

Video art: A very creative channel for computers

LOVERS AND respecters of popular culture are always looking for the art in TV. Whole courses in video are devoted to picking apart classic TV series like "The Honeymooners" line by line, scene by scene, looking for the themes and images and insights into Americana that so many people in the country seemed to cherish and need and identify with in the '50s and '60s.

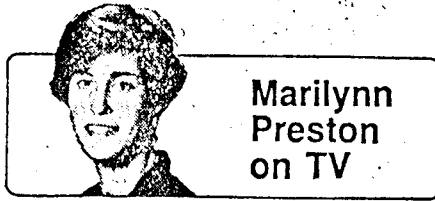
Coming up, in the '80s and '90s, lovers and respecters of popular culture will be paying more attention to the art on TV, to the artists who have decided to use the relatively new medium of television to do what artists have always tried to do, release their themes and images and insights to as large an audience as possible. The way people buy stereo records now is the way they may buy floppy disk performances of video art pieces in the future.

At least that's what video art people look forward to, and so can we all. Even though computer/video art sounds elitist and foreboding — like you should have at least college calculus before attempting to understand — it's really no more than television shows, video programs, and concepts designed and created by talented people who call themselves video artists and carried out, more often than not, with the help of a computer.

Video art can vary from short skit pieces that look like extensions of Second City material to abstract, non-narrative collages of moving forms. Video art ranges from the realist to the surrealist, from the camp to the abstract. Video art can be commercial or anticommmercial, thoughtful or silly, and the only rules that govern it after 15 years or so of development is that there are no rules. There is only technology and the artists' imagination, and both of those, for the moment, seem limitless.

At least those are some of the impressions Cindy Neal wanted to leave us with when she guest-curated "Video Art: The Electronic Medium" show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 237 E. Ontario St. (Until Nov. 23.)

Neal is herself an artist with a lively mind and a vivid imagination, and she has spent a lot of time thinking about the revolutionizing link between the computer, the artist and the television.



Marilynn
Preston
on TV

In the near future, she says, people will want to buy and own pieces of video art for the same reason people want to buy and own paintings, photographs, prints, or posters; because they like the images, because art stimulates their imagination, because art evokes some felt but undefinable response.

INDEED, SHE SAYS, video art is already beginning to spread. Some small, specialty video publishing houses are going into the business of selling and distributing videotapes, and more and more video artists are making products for that developing market. And more and more people, Neal is happy to report, are buying them.

Meanwhile, though, the best place to see the best video art is in a museum, and some of the finest video art in the country, Neal says, on display now at the MCA, is coming out of Chicago.

Chicago has earned a worldwide reputation as a video/computer art center, thanks, in large part, to the talented artists and innovators who work at and around the Art Institute, the University of Illinois at Circle Campus, and the Chicago Editing Center.

She singles out two Chicagoans for outstanding innovations in the video art field: Dan Sandin for developing the Image Processor — "an analog video synthesizer designed to give artists the capability of transforming camera images into rich color experiences" — and Tom DeFanti for developing two computer languages, GRASS and ZGRASS, that enabled artists to express their needs and desires to the computer more directly, in their own language, rather than first having to learn some difficult mathematic-based language.

THE BEST WAY FOR you to understand all this, of course, is to go down to the Museum of Contemporary Art and see what's going on. The exhibit is divided into two viewing spaces. One, the first dark room you come to on the second floor, is set up with pillows and chairs and several large and small TV screens, and this is where you can sit back and enjoy an hour's worth of video art pieces, all carefully chosen by Cindy Neal to keep you entertained and aware of the broad range of video art possibilities. (There are two different programs planned, so if you like what you see between now and Oct. 12, you might want to come back for part two of the show, between Oct. 17 and Nov. 23.)

I've seen the program of five tapes now playing and really enjoyed it. Some of the pieces are witty, some not; some are easily appreciated, some not; most take chances and, at least, are challenging.

In the second room (and this will change after Oct. 12, too), you can get even more involved. Copper Giloth and DeFanti, two Chicago computer designer/artists, have modified a little computer game that invites you to create your own video design and develop it into something that can best be described as video wallpaper. You ride the joystick; you create the pattern; you instruct the computer about the look of the final product. It's called Interactive TV — but instead of shooting down planes or avoiding asteroids, you begin to see and feel and sense the future of video art.

THIS SECOND ROOM also has a TV to display images, sounds, and little TV stories collected by Phil Morton and Jane Veeder. I liked it, too, and especially enjoyed hearing about CB TV. CB TV, Cindy Neal told me, is the logical extension of CB Radio, and in one little part of this tape collage she has chosen, you can watch amateur videophiles tune in to one another using their own camera-receiver-transmitter setups.

It turns out there's a widespread underground of just plain folks who like to talk to each other via their TV cameras, a kind of "Real People" gone underground. It's eerie, when you think about it, and it reminded Cindy Neal of "1984." It reminded me that television has come a long way in 20 years. "The Honeymooners" over.