

## Color my world

### Chicago Video

with videotapes by Tom DeFanti, Wayne Fielding, Tom Finerty, Copper Glioth, Barbara Latham, John Manning, Jeannine Mellinger, Phil Morton, Cynthia Neal, Lily Olinger, Edward Rankus, Dan Sandin, Mimi Shevitz, Bob Snyder, Janice Tanaka, Jane Veeder, and Tom Weinberg

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CHICAGO HAS LONG been a center for experimentation with electronic imaging tools. It was there that Dan Sandin—with his background in physics and synthesized music—designed and built his Image Processor in 1971-74. With Phil Morton, he later made available free plans for a low-cost kit. Largely through the efforts of Morton, Sandin, and Tom DeFanti—who wrote the computer graphics program for Sandin's processor—the video community has further been nurtured by courses at the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois.

It comes as no surprise, then, that most of the tapes included in "Chicago Video" fall into the image-processing category. Only three of the 14 tapes were not in some way computer generated and/or electronically processed, and the exceptions were all documentaries. I'll choose, therefore, to forego discussion of the documentaries in order to more fully address the show's real emphasis. However, the use of the label "image processing" itself is misleading, in that it tends to lump together tapes which are actually very diverse. "Chicago Video," assembled by Barbara London, MOMA's video program director, provides an opportunity to sort out some differences. It also reveals certain problems of "readability" involved in the genre, which stem partly from the nature of the imagery itself, and partly from the way the tapes are constructed.

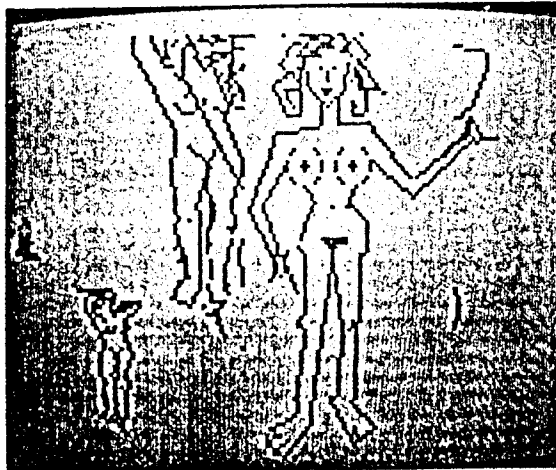
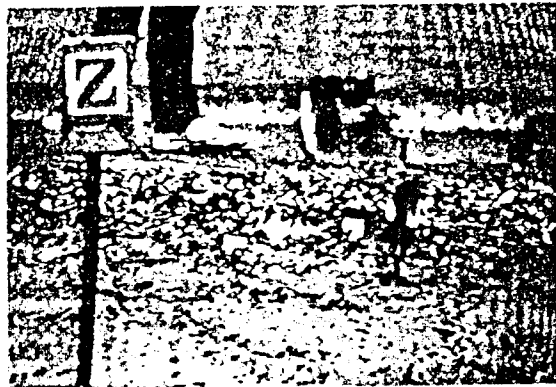
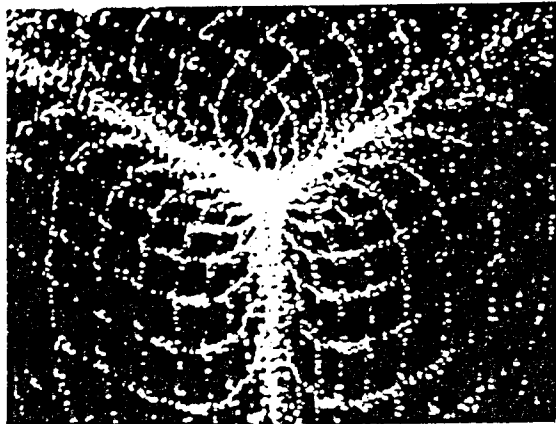
A basic choice can be said to inform the production of image-processed tapes: some artists investigate the signal and the tool as an end in itself, while others use the tools in producing tapes whose meaning lies elsewhere. This choice is most often a reflection of the backgrounds—art versus electronics, for example—that videomakers bring to the medium. Of course, there are numerous variations and exceptions, but these two categories provide a useful basis for a discussion of the ways video technology and notions of art are brought together.

*Spiral 5*, a collaborative tape by Sandin (video synthesis), DeFanti (graphics), and Mimi Shevitz (audio synthesis), is the best example of the first approach. The tape is a real-time performance in which the synthesizer console is treated like a musical instrument. After five "rehearsals" on the console, the three "performers" produced colorful permutations of a Y-shaped figure, which revolve and expand into images of the sun, a spiral, and spider webs. These variations, rhythmically structured by Shevitz's audio synthesis, burst, melt, and crawl, always returning to the basic shape.

The challenge of the synthesizer-as-instrument approach—which is also characteristic of the work of Stephen Beck and Skip Sweeney—lies in the refinement of skills as video musician. *Spiral 5* demonstrates such refinement, but its predictability would make it less than challenging for the uninitiated, since one must understand the circumstances under which the tape was produced in order to appreciate the mastery (or lack of it) in the performance. At the 1981 National Video Festival, Sandin acknowledged the limits: "I pity the people who have to figure this stuff out by looking at the tapes."

As if acting on this expression of sympathy, Sandin's *Wandawaga Waters* attempts to engage the viewer more didactically. After introducing himself, Sandin describes—then produces—various shifts in focus, exposure, and focal length upon a shot of a peaceful sunset. Unfortunately,

even though neither of these themes are fully developed, the tape is more a plodding, romantic contemplation of the tranquil lake where Sandin grew up than a self-conscious demonstration of video technique. It proceeds from "straight" to processed imagery of the lake and fish, as well as colorized close-up abstractions of dancing water, dogs, and birds, stringing together scenes with an ambiguity that precludes sequential reading.



Top: still from *Spiral 5* (1980), by Tom DeFanti, Dan Sandin, and Mimi Shevitz. Middle: still from *AlienATION* (1980), by Edward Rankus, John Manning, and Barbara Latham. Bottom: still from *Skippy Peanut Butter Jars* (1980), by Copper Glioth.

Didacticism is also evident in Phil Morton and Jane Veeder's *Program 7*, although they qualify it with humorous self-effacement. In the 30-minute tape, the video game is used not only as a structuring device, but as a mode of representation in itself. Black and white video travel footage of the Western landscape—the desert, cacti, and buffalo—is followed by its analog, a computer video display of a map of the U.S. Excited voices mimic automobile sounds as if they were playing something called "Roadtrip." Screeches and vrooms punctuate their identifications of various locales while a line is drawn over the map, plotting the trip's itinerary. We then see a van parked at a California State University at Sacramento. Morton and Veeder are there, we are told by a TV repor-

ter who is orchestrating a taping session, to discuss "TV as a form of communication."

It is now that we are clued in to making sense of what seems to be a disjointed assemblage of different bits of information. In the next scene, Sandin and Morton, flanked by their equipment, engage in a group discussion. Says Sandin: "The people playing with the toys are having their vision accelerated... and the audience does not have the tools to follow it." By juxtaposing explanatory

able, no matter how carefully one "reads."

In that Veeder's eight-minute *Montana* uses one of the three modes of representation which she and Morton attempt to synthesize in *Program 7*, the tape functions as its precursor. Also modeled after video games, *Montana* is a cleverly constructed visualization of the collision between nature and technology. A frenetic soundtrack composed of bird songs and computer sounds provides background noise while graphic images of mountains, birds, buffalo, and military aircraft converge on the screen from all directions. In the end, an emblematic image is drawn in etch-a-sketch fashion, and the words "Good luck electronically visualizing your futures" are added, spoofing the messages which appear at the end of electronic games.

Although it is certainly not unique to the area, another approach evident in "Chicago Video" can best be described as collage. In that video signals are layered by means of manual or voltage-controlled keying, switching, and colonization. Unlike film, in which superimposition is achieved through double exposure or optical printing, videomakers have a completely different set of formal choices, which, of course, vary depending on the capabilities of the tool. This range of options allows one to easily combine and manipulate disparate source material—e.g., black and white and color film and video, photographs, drawings, etc.—in a way that removes them from their original form, creating the potential for a new mode of signification. In addition to these possibilities—and those presented by the audio component—is the necessity of coming to terms with montage, since video, like film, is a time-bound medium. Thus, videomakers who use these tools are presented with a double challenge: making superimposition work sequentially.

That the collage approach predominates—at least at the Art Institute of Chicago—is no mystery. Until recently the school didn't have color cameras, the emphasis being placed on the processing tools of Sandin's design. The four tapes that I would group in this category were all produced by videomakers affiliated in some way with the Art Institute. All the tapes are highly expressionistic—both in terms of subject matter and the painterly look that the video signal can be made to produce. Whatever the complexity of subject matter itself, however, the combination of collage and montage frequently results in an unnecessarily complicated hodge-podge.

Jeannine Mellinger's *Nightmare*, for example, is supposedly about the "etymological origin and the psychoanalytical interpretation of the title word." Mellinger obsessively superimposes colorized footage of a dressage event, an assortment of kitschy figurines and old-fashioned paper dolls depicting little boys and girls, brides, grooms, seahorses, and drawings of ballerinas. The soundtrack is equally chaotic: Mellinger repeats the derivation of the word "nightmare," which she renders almost completely inaudible by overlapping and delaying between two audio channels, and intersperses this with recollections of dreams, excerpts from a dressage text, music, and references to father-daughter relations—all designed to connect metaphorically the socialization of women (as visualized through ballet) with the training of the horse. *Nightmare* is ambitious in that numerous issues of substance run through it, such as dominance and submission, female stereotypes, and female socialization. There are instances—such as the use of bright pink colorization—in which the tape's theme is visually reinforced. But its overall lack of clarity suggests that either Mellinger hasn't figured out what she wants to say about these issues, or else hasn't completely mastered the tools with which to say it.

Janice Tanaka's *Ontogenesis* is just as much of a bombardment, in this case of layered and colored images from American pop culture, media, and politics. It is more accessible, however, partly because the material is readily identifiable, and so is the message. Carefully structured by a cut-and-paste soundtrack, *Ontogenesis* is both nostalgic and cynically pessimistic.

We first hear a man crooning a 1930s tune called "My Old Flame" as aerial footage of the Statue of Liberty is intercut with pictures of women from the same era. This is followed by, "Look! Up in the sky..." with a colorized Superman, and then an aerial view of bombs being dropped from an airplane. One set of

values is thus supplanted by another. Superman becomes a war monger. The significance of this association becomes clearer later in the tape, when other "supermen"—namely, Presidents Eisenhower through Reagan—are intercut with processed footage of troops marching, Vietnamese civilians hysterically running, and media men talking—all to an updated version of the Lone Ranger theme.

Appropriately, the tape's ending supplies the apocalypse: grainy black and white footage of a lone figure walking toward the horizon of a barren landscape is rapidly switched between positive and negative. The eerie voice of the omnipresent telephone operator informs us, not surprisingly, "The number you have reached is not in service. Please check the number, and dial again." The last word repeats and reverberates, suggesting that the cycle of militarism and war continues, no matter who is president. This judgment, though hardly novel, is timely. The strength of the tape lies in Tanaka's concise articulation of disparate material.

In contrast to *Ontogenesis*, *AlienATION*, a collaborative effort by Barbara Latham, John Manning, and Edward Rankus, depends more on collage than montage. The tape contains much of the same kind of material found in Bruce Conner films, but it is assembled in a manner more akin to an artist's magazine—in which each page is a self-contained piece—than Conner's seamless editing style.

As the title suggests, *AlienATION* conjures up images of how strange America

might seem to a visitor from another planet, or even to Americans themselves. The tape is a compendium of absurd non-sequiturs derived from old science fiction and industrial films, pictures from '50s magazines and textbooks, and pseudo-scientific constructions with experimental rats. As in Mellinger's and Tanaka's tapes, an attempt is made to integrate this material through processing techniques and through an equally mixed and edited soundtrack. What actually ties these oddities together, though, is their strangeness, which, while wittily reinforcing the overall theme, isn't enough to sustain a viewer for 27 minutes.

Of the four tapes, Wayne Fielding's *Motion Sickness* is the least processed, but its problems result mainly from his use of montage. According to the press release, *Motion Sickness* is "about being preoccupied with life and sanity." Preoccupied it is: inexplicable actions—such as a hand removing coins from an ice box—are combined with eerie shots of inflated air bags, a doll's head, lemmings, birds flying overhead, and a semi-abstract, colorized landscape with the Star of David embedded in it. A soundtrack composed of electronically synthesized noise and an inaudibly slowed-down male voice further obscure this completely private tape, which mysteriously, is dedicated to Fielding's grandfather.

All four of the "collage" videotapes demonstrate—with varying degrees of success—attempts to use the formal properties of processing tools to make expressive statements. However, the problems of converting

formal experimentation into a work that is coherent and challenging to most viewers are not limited to this type of work. A good illustration of the difference is found in two tapes by Copper Giloth, which, in terms of process alone, resemble Veeder's video graphics. In *Popcorn*, a computer-generated line drawing of a popcorn popper fills up and overflows; next, we see abstract kernels that look like X-rays of teeth. Contrary to what the exhibition press release stated, there was no "story" in this display of technique. In *Skippy Peanut Butter Jars*, Giloth combines a series of computer-generated line drawings of female nudes with a voiceover in which she describes her childhood notions of what one must do to be an artist. Her use of the technology can't really salvage what is basically a cute and overly precious anecdote, however. To be an artist, thought Giloth, one must make drawings of naked women, and they must "look old." So, she says, she buned her drawings in Skippy jars. Throughout the narration, the cartoon-like drawings move up and down the screen, but—in terms of the story—there seems to be no point to Giloth's having replaced pencil with computer. The audio mix also seems gratuitous: her voice is delayed in one channel, making the text almost inaudible.

In contrast, Bob Snyder's *Trim Subdivisions* (6 mins.), is an exercise in which the video effects employed are well-suited to the subject. In this silent tape, pastel-colored facades of pre-fab development houses are segmented by pans, wipes, and squeeze zooms. A blue house is "painted" yellow, win-

dows are "moved," and sections of the facades are framed, enlarged, and substituted for one another. However, the underlying formal concern—the play between two-dimensional flatness and the illusion of three-dimensionality—is all too familiar. While Snyder's translation of this concern to video—in which these spatial shifts can occur in time—is a new twist, it quickly exhausts itself. Moreover, the interchangeability implied by visually substituting one facade for another becomes a worn-out comment on the banality of modern tract housing.

The tapes in "Chicago Video" raise a number of fundamental questions about how one can best use electronic imaging tools. For instance, what can this kind of video convey that's different from straight video? How can colorization, keying, switching, or any digital effect operate to establish a particular tone, provide pacing, articulate an idea, and/or render subtleties that straight video can't? What possible meanings does one generate by juxtaposing processed and non-processed video, and how can they be clarified in a tape? Near the end of Morton and Veeder's *Program 7*, an unidentified male voice defines intelligence as the ability to handle a wider range of information faster. Explaining, testing, and utilizing this kind of intelligence seems to be the challenge electronically generated and processed video now poses.