

Richard Baker in *This is a Television Receiver* 1979, a videotape by David Hall, commissioned by BBC TV.

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 dependent on the objectives in each work. But 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. This is 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 anyway¹.

The majority of such artists rarely have to contend with 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 art in that context is far less than actually exists². 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 strategy³, or struggle on the brink of collapse through insufficient resources. The short-comings of other alternatives (for video artists in particular) like broadcast television have been discussed at length elsewhere⁴.

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 little⁵. 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



This decade has seen a virtual revolution in the visual arts time-based media: including performance sound, film and

David Hall, a founder member of London Video Arts, with

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devolve some of their responsibilities to organisations better suited to handling them⁶? 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. It is interesting to observe of late that those artists who have utilised it in, for example performance work which has already attained 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 elsewhere⁷, 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-art-works 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 have been only a very few significant shows here. Almost without exception each of these was either initiated, if not totally organised, by artists themselves. Tape distribution until recently was handled directly by the artist concerned, with all the problems that entails. Now it is handled by London Video Arts.

There have 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 videotape, it 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, informal meetings and discussions, have taken place, and invariably the foremost problems 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 that 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 video¹⁰. 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 else-

where, including overseas; 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.

Needless to say, lack of funding was and still is LVA's stumbling block. The history of its attempts to secure sufficient funds is already, after less than three years, extremely lengthy and too tedious to relate in detail. It is enough to say that public bodies have been the only recourse, and they have been slow to commit themselves probably for reasons indicated at the beginning of this article.

Despite the example of the success of the film co-operatives, it seems video has to go through the same struggle for an equivalent length of time to attain sufficient strength and credibility. This is surprising when evidence of the status of much of the work has been established for some time (unlike the film co-ops when they first began); when models for promotion and distribution have been long established elsewhere¹¹; and when most of LVA's approaches are made to the very same bodies who now amply support independent film. Maybe the reason for this is just that their interest is still primarily with film.

However, London Video Arts persisted in the recognition that



s with a greater and greater number of artists working with video. Some work exclusively with one, others two or more.

writes about the struggle to get recognition for video art.

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the initial all-out plan had to be phased over a much longer period than originally anticipated. Applications to finance the whole project were rejected and so efforts were concentrated first on establishing an international tape library and on producing a catalogue. Following this, show space was offered at AIR gallery starting last October, followed by Acme in January (after the demise of AIR). Having by this time received just enough finance from the Arts Council for catalogue printing, some playback equipment, contribution to the first year's show expenses and preliminary office essentials, LVA was in business. Through all this time administration, collation of catalogue material and layout, organisation of shows, tape distribution etc, has been performed by the artist steering committee in their spare time.

Whilst this situation could continue indefinitely, hopes are that it will improve. Through the realisation of LVA's efforts so far, response to the invitation to have works included in the library by artists; response by prospective tape hirers; response by audiences attending the promotional shows; and a very slow but growing interest by official administrators, LVA will undoubtedly flourish.

Through all this LVA has, I

would maintain, sown the seed of a unique procedure for art video exposure in Europe. It has begun to develop a library of works which is, by and large, purposefully non-selective. To quote the catalogue: 'This catalogue represents a large cross section of artists' work in videotape, video performance and video installations from the UK and abroad. As such it is the first of its kind in Europe. Anyone working experimentally and anyone documenting artworks in the medium is eligible for inclusion in the library'.

However, communications being what they are there are bound to be limitations, and it goes on to state: 'The catalogue does not pretend to fully represent the diverse range of artists' video. The artists in it are those who were known to be working with video by members of the present committee at the time of compilation and inevitably there have been omissions'.

I would add to that there were omissions by people who were approached but felt they could not take part for personal reasons, or most often because they were limited by specific contracts with other organisations or galleries. This last point is perhaps in itself a subject for discussion. LVA was not set up as yet another competitive dealer in the art market. It

is non-profit and is prepared to act as direct agent for artists, or mediator for other organisations alike. It is simply out to create a better means of accessibility.

Selection is made at the hiring or purchasing stage by the 'client', i.e. renter or purchaser. The protective, isolated, and often elitist attitude adopted by many distributors and galleries at present precludes any true appraisal of the state of the art as an international activity. Whilst for obvious reasons it will be virtually impossible to make much change in the private sector, I believe that public and publicly funded interest could do much to improve and extend accessibility and interchange.

LVA's catalogue is offered to anyone interested in hiring or purchasing tapes, showing installations or staging performances. The first edition includes works by more than eighty artists from around the world, and since its publication many more have contributed information and tapes. At present the main outlet is colleges and universities, where not only lecturers show tapes, but where more and more playback facilities are appearing in libraries. The market for home systems is beginning to take a firm hold and one can conceive of that as a possible outlet in the near future.

Exhibition organisers are using the catalogue as a useful textbook to the activity as well as a listing since it includes lengthy statements by each artist. Copyright remains with the artist and two-thirds of the returns go to the maker.

Finally, it has to be said that artist-run organisations have their obvious pitfalls. An overtly partisan attitude can often go against the strategies necessary in developing the empathy of their 'patrons' and peers alike. Artists are often well equipped to illuminate on their personal objectives and needs, but for them to sustain a common collective endeavour with the minimum compromise can be quite an internal battle. It would be misleading to imply London Video Arts does not encounter these difficulties, which from time to time it does, and they are as real as those it finds outside. The greatest struggle has probably been in that the active participants have been so few. Anyone interested in contributing to its day-to-day running is welcome to take part. Membership involves only a nominal fee.

For further information contact London Video Arts, 12/13 Little Newport Street, London WC2H 7IJ, telephone 01-734 7410. Catalogue price: £1.50.

References

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 *Studio International*; and *Using video and Video Art*, David Hall, *Video Art 78 catalogue*, Herbert Art Gallery Coventry, or *Aspects magazine*, Winter 78/9.

8 Specifically discussed *ibid Video Art 78 catalogue/Aspects magazine*.

9 *Video: Towards Defining an Aesthetic*, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow 1976; *The Video Show* (installations), The Tate Gallery 1976; *Video Art 78*, Herbert Art Gallery Coventry 1978; *Artists Video*, Biddick Farm Arts Centre, Washington, Tyne and Wear 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979; and of course all the London Video Arts' shows at AIR and Acme galleries, London since October 1978.

10 Roger Barnard, David Critchley, David Hall, Tamara Krikorian, Pete Livingstone, Stuart Marshall, Marceline Mori, Steve Partridge and Jonnie Turpie.

11 Abroad, particularly the USA (eg Electronic Arts Intermix, New York) and Canada (eg Western Front Video, Vancouver and Art Metropole, Toronto).

David Hall was born in 1937, and studied at Leicester College of Art and the Royal College of Art in London. He began as a sculptor and started to work with film in 1967 and video in 1970. A founder member of London Video Arts, he has been involved in organising a number of video shows and writes on video art being a regular contributor to Studio International. He established and is currently head of the Film Video and Sound Department at Maidstone College of Art, Kent. He lives and works in London.

He has shown his sculpture in many international exhibitions and his films have been shown in a number of international festivals and group shows. He has done several Videotapes and installation shows. He is a member of the Arts Council of Great Britain Artists Film Committee and a member of London Video Arts.