

Carnegie Magazine

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You are hereby invited to "Raise Kane!" at the museum, attend a "Dollars for Dinosaurs" auction, and preview "Underground Art" in the new Pittsburgh subway. Read *Two Museums* to find out about Carnegie Institute activities.

Cover: The American White Pelican by John James Audubon. This is plate CCCXI of Audubon's four-volume masterpiece The Birds of America. The 1836 engraving is based on a composition painted in 1831 or 1832, perhaps in Florida. Library of Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

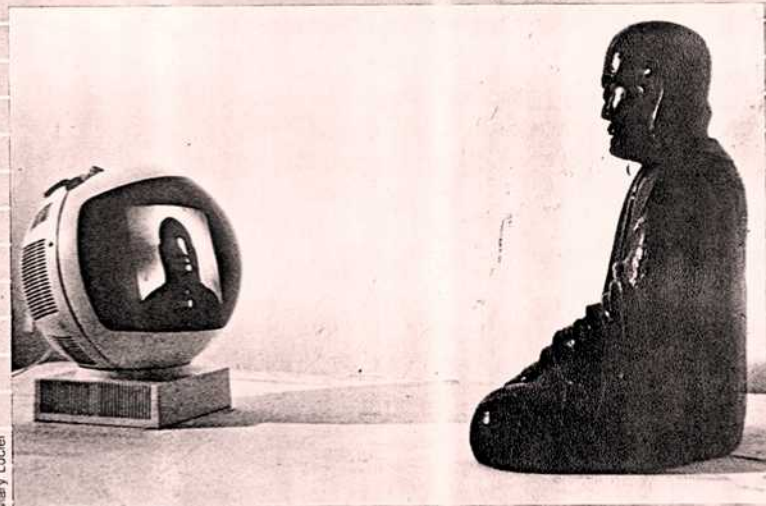
Electronic Sculpture: Video Installations in the Museum of Art

By William D. Judson

Imagine a small dark Buddha statue seated in the lotus position and staring at the screen of a molded plastic television set placed directly in front of him. On the screen is an image of this same immobile Buddha as seen from a video camera just behind the television set. The fixed gaze of the figure and the literal and metaphoric "closed circuit" of the camera and the television create a vector of visual and electronic energy which is held in quiet and engaging balance. And the witty incongruities of East meeting West, of art encountering popular culture, of the inanimate figure being presented on live television as it contemplates its immobile self, are all readily apparent the moment one sees this sculptural scene.

This *TV Buddha* (1974) is one of several works created by Korean-born artist Nam June Paik during the 1960s and 70s in which television sets are used like sculptural objects. Paik's early works marked the beginning of what has come to be called video installation art. The term "installation" refers to a situation in which the artist has arranged a group of objects so that they interact in form and meaning. An installation

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East contemplates West in TV Buddha by Nam June Paik.

Mary Lucier

thus inhabits three-dimensional space, like sculpture and architecture. A video installation is therefore quite different from a videotape, which is expected to be seen in two-dimensional form on a single television screen.

By the late 1960s Nam June Paik, trained as a musician, began incorporating television sets into his outrageous musical performances, which were as provocative as the European Dada and Surrealist exploits of the 1920s and which engaged the anti-traditional stance of modern artists like composer John Cage. By the late 1960s Paik was combining whole groups of monitors into a single work. In some cases these works were for performance situations, like the *TV Bra* (1969) and the *TV Cello* (1971) made for artist/collaborator Charlotte Moorman. While these were on view only for the duration of the performances, other multi-monitor Paik works involved the fixed arrangement of television sets (and often other objects as well) that were exhibited for days or weeks. In the spring of 1982 the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a large and impressive Nam June Paik retrospective which included many of these single-monitor sculptural objects and multi-monitor installations which have inspired and influenced so many artists over the last fifteen years. Paik is generally considered to be the

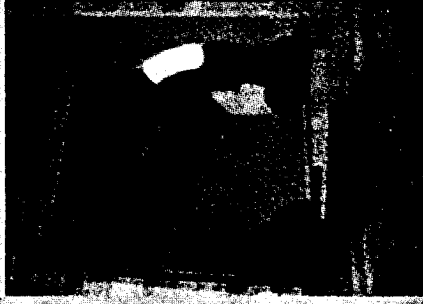
first major video artist, and subsequent video art, especially installation work, is indebted to his example.

One of the earliest and most durable video installation forms involves the use of cameras and monitors in a closed-circuit system so that the viewers and others see themselves on the monitors. Given the magnitude of activity in closed-circuit installations, it seemed appropriate, when the Museum of Art in Pittsburgh began exhibiting video installations in 1981, to select an artist whose work was directly related to this early and significant mode. That artist was Buky Schwartz, the Israeli-born, New York-based sculptor who has included video in his repertoire since 1976. His 1981 exhibition in the Museum of Art included two installation works, each of which employed a closed-circuit system. In considering these two works it is useful to know something of the artistic nature and previous history of closed-circuit or "surveillance" works.

The aesthetic concerns of surveillance works have ranged from voyeurism ("I really shouldn't be watching that person without his being aware of it") to conceptual enigmas ("How can I see that from here?"). The artist Les Levine, for example, was one of the first to raise the voyeuristic issue when in the late 1960s, he exhibited single-channel videotapes such as *The Nude Model* in

a situation that included a closed-circuit camera and monitor so that the viewer could watch himself (and others with him) watching and responding to the pre-recorded video tapes.¹ The viewer of surveillance works frequently confronts both psychological issues which enforce a particular self-awareness, and epistemological issues which question the actual nature of reality in the situation. For example, Dan Graham's multi-monitored, multi-cubed installations in the mid-1970s created puzzling situations which challenged the viewer's conceptual analysis ("Where am I?" "What room am I in?" "Where is that other, that video camera or perhaps a mirror which permits me to see myself or others in this way?"). The sculptor Bruce Nauman was also one of the first to work with closed-circuit installation, using tight spaces related to his more recent colored light sculpture spaces. His *Live Taped Video Corridor* of 1969-70 was a pioneering work in this regard.²

One of the most significant artists using closed-circuit video installations during the early 1970s was Peter Campus. In several installations Campus placed a video camera so that as viewers entered the gallery space, their own images were projected onto one of the walls, but were projected in a way that prevented the viewers from being able to see their own images clearly.



In Prometheus Buky Schwartz gave the visitor the power to make himself part of the picture he was looking at.



In the work *dor* (1975) for example, in order to be seen by the camera, it was necessary to stand close to the camera where there was enough light to be seen, making it impossible to view the wall on which the image was projected. Likewise in *mem* (1975), the camera only saw persons who were so close to the wall where the image was projected that they could not view it clearly.³ In viewing these Campus works, it became apparent that the viewer could either see the projected image on the wall or stand in a place that allowed him to be part of and "complete" the projected image, but it was not possible to have it both ways at once. This conundrum provided a poignant sense of incompleteness and of loss, even at the very moment of excitement in discovering what the installations were and realizing that one could in some way control and be part of the situation. The Campus installations of the mid-1970s were very much a part of a twentieth-century tradition which calls for the involvement of the viewer in a way that requires a physical and/or mental act to *complete* the work, a process very different from passively viewing and recognizing a given picture.

The two Buky Schwartz installations at the Museum of Art also shared this concern. In both cases the viewer's physical presence within the space of each work completed it and made it

comprehensible. The first of these two works, *Prometheus* (1981), incorporated familiar abstract painting techniques into the video work. In this work Schwartz used a color video camera which looked down from high on the wall at a mirror standing in the middle of the gallery floor. The mirror reflected the rounded shapes of a joyous yellow, orange, and red mural which Schwartz had painted directly onto the gallery wall. Two video monitors on opposite walls at eye level showed, therefore, what *appeared* to be a square painting on the floor, that is, the mirror. As a visitor moved into the space, however, and interrupted the line of view between camera and mirror and painting, it gradually became apparent that the painting visible on the monitor was not a single 2-D layer on a flat surface; part of it was painted on the wall, part on the mirror itself, and part of it was applied directly onto the monitor screen. Thus what appeared on the monitor to be a simple painting, was revealed by one's own body moving through the gallery space to be a complex, three-dimensional situation.

Schwartz's other work in this exhibition, which incorporated sculptural objects into the video piece, shared similar concerns. In one entire end of the gallery, several thick logs stood on end, varying from two to five feet in length. They seemed randomly placed

and tipped in various directions, giving the sense of being a truncated forest from some fairy tale. Irregularly visible here and there, on the tops or sides of some of the logs and in no apparent order, were small areas of white paint. On two of the adjacent walls were video monitors at eye level, and both showed the view from a camera high up on a third wall looking down on the configuration of logs. Also visible on the monitors was a geometric shape which seemed to float over the logs, a precise white pentagon looking like a line drawing of a house or of a baseball home plate. However, the moment one began moving into the spaces among the closely placed logs, it was immediately clear that what appeared on the monitors as a flat, white, two-dimensional form, was in fact the patches of white paint placed here and there on the logs as seen from a particular and privileged viewpoint, which is exactly where the camera was placed. What seemed at first to be an organically arranged log sculpture became, through the eye of the video camera, part of a precise geometric construction.

In such installations what seems to be the most simple view of space—that is, the camera view which we see on the monitor—is in fact the most deceptive image. The actual situation in the gallery can only be verified by our



Buky Schwartz

A seemingly random collection of logs is the basis for a geometric form which can be seen only on a monitor. Summer 1981 Buky Schwartz.

presence in it, by moving through the space and touching objects. Thus we experience and comprehend Schwartz's work in two ways at the same time, one conceptual and the other physical. As in daily experience, things here are not always what they appear to be. It is the elegance and directness with which Schwartz combines these two kinds of awareness, echoing classical notions of empirical and metaphysical knowledge, that makes our exploration of his work such a pleasure. Schwartz's use of the closed-circuit system does not emphasize the voyeuristic notion of surveillance. In the work of other artists the observation of human activity by video often calls attention to the looking process itself and thereby invests the activity watched with special significance.⁴ For Schwartz, however, it is the aesthetic situation, rather than the psychology of the human response, which is heightened by the closed-circuit system.

Another aspect of these closed-circuit works is that the viewer is also, inescapably, a performer—that is, a person who is physically there and does something, even if only to turn and flee! Several artists, including Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Peter Campus, have pursued this aspect of installation works by making one-channel video tapes in which the artist himself performs certain activities,

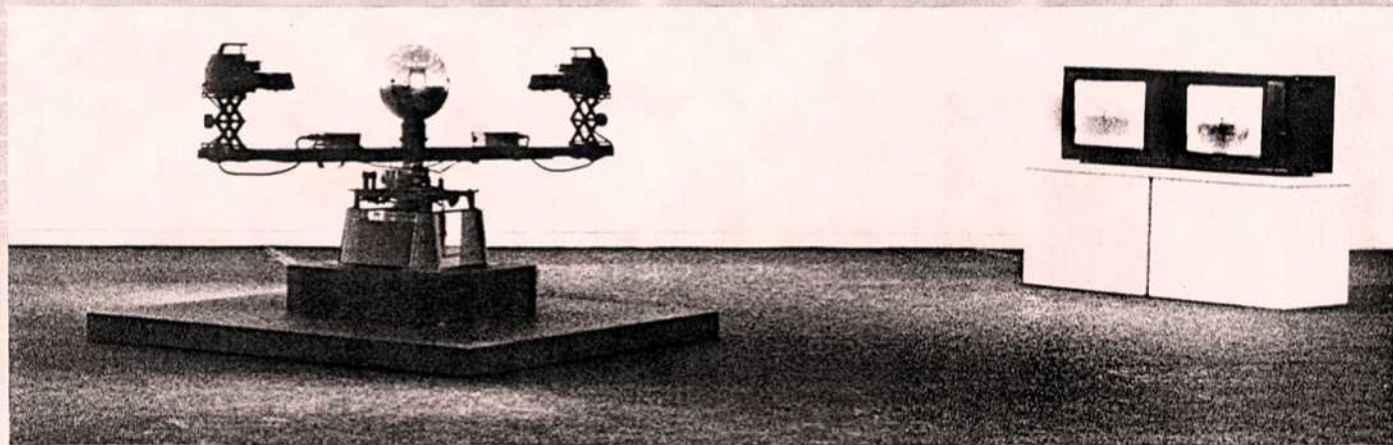
borrowing from the possibilities of installation situations. Buky Schwartz, for example, has made videotapes in which he rearranges objects and moves among simple shapes while in front of the camera. The result is that, for instance, what first appears on screen as a *geometric* structure in the middle of the studio turns out to be a combination of large pieces of contact paper on the studio wall, an upright beam in the middle of the room, and a small piece of adhesive tape on the video monitor itself. These videotapes are filled with little moments of surprise and revelation. They are also directly related to Schwartz's installations, and two of the videotapes were shown continuously on a monitor next to his video installation in 1981.

Elements of surveillance and performance on a closed circuit video system were part of another exhibition at the Museum of Art in the winter of 1982-83: Steina Vasulka's *Allvision*. Together with her husband Woody, Steina has been a central figure in video art since the beginning of the 1970s, and individually and together they have created a large number of tapes and installations. Steina's conception and design of *Allvision*, which Woody built, is one of the most engaging examples of her inventive use of video installation. *Allvision* is an elegant and deceptively simple machine: two video cameras

rotate around a spherical mirror and the images from these cameras are seen on video monitors. Upon entering the gallery, one is presented with three versions of space: the three-dimensional gallery space which one shares with the machine and monitors as sculptural objects; the space which one sees mirrored in the sphere; and the whole of space which is taken in by the cameras and presented in flattened version on the monitors. These versions of space correspond to three quite different ways of understanding reality: as a physical, *material presence* verifiable by touch; as a *visual perception*, in which the material world may be rearranged or distorted but which is nevertheless comprehensible as an optical entity, like a painting or photograph; as a *concept*, in which an abstract system must be taken into account before the reality it presents is understood.

Our experience of the interaction between these differing aspects of *Allvision* is shaped by the continuous, smooth movement of the machine as it sweeps the gallery, by the unpretentious elegance of the machine, and by the arrangement of the monitors. Indeed, the cameras' gliding movement is itself like a cadenced dance, taking in the random movement of the spectators in the space, and making the machine itself a performer. *Allvision* generates

In Steina Vasulka's Allvision the visitor becomes part of a changing scene, seeing himself in a reflective globe and also on a video monitor as moving cameras record viewers in the gallery.



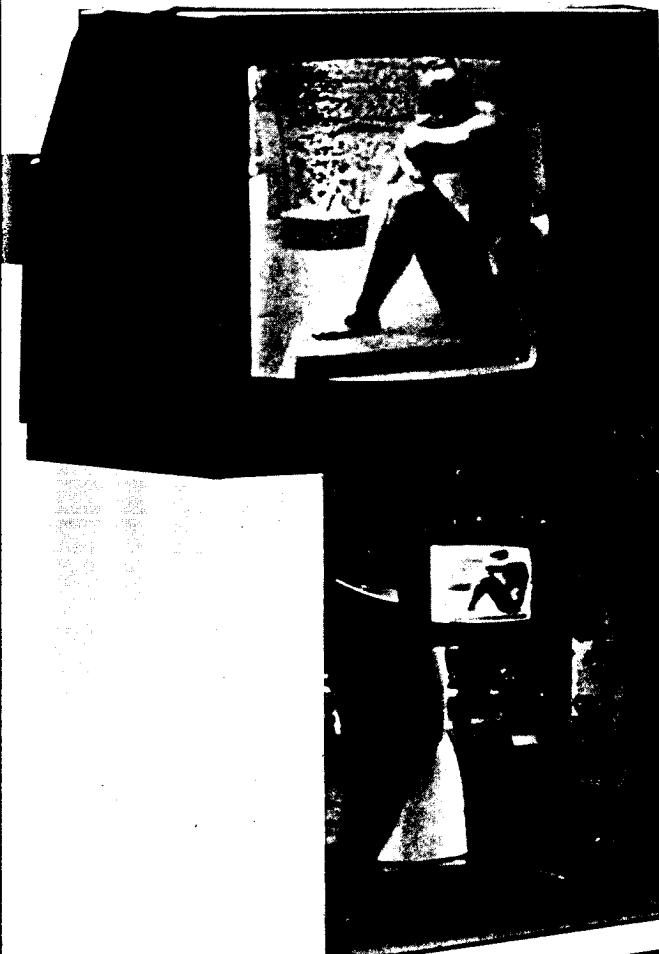
an engaging, immediate experience at the same time that, on a metaphoric level, it celebrates a technological age. It is also, emphatically, a sculptural object in the gallery, and as such is a descendant of the early video sculpture of Nam June Paik.

Two other recent video installations at the Museum of Art have emphasized a concern with landscape, a central issue for several video installation artists of the 1970s. The James Byrne exhibition in the summer of 1982 and the Mary Lucier installation the following year both incorporated landscape as a central element but each in its own particular way. Landscape has long been one of the major motifs in American art, and video has become a part of that tradition. Painters like Albert Bierstadt and Frederick E. Church in the nineteenth century pursued the Romantic vision of landscape as representing the most spiritual, sublime, and transcendent qualities of Nature. Such nineteenth-century painters, while helping to create one of the great American traditions of painting, emphasized the metaphoric potential of landscape. A century later, earthwork artists like Robert Smithson were using heavy equipment to move and mark the landscape in ways which contrasted momentary human endeavor with vast reaches of geological time, and at the same time they used materials which

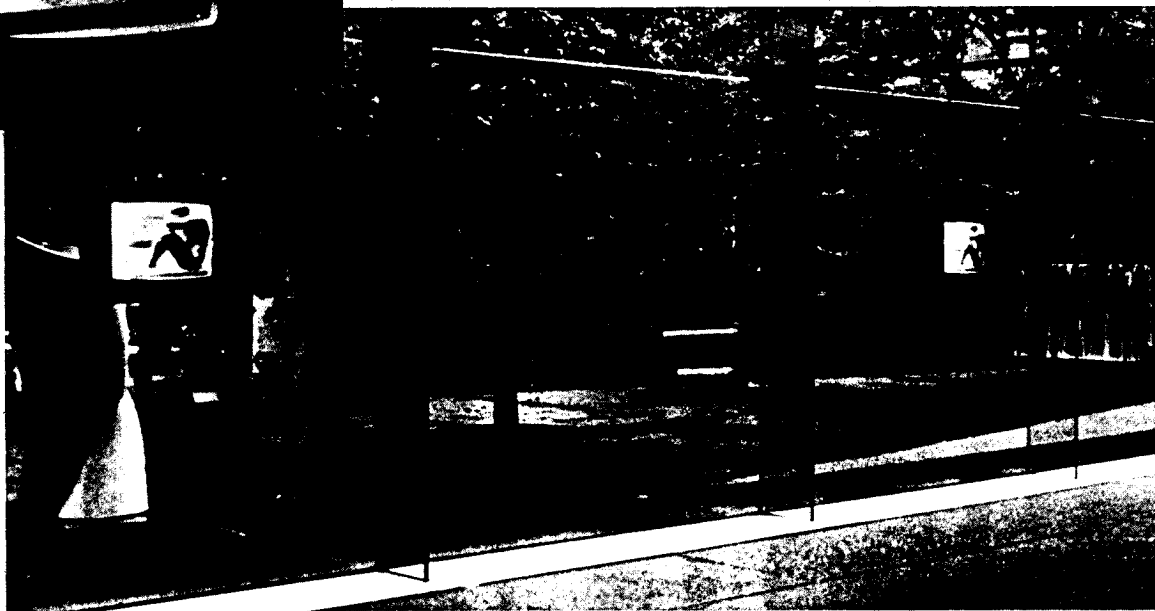
could not be readily appropriated into the economic value systems of the gallery and museum markets. Video art, especially in video installations, has shared with the nineteenth-century painters a sense of the potential metaphoric components of landscape. At the same time twentieth-century artists have used video art as a non-traditional medium within which to give a new human order and structure to the natural landscape. Frank Gillette, in *Quidditas* (1974-75), for example, has made multi-monitor installations from images of unspoiled areas of Cape Cod, and used camera movement, color, and editing to provide subtle references to the ecological factors of the landscape. Video artist Davidson Gigliotti has used three monitors to make a landscape triptych of a mountain in which the contemplative stasis of the image was Zen in spirit, and at the same time in keeping with the minimal reductivism of the late 1960s.

Also in the landscape tradition was James Byrne's site-specific installation . . . *this fountain is a field of fire* . . . (1982) which transformed the museum's sculpture court and fountains into an evocative landscape. Byrne suspended seven monitors at eye level in the windows of the foyer overlooking the sculpture court; the images on the monitors were from a carefully edited tape shot mostly in the sculpture court

itself, sometimes from the exact point of view of the monitors. At times the view on the monitors and the view through the windows into the sculpture court were so similar that museum visitors suspected they were looking at a live, closed-circuit surveillance situation and began looking around for the camera! In a few moments, however, differences in weather and tree foliage between the taped images on the monitors and the actual sculpture court became apparent. Then the observant viewer would see on the videotape that beyond Aristide Maillol's bronze female figure of *Night* in the sculpture court was a live nude male model whose pose echoed the sculpture's introspective, seated position. The unexpected appearance of this male figure on the monitors forced a glance out the windows ("Was he in fact there?"). Gradually the video images on the tape turned to dusk, and by the time that the male figure was suddenly seen struggling in the lighted evening waters of the Sculpture Court fountain, the viewer had been completely transported from the everyday, material presence of the foyer to a place of mystery where fleeting images of water seemed to become dancing jets of fire, defying gravity, and where a mythic battle involving man and nature seemed to be under way in the rushing waters of the fountain.

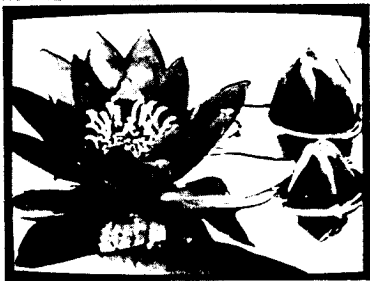


A real male nude appeared behind a bronze sculpture of a female nude in . . . this fountain is a field of fire . . . by James Byrne. The setting for the video was the museum Sculpture Court seen through the glass wall. Opposite—details of Ohio at Giverny, a visual homage to Monet.



Kevin Brunelle

In Mary Lucier's 1983 installation at the Museum of Art, *Ohio at Giverny*, landscape played an even more central role. This Lucier work was comprised of seven monitors mounted behind a wall in such a way that only the screens were visible. The screens were arranged in the form of a gentle arc as the monitors increased in size from left to right. The "Giverny" in the title of this installation refers to the town where early in this century, the French Impressionist master Claude Monet painted the great water lily canvases of his mature years. A fundamental concern in these Monet paintings was the acute observation of light—that is, light seen as color reflected by surfaces and diffracted into hues, which are intensified by interaction with adjacent colors, which is the basis of Impressionist painting. Similarly Lucier, in all her video work since the early 1970s, has been interested in light as recorded by the camera, light as electronically processed by the vidicon tube and circuitry, light as emanated by video monitors. Lucier's homage to Monet in *Ohio at Giverny* included, as one aspect, the use of landscape as a primary motif. The landscape images of *Ohio at Giverny* also recall the sense of personal meaning conveyed by the immediacy of Impressionist painting. In Lucier's work, as the images on the monitors of fields and streams from her native Ohio



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are transformed into views of Monet's hometown and garden, we again sense the personal engagement and significance of these images. Lucier uses video in this work to emphasize telling details, to control rhythms and dramatically slow down nature's movement, and to blend images through superimposition. Lucier, in other words, uses the technical means of video, just as the Impressionists used pigments and paint application, to evoke in her work the sense of the personal significance of the landscape imagery.

The most recent video installation at the Museum of Art, *Tough Lima* by Spanish-born, New York-based artist Francisc Torres, used science as its most apparent frame of reference. Neurophysiologist Paul MacLean of the National Institute of Mental Health, in 1973 described the human brain as a three-part or triune structure, analogous to an archeological model in which the deeper levels represent earlier evolutionary stages.⁵ MacLean termed the most primitive layer the "R-complex," referring to the fact that this structure is what makes up most of the reptiles' brain mass. It is this layer in the human brain, MacLean asserts, which regulates ritualistic behavior related to territoriality, aggression, and mating. In *Tough Lima*, as in previous video installations, Torres has used MacLean's

advertisements, brochures, publications, reports, wall decor

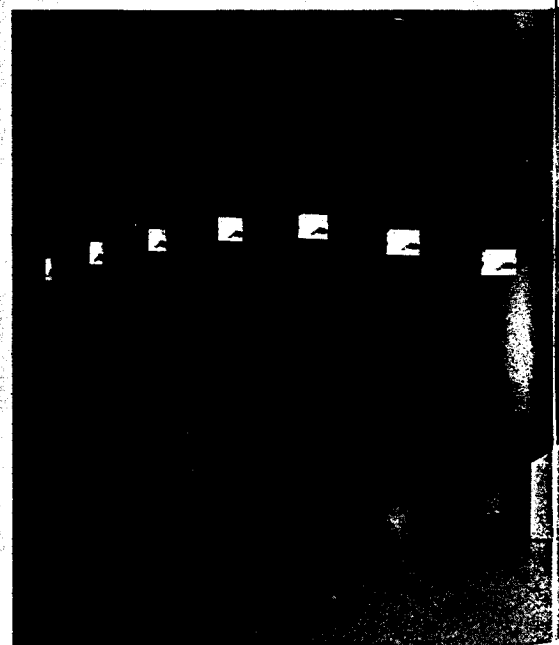
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Ohio at Giverney by Mary Lucier contrasted her native Ohio with Monet's famous gardens in France. A bank of monitors created impressionistic effects.

conception of the human brain not as a theory to be illustrated, but as an inspiration for visual forms which satisfy a complex, artistic sensibility, and also as forceful metaphors for conditions of human experience.

Tough Limo consisted of a large scale, wooden model of a military tank, with a crew of five live iguanas visible through small portholes, and with a videotape projected onto one wall of the gallery. The videotape includes many images of military tanks, including early movies from World War I, recent films of contemporary tanks on maneuvers, and a battery-operated, remote control toy tank which buzzes around and eventually mows down a house of cards. The video images of the various tanks are interspersed with other, directly metaphoric images, including reptiles. In one key sequence there are news images of the chairs on the reviewing stand during the assassination of Anwar Sadat. In front of the large model tank in the museum gallery were rows of folding chairs, some fallen as if being mowed down by the tank, in reference to the same historical act of violence. This is characteristic of the way in which the video component of this installation transports solid, imposing three-dimensional objects into an elusive realm of flux and metaphor.



Kevin Brunelle

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Carnegie Magazine—A Special Issue July/August 1985