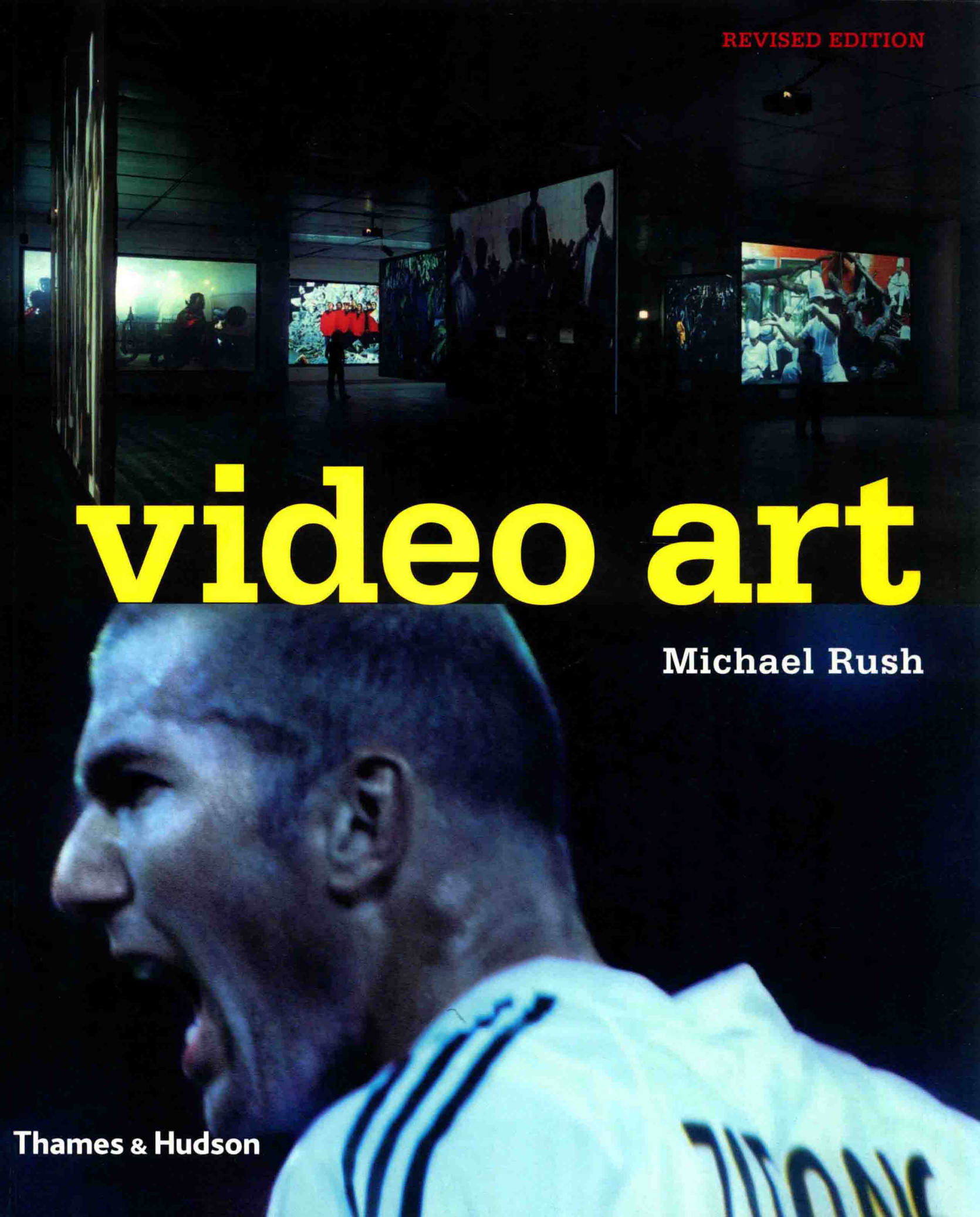


REVISED EDITION

# video art

Michael Rush

Thames & Hudson



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**Michael Rush**

with 475 illustrations, 372 in colour



**Thames & Hudson**

# For Joe Rush, father and writer

PAGE 2

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TOP LEFT

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## **Pipilotti Rist**

TOP RIGHT

2 *Ever Is Over All* (1997)

## **Michal Rovner**

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3 *Overhanging* (1999)

## **Douglas Gordon**

BOTTOM RIGHT

4 *Monument to X* (1998)

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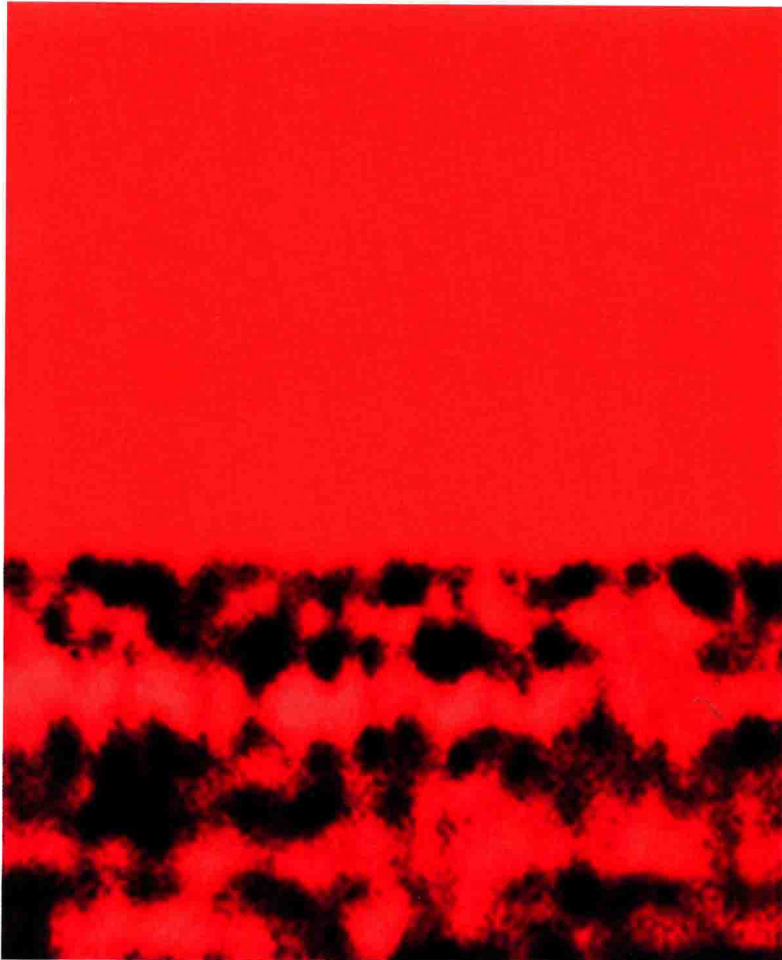
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# introduction

## Charles Atlas

5 *Mrs Peanut Visits New York* (1999)

Atlas brings a postmodern irony, honed while collaborating with 'downtown' dance artists in the 1970s, to modern-day urban stories and visually charged videos with Performance artists like Leigh Bowery, Lucian Freud's former model.

## The Emergence of Video Art

Cinema has often been heralded as the art form of the 20th century. The moving image, so radical a departure from the still image, emerged in the late part of the 19th century with the fury of a comet: exploding all earlier modes of image making and communication and bringing a new spirit of experimentation in art. When, in the middle of the 20th century, video technology became accessible to a larger population, the art of the moving image was introduced to a new generation of visual artists. Film, bulky and expensive, albeit richly textured and lush, was suddenly not the only means of creating moving images, and television, already controlled by advertisers and multinational corporations, was not the only destination for videotapes.

In 1965, video technology in the form of the Sony Corporation's Portapak (and lesser known products made by Norelco and Concord) became available to people outside the industry, including artists and activists, and once again, a new revolution in image making occurred. No longer bound by the constrictions of Hollywood power brokers and mainstream television producers, those with a vision were able to participate in the visual communication revolution that was rapidly changing social and cultural life throughout the world. The hand-held camera and portable video tape recorder – which featured a half-inch (0.5-centimeter) tape as opposed to the heavier two-inch (five-centimeter) tape used by television professionals – brought ease, mobility, and, most of all, affordability to the art of the moving image. Though not inexpensive, these cameras, priced in the United States and Germany from \$1,000 to \$3,000, were markedly cheaper than the \$10,000 to \$20,000 television cameras. Even more than the Bolex, the portable 16-millimeter-film camera introduced in the early 1940s that opened up the possibility of making independent experimental films, the Portapak paved the way for Video art.

## A Growing and Important Art Form

Video, once viewed as the poor cousin of cinema, soon became a significant medium itself in the hands of artists, documentary filmmakers, choreographers, engineers, and political activists who saw it as their ticket into the hallways of influence previously trafficked only by cameramen with 'identification badges' designating them from mainstream television stations. By 1968, exhibitions of Video art had already taken place in Argentina, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. This new medium seemed to have a message of its own, proclaiming that it was everywhere.

*Video Art* is intended as an overview of this remarkable medium that, in its little more than forty years of existence, has moved from brief showings on tiny screens in alternative art spaces to dominance in international exhibitions, in which vast video installations occupy factory-sized buildings and video projections take

**Bruce Nauman**

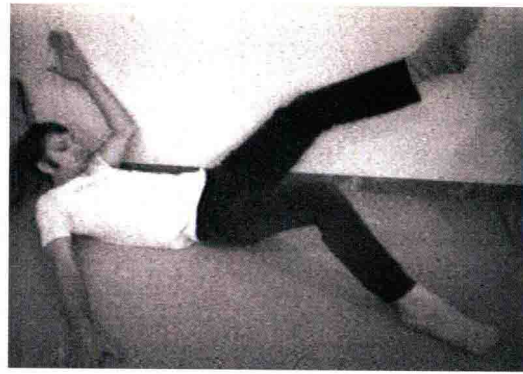
RIGHT

6 *Wall – Floor Positions* (1968)

**Bill Viola**

FAR RIGHT

7 *Déserts* (1994)



over the walls of an entire city block, as in Times Square, New York. Bordered on the south by the Panasonic screen, on the east by the NASDAQ stock exchange flickering facade, on the west by Reuter's kinetic-fronted news headquarters, Times Square is a virtual video environment.

The story of Video art embraces all the significant art ideas and forms of recent times – Abstract, Conceptual, Minimal, Performance and Pop art, photography, and digital art. The story also departs from art-historical categories into a new domain, that of the technological, which has its own referents and language.

As an 'art of time,' video has been used to extend, repeat, fast forward, slow down, speed up and stop time. In the hands of such artists as Vito Acconci, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, and Marina Abramovic, it has explored the body of the artist, the poetry of the soul, the complexity of the mind, and the inequalities fostered by gender and political prejudice.

Casting a net from eastern and western Europe, to North and South America, with brief stops in the Near and Far East, as well as Africa, *Video Art* will celebrate the breadth of this medium right up to the present revolution of digital technology, which enables artists to make use of whatever means of moving-image technology is available, frequently a combination of technologies, for their artistic expression. Since the medium has always been dependent on the availability of the technology involved (cameras, projection devices, feedback systems), it has been limited to the places that had the technology, namely, the United States, Germany, Austria, and, somewhat later, Great Britain. As video equipment became more available in other parts of the world in the late 1970s, the practice of the art grew.

**An All-Embracing Art Form**

*Video Art* will suggest multiple ways of constructing a history of the medium and offer as broad an overview as possible into the ways video artists (and artists who employ video as a part of their work) have used the video camera to make an art form now ubiquitous in the world of art. The story of Video art thus far concerns three generations of artists, who spontaneously adopted a massive communications medium for their own purposes, turning an implement of commerce (the video camera) into a material for art.

In discussing this broadly practiced, if young, art form, two immediate difficulties face a writer. First, the language used for Video art is borrowed from film; the traditional designation for speaking or writing about Video art is 'to film' rather than 'to video'. Second, no handy 'themes' or 'schools' of artists present themselves as

organizing tools. Video, in the hands of some of its early practitioners like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, William Anastasi, and others was merely another material put to use in the service of an idea: not an identifying material or medium that defined the artist. 'I wasn't interested in video, per se,' Anastasi said in an interview in 2001.<sup>1</sup> 'I used whatever was at my disposal (photography, video, drawing, sculpture) to express what I was interested in.' This attitude prevails amongst artists today. While some may identify themselves as 'video artists,' most see video as one material amongst many to be used in their art.

Thus a fluid approach to the topic has been adopted, while, for the sake of clarity and organization, four major themes have been identified as a way of approaching the subject of Video art. First, artists have used the video camera as an extension of their own bodies and as participants in performances, linking the physical and the conceptual right from the beginning (Chapter 2). Second, Video art has expanded the possibilities of narrative, producing linear and non-linear autobiographies and futuristic fantasies, defining the political and redefining the sexual, and exploring personal and cultural identity (Chapter 3). Third, the hybridization of technology, in which video is combined and recombined, often in interactive installations, with a vast array of other materials – digital video, film, DVD, computer art, CD-ROMs, graphics, animation, and virtual reality – to form new artistic expressions, such as 'Filmic art', not quite film or video (Chapter 4). Fourth, the pioneering works and influences to have emerged from the broad international arena (Chapter 5). Because of the vast numbers of artists who have turned to video as a medium of choice, this book will focus on a few representative artists whose body of work illustrates the topic at hand.

### **Blurring the Boundaries**

Video art emerged when the boundaries separating traditional art practices like sculpture, painting and dance were becoming blurred. Painting, Performance, dance, film, music, writing, sculpture could be combined in single works of art, as they were during Robert Rauschenberg's and Billy Klüver's event *Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering* in 1966. Writer Dick Higgins termed this phenomenon 'inter-media.'

Some early video artists, either emerging from, or reacting to, post-Abstract Expressionism used the video camera as an extension of their bodies. The camera became a component of the 'well-equipped' studio and artists began taping many of the actions they performed there, even in privacy. The physical and the conceptual were linked right from the start in Video art and they remain linked today. A major thesis of this book is that Performance has been highly influential in the unfolding story of Video art. Performance has emerged as the principal material in this medium, from the early videos of Vito Acconci, Richard Serra and Joan Jonas to the recent installations of Gary Hill, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Doug Aitken, amongst others.

This is not to say that other concerns were absent. Several of video's early practitioners were very engaged in technological advances such as synthesizers, image processing, computer scanning and so forth. Amongst the many innovators were Woody and Steina Vasulka, Ed Emshwiller, Dan Sandin, Keith Sonnier, Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe, Robert Zagone, Eric Siegel, and Swedish artists Ture Sjölander, Lars Weck, and Bengt Modin, to name a few. As Chapter 1 reveals, this thread in the history of Video art was one direction the form might have taken, but it did not. By



## Ed Emshwiller

TOP

8 One of the leading figures in the development of video technology, Ed Emshwiller (1925–90, United States) was one of the first to experiment with synthesizers and computers in his quest to 'sculpt with technology.' *Sunstone* (1979) is a prime example of his artful use of technology to create stunning images. A timeless face, carved from stone as a 'third eye', appears radiating color and forms that are computer generated.

ABOVE

9 Emshwiller's *Hungers* (1988) is an electronic performance with music by Morton Subotnick, sung by Joan La Barbara, that explores basic human cravings for food, love, sex, power, and security.

and large, those interested in the more technological aspects of the medium did not remain as artists, *per se*, but, like the early video activists, went in other directions, toward television engineering, directing, or documentary-making. The Vasulkas and Paik are notable exceptions, having remained influential video and media artists.

## New Ways of Telling a Story

Video artists have invented new ways to tell a story from the start. At each turn in the history of video, artists have taken an interest in 'time' as a medium in video. In the early days, it was 'real time' that interested artists: video, unprocessed and unedited, could capture time as it was being experienced, right here and now, indoors or outdoors. Today's artists are interested in manipulating time, breaking the barriers between past, present, and future. Large-scale installations can be the venue for multiple layers of time, time as it really is experienced in our waking and sleeping states.

## Interactivity

Another enduring component of video practice has been 'interactivity,' which, in today's digital art, has become a medium in itself. Some of the most important experiments in early Video art involved interactivity, including Frank Gillette's and Ira Schneider's *Wipe Cycle* (1969), which will be discussed in Chapter 1, and Juan Downey's *Plato Now* (1973), in which wired participants, sitting in meditation, 'interacted' with prerecorded quotations from the writings of Plato. Today, participants (gallery or museum-goers are now much more than 'visitors' or 'viewers') can create their own cinematic narratives via touch screens in the elaborate installations of Grahame Weinbren, discussed in Chapter 4.

Interaction barely describes the immersion viewers experience within such installations as Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (1992), in which ghostlike figures appear and recede in a long dark space as people walk through it, or Doug Aitken's *electric earth* (1999), a labyrinth of cloth screens on which are projected the night-time wanderings of a youth on the streets of Los Angeles and a large digital clock with its numbers racing through time.

## A Narcissistic Art?

In her 1976 essay, 'Video and Narcissism,' the American critic Rosalind Krauss postulated that video artists, in turning the camera on themselves, were engaging in blatant narcissism. She cites Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), in which the artist films himself pointing his fingers at his own image on a video monitor. '*Centers* typifies the structural characteristics of the video medium,' Krauss writes. 'For *Centers* was made by Acconci using the video monitor as a mirror.... In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to the works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition [Krauss's emphasis] of the entire genre.'<sup>12</sup> This is both a misreading of the psychology of narcissism as well as a misunderstanding of Acconci's intentions (to say nothing of the sweeping generalization about Video art, which, especially at that time, was largely preoccupied with being a critique of television). Does photographing the self constitute pathological narcissism, the condition of someone who (as described by Freud and quoted by Krauss) has 'abandoned the investment of objects with libido and transformed object-libido into ego-libido?'

## Nam June Paik

BELOW LEFT

10 Nam June Paik's work has become associated with fast-moving images that race across multiple screens before they can ever be digested. His interest lies in commenting on the saturation of the image in media culture. *MAJORCA-fantasia* (1989), in the midst of a furious collage of images, has outtakes from a recording of a performance by Joseph Beuys and one by Paik, in which he destroys a piano in an early Fluxist act.

## Steina Vasulka

BELOW RIGHT

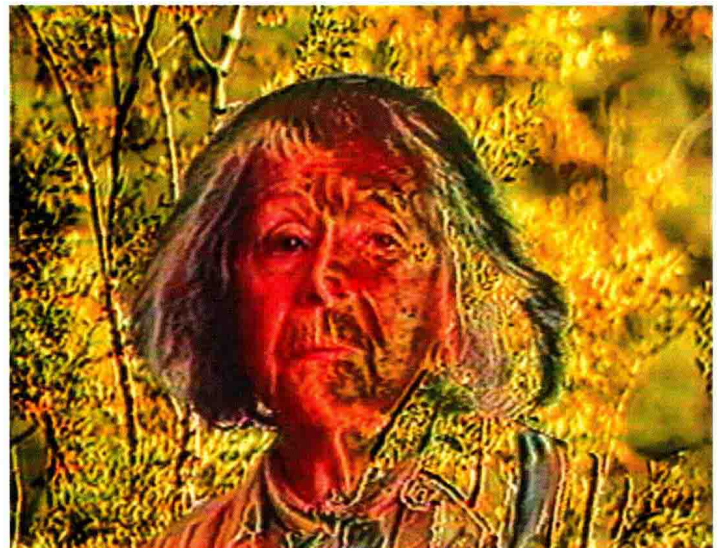
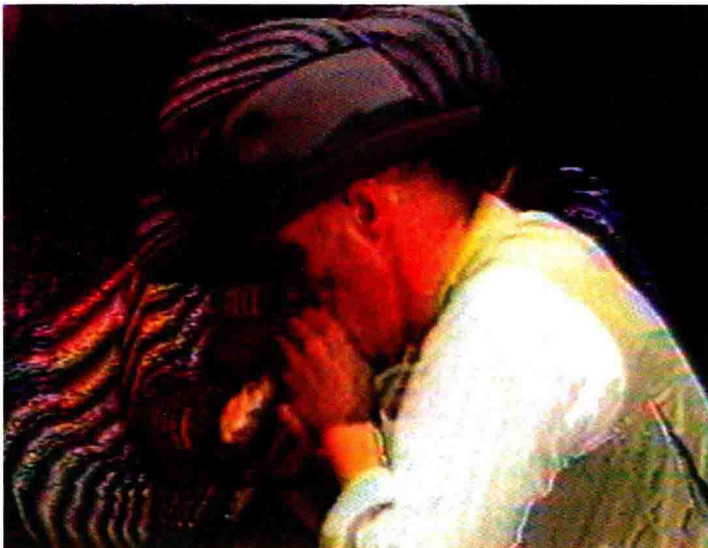
11 *Lilith* (1987) is an exercise in image manipulation in which the face of a woman is transformed into various shapes and sizes within a natural and manipulated landscape. The imaging techniques (focal plane shift and 'grabbing') are used by Steina Vasulka to create a mythic character.

Many early video artists used actual mirrors in their performances and videos (especially Dan Graham and Peter Campus), but, as with Acconci, their aim was to maximize the perceptual potentials of the medium as well as to engage in cultural critiques. Acconci, in fact, was expressly interested in drawing the viewer into the art process (bringing art out of the narcissistic, hermetic studio). He said of *Centers*: 'The result [the TV image] turns the activity around: a pointing away from myself [my emphasis], at an outside viewer – I end up widening my focus on to passing viewers (I'm looking straight out by looking straight in).'<sup>3</sup>

## Hybridization

In these early years of the 21st-century artists are using video in combination with film, computer art, graphics, animation, virtual reality, and all manner of digital applications. Video is sometimes, but rarely, the 'pure' medium of a work. More often it is a hybrid, a mixture, for example, of film and video, television and video, computer graphics and video. New artistic expressions are emerging from this hybridization. For some, the digital era heralds the end of Video art. Is the next stop for Video art obsolescence? As installations become more elaborate in the hands of Lynn Herschman, Granular Synthesis, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Jeffrey Shaw, and, certainly, Matthew Barney, will Video art cease to be the intimate medium it once was? In fact, it already has.

Krauss returns to the subject of Video art in her important essay, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (1999): 'For, even if video had a distinct technical support – its own apparatus, so to speak – it occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core. Like the eagle principle [referring to her ideas around Marcel Broodthaer's installations, the main focus of her essay], it [video] proclaimed the end of medium-specificity. In the age of television, it broadcast, we inhabit a post-medium condition.'<sup>4</sup> Krauss points to the multifaceted bases of video practices as central to understanding the current condition of artistic discourse: namely, we live in a time when ideas – and not specific media – are central to artists. To suggest that video 'proclaimed' this shift is to express, boldly, its importance to contemporary art.







# chapter 1

## Shaping a History

Jane and Louise Wilson

12 *Crawl Space* (1995)

Attempting a history of Video art is a complicated venture. The origins of the form were too multifaceted to be identified with one or two individuals, no matter how influential they may have been. In general terms Video art emerged in a complex international cultural environment characterized by anti-war protests and sexual liberation movements, all of which were increasingly visible on home televisions. This scene, combined with a moment in art history that, exhausted by the muscular trappings of Abstract Expressionism, was embracing new forms influenced by dance, theater, performance, film, and nascent multicultural awareness, made video the natural choice for art that was both a critique and a bold new experiment. In retrospect, the words of American artist Hermine Freed written in 1976 seem prescient:

The Portapak would seem to have been invented specifically for use by artists. Just when pure formalism had run its course; just when it became politically embarrassing to make objects, but ludicrous to make nothing; just when many artists were doing performance works but had nowhere to perform, or felt the need to keep a record of their performances; just when it began to seem silly to ask the same old Berkleean question, 'If you build a sculpture in the desert where no one can see it, does it exist?'; just when it became clear that TV communicates more information to more people than large walls do; just when we understood that in order to define space it is necessary to encompass time; just when many established ideas in other disciplines were being questioned and new models were proposed – just then the Portapak became available.<sup>1</sup>

Freed's essay is notable for another reason: early on (certainly by the early 1970s) video had become historicized with the language of art history. Freed spoke of 'formalism,' 'objects,' 'sculpture,' 'space,' all words associated with the study of art. If the appearance of the Portapak in 1965 was a defining moment in the creation of this new medium, within minutes, or so it seemed, Video art found a place in galleries and museums, in the United States and Germany; festivals with Video art were springing up in Paris and New York; public television stations were offering residencies to video artists; and cities like Buenos Aires (hardly ever mentioned in histories of Video art) were home to Video-art distribution centers. Such synergy could only have resulted from multiple influences brewing simultaneously in different parts of the world. Martha Gever and Martha Rosler's caveat against mythologizing video history in the person of one or two progenitors is worthy of attention, not so much because of their feminist perspective (however convincing), but because, in the threads of its history, Video art embraces an extraordinary diversity and richness that deserve investigation.