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Video Art

VICTOR ANCONA



BARBARA BUCKNER: Psychic Poetry Exemplified

I became acquainted with Barbara Buckner's videoworks when they were shown this spring at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Her 30-minute offering of 15 imaginatively synthesized poetic pieces drenched in magnificent color were titled: Grace, Body, Night, Lamb, Landscape, A Man, Hours, Image of the Kingdom, Mese, Mast, Axis, Waters, The Blue, Gathering In, and Dominion. Her work stood in sharp contrast to the fare presented by the other eleven video artists chosen to participate in the museum's 1979 Biennial.

Victor Ancona covers video art for this magazine.

In April, Barbara premiered a new work, *Pictures of the Lost*, an hour-long videotape shown under the aegis of the Film Archives Video Program curated by Shigeko Kubota at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York's SoHo district. Sharing her private visual world, Barbara Buckner presented us with contemplative images that bore such titles as *One*, *The Initiate*, *Stranger in the Beloved*, *13th Dream*, *113th Dream* and *The Golden Rime*.

She describes her work as "visual cyphers depicting contiguous states of spiritual enfoldment. They are direct apprehensions of events occurring within, not physically seen or heard. The work is an attempt to render cor-

respondences between physical light/color/objects and visible realities via electronic image generation."

The large audience at the gallery, attentive and appreciative but rather distant, asked few questions after the presentation on three small monitors came to a close. By way of explanation, Barbara said that New York City audiences tend to maintain a certain distance from the artist and the work because they are surrounded by the high pressures of the New York art world.

"When I showed my work in Boston they were much more open. If people can be educated about a work on its own terms so they can begin to communicate and be open to it more, that would be wonderful."

"One of the pleasures of showing my tapes is to get feedback; it's educative. An artist should be direct with the audience, and if the work is an integral one, it will communicate what it is on its own terms. The creation of a work is a very long and complicated process and the artist should shed some light on the process with the audience. It could be a very gratifying and uplifting experience." When Barbara Buckner sees "good" video, she's very happy for herself as well as for the artists

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producing the work.

Did she mind if people did not decipher the titles as the originally saw them in her mind's eye? "Not at all. I expect different people to see different things in my work from time to time. It has so much to do with the mood someone's in when they see a work—the background noises, the distractions, the atmosphere, the day and time it is, what you had for dinner—all play a part."

While she groups video image-processing into one large category, Barbara's work is unique, distinctive, idiosyncratic simply because her pre-conceived images are indelibly her own. Her work is definitely not in the video wallpaper category. It ought to be seen again and again in order to perceive the subtleties that abound within each of the short pieces created from forces within her metaphysical world. The elusive enigmatic quality of her images are the basis of their appeal despite their weakness in metrical patterns.

Barbara Buckner uses only half of video's potential. That is, her tapes are always silent. "The music is in the work," she claims, and I totally agree with her. Sound would be an intrusive element in so pervasive a work.

As befits a poet, Barbara often speaks in metaphors. "We must control the electronic beast rather than fear it. We have to understand the nature of the physics of these machines. Once the power is on—I call it the snake of the alternating current—they can go on permutating themselves and begetting patterns until the artist acts to wreck the order of the machine with his or her presence—own act of imagination.

"I've never been one to sit and play. Content is very important to me. Yes, the medium has become an extension of myself, tools being the parents of the creator," she said. What used to be chance manipulation of images for Barbara, has now become a controlled mastery of the equipment to produce a preconceived dream image. Gone are the days when she "twisted deals to see what would happen."

I asked Barbara Buckner how she garners her ideas. "You have to know what the work is before you begin. My thoughts come first, titles second. Then image-gathering takes place, and lastly, the processing. Once I name a work, it becomes alive within me. Now that I'm leaving literature behind a bit, my work will probably be named but not have a physical name—

numbers might be enough. The perception going on within me is on a very subconscious, dream-like level—images that are not read easily in one's waking life."

By titling her work at present, Barbara is forcing us to see the metaphors in her minds eye rather than allowing us to journey into our own field of imagery. I for one felt constricted by her titles, becoming too preoccupied in search for descriptive or metaphoric meanings in her work. Besides, the titles take too much time to read in comparison to the viewing of the work itself. Nor do I believe that the viewer's consciousness has to be congruent with the maker's in order to appreciate the work. Barbara admits that there is "work cut out for her" and that she may drop titling altogether and merely number her work from one to a hundred and beyond. She has an acute sense of destiny, promises not to repeat herself, having a strong sense toward the act of creation.

"My imagery comes through my poetry—within my heart and mind. Am I religious, you ask? I have a great deal of interest in using highly sophisticated imagery to produce works of profound spiritual significance—not profound for everyone, of course, but

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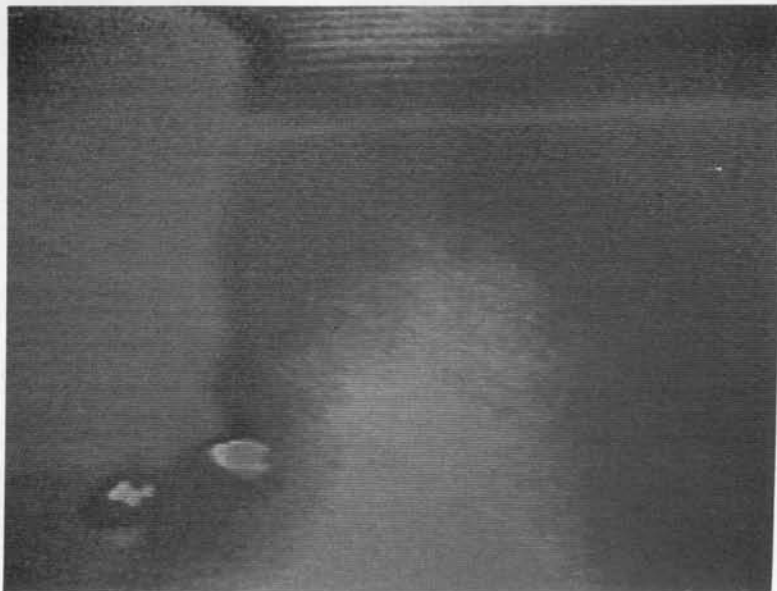
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profound for me. My imagery is very personal, directly concerned with my consciousness."

Chicago-born Barbara Buckner spent her early years in the New York metropolitan area, then entered Boston University's liberal arts program, aiming to become a journalist/writer. Her true ambition and inclination was to be a poet. As a result of writing a film script, she switched to New York University's School of Film and Television where, among other classes, she took a video course where she did some experimental work at Bill Etra's studio. In 1972 she earned a BFA degree. That same year she won second prize in the Yale Film Festival with a 20-minute film she "would rather not see again," even though it was shown at the Whitney Museum and contained "ideas of alchemy and seeds of concerns that I am now expressing more fully in video."

In 1973 she landed a two-year job as editor, camera and special effects person at Learning Disabilities Laboratory, New York, producing 12 half-hour tapes dealing with an innovative reading method.

The work, for Barbara, had a pictorial logic. She liked the malleable quality of video, then learned to control the medium. "At first my work had



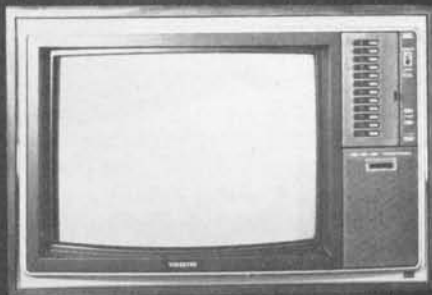
a Neanderthal approach to it. I was in a hermitic position. If my work then went beyond two minutes in length, I would almost cry out 'enough!'" Her own impatience with her early work prompts her to keep her current idea/

compositions at a minimum exposure to her audience. And therein lies a weakness. Since her metaphoric imagery is difficult to penetrate, it's often frustrating watching a Buckner work, only once. It's like being forced

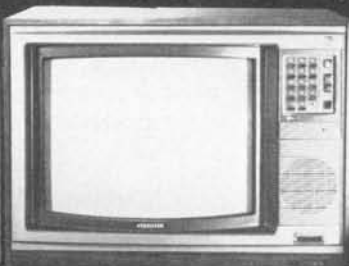
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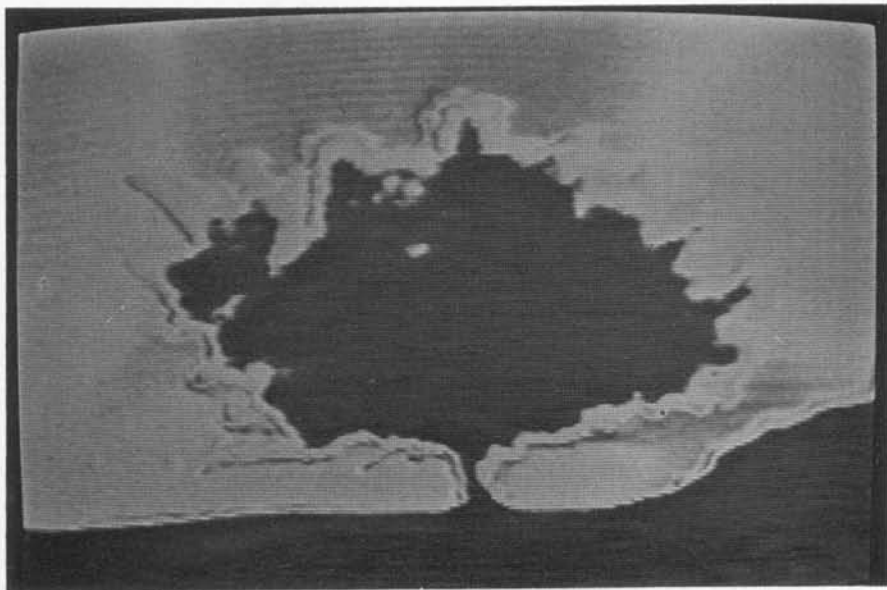
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Two images from *Pictures of the Lost*, and the creator. The hour-long work premiered in April at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York's SoHo.



to leave an interesting party just as introductions are being made, and being whisked off to another party, and another, ad infinitum.

At present, Barbara is a video instructor and video studio director at the School of Visual Arts, New York. "I love teaching," she said, "and I've learned to regulate my energy and engender enthusiasm among my students." She is, like many a video artist, frustrated in not being able to own her own equipment so that she could work whenever the Muse called. "Fifteen thousand dollars would do it nicely," she said.

Video poet Barbara Buckner has had numerous solo and group exhibitions, has lectured, and has been an artist-in-residence mostly in New York State and in Massachusetts. Since she weaves the threads of her subconscious mind into delicate tapestries for us to contemplate and enjoy, her work is worthy of being shown throughout the United States and particularly abroad where her sensibilities have roots.

The coupling of the spirit with technology as exemplified in Barbara Buckner's work is a daring attempt toward total creation in a new medium, a natural extension of the spiritual destiny of the artist.



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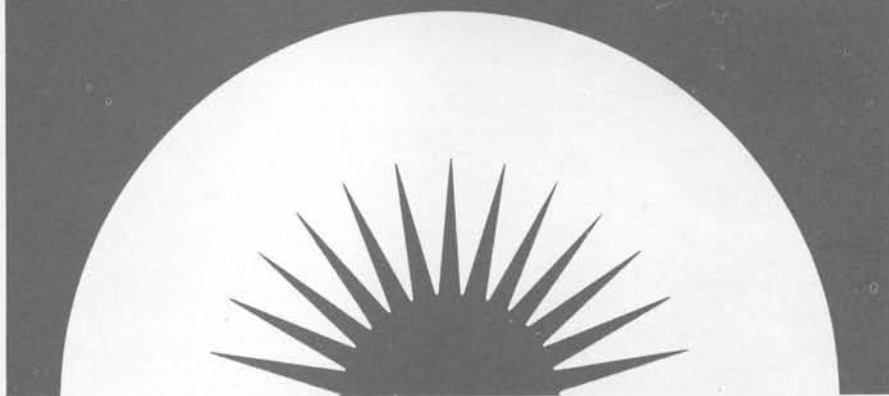
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