Video in Situ

A recent show at the Museum of Modern Art highlighted the work of eight international video artists who, in their widely diverse installations, seek to redefine formal, technological and social aspects of the medium.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Above and below, two video stills from Chris Marker's installation
Silent Movie, *1994-95, five monitors stacked on metal shelving.*
*photographs and simulated movie posters. Photo Richard K. Loesch.*

Early practitioners of video art lauded its egalitarian bent, its anticommercial essence and its potential for political commentary. But something peculiar happened on the way to art-world acceptance. In the struggle to break out of its presentational limitations—those small dark rooms with uncomfortable chairs—video artists began to explore modes of display which would give video art equal weight with other genres of contemporary art. One result of this exploration was the video installation. Taking on aspects of sculpture, performance and stage-set design, and often requiring multiple channels and multiple monitors, laserdisks and computer-controlled switching equipment, the video installation has become a high-tech, multimedia spectacle. In the process, it has moved far from video's philosophical origins.

"Video Spaces," presented this summer at the Museum of Modern Art, was an exhibition of eight recent video installations by some of the most innovative practitioners in the field. It appeared at a time when the video installation has begun to achieve widespread attention. Gary Hill's traveling retrospective [see *A.i.A.*, June '95], Bill Viola's presence at the Venice Biennale [*A.i.A.*, Sept. '95], and the forthcoming Lyon Biennial's focus on video and video installation (along with computer art, virtual reality and film) only hint at the pervasiveness of the form.

Organized by MOMA's video curator, Barbara London, "Video Spaces" was designed to suggest the range of current approaches, content and formats being undertaken by contemporary video installation artists. London gathered an international group—the artists hail from the United States, Germany, Japan, France and Canada—and deliberately avoided any overt thematic organizational principle. It was all the more striking, then, that the work exhibited continually returned to a rather anxious examination of the formal, technological and social paradoxes presented by the medium.

One theme that emerged prominently was the psychological, social and political meaning of the image culture which has been spawned by video's kin, television and film. Stan Douglas's *Evening* (1994) involves the restaging of televi-
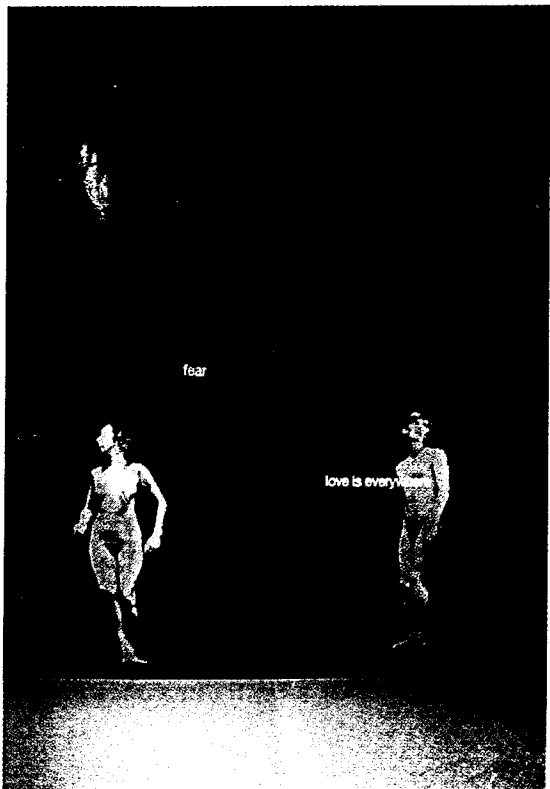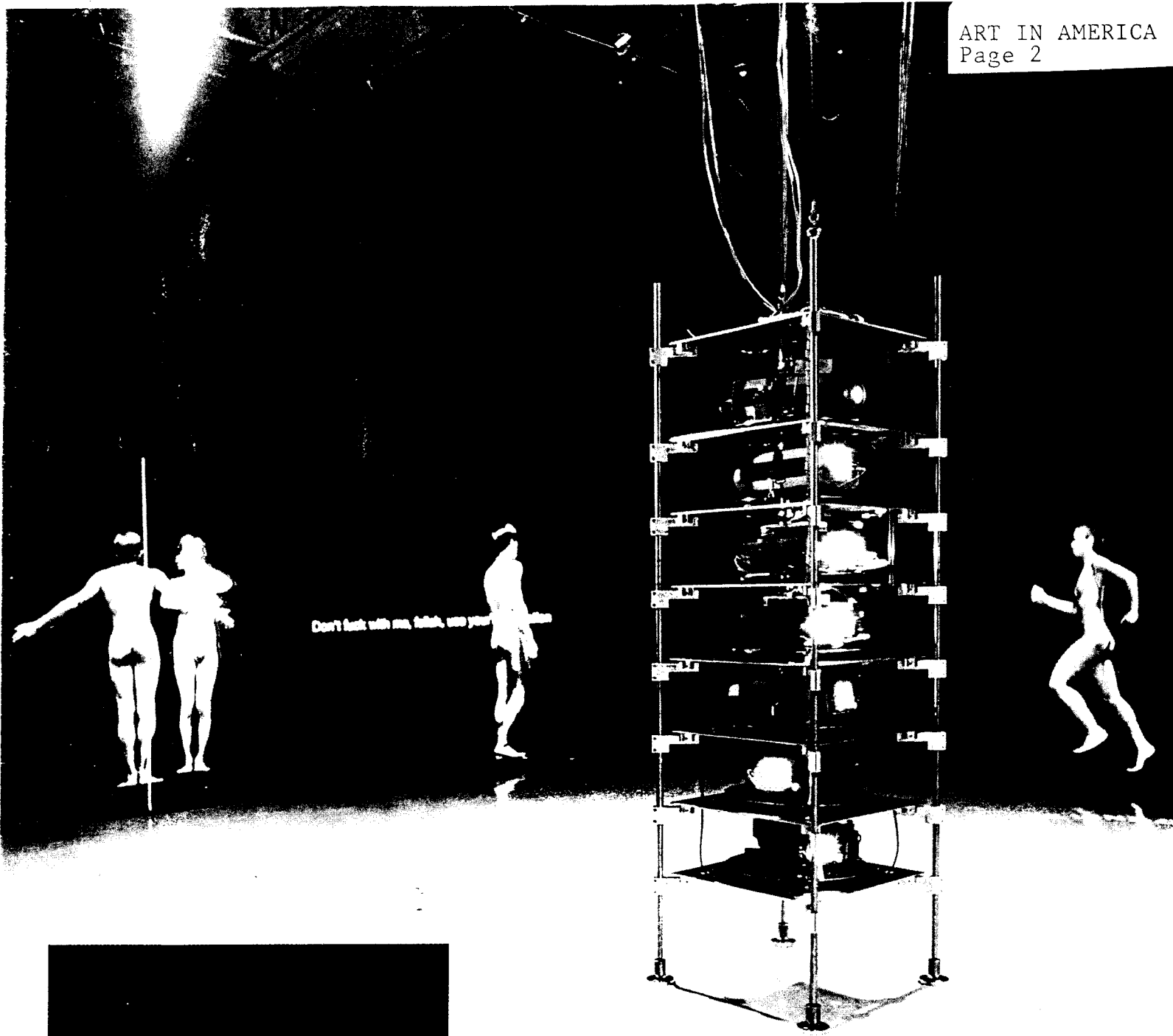
This page and inset (detail), Teiji Furuhashi's Lovers, *1994, projections of figures and text across four walls of a darkened gallery.*
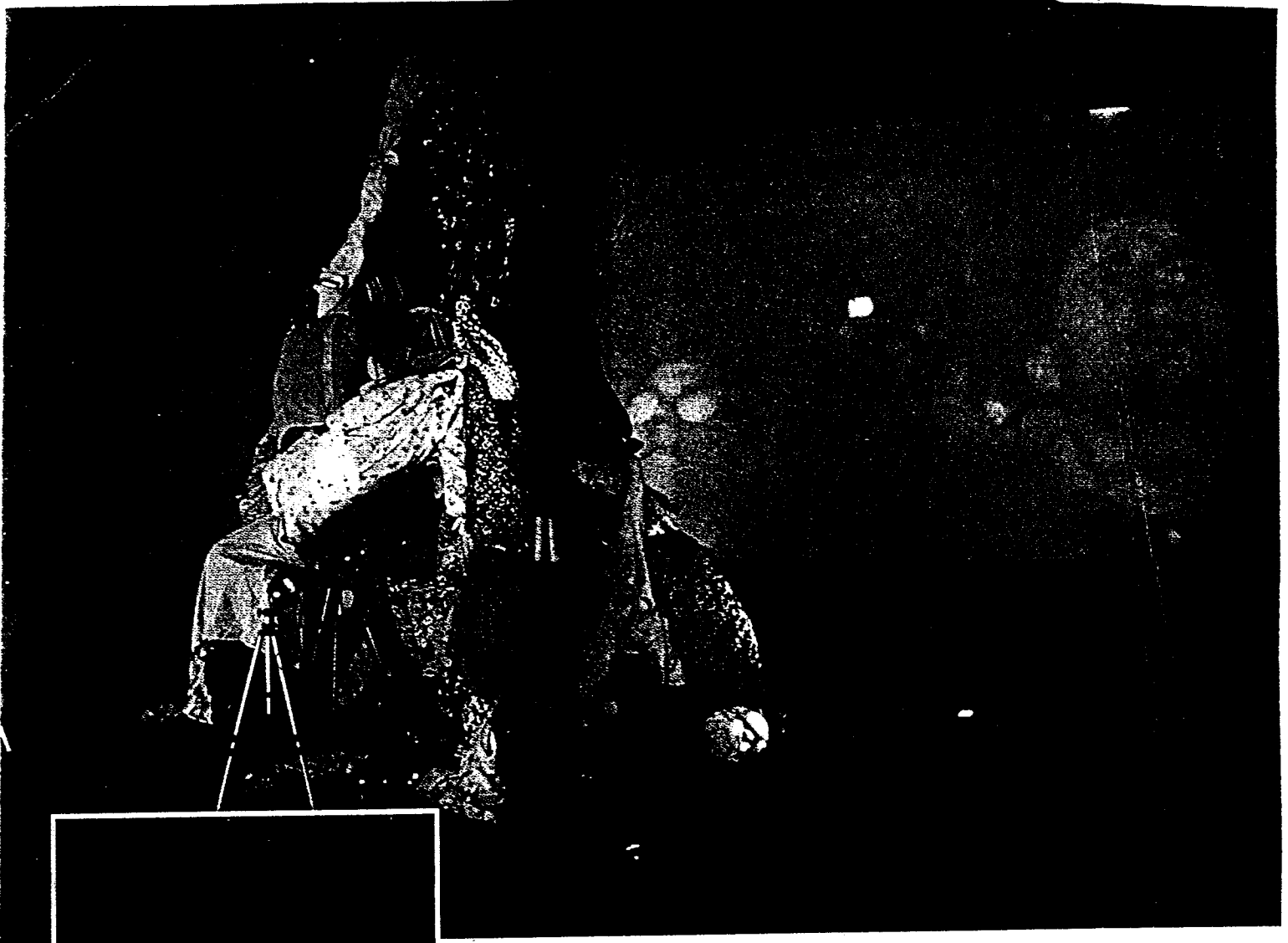
Above and inset (detail), construction made of rag dolls with video projections from Tony Oursler's installation System for Dramatic Feedback, *1994.*
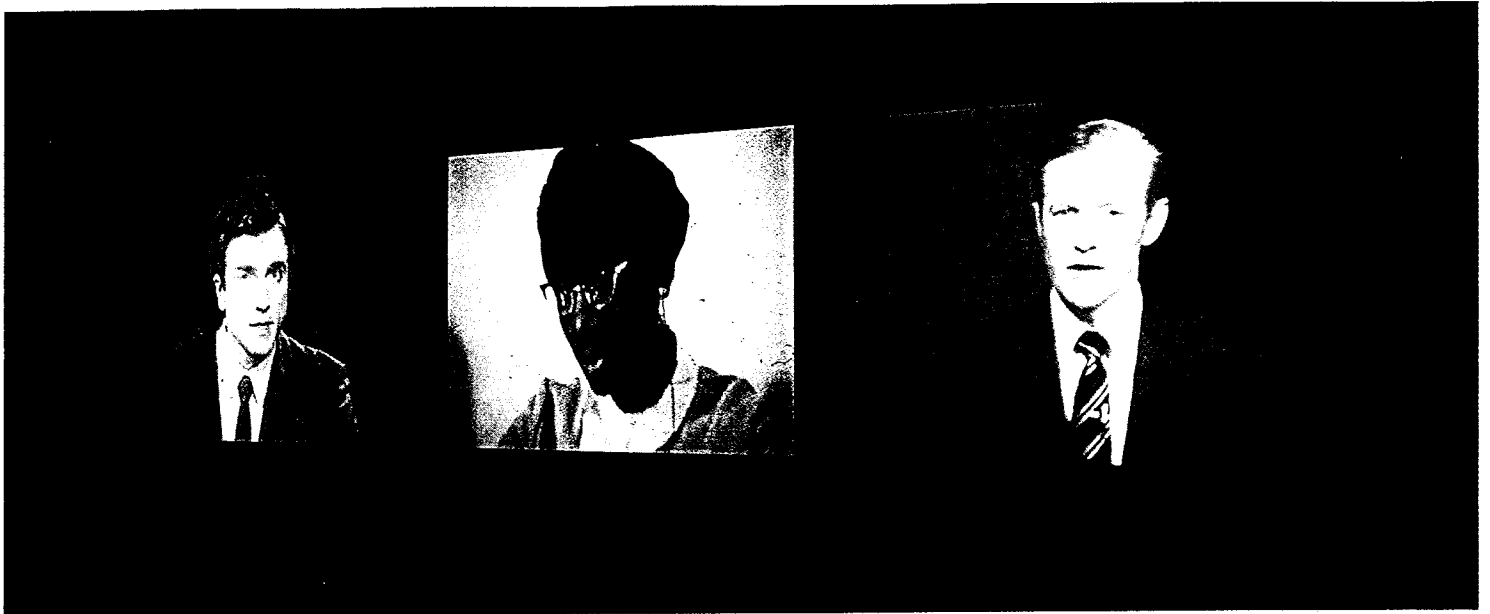
sion newscasts from 1969 and 1970. Douglas focuses on the moment when television news was beginning the slide from journalism to "infotainment." Using actors to read news stories which follow nine developing events from this era (they include the Chicago Seven trial, the My Lai massacre and its aftermath, and the murder of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton), Douglas highlights the incongruity between the "happy talk" mode of presentation and the gravity of the stories reported.

Technically, Douglas's contribution was the least complex in the show. Three staged newscasts, interspersed with real archival footage in black and white, were projected side by side on a large screen. Viewers had the option of standing underneath one of three pods, from which the voice of one of the three newscasters was clearly audible, or standing elsewhere while the three audio tracks blended in a cacophony of meaningless noise. Occasionally each screen went blank, except for the words "Place Ad Here," indicating a commercial slot and reminding us that, from the network's point of view, television news is simply a vehicle for advertising.

Douglas investigates how the media creates our sense of history. French artist Chris Marker suggests how it shapes our fantasy life. Marker, an influential filmmaker, is a mysterious figure who refuses to be photographed and has adopted a deliberately bland American moniker. Here, he explored the origins of Hollywood's dream machine in a work entitled *Silent Movie* (1994-95).

Marker's installation was dominated by a video tower, composed of five monitors, which was meant to mimic the utopian aspirations embodied in visionary Russian architecture from the 1920s. The monitors presented vintage film clips along with fabricated sequences which mimic the conventions of silent film, including lots of dissolves, superimpositions, irises and subtitles. The imagery, which included speeding trains, screen-filling eyeballs which dissolve into cameras, soft-focus heroines and closeups of hands picking up coins or spinning roulette wheels, also conjured up the silent film era, with all its glamour and high-toned surrealism.

Extending the masquerade were humorous fake movie posters on the gallery walls advertising more or less plausible imaginary films (*It's a Mad Mad Mad Dog,* a Rin Tin Tin movie directed by

Stan Douglas: Evening, *1994, video screens showing restaged television newscasts from 1969 and 1970. Photo courtesy David Zwirner Gallery.*

Oliver Stone Sr., Douglas Fairbanks as William the Conqueror in *How the Channel was Won*, "directed by Cecil B. DeMille with a cast of dozens"). The sly simulation of a bygone era meshed nicely with Marker's creation of filmic illusion.

A somewhat less sanguine meditation on cinema's effects appeared in Tony Oursler's *System for Dramatic Feedback* (1994). The entire back wall of this installation was filled with a projection of movie viewers looking up in a dark theater as they eat their popcorn. Arranged before them was a peculiar construction designed to test our voyeuristic pleasure in the discomfort and pain of others. To enter the space, the viewer had to

pass by a tiny rag doll whose white fabric head was covered with the video projection of a human face. The doll grimaces and cries piteously for help in a disconcertingly convincing manner. Inside, a massive construction of rags and stuffed clothing formed the backdrop for other distressing video scenarios which became evident as the viewer moved around it. One could see a hand slapping a bare butt, a nude female body endlessly rotating, a man's face apparently crushed beneath the weight of the installation with eyes that roll in captive agony, and a penis that stiffens and relaxes. But, although they operate on the same principle as the doll

entrance, animating otherwise inert fabric with glimpses of human flesh subjected to various indignities, these projections were less effective. They tended to become lost in the complicated structure, and some were virtually invisible on the patterned cloth.

The viewer's superior scale and position, as well as the presence of the bug-eyed peanut gallery behind, contributed to the uncomfortable realization that cinematic pleasure depends on a distancing mechanism whereby technology transforms the pain of others into entertainment.

Meanwhile, German artist Marcel Odenbach showed an interest in real pain, in particular as

Installation detail from Marcel Odenbach's Make a Fist in the Pocket, *1994, which includes video monitors, videotape projections and wall text. Photo courtesy Museo Nacional, Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.*
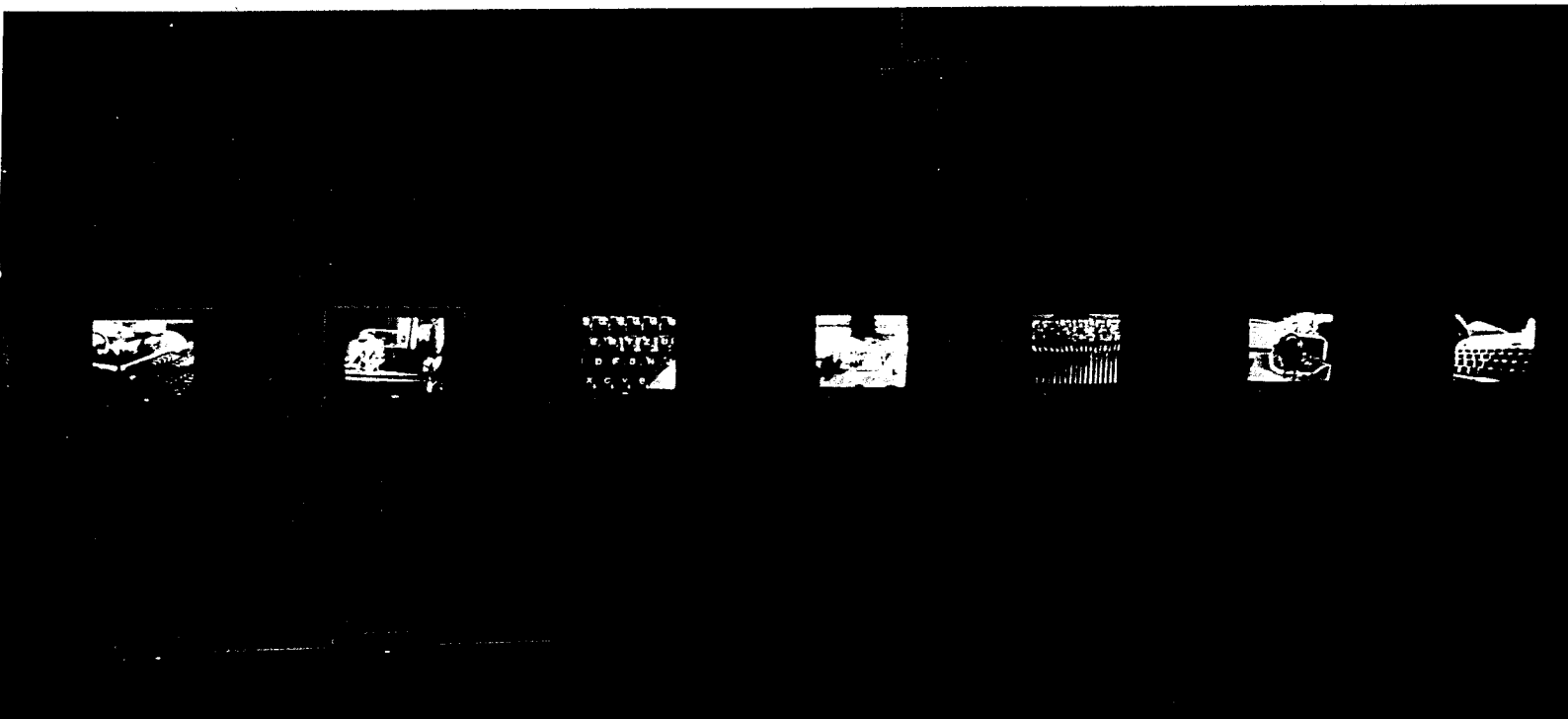
Taking on aspects of sculpture, performance and stage design, and often using the latest high-tech gear, video installation is a multi-media spectacle that has moved far from its philosophical origins.

manifested in the violence of German history. Although his contribution to the show, *Eine Faust in der Tasche Machen* (Make a Fist in the Pocket), 1994, contained some remarkable imagery, ultimately he seemed to be attempting too many things. As in Oursler's installation, a videotape projected on the back wall of the gallery set the stage for this work. Here it offered idyllic scenes of Thailand, including a closeup image of a Caucasian man getting a foot massage, as well as violent images of skinhead riots in Germany. On the wall opposite this projection, Odenbach had installed a row of video monitors which offered archival footage of the international uprisings, demonstrations and government reprisals which dominated the news in 1968. (For both Odenbach and Douglas, this moment seems to represent a time when it was still possible to believe that the media's dramatic ability to bring the news home might liberate rather than anesthetize its audience.) Interspersed with this footage were clips of Nazi book burnings and clacking typewriters. There seemed to be a message here about the unhealthy relationship between political violence and the media, but it was diffused by the eclecticism of the work's references.

A second theme which emerged from this exhibition was the changing perception of human identity in an electronic era. Lurking behind this change, of course, is the Frankenstein myth, updated now to include our ambivalent feelings about the effect of developments like virtual reality, the Internet and cyberspace on our individual and collective psyches.

Judith Barry and Brad Miskell provided a darkly amusing fantasy of an apocalyptic future where machines and human bodies have apparently fused. Titled *HardCell* (1994), it consisted of a wood crate torn open in several places to reveal pulsing innards which equally suggested human organs or the exposed wires, tubing and other mechanical hardware of some huge, damaged computer. As rubber sacs inflated and deflated, a spinelike column shifted in space, lights flickered on and off and monitors revealed interference patterns or bits of sci-fi text, one thought of Hal in *2001* (another paradigm of technology run amok).

Things seemed less catastrophic in Bill Viola's *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992), which offered an electronic model for the workings of human consciousness. Images projected onto a central turning screen flashed onto, slid off of and were reflected over the walls of a darkened gallery. A mirror on one side of the screen caused the stationary viewer to momentarily become part of this kaleidoscope of images.

Gary Hill took the opposite tack in *Inasmuch as*

Bill Viola: Slowly Turning Narrative, *1992, projections on a moving screen, mirror.*
Photo Gary McKinnis.

It Is Always Already Taking Place (1990). Instead of suggesting that technology can re-create the shifting, impressionistic landscape of the mind, he used it to express a disjointed experience of the body. Slightly moving fragments of a male body (Hill's own, as it turns out) were distributed among an assortment of monitors which ranged in size from tiny to normal. The fragments were not arranged in any discernible order, but instead became elements of an almost abstract human landscape which seemed to comment on the incoherence which technology has visited, not just on our consciousness, but on our physical sense of ourselves as well. A nearly inaudible audio track of Hill reading from a text contributed to the disjointed effect. The small scale of this work offered a marked contrast to the carnivalesque quality of the other works in the show. Forcing the viewer to draw close in an almost uncomfortable intimacy with the minuscule monitors, Hill demonstrated the effectiveness of restraint.

The final work in the exhibition seemed to stand by itself, transcending issues of media, technology and human-machine interface to provide a poetic meditation on the fragility and resonance of love. *Lovers* (1994), by Teiji Furuhashi, one of the founders of the Japanese performance group Dumb Type, consisted of a succession of ghostlike projections of figures which materialized and dematerialized across the four walls of the darkened gallery. Sometimes they walked slowly, sometimes they leapt through the air and sometimes their paths crossed and they seemed to embrace. But this contact was only illusory, for it was clear that their images were simply passing through each other. When a single viewer occupied the space, one figure appeared before him or her and seemed to gesture invitingly.

Lovers was somewhat reminiscent of Gary Hill's *Tall Ships*, which was one of the star attractions of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. However, while the moving figures in Hill's work often assumed confrontational poses, Furuhashi's work was lyrical and even elegiac in tone. These figures might be figments of dreams or memory, messengers from another realm where humans no longer require corporeal bodies.

By no means intended to offer a comprehensive survey (one can think of any number of other artists who might also have been included), "Video Spaces" made the case for the video installation as a fully mature art form. It also suggested that while the genre has moved away from a gee-whiz infatuation with the possibilities of technology, it remains haunted by the implications of the world that technology is bringing into being. If technology can make past and present seem to coexist, and can even alter our records, and hence our memories, of history, will "reality" cease to have any meaning? Are we more like our machines, or are they becoming more like us? If we alter our
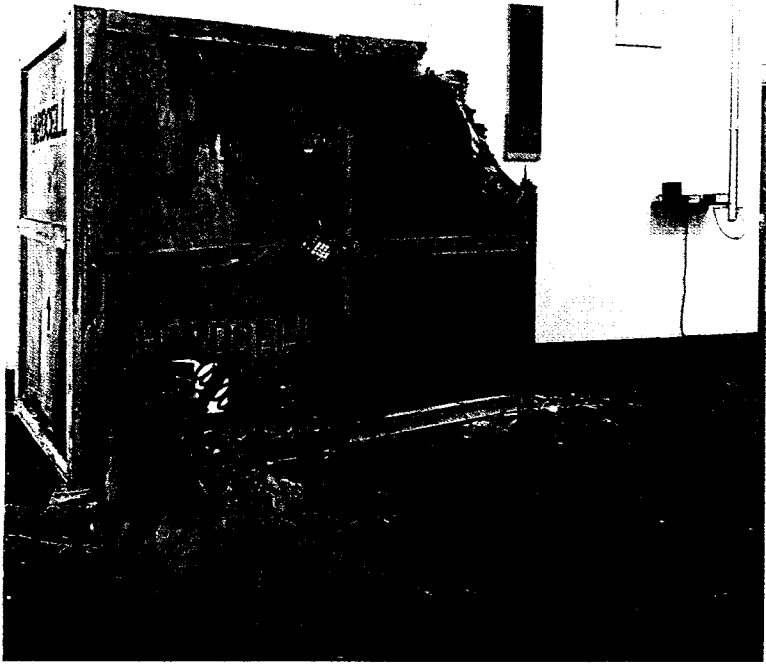
Above and right (interior detail), Judith Barry and Brad Miskell's HardCell, wooden crate, mechanical hardware, 1994. Photo James Welling, courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

consciousness, do we also alter our world?

The exhibition also demonstrated the art world's pull toward entertainment and spectacle. The works here may have dealt with complex issues, but their modes of presentation are engaging and user friendly, owing more to MTV than to the minimal and conceptual models which inspired early practitioners of video art. However, installations of this scale and technical complexity require institutional funding and support. Given the extreme probability that government and private arts funding, at least in this country, will be increasingly scarce, one wonders about the future of video installation. Who will be able to pursue this form? What kind of partnerships will be devised to make it possible? Major funders for this exhibition included the Samsung Corporation and the Japan Foundation. Is this indicative of the future of art patronage in this country?

Thus, in more ways than one, "Video Spaces" seemed to point toward a future in which the relationships between art, audiences and institutions may be quite different from those in place today. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster may have been reduced by popular culture into a harmless cartoon, but the questions she raised about science, art and humanity are with us still. □

"Video Spaces" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art from June 22 to Sept. 12 and does not travel. The exhibition, organized by Barbara London, was accompanied by an 80-page catalogue.

Author: Eleanor Heartney is a free-lance critic living in New York.