

FEEDBACK: Performance in Early Video
by John Thomson, 2002

FEEDBACK explores the centrality of performance in early video. The Vasulkas, Stan VanDerbeek, and Nam June Paik enlivened their formal innovation with a performance structure that added layers of complexity and cultural and ideological significance to their experiments.

The relationship between art and technology can be symbiotic, combative or accidental. Feedback considers this complex relationship in the context of the innovators that helped establish video as an art form. Their strategy was to participate in the development of new technologies, rather than just apply their artistic practice to systems they had been allowed to access. They not only took technological risks, but they also innovated on conceptual and ideological levels. Their vision was outward, embracing the world around them, and critiquing its culture, ideas and aesthetics.

The videos in Feedback synthesize sound and image around the construct of performance. In the 1960s performance had become central to contemporary art, and New York was an essential focus of this activity. The artists in Feedback were, in differing ways, part of this "downtown" scene, and they integrated the phenomenon of performance into their practice. Rather than taking a purely materialist approach, they mixed formal experimentation with the influences and inputs of other artists, often collaborating with performers, actors and musicians to produce work that was multi-dimensional. They also embraced the notion of performance in the wider sense that their works appear spontaneously constructed, incorporating action and participation. For an audience they have an immediacy, a flow, and a vibrant real-time quality.

Steina (b. 1940) and Woody Vasulka (b. 1937) arrived in New York from Czechoslovakia in 1965; Steina had studied violin; Woody was a film-maker and poet. They took up the early video Portapak and recorded the exciting cultural scene in which they had immersed themselves. SKETCHES (1970) is not only a part of this intriguing documentary project, but also traces their initial experiments with the manipulation of recorded image and sound. As the series progresses, the "sketches" appear more and more processed. In the opening *RED ROSES*, Warhol Superstar, Jackie Curtis, sings to an audience while the hand-held camera interprets her voice and actions, becoming a collaborator in her performance. LET IT BE is a "lip-sync" performance by Steina of the famous Beatles' song, where an extreme close-up of her mouth highlights the constructed nature of "sync'd" recordings. THE KISS, recalling Edison's elemental film, degrades the video image to its barest representational traces, while CHARLES' STORY introduces multiple imaging. The other sketches include experiments with the manipulation of play-back video, vertiginous zoom effects, and striking solarization processing.

VIOLIN POWER (1970-78) by Steina Vasulka is a wonderful distillation of the relationship between technical innovation and performance. Steina plays the violin increasingly interpretatively, using her violin as a producer of video signals, until her performance is represented by abstract forms.

Violin Power is an evolving exploration: it is an on-going project that has been presented with a progression of electronic equipment. This edition consists of a number of experiments through the 1970s that use such synthesizing equipment as Harald Bode's Phase Shifter and Steve Rutt and Bill Etra's Scan Processor. The work is at once a journey of the development of the Vasulka's experiments with the video signal, and a performance by Steina spanning a decade. She starts playing an acoustic violin soberly, then wildly to Let it be. As the performance continues her image is progressively abstracted until she reappears "in person" again at the end. The sound journey similarly travels from acoustic to electric to abstract electronic and back again.

Stan VanDerBeek (1927-1984) has left an important legacy of electronic image innovation. He created some of the first computer generated films, often presenting them in a live context. He later used video and broadcast television to continue his experiments. Like the Vasulkas and Paik, he was in contact with the luminaries of the American avant-garde, including John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Buckminster Fuller. The latter's utopian humanism was an important influence on VanDerbeek, who had a powerful faith in the universal benefits of the computer's image-making potential.

His videos often combine dream-like performance with computer-based video technologies, as if he is attempting to image the subconscious. COLOR FIELDS LEFT (1977) integrates vibrant abstract shapes with wild colour and intermittent abstract sound.

MIRRORED REASON (1979), which combines film and video, gels a performance piece with imaginative video effects. FACE CONCERT (1981) is a striking amalgam of colour-saturated video effects and movement. Although for most of his career he concentrated on film and the cinematic, his videos are remarkable for the evident gusto and depth of his attempts to expand the language of video.

Nam June Paik (b. 1932) is a fundamental figure in the development of video as an art-form. Born in Soeul, he studied music in Japan and Germany, and then worked with Stockhausen and Fluxus in Europe, before arriving in New York in 1964, where he experimented with the creative possibilities of the then nascent technology of video.

GLOBAL GROOVE (1973) is a crucial work in the history of video art. It is television, and about television. It presents performances within its diegesis, and has the performance feel of a "live" television broadcast. Taking its cue from McLuhan's "Global Village", it provides a promiscuous and fractured representation of contemporary culture. Believing that truly universal television can better the world, Paik presents the avant-garde and the mainstream, East and West, art and commercials together in a work that precurses channel-surfing, culture jamming, and post-modernist representation itself.

This Fluxus-inspired mix of the everyday and the arcane is part of Paik's strategy to combine technical and conceptual experimentation. He uses interview, performance, dance and monologue as material for his creative editing, Chroma Key effects, video feedback, and colourization. Employing the video synthesizer that he developed with Shuya Abe, he saturates colours, and overlays, multiplies and solarizes images. He also excerpts his earlier MAGNET TV effect, where he manipulated broadcast images with a large horse-shoe magnet.

The videos in this programme still shock with the vibrancy of their ideas and the dynamism of their activity. It is the synergy of their technical play, conceptual depth and performance structure that ensures their continued power and relevance. They are a testament to the ability of technologically experimental art to challenge on all levels.

Programme:

The Vasulkas

SKETCHES 1970, 24:23 min, b&w, sound

Steina Vasulka

VIOLIN POWER, 1970-78, 10:04 min, b&w, sound

Stan VanDerBeek

SELECTED WORKS:

COLOUR FIELDS LEFT, 1977, 7:47 min, colour, sound

MIRRORED REASON, 1979, 9:22 min, colour, sound

FACE CONCERT, 1981, 11:54 min, colour, sound

Nam June Paik

GLOBAL GROOVE, 1973, 28:30 min, colour, sound