

IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

CATHERINE LORD

Video as Attitude

Joan Jonas/*He Saw Her Burning*; Allan Kaprow/*Untitled*; Bill Beirne/*Extras: Street Performance for an Audience Enclosed*; Juan Downey/*Signage*; Dieter Froese/*Not a Model for Big Brother's Spy-Cycle*; Robert Gaylor/*Suspension of Disbelief/10:00 p.m.*; Gary Hill/*Primarily Speaking*; Rita Myers/*In the Planet of the Eye, Second Stage: The Eye of the Beast Is Red*; Bruce Nauman/*Untitled*; Michael Smith/*Mike's Dressing Room*; Francesc Torres/*Jean's Lost Notebook*; Steina and Woody Vasulka/*The West*; and Bill Viola/*Room for St. John of the Cross*.

at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, N.M. and the University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
May 13-June 26

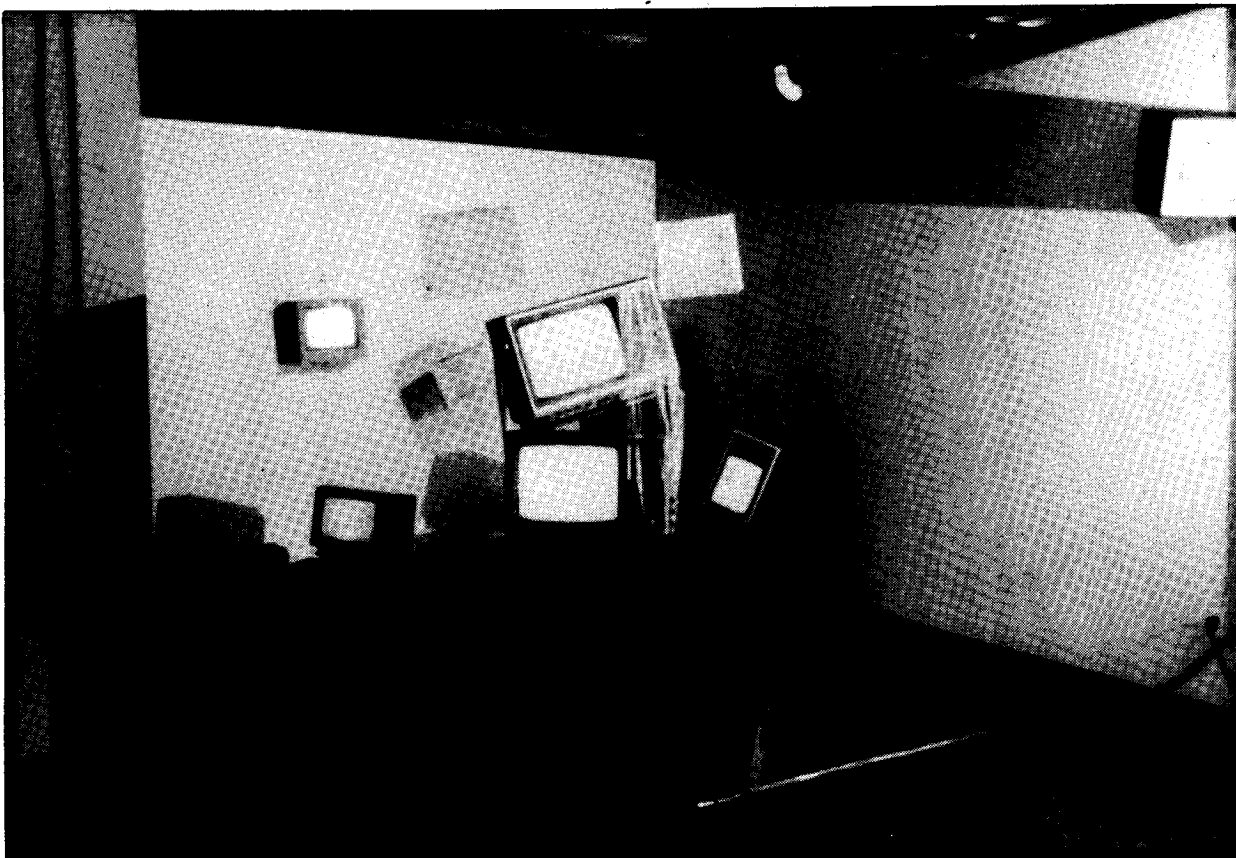
If a single word sums up this project, it's ambition. While it's one thing to do a large video installation in New York, it's another in New Mexico. There, the chutzpah needed to commandeer two museums and a respectable amount of equipment is not routine, and press and audience support minimal. That "Video as Attitude" happened at all is due mainly to two people: Steina Vasulka and Patrick Clancy. The former, when offered a one-person show at the Albuquerque Museum of Fine Arts, recommended instead a group show of contemporary video; the latter not only served as the exhibition's theoretician and curator, but as its fundraiser and technician.

Ambition, however, applies not only to the material circumstances of "Video as Attitude" but to the theoretical challenge Clancy intended by the project. The rhetoric invoked to support most video installation work seems designed to refute a notion of video art as a single-channel, broadcastable (well, potentially) medium. This rhetoric most often replaces picture-plane modernism with a me-too conception of sculpture—i.e., if sculpture is about deploying objects in space, monitors are eligible. This project seems aimed not so much at unleashing the potential of video technology, or even sculpture, as at liberating a few more exhibition and funding categories for videomakers who would otherwise fall penniless between guidelines. Clancy's ambitions certainly transcend this level of critique, and transcend as well the easy refutation of another recuperation of video—as a modernist medium defined by its identity as a series of electronic signals.

What Clancy wanted to present, basically, is implied but not summarized in the phrase "video as attitude." He wanted to show a group of works that would refute the inscription of modernist tenets upon video—not only by virtue of their sculptural attributes, but by implicating the viewer in a rethinking of the notion of point of view and of phenomenological experience. Pointing to the ways in which images structure reality in our media culture, Clancy writes:

It [TV, urban architecture and advertising] has accustomed us to the instantaneous reading of rapidly intercut information lacking a cohesive, overall context other than that of commercial manipulation. In the fabricated, artificial environment, signs and images become signifiers which, taken apart and reframed, replace natural space as an organizing principle or context for experiencing the world. . . . As a tool, video is capable of simultaneously displaying many kinds of signifiers, such as image, language, sound, text, color and realtime events in a synoptic manner. The various tropes of video such as keying, matting, and synthesized processes allow for a transformation of thought and language into new dimensions which can simulate the

CATHERINE LORD is the Dean of the School of Art and Design at the California Institute of the Arts.



Installation view of *Not a Model for Big Brother's Spy-Cycle*, by Dieter Froese.

man-made environment and aid deconstructive strategies.¹

The above suggests expectations that far surpass those usually applied to artists using video, but it raises what I think is a central issue: if Clancy's analysis of video's potential takes squarely into account the social omnipotence of media representations, can one expect the same of video artists, who like their peers in other genres, were bred to hold artmaking dearer than cultural analysis or critique? (This observation is intended in a basic sociological sense: "video art" is a very recent creation; despite the deluge of utopian agitprop produced in the last 20 years about democratic communications technology, those who practice video as an alternative to television generally define themselves as "artists," not anything so prosaic as communications workers.)

But there is a second major issue raised by this show and Clancy's suggestion that being within the "reality" of a video installation constitutes "a significant contribution toward a new definition of sculpture." Video art is becoming an increasingly specialized practice, even though its tradition (which includes many of the artists in this show) is still identified with an interdisciplinary approach. How, then, does the work in "Video as Attitude" relate to contemporary sculpture, which has, as an outgrowth of its particular history, taken on related problems of cultural space.

So what, then, of the work in this show?—or these two shows which, ignoring geography, I'm going to lump together.² The generations, practices, and intentions of the artists included vary considerably, though many of them see video as just one tool in a repertoire that includes books, sound, and performance. Only a few, I suspect, would admit in public that their business was deconstructing cultural signifiers. Of those who might, that some were more successful than others in creat-

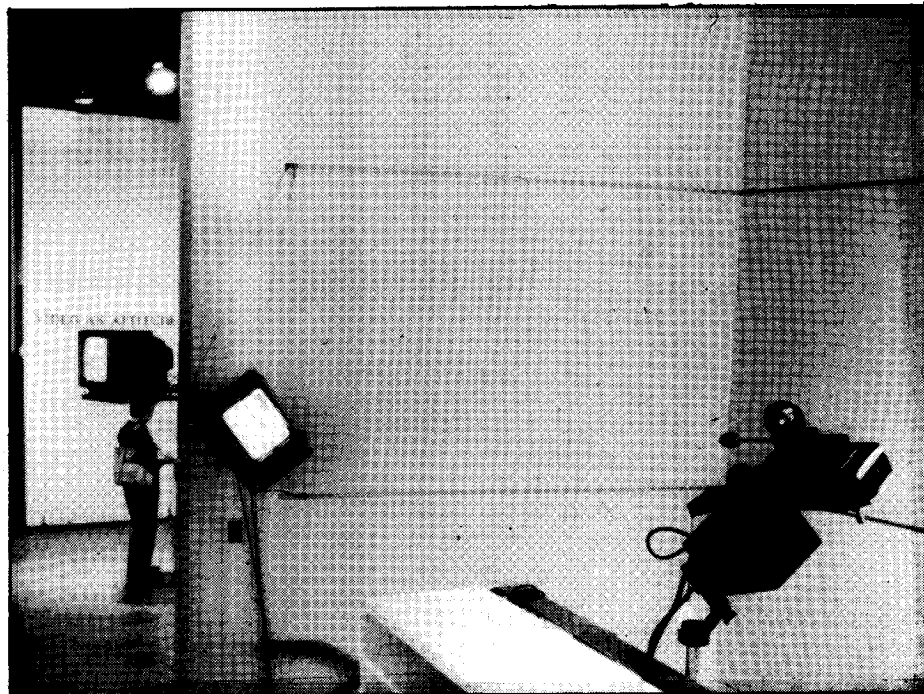
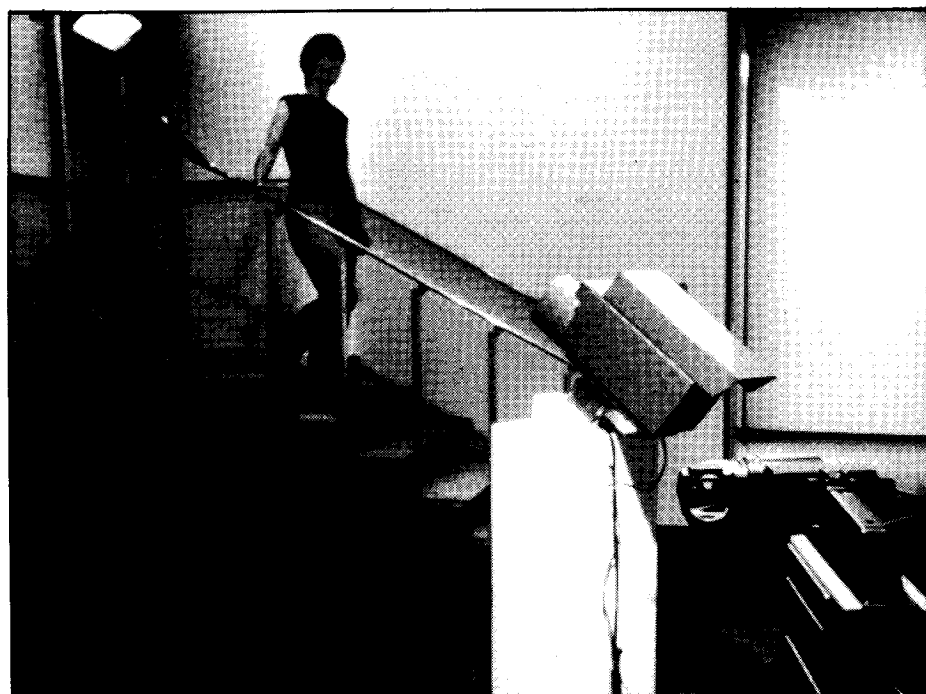
ing their own temporal-spatial reality, and thus challenging the primacy of the notion of point of view, reflects varying sophistication in sculpture (as opposed to video) and varying commitments to site-specific (or at least site-adaptable) work.

In terms of making the viewer a part of the event, and putting a particular gallery space to good use, Dieter Froese's *Not a Model for Big Brother's Spy-Cycle* was probably the most successful work in the exhibition. Insinuation was the strategy. At a rather awkward social juncture of lobby and stairs in Albuquerque's University Art Museum, a classic of bland-but-big architecture, *Not a Model . . .* edged into one's awareness as disconnected monitors and cameras obtruding into supposedly neutral space. In the midst of discrete, transportable units of video art, it wasn't entirely clear when, where, or even whether Froese's piece had started. That *Not a Model . . .* was a loop of real and dummy cameras, real and dummy monitors, and real-time and prerecorded tapes became clear only as one tracked the work down the stairs to find a maze of cardboard cameras panning crazily on plinths and, dangling from the ceiling, wire mesh monitors, the shadows of the functional products with which they were intermixed. Heading back up the stairs to see the image of what one had just traversed, and to complete the loop, one encountered two channels of prerecorded images of surveillance. The set-up was hapless victim and invisible inquisitor, the script, an often comic Joe-McCarthy-meets-the-striving-'80s-artist conversation:

Q: Do you speak Russian?
A: No.
Q: Do you engage in art politics?
A: No.
Q: Do you engage in art for the masses?
A: I do my best.

In the refusal to be limited by museum space, and in the

Installation views of *Not a Model for Big Brother's Spy-Cycle*, by Dieter Froese.





Installation view of *Room for St. John of the Cross*, by Bill Viola.

way meaning was assigned to the objects which comprise basic recording equipment, Bill Beirne's *Extras: Street Performance for an Audience Enclosed* served as the counterpart to *Not a Model . . .* at Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts. As Beirne explains his intentions, "I have become particularly interested in exploring and exploiting that aspect of behavior which attributes significance to gesture beyond that which is obviously true."

Spatially, *Extras* had three parts: first, a room inside the museum, containing newspaper clippings mounted on the wall, a camera pointed at the viewers, and a monitor; second, that corner of the plaza outside the museum covered by a camera pointing out from a second-story museum office; third, a daily, live transmission of the intercut results to Albuquerque. Structurally, *Extras* was based on a specific method of attributing significance to everyday, anonymous, and—for all practical purposes—unreadable gestures. The actions selected occurred by chance, or were orchestrated, both within the room and on the plaza. The method of assigning meaning—or sparking the desire to assign meaning—began with a series of enigmatic newspaper clippings, paired with descriptions of a simple action. For example, a letter to the editor of the Santa Fe newspaper from a man who had decided to make public his antipathy to modern art ("I've never seen anything by Picasso or O'Keefe [sic] that didn't look like the product of a fourth grader with limited time") was coupled with this description: "A man walks across the plaza and decides not to go to the museum." A short clipping about a man who stole a watch in a Santa Fe gallery, but opted to leave the high-priced paintings on exhibition, was linked to the following scene: "A young man stops another and asks, 'Hey, you want to buy this?' He takes a watch from an envelope as he speaks."

Every weekday lunchhour these and similarly unremarkable scenes were enacted by 12 extras amidst the unwitting bystanders in the plaza and in the museum room. (One of the nicest things about this piece was the cheerfully pragmatic choice of time: it vastly increased the crowd in the plaza, downtown Santa Fe's major hangout for those who can't retreat to air conditioned adobe condos, and gave the programmed extras, most of whom had other jobs, a chance to participate in an artwork scheduled during museum hours.) The performance was shown, with prerecorded cut-ins of Beirne's voice reading scene descriptions, on the monitor in the museum. This room thus became the privileged site for interpreting and structuring what could have been chance events—indeed, for deciding, thanks to Beirne's voice, that anything at all out of the ordinary was happening. That these events were viewed by a camera was half their significance; that chance could alter the narrative reading one would infer from the clippings further altered their significance. (What, to take the hot-watch sequence, if a stray tourist took up the extra on the offer? Or what if a van parked in the "wrong" place and rendered the entire event merely an auditory assertion?)

Beirne's use of random events and his alteration of the conventional boundaries of an artwork are hardly new techniques. Nevertheless, *Extras* succeeded in the specific aim of causing the viewer to attribute significance to whatever fell within the range of a surveillance camera, and to read not only the imagery being shown but the process of constructing it as imagery.

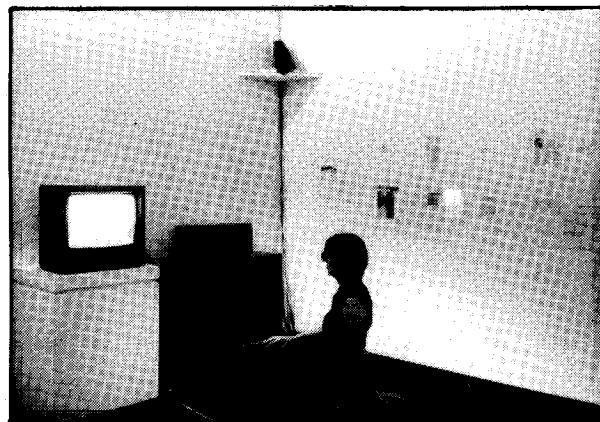
This was also true of Bruce Nauman's *Untitled*, which used a passageway leading to a small room as a site. True to form, Nauman set up the piece so that the viewer's entry at once activated and completed the work. A perceptual puzzle, it involved two live cameras, two monitors, and a physical mirror-image situation in the small room. There, a table and chair on the floor were replicated by a table and chair bolted, upside down, to the ceiling. Looking down the corridor from the entrance, one saw first an overview of what appeared to be the whole set-up, which, since the camera which fed the monitor

was mounted on the ceiling at the head of the corridor, perforce incorporated the approaching viewer's receding back. The second camera, mounted on the ceiling just inside the room, was aimed at the suspended table and chair in such a way as to render it rightside up—even though it was apparently shot from "below"—on the second monitor, which was placed on the table at a 90° angle to the first and thus could not be seen from the corridor. The real conundrum, if you're still with me, came after realizing that the second monitor itself was upside down. That this sort of cerebral conceptualism wooed viewers to decode camera representations of space was evidenced by dusty footprints on the wall at strategic points—the better, I suppose, to do the contortions needed to turn one's head upside down when squeezed behind a table in a small room.

Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* used a skillfully perverse strategy to lure the viewer into participation. The installation was, it should be said, an inescapable act of aggression from outside, since the booming, wave-like noises of the audio dominated the entire Santa Fe gallery space. To get physically inside the piece, one went down a black corridor to a large, high-ceilinged room that had also been painted black. In this dark room, the sound was even louder and emanated from a huge black and white projection high on one wall—jerky, hand-held shots of mountains taken from a moving car that read as black shapes coiling and twisting, images of flying uncontrolled. Underneath this, and its flickering gray light, was a rectangle of tungsten—the window of room roughly the same size as the one in which the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross had been imprisoned and tortured in 1577, a room too small to stand upright or lie down. There, St. John had written most of his poetry.

One could look into Viola's room only by kneeling, one viewer at a time, on the floor outside. Inside, the dirt-floored room contained a wooden table and chair, and a glass of water and a pitcher. Also, there was the other half of the video, a very small monitor with the only color in the entire installation on its screen—a perfect and static image of Mt.

Top left: installation view of *Extra: Street Performance for an Audience Enclosed*, by Bill Beirne. Below left: frame enlargement from *Extra*. Right: installation view of *Untitled*, by Bruce Nauman.



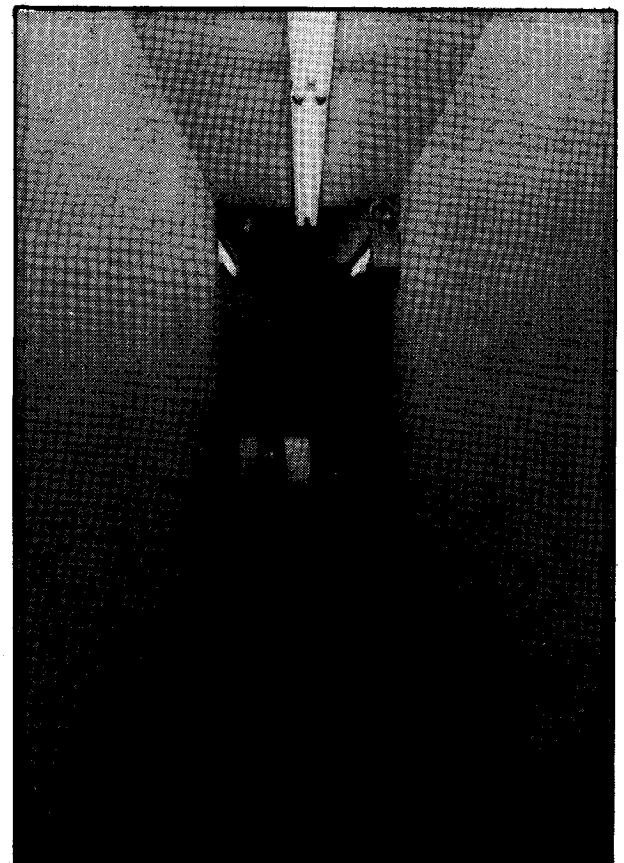
Rainier, with brilliant blue sky, white snow, and green grass in the foreground. On the soundtrack, only audible if one put one's head entirely inside (in an act of voyeurism forcibly combined with prayer), one heard St. John's poetry in rapid, soft Spanish. The result was a construction of an image of sanity, peace, and freedom that, as in the poetry of St. John, is an entirely private choice.

If the four artists I've discussed well used, or refused, a given space, others employed video to induce quite differently self-referencing in space and time. Three of these artists—Rita Myers, Francesc Torres, and Robert Gaylor—placed monitors in constructions intended as artifacts in a classic sculptural sense. (I've got to say here, not so parenthetically, that I think there has evolved a distinct type of video installation. This genre sets itself the problem of deploying black plastic high-tech objects on, around, or under materials and forms that carry their own meaning without making the combination look silly. For example, if you want to superimpose a sequence of imagery on a static construction that cannot symbolically incorporate the monitor as a three-dimensional object, you've got the job of burying the depth of the monitor—which is just *not* a flat screen. The solution is often a featureless plywood architecture harnessed simultaneously to the cause of symbolism and concealing all but the face of the monitor. Just as this can produce a forced effect in the work of Lauren Ewing and Mary Lucier, to take two examples, it creates difficulties in the work of Rita Myers.)

Myers has increasingly focused on articulating a private, mystical narrative. Her contribution to "Video as Attitude" was one of three sketches for a projected piece which—at 6,500 square feet and a running time of 4½ hours—will make Nam June Paik's extravaganzas pale as monumental video sculpture. The whole piece—a tiered black (plywood?) doughnut of about a 50-foot radius, with detached houses at the points of the quadrant—is to reflect in its shape and in the videotapes it contains a cosmology based on Hopi creation myths, Kabbalist theory, and the Tarot. Shown in Albuquerque was *In the Planet of the Eye—Second Stage: The Eye of the Beast Is Red*. Its bulk consisted of a circular black pit, perhaps 12 feet across and three deep, filled with gravel. Above rotated a black, elongated tower. In the pit, Myers buried four monitors, screens bizarrely flush with the gravel. On the monitors, which were spaced far enough apart so that one could not readily discern a structure in the rotating imagery and soundtrack, appeared a sequence of Myers's familiar icons: a woman's face, perhaps in pain, perhaps in joy; a ladder; houses with varying numbers of windows, sometimes with a door, sometimes without; and sand.

In this incarnation, however, Myers's project seemed like an epic gone wrong. Neither sound nor text nor lighting nor appearance gave *The Eye of the Beast* a compelling presence in the space allotted. This was disappointing, the more so because Myer's work (I'm thinking of her installations, not her tapes) can lure even chary rationalists into mysticism. Worse, in the context of an exhibition which was implicitly a retrospective of video installation and performance, the failure in execution of this piece made the idea of video based on a personal world—or rather, a system of signs based on a feminine mythology—much weaker than it ought to have been.

Francesc Torres, like Myers, has concentrated his attention on the display of a personalized mythology based on cultural referents, at once denying and reaffirming the arbitrary nature of decoding information received. *Jean's Lost Notebook*, like many of Torres's works, incorporated material garnered in Spain, where Torres was born. The metaphor that structured *Notebook* was the T-shaped stone monuments, or taulas, found in archeological sites on the island of Menorca. Represented initially by a series of lithographs on the wall, they were echoed in the museum by huge plywood replicas painted red, yellow, and green—a rendering of stone rubble so modernistically schematic as to constitute its opposite. Propped here and there about this "rubble" were six

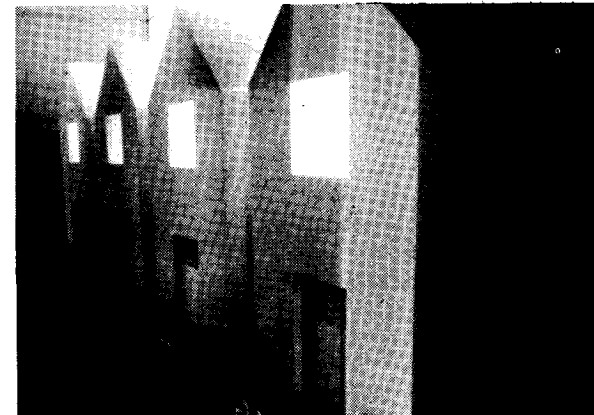
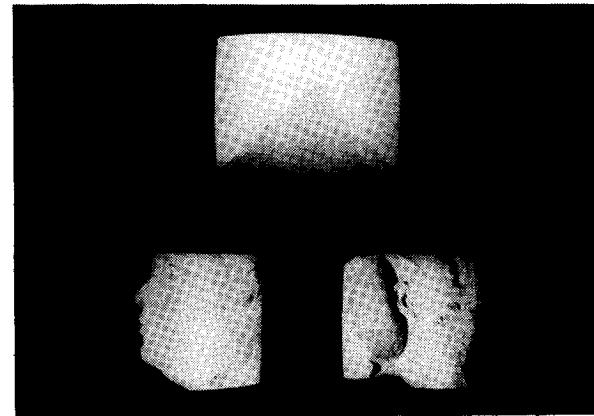
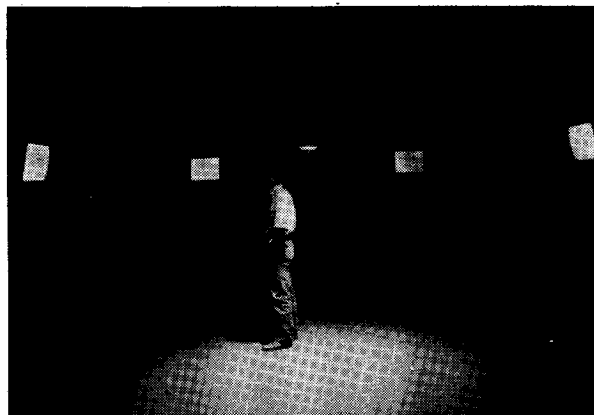
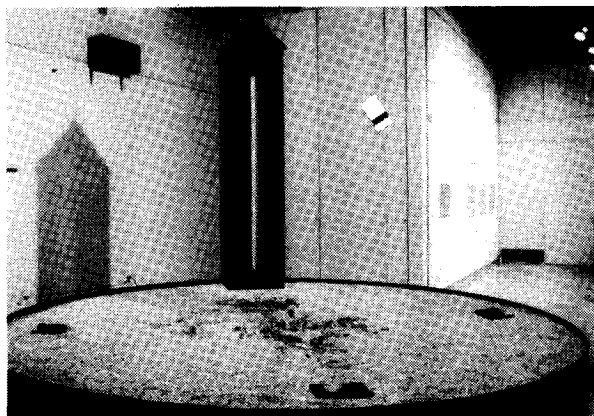


monitors. As in *The Eye of the Beast Is Red*, it was impossible to see them all at once; unlike Myers, however, Torres managed to combine successfully the improbability of megalithic children's blocks with monitors balanced at crazy angles in odd corners. As one circled the construction, one traversed a loop of imagery—moving at different rhythms, marked by different kinds of camerawork—that included the following: the Menorcan taula intercut with the Empire State Building, punctuated by the character-generated word "RECURRENCE"; a hand gently brushing dirt off a shard, punctuated by the words "MEMORY" and "REPRESSION"; various scenes of implied or stated violence—NORAD, Franco, Nixon, Pinochet, bombings, book burnings, plane crashes—punctuated by the word "OBLITERATION"; and caressing, obsessive close-ups of rocks and landscape in Menorca intercut with a hand stacking a taula from children's blocks, punctuated by the words "MANIPULATION" and "PLAY." The sound, issuing from a speaker above the installation itself, was comprised of a constant chatter of planes, jackhammers, and children screaming—just loud enough to dominate, not loud enough to overwhelm.

The idea, said Torres, was "to articulate a primal metaphor for the individual's conditioned needs to explore and learn and the whole human species' conditioned need to manipulate and control its natural as well as cultural and anthropological environments even at the risk of destroying them." The articulation of that metaphor, I think, did not really reside in the installation as object. Rather, it lay in the patience and care that Torres managed to induce in those viewers who made the rounds of *Jean's Lost Notebook*, zigzagging from one monitor (and one story) to another, retracing their steps, putting the fragments together for themselves. That these actions became somewhat habitual, if irrelevant, under a soundtrack of manic destruction which edged in and out of consciousness is further testimony to his success in making the viewer's experience of the work complete the intention in defining the form of the work.

While Torres's art basically affirms the potential for individual understanding, if not its probability, Robert Gaylor's *Suspension of Disbelief/10:00 p.m.* managed to make the mathematical analysis of media conventions involve a quasi-religious leap of faith. What one saw was four miniature (white plywood) suburban houses, little picket fences and all; each picture window emanated a familiar blue-gray glow. What one heard, thanks to a random selection from a Zelog/8 microcomputer, was split-second snatches of audio from the four network broadcasts available in Albuquerque. The possibilities in tabulating and displaying the results of such a computer sampling are manifold. However, the physical decoration Gaylor used to house his idea seemed totally unnecessary—a slick way to evoke the volume and mediocrity of what the media aims at the proverbial masses without really confronting the implications of entertainment. (The same can be said of Michael Smith, whose installation, *Mike's Dressing Room*, an "authentic" living room transposed to an art setting, relies on the dubious hypothesis that if every tidbit of personal life were converted into public broadcast material, the result would be a complete undermining of the media manipulation we all love to hate.)

The three remaining works in "Video as Attitude"—all of them also portable installation units—tackled the issues of constructing space and signification in an explicit but understated way. The least convincing was Juan Downey's *Signage*. (However, given Downey's tendency to re-edit and re-edit before going on to another project, my hunch is that *Signage* will become an entirely different affair.) His most recent project, the three-channel piece contains footage shot in Chile, Egypt, and New York, and consisted of a pyramid constructed from three monitors, with a speaker placed on top. The localized stack of equipment, appropriate as it was to a mediation on things like Egypt and systems of perspective, gave the feeling of defaulting entirely on any consideration of space—two- or three-dimensional, structured by imagery or



Top left: installation view of *The Eye of the Beast Is Red*, by Rita Myers. Below left: installation view of *The West*, by Steina and Woody Vasulka. Top right: installation view of *Signage*, by Juan Downey. Bottom right: installation view of *Suspension of Disbelief/10:00 p.m.*, by Robert Gaylor.

sound. *Signage* might as well have been an ordinary single-channel tape. The material, organized to oppose perception to sign systems, was all the things usually said about Downey's work: beautifully shot, fluidly edited, and occasionally witty. Nevertheless, the pellucid colors, the plays on motion versus stillness, the simultaneous views of different phases of a given event, the mirror-image panning, never coalesced to form anything more than bewildering, academic footnotes on the general topic of signs and culture.

In contrast, Gary Hill's *Primarily Speaking*, though not his latest installation, remains for me an extraordinary subversion of the premise assumed by most video installation artists—i.e., that visual phenomena are the key to structuring spatial experience. The work consists of two walls (plywood; however, they do nothing but hold the monitors at eye level and the viewer too close for comfort) about arms length apart, each housing a bank of four screens. It was impossible to take in all the rapid-fire, close-up imagery at once, only possible to apprehend that both the editing and the rate of the imagery flashing along the screens was dictated by the audio. That is Hill's mocking, persistent voice reading the text upon which *Primarily Speaking* is based, giving an effect something like a sociopath poet recently converted to Wittgenstein. ("I'm your monkey business. I can never really touch you. I can only leave word. Still, there's not much separating us.") The outcome was a spatial experience created by language—specifically, self-perpetuating linguistic plays that conflate emotional intimacy with the material facts of video presentation. The experience is reinforced by the presence and form of the flashing imagery, but it is not created by it: as Hill once said, the piece would be archetypically the same if redone with entirely different footage.³

Steina and Woody Vasulka's *The West* used video (Steina's) and sound (Woody's) to address and replicate the vast, arid, clear Southwestern landscape as a site for the making of signs: ceremonial Indian dwellings, the arrays of scientific instruments New Mexico hosts, even artworks. Though more conventionally reliant on imagery than *Primarily*

Speaking, *The West* is just as demanding in the precision of the Vasulkas use of video and sound to generate a phenomenological experience of space.

Austerly minimal in conception, the piece used a circle of six monitors suspended at eye level in a darkened room, thus mitigating all aspects of the standard carpeted museum room but size and emptiness. The eerie tones of the audiobook, low-frequency sound reproduced at a high amplification, heightened the emptiness by surrounding the viewer sitting in the center of the circle of monitors, watching the imagery from below. On the screens—generally used as three pairs in this two-channel work—the structure invoked circles (the Vasulkas' mirrored, rotating globe), as well as mirror imagery. Using highly saturated reds, pinks, and blues (the color manipulation hardly seemed to intrude on the "natural" appearance of the landscape), the imagery was in constant, stately motion: from the spinning mirrored sphere reflecting a blue sky against the red New Mexico land to the Anasazi's Casa Rinconada in Chaco Canyon, where the camera probed, in parallel but off-sync images, the passages of the ruin; from superimposed reverse pans over mesas to the mirrored sphere reflecting, and framed by, the giant silver dishes of New Mexico's VLA (Very Large Array) radio-telescope system, which itself, of course, turns slowly to scan the sky.

In its representation not just of "landscape," but of efforts to mark that landscape, to plot points in that landscape against the system of moving space—a process in which the individual is necessarily the focal point—*The West* served as an uncanny embodiment of Clancy's thesis. It elegantly demonstrated how imagery and sound, pared down to the barest possible elements, could constitute a complex mapping of space and time.

I hope I've suggested partial answers to my questions about video installation's relationship to contemporary sculpture, and made it clear that some installations, though they may involve extraordinary technical feats, are quite conservative in their reliance on a notion of sculpture as form. Video's relation both to the cultural use of technology and to its own potential—as a genre—in deconstructing the fabricated environment that has purportedly replaced "nature" as reality is enormously complex. My educated guess is that it's wishful thinking to expect video artists to take on the project of cultural deconstruction. Just as telling as the fact that there were no politically directed works in the show is the fact that in the works which attempted to deal directly with social issues (Gaylor, Myers, Torres, Downey, Smith) the analysis was weak, sometimes to the point of escapism.

However, as Clancy argues, video is probably more suited than just about anything else to the project of questioning the phenomenological experience of the modern environment and to involving the viewer actively in the process, to appropriating the codes of both media and art in order to expose them. One problem, it seems to me, is that as the use of video is increasingly institutionalized as "video art," the options narrow considerably. If the field of sculpture was considerably enlarged by the advent of video, what's coming to be defined as the sculptural use of video preempts many of the other incarnations that lend the art a certain power—documentary, narrative, even the strategic use of a broadcast function. In a related situation, photography paid a heavy price to win the label of art, but then, history is usually inclined to repeat itself.

NOTES

1. Patrick Clancy, *Video as Attitude*, n.p. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this article are taken from the catalogue.
2. There are two artists who participated in this exhibition whose work I can't review. I was not in New Mexico for the performances by Joan Jonas and Allan Kaprow.
3. Lucinda Furlong, "A Manner of Speaking: An Interview with Gary Hill," *Afterimage*, Vol. 10, No. 8 (March 1983), p. 14.

Installation view of *Jean's Lost Notebook*, by Francesc Torres.

