

(Personal unpublished response to AL Rees on his book 'A History of Experimental Film and Video', BFI, 1999)

For AL - The Big Chew: Grumbles and Ramblings Vol. I  
re *A History of Experimental Film and Video*

*..and in a word, the distinctions between your 'two avant-gardes' may be far more complex and blurred than you think.*

p8 (and elsewhere). Good section! But, working a medium 'in its own right' does not, of course, deny involvement with another: For example, the v. artist (distinct from 'user') working with video is not, ipso facto, committed exclusively to its use (though he may be), but, when doing so, is committed to consideration of its conditions; as he would be to those of, say, sculpture if working simultaneously with that. I may have been a 'hard-line video spokesman' (p112 & 113 and elsewhere) insisting on concern for these conditions, but then I would for any medium - regarding each as distinct - but never suggested denial of working in another (I chose to work with one - but may have worked with more). The edges are decidedly blurred! (Arguably the hybrid arts, eg 'expanded' film, video installation, etc also demand consideration of their 'conditions of hybridisation', which of course is rare).

p52. TV broadcasts began in 1928 from the roof of Baird Television's studio in 133 Long Acre, and 1929-1935 via BBC's Savoy Hill transmitter (under pressure from a Baird-sympathetic government committee after Reith dismissed the idea of TV, and Baird - his peer at Glasgow Tech).

p70-71. Your *Two avant-gardes* is very welcome and maybe should be developed(?), even as another book! The 60s events were significant but not, of course, only American. For example my own history obviously owes an occasional debt, but is mainly in parallel:

1954-59: Architecture. Calligraphy, abstract expressionism, colour field. A search for the 'essence'. Away with 'construction' - the cubist lagacy, this was mark and surface. *Real* painting. But where was stuff, tangible, material real stuff? Back to 'primitives', then the incredible Constantin Brancusi: Notably *Gate of the Kiss*, *Table of Silence* (1937) and, earlier, the seminal *Endless Column* (1920). This piece (and the 29m 1937 Tirgu Jiu Park version in native Romania), despite its 'folksy' origins, was a radical art statement: simply a series of identical rhomboids in repetition - the first and last being a half module. A column, yet not a column, but an endless column. *The incomplete*. (Not to be confused with later American work - some of which comprised serial parts, eg Judd - positing unitary closure and falling prey to Fried's negation - about which, incidentally, I have some doubts). Brancusi was a key influence in my work at that stage (and, it turns out later, upon contemporary Andre).

1960-64: To London, RCA. Birth of Pop (peers Hockney, Boshier, Jones and co). Swinging London emerging. Had to adjust after 'romanian' past. Stuck to my guns, more or less (rejected mandatory life-modelling after tussle with Meadows). Started to use welded metal and was first there to colour sculpture (soon abandoned). \*see Wolfram's 'Art & Artists' article, '68, and my entry on my '67 work in Tate acquisitions catalogue - attached.

1965: Major prize, *Paris Biennale*, followed by one-man show at Musée d'Art Moderne, 1967, showing only 'perceptual, environmental' floor works.

1966: Joined Latham and others founding APG.

1966: In *White on White*, Kunsthalle, Bern with Vasarely, Albers, Max Bill, Malevich et al.

1966: New York. Chelsea Hotel (Arthur Miller next room). One-man show Richard Feigen Gallery and earlier in first major minimalist show, *Primary Structures*, at Jewish Museum with Morris, Judd, Andre, Caro, King, et al. (NB. *Serra, Nauman and Co yet to emerge*). Talks with Bob Morris and Yvonne Rainer at their loft. Became friend of Roy Lichtenstein. Met Rosenquist and Newman. Saw movies at Cinemateque(?) including Brakhage birth film at which friend Derrick Woodham, sculptor and father to be, fainted. Met Warhol at newly opened *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* operating all technology himself; V. Underground's sound levels, lights and projectors.

1967: Started to make 'improbable' photo-works. Then experimented with film - search for post-object (and post-modern?) solutions in temporal media.

1968 (January). Floor works show at R.I. galleries (*see Wolfram*). (John and Yoko came along!)

Started teaching at St Martins with Caro, King et al. Sculpture students: Long, Dye, Fulton, 'George' (of G&G), Tony Hill, etc. Took up with Kardia and the 'lock-in' projects.

Made first film *Motion Parallax* bw/16mm/2 screen/mute (little seen - premiered at sculpture show in Nottingham) - simply a continuous travelling camera in landscape producing the reverse - a travelling landscape - when projected. Static objects/textures 'moving' at variable rates. No tricks, no cuts, no negation or distortion of intrinsic camera image, no colour, no 'composition', no 'aesthetic'. But was not convinced of this route. It was a reiteration of the issues I had been working through in sculpture:

To persist with 'object' as film - as I believe the closed, internal, idealised, extreme structural film was to become - was 'the moment of abstract formalism' (Morris, your p13) re-enacted, and this would be, for me, a retrogressive covering of old ground (*see Wolfram*). Rather, I was looking forward to the 'negative discourse' (and beyond) as a means of 'release' from the introverted confines of high modernism.

1969. So made *Vertical* with AC money, 'intrusions into perceptual assumptions', with the appropriated and purposeful 'look' of a maybe/maybenot documentary! Went down well in the art-world and international festivals c1970, but, I suspect, like a lead balloon with the emerging, intense, UK Co-op structuralist 'makers' and a growing band of pen-happy acolytes (Ho! Ho!). Got some of my sculpture students at Maidstone interested in film-making.

1970-71. Then came another 'landscape' film *Timecheck* (BFI money) '..never got beyond.. a string of ideas and effects..' LeG. Stud.Int. Dec '72! Yet M.O'P says 20 yrs later (Variant, Spr. '92) the film is '..immaculately paced..[with]..rhythmic subtlety..moments of structural poetry..[and] is a metaphysical one' (was he under duress? Wasn't in his book)!

1970. 'Last' sculpture - floor paint removal piece at ICA's *British Sculpture out of the Sixties*.

1971. Took part in the significant *Prospect Projection*, Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf of artists' film (no UK Co-opies here). Many European first films listed predate most N. Americans except Snow. (Broodthaers '58, Latham '60, Brouwn '60, Vostell '63, Hall '68 etc., whereas Morris '69, Graham '69, Acconci '69, Wegman '69 and Serra - including *Hand Catching Lead* - Castelli lists as '69).

*TV interruptions* for STV.....you know a lot of the rest. Back to The Book..

p79. '..London Co-op and its video *offshoots*..' ? I never shot-off from (or at) the Co-op! There was decidedly no connection with the Co-op in the delicate, and difficult, naissant years except that the *curiously UNMENTIONED* LVA was inevitably based on a co-op model.

p85. Many artists originated, of course, from the *curiously UNMENTIONED* rural Maidstone: Gawthrop, Joanna Millet, together with Partridge, Rigby, Cunningham and later Rowlandson and 'Pictorial Heroes' (Aubrey, Robertson) to name but a few. It should have got a word not only because artists cited originated or had early association there (eg Goddard), but because it was most certainly the first to seriously pioneer video.

p86-87. Pity the one and only mention of my ejaculatory influence gets lost in the centre binding, but a nice opening all the same! Interesting you remembered and resurrected *Phased Time*<sup>2</sup>. This was a retro100% mainline structural film, quite out of kilter with almost everything else of mine (and my objectives above). It was a totally pre-planned systematic minimalist construction (though the 'personal touches' were not) composed of equal time-spans of lens matting, panning, rewinding, reshooting, etc., the final section being a superimposition of all preceding visuals (and sounds). (The labs destroyed the neg - I need some ACE dough to make an interneg off the only print).

In contrast, how do the five films (made with T Sinden) - collectively titled *Cinema* on the AC grant application - feature in relation to today's plethora of late-90s gallery artists' (video-projected) mainstream cinema 'deconstructions'? There was a dash of appropriation, pastiche and deconstruction in each of those five. Again, clearly not appealing to a certain cognoscenti here at the time even though Jonas Mekas (himself) wrote, previewing my New York Millennium show, '*..This Surface stands out, after one viewing, as a superior piece of ironic structural cinema, in the self-referential style..*' (Voice, Oct 18, 1973)!

I would, of course, argue that the ten original (untitled at the time) *TV interruptions* (seven of which were later saved for distribution) were indeed interventions, but not *against* TV. And a pity you didn't clarify here that they were intentionally unannounced and uncredited. Never mind, nice page.

p88-89. I have to say the jump from APG in '66 (which I was instrumental in founding - not merely a 'member' - but which, as a group, had nothing to do with video art's beginnings) to the comment on Marshall's misgivings in '85 would have been the place to insert something about LVA's formation, the few but dedicated artists working then, and so on (?). (LVA was far more significant in this context than some of the other set-ups mentioned!).

p89. The climate of the time didn't 'lock' artists into anything, on the contrary it was an exhilarating and highly experimental period. The technical 'limits' of the time were no more or less significant than they are now, or will be in the future. It is, of course, all relative. However, I agree, the 'limits' were to some extent prescriptive, as they are now in their different way. In primitive video there was a 'tangibility' associated with open reel tape more akin to potential manipulation in the plastic arts. Now the limits are in its intangibility, its distance (clinically boxed-up), and it is totally incorporeal. The 'demystification' sought in early work is now lost in an impenetrable cyberspace.

Schum's works were all film not video, and he made them for the artists (three my ex-students). Need to discuss latter half of the page, particularly the penultimate para (it makes me feel extremely 'narrow'- see lead comments above). There *has* been critical debate but the relative 'holding back' you speak of (presumably in comparison to film) has perhaps been due to a dearth of sufficiently interested theoreticians... (Few 'art critics' have been interested here until very recently and 'the rest' have all been round at the Co-op for twenty-odd years!)

p90. The use of the quote at the end of the second para gives it a unintended spin.. It was carefully qualified as only part of objectives in the original context. Nevertheless, another good page! I definitely go for my 'stepping outside'...

p104. A Fluxus idea too? Never heard that one. You live and learn.....

Great book. You're doing a great job (but remember, David Sylvester - with a little help from his friends - always tactically champions the established, and never, ever puts his head on the line..) *Last word (for the moment): and also remember, ever since Logie-Baird all visual electronic information whether optically or computer generated, analogue or digital, is delivered via a video signal. TV cameras and tape were just the beginning, video art lives on!*

15/4/1999 (Theory-based Vols II thru' XII to follow!)