

VIDEO ART IDENTITY AND THE PROCESSES OF CULTURAL MAPPING

by
John
Byrne

In his article *'The Necessity Of Doing Away With Video Art'*¹ **John Wyver** argued that the video age has heralded a new era within which 'previously distinct' communications industries have converged. Within this (presumably postmodern?) era of boundary blurring, Wyver argues for the disposal of any notion of video art. One of the main reasons he gives for this is the notion that video art is now defined by its own self-perpetuating 'superstructure' of production and dispersal. Put simply, Wyver sees as problematic the continued existence of a tyrannical network of exhibitions, festivals and curatorial practices which originally developed to establish video's supposed artistic integrity, but which now survives only to be fed with more of the same old stuff.

For Wyver to criticise the poverty of medium-specific cultural production is one thing, to propose a notion of doing away with video art is another. Such an action would, I believe, merely deprive us of a potentially valuable tool of cultural self-criticism whilst, at the same time, altering nothing.

Traditionally speaking, image making practices have, in our society, been taken as an indicative barometer of the social, economic and political circumstances in which they were produced. If this is so then 'art', at best, can only provide us with new ways of seeing and perceiving the 'world out there'. However, an alternative to such passive conceptions of visual culture have been offered in the work of writers such as **Raymond Williams**. In his book *Culture*² for example, Williams argued for a general reappraisal of creative practices as sites of cultural activity, or battlegrounds, through which societies struggle to impose dominant points of view, and within which new meanings are themselves generated. Given this, 'video art' not only offers a unique opportunity to look at how we are structured through language and communication industries, it also provides the possibility to challenge certain processes of selectivity which not only underpin the 'art' world, but which govern our role as individuals within capitalist society.

One such dominant process within our society concerns the accepted notion that individual works of art can be collected, organised and exhibited in terms of authorial intent, as individual examples of their makers' creative genius. There is an imbalance in this which is both racial and gendered given the almost complete dominance in our galleries of individual geniuses who happen to be western, white and male. The individuals who currently go to make up our dominant canon of artistic excellence are not chosen on merit alone. So how are we to address such an obvious imbalance?

The first step is to argue, as it has been over the last decade or so, that 'art' is not produced by the individual 'author' at all, rather that it is the result of varied social processes which reach far beyond the interventionist role of any individual curator, critic or funding body. 'Art', therefore, can be seen as a historically specific and socially created term of identification which is encoded to its roots with assumptions about the role and function of gender, race and class identities. Identifying the point at which some of our society's more dearly held myths are generated is one thing, but altering them is another.

Certainly, to propose any notion that 'art' is not physically produced by individual human beings will be justifiably met with scorn. Nor is any strategy of anonymous exhibitions a tenable alternative. The uninitiated viewer needs, at the very least, some indication of where a particular installation begins and another one ends, and organising exhibition spaces in terms of named individuals would seem as good a way of doing this as any. The question of authorship is not simply about who made what and when, it is about a set of criteria - a cultural template if you like - which enables decisions to be made within our society over who 'counts' as an 'artist' and who doesn't.

Current selective practices act both as an index of what individualism 'means' in our society, and as an indication of how these 'meanings' affect relations of gender, race and class. But simply filling up a gallery space with a more 'equal' share of gendered and ethnically specific work will not alter anything, and although a contradictorily superficial improvement, such 'tokenism' of this or any kind cannot be avoided until the very 'meanings' and processes by which certain objects are allowed to function as 'art' within our society are radically altered. This, in turn, would necessitate a critical emphasis on work which explored the function of electronic media in the construction and proliferation of existing gender, race and class identities and their relationship to Eurocentric and phallogocentric ideals of individualism.

The urgency of this task within our present cultural climate cannot be underestimated. In Britain, we are still reeling from the legacy of the Thatcherite era. The broader ideologies of the '80s' boom played upon a particularly insidious version of 'individuality' which was defined largely by self-interest. 'Identity' became the means by which the individual could prove the successful pursuit of self-interest through the outward display of recognisable consumer goods. The familiar two-tier society of the haves and have-nots was confused further through an unprecedented level of social display. Paradoxically, the idea of confirming one's 'identity' through a display of wealth and social difference was carefully filtered through the uniformity of the international designer label. This 'sameness in difference', this access to a synthetic and manufactured identity which placates even the poorest strata of society with the advertising promise that their burgers and soft drinks will taste the same the world over, has begun to run amok. Arguments, however interesting, over whether or not this unprecedented boundary blurring constitutes a new 'postmodern' era will, I fear, provide little more than testimony to the inadequacy of a single 'individual' word or theory to stand for anything much these days. The sooner the inadequacy of 'individualism' as a template by which to represent the true diversity of cultural 'difference' is realised, the sooner we can start as a society (atomised as it is) to build upon notions of community.

One such work which fundamentally challenges accepted notions of individualism in the VIDEO POSITIVE 93 festival is **Simon Robertshaw's** interactive installation *The Observatory*. Whilst working with psychiatric and special care patients in hospitals, half-way houses and day centres, Robertshaw became aware of how their 'identity', or rather lack of 'identity', was constructed in and through the languages and discourses of medical 'science'. As a result,

Robertshaw has given us a work which forces us to become involved in a reciprocal discourse with images, notions and traditions of the body. The piece is in no way didactic. Nor will a close reading of the work be rewarded with a more thorough understanding of Robertshaw's own individual point of view. We find ourselves in a shifting and prismatic experience of historical and contemporary images and constructs of the human body. From ghostly etched glass images of human incarceration and DNA codes, to a projected CT scan of a child's head which is constantly in a robotic process of structuring and re-structuring itself, we are left in no doubt that these are more than mere records of our physical existence. They are historical documents which talk across us in a constant dialogue which is responsible for our own self image as the image of a 'healthy' body - a body politic whose measure is the white western male descendant of **Leonardo's** *Vitruvian Man*. However, this is not a representation of our own construction through surveillance. Rather, Robertshaw accepts Foucault's term 'the gaze' in order to implicate our complicity in this complex of representations. In doing so, *The Observatory* reminds us of our responsibility to reject any simplistic notion that we are being objectively observed by an amoral and 'well' meaning 'science'.

Themes of the individual, the body and its construction through a history of commodity exchange and global capitalist circulation have also recently been the theme of **Keith Piper's** video installation *Trade Winds*. Through a series of twelve crates, clustered into three groups of four thereby signifying the compass divisions of our maps, Piper traces a fragmented, conflicting and thoroughly materialist critique of black identity within existing capitalist economic structures. A shifting intertextuality of animated computer montages tests the inadequacy of a mono-racial cultural equation which has constantly failed to accept the cultural diversity of a truly multi-racial 'identity'. As a result, the viewer moves from box to box, packaged commodity to packaged commodity, to be embroiled in a 'process' in which dominant Eurocentric myths of black identity are fundamentally challenged.

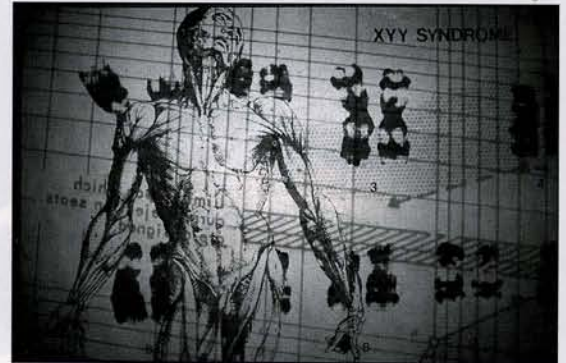
In **Judith Goddard's** installation *Descry*, we are reminded that the very process of 'looking' itself must be separated from those ideologies which would reduce it to a biological or physiological function. From **Alberti's** Fifteenth Century treatise on perspective to contemporary biological textbooks, processes of vision have been represented by a singular diagrammatic eye which constantly looks out³. There is never any indication that this act of looking is part of a broader process through which the viewer's identity is constructed. Rather, the individual viewer is represented as fixed, unproblematic and ahistorical. The eye voyeuristically devours the world out there on the individual's own terms. Goddard's work, however, re-invokes the true complexity of the visual process. Seven screens, seven different registers of experience, are converged through a suspended lens onto a single monitor. Here an eye operation is taking place. The physical intervention of hand and scalpel into the line of sight reminds us that the process of looking can never be reduced to a relationship between single object and single viewer. The space across which vision occurs is always marked by the traces and manipulations of others. To experience the visual, then, is to experience the social.

In order to make sense of the modern world, or to communicate about it, we are forced to use a set of discursive conventions which privilege the private experience of the 'individual' viewer. This is the fundamental 'myth' which must be challenged. For, in our society, the 'individual' is found to be an idealised construct which is built in the image of the white western male.

In the light of this, the work which is undertaken through *The Collaboration Programme* in VIDEO POSITIVE, providing community groups with the means by which to represent themselves, cannot be underestimated. Such opportunities reach far beyond the 'gable end' culture of community murals and, instead, provide these groups with a much needed means of self-assertion. What is more, video provides an available currency with which to challenge the more normative representations which are made for them by public and private media agencies. As with the installations of Robertshaw and Piper, these projects move beyond the ideology of expressive artist and public audience. They provide a platform through which the experience of self-identity is built across a polyphonous network of mutually determining ideologies. The result of this is a critical narrowing down of the space between 'spectator' and 'spectacle' which not only conditions our intended responses to art, but which are the dominant relations of 'privilege' and 'otherness' within our society.

It is because of the possibilities that such work provides, and the challenge it presents to a comfortable and otherwise 'systemised' gallery experience, that I believe there is a strong case (to paraphrase Wyver) for 'the necessity of doing Video Art'.

If galleries are a place in which the dominant ideologies of our society are imaged and expressed, they are also an arena in which dominant processes of visual consumption can be challenged. The work that needs to be done goes far beyond the telling of a story, the uncovering of some pre-existing truth. The challenge is for us to re-construct the very economy of seeing, and the contributory role of many diverse and specific voices which go to make up this experience. The power of an international televisual experience to provide us with rich and rewarding moving image culture is not in dispute: its uncritical power to replicate out-dated notions of experience and identity through the manoeuvrings of global corporate capitalism are. I am not arguing for a critical re-production of dominant ideologies. Our society has a long established track record of surviving public revelations of the 'truth' about itself. The hegemonic processes at work as we enter the new technological millenium are far too complex for that. Rather, I would argue for a moving image culture in which more people are introduced to the possibility of 'producing' their own image and identity, have access to the processes and procedures which enable this, and are consciously involved in what I believe should be the day to day process of democratically 'constructing' our societal environment.



The Observatory by Simon Robertshaw, 1992

Footnotes

1. John Wyver, 'The Necessity of Doing Away With Video Art', LVA Catalogue, London Video Access Limited, London, 1991.
2. Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Fontana Press, Glasgow, 1981.
3. The ideological problematic of the 'Albertian eye' is addressed in 'The Gaze and the Glance', chapter five of Norman Bryson's challenging work 'Vision and Painting, The Logic of the Gaze', Macmillan Press, London, 1991.