Catherine Lord

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

It's the Thought That Counts

Video as Attitude

Joan Jonas/Star Hair 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/Joan's Lost Notebook; Dieter Froese/Nota Model

May 13-June 26

Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, N.M. and the University for St. John of the Cross.

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 refuse 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 videotechnology, or even at unmasking media in a me-too conception of sculpture, as at liberating a few more exhibition and funding categories for videomakers who would otherwise fall penniless in the cold mug. The former, practices, and intention of the artists included 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 of these two shows which, ignoring geography, I'm going to lump together? 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 armataking a point of 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.

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monuments. As in The Eye of the Beast Is Red, it was impossible to see everything, plot all the implications, bothering for themselves 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 child's block with monitors balanced at crazy angles in front of the viewer. As in The Eye of the Beast Is Red, each housing a bank of four screens. It was impossible to take in all the rapid-fire, close-up imagery at once, only possibly to apprehend that both the editing and the rate of 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, 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 confute emotional intimacy with the material facts of video presentation. The experience is reinforced by the presence and form of the flashing imagery, but its absence by Hill once said, the piece would be archetypically the same if redone with entirely different footage.

Steina and Woody Vasulka's The West used video (Steina's) and sound (Woody's) to address and replicate the vast, and, clear Sound System is not so much a space for the making of signs: ceremonial Indian dwellings, the arrays of scientific instruments New Mexico hosts, even artworks. Though more conventionally reliant on imagery or 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, swiftly edited, and occasionally witty. Nevertheless, the paludal colors, the plays on motion versus stillness, the simultaneous views of different phases of a given object, the mirror-imaging, 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 arm's 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 possibly to apprehend that both the editing and the rate of 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, 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.")

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The Vasulkas use of video and sound to generate a phenomenological experience of space. Austerely 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 soundtrack, 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-spaces in this two-channel work—the structure involved circles (the Vasulka's mirrored, rotating globe), as well as mirror imagery. Using highly saturated reds, pinks, and blues (the color population 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 '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 Clayton'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, video's relation both to the cultural use of technology and to its own potential—as a genre—to reconstitute the fabricated environment that has purportedly replaced "nature" as reality is enormously complex, and I'm still skeptical. The most important conclusion from this article is that video art has in some way repositioned itself in the world of culture, but it has not done so in any easy or straightforward way. The installation art of the Vasulkas and the other artists reviewed in this article is not just the product of a new technology, but an active force in shaping that technology. The Vasulkas and the other artists reviewed in this article are not just the product of a new technology, but an active force in shaping that technology.