

The Video Show

David Hall

"Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back."

Nam June Paik

The Video Show, an important international festival of independent work currently at the Arts Council's Serpentine Gallery (1-26 May), is the first ever of its kind in this country.

Compared to similar events in the USA and almost every other principal European country it is, to say the least, long overdue. However, without wishing to waste valuable space unearthing the typically restrained politics on such issues, suffice it to say at last it's here.

The show's organising committee, including among others, Peter Bloch the distributor of independent videotapes and films, Stuart Hood of the R.C.A.'s Film and TV School, Clive Scolley of InterAction, and myself; came to the conclusion at an early stage that (a) we should include as many aspects of independent TV as possible, and that (b) priority should be given to British work. To this end such work was encouraged on an open submission basis, and participants from other countries are taking part by invitation only. Also, due mainly to financial restrictions, the difficult decision was made to show only British work in the performance/installation section.

In recent years, the word 'video' has come to be used as a convenient overall label for activity outside the commercial broadcast systems. This calls for a brief clarification since, technically, video (Latin "to see") refers primarily to the optical-to-electronic conversion of visual information, yet most of the work incorporates sound as well. Light passing through the lens is converted to electronic video signals in the camera, which are then fed to a monitor/receiver either by direct cabling, or by high frequency short wave transmission. In both cases independent audio information can be added. In closed circuit TV this is usually done through separate lines, and in broadcast TV the signals are combined at transmission stage. In both cases reception from the video camera and the microphone is simultaneous and virtually instantaneous.

Magnetic video tape recording, the

counterpart of audio tape recording, is a means (developed much later in television) of storing this visual information which can then be relayed by the same methods. Confusion has probably arisen since video tape recorders also record sound, side by side with the video signal. However, with this understood, I will continue to use 'video' as a loose distinction from broadcast TV as the word (however inaccurate) has become a symbol for most independent users. The amount of interest that British broadcast companies have shown in independent work is virtually non-existent. Their essentially insular attitude is often hidden behind worries about the lack of technical 'quality' in small scale equipment (usually half-inch width tape instead of their de luxe two-inch), and their occasional concessions in the form of so-called 'access' programmes (mostly using their own equipment) is an embarrassment to many independents.

Some of the larger companies in America have recognised the need to show alternative work if only on their 'culture' channels, and are now broadcasting half-inch tapes. It is also well known that companies in Holland, Germany and Austria have also put out a substantial amount of work. The rare piece that gets seen in Britain is usually well guarded within the frame-work of an 'Arts Feature', and the possibility of simply slotting works in to 'stand for themselves' is unheard of. (A freak of circumstance was in 1971 when I showed my 'interruptions' on Scottish Television, injected between normal programmes with no announcement). Most frustrating of all is that, at the time of writing, no company has shown more than a flicker of interest in the Video Show. The fact that the medium is precisely theirs probably incites more suspicion than if they were asked to simply report on a totally unrelated event.

It is impossible for me to comment on all areas of video use in the show, and although quite obviously there are many cases where a convergence takes place — thus inevitably arousing some contention — I feel most able to broadly consider the one popularly titled Video Art. But first I should at least mention a

parallel aspect which is well represented at the Serpentine. In the middle Sixties when TV making became accessible to people outside the broadcast industry, independent political and community-orientated organisations began to produce programmes about people and events either not covered, or unfairly treated by the mass media. In North America its growth has been closely linked with the development of Cable TV broadcast systems. Showing the work from our own fast diminishing Cable Stations, at a time when the present Government is considering abandoning its commitments and the ANNAN Committee is looking at the future of broadcasting in general, will hopefully activate discussion about the dubious future of the experiment.

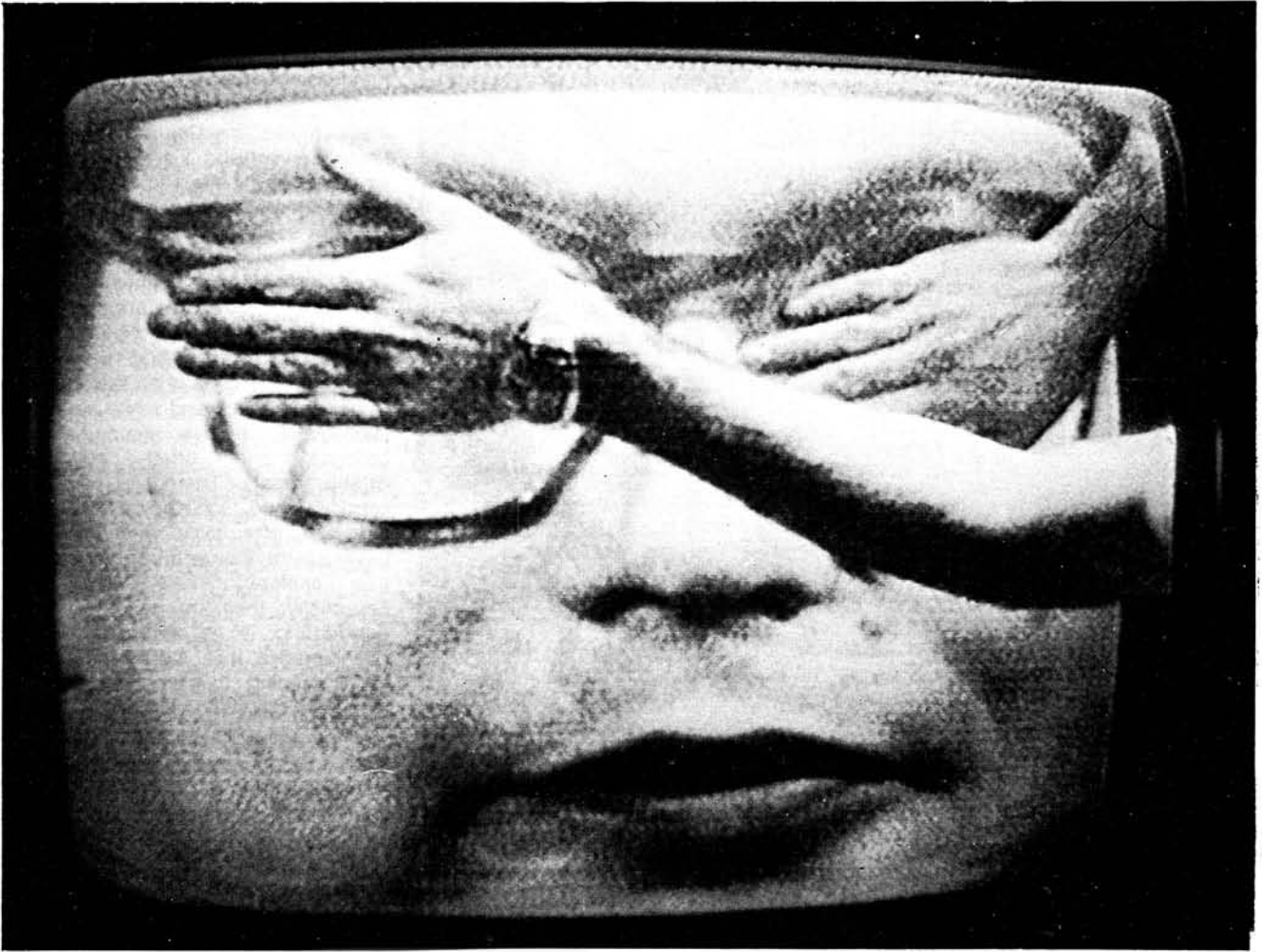
Independent British groups such as the Centre for Advanced Television Studies (CATS) and InterAction have important material in the show, along with tapes from the Hammersmith Project and the five 'experimental' community projects linked to Cable TV distribution. There is also a substantial representation of these areas from other countries, notably work from the Alternate Media Centre, New York; Top Value Television, San Francisco; 'Works', Canada; 'Slon', France and the Telewissen Gruppe from Germany.

Video artists, by inference, are ^{equally} aware of the potential of the Popular Medium. Such work takes on two forms, though the two often overlap. One is the production of video tapes, the other live performances and closed circuit installations.

To those still unacquainted with these explorations of the process, a brief attempt at some of the distinctions between video and film may be useful.

Initially, it might appear that the difference is no more than a choice of presentation medium. But the differences are significant and often quite subtle. It would be reasonable to argue that much video tape recording is done as a facsimile of film. This is understandable when one considers the historical pressures on such a comparatively new medium, much in the same way as film suffered in its turn from the classic theatrical influence.

But the argument of substitution is only relevant when the procedure is



Test No. 1
Video Tape by Michael Druks

conducted as though it were film. The fact that it is capable of recording an image is as obviously inherent in video as it is in film. It is the attitude towards process and structure which has to be considerably different. The most apparent difference is the comparative presentation systems. Film traditionally has an instant dynamic, the screen is large and consuming, and the audience is encapsulated in darkness, immersed in the isolated spectacle. Viewing a TV receiver, one is looking at a picture-box, a piece of furniture, the Telly, something we have at least got manual control over, if not the content. It is an object which exists in the same continuum as ourselves. We can become involved in it but never lost in it (have you ever watched the same epic on the Telly?).

However obscure the electronic functions, the manageable proportions of the video apparatus accommodates itself in our own reality. It has a low key everyday quality, which dispenses with High Art élitism. As David Ross writes:

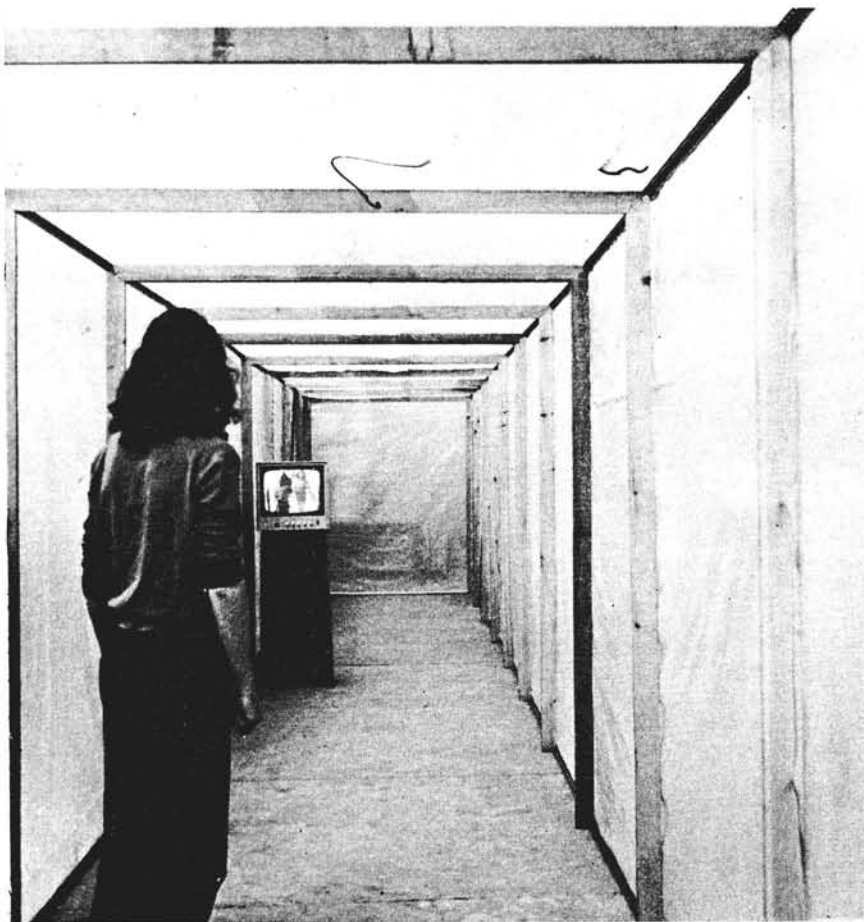
"Without a doubt video art tends to blur the distinctions between art and reality, and even proposes the two are the same, or should be. Artists working in the medium are exploring the perceptual and conceptual implications of the process in a manner that is specifically directed both towards the breaking down of the specialised and categorical nature of art experience and to the creation of a holistic view of art activity as a generalised case of human communication".*

Two basic functional aspects in tape-making which are analogous to film work yet differ considerably are (a) the nature of magnetic tape and (b) the camera. It is the fact that a video signal is transferred as an invisible stream along the length of the tape, compared to being a series of very apparent separate frames, which precludes the process conscious tape-maker from considering it in segmented plastic terms. It can only be regarded in *total* as a plastic equivalent to its duration. This essential difference is one which as yet only a few video tape makers have recognised, many still aping the film convention and often using electronic or crude manual edits. One cannot

therefore consider tape as a series of separate instants, only as flow, which also relates to the camera's function.

A video camera receives information through the lens which is focused on to a retina — the signal plate, much in the same way as it is on to the film emulsion in a cine camera. But there the similarity ends. In cine 'snatches' of light are flashed directly on to each 'frame' of film as it is separately exposed in the gate, in video there is a continuous flow of light on to the photoconductive signal plate which is scanned and transposed to the tape. Because of this continuous flow, the process is directly related to the real-time continuum. Concerns with real-time and temporal juxtapositions are ones which can perhaps be most effectively explored in video. The developing involvement with the medium has a historical rationality when considering recent moves from object orientated art to 'process' art where time-span becomes an intrinsic 'substance'.

Important video performance/installation work is being done by artists most interested in exploring and extending temporal, perceptual and behavioural relationships. These often involve the



Corridor Installation
Roger Barnard

audience as both spectator and subject. Some of them utilise tape-recording as part of the immediate process, i.e. tapes are recorded and replayed at the time of the event. In film, similar 'expanded cinema' events often involve live performances by the film maker, and/or audience, related directly to the screened material. However, I often find the validity of this questionable as the present-time action is substantially integrated with *indeterminate* past-time decision making (and the film has necessarily been pre-recorded, due to the technical process, usually some considerable time in the past) which confuses any implied temporal objectives. Only on the rare occasions when past and present-time relativity is inherent to the piece, and this has been carefully considered, are such events convincing. By comparison, some of the better video performance/installation artists are exploring the built-in capability of 'same-time' occurrence in their works. In video, present and immediate past-time sequences can be interrelated, even overlapped. Behaviour patterns can be replayed in seconds, and most unique of all,

participants can relate to their same-time image. They are intrinsically functional to the piece and become literally part of the work; viewer is simultaneously the viewed in a process of self-referring consciousness.

Compared to North America, and even the rest of Europe, video work in Britain has developed at a much slower pace. Little work by British video artists has been seen before in this country, and virtually none abroad. For a period the late Gerry Schum, of Dusseldorf, did some invaluable work acting as a catalyst in encouraging the translation of ideas into video tape by artists working in other fields. His 'Identifications' exhibition was held at the Hayward Gallery in 1973, and there is a selection of his works in the present show.

Some of the tapes produced were in association with a handful of British artists, and I have often wondered why these people never pursued the medium further (certainly one or two of the Americans have). I would suspect that none of them were potential video makers as they were never fully involved in the *process* themselves. They simply used it to document other concerns, with the help of Schum's expertise. This is not to say that the concerns bore no relation to the process, often they

did, but usually in a peripheral manner. In the main it was essentially regarded as a convenient recording mechanism for ideas not otherwise realised.

The major problems for the video artist in this country are the lack of financial support and access to equipment. In America, equipment is proportionately cheaper by half, access to more sophisticated hardware seems comparatively abundant (judging by the large turn-out of synthesised colour 'videography'), and support from private and public organisations seems to be there for the taking. Most of the British tapes are made on the scattering of half-inch black and white equipment available in a few sympathetic art colleges and other educational establishments. There are many more schools and colleges with such hardware, often far more sophisticated, but it seems their attitude towards any true explorations is very limited. Essentially, they are geared to either considering it as an 'Audio Visual Teaching Aid' (keeping TV in its place), or to feeding the broadcast industry with its traditional requirements.

Many art colleges still suffer from these misconceptions, and this should change. The amount of interest in the process as a potential art form is rapidly growing, as it has done in film. Encouragement and support must come from the hierarchies, by the CNAA recognising both media as an established field of 'study' and local governments and principals making a concerted effort to support it. Facilities outside these institutions are rare. An exception is the Arts Council's Film Department which has acquired a small amount of half-inch equipment for artists' use, and who consider applications for financial assistance in video on an equal par with film.

Now back to the Video Show, its layout and participants. Philips have generously loaned the major part of the tape playback equipment. All video tapes (except those from North America which has its own system) have been transferred to Philips half-inch cassettes and American work is on Sony three-quarter inch cassette. There are three potential viewing situations, a major viewing area in which the entire programme of tapes is running continuously; an area in which 'compilation' tapes composed of a selection of the full programme are shown (these consist either of short complete works, or excerpts by agreement with the tape maker); and a 'library' section where a visitor can personally select and view tapes at any time. Installations and performances are being staged concurrent with the tape showings in two separate rooms, one of

which has an Eidophor TV projector (see programme notes for daily or weekly changeovers).

The tapes from North America are loosely in two categories, those which are popularly defined as synthesised colour videographics, and the rest. Woody and Steina Vasulka, Ed Emschwiller, Tom Dewitt and William Gwin all have tapes produced with the increasingly sophisticated image generating, editing and colorizing devices that have grown out of the attempt to build on the initial feedback experience. I often react to this type of work as over-indulgence with electronic contrivances but Gwin's 'Irving Bridge' is a particularly subtle and beautiful piece in this genre.

Dan Graham, the installation artist who would certainly have been invited in this capacity had the section been open to other countries, is showing his tape 'Past Future Split Attention'. This is a behavioural 'effect and cause' piece involving two people's temporal relationship. 'One person predicts continuously the other person's future behaviour; while the other recalls (by memory) his opposite's past behaviour . . . ' Richard Serra's 'Boomerang', which is a little too obvious, examines a woman attempting to interact with her own immediately delayed voice, and his 'Television Delivers People' is a roll-up caption board spelling out the one-sided relationship of consumer and broadcaster. 'Vertical Roll' by Joan Jonas has the essentials of a truly 'video-processed' piece, and 'Both' by the lesser known Jim Byrne is a superb piece of coordination between himself and a pre-recorded image of himself. Dieter Froese, who has done important work on New York's Sterling Manhattan cable station, should not be missed, and Paul Sharits, to my mind one of the most important avant-garde film-makers, has recently been working with video tape and it is hoped to have some of his work in the show.

From Canada there is among others, Eric Cameron's 'Contact Piece - Nude Model' in which the camera action is in constant contact with, and determines the contours of, a female nude relating directly to his analogy of the 'lens as a sensuous penis'.

The younger Doug Waterman interests me from what I hear of his earlier work with static electricity contacted 'physically' on to the tape.

Interesting works from Europe come from Valie Export, Peter Weibel, Kit Colloway, Alberto Pirrelli, René Bauermeister, Wolf Vostell and Claus Böhmler.

The Swiss Bauermeister attacks the inside of the monitor screen with everything from his hands to a sledge



hammer as an identification of the object's physicality in his earlier 'Support - Surface', and in his 'Transvideo' the time-phased layered action is the most achieved, yet simply structured, work of this kind I have seen on tape. I am not however, too convinced by the particular use of imagery.

Austrian Peter Weibel, another notable 'live' video performer, is showing his compilation tape 'Is it Art?' most of which was made in association with Austrian Television for network transmission. In one well remembered section he gets a very straight newscaster to smoke so heavily on a cigar that it finally obliterates his precious image. Maybe it's not Art, but it certainly stimulates reaction to soporific viewing. Though I am not precisely sure what Valie Export is showing here, I saw some very interesting space/time definition pieces of hers at Knokke in January.

Finally in the foreign participants, Taka Iimura the Japanese film-maker also shows tapes of a particularly definitive nature, and Nam June Paik the father figure of video art deserves special attention.

At the time of writing, six weeks before the opening of the show, it is difficult to appraise the British entrants' work as so little has been seen yet. This is principally because (a) virtually no selection was involved, and (b) most of it is very new. However, I have presented it partly as a selection of artists own statements, and based the rest on similar information plus my own comments where work has been seen.

David Critchley is showing a number of tapes, and an event titled 'Yet Another Triangle': "My experience of video is limited . . . a camera, a recorder, a monitor, a studio and my manipulative intervention are the only ingredients. Some things I would stress about this situation are: 1. Video has immediate interaction in a live situation - the monitor mirroring the camera's view which in feeding back to an operator may alter that viewing area, and so on. 2. The system can impose time (length of tape) and space (camera

From Clive Richardson's Videotape 'Sketches'

view) restrictions on actions or tasks. 3. The closed system is openly accessible to alteration because an operator is part of that system. 4. The operator, by being in shot, completes both a visual and a conceptual circuit. 5. Any tape document for showing at a later time has at one time been part of a loop situation and as such can re-create that situation more effectively than any 'outside', voyeuristic document of an action. The recording means records itself etc. With these points in mind, complex combinations of form can be built up by altering the shape of the unit or adding similar units to it, and portable equipment gives scope for movement. I was concerned with the choreography of such an arrangement in 'Yet Another Triangle'.

Brian Hoey has recently left the Experimental Department at the Slade, and he is staging what he calls a 'Videvent' in the installations section: "For a system in which the spectator is participating with aspects of his own appearance or behaviour the most suitable medium appeared to be video, as it provides the basis for a real-time relation of events coupled with the ability to modify images in a fluid, organic manner". Practical possibilities include the manipulation of the participant in time, he may be seeing himself in the past with his actions over a period of time built up as a composite picture. Another possibility is the manipulation of the appearance of his image or an electronic abstraction of his image into quite a different form. As he moves so might an abstract pattern change in sympathy with his actions. The participant may be presented with an aspect of his behaviour heretofore unseen by him and, hopefully, encourage a greater awareness of the relationship between him and his environment."

Mike Leggett, who has done a substantial amount of work with video over recent years, is showing three tapes plus an installation entitled

'Outside the Grounds of Obscenity and Inside the Grounds of Hyde Park'. He predicts the installation "... will be making an on-going comparison between the Park as experienced before entering the Gallery, as seen through the glass of the windows and as seen through the medium of video and sound ... Essentially the event is low-key, on-going, demanding concentration of perceptive facilities and is broken into specific time periods during which emphasis of presentation is changed in the way conditions in the park may change according to the weather, number of people, time of the year, time of the day". Tony Rayns, reporting on an earlier video event, says Leggett "... arrived at the analogue of a mirror in his video work; the implication is perhaps that since video recording and playback processes are self-contained in a way that films are not, it is feasible to use video as an agent for self-confrontation, direct communication or political action without the fundamental ambiguities that underline such uses of film."

Stuart Pound, the film-maker, is showing his tape 'Nemo Omen', and wrote the following statement: "Major concern: To attempt to do in video that which is impossible or impracticable using film. This establishes a separate non-interchangeable role for video versus film. As video is the product of electronic technology it shares a number of characteristics with computers and other electronic control systems. The light display on the monitor can be considered as a grid composed of individual elements each with its own relationship in time. Each can be programmed with suitable interface equipment to perform a considerable number of interesting

functions using a vast range of subjectively chosen parameters. I do not wish to confuse this with what has already been well covered in computer animated film. Parameters of interest could be isolated, experimenting with various optimising processes which could then be modified to suit the video maker".

June Marsh, Mary Sheridan and John Gray as the Videoart Group, perform a videodance piece called "Dance Inside" on three separate occasions. This attempts to integrate dance and medium as a single choreography. "Videodance is concerned with the paradox of process and performance. Video allows extension back into time to produce interaction with the present. The cameraman sees the dancer, then the image of the dancer's reaction to that image. The process is dynamic and continuous; an open-ended situation where the technology and movement develop simultaneously, where the dancer is the cameraman, is the technician, is the choreographer ... " The process is extended further with the perception of the observer who selects from the images and reality before him. "The piece 'Dance Inside' is a 'live installation', a continuum, an extension to work which has as starting points, birds, a kimono, duet and spirals."

Stuart Marshall currently working in Newcastle, is presenting a number of live events. "Recently I have become very interested in video tape as an extension of the possibilities of audio tape. It is after all a magnetic tape system with an extremely large band width. This does not necessarily mean that I am now involved with the iconic for above all things video is a means of producing powerful imagery. If film illustrates and is iconic then video

translates and is narrative. Film is syntactically rich but video is the domain of powerful semantics. Being a communicational medium which is biased towards the analogue it follows the contours of the perceived life-world rather than articulates and structures it. Film has the power of negation (which is a syntactic function), video can only refuse."

Those quotes can only hint at some of the aims and attitudes of British video artists, yet it is interesting to note a number of common factors emerging in a comparatively new situation (for most) where, as yet, there has been so little dialogue.

Other participants include Clive Richardson who is showing a compilation tape entitled 'Sketches'. I have seen some of this work, which is principally concerned with re-defining the illusion by a reorientation of relative images and time scales: "... Artist inflates balloon, camera zooms out proportionately keeping circular image a constant size giving illusion of artist blowing himself smaller". These controlled but simply executed works have no pretensions. They are primary examinations of the medium's perceptual ambiguities. From what Dermot Thomas writes about his 'Test Card Piece' I would assume he has similar concerns. But the multiple regeneration and subsequent disintegration of the familiar transmission symbol also suggest a reappraisal of all that it stands for, as well as attempting to identify the medium in concrete terms. He says it is: "... a gradual alienation of subject, and triumphant of process into object".

Darcy Lange, a New Zealander who has worked mainly in this country, is showing extracts from a large body of material already seen here. His work appears as socially-orientated documentary, but his handling involves a unique, insistent scrutiny which sets it quite apart from the conventional distortions of, say, social drudgery. The work is a precise and unadulterated analogue, which presses the viewer into an acute state of real-time awareness.

This recognition of video tape's potential is something which, in a totally different way, Ron Carr manifests in one of his dry humoured works, 'Suburban Showdown'. In it, he juxtaposes images of everyday domestic paraphernalia with the sound track of a TV Western. This combination, and the minimal handling of any significant action, takes a wry look at both consumer fodder, and the obscurity of some recent art. Steve Partridge, a final year student at Maidstone Art College, is showing a number of tapes which span from early explorations of perceptual



Nemo Omen. Videotape by Stuart Pound

referring

ambiguities such as 'Crosspoints', to the more recent self-rehearsing pieces like 'Snowscale'. In the latest works he has attempted to integrate basic process-generated images and functions into an autonomous 'video experience' (which should not be confused with often highly emotive and illusionistic synthesized work).

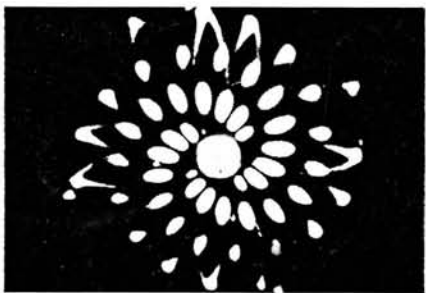
I shall be interested to see Liz Rhodes's tapes after seeing some impressive film-work by her recently. But from what she says about it, I am a little dubious as to how such disparate processes (film on to tape) can meaningfully function as one. Tony Sinden, best known for his work in film, has only very recently started to use video tape and is showing 'Rotatory Plaything'. He is also appearing in his own performance-event 'Vacuum', and collaborating with me on an installation called (and literally involving) '101 TV Sets'. This is a modified and expanded development of a similar piece we installed in the 'Survey of the Avant-Garde' show at Gallery House in 1972.

In a description of his tapes 'Performances' and 'Faces', Lee Noble discusses his specific interest in the ability to interact with oneself and to build and re-adjust on an endless instant feedback and layering system. Group Identity appear to have similar concerns in their tape 'G.I. Views'. By constantly interchanging roles as recordist and performer, and by juxtaposing separate visual and audio 'portraits', they suggest a complex structure of interlaced identities ultimately fused as one.

Roger Barnard has adapted an original 'Corridor' installation idea where "the passage of people along the corridor was monitored and simultaneously video-taped. The tape was then played back and the corridor



Top: 'First Conversation'
Participation Videotape
Bill Lundberg.
'Mandala' Videotape
Paul Brown & Mick Trim



monitored at the same time on the same screen".

Trevor Pollard is showing a 'Live/Delay' installation in which he describes the viewer as "... being the subject of changes to his own present in relation to his past and future". Tamara Krikorian, who has done a lot of valuable work encouraging the development of video in Scotland through the Scottish Arts Council, is

showing her installation 'Breeze'. Rolande Thomas, Peter Mitchelson and friends will be presenting a 'Set Piece for One Performer', and Sue Braden's 'Three Views from The Park' is a piece linking the grounds and gallery. Mike Dunford is doing a 'Blind Circuit' event; there's a promising installation by Pete Livingstone; Dirk Larsen's event; and Bill Lundberg is showing his tape "First Conversation" in a performance slot where it is intended to be watched whilst reading the text.

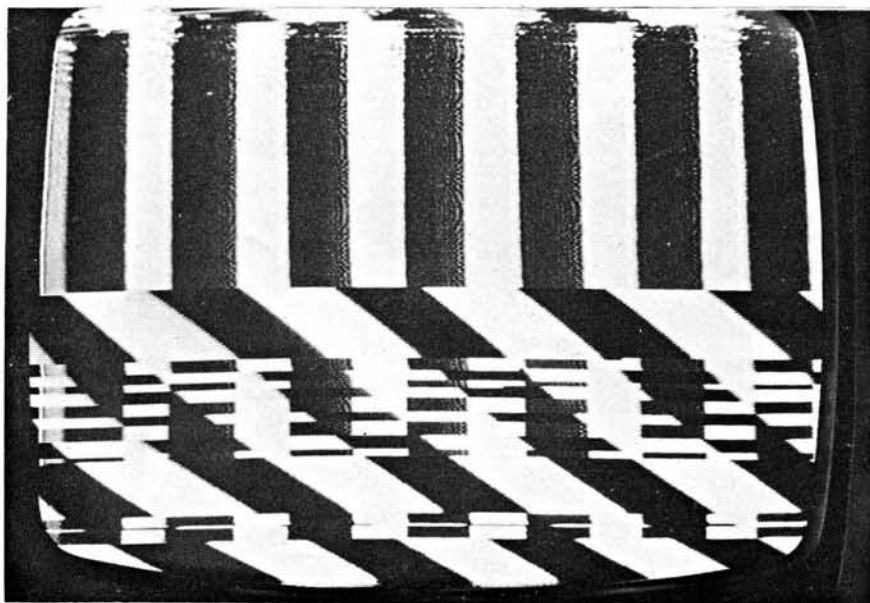
Perhaps I should not end without a word or two on my own work. I am showing two tapes; 'This is a Video Monitor' and 'Aspects' which is a compilation in three parts, 'Relative Surfaces', 'Vidicon Inscriptions' and 'Dieffenbachia Roll'. Also, apart from the collaborative piece mentioned earlier, I am showing my own installation 'Progressive Recession'. 'This is a Video Monitor' structured on an initial image of a woman miming a description of the perceived functions of the receiver, and is regenerated through a number of stages, each time identifying and re-identifying facets of her recurring statement.

'Aspects' is an exploration of some of the inherent properties in video. 'Vidicon Inscriptions', for instance, involves a unique characteristic of the signal plate (in the camera's vidicon tube) to trace and retain each transient movement, i.e. light path, encapsulating the passage of time as a single image.

'Progressive Recession' (on during the first six days only) is the realisation of one of a series of projected installations which I have been working on during the past two years. It utilises a number of live cameras and monitors, and primarily involves the viewer in an experience of spatial discordance when attempting to correlate his movement and that of his same-time image (no recording equipment is used).

Finally, I should mention that there are many more British tapes to be seen, among them is work by Paul Brown, Paul Wombell, Michael Upton, Steve James, Peter Donebauer, Michael Druks and Ian Breakwell.

*David Ross, introduction to Art + Cinema, Vol 1, No 2 1973.



Untitled Videotape
Liz Rhodes