

## VIDEO NOT SCULPTURE

Video Positive 1991

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The second Video Positive staged by Merseyside Movieola at the Bluecoat Gallery and the Tate in Liverpool in April, was a much more assured show than the first in 1989. A dozen installations by artists from Britain, Europe, North America and Australia gave an engaging insight into many of the genres and concerns being developed by artists in this area at the start of the nineties. It was not a thematic show, the selection being largely pragmatic rather than proscriptive.

The technical problems involved in staging so many installations were all but invisible; for which credit should be given to the organisers and technical crew, especially when so many galleries make such an issue of this (still!), and consistently get it wrong. The split-site nature of the show between the two main venues while posing no real problems in distance, did, however leave many visitors to the city (especially from overseas) wondering why there was no centre to the festival side of the show, a gathering place for chatting and meeting fellow visitors was sorely missed. This is only a minor criticism as most visitors during the month long show were probably Liverpool residents, but on the special events weekends when screenings were staged in the evenings there was no-where one could meet up easily. I can't think of a similar European event that doesn't get this right.

The contrast between these two venues was also fascinating: the cool gloss and formality of a museum; and the cosy familiarity of a city arts centre. The Tate did at least acknowledge the presence of the show this time round although its Director thought once again that this was a good time for his annual leave. For me the problem of video as sculpture reared its head again with some artists succumbing to the temptation of stepping over the boundary of necessary construction in order to stage the work and contextualise it, to making third rate sculpture. With the exception of one work no-one went too far with this but I was getting nervous at times....

Starting with the works at the Tate, I was impressed on the amount of thought that had been given to the layout of the works in the two large galleries set aside for the six installations. Although sound did spill over from one piece to another, it was minimal and not disruptive or confusing.

The German artist, Maria Vedder produced one of the highlights of the show. **Sparkle and Fire** was a five-channel installation displayed on ten floor-level monitors forming an arc, projecting outwards to the viewer, in a large corner of the space. Behind the monitors, slide projectors described planes and lines with light slicing through the dimness. On the screens a continuous movement was created from right to left by the incredibly precise choreography undertaken during the shooting of the work. Processes, alchemy, becoming, dissolving, mutating, burning, blowing, drifting. Every frame was always slowly becoming something else as its contents moved across the screen. A collage of feathers and smoke drifted as the camera tracked and became a jet of dust moving sideways across first one monitor and then its neighbour and then its neighbour, and so on. When you looked back to the first monitor the

process was happening again with another collection of objects or shimmering presences. Truly stunning and apparently seamless, the work was hypnotic, a real tour-de-force by one of Europe's premier video artists. The soundtrack by Brian Eno echoed the visual properties of the work, ambient (what else with Eno?), but a little safe and unchallenging.

This was just the opposite with Lei Cox's **Magnification Maximus**. The quadrophonic sound track was as challenging as you can get and was probably one of the pieces that did suffer a little from its location in the Tate as the volume level was too low. A kaleidoscope of images of animals and the food chain combined with a cacophony of sound produced his most complex work so far. Although the mania evident in the piece was intentional it suffered from being too busy at times: a metaphorical database, spewing forth information, images and sounds its effect was urgent and overwhelming. Lei Cox confirms his position as one of the few artists in Britain prepared to take on new digital media wholeheartedly with a vigour and freshness which is used to re-examine the human condition.

Another artist not afraid of using new technologies is Simon Biggs. **Alchemy** was his most accomplished work so far, a digitally illuminated 'Book of Hours' produced on and controlled interactively by a computer. It was displayed on two large video monitors turned on their sides and arranged like an open book, each screen becoming a page of the 'book'. The playback system was Laser Disc with interactive software, allowing the 'reader' to turn the pages back and forth with a wave of the hand over a photo electric switch placed in front of the display. Above the display and forming a corridor in space was a row of incandescent bulbs dimmed and added to the raised wooden floor which was rigged to amplify your footsteps as you approached the 'dias', an ethereal church-like quality was produced which enhanced and focused the reading of the work and its 'pages'. The pages themselves were bewitching illuminations made up of miniatures and lettering with abstract patterns of intricate detail. The creatures and figures would sometimes move across the page unlike any book, and the whole piece was an absorbing electronic delight. This is a work which I would like to see installed in a more imaginative setting (other than the neutral museum space) to really bring out its qualities. This work is no end-of-the-pier sideshow it is a demanding and innovative piece using new technology not for its own sake, but because its maker has something to say and this is the best way to say it.

Breda Began and Hovorje Horvastic's **Geography** was another visually stunning work. Large screen back projection monitors were revealed through ragged holes cut into three vertical banners hanging from ceiling to floor. In front on the floor a large earthwork had been constructed which was not altogether necessary. The resonances of this work were spellbinding as it flowed from one image to another creating relationships without narrative base or causality, but upon the insight and feel of the artists moving from earth to water, fire and air.

The other works in The Tate: Daniel Dion's **Anicca** and Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield's **Intermittent Signals** were less impressive. The former work was confused and ambiguous with a 'tacked on' interactive element which was meaningless. Most people watched the time-lapsed clouds on one screen which were at least pretty. **Intermittent Signals** didn't seem to know whether it should be a video installation at all, preferring to dabble in the European groove of 'if we pretend it is sculpture maybe someone will think it is acceptable as art'. In this case it tried to be photography as well with flat screen LCD

displays imbedded in photographic frames.

Moving to the Bluecoat, Judith Goddard's **Garden of Earthly Delights** stole most people's attention. A three monitor piece which is a development from her previous **Luminous Portrait** made for the Late Show last year. The work explored an super-real electronic world of earthly delights in which all the techniques of electronic matting and animation that Quantel's Harry machine is superlative at producing, were controlled with consummate and unfolding skill by Goddard's unnerving direction and artistry. A young woman is continually transformed into the bride's uniform and then the cycle reverses back again. Meanwhile all is not what it seems in the Garden all around her, and in the distance landscape is disforming into cityscape into ruin. An energetic piece of animation which I would like to see as a single channel work, I'm not so sure it was an installation, more a three channel work or triptych.

Catherine Elwes's **Wishing Well** was a piece of pure whimsy and some controversy. As you had to be over five feet to look into the 'well' it excluded some of its obvious visitors, ie children. This didn't seem to stop the more resourceful and anyway I saw it as a piece on my own terms anyway. The 'reflection' which was the tv screen at the bottom of a constructed well was a child, and for me it was child as self rather than other. The piece stayed the right side of the video/sculpture debate as the construction was necessary as part of the illusion rather than for its own sake.

The **Fujiyama Pyramid Project** by Peter Callas was an ambitious development of the same artists now famous work **Neo Geo**. As such it lacked the simplicity and purity of the original tape, and for me, fell foul of the video/sculpture principle. Elaborate structures of a pyramid and Mount Fuji relating to the graphics on the currencies of the USA and Japan were proper developments of the theme but not necessarily as constructions or pieces of sculpture, but there I go again.....

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