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**VIDEO AT THE NATIONAL REVIEW**

**"AVE '87"**

**JO SPENCE**

**CRITICAL REALISM**

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**WINTER 88**  
**SPRING 88**

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# VIDEO:

## DOCUMENTATION

## A N D

## INSTALLATION

## A T T H E

## NATIONAL

## REVIEW

## O F

## LIVE ART

Douglas Aubrey

### Video:

#### Live Art's poor relative

THE National Review itself is an excellent event to go to and witness some of the best and new live work going on in Britain at the moment - this actually does include video.

Judging by both the profile and the status to which video was afforded at the event, the serious performers (and administrators?) generally regarded the medium as an OK way to document the 'proper' stuff, or as a tag on the end of the National Review bill, alongside some brilliant, much mediocre and some atrocious live works.

#### Video Documentation:

##### A case of too many cooks...

THERE is obviously a need to document live work, however there was a considerable overload in terms of documentation at the event (at times there were 5 camera crews floating around recording virtually anything and everything that moved - when they could get the cameras to work properly and make sense of the spaghetti of video cables in the central foyer area).

On a more serious and disconcerting note was the sensation of wondering whether at times performances were being staged for the cameras - rather than for a live audience, (in this respect one consolation seemed that some of the best performance work on show defied documentation).

This whole area of documentation was one which raised much interesting discussion and debate among many of the video makers present. At a lively but short discussion, the point was raised by artists working with video as a 'main' medium whether documentation of live works could and should merit large budgets specifically for such uses, especially when considering the difficulty in working with the medium directly as an artist.

A valid conclusion that arose was that performers themselves should consider how their work is documented and whether they are going to work **for** or **with** the camera and even if video is the most effective means of documentation. This whole area is one which merits much discussion and development. One possible solution to the problem is the potential for more direct collaboration between performer and documenter in the recording and interpreting of such events.

#### The Poor Relatives Reviewed...

IN terms of works commissioned - specifically video installation, a thread which ran throughout was the active attempt by the artists concerned to use performance as an integral element.

In some this is more self-evident than in others, in particular Zoe Redman and Francis

Alexander's **Room of Clocks** which left one with the feeling of having missed the performance - of viewing the props, the situation of the performer, rather than the performers themselves. This in itself gave the work a timeless feel, but which like much of Redman's other work depends on her presence as a performer and poet.

Simon Herbert's work **Totem** more successfully captured this sense, relying on a childhood experience of watching a family drown in their car in a freak accident. Powerful images which have in effect become commonplace in the late eighties were combined with a highly charged monologue read by the artist himself, seen at times keyed through images of a Vietcong being executed and a number of other potent images from the twentieth century (all framed in place of the usual family snaps on the mantle above a constructed fireplace which formed the focal point of the entire work). The performance element relied on the artist's role as a witness, helpless yet able to comment and exorcise his fear and horror on seeing such an event.

Using the same idea of trauma, though in this case actual rather than observational, Mike Stubbs' **the Myth of Speed** falls severely short of its potential (Stubbs was involved in a serious road accident a while back). This work could have had the kind of impact that something like J. G. Ballard's 'Crash' has on its readers. Stubbs' concerns became lost by the poor presentation and lack of clarity of the imagery in which he deals, but then maybe some experiences are best forgotten...

Cat Elwes' simple two-screen piece **First House** dealt with the experience of motherhood; as a male I felt somewhat like a voyeur, looking into the house on the security and relationship between mother and child which this simple construction (a time-based 'Wendy House') explored.

The sound from this work also eventually became extremely tedious when trying to become involved in the other work taking place in the space, a problem due more to the containment of all the video works in a relatively small space.

### 8x5

POTENTIALLY the most effective and innovative works in the entire festival were presented over a self-contained five screen, five source format.

Confusion was the order of things here, with some artists making work to be viewed in a more conventional installation sense, where the viewer comes in, watches for as long as they like then leaves as was the case in my work with Alan Robertson as Pictorial Heroes: **The Great Divide**, whereas something such as Andrew Stones' **Salmon Song** demanded that the viewer sit and watch for 40 minutes before being confronted by a work such as that presented by Kate Meynell's **A Book of Performance**, which only utilised 2 (or was it 3?) screens.

8 works were programmed in such a manner and ran continuously throughout the day - for the audience this created a hit and miss affair, with viewing of specific works being determined by chance.

However, if you had the time and patience to view all of these works it would prove a rewarding experience, ranging as they did from the visually beautiful piece by Marion Urch **Out of the Ashes** to the (over) glossy comment and assault on the Yuppie mentality **Social Games and Group Dances** presented by Simon Robertshaw and Mike Jones which utilised the Quantel paintbox. Another work which effectively used the Paintbox was Chris Rowland's piece **Home on the Range**, dealing as it did with images of violence - particularly of death and conflict by the bullet, set against a shooting gallery and funfair type environment.

Both these pieces would have benefitted from a little more clarity and resolution in terms of issues addressed and a little less concern with technology and presentation, a major problem confronting any artist given the opportunity to work with such technology. Rowland has subsequently added a further section to his piece which I have yet to see.

Dealing with similar issues as Rowland to some extent, Steve Littman's **Street Life - Something of the present** dealt with the ideas of living with the gun and the type of Rambo-type mentality dominant in contemporary culture. Littman's intentions may be honourable but become lost in an orgy of violent and exploitative images - many seen in other Littman pieces (namely 'Smile' and 'In the name of the gun'). Overall the

point where imagery ceases to be obsessive and starts to become repetitive is an issue which arises here.

Throughout all the works with the exception of Stones' 'Salmon Song', which tended to deal with the medium itself and is one of a number of new works emerging which seem to be reviving the seventies pre-occupation with the processed image, and the notion of a 'pure video', a number of themes and key concerns emerged, such as the idea of cultural/social division and exile (as in the case of 'The Great Divide', which dealt with the idea of North and South Divide/Haves and Have nots and Janusz Szecerek's **Open the Box** which contained the divide between Eastern Bloc and Western Culture and the interpretations of world events through Television in the Global Village (or should that read ghetto?).

Another consideration was the very obvious concerns of both the male and female artists involved - the women tending to look inward and deal with uniquely feminist issues (which in some cases such as in Marion Urch's work) contained their own kind of violence whilst the masculine tended to look outward, dealing with more broadly based cultural and political concerns, ranging from the more obvious instances of male violence (which were criticised unreasonably by many women artists present) to explore and probe conflict and class hierarchies.

On the basis of these works, apart from the more obvious considerations, there seems to be emerging certain styles and techniques which characterise work produced by both sexes, Urch's and Meynell's work tending more to the filmic and poetic, whilst for

example Rowland's and Robertshaw/Jones's work tending to be more definitely 'video' in its use of effects and multi-layered imagery. Likewise, Steve Littman's Pictorial Heroes and Janusz Szecerek's relied on what could be seen as a 'harder' use of video effects and scratch style editing.

Whether this is a deliberate or accidental trend will have to wait to be seen, in the meantime it is apparent that all the artists involved had something worth showing and saying - and they did so, effectively, beautifully, violently and most of the time chaotically.

Overall the inclusion and profile of video at the event was down to the hard work and efforts of Steve Littman.

Unfortunately due to both technical and organisational problems a similar event at Glasgow's Third Eye Centre turned into a badly installed side show which nobody knew existed. This in itself didn't do the work - nor any championing of video - any favours.

Problems aside, let's hope that at next year's event in Glasgow that Video is not seen as the poor relative of performance and that the organisers are aware that in staging any work in this area don't forget what's been happening in Scotland or with typical London-style arrogance think they can dictate and control output.

Taking such an event out of London is both creditable and worthwhile - the problems begin when considering the whole context and validity of decentralising - but then that's a whole new argument to be considered...

## □ Mediamatic □

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