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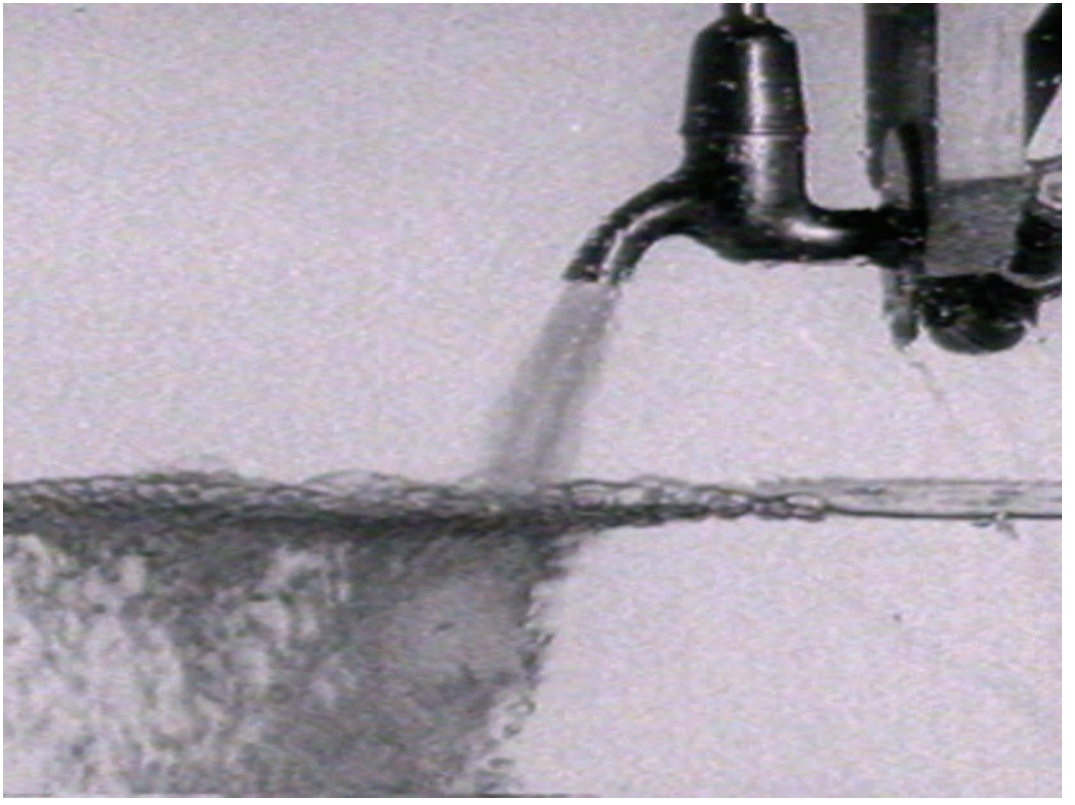
David Hall (1937–2014). Photo: Catherine Elwes.



David Hall, *TV Interruptions (Tap Piece)* (1971, Scottish TV). Courtesy of the artist.

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David Hall (1937–2014)

by Steven Ball and Catherine Elwes

> *Video as art seeks to […] expand and in part to decipher the conditioned expectations of those narrow conventions understood as television.* (David Hall 1976)[1]

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of David Hall, whose last work *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* (2012) graced the cover of *MIRAJ* 2: 1.[2] Long celebrated as the founding father of video art in the United Kingdom, Hall has been acknowledged institutionally in recent years by his inclusion in major international survey shows, and his key works have been acquired by public collections.[3] After leaving the Royal College of Art in 1962, Hall found early success as a sculptor and his work formed part of the emerging minimalist scene, exhibiting in key shows including the 'Biennale de Paris' (1965) and 'Primary Structures' (New York 1966). Hall made work for specific contexts and landscapes, and his early films, such as *Vertical* (1969), derived from attempts to photograph situated sculptures. Working in the early 1970s with colleagues such as Tamara Krikorian, Mick Hartney, Stuart Marshall, Tony Sinden, Kevin Atherton and Marceline Mori, Hall instigated a small but rigorous video practice just as portable video technology was becoming available to an 'amateur' market.[4] In his work, Hall soon developed an approach to video that combined cultural critique addressing the monolith of television, with conceptual sleight of hand and pure visual invention.

Television interventions

Hall claimed to be less interested in deconstructing moving image technology as a material and a process, than exploring the televisual medium as a 'culture in which ideas ferment and develop and exhibit'.[5] However, his most memorable works do, necessarily, reference and exploit the material existence and imaging capabilities of analogue video. Early pieces such as *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces)* (1971), short works dropped unannounced into an evening's viewing on Scottish Television, drew attention to the specificity of the medium within the context of broadcast television. These insertions 'just appear[ed] and vanish[ed]' and included the classic *Tap piece* in which the eponymous tap, gushing mains water, appeared to drown the interior space of the television, while *Interruption piece* featured a television consumed by fire. Hall's *TV Interruptions* were, in fact, shot on film because technicians' unions at the time blocked the broadcast of narrow gauge, 'amateur' video footage, but they would accept 16mm film. Nevertheless, Hall regarded these works as television art made primarily for viewing on 'the box' in a domestic context. As he emphasized in his conversation with Jackie Hatfield, 'it was about looking at a TV set, an idea on a TV set'. He wanted his pieces for television to be 'interjections' that,

1. David Hall (1976), 'British video art: Towards and autonomous practice', *Studio International*, May–June, pp. 248–52.

2. *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* (2012) was reviewed in *MIRAJ* 2: 1 by Steven Ball, pp. 132–39.

3. Hall's signature *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces): The Installation* (1971–2006), a multi-monitor installed version of his *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces)* made for Scottish TV in 1971, has been procured by the Tate and was displayed at Tate Britain for several months across 2014–2015.

4. The Sony Portapak became available in the United Kingdom and Europe in the early 1970s but was in circulation in the United States in the mid-1960s, where Nam June Paik was already experimenting with both the sculptural and conceptual potential of the medium. Portapak was something of a misnomer because the equipment was in fact, very heavy and presented problems for those of us of slighter builds.

5. David Hall interviewed by Jackie Hatfield on 9 December 2005 for REWIND (http://www.rewind.ac.uk/documents/David%20Hall/DH510.pdf, accessed 8 December 2014). All of Hall's quotes are derived from this interview unless otherwise indicated.

in the best provocateur traditions of the avant-garde, would 'create a problematic for the viewer'.

This is a Television Receiver (BBC 2, 1976), Hall's most famous intervention into the airwaves, constitutes the ultimate in television deconstruction. The newsreader Richard Baker, whose face and voice embodied the veneer of authority and veracity of BBC news, delivered a statement in which he detailed the illusion of his own presence. He described the precise relationship between the image of a man's face and the sound of his voice, ostensibly 'himself', and the technically specific means by which he had entered the domestic space of the viewer. Hall contrived to prove the point by exploiting a specific attribute or malfunction of the technology. He copied the original footage down several generations, enacting the decay of the audio-visual signal and gradually reducing Baker to a formless, babbling homunculus.

The genius of these works and their effectiveness relies upon the integration of two of the most significant guiding principles of Hall's work: their 'site specificity' and the imperative to speak to as broad and non-elite an audience as possible. The first imperative relates to Hall's earlier sculptures, which were not simply modernist meditations on their own material condition, but instead reflected on how the pieces related to the site in which they were situated, the view of the world they enframed. The second imperative grew out of the belief that film and video had the capacity to reach beyond high art enclaves, because 'people looked at cinema, people looked at TV', while at the time, only relatively few citizens regularly visited galleries.

Hall understood television (after Raymond Williams) as a continuous process devised for transmission and reception regardless of content, and (after Marshall McLuhan), constructed as an extension of human activity. For Hall, television created a social network, and the context of reception was crucial in its meaning and efficacy. Hall imagined that the broadcast of *TV Interruptions*, due to the strangeness of the ostensible content, would provoke reaction; he imagined conversations about these guerrilla transmissions taking place the same night in the pub, or the day after at work, in the office or on the factory floor. Where many 1960s–1970s experimental film practitioners seemed unwilling or unable to address the question of context, finding themselves in self-constructed ghettos inhabited by small coteries of the like-minded, Hall was determined to work in environments in which he could speak to a wide audience.[6]

Hall's anti-elitist approach was of a piece with his work with John Latham and Barbara Steveni's Artist Placement Group (APG) towards the end of the 1960s. With the participation of Jeffrey Shaw, Stuart Brisley, Ian Breakwell, and others, the project was dedicated to reimagining the role of the artist in the broader community, beyond the gallery and the rarefied atmosphere of the art world. Artists were placed in any number of working environments, often with industrial giants of the time such as British Steel and ICI. One of Latham's concepts was that an artist could play the role of an 'incidental person',[7] whose mere presence in a workplace, from a boardroom to a factory floor, would effect changes in the situation, either tangible and quantifiable at the time, or resonating at some point in the future. Hall's placements while working within APG were demonstratively productive: his film *Timecheck* (1969–1971) arose in part from the pursuit of a placement with British European Airways (BEA), and the *TV Interruptions*, while commissioned as site-specific works for the Edinburgh Festival, were often co-opted by the group as an example of a placement within broadcast television itself.

Hall continued to make works for television into the 1990s, principally for MTV. His *Five TV Interruptions*: (*reacTV*, *contexTV*, *exiTV*, *withouTV* and *ecstaseeTV*) (1994) perversely sought to slow down the turnover of images that had gradually accelerated in broadcasting

6. See the original Five Films programme note by David Hall and Tony Sinden, 1973.

7. John Latham quoted by Antony Hudek (2009) in his essay 'The incidental person' (http://www.apexart.org/exhibitions/hudek.php#_edn1, accessed 9 March 2015).

since the 1970s, particularly in the context of advertising and the music video channel MTV. Rather than subscribe to this hectic pace, Hall introduced 'extended time', slow motion, and, memorably, decelerated flying televisions that gracefully exploded on impact with the ground. However, by the 1990s, the object of Hall's critique was changing. MTV exemplified a shift in the broadcast landscape. It was fragmenting into multiple channels, across satellite and cable, which combined with the viewer time-shifting practice of VHS home-taping, permanently undermined the dominance of earlier forms of televisual programming and its assumption of a single-interest audience. By the early 2000s, with the increasing number of freely available channels on digital terrestrial television passing the 30 mark, not to mention the increasing competition of the Internet as a network platform, the notion of a counter-cultural broadcast to a large popular audience became untenable.

Hall recognized that the context had changed by this point and acknowledged that the *TV Interruptions* could no longer have any reflexive efficacy in the age of the ever-smaller audience demographics across proliferating channels, and when asked about whether intervention was still possible, his response in 2003 was that it was probably only possible on the Internet.[8] The televisual space that David Hall's pioneering work explored and problematized can be considered a conceptual harbinger for the networked media pervading contemporary society today. The parallel with Hall's television-based practice is not simply centred on the common presence of a dominant interface (then the TV screen, now the computer) but in how these devices form and are formed by social clusters with a global reach. Hall not only identified in television the possibility of a distributed, mediated space as an alternative site for art, distinct and removed from the exclusivity of the conventional art world, but also demonstrated that such a space could become pivotal to social activity.

David Hall, *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* (1972–2012). Installation view, Ambika P3 Gallery, London. Photo: Catherine Elwes.

Video as sculpture

Where Hall's concept of television as a social space dominated his broadcast interventions, his sculptural sensibility reasserted itself with the development of a series of multi-monitor installations beginning with *60 TV Sets* (1972) (Gallery House, London with Tony Sinden) followed by *101 TV Sets* (1974) at the Serpentine Gallery. Here, back in the 'comfort' of the gallery, Hall installed a mass of stacked TV sets each tuned to a different broadcast channel, producing a cacophony of sound 'at as high a volume as I could get away with'. Like Nam June Paik in the United States, Hall inserted the domestic found object of television into the hallowed spaces of a high art emporium. Hall was determined to strain further the parameters of the institution; technicians had to be constantly on hand to fix the unreliable second-hand TVs, and the work overloaded the electricity circuits, fusing the entire gallery.

The insistence on the monitor as three-dimensional object, domestic appliance and cultural portal in these works came to its logical end point with Hall's magisterial *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)* (2012) displayed in London's Ambika P3 gallery. Spanning the switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting, the work monumentalized and symbolized the final throes of television as a self-contained medium. A great swathe of upturned television sets, similarly tuned to the full range of terrestrial channels created

8. In conversation with the audience, after a presentation of his work at 'Sculpture of the Screen', Tate Britain, 2003.

a cacophony of mediatized sounds. The glassy TV faces, irregularly slanted, resembled, at a distance, a garden of nodding electronic blooms, while close-up they became sculptural building blocks of uncompromising weight and mass. Steven Ball caught the theme tune from the long-running soap *Coronation Street* (1960 onwards) rising from the babble, and observed that 'Corrie' was 'one of the few surviving television institutions that the original *TV Interruptions* are almost certain to have interrupted'.[9] The work thus recalled the inception of TV in the United Kingdom as well as its eclipse by the onset of digital broadcasting, and heralded the remediation of television content in the new, dispersed platforms of the digital age. Although this process of remediation was gradual, Hall caught the drama of the actual moment of the switchover from analogue to digital. On the appointed day, the analogue signals that had broadcast from Crystal Palace for 46 years were finally cut, transforming Hall's installation into a graveyard of televisions draped in a sea of white noise. As the signal died, the possibility of a dominant media structure broadcasting to a mass audience, also died, while its content, both contemporary and archival scattered to the consuming winds of the digital age. As Ball observed, the beauty of *1001 TV Sets*, and of much of Hall's work was that in 'bearing witness to the death of analogue', he created an 'event that the medium performed itself'.[10]

This self-performance by video was no more evident than in Hall's interactive installation *Vidicon Inscriptions* (1975) in which he exploited another fault in the system. The vidicon tube of an analogue camera could be 'burned' by exposure to bright light, the shape of the light source etching into the tube and persisting like a ghost over any subsequent footage. Hall rigged up a closed circuit system in which a bright light was triggered on the approach of a spectator. Visitors to the gallery were thus able to leave their calling-card images on the screen superimposed over slowly decaying phantoms of previous participants. The work presaged the age of 'selfies' and the online marketing of the subject in the various arenas of social media.

Advocacy, London Video Arts (LVA) and teaching

Hall is also remembered as one of video art's most tireless champions, being instrumental in securing institutional recognition and financial support for the burgeoning discipline. He was co-organizer of many of the early shows of video art including the first, at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975. In the cooperative and inclusive spirit of the times, the Serpentine show was open submission and international, and featured works by artists as well as community groups and video performers. A number of artists regularly congregated at 2B Butler's Wharf, near Tower Bridge, a derelict warehouse that became a hothouse for experimental performance and other time-based activities, and from which in 1976, a group emerged that founded LVA as an artist-run initiative that provided production and post-production facilities, and distributed artists' work both nationally and internationally.[11] LVA offered a space for artists to meet, talk and share skills. It was also a forum in which the different strands and factions could debate the issues of the day and Hall admits to some heated exchanges with Stuart Marshall, in what Hall described as a 'healthy dissention'.

LVA collaborated with alternative non-commercial gallery spaces such as ACME and AIR to show artists' work and Hall laboured tirelessly to secure Arts Council funding for the video enterprise (avant-garde film, with its long history going back to the early years of the twentieth century, was already relatively well-supported). Hall worked to establish video as a unique and discrete practice, based on the first new moving image medium since the invention of film. As he said 'it was partly a process of educating the funders'.

Hall often talked about the role of art schools in the early days, how they

9. Steven Ball (2013), 'The end of television: David Hall's *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*', *MIRAJ*, 2: 1, pp. 132–37.

10. Ball (2013: 136).

11. The founder members included Hall, David Critchley, Tamara Krikorian, Stuart Marshall, Roger Barnard, Stephen Partridge, Brian Hoey and Johnnie Turpie.

supported video artists by providing equipment and post-production facilities, which were very expensive to either buy or hire commercially. He is remembered in his teaching role at the Royal College of Art and Saint Martins in the 1960s, and at Maidstone College of Art where he initially worked within the Sculpture department before establishing, in 1972, the first time-based art degree option in the United Kingdom with an emphasis on video. Here, with the help of Arts Council bursaries, he gathered students and artists like Stuart Marshall who was himself opening up video-making courses at Newcastle Polytechnic.

In the newly formed departments of 'time-based media', staff and students developed mutually supportive working practices. As a lecturer, it was possible to try out ideas in the studios 'wherever you were, teaching-wise', and in many cases, staff and student practices 'enmeshed'. It was in this collection of educational centres (Reading, Maidstone, Coventry, London, Newcastle) that the philosophies of video art were also debated and contested and in which festivals of live art, film and video were staged.[12]

David Hall was a dedicated advocate for the medium of video, through his organizing, teaching and his own practice. Together with other artists such as Stuart Marshall and Tamara Krikorian, he was one of the first to write about video art in the United Kingdom, largely because, as he emphasized, almost no one else was theorizing or reviewing video shows.[13] He wrote about the Serpentine show in Art and Artists and contributed the article 'British video art: Towards an autonomous practice' to the *Studio International* issue on video in 1976. He became a regular columnist in *Studio International*, *Art Monthly* and *Time Out*.

Why video?

The initial engagement with the specificity of the technology was driven by a need to 'develop a vocabulary' that was particularly applicable to the medium. Hall carefully avoided calling the emergent video practice a 'language', which, he said would have implied a consensus, a 'total common ground' that never existed. Vocabulary implies a subsection of language, the molecular base of a linguistic system and the objective was to 'juggle those particles to do something different from television'. In spite of his canny manipulations of the medium, Hall did not subscribe entirely to the creed of video as a materialist practice. As Leo Goldsmith has argued, Hall's video works were 'very much *of* their medium rather than *against* it, offering other possibilities for television experience rather than a militantly "anti-television" one' (2015, original emphasis).[14]

Like many of his generation, Hall was initially attracted by the instant feedback of video. It was possible to watch and manipulate the image at the time of recording, whereas film was shot speculatively with no guarantee that what the film-maker saw through the viewfinder would correspond to the final film, and, as Hall remarked, once back from the lab, 'in terms of exposure, and the film, the image, there was nothing you could do with it'. The ability to monitor the image in the making was critical and led to the possibility of 'interacting with that moment of time, with yourself, with whoever or whatever was in frame'.

Hall liked the sense that he was making television, and he appreciated the domestic, intimate scale of it:

> It wasn't grand. It wasn't spectacle. It was roughly mirror size. It was average mirror size. You could see yourself. You could see events going on in a relationship. You had a relationship with it, which was equal. You weren't subsumed. You weren't dominated by the cinema spectacle. (Hall in Hatfield 2005)

This intimacy he said, has since been lost in video projection but it was inscribed in the analogue monitor as a physical object and as a medium of communication and reflection. In more recent times, with the

12. For instance, the Reading 4-day Opportunity and Coventry Events Week festivals that ran from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.

13. There were later exceptions, Philip Hayward in the 1980s and Sean Cubitt in the 1990s were early champions of British video (see Sean Cubitt [1991], *Timeshift on Video Culture*, London and New York: Routledge and [1993], *Videography; Video Media as Art and Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan). In the 1980s Jeremy Welsh, Catherine Elwes and Nick Houghton also reviewed video shows in the pages of *Time Out*, *Performance Magazine*, *Independent Video Magazine*, *City Limits* and later *Art Monthly*, *Vertigo* and *Filmwaves*.

14. Leo Goldsmith, (2015), 'David Hall (1937–2014)', *Artforum*, 1 September (http://artforum.com/passages/id=49737. Accessed 8 March 2014).

advent of digital recording erasing the technological distinctions between film and video, Hall resisted the use of the term video art as a blanket description of moving image work and agreed with Jackie Hatfield that it should be an historical term, 'otherwise', contended Hall, 'it becomes so nebulous, it could be anything'.

David Hall like many of his contemporaries regarded video as 'analogous to reality' and as a time-based medium, it 'paralleled real time. It paralleled our time as we lived and breathed and watched it'. However, as Hall said video reality is constitutionally artificial and the gulf or the 'combat' between the facsimile and lived experience was the conceptual space in which he was to test the edges of spectatorial credulity, and mirror back to us our own expectations and desires as audience. This was the particular skill with which he was endowed, as well as an unfailing ability to create memorable televisual images that still resonate today. David Hall will be much missed by his family, friends, students and colleagues. We have all benefitted from his dedication to an emergent medium whose legacy is finally being recognized and re-evaluated in the digital era. His own contributions, from his witty broadcast interventions to the monumental *1001 TV Sets (End Piece)*, testify to Hall's rigorously analytical mind, his formal inventiveness and his unerring ability to engage with the critical imaginations of the viewers and encourage them, like the artist himself, to dig below the surface of things.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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