I can count: I can count on you
I can count: I can count on you
In bed!! or on the barricades!!
Dearest Clara! and Dearest Franz!
Could there be but one Way!!!
thus (reluctant radicals) we weaken the Power of Empire
building a bridge into each other's consciousnesses!!!!

It bars / blocks; it is absent. Your words
create my vision. There in California, fires
on the horizon and the low Hartford hills
just on the other side (coming back, I'm coming back...).
Each word means, occupies, like the domination
of a foreign country. But written through to you,
as in: one body against another, one... another...

What I want to say is I'm going to try, to do better.
What I want to say is it's about time. What I want
to say... What I want to say...
"...As you can tell, I'm a radical, a failed radical. I can be anything you want but I'm not apathetic. I sit here and move the buttons any way I please." Alan Sondheim from Edges, 1978-79.

Alan Sondheim is ebulliently conversant with the literature of science, politics, philosophy, economics and art, as well as with the more intimate world of his own emotions. He is an artist who uses a variety of media to express his concerns about the diminishing sphere of individual freedoms in contemporary society. Sondheim publishes dozens of articles annually in both national and underground publications, lectures frequently in this country and Canada, and further shares his ideas through the medium of videotapes.

Over the past decade commercial television programming has expediently reduced the home viewer to a passive consumer of pabulum and sales pitches. Most Americans would be surprised to learn that, during these same years, a diverse and important body of video art has been created. Sondheim (and a number of other video artists) take the familiar context of the television set, its affinity already well established with the public, and use it to challenge that very body of ideas and values television best represents.

As might be expected, Sondheim finds it important to use the medium in non-commercial and non-conventional ways. Sondheim's videotapes are complex and multi-layered. Unlike the hyperkinetic pace of commercial television, they are sometimes slow-moving, even "boring". They offer neither a comfortably logical story line nor self-effacing polished camera work. Instead they present a range of possibilities, even several contradictory ones at the same time.

Through the assemblage of music, words, and images Sondheim's uneasy tapes dislocate the viewer. As with, for instance, the unfamiliar images of early Cubism and the often perplexing writings of such authors as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and William Burroughs, the absence of a concrete consistency (the "confusion") offers the willing viewer a provocative experience.

Sondheim makes videotapes which invite viewers to break the somnolent habit. He appeals to the viewers to become aware, alert and thoughtful. For some, however, the elements of confusion and boredom are so irritating that they walk out in frustration. Given our limited (and limiting) experience with television as the fast foods industry of words and images, this response is understandable.

Remnants from the Beginning of the Period of Destruction, a work which pre-dates both The China Syndrome and the real events at Three Mile Island, is a clarion call in the guise of science fiction. Sondheim projects us ahead in time, allowing us to examine with hindsight the "remnants" we have left. The film "was found one-half mile from Ground Zero...one-half mile from the blast." Grainy snippets of an early Walt Disney film and scenes of President Richard Nixon visiting flood-ravaged Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in the summer of 1972 (this footage taken by Sondheim himself) are transposed into eerie relics of a time long ago. These are implicit reminders that Disney and Nixon will be remembered for their ingenious use of the media to engage citizen sentiment.

As in many of his tapes, information is given and then taken away. Sondheim's voice
describes "...the first appearance of a small-scale atomic bomb on American land" yet minutes later he expresses uncertainty about the exact nature of the event, affirming only that "...something unbelievably frightening...occurred at this location." The voice of authority contradicts itself and there remains doubt about what really happened. This uncertainty itself becomes a disquieting factor.

Above all the credibility of the black and white footage prevails. Scientific literature notes that, in the face of conflict, visual stimuli will take precedence over all other senses. When, near the end of the tape, the image is interrupted and only the audio continues, an ominous malfunction of The System itself is suggested.

Without much emotion in his voice, Sondheim the commentator predicts the future: "large scale terror, devastation and a sense of social loss," along with the "mysterious appearance of certain anomalies in the environment." Remnants gives us a glimpse of Sondheim's view of the future and a terrifying one it is.

MATRIX 49 is an exhibition which brings into the museum a selection of work that is frankly experimental, with rough edges often in plain view. This seems appropriate because Sondheim is an artist whose expressions are always searching and always changing. Inevitably, his work sits awkwardly in a museum context. Sondheim is obviously not interested in making traditional art objects available for sale and then resale. Rather, his energies are almost exclusively committed to sharing ideas with his students, with his readers and, from time to time, with interested museum-goers. Conscious of a negativism and elements of self-deprecation which surface repeatedly in his videotapes, Sondheim has said recently that he hopes to be able to guide future work in a more positive direction. Searching for Ground in Hudson River Country ("Hudson River Blues") seems to be a turning point in this regard. It is a highly personal statement in which the artist asks himself difficult questions about problematic relationships in his life and about the value and validity of his own work. Against lush pastoral scenes of landscapes and skylines Sondheim counters, "These were the places I had been once... so what?" Through clarification comes a new ground, the possibility of making work which will be "more than just: this is what I filmed once."

Edges (or From Sea to Shining Sea or The Revolution of the Gun) examines several issues at one time. In part it is an exposition on what the artist perceives to be the breakdown of contemporary society. He invites the viewer to a banquet of apathy, banality and irritability. This, of course, proves to be no feast at all.

The notion of societal disintegration is quite intentionally mirrored in the very process by which Edges was made. As in Searching for Ground in Hudson River Country, Sondheim turns the work in on itself. Open analysis of how the tape was made—the motivations, hidden agendas, surprises and disappointments—becomes an integral and important part of the work. Excerpts of real life are welcomed into the story. The title, Edges, seems to acknowledge that it walks the fine line between fact and fiction.

While on the faculty at the Hartford Art School (University of Hartford) last year, Sond-
heim invited several friends and students to collaborate as volunteer actors. Once filming began, the participants rejected Sondheim's original storyline. The strength of their personae soon superseded and blended with the intentions of the film maker.

In *Edges*, the cast openly challenges the script, the camera and the director—all symbols of authority. Sondheim, in the dual role of the director both on the tape and in reality, allows his collaborators to take the lead. He feels a responsibility to the performers not to script them out of their souls. Yet, when the filming is over, it is he, as editor, who has the final word.

Eschewing traditional conventions, Sondheim captures on film a sense of "dailiness." It is this tedious drift of everyday events (sometimes tedious for the viewer as well) that most effectively conveys the profound alienation of the protagonists. The performances are so convincing that the audience may need to be reminded that all characterizations are absolutely fictional.

As if in response to the emotionally exhausting strategies of *Edges*, Sondheim removes all possibility of human intervention and interpersonal recitals in *Dance*, a completely machine-generated tape. In it he explores what he has called "the ideology of disco." Both the images and the sounds are regulated by a complicated computer program. The words determine the image and the sound moves steadily and inexorably from random noises to straight disco. The tape is not intended to hold the visitor's attention for its full thirty minute duration. Rather viewers should feel free to enjoy a few minutes of *Dance* and then wander on.

Alan Sondheim's work—with its broad sweep, its self-examination, its rough edges—blurs some of the traditional distinctions between art and life.

At times it offers us more and at times it offers us less than we might expect. Always, however, it represents the artist's ardent commitment to explore contemporary concerns with contemporary means.

Sondheim was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1943. He received both a BA and an MA in English from Brown University. Sondheim is currently on the faculty of the School of Fine Arts at the University of California at Irvine. He will return to Hartford to teach at the Hartford Art School this fall. His videotapes and publications are distributed by Art Metropole of Toronto.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX
Works in MATRIX:
Edges (or From Sea to Shining Sea or The Revolution of the Gun), one hour color videotape. With Laura Hayes, Tom Zummer, Laurence Hegarty and Galen Strazza, 1978-79. Special thanks to Sidewalk, Anna-Marie Piersimoni, ZBS Media and the University of California at Irvine Television Studio. Lent by the artist.

Dance, one-half hour black and white videotape. (computer and synthesizer-generated), 1979. Special thanks to the University of California at Irvine Computer Science Department. Lent by the artist.

Remnants from the Beginning of the Period of Destruction, one-half hour black and white videotape, 1978. Music by Laurie Anderson and Alan Sondheim. Lent by the artist.


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Selected one-man exhibitions:
112 Greene Street, NYC '71;
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax '71, '72, '77;
Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '76; The Kitchen, NYC '77;
Franklin Furnace, NYC '77; Real Art Ways, Hartford '78; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art '79.

Selected group exhibitions:
Bykert Gallery, NYC '71; Paris Biennale '73; Projects in Nature: Eleven Environmental Works Executed at Merriewold West, Far Hills, NJ '75; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Projects '76; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Biennial '77, '79.

Selected recordings by Sondheim:
The Songs, Riverboat Records '67; Ritual, ESP Records '68; T'Other Little Tune, ESP Records '69.

Selected bibliography by Sondheim:
An Ode, Burning Deck Press "On Machines," 0 to 9, no. 6 ('69).
Strata, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Halifax) '72.

Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America, ed. by Alan Sondheim, E.F. Dutton (New York) '77.
The Structure of Reality, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Halifax) '77.
"Alvin Lucier," Parachute, no. 12 (December '78), p. 41+.
Texts, by Sondheim and Geralyn Donohue, University of California at Irvine Art Gallery, '79.
"On Drawing, on Painting," Parachute (forthcoming issue)

Selected bibliography about Sondheim:

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