

Kostelanetz's remarks concern "literary video" as a genre in which text and image are brought into new relationships and are not kept separate as in broadcast television. The fact that video can distort images much more radically than film means that the merger of text and image promotes a more extensive exploration of visible language than possible in many other media.

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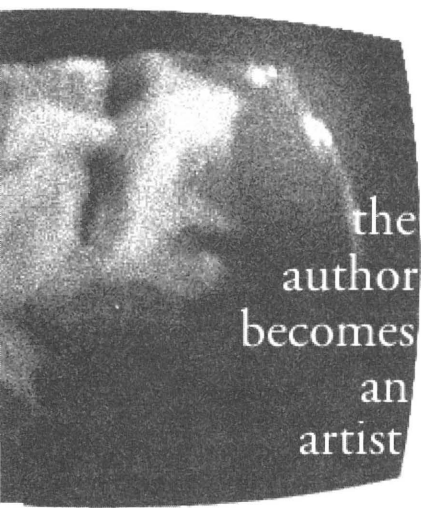


Of course, in this electric age of computers, satellites, radio and television, the writer can no longer be someone who sits up in his garret pounding a typewriter.

Marshall McLuhan, 1966

Literary video differs from other video art in its base of a text whose language is enhanced, rather than mundane — a text that is conceived within the traditions of literature and a contemporary sense of verbal possibilities.

Literary video differs from video literary-reportage, in which, typically, a poet is interviewed or is seen reading aloud; for in literary video, the author becomes an artist, exploiting the indigenous possibilities of the new medium — instant playback, overdubbing, image distortion in live time and so forth. In literary video, the screen is intelligently active, the author-artist visually enhances his own language; in video reportage, the camera as an eye is visually dumb. Literary video draws upon both literary materials and video possibilities



and integrates them, rather than keeping them separate; so that word complements image and vice versa.

The video medium itself is closer to books than film, because the television screen is small and perceptually distant, like the printed page, rather than large and enveloping, like the movie screen; and literary video is customarily read like a book, in small groups or alone. (Most of us feel no qualms about interrupting someone watching a tele-vision or reading a book, while people at the movies remain undisturbed.) Yet another similarity between video and book is that an artist making a video tape may, unlike the filmmaker, examine his finished product immediately upon completing it; the process resembles rewriting at the typewriter.

Because the video image is less precise than the film image, and the former's light source is behind the screen, video is conducive to antirealism, but that perceptual distance between the viewer and the screen inhibits the experience of dreaminess. Video offers an arsenal of techniques for producing instant distortion — a surrealism that, because of the screen's size, is more painterly (if not literary) than filmic.

Because the video screen is much smaller than the movie screen, video is not effective in re-producing proscenium theatre; even conventional films look ungainly within such a tiny frame. It is

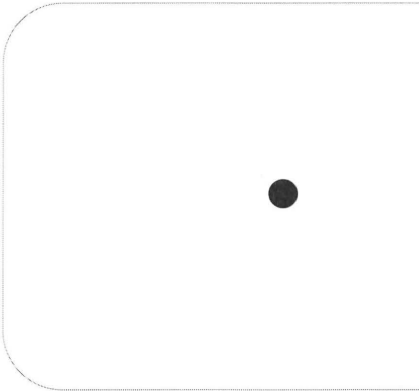
conducive to individuals rather than choruses, to faces (and parts of faces) rather than milieus, to one or two voices rather than several. The video image tends to be more flat (two dimensional), more tightly structured, and less cluttered — less like a film than a book.

Literary video should transcend the familiar representationalism or conventional syntax of familiar literature; it should also transcend those constraints of subject, theme and truth that constrict the story telling of commercial television. The video medium lends itself to the presentation of continuous movement and, thus, not to poetry, but to prose and to narrative.

Television is a mass medium; video a private one. Television

is treasured for its incredibility. Literary video is destined for an audience that is ideally both visually sensitive and literate; television for an audience that is neither.

My own video work is simple in certain respects and complex in others. So is most writing. However, I make simple what others render complexly, and make complex certain dimensions that others render simply. As a full-time writer, I bring language, with which I am familiar, to video, which I have scarcely explored. Although I won't abandon one art to do another — a 1960s fashion — I am, as a creative writer, currently experimenting not

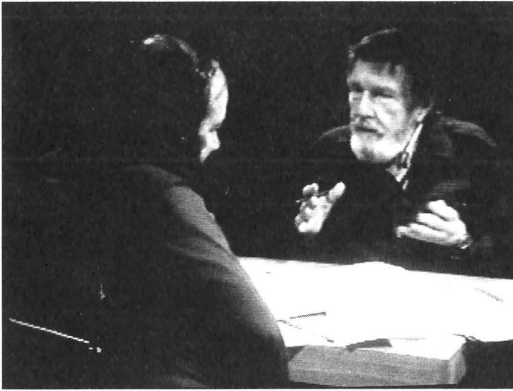


just vertically, within literary art; but horizontally, with media other than the small rectangular page — silk-screened prints, offset posters, ladderbooks, collections of cards, audio tape, and now videotape.

For “Plateaux,” which relates the stages of a love affair in one word paragraphs, I introduced an evolving moiré pattern; for “Excelsior,” which switches rapidly between two voices, I created two abstract kinetic fields and then swiftly alternated between them. The central work in *Three Prose Pieces* (1975) is “Recyclings,” in which nonsyntactic prose texts are read by several nonsynchronous voices, all of which are mine. The color image consists only of pairs of lips (mine), moving synchronously with the audible speech. The first section has one voice and one pair of

lips; the last (and sixth) section has six audible voices and six pairs of visible lips.

For another tape, *Openings & Closings* (1975), a collection of single-sentence stories, which are alternately the openings and closings of hypothetically longer fiction, I instructed the engineer to alternate between color and black-and-white camera crews, and then instructed each crew to make its current visual image of me reading as different as possible from the one before in order to realize visually the leaps of time and space that characterize the prose text.



John Cage Interviewed by R. Kostelanetz ©Artists' Television Network (1978).

Remarkably few writers have made creative video, although an army of poetic eminences have had their faces and voice memorialized on half-inch, black-and-white tape. It is surprising that no literary funding agency has ever, to my knowledge, supported literary video, for reportage, that artistically lesser form, rips off all the available funds. Intelligent literary video is less lucrative than dumb. Literary video will not supercede the printed page but will become yet another possibility for heightened language exploration.

Richard Kostelanetz lives in New York City and is widely recognized in both the fields of art and literary studies. Among the many publications to his credit are: *Beyond Left and Right: Radical Thought of Our Times*, *John Cage, Assembling Assembling*, *Conversing with Cage*, *Merce Cunningham* and *Booknotes*, 1958-1993.