

LONDON VIDEO ARTS, BRITAIN AND THE EUROPEAN SCENE

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The discussion tonight is intended to hinge specifically around video distribution, and I have been asked to say something about the position of London Video Arts, but first I ~~would~~ like to make some brief observations on British art exposure in general since the situation in any country puts a perspective on the problems, triumphs and failures of each of its constituent activities. Also it will be useful to remember that I am first ~~and foremost~~ an artist, and as you will see it has largely been out of necessity that I have found myself, together with a number of others, in the position of promoter, distributor and even exhibition organiser as well.

In recent years it is ^{obvious} quite clear that the economic climate in Britain is seriously ^{to some extent} affecting private, and public patronage. This is especially noticeable in a country where in any case public support for the theatre and music has ^{generally} ~~always~~ ^{grossly} ~~weighed~~ ^{-weighed} ~~outward~~ interest in the visual arts. And a third factor should also be acknowledged (related to its exposure abroad), and one which I shall dwell on for a moment. That's ~~is~~ geography, and a surprising lack of communication. I am referring to the rather obvious ^{fact} that Britain is a set of islands, and whilst it is the case that we are part of Europe, that ^{narrow strip} ~~tiny~~ stretch of water between us and the rest presents a significant problem in personal communication, at least in the art world. On the other side of the Channel, artists, promoters and exhibition organisers move overland around the European Continent with

comparative ease. With the development of a network of autoroutes, bahns and stradas the cultural life is, despite language differences, becoming rapidly accessible. It is, for instance possible to be at an opening in Belgium, Holland or Northern Germany within two or three hours out of Paris and vice versa ~~and~~ quite cheaply. ^(I was going to ask) Whether or not my colleagues from there agree this is providing a context for a single European 'identity' in terms of artistic activity and interchange ~~might be something they can answer~~. ^{could} But it is fairly evident that Britain has too small a part in what might be termed the European artistic community (and it is certainly not for lack of quality or quantity of work, there is and always has been a very intelligent and productive art scene). Of course the physical element is not much of an argument for this state of affairs, it is I believe more that artists and their supporters feel somewhat psychologically distanced (in both directions) by that narrow strip of water. It is an historical barrier which is hard to shake off. ~~in video. As there are not, and never have been, any~~

~~the British connection with~~
By comparison, ~~exposure of British work in~~ North America and vice versa has a real problem in physical distance, though this has proved only minimal in the west ^{to} east flow. Aside from greater financial back-up in terms of direct promotional aid, American artists (certainly in the States) have the added advantage of a substantial amount of indirect communication crossing the Atlantic. The production of a multitude of magazines, journals and other publications in North America (and also on the European Continent to a lesser degree) provides ready and regular reference to activities outside of Britain. Inside Britain such coverage is limited, (especially since ~~since~~ the virtual collapse of our only international product Studio International)

to a small internally orientated circulation of one or two informative journals, ^{which} ~~who~~ in any case show little interest in such 'alternative' media as video.

I am not intending to paint a dismal picture of art life in Britain, which as I have already said is extremely active, but to illuminate on a comparatively difficult context in which video artists work. A context in which an artist choosing such a medium not only encounters the inevitable problems that others must elsewhere, but where all activity noticeably functions in a somewhat isolated situation coupled with considerable financial restriction.

However, there is a degree of optimism there which equals that observed anywhere else. In fact, as I have implied, the nature of the situation is one which demands possibly greater self-propulsion by the artists themselves than most other places, certainly in video. As there are not, and never have been, any private galleries or institutions to speak of that have shown more than a token interest in video, and as public galleries tend on the whole to wait for the qualitative speculation of the private sector to realise, the incentive ^{so far} has come almost entirely from the practitioners to promote as well as to execute the work.

Britain now has nearly a ten year history of artists' video production. Throughout that time there has been a number of significant shows held there. Almost without exception each one was either initiated, if not totally organised, by an artist. Tape distribution until recently was handled directly, with all the problems that entails for the artist concerned.

Access to foreign works was impossible other than catching them briefly at a show.

But There has been, over the years, various attempts^p in Europe to initiate systems for greater accessibility to tapes and also distribution. It is, of course, very necessary as among other things, gallery exhibition is by no means a satisfactory method of exposure. Where it has always been possible to view paintings and other objects in an exhibition context (because it is traditionally accepted as the right context, and because the time devoted to each piece is entirely in the control of the viewer), video, certainly videotape, is out of context psychologically, due to the traditional expectations imposed on it by dominant TV - demanding comparatively intimate viewing, and practically, due to the difficulties of successfully exhibiting this time-based medium (especially in large group shows) where each piece necessarily demands a time control on the viewer.

Attempts in Belgium in early 76 by two assistant directors of a cultural centre to remedy the lack of international distribution in Europe by organising a European link failed through a sudden and mysterious change in their personal circumstances, though approaches to galleries, institutions and artists had been encouraging. Similarly discussions between artists and representatives of various organisations held at a symposium such as this ^{one} in Holland in early 77 proved equally positive but little developed beyond it.

And this has been the pattern in Europe since the advent of artists' video. Pockets of ^{Promisingly} activity regularly rise and fall. *briefly appear and disappear*

Numerous conferences and symposia have been held, informal meetings and discussions have taken place, and invariably the problems of distribution have arisen. Yet little has been resolved *that approaches an open ^{distribution} network.*

At this point it is worth considering the model of the film co-operatives. They emerged earlier in a situation not unlike the one we now have in European video. Many galleries and other institutions were slow to recognise that independent film-making formed a significant part of the artistic endeavour. Equally film distributors, private and public, failed to accept that the work was more than an amateurish and passing phase (one has heard similar murmurs in art circles about video, as though it were a 'movement' rather than a means). But due to a great deal of incentive from the film-makers themselves, co-ops in London, New York and elsewhere established not only an international network for distribution and shows, but inaugurated an international platform for critical and theoretical discourse. Since then their sceptics have (certainly in Britain) adjusted their views, discuss, even acclaim the work, and now provide substantial support and funding. The co-ops are still not without their problems of course, and I am not implying that everything about their procedural conduct should apply to video. However, the basic principle is not one to be ignored.

This has of course already been taken up by community-video people, *if it is wise to separate them out* though it would seem their needs are somewhat different. Their work *is* usually integrated into a cycle of

social *our terminology differs*

events and recordings are not often considered as the ultimate goal. They are part of a 'process' of collective involvement where tapes may rarely have significance outside their place of origin and are comparatively self-sufficient from the need for separate viewing and distribution (this appears to be the case in Britain, though it may be a point of contention here).

Having set the scene in Britain, and hinted at the European situation as I see it, I must now say something specific about London Video Arts which grew in that context. Modelled loosely on the co-op format, it was born out of discussion between myself and six or seven other British video artists, who formed as a steering committee in late 1976. The purpose was to establish a non-profit organisation to promote, show and distribute independently made artists' video. More particularly, the idea was to set up a workshop to facilitate tape production and experimentation with installations and performances; to provide a regular venue for showing these works and works produced elsewhere, including abroad; to create a tape library and distribution system which would include international as well as home products; and, perhaps most important in the long term, to stimulate dialogue on current practical and theoretical issues.

Needless to say, lack of funding was and still is our stumbling block. The history of our attempts is already, after less than three years, extremely lengthy and too tedious to relate in detail. Suffice it to say that public funding bodies have been the only recourse, and they have been slow (or arguably cautious in what is often considered as the classic

British manner). Despite the example of the success of the film co-operatives, it seems video has to go through the same struggle for an equivalent length of time to attain sufficient credibility. This is surprising when evidence of the status of much of the work has been established for some time (unlike the co-ops when they first began); when models for promotion and distribution have been established elsewhere, as they have over here; and when most of our approaches are made to the very same bodies who now amply support independent film. Maybe one of the reasons for this is just that their interest is still primarily with film.

However, London Video Arts persisted in the recognition that the initial all-out plan had to be phased over a much longer period than ~~was~~ anticipated. Applications to finance the whole project were rejected and so we concentrated our efforts first on establishing an international tape library and on producing a catalogue. Following this we were offered a space in a public funded gallery to commence promotional shows one evening a week starting last ^{year} ~~October~~. Having by this time received just enough finance for catalogue printing and the allocation of one playback system from the Arts Council we were, after two years, in business. In the last three months we have set up an administrative office, and distribution has begun in ^a earnest. Through all this time administration, collation of catalogue material and layout, organisation of shows, and so on, has been performed by the artist^s steering committee in their spare time.

Whilst this situation could continue indefinitely, the signs are that it will most likely improve. Through the realisation of our efforts so far; response to the invitation to have works

included in the library by artists; response by prospective tape hirers; and response by a large audience attending the promotional shows, ^{Arts Council of GB is} ~~the funding bodies~~ are currently holding, for the first time, serious discussions on substantial budgets before them for administrative aid, equipment and etc.

Artist-run organisations have their obvious pitfalls. An overtly partisan attitude can often go against the diplomatic strategies necessary in developing the empathy of their patrons and peers alike. Artists, by nature of their vocation, are often well equipped to illuminate on their personal objectives and needs, but for them to sustain a common collective endeavour with the minimum compromise can be quite an internal battle. It would be misleading to suggest London Video Arts does not encounter these difficulties, which from time to time it does, and they are as real as those it finds outside.

Through all this LVA has, I would maintain, sown the seed of a unique procedure for art video exposure in Europe. It has begun to develop a library of works which is, by and large, purposely non-selective. To quote our first catalogue: 'This catalogue represents a large cross section of artists' work in videotape, video performance and video installations from the UK and abroad. As such it is the first of its kind in Europe. Anyone working experimentally and anyone documenting artworks in the medium is eligible for inclusion in the library'. However communications being what they are, there are bound to be limitations, and we go on to state: 'The catalogue does not pretend to fully represent the diverse range of artists' video. The artists in it are those who were known to be working with video by the members of the present committee at the time of

compilation and inevitably there have been omissions'. I would add to that there were omissions by people who we approached but felt they could not take part for personal reasons, or most often because they were limited by specific contracts with other organisations or galleries. This last point is perhaps in itself a subject for discussion. LVA was not set up as another competitive dealer in the art market. It is non-profit and is prepared to ^{act} as direct agent for artists, or mediator for other organisations alike. It is simply out to create a better means of accessibility. Selection is made at the hiring or purchasing stage by the customer. The protective, ~~isolated~~, and often elitist attitude adopted by many distributors at present precludes any true appraisal of the state of the art as an international activity. Whilst, for obvious reasons, it will be virtually impossible to make much change in the private sector, I believe that public and publicly funded interests could do much to improve and extend accessibility and interchange. A network based on such a liason is something we ^{should} could certainly discuss here.

Finally, and briefly, LVA's catalogue is offered to anyone interested in hiring or purchasing tapes, showing installations or staging performances. On tapes our main source of feedback is coming from colleges and universities, where not only lecturers use them in class, but where more and more playback facilities are appearing in libraries. The market for home systems is also taking a firm hold in Britain, and one can conceive of that as a possible outlet in the not too distant future. Exhibition organisers are using the catalogue as a useful textbook to the activity as well as a listing since it includes lengthy statements by each artist.

Copyright remains with the artist and ^{is} monitored by us. Broadcast

OK, and
a word
on
Broadcast

outlets are minimal in Britain. We have only three air channels and about the same on cable. The BBC control two of the first. The competitive element between them and the third which is commercial is staked on fighting for the highest audience ratings, this, coupled with the belief that technical excellence is at a premium (above all else) and dominated by over-cautious and powerful unions, leaves little room for the risky business of entering into 'experimental' broadcasts. Occasionally a renegade producer has shown video art, but it is soon forgotten as a freakish phenomenon. And the cable stations, which are based in country towns, are very much ^{local} community projects struggling to survive on heavy subsidies. The concept of TV as art as not occurred to them, despite numerous efforts. But we are working on it.....