# Film Image

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# Electronic Image

## The Construction of Abstraction, 1960 - 1990

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*Visible Language* 29:2
John G. Hanhardt, 138-159

The past three decades have witnessed remarkable changes in our thinking about film and video as art forms. The avant-garde cinema enjoyed critical acclaim during the 1960s and 1970s, one of the greatest periods in the history of independent film in America. In the 1980s, filmmakers, critics and historians, who viewed the artists of the previous two decades as creators of the canon of works defining avant-garde film, increasingly began to question definitions of contemporary avant-garde film practice. At the same time that avant-garde film was undergoing this self-analysis and self-critique, the new electronic medium and aesthetic discourse of video art, which began in the 1960s, had

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firmly established itself as an art form. Today, the dialogue between film and video artists has increased as the electronic medium has become more pervasive and artists have begun to work in both fields, while at the same time acknowledging the unique properties and differences that distinguish these media.

The questions facing the writing of the histories of both art forms are background to the examination of the issue of abstraction in film and video over the past thirty years. In both art forms there are a variety of genres and styles which would compose any history of American film and video art; these include the models of abstract expressionism and other lineages within art history (minimalism, conceptual and fluxus art) as well as genres such as character and abstract animation, image processing and techniques such as hand-painted film and colorizing in video. Such a catalogue of techniques and image making phi-

losophies is certainly required as the basis for any history of this period and for any codifying summary of abstraction.

I have chosen to examine the issue of abstract image making in film and video in a transitional period during which video's rise to prominence stimulated efforts to redefine both this new medium and film as art forms. My thesis is that a specific body of film and video works has explored the issue of abstraction as a means to define their respective media. This has been done by choosing the basic temporality of the moving image and the material basis of the image itself as sites for an epistemological inquiry into the viewing experience, thus exploring the percep-

tual transaction between spectator and text. A historical subtext to this argument is the fact that the American, avant-garde cinema had for a variety of reasons become, like surrealism and fluxus art, an art-historical movement defined by a period and body of work.

Therefore, even though one continues to see new avant-garde films and fluxus works by the same artists or by artists working in a similar vein, these genres are no longer functioning as the "avant-garde." A further part of this argument is that there has been a reexamination of the original avant-garde impulse within the emerging discourse of video art; throughout the 1970s and 1980s the arguments of avant-garde film have been carried out and renewed within the differing practices and possibilities of this electronic medium. It is within the issue of abstraction that this argument bears particular interest and rewards. Through a

reexamination of specific film and video projects, including installations, we can identify specific strategies and practices which reveal a poetics of abstraction emerging out of the artist's effort to redefine these media as aesthetic discourse.

I want to begin my reexamination by going back to 1958 and a work by Stan Brakhage entitled *Anticipation of the Night*. With that film and in related writings, Brakhage proclaimed a new kind of filmmaking guided by a camera liberated from the constraining logic of bourgeois cinema. *Anticipation of the Night* rejects drama and the notion of a narrative representing a coherent and stable point of view. Instead, cascading, fragmentary


images of color and light filter through scenes from the artist's life; the editing and camera movement, through a new and radical appropriation of filmic space, form a constant inquiry into liberating the film from the narrative constraints of shot-to-shot continuity and a single vantage point. Brakhage urges the liberation of the camera from the linear language of narrative to an intense, personal space of evolving forms created from light and color and mediated by "metaphors on vision," the title of his manifesto published in 1963 by the journal *Film Culture*. The camera lens refines and distorts reality, collapsing perspective into an abstract two-dimensional plane and then opening it up into an illusionistic space; the film frame becomes a single space as foreground and background are joined into a continually shifting field of action. Variations in camera speed, from eight, to sixteen, to twenty-four frames per second, and the use of different film stocks create subtle changes and modulations in the image.

The aesthetic stance in *Anticipation of the Night* prefigures many later developments in independent film. In his interplay of camera movements with editing, even scratching directly on the film surface, Brakhage manipulated the tensions between the recognizable photographic image and the abstraction of the film frame. He strove to erase the surface and boundaries of illusion and create a new language of filmmaking.

*Anticipation of the Night* provides a convenient overview of various aesthetic strategies which sought to break through the logic of a cinema constructed as illusionistic space and dramatic narrative. Brakhage articulated that quest directly in *Mothlight*

(1963) where the bits and pieces of moths, creatures attracted to the beam of the projector's light in a darkened theater, are literally captured on the strip of celluloid. Like Brakhage's hand-painted films — *The Dante Quartet* (1987) and *The Glaze of Cathexis* (1990) — which acknowledge the materiality of the image in the strokes of the paintbrush across the frames of film, *Mothlight* ignores the boundaries of the film frame through the chance assemblage of the fragmented moth wings directly applied to the film. In *Mothlight,* Brakhage rejected the film and camera as the basis of the film image, as what we see appears by the chance application of material to the continuous surface of celluloid.

Brakhage, as is the case with all filmmakers, does not see his films until the laboratory processing and printing of the film negative is completed or, in the case of film which is painted, scratched or collaged, until the film is projected onto the screen.

Through the radical exploration of film in the terrain of the abstract image, Brakhage revels in the imaginings of the artist exploring and exposing the apparatus of cinema as celluloid and projector. For Brakhage, film does not exist as a still image but as movement, and so the final ingredient in his films is the viewer whose eyes complete the film experience. *Anticipation of the Night* is emblematic of strategies which create abstract images from the recorded image, the moving camera and through editing of single and multiple frame sequences; the disruption of the film frame in *Mothlight* represents the use of the strip of celluloid as a means to make new forms of abstract image. In both of these works, Brakhage is manipulating time and ac-

still image

knowledging the passage of film through the camera and the projector.

The articulation of the single frame has been a conceptual and compositional element in work by Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits and many others. It is animation, the filming of single frames of hand-drawn images, that perhaps best represents this strategy. The work of Robert Breer is exemplary in its carrying forward of an aesthetic of abstraction through manipulating the speed of alternating images. In *69* (1969), Breer constructs a visual tension as he moves between hard-edged geometrical forms and freely evolving line drawings. What I want to focus on here is Breer's exploration of depth illusion and his exposure of the mechanisms of creation. Objects appear to gyrate in and out of frame, images alternate with sequences of color frames, graphic and object animation alternates with live

action shots, a variety of techniques all coalescing around the distention of filmic space and the breakdown of illusion. Our perception of a three-dimensional off-screen space is suddenly broken as Breer acknowledges the boundaries of the frame. Sound adds another dimension as visual associations and perceptual cues are played with on the audio track. As Breer himself notes, *69* was a synthetic film: "I mean frame by frame synthesis . . . I was analyzing the construction of the film. That's part of my idea about concreteness and exposing the materials of the film itself."[1]

1 American Federation of Arts. 1976. *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema.* Catalogue. New York: The American Federation of the Arts, 144.

My selection of artists and artworks in this investigation of abstract image making in film focuses on those works which do not treat abstraction as the illusion of something else (the interior of the mind, the mystical pathway to a new consciousness) or as a way to illustrate a narrative. Rather, the focus of my presentation is on "process" or conceptual works which anticipated and then in the 1970s became identified as the "structural film." I would define these films as having as their primary goal the anti-illusionistic treatment of film. Unlike Brakhage's mythic, poetic ideology of the self of the artist, which grew out of the paradigm of abstract expressionism, or Breer's affiliation with neo-plasticism and his painterly concern with the limits of the canvas (frame) of the screen's surface, other artists in the 1970s and 1980s turned to the material of celluloid — of its meaning and imagery projected onto the screen. This is a concrete cinema of abstraction, an abstraction which negates the

cognates of language in a cinema of the unsayable. As Gehr writes, "Most films teach film to be an image, a representing. But film is a real thing and as a real thing it is not an imitation. ...Film is a variable intensity of light, an internal balance of time, a movement within a given space."[2]

2 Whitney Museum of American Art. 1983. *Ernie Gehr.* Program Note No. 9. New American Filmmakers Series. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, n.p.

The totally abstract image, tearing away the recorded image and treating the beam of light as the means to expose the grain as the basis of the recorded image, exposes at the same time the apparatus of the cinema, showing the projector and the screen not as neutral elements but as active ingredients in the hermeneutics of film reception and composition. Paul Sharits' installations are an

extension of his single-frame films, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968) and *Color Sound Frames* (1974), into the exhibition space. In *Episodic Generation* (1979), four aligned loop projectors present a continuous sequence of moving images on the gallery wall. The images of rephotographed strips of celluloid, each frame colored and rephotographed, compose alternating panels of color and movement. The images were projected on their sides with their sprocket holes visible on the top and bottom of the image. Sharits scratched the surface of the celluloid so the solid colors appeared to be torn and stretched as the fields of color rhythmically play off each other. Accompanying the installation of projectors/films was a display of the actual strips of film, called "frozen film frames," which showed the compositional material of the projected images and how the artist worked with the celluloid.

Sharits further explored the destruction of the film celluloid and the scale of the image within the gallery space in his installation *Third Degree* (1982). Here the three projectors were each placed at a different distance from the wall, creating projected images of different scale in relation to each other. He synchronized the movement of the three films through the projectors in order to develop visual relationships between the projected images. Because the two larger images are successive refilmings of the first, layers of time are created, disrupting and expanding the temporal dimension of the original footage. In *Third Degree* Sharits confronts the material basis of the film medium by burning the individual frames. The exploding, overheated film alters the

material medium, the recorded image is torn apart to expose raw colors and textures through the abstract layers of burning celluloid. The chemical properties of the celluloid and the light of the projector remove film from its traditional setting and transform it into a plastic, abstract field. Within the space of the gallery, the viewer is able to move about in front of the beams of light from the projectors, touch the screen surface and become engulfed in the abstract play of light and color.

The engagement of the viewer becomes total in Stan VanDerBeek's *Steam Screens* (1979) which he created with Joan Brighan. In this project he sought to break down the two-dimensional surface of the filmic screen and further explore his animated and computer generated abstract imagery. Presented in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Sculpture Garden in

the dark of an autumn evening, it was an installation which encouraged the active participation of the viewer. A grid of piping was laid out on the garden floor; compressed steam from a truck was pumped into the piping and released through tiny holes to create sheets of steam which filled the space. VanDerBeek's films were then projected into the sheets of steam from half a dozen projectors. Moving three-dimensional abstract images suddenly appeared to float within the immaterial, fluid and constantly changing "steam screen." Viewers caught the images on different parts of their body as they moved within and through the filmic space and three-dimensional fields of VanDerBeek's abstract patterns and constantly changing imagery.

[redacted]

[redacted]

I have chosen to highlight those artists and approaches in film which create their abstract imagery directly from the properties of the medium — whether it is by exploring camera movement (Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night*), applying materials directly onto celluloid (Brakhage's *Mothlight*), hand-drawn animation (Robert Breer's *69*), film installations treating celluloid as compositional material (Ernie Gehr's *History* and Paul Sharits' *Episodic Generation* and *Third Degree*), or the opening up of the screen surface to further abstract the image as an intelligible experience (Stan VanDerBeek's *Steam Screens*). These are not narratives which can be retold or images which can be easily reproduced. They are works which must be experienced, which engage the viewer in the fragility and temporality of the projected image and its instruments: camera, celluloid, projector, screen. The abstract image in the hands of these artists is not a

representation of another school of imagery but is created out of the resources of the artist and the sources of the medium. In focusing on this particular body of work I have ignored many artists (Marie Menken, Tony Conrad, Jordan Belson, Ken Jacobs, John Whitney, Len Lye, Sandy Moore, Nathanial Dorsky and many others). However, by highlighting this work I hope to demonstrate how film is different from video and yet how, through an engagement with abstraction, they come to share certain principles. Film is a handmade art form, it is a strip of film which can be held up to the light and must be manually edited. In the works I have discussed, artists have consciously sought to explore these physical parameters and directly engage

the viewer in the reception and completion of the work when it is shown. In their abstract play of light, color, black and white, sound and image, these works test both our language of description and the language of filmmaking. This engagement in the temporality of the screening process and the direct acknowledgement of the viewer also come into play in the work of artists working in video from the early 1960s to the present.

In a publication accompanying his one-artist exhibition at the Smolin Gallery in New York and his concurrent performance in the Yam Festival in New Jersey in 1963, Wolf Vostell wrote this *décollage* performance instruction: "Throw a big whipped cream cake to the TV and smudge it on the surface of the TV while the program is going on...."[3] Here Vostell enjoins the viewer to participate in disrupting the flow of television entertainment by

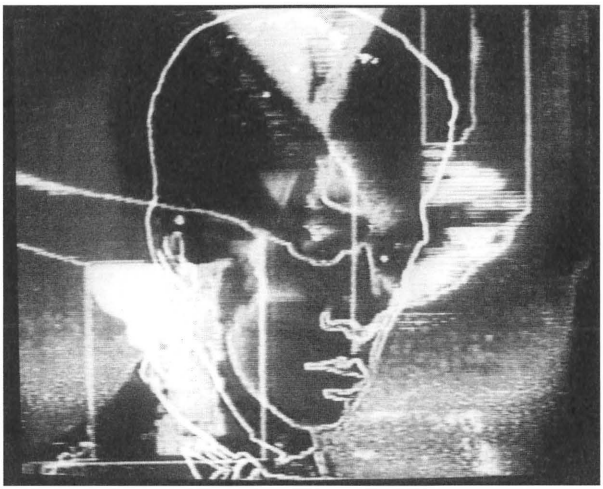
3 Vostell, Wolf. 1963. *Television Décollage & Morning Glory/2 Pieces by Wolf Vostell.* New York: 3rd Rail Gallery, n.p.

covering the screen and making it into an abstract, fractured image. Fluxus and happening events in the early 1960s, when artists first appropriated the television set into their artmaking, also extended to altering the electronic patterns of the cathode ray tube. Nam June Paik's celebrated *Magnet TV* (1965) does not employ videotape or broadcast images but shows a moving abstract pattern created by a large magnet moved about on the surface of the television set. Here Paik, a seminal figure as artist and activist in the history of this art form, was able to fashion a new abstract, kinetic image from the unique capacities of the television set.

In the 1960s Nam June Paik created a number of videotapes based on electronically disrupting the received broadcast signal, changing both sound and image to create an abstract alteration of the recorded image. An example is *Variations on Johhny Carson vs. Charlotte Moorman* (1966), in which we see Moorman on the Johnny Carson television show in an impromptu performance which Paik transforms into a chance event through a video image which constantly breaks down. These works predate Paik's own image-processing and colizing system, the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer and the various other image-modifying and synthesizing tools created in the early 1970s.

As in the case of my discussion of abstraction in film, I have chosen to highlight a specific body of works which focus on the chance occurrences and unique properties of the electronic medium unmediated by image-processed or post-production technologies; thus, I have not included the Rutt-Etra Synthe-

sizer, the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer or the works of Shalom Gorewitz, Stephen Beck, Eric Siegel, Ed Emshwiller, Barbara Buckner, Peer Bode or Mathew Schlanger, among others. As in the case of film I have chosen to focus on a specific selection of artists and video art works which explore the medium itself, the very quality of the electronic image, and do not employ image-processing and post-production technologies, computer graphics



Nam June Paik
*Edited for TV,* 1976,
courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix.

or the array of artists' tools, commercial and quasi-commercial resources used to create a more processed and produced language of abstraction. These works, predicated on chance and the abstract imagery that emerges from the impermanent electronic image, disrupt the normative codes and production processes to discover within the chance operations of the video imaging system a challenging abstraction which resists codification.

An important distinction between film and video is that the video image is immediately viewable as it is recorded: the image is created on the cathode ray tube, onto its own screen and does

not have to be processed and projected before the image can be seen. This creates an active dialectic between artist and process and viewer, a profound cognitive relationship which allows an abstraction unique to the medium. The artists I am discussing here — Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Woody Vasulka and Al Robbins — have each created work which explores issues related to those I have discussed within the avant-garde film. By relating to the unique properties of the medium and engaging the viewer in the reception of the work, these artists deconstruct the technology of their art form by playing with and creating a unique set of possibilities out of their respective medium.

## Video

In 1973 while working in a studio, Bill Viola chanced to make a videotape entitled *Information.* Like Nam June Paik's *Variations on Johnny Carson vs. Charlotte Moorman* it is a work predicated on chance, the unexpected occurences that create a unique art work. *Information* is the product of a breakdown in a video system. "It is the result of a technical mistake made while working in the studio late one night, when the output of a videotape recorder was accidentally routed through the studio switcher and back into its own input. When the record button was pressed, the machine tried to record itself."[4] This process created patterns of noise and interference. Unlike videotapes made for broadcast, which are processed through a time-based corrector to make the image fit into the window of the broadcast signal, *Information* has a non-conforming signal and plays back differently on every monitor. It is never seen the same way twice. In other words, the video remakes itself when played, the image is always decoded differently.

4 London, Barbara, editor. 1978. *Bill Viola.* Catalogue. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 24.

The chance operations that composed Viola's and Paik's early abstract image making projects also informed the explorations of the pioneering video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka. Instead of determining what inputs would create what effect, they sought to create not synthesizers but "opened ended boxes"[5] in which abstract imagery could be freely developed through a self-exploring technology. In such works as *Noisefields* (1974), what we see is the visual representation of an audio signal; through the use of an audio synthesizer the Vasulkas were able to manipulate the electronic wave forms of the audio and video signals. Thus the imagery is entirely electronic. "They have all been made artificially from various frequencies, from sounds, from inaudible pitches and their beats."[6] These visual images then flowed from the temporal dimension of sound. As Woody Vasulka noted, "At the time, I was totally obsessed with this idea that there was no single frame anymore. I come from the movies, where the frame was extremely rigid and I understood that electronic material has no limitation within its existence. It only has limitation when it reaches the screen because the screen itself is a rigid time structure."[7] Thus, like the filmmakers discussed earlier, the Vasulkas sought to break through the parameters of the medium and discover the chance combinations that would emerge from its basic materials.

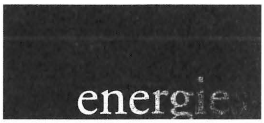
5 Furlong, Lucinda. 1983. "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka." *Afterimage, 2:1,* December, 14.

6 Furlong, "Notes Toward a History . . ." 15.

7 Furlong, "Notes Toward a History . . ." 14.

Perhaps no artist was as dedicated to freeing video technology from the imposed systems of the manufacturer than the late Al Robbins. The experience of Bill Viola in making *Information* was the operating challenge in all of Al Robbins work. It was not

created out of synthesizers nor did it go through a time-base corrector to make it suitable for broadcast; it was a raw work which existed only in the time in which one experienced it. Robbins' installations and videotapes did not exist as copies permanently preserved in an inviolable construct; instead, their random abstractions, energies and bursts of color, shapes and noise were creating and destroying themselves in the very process of their presentation. Robbins' struggle to purify the signal and image, to let it speak the poetry of its own raw imagery, occupied his life. As a poet and artist, he made work and wrote tirelessly of his quest to get through the toils to realize new outputs.




Robbins' installation such as *Anticata/Strophe* (1980) placed cameras and monitors throughout the gallery space so that images circulated according to the triggering of sequences through the "glitch" sound of the camera. As Robbins wrote, his installations extended "the act of shooting, to evoke a dynamic fluid and intricately expressive as shooting/activating space between images and between image and viewer, as speaking with each other, involving the perceiver in these speakings."[8] As the camera played off each other and the viewer activated the installation by walking through the "installation space mixed with the like qualities of the videotape. predetermination of recorded tape image is broken by the perceiver's effect. his position when the installation space is intensified: active, physical/kinesthetic, and self reflective. the installation space is carved according to the world where the tapes were shot and the position of the specta-

8 Robbins, Al. 1980. *Al Robbins Anticata/Strophe*. Program Note. The New American Filmmakers Series. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, n.p.

tor is brought closer to the posture of the act of shooting."[9] Robbins' abstract images convey the optics of real sight, not the "realism" we draw or photograph nor the safe boundaries we create around our world.

The process of discovery through the optics and electronic recording process of video led Bill Viola to gather abstract images from the desert lanscape in *Chott el-Djerid* (A Portrait in Light and Heat), 1979. In a sequence of remarkable images recorded through a special telephoto lens adapted for video, Viola shot the mirages that formed during the midday sun in the Tunisian Sahara desert. The colors of light and heat and the uncanny mirage effects create abstract images of real and imagined scenes. Here the landscape gives up images of lyrical and mysterious abstraction created out of natural phenomena. Viola's camera and his ability to create abstraction from the real-time process of image recording convey an immediate sense of discovery, not the distance created through film processing. The light emerging from the screen of the monitor gives a tactical impression of light and color; the abstract electronic image from the world around us has a soft and pointillistic impression. This work offers an interesting contrast to Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* and its probing and jabbing abstraction; the flow of video and the editing of film form two very different abstract image compositions. Robbins, Vasulka, Viola and Paik sought to discover in the abstract image the expressive, constantly present but impermanent possibilities of video as an artist's medium.

9 Stedelijk Museum. 1984. *The Luminous Image*. Catalogue. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 153, 155.

Looking back over the past thirty years of avant-garde film and video art production it is clear that the artists I have discussed sought to transform their media through chance occurrences and the transaction between their eyes and the world around them. This impulse originated within the film avant-garde and has been carried forward in the video art movement. I have suggested that abstraction, as it came out of either medium, film or video, became a purfying act which saw an idealism within the image wrested free of the logic of capitalism and the production of entertainment. Too often our histories of video art and film approach these media in terms of conventional narratives of mainstream entertainment or as mirror images of the other visual arts. The work of these artists struggling with the abstract image has sought to return technology to the *techné* of radical simplicity and renovation. As these artists pushed the media of film and video through the dimension of the abstract image, they sought to reinvent a poetics of image making.

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