Love Tapes, 1978
INTRODUCTION

For Wendy Clarke, video is a medium which makes things possible. Not just possible for the artist, or for those initiated into the mysteries of a complicated technology, but for anyone. Essential to all of her work is the participation of an audience which she introduces to experiences impossible in any other context—experiences which tend to humanize and demystify the videographic process, and whose aesthetic worth is measured by the growth and awareness they generate.

Clarke envisions her role as artist in terms of planning, facilitating directing, and synthesizing interactive situations. Her art involves the process of making discoveries and then sharing them, not through declarations of revealed truth, but by providing access to relationships wherein the audience can make similar discoveries for themselves. She provides a base—a game-like structure with simple rules, a taping format with a consistent theme—from which the art experience is created through subject-medium interaction. The process is one of consciousness-raising: the participant becomes aware of certain physical and/or emotional inhibitions imposed by a given socio-cultural training and works to overcome them within the unfamiliar video art context.

The most powerful interactive situations generally involve an initial sense of awkwardness and self-consciousness in response to an altered self-image. Unlike the mirror which we confront every day, the video monitor shows us ourselves "as others see us." We are also faced with a challenge which involves the possibility of public failure ("What if I can't do it?" "What if I say the wrong thing?"). It is only by befriending the video, learning its language and delighting in its possibilities, that the tension is defused and the experience becomes one of comfortable, even exhilarating alliance and revelation. "The idea I want to get across to people is that they can do these things. They don't have to create something 'great' ...the idea is to feel good doing it." Both technology and the creative process are demystified and democratized.

VIDEO PLAYGROUND

Clarke has referred to this as "a motion piece performed by the audience, created by the video." It is also an educational and aesthetic toy in the Creative Playthings tradition, created by the artist to share with us some basic differences between the world of "real" perception and that of television. A bright and animated jungle-gym environment encourages visitors to play a number of "games"—to interact with the various closed-circuit monitors and cameras in self-competitive situations which are both conceptually and physically challenging. Sophistication becomes a liability in this world where a contagious spirit of play and a delight in confusion prevails.

In three of the games, Chair (1976), Hand (1976), and Stairs (1976), flat, cut-out images (of a chair, a hand, and an ascending stairway) are affixed to the monitor faces. The foreshortened, planar nature of video space, which these shapes emphasize, becomes frustratingly apparent as we try simply to sit in the chair, match our hand to the silhouette, and walk upstairs. With awkward, tentative movements we enter a topsy-turvy Alice-in-Wonderland world where right is left, down leads up, horizontal becomes vertical, and, in the case of Hand, you have to move to keep still. Disoriented, we must re-educate our brain and body to conform to an altered reality. In the momentary hopelessness of it all, we find that we can laugh at ourselves and share our embarrassment with others.

The possibilities for human connection which video provides are symbolically represented in the Chair piece. Here the split-screen television image brings together two people who inhabit separate spaces at opposite ends of the room and allows them to touch, to kiss, to come
blows. The two participants establish a relationship which exists only through the magic of the medium. Again, we share with strangers.

In Self-Portrait (1973), the player stands viewing two monitors and attempts to draw her profile (seen in one of the monitors) on a pad hanging from her neck (visible on the other screen) using only the monitor images as a guide. Right-left reversal and a certain up-down dis-orientation complicate the task, confounding likeness and producing instead delightful drawings which portray both the frustrations and sense of accomplishment which accompany the re-learning process. Once complete, the self-portraits are hung on the Athenaeum wall. Together they form an expanding mural which graphically supports Clarke's generous contention that in the context of her work, everyone is an artist and everyone a star.

LOVE TAPES

In the earlier works which comprise the Video Playground, Clarke purposely avoided videotape in her desire to work with immediate and "live" physical experience. Yet at the same time, in a private quest for personal self-understanding, she was regularly keeping a video journal, recording at day's end her most intimate thoughts and feelings. "With the tape on I can feel..." she recorded on April 8, 1977. It was a secretive curing and growing process, kept separate from the more "serious" world of work where feeling was much more difficult.

The Love Tapes are essentially the result of Clarke's decision, after five years of covert self-expression, to "come out of the closet" with her feelings and to try somehow to reconcile the two major themes which had become central to the journal: work and love. In December 1977, she began to show publicly a particularly revealing segment of her journal devoted to the subject of love. She invited audiences to respond in kind, providing access to recording equipment and private space, hoping that with the tape on they too might feel. These audience-made tapes were, in turn, shown to new audiences who made their own tapes, and so on. The Love Tapes both document and stimulate this ongoing exchange of feelings.

Though limited to three minutes and made with the knowledge that they would be shown to an ever-expanding public, the tapes are startlingly direct and personal. Clarke and her medium inspire an honesty that is disarming. As we watch these communications from private places within the public space of the museum, we share with the "strangers" on the tapes and with those around us an unaccustomed intimacy. While they tell us a great deal about love in our society, they speak even more clearly of the possibility of human connection through the use of a technology more readily associated with alienation. The artist and the video become the unobtrusive match-makers. The artist feels strongly that to get beyond the introduction, we too must "open up" and make a tape. (For information about making your own Love Tape see page 4 of this artistsheet.)

The series of "self-portraits" here provides the emotional counterpart to the physical dimensions explored in the Video Playground Self-Portrait. And like the collage of drawings on the Austin gallery walls they are souvenirs of a larger interactive experience.

Though originally recorded in the context of a specific group identity, the Love Tapes tend to transcend stereotyping or classification with one major exception: the stereotypical idea that "men repress while women confess" seems proven true in the majority of the tapes. Only when it becomes easy to merge the personal and the public will the connections which Clarke envisions become truly possible.

Judith C. Rohrer, Guest Curator
Assistant Professor of Art History
Swarthmore College
STATEMENT BY THE ARTIST ABOUT THE LOVE TAPES

I started keeping a video journal in 1972. I would sit alone, watching my image on the monitor, and record an entry. While looking at myself, I would talk about what was happening in my life, my work projects, my feelings. I used the video journal as a process which I could go through and make myself grow and reach deeper levels. As part of the journal, on April 8, 1977, I made a tape which I have since called "Chapter One," in which I discussed my feelings about love. When I watched it back, I felt that the tape transcended my own experience and should be shown to others. The response to the first public showing of the tape, at the Mandeville Art Gallery at the University of California at San Diego, was so intense that I decided to invite future audiences to make their own "love tapes" after seeing mine. The first of these audiences Love Tapes were made by those who came to see the exhibition "Interactive Video" at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in December 1977 and January 1978.

The Los Angeles series was made by setting up a camera and monitor in a small room. Each person sat alone and was asked to talk about his or her own feelings about love for three minutes, while being videotaped. Each person was asked to begin speaking when the music started and to stop when the music was over. After the individual tapes were made, I assembled the people as a group. Together they watched all of the tapes, including their own. The entire process was developed so that people can experience firsthand their own creativity and ability to make art.

Then, last winter, I showed a selection of the Los Angeles tapes in New York to groups of varying cultural backgrounds. The people in each group made their own Love Tapes. Over the year the number of tapes has grown to 135, from which selections will be shown to still more people, who will make even more tapes, and so on, potentially communicating all around the planet.

As with my earlier work (Video Playground) the Love Tapes are about interactive processes that involve growth and change. But the video games were mainly concerned with physical awareness. With the Love Tapes I have found a way to make art that is directly and organically related to my deepest needs and feelings, an art that is both emotionally and conceptually satisfying.

PLEASE NOTE:

Wendy Clarke is scheduled to speak at the Atheneum on Thursday evening, January 29, at 8 pm. The event is free and the public is cordially invited.

In addition, Clarke will be at the Atheneum on Saturday, January 27 and Sunday, January 28 to videotape a series of Hartford Love Tapes. Anyone who wishes to make her/his own Love Tape is invited to come on either day between 11 am and 4 pm. The taping will be done in private and the participants are encouraged to bring along a favorite record to serve as background music appropriate to the expression of their feelings about love.

The artist intends to show the Hartford Love Tapes continuously during the last two weeks of the exhibition.
STATEMENT BY THE ARTIST ABOUT THE VIDEO PLAYGROUND:

I am exploring video much like an artist-inventor. I have become fascinated by a special kind of space created only by video, and these pieces have been conceived so that each person can experience this new space. New perceptions come from shuffling sensations already familiar to us; our brains, our eyes, our muscles, our movements change to fit our new knowledge of a new space. In order to complete or 'play' with each piece, the viewer must discover new perceptions and move in specific patterns; this discovery process becomes the emotional content of the pieces. Each piece describes a different kind of videospace. Reversal of images, kinetic two-dimensional representation, lens distortion and space foreshortening are some of the elements explored. I purposely avoided using videotape in this situation because I wanted to work in live space and real time.

The entire gallery has been designed as an environment conducive to play. I am an enthusiastic believer in play as a way to discovery—and also, it is fun. Because the pieces are participatory, people can bring their own characters to the show. Video is a new medium; its uses are just now being discovered; this is one such exploration.
Wendy Clarke was born in 1944 and grew up in New York City. Multi-talented as a child and teenager, she danced and acted professionally while taking classes in drawing and painting at the Art Students' League. In 1961 she worked with her mother, the film-maker Shirley Clarke, on the production of the feature film The Cool World.

Clarke studied with Shirley Kaplan at Sarah Lawrence in 1971 and 1972. From Kaplan she learned to value personal experience as an artistic resource and to use journals as a way of relating work and emotion. In 1972 and 1973 she worked with the Painters' Theater Company exploring the possibilities of improvisational theater. Since 1972 she has worked exclusively with video, serving as workshop director for the T.P. Video-space Troupe founded by her mother from 1972-1976. Clarke lives in New York City, where she continues to make Love Tapes.

SELECTED ONE-WOMAN EXHIBITIONS:
What's on Tonight? Women's Interart Center, NYC '73; Anthology Film Archives, NYC '75; Women's Interart Center, NYC '76; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '76; Missoula Museum of Fine Arts '77; Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California at San Diego '77; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art '77; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Projects '78.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:
Avant-Garde Festival, NYC '73; Toronto Women's Film Festival '73; Experiment V, Knokke, Belgium '74; Baltimore Museum of Fine Arts '75; Sacramento Film Festival '78; Pasadena Arts Festival '78.

VIDEO PLAYGROUND in Austin Gallery (through January 28, 1979):


Chair, 1976, closed-circuit television system with 2 monitors, 2 cameras and 1 special effects generator.

Hand, 1976, closed-circuit television system with 1 monitor and 1 rotating camera.

Stairs, 1976, closed-circuit television system with 1 monitor and 1 camera.

LOVE TAPES in Avery 107 and MATRIX (through February 1979):

The Love Tapes, 1977-78, are an ongoing project, here represented by a selection of 3-minute videotaped segments edited into one-hour cassettes.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ABOUT CLARKE:


MacDonald, Craig. "Video Artistry Is Her Game," The San Diego Union (October 13 '77).


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