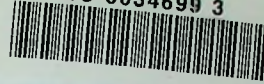# TAMING THE WILD OX OF EGO:
SEEKING A CRITICAL SPACE WITHIN ARTISTIC PRACTICE WHERE THE LOST BALANCE BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND COLLECTIVITY, EGO AND ID CAN RESIDE

BETH O'HALLORAN

Fine Art, Printmaking/Joint Course
1991

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I propose to illustrate the following:-

1.   The 'id-centricity' of Japan as it has evolved from pre-history.

2.   The egocentricity of the West as is illustrated in the concerns of psychoanalysis.

3.   The current new awareness of the drawbacks of the dominance of either quality.

4.   With such an awareness, there is the potential for social change. But first the word must be spread and traditionally the Arts have been, at the least, an effective messenger.

5.   Bill Viola is one such messenger and is the mediator between so many polarities.

INTRODUCTION

Ego, id, and super-ego. Psychoanalysis tells us that our psyche is made up of these three elements and in order to remain 'balanced' we must strive to protect their equilibrium. We know what happens when the scales are tipped -- some 'abnormality' is always the result. Taking it that a nation is the sum total of individuals, perhaps it is possible to identify the dominant psychological condition of a whole country.

Since the Renaissance, it is held that the East and West began to shift away from the unified whole they once formed. Artistically, we can cite the rift in that the once universal preference for colour or decoration-- as opposed to an interest in naturalism, perspective, or iconography-- became a more Oriental phenomenon. The West with its religious and artistic centre in Rome, began to move farther away from conceptually based artistic practices, and towards the development of illusionistic perspective. The Western mind began to explore the human sciences and developed into a more intellectualising, rationalising entity, whereas its Eastern neighbours continued to develop a sense of spirituality over intellectualism and an interest in the essence of objects rather than in the appearance of them. Hence, we come to a stage when the Western mind is more characterised by ego (linear,rational) and the Eastern mind more dominated by id (characterised by instinctual drives, predisposition to Truths).

Japan is a nation with no real quality of ego, hence it has come to be compared to the state of schizophrenia in which an individual is too receptive to external influences, has an acute awareness of the present moment, has difficulty in decoding information. In such a case, it is all too easy for a domineering super-ego to take control. In Japan's case, the super-ego is capitalism.

The United States is also a nation rife with capitalism, but being a Western nation, it appears more inclined to retain a sense of ego and, hence, has not reaped the same devestation to national identity as has Japan.

A central aspect of Freudian pschoanalysis is its policy that the recovery of most patients comes about in the reparation of the individual's damaged ego. Such an ideology which celebrates the importance of ego, reigned supreme throughout Modernism. However, with the dissolution of Modernism, has come a new Western downplay of the worth of autonomy and egocentricity. Much of current theoretical discourse recognises the need for a more collective approach to art, which would be more relevant to a society saturated by the mass-media.

Seeing as Modernism has proven the Arts' ineffectiveness at provoking radical social change, it would be foolhardy to hope for a new Utopia, via the art world. However, the Arts are an invaluable stage for social comment, whence, at least, an awareness of current social concerns can be voiced.

In the artist's work, we can find an arena where a new model for society can show itself. The videotapes of Bill Viola are such an arena. In his works is a space where autonomy (ego) and collectivity (id) can coexist. He solves the dilemma with his universally applicable works : the human presence is always present in his videos, representing the guidance of ego over the sea of visual information in his pieces. The videos do not slip into a mass of decontextualised information (as in the experience of the schizophrenic) because there is always a sense of 'I' controlling the unfolding of a theme. With his hallmark of slow pace and slow motion, he is able to simultaneously expose the fundamental characteristics of a technological medium (with all the rationality it represents) and to direct our gaze to the essence of the subject he is addressing (producing a heightened level of awareness). His work offers a Utopian balance of East and West, technology and spirituality, of ego and id.

JAPAN: A NATION WHICH HAS ESCHEWED THE SHACKLES OF 'EGO'

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Present day Japan is a melting pot of contrasts: various cultures, languages and religions swim together with so many clashing images -- Geisha girls and punks, Shinto temples and McDonalds', neon billboards beside a Zen rock garden. There are so many decontextualised Western signs, products and social habits blending with the Eastern ones.

Obviously part of the explanation for this has been the American victory over, and occupation of Japan since World War II which fully opened the Japanese eyes to the imagery of capitalism. However, the reasons for the hybridised condition of Japan go deeper. Japan has always been a nation which lacked a strong sense of self-identity. Perhaps this was due to its insularity, perhaps it is some other sociological reason. Psychologically however, it is the role of the ego and all the elements attributed to personality, to protect an individual, and perhaps the same holds for a whole nation which is the sum total of its individuals. Japan is a nation characterised more by ego-lessness (or id) than anything else.

According to 'Anti-Oedipus', by Deleuse and Guattari, such an ego-less state would be termed schizophrenia. I will give a full definition of these psychological terms in Chapter 2, but briefly we can say that the schizophrenic lives in an environment of decontextualised signifiers which fail to link up into any coherent sequence. 'He/she can no longer produce the limits of his being ... and is only a pure screen, a switching centre for all networks of influence.'[1] Here we have a definition of the current Japanese urban condition.

---

[1] Corinne Robins, 'The Pluralist Era -- American Art from 1968-1981'

In a generalised sense, Japan lacks a strong sense of ego. This condition has obvious advantages and disadvantages. The biggest plus appears to be a pre-disposition for a much more direct relationship with the universal and Truth. In not having the membrane of critical ego, the schizophrenic or egoless individual can have an overwhelming awareness of the present -- hence some very desirable and other nightmarish experiences. The Zen religious practice of Japan asserts the importance of joining the flow of nature, which is seemingly much more natural and readily accessible for a Japanese than for a typical Westerner with the ego hurdle to overcome.

In looking at Japan, we shall try to trace the history of its character and assess its current role as a model of a pluralist/postmodernist society. Japan appears to have a very pleasant disposition towards a spiritual stillness. In fact, Jean Baudrillard's words 'only a pure screen' which describe a schizophrenic's impressionable mind, would also describe the Zen maxim 'Imagine a blank screen' which seems to epitomise a vital element of the Japanese character.

Shinji Kohmoto, curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, says of the Japanese mind that 'formality helps us to acquire a certain stage of spirit. Art works operate as elements which create a particular space and mood; they were not (and are not) a method of defining meaning and ideas. Our main concern was not to produce or have objects, but to experience daily the different stages of the mind.'

This approach obviously differs from the egocentric approach of Western Art as it has evolved since the 'emancipation of the Renaissance, when the Oriental preference for colour or decoration was surpassed in the West by the quest for naturalism and perspective.'[2]   The Japanese have a long tradition of transcending the ego with the help of animistic religious practices. Their lack of interest in 'self' is evident in the anonymity of so much of their

---

2 Francois Fosca, 'A Concise Illustrated History of European Painting'

artworks and the practice of an almost assembly-line approach to so much of their craftwork.

Obviously, this trait is innate to the Japanese, yet it must have been spawned from centuries of conditioning. In recalling relevant highlights of Japanese history, perhaps we can reach some understanding of the permanent elements of the Japanese character and where their disinterest in self-identity and its expression may have come from.

2.2 BACKGROUND -- HISTORICAL EVENTS DEMONSTRATE RECEPTIVITY TO FOREIGN INFLUENCE

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the word 'art' only came into existence in Japan about one hundred years ago. Fumio Nanjo, Director of the Institute of Contemorary Arts, Nagoya, explains this in saying 'We [the Japanese] didn't have the term or concept of 'art' in a modern Western sense -- we had craft, the main concern of which had to do with techniques, materials and decoration in relation to space, architecture and lifestyle. In some senses this notion of art has not departed from that in Japan.'

Japan has no close neighbours. Some historians say that Japan's insularity led to its freedom from needing to assert its nationalism and hence it welcomed most imported cultural advances, not perceiving them as threatening.

The first recordings of religion occurred in the Archaic Age (7,000 B.C. to 500 A.D.) and centred on the worship of nature. The religious sentiments of the people 'reflected their dependence on and consequent fear of nature, whose sanctity was promoted by taboos and sorcery. Some scholars of primitive religion in Japan hold that the cult of sorcery ...became the basis for the later national cult of Shintoism.'[3]

---

[3] Yutaka Tazawa, 'Japan's Cultural History -- A Perspective'

The early 6th to the 13th century was the era of progressing Buddhist culture. Buddhism was adopted with little protest and brought with it the continental influence of China's T'ang Dynasty. Through such close contact, Japan indirectly assimilated a considerable amount of international culture since China had had a long trading history with many Eastern and Western countries.

In the Heian Period (9th to 12th century), an aristocratic rule was established with its headquarters in Kyoto. This new hierarchy reflected Japanese receptivity of Chinese and Korean cultures where similar governments had already evolved. However, in the late Heian period, Japan began to turn away from a distinctively Chinese culture in favour of a new, distinctly Japanese, culture. For example, in the Arts we see this transition in the Japanese simplification of many Chinese decorative motifs. Politically, the high state officials had enough free time to invest in a passive enjoyment of nature and appreciation of art which brought about a cultural refinement.

By the 14th century, Zen art had become the dominant cultural current of Japan. This art form is characterised by extremely beautiful paintings of the landscape which were meant to evoke a deeply spiritual response in the onlooker. The paintings were not concerned with representation ; rather they were idealisations, as though in the artist's heightened state of awareness he had touched satori and was showing it thus.

In the 16th century Kabuki theatre was born and in the visual arts a light and easy style emerged, although there was a new stress on making realistic portrayals of nature. This interest in a more realistic approach was probably due to the first contacts with western art which occurred at that time. During the following Azuchi-Momoyama period, communication between the Orient and the Occident thrived and a commercial spirit was sparked through trading activities. Ensuing contact with Confucianism with its emphasis on formal rationality, had little impact on Japan.

The birth of the Modern Age of Japan is marked by the Meiji Restoration in 1853, at which point Japan, the insular nation, was forced to assess itself in relation to a modernised Western world. Its artistic trends had been allowed to develop and evolve, unhampered by foreign invasion, yet that same insularity ensured Japan's isolation from advances in science and technology. Since the Restoration, Japan has had the task of catching up with the West at a phenomenal pace, yet retaining its traditions. However, Japan has always been a nation which adopts its neighbours' cultures and assimilates them into its own. We shall see that the present condition of Japan is not of a Westernised society but rather one which follows its tradition of 'Japanising' foreign influences without a crisis of identity since the Japanese mind has always lacked egocentricity.

2.3 MODERNISING JAPAN -- THE 'CORRUPTION' BEGINS

In 1853 Commodore Perry, with the aid of a strong militia from Europe and America, forced Japan to open its doors to the outside world. The Japanese economy developed rapidly in its race to equal the West and within sixty years Japan had emerged on a par with most other modern, capitalist states. Quite naturally the furious modernisation of Japan and the ensuing sense of competition had bred a deep insecurity towards the West, especially in the military field.

To adapt to the introduction of new technology, the Meiji government felt the need to change its social organisation and national consciousness. Thus the government implemented 'reform through the total abolition of the status system, the clans and the institution of a Prefectural system ... in 1871 ... and a system of universal primary education.'[4] On the whole, then, we begin to see a complete homogenisation of society. Again it is interesting to note that there was little dissent among the affected population: the people could see the huge influx of Western influences, yet accepted such things -- as having Westerners take

---

[4] ibid

over from Japanese as teachers or consultants -- without quarrel. Yet we have seen that Japan had a tradition of assimilating external influences without seeing them as a threat to national identity which characterises the two basic features of Japanese culture: adaptability and multiplicity.

2.4 MODERN/POSTMODERN JAPAN -- A PLURALISED SOCIETY

The general positivity towards modernisation and westernisation did sour considerably in the years just preceding and following World War II. Japan was not ignorant of the ill effects westernisation could have since they could plainly see colonisation's effect on China. With the subjugation of so much of the Far East in mind, the Japanese saw militarism as a priority.

During the Meiji Restoration, the potential crisis felt by the Japanese was embodied in popular slogans such as 'Use Western technology for preserving Japanese spirit.'[5] Shinji Kohmoto, curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, says 'the definition of "Japanese spirit" was very vague ... I think the idea of purity and spiritualism as an 'ism' was introduced into Japan by the government (Super- Subject) to organise the people.'[6]

Up until the War, the Japanese public had readily accepted the governments' ideals as truths and had striven to excel for the good of the nation. Naturally, World War II shattered many illusions for the people. The ideals of the pre-war Japanese mind are embodied in a quote from Kazuo Ishiguro's 'An Artist of the Floating World,' which refers to an incident involving reactions to the comments of a mentally deficient young man:

'[he] would amuse spectators by ... shouting "This village must provide its share of sacrifices for the Emperor! Some of you will lay down your lives! Some of you will return triumphant to a new

---

[5] Fumio Nanjo, 'Japanese Art in the 80s -- Against Nature'
[6] Shinji Kohmoto, 'Japanese Art in the 80s -- Against Nature'

dawn!" ... and people would say "The Hirayama boy may not have it all there, but he's got the right attitude: he's Japanese" '.[7]
However, the story progresses to tell of the post-war reaction to Hirayama's same words with a description of his brutal beating by a crowd of young men angered at his unconsidered patriotism.

Japan's strong sense of spiritualism suffered enormously during the war and was replaced by widespread bitterness and cynicism. In a way, World War II was a war betwen Japan's spiritualism and America's materialism. The spiritual confidence of Old Japan was greatly depleted. Fumio Nanjo, Director of the ICA, Nagoya, says:
'Because we were defeated by materialism, we may have changed our goal from a spiritual to a material one. But in one sense it was easy to change because the militarist aim given to the people before the war was: "You have to be efficient to defeat your enemies: refine production and fight" ... after the war ... the aim was: "Refine production and accomplish economic growth".'[8]

Of course a sense of spirituality and a distinctly Japanese social structure still exist today, but both aspects are mingled with so many western influences. No nation could withstand a lengthy American occupation without showing the signs. The fifties and sixties saw Japan invaded by an American lifestyle full of consumer goods, heralding a better life.

It is the weaving together of a medley of Japanese and Western elements which represents the Japanese condition of today. Some critics feel that pluralism has always thrived in Japan, as has the low distinction between high and low culture, a predisposition for communality as opposed to autonomy, a love affair with the cult of information: hence it has always been a post-modern nation.

Shinji Kohmoto expands on the identity notion in saying that Japanese culture has always been akin to an assemblage or collage, and that,
'modernism and the consequent post-modernist shift really never was an issue in Japan because the salient problem of modernism

---

[7] Kazuo Ishiguro, 'An Artist in the Floating World'
[8] Fumio Nanjo, op. cit.

was the search for identity and that never was a pertinent or pressing problem for the Japanese. The fact that there was no single definition of identity can be seen æsthetically in that the Shinto Shrine is next to the McDonalds which is next to the computer store, and they all are equally acceptable.'[9]

The Buddhist practice of trying to transcend the bodily and egocentric reinforces this lack of interest in a clear self-identity. Zen Buddhism has also instilled a strong familiarity with the notion of practicing and attempting to perfect another's teachings or technology. Fumio Nanjo feels that his Japan has always held 'the notion that if you first master technique, you will reach the truth of expression or creation. The strong justification for copying the master's style derived from such a way of thinking.'[10]

In so many instances Japan has imported a foreign 'master's style', has copied it and mastered it. Again this ties in with a lack of seeing things as sacredly belonging to oneself or to another. In the West we often perceive the idea of imitation as a negative value 'connected somehow to the aggrandisement of individuality or ego which dominates Western ideology'.[11] And we fight vehemently to defend our rights to self-expression or 'personal freedom'.

Japan has a long history of importing technology -- or, more simply, information -- from China, Korea and the West. Often the context of the original information was lost, thereby becoming something entirely different. For example, there are many paintings of tigers in ancient Japanese art, but since tigers do not inhabit Japan, almost nobody ever saw the real thing; it was only information taken from Chinese and Korean pictures. Quoting Fumio Nanjo, such a tradition has not changed:
only now in the eighties and nineties, we hear far more 'information' via technology which travels as quickly as a computer which can be programmed to send the message'.[12]

---

[9] Shinji Kohmoto, op.cit.
[10] Fumio Nanjo, op.cit.
[11] Kathy Halbreick, 'Japanese Art in the 80s -- Against Nature'
[12] Fumio Nanjo, op. cit.

It is the melting pot of decontextualised information in Japan which blends to form part of its seeming lack of 'True Japan-ness'; the Japan which we are beginning to see is no more real than the contemporary nation teeming with consumerism. Mass-media culture has defused virtually every stratum of Japanese society. We have already noted how the cityscape has evolved into a hybrid of ancient with plasticky modern, but Japan had already eroded any distinctions between high and low culture (a process which began with the Meiji Restoration's deconstruction of class systems) and also we see a new cocktail of language which evokes the apocalyptic vision of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*.

There is a form of pidgin Japanese which blends Japanese, Chinese, French and English. Surely this Creolisation of words and the Romanisation of many Japanese characters, would bring about a crisis, since it is often said that a nation can be defined by its language. And this same eclecticism is evident in the artistic languages of Japan's music, æsthetics and architecture.

Shuhei Hosokawa, Japanese music critic, says that 'the Japanese music culture was eclectic from its beginning. It has never been a colony; rather it has imported foreign cultures through the medium, not of human beings, but of objects and information.'[13] In commenting on pidgin Japanese, he refers to its diversification as becoming an idiolect which conveys no meaning to others, therefore preserving some new aspect of Japanism.

In conclusion, then, we can look at the rapid conversion to pidgin as a typical symptom of the Japanese condition. Its creation '... connects on the one hand with stubborn self-preservation and on the other with a form of creation which is absolutely Japaneseque. It is not only an isolated phenomenon in pop music but is a metaphor which dominates the whole Japanese culture of the Eighties.'[14] And it is this pluralistic culture, dominated by mass-media and consumerism, which has itself become a metaphor for post-modernism.

---

[13] Shuhei Hosokawa, 'On Tokyo-go: Pidgin Japanese'
[14] ibid

A major concern of post-modern theory is the demystification of the modernist adjulation of identity/authorship/autonomy.   These qualities naturally relate to one's sense of ego - that defensive agency which acts as a barrier between our vulnerable unconcious id, and the unpleasant aspects of reality.   The Japanese condition is marked by its lack of assertive personality, a strong sense of the present moment, a receptivity to all networks of influence. This description is practically verbatim with Freud's and Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the schizophrenic.

Perhaps we can see Japan as the personification of such qualities. In so doing we can see a case study where the psyche's imbalance has caused problems.   A nation so rife with capitalism must feel the disadvantages of not having a buffer zone (ego) to protect the vulnerability of being so open to influence.   In so many instances a schizophrenic condition would be such a positive experience (namely, in the acute awareness of the present) yet, the constant 'experience of isolated, disconnected ... material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence'[15] must have serious repercussions.   Perhaps, then, *Bladerunner* can be taken as an apocalyptic metaphor for what awaits a nation or a world which has difficulty in grasping the real; the character of which is personified in the schizophrenic existence of the film's robotic replicants (they live in a fragmented, perpetual present, having neither past nor memory).   Japan has, as a whole, internalised the signs of the "real" to the point where 'the difference between false and true becomes problematic'.[16]

Obviously, there are repercussions when one has difficulty distinguishing the real from the imitation, and one is floating in a sea of decontextualised information without an 'I' or 'me' as a focus to distinguish between beneficial and derogatory/ malevolent influences.   Such is the state of Japan -- a country which seems to be thoroughly open to the manipulation of the ever-powerful super-Subject of capitalism.   On the more positive

---

15 Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'
16 ibid

side, it is this Japanese openness which aids a deeply spiritual side of their character (especially manifest in Zen Buddhism) since they have such an ability to lose themselves in an exaltation of the present -- as in meditiative practices.

POST-MODERNISM -- THE AUTHORSHIP QUESTION

3.1 BACKGROUND

Most aspects of modernism deal with autonomy on some level. The self reflexive element is obvious in movements such as Expressionism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. We can see a more socially critical reflexive tendency in movements like Cubism, Dadaism, photomontage, Conceptual Art, along with 'the utopian attitudes of Futurism and Constructivism which embrace social modernity'.[1]

By embracing modernity, these groups complied with the larger scope of embracing a social situation which promised progression for and the Emancipation of mankind. There was often dispute between the various factions (Liberals, Conservatives, Leftists) as to who the actual subject for emancipation was: some said the poor, others said the iliterate, still others said the worker. However, there was the unanimous confidence that 'enterprises, discoveries and institutions are legitimate only insofar as they contribute to the emancipation of mankind' [2]

Obviously, on reflection, we can see that the idealisms set up in modernism began to lose their initial weight. After decades of failed social renewals and government systems, some of which instigated genocide in the name of progress, we see a cynicism setting in with such movements as the above-mentioned politically vociferous Cubism, Dadaism and Conceptualism combined with the implications of photomontage or, later, Pop Art, which all show modernist disapproval of the *status quo* in government, gallery and in corporations.

Modernism's birth came about in the rejection of the Institution. However, eventually modernism became too accepted by, and therefore analagous with, the self-same Establishment. It is the

---

1 Michael Newman, 'Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism'
2 Jean Francois Lyotard, 'Defining the Postmodern'

rejection of modernism which gave rise to post-modernism. However, we can see elements within modernism which heralded the future post-modern tradition. For example, referring to Michael Newman's article "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism", we can see the eclecticism which was adopted by Picasso in 1917-18, the later work of De Chirico, Picabia and vache period Magritte. They adopted a style which mixed Cubist, Rococo and Classical styles as a reaction against the purist Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and De Stijl, which were already becoming too imitable as styles. Secondly, we can cite the avant gardist criticism of art as an autonomous realm and desire to show art as a social institution. Thirdly, Newman points out another aspect of modernism in its repeated absorption of atypically western high-art traditions such as primitive art and the art of the insane, or the use of mass-media imagery and sub-cultural forms such as grafitti.

In Paris, 1968, there was a massive Surrealist-influenced student protest: seemingly, the last gesture of modernism in the belief that a complete social change was possible through the Arts. For with the sixties we also see the horrors facing the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the atrocities of Vietnam, and all the while we were watching such things on our televisions, we were being bombarded by commercialism which had perfected itself into a manipulative demi-god since the wide availability of television in the fifties.

In general there was dissatisfaction within society and an ensuing dissatisfaction with modernist art which appeared self-indulgent in the face of the social climate. By the sixties, modernism was becoming far too acceptable -- and therefore aligned with the restrictive -- by the Establishment. The idea of an autonomous self was becoming ridiculous when all evidence pointed to a loss of self-control to the Establishment. In 1969, Lacan and other theorists began to re-evaluate Freud and psychoanalysis which lauded the reparation of the ego. How can any person or nation have a true sense of identity when computers, telecommunications and mass-media imagery have infiltrated

virtually every culture on the planet? In the post-modernist climate there is a critical dissatisfaction with the notion of autonomy or authorship as a sacred and originating enterprise. On the whole, it is agreed that there is now a crisis in art since its role has to be re-evaluated. Jean-Francois Lyotard says that 'We are witnessing both an enormous crisis in the "arts" on account of which the word "art" has practically been relinquished and just as serious a political crisis ... What is important is the impossibilty of the artistic function which proceeds from the same reasons as those, on account of which a certain political ideology can no longer be pursued'.[3]

Presumably, Lyotard is referring to the failure of movements like Constructivism which linked artistic pursuits with 'socio-historical progress in the realisation of human emancipation on a larger scale'.[4]

He goes on to criticise the function of progression and the development of the techno-sciences which he feels are not truly interested in meeting human needs, but rather in making new ones -- creating a new need in the consumer. He feels that technological development is leading to a more and more complex human condition:
'Our demands for security, identity and happiness, coming from our condition as living beings and even social beings, appear today irrelevant in the face of this sort of obligation to complexify, mediate, memorise and synthesise every object and to change its scale'.[5]

Much of this complexification and commodification has occurred via the television. For, by 1958, over 42 million American homes were fed by broadcasts from 52 stations, where every aspect of 'high' and 'low' society, politics, science etc. 'were all brought together outside of their usual contexts and connections, and began to create a vast meltdown of forms within the public consciousness.'[6] Again quoting Margot Lovejoy, 'TV became the

---

3 Jean Francois Lyotard, 'Driftworks'
4 ibid.
5 Margot Lovejoy, 'Art and Artist in an Electronic Media'
6 Jacques Lacan, 'The Works of Jaques Lacan'

arena of a confusion, a melting pot of forms, concepts and banalities which acted as the crucible for post-modern consciousness.'[7]

3.2 PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DISCOURSE OF AUTONOMY

In an approach to describing post-modernism, many theorists (including Lyotard, Jameson, Lacan, Hutcheon and Newman) used the elements of psychoanalysis as a kind of microcosm to the macrocosm of society. Presumably, by looking at a study of the "self" in isolation, we can project it on to the larger picture of society which is naturally just a large number of individuals.

In my first chapter, I attempted to illustrate a general Japanese tendency to reject the importance of "ego". In psychoanalytic terms the personification of Japan would have a much stronger affiliation with "id" which, unlike ego, seems to respond to fundamental truths over appearances. Freud says that 'the ego neglects, scotomises, misconstrues -- it is an agency organised to misread the truth which comes to the subject from the unconscious'[8] (where the id reigns); 'its basic function is that of meconnaissance, the refusal to accept the truth.'[9] And Lacan reiterates a Freudian concept in saying that the ego 'is an agency designed to ward off unpalatable truths.'[10]

Perhaps before elaborating, we should define the terms of "id" and "super-ego" which make up the other two-thirds of the psyche. As we said, the ego acts as a kind of shield for the subconscious. Freud says 'ego serves as the organised, conscious mediator between the person and reality.'[11] In later works, Freud elaborates on ego by describing it as a mental projection of the surface of the body. Lacan says that 'ego is formed on the basis of an imaginary relationship of the subject with his own body. Ego

---

7 Margot Lovejoy, op. cit.
8 Jaques Lacan, op. cit.
9 ibid.
10 ibid.
11 ibid.

has the illusion of autonomy, but it is only illusion and the subject moves from fragmentation and insufficiency to illusory unity.'[12] He seems to disagree with the Freudian psychoanalytic practice where the therapist tried to improve his subject's mental state by putting his/her ego back into "normal" shape. Lacan feels that the patient is not really improving 'because he is relying on the unity of a projection (ego) set up to protect his real self'[13] the id, or unconscious self. The id is defined as 'the completely unconscious source of psychic energy derived from instinctual needs and drives'.[14]

Having explained ego and id to some extent, we shall look briefly at the third aspect of the psyche -- the super-ego -- as it will be relevant in the application of Althusser's theory on the connection between psychoanalysis and society. On the whole, it appears that the super-ego is literally that which floats above the ego -- the projection of the ego's ideals. It acts like a conscience 'formed by internalisation, through a process of identification, of parental demands, prohibitions and ideal images. It comprises both a critical self-observing and punishing function'.[15]

Althusser uses the term 'super-Subject' in a similar fashion to Freud's super-ego when he unites the 'psychoanalytic formation of the subject to a materialist conception of discourse and ideology.'[16] He sees ideology (as in an ideal set up by the ego) as something centred on a super-Subject. He uses the metaphor of religion, and that the super-Subject of religion is God. When applied to our society as a whole, the super-Subject now seems to be capitalism with its idealised media imagery and ideology.

Althusser explains, in a detailed way, the manner in which the super-Subject "subjects" the subjects (individuals) to itself. However, Lacan points out that this theory has several flaws, the most obvious being that the super-subject and its ideologies are

12 ibid.
13 ibid.
14 Merriam-Webster Dictionary
15 Sigmund Freud, 'The Works of Jaques Lacan-The Mirror Stage'
16 Michael Newman, op. cit.

imaginary projections created by the subjects (or egos) in the first place, in which case the relationship cannot really be universal or singular as Althusser states, since there are positions outside ideology.

3.3 EGO, ID AND SCHIZOPHRENIA (THE JAPANESE CONDITION)

In summation, then, we can think of the ego as Althusser's lower case "subject" which has been "interpellated" as "subject" as opposed to 'individual' by ideology. Ideology can be read in terms of ego ideals or as part of the super-subject which is like the materialisation of an ideal (for instance, God or the Lacanian term, Law of the Father). And the unconscious id is the part of the psyche which is considered the sensitive "real" or "true" self, which the ego is set up to protect. In terms of society, the id would be the real individual as opposed to the subjected "subject". It is in correlation with truths rather than illusions or superficialities. In this case, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the subject appears to be bound to the social order and works in the service of oppression. Perhaps we can see an example of this dilemma in the practices of modernism. In much of modernism, egocentricity was a ruling force and a great downfall of modernism was its becoming aligned with the Establishment which was a "service" of oppression. It was this subservience of modernism which provided the spark for the avant garde movements.

In psychological terms, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the notion of schizophrenia as a way out of the binding system. They felt that schizophrenia was a model of a condition wherein primary desire could resist and overcome the imposition of repressive discourses and institutions.

The term "primary desire" is reminiscent of the definition of id as 'a source of psychic energy derived from instinctual needs and desires'.[17] Could we then assume that whilst in the state of

---

17 Merriam-Webster Dictionary

schizophrenia, one would be in an egoless "id" state?
Schizophrenia is described by Frederic Jameson as a 'mental disorder marked by loss of contact with reality, personality disintegration and often hallucination.'[18] Jean Baudrillard says that the schizophrenic 'can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen,switching centre for all networks of influence.' [19] This would certainly remind us of the egoless quality, characteristic of the Japanese mind and philosophy.

The Japanese feeling of non-attachment ("Mu"), which is ever-present in Zen, is essential to the 'basic coolness of the Japanese spirit'[20]. For just one more angle on the schizophrenic, we can look to Lacan, again, who describes the experience as one of 'isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. It is seen as the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers, hence, one's sense of time. Past, present memory -- all effects of language are part of our experience of time which the schizophrenic does not know, therefore he is condemned to live a perpetual present in which there is no conceivable future on the horizon'.[21]

In such a case, a schizophrenic condition is the catalyst for a discussion in art theory 'which seeks to reconcile discourse theory with psychoanalysis'[22]. In finding an example of an artist who puts such a discussion into his/her work, Newman refers to the work of Victor Bergin and Mary Kelly and in his conclusion, Newman points out the need for the de-mystification of an artist as egocentric, creating autocrat. He says
'for both Bergin and Kelly, *painting upholds the status of the artist-creator within the patriarchical ideology of capitalism, and it is the primary historical form for the artwork as commodity*[my italics]. And, according to modernism in its Greenbergian version, the primacy of painting reinforces the separation of the ontology of vision from the epistimology of language in a way which blocks

---

18 Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'
19 Corinne Robins, 'The Pluralist Era- American Art From 1968-1981'
20 Yoshida Mitsukuni, 'The Hybrid Culture'
21 Jaques Lacan, op.cit.
22 Frederic Jameson, op. cit.

any possibility for the centrality of a theoretically informed critical and deconstructive practice.'[23]

Post-modernism seems to be the current 'theoretically informed critical and deconstructive practice'[24] for so many obvious sociological reasons, as we pointed out earlier[25]. However, in particular, post-modernism is the current basis of aesthetic theory because it breaks away from modernism's mystification of the author. Post-modernism 'does not uphold the status of the artist/creator and primacy of painting.'[26]

Artists working within the strata of post-modernism are at least giving us an example of an arena in which autonomy and collectivity can live in harmony, for we now begin to see a balance between the two concepts, where emphasis is shifting from the autonomous to the pluralist. Post-modern art is trying to reflect something of the underlying true characteristics of society (perhaps the id of society), however unpleasant they might appear. It demystifies the notion of subject and its subjectivity or author and authorship (through so many practices such as allegory, bricolage, mechanical reproduction, simulation, parody etc) and exposes the existence of a society ruled by information, eclecticism and pluralism.

As Newman says,
'a politically radical art cannot be based on theories which dissolve the subject, either into discourse ... ' [as in Derrida's notion "Representation is death itself", or Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author"] ' ... or which privilege the artist as the sole origin of the work of art. Such discourse must continue to be criticised together with its social and historical determinants, the artist cannot simply be killed off or considered an epiphenomenon of discourse, but remains as a morally responsible social agent with the capacity for self-knowledge and innovation without which any

---

23 Michael Newman, op. cit.
24 ibid.
25 Such issues deemed central to postmodernist theory-- notions concerning the constitution of the subject, of sexuality and gender, of originality and authorship in a media- saturated consumer society.
26 Michael Newman, op. cit.

kind of social transformation and cultural renewal are inconceivable'.[27]

Briefly then, we can infer that an egocentric state of mind is unbalanced and reaps ill effects, yet equally so, an 'id-centric' (if there is such a word) state is also unstable and schizophrenic. We can see in Japanese culture, a level of consumerist chaos and confusion -- perhaps most obvious in the ludicrously eccentric medley of pidgin Japanese. There is a lack of identity. On the whole, their general lack of ego has allowed the people to work extremely well together and has brought about a very successful economy. However, it is overwrought with capitalism. With World War II, we saw a huge shift in ideals. Their super-Subject was no longer the Emperor and Spirituality, but became economic growth and western-style, better- living commercialism. It seems they needed some degree of ego to protect their id (of spiritual truths) from contamination. They need some level of an ego membrane.

---

27 ibid.

SEEKING THE ARENA WHERE AUTONOMY (EGO) AND COLLECTIVITY (ID) CAN CO-EXIST

4.1 BACKGROUND

In diagnosing the dilemma of the current theoretical climate, Michael Newman says 'The problem for political theory and praxis is how to reconcile the claims of autonomy with claims of collectivity.'[1] And seeing as a radical change in society is not very likely, art could at least offer a model of a way to balance the two polarities of an egocentric approach with an 'id-centric' one. According to Newman, there must first be a 'rethinking of the theoretical and strategic polarisation which makes this balance difficult'.[2]

In so doing, as we said in Chapter 2, we must continue to question the discourse which 'privileges the artist as the sole origin of the work of art together with its social and historical determinants'[3], but the artist cannot simply be annihilated or 'considered an epiphenomenon of discourse.'[4] The artist must retain his status as 'morally responsible social agent with the capacity for self-knowledge and innovation without which any kind of social transformation and cultural renewal are inconceivable.'[5] In other words, he must hold onto some aspects of egocentricity.

Perhaps the critical space for a mode of working which could strike a balance between ego and id/autonomy and communality, comes from taking the bonuses of Western and Eastern philosophies and forming a new hybrid based on the past experiences of both. As we know, no form of 'emancipatory social transformation'[6] can be attained without some amount of autonomy being left with the artist. There is a need for the

---

[1] Michael Newman, 'Revising Modernism; Representing Postmodernism.'
[2] ibid.
[3] ibid.
[4] ibid
[5] ibid.
[6] ibid.

'author' to translate his ideas and make art which could point out a way for transformation.

As we have seen, there is a distinct lack of ego and autonomy in the Japanese cultural character, and until the advent of postmodernism in the west there had been an over-abundance of egotistical Occidental art. Obviously, there are good aspects to both approaches -- the communality of the Japanese yields very high production and compatibility among the population. And on the other hand, the autonomy of the West, dominated by the rationalising ego, has led to great feats of innovation, and shows the benefits of a linear approach to systems.

We can learn from the Japanese success in transcending ego. The Zen metaphor of training the wild ox (ego) epitomises a healthy approach to seeking a balanced relationship between ego and id. The story tells us to tame our wild ox but not to kill him because he is a useful friend and tool, yet one must make sure one always rides above him.

We could discuss the effects of a characteristically Japanese egoless philisophy on a Japanese artist, but it is obviously assumed that lack of ego is innate to the Japanese mind. In Chapter 1, we pointed out the similarities between Japanism and the precepts of postmodernism. It would be interesting, as a sociological study, to choose a Japanese artist who proves that the correlation does indeed exist. However, in this study it might be more interesting to choose the western artist, Bill Viola, who is attracted to Japanese ideologies yet has been brought up in a western culture which determines his consciousness to be rational, linear, and more prone to intellectualism than spiritualism.

Bill Viola is an artist who has studied Zen and other ancient eastern philiosphies. However, he is creating something new. His work is further reaching than a work created by a native Japanese in his egoless fashion. Viola's is a deeply spiritual approach, yet

universally so, although at the same time, he is keenly aware of
the implications of a media controlled society:

'I don't believe in stylistic limitation and the dominance of
packaging in broadcast TV. I think there are some universal
elements, in the sense that all human beings have two eyes, two
ears and a brain. They have the same machinery -- even if *a
given culture drastically determines consciousness and even
perception* [my italics]. We all share the same basic conditions of
life -- birth, growth, death -- and can even have the same
aspirations. This has been my model for thinking about the mass
media and I have tried to get in touch with that part of everyone.
So, even though I haven't been making works specifically for
broadcast, I do feel I am making work for a larger number of
people than the specialised audience of the art world.'[7]

Bill Viola's relationship with Japanese artistic approaches is like
the ego's relationship to the unconscious. His presence is a
mediating one. He sees the profundity of such treasures as Zen
art, yet, personifying the watchful ego, he is wise to the ill-effects
a media-saturated culture would have on such unspoiled works
(say, the cheapening of the original work through over-exposure
in reproduction). He approaches Eastern philosophies with the
discernment of a westerner who has witnessed the contamination,
since the War, of Japan's cities by capitalist greed. He adopts
aspects of Japanese ideology but teams them with his western
rationality. His pieces might at first seem a medley of
disconnected images -- like the vision of a schizophrenic -- yet his
videos all have a very strong clear message which always unfolds
eventually. There is a constant sense of logic in his pieces, logic
which acts as the mediator for the 'id' of his videos (such as the
universal notions of birth, death, decay). His pieces evolve
through universally legible means. For instance, his signature is
the slowing of events and images down so that we must re-
evaluate them and obtain a new perspective on them, and at the
same time we are exposed to the fundamental characteristics of
the medium -- these images are not reality, they are mechanical.

---

7 Bill Viola, 'in conversation with Raymond Bellour, October Magazine

Perhaps in discussing the work of Bill Viola, we can see an arena where harmony between many opposites can exist. The problem of current discourse is a universal one. As David Ross says, 'Though Viola often makes ironic reference to the relative nature of perception, his is most definitely the work of an artist who firmly believes in the power of art to affect the mediated universe. As such Viola's video straddles the edge of what might be called the postmodern break'.[8]

4.2 BILL VIOLA -- THE BALANCE -- A WESTERN ARTIST WITH AN EASTERN VISION

Bill Viola is a symbolic weave of so many cultures and systems. He is completely receptive to the influences of any society which may hold the answers to his philosophical questions. His unbiased openness to foreign influence is unusual in a western artist. As Jeremy Welsh says, 'While much contemporary art is at best a critique, at worst a manifestation on insubstantiality, Viola's work deals with the transubstantiality and with a holistic perception.'[9] His work transmits a deep awareness of the interconnectedness of systems, of consciousness, religions, and organisms. With his juxtapositions, Viola asks us 'to make a mental leap, to see beyond the limitations that define our present cultures and philosophies.'[10]

Bill Viola is an American video artist. He began working in video in 1970 amidst the experimental climate of the avant-garde -- Happenings, Performance Art, Conceptual Art, Fluxus etc. which had all developed in the sixties and were still prominent during Viola's college years. The early seventies were full of a newfound distaste of the 'falsity of commercial television and its humanistic promise in the light of the horror felt for the American presence

8 David Ross, 'Postmodernist Station Break: A provisional Overview of Video Installation'
9 Jeremy Welsh, 'A Thoughtful Gaze: The Videotapes of Bill Viola'
10 ibid.

in Vietnam; forces of racial segregation; sexual preference oppression and gender-based oppression.'[11]

It was television's power as an impersonator of the truth and the ensuing ability to manipulate the masses, which sparked the video art movement of the sixties and seventies. To place Viola in context, perhaps we should take a brief look at video art's history to determine the implications of working with such a technological medium.

4.2.1 VIDEO ART -- AN EXPOSE OF CAPITALISM AND THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES OF T.V. CONTROLLED BY MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

One of the first artists to take the media bull by the horns, was Korean born and Japanese educated, Nam June Paik. In 1965, he took a magnet to the face of television images 'giving them a tortured look of comic-book surrealist imagery ... which finally seemed to do justice to the face of a Richard Nixon or Marshall McLuhan.'[12] By exercising his control over the image, Paik symbolically freed himself from its domination.

Until the mid sixties, working with film was fairly inaccessible to most artists due to the expense and the bulkiness of equipment. But, in 1966, Sony released the first portable video recorder to the American market. From then on, video began to grow as an art form since the porta-pak 'placed the medium in the hands of individual artists instead   of the confines of the television studio.'[13]

The immediacy of video revolutionised the way artists could work with filmed images, not having to wait for film processing etc. 'The subsequent rapid development of video technology -- the

---

11 Robert Pelfrey, 'Art and Mass Media'
12 John G. Hanhardt, 'The Discourse of Landscape Video, the Electronic Grove'
13 ibid.

introduction of colour, more sophisticated editing systems and improved cameras -- help account for the dramatic rise of video in a short time.'[14]

The pioneers of video, in the sixties, were artists from the various Fine Art fields of Performance Art, dance, sculpture, music -- all of which gained an added dimension in video. Artists like Paik, Wolf Vostell, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Ira Schneider and many others were the corpus of artists who chose video as a medium which would subvert the dominant hold of television; others chose the medium simply because it made their work more accessible to a wider audience.

Critics like David Ross hold that video has changed fixed definitions of art as much as photography did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ross says,

> 'Paik helped transform television in a post-modern art form by understanding the social presence and meaning of television. He tried to demystify and change popular perception of the social presence and meaning of t.v. commonly held to be a commodity of entertainment or simply radio with pictures.[15]

Paik paved the way in a demystification of television and its ideology as a controlling entity.

Obviously, however, not all artists who choose video as a medium are overtly interested in this process of demystification. The medium is extremely connotative of the mass media, but as Andreas Huyssen says of postmodernism, 'We are witnessing the endgame of avant-gardism'[16] -- a time when no rules are the rules. Bill Viola is an artist who uses video as a creative medium: however, by the sheer nature of the medium, he is tied up in an exploration of a type of cultural commodification which is intrinsically linked to the social and political conventions of network T.V.

---

[14] ibid.
[15] David A Ross, 'A Provisional (Historic) Overview of Video Installation'
[16] ibid.

4.3 VIOLA'S WORK--THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND COLLECTIVITY

Bill Viola's work is the axis around which autonomy and collectivity revolve comfortably. Human presence always emanates from the pieces, even if he is only visible as a minute reflection in an animal's eye. He says 'My tapes always come back to a human presence, at least as a point of identification. All my images feel more inner than outer: they are all personalised.'[17] However, at the same time, the pieces are all universal in their messages. The author is present, yet he is not indulging his ego: he never flatters his appearance; his imagery is never ostentatious or fashionable; he does not indulge in showy special effects. He is understated, but not to a fault, since we can see the traces of ego being used as a tool -- as a source of identification with the rational capacity to identify and classify his various signifiers. Looking at his work, we may not understand all of his imagery, but he presents his subjects in such a way that we can always grasp the essence of them. We are not intimidated, rather we are always drawn in and asked simply to question our given perceptions.

Viola's work constantly tests our dulled senses of perception. He tries to open our eyes to alternative states of consciousness where a much more gratifying sense of perception can abide. He shows us the interconnection of systems in his pieces -- perhaps if we can question his logic in placing various images together and his methods, then we too will experience the extremities he expresses. As an artist, he is prone to seeing such interconnections much more clearly than the untrained eye. For example, he feels that there is a strong link between video technology itself and the human body -- the camera being like the eye and all the electric currents of the machinery being like the messages sent out and received by the brain. He sees light like water, 'Video treats light like water -- it becomes a fluid on

---

17 Bill Viola, op. cit.

videotape -- water supports the fish like light supports man. Land is the death of fish, darkness is the death of man.'[18]

To facilitate our sharing in Viola's depth of experience, he adopts a technique he calls the 'temporal magnifying glass' -- he slows time down so that we can catch the fleeting details. In his slowing down, our perceptions are forced to alter. John G. Hanhardt says, 'the fragile relationship of the self to the world around us is held together through our perception of that world.'[19] The schizophrenic has difficulty in determining the real from illusion or Self from Other. Viola forces us to emulate the schizophrenic's experience of displacement, yet utter confusion is avoided by the presence of an 'I' to organise the information. However, by not knowing the immediate relationship between signifiers, we are left in a temorary limbo -- whilst confronting a minute detail of some indecipherable Other, we are pushed into reevaluating our rational, classifying approach to image and simply accept the image for its innate beauty and later we may learn of its symbolic significance.

His piece Hatsu Yume (1981) is a good example of Viola's marriage between East and West, ego and id, self and other. He says ,
> 'A lot of my work deals with the notion of getting
> beyond, breaking some sort of expectation or
> patterning, reaching a point where you have to
> just give up and re-evaluate what something is and
> come to it a second time.'[20]

One way he pushes our expectations is through duration, 'because thought is a function of time. That's why Hatsu Yume is so long -- I really wanted to go beyond desire in that piece.'[21]

Hatsu Yume was executed in Japan while Viola was on an unprecedented fellowship at Sony's headquarters just outside Tokyo. The piece was done on very advanced equipment loaned

18 Bill Viola, 'Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes'
19 John G. Hanhardt, op. cit.
20 Bill Viola, op.cit.
21 Bill Viola, op. cit.

by the company. The title Hatsu Yume is the Japanese for First Dream, and relates to the Japanese belief that one's first dream of the new year serves as a prophecy for the year and, at the same time always relates to the greater spectrum of history since it is believed that cycles in history repeat themselves.

Much of the symbolism in the video is fairly excluding to a foreigner who is not familiar with the ceremonies etc. However, eventually, it becomes clear that Viola's concern in the piece was two-fold. Yes, he wanted to record the fascinating rituals and symbolisms of the Japanese, but he also wanted his audience, as a whole, to sense the essence, the spirituality, of the events, rather than to gather a distanced, intellectual understanding of them. When he describes the piece, he does not refer to the denotative specifics of the First Dream, rather he speaks in a much more encompassing, universal way.

> [During the piece]' ... I was thinking about light and its relation to water and to life, and also its opposite- darkness or the night and death. I thought about how we have built entire cities of artificial light as a refuge from the dark.'[22]

The piece opens and closes with images of water and takes on the structure of one full day. There are strong symbolic connotations to water. Viola says that water is a 'powerful obvious symbol of cleansing and also of birth, rebirth, and even death.'[23]

According to Viola, a central concern of the piece was to explore the relationship between light and water. Perhaps, light was chosen for its metaphoric value -- like the 'light that quickens consciousness, memory and reverie.'[24] And water for the 'water which is the primal source of life.'[25]

Obviously, the symbolic values of light and water are universal. The piece becomes more specifically Japanese after the opening scene , we see mountains in a misty distance, close-ups of bamboo stalks, a field being ploughed. The connotations are not so obvious.

---

22 Bill Viola, op. cit.
23 Bill Viola, op.cit.
24 Barbara London, 'Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes'
25 Barbara London, op.cit.

However, in one of the most clever sequences of the piece, the message is clear. Firstly, we see an image of a seemingly huge boulder or mountain with smaller rocks on top. Viola is playing the tape at sixteen times its natural speed giving the mountain a dizzy, jumpy effect. Very gradually, he slows the speed down, as we can register by the fact that the shadows of the clouds slow down. By making us examine a rock for such a long time (c.15 mins), we are forced to look for its significance. Viola tests our levels of concentration. We are pushed to give up and reassess our sense of 'rock' and to come to it a second time. Perhaps he is subtly referring to the Zen notion that everything is in a constant state of flux, for even a mountain is being changed by weather and erosion every day.

At this stage, Viola has caught our attention and slows the piece down to real time. And then the surprise -- figures begin to appear from behind the rock, telling us by their proportions, that the mountain is less than three feet high. Viola has skilfully shown us how deficient our usual levels of perception are and shows the value of adopting a more 'thoughtful gaze'[26]. Eventually, the figures are slowed down into slow motion, perhaps to make sure we recognise the significance of their size and so that we can get lost in a sense of timelessness in such concentration on the present moment.

The piece progresses with various shots of Shinto Temples, a mound of earth with smokeemanating from it, various piles of stones -- all seemingly spiritually rich images, since Viola manages to evoke such tranquility in each sequence.

The piece closes with an image of a still, calm sea at night with a brightly lit ship slowly gliding into harbour, casting beautiful reflections on the water's surface. Viola says of the piece,

> 'There is the suggestion of the events of this world's being illusory, or transient, since they are only visible as

---

26 Jeremy Welsh, op.cit.

reflections on the surface of the water. The direct reality is never perceived -- like Plato's cave.'[27]

Viola is obviously concerned with the universal legibility of his videos. His belief in the merit of collectivity is enhanced by his later works, such as 'I Do Not Know What it is I Am Like' which was recorded on a video disc. The disc is important to Viola for many reasons -- mostly as a symbolic emancipation from video's dependence on light to make images, since the disc fits into a computer and hence adapts to video graphic imagery which is made simply from mathematical equations. However, an even more directly relevant aspect of the video disc is that it can put control into the hands of the viewer. Viola is unconcerned with protecting the sanctity of his finished works in the sequence in which he would present them. Rather, he wants the viewer to become directly involved in the creation of a work of art. The disc works similarily to a compact disc -- the machine's operator can simply press a button to call up any piece of imagery and to view it in any sequence with the other images. The editing is personalised, and Viola has stepped back to involve others' creativity -- surely the actions of a man unconcerned with asserting his egocentricities.

Viola asks for his viewers to cut _their_ strings of ego, also. He implores us to become deeply involved in the constant teeming movement of the universe and to surrender to the sense of id and spirituality which dwells in such an arena. As the Zen tenet says,

> One can live only in the present moment. How refreshing to live concentratedly in the instant. To give over regrets, anticipations, worries, reflections on reflections. How refreshing and how loosening of prejudices and inhibitions.'[28]

Viola begs us to examine the intensity of the present moment and in so doing losing our sense of ego, if only for a short time, so as we may enjoy an alternative and very beneficial state of consciousness. Again taking a Zen tenet,

---

27 Bill Viola , op. cit.
28 Chimyo Horioka, 'Zen Art for Meditation'

'There is no ego in the sense of an endlessly enduring, unchanging, private soul or personality that temporarily inhabits the body. If the winds seem too high, remember the calm of the depths below the waves. The tree and shore accept both storm and calm. You also must accept. Go with what is happening and be part of it, with no ego to itself apart.'[29]

As we watch his images of dead and living animals, we are forced to confront other states of consciousness which we might prefer to conveniently ignore. Viola forces us to consider what we are calling Other and, as such, we must reflect on the 'I' and self which has set up our standards for classification. By absorbing his images of nature, and images of the artist himself 'becoming object within his work, we are constantly made aware of the fundamental distinction between observer/observed. Our notion of self is brought into consideration.'[30]

Viola's role, then, seems extremely important in our current artistic climate, when the consideration of self alone is not enough. His work blends subjectivity with the constantly universal, and deals with the dilemma facing an individual surviving in the sea of decontextualised images of the mass-media. His work is the unexpected combination of metaphysical themes with the most technological medium available, and as such, Viola distinguishes his work from that of any other currently eminent artist.

He evokes an essence of the Eastern timelessness using a Western mind fully aware of the capitalist-saturated state of both Japan and his native America. His work is certainly a gesture in the direction of an East/West reunion and symbolically of a psychological wholeness where the essence of id will be balanced with a proportionate level of guiding ego.

---

[29] ibid.
[30] Jeremy Welsh, op. cit.

CONCLUSION

We must now recognise that the schizophrenic state suggested by Deleuze and Guattari as a model condition wherein primary desire (id) could resist and overcome the repressive discourses and institutions, is not in fact feasible.

We can take the case of Japan as an illustration of the obvious flaws in their theory, seeing as Japan, with its prominent sense of id, has not resisted or overcome the repressive discourses of capitalism and corporate institutions, rather it has been consumed by them.

Postmodern discourse has recognised that for social stability, there is a need for harmony between autonomy and collectivity. The psychological condition in which either ego or id is repressed is an unholistic, unhealthy one. Obviously, then, there is always the need for a degree of watchful and discerning ego, in order to perpetuate the existence of passive id.

The questioning of the Establishment, as we know it today, began in the early sixties with the demystification of the power of television. Until the advent of consumer-grade video technology, 'T.V. was essentially a commodifying machine, generating the desire to consume while creating broad cultural consensus in the direct service of commercial enterprise and the maintenance of the political *status quo* .'[1]   But with this new technology, a new and powerful weapon has been handed to artists who now have a suitable medium with which they can question the social and historical determinants of autonomy and of the super-subject, capitalism. These artists can expand the public's awareness to its subjugation from being a group of individuals to being "subjects" (targets for consumerism).

We can learn from the example set by Viola. He deploys techniques which expose his medium for what it is, unlike commercial television's attempt to simulate real time and to glorify reality. Viola slows his images down; plays them for their true duration; blows up an image so that every electronic 'dot' is visible. Yet, at the same time, he is directing our gaze to the subject's essence. 'With the slow unfolding, we witness a process of revelation whereby we discover aspects of the ordinary that

---

1 Jeremy Welsh, 'A Thoughtful Gaze: The Videotapes of Bill Viola

would ordinarily elude our perceptions.' 2   He uses slow motion as
a 'temporal magnifying glass' and like any optical instrument 'it
can only bring a vision of the world closer to us by pushing it
farther away, by erecting a barrier between observer and
observed.' 3

Critical theory tells us that the time is ripe for us to adopt a
sense of ego as tool, and yet to recognise the endless benefits of an
increased awareness of the more understated qualities of id.
Assuming that theoretical discourse does truly reflect the state of
society and the needs of the individual, this is indeed the time to
reflect on our accepted precepts.   If a Utopian wholeness of psyche
and hemispheres is possible, we could all both increase our
enjoyment of the senses and, aid ourselves in the vigilance of
capitalism. The responsability for such a transformation is in the
gestures of a conscientious artist, such as Bill Viola. He could
personify an ego membrane for Japan, and an id magnifying glass
for the West.

---

2 Jeremy Welsh, ibid.
3 Bill Viola, 'In conversation with Raymond Bellour'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baudrillard, Jean   "The Ecstacy of Communication" in
Postmodern Culture ed. Hal Foster, Pluto
Press, London (1987).

Benvenuto, Bice &   "The Works of Jacques Lacan: An
Kennedy, Roser   Introduction
Free Association Books, London (1986).

Cooke, Lynn   "Reorienting: Looking East"
Catalogue for exhibition at Third Eye Centre,
Glasgow (1990).

Crimp, Douglas   "The Photographic Activity of
Postmodernism"
in October magazine, issue 16 (12), p.97
(1980).

Fosca, Francois   "A Concise Illustrated History of European
Painting"
Washington Square Press, New York (1961).

Foster, Hal   "Postmodernism: A Preface in Postmodern
Culture"
in Postmodern Culture op. cit.

Greenberg, Clement   "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"
in Art and Culture, Thames and Hudson,
London (1973)

Hanhardt, John G.   "The Discourse of Landscape Video Art: From
Fluxus to Postmodernism"
in catalogue American Landscape Video, the
Electronic Grove, The Carnegie Museum of
Modern Art, Pittsburgh, P.A. (1988)

Holmes, Stewart &   "Zen Art for Meditation"
Horioka, Chimyo   Charles Tutte Co., Tokyo (1973)

Hosokawa, Shuhei   "On Tokyo-go: Pidgin Japanese"
in catalogue Against Nature- Japanese Art in
the Eighties, Grey Art Gallery and Study
Centre, NYU (1989)

Hutcheon, Linda	"A Poetics of Postmodernism" Routledge, New York (1988)
Ishiguro, Kazuo	"An Artist of the Floating World" Penguin Books, London (1988)
Jameson, Frederic	"Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in <u>Postmodern Culture</u> *op. cit.*
London, Barbara	"Bill Viola: Installations and Videotapes" Museum of Modern Art, New York (1987)
Lovejoy, Margot	"Art and Artist in an Electronic Media" in <u>Postmodern Currents,</u> UMI Research Press, Michigan, (1989)
Lyotard, Jean Francois	"Complexity and the Sublime" in <u>ICA Documents 4 -- Postmodernism,</u> Cranford Press Group, Croydon (1986)
Lyotard, Jean Francois	"Driftworks" Semitext Inc., New York (1984)
Mitsukuni, Yoshida	"The Hybrid Culture" Cosmopolitan Public Relations Corporation, Tokyo(1984)
Newman, Michael	"Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism" in <u>ICA Documents 4 -- Postmodernism,</u> *op.cit.*
O' Brien, Paul	"Modernism, Postmodernism and Beyond" in <u>Circa</u> magazine,November/December 1989, pp.17-22.
Osaka, Eriko & Kline, Katy	"Against Nature-Japanese Art in the Eighties" catalogue for Grey Art Gallery and Study Centre,New York University (1989)
Pelfrey, Robert	"Art and Mass Media" Harper and Row, New York (1984)

Robins, Corinne	"The Pluralist Era: American Art 1968-1981" Harper and Row, New York (1984)
Rose, Barbara	"American Painting in the Eighties" Horen-Sydney Press, Buffalo (1979)
Ross, David A.	"Postmodern Station Break: A Provisional (Historic) Overview of Video Installation" in catalogue American Landscape Video, the Electronic Grove, op.cit.
Takashina, Shuji	"New Directions in Japanese Art" Kodansha International Ltd, Tokyo (1976)
Tazawa, Yutaka & Magahata, Yasunori	"Japan's Cultural History - A Perspective" Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (1973)
Viola, Bill	In conversation with Raymond Bellour in October magazine, issue 34 Autumn 1985, pp. 91-119
Welsh, Jeremy	"A Thoughtful Gaze: The Video Tapes of Bill Viola" Riverside Studios (Film and Video Umbrella), London (1988).
Wyver, John	"Television and Postmodernism" in ICA Documents 4 -- Postmodernism, op.cit.
Zeitlind, Marilyn	"Survey of A Decade"- Catalogue for Bill Viola The Contemporary Arts Museum, Heuston (1988)
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	Pocket Books, New York (1974)

Nam June Paik with *Demagnetizer*, 1965
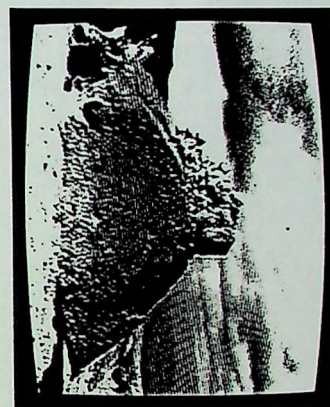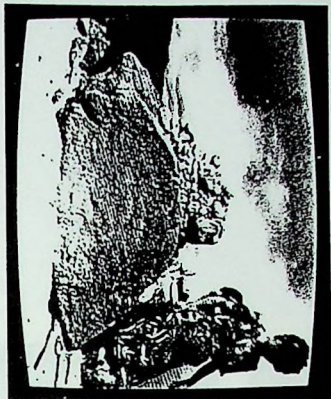
Hatsu Yume (First Dream). 1981.
Videotape.

Fig.2:

Fig.3:
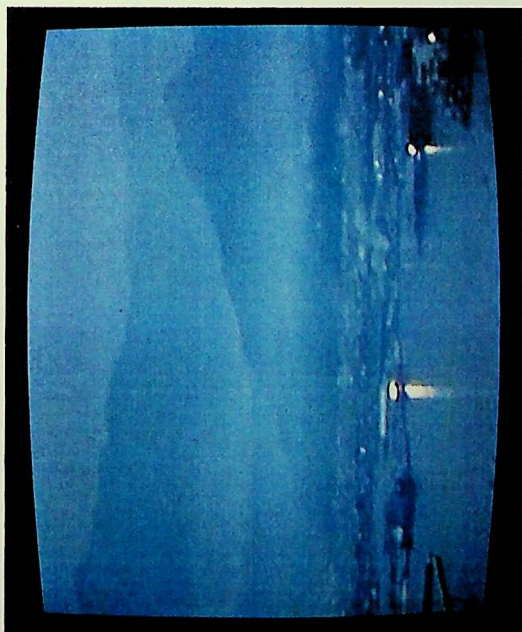
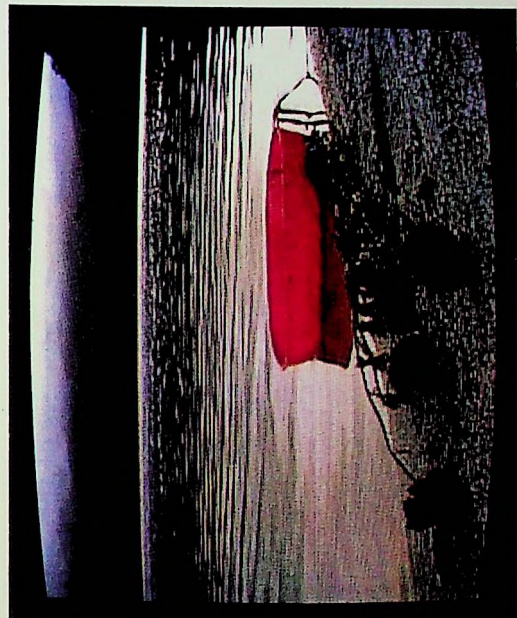*Hatsu Yume (First Dream),* 1981. Videotape.