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Video Prophets Who Foretold Today's Innovations

By MICHAEL RUSH

THE history of art is sometimes said to be a series of reactions, one generation of artists staking its claim to originality by trying to undo what another generation has done. Certainly the 20th century has undergone important sea changes resulting from artists' rebellions. Cubism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism each emerged accompanied by some strong words from artists about their predecessors.

It can also be said, however, that what looks new to one generation has probably already been explored by a previous one. Art also proceeds thanks to some convenient memory lapses. As the artist and critic Brian O'Doherty wrote in 1986: "Visual art does not progress by having a good memory. And New York is the locus of some radical forgetting."

"Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1965-77," opening on Thursday and continuing through Jan. 27 at the Whitney Museum, is bound to shake up a few memories in an older generation of artists and wake up the younger ones who weren't around to see the radical transformations taking place at the time. Organized by Chrissie Iles, the Whitney's film and video curator, "Into the Light" features 19 works (most of them "installations," a word not even fully in use then) by artists like Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol, Dan Graham, Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, Gary Hill, Keith Sonnier and Yoko Ono.

In each case the artist used some form of media (film, video, slides, sound) to create work hardly ever seen in a museum or gallery before and, in several cases, not seen since. Given the current dominance of video installations in most international contemporary-art exhibitions, these early projected works should be a revelation to many viewers. They "created a new language of art-making," Ms. Iles said.

The Whitney's upper floors will flicker and vibrate with the images and sounds of artists for whom media became another mode of expression for their ideas. "I wasn't interested in video per se," said William Anastasi, who is represented by a 1968 piece, "Free Will." "I used whatever was at my disposal — photography, video, drawing, sculpture — to express what I was interested in."

This sentiment, shared by many artists of the period, remains popular today. Mr. Anastasi was concerned with the gallery space itself, especially with its most mundane parts: the corners and the wall plugs. "Free Will," with its monitor placed on the floor, is a live-feed video recording of a corner in a gallery. In common with his conceptualist contemporaries, including Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner, Mr. Anastasi stripped bare all the aesthetic illusions associated with painting, seeking instead to offer a "paean to the here and now."

This conceptual approach to art-making is much in

A back-to-the-future exhibition offers 60's and 70's multimedia 'installations,' a word that was used only rarely at the time.

evidence in "Into the Light." Ms. Ono, a participant in Fluxus performances, was also interested in demystifying the art object. Her "Sky TV," 1966, remounted at the Whitney, features a live-feed video recording of the sky. Dennis Oppenheim's "Echo," 1973, is a dual-screen projection of the artist's hand slapping the walls of a gallery. The sound of the hand's impact reverberates throughout the space. Viewers are made aware that they are not just looking at art but doing it in a particular place at a particular time.

This heightened awareness of the present owes

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730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 646 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM

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much to the influence of performance on the rt of this period. Among the 19 artists in Into the Light" a majority, including Robert Whitman, Mr. Nauman, Peter Campus, Mary Lucier, Mr. Acconci and especially Joan Jonas and the choreographer Simone Forti, made expressly performance-based rt.

Early on in this cross-fertilization of disciplines, technology, too, played an important ole. The influence of Robert Rauschenberg nd his friends the composer John Cage, the horeographer Merce Cunningham and the ngineer Billy Kluver cannot be overemphaized. Their 1966 "Nine Evenings: Theater nd Engineering," a wildly ambitious mini-estival of performances-cum-film, slides, frared cameras, wired tennis rackets and e like, held in New York's vast 69th Regiment Armory, celebrated a new era of ixed-media art. The canvas, it seemed for while, had become irrelevant.

The media elements of Ms. Jonas's 1976 Mirage," originally a performance with lm, video and drawing, will be reformulated at the Whitney. Though she will not ppear in the work, as she sometimes does, Is. Jonas's presence will be unmistakable. ler poetic, nonnarrative presentations, omplete with cones, masks, chalk drawngs, taped images and sounds, have the ignature feel of the artist's close connection to the earth and mythology. "I attempt o represent states of mind and certain ransformations," she said. Poetry and pathos are also abundant in Beryl Korot's 1974 nultiscreen video installation, "Dachau."

Ms. Forti, who along with Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer nd others was a highly influential dancer-horeographer, experimented with holograms in the 1970's. This mysterious and erie technology, in which photographed objects and people take on an intimate three-limensionality, has never attained the popularity of video, but for an artist like Ms. Forti it provided a way to capture the depth nd fullness of her dance movements. In 'Striding Crawling," from 1977, Ms. Forti is een doing just that, but she looks like a ghost moving in spaceless time. The original hologram, complete with a plexiglass cylinder, lighted from below by a candle, will be included in the exhibition.

The artists gathered here by Ms. Iles were not interested merely in experimenting with new technologies (or updating old technologies like photography). For them the stakes were higher. The technologies gave them the opportunity to alter viewers' perceptions in ways not dreamed of by Vermeer or Van Eyck (whose experiments in perspective Ms. Iles discusses in her catalog essay). Mr. Nauman, with his carcerlong preoccupation with perception, is represented here by a 1970 film installation, "Spinning Spheres," in which a steel ball is seen turning vigorously on a glass plate in a white room. The images reflected on the ball are intended to destabilize the viewer's perspective as it becomes impossible to detect where the real walls of the space are.

The trickster Michael Snow has been toying with viewers' perceptions for almost 40 years in films and performances like "Wavelength" and "Right Reader" from the 1960's. At the Whitney, "Two Sides to Every Story," 1974, features a suspended

The spirit of Duchamp hovers over a show: everything and anything can be turned into art.

aluminum screen on each side of which images of a woman engaging in various gestures, filmed from front and back, are projected. Viewers must keep moving around the screen to keep up with what's happening, a rather dizzying task. Anthony McCall and Paul Sharits also grapple with sculptural and perceptual elements of cinema in their installations.

This incorporation of the viewer into the work of art, at least as co-conspirator, has been central to the practice of artists since Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) had viewers spinning parts of his sculptures in "Bicycle Wheel" (1913), and "Rotary Glass Plates" (1920). His presence, including his experimentation in film, "Anemic Cinema" (1925-26), hovers above a great deal of the work in "Into the Light." For Duchamp, ideas, materials, jokes, objects, technologies, words, drawing and whatever else were all fodder for a work of art.

Duchamp and his Dada colleagues were thought to be responding to a world gone haywire in the aftermath of World War I. Even though the formal tameness and visual rigidity of Minimalism and Conceptualism, the dominant movements in the United States in the 1960's and 70's, seem far removed from the tumultuous times in which they developed, many historians believe that these, too, were born of profound political disillusionment. In the face of the war in Vietnam, old ways of making art seemed not to make sense. Mr. Acconci, represented at the Whitney by a film, slide and audio installation, "Other Voices for a Second Sight" (1974), felt at that time like an ugly American constantly invading Europe with his work. "I imposed my language on them; I didn't speak their language," he said of his frequent exhibitions in Europe. "It wasn't '68 anymore, so you had to find the revolution."

And he did. As history would have it, he and his contemporaries started a revolution in art even as streets worldwide teemed with protesters amid war and rumors of war.

It can happen again. □

Michael Rush, director of the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, is the author of "New Media in Late 20th-Century Art" and the forthcoming "Video Art," both from Thames and Hudson.

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FAX 646 336 7185
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