

STUDIO International

Journal of Modern Art May/June 1976

£1.75 \$5

Video Art

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BRITISH VIDEO ART

Towards an Autonomous Practice

David Hall

A serious and sustained involvement by British artists intent on deliberating a *bona fide* relationship with the video process, has been both rare and, where it has taken place, invariably overlooked. Others, mostly operating with disparate concerns, have occasionally engaged in peripheral encounters where the technology has been (often indiscriminately) employed as an adjunctive recording or monitoring feature. However, it is the first more recently emergent faction in British video which I shall consider here as a preface to the following pages by British video-makers. Since much of this work is at such an early stage in its formulation, it would seem necessary to initially examine its potential relationship to the context in which it inevitably finds itself.

Consideration of video practice in terms of a specific frame of reference, as an essentially autonomous art form, has for the most part been elusive. The reasons for this appear to be twofold. Firstly, in comparison with painting, sculpture, performance, film, and so on, video arguably has no historical precedents as an established practice from which to devolve or develop a substantial theoretical base. Understandably, writings have mostly tended to either take a descriptive form or be formulated around establishing an identity in the face of video's ever-present forebear, broadcast television. This is inevitable, but in the main they have only served to postulate its *existence* as an alternative activity. In fact, one is constantly confronted with casts of that Giant Shadow through many of the works themselves. Undoubtedly this is due to video's relatively short history, as well as a concern on the part of many artists to reappraise the overwhelming popular view.

Secondly, insofar as most of the analytical critiques have appeared in art publications, I would suspect that any attempted definitive look at the position of video has, in part, been impaired by the age-old reluctance the art world has in reconciling itself with electronic media (I use 'media' here only as a convenience, and with some slight trepidation).

Implicit in the traditional sentiment that art can only manifest itself in an immediately tangible form is the essential reckoning that it has the innate ability to physically display the creator's thumbprint. Although this may not always be consciously desired, there exists nevertheless the latent evidence of direct tactile involvement in most models of art endeavour. From the obvious examples in the plastic arts through to film, there is this inherent potential at some stage in the making. Aside from the possibility of direct intervention at the photo-chemical stage, film may be cut, marked, scratched and assembled in a corresponding manner. By contrast, the effect of a physical gesture upon a videotape bears virtually no relation to the resultant experience. A magnetic tape splice is not *seen* as a transcribed cut moving through the monitor screen as a film splice might be on projection; its occurrence is apparent only as a representative indeterminate sync/scan disturbance.

Like a screenprint or a bronze, a film projection is a direct (albeit travelling) transcription of tactual/visual features on the film-strip itself. Conversely, a monitored videotape exhibits little relation to equivalent material manipulations, and equally has no perceptible counterparts as an object. A videotape as

object can only be regarded in total as the plastic equivalent of its duration. The video signal is transferred as an invisible stream along the length of the tape, compared with film's identity as a series of very apparent separate frames which may be considered in segmented plastic terms (an essential difference as yet recognised by only a few tape-makers, many others still apeing film-making conventions). Electronic devices have inevitably been evolved to mimic film techniques, and they include 'clean' cut edits, wipes, fades, dissolves and negative/positive features. All of them are intangible facsimiles of an alien and essentially concrete/mechanical process.

This brief comparison not only suggests a further, expanded, dialectic on two superficially conjugal forms, but equally serves to indicate a basic anomaly in the face of the implicit criterion elsewhere. Certainly, in my view, it implies the need for alternative procedural concerns on the part of the tape-maker. However, I do not mean to advocate an irrevocable acceptance of the essentially incorporeal nature of video (as is conveniently perpetuated by institutionalised TV). On the contrary, and in this sense broadly parallel to objectives elsewhere, there is the emerging pursuit which puts emphasis on a critical scrutiny of the 'medium' convention, *ie* the decoding of the illusion as an inherent condition of the work by the concurrent affirmation of the ongoing process(es). To quote Steve Reich on his music – where sound is, if only technically, a more appropriate analogue to video than film – 'I am interested in perceptible processes, I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music'.

The most evident response to the initial encounter with video technology is its intrinsic capacity for instant image feedback. An abundance of work has been produced based on this primary cognizance, and it would seem to be the *fons et origo* of some of the more important video art so far. However, there has been considerable disparity in the way this unique technological phenomenon is regarded and utilised. It has been used as the initial stage of 'abstraction' in what are known as synaesthetic or videographic tapes, the camera looking at a monitor which is recycling that camera's output. The feedback here is then often incorporated into the use of sophisticated video-synthesisers, editing and colourising devices. Almost without exception the tapes in this genre present complex synthetic imagery which, while not a normal experience on broadcast TV, tends if anything to corroborate the mystique convention by the development, deification and utilisation of increasingly sophisticated hardware available to, and operable by, only a few. Equally, this in turn produces the inevitable obscuration of any immediately perceivable evidence of the creative process.

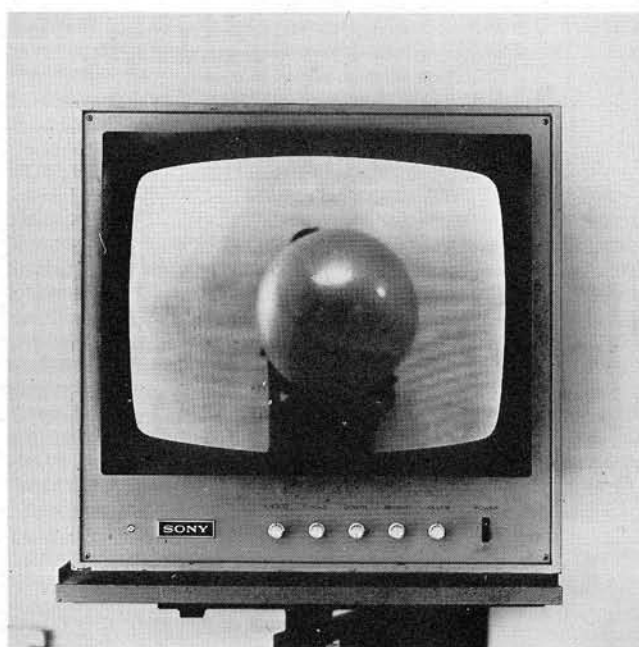
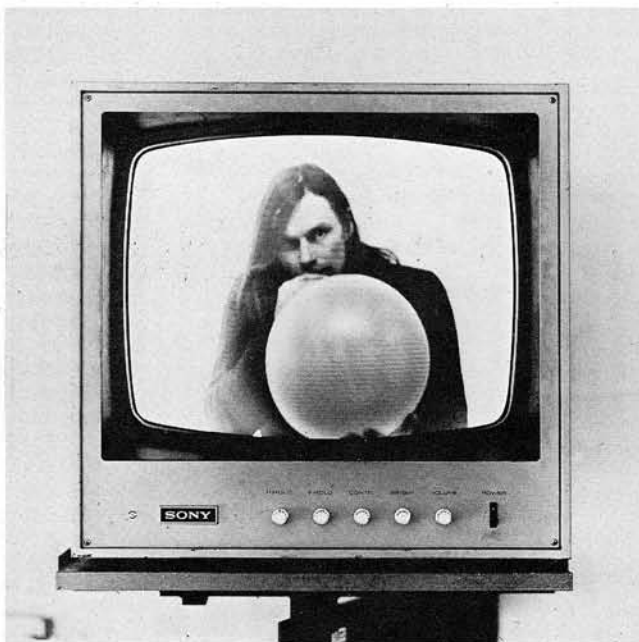
Alternatively, a proliferation of work has also emerged from the adoption of the triangular feedback configuration. Camera looks at artist/participant looking at monitor image of himself fed live from that camera – the analogical mirror – a mode for behaviour reflex. Many tapes, live closed-circuit installations and performances have involved this, and permutations of this configuration. It has been explored to the most profound advantage as a system to elucidate systems of spatio/temporal triangulation where the viewer

(*je* in installations) is simultaneously the viewer in a process of self-referring consciousness. However, here again there has been some disparity of intent, notably in the tape works. The immediate temptation, when confronted with a mirror analogue, is to become immersed either in self 'psychoanalysis' or at worst in narcissistic pursuits. In either case these processes of self-identification (the content) rarely conjoin with an identification of the video process (the form), let alone manifest it as an indigenous condition of the work.

As previously indicated, my purpose here is not to elaborate on the position of art work *using* video, but rather to tentatively examine video *as* the art work.

Video as art seeks to explore perceptual thresholds, to expand and in part to decipher the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television. In this context it is pertinent to recognise certain fundamental properties and characteristics which constitute the form. Notably those peculiar to the functions (and 'malfunctions') of the constituent hardware – camera, recorder, and monitor – and the artist's accountability to them.

The video product, as manifested on the monitor screen, cannot be regarded as a perceptually insular phenomenon. The dominant tangibility of the object presentation system is an irrevocable presence which in itself contributes from the outset to the dissolution of the image. To choose to ignore this paradox as an unfortunate discrepancy of technology, rather than to acknowledge it as an intrinsic state of the video matrix, already suggests a polarity between art work using video (and indeed most uses of video), and that which in my view constitutes video as art. This particular perceptual dichotomy, which a number of video-makers have explored by attempting to assimilate the apparatus and the emitted image, is but one characteristic. Others peculiar only to video, which some artists have realised are integral phenomena and consequently inevitable components of the videological syntax, include the manipulation of record and playback 'loop' configurations; immediate visual and audio regeneration; the relative lack of image resolution; video signal distortion; frame instability – often purposefully induced by 'misaligning' vertical and horizontal frame locks; random visual noise – most apparent on unrecorded tape; camera 'beam', 'target', focus and the photoconductive vidicon signal plate (the camera's retina); and so on.



British video-makers currently engaged in these pursuits (in some, if not all of their works) include Clive Richardson, Steve Partridge, Tamara Krikorian, David Critchley, Mike Leggett, Brian Hoey, Stuart Marshall, Roger Barnard, Trevor Pollard, myself and perhaps a few others. The history of the development is sparse, and activities have been dispersed with no means of correlation through exposure until very recently. Exposure has so far only occurred in this country, and has been restricted largely through lack of organisation and financial resources. Principal events include the making and showing of a number of controversial experimental tapes at the now extinct London New Arts Lab by the TVX group (John Hopkins, Jobear Webb, Cliff Evans, etc) in 1969–70; the broadcasting of my own *TV Pieces* as 'interruptions' to regular programmes on Scottish Television in 1971; the inclusion of video works in the 'Survey of the Avant-Garde' series at Gallery House, London, in 1972; 'The Video Show' at the Serpentine Gallery in May 1975; the *Arena* video art programme on BBC TV and the 'Video – Towards Defining an Aesthetic' event at the Third Eye Glasgow – both during last March; and now the current installations show at the Tate Gallery.

The early tapes of Clive Richardson, executed in 1972 when still a student at the Royal College of Art, were remarkably succinct as early examples of the

Clive Richardson *Balloon Piece* from *Sketches* 1972



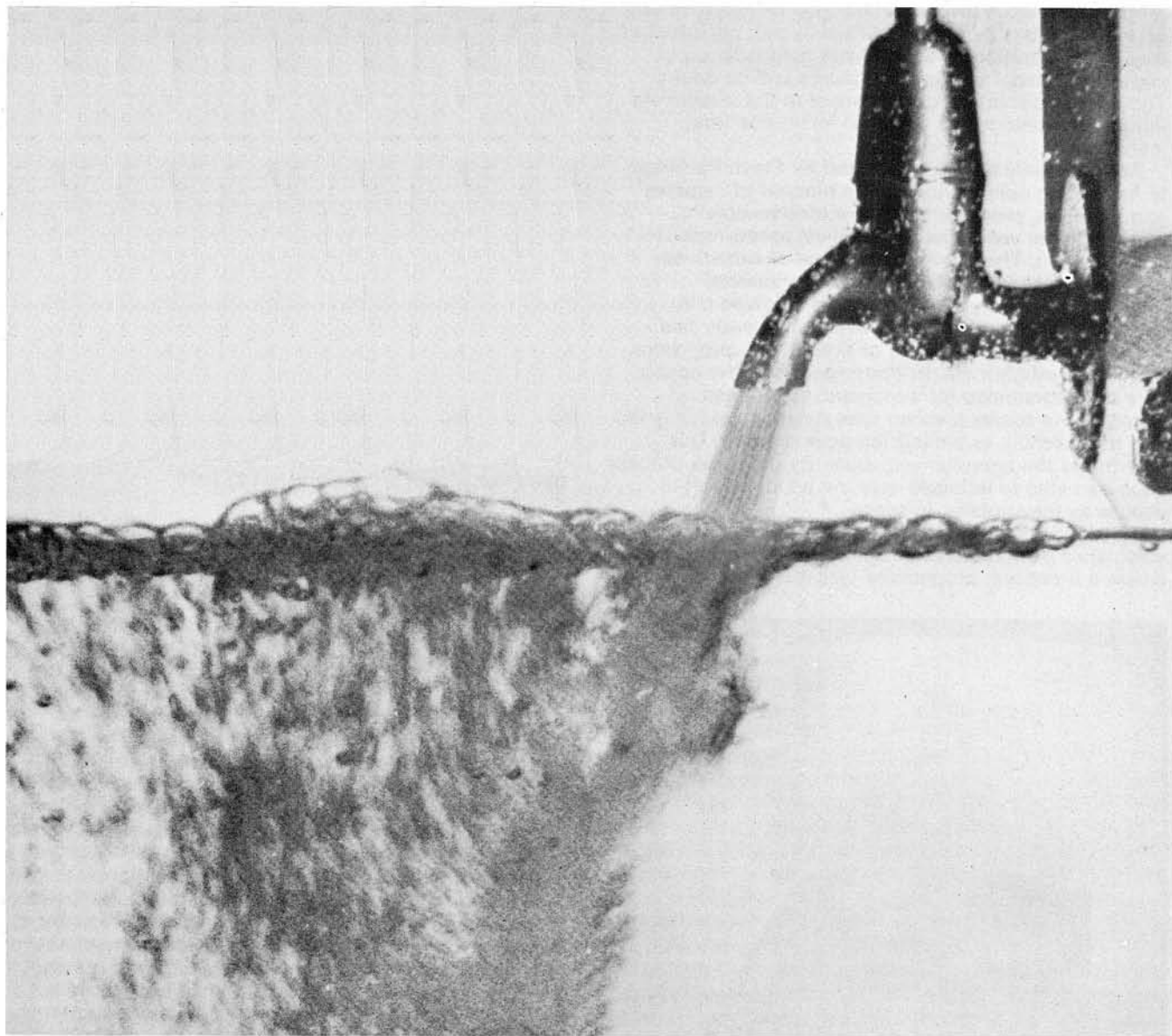
manipulation and reorientation of perceptual assumptions. It might be argued that these tapes (now known collectively as *Sketches*) would have been equally valid as film works, since they constituted primary investigations into the illusion convention peculiar to both. However, his juxtapositions of relative image size and its 'real' counterpart (*i.e.* rabbit was more or less rabbit size, balloon was balloon size, head was head size and so on, on the small screen) were a requirement integral to the function of most of the better pieces. The image of a rabbit is seen life-size behaving as a real rabbit does; and then very slowly, almost imperceptibly, the camera zooms out, revealing that the image of the rabbit is the image of another image of a rabbit on the image of another monitor on the real monitor. As the process progresses the size of the rabbit is kept constant (life-size and still chewing its lettuce leaf) by simultaneously zooming *into* the rabbit on the original recording. The process is reversed and the piece ends. In another work Richardson faces out from the monitor (framed approximately life-size) whilst inflating a balloon. As the balloon grows the camera zooms out keeping it a constant size, Richardson's head diminishes in size and then 're-inflates' as the balloon collapses. These are classics of their time.

The purposeful interface of reality and image, apparatus and illusion – the spatio/temporal ambiguities of the convention – were the demonstrative objectives in my own early *TV Pieces* (1971) for STV. In one, following a regular broadcast programme with no announcement, a water tap (again approximately life-size) is inserted into the top right-hand corner of the blank screen. The tap is turned on, out of vision, and the cathode ray tube 'fills with water'. The tap is removed. The water is then drained off, this time with the water line obliquely inclined to the expected horizontal. The screen is again blank – normal service is resumed and the illusion restored.

In more recent work Tamara Krikorian has also been investigating the perceptual disparity in the spatial concurrence of dominant monitor object and its output. She has attempted to integrate the two as a 'sculptural' whole rather than to accept the coincidence without apparent causal connexion. A perceptual gestalt is achieved by averting preference for any aspect of the experience. The first important contribution to this has been her insistent use of multiple banks of monitors, whether showing a different tape on each, or one tape linked to all. The tight configuration of four identical monitors (two wide and two high) in *Breeze* (1975), each displaying a separate tape of different static views of a stream, initially denies persistent regard for any one image. In addition, each image denies even 'reasonable' fidelity as the camera's automatic gain compensator is intentionally pushed to its limit, contrasting shadows and strong reflected light.

In *60 TV Sets*, an installation of broadcast receivers at Gallery House in 1972 by myself and Tony Sinden, and in the subsequent modified version *101 TV Sets* at the Serpentine Gallery last year, a similar objective was in mind. This by initially tuning each consecutive receiver to a different station. Then by distorting reception by misaligning vertical and horizontal holds; vertical linearity; frame height; brightness and contrast; and aerial orientation. Audio output was loud with the three available channels converging, plus some ambient noise from the ageing domestic sets. The result was the absolute antithesis of the broadcasters' intent. The message and the medium were objectified, re-forming as a new and autonomous experience.

Disintegrating Forms, the most recent work by Krikorian, involves the display of only one recording simultaneously fed to a vertical stack of five or six monitors. The tape is a single take of clouds moving slowly across the screens. The choice of image, grey and unassuming with little resolution, defies any precise definition. Often, when presented with no tangible form at all (the sky clears or becomes evenly overcast), there is a perceptual ambivalence as one searches to



David Hall *TV Pieces* 1971

resolve the even distribution of scan lines at the surface of the tubes.

Both Brian Hoey and Roger Barnard have produced installations concerned with spectator participation in spatio/temporal constructs. Hoey's *Videvent* uses two recorders with a tape laced through the first to record, and on to the second for playback, producing a time delay of a few seconds. A camera observes the participant, and the information is passed through a 'gen-lock' mixer and on to the first recorder. The delayed signal from the second is fed back simultaneously through the 'gen-lock' and mixed on to the first – an endless accumulative cycle of infinite images appearing simultaneously on a monitor, each spaced apart only by their actions in time and each receding into the past. Concurrent with this temporal recession is the inevitable stage-by-stage dissolution of the image, as the fidelity of the technology progressively breaks down. On the occasions when he has had colour facilities this too has served to elaborate the videological metamorphosis from 'representational' colour to electronic nebulae.

Corridor, by Roger Barnard, is a particularly contemplative piece. At the first stage a fixed camera views activities in a contained (corridor) visual field. Its live output is seen on a monitor opposite. The camera is linked to this monitor via a VTR which simultaneously records the information. At the second stage (when the tape comes to an end) the recording is replayed through a mixer together with live information from the camera, both being equally

superimposed at the monitor. Static characteristics of the past and present view (walls, floor, furniture, etc) appear as one, and the space image is unchanged. The illusion of the space-time continuum is subtly, but pointedly, disturbed only by the transient appearance of the spectator, from the past and in the present. A viewer confronts his present-time image, while simultaneously another appears at its side, and the first looks around to find that he is in fact alone. The first sits down, and the second sits on the same chair.

Barnard's piece distinctly exemplifies video's unique ability to both challenge and reorientate the axioms of the real and the televisual experience. My own installation, *Progressive Recession*, has similar concerns. It utilises nine cameras and nine monitors also in a corridor configuration. Two monitors are placed either end (facing each other) and the rest line one side. Each has a camera placed on top of it. The first monitor (at the side) reflects the spectator confronting it – the camera above is directly linked to it. The second remains blank when facing it, the image from its respective camera appears on the next (ahead of the participant's progression along the corridor), the third is also blank with its camera's output appearing on the monitor two ahead, and so on – the image progressively appearing further and further ahead by a systematic rate of 'acceleration'. The return journey along the corridor is similarly structured – spectator relative to his image. The two end monitors are linked to their opposite cameras, each image receding concurrent with the participant's move toward it. With

no recording equipment involved (hence incorporating no technical facility for *actual* time delay), my intention was the exploration of a schematic manipulation of correlative spatial events – the image and its origin. The relative disparities of movement in the visual field induce the analogue of temporal 'extension' and 'contraction'.

More recently a device invented by Steve Partridge, to be used in conjunction with a number of cameras and monitors, provides facility for innumerable compositional variations on this 'live' space-time configuration. There is an abundance of camera-to-monitor switchers available on the commercial market, but in each case the system involved only allows for a regulated switch-over (once every five seconds, every five minutes, or every five hours) from monitor to monitor etc. In Partridge's *AVS* the timing may be programmed for a moment-to-moment variation. He *scores* a varied time structure which is fed into the machine as a musician does on tape. This determines the temporal sequence. By the same process he is also able to infinitely vary the juxtaposition of images as they appear 'in space'.

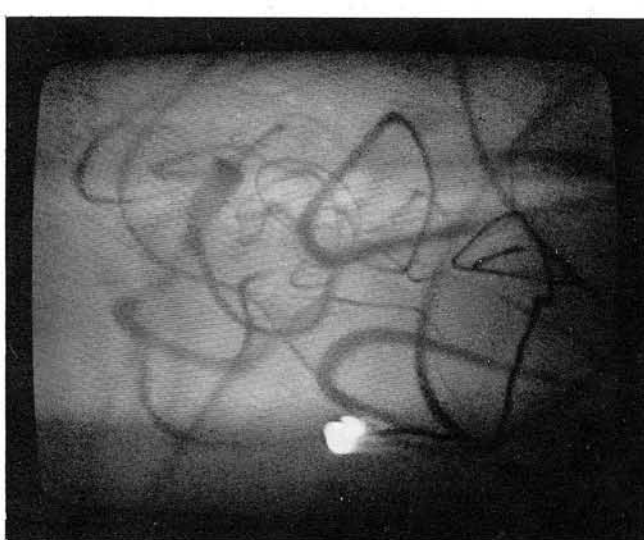
Partridge has also made a number of important videotapes. A notable example was *Interlace* (1975), where a broadcast programme was recorded and then



Steve Partridge *Interlace* 1975

re-recorded optically with the frame 'rolling over', sections 'frozen', video signal over-modulated, etc, this process being repeated a number of times. My tape *This is a Video Monitor* (1974), subsequently remade this year as *This is a Television Receiver* for a BBC broadcast using a familiar newsreader (see the cover of this issue), was similarly an attempt to not only totally reappraise the illusion convention, but more importantly to demonstrate the cognition and collation of some of the specifically indigenous properties on which is built a new and wholly videological experience. After an initial 'take' of the newsreader describing the essential paradox of the real and the imagined functions of the TV set on which he appears, a second is regenerated optically off a monitor screen (the sound by microphone), a third off that, and so on. Vision and sound progressively change, at each stage distorting the expected characteristics, displacing the imagined for the real – configurations of variable light intensity at the surface of the screen, each time identifying and re-identifying the implications of his recurring statement.

A later tape, *Vidicon Inscriptions* (early 1975), explores a particular property (considered deficiency) of the camera's vidicon tube. The signal plate at the front of the tube is designed to register optical information and convert it to electronic signals. The range of its normal operation is usually limited to variations in reflected light. A source light, or overlit object, will

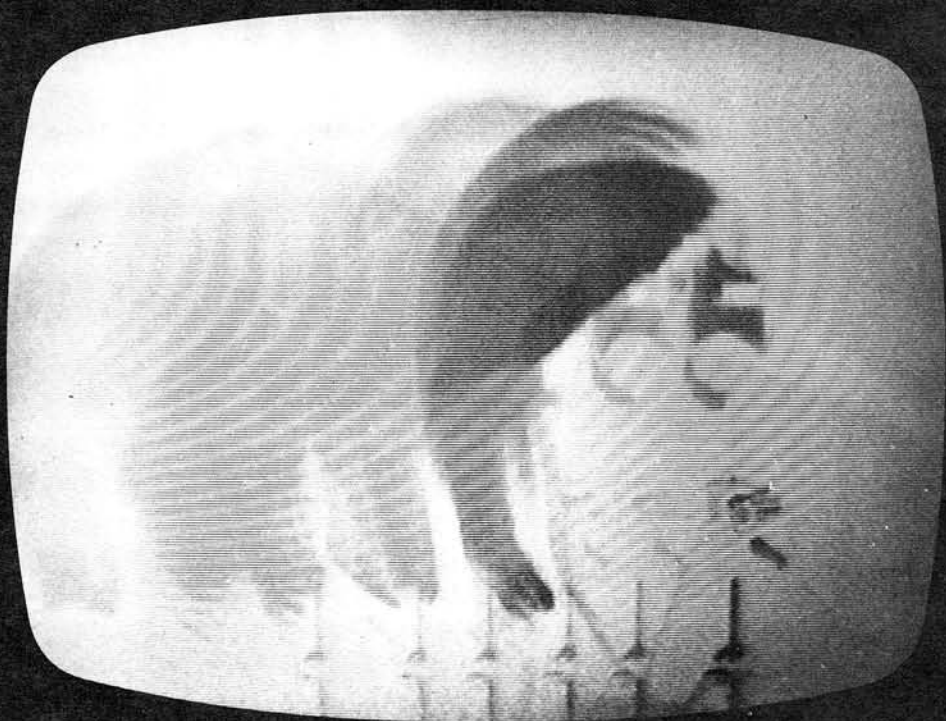
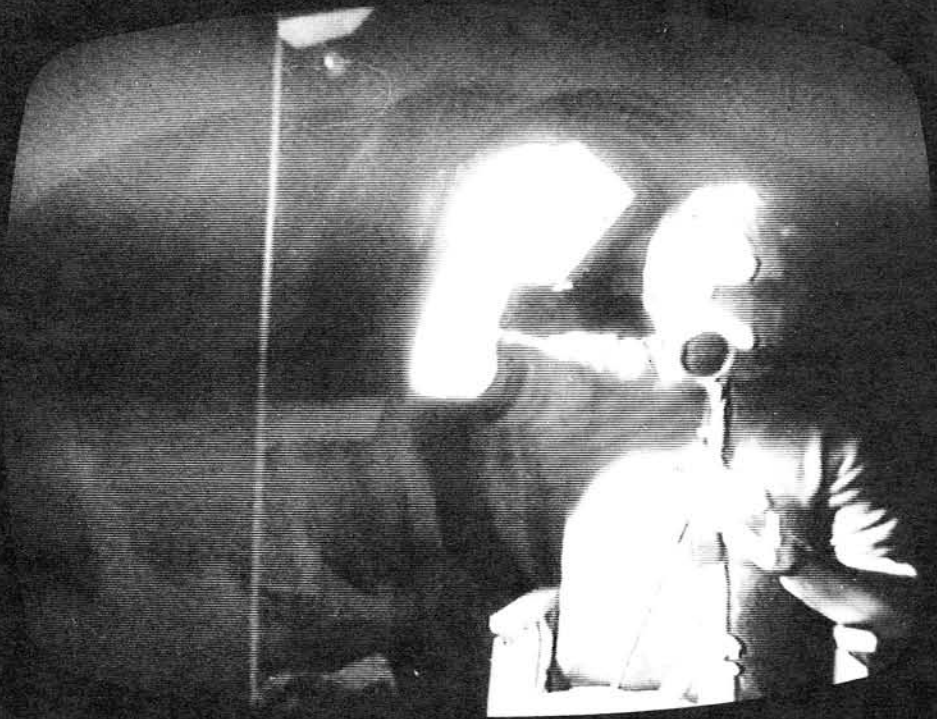


David Hall *Vidicon Inscriptions* (Part 2) 1975

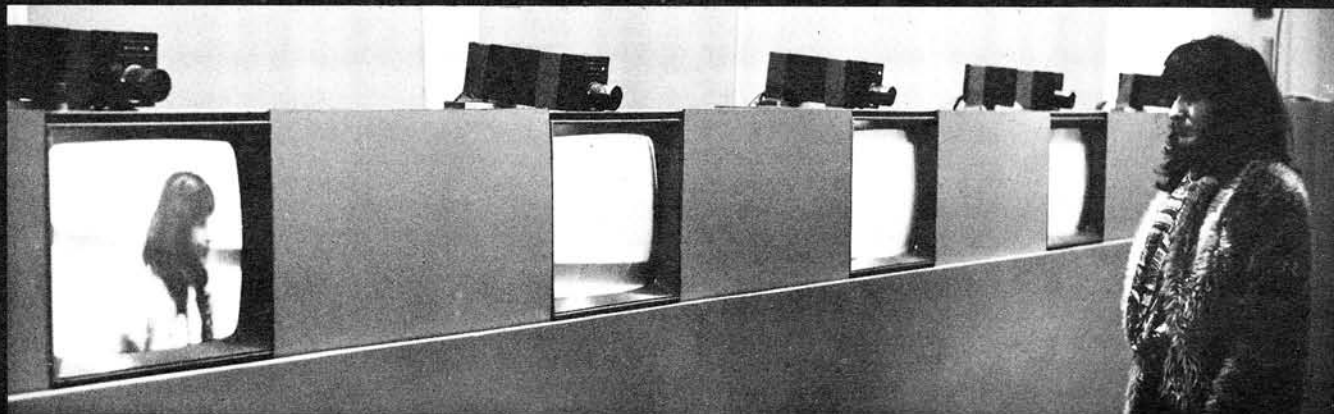
exceed its capacity for assimilation and the image can be temporarily, if not permanently, 'burnt' into the photoconductive surface. This introduces the unique facility to record the 'passage of time' and yet simultaneously fix the trace of that continuum, resulting in a correlation of the present and progressively receding past in the same camera at the same time. In one section of the tape the movement of a spot lamp about the screen marks the passage of time, and its trace is continuously retained. The last section records the progressively shifting position of the cameraman (seen through a mirror). Prior to each move the lens is covered and re-exposed after the change. At each stage the cameraman's past position is inscribed on the screen.

Most recently I have devised an installation incorporating this same phenomenon, the participants' actions being systematically inscribed at intervals by a trigger mechanism. A monitor linked to a camera above it faces the viewer at the end of a corridor. In moving towards it (and into a brightly lit area) he triggers a photoelectric switch which opens a polaroid shutter in front of the lens. The shutter closes after a few seconds. His continuous actions are seen on the monitor through the polaroid filter, and his inscribed movements (with the filter removed) are retained as part of the same image indefinitely, together with those of participants from the past.

David Hall



Vidicon Inscriptions (part 3) 1975



Progressive Recession 1975