

TANGO, FIRE AND PLIP-PLOP

Nik Houghton undertook to monitor London Video Arts' Channel 6 Festival. This is his report.

The Public Speaks - I ask two foundation students what they think of the videos they have just seen. 'Not much!', says one. 'A lot of it was a bit boring... I didn't really understand what people were getting at', says her friend.

Informed Opinion - Me: 'What d'you think?' Him (a video artist and lecturer): Umm... for a start I wish people would keep away from the gadgets when they make tapes'.

Channel 6 is the LVA's annual video bonanza with workshops at the AIR Gallery, selected tapes by the LFMC and - our concern - programmes at the ICA. On view here are a 'Ten Years of the LVA' package, a timely videology chosen by Tamara Krikorian, a 'Breaking Boundaries' selection chosen from open entry to the LVA, and a new edition of 'Infermental', the international video magazine. With each programme running to five hours - a mistake, surely, in terms of audience concentration - and an additional screening on Sunday 30th November of New German Video Art in the ICA's videotheque, this review is necessarily incomplete... I'd need the whole magazine to give you the complete picture.

Kicking out the jams, as we rocknrollers say, is Vulture Video's sharp rapattack on fast food capitalism, 'Lo Pay No Way'. Rap, scratch and political satire are funk'd around in this chunk of an agitpop in a work which is fast and blunt in intention. 'Play', by Catherine Elwes isn't. Instead it's an elegantly simple piece with only two images, a child tapping on glass and a piano player. Elwes seems to have arrived at a simple but resonant style, which is a refreshing counterpoint to the video overkill of her male contemporaries. Steve Littman's piece, 'The Winner', by example, drenches the viewer in thousands of scratched images which seem to threaten the recurring snapshot picture of a child. Fragments of text interfere in this media mash-up. In similar style is Jez Welsh's 'Labyrinths', a state-of-the-art funk where faces are dissolved, reconstructed, mixed, trixed and fragedented. Pop art or toys-for-the-boys stuff? It depends which side of the effects generator you are sitting. In 'Transitive Four' John Goff is, I think, sitting on the wrong side as plip-plopping video games are overlaid with images of war in a countdown to apocalypse. Something of a disappointment after Goff's meditative 'Alap' piece shown earlier this year at the Scanners exhibition.

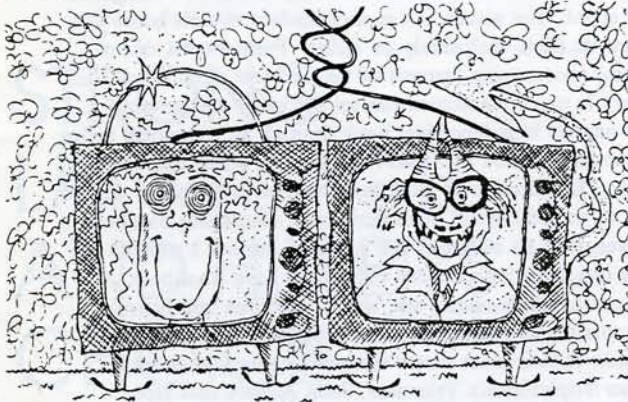
'Needle', by Sven Harding, is less exasperating although of the same edit-suite fever genre, and Mike McDowell's haphazard 'Beached' charges at you with a relentless barrage of ideas, images and texts. Acid, trippy, kinetic abstraction thrashes it out with a discourse on language for primacy in what is a confused work top heavy with video frazzle and oblique references.

More positive response is reserved for Dominic Dyson's 'Phantom Limb', a concise and seductively worked piece carefully using freeze frames, slow motion techniques and imposition to create ghosts of physicality - a dancer caught in mid-air, frozen by the camera, talks of body mechanics and 'jumping up not down'. Quietly innovative in its mix of street interviews, imagery and enquiry, it is one of the most intriguing tapes I've seen. Every time I view it another aspect or question emerges. 'Sardonic Hearts/ Euphoric Voices' is similarly intriguing as Tony Judge presents us with a cleverly constructed tape about power and patriotism. Its constraint and professional sheen is its strength as a young man, at first naked, dresses in City gent style while the signs of a 'Great Britain' present themselves to us. Short, vividly composed and hard-headed.

Judge, incidentally, is a student at the Scottish college Duncan-of-Jordanstone. Stephen Partridge teaches there and the influence of the highland landscape is evident in 'Vide Voce'. With specially composed music by David Cunningham 'Vide Voce' opens with a swing between cloud wreathed mountains and a wild landscape, moves through images of power stations and an oddly pop-viddish section to arrive at a naked woman swimming in the running water which feeds the power station. The music is beautiful but synthesis of sound and image are unbalanced by an almost arbitrary use of video effects in the middle section of the tape. In 'Beauty and the Beast', by Deborah Levy, the landscape is substantially less natural as a young man in Raybans - and little else - sits in a bath marked 'God' on a high rise wasteland. As a woman recites 'There is dirt in my heart - dirt in my womb', scenes of Felliniesque high camp - yuppie partygoers pose and chatter in stylised parody - are played out in an over-the-top lurch through art, fame and desire.

With Simon Robertshaw and 'One Of Those Things You See All The Time' it's understatement not overstatement which is most evident. Robertshaw won the £800 TVS/Media Centre Student Award at the 7th National Festival of Independent Video - a welcome boost to a broke tapemaker - and it's reassuring to see a work with complimentary and meaningful content and form getting recognition. In the context of video culture what's noticeable about this tape is the way it deals with specifics, mental health and medication, in an articulate but straightforward personal/political style rather than prowling vaguely through the sprawling territories of media, language or 101 other indefinable areas. Robertshaw's tape talks straight instead of mumbling through a sludge of imagery or mouthing off about anything and everything, and its very particularity is its strength.

Little of that particularity surfaces in the Infermental package, five one hour compilations of world-wide work. Nonetheless Dara Birnbaum's 'Fire' fights its way out of a largely disappointing selection and Lydia Schouten's 'Beauty Becomes the Beast' is striking for its off-the-wall quality of storytelling. Schouten's tape follows the mythic adventures of a woman who grows a devil's tale, visits the garden of lusts and becomes involved in sailor destroying mermaid antics. Set against this strangely mournful landscape of exotic myth, Birnbaum's 'Fire' looks positively minimalist as a Hendrix soundtrack accompanies a cut-up view of suburban America.



Elsewhere in the Infermental programme - this year compiled and edited by a group from Holland - electro rocker Yello looks moody in the 'Pinball Cha Cha' pop video, Servaas serves up 'Fish from Holland' in a work based around a Jaws theme, and Michael Smith executes a parody of pop promo styles in 'Go For It, Mike'. There's a lot more, of course, but watching work in an eyeball wrecked haze after nearly eight hours of viewing is unfair, and a more considered opinion will be forthcoming when I've finished the Optrex treatment.

So... just enough time for a cup of ICA coffee and it's off to Astrid Heibach's selection of new German tapes, presented by Heibach herself, an associate producer of Infermental. Outlining the conditions for video production in Germany Heibach indicated that the main areas of experimental production were Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin, all served by well-equipped art schools. Further to this there seemed to be some evidence of interaction between broadcast institutions and the independent sector with ZDF, a German TV company, commissioning independent works and gaining access for video artists to computer animation systems.

One such ZDF commission was 'Catfish Tango' (Bettina Gruber/ Maria Vedder) made for a children's programme. This underwater DIY fantasy - cocktail umbrella bobs past taking on the role of a jellyfish - occurs in a fishtank, a light-hearted high-tech piece. In 'Dienstag' ('Tuesday'), by Volker Anding, the humour is darker. A German citizen prepares his TV dinner while the gogglebox relays 'What Am I?', the German equivalent of 'What's My Line?'; abruptly the man freezes just as he starts to pour the bottled beer into his glass. He remains frozen as the room slowly fills with beer gushing from the seemingly bottomless bottle, and the inane gestures and grins of the TV continue unabated. A simple idea, beautifully executed and nightmarish despite its jokiness. Altogether different is 'Holzstucke' ('Pieces of Wood'), by Jean Francois Guiton, where fine edit techniques are applied to the collapse of elaborate wooden constructions so that the inevitability of their falling apart is constantly deferred by what amount th clickety-click animation. Subtle, rhythmic, funny and tense, 'Wood' is a tape which shifts outwards from its simple premise without overplaying its hand. Likewise,

Geor Maas' workshop cut-up '10 3/4', 3 minutes of computer animated composition, where hammers, drills and machinery create a playfully 'scratched' soundtrack.

In 'Ikarus' Stefan Schwieter extends rather than condenses a moment as a man jumping upward is caught in slow motion. As photos drift to the floor we are left to construct our own story or interpretation around this oblique piece. (Of his intentions the maker says: "To tell the story not in length but in depth, to explore time during its standstill and space in the absence of gravity").

'Killer' also tells a story. Gustav Hamos' piece centres on assassins, splicing the dramatically lit talking heads of three killers with distinctively different approaches to their vocation to a weird tale of catharsis and the contract killing of Flash Gordon. Something unnerving here as the thin line between parody and serious intention blurs into dangerous ambiguity. More nightmare too in 'Chore&Soli', by Todliche Doris, as the disturbing image of a composite face - two heads artfully overlaid to create a single distorted visage - surfaces to recite a childlike stanza. It's the sort of horrorshow snapshot you'd expect Nick Cave, downbeat crooner with the Bad Seeds, to keep close to his blackheart as he howls soulfully through Chris Dreher's pop-promo 'The Singer'. Cave sings a tale of tragi-comic lost stardom straight to camera while a doomy mid-tempo rockbeat accompanies his ironic looks and hammy guitar strumming. The music in 'The Miraculous Mandarin' is decidedly less kitsch as Bartok inspires a deliciously black and white film about Berlin lowlife. The 4 minute extract viewed here points to a dramatic and expressionistic narrative, both bleak and violent, which I will be looking out for when Harry Rag completes the project.



Stumbling out of the ICA after a day of art attack I was left in an initially ambivalent mood about Channel 6's main programme. This uncertainty was generated, I think, by the number of works - maybe 50% of the selection - which seemed at best only marginally interesting and at worst precocious trash. Tougher programming may have helped here, but finally the best works of Channel 6 outstrip reservations. Partly a UK review of tapeworks, partly a celebration of LVA's activities, Channel 6's best aspect shows a video culture healthily fragmented and on-the-move toward new territories of practice and content. Those new territories have yet to be fully defined or explored, but at least indicate progress. Next year, perhaps, we may see more confident moves in new directions. In the meantime - you haven't got an eyebath, have you?