

— Adapted from an article first published in *The Luminous Image* exhibition catalogue, *Stediljk Museum, Amsterdam 1984*.

VIDEO ART: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

by David Hall

After more than twenty years of practice, the view that video art is an established artform is still difficult to accept - on one hand by the art world, and on the other by broadcasters. Conventional, reactionary, and certainly monetarist ideals have generally stood as a barrier to both its exposure in the commodity art market, or as a challenge to the formal conventions of TV (there have of course been a few notable exceptions). Such an identity, or lack of it, has been a problem for many younger practitioners. Partly despairing of external indifference, and partly tempted by possibilities of commercial success, some are happier with the compromise of making conventionally attractive products rather than pursuing the difficult path of personal innovation.

Video as a fine art practice has nevertheless survived; despite cynical rebuffs at one time that it was merely a passing *movement* when it was and is a new art *medium*; despite its intangible form in an object-obsessive art market; and despite commercial temptations that harass the conscience of many a young artist who can operate a camera and edit suite. It has survived, and is perpetuated through the support of a handful of flexible funding bodies and, more importantly, through art colleges.

The art education scene, certainly in Britain, is inextricably linked with artists and the art world; in the rest of Europe attitudes vary tremendously; and in North America many 'professionals' will not be seen dead near an art department - other than on an occasional *prima donna* visit - for fear of being dubbed a dreaded 'academic'. Yet without doubt ninety-nine per cent of all artists started out as art students. It may be that in North America insufficient emphasis is placed

on contemporary issues and debate, or maybe too much time is spent collecting credits in subjects either barely relating or totally unrelated to the practice. But here, the importance of the introductory period working alongside artists cannot be underestimated. Most artists do some teaching at some level, often not only for financial support, but because the art college circuit provides a platform for contact and debate - debate that rarely occurs in the gallery world. This is an opportunity to discuss work openly, in progress, with few hang-ups about social etiquette.

Video art emerged out of, and has been sustained by, art colleges in this country not only because of an empathetic and progressive context (though this is lately becoming limited by reactionary changes in the name of economic rationalisation) but also out of necessity, since colleges of art have been the main providers of the essential and expensive hardware. Many artists in Britain have been dependent on their connections with these facilities in one way or another since the early seventies. Occasional excursions into the use of commercial equipment are attractive but economically prohibitive especially if considerable time is required for experimentation - and grants from funding bodies are extremely limited. Opportunities in broadcast TV are so rare as to be discounted in terms of day-to-day production. And workshops, cooperatives and other publicly funded facilities, whilst cheaper than their commercial counterparts, are still too few and undernourished. A video artist, unlike a painter, cannot function without considerable support.

Hence the college department that actively encourages video work is invaluable as a cultural and production context for students and artists alike. In this case, *education* is not only intended as a brief initiation period preliminary to

coming out into the real world, but is more an ongoing interface of introductory courses; professional artists' activity; common facilities; research and debate. There are some critics who might argue that this situation is both insular and cyclic, yet until an appropriate provision has been developed where artists are adequately facilitated in their production as well as in the exposure of their products, it still remains one of the most prolific workplaces.

More specifically, developing technology has undoubtedly influenced the nature of the product at all levels and wherever it is made. These developments have inevitably effected aesthetic criteria as well as making life easier. In the early days of basic black and white portapaks, extremely limited editing facilities, and no special effects, the tendency was towards fairly minimal but nevertheless profound pioneering work. This was necessary and appropriate at a time when concerns were generated in part by reductive and 'cerebral' preoccupations. If it can be said that now, in this so-called *post-modernist* phase, an inclination has developed towards more visually complex, even baroque artwork, then the timely expansion of technical possibilities in video allows for greater image manipulation. The dangers though are that as the gap has gradually closed between the technology available to the artist and that used by for instance TV companies, temptations inevitably arise to indulge in what is often only slick and superficial electronic wizardry. The medium here indeed becomes the message. Conversely, the current availability of complex studio mixers, time base correctors, multi-machine editing, 'paint boxes' and other dedicated computers can provide (with due caution for their many seductions) a very sophisticated palette inconceivable twenty years ago.

But perhaps more important than differences of how the work is made, where it takes place, whether it is linked to institutions, and whether one method is more appropriate than another, is the question - what is to be gained by any educational context? And this is meant to imply *any* gainful situation which promotes an artist's development, whether in a college studio or in a pub. Clearly one cannot *teach* art practice yet one can *learn* a great deal, and this is never-ending, not only by viewing others' work but by discourse in an informed and conducive climate. The romantic notion of the artist self-propogating in isolation is a fanciful but merely mythical concept. Exposure and critical reception are essential to a progressive artist.

While this is true for all artists in my view, it is nevertheless problematic for the student or artist working in video. Problematic in that it is still by far the youngest medium to emerge, with a very short history and very little critical back-up. All but a very few critical writings on video art to date have provided little substantial material to which one can seriously relate. And historical overviews, so far, are rarely more than national propaganda promoting work from wherever the writer happens to live. This lack of both specific insight and in-depth general perspective in critical literature doubly demands greater regard for meaningful verbal discourse in whatever social and working environment is available.

It is interesting to note that despite setbacks the number of aspiring artists working with the medium is rapidly increasing. Quantity is encouraging, but quality may be an issue particularly in this broad 'educational' context. Assessment of quality is a difficult and dangerous ground - criteria shifting constantly. And whilst I do not

necessarily advocate perpetuating earlier concerns which had their roots in conceptualism and structuralism (both out of minimalism) with an essential seeking for a video 'vocabulary' - an identity specific to its form, I believe there is still a necessity for a similar search for a personal aesthetic, the same philosophic approach expected of any other fine artist. As has already been suggested it is often easier to slip into an easier route well established by TV conventions (and this may be convenient to ~~a~~ post-modernist ~~ethic~~). In traditional art media there are arguably no equivalent dominant parallels. *objectives* Good or bad, a painting is a painting, uniquely created. By contrast video is capable of similar individual use, but is likely to be manipulated by public or private interests who absorb creative idiosyncrasy into a faceless melting pot and often regenerate it as tired convention.

*Video art, as distinct from the broader framework of other independent video which includes much video by artists, is a truly independent phenomenon. It has a uniqueness in formal innovation and an idiosyncratic approach to content. It seeks to explore perceptual and conceptual thresholds, and perhaps incidently, perhaps intentionally, it implicitly or explicitly decodes and expands the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television.*

Attitudes towards video art in colleges are in some ways no less problematic than in the artworld itself. Usually video activity exists side-by-side with traditional media and usually there has been a struggle to establish it as a viable artform. Justifications are difficult to accept by those who know little about it. And this is complicated by its intangibility, ephemerality and inevitable identity with non-art practice. By comparison painting and sculpture have their

history and critical support, where video is immediately confused with television and all that is considered untenable in a hitherto classically established context. Also, art departments are traditionally underfunded, and to suddenly present a new medium which demands resources equivalent to those in advanced science or engineering courses creates something of a dilemma.

However, it must be said that after twenty years a positive view might be that while countless difficulties prevail there is, ironically, a determined and healthy regime. The very problems encountered in pursuing an extremely demanding art activity are not the deterrents one might expect when, for a serious artist, there is little opportunity to slip into comfortable complacency; when there are no short cuts to easy financial turnover; and when there are comparatively less channels for exposure and critical acclaim. It is the continuing enthusiasm for experimentation and discovery in a new and socially relevant medium which stimulates the necessary determination among an increasing number of artists. This is the motivation of the true artist, who will always insist on personal ideals despite obstacles and the expectations of the status quo.