



Tony Oursler and one of his characters, *Electronic Canvas*, 2000

The revolutionary 1960s were difficult times for museums. The rapid evolution of art forms challenged traditional ways of exhibiting art. At The Museum of Modern Art, the first tentative step into the future was a look back. The exhibition *Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968) opened with Leonardo's prescient drawing of a flying machine, and marched through five hundred years of machine-inspired art. As a postscript to the show, curator Pontus Hulten tacked on three electronic works that underlined the past was over.

Studies in Perception I (1966) by two Bell Labs engineers, Leon D. Harmon and Kenneth Knowlton, looked like a conventional charcoal drawing of a reclining nude woman. Close examination revealed the work was a computer printout, and shading of the figure was achieved by varying the density of printed characters. The significance of the work, if any can be found in retrospect, lies in the leisurely pace at which the shading gimmick moved from idea to commercial appropriation. Nowadays innovation speeds from upgrade to upgrade; rapid obsolescence is de rigueur. However, in an age when video cameras were a burden to lug around and computers not movable at all, a decade or so passed before the innovation of the Bell Labs engineers showed up at computer fairs. Then all at once it seemed every dot matrix printing company had their units spewing out "charcoal" drawings.

For the Love of Scan Lines

The other future-oriented works in the exhibition, both by Nam June Paik, pointed to more enduring avenues of development. *Zen for TV* (1963) featured a doctored TV set with only a few scan lines lit up. The cultural icon that glowed in darkened living rooms of America was thus transformed into a meditative minimal sculpture. Moreover, though video as a modern art form did not exist, in working with the innards of the monitor Paik was exploring properties of video unique to the medium.

Paik's interest in exploiting the formative elements of video led to collaboration with his childhood buddy Shuya Abe, an engineer. Helped by funds funneled through WGBH, they invented a device that assigned colors to the intensity of video signals. WGBH also provided a home for the Paik-Abe Synthesizer, which



"HELLO," *The Medium is the Medium*, Allan Kaprow, 1968

Paik used in "synthesizing" his second piece in the "Machine Show..."

The video footage for *Lindsay Caged* (1967) was shot with a Portapak, one of the first consumer video cameras to land in New York. Paik pointed the camera at an evening newscast and captured a clip of New York's mayor Lindsay at a press conference. Into the Synthesizer went the snippet of tape, a few twists of dials, a couple of coffee all-nighters, and presto, a memorable video of the movie-star handsome mayor repeating a silly gesture over and over again. A year after the tape was shown at the Museum, it appeared in WGBH's *The Medium Is the Medium*, the first broadcast television program that addressed video as an art medium.

Recently I reviewed a tape of the show and discovered that this seminal program, which Fred Barzyk produced, may have influenced more video careers than I realized. In a shot that panned across the stagehands I recognized a couple of helping hands, youngsters Bill Viola and Mary Lucier.



WGBH, "HELLO," *The Medium is the Medium*, Allan Kaprow 1968

My initiation into the productive side of video came a few years later than these pioneers. In an exhibition slated to tour Australia, the Museum wished to send videos by painters and sculptors along with their standard work, but no one in the Painting and Sculpture Department was willing to tackle video. I was an assistant in the Museum's International Program, and somehow the job fell to me to organize the video segment.

The entrenched resistance video encountered at the Museum was common throughout the art establishment. Compared to other institutions, the Museum was better oriented to accept video, because "fringe" arts such as film

had acquired a defined space within the organization. Willard Van Dyke, the director of the Film Department, joined with Fred Barzyk and others in bringing to the Museum "Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television." (January, 1974) More than fifty video and experimental film artists came

together from around the world to debate, shape and guess at the influence of video on commercial television. This was my first encounter with Hollis Frampton, Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, Peter Weibel, Michael Snow and Toshio Matsumoto.

The novelty and revolutionary aura of video seduced me. With the encouragement of a few colleagues and a boost from the NEA, I segued to video as quickly as one could within a structured Museum organization. For a time I operated from the Print Department, stretching the logic that video is print-like because it can be issued in multiples.

My campaign in the Museum to carve a specific space dedicated to video ran up against a common New York real estate problem—nothing suitable is available. The video gallery finally settled in a small out of the way space, but I thought the site rang with good vibrations. Nearby was a Kinetic Art gallery where lovers of lava lamp art necked in dark corners. I had high hopes that video enthusiasts would

find my video program equally compelling. I prided myself that the MoMA video gallery was the first space in a museum anywhere in the world devoted specifically to video. (If this fact gets into the Guinness Book of Records, the Whitney Museum may contest the claim.)

The first show presented in the gallery starred recent work by Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, and Robert Morris. I worked with another curator in selecting these videos, and they were included in an exhibition of Minimal and Conceptual art that the Museum sent traveling to Australia. Often my early endeavors in the video gallery sought to integrate video art with the Museum's contemporary activity in other mediums. I thought cross-fertilization would alert my colleagues to the virtues of the new medium. Excellent videos by Gilbert and George and Rebecca Horn skipped to the top of the exhibition list because the artists were in the collection of the Painting and Sculpture Department, and also Drawings and Prints.

In retrospect, the ploys I used to nurture video on my home turf were amusingly far fetched. When the Museum purchased its first Polaroid print, I argued that video has much in common with Polaroid art. These new art mediums have a vital sense of immediacy because unlike their older siblings, movies and still photography, they do not have to wait for a lab to process the artist's output.

Outside the Museum video attracted an enthusiastic following.

Flush with a utopian vision, many artists proclaimed creative, revolutionary video would displace soul-deadening commercial television.

Saturday afternoons in Soho, the Anthology Film Archives screened videos and afterwards everyone streamed over to the Kitchen to see video installations and performances. Late in the day us lovers of scan lines gathered at one of the first restaurants in Soho, named in the no frills style of the day, Food Restaurant. Heated debates raged over drugs, politics, and in this group, the true nature of video. We argued the merits of Woody and Steina Vasulka's work—was their focus on modifying video's electronics overly influenced by Clement Greenberg's modernist esthetic? (Greenberg impressed the art world of the 1950s with the notion that the central task of artists was to discover and exploit the unique elements of their chosen medium.)

And politics—undoubtedly drugs influenced the megalomaniac manifestos artists issued. Flush with a utopian vision, many artists proclaimed creative, revolutionary video would displace soul-deadening commercial television. Events rarely turn out the way dreamers imagine them, but indeed much of contemporary television derives from the innovations of video pioneers.

The collective TVTV advanced their political agenda in a genre of small format documentaries. They enjoyed enduring support from Barzyk at WGBH and WNET's David Loxton, and eventually hit the big time with coverage of the 1972 Democratic Presidential Convention. Their video teams adroitly worked the convention floor and demonstrated the effectiveness of right-in-the-action journalism. The paltry cost of the equipment needed for this new style journalism induced the major TV networks to adopt



Susan Dowling, *East Ended Tape*, Peter Campus 1976

the technique without delay.

I never missed a segment of Barzyk and Loxton's annual mini-series *VTR* (Video and Television Review.) The show, aired Sunday nights on national PBS, connected artists to an appreciative audience beyond their circle of friends. Bill Wegman's performance tapes with his dog Man Ray made a TV star of the deadpan critter.

On occasion creativity flowed from the commercial world to video. Peter Campus, a professional filmmaker, devised a riveting and much copied illusion in which he appears to tear a hole in his back and walk through himself. The video *Three Transitions* (1973) was a WGBH Barzyk production, and the Museum exhibited the tapes. Peter Campus added to his other achievements by going on to a distinguished career as a video artist.

Barzyk produced the works of many video artists, and the Museum exhibited nearly all of them. I kept in regular touch with him, snooping around for any scoops he might direct my way. I have to admit I jollied him up a bit and promoted artists I planned to exhibit. The prospect that a show in MoMA's little video gallery might lead to national exposure on PBS gave me clout among video artists. To my colleagues, the PBS shows demonstrated the medium had attracted sufficient creativity to prosper.

Unlike videotape, installation art and video as an element within installation enjoyed a smooth induction to the Museum. The group-show *Spaces* (1970) was devoted to the new art form. For the first time the Museum planned and built a work of art as a room, adhering to an artist's specifications. Vito Acconci received a great deal of press and abuse for the amusing space he created. He used the Museum as a mailbox. Every day he visited his work to pick up mail addressed to Vito Acconci care/of Museum of Modern Art.

The Museum launched *Projects* to encourage and accommodate new installation works. The very first exhibition was a video installation. *Projects: Keith Sonnier* (1971) used a live video camera to project images from one gallery onto the walls of an adjacent space. The real time action startled viewers.



Peter Campus, *East Ended Tape*, 1976

Initially curators from Painting and Sculpture organized the *Project* shows, and then opened the series to all Museum curators. One of my memorable contributions was Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974). A video camera mounted above a television monitor points at a stone Buddha seated in a classic pose. The Buddha faces the monitor and gazes knowingly at his image. Nothing moves on the monitor, which leads one to wonder whether the image on the monitor is a live feed from the camera, or comes from another source, perhaps a videotape. Ah, I deduce, the piece enacts a Zen Buddhist koan: What is the difference between the Buddha staring at a live (present time) image of himself, and the Buddha confronted with his videotaped (past time) image?

Critics found the piece provocative and profound, though none perceived the *koan* or its "solution." Apparently critics are untrained in the art of Zen, for had they simply reached into the piece and put their hand in front of the camera, the static



The Medium is the Medium, Aldo Tambellini, 1968

nature of the Buddha contemplating himself would be shattered, and viewers would discover the camera was live. As soon as the show closed, the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art, Amsterdam acquired *TV Buddha*.

By 1974 video had acquired a secure mandate in the Museum. The Rockefeller Foundation expedited matters with a grant that allowed me to leave the Print Department and work exclusively on video. I inaugurated *Video Viewpoints*, an ongoing series where artists came to show-and-tell their innovative work.

The program gave off a whiff of gunpowder, an aura of revolution, though I expect the venue distracted politicized artists from their vision of a transformed society. The presentations were held in the posh old Founders Room on the sixth floor. For each show the porters, engineers and projectionists had to trundle in three heavy monitors, hoist them onto tall stands, and jerry rig video and sound systems. The equipment was appropriately funky for revolutionary action, but the room was the belly of the beast. The video revolutionaries were not in the basement of the

palace plotting a new order; they were in the king's chambers.

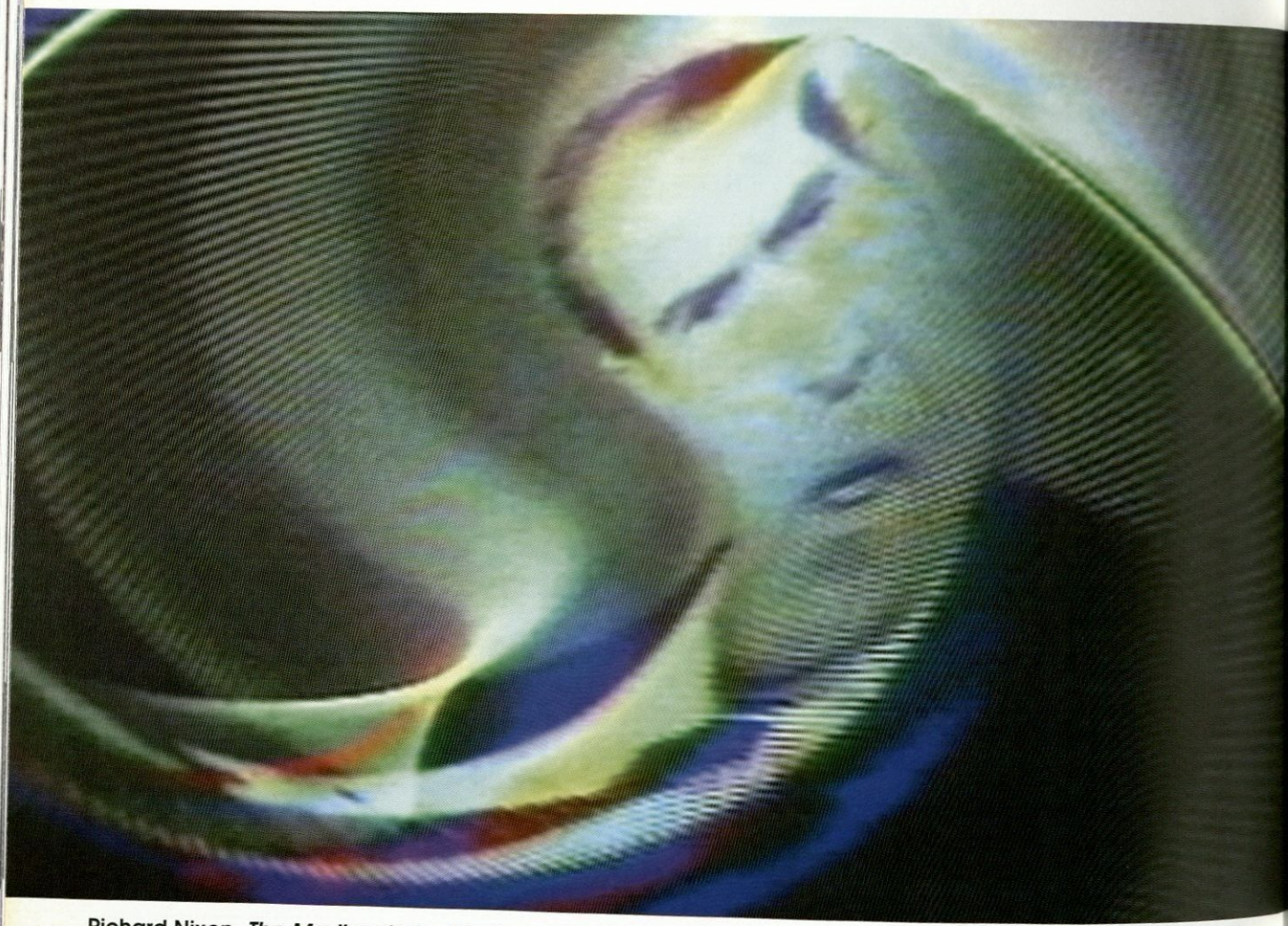
All video pioneers put on a show at *Video Viewpoints*, and many are memorable. Joan Jonas demonstrated her unique way of integrating live performance with pre-recorded action. Each work encompassed a suite of art forms—live events, a video-tape and an installation. Mary Lucier materialized the physical nature of light in the installation video *Dawn Burn*. Gary Hill's early work fused word and language, a theme that he still explores. The format of *Video Viewpoints* proved to be resilient, and recently it celebrated a twenty-fifth anniversary.

Video fared well in the 1984 building expansion. The Museum upgraded the video facilities, and opened a Video Study Center. Researchers now had a place where they could study the medium, which, for better and worse, had evolved into a field of scholarship. *Video Viewpoints* moved into the brand new Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2, outfitted with a state-of-the-art projection system donated by Mr. Akio Morita, the chairman of Sony.

As the personal computer gained social acceptance, the art world's anti-technology sentiment faded away. Only a few decades earlier in the Museum sculpture garden, Jean Tinguely had installed a dreadful machine. A large audience was on hand to watch the singular performance of the Frankenstein-like assemblage of industrial parts. They cheered as the monstrosity tore itself apart and burned.

Sentiment in the art community is more balanced now. The struggles and achievements of years gone by are history. Video has become an institution. The Museum's collection holds more than a thousand artist videotapes, and the archives are securely guarded for posterity in a climate-controlled vault in Pennsylvania. Videotapes and video installations are featured in contemporary art shows and biennials, and collectors are catching on.

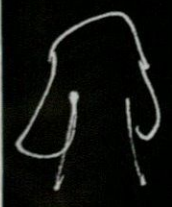
In keeping with the way things morph nowadays, video has acquired a new makeup. It is plugged into the digital art form energized by the computer. The Film and Video Department at the Museum is now titled "Department of Film and Media." Happily, "Media" is a revolutionary art form, and many of its growing pains are reminiscent of the early days of video. I often reflect on video's achievements and dead ends, and the thrill of blazing a trail in uncharted terrain. An old saw tells us that life's experiences are wasted on youth; only a mature understanding can fully savor the excitement of youthful adventures. This time around in Media, I won't miss anything.



Richard Nixon, *The Medium is the Medium*, 1968



Barzyk and David Atwood with Paik Synthesizer, 1970,
photo: Lynn McLaren from Rapho Guillumette



William We

Fred Barzyk

**The Search for a
Personal Vision
in Broadcast
Television**



Fred Barzyk**The Search for a Personal Vision in Broadcast Television**

September 7 - December 2, 2001

Organized by the Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University

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