Editor's Statement: Video: The Reflexive Medium

By Sara Hornbacher

It has been my intention as Guest Editor to suggest the scope of video art's brief history and to isolate particular theoretical issues, without recourse to a totalizing principle. The eleven articles and reviews that constitute this issue serve to distinguish a number of possible methods of analysis and styles of discourse, and Barbara London's "Selected Chronology" is included to assist further historical research of this twenty-year period (1963–83). As artist/editor, I have adopted a personal style of appropriation, assuming or annexing the persuasions necessary to the project of introducing this first *Art Journal* issue devoted to video. This approach utilizes a montage of the fragment, the direct quotation of the authors I have chosen, and an enactment of style in the post-modern spirit.

In the opening paragraph of his article, Benjamin Buchloh observes this period concisely with regard to the development of video and its relationship to contemporary theory:

> The usage of video technology in artistic practice since the mid sixties has undergone rapid and drastic changes. This makes it a particularly significant topic for the study of the shifts to which art in general has been subjected since the conclusion of post-Minimal and Conceptual art, the context within which video production established itself firmly as a valid practice of representation-production.

It is clear that these changes concern the affiliation of art practice with other discourses (film, television, advertising), the conditions of its institutional containment, and its audience relationship as well. Buchloh promotes a theoretical discourse relative to these through the rather comprehensive discussion of the work of four major video artists. He posits a post-avant-garde practice that is reflective of the critical authority in images themselves, recognizing that there is no neutral information or technology and insisting on an artistic practice that informs its audience concerning the ease with which cultural authority is molded into the realm of objective reality.

Electra: Electricity and Electronics in 20th-Century Art, a massive exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1984, is critically examined through its catalogue by Katherine Dieckmann, who applies a definitive view of postmodernism's task. Following *Electra*'s survey of technological development and art historical periods relative to electricity, as outlined by the exhibition organizer and catalogue essayist Frank Popper, Dieckmann summarizes, "The history of electrical inventions in art can be interpreted as a series of impulses towards the creation of an image-producing tool, towards video." The appearance of new inventions in the period from 1880 to 1918—particularly mechanics, optics, and, finally, electricity—corresponded to the development of modern aesthetics, which ultimately gave rise to parallel philosophic ideas leading to changes in perception. That we are again witnessing dramatic dialectical shifts is evident in the very notion of postmodernism. As cultural experience becomes increasingly synthetic and simulated, contemporary culture is obsessed with video—as form, as technology, as consumable effects and mediated environments. Video embraces the very paradox of pluralist qualities (access and diffusion) with the modernist trope, and tools, of technological progress.

Video, inextricably bound to technological changes, carries with it the priority of advancement, represented in the search for better equipment, better image resolution, and ever more efficient compositional control. Not long after Nam June Paik distorted television physically by placing an external magnet on the surface of the screen, the first portable video equipment was marketed in the United States by SONY/Japan. Lucinda Furlong tracks the historical development of a genre called "image-processed video" that claims Paik as one of its foremost influences. "Challenging the institution of television in the late 1960s also meant creating images that *looked* different from standard TV." Thus, image processing grew out of an intensive period of experimentation; it was at once a modernist exploration of the basic properties of the medium and a subversion of the technology transmitting Vietnam into our living rooms. During the seventies video became institutionalized as media centers were organized and funded primarily through state and federal agencies, and university art and humanities departments expanded curriculum and faculty to promote this new cultural form. These institutional systems of support permitted a few persevering pioneers to carve out personalized territories where image-processing tools were developed and utilized as a means towards understanding the structural properties of the electronic image. With the advent of the microchip in the mid seventies, video

was off and running towards its digital future. In the mid eighties it is increasingly difficult to identify a distinct genre of image processing, despite a continuing school of practitioners, as more artistic productions utilize certain varieties of digital imaging and control. Whatever future promise digital-imaging techniques hold for artistic production, extra-aesthetic utilizations problematize their discursive use in video art.

Many of the early practitioners viewed their activity as the locus or site of a profound social criticism directed in particular at the domination of individuals by technological culture, manifested most visibly in broadcast television but also in modernist aesthetics. The video artists who aligned themselves with the modernist project to put forward the new electronic medium as the message were (despite the anarchist content of much of their work) seen as perpetuators of the previous institutionalized art forms by most members of the alternative television movement. Reflecting the political turmoil of the sixties and early seventies, Deirdre Boyle elucidates the split that occurred, dividing the video artists and video documentarians into two camps. For both, video offered the dream of creating something new, of staking out a claim to a virgin territory. Although there was a distinctly formalized strategy in the deconstruction of the television set as material object and the re-presentation of the TV signal as material, perhaps the more transgressive behavior of this period was embraced by the guerrilla television movement, which sought to challenge the more public, information-based technology—broadcast television. Both spheres of activity were "molded by the insights of Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Norbert Wiener, and Teilhard de Chardin." Subject to the wider cultural effects of the encroaching conservatism of the late seventies, including changes in government funding patterns, the demise of guerrilla television served as an indicator of the sociological changes occurring in this country. To a great extent, the intellectual and physical energy of this communal enterprise has now been transmuted into the theoretical discourse of the eighties—urgent given the incursion of pluralist kitsch. A postmodernism of reaction is more entrenched than a postmodernism of resistance.

It would be difficult to conceive of postmodernism without continental theory—structuralism and poststructuralism, in particular—as a strategy of deconstruction to rewrite modernism's universal techniques in terms of "synthetic contradictions," to challenge its master narratives with the "discourse of others." The theoretical practice of deconstruction is paramount in a number of the articles published here.

The entry of psychoanalysis into poststructural readings of cinema gave rise to the analysis of the spectator's identification with the basic cinematic apparatus and physical position relative to it. In the arena of modern film theory, meaning, significance, and value are never thought to be discovered, intuited, or otherwise attained naturally. Everything results from a mechanics of work: the work of ideology, the work of the psyche, the work of a certain language designed to bring psyche and society into coincidence, and the work of technology enabling that language to so operate. In "The Passion for Perceiving: Expanded Forms of Film and Video Art," John Hanhardt traces the historical precedents for video practice, particularly video installations, to independent cinema. Citing Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* as title source, Hanhardt addresses the specific spectator participation in four museum installations—two involving film and two involving video—to point to the differing strategies employed to engage the viewer in the text of the work.

Recent analysis of the "enunciative apparatus" of visual representation from a feminist perspective reveals the designatory ability of media to construct gender identification. Marita Sturken's review of *Revising Romance: New Feminist Video,* a video exhibition distributed by the American Federation of Arts, discusses the construction of the "subject" within the text. Curated by Lynn Podheiser, this show broaches the issue of romance—a subject associated primarily with women—and asks, in effect, "What are the psychological, political, and aesthetic consequences of popular ideals of eternal passion and transcendent love?" Sturken suggests that these videotapes represent the first stage of intervention in the continuing project to "identify the structure of the opposition's hierarchy and its inherent vocabulary" in order to replace it. Furthermore, although *Revising Romance* has a specific topic, it is an admirable attempt to isolate this topic within the panoply of issues relevant to it.

In *Pure War,* Paul Virilio states that the problem is not to use technology but to realize that one is used by it. *The Un/Necessary Image* is a volume of works by artists dealing reflexively with the content and meaning of public information, with the "public image" generated by mass media, advertising, and communications systems. Originally planned as an exhibition at M.I.T., it became instead a major publication, a more portable dissemination of curatorial intent. Marshall Reese reviews this crossover publication and the works presented by the twenty-one artists, many of them artists also working in video. Reese notes that the editors have striven to arrange the contents in critical response to those corporate styles of layout they are appropriating, annual reports and museum catalogues, for example. As a summary representative of all the artists in this photo-text exhibition, Reese points to Hans Haacke's statement about the role of the committed artist with a direct quotation of Bertolt Brecht's 1934 remarks about the "Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth": "the courage to write the truth, although it is being suppressed; the intelligence to recognize it, although it is being covered up; the judgment to choose those in whose hands it becomes effective; the cunning to spread it among them."

In *Tropics of Discourse,* Hayden White suggests that "post-criticism" (-modernist, -structuralist) is constituted precisely by the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations; furthermore, that the principal device taken over by the critics and theorists is the compositional pair collage/montage. Collins and Milazzo, increasingly noted for their dense style of scrutiny of contemporary art, culture, and aesthetics, have contributed "The New Sleep: Stasis and the Image-Bound Environment," a paraliterary deconstruction of the instrumentality of several video artists' works within the context of mapping a more inclusive theoretical practice of artistic practice. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, postmodernist practice is not defined in relation to a given medium, but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms. Collins and Milazzo's collaborative practice dissolves the line traditionally drawn between creative and critical forms.

As the nexus for global cultural dissemination, video is the site of myriad problematics. Barbara London has written that "like printmaking, photography, and film, video has artistic and commercial applications" and that "both approaches utilize the same telecommunications technology, but reach audiences of different magnitude." That ever greater numbers of the art-school educated are engaged professionally in some cultural sector of commerce relative to advertising, television, and entertainment is obvious in the eighties. Indicative of the epistemological break occurring is the MOMA programming of video exhibitions that include artists who have successfully utilized a digested

avant-garde vocabulary of techniques and effects in their drive for expression in high-tech modes—in order to reach maximum distribution as music television. Here, the postmodern notion of *la mode rétro*—retrospective styling—exceeds even the newest technologies, and exemplifies the cultural consumption of all pasts, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents.

Lori Zippay reviews five publications, all international in their scope, all emanating from the period 1983-84. Although the seventies saw an evolution of independent video activity around the world, particularly in Europe, the wide-scale production, funding, exhibition, and distribution by artists seemed a distinctively American phenomenon. Whereas the seminal influences in video's infancy as an art form originated within the European avant-garde, American art since 1980 increasingly suggests the construct of television, while European video remains more clearly contained within the continuum of contemporary art or even cinematic traditions, having less in common visually, syntactically, and conceptually with television. Four of the publications are catalogues for international video festivals, which are gaining popularity as the worldwide network for video curators, artists, and critics grows. Zippay sees this "internationalization of the medium" as revealing, resulting in the distanced investigation of the art form outside any specific cultural context, and as leading to a more informed critical dialogue and a corresponding body of theoretic literature.

In recognition of the indigeneous nature of video activity in America, Martha Gever investigates the "Pressure Points" for producers, audiences, and the sustaining power structures. In establishing her argument she discusses the development of public support for the varying kinds (or genres) of productions and the distribution of this work to both closed-circuit and television audiences. Gever situates the current effort of American museums to establish a legitimate lineage for video art. She suggests that while social-change issues are frequently mentioned in introductory curatorial statements, collective political videotapes are less frequently included in the programming. She notes that the neglect of the considerable contribution of the documentary points to the inadequacy of video history conceived only as art history, maintaining that artist's television is "a social structure, a cultural condition."

Ann-Sargent Wooster's theses concerning the historical origins of certain conventions in video art are enlightened by her graphically visual descriptive style. In her article, "Why Don't They Tell Stories Like They Used To?," Wooster traces art historical precedents leading to video, twentieth-century avant-garde ideas regarding the structure of contemporary experience, and the appropriate devices/methods for narrative expression of modernity. In discussing individual videotapes to illustrate her points regarding fragmentation, disjunction, and chance operations, Wooster prioritizes artistic production as the nexus for discourse and provides further insights as artist/historian/critic into the failure of art criticism to embrace video art as a valid art form.

In the mid eighties, the extent to which the globe has become a village is readily apparent. As Dieckmann points out in "Electra": "Images generated by electronic means can be manipulated to lend a veneer of veracity to any number of ends." Video is a medium in suspension, bridging modernist and postmodern conditions with a variety of pluralistic features. It exerts a postmodernist tendency towards the interdisciplinary; many artists have entered video—out of other fields or afresh—for precisely the postmodern potential for a variety of practices and the possibility for playful experimentation. But video artworks, by the very nature of their continuity with philosophic tradition, cannot be exempted from investigation into the nature of their medium by a protective cloak of scientific perspective. Artworks generated by technological means require a broader discourse than the rationalist one of the "forward."

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