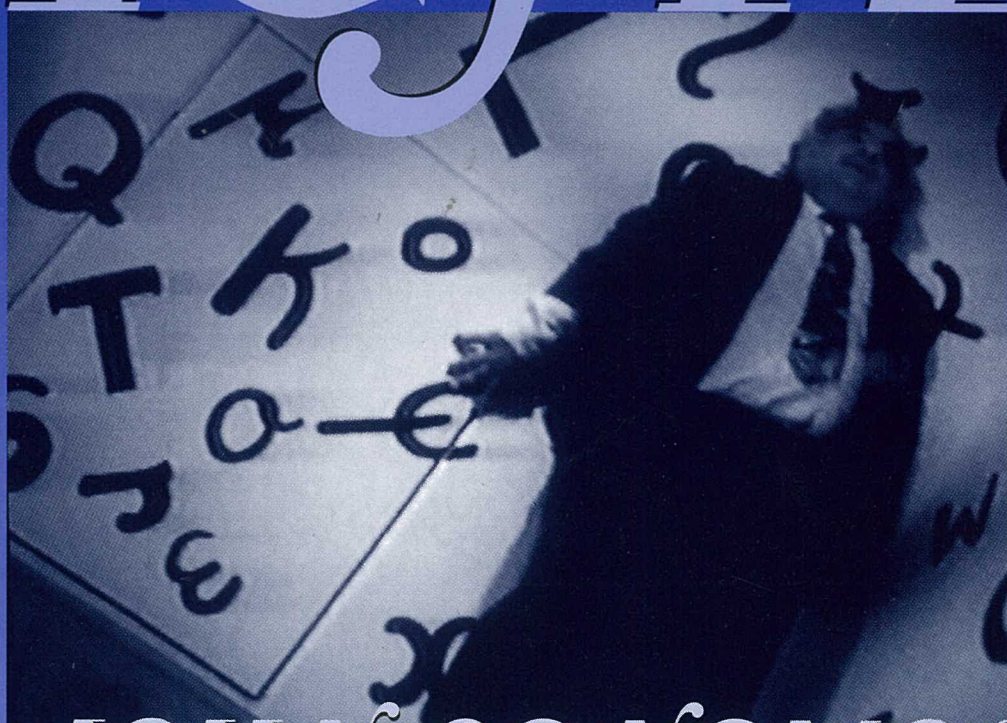


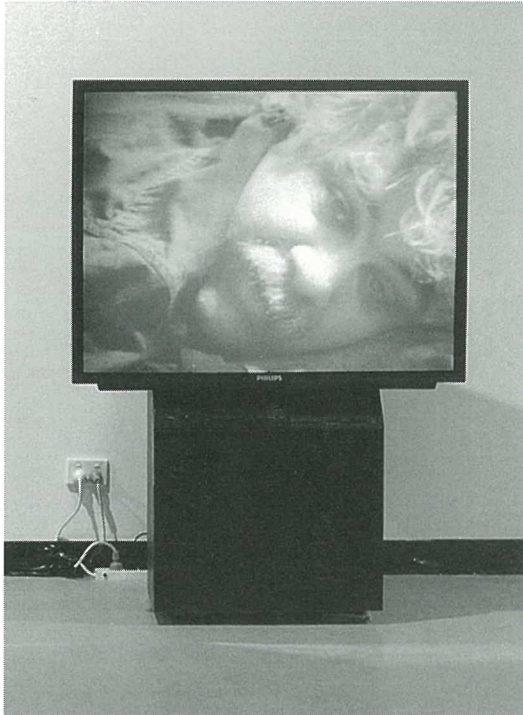
NIGHT



JOHN CONOMOS

*Australian Centre
for Contemporary Art*

*18 August –
17 September 1995*



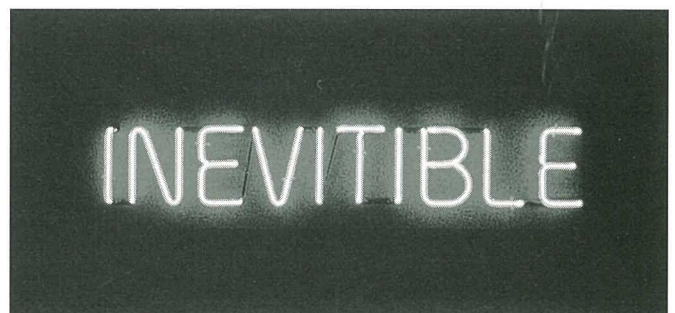
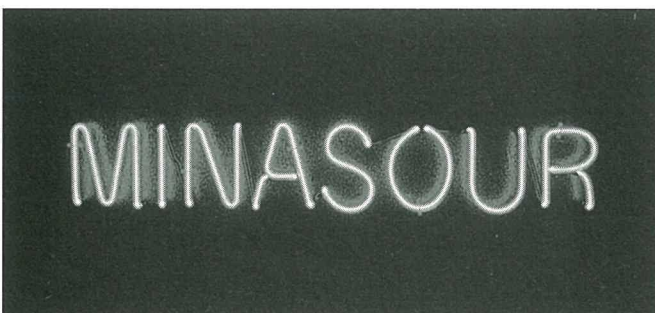
In a recent article on video artist Bill Viola, the critic Donald Kuspit announced that one of the most important events in the last thirty years of art history has been the use of the new, populist, commercial technology of television in the service of what may be art's most ancient and esoteric ambition: "the articulation of those inarticulate states of being, the almost unnameable sensations and feelings that traverse the subject's interior silence."*

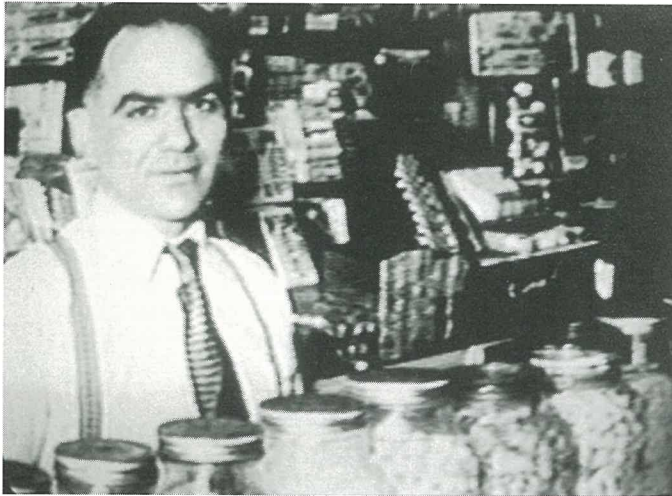
This installation, with its 3-channel feed, does precisely that. It takes the chattering speciousness of TV and makes poetry out of it. It makes use of video in a way that refuses to be a use.

Night Sky is an autobiography, part of an ongoing search by John Conomos in the gnarled roots of identity, an identity playfully, oftentimes painfully, elaborated. It moves from the olive- and - silver island of Cythera in Greece to the claustrophobia of a 1950s Milk Bar in Tempe, the industrial suburb in Sydney's south. And back again. Along the way there are memories and masks, jokes and jingles, doubles and dreams.

Following on from his earlier collaborative work *Museum of Fire* these videoscapes are about the condition of the alien – caught between places, and exiled from a lost time. Foreignness pushes against the need for close emotional belonging: strangeness and home operate together as one. The only way one can move and live inside these working contraries ("yes and no unsplit" to quote one of the inter titles) is through art (that home away from home), castaway on the pale flow of the TV monitor.

Night Sky is a kind of horoscope of his unconscious. The unconscious is the night sky of





one's workaday self. When it is day under one latitude, it is night under another. Speak English and an other, unspoken language goes under, is in the dark. Words and images continue their antipodean existence, unheard, unseen.

Sometimes they return, interfering with the host language, making communication difficult. The subject is caught between translation and schizophrenia.

Hence those near-miss words in comic strip neon: tost for toast, yous for you, inevitable for inevitable, chocols for chocolate, library for library, Minasaur for Minotaur. Hence the pun on "pun" being pound. Might not Milk Bar, given this crazy logic, incorporate opposites: mother's milk and the barrier to it?

The three monitors – occupying three places at once – interweave their stories like strands of hair in a braid. the world revolves, the camera revolves, images live and occur, in turns illuminated and plunged into darkness with the weight of a stone down a well; bodies flow into and through each other: walking, spinning, falling. In between all this is the unbearable heaviness of non-being: underworld textures speak surprisingly strongly. In the strange f-stop of dream, landscapes have a numbly grasped ominousness. The warped speed of slo-mo makes objects press sharply into our unguarded awareness.

The past burgles the present, the present pick-

pockets from the past. A cinephile and art theorist, John Conomos, excerpts bits of movies – Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Maya Deren, Rene Clair, 1950s Australian movies like *No Strangers Here* – and transfigures them in the contours of his own emotional context: some comment sardonically on cultural transmission, some are tuned into poetry serenading his losses; others retrieve his body, mitigating wounds he wants to keep intact.

Through the process of "morphing", of digitised transformations, family snaps bleed into each other – his face into his dead father's face, his son Joel performing as his former self. In the *Milk Bar of Dr Caligari* virtual space becomes more vivid, real space more virtual. He performs his suicided Uncle Manoli, he becomes Vito Acconci directly addressing us and himself. Self-reflexive and self-absorbing, these bittersweet revisitations make Conomos the bard of melancholy, longing and ambivalence.

"The soul" said Carl Jung, "is a life-giving demon who plays his elfin game above and below human existence." This elusive soul, I aver, is both the subject of John Conomos' work, as well as the arranger of its human subject. And so good is this autofiction one is never quite sure which is which.

GEORGE ALEXANDER

*Donald Kuspit, "The Passing", *Artforum*, September 1993

John Conomos is a media artist, critic and writer who is currently engaged in doing a major autobiographical/landscape video called *Autumn Song* and is writing a critical history of Australian video. He lectures at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales and is co-founding editor of the time-based arts journal *Scan+*. He spoke on interactive art at this year's Biennale of Ideas Symposium in Sydney.

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Selected Videography

The Voice of No One Was Again (with Mark Jackson) 1989
Light Was (with Mark Jackson) 1989
The Algebra of Stars (with David Haines) 1989
Of Dust and Time (with David Haines) 1989
Bottle in the Sea (with David Haines) 1990
Museum of Fire (with Chris Caines and David Haines) 1991
White Light (with David Haines) 1993

Exhibitions

Felicitous Rooms (with Mark Jackson), *One Road Block From Heaven* Show, Performance Space, 1988
From the Archive of the Body (with Steven Lojewski), Artspace, 1988
Light Was, Artspace, 1989
The Voice of No-One, Once Again, Australian Centre for Photography, 1989
The Algebra of Stars, Premiered at the Fourth Australian Video Festival, Sydney, 1989
Passages in Identity, installation show, Curator Brian Langer, Experimenta, Melbourne, 1990
Passion and Desire, Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery, Penrith, 1989
Surrender, First Draft West, Sydney, 1990
Museum of Fire, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 1991
Second Language Show (with Chris Caines and David Haines), Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1991
Inherent Identity, Performance Space, Sydney, 1991
Untitled (with David Haines), Camera Lucida, Sydney, 1991
White Light (with David Haines), video installation, Video Positive Festival, Liverpool, England, 1993
Night Sky, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 1993; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1994; Artspace, Sydney, 1994; Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1995

Screenings

The Voice of No-One Once Again (with Mark Jackson), "Frames" Film and Video Festival, Melbourne, 1990
Museum of Fire, Vox Populi, SBS Television, October 1991; 6th Australian International Video Festival, October 1991. Video was selected for Berlin Video Festival, February 1992 and travelling to Argentina, Brazil and Italy.
Second Visions, International Film and Video Festival, Glasgow, April 1992; *Experimenta*, 1992. Selected for *Telling Stories – Scanners of Memory* show, Video Positive Festival, Liverpool, England (curated by Brian Langer). Screened as part of TVTV, Cable program, Zurich, June 1993 (curated by Robert Fischer). Also selected for *An Eccentric Orbit* exhibition that travelled to Museum of Modern Art, New York; Chicago and Berlin.

Selected Publications

Michelle Royer, "One Road Block From Heaven", *Photofile*, Winter, 1988
George Alexander, *Australian Perspecta*, catalogue, 1989
Anne Howell, "Video Active", *Sydney Morning Herald*, October, 1989
Simon Crosbie, "Super 8 Screenings at State Film Centre", *Filmnews*, November, 1989
Noelle Janaczewska, "Film as Art or Art as Film: Film and Video at Perspecta", *Art Monthly*, no 22, 1989
Carole Hampshire, "From the Archive of a Body", *Eyeline*, no 8, March, 1989

Jacques Delareulle, "Virtual Landscape", *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 1990

Jacques Delareulle, *Experimenta*, catalogue, 1990
Freda Friedberg, *Frames* (Film and Video Festival), catalogue, 1990
George Alexander, *Double Exposure*, catalogue, Performance Space, 1991
George Michalakis, "Australian - Greek Artists", *Chronico*, March, 1992
Ken Wark, "Faraway", *Eyeline*, February - March, 1992
Gabriel Finnane, "Noted on 6th Australian Video Festival", *West*, no 5, 1992
Freda Friedberg, "Faraway", *Photofile*, Winter, 1992
Pat HOFFIE, "Speaking with Tongues", *Eyeline*, Autumn, 1992
Brian Langer, "John Conomos: His Work and Thoughts on Australian Video Practice, interview", *Variant*, issue 14, Summer, 1993
Alistair McIntyre, "21st century eye opener", *Midweek Guardian*, June 1993
John McKeown, "Video Positive or Negative – Review", *Shout Magazine*, June 1993
John McDonald, "Science Fiction and Sex", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 1995
Cecelia Smielewski, "Night Sky: John Conomos", *Photofile*, August 1995

Night Sky

Camera: Chris Caines, David Haines, George Zantiss
Additional camera: Vahid Vahed
Editing: Jason Gee
Lighting: Jacek Lukaszewicz
Sound: Chris Caines, Jason Gee
Telecine: Anthony Fassilis and Kieran Bleakley
Art Design: Edie Kurzer
Sets and Props: Garry Manson
Studio Production Manager: Brian Langer
Studio Assistant: Manoli Planzas
Neon Sculptures: Frank Kmiec (Neonics), Sydney
Produced in Association with the
Australian Film Commission, December, 1993

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John Conomos is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

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