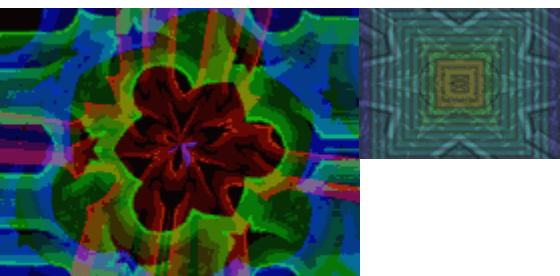


My first encounter with Walter was three years ago at the not Still Art Festival which Carol Goss had organized. At the time, I had no information about him except that he had been one of the earliest artists in residence at the Experimental Television Center, right after Nam June Paik had finished his residency there creating the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer with engineer Shuya Abe, with a grant they'd received from the New York State Council on the Arts. The following year (1997) at the NSA Festival, we spoke more at length. It was right around that time that I had begun thinking about doing this project, and had just seen the flyers from ETC about the Upstate Video History Project. Benton Bainbridge of The Pool and NNeng was there in the afternoon setting up with the other members of NNeng and had arranged to interview Walter and Carol. I sat in and listened to the them spin tales of the early days of video. It was that session that inspired me to pursue the project.

Walter's background in architecture led him into computer graphics. Around 1966 he became interested in the computer graphics and electronic music. He worked at the University of Waterloo developing some of the early 3D software, creating some of the first CAD (computer aided design - architecture) programs. Simultaneously, they had acquired a Moog synthesizer and were working with visuals and sound with equal interest. Some of the early inspirations for Walter were the work being done by the Experiments in Art and Technology group, and particularly the work being done at Bell Laboratories. There Charles Dodge was involved in analyzing music digitally, taking the magnetic field data of sound signals and feeding them into a computer and turning out data that could be analyzed in a variety of ways. At the time the Waterloo group also did visualizations by photographing the screen and taking a series of photo prints and animating them on movie film, creating some of the earliest computer animation. He later moved to New York and worked for several computer graphics companies there, including Computer Image Corporation, which used the Scanimate, an analog-based computer (meaning wires and switches instead of punchcards or disks with software) capable of generating video. A lot of the early TV logos were created using the Scanimate.

Around this time, Walter got involved with The Kitchen, a relatively new art and performance space founded by Steina and Woody Vasulka, two of the early video art pioneers. At the time he lived only a few blocks from the Kitchen's first location, which was in the Mercer Arts Center (Hotel) in what used to be the kitchen (hence the name). He had read Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot's *Radical Television* and was aware of the movement in video and got himself one of the new SONY portapak systems. Soon Walter became the Associate Director and was responsible for organizing the Open Screening, a weekly forum for people to show new works.

**"We would set up the matrix (of monitors) in different configurations. Sometimes we would run multiple channels of different material, or people would set up shows with different channels of material. Other people set up shows where there was video with live**



**electronic music. Some people set up shows with a live camera using the monitor matrix. (Nam June) Paik did some did piano performances with it."**

The Kitchen forum was a great place for early experimentation in video exhibition. Since it was a relatively new medium at the time, there was no established tradition of venues of exhibition formats, so anything was game. This led to a lot of performance, installation, single and multi-channel work which have since become the established modes of video presentation. Due to the funding provided by NYSCA at the time, there was money for equipment which allowed the artists to do those early experiments and truly test the possibilities. Performance was always considered an option in the early days. "If you could do it live in a studio," Walter remarked, "it seemed logical take the equipment and put it in a performance space and do it during a performance." That kind of basic logic in many ways was a sign of the times. A new medium presented a lot of potential for utopic ideals (see the section on Paul Ryan). Nothing was off-limits, since nothing had been tried yet. Especially since the live video camera presented a new real-time immediate feedback device, it seemed very suitable for performance whereas film always had to be developed, so there could never be a live movie.

In 1972, Walter met video artist Russell Connor and documentarian Ralph Hocking, who had just started the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, NY. Russell and Ralph were very interested in Walter's work with computer graphics, and so he became the second artists in residence there. ETC was a very different experience from the computer graphics places he had worked at before. It was less organized, basically a loft full of electronics parts, circuit boards, and cameras. Walter worked with the Paik/Abe, nicknamed the "wobulator" for the way it took images and jittered them up in interesting geometric patterns. It was basically a black and white TV set with electronics attached to its coils which could alter the magnetic signal fed to the monitor. It was about this time that the engineer David Jones came on board at the Center and started designing numerous devices which can still be found there today, including the Jones Colorizer and the frame buffer.

Part of Walter's residency involved showing the system to a wide variety of groups, including schools, colleges, public access television centers, arts centers such as Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, and museums. The people had never seen the Paik/Abe or even a video camera for that matter, so part of the show involved doing a little "performance," or demonstration to show what it could do.

**"In order to show it off, it seemed obvious that one should show how it worked. So part of the thing became doing a performance, so I used to cart around a lot of cameras, a prerecorded soundtrack and do a performance."**

After the performance, he would conduct a workshop to show people how the system worked, often showing tapes of work made using the equipment. This kind of demonstration in many

ways served as a kind of performance that borders on being educational as much as informational, a trend that seems to have found its way into some of the performances now being done on the internet, the newest medium to embrace performance.

At the Making Connections conference, David Ross, the Director at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gave a presentation called "The Success of the Failure of Video." In that presentation he alluded to a certain animosity between three different camps of the video art community, the image processors, the documentarians and the social activists. Walter didn't see the same kind of schism at the Center. "We did it all. People were trying to see what they could do with the medium" he says. It was all considered one big area of experimentation, whether the final output was going to be a performance or installation, documentary or single channel processed work.

Some people built sophisticated hardware interfaces for the machines. There was a genuine interest in blurring the distinctions between such things as performance and installation. "What was it? Performance or installation" Walter inquires.

The demand for demonstrations and performances was not to last though. As funding from NYSCA dried up and video equipment became more available, the call for performance in video dropped off. As Walter recalls, you could do it maybe once a year, and even then. But there just wasn't much call for it.

**"From the museum end, the thing they saw as being most amenable to the way they operated was the sculptural installation, because the artists provided them with a piece. It was usually on a laserdisk at that point. It fit inside a frame or object. Or there was some plan for reproducing it in the museum. Whereas documentary video - who knows? Does it go into the film department? Does it go into community programs? It landed up in various places."**

But not in the museums. They were focusing more on installation which was the most suitable medium for museum-based presentation. Single channel video and performance had to look elsewhere for support. Single channel work has found limited support through television, notable PBS and public access programming, but has never been able to achieve the level of success of museum based shows.

**"As far as performance goes, that was probably, thinking about it from their perspective, possibly the most risky thing they could get into. Because it takes so long to set up, and the equipment hardly ever worked. Who knows what you were going to get as an audience. You'd certainly never be able to do it twice, because it was so put together and it wasn't taped. And I think also the people doing it were 'of the moment' people."**

Performance was truly a thing of the moment, a theatrical concept. The theater of the 60's had really embraced a more open approach which brought in elements of improvisation and other ideas to challenge the old status and traditions of the theater, and video grabbed these principles up right away. Much of the early video work was being created by people with an anti-institutional attitude, and as such were against the institutionalism the museum presented. They were looking at video as a utopian instrument which could really empower people to improve their lives and the world around them. There was a real social aspect to the performances of that time, it wasn't considered purely entertainment.

**"I think people who are doing it and the people who are in those groups, a lot of them had a social mission, their reason for being there were to change the social structure. Others just bought into that. I wasn't particularly an activist, but, hey, I bought into it. It seemed like a cool idea to me. Cooler than bombing Vietnam."**

The screenings at The Kitchen certainly followed along these principles with the open screenings. It was not a place concerned with the preciousness of the image in the same way museums and other parts of the art world were.

Jumping ahead in time, I asked Walter about his observations of the current state of video art and performance. He remarks that there are some similar trends between what was done then and what current artists are interested in. He sees now to some extent "a reinvention of the 60's" in terms of techniques. Analog synthesizers are very much in vogue now, after being threatened to be pushed aside by the powers of the newer digital synths. Musicians these days find both kinds equally attractive for performance and recording. Walter recognizes the same kinds of filter sweeps and arpeggiation from early electronic music experiments and the diverse genres of techno music today. The raves that are being produced in ever greater numbers today are combining the same experiments in visuals and sound that were done thirty years ago. Some things just don't change. The interesting thing, and the reason he says it's being reinvented is that none of the newer artists (or very few) are aware of the history of video and all the early experiments. As you'll read in the interview with Benton Bainbridge, he didn't become aware of this history until only recently, and that it was events such as the Syracuse conference that have finally uncovered some of these things. New video performers are discovering for themselves these same techniques without knowledge of what was done before. There must be something universal about what they found.

