foci interviews with ten international curators
by carolee thea

Cover: Alighiero e
Boetti, *Cieli ad alta
quota*, 1993. Alighiero
e Boetti and the
Museum in Progress
in Vienna, in coopera-
tion with Austrian
Airlines and Asea
Brown Boveri, pro-
duced this work in six
versions which were
reproduced in the
in-flight magazine
Sky Lines; passengers
could ask for the
picture in jig-saw-
puzzle form. The
puzzles were made
the same size as
the folding tables
in the airplane.
Photo: Bill Orcutt.

barbara london
12/2000

Generations of artists have employed new technologies as part of the ongoing experimentation with the tools of artistic production. Andy Warhol, who frequently used an overhead projector, claimed that he wanted to paint like a machine. Refracting instruments, the camera obscura/lucida, and the microscope-inspired artists of the 16th and 17th centuries, and now images made with digitally-based pixels produced by an electronic paint box are replacing negatives, celluloid, or tapes. As a curator of video at MoMA, you have been involved with new media for many years.

> Yes, I started out when video was the cutting edge. As technology evolved and as artists continued to work with the latest tools, I continued to incorporate the "new" into my curatorial purview, my thinking, and my practice.

Tell me first about how you became involved in media.

> Originally, when I did my graduate work at the Institute of Fine Arts of NYU, I studied Islamic art, interested in the trade route between China and the Near East. I left graduate school and went to Europe. When I returned, I took a job at The Museum of Modern Art in our International Program, which still circulates exhibitions abroad and liaisons internationally with other museums. I assisted an important young MoMA curator of the 70s, Jennifer Licht, who organized an up-to-the-minute exhibition with such artists as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Lynda Benglis. I assembled the videotape section of that show, which the Museum sent to Australia. Then Riva Castleman offered me a curatorial position in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books; at the same time, the NEA[1] gave the Museum a grant to buy its first video equipment. I picked up the "hot potato" of video and simultaneously started the Museum's artists'-book collection. Video and books are relatively inexpensive multiples and have the potential of easily reaching interested audiences.

> Recently, I had a conversation with Paul Pfeiffer, who had made a similar switch of mediums. He studied printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute. Later, when he was teaching at Parsons School of Art and Design, he taught himself how to work with the computer because his students wanted to learn.

It makes sense that these two forms of reproduction—the electronic and the print multiple—would converge in your career.

> For the first few years, the Museum's ongoing video exhibition program was under the umbrella of our contemporary exhibition program,

"Projects." Back then I hung out at places like Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes
and Films, the Kitchen, and the Anthology Film Archives, going to all of
their video screenings, having coffee afterwards with people like Nam
June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, who was Anthology's video curator, Juan
Downey, and others. Eventually I migrated over to the Museum's Film
Department, which became the Department of Film and Video. Contem-
porary art is as much about concepts as materials, and artists use what-
ever medium suits their ideas. In the 1970s, the sculptor Richard Serra
began working with film and video, almost to get himself "out of a cor-
ner" he was in.

Let's talk about the effect of the new media on the perception and struc-
ture of time. As one of the commissioners for *Media_City Seoul 2000*,
you wrote a catalogue essay on the nature of time in video and quoted
Gary Hill. "Video" he said, "allowed a certain real-time play, the possi-
bility of thinking out loud; a process immediately accessible and more
parallel to thinking. Time is what is essential to video."[2]

In dealing with the durational sense of time, an artist like Bruce Nauman
would work in his studio alone, and repeat dance-like movements in
front of the camera for the length of the tape, which back in 1969 meant
either thirty or sixty minutes. At the beginning, Nauman, Peter Campus,
and other artists examined the complexities of time that resulted from
the interplay between the viewer, the live camera, and pre-recorded
video material. Time could be speeded up, slowed down, frozen, and
otherwise mangled within a context that allowed active viewer partici-
pation. In the installation form, video extends both space and time. Film
cannot do this. What you see in film has happened in the past.

The early videomaker Ed Emshwiller would talk about time as
"stuff." He became frustrated as a painter, because he wanted his view-
ers to experience the progressive changes he had made to the surface of
his canvases. He found that the only way he could do this was to make
computer-based video animations. Back then it was a different ball
game: Computers were analogue, large, and ultra-expensive.

In some of Gary Hill's installations, time feels tangible. In Hill's
Inasmuch as It Is Always Already Taking Place [1990], a figure is broken
apart. The actual body parts are contained as short loops on 16 TV
screens installed on a shelf. The body can never be still, and neither can
time. They quiver.

Yes, his work involves the body in interesting ways.

The body takes us to Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis, who were very

important in defining that gray zone between video and performance.
They worked with their own bodies in front of a live camera, checking
their image on an adjacent monitor. In her first videotape, *Organic Honey*
[1973], Jonas worked with masks to represent various alter egos.

More recently, in her tape *Host* [1997], Kristin Lucas talks to an ATM
machine that talks back. Here the CPU of Lucas' inner being didn't do so
well with a power outage. Lucas' alter ego complains that she doesn't
feel well. There are other artists, too, like Teiji Furuhashi, who deals with
the body by projecting images with which the audience interacts.

Now, due to the speed at which information travels, one has a vertigi-
nous sense of being thrust forward and a fear of being left behind. In the
beginning, artists questioned time in relation to the body, and now, with
the digital propellant, artists reflect their anxiety connected to that speed.

It's still very early in the development of "new media"; there have not
really been major breakthroughs, which will probably come out of left
field. First there was the Gutenberg printing press. Cervantes' "novel,"
Don Quixote, appeared around 150 years after the Gutenberg Bible.

Comparing today's digital sense of time to the days of the Gutenberg
Bible and Don Quixote is poetic, but with the speed of information hav-
ing increased considerably since then, another reflex takes over. Paul
Pfeiffer's work is a beautiful example of the physical anxiety produced by
this speed. His work, *John 3:16* [2000], is both psychologically and cor-
porally related to the tools of the medium.

Yes, that work is in the collection. Paul selected close-up shots of bas-
ketballs from off-the-air footage of professional games. In the comput-
er he laboriously removed the players, keeping only the close-ups of the
basketballs, which hover in space. The five thousand images of basket-
balls, shown on a flat screen jutting out from the wall in the position of
a hoop, question the god-like quality of the sports star, the game, the
mass media, and the medium of video. The title comes from the Bible:
"For God so loved the world...."

MoMA has always had an interest in new media. Tell me about the 1968
Machine show.

The full title of the show was *The Machine as Seen at the End of the
Mechanical Age*, and it was curated by Pontus Hulten. The show began
with Leonardo's drawings for his flying machine, then segued to Pierre
Jacquet-Droz's automaton of a young writer of the 18th century, and on
to computer prints made at Bell Labs through Experiments in Art and
Technology.[3] The show concluded with Nam June Paik's video portrait

of former New York Mayor John Lindsay, appropriated from a televised press conference. Paik presented the tape in the gallery on a jerry-rigged tape-loop device. Videocassettes were nonexistent back then.

In 1968, Paik, the Korean-born Fluxus artist, bought one of the first Sony Portapak video sets in New York and immediately turned the camera on the Papal entourage. His original works were like documentaries and coincided with McLuhan's theories, but they were purely art-oriented.

After the *Machine* show, Kynaston McShine organized *Information*, a show that looked at cybernetics and information theories. He included a number of videotapes by artists from Latin America.

Did "Projects" evolve out of necessity to accommodate new artistic emergences?

Yes. The Museum launched the "Projects" contemporary exhibition series in 1971 with Keith Sonnier's video installation. Viewers walked into a small room with a lowered ceiling. Actually, they had to duck to get in. Able to stand up only in the middle of this room, there they saw a camera directed at them. After they exited and entered the adjacent space, they saw the live projected image of viewers just standing up in the center of the space next door.

This seems like an early "surveillance" work. What were some of the other ideas that artists worked with?

I organized another "Projects" show with Peter Campus' installation, *Aen* [1974]. When viewers entered this installation, they found a totally dark room. A tiny spotlight was located along the base of the far wall. When they went to investigate what the spotlight was, their live image suddenly appeared flat on the wall, upside down and in a stark manner. An unobtrusive camera captured the live image. It was like coming face-to-face with a bad dream.

In your recent curatorial work, you seem to be most interested in the concept of time. Which artist has influenced you the most in this context?

Probably Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* [1974], which is like a koan about time. The viewer thinks, "Is the Buddha looking at his own image on the futuristic monitor in front of him, or is it a recorded image?" The only way viewers can tell is by putting their hand over the camera and seeing that it is live. Nam June thought a lot about different issues regarding time in video.

Surveillance is another interesting issue. Often used for control inside Eastern Europe—or in Deleuze's term, "the control society"—it has become an aesthetic device for many underground artists and presently

is used by mainstream video artists. Many of these videos are Warholian,
in that they refer to the tedium of the everyday.

In the 1970s and 1980s, artists explored surveillance. Julia Scher went to town with this idea. In *Video Time*, our survey collection show in *MoMA 2000* this year, we presented a feature-length videotape by the German artist Michael Klier. *The Giant* [1982-1983] is recorded in black-and-white directly from in-situ surveillance cameras. The giant of the title is the surveillance camera, that ubiquitous "big brother." It includes sequences of a rainy airplane runway, traffic jams, shoplifters, and mansion gates. Seen this way, the city of Hamburg becomes a science fiction nightmare.

I recently spoke with a cameraman who said that digital technology is the cheapest and easiest to use and will replace film.

Consumer audio/video equipment is nearly all digital now. We can't forget that film, analogue, and digital video each have distinct characteristics as mediums and they aren't going away yet. Artists use each of them for different reasons. The British artist Steve McQueen favors the look of analogue video. When I showed his installation *Deadpan* [1998] in "Projects," I obtained a digital projector with the luminance he wanted. But Steve could not abide the pixilated effect of a digital projector. For his video installations, he tends to favor a softer, film look.

When choosing new work by artists, do you have to understand what images they have in their minds?

Getting to this level of understanding takes time. It all begins with a file folder with an artist's name on the label. Inside go bios, magazine articles, slides, my notes. I gather more information. From there, my interest could result in putting the work in a group show.
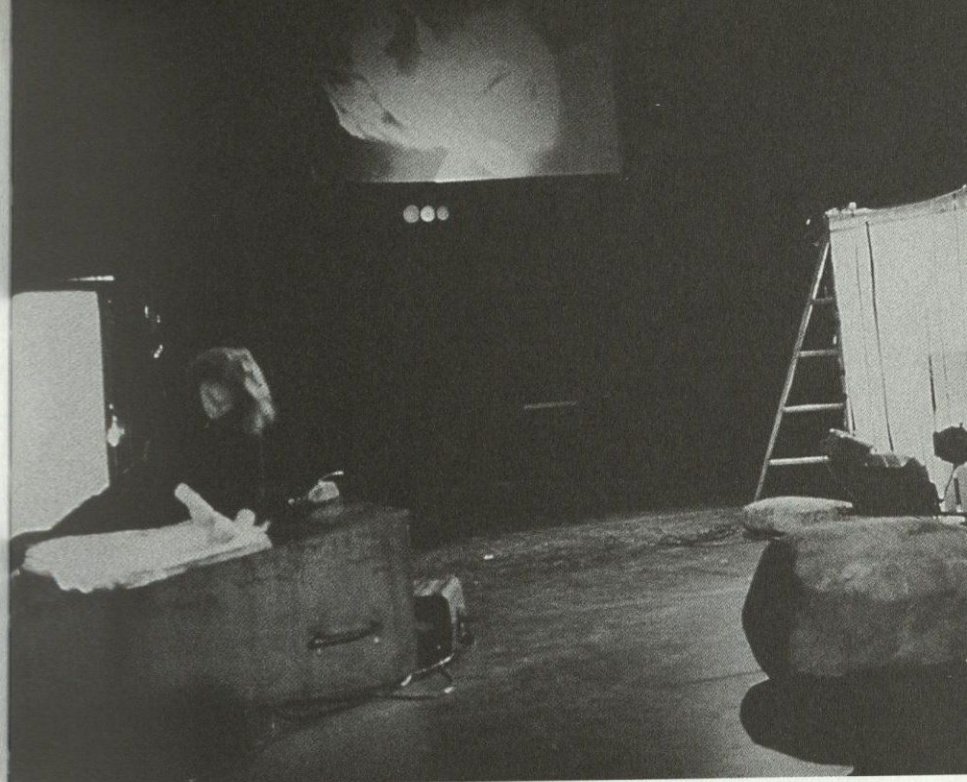
At the moment, I'm working on a Web site, called *TimeStream*, with Tony Oursler. The project is about how the moving image transmuted from medium to medium throughout history; now it is co-opting the hard drive. Tony tracks the evolution of virtual technologies and how they reflect popular belief systems. Web denizens can discover ways that radio, television, and now the computer have been used to communicate with the "spirit world." Connections can be made between points along a timeline to explore how technologies such as the camera obscura, influence machine, Leyden jar, magic-lantern theater, kaleidoscope, telegraph, and X-ray are precursors of today's Web art, cell phones, and surveillance cameras the size of vitamin pills. The Web artist Eric Rosevear is designing the site.

Is Tony working with Eric as he would with a master printmaker?

Top: Joan Jonas, *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places… Sweeney Ashtray.* Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery, New York.

Bottom: Kristin Lucas, *Host*, 1997. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Definitely. Eric is a great guide because he is a talented artist and under-
stands the Web.

New media demands different kinds of exhibition spaces. It was once
common to think that the "black box" would replace the "white box."
Now in *Open Ends*,[4] your show *Video/Performance* is housed in a nat-
urally lit space with windows and tables and chairs like carrels in a
library; everything is placed at different levels and sizes. This is like a
departure from the spectacular ways of viewing video. Bill Viola's work
takes over a whole blackened arena, and Doug Aitken needs an ambu-
latory space where the viewer is able to move through corridors. Other
installations require a huge, darkened space. In the 1999 Venice
Biennale at the Corderie, videos by many different artists were pro-
jected on walls, floors, and ceiling, encouraging viewer interaction.

I'm tired of the black box or a dark room, so with the *Video/Performance*
show, I experimented. At one end I have a visual "stack," so at a glance
the viewer can get an overview of the eight works in the show. The same
eight tapes are each presented on monitors at individual kiosks, where
viewers can have a one-on-one relationship with a particular tape. They
sit down and put on a pair of headphones and can become immersed in
a tape, which they can watch from end to end.

Video/Performance came out of thinking about how video and per-
formance art have shaped each other. Video and performance emerged
and forged their individual identities as art forms in the 1960s and 70s.
Often the two forms were used in tandem. Artists enthusiastically inte-
grated the spontaneity of a one-time action with the stimulation of a new
medium, especially one that included the possibility of "instant replay."
In *Organic Honey*, Joan Jonas comes up with an idea, does a perform-
ance, and changes it using the video as a working tool.

Instead of the petrified model, architects, directors, and curators are rec-
ognizing the museum as a new discursive arena to accommodate cul-
tural change, expanding audiences and new technologies. Examples
are the Kanazawa Museum in Japan or the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.[5] Will
MoMA take this opportunity to reckon with these issues?

MoMA's new building is expected to open late in 2004, so in the mean-
time we have an exciting exploratory phase. We will have a variety of
spaces. Some of our works will be installed thematically, not just in a
gallery for video. This is what our *MoMA 2000: Open Ends* series of
shows was about. In the new building, Teiji Furuhashi and others will be
shown in a multi-functional context. The walls will be wired, and we'll

have certain experimental spaces for the newer technologies. We also
have our Web site not only for PR and our store, but for experimental
work, like the Oursler Web site we're commissioning. We're not locking
into particular technology now for the new building, since many new
developments will happen before we open in 2004. We will remain in
touch with Sony and other technological friends, open to systems just
coming down the pike. In our new building, we will have state-of-the-art
research centers with primary reference materials and, in most cases,
actual works—film, video, prints, drawings, etc. In the galleries there
will be cafés with kiosks and books, rest areas, and pods where you can
watch a video or a DVD or whatever the next thing is.

Over the next four years we will all be exploring new ways of in-
stalling in our new space, MoMA QNS, in Long Island City. It isn't as big
as our current exhibition spaces in Manhattan, but we'll try things out
there and in other satellite areas. The MoMA Web site will evolve so that
our public from around the world will access different aspects of the col-
lection and see new commissioned Web works. I imagine we'll stream
artists' videos, as well.

Like a virtual museum?

It will evolve so that you can visit MoMA from anywhere in the world, as
long as you can connect.

What about digital interiors, where the content is fleshed out by view-
ers who complete the story?

That sounds like the people who were working with hypertext from the
early 1990s. A lot still has to be worked out with what the user/viewer
wants. There are many couch potatoes, and few who want to mouse
around.

And billboards, video, and signage?

There are unbelievable opportunities. When I was in Seoul for the bien-
nial, we placed artists' videos on many of the electronic billboards that
light up the major intersections with flashing ads. In the near future,
video will cover the entire skin of a building.

Like Nasdaq in Times Square?

Yes, and more so. I've talked with people in the construction world and
there appear to be new ways of putting moving images on the skin of a
building, more like a contiguous pattern.

This is where the digital world and architecture come together.

When the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt was planning its new
building, Jean-Christophe Ammann, the Director, commissioned a new

installation by Bill Viola. The costs of making Bill's work came out of building construction expenses, rather than the museum's acquisitions budget. Is it in your purview as a curator to request these changes?

Yes. When I began my curatorial work in the early 1970s, video attracted me because it was on the cutting edge. Today, the new kid on the block is digital art and I still have the urge to be on the cutting edge.

1. National Endowment for the Arts. 2. See Barbara London, "Video Time and Space," *Media_City Seoul 2000*, exh. cat. (Seoul: Inter Media_City Seoul, 2000), pp. 21-27. 3. Experiments in Art and Technology was formed in 1966 by Billy Kluver, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman, and Fred Walhauer as a not-for-profit service organization for artists and engineers. 4. *Open Ends: 11 Exhibitions of Contemporary Art from 1960 to Now*, Museum of Modern Art, 2000-2001. 5. The Contemporary Art Museum in Kanazawa will open in 2003; Palais de Tokyo is opening in the fall of 2001.

Foundation Contemporary Art Gallery from 1992 to 1993, she was a vis-
iting curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art on an ACC grant.
As a curator at Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, from 1993-1999, she organ-
ized *Cai Guo Qiang: Chaos* (1994) and *De-Genderism: détruire dit-elle/il*
(1997). As an independent curator, she organized *Liquid Crystal Futures:
11 Contemporary Japanese Photographers* in Tokyo, which then toured
five major European cities (1994-1996), and *Fancy Dance* in Seoul (1999).
She joined the jury of the 1999 Venice Biennale, and is a Board Member
of CIMAM. She also teaches at Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music,
and is the curator of the next Istanbul Biennial (2001).

mária hlavajová

earned an M.A. in Cultural Studies from Comenius University in
Bratislava. She worked with the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts as
its Program Coordinator, Deputy Director, and Director from 1992 until
1999. Since 1998 she has been a faculty member at the Center for Cura-
torial Studies at Bard College, New York. Recently she has been appoint-
ed Artistic Director of the Center for Contemporary Art Begane Grond
(Ground Floor) in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Since the early 1990s she
has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions, mainly of Slovak,
Czech, and Central European artists, including the exhibitions *Interior
vs. Exterior, or On the Border of Possible Worlds* (Bratislava, 1996), *There
is Nothing Like a Bad Coincidence* (Bratislava, 1998), *Midnight Walkers,
City Sleepers* (Amsterdam, 1999), as well as one-person and group exhi-
bitions of Roman Ondák, Boris Ondreicka, Denisa Lehocká, Paweł
Althamer, Roza El-Hassan, and other artists. She has contributed to con-
temporary art magazines such as *Atelier* (Czech Republic), *Kalligram*
(Slovakia and Hungary), *Profil* (Slovakia), and *Nu: The Nordic Art Review*.
She is based in Amsterdam and Bratislava.

kasper könig

has recently taken over as Director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.
He was formerly Director and professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt,
where he also founded and directed the exhibition space, Portikus. In
1977, 1987, and 1997, he co-organized *Sculpture. Projects in Münster*
with Klaus Bussmann. He has served as curator for numerous important
exhibitions, including *Westkunst* (Köln, 1979), *Von Hier Aus* (Düsseldorf,
1984), *The Broken Mirror* (with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Vienna, 1993), and
Eight People in Europe (Gunma, 1998). He recently worked as the Artistic

Director of the art exhibition at Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany. He
studied art history at the Courtauld Institute of London University from
1963 to 1964, and anthropology at the New School for Social Research
in New York in 1965. In 1968 he worked with Andy Warhol at the Factory
in New York, organizing an exhibition of the artist's work for the Moderna
Museet in Stockholm. He then taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art
and Design in Halifax until 1978, when he returned to Germany.

vasif kortun

is the founder and Director of the Istanbul Contemporary Art Project,
which opened in 1998. Between 1994 and 1997 he worked as the Director
of the Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New
York. He served as the chief curator and Director of the 3rd Istanbul
Biennial in 1992. Most recently he organized *Young Art in Ankara—3*
(Ankara, 2000), *Confessions of a Voyeur* (Istanbul, 2000), and *Unlimited
4* (Amsterdam, 2001). He is currently working on a contemporary art
museum, Proje 4L, that will open in September 2001 in Istanbul. His writ-
ings have appeared in *Flash Art International, Art Asia Pacific, New Art
Examiner, Art Fan,* and other magazines, and he has contributed to
numerous exhibition catalogues. He serves on the global committee of
the Walker Art Center, and is a member of VOTI and IKT. Kortun is the
editor of a quarterly contemporary art magazine, *RG*, published in the
Turkish language.

barbara london

is Associate Curator in the Department of Film and Video at the Museum
of Modern Art in New York. She previously worked at MoMA as a Cura-
torial Assistant for Video (1975-1981), and as Assistant Curator of Film and
Video (1981-1993). In 1974 she founded the Video Exhibition Program at
MoMA and has since been active in creating links between the electronic
arts and more traditional art mediums. Among the many exhibitions she
has organized at MoMA are *Video Spaces: Eight Installations; Music Video:
The Industry and its Fringes; New Video: Japan; Myth, Video and the
Computer; Video and Language; Video Art: A History; Video from Latin
America.* She has organized numerous solo artist projects, including work
by Steve McQueen, Bul Lee/Chie Matsui, Zhang Peili, Gary Hill, Judith
Barry, and Nam June Paik. Her essays have appeared in many exhibition
catalogues and art magazines. She holds a B.A. from Hiram College in Ohio,
and an M.A. from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University (1972).