CHANNEL 6: A FRAME OF REFERENCE
Jeremy Welsh

The name 'Channel 6' is a serious joke: while making reference to all that is Channel 4, and to the popular notion that a profileration of other t.v. Channels is desirably inevitable in the long run, it puts forward the proposition that an 'alternative' is necessary, and that a framework whereby the hybrid, elusive and often misrepresented form of 'Video Art' can be put on the spot and subjected to critical analysis. Whereas last year's 'Channel 5' was intentionally discursive, eclectic, and 'anti-critical' in the sense that it refused the concept of distillation, the isolation of the term 'Video Art' from the other terms, 'Community', 'Scratch', 'Independent' and the various other videos that vie for attention. By contrast, Channel 6 is concerned exclusively with Video Art (a term I'd gladly put to bed, but one which we are as yet unable to replace) and is intended, for better or worse, to provide a focus whereby recent debates can be crystallised, and a context in which that elusive 'critical language', commonly thought to be absent from the cloisters of electronic image making, can be (more clearly) enunciated, developed, given a vocabulary. At last year's Channel 5 symposium, a well intentioned but ultimately rambling affair that tried to democratically cover the ground evenly, the battle lines were drawn up for the debate that has raged, well simmered, at least, in the pages of Independent Video, Art Monthly, Performance Magazine and Undercut for the past year. The demarcation line was Scratch Video and those for or against took their places on either side, while others tried to sit on a shaking fence, or played hopscotch along the dividing line, refusing to line up with an orthodoxy of either persuasion. The past year's debate has generated a great deal of heat, some plainly stupid theoretical positions quite detached from the actuality of a living and developing practise, some valid criticisms, valiant defences, but sadly, very little critical writing of any enduring value. The criticism of criticism has become a popular sport, with regular matches and rematches whose recent predictability has, one hopes, signalled the close of the season. The call has gone up again for a critical language appropriate and particular to Video Art (Nik Houghton in the ICA Video Library catalogue,

LO PAY NO WAY, Vulture Video

elsewhere in this publication, and the Film Co-op 'Lightyears' catalogue) and I for one would echo that sentiment, with a few qualifications.

For a start, it would help if we could arrive at some consensus over the meaning of various terms that are frequently applied, often in support of opposing arguments. Like 'oppositional' for example, a stalwart of British video writing, a term used to describe video's position relative to television, or Video Art's position relative to other Videos. Scratch was seen by its early champions as 'oppositional' to the political structures of mainstream broadcasting, but is now reviled by anti-t.v. oppositionalists as having submitted willingly to its own re-appropriation. What we might term 'traditional' Video Art, i.e. that which consciously extends an aesthetic developed in the seventies and sees its own history as an oppositional strategy all but obliterated by the rise of Scratch (1) is seen by other sections of the 'video community' as elitist, anti-popular, politically retrograde. Yet those who espouse this tradition regard it as truly radical in its rejection of the pop option and its insistence upon alternative content and intellectual density, its foregrounding of issues such as sexuality.

Another problematic term is 'narrative' by which any number of quite contradictory strategies can be indicated.

The 'New narrative' practised and propagated by feminist artists including Catherine Elwes and Margaret Warwick is presumably not the same thing as a 'neo narrative' dismissed by Mike Dunford (Video Art: The Dark Ages. Undercut 16) as an anti-radical form alongside scratch and anything else 'post modern'.

Interestingly, Dunford, who seems to be championing a grafting of the critical methodology of Structuralist Film onto the practise of Video Art, cites Elwes as one of the only worthwhile practitioners of video in the eighties, while at the same time arguing vehemently against Narrative or Representation, two cornerstones of the theoretical position espoused by Elwes. A further confusion occurs and is sharply focussed in Catherine Elwes' most recent article, 'a bid for radical naturalism' (ICA video library catalogue), whose very title is a contradiction. The article itself argues quite eloquently for a more 'humanist' approach that would privilege content over technique. All well and good, but the term 'Naturalism' is deeply problematic. It means 19th. Century Romanticism, particularly in literature and theatre, it means the suspension of disbelief, the heightened artifice of t.v. soap opera or Hollywood film, it means the system of reinforcing the very modes of representation that Elwes herself wants to abolish or replace. Another recent article by Troy Kennedy Martin, this time about television, but

taking account of video, attacks naturalism as the institutional stifling of creativity within the broadcast medium. Troy Kennedy Martin's McTaggart Lecture (reprinted in The Listener 28/8/86) argues against Naturalism, which he regards as a transplant from another medium, that of theatre, onto the new form, television. He proposes as an alternative the 'micro drama' which should be short, fragmented, deconstructionist, fast, able to reflect contemporary society by speaking in the language that wields the most power. Advertising, in other words. Unfortunately, he seems blissfully unaware of Video Art, but cites Rock Video and t.v. ads as the structural models to be appropriated. If we can overlook the historical naivete that almost deals a deadly blow to his argument, (2) there is a serious point worth looking at, and a small area of common ground (framed mainly by ideology and a desire to express 'oppositional' positions aesthetically and philosophically), between his argument and that of Video Art theorists like Elwes, Stuart Marshall or Tamara Krikorian. His project to develop a radical new narrative form within television itself, one which can take account of current social/ political/ aesthetic considerations, that can be both entertaining and provocative, intellectually demanding without being elitist, should be taken seriously by video artists, should be taken up as, at the very least, a point at which the incursion into television can be made on terms agreeable to the artist. There are those, of course, who recommend a complete separation from television as the only way for Video Art to develop cohesively, but this must be a doomed strategy. Video Art not only lacks a rigorous critical framework, it lacks a ready context, an available means of diffusion that is capable of guaranteeing its long term survival. The Art Gallery has never been a happy home, the video bar is a neutralising filter, the museum is a tomb, the community centre is a marginalisation, the video festival is a rare banquet in the absence of a staple diet. Video artists can simply not afford to ignore television, or the domestic VCR, or the other possibilities that technology will deliver.

It is worth lifting a couple of short quotes from Troy Kennedy Martin's piece, as conversation starters in our discussion of video:

1: 'Given that....the technology, the talent and the resources are available, what would happen if they were used to construct short bursts of energy, micro dramas, in which the context was not dictated by the need to sell beer or music, but reflected an exuberant social, political or aesthetic point of view?'

2: 'One of the perennial problems we have had to face every time that we have been confronted with a situation which calls for imaginative change is that we are let off the hook by new technical developments which allow the old way of doing things just a little more life'.

'The old way of doing things' undoubtedly holds most of the cards (this is true in any art form, any political structure, any bureaucracy) but that should not be allowed to stifle radical intervention.'

Channel 6 set as its agenda the theme 'Breaking Boundaries', and though I sense in current Video Art and the often confused discourse surrounding it, that boundaries are at best being blurred, and at worst, erected or reinforced, the project remains a vital one. Video artists may not be working at the forefront of technical innovation, finance makes that impossible, and may not be in the vanguard of style makers who largely shape contemporary culture, whether 'high' or 'low', but they may, with the right support, encouragement, criticism, be able to indicate the IMAGINATIVE CHANGE that can invigorate a tired, flabby culture whose main feature is a cynical resignation to the inevitability of a stasis born of sumultaneity. It's time to take down the barricades and do something positive. Scratch is not all bad. Video Art is not all good. Critical positionism is unhelpful when there are so few taking part in the argument. Let's try to clarify the terms, develop the dialogue, treat the work itself seriously. No more facile reviews that use video tapes as foils for sharp literary rhetoric; no more luddite calls for the abandonment of high tech - it's only a tool; learn to use it - and a return to a golden age of d.i.y. boffinism; no more preciousness, spikiness, defensiveness; no more suspicion of the possibility that success does not mean inevitable liquidation. Let's have more intelligent discussion, more agendas for future development, more channels of distribution, more accessibility and engagement without trivialising, more hard headed, realistic attacks on the Old Way of Doing Things. And in developing or refining a critical language, let's avoid dogma, formalism, brittle typologies. We live in a pluralist, multi cultural society, that is part of a world whose operations are increasingly predicated upon the controlled flow of information. The former is the upside, the latter the downside of a volatile equation. Catherine Elwes correctly points out in 'A bid for radical naturalism' that a concern with ecology must be at the root of a radical practise; it is above all others the important issue of our time. But in espousing an ecological view of natural resources, we should not turn our backs on other pollutants, the cultural waste of consumerism. Video's ongoing argument with television may look pointless from one position, but from another it's just as fundamental as a concern with environmental conservation or the abolition of nuclear armaments. It is a commonly made mistake to asume that video which concerns itself with the technology, the language and the imagery of television is somehow lacking in 'content'. The colonisation of our imagination by the images and messages of media culture is an issue as 'hot' as any I can think of, and one method of fighting back is to proceed directly to the heart of the illusion and to try to expose its nature, its inner working, its very artifice. Simply doing this is not, of course, any guarantee of success, but failure need not invalidate the attempt. If the failure of Scratch is its re-appropriation by the commerical t.v. industry, the failure of Video Art is its invisibility, its total inability to either change that which it opposes or to produce an alternative credible enough to win broad recognition. (3)

Channel 6 marks the end of one ten year cycle, the start of another. By 1996 Video could be anywhere at all; let's hope we're not still having the same arguments.

Notes.

1: The relationship of Scratch to the historical development of Video Art is frequently misconstrued by informed and (un) misinformed alike: certain sections of the press took Scratch to be the first flowering of a new kind of art, either ignoring, or simply oblivious to the preceding history of video art in Britain and elsewhere. On the other hand, supporters of video art's other 'lost' traditions, reacting against the virtual erasure of these traditions, eclipsed by Scratch - or more precisely, by the media hype surrounding scratch - have tried to present scratch not as a stage in a developing history, but as an abberation, a diversion from the true path. What can accurately be called Scratch Video happened in 84/85, and

most of its pioneers are now somewhere else. However, its effect can clearly be seen in the work of many young artists who have seen past the media hype, and taken from the form what is appropriate and useful to their own practise, just as before them, Scratch artists borrowed heavily from earlier experiments. The main bone of contention is the speed with which the style of scratch was co-opted by the advertising / pop / fashion industry, but 'pre-scratch' or 'anti-scratch' artists must bear in mind that most of the 'tricks' of scratch were already there in video art; scratch merely speeded up the pace, tightened up the beat, and used t.v. images instead of not using t.v. images. Thus, deconstructive 'language' of seventies video art has passed over, albeit in a diluted form, to the vocabulary of commercial video. The repeat edit, the disruption of syntax by removing segments of action or speech, the temporal dislocation achieved by scrapping 'continuity' or 'narrative structure', the use of fragmentary narrative to replace realistic/naturalistic fictional models are no longer the discreet tools of self proclaimed 'otherness'; they are cliches, no more or less.

2: The kind of 'micro-narrative' proposed by Troy Kennedy Martin has

existed in video art for some time, and the notions of speed/ fragmentation/ deconstruction he puts forward as an antidote to moribund t.v. conventions, can not in or of themselves make a material change to the ways in which t.v. is either made or received. Indeed, the rock video, in which he detects some hope of escape, has become a deeply conservative force even less likely to interject radical arguments than t.v. drama itself. There is a real danger that the short, sharp video, taking on the guise of the t.v. commerical to deliver a package of radical content, will fall foul of the 'quick hit' principle, and lose its effect by allowing itself to be taken as mere gratification. Kennedy Martin is right to recognise that the t.v. remote control/vcr/rock video/t.v. ad have changed our patterns of viewing, and the logic of responding to this by adopting a quick hit method is understandable, but when acceleration is threatening to numb our senses, to atrophy our critical perceptions, then perhaps that which is long, slow and 'difficult' is more likely to represent a break with the dominant form. Naturalism is not television's only orthodoxy, and anti-naturalism is not the only weapon for a counter offensive.

3: The lack of critical recognition and its marginalisation by the Art

establishment are often held to be the main culprits in the ongoing saga of video art's apparent invisibility. However, the problem is partially self inflicted; if we reject the tenets of art criticism and the market view of art engenderd by the gallery system, and at the same time we declaim our difference from film culture and our opposition to television, then it must be asked, where do we see ourselves? If we want a critical language that refers only to Video Art as a self defining object of theory or criticism, then we are submitting willingly to our own marginalisation. Our theoretical apparatus must clearly take account of other cultural forms, and must recognise as a basic premise that we exist (and only exist) relative to television on the one hand and art on the other. The refusal to accept television as part of the equation is a response that seems peculiar to British Video artists; elsewhere, television is always given consideration, both in practice and in theoretical work. To take a random example, a recent anthology publishes in the USA is entitled TRANSMISSION: Theory and Practise for a New Television Aesthetics'. It is a collection of writing that is largely about video art, but it sees its subject as a form of television and its project to change the aesthetics of t.v.

Breaking Boundaries: New British Video 1986

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES. John Adams 60 mins.
PLAY. Catherine Elwes. 4 mins
CLOSE THAT DEAL. Mike Jones and Graham Ellard. 5 mins.
THE TELEVISION: LIVE FROM GLASGOW. Kevin Atherton 16mins.
ACCIDENTS IN THE HOME No. 9; INDOOR GAMES. Graham Young. 6 mins.
LO PAY NO WAY. Vulture Video. 7 mins.
STROBEZOOM. Pamela Smith. 12 mins.
I WISH. Ivan Unwin / F.S.F.P. 12 mins.
BARELY MOVING. Jonathon Davis. 5mins 30 secs
VIDE VOCE. Stephen Partridge. 10 mins
B. Mike McDowall. 6 mins.
PRAYERS TO THE BEAST. Deborah Levy. 10 mins.
RITUAL LANDSCPAE. Paul Mellor. 10 mins
LOST PLACE. Zoe Redman. 12 mins
BALTIMORE. Peter Harvey. 15mins
THE SENTINEL/NEEDLE. Sven Harding. 8 mins

PHANTOM LIMB. Dominic Dyson. 11 mins.
TRANSITIVE FOUR. John Goff. 5 mins
BEYOND COLOUR. Mineo Aayamuguchi. 14 mins
AN IMAGINARY LANDSCAPE. Chris Meigh Andrews. 6 mins
SARDONIC HEARTS/EUPHORIC VOICES. Tony Judge. 4 mins
ONE OF THOSE THINGS YOU SEE ALL THE TIME. Simon Robertshaw. 7 mins
THE WINNER. Steve Littman. 15mins
THE MAN OF THE CROWD. Mark Wilcox. 38 mins.

This programme was selected from a national open submission. 89 tapes were submitted and viewed by a panel at London Video Arts.

Selection panel:

Anne Wilson, Marty St. James, Jane Parish, Alex Graham, Atalia Shaw, Joram Ten Brink, Jeremy Welsh.