Issues in the New Cinematic Aesthetic in Video
Most of the historically important functions of the human eye are being supplanted by practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a “real,” optically perceived world. If these images can be said to refer to anything, it is to millions of bits of electronic mathematical data. Increasingly, visuality will be situated on a cybernetic and electromagnetic terrain where abstract visual and linguistic elements coincide and are consumed, circulated, and exchanged globally. —Jonathan Crary

The transformation by new technology of our familiar experiences of the visual into the cybernetic terrain described by Crary, and predicted in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan, has triggered an unprecedented sea change in video installation. First of all, a crossover, or even merging, has taken place between the languages of video and film. This is, in part, a result of the widespread use of video projection, which has liberated the video image from the spatial restrictions of the monitor and magnified it hundreds of times, creating a movie-sized image that relates not to the object, but to the surrounding architectural space. This physical shift has, in turn, detached the video image from its associations with the “democratic,” everyday, documentary/dramatic narrative language of television.

There is an inherent dichotomy contained within this situation. In spite of this independence from television, the spatial inclusiveness of the new cinematic video installation derives specifically from the integrating properties of the new electronic media, including television, as well as the Internet, which has overtaken television as the unifying global tool, rather than from the more old-fashioned medium of film.

And yet, I would argue that many younger artists, such as Douglas Gordon, Diana Thater, Sadie Benning, Stan Douglas, and others, have turned to the familiar, reassuring language of the older moving image technology of Hollywood film to make the rapidly disappearing, obsolescent values it represents more visible again. They have done so as a reaction to the traumatic effect of the sweeping power with which new technology has transformed our social and cultural environment into an all-embracing, interconnected, cybernetic force-field.

The cinematic aesthetic in much current video installation is a hybrid of old and new technology. The relationship of the video image to physical space has changed. The small electronic image/s, in often awkward dialogue with monitors and other
sculptural objects by which they were contained, have been replaced by large-scale two-dimensional images that position the viewer in a direct dialogue with architectural space. This, paradoxically, returns the viewer to the "Cyclops" gaze of television. The multiscreen clusters of monitors, frequently in stacks, blocks, or rows, or the often complex constructions that characterised sculptural video installations during the 1980s, took the eye away from the mesmerising pull of the single image. The body moved around a more classical Euclidian space, experiencing recognisable boundaries between physical objects, the interiority of the electronic images, and the architectural surroundings, often articulated in theatrically constructed environments.

The new cinematic form of video installation envelops the viewer in a more inclusive sensory experience that recalls both the multiscreen expanded cinema works of artists like Paul Sharits and Tony Conrad, and the perceptual experiments of Peter Campus and Dan Graham. A major shift has taken place, away from the object and towards a more internal, psychological experience, in which space is no longer tangible and theatrical, but illusory and filmic.

This new aesthetic was first developed in the instant feedback, performative, perceptual experiments with the camera by artists such as Campus, Graham, and also Bruce Nauman, David Hall, Les Levine, Frank Gillette, and Ira Schneider, which formed the content of much late 1960s and early 1970s video. Campus's use of projection was especially relevant to the current two-dimensional aesthetic. His work was to have an important influence on Viola's own later use of projection.

Campus presented the viewer with his/her own ghostly, lifesize, unframed image, recorded on a closed-circuit camera and projected onto a large screen in a darkened room, in an enveloping self-confrontation involving both a psychological, as well as a physical, space. The release of the video image from the monitor began to dissolve the space between the viewer and technology. In the resulting heightening of sensory participation, the viewer became an active constituent of the work; indeed, without the viewer, the work would not exist.

This level of involvement was possible because of what McLuhan has described as television's and video's tactile power. McLuhan argued that, unlike film and photography, television and video are not primarily visual media, but an extension of touch rather than of sight. Since the video image is low definition and does not give detailed information of objects, but a diffused outline through an electronic mosaic of horizontal lines and dots, the viewer fills in the spaces and completes the picture, which induces a more intense involvement with the screen. This tactility, or extension of our nervous systems, results in a kind of osmosis—what McLuhan describes as a tattooing of the technology's message directly onto our skin. If all media can be argued to be an extension of our physical and psychic selves, electronic media create the most all-embracing effect, a kind of total field awareness, or simultaneity.
The possibility of a reversed fusion, of the body onto technology rather than vice versa, was achieved in Hall’s *Vidicon Inscriptions* (1975), a radical experiment in video in which the viewer’s image becomes imprinted onto the fabric of the video monitor. Nam June Paik had already broken through the membrane between the monitor and the outside world in works such as *Magnet TV* (1965), in which he distorted the television image by applying a strong magnet to the monitor.

Hall took this movement a stage further in *Vidicon Inscriptions* by exposing the monitor’s vidicon tube to a strong light, triggered by the viewer’s approach to the monitor along a corridor. Filmed by a closed-circuit camera, in a process almost like flash photography, the viewer triggered a light to flash, causing her image to be burned onto the vidicon tube and to appear on the screen as a ghostly static image, layered over images of previous viewers. This fusion of the viewer’s image with the technology collapsed the space between viewer and image. Such encounters had also been previously explored in physical terms by artists such as Campus, for instance, in *Interface* (1972).

*Vidicon Inscriptions* is one of the earliest demonstrations of the profound intrusiveness of the camera, and of the gradual interpenetration of technology and the human body and psyche. The results of this penetration are depicted in Tony Oursler’s work, the central concern of which is the violence, sexual disturbance, and general psychological trauma visited by the individual’s inescapable envelopment by mass media and technology. In Oursler’s installations, the image has become separated from the monitor or screen. The monitor has disappeared, and the body, symbolised by rag dolls, becomes the screen onto which action is projected. The video projector is made visible, positioned close up to the body. It operates, as Silvia Eibelmayer has remarked, as a sinister, intruding presence, an anthropomorphic aggressor “at [which] the dummies scream back... in fright... and... impotent anger.” The projector’s relentless stare also evokes a filmic metaphor stretching back as far as the *Kino-glas* of Dziga Vertov: the lens as all-seeing eye. Once understood primarily in religious terms as a spiritual presence, the omnipotent authority of the eye is translated here into an invisible electronic presence that saturates both our body and soul, with disastrous consequences.

If the projection of video images onto objects separated the physical object from the source of projection, in Oursler’s *Organ Play* (1994), technology has apparently fused with the body completely. The organ in the jar speaks words projected by the video projector, recalling McLuhan’s remark that man’s relationship with electronic technology is total and inclusive: “Man is beginning to wear his brains outside his skull and his nerves outside his skin; new technology breeds new man... Man is being transformed into technology.” The boundary between the physical object and the projected image has disappeared.

The sculptural depiction of the body using groups of monitors placed in anthropomorphic stacks or clusters seems, by comparison, old-fashioned and concerned with the body’s physical
presence. In two classic examples, Marina Abramovic's *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995) and Gary Hill’s *Inasmuch as it is always already taking place* (1990), the bodies seem not so much to be fused with technology, as to be contained by it. Their fragmentation in both works is formal, recalling both the erotic montages of Surrealism and the taxonomic seriality of nineteenth-century photography, including the newly discovered X-ray, through which the body’s internal substance and structure could be observed. Yet, our eye is still called upon to complete the picture suggested by the electronic fragments. Stuart Marshall has argued that the separation of different parts of the body into video fragments contained within a larger formal physical structure refers not only to classical Freudian theory, but also to the Lacanian cycle of anxiety and relief as depicted in the Victorian music hall act of sawing the lady in half, only later to discover her intact after all.

The body appears intact and without physical frame or substance in both Hill’s *Tall Ships* (1992) and Viola’s *The Crossing* (1996). The format of the darkened corridor in *Tall Ships* evokes Nauman’s early corridor structures. At the same time, its darkness moves the viewer into a different kind of physical and psychological orientation in space, similar to that experienced in Viola’s installation *Tiny Deaths* (1993). The interactivity of the images in the space of *Tall Ships* suggests an inclusive, sensory viewer participation of a truly McLuhanesque kind, whilst at the same time revealing the impossibility of real fusion with the Other.

Artists such as Hill, Viola, Thater, and Gordon have all merged real-time video psychology with the dreamlike fantasy psychology of film to create a new cinematic experience of the projected image in space. Viola’s shift to a less sculptural use of space can be seen in *The Greeting* (1995), and other recent works, in which the monitor has disappeared completely and images appear in large-scale projections, or projected onto objects. In Viola’s most recent work, the single, towering portrait-format projection increasingly dominates, taking on the painterly presence of large-scale religious painting. Cinematic references are still present, however, partly in the predominance of the large single figure, which evokes the close-up images of cinema.

The cinematic can also be traced in Viola’s use of the filmic technique of slow motion, which he adopted as soon as video projection became a dominant feature of his work, unquestionably influenced by the slow-motion techniques of avant-garde American filmmaking, which he had studied in school. The degree of slow motion used in *The Greeting*—a forty-five-second shot slowed down to twelve minutes—is only possible to achieve with film (*The Greeting* was made using 35mm film). The video image would quickly have disintegrated at anything approaching such extremely slow speed. The extremity of the slow motion lends the sequence a cinematic quality, recalling the filmmaker Maya Deren’s description of slow motion as a “time microscope.”

Douglas Gordon’s video projections address a psychological space that marks a turning point in video installation’s shift to
the two-dimensional. In his work, a debt owed to the 1970s and Warhol has been transformed by a sensibility informed by 1980s television, cheap video, and advertising. It also epitomises the new preoccupation of video with film. His slowing down of Hitchcock’s classic film Psycho to twenty-four hours in his video projection 24 Hour Psycho (1993) was directly inspired by using the slow-rewind button whilst watching old movies on his VCR at home. The result of this simple device, enlarged to film scale, is a radical alteration of our perception of real time, as the viewer is caught between two experiences of time: the imagined original speed of the film footage and the visual reality of the slowed-down video image.

The cinematic scale of Gordon’s video image further complicates our reading of the image, since the size of the screen deceptively suggests a cinematic experience which is then undermined by the image’s mediation through the instant, present-time quality of video, blown up to a monumental scale. The screens in Gordon’s large-scale video projections are always freestanding, inviting us to view the image from either side. This device recalls film pieces from the early 1970s, in particular Michael Snow’s Two Sides to Every Story (1974), in which a 16mm film loop is projected onto both sides of an aluminium screen using a switching device. The double-sided screen device has also been used in recent works by Douglas and Viola.

Gordon transforms his double-sided image into two separate projections in his work, Between Darkness and Light (After William Blake) (1997) made for the Münster Sculptur Projekt. Like Thater’s Broken Circle (1997), also made for Münster, Gordon’s work is a site-specific project that uses the particular spatial characteristics of the chosen site. A large single screen bisects the underground passage of a pedestrian subway. On each side two Hollywood films of opposing philosophies are projected: The Exorcist (colour, 1973) on one, and The Song of Bernadette (black and white, 1943) on the other. Each represents the struggle between the opposing poles of good and evil. Imagery from each film bleeds into the other. The subway space functions as a metaphorical purgatory, in which the struggle is played out. Gordon’s work is cinematic in both content and format. The languages of video and film have become completely intertwined, but it is film which predominates in the end. Yet, the viewer is also returned to the all-absorbing “Cyclops” TV-type viewing of the single-screen image, here writ large, and operating somewhere between the living room, the cinema, and the street.

Diana Thater’s video installation Broken Circle, made specifically for the Buddenturm, a medieval tower in the city of Münster, displays a similar transformation of the language of Hollywood in a spatial format which both evokes and critiques that of classical cinema. Thater installed a 360-degree filmed sequence of film-trained and wild horses in progressive panoramic shots on the four floors of the tower. She explained that the single shot that makes up the piece can be easily recognised as one taken from a John Ford or Akira Kurasawa film—the kind of second unit shot
in which horses gallop towards and past a still camera. The work plays itself out like a movie within the winding spaces of the tower. The first floor shows the credit sequence—a clear distancing of the piece from its own technology, which is acknowledged only in the use of the separated-out colours of the video spectrum—and an embracing of the Hollywood film format. The remaining three floors display a narrative of wide shots of galloping horses moving around the walls at increasing speed, culminating in a fixed shot of the herd disappearing into the distance on the fourth floor. As with Gordon’s, Thater’s images engage with the architecture of the space, and the viewer’s experience of the piece is determined by this relationship.

In both form and content, video is now mimicking the qualities that had always pertained exclusively to film. The use of the word video as a defining term for a particular area of contemporary art no longer appears to be either necessary or relevant. Furthermore, the disappearance of the object from video installation returns the viewer to that state of sensory inclusiveness, in which the possibility of extending consciousness into the technological realm has emerged. But the disappearance of the more traditional experience of the visual from video is not necessarily a negative prospect, as Viola has remarked:

Art has always been a whole-body, physical experience. This sensuality is the basis of its true conceptual and intellectual nature, and is inseparable from it . . . . In my work, the visual is always

subservient to the field, the total system of perception/cognition at work. The five senses are not individual things but, integrated with the mind, they form a total system and create this field, an experiential field which is the basis of conscious awareness. This is the only true whole image.4

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