

TV as a Creative Medium at Howard Wise

by Jud Yalkut

"It was the funeral of President Kennedy that most strongly proved the power of television to invest an occasion with the character of corporate participation. It involved an entire population in a ritual process. In television, images are projected at you. You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point. This creates a sort of inwardness, a sort of reverse perspective which has much in common with Oriental Art."

-Marshall McLuhan

Since the introduction of the home television receiver in 1946, several generations of millions of viewers have been bombarded daily by streams of electrons, at the rate of 3 million information bits per second. Television viewing became a daily ritual, a family's life centering around their 16 to 21 inch monocular picture tube within its monolithic console. As receiving sets became smaller and more portable, the assimilation of the TV mosaic into the corporate bloodstream of vibratory inputs became established fact, as commonplace as transistor radios and corner telephone booths.

Early television broadcasting formats mimicked ancient radio iconography, giving meat to the disembodied familiar voices, and visualization to the fantasy patterns of the sound airwaves. TV created its own figureheads, gargoyles, and abominations, spewing forth never-ending inundations of encapsulated information, exploding frenetically like time seeds within the tribal psyche. The rate of bombardment was accelerated by the vanguard of television marketing demands, the repetitive imprinting process synchronized with the electromagnetic heat of cerebral brainwaves. It was only natural that the counter-reaction to this data spoon-feeding ad nauseam would eventually take the form of individual dietary control, with the emergence of television artists engaged in the articulation and reprogramming of the vital electronic emanations.

"Why has not art been affected by this all-pervading influence? Perhaps quite simply, because, up until now the time was not right. Perhaps it had to await the maturing of the generation who were in their sub-teens in the 1950's, those who were brought up on TV. As in every generation, some were artists working with TV because they were fascinated with the results they were able to achieve, and because they sensed the potential of TV as the medium for their expression."

-Howard Wise

Spectrographically probing the television art spectrum, the Howard Wise Gallery issued invitations to several artists, those already known for their video explorations and those ready to leap into TV from a neighboring art and technology promontory. The conglomerate constellating of these individual electronic visionings, a kaleidoscopic mosaicing of an already mosaiced medium, was exhibited at the gallery from May 17 through June 14 of 1969.

"This route to novelty depends not so much upon the novelty of perceptions available when people are allowed and encouraged to invent such perceptions."

-Sergo Boutourline

Sergo Boutourline's TELEDISCRETION presented "four mini-TVs with a device for fingertip selection of sound channels. Presentation will include three broadcast channels and one channel playing "A Commercial for Life." A videotape conceived and executed by Wynn Chamberlain and Sergo Boutourline". The interaction and selection of the TV spectator with the transmitted and

programmed channels generated levels of feedback, the simultaneous realization of one's ability to program modulate one's own perceptual inputs, the self-perception of the self as perceiver, in the process of perceiving.

"PARTICIPATION TV comprises 3 or 4 color TV sets which show multi-color echoes, or fog, or clouds which are electronically produced. Sometimes you can see yourself floating in air, dissolving in deep water."

-Nam June Paik

Paik, a pioneer of the "movement" who first exhibited TV abstractions in Germany in 1963, modulates incoming broadcast transmissions with electromagnetic distortions and circuitry modifications, abstracting iconographic clichés beyond all limits of symbolological recognition, creating neon-colored motifs of electronic interference patterns, fields of cognitive and nonfigurative imagery interweaving an unfolding Persian carpet of delight.

Sound modulations, hand clapping, singing, screeching, yelling, whispers, the ringing of a bell, all activate the neon tangles of fluorescent tracers, expanding and contracting the frequency modulations within involuted vortexes of electric color. Three TV cameras, red, green, and blue eyes survey the infinity of movements possible to the spectator-performer. Color-separated ghost shadows mirror and re-echo one's gestures, one's dance with light, with visual toys, with silence. In total feedback loop, a color monitor facets and fragments the closed circuit images of Charlotte Moorman's cello improvisations.

"In this case, the sound of the cello she plays will change, modulate, regenerate the picture of her TV-BRA·one sharp example to humanize electronics· and technology. By using TV as bra· the most intimate belonging of human being, we will demonstrate the humane use of technology, and also stimulate viewers NOT for something mean but stimulate their phantasy to look for the new, imaginative and humanistic ways of using our technology."

-Paik

Earl Reiback, a former Nuclear Engineer from MIT since engaged in the generation of luminal art works, contributed *Three Experiments Within the TV Tube*, his first TV work, "with the cooperation of R.C.A. tube laboratories, working within the depth of the TV tube, painting the walls of the tube with color phosphors". One called *Electron Beam* omitted the phosphors "off the front face of the tube, and added neon gas to the partial vacuum. With an external magnet the viewer can bend the beams of electrons" -- in the slow moving waves of concentric black-lighted galaxies *Thrust* mounted a phosphor-coated screen perpendicularly to the face of the tube to produce "shooting images in color· as the electron beam scan sweeps across the inner screen". A phosphor screen circumscribed and suspended within the perimeters of the picture tube receives the image streams of football games and horror movies, while the phosphor painted tube background reflects iridescent energy.

TV art imagery engenders multitudinous means of presenting itself upon whatever chosen monitor the presentation of a complete closed circuit system loop as a gallery piece, the modulation and distortion of received transmissions, the inclusion of the spectator as a visual link in the cybernated chain, and the eventual broadcast, through the air or via cable, of articulated and composed video imagery.

"A Moebius strip is a one-sided surface made by taking a long rectangle of paper, giving it a half-twist, and joining its ends· The outside is the inside. The inside is the outside. Here the power of Video Tape Recorder (VTR) is used to take in our own outside. When you see your self on tape, you see the image you are presenting to the world. When you see yourself on tape, you are seeing your real self, your 'inside'."

-Paul Ryan

You are sitting in a curtained booth on a stool, a TV aperture hangs before you like a surrealistic picture frame, beyond which the portable video camera sits and observes, as you are prodded ever so gently by calculatedly stimulating questions: "React to the following people: Nixon, your mother, Eldridge Cleaver, Teddy Kennedy, you- for the next ten seconds do what you want- Now, let your face grow sad · turn away from the camera · now turn back · press the stop button · thank you." You watch yourself in full audio-picture recap of your "interview", erasing all but the fewest frames of the previous tape as your tape will be obliterated by the next.

Said Paul of *Everyman's Moebius Strip*. "I feel it's only a very crude kind of beginning. I've been talking about the Moebius strip model and the videotape machine lately as an extension of man as a cybernator: communicating with himself about his behavior, he enlarges his control over his behavior. The machine is almost the reverse of what he is doing; what he puts out it takes in, processes, and then feeds back. Then a person can take that in process it, and feed it back. It's a matter of self-cybernating and self-processing, co-cybernating and co-processing ---lying one another's videotape playbacks in slow motion and imitating, or ___ body languages. That has a whole set of implications towards what I conceive of as bordering body languages. My hope is that we can avoid the professional, the professional who understands everything and barter on a lateral basis with friends. The electrical circuitry in the home and the video tape are really a beginning of a kind of elastic information environment in the home. The electric possibilities of communes are just beginning."

Former painter Frank Gillette and former filmmaker Ira Schneider joined forces to produce *Wipe Cycle*, a nine screen TV mural that served as the entrance and opening piece to *TV as a Creative Medium*. Facing the elevator doors opening into the gallery, the closed circuit cameras of *Wipe Cycle* instantly integrated the spectator's images in the immediate present and in delayed playback, switching with cyclic patterns of broadcast transmission and preprogrammed videotape, delay change cycles and alternations activating the nine screen matrix.

"Every 4 seconds the live feedback image exchanged places with the broadcast image for 4 seconds--in an 8 second cycle, 4 seconds is taken up by a live feedback of You in the Now, alternating with broadcast in the central monitor. The 4 external monitors exchange images every 8 seconds, and these are the tape programs. The 4 inner monitors exchange places every 4 seconds between the 8 and 16 second delays of the live image. So what you see phenomenally, is your image at 3 points in time fluctuating in the center of the mural, while at the extremities extraneous collage information is switching locations in its own pattern flux. Overlaid on all this is a 'light' pulse pattern every 2 seconds, going around counter-clockwise, and taking 6 seconds for a complete cycle. So the piece is based on a 2-4-8-16 second basis."

-Frank Gillette

Added Ira Schneider: "The most important thing was the notion of information presentation and the notion of the integration of the audience into the information. One sees oneself exiting from the elevator. If one stands there for 8 seconds, one sees oneself entering the gallery from the elevator again. Now at the same time one is apt to be seeing oneself standing there watching *Wipe Cycle*. You can watch yourself live watching yourself 8 seconds ago, watching yourself 16 seconds ago, eventually feeling free enough to interact with this matrix realizing one's own potential as an actor."

"The embedment of a TV in clear plastic so that it is totally viewable, ___ it from all human contact except for plugging and unplugging it. It is a relic of this civilization. When the TV stops functioning the work is complete."

-John Seery

John Seery's TV Time Capsule was the shortest-lived piece in the show, the color TV receiver completely sealed in a plastic cube, fusing and burning itself out by the end of the exhibition's first week. It was replaced to run for the last week of the show. "It was conceived in a factory, modified by the artists, until its programmed death; its death is its great creative act--the change of state."

"Art is sometimes called the 'transmission ecstasy'. Because TV is transmission with ecstatic potentials: why can't the viewer, after a trying day, sit down at his TV set and listen to music while watching the screen burst with beautiful color displays? These visual fantasies would relax you better than any tranquilizer."

-Eric Siegel

Siegel, an ex-prodigy from New York who home-constructed a closed circuit TV at the age of 15, contributed *Psychedelelevision in Color*, a ten minute reprogrammed color video-tape in which the image of Einstein gives birth to swirling continuums, four-dimensional whirlpools and sweeping electronic auroras, the two-dimensional phosphor screen transformed into a trip beyond vanishing points.

"In these years I developed devices with patterns, sequences, motion, color, programmed to make the viewer get involved in the unfolding composition, to relax and want more, to develop a new way of seeing. As the requirements of this new art revealed themselves, a need for an instantaneous, flowing, comprehensive device for expressing these images arose. This vacuum was filled by the use of the color television tube as the readout device for the program apparatus."

-Thomas Tadlock

Tadlock's Archetron, a monumental electronic console with one black and white monitor displaying the source image such as a baseball game, two smaller black and white monitors recording the stepped segmentation of the permuted image, crowned by a large color tube radiating an infinite complexity of vibrant radial reflections, pulsing unfolding, merging towards and surging from the meditational mandalic center.

"A pie-shaped triangular section of the broadcast image is removed", explained Tadlock, "and repeated 8 times in a reverse repeat around a symmetrical axis. The colors originate in the piece itself, reading out as the sums and differences of black and white areas of different parts of the same signal. The TV call stations are the only patterns that repeat themselves, if the machine is left at the same setting--So you get a complete set of things that are never the same and things that are always the same." During the brief moments when the TV image is blank except for small interference dots, the kaleidoscopic translation ripples gently in concentric waves upon the phosphored pool.

Black Spiral by Aldo Tambellini, of the Black Gate Electromedia Theater, resulted from a collaboration with Tracey Kinsel and Hank Reinbold of Bell Labs. A high-contrast spiraling white light shimmers, radiates, contracts, twists in orgasmic ecstasy, dwindles to nothing and blazes forth again on the black video field. *Black Spiral* was the only piece remaining on after the others retired for the day, a beacon of hidden forces.

"I wanted to convert the TV lines into spiral forms", commented Tambellini, "using live TV transmission and distorting the image through the circuitry of the set itself. I had been working in slides and film before TV, painting on film as a direct medium, and eventually scratching and drawing lines on the film similar to TV lines. This related to the rapid pacing and abstract blacks and whites of my films, drew me to television as the most powerful hypnotic medium."

The primeval permutations of TV as an artist's medium stagger the senses with the potentials of

programming on a global scale and within the inner sanctities of the private home. Joe Weintraub sees his *AC/TV (Audio-Controlled Television)* as a machine "translating music into a complex kinetic image on the screen of any color TV. The brightness is controlled by the volume of the music. The colors are controlled by the pitch. The patterns are dependent upon both. Installation is simple, as the *AC/TV* clips onto the antenna terminals of any color TV. Patents pending. The *AC/TV* is radical art because it allows the viewer to turn off the endless stream of garbage and use his Color TV in a personal aesthetically satisfying way." Radical, and marketable, art.

Paik early predicted that "as the collage technique replaced oil-paint in art the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas."

Tadlock hopes for a relaxing of the holds upon TV as a medium by government regulatory agencies: "TV has been out for 33 years and only now are artists able to use it. And even a show as comprehensive as *TV as a Creative Medium* may never be presented on TV itself except within the confines of a building."

"Eventually", speculates Ira Schneider, "I'd like one monitor at the North Pole, one at the South, and two at the equator, big monitors switching images back and forth."

We are witnessing the intermeshing of our globe's electromagnetic exoskeleton, one day to unite all in one glorious terrestrial aura.