

Without Thresholds: Contemporary Artist's Video: Diversity of Form, Possibility and Potential.

Today, most gallery visitors are blissfully unaware of the complex history of video art, but 'way back at the dawn of British video art in the early 1970's, pioneering video artist David Hall was making claims for video as art. Hall was not interested in making work which merely used video as a medium, but strove to produce tapes which fore-grounded video as the art work, and in his writings he was most concerned to distinguish video art practice from broadcast television:

*Video as art seeks to explore perceptual thresholds, to expand and in part to decipher the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television. In this context it is pertinent to recognise certain fundamental properties and characteristics which constitute the form. Notably those peculiar to the functions (and 'malfunctions') of the constituent hardware- camera, recorder and monitor- and the artist's accountability to them.*¹

Against this perspective, another pioneering British artist, Peter Donebauer, with perhaps a more pragmatic attitude to the technology, argued for an approach to video that focused on the primacy of the electrical signal, deliberately critiquing Hall's modernist position.

*...this rather deflates the theories of certain academics in this country who have tried to define an aesthetic based around television cameras, monitors and video tape recorders. Video can happily exist without any of them!*²

From a contemporary perspective, Donebauer's view seems to have been validated. Currently artists understand video not so much as a medium to be explored and celebrated for its own sake, but as a complex carrier medium for a much broader set of cultural and contextual pre-occupations. Like its sister technology television, video can adopt a multitude of formats and like television, video has the ability to contain a diversity of other forms. In its latest digital manifestation, video embraces photography, sound, film, graphics, and architecture. By extension video can contain cultural forms as diverse as narrative story telling, documentary, theatre, dance, music, virtual reality, and animation reaching out to new and as yet undefined forms such as interactivity and non-linearity.

Digital video is rapidly eradicating the boundaries between cinema and television, making the distinction irrelevant to everyone but the most devoted purist. Access to reliable inexpensive production equipment, the availability of DVD playback, high resolution video projection, and the potential of video streaming and web-casting have all had an impact on the use and popularity of video as a medium for artistic expression and as a gallery format.

This thirty year technical revolution has had very significant implications for artists and curators. In many art galleries and museums video is ubiquitous. Artists use video as a matter of course, and curators are more than willing to mount exhibitions that include or feature video work- indeed it would seem the inclusion of artist's video in exhibitions is de-rigueur. A survey of exhibitions currently on view at London's Tate galleries is a case in point. At Tate Britain, this year's crop of Turner prize short-listed artists all feature video work in various guises. Only a short boat ride down the Thames, Tate Modern has mounted its first large scale exclusive moving image exhibition "Time

¹David Hall, "British Video Art: Towards an Autonomous Practice", *Studio International*, May-June 1976, pp 248-252.

²Peter Donebauer, "Video Art and Technical Innovation", *Educational Broadcasting International*, Sept. 1980, pp 122-125.

Zones”, a survey of works by 10 international artists. Concurrently, other galleries at Tate Modern are displaying video work by Bruce Nauman, Gillian Wearing and Mathew Barney.

The Turner prize exhibition perfectly demonstrates the diversity of approaches taken by contemporary artists using video. Jeremy Deller's *Memory Bucket* (2003) is a blending of sophisticated home movie aesthetics with TV style documentary. Images of the south Texan landscape are cut together with talking head presentations and close-ups of fauna and flora. Presented on a large flat-screen TV this work offers a conventional viewing strategy, the wall-mounted screen mimicking a gallery presentation of painting. It deliberately follows television conventions because for Deller, the formal issues of video are not the issue. *Memory Bucket* is part of a wider strategy, and video is one element in a larger and more complex canvas.

Langlands and Bell offer several examples, from the twin screen installation *NGO* (2003) which juxtaposes a multitude of acronyms of governmental and UN organisations with stark photographs of agency signs in-situ, to a 'BAFTA' award-winning interactive representation of Osama bin Laden's fortified hideout. This large-scale projection work offers visitors the opportunity to explore a detailed computer-modelled version of the infamous terrorist leader's abandoned mountain headquarters, via a joystick control. *The House of Osama bin Laden* (2003) is very clearly referencing the computer game format, and although stripped of any of the usual rewards or goals associated with game playing, it employs this format to deliberately juxtapose a familiar fantasy with the anxiety of the unknown.

Yinka Shonibare's *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)* 2004 is a complex and meticulously orchestrated video work- his first. Commissioned by Moderna Museet in Stockholm and produced by Swedish Television, this work is an excellent example of the increasingly indistinct boundaries between the cinematic and the televisual in the age of digital video. Produced in 'high definition' digital video, *Un Ballo Maschera* draws on the talents of a host of television industry professionals- lighting engineers, camera operators, set and costume designers, make-up artists, choreographers, video editors and sound recordists, as well as over thirty accomplished dancers.

This work, clearly produced for broadcast television, is a perfect illustration of the complex and long-standing relationship between broadcast television and video art. Korean-born Nam June Paik, perhaps the world's first video artist, once famously said "TV has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back", targeting television as a worthy adversary and sparing partner.³ Early video artists were often polarised in their attitude to broadcast television- some committed to video as an alternative and distinctly separate medium, whilst others fought for the right to have their works aired on TV. In the UK, early video art was often considered unsuitable for broadcast, and when shown at all, relegated to late night slots or ghettoised into arts programming- packaged for specialist minority audiences, chopped up and served as extracts between the instructive contextualising of expert commentary. Channel 4 was especially active in this area, transmitting compilations of video art as part of its "Eleventh Hour" series in the 1980's and 90's. Often commissioning works from major American video artists such as Gary Hill, Bill Viola and Daniel Reeves that often only received a single airing.

It is worth remembering that Channel 4 has sponsored the Turner prize since 1991, and although this year Gordon's Gin has taken up the mantle, the Channel 4 broadcast connection continues, with John Wyver's "Illuminations" producing the televised coverage. In the past Wyver has himself been an active commentator on the relationship between broadcasting and video art. In an essay entitled *The Necessity of Doing Away With Video Art*, written in 1991, he argued that due to the convergence of previously distinct elements of moving image culture, it was no longer necessary, or desirable, to understand or treat video art as a special category. Wyver instead looked forward to a

³ Mick Hartney, "An Incomplete and Highly Contentious Summary of the Early Chronology of Video Art (1959-76); with Tentative Steps in the Direction of a De-Definition", *London Video Arts Catalogue*, 1984, pp 2-9.

time when “the innovative and challenging visions of artists and others integrated into each element of television’s output.”⁴ The main purpose of Wyver’s essay was to critique the perpetualisation of video art as a distinct genre and to propose a more eclectic mix of media both within the gallery context and on television. It seems to have happened in the gallery, but the broadcast industry is still keen to keep the category alive and artists firmly in their place.

Returning to this year’s Turner prize, Kutlug Ataman, the fourth short-listed artist, presented *Twelve*, a six screen video installation. Ataman also works as a film-maker, with two feature films to his credit, and his professional training as a film-maker is clearly evidenced by the careful framing and controlled camera work of *Twelve*. Many of his exhibited video works are multi-screen projections with long minimally-edited sequences running concurrently. *Twelve* presents recordings of six individuals, five men and one woman, recounting personal experiences of re-incarnation directly to camera. The video sequences, projected onto large vertical transparent screens present us with life-size and very candid images, but the potential intimacy of the situation is deliberately contradicted by the multi-screen format of the installation. The visitor is initially confronted by a babble of voices from the six separate soundtracks and the juxtaposition of carefully arranged multiple projections. There is roomful of individuals to choose from, and the images and sounds compete for attention. Superimposed text captions offer a simultaneous translation- the voices are all speaking in Turkish, as the subjects all live in a region of Turkey bordering with Syria. The captions and the production values initially suggest an experience reminiscent of TV news, but a closer reading provides us with more personal insights. Thus the work prompts us to engage by challenging our initial impressions, drawing us in and allowing us the opportunity to engage with a specific individual.

“Time Zones” at Tate Modern presents ten recent moving image works in a beautifully presented and carefully choreographed exhibition. Visitors move through a series of interconnected darkened spaces showcasing new work by international artists from Mexico, Turkey, Israel, China, the Netherlands, Albania, Serbia, Germany and Indonesia. These diverse works demonstrate the range and scope of moving image media and the extent to which contemporary film and video are interchangeable and interrelated: *Liu Lan* (2003) by Yang Fudong, and Fiona Tan’s double screen video installation *Saint Sebastian* (2001) were both shot on 35mm film, transferred to DVD and presented on data projectors. Wolfgang Staehle’s *Comburg* (2001) is a continuous ‘real time’ video projection from a web cam, whilst Francis Alys’ *Zocalo* (1999) is an unedited twelve hour ‘real time’ recording made on Mini DV, (a domestic video format) transferred to an Mpeg hard drive. Of the ten works on show, only *Untitled* (2001) by Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooijshot was shot, edited and shown as a film.

This interchangeability of formats and presentation is echoed in the exhibition catalogue essays. Gregor Muir, describing Fiona Tan’s two monitor video installation *Rain* (2001) consciously blurs the two forms: “On two *monitors* we view the same *film* of a downpour and a dog sat next to two buckets of water. The two *projections* are, however, out of sync, and thus the buckets are seen at various stages of fullness.”⁵ (Author’s Italics) Jessica Morgan compares Francis Alys’ use of duration in his video installation *Zocalo* (1999) to that of Warhol in his 1964 film *Empire*, as do a number of the other writers in the exhibition catalogue.⁶ Arguably the art-historical distinctions between these two media (and these two works) are important, even crucial- especially in relation to notions about the presentation of time-as-material. Warhol’s deliberate break with the dominant Romantic traditions of poetic temporality as characterised by the work of Stan Brakhage and his subjective “camera eye” is very different from the tradition of surveillance video or the ‘real time’

⁴ John Wyver, “The Necessity of Doing Away with Video Art”, *London Video Access Catalogue*, 1991, pp 45-48.

⁵ Gregor Muir, “Chronochromie”, *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, Tate Publishing, London, 2004, pp. 36-50.

⁶ Jessica Morgan, “Time After Time”, *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, Tate Publishing, London, 2004, pp. 14-27.

unedited documentation of performance by many video artists, including Martha Rosler, William Wegman, Richard Serra, Vito Acconci, Mary Lucier, Dan Graham and many others. Gregor Muir says: "We live in a world where it is possible to turn on the camera and leave it running." This is, of course, precisely what Warhol did not do when shooting *Empire*- as it requires an *active* role to keep filming for twelve hours- and not only because he had to keep changing the rolls of film!

An excellent example of the use of "real time" video is also currently on show at Tate Modern. Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio II with Color Shift, Flip, Flop & Flip/Flop (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001) presents nearly six hours of video and sound on seven screens. From fixed camera positions, Nauman projects wall-sized monochromatic video images of his studio, recorded at night. The raw documentation has clearly been electronically processed, with colour and image flipping (and flopping) added, but the random moments of authenticity- the scurrying mouse, the flitting insects, the occasional human sound and movement impress on us that we are witnessing something real, "authentic" and of the moment. The spatio-temporal experience is one of the most significant factors of the work. The soundtrack plays an important, if not crucial role in *Mapping the Studio*, as it provides an immersive ambience that holds the viewer and gives depth to the flat, low-resolution images that occupy and dominate the wall space. This ambient space provides a temporal continuity and references both the original space of the (audio-visual) recording and the technological space of the recording and playback apparatus. The two spaces and time frames are literally superimposed to create an experience that is neither cinematic, nor sculptural, but draws on both.

My own recent work has been concerned with the juxtaposition of time frames, particularly the simultaneous superimposition of the contemporary and the art-historical. In *For William Henry Fox Talbot (The Pencil of Nature)* 2002, a solar-powered live image of the famous oriel window at Lacock Abbey in Wilshire was relayed to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Thus digital imaging techniques were harnessed to transverse and connect physical distance, temporal space and technological history:

*The projection faded according to the light at Lacock, intense at mid day, fading out towards evening. New technology in this instance appeared frail, the shimmering image suspended in the gallery, still dependent on the same power of light as the original photograph. But while the original photograph was the work of one man, the digital image was the result of countless men and systems working together, a reminder of the interconnectivity of new technology.*⁷

Similarly, Wolfgang Staehle's *Comburg* (2001), restaged at Tate Modern, projects a live web cast, establishing a relationship between notions of time and context. Staehle's real-time image of the ancient Comburg Monastery near Schwabisch Hall, Germany implies a relationship between two distinctly different approaches to 'being-in-time'. The virtually imperceptible changes from image to image, versus the distracted gaze of the gallery viewer moving from one exhibit to the next. Staehle's stated intention was to prompt viewers to consider their own experience of time: We're all running around all the time. I wanted to make people feel aware.

Rarely broadcast, and seldom available on DVD or VHS, video art has come to rival the dominance of more traditional gallery-based art forms. An increasingly dominant mode of expression and representation, video seems to embody contemporary social and cultural pre-occupations. Artist's video can be presented in a diverse array of forms and formats, providing the viewer with challenging spatio-temporal experiences that must be constantly re-negotiated from work to work. Artists employ video to provide viewers with complex socio-spatial and temporal experiences which can make use of cinematic, televisual, literary, photographic, sculptural, digital and acoustic space. Gallery curators can re-enforce, amplify and augment this potential, as can be seen for example in

⁷ Paul Coldwell, "Digital Responses: Integrating the Computer", *Pixel Raiders*, March 2003.

the careful selection and juxtaposition of works in “Time Zones”. The digital convergence of audio-visual technologies and the interrelationship of physical, acoustic and virtual space have created new aesthetic challenges for contemporary artists, curators and audiences alike. Video art is clearly alive and well in the contemporary gallery context.

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