

LVA Cent
1991

the view from the bridge (written from the water)

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One of the more interesting things about my time spent working at LVA was viewing the collision of notions about exactly to whom the organisation belongs. Constitutionally of course it belongs to the membership, but lined up alongside them, vying for position are funders, artists, staff and clients. Given the kind of ethics predominant during the last 10 years it comes as little surprise to learn that the current slant is towards meeting the needs of paying clients, towards a position in which LVA is defined by its mission statement (1), but directed by its market.

Essentially funders are primary clients, buying huge chunks of service to sustain the core revenue of the organisation. But what of the regular client, with a low-budget arts/drama project with little hope of an audience. How do the views of this person, the bread and butter of LVA, and a surprisingly consistent market, affect its development and direction. The painful truth is that this particular grouping has been sentenced to death by constrictions on funding and the recent stronger focus on areas such as craft skills, product and audience. Major funding bodies, often in partnership with broadcast organisations have targeted their limited resources on funding lower-risk products. The consequence being that much video art either needs an exceptional treatment or the benefit of a track record before it stands a chance of funding. This fact coupled with the pressures upon art schools to shift their bias from educating to training, has meant a tilt away from a previous philosophy of open-ended development towards moving students up a ladder of

opportunity. Although these moves reflect the changes in attitude that have occurred over the last decade we have yet to view the results of them. However it is certain that the muted elimination of this grouping has been a fundamental shift in the kind of video art that will be seen over the next few years. It has had the effect of drawing a line which separates those privileged enough to have enjoyed cheap easy access in the past and those who will instead be trained to national standards for an industry possibly unwilling to allow them a measure of creative freedom.

In close harness with this is the likelihood of the development of a pan-european video art star system in which a few people will thrive and the rest will seek more gainful experiences in other media. Certain artists, because of the marketability of either their work or themselves will be picked up by the exhibitors in Linz, Osnabruck, The Hague and Liverpool. The video art world will move from essentially amateur promotion to professional management for gallery-based artists plus executive producers for single screen (television) artists. It will make for a higher profile for video art, but it will also effectively make entry and acceptance much more difficult. LVA has contributed to this in many ways over the past few years. Firstly by raising its standards to provide broadcast level production and secondly by making broadcast a focus for distribution sales. Whether this has been an evolution or enforced change is difficult to say as the issue is clouded, but pragmatic economics, above anything else has driven much of this change. In a climate where the number of arts-based media workshops has nose-dived so dramatically its impossible to be anything but pragmatic.(2)

The work of people like Marty St James and Anne Wilson has recently substantially raised the profile of video art. They have received reviews in the major national press with their pioneering interventions into the conservative arts gallery sector. Their recent video portrait of Duncan Goodhew which was displayed at the National Portrait Gallery was produced at LVA, and most likely would have been very difficult to produce without LVA. There has been support from commercial sponsors such as Samcom (3) for projects like this, but they have been thwarted by their corporate inability to realise the demands that would be placed upon them by artists exploring the cutting edge of the technology. At the same time as the portrait of Duncan Goodhew was on show LVA was also supporting a residency at the National Portrait Gallery by Julie Myers. This was a much lower profile event, but one which would have proved difficult to stage without equipment and advice from LVA.

LVA is clearly well placed to work closely with the logistics of video art, through practical advice and support. It is also in the strange position of being known as a first point of contact for aspiring video makers while also striving to

succeed by being a national centre for video art. This is a difficult paradox, but could also be seen as a positive force for the new organisations survival. It has the profile draw in the tape-makers while it also has the vision to become a promoter of that which is excellent. But in order to make the equation bear fruit it will need a greater say in how public sector policy affects the production of new work. It could well be possible that some kind of reformation of funding structures could create a scenario in which LVA could operate a franchise for arts funding. A structure where funds for production are administered by LVA and works are produced which can receive the skilled support of experienced producers, technicians and distributors from conception to completion. This is a model that is operated in parts of Canada and the US where the commitment of public access centres to creative production is backed up by an ability to fund. A development like this could enable LVA to achieve some security in terms of its client base by reinforcing its current regional status, blending its policies of cultural and economic development to break out of the cycle of dependency. This cycle being a situation which forces an organisation to plan for a long term future while reliant upon contracts for funding that rarely extend beyond one year. It seems unlikely that an organisation like LVA could gain promises that the big boys of the arts funding world cannot. But LVA is in a unique position of representing the art of a still living industry and this could be the key to its future.

Fifteen years in, the options for LVA's future are varied but critical. The imminent demise of the eminent GLA and the rapidly tightening noose of the Soho property market are doubtless more urgent matters, but it does seem that survival is more a matter of vision than of revision. Future staff, management and clients will need to face brave and radical steps to define who owns, and who benefits from LVA.

Notes:

- (1) Mission Statement - LVA aims to be a national centre for the advancement and encouragement of the innovative use of video and electronic media for artists and the traditionally disadvantaged through - a distribution and exhibition b education and training c production and access - and the implementation of our equal opportunities policy, to reach the widest audience.
- (2) The past two years have seen the demise of Women In Sync, Moonshine C.A.W. Bracknell Media Centre, as well as the collapse of West London Media and serious threats to other London Workshops.
- (3) Samcom used the Camden Video Festival in 1990 to test some sophisticated new multi-machine synchronising equipment. The system was able to control 11 VCR's frame accurately during the month long exhibition as well as the lights and sound.