

# VIDEO DRONE

Liz Kotz

In a welcome effort to redress the backseat status of time-based media like video in the market-driven art world, this year's Biennial includes eight "video installations" and two extra video screening rooms in the main exhibition galleries. Presumably, the intention is to produce a critical interaction between work in the visual and media arts; unfortunately, the results are dispiriting.

While the incidental use of TV monitors in room-sized installations by Renée Green, Daniel J. Martinez, and Fred Wilson may be a healthy sign—video is now a tool like any other—the superficial engagement with the medium evidenced in these pieces, like the "theory lite" paraded throughout the curatorial essays, only highlights the relatively backward and derivative cast of discussions of cultural difference and identity within the art world. While brighter spots include Shu Lea Cheang's *Channels of Desire*, 1992, which adapts the apparatus of the porn-video booth and the phone-sex line to explore interracial desire, Pepón Osorio's splendidly ornate domestic interior in *The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, 1993, and Matthew Barney's playfully perverse *Drawing Restraint 7*, 1993, any real understanding of cross-disciplinary influences is obscured by the uninformed and hopelessly New York-centric curating. A real genealogy of the tropes of the abject and pathetic, so evident in works by Jack Pierson, Mike Kelley,







Raymond Pettibon, and Charles Ray, should inevitably have led to precursors like Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, but also to media artists like Paul McCarthy, Joe Gibbons, and Tony Oursler, not to mention the process-oriented and durational gallery-based videos of Karen Kilimnik, Simon Leung, Lutz Bacher, Kristen Oppenheim, Larry Clark, Sean Landers, and Cheryl Donegan. The explorations of gender and desire animating the work of this latter group in particular would have complicated the otherwise reductive feminism characteristic of much of the show.

A key site for these explorations, the Bay Area, seems to be a recurring weak spot for the Whitney. Bypassing newer, more difficult work by emerging film/video artists like Craig Baldwin, Cecilia Dougherty, Julie Murray, Leslie Singer, and Greta Snider, the Biennial seems content, year after year, to include familiar and relatively unchallenging work by midcareer artists whose relevance to the present moment seems slight. Indeed, like the Academy Awards, the Biennial appears caught up in a perpetual game of catch-up. Thus, where Adrian Piper's landmark installation *Cornered*, 1988, was overlooked by the Whitney Biennial that followed it, this year we get Green's *Funk Stations*—a far less risky reading of Piper's 1983 *Funk Lessons*.

Fundamentally conservative notions of "quality" and fetishized technical expertise effectively exclude much of the best work in film and video today. Indeed, the

Whitney continually showcases the same core group of blue-chip video veterans. Gary Hill, whose turn to technically orchestrated installations made him a Documenta favorite, has been in every single Biennial since 1983—six times in a row—and Bill Viola has now been in eight Biennials since the initial inclusion of video in 1973. While Hill's installation *Tall Ships*, 1992, is a crowd-pleaser, its advanced computer-based technology and a "we are the world" level of multiculturalism seem a bit old-timey, as does Viola's Stan Brakhage-esque humanist paean to life, death, and the birth of his son. More modest and culturally nuanced works generally fare better. The jewel of the single-channel program is pixel-vision wunderkind Sadie Benning's elegant, sparsely narrated "road movie" *It Wasn't Love*, 1992. Also pleasurable are Jonathan Robinson's *Sight Unseen: A Travelog*, 1990, and Cheryl Dunye's *The Potluck and the Passion*, 1993, a deadpan look at an interracial lesbian potluck run amok.

In general, the urge to harness image-processing capabilities to "political" ends leads to naive and superficial work, as if high-end media producers simply refused to think through the meanings of the technologies at their disposal. Among the low points are Spike Lee's *Money Don't Matter*, 1992, a music video for a new Prince song, its trite analysis consisting of intercutting shots of the homeless with images of Donald Trump; veteran experimental-filmmaker Willie Varela's painful and poorly written *A Lost Man*, 1992; Jeanne C. Finley's *Involuntary Conversion*, 1991, a

sophomoric satire on bureaucratise ("permanent pre-hostility," "soft targets," et al.); and three-time Biennial favorites Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's (and Timothy Martin's) clumsy *Land of Projection*, 1992, in which televised images are projected on a replica of an Easter Island statue.

More interesting as an effort to redefine the political import of media technologies are the inclusions of George Holliday's videotape of the Rodney King beating, 1991, and of collaboratively made public-access tapes like Not Channel Zero's *The Nation Erupts*, 1992, and the Gulf Crisis TV Project's ten documentaries, 1991–92. But even here the museum siting of alternative media is awkward. While the Gulf Crisis tapes had a compelling impact in their initial broadcast, next to the musically paced and hiphop-inspired esthetic of the Not Channel Zero video they seem unnecessarily embedded in an artless and rather dry Paper Tiger TV esthetic.

Particularly troubling is the exclusion of more experimental work by artists of color—like Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, 1991, or Jon Moritsugu's *Hippie Porn*, 1991—that primarily uses white actors or takes on white culture. Critical work of the past decade has endlessly interrogated the commodification of identity politics, in which producers, whether black, Chicano, Asian, or gay, are expected to offer up their identity, their "difference," for the consumption of the mainstream institution and its viewing publics. While curatorial essays randomly quote cultural theorists engaged in the critique of essentialist notions of identity, curatorial practices appear to adhere to their most problematic assumptions.

If the Biennial is to build any understanding of the relationship of film and video—or of activist-based practices such as the extensive video work around AIDS—to contemporary art, it will need to make a commitment both to tracking the relationships of influence among artists and to rethinking medium-based curatorial strategies that isolate film, video, and performance into separate disciplines and histories, actively working against an understanding of the art of the present day.

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