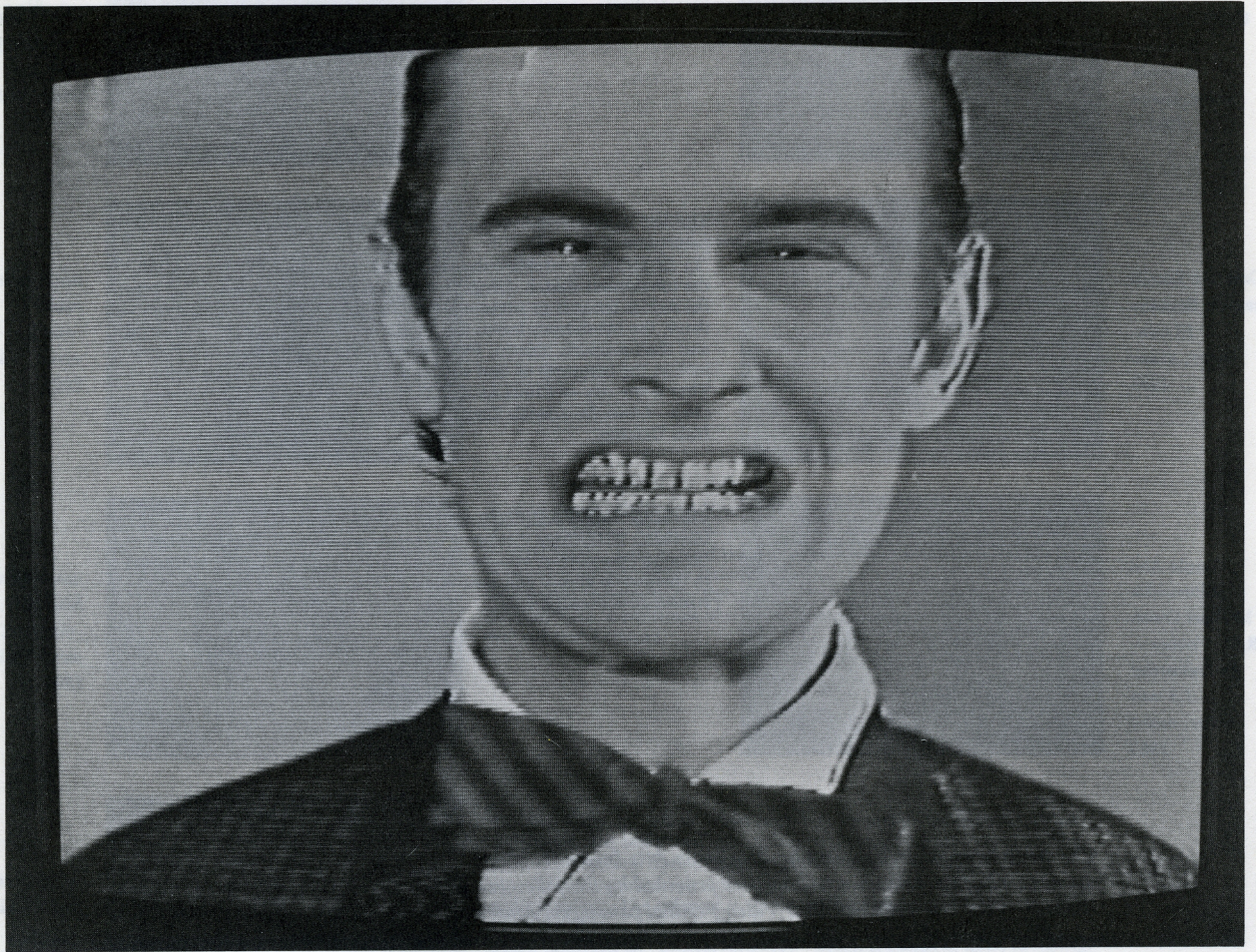


Video and Language

Video as Language



Rene Pulfer and Herbert Fritsch's video tape Ohne Titel

curated by Scott Rankin

The English text that you are now reading is partly phonemic. That is, it is a conventionalized system derived from the sounds of spoken English. These written words are signs, arbitrarily signifying objects and ideas. This code, particular to all Indo-European languages, delivers information about the phonetic pronunciation of the language. There is a direct relation between the written code and the verbal utterance. Conversely, Chinese characters and those of Japanese, Korean and related languages, are ideographic. That is, the sign (ideogram) derived directly from the object it represents. It is the phonetic utterance that is arbitrary. By way of this ideographic origin, written characters and visual images can achieve a visual fusion.

In the West, visual imagery and written language developed on separate paths. Each utilizes a distinct formal grammar and semantic code. These have historically been utilized either separately or as mutual aids to each other (as in the prehistoric cave painting or the medieval illustrated manuscript). This separation between the visual and the verbal is now the dominant form of communication throughout most of the world.

The medium of video, delivered via "Television," has become one of the world's primary channels for this communication. Television began as illustrated radio; an electronic illustrated manuscript. Its role as official channel has necessitated the adherence to the dominant form of (verbal) communication. This is a predominantly linear form of speech and thought. There can and should be no ambiguity. Poetry, in this sense, is inefficient.

Television not only channels messages of content, but delivers meaning through form, as well as through its role as an official one-way distribution channel. Umberto Eco, in a critique of Marshall McLuhan, offers this clarification on the "message" of the medium:

"The medium is the message" proves ambiguous and pregnant with a series of contradictory formulas. It can, in fact, mean:

1) *The form of the message is the real content of the message (which is the thesis of avant-garde literature and criticism);*

2) *The code, that is to say, the structure of the language—or of another system of communication—is the message (which is the famous anthropological thesis of Benjamin Lee Whorf, for whom the view of the world is determined by the structure of the language);*

3) *The channel is the message (that is, the physical means chosen to convey the information determines either the form of the message, or its contents, or the very structure of the codes—which is a familiar idea in aesthetics, where the choice of artistic material notoriously determines the cadences of the spirit and the argument itself)."*¹

Television, as channel, carries with it a particular coded language which determines its allowable content. This leads to what Baudrillard has called the "terrorism of the code."²

This is not to say that official channels necessarily rule out other forms of discourse—it must be noted that all language evolves:

*"Here then is the proposition: the medium is not the message; the message becomes what the receiver makes of it, applying to it his own codes of reception, which are neither those of the sender nor those of the scholar of communications."*³

It is, of course, necessary for the sender and the receiver to agree on most of the code or there cannot be a message. This agreement is *not* unilateral (albeit, in television, lopsided in favor of the sender). There is a subtle indirect feedback from the culture which creates an inevitable evolution.

For instance, music "video" and its influence on commercial television and television commercials (if you allow the distinction) has begun to alter the code by which a viewer receives the channel. Music video often claims to be "art". It is perhaps more accurate to say that it has adopted a visual code from the arts (film, video, painting, etc.) and assimilated it into a commercial channel.

Like film, video is able to use visual and verbal language. It can utilize music, sound, graphics and text and image. It has its own syntactical qualities of light, time and montage. It simulates a personal interaction with the viewer. Video has the ability to synthesize all the forms in which human communication presents itself.

This exhibition presents artists' work in video which has as its object language and sign systems. Each investigates various aspects of this form/code/channel matrix. Most utilize the inherent ability of video to deliver visual and auditory information equally. Some of these artists are well known and have exerted an influence. Others are less known. All are investigating and expanding video and the code by which it operates as a language.

Part One of the exhibition groups together works which deal with the acoustic qualities of language. Enrique and Fernando Fontanilles and Gary Hill visually reveal the phenomena of frequency. Richard Serra investigates "feedback" and its relationship to spatial orientation and thinking. Marina Abramovic/Ulay, and Linda Montano demonstrate the power of the spoken word as an emotional force. And Hans Breder recreates a Kurt Schwitters sound poem by translating the original German into phonetic English for a Macintosh computer to perform.

Part Two begins with work that deals with the phonetic qualities of language and then works which introduce the visual components which often accompany them. Laurie Anderson, John Baldessari, Gary Hill and the Belgian artist Joelle de la Casiniere fuse the visual with the phonetic. Gary Hill's *Ura-Aru* is a beautiful demonstration of the visual and phonetic qualities of both Eastern and Western language. William Wegman and Annette Barbier investigate the communicative properties of the human body and face. And presented in the gallery during all of the exhibit, Rene Pulfer's tape of Herbert Fritsch attempting to hold a smile is a funny and dramatic representation of facial expression.

Part Three presents tapes which investigate visual signs and the structure of semantic codes. Skip Arnold, David Bunn and Juan Downey demonstrate signs and their possible meanings. Peter Rose tells us a story that reveals how our framing of experience is related to language. Jacques Nyst questions the organization of the universe as mental construct. Ken Feingold develops a visual, aural poem built upon juxtapositions between images. Carole Ann Klonarides and Michael Owen emulate the smooth flow of the language of soft sell. And finally, Caterina Borelli and Pier Marton comment on the channel of television and its questionable content via form.

It is not possible to present a comprehensive survey of all the work being done with respect to "language." There are other artists who belong in this exhibition. Unfortunately, due to time limitations they could not be included. An attempt was made to exhibit work which has not recently been screened at LACE, and preference has been given to work which is not easily seen in Southern California. Each part of the exhibition will run for two weeks. Each part is short enough to be seen in one sitting. It is hoped that you will return to see each of the parts and allow the tapes to speak for themselves. Thank you.

1. Umberto Eco, "Cogito Interruptus," 1967

2. Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," 1981

3. Umberto Eco, "Cogito Interruptus," 1967

VideoLACE

December 4, 1986
through
January 18, 1987

VideoLACE is committed to the presentation and advancement of video art. The program encompasses the full range of presentations, educational programs and services at LACE. In the video screening room continuous exhibitions of single channel video are presented. Video installations are shown in the main gallery. Performance work utilizing video and evening screenings by visiting artists are presented in the LACE performance space. These presentations are selected by a committee of video artists and professionals in the field. To assist in the post-production of video art, LACE On-Line arranges editing time for artists at commercial facilities at reduced rates. As an educational resource, the bookstore offers an array of magazines and books about video including the VideoLACE publication *Resolution. A Critique of Video Art.*

Video and Language: Video as Language exemplifies the efforts to contextualize, interpret and present video art to the public through the VideoLACE program. I wish to thank Bruce Martin of Audio Graphic Films and Video for his assistance with the compilation of these tapes and Anne Bray, VideoLACE coordinator, for handling the logistics of this show with her usual efficiency and energy. Special thanks are due to Scott Rankin, whose insight and tremendous effort has brought this show to fruition, and to the artists whose work provided the impetus for **Video and Language: Video as Language.**

Joy Silverman
Director

L A C E
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

1804 Industrial Street
Los Angeles, California
90021

213.624.5650

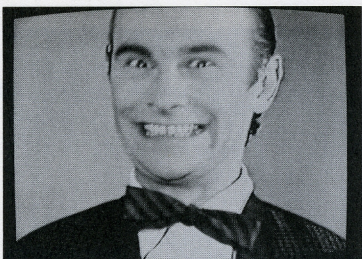
Tuesday – Saturday

11 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Sunday

noon – 5 p.m.

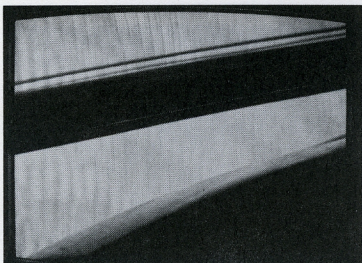
Rene Pulfer
Herbert Fritsch
Ohne Titel
17 min. loop
color, stereo
1983
video installation
in the gallery



For 45 minutes, Herbert Fritsch attempts to hold a beaming smile directed at the viewer. The last seventeen minutes of the smile are excerpted on the tape revealing all the pain and discomfort. The changing facial expressions graphically illustrate these muscles' role in communication.

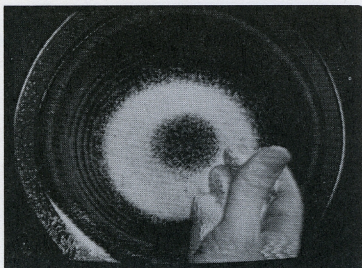
PROGRAM 1
screening room
December 4-8

Enrique and
Fernando Fontanilles
Two Strings
6 min.
color, stereo
1985



In a real time performance, a string bass is played in front of a video monitor which is out of sync with the video camera. This causes a frequency interference which allows us to see the actual wave form of the strings as they vibrate in sounding each note.

Gary Hill
Soundings
(excerpt)
4.3 min.
color, stereo
1979
revised 1986



As sand is placed on a loud speaker it forms patterns which correspond to the frequency of the sound being transmitted through the speaker. The artist's punning poem gradually becomes buried with the speaker.

Marina Abramovic
and Ulay
**Tiera Degli
Dea Madre**
16 min.
color, mono
1984



Abramovic and Ulay traveled to Sicily to continue their project of exploring time and place in relation to a culture and its people. Here their fluidly moving camera passes through a configuration of rocks and men to an interior of ornate furniture and motionless women, while an evocative hybrid language forms an hypnotic spoken accompaniment. As a study of contrasts—male/female, interior/exterior, nature/civilization—this tape also reveals the affinity of these people with their environment.

Richard Serra
Boomerang
10 min.
color, mono
1974



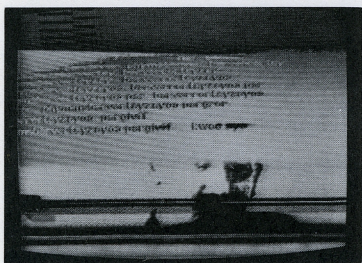
Nancy Holt wearing headphones sits in a recording studio in a tightly framed close up shot. Her voice is slightly delayed between speaking and hearing herself in the headset. This eliminates the normal feedback by which all of us situate ourselves in the world. Holt describes her situation and its confusing effects.

Linda Montano
Mitchell's Death
22 min.
B/W, stereo
1978



In this tape Montano mourns the death of her ex-husband. Every detail of her story, from the telephone call announcing the tragedy to visiting the body, is chanted by Montano as her face, pierced by acupuncture needles, slowly comes into focus and then goes out again. When in the image, her lips momentarily falter, the audio track, i.e., her voice, resolutely continues.

Hans Breder
Ursonate 1986
29 min.
B/W, mono
1986



Ursonate 1986 is the result of a transference process utilizing computer and video technology to transport a 1932 phonetic poem, "Ursonate" by the German artist Kurt Schwitters, from the cultural setting of that period into a contemporary context.

In the early part of the century, Dada artists who experimented with phonetic poetry were exploring the concepts of pre-language and pre-consciousness. The title of Schwitters' piece, "Ursonate," translates as primordial sonata. In *Ursonate 1986* video and computer technologies, extensions off the nervous system, are used to parallel and extend Schwitters' attempts to excavate the roots of language and to articulate the primordial. —Hans Breder

PROGRAM 2

screening room

December 18-31

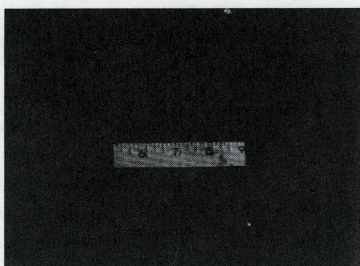
Gary Hill

Around and About

5 min.

color, mono

1980



Images are quickly cut to syllabic rhythm of the spoken word creating an experience which makes speech visible.

"*Around and About* attempts to engage the 'positions' of the viewer and to treat images offhandedly, making their context and content susceptible to the utterances of speech." Gary Hill

Joelle de la Casiniere
Grimoire Magnetique

26 min.

color, mono

1983



In *Grimoire Magnetique* (Magnetic Rhyme), Joelle de la Casiniere adapts to video the story of Hallaj Al Mansur, the 10th century Sufi master of mysticism. The story is told in operatic style based on a musical score by Jacques Lederlon. The text is sung, broken down into computer generated syllables and told in deaf signing over stills which relate to this Islamic religious tale.

Laurie Anderson

O Superman

8.5 min.

color, stereo

1984



This "visual music" from Anderson incorporates her interest in language using visual signs and devices to underline the verbal aspects of the piece.

John Baldessari

Some Words

I Mispronounce

1 min.

B/W, silent

1972



Baldessari turns to the blackboard and writes six words. He does not pronounce them. Of course, in our mind we do. This becomes a beautiful illustration of the phonemic origin of written English.

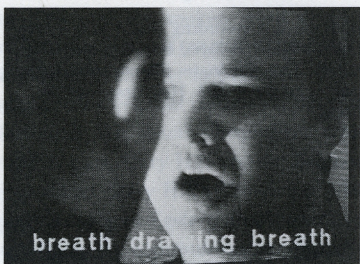
Gary Hill

Ura-Aru

27 min.

color, stereo

1985-86



Ura-Aru treats a selection of Japanese words as acoustic palindromes, words that have related meanings said backwards or forwards. Hill translates the meaning with English text/titles and related English words which are visual palindromes, words which change meaning read backwards or forwards. Hill employs great economy of technique as the printed word, moving through each scene, echoes the spoken word.

Annette Barbier

Mixed Emotions

11 min.

color, stereo

1983



Mixed Emotions explores a theory of emotional analysis based on examinations of facial muscle contractions and the relation of thought systems to the reality of experience.

William Wegman

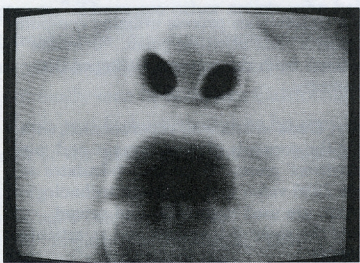
Selected

Body Works

14 min.

B/W, mono

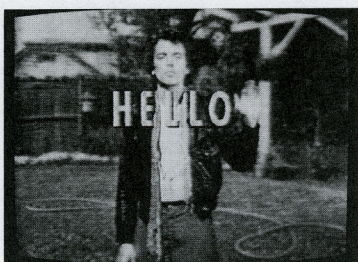
1970-72



In a series of short real time pieces, Wegman investigates various parts of his body and their ability to become instruments for communication.

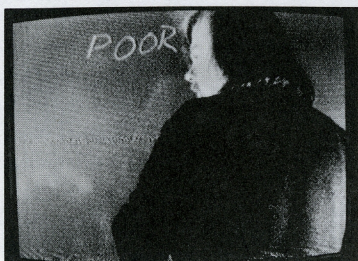
PROGRAM 3
screening room
January 2-14

Skip Arnold
Hello/Goodbye
30 sec.
color, silent
1984



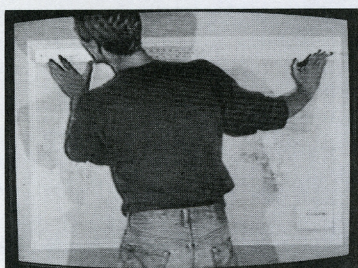
Arnold appears waving at the camera. "Hello" and then "Goodbye" appear as titles on the screen over the unchanged gesture.

John Baldessari
Some Words
I Mispronounce
1 min.
B/W, silent
1972



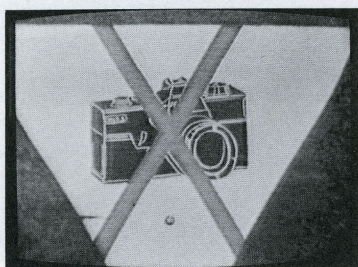
This tape is repeated here from Program 2 to emphasize the iconic quality that written words acquire after familiarization.

David Bunn
Chart
2 min.
color, mono
1983



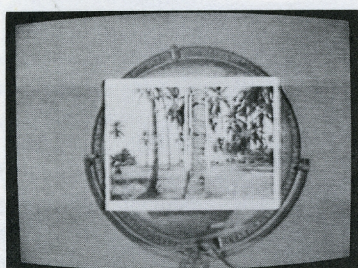
Bunn uses a ruler and pencil to measure the exact center on a Rand McNally global map and ironically declares that point the center of the world.

Juan Downey
Information Withheld
28.5 min.
color, stereo
1983



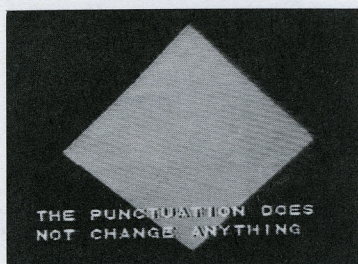
Shot in Egypt, Chile and New York, *Information Withheld* compares signs in everyday life which are supposed to convey information instantly and clearly, such as road signs, to signification in the fine arts, as in classical painting, which resonates with a multiplicity of meanings and ambiguous constructions. Extended segments of landscape are rapidly intercut with illustrations of sign usage to give the work a lush visual and temporal texture.

David Bunn
Tropical Light
3 min.
color, mono
1983



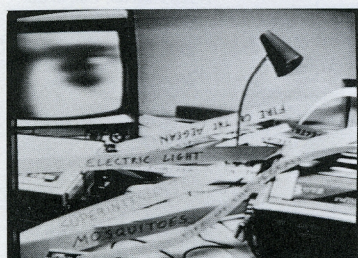
Tropical Light as well as *Chart* comment on certain realizations about the impact that one's own culture has in determining an understanding of another culture. Specifically the tape examines the degree that representation (and analysis based on that representation) affect that understanding. The referent is the cultural tv language of documentary segments of news features. The tapes assume a Western ethnocentric stance bolstered by "official language" which is excessive in its categorizing, labeling and analyzing. The veracity of the stance becomes problematic as it is supported by an increasingly biased circuitous logic and by images open to numerous interpretations. — David Bunn

Jacques Nyst
J'ai La Tete Qui Tourne
17 min.
color, stereo
1984



In *J'ai La Tete Qui Tourne* (My Head is Spinning), a whimsical and philosophical dialogue between a man and a woman forms the basis for a complex play of words, images and ideas. As they banter about "moving the earth and night to a small gray corner," Nyst flirts with the mundane and the cosmic, revealing a genuine delight with the philosophical implications of language.

Peter Rose
Digital Speech
13 min
color, mono
1984



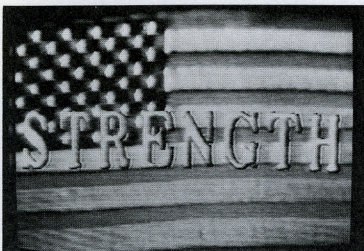
Digital Speech uses a traveler's anecdote, a perverse variant of a classical Zen parable, as a vehicle for an exploration of language, thought and gesture. The tape plays with the nature of narrative, with the ways of telling, performing and illustrating by means of nonsense language, scat singing and video rescan for comic comment. — Peter Rose

Ken Feingold
The Double
 29 min.
 color, stereo
 1984



The Double continues Feingold's project of building a language system from ordered sequences of images and sounds, and investigating the ways in which information is received and perceived. He describes his approach as "the world surveyed for extreme manifestations, wild examples. This work is about the space in between all these things, the gaps that open in between all these things, the gaps that open up before us when we look at ourselves in the world and find our pulses racing a bit from...what?...the knowledge that we are part of all this?"

Pier Marton
Unity through Strength
 6.5 min
 color, stereo
 1981-2



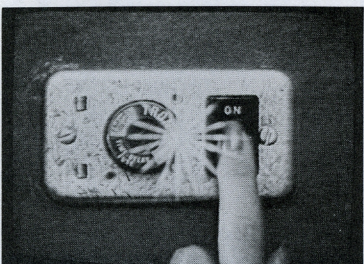
The fabricated aspects of television reality and its "deadly" hypnosis are presented in short segments, recycling and processing off-the-air images (news, sign-off,...). The score is based on an audio-sweetening demonstration record from the broadcast industry. —Pier Marton

Caterina Borelli
Passegiare Romane
 16 min.
 color, mono
 1985



The text superimposed on the tape and translated below is Borelli's perception of the tape.
 "In *ERSILIA*, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses... When the strings became so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain. From a mountainside, *ERSILIA*'s refugees look at the labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain. That is the city of *ERSILIA* still, and they are nothing." *Trading Cities* —4 from *The Invisible Cities*
 Italo Calvino

Carole Ann Klonarides
 Michael Owen
 R.M. Fischer —
An Industrial
 3.5 min
 color, mono
 1983



The artist's lamp sculptures are humorously subjected to the hype of the television advertising format. The text is a curious hybrid language between commercial broadcast lingo and critical art jargon which are in themselves empty and meaningless. They are meant to imply significance through style.

The video tapes were provided by Electronic Arts Intermix, Video Data Bank and the artists. Video tape descriptions of the following artists were provided by the following sources: Joelle de la Casniere and Juan Downey from The 1984 National Video Festival catalogue, American Film Institute; Annette Barbier and Linda Montano from the Video Data Bank catalogue; Ken Feingold, Jacques Nyst, Marina Abramovic and Ulay from Electronic Arts Intermix catalogue.

LACE Board of Directors

Joseph R. Austin *vice chairman*
 Karen Carson
 Karen Comegys
 Gai Gherardi
 Elizabeth Freeman *secretary*
 Edward Helfeld
 Lin Hixson
 Freya Ivener
 Mike Kelley
 Rick Oginz
 Jon Peterson
 Lari Pittman
 Astrid Preston
 Anthony de los Reyes
 Joy Silverman *ex-officio*
 Cam Slocum
 Coleen Sterritt
 Leopold Tuchman
 Robert Walker *chairman*
 Bruce Yonemoto
 Marvin Zeidler

VideoLACE Committee

Anne Bray *staff*
 Peter Kirby
 Chip Lord
 Tim Martin
 Branda Miller
 Patti Podesta
 Scott Rankin
 Joy Silverman
 Bruce Yonemoto *chairman*

LACE staff

Joy Silverman *director*
 Nancy Barton *bookstore manager*
 Anne Bray *video coordinator*
 Webi Garretson *performance coordinator*
 Loretta Cantieri *asst. bookstore manager*
 Jim Isermann *bookkeeper*
 Martin Kersels *administrative assistant*
 Jeff Mann *exhibitions coordinator*
 Laura Newton *development intern*
 Judith Teitelman *development coordinator*

VideoLACE is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, Media Arts Program. The catalogue is funded in part by a grant from the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles.

LACE is supported in part by Apple Computer, the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, Brody Arts Fund, the California Arts Council, The California Community Foundation, Chevron U.S.A., Inc., Cointreau America, Inc., The Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles, International Business Machines, W. Alton Jones Foundation, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, MIKA Company, the National Endowment for the Arts, National/State/County Partnership, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Security Pacific Foundation, Sheraton Grande Hotel, Touche Ross and Company, and the FRIENDS and SUPPORTERS of LACE.