

1935 Born in Leicester, England
1969 Emigrated to Canada
Now lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia

Education

1953-57 Studied painting, King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, under Lawrence Gowing
1957-59 Studied history of art, Courtauld Institute, London

Employment

1959-69 Taught history of art and painting, University of Leeds
1969-76 Taught painting, theory and later video, University of Guelph, Ontario
Since 1976 Director of the Graduate Program, Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Halifax

Publications

1970-79 A variety of critical articles and reviews in *Studio International*, *Vie des Arts*, *Art Magazine*, *Parachute*, *Arts Atlantic*, *Artforum*, *Arts Canada* etc.
1976 "Structural Videotape in Canada" in Ira Schneider, Beryl Korot (ed), *Video Art, an anthology*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, New York
1977 "Art as Art and the Oxford Dictionary" in *Vanguard*, October, The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver

Exhibitions (selected)

1972 Various teaching projects: Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C. USA; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
1978-79 Video Installation, *Keeping Marlene out of the Picture — and Lawn*; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Present activities

After *Process Paintings*, in the 1960's, and *Newspaper Paintings*, 1977 (now in the collection of the Canada Council Art Bank), Cameron is working on *Thick Paintings*, the most advanced of which is lettuce which lies buried beneath more than a thousand coats of acrylic paint. His critical studies are being redirected to provide a parallel commentary for these paintings and other art-works.

The popular idea of the artist as an ascetic detached from the world in his or her studio-cocoon is now, in reality, little more than a myth. It is true that Left Bank aspirations still prevail among some artists but for many more this kind of existence is neither desirable nor practicable. The need for first-hand contact with the outside world is essential. And to engage in other pursuits which are often considered peripheral to the act of art-making is something which can, through the breadth of experience gained, greatly enlighten and enrich the process, indeed it gives a perspective to that endeavour. Art is not in the product alone, it is (to use the age-old cliché) a way of life, where every element of the artist's output may be regarded as a significant and substantial part of the whole.

Eric Cameron is an artist whose every activity reflects his inventive and creative abilities. Each is approached with equal dedication and determination to produce the best. An article, and Cameron has had many works published, on another artist or on the state of art in general is never treated as a dry academic exercise, it can have humour, compassion and an uncanny personal insight, as well as a fine degree of objectivity. Arguably it often has the same ingredients as one of his art-works, indeed it could be considered as an equal. And aspects of his teaching could also be given similar consideration. Each is an important and contributory part of the complete artist. He has said, unashamedly, that 'ever since leaving (college) as a student, I've been teaching . . . in one way or another. I'm an academic.' However he goes on to qualify that by saying 'even in academic circles one doesn't spend all one's time talking about theories of meaning and signification. In fact, we spend very little time talking about that. University is a real-life situation . . . it has all the intensity and passion, the reality of life that anybody leads elsewhere.'

I first knew Cameron through his writings, and these convinced me of his importance in the role of artist-writer. In these he was also probably the first to expose Canadian video art internationally in a serious critical manner. In turn there is no doubt that both his writings and teaching have had a profound influence on many well-known younger artists who have, since the birth of artists' video in Canada in the early seventies, now inevitably gone their own ways. As a painter and art historian he moved to Canada from England in 1969 and took up the position of Associate Professor in Fine Art at Guelph University. In 1972 he began to work with, teach and write about video as well as continuing his work as a painter. In 1976 he moved to Halifax as Director of the Graduate Program at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, a college which has an international reputation as one of the most progressive in North America.

Within the context of this exhibition, and due to limitations of space, I shall confine myself to Cameron the video artist, though we must not fail to remember he is an artist of many parts. As he says: 'The roots (of my video works) lay in painting and I consciously attempted to formulate an art that would respond to the same strategy and make itself available under the same conditions. I looked for ways of using the camera to generate as a by-product a structure of sound and vision, which might be highly emotive, but would be anchored by the fact of the activity that gave rise to it.' That quote was from a statement made some three years ago in *Video Art, an anthology*.

'Anchoring by the fact of the activity that gave rise to it' is a key signifier to Cameron's procedure in approaching video as an art-form, and at this I cannot resist another quote, the opening paragraph of an article by him entitled *Structural Videotape in Canada*, in the same publication: 'The richest vein of video art has been that which marks most precisely the abutment of the reality of image content with that of screen, tape and camera. To either side vast horizons unfold, a whole world of sound and vision on one hand, and the embellishment of seemingly endless electronic wizardry on the other. That the more limited approach has been much more productive is perhaps simply because it is closer to the scale of everyday human experience: of a changing pattern of light and dark across the glass front of a box that we might touch or carry; of a space engendered within the pattern of tones that

Introduction continued

has a kinship with the space in which we live and move and have our being; of a band of fragile, uniformly gray tape passing through another box that is just as tangible; and of the camera as a mechanism responding to the touch of hands that might be ours.'

He goes on to distinguish two areas of approach in Canada, one aligning 'generally with the narrative tendency of much recent art, in which experimental and emotional aspects are more accentuated', and the other 'more purely analytical . . . the self-referentiality . . . linking it to so-called conceptual art'. Cameron's work, certainly his early work, belongs to the latter. Not the cold calculated analysis of much 'systems' art, nor the short-circuited self-referentiality that has produced the cul-de-sac much other modern art has found itself in, but analysis of the televisual phenomenon, an attempt to understand the implications of using the tools of this new-found medium, and its dominant popular counterpart, broadcast television, and to integrate that process of discovery into the work itself. The 'subject matter' of such work is not, as it is so often misconstrued to be, merely a celebration of the technical process itself, but more, that in purposefully forefronting its existence as (an inevitable) part of the whole, illusion and reality are in some ways merged as a total experience. Cameron's work investigates that delicate balance between the imagined and the real. He says 'that the nature of the medium is such however, duplicating as it does an aspect of the world it describes, that questions to which the analysis must address itself impinge from the start on fundamental human concerns: the interpretation of perceptual experience, the mode of knowing environment, and the sensory cues to one's own existence'. It is these that form the core of Cameron's work.

Cameron is not an overtly political artist yet his concern for analysis of perceptual values as, in this case, they are applied to the video medium and hence inevitably to television, indicates the desire to practise 'closer to the scale of everyday human experience'. I have said in one of my own articles that 'Video Art is video as the artwork, the parameters deriving from the characteristics of the medium itself, rather than art work using video, which adopts a device for an already defined content. By characteristics I mean those particular attributes specific to both its technology and the reading of it as a phenomenon. Video as art largely seeks to explore perceptual and conceptual thresholds, and implicit in this is the decoding and consequent expansion of the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television'. I also wrote more specifically that 'alternative attitudes portrayed through any medium demand an equal reappraisal of the condition of that medium, particularly television with its well-entrenched criteria. Reappraisal and necessary 'demystification' do not automatically come simply with alternative content; they can only occur when simultaneously uprooting and questioning (our conceptions of) the form'. Cameron has done this in many of his works.

His earliest videotapes, and proposals for tapes, in 1972 suggest an outrageous yet amusing attack on the accepted conventions of television. They were essentially an attempt at freeing our conceptions of the medium and transferring them to those of art. Whatever our notions are of the nature of art they are (usually) less tied to the kind of conditioned expectations applied to television as we know it. This replica of traditional theatrical presentation as a means for representing reality through documentation is always, as Cameron has said, functioning 'as a medium for contained messages within comprehensible norms of signification'. Comprehension here being the application of an acquired common rationale endlessly re-cycled within a limited unchanging framework of 'values'. These in turn equally demand a limited approach to production for fear of infringing upon the norm. Given the use of a television camera, rather than being subjected to its product, Cameron's initial reaction was to celebrate this reversal of roles by responding to it with the question 'what can you do with a television camera?' Obvious question it may be, but rarely had it been asked. By the time do-it-yourself equipment was released onto the open market broadcast television techniques had embedded themselves in the psyche, the camera was imbued with a will of its own.

It was more than a tangible object with an electronic eye, it was the slave of complex well-established procedural criteria. To 'refocus' it as a tool for artmaking one first had to exorcize its past.

Cameron proposed, and it only reached project stage, to throw a camera from the top of the Empire State Building. It was to be attached by a very long lead to a recorder which would retain for posterity its agonising descent. Then he proposed transforming it into a one-eyed dog, with padding and fur, and fixed onto wheels so that it could be taken for walks on its camera lead recording a dog's eye view. He also proposed and executed a number of 'contact' pieces, in one the camera lens was kept constantly in contact with the surface of a nude model's body as it moved about, replacing the hand as well as the eye. He made many more proposals, some realised, others not. In almost every case the camera was stripped of old connotations and replaced with a multitude of alternatives all deriving from the cognition that it was after all only a small, vulnerable, and very tangible object. The power of the TV eye had been transferred to the artist.

Since that time Cameron has made many more tapes inevitably utilising more sophisticated apparatus, but never has he been seduced by the technology, allowing it to define the parameters of the work as for instance so much 'abstract' artists' video has. Always it is at a minimum using only basic means, as in his *Sto/ol* of 1974. This succinct (10 seconds) work uses two cameras and a horizontally split screen; though the split is hardly apparent. The image is of a stool shot from different angles by two cameras. The two halves of the screen show the top half and the bottom half of the object matching perfectly so as to appear as only a single view. Cameron jumps over the stool, his feet landing in a position contrary to the expected. In running away from the scene of the action he knocks one of the cameras out of line destroying the already disturbed illusion. This piece is little more than a gesture, yet it is a gesture which encapsulates in a brief uncluttered moment a perfect counterpoise of the imagined and the real. Indeed its secret is in the swiftness of execution as one is held with its afterimage in a state of suspension, attempting to rationalise what is after all a very simple action. (One is tempted here to suggest some parallels with, say, the painting of Franz Kline or even Pollock.)

Two years later a composite tape of a number of pieces was produced under the title *Numb Bares*. This included *Behind Bars*, *Between Two Cameras*, *Keeping Marlene out of the Picture*, *Numb Bares* and *Ha Ha*. The selection represented in some ways a condensed historical survey of Cameron's work on videotape, with *Ha Ha* relating to earlier work done in 1972 through to *Keeping Marlene out of the Picture* which, as well as being one of the more recent titles, also signalled a new departure which was subsequently adopted in a number of installation works.

Conventionally, editing has always been used as a means to eliminate the uninteresting, the boring, the altogether unnecessary aspects of life. It has been a convenient way in theatre through to cinema and television of concentrating real life into the dramatic and the spectacular. The illusion of reality prevails in the imagery and aspects of content, but the time continuum is slashed and juxtaposed to compact and cram in those elements thought to be most desirable. At this point the true semblance of life is lost. When artists first came to use film and video some challenged the traditional tricks and structures employed in those media: works were made, among others things, to parallel 'life-time'; the duration of a film or tape was exactly the same as the event they were portraying. Indeed the subject matter was often not in a 'portrayal' at all, but was in identifying the very substance of film or tape moving through its playback apparatus in real time. The kinetic element was forefronted as an integral part of the total experience.

Cameron returned to editing in the tape *Keeping Marlene out of the Picture*. But it was not the retrogressive step so many video artists appear to have taken. The use of editing here is not one of simple convenience, utilising traditional precedents. It is one which has taken a careful account of earlier considerations, encompassing them and

moving forwards. The primary image is that of a room shot from a fixed camera throughout; a real-time continuum is established and apparently held. Conventionally a drama would include many different locations. If not it would certainly have many different camera positions edited together so that the viewer is transported in the flash of a second from one location, or camera position, to another many times over; thus parallels with viewer-presence in real time are immediately disturbed and lost forever. However, we have been conditioned to these particular devices for so long now that we rapidly assimilate them in our desire to follow the story. Cameron is less suppositious, acutely analytical, and not, in any case, unfolding a narrative in *Marlene*. Having established an apparently real space/time continuum by using an unchanging fixed view, he introduces events which challenge yet do not defeat that continuum. This is the fulcrum on which the piece is intriguingly balanced.

To edit out or juxtapose sections of a fixed-view recording of an 'inactive' space (object, etc.) goes unnoticed, the passage of time is disturbed only when 'active' elements are interrupted. Cameron's active elements in this tape are primarily the movements of a woman ('Marlene') in and out of, and about, the view of the room. The movements are of little significance dramatically or otherwise. It is the manipulation and juxtaposition of them by unexpected edits against the background of an apparent real-time continuum that are the events and the focus of the work. Cameron has said of the tape: 'Where editing (in conventional TV) is a means of juxtaposing incidents within the development of a drama, the edit for me is the central incident out of which my drama is constructed. The prospect of figures and furniture suddenly transported across a room, or of interrupted action repeated obsessively can be hypnotic. Shuffling the pieces does not register so much as an interruption of the natural flow-time but as a contradiction of the continuities of space, substance, mass and human life itself, as an abrupt edit causes people and things to melt into thin air. The process of editing (in this way) can transform the camera's objective record of visual information into an intensely subjective experience with reverberating echoes on the inner life of memory and phantasm'. Cameron carried these discoveries on from the tape into a number of installations, including the one on show in this exhibition.

The problem with a tape-recording is just that it is a recording, and it is known to be a recording. On viewing a tape we are confronted with both the present-time event (the tape is being played and its content takes shape 'now'), yet we are also in the clear knowledge that it is nevertheless only a shadow of past time. In a video installation, which may utilise present reality (i.e. the environment of a gallery space, apparatus, objects and perhaps other people as well as recordings), the clearly defined edges between past and present become decidedly blurred. It is this very 'blur zone'; this threshold of perception that so intrigues Cameron. The term 'blur zone' is one that is also applied to a frustrating problem in aviation psychology. A pilot, without the use of guidance aids, cannot determine his position in relation to the ground when flying close to it at very high speeds. He sees only a blur of a landscape below and around him for a considerable distance (like a much extended blurred view of a nearby track from a moving train window). He is most likely (without appropriate training) to automatically lapse into hazardous calculations based on past knowledge. In such circumstances should his memory be trusted?

Cameron's installations carry no danger and the analogy is an over-simplification. But often the sum total of the parts does not add up as we would like and we are induced into subjective speculation. And it is not that the 'parts' are numerous or particularly complex to decipher in themselves as many other artists' works are when they become mysterious under a shroud of intangible complexity. It is that he simply but thoughtfully extracts just a few of our most vulnerable perceptual values and relocates them one to another with such subtle balance that we are carried into a dimension that defies any immediate rationale. Not a confusion, but a pleasurable surprise at our sustained suspension in a new world somewhere between the imagined and the real.

Keeping Marlene out of the Picture and *Keeping Marlene out of the Picture — and Lawn* have been two of the most recent installations shown in Canada, and they have obvious ties with the tape of the same name. Three monitors are placed on pedestals around a room at eye level; one or another may be inclined off the horizontal. Each is placed close to, and facing a wall with just sufficient space to get into and view. The view on each is the one immediately behind them as though it were a window onto the room. A woman, maybe another spectator (?), appears on the screen that you are viewing, you look up, she is not there in the room, you look back to the monitor, she has disappeared. You hold your gaze on the monitor, she appears again, then disappears from the screen as she crosses the floor in front of you. You look up, she is still not there, but there is another spectator crossing to another monitor. He looks at the monitor then at you, wondering if perhaps you might just be the girl glimpsed on his monitor. Sounds periodically emit from the monitors, or are they sounds in the gallery itself?

Ghosts of the past are so convincingly juxtaposed into the present that you are wary to enter into that timeless space in the centre of the gallery. Cameron has transcended the time barrier and we are taken along with him. The space is no longer out there, something perceived and easily accounted for. We retreat to a mental picture (the perception of that space becomes a conception of it), yet in reality it is still very much there in front of us. The Art is in the formation of that conception, not in the environment out there with its few objects and other physical bits of paraphernalia; necessary as they are they merge and melt into that subtly induced blur zone.

And so it is with the installation in this exhibition, *In the Picture — and Lawn*. But here there are no images at all on the monitor, nor (with the exception of one) are there in the newly introduced slide projections. References to a past are made only in the manipulated sounds, or are they in the present? Changing hues of colour fill the monitor screen as we search for an image, and these are echoed in the colour slide projections. We have a space contrasting dark and light, the light changing persistently with colour. Mirrored reflections defuse and enrich the air. The space is alive yet we are blind save for the audio references. Even less is given to us than in *Marlene* yet even more provocation of our imagination takes place. More and more Cameron eliminates the non-essentials yet probes his art deeper and deeper into the psyche.

Oddly the one image that appears, and is also there for real, is a plant pot of ordinary garden grass. It appears to bear little relation to the issues discussed but maybe that is just it? Bizarre it may seem, but here is a symbol of that which is tangible and familiar, that which is secure, a foil constantly present, a small part of everyone's domestic life. It is an unpretentious presence, an anchor-point around which these issues of the mind revolve. And yet . . . it is not a lawn, it is a small strangely dismembered segment, totally out of context . . .

There is no doubt that Eric Cameron is an important artist, an artist deserving considerable attention on both sides of the Atlantic. This essay, and the exhibition, can only hope to indicate a very small part of the breadth and extent of his many endeavours.

David Hall 1979

December 17, 1979

Mr. David Hall
24A Brading Road
London, SW2

Dear David:

Many, many thanks for the essay.

On first reading, it came across as a generous and positive assessment of which I was certainly appreciative. But it was only after several readings that I became aware also of a quite remarkable grasp of the work, sometimes pinning it down with fragments of my critical writings judiciously selected from other contexts, but the whole welded together in a way that is utterly original though still extremely sympathetic. What surprises me most is that, while you have only dealt specifically with the video work, your generalizations also have the effect of bringing the rest into meaningful order beneath their umbrella - even including new work that you haven't seen yet and that I hadn't produced when last time we talked in Halifax.

I am naturally delighted to have such an essay as a part of my London and Paris shows, but I also hope there may be a chance of a magazine publication as well. Perhaps it would be best to wait until the installation is up and we can have some photographs made, but then you might consider Artforum where I am known, or failing that, Vie des Arts or Parachute.

We can talk about all that in England. I believe Griselda is arranging a lecture at Maidstone for me. In the meantime, sincerest thanks again.

As ever,



Eric Cameron,
Director of the Graduate Program

EC/gm