

Video Positive

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The Video Positive festival held recently in Liverpool marks the beginning of what is intended to be a regular survey of contemporary video work. Although in a sense it may be seen as a successor to the annual Bracknell festival, organisers Eddie Berg and Steve Littman intend Video Positive to be more inclusive and international in scope: certainly it is considerably more ambitious. Above all, the festival has been conceived as a showcase for installations, since these are the hardest things to mount in terms of cost and technical requirements. Hence the festival was dominated, at least for the first few days, by installations in all three of the main venues; the Tate and Bluecoat galleries in Liverpool itself, and the Williamson Museum in Birkenhead.

Most of the media and public attention inevitably focussed on the thirty-four monitor 'video wall' in the Tate. The main difference between the video wall and other kinds of multi-screen installation is that it can be programmed to send images not just to various individual monitors but to fill an entire block of screens with a single composite image.

Perhaps because they were first attempts to utilise the unique possibilities of the wall, most of the twelve specially commissioned six-minute pieces gave only an indication of what could be achieved. Rather than exploring the semantic possibilities of juxtaposing different tapes, many of the artists opted for merely decorative relationships between images, while others exploited the sheer scale of the three walls, which were arranged in one block of sixteen TVs and two facing walls of nine. Things were not helped by the refusal of the equipment to work properly, which meant that the pieces had to be manually coaxed into life by technicians instead of running automatically via a computer control.

Simon Robertshaw and Mike Jones sought to evoke Thatcher's Britain in their tape *Great Britain*. TV imagery of the Union Jack, swaying menacingly in slow motion; Margaret Thatcher, the Falklands fleet, news film of Little Towers and archive film of children playing ring-a-roses is contrasted with a slice-of-life monologue from a Liverpool housewife. Although the tape made effective use of scale, with the Union Jack dwarfing the real-life events occurring on the other screens, it brought no new insights

'Time to go'

The artists' section of the Time To Go Campaign for the withdrawal of British troops from Ireland is holding an auction of donated works this May. Among artists supporting the venture are John Hubbard, Richard Long, Albert Irvin, Bill Woodrow, Terry Atkinson and Ian Breakwell. Further contributions are being sought and information is available from Rene Gimpel (01-493 2488), Conrad Atkinson (01-639 0308) and John Roberts (01-806 5562).

into the complex nature of its subject matter: while Thatcher's Britain continues apace, 'Thatcher's Britain' is a clapped-out catch phrase, and *Great Britain* seemed to do little except reiterate the doxa that has grown around it.

Judith Goddard's *Silver Lining* turned the whole wall into a giant electronic painting with a golden image of a fishing port at sunset in a gilt surround built up from a repeated detail of a real picture frame. On the other screens a series of details of the frame dissolved from one to another.

It was intriguing to see a piece for the Video World by Laura Mulvey, who is better known for her influential theoretical writings for *Screen* magazine and for the series of ambitious films she made in the Seventies and early Eighties with Peter Wollen, the most memorable of which is probably *Riddles of the sphinx*. This time she has made a simple but effective tape, *New Horizons*, in collaboration with Chris Welsby. The tape opens with waves breaking on a beach, and then cuts to the rotten hull of an upturned boat, over which the sound of breakers continues. Then we see the bow wave of a boat, framed vertically, with apparently synchronous sound. When the camera zooms out, however, it transpires that the bow-wave is in fact a waterfall and later, in a similar fashion, that the upturned ship is in fact the roof of an abandonedcroft. By careful ordering of shots and juxtaposition of sounds and images, Mulvey creates a series of ambiguities: false clues which get at the heart of what time-based media are about – the creation of assumptions and expectations based on what has gone before.

Mulvey's tape exposes the nature of these devices out of which plausible cinematic worlds are compounded. *New Horizons* represents a return to basics after the dense theoretical films of twelve years ago.

While in many ways Mulvey's was one of the most accomplished pieces in the video wall, it really owed nothing to the wall for its efficacy. Conversely what was most striking about the rest of the work in this programme was the contrast between the immense cost, complexity and sheer physical presence of the wall and the rather slight results that issued from it.

The technocentric character of much video art is embodied not only in the wall, which was seen as the triumphant centre-piece of the festival, but also in the way video art has developed historically. This has been a process whereby older work from the '70s – a lot of which investigated the means and nature of image production – has been rendered somehow aesthetically obsolete by technological advances. Hence David Hall's *Vidicon inscriptions* of 1975, in which images were burnt onto the camera tube by prolonged exposure, is now obsolete to the extent that tubes have been replaced by microchips.

In contrast to the many artists who have been led on by available technology, David Hall has always been cautious of it, and critical of its effects. His multi-screen installation in the Tate *A situation envisaged: the rite II* was conceived as 'a comment on the acceptance of TV . . . where technological innovation . . . continues to precede

concern for issues of cultural form.' The work comprises fifteen TV sets which all face away from the viewer except for one in the middle which shows a 'facsimile black and white thirty-line transmission' of an image of the moon similar to the earliest broadcast pictures of the 1930s. The screens facing away showed a welter of current television output, but were placed so close to the gallery wall that they could only be glimpsed from the side. Thus *A situation envisaged* literally turns its back on technology and ironically it was the only video wall piece that was working properly in the Tate. It is a pity, therefore, that it was poorly situated in a dead corner of the gallery behind the technicians' area.

Two of the most currently admired and discussed video artists are the Americans Bill Viola and Daniel Reeves. But whereas Viola's work has had some exposure here through his retrospective at Riverside studios last year, Reeves's work has not previously been seen. There are striking similarities between them. Both address grand themes of death and man's attempts to defy it, our relationship to the planet, and related ecological questions.

Reeves's Tate installation, *The well of patience*, consisted of concentric rings of plaster buddhas and rat-traps arranged around a reflective 'well' on the floor, and wine glasses and hammers hanging from the ceiling. The six-screen back-projected tapes showed a long parade of slow-motion close-ups of water, icicles, waterlilies, hot springs, wild orchids, frogs, squids and vultures. These were followed by a sequence of

human marks and activities: pounding maize, quarrying, sifting wheat, stone circles and so on.

This will sound familiar to those who have also seen Viola's work, but where the two differ significantly is that in Viola's work there is a sense of his having struggled with his material and transformed it, whereas Reeves merely presents an endless, shapeless catalogue of natural and man-made wonders. If one criterion for art is that artists give form to the materials they work on, then *The well of patience* is arguably not art at all, but a kind of electronic mandala, or 'cosmic flower arranging' as a film-maker friend put it.

A number of other artists showed mixed media installations. One of the most highly regarded pieces in this genre was Mineo Aayamaguchi's *Beyond Colour* at the Williamson Museum. This used a grid of nine monitors with the same two tapes playing on all nine TVs in a chequerboard configuration. On the plinth in front of the monitors was a grid of small mirrors. Thus projected, the images of diagonally framed tracking shots along chainlink fences, railway lines, bamboo forests and venetian blinds were transformed into moving patterns in a manner akin to the way a kaleidoscope transforms coloured glass. The grid of mirrors offered a fragmented echo of the screen image. But although witty and inventive, I couldn't help feeling that this work was fundamentally formalist in its failure to move beyond mere patterns to say something about space and how one represents it.

Chris Rowlands's *Hothouse* comprised a

greenhouse full of plants, tools and TV sets showing lurid scenes of tomatoes being smashed with hammers, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. Designed to be shown at urban garden festivals, *Hothouse* probably lost a good deal of impact by being shown out of context.

In contrast to the foregoing were substantial programmes of recent tapes, mainly by women artists, at the Bluecoat Gallery. Most of this work is typified by its concern with issues such as personal and racial identities, the politics of childbirth and the social construction of masculinity. The weaker work tends, like *Great Britain*, merely to illustrate some aspect of a pre-existent debate and, as such, fails to bring fresh perceptions to bear on the issues which are, arguably, beyond the competence of artistic practice.

One outstanding exception is Jayne Parker's *Almost out*. This two-hour *tour de force* was made entirely in a video editing suite where Parker filmed alternately her mother and herself. Both are naked and Parker repeatedly asks her mother to show her where she 'came from', and what it was like when she was 'inside'. The tape successfully raises a multitude of related questions on nudity, nakedness and their representation, and on the nature of performance, and the power relations between film-maker and her/his subject, a relationship that is complicated in this case by the fact that the two are mother and daughter.

Video Positive was held in Liverpool from February 11-26.