

A SITUATION REVISITED

David Hall: *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II (Cultural Eclipse)*

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Twelve years after its first showing, the dark monumentality of David Hall's video sculpture *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II (Cultural Eclipse)* reveals its precociousness, in its prediction of the current tension between the power of the physical world, and that of the immaterial, all-pervasive systems of global communication. In retrospect, as the situation Hall envisaged has become a reality, the block of cubed video monitors turned to the wall in *A Situation Envisaged* suggests not so much a rejection of television, as a critique of the power of the broader technological network by which television has been usurped and, finally, absorbed.

In formal terms, *A Situation Envisaged* is also striking in its prescient re-interpretation of both the Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, of which Hall was a part, and the post-Minimalist artistic hybridity of the 1970s, which he helped to create. In the 1980s, there was little such engagement with ideas from the immediately preceding decades, as artists sought to distance themselves from them, and create a new context for art making. It was only towards the end of the 1990s that the power of this period became widely acknowledged in retrospect, as the eighties were left behind, and re-vitalised in the recent work of both original, and subsequent, generations.

Revisited in the year 2001, Hall's video sculpture, made during a theatrical, metaphorical period in the history of video installation, stands out as a strongly conceptual work. In the 1980s, just as large, expressionistic narrative paintings occupied the position previously held by abstraction, conceptual art and the blank canvas, video installations embraced a similarly theatrical, figurative style. The phenomenological and performative video spaces of the 1970s were replaced by dark spaces in which large objects, combined with monitors, created surreal visual tableaux. Chairs, uprooted trees, classical pedestals, antique travel trunks, boardroom tables, chests of drawers, bowls, tatami mats, rocks, sand, parasols, and even live rabbits inhabited the gallery space in dialogue with related video-taped imagery, articulating a new, narrative approach to the video image, in which both the domestic space and landscape played a prominent role.

During the 1980s, landscape and technology's problematic relationship to nature were predominant themes in both American and British video art. *A Situation Envisaged* articulates this broadly felt unease, and sense of impending, if not actual, loss; but its meaning is manifested in a reductive, conceptual form. Its structure is informed by Hall's background in Minimalist sculpture. His work was included in the ground-breaking exhibition *Primary Structures* curated by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966, which marked the beginning of Minimalist art. Hall's sculpture conformed to the basic principles of Minimalism: a rejection of the pedestal, the direct placement of sculpture on the floor, horizontality, flatness, geometry, seriality, gridded forms, a phenomenological reading of the work in relation to its surrounding space, and no reference to anything other than itself. The vertical rectangle of *A Situation Envisaged*, created from a grid of inverted television sets, emerges directly out of Hall's Minimalist thinking. Its geometric structure echoes Hall's early floor works, and those of Carl Andre. The transition of the horizontal plane to an upright position immediately suggests the obscuring of something behind. This is confirmed by a coloured aurora around the rectangle, created by the eclipsing of imagery emitting from the television set screens turned to the wall. *The Situation Envisaged* refuses the communicative imagery of television, just as Minimalism refused the subjective, interpretative image.

And yet, the form of *A Situation Envisaged* is impure. The insertion into the rectangle's centre of an image of the moon, made using a replica of the earliest TV 'camera'/scanner overturns Minimalism's refusal of symbolic interpretation. Puncturing the rectangle's surface, the moon (and by association an eclipse) indicates the rectangle's eclipsing of its abstract, formal integrity, in a self-reflexive assertion of the hybridity which has always defined the video medium. In another tautology, the aura surrounding the art object, which Walter Benjamin too hastily predicted would disappear in the

wake of mechanical reproduction, is here reasserted through the suppression of technology, and the re-definition of the luminous screen in sculptural terms. The aura also suggests the evocation of nature, through its resonance with the aurora surrounding the eclipsed sun.

The puncturing of *A Situation Envisaged's* rectangle with an electronic image recalls the rupturing of the object by Nam June Paik in one of his earliest video sculptures, *Magnet TV* (1965), in which a strong magnet applied to the top of the television set distorted the image on the screen into an abstract electronic shape. Paik's intervention can be compared to Dan Flavin's group of small wall sculptures, or 'icons', made around the same year, in which he attached electrical light fittings to the edges of box-like structures, in a similar rupturing of the object's integrity. *A Situation Envisaged* encapsulates the little-considered relationship between these two strands of 1960s art, in a single work.

Video and Minimal art were born in America at the same moment in art history, out of the same cultural crucible. Both rejected nature and the hand-made for an industrial model and fabrication. Both embraced the quotidian. Yet from the beginning, video incorporated the body, and that other irrational, spiritual subject, landscape. The fusion of nature and technology in *A Situation Envisaged* articulates the tension between industrial production and subjective creativity which, as Hal Foster points out,¹ has existed since the Industrial Revolution, and which became a hallmark of seventies art making.

In 1980s' video installation, this tension became articulated as an anxiety regarding the encroachment of technology into the natural world. *The Situation Envisaged* positions at its core one of technology's earliest attempts to capture nature. The fragile, simple image of the moon, made using a basic 30-line mechanical system like the one invented by Logie Baird in the 1920s, has a hand-made quality which contrasts with the industrial forms of both the Minimal rectangle and the television sets, creating yet another paradox.

The calm simplicity of the eclipse is, itself, almost eclipsed by the cacophonous sound, which emanates from the sculpture, in another rejection of Minimal purity. The white noise created by the collision of nine television soundtracks appears to surround the structure with an acoustic halo, merging with the coloured aura of light. The contrast between the silent, almost scientific image on the front of the structure, and the obscured multiple entertainment imagery behind it, articulates Hall's larger concern with the dissolution of culture, which the recent addition to the work's title, 'Cultural Eclipse', makes concrete.

The cacophonous structure of *A Situation Envisaged* relates to an earlier collaborative video work by Hall, titled *60 TV Sets*, made with Tony Sinden in 1972 and shown first at Gallery House, and then in 1975 at the Serpentine Gallery as *101 TV Sets*. In this large scale work, first sixty, then later one hundred and one television sets, in various states of repair, were set on shelves around each wall of the gallery from floor to ceiling and played randomly. Viewers were confronted by a televisual Tower of Babel, in which the attention to each television screen was interrupted by the loud noise and distracting imagery emanating from the one next to it. The multiplicity of images and soundtracks reappears in *A Situation Envisaged*, but in a suppressed form. Both works, made before cable television and the Internet, anticipate the ubiquity of the mass media revolution predicted by Marshall McLuhan, and articulated at the beginning of video's history by Nam June Paik.

In 1965, Paik declared that, "Television has been attacking us all our lives. Now we can attack it back." In 1973, Paik further stated, at the beginning of his seminal videotape *Global Groove* to which Hall's two installations are conceptually related, that this was, "the video landscape of tomorrow, where you will be able to switch to any TV station on earth, and the TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book."² *A Situation Envisaged* embodies both Paik's statements, rejecting the television screen, and transmitting nine television channels into the room at once, in a random duplication of the four TV channels available in Britain at the time.

This duplication, mimicking a selection from the considerably larger number of television channels available in America in the late 1980s, typifies the relationship of British video, and of David Hall's work in particular, to American art. From the 1950s onwards, American Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, performance, experimental film, television and video art formed the formidable international context for work made by British artists in all media, until the mid 1980s, when German painting created the first serious challenge to the American cultural hegemony. From the earliest days of British video, artists could not escape the long shadow of America, and the opportunities, which its advanced technology, television research labs, and more easily available equipment provided. David Hall's work, first in Minimal sculpture, then in experimental film, and finally in video, has embraced American formalist principles at every stage, and can only be properly understood within a broadly American context. In this sense, Hall's work must be assessed alongside the Pop art of Richard Hamilton, the conceptual works of John Latham and the performances of Stuart Brisley, all Hall's contemporaries, and all of whose work resides within this strongly international context.³

Hall's resonance with American art was evident in his early inclusion in the 1966 *Primary Structures* sculpture show, to the making of the first video interventions in British television with his *Seven TV Pieces*, made for Scottish Television in 1971 – an intervention directly related to American television practice. Hall's intervention was the only artist's collaboration with broadcast television to take place in Britain, during a period when America's larger group of independent television networks were commissioning dozens of artists and broadcasting their video works on TV. Hall's engagement with television, not in order to destroy it, but to claim a part of it for his own use, has remained consistent throughout his career. His classic single channel videotape *This is a Television Receiver* (1976), whose self-reflexive structure evokes the American sound work *I Am Sitting In a Room* made by Alvin Lucier in 1971, brought a national newsreader, Richard Baker, into the art and video world, in a conceptual tautology which arguably led directly to the dialectical structure of *A Situation Envisaged*.⁴

Reviewed twelve years after its making, *A Situation Envisaged* reads as a singularly international work, whose form is inextricably linked to the history of American modernism and communications technology. Hall's concern with the eclipsing of culture suggests an ambiguous position. The aura surrounding the television monitors is created by the obscuring of their communicative power. It simultaneously reasserts the authority of the object, defying Benjamin's prediction of its demise. In typical Hall paradox, neither television, video nor the sculptural object is, in the end, allowed to dominate. Maintaining the delicate balance between the physical and the virtual appears, according to *A Situation Envisaged*, to be the only way to avoid a total cultural eclipse.

Notes

¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996, p. 63

² Nam June Paik, *Global Groove*, 1973, single channel videotape, colour, sound, 28 mins.

³ Along with Stuart Brisley, Ian Breakwell and others, David Hall was a member of the Artists' Placement Group (APG), founded in 1966 by John Latham, whose radical utopian ideas remain some of the most important visionary artistic thinking to have been produced by British artists. Hall's Scottish Television video interventions were part of a series of actions by APG members in Edinburgh during the Edinburgh festival of that year.

⁴ Hall's use of the Logie Baird device in *The Situation Envisaged* was repeated in a videotape made two years later: *Stooky Bill TV* (1990), made for a series of television interventions based on the original 1971 Scottish Television project.