

## FIVE VIDEO ARTISTS

### Larry Qualls

Exhibitions by Krzysztof Wodiczko, Diana Thater, Jocelyn Taylor, Janet Biggs, and Dawn Dedeaux

From its infancy in the 1960s, electronic art, and specifically its video version, has been pulled in two very different directions. On the one hand, there have been explorations of the nature of the technology itself—how this hardware (as it is now called) might be used to create new, radically different art forms. In the seventies organizations like Experiments in Art and Technology promoted research into the fundamentals of art in the new age. This was an exciting time when people felt they were at the beginning of the creation of something that had the possibility of altering the very way we understand perception.

But at the same time that this program for discovering an ontology of art in digital form was being developed, there were those for whom the act of reproduction itself, rather than electronic manipulation or creation, remained the primary function of the new technologies. The equipment was simply a means, a recording device, another way of creating or preserving imagery that was not divorced from other kinds of image recording, such as painting, sculpture, or film (either single image or multiple image/action photography). In some of the arts developed from various new technologies, in fact, there was almost no attempt to go beyond the visual-reproduction capabilities of the form.

Holography as an art is a prime example; from the days of the now long-closed Museum of Holography, artists using the form have really done only variations on one scheme—a figure of some sort shown in some sort of dangerous, questionable, humorous, or upsetting context. An example would be holograms on a floor of people trying to emerge from cells beneath the floor. After the initial surprise or pleasure or disgust, there was nothing more to consider except the technology itself.

For video art, the dichotomy of approaches led, in one direction, to masterpieces like those of Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota, in which multiple video screens were united with surprising, shocking, even whimsical structures, and an increasingly elaborate technological underpinning. Paik has continued to be intrigued by

the possibilities of multiple channel imagery when yoked to the latest advances in hardware. In the summer of 1995 at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York he displayed a newly achieved and wonderfully funny picture of the United States, *Information Highway*, which was originally conceived in 1974. This work consisted of a vast neon map of the country fronting banks of monitors of various sizes showing images (from banks of laser disc players) relating to the fifty states; the video imagery was created with Paul Garrin. In another room, Paik also showed the artistic result of his latest research in art and technology, *Laser Candle*, which employed projected images and laser beams criss-crossing the room.

While artists like Paik and Kubota have continued to experiment with the possibilities of the new technology, others, notably Mary Lucier, have used whatever new technology became available to craft exquisitely photographed videos as part of elaborate studies of place and time, of memory and its relationship to the developing individual. Lucier is very aware of the nature of video, as opposed to film, in documenting aspects of the real world. She knows how to manipulate color, sound, the rhythm of cutting and editing, to create what is a specific grammar of video, not film: imagery that takes account of the “immediacy,” the sense of contemporaneity of video. There is a difference in feeling, and not just because of the lack of depth that characterizes video; a comparison of film and video of the exact same scene, unedited, makes clear that there is a different aesthetic, or ontology, if you will. Projection only magnifies this. Lucier is but the best known—and certainly one of the most accomplished—of those artists who have used video as part of room-sized installations exploring many contemporary personal or public issues. If most of these have been evanescent at best, it is because few artists have had Lucier’s intelligence and awareness of the nature of the form they have chosen to incorporate into the art being made.

One of the few who has recently created a moving work involving sound, video projection, and sculptural installation is Meridel Rubenstein, a mid-career artist from New Mexico who has had very little national exposure. Her *Oppenheimer’s Chair*, relating the development of the nuclear bomb at Los Alamos to the electric chair, is far more complex and satisfying than a description would seem to indicate. It was the highlight of the otherwise dismal “SITE Santa Fe” Exhibition in the summer of 1995 in the New Mexican state capitol.

Even in the realm of supposedly pure video documentary, artists have attempted to use the multiple image capabilities of video, either employing numerous monitors arranged in signifying patterns or arraying a number of images in varying ways on one screen. Thus, in the 1970s Juan Downey placed the viewer on a bench at the center of a circle of monitors showing aboriginal people in a dance ceremony. More recently, in the summer of 1995, Gerald McMaster, the Canadian artist and curator responsible for his country’s pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale, created a circle of monitors around which the viewer walked to observe a Plains Indian ceremony; this work, which McMaster called *Tribes Powwow*, was one of the video works on display at SITE Santa Fe. There is clearly much greater ease of image-making with new

video equipment that with the heavy packs Downey and his cohorts used, but the goal is still the same: to provide a sense of immediacy and mediation at the same time. The observer is also a participant.

Many artists have utilized the increasingly miniaturized and powerful technology of video to create variations—and not necessarily fresh ones—on the schemes first suggested by such works as Kubota's Duchampian video critique of *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Tony Oursler's puppets, the faces of which serve as screens for images from very tiny video projectors, place the technological possibilities of video in the service of mini-dramas, with narratives and other sounds accompanying the moving faces. Each figure, with its voice and images, plays out some sort of short psychodrama, the genesis and the result of which seem closer to the stuff of television talk shows and group therapy sessions than to the fully-realized theatre of puppetmasters like Theodora Skipitares. Carter Kuster, the Canadian-born performer and multi-media artist, skewered much of this sort of thing in a series of black paper silhouettes with chrons of the multitude of people he observed while watching the talk shows for a year. These are only passing shades meant to distract us with a moment of recognition and feelings of superiority.

The attempt to integrate video technology into performance over the past thirty years has been characterized by a vast number of dreary works, in which video monitors placed on or around a stage could not be seen or heard by all the viewers

or in which grainy projections served as an ill-conceived backdrop to various trendy theatrical experiments. With a few signal exceptions by powerful artists like Rachel Rosenthal, most of them have not been remembered past their initial runs. An artist who has been dealing with the integration of technology into non-traditional dramatic performance is Krzysztof Wodiczko, now director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Long known for his elaborate slide projections onto buildings around the world, Wodiczko has for the past four years created a series of street performances with immigrants either carrying a large video-topped walking stick, an *Alien Staff*, or wearing a video mouthpiece, the *Porte-Parole*, similar in form to the video glasses worn by the *Star Trek* character.

Documentation in various forms of these performances was shown at the Galerie Lelong in New York in the spring of 1996 in the exhibition *Xenology: Immigrants Instruments 1992–1996*. Of the *Alien Staff* and the *Porte-Parole*, Wodiczko approved of this explanation: "A small video monitor plays the pre-recorded story of the immigrant, or 'operator.' Relics symbolic of the operator's journey across the border (working papers, green card, etc.) are visible in clear containers within the body of the staff. The *Porte-Parole* is an instrument that encircles the jaw and the mouth of the operator, with a small video monitor installed directly over the operator's mouth, playing a pre-recorded and edited speech. The *Porte-Parole* literally acts as a mouthpiece by 'replacing' the operator's actual act of speech with the moving image of his or her lips and the sound of his or her voice. The small size of the screen forces the viewer to come face to face with the operator, thereby dissolving the physical and psychological distance between the operator, or immigrant, and the viewer, whether non-immigrant or immigrant. By creating this dialogue between the immigrant and the viewer, Wodiczko creates a forum in which two individuals communicate as individuals, without the labels 'us' and 'them.'" This use of electronic technology is but a further stage in the artist's ongoing program to find ways in which art can deconstruct expected responses, whether to the landscape or to the individual, and create the framework for new ways of perceiving and understanding.

To a younger generation of video artists, however, questions about the nature of the technology they employ, its language and its difference from that of earlier art forms, and the resulting implication for perception itself, are of no importance. They willfully choose to ignore the issue of signification of various media, and are not concerned with how the image is made. For these filmmakers, videomakers, painters, and still photographers, "Image is an image is an image." While this may seem like a tired joke, it is at the heart of their art. For them the image of the artist creating is what is important, and they achieve this by making an image that is hung or projected or digitized. They see no need for translation from one form of art to another nor for exegesis or interpretation. Immediacy is all. This is a total rejection of their teachers' theories, leaving only the teachers' tools—the slides or videotapes of classic movies—as their guides. The teachers have used slides and tapes to present theories of art and language, but by using translations of visual material, they have created students for whom the original is no more important than the reproduction.

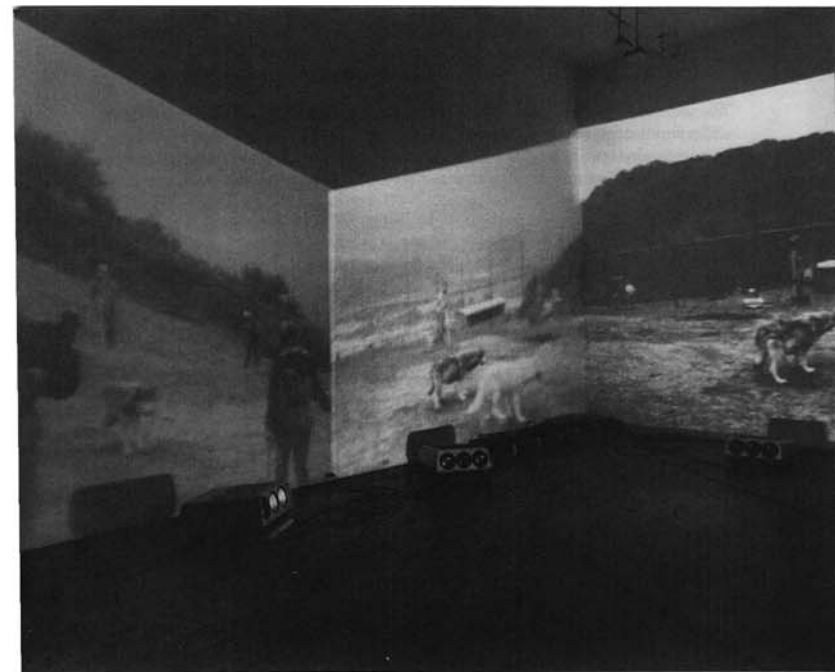


Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Alien Staff*, Barcelona, Spain, June 1992.  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.

The translation is the art. There is no difference for them between the projection of a film and the projection of a video. Art has become simply the flat image, whether in a magazine or in a slide. Even the three-dimensional art of this younger generation lacks sculptural "depth": it is about surface impact.

It is in this context that the reaction to the Winter 1996 installations of four young videomakers must be seen. Diana Thater is a video artist and curator from California, who in January 1996 presented a show of single-channel video work by artists from Southern California at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York; in February the gallery presented an exhibition of Thater's work. The artists she selected for the January show included such California masters of in-your-face rudeness as Skip Arnold, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, Raymond Pettibon, Mike Kelley & Paul McCarthy, Tony Oursler, and Chris Wilder, among many others. Thater stated her intention boldly: "to concentrate on more recent work . . . that takes as its inspiration the look, genres, structure, and techniques used by the television industry. . . . Thus, whether working in a garage with a pixel camera and puppets made of old socks and sets made out of cardboard, or shooting on film in a professional studio with a cinematographer and actors, the artists in this show critically embrace the television industry, recognizing that the language it invented may be transformed to suit the purposes of a different speaker. And so, it becomes possible to make single-channel video that dismantles pieces of the dominant structure in which it was made, while simultaneously making that action endemic to its creation of meaning as a work of art." In other words, what is being proposed is a jettisoning of all the critical distinctions and the history of video art. It is TV or nothing.

Thater expanded on this notion in her own video-projection piece *China*, which filled the main room of the gallery the next month. This 1995 piece, originally produced by and exhibited at the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago and at Le Creux de L'Enfer, Centre d'Art Contemporain, in Thiers, France, utilized 6 video projectors, 6 laserdisc players, 1 laserplay-6 synthesizer, and 6 laserdiscs. Thater taped a pair of trained wolves (China is the female one) with six separate cameras in a circle around the animals. The footage includes not only the animals, but also the handlers, the cameras, and the entire crew. She then took apart this footage and edited it in any number of ways, in terms of both action, color, and speed, before creating the six videodiscs which are used to project the images completely around the room. The idea for this originated in the Angela Carter story, "The Company of Wolves," in which Red Riding Hood joins the wolf pack. The spectator enters the work of art, becoming a part of it, just as in the works of Downey and McMaster. But here, the spectator alters the work as projectors are partially or wholly blocked. There is no omniscience. The work is interactive, incomplete without the intervention of the spectator. (Peter Campus experimented with this briefly in the 1970s.) Unlike earlier video art, however, the effect is not based on a critique of art or of the technology itself; the technology is a given. It is the psychology of the spectator which is being questioned, the colors and walls changing as the viewer moves about.



Diana Thater, *China*, 1995. Installation for 6 video projectors, 6 laserdisc players, 1 laserplay synchronizer, 6 laserdiscs. Photo: Courtesy Nicholas Walster and David Zwirner Gallery, New York.



In *Perspective Is An Energy*, a work for four monitors, Thater's weather photography owes as much to the rough-cuts of artists like the Kuchars as to the grandly designed nature studies of electronic artists like Mary Lucier. This gesture angered a number of older critics and curators, who wanted to see the debate about the nature of video continued; Thater does not care about this. She is interested only in the effects she can achieve, just as television is interested only in the products it can sell. She uses multiple projection as a tool, because it is more effective for creating a response than single-channel work.

It is communication that interests Diana Thater as well as many other artists of her generation. The visceral impact, the immediate sensation, the thrill that they have experienced and that they want others to have, this is what motivates so much in the visual arts now, from the paintings of Christian Schumann and Sean Landers to the films of Wong Kar-Wei or his American imitator Quentin Tarantino. The artists embrace the immediacy of television and utilize whatever is the latest technology without concern for questions about its nature; they gleefully plunder the entire history of visual communication without caring—or even knowing—what the original meanings were. And critics trained in the classics and believing that art is an exploration of the means, not just an end, howl. This is art divorced from tradition.

The kind of wall projection that Thater embraces is something that a number of other video artists also employ. Janet Biggs created a stunningly evocative installation for the curator Anna Kustera at the Chassie Post Gallery in New York. The installation consisted of three main elements. The first, *Amanda Riding Diplomaat*, a piece for a rotating projector, showed a nine-year-old girl trotting on a white horse that seemed to circle the gallery. Arranged in a line in the center of the gallery, four pairs of monitors presented video loops: one showed a girl playing with a stick horse; another, a girl on a coin-operated horse; a third, three girls on a merry-go-round; and five showed girls playing horsey with a parent. The third element of the exhibition was a large-scale color photograph of a girl in her bedroom, surrounded by such favorite things as a plastic horse collection, a saddle, horse show ribbons, and a diary.

The reaction to this complete immersion in Biggs' vision was very curious. Not one of the men, whether straight or gay, with whom I spoke about the piece seemed to be much impressed by it. They all noted the graininess of the encircling video loop and were interested in the technology of the rotating projector. All the women with whom I spoke were moved, but none more so than those who had had a horse as a child. One said it was like regressing into to a prelapsarian world. The technical limitations of the projection or the home-video qualities of the loops were of little concern; indeed, the quality of memory seemed enhanced by the technical limitations. All were very conscious that some of their deepest feelings were being mined, and willingly gave into this, just as audiences at the very poorly crafted, extremely manipulative film *Mr. Holland's Opus* gave in to its emotional tug. And it is this emotional rush that Biggs was hoping to achieve, using one of the most

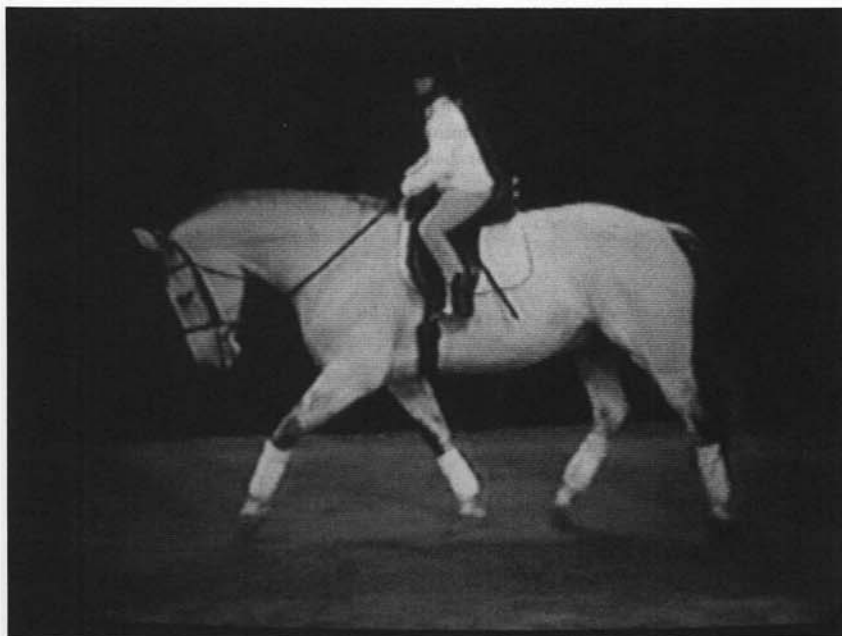
powerful attachments of a young girl's life to question issues of power, sexuality, and autonomy.

Jocelyn Taylor and Dawn Dedeaux also questioned these issues in their recent installations, but through adult actions rather than through recovered memories of the development of female sexuality. A co-promoter of the Clit Club in the early nineties and a producer for DYKE-TV, Taylor, who has received video grants from the Jerome Foundation and Astrea, is best known for *Real Sex*, her 10-minute 1995 piece that was part of an HBO special focusing on her erotic video work. A self-taught video artist, Taylor is as concerned with activism as art. And yet, in her installation *Alien at Rest*, presented at Deitch Projects, New York, in February 1996, she very consciously draws on art world history to explore questions of identity and sexuality.

Taylor is a tall, strikingly beautiful woman in an art/social world in which the question of female beauty is highly charged politically. She uses her self-awareness of her beauty in the very carefully composed and edited tape which was projected onto a long wall of the garage-like gallery space. Taylor is shown, on three channels, walking through the streets of Soho wearing only shoes and sunglasses; these views are interspersed with scenes of her in a bathtub staring straightforwardly and without coyness at the camera or with views of various parts of her body. The long gallery walls are scrawled with texts from Audre Lord, Lorraine O'Grady and others, as well as statements by the artist about her developing self-awareness as a black woman and a lesbian. In other spaces in the gallery, very small monitors show single-image versions of the tapes. The contrast between the jewel-like intensity of images on the small monitors and the oversized projections points up Taylor's awareness of how the much-talked about "gaze" is affected by matters of scale.

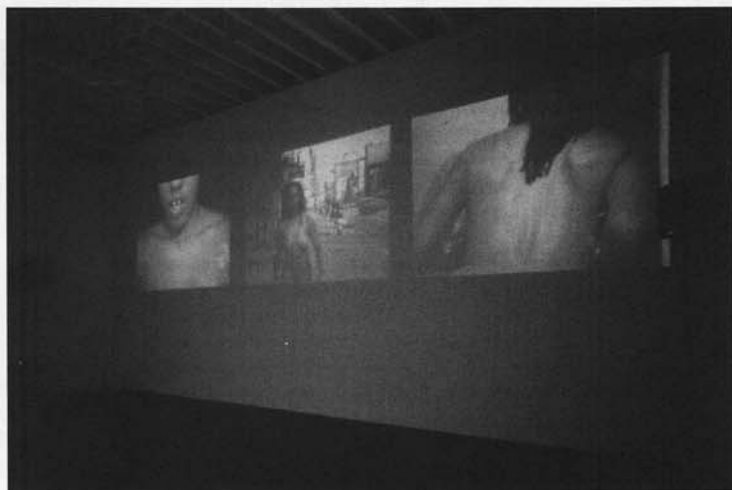
She is also aware that her nude stroll is a stunt with a long history in the art world. The furniture-sculptor Scott Burton ran naked through the streets of Soho in 1971, and any number of other artists, from Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann to Matthew Barney have used their naked bodies in film and video pieces. For the earlier artists, the idea of beauty or attractiveness was not the central question in these performances. Indeed, Acconci and Chris Burden, unlike Schneemann, were not attractive by any standards. But in the current climate [as Daryl Chin noted jokingly about Barney in PAJ 46], the naked figure can only be a male model to be accepted. And indeed, as if to make Chin's joke real, Mike Kelley and some other California artists have restaged some of the earlier Acconci pieces using actors with buff bodies, thereby utterly changing the meaning of Acconci's pieces. In the theatre, virtually the only bodies shown unclothed today are those of attractive young men, with the exception of occasional camp figures like Nathan Lane.

While part of this is directly attributable to the gay male sensibility that supports most serious theatre today, it also reflects the politicizing of the female body and female beauty over the past generation. The female nude is virtually unacceptable in contemporary art, freighted as it is with questions of pornography and submission.



Janet Biggs, still from video *Amanda Riding Diplomaat*, 1996. Photo: Courtesy Chassie Post Gallery, New York.

Jocelyn Taylor, *Alien at Rest*, 1996. Photo: Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.



Only older academic artists dare to display female nudes in any but the most ironic form. Otherwise it is only in the skin magazines and strip clubs that naked women are seen. Jocelyn Taylor affirms sexuality as an important aspect of artmaking by reclaiming the female body and the notion of female beauty for women as natural, while making women accountable for their own actions. She prevents objectification by gazing directly into the camera and, playing with the scale that video representation allows, makes the viewer complicit/active in any response. The projection or miniaturization of the video prevents the easy projection of fantasies. Object and subject are clearly defined.

Dawn Dedeaux employs various media, including photography, print, film, and video in her efforts to make political art that goes beyond mere documentary reportage. Like Sister Helen Prejean, the subject of Tim Robbins's *Dead Man Walking*, a very conventional film, she is from New Orleans and very concerned with the underclass, specifically black youths abandoned to lives of violence and incarceration. For a number of years she has been working in prison with these young men, exploiting them, as she is very aware, at the same time that she is teaching them to present themselves with all their contradictions. Very knowledgeable of contemporary trends in photography and video, she is also aware of their inherent limitations.

In a piece from 1991, *Super Convergence: January 27 1991 (The Day Mickey went to Baghdad)*, shown at the Houston Center for Photography, she installed a 12-foot by 10-foot grid of over 70 photos on one wall and a 6-foot by 6-foot floor image. The work showed live television coverage of the 1991 Super Bowl mixed with live coverage of the Gulf War. There were also frames from the commercials, the most expensive of the year, for the "events" and views of the Disney half-time extravaganza and of an archaeologist discussing imperiled Babylonian sites. This is a critique of television in visual terms. Dedeaux is aware of the limits of "television" itself, of the ways that even "art" video pieces, the kind promoted by a number of curators at such centers as the Kitchen, merely reinforce expected responses, whatever the theoretical underpinnings of the sound/picture montage. Such pieces no longer have the power to alter perceptions; they merely reinforce whatever aesthetic or political views the audience brings to them.

For her exhibition at the Thread Waxing Space in New York (8 February–16 March, 1996), Dedeaux presented a number of vignettes from works in progress, the *Free to Kill Series*. These incorporated video, wall paintings, free-standing sculptural elements, and small room-size sets. *The Face of God, In Search Of* (1996), scheduled to be shown at the Nexus Center for Contemporary Arts in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics, consisted of a raked platform, with metal studs on two sides and a plain metal bed at the center. On the plain wall at the rear was an eerie projection of various spectral figures and a violin body. In another piece, *A Safe Home*, the center of the gallery was nearly bisected by a metal wall running diagonally out from one side, this supporting six doors, each covered with a different example of the metal security grills increasingly seen now on houses of all classes. Between two of the



Dawn Dedeaux, *The Face of God, In Search of*, 1996. Installation photograph of a work in progress as part of the *Free to Kill Series*. Photo: Courtesy Thread Waxing Space, New York.

doors was a suit of armor. During the opening night reception, there was a naked blonde male standing between the doors or walking near the raked platform.

Other works by Dedeaux at Thread Waxing Space included large-scale mixed media paintings, a tableau with a suit of armor in a closet, and a sound installation in a lavatory. In an alcove on the right side of the main gallery, a small room, *Woman Eating Porkchop* was constructed with the interior walls finished, but the outside uncovered to reveal the metal studs. By peeping through the window at the front, the viewer became a voyeur, spying a kitchen setting with a video monitor presenting a woman voraciously eating a porkchop. The viewer is, at the least, invading the woman's privacy by peering through the partially opened window; the viewer could just as easily be a robber or a rapist or . . . well.

Behind the barricade of doors Dedeaux placed a ratty easy chair facing a monitor and a wall, on both of which was a terrifying video, *Drive-By Shooting*, showing two black youths cruising inner city streets in a car until they happen upon the site of a drive-by shooting just as the police are arriving. This time it is a camera that the youths shoot out the window as they mark their territory, and the viewer is intensely affected by the awareness that it could just as easily be a gun that these youths are shooting. The last excruciating minutes show a young male drive-by shooting victim lying face down in the gutter, his recently purchased fast-food nearby. The seeming artlessness of the footage, its apparently unedited nature, intensifies the effect. Clearly Dedeaux has worked on the tape, yet that does not serve to distance the horror nor its concomitant morbid, even prurient, interest. By doubling the image through projection, she makes it more than pop sociology, with the commentator at the end to bring the easy moral which is the standard television treatment and response to this kind of footage. She does not mediate through words or facile sermonizing, but forces the audience to confront its own culpability, its own involvement, without escape.

The two Hardy brothers, whom Dedeaux taped not long after they were acquitted in 1990 for a shooting that left one man dead and four injured, have been implicated in a number of crimes over the years. They were major figures in Dedeaux's multimedia exhibition *Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths*, created for the Contemporary in Baltimore and shown in New Orleans at the Contemporary Arts Center in 1993. This huge installation, with ten rooms lining a central hallway, included projection rooms for *Drive-By Shooting* and for *The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew*, which shows the brothers discussing the violent events of their lives. There were also huge hand colored photo-enlargements of the brothers, among others, in heroic warrior poses. In connection with its investigation of the execution of a woman set to testify against a New Orleans cop, the FBI seized the artist's raw footage of the Hardy brothers in October of 1995.

Dawn Dedeaux is perhaps the most striking of those artists who combine the ontological concerns of multi-media and video art with a political/social message.

The scope of her work is so large and her imagination so fertile that she refuses to be limited by any formal boundaries. Furthermore, she refuses to be constricted by theory or by any kind of critical or social or sexual structures that might limit what she is doing. Her work is neither programmatic nor proscriptive. It exists as both a reality, physical and virtual, in itself and as a prescription for treating the malaise of the art world and as a tonic for the despairing.

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