

MEDIA OF NOW: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HALL

That's why film (as cinema) and video (as television) became of interest, because they were the media of now; they were what most people were looking at, they weren't looking at art, art was in galleries.

—David Hall, 2005¹

David Hall made extensive contributions to contemporary time-based media as a founder, practicing artist, and activist for video arts, in his native United Kingdom and internationally. Hall was instrumental in constructing educational, critical, curatorial, and other resources for early video. His video work spans decades with the same complex questions regarding the context of immaterial art and the experiences of the viewer—keeping pace with the evolving context of the “media of now.”

Hall began his work primarily in sculpture before emerging as a key figure in the development of video as an artistic medium. He notes the inspiration of work such as Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Endless Column* (1920) as influencing his move toward the examination of the experience of time in his sculptural practice, and his working approach shifted to what he terms “perceptual, environmental, floor works,”² focusing on how the viewer perceives and experiences art. Hall was awarded first prize for sculpture at the Biennale de Paris in 1965 and was subsequently included in the foundational show for Minimalist sculpture, “Primary Structures,” at the Jewish Museum in New York City, as well as in “White on White” at Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland (both in 1966). Through the experience of making photography of his sculptures, and noting their tenuous relationship to the physical object, he explored that phenomenon further through his creation of film and video-based artworks.³

In 1971, while working with the Artists' Placement Group (APG), Hall created what became his most groundbreaking and historically noted works—the series of unannounced “Television Interruptions” aired on Scottish TV and commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council.⁴ These original ten artworks were noted as pioneering intrusions through the web of challenges of using broadcast TV as an arts medium—not for the sake of journalism about the arts or artists, but actually broadcasting an artist's video pieces on mainstream channels.

Broadcasting artworks on television poses implicit problems—the expense of broadcast slots being just one issue. As Hall says of his interruptions work, “Everybody talks about being in the right place at the right time. I always quite liked being in the wrong place at the right time.”⁵ In 1976, a second interruption, “This is a Television Receiver,” was commissioned for broadcast on BBC 2 during an art-oriented show called *Arena*. Introduced with the voiceover “And now for the very material of Television...” but otherwise similarly unannounced, BBC newscaster Richard Baker read a monologue deconstructing the magical experience of television by explaining its technical and social function in traditional newsreader monotone. As the piece progresses, Baker's image also is deconstructed into an unrecognizable electronic blur as the signal is distorted. Key to the experience of the interruptions were timing

and delicate parallels of comparison and contrast—a balance between suggestion of a connection and enough distinction to provoke reflection about the experience of viewing television.

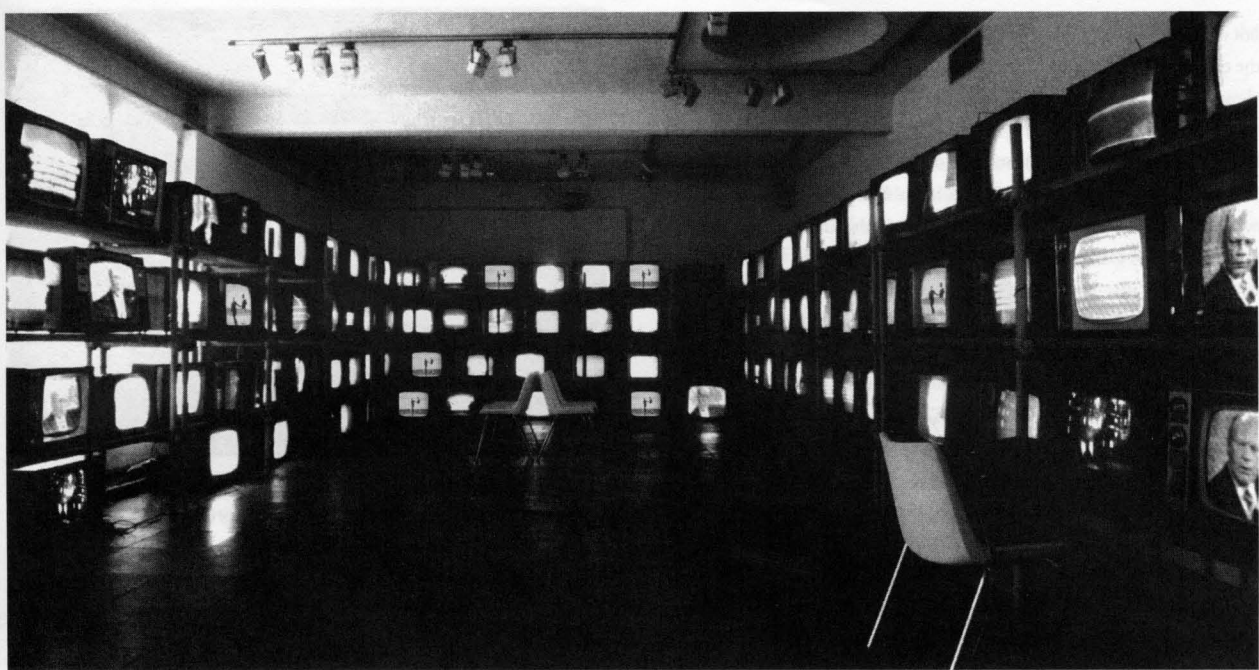
As this quote from *Eye* magazine says of his earliest interventions, “David Hall's [1971 “TV Interruptions”] set the stage for an era in which artists took up the camera to challenge television's established formulations and its power as a medium of social control ... his interventions almost established a genre, with subsequent works by [for example] Stan Douglas, Bill Viola and Chris Burden following the form of unannounced disturbances ...”⁶ A later broadcast-interruption genre work by Hall broadcast on Channel 4 TV played an important part in referencing video history while commenting on the contemporary trajectory of the use of television in society. “Stooky Bill TV” (1990) was a hypothetical conversation between Scottish television inventor John Logie Baird and his ventriloquist's dummy. The dummy—Stooky Bill—“speaks” critically of the way that television had developed after Baird's original invention. As an important historic-mechanical connection, “Stooky Bill TV” was actually taped using the same kind of 30-line television transmission technology that broadcast the first successful video signal in the 1920s—of the face of a ventriloquist's dummy.

In 1993, MTV Networks commissioned a series of works Hall titled “TV Interruptions 93.” This series of MTV Interruptions (reacTV, contexTV, withoutTV, exiTV, and ecstaseeTV), in the tradition of the earlier broadcast interferences, took a changed context and tendencies into account in terms of using the language of the television medium of the day in order to create as jarring a juxtaposition as possible—in the case of the context of MTV, through a contrasting slower pace from the mid-1990s music videos that book-ended the unannounced work.

In addition to broadcast works, Hall was simultaneously exploring the experiences possible through video installation shown in galleries and other venues for artist video that employed the unique, live, interactive possibilities of the medium. Hall considers his video installation work to have an element of interruption of the gallery context. In “60 TV Sets,” included in the exhibition “A Survey of the Avant-Garde” at Gallery House, London, in 1972, for instance, the cacophony of sounds created by the room full of television sets picking up various channels at high volume jarred the expectations of a viewer who came to the gallery expecting to enjoy a calm reflective experience.⁷

As a part of championing video as an autonomous arts medium, Hall was curator of some of the first major shows establishing artists' video in the UK including “The Video Show” at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1975, and co-curator of the first video installations exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London—also titled “The Video Show”—in 1976.

Hall also had significant influence on the founding of artist groups related to and supportive of artist video. He was a founder of APG, which began



in 1966 with the mission to release artists' creative assets out of the gallery and into broader culture and industry. In 1976, Hall co-founded London Video Arts (LVA) (now part of the Lux, London). The mission of LVA was to support artists working in the cost-intensive medium in their efforts to gain adequate funding and to promote and distribute their work.

Through his writings and lectures, Hall established the term "time-based media," now in broad usage in video education programs across an international span of academic contexts. In 1972, Hall founded the first time-based art degree option with an emphasis on video at Maidstone College of Art in Kent (now University College for the Creative Arts). In addition he advocated for the symbiotic relationship between working video artists and video art schools.⁸ Appointed Honorary Professor at Dundee University in Scotland in 2003, Hall has also taught at the Royal College of Art and the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, the Nova Scotia College of Art, and the San Francisco Art Institute, among others.

Hall has been an advocate and representative of video arts histories and vocally resistant to oversimplification of early trends in a medium that was developing organically, rather than perpetuating the myth of a kind of "single and sustained coherent orthodoxy."⁹ Hall has been a voice of reality against the pressure of video art historians to go back and retrospectively categorize the organic early movement of artists and align all with distinctive political motives.

The initial voiceover preceding the broadcast of "This is a TV Receiver,"—"... now for the very 'material' of television"—points to the question of television's immateriality as a medium. This shift from the material to the immaterial foreshadows net-based and other digital and electronic media. Intentional connection to the specific temporal and cultural context emerges as a pervasive thread throughout Hall's work. To revisit Hall's early work within range of its original intent, the viewer must imaginatively approach the

mindset of the time period, the early 1970s, when "there was no history [of video] at all, apart from television."¹⁰

The television experience is merging with that of cinema through larger screens, projected television, and downloadable movies. In this context, a backwards glance to the questions first pioneered in an era when video was either broadcast or closed channel and when video recording as we know it was at its earliest stage of development, has special relevance. Video histories are criticized for exaggerating the level of intentionality actually associated with early experimentation in the medium. Because of Hall's commitment to criticism and history, and openness to current conversation, however, the intentions in the work are more open. Some core questions and challenges emerge from Hall's works that are universally relevant for the moving image media in such constant transition.

Clear in Hall's writings and work was the message that art should have a place outside the protection of the gallery—a strong value and preference behind the conscious placement of the television interruptions within the "medium of now" of the 1970s. Closely related to a preference for art placed in a culturally relevant context is the value of the artists' cultural outsider status—the perspective of the artists' alternative view as a "positive social advantage" and the critical need for that resource in the broader society, as seen in Hall's work with APG.¹¹ Hall also emphasizes the value of the work of thinking, reflecting, and artmaking around the experience of the contemporary culture of the moving image throughout all of the decades of his work.

Some of Hall's greatest gifts and what may be the legacy of his years of work as an artist and advocate are these broader probing questions around the effect of the context of media on its viewers. Video art has

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"101 TV Sets 1972–1975" by David Hall and Tony Sinden

not outgrown the importance of this emphasis and the deep questions of the experience and effect of the “medium of now.” The twin questions of viewer experience and the exploration of the tensions between the physical and virtual worlds are fundamental to the medium of contemporary time-based art. Revisiting the challenges of those years in the development of artist video of the 1970s may bring fresh problems to the surface as video artmakers explore additional relevant forums in the future that lie beyond the black box of gallery projection-based installation.

What follows is an electronic-based correspondence that took place between David Hall and the author in May and June 2008.

JOANNA HEATWOLE: In addition to your extensive body of video artwork, one of your key contributions was to the language about technology-based arts, specifically the term “time-based media.” Tate Modern’s conservation Web page currently uses this definition: “A term used to refer to works of art which are dependent on technology and have duration as a dimension.”¹² What was your connection with the development of that term particularly and what are your perspectives on its current usage?

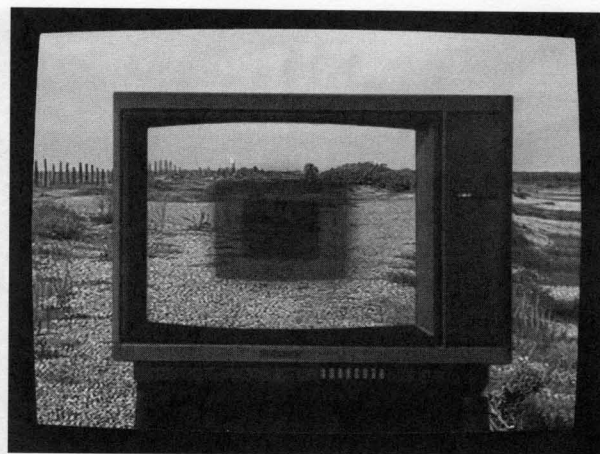
DAVID HALL: The Tate adopted the term comparatively recently following its growing use in academia. I do not go along with the limits of the Tate’s definition as quoted. “Time-based” is the significant element, and “media” is a suffix simply indicating a variety of mediums of expression, here used by artists. Video and (cine) film works are recognized as the obvious examples, and are of course technology dependent, but my use of the term was intended to encompass any work structured specifically as a durational experience. Performance works are time-based and often have no essential dependence on technology. I considered these included under the term’s umbrella.

JH: What was the original context?

DH: The original context was my introduction of it in lectures and writings at the turn of the 1970s. I was already working with film and later video as the technology became available. In education, in 1971, I set up a workshop for undergraduates at one of the colleges where I was teaching sculpture [Maidstone College of Art, Kent; now University for the Creative Arts]. In discussion it became clear that some students were becoming interested in producing works which were non-object-based, consistent with “the developing ‘fringe’ element of late sixties art ... which was already engaged in the essential ‘dematerialization’ of the object.”¹³

Despite opposition from certain quarters within the faculty I quickly succeeded in converting the experimental workshop into an established “pathway” in the Fine Art course (together with Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking) where students could specialize and graduate in what I soon termed Time-Based Media. This course was the first in the UK with emphasis on video as a means of art production, however students also worked with film, sound, and performance.

JH: What do you think of the future of “time-based media” as a term? Is it still relevant to current practices? Or is it being eclipsed by another kind of language for art dealing with the element of time?



DH: While artists continue to produce works as temporal manifestations, the term will probably hold, I think. It functions as a catchall phrase and is more precise and less clumsy than some alternatives.

JH: As your work spans several decades and multiple artistic strategies within the spectrum of time-based media, what do you see as some of your most important or challenging pieces overall?

DH: After my 1971 “TV Interruptions” for Scottish TV, the 1976 piece “This is a Television Receiver,” which appeared on BBC TV featuring the then most-popular newsreader, has had considerable attention, followed by “Stooky Bill TV” for Channel 4TV in 1990, using the first successful TV scanning equipment of the 1920s invented by John Logie Baird, through to the “TV Interruptions 93” of 1993 for MTV Networks, transmitted worldwide. The fact of their intrusion into the established bastion of video’s erstwhile parent (television) may have had some bearing on interest. But I have some non-broadcast single-screen tapes and a number of multi-screen installations that cover other ground.

JH: It does seem as though your “Television Interruptions” series of 1971 is your best-known work—did that work get the most publicity and critical attention?

DH: Apart from being around from the earliest video days, they were recently featured in installation form at an important exhibition, “First Generation: Art and the Moving Image 1963–1986,” at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid (2006–07), which to my knowledge gave the most comprehensive international overview of early video art to date. The exhibition included video artists from the United States, but also a better than average balanced representation of the contribution of European video artists as well. *Afterimage* recently published an interview with Berta Sichel, the curator. [Ed. note: See *Afterimage* Vol. 34, no. 6: “Art and the Moving Image: An Interview with Berta Sichel” by Perry Bard.]

I would say my earliest work has probably had the most attention, especially my various TV interventions. “TV Interruptions” (1971) are quite well known because they appeared so early on TV.



JH: Were your TV interventions the body of work that you expected to be the most important in terms of critical interest—or are there other works that should get more attention, such as some of your video installations?

DH: A (nine camera and monitor) interactive, live installation titled “Progressive Recession” (1974), with no direct reference to broadcast television, is a work I would like to see resurrected, as I would “Vidicon Inscriptions” (1975), based on a 1973 tape of the same name. Unfortunately installations in particular are prone to suffer an early demise if not taken on by a collection, unlike paintings and sculpture. Similarly I have installation works in my “Situation Envisaged” series that do refer to dominant broadcasting and hopefully make wide and diverse commentary on our precarious and fascinating condition poised between the real and the virtual in today’s electronic world.

JH: I was drawn to your work in particular because of the real versus virtual condition that you just referred to in relationship to your “Situation Envisaged” installations. The perceived importance of examining our “condition poised between the real and the virtual,” as you phrased it, seems to be shifting. We address this question in introductory digital imaging courses, and I remember some lively discussions a few years ago. But the past few semesters I get the sense that traditional undergraduate students no longer find this shift to virtual so dramatic or even interesting. They move so fluidly between virtual and material worlds, that this tension has not existed for them in their experience.

DH: I particularly like the following passage by Sean Cubitt in his 2006 *Art Journal* essay on my work, which may be relevant here. Cubitt wrote:

The question of being—of how things are, in what ways they exist for themselves and for us—is one of the two great questions at the core of philosophy West and East. The other is, what is the good life: what is virtue, how should we live together, what are our responsibilities, how can we live well? Mostly the two questions are kept apart. But in Hall’s works the problems of being and perception, their endless paradoxes, their endless renewals of possibility are themselves the form of the good life. A life is good that’s spent contemplating these things. But even more so, investigating being and illusion, absence, disappearance, forgetting, erasure and traces, is a way of understanding that this real life is not the

only life, and that a better or at least a different one lies alongside it, the depth of the screen away.¹⁴

JH: Some of my extended family members are Amish, and I overhear friends’ and strangers’ most frank impressions of the group. For the most part people understand the Amish as simply anti-technology and sometimes express their derision toward what they view as a hypocritical or simplistic stance. But Amish culture is a response to a more nuanced question: “How does the daily experience of a technology affect people and communities?” That is a subtle but fundamental distinction, and I think more radical than, for example: “Is a television itself ‘bad?’” The latter case leads to an easy answer—“Of course a TV set is not ‘bad’—look at educational TV programming—end of discussion.” Do you find that critics and historians increasingly understand the importance of the depth of questions raised in your own series of broadcast interruptions and challenge that notion of most early video art as simply “anti-TV?”

DH: These quotes may help clarify my position:

“This was never an attempt to promote a kind of seditious ‘anti-television’ ... This was an attempt [by artists] to independently assert a claim to some part of the medium for themselves, to make space for an autonomous practice.”¹⁵

“This was not simply art *on* television, an artist having a stall in the midst of the marketplace—a place in an arts feature, but an obstruction, a political act, and provoked the viewer to ask questions about what they were seeing and perceiving. ‘I had concern about art being confined, being compartmentalized within an elitist world, or seen as tangential to real life. I was interested in shifting ground, preferably into what I saw as the social context, into the broadest possible one across all boundaries, rather than specific to an elite.’”¹⁶

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NOTES 1. David Hall as printed in Jackie Hatfield, “Another Place—David Hall,” *Experimental Film and Video: An Anthology*, Jackie Hatfield, ed. (Eastleigh: UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 201. 2. David Hall’s response to A.L. Rees’s book *A History of Experimental Film & Video*, *British Film Institute*, 1999. Full text available at www.revind.ac.uk. 3. *Ibid.* 4. *Ibid.* 5. David Hall from a videotaped interview with Jackie Hatfield, December 2005. Available for online viewing as part of “*Revind: Artists’ Video in the ‘70s and ‘80s*” at www.revind.ac.uk. 6. Peter Hall and Matt Soar, “Images over Time,” *Eye: The International Review of Graphic Design*, Issue no. 60 (Summer 2006). Available online at www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=131&fid=577. 7. David Hall in interview with Jackie Hatfield, December 2005. Available online at www.revind.ac.uk. 8. David Hall, lecture notes from “*Video Art: The Significance of an Educational Environment*,” 1986. Text available at www.revind.ac.uk. 9. David Hall, “*Early Video Art: A Look at a Controversial History*,” in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, Julia Knight, ed. (London, UK: Arts Council of England and Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 1996); Reprinted in *The Video Project* online at <http://davidsonfiles.org>. 10. David Hall in interview with Jackie Hatfield, December 2005. Available online at www.revind.ac.uk. 11. Jackie Hatfield, “*Another Place—David Hall*,” 204. 12. *Time-based Media* definition is from the Tate Modern Web site: www.tate.org.uk/conservation/time/about.htm. 13. David Hall, “*Early Video Art: A Look at a Controversial History*.” 14. Sean Cubitt, “*Grayscale Video and the Shift to Color*,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 65, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 40–53. Also available at www.revind.ac.uk/resources_es.htm. 15. David Hall, “*Early Video Art: A Look at a Controversial History*.” 16. Jackie Hatfield and David Hall as reproduced in the essay “*Another Place—David Hall*,” 204.

FACING PAGE

“TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces): Interruption piece 1971” by David Hall

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“TV Interruptions 93: withoutTV 1993” by David Hall