RECENT BRITISH VIDEO

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John Adams
Neil Armstrong
Ian Bourn
Catherine Elwes
David Finch
Sera Furneax
Mick Hartney
Steve Hawley
Tina Keane
Richard Layzell
Antonia Sherman & Mark Lucas
Elsa Stansfield & Madelon Hooykaas
Caroline Stone
Margaret Warwick
Jeremy Welsh

Jeremy Welsh

IN RE DON GIOVANNI 1982 color 3 minutes

Jeremy Welsh was born in 1954 in Gateshead on Tyne, England. He studied at Jacob Kramer College, Trent Polytechnic Fine Art Department and at Goldsmiths College. He was a member of the performance group **Aerschot** and the rock group **The Distributors** and is currently the show organiser for London Video Arts. He has received two awards from the Arts Council of Great Britain. **1980-1983: The Basement**, Newcastle. **Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, Cotes Mill Gallery**, Loughborough. **AIR Gallery, B2 Gallery, W8 Gallery**, London. **Midland Group**, Nottingham. **Spectro Gallery**, Newcastle. **Institute Contemporary Arts**, London. **Bracknell Video Festival**, Bracknell. **Angelo Mazzuro Media**, Bologna, Italy. **Long Beach Museum of Art**, California, USA.
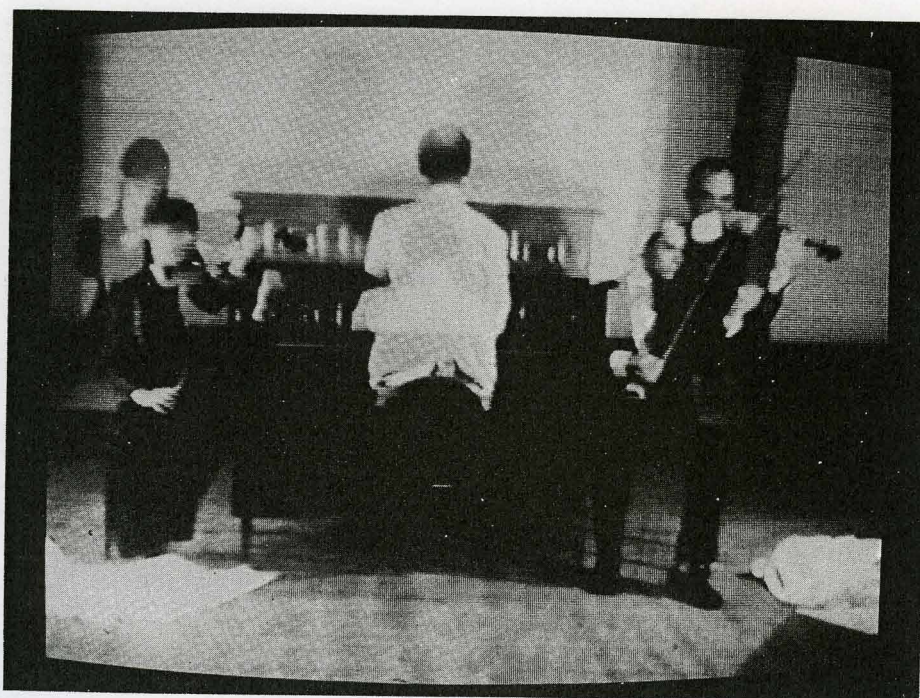
In Re Don Giovanni is a collaboration between myself and Michael Nyman using the music of the same title from his album **Michael Nyman.** The visual content of the tape springs from our mutual interest in the works of Fluxus artists such as George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono, Tomas Schmidt and others and from the research we were involved with at Trent Polytechnic from 1975 to 1977 into the influences of Fluxus upon experimental music and performance. Michael Nyman sometimes describes his work as 'Imaginary Pop Music' in which context this tape would be 'Imaginary Pop Video'.

Jeremy Welsh 1983

INSTITUTIONS/CONJUNCTURES/PRACTICES

Very little independent/avant-garde British video has been seen in the USA in general or in New York in particular. One suspects that this first major show for several years will be subjected to that close scrutiny which is reserved for the cultural "other"; that curious gaze which detects the threat of difference while seeking out the reassurance of similarity. I feel, therefore, a great responsibility for the selection and contextualisation of the works to which this catalogue serves as an introduction.

My intention is to make the works approachable – and to some extent consumable – while allowing their difference to emerge and insist. This ambivalent project which involves both an invitation and an exclusion necessitates the writing of a history (the socio-aesthetic context) and the elaboration of an aesthetic (that which constitutes the similarity of the works but does not collapse their difference).

Shows such as this are usually attempts to survey and therefore "represent" a much larger number of works. Such a strategy usually involves either the employment of a theme or the notion of a representative selection. The strength of each approach is precisely the weakness of the other. In the first case similarity is stressed over and above difference. In the second case difference is stressed over and above similarity. I am approaching, albeit cautiously, the very issues with which this **selection** is concerned. The key terms are **difference** and means and modes of **representation** – the very terms upon which an **oppositional practice** is predicated.

This selection of works is unashamedly partial. It does not attempt to "represent" the breadth and richness of independent video practice in Britain. Nor does it attempt to provide a linear, chronological historical overview. Instead it focuses upon the very issues which make such a representation impossible to select and such a history impossible to write.

All that these works have in common is their difference from something else. They are all "difficult" (in the sense that a child is said to be difficult) in that they seek to resist or stand apart from dominant ideological practices. It is precisely these issues which fascinate me as both writer and independent video producer and it is for these reasons that I have chosen to bring together these works and write this particular history under the title of this show.

Modernism

It is possible to identify a modernist and a post-modernist phase in avant-garde British video. Each phase has practices, institutions and critical discourses appropriate to it. The conjunctural determinations of these phases can be located in a variety of practices and institutions.

The video portapak became available in Britain in the early seventies at a time of national financial optimism and economic expansion. The sixties had seen the emergence of an exuberant youth culture which had generated its own economic units and cultural forms as a new market was created for a new and much younger generation of consumers. The revolutionary politics of '68 tended, in Britain, to focus upon confrontation with the educational practices, power structures and ideologies of the education institutions. Significantly it was in the art schools that the voices of dissent were heard the loudest. The alternative radical press flourished as new and specific cultural groups sought representation, self-recognition and affirmation. Pirate radio stations challenged the BBC's broadcasting monopoly of the radio frequencies. The late sixties and early seventies saw a progressive liberalisation of the legislation which maintained social inequalities based upon race, gender and sexual orientation. At the same time that the students of Guildford and Hornsey Colleges of Art were occupying their colleges and restructuring art education in favour of a network or non-specialist system, the arts themselves were entering a new phase of experimentation and cross-fertilization.

Artists had begun to work with forms such as installation, performance and mixed media which tended to cut across categories and definitions. Many younger artists felt the need to construct new institutions for the production and exhibition of work as an alternative to the commercial galleries and forms of patronage. These usually took the form of artist co-operative exhibition spaces which sprang up throughout the country and created new and different opportunities for production and consumption. In painting and sculpture modernism had reached its zenith. The semiotic shift begun by Cubism's rupture of sign and referent had eventually culminated in the play of pure signifiers free of any signifieds beyond the realm of aesthetics itself. Painting had achieved almost total reflexivity; it spoke only the conditions of its own existence. This far the history is not dissimilar to that of North America itself. But what was to determine the specificity of avant-garde British video was the form of modernism which it took up and developed to its own conclusions.

This entanglement of early avant-garde British video with late modernism requires further elaboration. There was, of course, nothing inevitable about it. One aspect of video practice was already establishing its difference from contemporary art ideology by moving towards the conventions (and dominant televisual ideologies) of agit-prop. In Britain, avant-garde video never fully identified itself with, or was accepted by, the traditional institutions and structures of the commercial art world. Its first practitioners were the very artists who had instigated the development of alternative exhibition spaces. Video technology became available, and a practice was developed for it, at the moment when traditional categories and definitions were being most forcefully challenged. As a consequence the technology was taken up in a number of hybrid practices such as ''video/performance' in which its role was more of an adjunct to or expansion of other media and practices.

Several British artists were, however, devoting themselves almost exclusively to the video medium and they recognized the need for a specific video practice to be developed. It is important to note the extent to which avant-garde film suggested models of organisation for this early attempt to establish video as an autonomous practice. Artist filmmakers had been struggling for several years to develop their own practice as an identifiable, autonomous and, most importantly, fundable aesthetic.

In the late sixties, as many younger artists began to work outside the commercial gallery structure, the State – in the form of the Arts Council of Great Britain – took on increasing importance in the funding and exhibition of alternative aesthetic practices. The two most significant new committees were the short-lived Special Projects Committee, and the Artist's film Committee which was set up in response to increasing pressure from artists working in film for a specialist body apart from that of the visual arts. Avant-garde filmmakers set up the London Filmmakers Co-op to handle the production and distribution of their films.

Artist video producers formed a pressure group: **London Video Arts**, which was to become a distribution, exhibition and production center supported almost exclusively by the newly formed Artists' Film and Video Committee. An aspect of the early membership of LVA which was specific to video was that almost all of the first steering committee members were, or were to become, in some way related to colleges and schools of art. Many artists in Britain rely upon part-time teaching in art colleges to scrape together a living. Equally, undergraduate art education in Britain tends to be organized around an atelier system, in which teaching by example is practiced by an artist rather than an educationalist. At this time many art colleges were setting up media departments and investing in video technology. This came as a response to both the new developments in cross-fertilisation in the arts (art colleges in Britain have always maintained a close contact with the professional art world) and the increasing fascination with new information technology, which was making its presence felt in educational institutions in the form of audio-visual aids in media-dependent teaching practices. Early British video therefore became inextricably linked with undergraduate and post-graduate art education, both in terms of its means of production and the development of its aesthetic. A consequence of this institutional conjuncture was that avant-garde video found itself face to face with the traditional arts of painting and sculpture. Video not only had to establish its own practices but also had to argue for the aesthetic validity of these practices. By developing a modernist practice, video would stand on an equal footing with other traditional art practices. At the same time, however, it would have the advantage of being recognized in its difference as a result of the modernist foregrounding of the inherent properties of the medium. Only such a project would guarantee the survival of the current means of production and the future support of the state funding bodies. It was these factors which constituted the conjunctural determination of the specific forms of modernist video.

Late modernism in painting took the form of a reflexivity which extruded all representation or meaning other than that which resulted from the purely formal play of signifiers. Avant-garde film practice had become ''about'' acetate, optical reprinting, movement, repetition and duration with an equal stress being placed upon the pro-filmic event, the process of image production and the projection event itself.

In modernist video there was also a constant attention paid to the possibilities of the technology and its means of image production. In some sense one can compare such work to modernist work in film in that there is a concentration upon the processes of image production. Yet there is a significant difference between the media which concerns the method of image registration. In video the image only appears at the moment of "projection". Videotape does not offer itself as a material surface to be worked upon. Hence the modernist attitude becomes directed away from the materials of the medium itself towards systems and signifying procedures. Separate units of image production – camera, recorder, mixer, monitor – can be brought into differing and complex relations but the producer is always kept at a distance from the actual electronic processes of image coding and registration. Many works focused attention upon the video monitor object either by retaping images from monitors in order to emphasize edge and frame or by perceptual plays between the screen as an image surface and the transparent front of a box.

The impossible contradiction which arose as a result of this attempt by video to take up the procedures of modernism was that there was an inevitable and constant confrontation with illusionism and representation – the very antitheses of the modernist object. Although film is also inextricably caught up with the photo-graphic representation of the world, film acetate can be marked, coloured, manipulated, re-filmed and reprocessed. Video technology simply refuses to be tampered with in the same way. The very drive to establish the ontological autonomy of video brought the artist up against the issues which constantly displaced the terms of his/her project. By attempting modernism, video practice in fact became embroiled within practices of signification. Unlike the media and practices of painting and sculpture, video technology and dominant televisual practices do not "belong" to the artist. The technology was not developed with him/her in mind and televisual "literacy" was established and is controlled by the television industry. Video's attempt at modernism produced a second unexpected dimension which was the establishment of a critical relation to dominant technology and its representational practices.

The curious result of this set of factors was that much early avant-garde British video turned the medium away from the world and in upon itself in order to achieve a high level of reflexivity. But, it then made deeply political claims for its subversion of dominant modes of representation. At the heart of this contradiction lay the seeds of a truly oppositional practice.

Post-Modernism
The terminology of critical and theoretical discourse rapidly palls and loses specificity. Sometimes redefinitions are necessary to pull terminology back into a theoretically precise space. I do not use the term **post-modernism** in the sense of a discarding of the modernist project or its "inevitable" supercession by the most recent form of avant-garde practice (a notion which is in some senses the very principle of modernism itself). The connotations which I intend to deploy are those of development and redefinition. Post-modernism does not transcend modernism but rather learns from it and develops its potentials. Essential to post-modernism is the notion of an oppositional practice. It is evident that as far as video is concerned, the engagement with modernism set the stage for the development of such a practice.

By the late seventies LVA had established an international library of over two hundred videotapes, developed a small scale production center in the heart of London's film sector and had a history of several years of exhibitions on a weekly basis in the Acme and later the AIR galleries in London. Avant-garde video was now fully recognized as a fundable practice by the Arts Council of Great Britain which instigated several video fellowships for periods of up to one year at a number of major polytechnic media centers and/or fine art departments. This policy was an attempt to promote video practice without having to invest large amounts of capital funding in a single production center at a time of State cuts in the Arts Council budget. This funding policy further entangled video practice with art college media departments which were, by this time, more secure – at least as far as their proven aesthetic status was concerned.

In the mid-seventies many of these departments had begun to make use of radical semiotic theory in their daily teaching. The attempt to establish a "science of signifying practices" represented by semiotic theory was taken up as a theoretical practice to accompany, inform and displace avant-garde film and video practice. By involving itself with modernist principles to the extent that it had, video practice had inevitably found itself asking deeply political and theoretical questions about the means and modes of televisual production of meaning. Radical semiotics was set on a similar course. The debate that ensued at every level of avant-garde film and video culture was to result in the rejection of the keystone of modernism – the denial of representation – and the development of modernism's progressive and radical potentials. Two of these radical aspects of modernism deserve special mention. They are **reflexivity** (or in post-modernist terminology **deconstruction**) and the **denial of the author**.

Semiotic theory began to provide the analysis of ideologically dominant televisual and semiotic practices of representation which would allow video makers to re-evaluate these two aspects of modernism and combine them with a new perspective on cultural politics to form the basis of a post-modernist oppositional practice. The Women's Movement provided a major political context for such an oppositional practice. The questions that women had been asking for several years tended to concentrate upon issues of representation and the ideological effects upon women's consciousness of dominant media representations of femininity. Feminist analysis suggested that power structures and practices of representation were inextricably linked and that the ideological had a specific effectivity which helped to mask contradictions in the social formation and maintain the dominance of the status quo. These observations led to the notion of a cultural politics which would involve the making of **interventions** at the ideological level in order to deconstruct and de-realize the fictional worlds constructed by dominant modes of representation. Interventionist strategies involved the setting up of organisations such as CIRCLES which places women's work in distribution.

CIRCLES was started in 1980 by women to promote and distribute women's works in a variety of media: films, tapes, slides, video, performance and other related activities. By presenting women's work in this way they aim to show its richness and diversity and the threads which run through and link it together and to also encourage discussion and support for other women to make and show their own work on their own terms.*

The Post-Modernist Work

Post-modernist video has not given up the deconstructive and reflexive separation of signifier and signified in order to reinstate the regimes of Realism and Representationalism. Modernism extruded the signified. Post-modernism re-introduced it, but displaced it in its relationship to the signifier in order to better understand the ideological effects of dominant televisual forms. This relationship of signifier to signified is reconstructed cautiously and problematically to demonstrate that no meaning is given or natural but is, instead, the product of a signifying practice. The world is not reflected in the practice of representation but rather is seen to be a product of it. It is precisely a fiction.

In its most radical instances, late modernism sought to deny the notion of the author as the transcendental source of a work's meaning. It consequently detached itself from conventional art historical models of heightened creativity and the ultimate expression of this creativity in the form of the masterpiece. Marks of authorship were expelled with the signified. This radical suppression of the author had as its concomitant a foregrounding of those aspects of a work which constituted it as a cultural text. Julia Kristeva has used the term "intertextuality" to describe this cross-referencing of aesthetic texts which tends to challenge the uniqueness of the individual art object. In post-modernist video this quality of intertextuality allows the work to be read in terms of its cultural and ideological resonances rather than in its capacity to "represent" the consciousness of its author. It becomes evident that the meaning of a work is precisely a social construction.

If the works in this show have anything in common it is their relation to this post-modernist context. Many of the works demonstrate a concern with narrativity — the dominant fictional mode. There is a strong tendency towards the discursive with an overt use of televisual devices. Frequently writing and speech accompany a devaluation of the purely "visual" as an overriding aesthetic. Many of the works conduct a critical analysis of the forms and themes of dominant television. Unlike earlier work, they do not construct dominant television as an irredeemably "bad object", but rather attempt to rework modes of representation such as soap opera to their own advantage.

All the works have been produced since 1980. They indicate a few of the possibilities open to an aventurous oppositional practice.

*Quoted from CIRCLES Catalogue No. 2.

Stuart Marshall 1983