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**THE VIDEO WORK OF  
NAM JUNE PAIK AND BILL VIOLA**

Thesis submitted by

Michiko KANZAWA

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## INTRODUCTION

**During long periods of history the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that antiquity but also a new kind of perception. (Benjamin, 1992, p.216)**

In the second half of the twentieth century, the moving image of video has taken hold, and can be seen as now having a pivotal role in the art world. The art world is seeking to explore the impact of the image generated with the new image-making technologies which have followed from the development of photography and film since the close of the nineteenth century. The impact of new technology on art is unpredictable: screen-printing contributed to Pop art while holograms only contributed to a few quickly-kitsch window displays. The imagination and enthusiasm of artists and the art world are at least as important as the technical advances in themselves.

The beginnings of video art can be traced to the early 1960s, when the Sony Corporation introduced its portable video recorder into the market. The artists came to video with ideas, such as producing public documentary, recording or filming performances, image-processing for installations. Each usage was further elaborated by the capacities of this new medium, and in turn, helped shape video's aesthetic discourse.



Video images are reproduced by the mechanical apparatus of the camera's eye. The artist films many fragments of *facts* in the world. Then through editing and cutting, the artist re-presents a sequence of these facts as his or her new image. Audio-visual imagery stream constantly from the monitors and screens, which are everywhere; home, shopping mall, museum, etc.

The transformation of the representation of reality of the world through the medium of video has been explored in American video artist, Bill Viola's "He Weeps For You" (1977). In this work a closed-circuit video camera projects a close-up of water dripping from a pipe. This enlarged image is seen on a screen; and the sound of water slowly dripping is amplified. This work takes a mundane object and projects it as a large-scale image which creates a vividly detailed presence. Not only is video a two-dimensional screen of colour sequences, but it has an audio dimension also. As well as the use of "straight" footage one can also generate effects with the video synthesiser, and more recently computer editing can transform these pre-recorded images into wholly abstract sequences.

Video art also has its expanded forms: sculptural installation. Nam June Paik, who is a Korean-American video artist, presented prepared television sets whose components had been altered to produce unexpected effects as part of his performance and installation. With sets often randomly distributed in positions around the gallery, each television became an instrument, removed from the social presence and meaning of television. Paik's prepared televisions were thus radically transformed into sculptural objects. In the process, Paik changed our understanding of television as a cultural form. This thesis will examine the use of video in the work



of these two central practitioners.

As we approach the last decade of the twentieth century there is a sense of profound change that is affecting our perception of reality of the world around us. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) the German critic and philosopher, claimed that our perception is not so much an inherited mechanism as a learnt one - the daily manifestation of our whole personal history of socialisation and interaction within the cultural environment. He suggested that the reality of the world is itself a complex system of signs interpreted by the culture. Perception of this reality is always mediated through the cultural environment.

While we may already ask the question: What is the artist's relationship to society, the broader culture, and his or her self-consciousness? This question is made more complex by artists working with video. The following pages survey how Nam June Paik's and Bill Viola's work question video's means and methods of perception and of, describing the similarities and the differences across their works.



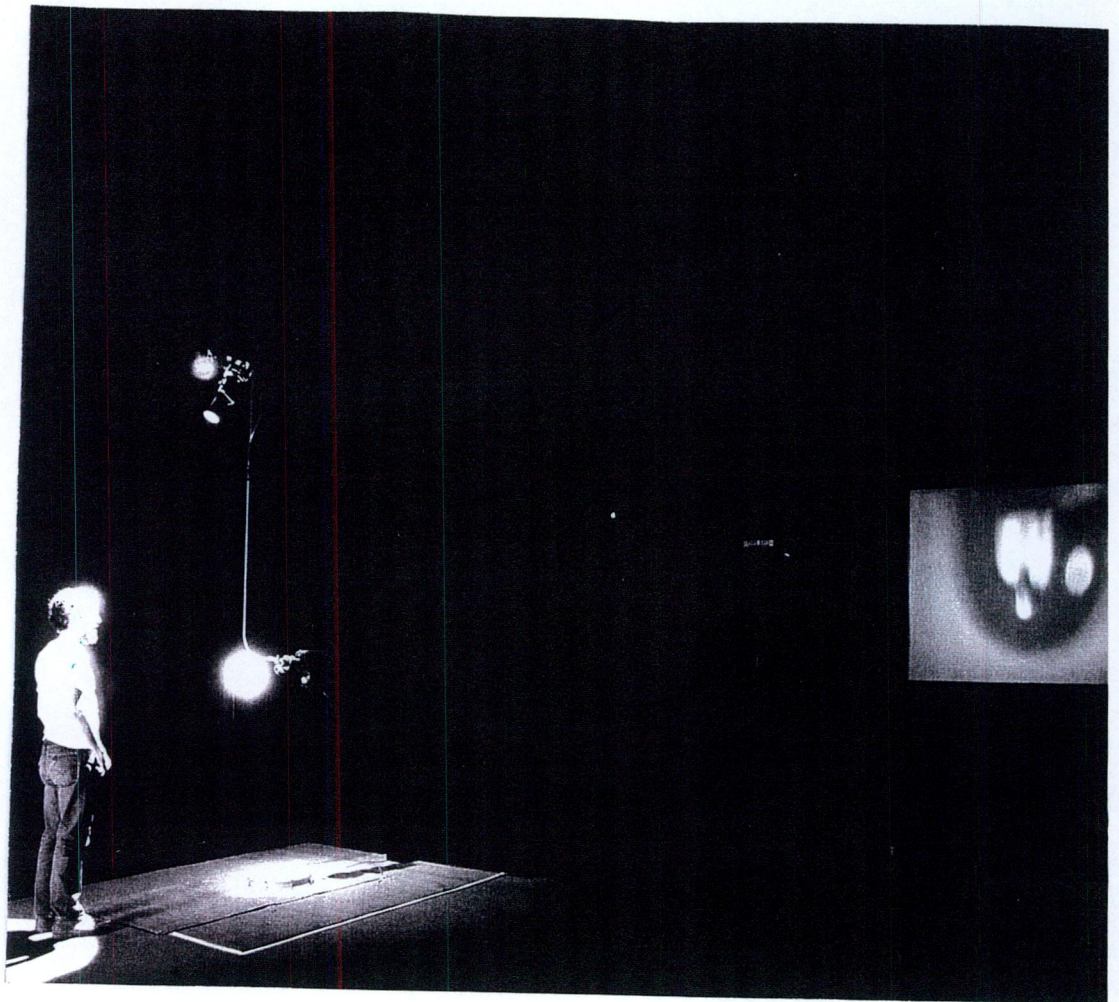


Illustration 1 - He Weeps For You (Bill Viola)





## CHAPTER ONE

In 1964, when Paik moved to New York, he brought the robot which he had made in Japan. This stick-like creature, Robot K-456, was a human-sized, remote-controlled robot fashioned out of bits and pieces of wire and metal. Later, Robot K-456 staged a performance in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1982 on the occasion of Paik's retrospective exhibition. The performance began with Paik guiding the robot along the sidewalk to the intersection of Seventy-Fifth Street and Madison Avenue. This robot is just one of the many explicitly handmade art works in his shows over the last 30 years.

In 1988, in the Newport Harbour exhibition, he showed "Chadwick a.k.a. Capek", part of Paik's "Family of Robot" series. The title incorporates the name of the Czech playwright Karel Capek, who popularised the term "robot" in the '20s. It also incorporates as well as Paik's anglicised mispronunciation of that name. The sculpture is a 7-foot-tall male figure composed exclusively of old television sets remarkable for their quaint wood cabinets. Paik literally deconstructed the domestic object of the TV set itself and reconstructed it as an art object.

In 1963, at the Gallery Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, Paik had his first solo exhibition. This show included a room of his prepared televisions. The televisions, through removal from the private space in the home, became objects to be manipulated and transformed by the artist's hand. Through Paik's manipulation, the television became the means to produce a new electronic image. He did this by applying magnets to the surface of the television sets and reworking the electronics of



their interiors. The wooden box of the television has been removed from its position within the home and stripped of its traditional meanings and represented as an object. It is now the sculptural dimension that attracts the viewers' attentions. Paik is fascinated by the relationship between hardware and software, or the 3-D "real" and 2-d simulacrum. Here the television sets are present *bodily* in his *hand-made* space.

In Paik's 1982 retrospective at the Whitney Museum in America, "Fish Flies on Sky" was shown. Television sets of different sizes hung from the ceiling. The dark ceiling in the darkened room makes the picture sources look like faraway stars in the sky. Visitors could lie down on soft mats and look up at the images while resting. In 1991, the installation, called "One Candle Room", was exhibited for the first time by the Frankfurt Museum Fur Modern Kunst. A camera recorded a candle that was burning while, at the same time, the image was screened on the wall by several projectors. Thus, a room-filling, seemingly transparent image was created with the flickering fire of a candle. Viewers participate because their movement affects air flow and therefore the candle's flicker. He thus created a space in which the viewers' presence altered the image. The relationship between viewers and Paik's work is generally one of participation. The relationship between the candle's flicker and the viewer's movement might be compared to face-to-face communication. In the development of this technology, the boundary between the viewer and the art work has thus become blurred. His works give us the opportunity to experience the diverse electronic materials as a creative handmade and bodily space.



In 1989, Paik exhibited "Fin De Siecle" at the Whitney Museum in America. The wall of the museum was replaced by three wall units, each one a mosaic of hundreds of individual televisions. The TV sets did not show a continuous, logical sequence of pictures, rather they presented many segments, in what might be described as an unassembled jigsaw puzzle. When the viewer is in this space, he or she feels the heat from some three hundred TV sets. Thus, again in Paik's work, the viewer is not just an eye but a corporeally embedded consciousness. Paik addresses the viewer's embodiment. A similar argument can be made about the work of Bill Viola.

**Camera breaks from the eye**

**Camera as nose**

**Camera as ear**

**Camera as insect**

**Camera as consciousness**

**Camera as microscope**

**Camera as telescope** (Viola, 1995, p.52)

Viola uses a video camera as a part of his body, and looks at the image through the camera lens with what may be described as the power of the contemplative gaze. The eye of the camera observes nature in a different way to the human eye. For example, we have some idea of what is involved in the act of walking, if only in general terms, but we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of second when a person steps forward. We might discover details of a structure, that we were previously unconscious of, through an examination of the camera image, as in the case of Muybridge. For Viola, the image of video communicates moments of consciousness to us; limit points of the communicable.

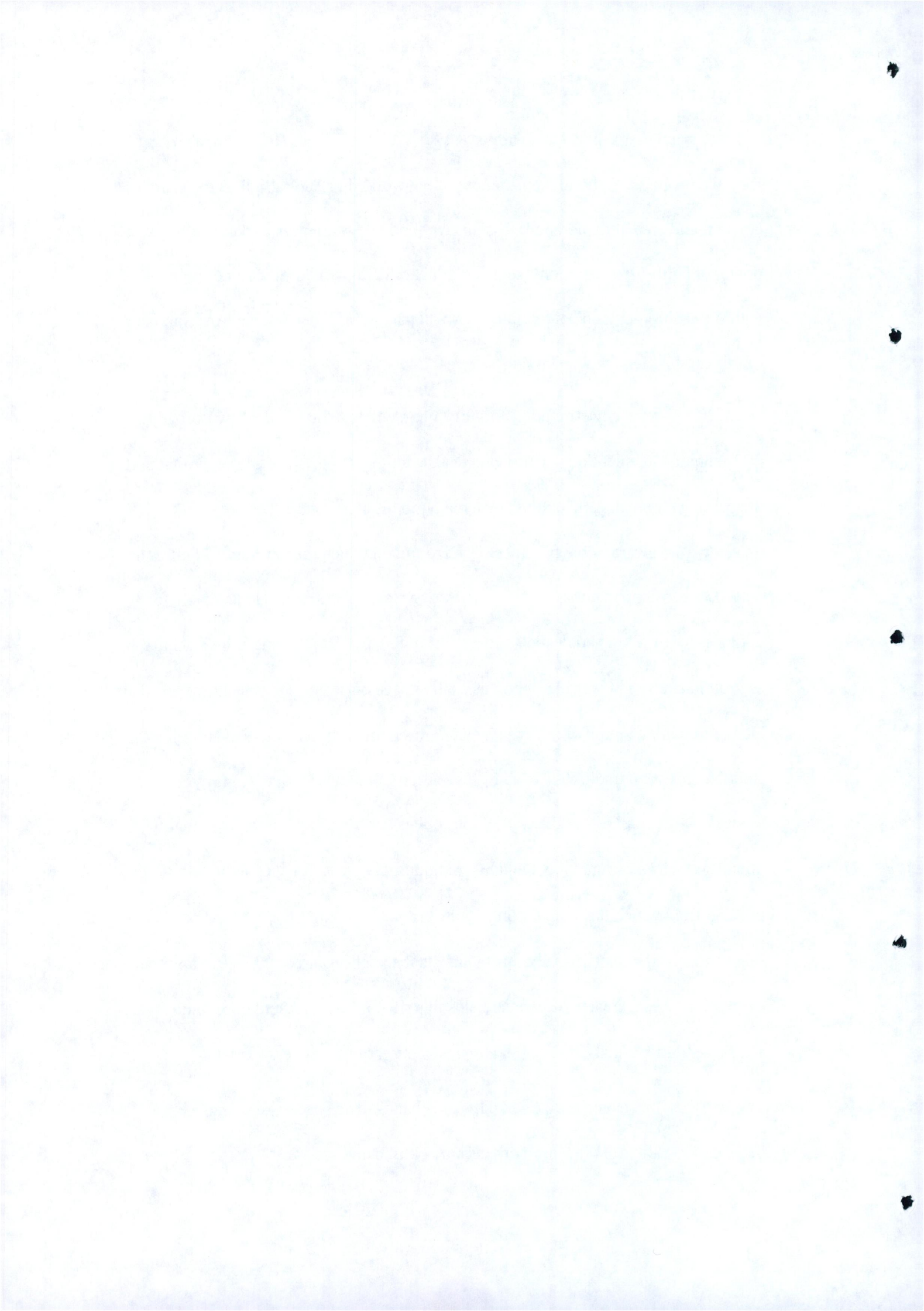


There is another aspect that is important for Viola's work, and this is 'light'. Light for Paik, is one of the bodily experiences of the work. For Viola, light is the primary concern and area of exploration. His imagery and edit sequences depend on the power of light. The refraction, flare, curvature, diffusion and diffraction of light within the different kinds of lens are always at play in his video image. An example of this can be seen in "The Passing".

In 1993, Viola's single-monitor, fifty five minute tape "The Passing" was broadcast in Britain on Channel Four. This video deals with the death of the artist's mother and the passing of genetic and cultural material on to his own son. When we see this image, we are aware of the blackness as a ground on which the illuminated figures are placed. According to Viola "light is related to water and life, and also its opposite, darkness to the night and death."(Viola, 1995, p.80) In "The Passing", the blackness as ground exerts a powerful hold on us as the image of death. This blackness, he also identified with the pupil of the eye. Viola draws frequently on Christian and Buddhist mystical traditions. In a key discussion of the black pupil of the eye, he argues that the pupil is the gateway of the soul as has been expressed in so many poems as well as within many religious traditions: the place at which light comes in, but also from which the soul not only looks but pours out into the world. For Viola, seeing grasps light patterns, and this manifests the relationship of the eye to spiritual expression. Viola creates perceptual fields that do not just represent observations about the world, but also they offer a representation of the process of vision.

When Paik presents his works bodily in his hand-made space, the boundary between the viewer and the art work became blurred and we are able to not only see





but also to feel ourselves embedded within his world. When Viola's single-monitor shows us the power of the sustained gaze, we find a different kind of light patterns on his screen. In his remarkable use of blackness, we might be thought to see ourselves objectively, as a mortal existence. Our relationship with the video art of both these artists is not just one of seeing, it is also a relationship with our own embodiment, with our bodies and perhaps, even with our mortality.



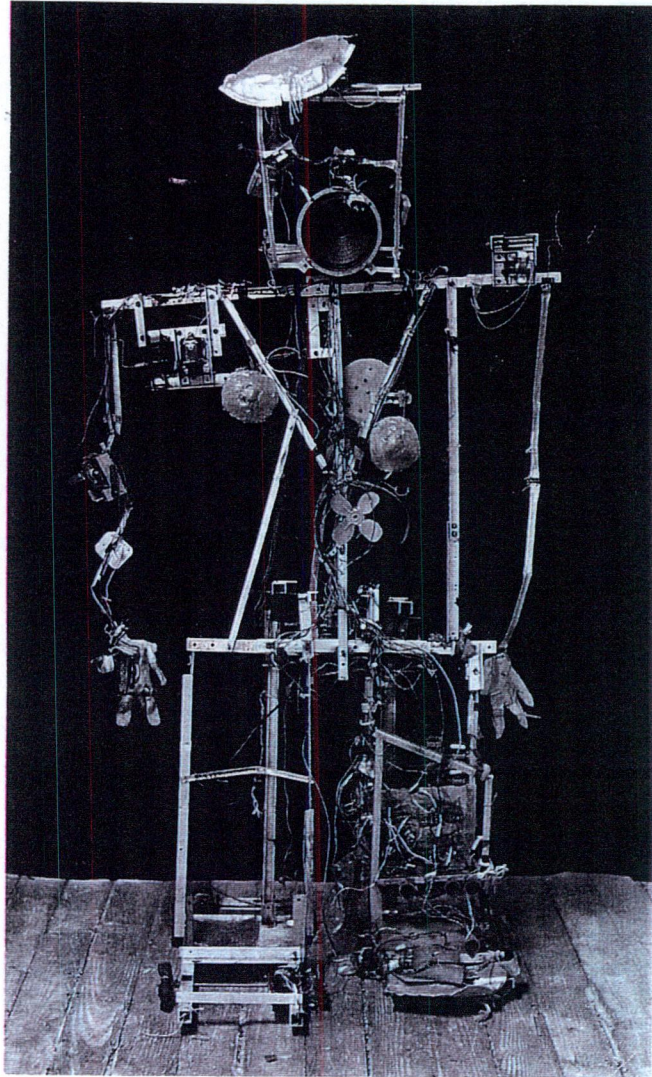


Illustration 2 Robot K-456 (Nam June Paik)



## CHAPTER TWO

**It (the synthesiser) would enable us to shape the TV screen canvas  
as precisely as Leonardo  
as freely as Picasso  
as colourfully as Renoir  
as profoundly as Mondrian  
as violently as Pollack and  
as lyrically as Jasper Johns."** (Stooss, 1993, p.87)

It may have been Paik's intention here to relate the pictorial qualities of the new medium to art-historical traditions. In impressionist painting, the image may be a landscape but the central issue is the effect of light on visual perception. For the cubists, the image was often a description of a still life or a portrait, but the content, in somewhat simplified terms, was the relationship between the viewer and the object, understood not just in terms of one viewing point. The technique of collage was introduced into the art world by Picasso. In 1912, "Still Life With Chair Caning" was made, in which Picasso pasted a strip of oilcloth on the canvas. Later, he would incorporate into his collages actual objects or fragments of objects, signifying literally themselves. This strange idea was to transform cubism and to become the source for much of twentieth-century art. An account of these developments can be found in "Realism and Ideology An Introduction To Semiotics And Cubism" by Francis Frascina, in Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction the Early twentieth Century.



The Renaissance period developed artificial perspective, which dictates a single viewpoint as the center of the visible world. Images are constructed so that the convergence of mathematically structured vanishing points address the central vantage point of the single spectator. The camera is based on perspective view, and the image it captures depends on where and when the camera is pointed. In the world of cubism, multiple viewpoints are melded together as in the phenomenon of collage. The technique itself finally provided an alternative to the conventional perspective which had dominated Western painting since the early Renaissance.

The principles of collage have been defined by one author as lifting "a certain number of elements from works, objects, pre-existing messages" and integrating "them in a new creation in order to produce an original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts." (Foster, 1983, p.84) Both perspective and cubism produce questions about "natural" or "real" appearances. Perspective claims to reproduce visual space while cubism often claimed to produce a more complex "reality".

The mechanical apparatus of the camera also gives rise to the question of the representation of reality of the world. Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction", argues as follows:

**Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be started by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without his being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shot now and be cut into the screen version. Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the 'beautiful semblance' which, so far, had been taken to be the only sphere where art could thrive.** (Benjamin, 1992, p.224)

This passage conveys a sense of transformation in the representation of reality of the





world by the camera. The director might in this way be thought to exactly record the facts which he or she wants. In this case, many fragments of fact have in some sense *actually* happened. These fragments can be then edited in a sequence to produce a representation; this is the principle of montage. This representation emphasizes the temporal dimension of the visual. Thus the new technology of montage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of visual traditions.

In "Global Groove" (1973) produced through the television laboratory at WNET in New York, Paik introduced a global model of artists' television. In this work Paik developed a collage technique by synthesising images from a variety of sources; Japanese television, avant-garde film-makers, such as Robert Breer and Jonas Mekas, and other artists as diverse as John Cage and Korean folk dancers. This international mix of synthesised images, which were filmed throughout Paik's life, combined with each other in the viewer's real-time. His multiple viewpoints integrated many fragments of fact and event to construct a representation of a complex "reality" of the world. It put the viewer into his virtual space in order to manifest ruptures of traditional representation and perspective. Arguably, the moving image and montage provide greater levels of stimulus to the perceptual system than previously available.

Furthermore, Benjamin identifies a difference between the traditional technique and the new technology, between painting and the camera.

**The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web...That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.** (Benjamin, 1992, p.227)

Benjamin illustrates the difference between the painter and the camera-operator by



referring to the difference between the magician and the surgeon. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself, or herself. But the surgeon does exactly the reverse; he or she greatly diminishes the distance between himself or herself and patient by penetrating into the patient's body. The camera-operator according to Benjamin has surgically opened and closed the body of the world, numerous times. Finally, these sutured images may appear unified, fluid and extraordinarily smooth in the final representation.

Video with its electronic images and edits has mobilised the partitioning of the figure. Viola picks up the appearances of things of the world, using the apparatus of the camera-eye. He then divides them and re-patches them together into a new appearance. He creates perceptual fields that do not just represent the appearances of things, but, they offer modified appearances, determined by the editing sequence and other decisions (frame, angle etc.). He holds a deceptively simple image for a sustained period of time until the mere fact of duration transforms the image into an analogy of mind itself. An example of this can be seen in his work. "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like".

This work is the 90-minute cornerstone of a major show of his art production. This video, in a cinematically constructed sequence, shows the artist in his study contemplating his notes, and images from the tape itself on a tiny monitor. The diminution of natural scale is accentuated by the image of a bonsai plants, and a snail exiting a miniature boat. These microcosmic images question the logic of orderly appearance. Each of these images is not to be seen merely as a copy or expression of some thing in the world, but should be considered a *partitioning* of what shows



itself in his virtual space. The image structures the interplay of images without objectifying them necessarily as things. This means that the structuring is not just a formal procedure for mapping out relationships to be seen, but there is a process of reflecting that may be described as a *partitioning* which is internal to showing or exposing. His extraordinary contemplative images draw the viewers' attention to the processes of sensation. It is here that one may locate a certain dimension of Viola's project which is concerned less with what the image literally expresses or says than with how it exposes itself as a sensation.

Paik's collage images prove to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of the traditional representation of "reality" of the world. Even though, Viola's images exceed the traditional representation and, as such, have the ability to awaken a sensation of visibility without limits. Our sense of seeing, which is governed by a single viewpoint as the center of the visible world, and the assumed distance between the subject and the object, or between the self and the other are ejected from the reassembled world of both Paik and Viola.



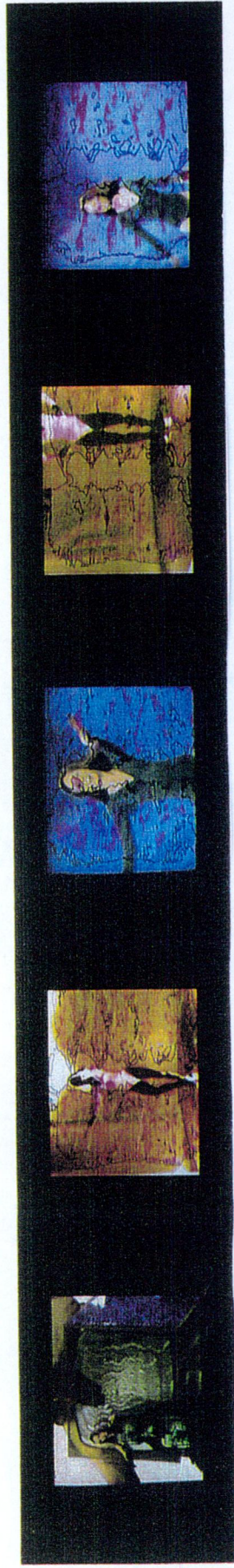
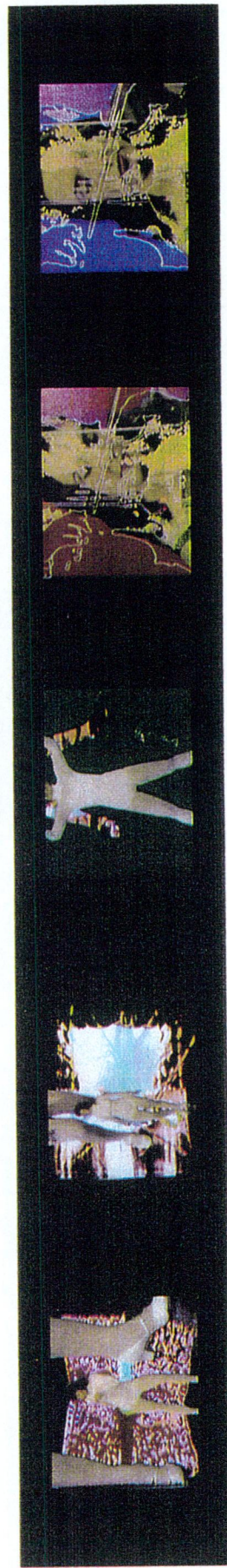
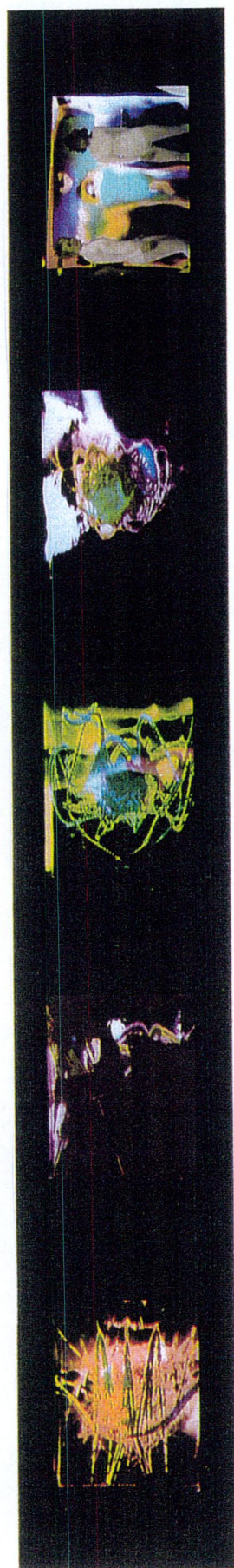


Illustration 3 Global Groove (frames) (Nam June Paik)





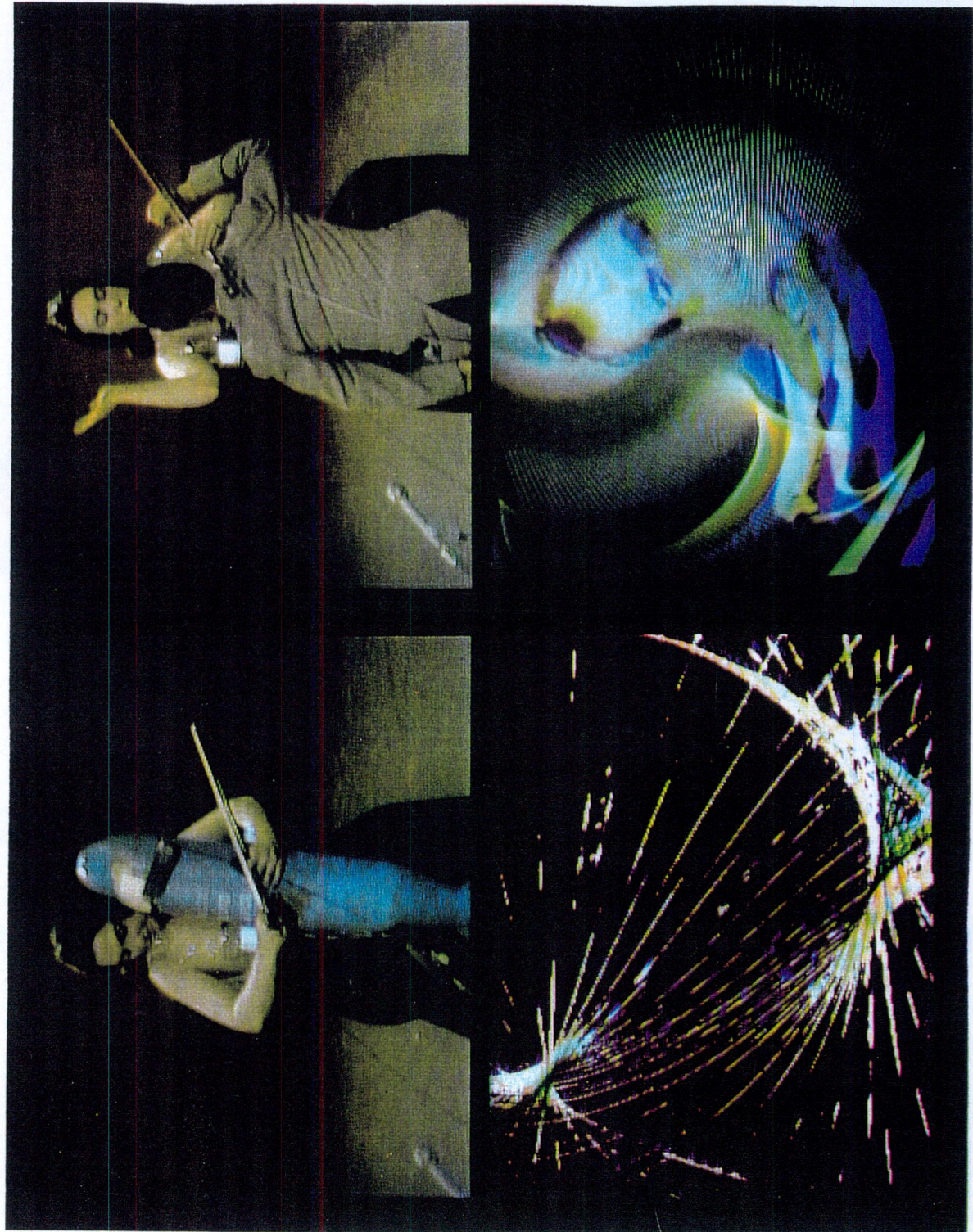


Illustration 4 Global Groove (frames) (Nam June Paik)



### CHAPTER THREE

"The Passing", Viola's single-monitor video work, collapses life and death, light and dark into a 55-minute tape provoked by the death of the artist's mother and the birth of his son. In "The Passing" the central image is of a man suspended in the darkness, bearing connotations of death by drowning. Viola refers often to the experience of near drowning, which he has made into a profound point of departure. In fact Viola did nearly drown as a boy; the experience may have been what made him a visually sophisticated *seer*. The drowning figure seems to be a device to present the real subject matter as a showing of the sensation of sinking, or of lack of support. Also, for Viola, water seems like an almost innately symbolic substance, but it sometimes seems as though Viola wants to strip water of its symbolic meaning and show it simply in all its dangerousness.

In "Migration"(1976) Viola's reflection appears first in a bowl of water and then in a drop of water. In "The Reflecting Pool" (1977-79) a surface of water no longer mirrors a man. He disappears into a point of iridescent light, which itself disappears, before the man himself unexpectedly rises up out of the water. A few drops of water briefly obscure the picture, until the dark, smooth surface of water once again becomes impenetrable. In "Nantes Triptych"(1992) the central panel shows a human figure under water which is alternately turbulent and quietly undulating. Water's uncanniness - by reason of its invisibility, it manifests itself through its movement - is recurrently an element in Viola's subject matter.



Clearly, the darkness of impenetrable water and the drowning figure have a very personal meaning for Viola. What is at stake in this reference to drowning seems to be some sense of self-loss. The fear of drowning appears equivalent to the fear that 'self' will lose its coherency. It is a fear that usually remains in the unconsciousness, emerging into awareness only with some trauma or threat of psychic disintegration. This fragile state of the mind (the drowning figure) might be experienced as a very deep anxiety or frustration in the unconsciousness (the darkness of impenetrable water). Lacan characterises this frustration, as follows:

**Is it not rather a matter of frustration inherent in the very discourse of the subject? Does the subject not become engaged in an ever-growing dispossession of that being of his, concerning which - by dint of sincere portraits which leave its idea no less incoherent, of reifications which do not succeed in freeing its essence, of stays and defences which do not prevent his statue from tottering, of narcissistic embraces which become like a puff of air in animating it - he ends up by recognising that this being has never been anything more than his construct in the Imaginary and that this construct disappoints all his certitude? For in this labour which he undertakes to reconstruct this construct for another, he finds again the fundamental alienation which made him construct it like another one, and which has always destined it to be striped from him by another.**  
(Hanhardt, 1986, p.185)

This fundamental alienation is the unchanging condition of a perpetual frustration in the state of the mind. In "The Passing", the final shot shows a drowned and breathless Viola himself in water which may be construed as indicated already, as a fundamentally alienating substance, and his body is suspended with the sense that there is nothing to hold on to.

Viola distorts the living of his life in order to shape it into material of which art can be made: for example in producing "Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House"

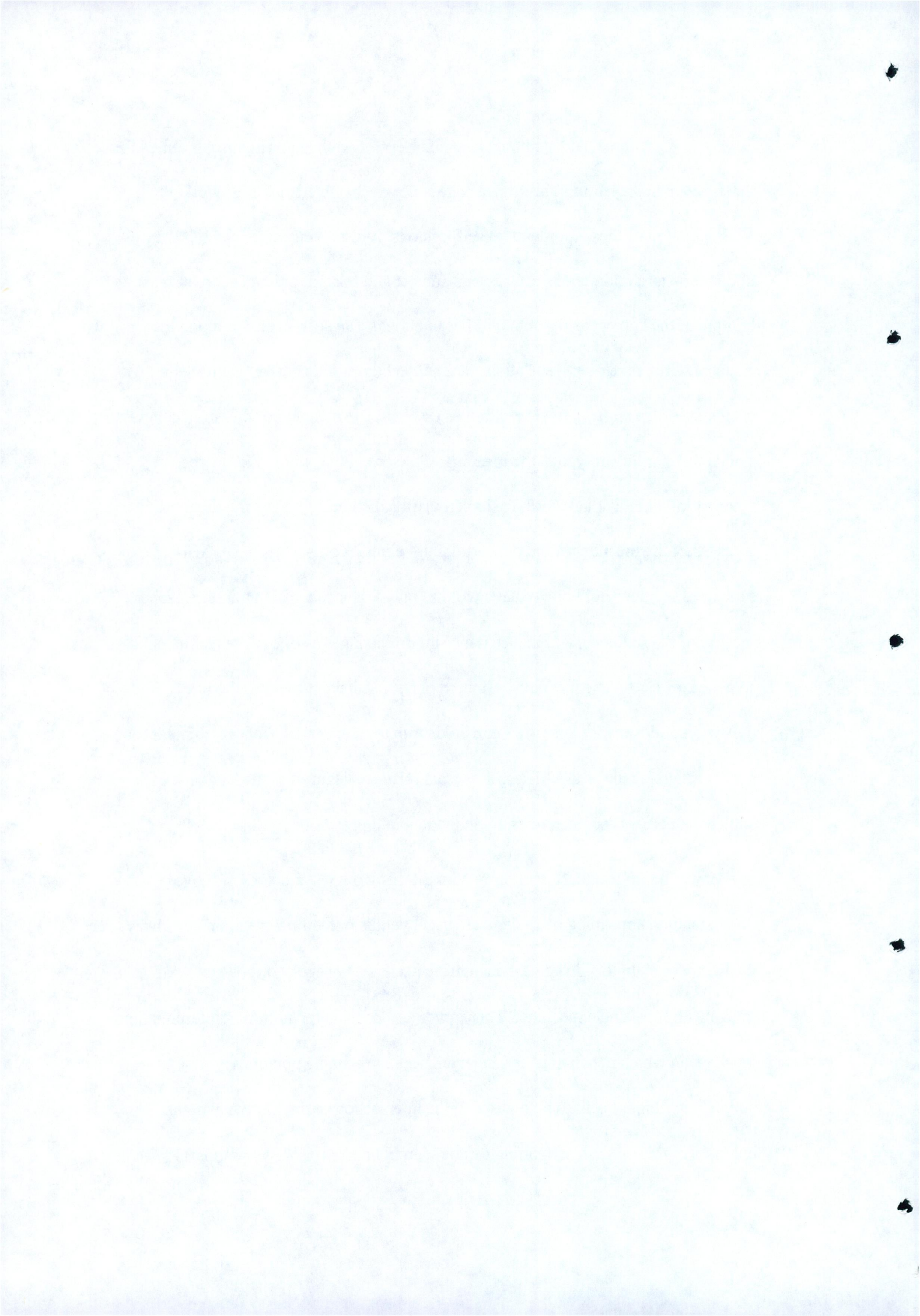


(1983) he spent three days without sleep in order to find the hallucinatory grounds for this tape and installation. This trance state is not uncharacteristic of his works.

Viola's pursuit of these moments of self-loss or self-dissolving states can be understood as a critique of the Cartesian subject and related to the poststructuralist critique of the subject as described in Lacan above. The subject strives along the chain of signifiers for self-revelation. The subject does not exist only in its self-enclosure of the *cogito* but also within its *Others*. The meaning of this subject never stands forth in full array, like the meaning of a word. If we want to know the meaning of an individual word, we look it up in a dictionary. What the dictionary gives is not the meaning of the one word, but "other" words. As one reads a sentence, one does not know what a word in mid-sentence means until one reaches the end of the sentence, and that sentence in turn changes as one moves to the next sentence, or page. The meaning of a word in a sense never arrives at the one definition or destination and the same holds true for subject. In Viola's statement for a 1990 catalogue, he writes "These are visual poems, allegories in the language of subjective perception, open to many individual interpretations." (Cubitt, 1995, p.121)

The viewer might produce an interpretation of this work, as one does in actively understanding a meaning of spoken language, yet his or her interpretation will always be incomplete. In this instance the language itself is an allegory of polysemy, of things without a single meaning. This arrives as a crisis in the notion of interpretation, in an age in which meaning is no longer anchored in a single point of view. Our subjectivity might begin to be realised in the intersection of different viewpoints. An example of this process of splitting can be seen in Paik's work "TV Buddha"(1974).





In this installation, a video camera reproduces the image of a sculpture of the Buddha and transmits the live image to a monitor at which the Buddha gazes. This mirror image shows us that video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time - producing instant feedback, unlike the other visual arts. This piece prompts discussion in terms of the centering of the self within our subjectivity. Firstly because the Buddha statue is presented as gazing at its own image reproduced mirror-like on the monitor, this piece immediately suggests questions of self and self-awareness. Secondly because of the specific use of a Buddha statue and the key terms of "*Anatta*" (Pali & Sanskrit) meaning the unreality of the ego within Buddhist traditions, it is clearly the terms of selfhood to which this piece directs the viewer. It may be considered an emphatic illustration of the displacement of the self that is the effected in constructing the self-image: the displacement of a single Buddha into two the viewer and the viewed. The condition of the self is presented as split and doubled by the mirror reflection of synchronous feedback through the medium of video. The mirror reflection of unmodified feedback is not only a process of bracketing out the object, but also a process of investing attention in the subject. This process promotes an awareness of the unreality of the ego within our subjectivity. Furthermore, "TV Buddha" might show us that the self does not complete itself as the whole.

The self itself is incomplete without being seen to be complete by the Other, or the other within the self thus suggesting discontinuity and lack of completion. It, on the other hand, implies the vanquishing of separateness. The inherent movement of this work is toward fusion. This "self" and its reflected image are, of course, literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of imaginatively



erasing the difference between the self and the other. In "TV Buddha", facing mirror-like monitor squeezes out the space between the Buddha statue and the image of the Buddha. This physical piece asserts the unreality of the ego, or posits a self-dissolving-self. And so, our consciousness becomes realised as the decentering self. It again may be seen as a critique of Cartesian subject and the *cogito*: "I think therefore I am".

Furthermore, "TV Buddha" challenges one-point perspective, as developed since the early Renaissance whereby the subject is addressed as the master of the object arrayed. The object here is not presented and focused for a privileged and simply positioned single point of view. The Buddha exists as being seen by its image, which means the Buddha is present before its gaze, the gaze of the object. The viewer is drawn into an already complex exchange of gazes. The subject is no longer addressed as the master of the object.

In Paik's and Viola's works, the viewer is no longer positioned so as to be tied to the centering of the Cartesian subject and the vision of artificial one-point perspective. Therefore, the viewer is made to feel him or herself in the presence of what is seen, by contrast, the viewer is present "before" the object of scrutiny.





Illustration 5 TV Buddha (Nam June Paik)



## CHAPTER FOUR

Paik's "The Electronic Super Highway" at the Columbus Museum of Art, in 1995, showed 36 complex video sculptures, several of which were installations within installations, and more than 650 working video monitors and TV sets. This was the third stop on a national retrospective tour exhibition. In this retrospective, one can see "Global Groove" (1973), displayed, a TV cello performance of Charlotte Moorman, John Cage reading a lecture, traditional native American chanting and drumming, a Korean drum dance, and Japanese Pepsi commercials. The videotape began with a statement proclaiming a future for television in which the TV Guide will be as thick as the Manhattan phone book. This idea of a future in which Paik will have access to television is an expansive vision of media that was first given expression in Marshall McLuhan's concept of "the Global Village". (McLuhan, 1962, p.47)

According to McLuhan, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself, in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in an historically speaking "sudden development" has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. The globe is no more than a village.

Since Paik has continued to find new ways to apply existing and rapidly developing television techniques, he must still adhere to preconditions in the use of the technology as mapped out in the utopian McLuhanian thought. Paik has always





inclined towards a kind of artistic alternative television that works against "Big Brother". George Orwell's classic novel 1984 (which was published in 1945) sets out explicitly to dramatise the tyrannical omnipotence of a bureaucratic elite, described as "Big Brother", with its perfected and omnipresent technological control. Orwell then sets out to show threat of the absolute technological power. Paik offers a counter strategy.

Since the sixties, Paik has seemed to make the world of television and video particularly his own, and this direction acquired semi-official status with his program for New Year's eve 1983, "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell", broadcast simultaneously by American and French television stations to the United States, Canada, France, Germany, and Korea. Paik used Orwell's novel to suggest the inherent dangers of satellite television from its inception - alongside its great artistic and entertainment value. The satellite program "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell" is based on human encounters. Paik, aims at promoting further encounters and intensified encounters between different cultures, in "the Global Village". In this context it is worth noting that television transmission by satellite is on the way to becoming the "main non-material product of post-industrial society."(Stoos, 1993, p.36)

However, Paik's art fails to confront the malaise identified by Jack Burnham in 1980 in analysing his own curatorial career in the fields of art and technology:

**Perhaps technology is only a matter of man-made or artificial negentropy which, because of its enormous and productive capacity and ability to aggrandise perception into convenient and coherent packages of "information," we perceive as invincible, life-stabilising, all-meaningful and omnipotent.**(Hanhardt, 1986, p.244)



A large quantity of multiplicative information and new electronic technologies seem to manipulate and determine our society. The society itself is locked into the prevailing market economy. In effect, this information technology within the context of consumer capitalism has penetrated into every aspect of our society. Paik's optimistic message about the human-scale, utopian potential of technology speaks from his position among the media industry, and institutional system and privileged museum culture. Martha Rosler points that Paik's celebrated attacks on the corporate structure of society have in fact been a pulling together of "the two ends of the American cultural spectrum by symbolically incorporating the consciousness industry (corporate media; TV) into the methods and ideas of the cultural apparatus (art world; museums) - always with foundation, government, museum, broadcast and other institutional support". (Green, 1996, p.17) It is surely by now right to ask how society and daily life have changed for the better since the realisation of Paik's recommendations. It is not at all clear that the triumph of MTV that Paik celebrates is a good thing; that situation leaves accumulated capital in complete control with no oppositional political culture. Paik seems to acknowledge some of these criticisms in the last paragraph of his final statement in the published catalogue: "Needless to say High Tech is not a panacea. It is just a local anaesthetic. There will be many unforeseen problems ahead."(Green, 1996, p.20)

We begun to accept the possibility that technological solutions are not universal panaceas. Gradually, but surely we are beginning to accept evidences that scientific research and technological invention have their boundaries. Since the scientific revolution, art has become a protected cultural sanctuary. Art liberates the human



spirit by its inability or reluctance to become acutely self-analytical, while at the same time art remains implicitly critical of everything around itself. However, from Burnham's point of view:

**"art [is] constantly moving away from clarity and resolution, and towards chaos and materialism; Technology [is] placing its raison d'être in empiricism, that tends to lead it towards its worst enemies, paradox and meaninglessness."**(Green, 1996, p.20)

Viola's video, "Anthem"(1978) shows oil rigs become predatory birds, factories become dragons breathing fire, and an operating room becomes a place in which life is destroyed rather than saved - vital organs are removed from an apparently still living body, a beating heart is cut open, eyes are cut up and others sewn shut. Throughout a young girl, whose prolonged scream punctuates the video like a stream of consciousness, tries to awaken from the nightmare, which may be her own vision. It may also be Viola's own vision, of technological society and it may make Viola's "agony" explicit. "Anthem" describes the trajectories of technologies towards the edge of perception: death. Viola's underwater figure deals indirectly with our feeling, amidst the technological society, of losing our grip on ourselves - the agony of our own possible disintegration. Viola's feeling of being negated is, perhaps, the most absolute, primitive agony: our mortality, from which there is no escape - or rather an emotional void or blankness from which the only escape is the fantasy of mysticism. Viola relates to the role of the mystic himself. Donald Kuspit has said provocatively that "Viola's mysticism is best understood as a sigh of psychotic illness". (Kuspit, 1996, p.264) Kuspit explains his reasoning as follows;

**D.W. Winnicott says, "a breakdown is a defence organisation relative to a primitive agony" an "underlying agony" which would**



**otherwise be "unthinkable" and in fact becomes thinkable through the psychotic illness, which is a way of naming and controlling it.**  
(Kuspit, 1996, p.264)

The screaming girl in "Anthem" seems to sink into her own scream, like a breakdown. Indeed, this girl's emotional state reflects Viola's primitive agony, which carries with it an unthinkable underlying agony or traumatic state of mind. This refers us to that which happened to us when we were not mature enough to experience: the infantile condition.

In our society, technological solutions are not universal panaceas, and the rationality of modernity may be seen to disguise so much irrationality. These may be aspects of the reason that Viola is so willing to play the role of a mystic. However, how do we help ourselves to escape from an unthinkable agony in our society? When the writer, Slavomir Mrozek, called art, "humanity's childhood disease", he indicated that we will not find any easy panaceas except perhaps a local anaesthetic in the art world.





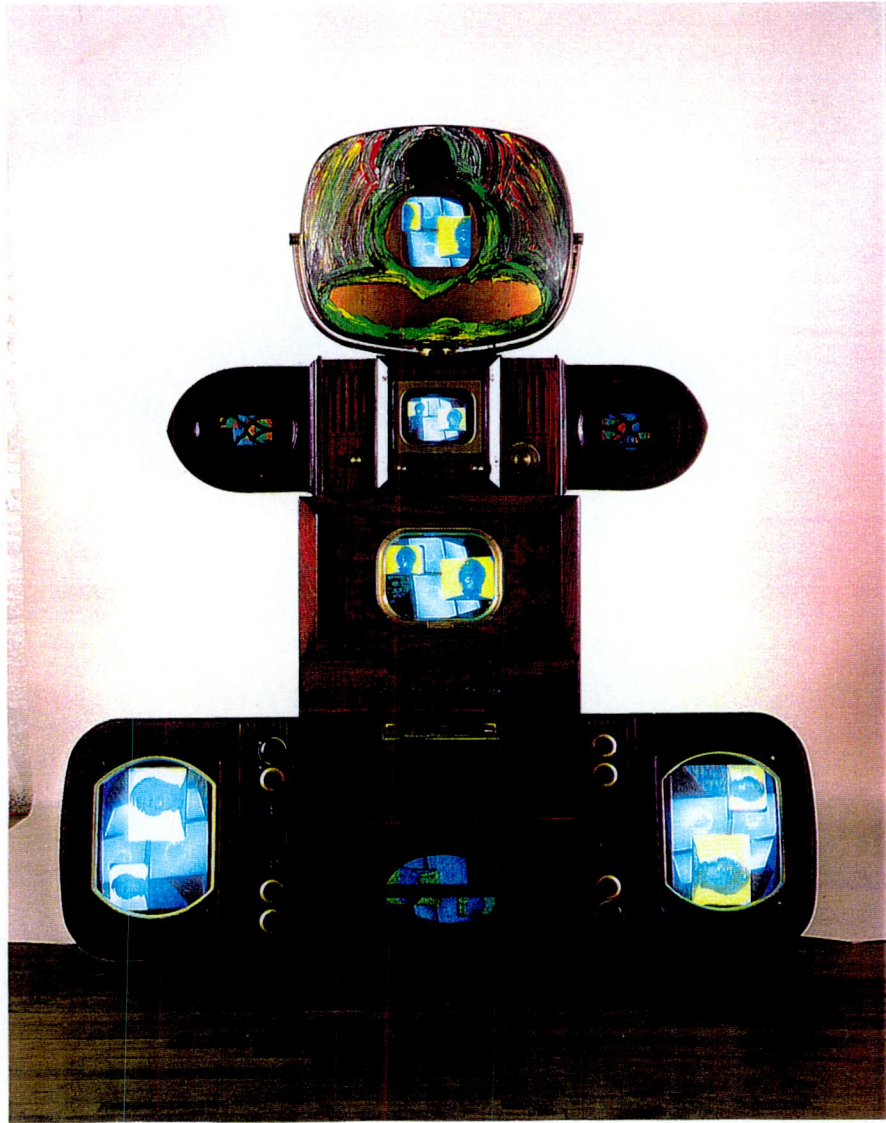


Illustration 6 Enlightened Baby (Nam June Paik)



## CHAPTER FIVE

Entering the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, and the viewer finds him or herself in one of the most majestic spaces in the darkness of the gallery's interior. On a huge screen attached to the wall is Viola's video projection, "The Messenger." It shows a naked man in water. Slowly, almost silently the man emerges face up from the depths, releases the air from his lungs with a great roar, inhales and then quietly slips back into the depth whence he came.

This show was commissioned by the Chaplaincy to the Arts and Recreation and the piece was originally shown in Durham Cathedral September 1996. An expanse of blue water rippling and sparkling at the west end of Durham Cathedral sitting in relation with the cathedral's 17th-century font, is the point of departure for this work. The baptismal associations are clearly emphasised by the naked figure. In this church connection and this baptismal context the religious message is unmistakable.

In the Douglas Hyde Gallery, for visitors standing in front of The Messenger the very special acoustic is an important factor as well: the mysterious way sound weaves around the vast stony wall. The soundtrack quickens, and increases in volume, when the figure finally breaks the surface and breathes. Any human child in the moment of birth if not of baptism must gasp desperately as the Messenger does. Viola recalls of an encounter with mortality

**that was the first time I had witnessed someone dying. It was not a violent death, just a release. I was extremely aware of a few last**



**breaths which were not just the ending of life in a clinical sense but also a conclusion in a spiritual sense: the idea that breath was the last of any kind of animate life-force.** (The Chaplaincy, p.9, 1996)

Viola has been holding his breath for a long time, in this piece and finally, he releases his breath on the surface of the water. This release of breath itself is the whole of his communication with the viewer; a limit point of the communicable. In most of works, he deals with birth and death. Neither birth nor death occurs in the abstract but in the concrete, within some unspeakable moments of consciousness.

Perhaps Viola's most poignant statement on mortality was "Tiny Death" (1993). The visitors/viewers entered a darkened room with muffled sounds of speech, to be confronted with black and white images of people - a middle-aged woman, a small child, a young man who walked with a stick - who appeared apparently at random on any of the four walls. The black and white image would suddenly be extinguished while the viewer watched, leaving only darkness and untranslatable noises. Morgan expressed the opinion that "[t]he impression had been one of a waiting-room from which people were summoned one by one. Suddenly it had changed to resemble a concentration camp where life could be snuffed out suddenly." (The Chaplaincy, 1996, p.9) The darkness and untranslatable sound are the central elements of the visual-audio impact of Viola's work. The screens of the blackness as ground on which the illuminated figures are placed, so that it persists as the possibility of the empty screen, or the end of communication; the word and its objects, the subject and its words, become one in the moment of their mutual disappearance.

Where the inner body-like noises are perceptible in the sound mix of "The Messenger", they are heard through echoes and mufflings: sound without words, but



one can imagine the distanced quality of the sound, and also learn how profoundly the meanings of sound belong to the body. Most of Viola's tapes eschew dialogue and verbal language, taking up a position towards language that seems strongly bound to the American Transcendentalist tradition of Emerson, for whom

**poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse and substitute something of our own and thus miswrite the poem.** (Cubitt, 1995, p.117)

In the lack of conjuncture between his using sound and verbal language, we are confronted with the impasse: meaning is no longer anchored in a divine being transcending and inhabiting language. His sound escapes from the cultural privilege afforded to closure, completion, integrity of the subjectivity, wholeness, autonomy, individuality and the coherence of the present. In "The Messenger", the spatial and temporal effects of the breathing sound may be energy itself. Viola observes that "today our communication so often depends on representation or demonstration, instead of the energy of creating the universe". (The Chaplaincy, 1996, p.14) This refers us to an outside of language, largely by insisting that language is not even the whole of communication. Viola by his way of using sound shows the lifeblood of the flux of communication and its continuing productivity.

Furthermore, in "The Messenger", the image sequence continually repeats, with the man perpetually rising and sinking, describing the constant circulation of birth and death. This is reinforced by the primal sound of life and instills a sense of ritual time, functioning like a great cycle of respiration in the sacred space. After all, the viewers share the same space, with the whole of his communication.





"The Electronic Super Highway: Travels with Nam June Paik", at the Columbus Museum of Art, included 36 complex video sculptures and more than 650 monitors and TV sets. There are strong effects of audio images provided by countless speakers, and played Paik's 30-beat-per-second editing rhythm. Paik's use of sound is very different from Viola's. Viola's concern in video art is with the sublime and the possibility of spiritual transcendence. But commercial television and entertainment are an important target of Paik's Fluxus-type cultural insurgency against high art. And Paik's utopian aim is to stage encounters between different cultures. Paik has argued: "As the poets of the beat generation learned from Zen, Phillip Glass obtained hits from the music of India, and Steve Reich looked to the music of Ghana in their creation of original forms of late twentieth-century high art, it is not as impossible task."(Hanhardt, 1986, p.222) Paik piles up images and sounds, and when they have reached a kaleidoscopic climax, paradoxically, the viewer becomes aware of a kind of void - a void full of images or the silence full of sounds.



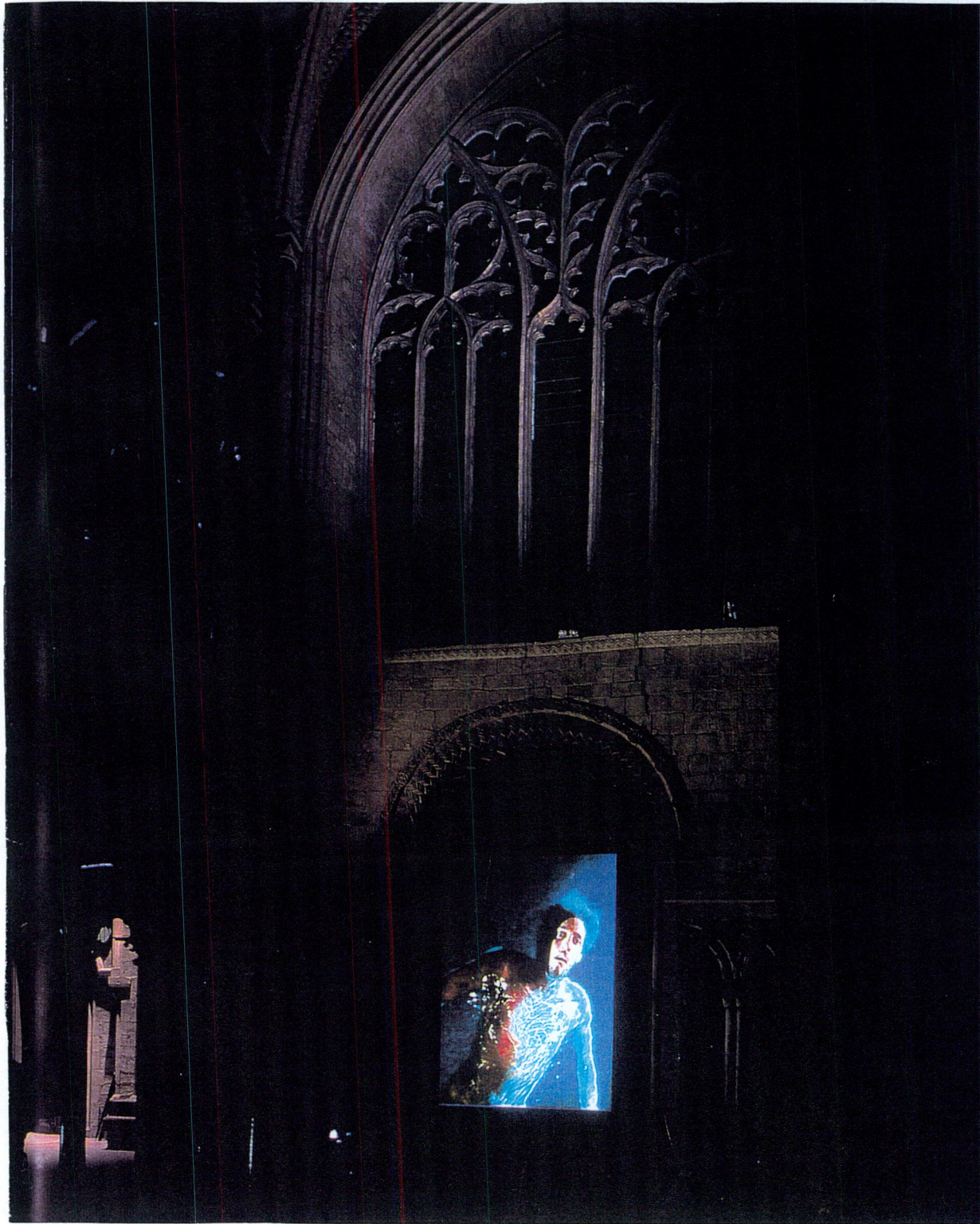


Illustration 7 The Messenger (Bill Viola)



## CONCLUSION

In the close of the twentieth century, the mechanical apparatus of the video camera reproduces the image of the world in a different way from conventional art. New technologies have contributed to the development of the montage technique. Montage questions the conventional representation of *reality* of the world, which has been described traditionally using artificial linear perspective. The images of montage present a much more complex reality of the world, through the combining of different view points and perspectives. Paik's international mix of synthesised images "Global Groove(1973)" shows us the multiple viewpoints, many integrated fragments of fact, which is the principle of various montage techniques. Furthermore, in "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like" (1986) Viola's microcosmic images, his fragments of fact, draws upon our sense of seeing without objectfying the world. The system of our seeing is based on the realisation of a fixed distance between the eye and the object, and an artificial regimen makes distance and isolates the observer from the object. In this regard the electronic apparatus and its phenomenon must be seen together, in parallax (technically the angle of displacement of an object caused by the movement of its observer). It is possible to take a mobile standpoint. The distance between the observer and the object depend on the observer's position in the present and that this position is defined in terms of *mobile* distance. Video with its camera techniques and editing techniques has mobilized the fragmented images of diverse displacements of the object. The viewer of video art immediately begins to encounter the hurtling forth of new fragments of narrative.



In Paik's work "TV Buddha(1974)", the Buddha statue and the image of the Buddha on the TV monitor, reveals another perspective of seeing. In the artificial perspective, there is always one-way seeing from one point position, whereby the subject exists as the master of the object. However, "TV Buddha" positions the viewer as being present before the gaze of the object. The subject no longer exists as the coherence of the simply self-present.

Viola's single-monitor also shows our subjectivity as incoherence, as grasping light patterns and darkness. In his video "The Passing", there is the drowning figure in the darkness of impenetrable water, which may be construed as incomplete, a cypher of our subjectivity within our (uncanny) unconsciousness. The impact of video art may ask questions of the Cartesian subject and the notion of an isolated subject, a subject that fails to recognize its corporeality, its intersubjectivity, its embeddedness in the flesh of the world.

The new visual technologies operate on the reality of the world surgically; reveal it in new re-presentations, shock the viewer into a new sense of seeing. Furthermore, Paik's and Viola's use of inner body-like sound, rhythms, or pulses stage a kind of throb of on/off on/off on/off - which, in itself, acts against the stability of visual space in a way that is destructive and potentially revolutionary. These whirling sounds are placed in diverse spaces, in the museum, or cathedral, and promote forceful spatial and temporal effects in these places. Sound has not only to relate to the image but to occupy the space. They send the viewer both towards the image portions of the sculpture (piling the wooden boxes of the television, mediating the composition and power of light) and through them to a further set of re-presented and virtual spaces.





These video artists' concern is to corporealize the visual audio image against the disembodied opticality of conventional art.

In contemporary culture some see the emergence of the global village, others the triumph of hyper-reality. We talk about how technology will soon be able to do some new task, how soon we will be able to accomplish something else, the language of progress. But all the time, our faith is not in a scientific elite not in a magically recovered community of electronic citizens, it is a blind faith in progress. The danger, few so acutely perceive, is the terrible tragedy to be seen in Paul Klee's painting of the "Angelus Novum", which, as Benjamin famously described;

**His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.** (Benjamin, 1968, p.258)

The angel stares backwards into history while it is being blown into the future, blindly, by the "storm of progress". Hardware develops far faster than software, and both far faster than most of us can find time to keep up with. It is as if the pace is being set by some historical engine beyond our control.

In the new digital art worlds, artists - practitioners - have a responsibility to analyse the parameters being set for video as it moves beyond the camera into the digital age. Few try to unearth the trends as they emerge in practice, with the result that the technology appears to take on a life of its own.



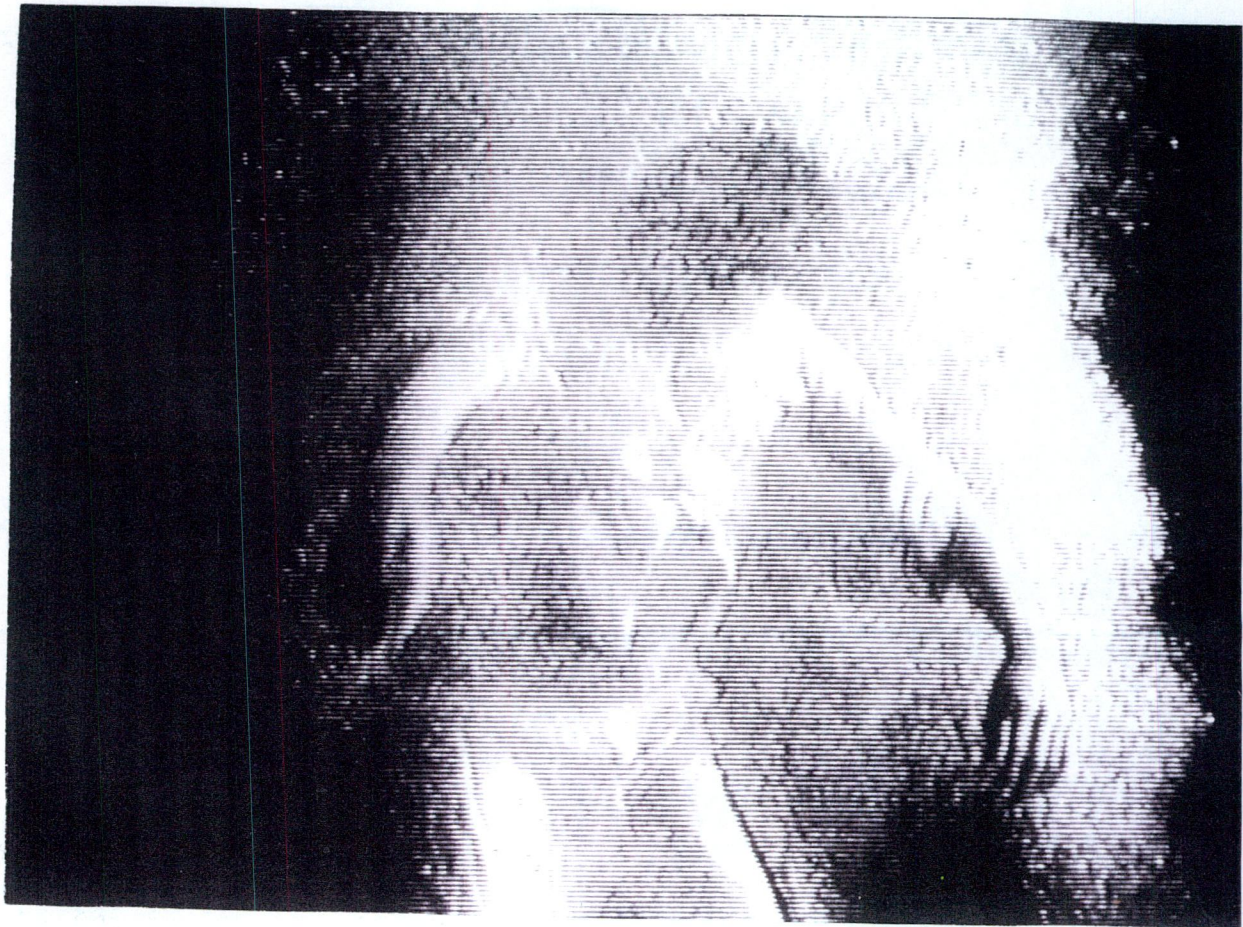


Illustration 8 The Passing (Bill Viola)



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