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Post Modernism and the Populist Tendency

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In this essay on current issues informing much video art production in Britain, I shall first reflect on some general issues raised principally by the parallel situation in the U.S. and elsewhere, and in the light of this I will then look at some of the more particular concerns and attributes of work being produced in Britain. The point of departure is in itself problematic; while in many ways it is now desirable to dispense with the term, 'Video Art', it is nonetheless a fact that the impetus for this enquiry springs essentially from the historical process of twentieth century art, and that the work under consideration is mainly produced by individuals who, in the absence of a better description, term themselves video artists. It has been argued, particularly by the American John Sanborn, that 'Media Artist' becomes a more apt title for the video user who begins to situate her/his activity within the context of mass culture; in describing the works of several artists including Tony Ousler and Gary Hill he writes: 'These quirky examples simply illustrate the growth of what I feel is a group of misleading media artists who do not make art as much as they make, well,...media. The material is so strongly spelled PRODUCT that the process oriented world cringes'. However, this is an artist talking about other artists, and I have no doubt that the media world itself would have no doubt but that such PRODUCT is art since it is clearly not MEDIA in its terms, as it originated somewhere 'outside'.

Undoubtedly, there are still those within traditionalist pockets of resistance in the art world who would argue the validity of video, or any popular cultural form, as art, but when considering the issue of the proposed new genre 'media artist' any such argument is irrelevant on two counts: firstly, it is historically untenable in its own terms, and secondly, whatever frame of reference is used to describe such individuals, as far as the media world itself is concerned, they are still basically UFO's, and 'video artist' is as good a bracket as any to put them in. The media world cares little about what artists call themselves, nor does it concern itself with whether or not one group of artists is considered to be art by another group of artists. The media can always find somebody to trot out a definition of art should the need arise.

However, the point of this preamble is not to become embroiled in a fruitless area of discussion, but to establish the point that one is accepting as given the term 'video artist' for better or worse in order to avoid confusion.

Is that all there is?

Populism in contemporary British art is not so much a consciously defined issue, as a tendency which has evolved over the past few years. It first became apparent in the late 70's, alongside the concept of Post Modernism, and while some early attempts were made to launch Post Modernism as a new canon (notably in a 1978 *Artscribe* appraisal of a number of painters including Duggie Fields), the idea and the attendant concern with populism have largely taken root outside of the kind of rigorous debate that typified the preceding eras of minimalism, conceptualism and formalism. Whereas in the U.S. populism is being heralded in a rather naive and inappropriate manner as the force that simultaneously puts the lid on the formalist avant garde, and allows artists to penetrate the main stream of media culture, here it is seen either as a stage in an ongoing process of development, perhaps a cause for cautious optimism, or simply as an opportunity, particularly when manifested through painting and sculpture, to pull bigger crowds into the galleries, thus validating their existence within a Thatcherite economy, and enabling dealers to sell more art.

The uncritical acceptance in the U.S. of the inevitability of significant 'crossover' into the mainstream

looks suspiciously like a reiteration of the 'more = better' equation that lies at the heart of imperialism, monetary or cultural. There is an assumption that making art available to a mass audience is an act of democratisation in itself, regardless of content, regardless of the consumerist connotations, regardless of the political position into which the artist must of necessity have been forced by the communications industry. This is not to suggest that an oppositional stance is irrevocably debarred from a mass context, but the dynamics of that context inevitably dictate a rigid, unilinear flow between producer and consumer. There is no doubt that the crossover from minority interest to mass culture will increasingly take place; as the industry's hunger for new material grows, more artists will find their work reaching a mass audience, and they will gain expertise and not inconsiderable stimulation from their relationships with the entertainment industry. But it will not make their art either better or worse ultimately, and it will probably not make any real difference to the industry itself or to the behaviour and attitudes of the recipients, other than extending the range of what they are prepared to accept as entertainment. The over-riding effect of television — a kind of tautological democracy — is a process of evening out. Everything comes across, within a limited range, as more or less level, as a unitary measurement in the ongoing flow of T.V. time. Although it is possible to intervene, to introduce new ideas or alternative viewpoints, the context somehow militates against the efficacy of content. The radical is generally assimilated instead of being defined or directed; the uniform quality of television is an affirmation of dominant values. The recent British election was won in the media because the Conservative political machine ruthlessly exploited the ability of the media to confirm suspicions, fears and prejudices by postulating them as inherently laudable national characteristics, which, if held firm, would deliver us ultimately to the gates of a consumer paradise. Political debate was reduced to the status of soap opera, which itself inadvertently took on the heroic characteristics of classical tragedy.

And so it is against this background of what mass media actually does or does not do that we must consider the issue of populism as a viable cause for the artist to embrace. Inserting 'alternatives' into the dominant stream does not subvert it and does not create access in any generalised sense. In fact, if one were to espouse a 'conspiracy theory' approach to the whole issue, it would be tempting to think that the real motive for allowing access to alternative viewpoints is simply to posit the inviability of such viewpoints in relation to the dominant norm. Utopianism is a tolerable deviation.

A recent issue of the American magazine *Art Com* devoted much space to the populist issue. Amidst a plethora of fashionable rhetoric, polemical platitudes and indigestible terminology, the apotheosis of the buzz-word mentality, there was little evidence that anyone had much idea what was going on, other than that a number of artists had broadened the scope of their work to embrace popular culture and would therefore address a wider audience, thus escaping from the cultural ghetto to which twentieth century history had hitherto confined them. It seems the assumption had been made somewhere along the line that because these artists had been 'liberated' and cut loose in the mass market of popular culture, they would immediately start in on the heroic task of liberating everyone else, armed with their sharp sensibilities, their intuitive grasp of the new technology, their phrase books in media-speak and their pretence to the status of Businessmen. The real issue behind it all is whether the advocates of populism will win the battle for art world supremacy, so that they can call the shots, define the context, refine the codes, dismantle the nexus of economic relations within the art world to institute a system more appropriate to their particular aspirations. (It is apparent that selling a lot of cars to a lot of people at the lowest possible price is a more effective strategy than selling a few cars to a few people at a high price, and subsidising this endeavour by trafficking in cocaine.)

Of the many views expressed in the *Art Com* survey, the most realistic in broad terms was that of Canadian artist, Tom Sherman, who is worth quoting at some length: "Let's face it, artists choose to work within the mass media context for a couple of pretty good reasons. What better place is there for indulging in or criticising mass media than the mass media itself? What better place could anyone suggest for finding an audience interested in indulging in or criticising mass media?". Sherman's statement can be contrasted with the contention of editor Carl Loeffler that "The 'cross over' tendency creates an expanded arena or context for the expression of ideas by visual artists. The 'new' arena for art involves radical changes toward the perception and definition of art".

To determine 'new' perceptions and 'new' definitions for art, on behalf of the world at large, and to dump these into the context of popular culture, is not popularization through mass engagement, it is simply elitism on an extended scale. The issue of populism is not unique to American and British art, it crops up everywhere that an established avant garde practice exists. It is probably more highly developed in America due to the sheer scale of the media industry there, and the comparative accessibility that artists enjoy. In Britain, it is a comparatively new issue, and one which is barely documented. There is the ongoing cable debate in Britain, but few now believe that there is any provision for truly democratic public access, and even if this were not the case, the question of art is not especially 'hot'. It would be pointless to make any claims on behalf of populist artists in Britain or to assume that the dawn of a new age of mass creativity or mass aesthetic involvement will be the inevitable result of a broadening of the art context.

Populism as reaction

In beginning to look at the implications of populism within contemporary British art, and video in particular, we must first ask what it was that caused the idea to develop. It is apparent in the first instance that it was, in art terms, a reaction to the formalism which preceded it. For many young artists in the late seventies, there seemed nowhere to go. Many retreated into a romantic rerun of some era or other from art history, others reached the conclusion that the whole issue was arid territory and turned, as had happened in the sixties, to popular culture. The violent energy of new wave culture quickly penetrated every level of creative activity in Britain, throwing up a whole new generation of musicians, graphic artists, fashion designers, poets, performance artists and writers. By the eighties, most of the early energy had dissipated, but by then certain ideas had firmly taken root in the art schools and in the minds of young artists trying to define a context for their own activities. And at the same time, cheap colour video was becoming a reality, video games were becoming a national obsession, home computers were becoming commonplace, and home recording technology to cater for the independent musician was invented. In the late seventies, Post Modernism was declared as the point after the end point in the modernist process. Painting started to come back, artists' film abandoned structuralism in favour of a vocabulary that drew a direct line of descent from Punk, but that also had all the right art-historical references. By the time punk had been declared officially dead, popular culture and high art alike had fractured into a million cults, trends, revivals and reruns. The era of New Romanticism introduced a note of self-conscious pomposity perfectly

attuned to the emerging national philosophy of Thatcherism.

Within art schools, the great revival of painting, the noises coming from Berlin and New York, the reaction against all the avant garde strategies of the seventies, created an opportunity for video to come into its own. Video provided a refuge for those unwilling to take up the task of re-establishing painting and sculpture. It also provided a language that was rapidly becoming universally regarded as the authentic expression of the media-dense times, and it provided a direct point of access to the whole field of popular culture.

A new generation of video artists emerged at the beginning of the decade. With scant regard for the process-oriented video of the seventies, they set about their task of synthesizing; anything could be incorporated, T.V. commercials, soap opera, pop music, literature, art history, fashion, performance, dance, computer graphics, video games.

Video in Britain is, all things considered, remarkably healthy now. Its roots lie in the development of video access facilities, such as that operated by London Video Arts, which came about in the seventies in response to demands from avant garde artists and community activists alike for the opportunity to explore and exploit the medium of video. We have now reached a position where such access facilities, in Britain at least, are becoming more widespread through the infusion of public money and more recently through the support of Channel Four television. Alongside this move towards an open access to video facilities has been the massive explosion in sales and rentals of domestic video equipment. At a grass roots level, video production is mushrooming, not only in terms of the obvious examples of domestic pornography and home movie making, but also in terms of a video subculture that is analogous to the opening up of musical production initiated by the new wave phenomenon in the late seventies. This inherently anti-consumerist trend embodies the assumption that instead of paying to see a high tech multi media extravaganza, you can do it yourself, albeit crudely, with whatever tools are at your disposal. The audience will inevitably be smaller, but a context exists, an exchange of ideas is integral to it.

Against this background of developing guerilla activity, it is possible for the video artist to embrace populist concerns, to gradually reach out to a broader audience, without having to bow to the demands of the media industry. Through a network of alternative venues ranging from small galleries to clubs, cafes and discos, to community-based arts centres and video workshops and to private homes, a more critical media consciousness may develop, based not on the assumption that acceptance into the mainstream of media culture will automatically open up new horizons, but on the assumption that the media mainstream is not the only alternative. And the most vital element of this tendency is the fact that it operates on the principle of engagement and involvement rather than that of exclusion; it is still about communication, social interaction, all of the things that the immobilised television (or domestic video) viewer is denied. And populism in this sense does not simply mean the espousal of the style or imagery of dominant popular/cultural trends; it allows an engagement with issues of mass concern; sexual politics; the nuclear arms race; race relations; community politics.

Having illustrated the naiveté of assuming that intrusion into the processes of mass culture will ultimately be the saviour of art, or that such intrusion will have any quantifiable effect upon the mass media itself, the mistake should be avoided of assuming that an emerging subculture based on video and other electronic processes will in itself make any noticeable impact upon dominant cultural forms. Certain elements will inevitably filter through and become assimilated; various individuals will make the transformation from 'alternative' to 'mainstream'; but a living oppositional culture will at least provide a spur to creative experiment and radical intervention which are difficult if not impossible within the dominant form.

Image, music, text

The contemporary cultural project, and the video tape in particular, exists within a matrix of references, historical, cultural, linguistic and social, which has multiple points of access, drawing as it does upon an extensive pool of information that is generally available through the media of mass communication. Yet it is dense in so far as the extent of comprehension is determined by the ability of the viewer to decode and isolate particular strands, and to extrapolate constructs based on the interrelations and connections between these strands, a process that may in one case be based upon an established theoretical methodology, and in another, be entirely intuitive. This disjuncture between the analytical and the instinctual exists as much in the makers of the texts as in those who endeavour to interpret or simply comprehend them. While some artists, commencing from a position of acquired theoretical methodology, translated into informed practice, pursue a deliberate process of deconstruction/reconstruction, others operate instinctively in a field, drawing upon a wide net of inputs, and employing techniques of deconstruction/reconstruction as learned responses rather than developed techniques. The text is the direct reverse of the formalist work, whose reductive purity sought scrupulously to eradicate all reference to anything beyond the blunt reality of the object itself. The text is an admission of the relationship of itself to everything else, it desires to merge with the context surrounding it, accepts that it would be irrelevent in isolation: the individual video production as text is essentially a part of a wider text whose parameters are delineated only by the range of contributory cultural/linguistic threads.

Thus, for video, the context may shift from gallery to cafe to discotheque to specialist festival to television to community centre, and may ultimately mutate into a form that owes something to all of these, whilst being a response to a new set of imperatives. If the video production is itself a text, or part of a text, then the situation in which it is experienced and commented upon is also part of that text on a broader scale. If video continues to attempt to engage a wider and less specialised (fragmented) audience, then the dialogue between that audience and the art/artist will contribute to the growth of the form through the development of a shared cultural syntax. One area in which this process can already be seen is in the work of various artists who are currently concentrating on image/music relationships, and on the relationships between sounds/words/images. Such projects can clearly be seen to relate to and to be influenced by mainstream tendencies in pop video and commercial television, but they differ essentially in orientation. Whereas in the instance of the commercial pop video, the image, the narrative, is subordinated to the primary function of selling a separate product, artists, image/music tapes are aimed at creating a synthesis, a form in which neither part would be effective in the absence of the other. In this area there exist both great potential for the development of a truly populist cultural form, and the risk of rapid assimilation into the machinations of the consumer industries. A conscious decision by practitioners and enthusiasts of video art to encourage active participation in the production and dissemination of video through independently controlled

channels, for the purpose of a broad and engaging dialogue, could create a strength that would allow for (potentially) mass exposure without massive dilution.

The most interesting aspect, perhaps, of the whole populist development in video, is that it is no one individual's sovereign province; it arises from a broader cultural concern. Although, like any other form, it produces both 'good' and 'bad' or 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' art, the individual work or the individual producer is not the main point; the fact that it is happening and that a vital and energetic cultural endeavour may result, is the main point. For this reason, I have avoided the consideration of particular video tapes and individual artists. Another piece of writing setting up another new genre with its attendant personality cult of 'key' figures is not what we need at this point in time. What we do need is a sense of responsibility, a commitment to maintain an openness to new possibilities and a confirmed suspicion of anything that appears to be the easy option. The Post Modernist ideal of Populism will either result in a further de-specialisation of cultural production, or it will simply deliver up another load of willing compliants to the waiting arms of the media industry.

J Welsh, October 1983

Hollis Frampton

The 'Undercut' collective expresses the sadness of many British film-makers upon hearing of the death of Hollis Frampton. His films meant much to many of us.

Stills from 'Zorns Lemma'.