

## ART IN-SIGHT

# Processing Fluid

## A brief history of independent moving image art in the UK

By Clive Gillman

The curious post-rationalisation of the history of art and culture – the vain search for certainty – which occupies much critical writing always strikes me as a fairly bizarre activity. The plotting of lineage and the determination of genealogy serves to cement the perception that culture is somehow a logical and linear process. The idea that it can be understood like an empirical science and that the dynamics of culture are somehow reducible to a simple message of defined cause and effect is difficult to comprehend. As Mark Twain said “The very ink in which history is written is merely fluid prejudice.” But of course, there are many histories and their re-telling sheds light on the current state of the culture and enriches our understanding of contemporary work which, whether by design or by osmosis inherits and transforms its own traditions.

In 1995, the Arts Council of England published a substantial book called *A Directory of British Film & Video Artists*. It contains a preface by David Curtis, then Film & Video Officer at the Arts Council, which simply and eloquently describes the activity of artists working with the moving image. The dream of alternative exhibition networks, the uneasy partnerships with television, the feature-film format ambitions of some and the focus of others towards new media. The book features small biographies of over a hundred individuals whose practice ranges from 35mm film production to video installation. It is debatable whether this large, disparate group has anything in common, but one wouldn't have to look much further than the listings at the back of the book to find the evidence. It reveals that only Willie Doherty and Tacita Dean had their work distributed by a contemporary art dealer. Almost all of the rest were distributed through either London Video Access or the London Film Makers Co-op.

If anyone were to compile a directory of film & video artists today, it would surely look very different. No doubt, it would be a far less dry publication, with an eye on sales rather than posterity, and it is very likely that all the artists listed would be distributing their work through dealers. It would certainly feature a whole raft of names absent from the earlier book – Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Georgina Starr, Jane

& Louise Wilson, Douglas Gordon, Steve McQueen, Mat Collishaw. It is also extremely unlikely that it would feature many of the names from the earlier book, names like Peter Gidal, Jeff Keen, Stuart Marshall, Margaret Tait, and David Hall even though their works still have relevance. So, what happened in those few years following the publication of the Directory, and what led to such a shift in perspective?

To answer that question inevitably involves taking a clear look at how we measure and understand the amorphous areas of creative practice in this country. We need to grasp who owns practice and how different aspirations dominate at different times. From its inception in the 1970s, UK film & video was the province of a small and committed band of individuals and two organisations. Some 20 years on, it is clear that this has now changed.

Although no such thing as a thesis or manifesto existed during the formative years of independent film & video, there was clearly common ground beyond the bond of marginalisation within the broader spectrum of the arts system. For many of these artists, the attraction of the practice was based around its currency – its ability to harness the medium through which most of us view the world. Many people were drawn to it as a way to find a voice – to say something that was not being said anywhere else. But for others there was the attraction of exploring the creative potential of a new medium, a medium without a firmly formed language in which the possibility of genuine innovation still existed. For some there was a technical fascination – the action of movement and of illumination and the nature of the processes involved. Students moved slowly into this area, mainly due to the cost and skills required to establish and maintain resources. A few colleges taught ‘media arts’ or ‘communication arts’ within the broader umbrella of fine art, with the Polytechnics in Coventry, Sheffield, Maidstone and Wolverhampton in the vanguard. But few outside of this small group felt that film & video was anything but peripheral to the larger arts picture. Despite this marginal position, clear signals were coming from across the Atlantic that moving image art was becoming more significant. The work of pioneers like Martha Rosler, Naim June Paik and

William Wegman demonstrated that the new pretender should be taken seriously and could hold its own alongside other forms of contemporary art.

Many of the earliest experiments in the UK took the form of sculptural ideas, exploring how the form of the video (and its equipment) could be used to structure and animate white-box spaces. The early work of Tony Sinden, David Hall, and Tamara Krikorian at venues like the ACME Gallery in London and the definitive 'Video Show' at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975 set the tone for later gallery-based works. Many works used the furniture of the television as a significant element, filling the gallery space with flickering images, confronting our early perceptions of the TV as a solo player, or as a window on the world. On occasions this approach even extended into domestic TV through commissioned broadcast works - as in David Hall's 7 *TV Pieces* made in 1971 for Scottish Television.

'Artists Video' at Biddick Farm in Washington, Tyne & Wear in 1979 featured artists like Stuart Marshall, Steve Partridge and Hooykaas & Stansfield. *Sotari. A Kick in the Eye* by John Adams & Jane O'Shaughnessy featured a collapsed video image that only revealed itself when the viewers' eyes moved from one monitor to another across the gallery space. The collapsed image contained an entire TV field within one line of picture information that would only be revealed by an eye quickly scanning across it - the image not being visible by looking directly at it. This was a technical trick that illustrated a sophisticated notion of the virtual voyeurism of the TV image. Tamara Krikorian wrote about these works in the 1984 LVA catalogue: "...far from being an activity carried out on the frontiers of the art world, these works, while confronting issues relating to the medium itself and offering a decoding of dominant forms, also concur both in form and content with concerns that have preoccupied other fine art practitioners during this period". While the concerns may have been the same, perhaps the critical issue - underplayed in Krikorian's article - was that video, as a medium, was still defining its language and still had currency in the wider cultural domain. A dichotomy that may have been both the strength and the weakness of the work of this period.

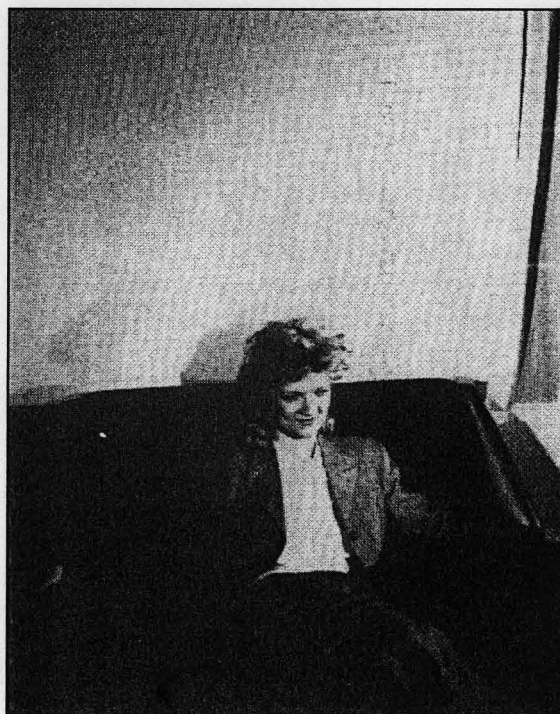
The National Video Festivals at South Hill Park in Bracknell from 1981-1988 showed artists like Gary Hill, Bill Viola and Dara Birnbaum alongside more home-grown products such as Mark Wilcox, Tina Keane and the South Wales Women's Film Group - often in the context of discussions with the artists present. Many of these presentations were to seated audiences, but site-specific installations were also shown. David Hall's 1980 *Situation Envisaged - The Rite*, was a development of an earlier work involving 16 TVs in a circle around a central rotating monitor. The work's themes of voyeurism and the dynamic of TV were often central to artists' works at this time and provided an analytical yet self-conscious core for the oeuvre.

There are critics who are rediscovering the work of Mark Wilcox (something of a star at the Bracknell events). His tape *Calling the Shots*, (1984) with its complex deconstruction of Hollywood narrative, now appears technically crude, but

conceptually sophisticated. It is a video that might sit well alongside the slicker work of artists such as Douglas Gordon or Mark Lewis. *Calling the Shots* employs the narrative artifice of a scene from Douglas Sirk's 1959 *The Imitation of Life*, re-shot with contemporary actors. The narrative slowly breaks down with subtle and effective editing. The re-presentation of the script produces a tightly edited and sharply scripted response to the dominance of dramatic narrative conventions.

However, other artists whose work might warrant reassessment have deliberately removed themselves from the probing of cultural archaeologists. David Critchley - a significant figure in the development of London Video Arts and an important early video artist - is reputed to have destroyed his entire back-catalogue - including the powerful *Pieces I Never Did* (1980). On the face of it, Critchley's wry description of all the works he planned to do but never carried out, might be read as a conceptual game interrogating our notions of the real and the imagined, but in the inevitable search for curatorial and critical credibility we are in danger of judging his work by the cultural standards of today. We need to take into consideration the environment that produced this work and not blindly claim kinship with an era that has passed. One of the reasons Critchley lists the pieces he never made was to point up the lack of understanding, opportunity and money that restricted video artists at the time.

But some forms of funding did exist. One of the formative influences in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the complex mix of public investment that was being made in the work of artists. Cash from the Arts Council was often matched or exceeded by money from the metropolitan authorities (like the GLC and Urban County Councils). Through this route, agendas were often matched, with the personal and the political finding common expression. Artists shared technical resources with campaign and issue groups and the inevitable hybridity of



Mark Wilcox,  
*Calling the Shots*  
(1984)



practice resulted in projects like the programmes made in support of the 1984 national miners strike. This offered many artists the opportunity for the political dimensions of their work to be framed and measured against the political agitation current at the time. In retrospect, much of the earnestness of the work of this time is as much a result of local osmosis as of national zeitgeist.

The founding of London Video Arts in 1976 and the continuing presence of the London Filmmakers Co-op created the core bodies around which much artistic activity revolved and in the rich loam of Metropolitan Authority funding many other groups thrived. Fantasy Factory – led by the legendary John and Sue Hopkins, West London Media Workshop, Despite TV, Sankofa, Black Audio Collective, Open Eye (in Liverpool), Amber (in Newcastle), Workers Film Association (in Manchester) – a list that could include 30 or more organisations across the country – each working around a set of production resources to develop skills and awareness within a creative context. Many groups eschewed conventional industry models and worked collectively seeking out independent or oppositional modes of distribution and exhibition. Some groups actively worked to develop a new broadcast channel - Channel 4, while others maintained a steady focus on a single issue, making political video in its most direct sense.

Despite the very local nature of many of the resource bases, international partnerships also developed. Festivals around the globe, regular exhibitions at London's AIR Gallery and the assiduousness of individuals like the artist/curator/writer Jeremy Welsh helped to create a new cultural dynamic. However, an ethos prevailed – informed by both political sensibilities and lack of opportunity – which meant that few artists engaged with the commercial gallery network. Most actively encouraged the duplication and distribution of their work for little or no reward.

To someone emerging fresh from art school in the 1970s and '80s, this seemed like a vibrant time, a time in which creative challenges to dominant media suggested genuinely new forms of expression and powerful new ways of engaging and entertaining. The perception of a plural yet forceful wave of creativity has perhaps tinted this era with a rosy glow, but there was undoubtedly something in this earnest and motivated burst of activity that was genuinely expansive and challenging.

By the time LVA and LFMC merged and the Lux was launched, much of these former ways of working had been subsumed into the suddenly fashionable waves of British art that were washing across London. Young gallery-based artists were using film and video as part of their practice. Saatchi and other commercial galleries began to market their work to audiences

and collectors. The emergence of Moviola/FACT and the first Video Positive festival in 1989 created a new national focus for work produced outside this commercial environment. Its Liverpool base provided a comfortable home for a citywide biennial of exhibitions, seminars and screenings. Video Positive, the subsequent development of MITES (the national arts technology support service) in 1992, and the consolidation of the Film and Video Umbrella under Steven Bode, all heralded the emergence of a new, effective, audience-aware approach to the presentation of work. This, and the sudden interest of national players like the Tate and the South Bank effectively consigned film and video art to the safe haven of the mainstream. It was accepted into the contemporary art canon along with the new breed of media-friendly artists.

But the energy and 'edge' that characterised early work hasn't entirely vanished. It seems to have been repositioned within other forms of practice. Most obviously on the internet, where the same mix of technical facilitation, community partnerships and genuinely avant-garde art are visible in the work of Heath Bunting and Irational, Mongrel, Redundant Technology Initiative and the FACT Collaboration Programme. The ethos of net art offers a space within which conceptual redefinition, special interests and new modes of communication all collide and produce something outside of the canon. Some (much like early video art) is technically deterministic, some echoes the alternative distribution aspirations that drove LVA and LFMC. However, most is wilfully bucking the conventions that seek to define or include it – creating confusion and excitement in equal measures. Much of it may not survive, much of it may be re-appropriated by those for whom lineage is everything, but none of it is likely to have the same meaning in ten years time as it has now.

So while the canon of film & video art today has become fairly well fixed, it might still allow the inclusion of people such as George Barber, Steve Hawley, Catherine Elwes, Jayne Parker, Andrew Stones and Frances Hegarty – who have all managed to evolve and produce new works outside the commercial gallery system. But it will probably leave behind many others. It will also leave behind much of the low-cost partnership projects that often did little for audiences but a lot for the project partners. It will also eradicate video's raw uncertainty and clumsiness (in the words of Steve Hawley – "all video art is at least 20% too long") and much of the dangerous angst that both threatened and engaged its audiences. I've made no claims that Simon Robertshaw has influenced Douglas Gordon, or that Akiko Hada has influenced Georgina Starr, because I've really no idea if they have. It is possible to draw one's own fluid prejudice from any point to any other point. But as we do this, we need to be aware that each one of these lines may be excluding other possible lineages and the present condition of film & video is denied the full legacy of its own history.