

No Gods or Picassos!

LET'S not shilly-shally about, the New Contemporaries concept is essentially one of a circus, of an aesthetic freak show. The proclamation of a showcase of young talent is always a smokescreen for assorted contrivances and peek-a-boo derivatives. What the artists are pronounced contemporaneous to is never made clear, and if they are so "new" then their contemporaries must be those of a lesser ability. I suppose it is really the fact of their combined selection by the panel that makes them so. Choices like these seem to be more or less based upon decisions created out of the residue of current trends, collaborations of preference and prejudice. Content and craft seem such fickle parameters at the best of times, and anyway hindsight is always a secure refuge for the critic.

Any collection of diverse works will lead to a series of comparisons between them to deduce their relative merits. This of course inhibits any realistic appreciation of individual items due to the perception of its neighbours or of the whole exhibition. The philosophy being: "Well if that got in, then anything can get in." Such an understandable viewpoint can only reinforce the zoological nature of the event: Come and have a look at *this* one!

So why do people enter? It is undoubtedly because participation is still seen as a stepping stone into the art= money scene for most artists. An early guaranteed way to get the stuff sold because that is primarily the reason for making it. What's the point in making the stuff if you can't get rid of it? It's one of the art world's coy Opportunity Knocks slots. "And here's a young man from Goldsmiths College who's done an interesting thing". All this goes to establishing another arena for the prophetic and introspective clod nonsense that has become the meat of current art. As with the euphemistically titled New Wave of British sculpture, so with the New Contemporaries: a display of the newly salvaged and repaired, of the baffling and the waffling, of evasion as a direct action ploy. So many crimes are committed in the name of homage, implication and parody, that one wonders what these people must use instead of original ideas.

It is mostly because there is this prospect of some media attention that people entertain the thought of submitting work; this is especially the case with those doing painting and sculpture. There is so much of it about that any opportunity for a public showing is going to be flooded with applicants hoping to be discovered or commissioned. Any claims to cultural evangelism can be dismissed as ideological masturbation when one considers the commercial/trendy nature of the Institute and its location on the Mall.

Much of what has been shown at the ICA, in other contemporary galleries and in the glossy art magazines over the past few years has been a display of aesthetic revanchism (look it up and figure it out). It is fervently mediocre and possesses no accuracy of assault. Art no longer reflects the current social symptoms of the society, it has become one of the symptoms. It is obedient and responsible, prone to the odd posture of defiance but ultimately decadent (in the worst possible sense) and perpetrated by those of dubious ability. In many cases it consists of the adopted policies of repossessed politics. The most emphatic visible principle is to keep making the stuff and make it saleable. One has only to witness the media attention given to Anthony Caro and his charlatan sculptures to comprehend the market forces at play to determine his 'greatness'.

In the case of video art and installation-performance it is more a case of necessity to enter the New Contemporaries, just to show that this work is actually going on and arouse curiosity in the medium rather than as an individual artist (at least that was my reason). What is lacking in this area is vibrant, realistic and critical coverage. Most of the writing is done by other artists in a sycophantic and back slapping manner to maintain their cosy positions within a select coterie. As a result there is some real rubbish being applauded because no one feels they have the 'right' to criticise. To do so would upset the delicate balance of a stable aesthetic of commerce. This is why there is so much around at the moment that is halfbaked, halfcocked, halfhearted and halfwitted.

Video art is a creature of incredibly short ancestry whose development has been both rapid and covert. Through its connections with new technology video has reached adolescence as an art form with amazing speed. Or in another analogy, it has developed from the caves of Altamara into the complexities and ploys of Marcel Duchamp. In its earliest years of growth, video art was a playful and curious beast, roguish and tenacious. It wallowed in its capacity for duration and its aesthetic malleability. It took issue with what it was incapable of being — of producing anything vaguely associated with television; of its technical failings — the lack of accurate editing capabilities and the frailties of the camera vidicon; of its sculptural analogies — the use of the monitor as a constructional unit and the manipulation of time as a physical thing; and of course of its own unique assets — the repetition, relay and instant storage and recall of material.

However the dilemma it now faces is one of direction. On the one hand it recognises the radical and rascally tendencies of its youth, and yet on the other it seems to welcome the sophistication and security of other commercial 'alliances' and 'liaisons'. I have to admit that the judgements may seem partial and derisory but that is for you to decide, for as Wittgenstein stated: "What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent." So in view of this it has to be said that video art, in its most succinct and forthright form does not kowtow to any approach or singular attitude — there are no gods or Picassos to refer back to — the history is still being created.

But to this writer, the current output of tapes does appeal inconsequential, mournful and obsessed with gimmickry and gadgetry, lacking all but the most petty and feeble of structures. The main purpose of young people to 'do Video' is to cash in on the gravy train of pop promo productions.

In the past few years this form has hindered and distracted the perception and development of video art. Audiences have become familiarised with desires for gross visual consumerism and their perception has in many respects been determined by these glossy, rapidly temporal shorts. As a result the expectation is that these tapes will fulfill the role that they have been wholly conditioned to accept. This is never the case.

Although it's shown on a telly, video art is not the sort of thing you'd expect to see on the telly — not even late night Channel 4. This provides many artists with a unique perspective in which to position what they are doing. To a degree this is an angle I use myself, to combat and conflict with these anticipated viewing tendencies, to re-employ television's own tactics in order to establish a more coherent awareness of its frailties and its distortions. This is particularly the case with 'GREMLIN SPORE IN SATELLITE CIPHER HOAX'. Television is still radio with pictures, it has contributed nothing new at all to the medium apart from a very retentive approach to its own importance. This is the crucial aspect, that without the necessary related and reliable imagery television collapses in on itself, a fragile structure of hoax and bluff at the best of times. In other work such as 'THE STRUCTURALIST HEATHEN MEETS MEDIA-DUPE MAN' the two figures are represented as two extremes of artistic approach and confront each other in a mock chat show situation. Instead of it being a thrilling theatre of exchange, the event turns into a platform less for negotiation and more for negation and denial and other related accusations. In the tape 'Shabby

'Figurehead' for instance the main character of the piece is built out of a collection of monologue errors, edited clips and images, voice-overs and an assortment of intertitles like a compiled dossier. At no stage does he get to articulate until the end in a long confession sequence in which the fabric of the first part is exposed. It really reflects the way television creates and destroys its pool of 'personalities'.

I work in a similar manner, developing and engineering a collection of created

characters, or rather I prefer to see them as part of a cabaret of agents. At the moment many of them are remaining dormant, all apart from the HOST who is currently establishing himself. This figure has accumulated a small network of his own — the Vectors — to whom he sends surreptitious articles, parcels and communications through the postal system. He really reflects the current direction of my own work, slanting it away from video into installation, posters, pamphlets and postal pieces. I

find these more passive media — as opposed to the emphatic determinant of the videotape — provide me with an opportunity to savour and manipulate further elements that video has a tendency to gloss over, particularly satire, word-play, caricature and other word/image configurations. For the moment, at least, this New Contemporary is happy to work on his own terms.

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VICKY BURTON

On the New Contemporaries

THE New Contemporaries, and why I entered work into it: At first it seemed an easy straight-forward subject to write about, but when I sat down to give my motives for sending in work I found that they were very unstudied and apparently very casual.

I had never really considered sending in films, or slides of my work to the New Contemporaries Exhibition whilst at college in Portsmouth. The ICA and this exhibition seemed a very distant phenomenon. The New Contemporaries entry forms were something that appeared in college at a certain time each year, always when I was busily involved in work, and then when I noticed them the exhibition had been and gone. I remember that it was a common opinion amongst the students and some of the lecturers at college that New Contemporaries was very much a localised London affair, its image being that of an exhibition dominated by a few London colleges with no real national approach at all. Along with these off-putting ideas, on a personal level as a student I never felt drawn towards showing my work outside of a very small circle of colleagues and lecturers. I considered my work too much a part of my passage through an institution of learning, pulled out of me this way and that by the differing ideas and characters that you find yourself amongst at art college. To take from the suggestions of themes for a statement on the New Contemporaries entry form this year, I did not feel able to exhibit because my attitude is that showing work publicly is a responsible and professional undertaking, something that I could not equate with my position as a student.

Why I found the impetus to show work after I left college was very much tied up with a response to shedding an institution which I had been so involved with for three years of my life. I had a film shown as part of the Women's Work II Exhibition at the Brixton Art Gallery and I noticed people taking an interest in my films, as phenomena totally removed from me as a person — which had never happened whilst at college — where the personality of the student and the work are always tied together when ever any

type of appreciation of the work takes place.

This, then, was amongst the reasons why I began to look for opportunities to show my work. Another reason was to be able to see them again myself, as I had no facilities for viewing 16mm film.

But the reason I ended up in this year's New Contemporaries exhibition was simply that I had a couple of acquaintances among this year's Organising Committee who suggested to me, mainly because of the lack of student response to the exhibition, that I might as well send some films in. I am sure if I myself, and the people I knew on the Organising

Committee had not been living in London now then I never would have entered into the New Contemporaries.

I have not attempted to criticise the New Contemporaries in this piece of writing as I feel that would take a great deal more research and understanding of the exhibition than I have, but I hope that from my contacts with this New Contemporaries exhibition some thoughts as to its probable future approach and development can be stimulated.

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