



Grass Field, by Alex Hay. Intermedia theater piece for "Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering". 1966. 69th Regiment Armory, New York.

Video: Its Context

Barbara J. London

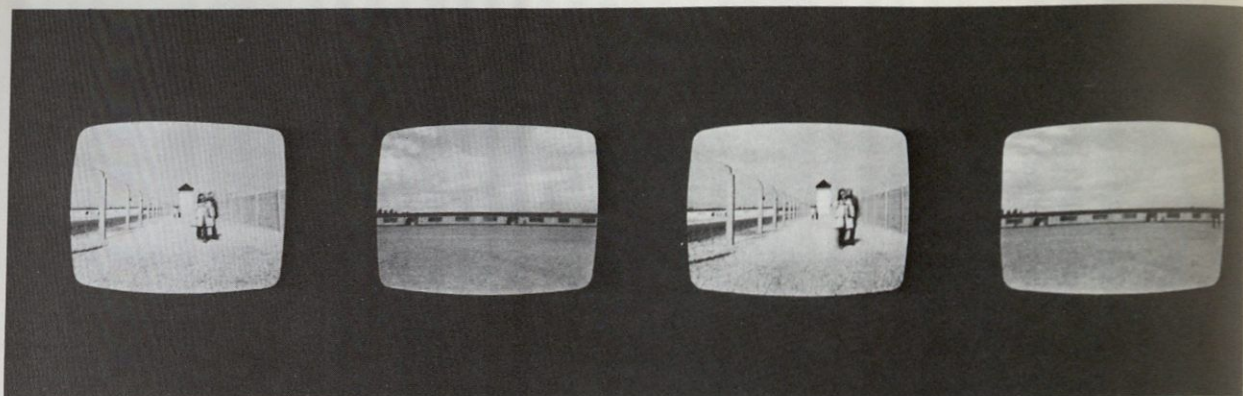
Twenty years ago, when the Sony Corporation introduced the portable video camera to the home market, artists suddenly had access to a medium that previously had been the exclusive domain of the broadcast industry. Nam June Paik, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Frank Gillette, Bruce Nauman, Shirley Clarke and many others began their investigations using these straightforward black-and-white video cameras and recorders, some working with crude "image processors" to generate color and special effects, others examining different aspects of visual perception. Encouraged with funding from the recently established National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Canada Council, artists explored the physical properties of video, discovering what it meant to have a "live" image independent of and simultaneous to recording. Some collaborated on lively performance events like Charlotte Moorman's annual New York Avant-Garde festival. Personalizing a heretofore cool medium, they examined formal, as well as poetic and political issues.

The Sixties were an experimental time, when the boundaries between the traditional art forms were blurring, and many alternative media and exhibition spaces were being considered. Despite artists' radical choices of unusual and often unwieldy materials, most of their work was made in response to previous conventions and needed an art context to be fully understood. At the time, many museums and art centers wanted to remain contemporary, so they were compelled either to construct larger, more flexible galleries or to sponsor exhibitions in outside locations to accommodate projects that frequently were made specifically for the site and addressed the politics of the area. While anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were going on, the women's movement was forming, and counter-culture events like Woodstock were taking place, Robert Smithson was making *Spiral Jetty* on private land in a remote area of Texas and Billy Kluver of Experiments in Art and Technology was starting to pair artists like Alex Hay with corporate engineers. Many women entered the open fields of video and performance, often addressing feminist issues, and worked on

equal footing with their male peers.

During this period of seemingly limitless permutations, international survey exhibitions like the "Tenth Tokyo Biennial", the "Sao Paulo Bienal", and "Documenta" expanded to include video as well as performance and photography sections. Video was further sanctioned by being integrated into ongoing museum programs and by the arrival of videotape distributors (including many women) in the United States, Canada, Japan, and Europe. The emergence of international video festivals and the initial occasional coverage of the field in such magazines as *Artforum*, *Afterimage*, and *Cahiers du Cinéma* further strengthened the independent video-maker's position.

Today, although artists have achieved a sophisticated understanding of video technology and of the medium's cultural dominance, they remain dependent upon federal, state, and corporate support. With its more personal point of view, artists' video is precisely where it has been since the start: on the periphery of both the art milieu and commercial television, its content related to the first and its form to the second. The art world is still committed to the saleable art object — most recently the "neo-Expressionist" painting, sculpture, drawing, and print — and television is mainly concerned with audience ratings. In this conservative, institutionalized time of Yuppies, Reaganomics, and pro-lifers, our canonized art comfortably fits the urban landscape: the collector's livingroom, the museum gallery, and the corporate lobby. With few exceptions broadcast television adheres to its established narrative conventions. So despite video's pervasiveness as a mass medium, the independent's projects continue to attract a specialized audience in venues that have not radically changed over the last ten years. Installations are shown in alternative spaces, featured in survey exhibitions like the "Luminous Image" at the Stedelijk Museum, and periodically are bought by museums like The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Centre Georges Pompidou. Videotapes continue to be presented primarily in programs at alternative spaces, museums, libraries, and



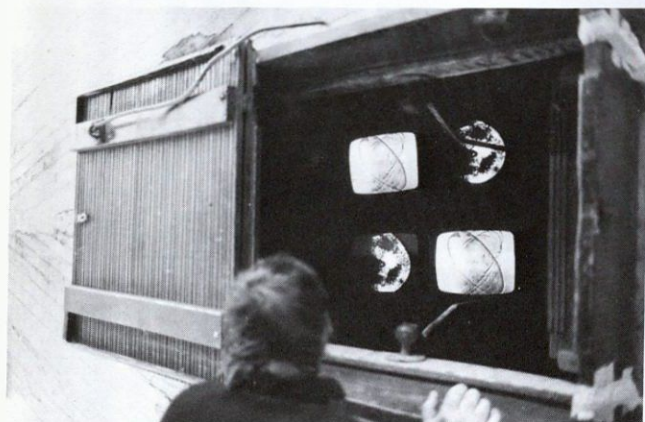
Dachau, by Beryl Korot. Installation at "Documenta 6", Kassel, 1977. Photo: Mary Lucier.



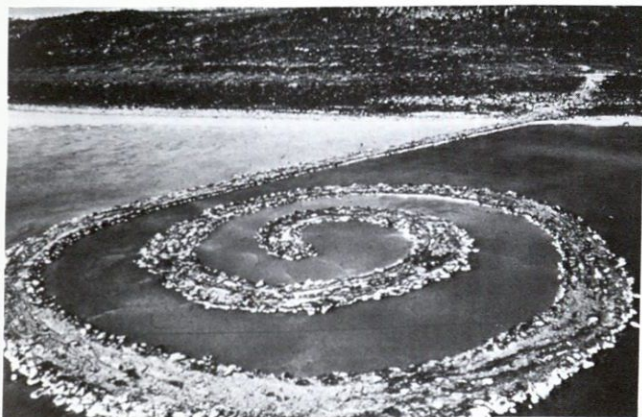
The Last Ten Minutes, by Antonio Muntadas. Installation at "Documenta 6", Kassel, 1977.



Nam June Paik points at an early videotape, displayed on a monitor with his first portable videotape recorder. New York, October 1965. Photo: Peter Moore.



Video Installation by Steina and Woody Vasulka. "Ninth New York Avant-Garde Festival" on the Alexander Hamilton Hudson Riverboat, New York, 1972. Photo: Peter Moore.



Spiral Jetty, by Robert Smithson. Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970. Photo: Courtesy John Weber Gallery.

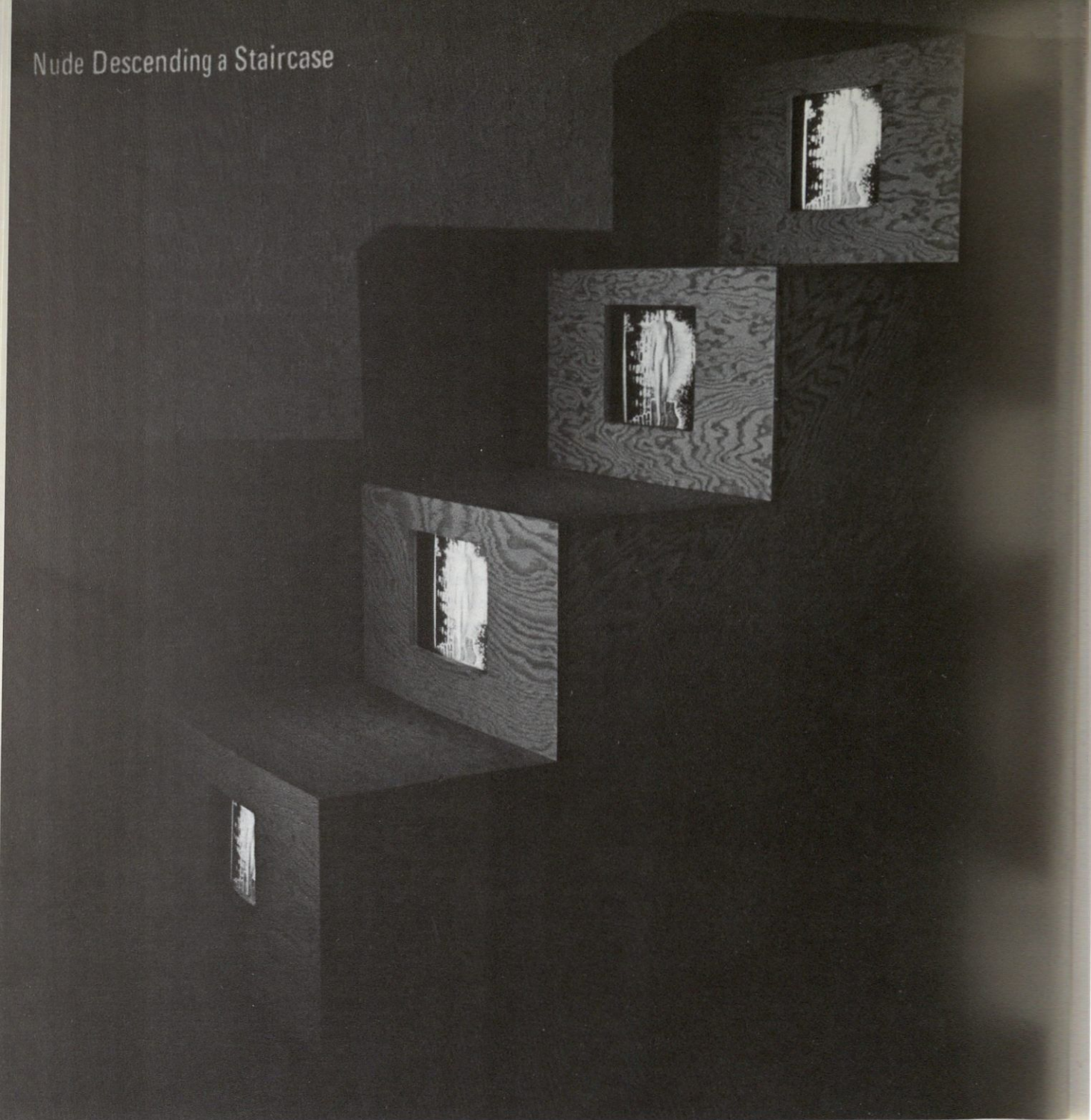
art schools, and sporadically in music clubs and on public and cable television.

A multiple with an indeterminate life and without resale value, videotape today is neither acquired, stored, nor programmed like a painting or sculpture. Closer to film in terms of productions costs, viewing, and collectability, experimental videotapes are also analogous to small-press publications, particularly the paperback editions. Both have a one-to-one relationship with their audiences, which are similar in composition and size. They generate only modest incomes for their makers, and serve vastly different functions than their commercial counterparts. The video installation generally requires too much space for the private collector's home, and its hardware is too frightening for many institutions. When installations are presented seven hours a day over consecutive weeks, consumer videotape playback machines, intended for moderate usage, often do not hold up, and the inevitable "down" time can discourage even the most sympathetic video supporter. The use of sturdier industrial rather than consumer equipment is one solution to this particular problem.

As a pervasive cultural form with so many applications, video is tightly woven into the fabric of our daily lives and its use is almost second nature. Consumer video products epitomize the term "user friendly". The 1/2-inch video cassette and recorder already are as versatile and accessible as the 1/4-inch audio cassette and home stereo system. Slowly viewers are becoming more aware of video as a viable means of artistic expression. Whereas people used to read poetry or novels to lose themselves and forget their anxieties, they now, instead of turning a page, turn on the television and/or VCR to watch feature films and electronic stories. These video narratives in the form of commercial television programs are today designed with past/present/future events melded together so that plot essentials can be grasped in the few moments of watching one channel in between dial switching. The broadcaster's handling of electronically "collapsed" time coupled with the fact that VCR viewers now are also programmers, closely watching favorite passages over and over or in slow motion, has affected artists' use of the medium. Robert Ashley, Joan Jonas, and Ed Bowes, for instance, are creating innovative fictive excursions in video, using less linear and more associative styles. John Giorno is switching from dial-a-poem to video, while Laurie Anderson is using an amalgam of technologies to create electronic stories, that all the while refer to the mass media applications of her tools.

Being so readily available and almost affordable, small-format video over the years has allowed artists to become familiar with the vocabulary of the medium. Some videomakers are able collectively to purchase

Nude Descending a Staircase



Nude Descending a Staircase, by Shigeo Kubota. 1976. In the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Peter Moore.

Shigeo Kubota's *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a work that explores the relationship between the body and the environment. The piece is composed of several rectangular blocks of wood, each with a small, square, black and white photograph of a nude figure descending a staircase. The blocks are arranged in a descending staircase pattern, creating a sense of movement and depth. The background is dark, making the light-colored wood blocks stand out.

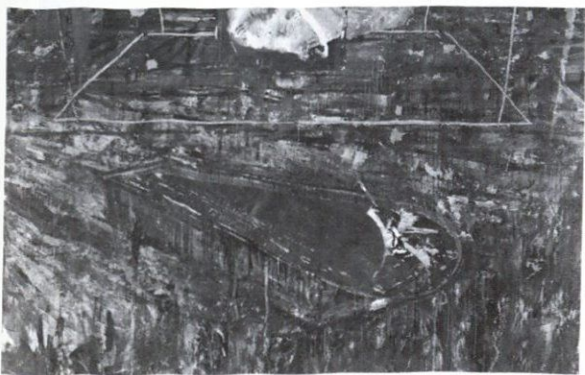
Shigeo Kubota



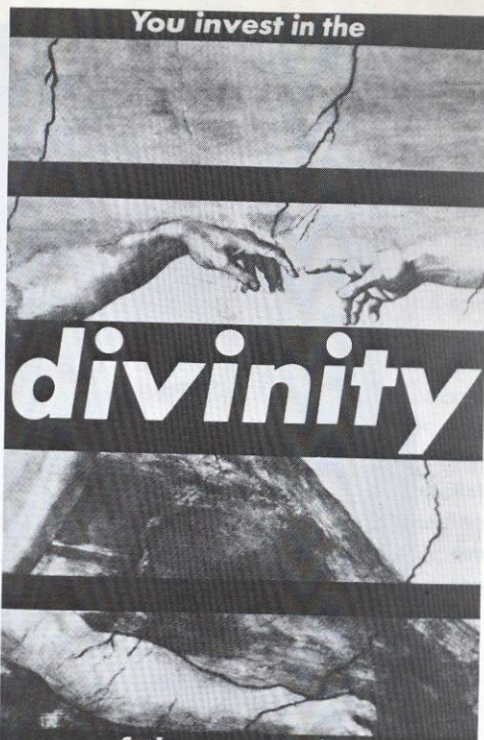
Perfect Leader, by Max Almy. 1983. Photo: the artist.



Walking in Any Direction, by Nan Hoover. Installation in "The Luminous Image," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1984.



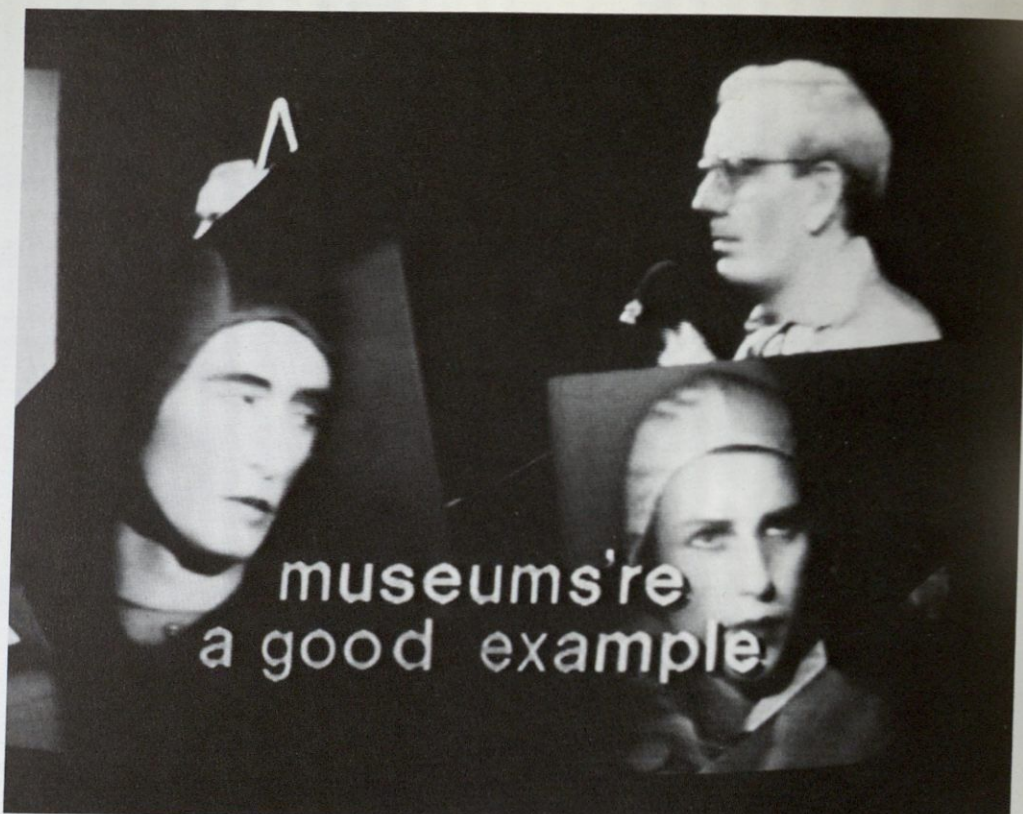
Red Sea, by Anselm Kiefer. 1985. In the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Courtesy Marion Goodman Gallery, New York.



Untitled, by Barbara Kruger. 1983. In the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Kate Keller.



"T.P. Video Space Troupe" founded by Shirley Clarke. Chelsea Hotel, New York, 1971. Photo: Dee Dee Halleck.



Perfect Lives. Conceived and directed by Robert Ashley. Produced by Carlota Schoolman for The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance and by Carol Brandenburg for the Television Laboratory at WNET/Thirteen. Video Director: John Sanborn. Associate Director: Kit Fitzgerald. Project Director: Carlota Schoolman. Music Producer: Peter Gordon. Music by Ashley, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and Gordon. With Ashley, Jill Kroesen, Tyranny, David Van Tieghem.



How to Fly, by Ed Bowes. 1980. Photo: Virginia Museum.



O Superman, by Laurie Anderson. 1981. Photo: Kira Perov.



In the Shadow of the City (Vampry) . . ., by Judith Barry. Installation at Artist's Space, New York. 1985. Photo: the artist.

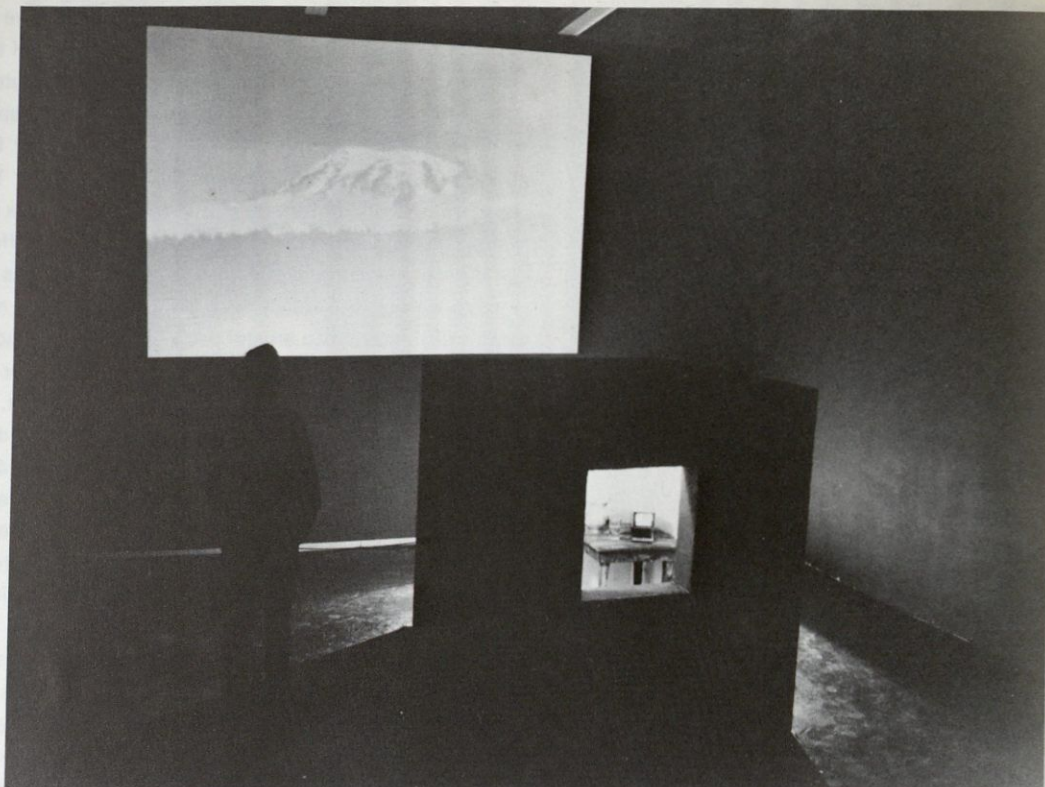


Set of *The Loner*, by Tony Oursler. 1980.

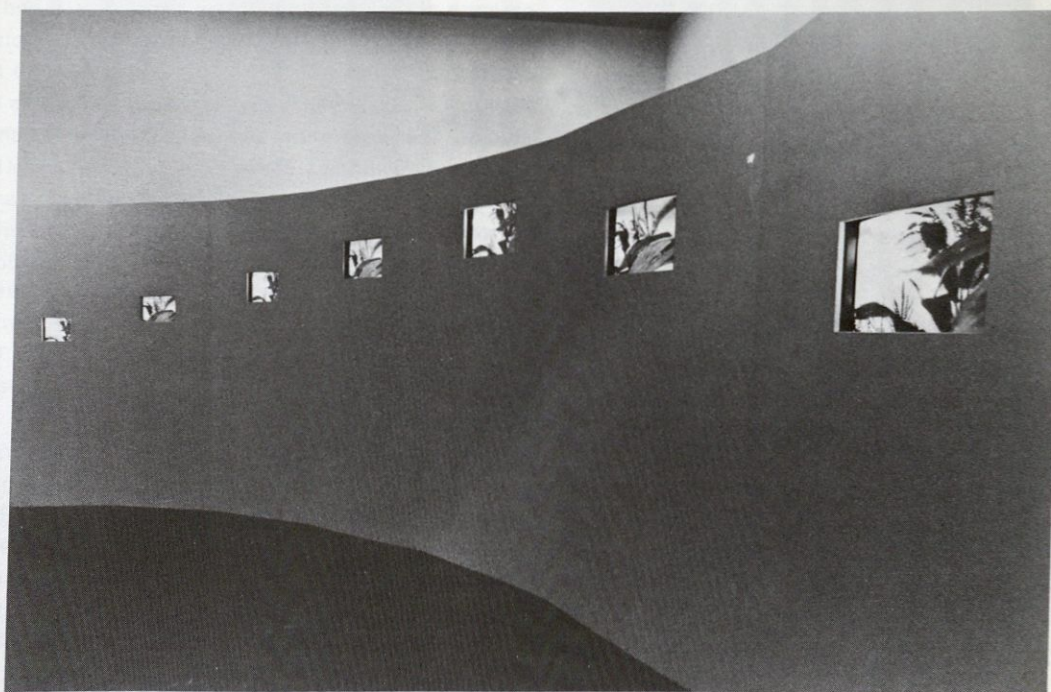
1/2-inch editing systems, to which art students have ample access at school. While artists are fortunate if they have hardware at home — the ideal being a computer, a camera, and "rough-cut" editing decks — many depend upon a one-inch commercial facility to do their final editing, which can cost upwards of \$300 an hour. That some are seeking a more polished commercial look now means that hopefully the flashy, corporate video effects found on prime-time television, especially in sports and in advertising, eventually will be integrated in more meaningful ways into artists' projects. High production value does not automatically make a work good, nor conversely does it automatically make it superficial. The successful videotape or installation has strong underlying ideas, which the hardware — whether broadcast quality or consumer quality — serves. In proceeding from vision to conception and finally to realization, the artist who is able to maintain a sense of integrity to the work, evokes the most serious and enduring consideration from viewers.

Today artists face a complex but challenging situation, with the wealth of new visual opportunities that video and computers provide on all technical levels. Some are using these electronic tools without much regard either for the broadcast market or its genres. Others appropriate and then surpass commercial television's applications, and are interested in the airwaves as an outlet. The content and diversity of videomakers' projects relates to the broad range of activity currently found in the other arts. Judith Barry examines the passage of time and its effect on spectatorship and the problems of representation in the architectural setting created by her installation *In the Shadow of the City (Vampry) . . .*. In *Perfect Leader* Max Almy adapts and studies the aggressive and synthetic salespitch of broadcast advertising. Both artists' projects parallel Barbara Kruger's print deconstructions. Tony Oursler's *The Loner* investigates inner fantasy in strange, miniaturized stage sets, in the same rough manner as Jonathan Borofsky's sculpture-wall drawings. Installations such as *St. John of the Cross* by Bill Viola and *Ohio at Giverny* by Mary Lucier examine the perceptual qualities of light with a resonance similar to Anselm Kiefer's studies of light and cultural history.

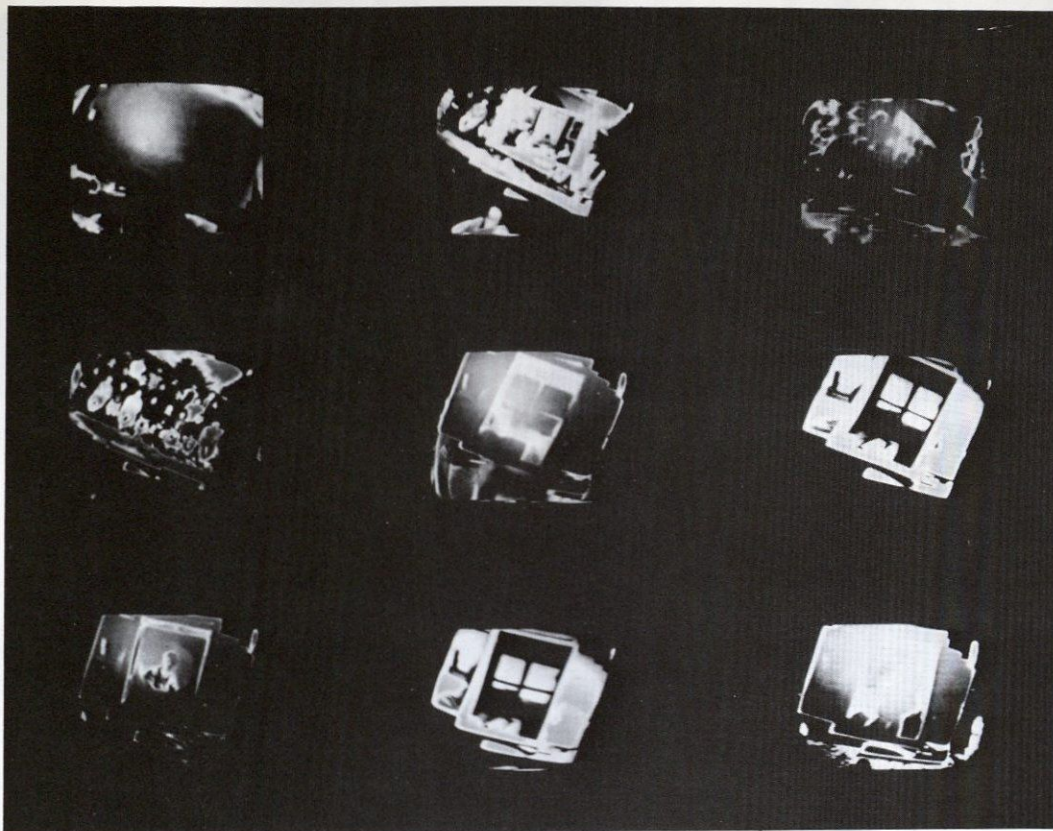
Relevant and often overlooked is video's relationship to its electronic peers. Thierry Kuntzel's imposing and nostalgic nine-channel *Nostos II* relates to Bruce Nauman's large neon projects, which challenge the viewer with the pervasive luminous material that asserts itself on highway and urban signs. In his video installations Peter Campus dealt with the psychological potential of having a live, six-foot image of the viewer, who becomes directly involved as performer-subject. Working with a unique, room-sized Polaroid camera, Chuck Close



Room for St. John of the Cross, by Bill Viola. 1983. Installation in "Video as Attitude," Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe. Photo: Kira Perov.



Ohio at Giverny, by Mary Lucier. Installation in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. 1983. Photo: Mary Lucier.



Nostos II, by Thierry Kuntzel. Installation at "The Luminous Image," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. 1984.



One Hundred Live and Die, by Bruce Nauman. 1984.
Photo: Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

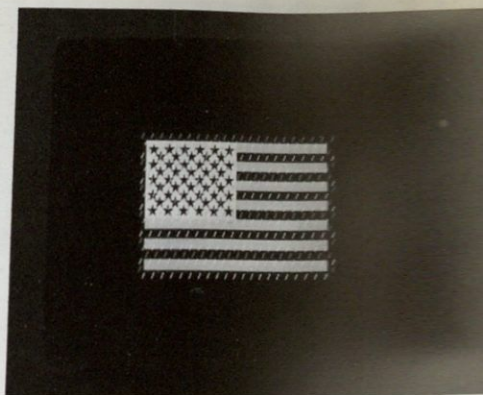


æon, by Peter Campus. Installation in "Projects: Peter Campus," The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1977



26

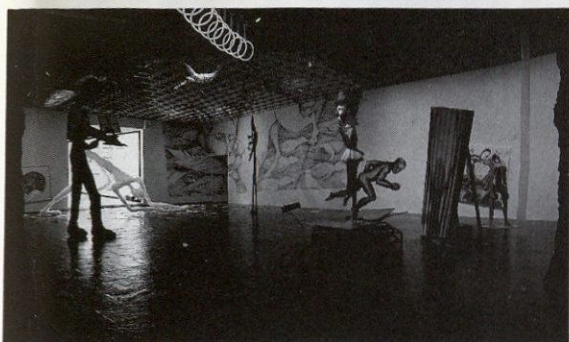
Montana, by Jane Veeder. 1982. Photo: the artist.



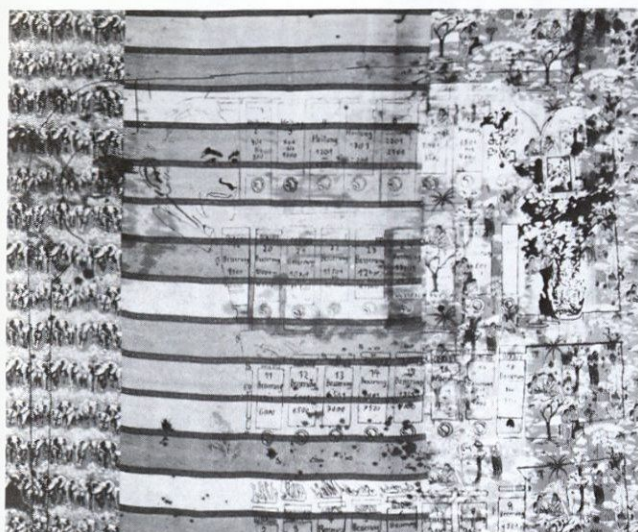
Pascal's Lemma, by James Benning. 1984. Photo: the artist.



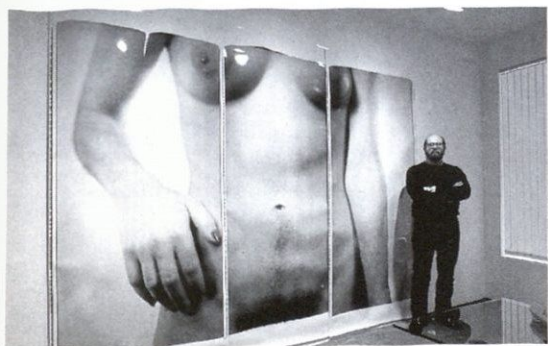
Kojak/Wang, by Dara Birnbaum. 1980. Photo: the artist.



Exhibition by Jonathan Borofsky at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1985. Photo: Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



Die Lebenden Stinker und die Toten sind nicht anwesend, by Sigmar Polke. 1984. Photo: Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Untitled, by Chuck Close. 1985. Photo: Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

similarly questions realism and what "simultaneity" or "now" means in constructing his overwhelming, matter-of-fact nudes. Jane Veeder develops whimsical, animated imagery with home computers, while James Benning recently made his twenty-minute *Pascal's Lemma* (1984) solely with a Necco home computer. Shown on a display terminal, the work weaves together ideas about the past (the life of the mathematician Pascal), the present (news headlines, the weather, time), and technology (Pascal computer language). Computers also have permeated painting. Ed Pashke and Sigmar Polke's layered canvases appear to have been designed with image processors, but of course were not. This electronic-collage look simply is part of consciousness today. Like videomakers Dara Birnbaum and Antonio Muntadas, painter Robert Longo appropriates images from the livingroom landscape, which in *Now Everybody* (1982-83) is news coverage of the Lebanon War. This differs from Warhol and Ruscha's earlier use of more emblematic images taken from the mass media. The personas Cindy Sherman constructs in her photo projects initially were taken from the silver screen, while the temporal element Brian Wood depicts in his sequential color and black-and-white photographic work is reminiscent of both commercial film and experimental video.

Because independent video has not proven to be commercially viable, the diversified field has been left to develop alone for twenty years. This has given artists the luxury of being able to pursue new directions, occasionally fail, and move on. So far critical writing has been descriptive. Writers of such magazines as *Artforum* and *October* have been overwhelmed by either the time it takes to screen work or by the vast quantity of projects, a problem posed by dealing with any contemporary art form in the same year work is produced. Criticism will develop, however, once artists' video is seen as part of a cultural continuum, as the offshoot of its twentieth century antecedents, such as Dada, Bauhaus, Abstract Expressionist, Pop, Color Field Painting, and New American Cinema.

In the coming decades video will undergo radical changes. High-definition video and improved projection systems are imminent, which means that by the 21st century video will have superseded film as the major moving picture in commercial theatres as well as in homes. The greatest advance will occur when the video signal becomes digital, providing extraordinarily sharp images and the capacity to make copies identical to original productions. Then artists' video projects with sophisticated sound can be replayed ad infinitum without loss of quality on "optical" laser disc systems that have minimal breakdowns. With digital audio/visual data stored in more capacious and efficient computers, it will be possible to fabricate realistic looking images entirely



28

Now Everybody, by Robert Longo. 1980. Photo: Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.



Marquesa, by Ed Paschke. 1984. Photo: William Bengtson.



La Television, by Antonio Muntadas. Installation at the Sao Paulo Bienal. 1981.



Sanctuaries, by Brian Wood. 1980. Photo: the artist.



Untitled, by Cindy Sherman. 1984. Photo: Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.

electronically, as companies like Lucas Films are proving already.

Before commercial television and Hollywood assume all credit for video innovations, there will need to be deeper understanding and appreciation of independent videomakers' ongoing and outstanding achievements. By challenging accepted conventions, artists' video expands the cultural landscape, making it so much richer.



Marilyn Monroe, by Andy Warhol. 1962. Photo: Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.