USING VIDEO AND VIDEO ART: SOME NOTES

David Hall

We need to absorb information constantly. Information that gives each of us identity and positions us in the world. Knowledge has countless sources, from the private to the public. Of the latter, the mass media are of course the most accessible. These media dominate our lives, and television most of all. TV because it presents the most complete illusion widely in use so far. We know it is only a facsimile of the world, yet we have adjusted for that in our desire to be informed—to have instant contact (albeit one-way). Our preconceptions of what a TV set should give us are a direct result of what we have allowed ourselves to be conditioned to expect. Indeed, it has become part of reality for many rather than seen as the interpretation of it by a few. However, the chink in this monopolistic situation first appeared when comparatively low priced TV recording equipment came onto the open market in the mid-sixties. It was aimed initially at industry as a managerial aid or promotional device cashing in on, hence perpetuating, communication techniques already well established in broadcasting. But inevitably a vast number of independent users, with very diverse views as to its potential, also emerged at the same time.

Unlike experimental/underground film, which has a history that stretches back to the innovations of ciné pioneers before its commercialisation, early independent video had no such precedents as TV had fallen into the hands of governments and big business at the point of its inception. Consequently, at first, this reversal of roles produced a great deal of low grade stuff by people simply amazed that they could conjure facsimiles of the telly-hero programmes they had worshipped for so long. Or, here was the idyllic way to materialise narcissistic pursuits. Others with more outgoing concerns rightly saw, and still see, its use and development in community work. Still others saw it as a direct political tool and produced programmes about people and events either not covered, or unfairly treated, by the mass media. Artists too were among the first to recognise its potential both in the possibilities of its unique properties and, in some cases, of its significant relatedness to contemporary culture through TV.

Continuing for a moment with a broad look at these categories of independent activity (though often any distinction is decidedly blurred at the edges); socio/political work is undoubtedly necessary and beyond dispute, but in many cases the method/structure/treatment is handled in a way which is directly analogous to that traditionally employed by the very establishment it implicitly, sometimes explicitly, deplores. Alternative attitudes portrayed through any medium demand an equal reappraisal of the condition of that medium—particularly television with its well-entrenched criteria. Reappraisal and a necessary 'demystification' do not automatically come simply with alternative content; they can only occur when simultaneously uprooting and questioning the form. Of course such analysis does not stand for much alone, but it offers a potentially endless expansion of the medium's vocabulary, hence capabilities, necessary to a fresh creative development. Some video-makers would suggest that this implied disruption takes it into obscurity, and beyond the apprehension of their audience. But that attitude could be considered as much a patronising assumption as the classic give-the-public-what-we-think-they-want cry which attempts to excuse most of the broadcasters' output.

These observations also often apply to artists using video whose work has for a long time been collectively, and wrongly, titled *Video Art*. In fact, whereas the plastic arts, hotly pursued by film, have undergone such a scrutiny of their roles as 'media' (fore-fronting critical analyses of the established conventions towards, primarily, the integration of form and content as an autonomous whole), the surprise is that only a comparatively small number of artists working with video have emerged with this as a criterion. Acceptance of it as a secondary medium—a convenient recording and/or presentation system for ideas otherwise realised—is an attitude adopted by many more. And perhaps most dominant of all in the art world are those who flirt with both, neither committed to the first nor admitting to the second. Justifications of the latter suggest that video is the only medium for its realisation, yet among other things take little account of powerful extraneous connotations that inevitably occur. The reading of independent video will continue to fall victim to its ever-present forebear, broadcast television, unless alternative models are implicated through the work itself.

Primarily then, my contention is with the use of video art as a generalised label for a great deal of art work involving video technology to whatever ends. Artists' Video might be a more appropriate all-inclusive title, though even here it could not fairly place multi-media work for instance, where video is often only incidental to the whole. Therefore the indications are that any attempt to make a generalised appraisal is a fallacious task since it is virtually impossible to find any common basis from which to begin. Too often enthusiastic writers have mistakenly constructed notions of a related endeavour on the presumption that simply the *use* of the technology presents a common factor of some ideological, conceptual or aesthetic significance.

However, it is possible to tentatively consider further that area of artists' video which we might now call Video Art proper. But first it should be noted that whilst the use of video by artists began over a decade ago (heralded as early as 1959 by *Ereignisse für Millionen*, a happening by Wolf Vostell using TV receivers), it is only in recent years that more critical objectives have emerged to identify video art, though nevertheless pockets of activity have been going on since the beginning.

Firstly, a number of artists working in this context recognise the need to integrate the *actual* properties as an intrinsic condition of the work, notably those peculiar to the functions (and malfunctions) of the constituent hardware—camera, recorder, and monitor—and the artist's accountability to them. These include the manipulation of record and playback 'loop' configurations; immediate visual and audio regeneration; the relative lack of image resolution; signal distortion; frame instability—often purposefully induced by misaligning vertical and horizontal frame locks; random visual noise; camera 'beam', 'target', focus, vidicon tube; and so on. Equally, some have considered that the video product, manifest on the monitor screen, cannot be regarded as a perceptually insular phenomenon. The dominant tangibility of the object presentation system is an irrevocable presence which in itself contributes from the outset to the dissolution of the image. To choose to ignore this paradox as an unfortunate discrepancy of technology, rather than to acknowledge it

as an intrinsic state of the video matrix, already suggests a polarity between art work using video, and that which constitutes Video Art.

Secondly, the most evident response to the initial encounter with the technology is its intrinsic capacity for instant image feedback. An abundance of work has been produced based on this, and it would seem to be the origin of some of the most important video art so far. However, there has been considerable disparity in the way this unique technological phenomenon is regarded and utilised. It has been used as the initial stage of 'abstraction' in what are known as synaesthetic or video-graphic tapes, the camera looking at the monitor which is recycling that camera's output. The feedback here is then often incorporated into the use of sophisticated video-synthesisers, editing and colourising devices. Almost without exception the tapes in this genre present complex synthetic imagery which, while not a normal experience on broadcast TV, tends if anything to corroborate the mystique convention by the development, deification and utilisation of increasingly sophisticated hardware available to, and operable by, only a few. Equally, this in turn produces the inevitable obscuration of any immediately perceivable evidence of the creative process as is also the case on television.

Thirdly, a proliferation of work has also emerged from the adoption of the triangular feedback configuration. Camera looks at artist or participant looking at the monitor image of himself fed live from that camera—the analogical mirror—a mode for behaviour reflex. Many tapes, live closed-circuit installations and performances have involved this, and various permutations. It has been explored to the most profound advantage as a system to elucidate systems of space/time triangulation where the viewer (i.e. in installations) is simultaneously the viewed in a process of self-referring consciousness. However, here again there has been some disparity of intent, notably in many of the tape works. The immediate temptation, when confronted with the mirror analogue, is to become immersed in a wholly esoteric self 'psychoanalysis'. In this case and others (some live performance work), this process of self-identification (the content) rarely conjoins with an identification of the dominant video process (the form), let alone recognises it as an indigenous and consequently irrevocable condition of the work.

Finally, there is work which appropriates and simultaneously juxtaposes familiar narrative devices with alternative codes as a means to re-determine the semiological function of the televisual phenomenon. While this has arguably been an ongoing practice throughout, it is only quite recently that an overtly conscious and critical approach has come to the fore through the work itself. Again the danger here is that in some cases the concern may be referred to the content alone without regard for those other aspects noted earlier and equally significant to the total experience.

It can be summarised then that Video Art is video *as* the art work—the parameters deriving from the characteristics of the medium itself, rather than art work *using* video—which adopts a device for an already defined content. By characteristics I have meant those particular attributes specific to both its technology and the reading of it as a phenomenon. Video as art largely seeks to explore perceptual and conceptual thresholds, and implicit in it is the decoding and consequent expansion of the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television.

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inception. Consequently, at first, this reversal of roles produced a great deal of low grade stuff by people simply amazed that they could conjure facsimiles of the telly-hero programmes they had worshipped for so long. Or, here was the idyllic way to materialise narcissistic pursuits ~~(especially as it happened to coincide with the Chemical Revolution)~~. Others with more outgoing concerns rightly saw, and still see, its use and development in community work. Still others saw it as a direct political tool and produced programmes about people and events either not covered, or unfairly treated, by the Mass Media. Artists too were among the first to recognise its potential both in the possibilities of its unique properties and, in some cases, of its significant relatedness to contemporary culture through TV.

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