

I n t e r v i e w

DAVID HALL

David Hall is one of the most important pioneers of video art in Britain. His work and subsequent teaching have influenced a whole generation of British video artists. He began working as a sculptor in the early sixties. Over the decade, his work with massive welded steel sculptures evolved, taking on a much flatter, ground-based aspect as he became more and more interested in the mechanisms of visual perception. He finally abandoned sculpture in the early seventies to work on film and then video, in particular video installations. In 1971, he made a series of ten television "interruptions", short pieces broadcast by Scottish Television between the normal programmes.

How was perception important in your video work?

– People regarded early video as alternative television, feeding into its expectations developed through television. As an artist, you have to be conscious that people read video through a syntax developed by watching film and television. That intrigues me. I've been concerned with this phenomenon and identifying the potential loss that occurs through this codification. My work tries to challenge the acceptance of those codes.

I couldn't work with video as a purist separate art form, with no history and no relationship to television. That is not to say that I must therefore make television. Nor does it mean I'm anti-television. My work would be of no significance without it.

Artists, whatever form they use, should be questioning the way society perceives itself, pointing out alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Art should do more than produce acceptably "beautiful", tasteful things. I see art as having a philosophical stand and purpose. It's not using language as a philosopher would, but it's using other means of expression to query perceptions that we readily adopt. That's what a lot of my work is about.

Most of the TV art that I've done, as distinct from the video pieces which were not seen on TV, are not autonomous art statements. They are foils within the context of television, like hiccups to the acceptance of the on-going subliminal flow. It is crucial that artists intervene on TV in this way. I'm not that interested in making video tapes for their own sake. I know a lot of video artists are. They want to make video as though it were an object like paintings or sculpture. I'm more interested in the interventionist approach. If I were interested in making objects in their own right I'd probably still be making sculpture. The whole point of moving into film and then into TV was that I was most concerned that art should be transmitted through the media that seemed to be the most relevant now.

The idea of "intervention" shifts the emphasis from the tape as a piece of creation to the interaction between the tape, the audience and the context...

– Absolutely. It is neither the piece alone, nor obviously television without my interference that constitute the work: it's the two together. In no way can the work be anti-television. It feeds off and relates to that context.

None of the work I made for television was so long that the audience would switch off. What was important to the work, was the normal broadcast television that came just before and after it. Before the viewers could decide it was not for them, the work had already ended

and they were back to broadcast television. Timing is important.

Festival rules state that work will be accepted for competition if it is specific in its use of video technology. In your writings about video you place the accent elsewhere.

– When I am asked to make a work for television, the fact that it might be on film is of no relevance. What is relevant is that the context in which I am to work informs what I do. It is important that the audience perceive an interaction with the context.

Those artists who say they are not interested in their work being seen on television constitute a big problem for video art. The fact is that the viewing of their work is influenced consciously or unconsciously by viewers' past television experience, so there is always a relationship to television wherever the video is viewed.

Do you have the impression that those people working in the field of video are unaware of these mechanisms of the television viewer?

– They are less concerned. There's some confusion. Early video was accused of being modernist and elitist. The term modernism was used to refer to work primarily concerned with its own being. Work that you had to recognise as an autonomous statement devoid of any interaction with the world per se. In the current post modern phase, the idea is that work should abandon that position and be less elitist. Everybody can relax and do things that are more accessible. Early video, supposedly without populist appeal, was then no longer relevant. I don't think that has ever been true of video art because of the inevitable inter-relationship with television as a popular medium.

So how do you see the relationship between current video and television?

– A lot of what could be more appropriately called independent video, rather than video art, is completely compromised. It is reactionary, conforming to a conservative view of the artist's place. It has the look of television. As a result, it is more likely to get financing. I find great difficulty in distinguishing between commercial television production and what is claimed to be video art.

What is lacking?

– It no longer has a radical purpose. So much of the work is attractive, tasteful, very slick, technologically glossy, visually inventive. You could put it on television

and it would become part of the moving wallpaper that so much television is. But it raises very few questions of any sort. It is no longer confronting one's perception, one's expectations. It's been drawn into the on-going procedure of the media. If artists are to continue to have any significance in the world, there has to be a sense of an independent philosophical purpose in what they do.

To what extent is the shift of interest from video as a creative process and from the perception by the audience, towards video as an object in itself, strengthened by the people promoting it?

– I can see the practical need to uphold the activity of independent video making. But many festivals are solely concerned with the celebration of the making of video, and there is very little critical debate about its objectives. It's a tragedy that the intense discussion that occurred when video first came into the hands of artists does not occur now.

Watching video requires an effort on the part of the audience which the larger public have got out of the habit of making...

– People don't want to give it time. The same is true of painting and sculpture though it is far less apparent with them since it's more difficult to measure. That doesn't mean popularising and simplifying one's intentions to make them more accessible. That would be dealing with quite different issues. That's why it's so important to get the work broadcast if only briefly. In a sense, viewers have no choice. It may have no great significance at the time of viewing, but its very presence creates a slight deviation from the norm. It's all you can hope art to do.

I would rather a person see my work and walk away if he was not prepared to give it the time than for me to explain what I am trying to do. The sense of discovery would be gone. One of the prerequisites of a work of art is that it isn't explained. As a viewer you work with it to gain some experience. You don't passively accept it with a given vocabulary. It needs to be discovered.

INTERVIEW: ALAN MCCLUSKEY