

A LOOK AT BRITISH VIDEO ART

In North America, Germany and Holland, video art has achieved artistic recognition. But the British video art scene remains in obscurity. In this article, Graham Wade examines British video art and looks specifically at a recent exhibition in Coventry.

WHAT is British video art? The question itself poses several difficulties which must be clarified before any sort of answer can even be attempted. In the first place the world of art, and particularly the world of avant-garde art forms, is in many senses separate from most ordinary people's lives.

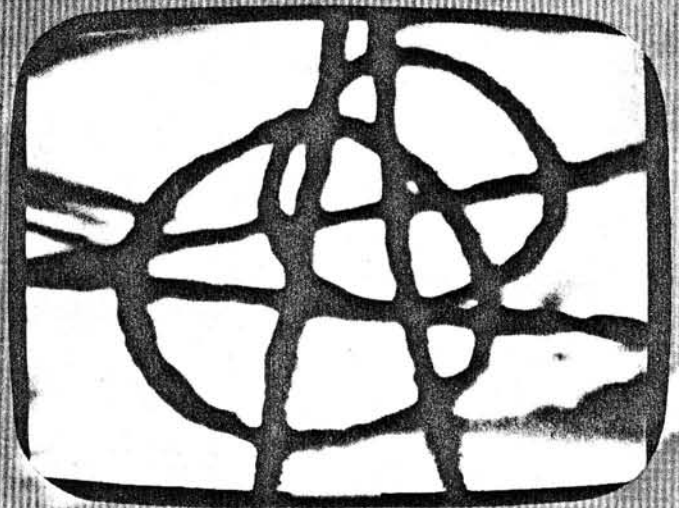
Secondly, the existence of British video art cannot simply be cut off and isolated from developments in other countries. The fact that it is a relatively recent movement means that its identity is still in the early stages of forming. So its different strands are difficult to define. On top of this, and in common with many new intellectual movements, its spokespeople tend to use overcomplicated and dense language in describing what they are about. Artists tend to be worse than most in this respect.

Because it is still in the process of establishing itself, video art, and especially the British variety, suffers from an inferiority complex which often leads it to defend the patently indefensible. It is not stretching the truth to say that there are virtually as many definitions of video art as there are video artists. So with this formidable list of reservations in mind, we can get down to business.

The first person to be credited with the title video artist is generally considered to be the American-Japanese Nam June Paik, who undertook some work involving TV in Germany during the late 1950s. He was also the person to take delivery of the first Sony half-inch portapak to be shipped to New York, for public sale, in 1965. It is the coming of cheap portable video equipment that marks the real birth of video art the world over—indeed it heralded the beginnings of all kinds of alternative media practice, like community and political video, which are other intriguing fields still sorting themselves out.

Because this country is less sympathetic to artists than most other western industrial-capitalist nations, the progress of British video art has been slower and more difficult than in, for example,





North America, Germany and Holland. The British scene has been dominated by the art colleges and interested teachers.

If a movement has to be given a figurehead—and that in itself can be very misleading—the best British candidate would be David Hall, who has developed over the years a section devoted to film, video and sound at Maidstone College of Art, Kent. He had some early work shown on Scottish Television in 1971, called *TV Pieces*. These were inserted, unannounced, after normal TV programmes. One of them involved a tap appearing in the top right hand corner of the TV screen. As water flowed from it, so the screen filled up with water—effectively the screen's space was the sink. In fact, *Tap Piece*, as it is called, was recently shown on *The London Weekend Show*, as part of a programme that looked at alternative uses of video.

Gradually, through the 1970s video art gained a foothold in a few British art colleges, but the first very public statement of its existence came in 1975 with the *Video Show*, staged at the Serpentine Gallery in London's Hyde Park. This went on for the whole month of May, accompanied by parallel events like the *Video Perspectives* series of seminars and lectures at the Royal College of Art.

What was most interesting about the Serpentine exhibition was its enormous breadth. Over 100 hours of video tape were on show—the majority originating in the UK. But in its open house approach the show managed to include much material that would now fall outside the purist definition of video art. In other words there were many pieces which had community and directly documentary themes.

A fair proportion of the tapes also came under the heading of video graphics, a field that at first was seen to fall under the heading video art proper, but now is excluded by many of the high-priests of the movement. Video graphics

is often produced by using a video synthesiser which gives endless possibilities of changing shape and colour.

One or two other exhibitions followed this event at the Serpentine, on which the Arts Council spent £13,000, including a small one at the Tate Gallery in 1976. This comprised some installation works by half-a-dozen British video artists, including David Hall. Because the presentation of the Tate Show was low key—it was not a main show and hidden away downstairs—its impact was minimal. The Tate has not held a video show since.

But what is video art? As I've already suggested the area is a minefield. At the simplest level it is merely the use of video technology by artists. But the stricter critics would say this is too loose. David Hall, for instance, would not only exclude the community people, he would exclude many artists who use video as an adjunct to their work.

His first point is that video artists need to integrate the essential properties of video technology into their activity. In other words just to use a camera to record an event is not enough. In specific terms he would typify this integration as including: "The manipulation of record and playback configurations; immediate visual and audio regeneration; the relative lack of image resolution; signal distortion; frame instability—often purposefully induced by misaligning vertical and horizontal frame locks; random visual noise; camera 'beam', 'target', focus, vidicon tube; and so on."

He goes on to a consideration of what actually appears on the monitor. Again, as I have said before, the opaque language of the artist/theoretician intervenes and all I can do is reproduce what the man has written: "The dominant tangibility of the object presentation system is an irrevocable presence which in itself contributes from the outset to the dissolution of the image." What that means I can't be sure.

A second category of video art David Hall defines as using the medium's ability for instant image feedback. This has been used many times almost to the point of boredom by video artists. Thirdly, he identifies work based on what he terms 'the triangular feedback

configuration". This he describes as: "Camera looks at artist or participant looking at the monitor image of himself fed live from that camera."

Sometimes it is hard not to become cynical in the face of overblown statements which often seem to amount to nothing more than gibberish. I have not bothered to quote at length how bad this can sometimes be—but, believe me, at its worst it is absolutely awful. On the other hand it would be easy to write off video artists as a bunch of charlatans who con the state for money to practice their irrelevant and meaningless hoaxes.

I believe some video artists are meagrely talented, but that is true of any group of people. Essentially they must be judged on their work—not in bare terms of success or failure—but on whether it displays integrity in its search of new areas of experience. This year, during May, the most recent British video art show took place in Coventry. It serves as a useful reference point for a consideration of the contemporary scene.

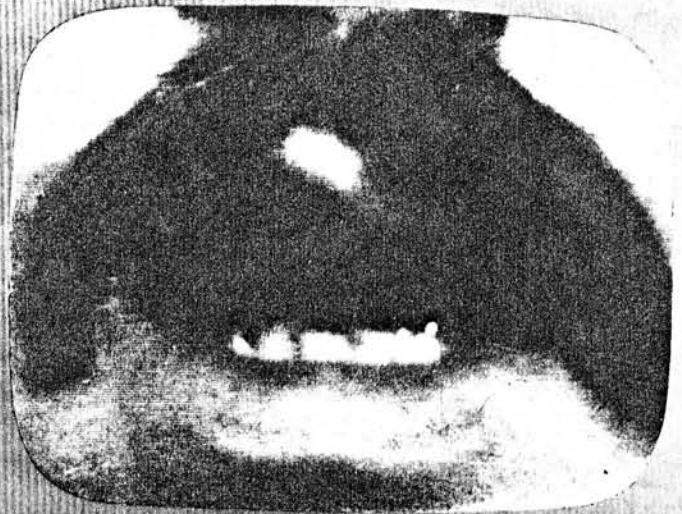
Video Art 78 at Coventry: A Review

This show was the first to feature video art in the Midlands. It got off the ground when Steven Partridge, who teaches video at Lanchester Polytechnic's art department, approached the local municipal art gallery to find out if they were interested. They were, and the Arts Council came up with £4,500 to finance the exhibition.

To begin the process of selecting work for the show, Partridge wrote to a number of people around the world who he had previously come across in the field of video art. They nominated people who they thought could possibly be shown and then a selection panel was assembled to make the final choices. This was effectively made up of Partridge, David Hall, an Arts Council representative and a Tate Gallery member.

From a hundred names for the tape section, they eventually chose 27. For the installations section—Steven Partridge found it impossible to describe what an installation is—there were around 25 candidates, who were narrowed down to seven. For performances—that is performance using video—they

Above, left to right: *Video Corpus* by Rene Bauernmeier; *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* by David Hall; *A Serene Composition Suggestive of Pastoral Repose* by Noel Harding; *Go Through the Motions* by Stuart Marshall.



selected three. All of the installations and performances, bar one, were British, although a fair slice of the tapes were foreign.

Many of the British tapes I found boring. Stuart Marshall's *Go Through The Motions*, 1975, presents the close up of a male mouth, which appears to be repeating the phrase: 'Go through the motions of saying one thing and meaning another.' After a while (and it seems an age), the mouth stops while the audio continues giving out the phrase. There are then variations on this theme, whereby the mouth will just stop miming the words for different parts of the phrase. So sometimes it appears in sync with the soundtrack and at others it is motionless.

The programme notes (sorry, catalogue!), presumably written by the artist himself, say: 'At first the mouth appears to be speaking until it suddenly freezes. From then on a play is set up between speech and mime, live sound and commentary which involves the patterned semantic deconstruction of the speech loop.' You could have fooled me. Yet Steven Partridge pointed out this tape as being one of the best.

Spered Hollvedel by Brian Hoey, 1977, (pictured on our front cover) was the nearest thing I saw to video graphics. It is based on Celtic culture and uses images of jewellery and stonework, although for much of its length these are used to create abstract images of swirling shapes and colours. The soundtrack is made up of some powerful music which 'at times seems very traditional and at others sound very electric.

Some of the feedback images were particularly striking and the inter-relationship between sound and vision achieved a subtle closeness at times. It was by no means brilliant, but at least kept the attention from wandering.

A US tape by Richard Serra, *Television Delivers People*, 1973, was for me the best thing I saw. It is uncompromising in its presentation and undivided in its message. For its whole length you just see sentence after sentence roll by like an endless series of credits, yet what they say is highly subversive and unlike anything on ordinary broadcast television.

Here are some samples: 'It is the consumer who is consumed. The viewer is not responsible for programming. You are the end product. TV establishments are committed to economic survival. TV defines the world so as not to threaten you. Popular entertainment is basically for the status quo. You are the product of TV.'

And so in a relentlessly circular argument of simple statements, supported on the audio track by sweetly sterile Muzak, the tape makes its point. It begins and ends with its straightforward assertion that "Television delivers people". It is direct, simple and meaningful—a lesson that would not be lost on some UK video artists.

David Hall's *TV Fighter*, 1977, was another tape I enjoyed. This takes a sequence of second world war footage of planes shooting up trains, boats and barges on canals. It is all shot from inside the attacking aircraft to a screaming, realistic soundtrack. After the first sequence, a hand appears to paint a roughly drawn gun sight on the glass of the monitor that is showing it.

Through several phases—and each one is marked by the complete replay of the original sequence—the viewer ends up looking at two monitors free-floating on the screen. They both have gun-sights painted on them and they both show the original sequence and the soundtrack screams on. It is difficult to describe in words (which is not a cop out), but the tape does bring into question most effectively the relationship between such war scenes and a viewer perched in front of the TV set watching a war movie or whatever.

One of the better installations was by Roger Barnard, called *Looking For Georgie*, 1978. This set up four cameras pointing at four chairs, so that when different people sat in them they would be faced by a monitor showing a face made up of one person's hair, another's eyes, another's nose and another's mouth. It is a kind of real time identikit picture with the added dimension of having the other people, who make up the composite sitting right there beside you.

Another installation by Stuart Marshall was set in a darkened gallery space, slide projectors, each projecting a

colour transparency onto opposite walls. One showed a side of a living room, the other a row of houses—presumably the view from the same room's windows. Facing each other on the other two sides of the gallery were two colour TV monitors on podiums. Each of these showed a different view of the same room with the angle of view changing from time to time. Added to this were various sounds—relating to the represented room—played from speakers set in the gallery.

So, basically, the piece was presenting an environment using different media in a gallery context. I had mixed feelings about it. Certainly it did reproduce the space and sounds of a real living room in an entirely different space which was an interesting experience to be within. But what's the point?

I asked that question to a group of visiting school students who were wandering through the gallery. They were about fourteen and from their answers didn't seem particularly impressed by what they saw, but when I suggested to them that money shouldn't be spent on such activities, they unanimously dissented. "People should be able to get on with what they want, regardless," argued one.

And in the final analysis I must agree with them. Art is not always easily accessible, and sometimes that is the fault of the artist, sometimes that of the viewer, and often a combination of both. But the video artist, like any other sort, must be given a chance. Art should not be the preserve of the, usually self-elected, few. And there are particular reasons why video art should break out of those shackles.

Perhaps the most valuable direction video art can go in is the exploration of counter-values to existing broadcast television. Already such a school exists within the mainstream of British video art, and clearly its work, if it became popular, could affect the way we view television and video technology.

On the showing at Coventry, video artists should go on doing their own thing while trying to get closer to the lives of ordinary people, rather than curling up in an elitist shell of obscurity.

Graham Wade