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## COVER STORY

# SIGNAL CHANNEL

By Michael Joe Krainak

A marble statue of a nude woman sits atop two side-by-side TV monitors which project another nude reclining across the screens. This parody of Titian's "Venus of Urbino" is the creation of video art pioneer Nam June Paik.

In his miniature installation "Lonesome Bird," David Zimmer places an LCD screen depicting a close-up of a finch complete with chirping sounds inside a Victorian-era apothecary jar.

New media and video artist called Sterz, just Sterz, projects from above snow that appears to float from below on an aluminum plate which lies on the floor. Called "Cure," it offers the viewer another of this artist's spontaneous aesthetic responses to the natural world.

Though the above artists and works aren't exactly household names to lovers of postmodern art, especially in this region, a new comprehensive show of video art, which opens this Friday, June 9, from 7-10 p.m. at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, will alter that perception.

"Signal Channel," curated by Jeremy Stern, assistant director of the Bemis Center, is the most significant show based upon this form of new media ever to be seen in this area. Before you remind yourself that it's the only show of this type, credit Stern and Bemis Director Mark Masuoka to have the vision and take the lead in this direction. The very title of this imposing show, which runs until August 12, says it is sending a clear signal in cutting edge contemporary exhibitions while it channels this "new" medium which began in the '60s and continues to reinvent itself in the 21st century.

Masuoka says the diversity of this exhibit also sends a signal to the community that besides being an international program, Bemis is "proud to support our community-based artists, not just once a year at our auction, but on an ongoing basis." Of the more than 25 video artists represented in the show, at least half a dozen are from this region including three affiliated with UNO: Gary Day, the director of university's print shop, Anthony Trecek-King, an assistant professor of music, and Russ Nordman, an assistant professor of art and art history.

In addition, "Signal Channel" will feature three separate screenings of video art curated by Echotrope, an area DIY arts group co-founded by Nordman and Jody Boyer, a program officer with the Iowa West Foundation and an intermedia artist. Echotrope will also host a panel discussion, "Document 2 Reinvent: Perspectives on New Media" on Saturday, June 10, from noon to 3 p.m. Boyer and Nordman will lead the discussion, which will feature nationally known video artists Phyllis Baldino and Peter Campus, who have pieces in "Signal Channel."

The panelists will focus on much of the work in the show and why new media has surfaced as a preferred creative outlet for many established and emerging artists who experiment, explore and test the parameters of conventional art-making practices. The very nature of this movement and the breadth as well as depth of this show feels right at home at the Bemis.



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"All the exhibits this year," Masuoka said, "have some reference to our legacy and how the Bemis Center has played a role in supporting new ideas, innovation in contemporary art (while) encouraging experimentation. How does an organization with a 25-year history remain relevant globally and within its own community?"

One way he said was to address video, which in a show of this ambition presents both unique opportunities and challenges for artist, viewer and venue alike. "Signal Channel" has been divided by Stern into three main sections which take advantage of the Bemis' large gallery spaces. In one gallery, "Process" focuses on artists who have manipulated raw imagery from the camera to create a new reality as well as those who create a reality independent from any raw footage.

In another gallery, we find "Objects," which investigate video as an object by itself through its relationship to sculpture, performance and interactive art. "Residents" showcases a selection of former Bemis artists-in-residence in the last decade. In a portion of this gallery, Echotrope will screen its contributors. Examples of the above in review are included later in the story.

Though the exhibit is organized thematically rather than chronologically, after all, video is barely 40 years old, Stern acknowledges that its contributors could be categorized loosely according to the medium's beginnings and the influence each artist has had on its evolution.

"The artists in 'Signal Channel'" range from founding fathers to the emerging generation in the art world today," he said. "Founding fathers, many who are actively still producing new, innovative work, would include Nam June Paik (who died last winter), Peter Campus, Tony Oursler and Gary Hill, to name a few."

Paik's role in video art is immense as he and Shuya Abe invented the Paik/Abe Synthesizer, the first machine designed to distort existing video. As an artist in residence at WGBH, he pioneered interactive television in his video "Electronic Opera #1," asking viewers to "close one eye" and finally to "turn off your television set." In the early sixties, he distorted and manipulated images of multiple TV sets. With the aid of the synthesizer he created the same effect on everyone's set via public TV broadcasts. Paik saw television as the canvas for the next generation of electronic artists.

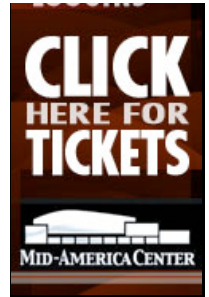
Peter Campus, also a seminal figure in video art, contributes what may be the show's signature piece, "Edge of the Ocean," in the Process gallery, a stunning, mood-altering meditation on the natural world as a lone tern floats above a pounding surf. His manipulation of light, time and space through foreshortening, slow motion and editing create an aesthetic that's less medium conscious or manipulative, yet remains a pure example of video art.

Stern considers the show's mid-career artists to be Nordman, Baldino, Mathieu Borysevicz, Torsten Zenas Burns, Portia Cobb, Gary Emrich and Charley Friedman, among others. Nordman, along with Day and Trecek-King, have created an interactive installation titled "The Book of Light and Dark," based upon the writings of Athanasius Kircher. This multi-media conceptual installation includes video segments from Nordman, animation and digital prints from Day and sound elements from Trecek-King.

A class of emerging movers and shakers might include Jennifer Steinkamp, Sterz, Songyi Kim, David Zimmer, Brian Alfred, Peter Burr and Kim Hager. Stern says though the show lacks a clear timeline, an historical perspective can be had by comparing an older and newer piece.

"There are older works in the show, Campus' 1976 'Third Tape,' that illustrate ideas and a look of early video along with new works, such as Steinkamp's 2005 "Dance Hall Girls 8," which epitomize a certain contemporary look."

"Third Tape" is a straightforward three-stage performance of the artist dissecting and recreating himself in a set of illusions including wrapping his face in close-up with cellophane tape, submerging his image in water and, most clever of all, tossing shards of a mirror on the floor so that they reflect up with pieces of his reflection. The camera simply records action created for the lens.



Steinkamp on the other hand creates computer-generated animation in high definition of colorful flowers that spin dramatically and provocatively. Shot at floor level from a worm's eye view, the flowers emulate the "fallen women" of her video's title clothed in scandalous dresses in bright colors and sexy poses.

Given its radical intent to experiment with a familiar medium or attack viewers' expectations or conditioning, video art may challenge viewers raised on Reality TV or even independent film. Stern and Masuoka both believe audiences will have to alter their viewing habits in order to appreciate what video art has to offer given the time variations and constraints, as works vary from mere minutes to more than a half-hour.

"Viewers may feel forced to watch until the end in order 'to get it,'" Stern said, "which is why I recommend seeing the show several times, perhaps tackling one gallery at a time." Masuoka agrees that people "have to slow down, watch, listen. No more two second viewings per object."

The rewards for the discerning patron are worth it, Stern said, as there will be "a wide variety of work to choose from, a little something for everyone. The one common theme is that all video artists have taken an instrument of commerce, the camera, and turned it into a material for making art. More to the point, it's an expression to get you to think and respond, much like any painting or sculpture does."

Perhaps the audience best prepared to respond to new media and video art are Gen Y and Gen Xers or even younger, who rather than merely growing up in front of a TV are more media and tech aware and adept, something not lost on those "Signal Channel" contributors who are both artists and educators.

"I have seen this with my students who are only 5-10 years younger than I am," said Boyer, who teaches intermedia classes at UNO. "I came of age with the DOS-based computer systems. I had an Apple 2e in my freshman year in college. These kids were working with this technology in grade school. So, yes, younger generations are perhaps more likely to respond to media art."

"I think that is a given," Professor Day said. "Our students don't seem to have any of the objections to new media that others might. As web and gaming venues grow, students seem to grow with what is there."

Nordman agrees, but points out the inevitable, which gives the exhibit virtually a nostalgic or at least an interesting retro quality. "We grew up with it (media technology). It's what we know and how we think. I suppose some young generations of time-based artists will look at us 'just video' artists and think of us the same way the Expressionists looked at salon school painters. Or, more accurately, how Xbox players look at Pong players."

Yet despite the generational gaps inherent "when it's all about the technology," the comprehensive nature of "Signal Channel" guarantees its inclusiveness, and to discerning viewers a virtual feast of both the familiar and the unexpected.

"Video games, music videos, cell phone video cameras, podcasts...parts of this show may come as second nature for younger generations," Stern said, "but this in no way excludes others from appreciation and enjoyment of the medium. Much of the early video deals with our relationship to television, which is something nearly everyone has some experience with.

"I think video is more prominent now than ever, both because of the wider acceptance of the medium and the wider availability of the technology needed to create the work. As the technology improves and reinvents itself, so does the medium of video art."

And it does so in some marvelously original ways that are bound to have viewers take a second look at "Signal Channel," as well as: a) see the creative potential of new media for their own devices; b) raise their expectations as to entertainment and enlightenment from a medium that is so all-pervasive. The following highlights from the exhibit, among those not already mentioned, raise such possibilities.

"Happenstance (part one of many parts)" created by Gary Hill. This digitally created, postmodern piece combines music, text and graphics as well as figurative images to examine the ephemeral quality within the nature of language. Phrases like "things are going to happen" belie the video's conceptual nature, but exquisite imagery of a tree dropping its leaves that morph into words hint at a theme for the exhibit itself: "Taking a breath when I see breath-taking things."

"Pauline" created by Thierry Hauch. In this two-part performance, the artist mimics the actions of a young girl rear-projected behind him. Minutes later, the situation is reversed. Hauch's illusion vs. reality "think piece" is clever, entertaining as he manipulates time, space and scale.

"Conspiracy?" created by Brian Alfred. Alfred has created a dual channel digital animation of multiple interior and exterior environments that effectively raise questions about government and corporate conspiracies. The cold, sterile imagery, devoid of people, plus the clever use of camouflage colors on the military installations only add to the desired play on paranoia.

"The Task at Hand," and "Modern Living Pre-approved," created by Gary Emrich. Two of the wittiest, hands-on pieces in this show, each serves as social and cultural commentary. The first is a superimposed image of two hands trying to open a pickle jar at a political rally. It seems light in tone about political relevance and priorities until it states "No new gun laws have been passed in Colorado since the Columbine shootings." The second video presents another pair of hands in close-up superimposed over various locations as they relentlessly tear up an endless supply of junk mail. No surprises here. It's a hoot and some videos you just get.

"CNN Trilogy" and "Prison Readymade," created by Mathieu Borysevicz. In the former, the artist edits news clips from CNN that key on such verbal motifs as "peace," "dead" and "dollars." The video's amusing repetition points out that what passes for truth from the network's talking heads is their "international" voice and inflection. Seen in the context it becomes readily apparent that all emphasis is no emphasis. The latter video is much darker in tone and message and not for the squeamish, as it uses footage from surveillance tapes at Folsom State Prison to comment on violence perpetuated by conditions of incarceration. This is not a Johnny Cash hootenanny at Folsom State Pen.

"Cosmetic/Not Cosmetic" and "Wine Rack/Not Wine Rack" created by Phyllis Baldino. Both of these performance videos were shot in the first take sans editing, and concern individuals, the artist in the first and an undisclosed male in the second, who deconstruct and then reconstruct everyday objects, a vanity case and the titled wine rack. Both of these videos are part of her "Gray Area" series, which is often paradoxical and provocative as in the former, where she labors manually with an electric drill while nude in a diaphanous night dress.

"Two Stroke Engine," "Uphill Drive" and "Barnyard Twist" created by James Hegge. All three videos utilize the camera as both an interactive object and a documentary device to manipulate one's point of view during a performance. All the action in these works, whether a pendulum, a swinging sledge hammer or a possible roundabout, include the camera in the motion and the effect is fascinating and disturbing.

"Grapefruit Piece" created by Charley Friedman. One of the more avant-garde and comically absurd pieces in the show, this performance gives new meaning to air guitar, as Friedman head bangs and devours a grapefruit while thrashing and plucking along to Led Zeppelin heavy metal and ballads.

"Signal Channel" also includes pieces from Rick Buckley, Peter Burr, Tania Condiani, Dan Geesin, Kim Hager, Ronny Hieremans, and Beth Krebs. The first of three Echotrope screenings during the two-month show will feature artists Dave Ellsworth, Todd Mccammon, Wago Kreider, Guli Silberstein, Natalie Frigo, Gregg Biermann, Katherine Parker and Victoria Fu.

### **Bemis residency program**

The second person or group to be musician-in-residence at the Bemis Center For Contemporary Arts is a familiar face to the Omaha music scene.

One of the indie rock scene's most enduring players, Simon Joyner (pictured below), began his residency on May 1, and will continue to through July 28. Omaha-based indie group Tilly and the Wall was the first to participate in the Bemis program.

"With an artistic career spanning fourteen years, Simon Joyner is known for his uncompromising contemporary songwriting," says Bemis. "By pushing his song craft into new territory with each release, he has secured a reputation for both following his own artistic vision and spurning commercial concerns.

"Joyner has 22 releases under his name and is also featured on a number of international music compilations, including the soon-to-be released U.K.-based Mute Records compilation, 'Songwriters.'

Joyner is also one of Bright Eyes' Conor Oberst's biggest influences.

Another new artist in residence at the Bemis is Leah Bailis, whose works entail photographs of actual houses in her immediate surroundings.

"The house interests me for its strength as a formal image – an exterior form that describes a space contained inside – and for its psychological function," Bailis says on the Bemis Web site. "The house can be understood as the self. I work from photographs of actual houses, varying the shape of the space and the sense of containment. I want my models to mirror the beauty, the sense of melancholy, and the tension that I find in the originals."

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