
Eye to Eye

A video 'event' by one of this country's most active exponents of the medium, who in addition has done much to encourage the development of video in Scotland, may well be a fitting occasion to draw attention to current controversies surrounding this relatively new art form.

Anyone attempting to come to grips with the history and theory of video is faced with a formidable, but not wholly unexpected, obstacle. As with so much contemporary film criticism, strongly indebted to structuralist and semiological language, video literature is — with some notable exceptions¹ — confused and, to the average reader at least, often unintelligible: a case of *obscurum per obscurius*. Flick through the catalogues of the *Artists' Video* shows held at the Bid-dick Farm Arts Centre, Washington (Tyne and Wear)², or plough through the special issue of *Studio International* devoted to video³, and one is forced to conclude that video artists are their own worst publicists. This is sad and not a little ironic, for one of the principal complaints made by some, though not all, video artists (one must beware of lumping them together) is that, by being refused access to official and commercial broadcasting

channels, their work does not reach the wide public which many believe it deserves. Unless video propaganda is effective, it is difficult to see how the controllers of establishment TV will ever come to regard video tapes by artists as a credible alternative to even as little as one hour a week of broadcasting time.

In a stimulating article on the problems of video art, published recently in the first number of the magazine *P.S.* (Primary Sources on the International Performing Arts), the author, Mick Hartney, suggests some of the reasons for official resistance to and public ignorance of video:

... the audience for video art usually consists of a small number of devotees, usually themselves involved in the medium, either as producers or as professional observers, while a great deal of work in the medium reflects its limited audience with a limited and arcane repertoire of concerns and references, which in combination with usually poor technical quality, much repetition of minimal incident, and extreme length of duration, has established an unfortunate reputation for video art...

Hartney goes on to discuss examples of what he calls 'impure' video — performance art and similar work in which video may be combined with other forms of expression towards a single end — and concludes that 'It may well be that artist's video... will derive from the performance area the renewed vitality which is necessary if it is not to become moribund and isolated.'⁵

Two Installations by Tamara Krikorian
Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh, Oc-
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The video artist's concern with real time, which often results in the 'extreme length of duration' to which Hartney refers, is an extension of his or her almost obsessional interest in the medium itself and what it can and cannot do. David Hall, video artist and, for about a year before its disappearance, video correspondent of *Studio International*, has compared the intrinsic differences between video and film. Hall emphasises that video tape, properly used, should be considered not 'as a series of separate instants, only as flow', and takes video artists to task for 'aping the film convention and often using electronic or crude manual edits.'⁶ Cutting, selecting, editing — the techniques of film-making, with its rapid succession of physically discrete but thematically related frames — are not to be applied to the video image, which is made up of a series of ever-changing dots. The implication is that video alone can tell the truth (similar claims used to be made for the still camera), and Hall quotes with approval a statement to this effect: that 'video art tends to blur the distinctions between art and reality and even proposes the two are the same, or should be.'⁷ But this is precisely where video artists, if they are taken in by this fallacious argument, are making their biggest mistake. Real life, except in rare moments of intensity when it may be said to approach the level of art, is on the whole formless and uninteresting, and without a shaping, dramatising presence will remain so to the majority of observers. Especially where a temporal art is concerned, some kind of narrative structure, however stylised, ambiguous or fragmented, is essential if the reader's or audience's attention is to be held. It often seems that video artists have taken the concerns with 'duration' of the French *nouveau roman* too literally, or have been seduced by Warhol's slowed-down films of static objects, using a stationary camera.

Excessive self-consciousness of the medium is probably the greatest danger to a wide acceptance and understanding of any novel art form. Tamara Krikorian, who professes herself entirely opposed to the idea of an abstract video (whilst still, curiously, calling herself a formalist), is fully aware of the introspective tendencies of much contemporary video work though she refutes the assumption that 'artists turn to video as a medium because they want to reach a mass audience or indeed produce work with the aim of showing it on broadcast television.'⁸ This assumption she imputes to Richard Cork, in his introduction to the catalogue of last year's Biddick Farm show (in which Krikorian participated), and a vigorous debate on this and other issues has been conducted in the pages of the northern-based art quarterly

Aspects by, in order of appearance, Krikorian, Cork and Stuart Marshall, lecturer in Video and Performance at Newcastle Polytechnic.⁹ Cork first expressed concern for the future of video in the special issue of *Studio* which he edited in 1976, where he urged video artists to balance their self-absorption in the medium with a greater degree of social awareness. In his introduction to the Biddick Farm show, the same fears are repeated, with a stronger sense of urgency, and a solution to the problem is seen in terms of establishing a fruitful co-operative relationship with TV — both producers and consumers (the 'collaboration without compromise' referred to by Fuller and Tagg is their attack on Cork in the October *Art Monthly*).

Krikorian's own reasons for turning to video rather than film would seem to be that the expectations of the television audience are different from those of the cinema-goer and that the potentialities of the medium have not been fully explored, whereas in film, with its much longer history, this is not the case. In this sense video art *does* act as a challenge or corrective to TV as we know it, but whether it is screened on established channels is not at the moment of prime importance: it is still at an experimental stage, perhaps not yet ready to brave the outside world.

Krikorian is especially critical of two aspects of television: first, the constant barrage of sound and image, creating a passive but at the same time impatient audience 'for whom time is an expensive commodity and impact must be immediate'; and secondly, the intervention of the broadcaster or presenter who 'manipulates our responses and reactions.'¹⁰ (The latter I take to be a vulgar travesty of the artist's organising mind.) Her own recent work in video is centrally related to one or both of these themes. In *the Mind's Eye*, *Unassembled Information* and *Vanitas* have the advantage of being short (10-15 minute tapes) and to the point. All three in their different ways juxtapose an image of apparent fixity and permanence with a random flux of material suggesting transience and the ephemeral — *Vanitas* explicitly so: it joins a long pictorial tradition of reflections on the transitory nature of mortal existence. All three, implicitly or directly, parody the version of reality offered to us by broadcast television. In *Vanitas*, the profile of the artist, frozen into contemplative stillness before a mirror reflecting the still-life objects around her, is sharply contrasted with a quick succession of views of chattering newscasters 'framed' by the T.V. screen (clearly seen as a 20th century equivalent to the traditional *Vanitas* object-symbols). In an installation at

Glasgow's Third Eye Centre earlier this year¹¹, and in the recent show at the Fruit Market in Edinburgh, where, by means of a mirror, the viewer participates in the *Vanitas* allegory, simultaneously becoming the viewed (as in closed-circuit video, which the artist regards as something of a fetish of contemporary video makers and has assiduously avoided using in her work), and thus 'completing the picture', Krikorian has expanded these preoccupations into necessary critique.

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- 1 e.g. Mark Kidel, 'Video Art and British T.V.', *Studio International*, May/June, 1976, p.p. 240-41. Mr Kidel is not a video artist.
- 2 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979 (all held in October)
- 3 May/June 1976, op. cit.
- 4 Mick Hartney, 'Observation and Obfuscation: Notes on video and performance', *P.S.* no. 1, 1979, p.5.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 David Hall, 'The Video Show', *Art and Artists*, May 1975, p.21.
- 7 *ibid.* The author of this statement is David Ross, in *Art and Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1973.
- 8 Tamara Krikorian, 'A Reply to Richard Cork — Video Art and the Mass Public', *Aspects* no. winter 1978/79, n.p.
- 9 See *Aspects* nos. 5, 6 and 7.
- 10 Tamara Krikorian, 'Some Notes on *An Ephemeral Art*', April 1979, pp 2-3. It is in this essay that Krikorian reveals her interest in video as stemming from a 'formalist position'.
- 11 *An Ephemeral Art*, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, April 19-28 1979.