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Video Art: The Brazilian Adventure

Arlindo Machado

Video was an early arrival in Brazil; it soon found practitioners and rapidly became one of the principal means of expression for the emerging generations of the second half of the century. Late in the 1960s—only 2 or 3 years after its commercial appearance in other countries—portable video equipment was being used by Brazil's video pioneers. This equipment had been put on the market by the Japanese electronics industry for private use in corporate employee training schemes. But there was nothing to stop its being put to other, non-industrial purposes, given the right circumstances. The very availability of the equipment opened the way for the appearance of what René Berger called "microtelevision"—radical television, produced and broadcast on closed circuit, independent of the economic and cultural models of conventional broadcasting [1].

The precocious appearance and rapid spread of video in Brazil can be explained by a set of factors, of which I will discuss the two most important. The first is cost. Of all contemporary audiovisual forms, video offers the best options in terms of production costs; this makes it possible for independent authors and non-profit groups to explore autonomous cultural projects. The electronics industry tends strongly towards progressive price reduction, so as to face competition. The result is that electronic equipment and processes—high-resolution cameras and digital post-production resources, for example—are today accessible to small producers. Not more than 5 years ago, these resources were available only to the large television networks. However, cinema—a close relative of video—is the opposite in terms of the economic tendencies of capitalist industry. The growth rate of production expenses has been calculated at about 16% per year [2]; what weighs most on this figure is the increasingly astronomic cost of film. As the cost of cinema production spirals upward, production on a more modest budget becomes an impossibility. National cinema industries (Brazil's included) teeter on the edge of bankruptcy, and the independent and experimental schools are caught up in a bitter process of extinction. In a poor country such as Brazil, the stampede of audiovisual creators to video is thus nearly inevitable.

The second factor, more broadly cultural in its nature, concerns television. Brazil is a television-centered country; the formative role of television is so decisive that few similar phe-

nomena are to be found anywhere in the world. But we must not forget that for the generations that came of age from the 1970s on, television is a primary point of reference, with its fragmentary language, its swift rhythms and its images in metamorphosis. Many of the groups that, principally from the 1980s on, took up the technology of video to express a different view of the world had television as the horizon of their cultural universe. Television was in their heads, and they wanted to turn it into reality—but not necessarily a reality that would coincide with what was to be found on commercial TV channels. Unlike previous generations, which believed (and sometimes still believe) that television bears the stamp of some sort of original sin and that it is condemned to incarnate the power structures of modern technological society, young Brazilian videomakers believed in the possibility of casting television in a different mold, one that would be more creative, more democratic. They kept alive the hope that the electronic media, with their immense capacity for technical intervention, might come to express an emerging new sensibility.

ABSTRACT

Since the late 1960s, video has stood out as one of Brazil's most important and lasting cultural phenomena. Three schematic phases are distinguishable in the short history of Brazilian video. In the 1970s it was explored exclusively by artists in search of new means and foundations for their creative ideas. In the 1980s independent video appeared, enlarging the range of creative video and bringing it to a wider public. In the 1990s a new wave of videomakers pursues more mature and individual work, while at the same time seeking to fortify previous achievements.

Fig. 1. Anna Bella Geiger, still from video in the series *Mapas Elementares* (Elementary Maps), 1977. One of the most important artists of the first generation, Geiger made a dozen works on the condition of man and woman in an underdeveloped country. Here she is shown drawing a map of Latin America in one of her videos.



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Fig. 2. José Roberto Aguilar, *Opera do Terceiro Mundo* (Third World Opera), still from video, 1978. Aguilar cries to someone behind the camera (the spectator?): “You are not Latin America! I am Latin America!”



Fig. 3. Sônia Andrade, *Untitled*, still from video, 1977. Andrade deforms her own face with nylon threads in this video.

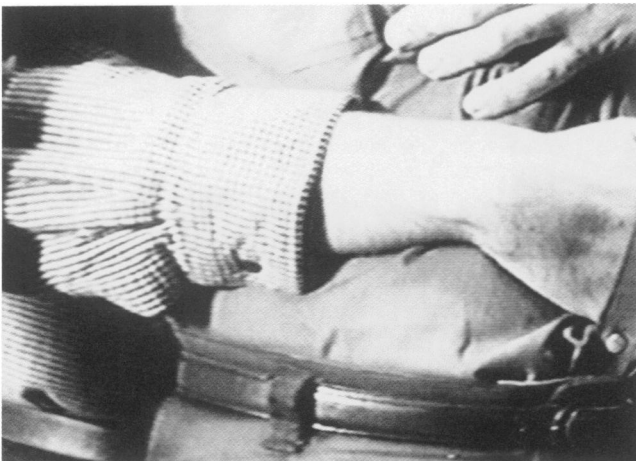


Fig. 4. Rafael França, *Prelúdio de uma Morte Anunciada* (Prelude to an Announced Death), still from video, 1991. A few days before his death, França finished his last work. The video reflects his agony during the worst moments of his illness.

THE FIRST GENERATION: PIONEERS

We have records of Brazilian artists working with video since the end of the 1960s [3]. Yet they can hardly be classed as videomakers. They were, for the most part, artists concerned with the search for new structures for their work. From the mid-1960s on, many artists attempted to break away from the aes-

thetic and commercial schemes of conventional painting and to seek out more dynamic materials to provide form for their artistic ideas. Some went to the streets and intervened in the state of the urban landscape. Others used their own bodies as foundations for public performances. Still others opted for mixed media and for relativized frontiers between the arts, in the form of hybrid objects and spectacles, installations and happen-

ings. And then there were those who sought innovative aesthetic experiences by using industrial techniques for generating images, such as photography, cinema and, above all, video. Here was the birthplace of video art, an aesthetic at first limited to the universe of fine arts, whose only exhibition space was the sophisticated circuit of museums and art galleries. This, at least, was the case with Brazilian video art; in other countries, the history is perhaps quite different. In the United States, for example, video art was at first strictly linked to experimental music (Nam June Paik was originally a composer), dance, theater and experimental cinema.

In Brazil, the first generation of video creators was composed of well-known or emerging names in the world of visual arts: Roberto Sandoval, Antônio Dias, Anna Bella Geiger (Fig. 1), José Roberto Aguilar (Fig. 2), Ívens Machado, Letícia Parente, Sônia Andrade (Fig. 3), Regina Silveira, Paulo Herkenhoff, Regina Vater, Fernando Cocchiarale, Mary Dritschel, Paulo Bruscky and many more. Video was born as an expansion of the fine arts, as one medium among many others; it never came to be regarded by the artist as an exclusive creative process. Indeed, it was sometimes difficult to understand video artworks outside the context of the artist's work as a whole. There was still no search for a language specific to video, except in a few isolated cases. There was nothing in Brazil like the distortion and disintegration of figurative imagery [4,5] that came to be the dominant line in video art in many countries in the northern hemisphere (exemplified by the works of Paik and Emschwiller in the United States).

Most first-generation works in Brazilian video were fundamentally recordings of artists' gestures in performance. The basic device was almost exclusively the confrontation between camera and artist—for example, artist Letícia Parente, in one of the most disturbing works of that time, embroidered the words “Made in Brazil” on the soles of her own feet, her actions followed by a camera in an extreme close-up. In some respects, the pioneer Brazilian experience echoes one of the directions taken by North American video at the same time—that represented by people such as Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Peter Campus and others, whose work, as observed at the time by Rosalind Krauss [6], consisted of placing the body of the artist between two machines—camera and



Fig. 5. TVDO, *Caipira In (Local Groove)*, stills from video, 1987. The group TVDO has been responsible for radical experiments in terms of formal invention and renewal of the expressive qualities of video. *Caipira In*, for example, fragments images of Brazilian identity into a disconnected mosaic. A spirit of corrosive parody and cynical humor pervades the work. Since this video does not explain or clarify issues of national identity, it radicalizes the experience of dispersion and doubt. Ostensibly a record of a popular religious festival, *Caipira In* becomes a reflection on the deforming presence of the videomakers and the distance between their culture and that of their subject.

monitor—so as to produce an instantaneous image of the performer, like Narcissus looking at himself in the mirror.

The technology was precarious, yet some powerful works were produced during this period. The most provocative were perhaps those of Sônia Andrade. From 1974 on, Andrade made nearly a dozen short-length experiments that can be considered among the most mature of her generation. One video shows the artist's face, totally deformed by nylon threads (Fig. 3); she then mutilates herself in small ways, removing body-hairs with a pair of scissors, fixing her hand to a table with wire and nails. These are works of latent self-violence, half-real, half-fictitious, by way of which Andrade discourses on the tenuous limits between lucidity and madness that are characteristic of the creative act.

Of this pioneer generation, most soon gave up video and went on to other experiments in the larger field of art. Very few kept faith with the basic principles or continued the tradition of video during the following decades. Of those who continued the aesthetic project of their forerunners (formal simplicity, moderate use of technology, "narcissistic" insertion of the performer into the image, public self-exhibition), the most important name is certainly that of Rafael França, who started to make videos in the early 1980s. Part of his work was done in São Paulo, part in Chicago, where he lived, studied and worked for a time. His *Fighting the Invisible Enemy*, for example, was made in Chicago in 1983. The fact that he lived outside Brazil and

had close contact with video abroad turned França into an important link between Brazilian and international video. He was the first to make a systematic effort to draw Brazilian video out of its shell. França wrote for newspapers and art magazines and curated important international exhibitions of video art in Brazil, and it may safely be said that following generations of Brazilian video artists have developed thanks to the ideas and paths he pointed out.

As with almost all the works of the pioneers, the principal character in França's videos is himself. In video he found a suitable means for meditation and reflection on his own inner conflicts and, above all, on his greatest obsession: the inevitability of death. His very personal work also centered on a dramatic inquiry into homosexuality. França died of AIDS in 1991, after leaving us with his most authentic witness to his faithfulness to himself. His last video, *Prelúdio de uma Morte Anunciada* (Prelude to an Announced Death) (1991) was finished only few days before his death and reflects his agony during the worst moments of his illness (Fig. 4).

THE SECOND GENERATION: INDEPENDENT VIDEO

At the beginning of the 1980s, a new wave of creators redirected the trajectory of Brazilian video. This was the generation of independent video, which consisted largely of young people, recently out of college, who sought to explore the possibilities of television as an

expressive system and to transform the electronic image into a fact of the culture of our times. The horizon of this generation's world was television, although for a long time independent video was absent from television proper, which systematically ignored it. For these artists, the sophisticated circuit of museums and art galleries was now in the past. Symptomatically, this new wave was opposed to pioneer video art in that it tended toward documentary and social themes. Video came noisily on stage; it began leaving its cultural ghetto and winning over its first public. Video festivals were held; the first video projection rooms made their timid appearance; strategies were sketched out with a view to breaking the stranglehold of the commercial TV networks.

In order to correctly evaluate the contribution made by independent video, one would have to identify the nature of the rather different way in which it looks at Brazil, the country and its people. This generation rejects wholesale representations; its doubts and the partiality of its intervention are made clear in its work. It questions itself as to the limits of its enunciating capacity and its ability to really know others. For these artists, the person who points a camera at someone else is no longer necessarily in a privileged position as a producer of meanings; he/she is no longer authorized to tell the entire truth about the person represented, nor is he/she in a position to bestow an impossible coherence on the culture in focus. The makers themselves are no longer absent from the au-

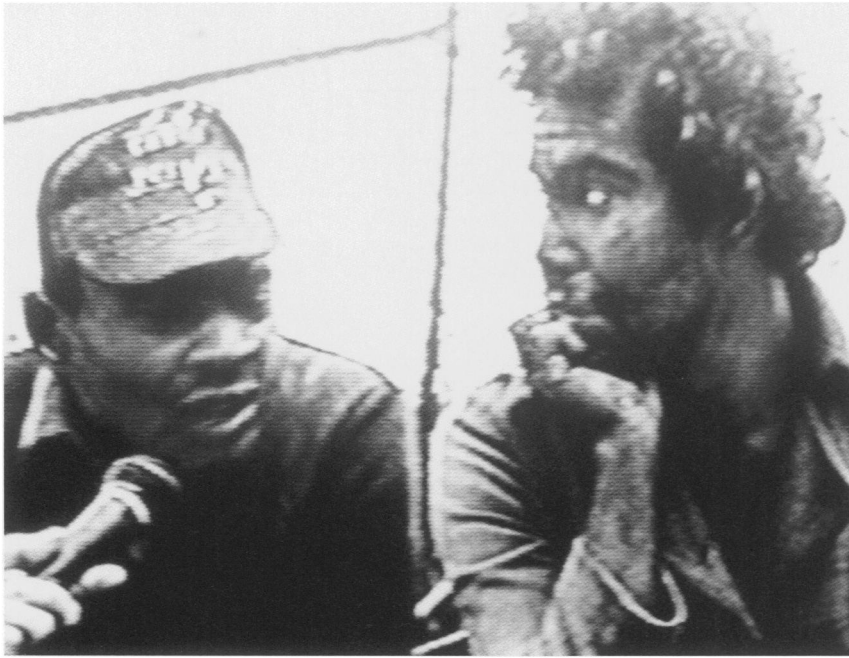


Fig. 6. Olhar Eletrônico, *Do Outro Lado de Sua Casa* (*On the Other Side of Your House*, still from video, 1986. In this work, members of Brazil's poor speak for themselves, taking over the microphone and the role of the interviewer.

diovisual "text," nor do they hide behind the cameras to suggest a pretense of neutrality. Instead, they see the production of meanings and the legibility of new videographic products as dependent on the capacity to create new relationships between the parties involved. Their real intent is less to tell the truth about the other—to reveal the other, to "translate" the other to our canons of intelligibility—than to try to build a bridge between cultures, so that they can at last enter into dialogue.

Different groups have employed different strategies to reach this point. Let us look at TVDO. This is a fairly radical São Paulo-based group that has had the effect of renewing the expressive resources of video in Brazil. If we look at their *Caipira In* (*Local Groove*) (1987), it would seem to sum up the anxieties of the group (Fig. 5). At first sight it looks like yet another of those works aimed at preservation of popular culture—a film commissioned by some official institution for the conservation of the cultural image or the good of the national heritage. The apparent idea is to film a popular religious feast that takes place annually in the small town of São Luís do Paraitinga. Yet the video negates the camera's recording function; it establishes a distance between subject and object, between observer and observed, and eliminates almost entirely the voices

and statements of those of whom it speaks. Electronic studio effects corrode the *in loco* images of the cameras; the montage breaks up any possible coherence that might "explain" the event; even the sounds recorded live during the feast are electronically processed until they are no more than pallid vestiges of themselves.

In fact, *Caipira In* is less a documentary about a religious feast than a reflection on the distance between two irreconcilable cultures—or, to be more exact, a demonstration of our inability to live the experience of another person as such. The "reading" is revealed as one version among an infinite number of others. The makers interfere; they display themselves as a clearly deforming presence. When they focus on someone else's culture they do not negate themselves, they do not renounce their own world, their own values, their own culture, nor do they allow themselves to be dissolved into the culture of the others. No pretense at objectivity hides the fact that the subject in the representation, faced with someone else's feast, brings along his or her own world, his or her own past and his or her own cultural references, on the basis of which, using them as a filter, he or she approaches the other culture. *Caipira In* is, in truth, a comment on this distance, a statement of awareness of it, a questioning of the

insertion of the analyst in a reality that is not his/hers. TVDO's video serves as a deconstruction of the documentary illusion, in which the intervention of the videomakers becomes a criticism of the ability to represent reality [7].

How then might we imagine a strategy for building a bridge between two cultures? A further group of videomakers, Olhar Eletrônico, has tried to obtain an answer to this question, and has taken a direction rather different than that of TVDO. Their search is not for radical separation, but for negotiation, so to speak—for exchange, perhaps the chance of a dialogue, an exercise in polyphony that will allow the multiplicity of voices to assume their place again. Now the artist aims at placing his/her work within a process of communication in which he/she is just one among the many voices in conflict.

And so Olhar Eletrônico, in its more significant works, seeks to break down any relationship of knowledge or authority that may exist between makers and the protagonists of the video. Attempts are made to avoid the superimposition of any discourse with pretensions to truth upon images of the subject and to create devices whereby the subject him/herself can reply, in all autonomy, to the inquiries of the makers. Fundamentally, this is an inversion of the falsifying reporting schemes of the commercial networks, which reduce all the ideological, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of the people who inhabit the country to an integrating and normalizing discourse, the discourse of the institutionalized television. To let people speak for themselves, to give the subject freedom to express him/herself, to render the production techniques transparent to the protagonists—these are some of the guiding principles underlying the work of Olhar Eletrônico. They can be identified in *Do Outro Lado de sua Casa* (*On the Other Side of Your House*) (1986) (Fig. 6). In this exemplary work, videomakers Marcelo Machado, Renato Barbieri and Paulo Morelli look at the daily universe of a group of beggars, living as they do at the very edge of society. But we do not find that sense of commiseration or guilt so common in a Christian or Catholic approach to the humbler part of the population. On the contrary: as the video goes on, the beggars begin to impose their own discourse and put forward, with complete independence, the singularity of their worldview. Indeed,

one of the beggars ends up by taking the enunciation of the work upon himself; microphone in hand, he sets out to direct the interviews with his partners. Here, in a disturbing reversal of roles, the object being investigated ends up behind the cameras, thus becoming the subject who investigates. Thus any humiliation in the approach to the protagonists is avoided [8].

THE THIRD GENERATION: THE VIDEO OF CREATION

The third generation of Brazilian videomakers can hardly be said to represent a radical change in style, content or form by comparison with the two preceding phases. In fact, the new generation, which made its public appearance in the 1990s, makes the most of the accumulated experience, comes to a synthesis of the work of its two generations of predecessors and sets out in the direction of more mature work, of a reinforcement of previous achievement. Most of the representatives of this generation come from the field of independent video; however, they opt for more personal, individual work that is less militant, less socially engaged. In this, they return to some of the guidelines of the pioneers. One may also perceive a certain extenuation of local concerns, an approach to themes of universal interest and a more direct link to international videographic production. Some videomakers (Sandra Kogut, for one) produce outside Brazil, so as to have access to greater financial and technological resources; others (including Eder Santos) use material produced in Brazil

and abroad. Names such as Kogut and Santos are internationally known; others, such as Arnaldo Antunes and Walter Silveira, although less well-known abroad, are respected in the cultural panorama of Brazil. The only commitment common to all representatives of this latest generation is the investigation of expressive forms specific to video and the exploration of stylistic resources that speak to the sensitivity of men and women at this century's end.

Santos is perhaps the best and most widely known of today's Brazilian videomakers. Paradoxically, his work is not easy. Indeed, the opposite is true: Santos's videos may be the most radical, the least given to making concessions, of any Brazilian videographic producer. They are generally composed of noises, interferences, "defects," problems with the technical apparatus; at times they go to the very limits of visualization. In many of his video installations, Santos projects his video images onto textured or wrinkled walls, piles of sand or otherwise irregular surfaces so as to disturb the intelligibility of the images or corrupt their figurative coherence. Almost nothing remains to be seen except for the pale traces of images.

It is easy to understand this deconstructionist fury in relation to audiovisual works: in his videos, Santos attacks the loss of the vitality of images, their reduction to clichés worn out by the abuse of repetition. The triviality of daily life, the stereotyped behavior of people, mass tourism, the futility of postcards—these are all material that the videomaker takes up; he builds, on them and yet against them, an implacable reflec-

tion on contemporary civilization. The two works that best demonstrate this existential posture are *Não Vou à África Porque Tenho Plantão* (I'm not Going to Africa Because I'm on Duty) (1990) and *Essa Coisa Nervosa* (This Nervous Thing) (1991). Both make use of deliberate technical interference to cause loss of vertical frame synchronicity; this makes the image oscillate non-stop before the eyes of the spectator so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to see. But such a work as *Janaúba* (1993) shows the ideal that he so tirelessly seeks: to bring back the primordial energy of the visual arts, to re-establish the meaning and force of the images that are lost in the ocean of the industrial images of today (Color Plate A No. 2). *Janaúba* is remotely inspired by an old, practically mythological film from Brazil's silent cinema, *Limite* by Mário Peixoto; it is almost a return to the origins of the audiovisual, an attempt to revive values that civilization has forgotten.

The work of Kogut is something rather different again. This artist seems to concentrate and express decisively innovative tendencies in video art; yet at the same time she radicalizes the process initiated by Nam June Paik of electrification of the image and disintegration of any sort of unity or discursive homogeneity. The technique of multiple writing that is the stamp of this work—where text, voices, sounds, and simultaneous images combine and strive to form a canvas of rare complexity—constitutes in itself the structural evidence of what may be called the aesthetic of saturation, of excess (a maximum concentration of information

Fig. 7. Sandra Kogut, *Parabolic People*, stills from video, 1991. The raw material used to make *Parabolic People* included videotaped improvisations by pedestrians in cabins erected on the streets of several cities around the world (Paris, New York, Tokyo, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, etc.). The shots from different sources were mixed and added to computer lettering and graphics.



in a minimum of space-time) and of instability (the almost absolute absence of any structural integrity or of any thematic or stylistic systematization). If it were possible to reduce to a single word the aesthetic project presupposed in the videographic work of Kogut, that word would be multiplicity; here we have an unceasing search for this multiplicity, which expresses a contemporary mode of knowledge. The world is seen and represented as a web of relationships, inextricable in their complexity, where each moment is marked by the simultaneous presence of elements of the most heterogeneous nature: all this is in tumultuous movement that renders events, contexts, operations changeable and almost impossible to grasp [9].

Take, for example, the series *Parabolic People* (1991): digital editing and processing resources allow an almost infinite number of images (or, rather, fragments of images) to be brought to the television screen; here they are combined into unexpected arrangements that are immediately rethought and questioned, to be redefined in new combinations (Fig. 7). The most common technique is the use of *windows* in the image, in which new images can be invoked to turn the screen into a hybrid space for multiple images, multiple voices, multiple texts. Within a scene shot in Tokyo, a window opens to a shot

of Dakar, then one of New York, one of Rio de Janeiro. This is not a case, obviously, of suggesting that they are all the same place; but possible readings of these simultaneous events are studied. Subtle, unthought-of, sometimes absurd links between them are discovered.

Sergei Eisenstein, in a discussion of the expressive potential of montage [10], had already suggested in the area of cinema the possibility of an in-frame montage—a combination of imagistic elements of contemporary times; these would relate to each other simultaneously and not just, as occurs in the cinema, as a linear succession of shots. Naturally, taking into account the technical possibilities of Eisenstein's time, montage within the frame ("vertical" or "polyphonic" montage, as he called it) could only be thought of and practiced as an arrangement of contradictory elements and as counterpoint between image and sound. But on the horizon of the electronic image, these limits no longer exist. Digital editing resources such as those available to Kogut for the montage of *Parabolic People* make for unlimited possibilities of constructive intervention within the frame. On a single screen we can have one image occupying the whole area, and at the same time numerous windows within this image, allowing us to visualize other images or even minimal fragments of other images

(whence the possibility of a "cubist" montage)—not to mention innumerable typologies for texts and a vast diversity of graphic signs [11].

Two further names of importance in the context of the third generation of Brazilian videomakers are Walter Silveira and Arnaldo Antunes. By a coincidence, both started out as experimental poets. Silveira's poetry, for example, owes much of its impact to the graphic aspects of writing, the expressive use of colors and the typology of its manuscript letters, all of which often demand that the reader "decipher" the characters in advance. In the field of video, Silveira has opted to experiment at the edge of electronic media. The best example of this is his *VT Preparado AC/JC* (Prepared VT AC/JC) (1986, created in collaboration with Pedro Vieira); the work is an impassioned act of homage to the composer of silence, John Cage (the JC of the title) and the poet of the blank page (AC is Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos) (Fig. 8). The makers thought up a video in which the blank screen is predominant, at moments interrupted by extremely rapid flashes of image, and more often by noises, impulses and distortions from the apparatus itself. The television pixel, greatly enlarged, is evident.

In the 1980s, Silveira was one of the founders of the independent group TVDO, mentioned above. After the dissolution of the group at the beginning of the 1990s, he engaged himself in the daily work of a small São Paulo television station (TV Gazeta), and since then has, on occasion, directed sensitive personal interpretations of the work of other Brazilian artists: that of Betty Leiner in *Les Êtres Lettres* (1991) (Color Plate A No. 1), of Ivaldo Granato in *Painter: Model in Video* (1991), of Wesley Duke Lee in *My Trip with Duke Lee* (1992) and of Maria Bonomi in *Elogio da Xilo* (Eulogy to the Xylography) (1995).

Arnaldo Antunes is much better known in Brazil as a singer, former leader of one of Brazil's most influential rock groups, the Titans. Over the last 4 years, after breaking off with the band, he has returned to his old passion, poetry. Three collections of his poems have been published. After 1992 he began to experiment with a new form of literature, produced on the computer and intended to be read on the television screen. Using resources from video and computer graphics, he launched in 1993 a collection of 30 impressive video poems, *Nome* (Name), which combine

Fig. 8. Walter Silveira and Pedro Vieira, *VT Preparado AC/JC* (Prepared VT AC/JC), still from video, 1986. This work is an homage to the composer John Cage (JC, seen in the still frame) and the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos (AC). The video itself—made with a predominantly blank screen interrupted at times by extremely rapid flashing clips—reflects, in an indirect way, the style of the artists that give the piece its title.



animated texts with changing colors, images taken with video cameras, spoken words and sounds and music (Color Plate A No. 3). Like Kogut's *Parabolic People*, this is another step in the direction of a multimedia art that aims to combine all previous forms of art in a perfect synthesis.

Today, important experimental filmmakers, such as Arthur Omar and Julio Bressane, are also working with video. In addition, new video artists are slowly appearing. Videomakers such as Carlos Nader, Lucas Bambozzi, Lucila Meirelles, José Santos, Henri Gervaiseau, Belisário França and Kiko Goiffman have produced works that are still few in number but high in quality. It is yet too

soon to determine if their collective output will constitute a distinctive new phase in Brazilian video art.

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