

When Video becomes Object?

Video Skulptur Retrospektiv und Actuel: *Cologne*
Video Formes: *Clermont Ferrance, France*
Distant Drums, Marion Urch: *Tate Gallery, Liverpool*

1989 has so far seen a high level of video exhibition in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, starting with the Tate Gallery's Arts for Television show and Liverpool's Video Positive, and continuing through Cologne's massive retrospective of Video Sculptures and Installations. **Jeremy Welsh reports.**

1 Let's say it again: Less is More, more or less.

Arriving at the Kolnischer Kunstverein for the Video Skulptur exhibition, a twenty year retrospective with 45 video installations, I was struck forcibly by two things. First, a large banner proclaiming SONY presents... (this impression followed up by the super abundance of SONY products used in the works) and second, by the fact that not a single work by a British artist was included in the show.

The exhibition was mounted at various sites, the two major of these being the Kunstverein and the DuMont Kunsthalle. The latter is a huge hangar of a space at the edge of the city, hard to find and hardly a sympathetic environment for the work. However, as DuMont, a major publishing house, produced the catalogue (book, actually) of the exhibition, then the use of their exhibition space was presumably part of the sponsorship package. The Kunstverein hosted, for the most part, the historical aspect of the show, while the DuMont Kunsthalle hosted recent and newly commissioned works. The contrasts, quite apart from the relative appropriateness of the two spaces, were illuminating. While the newer works at the Kunsthalle often seemed exercises in excess - are we really expected to be impressed by another mountain of TV sets by Nam June Paik? - the pieces of video's early history, carefully restaged at the Kunstverein, were spare, considered and ultimately much more powerful.

Perhaps the ceaseless spread of surveillance systems and public video information screens since the late sixties when these early closed circuit installations were made, gives them an extra frisson for the late eighties viewer. In works such as *Live Taped Video Corridor* by Bruce Nauman (1969), *Interface* by Peter Campus (1972) or *Present Continues Past(s)* by Dan Gra-

ham (1974), the combination of simple pleasure and implied menace imparts an extraordinary insight that any amount of technological overstatement cannot get near. Perhaps it is that these works bring us into direct confrontation with the essence of video as a means of instantaneous registration/transmission, and that we experience this in direct relation to the body, the space it occupies, and the ghostly emanation of the body's image, experienced as a degraded and distanced reflection. Many of the newer works, on the other hand, operate in a field that is defined, to a large extent, by the construction of media imagery and its diffusion into the entire fabric of culture in the late eighties. In some cases, the new works confront and resolve the problematics of this new and infinitely more complex situation as successfully as the minimalist pieces, but in too many cases, the artist seems overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of video's potential to expand to fill whatever space is unoccupied.

There is a simple and irresistible magic in the video delay of Dan Graham's *Present Continues...* as we experience our own image as a kind of temporal shadow, a simultaneous re-run of our own immediate history; or again in the playful quality of Peter Campus' work in which the viewer attempts to fuse together two images of his body: one a reflection in a large sheet of glass, the other a live video projection on the wall behind the glass. This quality is almost entirely absent in the eighties version of closed circuit video; for example Buky Schwartz' *Three Angles of Co-ordination for Monitoring the Labyrinthine Space*, which matches the grotesque linguistic construction of its title in an installation of overbearing and unnecessary complexity; a baroque embellishment of an idea that would be best kept simple. The installation consists of a wooden maze overlooked by cameras, with monitors

mounted at intersections of the walls of the maze. One look at any monitor tells you instantly what is going on and renders completely redundant the act of entering the labyrinth.

One work, more than any other in the exhibition, successfully marks and negotiates the transition from the early seventies to the eighties style of Video Art: Bill Viola's installation *He Weeps For You*. It is a live video/closed circuit installation, but one in which mediating elements have been introduced, that shift its theoretical ground away from the confrontational space of the earlier surveillance pieces, and into a post modern discourse around the Image. The spectator enters a darkened space through a brightly lit entrance and confronts a spotlight water tap positioned over a drum. A drop of water is forming at the mouth of the tap. A tiny colour camera is focussed upon the drop, and this image is then displayed on a large projection screen. The image of the drop swells, light patterns swirling over its surface, and a miniature, inverted image of the spectator is trapped within the drop. Finally, the surface tension breaks, the drop falls onto the drum, and the amplified sound of impact is heard from behind the projection screen.

In this work we have a refinement of the surveillance idea (the establishment of a direct phenomenological link between spectator and object) through the introduction of a highly symbolic mediating form - water - that shifts our reading of the work into a sphere that has to take account of representation in a broad sense, and also narrative. It shares with the other closed circuit works an existential frame of reference, but whereas the construction and aesthetics of the other works link them to a consideration of a political philosophy of control by technology, and our status relative to that, Viola's installation shifts the philosophical site to the metaphysical.

It is significant that the term 'Video Sculpture' is used in the title of the exhibition, rather than the more typical 'Video Installation', for two reasons: one being the increasing integration of video in major European museums and the consequent need to legitimise its status as Art Object; the other being that many of the works themselves aspire to the status of object. In most cases the fusion of video with sculpture is singularly unsuccessful. A video sculpture, on the basis of many of the exhibits in Cologne, would seem to be an ugly geometric wooden construction with a monitor inserted in it. As sculptures, nobody would give them a second glance; as video they add little or nothing to the arguments that Video Installation sets out to raise.

One of the few works that achieves this awkward fusion of the immaterial temporal form (video) with the solid, ponderous object (sculpture) is Canadian Barbara Steinman's *Cenotaph*, a simple and powerful statement in which unseen monitors mounted on top of a tall obelisk-like structure reflect their light upwards into a prismatic arrangement of perspex sheets. Engraved tablets of stone and images projected into frames at either side of the room complete this simple and evocative work. It helps that the installation is sensitively staged, in a darkened space of its own. Many of the works at DuMont Kunsthalle are less fortunate, clamouring for attention in the centre of the cavernous space. Although the problem of sound spillage had been dealt with by using infra red transmitters and providing spectators with audio receivers, image pollution presented a different problem. Whichever way you looked, there was monitor upon monitor, every work clashing horribly with its neighbours, the cumulative effect simply to neutralise everything.

At the DuMont, it tended to be those works that were shown in enclosed spaces, and which themselves were quieter and more contemplative, that succeeded in drawing in the spectator. Two works on the Garden theme provided welcome relief from the constant bombardment of imagery: Dalibor Matinis (Yugoslavia) with *Rock Garden* and Rita Myers (USA) with *The Allure of the Concentric*. *Rock Garden* explores further a theme that has become familiar in Martinis' work over several years: the lure of the oriental aesthetic and its transition into a western idiom. Based upon the design of an actual Zen garden, the raked gravel bed with its implanted monitors/rocks offers a harmonious vision of nature and culture, old and new. *The Lure of the Concentric* is a more complex work combining architectural structures with pools of water, rocks and monitors. The fairy tale castle quality of the metal structures in the piece, the gate through which it is entered,

and the co-incidence of image and material in the work evoke the idea of a kind of magical or mystical realm in which the balance between familiar and unfamiliar is always delicately poised.

Several works in the show dealt with political themes. The highly regarded German artist, Klaus Vom Bruch, somewhat obliquely presented a giant monitor mounted high above our heads, which constantly relayed live satellite broadcasts of Soviet TV into the space, most of which seemed to consist of politicians addressing large gatherings. In the days of Glasnost, Perestroika and a warming of east-west relations, the point of this gesture seemed lost. It may even be an ironical comment upon the Art World's current obsession with all things Russian; but somehow, especially in a situation where it ultimately became just another monitor, the point was missed, the work virtually disappeared, which is a shame as Vom Bruch is an artist of considerable power and vision.

More successful in dealing with political representation in the media was Antonio Muntadas (Spain/USA) with *The Board Room*. In a darkened rectangular room with a rich red carpet is a large boardroom table with thirteen chairs, and on the walls are thirteen small black and white monitors. The format construction, the reference to the Last Supper, the integration of images of power into an environment that replicates the site of political and economic power, combine in an eloquent and chilling statement. Perhaps alone among the installations at DuMont Kunsthalle, this work dealt unequivocally with the interpenetration of media, politics, economics and religion, with no illusions as to what is really happening in the world outside. Muntadas will be exhibiting another installation at The Cornerhouse, Manchester, from May 20th and a trip to that exhibition should be well worthwhile.

2 Using Frames to Turn Pictures into Architecture

There is a certain conceit at work in some of the exhibits, whereby a video piece that was self-evidently made to be seen as a single screen televisual or cinematic experience is transformed into an installation by the simple expedient of increasing the number of monitors, or by adding a selection of other objects and materials that force the work into a spatial relationship with its surroundings. Thereby, for example, Lydia Schouten's *A Civilisation Without Secrets*, which is a good video tape, becomes an uninspiring installation through the addition of a variety of decorative devices which push it closer to the

condition of window dressing than that of sculpture.

A similar problem arises with the work of Dara Birnbaum whose compelling *Faust* series of tapes are awkwardly coaxed into a dialogue with painting by installing the monitors within large graphic images on the wall. The point is not that such a strategy is, in itself, invalid, but simply that there is more to making an installation than simply adding extraneous material pediments to the presentation of a tape. This approach tends to fall down in the same way as the Video Sculpture idea, and the weakness of some of these works makes the exclusion of British artists all the more irritating. For example, Catherine Elwes' *First House*, shown last at the Riverside Studios, London, in 1987, is a far better integration of video and sculpture than anything on show in Cologne. And Tina Keane, who, of all British installation artists, has some kind of international status, has an understanding of the dynamics of video installation far surpassing some of the pedestrian attempts presented here. Tina at least gets mentioned in the catalogue, along with David Hall and Mineo Aayamaguchi, but that aside, it would be easy to assume that video installation never happened in Britain.

If most attempts at making installations by externalising (literally) some aspect of the video image are unsuccessful, then those that do work are all the more noticeable. Tony Ousler, for example, with *Spillchamber II*, creates an eerie, bizarre, sometimes chilling, sometimes darkly humorous ambience that engages narrative in a way that installations rarely can. The objects he makes within which the monitors are installed are strange encrustations of flotsam, familiar materials and objects turned alien through their use and through the sickly glow of electro pastel colours.

Another work that successfully bridges the gap between video and object, between internal representation and external reality, was shown in the recent French festival, Video Formes, at Clermont Ferrand. *Dali Baba and the 40 Wheelbarrows*, by Dominique Pochat, presented a state of the art computer animation of imagery quoted from Dali's paintings, within an installation that was literally an extension into space of the images on screen. A single monitor housed in a giant white egg was surrounded by a crowd of wheelbarrows, some suspended above ground, as if in flight, others resting on the floor, inviting the viewer to use them as chairs. Surrealist painting provides a rich hunting ground for the creator or manipulator of digital imagery - Magritte, for instance, has been described as the patron saint of video art - and there is nothing startlingly original about *Dali Baba*. It is, however, a faithful

and respectful rendition, realised with humour and with a high degree of skill, and, significantly, of all the installations I have seen in recent months, including the whole Paik show at the Hayward, it bridges the gap between Art and Popular Culture effectively. It is the kind of work that might encourage a potentially hostile audience to look a little further.

3 From Text to Object

Clermont Ferrand, for a small town, put on an impressive show of installations and screening programmes with its annual festival *Video Formes*. Many of the installations were newly commissioned works by French artists, and although standards varied widely, as did the experience of the artists themselves, the overall impression was one of an energetic engagement with ideas and images. The exhibition as a whole was put together around the theme of 'Crime', a concept that was treated with varying degrees of literalness. Significantly, perhaps unsurprisingly in French culture, many of the artists chose to work in an idiom informed by the literary or based upon the uses of text. The selector of the works, Jean Paul Fargier, video artist and leading theorist of French video, proclaims in his introduction to the catalogue: "Video is an unpunishable crime. Everybody is, has been, or will be a video criminal. Video crime is unpunishable because video is The Law. Video has killed cinema. Congratulations. Video will kill Television. Bravo. Is this a dream, or what? It's surely Television that kills Video? No....." etc. To what extent the works themselves support or contradict Fargier's postulations is a matter for conjecture, and formed the basis for a 'Tribune de Critique', a panel discussion about the exhibition.

Probably the most successful installation, and certainly the most direct and unambiguous, was *La Guillotine* by Jean Yves le Moine and Thierry Marchadier. Taking the form of a tall stack of monitors turned over so that their screens were in portrait format, the installation was a literal, graphic transcription of a guillotine, on which a number of texts appeared, and were then 'chopped' as the graphic image of a blade descended the stack of monitors. Finally, the jumbled letters of the text would tumble out of the bottom monitor (standing in a raffia basket) and appear to land on the floor where paper letters were scattered around the base of the installation. The texts were taken from French revolutionary and post-revolutionary statements, including the declaration of human rights, and the guillotine was used as a symbol of the transgression and denial of rights and liberties. An ironic 'tribute' to the French bicentennial and a chilling

statement on the scant regard our contemporary leaders hold for our so-called rights.

Other works dealt more obliquely and evocatively with the theme: for example, *Corpus Delicti* by Danish artists Ann Mette Ruge and Jacob Schokking. The three screen installation (and one which, indeed, functioned as sculpture) presented an evocative situation that may be the scene of a crime that is yet to come, or may be forensic evidence of an act that has already taken place. There is no corpse, but there is a body of evidence and there is a witness, a lone man on a single monitor, shot in close up, singing mournfully. A large pendulum suspended over a mirrored floor oscillated between two bulky cabinets whose legs were the blades of enormous kitchen knives. Each cabinet contained a monitor, face down, whose screen could be seen reflected in the mirrored floor. The pendulum marked time between these points, suggesting an oscillation between decision and indecision, between thought and action, between the moment before the crime and the moment after.

Some of the installations attempted interactivity of one kind or another as a means of implicating the viewer in the crime. These will be discussed in a future article about interactive media. Others, such as *La Porteuse de Crime*, drew a direct line from crime fiction or from other aspects of French literature, and seemed to require a broader knowledge of French culture and a better grasp of the language than I could muster. But the works in general seemed well realised and carefully presented, demonstrating that it is not necessary to be a major museum with huge corporate sponsorship to mount an enjoyable and challenging exhibition of installation.

4 Strangers in a Strange Land

A writer's device this, and maybe a little flippant, but being a British video artist confronted by (and excluded from) the riches of the Kolnischer Kunstverein, I felt like Marion Urch's Irish emigres arriving in England. *Distant Drums* at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool, is possibly Ms. Urch's finest work to date. The passion and commitment of her work remains intact, but the edges have softened a little, her vision is less fundamentalist, there is an acceptance of human frailty and a melancholic quality that render the work an intensely humane statement. The installation is not perfect; she does fall prey to a temptation many artists find hard to resist, the urge to put too much detail into the work. Hence, the basic construction of a Waiting Room, with assorted baggages, was embellished with the addition of china tea cups and dead leaves. Both of these

additions undoubtedly possess symbolic qualities that might add to the overall reading of the work, but it didn't really need them.

The synchronised video tapes screened alternatively along a line of identical monitors was spare and light of touch, evocative by holding back slightly, by eluding our closest scrutiny. Qualities that might be said to represent the condition of a culture that survives in enclaves, in traces, in interior familial rituals that transmit identity subtly, almost by osmosis. Image and sound work sensitively together and the work weaves a loose narrative that we can follow along a variety of strands, drawing together the threads of a story, a culture in exile and in transition, a culture that certainly influences and is partially absorbed in our own, but which we still maintain as Other.

The quietness and introspection of this work are typical of Urch's generation of British artists. And like the best works of some of her contemporaries, she displays these qualities as strengths. But it is perhaps in the appreciation of these qualities that at least some of the problems of British Video Art lie: perhaps these aspects that for us are the essence of the work appear to other cultures as mere introspection, as symptomatic of a self obsessed insularity that allows Britain as a nation to have such an unhealthy attitude to foreigners. In an Observer article on Liverpool's Video Positive Festival, John Wyver wrote of British artists' installation as lack in self confidence, ambition or breadth of vision. However, this is only a partial truth.

It is indisputedly true that we do not sell ourselves as effectively as (especially) the Americans or some of our European neighbours, and true also that our island mentality often keeps us out of the action in mainland Europe. But the ambition and scale of some of the world's more outgoing and effusive artists often represent little more than overblown ego and a childish need to be at the centre of attention. Take as a spectacular example Jean Michel Jarre's fiasco in Docklands. Not lacking in ambition, 'breadth of vision', or self confidence, certainly, but, dare I say, artistic merit or any kind of admirable moral, philosophical or intellectual content would seem to be entirely absent. This is an extreme example, but a fair proportion of the installations on show in Cologne had nothing more to offer (and often less) than these introverted British works; it's just that they shout louder and get noticed. As James Brown once said, 'You talk loud but say nothing', or again, as Carl Andre said, 'Sometimes, Less is More, More or Less'.

Jeremy Welsh