15. OFF THE WALL

VIDEO SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATION

VIDEO INSTALLATION: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN IMAGES AND SPACE

In 'Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between' media theorist and critic Margaret Morse examines the nature and functions of video installation, speculating on some of the most fundamental questions raised in relation to what she considered 'undoubtedly the most complex art form in contemporary culture'.[1]

Morse's analysis of video installation presents the notion of an art form that can never be liberated from the act of production, pointing out that the gallery-dependent installation is in stark contrast to 'commodity media' such as painting or sculpture in which the museum represents the ultimate validation. Installations are by their nature, impermanent and ephemeral and never completely disengaged from their original location. The gallery space is simply the 'ground' for the installation – the sculptural objects and/or structures, their placing, and the televisual images must be experienced directly through the physical activities and presence of the spectator. Unlike performance, the artist is deliberately not present, leaving the gallery visitor to 'perform' the work. Video installation is emphatically *not* proscenium art, an attribute it shares with other non-commodity art forms that include performance art, earth works and Expanded Cinema. It is important to note, however, that although video installations share much with other so-called 'non-commodity' art forms, in recent years there has been a particularly significant commodification of video installation work, with galleries, museums and wealthy private individuals acquiring examples for their permanent collections.

In terms of the creation of a video installation, the artist's activities in the gallery are the final stage in a series of actions that includes planning and logistics, funding applications and innumerable organizational and practical considerations that both hamper spontaneity and prevent improvisation. Nevertheless, the inevitable risks involved in realizing the work in the gallery space create a tension, and Morse identifies this gap between the conceptualization of the work and the realization of an idea or proposal as being at the heart of an installation's cultural significance.

Thus the video installation can be seen as an experiment in the representation of culture:

> … a new disposition of machines that project the imagination onto the world and that store, recirculate and display images … [presenting] a fresh orientation of the body in space and a reformulation of visual and kinaesthetic experience.[2]

Drawing on the simile of 'Plato's cave', an imaginary space in which the spectator is separated and removed from that which is being watched, Morse discusses the video installation as a work in which the visitor is surrounded by the physical present – the 'here-and-now', engaging with a spatial experience which is grounded in an actual, rather than an illusionistic space.

> The underlying premise of the installation appears to be that the audio-visual experience supplemented kinaesthetically can be a kind of learning not with the mind alone, but with the body itself.[3]

Video installations have from the outset been mixed media – CCTV, combined with pre-recorded video, slide and film projections, sound and photography, often containing more than one tense or image space simultaneously. Morse suggests that the key to distinguishing between installations may be to determine whether the spectator is expected to engage in two and three-dimensional spatial worlds, or remain in the 'real' space of the gallery. All installation is ultimately 'interactive' – the viewer is presented with a kind of variable narrative of spatial and representational possibilities that s/he must negotiate. The notion of the 'site-specific' installation is an important issue particularly in terms of the relationship of the work to the exhibition space in which it is installed:

> Site-specificity implies neither simply that a work is to be found in a particular place, nor, quite if it is that place. It means rather, that what the work looks like and what it means is dependent in large part on the configuration of the space in which it is realized. In other words, if the same objects were arranged in the same way in another location, they would constitute a different work… . What is important about a space can be any one of a number of things; its dimensions, its general character, the materials from which it is constructed, the use to which has previously been put, the part it played in an event of historical or political importance, and so on.[4]

There is a sense in which all video installations are site-specific, insofar as works installed in a gallery must be placed and tuned to the particularities of the site. Characteristics of 'site' include such factors as entrance positions, scale of space,

acoustics, light levels, type of space (its 'normal' function) etc. The most important issue in question is often the extent to which a work is site-specific.

Frederic Jameson characterizes an installation as a 'material occasion for the viewing process'. In his view there is a particular kind of spatial experience that characterizes postmodernism, a mode of address he refers to as 'spatialization':

> Conceptual art may be described as a Kantian procedure whereby, on the occasion of what first seems to be an encounter with a work of art of some kind, the categories of the mind itself – normally not conscious, and inaccessible to any direct representation or to any thematizable self-conscious or reflexivity – are flexed, their structuring presence now felt laterally by the viewer like musculature or nerves of which we normally remain insensible.[5]

Often, video installations whether projection or multi-monitor, seek to counter the notion that the television is a psychological space, with no existence in the physical world. There is a sense that single-screen works that do not in some way address the relationship to the space that they occupy offer a direct, almost cinematic experience, transmitting information via light and sound to the viewer without any direct engagement with the spatial or the physical.

MULTI-CHANNEL VIDEO – NON-CINEMATIC SPACE?

In the early days of video art, video projection was a rare occurrence. This was not simply because the equipment was notoriously unreliable, scarce and expensive, but also because the image was of such poor quality, especially when compared with film projection. Video projection in the 1970s and even in the early 1980s provided a low-contrast and a comparatively dim image, and due to the relatively low-resolution of the television image (525 lines in National Television Standards Committee (NTSC), 625 in Phase Alternation Line (PAL) (see Glossary: Television standards), it was also pretty fuzzy. Video artists who sought to explore notions of scale and/or the spatial characteristics of the medium invariably resorted to the use of multi-monitor, or as they were more often called, multi-channel works. Viewers confronted with a bank or array of monitors in a gallery or exhibition space were immediately required to assess the implied relationship between the images on display. A multi-channel work challenges a viewer to engage with the work on a spatial level, in that she/he is deliberately left free to make decisions about the order of priority of the images, the relative relationship between the multiple screens and the viewing position, and to consider the space between the screens, their relative size and even how they are mounted or displayed. A further potential level of signification can be articulated by the artist who has control of the images across the multiple screens as well as within

15.1: Beryl Korot, configurations of *Dachau 1974*. Courtesy of the artist.

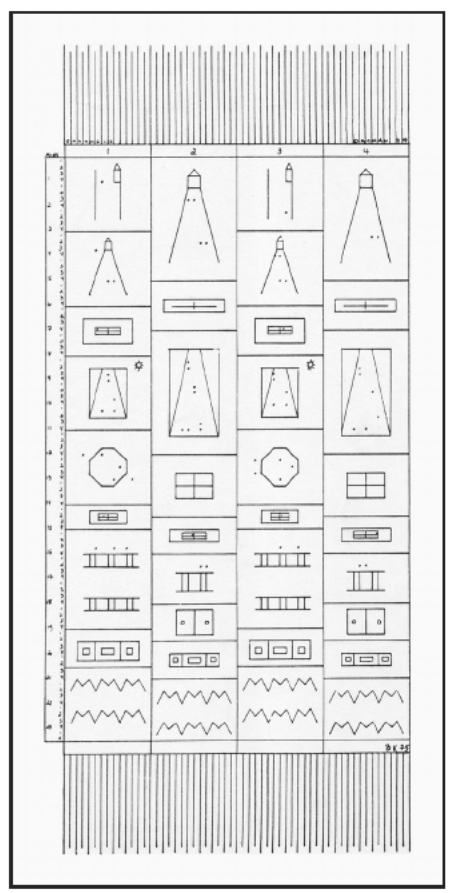
the space of the single screen, and this is of course in addition to any manipulations of the soundtrack. This is clearly a complicated art form, requiring the sort of attention from the spectator that traditionally might be expected of music!

Many artists who experimented with video worked across the genres of single and multi-channel video, and the works were often complimentary or made in relation to one another. In the first London Video Arts (LVA) catalogue which was published in 1978, a substantial section (a third of the catalogue) was devoted to installation work with details of installations by international artists who were also tape makers, including Eric Cameron (Canada) Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn (USA) David Hall (UK) Takahiko limura (Japan), Christina Kubisch and Fabrizio Plessi (Italy), Beryl Korot (USA), Tamara Krikorian (UK) Mary Lucier (USA), Stuart Marshall (UK), Steve Partridge (UK), Tony Sinden (UK) and Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas (Netherlands).

Beryl Korot's (1945, USA) *Dachau 1974* is a good example of an early multi-channel installation. This four-screen work was built around a structure that literally 'weaves' layers of meaning through its multi-layered construction. The work was not concerned to establish a relationship with the gallery space and in some ways it replicates the full frontal viewing experience of a multi-screen film, any difference to some extent connected to the intimate scale of the video images and their contrast with the image content. The viewer was encouraged to watch the piece in its entirety (24 minutes) and to face the screens seated on a bench placed at a specific distance from

the row of screens. In *Dachau 1974* the four identical monochrome television screens (22 inches in the original presentation at The Kitchen in New York) were presented in a horizontal line, their familiar boxes masked behind a panel so that only the shape of the screens was visible. A diagram mounted on the same wall provided the viewer with information about the sequencing and editing structure of the work.

In seeking a model for combining video images from a number of sources, Korot drew on her experience of weaving – specifically referencing the mechanical technology of the loom as a system of combining many elements 'both literally and metaphorically' developing patterns that evolved in time. In discussing this aspect of the work Korot made an analogy between weaving cloth and editing video sequences, which also demonstrated her understanding of the relationship between the artist and the technology she was using:



15.2: Beryl Korot, Structural diagram for *Dachau 1974*. Courtesy of the artist.

> Just as the spinning and gathering of wool serve as the raw material for a weave, so the artist working with video selects images to serve as the basic substance of the work. All technology, in its capacity to instantly reproduce, store, and retrieve information, has moved continually in a direction that seeks to free us from labouring with our hands by giving us greater conceptual freedom to organize, select, and judge. For myself, it's becoming clear that the greater my understanding of the role of craftsmanship in working with the video medium, and the more manually active I remain in the selection process, the greater the possibility for making a technological work true to my intentions.[6]

The video sequences Korot selected to present were all recorded at the site of the former Dachau concentration camp in Poland. During recording, Korot concentrated on the symmetrical structures of the architecture, seeking ways to capture an ambience of the place as it was at the time of shooting (1974) which would reflect its own horrific and dark past. Korot sought to represent a spatial experience of the physical place through the developing temporal patterning of the work, and to accomplish this she assigned time values to specific images and their accompanying sounds, thus creating 'image blocks' via a repetition of the imagery. In the final exhibited work, channels 1 and 3, and 2 and 4 showed the same images (and played the same corresponding sounds). In line with her weaving analogy, Korot conceived of each channel as representing a thread, so that the pairs of channels (1 and 3) and (2 and 4) formed interlocking combinations, which Korot perceived as a method of binding the sequences across the duration of the piece.

Critic and curator John Hanhardt describes the experience of viewing the work in his 1976 essay 'Video/Television Space', pointing out the participatory aspect of *Dachau 1974*, which is an integral part of much multi-channel work:

> The rhythms articulated through the timing of sequences and juxtaposition of spatial perspectives create for the viewer a many-levelled experience. There is the nature of the images – selective compositions which cumulatively present the camp as a geographic, architectural place. The viewer is disturbed when he realizes what the place actually is. There is also the elegant structuring of sequences which involves the viewer on an exploratory participation into the interconnections and the decipherment of these sequences.

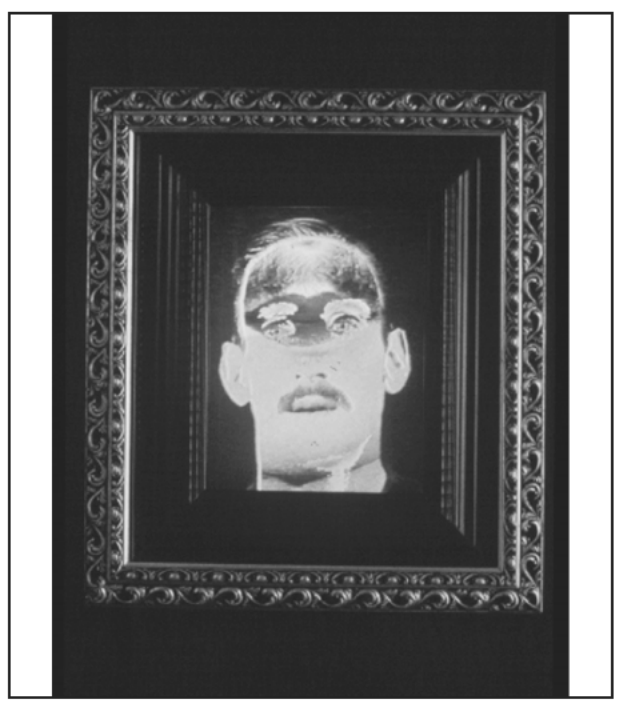
As has been discussed elsewhere in this book, artists working with video installations often seek to engage the viewer in a direct physical relationship with the apparatus of video and the resultant images, but this participatory aspect is not always only limited to the actions of the spectator. In Madelon Hookyaas and Elsa Stansfield's installation *Compass* (1984), exhibited at the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam, a

15.3: Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield, *Compass* 1984 (Outside). Courtesy of the artists.

15.4: Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield, *Compass* 1984 (Inside). Courtesy of the artists.

'live' video camera mounted on a wind vane on the roof of the gallery influenced the changes to images displayed on four monitors arranged on the four cardinal points of the compass. The images on monitors in the gallery were directly affected by the direction of the wind, providing an experience of the relationship between past and present, with natural forces as an active participant in the creation of the work.

Video artists have also exploited the potential of the television screen as a frame, analogous to the traditional painterly device. British video artists Marty St. James (1954, UK) and Anne Wilson (1955, UK) produced a series of video portraits in the early 1990s, exploring both a multi-image format with installations such as the fourteen-monitor *Portrait of Shobana Jeyasingh* (1990) and the 11 monitor *The Swimmer, Duncan Goodhew* (1990) and more intimate single-screen works, often commissioned and exhibited alongside more traditional portraits in formal gallery settings such as the National Portrait Gallery in London. This series of works included numerous commissioned portraits including *The Smoking Man – Giuliano Pirani* (1991), *Portrait of Neil Bartlett* (1990), *The Actress, Julie Walters* (1990). According to writer and video artist Jeremy Welsh, the single-screen portraits were the more successful:



15.5: Marty St. James and Anne Wilson, *The Actor* (Neil Bartlett), 1990. Courtesy of the artists.

15.6: Marty St. James, *BoyGirlDiptych*, 2000. Courtesy of the artist.

> Functioning best when their close conformity to the traditions of portraiture was subtly undermined by the management of time and change in the image. An apparently still face might suddenly speak, begin to cry or turn its head to follow the viewer's movements through the museum.[7]

Working alone, Marty St. James has extended and developed this approach in recent years, exploring the potential of digital moving image and monitor display as a medium for portraiture with works such as *Boy Girl Diptych (*2000) a double-screen work using images of his children recorded over a period of 11 years.

VIDEO SCULPTURE

In my own video installation work of the 1990s I have often sought to create multi-channel works in which the space between the monitors was of crucial importance to the experience. One of my primary intentions was to draw the attention of the spectator to their own perceptual relationship to the work they were engaging with. For example, in *Eau d'Artifice* (1990) a circular pyramid of 35 video monitors was arranged in seven layers, presenting images and sounds of flowing water to construct an artificial 'electronic' fountain within the gallery space. The visitor was encouraged to engage with the structure as one might a 'real' fountain. The installation ran continuously in a twenty-minute cycle of a compressed day, the ambient light and colour progressing from early morning through to evening before the water spout was shut off, allowing the reflected image in the 'reservoir' to settle, revealing the neo-classical face of the top spout before the entire cycle began again. My intention

was to make the viewer aware of his or her own crucial contribution to the illusionary 'idea' of the fountain – the spaces between each layer of monitors only *implied* the flow of water, thus the fountain was a special kind of 'fiction'.

Video sculpture, although a sub-set of multi-channel video, is less cinematic and more 'sculptural'. Gallery visitors are not expected to sit and watch a video sculpture from an appointed spot – they are encouraged to walk around it, to view it from all sides and angles, as if it were a traditional sculpture which has been considered 'in the round' by the artist. The images and sounds, although often important, are only elements to be read in relation to the structures and forms that are simultaneously the technical support for the image/sound and an integral element of the work. Video installations of this kind are often playful or deliberately ironic, for example much of the video installation work of Nam June Paik, such as *TV Chair* (1968–74), of the *Family of Robot* (1986), *TV Garden* (1974), *Fish Flies on Sky* (1975) and many others. In these and similar works, Paik is partly relying on the juxtaposition of the familiar domestic television into an incongruous physical situation – fixed onto the ceiling, wedged into the seat of a chair, or fashioned into a deliberately

15.7: Chris Meigh-Andrews, *Eau d'Artifice*, 1990. Courtesy of the artist.

clumsy anthropomorphic representation. The images on the screen are often simple, repetitive and graphic, even perhaps of secondary importance, simply re-enforcing or complementing the physical structure – fish swimming in an aquarium, a static image of flowers, indiscriminate off-air footage that has been electronically processed, etc.

Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist often uses the genre in an ironic mode in gestures that acknowledge the influence of Paik. Video installations such as *TV-Luster* (*TV Chandelier*) (1993), *Selbstlos in Lavabad* (*Selfless in the Bath of Lava*) (1994), *Eindrucke Verdauen* (*Digesting Impressions*) (1993) and *Fliegendes Zimmer* (*Flying Room*) (1995) similarly position the television as a sculptural element in ironic relationships to other domestic and familiar objects. In an essay Rist wrote to introduce an exhibition of Paik's work in 1993, she provides us with an insight into her own complex and playful attitude to video as much as his:

> The world in front of, behind, or between the window and TV is the biggest video installation imaginable. It is all just a question of point of view. Video is the synthesis of music, language, painting, mangy mean pictures, time, sexuality, lighting, action and technology. This is lucky for TV viewers and video artists. They love video; they love it with all its disadvantages, like the poor resolution of the image, reduced to 560x720 dots. They love it because of its disadvantages. It kick starts our imagination and, behind our eyeballs, turns into an orgy of sensation and imagination. The monitor is the glowing easel where pictures are painted on the glass from behind.[8]

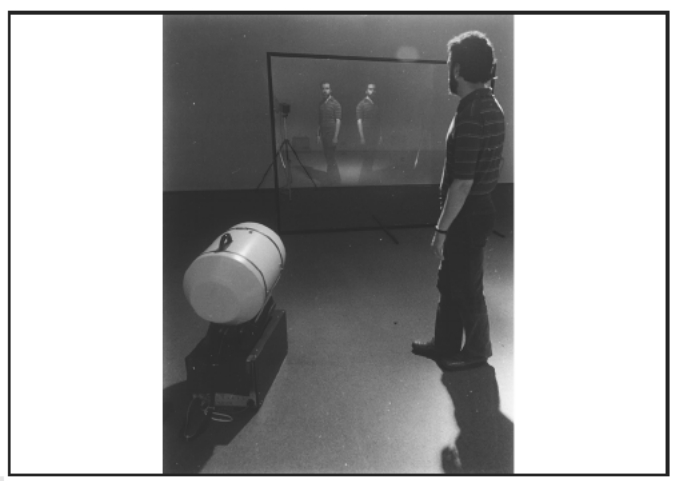
Clearly however, not all video sculpture is ironic. A number of the works that have been discussed in detail in other chapters of this book – Bruce Nauman's *Video Corridor*, Michael Snow's *De La,* Judith Goddard's *Television Circle* and Studio Azzuro's *Il Nuotatore* are further examples of video sculpture. In these works there is no single viewing position from which to view the work, or even the images on the screens. In these and many other video sculptures there is a dynamic interplay between the images, sounds and the structure of the installation – the way the images are presented, how they are encountered and the relationship that is established or implied within the space or location of the work.

PROJECTION INSTALLATION: VIDEO WITHOUT THE BOX

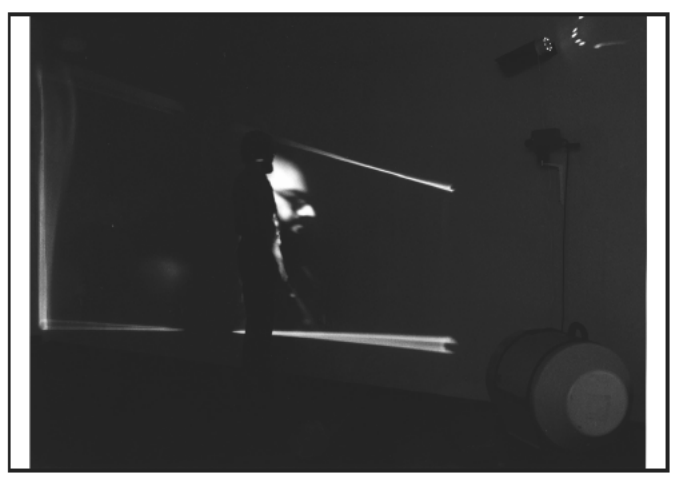
One major consequence of the developing technological change in video is the rise of the video projector as a tool for artists and in gallery presentation. As was stated previously, the image quality of early video projection was disappointing, especially when compared with film, but some artists experimented with it successfully. In the early 1970s Keith Sonnier (1941, USA) produced a number of environmental works at the

Castelli Gallery in New York and at the Stedelijk van Abbe, Eindhoven such as *Video Wall Projection* (1970), which exploited the shortcomings of an early monochrome video projector.

During the 1970s Peter Campus (1937, USA) produced an extended series of projected video installation works that sought to deliberately confront the viewer with a self -image that defied or challenged normal expectations. In an important sense these works were participatory and sculptural in that they invited and even required audience participation. In *Shadow Projection* (1974) the viewer's projected image was made to coincide with his/her own shadow, one shrinking whilst the other increased



15.8: Peter Campus, *Interface*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist.



15.9: Peter Campus, *Mem*, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

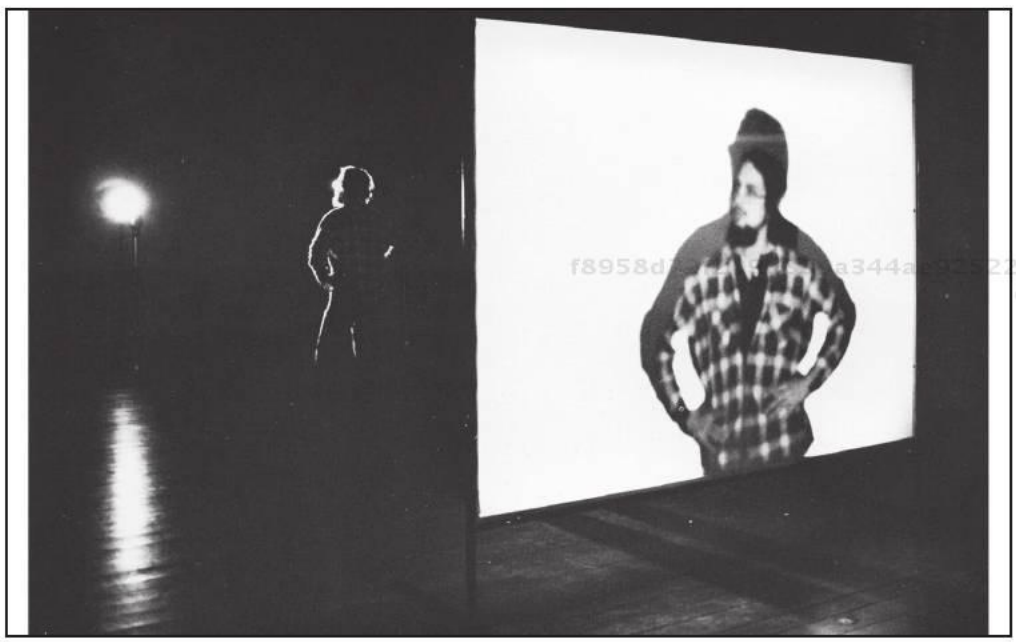
in size. In this and other works in the series, which also included *Interface* (1972), *mem* (1975) and *aen* (1977) Campus used disconcertingly simple arrangements of the 'live' video image and projection technology in conjunction with mirrors, inverted cameras or distorted projections to create and explore the new sensory conundrums of televisual space. In order to present this work Campus developed a particular configuration for his projection projects that meant that he often had to provide his own customized equipment:

> During the 1970s I worked with a Kalart Victor projector which ran on radio tubes and weighed about 150 pounds. I would travel with a lot of tube replacements in my suitcase. It used a cathode ray tube around 5 inches in diameter which was pointed backward into the rear of the projector. Surrounding the CRT was a parabolic mirror that was originally designed by Isaac Newton as a telescope element. It produced a beautiful image that has not been duplicated by the newer better smaller projectors.[9]

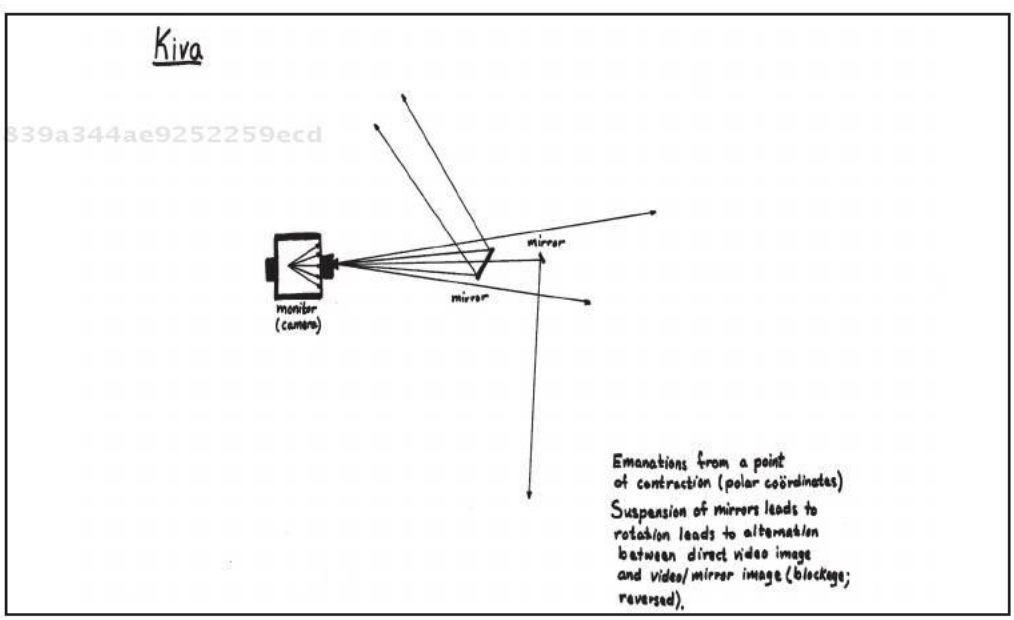
In many of these projection works and in his videotape *Three Transitions* (1973), Campus was particularly interested in exploring and representing notions of televisual space. All of these works confront the viewer with examples of complex co-existent physical and virtual spaces manifested via video technology. In the installations, the viewer is compelled to confront his or her own image, and to recognize and acknowledge the fascination of the live electronic mirror of video feedback.

In 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', the writer and theorist Rosalind Krauss identified a potentially problematic inherent 'narcissistic enclosure' in artists' video, but suggested that in works by Campus such as *mem,* it could be critically accounted for since the work allowed participating viewers to engage with and to become aware of their own narcissism. She described the process of this action and reaction and how it functioned in relation to the projected image on the gallery wall and the actions and awareness of the viewer:

> Campus' pieces acknowledge the very powerful narcissism that propels the viewer of these works forward and backward in front of the muralised field. And through the movement of his own body, his neck craning and head turning, the viewer is forced to recognize this motive as well. But the condition of these works is to acknowledge as separate the two surfaces on which the image is held – the one the viewer's body, the other the wall – and to make them register as absolutely distinct. It is in this distinction that the wall surface – the pictorial surface – is understood as an Absolute Other, as part of the world of objects external to the self. Further, it is to specify that the mode of projecting oneself onto that surface entails recognizing all the ways that one does not coincide with it.[10]



15.10: Peter Campus, *Shadow Projection*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist.



15.11: Peter Campus, Diagram for *Kiva*, 1971. Courtesy of the artist.

In works such as *mem*, *Shadow Projection* and *Interface* the viewer is participating in the work at a number of levels; actively involved in defining the image that is produced, decoding the operations and function of the mechanism of the installation and reflecting on the impulse which compels them to engage with it.

BREAKING THE FRAME

As with other aspects of video technology during the period under discussion, video projectors increased dramatically in quality and reliability, decreasing in size and bulk, whilst the cost of purchase continued to decrease. With this rapid change a growing number of artists began to explore the potential of this new mode of presentation. One significant feature of projection is the potential to project images onto surfaces (and objects) other than a conventional screen. Not only did this have an effect on the size of the image that an artist might consider, but it also presented the possibility of abandoning the traditional TV rectangle altogether. The standard broadcast TV ratio (3:4) that video artists had been confined and constrained by since the 1960s was no longer necessary or desirable, and this technological change helped to transform video art, liberating it from the inevitable reference of television, and as the resolution and brightness range of video projection increased, video began to be (almost) indistinguishable from film![11]

The work of Tony Oursler (1957, USA) provides an example of the potential of video projection to transcend the conventions of the rectangular television frame. Oursler began working with video in the mid-1970s, often making props and characters for his tapes, which he saw as an integral part of his working process. In this early period Oursler sought to create a dynamic tension between the interior space of the video presentation and the gallery space:

> The first installations were almost like screening rooms and the later installations were packed with information. I was very disenchanted with the television as an object which had been celebrated by the previous generation of artists, such as Nam June Paik and Dara Birnbaum, and others who found themselves in the position of converting a household appliance into art, whereas I felt like the magic of the appliance was hindered by the box itself. So most of my installations involved manipulating the video image to remove it one step from its physical origin into another space or dimension.[12]

Seeking a strategy to engage the viewer in a more active relationship to his work, and endeavouring to create a 'situation rather than an image', Oursler developed a series of installations involving the human figure. Particularly interested in the relationship between the power of technology and its relationship to human desire,

Oursler produced a series of talking dummies in the 1980s, experimenting with compact low-cost LCD video projectors to project human features onto their blank faces. Oursler used these talking dummies in an attempt to 'deconstruct the American narrative', describing the plots and highlights of popular feature films, engaging the viewer in an active relationship through memory and shared cultural experience.

In this series of video installations Oursler often deliberately isolated individual aspects of dramatic cinematic narrative to elicit a feeling of empathy in the viewer.

15.12: Tony Oursler, *Judy,* 1994. Courtesy of the artist and the Lisson Gallery, London.

In *Crying Doll* (1989) images of the continuously weeping face of performer Tracy Leipold (who has worked with Oursler on a number of his projects) were projected onto a diminutive doll. In this and other installations of the period, Oursler exploited another particular unique feature of video technology – its ability to present continuous and perpetual action:

> What makes the crying doll most effective is its superhuman ability to never stop weeping, which in turn becomes horrifying for the viewer, who eventually must turn away. It is that moment of turning away which the empathy test is all about.[13]

The technical improvements that have led directly to the development of low-cost, high-resolution and ultra-bright video and data projectors have contributed to a revolution in the presentation of video in the gallery and elsewhere. The video monitor, once the mainstay of the video installation and presentation, is now rare and in many ways its use often signifies an artistic statement, for example in Gary Hill's exposed CRTs (see Glossary) such as *In As Much as It Is Always Already Taking Place* (1990), *Between Cinema and a Hard Place* (1991) and *Between 1 & 0* (1993).

Advances in video projection have not only liberated video from its characteristic 3:4 aspect ratio and from the intimate scale associated with the television screen, but has also contributed to an erosion of the previously distinct characteristics between video and film. The dominance of video projection as the preferred presentation format in recent video work combined with other new technological developments such as the DVD and the computer hard drive has transformed the gallery exhibition of moving image work over the last decade. Curators now routinely include a mix of film and video in group shows, early classics of avant-garde film are presented in endlessly repeating loops alongside paintings and sculpture of the period, and projected video compilations juxtapose experimental film and video indiscriminately. This blurring of the distinctions and differences has its advantages – comparing the film and video work of artists who have worked with both media such as David Hall, Richard Serra or Robert Cahen can be instructive and illuminating.

The digital revolution has relentlessly eroded the distinctions between electronic and film-based moving image work. The convergence of computer manipulated imagery from a diverse range of sources – photographic, filmic and electronic – together with the development of image display technologies such as the plasma screen and high-resolution data projection has rendered the distinction between previously distinct media increasingly obsolete and largely irrelevant.