



**VIDEO
MAART**

VIDEO STUDIO JAN VAN EYCK 1981

The time-based media dilemma.

This decade has seen a virtual revolution in the visual arts with a greater and greater number of artists working with time-based media: including performance, sound, film and video. Some work exclusively with one, others two or more.

Time-based media are a problem. Not so much for the artists, but with the systems of support and exposure. Most progressive contemporary work presents problems for the viewer/audience, and these problems vary enormously dependant on the objectives in each work. But what is a bigger issue is getting time-based work to an audience in the first place.

It is well recognised now that the capitalist system, in keeping with its demands on any produce, successfully continues to harness the artwork and more importantly the artist - that is anyone with anything to sell.

Sculpture and painting are obvious examples, indeed any marketable object. Yet every artist needs support, and whatever his/her inclinations are the concession to somewhat dubious (to say the least) operations may be the only recourse. A sorry state of affairs. Dedicated object-makers have only their needs and consciences to grapple with in finding a means, but time-based artists have the additional problem that they rarely have anything to sell anyway. (1)

The majority of such artists rarely have to contend the issues surrounding private sector dealing (though there are some who surely would not mind), and the alternative has become public sector support, whether it is grant-aid, public or part-public gallery shows. And here there are doubts also, not so much related to personal financial interest (though even that may be a point of contention in some cases) but more a question of what exactly constitutes the curatorial/administrative role.

In Britain it is fairly evident that the large public galleries reflect very much the produce of the private sector syndrome - object art, even though it may not always come via that system. The proportion of exposure of time-based in that context is far less than actually exists (2). Whilst it may be difficult for some of the general public (and a large faction of reactionary artists working in more traditional media) to accept that such work is indeed

art at all, one would expect curators to attempt to reflect current activities more accurately than they do at present. Other smaller venues supported by public funding bodies either similarly ape private gallery strategy (3), or struggle on the brink of collapse through insufficient resources. The shortcomings of other alternatives (for video artists is particular) like broadcast television have been discussed at length elsewhere (4). Administration of direct grant-aid to artists and artist organisations appears to suffer a similar plight to the one encountered with curatorial support - or lack of it. Whatever the publicised intentions of national and regional bodies are, the actual support for time-based "visual" arts is comparatively minimal. This, it would appear, largely rests with the degree of knowledge and empathy of those personnel employed to foster its needs (whether they are full-time administrators or unpaid members of committees). And then, it is inevitably argued, there is never enough money. It is interesting to note that whilst financial support to individuals is never enough (individual grants for work in these comparatively expensive media rarely exceeding that obtained by artists working in traditional media), support for artist-run organisations who attempt to redress the balance by providing facilities and services on a non-profit basis is pathetically little (5). Are we experiencing a monopolistic power struggle on the part of (some) funding bodies who maintain a "divide and rule" principle by refusing to sufficiently devolve some of their responsibilities to organisations better suited to handling them (6)? If this is so then they are in not such a different position to that of the private dealer where the artist is always at some level accountable to his/her patron.

Video is undoubtedly the newest addition to this time-based activity in Britain and, probably because of this, understanding and the subsequent desirable support is even more difficult to obtain than for other areas. And it is interesting to observe of late that those artists who have utilised it in for example performance work, which has already attained greater historical credibility, have received marginally better attention than those who work with it alone. There is insufficient space here to enter into a critical discourse on approaches to working with video which I have attempted to cover elsewhere (7), but suffice it to say that it is so broad - ranging from use as a convenient recording device (hence peripheral to the work in question), through integration in multi-media works, to the installations and tape-as-artworks of bona-fide video (or "television") artists - that it would be a mistake at this time to lump all artists' uses of video under the popular label of Video Art, especially when often the boundaries are so blurred. Britain now has nearly a ten year history of artists' video production and throughout that time there has been only a very few significant shows here. Almost without exception each of these was either initiated, if not totally organised, by artists. Tape distribution until recently was handled direct through the artist concerned, with all the problems that entails. There has been, over the years, various attempts in other parts of Europe to initiate systems for greater accessibility to tapes and also distribution. It is, of course, very necessary as among other things, gallery exhibition is in any case by no means a satisfactory method of exposure. Where it has always been possible to view paintings and other objects in an exhibition context (because it is traditionally accepted as the "right" context and because the time devoted to each piece is entirely in the control of the viewer) video, certainly video-tape, is out of context psychologically due to traditional expectations imposed on it by dominant TV - demanding comparatively intimate viewing, and practically, due to the difficulties of successfully exhibiting this time-based medium (especially in large group shows) where each piece necessarily demands a time control on the viewer. But to date all attempts at viable and inclusive systems of distribution of artists' video have failed on the Continent.

Numerous conferences and symposia have been held, informel meetings and discussions have taken place, and invariably the foremost problem of distribution has arisen. Yet little has been resolved over there.

However, there is in Britain a degree of optimism which surpasses that experienced in the rest of Europe. In fact, as I have implied, the nature of the situation is one which demands possibly greater self-propulsion by artists themselves than most other places, certainly in video, and the incentive has come almost entirely from practitioners to promote as well as to execute the work. In 1976 London Video Arts was born out of discussions between a number of artists who were active in the use of video. Modelled on a co-op format, with constitution and steering committee, its purpose was to establish a non-profit organisation to promote, show and distribute independently made artists' video. More particularly, the idea was to set up a workshop to facilitate tape production and experimentation with installations and performances: to provide a regular venue for showing these works and work produced elsewhere, including abroad; to create a tape library and distribution system; and, perhaps most important in the long term, to stimulate dialogue on current practical and theoretical issues.

1. However, one must not forget that some of them have happily conceded to the groans of their dealers and similar financially interested parties, and produce photographs and other documentation of activities and events as saleable substitutes for the real thing. Bastardisation was and never will be "great art" however convenient it proves itself to the current regime.
2. The Tate Gallery for instance has virtually no record of acknowledging its existence aside from a brief period which included one or two film showings by artists and a video installations show in 1976. Soon after that all activities were blacked. The Serpentine and Hayward galleries occasionally make token gestures but little more.
3. Exceptions in London are notably the Acme gallery, Riverside Studios (occasionally), and the now defunct AIR gallery.
4. For example Studio International, Video Art issue, May/June 1976; and bi-monthly Video Reports in the same magazine by David Hall, Jan/Feb 1976 onwards.
5. The London Film-makers Co-op appears to be one of the rare exceptions to the rule here, though it has taken more than a decade to achieve it.
6. By comparison Canada Council "devolves" a large portion of its funds on a recurring basis to artist-run organisations specialising in video-facilities.
7. op.cit. Studio International; and "Using video and Video Art", David Hall, Video Art catalogue, Herbert Art Gallery Coventry, or aspects magazine, Winter 78/9.