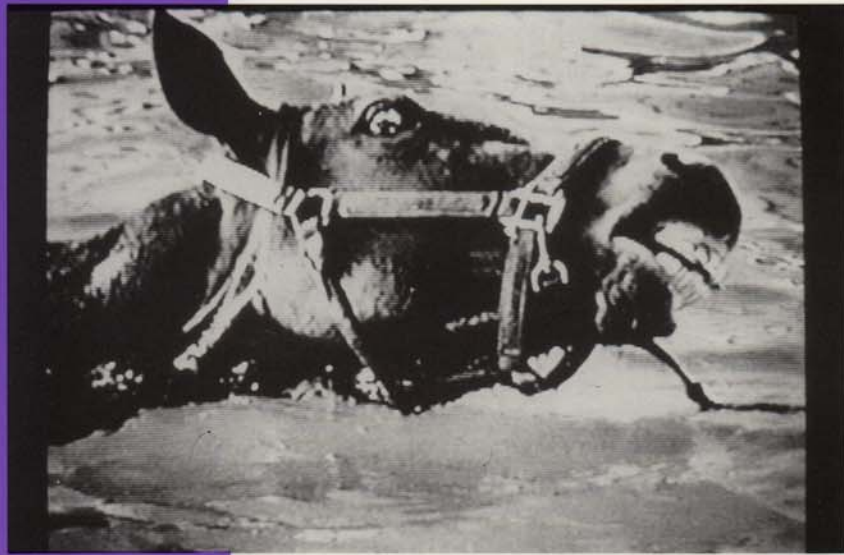


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Gary Hill in Conversation
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FIRE & WATER Three Media Installations

Michael Rush

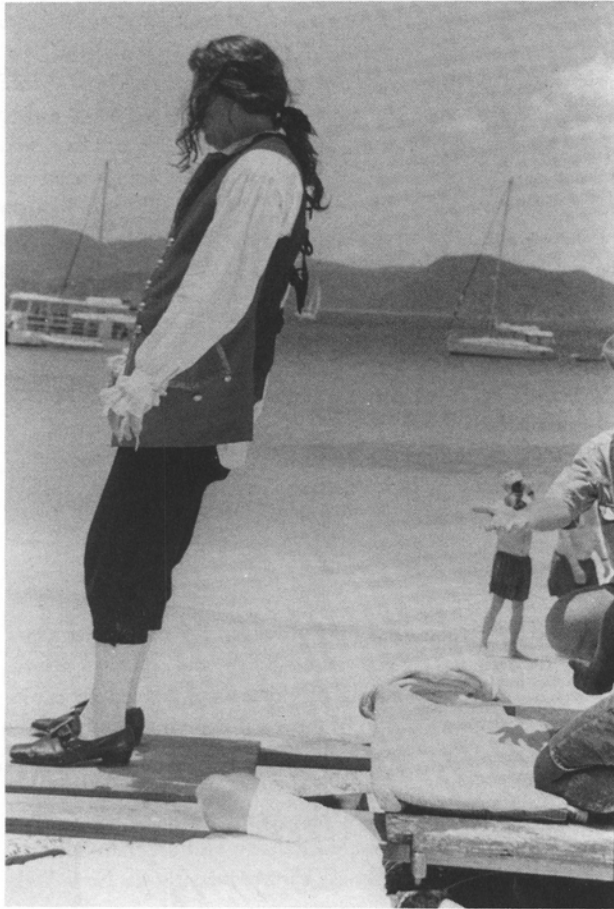
Janet Biggs, *Water Training*, Anna Kustera Gallery, New York, November 15–December 20, 1997. Rodney Graham, *Vexation Island*, 303 Gallery, New York, November 1–December 20, 1997. Stephen Sprenyjack, Video Installations, E.S. Vandam Gallery, New York, November 8–December 20, 1997.

Though there has been considerable argument over the origins of video art, especially the targeted critiques from feminist writers Martha Rosler and Martha Gever, it was clear from the start (mid-1960s) that some video art was activist-driven (Les Levine, Frank Gillette), while some was more personal, derived from the prevailing forms of body art and performance (Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas). For all early practitioners (Nam Jun Paik, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Ana Mendieta, John Baldessari, to name a few), the spontaneity and instantaneity of video were of special interest. Video recorded and revealed real time, thus affording a sense of immediacy and intimacy not possible in the plastic arts or even film.

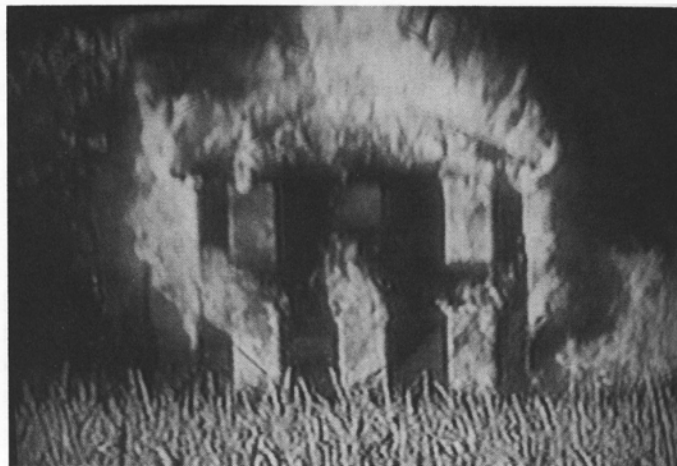
While some of the spontaneity of early video has yielded to more sophisticated editing techniques and extravagant multi-channel installations, use of the medium for very personal expression

has only grown in the past thirty years. The accessibility and relative affordability of video have yielded an explosion of personal experiments, from the low-tech diaristic tapes of Sadie Bening to the high-tech spiritual sagas of Bill Viola. The recent works of Janet Biggs, Ronald Graham, and Stephen Sprenyjack, all shown recently in New York, are representative of the varied expressions of media art currently finding their way into gallery exhibitions.

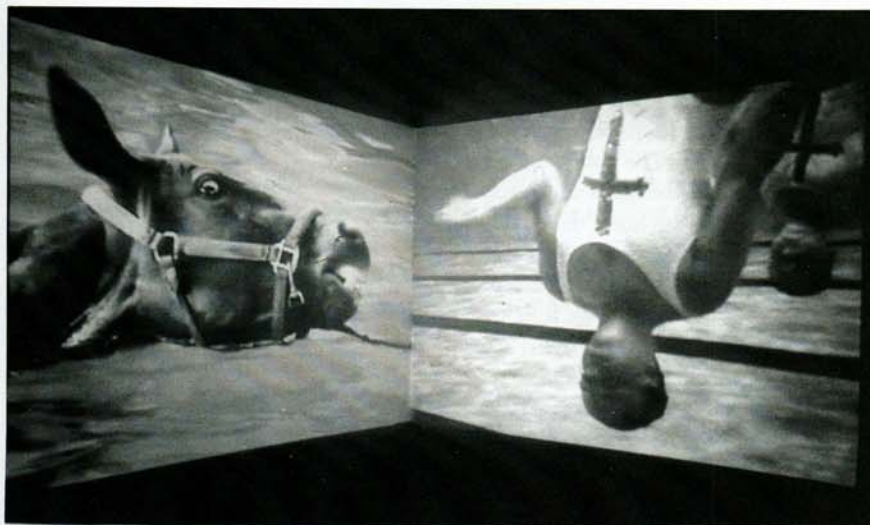
Janet Biggs's three-wall installation, *Water Training*, at Anna Kustera, juxtaposes images of a horse treading water with underwater shots of several groups of young aquatic dancers and a third scene shot from the bow of a ship slowly making its way through a fjord toward a glacier. Kustera's multi-level, terraced space is ideal for viewing these images simultaneously. The tranquil beauty of the passage through the fjord provides a foil for the other, more disturbing sequences; though this, too, is



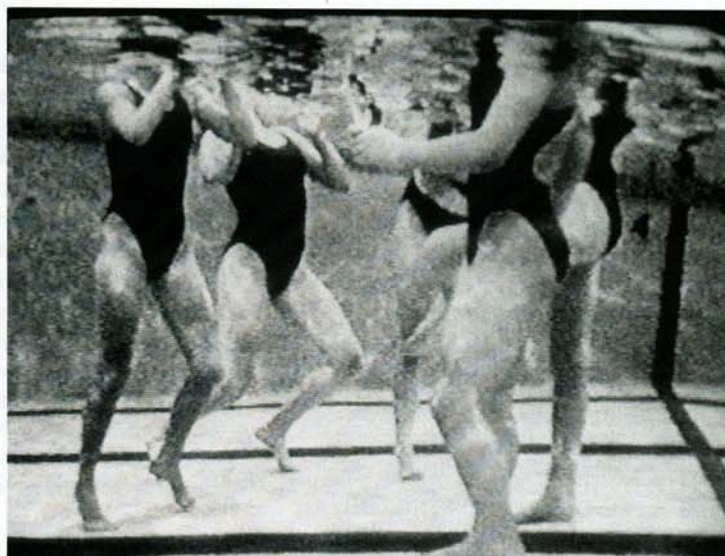
Rodney Graham,
Vexation Island,
cinemascope film,
1997. Photo:
Shannon Oksanen,
courtesy 303
Gallery, New York.



Stephen Spretnyjack, Video
Installation. Photo:
Courtesy E.S. Vandam
Gallery, New York.



Janet Biggs, *Water Training*, 1997.
Two video projections, each video
image approximately 10' x 14'.
Photos: Courtesy Anna Kustera
Gallery, New York.



fragmented by quick cuts from the underwater video. The horse looks terrified; noose around its neck, eyes glaring, nostrils flaring. The sound of his strained breathing permeates the space. At a right angle to the horse the laborious, synchronized movements of the dancers are projected like surveillance shots of bizarre movements we have no right to see. Several groups of girls ten to thirteen years old dive into the water one after the other and engage in the most strenuous leg movements that allow them to stay afloat and perform graceful above-water gestures for the onlookers. The rigorous choreography echoes the forced running in place of the horse, forming a relentless battle between the weight of the water and the striving to stay afloat.

Biggs has a career-long interest in the harsher aspects of childhood and adolescence. She has created installations with cribs and stuffed toys, night lights, and hundreds of baby shoes. The shots here of the aquatic performers remind us of the paces girls are put through for beauty pageants or cheerleading teams: pressures to perform tasks for the voyeuristic pleasure of their elders. The girls in Biggs's video are literally kicking to stay alive, otherwise they drown, which is the metaphorical outcome of ruining the pretty picture of the dance if they don't keep up. The horse, stripped of its prowess and Freudian sex appeal, faces the girls as if pleading them to help him, to release him from his constraints. Or, representing all beasts of burden, he's flashing a warning to the girls to get out of the water while they can. (Lest anyone feel, as I did, that some pretty hefty animal abuse was going on here, the horse was actually

receiving therapy for injuries incurred during races, which are, of course, another form of abuse.)

Rodney Graham, the quirky, Canadian Conceptual artist, is also in deep water in *Vexation Island*, his 1997 film created for his country's pavilion at this past summer's Venice Biennale and recently seen in New York at 303 Gallery. But his water is the lush blue of the Caribbean, where he filmed this nine-minute Robinson Crusoe story in Cinemascope, which, obviously, provides a viewing experience far richer than video. At least on the surface.

Graham, decked out in full eighteenth-century British seaman's outfit, lies stranded and unconscious on a tiny island, as a royal blue parrot, perched on the proverbial barrel, chirps nearby, nary a thought of fleeing his companion. Graham's character awakens, looks up to a coconut tree, senses relief from hunger and thirst, shakes the tree, and is rendered once again unconscious by the falling coconut. *C'est tout*. But what a sumptuous *tout* it is thanks to the elegant camera work of director Robert Lovegall and cinematographer Tobias Schliessler, and to Melanie Barter's editing. Slowly and methodically does this camera probe Graham's face and prominent head wound, then pan out to the sea and circle back as Graham rises and looks up to the top of the tree. Angles shift seamlessly, point of view moves from Graham to tree to ground as Graham performs his slow motion fall.

Purely as a viewing experience, the film is an exquisite nugget which might serve as a trailer to a longer narrative or, to the casual eye, as an alluring adver-

tisement for the Virgin Islands. To the well-disposed art enthusiast it can be an enticing fragment, like an out-take from a lengthy Pina Bausch dance, or a relief from an oversized Rauschenberg canvas. Graham's careful use of familiar strategies like repetition, slow motion, and shifting perspectives remove the film from the commonplace, transporting it to the modernist company of Stein, Cage and, even, Eisenstein (by way of affinity, not in any way by comparison). The Robinson Crusoe motif provides a user-friendly handle for many varied associations, not least of which might be the struggle of the artist to make something of merit and beauty, only to be knocked down again by contrary societal or critical forces.

But, alas, according to Graham's own account, printed in *Art/Text*, inspiration for the film came from Gilles Deleuze's foggy notion of "realist" or "vegetative" violence symbolized by the sudden, crushing blow of the coconut. It sounds like a parody of philosophes-based Conceptual Art from the seventies and early eighties that made Foucault, Derrida, and the others household names in some very specialized houses. Graham went to too much trouble and expense here to be kidding. This film is not slapstick. Would that it were; it would be a memorable send-up of all those ersatz philosophical artworks, based on weekend readings of dense critical texts that defy facile translating into "art." It may be unfair to take an artist at his (written) word, but such spurious sourcing is probably what sank this guy's ship to begin with.

Stephen Spretnyjack's heartfelt, but overinclusive, installation at E.S. Van-

dam starts with a large projection of a burning house, looped to play continuously in this converted basement gallery. It is a daring image that might be issuing a warning to all those who enter here, but nothing that follows matches this fury. Rather what we find sequestered in corners or suspended from the ceiling are the minutely detailed ramblings, in the form of photos, scrapbooks, and rolodexes, of an artist very attentive to his every thought. In display cases and pasted to the walls are endless sketches and snippets of writing that relate to other objects in the room, but not much is worth probing. Like Graham, he tells us too much, but way too much, about his source material. Unlike Graham, it's his sources (diaries, poems) that become the material itself. The flaming house is all too quickly consumed in reams of artifacts (including a burning permit from the fire department) that restrict the video's poetic impact.

The same is true for another striking video, this one of a bird projected into a makeshift window constructed on the gallery's brick wall. The bird, looking very at home on the windowsill, cocks his head as if performing for the crowd. Close-by are obsessive notations of every movement the bird makes and the precise time he makes it. This might be fine were it not that the bird jottings get lost in the midst of all the other unrelated matter surrounding them. A more restrained installation, with just the projected image of the bird, perhaps, paired with the burning house, would suggest a mysterious disjunction worthy of the viewer's inquiry. Spretnyjack also crowds us with puerile projections of himself making faces for the camera—these

projected onto a mirror which then re-projects them onto a wall—and personal notebooks that distract from his strongest images, as if this were his last

chance to exhibit everything in his studio. He's got the Conceptual part right, it's the Minimal part he needs to study up on.

MICHAEL RUSH is a theatre artist, filmmaker, and critic. His documentary, *Biennial '97: Whitney Museum of American Art*, is being distributed by the Center for Media and Independent Learning, Berkeley. His new book *New Media in Late 20th Century Art* will be published shortly by Thames and Hudson.