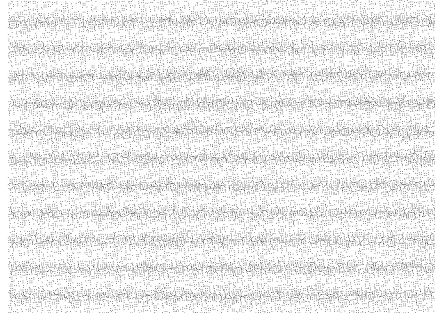


**VIDEO
DISCOURSE:
MEDIATED
NARRATIVES**

February 6-
April 5
1987

La Jolla
Museum of
Contemporary
Art



Before videotape was invented, before there was film or literature or mosaic frescoes, people told stories. Around fires, in classrooms, around tables after dinners, and in children's rooms, cultural customs and myths, family history, the rules of how to live were explained in stories. I think we all know this, but in the age of the 'blockbuster' film, the news 'Special', MTV and television's relentless flow of demographically studied situation comedies – in short, the age of mass markets, it is easy to forget that stories originate with individuals and can be told by one voice. VIDEO DISCOURSE is a survey of stories told by artists through the contemporary medium of videotape.

In 1956 videotape was developed and put to use as a method of storing television programs that until that time had existed only as live transmissions. Because it was a technical convenience within the control system of television network engineers, it was not put to use as film had been as an individual and personal medium. Then in 1967 the Japanese electronics company Sony introduced into the U.S. market a portable video recorder that could be carried by one person and was capable of recording up to twenty minutes on half-inch reel to reel tapes. Although the company designed this equipment for industrial and educational markets, it was immediately picked up and used by artists who found in video a unique way of extending ideas they had been investigating in other disciplines. Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, William Wegman, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and others used the new medium to experiment with the process of art-making. They shared nothing with television, preferring to explore the political and aesthetic properties of the medium itself.

Joan Jonas, a sculptor who began making movement and performance works in the late 1960's, bought a portapak in 1971 and incorporated it into her live performances as a process tool. "The major structuring element of these works was the simultaneity of live performance activity and video image, both close circuit and taped," Jonas has said¹. She explored the nature of the video signal (in **Vertical Roll**, 1972) and used it to fragment her image, her 'self', in live performances. While Serra, Benglis,

Nauman, and Acconci have moved away from video in their work, Jonas continues to use ever more sophisticated electronic tools, as evidenced in VIDEO DISCOURSE by **Double Lunar Dogs**, a haunting science fiction performance piece, remade for video.

Television haunts the production and exhibition of all video art, as David Antin says.² It can hardly be otherwise as the average American consumption of television climbs above the seven-hour-a-day level. And film history stands in the wings like a proud grandparent, I think, recalling its own first years of experimentation. The artists surveyed in VIDEO DISCOURSE do not ignore this ghostly condition, nor do they actively battle it. Rather they stake out personal territory within the landscape of image-making by virtue of their profoundly personal approaches to storytelling. Within this exhibition several strategies are employed. Jeanne C. Finley and Sherry Millner work from personal history, using humor and irony to fashion their narratives. Dale Hoyt, Joan Jonas, Ardele Lister, and Steve Fagin are ostensibly adapting from sources in literature—but 'adapt' is too mild a word to describe these wildly original translations to video. Each of these artists uses their source as a jumping-off point from which visual improvisation and dramatic distortion create intricately original works. Matthew Geller and Gary Hill create meta-structures to comment on the stories they tell, Hill working from a Gregory Bateson essay, and Geller from true stories and computer theories. Woody Vasulka begins with two historical characters, actually improvised by the performers who play them, and wraps their actions in electronic effects made on his own image processor. European Michael Klier uses footage recorded by surveillance cameras to construct a chilling narrative of life in 1984. It has the cold power of distance—a document pulled from the shelves of some bureaucracy.

What unites these works is individual authorship—they expound a point of view as independents working in video, a conventionally commercial medium familiar to Americans as television. Raymond Bellour, the French film and video critic, has said: "Television in its 'universal' American version, will never become our mythology. The American cinema did because it circumscribed its own oneiric space built on an immense, yet delimited capacity for illusion. This is why cinema in and of itself resists television." In VIDEO DISCOURSE we see another kind of work that resists television by virtue of its independence, originality, and its context in the art world. It is work that both engages and makes demands on the viewer.

Chip Lord, guest curator Jan. 1987

1. Joan Jonas, **Scripts and Descriptions, 1968-1982**, edited by Douglas Crimp (University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1983).
2. David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," first published in **Video Art**, edited by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), recently reprinted in **Video Culture: A Critical Investigation**, edited by John Hanhardt (Gibbs M. Smith Inc., 1986).
3. Raymond Bellour, **Video Utopia**, The Catalog of the National Video Festival (American Film Institute, 1986).

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Steve Fagin

born: 1946, Chicago

Virtual Play: The Double Direct Monkey

French in Slack's Machinery 1985 80:00 min.

color



Virtual Play is an essay on representation, narrative and love humorously woven through the life of Lou Andreas Salome, turn-of-the-century intellectual and romantic giant, who captivated among others, Freud, Nietzsche, and Rilke. Of **Virtual Play**, Barbara Kruger has written in **Artforum** "The richness of the work allows it to offer viewings and readings on a number of levels, from pleasurable visual dexterity to gossipy verbal admissions to the decoding of rebuslike textual formations." Included in **Virtual Play's** extensive international showings are: the Museum of Modern Art, the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Worldwide Video Festival in the Hague, and Video Free America, San Francisco.

Steve Fagin currently lives in Richmond, California. His piece, **The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel** has been chosen for the Whitney Museum's 1987 Biennial Exhibition in New York. He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, 1986, and is also the co-founding editor of **Film Reader**. His work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and is distributed by The Kitchen and Video Data Bank.

Jeanne C. Finley

born: 1955, Los Angeles

I Saw Jesus in a Tortilla 1982 3:30 min.

Deaf Dogs can Hear 1983 5:30 min.

black & white

Matthew Geller

born: 1954, New York City

Windfalls 1982 22:00 min.

color

Gary Hill

born: 1950, Santa Monica

Why Do Things get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia) 32:00 min.

color



Based on a newspaper account, *I Saw Jesus in a Tortilla* uses a series of still images and a professional voice to relate the story of **Ramona Barraras**, a New Mexican woman, who saw the face of Jesus while making tortillas. *Deaf Dogs can Hear* is about a child's first pet, a sad chihuahua, and the tribulations of its life. In both pieces, Finley uses ironic, funny, or poignant images to illustrate the narrator's tale, adding a visual narrative that counterpoints and dances with the voice. Originally created as projected slide works, and then transferred to video, these pieces are economical, funny, and entertaining.

Jeanne C. Finley's photography and video work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The World Wide Video Festival in the Netherlands; and The National Video Festival of the American Film Institute, among other places. She was a recipient of a 1985 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Open Channels video production grant from the Long Beach Museum of Art, and the Phelan Award in Video, 1987. She served for three years as Assistant Director of S.F. Camerawork Gallery, and teaches at The San Francisco Art Institute.

"Windfalls is built out of a rambling, jumpy, and (at first) nonsensical pair of narratives. Two men each tell a long story: one about his purchase of a hot TV set, the other about an aborted and embarrassing jam session. Their tales cut in on each other, skip backward and forward in time, and are sometimes accompanied by tantalizing fragments of a scientist's lecture on new developments in the understanding of intelligence. As these three tales proceed, you realize that you are weaving together snippets from your own short-term memory in order to build a nearly seamless narrative out of Geller's intentionally disjointed fragments." – Kay Larson (New York magazine).

Matthew Geller has recently finished a feature length video fairy tale, **Everglades City**. His tapes have screened both nationally and internationally and won numerous awards including those of the Atlanta, Houston, Athens, American, U.S. and Tyneside Film and Video Festivals. Geller is currently the Video Curator at The Institute for Art & Urban Resources (P.S. 1) and in development for his next video feature – a musical comedy fantasy. He lives in New York.

Based on the "metalogue" by Gregory Bateson who defines the term as "...a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem, but the structure of the conversation as a whole is relevant to the same subject."

The video work extends this doubling of structure in a reflexive manner. Backtracking through an accumulation of visual/aural catastrophes, **Come On Petunia** leads the viewer through the looking glass to witness her processual equivalent – Once Upon a Time – establishing the ingress to a conversation muddled with entropic sadness, (the eyes open faster than they close).

Originally a sculptor, Hill began working with video in the early 1970s and has produced a large body of both single-channel works and inter-media installations. He has received several grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts; among the latter, a Japan/United States Cultural Exchange Fellowship. While in Japan he was artist-in-residence at the Sony Corporation in Hon Atsugi. Hill was a Video Artist Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation and was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He currently lives and works in Seattle.

Dale Hoyt

born: 1960, Auburn, New York

The Complete Anne Frank 1985 36:00 min.

color

Joan Jonas

born: 1936, New York

Double Lunar Dogs 1984 25:00 min.

color

Michael Klier

born: 1943, Karlsbad, Czechoslovakia

Der Riese (The Giant) 1983 82:00 min.

black & white



Described by Dale Hoyt as “a psychedelic soap operetta,” **The Complete Anne Frank** depicts the famous diary in a montage of lush, abstract and prismatic visuals set against a traditional teleplay staging of the story. Four actresses portray the Dutch teenager’s sorrows, joys and awakening sexuality to reveal a touching search for self discovery. At the same time, this is a highly personal work, dealing with the artist’s own relationship with Anne Frank as myth, media icon, and person. Through its unusual construction of assorted media debris and cliché, the tape dramatically illustrates the components of crisis which parallel the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II.

Dale Hoyt currently resides in San Francisco where he is also a writer and performance artist. His work to date has been shown in many U.S. cities and has also been screened in Amsterdam, Berlin, London, Munich, Paris, and Tokyo. His critical essays on media and culture have been published in **Send, Release/Print**, and **BAVC Newsletter**. Hoyt’s work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Based on the short story **Universe** by science fiction writer Robert Heinlein, **Double Lunar Dogs** was first presented as a performance at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, in 1980. Jonas employs used NASA footage, image-processing and digital video effects to intensify the visual impact of a vision of post-apocalyptic survival. Memory aboard a ‘spacecraft’ becomes the subject of the work. The characters (played by Spalding Gray, Jill Kroesen, John Malloy, David Warilow, and Jonas) struggle to recall aspects and artifacts from the past – they play games and quiz each other, but their exercises end in futility – they exist only in an electronic space which they cannot define.

Joan Jonas was trained as a sculptor and has been working in multi-media performance, theater, dance, and video. She has been awarded five National Endowment fellowships and a Guggenheim fellowship in 1976. In 1980 The University Art Museum, Berkeley, presented a retrospective of her work in video and performance. She lives and works in New York.

Photo: Kira Perov

Der Riese (The Giant) is an ominous work structured almost entirely of material generated by video surveillance cameras that monitor traffic and travelers, department stores and shoppers, private property and public parks. Collected by Klier in German cities over a period of three years, this work suggests the future-shock premise that no place escapes scrutiny and nothing goes unnoticed.

It is a compelling spectacle produced without a cameraman or a director, with neither script nor actors, accompanied by ambient sounds and selected movements of symphonies by Wagner and Mahler. It is almost totally dehumanized, ending, as it began, in a landscape unmarked by a human presence – a video-simulated environment.

Michael Klier has lived in Paris, where he collaborated with François Truffaut on several projects. Klier has also made documentary films about a number of European directors, including Truffaut, Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Marie Straube and Alexander Kluge. Klier is currently residing in Berlin. **Der Riese** is his first videotape.

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art

Ardele Lister

born: 1950, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Hell 1985 17:00 min.

color

Sherry Millner

born: 1950, Brooklyn, New York

Scenes from the Micro-War 1985 22:00 min.

color

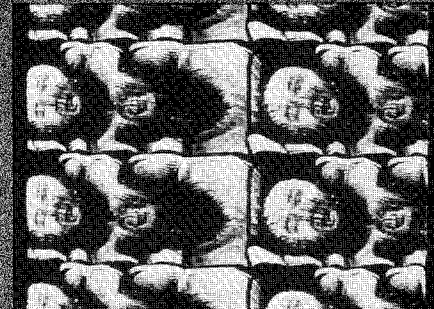
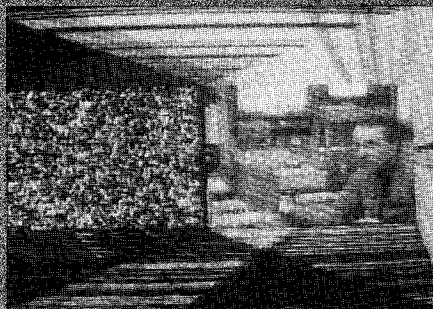
Woody Vasulka

born: 1937, Brno, Czechoslovakia

The Commission 1983 45:00 min.

stereo sound

color



In **Hell**, inspired by Dante's **Inferno**, lost souls are trapped and stored on computer disks and tortured with the icy precision of digital video effects. It is an inquiry into contemporary ethics staged within the video frame but remaining faithful to the essential structure of the **Inferno** and its movement downward from the dark wood to the 'frozen imagination.' Using contemporary metaphors and locations, Lister places her work in the television landscape of urban American life. Ardele Lister holds a Master's degree in art from the University of British Columbia. She wrote art criticism and edited the Magazine, **Criteria**, before moving to New York in 1976. Lister has directed for film and television and is the recipient of several awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (1985) and a Black Maria Film/Video Festival Award. Her works are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the National Gallery of Canada. Lister's recent screenings include the American Film Institute, Washington; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Tokyo Biennale; and the Long Beach Museum of Art.

Scenes from the Micro-War uses the obsessive visual metaphor of camouflage to examine hidden stresses and contradictions in the everyday life of the American family. Specifically it uncovers a recent shift in the average family's social function from the consumerist unit to a military training force. The fractured narrative serio-comically follows the olive drab and khaki brown misadventures of one such family hypnotized by Reagan's "Space Wars," state terrorism and "Rambo/Commando" fashions.

Sherry Millner studied at California Institute of the Arts and holds an M.F.A. from U.C., San Diego. Her work has been shown in festivals and exhibits in the United States and Canada. She is an Associate Editor of the film magazine **JumpCut** and an Assistant Professor at Rutgers University. **Scenes from the Micro-War** was produced with an Open Channels production grant from The Long Beach Museum of Art and has been selected for the 1987 Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In **The Commission** Vasulka creates an electronic stage applying an intricate array of video and audio effects to live performance as narrative device. **The Commission** is a metaphor for art-making as realized in the story of two eccentric, self-indulgent, and ultimately tragic artists. Paganini, created by artist Ernest Gusella, is a tortured, sickly romantic who describes his grotesque fantastic visions via his young son. Berlioz, created by composer and performer Robert Ashley, is a cerebral, self-absorbed character who speaks in abstractions. Vasulka creates a unique and strange electronic context for these performances, reacting to their moods with his vocabulary of digital processing devices, interweaving distortion, multiplicity, ghosting, and disintegration to create his own resonating visual drama.

Woody Vasulka studied at The School of Industrial Engineering and The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, before emigrating to the U.S. in 1965. He joined the faculty of the Center for Media Study at State University of New York, Buffalo, in 1974 and there built the "Vasulka Imaging System", a computer-based, personal image-processing facility. He is a 1979 Guggenheim Fellow currently living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he is producing a multi-part video tape, **The Art of Memory**.