John G. Hanhardt
Video Art: Expanded Forms

Since its emergence twenty years ago, video art has made a vital and important contribution to American culture. Its beginnings can be traced to the early 1960's and Nam June Paik's incorporation of the television set into his new artwork, however, it was in the middle of that decade, when the Sony Corporation introduced to the American market its portable television camera and recorder, that video became more widespread as an art form. This "portapak" system released the medium from the confines and economics of the television studio and placed it in the hands of individual artists. The immediate appeal of video was the ease and flexibility of its operation. It did not require crews and specialists to operate; one could work with it by oneself in the studio/loft and out of doors; what was being recorded by the camera on videotape could immediately be seen on the screen. The electronic recording capability of video meant there was no wait for the videotape to be processed, as was the case in film, before seeing what had been shot with the camera. The subsequent rapid development of video technology – the introduction of color, more sophisticated editing systems, improved cameras – in part account for video's dramatic rise in such a short time. But there was also the fact that artists already working in other art forms were attracted to the medium. They came to video with aesthetic and theoretical ideas which were further shaped by the capacities of this new medium, and which in turn helped shape video's aesthetic discourse.

Thus at mid-century, there was introduced a new electronic moving image medium that was to challenge the mechanical, industrial technology of the motion picture system as the dominant means of image recording and representation. Video placed itself on the cutting edge of the art of the time and the new technologies coming to change our culture. However, the difference between, and relationship of, video to broadcast television was to have a profound influence on the history of both. By the 1950's, network television had become the most pervasive mass communications technology. The statistics of how many people owned televisions and the amount of time they spent in front of their sets was staggering. According to many sociologists, television – the most powerful popular entertainment commodity – had transformed our society into a "TV culture". It was the format of television viewing within the home and the nature of its programming that the individual artist was to come up against in attempting to gain serious attention and recognition for his work.

The question "What is video art?" often contains the implication that the medium itself is somehow responsible for what commercial broadcast television became. Broadcast television was not something we watched to see either a new visual art form or a serious means of narrative expression. The very conditions of viewing television in the home were full of contradictions: one sat in a well lighted room facing a small screen surrounded with visual and aural distractions. The programming itself was constantly interrupted by commercials that were, in terms of their placement and impact, what television was delivering to the viewer. Television became a marketing tool, representing the most effective means to promote and create a need for new products. Thus the television narrative was structured to demand little in the way of concentration from the viewer. The viewer was not expected to give the program his full attention: his attention was supposed to be attracted to the commercials. The sixty-second spots were what the programming was designed to support, not the other way around. Thus commercials often became the most interesting, imaginative "programs" on television. Alternative forms of programming were available on the Public Broadcasting System and on cable, however, the overwhelming presence of commercial television conditioned the viewer to expect from the medium the lowest common denominator. This attitude was reinforced by the technology of television as it was presented to the consumer. The production process was invisible to the viewer (we did not grow up with home videotapes as we did with home

movies) and removed from his control. It was not the communications medium it claimed to be but rather a one-way channel, broadcasting programs that admitted no innovation.

The artists who pioneered the development of video as an art form: Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Peter Gampus, Frank Gillette, Juan Downey, among others came to the medium from other fields – music, performance, sculpture – and were attracted to the opportunity to subvert this dominant model of television and to see their work distributed on television. However the context in which they worked was the art world, and they were ultimately attracted to the conceptual properties of the medium, to the fact that within its time-based image recording capacities one could explore visual and sound relationships within a whole new set of options. These options were in part guided by the intertextual nature of the medium: while exploring its unique capacities for recording and transforming imagery, one could combine it with other art forms. Not only was video a two-dimensional screen of black and white and later color sequences, but one could write and compose for the soundtrack. The artist could also direct the camera at himself and express and explore personal narratives and body art, he could take it out of doors and record and interpret events and create video landscapes. The image transformation properties of video came in part from the very properties of the medium: one could create effects and later, with the development of the colorizer and video synthesizer, transform these pre-recorded images into wholly abstract sequences.

But to return to my earlier question about what makes video art and how it is exhibited in the museum. The question that should be asked is not whether video is an art form but how video changes our definition of art. Walter Benjamin's influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" stated the same proposition in examining the challenge of photography and film in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As with any new medium, the traditions resist a new technology that appears to simply record reality rather than transform it through an artist's vision or aesthetic. Video art is ontologically different from film and the other visual arts; yet, as we noted, it does not exist in a vacuum unaffected by the aesthetic concerns of painting, sculpture, performance art, film, music, theater and dance. It appropriates from all of these forms and transforms them into a richly suggestive and complex iconography of genres, styles and forms. At present, the discourse called video art confronts the text of the art object, which is codified strictly by a market created by other definitions and art forms. Video is on the "cutting edge" of expression, as new technologies open up possibilities for image making.

The challenge to the museum, if it seeks to interpret and respond to the contemporary concerns of artists, is to present this work and provide a context for it. Part of the context is implicit in the overall exhibition policy of the contemporary art museum surveying painting, sculpture, photography, performance, music, dance, prints, and drawing, and thus providing the connections that video has to these disciplines. The physical problems involved in exhibiting video art are no more complex than installing sculpture. One must create an environment for the videotapes that provides a clear and comfortable viewing situation where pedestal height, lighting, and control of ambient sound support the viewing of the work. Technical and support staff who operate and maintain the exhibition equipment see to it that the correct color balance and sound levels are maintained during the exhibition. The presentation of single-channel videotapes, those produced for viewing on the single monitor, are presented in one-artist and group shows where historical, formal, and other distinctive features of the work are given a context in catalogues and program notes. In this way, the viewer leaves behind his preconceptions of what to expect on the television set, as he gives the work the attention that it deserves. The temporal nature of viewing videotapes confronts our habits of gallery going and of watching television at home. When one moves through a gallery, it is easy not to give full attention to the individual pieces on view: we review work

and walk away from those pieces that do not command our attention. So too, when we view the gallery monitor, we are conditioned to expect "television time" quick edits and "easy-to-read narratives". These things do not characterize video art. This is not to suggest that video art is static or overly complex, but it does mean that we are being challenged. The viewer is expected to devote the time necessary for the enriching experience that the best work has to offer.

Video art is not only single-channel videotapes created for gallery and/or broadcast. It also has its expanded forms: sculpture and installation pieces that engage multimedia and formal issues within gallery spaces. It is on this work that I would like to focus my attention, as it opens up the medium and addresses a set of issues and questions intrinsic to our understanding of its creative use. This work re-examines the basic ontology of video, the distinctions between it and television, and the intertextual nature of the medium.

The six pieces I will discuss are not meant to represent historically the form that was part of video art from its beginning. Rather, they represent, but by no means exhaust, some current issues. They do, however, indicate how flexible video is both in terms of its technology and in terms of how we can conceptualize with it. In these projects, a whole series of issues is raised around the relationship of the image (the monitor's screen), to the monitor (television set). Both the screen and its container are taken as integral elements in a whole: that whole reshapes the medium into a plastic form that suggests the full experience of the medium.

Certainly the key figure in the history of video art is Nam June Paik, who was recently given a comprehensive retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and whose work has explored all areas and forms of video. In the late 1950's, he first expressed interest in the possibilities of television in a letter to John Cage. In 1963, he had his first exhibition of video art – the first ever organized – in which he transformed television sets into sculpture. His later sculpture/installations were to transform our customary view of the medium by creating powerful and witty metaphors out of its elements. The elements are the monitor itself, the viewer's relationship to it, and the imagery created for the screen. Paik transforms the entire viewing process, removing the medium from its customary contexts and position. In TV GARDEN (1974–78), approximately thirty television sets of all sizes are positioned in a darkened gallery space, surrounded by plants and trees, such that when the viewer enters the gallery and walks around the TV GARDEN on the raised ramp, he sees different groupings of video images as his point of view changes. Televisions are on their back, side, upside down, upright, partly covered by ferns and plants. The resulting video environment, or landscape, transforms the sets into a kind of electronic flora with its constantly playing imagery and rhythm of the soundtrack illuminating the garden itself. The videotape created for the installation is a constantly changing collage of images and sounds. These videotapes were created by the artist using his Paik-Abe video synthesizer, which layers and colors pre-recorded images in dazzling displays of color and sound. V-YRAMID (1982), another piece in the exhibition, was acquired by the Whitney Museum for its permanent collection. This towering sculpture is made up of forty televisions interlocked in a pattern of different-sized televisions. When the videotape created for this work is played, the collage of moving and layered images and sounds is rotated and juxtaposed by the positions of the televisions. Here, as in TV GARDEN, the home television is transformed and rendered into an art work. The videotape's composition, camera movement, and color compose the sculpture, as we see the videotape altered and transformed by the positions of the television sets.

Mary Lucer's DENMAN's COL (GEOMETRY –1979 his 81) explores the formal compositional properties of the multi-monitor, multi-channel installation. In this project five monitors of differing screen sizes are angled by a structure that suspends the monitors in the darkened gallery space. On the videotapes are color shots of urban views intercut with images of various drinks being poured into glasses. The elegance of the images, their color and

composition, creates a serene ambience as we watch the cycle of images. In this work, the monitor's controls are masked by the structure so that one only sees the screen. As the images rotate against the surface planes of the sculptures, they create a disorienting and compelling video landscape.

In Ira Schneider's TIME ZONES (1980), a circle of twenty-four pedestals with a monitor on each creates a ring of moving images.

Here the television is acknowledged and the imagery viewed straight on; their position has not been altered. In this installation, Schneider has created an ambitious project that creates a global image of video as a communications and artists' medium. Each of the twenty-four televisions represents one of the world's time zones. The images have been shot and/or collected by Schneider, and in a complex scenario of image and sound editing, the complete cycle of the twenty-four videotapes gives the sensation of changing time around the world and a vivid sense of the quality of cultural differences and physical time.

The mixing of video with other media to explore aesthetic and theoretical issues is demonstrated in Francesco Torres's latest installation, THE HEAD OF THE DRAGON (1981). This project employs videotape, closed-circuit video, film loop installation, drawing, and sculpture to posit an engaging and complex work modeled on a metaphor for the human brain. As the viewer moves through the gallery space, the different elements compose a cognitive model for the brain as a site for exploring the origins of human consciousness. The repeated cycle of videotapes is an extension of the battering ram structure: fastened onto the head of this structure is a monitor that shows a live snake, that is positioned on the other side of the door opposite the ram. This reptilian motif, which is echoed in all parts of the project, is based on the biologist Paul MacLean's thesis of the reptilian basis of human consciousness. A profound and complex work, THE HEAD OF THE DRAGON posits the intertextual and multimedia capacity of video art.

The closed-circuit capacity of video is demonstrated in William Anastasi's TRANSFER (1968). In this work, a camera affixed to the monitor is facing the power outlet. On the monitor, we see the image of the power outlet and plugs. A deceptively simple piece, this early work by a noted minimal artist creates a commentary on the medium and the origins of its process. In representing itself, the two-dimensional image posits the origins of its imagery within itself. Expressive of the concerns of minimalism, this work by Anastasi creates a singularly clear, richly subtle, and self-contained expression. By exploring the medium in relation to the site of its actual installation, TRANSFER treats the perception of representation.

The future of video art is secure in the quality and variety of work being produced by artists throughout the United States and abroad. It is a medium that is constantly evolving and changing through the aesthetics of its artists and the developments of its technologies. The home viewer and the gallery goer will be confronting a changing home space unit exhibition space as the post-industrial, technological age creates a new paradigm for our culture. Just as the industrial revolution introduced photography and film, so the electronic, technological age has brought forth video. Its future will affect how we perceive the world around us and ultimately how we refashion and preserve it.

The artist, forever participating in charting change and preserving values, will be creating new works and ideas from the resources of this extraordinary medium of video.

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