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Spin, Tumble, Freeze: technology and Video-Art Steve Hawley

The relationship between artists' video and the technology that spawned it has always been an uneasy one. In the twenty years since the first Sony Portapak went on sale in New York (and was bought by the seminal figure of video, Nam June Paik) progress in the quality and capabilities of video hardware has increased in an ever steepening curve. At each point on this curve the influence of new technology can be literally seen, in tapes by artists whose attitude towards the tools of their trade seems to be ambiguous. On the one hand it was possible for the American William Wegman to produce his no-budget, unedited, black and white tapes in the early seventies (often with his dog, Man Ray) with a seeming disdain for the technical demands of video. At the other extreme a few years later, the pioneer American video artist Woody Vasulka, when designing and building his 'Vasulka Image Articulator' with Jeffrey Schier, would at times sign, in solder, the circuit boards he was working on.

The situation has become more acute with the advent of digital technology, which can turn the video image into a plastic form to be manipulated at will. However the cost of such digital equipment is so high as to make access for artists in Britain difficult if not impossible. It is certainly true that for the last fifteen years the higher levels of public funding in the US coupled with a more adventurous broadcasting policy have always led to American artists having use of the newest, most sophisticated equipment. American culture automatically validates 'newness', regarded in Britain with a distrust matched by an official attitude of respect for traditional media. Whatever the reasons, this gap between the two countries was never so wide as it is now.

As a result, the peculiar opportunities and problems associated with this new technology are being faced now by American artists, who however are arriving at

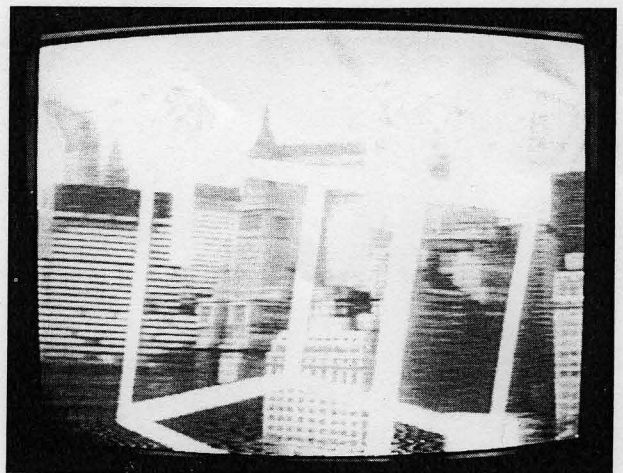
widely diverging solutions. Two approaches to video technology can be seen in the work of John Sanborn and Bill Viola. Sanborn's short tape *Act III* is a technical tour-de-force. To the soaring systems music of Philip Glass, live camera-work is combined with symmetrical computer-generated forms which pirouette in video space. In the most striking section the computer patterns dance out of the sky from behind the skyline of New York seen from a helicopter, and in one continuous sequence form and reform above the Hudson river as it flashes below. The tape also demonstrates some of the range of effects possible utilising digital technology, notably the ability to treat the video image as a two dimensional plane that can be flipped, spun, zoomed into infinity, or even squeezed into a three dimensional shape.

John Sanborn's approach to the medium is uninhibited and pragmatic: there seem to be very few, if any, of the available video effects he is unwilling to use. Bill Viola's work, whilst created often with the most sophisticated cameras and post-production, seems restrained by comparison. In his 12 minute tape *Anthem* he turns an unblinking gaze on the American landscape and culture as though looking from another planet. As oil pumps oscillate in the desert like giant birds, and shots of industrial plants alternate with life-support machines, the soundtrack underscores the measured pace of the edits (all straight cuts) with a low wail — the slowed down scream of a young Asian girl. She is shown again three times in the final sequence, in progressively slower motion, until the eerie rumble of the scream accompanies an almost motionless image.

Bill Viola manages to resolve very disparate material and maintain a narrative momentum in *Anthem* by his very precise editing. Because of the passivity of the camera, always still with no zooms or pans, the edits function like the ticking of a metronome, and the final



Anthem, Bill Viola



Act III, John Sanborn

slow motion shots interfere with this rigorous sense of timing and yet preserve the content of the piece: time seems to run out, like sand from an egg timer. John Sanborn's *Act III* is propelled along in a very different way. First of all by the insistent rhythms of Philip Glass's music, and the fluid movements of the camera and computer generated imagery, but also by a variety of video effects, which serve as transitions between one shot and another. There is scarcely a conventional edit in the piece. It is this bewildering array of transitional devices which is, amongst other products, the result of digital technology. Video effects can now be broadly divided into two categories, which are not however mutually exclusive: devices which serve as narrative punctuation or transition, and those which interfere with the illusionistic nature of the video image itself.

In the first category are straight edits and mixes, 'shove-ons', and also wipes, of which even the simpler vision mixers are capable in large variety, from the conventional horizontal or diagonal to complicated diamond patterns and others. In the second category are three kinds of effect. Firstly those which treat the video image as a two-dimensional plane to be manipulated in an illusionary three-dimensional video space — in video terminology, spins, tumbles, squeezes and so on. This kind of effect is familiar from its use in television commercials and particularly trailers for broadcast TV programmes.

Secondly there are those which interfere with the time element of the illusionary image. This includes slow motion (not produced in the camera as with film, but at the post-production stage), freeze, and variable rates of grab. The latter, in which say each fifth frame is held for one fifth of a second, produces the jerky puppet-like movements widely used in pop promotional videos. Finally there is a steadily increasing number of effects which interfere with the visual illusion. This includes chroma-key, posterization, colourization, pixillation (where the image is split up into a patchwork of square bricks of variable size), and many others.

One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that with an ever growing variety of treatments of the video image, the video artist has at last the capability of fully controlling the instant medium. However this capability brings with it some problems. The spinning video image zooming into the blackness of space, the cracking of the image into myriads of coloured bricks which reform to the next shot, these have joined the mix and the edit as techniques of narrative punctuation. However their significance is different from the older techniques: they are meant to be seen, to be noticed, and to impress as futuristic sleight-of-hand, a magical transition between shots. Some artists like John Sanborn have produced tapes in which transitions of this kind follow relentlessly one on another. In Robert Ashley's seven part *Perfect Lives*, directed by Sanborn, the tumbling rush of shots is incessant, nowhere more so than in the 25 minute *The Lessons*, intended as a schoolroom demonstration of the available video techniques. However, where the piece is overloaded with devices for narrative punctuation, this effect is paradoxically lost, as in a written sentence which consists only of elaborate commas and full stops. It moves forward without anchor points among the waterfall of images, which tend to run into each other in a solid mass.

The advertising industry has naturally siezed on these new methods of product display for TV commercials. However this aligns accurately with the role of the advert as punctuation in the flow of TV programming. The more conventional editing methods that digital effects are supplementing and occasionally

supplanting always relied in any case on much more rapid cutting than would normally be acceptable in film or TV. In addition, the hope is that these transitions lend the commercial an assumed air of futurism and magic, which is one reason why they are used to promote the most banal of products — washing machines and game shows.

There is another difficulty following on from the use of devices which affect the illusionism of the image, in that so often these operate as a denial of meaning within a piece, an obliteration of content. There can be very few instances where posterization or pixillation can function adequately as overlays on an image in a metaphorical way, or to further the narrative. If not, and if the viewer is not to be left merely passive, then failing to answer the question 'Why?', the only response left is 'How?'. This forced preoccupation with the means can be an opaque barrier shielding the viewer from the content of a piece rather than enhancing it.

As more and more effects are developed there is a period of time in which their impact is one of mystifying spectacle, but this however declines very quickly into mannerism. Many music promotional videos depend on this novelty factor to seize the attention: if this can be achieved for long enough the viewer if forced automatically to sample the product, the record (unless she turns the sound down ...).

It is interesting that the effects employed in Bill Viola's work are mostly manipulations of the time illusion of video. His tape *Hatsu-Jume* (First Dream), produced in 1981 in Japan with advanced cameras and technical assistance from Sony (where Viola was visiting artist) makes extensive use of slow motion, together with speeded-up motion. These effects do not function as punctuation, nor do they seem to interfere with the reading of the image, even if the question of why they are used is sometimes left unanswered. However if the impact of a piece of art is the product of cultural and historical factors then it may be that John Sanborn has found a form of expression that mirrors western society in the early '80s: its obsession with pace and technology matched by a jewel-like surface, which reflects much but remains opaque.

As the cost of new technology falls and it becomes more widely available, British artists working with video will eventually be able to gain access to new techniques. It remains to be seen whether these will take their place within the grammar of film and video or become, like some of the techniques of early silent film, disused aberrations in the medium's development.

Steve Hawley