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EARLY VIDEO ART: A LOOK AT A CONTROVERSIAL HISTORY

'Artists working in the [video] medium are exploring the perceptual and conceptual implications of the process in a manner that is specifically directed both towards the breaking down of the specialised and categorical nature of art experience and to the creation of a holistic view of art activity as a generalised case of human communication.' (1)

This quote from David Ross in 1973 appropriately encapsulates the drive by Britain's first video artists. At that time modernist 'specialised and categorical' tendencies in fine art - nurtured in a well-established nineteenth century Salon-based enclosure - quite clearly exerted considerable pressure on the new thinking. But it has been a mistake by some writers to suggest that the earliest video practitioners willfully subscribed to that ideology; rather they were, from the beginning, intent on cautiously constructing alternative frameworks and procedures out of the prevailing climate. However, the documentation of work at the time was both limited and sporadic, and was written mostly out of necessity by the artists themselves. It was not until later that 'histories' of the first decade began to emerge and, whilst occasionally referring to the few previous reports, many showed signs of devising alternative readings of that past. Together with attempts to set original intentions against later theoretical debate - probably in an effort to accommodate current concerns - this proceeded to oversimplify, distort and ultimately misrepresent aspects of the early practice. Consequently, over the years, the process particularly affected the most distant work causing it to become virtually unrecognisable. In this short essay I shall, from the vantage point of one of its first practitioners, offer some observations on this curious phenomenon where the development of the historiography often bears little relation to the situation and objectives as they were at the time.

Throughout the seventies video (or television) art did not attract the attention it probably deserved, and that was to be expected in Britain. But contrary to suggestions in some accounts there was no overt desire by most of its few artists to aspire to the commercial art gallery scene. More importantly they sought a wider audience - a place in the broader cultural context. Occasional uncompromised interventions into broadcast TV gave some substance to the endeavour together with exposure in whatever venue could be found. With minimal support from broadcasters and overly cautious funding bodies it was not easy, no-one expected it to be. But after the turn of the eighties - faced with the pressures of an ascending Thatcherite regime; opportunities that came to be offered by independent commercial enterprise; and the lure of the new and promising Channel 4 - some of the growing number of practitioners became embroiled in attempts to justify political and institutional viability. At the same time a significant new wave of semiotic, psychoanalytic and gender theory was evolving and was adopted with great enthusiasm often demanding a specific narrative coherence and becoming an undoubted influence on a number of later works. Here then, claims to both a 'new-found' pluralist freedom and a 'return' to representation were born. Meanwhile, over that period, unprecedented accounts of

the earlier radical work began to appear, some charging it with the failings of a modernist elite.

However, difficulties arose when attempts were made to construct a rationale for an alternative, even 'anti-modern', phase in video. While the popular new postmodernist debate addressed to other art activities remained within an understanding of the broad parameters of those activities, video art had by then been all but lost in the confusion of a climate where arguments were made for its inclusion in a nebulous so-called video (or moving image) culture. Here problems occurred in attempting to critically identify new parameters for activities still evidently insisting on (though sometimes not admitting) a video art label, which, by their inclusion yet by definition, begged the question as to whether this was possible. The paradox attracted a curious strategy - an attempt to construct a sectioned-out preceding phase, often conveniently but mistakenly packaged as 'formalist', presumably in the belief that perhaps a displacement of the 'old' would somehow give credibility to an alternative 'new'. However, gigantic flaws appeared in adopting this tactic. First, there was no single and sustained coherent orthodoxy among the earliest artists as this might suggest, though climatic influences inevitably caused loose alliances as they always have. Secondly, the few examples cited as being typical of this early phase did not neatly conform to the role attributed to them (which, oddly, has been admitted in some reports). And finally, and most importantly, a great deal of work produced then, and often avoided in the argument, did not adhere to definitive criteria understood as belonging to formalist practice elsewhere.

Parallel tactics applied to the other arts may have had some ground, but arguments for a deflation of the modernist 'heroic might' of objecthood, often conveniently illustrated by restricting the attack to minimalist object art, were problematic when addressed to the earliest video. The developing 'fringe' element of late sixties art from which this work emerged was one which was already engaged in the essential 'dematerialisation' of the object and moves away from dominant concerns largely rooted in Greenbergian principles. This was appropriately taken up and pressed forward by the advent of video, and while there was invariably more than a vestige of a formalist 'look' to much of the new work, to perceive this later as its ultimate purpose has been a grave misreading of more progressive aims - notably its push for 'acts of signification' beyond those specific to the 'object substance'.

In retrospect the earliest work can therefore be seen to owe more to conceptualist rather than formalist concerns. This important (though often confused) distinction was what, as well as its production and display systems, separated it not only from current obsessions in the mainstream plastic arts but also from formalist avant-garde film of the time with which it has often been identified. Conceptualism was intended as a liberation from the shackles of the object and consequently its filmic counterpart (preoccupation with materiality), encouraging for some a potential for greater social engagement. But it failed in this respect not so much because of its ideological intentions but because the art market was allowed to quickly seduce, reshape, package and consume it. Gallery work was therefore perhaps wrongly identified as the final marker of high modernism rather than the herald of a new and different opportunity. But a dearth of commercial interest in early British video art ensured that (thankfully) it would never fall into the same trap. Ironically it was some later work which appeared to concede to retrogressive modes of representation, claiming to be more 'populist' or 'accessible', which would find itself wooing ideologically constricting support.

In the early work processes of deconstruction were evident from the outset in an attempt, as I wrote in 1976, to 'decipher the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television'(2) and contrary to later claims very little engaged exclusively in statements of its 'own presence' as I have already implied. For example, unique video reflexivity was a component utilised as a significant part of the formal construct but rarely the prime objective of the work. Many early installations were not intended to 'address themselves' - where they 'uncompromisingly referred the viewer back to the specificity of the technology'(3) - but were primarily devised as a complex analogical mirror where the viewer, interacting with his/her image as collaborator rather than spectator, was 'simultaneously the viewed in a process of self-referring consciousness'(4). It is quite evident here that artists were intent on exploring relationships of hitherto unapproachable psychological innovation and response, where the formal, physical (and technological) framework was essentially the site of the experience. Therefore, whilst occasionally engaging formalist devices, concern only for a foregrounding of the signifier was rare from the beginning unlike much of the debate and work readily apparent in film. Even so, artists initially sought to detach themselves from dominant modes of expression, primarily in the use of the signifier and its technology, necessitating investigation into not only the medium's inherent properties but importantly, by evident implication if not by direct engagement, the political structures employed in television.

However, as Ross also said in 1973, 'many critics have confused video art with the liberal political movement to decentralize the television industry' (5). This was never an attempt to promote a kind of seditious 'anti-television' as was the naive aspiration of some American groups and agit-prop activists in Britain, nor was it a product of technological determinism as witnessed in the output of early 'video-freaks' or indeed their latter-day 'techno-artist' counterparts. It was neither a move by serious artists to totally disengage from television hoping to establish a 'counter-culture', nor was it a move to project themselves unconditionally into the enclaves of the art elite. This was an attempt to independently assert a claim to some part of the medium for themselves, to make space for an autonomous practice (here meaning a practice untethered from prevailing ideologies, not the modernist autonomy of 'introversion' complained of elsewhere).

Nevertheless, the inevitable and necessary early 'oppositional' stand made in face of its monolithic forbear was one which rarely fell into the reductive anti-illusionist cul-de-sac. The phenomenology of viewing any video work is without a doubt dominated by the (broadcast) television experience, and astute artists were aware that the viewers' psychological strategies in deriving 'meaning' from the works were, albeit subconsciously, fundamentally sited in their televisual expectations (in my view these can never be entirely removed, or 'purified', from the reading of a tape or installation), and I and other artists specifically confronted this as a central issue in a number of our works. But it was the conceptually provocative approach to both form and content which, whilst 'conventionally' inducing perceptual engagement (rather than alienation), countered, by improbable presentations, the seductive (manipulatory) expectations inevitably present in the viewing process. On occasions some of these works 'objectified' the display system but this, again, was rarely the sole intent. However, a conscious acknowledgement of the system's specificity here identified it as the producer of illusion which called to question dominant modes of representation. But the best of the work did not rest with this denial, and there was

rarely denial of a coherent image or of signification beyond the formal syntax. In this then, the earliest video art, 'messages' were implicit; sometimes metaphoric; clearly transgressed the boundaries of a formalist aesthetic; and stood as signs of a political independence outside the confines of both orthodox modernism and institutionalized TV.

References

- 1 David A. Ross, Introduction to Art + Cinema, Vol 1, No 2, 1973, p 5.
- 2 David Hall, British Video Art: Towards an Autonomous Practice, Studio International, Vol 191, No 981, May/June, 1976, p 249.
- 3 Stuart Marshall, Video: from Art to Independence, Screen, Vol 26, No 2, March/April, 1985, p 69.
- 4 David Hall, The Video Show, Art and Artists, Vol 10, No 2, Issue No 110, May, 1975, p 22.
- 5 David A. Ross, op. cit., p 5.

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