

Introduction: Then, Now, Next

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London Video Arts is now in its eleventh year. 1988 will mark the tenth anniversary of the publication of its first distribution catalogue. This catalogue is only the third in ten years, but the difference between it and its 1978 counterpart illustrates the growth and development of the organization over a decade. Precisely how LVA has changed its approach to tape distribution is described by Marion Urch in her introduction to the catalogue.

Most things about LVA, about British Video Art, about the technology we use and the situations we use it in, have changed in the past decade. In 1978 access to facilities was difficult, expensive and rare for most artists eager to use the new technologies. Now LVA has one of Europe's best equipped open access resources, which enables something in the region of 150 users, either groups or individual artists, to realise production's each year. Regular training courses provide instruction in the use of video equipment from basic introduction through to advanced workshops in lighting, 3 machine editing or sound production.

The tape library at LVA has grown rapidly in the 1980's, and now houses over 600 tapes, accounting for about 1000 titles drawn from several European countries, North America, Australia and Japan, as well as the U.K. The engagement of LVA with the 'video community' internationally has also developed, so that now a network of contacts with distributors, festivals, curators, exhibitors and artists throughout the world is being established.

In the 1980's we have witnessed a great expansion in the production of independent video tapes and a consequent broadening of the definition of Video Art, described by Michael O'Pray in the catalogue for the 1985 video season at the Tate Gallery as 'The New Pluralism'. This plurality of interpretation, of stylistic convention and of intention is reflected in the selection of 107 tapes chosen for the 'active' section of the catalogue, as of course it is in the listing of recent additions to the Archive. There are numerous reasons for pluralism in contemporary video as in any area of the arts today; however, a few specifics have had a major impact upon video's development. To a large extent, Video Art has moved out of the gallery, though indeed, it often returns to that situation, and has taken up temporary residence in cinematheques, film theatres, public spaces, recreational spaces, and, most significantly, on television. Although the proportion of Video Art that is either made for, or simply ends up on television, is still very small, the fact that the possibility exists and can be exploited has had a dramatic impact upon the way many video artists regard themselves and their work. Unlike any other situation in which artists might display their work, Television offers the potential for a mass audience.

Particularly in the USA, but increasingly in Europe, the new willingness of Television to engage with artists has brought about a change in definition from 'Video Artist' to 'Television Artist'. A recent symposium held in Amsterdam during the Stedelijk Museum's exhibition 'The Arts For Television' concentrated very closely upon emerging channels of communication between artists, museums and television. Although many of the artists whose work was featured recognised that Television placed a different set of demands upon their working methods, they generally felt that such demands were acceptable as part of the working relationship and were compensated for by the benefits. What emerged was the impression that video artists were becoming 'professionalised', and this attitude of professionalism also shows up in the huge amount of work produced outside television, whether it be aimed at the gallery, cinema screening, domestic viewing, or whatever. The quality of production and the confidence with which many artists now use the medium are a graphic illustration of the development that has taken place in the past ten years.

If confidence is the keynote of much of the new work distributed through this catalogue, then confidence in the face of diminishing public support for the arts must underpin LVA's development in the next ten years. An outward looking approach is essential, a commitment to actively engaging with 'Video Culture' at an international level is fundamental, and the further development of a coherent infrastructure to support the production, distribution and promotion of video into and beyond the 90's has to be a primary aim for LVA and all who contribute to its growth and development. We regard this catalogue – the collection of tapes more than the document – as a crucial index of future directions and we hope it will be of service to all of those artists represented in it, all of those who use it as a source of information, and that it may act as a trigger to encourage more producers to make work in the future and to submit their tapes to LVA for the next catalogue.

Jeremy Welsh, September 1987

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