# Seeing

Colette Copeland

Is Video Suffering an Identity Crisis?

Last week on Art Blog (Roberta Fallon's and Libby Rosof's website forum about artists and art events in Philadelphia and beyond), there was an interesting discussion on video art and its problem with identity. Franklin Einsproch from Miami stated that video's 'identity' problem stemmed from the overlap with film, theater, dance and animation. He contended that video is and will continue to be used as a default category, when the hybridization of other media blurs the division of categories, making it impossible to classify.[1] Rosof expressed impatience with video installation, commenting that video did not always give the 'payback' that a film does. Viewers are left hanging, having to look, look and then look some more.[2]

Since video art is a relatively new medium (30+years old), it does not have centuries of tradition and history that other media such as painting and sculpture do. Artists are still experimenting with form and content. One of the challenges videomakers face, is how to educate the viewer in the syntax or structure of video. Video should be critiqued according to the principles of its inherent structure and not compared to film or judged as a poor imitation of film. Early video artists responded to the immediacy of the medium as a means of communication and breaking away from traditional narrative structure. Video also is often compared to TV. Perhaps this is because it is very often shown on a TV monitor. Usually this is not the artists' choice, but a result of the budget constraints within the galleries and museums. Until projectors become as affordable as TV monitors, video will continue to be shown on a flat rectangular box. 000
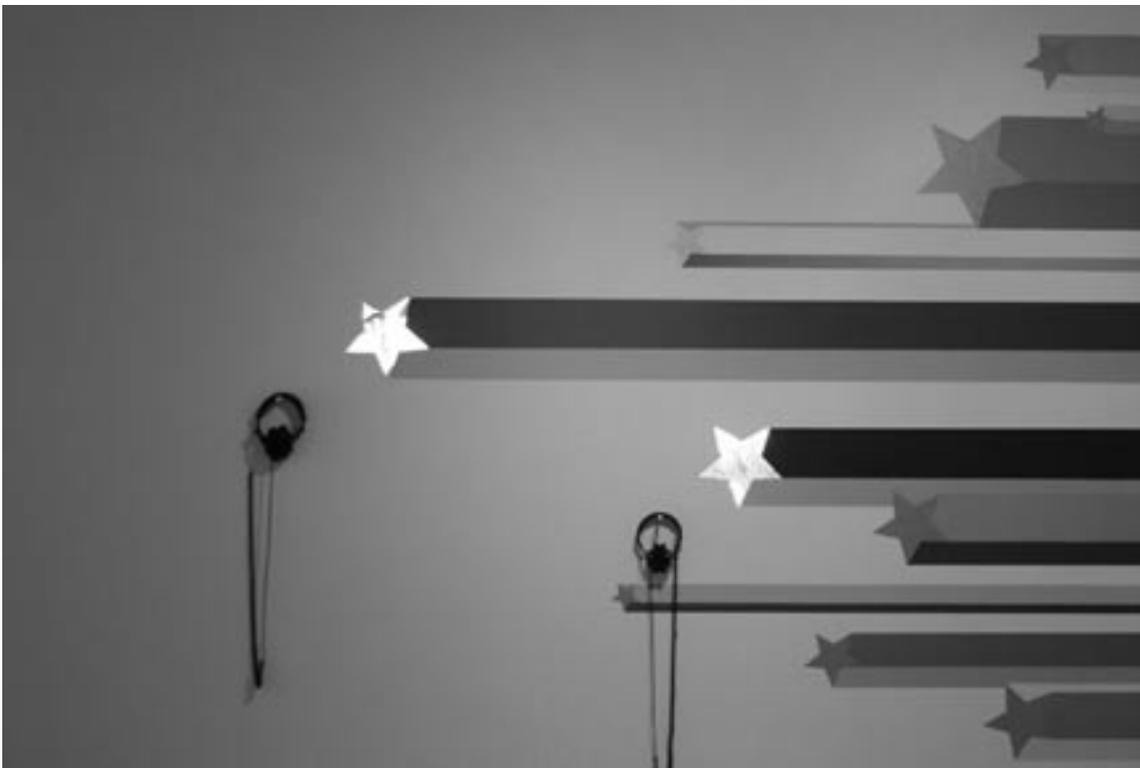
Nadia Hironaka

The Fabric Workshop's current exhibit entitled, *Surface Tension* (through November 14), stretches the syntax of video. Curator Cassandra Coblenz addresses the relationship between the image and the screen and the reciprocity between the two, which creates the visual experience. The title, *Surface Tension* is a metaphor for resistance/resilience. All of the featured artists' works explore the play between surface and depth, as well as rupture the traditional notion of screen. Another common theme throughout the exhibit is voyeurism. The viewer is not a passive spectator, but is implicated into the act of looking.

In the Philadelphia Inquirer's review of *Surface Tension*, writer Ed Sozanski states "Digital technology has transformed video art to the point where method and form have become content."[3] In other words, Sozanski felt that the exhibit 'wowed' its viewers with technology, at the expense of content in the work. While technology features dominantly in the video installations, it facilitates not replaced the conceptual ideas of the artists.

Local Philadelphia artist Nadia Hironaka's installation entitled, *My Stars* invokes the themes of patriotism, political power and globalization. Hironaka created a wall painting of shooting stars, directing the viewer's gaze inside two stars, which houses the two videos subtitled National and International. Each star housed five mirrors, producing a visual kaleidoscope effect. Various vacant and industrial spaces morph into abstract patterns and designs. The soundtrack features clips from different films and had a sci-fi tone to it. As opposed to the large-scale video projections, frequently seen in museums, the intimacy and containment of the work forces the viewer to become an active participant. The whimsical feeling of the wall painting and kaleidoscope images contrasts the more subtle implications of power and control. I was struck with the notion that the similarities between national and international are much greater than the differences. Within the context of current U.S. politics, the artist asks us to question the power of illusion that exists within global governments.

Nicole Cohen utilizes the intimacy of small projections in her work, *Jet Lag*. Like Hironaka's work, Cohen uses interior spaces as a metaphor to comment on contemporary culture. *Jet Lag* features two appropriated photographs of advertisements of luxury jet plane interiors. Two small projections of two figures walking back and forth between the public cocktail lounge and the private sleeping room are superimposed on top of the photographs. The unexpected presence of the translucent bodies disrupts the pristine interior of the spaces. By employing ordinary people interacting with the space in a banal way, Cohen ruptures the seductive fantasy of fame and fortune which advertisers perpetuate to sell their products.

Both Camille Utterback's and Tony Oursler's work deals with the fractured image. Utterback's installation entitled, *Liquid Time*, requires viewer participation in order to activate the video. The artist designed a program, which causes the video to splinter into small fragments or ripples, when the viewer walks into the space. Eleven different crowded urban street scenes in Tokyo are included in the work. Depending on the viewers' body movements within the piece, the video progresses forward or backward. *Liquid Time* challenges the viewer to question his/her role in society, either as a contributor to the urban chaos or as a participant in slowing down the fast pace of technology-driven culture. The viewer is given a choice; whether to increase the frenetic pace or to bow out of the 'race'. Utterback's work attempts to bridge the conceptual and corporeal. Her work creates a dialogue between our physical bodies and the relationship with the interfaces and representational systems of our machines/technology.[4]

Tony Oursler's installation *Wavefront* explores how technology mediates experience. Oursler assembled a sculpture out of TV antennas, which fractures the projection of two disembodied heads. The faces are whispering in a trance-like state, appearing to converse without acknowledging one another. Oursler states that the conversations are fictional interviews of people communing with the dead, which is not readily apparent to the viewer. The murmurings are so low as to render the words intelligible. The viewer inquires whether the harsh mechanical contraption is conjuring or interfering with the illuminated faces.

Ambiguous Icon, the LED custom electronic work by Jim Campbell investigates how meaning is extrapolated and transformed when the amount of visual information becomes miniscule. The reduction of the image to an almost abstract mathematical concept forces the brain to compensate for the lost information. The 'screen' is comprised of red blinking lights, which form a shadow of movement. The viewers' mind sees a low-resolution image of a figure running and falling. The title refers to the ambiguity of poetic meaning and precision of mathematical information.[5] The shadowy silhouette becomes the icon of humankind—struggling for existence.

Recent artist-in-residence Peter Rose's *Pneumenona* is the highlight of the *Surface Tension* exhibit. The viewer enters into a darkened space and becomes immersed within the environment. The viewer first encounters reflections of leaves on a cerulean blue tarp blowing in the wind. Occasionally the wind blows the tarp forcefully enough to reveal a RV campsite in a serene, wooded setting. Once the viewer is lulled into the tarp's tranquil motion, a fan blows the screen up revealing a second projection of another tree, pulsating with staccato bursts of light in a field of darkness. The lights deconstruct and reconstruct the tree in a cubist fashion. The projection

bleeds onto the side walls, creating an eerie ambience fraught with suspense. The architectural and sculptural aspects of the projection define the space, entangling the viewer, as is evident by the viewers' shadow on the rear wall.

Sound is a key component in defining mood and building tension within the work. The ambient sounds of nature: birds, wind, and insects, all transform into tremulous, industrial sounds resembling a military plane or earthquake. The effect is one of impending doom. The motif of veiling and unveiling is a visual metaphor about life. Rose's work asks us to question the appearance of things; to delve deeper beyond the surface, where darkness and meaning reside. Rose ruptures the serenity and illusion of the Thomas Kinkadian utopia, bringing the viewer back to a primal state of being.

And what of the original question of whether video is suffering an identity crisis? Whenever artists present work that challenges the traditional categorizations of art, the public will continue to compare it with whatever they find comfortable within their range of experiences. It is evident from the artists' work in *Surface Tension* that video is a unique medium that, at it's best, will continue to redefine our shape-shifting expectations and perceptions of art.

Endnotes

[1] August 23rd's posting entitled, *Watching, Looking & Performing*, Art Blog www.fallonandrosof.com
[2] August 21st posting entitled, *Video Time* and August 22nd posting entitled, *The Fault, dear Brutus is in the Video*
[3] Sozanski, Edward, *Cool Video Technology, Lukewarm Substance*, The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 31st, 2003, p. H05.
[4] Excerpted from Camille Utterback's artist statement
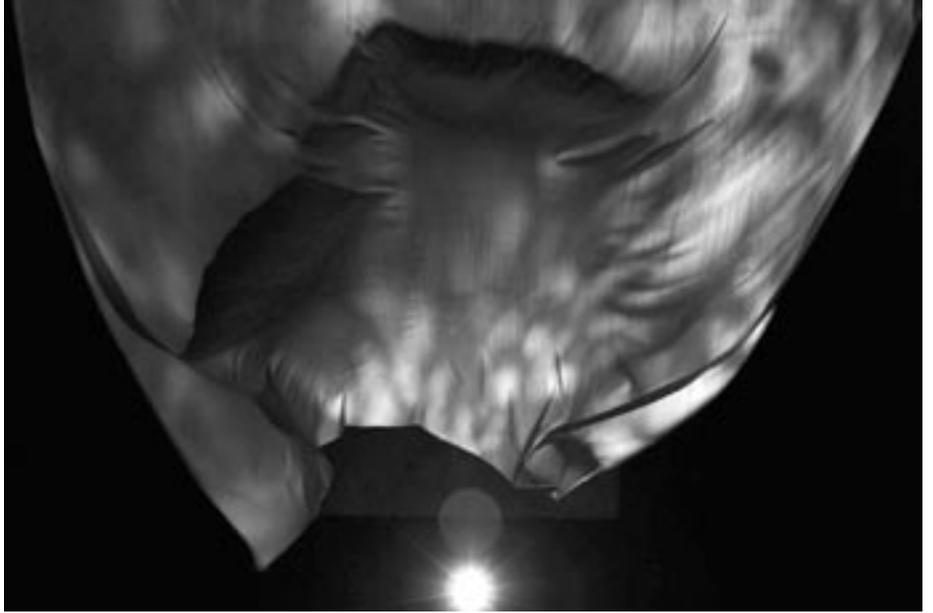[5] Excerpted from Jim Campbell's artist statement

Nicole Cohen

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Peter Rose

Tony Oursler

Camille Utterback