

The New York Times

Published: January 24, 2003

Video, in Its Infancy, Had to Crawl Before It Could Walk

By ROBERTA SMITH

I like video art as much as most art critics, maybe more. Still, through "Video Acts," the sprawling survey of early single channel videotapes at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, is not my idea of a thoroughly good time. Building a private collection of these works, as Pamela and Richard Kramlich of San Francisco did, strikes me as even less enjoyable.

But the Kramlichs have performed a great service, and "Video Acts" is an imposing measure of their dedication. The show fills the ground-floor galleries at P.S. 1 with more than 100 tapes from their personal collection and from the New Art Trust, a separate foundation they established in 1997.

Concentrating on works by American and European artists from the late 1960's and the 70's, with a soupçon of tapes from the 80's and 90's to top things off, this exhibition is indispensable viewing for anyone interested in the history of one of contemporary art's most ubiquitous mediums. Spending about five hours in it (preferably spread over two visits) will not only increase your video I.Q. but may also lead you to the conclusion I came to: both video art and its early pioneers have come a long way since the 1970's, and thankfully there is no going back.

The show is a total-immersion affair. This is partly because it is almost completely cast in darkness or semidarkness, starting with the lobby. Pity the people stationed at the reception desk. You can forget about reading many of the labels; even the tapes themselves, for the most part black, white and grainy, are sometimes difficult to make out.

You will see enough to know that video tedium was even more of a problem 25 years ago than it is today. When handheld video cameras became commercially available, numerous artists rushed out, bought them and rushed back to their studios. One can almost hear dozens of doors shutting and the voices behind them saying, "Now what?"

The artists in this exhibition used the camera foremost as a means of recording private performances and little feats of body art. Bruce Nauman made a square outline in tape on his studio floor and spent an hour stepping on one corner and then another, an activity reminiscent of Trisha Brown's early dances. Vito Acconci walked up and down in a corridor humming loudly to himself, boxed with his shadow and plucked the hair off his stomach by hand, trying to be more like a woman.

Joan Jonas, one of the first artists to use a live video feed in public performance, staged wordless fairy-tale-like plays in her studio, in one case with the painter Lois Lane. Marina Abramovic and her partner Ulay held ritualistic slapping contests, staring contests and shouting matches.

Spurred by his own sense of humor and the comedic talent of his adoring Weimaraner Man Ray, William Wegman was one of the few to embrace the medium's entertainment potential, and tellingly, his short, quirky tapes seem to be among the shows most closely watched. My favorite is a close-up of Man Ray's snout and tongue as he noisily and messily laps milk out of a glass, cleans up after himself and starts licking the microphone. You have to see it, but laughter is guaranteed.

The show's organizers are not providing flashlights to counter the shadowy labels, but they have concocted a relatively lavish scheme to offset the video medium's tedium: every single videotape has its own monitor, and the monitors are ganged together, usually with benches (and earphones when required) in a manner that allows for channel-surfing in real space. You can skim the possibilities, settle in where things seem promising, move on where they don't.

This arrangement creates the illusion of liveliness and density that individual works may lack, while also conveying an atmosphere of heady experimentation that was genuine to the time. In one of the show's first galleries, Richard Serra's little-seen "Prisoner's Dilemma" documents more than distills that atmosphere. A largely ad-libbed play about a corrupt district attorney (played with sinister aplomb by Richard Schechner), it has a supporting cast that includes Joel Shapiro, Jeffrey Lew, Gerry Hovagymyan and Spalding Gray, the last already a budding monologist. The tape concludes with a philosophical re-enactment of the play's basic conundrum before a live audience, performed by the writer Robert Bell, the critic Bruce Boice and a cooperative, bemused Leo Castelli.

Several galleries function as total-immersion chambers for a single artist's work, especially for Mr. Nauman, Ms. Jonas, Mr. Acconci and Ms. Abramovic and Ulay, who are seen here as the four pillars of video pioneerism.

The sense of sensibility in such instances is powerful: the vaudevillian lyricism of Ms. Jonas's first efforts comes across in videos that sometimes look as ancient as silent movies. The threat or actuality of physical pain makes some of the Abramovic-Ulay performance videos difficult to watch. Mr. Acconci's obsessing about women, sex and relationships turns his gallery into a gantlet of muttering narcissism. Best is "Home Movies," a tape in which he gives a slide show of his well-known pre-video performance pieces, regularly breaking off to rationalize his infidelities to an absent lover in his famously hoarse whisper.

Mr. Nauman's work is especially prominent. Its dry monotony and emphasis on the artist-as-prop give the show an undercurrent of quiet absurdity, a quality that has become more abrasive and effective as his art has progressed.

In other galleries there are interesting juxtapositions and little competitions. Bill Viola and Gary Hill, masters of technical effects, face off in one instance. In another you can compare Mr. Wegman's humor with that of John Baldessari, who sings Sol LeWitt's "One Hundred Sentences About Conceptual Art" in one piece and, in another, covers a page with repeating sentences that say "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art." (This takes 13 boring minutes.)

The show includes many other classics, by artists like Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum, Gilbert and George, Valie Export and Nam June Paik. They should be seen at least once, although the reasons they have entered the amorphous video canon are not always self-evident.

There are other works, like Mr. Wegman's tapes, that operate with the clock, the viewer and popular culture more firmly in mind. One of these is Peter Campus's "Three Transitions" (1973), which opens a bag of video magic tricks taken for granted by today's artists and does so in crisp, sharp colors that stand out amid so much grainy black and whiteness.

Also good to see are the slightly later (mid-1980's) videos by the Canadian collective General Idea, made with a savage appreciation of television culture and the art world's foibles, as well as a bracing sense of undiluted color.

Isolated at the end of the show's final corridor, Pipilotti Rist's two-and-a-half-minute "Blutclip" from 1993 is a good finishing point. Using a miniature camera, she scans her nude body, spotted with gemstones and bright red menstrual blood, turning her curves and pale skin into an immense, encompassing, largely abstract landscape. It is a beautiful, thrilling work, and it makes you appreciate the good old days of video art, without wishing even for a minute that they were back.

"Video Acts: Single Channel Works From the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and New Art Trust" is at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Museum of Modern Art Affiliate, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Street, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 784-2084, through April.