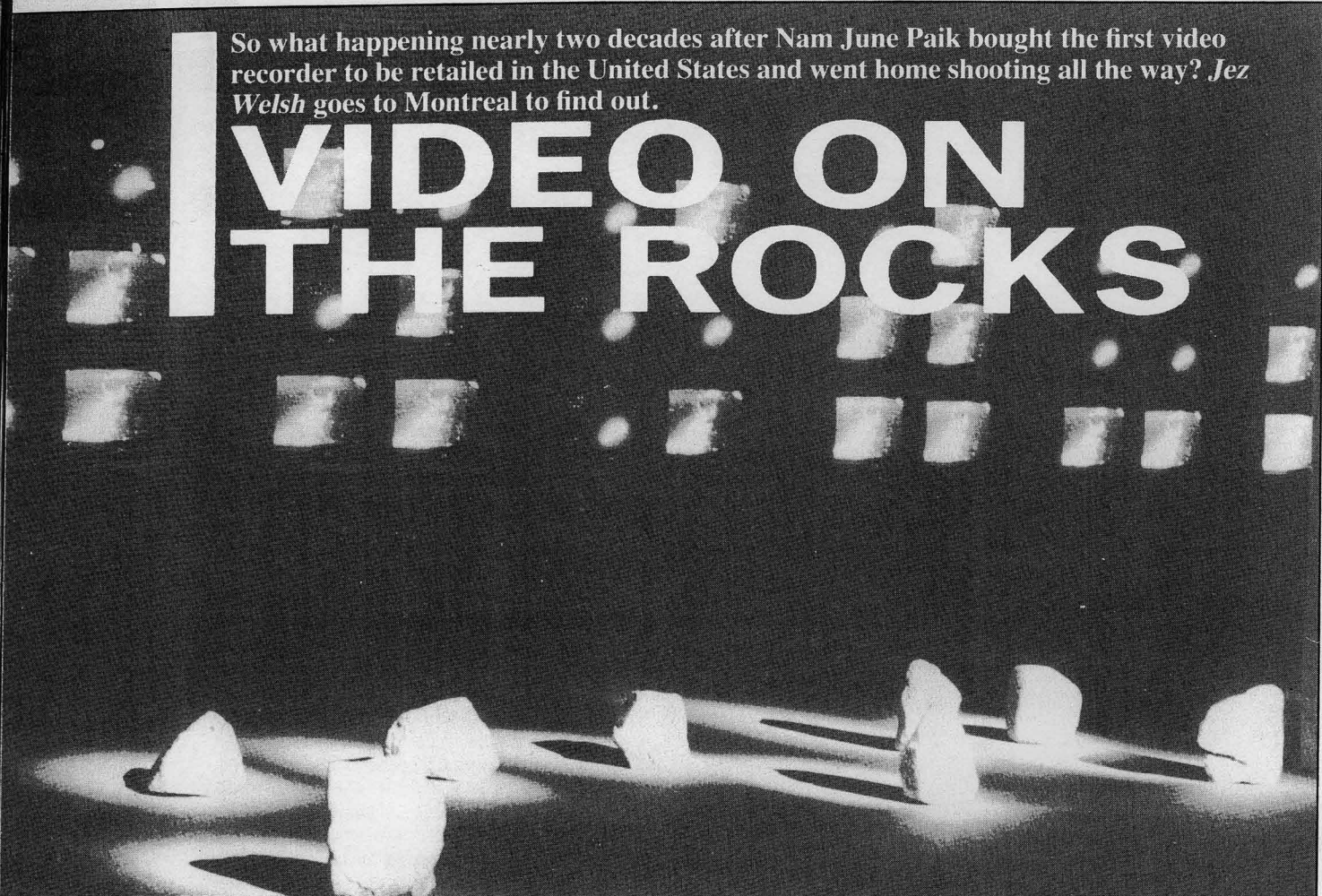


So what happened nearly two decades after Nam June Paik bought the first video recorder to be retailed in the United States and went home shooting all the way? *Jez Welsh* goes to Montreal to find out.

VIDEO ON THE ROCKS



Medusa by Gerald Minkoff

1984 has been the year of the video festival, and Canada has been the host country of several of these international jamborees, including the British/Canadian Video Exchange whose most reported moment was the seizure of several British tapes from A-Space gallery, Toronto, by officials of the Ontario censor board.

Video 84 was one of the most ambitious projects to date, featuring installations by seventeen artists in seven galleries, a week of screenings with national selections from eleven countries, and a three day symposium on the theme 'Problems of description in Video Art', with guest speakers from each participating country. It would be impossible to attempt to cover the whole event, so I have chosen to look specifically at the installations and to consider a few works, and some of the issues raised.

I will just mention in passing that the Japanese tapes were a delight and a revelation, the conference was at turns challenging and frustrating, and

J. Welsh

that Nam June Paik can never be extricated from mythology.

EDWARD MUYBRIDGE GOES TO THE OLYMPICS

So commented a friend upon Italian critic Vittorio Faggione's description of an installation in the basement of a palace in Venice, in which a swimmer passes around the room, from one TV set to another, perfectly synchronised. One could not fail to be impressed by the technical sophistication, or effected by the sheer beauty of the piece, but can such a work be any more than a technical exercise. (This was a festival of one-liners, usually provoked by installations, of anecdotes and mythologies.)

As I stood in the gallery at the *Universite de Quebec a Montreal*, confronting (or confronted by) an intimidating array of monitors—thirty-six in blocks of six along a wall—a friend commented 'The only difference between this and a TV showroom is the rocks'. The work, by Swiss artist Gerald Minkoff, indeed included rocks, sixteen of them, lit by sixteen

white spotlights, picked up by camera and relayed to sixteen TV monitors, the other thirty showing other images. To discern precisely the relationship between the elements it was necessary to read an accompanying text though this in itself made oblique, semi-mystical and rather baffling assertions. Later, in a bar, someone told me that the artist had described the piece to her, which made it much easier to understand. However, the personal explanation is not on offer to the casual viewer, so we must look at the work from that viewpoint, and two problems are immediately raised, which recur throughout the exhibition. Firstly, why use so many TV monitors? Is their use necessary to an understanding of the work? Is such material indulgence justifiable? And secondly, does the work make itself apparent, does it deliver—or even possess—a message, a discernible point? The first question I shall return to later, the second is a starting point from which to look at a few of the installations more closely. Impossible to consider them all,

but let's isolate a few that seemed to 'work' and find out why.

The immediate delivery of its essence to the casual viewer is essential to the installation. If the work seems obscure, diffuse, directionless, then the chances of the non-specialist taking time to find out what's happening are remote. The successful video installation does two vital things; it unfolds upon first encounter, it draws the viewer in, then it carries him/her along as it elaborates upon its point(s). This second attribute is, for me, a qualification of the first: there are those installations that have an immediate impact, that arouse or amuse, but which simply repeat, variegate without developing textually. The result leaves a hollow, unsatisfied feeling, as in the case of Michel Jaffrenou's *Video Circus*, an example of stunning technique, a well managed illusion, but somehow facile, its effect in the end no more and possibly less, than what it represents.

In sharp contrast, the technical simplicity and sculptural elegance of Barbara Steinman's work spoke volumes. *Chambres a louer* (rooms for rent) gave us a world we could recognise instantly. The cheap room, the window on the world. In a large, darkened space, we are confronted by two life size tableaux, and beyond, two miniature 'maquettes' of the same. In each tableaux a white-draped chair is positioned before a window, and beneath each window, a large iron radiator. The window is partially obscured by a venetian blind, but through the slits of the lower part, we see a view, a video recording of a landscape, while shafts of coloured light penetrate the room from the upper section of the window. We choose between the two rooms, the two views offered, sit in the chair and begin to watch. It is, of course, much like looking through any window, we do not exert any control over what happens, things come and go before our eyes. Every two minutes the view changes, the framing changes from close-up to wide shot, evoking a hundred variations on the theme of the familiar view, awakening memories of being in rooms like this, staring through the window at a brick wall, a tree, a bus stop.

The scenes we observe are almost entirely unpopulated—or depopulated—the effect an echo of alienation, not so much painful as numbing. The longer we spend looking 'through' these windows, the greater the power of the work to subvert our perceptual faculties. Observed at the opening of the show: A woman sat looking at the window for several minutes, then walked up to it and peered sideways through the glass to observe that part of the view obscured by the edge of the window frame.

The re-presentation of the familiar and a gentle manipulation of our perception of it characterised a number of works. Dalibor Martinis' *HMS GOODBYEHALLOO* is a voyage. The installation is boat-shaped, at each side ten monitors show us the sea rushing by. In front and back—stern and bow, but I don't know the difference—we see views, one approaching, the other receding into the distance; where we are going and where we have been. In this instance, both are the same, and instantly recognisable, Manhattan seen from the water. The journey is a literal record of a ride on the Staten Island ferry, but it is also a gently ironic musing on the whole idea of the journey, our obsession with travel, our constant striving for 'the other'. In this story we are always leaving or arriving, never 'being there'. The structure is transparent, the nature of the piece immediately apparent, but it carries us along delivering small surprises, variations.

Sudden shifts of viewpoint reverse the continuity of process; coming is going and going is coming: Texts are used to evoke exchanges that might take place between fellow travellers, and these fragments of dialogue refer back to the central theme of the piece. As a trumpet is indistinctly heard among the noises of engines and rushing water, we read; 'Why are you playing a trumpet?—Because I'm arriving in New York.—But we just left New York.—Then, my friend we are not in the same boat'.

GROWING RICE IN THE SAME PADDY FIELD FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS IS TECHNOLOGY

was the title of Fujiko Nakaya's paper on Japanese video. She presented us with the image of a unified culture whose essence was transmitted from old to new, she refuted the conflict between nature and technology that exists in the west. Japan never had an industrial revolution; the Japanese are not afraid of technology; technology is a way of getting along better with nature; the Japanese perception of time is non-linear, non sequential; the law of perspective was invented in Renaissance Europe; Multiple viewpoint is the Japanese norm. Through her delivery she sought both to describe or explain the cultural context of the Japanese video works, and also to dissociate it from the precepts of Western culture.

In Keigo Yamamoto's installation we are asked to



The Mythology of Paik

Journal of the Plague
Year by Stuart
Marshall

participate, not only in the event itself, but also metaphorically in the culture it represents. We are faced with two monitors, each showing a blank red screen. One set is placed on top of the other, and before this construction stands a red wooden platform, upon it a pair of wooden Japanese sandals. Upon pressing a remote control button, the tape starts running and on one screen, a pair of feet appears, wearing the sandals. We put on the footwear offered, step onto the platform and try to follow the movements on screen, seeing our own movements on the second screen, watching and responding, trying to match step for step, sound for sound, trying not to fall over in the unfamiliar shoes. The walk lasts a short while then ends, at no particular point, but it is a different coming and going, not the same as the one experienced in Dalibor Martinis' installation.

Elsewhere in her talk, Fujiko Nakaya described TV: 'TV is the Bonsai of reality', everything is reproduced in miniature.

In Stuart Marshall's piece *A Journal of The Plague Year 1984* we find a different view of television, of the ways in which the media function. Marshall's concern is the media reportage of AIDS, the effect of this upon the gay community's perception of itself, the use of disease, or fear of disease, as social control. On five small screens, each presented as a hole in the wall, in five separate alcoves, we are presented with five views, five strands, a mixture of media 'fact' and subjective fiction/recollection. In each alcove, around the aperture that reveals the TV screen, texts have been drawn on the wall in pencil, a graphic extension of the electronic message, a concretisation and a series of clues to the reading of the information we are presented with. This is a complex and serious work that deserves a far deeper analysis than can be given here. It is also a radical video installation, not only in terms of its explicitly political content, but also in its formal construction. It does not rely on seductive perceptual trickery, it does not purport to be sculpture, either by reference or extension, it does

not rely on simple multiplication for impact, but it offers several particular viewpoints that we must consider for ourselves in order to make a coherent reading of the text. In his writings on video, Stuart Marshall has spoken of a quality of 'intertextuality'; here he adopts it as a structural principle of the work.

A CAPITALIST ART

As mentioned earlier, one of the questions immediately raised by many installations is that of numbers; Why so much, so many? and: What does this cost? Over a period of eight days, attending numerous openings, I lost count of the number of TV monitors scattered around Montreal's art galleries. After a morning at the conference in which speakers had consistently appraised video works in purely aesthetic terms, in which installation had been posited as the means by which video art could exist within the museum context, the point was made by a dissenting voice in the audience: these works are extremely expensive to make; to be shown they require considerable technical resources—multiple monitors, multiple vcr's computer control systems, advanced video editing, etc. Thus, these works can only exist within a culture of surplus value, they are inherently an expression of capitalist ideology, regardless of their particular content. The argument was quickly suppressed—it happened conveniently to be lunch time—but was taken up enthusiastically outside the conference hall, in cafes and bars. It was becoming apparent that far from being an oppositional practise (though its distance from TV is not in question) video installation was in fact being used as a tool of appropriation by wealthy museums. The installation, whatever its ephemeral qualities, whatever its 'content' in terms of information, is reducible to object-status. Regardless of whether the piece 'works' in self-referential terms, or whether it possesses qualities of beauty (which many do) we can not dissociate it from a context within which the real issues are politically defined, who controls

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London 1984