

GRACE GLUECK

## Turn On, Tune In and Drop By: Video Art's Come a Long Way

Video art has come a distance in the last 30 years, from the days when Nam June Paik "deconstructed" commercial TV images on beat-up old monitors, and a gaggle of Portapak users and abusers saw the TV screen as replacing the easel.

GALLERY  
WATCH

Now infinitely more sophisticated, video has also assumed much greater dimensions. Asserting itself in part by the space it usurps—as painting has for almost the last half-century—it creates surroundings that envelop the viewer, images that are no longer screen-bound but play over walls and ceilings and concepts that address themselves as much to the mind and emotions as to the dynamics of the medium.

The effects can be compelling, and you can experience them in two current shows, *Video Spaces: Eight Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, 11 West 53rd Street (through Sept. 12), and *Gary Hill* at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 575 Broadway (through Aug. 20). The nine artists in *Video Spaces* (Mr. Hill is included, too) come from all over the globe, and are well known in the field. Undriven by art-market pressures, their installations are not harnessed to trends or movements, which places more of an obligation on artists to do vital work and on viewers to separate talent from chaff. Some of the pieces in this show are more equal than others, as they say, but the mix is lively, covering a range of themes, from "the media" to politics to metaphysics.

Stan Douglas and Tony Oursler focus on electronic media and the society that's spawned it. In Mr. Douglas' *Evening*, three giant screens confront you, each representing a fictitious Chicago TV station, each dominated by a "star" newscaster whose function it is to present the news—and himself—as entertainment. Mr. Oursler's environment, *System for*

*Dramatic Feedback*, is a visual and verbal Babel that cleverly suggests the psychological impact of TV on its audience. Recurring wall projections show passive young viewers, ingesting popcorn along with images; rising from the floor is a structure of rag dolls, constantly massaged and manipulated by distorted TV projections that play over them—for example, a video hand that noisily smacks the posterior of a bent-over male figure, which shrieks as it is hit.

On the personal side are entries by Gary Hill and Teiji Furuhashi. Mr. Hill (I'll get to his separate show at the



CHRIS MARKER

Chris Marker's *Silent Movie*, 1994, is one of the eight installations in MoMA's *Video Spaces* show.

Guggenheim) targets his own body with the TV camera in a piece called *Inasmuch as It Is Always Already Taking Place*. Different parts of his anatomy, some of them quite ambiguous, are teasingly explored on 16 screens, ranging in size from the dimensions of a man's chest to those of a thumbnail. In *Lovers*, the Furuhashi work, shadowy projections of life-size nude male and female dancers gambol around the walls of a darkened room, occasionally meeting for a quick "embrace" that's simply an overlapping of two translucent figures. A soundtrack whispers ethereal nothings. One can tru-

ly say that this is a moving creation.

In the sheer entertainment category is *Silent Movie*, the creation of Chris Marker (the pseudonym of a European-born filmmaker in his 70's). Stacked in a tower arrangement, like a vertical film-strip, five monitors show Mr. Marker's own pastiches of silent films, along with subtitles. He makes witty use of the technical means available to early directors: closeups, dissolves and the like, accompanied by suitable music. On the walls are spurious silent film stills and artful posters of *The Great Premakes*, jokingly cast epics such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* with Greta Garbo and Sessue Hayakawa.

Other voices, other rooms: Judith Barry and Brad Miskell team in a comic sendup of the consumer romance with computers—a big, battered wooden crate labeled "Hardcell," with holes you peer into. Inside lie the twitching, groaning guts of junked word processors,

linked by a frenzy of wires and cables. Political oppression is the province of Marcel Odenbach, a German, who in *Make a Fist in the Pocket* looks back on the international phenomenon of student rioting in 1968, as well as current xenophobic violence in his own country.

A disappointment, alas, is the contribution of Bill Viola, a guru of the medium who's done some wonderful work. Not here. His *Slowly Turning Narrative* involves a 12-foot panel, mirrored on one side, a film screen on the other, that rotates briskly in the middle of a darkened room. On the screen side is projected a brooding male face, accompanied by rhythmic chanting, that alternates with shots of contemporary life. Viewers are reflected in the mirrored side of the panel. As the panel turns, it scatters image fragments over the surrounding walls, creating a busy environment that, according to Mr. Viola, evokes the meanderings of a "constantly turning" mind "absorbed with itself." Simplistic but pretentious, it's exactly the kind of mumbo jumbo that gives video a bad name.

Still, this is an energetic, impressive

show—organized by Barbara London, associate curator in the Department of Film and Video—and if you're not caught up with the current state of the art, it's a good place to tune in.

#### HIGH-VOLTAGE HILL

At the Guggenheim SoHo, Gary Hill's tech-y, offbeat and sometimes arresting installations—fueled by literature, philosophy, art history and a bit of narcissism—propel you through a long suite of darkened rooms. If you like *Inasmuch* (see above), you'll find his slightly later piece *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)* positively riveting. Rife with, shall we say, the ambiguities of perception, it shows the bodies of a man and a woman in erotic play flashing in rapid fire across a long bank of video screens. But the bodies are so parsed and fragmented that their eroticism pales, offering only a tantalizing glimpse of probabilities.

In a very different piece, *And Sat Down Beside Her* (the phrase is from "Little Miss Muffet"), the components are a number of tiny, taken-apart monitors hanging from bundles of big black cables, that suggest spiders swinging from their webs. Multiple lenses on the floor evoke spiders' many eyes, and there's also a real but surreal-looking table and chair. On the chair lies an open book whose pages bear a projected image of Mr. Hill's countenance. The artist's voice is heard on tape, reading from a hallucinatory novel, *Thomas the Obscure*, by Maurice Blanchot, in which the narrator conjures up a woman in the form of a spider. Hard to know what to make of this, but it's good and creepy.

On the other hand, Mr. Hill can get a little silly. In an early work called *Cruz*, four monitors placed in a cruciform arrangement show his disembodied moving head (with tortured countenance), hands and feet as if he were nailed to a cross. Another piece, *Remarks on Color*, is a 45-minute color tape in which a little girl reads aloud Ludwig Wittgenstein's treatise of the same title, cutely stumbling over the big words. No, no, and again no, Mr. Hill. Nevertheless, this high-voltage show is well worth seeing. It was organized by the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle.