

Video Art Is Born

Medium
Rare

BY KYLE GANN

For years "video art" meant little more than curved laser shapes on a green oscilloscope screen, accompanied by bloop-bleepy music. More recently, video has appeared in operas by Robert Ashley, Elodie Lauten, and William Harper, but always under the same constraints that limit taped sounds, never as an equal partner to the more exciting music.

Suddenly in one week I saw two performances in which video became an *improvising* medium with an artistic suppleness that for the first time makes the form seem open-ended; write in the history books that 1987 marked the birth of a new medium, 20 years in gestation. The Kit Fitzgerald/Peter Gordon *Spectaculo* at La Mama E.T.C. Annex (I attended October 11) and the Ed Tannenbaum/Maggi Payne collaboration at New Music America in Philadelphia (more about that festival next week, when I've recovered from it) were similar in technique but highly individual in sensibility, and both sported a panache that pushed the technology into the background, where it belongs. Let's celebrate our newfound maturity: the medium is no longer the message.

Spectaculo was a series of vignettes, Gordon's music alternately accompanying, illustrating, and interacting with Fitzgerald's fluid images. Gordon has a knack for incisive simplicity, making some of his work with the Love of Life Orchestra the cleanest and most listen-

able art-rock around. His biggest failing, as with so many improvisers, is self-indulgence. "Blue" Gene Tyranny, who played amplified/alterd piano, almost possesses the opposite fault: he provides less of his elegant pianism than we're eager to hear. In *Spectaculo* (assisted by Eric Liljestrand on guitar and Eric Feinstein on French horn) Gordon and Tyranny's talents fit snugly, bringing out each other's best and creating a music with an understated, intelligent sentimentality. Only twice did a verbal phrase intrude, a whispered "Do you remember?"; it was enough to set a tone, and not a speck too much. Even though Gordon's sax improv hails from a much hotter tradition, the calm classicism of Satie was what most came to mind. When Tyranny stopped boogying for a serial break, plunging for five seconds into a Stockhausen klavierstück texture, the music would plop right back into beat as placidly as if nothing had happened.

The music's mood drew definition from Fitzgerald's varied images, which conveyed atmosphere rather than narrative. At times she sketched childlike pictures on a computer board (which it transferred to the screen), changing colors as she went, a little reminiscent of Captain Kangaroo's magic drawing board. Elsewhere she played optical illusions with scenes of deserts and domestic animals, flashing negative images in a frenzy that matched the music's crescendo. The most impressive analogue came when different colored rectangles radiated from the screen for each note Gordon played, and one image epitomized the evening's down-home humor: two miniature rocking chairs set (and filmed) on the grand piano strings were anthropomorphized when Tyranny made them jump around by playing violently. At its weakest *Spectaculo* approached a near-commercialism that would have made high-class public TV, and at its best it sublimated a complex technology into the warmest, most natural expression possible.



LINDA ALANIZ/MARTHA SWOPE ASSOCIATES

Kit Fitzgerald and Peter Gordon

My one complaint, and I feel like a broken record, concerns the amplification. In such a small hall the instruments didn't need it, and I didn't need the headache. Now that so many rockers are working outside rock's usual auspices, they need to become aware that artificial loudness is an easy and obvious means for granting authority to mediocre music. *Spectaculo* was insulted by the strategy.

The series of *Technological Feets* Payne and Tannenbaum performed October 7 were more process oriented, but dancer Lynette Kessler drew enchantment from their conceptual austerity. As she danced, Tannenbaum's computer froze her image, one layer at a time, from

the top down (a technique Fitzgerald also used). Her twirling motion became an onscreen anatomy lesson, full of startling revelations. What gave the piece its breathtaking poetry was the variety of her gracefulness: no pose repeated another, and each wrote a different haiku about the human body. Tannenbaum showed equal ingenuity with various light-producing objects that he swirled on camera for a kaleidoscope of color. Those who saw only the films at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation last May would have been amazed at the depth the live dancer added, and the temptation to watch her instead of the screen was maddening.

Payne's live-synthesized music was entirely successful in a way which is unlikely to bring her much critical praise: her

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mellow repetitions provided the visuals with so inconspicuous an atmospheric frame that afterward I could hardly remember what the music was like. Closing one's eyes, though, immersed one in an inviting ocean of sound, and I imagine that the project would have possessed far less charm without her music.

The best art of these 1980s (and both pieces are strong candidates) exhibits a quality of self-restraint, of perceivable limits and clear intentions which are necessary in an age in which art has no guidelines. Technology, as it becomes available in homes and department stores, quickly loses its artistic content, and ultimately future audiences are only going to flock to see work that acknowledges the ways in which humanness remains unchanged. Poetry atrophies, as Pound noted, when it gets too far from music, and music atrophies when it gets too far from dance. Video will probably atrophy when it gets too far from the body. It's great to see that there are already artists who realize that. ■

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