

tax collector and so on, all come to make a point and go. Even Levi's sister Luisa (Lea Massari) who visits him once, seems to have no other contact with him. Levi himself (Gian Maria Volonte) is passively played as an outsider looking in. He may stand in the piazza shown large on the screen, shot with a wide angle lens only to be cut against a telephoto shot of him, the background now out of focus. This conveys the amazement that Levi feels, but the film lacks the analysis that can often be found in Rosi's work.

There is a deliberate naiveté in the photography by Pasqualino de Santis that is designed for the camera. The morning sun, shown as a backlight to the peasants going to the fields, the donkey that passes the gateway on call are images that grate on the nerves. But against this there is the insight into peasant life, 'a mixture' as Rosi says, 'of observation, detachment, engagement, contemplation, indignation and reflection'. The paradox for Carlo Levi is that he feels 'close to the sufferings of the poor people and the peasants, and at the same time, profits from it'. He remains 'a cultivated bourgeois' who sees everything with a poet's eye: the tax collector who will, because there is no money take anything from a goat to a piece of cheese; the peasants who slaughter their goats to avoid the tax; the bird that flies freely to suggest freedom to Levi; the superstitious belief in the angels that guard the doors at night; the mysterious pig doctor who stands in relation to the animals as the quacks do to the peasants; the alcoholic priest who suddenly berates the congregation on Christmas Eve over the monstrous war in Ethiopia are all impressive romantic images. For all its technical weaknesses, we could do with more films like *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, which I shall review shortly.

Kevin Gough-Yates

## AROLDO BONZAGNI

(1887-1918)

Paintings and Drawings

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## Performance & Video

Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli are video artists from Melbourne who showed their collaborative work at the ICA's show of contemporary Australian art in March. In April they introduced and presented their tapes, including a three-monitor installation, at the AIR Gallery basement. As I haven't seen any other recent Australian video art, I can't say how representative their work is. They certainly seem to receive a lot of official encouragement back home, including fairly generous access to the facilities of 'Open Channel', a well-appointed community/ethnic production house, which receives government funding. Without actually being broadcast, their tapes have been shown widely in Australia, and later this year they intend to produce work for a public service and religious television channel. The London screenings were part of a whistle-stop tour of Europe, during which they plan to produce work along the way at facility houses which will spare them the precious studio time. They like to work at broadcast or near-broadcast levels of production, and popular appeal is clearly one of their priorities. Most of the pieces they showed here are short, visually direct, and employ plenty of technical devices. They usually incorporate commissioned musical soundtracks by rock/avant-garde musicians of their acquaintance, and the pieces are clustered in groups linked thematically to form video-albums. In all, the work seems packaged to provide undemanding entertainment for middle-brew art-lovers.

And as for the content? Well, their statement of intent reads thus: 'Pop Art

Tapes by Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli, ICA March 23; AIR Gallery Basement April 15. Videotapes by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, available from London Video Arts, 49 Wardour Street, W.1. Tel: 01-734 7410.

took mass-cultural imagery and placed it into the context of fine art. We take Fine Art imagery and transmit it through a mass-cultural medium'. This is really just advertising copy, part of the quite slick and apparently successful campaign of self-promotion which has enabled them to work with facilities and support well beyond the reach of video artists, in this country and abroad, who are engaged in a serious examination of the television medium. In itself, this is nothing to get particularly incensed about. Video artists are accustomed, and some of them quite content, to be working in the shadow of the broadcasting institutions, within which mountains labour daily to produce mice. The problem is that Randall and Bendinelli appear to take themselves seriously as artists. They delve furiously into the recent history of painting for 'Fine Art imagery' to animate and imitate, but their pastiche approach, far from breathing life or humour into the still, silent paintings on which their work is based, drowns out, with a flood of technique, those very qualities for which the paintings are valued. Perhaps they hoped the art would rub off on them: instead, they simply left fingerprints all over the art.

To give a few examples: they have selected, in a piece called 'Fantails', a painting by Man Ray, completed in 1934 and entitled: *A L'heure de l'observatoire — les amoureux*. It's a large painting, which depicts a darkening landscape, hugging the lower edge of the picture, and features a little cluster of observatory domes. Hovering vastly over this scene is a gigantic, disembodied mouth. Or rather — and this is important — a pair of lips, closed and silent, forming a narrow ellipse which recurs in much of Man Ray's work, including the famous spiked iron. Apart from the verbal pun, this motif generates a wealth of visual metaphor. It is a fish, a blade, a planetary orbit. When bifurcated, as in this work, it becomes not only the entwined lovers of the title, but simultaneously the phallus and the vagina. Its scale is ambiguous: the landscape urges us to read it as a huge object, while its familiarity insists on its human dimensions.

The video version, by Randall and Bendinelli, reproduces the basic elements of the composition in the most literal way: a day-glo pink mouth is 'keyed' — electronically inserted — into a landscape. It's a neat trick, but the mouth, of course, has to talk, this being an audio-visual medium. It recites a couple of texts, on the life of Man Ray, and the influence of the astrological sign of Pisces on the Artist. In doing so, it remains obstinately

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a mouth, the shape fails to coalesce into a suggestion of the Piscean symbol. A rich, multi-layered visual pun is eradicated in an attempt to spell it out. Anyway, Man Ray wasn't a Piscean. An equally plodding transcription is made of Balla's *Leash in Motion* of 1924. This is probably the most sugary of Futurist works, in which the frisky passage of a lady's lap-dog floats like a skein on the picture surface, frozen as though by a strobe-light. The videotape, however, gives us an only too slick clock-work puppy, chattering across the frame, multiplied in fugal superimpositions. It provides a brief frisson of recognition for those in the know, but the technique is redundant in the tape — why strive for a suggestion of movement, when movement is fundamental to the medium? — and the work remains a caricature. Other pieces in this series take a swing at Warhol and Malevich, but retire a poor second-best. The Warhol sketch — I use the word in its sense of offhandedness — parades a series of Warholian portraits, electronically colourised, and captures the bland qualities of the artist quite successfully, but doesn't hint at his toughness or morbidity. The swipe at Suprematism veers off at a tangent, populating Malevich's solid blocks of pigment with moving shapes and colours, captions and more muttering mouths, repeating the (ironic?) title: 'Love me, Buy Me, Envy Me'. Oddly, this shameless travesty of Russian Constructivism hints at what can be achieved by video techniques when employed in their

own right, without relying on art-historical references for spurious 'Fine Art' status.

Now perhaps I'm just being a spoilsport, and misjudging the Australians' intentions. Perhaps in these works, and in another set of short pieces called 'Spaces', in which they concentrate on Australian painters from Max Meldrum to Brett Whitely and take a little more concern over translating painterly qualities into video equivalents, they really are bringing art to a wider audience. The fine-art references are given credits on the tape, albeit writ very small, and maybe some viewers will be led to the source-works for the first time after seeing the video. I rather doubt this however, and suspect that Randall and Bendinelli are half-inclined to coddle a mass-audience's inclination to reject the subtleties of the paintings in favour of the fast-food substitute.

In doing so, of course, the video-makers themselves reject the potential of the medium to create subtle and precise conjunctions of image, movement, transition and sound. When the artist is in control of the technology, rather than the other way round, the effect can be stunning, without becoming intimidating. But high technology, and the skills required to use it effectively, almost inevitably remain in the hands of high finance. Artists can be forgiven if they turn away in frustration, and either reject the medium altogether or confine themselves to the basic recording function, concentrating their

skill on the content and its meaning. But there is no clear delineating line between 'pure' video and the panoply of broadcasting resources. Artists who are determined enough can acquire control of the means without losing sight of the end: It's very tempting to compare the work of Randall and Bendinelli with that of K. Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, New York video artists who also work as a team, use very sophisticated techniques, and court popular acceptance. I have had serious reservations about much of their work so similar did it seem, in philosophy as well as surface gloss, to television advertising. Their recent work, however, in particular a set of three very short pieces entitled 'Static', 'Don't Ask' and 'Episode', while maintaining a ferociously tight structure, and almost subliminal editing, moves away from illusionism. The tapes work very like good rock records in their brevity, pace and overall shape, but unlike most rock promotion videotapes, in which visual interpretations are loosely joined to the sense of the lyrics, all the elements are woven together as a counterpoint of spoken fragments, printed captions, images, camera movements and transitional devices. The rather vacuous content of earlier work has been dropped in favour of an evocation of increasingly complex internal relationships, which owe nothing to the trappings of gallery art. In a future article I hope to assess their work at greater length.

Mick Hartney

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