

CONFERENCE PAPERS

November 1985, with Faction Films being interviewed by Philip Hayward. Hayward previously interviewed George Barber after a compilation of his work was screened. As an independent local cinema the Acton screen will be the venue for community video screenings organised by Hammersmith's Connections workshop. West London Media Workshop will similarly use the venue four times a year. And West London SEFT are in the process of

developing further uses of this video facility.

Part of the remit of any independent cinema is to form links with the community and identify all the possible audiences who could make use of it. But the area to watch is the new 52 week programme, funded by Greater London Arts, of screening one independent video per week as an accompaniment to the feature film. This will open a range of

video work to a more general cinema audience. Can independent video recapture the high ground of radical cinema, shown without the red triangle in the corner, disrupt and destabilise familiar and comfortable viewing patterns; or will it too be bought off the megastore shelf?

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TOWARDS A CRITICAL LANGUAGE FOR VIDEO: Paper by Nik Houghton, London Video Arts

Part of video's attraction for me has, I suspect, been based on the medium's indefinable and fast moving state. It can, for example, be used in a sculptural/ installation context, put to use as a documentary tool or utilised as an abstract form. It's a medium in which it is still possible to be playful and innovatory, an artform not yet ossified or constricted. Furthermore, video has always seemed to me to operate, for better or for worse, at the forefront of cultural shift, underlining the haphazard jumps in theory and practice which have defined the art'n'media scene in the last 20 years. Its appeal too is perhaps its intertextuality, the way in which video interacts with subculture, pop music, politics, theory and technology, television and 'high art'. A medium without real tradition or theoretical background, video asserts itself in that blurry area of post-modernism where, to quote John Wyver, the distinction between high art and mass culture collapses.

But if all this sounds a little too self congratulatory then it should be clearly understood that there is a downside to this model of bright new art which is, in part, paradoxically defined by the very lack of tradition which gives video its freeform profile. By this I mean to indocate a video culture which, although in apparent expansive and upwardly mobile mood has, largely, existed independently of the critical and theoretical thinking which has informed other contemporary art-forms. This failure to arrive at a cohesive critical methodology, a language which accounts for video art specifically, perhaps partly



explains the strangely muted response of the press toward what is, apparently, a high profile area.

What's interesting here is that despite the surge of interest in video art in the last 5 years or so - the media's love-affair and eventual containment of 'scratch', from subversion to hip-hopping TV adverts; the newly emergent Network 21; increasingly prolific and well organised exhibitions - the response of art critics and the 'serious press' has been limited and often confused. Perhaps part of the problem is that no-one quite knows how to define video. (I mean, well *yes*, it *calls* itself video *art* but, really, Algernon, what's it got to do with painting?) Without the relevant critical tools, is this stuff television, sculptural, conceptual or what?...perhaps we should give it to the

film critic? The gurus of high art have, one suspects, found it difficult to assess the thing, preferring instead to regard the form as some sort of marginal hiccup in contemporary culture. Even where there is critical writing it tends towards the dismissive, defensive or slapdash. Indeed even amongst those publications which give column space to video art there remain problems as the more dynamic and dramatic products tend to claim space over more problematic artefacts. Often 'successful work' is regarded as that which is most entertaining, straightforward and easy to consume. The criteria of the throwaway pop-promo, in fact. (Honourable mentions here to 'Artforum', 'ZG' magazine, 'Performance', 'Block', 'Art Monthly' and the vital 'Independent Video'; 'City Limits' deserve a nod but the increasing tendency to see a 'video

section' as VHS film review - leave it to the film-critics, pal - undercuts the work done here). (see note 1)

The problem is exacerbated by video art's refusal to be constrained within categories or genres - this seems to me to be particularly true of new or young tape slingers - and its tendency to operate at the point of 'cross-over' between various forms and styles. For critics perhaps more attuned to the transient excitement of pop video or, alternatively, more at home with the 'traditional' arts this can create obvious and unsettling problems (d'you think that if I ignore it it might go away, Jerome?...)

Quite simply a critical mechanism has yet to emerge for the analysis of video art and, whilst ever more work emerges and public interest grows, the press remains largely muted. Informed opinion is essential at this juncture as is any initiative for debate and discourse about video art, its origins, intentions, and direction. (I am not here arguing for wholly academic and theoretical strategy - a textbook institutionalisation of video art - but pointing to a tactic of information dispersal and analysis as a means of promoting a greater and wider based understanding and appreciation of the medium).

Finally, I suppose that what I am asking for is a critical system specific to video art which, while it may seek to account for media theory, feminism, politics, etc, within its whole, is particular to video art. Such a system might also function as an intervention in a video art scene which, although active, often seems too hypnotised by its own

eclecticism to fully consider where it's going. Alternatively it could just be that video art's vitality, its form hopping fluidity, has developed precisely *because* it has been unconstrained by the baggage of theory, history and 'high art' mediation.

The 'truth' lies, perhaps, between the two ideas: video art has developed, broadened, enlarged itself at least partially because it has no 'rules' nor a dominant theoretical base or critical system, it's been free to shift, dabble and diversify in a multitude of directions. So far so good. Now, though, maybe time to make sense of what has gone before and account for what is currently happening. The intention is not to restrain but explain, not an argument for conformity but critical thinking.

How this is undertaken I do not pretend to know but, in the end, it might well prove to be as important a project as the continued production and promotion of video art. "The criticism - both method and specific analysis - which would be appropriate has not emerged. Perhaps what we need is an appropriate criticism, something to parallel appropriate technology", wrote Dick Higgins in 1979. (see note 2). He was talking about performance art but the ideas hold true, I think, for video art now as they did for performance art in the late 70's... "In short, we need a repository of sets of critical approaches and ideas from which we can develop this appropriate criticism".

In the sorting house of post-modern practice it may yet be imperative that we begin the construction work on a critical

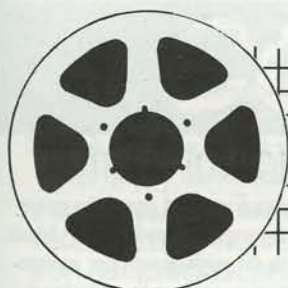
structure if video art is not to implode under its own weight. The building blocks for this structure must, finally, come from the tapemakers themselves, critics, observers, theorists. It will rely not on traditional methods of art criticism but on new ways of thinking. The form of the structure is not yet defined and this is potentially its most exciting aspect - the opportunity for us all to contribute to an, as yet, incomplete critical system.

Any volunteers?

Note 1. To the uninformed it must often seem that video art is some sort of ghostly, rarely glimpsed phenomenon as listings magazines seem notoriously ineffectual at highlighting exhibitions and both the 'dailies' and art press rarely respond to new exhibition initiatives. "Yes, but how can you know where to see all this stuff?", someone once asked me about video art. I think I mumbled something about the ICA and 'keeping an eye out'.

The situation is made worse by the apparent failure of video columnists themselves - 'City Limits' and 'Time Out' - to review exhibitions and screenings; in both publications valuable column space is taken up with endless reviews of VHS films. Beyond the cosy glow of the office TV, however, new works go unseen and marginalised. Presumably these people have neither the energy nor the taxi fare required to visit galleries and the like.

Note 2. Extract from 'Post-modern Performance', Dick Higgins: PERFORMANCE BY ARTISTS; Metropole Press, 1979.



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