VIDEO ART

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An Anthology

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I. S. and B. K.

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B C D E

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Broadcast and Closed-Circuit Exhibition

Commentary

THE EUROPEAN SCENE AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Bill Viola

A Forethought

The information in this article is the result of the first year I spent in Europe, working as technical director of Art/Tapes/22, an experimental video production and video cassette distribution center located in Florence. The center was initiated in 1973 by Maria Gloria Bicocchi as a place for experimentation by invited artists confronting this new medium, which was still very underexposed in Europe. The actual production/physical organ (the studio) is complemented by video cassette dissemination, which lends an international character to the center. Much of the enthusiasm expressed in this article is due to the working ambience at Art/Tapes/22, where I feel a really open attitude toward the potentials of video as a healthy cross-cultural intersection of expression is being put into physical form daily. Built on the energies and desires of its director, Maria Gloria Bicocchi, it is, I feel, the only place of its kind in all of Europe and the United States, a place where artists from all countries can find a common ground through the medium, and where a personalized, positive working situation opens channels for work.

The development of video in Europe has proved to be both pioneering (in the work of people like Gerry Schum and Wolf Vostell) and yet quite late and timid in taking root (as evidenced by the generally sparse amount of consistent production). It is not my intent to produce a historical document tracing the advances of the video medium in Europe. I've arrived too late on the scene for that, and I feel a more than adequate amount of this data is already available for those interested in it. (I refer the reader to the notes at the end of the article for source listings.) Therefore, what I am presenting is a set of observations and experiences from the point of view of an American directly involved in the growth of video throughout Europe, and more specifically Italy, over the past year. Thus it is a subjective array, which I hope will be taken as just that—an observation from one person speaking for himself, and situated in the very midst of the scene on which he is commenting.

The European Scene

VIDEO REPORT: Well, Sony announced their new fall line in Paris today. The word is out—half-inch widths are still in! Come this November, the new 8650 (½-inch color) will hit the European scene, and people just can't wait to get their hands on it, complete with a lot of the features we've all been clamoring for, and on PAL standard. In the U-matic line, it looks like cassettes are in and here to stay. The international modes, the dual standard U-matics, will be around again this fall, along with a few new additions. Up in luxurious Paris showrooms we saw the new cassette color portable, and the new automatic cassette editing system, both also due in late autumn. All of this may sound a bit old hat to those of you from the States, but people here are just buzzing with excitement about it. In fact, for those of us here in Europe a lot can be gained by frequent visits to check up on latest technology fashions from the States. END VIDEO REPORT.

> Externally the branch is the origin of the fruit;
> Intrinsically the branch came into
> existence for the sake of the fruit.
> Had there been no hope of the fruit, would the
> gardener have planted the tree?
> Therefore in reality the tree is born of
> the fruit, though it appears to
> be produced by the tree.
>
> from Jalal al-Din Rumi
> *Mathnawi*
> in *Rumi Poet and Mystic*, translated by
> R. A. Nicholson
> (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964)

I have chosen to begin this article from a hardware point of view, since I am in charge of production at Art/Tapes/22, and it is the major focus of my activities. Yet more generally, I feel that the development, release, cost, and particular construction of video hardware systems becomes the major procreational determinant for all software germination, regardless of time, place, and the personal background of the user. (This given fact has only recently begun to change, as more "spaced-out engineer types" continue to modify equipment and design/build their own.) From this initial standpoint the situation in Europe is dominated by a severe time lag, which will

be examined more closely. The information stated at the outset was accurate; people are still waiting here for hardware introduced more than a year ago in the United States. In Tokyo, the Video Vatican, equipment is ordained initially for NTSC, the signal standard used in Japan and the U.S.A. New products are, for the most part, introduced simultaneously in Japan and the United States, and then modified for PAL standard later, at a time lag of often as much as one year.

The European-American signal-standard differentiation means more than the occasional tourist death, when some poor guy plugs his 110-volt American electric shaver into the 220-volt socket of his Rome hotel bathroom and fatally shaves himself clear through to the back of his head. Its ramifications are multiple, affecting both the video maker and viewer alike, and modulating all software display both physically and psychologically.

A more technical note is needed here. Somewhere along the line, a majority of European countries decided to go with a 50-Hertz (cycles per second) 220-volt AC power to supply their populations with the increasingly needed magic juice. On the other side of the Atlantic, they went with a lower voltage (110 volts), and a bit faster (60 HZ, or cycles per second). Since the two continents weren't wired together this pretty much didn't matter, except for the occasional uninformed traveler with electric utensils. When television came along, engineers utilized the frequency (the cycles per second) of the standard current to time the succession of images whizzing by on the screen. Therefore, Americans receive sixty images, or fields of video, every second, to the fifty that Europeans see. As the many new books and articles on the inner workings of video will tell you, each of these fields of video is actually the tracing of a narrow beam of electrons bombarding a phosphor surface, and thus manifesting itself as a glowing phosphor dot on the screen. Sweep this beam around fast enough and (due to persistence of vision and slight lag in the phosphor glow) this point becomes a line; when organized in a neat succession from top to bottom, the lines become a plane—a glowing surface called a raster when empty, the *Johnny Carson Show* when full, and snow when confused. There is a finite number of lines that can be scanned onto the surface area of the screen in the given time interval (60 HZ in America, 50 in Europe). In one-sixtieth of a second this number is 212½ lines; in one-fiftieth of a second, 312 can fit. So one thing becomes clear after all these electrons have flown by—in Europe people get an image that completes itself at a slightly slower rate, but one that contains one hundred more lines than its American counterpart. This yields an image in Europe of noticeably superior resolution (or detail). When I first arrived in Florence, the first videotape I saw was shot with a black and white portapak outdoors in direct sunlight (an optimum shooting ambience). Aside from the slight optical flicker (caused by the slower 50-cycle rate, to which I am now completely habituated) the quality of that image was just amazing. The detail and clarity of that tape was unlike anything I was used to seeing in the States. And color is another point. The technical differences are too complicated to go into here, but the different color reproduction system, combined with increased picture resolution, results in a color television image that is quite amazing for a person of the NTSC persuasion. Europe got its

> We know geometrical figures of three kinds:
> Figures of one dimension—lines.
> Figures of two dimensions—planes.
> Figures of three dimensions—solids.
> A line is regarded here as the trace of a point moving in space.
> A plane—as the trace of a line moving in space. A solid—as the trace of a plane moving in space.
>
> Let us imagine a straight line limited by two points, and let us designate this line by the letter "a." Let us imagine this line "a" moving in space in a direction perpendicular to itself and leaving a trace of its movement. When it has traversed a distance equal to its length, the trace left by it will have the form of a square, the sides of which are equal to the line "a," i.e., "a^2."
>
> Let us imagine a square moving in space in a direction perpendicular to two of its adjoining sides and leaving a trace of its movement. When it has traversed a distance equal to the length of one of the sides of the square, its trace will have the form of a cube, i.e., "a^3."
>
> Now if we imagine the movement of a cube in space, what form will the trace left by its movement, i.e., "a^4," assume? Examining the correlations of figures of one, two, and three dimensions, i.e., lines, planes, and solids, we can deduce the rule that a figure of a higher dimension can be regarded as the trace of the movement of a lower dimension.
>
> . . . Further, a point may be regarded as a cross-section of a line; a line as a cross-section of a surface; a surface as a cross-section of a solid; a three-dimensional body can therefore be determined as a cross-section of a four-dimensional body.
>
> Generally speaking, in every four-dimensional body we shall see its three-dimensional projection or section. A cube, a sphere, a pyramid, a cone, a cylinder, may be projections or cross-sections of four-dimensional bodies unknown to us.
>
> from P. D. Ouspensky
> *A New Model of the Universe*
> (Vintage Books, 1971)

A New York *Times* article of several years back reported that the C.I.A. had estimated the number of prisoners in Russian prison camps in Siberia to be more than one million. This figure was arrived at mainly by counting the number of prisoners out in the yards during the day, data compiled by satellite photographs. It seems that some surveillance satellites can spot objects on the ground less than a person-width across under optimum weather conditions and from about two hundred miles up, transmitting a video image back to Earth of roughly 10,000 lines resolution. Figuring that much of the technology being used by artists today was the result of World War II, it is just a matter of time before this new hardware is available for the individual.

system after America, a case in point where lateness was beneficial.

But things don't finish here; we got other problems, kids. The two systems are not at all compatible. Tapes made utilizing the NTSC system cannot be played on PAL equipment, and vice versa. Does this mean that Desi can't love Lucy in Italian, too? Well, due to the fact that much material for television was produced originally on film, Hugh Beaumont could leave it to Beaver abroad as well, and the exporting of all this valuable information and rich cultural heritage was not retarded. But for stuff done directly onto video—that's not so easy. Technology exists (at the BBC in London, for example) to transfer electronically between standards, involving some form of time-base correction and digital processing systems, but it's unfortunately out of the reach of the independent video maker in the U.S. or Europe because of its cost. So the only other option available is optical transfer, which is like taking a Xerox of a Xerox; if this is not one's intent, the image degeneration incurred can be quite corrosive. (The process, called scan conversion, involves taking a tape made in one standard, let's say PAL, and first displaying it normally on a monitor. Next we take an NTSC [American standard] camera and point it at that monitor rerecording the image off the screen *optically* onto an NTSC videotape recorder. Thus, picture quality and resolution suffer.) As to the satisfactory solution to this problem, again we are at the mercy of the Sony high priests and must wait.

In the meantime, we've got a small U-matic wonder now flourishing on the market in Europe, but still overlooked in the States. It is a dual-standard ¾-inch video cassette-monitor ensemble capable of playing back or copying either NTSC or PAL video cassettes (but unfortunately not able to transfer between them). In Europe, if one wants to purchase a video cassette player or recorder from Sony, it can only be dual standard. This means that most places in Europe that have acquired video cassette machines can view tapes made in both the U.S. and Europe. Since the dual-standard cassette has arrived relatively late in the States (many places have purchased cassette machines already, and thus have the NTSC models only), this puts Europeans in the position of being able to receive software from the best of both worlds, but makes it very difficult for Europeans to share their efforts with Americans. This one-way information flow imposed by the technology is extremely hazardous, serving to increase the amount of raw information draining from the U.S. and seeping out into the rest of the world, and not allowing it to be replenished from outside sources. Obviously, the ultimate solution lies with some global TV standard or multistandard interface device, resulting from the digital time-base correction technology available today, but until this situation exists—and until each locality is able to develop its own integrity with the medium—any benefits such advances might produce are still a long way off.

Goldbricking

Television has been acclaimed, in numerous popular analyses by cultural visionaries, as a truly global medium. As to what exactly all this means, I don't know, but I have been observing some recurring patterns of early video interception stretching across national boundaries, which, by the process of elimination, can be attributed to our common biological and genetic factors and/or the construction of the television medium itself. There seem to me to be definite stages of development as video becomes woven within a given social framework. The cultural surround (growth medium) in Europe is, when observed on a certain scale, very different from that of the States. Growing up in New York City and enjoying a seven-channel childhood, I became passively conversant in television skills at quite a young age (though the active application of this vocabulary has proven very difficult in my later video-making experience). This abundant television environment, along with contributing factors such as familiar electric toasters, automatic blenders, luxury refrigerators, microwave ovens, and lush push-button kitchens (which bear more than a visual resemblance to the control room at NBC studios), arrived much later in Europe. The difference in cultural and media backgrounds results in a distinct flavor in the kinds of things people do, which I feel is leading to a definite form people can call "European" video, and which will, by far, be the most important result of this phase of the spreading of personal TV. Right now, the video being produced in many places in Europe demonstrates the processes of learning a language, which unfortunately in the U.S. is often taken as a definitive and final form by persons eager to delineate so-called video aesthetics

and general analyses of the medium—a form that will continually metamorphose as certain levels of literacy are reached. There is a definite maturation process which must be recognized, and within which each point has equal importance and integrity and cannot be considered autonomous or absolute by any means. In addition, this process is, to a certain extent, different for each culture involved, and as a result it is often poorly judged by people who, having themselves experienced the change induced by a new technology, assume that it will hit everyone in the same way. My experiences here in Florence have taught me more about the medium itself than any particular set of characters I can lump together to call the "European video" scene. I choose to pursue this aspect further in this article, rather than dwell on any specific set of differences self-evident to anyone viewing the tapes themselves.

The work being produced on the continent is, for the most part, black and white, ½-inch, with one of the important duration determinants being the length of tape available. In other words, a lot of it is long and difficult to sit through, despite the fact that much of the television, especially from the BBC, is of very high documentary quality, data-rich, and quite concise. This process occurring in America can appear even more extreme, owing to the dominant environmental module of the thirty-second television commercial, which is far more concentrated and prevalent than anything in Europe. Of course, viewing much of video as a reaction against a dominant force, it is easy to see why most initial efforts stretch out rather than compress. (Brevity is not meant to be stressed here as a crucial element as much as a certain organizational awareness necessary at the producing stage.) As I have mentioned in other writings, most people will call many video works boring while not really getting to the source of this discomfort. It is not so much that these tapes are boring because, for example, the images on the screen are static and/or the development in time is rather slow. Quite the contrary—with video, a static image does not exist (as explained earlier); its high-velocity data flow makes it the fastest-changing thing we look at in our daily environment. Physically, it is probably the most difficult and demanding form to which we pay so much attention. Many early video efforts seem to be the most successful in their illumination of this fact.

But this is all in regard to the video maker. It must be noted that the viewer-recipient goes through a learning process as well. One of the most amazing things for me, both in the States and in Europe, is that people will actually watch all this stuff unflinchingly, in its agonizing entirety, provided this instance is one of their first video encounters. In fact, much of my experience, in particular with the common species of large videotape art exhibitions, indicates that initially people will watch almost anything. The excitement in the air of perked-up antennae when, for example, the slight hum of a greatly amplified live microphone or the fresh glow of a newly turned-on television screen first fills the space is very real. I've seen people standing around, at the opening of video art shows, for the longest time just watching snow, which can be attributed either to a childhood infatuation with connect-the-dots books or to the rapture of newly found freedom to arrange the video raster as they please. I remember as a child I kept asking my father how come bugs liked the N.Y. Yankees, too, when we'd spend hot summer evenings in a darkened room watching the baseball players on TV and the moths in the room tried desperately to get through the glass into TV-land.

An experience on a different summer night much later in my studio stands out in my mind here. I got hold of a bunch of video equipment from the local university to fool around with. Among the toys was a favorite of mine, a video projector, which was the first thing I set up. Late one night, as the camera running into the projector was warming up, I turned away for a brief moment to get something. When I turned around again, I was almost knocked over by the huge, glowing image just a few feet from my eyes—a giant brick. Not your normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill brick, mind you, but a giant brick—huge, just floating up there like the Goodyear blimp. It seemed that the camera warming up just happened to be pointed at a red brick lying on the floor of my studio. I quickly located the actual brick in the room. I was relieved—there it was, just a normal brick—but after that experience it sure did seem exceptionally puny and undernourished in real life. Of course, a lot of the initial impact of the video brick was amplified by its size, but a monitor I had set up in the room with the same image on it still bore out the basic fact. That brick just looked *so* good up there, glowing, framed by that monitor box, the word "Sony" sitting proudly right under the image at the bottom edge of the screen. It was special—a gold brick, much nicer than that dirty old thing sitting over there in the corner in front of the camera. And that's when I realized I was up against a problem in the work I was setting out to do. If video makes a regular brick look that good, then there is a real danger in that it's going to make everything look good initially; and it will be difficult not to get seduced into believing that all the stuff I'm putting before the camera will survive taping. The taping part is very important, in that it demands a very different set of production criteria than a closed-circuit or live situation. (This breeds a lot of confusion, in that with video, people can see the final form of their work while, or just after, they make it.) Large video exhibitions for the most part tend to amplify these problems and not diminish them.

The Continental Drift Theory

In Italy, we had our first large show in international video-

tapes in Milan in March of 1975. It was organized by Tomasso Trini, editor of *Data Art* magazine, and sponsored by Camel cigarettes (R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.). It was a "Camel Award" art exhibition (as cigarettes are prohibited from advertising in Italian mass media, they tend to organize art shows and sporting matches and the like). It was held in a large public exhibition space called La Rotonda di Via Besana, a very interesting building, as I was to learn from the custodian. It was constructed in the shape of a cross surrounded by a curving wall and oriented dead along the points of the compass. I'm not very clear as to its history, but I gathered that it was a church, then a hospital, and also had the dark distinction of being a housing place for lepers in Milan. Each of the long columns inside supporting the high ceilings contains, near the top, skulls carved in stone, coldly staring down at those on the floor below.

Nonetheless, historical considerations aside, the show went very well, and was (as is often the case with large video shows) very well attended. For many of the tapes, crowds ringed the monitors as at a street-corner intersection after an accident. Since this was an international conglomeration of work, it was very interesting to see how the change in context affected some of the tapes. Ira Schneider's *Manhattan Is An Island*, for example, which some people thought was like adding water to water when shown in New York City, was many Italians' first real view of the legendary "Big Apple," and was watched intensely, having a completely different meaning and function when transplanted to Milan.

Every once in a while the tapes would not be changed on cue, and I would come up on a comfortable little gathering of people settled into some heavy snow-watching till the next organized raster scan greeted their eyes. Actually snow between tapes can serve as a very good cerebral blackboard eraser, easing people into the "clean-slate state" in which they are ready for the next tape. In a large video show, this is often sorely needed by the audience to distinguish the individual pieces they have been told exist, especially when video exhibitions are new to them. The video makers themselves often fail to recognize this phenomenon, a trick video performs so well, as their pieces sink into the giant program of the whole show.

Another aspect peculiar to this event in Milan, and having to do with inundation, was the showing of high-tech color tapes, such as Nam June Paik's *Global Groove*. The huge crowds of glassy-eyed humans entranced and entrenched around the monitors when those tapes went on were amazing to watch. It all really made sense when someone told me that they do not yet broadcast color here in Italy, so that the audience had hardly been prepared for this onslaught of high-energy, super-saturated color. That's like airlifting someone off the Sahara and dropping him down in the surf off Coney Island. This is a bit overstated, but the reaction to the color itself was (as with most video display) markedly more intense.

The Italian government has been in a deadlock over the issue of color television for several years. Very basically, the choice with regard to color in Europe today boils down to a choice between two systems, the French SECAM and the German PAL. Naturally, the decision to go with either system is a political one between the French and the Germans, one that the Italians have just made as I am writing this. So up until today, color programs have not been broadcast in Italy. But color has existed—people living in the north have been able to receive color signals drifting in from across the Swiss, Yugoslavian, and French borders. This leakage is another aspect of broadcast television's potency within the geographic framework of Europe, and will surely dominate future political and social life. The lines of territory written on most maps are becoming about as meaningful as a page of notes written with a Flair pen in the rain. New national boundaries are being defined by the electromagnetic standing wave patterns spilling off the transmitter towers in each country and intermingling in the atmosphere. The smaller and closer together the countries are, the more acute the effect. There are temporary ways around this problem for nations just wiring up, such as the Indian government's hiring of an American firm to supply fixed-frequency radios (nontunable, one station only) and distributing these radios to many villages in the countryside. Like it or lump it. And most did—lump the radios by trying to retune them till they broke under the strain. This plan is just temporary, however; a more durable one has been implemented in "civilized" areas such as Europe, where the great transmitter race is just getting under way, controlling the audience, as in America, but with a bit softer approach.

Getting back to the Milan show and the European/American standard hassles: This problem of standardization at the exhibition was surmounted by the innovative dual-standard Sony cassette machines. But I found myself making an awful blunder, which graphically showed me that the difference in standard ain't just technical. The largest number of tapes supplied for the show came from the Art/Tapes/22 studio, works produced by Americans as well as Europeans. At the show a number of times I would put on a tape made by an American at our studio (therefore, made originally on PAL standard), and flip the switch on the cassette machine into the NTSC (American) playback mode. When the screens would start to go berserk from the mismatch and people's eyes would just kind of roll up inside their heads, I would realize my mistake and, embarrassed, flip the switch to the PAL (European)

standard mode, making sure the word didn't get around about what I had done.

Video Alla Fiorentina

It was these moments of transatlantic uncertainty that plagued my first few months of living in Florence. There I was in Florence, speaking English and not being an art history major. The first week alone was so disorienting—my first social contacts were with a group of students playing old Bob Dylan records; on my second night there, they rushed me off to the Space Electronic, a psychedelic disco complete with black light posters on the walls, strobe lights, and colored spots pulsing to the music, a parachute hanging over the dance floor, acid rock music with a colored light show backdrop, and updated with video monitors suspended from the ceiling so one could watch oneself dancing and having a good time. By the end of the night I was blitzed, to say the least. My second night of incoherency was compounded by going to see *Midnight Cowboy*, dubbed into Italian, of course. There was Razzo Rizzo speaking his native tongue, along with eight million other New Yorkers —my entire hometown speaking Italian! Sitting in a Florence movie theater and watching those streets I had known and loved as a child. Boy, was I confused! By the end of the week I had also seen *American Graffiti*, dubbed in Italian as well, and I felt the reprogramming of my childhood was complete. I even contemplated buying a cheap character generator to keep strapped to my belt, generating subtitles for me as a conversational aid.

The whole dubbing process has a very strong effect on most Europeans, yet is it rarely encountered by Americans. A great deal of film, and even more television, is dubbed into Italian, usually from English. I wonder what this does to young children growing up and watching TV, knowing that what's coming out of these guys' mouths is not really what they are saying. In the movies, an Italian actor dubbing the voice of Woody Allen, for example, will dub him in all successive films in which he appears, so as to build up continuity and credibility between films (something extremely vital for the movie industry). So for every Woody Allen and John Wayne, there is an Italian Woody Allen and John Wayne living somewhere in Rome, a kind of surrogate identity hoping his American counterpart will have a long and successful career.

About one month after I arrived in Italy, I was approached by a group of young *avant-guardia* architects about teaching in a cooperative new school. "Great," I said, "what's it called?" "Global Tools," they said. "Oh," I said. We then proceeded to talk about geodesic domes, inflatables, survival arts, solar energy, and statements like, "You are information." So there I was—taking regular trips to the Space Electronic, making video art in Florence, and being approached by Global Tools —living the life of a true fugitive from culture. The most difficult times came when I would go back to New York and collide with the same process happening in the other direction. One time, I arrived at Kennedy Airport and later wound up getting off a train in Penn Station, extremely thirsty. I walked into an "Italian" pizzeria for a Coke, only to be met by an all-Puerto Rican staff speaking Spanish, with life-size plastic hams and sausages dangling majestically from the ceiling. In Florence, it had taken some effort to associate those symbolic plastic replicas with the actual things hanging in most restaurants there, but now to actually see them again in genuine plastic set me back quite a lot.

Although more visible when occurring internationally, this cross-breeding proliferates on the national scale, where indigenous films and television serve most adequately as plastic ham and sausages hanging high in the national skies.

Be Here Now

It is almost impossible to walk around Florence and not get in someone's photograph. The number of Botticelli frescoes and Michelangelo *Davids* now existing in the world is frightening. They'll shoot anything, as long as it isn't moving. Mom in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Pop in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Little Joey in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Sis eating real Italian ices in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Mom and Pop together in front of the . . . the possible combinations are endless. Then they go back whence they came, little chunks and pieces of Florence firmly in hand as evidence. What's so strange? We've done it on the moon, why not Italy? One of the first things I realized working in the depths of our studio all day long here is that the inside of a studio can be anywhere in the world. In fact, television studios and airports are probably the first really international spaces we have. With television advances such as satellites and chroma keying, it is now possible to put someone anywhere you choose. In terms of a repeatable form, it is interesting to see the similarity between tourists having their picture taken in front of some public monument, and any newscaster on TV wrapping up a story standing in front of the White House or another notable landmark. It's the same process—a verification quite necessary to establish credibility. It soon becomes obvious that the entire set of spatial-distance clues appears very dubious when dealing with radio or TV. The first week I was here I called my family in New York just to let them know how things were and how the movie ended on the plane. As soon as someone picked up the phone in New York, there was this strange echo effect. I could hear my voice again a split second after I said something. I finally realized that this was a part of my own telephonic signal returning to me. The impulses carrying my voice from

Florence to New York had somehow bounced off the New York end and come back, thus the split-second delay. The feeling of all that space participating in an intercontinental echo chamber was chilling. (I finally had to cut the conversation short.) In radio, it seems the farther away a correspondent gets, the more tinny and garbled his voice sounds. I once heard a radio broadcast from some guy standing on a street corner in Santiago, Chile, an audiotape that could have been much more economically produced by somebody on the corner of Times Square with a cheap-o Radio Shack microphone pumped through a tiny transistor radio. But somehow you just knew that those were real Chilean car noises.

The first time I saw Michelangelo's *David*, it was a shocking experience. He was too big. Obviously, the question becomes, what does "too big" mean? I had been force-fed art history in school and so was somewhat acquainted with the city of Florence before ever having set foot in its streets. I used to really hate art history and all those marvelous marble bodies with their firm marble penises, which I suspected might have something to do with the fact that the dominant population of nubile young art history majors were female. (Just a collegiate sexual fantasy on my part, I'm sure.) But when I arrived in Florence, I realized that the only thing I'd ever studied then was black and white photography. When you actually experience the incredible works of art in a place like this—when you are standing right there, watching, breathing, smelling, hearing—you know. There are no words or photos in any art history book that can substitute for the knowledge of being right there. Those works have taken on a completely different meaning for me, determined for myself by my own feelings at a particular moment and place, and really more by the surroundings than by the center attraction on the pedestal.

An overheard conversation in Florence often has to do with something or other not being like someone "pictured" it to be, usually in terms of scale and dimension. If you haven't pictured the thing before you get to Florence, it's all right there, pictured for you, in the guidebooks you buy when you arrive. So the idea is to first find the photo of this famous thing in your book, then travel around the city until you find a physical object that looks like the image in the photo, compare shape and form, and, once you're sure, take a picture of it yourself. You also might want to check it off to avoid future confusion. Unfortunately, photo-pattern recognition is not strictly limited to tourist behavior. Latent in the technology, it seems to surface in other areas as well, most notably our educational system and independent video making.

View from the Inside

At the beginning, soon after I had learned basic video skills, I had to satisfy the obligation to initiate others into the secret rites, and found myself teaching several basic video workshops. A common exercise with the class would involve taking the equipment out onto the street and just recording whatever happened to be going on, which, as we all soon discovered, turned out to be a whole lot more than was expected. (This brings us back to goldbricking and something Nam June Paik wrote concerning overtaping.) For these classes, the biggest

(Ouspensky commenting on the work of C. H. Hinton)

What we call perspective is in reality a distortion of visible objects which is produced by a badly constructed optical instrument—the eye. We see all objects distorted.

. . . But, according to Hinton, there is no necessity to visualize objects of the external world in a distorted form. The power of visualisation is not limited by the power of vision. We see all objects distorted, but we know them as they are. And we can free ourselves from the habit of visualising objects as we see them, and we can learn to visualise them as we know they really are. . . . Hinton's idea is precisely that before thinking of developing the capacity of seeing in the fourth dimension, we must learn to visualise objects as they would be seen in the fourth dimension, i.e., first of all, not in perspective, but from all sides at once, as they are known to our "consciousness." The development of this power to visualise objects from all sides at once will be the casting out of the self elements in mental images. According to Hinton, "casting out the self elements in mental images must lead to the casting out of self elements in perceptions." In this way, the development of the power of visualising objects from all sides will be the first step towards the development of seeing objects as they are in the geometrical sense, i.e., the development of what Hinton calls "higher consciousness."

from P. D. Ouspensky
A New Model of the Universe
(Vintage Books, 1971)

I don't know how many dull, unedited tapes I had to sit through politely. . . . We should be more conscious of the situation: we are in the era of information overload and it means information retrieval is more tricky than information recording. . . .

from Nam June Paik
Video 'n' Videology (1959–1973)
edited by Judson Rosebush
(Everson Museum of Art, 1974)

hit, and the most valuable experience, would be playing back the tapes made out in the daily environment, and also being allowed to tape their roommates, dogs, their block, everything familiar to them, and then play it back. As tape, this may seem much too personal and self-indulgent to be of value to persons other than those involved, but so what? At most, I feel, a successful videotape can only hope to introduce a new view into the familiar context of events and possibly induce some reevaluation—but it will never be a thing in itself, self-enclosed, or else it would lapse into the common-denominator drone of popular entertainment. Problems arise today when video makers cannot distinguish between something that has personal value alone, and something more relevant on a public scale. It is a twilight zone that is very difficult to define, and the currently accepted role of the artist as social deviant who reveals personal oddities to the world tends to cloud things even further. I cannot stress enough that *each* aspect (the personal learning experiences and those publicly meaningful) is of equal value. And as to the set of criteria for one aspect or the other, who can really say (as the most personal situations can often be most publicly relevant), but I think that if more people kept a lot of their video activities on the level of personal, private education, then when they did make a video statement, drawing from this acquired knowledge, they would make it all the more effective.

When an outside observer looks over the videotape scene, a large bulk of the work probably seems very simplistic, basic-level stuff, with a groping for something and not quite hitting it. Consider the potential richness of an interface between the human visual/aural/perceptual system with brain and the electronic data processing/storage capabilities that the television medium can yield. If one closely examines a large amount of the recorded magnetic material labeled video art, it soon becomes evident that these efforts are mostly learning probes expressed in very simple sentences. As a native American I find myself constantly fighting some invisible, imposed blockage on my sensory system and am continually trying to open up and extend my perceptual awareness, rather than let it fold in. I think this frustration is typical of many people who have attempted to expand actively via sight/sound tools such as video and videotape. More and more, as is true with just about every human endeavor, I am finding that the limits are more in myself than in what I am attempting to utilize. I really feel sometimes as if I'd lived a sensory-deprived childhood, and, in regard to video, much of the work I've seen appears to be suffering from the same vitamin deficiency.

> In the use of the olfactory apparatus Americans are culturally underdeveloped. The extensive use of deodorants and the suppression of odor in public places results in a land of olfactory blandness and sameness that would be difficult to duplicate anywhere else in the world. This blandness makes for undifferentiated spaces and deprives us of richness and variety in our life. It also obscures memories, because smell evokes much deeper memories than either vision or sound.
>
> from Edward T. Hall
> *The Hidden Dimension*
> (Doubleday and Co., 1959)

> To state it tersely: if one works with a bottlenose dolphin day in and day out, for many hours, days, and weeks, one is struck with the fact that one's current basic assumptions and even one's current expectations determine, within certain basic limits, the results attained with a particular animal at a particular time.
> . . . You see, what I found after twelve years of work with dolphins is that the limits are not in them, the limits are in us. So I had to go away and find out, who am I? What's this all about?
>
> from John Lilly
> "A Sense of Weirdness"
> in *Mind in the Waters*, edited by
> Joan McIntyre
> (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974)

In this light, the state-funded media centers in America become extremely vital as agents to combat this culturally induced stunted growth. Such centers, particularly abundant in the Northeast coastal areas of the U.S., and popping up now in other parts of that country as well, are virtually nonexistent and sorely needed in Europe. I am speaking of centers of the access-type, which to many people immediately signifies slipshod, technically shabby work, usually on such varied topics as the migrating habits of short-order cooks in inner-city Schenectady, New York, and therefore of very little value. But this attitude is very unhealthy, just as it is unhealthy for funding agencies to be disappointed and consider cutting funds when very little refined or sophisticated work emerges. These are centers to develop literacy and, considered as such, should be increased in number, not limited. You don't teach people how to write and then expect that everyone in the class will be a novelist; it just doesn't work that way. It should be hoped that very soon Europe, too, will recognize the need for such learning spaces, and that this process will be allowed to develop to the fullest extent possible there.

Picturing—Visual Literacy

Physiologically, we have all the necessary apparatuses to give us an adequate picture of the world. It is just, as stated before, our minds that get in the way and give us a "viewpoint." I remember one time I was asked by the Lincoln First Bank in Rochester, New York, to do a video installation in their lobby —one of the first pieces of "bank video art" ever done. We were up in the offices on top of the Lincoln First Bank Building in downtown Rochester, with a breathtaking view of the city through large wall-sized windows. Commenting on the urban plight led us into staring out of the window onto the landscape, where I immediately noticed a large microwave relay tower poised on a distant hill. I pointed it out, launching into some broadcast media simultaneity rap. One of the bank guys said, "You know, we use this window as a way to tell what people are into. For example, last week we had a guy here who works with HO trains, who might be doing a big installation for our Christmas show. He immediately spotted the Rochester railroad yards over there off to your left." I looked out the window; it was the exact same landscape we both had seen, yet each of us had seen a different view.

The Elephant in the Dark Room

Some Hindus were exhibiting an elephant in a dark room, and many people collected to see it. But as the place was too dark to permit them to see the elephant, they all felt it with their hands to gain an idea of what it was like. One felt its trunk, and declared the beast to resemble a water pipe; another felt its ear, and said it must be a large fan; another its leg, and thought it must be a pillar; another felt its back, and declared the beast must be like a great throne. According to the part which he felt, he gave a different description of the animal. One, as it were, called it "Dal," and another "Alif."

from Jalal al-Din Rumi
"The Masnavi"
in *Teachings of Rumi*, translated by
E. H. Whinfield
(E. P. Dutton and Co., 1975)

It's not because we're dumb that we don't see those things. Our sensory systems, especially vision, are extremely complex and highly evolved; it's just that we have it built into our design that we single things out that have to do with our survival, and furthermore, we do this with each sense modality in isolation. Each fully matured human being on this planet enjoys a very complex central nervous system and elaborate sensory reception equipment, with vision at the top of the stack. Each retina is loaded with roughly 100 million photoreceptors, sensitive to frequencies from 311,000,000,000,000 cycles per second (red light) to about 737,000,000,000,000 cycles per second (violet light), all inputs converging down into about one million relay channels to the brain. In other words, we can get a lot of stuff, and get it fast. This high level of visual intelligence (with the capability for sensory integration/balance) seems to have reached an extremely advanced state at one time, as evidenced by the remarkably complex architecture and writing/notational systems of the Mayan and Egyptian civilizations (later passed on in part to the Greeks, Arabs, and Chinese) and the ancient symbolic geometries which their proportions and configurations reveal.

The scattering of sense projection areas which we humans inherit appears to have evolved from conditions of extreme danger orientation. Sight, sound, touch, smell are each bordered by interpretation areas which deal only with one sense modality. When hearing registers a danger sound it does not wait for visual information before signaling alarm. Nor does vision, on seeing the form of a predator, wait for sound or touch. Our intellectual functions have arisen from separate sense modality interpretation areas. Perhaps this may contribute to the ease with which our mental processes become isolated from one another.

from Sterling Bunnel
"The Evolution of Cetacean Intelligence"
in *Mind in the Waters*, edited by
Joan McIntyre
(Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974)

Memory and recall are keys to development of intelligence over time. As has been shown, mnemonic ability is a function of efficiency in encoding data. I heard an interview on the radio with a man who had a computer mind, who had been astounding scientists with his uncanny ability to retain information and unerringly reproduce it at given time intervals. The reporter asked him how he had remembered an exceedingly long list of unrelated items and recited them perfectly. "Well," he said, "I pictured myself on a steet in a city somewhere. I started to take a walk down this street, and at each shop I passed, I put one of the items on the list in the window. When I had walked to the end of the street and the shops were all filled, I was done. Now, if someone wanted me to recite the list, I would just go back to that city in my mind, and take a walk down that street again, looking in the shop windows." It seems that dolphins might have an even more accurate means of recall, if a current theory proves correct. The information they get about their environment is dominantly acoustic, the result of a kind of biological sonar system they possess. Sound waves are sent out by the animal and return in altered patterns

after they have bounced off objects in the immediate line of fire. Reading the difference between outgoing and incoming sound-wave organization yields data about the environment. Some scientists have speculated that the dolphin may be able to reproduce these sound-wave patterns vocally, and thus virtually re-create an object for a fellow dolphin in the form of an acoustic image.

What do we normal folks have to compare with this wonderfully integrated natural apparatus? Well, for now, we have TV. With its high rate of information-processing, highly ordered structure, and ability to operate in "real" time, the television process is the common form coming closest to our language of visual efficiency. And what are people doing with it? A lot of things—watching it for one, on the most passive side, and physically manipulating it on the most active. The physical manipulators are a group of people making images (often involving video synthesizers) and represent, I think, the most extreme reaction to the sensory underdevelopment I was talking about. They are simply making images: representational images, abstract images, and everything in between. It's the control, the ability to create visual forms, that's turning these people on, as evidenced by the fact that it is invariably more fun to do than to watch, and very often more exciting when created "right before your very eyes" than re-created on tape.

The results of video utilization in a more sensory-balanced culture cannot clearly be ascertained, because television in developing countries has been utilized primarily for political motives, and very often by a team of Western experts called in from the outside. It should be noted here that though many people today in Western countries feel attracted to the Eastern way of life, most Eastern nations are trying to become more Westernized.

One inkling of the possibilities that occur when a differently centered culture gains access to television can be found in a program broadcast in Thailand. It is a kind of debate, utilizing the immediacy and the continual changing-ness of the medium to its fullest. Two people, usually a man and a woman, will have an argument—a lover's quarrel, a fight over housekeeping, etc.—and the whole thing will be set to music. The idea is that each tries to outinsult, outargue, the other, yet the replies must all adhere to the melody set down, and, more importantly, the last line of each response must rhyme with the opponent's last line. The winner is the one who outrhymes the other. This is all unrehearsed and done quite spontaneously.

People in the developing countries lack technical information. Apparently, technical instruction and know-how cannot be filtered out from all the other cultural propaganda. This, compounded with governmental desires to Westernize, makes the chances for the emergence of a distinctive, highly advanced audio-visual language quite slim at present. Many individuals who have spent time with the peoples of these countries speak of the "waiting" quality shared by the general population. They have a common sensibility toward life—a life that just plods along, indeterminate, relentless, with all goings held in colloidal suspension, becoming the flow. And so all the events of this life make sense; they have to, that's just the way it is.

On this fair ocean our human forms
Float about, like bowls on the surface of water;
Yea, like cups on the surface, till they are filled;
and when filled, these cups sink into the water.

from Jalal al-Din Rumi
"The Masnavi"
in *Teachings of Rumi*, translated by
E. H. Whinfield
(E. P. Dutton and Co., 1975)

Highest good is like water. Because it excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way.

. . . The way gives them life;
Virtue rears them;
Things give them shape;
Circumstances bring them to maturity.
Therefore the myriad creatures all revere the way
and honor virtue. Yet the way is revered and virtue
honored
not because this is decreed by authority but because
it is
natural for them to be treated so.
Thus the way gives them life and rears them;
Brings them up and nurses them;
Brings to fruition and maturity;
Feeds them and shelters them.
It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet extracts no gratitude;
It is the steward yet exercises no authority.
Such is called the mysterious virtue.

from Lao Tzu
Tao Te Ching, translated by D. C. Lau
(Penguin Books, 1963)

Maybe the television now being nurtured in this vast field of modern technological desolation, if applied and utilized and respected like water, will be cultivated by these wait/watchers into a rich and succulent visual/aural silt, one which is functional from raw need, and yet manifoldly sensitive from a life attitude of patiently (gently) waiting—a fertile reflection of a high degree of visual literacy shared by all beings on this planet. It would be a shame if these words become mere romantic rhetoric in the future, as they appear to be now.

Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

As is often the case, it took one piercing instance to snap me into recognition of how far I, and the situation I was in in the States, had strayed from internal truths. It was at the Open Circuits Conference on the Future of Television held at the Museum of Art, of all places, that I experienced this subtle awakening. Based on the magic Woodstock time interval of three days, and plagued by the normalities of communication retardation, which any discussion by more than three unrelated people using words, excessive human ego, authority designation, and an overabundance of videotape will invariably tend to create, I think the conference did most good on a more interpersonal level, for those who were physically present in that big room.

It was in the closing moments of the third round—rather late in the evening, in a sweaty, stale, cigarette haze that curtained the finale, with an intense panel of artists, museum people, and critics each trying desperately to name the elusive list of video aesthetics—that a familiar, long-term division soon broke onto the surface as expected: the never-ending battle between the video synthesizers and the so-called "conceptual" video utilizers. Round and round it went, and just as the last moments were literally ticking out, a short Oriental fellow by the name of Nam June Paik stood up, "as if disturbed from sleep," yawning and scratching his hair, and spoke out for the synthesizers. He said that video feedback is like sex. (Laughter.) It is a lot of fun for the guy doing it, but everyone else is just a voyeur. But the important part is that, like sex, everyone can do it. It is a form of communication with the self via a responsive machine. And finally, it has made some people happy doing it. (All pause.) Well, the discussion soon continued and promptly got on the same track, only to be left hanging minutes later by the mandatory exodus from the building due to the late hour. But still, that long "Wha?" after Paik's brief statement resounded long into the night. All he said was, "It makes some people happy." Why did the word "happy" seem so out of place in a discussion on video aesthetics, and in a conference on the future of television? I heard that statement not so much as a rebuttal defending the video synthesizer (the first one of which is named after Paik), but more as a general comment on the present situation. How far away from plain human feelings we've wandered if we are that incapable of understanding something with our hearts rather than our heads. Video, more specifically television, offers us the most potential freedom and clarity of expression yet, and we tend to use it for our own little quirks, for narrowing down rather than exploding things way out (along with the threat of possibly us with it)—a bit more dangerous but vastly more exciting in the long run.

Much of the information and ideas expressed here concerning global potentials and media in developing countries emerged from discussions with Lorraine Herm, Communication Program officer for U.N.D.P. (United Nations Development Program), and from the insights her energies and experiences have yielded.

NOTES

Concerning the historical development of video in Europe, the bibliography in the Projekt '74 catalogue compiled by David Ross and Wulf Herzogenrath covers both European and American video up until June 1974. The following is a general list of large video exhibitions in 1974–1975.

September 1974	Incontro Internazionale Video e Films, Palais des Expositions, Geneva, Switzerland.
October 1974	Impact Video Art, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Lausanne, Switzerland.
November 1974	Art Video Confrontation '74, ARC Musée National d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris.
February 1975	Rencontre Internationale Ouverte de Vidéo, CAYC, Espace Chardin, Paris.
February 1975	Artists Videotapes, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium.
March 1975	Americans in Florence/Europeans in Florence, Videotapes from Art/Tapes/22, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Holland.
March 1975	Camel Award, Artevideo e Multivision, La Rotonda di Via Besana, Milan, Italy.
May 1975	Americans in Florence/Europeans in Florence, Travels to Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.
May 1975	3rd International Open Encounter on Video, CAYC at Gallería Civica di Arte Moderna, Ferrara, Italy.
June 1975	The Video Show, Serpentine Gallery, London, England.

(For information previous to 1974–1975, see *Kunst Bleibt Kunst* catalogue from Projekt '74, International Art Exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Cologne, Germany, July 6–September 8, 1974.)