TEXT: *MICHAEL O'PRAY*

['David Hall' article, Variant magazine, April '92]

David Hall's contribution to video art in this country is unparalleled. Not only are many of his video pieces classics of the art, but he has also contributed to experimental film, installation and sculpture in important and influential ways. To survey his work is to survey the history of video in this country. Hall being a founding member of the video avant-garde movement in the early 1970s. Hall dominates the early years being not only one of its imaginative practitioners, but also a campaigner on behalf of the art which struggled into existence partly through a series of exhibitions held in the early 70's at the Serpentine Gallery and the Tate Gallery, both in London. Hall was joined by such artists as Stuart Marshall, Tamara Krikorian, Steve Partridge, Kevin Atherton, Mike Leggett and others, who moved towards setting up London Video Arts in 1976. Video Art, at the time benefited from gallery interests in the period when painting and sculpture - as traditionally practised -were in retreat and often proclaimed as vanquished forever. Halls' practise is rooted in this period, but also in the 60's when the conceptualist minimalist strategies of American and European Art were at their height. However, Hall has always eschewed a simply formalist or artsy notion of video art preferring instead to locate his interests in the institution - social, political and cultural - of broadcast television.

In many ways, the notion of 'video art' is a rather constrictive one when applied to his work, which shares very little with what passes now for video art in international circles. There is, in Hall's work, a sensibility and intelligence which draws on issues and concerns related to form, representation and objecthood: seemingly dead in art practice in the wake of post-modernism. To such an extent Hall remains a sculptor, particularly in his video-installation work, and to some similar extent he remains both a sculptor and a film-maker in his single-screen video work. It is important to note that for Hall the idea of a 'video art' is at least a premature one. and at most a still-born practice. His installation A Situation Envisaged The Rite II, shown at Video Positive in 1989 (at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool), looked distinctly uncomfortable in the context of other contemporary British installation pieces, with their unquestioned use of images as content and their indifference to the means of representation. Hall's work could so easily be, and was, assimilated into a modernism now generally perceived as depleted in its energies and sterile in its project. But this would be to ignore his continuing engagement with broadcast television. For example, his recent single monitor piece Stooky Bill TV (1990) was a caustic glance backwards at the founder of television: John Logie Baird's legacy of 'dummy television'. But the tape is also a resounding formal success in so far as it presents an image equivalent to that first one produced in an attic in October 1925. All the trademarks of Hall's work are present here: dry wit, seriousness, and the exploration of illusion; the awareness of material conditions and of cultural forms.

David Hall was trained as an architect and then, most importantly, as a sculptor. His early success in sculpture was gained through pieces that often stressed the relationship between sculptural object and gallery environment, most usually the floor, thus creating large flat pieces in which the floor they lay on formed an instrinsic part of the work. Turning to film he maintained an interest in the perspectival distortions and illusions present in the sculptural work. More significantly, he introduced the element of time and the problems of representation through use of a mechanical means of reproduction. The first film, *Vertical*, develops the relationship between vertical objects within the traditional horizontality of the landscape, and the elements of space and distance between objects (perhaps a kind of definition of space). *Vertical* is also a lyrical film which captures a traditional conception of landscape. The same poetic quality is to be found in his *7 TV Pieces*, shown on Scottish Television in 1971.

If *Vertical* is dominated in the end by aspects of illusionism (one is often not sure whether a particular vertical object is in fact horizontal), and by a montage style of film construction, *Timecheck* is a definite advance and has none of the awkwardness of *Vertical*; which has the feel of a film made by someone still fascinated by the powers of the camera. *Timecheck* is immaculately paced using non-image sections as a form of punctuation and rhythmic subtlety. Its theme, of time and distance, does not exclude passages of enormous romantic beauty and splendour for example, the time-lapse cloudscapes and shots of the earth from satellites. Silence is also balanced against more conventional sounds and there are moments of structural poetry - so to speak - when he uses pixillation, as in the motorway scene. Nevertheless, the film is a metaphysical one particularly in its final sequence when the astronaut's voice repeatedly says *'I think we're going into darkness now'*, and then the film also ends in darkness. The congruence between film image, soundtrack and the film itself reminds us, in retrospect and knowing the films and tapes that were to follow, that Hall was to often play on this distinction between representation and the film or tape's construction of that representation. The mimicry of the medium's representation by the means of that representation is a mode of exemplification of the role of the medium as a representer of space, time and objecthood.

In Hall's next film, *This Surface*, he consolidates his interests and sheds his metaphysical and romantic trappings (although never entirely, I believe). *This Surface* is a film which is compromised largely of tracking shots of a street, over which the words render the street images blurred or vice-versa. Thus Hall poses the problem of the film plane. If all of this is a matter of light falling on a surface in such a way as to look like objects, space and time passing, then by putting an image over that image, particularly an image of linguistic signs which do not share that same space and time, then what is posed is the problem of representation itself. At the same time the very materiality and illusionism of the medium is thrown into relief. There is much here that reminds us of painterly problems in modernist art where the tension between picture plane and representational perspective is explored. By using film, Hall understands, however, the difference between painting and time-based visual art; in this case, film. It is also fairly clear in this film, given the benefit of hindsight, that the specificity of film as the medium for exploring such issues was becoming less and less relevant. In many ways *This Surface* could have been made on video, for example. The formal questions of *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* are very much present in *This Surface*, albeit in a rather simplified state. Similarly, Hall's sense of fun (not often mentioned) is apparent in the pub sequence of the man dancing with a pint on his head, as it is in *Stooky Bill* (note the dummies in the amusement arcade in *This Surface*). It would seem logical that Hall should shortly turn to video completely after this film.

View does have the aesthetic of formal film in its calm, minimal

style. The image of overall whiteness at the beginning of the film is thrown into representation by the appearance at the right hand edge of the frame of a strip. The strip disappears and we become aware of the fact that the film was 'moving': unknown to us simply because there was no represenational image until the strip appeared. Again, this is a point that flows from the earlier films, but is stated here with economy and formal power. The movement of the camera becomes more pronounced and we realise it is moving between what seems to be a wall and a doorway through which we can see a room. The implication is that an image is a matter of recognition of representational subject-matter yet the white wall which was like blank leader was an image too. The intrinsic problems of abstraction are here set out filmically. As the camera settles to stare into the room, the black and white momentarily gives way to colour (we are reminded of Michael Snow's use of colour filters in his classic *Wavelength*). *View* is a retreat from some of the questions of *This Surface* and perhaps represented for Hall a lapse into a formalism which he was rarely guilty of in his video works. There is a compositional quality in *View* which runs throughout the films and maybe stood for a form of aestheticism which he wanted to eradicate. The answer seemed to lie in video.

This Is A TV Receiver is a quite different piece of work. It is made on video and interestingly recovers Hall's sculptural concerns. Unlike film, the video monitor is a discrete object. Film requires a projector and screen and the distance between them traversed by a beam of light. In watching *This Is A TV Receiver*, the materiality or the very objecthood of the monitor is intrinsic to the piece. The image of a TV announcer talking about the machine we are necessarily sitting before and watching, is deconstructed through sound (voice referring to a means of its own represenation), and electronic patterns, rendered problematic and revealed for what they are - an illusion. The work is a tour-de-force and intrinsically an installation piece, not a tape. It would be pointless video-projected as it needs the monitor, its material base, for its point to be made.

In *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* such issues are rendered complex and beautifully conceived. The tape again requires to be seen on a monitor (this is not a trivial point as this writer rarely sees much video art these days on anything but a screen using video projection). The work is extemely difficult to describe as it stretches and tests the very language of the medium - such concepts as image, representation, movement, time, space, illusion are rendered almost useless or in need of careful analysis and redescription.

Like *TV Receiver, TV Fighter* locates its problematic in broadcast television. Hall takes the point-of-view shot of a fighter-plane strafing a railway train and a ship at sea. It is a fragment of archive war footage. We are visually and aurally transported with the invisible pilot, as the invisible plane swoops down, tracer bullets marking out the gunfire. After the explosion of the hit, the plane pulls out of the dive to reveal the horizon sinking in the screen. These shots are repeated and edited in slightly different ways throughout the piece. A hand paints a gunsight on the screen (we now become aware that the image is at a remove from the picture plane of the image on the screen we are looking at). This is a characteristic move by Hall: a simple device to unsettle our perception of the image and its relationship to the representational mode of video-as-image-maker. The visual identity of the viewer's screen and the taped screen is denied, whilst at the same time rendered conceptually paradoxical. Hall proceeds to move the camera to mimic the fighter-plane approaching the target. The sound now becomes 'attached' to the moving camera as the monitor showing the swooping footage becomes the target. In other words, the dislocation of sound and image, always present in television, is made obvious. Hall pushes the piece even further conceptually by presenting us with an image of a monitor, with gunsights, showing on its screen a 'moving' monitor with gunsights over the image of the fighter plane sequence. The visual and aural confusions barely make description possible at this point. We cannot distinguish between camera movement and its effect of making objects shown seem to move. *TV Fighter* remains as pertinent, and as exciting today, as it was when it was made fifteen years ago. It is a classic tape and installation (a term necessary, I believe, given the ubiquity of video projection these days), of video art, both in Britain and internationally.

In recent years, Hall's 7 *TV Pieces* has been recuperated and shown in various screening contexts largely, one believes, as an example (and an early one), of interventionist strategies by video artists in broadcast TV. It was commissioned during a brief enlightened period by **Scottish Independent Television** to coincide with the Edinburgh Festival in 1971. Oddly, and ironically, it was shot on film in black and white for unannounced insertion during normal TV transmission. The pieces were designed to *'redirect attention back to the box as an object'*. As conceptual pieces they do not seem as advanced and sophisticated as say *TV Fighter*, being very much concerned with issues similar to those explored in the early film work such as *Timecheck*. In the piece where a tap fills the monitor screen with water, Hall comes close to themes to be explored later in his video work. By and large the pieces are overdetermined, although not detrimentally for this viewer, by a filmic aesthetic of enormous power at times.

Throughout the '70s and '80s, Hall has carried on more ambitious installation work. In 1978, for example, his *Situation Envisaged* merged sculptural qualities with a critique of broadcast television. It consists of a tight quarter-circle of television receivers turned towards a wall, showing all channels. Through narrow gaps between the receivers the viewer can see fragments of an inner screen on which the other receivers are also reflected. Entering the darkened gallery space, one is confronted by a monolithic fortress-like circle of plinths and receivers, the electronic light bathes the wall making the semi-circular grouped objects dark and foreboding. The babble of sounds emanating from the receivers contributes to an overall atmosphere of threat and dull, blind power. Video installation rarely has sure power and authority, stressing both formal and thematic aspects of the medium. Like the early sculptures, it depends very much on its relationshipto the gallery space, creating a tension, in this piece, between the objects and the adjoining wall. Hall's more recent installation, shown at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, had a more open quality but relied on the receiver, banked vertically, as an object whose function as image maker is always fundamental to any engagement with it. For Hall, the work of television and video art is one that cannot be indifferent to the dialectic between television as machine and as mode of mass communication.

A renewed interest in his work, after the doldrums of the '80s, speaks of a demand for seriousness in the area which is never quite captured by the new cultural video makers, whose response to broadcast television has been to occupy some of its territory: illusion, narrative, 'entertainment' and so forth. Hall has never compromised his aesthetic and artistic project for such temptations of cultural novelty. In the process of making some of the most intellectually satisfying and demanding films and tape pieces of the past twenty years, he has also given us, perhaps against his own wishes, a body of work of often lyrical beauty and formal imagination.