

FUJI

Insert this side into recorder  Do not touch the tape inside

VHS

NOTICE
THERE WILL BE A
CHARGE FOR TAPES
RETURNED NOT
REWOUND

VHS The Exhibition
FRANKLIN STREET WORKS
9/6 - 10/14, 2012

PROPERTY OF
"HOT TO GO VIDEO"
**ONE DAY
RENTAL**
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“Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present. This kind of time has little or no space; it is stationary and without movement, it is going nowhere, it is anti-Newtonian, as well as being instant, and it is against the wheels of the time-clock.” – Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966)



The VHS cassette tape is a foreign and antiquated thing, stacked or shelved in VHS catacombs in libraries and homes around the world. In disuse, these humble relics are icons of a departed era, as peculiar to their time as are the rusted chassis of Ford Model-T cars you might find in a desert gulch. Like the broken down car, what is forgotten in the reduction of a VHS tape to its physical form is that it was once a vehicle: these cheap plastic containers were a predominant format for storing and sharing television, movies, and intimate personal memories – content that is decaying right off the magnetic tape, leaving behind only their plastic casings.

The VHS tape was merely one element in a now-defunct system that has been supplanted by personal computers. In the 1980s, the widespread adoption of the home video system – which included a video recorder or VCR, video camera, and standardized cassette tape – greatly altered how individuals related to television and commercial media. Thanks to this home video system, there was a new participatory and personalized relationship to television, which turned individual consumers into producers, programmers, and distributors. Film had preceded video in offering “amateur” grade formats for home movie making, but these required a lab for processing, and the film stock was expensive enough to encourage thrifty and careful use. Video could run for hours, and be played back instantly on the very same device that delivered professional studio content; where home films were kept in a domestic zone separate from the cinematic setting of Hollywood releases, video blurred the division between home-made and corporate television.

Now that the clunky components of the analog home video system have been made obsolete by digital camera/computer hybrids, there is a growing nostalgia for VHS that is both symbolic and formalist. Recently, VHS has become a fetishized production and release format, especially as part of the found-footage horror subgenre popularized by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). A fan culture has sprung up on-line around VHS, often helmed by individuals too young to have grown up with the format. Forgotten shot-on-video features such as *Video Violence* (1987) have gained new interest, and even big-budget films such as Ti West’s *House of the Devil* (2009) are being released in VHS special editions.

Perhaps the penultimate example of VHS fetishization is Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009), a purported home movie of a perverse and dysfunctional family, which was shot and edited entirely on VHS. Korine had thought to "distribute" the film by leaving a heap of unmarked VHS tapes on the sidewalk.

But VHS is more than a vintage object or an alternative distribution strategy. As a symbol it is also incredibly psychologically charged, imprinted with the personal and cultural associations of the volatile era that gave rise to it. Steven Spielberg and Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982) provides an iconic illustration, demonstrating how the cultural pressures of that time turned the home into a war zone. The '80s was a screaming neon clash with the Reagan Administration's nostalgia for the black and white traditional values of the '50s. A major crack-cocaine epidemic, the AIDS crisis, the Second Cold War, and any number of stressors shook the plates of national sanctity. *Poltergeist* opens with images of a fractured national identity displayed on a television set. A montage of grainy, cropped images of patriotic statues and monuments, accompanied by the national anthem, is abruptly disrupted by static (the broadcast transmission used to go dead late at night). As anyone who has seen the film knows, this static is a doorway for malevolent forces, which take over and viciously destroy an all-American family's suburban idyll.

Poltergeist locates the television as a conduit of destruction, though not as an evil machine operating of its own volition. As in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), it is the interaction of humans with television that causes trouble. In the confrontation of conservative public values with private liberties during the culture wars, the increasing personalization of television could be seen as a corrosive force, in that it enabled certain vices.

VHS tape continues to be associated with unwholesomeness and cheapness, a video version of pulp fiction. There are factors in the development of VHS that encourage this view. Initially, mainstream content providers were reluctant to embrace home video, concerned that it would threaten their market. Distributors outside the mainstream – the porn industry in particular – were the first

to widely embrace VHS as a new distribution platform. VHS was an inferior quality format to Betamax, but it won the format wars because it boasted a longer recording time. Warped and ghosted images or drop-outs to static are the features of lowly VHS. Like a cheap paperback, these glitches have come to be identified with its cultural status as something tawdry and worn, bearing the traces of its probably sordid uses.

New technology arrives with promises of progress and change, but the refuse plastic VHS tapes, like the old Model-T chassis, is a reminder of the inevitable slide of cultural products from useful devices or tools to forlorn and ridiculed artifacts. This obsolescence does not happen in isolation, but is an aspect of the degradation of whatever system this artifact was an element of. In the case of VHS tape, it is the end of a certain kind of home video system, replaced by DVDs and media distributed through the Internet, which has made it useless. As plastic husks, VHS will endure for ages, but without any way to play them back or retrieve the information encoded on their metallic strips, they will remain inert.

The relic VHS tape emblemizes decay and degradation, and the inevitable breakdown of systems or penetrability of institutions, whether of self, family, or nations. Looking back at this peculiar object that was once so common place, so heavily used and circulated, and seeing it reduced to an absurd thing that has lost its function, forecasts the uselessness of our own cultural artifacts, which will one day join the VHS tapes in the trash heaps.

VHS THE EXHIBITION

Considering VHS and home video within the tradition of art inserts a “lowbrow” format into a “highbrow” context. Artists experimented with video since the release of the first consumer-level video equipment in the 1960s, but the affordability and standardization of the home video system in the 1980s truly made video accessible to the masses (prior to this, cameras were heavy and expensive, and professional editing facilities were a necessity). Unlike the superior video formats artists had tended to use, such as Betacam or ¾” Umatic, VHS emphasized function over aesthetics, facilitating recordings of mundane everyday scenes or more base voyeuristic or exploitative uses.

Representing a demystification of television technology, VHS could be seen here as an extension of those avant-garde art movements of the 1960s and ‘70s that sought to demystify art. In reaction to the pure, severe aesthetics of Modernism, which memorialized the institution of art, these movements infiltrated that institutions with installation, media, and performance art that was cross-disciplinary, often participatory, and explored high concepts with humble materials. With an eye to the world outside the art museum or “mausoleum,” these artists desired the spread of art into a broader cultural arena. The dissolve between art and life, fine art and popular culture, and an expanded view of where art may be found and exhibited, are all legacies that enable a consideration of home video as a significant artistic tool.

Grouped together, the works in VHS The Exhibition provoke familiar definitions of art and art making. An interest in narrative strategies more commonly associated with filmmaking reveals the multi-disciplinary background of several of the artists. The shared subject of these works is domesticity and the everyday, emphasizing the personal and mundane. Counter to the view of art as monumental, ephemerality and impermanence is also a theme.

Each of the works somehow evokes mortality, if only by capturing discrete moments visibly receding into the past. An anonymous television-signal hack from the 1980s, commemorated by a poor quality document posted to YouTube, is included as an artwork, though it is not known whether the maker(s) considered it as such.

Exhibitionism, and the need to have a public audience, is also an essential connection between these works and the framework of VHS. Even the most personal of works is designed for public consumption. A contradiction between the ideals of avant-garde art movements and the motivations of artists creating art for a public is revealed. The obsolescence of VHS throws into relief the dependence of any art on institutions for exhibition and interpretation. Without a means to display the content on VHS tapes, they are reduced to functionless things, and their meaning is lost. The coffin-like VHS tape, dressed in funereal black, symbolizes the vulnerability of art once it is removed from a circulatory system of creation and display, for while the plastic tape casing will probably outlive all of us, the images captured on the fragile tape inside will decay, along with the memories that will be lost with us.



Matching the layout of Franklin Street Works' galleries, the exhibition is roughly organized in two sections. Upstairs, the focus is on the larger culture of analog home video. Three staged domestic scenes are organized around one aspect of this history, though they are unified in presenting the at-home individual's interaction with, or intervention of, television. Loosely inspired by the interior design of *Poltergeist* and other '80s era horror or slasher films, each scene also incorporates frightening details that symbolize instability, and the infiltration of the domestic sphere. A selection of movie posters, of exactly the kinds of low-budget horror films that are associated with VHS distribution, also convey the exhibition theme: the contamination of home or family by malevolent forces or human vice.

In the "**Living Room**" scene, Trevor Shimizu's *Final Analog Broadcast* (2009) captures the momentous transition in 2009 from an analog to digital broadcast signal. This was a landmark event that was like a sudden fissure between technologies, dividing those with older CRT (Cathode-Ray Tube) televisions from those with the more ubiquitous HDTVs (High Definition TVs). All of the cultural traumas associated with technological obsolescence happened in fast forward; Shimizu's recording is a time-capsule of the count

down to the death of one history, and the birth of another, causing a frenzy of awkward, provisional measures to keep individuals with CRT monitors (in many cases, the elderly or the poor) connected to television. From the perspective of art making, what rapid obsolescence signifies is the unique dilemma of any artist working with commercial technology – he or she is usually in a position of adapting to or reflecting upon changes, rather than instigating them.



“June 12, 2009, the last day for people in the USA to see TV transmitted over the air on their analog TV sets. The place I lived had a large analog TV set with a speaker wire attached to the “antenna in” jack. HDTV sets were around, but my roommates didn’t really watch much TV, so there wasn’t a need to upgrade. One station had an infomercial about how to deal with the change - how to connect the digital converter box to the analog TV, how to use the remote, how to scan for digital channels, often using the elderly to illustrate the type of frustration one might have during the switch from analog to digital. I liked this infomercial, so I looked for a VHS tape to record over. The tape was a 143 minute black and white transfer of Douglas Fairbanks’ The Thief of Baghdad. I didn’t think I would ever watch it, so I put scotch tape over the notch on the spine of the tape, enabling me to record over The Thief of

Baghdad (Blank VHS tapes have tabs which can be pulled out to copy protect the video. Commercial distribution companies usually remove the tabs before distributing the VHS tapes). I recorded the infomercial for a few minutes, stopped recording out of some anxiety that maybe I would want to see this tape, decided it was too late, and then started recording again. Around 11:30 PM, I switched channels and found the Simpsons playing with scrolling text announcing the end of analog TV above an image of some escaped cons. The show played through, cut to black, and the switch from analog to digital happened.” – Trevor Shimizu



In the “**Dining Room**” scene, copies of *The Videophile* magazine are available for perusal. This magazine, published from 1976-81 by Jim Lowe in Tallahassee Florida, thrived in the years prior to the widespread marketing of home video in the mid 1980s, when it was still slightly underground, or peculiar, for individuals to have video equipment at home. In these years, before the technology was made easy to use and accessible, a devoted group came up with ingenious ways to record and share taped television shows and movies with each other. The magazine was essentially a newsletter that included useful articles on the technology and concerns of the day, encouraging individuals to stop being intimidated by their televisions.



The “**Bedroom**” scene commemorates events that occurred on November 22, 1987. In the course of one evening, two channels in Chicago were temporarily hijacked by unidentified individuals who staged a concise piece of absurdist theater, perhaps meant to be a subversion of commercial television and therefore an example of “culture jamming”. The first instance occurred during the 9 o’clock news on WGN-TV, the second interrupted an episode of *Dr. Who* on PBS station WTTW. The *Dr. Who* intervention was of a longer duration, though both incidents involved the same scene: an individual wearing a Max Headroom face mask makes derisive comments and lewd gestures, at one point baring his buttocks to the camera, while a collaborator rotates a piece of corrugated metal behind him.

The metal backdrop and mask, and inside jokes involving Pepsi and Coca Cola, are all nods to the iconic ‘80s figure Max Headroom. Headroom was the “star” of a British-produced sci-fi television series, about a reporter who is forced to undergo an experiment to make a computer-generated version of himself. The result is Max, a dapper but cynical talking head and television jester.

In order to achieve the “look” of a computer-generated figure, the actor who played Max (Matt Frewer) wore a prosthetic mask and pounds of makeup – analog culture dreaming of a digital future.

One memorable aspect of Max is his glitchiness, a symptom of the imperfect technology that created him. He often stutters when he speaks, and only his head has been generated, so he is forever trapped in the boxy confines of the television monitor. These limitations might have been one reason for his selection as the hijacker's surrogate. The intervention showed the vulnerabilities and imperfections of the broadcast signal, undermining the control of the broadcasters. The pure absurdity of this interruption, devoid of any context, must have been a shock to viewers at the time. Chicago filmmaker James Fotopoulos, who was witness to the incident, has succinctly described what might be its most unsettling, and conceptualist, quality:

“The Headroom video was...basically home equipment in a garage. The production was ‘intimate,’ personal in a way when funneled up through a trier system that reached a mass audience, which is probably the key factor, becomes deeply unsettling: a visual violation of the viewer’s trust. In a sense = the production (and its ‘value’ system – economic, etc.) unsettling what is familiar in the audience.”



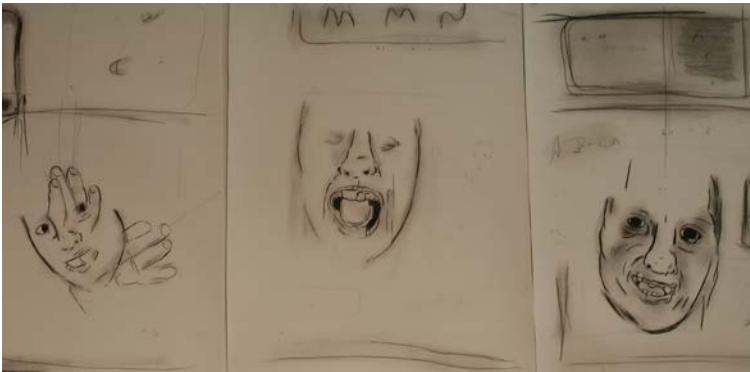
In the downstairs galleries of Franklin Street Works, a more formal presentation of monitors on pedestals and projections echoes the themes in the upstairs gallery, while also provoking the institutional norms of art, where upstairs the emphasis was on domestic or cultural institutions.

In one gallery, Dustin Guy Defa's *Family Nightmare* (2011), Robert Beck's *Song Poem (Trips Visits)* (2001), and Sadie Benning's *Living Inside* (1989) each offer private, personal moments for public consumption, something that was encouraged by home video. Benning's work, shot with a Fisher-Price toy version of a video camcorder called PixelVision, is an intimate teenager's confessional, recording her social awkwardness and maladjustment. Defa's *Family Nightmare* is a ten-minute short culled from over 40 hours of his own family's home videos. He has edited together a disquieting portrait of his family abusing substances, watching porn, and fighting. As a final intervention he stripped the original sound and dubbed his own voice over all of the speaking parts to conjure an unnerving subjective viewpoint.

Robert Beck's *Song Poem (Trips Visits)* (2001) was commissioned for the exhibition *Song Poems*, curated by Steven Hull. The artist writes: "*Song Poem (Trips Visits)* is a single-channel work I created using videotapes I found in second-hand stores, from home movies to hunting 'How To' tapes. It was created for a show titled *Song Poems*, which took as its departure a popular 1960-70s mail-order phenomenon, advertised in the back of magazines, offering to set poems to music in an array of styles and return them as "singles." The exhibition brought together musicians and video artists to set original poems by a variety of artists and writers to music and images. I created a video for an original poem by the show's curator, Steven Hull, with music composed by The Pony Express, an alternative New York rock band."

Playing in the black-box theater gallery, James Fotopoulos's *Jerusalem* (2003) is an experimental sci-fi genre feature, the first in a series of videos exploring inter-dimensional travel.

“Late one evening I entered a convenience store and saw a blank regular 8mm tape on the bottom of a shelf. Immediately the idea hit of this tape lying there like a stone, like an artifact found in a tomb. In my mind a series of images (which would become *Jerusalem*) unfolded in succession = with this was the idea that all of these images would be shot unfolding before me, as if I was preserving the already dead medium – creating something found. It would be like I went into the past to create what I found in the future and brought it back to the present. As if I jumped forward over the transmission into the antiquatedness of the technology, so my production would take place as if already dead = frozen. So I would shoot it, edit it and have it unfold with all the mistakes, at the fastest execution possible within camera.” – *James Fotopoulos*



Drawings from Video Series: *Jerusalem*, *Sublimation*, *Conjunction*, and *The Pearl* (2003-04)

Jerusalem unfolds opaquely, like a mysterious tape salvaged from a thrift store. In place of opening credits, viewers are immersed in an overture of voices emerging from visual static, recounting frightening alien encounters, strange dreams, and emotional traumas. *Jerusalem*'s action centers around a group of actors in an empty apartment, their behavior and rituals attenuated to the point of becoming a curious choreography of frozen poses.

Precisely composed scenes of banal details, like a ceiling fan pulsing ominously, are juxtaposed with the actors posing, their visages occasionally burnt by analog solarization techniques.

A highly technical filmmaker who has worked prolifically in film and video on many scales of production, Fotopoulos recognized the unique place VHS holds culturally and technically as media transitions to all-digital platforms, and exploited this for *Jerusalem*. He wanted to work with an *antiquated* technology that could exist as a relic outside the continuous flow of media channeled through the Internet, “something tossed aside, something dumped in the trash or a thrift store.”

His process reflects an analog approach on all levels, using the technology as an instrument to construct a visual manifestation of psychological impressions, resonant in an abandoned apartment where he'd once lived. Fotopoulos harnesses the peculiar energy of this apartment to evoke the dislocation of time and place. A comparison to musical instruments draws out the physicality and total involvement of working with analog technology, in contrast to relatively automated digital tools:

“After the initial footage was shot, it was exported onto a VHS tape player and I began re-taping it off a small cheap TV, feeding the taping back into a second VHS player – making edits where needed with the pause button. I did this a couple of times. I felt I couldn't use the machine (the VHS player) as it was originally used anymore = now it was like a piano or violin... as I always felt those tools existed to make one's inner sounds into a reality for those out in the world to hear – the VHS player was now a machine to realize my inner sounds and images in a similar way. Thus it achieved a new value.”

The expressive visuals of *Jerusalem* are matched with an intricately layered soundtrack. The script for *Jerusalem* is 11 pages, read repeatedly over the course of the film's 78 minute duration, creating a pummeling, hypnotic effect. VHS was integral to the sound design, which Fotopoulos favored for “the thick warmth of the atmosphere, sense of space and ability to pack in so much

texture = like a wet dark womb.”

In his serious consideration of the unique properties of VHS tape, and its place culturally, Fotopoulos exemplifies the aim of this show. By escaping the limited view of VHS as a pure fetish object, divorced from its culture, the now obsolete format becomes an opportunity to recognize how artists relate to a profound cultural shift instigated by technology, especially as it impacts on them on a personal level.

CODA

In 2010, the artist Kristin Lucas recreated a video store as an interactive artwork entitled *Video Check Out*, hosted by the Wisconsin Union Galleries at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Remaining faithful to the video rental store's unique system, visitors could check out tapes, take them home, and return them, whereupon they would be re-shelved and lent out to other visitors. But these were not plastic tapes containing *Jurassic Park* or *The Breakfast Club* – they were heavy “sculpture” VHS tapes made from cast concrete.

Lucas was interested in the eventual degradation of the concrete tape through repeated uses, while also emphasizing the tapes' inert “thingness” as VHS becomes an obsolete format. Visitors were encouraged to take photos of the cement tapes in various scenes at home, often with their purpose shifted to that of paperweights or doorstops.



Using a building material, Lucas also likened the VHS tape to a building block or brick, extending the metaphor by observing that VHS functions as an element within media architecture, calling attention to the structuring of information and interactivity. This is an aspect in much of Lucas's work, which is focused on the limitations of media in supporting a fully utopic ideal of participation, and the interaction of individuals on a personal level.

Drawing this back into traditional art processes, Lucas also emphasizes the process of creating the cast tapes, as a physical embodiment of the inevitable decay of the VHS tape over time: “I was thinking about the generation loss and wear and tear that occurs with copying and playing magnetic tape media. I wanted to have this conversation through casting which does similar things but to objects. And I thought that by using concrete as the material to cast, in a way the tapes look like fossils exaggerating their rapid obsolescence.”

Lucas’s inspirations and concepts for the project are rich and far reaching, including: “post-minimalism, Happenings, participation in art, alternative modes of collaboration with the viewer, interventionist art - infecting a form - having a conversation with the viewer that is not passive, live art, art that is restless is nature, art that is affected by its environment and built in variables – contingency – network art, art that considers its dissemination to be a part of the conceptual framework, hybrid art – art forms that resist easy categorization, where the absence of the tapes on the shelves is as active a part of the viewing experience as the tapes that are positioned on the shelves, mucking around with behavior, boundaries, value systems...”

A relatively straightforward (though labor intensive) inversion of materials, from cassette tape to concrete block, is a poetic summation of what the metaphor of VHS and home video might bring to an art’s context. Lucas’s *Video Check Out* used VHS to reflect on how art engages and interacts with a public, the dependence of art on a system for interpretation, exhibition, and preservation, the inevitable loss of relevance and information over time, the increased distance from the point of creation to public reception, and finally, the spectator’s active role in completing the creative act. *Video Check Out* muses on one dead system – the home video system – in order to demonstrate the activity of another.



About the Artists:

In 2008, **Robert Beck** changed his artistic signature by a single letter to Robert Buck, a “gesture” that coincided with a solo exhibition at CRG gallery, NYC, and a lecture for the Dia Art Foundation on Andy Warhol’s name change. His work deals often with identity, authorship, and the indelible traces of cultural ritual and ideology. He lives and works in NYC and the deserts of the American Southwest.

Sadie Benning, daughter of filmmaker James Benning, began making her distinct Pixelvision videos as a teenager, turning the camera on herself to record a visual journal of her life. In 1993, she was the youngest person to be included in the Whitney Biennial, and in the late ‘90s Benning co-founded the feminist post-punk band Le Tigre.

Dustin Guy Defa is a filmmaker whose narrative feature film *Bad Fever*, starring Kentucker Audely and Eleonore Hendricks, premiered at the SXSW Film Festival in 2011.

James Fotopoulos has made hundreds of films and videos on subjects ranging from an adaptation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem *Christabel* (2000) to the sci-fi feature *Dignity* (2012), starring the Zellner Brothers. His work has been shown widely at many festivals and venues including the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Sundance Film Festival, the 2004 Whitney Biennial, the Walker Art Center, and the Museum of Modern Art, among others.

Trevor Shimizu received a B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute, where he was influenced by Ernie Kovacs, Cindy Sherman, and William Wegman. His visual art often displays a laconic humor that provokes questions of auto-biography, and the authenticity of art. In Winter 2012, he had his first solo show of paintings at 47 Canal, entitled “Late Work.”

About the Curator:

Rebecca Cleman is the Director of Distribution of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), NY. She has programmed screenings for the New York Underground Film Festival, Light Industry, Anthology Film Archives, and the Migrating Forms Festival among other venues. In 2010 she co-curated the media content for Amnesia at Andrea Rosen Gallery. She has most recently organized two programs within the VHS series at the Museum of Art and Design, NY, and published an essay on the subject of horror movies and home video for the Moving Image Source. Cleman lives and works in NYC.

VHS The Exhibition

CHECKLIST

Upper Gallery:

Trevor Shimizu

Final Analog Broadcast, 2009

48 min, color, sound

Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, NY



Anonymous

Max Headroom broadcast signal intrusion - WTTW Channel 11,
Chicago, 1989

2:30 min, color, sound

Courtesy of FuzzyMemories.TV, Youtube



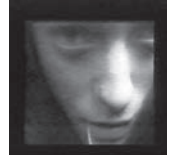
Downstairs Gallery (clockwise from left):

Sadie Benning

Living Inside, 1989

5:10 min, black and white, sound

Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank



Dustin Guy Defa

Family Nightmare, 2011

10 min, color, sound

Courtesy of the artist



Robert Beck

Song Poem (Trips Visits), 2001

10 min, color, sound

Edition of 5

Courtesy of the artist



Blackbox Gallery:

James Fotopoulos

Jerusalem, 2003

78 min, color, stereo, sound

Courtesy of Fantasma, Inc.



Hallway:

James Fotopoulos

Drawings from Video Series: *Jerusalem* (2003), *Sublimation* (2003)
Conjunction (2003) and *The Pearl* (2004)

Graphite and charcoal on paper

Images from *Final Analog Broadcast*, courtesy of Trevor Shimizu and of 47 Canal, NY.

Images from *Video Check Out*, courtesy of Kristin Lucas

Images of VHS tapes, courtesy of Rebecca Cleman

Special thanks to Art Honneger of the Mohawk Group for the gratis carpet squares and to Laurel Thrift for the great deals on TV and Desk.

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Essays © Rebecca Cleman

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