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As Attitude

VIDEO AS ATTITUDE

To most people "video art" implies a single-channel video tape which functions as a self-contained work. Although all of the artists in **Video As Attitude** use video in the works presented here, they are also known for work in performance, sound, books, drawing, sculpture, or any combination of these media. This exhibition presents video as a component which interacts with other media in a multi-layered, sculptural context.

Artists' use of video is not only coincidental with the invention of the first portable video recording equipment in the early 1960s. It also reflects an attitude toward experience and information that has been a part of our culture for centuries. In 1685, Johannes Zahn wrote **Oculus Artificialis** based on Athanasius Kircher's translation of Alhazen's tenth century Arabic text on optics, the first known writing to document the principle of the **camera obscura**. Zahn outlined the adaptation of his magic lantern so that it was linked to a weather vane atop his house. As the wind changed direction the weather vane moved a cogged gear that engaged a circular glass plate with engraved images representing the cardinal directions. The plate revolved in back of the magic lantern lens and the moving images were then projected into a darkened room. The resulting coded real-time readout of natural phenomena was a part of man's ongoing and varied interaction, both as scientist and artist, with nature.

Such uses of magic lanterns, **camera obscurae** and **camera lucidae**, or E. G. Robertson's Phantasmagorias, popularized in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century, were forerunners of video installations. Magic lantern events, often with musical accompaniment, were popular drawing room entertainment during the nineteenth century.¹ The fact that we now often think of **camera obscurae** in terms of still image formats such as drawing, painting, and photography, has overshadowed their significance as generators of real-time processes. They were not simply cameras which documented single perspective still images, but were open systems incorporating movement, natural events, and performance within the context of a created environment.

Paintings and drawings produced during the period before the Industrial Revolution were, in a way, "windows on the world." They partially derived their meanings from the fact that they were framed within the context of nature and could therefore be seen as part of a "real" spatial continuum. Perspective was a code devised to organize this experience in a very particular way for the Western viewer.

Various cultures use different spatial codes to organize experience. Space can be coded in a conceptual manner, as is the case with dialectical thought; or, more conventionally, in representational systems such as those in Chinese and Western painting. In geographical and temporal terms space can also be thought of as the distance between places or events. When considering a definition, it is apparent there is no such thing as literal space. There is only created space.

The use of video in sculptural installations is similar to ways the earlier **camera obscurae** were employed. However, the context has changed. The post-industrial cultural environment of signs, cities, and electronic media has replaced nature as the dominant paradigm of "reality."

Our experiences of this new "reality" are often discontinuous and at the same time repetitive. This is a change from the continuous spatial model of "reality" in which a causal, evolutionary cycle of primarily natural events was passed down from generation to generation. The experience of 30-second television commercials and driving along the highways of American culture with their neon signs, billboards, and urban architecture has shortened our attention span.² It has accustomed us to the instantaneous reading of rapidly intercut information lacking a cohesive, overall context other than that of commercial manipulation. In the fabricated, artificial environment, signs and images become signifiers which, taken apart and reframed, replace natural space as an organizing principle or context for experiencing the world.

Artists' incorporation of these new attitudes into diverse environments makes us question our received notions of how we organize experience. We literally question our points of view. Within this context, video often mediates between "real" space and the fabricated environment. We as viewers no longer remain passive. We are the important link in a deconstructive and reinventive process. A critical appraisal of the codes and conventions of the messages we receive through the news and commercials of broadcast television allows us to deconstruct this information and arrive at a shift in consciousness, a new mythological dimension. This attitude is present in the work of the artists in this exhibition.

Video As Attitude raises timely questions regarding sculpture, space, and narrative processes at a time when the vocabulary of painting has long been the dominant way of considering art in our culture. As a tool, video is capable of simultaneously displaying many kinds of signifiers, such as image, language, sound, text, color and real-time events in a synoptic manner. The various tropes of video such as keying, matting, and synthesized processes allow for a transformation of thought and language into new dimensions which can simulate the man-made environment and aid deconstructive strategies. By shattering the notions of formal stylistic conventions relative to a particular medium video has had great impact on contemporary painting and sculpture.

The installations and performances in **Video As Attitude** incorporate a multiplicity of media which both simulate and become new environmental contexts for experience. If moving through space can be considered analogous to thought processes, then being within an installation is like being inside the mind, or a simulated "reality" which becomes the world. The work of these artists does reflect an awareness of the mechanisms, codes, and particular qualities inherent in video. We are observing the ascendance of this synthetic approach as the most relevant means to explore the complexity of these issues. This attitude is a significant contribution toward a new definition of sculpture.

Patrick Clancy
Albuquerque, New Mexico
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¹Ceram, C. W. **Archaeology of the Cinema**. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965.

²Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. **Learning from Las Vegas**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972.

Patrick Clancy, guest curator for **Video As Attitude**, has used video in an installation context since 1968. In addition to his creative work, he has taught and lectured extensively on the history, theory and production of film and video. He was a co-founder in 1966 of the Pulsa Group.