

REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80's Interview with Marc C Chaimowicz

Interview by Dr Jackie Hatfield, 21st November 2004

MCC: There was one piece for example involved - actually anchored in video - a video dependant piece, which I seem to recall being shown at the Biennale De Journ in Paris. So what is that? That's a kind of institutional context. And then there was a video, an autonomous video piece that was shown, I think at '78 at the Hague Annual within part of an installation. So that again is an institution. So there were either institutions or else festivals and in the late 70s, I started working with the private sector with a gallery, the Nigel Greenwood Gallery and a number of works would have been shown there. In Italy, i.e. the Cavallino, was kind of unique in a sense because Gabriella ran the gallery programme but Paolo her brother, was highly engaged, and I suspect still is, he works exclusively in video, so there was a parallel activity going on within the walls of the Cavallino Gallery in Venice. So although it was the private sector and I think that Paolo wasn't remotely interested in dealing with art or making money from art, he was essentially somebody highly engaged and committed to video based practice and happened to work from within the private sector but it felt more like a Foundation, really because it wasn't profit driven. So I guess those will be the three areas.



MCC: You see, this is very interesting because earlier on I talked a bit about, in my mind, the highly enlightened, editorial engagement of Richard Paul in the 70s when he took over the editorship of Studio International. Richard's did two things, first he decided he would run a number of thematic issues, a number of which have become great reference works in their own right. That was pretty unusual and I suspect in retrospect still remains unique in terms of you know Monthly Art, International Art magazine in that each magazine, each issue was devoted to a specific issue. He was also quite committed to what I suppose would then have been known as "New Activities" or "Experimental Work" or whatever, anything that wasn't painting and/or sculpture. So, I think he felt as a good journalist would, that his audience needed to be sensitised to radical practice and so part of that procedure would have been in terms devoting a whole issue to performance art for example or a whole issue to video art. Both of those issues are now seen as reference points. But then in parallel to that, that would have been a features part of the magazine, there was also a 'review' section and in the 'review' section he decided that there should be a regular column, written by specialists in these new fields on the basis that most critics and most journalists simply didn't have the grassroots understanding of what the issues were or even who the people were or where the action took place. A lot of it was alternative underground or, you know, emergent. As I recall he invited I think 4 or 5 people to each run this monthly column. Video was rightly run by David Hall, Malcolm Le Grice in Experimental Film, Michael Neiman did Experimental Music I did Performance.

JH: So performance and video tended to be very closely linked?

MCC: I can imagine, yes. It also, in a sense, it wasn't as alienating, it wasn't as butch as film would have been then because film was as we all recall was very... seemed very technical. And also it was more expensive with the exception of... I mean that's perhaps one of the reasons why Larcher was so fascinating, was that he had a kind of lightness of touch and kind of autonomy in terms of how he redefined his own usage of presumably what we would view was 16mm, then he was processing it himself which I found very painterly and there would be a whole reel of David Larcher where there was almost no recognisable element which would then be countered by the whole reel of documentary like work. So I think that the slow time base of his work gave him kind of breadth that was untypical but ordinarily, you are absolutely right, I would have found film too cumbersome.

JH: So Marc, could you talk about where the fixed boundaries were coming from, because you talked earlier about the fact that there were these kind of institutional boundaries but the art works, the artists were working across. So could you talk about where were those boundaries coming from?

MCC: Well it would seem to me that they were primarily originating in the academies, in the art schools. I mean until the mid seventies students had to make choices from the very inset so you would apply to do a first degree to the School of Painting or The School of Sculpture. The art schools inherently also perpetuated a kind of hierarchy of values which now would seem to us absurd, in which the noble art of Painting was at the very top of the apex and the humble craft based practices the applied arts, as in the department of ceramics or textile for example, was at the bottom of the pile. There was also an implicit gender divide whereby the applied arts would tend to be peopled by female students, and painting and sculpture by male students. But the hierarchy was so ineptly rigid that if you were perceived as a very gifted young student then you were presumed to go off and study painting, if you were not quite so fine or sensitive perhaps a little more manually minded then you would be sent off to carve stone or whatever thus to study sculpture. So the institution was largely responsible, the institution, the Academy was largely responsible for perpetuating those rigid kind of categories. But beyond that in terms of the world of the museum for example, likewise, there would be the curator of painting, the curator of sculpture. Then within that, within those autonomous fields of practice there'd be further sub-divisions whereby there'd be forever a kind of mistrust and a climate of rivalry between for example figurative painting versus abstract painting. Then within that there'd be further categories between, say, romantic kind of figuration, which was derivative of say DeLacroix - I could have included somebody like Francis Bacon who was opposite the Expressionists and then the kind of Neo-Classics', tradition of Figurative Painting from Cezanne through Coldstream. It actually meant that the creative potential, which is probably inherent in most students and can come through in an artist able to master their own relative freedom of practice as with say Picasso or Matisse or Bourgoire, they are actually bobbing about between earthenware, painting, sculpture, collage and graphic work, you know. I mean there has been some great graphic work done by any number of these people but graphics was again seen as a lower art form. But I think that, ironically perhaps, even within the field of, within the hopefully more enlightened area of say video there would have been inevitably a kind of conscious or otherwise perpetuation of those kinds of categorisations so there'd be the purists and there'd be the romantics and there'd be the structuralists and the others. There'd be someone like

Sally Potter, say, who was interested in narrative who would have had to find a different field in which to work which happened in her case to be experimental cinema.

JH: What about art and language and a little bit about how some artists would not be seen to write because art and writing are separate?

MCC: Of course that's absolutely true. Writing was, I mean even within the English formal, within the kind of post Coldstream tradition which, I suppose, held its kind of gods Kossoff or Auerback in which, you know, you did kind of suffer, perpetuate the work ethic and so there'd be myths, there'd be these great myths that spread within the activity, wherein Auerbach maybe had one days holiday per a year. The idea which would have been, I suppose, disapproved of and seen as prone to a kind of Parisian sort of dilettantism really, you know the kind of dandy like figure of Charles Baudelaire for example who happened to be a regular prose writer and brilliant critic, nonetheless in England that was highly disapproved of, you had to commit yourself fully to one area of activity and you are either fully engaged in the subjective nature of making work or in the so called objective nature of critiquing work and so you cannot be both a critic and a maker. It wasn't until art and language for example, that the implicit dialectic between the two was recognised wherein they would propose that theory was practice and practice could be theory. So I would say that between them there was probably a greater body of radical questioning and re-evaluation between say '72 and '82 than maybe any other decade. A very wide range of criteria was being questioned.

JH: So what happened in the UK where suddenly - in the 60s - you get this kind of polarity?

MCC: Well yes, it's a good point. Someone like Brian Eno for example, who is even now highly regarded by people a lot younger as someone who is critically, culturally quite aware. I think suffered quite a lot from being seen as dilettante because he was working between pop music i.e. popular culture and high brow practice i.e. experimental music, and intermittently wished to promote himself as a visual artist with his light box installations. He was very involved in theory and cybernetics and very interested in sciences. In a way he is a kind of very good example of the kind of universalist. But that's always been disapproved of as I think maybe there is a kind of protestantism perhaps. I mean we know England is not a catholic culture, and I think it does mistrust someone who, they would either see as dilettante or a Jack-of-all-Trades and both imply the presumption that you have to fully devote yourself to one thing, you know, you have to focus in. I think that's presumably a kind of manifestation of the work ethic which is inherently quite puritanical and it would nonetheless engage a very wide range of people who may for example wish to redress the dichotomy between work and life, or, i.e. the between the professional and the private or the domestic and the professional or whatever. And so, you know, that's why to our generation we were so awestruck by Joseph Beuys who had elegance and fluidity in his ability to move from botanics and the natural sciences to sculpture and on to politics and sociology. He was a very engaged with say the Green Party, one of the founding members of the Green Party so he is engaged also in environmental issues, and yet he is in parallel almost kind of organically and inherently engaged in making the most beautiful watercolours and drawing and objects and installations. So there is a project, a Beuysian project that is almost free of boundary, some kind of antithesis to the earlier model. Whether or not the work is accessible or meaningful or important it was, I think, to a number of people in the 70s a kind of revelation. Because as you say wasn't

unique, I mean it was actually a reassessment and a way of perpetuating a continuum that went right back to the turn of the century in a way to Duchamp.

MCC: But even then, you know, we mustn't forget that institutions are forever resistant for all kinds of reasons wherein they don't have either the will or therefore the needs to recognise that kind of, that kind of fluidity. So given that the canon of art history it doesn't recognise that those ways of working by default will remain seen as marginal.

MCC: But then you see in those days the term Performance didn't exist. They were called Events or Happenings, from Kaprow you know. And I was also working with things. I was placing things in terms of reassessing how to work with the real rather than to transcribe to real through a camera or through a brush. I was actually dealing with; I was bringing matter into the work. And we used to call those environments and then they later became known as installations. But then it took only about 10 years for those activities to become in their own manner increasingly institutionalised. So you got art schools running Performance modules and you got the word Installation becoming a kind of passé partu in terms of publishing silly books on. So again the problem we'd highlighted earlier on in terms of how formalism insidiously can appropriate a very wide range of work re-emerges on a kind of regular basis and so some, the term Installation is by default absurd, it means nothing at all and yet it's now a kind of...

JH: Norm?

MCC: A norm, yes

JH: And a medium in itself.

MCC: That's right; it's become a medium, a force in itself. But that would have been why I was drawn to time based work. Well I have to say that I was never all that happy in that way of working. I mean intellectually it seemed the right way to work, I am glad I did what I did and hopefully there is one or two pieces that may've been of some, of some worth. But temperamentally I'll always find ploys wherein I was showing my back to the audience or to the camera or working in darkness with the use of slides, I wasn't extrovert enough to really enjoy that kind of "look-at-me" nature of much of that work working. So it was a kind of relief to move away from it after about 10 years.

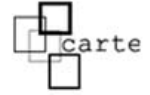
MCC: So I think in that sense community remains kind of urgent. But then of course it led me to question the premise of collaboration but I found that more so in terms of skills really whereby I enjoyed working with industrialists or with carpenters, or with cabinet makers, or with people who can make things for me because I am actually working with their skills rather than attempting to do what they do better than myself. So that's another kind of community I suppose but that still implies dialogue. Which is maybe more to do with materials than ideas. So, I suppose, dialogue is something that we kind of, we all directly or indirectly yearn for is it not, really cultural practice is about dialogue is it not? Even if it may just be a dialogue between two colours. So I think that certainly the video work was very often looking at those questions, certainly questioning the dialogue between the maker and the viewer.



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