JOHN WYVER samples the tasty effects of Britain's first Video Art exhibition at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool

Gogglebox art hits back at telly vision

'TELEVISION has been attacking us all our lives,' the artist Nam June Paik once said. 'Now we're hitting back.' By 'we' he meant those who had glimpsed a greater creative potential in television's technology than game shows. 'Video artists' these visionaries came to be called, and Paik, an enigmatic South Korean, was acclaimed as their guru and godfather.

According to a cherished myth, in 1965 Paik used one of the first portable video cameras to record scenes of New York street life. In so doing, historians seem to agree, he brought forth video art into the world. During the years since, give or take an occasional Channel 4 screening, it has to be said that the world has remained largely unmoved. But on the fringes of the visual arts and at the edges of television, video is developing into a stimulating, creative culture.

Throughout the Sixties and early Seventies, first in the United States and Germany and then in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, many video artists concentrated on exploring the specific qualities of electronic images. Just over a decade ago these academic, formalist concerns began to give way to humour, music, story-telling and parodies of popular forms. Artists increasingly used video to explore personal and political responses to the world. Video art started to seem more accessible, and to become marginally more acceptable to mainstream television. Advertising agencies, pop promo producers and graphic designers began to take notice. Despite these developments, most new work continued to be shown in a handful of galleries, and often only to the artist's family and friends.

The Video Positive Festival in Liverpool (until 25 February) is the latest attempt to expose video culture to a broader public. Organised on a budget of just over £30,000, but with support in kind from, among others, the video facilities company Samcom, the festival features about a dozen environmental video sculptures, or installations, workshops, lectures and presentations of individual tapes.

The centrepiece of the festival is a 40-monitor videowall at Liverpool's Tate Gallery. Introduced some four years ago, videowalls are popular attractions at rock concerts and trade exhibitions, but this is the first time one has been seen in a British art gallery. A bank of 16 televisions faces two groups of nine, and its power is apparent as soon as an array of images begins to bounce around the screens in a carefully programmed sequence. To be subjected to the wall's full aural and visual assault can be, by turns, delightful and disturbing.

The imaginative possibilities of the wall were well demonstrated by three of the commissions from British artists. Katherine Meynell's 'Moonrise' is a dream-like fable juxtaposing images of air, fire and water with a hermaphrodite juggler and an infant mermaid. 'Interrun' by Stephen Partridge is a complex and technically sophisticated response to a Scottish landscape, accompanied by a rich, enfolding score from Lei Cox. In complete contrast, 'Great Britain' by Simon Robertshaw and Mike Jones endeavours to connect media representations of recent political events with the texture of everyday life in the 1980s. In no other work in the festival is the intention to 'hit back' at television so explicit.

Ten days' hire of a medium-size videowall, plus essential preparation, would leave little change from £100,000, so, regrettably, without further sponsorship Arts Council-funded initiatives for other walls are unlikely to follow. None the less the experts running the Tate wall recognise how stimulating the contact with the artists has been, and the partnership suggests a model for bringing together high culture and hi-tech.

The spectacle of the videowall is so intense that most of the other, smaller installations appear pallid by contrast. The only one of sufficient complexity and beauty to survive comparison is 'The Well of Patience' (at the Tate, last day today) by Daniel Reeves, an artist from the United States who lives in Scotland. On the floor of a darkened space are several hundred white mousetraps and a score of figures of the Amida Buddha, arranged in a circular pattern around a mirror. From the ceiling hang wine glasses and hammers, echoing the circle below and brushed by a light breeze. The effect is strangely poetic. Between this 'earth' and 'heaven' are two panoramic video screens on which are projected triptychs of images from nature. Even as realised here, in imperfect conditions, 'The Well of Patience' asks impressive questions of spirituality and of our relationship to the natural world.

Recognising the qualities of the best video installations like 'The Well of Patience', the contemporary art market, especially in Europe, has begun to sense the medium's investment potential. Experiments in selling individual, limited-edition art videotapes have never been successful, but now private collectors, museums and even corporations are beginning to purchase installations. And European artists are responding with ambitious and effective ideas.

The Tate's videowall: 'To be subjected to the wall's full aural and visual assault can be, by turns, delightful and disturbing.' Photograph by **GED MURRAY.**

In Britain the less developed video tradition and the minimal funding available have restricted artists to a far more modest scale. In Jeremy Welsh's intimate installation 'Immemorial' at the Bluecoat Arts Centre (co-host of the festival with the Tate), the reserved quality is appropriate for this tribute to the artist's father and grandfather. But the other work on view last week was disappointing (two new installations are to be mounted from Tuesday). Not all video makers want to 'hit back' at television, but too few British artists currently seem capable of making more than tentative stabs into the ether.

An essential element of video cultures abroad is the flourishing international festival circuit. Annual or biennial gatherings in Los Angeles, in Berlin, Bonn, the Hague and elsewhere are important occasions at which to view recent work and to promote national video culture. Britain has never had such a festival, and Video Positive, with its limited programme and stretched organisational capacity, does not yet stake an entirely convincing claim to this role. But the organisers have ambitions, which deserve support, to mount a more substantial festival in 1991. With the Sky channels newly beaming down upon us, and more planned, we may need all the help we can get to 'hit back' at TV.

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