

Video ~~Article~~ 1986 Sept. N. 57

CHECK RIGHTS ON DOG CLIP

VIEWS ON VIDEO-ART IN THE 70'S AND 80'S BY JEZ WELSH

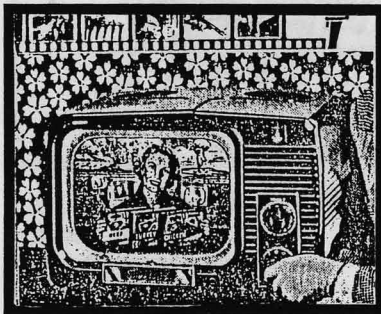
ONE:

It's a warm evening in early summer. The sluggish waters of the Thames are stained red by the fading sunlight. A few tourist boats, motor cruisers that can be rented by the hour as floating discos for private parties, make their way up and down the river, the disembodied sounds of rock music fading as they disappear round a bend in the river.

In his recently converted riverside apartment, Richard is sitting back relaxing in a chair that's made from a 1940's car seat supported by some bits of scaffolding tube. He's drinking Perrier with a twist and flipping through the TV channels with his remote control. The developers who converted this former banana warehouse into 'loft' style executive apartments had even installed a satellite dish on the roof so residents could pick up European stations like Sky Channel and Music Box. Like many of the new residents of the old docking areas, Richard's in the Media business. His home is his office, so it's packed with TV and video equipment, satellite decoders, computer networking terminals.

Richard's bored with the TV and goes to put a tape into the video recorder. He puts down his drink on a table whose surface is a piece of shattered plate glass, resting on some sections of charred railway sleeper held together by a massive steel bolt. The video recorder is housed within a similar construction; sand-blasted glass shelves slotted into lumps of pre-stressed concrete with sections of the steel exposed. On the bottom shelf there's a stack of cassettes that he hasn't watched yet. He chooses one that he'd recorded the previous night: a midnight special on Video Art Then and Now.

Martha's in the kitchen where the burnished steel industrial catering units glow pink in the twilight. She's standing by the wall-sized window, looking down the river, doing something Nouvelle to an avocado and listening to opera on her personal hi-fi. The loading bay door is open, and subdued sounds drift in on the light summer breeze; the muffled, distant sounds of the river boats, a murmur of voices from the terraces of the Riverside Brasserie below on the quayside. A black cat sits on the polished timbers of the loading deck. Not many rats to hunt these days, but the trash



cans are usually full of smoked salmon. Richard rewinds....

TWO:

It's a dark damp night in the autumn of 1976. In a derelict area of East London, people are converging on a disused banana warehouse by the waterside. Xeroxed leaflets pasted onto corrugated iron fencing that lines the rutted streets announce an evening of performance, video-art and experimental film, in the newly established Artists Space Gallery, Riverside Wharf; one of several collectively run ventures within the warehouse complex. All along the river from Tower Bridge to the Isle of Dogs artists and craftspeople are moving into derelict industrial and commercial premises that offer an abundant supply of cheap space.

Inside the building, a second floor has been cleared and painted white. Groups of students and young artists stand around a few portable gas heaters that fail to counteract the damp chill of this long-neglected building. A makeshift bar is dispensing cans of beer and cheap wine in plastic cups. A young man in black with close cropped hair and a single earring is handing round typewritten programme notes for the evening's events. In one corner, a few people are clustered around a rack of black and white reel to reel equipment, setting up a closed-circuit system that is linked to a TV monitor mounted above the entrance at the head of the stairs. As the audience arrives, a talking head appears on the screen and announces that this is a live video-art piece in which they are taking part.

Around the bar there's an animated discussion about the new colour cassette recorders introduced by Sony. This will be the technology that pushes the art of video a stage further, with colour, stereo sound, and the ability to do remotely controlled electronic editing. Someone knows of people in New York who are already using these machines, but no-one here has got one yet.

Another monitor in a far corner shows a tape in which a man performs a series of 'tricks' or illusions direct to camera. By means of simple edits, objects appear and disappear, things emerge out of television sets into the 'real' world; a TV set fills up with water.

The programme of events lasts a couple of hours, then around 9.30 everyone leaves the building, and a whole crowd heads for the nearest pub, an old street corner bar that is smoke-filled, dirty and about half full of middle-aged men, ex-dockers stranded when the Port of London went into decline. They regard the interlopers with curiosity; these young, enthusiastic, noisy strangers who rapidly fill the small room with their noisy presence. The evening's events are discussed, argued over. There is talk of a weekly event, maybe opening the space as a daytime gallery for

larger sculptural installations and photography exhibitions. Round one table, plans are being made to establish an international archive of artists' videotapes. Someone has been to New York and visited a place that has such an archive, and is even managing to distribute tapes to Art Schools and galleries.

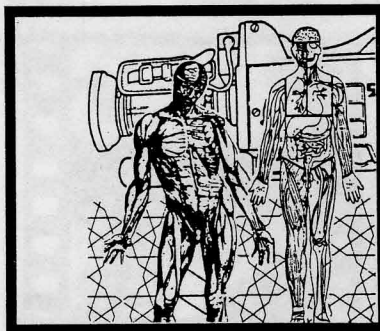
Just before closing time a couple of youths with short spiky hair and leathers with chains, studs and rips, walk into the pub and hand around photocopied leaflets that look like DaDa collages, announcing a party in a nearby warehouse, with music by a group called the Sex Pistols.

THREE:

Martha comes through from the kitchen to join Richard in the living area. She sits down on the sofa that's made of a sheet of resin dipped canvas draped over a construction of welded steel rods. The whole apartment is a rubber-floored theme park of Post Suburban, Proto-Holocaust Chic. The dining table is a sheet of chipped Terrazzo balancing on three tripods of wrought iron; it's surrounded by eight chairs in gilt sprayed wrought iron, after Louis XIV thrones. The apartment is lit by a variety of sources, from industrial tungsten halogen floods that point upwards making a wall of light at one end of the space, to small spotlights disguised as lumps of driftwood or scrap metal. Instead of walls, there are hanging sheets of graffiti sprayed PVC, or free-standing screens of shattered glass and corrugated iron. One of these sheets of iron still bears some original 1976 xeroxed punk graphics.

Riverside Wharf has changed a lot since 1976. Gone are the artist-run galleries and the cheap studios. At streetlevel, it's all Brasseries and designer shops selling limited edition clothes and home furnishings; the quaysides are terraced bars, the moorings are taken over by private cruisers and power boats. Up above, it's all spacious apartments, up-market design studios, media consultancies. And video-art has changed too, and punk is history, a very repeatable reproducible history.

So now Martha and Richard are sitting down amidst their deconstructed decor, watching Video Art on the box. They generally like this sort of thing, so long as it doesn't get too long-winded or pedantic. Martha likes the ones that are parodies of soap operas or TV dramas, just as she like soaps themselves. As far as she's concerned these 'meta-soaps', as the media pundits term them, are just an alternative sub-genre of the form itself. Although the Representation might be differently constructed, and the politics more blatantly expressed, the narrative still had to conform to the same rules, otherwise it just wouldn't work. Richard likes most of this stuff, for a variety of reasons. Some of it is entertaining, some of it provides a good source of ideas to incorporate into his own productions. At the ad agency he's considered a bit avant-garde; while



his colleagues live in leafy London suburbs in period houses, or in smart Georgian apartments near the West End, he's down in the docklands living in a film-set. This stuff generally fits well with his life style; the commercial music clips that most people think of as video are much too conventional, predictable. Rock Video is just like the junk food that usually accompanies it in tacky glittery cafes for the 18-25 crowd. He thinks of Video Art as more like a kind of Visual Sushi. And the best thing about that is that it does a lot of work for him, provides him with a source of ideas to quote or borrow.

Like scratch video, for example. At a party eighteen months ago he saw a compilation tape of short, sharp videos that were basically rhythmic cut-ups of off-air material; mainly political speeches, news and current affairs footage, lots of conflict, terrorism, war and civil strife. It seemed like a pirate form

of political satire and, generally, it displayed an uncanny feel for the rhythmic structure of video editing, for the visual language of the edit suite, and it seemed well tuned to The Street, that howling no-man's land where consumer trends are nurtured. So Richard used scratch. He started to shoot his ads so they looked like badly transferred Super 8, or dodgy off-air recordings. He used jump-cuts, repeat edits, stammering voices and heavy electronic drum tracks. He got bits of archive film and recoloured it with paint-box graphics; he went out and shot in blitzed urban shiteaps of housing estates. It all worked a treat. Soon he was being commissioned to inject new life into a whole series of flagging campaigns, to put the mark of Street Credibility on all these disposable products.

FOUR:

Now Richard's looking for a new style. He's done scratch, and the market is flooded with bad imitations that look low budget because they actually are low budget. His trick had been to spend a fortune on making something that looked home made on the surface, but was packed with hidden production values. He's thinking about minimalism, maybe, and he's hoping that this Video Art series will give him a helping hand.

The tape has rewound, and he pushes 'play'. It's the commercial break before the programme starts and here's one of his commercials, the one for a new range of trashy kitchen ware that he did in the style of a Pop Art screenprint. He wonders if the programme controller put it into this slot because of its 'video-art' look, or whether it's just coincidence. The programme starts. There's an earnest intellectual giving the introduction. He's talking about Deconstruction, meta-languages, Simulation, the Evacuation of Meaning from the Sign, the reclamation of the Image. Richard hits the quick search button; the Semiospeak is instantly condensed to a high-pitched warble.

Introduction over, the first video is an ancient black and white tape in which a large dog performs a

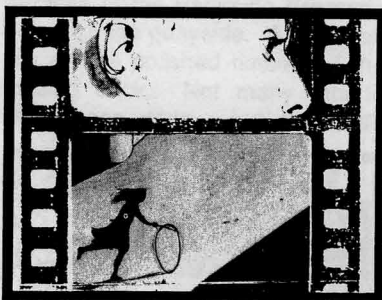
variety of tricks, all in real time. There's a direct, simple visual humour here that could be a very useful starting point. Out comes the Filofax and a fine line pen. He makes a note in the pink section, which is the ideas bit of his portable information system. There's the accounts dept., the phone book, the year planner, etc, all neatly housed in black ribbed rubber. He makes a note in big black letters: CHECK RIGHTS ON DOG CLIP.

The dog video is followed by a piece of high-tech psychedelia from the mid 80's. Over a soundtrack of lunging minimalist music, the Manhattan Skyline is invaded by twirling pyramids and electro pastel tantric symbols. The computer generated landscape - Martha calls it Magritte on acid - metamorphoses continuously, every image flipping inside out and vanishing into a cosmic plughole somewhere in the middle of Lower East Side. Richard and Martha think of this as electronic wallpaper, the sort of thing that looks good in the background at clubs or parties. Last time he went to New York, Richard saw stuff like this at a club that had a huge matrix of video screens that could magnify or multiply the image, create a real sense of spectacle. He'd been quite impressed by that, and now he's doing a video mural for the launch of a new car. He's thinking along the lines of a Post Scratch Surf Movie: Beach Boys harmonies over Beat Box rhythms - palm trees, girls, surf, breakdancers, and a big red car performing wonders thanks to electronic technology.

The dayglo Manhattan vision fades and up comes a series of 'electronic collages'. Some of them are Scratch tapes he recognises; political cut-ups in which world leaders make assholes of themselves by saying the opposite of what they normally say, i.e. the very things we always suspected they meant behind the rhetoric. TV space puppets press buttons and worlds explode. Missiles go off. Newsreaders stammer and gibber inanely. Then there's some other stuff, mainly European, that has a similar look but no apparent point to it: cut-up TV, ads; bits of porno movies; bits of rock music; bits of home movie - all mashed up in a

confusing whirlpool of imagery. As this sequence ends, the presenter reappears and begins talking about the way that the domestic VCR calls into question the whole notion of copyright; how it is an invitation to the viewer to hit back at TV; how the viewer can develop an active rather than a passive mode of watching. He suggests that scratch or montage video could truly be a form of underground television, that anybody with a domestic VCR could do it themselves.

Now there's an interview with a video Scratcher, who's disappointingly unexotic looking. It turns out that he doesn't sit at home with two VHS machines bouncing his pirated signal back and forth between them. He's a technician, and does it in a broadcast suite at night after everyone else has gone home. He doesn't think that



scratch video, or community video, or video-art will revolutionise broadcasting. He doubts that many kids sit at home making scratch tapes. He suspects the whole thing is finished anyway, and something else is coming along. For him it is important to have access to the best technology so that he can get his material out to a broader audience. He thinks that Video Art is dead, and that it's pointless to make work for a tiny audience in a gallery.

The presenter concludes the programme by promising that the following week there will be 'New Approaches to Narrative'. The show closes with another old black and white tape. A number of people sit in front of camera and describe what they think Video Art or Television Art should or could be. The last speaker gives a demonstration of 'TV Painting'. He takes a large brush and begins to paint a scene with a river, warehouses, a distant bridge. When the picture is finished, he

rips it away to reveal a window behind, through which we see the exact scene he had just painted. Richard freezes the picture to look again. It's the view from his own window.

Richard switches off the video and selects a channel on TV. There's a discussion programme on, called 'Were You Watching?'. A panel of experts are talking about some programmes from the previous week's schedule. They are talking about the Video Art programme. One panellist asks, when you show video on TV does it stop being video and become television? Another counters that therefore TV must become video if you record it to play back later. So what is video that is broadcast on TV, then recorded back onto video again? The discussion shifts. Now a producer of commercials and pop videos is maintaining that Video Art is just boring, obscure and elitist; and that real creativity is in commercial work, where the best technology and the best technicians guarantee the best results. To demonstrate, he shows a 30 second commercial. Richard grimaces: it's one of the derivative scratch ads that have sprung up in the wake of his own commercials. Next it's the turn of a documentary film-maker who complains that Video Art is elitist, decadent, divorced from the grassroots movement that produced it. He says it's now no more than 'high-tech entertainment for yuppies'.

Finally, all the panel members agree that the best thing on TV that week had been a documentary film in which the cameraman had recorded the gunman who was about to shoot him, in effect documenting his own assassination. They all agree that this is 'real' television, that it has 'raw emotional power', that it can 'stir the viewer out of passive acceptance'. HAH, says Richard. ZAP goes the remote control. OFF goes the TV set.

Richard goes to stand by the open landing bay, looking out over the now darkened river. A police surveillance helicopter is buzzing the high rise housing complex over the river. It's a hot night. Richard thinks, 'The Riot Season's here again'.