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To Replace Paint and Page, Artists Try Pixel Power

By Linda Yablonsky

Artists have experimented with new technologies ever since they left the cave wall for the canvas. Now, with computers (and flat-screen monitors) in nearly every gallery and studio, the DVD is becoming more than just a cheap way to archive or display images transferred from other media. Even with the technology for viewing images constantly changing (remember laser discs?), several projects currently under way or already available suggest that the DVD and, to a lesser extent, interactive CD-ROM and DVD-ROM, is coming into its own as a new kind of artists' multiple, similar to limited-edition books and prints.

Lawrence Weiner, a pioneering conceptual artist and filmmaker best known for attaching stenciled aphorisms to walls, doorways and halls, is still, at 61, breaking new ground. Over the last year, using simple graphics, digital animation techniques and film clips, he has created a five-DVD set of etymological (and rather naughty) "cartoons" based on the English language, his primary medium. "The only material reality of this work is the ambience it engenders," he said, acknowledging its lack of physical presence beyond the screen, or the mind. "It gives you entrance to another logic altogether, which it cannot do on the gallery wall."

A DVD's ability to play either in projection or on personal computers anywhere in the world has great appeal for Mr. Weiner, who welcomes opportunities to make his art more public. (He has even done New York City manhole covers.) "Why make something if not for people to see?" he said. "You make media to have a basic conversation with your own culture."

The first four discs in Mr. Weiner's "Moved Pictures" series have the word "blue" in their titles—the fifth is "Sink or Swim"—and refer both to the horizon line between water and sky and to divisions between cultures. Two discs, the 15-minute "Wild Blue Yonder" and the five-minute "Blue Moon Over," come in signed, limited editions with bound "comic books" of their storyboards. "I'm a packaging freak," Mr. Weiner said. "I like to have a badge and a book and a CD all entering into the world." He added, "It's better than T-shirts."

Elaine Reichek, another conceptualist, has used needlework to point up both the striking similarity of the cross-stitch to the pixel, and the associative thinking generally ascribed to women and the web-like structure of cyberspace. Two years ago, during a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Ms. Reichek began linking the imagery of early American samplers illustrating the story of Adam and Eve to 20th-century studies in genetics. Soon she was embroidering her own "biblical" samplers revealing, for example, correspondences between Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" and Stanislaw Lem's science-fiction novel "Solaris" or the wording of "Genesis" and the screenplay for the 1982 film "Blade Runner."

Rather than mount "Madam I'm Adam," her exhibition of 16 such works, in the Gardner's small gallery for contemporary art, Ms. Reichek decided to place it in the museum proper. But the Gardner has iron-clad prohibitions against disturbing any part of its permanent collection in any way, so Ms. Reichek now has a virtual show that patient viewers can navigate on the museum's web site (www.gardnermuseum.org); a more sophisticated CD-ROM version will be available in early December.

"It's only because of digital technology that this exhibition can exist," Ms. Reichek said. It would be a shame to miss the felicitous sight of the sampled "zip" painting by Barnett Newman that she juxtaposed, while filming, with the club-wielding Hercules pictured in a 15th-century fresco by Piero Della Francesca. Only in virtual reality could two of Ms.

Reichek's homemade samplers hang in the frames of Rembrandt paintings that have been missing since 1990, when the museum was robbed of millions of dollars in art. "It's much more exciting than having a show in a room," she said.

For Brian Conley, the Brooklyn-based creator of "Fragments," a large-scale, interactive video installation whose computer-manipulated images and sounds are triggered by viewer movements, the DVD is essential. "DVD's are useful for people who work with a diversity of materials," Mr. Conley said. "They're also a convenient way to give curators an idea of what I'm doing."

Even Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistan-born New York artist whose labor-intensive, miniature paintings are rooted in a centuries-old tradition, has embraced digital media. Yet some visitors to her exhibition at the Brent Sikkema Gallery in January never noticed that two of her paintings are not sitting still. Driven by DVDs, Ms. Sikander's animated hybrids of Persian and Indian fables morphed together, split apart and disappeared from their wall-mounted iMac monitors, slowly reappearing as abstract or comic new figures.

"This was very much about using technology in a controlled manner that was not an obvious departure from painting," said Ms. Sikander, 33, who has long experimented with miniature forms. "I'm interested in art which is valid in the present but also has a relationship to the past, in how we define the traditional. I'm interested in the moment when everything breaks down. I'm questioning what is exotic."

For Chrissie Iles, curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum, DVD is another word for video. "It's not a separate medium," she said. "It's just the latest format for viewing video. And it's ephemeral," she warned. "Buyers should make sure they have a submaster tape from which to make copies in whatever new format appears, because in 10 years to DVD player will almost certainly be obsolete."

Indeed, even beta submaster, or digi-betas, must be renewed every five years. Some galleries offer an artist's digi-beta with a signed, limited-edition DVD and, for a price that can reach well into six figures for artists like Matthew Barney, William Kentridge or Shirin Neshat, might also provide a projection system and explicit instructions from the artist regarding the work's proper installation and care. Others put a DVD together with an exhibition copy in a sleek package costing \$6,000 or more (only sometimes copy-protected by encryption) and expect collectors to return for format updates as the years go by, while the David Zwirner Gallery in Chelsea offers "Suspira," a video on DVD by Stan Douglas, for \$32.50.

Whatever the price, the audience for art DVDs must be growing. The supply is. Printed Matter, the art bookshop in Chelsea, is publishing projects like "Mobility Agents: A Computational Sketchbook v1.0," an interactive digital drawing manual by the digital artist John F. Simon to be available next month. And last fall, the New Museum of Contemporary Art joined a growing network of nonprofit museums lining up to distribute a DVD-only library being developed by Bick Productions, its publisher

Founded by Ilene Kurtz-Kretzschmar and Caroline Bourgeois, independent curators based in New York and Paris respectively, Bick is offering to make the work of name film and video artists accessible to a broad segment of the art-viewing public. Collectively titled "Point of View," the company's 11-disc anthologies come in six languages and unlimited editions, priced at \$1,000 per set. Douglas Gordon, Isaac Julien, Paul McCarthy and Pipilotti Rist are among the contemporary artists contributing five-minute videos to existing images in the first group of discs, which the New Museum will release next spring. "They're mostly installation artists accustomed to working at large scale," Ms. Kurtz-Kretzschmar said. "For them, this is like going back to their roots."

ArtPix is a nonprofit DVD publisher whose mission is to archive art ephemera. "This is a way to begin preserving the work while the artists are still living," said Fredericka Hunter, the Houston art dealer overseeing the project. "We started with CD-ROMs, but we could only produce one every six months and we had 15 titles lined up," she said.

So far ArtPix has published five. One disc pairs an actual painting exhibition organized by the critic Dave Hickey with a virtual one by David Pagel. "Billy Sullivan: Photographs" includes both a DVD and an interactive CD-ROM, while the latest disc, "Robert Whitman," is a DVD compilation of the artist's otherwise unavailable 1960s performance films. "Our production values aren't high, but they're amusing," Ms. Hunter said. "We don't expect the discs to last, but we have the masters and we can always keep them fresh."

The British digital artist Julian Opie bypasses DVDs altogether by affixing a hard drive programmed with a looped, computer-generated animation directly to the back of its display screen. The New Yorkers Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, married collaborators who have exhibited several DVD projects, recently created a discless work for a bright red suitcase fitted with custom circuitry and a built-in screen. Its software alters the sequence and speed of their short film, "Horror Chase," at random and in real time, so it never plays the same way twice.

Clearly, as technology goes, so goes more art. In 2000, while still a graduate student at the Pratt Institute, Scott Hug purposely designed "K48," his energetic new art magazine, to be the size of a CD. Every issue—there have been three so far—includes a disc with original music and videos by young artists in Mr. Hug's acquaintance. "The revolution of the computer in the bedroom is what I'm a part of," he said. "The magazine is an extension of that. Putting my art in a gallery just wasn't enough. Working in collaboration with a community of people was more important."