

VIDEO-SKULPTUR



**Retrospective and new works 1963-1989
Cologne 18 March - 23 April 1989**

This exhibition is probably the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken in Europe of three-dimensional video art. I use that latter term advisedly, for while we customarily use the term 'video installation' to distinguish between single channel video-tapes, and work which employs multiple screens, or specific viewing arrangements, the curators here applied a further distinction, which refines the criteria of the selection. With 45 artists represented, the work distributed through five spaces around the city, the exhibition is at least twice the size of the important 'Luminous Image' show presented in Amsterdam five years ago. Moreover, while that survey confined itself to new work, Video-Skulptur takes the rare and welcome step of including, and where necessary reconstructing, important work twenty or more years old, which many of us have known of only through descriptions or inadequate photographs.

So we can encounter here ground-breaking work such as *Wipe Cycle* by Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, *Iris* by Les Levine, and *Heuschrecken* by Wolf Vostell, all from

the late sixties, alongside more recent works such as Beryl Korot's *Dachau*, from 1974, and Bill Viola's beautiful *He Weeps For You* of 1976. At the same time, we can survey a range of very recent works from around the world, from the exquisite abstractions of Roos Theuws to the explicit political and social comment of Antonio Muntadas and Lydia Schouten. 'Around the world', in this context, does not include the British Isles, an omission which this visitor noted with a mixture of indignation and embarrassment. More on this later.

Cologne is particularly well-placed to originate this exhibition, in terms of both its location and its history. The site of the longest-established Contemporary Art Fair in Europe, it has seen a cluster of commercial galleries spring up around the town, many of which are displaying - and selling - important work by major international artists. During my visit, exhibitions in progress included work by William Burroughs, David Salle, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, etc. In the shadow of the Cathedral stands the dramatic architecture of the new Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, and inside that

is the legendary Museum Ludwig, probably the largest collection of American Pop and German New Painting in the world.

Within fairly easy reach of Cologne are some important centres for video art. To the north is Dusseldorf, where Beuys was Professor of Sculpture, and Nam June Paik, U-figure of video art, is visiting Professor. To the southeast is Kassel, home of 'Documenta', which since 1977 has had a prominent video component; while to the northwest in the Netherlands is Maastricht, where the Jan Van Eyke Academy has generated much significant activity under the aegis of Elsa Stansfield.

Cologne's broadcasting station, WDR, has long been responsive and supportive towards experimental art. In the late fifties, both Stockhausen and Nam June Paik were in residence in its Electronic Music Studio; a decade later, the station was enterprising enough to commission the historic *TV Gallery* collaborations between Gerry Schum and numerous avant-garde artists, which were highly influential upon the particular character of European, and especially Brit-

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ish, video art in the seventies.

Many of Paik's early performances were presented in Cologne, in the atelier of Mary Bauermeister, including the historic encounter with John Cage, during a performance of *Etude for Piano*, when Paik leapt into the audience to scissor away part of Cage's clothing, and then concluded the performance from a phone box some distance away. Paik had his first major retrospective in Cologne; many of Germany's important video artists, including Klaus Vom Bruch, Ulrike Rosenbach, and Marcel Odenbach, live and work in the city. During the run of Video-Skulptur, the local video art tape distribution library, 235 Media, organised screenings of its entire, very impressive, catalogue, with work from the USA and Canada, Japan and Australia, as well as the expected German, Dutch and Belgian artists, in luxurious viewing conditions at the Paragon Gallery.

The credentials of the co-curators of Video-Skulptur, Dr. Wulf Herzogenrath and Edith Decker, are impeccable. Herzogenrath has, for many years, been a knowledgeable and energetic champion of time-based arts. As Director of the Kolnische Kunstverein since 1973, he was responsible for Paik's 1976 retrospective, and for the comprehensive survey of experimental cinema *Film as Film*, which came to the Hayward in London in 1979, among a long list of prestigious exhibitions. He has written books on Paik and German video art, and curated the video sections of two recent Documenta shows. Edith Decker has a background in sculptural projects, and has also written a monograph on Paik, concentrating on his video work. They have co-authored a splendidly-produced book accompanying this exhibition, which enlarges its scope to constitute a comprehensive reference volume for video installation work.

Herzogenrath is keen to emphasise the choice of the term 'Video Sculpture', rather than the more common category of 'Installation'. He is interested in work which does rather more than just multiply banks of images. Each piece included articulates the space it occupies, or induces the viewer's mind, in a unique manner. Bruce Nauman's 1969 piece, *Live Taped Video Corridor*, for example, coerces the viewer down its claustrophobic passage with two images of itself on monitors at the far end. But only one monitor registers the viewer's appearance in the space; the other image, taped, remains deserted, inviolable in its temporal distance. The video element acts as a meta-statement on the viewer's relationship with the space, co-existing with, rather than dominating or controlling, the sculptural element.

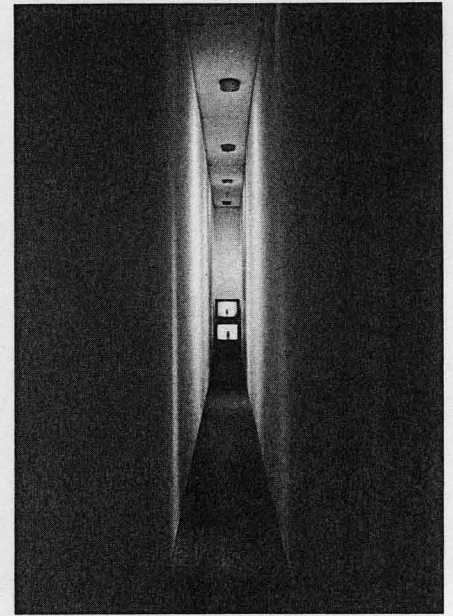
Similarly, the very recent piece, *Materia*

Prima by the Italian artist Fabrizio Plessi, leaves its 20 television sets supine, inactive, their capacity for communication only potential. Surrounded by slabs of marble as though hatching from a quarry, the stillness and absence of signal force visitors to consider the mass of remembered and conjectured televisual baggage, and garbage, they bring with them to the work. Both these pieces are presented in the Kunstverein, where most of the historical work - and in the highly volatile context of video it does not seem absurd to apply the world 'historical' to work only fifteen years old - is concentrated. Here, early work by Paik, Douglas Davis, and Peter Campus provide an overture to seminal pieces by Friederike Pezold, the Dutch artist Servass, and Mary Lucier. Lucier's *Untitled Display System* of 1977, with its spidery profusion of lines laser-burnt into the camera tubes, is just one example of a work given new significance after a decade of Post-Modernist and Neo-Expressionist ferment in the art world. A return to formal concerns is suggested by more recent conjunctions of sculpted material and image created by Graf/ZYX and Helmut Mark.

Nearby, in the Kunststation St. Peter, the church where Rubens was christened, and where exhibitions and concerts are celebrated alongside the Mass, two works startlingly animate the hallowed space. Next to the very font where Rubens no doubt bawled through his immersion, the rippled spectral image of Ulrike Rosenbach flows across three screens, the pastel shade of *Or-phelia*. This work was seen in London last year as part of the Edge 88 New Art festival, but its setting here lends it qualities of mysticism and liturgy. Close by, an example of Rubens' more mature output has been replaced in a chapel by Gary Hill's *Crux*. Five monitors delineate the cross, depicting the artist's head, hands and feet: not nailed and bleeding, but floating miraculously through a sunlit forest. The result seems at first shocking, almost blasphemous, but ultimately devout, a work of joy and meditation.

In the industrial north of the city, a huge warehouse has been put into service as an art gallery by the DuMont Schauberg newspaper empire. It's rather as though Rupert Murdoch were to open a rival to the Hayward Gallery in Wapping, but for the purposes of presenting most of the new work in this survey, the space, with its utilitarian construction, and decidedly non-reverential atmosphere, is splendidly appropriate.

Most museum curators hate video art: not only does it demand constant technical attention, but it often makes noises, and art is supposed to be silent. This can cause problems even for enthusiasts, as an array of videosculptures can create



aural havoc. In the cavernous DuMont Kunsthalle, where a dozen works share the open-plan central space, while as many more occupy cubicles around the walls, Herzogenrath and Decker have addressed the problem with a new infra-red sound transmission system. This broadcasts the audio element of each piece within a tightly defined zone, to be received via hand-held receivers, similar to those used to provide commentaries in conventional exhibitions.

The system enables the visitor to concentrate on an individual work, or simply to wander through the show, listening in when a particular piece engages one's interest. This state-of-the-art stratagem works reasonably well, though it's possible to cheat the process and mix into one installation the soundtrack from a neighbouring piece, often with interesting results. More importantly, the system doesn't seem to run to stereo, so where audio landscaping is important to a work, the organisers have reverted to conventional loudspeakers and an effort to isolate the piece.

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Video art is frequently derided, because the technology is so prominent, and threatens to smother the content. Frequently, of course, the technology is the content. No one should confuse the products of the electronics industry with the uses artists make of them, even in the reflexive mode which characterised the art of the 70's. Nevertheless, there are some indications here that technological developments can enable artists to achieve both more complex and better-defined forms and statements. The use of video projectors, for instance, has liberated the medium from the prison of its miniature scale, and indeed from the confines of monitor box. This freedom enables Tony Oursler, in particular, to present, in the passionate ecological tract, *Spillchamber 2*, a dazzling variety of images, none of which resemble conventional television. Where traditional monitors are used, improved precision of relative timing enables an artist like Marie-Jo Lafontaine, in *Victoria*, to impart to the otherwise identical monochrome images, of machismo foreboding, a rippling asynchronicity which heightens the tension of the piece.

Even some older work, like Dan Graham's *Present Continuous Past(s)*, of 1974, can benefit from this effect. Its mirrored room contains in one wall a monitor screen, linked to a camera. This views and relays to the screen not only the image, delayed by six seconds, of anyone who enters the room, but also the screen's own reflection, so that the delay is compounded in a theoretically infinite recession. In earlier versions of this work, the vital delay was effected by a tape loop passing unreliably between two elderly open-reel video recorders. Here, sophisticated micro-chip circuitry has replaced that cumbersome device, not only improving the legibility and survival prospects of this most elegant of video works, but also giving the movement of the delayed image a curious, dream-like quality which is wholly appro-

priate in a work which so directly confronts immediate perception with memory and anticipation.

A suggestion of extraordinary possibilities for the future is provided by the only true inter-active work in the show, Jeffrey Shaw's *Narrative Landscape*. Although many video sculptures, like Graham's, incorporate the presence of the viewer into the work, new combinations of computer and video-disk permit their active participation, and exercise of choice, in seeking a route through the structure of the work. This is familiar territory for children raised on video games: it is quite a different experience in a context of contemplative exploration and revelation. Shaw's piece, although awesomely well-conceived and presented, is already quite primitive, compared with recent innovations. It would have been good to see in this show the work of Peter D'Agostino, or of Weinbren and Friedman, who are producing interactive installations of epic proportions: perhaps they belong to the video art of the 1990's.

I missed as well, with a pang of patriotic disappointment, any work from Britain, although a few British artists (David Hall, Tina Keane, Eno, Mineo Aayamaguchi) get some mention in the catalogue, which spreads its net even wider than the show itself. Now I know for sure that there has been video-sculpture made by British artists which would not have disgraced itself in this show; some indeed, whose presence would have improved it. The absence of any work by Urch, Littman, Welsh, Goddard, Maynell, and others, is incomprehensible. It may be that we simply do not attract attention to the good work made by British artists, with sufficient hullabaloo or support.

It is almost inconceivable that a show of video of this scale and scope could originate in Britain, given the current climate for funding and industrial liaison. The

Video Positive show in Merseyside in February, though touted as the biggest ever in Britain, was positively miniature in comparison. No one in Cologne, not even Dr. Herzogenrath, had heard about it. British arts administrators and curators would do well to visit Video-Skulptur, to see what is possible in the presentation of video art - given funds, benign regard from Sony, and curatorial dedication. It's not too late - although it will have finished its run in Cologne by the time this appears in print - it will be shown in toto in Berlin, in August and September of this year, where it will be just part of what promises to be a mammoth retrospective survey of video art in all its forms.

Even more urgent is the need for those British artist-animateurs with a more specific interest in video to learn a couple of European languages, spend a few bob more on postage stamps, use the international telephone service and travel a bit, to raise the currently near-nonexistent profile of British video art abroad. If that could happen, it might then start to be taken seriously by both the public and private sector at home. See you in Berlin.

Mick Hartney

'Video-Skulptur, retrospektiv und aktuell 1963-1989' by Wulf Herzogenrath and Edith Decker, the publication which catalogues and accompanies the exhibition, is available from Nigel Greenwood Books, 4 New Burlington Street, London W1X 1FE. Tel: 01-434 3797. A 60 minute video tape with documentation of the exhibition, and interviews with curators and artists, is available from Dumont Video Editions, Dumont Buchverlag, Cologne. Price 78 DM + p.p.

'25 Years of Video Sculpture, Video Installations and Video Tapes' will be presented at the Congresshalle Berlin, as part of the 39th Berlin Arts Festival, from the 27th August to the 24th September 1989.

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