

# A REPLY TO RICHARD CORK— VIDEO ART AND THE MASS PUBLIC

Tamara Krikorian

While sharing some of Richard Cork's concern with bringing art closer to the people, I cannot share his recipe for putting this into practice, and that is in proposing as he does in his introduction to the catalogue of the recent exhibition 'Artists Video—An Alternative use of the Medium', Biddick Farm Art Centre, Washington, that the artist should first consider the audience he would like to address. In doing this, as in all the arguments about 'Art with social purpose' one risks a state of compromise. In the case of television this is a particularly dangerous compromise, since the audience is primarily concerned with entertainment and the broadcaster with entertaining. I would deny in fact, Richard Cork's suggestion that artists turn to video as a medium because they want to reach a mass audience or indeed produce work with the aim of showing it on broadcast television. It is a pre-eminently visual medium and therefore should be exploited as much as painting and sculpture, and obviously our primary knowledge of video as a medium comes through our knowledge of television.

Before relating video art to broadcast television one must take into account the nature of television and its institutions and the individual artist's position in relation to these. The nature of broadcast television is illusionistic, it presents us with an 'apparent' view of reality, produced through a rigorous institutional and impenetrable structure and an obsession with distribution and flow. Raymond Williams has revealed the nature of television so eloquently and with such precision in 'Television—Technology and Cultural Form', that it would be inappropriate for me to attempt to précis his discussion. However, one element which I must emphasise is the avoidance in broadcast television of any reference to mediation—the mediation of the broadcasters. This denies the audience the means of doing anything more than remaining passive consumers. There is already a significant force both inside and outside the broadcasting institutions, which proposes the 'anti-illusionist' approach as the only means of getting the audience to understand the nature of the medium which is dominating their lives. In other words, that it should be through a process of education and 'decoding of material' that the audience comes to understand the work, rather than searching for values of mass appeal. I would remind Richard Cork that a similar debate has been taking place in relation to film and the understanding of that medium since Dziga Vertov and earlier! And that analysis of film has led to the appreciation of film as an art form.

highly controversial paper by John McGrath, best known as an ex-scriptwriter of *Z-Cars*, and a Director of the ZBB (England) company. In this paper which was principally about the Drama Documentary, McGrath attacked the broadcasters for what he considered to be a reactionary policy of mystification, in concentrating their energies on the 'content' of the work in an attempt to be naturalistic while denying through a deliberate avoidance of reference to the medium an understanding of the medium itself. I will not go into the reverberations of that debate, which has been taken up by a large number of people both inside and outside the medium of broadcasting. (Dennis Potter's 'Pennies from Heaven' broadcast earlier this year, went some way in bringing this debate out into the open.) I am not in this instance discussing broadcasting as a central issue. However, I think what clearly must be understood by all those calling for participation by artists in broadcasting are the enormous problems to be resolved. The reasons given so far for the resistance of the 'broadcaster' to accept video art or video artists, namely technical deficiencies in

the work or opposition from the unions, are only some of the very complex issues, confronting not only the artist in relation to television, but the scriptwriter, producer, filmmaker and many others, who are concerned with television as being anything other than an entertainment medium.

And here one comes to the basic contradictions in Richard Cork's discussion, and I quote: 'They may very reasonably point out that one of their tasks should be to uphold a consciousness which runs counter to the prevailing values of TV consumerism, and that it would be compromise of the worst kind to curry favour with the shibboleths upheld by the communications establishment. But I would argue that to concentrate on dismantling conventional codes, at the expense of thinking about why a mass television audience should want to watch such exercises on the living-room screen, is to run the danger of producing work which seals itself off inside an avant-garde debate which has too little meaning for anyone unacquainted with that debate.' The contradiction is found in the notion that it is possible to 'counter prevailing values'



artist should first consider the audience he would like to address. In doing this, as in all the arguments about 'Art with social purpose' one risks a state of compromise. In the case of television this is a particularly dangerous compromise, since the audience is primarily concerned with entertainment and the broadcaster with entertaining. I would deny in fact, Richard Cork's suggestion that artists turn to video as a medium because they want to reach a mass audience or indeed produce work with the aim of showing it on broadcast television. It is a pre-eminently visual medium and therefore should be exploited as much as painting and sculpture, and obviously our primary knowledge of video as a medium comes through our knowledge of television.

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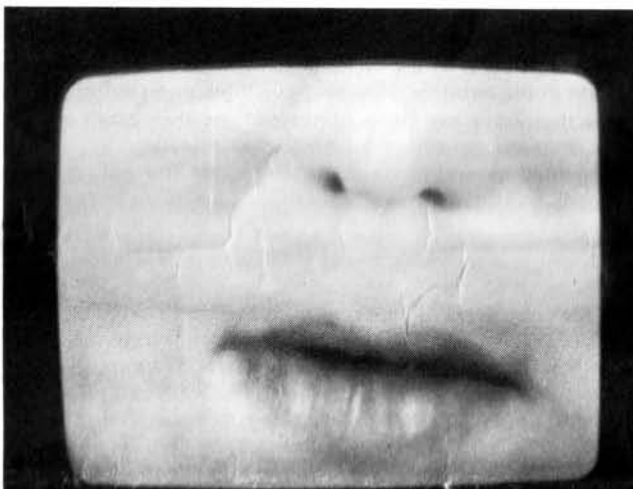
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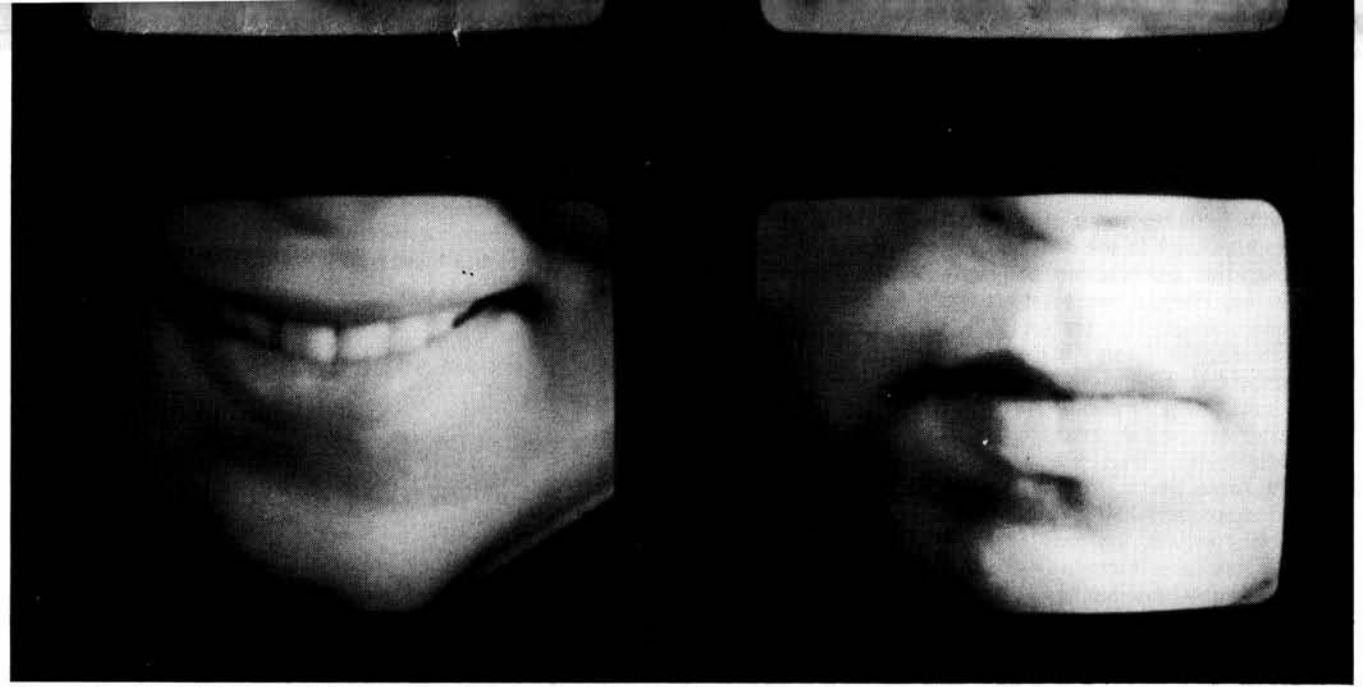
'Vanitas' 1977 Tamas Krikorian

without equipping the audience with a language to do this. This language must come from a formal 'dismantling of conventional codes' which may well 'seal itself off inside an avant-garde debate' if the myth is perpetuated that not only television but that art also, is for entertainment and that intellectual analysis must therefore be avoided.

In any case we are talking about an avant-garde debate or a specifically 'modernist' debate? I would defend a position based on the ideals of early Russian formalism and believe that it is through the introduction of Greenberg's modernism that the avant-garde position has been weakened or split. What one would call for, and this applies to film as well, is a use of language which is more comprehensible to a wide audience, not that the level of debate should necessarily have a mass appeal. There should be no compromise in practice. If one goes back to the Russian avant-garde and the dynamism of that work, one sees artists who were working 'within' a revolutionary situation but without compromise to their own ideas. It is doubtful that the mass audience 'understood' their activity, but it would be sacrilegious to deny the range and influence of that work. Where I would further disagree with Richard Cork in his discussion about art for a mass public; is that there is any more reason to suppose that avant-garde practice produces more 'tedious empty and pretentious' work than any other practice.







Examples of what Tamara Krikorian describes as 'anti-illusionist' video. Top left: Tamara Krikorian 'Unassembled information' 1977. Bottom left: Stuart Marshall, 'Go Through the Motions' 1975. Top right: Dave Critchley 'The Tortoise and the Hare' 1978. Bottom right: Steve Partridge 'Dialogue for Four Players, A Four Channel Installation', 1978.

I have not referred in detail to the recent show 'Artists Video—An Alternative use of the Medium' as I hope that from this article my own position is entirely clear. While praising the organisers in their efforts to provide an annual platform at Washington for video art, I regret their policy of attempting to appeal to a mass audience. The majority of the work (with few notable exceptions) can unfortunately be labelled with the description that Richard Cork applies to much avant-garde practice—'tedious, empty and pretentious' but in this case not because it subscribes to an avant-garde practice but because it appeals to a mass audience. I am talking here of work produced through a particular involvement with the technology, with synthesisers and colouring devices; synaesthetic tapes which, as David Hall says, 'present a complex synthetic imagery which, while not a normal experience of broadcast TV, tends if anything to corroborate the mystic convention . . .' On another level this work is presumed to have mass appeal in spite of its mindless attack on the senses through a jumble of garish images and sounds.

Another aspect of the Washington show was the concentration on the medium rather than on the work of the individual artist and this is where many of the important issues related not only to video but other media become blurred. It would seem that it is all too easy to ignore the artist as an individual for political reasons and, worse still, for reasons of administrative compartmentalisation. There seem to be too many apologies for

the medium and not enough support for the artist working with whatever medium he chooses. I would disagree with Richard Cork that there is insecurity 'in the enterprising venture which goes under the label of video art'. I believe that there is insecurity amongst critics and administrators who would like to regulate our activity as artists and bring it to terms with their ideas of what art is or should be. Isn't this again denying the role of the individual and bringing everything down to a norm? What is a video artist? David Hall has discussed this in detail in the adjacent article. But more specifically, who are the individual artists, are they simply part of a package, which can be accepted and rejected at the critics whim or a group of individuals sharing a common medium, but with very different ways of expressing themselves in it? Cork assumes that all video artists want to be seen as TV artists. This is certainly not the case. There is no more reason to suppose that video artists should show their work on TV than that all writers should want to print their writing in a newspaper. The writer whose work appears in an edition of a hundred may well have a more lasting and potentially wider influence in terms of his art than the newspaper columnist whose daily prattlings are forgotten within the week. The ephemeral nature of the medium is one which the video artist should be concerned with and not its ability to reach a mass audience.