

MARY LUCIER, *The Kitchen*

Climactic changes in the artistic and economic environments have had notable impact on the development of video art. A number of galleries have abandoned what they found to be the unprofitable practice of trying to sell or distribute artists' videotapes (they never had the commodity appeal of unique art objects or even photographs). At the same time, nonprofit arts organizations have become aggressively involved in cablecasting artists' video, advancing collaborative approaches to the medium and a higher awareness among artists of its social functions. The few museum showcases for video, such as the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art, have also begun exhibiting a greater number of issue-oriented video documentaries by artists or about the art world.

Much of the video medium's moder-

nist "self-criticism from within" championed by early video art experimentalists has yielded to a more "outer" and literal social criticism—video critiques of the "media environment." Fewer artists today seem interested in perceptual explorations of the unique technical features of the medium, while more have taken to parodying the content of, or providing serious programming alternatives to, commercial TV. Economics and social consciousness notwithstanding, in the evolution of its adversary position artists' video has come much closer to becoming artistic television.

Against this backdrop the original visions of only a handful of the earliest video experimentalists have survived and matured. For these it seems that the "systems esthetic" of the video installation has become the most fertile ground for participation in the "tradition" of advanced painting, sculpture and inter-media forms. A recent video installation by MARY LUCIER at the Kitchen stands out as a paradigm of this genre.

Paris Dawn Burn was a marvel of concision, astutely exploiting the latent properties of the video medium to generate manifest imagery with powerful symbolic resonance. The work serially presented seven recordings of the sun rising over a church dome. Each black and white tape was played in overlap-

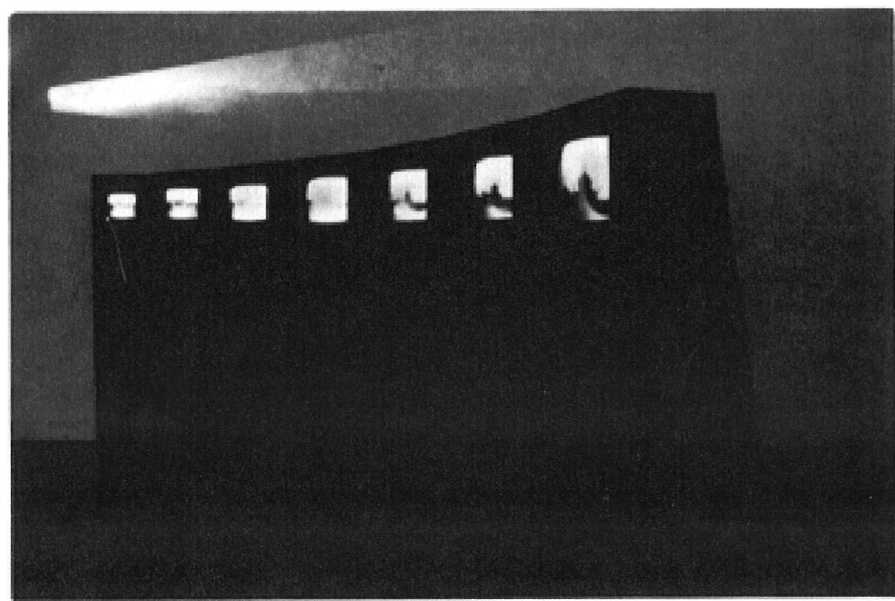
ping sequence on one of seven monitors of increasing size, placed on platforms arranged in a wide arc. A color slide of the scene of the sunrise was projected behind the monitors; it did, like the audio track of morning sounds, heighten the real-time verisimilitude of the work. Lucier's signature as a video artist is the burning of the camera's vidicon tube—its light-sensitive "eye"—and the recording of it as an image on the tape. Here, when played back, that intense ball of sunlight seemed to scar the inner surface of the screen. Literally tracing the sun's ascent, each scar also marked its shift of position from the previous day, since the use of the same camera for each of the seven tapings allowed the previous days' burns to register accumulatively on each successive screen.

Laserings, Lucier's other installation at the Kitchen, involved the burning of the vidicon tube in real-time. A helium laser gun suspended from the ceiling aimed a beam directly at the eye of a suspended live camera. A live monitor displayed erratic burn spots and optical diffractions as the free-swinging laser and camera shifted positions owing to natural vibrations in the room.

Laserings, however, seemed rather more of a technical exercise or formal study, compared with the synergism of form and content in *Paris Dawn Burn*. The initial monitor image of a sedate pre-dawn cityscape served as a picturesque foil for the calculated multifaction of the mechanism of this illusion. "Sacrifice" of the video camera (a damaged vidicon tube must be replaced at considerable cost) is the factual outcome of the artistic, ritualized witnessing of sunrise over church.

If this is "antivideo," it is far less polemical than, say, the work of Douglas Davis. Lucier stages her media martyrdoms as a mode of distancing the viewer from the illusionism of video, seeking to objectify its automatic mediation of perception. Her burning of the video "eye" (anthropomorphically identified in the viewing act) is a surrogate for the "masochism" of such artists as Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Herman Nitsch, who have contrived to de-personalize and objectify their own bodies through actual or simulated self-abuse. Shock attraction, however, is not Lucier's methodology. The uniqueness of her conception lies in its formally redeeming virtues. She considers the burn markings "a kind of calligraphy." Indeed, the video scars of *Paris Dawn Burn* were a most elegantly executed epitaph.

—RICHARD LORBER



Mary Lucier, *Paris Dawn Burn*, 1978, installation at the Kitchen.