

FROM HI-8 TO HIGH CULTURE

The 1999 New York Video Festival

Walter Reade Theatre (The Film Society of Lincoln Center)
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This year's New York Video Festival described itself in its program literature as presenting an art form that has become "classical." And with the classical comes high ideals. "We must always remember that the *raison d'être* is the art, not the technology," states the festival's flyer, an idea that is refreshing (although not original) given the proclivity of electronic artists for distraction by new media hype. Consequently, a number of festival offerings were inspiring due to their "make-do" constructions. Christopher Wilcha's *The Target Shoots First* (1999), a Hi-8 document of his sojourn as Columbia House Record Club's resident grunge expert is the kind of work that reinvigorates video art by virtue of its simplicity, as did Sadie Benning's work some years back. Miranda July's combinations of slide technology and "cheesy" video effects in the performance piece *Love Diamond* (1999) make her suburban surrealism and black comedy vignettes seem more like puppet theater than multi-media art. Backed by an intricate ambient score by Zac Love, the lovable and slightly dippy tone of her multiple voices—at times cloying, at times sexy, at times spooky—is all the more remarkable since it is unenhanced by technological gimmickry. Kelly Reichardt's 50-minute traditional narrative, *Ode* (1999), a lyrical rewrite of the Billy Joe McAllister legend that comes off like a utopian after-school special, was shot in Kodachrome and without a crew. This inclusion of film, as well as performance art, to the festival's offerings is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the claim that the festival is about the art, not the technology. Perhaps it is also a sign that video's classical period will be marked by various technological convergences and expanded notions of the medium.

In addition to the low-tech work, including the sincere, hand-held camera explorations of family, sex and death that never go out of style, there were high-tech experiments, all of which are closer to what is called digital art than video art. Many utilized the look of the interface—that liminal area between computer data and its user, the aesthetics of which have become an important issue for digital commerce. In video, the interface aesthetic highlights the similarities between television and computers as tools for reinventing, repackaging or reframing information. The interfaces of Chris Petit's experimental documentaries are masterful. In *Negative Space* (1998), these windows dramatize the theories of camera framing that fascinate his subject, film critic and artist Manny Farber. In *The Falconer*

(1998) the interface has alchemical powers, creating a visual equivalent of the alembic in which we witness the shape-shifting substance of the filmmaker Peter Whitehead. Whitehead's life, we discover, is fantastical and shocking enough to require the multiple filters, hieroglyphs and other symbolic arcana of Petit's interface lest the subject utterly explode the nonfiction restraints of the documentary genre. Petit is video artist as alchemist and disembodied cicerone; he approaches curiosities of film history within the frames of video technology but through a cathode ray tube darkly, following unconventional axes with his own eloquence and history.

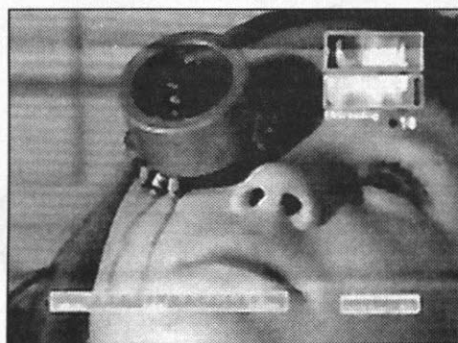


Above: frame enlargement from *The Falconer* (1998) by Chris Petit. Above right: frame enlargement from *F for Fake: The Black Hole Sun* (1997) by Cane CapoVolto. Right: frame enlargement from *Wonder Spider* (1998) by panOptic.

At times the art of the convergence between computer and video was not as fully worked out. Marcello Mercado's *The Warm Place* (1998) is a potential equal of Woody Vasulka's *The Art of Memory* (1987), though Mercado overkills his piece with computer graphics. Intentionally or not, the unmanipulated slaughterhouse ballet of his video's last moments allows the viewer to reflect on the potential simple beauty of uncomputerized video while watching an equally simple method for slaughter. The artist collective panOptic's *Wonder Spider* (1998)—a collection of fake interfaces intentionally created to induce the displeasure of seizure and mind control through strobe effects—is, paradoxically, a visually and sonically elegant exploration of the intelligence of the machine that is reminiscent of the works of Paul Bush, *The Bureau of Inverse Technology* (B.I.T.) and [techné]. Like B.I.T., panOptic presents itself as a fake corporate entity, but unlike B.I.T., their schtick is weak. Most of their question-and-answer jokes fall flat, enough to make viewers question their validity and intentions.

Which brings me to some reservations about the future of this quirky art. Given the heady combinations of art, technology and business that are afoot—regardless of the calculated ingenuousness of the festival's literature—the newest generation of electronic artists evince an ambiva-

lent relation (sometimes unsettling, sometimes refreshing) to Andy Warhol's dictum: "Being good at business is the most fascinating kind of art." PanOptic (the average age of whom is 25) may not be "working on visual weapons for [eastern European] government[s]," as they deadpan in their jokes, but are graphic designers who feel more comfortable in the business world. (One member of panOptic even said to me, "I



don't really get the video art scene.") Similarly, Wilcha's video, despite its low-tech charm and disarming sincerity, at times seems like a corporate-orientation video for the next generation of suits, as he described office politics, the difference between marketing and creative staffs and the values of synergy. While he questions his presence and role as an artist in the corporation, he and his camera seem to fit too well into the contested space.

The best work of the festival exhibited a familiarity with the pleasures that the audience of video art has grown to expect. *Eklipsis* (1998), Tran T. Kim-Trang's latest installation in her blindness series, continues the tradition of essayistic video with a nuanced analysis, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard and Michel Foucault, of hysterical blindness in Cambodian women. *Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* (1998) by Walid Ra'ad, an absurdist history of the Lebanese Wars, spins a memorable metaphor for history by analyzing, among other things, photographs of horse race finishes in a Beirut newspaper. By creating a chronicle for objects that do not manifest historical importance but nevertheless evidence historical residue, he engages viewers in the problem of representing history. *2 Spellbound* (1999) by Les LeVeque, a conceptual experiment, breath-

taking in its simplicity, takes Sigmund Freud's idea of condensation to the extreme by condensing Alfred Hitchcock's psychoanalytic thriller into an eight-minute dance video. It was a pleasure to see Hitchcock's camera moving through film space like the Concorde as suspense is dissolved into speed. This video is noticeably indebted to Ken Jacobs's 35mm experiments such as *Georgetown Loop* (1996) and *Disorient Express* (1996) which transform early kinoscope train films, from 1903 and 1906 respectively, into visual psychedelia through a similar split screen effect.

LeVeque's video contributes to the inevitable presence of filmmakers fond of using quotations and found-footage. Of the former, Ken Kobland is the most subtle, if only because one is never quite sure from where he is quoting or if he is quoting at all. Sometimes one might ask why he is quoting, as in his earlier work *Shanghai'd Text* (1996) in which his utilization of pornography, Dovzhenko and opera—while obviously accomplished and visually stunning—seems motivated only by the gesture toward postmodernism that the title implies. His melancholy *Transit Riders of the Earth Unite! Walk Dog Eat Donut* (1999), however, screened in the festival, is a much more compelling video, maintaining a strong sense of unity through the use of his own footage of subway excursions and a soundtrack patchworked from personal diary entries, dubbed dialogue from Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963) and a Russian ballad. *F for Fake: The Black Hole Sun* (1997) by the Cane CapoVolto collective and Stuart Hawkins's *Rabbit, Rabbit* (1999) continue the poetic tradition of video art, the former with an exploration of cognitive dissonance (through Georges Bataille, Goethe's color theory and Italian science-fiction) the later with one of morphological resonance (through Albert Einstein, Rupert Sheldrake and *In Search Of*-type conundrums). Through the use of fragments and voice-overs that allude to the more mystical forms of popular science in the last two centuries, Cane CapoVolto moves in one direction toward the exploration of an anarchic unconscious of these info-artifacts and Hawkins toward the harmonies that these fragments create on their own. Replicating Sheldrake's final scientific analysis of the flight patterns of birds in his theory of morphological resonance, one might assess the shape of present and future video as driven by some instinctual and inexplicable, but nevertheless human, aesthetic knowledge. Or, one might consider that—emerging from blue screen instead of crossing blue skies—the continually changing patterns of video art might be indicative of an even more complex and inclusive multi-media future with an agenda of its own.

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