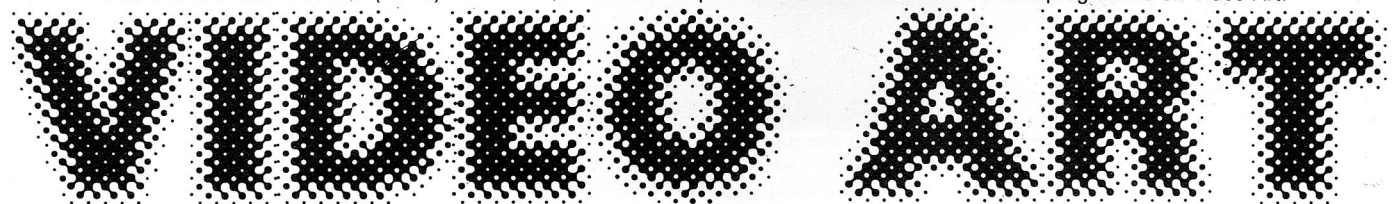


David Hall

This is a Television Receiver (1976): David Hall; colour videotape commissioned for BBC 2's *Arena* programme on Video Art.



Video: the State of the Art; Douglas Skrief charts the brief history of creative video in Britain, explores the spectrum of material currently available and points to the areas of future growth.

SPRINGING from a decade of such self-conscious creativity and critical paranoia, it is not surprising that various works using video technology from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies were categorised, very loosely, as 'Video Art' and that practitioners were identified as 'video artists'. The terms identified no coherent movement or distinguishing characteristics. And often the employment of video technology was only as an incidental inclusion in a large performance work or as an unquestioned medium for the transmission of material unseen on broadcast television.

When video equipment became generally available, some artists realised its potential use as an adjunct to their current preoccupations: this was especially so for those involved in Performance and Body Art such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman in America. Manipulation of the equipment, pioneered by Nam June Paik, to produce new, often abstract effects was seen as a branch of contemporary art with its roots in the Modernist movement.

The United States had the advantage over Britain during this time. The technology was available five years earlier there, and it was more accessible. Experimental workshops developed around the availability of sophisticated equipment at the Public Broadcasting Systems' affiliate stations located in already active art centres — WNET in New York city, WGBH in Boston, and KQED in San Francisco. British television was not so open-minded, either to contemporary art or to potential disruption of their internationally recognised high standards of image quality.

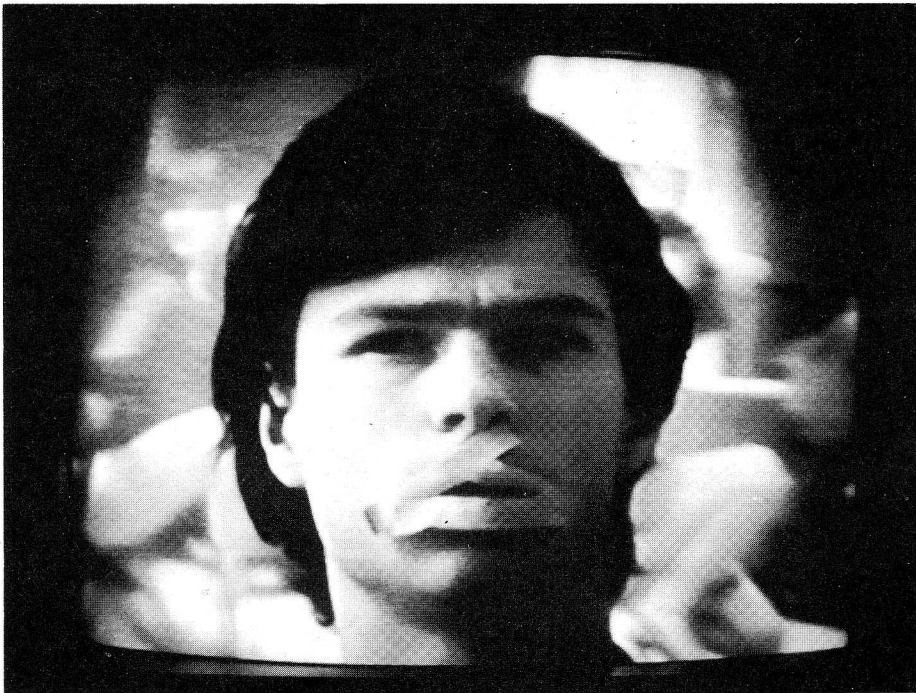
Still developing, difficult to categorise,

and coming on the tail of foreign developments, use of video in Britain has covered ground. David Hall, perhaps Britain's most experienced video artist, has passed through several phases, including the distortion of broadcast images and burning abstract inscriptions on the vidicon tube, to settle, for now, on installation works. David Critchley has produced a video-maker's video in which he questions expressionistic, structuralist, narcissistic, and other video-makers' preoccupations. And *Psychic Television* has planned to popularize a tradition-smashing performance spectacle. In the meantime, nodding recognition has been given to video work as an independent and legitimate endeavour by arts funding organisations, and occasional shows have continued to be mounted by museums and galleries. Interested users of video have formed into groups, notably the London Video Artists, which provides distribution and limited exhibition-coordinating services as well as some equipment, and the more politically oriented Independent Video Association. Formation of video collections at the Arnolfini art centre in Bristol and the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London suggests that video is being recognized institutionally as significant enough to merit public accessibility and protective storage. And though of the forty or so degree courses in art in Britain only three or four concentrate on film, video, and performance, fine arts students are wanting more and more to work with 'time-based media'. So far quite extensive experience is provided at Maidstone, Coventry, Manchester Polytechnic, the Royal College of Arts and St. Martin's, London.

One is still considering just the begin-

nings of a mode of expression, one for which there has been no thorough overview and thus no way of calculating, exactly, movements or even categories. The technology is also developing so quickly that the appropriateness of terms of critical discussion rapidly wear thin — especially as filmic devices become increasingly available to the video user. Critical comment, often dismissive of the new medium as 'just another movement' is usually limited to description or to relating the experience of video to that of the cinema and broadcasting. In this critical vacuum, artists are searching for appraisal in art publication reviews which, in turn, are only beginning to reconcile themselves to the electronic media as capable of noteworthy contributions in a creative field. Accompanying, and in fact partly causing, this lack of critical attention is the infrequency of presentation of video works. While the private market has not been as forthcoming in its purchases as have museums with reputations as collectors of avant-garde art, museums and galleries have been slow to provide opportunities for public viewing of video. Also the art market has tended to avoid video, seeing it as an inconvenience, as being not easily saleable because of the lack of status resulting from its association with television as a mass-medium, from its reproducibility (its lack of uniqueness), and from its technologically-based anonymity (the sense that anyone could have made it).

Looking ahead is to gaze into a highly unpredictable future. The growth of interest and activity institutionally, that is in schools, museums, and funding bodies, will not be stunted by traditionalists and reactionaries as much as by the constraints of



Cooking with Katie: Mike Stubbs; colour, 40 minute U-matic video.

the economy. Doubtlessly, experimentation with technological innovations will continue as they become accessible, yet even in prosperous times access to increasingly refined technology will be hampered by its high costs. Video's capacity as a recorder of, and an adjunct to, the expression of ideas independent of video's peculiar attributes will continue; attention to performance and to a more concentrated sense of content to maintain audience interest is increasing now. Substantial development of video as an independent medium of properties and potential unique to it will depend upon a continual re-examination of video in relation to the 'media'. As David Hall wrote in the preface to the Herbert Art Gallery's 'Video Art 78' catalogue: 'The reading of independent video will continue to fall victim to its ever-present forebear, broadcast television, unless alternative models are implicated through the work itself.' This concern for the future stems from a recognition of video's past.

What the public could see on television sets was controlled by large corporations and the government from just after its inception until the mid-1960s. It was then that relatively inexpensive recording and playback equipment was placed on the market by electronic equipment manufacturers. They realised that semi-professional video equipment had great potential as a managerial aid for staff-training, as a promotional medium for services and products, and as an educational tool.

Once available, and especially once portable (a development prompted by the United States' military surveillance demands in Viet Nam), the equipment became attractive to people outside of business and education. The desire to indulge in home-made pornography pushed general sales in the States: video proved to be an 'idyllic way to materialise narcissistic pursuits' as one polite observer puts it. Community groups were able to call attention to a

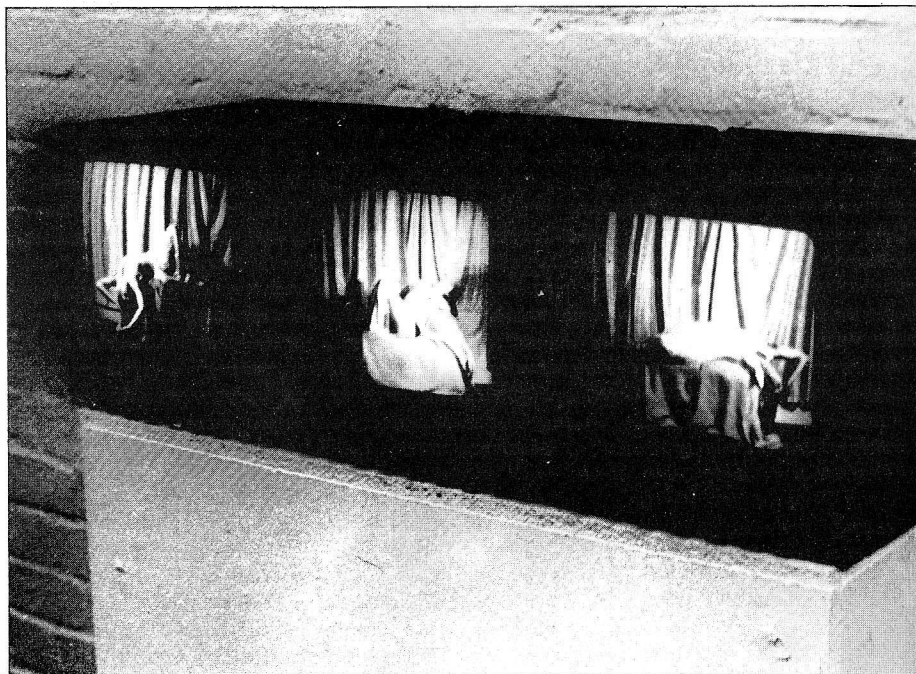
variety of local concerns, from the need for new educational facilities to the problems of neglected minorities living in that community's neighbourhoods. Political activists saw relatively inexpensive video equipment as a means to appropriate the modes of production from governmental and industrial propagandists.

The formal presentation of the content of these and other disparate activities in video usually appropriated broadcast models, such as 'talking heads', a narrative progression of rational content, and frequently a documentary format. While video was developed to get around problems of live-transmission programming, providing freer production scheduling, programme repeatability, and more flexible transportation and storage of programme materials, its intro-

duction did little to disrupt conceptions of television as a spontaneous, transparent medium which projected a facsimile of the world of an unprecedented degree of reality. The instantaneous monitor feedback of what was in front of the video camera enhanced people's perception of television's transparent immediacy. Divorced from its broadcast context physically, video often did not escape a prolonged identification with broadcast television.

David Hall's concern centres specifically on the use of Video Art as an inclusive term for the wide-ranging activities in which the use of video technology is the only constant. The implications of his concern are broader. Acceptance of the technology as a secondary medium ('a convenient recording and/or presentation system for ideas otherwise realised') and unquestioned acceptance of its relationship to television, 'do not take into consideration 'the powerful extraneous connotations that inevitably occur.' 'Reappraisal and a necessary "demystification" do not automatically come simply with alternative content; they can only occur when simultaneously uprooting and questioning the form. Of course such analysis does not stand for much alone, but it offers a potentially endless expansion of the medium's vocabulary, hence capabilities, necessary to a fresh creative development.' Only in this way will video be able to break free from expectations conditioned on the popular experience of television and Video Art become video *as* the art work rather than art work using video in a prescribed context.

In describing emerging critical objectives for Video Art distinct from other creative endeavours employing the technology, Hall implies a set of criteria for future work. Suggested criteria might include a simultaneous recognition and integration of the actual properties of the technology and its hardware — including manipulation of the recording and playback equipment, use of random visual noise, signal distortion, and



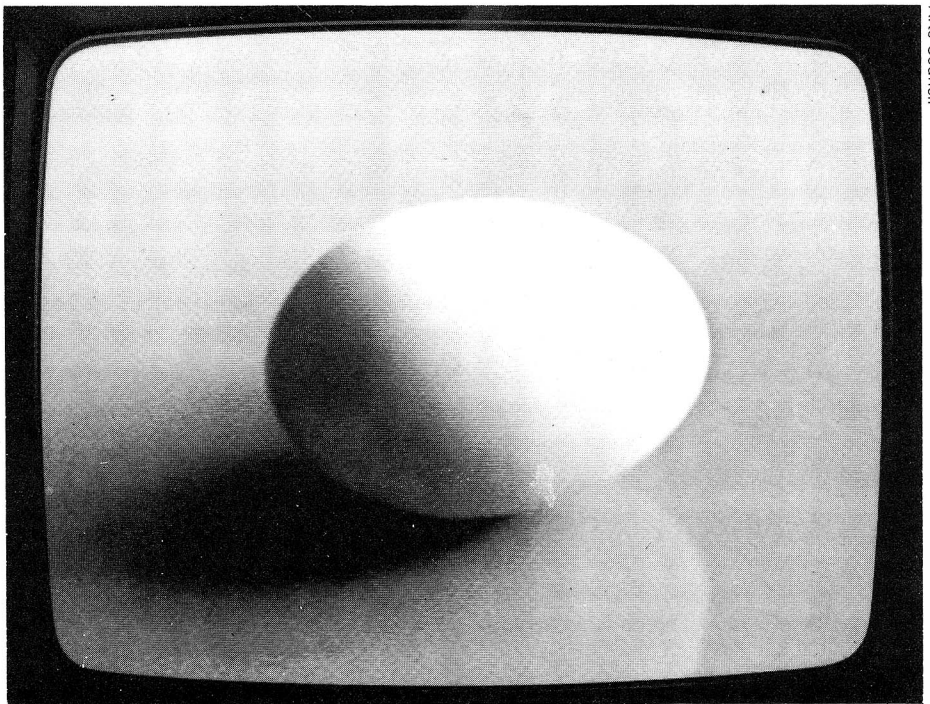
Aesthetic Configurations (1980): Philippa Brown; black and white, 9 minutes.

frame instability, for example — and also of the actual presence of presentation equipment as more than 'transparent' aids to viewing. If the capacity for instant image feed-back is utilised for the production of 'abstractions' which are then edited and coloured in sophisticated synthesisers, awareness must be maintained that the mystique of the hardware is only being increased. Works in which the participant is confronted with a live monitor image of himself as he stands before a camera must not fail to take into account the fact that the video process is as an indigenous a condition of the work as is the self-examination which usually makes up the content of the work. This also applies to works which are determining or re-evaluating the semiological functions and familiar narrative devices of television experience.

Insistence on the integration of content and form may seem critically conservative when dealing with a medium as new as video, especially considering its early avant-garde associations. But it may be a necessary step in sorting out the increasingly disparate uses of the technology and in preserving the admittedly delimiting usage of the term art. Clearer distinctions may assist the users of video themselves, giving them a sense of place in the development of video, providing a means of calculating their work's relationship to the larger body of video use, and enabling them to more astutely broaden their practice into unexplored areas. At the same time, increased exposure of the public to video is required — this to stimulate open-minded yet unintimidated critical appraisal of quality, craftsmanship, originality and significance of statement. Otherwise video will be doomed to its status as 'just another movement'.

PROGRESS in the use and appreciation of video will be tied, as it has been in the past, to the availability of production resources and to the viewing of exhibited work. Institutions with a record for supporting film ventures have especially been the target of subsidy requests by independent video practitioners. Traditional exhibitors of art have been expected to open their galleries to the new medium to make it accessible to the public they serve. The openness with which funding and exhibiting organisations have embraced video has varied, reflecting their caution and uncertainty, while their frequent slowness to act has sometimes been a catalyst to the emergence of new video-oriented organisations.

A natural target of funding requests is the British Film Institute. However, the BFI is not a body which responds quickly to new needs. If something appears on the edges of its concerns — which is mainstream cinema — it prefers to provide encouragement and to fund indirectly, thus, for instance, supporting independent film-making through an indirect grant to the London Film-makers Cooperative. Concerning video, the BFI has no specific position. Indeed, when the policy group recently met to discuss video access libraries like the Arnolfini's and the ICA's, the topic was of interest but



Video Elegy (1980): Huw Parsons; gallery installation — an exploration 'into our own ambiguous perception of TV and cinema images ...'



Continuum: Chr. Andrews.

unfamiliar. This reaction seems to support what some within its doors say — that the BFI as a body does not seem particularly aware of an independent video constituency and that it draws little distinction between either video and broadcast television or video as an independent medium and as a useful tool for film-makers.

Strictly speaking, video is not unknown to the BFI. It has been used in BFI funded projects for transfers of film and for instant playback uses on film projects. And funds have recently been awarded Mark Nash, editor of *Screen Magazine*, for the development on video of a project idea; to review his ideas for a documentary on the various skills and traditions of acting, it was agreed that a convincing way to suggest them was on video. (After their production, it became

obvious that video would be more appropriate than film for the entire project, especially as a teaching aid.) Also, the distribution library is now known as the Film and Video Library, and the BFI has bought all of Godard's video work, two video series made for French television (only one of which was shown), work by the ex-Chilean Raoul Ruiz, and part of a video magazine made for the Beaubourg Centre in Paris. Plans are being made to bring independent foreign film-makers to tour and talk in Britain; one possibility is the French video artist Thierry Kunzel who works in the creative development branch of French television — a reflexive, interrogative and theoretically sophisticated video artist.

Besides these peripheral contacts with video, more concrete attempts to support

the investigation of the medium have been made. It was clear to the BFI four or five years ago that a good case existed for the funding of video projects. Some Sony portapak were bought and lent to people interested in community politics and to people interested in performance and video art; these were the two apparent pressure groups. Peter Sainsbury, head of BFI Production, explains the outcome of the project as this: 'Research and a written report followed; we did not decide that video was outside our area of interest but rather, in 1975 and 1976 we did not find what was going on all that interesting. In retrospect it was evident that video users with a political message were not interested in the medium itself, and so we let the community politics projects be subsumed by community arts councils without closing out the possibility of further applications from video users.'

No categories in video exist; the review panel is a film panel. This must be in part responsible for the extraordinarily low number of applications from video-makers received by the BFI. In some years none have been received; in others there have been four or five from among two-hundred. Of recent applications none have been funded. They were found to be no more interesting than what was being done in 1976: as Sainsbury explains, 'We have left alone projects concerned with analogues to kinetic art or projects which were actually pilot TV programmes. These will be left alone in the future as well.'

If eventual broadcast of a work is a concern of the video-maker a potential conflict of interests is presumed. One thing the BFI does not want to fund is a bad copy of broadcast television or video magazine projects which depend upon conventional content. Video art which is abstract in a superficial way will also not be funded. The real issue in any consideration, Sainsbury says, is whether it is 'a good project', and yet at the same time 'it is too glib to say that the low quality of applications in video has resulted in so little funding in the area. There are very few applicants, and there must be something in the structure of the BFI which suggests we are not interested. There should be discussions with video organisations, and there should be open encouragement to video artists to apply.'

Whether there will be anything to apply for is another question. Already over-taxed budgets appear especially alarming in light of this year's £400,000 deficit and severe cuts for next year. Money must now be raised as special funds and not through the government — thus BFI Director Anthony Smith's active and successful participation in fund raising for the video library at the ICA.

Disregarding the inevitable bias towards film, the attitudes of the BFI reveal a few important implications. Awareness of video as an independent medium has not thoroughly permeated even the strongholds of support for more established visual media, and where it has, present financial restrictions negate the promise of substantial support. Alleviation of these restrictions

may depend on the private sector and not public agencies — though one hopes not at the cost of lessened appreciation of the autonomy of some video work from commercial uses of the technology. Where independent video is recognized, it is a fringe activity where individual works are measured by their contribution to the development of video as a medium divorced from one-sided political concerns, broadcast television, and superficially abstract works. Finally, a constructive relationship in the future demands present open-minded reaching out by both the institutions and the body of video users. Significantly, in relation to film, that future may be influenced by the increasingly important role video resources will play as most of the major regional theatres disappear and as video loan and reference centres spread.

FRUITFUL relationships have already been realised at the grass-roots level of the Regional Arts Associations, which are perhaps better able to respond to the needs of video-makers. For example, in Carlyle, Northern Arts is supporting Aidinvision which, with its studio production facilities, represents an advance on the portapak schools. In London, the Greater London Arts Association has twice funded the Independent Video Association's conferences. GLAA also provides practical training with professional courses and makes production and editing facilities available for London users. Generally, GLAA sees itself as providing a boost upwards for the trained non-professional, but they also act as a granting body to film and video-makers by providing funds for production costs. This year £17,850 is available in production grants. Completed works are promoted, sometimes in international festivals, and they are distributed through outside organisations such as London Video Artists and the British Council. As with the BFI, there are far fewer applications in video than in film, and these tend to be from community video tape-makers and local documentarists rather than artists. Projects funded have ranged from a programme on the political philosophy of William Morris to one on pot-holing in Yorkshire to another on stereotypes of women in media. Audiences are generally community groups and schools.

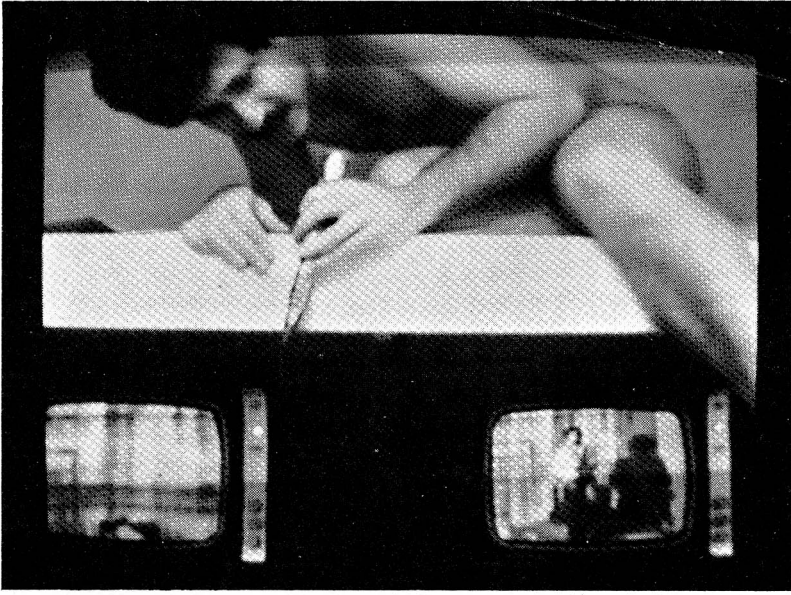
While these regional resources assist the spread of independent video production and viewing, creative initiatives have generally depended more heavily on the Arts Council of Great Britain, the major funder of GLAA. The implications derived from the experience of the BFI are largely transferrable to this other conspicuous target of funding requests. The arts department has not been particularly sympathetic to the idea of independent video work. The touring-artists tape program was, outsiders say, the result of two years of convincing the Council that it might fund something other than painting, sculpture and film; also, its 'art' bias left disgruntled some experimenters in documentary video whose work was left out.

Unlike the BFI, the Arts Council has concentrated its resources on funding insti-

tutions and individual initiative. Recent purchase of video equipment by London Video Artists was thus made possible, as was the position there of a six-month administrative post. Individual grants to artists include a £3000 bursary for costs and travel for Richard Lazell to spend a year at Brighton teaching with the aid of the sophisticated video equipment there. Perhaps the project providing the most impact has been the 'Video-Artists on Tour', an outgrowth of the Artist's Film and Video Committee's 'Film-makers on Tour'. About twenty-five participants receive £32.50 plus expenses to travel in Britain to introduce a programme of their work and then to discuss it or answer questions about it after its presentation.

David Curtis of the Arts Council's Film Office hopes that the touring project might provide the initiative needed to tackle what he sees as the single largest obstruction to the development of creative video programming — the lack of any real context in which video can be exhibited. For if one generalisation can be added to those implied by the experience of the BFI, it is that reaching audiences with the finished work has been immensely difficult. Also, comprehension does not necessarily follow accessibility. Artist-organised shows have been criticised for not being structured so to make sense to a lay audience. However, successful shows, at the Tate, the Serpentine, and the Herbert in Coventry, for instance, have been organised. And recent Tate and ICA programmes are welcomed as part of their coverage of twentieth-century art forms. Nevertheless, grumblings were heard in the artist's community that the coordinator of the Tate's recent show did not have a firm grounding in the field and that the programmes' having been slotted in between larger exhibitions gave them an air of acting simply as space-fillers. Like other potential exhibitors, the National Film Theatre has been lax. And while David Hall appeared on BBC 2 in the early days of British video, there is now not even magazine format patronage. Channel 4 remains a mystery for the moment.

IN light of this situation, initiative has been taken by the video community itself. In 1976 ten people gathered to create an organisation which would look after the interests of video artists. Their immediate concerns were for the distribution and exhibition of members' video tapes. Today about 150 members have deposited some 200 tapes that make up the rental library of London Video Artists — a limited company with charitable status. While the tapes must be possible to watch, the only stipulation for deposit in what is basically an open access system is that the work originate on video and be of experimental or innovative nature (recently changed from 'painterly or sculptural'). With the tape on hand — a U-matic video cassette — LVA then works as a clearing house, hiring the tapes to any interested parties. A week's rental runs from between £36 and £63 depending on the length of the tape. The member collects 66 per cent of the rental



Reconstruction of Rock 'n' Roll Tribal Practice (1980): Dov Eylath; black and white, 8 minute U-matic video.

income. The remainder goes to pay the overheads of the LVA office. A record of the rentals suggests the clientele of creative video work; they range from the Tate and The Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool to the art academy of Geneva and the Musician's Collective of London. About a third of the rentals go to polytechnics and art colleges, a third to galleries in Europe and Britain, and a third are hired by the LVA itself, with the aid of Arts Council funding, for exhibitions organised by volunteers usually held in London's Air Gallery. Arts Council funding has also just enabled the purchase of new video equipment which LVA sees as its first step towards providing full production and exhibiting facilities.

The specific interests of video-makers in the distribution and exhibition of their work became clear recently during negotiations between LVA and the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London.

The ICA, at great expense, has just completed its Cinematheque, an evening exhibition space for film and video which during the day doubles as a viewing room for a proposed video library. Being that the notion behind the library is one of open access to a broad spectrum of work, the plan has been to purchase on an all-inclusive basis which will avoid the buying of a preponderance of a particular type of video production. Avoiding a selection process which may reflect the objectives of a particular committee — for example, a film-video committee which recognises only art video and not documentaries — the ICA has proposed a set agreement which provides the artist with the price of the tape and transferral and 50 per cent of fees received from each exhibition of a tape, probably £1 per person for a showing.

During the planning stages a number of problem areas were recognised by LVA, and its management council asked the general membership for the right to negotiate with the Institute. Negotiations led to satisfaction except for the issue of payment; while the video-makers had been relieved of the prospect of having to transfer their tapes to

Philips 2000 to match the machines in the library instead of leaving them on a U-matic format, they were displeased by the financial arrangement suggested.

It seems that LVA wants to establish the precedent that video art is not for free — that it is not TV — and that the consumer must pay directly even if for a noble cause. Obviously video libraries are a breakthrough in accessibility and the ICA's a pioneering effort toward making individual viewing a possibility. Lack of discussion of video works, as suggested above, is due partly to the difficulty in seeing them, especially with the infrequency of their presentation. At the same time, a reasonable purchase or hiring fee helps cover costs of time and equipment in the production of the work and, perhaps more importantly, helps to ensure the production of the next. Good faith (and aesthetic evaluations) have less to do with it than practicalities of finance and distribution. Learning from the issues raised by the ICA's experience, Bristol's Arnolfini art centre is purchasing tapes for a 'reading room' research centre. Not buying in quantity it is thus able to pay what video-makers think more appropriate: £5 per minute of programme, the cost of transfer, and £35. The consensus outside the ICA is that the Arnolfini's approach is sounder even though prey to the tastes of the selection makers.

Another group involved in establishing suitable rates and conditions for the use of video is the Independent Video Association, formed this year after an apparent need for it was felt after the First National Independent Video Festival. As well as organising future festivals and acting as a forum for information gathering and exchange through workshops and their newsletter 'Noise', the group plans to lobby for the interests of its members.

Their concerns are more broadly based than LVA's because of their representing commercial interests as well as those of documentarists and artists. Already they have approached the BFI with proposals they asked to have considered. While An-

thony Smith offered then the National Film Theatre as a free venue for future festivals and the BFI's cassette-duplicating, standards conversion, and telecine facilities based at Berkhamsted, and assured them that the Production Board's chairperson, Verity Lambert, is sympathetic to video, financial constraints restrict funding of a festival, publication support, or subsidising seminars or workshops.

Channel 4 was mentioned as a possible source of funding for seminars and workshops, and as one of IVA's major objectives is to explore every avenue of distribution available to its members' work, the lead will surely be followed up. What will be found is still uncertain, even to Channel 4.

At Channel 4, £150,000 in capital has been set aside for use in the field of independent video and workshops. Whether this will be distributed in specialised grants or larger sums is still an unanswered question. Problems revolve around unclear guidelines for the channel's use of its funds. There is also the complication of union agreements with ACTT which has negotiated quotas on the contribution from the independent sector. The independents, while forming associations, are not unionized.

Another major hurdle is the problem of standards. Creative work in video has been barred from broadcast to a large extent because it has been recorded on $\frac{1}{2}$ " or 1" tape which, in relation to the broadcast industry's 2" tape, is sub-standard. Alan Fountain, Commissioning Editor for Independent Film and Video at Channel 4, explains: 'While there are IBA codes, there is still a commitment to put on the screen from time to time work which may not be up to broadcast standards.' This already happens infrequently during newscasts when items only available in sub-standard format are deemed sufficiently newsworthy to warrant their being broadcast. These exceptional cases may be used as a model for showing unusual independent work of considerable merit. The criteria are far from being set, however. Otherwise a policy of rule rather than exception may be adopted.

Channel 4 is unique as a programmer rather than a producer of its content, and dependence on the independent sector has been deemed critical to its success. Its future credibility as a 'new' channel is at stake, partly because of its promise to focus attention on the contribution of independents. At this early stage the commissioners are interested in finding out what the independents want to do now and in the future. Fountain strongly encourages video makers with ideas to come forth immediately and not wait: 'Challenge us to work together.'

This opportunity is rare in Britain. There is at once the promise of access to resources and the possibility of introducing viewers on a mass level to a reassessment of the broadcast experience. As the opportunity is explored the temptation, and perhaps the danger, is to leave unquestioned the mystique of this forebear of independent, creative video.