

Video Shock

By Ingrid Wiegand

The experiments, often startling, that video artists are presently engaged in for their own artistic purposes may well affect tomorrow's commercial television. Here is an overview of some of these video explorations.

1. *Global Village, "Transsexuals," 1970. Typical of the documentaries of the period, the tape reflects early videomakers' concerns—sexuality, minority groups, etc.—and techniques—street interviews, no overvoice narration. Photo: James Newman.*



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The wide range of concepts that fall under the aegis of "video art" reflect, in part, one of the artists' basic working conditions — complete freedom, with no one to fear or favor, except perhaps their peers. Accordingly, the attention of the artist is primarily directed toward the visual articulation of ideas for their own sake, ideas which may be verbally elucidated, but more usually are not. For this same reason, artists are not concerned with the notion of image quality, as this concept is ordinarily used, because image quality in a work of art is something else again. Coarse grain may be a desired part of the work, in the sense that the coarsely defined image of the impressionists was not less in "quality" than the more defined images of the painters who preceded them. Crude, torn cuts (or "edits" as they are called in video and television parlance) in the form of the original "camera edits" (instabilities occurring on tape when the camera is turned off and on again) may be included deliberately in the finished tape, much as some photographers print the rough edges of the negative or include a torn edge on all their prints — to introduce the process of making the work into the final piece. Even image stability is sometimes abandoned, and the image is permitted to "roll" vertically to create a specific, desired effect, a condition that would give any broadcast person terminal heartburn. Finally, the notion of image quality is viewed askance as a concept that relates far more to marketing than to the world of esthetics. In an era when art need not be pretty, orderly or pleasing to be not only art, but good art, the conventional notion of image quality does not play a part.

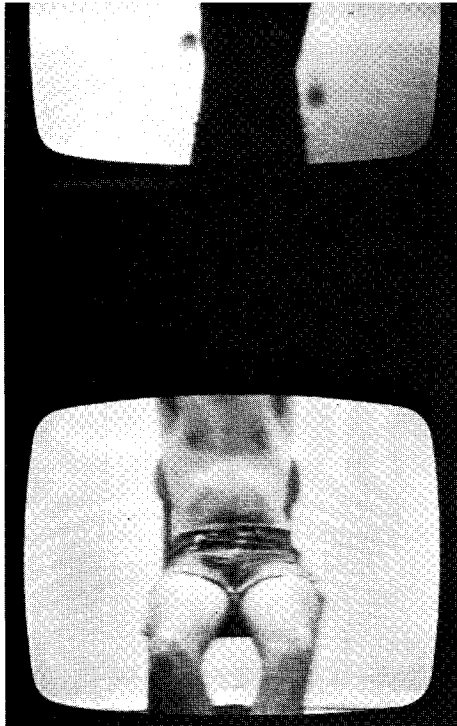
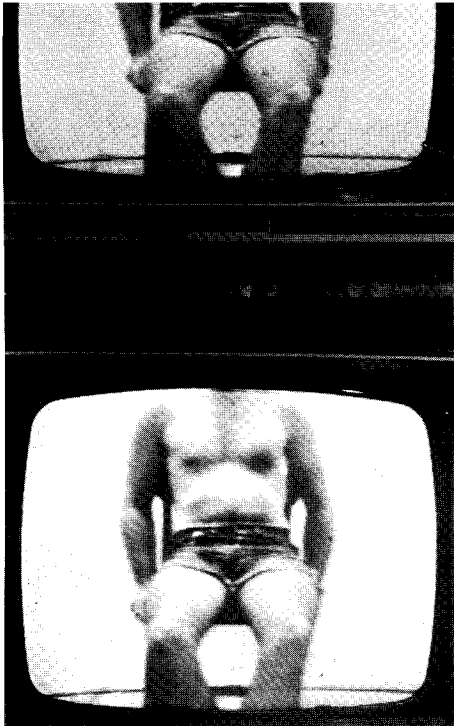
The range of concepts in video art is also the direct outcome of the artists' equipment. Most non-synthesized video art to date has been made with portable half-inch black-and-white video camera and deck. This equipment is still relatively cheap (less than \$2000 for camera, record-and-playback deck, and battery or a-c power adaptor). It is light, reasonably rugged, and enables the user to shoot an uninterrupted half hour of video *and* audio on tape for about \$11. The portability makes it possible for the artist to work with a wide range of subjects and settings. But the low cost of the tape has been more important, because it has enabled the artist to experiment, to

While the television image has been burned into modern man's retina since the late forties, its potential as an artists' medium was not considered until 20 years later. Today, under the general heading of "video art," the young medium has sprouted so many forms and variations that it appears much more established than it in fact is. There is documentary video, documentation video, synthesizer video, conceptual video, installation video, perceptual video, multichannel video, and a plethora of combinations of the above. Now, a number of artists are also developing the "video movie," a more or less narrative kind of videotape.

Yet despite the growing body of serious work being made, the attitude toward video remains ambivalent, even within the art world. On the one hand, the U.S. was officially represented solely by video art at the recent São Paulo Bienale in Brazil. On the other, many artists and art dealers still seem to consider a video artist as standing somewhere between a side-show freak and a con artist — making a show of something peculiar that may or may not be art.

Partly this ambivalence stems from the fact that video starts out close to television, which, as nearly everyone knows, ain't art. As everyone else knows, or claims as the truth, putting art on The Tube is like getting married in the Grand Central ladies' room — an act not to be taken seriously. There is also the matter of odious technical comparisons. Video art is never slick enough for the professionals, who expect a certain "quality" that is entirely identified with high resolution, image depth, correct color, even lighting and studio sound. Finally, video has been outrageously over-billed as The Art Form of the Future, or alternately, as the new Diogenesian lamp that will reveal All.

Ignoring these claims and disclaimers, a substantial number of video artists have persevered in their lofts and video rooms and in a few centers for experimental TV, to make videotapes primarily as works of art. Some simply turn on the camera and let it go; some have developed complex methods of editing and presentation. Some have developed sophisticated techniques of manipulating the television image electronically in an endless variety of ways. But whatever the form, all are making works of "video art."

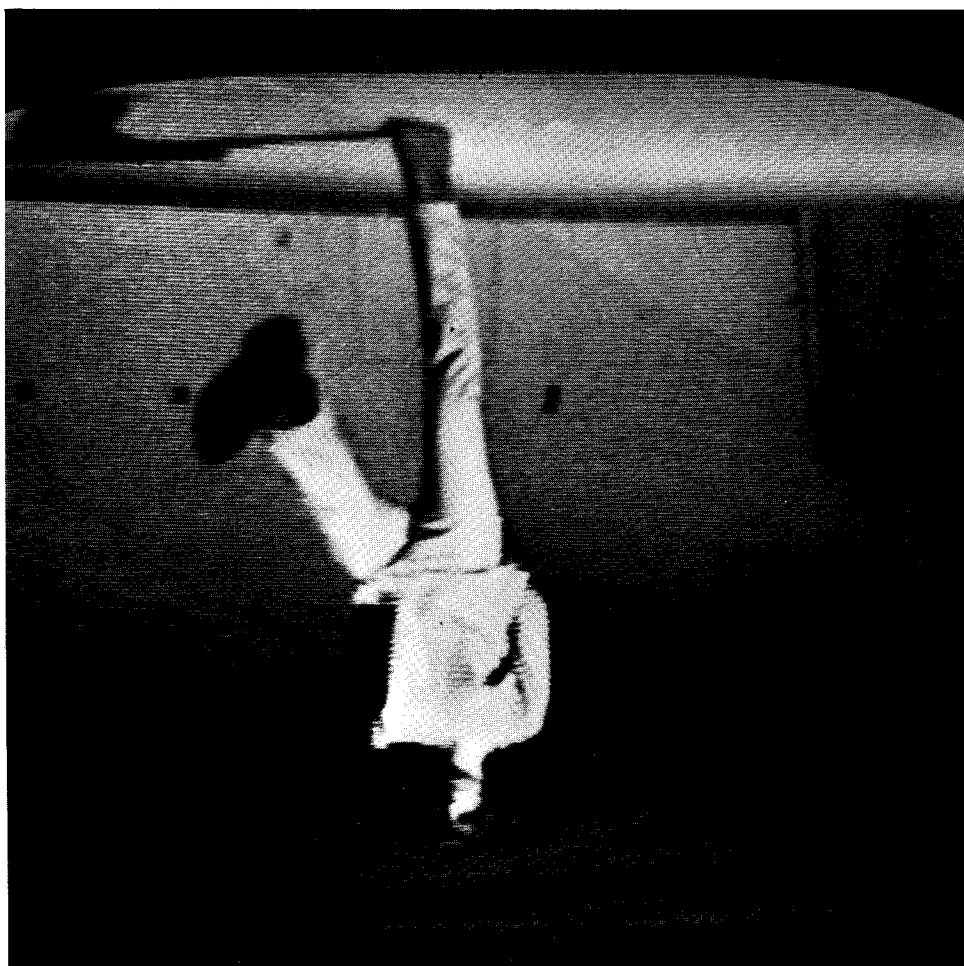


shoot material of undetermined value, to make long, leisurely takes, to be looser in his selection of subjects, and to record entire actions in process, rather than to shoot selectively. (The desirability of a low ratio between the original and final footage of a film or broadcast TV program does not apply, because it is a measure of the director's and producer's *efficiency*, a measure inapplicable to making art.) For the artist, this relative freedom from the economic limitations of film yields advantages only big film productions normally have.

The equipment also gives the artist another fundamental advantage only video offers now — instant replay. Since the results of a shooting can be viewed immediately (either on a TV monitor or on the camera "viewfinder" — a tiny TV set that shows what the camera "sees" and plays back what has been recorded), the artist can make an immediate judgment while the mood, the situation or the idea still holds. This ability to correct in process (although it is, of course, also available to non-art videomakers) is invaluable for the artist, enabling him to adjust not only the final arrangement of edits, but also the original, or "raw," footage itself. Together with the long running time, instant replay has also created a sensibility that values "real time," where a tape's duration is the actual time of the event taped. In effect, video facilitates pre-editing — where the entire tape, or substantial parts of it, are worked out in advance, and the raw footage becomes the final work. While this technique has been used by artists making films, video has made this approach its own.

When the first portable video equipment in the shape of the Sony CV Portapak arrived in the States in the late sixties, it promptly created a new word: as a noun, "a portapak" now describes any portable video camera-and-deck system, as "kleenex" describes any paper handkerchief; as a verb, "to portapak," it describes the process of working with a portapak outside the studio. On its arrival, the Sony Portapak was promptly picked up by groups of (mostly) young people to record the public and private obsessions of the time — anti-war protests; gay, women's and Puerto Rican lib events; orgies and rock music events; as well as parents and grandparents, wives, lovers and children; lovemak-

2. William Wegman, *untitled tape*. Wegman's torso is used to create, successively, the faces of two people involved in confrontation. The two personalities are differentiated by Wegman's raising his arms for one and lowering them for another.
3. Bruce Nauman, "Revolving Upside Down," 1969. In this real-time (55 minutes) tape, Nauman performs a series of leg movements while revolving on one foot before an upside-down camera. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni.



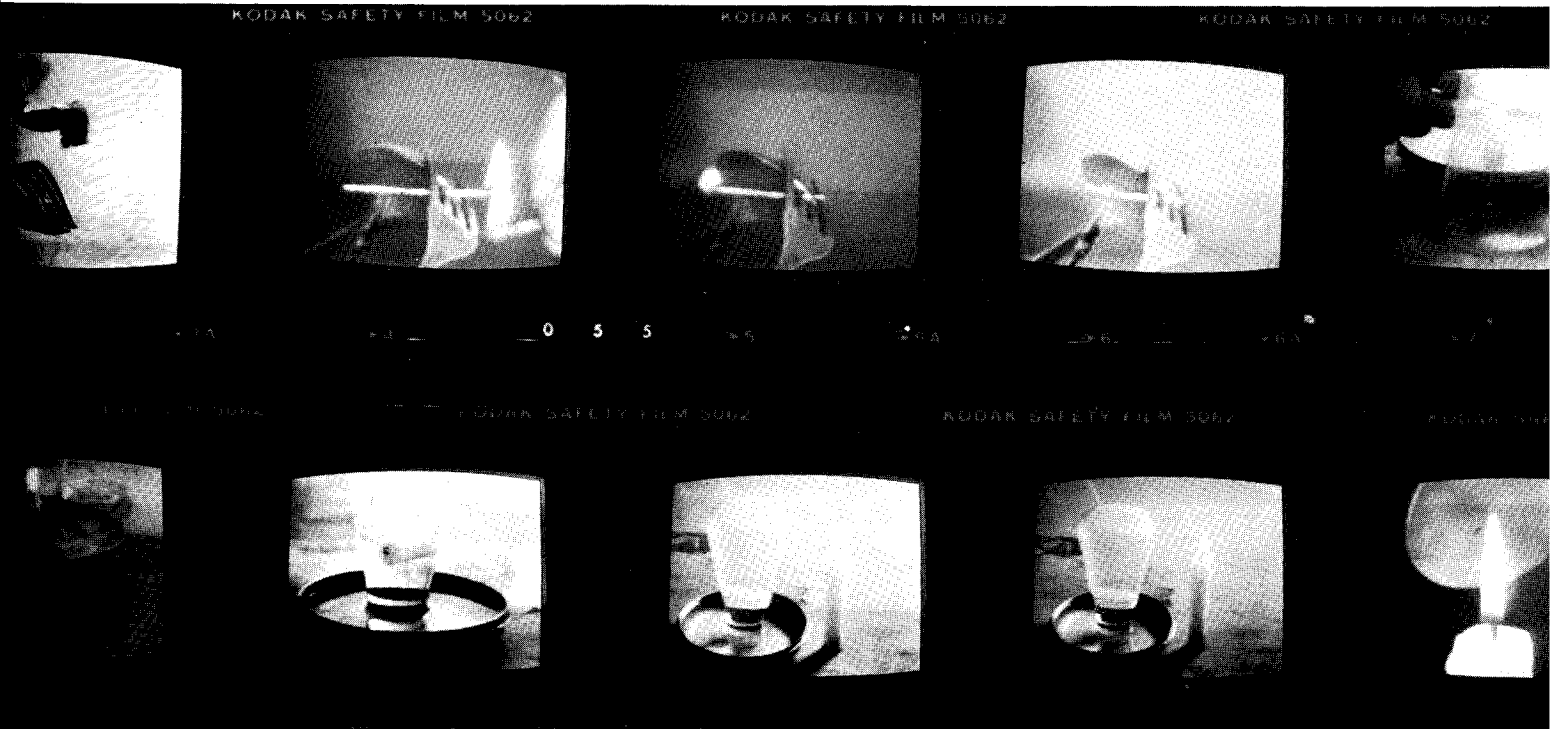


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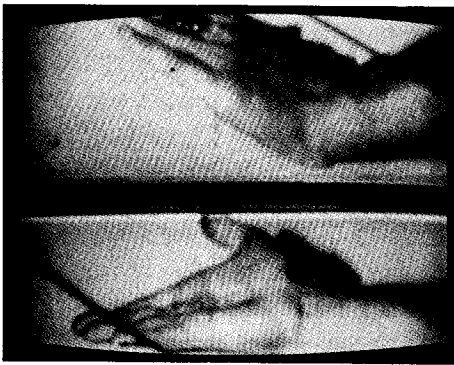
- 4. Terry Fox, "Children's Tapes"; a series of episodes involving earth, air, fire and water.
- 5. Douglas Davis, "The Cologne Tapes," 1974. Here, the artist has placed an expensive portable video camera in various unlikely situations, with interesting results.

ing; and the counterculture in action. Among the video people of that time it was customary to invite interested friends over to show the day's or week's footage, and video-obsessed groups and communities and collectives proliferated. Until about 1969, half-inch video editing equipment was not available, so tape had to be pre-edited or not at all. Until about 1973, the editing equipment was unreliable and limited. Nevertheless, a large number of interesting and even startling videotapes were made.

One of the first areas of video exploration was the documentary. It was a direction dictated by the socially-conscious ethos of the time and by the fact that the film documentary had set precedents that could be emulated. Typical of the documentaries of the time, "Transsexuals" was made in 1970 by Global Village, one of the few early video operations still active. The tape embodied many of the early videomakers' techniques and concerns: sexuality, minority groups, the absence of overvoice narration to let the subjects speak for themselves, street interviews on the subject, and concentration on a few people in the group or event being taped (see Fig. 1). More recently documentaries like "Superbowl," made in



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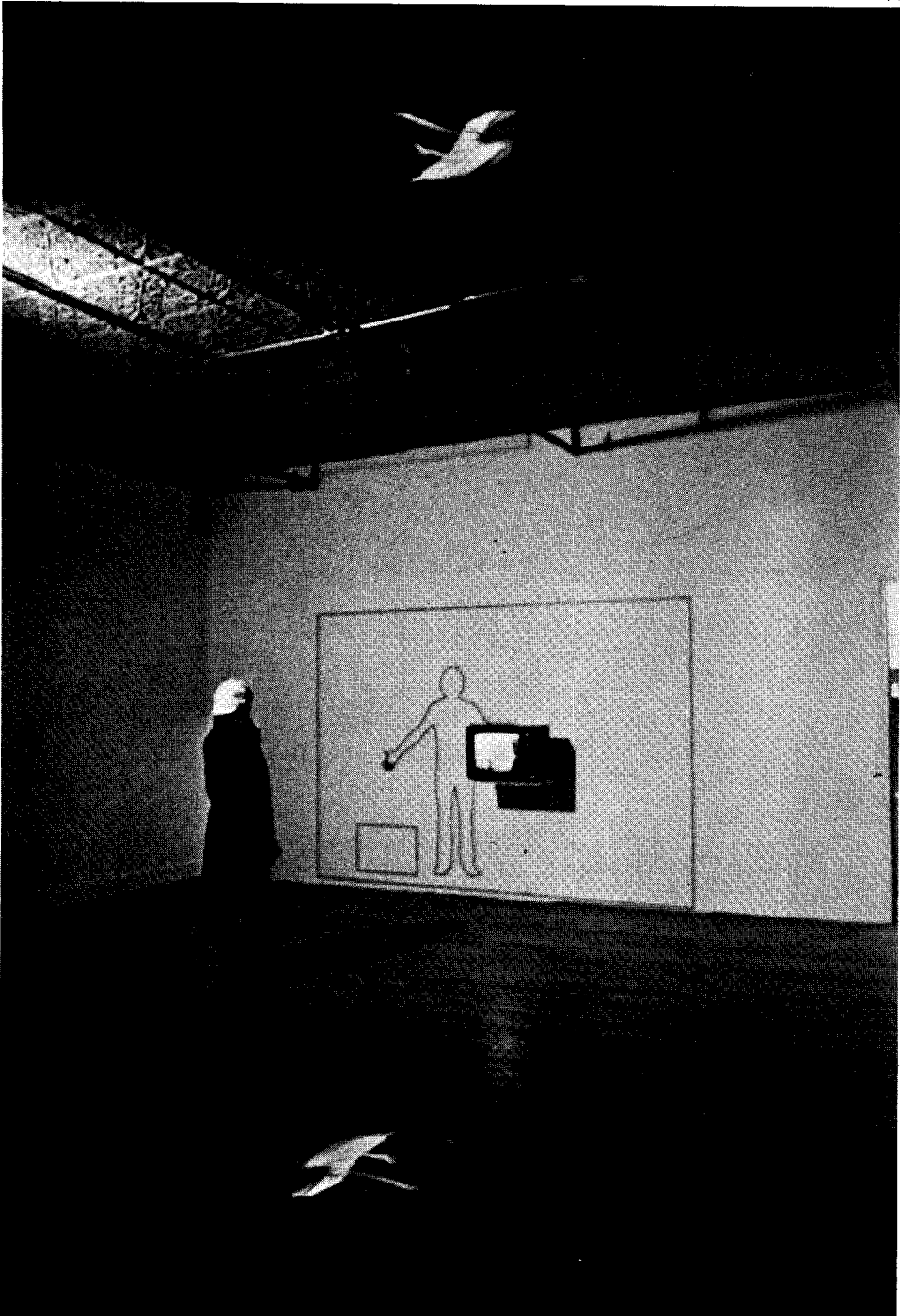


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6. Joan Jonas, "Vertical Roll," 1972. In this tape, the artist lets the image roll vertically so that the "blanking bar" between frames moves down, creating an "elevator" effect. At one point she hits one hand against the floor and the other upward, so that she appears to be clapping hands across the blanking bar.

7. James Byrne, "Floor/Ceiling." Here, a tape of the artist manipulating a camera at arm's length is viewed on two monitors, one lying on its back on the floor, the other hanging face down from the ceiling. Since the camera is initially hanging from the ceiling and is then slowly brought down and placed on the floor, the camera and monitor perspective are related, while not necessarily reflecting the viewing experience. Shot in real time, Byrne's manipulation of real and apparent time gives the viewer a revealing experience of the same camera "eye" that he unconsciously knows from television. Photo: Kathy Landman.

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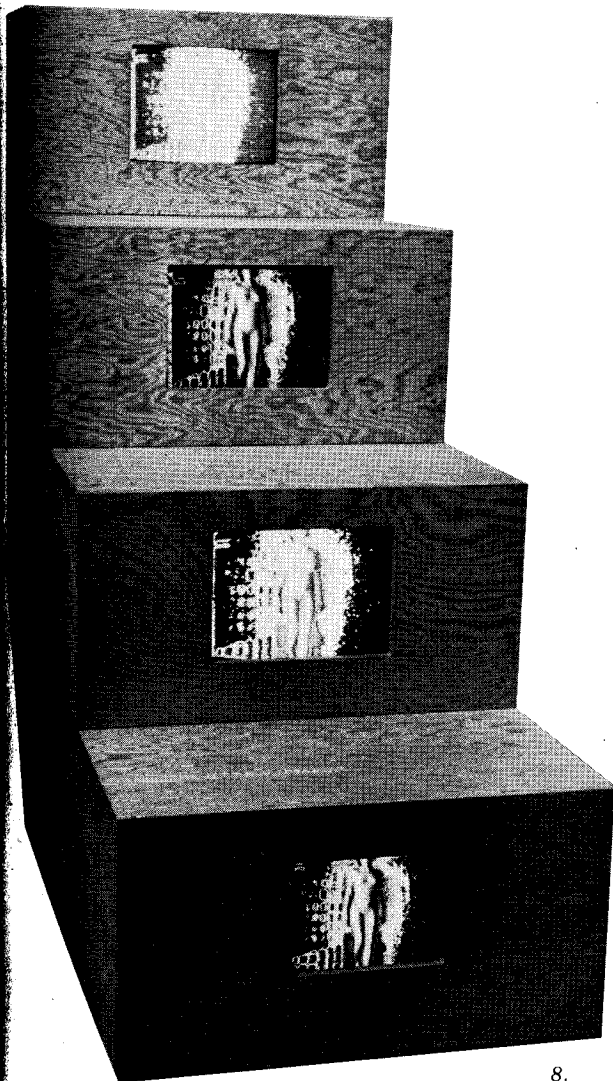
1976 by the Los Angeles-based video collective TVTV, used very similar techniques on a very different subject, and shot it with the latest portable color video cassette equipment. As in the documentary form in general, the subject generally dominates over the formal concerns of a documentary tape, so that both early and recent documentary videotapes represent an area that shades from the world of art into the territory of video journalism. Nevertheless, these tapes not only remain valid works in their own right, but the early ones laid much of the groundwork for the video art that is being made today.

Another group of artists that started to use the early portable video equipment in the late sixties were conceptual artists for whom the act of making a work of art constituted the work itself. Now known as "performance artists," people like Vito Acconci recorded on tape some of their publicly performed works that would otherwise have been as ephemeral as a dance. Since the videotape is made solely as a record of a work in a different medium, rather than as a piece in itself, works of this kind constitute "documentation video," valued, nevertheless, as art for their content.

But as the potential of videotape as an original medium became evident, artists like William Wegman, Bruce Nauman, and Joan Jonas (as well as Acconci) began to create "performance video," in which the action was specifically devised to create a video image. William Wegman uses short, often comic real-time takes of simple but carefully set up situations, involving objects, himself, or his dog, Man Ray. In one untitled tape, Wegman's torso is used to create, successively, the faces of two people involved in a confrontation (see Fig. 2). Bruce Nauman makes long (45 to 60 minutes) real-time tapes of himself or other people performing minimal, often bizarre, actions (see Fig. 3).

"Conceptual video," like conceptual art, is more concerned with the process of making art than with achieving a product recognizable as a work of art. Conceptual art is essentially the visible trace of an artist's gesture — the draping of a rope, the digging of a trench, for example. Or it may be concerned with the assembly of objects or images that contain an idea, or concept. In the same way, conceptual video is concerned

8. Shigeo Kubota, "Nude Descending a Staircase." A video variation on Duchamp's famous work of the same title, this piece uses a four-step plywood stairway that incorporates four small color monitors into the risers of the four upper steps. The monitors show a tape Kubota made of a nude descending a staircase at various speeds, angles, and degrees of closeup, as well as with various synthesizer effects. Photo: Thomas Haar.



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with the creation of tapes that present traces of an action as art. To some extent, of course, most non-documentary and non-narrative tapes are "conceptual." And this is a good place to note that these categories are not absolute, but are merely tools to facilitate discussion. The categories involve fine distinctions that do not really describe the work, or interest the artist. The work of most artists can really be viewed as belonging to several "categories," depending on the emphasis in each piece.

The epithet "conceptual" can nevertheless be applied to Terry Fox's "Children's Tapes," a series of episodes involving earth, air, fire and water in a number of situations (see Fig. 4). In one, for example, water drips into a spoon whose bowl is floating in a deep saucer of mud. At some point, the spoon fills and sinks suddenly from sight. From a completely different angle, Douglas Davis places an expensive portable color video camera in unlikely situations — left lying on a street, buried in the ground at night — and records the outcome of these actions (see Fig. 5).

The videotapes of Joan Jonas are involved with both conceptual and performance ideas, but they are also excellent examples of "perceptual video." Jonas' tapes almost always involve alterations in the conventional perception of space (see Fig. 6). James Byrne shoots with the camera placed in unusual positions and moves them so that body and camera movement cannot be distinguished. In "FloorCeiling" (see Fig. 7), a tape of Byrne manipulating a camera at arm's length is viewed on two monitors, one lying on its back on the floor, the other hanging face down from the ceiling.

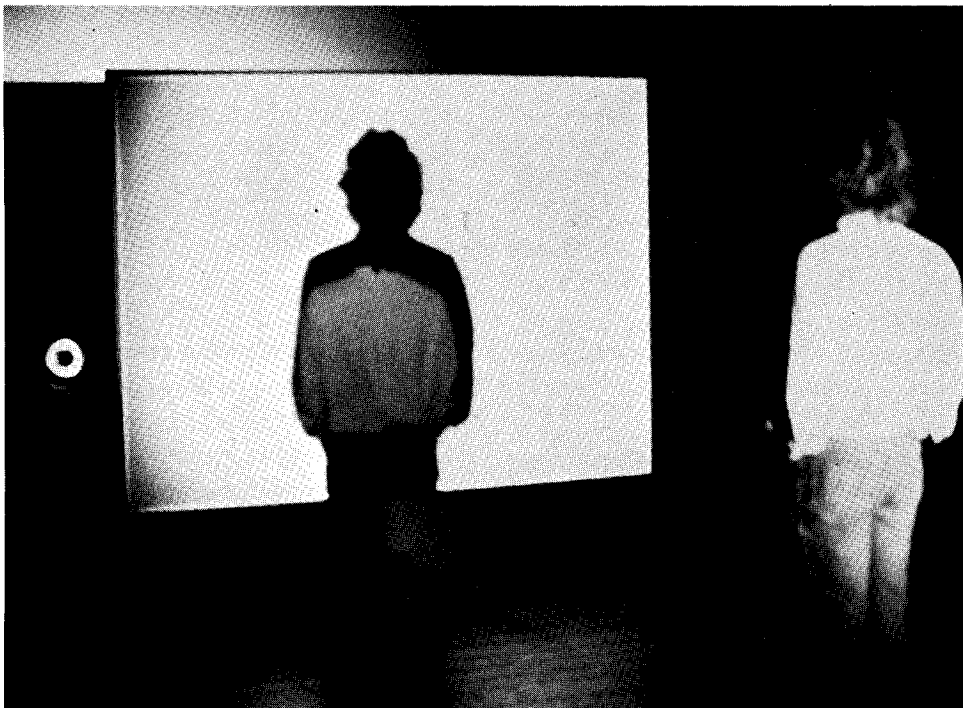
Byrne's work can also be seen as an "installation video" piece, since it requires that the monitors on which the work is shown be installed in a specific way. Shigeo Kubota's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (see Fig. 8) uses a four-step plywood stairway that contains four small color monitors showing a tape of a nude descending a staircase at various speeds, angles, and degrees of closeup, as well as with various video synthesizer effects. Peter Campus, on the other hand, is a master of installation works that require the viewer to involve himself in them and extends video into the

area of environmental work (see Fig. 9).

The world of video art also includes a genre called "multichannel video," which is distinguished from Byrne's and Kubota's multi-monitor installation works by the fact that each monitor actually shows a tape different from the others. That is, each monitor is connected to a different deck, so that a number of different tapes are played simultaneously. In Ira Schneider's "Video '79" (see Fig. 10), the artist used no less than eight different tapes and monitors to show different aspects of the American scene, as well as a closed-circuit camera and monitor setup that involved the viewer as an element of the work. Davidson Gigliotti, on the other hand, presents a completely static image on three carefully arranged monitors (see Fig. 11), the effect being to destroy the single-image-in-a-box concept normally associated with television.

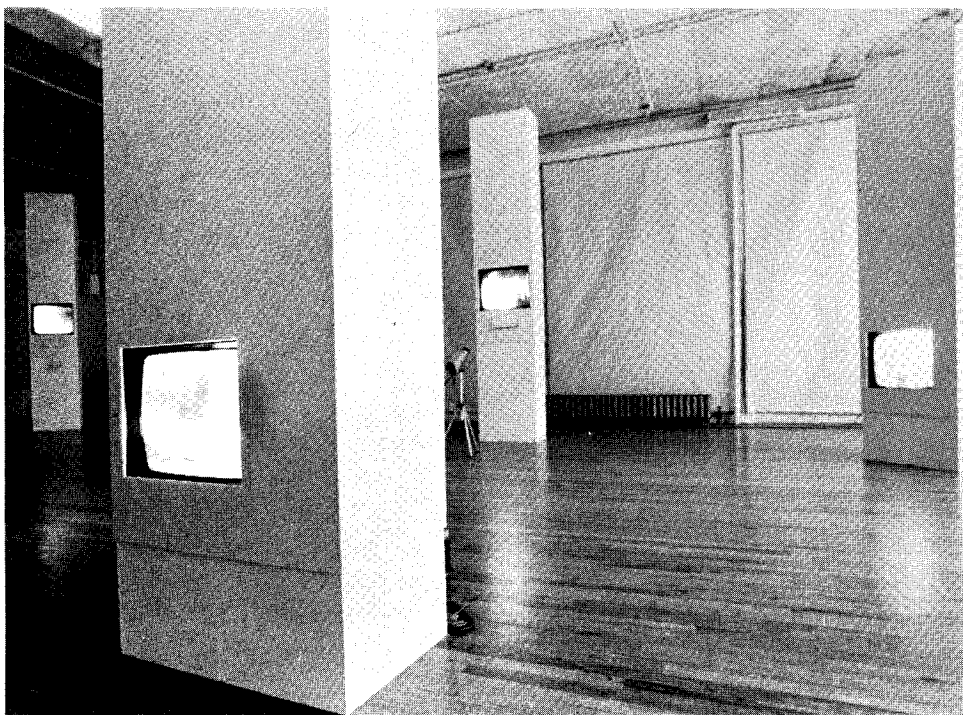
All these artists are essentially working with images of the world as we know it. Superficially, all are "realists," although the reality they present is radically different from our everyday perceptions. But there is also another, almost completely separate world of video artists who are concerned with the electronic manipulation of the video image, to achieve both abstract images and effects that render the familiar world bizarre and alien.

These are the artists who create "synthesizer video," images produced by means of electronic devices that alter one or more of the several signals a television set needs to yield an ordinary image. Synthesizer video is actually the oldest video form, having been "invented" in the late '50s by the redoubtable artist Nam June Paik. At that time, Paik discovered that he could give his TV set the bends by placing magnets against it in various ways to create strange and beautiful image configurations. Several years before the pop art hit the American beach, Paik was experimenting with Army-surplus oscillators and tuners to drive the TV image around the tube face. A classic Paik piece made in this vein is his "Portrait of McLuhan" (see Fig. 12), in which the Solomon of television weaves through a continuous series of startling changes. Today, the Paik/Abe video synthesizer (made with his colleague, Shigeo Abe) is still the prototype of far more sophisticated systems.



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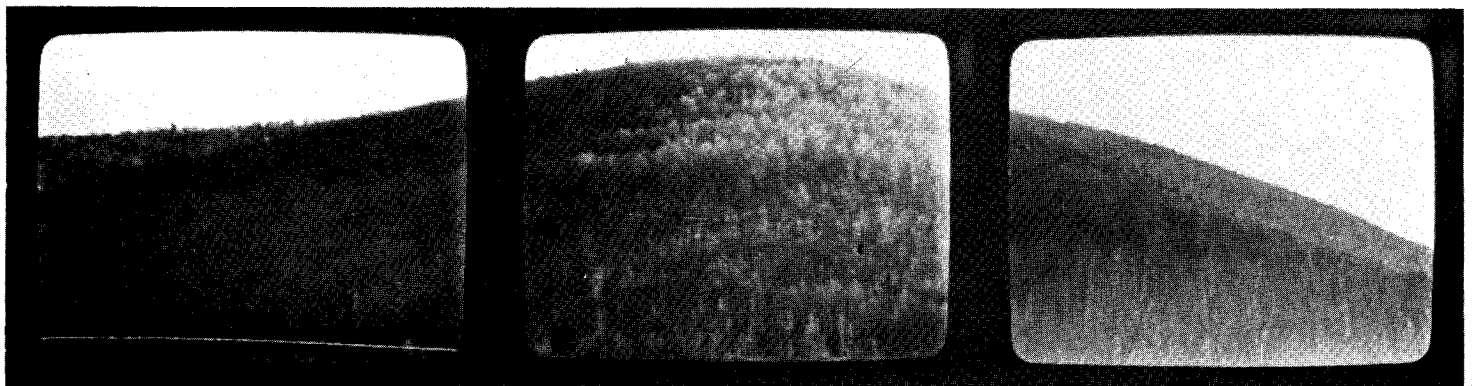
9. Peter Campus, "Shadow Projection," 1974. In this closed-circuit video installation, the back of the viewer is projected onto a large rear-projection screen at the same time that the shadow of the viewer is thrown on the screen from the opposite side. Since the viewer is between the camera and the screen, it is impossible for him to see himself and his ghostly back remains tantalizingly unreachable.



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10. Ira Schneider, "Video '75" (subtitled "The First Days of the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century"). Here, the artist uses eight different tapes and monitors to show different aspects of the American scene, as well as a closed-circuit camera and monitor setup that involves the viewer as an element of the work. The monitors, encased in tall, white pillar-boxes, are arranged in a large area so that the viewer has to wander among them and "visit" each part of the multichannel work.

11. Davidson Gigliotti presents a static image on three carefully arranged monitors. The monitors show a landscape—a brook, a mountain—but each monitor shows only a part, because each monitor is arranged in the same position as one of the three cameras that shot the scene. The events in the three tapes are minimal, such as a landscape watcher might see: the nod of a bough, the sound and sight of running water. The effect Gigliotti achieves destroys the single-image-in-a-box concept normally associated with television and opens a telescopic window on a living, distant scene.

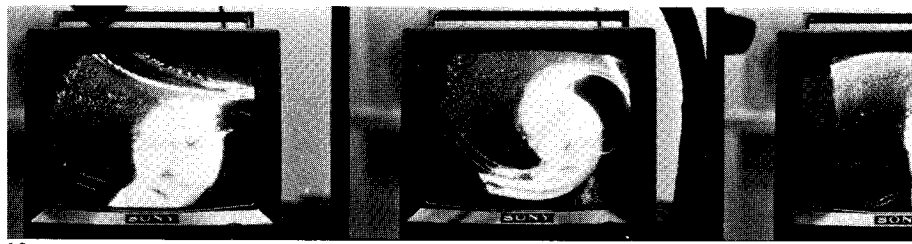


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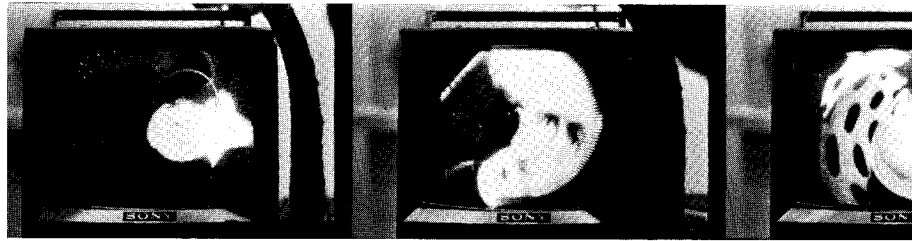
Steina and Woody Vasulka are also pioneers in the field of synthesizer video. Their complex explorations in this field are recognized the world over, as in their videotape "Vocabulary" (see Fig. 13), which deals with their attempts to organize the multitude of visual effects into an electronic video "language."

Synthesizer artists also differ from other video artists in that most of them are dependent on experimental video centers for access to the full equipment required for such work. While some, like the Vasulkas, have gradually built or accumulated the equipment they need, most wait for brief periods of access to the expensive and complex equipment available at the experimental TV labs. Because of the cost and limited time, it is almost impossible for artists to go through the meaningful learning and just-fooling-around periods necessary to an artist's development. Under these conditions, video artists feel compelled to produce recognizably impressive works — which has resulted in videotapes that seem over-orchestrated and uninventive once the strangeness of the technological hijinks has been overcome. Nevertheless, these works have tended to gain more acceptance than most other forms of video art, partly because the technology is good, and partly because technological footwork is more understandable than other artists' concerns. Experimental TV centers like WNET's in New York and WGBH's in Boston are also associated with public broadcasting stations and are motivated to push the work done in their studios to justify their existence. Despite these limiting conditions, synthesizer artists have demonstrated that video has the potential to produce infinitely more varied and original ways of manipulating the image than commercial and public television (including advertisements and station breaks) have even hinted at.

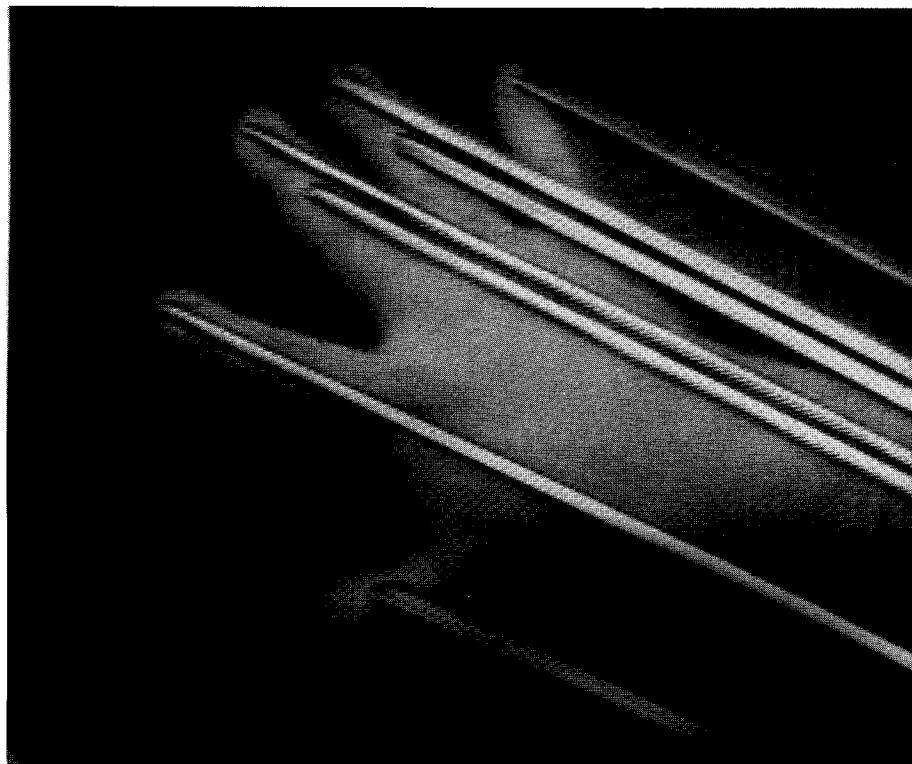
Ingrid Wiegand, the only video writer in the U.S. reporting exclusively on video art, writes regularly for the Village Voice and the Sobo Weekly News. She is also a prominent video artist in her own right, with tapes appearing in various festivals, including this year's Berlin Film Festival. Her work and commentary are also represented in Video Art, a new book from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



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12. Nam June Paik, "Portrait of McLuhan." This classic, early example of "synthesizer video," in which oscillators and tuners are used to drive the TV image around the tube face, with startling results, is still the prototype of today's more sophisticated synthesizer systems.

13. Woody and Steina Vasulka, 1974. A more current example of "synthesizer video" by pioneers in the field.