

Chapter 2: Video Art

A New Medium

Critics may still have been (indeed still are) arguing over the aesthetic viability of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (the upturned urinal submitted to an art exhibition in 1917) in the mid-1960s, but by this time the boundaries of art had been stretched so far that there were no more 'boundaries.' Readymades like *Fountain* turn out to have been just the beginning. In New York the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenberg, and Jim Dine, the mixed-media canvases (with beds, stuffed chickens and wires) of Robert Rauschenberg, the body installations of Carolee Schneemann, and the neon panels of Dan Flavin are but a few examples of the multiplicity of art works on display at that time. Critic Clement Greenberg's dictum that the meaning of art (by which he meant a painting or a sculpture) was to be found within the object itself, was being challenged now by the notion that central to the practice of art was concept and context.

Minimalism and its offspring, Conceptualism, were the dominant forms of the period. 'Unfettered by object status,' art critic Lucy Lippard wrote, 'artists were free to let their imaginations run rampant.' In the visual arts, illusionism was rejected in favor of a pared down simplicity that was closer to industrial design than to pictorialism. This attitude reflected the ever increasing tendency in art toward eliminating the boundaries between art and everyday life, or, as history has come to treat it, between 'high' and 'low' art. And beyond the confines of the art world, the medium that predominated in mass culture at that time was television.

Art histories of the period often begin by considering Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954–55), Frank Stella's *Stripe Painting* (1959), or Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964); not with any discussion of video art. It is partly because video art, which emerged in the mid-1960s, must be considered from the perspective of a world increasingly dominated by the media, especially television; and this, to many critics, is too far afield from the concerns of art. However, as San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator Christine Hill notes, 'a fundamental idea held by the first generation of video artists was that in order to have a critical relationship with a televisual society, you must primarily participate televisually.'



Paul Heston photo

Here's Mr. Showmanship himself—Cecil B. DeMille—enjoying Magnavox Big-Picture TV at home with his family in Hollywood.

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ONE of the things which makes many American homes so envied is television, and magnificent Magnavox Big-Picture TV ranks highest where gracious living is a daily habit. For Magnavox instruments are showpieces inside and out, combining

advanced engineering with stunning cabinetry of heirloom quality. Each superb furniture piece is the ideal sounding chamber for glorious Magnavox tone. Sharp, clear Magnavox pictures are specially filtered for pleasing contrast. No matter

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THE MAGNAVOX EMBASSY (also shown above) AM-FM radio-phonograph in rich mahogany finish. Add 20-inch TV now or later.



Better sight...better sound...better buy

the magnificent
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Ultra High Frequency Units Readily Attachable

81. 1960s advertisement for Magnavox Televisions. By 1960, ninety per cent of American households had television sets.

Images from around the world, which had only been available in the newsreels in movie houses, were now filtering into the average home, not only in black and white but now also in color. The moving image had entered the common household with a vengeance: by 1953, two thirds of American households had televisions; and by 1960, it was up to ninety per cent, a fact which was to have a profound effect on the film industry. Nonetheless, despite some notable exceptions on television in the US like the serious dramas on *Playhouse 90*, 'art' was to remain the domain of cinema. This century has established a kind of media technology pecking order, with cinema still on top, followed by television, then video, and now computer-transmitted images; all of which, arguably, derived from theater, which has suffered the most from loss of audiences and loss of artists to the other media.

By the 1960s the total commercialization of corporate television had been accomplished, and, to media watchdogs and many artists, television was becoming the enemy. Americans were watching up to seven hours of it daily and a new consumer society was forming, generated by an advertising oligarchy, which is what keeps television going. In addition worldwide political upheavals and dissident awareness, the student revolts in Paris, New York and many other parts of the world, and a sexual revolution all contributed to the cultural contexts in which video art emerged.

No one conceptualized the broad effects of the media explosion better than Canadian author Marshall McLuhan (1911–80). In his many writings, especially *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), he helped a generation to understand the tremendous impact of the media on daily living. 'Any one of our new media,' he wrote in 1960, 'is in a sense a new language, a new codification of experience collectively achieved by new work habits and inclusive collective awareness.' 'The new media,' he went on to say in 1969, 'are not ways of relating us to the old "real" world; they are the real world and they reshape what remains of the old world at will.' His critiques of advertising and commercial television became rallying points for 1960s artist/activists.

Though there has been argument over the exact origins of video art (especially targeted critiques from feminist critics in the US like Martha Gever and Martha Rosler), in the very beginning there were two types of video practices: activist-driven documentaries linked with alternative news reports and more properly so-called art videos.

Among the former camp are the political activities of so-called guerilla videographers like the Canadian-born Les Levine (b. 1935)

and US artist Frank Gillette (b. 1941), who forced their way into political conventions and other newsworthy events without the proper credentials customary to news media. Levine was one of the first artists to use half-inch video equipment when it became available in 1965. *Bum* explored the street life of the down-and-out occupants of New York's so-called Skid Row on the Lower East Side. In 1968, Gillette also took to the streets, taping a five-hour documentary on hippies who congregated around St Mark's Place, the main thoroughfare on the Lower East Side in New York. Both Levine and Gillette utilized a gritty, you-are-there improvisational style of filming, which did not place any preconceived artistic or directorial overlay on the material. The subjects were starkly presented and were in no way 'artistic.'

In the US video collectives also sprang up quickly, spearheaded by groups such as Videofreex, Raindance Corporation, Paper Tiger Television (in New York) and Ant Farm in San Francisco. Strongly influenced by French and American *cinéma vérité* filmmakers who preceded them by ten years, these early video users were adapting a style that was soon to be very appealing to mainstream television stations in their 'on the spot' news coverage.

A case in point, Top Value Television (or TVTV) produced alternative coverage of the 1972 Democratic and Republican conventions in the United States. Using a half-inch, open reel, black and white Portapak, several TVTV 'correspondents' infiltrated the main convention floors, interviewing everyone from politicians to commercial television reporters in what amounted to an entertaining, provocative look at the foibles of American political and news gathering processes. The link between early alternative television (which actually received government funding) and mainstream television has its own, vital history. Suffice it to say, by the end of the 1970s, as US video historian Deirdre Boyle points out, network television, realizing their entertainment value, had absorbed many of the guerilla television camera and interviewing techniques. It even won over several of its members, including one activist/producer, Jon Alpert, who became a producer for NBC Television News.

The more purely 'art'-oriented video histories will usually point to the day in 1965 when Korean-born Fluxus artist and musician Nam June Paik bought one of the first Sony Portapak video sets in New York, and turned his camera on the Papal entourage that day making its way down Fifth Avenue. That, in this view, was the day video art was born. Paik apparently took the footage of the Pope, shot from a cab, and that night showed the results at an artists' hangout, the Cafe à Go Go.

82. (above right) Andy Warhol, *Factory Diaries: Paul Johnson*, 1965.



83. (right) Andy Warhol, *Factory Diaries: Chinese Dinner on Couch*, 1965.

Warhol's Factory was the defining locus for multiple art practices. In the mid-1960s Warhol was in possession of his first hand-held video camera with which he taped all manner of activities in the loft, including quotidian ones like people eating or sleeping or simply talking to the camera.



84. (left) TVTV, *Four More Years*, 1972. The look of low-tech, portable camera interviews were soon admired by mainstream television news because of the authentic immediacy they suggested.

As video art history keeps getting re-written, we now know that Andy Warhol was most likely the first artist in the US to show what has become 'video art.' Warhol was among the first to use portable video cameras. In 1965, he was asked by *Tape Recording* magazine to experiment with the portable Norelco slant-track video recorder, a remote-control television camera with a zoom lens, and a Concord MTC 11 hand-held video camera with a Canon zoom lens. He made two thirty-minute tapes of a member of his cohort, Edie Sedgwick, and incorporated the tapes into his first double-projection film, *Outer and Inner Space* (1965). However, on September 29, 1965, just weeks before Paik's presentation at the Café à Go Go, Warhol presented videos at a party in a large, underground railroad space (it was important that the party be 'underground' for the presentation of 'underground' tapes) below the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York.

What makes Paik's filming of the Pope or Warhol's taping of one of his 'superstars' video art? At the most basic level, they are considered so because recognized artists (Warhol and Paik), already associated with visual art, music, or performance made the tapes as an extension of their artistic practice. As opposed to a newsperson on the beat with the Pope, Paik created a rough, non-commercial product that was a personal expression. Paik was not 'covering' the news of the Papal visit; Warhol was taping the way he might have been silk-screening or photographing. For Paik, this was the beginning of a career-long use of video as a preferred medium. He became the first 'spokesman' for video art. 'As collage technique replaced oil paint,' he is quoted as saying, 'so the cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas.'

At issue here is the intentionality of the artist, as opposed to that of the television executive or even commercial filmmaker or video maker: the work is not a product for sale or mass consumption. The aesthetics of video art, as intentionally loose as they may be, demand an artistic starting point from video artists that is akin to the aesthetic enterprise in general. Video, as an art, should be distinguished from the uses of video, however artfully executed, in documentaries, news reporting, and other purposeful, that is, applied, arenas. 'Art' and 'artful' are separate, though linked, terms that exist to help us differentiate between what can and cannot be considered to be art. Artful techniques may enliven commercial television, advertising, etc., but these techniques are not in themselves what we would normally call art. Art lies in the intentionality of the artist: to make or conceive of something without the constraint of some other purpose. The



intention of the activist videographers, no matter how artful in execution, was not to create a moment of personal expression regardless of a practical application (here an alternative to traditional news reporting).

This is certainly not to suggest that the only legitimate historical analysis of video art must begin with those artists who came from more traditional media, like painting or music, and incorporated video into an essentially painterly art culture. But we must recognize, as John Hanhardt, curator at New York's Guggenheim Museum points out, that it is a curatorial museum culture that has become the ultimate validating source for all works of art. The artists whom that system recognized often came from the established media of painting and sculpture.

Paik, who studied aesthetics and music in Japan in the 1950s, is clearly representative of the video *artist*, as opposed to activist or reporter. A native of Korea, he moved to New York in 1964 from Germany where he had been a student, specifically, as he says, because of John Cage, whose experimental work in music and performance had a tremendous impact on many young artists at that



85. (far left) Nam June Paik, *Zen for Head*, 1962.

86. (left) Nam June Paik performing La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10* to Bob Morris as his *Zen for Head* at Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik, Wiesbaden, Germany, 1962.

87. (right) Nam June Paik, TV installation at Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, 1963. The single line on Paik's television screens actually reflected the very first image to appear on the first television set in the late 1930s.

time. While in West Germany he met Cage and other Fluxus artists, and participated in what is considered the first Fluxus festival, the *Fluxus International Festival of Very New Music*, held in the auditorium of the Städtisches Museum in Wiesbaden. At the festival, Paik 'enacted' a 'score' by composer LaMonte Young that consisted entirely of the direction 'Draw a straight line and follow it.' Paik dipped his head, hands, and necktie into a bowl of ink and tomato juice and dragged them across a long horizontal piece of paper. Paik later returned to this single straight line in his 1968 *Video Buddha*, which features a Buddha sitting in front of a television screen showing only a black horizontal line.

For Paik and other early practitioners of video art, including Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and John Baldessari, it was video's capacity for instantaneous transmission of image that was most appealing, in addition to its relative affordability. For these artists, all of whom were preoccupied with themes concerning time (and often memory as well) the spontaneity and instantaneity of video were crucial. Video recorded and revealed instant time, whereas film had to be treated and processed. According to



Graham, 'Video feeds back indigenous data in the immediate, present-time environment. Film is contemplative and "distanced;" it detaches the viewer from present reality and makes him a spectator.' Furthermore, as multiple projection devices were formulated, especially by Paik, it was possible to represent the often chaotic and random feel of multiple images competing constantly for our attention.

Video also afforded a sense of intimacy usually not realizable in film. In the hands of artists like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, who literally turned the camera on themselves in fabricated situations (Acconci) or in their studio (Nauman, Howard Fried), video became an extension of the artistic gesture so long associated with painting, and especially with the Abstract Expressionists who had emphasized the physical act of painting itself. With video, the artist's gesture could be recorded and his or her body could be observed in the act of creation.

By the time he bought his Portapak, Paik had already been involved with using television in his art. In 1963, at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, Paik filled a gallery space with televisions, some on the floor, some placed on their sides, all in an

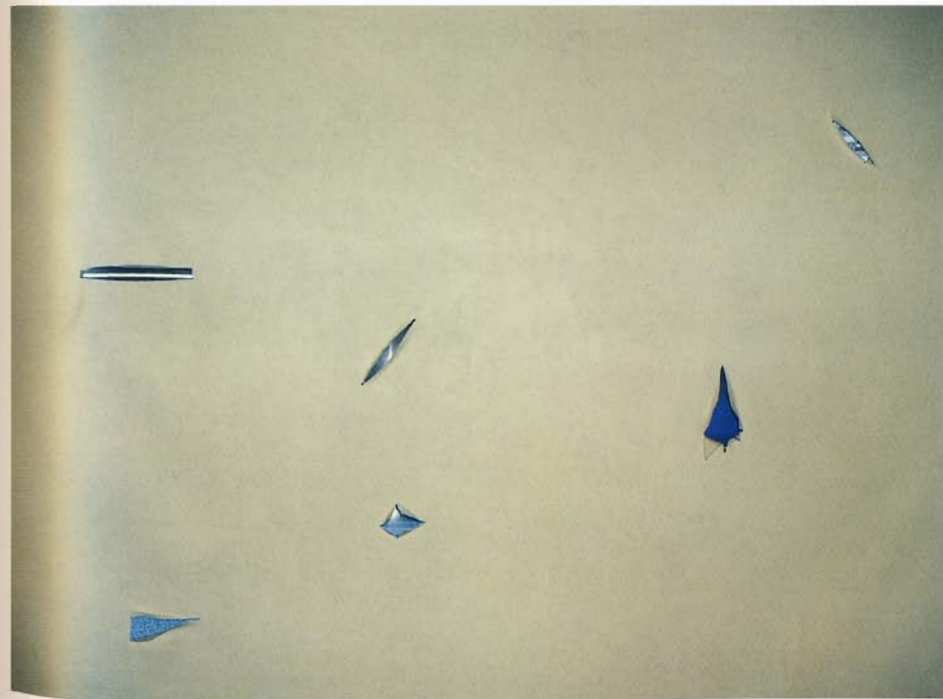


88. Nam June Paik,
Zen for TV, 1963–75.

effort to disrupt the normal relationship of the viewer to the television set. Though the distorted images in this early media sculpture were not Paik's own, this reconfiguring and displacing of the television set from its normal setting in the living room of a home has remained a central preoccupation of the artist.

Also in 1963, German artist Wolf Vostell (b. 1932) placed television monitors amidst what he called his 'De-coll/ages' magazine covers and announced that the television set had now been appropriated by an artist. Earlier in his first *TV De-coll/age* (1958) Vostell placed six television monitors in a wooden box behind a white canvas. 'The TV set is declared to be the sculpture of the twentieth century,' he said at the time of the exhibition, sounding as confident as Paik had about the death of the canvas. Their early enthusiasm provided a rallying point for the new electronic art. Vostell and Paik recontextualized the monitor, thus inaugurating a new way of viewing the small screen divorced from the familiar, commercial locus of the home. Now that the television medium had been liberated, so to speak, from the control of the commercial producers, artists could explore what to put on it in place of mostly commercial-driven content.

89. Wolf Vostell,
TV De-coll/age No. 1, 1958.



Below, clockwise from top left:
90. Douglas Davis,
Video against Video, 1972.

91. Douglas Davis,
Street Sentences, 1972.

92. Douglas Davis,
Talk-Out, 1972.

93. Douglas Davis,
*Studies in Black and White
Videotape 1*, 1971.

A critical attitude toward television was dominant in video art from its inception and into the mid-1980s. Like the Fluxus film artists before them, video artists took it upon themselves to comment, often in the ironic tones of postmodernism, on the cultural wars surrounding television and its prevalence in the twentieth-century household. Richard Serra's (b. 1939) *Television Delivers People* (1973) features a scrolling text criticizing television as corporate entertainment. To highlight his cultural critique Serra uses a soundtrack of musak, a bland hybrid music played in elevators and malls throughout the world. In a series of tapes from the early 1970s, including *Studies in Black and White Videotape 1* (1971), *Talk-Out* (1972), and *Street Sentences* (1972) US artist and critic Douglas Davis tackled received assumptions of television's use of time and space by breaking the 'fourth wall' and addressing the viewer directly. Like Acconci, he debunks the presumed intimacy of the medium and reveals it for the distancing device it really is. Taka Iimura (b. 1937) grappled with the illusory nature of language and recorded image in his perception-bending videos from the early 1970s. In *Double Portrait* (1973), utilizing delayed audio playback



94. Mako Idemitsu, *HIDEO, It's Me, Mama*, 1983.
More than fifteen years ahead of the popular film *Truman*, in which the life of the main character is unwittingly taped and projected onto television sets worldwide, Mako Idemitsu created a character called Hideo who is constantly watched and judged by his mother, who appears on video screens wherever he goes.

and reverse image playback, Iimura exposes the questionable reality of electronic images.

The numbing effects of television commercials are interspersed with disturbing war footage in German artist Klaus vom Bruch's (b. 1952) *Das Softiband* (The Softi Tape, 1980). Seemingly endless repetitions of an ad for facial tissues highlights the power of television to trivialize even the most poignant events as archive war footage competes with the commercial for the viewer's attention.

Cultural and media critiques reach a Kafka-esque synthesis in Japanese artist Mako Idemitsu's (b. 1940) videos of tortured family members, who can never escape the watchful eye of the mother because she is always watching them from a television monitor wherever they go. Idemitsu reflects the corseted nature of Japanese life through the melodramas of television soap-operas which play continuously in the background of her psychological narratives such as *HIDEO, It's Me, Mama* (1983) and in the trilogy, *Great Mother* (1983–84).

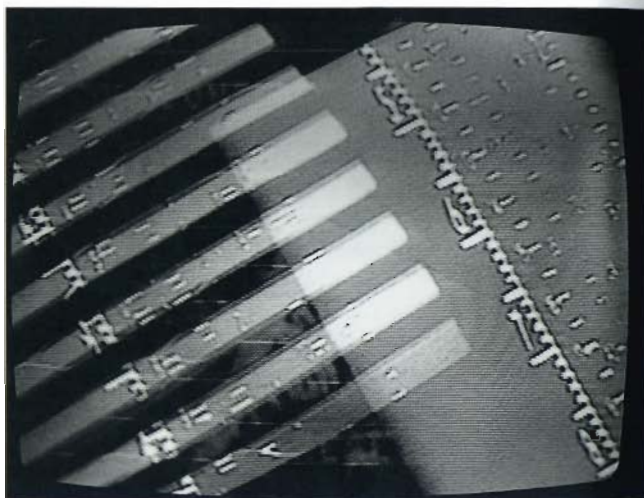
In addition to criticizing the television medium, several early video artists engaged the technology of the camera and created innovative means of expression that were both used by other



95. Ed Emshwiller,
Thermogenesis, 1972.



96. Keith Sonnier,
Animation II, 1974.

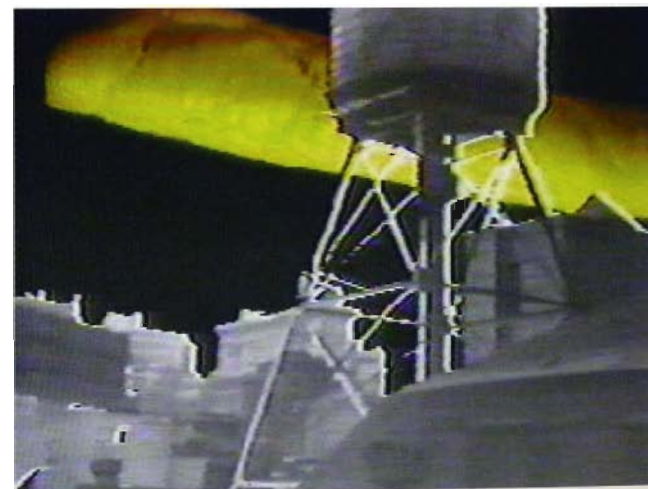


artists, and commonly usurped by mainstream media and advertising. American Ed Emshwiller (1925–90), who was an Abstract Expressionist painter as well as filmmaker and teacher, exploited the capabilities of video synthesizers and computer systems with his own original artistic and electronic strategies. In *Scape-mates* (1972) Emshwiller utilized a form of computer animation which resulted in an almost psychedelic dance of figurative and abstract elements. Earlier that same year he took his own black and white drawings and, with the assistance of engineers at Dolphin, one of the first corporations involved in computer imaging in the US,

created *Thermogenesis*, a videowork that dances with imagery in a sound environment made with a Moog Audio Synthesizer in collaboration with Robert Moog himself.

Dan Sandin, whose interests in video grew out of his involvement with student protests in the late 1960s, developed the Image Processor in 1973. The IP, as it is called, is an analogue computer for the manipulation of video images. In his *Spiral PTL*, Sandin uses the IP to move a linear spiral made of dots in a musical rhythm with an accompanying soundtrack of electronic buzzes and running water. In a decidedly abstract vein, US artist Keith Sonnier (b. 1941) used an early version of a computer scanner, the Scanimate, to create sensuous multiple image collages. *Painted Foot: Black Light* (1970), and *Color Wipe* (1973) both show extensive formal experimentation with light and color. His *Animation II* (1974) is a record of abstract shapes and colors which serve as metaphors for the properties of paint and paintings.

Also prominent among early technological innovators of video art was the husband and wife team of Steina and Woody Vasulka, who emigrated to the United States in 1965 (she was born in Iceland in 1940, he in Czechoslovakia in 1937). Seizing the reins from commercial television, they set out to advance the technology of video by creating devices for artists, especially in the fields of digital processing and electronic image processing. In keeping with the age-old practice of artists' constantly exploring the tools of their medium, the Vasulkas possessed a passion for understanding the inner workings of video: electrical energy organized as voltages and frequencies in a temporal event.



97. Steina and Woody Vasulka,
Golden Voyage, 1973.

Like painters involved with the contents of their palette, these innovators probed the video medium in much the same way that abstract artists or colorists did. Distinguishing themselves from the electrical engineers of commercial television, they were interested in the mechanisms of video as they function artistically, not how they can enhance the transmission of images of a commercial product. In a sense the Vasulkas embody the notion that video art was to television what studio painting was to early forms of drawn or painted advertising. In works such as *Home* (1973) in which the Vasulkas artfully incorporate colorizing and electronic imaging techniques to glamorize everyday objects, and *Golden Voyage* (1973), a multilayered homage to Magritte, the Vasulkas invented new means of electronic manipulation that altered viewers' perceptions, as Pointillism and Impressionism had done in painting a century before. *Vocabulary* (1973-74) resulted from their experimenting with digital manipulation of images that closely resemble today's floating, computer-based images seen everywhere on computer monitors and on television. Using the image of a hand filmed in close-up as a metaphor for artistic creation, the artists fashion an electronic sculpture from which light emerges and through which other objects are shaped and imbued with a life of their own.

Nam June Paik, who has been influential in virtually every area of video art, contributed one of the first new technologies with his Paik/Abe Synthesizer, a device for image manipulation and colorization, developed with electronics engineer Shuya Abe. His *Suite 212* (1975, re-edited 1977) is Paik's personal New York notebook. Essentially a monumental electronic collage of altered images accented in dizzying colors, this piece set the stage for Paik's later investigations of imagery and culture, a classic example of which is *Butterfly* (1986), a vibrant amalgam of collaged images and music.

Several artists, taking their cue from Paik and the Vasulkas, incorporated sophisticated technology in their critiques of technology. Max Almy (b.1948), a Los Angeles artist, uses computer animation and digital effects in her postmodern renditions of a world dehumanized by technology. In *Leaving the 20th Century* (1982) Almy creates a futuristic landscape in which human relations and attempts at communication completely fail. Time travel is imaginatively accomplished through the computer chip in this early experiment in computerized video art.

Television also benefitted artists. Public television stations in the United States and Europe fostered experimentation by



98, 99. Ture Sjölander, Lars Weck and Bengt Modin, *King of Sweden* (top) and *Charlie Chaplin* (above). Two distorted TV film clips from the film *Monument*, 1967. Many innovations in what later became computer animation were inaugurated by video artists who early on developed electronic imaging techniques.

100. John Baldessari, *I Am Making Art*, 1971. Conceptual artists like John Baldessari made several homespun videos whose intentional lack of polish took aim at the pretenses of high art.

allowing access to fully equipped studios. Starting in the late 1960s, Boston's public television station, WGBH, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, produced the New Television Workshop under the leadership of Fred Barzyk. In 1969 six artists (Nam June Paik, Allan Kaprow, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Thomas Tadlock, and Aldo Tambellini) made videotapes using WGBH equipment for a program called 'The Medium is the Medium' which aired nationally. This was the widest exposure the new practice of video art had yet received.

Robert Zagone, working at public television station KQED in San Francisco, created eerie disintegration of abstract forms through multiple camera feedback techniques in *Videospace* (1968). He also replicated a dream state in his multilayered tape of a dancer, *Untitled* (1968), which resembles an updated and animated version of a Muybridge chronograph. Swedish artists Ture Sjölander, Lars Weck, and Bengt Modin produced *Monument* (1967), a program for experimental television which combined pre-recorded film, slides, and videotapes in a process that distorted images during the transmission of the image from the tape to the television. After seeing these for the first time, historian Gene Youngblood said, 'We see the Beatles, Charlie Chaplin, Picasso, the Mona Lisa, the King of Sweden, and other famous figures distorted with a kind of insane electronic disease.'

Peter d'Agostino's (b. 1945) *TeleTapes* (1981), produced by the influential Television Laboratory at New York's Public Television Station, WNET, incorporates card games, tricks, and a broad assortment of television effects, to confront the viewer with 'experiential reality' and 'television reality.'

