

T.V. OR NOT T.V.

ALTHOUGH VIDEO ART WAS BORN FROM THE SAME TECHNOLOGY AS TELEVISION, ARTISTS HAVE TAKEN THE MEDIUM IN UNCONVENTIONAL DIRECTIONS.

BY REGINA CORNWELL

He would sweep in with a flourish, wearing a purple cape whose color we could only guess at, since we were watching him in black and white. He would pontificate, scrawl on his blackboard, and call up the angels to erase it for him. This was Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, one of the first televangelists, who appeared regularly on network prime-time during the 1950s. To curious children he had a wonderful air of mystery. Under Sheen's fiery television tutelage, audiences got religion through learning; they did learn, even if they didn't get the religion. With his *Life Is Worth Living*, Sheen straddled the line between pedagogy and entertainment. He was a repressed actor who embraced the opportunities of a new electronic medium, yet when we think of today's televangelists, Sheen looks different. Perhaps it was his blackboard. This teaching aid stands as a reminder of a time when pure entertainment hadn't yet become the *raison d'être* for all of television.

Sheen's TV program was what appears today as a part of the golden age of televised simplicity and innocence—and even occasional substance. In those days, late-night talk shows such as Steve Allen's *Tonight Show* provided teenagers with the kind of open, issue-oriented discussions that the great American family had already forgotten how to conduct. By the early 1970s such substance was eclipsed by escalating entertainment values, and television was being referred to by artist Vito Acconci as the "home companion." This increasing slickness made the dangers of such passive companionship more and more evident. Acconci was one of



Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, 1986. Courtesy of the artist.

pages 58–59 and 62–63:
MICA-TV (Carole Ann Klonarides
and Michael Owen), John Torreano:
Art World Wizard, 1986. Courtesy
of the artists.

several artists who began experimenting with video as an alternative means of expression during the pioneering days of video art.

During the early to mid-seventies an increasing number of videos made by artists explored the subject of television, approaching it in a variety of ways. In Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* (1973), the screen is filled with a scrolling text that denounces television and the corporate world, a polemic designed to goad viewers out of easy passivity. Joan Jonas's twenty-minute tape *Vertical Roll* (1972) plays with the technology of video as a structuring device. Acconci, dripping saliva from his mouth, was the strange

"talking head" in works such as *Waterways: Four Saliva Studies* (1971), one of his many tapes that at the time seemed egregious violations of viewers' expectations.

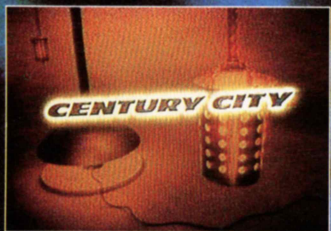
These tapes were made and shown within commercial galleries, which briefly supported video. They have a relentless seriousness about them, reminding us that within the art world of a dozen and more years ago, the notion of art as simply another variety of entertainment hadn't yet taken hold. Although Bishop Sheen's blackboard and these artists' works are unlikely bedfellows, there are curious affinities

between them, and both suggest possibilities for the medium that failed to materialize in television's inexorable advance toward commercialization.

Our cultural climate has changed considerably. In the overstuffed postmodern eighties, entertainment is everywhere, including the gallery and museum. But it is all led by the box, our home companion—all singing, all dancing, all talking, all joking. It is difficult to ignore the arguments of Neil Postman, who tells us in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that television has profoundly altered the way the United States perceives itself and conducts its social and politi-

from television, film, advertising, the press, and other cultural forms. Appropriation and simulation work hand in hand. But because video shares television's technology, it is by its nature a media art, different from the traditional visual arts, and it is natural that it should borrow something of its style and content from television.

At the forefront among the artists today who examine television are MICA-TV and Joan Braderman, working on the East Coast, and the brothers Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, on the West Coast. Shown in museums, alternate spaces, universities, and on cable and PBS, their work contrasts sharply with the video that was shown in galleries in the early seventies, which used or criticized television with great sobriety. While each of these 1980s artists employs television in a different way, entertainment plays a major part—



MICA-TV, R. M. Fischer: *An Industrial*, 1983. Courtesy MICA-TV.



The show-me child in John Torreano: Art World Wizard.



MICA-TV, Cindy Sherman: *An Interview*, 1981. Courtesy MICA-TV.



Cindy Sherman: *An Interview*.



Joan Does *Dynasty*.

cal life. The television set has become amusing educator, made-up politician, showy preacher, and tabloid journalist all in one, eroding our social connectedness as we passively sit before it, its indifferent face disguising its subtle threat and undermining our critical faculties.

Throughout the 1980s we have seen the visual arts investigate and appropriate

and is even caressed—in the videos of all of them.

Television is emphasized in the very title of the production company MICA-TV, composed of the team of Carole Ann Klonarides and Michael Owen, who have been working together since 1980. Several of the tapes they have made are short collaborations with individual artists about each artist's

work. Neither biographical nor documentary, these entertaining MICA-TV pieces stand in sharp contrast to standard overwrought romantic film and television documentaries about artists. In place of the clichés and stereotypes that saturate these formulaic works, Klonarides and Owen take off on old and new media styles, investing them with new messages, and sometimes even creating new forms. It is surprising that they have received so little critical attention.

In the ten-and-one-half-minute *Cindy Sherman: An Interview* (1980–81), photographer Cindy Sherman appears variously as gallery director, talk-show hostess, and publicist, seated across the table from an interviewer, as they discuss her portfolio called *Untitled Film Stills*. The backgrounds shift to suit her changes of costume, fitting the cheap publicity look of the roles she takes in her *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman discusses her career, her move to New York, her working methods, and how businesslike her life has be-

come, as the interviewer (played by Klonarides) wraps up with "It was interesting meeting all of you." *Cindy Sherman: An Interview* takes Virginia Graham's *Girl Talk* from the 1960s and 1970s, and *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood*, which aired during the 1950s, as its tongue-in-cheek models, transforming girl talk and Hollywood

gossip into devices accommodating the method and style of Sherman's work. In front of the video camera, Sherman performs in costume as both subject and object, as she did before her still camera when her identity was very often unrecognizable to even a knowing audience. For those viewers who might get lost in Sherman's many identities, Klonarides adds in voice-over on the five stills at the end: "That's her."

Klonarides and Owen again refer to a period television show in their video *John Torreano: Art World Wizard* (1986). NBC's program of three decades ago, *Watch Mr. Wizard*, with Dan Herbert in the title role, is their model. "That's what all the kids in the neighborhood call him because he shows them the magic and mystery of science in everyday living," the introduction to the show intoned as Mr. Wizard made his appearance, ready to demonstrate often complicated experiments on explosions or how a pulley works to an eager

and curious child who shares the stage with him. In *Art World Wizard* we watch the wry artist Torreano give playful but thorough explanations to his young and skeptical neighbor as he constructs a diamond shape, the hallmark of his work. Torreano then winks and orchestrates some screen magic, adding mys-

tery and dazzle to the diamond through special effects he creates with a device known as a video paintbox. The tape trades its black-and-white vintage look for color during this sequence. Practicality and imagination come together in a simple way, teasing us into discovering something more about the artist's work.

The old Mr. Wizard presiding over science contrasts well with the four-minute in-and-out eighties *Art World Wizard* and the disbelieving, show-me child of today. The latter cannot see the developing diamond shape but only "a bunch of wood stuck together" until it is transformed by the flashy special color video effects. With a short and entertaining format, *John Torreano: Art World Wizard* offers us a series of brief takes on art and the art world.

"In an era of contradictory signs, confusing movements, and hysterical hype, one takes comfort and direction from works which light our way through the overcast landscape of contemporary culture," is the way the

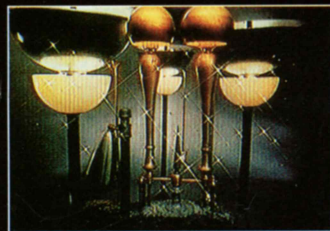
tion for this tape, made for a mere two thousand dollars, a small fraction of the cost of the high-end work whose appearance it emulates.

MICA-TV boldly mixes critical statements about Fischer's work with sales claims, so that the two, criticism and marketing, become indistinguishable, merged in hyperbole and hype. The aggressive tape, with its paternalistic voice-over narrator and its glossy images promoting two lines of Fischer's sculptures, also calls into question the troubling distinction between art and industrial design, art and craft. The copy trumpets everything from Fischer as "the impresario of futuristic nostalgia" to "*Home Base*, a stunning marriage of nature, heavy industry, and nineteenth-century charm."

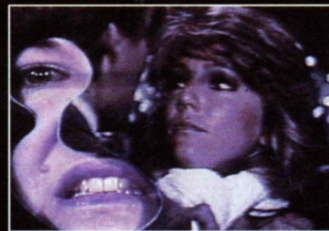
Sarcastic and entertaining it is, but by exaggerating the industrial format, the piece smirks at what it is designed to criticize, and it also ends up as baldly self-serving. It finds fault with the sales-pitch approach to art, while at the same time benefiting from it. But *R. M. Fischer* is



Cindy Sherman: *An Interview*.



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Joan Does *Dynasty*.



John Torreano: *Art World Wizard*.

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fascinating exactly because it treads such a fine line between sales pitch and disapproval of the art world's commercialism. However, it is unable to comfortably address an art that merges with craft and industrial design. Rather than transforming today's television entertainment, it seems disturbingly caught up in it.

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MICA-TV combines entertainment with informational forms of television—the talk show, the educational program, the commercial, the public-service announcement, and the teaser. In the works of Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, which include *Vault* (1984), and Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986), the material is mined directly from the heart of televisionland—the soap opera. Both of these works were shown in biennials at the Whitney Museum and have received attention at other museums and at festivals in the United States and Europe.

Vault is real pastiche. Speaking for himself and his brother, Norman commented: "Formally, *Vault* depends upon conditions internalized and strategies employed by commercials. And psychoanalysis has been an integral part of the commercial—the vehicle for marketing products." *Vault's* send-up tale is based on the premise that "we perceive our personal histories as a series of personal traumas," mimicking the treasure trove



Cindy Sherman: An Interview.

that television, Hollywood, and advertising readily cash in on.

Demonstrating their belief that, in Norman's words, "most feature work can be condensed into twelve minutes," *Vault* runs for just that long. It is dedicated to the memory of Luis Buñuel, a film director who was adept at orchestrating absurdist

melodramas of the middle class; the soundtrack is dominated by Wagner's *Liebeshod*, the same music that Buñuel selected to accompany his 1928 film *Un Chien Andalou*. The Yonemotos embellish the intentionally stiff and mannered acting in *Vault* with anxious glances and overdetermined reaction shots as the characters mouth soap cliché after cliché. At the same time, they elide and juxtapose time and space, saturating their plot with symbols from popular and high culture.

These are symbols mediated and known to many only through television—the controlled classical musician, the romantic and intuitive abstract artist, the sports amateur "imaging" her way into professional stardom, the wealthy oil magnates familiar from *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Through hyperbole, *Vault* plays with media formula and convention, pointing up what it is that soap operas do. While it may deconstruct the soap and amuse viewers at the same time, the irony and extreme distancing end up draining the work. Unlike the never-ending soaps, when *Vault* is over, it's over. Is the deliberate coolness of production a critical send-up, or is it an affirmation of the television it is analytically taking apart? We aren't sure.

Soap opera is one of the most influential products of television and popular culture. The Yonemotos are on the outside of the soap, looking in at it. In *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986), Joan Braderman peers out at us from the television screen in her cogent recut of a season's worth of episodes from *Dynasty*, reduced to thirty-five minutes.

Two years earlier Braderman had made *Natalie Didn't Drown: Joan "Reads" the National Enquirer* for Pa-

per Tiger TV in New York, an alternative media group that invites writers, artists, and academics to produce half-hour critiques of the media, which are then aired on public-access cable. Influenced by Paper Tiger and encouraged by the success of her witty show for them, Braderman invented a new form for *Joan Does Dynasty*.

Appearing in discreet black, sometimes hidden behind a Mexican wrestling mask, in close-up or full shot, occasionally upside down, Braderman is ubiquitous throughout the video, delivering her commentary in scene after scene, sharing the screen with the ongoing drama of *Dynasty*, the favorite evening soap of the mid-eighties. Braderman, feminist activist and one of the original members of the *Heresies* magazine collective, dissects the wardrobes, home decor, friends and lovers of Alexis Carrington Colby (Joan Collins) in tones sometimes akin to gossip, but more often taking the form of sarcastic and very entertaining social and political commentary. "I'm an



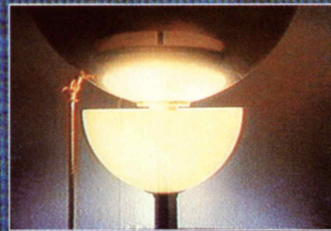
above: *Joan Does Dynasty*.

left: Bruce Nauman's installation at the recent Cologne exhibition Video Sculpture.

American, like TV itself," is her opener, introducing herself as a loud-mouthed sixties academic, heartily enjoying her interventions onscreen. Nothing escapes her in *Dynasty*—sexist men, anti-feminist women, class condescension, racist putdowns. Now and then in her leap



Joan Does Dynasty.



R. M. Fischer: An Industrial.



Joan Does Dynasty.

through the *Dynasty* season, Braderman repeats a character's gestures or dialogue in short choppy sections, underlining a fetish, accenting a violent moment, or pointing up an excess.

Speaking of Collins's influence, the onscreen Braderman remarks that she "is installed in our lives, in your life and in my life. She is there every Wednesday night and she's watching us. She's got the power." Bra-

derman's point is that *Dynasty* is about power—as is television itself. "TV and global enterprise," she says, "joined in a symbiotic relation, cannot be thought of separately." The issue is how to appropriate that power, which Braderman demonstrates symbolically by speaking to us from within the box itself.

Braderman does, however, admit to an ambivalence. "I confess my unreconstructed *Dynasty* delectation. Although I've got the intellectual tools to deconstruct its odious subtext, does this tell you anything? Is deconstructing it merely the invention of a new way to love it? I don't know. . . . In the age

of the consciousness industry, no one hears you when you scream."

The unfortunate irony is that *Joan Does Dynasty* will probably never be shown where it ought to, on the networks, because of the legal problems that it would inevitably cause. It subverts and defaces *Dynasty*; commercial stations fear the networks and advertisers too much to show it.

We are far from the symbolic blackboard of the fifties and the more optimistic work of the early seventies. *Joan Does Dynasty* marvelously sums up the dilemmas of making video art using the media and its hypnotic powers of entertain-

ment in the postmodern eighties. An artist may create new forms, but will these make us aware of the real power of television and how to deal with it, or will they simply be absorbed by it? Public discourse is radically affected by television, as Neil Postman argues, and in recent years the political ad, the news, and the educational program have all increasingly emulated the soap, dramatizing events to attract ever larger audiences. These days, how can we tell the difference between *Dynasty* and a presidential news conference? *Dynasty*, Braderman tells us in her "graffiti" version, is "very much like the movie we live in, where a movie actor plays the president."

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