Structures, paraphernalia and television : some notes

David Hall

1. D Antin, 'Television: Video's Frightful
Parent', *Artforum*, December 1975.

When I made sculpture in the sixties I photographed it, but two dimensional pictures said little about my work. However, if people did not see the sculpture they more or less believed they had if they saw the photographs. They made judgements about it, they were used to that from looking at images. I decided that they were probably more important than the sculpture and turned to making only photographs.

I then quickly recognised that the illusion was even more convincing when it moved and had sound, and I started to make films. But I was not always interested in making the illusion convincing, if it was it would be like looking at something else, not at a film. I used illusion only as a means to see itself. If I had denied using it altogether it would be very convenient and 'true' to the mechanics and process of film, but illusion would still be there because people wanted it to be. They expected that from looking at films. I became very interested in their expectations, but did not necessarily want to give them what they might expect.

Having made a number of films I soon became interested in television. TV as a medium [and its offspring video] was a different proposition. Viewing TV was not a special event with a captive audience like film, but it reached everyone. A TV set was an object, small, intimate and at home. And with TV, people mostly got what they expected. by the beginning of the seventies my interests in film had transposed to TV. But the context was very different and the work had to respond to that.

If I made work specially for TV, knowing it would be seen on TV, that would be preferable. But opportunities were rare for the kind of work I made. An alternative was to also make TV knowing that it would not be seen there, and that it would more likely be seen in a gallery - which was a very different context. I was, and still am, very conscious of context.

Work I have made for broadcast TV is different from work that is not, because the viewing situations are different, different values and influences are at work. But essentially, even out of the context of TV, TV is still there: David Antin rightly said that "... television, which controls the technology and shares the essential conditions of production and viewing of everything seen on a monitor screen, has also provided almost all the background viewing experience of the video audience and even the video artists. So, no matter how different from television the works of *individual video artists may be, the television experience dominates the* phenomenology of viewing and haunts video exhibitions the way the experience of movies haunts all film."[1]

I was not disheartened that this was the case, on the contrary, it was precisely why I found it so appropriate. Television undoubtedly sees itself as the key mediator, even the climatic controller, of present-day culture. That I should adopt TV as the vehicle for an alternative mediation or critique of that culture - and by implication of TV itself - was highly appropriate. To show it was another issue.

Because there was, and is, this implicit [if not explicit] critique of TV in the work; art as TV is a great problem for the broadcasters. And because of its ephemerality, its intangibility, and most of all the problem of having to give the work *time*; TV as art is a great problem for the art market.

In 1972 I made and exhibited my first TV installation, and this presented a different

set of considerations. Unlike single screen works, installations are hybrids. They involve a physical structure, with usually more than one screen. They have no place on TV, they are gallery works. Was this a return to sculpture, this time in combination with pictures?

Often formal concerns, accepted as indigenous to the act of making sculpture, are not given the same attention by installation artists. The construction and attendant paraphernalia are often only there out of necessity. They are merely a support structure, the furniture carrying the 'substance' of the work, the message from the screens, that other dimension [after all the screen dominates, it is the point of focus]. Yet, because the choice is made to involve elements of an essentially different order, their presence cannot go unnoticed.

The context of its immediate environment is undoubtedly influential in the reading of a painting, and is crucial in that of a sculpture. No object is observed in a void, perceptual cues triggered by its surroundings play a significant part in the condition of viewing. Likewise any part of a construction, in this case an installation, is influential upon the next.

The immediate perception of a single video monitor screen is as a kind of window [unavoidably a television window]. At the moment of attention the viewer assumes total disregard for the TV as object. But the introduction of a second monitor [or more] into the visual field presents a monumental problem. There are not just two, there is a conflict. Is one screen given attention, or is the other?

As one is seen as a window, the other becomes object. Should the attempt be made to view both together? And if that is possible, can they be given equal divided attention, can they both be observed simultaneously as windows? Alternatively can they be read working from one to the next like reading a book; not noticing the apparatus, the environment, the objects and/or space between; like not noticing the paper, nor its thickness, nor even the act of turning the page?

If the intention is not that they are viewed simultaneously, but that they are read from one to the next, how is this to be established? There is no fixed convention in the configuration of an installation [and hence the reading of it] unlike the format of a book, or watching TV. Is there perhaps an expectation of eye and/or body movement from one to the next *presuming* a progression without convention or direction as a guide? Or is it more likely, initially, that an assessment is made of the whole, and then judgement made as to how best to proceed and *where* to put attention.

Initially, in taking stock, there is an instant confrontation with the total construct - the physical, architectural, three dimensional structure - within a physical space. Primarily a here-and-now spatial consciousness is operating, necessarily it must. What is displayed on those screens, in that other temporal dimension, comes second. This other phenomenon may then rapidly take over [television is such an obsession], but the scene is set: this is not a conventional viewing situation, it is not a living room; there is a multiple of screens, presented within a dominant and *unique* physical structure, in turn within a specific and unlikely environment.

So aside from the abstract objectives that may emanate from the video screen - parallels and oppositions to real-time representation, philosophic and ideological issues, psychological conundrums, and other creative exhortations in temporal flow - it became clear that here, physical formal considerations must equally be made. That all that was to be *said* via the screens must also acknowledge the specific context. And that simultaneously the context should not only integrate the screens [as a consciously formal component] but, by the *character* of its configuration,

support their abstract content. This could not merely be an incidental system for display. The combination was the total work.

The formal coherence of the physical structure - be it a unit or constituent parts however incidental and dispersed - as a holistic *sculptural* statement; and the *considered* attempt to integrate the other alien dimension - with so seductive a role yet no tangible substance - soon became an important objective for a formally successful installation.

Television, however, has little time for such subtlety. So to return to the beginning, and that 'background viewing experience'; not only was it necessary that the structure in some way integrated the 'message' of the screens, but that this element should itself both acknowledge and confront the very issue of TV's dominant influence. Not through negative submission. Not necessarily as a primary reference [which is the case in much of my work]. But at least by the *apparent* acknowledgement that, in its reading, any use of the medium is the *use of television* - not the use of a virgin phenomenon, innocent of such powerful connotation. And that, in making any statement, there is, simultaneous with whatever other objective an implicit confrontation with this, the Inevitable Presence.

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Traditional maxims comfortably embraced sculpture, and within them theoretical debate battled with their limits. Yet once beyond into a world where the work - a combination of opposite dimensions - had no established precedent, there was little serious inclination to accomodate it. More importantly installations have an added obstacle, they not only make this combination but one of them (like single screen work) has an association with TV, and the regard for TV is one that by and large has no place as fine art.

Installation is a cumbersome and ambiguous term (it conjures an image of a technical, industrial, or even military complex) But then, there appeared to be no other more appropriate alternative. The extension of my work from the time-based two dimensions of the single screen into the realms of three presented more pressing issues than that of the label. Nevertheless, should it, could it, perhaps be considered as sculpture?

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