

SEHEN und Video

Spezialgebiet eines neuern
Heinrichs Mediums

Katalog documenta 6
1977 Band 3 S 289 - 293,
S 295 - 296

VIDEO ART IN WEST GERMANY

PLEASE COPY

VIDEO ART AN ANTHOLOGY
Ed. by JRA SCHNEIDER AND BERYL KOROT
New York and London 1975

Wulf Herzogenrath

There is always
some letters
missing

I. From reproduction to creative works suited to the medium.

Video as a technology is already almost two generations old. The first television transmissions on a large scale were produced as propaganda: The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin were viewed, as well as heard, live—i.e., at the same time as the events themselves. Simultaneity and picture-sound synchronization represented a big step in the development of comprehensive, direct information with a high degree of realism.

This is not the place to discuss television as a medium in our daily lives, or its influence on politics and its manipulation of the television audience. I ask only that you bear in mind the fact that video technology was originally invented and intended for the purpose of the accurate reproduction of reality, and for the distribution of information. It was only freed from its functional framework a generation later, to do more than relay information about things which had already taken place.

In the history of graphic techniques, this progression appears again and again. The woodcut was used originally for distribution of the Bible and ideas related to the church, as well as for pictorial communication of sensational and macabre figures and events. These pictures made no claim to artistic value; they were intended only to reproduce as clearly as possible and to make known the subjects dictated by the person commissioning the work. Artists did not begin to use this technique until about a generation later. They were interested in the new representational possibilities of the technique, and the ability to make multiple copies. Likewise, copper-plate engraving and lithography were used at first only as reproduction techniques in books and newspapers, until artists recognized and began to use the mechanical and artistic possibilities of these new graphic processes.

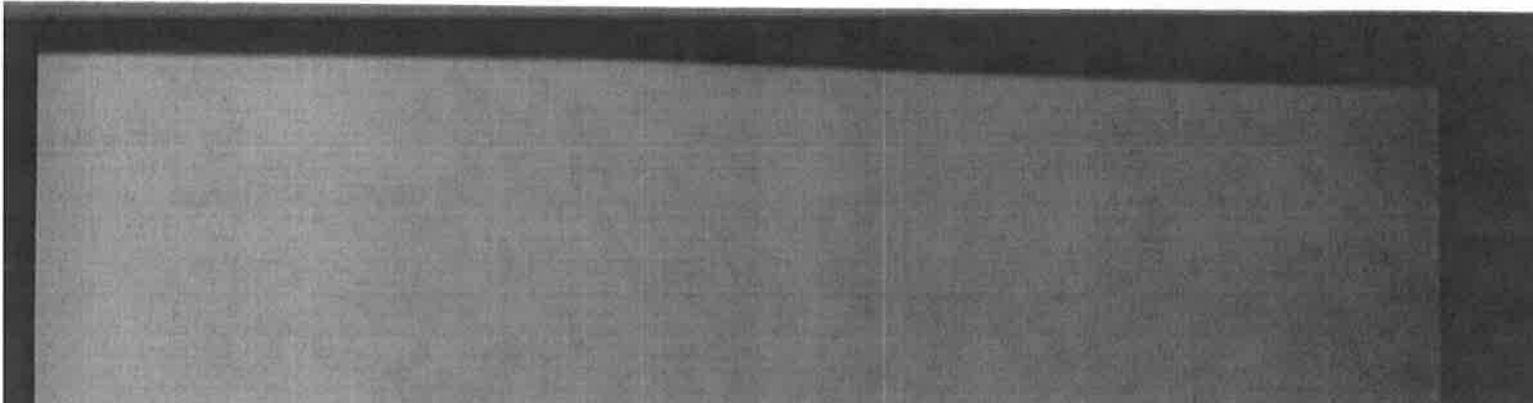
This span of about one generation's time between the discovery and socioeconomic use of a duplication technology and its artistic use become especially clear in the case of silk-screen printing. In the twenties, brightly colored and large-format posters were needed in large editions for publicity campaigns. These two qualities could be provided only by silk-screening, an old technique for prints of unusual size, which only then

began to be adopted on a wide scale. Using silk-screening, one could make an unlimited number of red and brilliantly colored prints. The consumer developed this technique to a high level, and a generation later the artist Willi Baumeister, working under Poldoski in Stuttgart, first used it experimentally. From that time on, a new graphic medium was available to everyone, and its popularity spread with such speed that today we have to remember that artists before the 1960's hardly used it. (The German national authorities still do not regard screen printing as an "artistic" technique; they tax it as a law for commercial, purely reproductive processes.) It lags along a generation behind the real work.

The two media/groupings of photography and film and television, naturally introduce other problems because they are less artistic, i.e., experimental and their uses—but rather because these media offer new opportunities for different kinds of communication. They are put to use in various ways in the mass societies of industrial democracies, and the information-dictatorship of these media offer direct inclusion of reality, through electronic processes by which they work, and with, and even feedback from, consumers, who then should become participants.

If we consider briefly at this point the artistic influence of the development of media, we can draw one conclusion: the development of all newly discovered processes: the new medium imitates the technical or stylistic methods of its predecessor. Gutenberg, for example, printed the Bible in 1455 with the hot-metal process, imitating the different forms of the old manuscript letters with accuracy and acting completely against the character of the medium he was using. He did so, perhaps, not on aesthetic grounds, but from economic considerations: to find buyers for his printed products, and he could keep his "invention" a secret.

Likewise, the first portrait photographers carried over the pictorial style of seventeenth-century painting, and the outstanding photographers (August Sander, Hans



ed themselves from the clichés of the earlier
ie social significance of those clichés.

, too, beginning with the earliest performance
d live theater performances for nearly a gen-
aining an artificiality appropriate to the live
ained for artists like Chaplin, Eisenstein, and
g to explore the inherent qualities of film in a
stinctive way.

omparisons we can conclude that each new
st copies the themes and forms of an older,
n—perhaps not even from ignorance of the new
out rather from the need to demonstrate the
efits of the new discovery. This fact should not
what is astonishing is the generally uniform
e between a new medium's discovery and its
artists who experiment with its unique applica-

on also began as "radio with pictures" or actual-
and even today there are too few people in posi-
tance in the television establishment concerning
ith forms appropriate to the medium. Television
ld films in response to public tastes; and for fear
itical novelty might offend, they develop no new
t communication.

th noting that the development of cheap video-
back units, the so-called portapak selling for just
(1900), was not inspired by a desire to use the
stically; for years it was built only to meet the
iness. Video was installed for security uses in de-
ories and banks, for traffic supervision by the
r training purposes in large international com-
since the end of the '60's has the portapak been
the general market. As soon as it appeared, it be-
lly spreading instrument for individual communi-
te documentary television, and experiments. With
y of private production, the video medium moved
an area which radio, as well as the audiotape
ady occupied.

1932, Bertolt Brecht made his "Proposal for the
ion of Radio": "Radio can be transformed from a
mechanism into a communications apparatus.
l then be conceivably the most splendid communi-
work in our public life, an enormous channeling
t is, it would be this way if it saw its role not only
out but also as receiving; in other words, if it gave

the listener a chance to be heard as well as to hear, and did not
isolate him but set him in contact. Radio would accordingly
have to organize the listener as a contributor." (In *Writings
on Literature and Art*, vol. 1 [Frankfurt: Suhrkampverlag,
1967], p. 134.)

Radio could fulfill this role only to a limited extent. Sound
recordings, in spite of its relative technical simplicity, stimu-
lated no media revolution and brought about no change in the
"one-way-street" system of public radio, even though all the
media and technical opportunities were present.

In this realm, video—picture and sound—signified the closest
reference to reality. Television, with its seemingly true, pic-
torially genuine reality, made the event easy to comprehend.
Television always suggests reality, regardless of all its manipu-
lation and deceptions. Even though radio is "live" and close to
reality, it leaves a great part of the observer's imagination free;
and film, on the other hand, plays constantly with fiction, with
illusion. This is apparent from the simple fact of star-worship:
the film star fascinates through his film roles. He is presented
through shows, publicity, even through typecasting in serial
shows, as a seemingly "private" person; and therefore the
viewer always wants to see him in his role, in his "typical" be-
havior, which is taken for real. (The audience often knows
only the name of the character, not the name of the actor!)

II. The four areas of video art in the German Federal Re- public.

This first area, television's claim to reality, is an important
theme of video artists, even though it comes a generation after
the discovery and popularization of the medium. They can
count on the viewers' attention to their product, since the
audience sees it on the same set that gives them their other
programs. Television ought to be considered more as an em-
ployer of artists than as a distributor of video works especially
for the medium. However, since the two productions of Gerry
Schum's TV Gallery, there have been no similar works.

Schum produced two films—*Land Art* (1969) and *Identifica-
tion* (1970)—with artists who created special pieces for these
films. These were not artworks in the usual sense, but foot-
prints that were quickly washed away by the tide, activities
that had meaning in that they were shown on the television
screen. The German artists Rinke, Ruckriem, Ruthenbeck and
Walther all participated. Keith Arnatt, in a courageous step
vis-à-vis the television authorities of 1969, put on a week-long
sequence of pictures, in which each day at the same time the
next picture faded in, and the viewer saw Arnatt himself sink-

ing further and further into the floor, until in the last picture he was not visible at all.

FERNSEHGALERIE BERLIN GERRY SCHUM

LAND ART

LONG 'Walking A Straight To Mile Line - Dartmouth England

FERNÁNDEZ 'A Hole In The Sea - Subevaranga Island

OPPENHEIM 'Timehack - Fort Kent Zoogenic USA/Canada

SMITHSON 'Fossil Quarry Mirror - Capota Lake N.Y. USA

BOEDEM 'Sand Fountain - Camargue France/Belg

DEBETS '12 Hours Two Object - Bunko Coast Holland

HILTMANN 'Ten Lines From Celine - Mirnyy-Dzhet USA

WILSON 'Copsin - Copsin Dry Lake California USA

SENDUNG 15. APRIL 22.40 Uhr I. PROGRAMM

Gary Schum, poster for the broadcast *Land Art* from the Schum Television Gallery, 1969. Photo by Joschik Kerstin.

Interruption of habitual viewing patterns, and inquiry into the meaning and the reality level of television programs, are appropriate themes for video artists. The great success of a television production called *Standing on My Own Head* by the Canadian artist Robin Page, then living in Cologne, proves that it is possible to awaken the interest of the usually passive and change-resistant public. At the end of 1972 he challenged the viewers of a show called *Artists' Portraits* to draw him and to send him the drawing, in exchange for which he would send them the portrait he was making during those same two minutes, a portrait of the onlooker (actually of the monitoring camera). In those two minutes nothing happened on the

screen except quiet observation; and the same thing in the homes of many German television viewers three thousand had the courage to send in their d

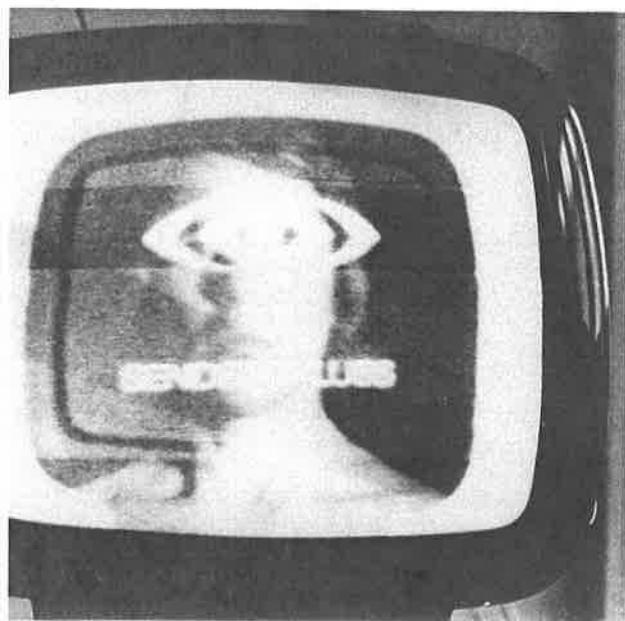
Activities with viewer participation were publicized as early as 1963 by Wolf Vostell. Despite this, it took him time to announce such activities as these on the radio: "Hold your naked body to the television screen"; "Hold your naked body to the screen." This sort of play activity with the television set from a different viewpoint—as a TV set are also helpful. In 1963, for example, he suggested the set in barbed wire, throwing a cream pie at watching the rest of the program; or watching it out pictures, photographs, etc.; or even, after a with friends, taking the television set outside at

Such activities, or even more strenuous ones, are necessary to help the viewing public achieve a critical relation to television, to the medium and its content. It has been documented, for instance, that viewers are often evening on the blind side of their TV sets. As an example, the viewing public complained bitterly in 1968 that a mustache that a very popular television announcer had during his vacation, and succeeded in making him share with us see televised reality merging with private reality. Television personality is no longer merely part of an atomized world, but a true family member.

Jochen Hiltmann's *Video-Tape II* (1972) is a continuation of television viewing habits. In the third part of a small television set is turned on, and the first part of an announcer of the Third WDR program (TV) appears on it. Then the televised picture of the announcer is taken over by its own monitor. We see a man, not the announcer, but inside the picture tube, feeling along the edge of the picture tube, getting more and more excited and nervous, and finally seeming to crash through the picture tube. After his last, violent blow a sign appears on the screen: "Technical difficulties—Please change channels"—with the screen for a long time, until the tape ends.

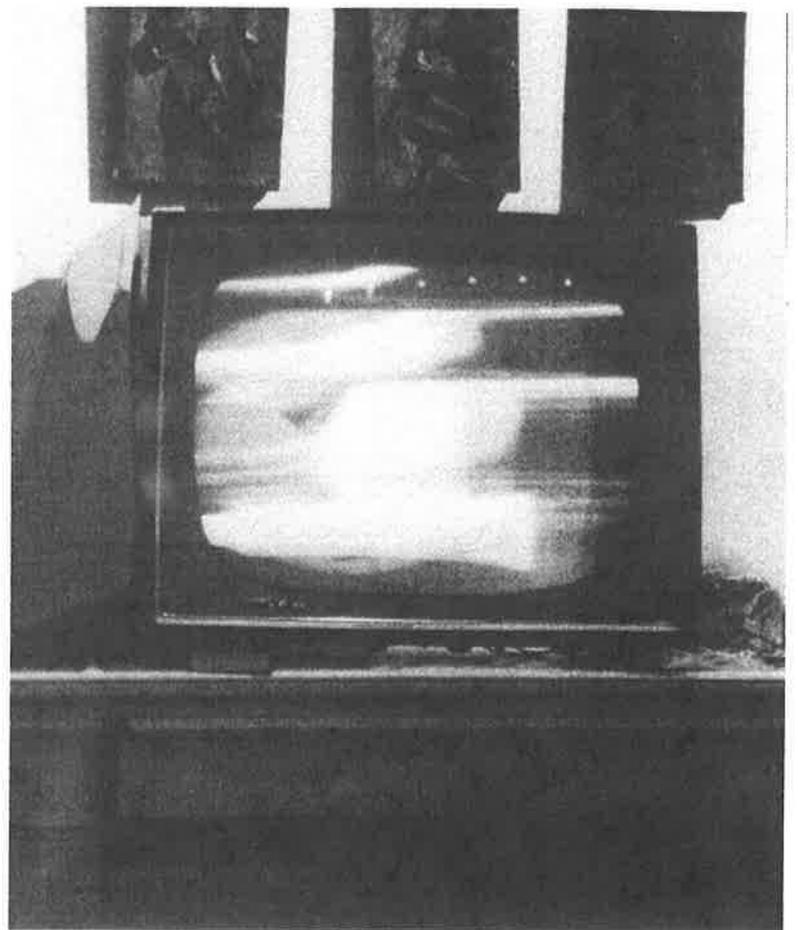
In 1973 Harold Ortlieb created a private, self-produced on a thirty-minute videotape, *Television I*, in which he attempts to overcome the distance of the viewer. The television program: The TV viewer fades in and out in the rhythm of his breathing. Inhaling means that his face fades in, and exhaling means that his face fades out. The viewer meets himself on the screen against the background of the permanent television picture.

visual feedback, the viewer begins to meditate. In them he "releases" himself and engages in contemplations of attention to the program alternate with self-awareness. External direction and internal dominate by turns. The consciousness of the viewer passive reception gives way to active penetration of perception, the television program. He is not receiver, he himself becomes a sender. He perceives time as living time. The medium does not control controls the medium.



erlieb, still photo from the videotape *24-Stunden* (24-Hour Action"), Hamburg, 1973. Photo by Harald

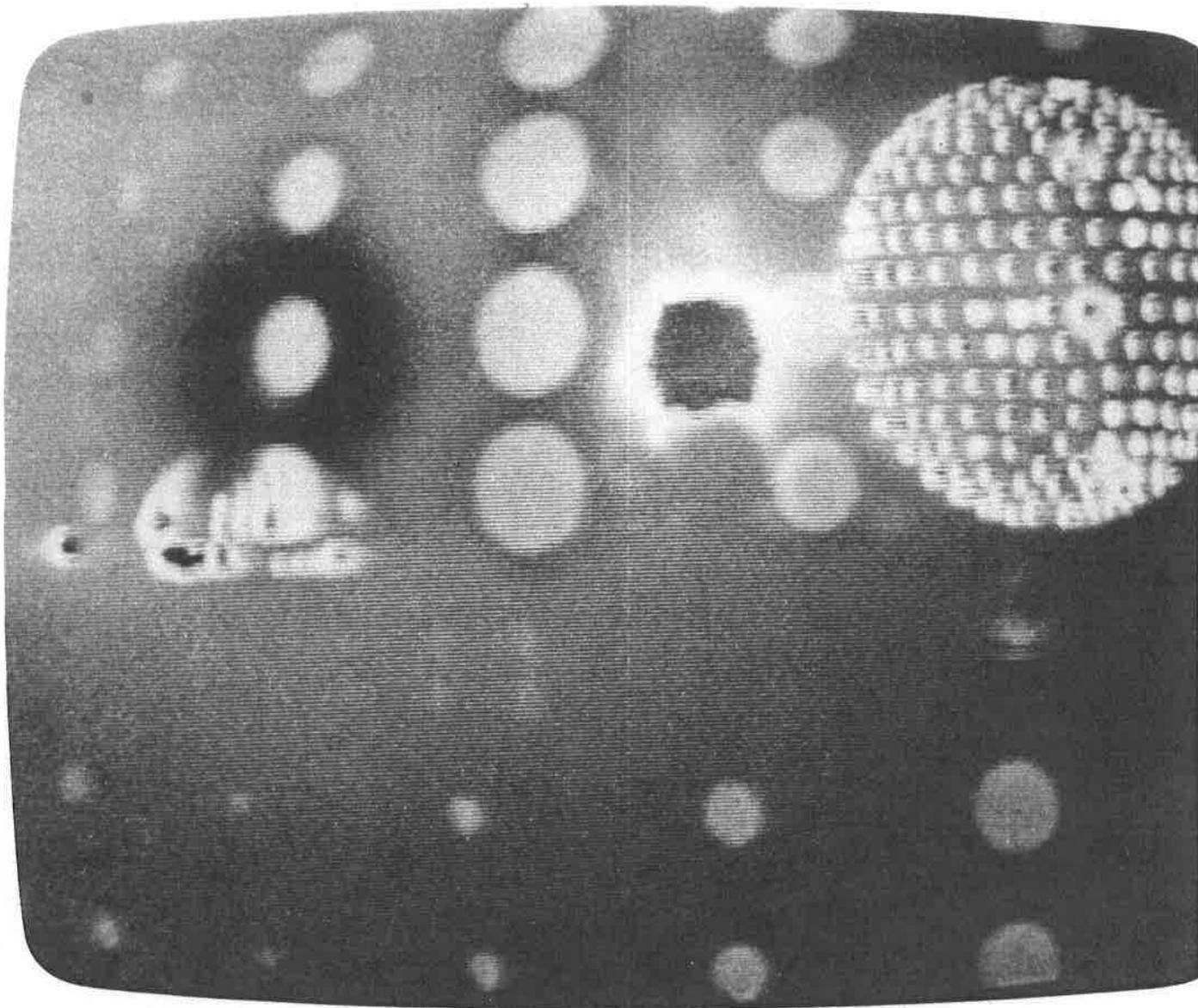
area consists of electronics with its multitude of possibilities. As early as 1963, in their first "happening" in Wuppertal, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell altered the television picture with magnets, electric household appliances, and made visible the artificial-25 European picture lines. Paik, together with his wife Yoko, and Shigeo Fukuda, perfected the first video synthesis in 1970 in New York. With this device and its many possibilities, it is possible to call forth electronically every dimension, rhythm, etc. As early as the end of the 1960s, Piene and Aldo Tambellini produced their half-film *Black Gate Cologne* on West German TV. In their documentary pictures of an action with inflatable figures, the illumination devices were altered by the superimposition of electronically produced forms. These colorful



Nam June Paik, electronic object *Verändertes Fernsehgerät* ("Transformed TV Set"), from his one-man show in the Parnassus Gallery, Wuppertal, 1963. Photographer unknown (repro).

superimpositions showed the possibilities of the electronic medium.

Such electronic elements have, of course, been used in West German television only as pause-fillers, or in shows and television plays by directors like Jean Christophe Averty, Pierre Koralnik, Michael Leckenbusch, George Moorse, Bob Rooyens, or Peter Zadek. Only the music division of the WDR (directed by Montez-Baquer) has broadcast various ballets with electronic video processes as artistically equivalent forms to the music and dance movements. Since the big public television stations in the German Federal Republic still have no experimental studios, like those that developed here so early and so commendably for electronic music, West Germany has nothing at all to show in this area. We here in Europe cannot compete with the richly furnished studios of Boston, New York, San Francisco, and even Canada.



Otto Piene and Aldo Tambellini, still photo from the videotape *Black Gate Cologne*, a production of the WDR station, Cologne, 1968. Photo by Joschik Kerstin.

Despite all the critical acclaim for the often purely decoratively used video abstractions, the lack of experimental studies is regrettable, especially in Germany, where in the '20's the foundation for this development was laid. Contributing to this foundation were the "absolute" films of Walter Ruttmann (shown first in 1921), Viking Eggeling (shown in progress in 1921, first publicly shown in 1922), Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, Werner Graeff, Kurt Franz, as well as the color-and-light shows of Kurt Schwerdtfeger and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack (first performed in 1922 at the Bauhaus).

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The combination of nonrepresentational form with visualization of music"), the chief theme of many was achieved optically and intelligibly, following the projects of Scriabin with Alexander Laszlo's light organ" (developed before 1924) and by the work of Oskar Fischinger, who after his emigration to Germany began to have a strong influence there on the first of experimental film makers and video artists. After the departure of Nam June Paik, who as an artist in M

ition of Music—Electronic Television” (Wup-
e Parnass, March 1963—the very first video
id the foundations for his later, influential work,
great gap that was only made more apparent by
st appearances” afterward. Of course, if he had
work with German television studios, he could
e close to the opportunities that he has found in

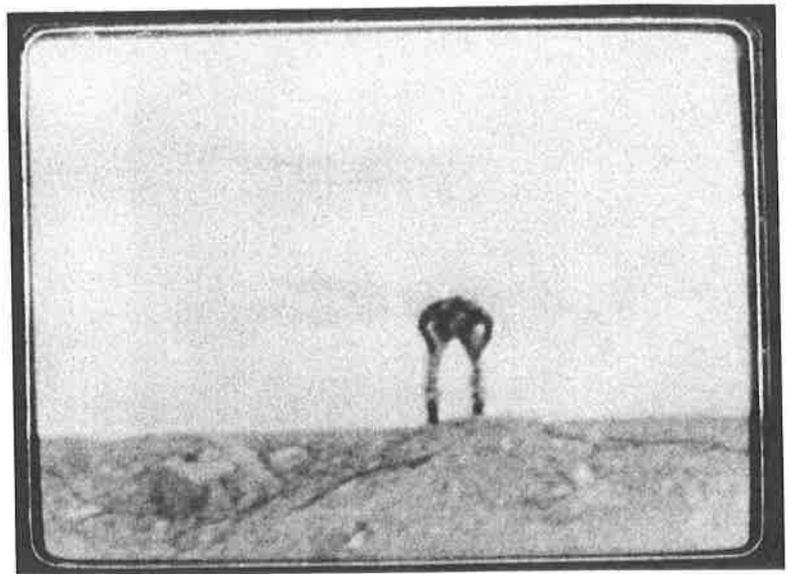
najor area I would include video therapy, video
video plays, and video communication. Here
versally available medium, usable even with nor-
ghting and independent of networks, can be said
dividual creativity and spontaneity, using a pre-
ed stimulus and followed by shared viewing of
ich have just been taped.

roup Video-Audio Media and the Darmstadt
issen (“Tele-knowledge”) have undertaken
orts in this field. There are similar groups in
d in Munich, which have worked with video
y in the area of drugs. Here the concept of art is
andoned as being too limiting: “The spontane-
tion of trivial and fictitious roles creates a frame-
and communicative creativity, which lends itself
ment of new and appropriate forms of behavior
mess-raising; it makes an emancipating contribu-
above mere artistic production.” These words by
sler of Video-Audio Media state the viewpoint



lio Media (Michael Geissler), still photo from the
ch will nicht nach Casablanca (“I don’t want go to
”), 1973. Photo by Joschik Kerstin.

underlying the varied spectrum of that group’s activities; like-
wise the slogan “Make your own television” of Telewissen. It
becomes apparent in the work of these groups that video can
be used by everybody like a notebook, an electronic journal.



Jochen Gerz, still photo from the videotape *Rufen bis zur Erschöpfung* (“Shouting to Exhaustion”), 1972. Photo by Jochen Gerz.

In the realm of art, this realistic, easily available documenta-
tion medium is especially important to artists who choose
not to create on canvas or paper, in stone or wood, but rather
to portray processes, changes, and events. Videotape is the only
possibility, the only medium that brings events closer after
they occur and makes them visible. When Jochen Gerz,
in his tape *Shouting to Exhaustion*, 1972, places himself sixty
meters from his camera and synchronized microphone, and
then calls “Hello” as loudly as possible, videotape provides an
accurate documentation of these twenty-five minutes of physi-
cal exertion. Rebecca Horn illustrates her actions: Pencils are
put on the mask of a head; or fingers are alarmingly lengthened
with long, black sticks that feel around a room; or feathers
stroke searchingly and tenderly. Ulrike Rosenbach has been
carrying out live performances since 1973, in which she records
herself with a camera and then includes the monitor picture
in its piecemeal presentation with the large space and process
of movement. She usually includes looped tapes of music for
intensification of the psychologically penetrating quality of her
movements. Frederike Pezold does her video work on the
theme of: “The body language of one sex, according to the
rules of anatomy, geometry, and kinetics.” She records her
body in such a way that almost nonrepresentational black and
white pictures in countless variations emerge, from which she
makes photo enlargements and sequences of drawings.