

The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

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Reflexions

Madeline Burnside

Garden of Electronic Delights
William and Louise Etra
The Kitchen

Her body responded when I touched her nipple and she emitted a high-pitched whine. She lay on a low table covered in black velvet. The two video screens beneath her clear skin changed from blue interrupted by rainbows to a warm purple.

This transparent body was a cast of a reclining woman. Silver shapes marked her nipples and pubic mound, and wires attached to these were connected to the input of the video monitors that were set into the surface of the table. Touching the shapes affected either the image or the sound. At the edges of the table were 14 rectangular copper plates, three of which had buttons set into them. Touching the buttons also affected monitors, and the intrusion of any shape, such as one's hand, over the figure's chest (where the larger of the two screens was located) appeared immediately in blue on the screens, having been picked up by an overhead camera.

In another piece, *The Fourth Dimension*, input from two cameras was mixed on a large Advent screen. One camera was focused on a visual plane slightly to the right of the projector; the image was then doubled in a kaleidoscope effect, so that moving behind the projector from the right reduced one from a pair of images to a fat, two-headed creature, and finally to a line that disappeared into itself. The other camera was focused on a hidden oscillator that measured these movements. The grid of the oscillator and its waves of disturbance were clearly visible in the lower half of the screen.

While this exhibition shows the work of a group of artists, these two reflective/reflexive toys dominated the gallery. Technically ambitious and physically large, they drew the observer by their mere presence and then further involved him/her through demanding response — if you didn't do anything, neither did the screen.

This type of environmental video serves to demystify some of the daunting qualities of works that fall in the avant-garde, high-art category. As a way of involving the audience they create a science-fair atmosphere in which the audience is trusted by the artist to in some way create the work for themselves, and is also given

a broad permission of behavior. Waving your arms in front of a deKooning is not considered to be a socially acceptable way of perceiving it or investigating its potential, but bodily movements are encouraged by the Etras. However, for some reason they have chosen to maintain the adept-layperson separation by concealing the technical aspects of the piece, which become magical to the audience in much the same way that many garage mechanics make even their simplest operations seem mysterious in order to keep you from doing your own work and rendering them redundant. This, for me, did not add wonderment or increase my pleasure where, for example, having the hidden oscillator-camera setup revealed to me did. What purpose was served by the mystery? The unknown origin of the grid lessened its interest as an image.

The Etras and other artists in this show, Lou Katz and Laurie Spiegel, contributed another aspect of video to this exhibition in the form of stills from computer-generated video tapes. This technique, first used in the Sixties by Nam June Paik, still has visual possibilities to offer video artists as a source of experiment. Spiegel's work of this type was the most interesting in that she achieved a woven, rug-like texture in her dark patterns by separating colors into almost pointillist marks. Threads of hue disappeared behind adjacent sections of the design, and then re-emerged in a mathematical pattern that was humanized by the tactile quality of the various weights of "thread."

More formal sculpture was also present. Joel Battle showed two bas-reliefs formed by what appeared to be a woman's torso protruding through a stretched sheet of cream-colored plastic. Glenn Applemat contributed a fortune cookie jar in the shape of Chairman Mao Tse Tung's head, with his cap as the lid and a long tickertape fortune/political statement spilling from his mouth.

Laurie Spiegel and Louise Etra reworked a piece built by Spiegel's father, Gabriel Spiegel, in 1930 in which a child-sized mechanical doll sat in a high chair, waving her arms and legs. In the new work the doll held two strands of recording tape which were tied to two other, similar threads from each of which were suspended a red plastic apple. The apples contained small gongs that were sounded when the apple was shaken by an observer or by the strands of tapes from the doll's moving hand. This piece, called *Happy Apple Environment*, was filled with Laurie Spiegel's musical composition of gong sounds, broadcast from a tape recorder. The macabre solemnity of the doll and the deep tones of the music contrasted with the smiling cartoon faces on the apples. ●