

Video Art Today

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Since the 1960s the exciting potential of electronic technologies has attracted writers and artists known primarily for their work in other media. Now in 1983, the innovative ideas expressed through the new media have attained greater acceptance, given their relevance to life today.

Video is integral to this area of telecommunications. Television sets are in use everywhere, whether with broadcast and cable programs, or with home cameras and videotape recorders, while monitors are used with video games and computer systems in both private and corporate worlds. As travel costs escalate, video is becoming an economically more viable means of exchanging information. Development in such areas as communications satellites and interactive video discs are affecting both the commercial and non-commercial worlds.

Ten years ago, artist's video was based upon experiments with such tools as portable black-and-white cameras, 1/2-inch recording decks, and "image processors." As artists continue today to investigate the potentials of the technology, they have also strengthened their styles, methods, and statements. Completing a work is more complicated now that professional quality broadcast video is becoming the standard, and arts funding is being restricted. Add to this public television's reduced sponsorship of independent productions, and artists realize they must become even more enterprising. Some have taken jobs with commercial houses, which gives them access to broadcast equipment during off-hours. Others obtain cable contracts, receive grants, or borrow money to cover the production costs involved in completing a new work.

Artists have gained a sophisticated awareness of the characteristics that make the medium so relevant. Chief among these is the ability, at the same time or directly after shooting, to screen images. Television transmissions often seem live when they are pre-recorded, making it ambiguous as to what "now" in video really is. Artists' tapes have the same sense of immediacy as television—the action or situation appears close in time and distance to viewing.

As a result of video being screened mainly on monitors rather than through projection systems, many videotapes have been designed to establish an intimate, one-to-one relationship with the viewer. Artists' video, like commercial television, tends to concentrate on close-up shots of individual figures rather than on visually complex situations. When long-shots are used, it is to create a specific impression rather than to highlight details. Artists know that despite the modest size of most monitors or television sets, video is an engaging form. The screen is such a strong light source that the visual images and the powerful accompanying sounds capture viewer attention.

Unlike most filmmakers, independent videomakers have the luxury of over-shooting, because tape is relatively inexpensive and can be re-used. Generally, they have ample footage when they begin the laborious editing process of re-arranging sections electronically; it is the editing process itself that is time-consuming and costly. Editing in a professional studio with engineers also can be a tedious process, because audio and video edits must be made separately, and time-coding is complex. Yet computer time-coding enables editing video to have the same accuracy as film editing. Again, unlike film, video cannot be handled by the editor: the tape must be run through a playback deck and monitor to be screened. Video editing means that every section is re-recorded individually from the original tapes to occupy a particular time slot. Later, if a sequence has to be added or subtracted, everything before or after must be shifted as well. Unfortunately, each generation removed from the "master" (original) involves reduction of image quality and intensity of color.

In the 1980s, independent videomakers have developed a clearer understanding of the medium, critical vocabularies have begun to emerge, and work has become stronger. Today there is greater interest in and awareness of video, as evidenced by both the number and quality of installations and tapes being included in contemporary exhibitions. Moreover, in an increasing number of festivals video is being given the same consideration as film. Museum collections are being formed, such as The Museum of Modern Art's archive of videotapes and video sculptures, which means that video is being catalogued and preserved, and will be available for future generations of scholars. The video field gained new respect in 1982, when The Whitney Museum of American Art presented a retrospective of Nam June Paik's work in New York and in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition called attention to those accomplishments of video art that established video artists such as Paik have produced—serious projects which, because they are based on familiar iconography, museum-goers understand and enjoy.

The independent videomaker occupies a unique position now, at the moment before the film industry fully embraces video, and even dominates the field. The independent will continue to provide some of the best experimental productions, which will be utilized in broadcast and non-broadcast situations. Whether these works are fictive or documentary, single or multi-channel, computer or "image processor" derived, the projects have relevance because they are based upon contemporary vernacular. Artists, writers, and curators have a great responsibility to set high standards today, so that video will continue to grow, develop, and be fully recognized tomorrow.

