

MEDIASCAPE

June 14–September 15

Guggenheim Museum SoHo

Mediascape is organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in association with ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

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"Television has attacked us for a lifetime—now we strike back." Nam June Paik's reaction to the dominant medium of the postwar period set the tone for many artists' investigations into technology beginning in the 1960s. Instead of sitting back and absorbing the anesthetizing effects of network television, artists began buying video cameras, stringing coaxial cable, and soldering together their own hardware to transform the TV image into something strange or disturbing. In the succeeding three decades, other artists have pursued this impulse to commandeer or refashion new media to different ends. *Mediascape* examines two directions this impulse has taken: works that engage the viewer through sight and sound, and works that invite the viewer's interaction. On the second floor of the Guggenheim Museum SoHo are sculptures and installations that investigate video's inherent tendencies, often exaggerating its effects or disclosing its limitations, along with pieces designed to exploit the narrative potential of video and electronic signboards. On the first floor, meanwhile, are works by younger artists who have grown up with interactive technologies such as the computer. These artists' immersive environments reflect their generation's more optimistic attitude toward the liberating possibilities of digital technology.

Paik's first experiments with television in the 1960s and 1970s amounted to a direct assault on the TV set itself: in one piece he warped the picture with a magnet; in another he gutted a TV casing, replacing the picture tube with a candle. Paik's target has since shifted from the TV set to TV time. In his recent video sculptures *Passage* (1986) and *Megatron* (1995), constantly changing sequences of images fleet across TV screens. In this way, the works reflect the increasingly choppy editing of mainstream television, on which news spots lasting a matter of seconds outnumber in-depth, feature-length reports. By appropriating and accelerating the "microtime" of MTV and commercial breaks, Paik pushes this implosion of time to its logical conclusion, creating an array of images dazzling enough to compete with TV. Yet despite the frenetic pace of the images, the effect can be surprisingly meditative.

Like Paik's works, *Raw Material: Brrr* (1990) by Bruce Nauman, another early practitioner of video art, also compresses experience into intense bursts of electronic image and sound. Images of the artist's face are shown on two TV monitors, with a similar image projected onto an adjacent wall. Unlike the "talking heads" seen on TV, these faces have little to tell us, as they repeatedly blurt, in a nonsensical gesture, the simple monosyllable "Brrr."

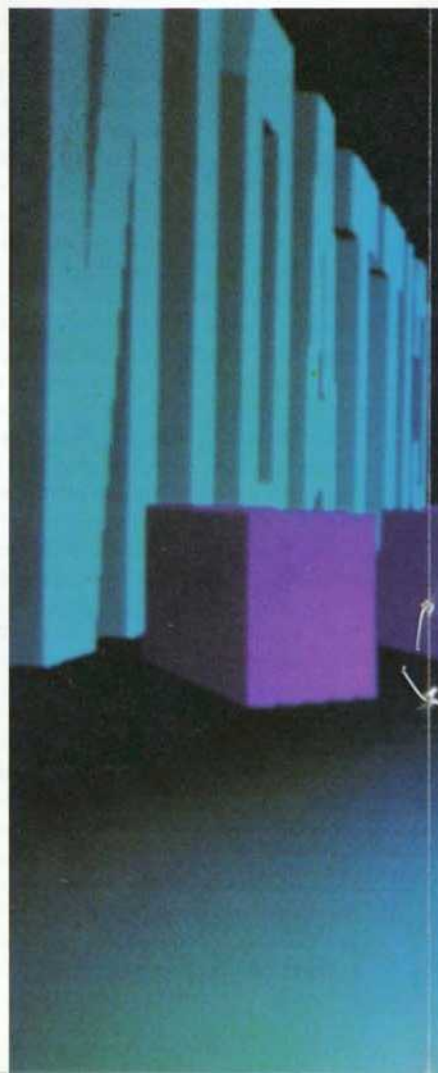
Nauman also makes use of video in an earlier work, *Video Surveillance Piece (Public Room, Private Room)* (1969–70), but instead of exaggerating the distortion of time in edited video, in this piece he exploits the "real time" inherent in live feed, while simultaneously turning video upon itself. In each of the two rooms of the installation, one of which is closed to the audience, a video camera sweeps back and forth to survey the contents of the room. Each room also contains a monitor, which shows what the camera in the other room is recording. A sense of alienation arises as we become the unsuspecting objects of the camera's gaze, a sense that may become more acute as the camera pans toward the monitor and we stand



above: Bruce Nauman, *Raw Material: Brrr*, 1990 (detail). Two-channel video and two-channel sound installation, 60 minutes, color; installation area variable, approximately 6.25 x 7.5 m. ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Photo by Douglas M. Parker.

right: Jeffrey Shaw, *The Legible City*, 1991. Interactive computer-graphic installation; screen approximately 3.5 x 5 m; installation area variable, approximately 5.5 x 8.8 m. ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Photo by Jeffrey Shaw.

facing page: Nam June Paik, *Passage*, 1986. Two-channel video installation, 30 minutes, color, 3.48 x 4.32 x .61 m. ZKM/Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Photo by Thomas Goldschmidt.



outside their mutual regard. Though our image never appears on the monitor in the public room, it does appear on the monitor in the private room. The installation thus reminds us that video is a two-way medium—that what enables us to watch also enables us to be watched.

Woody and Steina Vasulka also give us the camera's point of view, but in this case they do so to open the viewer's eyes to vantage points made possible by the logic of machines. In contrast to conventional cinema, in which the director, cameraman, or another human agent determines the camera angle and subject, many of the Vasulkas' works make use of rotating mounts, pivoting mirrors, and reflective spheres to free the camera's point of view from a controlling human perspective. While Steina Vasulka's *Borealis* (1993) was filmed with a handheld camera, the piece uses odd angles and time reversals to thwart a conventional cinematic perspective. Images of the churning waters and steam of the Icelandic terrain are projected on upright screens floating in space, transposing to vertical the traditional horizontal format of TV and cinema.

A number of the other artists whose works are shown on the second floor have chosen to broaden their investigation beyond the question of video's innate limitations and abilities, and in doing so have reclaimed the possibility of narrative that Modernist abstraction rejected. Rather than present the seamless, linear flow of traditional narrative, however, Marie-Jo Lafontaine and Bill Viola deploy multiple monitors or screens to repeat or juxtapose narrative elements. The weightlifter in the 27 monitors of Lafontaine's *Tears of Steel* (1987) tries to hide the strain of his efforts from his face, but Lafontaine's setting of this stoic scene to an aria sung by Maria Callas draws attention to the deceit implicit in the weightlifter's and singer's attempts to make their acts seem effortless. Viola sets up contrasts in his work as well. The three projections that make up *City of Man* (1989) are reminiscent of panels in a Renaissance altarpiece predella, suggesting such venerable themes as the three ages of life or the triad of heaven, purgatory, and hell. Unlike the art-historical precedents his work suggests, however, Viola offers no clear-cut hierarchy or progression among these images, merely their jux-

taposition, which is left to the viewer to interpret. Viola's *Threshold* (1995) pits the public against the private in contrasting technologies. Electronic signboards broadcast reports cabled in from a news service, while images of people asleep in their beds are projected on the wall behind. Jenny Holzer also employs electronic signboards in her untitled installation from the 1990 Venice Biennale, but without the space of repose offered by *Threshold*. In an enclosed room, 21 LED signboards surround the viewer, flashing messages in a welter of languages. Selected from the artist's *Truisms*, *Inflammatory Essays*, and other writings, the "reports" that appear on her signboards are more subjective than Viola's. They voice diverse, often controversial opinions, in statements such as "PEOPLE WHO DON'T WORK WITH THEIR HANDS ARE PARASITES" and "MURDER HAS ITS SEXUAL SIDE."

In the first-floor galleries are works by a generation of artists who have come of age as the computer-driven technologies of the Internet begin to compete with those of television and cinema. Like Viola and Holzer, Jeffrey Shaw and Bill Seaman are interested in the visual potential of written language, but they have created interactive immersive environments that lend this language a more manipulable presence. In *The Legible City* (1991), Shaw uses language to map history onto virtual space. For this piece, he worked from maps of New York, Amsterdam, and Karlsruhe to create virtual replicas of their urban landscapes, but in his simulated versions giant virtual letters stand next to one other like buildings on city blocks. These letters spell out monologues evocative of the respective cities. To create the Manhattan version, for example, he wrote fictional monologues by Frank Lloyd Wright, Donald Trump, a taxi driver, and other past and current denizens of New York. By riding an interactive bicycle "through" this virtual city, the viewer thus encounters the history of the city inscribed in its geography. Seaman, in *Passage Sets (One Pulls Pivots at the Top of the Tongue)* (1994–95), links words to specific sound and video sequences. By clicking on words on a screen to string together



an impromptu poem, the viewer triggers static and moving images on the other two screens. Toshio Iwai's *Piano—As Image Media* (1995) is also designed for viewers to draw analogies between notations and their sensory equivalents. But in this case, the viewer quite literally *draws*, using a trackball to leave a pattern of marks on a projected screen that is then interpreted by the piano as a musical score.

Of all the works in the show, Iwai's demands the most active participation from the viewer. As an investigation into technology as a tool rather than a vehicle for content determined beforehand by the artist, Iwai's piano harkens back to the experiments of Nauman and the Vasulkas from a quarter-century earlier. In contrast to the dystopian tone of Nauman's *Video Surveillance Piece*, however, Iwai's work reflects the enthusiastic embrace of technology by many of today's younger artists, who foresee technology opening up a new autonomy for the viewer rather than the submission to authority suggested by Nauman's closed system. As such, the experiments presented in *Mediascape* reflect our society's growing fascination with the question of how we can use technology, and a concomitant concern over how technology can use us.

—Jon Ippolito, Exhibition Coordinator

