

The Passion for Perceiving: Expanded Forms of Film and Video Art

By John G. Hanhardt

The picture, certainly is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.

—Jacques Lacan¹

The spectator in the movie theater and the reader of the novel are no longer seen as passive receivers but as, in fact, engaged in the active production of meaning. Contemporary theories of interpretation are approaching an understanding of the reception of the aesthetic text as a complex hermeneutic of multivalent readings centered within the psychology of the reader and the social institution of discourse production.

The title for this paper, "The Passion for Perceiving," is taken from one of the key works of recent film theory, Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*.² The role of the spectator holds a central place in Metz's elaboration of a semiotic analysis of the formation of the cinema as text and social institution. Metz's psychoanalytic inquiry into the roots of the cinematic discourse posits that the psychology of the spectator is formed through the group experience of film viewing in the theater and the individual's interaction with the film's formal construct of narrative tropes. Metz thus enlarges the cinematic discourse by basing his semiotic method not exclusively on linguistic models but on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as well.

One of the problems with Metz's approach, as with film theory in general, is that it is given over exclusively to a cinema shaped by narrative and representational concerns. Metz's reading of film is conditioned by the dominant codes of the classical cinema and its conventions of viewing. But the avant-garde film has evolved its own separate history, allied to the movements of modernism. The developing theories of

interpretation in the visual and literary arts—with their attention to a variety of texts and visual-art traditions—can contribute to a better understanding of the cinematic experience when it is seen as an enlarged discourse composed of a variety of texts and viewing experiences.

The problem of contemporary film theory—its exclusive preoccupation with the normative theatrical film production and viewing experience—figures also in the writing of video's history and theory. The terms "video" and "television" identify two different forms of the medium. Television is the broadcast mode of the medium, which historically has been defined by the commercial networks. Video traditionally identifies the independent producer and artist creating tapes for telecast outside commercial television.

Television began as an industry whose developments, through patents, economic consolidation, and communications law, were quickly subsumed into a monopolistic commercial broadcast industry. Similarly, film emerged in the nineteenth century as a phenomenon of individual investors and entrepreneurs joining the recording ability of film and photography to its narrative potential as a popular art form. These protonarrative forms were explored before the rapid consolidation of cinematic practice into the monopolistic entertainment industry established at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the highly capitalized corporate structure of broadcast television did not avail itself of independent production, its history does not parallel that of the experimentation and individual innovation of nineteenth-century film. But in the early 1960s, there did emerge—out of Fluxus and Pop

Art—an appropriation of the television as an icon, to be destroyed and transformed, by such artists as Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik.

The development of the portable videotape recorder and player by the Sony Corporation released the medium from its studio confines; it became a new image-making tool in the hands of artists. One of the experimental forms that shaped video art was the installation, which took video out of the customary single-channel television and gallery-viewing format and posited it as a sculptural/installation/environmental medium. It is this work that will be briefly reviewed here as we begin to contrast film and video installations and to explore the differing strategies they use to engage the viewer in the text of the work. This comparison reflects the dialogue that is emerging between film and video artists who are joining these media through a conscious reevaluation of the traditional forms and strategies of film and video causing a rethinking of sculpture, installation, and performance.

Video as installation has expressed a conscious rejection of single-channel television viewing within the home. Video installations employ a variety of formal strategies and technological properties of the medium: multichannel and monitor displays of videotapes where the monitor as a physical object is marked within a wall structure, as in Mary Lucier's *Ohio at Giverny* (1983); or the placing of monitors in various expressive configurations, as in Ira Schneider's *Time Zones* (1980); or the juxtaposition of monitors with other materials, as in Francesc Torres's installation *The Head of the Dragon* (1981). Common to these works is the use of the

flexibility of the monitors' placement and consequent distribution of images to articulate a whole work out of a dialogue established among its elements.

A similar set of examples is available from film-installation work: from film-projection installations that employ multiple projections of images on a wall surface, as in Paul Sharits's *Episodic Generation* (1979), to the distribution of projected images from multiple points of view within an environment of steam, as in Stan VanDerBeek and Joan Brigham's outdoor work *Steam Screens* (1979), and finally to the intertextual projection of film images within environments of objects that articulate together a whole text of different parts and elements, such as Leandro Katz's *The Judas Window* (1982). The examples of film (Morgan Fisher and Benni Efrat) and video (Peter Campus and Buky Schwartz) installations described below employ film and video in a way that directly acknowledges the spectator within the work itself, thus posing an active dialogue between the viewer and the text of the installation.

In Morgan Fisher's *North Light* (1979) (Fig. 1) the content of the film is determined by the site of the installation, and in Benni Efrat's *Putney Bridge* (1976) (Fig. 2) the artist becomes an active participant in the viewing experience. The two artists working in video, Peter Campus and Buky Schwartz, both employ the closed-circuit properties of video. The image projected onto a gallery wall in Campus's *Mem* (1975) (Fig. 3) and the image on the monitor's screen in Schwartz's *Yellow Triangle* (1979) (Fig. 4) are real-time, live images being recorded by the video camera. The two sets of work in film and video posit the cognitive experience of perceiving the work as a dialogue between the artist and the spectator. The ontological differences between film and video result in differing perceptions of the nature of the image. Each piece, however, shares in forging an active inquiry into the instability of the viewing experience, and exposing the impossibility of a single reading/experience of the individual works. These projects are about the experience of time and place as both are acknowledged within the text of the work and as they affect our perception of it.

Morgan Fisher's *North Light* (Fig. 1) was created for the third-floor gallery of the Whitney Museum for an exhibition called *Re-Visions: Projects and Proposals in Film and Video*.³ This work articulates the two-dimensional perspective of the film image and its relationship, through the content and process of projection, to the surface onto which it is constantly projected. Fisher, a leading

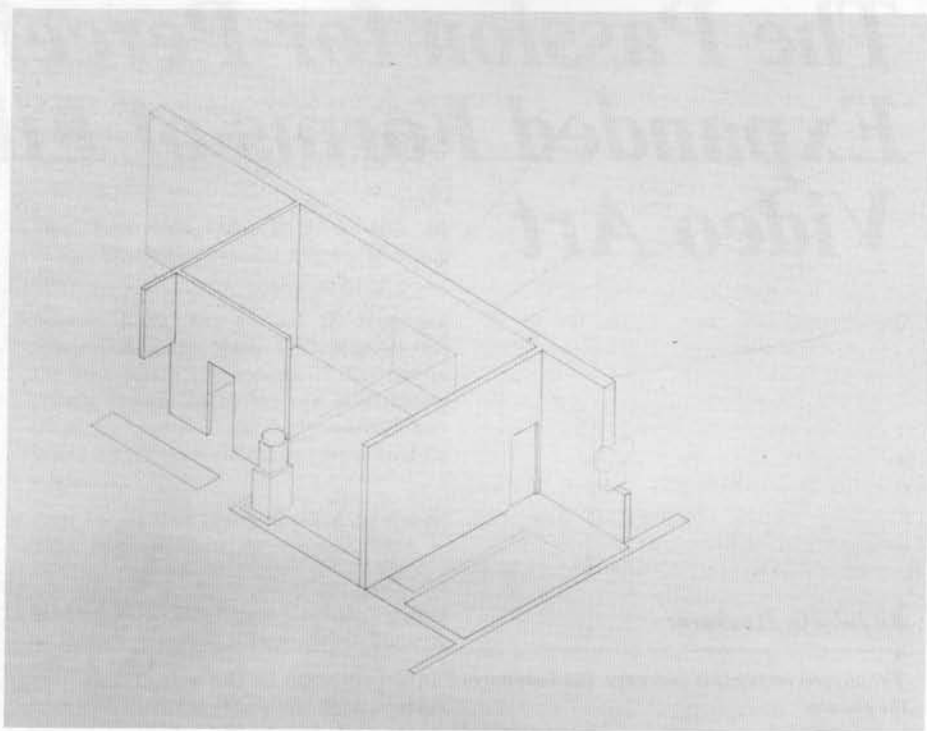


Fig. 1 Morgan Fisher, *North Light*, 1979, drawing.



Fig. 2 Benni Efrat, *Putney Bridge*, 1976, film performance.

structural filmmaker within the avant-garde, pursues here his concern with the process of filmmaking as he treats the myth of the screen as a window onto the world. Fisher plays with the idea that film presents a "true" record of reality. The image in *North Light*—a silent color loop—is a view of the opposite side of Seventy-fifth Street projected continuously onto the north gallery wall. Because of the camera's position, the image can only approximate what an actual rectangular break in the wall at the projection point would reveal. This "approximation" is further attenuated by the two-dimensionality of the image, the position of the projector, and optical

factors in filming and projecting the image. Fisher's installation establishes a complex metaphor for the representation of point of view within the image and in relationship to the site of its showing. The loop captures within its twenty-minute cycle the action that takes place within that time in the building across the street. The narrative of the film loop is expressed in the viewer's expectation that "something should happen" on film. This is frustrated in the changeless replaying of the same action, which is itself minimal. Because the body of the spectator standing in the beam of projection casts a shadow onto the projected image, he or she becomes

part of the image. Our time spent in the frame is the image's narrative as we reflect on our position vis-à-vis the film and the real-world time taking place behind the projected image. Fisher's title, *North Light*, refers not only to the projection on the north gallery wall but also to the light that painters seek in their ateliers. Thus, Fisher's view from an imaginary window casts its own light and recalls seventeenth-century Dutch architectural painting, where the point of view of the spectator is acknowledged as matching the canvas as window.

The temporal, two-dimensional property of the projected film image is further developed as a performance by the artist in Benni Efrat's *Putney Bridge* (Fig. 2). This twenty-five-minute, black-and-white film is an unedited long shot of the Putney Bridge in London showing traffic crossing the bridge and boats moving beneath it. As the film is projected in a darkened gallery onto a blackboard surface, Efrat marks the blackboard with various pastel-colored chalks. Thus, the black-and-white film is interpreted through the application of the colored chalks to the screen surface. By the close of the performance-projection the screen has become an abstract pattern of colors that articulate and reveal the film image of the bridge. After the film has run through the projector its beam of light shows only the pattern of hand-drawn colors. Efrat's film performances and installations are distinguished by their concern for the two-dimensional projected image and its relationship to both its source and the three-dimensional context onto which it is projected. In *Putney Bridge* it is as if Efrat were painting the actual Putney Bridge as an abstract painter who "sees" the actual landscape through his canvas, which appears and disappears as one's eye moves between the painted surface and the actual landscape.

In both the Fisher and Efrat works the film projector is part of the work. It is placed within the gallery, and its sound is a presence in the gallery. The projector's beam of light—the method by which the film image is revealed—is interfered with either by the spectator, whose body becomes part of the illusion of Fisher's *North Light*, or by the artist, as in Efrat's *Putney Bridge*, where the beacon of projector light reveals the artist's performance and hand-drawn interpretation of the filmed landscape.

The two video installations—by Peter Campus and Buky Schwartz—explore the closed-circuit, real-time perception of video. Unlike film, which must be processed before it can be screened, the video image is instantaneously recorded and playable. Thus the video camera in the hands of the installation artist can



Fig. 3 Peter Campus, *Mem*, 1975, video installation.

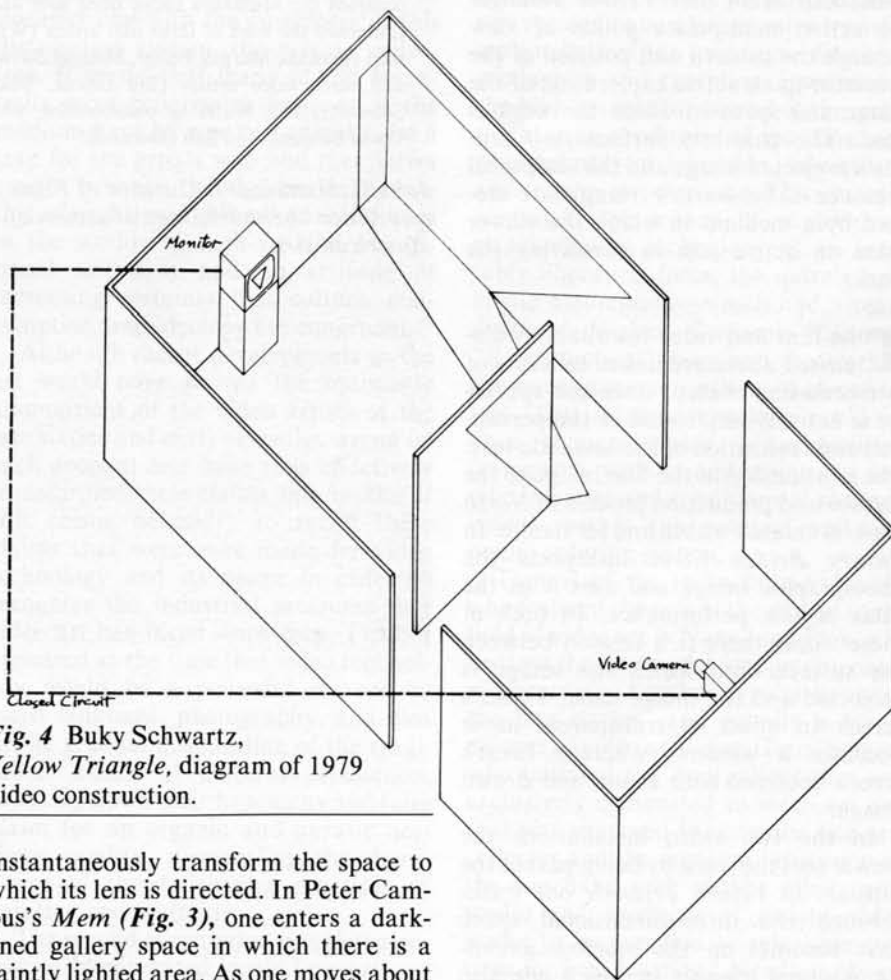


Fig. 4 Buky Schwartz, *Yellow Triangle*, diagram of 1979 video construction.

instantaneously transform the space to which its lens is directed. In Peter Campus's *Mem* (Fig. 3), one enters a darkened gallery space in which there is a faintly lighted area. As one moves about within this space, an image of the viewer's body is projected onto the gallery wall. The projection is not a direct representation of the viewer's body. Rather, the camera, which is not visible to the viewer, renders aspects of the body as light. Thus, the viewer moving about the

space is involved in constructing a self-portrait as a fragmented image on the gallery's wall. The projected image flattens the spectator's body as a presence-substance, playing with the boundary between abstraction and representation

as fragments of the body are revealed and disappear.

Buky Schwartz's *Yellow Triangle* (1979) (Fig. 4) employs the camera and acknowledges the two-dimensional properties of the video image, which flattens the space surveyed by the camera's lens. In this project, one of Schwartz's video construction series, a camera is located near the gallery ceiling and is directed into the gallery space in which the artist has painted a yellow triangular pattern on the floor and walls, which is seen as a triangle on the monitor. It is only on the monitor that the painted surfaces can be seen as a yellow triangle, and that only when the viewer is in the image itself. Here Schwartz has created the illusion on the monitor's screen of a sculptural object, a yellow triangle, that is only perceivable on the monitor's screen constructed from the point of view of the camera. The spectator is one with the picture as he or she looks at the monitor and stands within the triangle.

In both *Mem* and *Yellow Triangle* the artists manipulate points of view through the camera and position of the spectator in an active exploration of the image and space in which the work is sited. The painterly surface on Campus's projected image and the sculptural presence of Schwartz's triangle are created by a medium in which the viewer takes an active role in perceiving the work.

The film and video installations discussed above are linked to issues of interpretation theory, since the spectator is actively implicated in the perception and realization of the aesthetic text. The relationship of the film image to the surface and production process in *North Light* is created within and for its site. In *Putney Bridge* Efrat interprets the photographic image and uses it as the basis of this performance. In both of these works there is a tension between the surface onto which the image is projected and the image itself. Fisher's screen in effect is transparent as it becomes a window, whereas Efrat's screen becomes both a film and drawn image.

In the two video installations the viewer sees the work by being part of the illusion. In *Yellow Triangle* one walks through the three-dimensional space that becomes on the monitor a two-dimensional triangle in which one also disappears. In *Mem* the spectator himself becomes the image, the aesthetic text, projected onto the gallery wall.

These four projects are representative of a number of film and video installations that function as complete works of art only when the viewer becomes part

of the picture and fuses with the eye of the camera-projector-monitor. The spectator is in an active dialogue with the text, seeing it not as a closed code but as an engaging phenomenological experience. These film and video installations can be seen as models or metaphors for the relationship of the reader-viewer to text: they exemplify the aesthetic text as a presence in an active and reciprocal dialogue between the artist and viewer.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, 1978, p. 96.
- 2 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Bloomington, Indiana, 1982.
- 3 *Re-Visions: Projects and Proposals in Film and Video*, April 19–May 13, 1979, was the Whitney Museum's first large-scale film- and video-installation exhibition. The exhibition occupied the Museum's entire third floor and comprised the work of three film artists (William Anastasi, Morgan Fisher, Michael Snow) and three video artists (Bill Beirne, Buky Schwartz, Bob Watts in collaboration with David Behrman and Bob Diamond).

John G. Hanhardt is Curator of Film and Video at the Whitney Museum of American Art.