

TV: Through the Looking Glass



© Dara Birnbaum

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THE FINE ARTS CENTER ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

INTRODUCTION

"TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS" presents a collection of 15 video tapes made by artist-producers since 1970. The exhibition offers a well rounded introduction to "video art" and "artists' television," and to the variety of ways artists have approached the video medium.

In 1966 the first portable video camera and recorder became available in the United States. Called the Sony Portapak, it represented an enormous breakthrough, for it meant that control over video production no longer rested solely with the television networks. Individuals finally had an affordable video production tool. Artists and independent documentary filmmakers were eager to work with a new medium. Video artist Nam June Paik received the first Portapak unloaded off the boat!

Artists who began to investigate video in the late 1960s produced tapes that looked different from commercial television. Essentially, they were less interested in mimicking mass media than in using video to expand or enhance their own work; whether it was sculpture, theater, performance, dance, filmmaking, or drawing. In addition, the technical limitations of the small scale format reduced the picture quality, and gave the images a fuzzy, unfamiliar look. While programs created for network television were slick and corporate, the tapes produced by individuals were exploratory and personal.

The anti-establishment tenor of the times was also reflected in the critical stance artists adopted toward broadcast TV. Peter Campus, Richard Serra, and William Wegman, represented in this show, were among these pioneers.

By the mid 1970s, as artists became more familiar with the technology of video and more sophisticated low-cost portable tools were available, they began examining other approaches to television and to the medium itself.

For some, the challenge has been to take accepted television formats, such as music videos, commercials, or nightly news programs, and refashion them to communicate ideas rarely expressed on television. Examples of this approach can be appreciated in the tapes by Max Almy, Joan Logue, Michael Smith, MICA-TV, and trio Doug Hall, Chip Lord, and Jody Proctor. The documentary/news story form has been redefined in the tapes by Maxi Cohen and Jon Alpert.

Other artists explore beyond the parameters of regular television. They experiment with narrative forms. They use computers to manipulate the video signal and create

new images, seeking to evoke the viewer's response through non-narrative means. The tapes by Dara Birnbaum, Hank Linhart, Nam June Paik, Dan Reeves, and Reynold Weidenaar suggest the range of possibilities in this area.

Political issues still dominate many of the works produced. Often the issue is television itself, but societal myths, social injustice, nuclear war, and other timely topics are also treated here with deep concern and, often, with a sense of humor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Media Alliance and the New York State Museum in Albany for organizing and developing this exhibition and contributing the illuminating program notes contained in this catalogue. I am also grateful to the artists whose work is included in this two-hour presentation. Special thanks are also due to Lisa Overton of Media Alliance for making this video program available to the Stony Brook Community.

In addition, I want to express my appreciation to Jay Strivey, Acting Technical Director, Fine Arts Center; Stephen Larese, Department of Art Specialist; Joyce Chen, Karl D'Amico, Ophelia Lopez, Selena Wright, Art Gallery Assistants; Sally Deval, Laura Gelfand, Susan Mathisen, Annemarie McNamara, Alda Serrao-Feliciano, Gallery Interns; and Mary Balduf, Gallery Secretary, for their help with the exhibition.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

"TV: Through the Looking Glass" was organized by the Media Alliance in cooperation with the New York State Museum, Albany, New York.

The Media Alliance is a professional association for the electronic media arts field in New York State. For information on programs and membership, contact: Media Alliance, c/o WNET, 356 West 58th Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 560-2919.

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TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS



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1. PERFECT LEADER by **Max Almy**; 1983. Color, stereo, 4:30 minutes.

The "perfect leader" is the brainchild of an omnipotent computer. The question is: who programs the computer that defines perfection? In the present case, Max Almy herself is in charge of the computer animation and the audio and video special effects required to create this vision of salvation.

The tape is a swift and wicked satire on political image-making and the marketing of a candidate. It is also an expression of concern over the degree to which our lives are, in general, manipulated by media and technology.

In her earlier work, Almy examined more personal aspects of contemporary life than in this tape, the first in a new series on social issues.

Max Almy studied art history and fine art in the late sixties. Her interest in new technology drew her to video in the early seventies. Since then she has learned to work with the most sophisticated digital video effects devices and like all the artists in this exhibition, to create visual art that is appropriate to the medium of television.

2. CAPE MAY by **Maxi Cohen**; 1982. Color, mono, 4:30 minutes.

In this short work, the artist takes maximum advantage of video's characteristic immediacy and intimacy; the piece shows how personal television can be.

As Maxi herself describes it, "My own photography, my love of postcards and the painting of the super realists influenced the style of this portrait of a seaside resort after



© Maxi Cohen

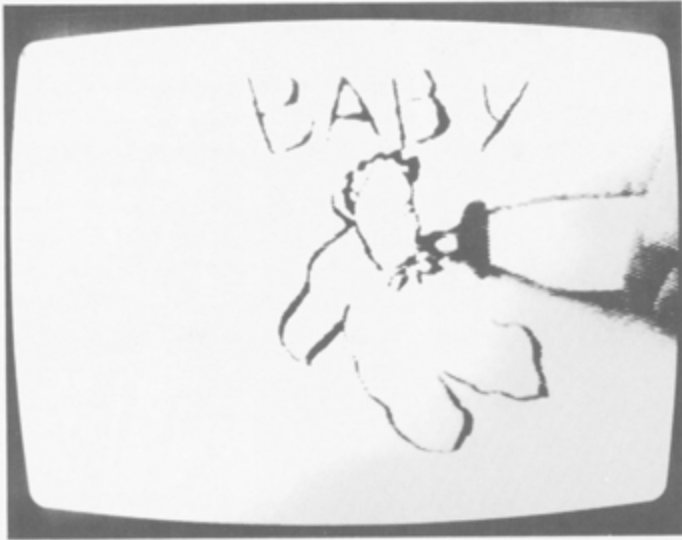
Labor Day. The town was populated by older people who could afford the lower off-season rates. I was interested in how people represented themselves and how we can know so much, and so little, by the few things a person tells us... 'Cape May' is a TV poem, a portrait of a moment in the American landscape."

Maxi Cohen has been active on the independent video scene since 1970, when she produced the first weekly hour long program on community access cable television in Cape May, New Jersey. She managed Manhattan's first Video Access Center, opened in 1972. She is well known for her video portraits of life on location from Las Vegas to Ozone Park, Queens.

3. GO FOR IT, MIKE by **Michael Smith**; 1984. Color, stereo, 4:30 minutes.

Michael Smith, a comic performance artist, has been creating characters and developing his favorite, "Mike," since the mid 1970s. In his videos, Smith uses recognized TV formats, such as music video and situation comedy, to comment on subjects ranging from how media technology controls our lives to how government misleads us about the dangers of nuclear war.

In this tape, Smith comments on how the traditional American dream of "manifest destiny" translates in the 1980s. Or, as the artist explains it, "Mike, the everyman, totes the ambiguous baggage of a potential statesman from the classroom to the campaign trail in a snappy music video that combines the look of 'Up With People' and the sound of ZZ Top."



4. INSURANCE MONKEYS by **Hank Linhart**; 1983. Black and white, stereo, 9:00 minutes.

This is a cartoon fable about a man who gazes at his ordinary life—his office job, his family in the suburbs—and wistfully wonders how it got that way. As Linhart describes it, “the narrative text is pried loose from lists of vocabulary words taken from N.Y. State Regents Examination Primers. The words have a mix and match organization.”

Crude line drawings are scrolled in front of a camera and, in turn, grabbed, stored, and displayed by a computer. In this way, the computer is used as a narrative device and television is treated as a proscenium stage, or a Punch and Judy puppet theater. Viewers are encouraged to watch TV actively by making their own associations between sound, image, and text.

Hank Linhart was working in sculpture and exploring Super 8 film making when he was introduced to the video portapak in 1972, at SUNY Buffalo. Video makers there were producing non-narrative tapes, and Linhart, influenced by those around him, has since then investigated nontraditional ways of creating images and telling stories.

5. BEST OF WILLIAM WEGMAN by **William Wegman**; 1970-77. Black & white, color, mono, 3:00 minutes, excerpted.

Bill Wegman has been compared to Buster Keaton and the television innovator Ernie Kovacs. In his tapes he plays with formats and situations typically found on network television.

Wegman's humor is often based on the personification of inanimate things and the incongruity of unexpected behavior as, for example, when his stomach becomes a singing face. The star of many of Wegman's tapes is his



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dog Man Ray. Normal dog behavior takes on a new meaning in the situations they create together.

By addressing the audience directly, Wegman strengthens his characters' credibility and takes advantage of video's ability to create a feeling of intimacy between himself and the viewer.

The humor and immediacy of Wegman's tapes relate them to his well known work in other media—large scale Polaroid photography and drawing. He began to work in video in 1970 and continued to make tapes until 1977. He returned to the medium recently and has been collaborating with other artists.

6. THREE TRANSITIONS by **Peter Campus**; 1973. Color, mono, 5:00 minutes.

Campus's video tapes explore perception and video space through the use of straightforward video effects. Campus came to video with a background in experimental psychology and commercial film. He uses the medium to portray subjective, psychological states.

In “Three Transitions,” Campus presents three introspective self-portraits with dry humor. He begins with an image created by two cameras facing opposite sides of a paper wall. With his back to the camera, Campus cuts through the paper so that it appears as if he is cutting through his back. He steps through it as if he is stepping into his own image. In the second and third transitions, Campus's use of the “chroma key” effect (superimposing one image on a blue area of another video image) creates increasingly self-destructive situations.

The chroma key effect, like other video special effects, makes illusion look real. Campus's use of this device is also a reminder to be wary of believing everything you see on television.

This tape was produced by the WGBH New Television Workshop in Boston, Massachusetts.

7. AMERICAN SURVIVAL: PHILADELPHIA SQUATTERS by Jon Alpert/Downtown Community Television Center; 1982. Color, mono, 11:17 minutes.

"Owning your own home has always been an essential part of the American Dream. But for millions of Americans, the endless struggle to obtain even the most basic shelter has turned the American Dream into a nightmare .

"This is the story about Mahasan and her nine children, who join a squatters' movement in Philadelphia to find a home and then must fight the authorities to keep it.

DCTV is a nonprofit media center located in Manhattan's Chinatown. It serves community residents, independents, and artists. Jon Alpert, the founder of DCTV, and his co-producers use their video expertise to document a wide range of social and political issues. Their work is frequently broadcast on NBC TV's morning news program, "The Today Show." After the broadcast, both City officials and Mahasan herself acknowledged that the presence of the video camera and the national attention to her story were very influential in the city's decision to let her keep her home.

Alpert's work is an example of what distinguishes independent production from commercial television. He presents not just the "newsworthy event," in this case, the organized squatters' march through the slums, which NBC's own news crew covered. He also recorded the causes of that event and, in so doing, demonstrates its meaning in human terms for both the subject and the viewer.

8. 30 SECOND SPOTS by Joan Logue; 1980-85. Color, stereo, 3:00 minutes.

A spot is the ad industry term for a television commercial. Joan Logue produces 30-second commercials for artists. Her video portraits are designed to take maximum advantage of the short attention span of audiences conditioned by commercial TV. Each brief portrait, capturing an essential characteristic of the artist, is as unique as a signature.

She has produced sixty-four "30-Second Spots" with performers, painters, and writers in New York, Paris, and San Francisco. The six selected here are: dancers Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane; performance artist Laurie Anderson; composer John Cage; sound artist Liz Phillips; dancer Lucinda Childs; and actor Spalding Gray. Logue uses digital video effects to manipulate certain images; she grabs hold of possibilities offered by video technology in order to illuminate the beauty of her subjects' performances.

Logue was a photographer when she was introduced to video in the late 1960s. She has been working in video since then.



© Paula Court

9. TECHNOLOGY/TRANSFORMATION: WONDER WOMAN, by Dara Birnbaum; 1978. Color, stereo, 7:00 minutes.

Birnbaum's work from this period attempts to slow down the pace of television events and capture moments of TV time, enabling the viewer to examine the meaning of television images.

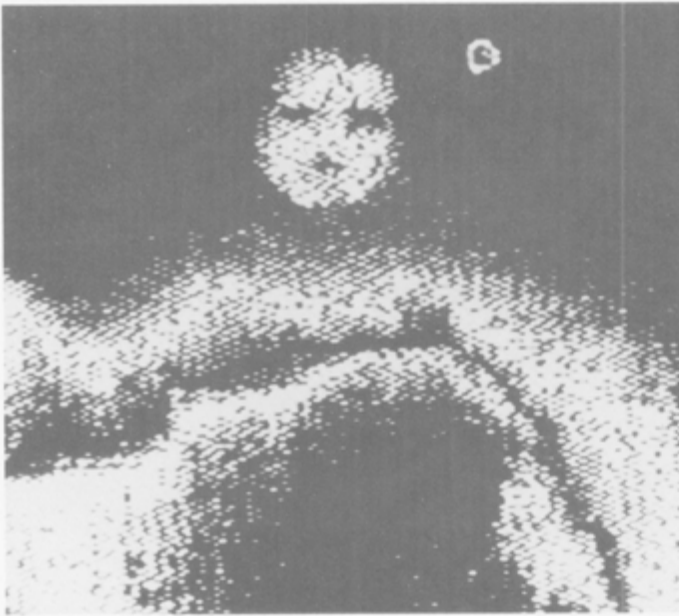
This tape scrutinizes the television presentation of "woman as heroine," exemplified by the transformation of Wonder Woman in the old TV series. We see a woman transformed into a myth; Birnbaum moves in on the psychological transformation by isolating and repeating the moment of physical change. She emphasizes the electronic methods necessary to move her from reality to fantasy.

Simultaneously, Birnbaum adds lyrics from the song "Wonder Woman in Disco Land," which complements the TV version by describing another equally unrealistic pop culture version of woman as a sexual object.

Dara Birnbaum took degrees in architecture and painting before learning to work with video technology. She has produced single- and multi-channel works.



© Dara Birnbaum



10. NIGHT FLAME RITUAL by **Reynold Weidenaar**; 1983. For clarinet, pitch transposer, digital delay, color video, and electronic sound, 5:22 minutes.

This work explores the dynamics of ritual—its rhythms and feelings, its oscillation between the concrete world and other worlds. It is not a literal description of a ceremony. Rather, it offers scenes and sounds with fluctuating contrasts and interplay in perspective, motion, and texture, which heighten the uniquely musical feelings that spring from ritual.

The musical score to which the visuals were fitted supports the images but is not subsumed by them. Sights and sounds are parallel.

Weidenaar, a composer and video/film maker with degrees in music composition, teaches experimental video and film production and creative sound design in New York.

11. R.M. FISCHER: AN INDUSTRIAL by **MICA-TV: Michael Owen and Carole Ann Klonarides**; 1984. Color, stereo, 4:30 minutes.

This nontraditional documentary presents the work of R.M. Fischer, a contemporary sculptor. MICA-TV specializes in video portraits of artists who work in media other than video. They collaborate with their subject to create a program structure and style, often derived from a standard television format, which best parallels the artist's work. This piece parodies the "industrial," or long form commercial, normally used for training and educational tapes or department store point-of-purchase displays.

R.M.Fischer's lamp sculptures are a hybrid of high-tech slickness and Baroque exaggeration. His style, and his related interest in mass-marketing techniques suggested the state-of-the-art industrial format and the "Star Wars" introduction. The narration sounds like advertising hype but is actually compiled from quotes taken from critical

reviews of Fischer's work. The original music is by A. Leroy.

Klonarides has a master's degree in Media Studies and is a gallery director; Owen studied film and art history and is a video producer.

12. TELEVISION DELIVERS PEOPLE, by **Richard Serra**; 1973. Color, mono, 6:00 minutes. Co-produced with Carlota Schoolman.

Serra is a sculptor who, like many artists in the early 70s, explored the possibilities of video as a new art medium. His tape is characteristic of work produced at that time in its simplicity, its literal presentation, and its sharp criticism of the structure of commercial television.

The title refers to the notion that television delivers viewers to advertisers, who bombard their captive audience with product propaganda and manipulate their fantasies. Serra's point is that commercial television is a manipulating device controlled by corporate interests. This idea contradicts the commonly held belief that people control the role of television in their lives.

The tape consists of statements excerpted by Serra, from papers delivered at conferences on television and television advertising. The harsh didacticism of the text contrasts sharply with the soothing Muzak and the blue background. Through this use of irony, Serra criticizes the very medium he is using.

13. LAKE PLACID 80 by **Nam June Paik**; 1980. Color, stereo, 4:00 minutes.

Nam June Paik introduced video and television into an art context in the early 1960s; he was the first to manipulate the electronics inside the TV set to create new kinds of video images and exhibit them; he was the first to use the Portapak, the portable video camera and recorder introduced by Sony in America in 1966.

Born in Korea, Paik studied classical and avant-garde music in Japan and then Germany and was active in the Dadaist oriented Fluxus group.

His tapes are brimming with humor, fast-paced music, cross cultural references, sensuousness, and an irreverent handling of images. He is a master of the quick edit, splitting actions apart, accelerating them, cutting images from earlier tapes into whatever has been collected or purposefully shot for the new one. Paik plays freely with images and confounds accepted notions of what television should look like.

The tapes can be shown separately or seen in installations, such as "TV Garden," his multi-monitor video sculpture.

"Lake Placid 80," a Paik document of the 1980 Winter Olympics, was commissioned by the National Olympic Fine Arts Committee.



© Kira Perov

14. SABDA by **Dan Reeves**; 1984. Color, stereo, 15:00 minutes. Associate Producer and Sound Recordist: Debra Schweitzer.

This experimental video was inspired by the poetry of praise written by the North Indian poet Kabir and other mystical poets. The title refers to "word," the original sound of life.

All the images and sound were recorded on an extended trip to India that Reeves made during the summer of 1983. In "Sabda," images carry the emotional content, while the few words gently assist interpretation. Through a synthesis of sound, image, and poetry, the artist attempts to push beyond the world of events and appearances, much as one does in meditation.

Dan Reeves studied photography, cinema studies, and anthropology. He was a film maker before turning to video toward the end of the 1970s. Many of his previous tapes express his concern about our preoccupation with war and nuclear arms. Taken as a whole, Reeves's work is an eloquent plea for peace on earth. This tape, one of a growing number of video works which may be described as visual poetry, is non-narrative but strongly conveys a mood or a message.

15. THE AMARILLO NEWSTAPES by **Doug Hall, Chip Lord, and Jody Proctor**; 1980. Color, mono, 28:00 minutes.

In 1979, Doug Hall, Chip Lord, and Jody Proctor went down to Amarillo, Texas, as "artists-in-residence" at the ABC affiliate station, KVII-TV. They intended to learn how network news is produced and to test their thesis that artists and newscasters have something in common: "both organize information in a particular way to achieve a desired result." The results, however, tend to emphasize the differences!

For two and a half weeks they accompanied reporters in the field and watched how news was produced in the studio. Then, they edited their own version of a news program, which incorporates real broadcast coverage of a killer tornado, a news story of their own creation and, of course, their performances as co-anchors with Dan Garcia of KVII-TV News.

Throughout the program, the stories actually broadcast are juxtaposed with original versions produced by Hall, Lord, and Proctor. This technique deftly illustrates how the requirements of the commercial network news format restrict information given to viewers.

There is also an absurd news story about downtown Amarillo, which parodies "human interest" stories, while it demonstrates how any non-event can become "news" through media coverage.

Doug Hall and Jody Proctor were involved in a performance collective called T.R. Uthco, active in San Francisco during the mid 1970s. Chip Lord was a member of the media group Ant Farm, founded in 1968, also in Northern California. They are famous for works such as "Media Burn," a biting commentary on media coverage and the television viewing experience.

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Works are listed in order of appearance.

1. PERFECT LEADER by Max Almy; 1983. Color, stereo, 4:30 minutes.
2. CAPE MAY by Maxi Cohen; 1982. Color, mono, 4:30 minutes.
3. GO FOR IT, MIKE by Michael Smith; 1984. Color, stereo, 4:30 minutes.
4. INSURANCE MONKEYS by Hank Linhart; 1983. Black and white, stereo, 9:00 minutes.
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PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975 FACULTY EXHIBITION
- 1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
- 1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
- 1978 LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
- 1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
- 1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
- 1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
- 1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN MCCOY
- 1983 THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW
- 1984 BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE
- 1985 LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESCO TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN SANCHEZ/INSTALLATION BY
ALFREDO JAAR
ABSTRACT PAINTING REDEFINED
- 1986 KLEEGER: METAL SCULPTURE
TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
YANG YEN-PING AND ZENG SHAN-QING
EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OF THE EAST VILLAGE

