

VIDEO

Report by David Hall

International Video Manifestation

Bonnefantenmuseum

Maastricht

11 February - 20 March

In the five week video tape exhibition organised by Alexander van Grevenstein as part of his Video en Film Manifestatie, five countries were represented, each being allocated a week to put on a programme. Margo Bijvoet selected the Dutch works, Jan Debbaut the work from Belgium, Don Foresta works from the USA, Dany Bloch the French, and I took the British. As well as showing the tape programmes, van Grevenstein organised discussions and talks on video and related issues (I gave one on British video installations at the post-graduate Jan van Eyck Academie which is close-by to the museum). As I mentioned when announcing this show in the March/April issue, he also managed to get Sony to loan gratis all the equipment necessary to stage the exhibition including a mixing console, VTRs, and three studio cameras plus a portapak. This gave the opportunity to a number of artists to actually produce new works insitu; it made possible the recording of other events; and the museum also concurrently ran creative courses involving this equipment for local people, which always helps to demystify the technology, and in particular the élitism of broadcast TV.

~~In my view~~ The show was an unconditional success. It is just a pity that comparatively small public galleries, such as the Bonnefanten, do not receive quite the support they deserve on occasions such as this - particularly as it would seem the traditionally prestigious Dutch centres, like the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, automatically command attention whatever they put on. To my knowledge no larger Dutch gallery has, as yet, attempted to match van Grevenstein's commitment in presenting such a broad spectrum on recent developments in video art.

However, the Dutch ministry responsible for such affairs was well disposed and helped financially. After all, geographically, Maastricht is strategically situated in Northern Europe, easily accessible on that southern-most finger of Holland, not so far from Cologne and Dusseldorf, Amsterdam, Brussels, and even Paris. Given further encouragement, the recently appointed van Grevenstein could, with his relentless enthusiasm, do much to establish an important centre for contemporary art. Already he is planning another video show next year to include tapes from those countries not shown this time, together with a number of closed circuit installations from Britain.

// During the endless discussions that took place, often occurring spontaneously between representatives from each country (five other British artists were there aside from myself: Krikorian, Partridge, Marshall, Critchley and Barnard), one of the most predominant issues centred on the need for a European link-up, some common information centre on video art development this side of the Atlantic, even a central distribution system. Though no conclusions were finalised on how this might be done, it was thought to be ^{crucial} ~~critical~~, since, for all sorts of reasons it was felt that the great amount of often important work being produced now in Europe was still too dispersed at its point of origin. Typically, and by comparison, work from America was well organised for distribution through such channels as Electronic Arts Intermix, and even the more limited private gallery systems such as Castelli Tapes. Because of its promotion and easy accessibility it was felt that all too often American work continued to thrive on its original reputation accruing credibility which was not now always deserved.

This was perfectly exemplified in the selection of tapes from the US on view. Don Foresta (who is, incidentally, the Electronic

Arts Intermix representative in Paris) says in his catalogue foreword to that section that 'this exhibit represents the culmination of what might be called the first generation of video art. The several artists presented are part of the handful of men and women who have created the art form, people who have been with video from the beginning'. Implicit in that statement is the suggestion that video art was 'invented' in America, when it is reasonably common knowledge that Wolf Vostell was publically experimenting with television images at the same time if not before Nam June Paik, not to mention the lesser known work of Ture Sjölander and Bror Wikström in Sweden. However, even accepting Paik's importance in that he probably received greatest coverage consequently stimulating interest in the medium by other artists, the majority of the other participants either simply were not working with video, or at least were not heard of in Europe, until the turn of the seventies. By that time a number of people were also working with medium - or soon afterwards - in Europe. ~~Certainly Weibel in Austria, and Leggett, Richardson, Evans and myself in Britain (there is of course many more).~~

Having said that, it would seem to me that the 'distinction' American work has is not in its invention, but simply in that both production facilities and promotion are, for obvious reasons, considerably advanced on those in Europe. The 'professional look' of many of the tapes comes closer to the expectations of broadcast 'quality' which in turn subconsciously induces greater belief in the credibility of the original concept which, in fact, can often ^{be} quite weak. A professional studio with 2 inch tape originals; time-base correctors; the dreaded tricky chroma-key facility; synthesisers and the like, in no way glosses over such a basic deficiency. ~~for me at least.~~

Those comments should not be read as a generalisation. There is of

course some very important work being done in the US (ironically most of it seems not to be produced by such sophisticated means), but little was seen in this selection. William Gwin's Point Lobos State Reserve delicately manipulates images of water and landscape via a key device. His sense of timing is superb and the whole piece is pleasantly contemplative without the violent colour extravaganzas and quick sell techniques so fashionable among his fellow countrymen. Peter Campus's Three Transitions (which by now must have appeared in every show in the last three years) wears a little thinner each time I see it. The technical trick of chroma-keying one image of himself over another; or facing two cameras at each other with a screen between, then cutting through that screen with a knife so that he can pass through it and 'himself' as the camera images are mixed; is I suppose as someone said 'exploring the transforming, plastic possibilities of the video medium itself' and 'inverting our expectations of video as an objective, truth-telling medium'. But it is ~~grade one stuff~~. Predictable in the extreme. The sort of thing I would expect from one of my first year students en route to greater things. Had it been made seven or eight years ago I would acknowledge its rights to some historical credence in the short-lived span of video experimentation - but it was made in 1973. Perhaps the biggest failing in Campus's tapes is that he takes little account of time, its inevitable presence which shapes the reading of a time-based statement, rarely does he shape it, he is a constructor of images, a visual artist, he is not a composer in time. For this reason (and others) I believe he is much more substantial as an installation artist, where he stages the scene and the participant introduces the relative temporal element.

// Though the claim was made that ^{these} were examples of 'first generation' video art out of the US, virtually all of the works were no more than two or three years old. Perhaps the most interesting tape I saw was The Space Between the Teeth (why do so many Americans insist on these freaky titles?) which was part of Four Songs by Bill Viola. Briefly, it began with him walking into shot and sitting down facing camera. As I remember it everything is silent then he lets out an ear-shattering yell, and continues to do this at regular intervals. Eventually the camera tracks away from him down a long corridor, his voice becoming progressively fainter. Then by means of 'jump-cutting' between the distant camera position and a close-up of his mouth he bends and distorts the illusory space. I cannot describe the complex procedural details here, but what was most impressive was the carefully planned structure in the juxtaposition of audio, visual and temporal elements, each playing an equally significant role in the realisation. My one regret was that the quick-burst editing induced immediate connotations of a filmic syntax, and this ~~eliminated the reading of any implicit concerns for~~ ^{with video's} ~~more essential~~ indigenous possibilities ~~of video~~. Maybe it should have been a film.

The Dutch section included works by Abramovic, D'Armagnac, Cardena, Tarlo, van der Wal, Heske, etc. Abramovic and Cardena are fairly well known as 'performance' artists, and their tapes were little more than documentations. This was true of most of the Dutch works

I saw, with the exception of Nan Hoover. Her Light Pieces, were primarily 'straight' recordings of movements of her hands, face, legs etc, ^{but} her timing and discreet formulation and revelation of the image showed a very precise consciousness of how the monitor frame and temporal manipulation can be successfully utilised, ~~producing an aesthetically unique experience~~ ^{was a video work.} accessible only in this form.

// A lot of the Belgian tapes also took the form of documentation ~~of video~~, video being used merely as a convenient recording device. However, three works stood out as being the exceptions. One was by Danny Mathysse, who integrated notions of time delay in using an image of himself taking a succession of polaroid stills of a two-monitor installation. The image on the first monitor being the second generation view of the set-up, and on the second, subsequent generations in time and space. Each time he took a picture he pasted it over that monitor - gradually covering the screen, replacing the transient ever-changing video image with fixed views marking moments from the immediate past. The inevitable, and intentional, 'contradictions' implicit in correlating two media in this way establishes a ~~particularly unique~~ ^{particularly personal} approach ~~to video~~.

The second piece was an untitled work by Frank van Herck and Chris Goyvaerts. A pre-made tape of a nude girl was reshot optically off a monitor screen. But more often than not the tape ^{was} ~~is~~ run at variable speeds, sometimes very fast, at others very slow, each time electronic discrepancies identifying the process. At intervals the original tape ^{was} ~~is~~ stilled or 'frozen', at which point a hand appears between the viewed monitor screen and the screen playing back the nude recording and proceeds to outline, with a magic-marker, parts of the girl's body (it also marks out the position of a keyed-in image of a florescent light tube - another version of the proverbial phallus?). As the tape progresses, and the position of the girl changes, so the marks are built up almost like a cubist drawing - except that in this case one witnesses the entire creative process as the work. ^{Here again,} Equally, one is made constantly aware that it is a process entirely dependent from the inception as a work in video.

The last Belgian tape was La Ligne du Soleil by Barbara and Michael

Leisgen. A camera was set in a landscape facing the sun, and, as every self respecting video engineer knows, this just is not done! After a very few seconds the intense light burns into the signal plate of the vidicon tube (the camera's retina) destroying the photo sensitive cells. The camera is then very slowly panned to and fro horizontally tracing its movement in the form of ^a lineal burn (which is held as a negative mark) just above the horizon. The camera comes to rest with the sun in the centre. The lens is shut down leaving only the trace of that movement in view. This is no unlike work I ~~was~~ ^{did} myself in a tape two years ago, and an installation last year. The Leisgen's piece seems only to hint at better things, but at least they are obviously conscious of the potential of 'video as video' which so few artists are. I should just mention here that Jan Debbaut, who selected the Belgian programme, has done much to encourage video work in that country, and it is a great pity that he lost his job at the International Cultureel Centrum in Antwerp (for purely petty bureaucratic reasons) where he was very active in setting up video facilities for artists. I would hope that he can very soon find alternative means to continue this invaluable work.

It is virtually impossible for me to say anything about the French programme, since for various reasons I saw hardly any ^{for instance} (~~like~~ as far as colour work is concerned they use the SECAM system and the rest of Europe is PAL which was creating difficulties whilst I was there ~~in getting it together~~). However, suffice it to say that Dany Bloch (the selector) and Léa Lublin, a very prolific artist, were both very active in discussion contributing a great deal to ideas on distribution, broadcast exposure and the like.

Many of the tapes I selected from Britain have been mentioned here before. Aside from myself and those artists that also went to

Maastricht (see above), tapes were included by Tony Sinden and Brian Hoey. Tamara Krikorian showed a new tape called In the Mind's Eye. Taking its cue from her 'voice-over' reading of a poem about a fantasy train journey by Rimbaud, the tape is comprised of three sections: the first is a straight shot looking through a railway carriage window; the second was that same view reshot optically off a monitor screen with a gently moving hand-held camera - the edge of that 'inner' screen appearing as an allusion to a carriage window, (yet paradoxically, and quite evidently, a monitor screen); and the third is a close-up of her eye, with reflected in it, a monitor screen. At times the preceding shots can be discerned in that reflection. This tape is a new departure for her, since most of her attention in the past has been channeled into installation works. Though the structure may be a little indecisive, the concept is strong, the romantic connotations being carefully controlled within a clear cognition of the way in which the substance and effect of any medium ^{can} should, indeed ^{does} must, invariably influence and shape the reading of any idea. (~~Tamara Krikorian has been asked to show tapes at the forthcoming Paris Biennale. Though I am pleased for her, I am mildly outraged that no other tapes have been selected from the list of proposed British artists that I made as 'correspondent'. British art tapes stand up well now on the international scene, and to choose only one artist is a gross misjudgement~~).

Brian Hoey (in collaboration with Wendy Brown) also showed a new tape titled Flow. Briefly, it was a continuous take of water in motion which had been 'colourised' on a synthesiser. Hoey has a special sensibility toward work of this kind which was more than apparent in this piece. Unfortunately technical problems still abound with the more sophisticated hardware in Britain, and a lot of his intended subtleties suffered unnecessarily due to this. Finally, Stuart Marshall, prolific as ever, not only showed one or

two new pre-made works, but produced three new pieces in the museum. One I didn't see in its finished state, the second he was dissatisfied with and scrapped, and the third was Sound Cuts. As with many of his tapes, Sound Cuts is very much conditioned by his concurrent interests in musical structures. However, like Ambrosini (discussed below), he is totally committed to the integration of sound and vision in his tapes, neither one taking precedence over another. Similarly, most of his 'compositions' on video have an implicit regard for the intrinsic, often self-defining, aspects of the process. Using the three studio cameras in a triangular formation, each pointing to the centre, a performer stands facing one of them (framed between neck and thighs) and claps two wood blocks together. The performer, keeping his eye on the red tally (or cue) light on each camera, sees that Marshall has switched recording camera (from the control room), he turns to this camera and claps the blocks again. Marshall switches cameras again, the performer turns and claps again. This procedure continues for some time, Marshall cueing and controlling the action and the pace. Progressively the pace quickens until the performer begins to predict the now regular cyclic switching. As he does this he ^{starts to} ~~dictates~~ the pace which quickens still further, Marshall having to switch cameras at each turn. The result is that the viewer is confronted with a remarkable reorientation of his expectations. The illusion of depth is flattened as each view is virtually merged with the next. The position and relation of the performer to ^{whichever} ~~which~~ camera becomes blurred. The initial assumed configuration of the parts becomes a 'whole', sound claps and camera cuts become, effectively, as one - a kind of audio-visual gestalt.

Venice

Earlier (in January) I went to Venice also taking with me a programme of tapes by British video artists including Marshall, Critchley, Partridge, Krikorian, Hall and Hoey. It was first shown at the Cavallino Gallery, and later in Milan at the Bon à Tիրer Gallery, and in Florence on the premises of Art Tapes 22 (as I have mentioned before, Art Tapes 22 has for economic reasons sadly ceased functioning as the production centre it once was, but pre-made works are still shown there from time to time). My trip was sponsored by the British Council's Fine Art Department who are showing an increasing interest in video art development in this country.

The Cavallino is probably the most progressive independent gallery in Venice dedicated to avant-garde activities. It is run by brother and sister, Paolo and Gabriella Cardazzo. Gabriella appears to concentrate her attentions mainly on less 'technically' originated work (though has a profound interest in film and video), whilst Paolo is committed to showing, and perhaps even more important to providing facilities for the production of, works in video (British galleries please take note!). He started with portapak in 1974, and has gradually added to these with studio equipment such as U-matic cassette VCRs, ½ inch reel to reel VTRs (with edit), good quality Sony studio cameras, and a very unique and compact mixing console with key facility. In addition, he is currently in the process of acquiring ^a portable colour recording system.

Cardazzo is very keen to work alongside artists during production,

and has been involved in 'field' events outside the gallery including one which he organised last year when Italian and Yugoslav artists (Ambrosini, Sambim, Trbuljak, Kraus, etc) worked in collaboration at Motovun in Istria, Yugoslavia, producing some interesting and revealing works. I was particularly taken by a very simple, yet significant gesture which constituted a tape by Trbuljak: A portapak camera was set up facing its own recording machine - ie the shot was of the portapak VTR in operation with tape running through it. The image one sees is from that tape. After a few minutes a hand appears in the top of the monitor screen holding a pair of scissors. The tape is cut through whilst still recording. End of tape. Though perhaps a little passé and Dadaist as a gesture, the significance is that it is rooted in the cognition of the particular, often unique, ways in which temporal occurrences may be juxtaposed in video. In this case the events of initial recording and eventual viewing are fused as one, mutually and irrevocably inter-dependent.

Through January and February the Cavallino not only held an exhibition of pre-made tapes which included the British programme, but Cardazzo also spent a great deal of time producing works with (mainly Italian) artists. Claudio Ambrosini was one who I found interesting. His background is in music, in fact he is still very active in that field, performing some remarkable experimental works, and teaching for his bread and butter in a traditional Venetian music academy. His work with video is comparatively recent, but he has succeeded in integrating his considerable sensibility in the temporal structuring of sound, ~~together with video, not merely using supporting images~~ (as many musicians have done, and even more video artists have done vice versa), but by directly manipulating the functional and phenomenal aspects of the

presentation system as he does a musical instrument or other sound producing objects. In the tape, Video Music, one initially sees on the monitor the view of another monitor with no image displayed other than the 'snow-field' which appears when there is no video-signal reception. Similarly, this is complemented by 'white-noise' sound. Then Ambrosini's hands move into shot and begin to 'play' the audio slide controls (volume and tone). As he does this keyed print-outs of various musical parameters appear over the snow-field identifying his action (timbre, rhythm and crescendo, synchronous mixed motion, etc), and variations on the hiss of white-noise are the sole audio ingredients. The tape ends with the print-out invitation to do it yourself on the viewing monitor, which perhaps overstates the already clearly didactic intention behind the piece. However, it does set the context for an extension of this vocabulary into recent more complex compositions integrating sound and vision such as Light Solfeggio.

It is clear that Cardazzo is performing a very necessary function at the Cavallino Gallery in his promotion of international video art. In addition to showing and producing tapes he is acquiring a substantial tape collection, and has effectively taken over where Art Tapes 22 left off when it collapsed last year. In all I felt the workshop/exhibition period was very successful and had only two reservations about it. One was that the programming of events could have been a little tighter and better organised, and the other was that due to this Roger Barnard, who went with me at his own cost, was unable to realise an installation he had proposed.

Whilst in Venice I paid a visit to the new Archivio Storico della

Arti Contemporanee which is a permanently open annexe of the Venice Biennale situated at the junction of the Calle de ca Corner and the Grand Canal. The purpose of this archive/showplace is not only geared to logging work and other activities presented at the Biennale exhibition, but has set out to be one of the most comprehensive storehouses of information on contemporary art activity. It has a wealth of books, **catalogues**, periodicals and other publications from around the world. Records, audio and video tapes, **some** that have been used to record interviews and events, and others which are artworks in their own right. And a collection of sculpture and painting.

The administrative and technical systems for collating this information ~~and the works~~ appear to be quite considerable, and are certainly well organised. I was, of course, most interested in the video tape library (I should add here that none of the material in the archive is for loan or hire - it is essentially a reference library). From a card index one may choose a tape for viewing. This is then played behind the scenes on a VCR and fed to one of a bank of very well laid out monitors in a darkened room. Each monitor has its own audio headset. The original acquisitions are never used for this. A crew of skilled video engineers, working with some very expensive equipment including a time-base corrector, transfer each original to U-matic $\frac{3}{4}$ inch cassette for the purpose.

At present, the collection of video art tapes is small, most of them originating from Maria-Gloria Bicchochi's Art Tapes 22, with works by Bill Viola, Terry Fox, Dennis Oppenheim, myself and others. My conclusion was that this area must be expanded with particular attention being paid to the great amount of work now available in Europe.

Documenta

The international Documenta exhibition at Kassel this year includes a substantial video section which will be on view from 24 June to 2 October. There will be approximately fifty tapes on show and twelve installations. The installations will be, perhaps predictably, almost entirely by Americans and Germans including Paik, Campus, Korot, Horn and Rosenbach. None from Britain. Of the large number of artists invited to show tapes, only two from Britain have been in selected, myself and Michael Druks.

Washington New Town

There is to be another international tape show at The Galleries, Washington New Town, Tyne and Wear 18 - 29 October. It will be organised by Brian Hoey and the Biddick Farm Arts Centre, where he is artist in residence.