

TOO MUCH ACCESSIBILITY

Venice / David James

Of all media, the hardest to work in at present must be video. Unlike poetry or painting, which seem to be biological necessities without which the organism atrophies, all the reasons for doing video work are historical, and in the early eighties, history allows few options. Once the video maker has decided not to contest the culture industry by attempting to destroy television, then inevitably, on some level he/she will be competing with rock video. And so the austere recalcitrance and self-interrogation that used to characterize the most significant use of the medium tend now to give way to a decorativeness that can easily slip over into the trivial.

In the early seventies, when she was content to do boring tapes and performances, Joan Jonas managed to pull off some pretty interesting stuff: *Vertical Roll* (1972) is a classic investigation of video information processing and its use in a performance situation. Now, recognizing correctly that the bottom has fallen out of that market, she has decided to make her work accessible, and the compromises are visible. Although it is easy enough to conjure up a rationale for the conceits of the work shown recently at Beyond Baroque, it's less easy to rid yourself of the suspicion that they gloss over the lack of real substance.

The oldest tape (1974), depicts a couple of women, naked or in diaphanous white dresses, swimming around in a pool. The ripples they make disturb the surface of the water and provide a visual bridge to the flickering of the video image. You can easily argue, as does the press handout, that "a parallel is made between the surface of water in a pool and that of the video screen." This may well be, but it's not news now and it was a cliché in '74. Also, the glitches that come from the sloppy editing between shots are not enough to earn the title *Disturbances* or to justify the overall conception, especially

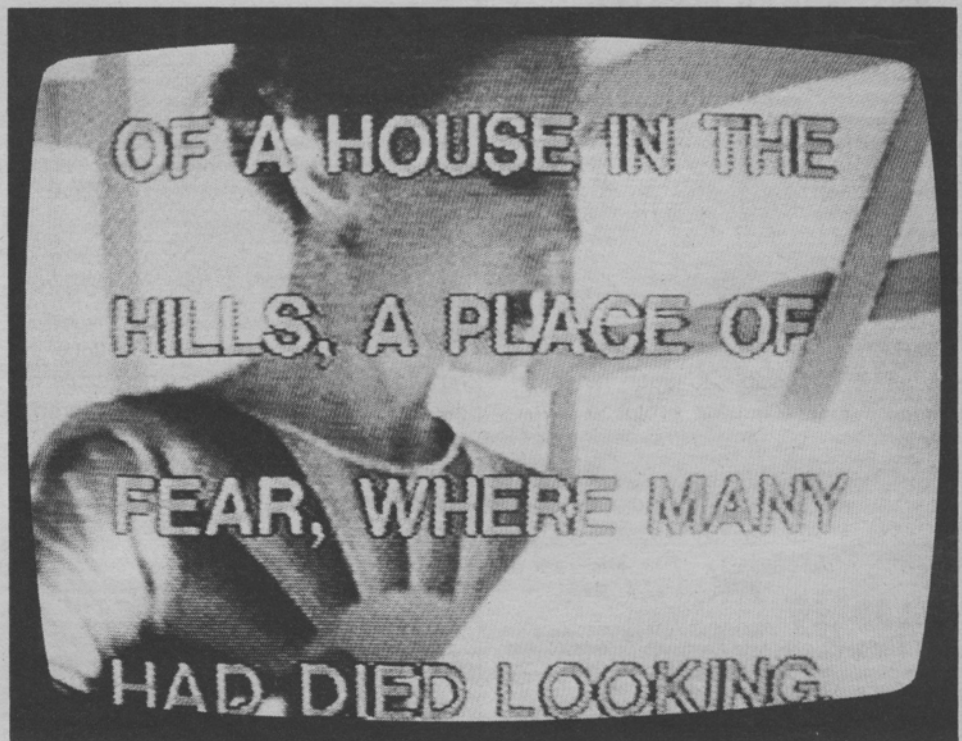
when a magisterial treatment of the same theme (without the soft-core pornography come-on) is available in Chick Strand's *Kristallnacht*.

The other two tapes, *I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)* (1977-78) and *Upside Down and Backwards* (1980), are more substantial. Both use the same strategy of fragmenting, intermingling and eventually amalgamating material from two different sources. In each case, there is the same interest in watching motifs accumulate resonance and acquire narrative coherence as they migrate from context to context.

I Want to Live in the Country combines the natural space found in footage from a vacation in the Canadian countryside with the fabricated, electronic and intellectual space found in a TV studio where the vacation is recalled. The video uses this layout as a base in which is embedded fragmented images of dreams, narrative vignettes and other images which, as they dissolve from one context to the other, signal their reconciliation into the single space of the artist's imagination.

Upside Down and Backwards begins by interweaving bits of text from two fairy tales, "The Frog Prince" and "The Boy Who Went Out to Learn Fear," in a print-out over the visuals, one in yellow, the other in blue. Fragments of these stories recur through the tape until they are re-presented, mingled together in green (blue plus yellow) titles. The progress of their melding supplies the structure within which improvisations and partial dramatizations or images from the stories are suspended. Its central tableau is an extended riff on the Death and the Maiden theme in which Jonas unclothes and dances with a skeleton, caressing it lasciviously as the camera explores it in close-ups which, aided by expressionist lighting, hover on the edge of abstraction.

Although spoiled by its assimilation of New York new-wave decorativeness, *Up-*



Joan Jonas, still from *Upside Down and Backwards*, 1980, videotape, at Beyond Baroque, Venice. Photo: Marilyn Groch.

side Down and Backwards does open up some interesting possibilities for narrative. But for these to be clarified, the visual dress that makes these tapes so eminently consumable needs to be cleared

away. That formal possibility is finally, however, a social possibility that reflects the uses our culture decides to make of the medium. And we are as responsible for that as Jonas is. □

NEWS AND NOTES

RUBIN NAMED DIRECTOR

David Rubin, formerly assistant director of the Galleries of the Claremont Colleges, has been appointed director of exhibitions at the San Francisco Art Institute's Emanuel Walter and Atholl McBean galleries. Concomitant with Rubin's assumption of the position is his appointment as adjunct curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

HAMMER DOUBLES DONATION

Armand Hammer, internationally known businessman and philanthropist, has announced that he intends to double his original donation of Daumier prints to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. This brings the total of lithographs donated to 2,000, in addition to the 18 Daumier caricature bronzes previously contributed. The announcement was made at a dinner held in Hammer's honor in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition

Daumier: Selections from the Gift of Dr. Armand Hammer at the Corcoran Gallery.

CAPP STREET PROJECT

The formation of a private nonprofit experimental program of art patronage has been announced by its founder and director, Ann Hatch. Designated the Capp Street Project, the program will allow selected artists to spend three-month residencies at San Francisco's 65 Capp Street, a structure designed and created by David Ireland. The artists-in-residence, chosen by curator Leah Levy and a six-member advisory board, will create temporary works designed specifically for the site and receive working stipends and living accommodations. The four artists chosen for 1984 residencies will be announced later this month. For further information, write: Capp Street Project, PO Box 40339, San Francisco, CA 94110; 415-524-6924.

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