a three part video program investigating the representation of Japan
JAPAN
OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN

a three part video program
investigating the representation of Japan

Part 1:
OUTSIDE LOOKING IN
February 13 - March 21, 1992

Part 2:
AN INSIDE VIEW
April 9 - 25, 1992

Part 3:
INDIVIDUALS, IN BETWEEN
May 7 - 23, 1992

Organized by
Micki McGee with Yumi Saijo

Artists Space
223 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013
Part 3: Individuals, In Between
May 7-23

Program 1:
(Running time: 43 minutes)

Memories from the Department of Amnesia by Janice Tanaka (1989, 12.50 min, in English) is a deeply personal reflection upon the loss of a parent—specifically, Tanaka’s mother. Memory is at the core of this poignant work, in which Tanaka transforms the autobiographical into the universal. Stages of mourning—evasion, fear, grief, denial and remembrance—are rendered as a series of evocative visual metaphors. Transfigured through Tanaka’s characteristically lush image processing, haunting images are complemented with a collage of photographs, voice-over and text, which together recount a personal history of her mother’s life. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

History and Memory by Rea Tajiri (1991, 30:00, in English) focusing on the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, this powerful and poignant work examines the rewriting of history through media representation. In a pastiche of film images, written text, voice-over and video, Tajiri interweaves collective history and personal memory. The attack on Pearl Harbor is seen through anonymous archival footage, Hollywood’s From Here to Eternity, a filmed re-staging and a news report. The Japanese-American internment is similarly reconstructed. “Who chose what story to tell?” asks Tajiri. Referring to things that happened in the world with cameras watching, things that we re-stage to have images of them, and things that are observed only by the spirits of the dead, Tajiri reclaims history and memory by inserting her own video footage and narrative voice, and her mother’s recollections of her family’s internment. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

Program 2:
(Running time: 60 minutes)

Intimate Stranger by Allan Berliner (60:00, 1991, in English) tells the story of Berliner’s grandfather, Joseph Cassuto, a Palestinian Jew raised in Egypt who relocated to Brooklyn and Osaka, as he formed a life-long connection with a life-long affiliation with a Japanese textile company. The bond, which continued during and after the devastation of the Second World War, brought Cassuto neither wealth nor fame, but instead afforded him a unique cultural position, as an “honorable special foreigner.” (Distributed by the artist.)

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Program 3:
(Running time: 61 minutes)

Drift by Gavin Flint (10:00, 1991) Using footage from the American television program Hart to Hart, which is a favorite among Japanese audiences, Flint considers the myriad ways in which meaning is fractured by translation. Flint constructs a hypothetical situation wherein the English original for the program is lost and the show is translated back into English and once again into Japanese, rendering the dialogue nonsensical. By amplifying the “drift” of meaning which occurs in translations, Flint suggests the fragility of cross-cultural communication. (Distributed by the artist.)

Halving the Bones by Ruth Lounsbery (work-in-progress, 19:00, 1992) tells the story of the filmmaker, a half Japanese woman living in New York, who has inherited a can of bones that she keeps on a shelf in her closet. The bones are half of the remains of her Japanese grandmother; the rest are located in a cemetery in Tokyo. Through a narrative and visual collage comprised of family lies and stories, home movies and documentary footage, the film traces 100 years of her maternal family history from Japan to America as she attempts to set the bones to rest.

Video Girls and Video Song for Navaho Sky by Shigeko Kubota (31:56, 1973). Kubota writes, “This is a video fusion of synthesized image and video document. I went to the Navajo Reservation and stayed with a Navajo family for 40 days. This is my video diary of women who I met in Arizona, Tokyo, Europe, and New York. I carried my portapak, instead of a baby.” Kubota creates an ironic collage of radically disparate cultural contexts. Navajos riding a horse-drawn cart to a public well are contrasted with erotic cabaret dancers; a Navajo woman slaughtering sheep is juxtaposed with a performance art piece involving a dead goat and a naked man. Featuring Kubota’s often haunting and witty electronic manipulation, this video document is an autobiographical journal of cultural identity and difference. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)
Outside/Inside/Inbetween

A three-part video program investigating the representation of Japan

Since the end of World War II, Japan and the United States have participated in a partnership based on mutual needs, reciprocal resources and a perceived common enemy, the Soviet Union. Now, with the Soviet Union dismantled, the symbiotic relationship between the two nations has begun to shift. Policies forged to win the Cold War have left the U.S. economically vulnerable; a half-century of defense-driven growth has allowed the U.S. to emerge as the political victor of the Cold War, while Japan——which prospered under U.S. protection and an international consensus that military expenditures——appears to be the economic winner.

Although the U.S. has become the only remaining military superpower, it has accomplished this dubious feat at a high cost, by becoming one of the world’s largest debtor nations. Meanwhile, rising from the economic and political devastation of the Second World War, Japan has become an economic superpower——building the world’s second largest economy——by relinquishing military power in exchange for access to global markets.

This post-Cold War reversal of fortunes has produced renewed tensions among longtime allies. As the U.S. economy staggers under the weight of government debt and burdensome trade deficits, Japan and the Japanese are becoming acceptable targets for America’s economic anxieties. Our mass media images, both compliant and adversarial, resonate with concerns about political and economic potency. Oldsmobile commercials allude to the diminutive “size” of Japanese men; President Bush is pictured prostrate at the Imperial dining table. An array of recent non-fiction publications feature alarming, even paranoid, titles such as The Coming War with Japan, The Japan That Can Say “No,” and Zaibatsu America: How the Japanese are Colonizing Vital U.S. Industries. As American anxiety about Japan has increased, Japan has represented not as an economic competitor, but as a predatory arch-rival.

The apprehensions and aspersions have not been unilaterally: prominent Japanese politicians have recently begun commenting on the decline of American industry. Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa and Speaker of the Lower House of the Diet, Yohei Kishida, have characterized U.S. workers as “lacking a work ethic,” “lazy,” and “illiterate.”

As tensions heighten, the formerly synergetic nature of the alliance between Japan and the U.S. is obscured; the interlocking partnership which built Japanese economic power and U.S. political dominance may give way to a less cooperative, potentially dangerous, relationship.

In the face of these strained relations, JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN, a program of independent media art by Japanese, Americans, and Japanese-Americans, suggests that U.S. perceptions of this Asian nation may be as flawed as Japanese characterizations of American workers.

Outside Looking In

The U.S.-Japan Cold War partnership yielded considerable cultural exchange: many of the videotapes featured in Part 1: Outside Looking In were produced by artists who visited Japan with the support of cultural exchange programs, including Gary Gin, Ed Hinckley, Bill Viola, and Stein and Woody Vasulka. Turned their attention to representing Japan with the support of the U.S./Japan Friendship Commission. Their video investigations——representations of society and tourists might view any exotic locale.

With this Baedeker’s point of view, these artists examine the surface of the Japanese culture by picturing those sports and games, arts and rituals, landscapes and architectures that are distinctly Japanese: sumo wrestling, pachinko betting, Butoh, Kabuki performances, Shinto rituals, festivals, bamboo forests, rice paddies and active volcanoes, flower arranging, gardens, paper lanterns, rubber bands, cushioned subway benches, Shinkansen Bullet trains and shimmering neon-lit urban landscapes are among the visual materials from which these artists construct their impression of Japan.

While their material appears similar, each brings their own distinct artistic concerns to their work; the artists come from different cultures and times: Hill, well-known for his investigations of language, unrolls Japanese palindromes——words or phrases that read the same backwards and forwards in Ura-Aru (The Backside Exists). Viola, renowned for his romantic renderings of light against landscape, takes light as his subject and metaphor in Hatsu Yume (First Dream). Fishermen use light as bait as their nets sweep the inky black sea at night; the dazzling neon displays of the Tokyo skyline lure urban inhabitants. The Vasulka’s, pioneers in the use of video synthesizers, use digital animation in the Land of the Elevator Girls to capture the motion of a metaphorical elevator door which opens and closes to reveal glimpses of Japan’s landscape, architecture and daily life. And Velev, known for his numerous anthropological video essays, explores the layers of traditional ritual with popular culture to suggest the tensions in this rapidly modernized nation in The Meaning of the Interval. These individual, even idiosyncratic, views of Japan maintain considerable distance from their subject. For the tourist, the culture is always just at hand, yet out of reach; for the voyer, the object of desire is visually present, if physically and emotionally absent. Relying on visual images (or, in Hill’s case, non-painful pithic research), these artists may attempt to find narrative structure or voice overs——these artists keep the history and significance of particular cultural practices at arm’s length. The risk of such a position is that an artist may inadvertently eroticize, rather than illuminate, the culture depicted. For the Japanese viewer, these tapes may appear to be evocative homages to the rituals and realities of Japanese daily life, while for the Westerner, they may function as visually provocative images of an exotic “other.”

Though also foreigners to Japan, videomakers Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker take a different approach to representing Japanese culture. Rather than attempting the risky business of relying on pictures alone to do the work of a thousand words, the two producers employ a traditional form: the narrative documentary essay. While they utilize a conventional Western narrative structure, the team avoids the usual Westerner’s focus on Japanese traditional arts by investigating a popular phenomenon. The result——The Japanese Version——is a skillfully researched, insightful travelogue focusing on the Japanese propensity to import, assimilate and reinterpret foreign ideas, customs and objects; for the voyeur, the object of desire is visually close...and out of the closet.

These varied approaches to representing Japanese traditional and popular culture serve a single limitation: they are all, whether visually provocative or particularly informative, depictions of Japan’s surface culture. They are surface culture. To do so, doing the work of crossing cultures and sexual orientations often represented as outside both mainstream Japanese and American culture are brought inside...and out of the closet.

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An Inside View

Japanese independent media productions offer an unexpectedly close look at Japanese culture, partly because of a dearth of opportunities for exhibition and screening. Japanese video artists persevere with their productions, addressing an array of concerns, both serious and comic. Visual Brains, an ongoing collaboration by Sei Kazama and Hatsune Ohtsu, has taken on a five-part project that satirically interprets illogical aspects of Japanese life. To date, they have completed the first three; Volumes 1-3, which are featured in this program. Volume
The parallel stories of thwarted female ambitions are fiercely critical of a society that represses their ambitions viciously, through husbands and sons. The male-female, public-private, office-home division of labor that Idemitsu critiques from the female perspective has another, similarly oppressive outcome in the sadly monotonous daily life of the overworked "salaryman," or office worker. Akiko Higuchi's CUE portrays a "day in the life" of a salaryman, as Orwellian TV commercials announce that "Everybody's looking for peace and happiness" in a beligerent businessman races from bedroom to bathroom to office, where he drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. CUE, much like 5-7-5 Hi-Cook, decries a culture where segmentation rules and all activities occur on cue, to a unified rhythm, and with the consensus of the group.

In their most critical commentary, Volume 3: Stand-Drift, Visual Brains looks at Japanese complacency in the face of the Persian Gulf War, which relied heavily on foreign oil. As Japan's dependency on foreign oil could have seen the war interrupted oil shipments. Only after considerable pressure from the international community did Japan agree to partially finance the Persian Gulf War. Stand-Drift paints a picture of a Japanese woman's daily concerns — finding an attractive mate, keeping a slim figure, perfecting her makeup — against the critical moments of the Persian Gulf War.

While Stand-Drift represents a stereotypical Japanese woman as preoccupied with petty vanity in the face of international conflict, Mako Idemitsu shows another side of the lives of Japanese women with Kyoko's Situation. Continuing her investigations of Japanese family life, Idemitsu tells parallel stories of two women artists, Tani and Kyoko. Using the "video-within-video" video that Idemitsu has developed in previous mediascapes, Kyoko's situation unfolds on a television monitor within Tani's drama. The parallel stories of thwarted female ambitions are fiercely critical of a society that represses their ambitions viciously, through husbands and sons. The male-female, public-private, office-home division of labor that Idemitsu critiques from the female perspective has another, similarly oppressive outcome in the sadly monotonous daily life of the overworked "salaryman," or office worker. Akiko Higuchi's CUE portrays a "day in the life" of a salaryman, as Orwellian TV commercials announce that "Everybody's looking for peace and happiness" in a beligerent businessman races from bedroom to bathroom to office, where he drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. CUE, much like 5-7-5 Hi-Cook, decries a culture where segmentation rules and all activities occur on cue, to a unified rhythm, and with the consensus of the group.

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Individuals, In Between

Individuals, by virtue of geographical relocation, biological inheritance or intimate relationships, frequently find themselves poised between cultures. While Japanese society values purity and has privileged notions of "insider" and "outsider" — of Japanese and "gaigin" — these subject positions are not entirely fixed and immutable. Reciprocally, American culture, with its melting pot — and, more recently, mosaic — metaphors, suggests that all immigrants may be integrated into a grand heterogeneous multicultural society, but offers no certain guarantees of equality.

Third generation Japanese American artists Rero Tajoji and Janice Tanaka reflect on one outcome of this failed harmony: the family members by the U.S. War Relocation Authority. In History and Memory, Tajoji juxtaposes Japanese film images and U.S. government newsreel footage of the Second World War and Japanese relocation against her mother's story of her family's detention at Poston internment camp. Official history and unofficial memory draw widely disparate paths through time. Similarly, Tanaka tells the story of her mother's detention at Manzanar in Memories from the Department of Amnesia. Forced to sell her property and relocate, separated from her husband who was arrested by the FBI, her mother's life was irreparably damaged; her story reveals the long term effects of the internment as told in one delinquent's eyes.

Mixed heritage video-makers, Gavin Flint and Ruth Lounsbury each comment on their positions as individuals of dual ethnic backgrounds, as persons who are neither clearly American nor Anglo-American. Flint, who was born to an American father and a Euro-American mother, was raised in Japan, has a curious relationship to the Japanese-American dichotomy. In Drift he explores this anomalous situation by considering the displacement of a narrator who, raised in Western television programs dubbed into Japanese, always assumed that John Wayne spoke fluent Japanese. Lounsbury's Having the Bones tells the story of her inheritance: a can culture,Kubota ruminates on cultural differences in Video Girls and Video Songs for Native Sky, a video diary of her forty day stay at the Chirine, Arizona Navaho reservation. Her electronic collage compares disparate cultural images — Navajo's a horse-drawn cart to a public well are contrasted with erotic cabaret dancers; a Navajo woman slaughtering a sheep is juxtaposed with a performance art piece. Her diary suggests that most Americans are as much outsiders to Native American culture as they are to Japanese culture; that the "melting pot" of American ideology may be as mythical as the ethnic purity ascribed to the Japanese culture.

Taken together, the three programs that comprise JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN map out a terrain where the Japanese and American culture intersect, overlap and diverge. In charting this territory, these video explorations suggest that the relationship between Japan and the U.S. — though often contentless — is just as frequently ceremonial and that cultural difference occurs along a continuum, rather than in stark contradiction. While a map can never completely and accurately present a terrain, these investigations suggest that this territory is well worth charting and revisiting, particularly as the landscape of global political power shifts and changes.
Part 1: Outside Looking In
February 13 - March 21

Program 1
(Running time: 57 minutes)

Kinema No Yoru (Film Night) by Peter Callas (2:15, 1986, in Japanese) collages computer-animated images from Japanese and Western films and popular culture in an electronic celebration of visual culture. Callas, who makes his home in Tokyo, Sydney and New York, produces a tape that revels in the split-second pleasures that electronic media provide. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

The Japanese Version by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker (55:00 minutes, 1990, in English) is a surprising and entertaining look at what happens to Western influences when they reach Japan. While today Japan is the world's biggest exporter of electronics and automobiles, for a thousand years the Japanese have been insatiably importing ideas, customs and objects from the rest of the world. Produced by two "outsiders," The Japanese Version goes beyond the usual stereotypical images of Japan to reveal Japanese reinterpretations of Western culture. Callas, who makes his home in Tokyo, Sydney and New York, produces a tape that revels in the split-second pleasures that electronic media provide. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

The Meaning of the Interval by Edin Velez (18:40, 1987) is an evocative essay that explores the inherent contradictions of contemporary Japan, from the rituals of Shinto religion to the nation's fascination with Western pop culture. Constructing a densely layered, nonlinear weave of the mythical and the everyday, Velez probes beneath the surface to unearth ancient, often anachronistic tensions. In Velez's collage, emblems of contemporary Japan — the Bullet train, businessmen and McDonald's — collide with traditional ritual, from Kabuki and Sumo to Shinto. The "interval" of the title relates to the Japanese concept of "ma" — the space between things, a source of energy, tension and balance. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

OUT Takes by John Goss (13:00, 1989, in Japanese and English, with English titles) repositions excerpts from two U.S. television programs — Pee Wee's Playhouse, Rex Reed's At the Movies — and one popular children's show from Japan — Mai do Owagao Seshimosu (We're Always Making Trouble) — to reveal the homosexual subtexts in each. In so doing, sexual orientations often represented as outside both mainstream Japanese and American culture are brought inside... and out of the closet. (Distributed by the Video Data Bank, Chicago.)

Program 2
(Running time: 59 minutes)

Ura Aru (The Backside Exists) by Gary Hill (28:30, 1988, in Japanese and English) conforms palindromic word play (words or phrases reading the same backwards and forwards) to the underlying structure of the Japanese Noh drama. Noh is a drama of essential dualities — characteristically, two principles enact connections between mortal deeds and otherworldly consequences in mythic narratives that unfold in two scenes. In a series of compounddualities mimetic of Noh, Hill composes evocative acoustic palin-
Part 2: An Inside View
April 9 - 25

Program 1: (Running time: 62 minutes)

Kiyoko’s Situation by Mako Iedemitsu (24:19, 1989, in Japanese with English subtitles) articulates the deeply embedded cultural roles of Japanese women through the parallel stories of two female artists, Kiyoko and Tani. In Iedemitsu’s narrative-within-a-narrative, “Kiyoko’s situation” is played out on a television monitor within Tani’s, a metaphorically and literally condensation Tani to death. In the final cruelt, she hangs herself, using the television monitor as a jumping-off point. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

De-Sign, Volumes 1-3, by Visual Brains (Sei Kazama and Hatsune Ohtsu). De-Sign 1: Kunren (8:10, 1989, in Japanese with English subtitles) comments on the transition from the Showa period to the Heisei era, which occurred with the death of Emperor Hirohito. In Kunren, which means “disciplined training” or “rehearsal”, Visual Brains alludes to the widely held belief that Hirohito, who fell ill near the end of 1989, was kept alive through the end of the year so that the New Year's holiday would not be interrupted and the millions of New Year's cards mailed by Japanese would not become instantly obsolete.

De-Sign 2: 5-7-5 Hi-Cook (9:37, 1990, in Japanese with English subtitles). Classic examples of the Japanese haiku form, which is based on a 5-7-5 rhythm, usually comment ironically on political or social situations. In 5-7-5 Hi-Cook, Visual Brains comments on current political and social conditions and this rhythmic structure that recurs throughout Japan’s daily life, in the announcements of newscasters, the slogans of advertising campaigns and the roadside messages of police officers.

De-Sign 3: Stand-Drift (20:00, 1990, in Japanese with English subtitles) looks at the Japanese dilemma in the face of the Persian Gulf War, Japan, which relies entirely on foreign oil, could have seen oil industry paralyzed within 90 days if the war had interrupted oil shipments. Although the Japanese government bowed to pressure from the international community and agreed to partially finance the war, the Japanese public became avid spectators to this war, watching CNN reports as dramatic entertainment. Stand-Drift paints a picture of a stereotypical Japanese woman’s daily concerns — finding an attractive mate, keeping a slim figure, perfecting one’s makeup — against a critically televised moments of the Persian Gulf War. (Distributed by the artists.)

Program 2: (Running time: 53 minutes)

The Other Side by Osamu Nagata (9:30, 1990) offers an image of the television set as a narrow tunnel through which one might crawl to reverse the flow of information and catch a glimpse on actual family, instead of a silicon stereotype. (Distributed by the artist.)

TV Drama by Yoshitaka Shimano (7:20, 1987) applies the concept of the nested set of boxes to a series of television sets that are sequentially destroyed. As a craftsman might fashion a perfect set of fitted boxes, Shimano devises a tightly knit minimalist set of television demolitions. (Distributed by the artist.)


Ph by Dumb Type (30:00, 1991) documents the Ph performance by the Kyoto-based multimedia group Dumb Type, who combine talents in the visual arts, architecture, theatre, music, dance and computer programming to create elaborate inter-disciplinary events. Their work melds traditional Japanese design concepts with technological advances to shape new aesthetics and iconography. Commenting on their work, Dumb Type wrote: “Technology today has in many ways created a network covering the globe, making the world smaller, and sending accurate information even thousands of miles, from point A to point B, in just a few seconds. In reality, however, when we try to communicate, for example, the few works ‘I love you’, just these three words, we are forced to realize the vast distances that lie between us...” (Distributed by the artists.)

Program 3: (Running time: 41 minutes)

Mechanic and Angel by Hiroshi Araki (10:30, 1990). In this animated morality tale, Tionnamen Telephone Company devils are defeated through the skillful work of our Kewpie doll-mechanic hero and his angelic associate. These cartoon figures duke it out in a classic fight of “good vs. evil” that uses one of Japan’s favorite Western imports — the kewpie doll — as a symbol of the good influences and happiness that have come from the Western world. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)

Cue by Akira Higuchi (20:00, 1990, in Japanese) portrays a “day in the life” of a salaryman: as Orwellian TV commercials announce that “Everybody is looking for peace and happy family life,” an overworked businessman races from bedroom to bathroom to office, where he drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. Like the brooding “shishoasetu” novels of the Meiji period, Cue registers a profound ambivalence about modern life. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)

Self Image by Jun Ariyoshi (4:35, 1991, in Japanese-English) For Western cultures, “two faced” is a rather disparaging comment on a person’s character. In Japanese culture, to have “hakusho-so”, which means, literally “to have 100 faces”, is a great compliment, indicating that a person is worldly, clever and flexible. Ariyoshi’s visually lush Self Image puts forward a variety of possible faces, from fashionable to clownish to garish and playful. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)
JAPAN OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN

a three part video program investigating the representation of Japan

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Part 2: AN INSIDE VIEW/April 9 - 25, 1992

Part 3: INDIVIDUALS, IN BETWEEN/May 7 - 23, 1992

Acknowledgements

Many people have participated in the realization of JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN. Yumi Saijo began working on this program as an intern and rapidly became a full-fledged collaborator on Part 2: An Inside View. She traveled to Japan to secure videotapes, translated dialogue and program notes, and illuminated many aspects of Japanese culture referred to in the tapes in this program.

People often say “this show couldn’t have been realized without the help of...”, and in this case it’s true. Ms. Saijo’s work on this exhibition has been indispensable.

The staff at Electronic Arts Intermix—Stephen Vitiello, Ivor Smedesteod, Wellington Love, and Lori Zipay—were enormously helpful. Wellington and Lori supplied me with program notes material from their recently published catalogue, Electronic Arts Intermix: Video. — Stephen acted as a liaison with SCAN Gallery in Tokyo and Ivor compiled the exhibition reels for the show. I am grateful for their help.

On the Tokyo side, thanks are due to Fujiko Nakaya and Wako Enomoto at SCAN Gallery, who assisted in securing many of the titles featured in Part 2. Carrie Sakai has offered guidance and insight into Japanese culture; I am grateful for her help and support.

Finally, many thanks go to the artists in the exhibition; their work helps illuminate many of the misunderstandings between Japan and the West.

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The video program screens continuously during gallery hours (Tuesday - Saturday, 11-6) and is free to the public.

Many Artists Space video programs are available on VHS tapes for home viewing. Inquire at the front desk or call 212-226-3970 to reserve tapes.


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