

MONA JIMENEZ: I have had the privilege to work with the Experimental Television Center on the Video History Project, and be the coordinator of this conference. Actually, to get to this point was a really amazing process and there were many people who helped along the way. A lot of people have made this event and this weekend possible. One of the contributors that are actually a sponsor of this event is VidiPax, a video restoration company in New York City. We would like to say thank you very much to Jim Lindner for doing that. We also got support from New York State Council on the Arts (Debbie Silverfine's here representing them); the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Dave Jones Design, whom we cannot forget; and many individual contributors. I want to also take a moment to say that if it was not for the Experimental Television Center and Ralph and Sherry Hocking, we would not be here—it has been a real privilege to work with them. Thank you.

I was not actually in Syracuse during the heyday of early video art; I was in Geneva, New York. I had my PortaPak and was doing community video and making artwork, intimidating bureaucrats—you know, that kind of stuff with cameras. But since then I learned that there were people criss-crossing the state, doing amazing work. In Syracuse, there was truly some remarkable work being done and I am really happy to introduce David Ross tonight, to bring him home to Syracuse and home to his position as the first video curator. I am really glad he is here, and looking forward to hearing what he reveals from those days.

David Ross is widely known as a champion of contemporary art. He began his career as world's first video curator at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, where he organized pioneering media exhibitions with such groups as Raindance, the Videofreeks, the Experimental Television, among others, as well as artists such as Frank Gillette, Shigeo Kubota, and Nam June Paik. He then served at the Long Beach Museum of Art and the University Art Museum at Berkeley, where he was chief curator. While director at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, he served as founding chair of the Federal Advisory Commission on Major International Exhibitions, co-founded the Contemporary Art Television Fund and taught a Senior Seminar on Contemporary Art at Harvard University. From 1991 to 1998, he was director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he recently curated (with Peter Sellars) a major retrospective of the work of Bill Viola. He recently moved on to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and I hope we will still have opportunities to collaborate across the country. Please welcome David Ross.

DAVID ROSS: Today I feel very old. I can tell you that the reason I feel old is not because we are talking about the history of video; it is because I remembered the last time I was in this room was to hear Huey Newton. And I am not Huey Newton—he was great. It was an amazing lecture.

This is a bit of a homecoming for me—my video bar mitzvah—and it is something I have been looking forward to for a while. I was not quite sure who was going to be here, because of the transitions in my life right now, and I should have paid more attention to

all the mail that I was sent. I knew there was a conference on the history of video, but I had no idea that there were going to be literally dozens of people who I have known for nearly thirty years. Fortunately I have mentioned some of them, but I do not mention all of you. What can I say? The fact of the matter is that I could just scrap the lecture and go around the room, and we can tell stories about everybody who is here. That might be just as much fun.

This is an incredible moment right now. Whoever had the idea (probably Sherry, because she always had great ideas) of convening a conference to talk about video's history at this particular point in time could not have timed it better. For some strange confluence of reasons, all of a sudden video's history has been revealed, as if the clouds have lifted. There is rarely an opening or a lecture I go to where I am not approached by Ph.D. candidates doing their theses on Peter Campus, Bill Viola, or the early video work of Nam June Paik—it is actually astounding! But of course, there's a new academic industry, and that is important too.

I am really glad that this evening is partly sponsored by a company that is involved with the restoration of videotapes. It is a pressing issue. There is a lot of important art languishing on people's shelves. We can only hope they left the plastic bags off the reels, because it turns out, it is the only way that the tape is safe because if you kept it in the bag, it is going to rot. I have found remarkable things in my own files and on my shelves that, because the Bay Area Video Coalition has a very active preservation program, we are able to save and place in public collections or make available to scholars. So I am

very grateful for them, and for all of their interest. I understand too those of you who are here out of enlightened self-interest—that is why we all do what we care about. We got involved in video in the first place because, somehow, we felt it was something we had to do. It was a way we could personally engage the world.

Let me state that I am a museum director and a curator. I have grown relatively comfortable with those titles, even though those who know me realize how far out in left field I came from to attain those titles. I have never felt comfortable with the term historian, probably because I am not one but also because I know how hard it is to be a good one, and to be thorough. To be honest, I lack the willingness to shed my prejudices and passions at this point in my life, and if you cannot do that, you cannot be a worthy historian. I am still too close to the material—both video and other—that I am involved with to have the kind of distance that real historians require. I am a witness: that is what I am. I am an unindicted co-conspirator, and I am still infected with a bad case of attitude. So please make a note of that, lest you find yourselves confused later. I do not want any nasty letters!

So here we are. The Success of the Failure of Video Art: or Video Art Gets the History It Deserves. How absolutely fitting: a conference featuring presentation of scholarly and not so scholarly papers dealing with the history of video art and its relation to this region: Upstate New York and Syracuse. I am thrilled it is not snowing. You have no idea how much prayer I invested during the High Holidays on this, and I guess prayer works.

It has always seemed rather odd to me that this activity first took root in this region, rather than, say, Los Angeles. Was it something in the water? That is what the Genesee Beer people used to tell us in their ads. Or was it the fact that being *the* U.S. major metropolitan region with the longest season of the absolutely worst weather, there was a tolerance, perhaps even a willingness—or maybe we should call it a desire and need—for an art form that demanded so much time indoors? This theory is only enhanced when we factor in the intense video activity which took place in Binghamton, and especially in Buffalo. Have you ever visited Buffalo in the winter? Makes this look like the Bahamas.

But seriously, we can look at two major factors, it seems to me, that led to the development of video around here, besides the fact that a man named Jim Harithas happened to take over the Everson Museum as its second director in 1971. He had the strange idea of hiring me (a twenty-one year old and still an undergraduate here at Syracuse) as curator. There are two much more important factors than either Jim's crazy wisdom or my presence and willingness to do anything for a hundred dollars a week. I think the two major factors really were the presence of the New York State Council for the Arts, and the inspired radical activism of Ken Dewey (the late figure and force at NYSCA) who was so ably followed by a man who built video art for all of us, Russell Connor. Without Russell, and without NYSCA and the funding they provided, we were another small city where some people were interested in this new thing taking place. But because these people at the council had the vision to get equipment into the hands of artists, filmmakers, poets, dancers—without any preconditions—a certain kind of activity was able to happen.

Also taking place at this particular moment in the steady progress of contemporary art, as it was practiced in New York and elsewhere, during the history of what is now referred to as Conceptualism; it was a moment during which the attendant philosophical questioning of the nature of art and its ontological properties and social functions provided the basis for an enormous opening up of art practices. Needless to say, in its early years, the juncture of the words video and history seemed an even more oxymoronic construction than the phrase “video art” itself. It was not that we were uninterested in history, or unaware that what we were collectively engaged in would have historical resonance someday—maybe even a real historical significance. I would often introduce programs and exhibitions in shows at the Everson that seemed to present far too much material, with the disclaimer that in 1972 or so, it was far too early to impose quote “premature critical standards on a medium whose distinctive features and special qualities were still emerging.” At the Everson, I was overtly concerned with the conflict that arose when we had to make choices—make history, so to speak. Yet our very provisional judgments of quality would skew later efforts to develop a coherent and comprehensive historical view of this very brief moment in time. That was a concern we all had. Was a decision not to show something that we just could not recognize perhaps relegating a wonderful idea by an interesting artist to the dustbin of history? As a young, untrained, absolute novice curator, this position often left me feeling not only exposed and deeply dissatisfied. I realized that our job collectively was to get as much material in front of as many people’s eyes as possible, and to hopefully generate a critical discourse.

It is understandable that this notion of video history emerged relatively recently. Nearly thirty years after video art began to generate its genuine history, an actual history of this form is still a somewhat fresh development. It is not that contemporaneous histories of video art were not written or published—quite to the contrary. Video art was first and foremost a revolutionary communications medium, developed during a period of heightened historical awareness. It numbered amongst its early practitioners several very good and motivated writers: Paul Ryan, Ira Schneider, Beryl Korot. *Radical Software* exerted a strong influence on video makers, and later, *Afterimage* and then *Artforum* provided some of the first cogent and seriously developed critical and theoretical writing about video art. But that was not history; that was the beginning of critical reflection. In recent years, a generation of academic writers and media studies scholars have begun to consider video art, both within a traditional art historical framework as well as from the broader perspective of cultural or media studies. Moreover, in the general press, video art has always been good future shock copy for the adventurous feature writer or the jaded television critic. Imagine: Artists working within the vast wasteland. How wacky! How provocative! How futuristic! We all know Michael Shamberg, who founded Top Value Television after being allied with the Raindance-Videofreeks nexus for a while, is now a major Hollywood film producer. He began his career as a reporter for *Time Magazine* and had the assignment to cover the exhibition “TV as a Creative Medium” at the Howard Wise Gallery. That assignment blew his mind, and he gave up *Time Magazine* to join the world of video. Eventually, he gave up the world of video to join the world of Hollywood, but that is another story. That is not such an unusual path. People from all over the world found themselves enormously attracted to the potential of video,

to do something in a medium they never thought they would have access to, and to speak directly and from their heart.

What I mean by a genuine video history is that we are able to place video art into a truly historical, dispassionate framework now; it is a perspective brought about by nothing less than the appearance of its successor, net culture, in all of its attendant forms. In a very real sense, the ability to place video art into the art historical mainstream is the direct result of a very significant cultural change, one that has rapidly evolved during the mid-1990s as perhaps the most profound cultural transformation of the century.

By this reckoning, now we should be able to agree about what we mean by the term video art. If we are writing the history, then let us finally define our terms. Can we say that video art is an art historical term that dates from the late sixties when first applied to describe three distinct types of artistic practice, linked by a shared use of video cameras, recording devices, monitors and projectors? In this way, video art shares an active engagement with the particular temporal representation made possible by the most distinctive feature of video: the reproduction of actual conveyance of real time.

Encompassing artists' videotapes, sculptural video installations, and live performances in which video plays a central role, the term video art remains—still to this day—gloriously imprecise. But when we use it, we all know what we mean. Perhaps this is because video art is not simply a term describing a form of practice; it is also an art historical phrase, delineating a particular period in the story of post-war art. An equivocal designation, it



refers both to experimental aesthetic practices allied with the creative use of television technologies, as well as to a specific movement in post-war art history. It is a movement.

The term video art is used to describe a wide range of aesthetic formulations, however, utilizing television productions as well as display and distribution devices. In fact, it conveys no specific aesthetic orientation, as a term like Surrealism or Minimalism or Abstract Expressionism might. Yet the idiom is in fact associated with an international flourishing of artists' experiments with industrial (as opposed to traditional) art technologies, and it generally signifies avant garde activity. Beginning in the late sixties and early seventies, art critics, journalists, and practicing artists roughly applied the term to indicate both an allied aesthetic and ideological attitudes towards the production of art made with newly emerging portable video technologies. Yet as with most newborn critical terms, it was overly simplistic, and as such, quickly emerged as a highly convenient shorthand for a nascent art form.

If viewed through an art historical matrix, video art involves aspects of late Pop Art, post-Minimalism, Performance Art, and the neo-Dada movement known as Fluxus, among other things. It engages the artistic imagination of photographers, filmmakers, painters, sculptors, choreographers, musicians, and also provided a novel medium for poets and composers. As a new art form with no specific formal precedent, video art was seen as wide open territory. Nam June Paik would say, "I am a poor man from a poor country, so I go where no one else is." Video art was a hybrid medium, free from a constraining, critical old guard or an institutionalized marketplace. It emerged during a period

characterized by artists who were motivated by strong, antiestablishment sensibilities. Video art provided an active forum for opposition to prevailing notions of mass media and its allied social structures. Its ability to reframe the standard forms of documentary representation and serve as a critique of the power and complicity of broadcast television journalism during a particularly difficult moment in American history attracted photographers and documentary filmmakers. When combined with the projected power of this kind of video work to serve as the locus of communities, new communities bound together by a shared and open-ended communication structure—an early model for the virtual community today. This form of video artwork was particularly attractive to those who felt the need to produce work that was directly and immediately relevant to the lives of the broader (non-art world) public.

Those who knew me then know that as a twenty-one year old former student radical, who often wondered aloud what I was doing working in an art museum, I personally found this kind of video art activity particularly meaningful and satisfying. But I soon saw the work that was made within the dialogue of art history also had a unique power and special relevance. In fact, its irrelevance to the mainstream art world gave that kind of video artwork a particular cache, an anti-heroic status. We knew that Nam June Paik's work and theoretical writings were more than relevant, they were revolutionary. We found a relationship of Paik to the social sculpture and the pained quest for spiritual grounding in the work of Joseph Beuys; from that we could extend video's role in the unfolding moment to the attempt to connect the political to the spiritual. Similarly, the early works of Juan Downey, Shigeo Kubota, Peter Campus, Bruce Nauman or Frank

Gillette, among others, all had undeniable physical and psychological presence, and looked like nothing anyone had ever seen or experienced before. It begged the larger question, as had the work of Ache [sp????????] to Benjamin a generation before, not whether this was art, but how the invention of this form and new technological paradigm had changed our definition of art: how it might function, how it might convey meaning, how it might contain and transmit poetry of one sort or another. The potential of a new epic theater was revealed; yet the idea was dependent upon the realization of a more complete system than that provided by the art museum, or even the alternative media center.

In general, the real-time capacity of video art (the miracle of instant playback that we now greet with a yawn and a nod of “what else is new?”) was *the* salient feature of early video experiments. Considering how difficult and clumsy it was to edit, simple playback or live video allowed for the embrace of the mundane real world in real-time or in seamlessly recorded approximation of real time. How positively Warholian! How appropriate an antidote to the world in which violence and velocity were inextricably linked, and how critically necessary to sculptural practices (like Bruce Nauman’s) which embraced both the Duchampian conflation of the body and the machine, as well as the phenomenological approach to the experience of art itself.

Those artists who came upon video art from their work in electronic music found the medium perfect as an extension of the increasingly productive merger of computers,

synthesizers, and other electrical devices. Alvin Lucier, Charles Atlas working with Merce Cunningham, David Tudor and that guy who used to work with David, Bill Viola, [?????is he referring to Bill Viola as the guy that worked with David or is there someone else????], are wonderful examples of the ways in which this orientation led to the creation of extraordinarily innovative art and changed our idea of music in this century. The pre-digital world of analog synthesizers and the ability to compose with electronic images through transformed video camera signals or purely electronic input, predicted and led to the development of a wide range of new creative possibilities for artists as diverse as Woody Vasulka, Stephen Beck, Dan Sandin, and the late Ron Hays. This development (which so directly comes from the world of experimental filmmaking and such masters as Jordan Belson, Hollis Frampton, and John Whitney and so many others) opened up the formal possibilities of images manipulation for a new generation of artists, with closer links to the evolution to the digital computer.

Aside from Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema*, which was a bible for many of us trying to grasp an overview of this activity in the late sixties and early seventies, there was no literature to speak of, no history to refer to. Several years later, Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot's 1974 book *Video Art* was the first survey art book to look at this activity. The next year, Gregory Battcock, the critic who made such a wonderful series of anthologies, produced an anthology of artists' writing on video; in Canada, Peggy Gale produced *Video by Artists*, also an anthology of artists' works and writings. Beyond that, there was no literature at all. Douglas Davis, the artist and writer, produced some early video projects—one in 1972 at the Everson, called *Talk-Out!* But perhaps more

important than his work was his writings in various categories—in art magazines, in catalogues, and even in the pages of *Newsweek* where he was an art critic at that time. There was David Antin, the poet and critic, who contributed a milestone essay relating video to the broadcast television grammar. The artist and critical writer Dan Graham, of course, published some extremely important work relating video space to architectural and psychological space. Rosalind Krauss, in *Video and the Aesthetics of Narcissism*, broke ground, in terms of video art and its relationship to newly emerging psychoanalytic theory. By and large however, these books and essays were few and far between.

I am not here to recapitulate in this short time an overview of video art pioneers—as many of you are here, for God’s sake! We could and perhaps should, go on about a number of things that took place during that period. For example, the initial hostility between filmmakers and video artists, which continued to confound me for years: why there was so much fear on the part of experimental filmmakers of the work that video artists were doing, why there was so much dismissal of the lack of craft, of the immediacy. I recall very well Hollis Frampton taking me to task in a discussion that we had together at Anthology Film Archives. It was one of the most humiliating moments of my life, because those of you who knew Hollis knew what a brilliant debater and a brilliant man he was; if he disliked something, you would not want to be on the other side of that argument. That kind of hostility, anger, and mistrust—that kind of skewed set of values and goals—was very much the norm between the film and video communities for many years.

Or to consider perhaps the separate camps even within the world of video art, separated along the lines of those artists who were involved in image processing (whom people suspected maybe they took one or two hits too many of blue cheer), and those whose work was more camera based, working out of montage theory and cinema practices, making more cinema-like video works; and then there were those working at more sculptural forms, using video tools to create extraordinary new forms of sculpture for traditional art spaces. Those groups did not speak. There was mistrust. Even NYSCA, in all its wisdom, could do little to bring those groups together and often inadvertently exacerbated the distance and the difference between those worlds. Perhaps we need to address the rise of the video installation itself, now a truly ubiquitous feature of contemporary sculptural practice. Maybe there exists a need to explore the specific relationship of these developments to analogous moments in the broader history of art. Video art and video sculpture did not occur in a vacuum. We are able to look back now and see precisely how post-Minimal sculpture and the evolution of the use of these tools was so perfectly connected and linked. Though my putative theme for this discussion is the success of video's failure, the question I would like to raise in fact deals with the current of affairs of media art.

We had no idea how the force of the marketplace and the interlocking forces of technological change would affect what we were doing back then. In Syracuse, as in progressive communities around the United States, the advent of cable television was viewed as a crucial event in the growth of the city, in the evolving history of video, and in the maturing of our cultural infrastructure. Along with my colleagues who worked with

me at Synapse and at the Everson, we all believed deeply that the advent of cable television would provide the necessary framework and actual support for the extension of video art, the art museums' and the artists' influence, directly into the homes and the lives of people who, for the most part, were passive audiences for commercial television, and to whom I felt the art museum remained a distance abstraction. I hoped that video art would allow the artist and the poet to exert a humanizing and creative destabilizing force into American life. Though I never imagined this force would unseat or replace the power of commercial entertainment, it never bothered me since what I hoped to see come about was merely the presence of the artist's mentality and sensibility in the operation of the machine that managed our consciousness. It did seem to me that the art museum had the responsibility to be a force in favor of this kind of pervasive change, and that cities, museums, and their audiences would only gain from the change in the structure of the media ecology. But cable television, in its first generation, failed to do this in a very obvious and important way. No one expected enlightenment from this industry; no one expected enlightened leadership or intelligence from the leadership of this industry. What we expected was what we saw, because its values were always directly a part of the major media corporations that control, and continue to control, so much of our information economy where bottom line profit and shareholder value are the only issues that matter.

Most critically, however, cable television suffered from an immediate bandwidth problem. As a result, many of the blue sky predictions of a mass medium based on an economy of abundance were soon transformed into dark jokes. Whether that scarcity ever

existed, whether it still exists (even within systems of hundreds of channels), whether it is in fact a manufactured phenomena in the interest of maintaining control of an economic system is, in fact, a moot point today—unless you are searching for a link between the destruction of the Red Line trolleys in Los Angeles and General Motors, and the sorry state of cable television and the ascendancy of CNN-Time Warner. But the fact remains that that time is on our side. Within a highly commodified world, time has become and remains one of the most valued products bought and sold around the world today.

Although I held out hope, as did so many, that cable would turn this around, the demise of things like CBS Cable or Russell Connor's channel "A For Art" made it very clear that this was not to be. To expect enlightenment from the cable television industry was to expect enlightenment from the franchise fried chicken industry. As I stated before, with an openness that surprised some, art museums quickly picked up the slack. Before you could even notice it, art museums around the world were presenting exhibition programs, screening series, and even retrospectives of important video artist's works. The notion of a screening space in an art museum, even though it seems to be a mistake of the menu for the food, became a notable feature in some of the nation's most preeminent institutions of modern art, like MOMA and the Whitney. John Hanhardt and Barbara London served as curators for so long, and still to this day continue to carry the torch for video art within institutions, John now at the Guggenheim. At the Long Beach Museum, the Walker Art Center, the ICA in Boston, San Francisco, the Wexner, and so many museums around the country, video programs have taken place over the course of fifteen, twenty years.



All that somehow seems irrelevant today. During the eighties and nineties, the rapidly growing popularity of consumer grade video camcorders and affordable home VCRs led to a very broad understanding of video as a thing, distinct from broadcast television. That was a very important psychological sea change. This recognition of difference was crucial to what followed, for in its own plodding fashion, time marched on, producing a generation of artists who grew up relating to video, as John Baldessari had predicted they might, like a pencil.

But a number of other things developed, that were not even predicted by John Baldessari, that not only challenged the direction and operation of our museum-based media programs, but our notion of the museum itself. Perhaps Intel's Gordon Moore saw the future, since it hinged so directly to the unbelievably rapid growth of the microprocessor industry. For end users like us, just simple consumers, the view was far less clear. Even many in the center of the computer industry, like Bill Gates himself, misread the growth rate and the unprecedented power of this new thing, the internet. Yet during the same period, the tools of video production became increasingly integrated with newly emerging digital technologies and the explosion of personal computing. I am not speaking about computer art, that art form making use of the electronic devices to generate different forms of image processed imagery. I am not referring to the remarkable ability to create three-dimensional spaces using very robust Silicon Graphics reality engines, to construct virtual reality environments, to create completely credible images purely from code that seem to have been generated by a camera, or to render previously unimaginable architectural constructions in space of great beauty. I am not speaking

about how the computer has aided in these important developments, results from the application of robust computers and brilliant software designs. This level of innovation is contained within broader, new developments of net-art and cyberspace. In McLuhan's terms, the net has embraced and recontextualized all earlier media, including video and film, text and music, and has rendered them all in the same way as art. Interestingly, as a result of the appearance of the internet, a new set of potentials began to appear to a generation of younger artists, those fully versed in video as a creative medium but a little bored; fully aware of its potential as a sculptural tool used in traditional space but dissatisfied with that space; fully aware that the medium had failed to extend the reach of the artist, or the extent of his or her engagement with the world; and fully aware that as a result of this failure, the artist remained in a relatively powerless condition, relative to the real potential of media art.

I remember when I was in that debate with Hollis Frampton at Anthology, he was particularly angry with me because I had said, "Video art cannot be assessed critically, because video artists do not have access to the tools of distribution. Video art will not be a complete art form until artist have the ability to make that decision to distribute their work as they like, point to point or point to space." In a retort that left me absolutely devastated, he turned to me and said—we had had many drinks—he turned to me and he said, "You know, Ross, now that you have moved out to California—" (this was my first move to California) "you have changed. Richard Nixon..." (He evoked the word Richard Nixon, and it really freaked me out! Where was this going, I thought.) He said, "Richard Nixon was once accused of belonging to an antisemitic country club." Now he's using

the word anti-Semitic, and my parents were in the audience. He explained that he was boring from within. “That is what you are doing, Ross. You have gone Hollywood. You are just out there, boring from within.” I crumbled. There was literally nothing I could say. Thank God Richard Serra was in the audience, and got up and reminded Hollis that it was Nelson Rockefeller, that wonderful Republican, who had funded so much of the video experimentation that we all have relied upon. It allowed me to regain my thoughts.

But the fact is that from that point to this point, the relative power condition that artists find themselves in has not changed—ironically. Finally, to the earlier question of why video art is now so openly embraced as a legitimate field for study—as the art world developed an appreciation of the broad range of important work produced within this medium, following the logic of McLuhan’s dictum, video art was no longer viewed as a threat. It was clear that video artists were threatening no one, that their power was contained. It was no longer inherently a radical destabilizing or reorienting practice. It was no longer cutting edge. It is now acknowledged as a mature medium whose qualities were particular to individual artists’ ability to work with an established set of tools, push the boundaries a bit further, and nestle themselves into a field with a rapidly developing academic practitioner. It is now a field like any other form of performance, cinema, or sculptural practice, subject to critical evaluation by a generation who view the medium as *terra cognita*.

This is not bad news. Video art has not run its course and it is not over by any means, more than any other art form can ever be over. Not more than any other form that we

have come to recognize and treasure. The fact that in our lifetime, we have seen the birth and maturing of a medium as rich as video art, is reason for continued study and considerable attention—and yes, even celebration. But we now face the wonderful prospect of trying to come to grips with this new thing, not actually a medium, not easily described as a space or a condition or an aesthetic formulation. It is something else. It is not recognizable. It is, in many ways, a product of the success of the failure of video art. It seems to me much more important to turn our attention not only to the history, but to the present and to the future. For what would Walter Benjamin say about the current state of things? Would the same larger questions asked in regard to photography pertain to this particular shift in paradigms? I will end with a series of questions that attempt to begin to locate and describe some of the distinctive features of this new thing. Hopefully, it will lead to a discussion of other features, aspects, and qualities of this new net-art.

So how do we define net-art? We think we can define video. Is net-art that work experienced within what we still embarrassingly call cyber space? Or is it that work produced with the tools of digital computer-based technologies? Probably the former, as the latter seems a bit restrictive and limiting. It seems to me that we still need to define the relationships that lie at the center of net-art as part of its primary definition. Perhaps we can do it in another way. What are the distinctive qualities of the art forms embedded within this space that are part of this net-art? That is a bit dicey to answer, as the wheel is really still spinning; it seems the best we can do is to try to keep score of those distinctive features and qualities that we might recognize today. Probably like many of you, I have spent many evenings scanning, surfing, browsing the net; I look at work that people

direct me to, find works that lead me to others, find myself part of an audience brought from one place to another, and find myself caught up in something that is more radical than anything else I have ever experienced in the world of media art. I have made a few observations. Although this list is by no means a hierarchical list, I'd say primary as a distinctive quality of this new net-art, and a feature that one longed for and found in some performance video and some video installation, was the interchangeable identity of readers and writers, the erasure of the line between the audience and the artist. That seems very high on my list. On the net, there is no longer a structurally enforced border between readers and writers. Authority literally flows back and forth within a net-art relationship. This can be seen in so many works, like very early work by Doug Davis, who once again was there early on, thinking theoretically about what this means, and made a work that the late Gene Schwartz acquired as a gift for the Whitney Museum, their first net-art work. I believe it is called *The World's Longest Sentence*. It is essentially a collaborative text on the Lehman College website, which continues to this day—it has been in process for about three years now. Each visitor to the site adds his or her own new text, a sort of unfolding exquisite corpse text project. I do not think it is great, but the idea is there: it is a live, open, totally iterative and interactive work. Or like Jenny Holtzer's first work that she produced for ada-web, that program now run by Benjamin Weil to commission interesting works by a group of fairly established artists. Jenny's work in ada-web, in which she re-presented her Truisms in a format that allowed specifically for readers to rewrite those phrases and reinsert them, reauthored, back into a continually mutating work. Those are just two very simple examples of the erasure of that line.

Far more complex psychogames are already taking place, in which identity and authorship are traded, hidden, transformed. Quite frankly, it is not always easy to know when you are looking at one. I think the ability to hide the idea of a work of art as a work of art is also a very distinctive quality in the net. It is very easy to not have to frame your work within the context of a museum or an art program. You are able to place it into a variety of contexts, where in fact, it fits seamlessly as a kind of guerilla activity, as a kind of pirate incursion.

But I would also say that the ability to mix real-time with recorded time—qualities borrowed from video art—seem a natural quality of this new space. In fact, recorded and live video, film, as well as instantaneous digital photography can be seamlessly integrated into web-based work. Shu Lea Cheang's *Bowling Alley* (work that she produced at the Walker) successfully creates this kind of hybrid temporal space. But the problems associated with slow download time and unpredictable transfer rates makes much of this capacity still very much a potential, although one whose reality is coming rather quickly, with the advent of cable modems. (I love the fact that cable once again finds its way into this!) But allied to similar concern for the transformation of identity and consciousness and the ongoing mutability of identity found in so much other media-based art today, Shu Lea's work relates her current net-art to much broader formal social aesthetic issues in circulation in the mid to late nineties. I think the fact that she is able to directly move those concerns into the net is a very important and salient feature.

Something that is quite wonderful is hypertextuality, or the ability to move from and between key words or images by virtue of links embedded in the code beneath those words or images. This is obviously a central feature of net-art, as it relies on the nature of the web's unique interconnectivity, its speed, and its near universality. There have been numerous hypertext literary collage works revealing this new set of aesthetic relationships. In a way, it seems to me an outgrowth of William Burroughs' famous cut-up text projects from the fifties, taken into the digital era, and made all the more potent by the potential for truly random juxtapositions. Mark Amerika's *Grammatron* project, was a fascinating example of the potential in this area.

We cannot notice that there is a capacity in net-art to the indexical. Works that are indexical in nature seem to have a special place within the world of the net in general; the World Wide Web is, as we have learned, one vast interconnected, searchable archive and database. Clearly, net-art has embedded itself into all the networked potential of video art, and the randomness and unpredictability of correspondence art, as well. It has the ontological capacities of conceptualism, and the ability to function quite effectively as agitprop. Antonio Muntadas' early web work *The File Room* is a great example of this rather straightforward use of these tools in this space. Some people dismiss using the merely indexical as too straightforward, but in fact, in *The File Room* the artist and a group of collaborators in Chicago produced an open archive devoted to the subject of censorship—cultural censorship—throughout history, from around the world. Not unlike commercially run databases such as Lexus and Nexis, the research backbone of the legal profession and journalism, *The File Room* contained searchable files with text and

illustrations, and grew for the three years it was in existence. It was remarkably useful. It is now been acquired as an object, by the Chicago Art Institute. (I believe that is the case. At least they were in the process of it.)

Net-art is also discursive, and exists within a malleable social space. This is where the Beuysian notion of art as social sculpture seems to be reflected in a great deal of the early net-art experiments; the very nature of online communities and chat rooms, their poor relations, depends on this very significant feature. The Walker Art Center Rhizome project called *The Shock of the View* constitutes an extraordinary opportunity to participate in a work which involves two commissioned net-art works set into a discursive frame, which itself consists of a listserv dialogue open to any subscriber free of charge, and two critical essays, which are being constructed in real-time, in relation to an evolving real-time evaluation and analysis of the works themselves. I cannot imagine a more complex intellectual community in process, and happening on a global level. The level the dialogue in the first three weeks of this project has been very high, and it reveals a wide range of very sophisticated and well informed critical opinion. The immediacy with which the world responded to net-art is easily ten times a factor than the speed that the world responded to video art, both on a critical level, as well as on a level of artist participation. Not to mention the fact that nearly every art museum, university library, public library, and other information industries have developed websites. I do not know many drycleaners who do not have websites at this point. The idea of this world has become so ubiquitous that the artist's role in it is not special or extraordinary; it has its



real place. There is something wonderful about the regular place for art, in a broad world where many people have access.

Now, the cost of the computers and equipment aside, the world which supports net-art is relatively inexpensive to inhabit. It is truly based upon an economics of abundance, and as opposed to the cable television model, the web has not yet been constrained and commodified. Although corporations like American Online have tried very hard, as well as CompuServe, to create a constrained shopping mall within the web, the reality is that the web remains fully unfettered. Compare this for a moment to the world of broadcast television, or to the world of the art museum, and you will see why there is a perceived threat to this new economy. The real-life-whenever-cam sites that we see now popping up along the web, where you get to watch somebody's real life, either photographed every hour or a real live video feed, flirts with this idea of the economy of abundance in a new low-cost fashion. The porn industry, which predictably has shown enormous creativity in their use of the net and its basic forms, has already created wonderfully erotic real life sex sites; but they are merely come-ons to credit card porn image four-X video or live four-X video download sites. We expected to see them, and we are happy to see them succeeding. But I can imagine net-art works which take the documentary format of the Loud family documentary and extend it towards the hyperbole that is *The Truman Show*. Net-art is dematerialized, but not necessarily conceptual; time-based, but unconstrained by social and economic factors normally at play in determining duration. That is to say, truly epic works can exist not in an approximation of real time, but in actual real-time.

Finally, power relationships are equally transformable as institutions vie with individuals within a more fully equalized field than ever before possible in the history of art. Net hackers, hactivists, net anarchists, or whatever term seems to fit, there is and will continue to be a strong undercurrent of intelligent antiestablishment sensibility in most interesting net-art. Legitimate concerns are raised by those who fear that anti-porn crusaders will lead to strangulating forms of censorship, and close down the web's spirit of pure freedom. But the reality is that the power relationships made possible by the net will forever change the relationship between artists and institutions, and challenge our very existence. What does an art museum do in a world, looking forward, where an individual artist can (as Nam June Paik predicted in his 1974 collage, dedicated then to the great communication artist Ray Johnson) be his own television station? What does it mean when the museum no longer plays the role of promoter, or even mediator, and has to rely on its own intelligence to be a co-conspirator, and to play along with artists in direct relationships between artists and a public? Could the art museum, the contemporary museum that engages in net-art find itself obsolete, or at least transparent? Maybe it needs to be.

It seems to me that the failure of video art was its inability, finally, to construct a real community—a virtual community would have been good enough—that would have sustained the vision and the ability for artists to communicate directly to a world of people located in their homes, remotely from museums, and outside of the institutions of art. The successes of video have been catalogued well enough. They are remarkable. But its failure is central, and a central lesson that we need to learn as we begin to evaluate and

find ways of protecting the inherent qualities of the net today. For it is going to be in this generation of artists, who make use of this new set of tools within this new space, who come to see *it* as a pencil, that the real web art, the real media art, the great art of the twenty-first century is likely to come. Thank you very much.

(Tape stops, re-starts)

## QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

...not even recognize, enjoy, or even figure out how to get into yet, does not mean that work that is being made (whether it is painting with traditional media, making sculpture with objects, or working with video tools to create sculptural spaces or performances) will disappear, it is just entering a new phase. I think it is very important that we face the reality of that, the enormity of the change of the environment that has already happened. This is not something we are looking forward to or worrying about, this is a change that has taken place. So what does it mean to make video installation work in an era in which the work of art can be extended or constructed in another whole framework? Well, it does not mean the end of that old way of making art, but recontextualizing it. Our critical reading, as all critical readings do, will now change over time. If you created a slow scan experiment today using telephone lines and slow scan—anybody that remembers slow scan video experiments would consider it rather unnecessary, or quaint, or kind of like you were doing a historical thing by using that technology since you can in fact do that

for sixty-nine dollars by just hooking up to your phone line and your computer. So the new technology has created a new context. On a very basic level, this has allowed us to create a new framework for critical reevaluation. It is from within that framework that this first generation of video historians will write their histories. That is why history is so unpredictable and so unreliable—because it reflects the biases and the technological and social paradigms of the moment in which it was written. So though we understand the paradigm in which it is written, it may not be one that reflects directly upon the reality which many people were experiencing when they made their works. It is odd. It is only thirty years ago, and you say, “Well, that is not the way it was. No. It was not like that at all.” But you cannot construct that reality anymore because you cannot take it back to a level of unknowing, knowing now how this media has evolved and how new things have evolved.

ERIC ROSENZWEIG: I have some strong disagreements with some of your statements about the net. The backbone is fully owned by the phone companies—MCI or AT&T—that is perhaps even worse than the cable companies....

ROSS: Is it really worse that there is a commercially owned phone line system that you have access to...without any censorship or need to apply or run any content by anyone?

ROSENZWEIG: I do not think that is a negative thing...

ROSS: What is the opposition then?

ROSENZWEIG: I think perhaps as the bandwidth increases and our desire for bandwidth is increased, when we want to start seeing full motion video, we are going to be taxed or charged on the amount of bandwidth we are using.

ROSS: I think that is likely to be the case. I believe we are going to still stay within the framework of late capitalism. This is not bringing about total and continual revolution. It is not about that at all.

ROSENZWEIG: There are political implications to search engines, and who controls them. I think if your work is playing on the web, well, then it might as well be playing in the window of a laundry—without an institution such as the Whitney or San Francisco Museum or the Wexner who are able to get the word out. There's an interesting artist in Canada named David Rokeby, who writes about the political implications of search engines. Who's controlling them? How are judgments being made? How are decisions being made? I do not think it is as easy as just registering your site and hoping for the best.

ROSS: Well, I think that is an interesting point. You know, Nam June Paik named the term the “information superhighway” in an essay he wrote for the Rockefeller Foundation

in 1974 called *Education in the Paperless Society*. But as we all know, it is nothing like a highway. There are not off ramps and road signs, and you do not go in a single direction. It is an ocean, and you have to find your way. In fact, the role for the art museum may in fact be being an institution that helps guide an audience to a variety of works that curators have found and tried to deal with and place into an educational framework. Yet at the same time, artists who figure out a way to get their work to the audience they want will make truly radical and successful art. I do not know any artist who wants their work to be seen by the whole world—it's not necessarily the framework they are interested in playing in. But imagine if you are creating a work of art and you can have it seen globally by forty-thousand or fifty-thousand people. That is a wonderfully sized audience for a work of art. If every one of those people who sees it is giving you fifty cents, that is not a bad income from that work of art. So there is a potential for developing mechanisms in which artists actually can manage their own lives, distribute their own work; and they will maybe find some common carrier collection mechanism. Maybe AT&T will do it for anybody—for the drycleaner or for the artist, it just does not matter. Or maybe Bank of America and AT&T will merge and we will all really be in trouble. But there will be some mechanism. I guess maybe in my increasing middle age, I no longer fear those mechanisms because I see the potential to manipulate them. Artists have shown an ability to work under truly extreme situations; we are moving towards an era where artists can manage true control of their works and are able to deliver them to certain audiences. Poetry is inherently aimed at a small audience and is a communication not aimed at a broadband audience. I do not think this changes the relationships on a proportional level; it means that you have an opportunity to communicate globally, instantaneously, and

hopefully, in an unfettered way—except in countries that do not allow phone service into their systems, like China.

...Fifty percent of the world is not not connected to a phone... and still ninety-seven percent of the information in the information sphere comes from about eight percent of the world's information producers. The new information order has not yet changed things in a remarkable way. This is not total revolution. At the same time, this is a chance for artists to have access to an enormously new global audience. It is true artists cannot do everything, and they do not have access to audiences everywhere. There are vast parts of the world, in Africa, Asia, and Central Europe where there is no infrastructure left because of warfare; they do not have access to this poetry, and where there is a need for it, there are wonderful artists who would probably participate. But this is not a panacea. This is not about a new system that is going to eradicate want and hunger and fear. It is about expanding the horizons for artist's participation in the world—and that has to be worth something. If we believe that it is worth making a work of art, that is worth expanding, even as radically incrementally as the net will allow.

Questioner #1: I really appreciate your expanding the conversation out of video into the net and raising these issues. I think it makes a lot of sense, what you are doing. I wanted

to ask you, though, in terms of learning from video history, the issue of community. Why do you think video failed to create community?

CAROL GOSS : Could I talk about that for a minute?... I wanted to address that. I disagreed with what you said. To some extent, I agree with what you say about the net. I think it is ironic that a person who has spent most of his life in art institutions, which were initially established by the oligarchies for the elite with commodification of art to be put in a building that is owned by the board of directors, who invest in the individual artists—we could go into the politics of art institutions. But in discussing community, to go from the politics of art museums to egalitarianism for the entire planet in one leap is very altruistic. Addressing the issue of community in the art world, NYSCA sponsored a conference in March called Art and Technology, which was held at IBM Conference Center. One of the conference discussion groups was net-artists discussing what current projects they were involved in. Everybody was under twenty-one in the room, except myself and a couple other people; they were kids and they all had very elaborate projects up on the net. Some of them were sponsored by people, some of them with their own projects. They complained about lack of community and they said that they were jealous and envious of the media artists that preceded them (that are here tonight) that had Anthology, that had the Kitchen, that performed as groups, that did establish community. We were all seeing each other and realizing that there was a lot of community. These people who are on the net now may be communicating with half the world, but they do not know anybody down the block. They cannot go to a café and have a cup of coffee and hang out and discuss what they're doing.



ROSS: I am not sure that is entirely true, although it may have been true for the people that you were talking to that day. I am a member of Echo in New York, which began as, and remains a very lively downtown-based web community... and so many others around the country evolved as models of a community structure.

GOSS: Yes, but they were not physical presence. They thought of community, and they used the word community—in terms of the physicality, of being in the room and having the vibration on that level.

ROSS: I think it is true, this physical need for face-to-face communication, for being in a space like we are in this evening, which is not about to disappear even with the advent of technologies that allow for further abstraction of our relationships. In fact, it may create even more of a longing, a need for that kind of real contact. At least I hope so. I do not think anyone even remotely desires for it to replace the physical and social relations. It is about extending the discourse, extending the power and ideas and works of art beyond those small confines of communities—as wonderful as they were. Like the community that surrounded the Kitchen (and still does today), or museum communities and memberships of museums, outside, beyond the edges of those communities that feel comfortable interacting with one another. I think we have to recognize that as open as we may seem to be to many other people, as a media arts community, it was perceived as enormously closed to people who were on the outside and who did not understand how to get in—people who did not feel that somehow they belonged. That psychological barrier

is probably a lot less potent in the web, because of the nature of those tools and the ways in which people interact.

QUESTIONER: I think some issues are mixed up here. One of the things involved in the problems that video art faced is the fact that it is a very hot medium. In a way I think one of the real killing forces was MTV, in that you had a readily accessible, heavily subsidized media that was very similar in a lot of its root forms, that was totally free and available, and really undermined the ability of a lot of young video makers to be able to sell tapes on any kind of level. The thing that I find a little problematic now with web-art is the kind of bandwagon that comes along with it. Just to cite an example, one thing that really made me laugh was when the Guggenheim announced their web site; in order to even get the URL you had to go to a forty-dollar-a-person event, for them to give you the URL. I mean, talk about trying to make money out of something that is, you know, grassroots.

ROSS: You are making a very important point there. On one hand, the web presents a very radical set of alternatives; on the other hand, it is not inherently radical like video activity—whether it was community video work or early video art work, or any kind of video work—was inherently radical. You would not find it in another kind of situation or in an analogous situation thirty years ago. Yet immediately, the net is open to a very clearly commercial exploitation and remarkable commercial inventions, as well as very grassroots, anarchistic and poetic uses at the same time. So it is a far more diverse field.

I am actually happy with the fact that it is not monolithic, that it is like the real world—or more like the real world than the media art world. Maybe that is an answer to Paul's question, why the video community did not sustain itself, because it was not enough like the real world.

QUESTIONER: What you were saying about every artist being able to hang up their own shingle, in a way, and be their own producer is the real power of the thing. I guess what is funny is how many people out there are trying to draw maps to what everybody should be looking at and what everybody should not look at. You have to have some of that on some level, but it seems like an extension of the same kind of myopic vision that we see in institutions in general. The one problem I see with web-based work that someone is going to have to address this sooner or later—is that I could make something for Cosmo Player 1, and six months from now it's gone, and I can't show that work anymore or do anything with it.

ROSS: It is absolutely true. At the San Francisco Museum we collect websites, which sounds like an odd thing to do. It was being done before I got there. In fact, when I first came to the museum I thought it was a very odd thing to collect websites—sort of like putting a pin through the head of the butterfly and putting it on the wall. I thought: That is kind of perverse, because a website is a living thing. Aaron Betsky (the curator of architecture and design who started this collection and who is quite a brilliant guy) he said, "No, no, I want to have absolutely clear examples, with all the necessary emulation programs, so that in twenty-five years, we can look at a website from 1995, that was

produced with certain technologies, for a certain industry...” We are not just collecting art websites, we are collecting industrial websites and, for their graphical forms. The more I have come to look at the collection, the more I think it is a rather interesting idea, even though it is kind of perverse. But how would you collect websites? How would a museum engage? Do we keep them going forever? What does it mean if the artist backs out of a project in which the artist’s own sense—spirit and intelligence—was an active part, and then they turn it over and they give it to the museum to own and keep running and staff in some way? It is not the same thing anymore. So, the idea of things necessarily being forever, just because they have the potential (a potential that fascinates me) is not necessarily critical to the definition of the form. But it does remain a fascinating distinctive feature.

QUESTIONER: One thing I am struck by, working with media art—and your last comment alludes to that, is this kind of acceleration that is taking place where if you look at something like the history of photography—a hundred-and-fifty years give or take—and there is a sixty-year period of nebulosity before things start to coalesce or what have you... In film, that period gets shrunk down to a hundred-year history, and like maybe thirty or forty years of raw development before these forms take. Now with video, we are talking about a thirty-year history. Now with net-art, obviously the internet has a longer history but the web Mosaic was made in 1991, '92—so we’re talking about six years. We are already able to pull out these works and have collections happening and museums buying it, so this process of maturation and obsolescence is becoming

increasingly short. I do not know if this is a general process of industrialization, or just going along with industrialization...

ROSS: What is the name of that mythical snake that eats its own tail? Ouroboros. We are getting to that point where we are consuming ourselves in real-time. It seems to be a historicizing of whatever, the last ten minutes. In fact, it still seems to me somehow reasonable.

CHRISSIE [Chris Hill????????????]: I think the issue of time is intimately connected with space. One of the reasons I think young artists are so interested in video installation and video from the late sixties and early seventies is that despite its materiality and despite its experimentation that led to the net works that we are talking about now, it remained intensely physical because it was a performative tool. So a lot of the experiments that took place with the camera were shifting the meanings from the object to the viewer in space, which had also been done by minimalism. But the experience was still very much in the space itself. If you went to see a Joan Jonas performance, you were usually another artist or another person working with video who was in her loft, in her studio—there were thirty people, and that was it. It was an intensely physical, performative experience, and you “had to be there”. That sense of community also has to do with the fact that those works made in the seventies, about which there is such intense interest now, were physically based—as was a lot of conceptual art, comparatively speaking. There was an article in the *New York Times* about how a young generation of people are getting into fifties furniture. They are buying up fifties furniture because it is

so organic and physical. Growing up with the net, a generation of young people feels a need for a more physical and tangible experience in space. So at the time we are talking about historically, I think video's unique position was that it was just on the cusp of that moment of dematerialization; that was not simply the domain of video—dematerialization was happening everywhere in art. At the same time, comparatively speaking, it seems very physical. I think people have a need for physical containment and a physical relationship with each other, and a spatial experience—which is what Dan Graham's pieces were all about, and Bruce Nauman's corridors, video and performance and otherwise. That is what people really still have a very intense need for.

QUESTIONER: I feel that all of the arts have a tendency to cross over into each other. Perception plays a key role in art. I have forgotten who said it, but they said that to a lesser intelligence, our technology appears like magic. With the tools we have available to us, that technology is a form of divinity, one we must learn to channel. It seems like we are all afraid of this abstract monster that is trying to devour our reality, and it is... There's our way, to channel our divinity. It is a depletion of space.

ROSS(?): Very beautifully put, thank you.

QUESTIONER: I am actually glad we started moving away from the web to get back to video here, with your comments about performative video. And actually, I have to disagree because I do not think we are seeing a failure of video art. What I am seeing right now in New York is an explosion of video. It is so commonplace, I almost think it

has become mundane. One thing I think I share an interest in with many people who are very heavily involved—is the idea of video as a performative medium. This is something where, unlike film, the web and digital tools for example, and more akin to music, this is a camera with knobs; this is a box with knobs, faders, et cetera, that I can interact with in real-time and create an effect that I have precise control over.

ROSS: It is an amazing medium. I would not argue with that for a second.

QUESTIONER Cont.: What I am actually curious about is, and what I did not see a lot of discussion of when I was kind of getting my feet wet in video in the eighties, is the idea of how video can be played. With exceptions like Joan Jonas or the Totts [????], and Nam June's televised experiments... I am wondering if we can go back to that history and if you can give your comments and thoughts about what you were seeing at that time. I think a lot of people right now are becoming very interested in this idea.

ROSS: Well, that is a very good question and you are absolutely right. I have heard from students for years about how frustrating it is in general, to not be able to go into art museums and see in the permanent collections examples of the key video works, even those that were made as multiples—that is to say, as videotapes—during the late sixties and seventies and eighties. Yet that is part of the frustration of having a museum collection in a limited space, and that one must make those decisions. I remember Janine Antoni asking me at one point to look at a new work that she was thinking about, because she had heard about Joan Jonas' performances, and she'd read about them, but she had

never seen one. Where did you go to see them? Well I think for me, part of it is what the power of that was—and I do not see this as a negative at all—is that there was an ephemeral quality to them. They were not meant to be repeated or to be commodified. There was an attempt to make work that would have, as part of its distinctive quality, a truly fleeting moment. There was a sense of interest in video because it was not a thing that could be kept. No one imagined that there'd be concern about video preservation and video history today; it was just a simple thing you could do that was not part of the bullshit art world—making objects, framing them, and selling them in a system, or having them commodified or collected within a museum. There was a resistance. It was a form of resistance. It came about during a time when artists, primarily because of their opposition to the war (but other things as equally pressing), banded together and tried to find ways of remaining artists, but also resisting the incursions of the larger world. They were creating works that were hermetic, that were not for the larger world, but were about a kind of protest, and a way of life. So when Terry Fox made video installation works in the early seventies, or Howard Fried in San Francisco, they literally made them—as Chrissie was saying Joan Jonas was doing on the other coast—for seven or eight people to watch. They were not disappointed that they did not get a hundred-thousand people to watch. They did not care; it never even occurred to them. They wanted to work hermetically. It was about disappearing. It was about the artist being as close to disappearing, to becoming as pure a spirit, as pure a force as possible. I think the fact that the trail is hard to follow is perhaps one of the actual successes of the failure of video. And remember that my title is not The Failure of Video, it is The Success of the Failure of Video, because I think that video has succeeded enormously in informing and



transforming a generation of artists—those who both use electronic media tools to make work, and those who do not. Video informed people who are painting today, as well as people who are working in digital art, film, video or performance today. Its success has resulted in a different understanding of the role of time in works of art, and a different understanding of the potential that art can construct community. Has that happened yet? Have I found a work in this new scene, or do I even recall a work from the seventies or eighties, that just nailed it? No, I cannot say; however there was not a masterpiece orientation. No one spent much time saying, “Well, here it is. Here is *the* great work. Now we can move on.” There was not that kind of hierarchy. In fact, the lack of a critical hierarchy was, in part, a reflection of a collective desire to not have that happen, but to have a more consensual, communal response to work, rather than the construction of a hero system. That is why when the hero system of the eighties that elevated David Salle and Julian Schnabel to such prominence took place in a total vacuum; there had been no heroes.

QUESTION: I have a question about your observations of some changes in the nature of video art over the last thirty years. In a review of the Bill Viola show that you curated last spring, a reviewer referred to Bill as a modernist, in a way that has become pejoratively hip and fashionable. I have not kept up much in the last ten or fifteen years. But when things began, it was a through going modernism that I thought was driving everything—*Expanded Cinema*, *Radical Software*, *Synapse*. All the names and everything showed this almost positivist attitude about the changes we thought could be brought about. I am not

sure what has happened lately. Is the change to postmodernism interesting, important? Is that a dichotomy there?

ROSS: Well, that is an enormous question. Bill is a modernist, to the extent that I understand that term and how it is used, that is to say Bill's work posits technology in an idealist framework. He believes in the capacity of a work of art to create a transcendent space, with a set of controlled means. You know, the ideal of the modernist was really to harness the machine in a way that was spiritually and ideologically engaged, and would produce an ideal result. If you think back to who was the key modernist (maybe you would say it was Malevich, Mondrian) where you are talking about a true reduction of means and a true boiling down—Ockham's razor is applicable. When you look Bill's work, which really evolved out of the Cage/Tudor tradition, it has developed in a way that has become more minimal and restrained, more about the attempt to attain some type of a transcendent space without any hedging. There was no sense in those work that perhaps the artist or the work cannot do that, which in a way, is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism—a certain kind of recognition of the fact that perhaps works of art cannot function in contemporary society. Perhaps they crumble under the pressure of late technological, late capitalism. And yet Bill's work turns away from that—or just ignores it—and posits something far more ideal. He is criticized for that in places where they consider that approach naive. I mean, Bill is very much considered a naive artist by some people. It is not that he is unaware of that; he's deeply aware of it. He isn't even upset when he hears people criticize him, like any artist. But the fact of the matter is that that is what it is.

QUESTIONER: I think one important feature of the exhibition that David and Peter Sellars curated, is the sense of spectacle that those works have. Something that people have not really addressed in Bill's work is its influenced by avant garde film, which he looked at a lot when he was a student. As he said to me when we were installing the exhibition at the Whitney, he was deeply influenced by going to the World's Fair as a teenager, with the large scale commercial projections that surrounded you on all of the walls. When someone mentioned the explosion of video in New York, what you are getting is not the small monitors with tapes, but the large-scale projections on the walls. I think a lot of younger artists working with video are actually working with the language of film or large scale slide projection, because that is what video technology can now do. I went down to San Antonio a few weeks ago and saw a collaborative performance by Diana Thater and two young L.A. video artists, plus two young L.A. musicians and DJs who did—from eight o'clock in the evening till two in the morning—a live mixed VJ/DJ-ing performance with a hundred-and-thirty tapes and six projectors, on all four walls. It was incredible; what was interesting about it was that it was not about the market, it was not a piece that might enter a museum. If you did not see it, you missed it and that was it. I found that exciting, because it was so un-commodified and collaborative, and actually, connecting back to the history we were talking about.

ROSS: And not a little bit nostalgic also, for the Warhol and the *Exploding Plastic Inevitabl*. My own daughters, who are twenty and sixteen, say, "Oh, it would've been so cool to be in New York with the Warhol Factory..." Of course every generation finds

their own way of celebrating and of violating the rules, and extending those kind of activities. I think the fact that there is a nostalgic reuse of single channel videos and a revisiting of that is interesting. It is what I was talking about—the academic side of it too, because there is good, academic painting being made, also. I mean really competent and well made, and sometimes even moving; but on the other hand, it is not necessarily that painting that is pushing the edge of where art is. And yet, there's also painting that is pushing the edge of where art is. Video now has its academics.

QUESTIONER: I share your enthusiasm for the worldwide web and web-based communication, and find it the thing that I am the most interested in. When you talked about universities, one of the problem with university communities is that the students leave, so the community keeps evaporating, right? It is dependant on people coming back as you are back tonight, right? So there's a whole thing that recycles within communities. I was struck by when you were creating your model, it was like a model of sort of like a snake molting, you know? The skin was left in video, and the snake kind of went somewhere else. Or a model of metamorphosis: the pupae is turned into the butterfly, and now we are off somewhere else. There is already a problem with the obsolescence of technologies. You know, Sterling's *Angle* [????????????] and the dead technology, the abandoned technology. As a betting man, I would say, you know, "Yeah, let's go with the latest gear." I feel like that is a real problem, whether its institutional support or universities jumping really quickly. I have heard of programs in new media created now that do not have video, because everybody knows you can do it in the box. There is a problem with this kind of progressive or linear structure of abandonment. It

seems to me, with the investment you have made in your own career, and what many people are talking about—this investment in real space (or the lesson of immersiveness that installation has given us, or interactivity, as Barbara London said, audience response or audience interaction) there needs to be a superimposition. I am staring at my computer every day, watching these listservs, et cetera, but I feel that there needs to be an inversion. And maybe that is part of collapsing time, where is the hundred years to sixty years to thirty years to ten year form; that somehow it has gotten to be more of a superimposition and not just for the survival of a video community anymore. It is for the whole art culture.

ROSS: Well, I think you are absolutely right, Tom, and that is very well said. Thank you. Because in fact, what is taking place is not just the survival of the video art community. Of course I think video art survives; and there are many artists, and people deeply engaged in it in institutions and individually around the world. But what is happening is the integration of these generations of artists who are working in now what are fairly established and traditional media forms (in terms of performative or interactive or cinema-based media forms) as well as those who are trying to integrate that into a new set of frameworks. That is where the friction is, and that is where it does not seem to be fitting or working—and of course, that is what is really interesting. Because we are going to learn from what is not working yet—why it's not fitting, why these younger generations of artists who are interested in using media are finding it so hard to have access to both the institutions and a framework that is satisfying to them. Remember the video scene was constructed by many of you here in this room, because there was not a

satisfying scene, even reasonably appropriate to work in. I am not necessarily interested in maintaining that just because it served a purpose then, as a museum piece. On a certain level I am a museum person, but on a philosophical level, I am much more interested in allowing that friction to generate something else: new sets of forms, and relationships between artists and institutions and audiences to evolve. If we do anything less, I think we do ourselves and the histories we have engaged in a disservice.

QUESTIONER: The issue about video as a performance medium, and mentioning the switcher, reminded me a lot about the debate about hip-hop DJs and whether or not what they were doing with records and turntables and audio mixers represented art or performance, or whether it was a corruption of other people's work. I have seen that performance medium evolve into a distribution of DJ mixed tapes and the emergence of the DJ as a performer, to the extent where there is now a Grammy category for the remix artist, as well as CDs that are released by DJs, remixing other people's work. It makes me wonder what might happen if there was a commercially available video switcher that someone might buy for their kid as a Christmas toy or something like that, and how that might affect the video art community.

ROSS: In fact, there are now computer-based digital editing tools that you can get for several-hundred dollars, and pretty soon they will be on the toy level. I think that will happen, and it will be interesting to see that kind of appropriation and collage taking place in the hands of kids who make use of that material.

QUESTIONER: Well, one of the reasons why I wanted to bring that subject up was because I work in commercial editorial, and I have not heard a lot of conversation about the editorial aspect of the creation of video art. Right now, from what I can see, there really is a golden era of the explosion of the editorial process, and the decentralization of the means by which to produce editorial. I'd like to suggest that as the penetration of computers and television interactivity might come across in the next ten years or so, there will be more people making their own editorial than there would be their own production and distribution.

QUESTIONER #2: Could I just mention, there is actually a five-hundred dollar video switcher now? Five-hundred is a lot more than eighty bucks at RadioShack, but it will come down. Wait eighteen months.

QUESTIONER #3: I am going back to nostalgia. This made me think of one thing that I did miss, and that is the spirit of experimenting, of risk taking. The Happenings. The idea that making art was what was exciting—the process—that success was not the goal. I haven't seen that for a long time. I also wonder, this struggle with net-art and finding that way, that element doesn't seem to appear either.

ROSS: Well, it is true. To obtain the resources to do large scale video projects, especially broadcast projects, in the early seventies took an enormous effort, a willingness to use and manipulate the system: raise money, play political games, do whatever was necessary. That is not necessary within the web, you know? It is reduced to

a level that if you have access to a computer in school, or just your own computer at home, for a couple-hundred dollars you can just be a producer. You can make work and put it out there in some form. That is both sad, because, in fact, there was an amazing energy that came along with the ability to bring those resources together, and it formed a kind of community and created a kind of pressure. But it also was a barrier for thousands of other people who did not have the ability to do that.

QUESTIONER: I want to know what you think about juvenile censorship, as far as most teenagers and very young kids like to express their art through the internet, mostly through violence or something that most adults do not find appropriate for kids of our age, and if you think that censorship and having people ban stuff like this is right, or shouldn't kids be allowed to express their own art? Well, as a pretty young person myself, I think it is not right to let people ban what we want to do. And I have heard plenty of opinions of people, of adults.

QUESTIONER: Right on!

ROSS: Well, I think you are absolutely right. I think what you look at is a function of what you and your parents decide you should look at. You know, you are part of a family, and you make those decisions within a family. If your family gives you absolute freedom, then God bless 'em. If they make rules, then I am sure they have good reasons for them. But on the other hand, you have all the reasons to try to break the rules because that is what kids and parents have been doing forever, right? But I think for the government to



step in there is just another example of government trying to step into the private lives of people on levels where they should not in society. So no, I am absolutely a hundred percent against it. I think you should be treated as a person with enough intelligence to know what you want to look at and to be able to handle what you look at. If you cannot handle it, stop looking at it. Or talk to someone about it and ask them what it means or express what is happening to you. As long as you have a means to talk about the art you are looking at, in whatever form that takes—whether it is super-violence or, you know, sneaking porn, or looking at conceptual art that is interesting to you, or some other thing—as long as you have someplace to work it out, I think then it is fine.

QUESTIONER: I am not a video artist and not a video historian; but as an artist and a consumer of art and a programmer of art, I was interested to hear the impressive list of credits that you gave to different groups of people and different types of artists in video history. I was curious at the connection between early feminism and first generation feminist artists, also very much involved in performance and identity work and the anti-heroic, and humanizing of art. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the connection, and perhaps the indebtedness, of video artists to early feminist art.

ROSS: Early feminism and middle-feminism and contemporary feminism continues to play a very large role in all culture. For me, and the way I saw it, I do not think it necessarily played a particularly strong role in video culture. It was pervasive in everything. Except there were some strong woman artists, like Joan Jonas, particularly; Shigeko was also making some work that had very strong feminist roots. But I did not see

it as an extension of or a direct tool. I mean, we think of Martha Rosler and the *Semiotics of the Kitchen* from 1974. To call Martha a feminist (although it would be true, she's a feminist) but her work and her sensibility goes a lot further and deeper, it is a way of essentializing that aspect of her politics, to look at her work from that perspective. I tended to see it that way. Clearly, I found feminism an important element in men's and women's work that was of significance, starting from the moment where those realities started to become known and understood by broader populations of intellectuals. But as content or as a driving force in the history of video art, except for the fact that it was also part and parcel of kind of an antiauthoritarian movement in the culture, I did not see it (and this is only my own personal perspective) as having that much direct relation. Yeah.

QUESTIONER: We all know that very soon, maybe sooner than we think, our visits to Blockbuster will be replaced by a visit to what we are calling a website right now. This ground shift in bandwidth on the internet, which is obviously before us all, seems to me to offer some ground for a reassessment of the slightly pessimistic picture that you have offered for video, simply on the basis of a differentiation between community and archive. In some sense, you may have conflated community and archive. Even today, Blockbuster does not seem completely satisfying to everyone; we know that when this change takes place, mobs of people are going to be out there looking for *us*. We can anticipate that with some sense of complete assurance. It is very hard to feel that there is a tremendous incentive right now to pursue the construction of alternative moving image media. Perhaps what you are saying applies to the situation as we see it at the moment; but I find it hard not to be completely convinced that there is some other condition. I

would not say this is a technologically determined situation, but maybe one that is determined on the basis of how we see ourselves. If we see ourselves as standing at the dam of a repository or archive of some kind, then this becomes a more meaningful and positive image.

ROSS: I think that is a great statement, and I agree with everything completely. I believe that is the direction I think we are headed, and it is a reason why I am actually feeling rather positive about the future of this community, and of the potential for this community to affect the lives of audiences around the world. (applause; END)