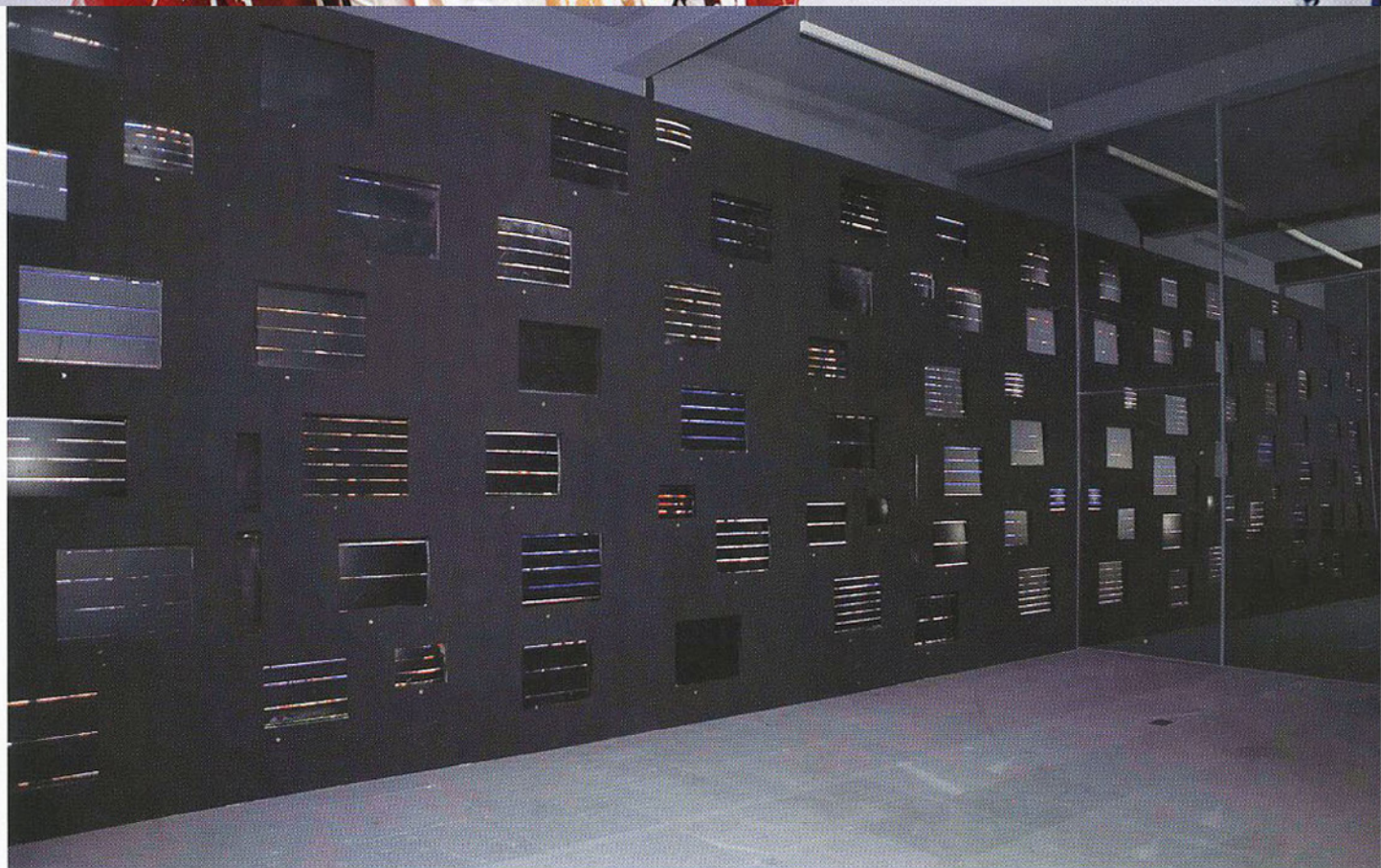


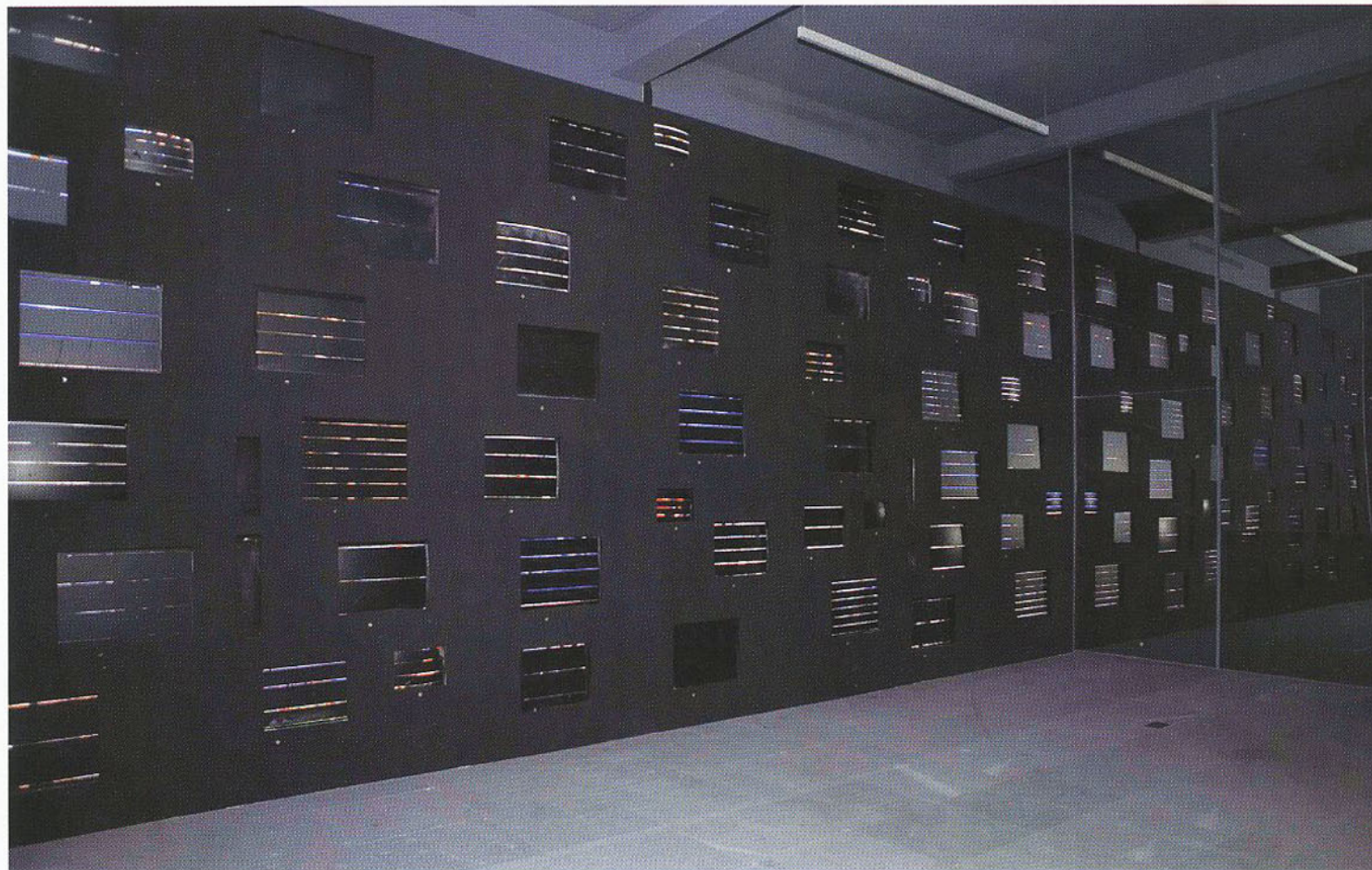
Art in America

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Eugènia Balcells: *TV Weave*, 1985, 54 television sets, 2 mirrors, mixed mediums, music by Peter van Riper.

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Eugènia Balcells: TV Weave, 1985, 54 television sets, 2 mirrors, mixed mediums, music by Peter van Riper.

Valie Export: Adjungierte Dislokationen III, 1978/96, 24 monitors, painted walls, 2 video cameras, mixed mediums.



When Video Was Young

An exhibition at the Reina Sofía in Madrid looked back at the years 1963-86, when experimental use of moving pictures by avant-gardists of all kinds evolved into room-size installations by artists devoted to video alone.

BY JOSEPH JACOBS

Because video art generally demands a lot of space, is difficult and time-consuming to install, and, ideally, involves separate rooms for those pieces with sound so that one work does not impinge upon another, museums have long avoided collecting or showing it in depth. But Berta Sichel, the curator of video and film at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, has rushed in where others have feared to tread. In the cavernous third-floor space of the museum's Sabatini building, a former hospital, she mounted a major survey of video art called "First Generation: Art and the Moving Image (1963-1986)."

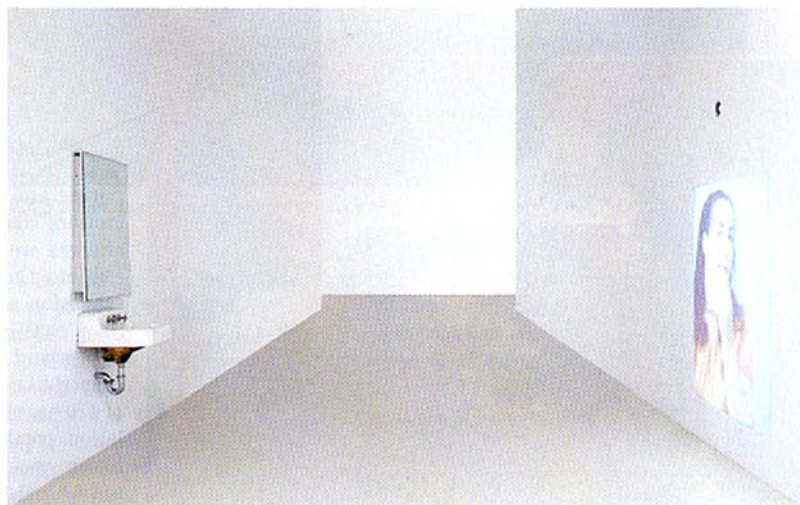
Consisting of 34 video installations, 14 video projections and 80 single-channel videos, the show dwarfed the 2001 Whitney Museum of American Art's "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977," organized by Chrissie Iles and presenting 19 installations and projections. It was also more extensive than the Pompidou's "Video: An Art, a History, 1965-2005," which drew 25 video works from that museum's collection for an exhibition that is traveling internationally (it was at Miami Art Central in the fall of 2006, and can be seen this fall at the Museu do Chiado in Lisbon). The Pompidou's "Le Mouvement des images," on view in Paris last year, celebrated the museum's extensive film and video collection and was augmented with more than 200 works in static mediums. A recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York also showcased a growing video collection, though it included only eight works, among them Maria Marshall's acclaimed 1998 short of her two-year-old son seemingly smoking a cigarette and Omer Fast's brilliant *Spielberg's List* (2003).

As well as being notably ambitious in scale, the

Reina Sofía's exhibition was geographically broad, encompassing Europe and Latin America with a nod to Asia. Strikingly, it too was largely restricted to the museum's own collection, all acquired in the last two years. In other words, the museum bought the exhibition, and its program is a declaration that video is an important, even defining, component of contemporary art, and that the museum itself plans to play a major role in establishing the video canon. Sichel arranged the show chronologically, and in carefully placed text panels she discussed such relevant styles and issues as Pop art, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism; performance art; postmodern theory; feminism, and racial and gender identity.

The exhibition opened with Robert Whitman's 1964 *The Bathroom Sink*, certainly one of the highlights of the show—as it was in the artist's 2003 retrospective at the Dia Art Center in New York City. For anyone who did not see it there, or who missed the Whitney's "Into the Light," which also opened with a Whitman film projection (*Shower*, ca. 1964), *The Bathroom Sink* is an eye-opener. A seminal figure in the 1960s and '70s, Whitman is not as widely known to the general public as he should be. He wasn't initially associated with video, which scarcely existed commercially when he made his first installations in 1963. (Like Iles, Sichel wisely avoided the word video in the title of her show.) Instead Whitman used 16mm film, today digitized and transferred to a disk. Coming on the heels of Robert Rauschenberg's Combines and Allan Kaprow's Environments and Happenings, Whitman's early use of film reflected a new freedom to use any material that seemed appropriate to make art.

In part, the attraction of film projection for



Robert Whitman: *The Bathroom Sink*, 1964/2003, 16mm film transferred to DVD, mirror, sink, approx. 8½ minutes. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Whitman had to be its transient, ethereal quality, which in literally reflective works like *The Bathroom Sink* is enhanced by the use of a mirror that bounces the imagery onto an opposing wall; what we see in the mirror is a reflection of the movie playing on the wall. The film shows a woman combing her hair, brushing her teeth and putting on makeup, everyday chores executed at a common bathroom sink. But the mundane is transformed into the magical, even the mystical, in a breathtaking poem of flickering images that change not only because film involves pictures in motion but also because viewers themselves get caught up in the action, appearing both in the mirror and as shadows cast on the wall. Quotidian activities and even the physical world itself are gradually undermined.

Whitman was followed by two artists often considered to be the progenitors of video art, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, both of whom mounted now famous exhibitions in 1963 with television monitors, neither using video but rather broadcast commercial TV. Vostell's *6 TV Dé-coll/age*, originally shown at the Smolin Gallery in New York, is, like Whitman's piece, an environment, with six monitors surrealistically "collaged" into an office environment of file cabinets, tables and telephones, the monitors displaying the problems that plagued television at the time—rolling images, snow and diagonal pictures, for example. Paik is represented by John Cage-influenced "prepared televisions," like those shown in Paik's Wuppertal exhibition, "Exposition of Music," where magnets distorted a TV image into a Minimalist abstraction.

The Reina Sofía exhibition then moved on to

Wolf Vostell: *6 TV Dé-coll/age*, 1963/95, VHS transferred to DVD, 6 monitors, 6 file cabinets, telephone, watercress sprouts.



Among wonderful surprises was Ira Schneider's 1974 *Manhattan Is an Island*. On 23 monitors mounted at varying heights, it showed footage of people moving about the city, capturing the intensity of street life.



One image from David Hall's 7-monitor installation *TV Interruptions* (7 TV Pieces), 1971/2006.

introduce artists who use actual video, presenting classic work by such well-known artists as Joan Jonas, Mary Lucier, Bruce Nauman and Peter Campus. Groundbreaking body-centered works included Ana Mendieta's *Blood Sign #2*, *Body Tracks*, Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits*, Marina Abramović's *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful*, and feminist takes on Duchamp by both Hannah Wilke and Shigeko Kubota; all of these videos were made between 1973 and 1976. Among artists taking aim at the mass media were Antoni Muntadas, with *Between the Lines* (1979), and Dara Birnbaum, in *PM Magazine* (1982). Also included were artists less known to American audiences but nonetheless often key figures in international video: Juan Downey, Rafael França, Anna Bella Geiger, David Hall, Takahiko Imura, Thierry Kuntzel, David Lamelas, Joan Logue, Marta Minujín, Otto Piene, Ulrike Rosenbach, and the team of Joan Rabascall and Benet Rossell.

The show was filled with wonderful surprises, as Sichel on many occasions stepped outside the canon. Ira Schneider's 1974/2006 *Manhattan Is an Island* was one example. On 23 monitors mounted on unusually tall pedestals of varying heights, suggesting skyscrapers and evoking Manhattan, Schneider presented black-and-white video footage of people moving about the city, capturing the ceaseless intensity of life on the sidewalks and streets. An especially entertaining installation and a huge draw at the opening was Jaime Davidovich's *The Live! Show* (1978-84/2005), consisting of

videos that the Argentine-born artist aired weekly from 1978 to 1984 on his cable television show, which was broadcast from his loft in New York's SoHo. "The Live! Show" was a satire of television as well as of the art world. Davidovich aped different characters who appeared on network broadcasts, often giving the work a political twist. For example, in a segment about learning to draw, he spoofed the '60s television art instructor Jon Nagy. In his lesson, Davidovich shows how to draw a middle-aged man, accompanying his instruction with a running commentary on the foibles of the figure's character; the subject ultimately emerges as Ronald Reagan.

At the Reina Sofía, the videos were presented on a 1970s television placed in a '70s living room, with period carpeting and a leather sofa on which viewers could sit and watch. Nearby shelves were packed with the Pop objects that Davidovich sold on a television segment called "The Video Shop": salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars and Christmas ornaments, all shaped like TVs, as well as a full range of Fluxus products. The entire installation, created especially for this exhibition, was a reminder of how video, unlike painting and sculpture, can be reformatted and its presentation entirely redesigned, while retaining historical associations—in this case to Pop and its own references to the mass media, consumerism and contemporary life. The humor of Davidovich's

work was made all the more potent by contrast with Muntadas's nearby piece, *Between the Lines* (1979/2006), a serious postmodern deconstruction of how the media manipulate images.

Another surprise inclusion was Roger Welch's *The O.J. Simpson Project* (1977/2006), an installation that included two 24-inch monitors showing the famous Buffalo Bills running back talking about his ambition to become an actor. The monitors flanked a wall-size projection of Simpson

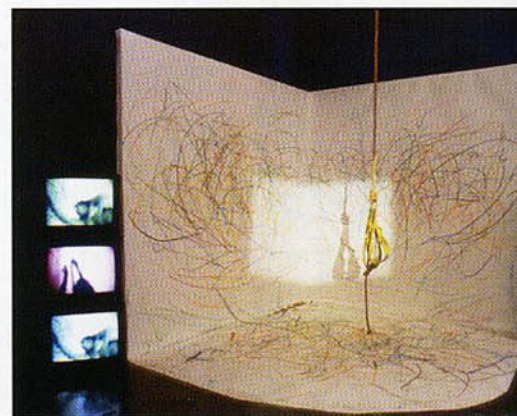
Ulrike Rosenbach: *Hercules-Herkules King Kong*, 1977/2005, digital photograph with video monitor, dimensions variable.



View of Ira Schneider's *Manhattan Is an Island*, 1974/2006, 23-monitor video installation. Photo courtesy the artist.

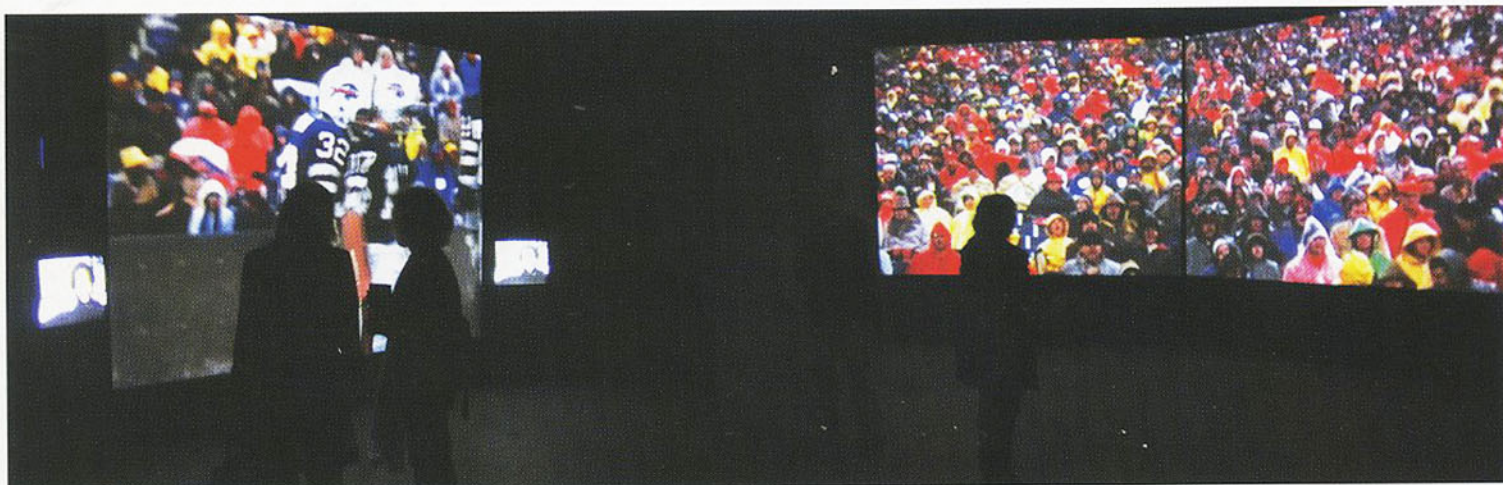


Video still from Jaime Davidovich's *The Live! Show*, 1978-84/2005. Photo courtesy the artist.



Carolee Schneemann: *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1973-76/2005, mixed-medium installation, including 6 monitors, crayon on paper and rope.

playing football. On the opposite wall were two more large projections, these of the crowd in a packed Buffalo stadium cheering wildly, presumably for Simpson. The viewer was surrounded by the projections and immersed in the deafening roar of the crowd. The contrast between the public and private Simpson could not have been greater, and the disastrous course that Simpson's life subsequently took makes the disconnection between public image and private life all the more striking.



View of Roger Welch's *The O.J. Simpson Project*, 1977/2006, 16mm film transferred to DVD, 3 projections, 2 monitors. Photo courtesy the artist.

The large scale of Welch's 1977 piece anticipated the evolution of video in the 1980s, as artists moved away from monitors and increasingly turned to projecting expansive images that rival painting or even attain architectural scale. Appropriately, the show ends with Bill Viola's *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983). One of the few borrowed works, it features a wall-size film projection of a mountain range, resembling Welch's *The O.J. Simpson Project* not only in scale but also in its ear-shattering, earthquakelike rumbling. Both works underscore, by contrast, how conceptually driven and monitor-constrained so much of the earlier video was, and how much less attention most artists in the medium's first generation had given to purely visual considerations. Paradoxically, the exhibition's visual tour de force was perhaps Eugènia Balcells's *TV Weave* (1985), which consisted not of large projections but of 36 television monitors of varying size embedded, floor to ceiling, into an enormous wall in a darkened room. The monitors played a live feed coming from an antenna on the roof, the screens each masked by black tape that reduced the image to multicolored, horizontal slivers. Flanking the installation on both sides were glass walls that functioned like mirrors. While the piece is about light, color, the media transmission of information and the viewer's perception of it, its most powerful aspect is its dazzling, mesmerizing abstract beauty. *TV Weave* evokes the feeling of being in a mystical, otherworldly chamber, largely by its stained-glass colors, which emanated into the darkened room and were reflected into infinity on the adjacent glass walls.

Another striking work was *Adjungierte Dislokationen III* (1978/96) by Valie Export, the Austrian performance artist who often deals with highly provocative gender issues. The work consists of three banks of eight monitors, each placed against a black-and-white striped wall in a three-sided room. Two rotating back-to-back cameras hanging from the ceiling recorded the room, transmitting the striped images onto the monitors. The work was first presented in 1973, with the cameras mounted on Export's body, front and back; in this version she is absent, and it is viewers rather than the artist whose actions are captured by the cameras. Like so much video art from the late '60s and early '70s, such as Bruce Nauman's 1970 live-feed video *Cor-*

ridor Installation, Export's installation is about electronic media's ability to re-present reality and offers an early critique of surveillance technology.

Sichel ended her survey in 1986 for several reasons, and implies she selected this exact date because it marks the establishment of the worldwide web and the move away from broadcast television to cable. She also points to the rise in the 1980s of scores of artists like Viola and Gary Hill who work primarily in video and do not come to it from other mediums—a shift that radically altered the discipline. But perhaps the most compelling argument for ending the show in the 1980s is the dramatic change that took place then in the scale and esthetics of video, which is increasingly integrated with other mediums, frequently in complicated installations. It seemed only fitting to see

Nam June Paik brought back toward the end of the show, where he was represented by *Mirage Stage* of 1986. A towering work of dozens of monitors, most in old-fashioned wood cabinets, it screens images of figures like John Cage who played key roles in molding the art of the second half of the 20th century. Along with Paik's modest 1963 television piece, *Mirage Stage* functioned like a bookend, mapping the distance video art had traveled since the early '60s as it became bigger, bolder and more complex. □

"First Generation: Art and the Moving Image, 1963-1986" was on view at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía [Nov. 7, 2006-Apr. 9, 2007].

Author: Joseph Jacobs is executive director of the Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation in New York.

Nam June Paik: *Mirage Stage*, 1986, 40 empty TV sets, 33 monitors, 3 DVDs.

