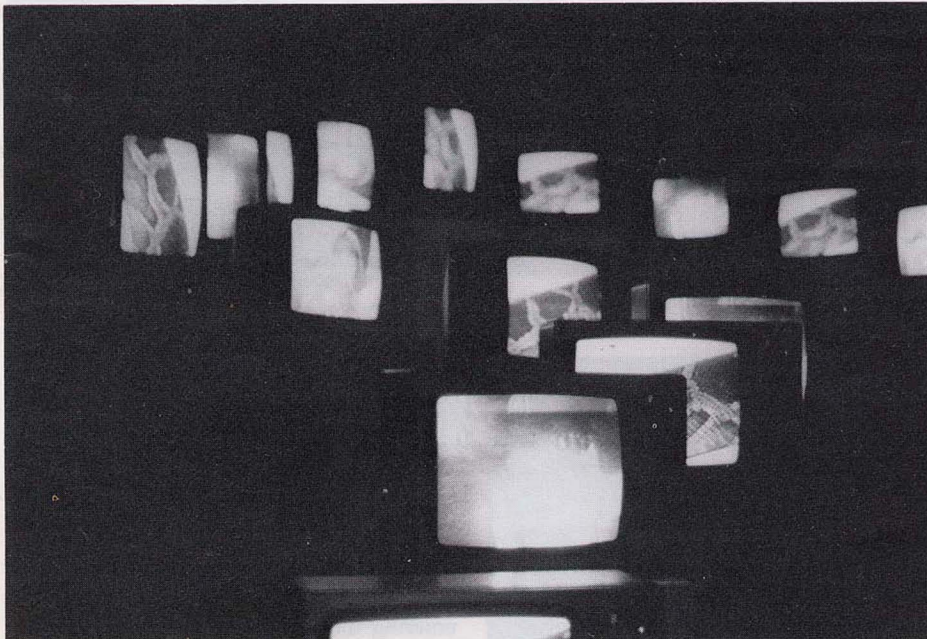


Declarations of Independence:



'Chat Rap' (John Scarlett-Davies).

Shows, schisms & modernisms

'Media Snake' (Installation, Tina Keane).

In the second of two articles on independent work being produced and distributed on video, Michael O'Pray charts the short but rapidly proliferating life of video art in Britain.

The youngest of the arts, video was also the most successful in immediately establishing itself seriously in the art world. Film took until about 1912, with the Futurists, to achieve any impact on the art world. Of course, the distinction must be made here between broadcast television and video. The former was established in the 1930s, although it did not become a popular mass

medium in this country until the 1950s. Rather, it was the availability of the portable video recorder in the mid-60s which made video art possible, although Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell had used television receivers in large installation pieces as early as 1959. The popular version of the 'birth' of video art has Paik buying the first portable video recorder retailed in the United States on

October 4th, 1965. Characteristically, in the taxi on his way home from the shop, Paik made his first tape (Pope Paul VI was visiting New York at the time) and showed it the same evening at the Cafe-a-Go-Go where artists, poets and musicians regularly met. Ironically, thanks to Paik, the act of commodity consumption was almost of a piece with the 'moment' of artistic production.

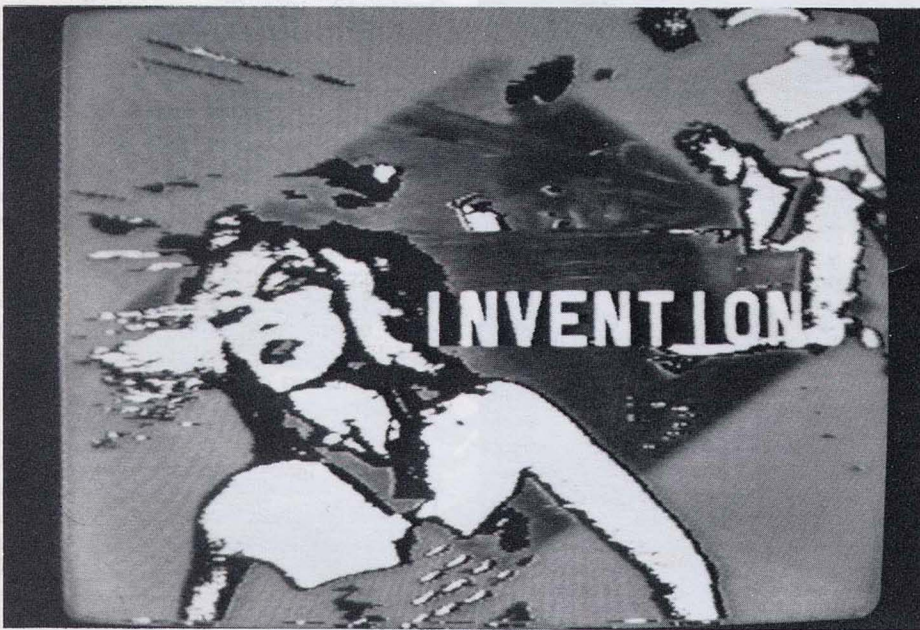
It is certainly appropriate that video art came into being during the 1960s, when artists became increasingly antipathetic to the gallery system. Furthermore, the whole status of the art object was under scrutiny. For example, Andy Warhol's work stressed the constructivist notion of the 'factory'; minimalist sculpture celebrated what Michael Fried called its 'theatricality' with the stress on physical environment; equally, the Dada-like Fluxus art movement, in which Paik was an influential figure, had created its own anarchistic anti-art which resulted in conceptual art and its tributaries—performance art, body art and video art itself. Most of the early video artists, like Paik, came from other media—music, dance, sculpture, painting, performance.

More importantly, video was born under the shadow of a commercial broadcast television system, dedicated to kitsch and philistinism, which nowadays is graced with the title of 'popular culture'. Its conventional output had none of the vitality cinema had inherited from its nineteenth-century circus and itinerant side-show beginnings. If avant-garde film had to grapple with mainstream cinema, at least it recognised a historical tradition encompassed by the 'art' of such as Vertov, Eisenstein, Welles and Lang.

When video art wandered from its primarily modernist practice, there was no similar artistic tradition with which to engage, only the medium itself. Consequently, it is no accident that 'scratch video', for example, drew blatantly on the cinema for its raw material, its found footage. This lack of a tradition made itself felt, not so much in the first wave of British video artists, committed as they were to fine-art modernist practices, but in more recent years, when the anti-formalist swing took place among a younger generation of video artists. As we shall see, however, too much can be made of this point, for early video artists like David Hall were crucially involved with the problems of broadcast television.

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The history of British video art is brief, beginning in the early 1970s. What 'historical' accounts exist are to be found in catalogue essays and odd articles in *Screen*, *Afterimage* and *Independent Media*. Astonishingly, there has been no book published so far on British video art, neither has there been a video journal, nor a major exhibition or festival dedicated to video since the mid-70s, all of which says much about the often paradoxical problems faced by the British video art community. David Hall, Mick Hartney, Tamara Krikorian, Jez Welsh, Catherine Elwes and Stuart Marshall, all video artists themselves, have also been the most prolific activists, critics and theorists of the new art, and much of this article,



'I.O.D.' (Jeremy Welsh).

particularly where it addresses the early years, is culled from their writings.

A single figure dominates the beginnings of video art in this country—David Hall. A successful sculptor, he turned to film in the late 60s and to video in 1970. His early experiments with broadcast television are unique and serve as a significant reminder of a period in the 70s when video was an important part of the visual arts. In 1971, Scottish Television broadcast Hall's *Seven TV Pieces*, all of which wittily played with the scale and nature of the ordinary television set (a tap fills the screen with water which then empties at an unnatural angle, etc.). These short tapes interrupted normal programmes without any introduction or explanation. Channel 4, for all its commitment to innovation, has never risked such a programming tactic, one which makes the event in itself an experimentation and not simply the viewing of an art tape.

In many ways, the early British video movement was akin to the avant-garde film sector based at the London Film-makers' Co-operative where formalist, or structuralist, aesthetics predominated; self-reflexivity in the medium was central, as was its oppositional stance. Instead of mainstream Hollywood being the enemy, broadcast television served that function for video art. Gallery exhibition—despite video artists' dissatisfaction with this kind of consumption—predominated, and conceptualist and performance-based art produced much of the best work of the period.

A series of exhibitions in the early 70s paved the way for the present practice of video art. The largely ineffectual "Survey of the Avant-Garde" at Gallery House, London in 1972; the "Open Circuit" exhibition of 1973 organised by Lesley Green and Robert Breen for the Scottish Arts Council in Edinburgh, in which David Hall and Tony



'There Is a Myth' (Catherine Elwes).

Sinden were featured; the watershed event "The Video Show" at the Serpentine Gallery in May 1975; and the video installation show at the Tate Gallery in 1976. By that time, Hall's campaigning activities had attracted a group of video artists—Tamara Krikorian, Stuart Marshall, Brian Hoey and Roger Barnard, David Critchley, Kevin Atherton, Steve Partridge, Mike Leggett and Keith Frake. In 1976, the then influential *Studio International* magazine dedicated an issue to video art and BBC TV devoted a special programme of *Arena* ("Art and Design") to it.

In the same year, 1976, London Video Arts (LVA) was founded. Goaded by problems of access, this organisation hoped to provide the means of producing and promoting work. It became the prime production, distribution and exhibition body for video art. The Arts Council provided financial assistance in these early years. In 1979, LVA began to formalise its activities. Issues of legal status were raised and in 1981 a grant was given by the Arts Council for a person to research its administration. An equipment grant shortly followed, allowing subsidised access to production facilities. However, much of the work was still done by unpaid volunteers. Tape distribution and income from hiring equipment allowed another person to be employed and a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation grant in 1982 provided for a third person. In 1983, two production posts were financed by Channel 4 and GLAA.

In the years following the founding of the LVA, video art was still very much a modernist project, though one with its own critical thrust. The video artist and critic Mick Hartney stated that "it would be several years before the energy which was expended at this time in establishing areas of media study in art colleges, in evolving a critical frame of reference for the discussion of video art, and in forming an artist-based support structure within which video art could thrive, was to be rewarded with the emergence of a vital, various and autonomous practice". In the meantime, David Hall's tapes set the tone. His installation "Situation Envisaged" (1978) meshes sculptural qualities with a critique of broadcast television. It comprises a tight semi-circle of television receivers turned towards a wall, showing all the channels; through narrow gaps the viewer can see fragments of an inner screen on which the other receivers are also reflected. On entering the room, the solid semi-circle of receivers on plinths is like a fortress trapping the electronic light which suffuses the darkened gallery. The babbling of sounds and voices without images adds to the overall atmosphere of manic threat and dull power.

Like Hall's work, the early tapes of David Critchley (*Static Acceleration*) and Stuart Marshall (*Go Through the Motions*), for example, explored the conceptual issues of representation, the viewing experience, sound and image and illusionism. This baseline critique of the video and television medium gradually gave way to work of a more varied nature. Colour replaced the crude black-and-white tape, and with the rapid development of video technology, artists perceived the possibility of mimicking broadcast material at least in its superficial

visual qualities. Stuart Marshall's British Video Art exhibition (1983) was one of the last statements of the modernist aesthetic stemming from the 70s. Marshall selected tapes according to such key terms as "difference", "means and modes of representation" and "oppositional practice". In describing work by video artists who do not see dominant television "as an irredeemably 'bad object'", but as a source of material (e.g., soap operas) which they might use to their own advantage, Marshall was responding to feminist work, deconstructivist tapes, and interests which were to erupt in scratch video a few years later.

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In the late 70s and early 80s, the women's movement began to take effect in both avant-garde film and video art. More and more artists came to reject the formalist and 'experimentalist' approach of Hall et al., and to engage instead with representation as

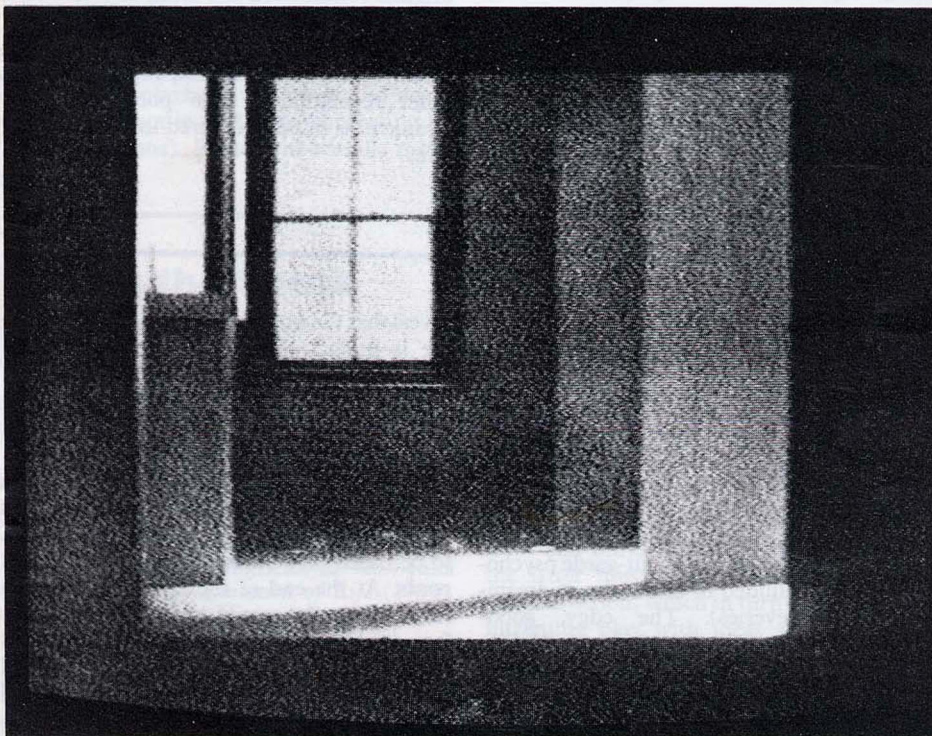
understanding of how these fictions operate".

By 1985, video art had become much more eclectic. In Tina Keane's and my own video season for the Tate Gallery in 1985, we called the show "The New Pluralism" in an attempt to capture the diversity of approaches, styles and production conditions operative in the 80s. As Jeremy Welsh points out in the 1987 LVA Catalogue, "Video Art has moved out of the gallery . . . and has taken up residence in cinemathèques, film theatres, public spaces, recreational spaces and, most significantly, on television". The impact of Channel 4 in aesthetic terms has been slight, but it has allowed artists to be shown, often successfully, to a wider audience. John Wyver's *Ghost in the Machine* series, *Video on Four* and other programmes have all shown already existing work. Commissioning of video art work (and avant-garde film) is still relatively rare.

The influence of home-recording machines has probably been large but more

with video art. It is only in the past year that a video officer has been appointed by the BFI and the accent is very much on video for social, political and narrative ends. A central problem, one feels, is the notion of 'art' itself, which sets up a strong antipathy with its élitist, self-indulgent, apolitical (or worse, reactionary) connotations. In recent years, video art has broken out of the ghetto somewhat (although for some the price has been too high). Articles on video art now appear regularly in *Screen* and *Framework*, for example. The monthly magazine *Independent Media* has been crucial on this score, being the only magazine to deal extensively with video.

Channel 4 screenings have also helped, but perhaps the most influential event has been the communal practice discovered by video artists, community video workers, filmmakers, intellectuals, etc., during the Miners' Strike, when differences and prejudices were buried in order to work together on support tapes. Inevitably, our understanding of what video art is has been inexorably transformed in recent years so that a large grey area exists in which labels like community video, video art, political agit-prop, documentary, etc., are almost useless. Nevertheless, the present-day pluralism in video has not by any means destroyed its underlying thrust, which is not to treat video purely as a means to some other external end, but is always concerned with expression and formal experiment. ■



'Still Life' (Margaret Warwick).

ideology, with the actual content of television imagery. Mick Hartney's *Orange Free State* (1978) was a "meditation on tyranny"; Ian Bourn's *Lenny's Documentary* (1978) explored, among other things, the interview genre; Peter Savage's *It's Like Reading a Word* (1979), Mike Stubbs' *Cooking with Katie* and tapes by other artists all take off in directions that lead away from formalism.

For example, from about 1980 onwards, Margaret Warwick discerned the emergence of what she called 'New Narrative'. Warwick pinpoints the reductive aesthetics of a modernist materialist film practice (a trap into which David Hall's video work would fall) which creates the conditions for the New Narrative video but cuts off the possibilities of confronting "fabrications, illusions of male fantasy, in other words: fictions". Warwick sees the need for video artists "to construct a fiction about existing fiction in order, perhaps, to gain a better

indeterminate. It has not led to any greater accessibility or democratisation of video as art, and it would be idle to expect otherwise. Painting and drawing gained little from such access to its raw materials. There is without doubt a generation of artists who have been brought up with television, who have known only Thatcherism, high unemployment, the collapse of the 60s and early 70s left, latterday semiotics (filtered through the art college curricula), and an anti-intellectualism. Scratch video was born of this set of conditions. Pop videos and television advertising have also been sirens—promising money, careers, a large audience and some scope for experimentation. A comparison with the 30s documentary movement, with its state patronage and commercial outlets (Len Lye's GPO adverts, for example), is not too far-fetched.

Large institutions like the BFI and Channel 4 have been tardy in coming to grips