

Marilyn Arsem

Video vs. Memory vs. Memory

Boston Film/Video Foundation
 Boston, Massachusetts
 March 7, 1981

Conceived by Marilyn Arsem. Performed by Joan Gale and Daniel Lang. Video production by Eliot Hoffman and Sarah Griffith. Produced by Mobius Theater, Inc., at Boston Film/Video Foundation (March 7, 1981), and Helen Shlien Gallery, Boston (March 14 and 15, 1981).

Premise: Memory is deceptive.

Objective: To create a performance piece involving an audience, which would parallel their attempt to remember and recreate an event with that of the performers.

Preparation: An eight-minute sequence was videotaped, in which the performers were given a set of objects and asked to create a sculpture. We specifically chose a directed task involving judgment and decision, and avoided roleplaying or a confrontational, climactic event. Without view-

ing the tape or consulting each other, the performers each went home and wrote a detailed description of what they remembered having happened. Two days later, they met and worked out a compromise version of what had happened. At that point, two days after the taping, we had three versions of the event.

- 1) Performance: Memory vs. Memory. Joan's version vs. Dan's version, alternating in a fragmented form which paralleled points of agreement and contrasted points of contention.
- 2) Video: Video. Showing of video of original event.
- 3) Performance: Memory. Joan and Dan's compromise version, videotaped in performance.
- 4) Video: Video vs. Video. Showing of video of original event and compromise version, simultaneously.
- 5) Audience: Memory vs. Memory vs. Memory. The audience corrected Joan and Dan's compromise version, as they performed it again. Anyone could shout "Freeze - go backward - stop," and instruct them as to how it really happened. The rest of the audience had to agree on the

corrections.

- 6) Performance: Memory. Joan and Dan performed the audience-corrected version, videotaped in performance.
- 7) Video: Video vs. Video vs. Video. Showing of video of original event, compromise version and corrected version, simultaneously.

Observations: As we had hoped, the audience became very animated and involved as they argued over what had really happened - just as Joan and Dan had as they worked out their compromise version. The audience transformed from sitting passively, eyes focused on the performers or monitors, to sitting forward, eyes focused on the performers as they directed them, to turning around and focusing on and talking with other audience members. They had the added satisfaction of being able to prove they were right in the immediate showing of the videotapes.

An interesting reversal of expectations occurred. The taped sequence was longer and more complex than was originally planned. Both performers and audience

initially thought they couldn't remember anything. They then discovered that by working through it, with the objects, and especially with the help of others' memories, it was possible to reconstruct the event.

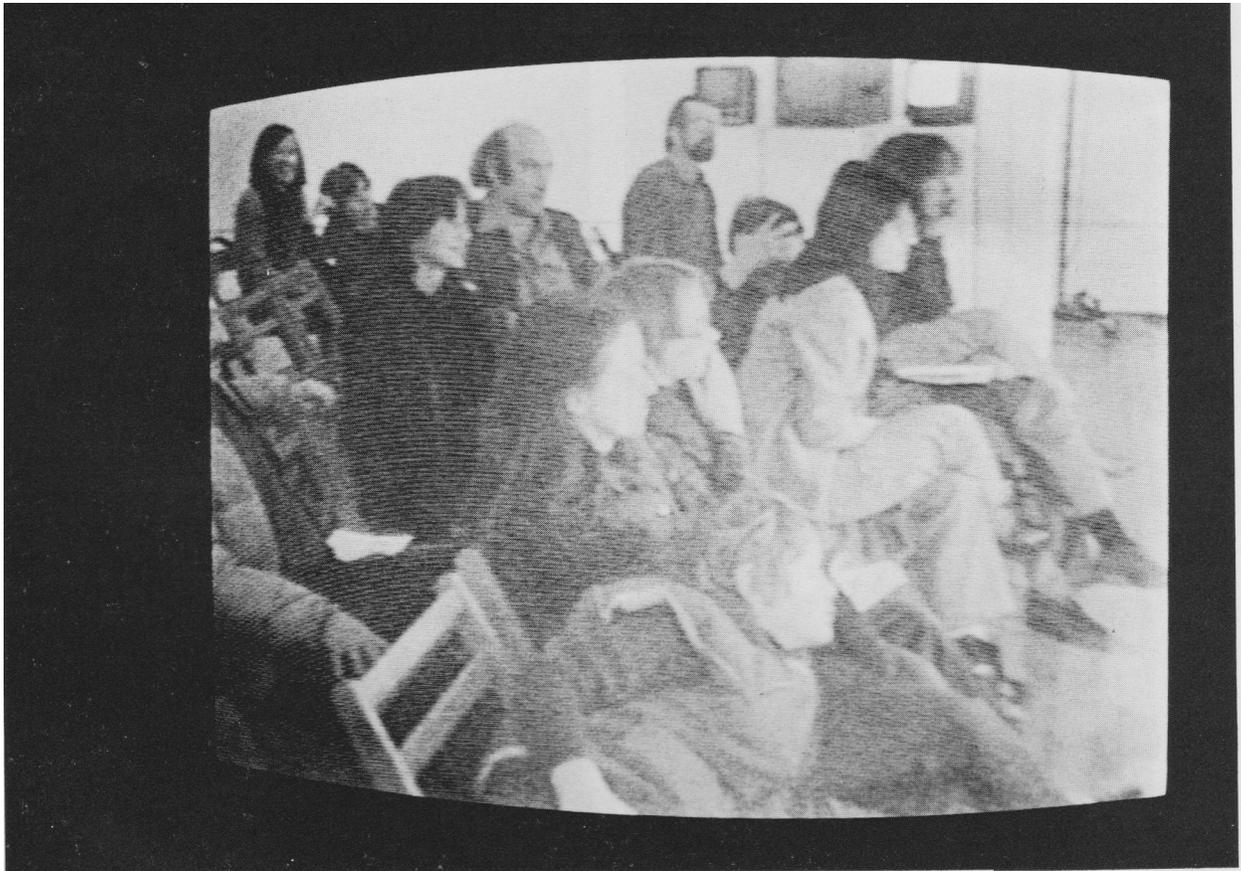
In reconstructing the event, a selection process did go on that simplified it and shaped it. There was a tendency to have a performer speak in your own words, i.e., what you had interpolated as having been said. This was true even for Joan and Dan, who had worked together prior to this project.

Memory related issues were most complex for the performers. In a performance, they had to remember minor differences between versions, and then the immediate audience's corrections. It was harder in successive performances to remember what they had remembered at the time they constructed their own versions, excluding newer memories of the event, as well as prior audiences' memories.

-M.A.

Summer 1981

HIGH PERFORMANCE



photography: Paul Miller