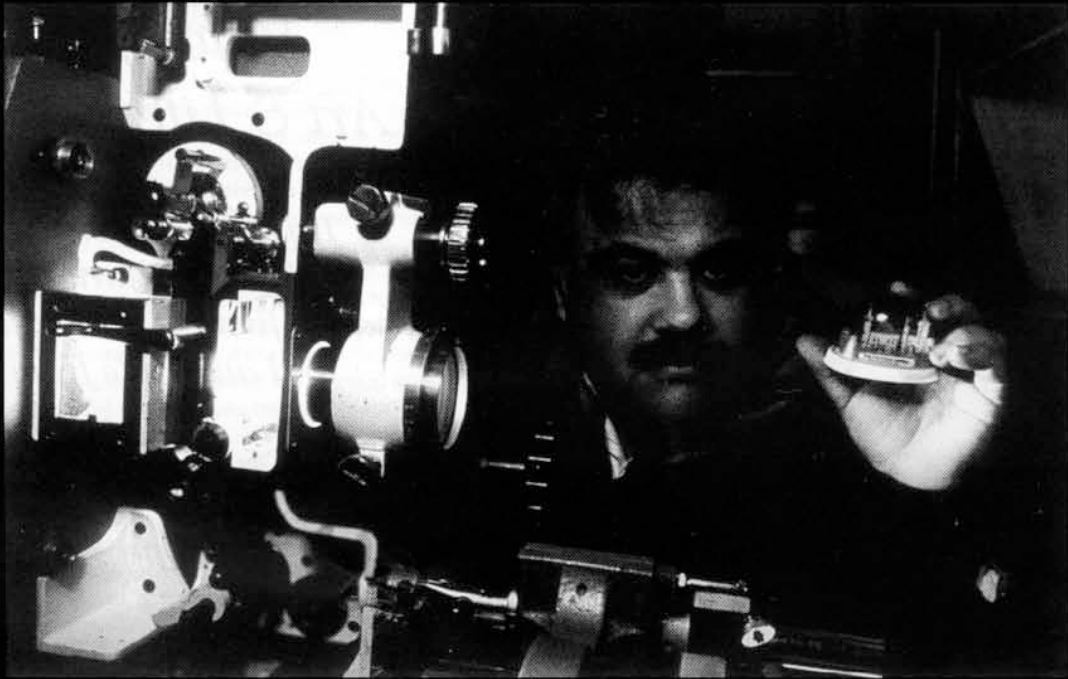


From the Archive of a Body photo performance by John Conomos and Steve Lojewski, 1982. Photo: Steve Lojewski



*JOHN CONOMOS :  
HIS WORK AND  
THOUGHTS ON  
AUSTRALIAN  
VIDEO PRACTICE*

# interviewed by **Brian Langer**

**John Conomos** is a video artist, critic and writer who lectures in video, art and film theory at the University of New South Wales. He is editor of *Scan+* an independent new media journal published by Electronic Media Arts (Australia) Ltd and is currently writing a history of Australian video. He began working with video in the late '70s. **John Conomos** and collaborator **David Haines** are presenting a new installation work at *Video Positive '93* funded with the assistance of the Australia Council. **Brian Langer** is a video and new media curator and has been Director of the annual AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL since 1988.

**John Conomos:** I was primarily a cinephile in the '60s and '70s and I am still very interested in questions of film form, mise-en-scene, performance, style etc. By the 1970s I was a closet writer of sorts, experimenting with the possibilities of emerging as a literary writer. In the late '70s and early '80s I was actually writing criticism and verse, though none of my poetry has been published because I didn't have the courage to go public. I was pushed into critical writing by the Australian film-maker and academic **Laleen Jayamanne**, who in the early '80s suggested I should talk to Tina Kaufman, editor of *'Film News'*.

In the late '70s I did a video production course at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. I became interested in video because at that time I was writing film scripts and I was looking at video as a possible cheaper technology to make projects because as we all know, film-making is such a long haul. Following this I began exploring video and the time-based arts in the mid '80s because I became much more interested in questions of avant-garde histories and textual practices and the 'adventure of form' in electronic image-making. Primarily my interest in video is an extension of the passion I have for the cinema and my interests in cinema - to me (to echo **Godard**) it's all cinema whether it be electronic or photo-chemical - it's all image-making and it's all an extension of writing. I am more interested in video and cinema as a form of choreographic writing - a choreography of expression with images and sounds. This explains my interest in time-based arts, especially video, because it is an incredibly elastic inter-textual medium to work with and it allows one to explore aesthetic, cultural and formal questions and pre-occupations much more readily than say, working within the social context of cinema in Australia as it was practiced in the '70s and now. It is a question of textual preferences, convenience, historical and cultural circumstances.

One of the more significant developments for me as an artist, critic and writer in the areas of culture, electronic arts and screen studies, is that I've opened up more to the imaginative possibilities of questions of inter-textuality, 'borderline' cultural production that deals with multiple spaces like, for instance, the post-humanist self-reflexive cinematic practices of **Raul Ruiz**, Jean-Luc Godard or **Chris Marker**. I'm much more interested in questions of poly-culturality, heterogeneity, displacement and cultural otherness.

**Brian Langer: Are you interested in the areas of television and global media?**

I'm very interested in the complex dialectic existing between local audio-visual production in the Antipodes and the cultural and technological ramifications of global media in international communication flows. There are very complex and multi-layered areas of intersections between culture, sociology, philosophy, institutions, gender and so forth, I'm always mindful of this situation when I make my artworks, but these concerns play a secondary role in the actual making of my video pieces. I'm much more interested in the aesthetic adventures of post - Godardian experimentation and subjectivity.

**Have recent feminist interventions into film and video theory influenced your viewpoint on the development of new technologies?**

Anyone who comes from a cinema background and is presently engaged in *film-making* as much as *video-making* and film and technological arts criticism, is indebted to the feminist screen theory produced during the '70s and '80s. Feminist film theory has been crucial in opening up the critical questions concerning spectatorship, representation, gender, class, sexuality, race and so forth. If you look at the emerging debates around virtual reality and cyberspace technology, a lot of the more engaging and probing critiques about these more recent manifestations of our techno-culture emanate from feminist circles. Arguably, this is because feminist debates are much more attuned to the phallogocentric and logocentric limitations of the Utopian discourses surrounding virtual reality.

**Could you outline what you have discovered from the artists, curators and educators you've interviewed for your forthcoming monograph of video in Australia?**

Well, in my research with past and present practising video artists, media artists, curators and educators that are interested in the new media arts, I must stress that the research foregrounds the hermeneutic significance of the theoretical debates central to the whole notion of historiography. Clearly, when one constructs a history it is important to be aware of the many theoretical and philosophical debates concerning illusionism, subjectivity, cultural imperialism and so forth. In my discussions with video artists from the '70s and '80s and more recently the early '90s, this has emphasised the importance, to me, of having a sustained continuity of cultural, institutional and pedagogic support for the electronic arts in Australia.

When you speak to artists who began in the '70s such as **Jill Scott, Randelli, Leigh Ilobba, Steven Jones, David Perry** and more recently (since the early '80s) people like **Peter Callas, Joan Brassil, John Gillies and David Chesworth**, they all testify to the problem of negotiating with a cultural amnesia in their practice and surroundings. In our media landscape video is still waiting to be recognised whether it be in the fine arts world, the cinema or in the world of community and alternative/TV media. Video art has always been relegated to the back seat.

This problem of cultural amnesia for Australian video artists, is the frustration that they have encountered in the past and the present, in the sense that they are always constantly re-inventing the wheel with video. It's been a fitful ruptured history of stops and starts, booms and bursts. Historically speaking, there has been a refusal, a denial of the continued presence of the media arts in the cultural landscape of this country.

**You have interviewed many artists who have received Government funding towards the development of their work. In cultural policy areas of the funding of artists and the time based arts in Australia where do you think the pressure is coming from?**

There are a few people, on a national and interstate level, who are interested in questions of cultural policy formulation and the articulation of policy pertaining to the technological arts. Unfortunately, historically speaking, most funders have been more attuned to the immediate,

direct needs of artists engaged with traditional two dimensional media art forms. So, in spite of the important interventionist role performed by the electronic media arts, such as the AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL (since 1986) and organisations like Electronic Media Arts (EMA) and Sydney Intermedia Network (SIN) in Sydney, Modern Image Makers Association (MIMA) in Melbourne and the Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) in Adelaide (and others), all these organisational and cultural spaces are effectively performing what I call 'salvation army' work. They are endeavouring to open up more and more new vistas of possibilities in the sustained and continued promotion of electronic arts - and that's the operative word continued; because we have very short memories in terms of what has happened in the past and what is possible in the future and in the present.

So, yes, institutional cultural funding spaces are slowly becoming sensitised to the funding, exhibition and critical reception of electronic arts in this country. It's a question of becoming more open to the possibilities of electronic arts as expressed on a grass roots level with the younger generation of electronic image-makers in this country, to what is happening in terms of the festival world and the pedagogic cultural sites in the northern hemisphere.

I think it's very important to be mindful of this dialectical relationship between the northern and southern hemisphere in terms of local audio-visual production. And I think this is one important objective the AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL has fulfilled and is fulfilling in introducing local electronic arts to the works of American, European, English and Japanese electronic image-makers since the '70s. There is much more of an effort there in building bridges.

**As the editor, what have been the main concerns of SCAN+ ?**

Since its inception in 1988, SCAN+ has been primarily interested in sites and debates around time-based arts in Australia because prior to that, the critical/cultural landscape in the promotion of electronic arts has been virtually negligible, particularly in terms of fostering video criticism in this country. Also, it has a polemical objective in a sense that it's trying to spearhead a cultural interventionist mode of thinking; of negotiating the dynamic presence of the electronic arts in Australia, so it has been a very important editorial platform to articulate the continued necessity for institutional funding support for the electronic arts. Also, and *most significantly*, it performs the role of an electronic switchboard, if you will, between local artists on an interstate basis across the breadth of this large country. So the journal itself is very interested in promoting 'rhizomatic' textual practices, in the context of critics, theorists, educators and artists - it has adopted an anti-binary, anti-homogeneous stance towards the electronic arts. And I think that's important to bear in mind - culturally and polemically - what SCAN+ is endeavouring to do.

**In relation to your own video work, what are the critical, conceptual, cultural and stylistic concerns which you are interested in?**

There are a number of fronts that I work on as a video artist. First of all, because of my life-long interest in surrealism and absurd theatre and absurd literature, I see video as a very ideal medium to explore my

aspirations and inclinations to surreal image-making. Specifically, I'm very interested in the whole notion of the surrealist critique of everyday life in terms of the poetry of the marvellous, the irrational, reverie etc because of my concerns since the '60s in European philosophy, particularly in thinkers like Nietzsche, Bataille, writer-auto-biographers like Michele Leris, philosophers like Foucault and Deleuze. I'm very interested in any kind of imaginative adventure or theoretical critique which talks about the laughter of the night and the notion of life as a surrealist cabinet of chance, randomness and inter-textual happening. So video, because it is a very elastic collage art form, gives me the opportunity to create an art that highlights collage stylistics, radical juxtapositioning and heterogeneity. By colliding cinema with literature, literature with philosophy, cultural theory with fine arts theory, poetry with architecture and so forth, video allows you to create these inter-textual spaces, themes and stylistics which enables you to articulate multiple vistas of imaginative possibilities. I have always been interested in visionaries like **Antonin Artaud** and **Andre Breton**, or poets like **Paul Eluard**, or **Pablo Neurada**, or painters like **Max Ernst** and **Henri Magritte** whoever theorised, wrote or painted under the sign of absurdism, surrealism and so forth. Since my teenage years I've been fascinated by these thinkers, visionaries, poets for a number of many complex autobiographic, cultural and philosophical reasons. Because of my bi-cultural subjectivity and my own personal circumstances, I've become attuned to the theoretical, lyrical, poetic structures and concerns of their works. And video, for me, as much as cinema, I must stress this, has given me the opportunity to articulate my interests in these realms of imaginative thought, intuition and poetic insights.

I've been very influenced by cinematic and literary influences. In terms of my video work I've been very keen to explore the possibilities of creating a 'surreal' iconography of my own interiority as a 'post-colonial' subject living here in Australia in the '90s. I think that's an important aspect of my work to stress. For example, from the '60s, I have been very interested in French avant-garde cinema practices, the historical avant-garde film-makers like **L'Herbier**, **Cocteau**, **Richter** and **Fischinger** etc and the more recent emergence of European auteur cinema of the '50s and '60s. I've always been interested in the works of Chris Marker, Jean Luc Godard and **Jacques Rivette** and many other film-makers, in one way or another, including 'dialectic' film-makers too, like **Alexander Kluge**, **Jean-Marie Straub**, **Daniele Huillet** and post-Bunuelian tricksters like Raul Ruiz. These film-makers have propelled me into the directions of seeking images and sounds which critique the humanistic foundations of western culture.

My influences have been **Jean Paul Fargier**, **Robert Cahen**, **The Vasulkas**, **Gary Hill**, **Bill Viola** and certain works by **Terry Flaxton**, **George Snow** and **Mona Hatoum**, to name a few. American video and performance artists like **Peter Campas**, **Vito Aconcci**, **Ken Koblin**, **Lynne Hershman**, **Joan Jonas** and **Tony Oursler** have been instrumental in shaping my ideas about video performance. It seems that as an artist I'm caught between the two vector forces of contemporary European and American video.

In terms of British video art, I'm very conscious of the cultural and aesthetic importance of British scratch video. Having seen **Ian Breakwell** perform some of his narratives, this has also stressed the importance upon

me of narrativity in video and electronic arts generally. In fact, I think narrativity itself is going to be re-negotiated with the current and future development of interactive arts. I am also respectful of **Jeremy Welsh** because he is that rare person who works as an artist/writer/theorist/educator/curator/critic: always trying to combine many different concerns at the same time. It's always a source of constant dialectical juggling. And finally, there is **David Larcher** who, like Fargier and Cahen has had an extraordinary impact on my ideas about electronic collage and mixing media - 'cine-video'.

**You often collaborate with other artists in the production of single channel work and or installations. Could you comment on this activity and its importance to you?**

Collaboration for me so far has been central to my practice as an image-maker be it in terms of cinema of video and installation. For me, I work with collaborators, who have similar, or empathetic ideas to me in terms of world views and conceptual frameworks. It doesn't mean I seek clones out there, but I work with people I regard as friends first, then as professional collaborators. For me, what is crucial for artistic collaboration is borne from intimate, conceptual and emotional dialogue.

**What is your interest in video installation?**

I like creating auto-biographical, cross-cultural spaces and theatrical spaces whereby the spectator can circumnavigate the audio-visual concerns of an installation in an interactive sense.

I like the idea of motivating the body of the spectator as much as using my own body in constructing installations. In the context of contemporary European avant-garde artforms, the body as a source of anti-binary, open-ended knowledge apropos of Deleuze and Guattari and others going back to someone like Artaud seems crucial for my approach to video installation.

I also like working with the dramaticity and plasticity of video installations. I like creating assemblages - machinic assemblages of plastic forms and conceptual intertextual spaces and concerns. I agree with René Payant that video installations are complex sites of multiple knowledges and multi-layered architectural forms. I've always been interested - irrespective of the medium be it literature, cinema, video - in multiple phantasmic spaces. Installations link together high and low art, art and technology, public and private spaces, in our 'post-media' epoch.

Also installation is significant in the sense of my ideas that go back to my cinema background in terms of mise-en-scene, of creating a multi-faceted theatrical space, of performance styles, speech, philosophical ideas and experimental ideas in terms of movement. I love the choreography of the invisible; the unfolding of the invisible. That to me is one of the main ideas in forming my artistic practice and theoretical writings. Movement, be it say in a Chris Marker movie or movement in terms of **Thierry Kuntzels'** or in **The Vasulkas'** work. Movement for me emphasises the thematics of the surrealist notion of possibilities of rupturing everyday life. If you move your mind and your body and you transgress the here and now in terms of your (un) consciousness, movement can have *untold* dimensions to it.