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**ARTISTS VIDEO**

## Foreword

Video and art. Video Art. Together the words perhaps seem at odds, even incompatible. Video is a very new and strictly technical term, invented simply to identify the electronic signal which carries television picture information. Art is something else. The word usually conjures to mind an act which is virtually as old as the human race. Creativity. The manifestation of self-expression through personal dexterity — the very antithesis of all that is impersonal about modern technology. Consequently it may be difficult to accept that such a combination can have significance in the bastions of High Art. Indeed, many artists and critics as well as viewers tend to be antagonistic, even reactionary, towards this new television art. Of course their reasons vary greatly, it is not only the problems of assimilating their traditional concepts of art-making with those of technology, but also I suspect they have fears that such an activity might threaten the established élitist rôles of art and artists. What, after all, has television got to do with art, and art with television? There is one crucial common factor, both are concerned with communication.

Until the Industrial Revolution, art had a significant place in society. Among other things, it imaginatively exposed the artists' view of the topical preoccupations of the time. As well as being a medium of personal expression, it was one of mass communication. Painting and sculpture were a *necessary* part of the culture. Since then most traditional artistic activity has, by comparison, gone into obscurity. It has been replaced by instantly accessible technological innovations. Notably, radio, film and television. Yet, because of the seduction of the new-found materialist wealth and culture (a direct product of the Industrial Revolution) the imaginative art content in these new media is at a minimum, and commercial interests predominate. The creative, experimental aspect is essential. It is as necessary now, if not more so, as it was through painting and sculpture in the Renaissance and before. If broadcast television has adopted a substantial part of the rôle of those classic forms, it has to be more than merely illustrative, informative, and 'entertaining'.

Many video artists have recognised a greater importance in using this — now the most popular means of visual communication — over and above any other medium. All may not have come to use it for the reasons I have suggested, but *by* using it they inevitably challenge both the conventional expectations of what TV should be, and the élitist dilemma of twentieth century art. Low cost equipment developed over the last twelve years has made it possible for artists to work independently, producing their own recordings and closed-circuit TV environments as art works. But the greatest hurdle has yet to be cleared — that of getting through institutional red-tape, working alongside broadcasters, and transmitting their wares. Programmes of artists' videotape recordings are to be seen more and more on American broadcast TV; a number of significant transmissions have been made on the Continent; but as yet coverage in this country has amounted to only one or two isolated occasions — yet here is an art that *is* TV.

In the meantime, artists' video is steadily gaining ground if only by being exposed to the public through closed-circuit exhibitions such as this. And it is all very new. Until two years ago, when the Arts Council held a major show of independent video work at their Serpentine Gallery in London, little was known of video art in this country. Since then there have been important events in other venues in London, including the Tate Gallery; in Scotland and elsewhere in Britain. Equally British video artists are gaining status abroad, and have been represented in exhibitions in Holland, Italy, France (the Paris Biennale) and Germany (Documenta 6, Kassel), all with considerable success. Regional art centres around the country are showing increasing interest in showing the work, and recently a number of British artists have come together to set up the first organisation (London Video Arts) for the promotion and distribution of art tapes from here and abroad.

This exhibition represents a selection of current work by artists from around the world. Most of it has little to do with the broadcast TV as we know it. Broadcasters play it safe in assuming that they are giving-the-public-what-they-want. They use traditionally accepted rules of presentation and snappy 'sales' techniques. The content may vary but the form never changes. It rarely acts as an agency to give any true insight into the mainstream of progressive endeavour. That art can be provocative, contravene expectations, even implicitly political, is a view they have not seen, or more probably care to ignore. Video art not only presents a highly personalised content, but examines and utilises formal and technical aspects of the medium in ways unseen over the air. Our preconceptions of what a TV set should give us are a direct result of what we have become conditioned to expect. This is a dangerous state of affairs, and the work of video artists communicates a freedom of expression which both expands our consciousness of what TV could easily offer and heralds the day when art will again take on a significant niche in our culture.

However you respond to this work, be sure that it is not a passing fad, another short-lived 'movement' in the history of twentieth century art. Movements and styles have, and will, continue to change *within* it, as they have in other art forms. But as long as television exists artists will use it. This is just the beginning.

**David Hall**

FOREWORD - WASHINGTON, TUNE & WEAR,  
ARTISTS VIDEO SHOW  
CATALOGUE 1977

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