VIDEOFILE

SELLING VIDEO VAN GOGHS

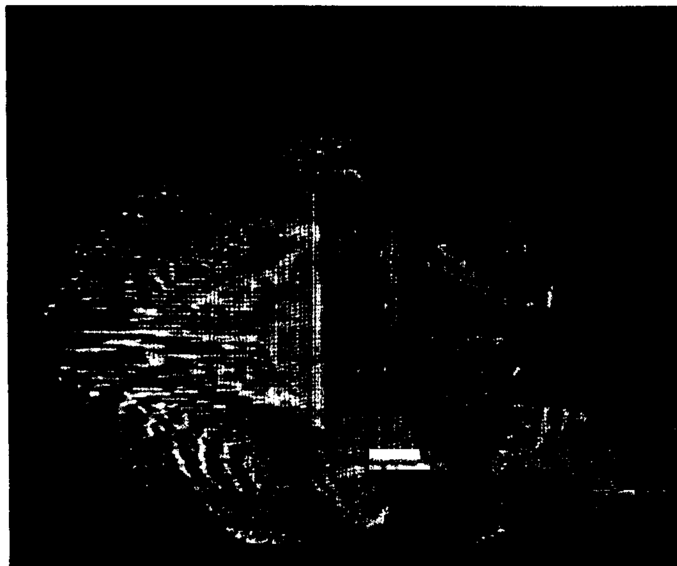
Ellin Stein

IS THERE A MARKET FOR ELECTRONIC ART?

Despite the emergence of video as a bona fide art form, art galleries have shown a marked reluctance to handle tapes, even those by well-respected artists. Most video art is distributed and sold by nonprofit organizations such as Electronic Arts Intermix and the Kitchen that are supported in part by grants. But galleries, which are run as self-supporting private enterprises, stay away from video art for the simple reason that there is, as yet, no money in it.

A notable exception is the Leo Castelli Gallery. "The videotape and film division isn't worth it as a business venture," says division director Patricia Brundage. "It only exists because of Leo's personal interest and commitment." Leo Castelli's legendary taste and acumen built his gallery into one of the most powerful and influential in the world. As the dealer for artists like Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Claus Oldenburg, Castelli can afford to take a few risks. Having once gambled and won on a new art movement that was heavily influenced by and even took its name—Pop—from popular culture, Castelli is willing to gamble again, on video.

The division, Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, was started in 1974 with tapes by such artists as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra, whose work in other media was already handled by the gallery. "Most of our artists use video as a second medium," Brundage says. "They had reputations in other areas first."



Ed Emshwiller's Scapemates*: electronic choreography.*

Many of the early tapes are primarily of historic or archival, rather than intrinsic, interest. For example, *Slow Angle Walk*, made by Bruce Nauman in 1969, is just that—a man walking very slowly and exaggeratedly shot at a sideways angle. The tape is a fifty-five-minute exploration of the formal relationship between the man's limbs and a line on the floor. *Undertone*, made by sculptor Vito Acconci in 1972, features the artist himself sitting at a table saying things like, "I want to believe there's no one here" and "I want to believe there's a girl under the table rubbing my thighs." During the course of the tape, the imaginary paramour moves upward. She is the sole kinetic element—Acconci and the camera barely move at all. (While I was screening these early tapes, Brundage would periodically poke her head in and ask, "Had enough yet?" with the resignation of one who has seen many eyes glaze over.)

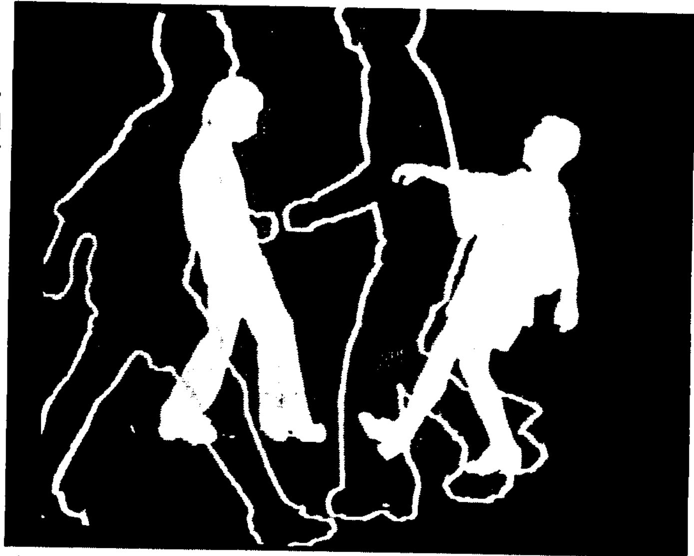
This attachment to stasis and nonexistent production values was an extreme reaction to broadcast television, which was perceived as masking its conceptual emptiness with an excess of hyperkinetic glitz. At the time it was a radical but necessary step. However, the second generation of video artists are less puritanical and more willing to acknowledge video's roots in television. Some, coming from a dramatic tradition, try to revise video's notion of content while others, the artists with fine arts backgrounds, try to rethink the formal aspects of the medium. Artists such as Michael Smith and Mitchell Kriegman, whose video works have recently been added to the Castelli catalog, do not shy away from entertaining; they incorporate "revisionist" elements like dramatic narrative and even humor into their work. And no matter how esoteric their approach, all artists working in video now try for broadcast quality, just in case.

"There used to be a prejudice against entertainment, but not so much any more," says Kriegman, whose work has appeared on "Saturday Night Live" as well as on the art circuit. "Anyone working in video has to address television in some sense. Of course, some of the very technically oriented video people still feel my work isn't *really* art." Kriegman's tapes are similar to "Saturday Night Live" sketches, but with a surreal, as opposed to gag-directed, sense of humor. In *Heart to Heart*, Kriegman is in bed, telling his girl friend that something has changed in their relationship but he can't put his finger on what it is. She disagrees, but in each new shot the girl friend is played by a different actress wearing the same wig and nightgown. Another Kriegman tape, *Dancing Man*, features mime Bill Irwin as a disco devotee whose

Photo courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix

Saturday Night Fever threatens to turn into a St. Vitus's Dance.

Kriegman feels that being associated with Castelli will make his access to universities and the rest of the art world easier, as well as improve his contacts with Europe. However, being distributed by Castelli has so far not increased his sales to private collectors. "I don't know anyone who has sold a tape to a private collector," he says. "Occasionally, normal people who have seen one of my tapes will write to me directly and ask to buy it. I probably do as well on my own selling to individuals as the gallery does. The video art market is not a market—it's an oddity. It's virtually nonexistent. That doesn't mean video isn't a viable art form, but the whole point in video is not to be an object. I don't want my tapes to be art for rich people."



Emshwiller's Crossings and Meetings: *Muybridge meets the computer.*

Photo courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix

Video art is difficult to display or to use for decorative purposes, and a videotape is not a one-of-a-kind work; tapes can be duplicated. Furthermore, because the image quality degenerates in decades, a tape's value cannot be guaranteed to appreciate over the years, even if the artist's reputation soars; Brundage, however, claims the Castelli tapes have maintained their resale value. These factors, plus video's unfortunate resemblance to common television, discourage private and, even worse, corporate collectors, the financial mainstays of painting and sculpture.

Castelli sells to only about five or ten private collectors, people who either work in video themselves or who collect the work of a particular artist in all media. The bulk of the gallery's sales are to institutions—museums, libraries, schools—including the University of Wisconsin, the Museum of Modern Art, and the University of California. Business is evenly split between sales and rentals. Castelli reaches the market through direct mailing to a five-hundred-name list and through advertising in art-oriented and upscale publications such as *Interview*, *Artforum*, *Bomb*, the *Village Voice*, and *Video '80*.

The gallery splits the proceeds fifty-fifty with the artist and carries the cost of duping. A tape will be put on any format for the buyer and replaced from the master if it gets jammed or scratched, so tapes are in fact purchased for the life of the master. The gallery imposes certain restrictions on the exhibition of the tape. For example, the tape can't be copied or resold, and it must be shown in its entirety with the sound on. (This is an attempt to guard against the tapes' becoming video wallpaper à la MTV.) The tape may be playing on a television set, but it must be treated like a work of art.

Castelli's rental prices hover around $50 to $60. Purchase prices range from $75 to $1,200, with most in the neighborhood of $250 to $300. Brundage says prices have been reduced to encourage buying over rental. The videotape and film division has only recently started to break even. Its yearly dollar volume is less than one percent of the gallery's total sales. "The division pays for itself now," Brundage declares. "Financially, video's not the stepchild any more; it's the little brother." But despite its improved finances, the film-tape division is still clearly a labor of love for Leo Castelli, who over the years has invested more than $100,000 of his own money in it.

Only one other New York art gallery has a substantial video collection, and that's also because of the personal interest of its owner. "I've been handling video for nine or ten years," Ronald Feldman recalls. "I started as soon as my artists told me they were working in video." Feldman had always had a strong interest in conceptual and performance art, and his video collection grew partly out of the recording of performances at his gallery, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. His biggest video sellers are artists primarily known for performance, such as Les Levine, Chris Burden, Eleanor Antin, and Douglas Davis.

Like Castelli, Feldman rents and sells mostly to institutions, especially colleges and college-based museums. "There are no individual collectors," he says. "For one thing, it takes so long to view the tapes—no one has the time. It's not like a painting, where you can just pass by it if you don't like it."

Feldman generally splits the profits fifty-fifty with the artist, but duping costs are charged to the buyer. And, like Castelli, video accounts for one percent or less of the gallery's total dollar volume. However, the video division reached the break-even point five years ago and business has grown ten to twenty-five percent per year. Hence Feldman is "very optimistic. The promise and potential of video is interesting. I do expect the finances to reverse themselves. I see an audience developing for art tapes, but we have to create it."

To do this, Feldman promotes his artists' work in novel ways. In 1977, he bought commercial time on broadcast programs, including "Today," "NBC Evening News," and "Saturday Night Live," to show Chris Burden's "art works in the form of commercials." In one of these, three phrases—"Science Has Failed," "Heat Is Life," and "Time Kills"—appear on the screen in succession. In another, "Chris Burden's Self-Promo," the names of three great artists—Michelangelo, Van Gogh, and Picasso—flash before the viewer. The final name on the list, in the biggest letters of course, is Chris Burden.

Castelli and Feldman do not have exclusive rights to distribute the video art. The artists also distribute it themselves. In addition, several have agreements with Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), the most active and comprehensive nonprofit distributor. Artists who overlap include Chris Burden, Peter Campus, Joan Jonas, Frank Gillette, and William Wegman. In conjunction with

his canine collaborator, the late weimaraner Man Ray, Wegman has created best-selling tapes that appear in both the Castelli and the EAI catalog. As Man Ray's name might suggest, Wegman's style is heavily influenced by Dada and surrealism. (These movements, themselves long considered stepchildren of true art, achieve a new legitimacy on video, as if the movements anticipated the medium.)

EAI's greatest strength is its roster of video Old Masters, such as Nam June Paik, Ed Emshwiller, and Woody and Steina Vasulka, along with newer masters, including Bill Viola, Skip Blumberg, Stephen Beck, and Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn. Also, EAI distributes documentaries, which are an important element in independent video, but which the galleries won't handle, because they are not, strictly speaking, video art. EAI markets more aggressively than Feldman or Castelli, and total annual sales and rental volume are "close to but below" $100,000. Although not an inconsiderable figure, it's nevertheless peanuts compared to the huge sums of money commonly thrown around in both broadcast television and the upper reaches of the fine arts.

The problem is that video art "is neither fish nor fowl," as Feldman puts it. It cannot guarantee the exclusivity and investment value that would make it appeal to an elite, nor does it fit into the networks' preconceptions of what will appeal to the viewing masses. There are encouraging signs of change: William Wegman's work has been shown on "David Letterman" and "The Tonight Show"; PBS periodically gets funding for fine independent video programs, such as the recent Paik retrospective; MTV is accustoming a wide audience to video that is free from the conventions of dramatic narrative and naturalistic presentation; and video art occasionally sneaks onto Showtime and other mainstream cable services as filler. As well, a generation is coming of age exposed to video art survey courses at colleges (assuming some students are going to classes in anything besides law, accounting, and electrical engineering).

But whether video art will remain a footnote to both television and art or find its audience and become financially viable remains to be seen. Right now it has the worst of both worlds and the potential for the best.

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SCANLINES SCANLINES

LET'S *NOT* GET PHYSICAL

Last summer, in an office softball game, I hit a line drive on one hop to the outfield and was thrown out by two steps at first base.

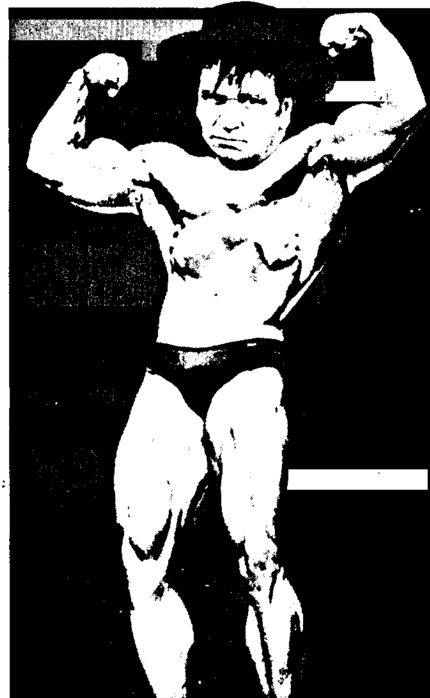
Back at the bench, some wise guy said, "That's usually a single."

"Yeah," I said, puffing a bit, "I *am* a bit out of shape."

All fall, I brooded about that play. Watching the World Series and pro football, I marveled at players like Eddie Murray and John Riggins. Now, *those* guys are in shape, I'd think, while opening another bottle of beer and taking another handful of peanuts.

Finally, I turned to the stars for guidance. No, not to astrology, but to Hollywood. But at the bookstore, I just couldn't decide whose exercise program I wanted. Linda Evans's or Victoria Principal's? After careful study, I decided I wouldn't look good with that kind of physique. Maybe I wanted a body like that of James Caan or John Travolta or Lou Ferrigno. It was all too confusing, and I went home empty-handed.

Then a friend told me he had bought the Jane Fonda workout videotape. Now, this guy's idea of exercise used to be raising an eyebrow when an attractive woman walked by.



"Jane looks great in that high-cut leotard, right?" I said.

"No, no," he replied, puffing a bit. "You don't understand. I'm feeling great. I just finished my workout and . . ."

Now I began to resent the stars. This wouldn't have happened in the golden age of Hollywood, I thought. Can you imagine *The Wallace Beery Workout Book*? Or *Garbo's Guide to Thin Thighs*? If Jimmy Cagney had come up with the idea of writing an exercise book, Jack Warner would have permanently lent him to another studio.

I decided to forget my problems and check out the new Jane Fonda film.

"Two, please."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wiener. Your friend can go in, but you can't. Ms. Fonda has rated her film R, which now means: 'Restricted, No One Admitted Who Is More Than Fifteen Pounds Overweight.' "

After a brief discussion, my date went in to check out the movie and I stayed in the lobby with the video games and the candy counter.

"How was it?" I asked when she came out.

Her eyes looked glassy. At first I thought she was adjusting to the light, but then she said in a strange voice: "Say, why don't we jog on home? I'm feeling so out of shape!"—**Thomas Wiener**

GOD, COUNTRY, AND CAPRA

They indoctrinated—and inflamed—the American soldiers charged with defeat of the Axis. Now, forty years later, eighty-six-year-old director Frank Capra has reedited his six government-commissioned *Why We Fight* documentaries into eight one-hour programs designed for television. Produced with John Beck and Capra's son, Frank Capra, Jr., the titles are *Prelude to War*, *The Nazi Strike*, *The Battle of China*, *The Battle of Russia* (in two parts), *The Battle of Britain*, *War Comes to America*, and *America Goes to War*. Each includes a brief new introduction and afterword, featuring Capra informally addressing groups of young people. A percentage of the profits will create the Frank Capra Fund to support a communications training unit for the armed forces.

The idea for the series originated with the government's Defense Audiovisual