

The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

Video: Surprises and Disasters

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Metropolis Video at the Kitchen
Ron Clark at the Whitney Museum
Lynda Benglis at the Kitchen

Surprises are intrinsic to art. In the process of making art, artists may tap the infinite source of possibilities that is our common unconscious. When you go to see art, you have, therefore, to be ready for anything. Three videotapes shown this month ran the gamut: one unlikely success, one fine work strangled by pedantry, and one unexpected disaster.

When *CBGB Video* was shown one night at the Kitchen, it seemed reasonable to expect a vaguely interesting "look-at-them-then" show, more pointed toward punk rock freaks than the video audience. "The footage was shot, at first," said Leanne Mella, one of the Metropolis Video group who made the tapes, "because it was the end of the summer and we liked the music and it seemed like a good idea." In effect the tapes were shot without profound aesthetic intent, although they are in fact very professional, shot with a three-camera setup and a switcher. The end result, however, after the 20 hours of material was cut to about two, assembled and set up as a three-monitor installation, was something else, something that could be appreciated not only by the punk rock aficionados that dominated the audience but by video freaks as well.

The material involves simple shots of the bands at work during their early time — 1975 — including The Talking Heads, The Heartbreakers, Blondie, and Tuff Darts. But unlike the heavily-directed material that passes for live band video on the air, *CBGB Video* retained a looseness and intimacy which left room for that earnestness and uptightness that seems to be an intrinsic element of punk rock. In fact, it is very probable that the black-and-white video and the loose (but not sloppy) style of shooting were essential to the communication of the material, and that a broadcast color version would have obliterated the vibrations of the young contenders.

But whatever the virtuositities of the shooting might have been, they were greatly amplified by the use of a three-monitor setup. Multi-monitor presentations have fallen into disfavor lately, partly because they were overused in the late Sixties and early Seventies, when it was hard to see anything shown on less than five monitors at a time. But the use of multiple monitors for *CBGB Video* worked because the material was rhythmic, and therefore the multiplication of images became the visual amplifier for the beat of the music as it came across in the visual gestures of the musicians. For the couple of hundred people who viewed the tapes at the Kitchen, the use of three separate sets

of three carefully matched monitors also helped to make the viewing work for the big audience.

Ron Clarke's *Dialectical Facts* is a beautifully constructed videotape that extends and develops the narrative ideas that he introduced in his earlier piece, *Doubt*. Using what appears on the surface to be a simple device, he develops a complex pattern of nuances that gradually add up in the viewer's mind to something approximating a plot in conventional narrative. The device is to take a series of actions or events — people walking down a street, people sitting or standing together, or an individual performing a simple action, such as looking out of a window. These small events performed without emotion are then cut into small parts and intercut with each other to create a continuity by association that is reinforced by a third-person script of brief comments, such as: "I first met her on a plane to Berlin." "In the same year I joined the PCI" "She worked as a writer for a well-known American travel magazine." "There were a lot of police carrying automatic weapons." "Outwardly, our relationship did not seem to have changed." The viewer's natural tendency to create cause-and-effect relationships gradually creates a sense that something mysterious and political is being described from the point of view of two lovers and another woman. It is as if the entire work were a series of glimpses into a larger and completed pattern which is left for the viewer's intuition to develop.

Unfortunately, near the end of the work, Clark becomes impatient with this elliptical process. Suddenly we find ourselves confronted with a lecture on proper communist political ideology, especially as it refers to Chile under the junta. While only the most fascist minded can view without rage the reign of the pigs we let loose on the Chilean people, the suggestion that the equally uptight materialist ideology of doctrinaire communism is a viable alternative for the already oppressed Chileans is ridiculous.

Lynda Benglis' and Stanton Kaye's *The Amazing Bow-Wow* was a totally different kind of surprise. An interesting and often powerful sculptress, Benglis has made some effective videotapes in the past, and this is her first for quite a while. The tape is beautifully shot and edited in color, with black-and-white for low-light-level situations. But in content, the tape is a disaster. It is the story of a couple (Benglis in a blonde Twenties wig and rig and Kaye as her bearded husband) who run a carnival sideshow with a human-size hermaphroditic talking dog (yes), with elaborately constructed genitals. It could be funny, or even sad, but the whole thing is done with such a campy, inept style, that a sophisticated highschool group would turn it down.