

## They Were Just Playing Around

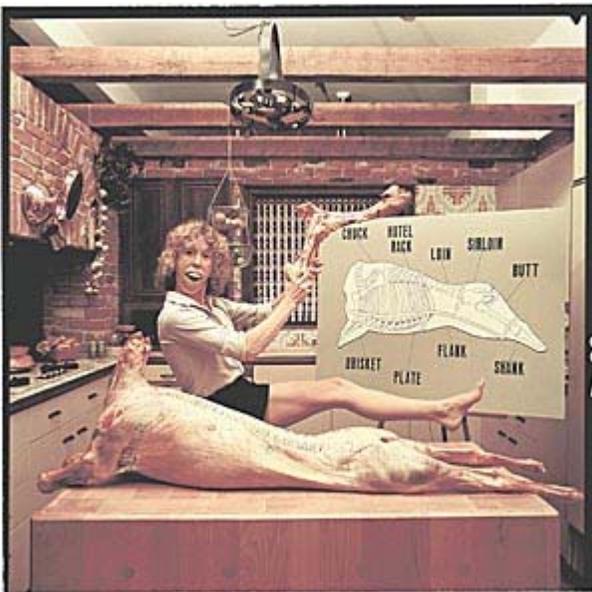
**But Experimental Videos From '60s and '70s California Are Now Recognized as Art**

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD, *Los Angeles*

"Video at the Getty," said David Ross in a matter-of-fact tone that could not, given the circumstances, help sounding like an incredulous question.

The former director of art institutions on both coasts was waxing nostalgic recently in an auditorium at the Getty Museum of Art. Invited to help celebrate its landmark "California Video" exhibition, running through June 8, he was eventually joined on stage by other gray-haired pioneers of electronic media and performance from the 1970s -- John Baldessari, Bill Viola, Suzanne Lacy, Paul McCarthy, Doug Hall and, by video hookup, William Wegman -- all of whom had worked in universities and art collectives around California back in the day.

A mood of pride and bemusement filled the hall. It was like a high-school reunion where the kids from shop class, dismissed as pot-heads and losers by their peers, had grown up to be recognized as the true visionaries.



*Long Beach Museum of Art Video Archive, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute*

Suzanne Lacy's 'Learn Where the Meat Comes From'

For the world's richest art museum to have lovingly preserved and installed famous and obscure works by some 58 artists, and produced a highly readable catalog of essays and interviews, underlines the exalted status of video now. Not everything here deserves lavish praise, by any means. But give the Getty credit: Since the turn of the millennium, when the museum's leaders rebranded it as a player in the field of contemporary art, they have done so with seriousness and care.

The decision in 2005 to buy the video archives from the Long Beach Museum of Art, where Mr. Ross was deputy director from 1974 to 1976 (and arguably the first curator of video art anywhere), signaled that the Getty wanted to be comprehensive (it likes to buy in bulk, when it can) as well as a supporter of local products. The consulting curator Glenn Phillips and his staff have spent the past two years overseeing digital transfers of material created in various outmoded formats that was scratched, decaying or worse.

Almost no one at the time regarded these taped documents of goofy antics -- Mr. Wegman spraying his underarm with an entire can of aerosol deodorant, Mr. Baldessari writing the sentence "I will not make any more boring art" for 32 minutes and 21 seconds -- as valuable, least of all those who created them. Videotape was like "toilet paper," in the words of performance artist Martha Rosler. Mr. Ross recalled that New York dealer Leo Castelli showed an almost parental indulgence toward the artists in his gallery who chose to "play around with video."

The exhibition has tried to maintain the carefree and low-tech origins of the work, although the Getty's splendor always makes joking insouciance hard to bring off. Most of the pieces are displayed on small monitors built into pods that rise on stalks from the floor, with two sets of headphones attached. The museum is promoting the show with psychedelic graphics; the mushroom-like pods seem designed in this spirit.



*T.R. Uthco/Ant Farm/Electronic Arts*

'The Eternal Frame' by Bay Area art collectives T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm

In the view of Mr. Phillips, California video in the late 1960s and '70s was distinguished from New York and European video by "a sense of fun." A stroll through the show certainly elicits more laughter than angst. Bruce Nauman's "Walk With Contrapposto" from 1968 is a deft art-history joke. As the artist jerkily moves his body according to Renaissance dictates for posing an erect statue, he silently demonstrates how one medium's ideal can look ridiculous in another. Ms. Lacy's "Learn Where the Meat Comes From" adopts the style of a Julia Child-type cooking program circa 1976, except here the host enjoys food so much she eventually grows fangs and assaults the side of lamb she is preparing.

Backdrafts from Vietnam, feminism and racial ferment can be felt in much of the work. More surprising are the purely abstract studies in color and electronic distortion that came out of the Bay Area. The National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco served as a think tank for anyone interested in video during the '60s and '70s. A number of artists here -- Joanne Kyger, Warner Jepson, Stephen Beck -- did stints there. Ms. Kyger's "Descartes" from 1968 tackles the mind-body problem by blending texts from the philosopher with feedback images, tape loops and other video techniques designed to present someone engaged in thinking about thinking and the fundamentals of reality. This dense piece about mind and body is worth the 11 minutes it takes to unfold.

The show surrounds established figures such as Mr. Baldessari, Mr. Nauman, Mr. Wegman, Eleanor Antin and Chris Burden with many lesser-knowns, permitting all an almost equal chance to assert their lasting importance. Some artists more associated with New York (Tony Oursler) and England (the Kipper Kids) were included because they went to school, taught or exhibited in California.

This attempt at providing context may be necessary for historians but not uniformly enjoyable for visitors. One viewing will have been plenty for a fair amount of the work I saw here.

The highlight for many will be "The Eternal Frame," one of the most infamous works of the period. In 1975 two Bay Area art collectives, T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm, decided to re-create the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination where it had occurred, at Dealey Plaza in Dallas. Begun as a gesture of exorcism and nose-thumbing mockery of the media's obsession with JFK, the videotaped re-enactment involved dress up (Mr. Hall was the Art President and Chip Lord was in drag as Jackie), a Lincoln Continental and lots of fake blood.

What the artists didn't expect was that Dallas citizens would embrace the performance, seeing it as a tribute and welling up as they remembered the 1963 events. The artists have the courage to show these reactions as well as the anger of some San Franciscans who, when shown the video in 1976, objected to the desecration of history. Audiences at the Getty can watch the fascinating, multilayered results on a Philco console TV while sitting on a sofa, with JFK memorabilia on the walls and copies of LIFE in the magazine racks.

The archival material stands up better than many of the Getty's recent purchases in the last rooms. Mr. Viola's "Sleepers" from 2002 disappoints. A collection of six oil drums filled with water, each containing a sunken video monitor showing a person asleep, lacks his usual ability to enchant. Mike Kelley's "Candy Cane Throne" from 2005 doesn't prosper as a stand-alone work apart from the sprawling installation about high-school rituals in Detroit of which it's only a small part.

One exception is Jim Campbell's "Home Movies 920-1" from 2006. A masterwork of technical ingenuity and beauty, it consists of light emitting diodes arranged in 40 columns that are spaced a few inches apart, each only an inch-wide. Each LED chip projects tiny pieces of a black-and-white image on the wall behind. Together, they make up a shifting image that seems always about to come into focus but never does.

To judge by the thronged galleries when I was visiting, the Getty is doing a popular service as well as a scholarly one by collecting video. The origins of MTV and the YouTube culture can be found here in these lowly experiments. Pay a visit and you can see a medium travel from disrespect to dominance.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications**

In the this Leisure & Arts article "They Were Just Playing Around," a review of the "California Video" exhibition at the Getty Museum of Art, the role of Jackie Kennedy in the film "The Eternal Frame" was incorrectly given as Chip Lord. She was played by Doug Michels.

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