

Extract from 'The Early Chronology of Video Art' by Mick Hartney, London Video Arts Distribution Catalogue 1984

In Britain, meanwhile, another project entailing intervention in broadcast TV took place in 1971, whose author would be crucial to the emergence of a distinctive sensibility in British and European Video Art.

David Hall had worked as a sculptor before turning to film in 1967. He produced a series of films, some in collaboration with Tony Sinden, which had in common their rejection of conventional narrative or documentary form, in favour of a clear autonomous structure based on the specificity of cinematic representation. In 1970 he expanded his concerns to include television and video. His Seven TV Pieces, shot on film, were broadcast by Scottish Television in 1971, as interruptions to regular programmes, without announcement or explanation. In each, the depicted event drew attention to the scale and character of the television set on which they were viewed, as when a tap moves into frame, and the set appears to fill with water, later draining away at a totally unexpected angle. These works were a declaration of intent which Hall elaborated in subsequent video installations and tapes, and the combination of attention to the usually disregarded material factors in television viewing, with a contentious approach to television as a social phenomenon of questionable merit, to which video art could address itself as an alternative, were to be a recurrent feature of British Video Art.

Over the next few years a number of artists

emerged on the British scene who held in common a commitment to the exploration of video as an art form in its own right, rather than as a medium of documentation or as a source of kinaesthetic imagery derived from abstract painting. The severe restrictions of the medium, at the level accessible to artists in Britain, and indeed throughout Europe, became a source of strength and liberation. The kind of residency in broadcast facilities offered to artists in the U.S.A. was virtually unknown here, and artists were confined to a mode of production which precluded the use of colour, vision mixing, and clean editing such as obtained in film. A new aesthetic was developed which advanced propositions rather than complex images; which favoured an equivalence between recording and viewing time-scales; and in which the closed circuit or continuously recorded multi-monitor installation figured with particular importance. Deprived of establishment support, totally ignored by broadcasting, and neglected by the art world critical infrastructure, video artists in Britain and Europe resorted to self-help and reciprocal analysis of a particularly intensive kind. The influence of David Hall, as artist, teacher, commentator and amateur was of enormous importance between 1971 and 1976, when his crusading efforts to establish video art as an autonomous form with distinct values and aesthetics began to bear fruit in the form of Arts Council and gallery recognition and support.

Sharing Hall's general approach, but contributing each their individual personal concern with video, were Tamara Krikorian, Stuart Marshall, Steve Partridge, Mike Legget, Brian Hoey and Roger Barnard, Dave Critchley, Kevin Atherton and Keith Frake, who, while working in a variety of media, including performance, contributed important tapes and installations during this period. Actual exposure of their work to the public was sparse: following the ineffectual 'Survey of the Avant-Garde' at Gallery House, London, in 1972, to which Hall and Sinden showed the installation '60 TV Sets', there were just a few scattered screenings of video work in private and public galleries in Britain, until the massive survey show at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975. Most work was made, shown and discussed in the Fine Art departments of colleges, where ad hoc areas emerged in which students could explore media other than painting and sculpture, without the technique-based constraints of the film schools. The same process, in varying degrees, was occurring in other European countries, although the more rapid recognition of the medium by curators on the continent was evident in the exhibitions 'Projekt 74' at Cologne, 'Impact Art/Video Art', Lausanne, and in 'EXPRMNTL 5' an international film festival in Belgium, all in 1974.

'The Video Show' at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in May 1975 was a kind of watershed, at least for the British video scene. European and American video art was seen for the first time on any scale in this country, while all the important video artists in Britain at that time showed work alongside community artists, alternative media producers, would-be

media barons and plain oddballs. It was the first and last exposition of its kind in Britain. Although the annual shows at Washington, Tyne-and-Wear, organised by Brian Hoey and Wendy Brown, would continue from 1976, to bravely, bring together international tapes and installations of various kinds, video makers polarised at this point into the main divisions of artists and community activists, with increasingly separate funding, outlets, and intentions.

There would continue to be an ill-defined middle ground occupied by those concerned with high-tech abstraction, video theatre and performance, and groups specialising in music or dance, but the events of 1976 demonstrated the clear emergence of video art as a distinct discipline in Britain, concerned with fundamental implications of the medium as a route to philosophical questions about the nature of representation itself, and the specific conventions of social representation embodied in television.

Recognition of this school of practice, (although it should not be misrepresented as a homogeneous group-practice), was demonstrated in 1976 on three important levels: BBC-TV devoted a special issue of 'Arena - Art and Design' to video art; Studio International, the most prestigious art journal in Europe at that time, likewise devoted an issue; and the Tate Gallery mounted an exhibition of installations by six video artists - a gesture of respect for the medium which would not be repeated until 1981, in a survey of

time-based work. Much of the credit for this confluence of attention must go to the campaigning zeal of David Hall, who was closely involved in all three events. The selection of artists included in TV programme and magazines was governed to some extent by his own purist preferences; but in retrospect the adherence to a unified mode of practice, derived from, but also extending outwards from, the formalist/materialist tendencies of 70's avant-garde art, was justified. The documentation of international tendencies in Studio, in particular, revealed a set of concerns constituting a coherent sensibility in European video art, present even in Poland in the work of Wojcieh Bruszewski and others: a radical engagement with fundamental aesthetic and social issues which was frequently absent in the more populist or narcissistic products of all but a few American artists.