



Nancy Cain of TVTV taping for *Four More Years*, 1972.

## Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History

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People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories are written.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

The making of history is an elaborate and highly regimented process—a complex structuring of a particular narrative that sets out to tell a single, well-contained story, replete with a delineated beginning, middle, and end, neatly sealed with closure, and governed by cause and effect. Histories do not simply evolve, they are *constructed* through certain agendas. As narratives, they adhere to a specific set of cultural codes governing the nature of shared reality and the communicability of experience.

History is, in fact, not a process of accumulation but of selection, a version of events that can be defined through its exclusion of many stories. (Most commonly written out of history are women and people of color.) History is amorphous; it is redefined and reshaped according to the ideologies of any given period of retrospection. It represents to us not simply the telling of events, but the interpretation of those events—interpretation by individuals and institutions. Today, this interpretation is a process that begins with the media as the primary initial interpreter of political and social events.

Those stories that are for whatever reasons excluded from the metanarrative of history, however, are not destroyed. While they may be silenced, they often work in subversive ways against the totalizing effect of history. Michel Foucault was instrumental in defining these localized or subjugated knowledges. Foucault defined subjugated knowledges as “historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence of formal systematisation,” as well as knowledges “that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper is concerned with a very specific history, in an attempt to open up a space for the histories, or subjugated knowledges, that this history

has worked to exclude. The historical narrative of video art, which has been constructed in a brief twenty years, is thick with myth and follows the conventional narrative codes of history making. It does, however, represent an important historical rupture. As a historical model, the development of video art can provide us with a microcosm of the social dynamic of the late twentieth century precisely because of video's problematic relationship with history and the paradoxes of our culture that are embodied in perceptions of the medium. This problematic of history is irrevocably tied to the relationship of art and technology in contemporary Western culture, and ultimately to the phenomenology of the video (and television) medium. I am interested here in examining the reasons for this problematic relationship and the paradoxes of the video medium, in examining video history as it has been constructed. This paper is an attempt to analyze this dynamic; it is not an attempt to replace the history with another.

### The Need for a History

Video has been plagued by the notion of its own history. Attempts to define the medium have shadowed its growth from the very beginning. Bill Viola recalled: "In 1974, people were already talking about history, and had been for a few years. . . . 'Video may be the only art form ever to have a history before it had a history.' Video was being invented, and simultaneously so were its myths and culture heroes."<sup>2</sup>

Not only was video being "invented," it was being staked out and claimed. Many of the artists involved with the video medium were interested not only in using the camera to interpret certain events but in the new medium itself as their subject matter. Many of the art institutions that dealt with video upon its inception were keenly aware of the importance of situating specific figures and events within a larger context. The intense self-consciousness that pervaded this medium can be seen in many ways as a postmodern self-consciousness, one that came out of the perception of video as marginalized—on the fringes of the art world, straddling the fence between art and information, defining itself against and in spite of the overwhelming presence of television. This self-consciousness fed the early desire to shape video history as it evolved—to label the "first" of all developments and to establish central heroes in the construction of a growing mythology.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this preoccupation with history seems extraordinarily paradoxical in a medium whose very technology is geared to the present and associated with the future. There are two primary reasons for this compulsion to shape and define video's history: the first is technological, the second institutional.

The advent of accessible and portable video technology in the mid-1960s began an era in which the consumer video market would expand and develop with extraordinary rapidity, to the point that within twenty years VCRs and

portable cameras have become commonplace in our society. This changing technology has been fueled not only by the consumer market but also by advances in industrial equipment resulting from broadcast news's increased reliance on electronic news gathering and the integration of video editing systems with computer technologies. This technology has advanced with a speed that is unprecedented in the history of the imaging arts.

Technological change is not, of course, a neutral event. The accelerated development of electronic imaging and television technology in the last two decades has been the direct result of a specific ideology. The increased mobility of television cameras and the massive push for a consumer market (the replacement of the Kodak Instamatic with the home video camera) were directly related to the desire to capture reality in "real time." Television is coded as the immediate—the live image transmitted to many locations at once. It has never been conceived, either culturally or industrially, as an archival medium. As a consequence, video is materially a rapidly deteriorating medium. Videotapes made in 1973 (a mere sixteen years ago), with their blurred, grainy images and muffled sound, seem like distant aesthetic antecedents to contemporary work. These tapes (those that are not already irretrievable because of image deterioration or because their equipment format is now obsolete) appear to be strange and elusive artifacts of another era; in other words, they seem much older, and much more evocative of a past, than, for instance, 16mm films from that time.<sup>4</sup> These early tapes also represent a time when preservation was simply not seen as a relevant issue and when image quality, as it is commonly defined today, carried less significance than the drama of capturing an event on camera.

In a medium heavily dependent on technology, these technical changes ultimately become aesthetic changes. Artists can only express something visually according to the limits of a given medium's technology.<sup>5</sup> With every new technique or effect, such as slow motion or frame-accurate editing, attempts have been made to use those effects for specific aesthetic results. The aesthetic changes in video, irrevocably tied to changes in its technology, consequently evolved at an equally accelerated pace. For instance, within a short period of time, digital imaging and frame-accurate rapid editing have replaced real time as the most prevalent aesthetic styles. Whereas in 1975 it was still standard fare to produce a tape in real time, by 1982 it had become (when rarely used) a formal statement.

We are thus confronted with a new, accelerated time frame for perceiving an art form and its development, a time frame that has had a direct effect on video's apparent "need" for a history. In a mere twenty years, the technical and aesthetic changes in video evoke the equivalent of decades of development in such diverse media as photography and painting, thus provoking the perception that it must be quickly historicized. The need for history increased when information begins to erode and become irretrievable. As the *electronic*

history of video fades, its *written* history gains importance. When the tapes are no longer decipherable, there will still be interpretive texts. Video's preoccupation with history, its underlying fear for survival as a medium within the master narrative of art history, is manifested in the construction of history as word.

The other primary reason for video's concern with its own history is not technological but institutional; however, it also carries with it a fear about survival. A history is often created as an act of preservation within specific social structures. That is, to formulate a history is to establish the legitimacy and autonomy of a particular field. The role museums and art organizations have played in institutionalizing video (a medium that, one must add, artists originally perceived as antithetical to the art establishment) has significantly shaped the field. This "museumization" has succeeded in both nurturing and isolating work produced in video, a factor that can be seen as the direct result of nonprofit funding structures in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In order to receive funding, museums and art organizations segregated the medium of video into departments separate from other media. This segregation has meant that most exhibitions of video have been presented in a solitary context, rarely in the context of film, painting, or other media. The prevalent nonacceptance of this new medium in the art world has caused video curators and critics to reemphasize video's properties constantly and to defend its inclusion in their exhibitions and in the museum context in general. Within the modernist conventions that have governed these institutions, a medium that deserves curatorial attention is defined by its properties and most importantly through its development or history. Thus, the establishment of criteria for the history of video has been a means for video departments to defend not only their existence but their funding. Museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Long Beach Museum of Art have taken on the role of defining video history. In 1983 and 1984, each presented a major history show that was selective in its presentation and produced a particular historical narrative.<sup>7</sup> These institutions are shaping video history with little acknowledgment of the influence of other art forms, communications theory, and sociopolitical factors that were instrumental in the development of the work.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is paradoxical that institutions are the primary historical interpreters of a medium that initially developed outside of and in opposition to the established art world and still considers itself not to have gained full acceptance in that world.

### The Myths of Video History

That history is a myth-making process perhaps does not need to be reiterated yet again; however, the role that narrativity plays in this myth-making is crucial. Hayden White has written,

*It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. . . . The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.<sup>9</sup>*

The history of video has been turned into narrative according to a particular "hierarchy of significance," and it differs from many conventional histories only in that it has been so actively written by many of its participants even as they are participating in it. The telling of this history has constantly emphasized the role of video as a subjugated knowledge within art history. This emphasis on its marginalization has ignored the fact that video itself has a history that has eclipsed other possible histories of the medium.<sup>10</sup>

The story as it has been told is usually quite simple—in the late 1960s, the advent of the portable video camera sparked an energetic movement as artists and activists picked up cameras and pursued an electronic revolution. It is said that Nam June Paik was the *first*—while driving home with a new portapak, he shot tape of the pope's visit to New York, which he showed that night at Cafe à Go Go. Soon, many artists and activists began making anti-television, gritty tapes about the counterculture and the antiwar movement, as well as tapes that examined video's capabilities and electronic properties: intimacy, instant replay, and real-time. The mythic history is charted through various events—the "TV as a Creative Medium" exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1969, the artist-produced tape *The Medium is the Medium* (1969) at WGBH in Boston, the initiation of media funding by the New York State Council on the Arts in 1970, the Circuits conference at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974, and so forth. It then moves effortlessly on to the late 1970s, with technical advances allowing for the frame-accurate editing, digital effects, and artists producing "works for television" using increasingly sophisticated equipment.

There are many problems with this version of video history. It is institutionally based and technologically determinist and highlights the accomplishments of one individual in what was (and is) an extremely diverse field. It is art-historical to the extent of negating video's use as a social tool. In her seminal paper on the myths of video, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," Martha Rosler states, "The elements of the myth thus include an Eastern visitor from a country ravaged by war (our war) inoculated by the leading U.S. avant-garde master [John Cage] while in technology heaven (Germany), who once in the States repeatedly violated the central shrine, TV, and then goes to

face the representative of God on earth, capturing his image to bring to the avant-garde. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

Video's inception is seen through the rosy light of nostalgia. According to myth, it was an era when freedom of the spirit abounded, when artists and activists discovered a new medium and took to the streets with it, assured that their "guerrilla" tactics would ultimately change television. From the perspective of the 1980s and the 1990s, the 1960s as an era of commitment and optimism has become an increasingly important cultural symbol, as evidenced in the repackaging of 1960s icons into television commercials and the fervored re-embrace of the Kennedy myth. With the rise of conservative influence in this country as well as the increased commercialization of the art world, it should be no surprise that the 1960s, with their mix of practice and theory, politics and actions, are looked on as a "utopian moment" by both artists and activists in the United States today.

While the technological and institutional factors I have discussed offer reasons for video's preoccupation with history, they do not wholly explain the distorted aspects of that history as it was handed down. Certainly it is not unusual for a history to be constructed around the accomplishments of "great men," and Paik has always been very shrewd not only about his own role in video history but also about how history is made—by institutions with power. An emerging field's need for a central hero in the construction of its narrative is obviously a contributing factor, as was the anti-establishment, anti-individualist ideology of the video collectives, which eschewed the "hierarchy of significance" being constructed by the art institutions' defining and highlighting of the "video artists." That video had not yet become (and still is just barely) a topic of exploration within academia was also a contributing factor. However, beyond these factors lies a more fundamental reason, one that contributes to video's overall problem with history. This is a medium whose development embodies many dichotomies of Western culture, whose position at the axis of art, electronic technology, and telecommunications offers a problematic subject for historical interpretation that has no direct antecedents.

### The Political Ideology That Gave Birth to the Myth

The era in which video evolved was an intensely active and idealistic one, now seen as the primary moment of radical social upheaval in the United States and Europe in the latter half of this century. That video's emergence coincided with this pivotal moment of idealism about cultural change and social pluralism contributed to its initial burst of energy and diversity. The motives of those who began working in video in the late 1960s and early 1970s were multifarious, although not initially incompatible. For many, video represented a tool with which to "revolt" against the establishment of commercial televi-

sion. For others, it was an art medium with which to wage "war" on the establishment of the commercial art world. For example, artist Frank Gillette has said, "Video was the solution because it had no tradition. It was the precise opposite of painting. It had no formal burdens at all. In fact, it had a kind of perverse aura around it, because of its crude application up to that point, its crass commercial utilization in the mass media."<sup>12</sup>

Video art was introduced at a time when the art world was undergoing upheaval, as artists questioned the traditional art object through nonmarketable art forms such as performance, conceptual art, earthworks, and body art. It was also, appropriately, a time when the power of the media had been overwhelmingly reaffirmed, just after the on-camera assassination of this country's first "media president" and in the middle of its first "living-room war." These social and political events were delivered to an eager audience via the medium of television, whose role as the primary interpreter of events had only recently been established.

While rigid boundaries are now drawn between socially concerned videotapes and video art by the institutions that fund and exhibit this work, few categorizations were used when artists and activists first began making tapes. The standard subcategories that are commonly used to describe video today—such as documentary, media-concerned, image-processing, and narrative—while glaringly inadequate now, had no relevant meaning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Distinctions between art and information were not initially made by these artists; to them, everything was simply "tape" (and many eschewed the title "artist" as one that connoted elitism). Steina Vasulka has noted, "We all knew we were interested in different things, like video synthesis and electronic video, which was definitely different from community access-type video, but we didn't see ourselves in opposite camps. We were all struggling together and we were all using the same tools."<sup>13</sup>

This overlapping of aesthetic intent and communications/social critique was the direct result of the political ideology of the time. In the late 1960s it seemed possible to infiltrate and change the hierarchical system of telecommunications in Western society. At a time when artists and activists were reading Marshall McLuhan and thinking in the technologically idealistic terms of "the medium is the message" and the electronic community of the "global village," video was seen as a stepping-stone to the new communications revolution. Activists believed that the television revolution could be sparked simply by putting inexpensive, portable equipment into the hands of the public, allowing them to use media to define themselves. The first video artists are now commonly referred to as *pioneers*, evoking images of rustic souls staking out new terrain in art and society. The term *guerrilla television*, with its implications of aggression and subversion, came to signify a specific kind of activist videotape, one that functioned as an ironic observation of the follies of the establishment



as well as a stylistic revolt against the conventions of television. Michael Shamberg, who coined the term from the phraseology of fellow Raindance member Paul Ryan, defined guerrilla television as "the applications of guerrilla techniques in the realm of process. Guerrilla Television is grassroots television. It works with people, not from above them. On a simple level, this is no more than 'do-it-yourself-TV.' But the context for that notion is that survival in an information environment demands information tools."<sup>14</sup> This blend of naive optimism with a sophisticated understanding of the fundamentals of communications and media manipulation was typical of the times.

Rosler has written,

*Many of these early users saw themselves as carrying out an act of profound social criticism, criticism specifically directed at the domination of groups and individuals epitomized by broadcast television and perhaps all of mainstream Western industrial and technological culture. This act of criticism was carried out itself through a technological medium, one whose potential for interactive and multi-sided communication ironically appeared boundless.*<sup>15</sup>

Great expectations accompanied video's emergence. Not only were the media towers going to topple and the individuals going to have their say, but the realms of art and society were to lose their boundaries—everyone would be a producer; everyone would control information flow. Video's arrival came to symbolize this potential redefinition of the system. It has inevitably disappointed those expectations.

### The Paradoxes of the Medium

What emerged from this complex set of events was not a medium with a clear set of aesthetic properties and cleanly delineated theoretical concepts. Instead, one sees paradox, the paradox of video's apparent merging of (hence its negation of) certain cultural oppositions—art and technology, television and art, art and issues of social change, collectives and individual artists, the art establishment and anti-establishment strategies, profit and nonprofit worlds, and formalism and content. These paradoxes are at the root of video's problematic relationship to both history and modernism. At the base of each lies the traditional notion of the opposition of science and art in Western culture.

While the history-making process has simplified the diversity and conflicting intent apparent in the stories told about video's early years, the merging of the cultural oppositions of television vs. art, profit vs. nonprofit, and the establishment vs. anti-establishment was in evidence from the beginning:

- Most of the video collectives have been historicized as zany, anti-Establishment groups with mutually supportive and egalitarian structures. However,

Raindance, for instance, was conceived as a "think tank" (its name coined by Frank Gillette as a take-off on corporate R&D and the RAND Corporation) and began as a profit-making corporation. Furthermore, many of these groups were hierarchical and male-dominated as well.

- The collectives were also primarily historicized as anti-establishment. However, TVTV (Top Value Television), which was begun by ex-Raindance member Michael Shamberg and made its name with two behind-the-scenes vérité documentaries on the 1972 national political conventions, eventually lost its impact when confronting the potentially more seductive subject matter of the entertainment industry. (Several ex-TVTV members are now Hollywood producers.)<sup>16</sup>
- The definition of video as an art form has most commonly been noted as being realized with the exhibition "TV as a Creative Medium," yet many of the works in that show—such as Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider's *Wipe Cycle* (1969), a grid of monitors intended to subvert the viewer's standard relationship to television—dealt with both political and aesthetic concerns. In fact, while signaling the emergence of a new art form, "TV as a Creative Medium" acts in retrospect like an indicator of the diversity of concerns in early video—the legacy of machine art and kinetic sculpture, issues of mass media and information, as well as explorations of the aesthetics, technology, and time-based aspects of the medium.
- Although it is commonly noted that many artists began making tapes that were antithetical and antagonistic to television, the fact is that from the beginning there were artists trying to get on the airwaves. They attempted to do so through public television experimental workshops and projects like the infamous and ill-fated 1969 attempt in which the Videofreex and several other video collectives made a (never-aired) pilot about the counterculture for CBS called (somewhat prophetically) *Subject to Change*.

The writing of history necessarily homogenizes difference in an attempt to qualify and define a particular era or field. Indeed, these kinds of conflicts in video's development—conflicts that arise from its embodiment of aspects of our culture that we insist on reading as oppositions—have been simplified in retrospect in order to construct this historical narrative.

The burden of an art form that paradoxically combines both science and art as a technological medium is a culturally weighty one. Video is heir to the ideology sparked by kinetic sculpture and the art and technology movement of the 1960s (rooted in cubism, futurism, and the Bauhaus) in which the merging of art and the machine was seen as paramount. As the most recent addition to the camera arts, video shares (albeit not consciously) the legacy of pho-

tography as an infinitely reproducible art form. Yet video is an instantly reproducible medium with unprecedented powers of transmission, whose very essence is simultaneity. Not only does it retain those qualities of reproduction, it also signifies the electronic factor, which through television and computers has come to symbolize information in contemporary culture.

Video's paradox of art and technology is deeply rooted in cultural perceptions of the role of technology in Western culture. Early attitudes toward technology easily manifested themselves as either an antitelevision and antitechnology tendency—epitomized by the burning TV sets in Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975) and the gritty, antislick style of many early tapes—or an emphatic embracing of technology with the notion that the influence of artists could somehow alleviate its destructive potential. Nam June Paik, who has professed to “make technology ridiculous,” was not alone in thinking that the role of artists in a technological medium was to create a new kind of technology through humanizing use. (Paik's stated method of humanizing the medium was to construct a “TV Bra” from two miniature television sets for his collaborator Charlotte Moorman to wear while playing a “TV Cello,” a rather sexist gesture that tended to considerably reduce the notion of humanism.) The first issue of *Radical Software*, a video magazine published by Raindance in the early 1970s, suggested, “Our species will survive neither by totally rejecting nor unconditionally embracing technology—but by humanizing it; by allowing people access to the information tools they need to shape and reassert control over their lives.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1970, when Gene Youngblood published his seminal book *Expanded Cinema*, the era of techno-speak and embrace of new technology was well under way. Youngblood was one of the first to write about video, and he situated it in the context of other media, such as film and performance/theater. His particular brand of technovocabulary and technological utopianism in the arts was very influential. He wrote, “It is now obvious that we are entering a completely new video environment and image-exchange life-style. The videosphere will alter the minds of men and the architecture of their dwellings.”<sup>18</sup> In that same year, Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe built the Paik/Abe Synthesizer while artists-in-residence at WGBH in Boston; Stephen Beck built his Direct Video Synthesizer while at the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET) at KQED in San Francisco; and Eric Siegel, experimenting on his own, built his Electronic Video Synthesizer. Later, Dan Sandin and Steina and Woody Vasulka would design their own devices as well. With variations, all of these machines were designed to allow unprecedented manipulation of the electronic signal and to put the technology directly in the hands of the artists. Hence, the artist would not only be the producer, but also the manufacturer, governing the initial design level at which aesthetic parameters are established. Technology was thus perceived as something that must not only be humanized

but made pluralistic and accessible, and electronic technology was seen, because of its phenomenology, to be inherently more accessible.<sup>19</sup>

### The Role of the Institutions

The institutional and nonprofit worlds have converged in unique ways in the field of independent video. The very reproducibility of videotape as well as its time-based properties placed it squarely outside of the commercial art world market. Attempts to amend this were made initially, by galleries such as Castelli Gallery in New York and Art/Tapes/22 in Italy, in producing tapes in “limited editions” for special worth, but they failed. The notion of an art form intrinsically set outside of the traditional art market dovetailed easily with the anti-art-market movements of the 1960s. Here, many thought, was a medium that simply could not be co-opted by the commercial art world.

Nevertheless, the outsider role played by video as a foundation-supported art form is equally complicated. Ironically, while the majority of early video activity took place outside of established social organizations and museums, the institutionalization of the medium (however ambivalent) took hold quickly. Several funding institutions, such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) began doling out large sums of money to artists and media organizations by 1970, a mere two years after most artists began to use the equipment. (That they were so eager to embrace electronic media can be seen, in part, as indicative of the powerful way in which independent video symbolized the communications revolution at the time.) Public television artist-in-residence workshops were in evidence by the early 1970s, and most of the major museums in the country—the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Long Beach Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—had all had major exhibitions of video or exhibitions that included a significant amount of video by 1976. Four of those museums—MoMA, the Whitney, the Everson, and Long Beach—had also established video departments or programs by that time.

The influx of a significant amount of funding from both NYSCA and the Rockefeller Foundation (funding that, it should be noted, has not increased proportionally to the growth in the field) radically changed the video community. There was a lot of “new” money to be fought over in the beginning, which inevitably had a fracturing effect on the nascent video community. In a medium that by its very nature could not fit into the support system of the art world, the role of funding institutions is an immensely influential one. The Rockefeller Foundation, for instance, played a central role in shaping the kind

of work that was produced throughout the 1970s. The foundation's director for arts, Howard Klein, saw the funding of video art primarily as a kind of television research and development—he was interested in effecting broad social change (on the level of the Rockefeller's "green revolution") and saw television as the means to accomplish this. Klein, for whom Nam June Paik was a highly influential adviser, was instrumental in establishing experimental television workshops at public television stations where artists could have access to equipment and in helping to establish and maintain sophisticated postproduction facilities throughout the country.<sup>20</sup>

The Rockefeller Foundation's decision to explore artists' television and to fund postproduction centers, and the fact that NYSCA can, by law, only fund organizations and not individuals were major factors in shaping the video community as it evolved. From the beginning, public television and art institutions became the primary arbiters of taste, deciding what was worth producing and worth watching. Throughout the 1970s, this kind of funding structure not only served to influence what kind of tapes were made, it also served to establish the increased demand for production values. One of video's early attractions as a medium was its low cost, which fit perfectly with the idea of everyone being (and being able to afford to be) a producer. The role of funders and museums has also served to emphasize production values, and many artists, unhappy with life on the fringes of these institutions, wanted access to commercial techniques. The prohibitive cost of making videotapes with current production values has in turn served to strengthen the influence of funders and exhibiting institutions.

That the Rockefeller Foundation chose to concentrate its funding on public television, in an attempt to change television as an institution and hence have widespread cultural impact, can be seen in retrospect as a fatal mistake. Public television did not fulfill its promise of diverse programming and opportunities; neither did cable. The increased desire among many artists for production values and access to broadcast, which was fostered in part by funders such as the Rockefeller Foundation, can perhaps be seen as inevitable. However, it is part of the video myth to assume that all artists became hungry for production values. There are many video artists and activists who have chosen not to follow this route.

The role played by institutions has also been a central factor in the dichotomy of art and social issues in video. Many of video's funding institutions, such as the New York State Council on the Arts, began to veer away from financing community-based, information-oriented works to funding "video art" by the mid-1970s. This was responsible in part for causing the split in what had been diverse yet somewhat coexistent intents among videomakers, in widening the schism that had existed between the two worlds. Irrevocable distinc-

tions were soon made at the institutional level between those who saw video as a social tool and those who saw it as a new art form.

This kind of division increased as the political intensity of the 1960s wound down. That video would, despite its fringe status, be institutionalized and absorbed by the art world was perhaps inevitable. After all, most of the anti-art market movements such as conceptualism and performance art were eventually co-opted by the art world and lost their anti-art establishment status. However, the role that the collectives and socially concerned videomakers played in video's inception and development as a medium is significant; their fate in video history is telling.

### The Collectives

An examination of the role played by the collectives in the development of video's difficult history reveals the opposition of art and social issues as a primary dichotomy that was initially made problematic in independent video. The marginal way in which the collectives are treated in video history is indicative of the way in which socially concerned work was simply written out of the art-historical agenda for video set forth in its museumization (and ultimately historicized quite separately).<sup>21</sup>

These collectives—which included the Videofreex, Raindance, Global Village, and People's Video Theater in New York, and Ant Farm, Video Free America, and Optic Nerve on the West Coast, among others—were not formed in isolation. Collectivism was a life-style of the times; the prevalent ideology was one of sharing—living environments, work, information. Video collectives also formed in order to pool equipment resources and coalesced as more formal nonprofit entities in order to be eligible for funding.

Of all of the activity generated in video in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that of the collectives was the most spontaneous and intense. Throughout the country, they produced an abundance of "street tapes" that epitomized the drama and excitement of capturing images and people on the street, characterized by a tangible immediacy and fascination with the simple act of recording. These tapes were arbitrary, often chaotic and unviewable, sometimes keenly observant and revealing. An examination of two collectives reveals the diversity of their intent.

The Videofreex concentrated on documenting the counterculture, and providing an alternative history through the television medium. They taped anti-war protests, the Black Panthers, communes, the trial of the Chicago 7, and other aspects of the anti-establishment movement. This was not a selective documentation of events, it was an amassing of information based on the valorization of the notion of real-time tape as more "real"—because of its lack of

intrusive editing and its immediacy—than other imaging means. After the debacle of their attempt to work with CBS, the Videofreex moved to upstate New York and became involved in grass-roots television and the dissemination of information at a local level. Shedding their naïveté about usurping the power of the media on a national level, they chose to exercise their ideas at a community level.

Raindance, on the other hand, was a highly cerebral group that leaned toward theoretical concerns. Its members were interested in cybernetics, ecology, and issues of media, and the tapes produced by Raindance explore the points of intersection of television, art, and social change. The power of Raindance's work was not in accumulation, like that of the Videofreex, but in editing and juxtaposition. After amassing tapes from the street, interviews in their loft, and excerpts from television, Raindance members combined those elements into "Media Primers" which form ironic commentaries on the fluctuating state of society and the complex power relationships evident in daily life. In their juxtaposition of the mass media with alternative media, these tapes reaffirmed their subversive tactics.

Those video collectives of the 1960s and 1970s that did not evolve into more established nonprofit organizations fell victim to changing times, personality clashes, and the institutionalization of the medium, and they disbanded by the mid-1970s. Many of the videotapes created by them are lost or technically irretrievable, and issues of ownership (raised by institutions such as museums and distributors) replaced what had been a more casual notion of sharing tape. While the members of these collectives were artists (and many still are practicing artists), their concerns with amassing alternative information, addressing issues of media and technology, and their pluralist approach to documenting history were antithetical to the way in which discussions of video evolved in the art world. The belief structure of art in Western culture espouses the primacy of the individual creator and the notion of a masterpiece as a means to establish the financial worth of a work of art; it does not bend easily toward the concept of collectivity.

While the collectives have often been written out of the museum-formulated history of video, they are replete with their own particular mythology, one irrevocably tied to the notion of the 1960s as an egalitarian and visionary society. I offer them as an example here not to indicate their special omission in video history, but to note one aspect of a vast array of political work being done in video that does not factor in the art-historical narrative of the medium. In addition, the work of the collectives is extremely important precisely because it represents an alternative television document of a pivotal moment in history. Without this work, we have only the mainstream media's view of a movement that was conceived precisely in opposition to that monolithic viewpoint. One of the most important influences of electronic technology on our

culture is the potential for many *moving-image* histories to be created and preserved.

### The Problem of Inherent Properties

The issue of video's inherent properties has reached new levels of debate within recent years, a debate that centers on the key issues of video's relationship to modernism and its potential for an electronic language. Discussion of video's inherent properties has been the predominant method of tracing the medium's history since its beginnings.<sup>22</sup> That discussions of this medium should be so overshadowed by this kind of technologically determinist way of thinking reveals fundamental flaws in the way in which our culture perceives the act of artistic creation with technological tools. It points to a tendency to believe that machines dictate aesthetic development and a deep-set cultural belief that people do not really control machines but are always on some level controlled by them. Can it be, as Woody Vasulka says, "a dialogue with the machine" between the artist and the tool? The cultural inability to perceive technology as having creative potential is a fundamental aspect of video's problematic theoretical base.

The problem of how to discuss the properties of video is fundamentally tied to video's relationship to modernism, a relationship complicated by video's emergence in modernism's final stages. Attempts to locate video within the modernist discourse began early. In 1974, critic David Antin wrote that video had acquired two discourses:

*One, a kind of enthusiastic welcoming prose peppered with fragments of communication theory and McLuhanesque media talk; the other, a rather nervous attempt to locate the "unique properties of the medium." Discourse 1 could be called "cyberscat" and Discourse 2, because it engages the issues that pass for "formalism" in the art world, could be called "the formalist rap."<sup>23</sup>*

In modernist discourse, a medium is distinguished by its unique properties; its formal principles define it as a medium and differentiate it from other media. Critics of this approach point out that limiting discussion of video to its distinct properties restricts the discourse of the medium to the limitations of modernist art theory. Martha Gever has written,

*Even without a guiding set of principles that might constitute a theoretical premise, video made by artists tries to gain a foothold in contemporary culture at large, resting all the while on the traditions of fine art. In accordance with modernist art tenets, theoretical constructs pertaining to video cannot be directly translated from either film or visual arts like painting. [In modernist discourse] each medium exhibits distinctive properties, and those specific to video must be defined in order to validate that medi-*





Vito Acconci, *Theme Song*, 1973.

*um's aesthetic credentials and participation in existing cultural institutions and to distinguish video from its crass relative, commercial television.*<sup>24</sup>

While it is undeniable that many of the first videotapes made by artists were concerned in a reflexive way with the specific properties of video—what distinguished it from film, painting, sculpture, and performance—this aspect of many early videotapes was closely allied with other concerns at the time—minimal sculpture, conceptual art, and body art/performance—in a reduction of the work of art to the bare essentials of the tools and questioning of the art process. Video history may have isolated the reflexive aspects of early videotapes to emphasize video's properties, but these tendencies in video formed part of a larger aesthetic discourse in many art media.

Artists like Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, Nancy Holt, Keith Sonnier, John Baldessari, Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, Eleanor Antin, and others added video to their repertory of media not with intentions of changing television and directly effecting social change, but with an interest in changing the standard artist/viewer relationship and the rigid criteria of the commercial

art world. They were interested in seeing the system, in this case that of the art world, irrevocably undermined and redefined. Like the proponents of guerrilla television, these artists were interested in significant change. In both contexts, the newness of the video medium, its relationship to television, technology, and information, and its reproducibility, made it seem like the appropriately radical tool with which to achieve their goals. That video seemed like the medium with which to explore these ideas was a political as well as an aesthetic decision—its materiality and relationship to television inevitably made it a political tool in the art world.

Yet, it should also be noted that an early preoccupation with video's inherent properties was part of the self-consciousness of the new medium. Many of the artists who first began working with video explored their new tool by essentially teaching themselves, methodically creating rules to be deliberately broken. For instance, Bill Viola tried to get at the essence of video by reducing his choices with a camera, working for a long time without recording, and then making pieces of predetermined length. Peter Campus, James Byrne, and several other artists methodically examined video's instant replay, scale, the relationship to the viewer, camera movement, and color—in effect, its phenomenology. (Some of the artists working in the collectives examined these properties in their work as well.) Steina and Woody Vasulka produced many tapes throughout the 1970s that can be seen as meticulously documenting formal imaging effects in order to isolate and derive meaning from specific imaging techniques. Thus, there are some video artists who, as they have continued to work in the medium, have produced bodies of work that, seen in their entirety, provide microcosms of the developing capabilities of the medium as it is irrevocably allied to technological advances. One can follow the capacity of video to transform and manipulate time in the evolution of Viola's work, and its image-processing capabilities in the Vasulkas' work; indeed, it is quite tempting to do so. However, done without the larger context, this is simply an isolated and reductive reading.

An examination of two so-called properties of video, intimacy and real time, makes this point clearer. While as a tool for expression video would seem to have many distancing factors, such as the actual television set, it is often pointed out that the size of the screen and the instant image provide an intimacy not shared by paintings or the cinematic apparatus. The tendency of artists to set the camera up and perform in the space before it and to use the monitor as a mirror caused art critic Rosalind Krauss to label video as inherently narcissistic. She noted, "Self-encapsulation—the body or psyche as its own surrounding—is everywhere to be found in the corpus of video art."<sup>25</sup> However, to say that one medium is categorically more intimate than another or that intimacy is inherent to a medium is to privilege the notion of technology dictating aesthetics. One can question whether artists used the camera this

way simply because of its technological properties. The "intimacy" evidenced in early works by artists such as Vito Acconci can also be read in the context of the strategies being used at the time to change the viewer/artist relationship, to undermine notions of personal and private, and to redefine the role of art in society.

Many early videotapes were lengthy ongoing projects of extended footage, such as *The Continuing Story of Cavel and Ferd* (1970-75) and Paul Ryan's twelve-hour *Video Wake for My Father* (1976), which bore no relation to the restrictions of television time (that now govern, however indirectly, contemporary works). Other projects were referred to as "tapes," implying that they were a continuous process (a monitoring process) as opposed to a finished work. Because there existed very little editing equipment until the early 1970s, the notion of real time can be seen as one which grew out of circumstance. Yet these explorations of real time can be related to concerns in independent filmmaking (particularly the structural films of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton) and the notion, propagated by Allan Kaprow, among others, and rooted in dada and the historical avant-garde, that art and life, especially in performance and "happenings," could be interchangeable and indistinguishable. For many, real time was a defiant reaction to the fragmented, incomplete view of events offered by television. Thus, the real-time quality of many of these videotapes was a technological property that was exploited for aesthetic intent.

It is precisely at this distinction between aesthetics and properties that this issue can be centered. The assumption that the aesthetics of video is a direct result of its properties leads us into technologically determinist terrain yet again. Technologies such as television do not simply appear at specific point of history, they arise out of specific desires and ideologies. However, this distinction does not negate the fact that video has a specific phenomenology, which effects our experience of the medium. It is crucial that this phenomenology be seen in the larger context of the medium's development.

Most recently, the debate of video's properties has raised the issue of the potential to construct an electronic language. As artists deconstruct particular digital effects and attempt to explore their metaphoric and narrative meaning, they take steps toward the construction of a syntax. Hence, properties take on meaning as codes. What does it mean to use slow motion? What kind of meaning do certain digital effects impart—the potential of turning a moving image into a two-dimensional sheet that can be manipulated on the screen or the seemingly limitless possibilities of combining images within the frame? Certain artists have almost systematically attempted to use effects to impart specific meaning: Woody Vasulka has used digital effects for specific narrative meaning; Bill Viola, Barbara Buckner, and Dan Reeves have used certain effects, for instance, to evoke spiritual states—keying an image through a mov-

ing landscape to evoke transcendence, using ghostlike and shadowing digital effects to portray the transience of human nature. Yet, attempts to define an electronic language have not taken into consideration the extent to which language in this context (one has only to look at cinematic language to confirm this) functions merely as a kind of convention, a shorthand way for the viewer to read the form as it defines the content. It remains to be seen whether or not the construction of a syntax in electronic imaging can be anything more than one of convention.

The confusion over the role of video's properties is irrevocably tied, as Gever noted, to video's relationship to modernist art discourse. Video's difficult alliance with the tenets of modernism is attributable to the ways in which its qualities and presence as a medium questions those tenets. Defining video in terms of its individual properties is meant to act like a ticket of admission to modernist art theory; but ironically, the art world has at best ignored and at worse dismissed video art precisely *because* of its time-based and electronic properties and its relationship to television. Artist Rita Myers has stated,

*That video emerged during the final stages of the modernist enterprise is crucial. While it did attempt to locate its "inherent properties" like a good modernist medium, these properties were inextricably linked to subject matter, a natural consequence of the camera but also a radical shift away from the other modernist media, painting, sculpture, etc. You can't really reduce a medium to its constituent elements when one of those elements virtually gives you the world back. Video challenged the modernist creed with content and it continues to challenge the traditional museum/gallery world with moving parts and time, among other things.*<sup>26</sup>

The kind of modernist formalism that has reigned in the art world through the power and doctrine of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art has been challenged not only by the deliberate pluralism of postmodernism but also by the camera arts: photography, film, and video. Video's role in the transition from modernism to postmodernism remains to be explored, but the development of its own theoretical base must not be solely derived from these discourses.

### Questions of Theory

The struggle for a comprehensive theory of video in the United States has resulted so far in a surprisingly limited discourse, mired in myth supported by selective historical accounts and weighted by the issue of the medium's properties as defined by modernism. This frustratingly narrow discourse has stalemated in its nonacknowledgment of several key issues: the diversity of intent of videomakers and the unresolved relationship of art and technology in our culture. This is a medium in which the ongoing developments in electronic

technology, and their relationship to the power of technology in our culture—as it is manifested in the transmission of images on television, the storage of information in computers, and the mass media—cannot be ignored.

But we are ambivalent about technology in Western culture. On one hand we see it as a panacea for global problems, on the other hand we feel we have little control over it. Popular culture is rife with images of technology overpowering those who attempt to use it—people are beset by appliances on TV commercials and computers overpower humans in science-fiction movies. It should be no surprise, therefore, that there is a cultural difficulty in discussing a medium in which artists engage in a dialogue with electronic technology and that the dominant approach in analyzing the development of this medium has been to chart technological change and the capabilities of machines rather than people. Technology itself has been a difficult subject for video artists as it presents them with a dilemma—how can one critique applications of technology while formally appearing to embrace it by using a technological medium?

The problematic relationship of technology and art in Western culture and our ambivalent perception of technology are fundamental reasons for the immature state of video theory and video's difficult relationship to history. That this discourse has remained until now within the realm of modernist art discourse has also been a fundamental deterrent to a comprehensive theoretical discourse taking shape. The cultural paradoxes presented and represented by video simply cannot be contained solely within an art theory paradigm but must be considered within a larger cultural context. The development of this particular medium at this particular time was no accident. Its problematic relationship to history can provide us with insight into the role of memory and the difficulty of history-making in postmodern culture.

In the late twentieth century, we perceive historical fact as that which is recorded by a camera. It has been noted by such theorists as Roland Barthes that the photograph is always coded as the past, the what-has-been. Cinema, on the other hand, while it represents a kind of movement into the present, has increasingly come to evoke history. A grainy black-and-white or faded color film, for instance, is immediately read as representing history and memory, and the Vietnam War and the assassination of President Kennedy are events that are culturally perceived as filmic images. However, the television image (and video is implicated within this definition) has a different set of cultural readings. Television is defined as transmission—the image transmitted at the same time to innumerable TV sets—and this simultaneity is a major factor in cultural perceptions of it. The television image is the copy with no original—it is many images everywhere at the same time. It is coded not only as "live" (there are many conventions in television that make it appear live when it is actually prerecorded) but also as continuous and immediate.

This concept of the immediacy of television (and of electronic culture in general) has broad implications in our cultural perceptions of the medium. Because of this aspect of television's phenomenology, it is simply not seen as representing the past in the way that photography and film do. Obviously, few contemporary events have been recorded on tape (the Iran-Contra hearings and the *Challenger* disaster stand out as the most obvious),<sup>27</sup> and as this changes, the cultural perception of television as an historical medium will change. However, the ideology that resulted in the invention of television and video technology, as well as many aspects of computer technology, is one based significantly on the notion of immediacy. In an information culture, the speed of information is paramount—information is more valuable if it is more immediate. Television technology simply did not evolve out of a desire for the preservation of history. Many early videomakers were responding to precisely this aspect of immediacy, with the attitude that tape was ephemeral and instant, the "now." (The paradox of this is, of course, that this ephemerality resulted in tapes that appear to age faster than other works do, thus helping to fuel the desire for a history.) Thus, the very nature of television technology, in its materiality, acts as a negation of history, and this negation forces us to redefine and reconceptualize the notion of what constitutes the past.

That video was formed with an *a priori* need for history reveals, in many ways, the precarious position of Western culture, and video's role as a technological medium offers a challenge to contemporary discourse. Our future, like the preservation of our past, is irrevocably dependent on electronic technology. In the 1980s, that technology took on new cultural meaning, not of space progress and prowess but of careless space disaster, not of harnessing new energies but of uncontrolled nuclear contamination. In this nuclear age, our vision of the future is more often tinged with anxiety than with optimism; at a period of time when the state of the world seems especially precarious, the need to establish the past reveals an attempt to reclaim the future.