

1240  
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# LETTERS

## CHEAP SHOTS FROM A DISTANT SIDELINE

**Dear Performance,**

What a drag to have to spend the last day before the Christmas holiday defending one's honour against attack from an erstwhile ally. Ken Gill's vicious attack on LVA ('Does Good Video Art exist in Britain?' — No 38) really is galling on a variety of levels; it is misleading for a start, and incomplete in so far as it does nothing to describe or explain the context in which the European Media Network exchange took place. Then, it's a pretty shabby piece of writing whose real critical content is absolute zero. But worst of all, to have LVA dismissed as an organisation that couldn't care less, that is too tied up with its internal problems, etc, etc, by someone who abandoned the British art scene amidst the disintegration of the Basement Group/Projects U.K./Newcastle Media Workshops, is not something I'll let go by without fighting back. Ken Gill would be doing British video artists a much greater service by putting his considerable talents to work on their behalf instead of taking cheap shots from a distant sideline.

As the selector of the British tapes for the exchange, I'll defend my choice absolutely. The basis of the exchange was that each participating group should make a one hour package of work that they considered to be a reflection of some aspect of the 'media arts' in their own country. A one hour package could not in any way be a comprehensive overview, and rather than presenting a fragmented and contradictory programme that attempted to deal with a diverse range of practises, I deliberately chose to foreground a particular strand of work. The choice was between the more formal video art tapes that I eventually selected, or a programme of the scratch tapes that Gill would evidently have considered more acceptable. However, his absence from these shores is clearly illustrated here; Scratch became the most over-used word in the Media Language during 1985, and the illusion that video art began with scratch threatened to obliterate the 'lost' history that stretches back 'in a tenuous line to David Hall'. It seemed that every package of British video focussed sharply on scratch to the exclusion of other traditions (I myself have been party to this, programming scratch tapes for touring programmes in the US and festival screenings elsewhere) so I consciously decided to look at another area of work in this selection. And while Gill finds it 'flaccid and marginal' I am certainly not alone in considering it important, worthwhile, deserving of serious critical attention. Not that the

ensuing statistics are necessary in my view to validate the work, but for the record, Triple Vision's tape Circumstantial Evidence was a prizewinner at the International Television Association festival 1984, and was nominated for the BFI Grierson Award in 1984; Mark Wilcox's Calling the Shots won prizes at Video Culture '84 in Canada and Video CD 85 in Yugoslavia; Catherine Elwes With Child has been broadcast recently on Channel 4 as have Graham Young's short Accidents in the home pieces and both have been selected for many exhibitions.

Gill describes these tapes dismissively as 'art school work'; as an inveterate art school prankster, he should know. Perhaps his review is just another prank and perhaps I should not let it get to me, but when a highly opinionated and distorted view, riddled with contentious assertions and factual errors, gets circulated in an international magazine, I worry about the damage it does to LVA, to the artists concerned, to the work itself.

I don't want to indulge in Gill's either/or analysis of the state of British Video, it's puerile and useless. I share his enthusiasm for the work of the Duvet Brothers, I have included their work in several international selections and screening programmes in the UK. Furthermore, various other UK artists (including myself) were featured in the Duvet's Berlin screening. Obviously not worth mentioning this fact, since it takes the sting out of his argument a bit. And far from being an obstacle, far from 'not caring less', LVA is eager to get more British video artists into Europe, either through our own exchange projects, or by providing information and contacts so that artists themselves can promote their own work by following the example of the Duvet Brothers, getting out and DOING IT.

Finally, Gill's piece said precious little about the event as a whole: LVA's selection formed one eighth of it, along with programmes from Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, Germany, Holland and Belgium. And what does he say about the rest? The German tapes were 'weird in places but lacking any genuine madness'. Since when has 'madness' been a pre requisite of any art or a guarantee of quality? And that the Belgian work made such a strong impression on him that he couldn't remember a single name out of a selection that possessed 'wit, acuteness and diversity', while the Dutch programme was entirely delineated by the word 'turgid'. I presume he didn't actually see the work from Spain, Italy, France or Hungary since any mention of those participants is entirely absent. Had

he bothered to think about the selection as a whole, he would have discovered that the eight national compilations each contributed one variant on the theme of 'European Media Art' ranging from the Italian selection of t.v. commercials and fashion features, through the performance documentation of the Hungarian programme to the post-structuralist neo-narrative tapes from Britain. And finally, to utterly reject the facile and negative description of the tapes by Catherine Elwes, Triple Vision and Mark Wilcox as 'lacking in imagination', I would offer the alternative view that they are thoughtful, thought provoking, challenging and indicative of a developing tradition that both finds its roots in the practises of the seventies, while extending those concerns to an eighties context. And with specific reference to Mark Wilcox's Calling the Shots I can report that having shown it to audiences in Yugoslavia, Holland, America, Canada, and all over England, it has never failed to generate laughter, and usually gets applause. Unusual for any video tape. Living too close to the wall must have blunted our correspondent's sense of humour.

**Jeremy Welsh,  
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## NAMES, STARS, LEADERS

**Dear Performance,**

Thank you for your illuminating and informative review of Hidden Grin's contribution to the Midland Group/Zap club Performance Platform. Rob La Frenais' comments were generally well received by the company, but we feel we must correct certain inaccuracies concerning the genealogy of the company and specifically the past work of Rational Theatre. To set the record straight — Hidden Grin was formed by four of the members of the seven strong Rational Theatre Co-operative. A number of shows were produced by this co-operative, including Orders of Obedience and Rococco which he mentions in his article as being the work of Peter Godfrey. It is quite alarming that after four years of co-operative work (and you of all publications should understand the workings of a co-operative theatre group) the work we produced collectively can still be misleadingly attributed to one name. The experience of actually creating the work was very different, and I think I speak for all the other members of the company when I say that the period between 1980 and 1984 when we produced seven Rational Theatre productions was genuinely and excitingly collaborative. The fact that Peter founded the company does not