**Video installation in Britain - the early years**

Stuart Marshall on Video installation in Britain for *Signs of the Times* catalogue, Modern Art Oxford

The catalogue for a show which surveys British new media installations from 1980 to1990 must necessarily engage with the history of video art. However, even though ‘Signs of Times’ is the first exhibition to recognise that video installation has a history in Britain, it does not purport to represent a definitive history of British video installation during this decade. Perhaps this reticence represents the problems we have today of even imagining a coherent history of video during the eighties when the art world has found itself within the throes of the anti-historical, heterogeneous forms and concerns of post-modernism. The use of the video medium in Britain as a component of installation work is not co-extensive with this decade - it can be dated back to the mid-seventies. In a sense this earlier period can be seen as the pre-history to the work in this exhibition which judiciously chooses not to present itself as history. Ironically this early period was very concerned with a sense of its own history.

Video as art was, and continues to be, ignored by British art critics, theorists and historians with the notable exceptions of Richard Cork during the seventies and Michael O'Pray during the eighties. In the case of a new art medium and a new art practice, the production of history is usually intended to validate the practice by conferring upon it the respectability of a tradition and a heritage. From the mid-seventies therefore, video artists and producers set about writing their own histories of video in order to recapture video from the stuffy grasp of sociologists and media theorists, and in order to make a claim for the aesthetic validity of their new practice. This, of course, was not the only intended effect. Art world funding secures the future careers of individual artists.

By the end of the seventies video artists had, in the main, stopped producing their versions of the history of British video art. This may have been because their validating project had proved to be successful, albeit in a very limited way. Video artists were by then recognised as legitimate beneficiaries of, for example, Arts Council funding. Perhaps the reason can be found in the extraordinary growth of the domestic and commercial video industry and its exploitation and recuperation by the dominant media. Video was an unfamiliar technology in the seventies and artists who worked with the medium had a strong sense of their potential role in determining its future uses and applications. Or perhaps video art was no longer able to sustain a sense of itself as a movement as the aesthetic 'clarity' of seventies' modernism disintegrated into the pluralism of the eighties.

If we intend therefore [as I do here] to cast an eye back to the video art of the mid-seventies, we should be aware of the extent to which the theories of that time were attempts to secure a future which may, or may not, have come to fruition in the1990s.

The first major exhibition of independent video *The Video Show* was mounted at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1975 by Sue Grayson, with a committee which included William Feaver, David Hall, Professor Stuart Hood and Clive Scollay. This month-long event brought together dozens of community activists and artists [who up until that time had been working in relative isolation] in a circus-like presentation of tapes, installations, performances and lectures.

The catalogue to the show consisted of a loose-leafed folder of video-makers' statements. Many of these display an innocent enthusiasm and optimism which stemmed from the belief that video makers were witnessing and participating in the beginning of a progressive technological and social revolution. Great claims were made for this revolution. Agitprop and community action video makers' statements from the time are littered with references to "guerilla television", "democratic media" and "the people's tube". With hindsight one can see that many video makers had fallen for what Raymond Williams described as "technological determinism" - the naive belief that new technologies such as video would, by their very nature, democratise the media by decentralising the means of production. Such ideas were, of course, a product of their times. The current theories of communication were dominated by Marshall McLuhan's determinist concept that new, technologies would produce a "global village", and by cybernetics and idealist information theory - the science of semiotics had only achieved a toe-hold in Britain at that time.

The discourse of counter culture is equally apparent in these texts. The student revolutions of the late sixties had endowed young people with an extraordinary sense of their own power and the unassailable progress of civil liberties seemed to be guaranteed by the recent liberal legal reforms of the Labour government. Videoart was born at the end of an era of consensus politics which was to be erased by a decade of popular authoritarianism under Thatcher.

Many British video artists met for the first time at this event and it soon became evident that a large percentage of them saw video art - as did their agitprop colleagues - in opposition to the dominant use of television technology and televisual practice. Many early artists' statements read like political diatribes against the television institution. I recollect that these artists were greatly surprised to discover the extent to which they had similar concerns and objectives which included the desire, as David Hall later described, to "decipher the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television".

This coincidence of interests can, in fact, be quite easily accounted for if one examines the art world context which informed and shaped avant-garde practice at the time. These were the last days of high modernism, and the language of opposition and independence which was articulated by video artists found itself drawing, not only upon the anti-establishment discourse of the counter culture that influenced agitprop video makers, but also upon the discourse of high modernism itself.

The refusal of representation in modernist abstract painting - the play of signifiers emancipated from the tyranny of the signifier - provided video artists with their focus upon the 'inherent properties of the medium', for reflexivity and their concern with the technology itself and its means of image production. However, while modernism in painting was essentially an apolitical movement in its late form, in the case of video, modernism was given a sharply political inflection. This curious situation can be explained by referring to the history of the medium itself.

While in the case of painting, high modernism was a reaction against a history of painting, in the case of independent video, modernist practice was a reaction against non-fine art visual practice - the history of broadcast television with its suspect promulgation of conservative values and its ceaseless production of a reassuring and illusory representation of the social, political and cultural world it purported to be a window upon. The constant attention which was paid to the means and methods of video image production was frequently explained as an attempt to recover and develop the inherent 'syntax' or grammar of video. By returning to the 'facticity' of video itself it was hoped that a language would be developed which was 'true' to the medium and which did not ape the language of film or the journalistic conventions of broadcast television.

These concerns were most thoroughly explored in single monitor videotape works but they also informed many of the early installation works. For example, one of the specific qualities of video technology is its capacity for the live monitoring of the camera image and the consequent possibilities of image feedback which are produced by pointing the camera at its own image upon a monitor to provide an infinite regression of images within images.

Several installations in 'The Video Show' were concerned with these possibilities of live and tape-delayed video image feedback.

Roger Barnard's *Corridor* used a video camera suspended above the entrance to a corridor to feed a live image to a monitor at the farthest end of the space. As the spectator walked towards the monitor s/he was able to see him/herself disappearing into the distance. By using a video tape recorder and a video mixer in the closed circuit, *Corridor* also included a time delayed recording of earlier spectators into the live image and the spectator had the unsettling experience of being accompanied by the video ghosts of earlier participants.

David Hall's *Progressive Recession* used nine closed circuit video cameras to progressively displace the viewer's image ahead of him/herself along a row of nine monitors in a manner which confounded the viewer's sense of space and time.

Brian Hoey's *Videvent* used a short tape delay to feed the viewer's image back to him/herself and so allowed for an interaction between temporally separate images in an infinite regression of superimposed actions.

While this concern with image feedback most clearly informed those installations which used a live camera component, some installations which used pre-recorded tape playback also continued to explore this theme of technology turned in upon itself with human participants also caught up within the video network. For example David Critchley's *Yet another Triangle* consisted of a triangular three monitor playback of pre-recorded 'videotape task' in which three performers moved around a space, each attempting to keep the other two performers within the viewfinder of his portable videotape recorder. The tape playback provided a dizzyingly complex representation of an everchanging matrix of points of view.

Tamara Krikorian's *Breeze* showed a four-channel pre-recorded tape installation which differed from works such as these in its use of evocative landscape subject matter - four views of a flowing stream. However, it also displayed a similar concern with the specificities of the video medium by exploiting the video camera's inherent tendency to overdrive which causes enormous contrast fluctuations across the video image when brightly lit areas appear within the frame. Hence Breeze, while undeniably evoking a tradition of British landscape art, also insisted upon the recording medium intervention in the process of representation.

In the late sixties and early seventies the arts were entering a new phase of experimentation and cross-fertilisation. In the wake of Conceptual Art, Performance Art, and a long tradition of 'mixed media' dating back to the earlier part of the nineteenth century, many younger British based artists has not only begun to make new kinds of art but also had begun to create new institutions for the production and exhibition of work as an alternative to the commercial galleries and traditional forms of patronage.

The London New Arts Lab, 2B Butlers Wharf and Womens Arts Alliance and Artists For Democracy in London, and Ayton Basement [eventually to become Projects U.K.] in Newcastle were examples of spaces run by younger artists with minimal funding which were committed to the production and exhibition of experimental work. These venues played a profoundly important role in creating a legitimising context for experimental work of a politically or aesthetically challenging nature. This less formalist mixed media aesthetic could also be found at the Serpentine show, for example in a number of performance works which also used video.

During *The Video Show* a woman's day of performance and installation was organised without official recognition. In this event Tina Keane showed a work titled Hands which explored her ongoing concern with concepts of childhood, phantasy, memory and consciousness. In Tina Keane's case the history of performance work was a more important influence on her video practice than debates within modernist fine art practice. To a great extent this choice of context was political as well as aesthetic. It refused the authoritative status of the fetishised modernist art object which was associated with the power and prestige of the male dominated museum system and instead insisted upon the need for representation. Although Tina Keane's work by no means eschewed any reference to technology [her installation *Swing* shown at the Serpentine Gallery in 1978 used closed circuit video to monitor the movements of the spectator for example], the presence of the technology was not privileged in the work but rather was introduced as another element within the meanings of the piece.

Artists who identified with the video modernist movement were responsible for the setting up of London Video Arts in 1977 and for the initiation and administration of many of the public video art exhibitions and all of the video art criticism and theory to be published in main stream art magazines over the next five years. By virtue of this curatorial and promotional activity, the modernist tendency within video began to validate itself and enjoy a limited aesthetic hegemony.

In the summer of 1976, the Tate Gallery made its first [and for a long time only] foray into video art - albeit through the back door of the education department - when it mounted an exhibition of video installations in two of the basement galleries. Works were shown by Tamara Krikorian, Brian Hoey, Stuart Marshall, David Hall, Steven Partridge and Roger Barnard. Brian Hoey and Roger Barnard developed the pieces they had shown in the Serpentine show.

In David Hall's *Vidicon Inscriptions* the viewer was again both the subject and object of the work. A single black and white camera with a polaroid shutter was mounted on top of a monitor pointing towards a brightly spotlit space. When the viewer entered the spotlight a photo-electric switch caused the shutter to lift and the image of the viewer was 'burned' into the camera's vidicon tube. When the shutter closed the viewer was able to see his/her image moving faintly in real time behind the frozen 'photograph' which had been registered on the vidicon. Steven Partridge showed a complex work Installation *8x8x8* which used an electronic switching device to route the output from eight live video cameras to any combination of eight video monitors so providing a rhythmic articulation of the viewer's image throughout the installation space.

Tamara Krikorian presented *Disintegrating Forms* in which a number of monitors on extremely high plinths showed a live camera view of clouds in the sky above the gallery. The hazy black and white images formed and disintegrated high above the viewer's head to create a contemplative work of great beauty.

My own piece *Orientation Studies* used a series of eight black and white video monitors lying on their backs below two viewing platforms. The monitors showed a repeated pro-recorded image of rapidly flowing streams and rivers which moved through the frame to produce extreme perceptual disorientations.

In a sense the Tate Gallery show represented the definitive moment of video installation modernism, and from this point it is possible to trace a rapid disintegration of its predominance as the rallying point of video aesthetics.

The version of late twentieth century art history which is proposed by formalist art critics tends to describe the relationship between modernism and post-modernism as a break or rupture characterised by the difference between, on the one hand, the work of art as a pure state of objecthood and, on the other hand, a chaotic play of cultural quotations wrenched away from any sense of history or development. However, it is possible to propose a different relationship between modernism and post-modernism in the case of video art.

The formalist ambition of modernist video to derive a video 'language' from the technology of the medium floundered on a fundamental confusion about the nature of advanced signifying practices. This involved, in Hjelmslev terminology, a confusion between the form of expression [the signifier] and the substance of expression [the signifier's material support - in this case the technology of video]. In all advanced signifying practices, meaning is produced by the codes and conventions [the forms of expressions] which are superimposed upon - while constrained by - the material support. For example, the meanings of spoken language are produced by the 'patternings' of sounds produced by the breath and not from the breath itself. Modernist video could never achieve its ambition to produce a 'pure' language of video precisely because it confined itself to the modernist understanding of aesthetic practice which excluded the possibility of representation.

From the mid-seventies onwards, a series of political, cultural and aesthetic debates within video and film practice were to result in the rejection of the keystone of - modernism - the refusal of representation - and the transformation of the modernist concern with reflexivity into the post-modernist practice of deconstruction. This involved a shift of focus away from the medium itself to its dominant practices of representation and the construction of oppositional practice. The Women's Movement provided a major political context for such an oppositional practice, as feminist theory had tended to concentrate upon issues of representation and the ideological effects upon women's consciousness of dominant media representations of femininity. Feminist analysis suggested that the ideological domain had a specific effectivity which helped to mask the contradictions in the social formation and maintain the dominance of the status quo. These observations led to the notion of a cultural politics which would involve the making of interventions at the ideological level in order to deconstruct and de-real-ise the fictional worlds constructed by dominant modes of representation.

The existence of this tendency even during the period of modernist dominance is evidenced by, for example, the work of Tina Keane and can also be detected within the modernist group itself. It is clear on closer inspection that the modernist tendency included a wide set of concerns, and that even those video installation works which fell under the category of modernism included complex articulations of representation. For example, Roger Barnard's *Corridor* through its use of a time shift tape-delay produced a sometimes alarming disruption of the viewer's relationship to his/her own subjectivity.

*Signs of the Times* includes work from 1980 to the present. By so doing, it excludes the vast majority of work which can be identified with the modernist project in British video art. It situates itself firmly within the period of video installation which can be identified with the post-modernist movement. While this exhibition may refuse to provide us with a definitive history of video installation in the eighties, its very title suggests that this show is offering itself to the viewer as a representation that is asking to be decoded - to have its 'signs' interpreted in order to reveal the historical trajectory which lies beneath them. Some of these signs consist of traces of the modernist concern with the medium. Throughout the late seventies many video installation works continued to conduct a critical analysis of the forms and themes of broadcast television but unlike earlier work, they did not construct dominant television as an irredeemably 'bad object', but rather attempted to rework televisual modes of representation to reveal their ideological investments.

Most of the early works included in *Signs of the Times* can be located in relation to this new critical analysis.

In the catalogue to her 1979 exhibition *An Ephemera/ Art*, Tamara Krikorian summarised succinctly the political and aesthetic moment at which high modernism reformulated its agenda and paved the way to the richness and the pluralism of the eighties:

*"My own interest in video, and indeed in television, stems from a formalist position, a formal analysis/decoding/deconstruction of the medium, but ...it is not possible to consider television without taking into account its structure, not just in terms of technology but also in terms of politics. This led me to realise that the reference points in working with any medium must come not only from the medium itself, following the modernist approach of 'pure art', but from relationships between types of work, painting and sculpture and video etc. The reference must also come from the artist's own experience as a mediator between what has gone before and the raw material and the ideal, constantly restating and confronting the spectator with a discussion between the old and the new. "*2

**Stuart Marshall,**

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