SPINNING WILDLY OR STANDING STILL

The 1980's have seen major advances in video technology and its accessibility. Yet JEZ WELSH finds that some of the most important new video art rejects the delights of the edit suite. The backlash starts here?

IF VIDEO IN the present decade has been characterised by an expansion of the technological possibilities, means of distribution and dissemination, and by a diversification of styles, subjects and artistic intentions, is it any longer possible to discuss the notion of a 'Video Aesthetic'? If we reconsider the work of the early 70's then we can describe the 'look' of video art as something quite distinct from the 'look' of television, but as the two forms that were once considered to be polarities on the spectrum of electronic visual culture move closer together, this distinction is diminished or lost altogether. However, it can still be argued that there is a specificity of the medium and it is precisely this specificity that informs the development of many contempoary video artists who have grasped the possibilities afforded by rapid technological developments to begin to define a language of the electronic image that owes little if anything to cinematic conventions. The 'space' of such work is not the pictorial space of post renaissance painting, the naturalistic space of proscenium arch theatre whose conventions have passed over into much of television, nor the perceived space of the camera/viewer in cinema. Rather, it is a hyperspace of indeterminate dimensionality that is nonetheless contained within and defined by the frame of the TV screen. It is a space that video art shares with advertising and pop video.

So far, so good; the theory can take account of work that is constructed electronically through sophisticated post production or the use of computer imaging systems, but what about all of those tapes that reject the use of electronic trickery and instead exploit qualities of stillness, slowness,

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duration, as an antidote to the rapid fire image saturation of media culture? It can equally be argued here that a specificity of the medium is at work here, but rather than a technologically determined specificity, it is an attitudinal specificity whose genesis is in the minimal/conceptual work of the early seventies.

To reduce all of contemporary video to these two tendencies is of course a fatuous exercise, but it can be illuminating to consider examples of both as a means of fixing points on the map of video's aesthetic territories.

A tape that perfectly exemplifies the technologically defined aesthetic is Ingo Gunther's *Rotorama*, recently screened in Channel Four's Eleventh Hour European Video slot. It is a tape in which the output of American television is the raw material, and the tools are state of the art digital video effects used to the point of overkill such that the image bombardment of consumer culture is focussed directly on the viewer throughout the seven minutes of the piece. Images appear then flip, twirl or tumble out of vision so quickly that only a residual haze of recognition imprints itself upon the retina. However, through this torrent of detached signifiers, two elements stand out and provide us with a key to the reading of the work: the recurring images of eyes looking back at us as if our own reflection had become incorporated into the image, our gaze deflected from its subject and turned back on itself; and secondly, television's fetishisation of its own technologies as expressed in consumer product advertising. Where the names of manufacturing corporations or of specific items emerge as the most significant and recognisable ikons in a symbolic language of auto suggestive

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imperatives. So completely does *Rotorama* define the form of Video-as-appropriated-reprocessed-deconstructed-designified information that it almost negates its own project. While the central comment about the media's power emerges as a now familiar argument, the tape accelerates and abstracts to a point where it could no longer 'Carry a meaning'. Perhaps this is a crystalisation of the ultimate nature of television, perhaps just a

contemporary obsession. However, it posits the very real problem; where do we go from here?

If *Rotorama* exists as the apotheosis of the media artist's twin obsessions, technology as the prime determinant of working practise, and television as the all enveloping cultural environment of post modern society, then the works of Yugoslav artists Breda Beban and Hrvoje Horvatic exist in a parallel universe. Shunning all

temptations to explore the delights of the edit suite, they draw their inspiration from Central Europe's rich cultural heritage from Byzantine painting to body art. And unlike much contemporary art, their use of imagery and symbolism from their cultural history is not simple pastiche, but an attempt to situate their own work within a cultural perspective that has a past as well as the eternal present inhabited by consumer societies.
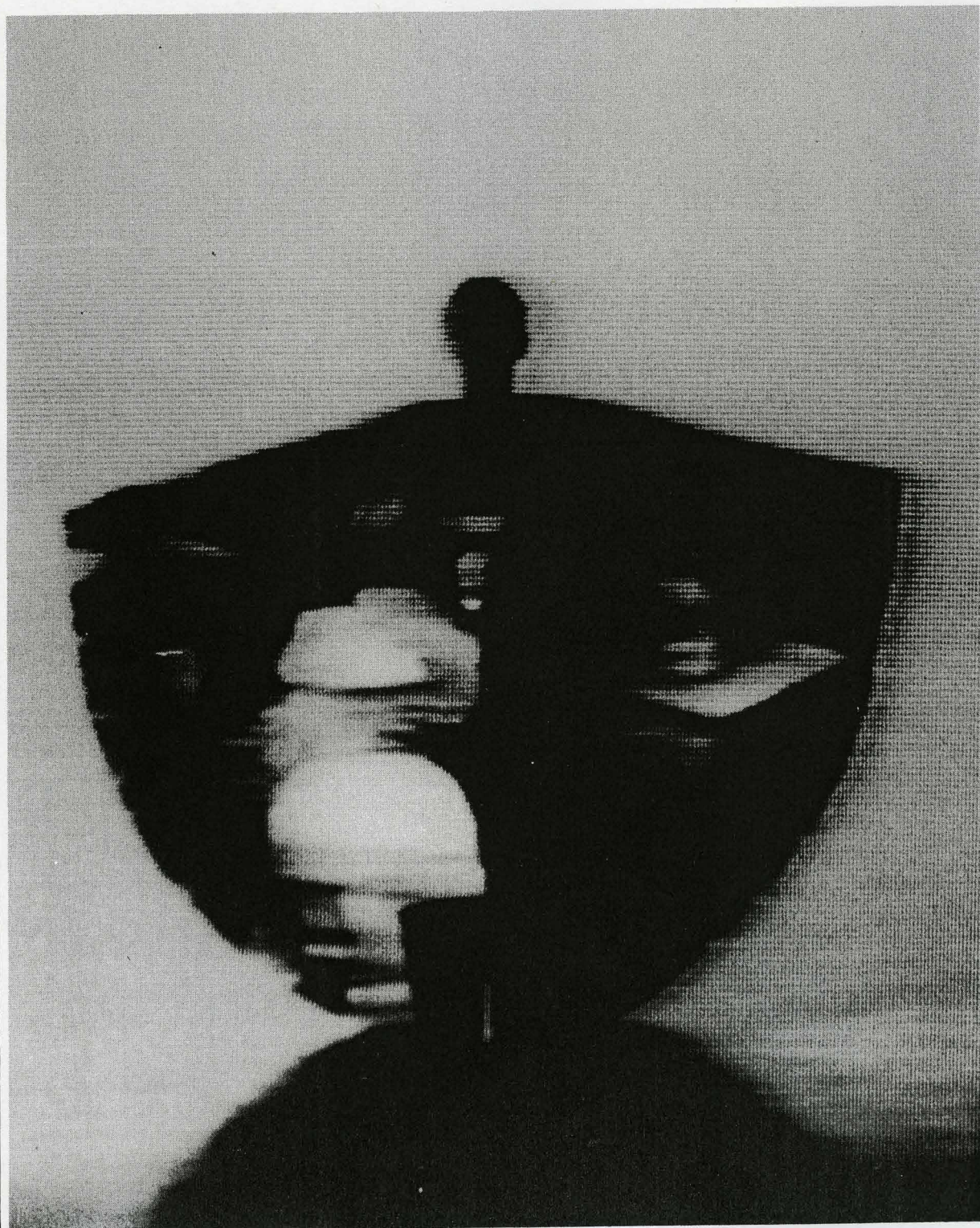
Remarkably, several of their slow, gradual and for video, long works, have been produced by and for Yugoslav television. Unlike British broadcasting which tends to be centralist and monolithic, TV in Yugoslavia is regional and relatively open. It is now becoming a regular feature of TV output in Belgrade, Skopje, Sarajevo and Ljubljana to present works by artists, even at peak viewing times.

Their most recent work, *Taking On A Name*, was produced by TV Skopje, and is a slow, evocative and meditative piece on our perceptions of time and place. Breda Beban is a painter and performance artist, influenced by minimalist and conceptual art, while Hrvoje Horvatic trained as a film/TV director. Taking on a name is characterised by long shots, fixed camera and subtle changes of light and tone, accompanied by a soundtrack that begins with a repeated three note sequence played on bass guitar and is gradually augmented by a shimmering chorus of sustained electronic tones. The images are of water, of a woman standing on a lake shore in a robe like a priest's vestment, slowly extending and then lowering her arms like a moth opening and closely delicately patterned wings. The actions are both ritualistic and sculptural. An earlier work, *Bless My Hands* (1986) takes place in an empty room, lit by a single window, and centres upon the simple action of burning a sheet of white paper and spreading the ashes over a golden circle on the floor. The actions are performed in silence, the only sounds being those outside the room, and a voice that speaks the lines 'Bless my hands, let me be good, let me be loved' like a litany at the beginning and end of the piece. Presented as a hommage to a Yugoslav conceptual artist, it is a moving and powerful work whose simplicity and discipline have an engrossing quality. This work in particular exists as a contemporary extension of video art's beginnings, but the grainy grey austerity of the early works is here supplanted by a cool and sensuous wash of pastel colours.

As yet, their works have not been exhibited outside Yugoslavia, but in the coming year we can expect to see them alongside other exponents of video's new minimalism. ●

Rotorama