Artists Are Creating
A Wonderland of Video
In Museums and Galleries
THE video art to be seen around New York City this weekend might make one wonder why television was ever called a vast wasteland. On video screens in museums, galleries and performance spaces, veve and imagination are in flower.

At the Ted Greenwald Gallery on Mott Street, near Chinatown, two new tapes by the video pioneer Les Levine can be seen; one is a reverie blending visions of Hawaii and Ireland, and the other, grotesque faces out-Picasso Picasso. Someone passing the large window of the New Museum in SoHo can mark "real time" by watching Hung Su-Chen on a video monitor slowly ingest a length of red string. At P.S. 1 in Long Island City, Queens, the antics of a cute kitten fill the screen.

As part of a "Video Landscapes" series at the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens, Bill Viola, who will be the first video artist to have a retrospective showing of his tapes at the Museum of Modern Art this fall, holds our attention as a Color Field painter might, with delicate, shimmering images of barren landscapes in various parts of the world. In contrast, the pace is frenetic at the Kitchen Center on West 19th Street, with the opening last Tuesday of its annual "Techno Pop" series - short videotapes by a myriad of video artists.

Video art flickering images on a television monitor - is different from its more staid ancestors. Unlike painting or sculpture, where the gallery patron or museumgoer circulates freely around the work, video art demands that the viewer stay put, often for considerable periods of time. And unlike commercial television, the viewer doesn't just passively consume what he sees but has a heightened awareness of the manipulation of imagery.

Video art includes documentaries, and people may wonder at first where the "art" component is, despite the axiom that anything in a gallery context must be seen as art - even a selection of daily fare from Nicaraguan television (on view at Artists Space, on West Broadway in Tribeca). The preponderance of documentaries in the video-art realm creates no conflict for the assistant curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Lucinda Furlong, who has curated a series of 13 narrative and documentary videotapes on view at the museum, tapes made by women.

Documentaries are a "grass-roots" art, she argues, adding that one should keep in mind the distinction between video art and video made by amateurs.

It was video made by artists such as Linda Benglis, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman and William Wegman that was responsible for the medium's first wave of popularity in the art world in the late 1960's and early 70's. Video was an extension of their minimalist ideas carried out in other media. Those were also the days when ideas advanced by Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller - ideas about humans mastering their environment through technology - were popular. Images were manipulated to look different from standard television fare and many artists became absorbed in "playing with the signals." Later, such experimenting was no match for the sensuous surfaces of Neo-Expressionist painting, and video art has largely been under wraps in recent years, a specialized pursuit usually supported by grants. If one is beginning to see more of it now, it is because of the public's fascination with information, an appetite whetted by the widespread use of computers.

Objectifying Daydreams

Les Levine, who was born in Ireland, says he "didn't grow up with technology," and so was never in awe of it. He made his first videotape in 1964 and now is concerned mainly with making models of how the mind works. As such, he refers to himself as a "media sculptor." He makes that clear at the Ted Greenwald Gallery in his work "Trade Wind" as he constantly shifts from an image of blossoms in Hawaii to one of Dubliners engaged in random conversation, in this way objectifying the way that someone daydreams. Each image is followed by an abstract grid of the actual colors in the image picked up by the camera. The procedure might be extremely up-to-date but there is old-fashioned poetry on the soundtrack, lilting recorder music played by a man we do not glimpse until the end of the tape.

From the limpid beauty of "Trade Wind," there is a shift of sensibility with Mr. Levine's second tape, "Close Frenzies." Young adults on the screen talk seemingly nonstop about what friendship means, but Mr. Levine has manipulated each face like a kaleidoscopic image - everyone has eight eyes and four mouths. This manipulation emphasizes that the person each speaker really clings the closest to is himself.

There is a facial distortion of a gentler kind in the tape "East/West" by Hung Su-Chen, as part of the "Reading Art" exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway. Ms. Hung speaks out of both sides of her mouth, as the screen carrying an image of her face is split. She speaks Mandarin Chinese from the left half of the composite face and English from the right. The implied setting is an immigration office, the moment of truth in Ms. Hung's division comes when saying that, if asked to bear arms, she doesn't know which side she would fight for.

According to Ms. Hung, it is not political confrontation but something more eternal, comparable to the stillness of Zen breathing exercises, that informs "Sweet Red 2," the installation in the New Museum's window facing Broadway. Last month, the artist staged a performance in which she ingested a red string that dangled in front of rice paper masking the window, with her situation behind the paper. Now on the continuously playing record of that event, the viewer sees what looks like an animated Rorschach blot, moist lips moving against the paper. The event illustrates that favorite theme of video artists, "real time" - the time in which the string was eaten almost simultaneously with the act's recording on tape - but it is also inappropriately tinged with eroticism.

The TV Set as Sculptural Form

At P.S. 1, a different experience awaits the video viewer. Hearing the screech from the video room, a visitor walking down the hallway may fear finding a catastrophe inside. But those who will be totally taken in by the playful kitten on the screen. When the cat's image goes off momentarily, ultraviolet light comes on as if Dale Hoyt, the artist, is trying to create a tension between the viewer's ignorance and the frightening world around him. Elsewhere at P.S. 1, video is used in clearly pragmatic ways as a supplement to more conventional media. Betsy Damon has filled a room with a huge, cast-glass installation created in a dry riverbed.
in Utah. Her tape documents the casting process, beginning with the gathering of the weeds that went into the paper pulp. Seeing the process in color makes it more impressive. Duster Simpson documents an ancient cherry tree he tried to save from bulldozers in Seattle. But he also shows sculptures he made from the tree even after it failed.

With sonic installations, it is not only what is on the screen but also the actual cube-like monitor itself that is treated as a sculptural form. A piece from last year's "War Mop," a work by the late Nam June Paik, is an apparatus that lies on a table and reflects a monitor on a box. The Cage-like image of a battered-out refugee camp in Lebanon is truly ridiculous. The piece is certainly in keeping with its political content.

The two widely separated monitors of John Knecht's "I'm Glad to the Brink of Fear" carry the smiling faces of President Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev. The faces are almost frozen even though one senses that the two that might move, and this objectifies Marshall McLuhan's famous notion of television as a 'cool' medium: one of static uniformity, in contrast to the 'hotter' medium of print, which one must internalize and digest, or of film, whose scale envelops the viewer.

However, the most exciting fact at Artist's Space is the presentation of "TV Sandino" — game shows, soap operas, as well as news and public-service programming from Nicaragua television. Certainly, watching this programming helps demystify the Sandinistas. One also appreciates the details in the viewing area, such as the couch with bamboo arms, which sets a semi-tropical mood. (The project's curators were Annie Goldson and Carlos Pavarn.)

### Links Between Tapes

In a marathon series that has a point, such as the Whitney's, comparisons might be made between various tapes. In the series 'Social Engagement: Women's Video in the 80's,' there is a grouping called "Critiques of the Media." In one work, Joan Braderman has concocted an appropriate Pop-Art set of flowered wallpaper from which she makes an analysis of The National Enquirer. Though she makes incisive and serious comments, on the screen Ms. Braderman's face and a mélange of Enquirer articles are arranged in a bold way using brightly colored circles and jagged lines. Martha Rosler's "Simple Case for Torture" is much more sober-sided and bare-bones. Her fingers are shown fumbling clippings and photos as well as advertisements from news magazines to develop a case that the media is an instigator of violence.

A couple of videotapes are directly concerned with the fine arts. Jenny Holzer, who is known for her electronic messages, confesses in "Sign on a Truck" that she was attracted to the technology of a truck with an electronic sign board on which faces are instantly enlarged to the size of Chuck Close paintings. The tape was made in 1984 and Ms. Holzer's crew asked people who were voting for in the Presidential election and why. Ms. Holzer's "Sign on a Truck" is part of series, "Social Engagement: Women's Video in the 80's," at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Jenny Holzer's work always has an eerie tinge to it and the effusive remarks she elicited sound chillingly ironic a couple of years later.

Cheang Shu Lea's "Trial of the Tilted Arc" is a straightforward documentation of the hearings concerning the removal of Richard Serra's controversial sculpture "Tilted Arc," situated in Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. The tape makes a good case for those who hold the philosophical position that the words spoken about an artwork become the artwork, while the physical piece becomes a sort of prop.

A perennials showcase for video is the Kichen, whose screening room is open Tuesdays through Sundays with a varied menu of programming. This weekend is the beginning of the 1987 "Techno Pop Show," curated by Sara Hornbacher. It is a show that highlights the upbeat use of graphics and computers. Survival Research Laboratories, Ed Rankus, Gretchun Bender and Robert Longo are some of the artists. There is a change of pace when Mark Karlin's four-part documentary on Nicaragua weighs in.

This diverse presentation is complemented by David Daniel's "Buzz Box," an installation that includes not only a 15-minute videotape, but also the hundreds of paintings, sculptures and graphic works used in making the tape. Along with an electronic soundtrack, "Buzz Box" is an example of what Mr. Daniels calls "maximalism."

### The Screen as Canvas

A bit far from Manhattan, closed on Saturdays and Sundays, but having the strongest contemporary video on view right now, is the Robeson Center.
For the Consumer, Flexibility

One of the advantages of film art is its potential flexibility in relation to the viewer's time and surroundings. In 1969, Howard Wise staged an exhibition at his uptown gallery called "TV as a Creative Medium." Soon afterward, he closed his gallery and opened Electronic Arts Intermix on Mercer Street, billed as the oldest video-art screening room. By appointment, the public may view the collection of more than 700 tapes, at no charge. Items in the collection range from historical tapes by those considered video art's Old Masters, such as Nam June Paik, to the newest experimental work, including tapes of dance and rock performances. Ten of the most common parlance here, such as "image processing" and "media reflective," may make one's head spin, but tapes in these modes are also available.

The fact that almost everyone by now has inserted a rental movie into a video-cassette recorder might mean that it will soon be commonplace to screen art videos at home. The most resourceful video outlet is the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The catalogue reveals that the bank carries video biographies of many major painters and sculptors and a recent flyer advertises "What Does She Want," an anthology featuring the "most original women working in film video and in the visual arts." In the salons of days past, the Castelli and Sonenberg galleries presented a video outlet and their vintage offerings are available through the Video Data Bank.

Video has also crossed over into live multimedia performance as one more visual component. Because it is prerecorded, it provides an added narrative element. For some of his dance performances, Merce Cunningham has set monitors on the stage, and directors and playwrights such as Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman have exploited the added texture that video brings to a work. Artistic musicians such as Laurie Anderson and Talking Heads understand how video's beam of light can double the intensity of their performances.

Video in performance is widespread in the 1980's, but innovators of the '60s included Joan Jonas - and even earlier, Nam June Paik used videos when he appeared with the Adventures of Fluxus group.

However, according to the director of Media Alliance, Robin White, the real role that video is beginning to play in performance art lies in preserving a performance. Performers such as Eric Bogosian have made tapes of their monologues, performances that were specially staged for the taping.

More Entertaining, More Involved

It is therefore likely that videos will be increasingly entertaining and, probably, increasingly elaborate. Mary Lucier's "Wilderness," which will be installed at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y., in April, could be called baroque. The piece is shown on seven monitors mounted on antique columns, and the narrative - about the advance of civilization on the environment - uses sites painted by members of the Hudson River School in the 19th century.

And it is likely that video will be more innovative. The 1987 Whitney Biennial, which opens in April, will give a taste of the future through several installations. The redoubtable Nam June Paik will build a couple of human figures out of monitors; Judith Barry will forgo use of the monitor and project her image directly on the wall; the team of Grahame Weinre and Robert Freymann will introduce "interactive" video in which the image changes when the screen is touched. Another "Old Master," Bruce Nauman, will bring back video by putting a monitor in his installation.

A selection of video art available in the metropolitan New York area or through catalogues follows:


Artists Space, 223 West Broadway, between Franklin and White Streets. "Dark Rooms: Installations and Videos from Nicaragua Television." Tuesdays through Saturday, 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. Installation, 210-1642.

Electronic Arts Intermix, 282 Mercer Street, near Eighth Street and Astor Place. By appointment, Monday through Friday, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Free. Information: 473-6822.


Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street. "Video Viewpoints: Next Generation." Featuring Peter D'Agostino's "Double You (and X and Y)" is on March 30 at 6:30 P.M. Free tickets are available after 6 P.M. Information: 708-9490.

Neuberger Museum, Purchase, N.Y. Mary Lucier's "Wilderness" will be installed April 12. Information: (914) 253-5133.


P.S. 1, 46-01 21st Street, Long Island City, Queens. Dale Hoyt's "Kitten Season." Open Wednesday through Sunday, noon to 6 P.M. Through March 22. Also: installation by Betsy Damon and Buster Simpson. Information: (718) 784-3884.


"Advance of Civilization on the Environment" - uses sites painted by members of the Hudson River School in the 19th century.