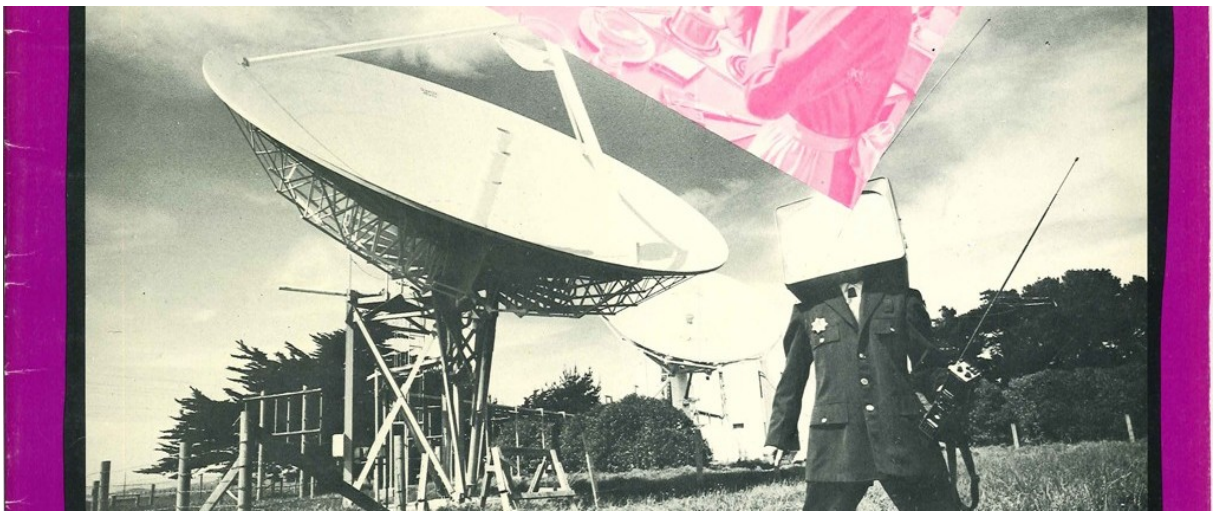


Studio Sessions

Conversation with Steve Seid

By Tanya Zimbardo March 17, 2015

Studio Sessions offers behind-the-scenes access to Bay Area artists, writers, curators, and creative individuals through a variety of tête-à-tête conversations that consider the how, and what, and where of making art. Studio Sessions are presented as interviews, profiles, and studio visits through text, photo essays, and videos.

Steve Seid isn't going anywhere. I reassured myself of this fact after he casually mentioned in conversation that he was clearing out his office. Seid has been a major curatorial force in the San Francisco Bay Area for several decades and will continue to contribute to the field post-retirement from the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. He was involved with various local video art organizations when PFA Director and Senior Film Curator Edith Kramer first invited him to guest-program, later appointing him as video curator in 1988.

Since then, Seid has organized over a thousand (yes, you read that correctly) screenings of film, video, and digital media, accompanied by his often refreshingly funny and incisive texts. His exhibitions at the Berkeley Art Museum include Chris Marker/MATRIX 168 *(1996),* Videospace (*2000),* Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens *(2008), and the co-organized* Ant Farm 1968–1978 *(2004),* Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the Bay Area, 1945–2000 *(2010),* Silence *(2013), and a number of live events as part of the museum's L@TE series. A few of his upcoming projects, like the much-anticipated newly restored print of Steven Arnold's* Luminous Procuress *(1971), starring The Cockettes, took years of persistence. Curating for an archive has often entailed tracking down and preserving works that have been considered*

lost, forgotten, overlooked, and sometimes engaging artists who abandoned working in time-based media. Seid's programming often brought works by different generations together and contextualized Bay Area artists with their contemporaries elsewhere.

A significant history of Bay Area video art is represented among the thousands of videos Seid brought into the PFA collection, including works that reflect the curatorial efforts of artist-run spaces. I would sometimes run into and chat with Seid at PFA during research appointments to view some of these rare titles, including examples of SFMOMA's early forays hosting performance and video. When I invited Seid to participate in this conversation based on our shared interest in the history of performance-based video art, he replied, "As Gary Gilmore would say, let's do it."

Video 80/81, 1981. Cover photo and design by Chip Lord. Courtesy of SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, San Francisco.

Tanya Zimbardo (TZ): I recently met with Stephen Agetstein when he was in town. Both of you have separately mentioned the desire to put online issues of *Video 80* and *Send*. I want to encourage this idea by committing it here to print. Could you say a little bit about your involvement as one of the editors and writers for this publication and the related San Francisco International Video Festival (SFIVF) in the '80s?

Steve Seid (SS): It was the complete invention of Stephen Agetstein and Wendy Garfield, cofounders of the festival. The festival would have a catalog that could be expanded into a magazine. The first issues were in huge tabloid format and the main designer was Chip Lord. It later became *Send* magazine at the advice of Les Levine, then *Video and the Arts*. The distributor got angry that the title changed with every issue. The concept then was a periodical that wasn't necessarily tied to the festival. We had subscriptions, but it was rare that we could fulfill them.

TZ:
I've been going through the issues. It is an invaluable resource—great interviews, festival descriptions, contributions by local arts writers and key artists. For example, Lowell Darling writing under the pseudonym Dr. Ray Orbison.

SS:
And Dale Hoyt writing under the pseudonym Natalie Welch. We had contributors like Bill Viola, Peter d'Agostino, Les Levine. David Ross wrote an introduction to the first issue.

TZ:
I like the funny ads for the SFAI Performance/Video department. I appreciate the artist pages.

SS:
Thirty years later, when we [Steve Anker and Kathy Geritz] were doing the book *Radical Light*, the whole concept of the artist pages throughout was directly inspired by *Video 80*.

[SFIVF] was an amazing experiment, but it caused a lot of upheaval.

TZ:
In what way?

SS:
The basic notion of the festival was that there was this new art form called video art and an international body of work, but there wasn't an audience yet. The underlying sense was that we were not only exhibiting it, but also creating an audience. We made one significant error, though, which was to show this pantheon of artists working at the time. We had a juried process and made invitations, but it tended to be the upper-echelon level of artists. With a few exceptions, we weren't really showing the emerging scene in San Francisco. By pursuing a kind of safer and grander selection (which, to me, were pretty spectacular works), it created a backlash locally. Video Refusé was created directly in opposition to us. They showed anything that was submitted the first year.

The second year, the venues started to pick what they would show. By the third year, it was a curated festival and they fell into the same trap as us.

We were not only exhibiting it, but also creating an audience.

Through these two organizations, the whole strata was covered, from really emerging to fully established artists. Eventually, [SFIVF] opened the Video Gallery, which made the festival redundant. A lot of the energy got diverted. At the demise of the festival in 1986, we had taken over a space that was too big. We got a grant from the city to renovate, but it simply wasn't enough money and the festival collapsed under the enormity of the project. It would have been spectacular if it had happened.

One of the best shows in the Potrero Hill location was a nine-hole golf course [*Artists' Olympics: Miniature Golf,* 1984] with Howard Fried, Paul Kos, Tony Labat, Chip Lord, Phil Garner, and a few others. Howard's piece was pure sculpture, white instead of green felt, with no hole—a beautiful thing on the ground. Paul, in the corner of the gallery, had a 10-by-10-foot square of ice on a slight pitch melting in a specific direction. You were allowed to putt if you wore crampons. I loved that show.

Leslie Singer. *Hot Dog Fat*, 1987. Courtesy of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley; © Leslie Singer

We did George Kuchar's very first video installation, an adaptation of *The Weather Diaries* (1986) in the South of Market space. I was proud of that and helped build it. We built a mock motel room. George and I went to a bunch of Goodwill stores and bought beat-up couches, an old TV with a

big wooden console, clothesline with dirty underwear, and bad motel art. Nearby were installations by Jeanne C. Finley and Chip Lord.

The closing event of the gallery in the Potrero space was Judy [Bloch] and my wedding party.

TZ:
That's fantastic.

SS:
One other thing that I thought was radical at the time was that we arranged to distribute works—five or six titles. Works by Daniel Reeves, Nam June Paik, and others. Our interest was the VHS home market. It was an interesting failure. We got the works on the shelves of many home-video stores. The only one who was doing it well in that area was Les Blank—he was kind of the mentor for all of us.

TZ:
Well, who could resist him and his merch table?

Were there certain exhibitions that stand out for you? That you felt were pushing the medium or display?

SS:
I saw a Doug Hall show at 80 Langton Street that was astounding. There were heroic flags and video projection. It was during that period when Doug was exploring the semiotics of power. Early '80s. Around that time 80 Langton also exhibited some of Mapplethorpe's riskier photographs. It was such an interesting space because it even had the physical attributes of the underground. It was in an off-alley. Even though they continued to do great work around the corner for decades, it was more formalized in the new space.

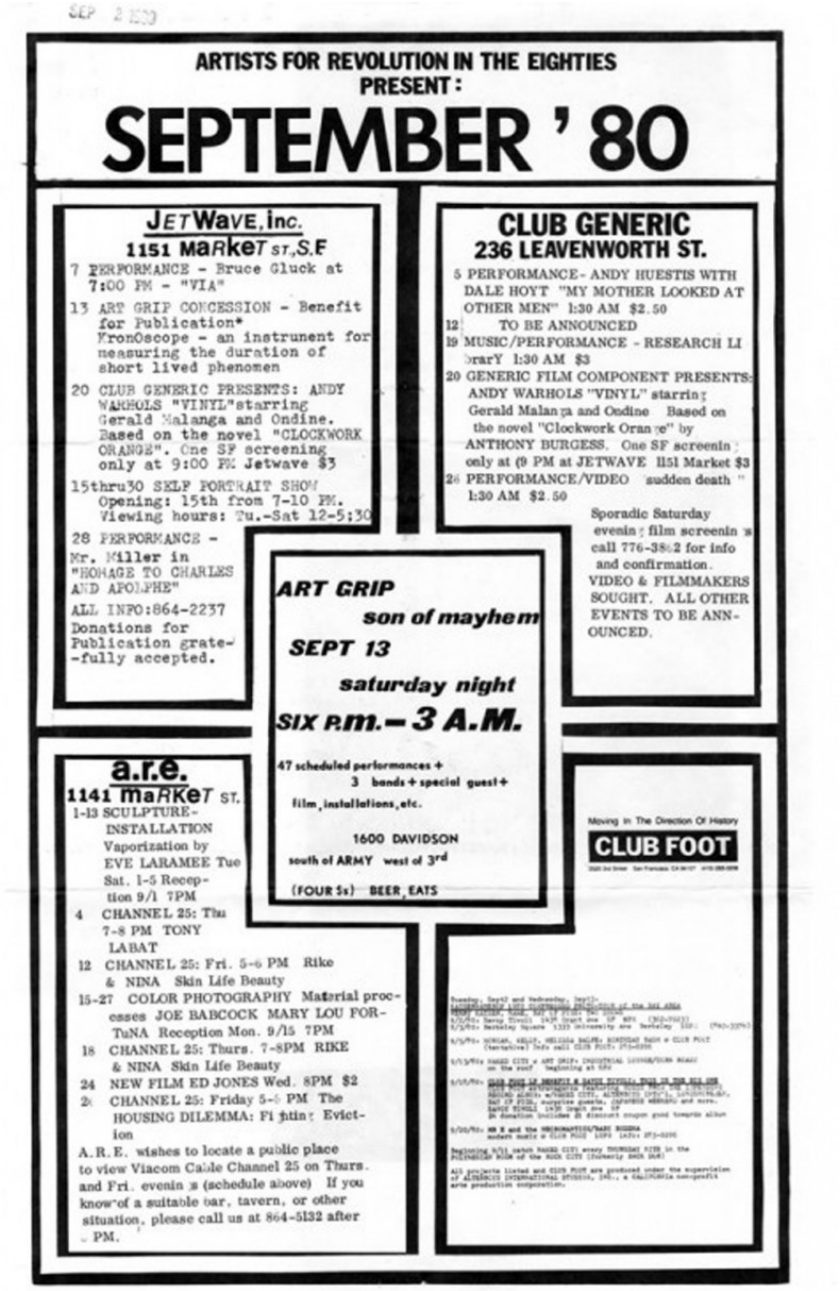
Carl [E. Loeffler] did some great stuff with La Mamelle's artist television series.

TZ:
Do recall watching that on television?

SS:
No, not in real time. They were doing a lot of performance as well. That was where I met Bruce Yonemoto, when he would come from L.A. to do something in the gallery. Tony Oursler was around a lot.

Henry Rosenthal had this wonderful cable-access television show called "Files: Things That Are Kept and Why" (1975–76). He would bring in artists like Tom Marioni and talk about their fetishized objects and why they have them.

TZ:
How about some of the artist-run galleries that were alternatives to the first alternative spaces? Jetwave, A.R.E., A-Hole Gallery, Q. Novelties…? A few of them also showed works on television.



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Flyer, 1980. Courtesy of SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, San Francisco.

SS:
A.R.E. I liked a lot because it was dominated by video artists. I was friendly with Glen Scantlebury, who was one of the main people there. I went to Club Foot a bit. There was Valencia Tool and Die.

There were also two great motel interventions back then. The more ambitious one took place at what is now the Phoenix, a Tenderloin motel built around a central court. The motel had closed-circuit porn back then, so it was perfect for running artist-made videos as well. Tony Labat, just out of grad school, was one of the ringleaders. This was 1978. The second one took place in a small motel behind the Stud at 9th and Harrison. Every room was prepared. You'd wander through the building glimpsing tableaux like it was *Satryicon.*

TZ:
And there was also the video program later at Artspace's restaurant Limbo.

SS:
Next to it, the Billboard Cafe would have guest video DJs. Tony Labat would DJ and invite others. I got invited and it was a real thrill because I was only beginning to curate at that time.

Marshall Weber had a real presence and influenced many of his peers. His gallery, Martin-Weber, is where I first saw Alan Rath's work. That place burned and resurfaced as Artists' Television Access.

TZ:
There were artists of that generation who were challenging the earlier resistance of conceptual artists to the stage. Do you recall seeing video work in clubs? I'm thinking of someone like Judith Barry who chose to show certain titles at art venues but also at Mabuhay Gardens. She brought a video array version that documented her SFMOMA group performance *Kaleidoscope* (1978) to Mabuhay in 1981.

SS:
I met Judith when she was coming out of Cal, but showed her works considerably later.

I don't remember videotapes at the Mabuhay, but spent a lot of time there because I was part of that world. I was writing about music and culture for alternative weeklies. The punk scene was the most vital thing going.

NCET poet-in-residence Joanne Kyger's *Descartes*, 1968. Courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley; © Joanne Kyger.

TZ:
What about Joe Rees? I went to the Target Video screening you organized in conjunction with your *Bruce Conner: Mabuhay Gardens* exhibition.

SS:
I knew Joe from back in the day. He had that huge studio of his own and could invite bands to perform there. Back then there was a conflict between venues and the idea of what was punk, hardcore, new wave, etc. Joe managed to overlap a bunch of the different camps. By the mid-'80s the punk scene had pretty much ebbed. Joe was legendary but had moved away. The *California Video* (Getty Research Institute, 2009) show reintroduced him to a lot of people.

TZ:
Apart from periodically showing work from that era, are there any qualities of the scene—the ethos, the energy—that influenced how you approached curating?

SS:
I guess what subtly informed me was working with the SFIVF, which was a cross-venue exhibitor. There was never a set way to show anything. Every situation had to be invented. There was a screening on a ferry in the bay. There was a screening at a diner with a TV monitor in every booth. There was a cab you could call and watch videotapes on a small monitor. These were attempts to destabilize viewing. I worked for several years at the Mill Valley Film Festival. They had the Video Fest. We were an autonomous unit, we had our own venue. We had an auditorium and had to invent atmosphere.

We had an auditorium and had to invent atmosphere.

When I got to PFA, it was the first time I found myself in a formal rectangle with rows of seats. I spent a lot of time trying to intervene in that screening space. For twenty-five years I played music before every one of my shows that was supposed to be connected to or play off what you were going to see. I used to do a lot of live events and bring in musicians.
One of the funnier events I did in this vein was a marathon screening with Lynn Hershman Leeson of her single-channel video work.[1] It was when Second Life was big. She would appear onscreen as her avatar and periodically answer questions. She never appeared [physically] and we never disclosed she was up in the booth with her laptop. That was one of the high points of tomfoolery.

TZ:
Several programs marked shifts in the artistic use of new technologies and media formats. Christine Tamblyn's *She Loves It, She Loves It Not* (1993) on CD-ROMs or the group *PowerPoint to the People* (2004) come to mind.

SS:
There was a period of interactive CD-ROMs, notably *Freak Show* (1994) by The Residents,[2] published by Voyager Press in LA, which later became Criterion. For a few years they underwrote the production for all of these discs. I did an exhibition in the lobby of the museum theater where visitors could play CD-ROMs of artist-generated games.[3] People were fascinated and stayed until you kicked them out. The populist appeal of the medium won out the museum and they extended it.

Former NCET staff and participants at the opening of *Videospace*, 2000. Back row: Paul Kaufman, Warner Jepson, Stephen Beck, Rick Davis, Alan Hinderstein, Bill Roarty. Front row: Joanne Kyger, Loren Sears, Ron Pelligrino, Woody Vasulka, Penny Dhaemers, Richard Felciano; photo courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley.

TZ:
I have to thank you for introducing me to Leslie Singer's performance-based work in the '80s. What a revelation that was for me. I was reminded of when I watched all of Anne McGuire's works for the first time years ago, when I was a TA for Media Arts at CCA. I was completely floored.

SS:
Anne worked at PFA. I just loved her work. *I Am Crazy and You're Not Wrong* (1997) is Anne's early apotheosis as the queasy performer. When I was entering that world as a writer and curator, there were a couple of essential young artists like Leslie Singer, Dale Hoyt, and Cecilia Dougherty. Dale had just triumphed with *The Complete Anne Frank* (1985). Cecilia was doing her early feminist lesbian work.

TZ:
Cecilia seemed to be ahead of the curve with performance reenactment, not only *Fuck You Purdue* (1987), but also riffing on canon with the all-women send-up of Lennon and Ono in *Grapefruit* (1989).

SS:
Grapefruit was a landmark work. It was a great appropriation of a typically masculine space. I also was astounded by what Tony Labat was doing in the '80s—it was some of the best work coming out of the Bay Area. I did the preservation of the work he did as a graduate student. And then there was another wave like Anne, Torsten Zenas Burns, and Anthony Discenza (HalfLifers) cutting their own territory.

TZ:
Which video preservation projects did you decide to begin with at PFA?

SS:
The very first tape I preserved was by Andy Warhol. It was an absolutely unique, one-of-a-kind tape that had been completely forgotten. Warhol made it [*Water,* 1971] for a show Yoko Ono had organized for John Lennon's birthday at the Everson Museum of Art. He set the camera on a tripod and shot the water cooler at the Factory. People come to the water cooler and have conversations. The theme of the Ono show was water. She supposedly wanted to immerse the tape in water. Fortunately Warhol refused and the tape survived.

TZ:
An early artist project for television that I saw profiled in *Send* magazine is the Dilexi Series.[4]When you showed it at PFA in 1991, the program notes indicated that Yvonne Rainer's *Dance Fractions for the West Coast* (1969) had been considered lost. It was paired with Anna Halperin's *Right On*, her Dancers' Workshop collaboration with Studio Watts. Your work with this kind of material anticipated the more recent resurgence of attention to performance and dance choreography in contemporary art.

SS:
I slightly knew Yvonne Rainer, and when I contacted her about the tape, she was like, "What are you talking about?" She recorded it while she was in a residency at Mills College in 1969.

Jim Newman ran the Dilexi gallery in the 1960s, which was kind of an alternative space although it was commercial. He decided that he wanted to go outside of the gallery and saw television as an interesting playground. He approached KQED-TV in 1968. The Dilexi Foundation underwrote production, and KQED provided broadcast slots and studio equipment. Many of the works were made specifically in the Bay Area. Stephen Agetstein met Jim and he disclosed that he had this series. When I went to PFA, I got Jim to give us the full series and transferred all of them.

Frank Zappa sent his work too late. I had the announcer copy introducing the pieces on air, including "Here is the substitute!" Never did show that one. The tapes were of all different lengths and they were shown throughout the summer of 1969. They weren't conforming to television time norms.

TZ:
How did your sleuthing process to find National Center for Experiments in Television tapes develop?

SS:
The NCET was at KQED from 1967 until 1970, when they had a falling out and left the station, and by 1975 they were no more. It was born of the notion that television was a wasteland and needed the injection of artists' creativity. First called the Experimental TV Project, it was cross-disciplinary—artists, poets, composers, engineers. It initially came out of a discussion with the Rockefeller Foundation when they were interested in funding the San Francisco Tape Center, which had moved to Mills. KQED had a radical presence; it was really a progressive station back then.

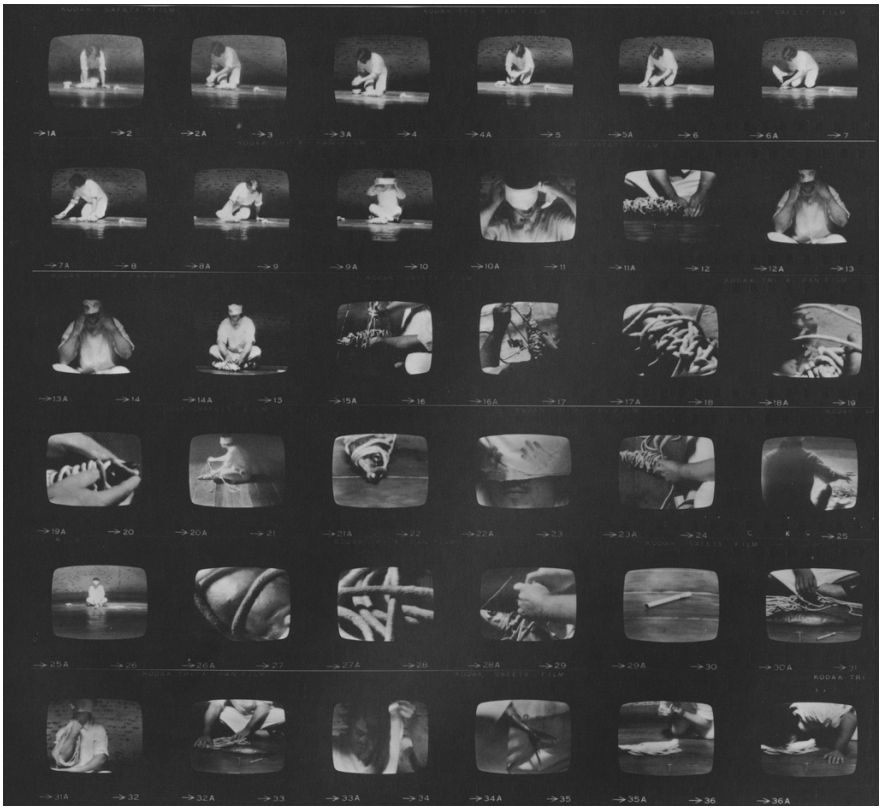
TZ:
I'm interested in how they [NCET] were given the privilege to experiment without an outcome.

SS:
The original director, Brice Howard, had come out of educational television. He had considered it an intellectual vacuum and believed in experimenting without the mandate to produce anything at the end. KQED's grievance with the Center was that they weren't producing content that was of benefit to the station. The Center continued outside the station but it changed the work drastically; they couldn't afford studio-level equipment anymore and began producing their own tools to do image processing—synthesizers, colorizers.

The unusual thing was that a lot of the artists left the Center and never made electronic art again.

A few years later, one of the NCET's interns from Dallas had heard that the station was going to throw out the original videotapes. He pulled up to the dumpster, filled his trunk, drove back to Dallas, and placed them in a university. They were uncatalogued until I showed up in the 1990s. When I was wandering through the vault I discovered additional tapes placed randomly on shelves. I took a bunch of them back to Berkeley and began preservation. I did preservation on 30–40 tapes and there is more to be done. The unusual thing was that a lot of the artists left the Center and never made electronic art again, or they returned to other disciplines. Warner Jepson continued to be a composer. I tracked him down and he had some videos. Warner would do this unique thing of hooking up a Buchla synthesizer to the Templeton video mixer and then he would start playing music through the synthesizer to modulate the colorizer and alter the image of his face on the monitor. These self-portraits were made late at night in at the Center and they are stunning.

TZ:
To my knowledge, *The Videola* (1973) and NCET concerts on that video sculpture was the first show dedicated to video art at SFMOMA. *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* toured to SFMOMA in 1969, and the short-lived Bay Area chapter of Experiments in Art and Technology organized *Inside/Outside*, a participatory video and sound event as part of that presentation. I found this fantastic newspaper clip profiling EAT coordinator Merlin Stone. When asked what she was going to work on next, she replies, "I'd like to laser-beam a light show on the moon."



Terry Fox, *Turgescent Sex*, 1971; camera: George Bolling. Courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley; © Estate of Terry Fox

SS:
Loren Sears, the filmmaker from the first wave at NCET, claimed that he was involved with that presentation. Don Hallock's *The Videola* was a very important display invention at the time, and wasn't shown again until I installed it [*Videospace: National Center for Experiments in Television 1967–75*] in 2000. [5] It is now represented in the collection.

Brice Howard, who wrote the book *Videospace* (1972), was completely against the notion of the corporate television signal and thought abstract imagery would create a meditative space to liberate yourself. There are hundreds of hours of undulating video imagery, but only a few composed programs. Stephen Beck made specific works with music attached to them. One of my favorite artists was Willard Rosenquist, who did wonderful analog work with tabletop Mylar landscapes and bounced light off it. It looked completely synthesized but were in fact analog objects colliding with light, synthesized in their capture. In one tape, an engineer offscreen controlling the record decks asks, "Well, what should we do?" And Willard replies, "Anything." I thought that was the aesthetic modus operandi.

One of the joys of being at PFA was that I then began to meet artists, like Paul Kos, who would give us work. And one day George Bolling walked into my office...

TZ:
Tell me about George. As you know, I had identified a documentary he made on the artists associated with the Museum of Conceptual Art in SFMOMA's archives around the time that he passed. I've discussed that period of the de Saisset's video program and support of Bay Area conceptual art under director Lydia Modi-Vitale with several of the artists like Howard Fried, Paul Kos, Joel Glassman. He has been described as a sensitive and thoughtful videographer. [6]

SS:
The shame is I didn't know him well. He may have already been living in Los Angeles. In his basement he had a box of tapes and gave them to me—several Terry Fox masters, Paul Kos, and others he had shot, including his own work. The most successful piece to me was Terry Fox's *Turgescent Sex* (1971). It was pristine considering what those cameras could record. I have this wonderful tape [*Clutch*, 1971] of Fox moving in relation to a lozenge of sunlight slowly crossing the floor of his studio.

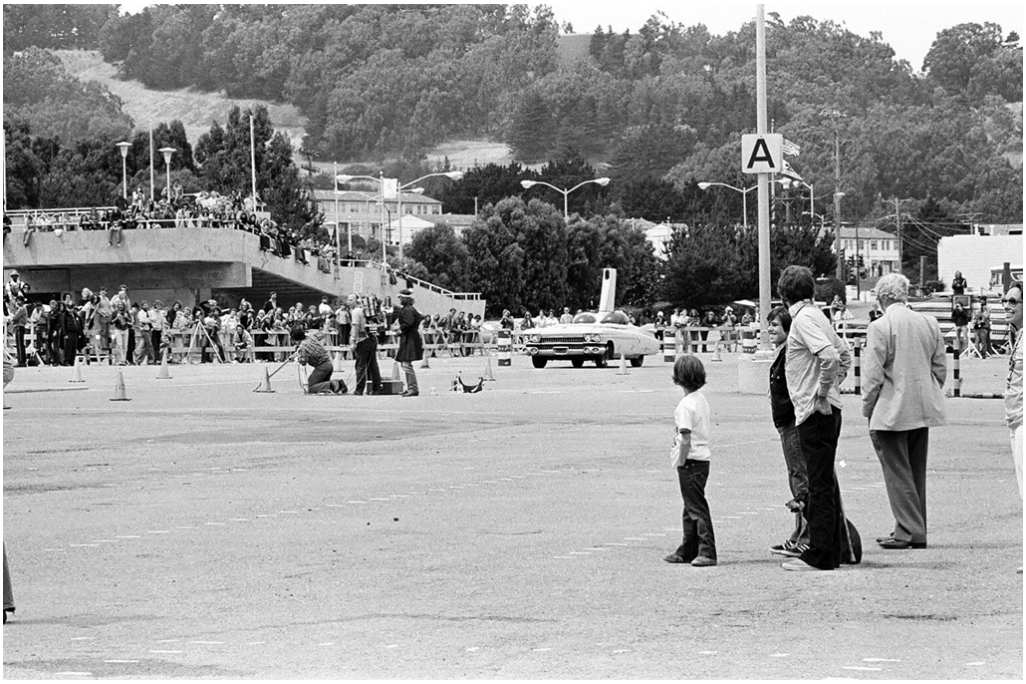
TZ:
I once viewed at PFA the different passes of recording this one piece [*The Rake's Progress: In the Service of Art,* 1971]. Lydia Modi-Vitale sits on the side and music is playing. Terry and George are working with the camera as he applies a substance to the monitor.

SS:
Yes, that is a terrific performance. Terry Fox not as just the performer but as author. He taped himself applying grease to the monitor screen. Then played that footage through the monitor while

he was removing the grease. It creates a dizzying ontological question about appearance, reversibility, stability.

Ant Farm. *Phantom Dream Car*, 1975; Courtesy of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; © Ant Farm.

Curtis Schreier and Chip Lord of Ant Farm in the Phantom Dream Car, 1975; photo courtesy the artists; © Ant Farm.



Ant Farm, *Media Burn*, Cow Palace, San Francisco, July 4, 1975. Courtesy Chip Lord; photo: Diane Andrews Hall.

TZ:
A fascinating and rarely shown document in the MOCA archive at BAM/PFA is this wonderful walk-through of the space narrated by Tom Marioni as he points out different performance residue.

You've had a long relationship with Ant Farm. I've heard that you are currently working on another project on them.

SS:
I'm writing specifically about Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975). BAM/PFA has the Ant Farm archives. They saved everything. You can track through their correspondence, receipts, sketches, how that performance evolved into what it became. It is an attempt to be granular, to get into the minutiae of how something like that comes to pass. *Media Burn* was clearly theorized three years earlier. One of the things I want to address is that the anti-television sentiment was just the surface of a very complex collision of ideas and images. It wasn't simply about putting "your foot through your television screen" as the Artist-President would have it. It was equally about the monolithic power of mass media and our expulsion from any chance at interaction. Much of that centralized power still persists, but do you know anyone now who would want to put their foot through their iPhone? I think people are mesmerized by the same things Ant Farm was fighting against. It wasn't a Luddite sentiment by any means, but [*Media Burn*] had more to do with a liberated consciousness.

Notes

1. Seid organized a seven-hour program of Lynn Hershman Leeson's video work on June 1, 2008, as part of *Life*^{n} (*Life to the Power of N*), a series of exhibitions in 2008 highlighting the work of Hershman Leeson. Initiated and coordinated by SFMOMA, the project was jointly organized by the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the de Young Museum, the Hess Collection, New Langton Arts, SFMOMA, and 01SJ: A Global Festival of Art on the Edge at the San Jose Museum of Art.
2. Seid included *Freakshow* in *The Residents' Freakshow CD-ROM*, *John Sanborn's Media Band and Other Works* on October 28, 1993, and in the PFA lobby preceding *Icky Flix Remix: Videos by The Residents, 1975–2010* on June 9, 2010.
3. *Retrieving the Future: Interactive Narrative in Multimedia* was on view at the Berkeley Art Museum from July 13 to August 23, 1994.
4. The Dilexi Series included 12 works by Arlo Acton and Terry Riley; Julian Beck and the Living Theater; Walter de Maria; Kenneth Dewey; Robert Frank; Anna Halperin; Philip Makanna; Robert Nelson and William T. Wiley; Yvonne Rainer; Edwin Schlossberg; Andy Warhol; and Frank Zappa.
5. Co-curated by Steve Seid and Maria Troy, associate curator of the Wexner Center, the retrospective *Videospace: National Center for Experiments in Television, 1967–1975* was presented at the Berkeley Art Museum from September 14 to November 15, 2000.
6. For a discussion of George Bolling's tenure in the 1970s at the de Saisset Art Gallery at Santa Clara University as the first museum video curator on the West Coast, see Zimbardo's "George Bolling: Invisible is the Medium," SFMOMA Open Space (http://openspace.sfmoma.org/2013/03/george-bolling/).