
VIDEO

Report by David Hall

Artists' Video
The Galleries, Washington, Tyne and Wear
19–30 October

Driving into Washington New Town, just a few miles south of Newcastle, is peculiarly out of context when compared to my other experiences of old Geordieland. It is almost a Little Los Angeles. A network of de luxe new highways interconnect scattered buildings over a vast area, and everyone appears to travel by car (public transport seems to be incidental rather than an absolute necessity at present). In the town centre most social and commercial amenities are provided in one giant enclosed precinct called The Galleries. This includes shops, pubs, legal advisers, libraries, local government offices—the lot. It also includes the town's Information Centre, part of which was taken over by the local Biddick Farm Arts Centre to stage the Artists' Video exhibition. The Biddick Centre is grant-aided by Northern Arts, Sunderland Borough Council and the Arts Council of GB, and Brian Hoey and Wendy Brown, its present Artists in Residence, were the initiators of this show. Hoey, Brown and Rosemary Herd, the Visual Arts officer of the Biddick Centre, undoubtedly worked very hard—in a climate not particularly well-attuned to art shows of any sort, let alone video—to produce one of the few shows of this kind to appear anywhere in Britain.

Even though the show was very much an international affair (including tapes from the US, Canada, Switzerland, Sweden and some of the best from Britain), the national press typically ignored it, presumably on the grounds that it was in such an 'obscure' locale. This is ironic at a time when everyone is clamouring for greater attention to art activities in the regions. Even William Feaver, who wrote the catalogue foreword (blundering a little—but acceptable), made not the slightest whisper of a mention of it in his *Observer* column. The local press, forever looking for a cheap thrill and a quick sell, made no serious attempt to discover what it was all about but instead jumped headlong into a totally unfounded Customs' suspicion that they were importing a blue movie from Sweden in the form of Ronald Nameth's tape *The Adventures of Energy* (music by Terry Riley). The local radio did a hurried two-minute interview with Hoey and Herd on an early morning breakfast show, and local TV was nowhere to be seen. Despite this dearth of media publicity audiences were quite good, showing a lot of interest and asking a lot of questions.

A fair proportion of the tapes on show had that seductive, though mostly cosmetic, appeal of electronic trickery produced with colourisers, complicated special-effects generators, chroma-key circuits, video-synthesisers and the like. In fairness to those artists who are aware of the dangers, I must say here that it is extremely difficult to offer a generalised complaint about work such as this—only that much of it truly reads as the now proverbial moving wallpaper. The intention so often seems to be based purely on exploring kinetic image invention for its own sake, where the prime objective appears to be to gain access to more and more sophisticated means with less and less concern for the implications of doing it. Certainly it rarely does anything to extend the now well-established 'principles' peculiar to institutionalised TV. To quote from an earlier article: 'Almost

without exception 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 (obsessive) 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.¹

Woody and Steina Vasulka (US) were the two artists in the show perhaps most totally absorbed in electronic wizardry, and since I am so diametrically opposed to their work let it suffice to quote their catalogue entry for one of their tapes as an illustration of my point: '*The Matter*—a dot pattern with its raster is displayed on a scan processor. Three basic waves, sine, triangles and square, generated by a locked waveform generator, are applied to shape the display. A slow ramp generator controls the size and image drift.' Alternatively, Doron Abrahami (GB), avoiding this technical jargonese, commits himself to the core of the matter (inadvertently aligning his intentions with the dictum of the broadcasters) by stating: 'I have tried to explore the possibilities provided by sophisticated TV equipment, to create a kinetic entertaining video-tape, set to music.' Pleasant, but highly soporific. However, it would be quite out of place to hint at a general condemnation of the show on the strength of my comments so far. Tapes by John Freeman (Canada), Geneviève Calame (Switzerland), Brian Hoey (GB) and to some degree Cliff Evans (GB) all involved synthetic 'abstraction', which proved with careful consideration that it is possible to manifest ideas which extend beyond the eclectic amorphous dream-state of outmoded psychedelia (Dewitt, Donebauer), or glossy and hard-edged 'computed' animation (Vasulkas, Emschwiller).

Moving on from the synthesised work, I was very disappointed in Ira Schneider's (US) tape *More or Less Related Incidents in Recent History*. However hard I tried I could not see it as more than an ad hoc compilation of off-air shots of Nixon, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rock stars and, as he states, 'other brief clips from broadcast TV which typify our age'. These were interspersed with colour portapak shots of a New York boutique being decorated. As a rather slender insight into the American 'media/political/rock/alternative culture' I suppose it was OK. But for a video artist of Schneider's reputation to get off on the 'junk footage and roving camera routine' was in my view a slight on his proven capabilities.

Ture Sjölander and Bror Wikström (Sweden) showed three tapes: *Time*, *Monument* and *Space in the Brain*. I was particularly interested to see *Time* (1965-6) since this was one of the first experimental tapes to be broadcast. And their subtly structured nudging and twisting of familiar broadcast imagery (by carefully distorting the video scan-line raster) induces a very particular reappraisal of the Telly conventions. It is certainly an historical landmark in the development of video art. Their statement about broadcast TV is as applicable now as it was then: '... pictures have not attained more than a purely illustrative function ... because most of the pictures are created by Word-people. In fact, roughly half the items on TV today could just as well be broadcast on radio instead.'

John Hopkins and Sue Hall (GB) presented a compilation entitled *Albion Free State* which included one or two slightly bizarre experiments and some important controversial documentation (which I have always suspected they are better disposed towards than the former) like *Squat Now While the Stocks Last*. Other British work included Aidanvision's *Figure in an Interior* which was the record of a staged situation in which an (unmistakable) actor was confronted with a *Logan's Run* simulated-computer-style interrogation. The initial concept suggested many of the inherent psychological and philosophical issues which have emerged with the one-way systems of present-day media presentation. In its realisation the resultant tape employed too obviously the very tactics and traditional techniques of those systems which I assume it sought to question. Viewers remained passive and external to the performance—voyeuristic rather than integral to the process.

However, that particular tape aside, Aidanvision (situated in Carlisle) is headed by Roy Thompson and is one of the rare independent studios in this country which, to quote, 'concentrates on the experimental use of the medium, in the context of commitment to art'. Artists in that region and from beyond are apparently welcome to use its facilities.

Tapes were also shown by Tamara Krikorian, Steve Partridge, Stuart Marshall, Tony Sinden, David Critchley, and myself. Some of these I have discussed before. Krikorian showed an adaption for single screen of her multi-monitor installation *Breeze* (1975). Partridge presented five works, the most successful being *Interlace* (1975) which, by systematically over-modulating, rolling, mixing, freezing, etc the video image from an off-air discussion, insists on the viewing experience having a 'televsual autonomy' bringing into question the re-presentation convention as adopted by broadcasters. This is very much an extension of Sjölander and Wikström's concern, hinted at ten years earlier in their tape *Time*. Stuart Marshall, though handling his work somewhat differently, comes to similar conclusions when he says that his tapes called *Go Through the Motions*, *Just a Glimpse* and *Arcanum* all examine the interrelations of the image and sound tracks and challenge the notion that any system of representation can simply re-present'. *Go Through the Motions* (1975) is probably the earliest of his tapes shown, yet for me remains one of the strongest. Briefly, it shows a close-up of his mouth throughout the duration apparently repeating the words 'Saying one thing and meaning another' (in fact he is miming to a pre-recorded sound loop). As his lips attempt to synchronise with the sound they purposefully move almost imperceptibly in and out of phase with it. The viewer is, almost hypnotically, induced into at once attempting to assimilate sound and vision according to his preconditioned subconscious, yet simultaneously conscious of the purposeful disparity, not only of sound and vision but of system and actual context.

My own *This is a Video Monitor* (1974) (discussed in the *SI* video issue) has similar objectives in its—albeit slightly different—use of miming, but also involved progressive image disintegration in an attempt to reappraise the (visual) illusion convention. I also showed *Relative Surfaces* and *Vidicon Inscriptions*. Tony Sinden showed a new tape, *Light Sensitive*, which explored the reaction of variable light exposure on the vidicon tube. As he wrote, 'the recording was more form-evolving than object-seeking' and the result was very much conditioned by a primary concern for the inherent properties of the medium (not unlike my *Vidicon Inscription*).



David Critchley *Static Acceleration* video tape 1976

One of the tapes that I was most impressed with was a new work by David Critchley, *Static Acceleration*. This began with a view of Critchley's head against a grid-like (net?) background. Very slowly his head begins to turn from left to right, right to left and so on, apparently following the movement of a tennis ball in an indoor match (the sound is

heard of the racquets hitting the ball). The speed of the 'game'—and consequently Critchley's head movement—progressively quickens until it appears as an irresolvable 'blur'. The first section ends. A second is repeated, off the first. But this time as the movement quickens so Critchley simultaneously slows down the tape speed as it moves round the video-head drum. This effectively compensates for the acceleration, and the increasingly blurring image is examined at a progressively reducing pace. Where this might also be achieved in film by 'step' printing, or by reshooting off a variable-speed projector, awareness of the process as an integral part of the perceived work would not be as apparent, since in the case of video (that is the half-inch tape equipment used here) and using the 'slow motion' facility as Critchley did, the inherent deficiencies of that mode clearly indicate what is going on as scan fields (or 'frame' lines) break up the picture, drifting through top to bottom. Their increasing occurrence disturbs the image and converts represented action into pure videological experience at the surface of the screen. This piece simply, yet admirably, combines and manipulates time and fundamental aspects of the process in a carefully considered work only possible in, and about, video.



Roger Barnard *Four Different Faces* video installation 1975

Tate's Education Department does it again

In May of this year the Tate Gallery put on its first ever video show. It ran for three weeks, showing two different artists' closed-circuit installations per week, and included Roger Barnard, Brian Hoey, Tamara Krikorian, Steve Partridge, Stuart Marshall and myself. Public attendance was very high yet with one notable exception² press coverage was nil. I can only speculate as to why this was so. Firstly, I suspect that those reporters one might have expected to have given at least minimal attention to what was, after all, an historic breakthrough (video at the Tate no less) were possibly a little chary as to how to assimilate work which is only now establishing itself amongst other avant-garde forms in this country. However, the additional fact that the show was not given the full-blown approval and treatment in the main galleries by the Exhibitions Dept and was instead put on downstairs by the Education Dept in their lecture theatre may also have been a contributory deterrent.³ The significance here seems to be that the upstairs shows are invariably of artists well-known in the private gallery system, whereas those organised by Education (mostly film and now video) involve artists who have little dealing with such concerns. As I have indicated before, the Education Dept is fast becoming the experimental showcase of the Tate, supporting — on a comparatively minuscule budget — areas of activity which appear to be carefully ignored by what one would suppose is the 'proper' channel. It deserves all possible encouragement from outside.

An example of its continuing efforts was seen from Tuesday 29 December until Sunday 9 January inclusive when the Education Department staged two installations by Roger Barnard — which, I would add, 'graduated' to the upper galleries. One piece, *Four Different Faces*, was a remake of one of his closed circuit works shown there in the May exhibition, and the other, *Box*, was not a video piece but involved a two-way mirror and participant-controlled lighting.

Four Different Faces was a fairly 'simple' technical construct, as many of the best video installations are, and Barnard's description of its function is equally unpretentious: 'You sit facing a TV monitor. On the monitor you see in sequence:

1. Your own face as in a mirror. 2. Your face straightforwardly monitored. 3. Two left sides of your face combined to form a third face. And 4. Two right sides of your face combined to form a fourth'. The piece utilises two cameras, sitting side by side on top of the monitor, which are fed through a camera mixer. One camera views the participant in its 'normal' mode

whilst the other has been 'reversed scanned' (the image is flipped through 180° horizontally). Hence in 1 (above) information is taken from the reverse scan camera which produces the mirror image, in 2 from the standard camera, and in 3 and 4 the screen is split vertically into two halves (via the mixer) showing information from each. By switching in the left half of an image from the standard camera and the right half from the reversed one — and vice versa — Barnard's description in 3 and 4 is realised. These images of ourselves in mirror reflex and then as others see us, and the subsequent matching of the two in combination producing a third synthetic/symmetrical 'person', superbly exemplify that particularly unique facility of video to parallel and externalise those disparate percepts of self as a complete and concrete phenomenon.

Aside from this as the basic concept there was no accounting for each individual's inventive behaviour when confronted with the possibility of infinite image-making. This factor was obviously influential when the Tate decided to stage it as part of their Christmas attractions for the kids, but that in no way deterred adults from indulging in an important innovation from an important young video artist.

Open Invitation

Apart from the Serpentine Gallery's Video Show last year there has not been an occasion where video artists (or artists using video) have had the opportunity to show their work in this country on an open submission basis — that is unconditionally, without subsequent selection, or of course by invitation. Whilst I believe that selective shows are essential in giving the artist adequate time, space and facility to show his wares with the minimum amount of jostling and confusion (unfortunately unavoidable at times at the Serpentine), there is nevertheless a positive need for organised viewings of works which otherwise might never be seen. Equally, such an event would be even more useful if it were combined with a symposium where discussion could take place on the attendant current issues and problems of video art making in Britain. A central venue easily accessible would

be the ideal requirement, and this must certainly be pursued — possibly somewhere in London. However, in the meantime I am proposing to hold a pilot event, to be conducted with a fairly informal structure, at Maidstone Art College. The emphasis will be on student work and work by younger artists in general. These, or college representatives, are invited to write to me at the Film, Video and Sound Dept, Maidstone Art College, Oakwood Park, Maidstone, Kent no later than 10 March indicating their interest either in showing tapes or attending, or both (letters should include running times of work and format). Subject to the response I shall be able to formulate the necessary arrangements and fix the dates. It will probably be a three, possibly four-day event. Unfortunately no organised accommodation will be available, but as Maidstone is only 35 miles from London with frequent trains from Victoria (a one-hour journey) this should not prove too much of a problem. Working on a very small budget no fees can be paid for tape hire on this scale, but technical facilities are good and tapes should be on one of the three following formats: $\frac{1}{2}$ " High Density EAIJ (Sony AV series), $\frac{1}{2}$ " Low Density EAIJ and Sony Umatic $\frac{3}{4}$ " cassette.

Anyone interested in submitting papers for discussion (with a bias towards experimental video art) is welcome to do so.

Bursary-cum-Fellowships

As I have repeatedly insisted, one of the greatest problems particularly for younger video-makers is the need for access to reliable and well-maintained equipment. Many students who produced exciting work find themselves out in the cold wide world with little enough cash to survive on, let alone set themselves up with excessively expensive hardware. The Arts Council still need to think very seriously about supporting a central resource centre which has sufficient funds to maintain a properly functioning workshop. In the meantime they have a scattering of VTRs and cameras which, whilst available to all and sundry, seem to suffer interminable problems from misuse and the fact that no one at the AC is sufficiently experienced to put even minor defects to rights. Alternatively, they are to be congratulated on their bursary awards scheme which offers cash-in-hand with very few strings attached. However, since the amounts offered are very small the artist has to shop around for the cheapest possible hire deal on equipment, or borrow from a friendly college or other institution. (If he/she were to pay full dealer rates on portapaks or studio the average award would be frittered away in under a fortnight). Unless the Arts Council can multiply its offers by ten-fold, which they are bound to claim is impossible, technical facilities must be found on a minimal cost basis to supplement the financial deficiency.

One way around this is to offer joint bursary-cum-fellowships in collaboration with establishments already holding the necessary equipment. This has already been inaugurated on one count with the RCA's Film and TV School, and as I have also suggested before, could equally well occur elsewhere. The RCA is unique in its colour facilities, but much work could be done in other colleges even though, by and large, it may be restricted to black and white. In this context I am pleased to announce here that such an arrangement has been organised with my department at Maidstone. The proposal is that the artist would receive his bursary and pay a nominal portion of it to the college as a 'facilities fee'. In return he would be expected to spend a good portion of his time working in the college on a fellowship basis, paying for tape and other consumables out of his award. In this way he has the use of reliable hardware and technical assistance, whilst (hopefully) the students benefit from his presence as a comparatively mature artist. Only one or perhaps two video-makers could be taken on each year. Consideration is also being given to a similar arrangement for film-makers.

London Video Arts

With the ever-pressing need in this country for a centrally located organisation to promote, show and distribute independent work in video art, I am pleased to announce that, at the time of writing, just such an idea has been realised in the form of London Video Arts.

First, it is important to state that the name in no way indicates that it has been devised exclusively for London-based artists: it is simply a means of identifying its geographical locale. It has been initiated by a group of video artists and will operate as a strictly independent non-profit-making collective. Finances are virtually non-existent at this stage, but approaches are being made to appropriate funding bodies for support. Eventually London Video Arts hopes to provide a venue for the showing of tapes, installation and performances. It is also intent on acquiring equipment and technical assistance with a view to providing workshop facilities. In the meantime tape distribution is immediately feasible. It is proposed that tapes offered for hire will be of both national and international origin.

In future issues of *Studio International* I shall be reporting on the progress of this venture, but in the interim any artists interested in finding out more about LVA, or any educational establishments, galleries or other parties wishing to obtain information on its activities should write to: London Video Arts, 17 Dawson Place, London W2.

Italy

With the collapse of ART/TAPES 22 in Florence, the show of British tapes that I announced would take place there earlier this year had to be abandoned. Financial difficulties inevitably destroyed what was probably the most ambitious venture ever conceived in Europe for the production and distribution of video art tapes. With no official support and very few sales, Maria Gloria Biccocchi (ART/TAPES' director) had no recourse but to sell out equipment and cut her losses as best she could.

However, despite that very sad announcement at a time when Italy is suffering the same pressures as this country, the Cavallino Gallery in Venice is very much alive and will be putting on the same British show intended for ART/TAPES this January. The show will also go on, hopefully, to other Italian galleries. The British Council have given financial support which includes fees for tape hire. I shall discuss the event in more detail at a future date.

Paris Biennale

Two British artists have been selected to present video installations at the forthcoming Paris Biennale (the international avant-garde show for under 35s). They are Steve Partridge and Stuart Marshall. Their works will be two of a total of five or six in this category. There will also be a selection of tapes on show from this country, but as yet the names of artists to participate in this area have not been decided. Finally, there is to be an international 'panorama' of video art tapes from older artists established in the field.

- 1 David Hall, 'British Video Art', *Studio International*, May/June 1976.
- 2 Richard Cork, London Art Review, *Evening Standard*, 3 June 1976.
- 3 Officially, the Tate's Exhibitions Dept and Education Dept are listed as one — the Dept of Exhibitions and Education. But the structure and attitudes of the respective curatorial staff over recent years clearly distinguish it as two virtually autonomous factions.