video Program is guided and advised by a National Film/Video Advisory Committee composed of museum and media arts center directors, curators, educators, and filmmakers. Film exhibitions organized from the broad areas of "films as art" (animation, experimental narrative, documentary, abstract film) and "films on art" (documentaries on the lives and works of artists and on historical and contemporary art movements) circulate widely to museums, universities, media arts centers, neighborhood cultural centers and libraries, accompanied by catalogs, program notes, and promotional materials. In 1983 the AFA began traveling video exhibitions in addition to film exhibitions. Currently touring film/video exhibitions include: *American Documentary Video: Subject to Change, Art and Artisans: A Celebration of the Margaret Mead Film Festival, BBS Budapest: Twenty Years of Hungarian Experimental Film, Before Hollywood: Turn-of-the-Century Film from American Archives, By Brakhage: Three Decades of Personal Cinema, Canadian Experimental Film in the Seventies, A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema, Japanese Experimental Film 1960-1980, Kenneth Anger's Magick Lantern Cycle, New Video: Japan, The Originals: Women in Art, The Other Side: European Avant-Garde Cinema 1960-1980, Revising Romance: New Feminist Video, The Ruckus Films of Red Grooms, Synthetic Movements: New Directions for Contemporary American Animation, Unreal Time: Animation and Film Graphics, 1989*

*Whitney Biennial Film/Video Exhibition, 1987 Whitney Biennial Film/Video Exhibition.* The AFA Film/Video Program is a primary source of high-quality prints by film and video artists for media study collections. The AFA makes available for rental a growing library of award-winning art documentary titles under its Group Booking Program. And the AFA provides work by American independent film and video artists for broadcast and cablecast.

Inquiries are invited from institutions interested in presenting film or video exhibitions, adding new titles to their collections, or scheduling fine arts exhibitions. For information, please contact:

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41 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10021  
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To obtain information about other AFA services, please contact:

The American Federation of Arts  
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