

The Tate's Touch

Su Braden reviews:

David Hall's films
(Tate Gallery)

David Hall was a 'minimalist' sculptor in the mid-sixties, who made his name by playing with perspectives and illusion. The metal sheets he used for this purpose became flatter and flatter, until they almost seemed to disappear into the ground, and then Hall turned to film. Film offered the possibility of making lines disappear altogether.

Soon he became preoccupied with the nature of film itself. Just as his sculptures demonstrated his interest in the ways we look at sculpture; (what is there? what do we assume to be there? how can we test these things?), so with film, he is concerned with 'the cinema' and the way in which we generally accept it. He questions how our perceptions of the tricks the cinema play might be made more conscious. His concern, both in the sculpture of the '60s and in the current films, is with the processes of the artist and spectator in the creation of 'art'.

During the first week of its three week programme, the Tate showed Hall's first film, 'Vertical' and seven TV shorts. 'Vertical' is academically interesting as a transition between his sculptural concerns and his current interest in the cinema. It also reveals the emergence of humour in his art, an aspect never

revealed in his sculptures.

In discussing Hall's TV films, one must remark on the general situation regarding how work is shown at the Tate.

The insensitivity of its management is reflected in the fact that Manzoni's plynths for human statues (to be created by the gallery-goer jumping up on them) were recently exhibited along with notices forbidding the public to touch. The Tate's style may be less obvious at first in relation to the showing of the David Hall films, but it's there all the same.

If you were not unlucky enough to receive the Tate's press release on the films, the gallery's flair for management shows up first in relation to the seven TV pieces. These were made as 'interruptions' which could be introduced into normal viewing time (they were originally shown on Scottish television during one of the Edinburgh Festivals.) They are all investigations of TV sets as objects, using the specific size of screen as a format. The Tate shows this work on an ordinary film projector; and at that enlarged scale the point, as far as I am concerned, is completely lost. For example, in one piece a tap (which on telly would have been actual size) is lowered into one corner of the screen and your telly is filled up with water. At the Tate it's just a film about a trans-

parent sink.

My real complaint about the Tate's handling of David Hall's films, however, is the way in which it reduces them to the terms of historic paintings in an art gallery. The press notice, for example, was both a review of the work (in case any of us might have any concepts of our own about it) and a justification of it in terms of art. The films themselves are all, with the exception of 'Vertical',

about real TV programmes or real cinema — and unless seen in one or other of these contexts, they become academic 'exercises'.

Can Art continue, eternally, to be for Art's Sake, even when it is patently a relevant comment on a more popular media? And how do the Tate's curators continue to justify their roles as keepers of public art — while making so little effort to rethink the public context? □



From 'Actor', 16 mm, 1973



From 'Edge' 16 mm, 1973



Filming '7 TV Pieces', 1971