

Independent Media 163  
1990

Jeز Welsh, video artist, activist and arbiter, offers his thoughts on the 90s and why he's leaving England.

# RESIGNING NOT RESIGNED

## P R E A M B L E

FOR SOME REASON - for various reasons: because I didn't get round to it; because I hadn't the time - I never quite managed to write my piece for the 100th Edition of *IM* A pity, really since I have over the years been a sporadic contributor, and it was certainly not for want of things to say that I failed to put pen to paper at the crucial moment. Actually, I had plenty to say, but somehow the syntax was missing. I had all of these coagulating ideas inside my head that I could not/would not commit to paper at that moment. Maybe because some of those thoughts would be virtually treasonable - to utter then would be to damn myself as a heretic with words from my own mouth.

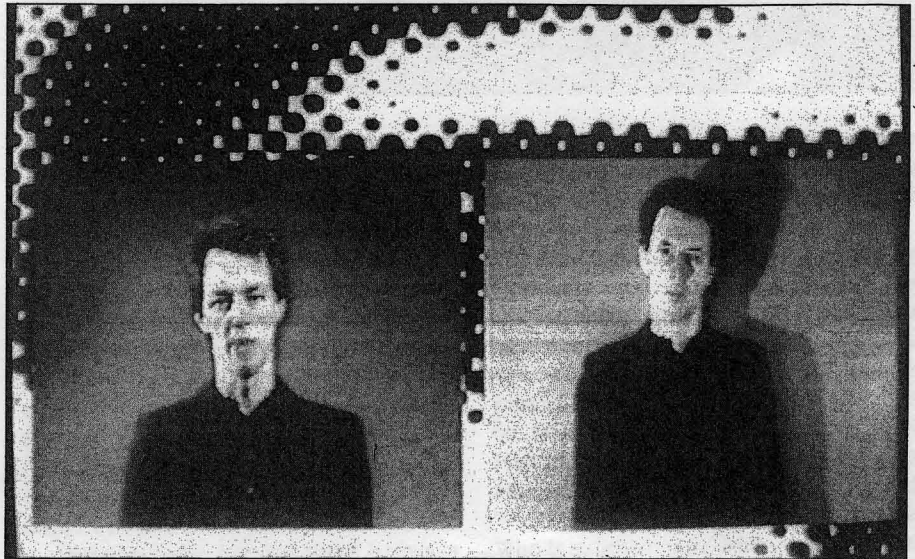
## A M B L E

SO HERE IS MY rear-vision skim through the Video Decade and my side-long glance at the state-of-the-art (and the art's in a state) on the threshold of the millennial countdown. It's time for a change, for me, for all of us. So I'm resigning, but I am not, and will not be resigned. My resignation is not just a matter of leaving a job - if it were, I wouldn't need to do it in this semi-public arena. No, I'm resigning from British Video Art - no longer will I be its standard bearer, apologist, promoter, proselytiser. I might yet write something of its history - if for no other reason than to clear a space in my head - and I shall observe with interest its future - IF it has one.

## ( R ) A M B L E

I honestly do not understand why so many commentators, having heaved a sigh of relief as the Hit and Run eighties closed, have chosen to regard the onset of the nineties as a cause for unbridled optimism (Perhaps, in the words of Jim Morrison circa 1969: "I've been down so long that it looks like up to me.").

Just look at where we are now, as compared to then. At the beginning of the eighties we strode forward confidently, convinced of the rectitude of our arguments and principles, convinced that we were going to get what we wanted. And, by and large, we did. Not only that, but we kept most of it until well into the second half of the decade. Workshops. Access to television. Distributors. An expanded network of places to see



Eclipses (1988)

and show independent work. Funding for innovative, new, challenging & radical work.

So what happened? We start the new decade having lost most of the things we gained in the last one. As walls come tumbling down over Eastern Europe, the shutters are coming down in the West. Television has had enough of those deviant 'Independents'. The workshop sector has more or less imploded. In West Germany, where spending per capita on culture has been the envy of other European countries till now, there is suddenly no more cash for Art (and probably many other things), as the Money Machine of Western Europe pours its reserves into buying off the East. And whereas the early eighties experiment was the outgrowth and consequence of a period of development that began in the late sixties, and was brought to fruition through a collective effort, the early nineties experience is that of fragmented and increasingly isolated individuals. Collectivism has been abolished. RIP: IFA, IVA, IFVA, IFVPA, etc.

## S H A M B L E S

The disintegration of the 'Independent sector' is, unfortunately, Not at all surprising. I don't really want to go into it here, but if anyone is interested, there is a fairly lengthy essay I wrote in 1984 for a book published by Artexes in Montreal, in which I exam-

ined various infrastructural problems of video - problems that I then hoped could be solved (*VIDEO Anthology*, edited by Rene Payant, published by Artexes, 3575 Boul St Laurent, Montreal).

The whole notion of 'Independence' is/was, anyway, something that should have been subjected to serious critical appraisal. We are not and have never been 'Independent'. We are entirely dependent upon patronage of one form or another for our means of production and dissemination, and we are interdependent in terms of our relationship with the broader cultural context. Even our fondly cherished notions of editorial independence don't hold up well any more. It seems quite clear that if your message is too radical, your form too innovative, your idea too wild, your difference too different, then no one will finance, support, promote, exhibit or distribute what you make, or try to make.

TV is, believe it or not, only really interested in bite-sized curiosities to fill the gaps between real television programmes. Television as Art? Forget it! One minute on the *Late Show*, or four for Bonny Scotland, it makes bugger all difference to anything. Infiltration? Intervention? No, not really. Suffocation. Neutralisation.

And the machineries of State Funding? The BFI's flirtation with video was half

hearted and short lived. And now the Arts Council has stitched up Video Art as cheap programming for Television - cheap programming that is so cheap they can afford to never use it. Now that they have got round to screening the New Directors productions (three years after completion in some cases), we are offered images that are anything but dazzling. The most telling thing about the new series is that the title sequence is the only part with anything approaching 'Dazzle'. There is nothing much new or experimental about the work. It is, for the most part, work by people who have done better things before or who have gone on to do better things since. It is work that would have been best left in the vaults.

There is still The Gallery, but the latest Arts Council policy puts the cart firmly before the horse by suggesting that curators shall decide what kind of art artists shall make. I must take a share of the blame, since I have also been involved in commissioning work for thematic shows, and, indeed, there is nothing wrong with themes or commissions as such. The real problem is that video artists have effectively been locked out of the funding structure - it is no longer possible to get funding simply because you need it to make work. You have to pre-market the work even before you get the money to make it. I regard this as an entirely BAD situation that will do nothing but damage in the longer term. Worse still, there is barely an opening left for the young artist leaving college and wanting to work on a modest scale. For the price of one bad narrative film or video they could have funded twenty young makers to produce something on Lo-band or Super-8.

And not only is there a lack of funding for non-broadcast, single-screen production, but even the resources that artists could use are pricing themselves out of the reach of unfunded makers. It is not the fault of the workshops themselves; they now have to compete in an aggressive market to survive.

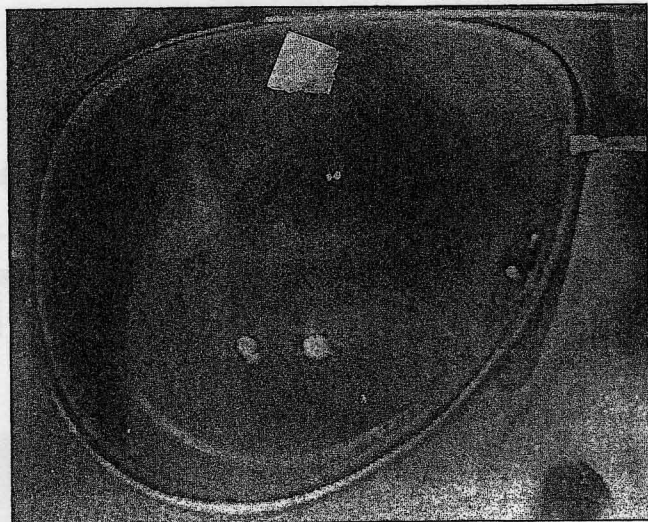
It is just a further illumination of the total lack of vision on the part of funding agencies. Instead of pouring money into expensive Wardour Street facilities for the Eleventh Hour or New Directors schemes, they could have set up LVA (or some other) with

a broadcast on-line suite, and could have thereby built some long-term security into the Independent Sector. Instead, they spout forth regurgitated management theory, failing utterly to comprehend its irrelevance to cultural practice, and look only for neat packages that can be justified to accountants. The guardians of culture have lain down like lambs and let the wolves of Free Enterprise run rings around them.

## P O S T A M B L E

So in view of this uninspiring situation, it is interesting to read Terry Flaxton's thoughts of returning to his Video Roots (*IM* 100). Quite by chance, I've had the same conversation with several people, all involved in video throughout the eighties, but in different countries on different continents, and they have all reached the same conclusions (myself included): Go Back To Basics. If Corporations, Patrons, Bureaucracies get in the way of your Art, ignore them, avoid them. If no one wants your work here, take it somewhere else, because there is always somebody, somewhere who will recognise its worth. I only part company with Terry at the end of his article, and not seriously enough to make an issue of it, but, if he really wants to 'recover' nature he will even have to jettison the VHS camera. 'The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes' is perhaps a forgotten art.

Trying to 'recover' nature (trying to reinvent meaning in the debased discourse of The Image) may well be a *leitmotif* for the nineties aesthetic. There are good models to follow, such as Bill Viola, whose recent installation at Foundation Cartier near Paris was one of the most powerful and captivating video works I have ever witnessed. Viola is an interesting case to consider in the light of our predicament. Viola is, and is treated as, a serious artist, is well supported, has produced some remarkable (as well as some unremarkable) work, and has achieved a level of maturity and sophistication in his work that perhaps exists nowhere else in video. The fact that he has been consistently well supported since his early career must contribute to what he and his work have become. The sad fact is that if Britain had a budding Bill or Betty Viola it would probably not recognise what it had, would fail to nurture it and would throw away an opportunity to make a significant contribution to con-



The Slow Learning (1989) with P.A. Green)

temporary culture. Since we do not support - and hence lose - our finest scientists, it is perhaps naive to suppose that artists should fare any better.

If all of this sounds unduly pessimistic, try a little exercise - at least those of you who can remember back to 1980. Think about how many of those video artists from the early eighties are still active and actively promoted. When did you last see new work by Mick Hartney, Dave Critchley, Steve Hawley, John Adams, Zoe Redman, Marcelline Mori, Tamara Krikorian, Mark Wilcox, Neil Armstrong, Janusz Szczerek? Who is supporting or producing new work by Graham Young, Cate Elwes, Kate Meynell, Steve Littman, Liz Power, Chris Rowland, Marion Urch, Clive Gillman, Chris Andrews? Just a few names - there are others who have been better supported recently, but for how much and for how long?

There is, sadly, no Fantasy Island to which one might retreat from the grim realities. Public support for the arts, across the board, is on the way out in the Free Market Economies of The West. America looks likely to abolish The National Endowment for The Arts, leaving public arts institutions entirely at the mercy of corporate patrons. Perhaps the East will resist the onslaught of MacDonaldis and the thoughts of Milton Friedman, perhaps not.

I do fervently hope that we have a future in a multicultural, non-nationalistic, democratic and responsible Europe and that the brief history video has enjoyed so far will become the introduction to what follows rather than the epitaph of what went before. It is certainly time for video art, community video, alternative television, whatever else we call any of it, to assess what its strengths and weaknesses have been. We must lose our island mentality and recognise that the community we belong to is big, complex, evolving and is not restricted by national, cultural or formal boundaries. I leave London for a small town in a northern country where many of these arguments have not yet taken place. Perhaps I too, like Terry Flaxton, need to recover nature, regroup, recoup, rethink - and relax.



Immemorial (1989).