

PERFORMING POST-PERFORMANCE or THE TELEVISIONIST PERFORMING TELEVISIONISM

by Carl Loeffler

The Artist and Television

The current tendency of the visual artist crossing over into mega media venues was expressed in two recent projects occurring within the format of television. The University of Iowa in Iowa City was the project site for the ARTIST AND TELEVISION conference, a massive telecommunication event transmitted via satellite to over 300 cities in 43 states. And the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, sponsored PRIME TIME VIDEO, an original video art project featuring 5 works produced for prime time broadcast television in cooperation with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Both projects are ruggedly aggressive toward interfacing visual artists with television and attempted to deal with television in its own terms: production value, entertainment factor, distribution, and sponsorship. A discussion of the debatable success of the projects follows, but in conclusion, both projects are important

signifiers of increased crossover activity between visual artists and television in the future.

Perhaps the most notable name in the distribution of video art on television is Jaime Davidovich who with Estera Pollock hosted the ARTIST AND TELEVISION transmission. The project conjoined live interaction from sites in Iowa City, New York, and Los Angeles and was distributed via satellite to over 43 states. If participation and distribution are the measure, this project is the model. Each of the three interactive sites organized a multitude of activity intended for participation. The three hours scheduled for the actual transmission could not accommodate all of the activity prepared for the format. Yet the transmission contained an enormous amount of interaction and remains the most collaborative and widely distributed artist-based satellite work in the history of video art.

Speaking as an active participant in Iowa City, the excitement was terrific and the pressure enormous. Jokes were made about the historic nature of the transmission to vent the mounting tension as scripts were passed around and make-up applied. History was in the making and the potential audience was in one word -- massive. The camera lights went up and the transmission opened with hosts Davidovich and Pollock, who in the manner of television anchor persons, weaved through an odyssey of dialogue, interviews, pre-recorded video art, and live performance art, most often interactive in concept, ori-

ginating from the three project sites. For those of you who missed it, PBS is rumored to broadcast an edited version of the transmission at a later date.

The crossover of visual artists into television raises the particular question: where does video leave off and television begin? Even more important, does the participation of video artists and television result in the production of what can be termed television art? In order to heighten the drama of these briefly stated questions this essay is retitled, THE TELEVISIONIST OR PERFORMING TELEVISIONISM, to suggest a sense of change taking place in visual



Pollock and Davidovich with Alexis Green. Artists and Television Transmission, 1982.

artists' approach to the television medium. There is a difference between video and television and for years the mis-identification of the terms has been troublesome. In an attempt to clarify the situation, the following distinctions between video (art) and television (art) are proposed:

Video art is often presented in a gallery context or a "framed" segment of television.

Television art is presented in an "unframed" television context or "framed" gallery situation.

Video art is subject to the criticism applied to painting and sculpture.

Television art is derived from painting and sculpture but subject to the criticism of the information environment.

Video art is subject to the high art value of the individual as genius.

Television art is dependent upon a production crew and obscures the genius of the individual.

Video art is perceived as an art commodity which increases in value over time.

Television art is perceived as information which only has value for as long as it is useful.

Video art is distributed to an art audience.

Television art is distributed to a non-art audience.

Video art applies hardware as an aspect of mystification.



Television art applies hardware to become more accessible.

Video art is funded by the art system of grants and patrons.

Television art is funded by investment groups, advertising, and mega distribution.

Video art looks to the art context for meaning in the end.

Television art looks to the art context as a means to the end.

The development of a television art can be substantiated but the remaining question is: assuming that the ultimate criticism of television art resides in the ratings, will television

artists cease to be identified as practitioners of visual art and become television producers? Perhaps the next "art book" to appear will be titled, THE PAINTED TUBE.

Returning to the two projects mentioned, the ARTIST AND TELEVISION transmission and the PRIME TIME VIDEO series, are they to be regarded as video art or television art? Although important as both of the projects are in the development of a television art, both are transitional, and more aligned to video art than television art. The

internal conflict suggested is evidenced in the ARTIST AND TELEVISION transmission which by virtue of the title isolates the artist from television and "frames" the experience as a function of art. Additionally, the nature of the live performative type works selected for the transmission were vastly inappropriate and better placed in an artist-space situation -- in this context, they came across as performance art works on television. Performance art does not fare well in a tightly scheduled format. One disaster in the transmission was Chris Burden's performance (by the way, not interactive), which developed technical problems and was cut off prior to completion when the time allotted was exceeded. The greatest video art signifier of the transmission was the endless technical problems with the enormous system employed. Not that technical credit should not be granted here. Factually, the transmission was a massive undertaking but the limited budget available and typical last minute "art scrambling" positioned this project within the context of "under budgeted visual art" where the idea is often more interesting than the execution. The most televisionist aspects of the transmission consisted of the anchors Davidovich and Pollock, who came across as wonderfully predictable television hosts replete with posed opening smiles, speaking in phrases completed by the other, and utilizing the standard devices in television when introducing station breaks, program segments, or returning from same. The massive distribution of the transmission is another example of televisionism carried out to stunning completion.

Regarding performance, the most successful was produced by John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn (in Iowa City) and interactive with Gary Lloyd (in Los Angeles). Consisting of overlapping visuals and audio, the piece was wonderful to watch and provided accessible open interpretation for a general television viewing audience. The successes of the transmission are to be found in those areas of the program which in some manner were concerned with the conventions of television. The ultimate function of the television

artist is to take the conventions of television to a further conclusion.

The PRIME TIME VIDEO series sponsored by the Mendel Art Gallery was produced to be entertaining for a television viewing audience. The concept of the project is televisionistic but transitional in execution. The series title and the nature of the videotapes produced, positions this project within the context of video art on television. Surprisingly, only three of the five videotapes in the series are interesting as video art let alone television. In short, as important as this project is toward the development of a television art, the series is uneven in concept, production value, and in application to a television viewing audience.

The most successful work is Noel Harding's PEOPLES' HOMES BELONG TO THOSE WHO LIVE IN THEM, a primary example of video art if not television art. The success of this production is derived from well-paced edits, compelling special effects, performative aspects, and an exceptional audio track which weaves in and out of the work in a sculptural manner. The camera shots are a real attention grabber. Television viewers will stick with this one just to see what it is all about. Elizabeth Chitty's contribution, in essence a love story (made for T.V.), utilizes one of the most spectacular opening scenes witnessed: zooming from outside of a window into a home, to a television set displaying a slow vertical roll and accompanied by an audio track suggestive of an amplified heart beat. When the zoom is completed the set is near full frame and Chitty interacts with it in a manner representative of preoccupations expressed in her recent performance, HISTORY, COLOR T.V. & YOU. From there the videotape tends to drag, but what an opening sequence. The most accessible work to a television audience is John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald's production. In comparison to their other work this videotape is restrained in application of special effects. The success of this work resides in the subtle manipulation of images familiar to the Canadian plains. Opening on a shot of a grain tower the videotape unfolds

accumulated images of wheat fields, harvest machines, tractors, farm houses, each subtly manipulated to hold the attention of a video art audience yet identifiable for a television audience. The remaining videotapes in question were produced by General Idea and Stuart Sherman. G.I.'s videotape is far too long and too narrative. Conjoining black and white segments with color in the production is interesting but what ever happened to their acute sensibility expressed in PILOT, a superb example of video art. Sherman's work is intended to amuse children but this is doubtful.

PRIME TIME VIDEO has sensational aspects to it. The most impressive is the sponsorship of the CBC. Factually, the quality of the series resides in the production value of the videotapes which could not have been attained in this situation without the support of the CBC. In this regard, the series is televisionist in nature and will serve as an important model for future activity. O

Post Video cont. from p. 33

ducing, and distributing video art. In this narrowcast future, cable, satellites and videodiscs feed a more individualized home media center. Here, new video artists will have access to a self-selected gallery/audience of people using their homes to showcase new video art.

In either case, the video production facility will continue to be the vital link in the new video artist's ability to conceive, create and distribute new video art. Whether artist/consultant or artist/businessman, it is essential that the new video artist work confidently with commercial production facilities and audiences outside the gallery environment. O

COPY CAMERA

ART COM STATS

70-12th Street
S.F. Ca.
431-7524