

# Review

## RE-PRESENTING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

**Signs of the Times:** Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. 7th October - 9th December 1990, and at Leeds City Gallery and Leeds Polytechnic Gallery October 1991.

A notable absence at the re-staged '**Signs of the Times**' show in Leeds was **Rose Finn-Kelsey's** installation *Bureau de Change*. Perhaps it was not possible to persuade a bank to lend the £1,000 of 'loose change' with which to construct the mosaic of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. Perhaps they couldn't find the wage for the security guard to attend the 'painting' during the show. Perhaps they couldn't find the extra monitor and camera to survey the 'painting' or perhaps Rose Finn-Kelsey wasn't able to be there to install the work. It could be, simply, that the elaborate *Bureau de Change* was just too much of a headache for all concerned.

Audio-visual work can be unweildy and unco-operative for curator, artist and audience alike. From the curatorial viewpoint, to tour a show so that each work is carefully and appropriately installed is no unambitious project. It needs maintaining and turning on and off, and when it goes wrong a technician is left exposed in the midst of a disfunctioning work in clumsy view of the audience.

Usually only fairly well-known artists get sufficient technical support. When an audio-visual artist is showing work in a gallery unfamiliar with the media, often the full brunt of responsibility falls on them: to find the equipment, transport and install it. It is a time-consuming and infuriating process which is invariably unpaid.

For the audience, accessibility is an issue, given that one frequently has to negotiate less than welcoming spaces, wait for things to happen and even move between locations, as was the case in Leeds. Curating '**Signs of the Times**' can have been no easy feat, even before considering how the work is understood

as representative of, or extracted from, a 'decade of video, film and slide-tape installation in Britain 1980-1990'.

*Bureau de Change* delineates quite clearly a number of related issues: the relationship between art and market; discursive intent and audience; spectatorship and cultural position; the activity of work and how it is paid; and maybe, most pertinently, the thorny question of the 'museumisation' of audio-visual work and the role of the curator. *Bureau de Change* is the theatre of the museum in a museum. However, the guard was really guarding the money.

The museumisation inherent in creating a show such as this necessarily re-presented works in locations other than those for which they were originally made. *Electro-Television Circle* by **Judith Goddard** was commissioned for a forest site on Dartmoor. Inside, the installation's (question-raising) conquest of the landscape and the elements was lost; the 'environment' became a sequence of slides of urban landscape and domestic interiors which attempted to qualify its new situation.

**Susan Hiller** chose to re-contextualise *Belshazzar's Feast/The Writing on Your Wall*, seven years after it was made, with two wall-mounted texts: one, a framed transcription of the bulk of what is spoken on the tape; the other, a large photocopy of the text, reproduced in the catalogue. The latter discusses the relationship between the TV and the hearth and introduces the metaphors within the work. The texts provided entries into and reflections on the video, and gave it an historical moment. In the re-installation, she positioned the audience (on red cushions opposite each monitor on the floor) and so explored conditions of attention, a relevant concern within time-based work.

The artist's consideration of their audience, however, may be undermined by an insensitivity to installation on the part of the gallery. A curious aspect of the exhibition at Leeds City Art Gallery was the random scattering of gallery sofas around some of the installations in a way that was neither useful nor appropriate. Nor did any of the work at the City Art Gallery benefit from the fact that **David Hall's** piece was being put up several weeks late. Installing the work in Leeds was bound to be difficult, given that the exhibition was curated by **Chrissie Iles** at MoMA with particular space and resources in mind. Nevertheless, it should have been possible to open the exhibition in Leeds in its complete state.

Inevitably, and inescapably, audio interference from various works was experienced at all venues: sound is difficult to contain except under very exceptional circumstances when presenting a number of audio-visual works in one space. In Leeds Polytechnic Gallery, however, *Achievers-Strivers-Strugglers-Survivors* by **Anthony Wilson**, and Susan Hiller's installation, were shown on request and not simultaneously, thus avoiding the aforementioned problem. In Oxford, however, the unfortunate placing of **Timara Krikorian's** silent *Time Revealing Truth* compromised its demand for sustained concentration. As a possible introduction to video art, it was perhaps a difficult work. By being situated at the entrance to the exhibition it suffered from heavy gallery traffic and noise interruption. In Leeds, it occupied a more contemplative space and was cordoned off by a red rope which essentially altered the viewer's physical relationship with the work.

The latter concern is also relevant in the case of *K* by **Jayne Parker**, where the curatorial decision had

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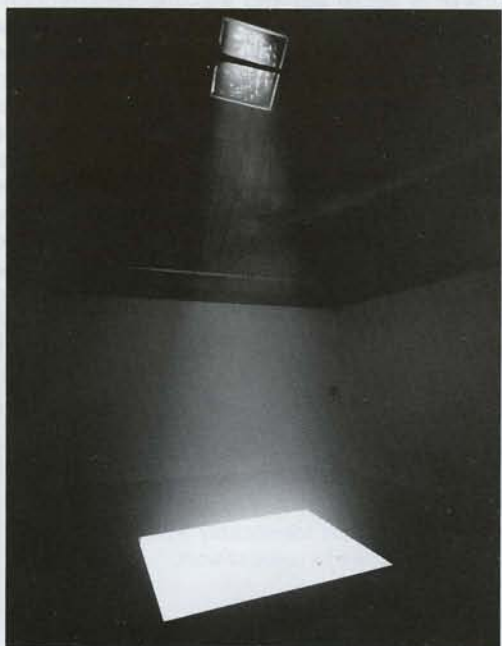
been made to show it as an installation (comprising a video transfer and a large photograph) rather than as a film projected in the gallery. This would have shown the work in its intended and stronger form, which raises the issue of the absence of single screen/projection pieces within the exhibition. From the accompanying seminar which took place on 11 November 1990 at MoMA, an assumption emerged that such work has ample screening opportunity, though it had been intended to show concurrently a programme of films and videos. However, information about the screenings was inconsistent and it is not known whether it ever took place at MoMA. Nor was it included in the catalogue.

Sound work occupied a similarly less central position. It consisted of work by **Hannah O'Shea**, **Stuart Brisley**, and *Sound Moves*, a compilation of audio by women. All the sound work was primarily vocal and because of its presentation (via headphones at a desk) operated in an intimate and controllable way. For the majority of the work this was appropriate, given that *Sound Moves* was accessed via the telephone system when it was originally made. It is a pity, therefore, that sound made to occupy a more extensive physical space was not represented.

Interestingly, it is within *Sound Moves* that issues of cultural position and vernacular language are most overtly and variously dealt with. In comparison with Judith Goddard's use of the 'Celtic lament' as a point of return, which seems appropriate and romantic after electronic feedback and Blake's Jerusalem, the keening in the sound work of **Alanna O'Keely** and **Ann Sullivan** is better considered. They more explicitly acknowledge the purpose and cultural derivation of their particular laments.

The emphasis on political or discurive intent within the work varies. Perhaps it is impossible to separate entirely perception from representation. However, some artists have greater concern with materiality than with explicit meaning. This is not necessarily a perjorative statement. Indeed, in **Chris Welsby's** *Rainfall* it was the refined simplicity of his very material yet illusory image which was so compulsive. However, in the case of *Viridus* by **Holly Warburton** (omitted from the exhibition in Leeds), despite sophisticated and opulent illusion, the confusion of signs within the imagery undermined intended meaning and the work was

Chris Welsby *Rainfall*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Photo: Edward Woodman



Rose Finn-Kelcey *Bureau de Change*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Photo: Edward Woodman

reduced to extraordinary spectacle. **Cerith Wyn Evans**, who described technology as his site, produced an intellectually sophisticated video work but one that disengaged itself completely from issues of representation. In contrast, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, made in 1984 by **Stuart Marshall**, 'speaks about the experience of AIDS from within the gay community' (Stuart Marshall, catalogue entry, p.47). Its challenge to public perception is as important now as it was seven years ago, but then the promise of the future is always more attractive than the difficulties of the present.

The excitement apparent at the seminar regarding the development of virtual reality as a democratic medium offering empowerment to the viewer/user (!), conveniently overlooked the political implications with which the technology is rife. Even though the viewer is liberated to choose their own narrative, there remains the responsibility of authorship. Choice is not disengaged from cultural, social and economic conditions, either as it is individually made or as it is presented. If authorship is not positioned, once again the non-privileged voice remains unheard. (It is notable that the selection in '**Signs of the Times**' appears very centralised and that all the installation artists are white.)

What '**Signs of the Times**' did achieve was to provide a rare opportunity for audio-visual artists to show work (privilege is relative), and to present the possibility of discussion in direct response to the work. It is a shame that it couldn't have toured more extensively.

The museumisation of audio-visual work must exist with the constant irony that it is re-inventing works of a temporal nature which largely were conceived of as non-collectable. The dilemma is either not to re-present it (possibly a decision taken by Rose Finn-Kelcey) and so deny wider access to a whole area of art practice, or to accept and acknowledge that the work is qualified by its changed context.

Even though '**Signs of the Times**' is deliberately not 'a definitive history of video installation in the eighties' (Stuart Marshall, *ibid*, p.16), its consequence as a major exhibition of time-based work in Britain is that it is, and will be, perceived as a valuable historical document.

**Susan Brind and Shirley MacWilliam**

