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Rewind and play: 40 years of California video art

Jennifer Steinkamp
"Oculus Sinister (left eye)," just weeks old, is part of the exhibit at J. Paul Getty Museum.

By Suzanne Muchnic, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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SO, you think it's easy to organize a big show on the history of Californiavideo? Just round up a bunch of old tapes and let them roll?

Consider "Philo T. Farnsworth Video Obelisk," made in 1970 by Skip Sweeney. Part experimental theater, part political commentary, part tribute to a TV inventor, it's a funky period piece meant to be screened on a tower of seven video monitors stacked on shelves.

And it's one of many troublesome pieces in "California Video" opening this weekend at the J. Paul Getty Museum. Devoted to a 40-year chapter of art history that evolved from navel gazing and goofing around to orchestrating dazzling environments, the sprawling survey offers about 50 single-channel videos and 15 installations made by 58 artists -- and much more in a study room.

There's lots of relatively simple, quirky stuff from the early days: Eleanor Antin reinventing herself as a clumsy ballerina, Cynthia Maughan turning a recipe for tamale pie into a murder mystery, William Wegman extolling the virtues of deodorant while spraying his armpit and developing a rash, Jay McCafferty shaving himself in an ongoing annual ritual.

But there's also more complicated material. Bruce Nauman's 1969-70 take on public surveillance requires a room of its own, two cameras and two monitors. Joe Rees' 1977-85 video documentation of the punk scene is accompanied by Getty remakes of period posters. Paul Kos' 1983-86 recreation of a stained glass window at the Chartres cathedral is screened on 27 monitors built into a wall.

The latest piece, finished a few weeks ago, is "Oculus Sinister (left eye)" by Jennifer Steinkamp. Inspired by photographs of lava flows and a visit to the Pantheon in Rome when rain fell through the opening in the domed ceiling -- an experience that she likens to God crying -- the L.A. artist used a computer to generate images of flowing masses of color and projected them into the funnel-like oculus of the Getty's special exhibitions pavilion. "I think of it as the left eye of God crying volcanic stuff," she says.

Sweeney, whose youthful passion shifted from theater to video when he became fascinated with the new medium's ability to document reality, dreamed up "Philo" while fulfilling his public service obligation as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. As program director of Intersection, a church-organized art center in San Francisco, he grabbed the Thursday slot and produced a wildly imaginative weekly show with a group that changed its name from Electric Eye to Video Free America.

Conceived as a video magazine, the two-channel show was a mélange of taped "articles" on current events -- including phony interviews with Richard Nixon that spliced an "interviewer's" rude questions about the president's personal life into his speeches -- and explosive patterns created by video feedback. Periodically, the "Top Ten Vibes of the Week" popped up with bits of documentary or humor and segments on Farnsworth, whose claim of inventing television challenged that of RCA scientist Vladimir Zworykin.

"The artists used footage of television commercials and people in a laboratory hooking themselves up to EEG machines, reading their alpha and beta waves, all this trippy stuff," says exhibition organizer Glenn Phillips, a senior projects specialist and consulting curator at the Getty Research Institute. "They filmed a civil rights speech by Dick Gregory and there's lots of silly stuff. They were doing every single thing they could think of to experiment with the camera. People would come in once a week and watch it like a theatrical event."

A must-have

TOWARD the end of each show, Sweeney and a couple of his pals, dressed in black, would sneak out from behind a curtain, remove three of the monitors, turn them on their sides and put them back in the "obelisk." Footage shot sideways would then appear on the rotated screens.

When Phillips heard about "Philo," he had to have it. Although Sweeney had lost track of the feedback tapes, he was willing to lend the others. But, like all vintage video, they are fragile. To be played over and over in an exhibition, the tapes had to be painstakingly cleaned, conserved and transferred to a digital format.

The Getty was up to the job. With a vast collection of videos, including about 3,000 tapes collected by the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Research Institute has set up a special conservation lab run by Jonathan Furmanski. After each tape is cleaned, he makes an analog copy that goes into cold storage with the original and a digital tape to create DVD "use" copies.

The Getty has quite a collection of obsolete equipment needed to play the vintage artworks. But Sweeney's video was made on a rare machine that "had gone the way of the dodo," Furmanski says. Fortunately, almost at zero hour, a working model appeared on EBay. He snagged it for just under $500 and got to work.

Coming up with a version for the show required lots of consultation with the artist -- who works with new media at his production house, Video Free America -- because he had used various cameras and experimental techniques and the surviving tapes were in poor condition. With parts of the program missing, it didn't make sense to reconstruct the obelisk. The solution was to screen excerpts in the gallery and additional material in thestudy room.

"With 'Philo,' " Phillips says, "we were never going to have a perfectly stable, pristine copy for the exhibition. The amazing thing is that we have it at all. The material is so good, it doesn't matter if it isn't perfect, we just have to show it."

Grim history

ANOTHER must-have that didn't come easy is "The Eternal Frame," a 1975 video reenactment of President Kennedy's assassination made by two Bay Area collectives, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco. Galvanized by the historic event and how it had become part of popular culture, the artists started talking about re-creating a bootleg film of the assassination on their home turf. But when someone suggested using the real location, they headed off to

Dallas intending to stage and shoot the work as fast as possible -- and get out of town before they got into trouble. Instead, they shot the scene over and over, including a crowd of people who mistook the artwork-in-process for a tourist attraction.

At the Getty, the resulting 22-minute tape is shown in a domestic setting with flowered wallpaper, shag carpet and orange couches, just as in 1976, when it debuted at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

"They made a living room shrine to JFK with all this memorabilia around," Phillips says. "It was never shown that way again, so we worked with a Hollywood set dresser and refabricated the whole thing. When we couldn't find the exact objects used, we had to make them." That meant producing the wallpaper from scratch, aging new couches and adapting a marble plaque with Kennedy's "ask not" quote to look like the wood original.

All this research, conservation and fussing with props is intended to help convey the spirit of an unruly art form as it evolved on the West Coast. "The thing about videos from California is that they are so entertaining," Phillips says. "A lot of my favorite videos might seem dry to other people because the artists are dealing with difficult ideas that are grounded in technology. Artists in California might be using the technology in just as sophisticated a way, but they make it funny, interesting and visually compelling."

Californians' sense of humor and willingness to flaunt their personalities in early videos may reflect the freedom of not being in New York, he says. "It's only recently that you find a developed art market in California. Artists were making work for each other, so it was easier to take a risk. Failure was not going to affect you in the same way that a failure in New York might. There's a sort of energy that comes from that."

A former curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Phillips joined the Getty's staff in 2002 and started working on the exhibition in 2006, after the acquisition of the Long Beach archive. Although the collection is international in scope, Phillips decided to focus exclusively on California because, he says, "a show like that hadn't been done." He and his assistant, Catherine Taft, came up with a list of about 300 artists and winnowed it to 58, selecting about half of the material from the Long Beach trove, the rest from other Getty holdings and outside sources.

"One of the most surprising things to me after moving to California was how many video artists I found out about that I hadn't known," Phillips says, "People who work with video on the East Coast know about John Baldessari, Chris Burden, William Wegman and others, but there are so many more. Look at someone like Cynthia Maughan, who was a student at Cal State Long Beach when Wegman was teaching there. She never took a class with him, but she started working in his vein and produced over 300 videos, a hilarious sort of feminism. Few people know her work, but it's just amazing. It seemed like a good time to document that history."

North and south

HE considered concentrating on Southern California but decided to deal with the entire state because "the Bay Area is such an interesting counterpart," he says. "The first experiments on the West Coast happened in the Bay Area, where you find a lot more psychedelic art, artists working with image processing. At the National Center for Experiments in Television, sort of an adjunct to KQED-TV that started in 1967, people were trying to produce a new type of television. They were building video synthesizers, doing things that disturbed the signal, producing heavily modulated abstractions. There were also conceptual artists and collectives doing political work.

"In Southern California, there was a real explosion at CalArts because they bought over two dozen Sony Portapaks for the art students," he says, referring to the first portable video recorders. "The faculty and students were experimenting together. That was very exciting as well."

The exhibition will give pioneering video artists such as Antin a chance to revisit some of those moments. "I'm really looking forward to seeing old friends," she says, "and some of the best old friends are the works themselves. There's such a richness of material, things I love and works that are important conceptually."

But is the public ready to settle down with headphones and watch hours of old video art? Isn't it awfully dated? "I have been thinking about this a lot," Phillips says. "I would show '70s videos to students in the mid-'90s and they would be ready to revolt. Now it looks fresh to students. It sounds like a cliché, but I think YouTube has something to do with it. People are accustomed to seeing personal media produced in a bedroom that doesn't have a lot of editing. A new generation has been trained to see these things in a different way."