

INDEPENDENT

Media



In this issue we ask - Actors, who needs them? Or rather, do we need the ones born and bred in Britain? Why are the Americans so much more fun to watch?

Also, we look at independent distribution, at video in Chile, review some new tapes and films, profile a couple of interesting people, and print a guide to media education.

Interested?
Look inside....

DECEMBER 1987 NO.72 65p
VIDEO FILM PHOTOGRAPHY PRINT RADIO

FROM WITTGENSTEIN TO JACK

Steve Hawley, International Video and Monomedia

Coming to art school in his mid-20's after a brief period of studying philosophy - "I think it was one term", says the artist - Steve Hawley had previously spent seven years working in an insurance office before enrolling at Brighton's art school. Hawley here produced a number of tapes before taking up a one year residency at North East London Polytechnic's fine art film/video department. After a period of part-time teaching Hawley quickly moved on to Sheffield's media department, and it's here that he now occupies the position of Head of Department.

"I tend to find my early tapes a bit embarrassing - I'm not keen to show them...": FROM A CONVERSATION WITH STEVE HAWLEY

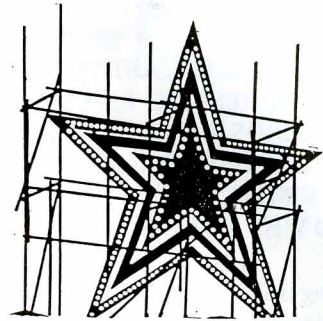
"It's video art isn't it?...Just video art": FROM A DISCUSSION AT LONDON VIDEO ARTS

"Hawley's video work is a prime example of someone who doesn't shun technological effects but instead seeks to control them for his own expressive ends": MIKE O'PRAY - Art Monthly Sept 86

From his early, student, tapes up to his most recent productions, Steve Hawley's output has always been informed by a determined professionalism and the notion that entertainment, comedy and a pleasing, eye-catching visual quality are intrinsic to the making of video art. The question this approach prompts, however, is the extent to which this desire to keep the viewer amused, pleased or engaged represses content or real experimentation.

By example, it's notable that in Hawley's early pieces - from 1982 to 84 - content formed the core of the works with tracks, texts and a sparse use of effect determined by the meanings implicit in the tape. (In 'The Dictionary' Hawley's exploration of language, Wittgenstein's texts and the meaning of words is articulated through a carefully structured use of repeat edits, image mixes and chomakey. 'Trout Descending A Staircase', a tape made three years later in 87, has only an elegant joke as its reason for existence as an artist, literally, paints video-generated textures onto an electrical canvas. A playful, popular and visually intriguing joke this may be yet it's still a work detached from the 'stuff' of content or complexity ... The medium IS the message here, to quote McLuhan).

Similarly 'One Shot Jack' (1987), also a short 5 minute piece, offers itself as a



carefully composed, vividly lit series of images which hint at the nature of masculinity rather than presenting an explicit critique of the trappings of manhood. (This interpretation is, to some extent, undercut by the artist's description of the tape: "A plastic kit of racing car mechanics starts to look like a Bemini sculpture").

In a larger context perhaps the shifting route of Steve Hawley's interests prompt an examination of the extent to which video art now divorces itself from content and its former relationship with other areas of activity. (Performance; drama; narrative; film; television and so forth). The, as yet, vaguely defined area of 'pure' video art - an art form which is, in a sense, about itself, the textures, beauty and transforming qualities of video - is most acutely defined by Hawley's latest pieces. Alongside tapes like John Goff's 'Interior Machines', 'Lighthouse' by Leigh Cox and Colin Scott's 'Italo Svevo', to name but three from a growing catalogue of works, Hawley's new tapes offer a move into areas of video art where references to an 'outer world' are transcended by an impulse towards a self-contained video generated vision. (The crux of this is that these works are 'pure' video in the sense that no other medium could have created them; they are, uniquely, video generated).

Profile

It's here, perhaps, that we can see Hawley as a paradigm of video artists' increasing sophistication and confidence in an art form with its own set of references, language and means of production. Just as Steve Hawley's works trace a move from a sometimes awkward yet thought provoking struggle with the mechanics of language, logic and meaning to an almost 'classical' position where video art is a descriptive and transformative medium - closer to the aesthetics of abstract painting than the rough and tumble of criticism or analysis - video art, or areas of video art, can now be described in this way.

IN YOUR EARLIER, AND FOR ME MORE INTERESTING TAPES, YOU USED WORDS, LANGUAGE, A LOT. IN THE LATER PIECES THERE'S A MORE VISUAL QUALITY. I WONDERED WHY THAT WAS?

The thing is that I show a lot internationally....Obviously there's a problem there if your work is to do with the English language. I think that additionally that in the U.K. there's a very narrow definition of what's 'good' video - in Europe there's a broader definition...

WHAT ABOUT "Trout Descending a Staircase"? IT'S A VERY SIMPLE, VERY ATTRACTIVE TAPE BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE MUCH SUBSTANCE.

I'm very pleased with it. It's a piece which everyone seems to like - even my granny is keen on it!....You see, I don't think that work should always be challenging or complicated. I'm now moving toward very accessible types of tape making, works that are popular.

In Hugh Adams' 'Art Of The Sixties' (PHAIDON-1978) Allan Kaprow, an artist, is quoted as saying "...the newest energies are gathering in the crossovers, the area of impurity, the blurs which remain after the usual boundaries have been eased. This zone is increasingly referred to as 'intermedia' (NOTE: A term from Dick Higgins' for "media between media") and within this zone I see the most critical points of oscillation occurring between intermedia and life". (Pages 26-27).

Kaprow is here talking of the Sixties yet there remains a sense in which his comments apply to video art from the 70's to the 80's. In the context of Kaprow's words, we can see that 'The Dictionary' is a product of 'intermedia' - an interaction with television's 'language lessons'; a discreet reference to the 'pop video'; an anecdotal style partly derived from literature - while 'Trout' occupies a space wholly of its own making. (Not so much 'intermedia' as 'monomedia').

Whilst traces of Kaprow's "oscillations" remain in video art, the attention and official recognition given to this newly arrived phenomenon on 'pure video art' signals the ease with which UK video takes on the shape of an acceptably rarefied and 'safe' medium.

The attraction of these pieces, this genre of work, is the ease with which they can be consumed. Offering the gleam and gloss of perfect images, painterly textures, reflective pictures the subversive, problematic or personal impulse is subsumed. Nothing is made explicit here. Any message or meaning, any 'speech' is coded, buffered and bled of significance by the smooth rush of pleasing images. Without the counterbalance of "the area of impurity" Kaprow describes it may be that the history books will see the late 80's as a period when video art grew up, stopped getting stropy, settled down and, finally, found a place for itself.

In achieving this the new aesthetic shifts away from the notion of video as an interpretative, analytical tool for examining and de-constructing existing ideas of reality, societies' structures and politics and into the field of a cooler, more mannered art.

YOU'VE JUST BEEN WORKING UNDER CHANNEL FOUR'S 'Illuminations' SCHEME - ISN'T THERE A PROBLEM THERE OF TRYING TO PLEASE AUDIENCES?

I don't see it as a problem. It's a different medium but the same things apply. I'm still trying to produce work which an audience will enjoy.

AND YOU'VE BEEN MAKING FILMS?

Yes. I suppose its the image quality and the fact that you can project in a big screen. I guess that if one could always guarantee that video would be projected on a good quality screen there wouldn't be that problem but one can't determine that so, yes, I'm working on film alongside video projects.

Finally, I suppose, that what's written here is not so much an attack on Steve Hawley's turn toward the visual, the seductive, the tricky - I find Hawley's two newest pieces and work like 'Lighthouse', "Svevo" etc, frequently beautiful, often entrancing and refreshingly visual - but an adjunct to a broader debate on entertainment, visual culture and television's effect on video art. The issue here is, perhaps, whether a healthy pluralism can exist in video art or whether the popularisation of video and the market forces of television commissions, festivals, and galleries will effectively reduce the range and pitch of video art's broad voice to an attractive but ultimately shallow monotone.

This debate will, I suspect, run and run. And me? I'll be running with it, breathless perhaps, but running anyway somewhere between the mob with 'Integrity' on their T-shirts and the other group with 'Populist' as their logo....

Steve Hawley's tapes are available for hire through London Video Arts. Ring 01-734 7410. His collaborative work - The Chemistry Set - with Tony Steyger, a freelance director, has not been accepted for transmission by Channel Four. The author would like to thank Steve for his help in preparing this article and contests the fact that he, the writer, is a Puritan ■

Nik Houghton