Video Art: Television as Canvas

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

Technology affects art as it does so many other things. Creating with video is becoming increasingly appealing, and experimenters feel confident that a medium can affect an artist's decision as surely as a canvas.

Full appreciation, however, is a challenge for much of the viewing public. Those raised with television will be more readily receptive. Those firmly conditioned to the preciousness of the art object are resistant. All usually have first to overcome the handicap of over familiarity with predictable television usage and appearance.

Two new Long Island exhibitions are helpful, for they provide good insight into a number of aspects of the medium's capabilities. A video art show in the Hofstra University Gallery in Hempstead and a video-sculpture exhibition at the Suffolk Community College in Riverhead both have video installations that include some of the country's best talents, and several of the pieces are quite experimental.

Hofstra's featured artists — Nan June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, Dan Graham and Dara Birnbaum — reveal a broad range of approaches to video art. Each serves as a reminder that practitioners regard video as a visual technique to be mastered and shaped for individual expressive purposes.

In most examples there is a consciousness of images being conceived in frames or brackets, but unlike painting and photography there are multiple opportunities to choose positions and boundaries. In most, too, there is an awareness of time's being used in novel ways as an additional creative language. Our attention is captured, then divided without control into precise segments. A predetermined, very definite pace and rhythm becomes choreography for the eye.

In Nan June Paik's "Good Morning Mr. Orwell" for example, 30 minutes of electronic experiments form taped sections of celebrity performance into patterned episodes. We see George Plimpton, Merce Cunningham, Laurie Anderson, Salvador Dali, the Thompson Twins and Joseph Beuys, among others, in arbitrary colors, dissolving and reappearing in synchronization with Philip Glass and John Cage music. Figures turn into bold outlines or silhouettes, surrounded by shifting patterns. The film is so soft, so hard. Images overlap. Some take on new configurations. Numbers repeat the same pictures simultaneously. Although the viewer doesn't know what to expect from sequence to sequence, the film lends credibility and therefore all seems plausible.

By using visual information from other contexts are also re-used as content in Dara Birnbaum's "P.M. Magazine." And this offers a suggestion of video art's potential to function as political commentary. Here, however, the Birnbaum piece is more strongly sensed as a symphony of light, sound and images that constantly alter their framing and their speed. Three screens carry different interpretations of the theme. This installation has considerably more artistic merit than most, with three enlargements mounted on huge panels. Hofstra titles it "Video Sculpture" and asks us to consider, too, the three-dimensional character of these electronic works.

Mr. Paik's "E.T. Buddha" measures up quite well by sculptural standards. Still, its major impact comes from its use of a camera and negative/positive reversal techniques. For it is like the viewer to place and activate his own image on the screen containing an E.T. likeness and watched by a seated Buddha figure. The intended hypnotic effect is rather successful.

Live action is important to video art. Dan Graham's "Two Viewing Rooms" (shown previously at the Institute of Contemporary Art) also allows the spectator to participate by means of a two-way mirror and monitor. Multiple reflections give a sense of depth and breadth, and yet the artwork seems somewhat less interesting than others here.

It falls to Shigeko Kubota, a well-known maker of video sculpture, to demonstrate how an artist might use the medium to achieve a more subjective, personal content. She is particularly fond of incorporating autobiographical references into her designs, and she has also created a number of homages to Marcel Duchamp, the artist credited with bringing "ideas" back to an avant-garde aesthetic. Her project that had been principally concerned with abstract form. "Meta-Marcel Window" refers to Duchamp's work, and to the window as a connection to the interior and the exterior. Another Kubota work comments on Duchamp's famous Nude Descending a Staircase (it caused great controversy at the 1913 Armory Show in New York) and seems to be referring to the importance of motion in video conception.

"The West" explores the ancient and modern landscapes of New Mexico, including the ceremonial sites of an early Indian population, the ruins, and other settings. The work gives a heightened sense of the drama and character of the setting. The treatment of the desert color is particularly outstanding. Intense and subtle, it has an own mesmerizing effect. Originally produced for "SUNY: The Arts on Television" last year, "The West" has since had a number of prestigious showings abroad, including one at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Both exhibitions will run through Dec. 20. Gallery hours at Suffolk Community College, off Route 51 in Riverhead, are 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. Mondays through Thursdays and 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. Fridays. Visitors should use the parking lot for the library. Gallery hours at Hofstra, in Hempstead, are 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Tuesdays.