

# ARTISTS TELEVISION

## by Stephen Partridge

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Stephen Partridge left London in January 1984 to take up an appointment as lecturer in Video and Computer Graphics at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, Scotland. He was charged with the responsibility of setting up the video facilities and inputs into academic courses. He started working in video in 1974 and has an international standing as a video artist making single-screen works and installations and his work has been shown at the Tate Gallery, London, the Paris Biennale, and the Kitchen, New York. In 1984 he was commissioned by Channel 4 TV to make a work for broadcast television, *Dialogue for Two Players*. He was a founder member of London Video Arts and has curated a number of exhibitions of video art.

This article is the first of a series which will aim to increase the level of interest and standing of not just video, but all 'time based' media in Scotland. However, the first will concentrate on video.

It is always interesting to note that most articles on British video practice always mention an unusual milestone: David Hall's series *Seven TV Pieces* for Scottish Television of 1971. Unusual for two reasons: it was the first example of an artist's real engagement with the dominant form, i.e. broadcast television, and remains one of the most successful, predating many other rather less successful attempts; it also happened in Scotland. The pieces were planned as 'interruptions' to regular programming, without explanation (explanations such as the 'do not adjust your set' variety are usually the kiss of death for art on television - particularly that which seeks to engage with the medium itself.) It seems that

David Hall had recognised very early on that an artist working in video on television had to 'negotiate the right circumstances for the work to be seen'. Indeed he had made these an important part of the work themselves.

'In one, a water tap (approximately life size) is inserted into the top right hand corner of the blank screen. The tap is turned on, out of vision, and the cathode ray tube 'fills with water'. The tap is removed. The water is then drained off, this time with the water line obliquely inclined to the expected horizontal. The screen is again blank - normal service is resumed and the illusion restored.'

There were to be only two other significant opportunities to see examples of video art in Scotland in that decade; the 1973 exhibition *Open Circuit*, organised by Lesley Green and Robert Breen for the Scottish Arts Council in Edinburgh, and in 1976, the exhibition *Video; Towards defining an aesthetic*, organised by Tamara Krikorian and Lindsay Gordon for the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow.

Despite the fact that all three events were highly successful, video never took off in Scotland in the way that it did across the rest of Britain and Europe. Perhaps this is an identification of the powerful role that art colleges play within the direction of art development in the country as a whole. There were no practicing artists working in video and employed neither full or part-time in any of the four Scottish art schools. This is not encouraging news for any art form in the present climate of reduction and rationalisation associated with the unpleasant and aggressive-sounding acronyms of NAB and STEAC.

Since the seventies video has come a long



Stephen Partridge  
*Dialogue for Two*  
*Players, 1985*

way, indeed the very term 'video' - originally adopted by artists throughout the world to signify an alternate stance to 'television' - has become an everyday word and as such is mis-used by just about everybody. In many ways this is encouraging to the artist, freed from its experimental or even avant garde caches, artists' video has evolved into a multi-practice activity: from performance related, through feminist, political, synesthetic, structuralist, etc., etc. In all these manifestations and differing concerns there is a common thread, and that thread is television.

It is foolish to ignore broadcast television, it is after all the common daily experience shared by so many. Unlike film, where the means of production was in the hands of individual creators in the early part of the century, and as such developed first of all as a formal expressive medium videotape as a medium did not even exist for the first twenty years of television. The first video tape recorder developed by Ampex appeared in 1956 and was mainly intended to be used by broadcasters as a storage medium particularly in the States where time zones presented special problems to national networks. It took another ten years before even broadcasters used videotape as a production medium and even then only in the studio. And it was thirteen years later in 1969, over three decades since the BBC started regular transmissions, that the Korean artist Nam June Paik, based in New York, made what are generally regarded as the first artists works on video using the new portable black and white equipment developed by Sony for the American armed forces in Vietnam.

The implications of this history are unique. The practices, and methodology of the broadcasters were able to develop and largely fix into a recognised and recognisable (by the viewer) language which became the norm (or standard as the broadcasters prefer to say - with implications of value and 'professionalism'). Any other approach was deemed unprofessional, amateur and of course, boring, i.e. not entertaining. Artists using the new medium of videotape had two problems, firstly to develop a syntax or formal language of their own, and secondly, to challenge to broadcasters conventions which tended to constrict any other ways of using the medium.

Throughout the seventies, artists' video largely confined itself to the art gallery which was not always the most sympathetic environment,

especially for the public who were unused to sitting in public spaces watching television sets set too far away from them and with extraneous noise often hampering concentration. Multi-monitor installation work was not so out of place with its 'sculptural' properties and scale, installation works were accommodated more successfully than single videotape works, and many were able to take up an oppositional stance. David Hall's *The Situation Envisaged* shown at *Video Art 78*, in Coventry, like his earlier *101 TV sets, The Video Show*, Serpentine Gallery, 1975, challenged the very act of watching television, in the former reducing it to an unnerving voyeuristic act and, in the latter, producing a complete overdose of programming predating the 'Scratch' video of the eighties. My own *Dialogue For Four Players* at the AIR Gallery in 1978, concentrated on the way information, both visual and aural, can be manipulated and mislead both participants and the viewer.

Single screen works had not given up the unequal struggle with television, particularly in Britain and Europe. Ian Breakwell made a series of programmes in a television studio which directly confronted in an ironic and witty form, the broadcasters conventions which culminated in the *News* (1980, 20mins); in 1976 Anna Ridley was able to persuade BBC's *Arena* programme to make a programme on Video Art which featured a new piece by David Hall, *This is a Television Receiver* (1976, 10 mins), made with the BBC's own equipment and newsreader Richard Baker; and Mick Hartney challenged racial, political, and formal issues as well as televisual language in *Orange Free State* (1978, 25 mins).

A dramatic change came about in the early eighties when it seemed that video art had been re-invited by a new generation of young 'street-wise' media-conscious artists popping up in London, New York, Paris, Rome and Tokyo. Many 'first wave' artists seemed alarmed, particularly at the unabashed and confident ignorance of many of these new practitioners the carefully nurtured oppositional approach of the previous decade. The lines between art and popular culture were vanishing again but, as in the sixties, it was not long before they were redrawn, with many of the more successful 'artists' turning out to be 'directors' - glad to be welcomed on board by an industry which is ever hungry for 'new' ways of packaging the same message.

On balance the diversion was a positive one, giving artists' video the temporary illusion of involvement within the centre stage rather than its usual 'fragmented niche on the border of the culture'. This helped to stimulate a new level of activity and diversification, and co-inciding with the launch of Channel 4 the opportunity for new forays into television by artists - some good, and some ignoring the hard won lessons of the past - slipping into easy collaboration, 'allowing their work to be conveniently packaged so that it falls neatly into the broadcasters' idiom.'

In 1982 Anna Ridley, by then an independent producer, started negotiating directly with Channel 4 and successfully persuaded them to commission a number of British artists to make individual works for television. It was not to be a titled series of particular transmission length or slot, nor was the selection confined to visual artists. Between 1984 and 1985 they were made