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THE NEED FOR A MAJOR INTERNATIONAL HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL SURVEY OF VIDEO ART

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This paper is a first draft introduction to the proposal for a major retrospective in Britain of developments in video art.

Video art is undoubtedly the newest artform to emerge with the advent of low gauge technology and its availability on the open market only fifteen years ago. It was heralded some time before then by such events as Wolf Vostell's 'Ereignisse für Millionen' (1959, using TV receivers) and the first experiments (again with TVs) by Nam June Paik in 1963: 'Exposition of Music - Electronic Television' and 'Zen for TV' etc. Both artists were involved with Fluxus. Since that time there has been an abundance of work produced, initiated in the USA in 1965 with the first low gauge machines and followed almost simultaneously in Europe with their introduction here.

Throughout the world there has been a limited number of major artists' video exhibitions, yet in virtually every case little attempt was made to establish a historical or critical appraisal of the state of the art. Either they have been the result of rather idiosyncratic preferences on the part of a single selector (eg Documenta 6, Kassel 1977) - though from time to time very good work has appeared in these shows but without the appropriate critical setting - or they have been a hoch-poch of all manner of independent work with no apparent link save the technological one which simply results in an overdose and confusion for the visitor (eg The Video Show, Serpentine 1975). Occasional thematic shows have been more critical in their specificity but have provided little historical context. During the period there has also been innumerable one-person shows, and small group shows, which either do not attempt or cannot possibly hope to clarify a historical framework.

Britain for its part has made no attempt so far to acknowledge the need for any kind of serious appraisal of this work. The shows that have occurred here have all been comparatively limited in scale, and have in most cases been largely initiated

and organised, with difficulty, by the artists themselves. Critical debate, whether verbal or literary, has come almost entirely from the artists as well. This is in no way a bad thing and is to some extent inevitable in the early stages, but I believe the time has come to extend critical attention beyond the limits of self-appraisal in this country.

It is timely now to mount a major exhibition, and it should specifically be one which primarily traces the development of artists' concerns, and not one of technological innovation which all too often shows have cashed in on as a public draw. The recent introduction of video-home-systems has both escalated public awareness of the medium's existence, and in some part demystified early adolescent fascination. For this reason it is doubly timely to have this alternative and specific use made public in preference to yet another trade fair. I believe such timing would give the show added credibility discounting, of course, some inevitable reactionary response.

I have quite purposefully used the term Video Art, and consider it a specific category within the much looser context of Artists' Video or Use of Video by Artists. If the show were to attempt to include all manner of video by artists it would be an impractical proposition and it would be impossible to establish any critical base. Video Art has, unfortunately, been used all too often in the past as a label for work and shows which often include the most peripheral encounters with the technology. I have, over recent years, attempted to establish a more specific definition to the title in various writings. This has met with obvious disapproval from those with fringe interests and sometimes with reservation by those working much closer to the medium. Nevertheless in proposing such an exhibition it is imperative that the line is drawn somewhere, and not in an arbitrary manner. One of my articles 'Using Video and Video Art: Some Notes' (Video 78 catalogue intro. and Aspects magazine, winter 1978/9) gets closest, I would maintain, to specifying the framework. One or two quotes may be appropriate here:

'..In fact, whereas the plastic arts, hotly pursued by film, have undergone...a scrutiny of their roles as 'media'(fore-fronting critical analyses of the established conventions towards, primarily, the integration of form and content as an

autonomous whole), the surprise is that only a comparatively small number of artists working with video have emerged with this as a criterion. Acceptance of it as a secondary medium - a convenient recording and/or presentation system for ideas otherwise realised - is an attitude adopted by many more. And perhaps most dominant of all...are those who flirt with both, neither committed to the first nor admitting to the second. Justifications for the latter suggest that video is the only medium for its realisation, yet...take little account of the powerful extraneous connotations that inevitably occur.'

'...Too often enthusiastic writers have mistakenly constructed notions of a related endeavour on the presumption that simply the use of the technology presents a common factor of some ideological, conceptual or aesthetic significance.'

'...it is only in recent years that more critical objectives have emerged to identify Video Art, though nevertheless pockets of activity have been going on since the beginning.'

'...Firstly, a number of artists...recognise the need to integrate the actual properties as an intrinsic condition of the work, notably those peculiar to the functions (and mal-functions) of the constituent hardware - camera, recorder and monitor - and the artist's accountability to them... Equally, some have considered that the video product, manifest 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 (perhaps) as an unfortunate discrepancy of the technology, rather than acknowledge it as an intrinsic state of the video matrix, already suggests a polarity between art work using video, and that which constitutes Video Art.

Secondly, the most evident response to the initial encounter with the technology is its intrinsic capacity for instant image feedback. An abundance of work has been produced based on this, and it would seem to be the origin of some of the most important video art so far....

Thirdly, a proliferation of work has also emerged from the adoption of the triangular feedback configuration. Camera looks at artist or participant looking at the monitor image of him/herself fed live from the camera - an analogical mirror - a mode for behaviour reflex. Many tapes, live closed circuit installations and performances have involved this, and various permutations. It has been explored to the most profound advantage as a system to elucidate systems of space/time triangulation where the viewer (ie in installations) is simultaneously the viewed in a process of self-referring consciousness...

Finally, there is work which appropriates and simultaneously juxtaposes familiar narrative devices with alternative codes as a means to re/determine the semiological function of the televisual phenomenon. While this has been an ongoing practice throughout, it is only quite recently that an overtly conscious and critical approach has come to the fore through the work itself....'

'...It can be summarised then that Video Art is video as the artwork - the parameters deriving from the characteristics of the medium itself, rather than art work using video - which adopts a device for an already defined content. By characteristics I mean those particular attributes specific to both its technology and the reading of it as a phenomenon. Video as art largely seeks

to explore perceptual and conceptual thresholds, and implicit in it is the decoding and consequent expansion of the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television.'

Without a doubt it is difficult and indeed dangerous to hone down the framework too specifically, and there is the need for considerable debate as to the show's constitution with contributions from here and abroad. I would however consider it important to establish a reasonably clear concept of the show's objectives well in advance, and would suggest my notes above (ie a modification of them) be used as a starting point.

The three principal components for inclusion

Installation works have been a major element since 'Ereignisse..' and should be well represented. And, since they occupy a substantial physical area, and are often concerned with the manipulation of the space, they are most appropriate to a gallery context.

Tapes are of course an equally important factor. But I have always believed that gallery exhibition is by no means a satisfactory method of exposure. Where objects and environmental works are usually in the 'time-control' of the visitor, videotape is a) out of context psychologically due to traditional expectations imposed on it by dominant TV - demanding comparatively intimate viewing, and b) practically, due to the difficulties of successfully exhibiting it (especially in large shows) where it demands the time-control. Cinema facsimiles are impractical, and 'videotecs' (self-selected tapes seen in booths with individual monitors) eliminate the possibility of encountering a programmed historical survey. However, they must be seen and some compromise would have to be reached.

Video performance is the third category and this is an area where problems of definition may be most prominent. Where the technical properties are manipulated as an intrinsic condition of the work (eg Weibel's early performances), or where concentrated (framed) aspects of consciousness are essential as in 'psychological' works (eg Weibel again and Acconci), then these would classify within my conception of video art activity. But the abundance of works by primarily

performance artists who consider it only as a convenience as a back-up to their principal live (flesh and blood) performance would be in doubt. Unfortunately placing some of them is difficult since occasionally the edges are decidedly blurred.

Documentation and debate

Documentation would comprise of a substantial catalogue including articles from authorities around the world including overviews of developments internationally and locally, both critically and historically from possibly Ross, Antin, Davis (US); Herzogenrath (Ger); Weibel, Krieshe (Aus); Bruszewski (Pol); Cameron (Can); Debbaut (Bel); Van Grevenstein (Hol); Bicocchi (It); Muntadas (Sp); Bloch (Fr); Hall, Krikorian, Marshall (Br); and others. The brief would be for critical assessment. Equally there would be wall documentation in the exhibition itself identifying principal developments.

An international symposium could take place, not as the main feature as has happened elsewhere, but as a culmination to the show. Certain specific programmes could be introduced by authors or others interested in a particular attitude or period. This would be primarily for tapes, but could also include discussion on installations and performance.

Initial proposal for sections, participants and specific historical works of significance

1. The early years

Re-stage Ereignisse für Millionen, happening, 1959, Vostell (or a modified or similar work from Vostell of this period)

Re-stage works by Paik from his Fluxus period (c 1963) Exposition of Music - Electronic Television and Zen for TV and/or others (he may have taped facsimiles of some of these)

Tape/s (if available) Paik showed at Cafe a Go Go, New York, 1965 (if not, documentation)

Time 1965, and Monument 1967 (first actual video recordings of raster distortion etc.) Sjölander and Wikström, Sweden

Re-stage Video Pieces (a - n) and Lip Sync (tape), 1968/9
Nauman, USA

Re-stage Wipe-Cycle installation, 1969, Schneider and Gillette, USA

Small presentation of tapes made with artists by Gerry Schum, 1969
Germany

Also a small selection of tapes from this period (until 1970)
from other artists

2. 1970 on (not in chronological order)

Performance and tapes, Weibel, Austria

Tapes, Kriesche, Austria

Tapes, Bruszewski, Poland

Installation and tapes, Cameron, Canada

Installation and tapes, Harding, Canada

Tapes, Sherman, Askevold, Campbell, Druick, Steele, etc, Canada

Tapes, Bauermeister, Otth, Switzerland

Tapes, The Leisgens, Belgium

Performance and tapes, Hoover, Holland

Installation and tapes, Froese, Gr/USA

Tapes, Muntadas, Spain/USA

Tapes, Ambrosini, Sambin, Italy

Performance and tapes, Rosenbach, Germany

Installation and tapes, Mori, France/GB

Installation and tapes, Campus, USA

Installation and tapes, Paik, Korea/USA

Installation and tapes, Viola, USA

Installation, Graham, USA

Performance and tapes, Acconci, USA

Tapes, Jonas, Serra, Mann, Davis, Sonnier, The Vasulkas, Geller,
Morris, Oppenheim etc, USA

Re-stage '60 TV Sets' installation (1972), Hall and Sinden, GB

Installation and tapes, Hall, GB

Installation and tapes, Krikorian, GB

Installation and tapes, Partridge, GB

Installation and tapes, Marshall, GB

Installation, Barnard, GB

Performance and tapes, Critchley, GB

Installation, Adams, GB

Tapes, Hoey, Richardson, Leggett, Meigh, Stansfield, Frake, etc, GB

Installation Iimura, Japan/USA

The second section is both only a provisional suggestion needing considerable modification, and would itself require sectionalising into historic and perhaps (if desirable) 'common objectives' categories necessary to critical appraisal.

It is fairly evident that ~~that~~ this proposed exhibition would require considerable finance and space (Hayward Gallery?). It would also be a mammoth organisational task. This paper is intended as an initiation to the idea and I would be pleased to consider either elaborating it and/or taking part in any discussions after the first response.

David Hall August 80.

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