LIGHT INTO ART:
FROM VIDEO TO VIRTUAL REALITY

PEGGY CRAWFORD   CARL LOEFFLER AND LYNN HOLDEN
SUZAN ETKIN   BRUCE NAUMAN
GARY HILL   KEITH SONNIER
ALFREDO JAAR   HIROSHI SUGIMOTO
RONALD JONES   KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

Throughout the history of mankind, no century has experienced as much change and rapid growth as the twentieth century. In only 94 years, practically every facet of human and organic life has been affected and altered by scientific invention and technology. Both world wars played a critical role in pushing technology to new realms. Electricity, telephones, automobiles, air travel, nuclear power, space research, miracle drugs, heart transplants, test-tube babies, fax machines, and computers are only some of the areas whose inventions or advances in the 20th century have made a major impact on daily life. The Futurists in this century were the first artists to embrace and celebrate technology as they glorified the modern delirium of speed and contemporary machines.

When photography became commonplace for artists in the nineteenth century, a new chapter of art history began to be written both perceptually and stylistically. As realism gave way to the vocabulary of abstraction, society had to adapt to seeing an alternate version of 'reality.' The Impressionists and Cezanne were once considered revolutionary; today those early avant-garde renegades represent art history's celebrated masters of Modernism. Over the past one-hundred years, artists have continually brought a new excitement and tension to art by counter-balancing and acknowledging the dualities of mind, spirit and new technology.

The pioneer of light art, beyond the photograph, was Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968). In 1905 he began producing sculptural works with glass and incandescent lamps accompanied by music. His Lumia Suite was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the 1960s, a heightened interest became evident among artists in Europe and the United States in finding a liaison between art and technology. Jean Tinguely, Nicolas Schoffer, Yves Klein, and Group Zero pushed their experiments in light, movement and technology to extreme levels and their work helped to influence artists in the United States.

This was particularly true with the founding of the collaborative group Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) by Rauschenberg and Kluver to promote experiments between artists and engineers. Maurice Tuchman conceived a program in 1966 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to further the marriage of art and technology. Jack

Burnham's "Software Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art," at the Jewish Museum displayed only machines in hope of demonstrating the use of electronic and communications technology by artists.

Technology has now become a part of the artist's "tool box," as natural as brush and paint. In the United States during the late 1960s, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, and the Pulsa Group embraced technology, particularly light, as a viable artistic medium. Their experiments demonstrated a new concern, not so much for an immediate object, but for larger social systems and inventive ways to make art. Artists from all disciplines have followed their direction and have increasingly surmounted their hesitations and fears about using technology to make art.

The exhibition *Light Into Art*, presents a diverse range of works by ten artists who acknowledge and exploit technology. The art gathered for this display does not constitute a specific movement or pretend to provide a definitive survey about how artists are currently viewing and using technology. This exhibition is far too modest; it merely presents a sampling of how a selection of artists are using technology and light in the 1990s. Although several of the artists represented continue to pursue photography as a practical medium, others opt to use non-conventional technological tools such as video, lasers, computers, and virtual reality. The illusory quality of light poses many challenges and possibilities. Light and

Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Union City Drive In, Union City*, 1993

other forms of new technology now afford artists the ability to not only push their ideas, but also to manipulate media, control physical and material boundaries, and to capture the fractured realities of this era.

In spite of the technical and aesthetic factors that inform this work, it would be foolish to pretend that any unifying thread exists between each entity. However, as technology becomes more sophisticated and begins to play a more common and dominant role in the process of art making, its visual and multi-sensorial impact cannot but alter one's perceptions and experiences of art. This is particularly true in the area of virtual reality, where the imaging of 'virtual' objects, and the viewer's ability to manipulate, move and meet through computer data-ware allows for an experience in cyberspace. When one is experiencing virtual reality, the virtual technology equipment prohibits contact with the outside world;

parts of one's body are enclosed in specialized, immersive equipment and this physically restrictive characteristic is potentially somewhat dangerous. "Viewers of a virtual-reality world are denied the emotional charge that comes with watching the finale credits or finishing the last page. Because there is no fixed end point in a 'voomie,' its author does not have control over the emotion viewers will feel when they leave the narrative. If, as in most virtual worlds, there are no constraints on when viewers can exit, they are most likely to turn off the machine when they are least interested in the narrative." [1]

The artists included in this exhibition approach technology as a tool both of the hand and the mind. Collectively, those artists at the end of this century who are employing and exploring technology's vast potential tend to push boundaries in order to investigate the imaginative aspects of human intelligence. Breaking away from the limitations of concrete materials increasingly allows artists to gain access to infinite zones of invention and to communicate abstract information beyond concrete confines. Yet, a challenge is posed to all who elect to harness technology's infinite potential in this age of mega-access; the intoxication of technologically-derived art is seductive. In order to transcend the immediacy of technology's thrill, artists need to synthesize content and be in control of its vibrating electronic power. The Post-Modern viewer's gaze and attention span demand quick satiation — how does the artist convey relevant statements and compete with the notion of seeing and experiencing the bigger, bolder, and more sensational?

Technological art of the 1990s fits well within the realm of the late Post-Modern debate. It allows artists to produce eclectic combinations of materials, styles and information. Providing audiences with multiple readings is a common practice. Modernism's positive linearity and simplistic categorization have given way to the Post-Modern impulse of convolution and multiple readings. Many of the pieces in *Light Into Art* are multi-layered in their meaning and presentation, and many of its artists seem to focus on the human condition in relationship to its social order. Content is a primary concern over formal or material issues, often requiring the viewer to spend time deciphering the artist's enigmatic
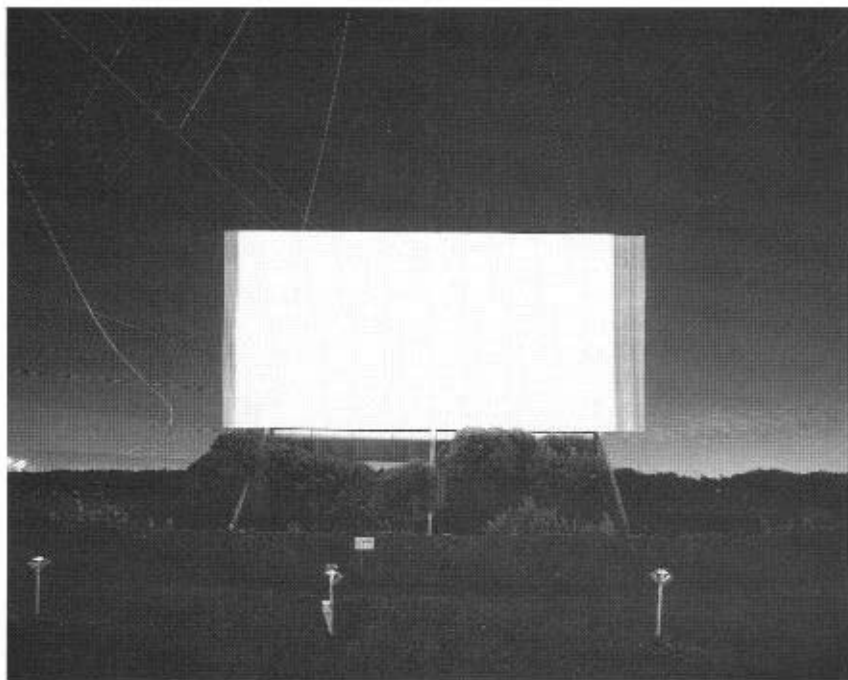
messages. Unlike the Modernists who strove to present universal truths and positive resolutions, contradiction, dualism, and ambiguity abound in much late twentieth century art. Curiously, technological art does share with Modernism an underlying foundation of rationalism, given that technology's underlying roots are in science and mathematics. On the other hand, because technology affords an availability for alteration, artists can and do construct works that counter rational objectivity.

Keith Sonnier and Bruce Nauman were pioneers in exploring light as a medium in their early videos, holograms, and neon works of the late sixties. They continue today to use varying forms of technology in their attempts to modify the spectator's sense of perception, producing arresting works that raise questions about humanity's vulnerability and the social system in which we co-exist. Throughout their work, the past continues to meet the present and look to the future.

The computer has become as natural for Ronald Jones as the brush is for the painter. In his art, composed of multiple layers of information, form and shape become vehicles and symbols to connote information about specific events in world history. Frequently the work is a conglomerate of written texts, advanced video and digital photography, audio, performance, and installation; his exchange of information across interdisciplinary zones has become his artistic signature. The pieces included in this exhibition include carefully programmed, large electro-static prints. The laser sintered sculptures that accompany the electronic generated stage sets designed for his opera *Petrarch's Air*, further enhance the mysterious sensibility of this theatrical presentation that addresses the upheaval of society in the 1960s and the lingering enigma surrounding JFK's assassination.

Along more traditional lines, Alfredo Jaar, Peggy Crawford, and Hiroshi Sugimoto employ photography's capacity for mechanical reproduction to make their imagery. Jaar's photographs, often presented in an unconventional manner, emphasize the strife of under-privileged peoples. However, his intention is that his work remains open-ended and never pessimistic. He calls attention to larger social views and invites the viewer to pause and reflect upon the subjects presented. Crawford's detail-oriented photographs taken of James Turrell's light installations captures the poetic and metaphorical presence of that sculptor's illusory constructions. A type of light inversion takes place within her picture of a picture of specialized light. Sugimoto's photographs of American drive-in theatres are created by shooting the entire length of the films presented; the continuum dissolves into a single white glowing frame, attracting us with its brightness, but giving us no image in return.

Gary Hill has now surfaced as the 1990's inventive media magician. In his unusual technological constructions he combines various media to produce installations and unconventional sculptural forms. The images are transitory and fleeting. His evocative yet minimal space-age installations evince a sensibility of alienation and fragmentation; such work perhaps provides an appropriate summary for our current decade.

The light boxes of Krysztof Wodiczko stem from his original projections of large photographic images of objects and body parts onto public buildings and monuments. In these public spectacles, Wodiczko raises significant questions about art, architecture, and public space. Through this artist's activation of an existing architectural structure with a select laser image, a sense of the fantastic coupled with a disturbing dissonance becomes apparent. His use of light and technology demonstrate that space should no longer be perceived from a single viewpoint and that public space has now become the canvas for an artist employing advanced technology.

Contradiction abounds in Suzan Etkin's enigmatic light sculptures, that purport to be beautiful but are meant to be transitory constructions calling our attention to the temporary nature of human experience. Here, light functions as a type of connective medium; the industrial elements intertwine with the wooden frame and the resulting ethereal quality of the layered space.

As the future for art remains an uncharted territory, Carl Loeffler and Lynn Holden's virtual reality software-generated journey provides viewers with a glimmer into what art may be like in the twenty-first century. Obviously, this virtual work demands viewer interaction and participation. Although a definite software program has been created for this virtual museum of the future, because each participant's ability to probe its challenging layers will vary greatly, each viewer will record varying experiences as she/he interacts with the technology.

Light Into Art invites thought and exploration. Unlike many group exhibitions of the 1990s, *Light Into Art* does not address a single ideology or theme. It is an open-ended display about how artists are using technology at the close of this century. However, it is important to note that the majority of the artists have been influenced by Post-Modern strategies and the massive social changes of the past twenty years. These artists take into account issues that transcend singular definitions and formal rules. Most of these artworks possess characteristics and meanings based on socio-cultural contexts and do not fit comfortably into any style or movement. While light is the binding element here, perhaps this art can also be viewed as a visual text written and influenced by a particular era. If a conclusion can be drawn, it is that we as a society cannot turn away from high technology and its many manifestations that touch our daily lives. As the contemporary artist grapples to deal with the philosophical preoccupations of a global social structure undergoing major transitions, electronic art offers new means of making art while simultaneously directing an assault on the integrity of the traditional art object. Clearly evident, both art and the future are not what they used to be!

Elaine A. King
Exhibition Curator

¹ Jon Ippolito, "Will Virtual Reality Open Doors or Close Them?" Guggenheim Magazine, Guggenheim Museum, New York, Spring/Summer 1994, Volume 5, p.50.

Checklist of the Exhibition

All dimensions are in inches where height precedes width precedes depth unless otherwise noted.

PEGGY CRAWFORD

Skyscape Multiple I, 1990
cibachrome photograph, 4/25
24 x 20
Courtesy: Artist, New York

Skyscape Multiple II, 1990
cibachrome photograph, 1/25
24 x 20
Courtesy: Artist, New York

Smart House, Cincinnati, 1994
cibachrome photograph
16 x 20
Courtesy: Artist, New York

SUZAN ETKIN

Reverberator, 1989-1990
microphone, stand, halogen bulb, transformer, AC cable
59 1/2 x 10 x 10
Courtesy: Artist, New York

Lightpool, 1990
mirrors, screen, wood, neon lights
77 x 86 x 5
Courtesy: Artist, New York

GARY HILL

Learning Curve (still point), 1993
single channel video installation, five-inch color monitor, plywood chair, table
54 x 32 2/3 x 225 3/4
Courtesy: Donald Young Gallery, Seattle

ALFREDO JAAR

Children, 1994
cibachrome print
38 1/4 x 87 1/2 x 1 1/4
Courtesy: Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York

RONALD JONES

Petrarch's Air
An Opera in Four Acts, 1993-1994

Act I. Jack Ruby's burlesque club sits on the lunar surface with Neil Armstrong's

Alfredo Jaar, Children, 1994

quarantine bed at center stage.
laser sintered polycarbonate sculpture with electro-static Cactus print
dimensions variable
Courtesy: Artist and Serena + Warren, New York

Act IV. Miles above the lunar surface, Ruby's astronaut bed and Werner's bed dream of the battle between Alzheimer's disease and the molecular structure of nuclear fission.
laser sintered polycarbonate sculpture with electro-static Cactus print
dimensions variable
Courtesy: Artist and Serena + Warren, New York

CARL EUGENE LOEFFLER AND LYNN HOLDEN

The Networked Virtual Art Museum: The Temple of Horus, 1993-1994
two interactive virtual reality booths
dimensions variable
Courtesy: Artists and the Studio for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University
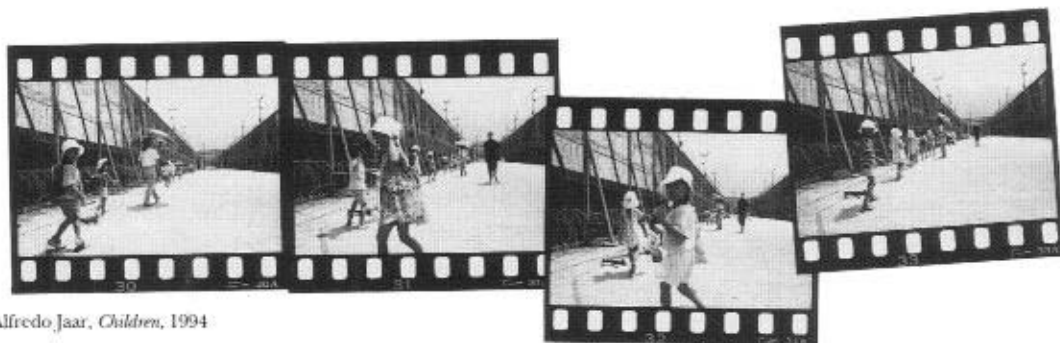
BRUCE NAUMAN

Dirty Story, 1987
two color video monitors, two videotape players, two videotapes (color, sound)
dimensions variable
Collection: The Dannheisser Foundation, New York

KEITH SONNIER

Perforated Shelf IV, 1990
plate glass, aluminum, neon, argon
58 x 31 x 6
Courtesy: Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Station W.A.C.O., 1990
aluminum, mylar, neon
74 x 54 1/2 x 27
Courtesy: Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

Union City Drive In, Union City, 1993
black and white photograph, 3/25
20 x 24
Courtesy: Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Winnetika Drive In, Paramount, 1993
black and white photograph, 3/25
20 x 24
Courtesy: Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Centinela Drive In, Los Angeles, 1993
black and white photograph, 1/25
20 x 24
Courtesy: Sonnabend Gallery, New York

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

Hirshhorn Museum Building, Washington, D.C., 1989
cibatranslucent print in Luminaire Ultra light box 1/5
30 x 40 x 5 1/4
Courtesy: Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York

Zion Square Projection, 1991
lightbox with transparency
35 1/2 x 35 1/2 x 5
Courtesy: Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York
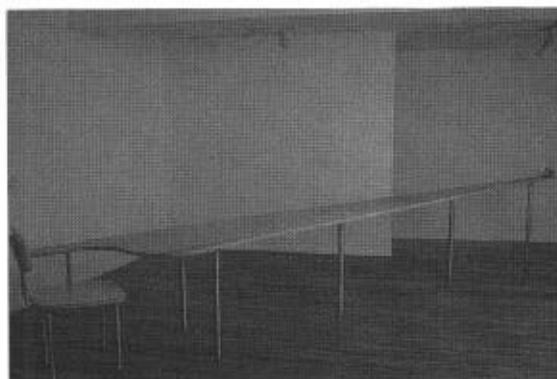
Krzysztof Wodiczko
Projection, 1990

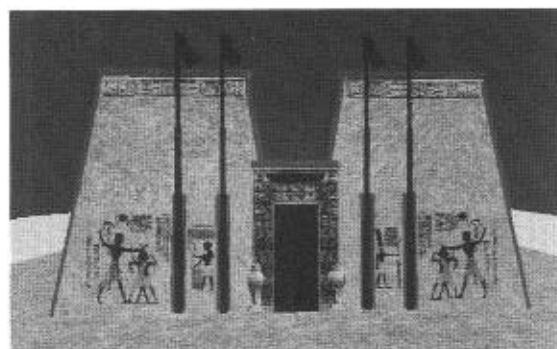

Ronald Jones
Petrarch's Air, 1994
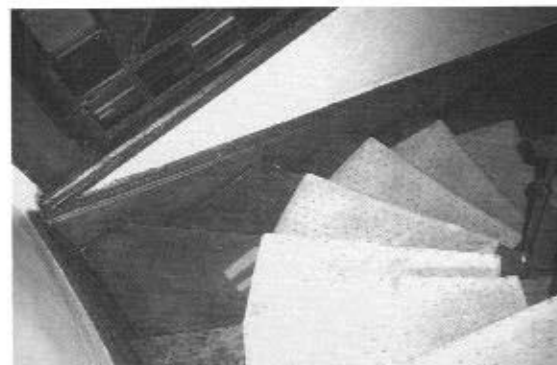

Suzan Etkin
Reverberator, 1989-90

Bruce Nauman
Dirty Story, 1987

Gary Hill
Learning Curve, 1993

Carl Loeffler and
Lynn Holden,
Temple of Horus, 1993

Peggy Crawford
Smart House, 1994

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On the cover: Keith Sonnier, *Perforated Shelf IV*, 1990