

New American Video Art: A Historical Survey, 1967—1987.

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This exhibition of artists' videotapes is composed of three exhibitions originally presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The first is a historical survey covering the period 1967 to 1980. That program is supplemented by the videotape selections for the 1985 and 1987 Whitney Museum Biennials. The essays which accompany these three programs were written for the original touring exhibitions. The other component of this exhibition of American video art is a presentation of three installations. The entire program was curated and organized by John G. Hanhardt and coordinated by Leanne Mella.

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I. New American Video Art, 1967—1980

"New American Video Art, 1967—80" surveys the emergence of video as an art form from its beginnings in 1967 to 1980. These first years in the history of video art saw a wide variety of approaches that sought to describe and define a new field of art-making. But behind the diversity of these initial efforts lie three features common to video art in this period: a collaboration with the other arts, an involvement with political and ideological debates, and an intentional distinction from commercial television.

By the late 1960s, television had become a pervasive mass medium viewed in virtually every home. On home television sets, the public was offered a homogeneous selection of programming that followed formulas for structure, running time, and content. The viewer's perception of the medium was largely determined by the role television had come to play as a commercial entertainment and information industry whose success and therefore profit was gauged by the number of viewers it attracted. In an attempt to challenge the television industry's hegemony, many artist-activists worked, often as collectives, to use video as a tool for social change. At the same time, video artists began producing tapes and installations designed to explore the medium's potential for a new aesthetic discourse. It is the work of the latter group that "New American Video Art" seeks to elucidate.

While a number of artists began experimenting with television in the mid-1960s, the direct appropriation of television began with the manipulation and destruction of the television set itself in the early Fluxus art projects of the Korean-born composer and musician Nam June Paik and of the German artist Wolf Vostell. Vostell and Paik's actions signaled a reevaluation of the television set as a cultural icon and as a technological product removed from the control of the individual. Their first exhibitions, held in West Germany and the United States, reflect the international dimension of video art's beginnings. They also show how television contributed to the changing dynamic of the arts in the early 1960s, a process that involved a re-examination of sacrosanct visual traditions. One manifestation of this change was the focus on popular culture at large, formalized in painting and sculpture as pop art.

Just as the emergence of independent filmmaking in the 1940s owed much to the development of the small gauge 16 min. camera, video became more accessible to artists and activists in 1965 when the Sony Corporation introduced its portable videotape recorder into the New York market. Nam June Paik and Les Levine were the first artists to use it. In 1965, at the Cafe a Go-Go in New York, Paik showed his first videotape of Pope Paul VI's visit to the city, shot with a portable video camera he had bought that day. In a sense, Paik's action symbolizes the initial attraction of this equipment: it was portable, and, unlike film, which had to be processed, you could immediately see on a monitor what the video camera was recording. It was commonly believed that the new video equipment would enable the avantgarde producer to remove the production of video from the economic and ideological constraints of the

television industry. Further, in keeping with Marshall McLuhan's theories, encapsulated in his aphorism "the medium is the message", many artists envisioned an electronic age where the individual and collective producers would participate in a "global village" of information and images that superseded national and cultural boundaries. While many of these expectations remain unfulfilled, this optimism and spirit resulted in a rich and diverse group of works that prompt us to think about the potential of television as both a social and aesthetic force.

"New American Video Art" surveys, within a chronological framework, the kinds of technical changes and aesthetic and philosophical issues that appear and re-appear throughout the period. Although it is impossible to categorize every tape, a number of approaches can be identified. In *image processing*, an aesthetic that has evolved in contrast to broadcast television's "special effects", a variety of electronic devices transforms both prerecorded and electronically generated imagery. In *personal documentaries*, the hand-held video camera becomes the means to examine the dynamics of places and events. *Performance* videotapes employ a range of narrative strategies to investigate the artist's self, the psychology of image manipulation, and the relationship between the viewer and the artist/performer. Other tapes use the properties of the video image and the image-making process to explore the epistemology of perception. Finally, some artists have produced narratives and texts in order to criticize or counter the ubiquity of commercial television.

Program 1 begins with two tapes that are directly related to the institution of broadcast television and the political climate of the late 1960s. In *Videotape Study No. 3*, Jud Yalkut and Nam June Paik, who viewed the medium as potentially subversive, mocked the actions of politicians and the role of television during this period of urban unrest and the United States' military involvement in Vietnam. Yalkut and Paik satirized President Lyndon Johnson and New York City Mayor John Lindsay by manipulating footage of their TV appearances. The resulting distortion, which is counter-pointed by an equally manipulated soundtrack that contains excerpts from their speeches and interviews, presents these men as foolish and hypocritical.

An early effort to bring video artists to television was made by WGBH, Boston, which, like WNET, New York, and KQED, San Francisco, was one of the most innovative stations of the Public Broadcasting System. Six artists (Aldo Tambellini, Thomas Tadlock, Allan Laprow, Otto Piene, James Seawright, and Nam June Paik) were commissioned to create programs for public broadcast and given access to the station's facilities. The 30-minute combined program, *The Medium is the Medium*, is one of the first examples of video art to appear on television. We see image-processing techniques employed to transform prerecorded footage and generate new kinds of abstract imagery. These include colorizing, where a color signal is added to a black and white or another color signal, resulting in brilliant, intense images; mixing, which involves the superimposition of two or more images, like photographic double exposure; chroma-keying, a masking process in which an image is inserted into specific areas of the frame; switching, in which two video images are displayed alternately at varying rates; and fades and wipes, which are variations of switching and mixing. *The Medium is the Medium* also includes productions that demonstrate television's potential as a two-way communications medium. In Kaprow's *Hello* the participants talk with each other via a live feed, and in *Electronic Opera No. 1* Paik humorously invites viewers to respond to his instructions.

In addition to producing single-channel videotapes, artists began using television in video environments, which later became known as installations. These large-scale video projects added a temporal dimension to sculpture through the use of live and prerecorded video. Ira Schneider's videotape record of the 1969 Howard Wise Gallery exhibition, *TV as a Creative Medium*, documents some of the twelve pieces included in the show, among them Serge Boutouline's *Telediscretion*, Paik and Charlotte Moorman's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, Eric

Siegel's *Psychedelevision in Color*, Thomas Tadlock's *Archetron*, Aldo Tambellini's *Black Spiral*, and Joe Weintraub's *AC/TV (Audio Controlled Television)*. The tape is a straightforward presentation of the featured works, in which Schneider walks through the gallery and captures the exhibition's ambience and scope. *TV as a Creative Medium* also includes Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette's *Wipe Cycle*, a project conceived of as a kind of television mural. Viewers faced a bank of nine monitors in which they could see themselves and the surrounding space from different points of view, at different moments in time; this video alternated with programming from commercial television.

In Schneider's tape and others from this period, the grainy quality of the image and instability of the picture reveal how technically inferior was the video equipment used compared to the broadcast TV standard. But despite these limitations and, indeed, because of the intentional distancing from broadcast TV, low-cost video offered an attractive means for artists seeking to further reexamine the definition of the art object. The Conceptual, Minimalist, process, and body art movements were challenging the dominant notion of what constituted fine art. Because video, like photography, was a medium that could be easily reproduced, artists used it to challenge not only the notion of the traditional uniqueness of the artwork, but the material basis of traditional aesthetics. Video installations added a new aspect to the physical object of sculpture: the moving image, recorded over time, was used to manipulate the viewer's point of view within the space. In Bruce Nauman's *Corridor* (1969—70), for instance, a passageway became a sculptural form, and the viewer's presence was perceived through and mediated by the video camera's point of view.

Nauman's videotapes also confronted the concept of time and vantage point. In *Lip Sync*, the sole videotape in **Program 2**, Nauman appears upside down, in close-up, wearing headphones. As he repeats the title words over and over, his voice constantly goes in and out of sync with his moving lips, creating a work that has no beginning or end. By stretching time (the activity continues for the duration of the 60-minute reel) and making the artist's own single gesture the tape's subject, Nauman frustrates the viewer's expectations for narrative development and closure. Thus, repetition becomes a strategy for exploring perception and understanding of a temporal action stripped of all narrative meaning. *Lip Sync* should be viewed in relationship to Program 3, in which single actions have deceptively complex effects.

Program 3 opens with *Vertical Roll*, in which the choreographer and dancer Joan Jonas uses the vertical action of a misadjusted television set -normally seen as a technical flaw — as a constantly moving frame for her performance. Her actions are directed not only to the camera but through it, to the monitor itself. Because her actions change with each roll, she calls attention to the ephemeral nature of the video image.

Accompanying *Vertical Roll* in this program is *Undertone* by Vito Acconci. A leading body art and Conceptual performance artist, Acconci is seated in this tape at the head of a table facing the camera and the viewer is to imagine what he is doing with his hand underneath the table top. Often highly charged and erotic, Acconci's speech implicates the viewer as a voyeur, all the while expressing the performer's need for an audience.

In **Program 4** John Baldessari, William Wegman, and Peter Campus, like Nauman in Program 2, and Joan Jonas and Acconci in Program 3, capitalized on the potential privacy of video productions; artists could simply set up a camera in a stationary position anywhere and engage in single-take, un-edited performances. Thus, these artists' actions constituted the very process of making art; the tapes became substitutes for the actual art object, a strategy uniquely suited to video technology and especially expressive of the aesthetics of process art, Minimalism, performance, and Conceptual art.

Like Nauman, Jonas, and Acconci, John Baldessari came to video from other art forms, in his case from photography and drawing. In *Inventory*, one can see how he established, like the others, a rigorous strategy for exploring the perceptual properties of the video image-making process. Baldessari here transforms a seemingly uninteresting activity — the attempt to identify and describe objects as they are placed before him — into a study in perception. His droll and deadpan commentary is at once humorous and thought-provoking. The viewer realizes how the camera view flattens the three-dimensional object and also affects its scale so that familiar objects appear to require Baldessari's verbal description in order to be identified.

Following Baldessari's videotape is William Wegman's *Selected Works, Reel 4*, in which the artist is seen in a series of vignettes produced in his studio. Wegman engages in short narrative routines that poke fun at common foibles and activities as his "character" attempts to cope with the vicissitudes of everyday life. Joining Wegman is his pet Weimaraner, "Man Ray", who acts as the artist's unflappable sidekick. We see in these works not only Wegman's subtle humor and theatrical timing but an early example of performance activity that reflects both television — the routines recall those of the pioneer TV comedian Ernie Kovacs and the performance art of the 1970s. The third tape, *Three Transitions* by Peter Campus, employs chroma-keying. In one of the "transitions" we see Campus burning a sheet of paper on which appears to be his own live image. Through chroma-keying, the paper is replaced with a live image of the artist so that he observes an illusion of his own face being burned. Campus, who also created some of the key video installations of the 1970s, has here wittily transformed his own image into a new form of video self-portrait. Television is both implicitly and explicitly the subject of the tapes in **Program 5**, which encompasses work from 1972 to 1974. David Antin, in his seminal essay "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium", dubbed television "video's frightful parent" to remind us of the art form's not-so-distant relationship to the industry. While some artists consciously rejected its conventions. Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* consists of a printed text of facts and opinions critical of the television industry. They are strung together as aphorisms that roll up the screen, producing an indictment of the industry. The Muzak heard over the text provides a lulling musical background that softens the information's critical edge, just as television avoids harsh realities by "selling" the news as a commercial commodity.

In contrast, Nam June Paik's *Global Groove* is a celebration of television's avantgarde potential. Shots of Allen Ginsberg chanting, John Cage telling a story, and Charlotte Moorman performing with her cello are interspersed with commercials from Japanese television, pop songs, and dance. *Global Groove* is intended as a vision of the future of television when "TV Guide will be as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory" — a future of infinite, global possibilities imagined by Paik in a bravura collage of images created with the Paik/Abe video synthesizer.

Douglas Davis' *Handling (The Austrian Tapes)* was produced for Austrian television and, as with Davis' later satellite performance projects, calls attention to viewers' normally passive role in watching television. Davis seeks to involve them as participants by asking them to touch the screen of their home television sets as they watch his program. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot's *Fourth of July in Saugerties* documents a small-town community event. The process exemplifies the kind of personal appropriation of the television medium that is facilitated by the hand-held portability of video equipment.

Program 6 represents a diverse selection of works which describe other areas of video activity in the first half of the 1970s. These focus on the issues of cross-media influence and collaboration, new technologies, and feminism. In *Scapemates*, for instance, Ed Emshwiller collaborates with dancers and choreographers to translate — not merely record — the dance experience through special video effects that allow images to be juxtaposed and otherwise altered.

These effects were usually only possible through the use of expensive broadcasting devices. However, some artists, notably Steina and Woody Vasulka, pioneered the development of relatively low-cost video tools. They commissioned engineers to build specialized devices such as keyers, switchers, and colorizers. With this equipment, the Vasulkas investigated the video image and sound as visual and aural manifestations of the electronic signal. In one image from *Vocabulary*, a hand first appears to hold beams of electronic energy and is then transformed into a video pattern — an elegant expression of the artist's hand molding a new visual material.

A number of women were using video and other media to expand on an emerging feminist art. They opened up formerly taboo subjects such as personal experience and female sexuality. Thus, Nancy Holt's *Underscan*, which portrays the monotonous routines of her Aunt Ethel's daily life, is one of a number of autobiographical works produced at the time. And Lynda Benglis, whose work in sculpture and performance often outrages audiences, explored pop culture and its objectification of the female body in *Female Sensibility*.

Program 7 features three artists's representations of nature, people, and places in personal documentaries. Frank Gillette's *Hark Hork* is both an evocative meditation on nature and an exploration of the flora and fauna of an ecology. As in his installations, Gillette looks to the process of nature for the systems which guide human biology and thought. His videotapes isolate an aspect of that ecosystem in elegant and rigorous compositions. For Andy Mann, in contrast, the portable video camera was a means for studying the people who inhabit the environment around him. In *One-Eyed Bum*, the camera's presence becomes a vehicle of communication between two strangers, Mann and a bowery derelict. Juan Downey's *Moving*, an impressionistic view of a car trip to California, shows the capacity of video to serve as a kind of diary that captures the quality of travel and quotidian experiences.

Program 8 demonstrates the many ways that the notion of "performance" was interpreted and enlarged upon in the mid-1970s. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Martha Rosler transforms kitchen implements into symbols of female frustration and rage. Rosler delivers a deadpan performance that, unlike Julia Child's cheerful TV delivery, challenges accepted ideas of female domesticity. Terry Fox's *Children's Tapes: A Selection*, on the other hand, uses ordinary household objects, such as spoons, matches, and string, to create humorous surreal "events" that mark the passage of time and serve as pseudo-lessons in chemistry and physics.

In Richard Serra's *Boomerang*, artist Nancy Holt wears headphones through which she can hear her own voice in time delay. Holt describes the confusion she experiences: as she tries to speak, her voice "boomerangs" back through the headphones, interfering with her ability to articulate a thought. Finally, in *Running Outburst*, Charlemagne Palestine exploits the jumpiness of the hand-held camera as a marker of his presence in space. This is underscored by the topsy-turvy quality of the video and by the modulation of Palestine's voice created by his movement.

Program 9 offers three examples from the mid-1970s of artists once again confronting the television industry. Stephen Beck's *Video Ecotopia*, produced with the Beck Direct Video Synthesizer, projects a visionary image of how the tools of television can be used to create a utopian video environment. Beck's post-industrial landscape expresses the optimism of a vision rooted in the ideology of a "greening" of America then current in contemporary social thinking.

Ant Farm, a West Coast architecture collective, began producing media events in San Francisco. *Media Burn* is a satiric look at television. In this elaborately staged event, the group constructed a wall of old TVs into which was driven a Cadillac specially modified with video equipment. This happening was covered by the local TV stations, a coverage that

became part of Ant Farm's own documentation on videotape. In 1977, another California group, TVTV, which has produced a number of successful video documentaries, created their first dramatic series. *Birth of an Industry*, aired on KCET, Los Angeles, as part of the *Supershow* Series, is a critical drama based on the early years of television.

Program 10 features two works that reflect the performance and mixed-media experience of the artists. In subject, the works speculate on the artist's place in society. In *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)*, Joan Jonas juxtaposes footage of the Nova Scotia countryside with footage shot in her New York City studio. In a voiceover, she reminisces about the pastoral life, ruminates on her art-making and the perspective that time and distance can provide. The contrast of the locales and what they represent — that is, the romantic vs. the cerebral — informs Jonas' aesthetic vision and personal sense of herself. Stan VanDerBeek's *A Newsreel of Dreams (Part 2)* synthesizes the spectacle of political and social life with private fantasies in a celebratory mood tinged with skepticism. Both of these productions reveal how different sensibilities responded to a social and cultural climate.

The works in **Program 11** begin to reveal certain changes that occurred in video art at the end of the 1970s. A younger generation was starting out with more sophisticated equipment than had been available to earlier video artists. By the end of the decade, Bill Viola became one of the foremost artists of this group. In a series of videotapes, he explored a complex set of cognitive issues, including the perception of sound in *The Morning After the Night of Power*. In *The Space between the Teeth*, Viola's aesthetic follows a less reductive and linear line than earlier work as he employs editing and other effects to fill his images with more detail and create subtle changes in their compositions. In *Four Sided Tape*, Peter Campus continues to produce incisive personal portraits, but without the chroma-key he earlier employed. As video technology became more developed and refined, Campus sought a simpler, more direct performance approach that yielded a new format rigor and subtle humor. *Vito's Reef*, by Howard Fried, one of California's leading performance artists, is a complex exploration of pedagogy and viewer/camera perception. Standing beside a blackboard, the artist assumes the role of teacher and addresses the camera, and, by extension, the viewer. His convoluted monologue confounds the viewer's expectation of the usual sequential flow of information as presented on television.

The earlier, personal documentaries, seen in program 10, drew upon experiences found in the artist's local community and neighborhood. However, as more sophisticated and portable equipment permitted greater flexibility, artists began to travel and confront unfamiliar situations that demanded new responses. This is dramatically represented in **Program 12**, particularly in Juan Downey's *Laughing Alligator*, a tape produced during an extended visit to the Amazon rain forest. The tape's autobiographical theme focused on the confrontation and understanding of the Yanomani Indians, whom Downey and his family befriended and who experienced the video camera for the first time.

The two other tapes in program 12 also deal with travel experience, but at a considerable remove. *After Montgolfier*, by Davidson Gighotti, is a contemplative view of the Minnesota countryside as seen from a hot-air balloon. One of a series of artists' productions for public television, this lyrical tape allows one to perceive the landscape from a new perspective. The ability of video to offer novel vantages is pursued in a radically different way in Shalom Gorewitz's *El Corandero*, in which "straight" camera images shot in Spain are colorized and otherwise manipulated to evoke new impressions of the locale. In all three of the works in this program, the artists have reinterpreted the social and physical landscape by visually altering either the original images or a conventional viewpoint.

As **Program 13** reveals, the close of the decade brought developments in the editing and processing capabilities of video, making possible quick and clean edits and a stable signal that

could maintain color and image quality. As part of the arts program for the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, video artists were invited to produce tapes and installations. *Lake Placid '80*, by Nam June Paik, presents a treatment of the games which recombines earlier Paik material with footage shot at the Olympics site. The result is a fast-paced trip through the experience of sport as pageant and intense action. Another videotape, *Olympic Fragments*, by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, uses the techniques of television sports coverage to slow down, freeze, and reverse action. The effects provide a most vivid sense of the beauty and subtlety of physical action in sport.

The final videotape in this program, Bill Viola's *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, employs a telephoto lens to distort the viewer's perception of the landscape in a way that shatters the illusion of video space and reality. Rather than rely on special effects, Viola exploited the out-of-focus quality achieved by the decreased depth of field peculiar to a telephoto lens.

Program 14, the final program, returns to two issues that opened the exhibition and have remained central to the history of video art: the interpretation and transformation of television; and the production of new imagery from the technology of video. Data Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* is a vivid distillation of the subtext of the pop TV icon Wonder Woman. Through rapid editing, Birnbaum employs the strategy of repetition to emphasize certain moments from the TV show and concludes with its sexist disco theme song. By isolating these segments, she attempts to reveal the sexism implicit in this popular commercial show.

The final three videotapes employ both basic and advanced techniques to show how the capabilities of image processing are changing. In *Sunstone*, Ed Emshwiller uses a sophisticated computer to render a complex three-dimensional illusion; a two-dimensional image of the sun is transformed into a three-dimensional cube. In its appropriation of state-of-the-art equipment, this tape foresees much of video production in the 1980s. In contrast, Barbara Buckner's *Hearts*, a Minimalist but lyrical evocation of the heart image, joins the abstract and representational in a way that reflects less on other popular art styles than on an intensely personal form of poetic self-expression. The concluding videotape Woody Vasulka's *Artifacts*, is a catalogue of image transformations created from the linkage of the computer with video technology. Seven years after *Vocabulary*, the Vasulkas individually and collectively continued their exploration of new visual terms.

The tapes described briefly here outline the first twenty years of video art's history. It is a medium that is constantly evolving and changing through the aesthetics of its artists and the development of its technologies. It is also a body of work that has yet to be fully examined, but is challenging the critical and historical interpretation of twentieth-century art. Video will affect how we perceive the world around us and ultimately how we refashion and preserve it.

Program 1

Videotape Study No. 3, 1967—69. Jud Yalkut and Nam June Paik. Black and white; 5 minutes.

The Medium is the Medium, 1969. WGBH, Boston. Color; 30 minutes.

TV as a Creative Medium, 1969. Ira Schneider, Black and white; 13 minutes.

Program 2

Lip Sync, 1969. Bruce Nauman. Black and white; 60 minutes.

Program 3

Vertical Roll, 1972. Joan Jonas. Black and white; 20 minutes.

Undertone, 1972. Vito Acconci. Black and white; 30 minutes.

Program 4

Inventory, 1972. John Baldessari. Black and white; 30 minutes.
Selected Works, Reel 4, 1972. William Wegman. Black and white; 20 minutes.
Three Transitions, 1973. Peter Campus. Color; 5 minutes.

Program 5

Television Delivers People, 1973. Richard Serra. Color; 6 minutes.
Global Groove, 1973. Nam June Paik. Color; 30 minutes.
Handling (The Austrian Tapes), 1974. Douglas Davis. Color; 5 minutes.
Fourth of July in Saugerties, 1972. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot. Black and white; 15 minutes.

Program 6

Scapemates, 1972. Ed Emshwiller. Color; 29 minutes.
Vocabulary, 1973. Woody and Steina Vasulka. Color; 5 minutes.
Underscan, 1974. Nancy Holt. Black and white; 8 minutes.
Female Sensibility, 1974. Lynda Benglis. Color; 14 minutes.

Program 7

Hark Hork, 1973. Frank Gillette. Black and white; 18 minutes.
One-Eyed Bum, 1974. Andy Mann. Black and white; 6 minutes.
Moving, 1974. Juan Downey. Black and white; 30 minutes.

Program 8

Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975. Martha Rosler. Black and white; 7 minutes.
Children's Tapes- A Selection, 1974. Terry Fox. Black and white; 30 minutes.
Boomerang, 1974. Richard Serra. Color; 10 minutes.
Running Outburst, 1975. Charlemagne Palestine. Black and white; 8 minutes.

Program 9

Video Ecotopia, 1975. Stephen Beck. Color; 5 minutes.
Media Burn, 1975. Ant Farm. Color; 25 minutes.
Birth of an Industry, 1977. TVTV. Color; 18 minutes.

Program 10

I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances), 1976. Joan Jonas. Color; 30 minutes.
A Newsreel of Dreams (Part 2), 1976. Stan VanDerBeek. Color; 24 minutes.

Program 11

Four Sided Tape, 1976. Peter Campus. Color; 3 minutes.
The Space between the Teeth, 1976. Bill Viola. Color; 9 minutes.
The Morning after the Night of Power, 1977. Bill Viola. Color; 9 minutes.
Vito's Reef, 1978. Howard Fried. Color; 34 minutes.

Program 12

Laughing Alligator 1979. Juan Downey. Color; 29 minutes.
After Montgolfier, 1979. Davidson Gigliotti. Color; 10 minutes.
El Corandero, 1979. Shalom Gorewitz. Color; 6 minutes.

Program 13

Lake Placid '80, 1980. Nam June Paik. Color; 4 minutes.
Olympic Fragments, 1980. Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn. Color; 10

minutes.

Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat), 1979. Bill Viola. Color; 28 minutes.

Program 14

Wonder Woman, 1979. Dara Birnbaum. Color; 7 minutes.

Sunstone, 1979. Ed Emshwiller. Color; 3 minutes.

Hearts, 1979. Barbara Buckner. Color; 12 minutes.

Artifacts, 1980. Woody Vasulka. Color; 22 minutes.

II. New American Video Art: 1985 Biennial.

We have barely come to grips with the profound changes film and photography have had on how we understand the world around us. The ability to record both still and moving images on film gave us insight into physical and biological change and shaped our cultural realities as well. Today, a video culture is entering all areas of image making: the home video recorder and the manipulation of the video image by the home viewer; the advances in computer assisted editing; the creation of new and highly sophisticated levels of artificial and representational imagery through computer graphics. In fact, the impact that electronic technologies have on how we work and process information has been felt on how we produce and perceive film and television.

For all the sweeping changes that have occurred in the television industry — the increase in the number of cable channels; the expansion of the number of television producers and distributors — the actual programming we see has changed very little. Television, defined by demographics rather than by quality and diversity, has merely succeeded in giving us more sports, more news, more weather, and more movies. What has changed is the relationship of the viewer to the television set. The proliferation of the home video recorder/player gives viewers more control over what they see and when. With small-format video equipment, the home viewer has the capacity to record programs "off air" for later viewing, rent or buy videotapes, and produce home videotapes.

The fifteen artists in the Biennial's eight programs represent the diversity of the single-channel video art field. These artists are using video to transform the other arts such as dance and music, and are rethinking the traditional genres of narrative and performance.

Dance and choreography have played an important role in video art's history. The movement of the dancer through a performance space provides a unique challenge to the video artist seeking to translate the dance experience into the two-dimensional, small-screen properties of video. *Parafango*, produced by Charles Atlas with Karolm Armitage, is a videotape about the creation of dance and the production of a videotape. Atlas, who has previously collaborated with Merce Cunningham and other dancers, has produced a compelling and engaging work about art and artists. *Damnation of Faust: Evocation* is Dara Birnbaum's vision of a playground in which the play and movement of children are choreographed. The result is a lyrical contemplation of place and innocence in the midst of an urban environment (Dara Birnbaum's 1985 Biennial video installation is also based on material from the single-channel *Damnation of Faust*).

Language forms the basis of Peter Rose and Jessie Lewis' *The Pressures of the Text* and Gary Hill's *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia)*. Peter Rose, who is also a performance artist, plays the role of an "explicator of texts" in this satire, the title of which derives from Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*. Rose delivers a humorous take-off on theories and hermeneutics — prevalent in contemporary linguistics and philosophy. Gary Hill has taken passages from *Through the Looking Glass* and Gregory Bateson's *Steps Toward an*

Ecology of Mind and directed his performers to speak the sentences in reverse. Hill then edited the tape so that, although we hear them speaking backwards, they sound as if they are speaking normally — yet slightly askew. Through this alienating effect, in combination with the actions of the performers, the nonsense of Lewis Carroll is subtly mimicked.

Woody Vasulka and Bill Viola have created a unique aesthetic through innovative use of video technology. In Vasulka's *The Commission* the tempestuous relationship between Hector Berlioz and Niccolò Paganini is enacted in the American southwest. Vasulka uses various video effects to construct an elaborate metaphor for the two contrasting artistic temperaments. Bill Viola's *Anthem* explores the relationship between image and sound as both are graphically used to compose a vision of the individual in an industrial, high-tech landscape (like Birnbaum, Viola is represented by both single-channel and video installation work in the Biennial).

Dan Reeves' *Sabda* and Ed Emshwiller's *Skin Matrix* are personal videotapes that address the self of the artist through different visions. In *Sabda*, Reeves illustrates the language of Indian philosophy with image-processed views of people and landscape. In *Skin Matrix*, Emshwiller turns the camera on his own body: skin becomes a terrain of textures electronically juxtaposed with other surfaces and environments. Lyn Blumenthal's two-part *Social Studies* investigates the nature of cultural spectacle by contrasting Cuban and American television. In *Social Studies I: Horizontes* she uses a daytime dramatic serial that stresses Cuban solidarity; *Social Studies II: Academy* consists of moments from an Academy Award ceremony. In both segments, Blumenthal attempts to expose the ideological underpinnings of cultural forms from two different economic systems. Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's *Vault*, which juxtaposes two melodramas suggestive of television soap operas, is a tongue-in-cheek look at the representation of sexuality and romance on television.

Ken Feingold's *The Double* combines material from television with new imagery shot by the artist to create vivid work about the spectacle of violence as seen on television and in our environment. Juan Downey's *Information Withheld* is a semiotic study of the signs of fashion and politics in our culture. Downey's image-processed documentary footage from Egypt and New York constitutes a witty exploration of the signifiers of Western and Eastern culture and their borrowings from each other. Doug Hall and Joan Jonas are performance and installation artists whose videotapes have a compelling theatrical presence. Doug Hall's *Songs of the '80s* is a visually and aurally graphic work that conveys a sense of the emblematic, seductive power of the video image. Over the past ten years, Joan Jonas has created a body of work that draws on numerous sources: the artist's life; Grimm's fairy tales; news events. In *Double Lunar Dogs*, Jonas refashions this material into a science fiction vision of the imagination. Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* is one of the most ambitious independent undertakings created for television: a three-and-a-half hour video opera that gives visual form to Ashley's complex scoring and elliptical use of language. Its subject is the yearnings and frustrations of America as seen in the foibles of a small rural town. Presented in its entirety at the Whitney Museum, *Perfect Lives* has been excerpted for the Biennial tour.

Program I

Parafango, 1984. Charles Atlas. Color; 37 minutes.

Damnation of Faust: Evocation, 1984. Dara Birnbaum. Color; 10 minutes.

Program 2

The Pressures of the Text, 1983. Peter Rose and Jessie Lewis. Color; 17 minutes.

Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia), 1984. Gary Hill. Color; 32 minutes.

Program 3

The Commission, 1983. Woody Vasulka. Color; 45 minutes.

Anthem, 1983. Bill Viola. Color; stereo; 11.5 minutes.

Program 4

Sabda, 1984. Dan Reeves. Color; 15 minutes.

Skin Matrix, 1984. Ed Emshwiller. Color; 17 minutes.

Program 5

Social Studies I.- Horizontes, 1983. Lyn Blumenthal. Color; 20 minutes.

Social Studies II. — Academy, 1983—84. Lyn Blumenthal. Color; 18 minutes. Vault, 1984.

Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. Color; 12 minutes.

Program 6

The Double, 1984. Ken Feingold. Color; 28 minutes.

Information Withheld, 1983. Juan Downey. Color; 28 minutes.

Program 7

Song of the '80s, 1983. Doug Hall. Color; 17 minutes.

Double Lunar Dogs, 1984. Joan Jonas. Color; 25 minutes.

Program 8

Perfect Lives, Part IV — The Bar (Differences) and Part V- The Living Room (After the Fact), 1983. Robert Ashley. Color; 3.5 hours (60 minute excerpt).

III. New American Video Art: 1987 Biennial.

The 1987 Biennial features the work of fifteen film and fifteen video artists. By presenting the work of both established and emerging media artists, the exhibition demonstrates the vitality of today's independent film and video. It showcases the broad spectrum of styles, forms, and genres that constitute contemporary media arts.

The film and video selection represents techniques and strategies shared by film and video artists alike. These include: the narrative made — the construction of stories through written texts, acting, and sets; the documentary — representation of social reality through recorded image; image-making — an avantgarde approach that explores new forms using abstract images and image-processing techniques; and animation which combines series of hand-drawn and pixelated shorts in abstract and representational sequences.

In addition to addressing formal issues, the film and video selection explores political ideas — and, in particular, feminist issues — that have become increasingly central to artists.

Bill Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986) suggests a phenomenology of perception, as the artist meditates on how we perceive and respond to the world around us — both our physical and spiritual environment. The artist's eye becomes that of the camera, recording a catalogue of images and sensations. We move, through this videotape's five parts, from still-life interiors to images of animals in nature, landscapes, and Indian fire-walking rituals. Viola's "eye" is also the self, the "I" of the artist whose work constitutes a cross-cultural inquiry into other ways of seeing and thinking.

The relationship of language to image has been central to the work of many independent video artists, including Gary Hill. His videotape *URA ARU (the backside exists)* (1985—86), produced while he was an artist-in-residence in Japan, treats a selection of Japanese words as palindromes, words that are the same when read backward and forward. Characterized by

great economy of action and image, the tape presents a series of visual-verbal haiku; the printed word, moving through each scene, echoes the spoken word. By inscribing words in the narrative space, Hill places two aspects of language — sound and image — in a dialectical relationship.

A number of artists have made videotapes that critique commercial television and expose its socio-cultural ideology. Two recent works by Hans Breder — *My TV Dictionary: The Drill* and *My TV Dictionary: The Helicopter* (1986) — explore the relationship of the home viewer to commercial television. To produce these works, which figure in a longer series, Breder recorded footage from commercial programs and edited them into a montage that reveals their violent and sexist subtext.

Sherry Millner's *Scenes from the Micro War* (1985) creates a satiric narrative of the nuclear family acting out fantasies of Ramboesque survivalists. Millner takes from television and the print media popular images of power and uses them to comment on the rhetoric of militarism.

Matha Rosler's *If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION* (1985) interrupts recorded footage of network news reports with electronic interference, blocking out and disrupting the flow of "information". This technique creates a kind of realized metaphor: seeking to dramatize the impact of the mass media, Rosler offers a literal interpretation of the dis-information that, in her view, crosses media news desks in the guise of objective reporting.

Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986) exploits the technique of video keying to insinuate the artist literally into the serial melodrama *Dynasty*, Braderman's running commentary and her interruption of the show's narrative constitute a witty, deflating critique of that program. By trespassing into the text, Braderman exposes *Dynasty* — and commercial television as a whole — as a means of merchandising a way of life. In particular, she highlights the "commodification" of women through insistent association with objects, clothes, and sex.

Video artists have appropriated a variety of texts and images to explore how a culture represents itself in history and myth. In *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel* (1986), Steve Fagin audaciously weaves together texts by Flaubert and Roussel, and images by Marcel Duchamp. Combined with performance and dialogue, these appropriated words and image playfully resurrect the pre-modernist and modernist text as a kind of visual "language machine", to use Michel Foucault's term for Roussel's Surrealist texts.

The appropriation of classical myth is the basis of Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's *Kappa* (1986). The Kappa is a mythological Japanese figure who pursues young women and yearns to take part in a society from which he is excluded. Anarchic and archaic, the Kappa remains a popular myth in Japan, and has even been used to promote a popular soft drink. The Yonemotos, who have a strong interest in the fetish habits of popular culture, use the Kappa (played by collaborator Mike Kelley) to satirize the values of contemporary life.

Dan Graham's *Rock My Religion* (1986) traces the history of rock 'n' roll in terms of its links with American religious culture. Through image and interpretive text, Graham links rock 'n' roll's messianic and often ecstatic appeal to young people to that of religious groups from the Shakers to the Southern Baptists.

The personal documentary occupies an important place in the history of independent video. One of its leading practitioners, Skip Sweeney, made *My Mother Married Wilbur Stump* (1985), an extraordinary portrait of his mother — and the man she married after the death of

Skip's father. Through home movies and interviews, Sweeney builds marvelously witty portraits and explores relationship within the family. A companion piece of his earlier work, *My Father Sold Studebakers*, the tape is an outstanding example of video verite, in which the artist uses his camera to establish a dialogue with his subject. *J.S. Bach* (1986), a documentary that figures in a series of videotapes by Juan Downey, begins as a personal reflection on the death of Downey's mother. Although it touches on the music and life of Bach, it is hardly a conventional portrait of the composer; rather, it explores the semiotics of culture and society.

The special techniques of video image processing have always figured prominently in video art. Independent video artists make use of the array of techniques that have been devised for commercial purposes, but unlike commercial TV producers, they do not use these techniques to create "special effects". Rather they use them as the vocabulary for a new visual language. Several videotapes in the exhibition exemplify this trend.

Matthew Schlanger's *Lumpy Banger* (1986) and *Before the Flood* (1985) do not follow the rigid digital symmetries of many image-processed techniques. Rather, these works create an intertextuality — combining idioms from print media and the visual arts — that is specifically video in its movement and quality. Peer Bode's *Blind Fields* (1985) and *Animal Migrations* (1985) incorporate found footage, abstract images, music and text, extending the reach of image processing. Bode's style charts a refreshing new course in the relationship of sound and text to image. In his work, sound and text support and amplify the meaning of the image, rather than merely illustrating it. A leading figure of video image processing, Shalom Gorewitz has delved into the relationship between language and image in his work. In the videotape *Run* (1985), he uses colorized, constantly shifting images — both abstract and representational — to carry forward this work. The 1987 Biennial marks the fifth year that both film and video have been fully represented in the exhibition. During that time, these media have been reshaped by dramatic changes in the economy and technology of production, distribution, and exhibition. The works presented show that today's media artists are at the forefront of technological change, and at the same time are deeply engaged in the aesthetic and ideological concerns that confront artists working in every medium.

John G. Hanhardt

Program 1

The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel, 1986. Steve Fagin. Color; 74 minutes.

Program 2

Kappa, 1987. Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, in collaboration with Mike Kelley. Color; 28 minutes.

J. S. Bach, 1986. Juan Downey. Color; 28 minutes.

Program 3

Rock My Religion, 1986. Dan Graham. Color; 57 minutes.

Program 4

I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like, 1986. Bill Viola. Color; 89 minutes.

Program 5

If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could be DISINFORMATION, 1985. Martha Rosler. Color; 17 minutes.

Scenes from the Micro War, 1986. Sherry Millner. Color; 24 minutes. -

Program 6

My Mother Married Wilbur Stump, 1985. Skip Sweeney. Color; 28 minutes.

Joan Does Dynasty, 1986. Joan Braderman. Color; 31 minutes.

Program 7

URA ARU (the backside exists), 1986. Gary Hill. Color; 28 minutes.

Blind Fields, 1985. Peer Bode. Color; 5 minutes.

Animal Migrations, 1985. Peer Bode. Color; 11 minutes.

Lumpy Banger, 1986. Matthew Schlanger. Color; 1 minute.

Before the Flood, 1985. Matthew Schlanger. Color; 6 minutes.

Run, 1986. Shalom Gorewitz. Color; 4 minutes.

My TV Dictionary: The Drill, 1986. Hans Breder. Color; 4 minutes.

My TV Dictionary: The Helicopter, 1986. Hans Breder. Color; 4 minutes.

IV: New American Video Art: Expanded Forms.

The works by Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, and Buky Schwartz on view in "Video Art: Expanded Forms" represent installation, one aspect of the video art form. They each explore the expressive potential that resides within the properties of the medium. In addition they reflect on the representation of the body within the medium as an aesthetic text. Bruce Nauman, in his video work from the early 1970s (represented in the videotape exhibition with *Lip Sync* [1969]), turned the camera on himself and through various strategies, including repetition, treated his body as a text. In *Clown Torture (No, No, No, No)* (1987), a recent work which marks a return by Nauman to video, the repeated image of a clown exclaiming "No, No, No, No" becomes a psychological portrait that recalls Nauman's earlier confrontation with the dynamic of how we perceive ourselves through gestures.

Nam June Paik, the pioneering figure in the history of video art, also returns in his *Family of Robot* to issues important in his earlier work. *Baby* (1987) recalls Paik's *Robot K-456* (1964) a remote-controlled robot that he used in various performances in the 1960s. In these works Paik employs the metaphor of the human body and the family to control and humanize contemporary technology.

The third work on view in this exhibition is *Forfera* (1988) by Buky Schwartz. Schwartz' installations have been characterized by their exploration of the closed-circuit properties of the medium. The position of the video camera and the viewers' relationship to the space that the camera covers is explored by the artist through the movement of the rotating disc. Here the viewer's and camera's points of view are engaged through the movement of the sculpture within the room.

Seen together these works describe very different aesthetic strategies to employ a new technology to imagine and see the body and self as both humanizing studies, perceptual studies, and probing insights into the psychology and psyche of the human body and spirit.