

# Allure of the **Raw:** CALIFORNIA VIDEO

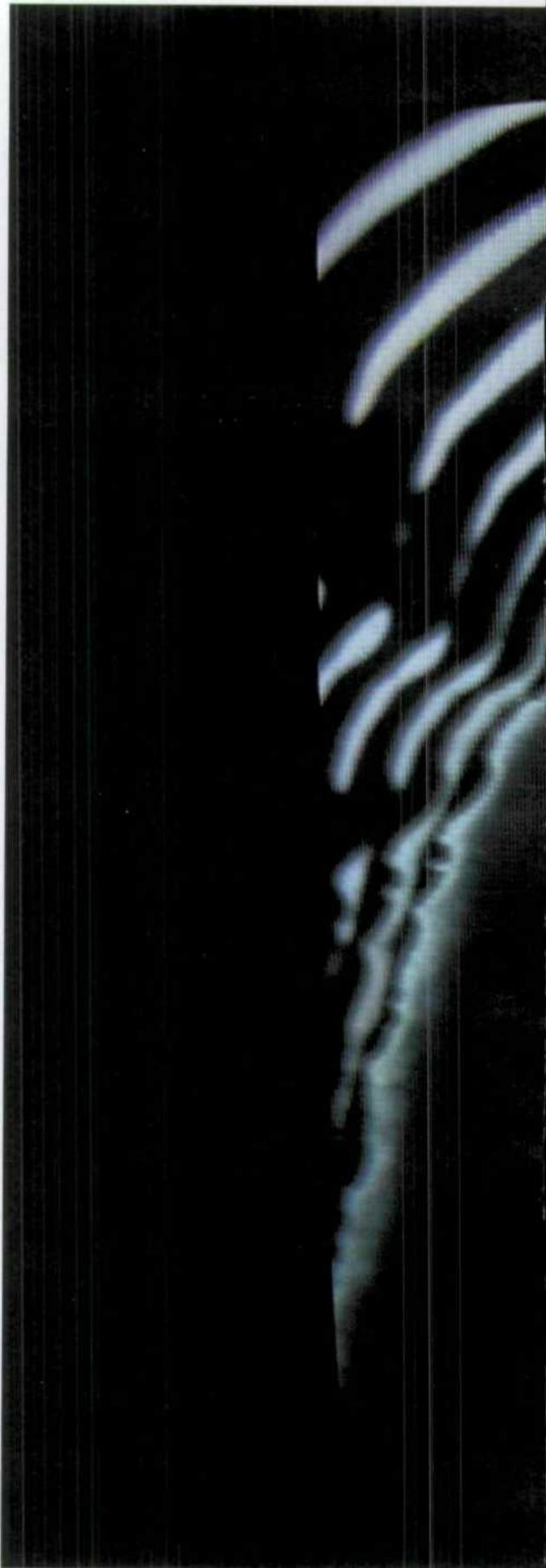
By HOLLY WILLIS

On a Tuesday night last November, a woman in a tight white T-shirt and black pants shot her swarthy partner with a rifle while onlookers watched in rapt fascination. A performance piece presented as part of the Performa 07 biennial, the event reenacted Chris Burden's now notorious performance at the F-Space gallery in Santa Ana, California, which took place 36 years earlier when he, too, was shot in the arm. Burden's painful injury was captured on Super-8 film, and the footage, although only a few seconds in length, was later distributed on video by Electronic Arts Intermix as part of a compilation of Burden's performance work from the 1970s. Thanks to the video documentation, the debate sparked by the event, and the sheer madness required to stage it, Burden's *Shoot* catapulted the artist into the status of the legendary.

And the reenactment? The woman was a characteristically busty and rather awkward avatar toting a sticklike .22, and the wounded fellow felt no

pain, as the shooting took place in the cartoonish multiuser virtual environment known as Second Life. Staged by the self-described Net-art pranksters and hacktivists Eva and Franco Mattes, the reenactment of *Shoot* was part of a larger series of restaged seminal performance pieces from the 1970s and '80s, including Joseph Beuys's *7,000 Oaks*, Valie Export's *Tapp und Tast kino (Touch Cinema)*, and Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*.

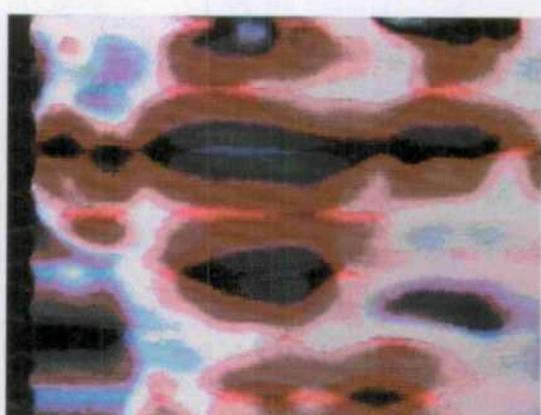
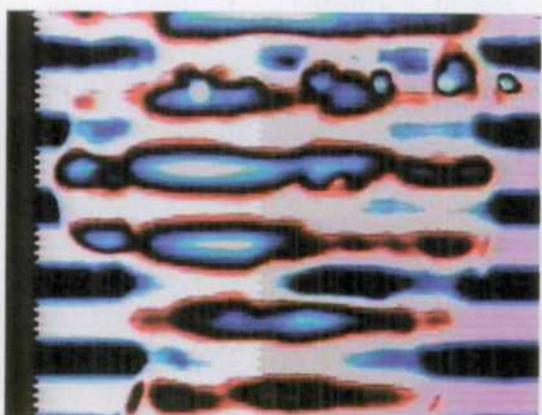
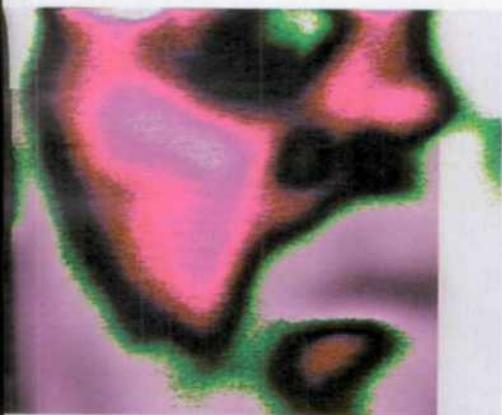
Casual onlookers and pundits may write off the shootings staged by the Matteses, who go by the name 0100101110101101.org, as pure gimmickry (and many have). But one thing is abundantly clear, and has been for several years now: we are in the midst of a provocative return to the artworks—specifically video—of the 1970s and '80s. Beginning this month, in "California Video," the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Museum in LA will mount a large-scale show of more than 30 years of video art produced in California. Featuring more



SKIP SWEENEY, STILL FROM INTERSTITIAL INTERVIEW SEGMENTS OF ILLUMINATING SWEENEY, 1975. SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO CREATED FOR TV, COLOR, SOUND, 30 MIN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



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than 50 pieces, with several commissioned specifically for the exhibition, "California Video" grew out of the Institute's acquisition two years ago of the vast video archive established by the Long Beach Museum of Art in the mid-'70s, which includes more than 3,000 videotapes, many produced by artists based in Southern California. The show comes at an opportune time for audiences to reflect on the difference between new-media art being made then and now. Indeed, and not insignificantly, these early videos—by artists including Eleanor Antin, Ant Farm, and Arthur Ginsberg with Video Free America—seem particularly audacious, smart,

ade of feminine grace is implicit. But while it's tempting to read the images in this direction—with video revealing photography's lies—the brilliance of Antin's work is that it invites a reading that moves in the opposite direction as well, revealing that the video "documentation" is just as easily prone to manipulation. Antin stretches well beyond this now well-worn conceit, however, to suggest the connections between artifice, manipulation, role-playing, and the act of being—or playing—a woman. Antin moved to Southern California from New York in the late '60s to teach at the University of California, San Diego, and her arch wit and

**These early videos are particularly audacious, smart, and political now, when most of us feel as connected to our political system as to cluster bombs exploding in Iraq.**

funny, and political now, when most of us feel as connected, and relevant, to our political system as to the cluster bombs exploding in Iraq.

For "California Video," the Getty will present two components of Antin's 1973 installation titled *Caught in the Act*, which includes *Caught in the Act: Choreography I—Center Stage 1-8*, consisting of eight black-and-white photographs, along with a 36-minute single-channel video. The photographs present Antin as the elegant ballerina Eleanora Antinova, one of the artist's highly iconic multiple personae. The images suggest grace and balance, characteristics revealed to be false in the videotape, which discloses the behind-the-scenes endeavors required to manufacture the poise displayed in the still images. The feminist critique of the masquer-

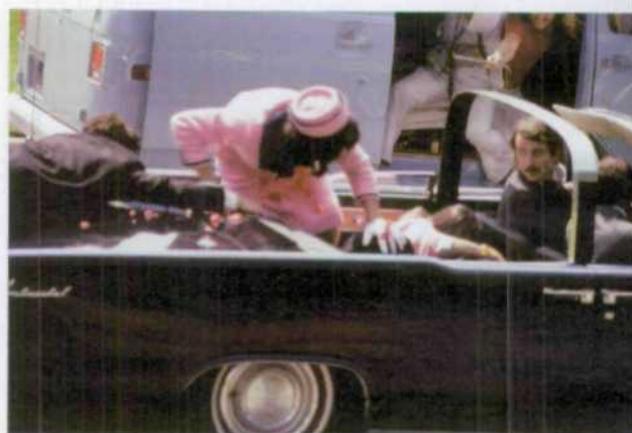
refusal of traditional artworld categories still resonate today. What is gender, her piece asks, if not an elaborate masquerade with various levels of truth, none of them ever finding solid ground?

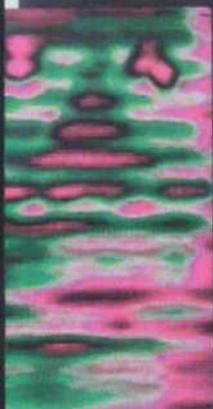
Many artists combined performance and a feminist political stance to disrupt conventional notions about video's closest cousins, namely television and film, while helping build a framework for considering feminist politics in embodied, smart, and often humorous ways. Antin considers the framing afforded by both the still and the video camera, and she interrogates the gendered gaze. Other artists also tackled these issues: Joan Jonas's video *Vertical Roll*, from 1972, for example, shows close-up fragments of the artist's body in various costumes. But as much as we strain to see more clearly, we are pre-

TOP (FIRST AND SECOND IMAGES): JOHN STURGEON, STILLS FROM *PORKY*, 1974. VIDEO, 1 MIN 45 SEC. (THIRD AND FOURTH IMAGES) STILLS FROM *NOR/MAL CON/VERSE*, 1974. VIDEO, 4 MIN 18 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

ABOVE: WARNER JEPSON, STILLS FROM *SELF-PORTRAIT D-38*, 1975. VIDEO, 55 MIN 11 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

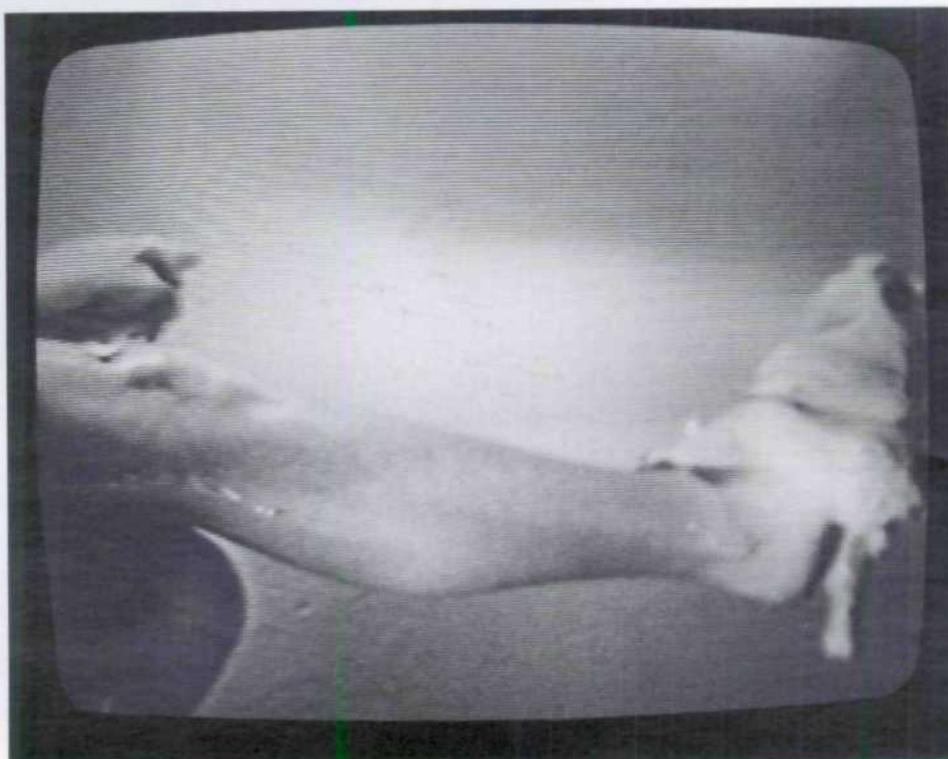
BELOW: T. R. UTHCO AND ANT FARM, PRODUCTION STILLS FROM *THE ETERNAL FRAME*, 1975. VIDEO, 22 MIN 21 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTISTS.

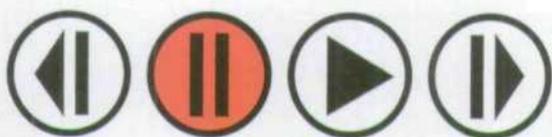




ELEANOR ANTIN. LEFT: STILL FROM REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING, 1971. VIDEO, 38 MIN. ABOVE: STILL FROM CAUGHT IN THE ACT, 1973. VIDEO, 36 MIN 10 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

BELOW: NINA SOBELL, STILLS FROM CHICKEN ON FOOT, 1974. VIDEO, 5 MIN 38 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTIST.





ARTHUR GINSBERG AND VIDEO FREE AMERICA, STILLS FROM THE CONTINUING STORY OF CAREL AND FERD, 1970-75 VIDEO SERIES. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

HILJA KEADING, STILL FROM LET ME (ENTERTAIN YOU), 1989. VIDEO, 9 MIN. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

ALL IMAGES FROM THE CATALOGUE CALIFORNIA VIDEO ARTISTS AND HISTORIES (GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, 2008) EXCEPT FOR IMAGE BY ARTHUR GINSBERG AND VIDEO FREE AMERICA.

vented, because the image constantly “rolls” upward; meanwhile, the sound track offers a loud, violent pounding. The piece is a radical denial of the pleasure associated with viewing the female body, and while it offers a different kind of critical pleasure (at least to some viewers), the viewing experience itself is often described as painful. So if one of the tenets of early feminist artmaking was a denial of pleasure,

set in a '60s-era living room, replete with an old TV set, to consider depictions of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Made as a collaboration between the San Francisco-based media and performance-art collective T. R. Uthco (which included Diane Andrews Hall, Doug Hall, and Jody Procter) and the Ant Farm media collective (Chip Lord, Doug Michels, and Curtis Schreier, among others), also based in

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Antin's feminist strategy deployed humor, and as *Caught in the Act* suggests, a powerful statement can be at once provocative and funny, a key factor that contributes to the staying power of her work.

“California Video” also features a restaging of the original installation of the notorious 1975 project *The Eternal Frame*, which includes a 22-minute video

San Francisco, *The Eternal Frame* not only re-creates parts of the famous footage shot on Super 8 by Abraham Zapruder as the Kennedy motorcade traveled along its route through Dealey Plaza, but also stages the assassination itself as a media event in a fake documentary. The video gives us the reenactment of the assassination, as well as the activities

leading up to the reenactment—the preparations and rehearsals, all of it gradually embodying the *mise en abyme* structure of references without sources, with *The Eternal Frame* positing exactly that: an eternal frame, one that forever circumscribes the Real. The video, restored several years ago through the Bay Area Video Coalition, remains both a fierce skewering of American media mayhem and an incredibly thoughtful, sophisticated media analysis. Few parodies since have managed this deft combination.

If 1970s feminism and media analysis have returned with new relevance, so too has an interest in reality, even if contemporary versions of reality TV bear little or no relationship to their namesake. One of the most compelling documents of everyday life has to be *The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd*, which follows Carel Rowe, a filmmaker and performer in porn films, and Ferd Eggan, a bisexual drug addict, from 1970 to 1975. Directed by Arthur Ginsberg, working with the San Francisco media collective Video Free America, the project hovers between documentary and narrative, and indeed, its makers dubbed it “an underground documentary soap opera.” Viewers witness the evolving relationship between Carel and Ferd as they plan their wedding and get married, while grappling with issues related to personal and sexual identity. Ferd wants to maintain sexual contact with other men; Carel struggles to define her creative impulses and their role in her life. While Carel and Ferd's emotional turmoil makes for thoroughly engaging TV, viewers have to reckon with the degree to which what they're watching is “real.” The conversations about sexual and personal identity are bracingly honest, and Carel and Ferd's life (portrayed as “everyday”) strays far from the heterosexual norm.

CHRIS BURDEN, STILLS FROM THE  
TV BROADCAST OF THROUGH  
THE NIGHT SOFTLY, 1973. VIDEO,  
30 SEC. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

As we increasingly interact with one another in virtual worlds, whether in such multiuser environments as Second Life or on the various Web 2.0 platforms many of us confront daily, we crave unfiltered experiences. Looking at the projects in "California Video," it seems that the boundary between the real and the mediated was more distinct and Manichaean 30 years ago than it is now, in a world gridded by electronic networks, and this may be why these videos feel so fresh and relevant today.

In his 1996 book *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Hal Foster argues that an avant-garde practice is never fully significant during its inception. Instead it functions as a trauma, a hole in the symbolic order that can be only partially registered at the time; its repetitions and returns act as a sort of deferred action. Perhaps our current interest in the body-centered and visceral performance-video works from the past constitutes a desire to work through their impact—and trauma. Why were these bodies traumatic? They were racialized, sexualized, transsexualized bodies, bodies that oozed, bodies with orifices, bodies that announced their corporeality almost *in response* to the camera. Early video was all about using the video camera as a mechanism to engage *aliveness*, whether in awareness of the artist's own physicality or to look outward, at the world. The performance and Conceptual videos from the past, then, ask viewers at once to recontextualize the earlier work—to understand both its very physical, embodied disruption of everyday life—while recognizing the implications of its returns and repetitions in this life and our Second.

For more information on "California Video," turn to Index, p. 94.



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