A video “installation” does more than present videotape; it treats the monitor as an object to be considered as part of an information package. An installation, in effect, becomes a sculptural environment.

In the mid-1960s, Nam June Paik embedded TV sets in furniture. Recently, Paik has set up a video landscape, a walk-through array of monitors showing gardens and rivers. Dennis Oppenheim has put a monitor at the end of a trough of turpentine; the viewer gets the smell of art school, while Oppenheim, on tape, recalls the attendant horrors. Doug Davis has turned a monitor to the wall, denying image-content, letting the blueish video glow paint the room. Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Les Levine, and others have used closed-circuit (often with time-lag tape) to let the spectator produce video content in the process of walking through the installation.

These installations are related to the happening-derived environments of the early 1960s, to certain examples of mixed media and expanded cinema, and to certain earthwork presentations in museums. But the situation is probably closest to that of electronic music where some composers went environmental to escape the tedium of taped, that is, non-live music and to exploit further ranges of sonic possibility. Max Neuhaus’ Water Music, for example, was accessible only to listeners who would get into a swimming pool.

Most of the first wave of video artists used tape merely as cheap and convenient film. They seemed embarrassed (or stymied) by video’s childish simplicity and by its seemingly retrograde aesthetic of gaudy realism. They also seemed to feel an irresistible urge to “get on TV” themselves. The typical “performance” tape of the early 1970s showed the artist engaged in some mindless, repetitive, painful chore, as if the indulgence in self-expression required an act of torture to redeem it. The tape, moreover, was unedited, in the manner of early show-what-you-shoot Warhol, although the rationale was merely technical: the artist simply lacked an extra deck on which to edit. Then too the tape ran on forever, as if the artist made no distinction between dramatic time—to say nothing of real time—and the timelessness of painting and sculpture. Worst of all, the tape was shown over any old set, in any old setting, as if there were no difference between looking at TV (or painting or film) and watching tape. But video seen in a gallery or museum does have its own set of expectations and possibilities, most notably, the fact that the monitor is an object among others; it occupies space; it is available to the viewer only from a specific, however barren, perspective.

Paul Kos, 33, has tried to deal with the context in which his tapes are seen, first, by providing documents to supplement the information conveyed by the monitor and, finally, by designing the viewing space itself. For Kos, the monitor has become more than a projection device; it has become the core of an environmental piece of sculpture, its explanation, focus, and payoff.

In seeking and developing the intrinsic qualities of video, Paul Kos realizes the sculptural potential of video, in which the monitor has not merely a two-dimensional face, but becomes a creator of sculptural space as well.
A monitor in the living room.

In 1971, Kos drilled a hole in a gallery floor to let a pile of sand seep through to form a cone on the basement floor (another mass transfer). Again viewers could watch the action at one remove over closed-circuit.

In 1973, Kos moved from using video to clarify a live performance towards creating a set decorated by objects related to a taped event. Olga/Gold was a tape in which the camera scans the hills of Wyoming, “searching” for Olga, a miner’s wife who disappeared on her honeymoon in 1936, “without a trace.” On the soundtrack, Kos calls out “Olga... Olga... Olga...” and, alternately, “Gold... gold... gold...” (a scrambling of the letters of “Olga”; another kind of futile search). Kos also made “prospecting” sculptures, sluces and pans “spotted” with gold, which he showed in the same room as the tape, although not as part of a unified piece.

The first integration of a tape with supporting objects came in 1974 with Cymbals/Symbols: Pilot Butte presented at the de Young Museum, San Francisco. The monitor sits on a white stand in the corner of a room facing the entrance. An approach to it is blocked by twin steel sheets, 4 by 10 feet, hanging from the ceiling. Two photos, to the right of the entrance, are flanked by another diptych, a statement by the artist and one by the curator. (Kos, raised a Catholic, is almost Manichaean in his preoccupation with dualisms.)

The tape itself is in two segments. The first is another obsessive search: Kos wandering in the desert near Pilot Butte, outside his hometown, Rock Springs, Wyoming. As he walked, carrying the camera aimed at the ground—the blurry image is the equivalent of action painting in action—he chanted: “There are tiny sounds in the desert; there aren’t any sounds in the desert.” When he finished the couplet, he froze (as in the children’s game, “Red Light”): the new image is stable, in good focus; the ground is parched, rubble-strewn, the equivalent of the surface of a Jackson Pollock, who, coincidentally, was born in Cody, Wyoming.

As Kos moved on, alternating the couplet-with-movement and silence-with-still-life, he discovered new terrain: scrub. And he discovered tinny sounds (off-camera, Marlene Kos, his wife and co-worker, banged and scraped a coat hanger against the top of a trash can). Thus, the first line of the couplet (“There are tinny sounds in the desert”) is made literally true; and the second line (“There aren’t any sounds in the desert”) literally untrue. Finally, Kos came upon an ant colony: life, survivors in the desert, workers, travellers with a purpose.

The importance of sound in this segment, that is, the importance of the controlling couplet and the silence and/or tinny, tiny sounds, is emphasized in the way the audio is broadcast: through the giant steel sheets, which are driven as (whispering) loudspeakers by tiny, invisible transducers. At the simplest level, this is a bit of magic, nothing more, tricky technology. But by extending the audio out from the monitor, by translating it as an independent object in the space of the viewer, Kos manages to defeat the recency of conventional video, its tendency to retreat from the viewer, back toward a remote, dimly perceived, gray distance. He makes the video belong to the room in the way Rauschenberg’s combines broke through the picture plane into the viewing space.

The steel sheets are of course a typical Minimalist configuration, the obverse of Serra’s steel slabs: these sheets seem to float. Moreover, they are only a half inch apart, nearly two-dimensional. They carry further the “flattening” of reality by the photos and by the (black-and-white) video. The sheets seem more graphic than sculptural. Indeed, each sheet is inscribed with a set of concentric circles centering on a small hole drilled three feet from the bottom. The circles are literally the shape of cymbals, and the sheets are literally cymbals—they resonate. Kos claims the circles are topographic representations of the butte, which, in turn, is shaped like a cymbal. Wyoming, Kos adds, is itself shaped like a butte, rising from the eastern plains to a high plateau.

The sheets are lit by theatrical mini-spots that cause an “X” of light to center on the holes and cast shadows of the sheets onto the end walls. These shadows seem like eclipsing objects, since light spills over their edges, not unlike Robert Irwin’s illuminated paintings. Most important, the walls and floor of the viewing space are thus also activated.

The second video segment, Pilot Light/Pilot Butte, is essentially visual in orientation. It is documented, for example, by the two photos on the wall, a view of the butte at midday, another view at sunset (the shots that open and close the segment). The photos are therefore time-marks, frozen moments, before-and-after, in contrast to the in-between, on-going, process time of the video.

After the first shot of the butte, the segment continues with Kos, shown in extreme close-up (so his face is not seen), building a fire on top of a tree stump (a nicely ironic fireplace). He arranges split logs in a log cabin array. Then he twirls a piece of ice in a big, upside-down (cymbal-shaped) pot top, trying to make a magnifying lens. The effort is frustrating and almost silly, although the idea of an ice lens is mentioned in a survival book Kos found on his teen-age brother’s bookshelf.

After a long time, the lens is held up to focus the sun, and, at last, to light the fire. The lens is then put on the raging fire, and, finally, as the logs begin to tumble, the as-yet-unmelted lens falls into the ashes. The last image is the butte, in silhouette, as if eclipsing the sun, trying to put out that light.

A pilot light, normally, serves as an easy way to ignite a gas fire; the tape shows the great effort needed to start a fire by ice. A pilot light is also a beacon, a guide to the pilot, as the butte was, in fact, a landmark for travellers to Rock Springs. But this particular pilot light cuts more in the direction of a distress signal, an identifying flash to request and assist the arrival of a rescue party. In this context, each hole in the steel sheets resembles the hole in a rescue mirror: one aims the sun’s reflections by spotting the oncoming plane through the hole.

Thus, the search of the first
rEVOL UTION: Notes for
Symbols, rEVOL UTION is a
modernist airport. At the end of
the travellers' chapel at some
modernist airport. At the end of
the room, on an altar-like ped-
estal, there is a small, tabern-
cacle-like red box (an old chem-
istry set); in it, a typewriter, a
stack of typed sheets (the mis-
sal), and the tiny monitor. The
approach is marked off by red-
wood 2x4s (pews), spaced a foot
apart.

Sound is again extremely im-
portant. (Kos may be unique in
exploiting the audio aspects of
video.) The viewer must take
five or six steps into the room before being able to hear a muffled
drum roll (ta-ta-ta-tum, ta-
ta-ta-tum, ta-ta-tum-tum-tum). It
is almost impossible not to
march in step (the spacing of
the 2x4s encourages short, clipped
steps). The monitor finally ex-
plains (in a split-screen image,
another dualism): on the bottom
half, a typewriter drums out
“mar mar march,” that is, when
struck, three letters and a space
make a ta-ta-ta-tum sound. (All
the letters of the typewriter in
the red box are blacked out, ex-
cept for “m.a.r.c.h.”) On the top
half of the screen, Marlene Kos
(mar mar . . .), in a black,
priestly coat, marches back and
forth.

Again the piece is very liter-
ary, filled with puns. Again the
detail is small, the action muted,
the soundtrack incantatory, the
overtones religious. Yet the
piece is political; it tells the
viewer what to do: march. The
viewer recognizes this command,
however, only after he has tried
to negotiate the planks on his
own and only after his rhythm
has been regulated by the mar-
tial music. Only then can he de-
cipher the command. Or is the
command really a caption, a sub-
title for the little movie of Mar-
Marlene marching? Is Mar a trun-
cated god of war? Is the red light
and the red box the liturgical
color of war and revolution: Is the
“rEVOL UTION” less a forced
march than an endless turning
about, a mark time, mark . . .

Compared to the wandering
and rescue rituals of Cymbals/
Symbols, rEVOL UTION is a
playful, yet compulsive, no-exit
journey. The artist is, nonethe-
less, in control, vanishing to per-
form his typewriter march,
another absurd technical feat,
like lighting a fire with an ice-
box. The artist is now sure
enough of his craft to employ an
actress to act and try to shape
the environment of his audience. He
lures the viewer in, withholding
information until the viewer is
halway through the “invasion.”
The artist makes things difficult,
exerts a more thorough control,
with the planks and the music.
Finally, he provides a small pay-
off and reveals that a trick has
been played, a ritual performed.
The viewer has marched to a dif-
cerent drummer.

Tokyo Rose (1976, taped but
not installed at this writing) will
be a trap, easy to enter, hard to
escape. It will be an environment
that mirrors for the viewer the
content of the tape: Marlene
Kos (who is credited with script
and performance), in Oriental
make-up as Tokyo Rose, is
shown behind the meshes of a
flytrap (similar to the trap the
viewer has entered); she seduc-
tively repeats: “Come in. I want
to be your friend. Do not strug-
gle. Lay down your arms. Come
in. Do not resist. I want to be
your friend.” She baits the view-
er just as Tokyo Rose tried to
persuade American fly-boys to
surrender. Several of her “vic-
tims” (flies) can be seen crawling
around the surfaces of the trap.

In Tokyo Rose the decor and
the tape have been fully integra-
ted. There is no documentation,
no reportage from another time,
another place. The tape is the
bait of the trap. The relationship
with the audience is the content
of the piece. Will the audience
get caught up? Or will it feel se-
duced and manipulated?

The action of the tape is sta-
tic; the soundtrack, again, is
loop-like, incantatory. The con-
figuration of objects is simple, to
a new degree of austerity. The cen-
tral act is again a ritual pas-
sage, a certain kind of game of
skill. Again there is the question
of submission/manipulation. Here
the overt mode is propaganda,
doubly devious because the ex-
act means of persuasion is sexual
enticement. (The entrance of the
flytrap is shaped like a cone, like
a vagina.)

The made-up woman prom-
ises,cajoles, and traps the travel-
ler. She has disguised herself; she
only pretends to be warm and
friendly. Actually, she’s no rose,
she’s a Venus flytrap, a false bea-
con, a misleading voice. The pi-
lots who heard Tokyo Rose must
have understood as much;
the seductive message, with its
obviousness, its vulgarity, may
always be understood as a false
give-away, a trap. Yet (sexual)
surrender is so appealing. Failure
itself has its appeal. Being trap-
red even doubles these appeals,
because it absolves the victim,
who can claim to have been
tricked.

Tokyo Rose is a long step
from early artist-as-ego-tripper
tapes. At one level, Kos has re-
treated to the traditional posture
of the artist working from a mo-
odel, using her sex appeal as the
ultimate bait. But the relation-
ship between artist and model
here is extremely complex, not
simply because Marlene Kos
shared in the act of creation.
Despite the apparent historical
allusion to Tokyo Rose, the
piece seems to bear most heavily
on the relationship between hus-
band and wife, on the relation-
ship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
ship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
ship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
ship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
relationship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
relationship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
relationship between co-workers de-
pendent on each other like star/
friendship, friendship, friendship,
friendship.

At the formal level, Kos’ ac-
chievement over the past three
years has been to develop the in-
ternal characteristics of video—
video as sound, video as light,
the monitor as object—and also
video’s relationship to the
viewer—the context in which the
screen is watched. Most impor-
tantly, he has managed to deal
with video in traditional sculp-
tural terms; he has arranged the
monitor in space, a space that in-
cludes not only the dimensions
of the viewing room, but also
the stored images and elapsed
time of the video itself.