

Specifically Video

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(abridged version)

In many respects, the technologies of film and video have merged. It is now rare to be medium specific from input to output like Tacida Dean in her current exhibition at the Tate. More usually, film is seen on TV, video projected, and all editing is done on computer. But historically, within a theorised, materialist frame, film and video have been seen as separate areas of art practice.

Rosalind Krauss in her essay "Video - the aesthetics of narcissism" observed that: "unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback. The body is therefore centred between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performers' images with the immediacy of a mirror."¹

The optics that produced the shallow depth of field of most early video cameras exaggerated this tendency. In the 1970s, Stuart Marshall took up these concerns. He saw video as a kind of mirror," that allows for an observation of the self that is not spatially fixed (one sees the image from a place where one is not looking). For the artist observing him/herself on the monitor there is a narcissistic identification with the body image and an oscillation of exhibitionism and voyeurism as s/he is placed as both subject and object of the look."² The medium had an immediacy without print and processing and it was this immediacy which gave it such responsive possibilities.

David Hall's tapes *Vidicon Inscriptions* (1974) reveal another aspect of video's materiality by investigating the technology of a 'tube' camera. These cameras would 'burn' the signal plate of the vidicon tube if they were pointed at a bright light (at the time considered a great technological deficiency). Hall used this physical property of the camera to temporarily record and fix a visual trace as afterimage.³

Although particular to video in the 1970s, Hall understood this in conceptual terms,⁴ which can be seen to reflect those by Gidal and filmmakers claiming territory specific to the material quality of film.

Through the visibility of the process of signification (edits, lighting, camera shake, grain etc) there is a refusal of the film industry's production values that, through narrative illusion,

causes the cinematic repression of time and space. Meanwhile, video makers had the box of light scanning dots to contend with, placing the viewer in a very different position.

The structure of art works has often incorporated notions of material and apparatus, from Gidal to Gordon. With the exception of layered options offered by some web work, these tend to give audiences a role as viewing subject, rather than a directly interactive (programming) ability. Seen through a computer screen in virtual space, web work relies heavily on a new form of suspension of disbelief. It requires an ability to engage conceptually at the same time as peering past the grey plastic into the work beyond. This is (until technology changes) a viewing state that tends to deny the corporeal and is predominantly an intellectual one. In these circumstances, the complete or 'voyeuristic' viewing is not available.

As a student in the 1980s, my interest in performance gave me an attachment to video, with permutations of being behind and in front of the camera with a remote control. Video offered a kind of easy spontaneity and intimacy that now becomes further extended with domestic editing. In new work, I find myself looking at the leaky bits between cinema, new technologies and performance. Unlike a material support (as in CD, film etc. which are recognisable ways of understanding the apparatus as also signifying meaning), 'digital' itself, seems unsatisfactory as a categorising term. It only partially identifies the process or what is produced. It has been argued by Laura Mulvey that 'new technologies' since VHS, allow for different readings. A new 'pensive' viewer can replace the once 'voyeuristic' one, by offering him/her the slowing down, re-running and stilling of the film. There are now two types of viewing available, the 'complete' one in a public cinema and the 'incomplete', pulled apart one of the domestic VHS/DVD. The relationship between the material, the changing roles and consciousness of the maker and viewer, have expanded the possibilities afforded by video in all its forms.

1. "New Artists Video", Gregory Battcock, Dutton press, 1978
2. Op cit
3. See "Diverse Practices" ed. Julia Knight, Luton Press, 1996
4. see David Hall, "Before the Concrete Sets", LVA catalogue, 1991