

# ART

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IDEAS

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Caroline Tisdall Interview  
George Wyllie Interview  
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The Assault on Culture  
Adorno  
Pornography and Eroticism  
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# Views from an Electronic Attic

**Channel A: Video at the National Review of Live Art, The Third Eye Centre, Glasgow from 5th-9th October**

Doug Aubrey

**A**LL the work presented in the much improved, new formula and thoughtfully presented section of the National Review of Live Art (sounds more like a soap powder than an exhibition) concentrated, to quote the catalogue notes 'uncompromisingly on video as a form in its own right.' The show provided an opportunity to see a lot of new tapes (mostly produced by Artists in Scotland) in a broader context, in a space, which if the Third Eye have the insight could become an excellent permanent venue for video work. (What about a Third Eye Videotheque or National Video Archive, but then a space for video - on its own you mean - without the other stuff . . .?)

An energy and spirit of experimentation typified the majority of the work on show - both the successes and the failures.

A spirit often lacking in much 'live work' which seems obsessed with key figures from the sixties and seventies (as was the case at Edge) or unable to break from the constant recycling of existing styles, approaches and attitudes (How much longer can younger performance artists go on 'imitating' McLennan, Brisley, Aktionsim et al before someone starts to experiment and trust their own experience and ability rather than simply appropriate style without content or spirit?)

Although relatively partisan in its selection, the Video programme overall showed that as the decade comes to an end that there is like in other artforms no one way to make work and definitely no singular or limited vocabulary by which (in particular) younger artists operate.

Chris Rowland's piece **Hothouse** addresses itself to the festival city in particular the (currently being bull-dozed) Glasgow Garden Festival. A random and tangled mass of monitors lie stacked on top of each other inside a glass green house, from the viewers position an over saturated, roughly shot flow of images move across the surfaces of the T.V. screens. Confusion is contained within the stable structure of the green house, with some images trying to get the better of other ones. Glass breaks and we hear voices - punters in awe at the glory of the gardens?

The Garden Festival was very much about a lot of gratuitous imagery - and folly to which a large number of artists have willingly contributed. It is both essential and relevant to tackle such subject matter from a critical perspective rather than simply become collaborators (the difficulty

being how as artists we all avoid simply becoming victims of an overbearing and often restrictive realism, yet still deal with an issue and avoid falling into the trap of simply making counter propaganda).

Work which deals directly with Social or Cultural criticism or comment is often looked upon by many as being either second rate or irrelevant, usually by those obsessed with much which is often outdated, obscure or style orientated at this period of time.

"If the shit stinks then smell the flowers instead. But then when you think about it what makes the flowers grow . . .?"

Rowland's piece was the only installation which attempts to deal with such a specifically poignant issue, which is both admirable and significant. However, the clarity in terms of content and presentation needs to be further resolved so that the impact and the implications of the work can be more fully realized and appreciated.

**Beyond Colour** A nine screen, video wall presentation by Mineo Aayamaguchi, ran continually throughout the event. A composed and rhythmic flow of images created a sense of harmony as landscape, nature, man-made objects such as digital displays on hi-fi's and

neon lights blended in with close up details of a clothed human body, creating a sense of 'wholeness' from formally disparate subjects and objects. Images seemed to flow across the surface of the T.V. screens, breaking down the physical frames between image and the medium. On the floor mirrors reflected the images on the screens, broken-up and fragmented out across the space itself and into that occupied by the viewer.

The work's overall simplicity had an attraction which became infectious, drawing you back, to witness something different in the overall flow of events on each separate viewing, essential if the work's full potential was to be experienced and its sculptural quality fully appreciated. Contrasted with many of the other works in the show, this piece was relatively low-tech in its production, relying on composition of subject matter with the camera and well timed editing, to create many striking and beautiful images. A good example of where simplicity is often the best effect available to put ideas across.

At the other extreme in terms of the technology used to create it, Lei Cox's **The Untitled** created a work which attempts to transcend the time-base. If it were possible such a work would exist as a series of 3 looped images, running continually, with no discernable beginning, middle or end, reflecting on Cox's interest and



Chris Rowlands "Hothouse" installation. Photo: O. Bamboye.

activity as an important image maker/photographer rather than programme maker.

The three screens used each contained an image of a half-man/half beast-creature born from the technology (indeed Cox spent what probably amounted to hundreds of hours creating his image).

On one screen a fish with the body of a human swims across the front of the screen, a girl tapping the inside of the tank (the other side of our TV screen) trying to attract this strange creature's or our attention.

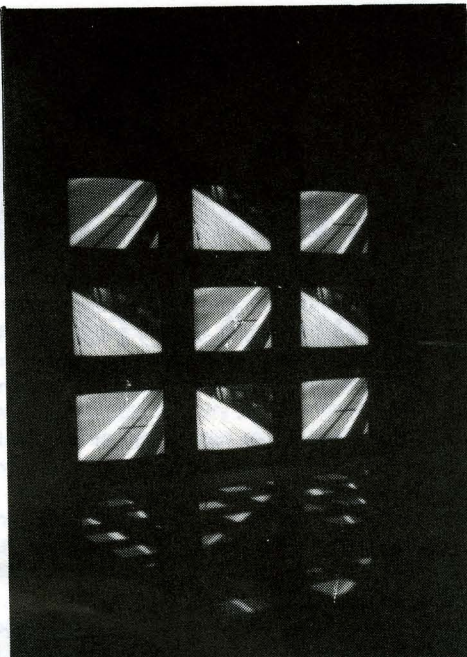
On another screen, a bird-like creature sits in a cage, its wings and body replaced with that of a human, again another face looks out from behind the caged image, making one wonder who exactly it is who's caged - Lei's creatures, the observer or ourselves.

On the third screen a half man half rat scurries around, trapped in a looped movement observed in the same manner as the others were. Occasionally, a model aeroplane flies past, either in front or behind the creations, adding depth and perspective to an otherwise 2-dimensional image.

Accompanying these 'creatures from the digital dimension' were a number of sampled and manipulated sounds, strange shrieks and primordial cries, emanating from the TV's and their caged creatures, somewhere deep within the medium itself. A fourth, as yet to be completed, image is awaited, necessitating countless more hours of time working with advanced technology such as the Quantel paintbox.

Cox, like several of the other artists exhibiting has been lucky enough to pursue and develop his ideas on some of the most advanced resources available to artists in Europe, at the Television Workshop in Dundee. The question which begs to be asked is would such lengthy periods of time be available to artists outside of such places and whether artists like Cox could pursue such a significant and important direction in their work outside of the current education system?

Like many others who were showing, Cox is a recent graduate of the Electronic Imaging course in Dundee, which now has the potential and resources to allow artists to make the medium as an artform into the nineties and beyond and out of the current confusion and conceptual 'difficulties' which hold it in pause and which if these younger artists are not given



Mineo Aaymaguchi "Beyond Colour" installation. Photo: O. Bamboye.

the opportunity, will result in a return to the numbing and stodgy pre-occupations of the seventies.

Alistair McDonald's piece **Staircase**, relied on the technically difficult requirement of ensuring that all the tapes were running in sync.

When this was the case the work is McDonald's best to date, dealing as it does with the themes of male hierarchy and masculinity, as we witness a 'rite-of-passage' from boyhood to manhood, with many of the images reflecting on the kind of media stereotypes to which males (supposedly) aspire.

A relatively simple piece in terms of its subject matter it has unlike any of the other installation works on show a narrative structure requiring that as viewers we are prepared to give up five minutes of our time to appreciate the work in full (obviously far beyond many respected art-viewing critics).

The subject matter is both significant and overlooked particularly from the obviously hetero-sexual stance which the work adopts. We are left wondering whether the media images and film icons included in the work are there for a critical or celebratory reason. Either interpretation has both a valid point and is one well worth addressing.

McDonald made this work almost eighteen months ago and like many who choose to work in the medium currently works in the 'industry' to be able to both live and sustain a creative practice. A new piece from McDonald is now long overdue . . .

In contrast to McDonald's piece, Kate Meynell's **Medusa** seemed unable to sustain its presence within the space. Whether this was through lack of consideration by the artist of the context in which the work was to be placed, or that the work itself required a more suitable and specific space (the piece was previously shown at the Tate Gallery) is open to interpretation. Whether a good installation should (to use everybody's favourite catch-all phrase) be 'site specific' or strong enough to transcend its context is open to debate.

Slower and more contemplative than the other works shown, an image of a human eye, moves slowly within the frame of TV screens, its mesmerizing gaze firmly rooted on the viewers. Images of varying significance were keyed over this - a solarised shot of a snake, the sea and pomegranates all appear as the work attempts to reverse or challenge the dominant (cultural) gaze of the male, questioning both the view point one may have or adopts. Accompanying the images is a hissing sound which at times becomes hypnotic, at others annoying.

The works relationship back to ancient mythology is interesting but predictable in the light of a multitude of works which use these classical themes as a central point to deal with certain important and relevant themes and is very much synonymous with a certain school of thought and group, of women artists who have come to prominence.

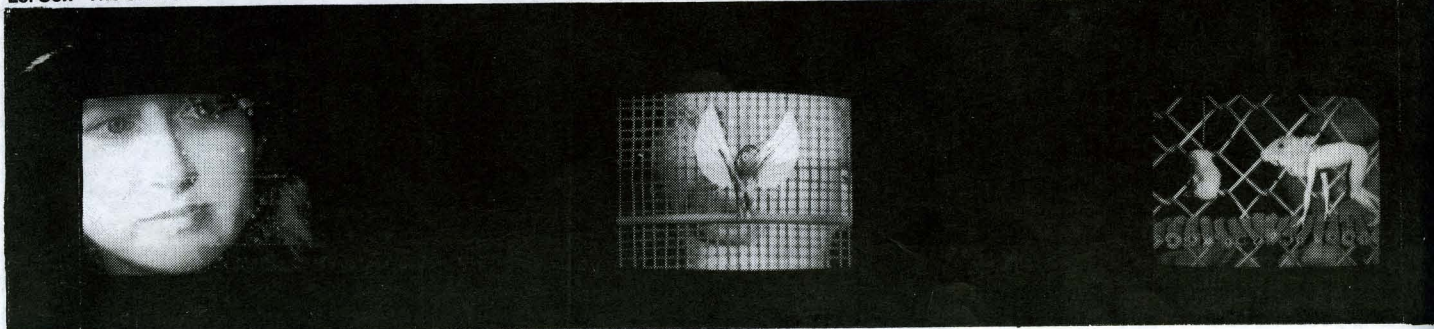
An interesting parallel to Kate Meynell's piece in the single screen selection is Nicola Percy's complex yet poetic piece **Into Oblivion Caring not, Daring not**.

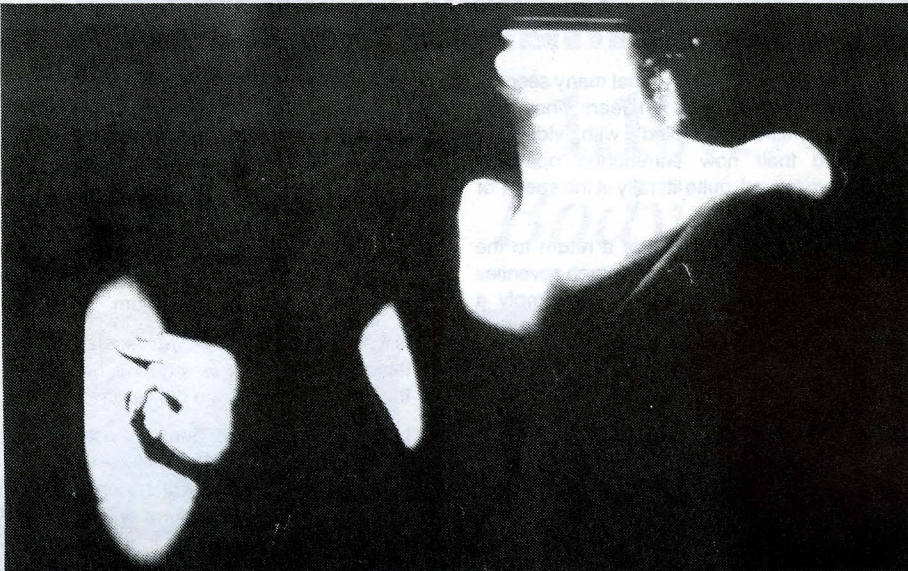
Put together with a captivating and haunting sound track, the beauty of the tape lies in its treatment of the female body.

At times its complex images created by mirrors and the defraction of light bordered on the erotic and sensual, as others we are confronted by images which appear stark and voyeuristic.

Somewhere in between are glimpses of things which create shared experience and unite us with the subject on the screen.

Lei Cox "The Untitled/The Observed" installation. Photo: O. Bamboye.





Nicola Percy, still from "Into Oblivion: Caring Not, Daring Not"

Clio Barnard's excellent **The Limits of Vision** a work in two parts deals with the notion of genius, obsession, potatoes and everyday activity as a work of art. A clear concise and often witty narrative overlays images, mostly set against a black backdrop, which vary from the beautiful to the absurd. Striking in particular is the image of identical twins, dressed in flowery frocks, sitting in a bath and a discussion which unfolds between them and Leonardo Da Vinci. Barnard has the potential to become a significant tape maker, if she can maintain the impetus. Interestingly (and a bit predictably) Barnard is one of a new wave of tape makers passing thru Dundee on her way to London.

Steve Littman's **In the Name of the Gun** is a single screen work based around the themes explored in the installations **Smile** and **Street Life**, presented at last year's National Review. Littman remains a catalyst in the organizing and promotion of Artist's Video events - often at his own expense and with much criticism from many under-achieving live art-hacks.

That aside, it's about time he made a new piece of work . . .

Other works produced by younger tape makers, many of whom are still students or recent graduates are those by Cavan Convery and Richard Couzins, which display a flair, humour and ingenuity lacking in much work produced by more 'established' artists.

**Venus** by Sandra Christie is both a perceptive and well constructed work by a video maker who deserves a higher profile and encouragement to continue. The animator Liz Power's piece **A Cruise to the Universe** is an odd work to try and classify. Power is particularly keen to develop her skills as an animator for children, difficult in an industry now so self obsessed with the fast moving and 'wacky' constructivist rip-offs which recently graced our TV. screens.

Currently her work attracts a sympathetic eye from artists' video audiences, though it will only realize its full potential when shown on broadcast to children or when the current 'acid-house wall-paper makers' realize they've run out of frames to squeeze things into . . .

**Vicious/Soccer** by Nigel Lindley are works produced by a recent graduate from the now defunct Fine Art based course at Maidstone (the pioneering centre for artists' video in Britain). Suffice t say that love them or hate them, these tapes are made by one of a number of younger artists trying not to fall into the trap of 'designerism' which plagues the medium and who work to often uncertain and unsupported ends. Unfortunately the wisdom of the dominant free-enterprise, art school entrepreneurs who control such institutions is that such practice (as it existed) is no longer relevant and more specifically hasn't got a place in the design-led nineties.

**LES-A Dream in The Life** directed by Dean Stockton is a broadcast piece made on a budget greater than the cost of staging and making all the other works put together. At its best, it's an interesting piece of broadcast television - challenging many broadcast conventions and offering an interesting insight. I don't really know why it was included in the event - particularly when much dialogue orientates around the need for artists to break with the conventions of television and start making 'art' again. That aside, it was watchable, well made and sensitive and is a good example of Television's potential when dialogue is avoided.

**Sentences** by Steve Partridge with sound by David Cunningham are designed as a series of interruptions into the conventions of Broadcast Television. Unfortunately to show them consecutively took away their potential as interruptions (their 'sting' if that's the right term) - they needed the context in which they were designed to be screened to clarify them. As

works in their own right they represent a significant move from Partridge's earlier collaborations and reveal a desire for a return to the minimalism and conceptualism apparent in much of the earlier work of his peer group, and many of whom now hold influential positions as artists, teachers, producers and administrators who have in many cases produced little during the eighties. (Partridge being an exception).

Several other Events of relevance which occurred within the context of the N.R.L.A., were the staging at Transmission (in many respects the pioneer in presenting and fostering time-based work in Scotland) of Paul Wong, a Chinese-Canadian Media Artist, who presented extracts from his various projects to date. Often lengthy, these pieces revealed an Artist prepared to confront and deal with subjects ranging from an exploration of sexuality, to his position both personally and culturally in a country in which he lives and remains as an outsider, dealing, as he does with the 'yuppie mentality' which surrounds him, using lifestyle advertising techniques, whilst at the same time exploring his background in China in an almost Cinema-verite style (as was the case of a work in progress **Ordinary Shadows Chinese Shades**).

Back at the Third Eye Centre, much was being made of the visit to Scotland of a Russian Artist/ Video maker Boris Ukhananov. It becomes difficult when one tries to evaluate the work which was presented. Should it be viewed from the context of the medium and its use to date, or should one consider it as a phenomenon of Glasnost that artists from the Soviet Union are now able to make creative/avante-garde films and videos, no matter how primitive or clumsy they may seem?

Indeed many resembled the often produced works made by people who get access to video equipment for the first time (a phenomenon not unique to the U.S.S.R. I hasten to add . . .). There is without a doubt a need for dialogue between artists from East and West (I think we could learn something from each other no matter how critical that dialogue may be). What concerns me is the appropriation of both Artists and their often suspect ends (many of whom have scant regard for either the medium or artists using the medium). If Ukhananov's visit proved anything, it was how hungry him and his contemporaries are to meet and see other artists who work with time-based Media.

Ukhananov spent hours watching tapes, talking to artists and experiencing the city (and its night clubs). His energy and enthusiasm was apparent as was his desire to talk to as many people as possible. His presence also revealed much about the sycophancy and suspect-motives of certain gallery owners, evidenced by an incident in which a certain influential figure (Richard Demarco) and his entourage sat and watched video for half an hour, before they realized that what they were watching were not Russian works, but Dance documentation pieces, upon which it was decreed that 'this is not culture' - exit one previously captive audience and their mentor in pursuit of Boris, who was probably watching a less entertaining performance elsewhere . . .