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**ART**  
'Video Spaces,' at the  
Museum of Modern  
Art. Page C13.

ART REVIEW

# Back in Fashion, Video Installations

By CHARLES HAGEN

Video art, which in its brief history has gone in and out of art-world fashion more than once, seems to be on something of a roll this summer. Bill Viola, a star of the medium, is representing the United States at the Venice Biennale; Gary Hill, another prime figure, is the subject of a retrospective at the Guggenheim SoHo, and recent gallery shows in New York City have featured installations by Nam June Paik and Mary Lucler, two video stalwarts.

Now the Museum of Modern Art gives a further boost to the video boom with "Video Spaces: Eight Installations," which runs through Sept. 12. Organized by Barbara London, head of the museum's video program, the show features recent

works by Mr. Viola, Chris Marker, Gary Hill, Judith Barry and Brad Miskell, Teiji Furuhashi, Tony Oursler, Stan Douglas and Marcel Odenbach.

The themes addressed by this diverse group range from the history of movies to the conventions of television news; from images of the body to the presentation of what seems to be a malfunctioning cyborg. While not a full survey of this high-tech genre, "Video Spaces" provides a tempting sampler of current work.

The show, like much current video work, is based on installations rather than videotapes. Many artists have turned to this hybrid form, in which elements of sculpture, theater and performance are combined with video images, either shown on monitors or projected on walls.

The increasing sophistication of

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Celebrating ideas,  
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video equipment allows artists to push the technological aspects of their works into the background, and concentrate on the ideas behind them. This welcome development is especially apparent in "Lovers," Mr. Furuhashi's elegant installation and one of the show's real standouts.

In this quiet piece, nude figures seem to walk along the walls of a darkened room, stopping occasionally to embrace one another; from



"Slowly Turning Narrative," a 1992 work by Bill Viola, in "Video Spaces," at the Museum of Modern Art.

## What Is Back in Fashion? Video Art Installations

time to time one breaks into a wild run. Mr. Furuhashi's background in performance and theater is apparent in this modest but evocative piece. Endlessly joining and separating, the evanescent figures create a richly suggestive mating dance.

The spirituality implicit in this ghostly minuet can also be found in "Slowly Turning Narrative," Mr. Viola's contribution. In it, a panel the size of a movie screen, with a giant mirror on its back, turns slowly in a darkened space; from one wall are projected shots of open-heart surgery, children playing with sparklers and other emotionally charged scenes. From the facing wall comes a close-up of Mr. Viola, intoning variations on the phrase "the one who": "The one who finds, the one who believes," and so on.

Mr. Viola uses this elaborate setup to create a kind of sculptural montage of the two sets of images. Viewers, too, are woven into the work, both physically, as reflections in the oversize mirror, and emotionally, as the implicit "ones" Mr. Viola addresses.

Mr. Furuhashi and Mr. Viola's complex and powerful pieces are the strongest in the show, but others demonstrate the range of approaches artists have adopted. Mr. Marker, the 73-year-old French film maker, pays homage to silent movies, showing excerpts from classics, by directors like D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, intercut with shots of an actress who seems to be meditating on the scenes. Stored on video disks, this montage is presented on a tower of monitors, in snippets selected at random by a computer. Mr. Marker's love letter to early movies has the effect, perhaps not unintended, of making viewers want to see the original films again.

If Mr. Marker's work deliberately evokes the great film editing of the silent era, Mr. Hill's self-portrait, with monitors of different sizes displaying images of different parts of his nude body, suggests an electronic, three-dimensional version of a Cubist collage. Arranged inside a waist-high, cavellike recess, the monitors, ranging from full-size models to ones as small as thimbles, seem like glowing chunks of flesh.

Several works comment, directly or indirectly, on the role of technology and media in contemporary life. Judith Barry and Brad Miskell show a large shipping crate, charred and broken as if it had just fallen from

space; inside, tangled wires, twitching antennae and flickering video monitors suggest a cybernetic creature in the final stages of memory crash.

If this smoldering evocation of a high-tech smash-up seems like a prop from a quickie sci-fi thriller, Tony Oursler's installation appears to come from an even lower-budget production: the video images are projected onto a collection of thrift-shop clothes arranged to suggest a pile of interlocking people. A rag doll with the video image of a screaming woman for a face has an unsettling immediacy, but other visual tropes are limp: a video hand spans an old pair of pants; a projected fist emerges from a shirt sleeve. Mr. Oursler's low-rent approach is appealing, but the piece, meant to be a critique of media violence, is disjointed.

Stan Douglas uses re-enactments of newscasts from 1969-70 to suggest that this was the period when television news turned from substantive reporting to chatty, happy-talk shows. Large screens present staged programs from three Chicago stations, featuring stories about Jimmy Hoffa, the Black Panthers and other topical figures. But Mr. Douglas's broadcasts never seem real, and as a

result, his critique loses its punch.

Marcel Odenbach, too, alludes to historical events, with images of fingers pecking at a typewriter mixed with shots of Nazi brown shirts throwing books into bonfires. Facing these disturbing scenes are images of contemporary Thailand, including dancers performing for tourists and one man giving another a massage. Mr. Odenbach takes as his epigram a sentence by the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann: "I am writing with my burnt hand about the nature of fire." This enigmatic work seems to be a meditation on political violence, particularly in Germany, but it hits only a few of its targets.

Perhaps the strongest impression left by "Video Spaces" is the variety of art in it. Working with increasingly flexible technology, the artists are united as much by their determined diversity as anything else.

In video art's early days, many artists worked in opposition to television, making videotapes that deliberately challenged broadcast norms. But in recent years video artists have staked out territory at the intersection of film, performance, sculpture and computers. And as this striking show at the Modern (11 West 53d Street, Manhattan) demonstrates, some of these artists have begun to produce challenging works that could be created in no other medium.