

VIDEO ART: OLD WINE, NEW BOTTLE

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The use of television as an art medium is generally considered experimental. In the sense that it was rarely thought of that way by artists before the early sixties, it must be granted a certain novelty. But so far, in my opinion, it is only marginally experimental. The hardware is new, to art at least, but the conceptual framework and esthetic attitudes around most video as an art are quite tame.

The field has customarily been divided into three main areas: *taped art performance*, *environmental open-circuit video*, and *documentary or political video*. In the first, some artistic event performed by the artist and friends or by electronically generated shapes is condensed, stored and reproduced on standard length tapes for replay later on.

In the second, people, machines, nature and environments interact, communicate, and perhaps modify each other's behavior in real time. Although in this group tapes are sometimes produced to document what has occurred, they are not integral to it. But tapes can be used to alter time and file away prior activities for representation in the carrying out of the process.

In the third area, events deemed socially important are recorded on portable equipment (and, more rarely, are transmitted live over cable), for the enlightenment of a public which normally has no access to this material on network TV or other news media. I discount this third group as more socially important than simply artistic, because although it has been made welcome in art when no one else wants it, its legitimate work must be done in the real world and not in the art world. It is a hunch that this use of video could

bring about valuable human experiments. But to include it in a discussion of art just because it has made the art world its crash-pad is to limit its utility to a small intelligentsia, and to defuse its arousal intent by a pretense to esthetics.

I'll confine this review, then, to the first two areas. There are, of course, overlaps between them, and sometimes additions of other means such as radios and telephones, telegrams, films and slides — but in general this division helps to locate the artists' principal concerns. Now, more than a dozen years after Paik and Vostell used TV sets as props in their environments and Happenings, a tentative evaluation of the field is possible.

It is clear to everyone that video art tapes are the popular form of the two groups, for all the obvious financial reasons. Taped performances by an artist doing something, or by abstract color patterns doing something, are, after all, theatrical arts. They evoke comparisons with TV commercials, comedy routines, product demonstrations, promotional and educational TV, and the most dreary abstract animated films of 30-odd years ago. Thus, while some performances are unique as theater pieces, and fewer, still, involve experiences with video per se — I'm thinking of tapes by Acconci, Jonas, and Stoerchle — most of them are just more or less adequate recordings of the performances or are compositions of "special effects" which could have been done just as well or better as film. Videotape is simply cheaper and faster.

Moreover, this traditionalism is encouraged by galleries and museums which display and merchandise the tapes as the equivalent of editions of prints. Collectors purchase them as art objects, and audiences

view them as chic home movies. The accumulated weight of art history and current gallery-induced attitudes are brought to bear on every tape that's shown. Given these conventional sources, formats, contests, and modes of consumption, the "discoveries" they may contain are of minor note; they are not experimental.

I pass over here live performances which continue to incorporate video as a prop, such as in the work of Jonas and Stoerchle, or which use it as the equivalent of a performer as in Ned Bobkoff's substitution of a VTR for the audio-recorder in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. These are straightforward theater that retain the usual physical conditions of the art: an enclosed time/space, with an audience and an actor, animate or otherwise. When these structural elements are constant from one era to another, no matter what internal changes may be made, they are changes in details. It is worth mentioning in the context of video art tapes, because this is the way the tapes are presented to the public: as if in a pocket movie theater.

But in contrast, the closed-circuit, environmental videographers are trying to make use of what in the medium is not like film or other art. Their most experimental feature, it seems to me, is the emphasis upon situational processes, rather than upon some act canned as a product for later review. Products do, of course, provide new experience and influence thought. Hallucinogenic drugs, water skis, even TV sets, are examples. But art products tend to be stereotypically responded to, and very little fresh experience or thought comes about from them.

Among those working in this area are Douglas Davis, Juan Downey, Frank Gillette, Bruce Nauman, the Pulsa

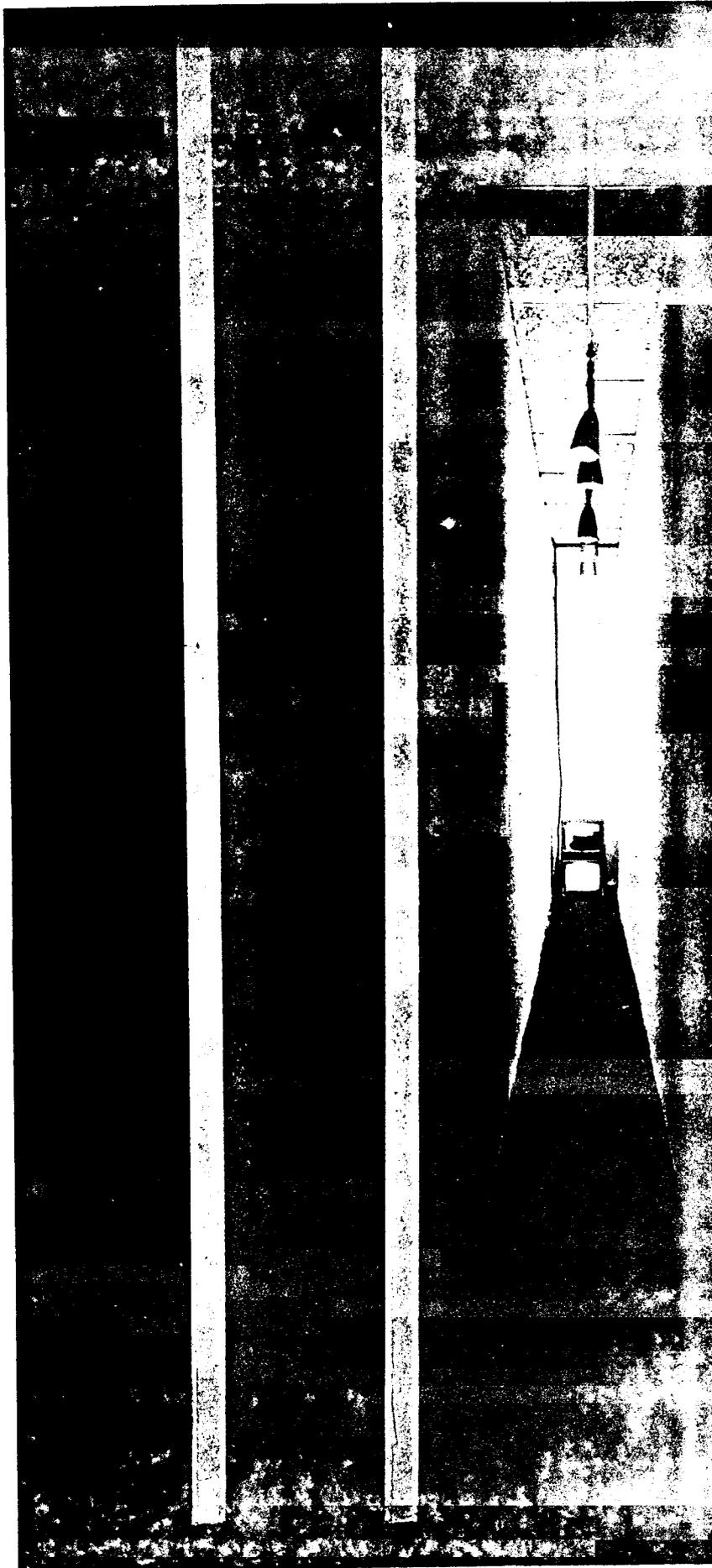
group, Ira Schneider, and Keith Sonnier. Video for these artists is a system of echoes, communications, reflections, and dialogues linking the self with what is outside of the self and back again. This hardware linkage proposes to positively alter the behavior of human and nonhuman participants alike, as if it were some infinitely readjustable ecology. (I am intentionally using hyperbole here to emphasize a certain grandeur, or high seriousness, in these projects.)

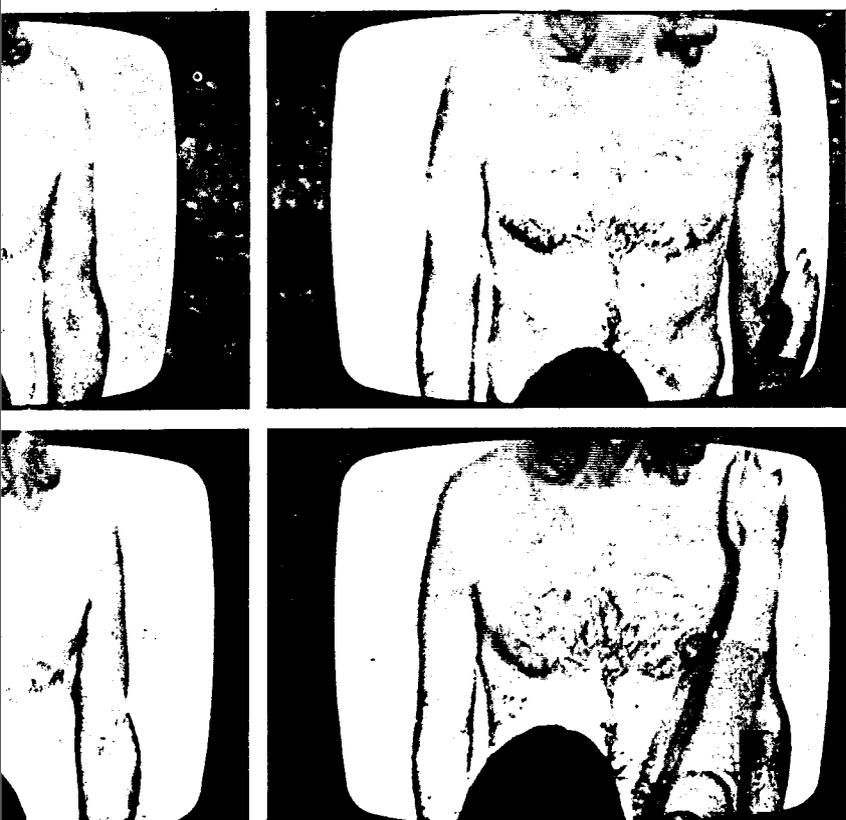
Some works include real-time communiques between public and TV stations, using telephone and other rapid-message technology, which are all fed back into the TV output, to be, in turn, modified and commented upon by the participating public. Others, less outgoing, involve elaborately constructed displays with many monitors and cameras through which visitors pass, to see their own images in different views and in delayed time. Such mirrors of the individual may also be collaged with pretaped and electronically generated material.

Still others are assemblages of concentric or serially arranged stacks of monitors and cameras which show simultaneous views of the cosmos, nature, a city and microcosmic life. And there are room-filling environments achieved solely with video projectors that blow up the small scale of the normal monitor and fill the walls with deserts, subways, and one's own, real self.

From quite the opposite point of view are the spare, contemplative environments of a few bare walls (sometimes physically constrictive), one or two fixed cameras, and a monitor showing a blank, motionless section of wall or doorway. They resemble those empty security monitors in very expensive apartment houses: one waits for a thief to cross the camera's path — and, of course, it is the visitor to the exhibit.

Intriguing as these are, they are also discouraging. The level of critical thought in them, their built-in assumptions about people, the indifference to the spaces into which the hardware is put, and the constant reliance on the glitter of the machines to carry the fantasy — strike me as simple-minded and sentimental. For instance, there is the notion, introduced by the Italians before 1914 and worn threadbare by the sixties, that there is something vital about an all-at-once rapid flow of indiscriminate information, sensations, and activity between people and surroundings, while ignoring the plain fact that people and surroundings receive and exchange messages quite selectively. There is the science-fiction assumption that electronic communication technology can provide a global and even cosmic consciousness, when nothing in the world's extensive use of that technology to date suggests that that is so; or if so, that we apprehend and apply such beatitude. Moreover, it cannot answer to our clear need for privacy. Now, in the case of the minimal, meditative environments where extremely subtle body sensations and feelings are stimulated, it is assumed that meditation and privacy are possible in a gallery situation; but it should be obvious nowa-





days that everyone is on display as a work of art the minute they enter a gallery. One cannot be alone. A gallery is not a retreat. Everything becomes art, not self-awareness.

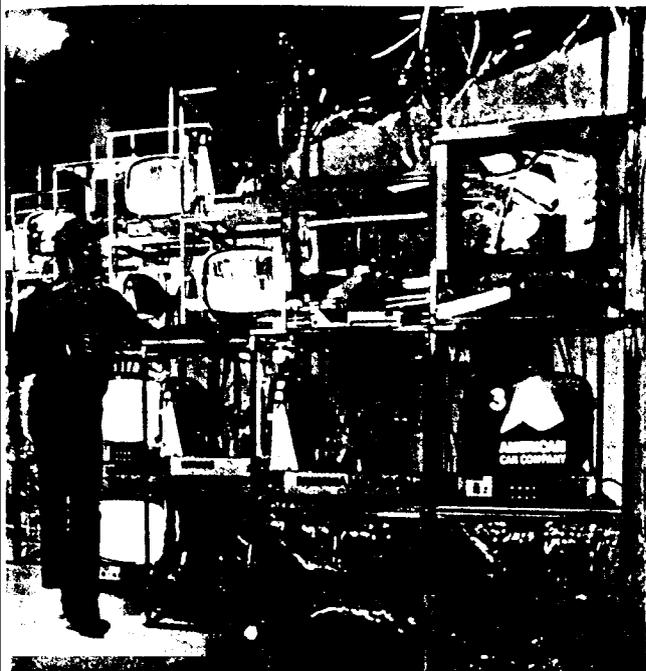
There is also the very utopian conviction, related to the last one, with its roots in progressive education, that if people are given a privileged place and some sophisticated toys to play with, they will naturally do something enlightening, when in fact they usually don't. For example, Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider designed a collaborative environment at Antioch College in 1969. It was a room comprised of four persons, seated back-to-back, facing four walls, two mirrors, four remote-control cameras, and a single monitor. As the artists describe it, "after an initial period of self-consciousness, the subjects began to generate their own entertainment. During the session, the subjects played with their mirrors and cameras, read poetry, drew, rapped, did somersaults" (*Radical Software*, Vol. II, No. 5). Playing around? Poetry? Rapping? Somersaults? All that expensive technology, care and work, for helpless behavior that has been predictable in every so-called experience-chamber since the eighteenth century! That is hardly experimental.

But Gillette and Schneider are gifted artists with very good minds, whose work interests me very much. If the Antioch piece is singled out, it is because it points up the frequent lapses in critical judgment among those who get seduced by fancy hardware. They become indifferent to the clichés passed on in the name of modernity.

Actually, their environment as described and diagrammed seems to me much more ritualistic and hieratic than the human response to it. The problem came about because the artists felt free to carefully program the physical surroundings, while they held off giving their subjects a program appropriate to those surroundings. This may have been a misplaced fear of manipulating people, even though the room obviously was designed to elicit responses and that can be construed as a manipulation. Whatever the reason, Gillette and Schneider didn't follow through holistically.

This, in general, is the fate of participatory art when it is shown in an exhibition context. Both artist and viewer unconsciously expect it to be, and act like, a picture, discrete and kept at a distance. When the viewer is urged to become a part of the art without further help or preparation, he or she feels put upon and becomes a stereotype.

I might add to the list of stereotypes the video artists' relentless fondness for time-lag devices. These are the exact counterpart to echo-effects in earlier *musique-concrète*. Implied here is the idea that repetitive recall of the immediate past is an effective denial of the future, hence proof of an eternal present. Perhaps, too, there is a popularistic appeal to the same experience from drugs. In any event, this is not exactly a brand new philosophical discovery; nor one which illuminates a world which customarily forgets its yesterdays and ignores its tomorrows without the benefit of video environments. (Ironically, the relatively conservative tape art referred to previously, especially the kind which simply records a theatrical performance,

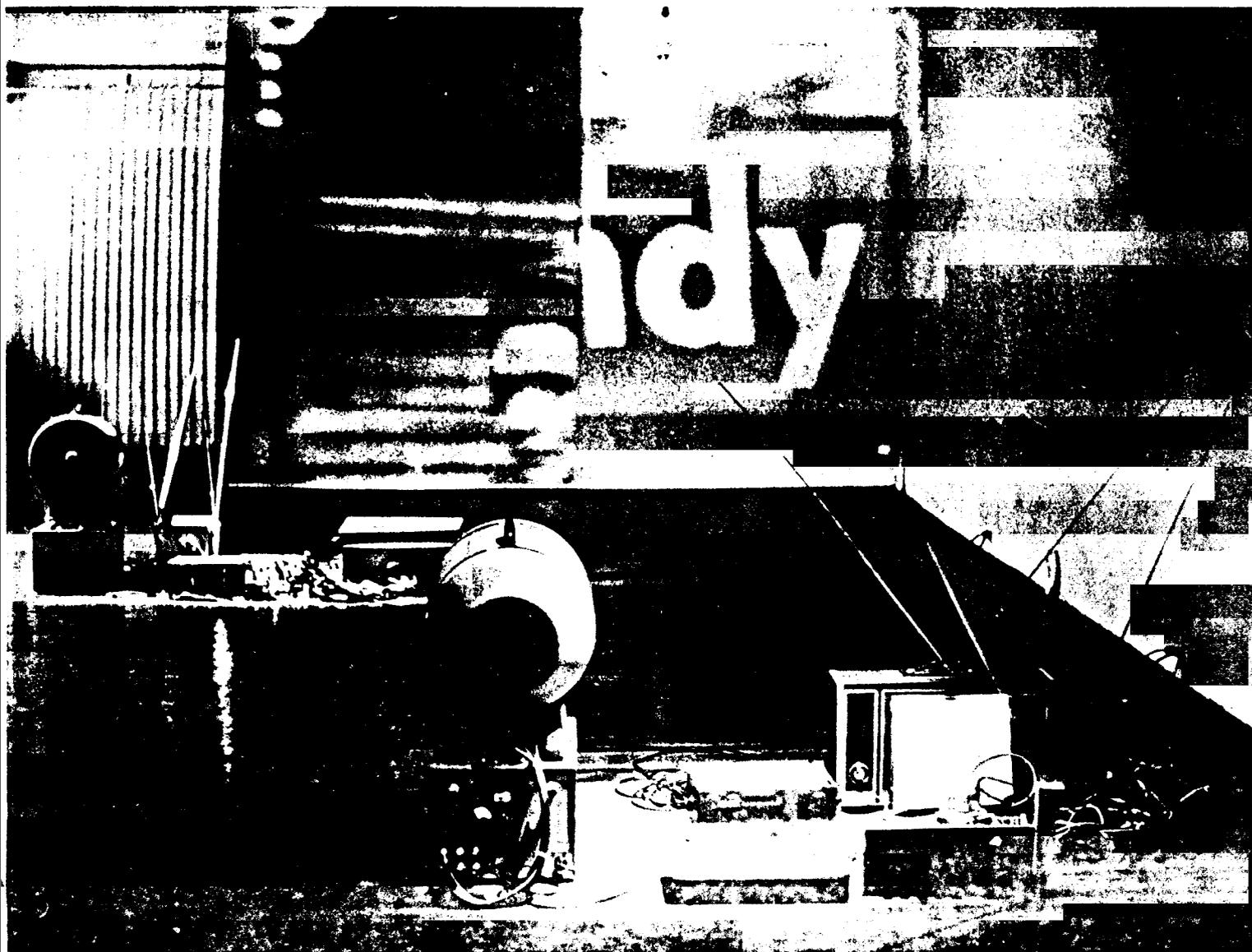


Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *Modular Video Matrix*, 1969.

I find much less trivial on a conceptual level. Undistracted by both the mystique and the technical problems of gadgetry, these artists may spend more time in thought and fantasy.)

In the last analysis, environmental (tapeless) video, the kind whose only product is the heightening of consciousness and the enlargement of useful experience, seems to me the only interesting video art. Yet, at this time, it is still a lavish form of kitsch. Like so much art-tech of recent years, video environments resemble world's fair "futurama" displays with their familiar 19th-century push-button optimism and didacticism. They are part fun house, part psychology lab. Such associations, and a sponsorship by art museums and galleries which have a tradition of hands-off, silent respect for what they show, practically guarantee a superficial and cautious participation in what is supposed to be involving.

Participation's a key word here, but in this most experimental branch of video, we succumb to the glow of the cathode-ray tube while our minds go dead. Until video is used as indifferently as the telephone, it will remain a pretentious curiosity. ■



Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *TV Channel Mix*, 1972. (Photo: Richard Landry.)