

Stephen Littman

THE ROLE OF VIDEO AS MEDIUM OF DOCUMENTARY

Over the last 10 years I have made art using a variety of media, in particular performance, video and installation. As a counter point to my own concerns I have been documenting other artists works, including visual theatre, music and dance. My own work is conceptual in form and structure and this is carried over in the way I document pieces for television or single monitor viewing.

I see the monitor (or Multiples) as an integral part of the content of a video work, which has the ability to transform the vocabulary of the pictorial space of the viewer; and so in this way I develop a framework within which to transpose ideas.

I use narrative tensions to explore a world of symbolic reference, trying to understand and exploit the relationship between image, subject, form and structure. The work is concerned with looking through collecting devices such as film and video cameras, which focus the viewer and allow a statement to be made.

By exploring self imposed structures, I provide myself with the boundaries of how to interpret others work; either just pointing the camera, or making an intervention, so that the performance and its emotion may be realised on video. I am not fixed in the way I see and feel appropriate to the intentions, there are no proscribed formats of presentations.

The start of my professional documentation of art / dance began in 1981 when we received a phone call at London Video Arts asking whether we could shoot some dances for an educational / documentation video for the British Council / A.C.G.B. It would include a performance and interview with the artist. The artists involved were Mantis, Rosemary Butcher, Second Stride, Laurie Booth and Janet Smith; I collaborated with Pete Anderson in the making of these. At the same time, I became involved with Impact Theatre. These tapes were just records of the event. (The dance tapes later went on to be the first official exam video for the A/O level syllabus). This started a fascination with the recording of time based events and the search for equivalents from a three dimensional to two dimensional space.

My first involvement with the N.R.L.A. was in 1980 as a performer in Zoe Redman's slide film loop work "Ballroom Dancers"; but it was not until 1985 that I made my first video work for the N.R.L.A. I worked with Hidden Grin on "Overseen Overheard Overlooked" - 60 monitors (with 8 source inputs) with performance and confessions.

Nikki Milican then asked me to curate a video section for the N.R.L.A. at the Midland Group for the following year, in addition this was to include the documentation of all the work put on during the Festival. When in 1987 the N.R.L.A. moved to Riverside I curated a video installation show. With Tony Judge, Projects U.K., and students from D.J.C.A. and

Maidstone College we documented everything that moved. It was fairly chaotic.

In 1988 the N.R.L.A. moved to the Third Eye and Steve Partridge was invited to share the work with me. It would have been very difficult to envisage taking on such a task without the close association of someone who worked in Scotland. In this and the following year we continued our tradition of documenting everything with a group of competent students plus colleagues including Tony Judge. Steve and I divided the documenting of the N.R.L.A. into two working groups, he produced (while Doug Aubrey directed) D.J.C.A. students on all interviews and outside work; I directed Maidstone students on the studio performances. We will be doing so again this year.

By documenting so much and exploring ways of producing something more varied in arts documentation than the way T.V. does it, I found I had created an awareness in myself of the need and a role for works in many genres to be recorded on video - instead of leaving the record to a book / catalogues and to hearsay and memory. As a lot of time-based work is transitory by its very nature, it may seem to be irrelevant to try and document it in any form, but there are practical reasons as well as creative ones for doing this. If work is to be promoted internationally the venue often won't book it without seeing the video. I had the technology available to document time-based work on another time-based medium.

It is important to set up a sense of place and a watching space that takes the viewer into the world of the event. This could mean a number of options for the documentation that is being undertaken, from a straight record without intervention to video-construct of the work for the T.V. viewer who may never have seen the original piece.

In some respects television has already done something of the above, but on the whole they are not very successful. Early 50s American drama / live T.V. plays were exciting and had an element of risk. These come the closest to real theatre in the home. "Play for the Today" mainly dealt with language of the spoken word and not the world of the visual, they were always pre-recorded and edited. Then there are the Shakespeare plays from the B.B.C. - very expensive, and emotionally weak. They forgot who would be watching and how. TV is a pretty small medium, the space of the event must match its grandest gesture or fail.

My own formal concerns deal with a number of central issues:

1. The form and structure; this deals with rhythm, patterns of repeating images which dance visually, providing readings and re-readings of the information. These could either play on one or 40 or more T.V. Screens with a number of source machines running into them. I desire control to a frame, total accuracy, so nothing is left to

chance but so that anything is possible within the framework.

2. Content: The issues and ideas structure by the form.

3. Technology and treatment of visual image, and where that takes the form and content.

Together, these lead to emotional statements that a viewer can feel and see, understandings which are implied by the form, content and technology but which exist outside of those languages. This is about the reaction, the least definable part of the work, but the part by which the viewer becomes an active participant.

I have recorded over 100 performances from about 70 different artists or groups. Some have been in dance, others in performance art / visual theatre. The majority of these fit into two groups; those I had a personal involvement with, such as Impact Theatre or Hidden Grin, to groups I was commissioned by, such as Station House Opera, DV8, Rosemary Butcher, Laurie Booth, Gary Stevens, Rose English, Graeme Miller, etc.

These works fit into (what I perceive as) two aesthetic styles, those in which there is some intervention in order to control the end product, the video; and those which have been shot as originally designed, i.e. straight documentation. The straight works are formal, very simple, but they have a lot of meticulous care in the structure and crafting of them, to bring out the qualities intended by the director of the show. Where I have intervened I have tried to explore the very notion of the recording event, by using the quality of the recording medium – to make time flexible and to capture from different perspectives the essential elements of a show and construct it to fit the box. The way in which one receives and perceives information differs from a theatrical space to the space of a small screen. Should this level of manipulation happen to the work? On the whole I feel it should, as the medium of the T.V. box does not really allow the full emotion of the work to come through unless the work is treated. For me, the most successful videos have been the ones where I have had the most involvement in the structure, these being "Songs of the Claypeople" and "The Carrier Frequency" by Impact Theatre, "Surfing on the Short Waves" a group project with ICA/Tim Buckley, "Different Ghosts" and "Animals" by Gary Stevens and Lumiere & Son's "Panic". There are also a lot of other works I have enjoyed making, but these seem to have created elements which both ask and resolve the most within the medium, outside the structure of the theatre space.

Most works have been recorded in low band U-matic which was the industrial standard of video recording up until a few years ago. Recent shows have been recorded on the expensive broadcast formats such as betacam SP or U-matic high band. These give a better picture quality and the work shot can then be used as broadcast promotion tapes.

The role of The National Review of Live Art in the development and exhibition of live works in this country and abroad has been of very great importance and influence, the recording of these events has established an archive. I expect to continue this archive and in doing so go on exploring ways in which documentation can be achieved. I now know the best way is to start from the beginning and take the work out of theatre into the T.V. studio and collaborate with the Company working through the camera. This does create other problems, like who is directing the work and who is in control of what. So far I have found this can be overcome through mutual understanding of all concerns, breaking the barriers that go nowhere.

Funding has always been a problem. No one within the grant aided sector can pay the real cost of a professional video, and that is what I aim to achieve when making work. I use my personal access to the right technology. Shooting stuff on V.H.S. or other low grade formats is not a good policy for anyone. It often makes the work look bad and the sound is usually just as awful. The funding agencies are keen to develop small initiatives but they are not yet prepared to see the significance of the work in a way which would adequately finance documenting the arts in this country, what we need is a library to house the archive and to develop the innovative expansion of that resource. At present it seems unlikely that this would come from public funds so it needs to look elsewhere to develop this outside the arts council base, an alternative at this point is to look to T.V.

For me it is important to develop and maintain the archive, to protect it and give it life for future generations, as well as giving access to it to those who need it now. This does and will cost money, but like collectors of culture and searchers for significance, I expect it will be myself who will foot the bill in the end, although I may be broke, I have something I believe in totally.

I have always been someone to develop new initiatives in video events / installation, exploring with others new media and ways of collaborating. I am currently developing a space at Maidstone where artists and performers can work and develop aesthetics in the use of video with minimal cost. We have a fine studio and a high level of technology, staff and students are available and we want to develop work and theoretical attitudes to live work. This year I have worked at Maidstone with Gary Stevens, Glory what Glory, Graeme Miller, Keith Piper, Simon Robertshaw and Mike Jones, Judith Goddard, and Kate Meynell. The facilities are good. The desire to make innovative work is there.

Stephen Littman
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Lecturer in time base studies, Maidstone College, Kent Institute of Art & Design.