

Artists' Television

Since the seventies video has come a long way, indeed the very term 'video' - originally adopted by artists throughout the world to signify an alternate stance to 'television' - has become an everyday word and as such is mis-used by just about everybody. In many ways this is encouraging to the artist, freed from its experimental or even avant garde caches, artists' video has evolved into a multi-practice activity: from performance related, through feminist, political, synesthetic, structuralist, etc, etc. In all these manifestations and differing concerns there is a common thread, and that thread is television.

It is foolish to ignore broadcast television, it is after all the common daily experience shared by so many. Unlike film, where the means of production was in the hands of individual creators in the early part of the century, and as such developed first of all as a formal expressive medium; videotape as a medium did not even exist for the first twenty years of television.

The implications of this history are unique. The practices, and methodology of the broadcasters were able to develop and largely fix into a recognised and recognisable (by the viewer) language which became the norm (or standard as the broadcasters prefer to say - with implications of value and 'professionalism'). Any other approach was deemed un-professional, amateur, and of course boring, ie not entertaining. Artists using the new medium of videotape had two problems, firstly to develop a syntax or formal language of their own, and secondly to challenge to broadcasters conventions which tended to constrict any other ways of using the medium.

Throughout the seventies artists' video largely confined itself to the art gallery which was not always the most sympathetic environment, especially for the public who were unused to sitting in public spaces watching television sets set too far away from them and with extraneous noise often hampering concentration. Multi-monitor installation work was not so out of place with its 'sculptural' properties and scale, installation works were accommodated more successfully than single videotape works.

A dramatic change came about in the early eighties when it seemed that video art had been re-invented by a new generation of young 'streetwise' media-conscious artists popping up in London, New York, Paris, Rome, Tokyo. Many 'first wave' artists seemed alarmed, particularly at the unabashed and confident ignorance of many of these new practitioners of the carefully nurtured oppositional approach of the previous decade. The lines between art and popular culture were vanishing again but, as in the sixties, it was not long before they were redrawn, with many of the more successful 'artists' turning out to be 'directors' - glad to be welcomed on board by an industry which is ever hungry for 'new' ways of packaging the same message.

On balance the diversion was a positive one, giving artists' video the temporary illusion of involvement within the centre stage rather than its usual fragmented niche on the border of culture. This helped to stimulate a new level of activity and diversification, and co-inciding with the launch of Channel Four the opportunity for new forays into television by artists - some good, and some - ignoring the hard won lessons of the past - slipping into easy collaboration,

allowing the work to be conveniently packaged so that it fell neatly into the broadcasters' idiom.

In Scotland over the past five years we have tried to concentrate on creating the right environment for the production of new work. The main agency for this has been The Television Workshop, established at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in 1985. Artists from all over the UK have used the now extensive facilities, and have produced some of the best work to be produced over the past two years in this country. Regular screenings and exhibition has been more problematic, although there have been some excellent shows. The broadcasters are starting to show interest and this could lead to some interesting collaborations in the near future.

So what of the future? Artists must be involved in television directly, negotiating the right circumstances, approach and level of support. They should not just sell their work for the 'going rate' - a rate that takes no account of the means of production that an artist practices. Their work should not be led by the Arts Council or BFI schemes, these agencies should be responding to the artist, at the moment we are often in the classic situation of the tail wagging the dog, with arts officers and 'independent producers' coming up with wacky schemes and proposals which artists are then asked to apply for within a very tight brief. Are we to be turned into freelance cultural operators, bidding for and delivering work to the sponsor? What happened to the notion of giving financial support to practicing artists directly?

We must have better support and interest from the galleries and arts agencies. The general calibre of gallery directors and arts officers in this country is, frankly, very low indeed.

I have been working in video now for fifteen years and have still yet to be involved in a large show in this country, where there was any specialist knowledge and support from the gallery staff. When it comes to exhibition it's a case of DIY. The larger and more prestigious the venue, the less the support. National centres like the Tate sub-contract their responsibility to individual artists or artist organisations. This show is no exception, Merseyside Movieola and artist advisors have raised the funding, selected the work and organised the exhibition on nearly every aspect (especially the technical aspects). The Tate's commitment stretches only to giving the space, and not the space asked for. One gets the impression that if the show is a success it will be an official Tate show and if not the arm's length principle will save it from any embarrassment.

What do I hope for? For the galleries, and arts centres, arts officers, and funding agencies to support artists working in time based media, and to enjoy and take the work as seriously as the public who can always be relied on to come to shows such as this one.

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