

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO
MUSIC
PERFORMANCE
DANCE

REVIEWS

Manhattan short cuts

Robert Wilson/Video 50, at the Kitchen, New York, December 1982; *Ishmael Reed/Personal Problems*, at the Kitchen, November 1982; *Image Process* (Mimi Marton, Matt Schlanger, Connie Coleman and Alan Powell, Merrill Aldighieri and Joe Tripician, Central Control, Sarah Hornbacher, Julie Harrison, Maureen Nappi and Mark Lindquist, at the Kitchen, December 1982

ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER

ROBERT WILSON is known primarily as a man of the theater. His spectacles, which have been called a theater of images, demonstrate the conspicuous consumption of time in their molasses-in-January slowness. The characters are generally arranged in tableaux vivants. Action often involves nothing more than providing startling disturbances of the stillness of the tableau. The figures, like characters from Dickens, are distinguished by odd, telling gestures and twitches.

Wilson's use of language in the theater has often been pre-verbal, or relied on the kind of half-understood repetitions of words found in opera. Underlying it all were the surrealist principles of surprise and disassociation. Video, however, has come to be an important sub-genre for him. How does a man adapt an extreme theatrical vision to the special needs of television? Wilson has continued to pursue the themes that obsessed him in theater, treating them in a more intimate and abbreviated form. Extreme slowness has been replaced by a more pizzicato tempo.

Wilson's earliest video project was part of a multi-media performance, *Spaceman*, presented at the Kitchen in 1976. Short tapes were displayed on banks of monitors assembled inside a plastic envelope or aquarium the size of a small room. The tapes combined short stories with wordless tableaux suggesting an astronaut in a spaceship. His next project was *Video 50*, a series of 100 30-second spots, or *entre actes*, originally designed for French (INA) and German (ZDF) television as an occasional substitute for commercials. (The spots were eventually also shown on Swiss and Belgian television.) This was followed in 1982 by the 30-minute prologue to *Dealman's Glimpse* [see *Afterimage*, December, 1982], a wordless tale of domestic

murder, produced by Lois Bianchi, funded by the Program Fund for the Corporation of Public Television, and shown on American PBS stations. Europe has been a consistent supporter of Wilson's artistic endeavors; he is currently finishing *Stations*—13 episodes totaling 57 minutes—for INA and ZDF. Each episode is based on one of the following—fire, earth, air, metal—and features a small boy and his parents. In each the boy has an experience: the viewer must decide if it is real or not.

Video 50 is the most radical of Wilson's experiments with broadcast TV because it challenges the very fabric of the medium. The little surprises or everyday magic of each episode, and the act of presenting them in the context of regular programming, are a deliberate manifestation of surrealist shock, disassociation, and magic. Wilson takes an essentially elite form and situates it within a popular medium—what would be in another's hands a form of *épater le bourgeois*, or a deliberate art strategy. Placing "art" in a mass medium—newspapers, magazines, television—was a deliberate play by artists in the late '60s and early '70s. Aimed at a broadcast audience, Wilson's spots serve a different, gentler purpose—almost populist, like a music hall review or the entertainment quotient of regular commercials. In America they are shown in museums and galleries as a continuous cycle. As a cycle, rather than isolated "spots," certain episodes appear repeatedly with slight alterations. Taken together, these changes begin to read like plot development, and the collage of semi-related parts starts to seem like a story you can't quite get a handle on.

Intended for a multi-lingual audience, the playlets rely on pantomime to speak a universal language. Music by Alan Lloyd underscores the action like piano accompaniment for silent movies. At other points, grunts and creaks which know no country add sound texture to non-verbal events. Individual episodes are striking mini-movies whose effect depends on shattering the viewer's expectations—e.g., a door creaks shut under its own steam; a disembodied hand/arm darts out after the lock catches. Many rely on the difference between photographs and reality to create an shadow-box effect, like Joseph Cornell's work transformed into theater. Photographs or magazine illustrations are collaged with live characters, and the scene is activated by noises or small movements on the part of the live performer. In three distinct episodes, a parrot on a perch appears against a blue sky, then against a red desert, and finally, very large against a city skyline. In the first two instances, the action consists of small movements of the bird's eyes and feet. In the last, the impact of the scene relies on a typical surrealist scale change. The parrot is transformed from household pet to the monster that ate the

world. In another episode, a man and woman are arranged in a tableau from pulp detective fiction (he is the robber and she is the victim). They appear to be cut-outs, arranged like a pop-up book against a city that falls away at their feet. A revolving close-up of the figures reveals that they are living "dolls." She winks, breaking the illusion that what we are looking at is camera animation of a period illustration. Wilson himself appears several times in a dark business suit, perilously balancing and almost falling from a narrow ledge in front of a waterfall. When the scene loses some of its terror, as the viewer realizes the waterfall is merely a photograph, Wilson's elegant clumsiness remains eye-catching.

Several scenes change their meaning through repetition. One sequence opens with Lucinda Child's lavishly painted eyes staring at what appears, through a deliberate ambiguity of space, to be lucite jewelry boxes. Subsequent spots reveal that she is watching bread toast in a toaster. The last time we see this activity, smoke coils out of the toaster. The burnt toast pops up, and Childs says "Damn." The art here relies on making a common domestic activity seem extraordinary and an elegant woman seem ordinary. A similar spot features a circle of windows facing a wood. White curtains are driven inwards by a storm. This scene appears several times as a kind of poetic glyph for loneli-

Top: frame from *Video 50*, by Robert Wilson. Bottom: staff and crew of *Personal Problems* (1982), by Ishmael Reed.



Afterimage, February 1983

ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York, is currently working on a history of video.

ness, the sort in which Edward Hopper specialized. In the room's final appearance, an elderly woman enters and stares out the window before closing it against the storm. Her presence alters the universality of the scene, rooting it in the specific loneliness of old age.

Some of Wilson's mini-tableaux are spectacular, others are less adventurous. Seen in one sitting, the spots lose their shock value. In their original setting, with the lapse of time and memory between episodes, these little magic bullets shooting into the living room must have been a truly special occurrence.

Today, we have two kinds of soap operas. There are classic soaps of the '50s, the modern-day equivalent of a comedy of manners, where characters perform against the backdrop of an understood set of rules, as television critic Michael Arlen has pointed out. There are also glossy night-time soaps, like *Dallas*, where everyone is basically amoral. Soap opera "manners" may not exactly reflect the values of their audience, but they are internally consistent (the night-time soaps are an exception), and characters develop against the framework of those "manners." Ishmael Reed's self-styled black soap opera, *Personal Problems* (directed by Bill Gunn, produced by Walter Colton) fulfills none of these conventions. Reed sets out to make a black world without white face or white faces; he maintains that in earlier attempts at black soap opera the principle characters were played by middle-class whites. Yet his soap opera is severely flawed. Not only does he fail to develop a convincing black milieu, but his characters are mostly cardboard figures. The character of Johnnie Mae Brown, played by Verta Mae Grosvenor, is the only exception. A Harlem Hospital nurse, she is shown being compassionate at work and a grouch at home, escaping into ultra-femininity with her lover (walking in high heels on a rocky path with the aid of his hand), letting down her hair with her girl friends, and writing poetry. Unlike soap opera characters, who are painfully normal, Johnnie Mae is unusual in every respect. She is a poet, an only child (even if she was a latch key child, without Campbell soup for lunch), and has no children of her own.

Reed says he decided to make this work because everyone has personal problems. Johnnie Mae's problems include her affair with a musician, her discomfort with her family, the problems produced when her brother and sister-in-law move in with Johnnie and her husband, and a family crisis provoked by the death of father Brown. None of the other characters achieve the multi-dimensionality of Johnnie Mae—not her husband, Charles Brown (played by Walter Colton), his father (played by Jim Wright), or the supporting cast. So far Reed has made two one-hour episodes. An initial interview with Johnnie, an interview with her lover, a scene in the hospital, and a family fight in the second episode, really sparkle, but most of the other changes are lackluster.

Reed straddles two distinctly different genres—video art and broadcast television. He employs the disconnected plot that is a feature of avant-garde work in a genre where a semblance of logical progression is important in experimenting with narrative of the avant-garde and the clarity of broadcast television. Sometimes, however, the sound has the polymorphous quality that characterizes Robert Altman's movies or *Hill Street Blues*. An outstanding example is a scene in a wine bar where street noises blend and drown out the overlapping voices of the three women, who speak over each other to create a naturalistic Tower of Babel. Reed also interrupts the narrative to interview the characters about their lives, an innovation in the soap opera format which works extremely well. Still, if Reed continues this project he will have to pay more attention to character development as well as plot, and acquire a more urgent sense of the importance of pace.

This is the fourth year Shalom Gorewitz has curated a collection of image-processed work, and I am reviewing here the first part of a two-part show. With the exception, perhaps, of Mark Lindquist's state-of-the-art computer graphics in *The Subway*, there are no real surprises. Artists continue to color (pun intended) their synthesized collage stories and essays. If one generalization can be made, it is the preference for austere, colored geometric forms and grids over the

hot, flashy colors and softer forms of other years.

Mimi Marton has found a moving way to pay homage to her dead father in *Pappa Tape I*. She stresses their kinship through the use of vertical and horizontal rolls, where one slat of the venetian-blind effect is the artist and the other her father. This happens three times: first they exchange heads (their profiles match), then they exchange feet, and finally they are shown lying in beds in opposite directions, mirror images of each other. Other pictures, basically still, "flesh out" Marton's memories. A crying sound, like a child calling for its father, accompanies the opening section.

The outstanding quality of analogue image processing is its ability to produce voluptuous, flooded wells of color. Matt Schlanger uses this in *Apsu and Tiamut* to envelope a single incident from an Arcadian creation myth, the first embrace of the primordial couple that brought the world into being. Schlanger's god and goddess, who could be everyman and everywoman falling in love, seem like everyday people from an old movie. A woman appears and disappears in a flower-like cluster and then is shown in a passionate embrace (this sequence appears several times in slightly different forms). Given the limitations of his material, Schlanger manages to generate a sense of

tension and magnetism through the use of a two-part movement made up of separation and compelling embrace. At one point the colorizer is used to graphically demonstrate the erotic/generative content of the scene—the kiss begins in grisaille and becomes enflamed with hot orange.

Skank, by the Lubies (Henry Linhart and Josh Freed), is a charming, relatively chaste piece of beefcake. A male dancer dances in strobe flickers. All that is seen is a torso. The body is bleached with light until at times only the nipples remain. The way light strikes the body acts as a caress, increasing the sense of intimacy an extreme close-up of the figure automatically gives.

Connie Coleman and Alan Powell's *Saturday Night* is like Degas's keyhole studies of a woman unaware—like a cat licking herself, as Degas said. Very little actually happens. A woman is shown performing small grooming routines—brushing her hair and primping in front of a mirror. Great efforts are made to suggest that something is happening. There are strobe flickers, shifts in voltage, and a revolving camera that circles the figure, grabbing at various points of view like Cubist multiple perspective. The camera positions and the editing give the impression the woman is under surveillance; at times the intimacy of the camera seems intrusive.

In *Skin Deep From Outer Space*, Merrill Aldighieri and Joe Triplician transform an ordinary beauty parlor through film animation, colorizing, and a storyline about visitors from outer space in a brain recharging center filled with more than a little of the horror mental hospitals offer. The success of this science fiction fantasy is the transformation of the ordinary denizens of a beauty parlor, through colorizing and scratch animation, into unusual victims. A man (what is a bearded man doing in an emporium of female beauty?) says, "Will you remove my facial features?" Gray-haired ladies smile happily at the camera while cartoon drawings of rays attack them from blow dryers and brushes. All good science fiction and horror films, even a comedy like this one, depend on transforming the familiar. In this Aldighieri and Triplician show a master hand.

The extraordinary illusions of *Out of Order* by Jim Serpenti, distinguish it from the song-plus-image video disc format it resembles. The tapes opens with a close-up of a brilliantly colored face, like a Japanese mask. The face changes and then disintegrates in a psychedelic maelstrom of shifting, glowing forms. As the camera closes in, the face decomposes even further, like eggs scrambled in a pan, until it becomes a swirling, throbbing pinwheel. In its final appearance, the face is replaced by a wholly abstract pattern.

Though *I/O Disorders Meaning* appears to have more narrative content than Hornbacher's earlier work, your reaction to Sarah Hornbacher's pulsating, apocalyptic view of the world will depend on your fondness/tolerance for flashing lights and crescendoes of noise. (I remember a group of high school escapees mesmerized by Hornbacher's work at the "Video Music" show at the Downtown Whitney. Their teacher had to drag them, still rocking, from their seats.) It begins with a quote from Susan Sontag: "Existence is no more than the attainment of reality in a state of flux." Einstein then appears with a pair of rotating hexagonal goggles. He gradually recedes behind layers of other material but his eyes remain, like the Cheshire Cat's smile. The Mona Lisa follows in a similar role, radiating her presence from a cluttered shell just to be replaced by lightrope walkers and other balancing acts. Then what looks like footage from *Star Trek* and other science fiction movies appears in various formats on a black and white, diagonally pinstriped screen (often broken into quadrants), frequently joined by a picture of Saturn. These flashing images are accompanied by high-pitched whirling sounds of escalating frequency and volume. The result is the kind of adrenaline rush that video games generate. The accelerating tempo leads you to expect a climactic moment, but Hornbacher takes a long time to say goodbye. The initial sections provide a richly layered world, which seems to say something about flux and change. Yet Hornbacher's end game is not as strong as her opening moves, and the tape seems to trail off into outer space.

Top: frame from *Shank*, by the Lubies. Middle: frame from *Out of Dream*, by Central Control. Bottom: frame from *Saturday Night*, by Connie Coleman and Alan Powell.

