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Processing Fluid - a brief history of independent moving image art in the UK

First published in [Filmwaves](#) Issue 14, 2001

The curious post-rationalisation of the history of art and culture - the vain search for certainty - which occupies much critical writing always strikes me as a fairly bizarre activity. The plotting of lineage and the determination of genealogy serves to cement the perception that culture is somehow a logical and linear process. The idea that it can be understood like an empirical science and that the dynamics of culture are somehow reducible to a simple message of defined cause and effect is difficult to comprehend. As Mark Twain said "The very ink in which history is written is merely fluid prejudice". But of course, there are many histories and their re-telling sheds light on the current state of the culture and enriches our understanding of contemporary work which, whether by design or by osmosis inherits and transforms its own traditions.

In 1995 the Arts Council of England published a substantial book called 'A Directory of British Film & Video Artists'. It contains a preface by David Curtis, then Senior Film & Video Officer at the Arts Council, which simply and eloquently describes the activity of artists working with the moving image. The dream of alternative exhibition networks, the uneasy partnerships with television, the feature-film format ambitions of some and the focus of others towards new media. The book featured small biographies of over a hundred individuals whose practice ranged from 35mm film production to video installation. It would seem on the surface to be debatable that this large group should have something in common, yet it is clear that something was held in common by these disparate artists. Indeed, one wouldn't have to look much further than the listings at the back of the book to illustrate this commonality. It reveals that only two of the featured artists had their work distributed by a contemporary art dealer, with almost all of the rest having their work distributed through either London Video Access or London Film-makers Co-op. The two that had their work distributed by the dealers were Willie Doherty and Tacita Dean.

If the same exercise, to compile a directory of film & video artists, were to be undertaken today it would surely look very different. No doubt it would be a far less dry publication, with an eye on sales rather than posterity, and it is very likely that all of the artists listed would be distributing their work through dealers. It would certainly feature a whole raft of names not appearing in the earlier book - Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Georgina Starr, Jane & Louise Wilson, Douglas Gordon, Steve McQueen, Mat Collishaw. It is also extremely unlikely that it would feature many of the names from the earlier book, names like Peter Gidal, Jeff Keen, Stuart Marshall, Margaret Tait, Steve Hawley and David Hall even though their works still have relevance. So what happened in those few years following the publication of the Directory, and what led to such a shift in perspective?

To answer that question inevitably involves taking a clear look at how we measure and understand the amorphous areas of creative practice in this country. To understand who owns practice and how different aspirations dominate. To begin to make any meaningful assessment of the practice of film & video art in Britain it is clear that, for some 20 years, it was the province of a small and committed band of individuals - and two organisations. It is also clear that this has now changed.

Although no such thing as a thesis or manifesto existed during the formative years of independent film & video, there was clearly some common ground - if only in the bond of marginalisation within the broader spectrum of the arts system. For many of these artists, the attraction of the practice was based around its currency - its ability to harness the medium

through which most of us view the world. Many people were drawn to it as a way to find a voice - to say something that was not being said anywhere else. But for others there was the attraction of exploring the creative potential of a new medium, a medium without a firmly formed language in which the possibility of genuine innovation still existed. For some there was a technical fascination - the action of movement and of illumination and the nature of the processes involved. Students moved slowly into this area, mainly due to the cost and skills required to establish and maintain resources. A few colleges taught 'media arts' or 'communication arts' within the broader umbrella of fine art, with the Polytechnics in Coventry, Sheffield, Maidstone and Wolverhampton in the vanguard. But few outside of this small group felt that film & video was anything but peripheral to the bigger arts picture. Despite this marginal position, clear signals were coming from across the Atlantic that moving image art was becoming more significant. The work of pioneers like Martha Rosler, Naim June Paik and William Wegman demonstrated that the new pretender should be taken seriously and could hold its own alongside other forms of contemporary art.

Many of the earliest experiments in the UK took the form of sculptural ideas, exploring how the form of the video (and its equipment) could be used to structure and animate white-box spaces. The early work of Tony Sinden, David Hall, Tamara Krikorian and others at venues like the ACME Gallery in London and the definitive 'Video Show' at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975 set the tone for later gallery-based works. Many works used the furniture of the television as a significant element, filling the gallery space with flickering images, confronting our early perceptions of the TV as a solo player, or as a window on the world. On occasions this approach even extended into domestic TV through commissioned broadcast works – as in David Hall's '7 TV pieces' made in 1971 for Scottish Television.

'Artists Video' at Biddick Farm in Washington, Tyne & Wear in 1979 featured artists like Stuart Marshall, Steve Partridge and Hooykaas & Stansfield. One piece by John Adams & Jane O'Shaughnessy entitled "Sotari" featuring a collapsed video image which only revealed itself when the viewers eyes moved from one monitor to another across the gallery space. The collapsed image containing an entire TV field within one line of picture information which would only be revealed by an eye quickly scanning across it – the image not being visible by looking directly at it. A technical trick which illustrated a sophisticated notion of the virtual voyeurism of the TV image. Tamara Krikorian wrote in the 1984 LVA catalogue about these works saying "far from being an activity carried out on the frontiers of the art world, these works, while confronting issues relating to the medium itself and offering a decoding of dominant forms, also concur both in form and content with concerns that have preoccupied other fine art practitioners during this period". While the concerns may have been the same, perhaps the critical issue – underplayed in Krikorian's article – is that these concerns were played out in a medium that was still defining its language and which still had currency in the wider cultural domain. A dichotomy that may have been both the strength and the weakness of the work of this period.

The National Video Festivals at South Hill Park in Bracknell from 1981 -1988 showed artists like Gary Hill, Bill Viola and Dara Birnbaum alongside more home-grown products such as Mark Wilcox, Tina Keane and the South Wales Women's Film Group - often in the context of discussions with the artists involved. Many of these presentations being to seated audiences, but many site specific installations were also shown. David Hall's 'Situation Envisaged – The Rite' shown in 1980, was a development of an earlier work involving 16 TVs in a circle around a central rotating monitor. The work's themes of voyeurism and the dynamic of TV were often central to artist's works at this time and provided an analytical yet self-conscious core for the oeuvre.

The work of Mark Wilcox (something of a star at the Bracknell events) has recently been rediscovered by some critics. Works such as 'Calling the Shots', (1984) with their complex deconstruction of Hollywood narrative, now appear as technically crude, but conceptually

sophisticated, works which might sit well alongside the slicker work of artists such as Douglas Gordon or Mark Lewis. Within 'Calling the Shots' the narrative artifice of a scene from Douglas Sirk's 'The Imitation of Life' from 1959 is reshot with contemporary actors. The narrative slowly breaking down with subtle and effective editing. The re-presentation of the script producing a tightly edited and sharply scripted response to the dominance of dramatic narrative conventions.

However, other artists whose work might warrant reassessment have deliberately removed themselves from the probing of cultural archaeologists. David Critchley - a significant figure in the development of London Video Arts and an important early video artist - is reputed to have destroyed his entire back-catalogue - including the powerful 'Pieces I never did' (1980). On the face of it, Critchley's wry description of all the works he planned to do but never carried out, might be read as a conceptual game interrogating our notions of the real and the imagined, but in the inevitable search for curatorial and critical credibility we are in danger of judging his work by the cultural standards of today. We need to take into consideration the environment that produced this work and not blindly claim kinship with an era that has passed. One of the reasons Critchley lists the pieces he never made was to point up the lack of understanding, opportunity and money that restricted video artists at the time.

But some forms of funding did exist. One of the formative influences in the late 1970s/early 1980s was the complex mix of public investment that was being made in the work of artists, cash from the Arts Council often being matched or exceeded by money from the metropolitan authorities (like the GLC and Urban County Councils). Through this route agendas were often matched, with the personal and the political often finding common expression. Artists found themselves sharing physical resources, such as edit suites and cameras, with campaign and issue groups and the inevitable hybridity of practice resulted in projects like the programmes made in support of the 1984 national miners strike. Although this hybridity was not a given it certainly provided a powerful context. One which provided many artists with an opportunity for the political dimensions of their work to be framed and measured against the political agitation current at the time. In retrospect, much of the earnestness of the work of this time is as much a result of local osmosis as of national zeitgeist.

The founding of London Video Arts in 1976 and the continuing presence of the London Filmmakers Co-op created the core bodies around which much artistic activity revolved and in the rich loam of Metropolitan Authority funding many other groups thrived. Fantasy Factory - led by the legendary John and Sue Hopkins, West London Media Workshop, Despite TV, Sankofa, Black Audio Collective, Open Eye (in Liverpool), Amber (in Newcastle), Workers Film Association (in Manchester) - a list which could include 30 or more organisations across the country - each working around a set of production resources to develop skills and awareness within a creative context. Many groups eschewed conventional industry models and worked collectively and sought out independent or oppositional modes of distribution and exhibition. Some groups actively worked to develop a new broadcast channel - Channel 4, while others maintained a steady focus on a single issue, making political video in its most direct sense.

Despite the very local nature of many of the resource bases, international partnerships also developed. Festivals around the globe, regular exhibitions at London's AIR Gallery and the assiduousness of individuals like the artist/curator/writer Jeremy Welsh helped to create a new cultural dynamic. However an ethos prevailed - informed by both political sensibilities and lack of opportunity - which led to few artists engaging with the commercial gallery network. Most actively encouraging the duplication and distribution of their work for little or no reward.

To someone emerging fresh from art school in the '70s and '80s, this seemed like a vibrant time, a time in which creative challenges to dominant media suggested genuinely new forms

of expression and powerful new ways of engaging and entertaining. The perception of a plural yet forceful wave of creativity has perhaps tinted this era with a rosy glow, but there is undoubtedly something in this earnest and motivated burst of activity that was genuinely expansive and challenging.

By the time of the merging of LVA and LFMC and the launch of the Lux, much of these former ways of working had been subsumed into the suddenly fashionable waves of British art that were washing across London. Young gallery-based artists were using film and video as part of their practice and Saatchi and other commercial galleries were beginning to market this work to audiences and collectors. The emergence of Moviola/FACT and the first Video Positive festival in 1989 created a new national focus for work produced outside this commercial environment. Its Liverpool base providing a comfortable home for a city-wide biennial of exhibitions, seminars and screenings. Video Positive, the subsequent development of MITES (the national arts technology support service) in 1992, and the consolidation of the Film and Video Umbrella under Steven Bode, all heralded the emergence of a new, effective, audience-aware approach to the presentation of work. This, and the sudden interest of national players like the Tate and the South Bank effectively consigned film and video art to the safe haven of the mainstream, bringing acceptance into the contemporary art canon alongside the new breed of media-friendly artists.

But the energy that led to the early divergent forms hasn't entirely vanished. The 'edge' which characterised early work seems to have been repositioned within other forms of practice. Most obviously in the internet, where the same mix of technical facilitation, community partnerships and genuinely avant-garde art are visible in the work of Heath Bunting and Irational, Mongrel, Redundant Technology Initiative and the FACT Collaboration Programme. The ethos of net art offering a space within which conceptual redefinition, special interests and new modes of communication all collide and produce something outside of the canon. Some (much like early video art) is technically deterministic, some echoes the alternative distribution aspirations that drove LVA and LFMC. However, most is wilfully bucking the conventions that seek to define or include it – creating confusion and excitement in equal measures. Much of it may not survive, much of it may be re-appropriated by those for whom lineage is everything, but none of it is likely to have the same meaning in ten years time as it has now.

So while the canon of film and video art work today has become fairly well fixed, it might still allow for the inclusion of people such as George Barber, Catherine Elwes, Jayne Parker, Andrew Stones and Frances Hegarty - who have all managed to retain the ability to evolve and produce new works outside the commercial gallery system. But it will probably leave behind many others. It will also leave behind much of the low-cost partnership projects that often did little for audiences but did a lot for the project partners. It will also eradicate video's raw uncertainty and clumsiness (in the words of Steve Hawley - "all video art is at least 20% too long") and much of the dangerous angst that both threatened and engaged its audiences. I've made no claims that Simon Robertshaw has influenced Douglas Gordon, or that Akiko Hada has influenced Georgina Starr, because I've really no idea if they have. One can draw one's own fluid prejudice from any point to any other point. But as we do this we need to be aware that each one of these lines may simply be denying the past in order not to offer its full legacy to the present.

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