

# libraries able

June, 1977

Volume 5, Number 6

## WHAT IS VIDEO ART?

SPECIAL TO CABLELIBRARIES BY HOWARD WISE,  
DIRECTOR OF ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, NEW YORK CITY

"Video art" is a phrase widely used these days, yet there are probably as many meanings intended as there are users of the term.

In order that we may be better able to communicate what we have in mind when we refer to "video art", we should attempt to define what we mean when we use the term. This is difficult, since video itself is a complicated electronic invention, the working of which is only with difficulty grasped by the layman's mind. Furthermore, the terms "art" and "artist" are themselves elusive as to their meanings, as a look at any good dictionary will confirm. Nevertheless, if we are to use the term "video art" (and we do, because it exists), we must make an attempt to agree upon its meaning.

Just as the dictionaries give more than one definition of "art", perhaps we shall have to use more than one definition of "video art". Let us postulate that by the term "video" we mean the electronics and mechanics of the invention which we call television, including the devices that have been developed to modify the electronic signal, many of which were invented by artists once they gained access to the television medium.

Let us also postulate that by "art" we mean "the application of skill to production according to aesthetic principles". This is number nine of Webster's many definitions of the word, though most of these definitions do refer to "skill" as an important element.

Let us also postulate that by "artist" we mean "one who professes or practices an art in which conception and execution are governed by imagination and taste", another of Webster's definitions. Though many art critics would probably disagree with these definitions, they would also reject the others, many of which are even less apt. So let us define the term "video art" as "the product of the skillful use of the potentials of the television medium by an imaginative person in communicating his meaning to the viewer or participant". Thus any program capable of evoking in the viewer the artists' meaning and experience would come under this definition of "video art".

### CATALYTIC EFFECT OF NEW TV TECHNOLOGY

Perhaps because of two events that occurred in the late sixties, the term "video art" took on a very special meaning. One was the introduction by Sony of low cost portable television using half inch videotape. By the use of the porta-pak an individual had the possibility of making his own television program. Artists, always sensitive and alert to new developments, understood the possibilities of this medium now made available for their use, and were quick to explore this as a means of personal expression and communication.

Many, seeking more unconventional ways of using the medium, invented new "video tools" in order to obtain unusual effects of design and color in addition to those available from the "special effects generators" of the TV studios. Nam June Paik, in cooperation with Shuye Abe, a Japanese TV engineer, developed a "video

synthesizer" which permits the operator, by the use of switches, knobs and other electronic controls to modify the camera image at will. Eric Siegel invented a "colorizer" which enabled the operator to colorize in a controlled manner a tape shot in black and white. Stephen Beck developed a "direct" video synthesizer which enabled the operator to create colorful patterns directly on the TV screen by the use of electronic controls without the use of the TV camera, and to compose these patterns at will. Woody and Steina Vasulka developed several new "video tools" which enabled the operator to secure unusual special effects, particularly in the interaction of the sound and the audio signals, each one affecting the other. Dan Sandin developed another synthesizer, and a number of other artists contributed to the array of "video tools" at the disposal of artists in their use of the TV medium.

### IMPACT OF FOUNDATION FUNDING

The other event was the decision in 1967 by the Rockefeller Foundation and other funding agencies to establish experimental television centers at KQED (The National Center of Experiments in Television), San Francisco, and at WGBH (The Experimental Workshop), Boston. These were followed by The Television Laboratory at WNET/Channel 13, New York. Artists-in-Residence were appointed, and some of the new "video tools" were developed as a result of the activity at these centers. An important aspect of the work of the Centers was that the participating artists were given access to the use of the stations' facilities for their creative work, and were thus enabled to obtain a first-hand knowledge of the TV medium.

Much of what we have in mind when we say "video art" stems from the techniques made available to artists as the result of these two events. What is meant by the term when used in this sense is a more limited area of "video art", which may be defined as: "The use of the tools of television to produce electronically modified camera images or directly produced electronic images, all more or less abstract". This definition implies the skillful use of the "tools of television" but it does not require that the product contain that elusive ingredient which for want of a better term we call "art", that is the ability of the artist through the use of his medium, to evoke in the viewer emotional and intellectual responses to his work. In speaking of "video art" in this sense, most of use would include works covered by the above definition whether or not the work has the possibility of evoking an emotional or intellectual response in the viewer. In such cases, the medium is, as Marshall McLuhan has said, the message.

### WHAT IS ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX?

Electronic Arts Intermix was founded by Howard Wise in 1970 to foster the use of video as a means of personal communication. Earlier, Wise had mounted a series of exhibitions featuring energy as an essential ingredient. The last of these, mounted in May, 1969, was "TV as a Creative Medium" reportedly the first organized surfacing of the then underground Video Movement.

### FACILITIES FOR ARTISTS

According to Wise, there was a pressing and urgent need to provide facilities where video artists could edit the programs which they had made. In 1972, with a grant from NYSCA an editing deck and monitor were acquired. Nourished by grants from the Rockefeller

CABLELIBRARIES  
June, 1977

#### Editor

MARGARET CLELAND  
50 Foothills Way  
Bloomfield CT 06002

#### Contributing Editors

KANDY BRANDT  
LARRY MOLUMBY

#### Advisory Board

ROBERTO ESTEVES  
FRANK NORWOOD  
EDWIN PARKER  
RUSSELL SHANK  
JAMES WELBOURNE

For subscriptions  
write:

C.S. Tepfer Publishing  
Co., Inc., Box 565  
Ridgefield CT 06877

\$15 per year.

Endorsed and approved  
by Information Science  
& Automation Div. (ALA).  
First issue supported by  
grant from the John and  
Mary Markle Foundation.

Copyright 1977 by C. S.  
Tepfer Publishing Co.,  
Inc. Excerpts of up to  
150 words may be re-  
produced without  
permission from the  
publisher if credit is  
given to CableLibraries.  
To reproduce or copy  
more than 150 words,  
apply for written  
permission from the  
publisher.

2 CableLibraries June 1977

Foundation and further support from NYSCA, EAI developed the editing room into a sophisticated Editing/Post Production Facility with an automated color editing system having 1/2 and 3/4 inch capabilities together with control and post production equipment. Here, independent video artist-producers may do their creative editing at nominal cost. During a recent 12-month period, 103 artist-producers used the E/PPF a total of 250 days, averaging 17 hours per day.

### DISTRIBUTION SERVICE

Another need that soon became apparent was a means to enable the artists' work to be seen more than once or twice at a museum or a festival. With a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, EAI set out to determine if it were feasible to establish a distribution service to supply at modest cost the videotape programs made by independent artist-producers. In order to secure the greatest impact for the artists' work, the decision was made to point major efforts to museums, universities, art schools and now especially to libraries, feeling that the programs are particularly appropriate to these audiences.

Another objective was to help the artists to earn some compensation from their work by sharing the fees with them, retaining a share to help EAI defray its operating costs.

### TAPES FOR CIRCULATION

By granting the right to circulate videotapes EAI hopes to enhance the scope of the libraries' service and the impact of the artists' work. EAI also hopes to refer requests that they receive for short term rentals of videotape programs to local libraries for better service at less cost than EAI itself of necessity must charge. (See Software Section of May, 1977 Issue of CableLibraries for information on EAI's Contemporary Video Series.)