A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II (Cultural Eclipse)
by David Hall (1988-93)

MODERNISM AND MEANING: READING THE INTERVENTION OF BRITISH VIDEO ART INTO THE GALLERY SPACE

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INTRODUCTION

Video art which occupies the physical and ideological architecture of the dominant gallery space does so uncomfortably. The overbearing white walls, intended to valorise the painterly practice of the last 100 years or so, loom ominously as people move slowly about constructions and screens which emit rather than absorb light and which project a cacophony of sound across an ideological space intended for the silent benediction of aesthetic engagement. Does video art simply occupy this space as some unwanted and overlooked object may inhabit the corner of a domestic living room? Or does video art work this space as physical and ideological material which it must confront and transform in order to signify at all? And, if it does, how would this effect any attempt to critically locate experimental video within dominant Modernist[1] paradigms of attribution, interpretation and validation?

To ask such questions is to confront the well-policed borders of 'art's' objecthood, and the hegemonic mechanisms of a medium-specific canonicity which seeks to subsume 'other' practices in order to emasculate the ideological nature of 'art's' self-referential function within our society. The result of this encounter is usually the realisation that, if one is to use the available critical tools of a dominant art historical epistemology, it is impossible to account for any work in electronic media as being 'art'. Obviously, it could be argued that such an inquiry may tell us more about the inadequacies of art historical and critical practices than the practice of video art itself. However, I believe it is crucial to address the inability of art historical, critical and curatorial practices to deal with the sexual, cultural and political multifariousness of our current society. It is only by doing this that we will be able to embed a developing concept of video art back within the polyphony of cultural discourses through which it has been spoken as a practice. The task, then, is to preserve video art's blurred boundaries and complexity from those who would see its position within the gallery as signalling its surrender to the naturalisation process of institutionalised commodity fetishism. Furthermore, we must wrest the critical value of this complexity from those forms of Post-modernism which would celebrate the endlessness of difference and, instead, place it firmly within a Materialist conception of visual culture which would be dialectical enough to account for both its specificity and its interaction.

As part of the first Video Positive festival in 1989 David Hall's video installation *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II* (1988-93) was exhibited at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool. The piece itself consisted of 15 video monitors which were arranged as a videowall. Only one screen, the central monitor which showed an image of the moon, faced the audience. The other 14 monitors were turned away from the audience, their unseen images throwing electronic light at the wall and creating a prismatic halo effect of shifting colour. The viewer, deprived of the everyday experience of looking at the TV monitor, who strained to piece together the lost

visual narrative by attending to the accompanying sound, was equally frustrated by its 'unreadability'. The sound was in fact 'an "overdose" – a loud conglomeration deriving from multiple broadcast channels, and composed as a musical score'.[2] The installation itself was both polemical and perplexing. Or rather the denial of the right to view the most 'democratic' of mediums, especially within the visual sanctuary of the gallery space, was a critical affront to the experience of art which one expected to have in such a situation.

If we are to account for this work we must begin by identifying the practice of video art which requires an examination of those cultural networks of exchange and distribution by which meaning is produced in the discourse of art. In other words, we must identify video art's position within a milieu of signs. However, this is not to be done by amassing a chronology of events or a detailed list of political, social or technological shifts and changes. It is all too easy to rely on the crude and circular assumption that meaning can be uncovered by reconstructing events which are, in turn, claimed to underpin the historical transparency of a given text. This essay, therefore, will not concern itself with the task of reading Hall's installation in a conventional art historical sense or, even less, of tracing a chronology which would somehow explain the work's meaning. Instead, what follows is an attempt to map out some of the shifting theoretical and ideological issues through which we might meaningfully engage with such a work in a gallery space. This will necessitate the identification of key theoretical debates which underpinned the historical development of this practice, the clarification of these debates in terms of their importance for engaging with the work itself and, finally, the location of a critical discourse within which to contextualise works such as Hall's *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II*. It is only by doing this that we can rescue video art from the position which it currently occupies within the gallery space – as simply an 'other' minority practice against which the aesthetic experience of late Modernism can be defined by its difference.

MODERNIST VIDEO: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS

A pertinent starting point for this is Hall's own short essay 'Before the Concrete Sets' which was published in the 1991 London Video Access Catalogue.[3] Here he criticises the inability of historical and theoretical accounts of early British video practice to recognise the complexity and critical intention of this work in the face of pressure from other more recent debates within the visual arts. Hall is almost certainly referring to Stuart Marshall's contention, outlined in his catalogue introduction to the *Recent British Video* exhibition held at The Kitchen in New York in 1983.[4] This has, so far, been one of the few attempts to systematically theorise the developments within British video art practice. Although he modified this approach in later writing the fundamental principles which underpinned his

arguments remained the same. In this essay Marshall mapped out the development, or rather the trajectory, of avant-garde British video in terms of a shift from Modernist to Post-modernist practice. The former he saw as an early set of concerns with the specificity of the video media itself; the latter he saw as a convergence of these interests with the pursuit of a documentary or narrative-based video practice which had developed, primarily through the work of the Women's Art Movement, as a parallel and corrective set of concerns to Modernist video. This convergence resulted in a critical play between self-reflexivity and narrative which, for Marshall, resulted in the possibility of a Post-modern video practice; a practice which was concerned with the deconstruction of narrativity as a dominant fictional code, but which was also capable of using and re-working those norms and conventions to its own ends.

For Hall, to make such a separation is to over-simplify the changes which took place within British video practice and, more importantly, to do a disservice to earlier forms of that practice. The best of the earlier work, he claimed, was neither a reductive anti-illusionism nor a technologically determined 'anti-television'. Rather it mounted a paradoxical critique of the experience which a viewer might expect from the media of television. Whilst the viewer was able to engage with the work via the motivation of dominant televisual experiences which allow meaning to be constructed, the naturalised and seductive properties of these codes were countered through the formal experimentation of the work produced. Hall's own piece *This is a Video Monitor* (1974), for example, shows an image of a woman who describes the functions of the monitor on which she appears. This image is subsequently re-filmed from the monitor, re-played and re-filmed again until the sound and visual quality has been all but totally obliterated through several generations of recording. Through the gradual degeneration of the image, the illusionistic characteristics which one expects of a video recording are replaced by the patterns produced at the level of the screen surface by the electronic message. As such, the piece challenges the viewer's expectations of the dominant televisual forms of narrative by uncovering the 'real' properties of video recording upon which these depend.

Because of the political and critical subtext of early video work, Hall saw it as belonging less to the ideology of the self-reflexive modernist art work and more to the development of those practices, such as Conceptualism, which sought to disrupt the formalist autonomy of the art object. As a corollary to this, Hall saw the project of Conceptualism as offering a relative freedom from the formalist object; a critical freedom which he saw as underpinning the difference between video production and avant-garde filmic practice of the period. Whereas 'structural materialist' film epitomised a concern with formal experimentation in order to secure the materiality of film on its own terms, he saw video as offering some level of liberation from the self-referentiality of this project and, by implication, the possibility of a more socially relevant practice. However, Hall saw the failure of the

Conceptualist project as lying in its inability to resist the commodification and consumption of the work by the international art market. For Hall, it was the validation of such work within the modernist gallery system which finally absorbed the Conceptualist project into the canon of modernism and consequently deracinated it of any critical and social value. That this fate did not befall early British video art was in part due, for him, to the lack of commercial interest shown in the work by the international gallery network.

For Hall then, the investigation of the technological properties of the media in early British video art was more than a concern with the identification of those properties which could be said to be specific to that media. Instead, such work could not help but call into question the meaning of the TV message and was, therefore, inevitably a political critique of the structures of TV itself. In the light of this, Hall was concerned that a developing history and theory of video art, in seeking to identify a new video culture in difference to institutional Modernism, would run the risk of both misrepresenting the early work as modernist whilst subsuming its critical value into a confusion of agendas and objectives, or what he called 'a nebulous so-called video culture'.[5] Hall's reminder of the critical intention of this early work acts as a necessary corrective to those who would simply label the work as Modernist because of its lack of narrative structure or the medium specificity of its production. However, it could equally be argued that his own equation of high Modernism with the power of the gallery network to commodify critical counter-culture is equally misplaced. To see the commodification of the art object and its display within the gallery space as the marker of high Modernism is to mistake effect for cause. Hall's further assertion that much later work, by conceding to 'popularist' or 'accessible' modes of representation which he saw as retrogressive, ironically found itself courting a Modernist institutional and ideological network which it had theoretically rejected, and from which early practice had maintained a critical distance, is equally predicated on a misrepresentation of Modernism's coercive strategies in the face of more seditious cultural practices. As mentioned earlier, within the dominant Modernist paradigm of attribution, distribution and display, and its attendant discourses of authenticity, value judgement and aesthetic contemplation, video cannot operate as art at all. This is a point which must be cleared up and to which we must now turn if we are to identify the critical space within which later video practice can be seen to operate.

RE-READING MODERNISM: VIDEO ART AGAINST THE GRAIN

There are two principal difficulties which can be encountered in mapping out the relationship of a developing avant-garde video practice with the dominant paradigm of Modernism. Firstly, it is easy to slip into an over-arching characterisation of

Modernism, usually in its Greenbergian form, and to miss the diversity and complexity of critical practices which have gone to make up the discursive field of modernism since the turn of the century. By reducing the project of modernism to a gradual whittling down process whereby the materials of expression which were unique to a particular medium were identified and, in effect, became the subject matter of that practice, Greenberg denied the possibility of accounting for work in terms of its engagement with the outside world. The result of this was, on one hand, to separate art as an autonomous and self-referential sphere of activity from the rest of everyday life and, on the other, to omit such practices as Dada, Surrealism and the Ready-mades of Duchamp from the Modernist canon, seeing them as interesting only on the level of their commitment to technical radicalism. Secondly, by simply taking modernism to be an increasing concern in the visual arts with material specificity, it is too easy to miss the specific kinds of problems which Modernism has in accounting for any installation or work in a temporal media within a gallery context. For example, the critic Michael Fried in his influential critique of Minimalism, 'Art and Objecthood', dismissed such work for what he saw as its objecthood and the need to experience such work over a period of time.[6]

For Fried the attempt by artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt to subvert the syntax and grammar of Western painting and sculpture, by making objects which could not simply be accounted for in terms of shape, form, line, colour, tone, volume etc., was to confront the audience with implacable objects and to set in motion a relationship of viewer to object which he saw as being paradigmatically theatrical. The conceptual shift necessary to move away from a concern with a work's internal structures and towards a new consideration of the object in its situation would be, for Fried, to situate the experience of the aesthetic in duration or time. However, Fried saw the job of modern painting and sculpture as the use and deployment of technical resources to stave off the tacit materiality of the object itself. It was the careful use of conventional means to defeat or suspend the condition of theatre which, for Fried, was the rationale of a modernist practice struggling to retain the specificity of the aesthetic experience. As an example of such practice, he cited the work of the British sculptor Anthony Caro. Fried claimed that any encounter with this work, whilst of necessity taking place in both time and space, always appeared to be complete: that the work had a particular kind of continual presence which one was able to experience 'as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it'.[7]

It was against the grain of a Modernism intent on retaining the privileged position of aesthetic experience within a gallery space, rather than within a Modernism capable of accounting for work in any media in terms of its self-reflexivity and technical radicalism, which video artists found themselves struggling in the 1970s and 1980s. A different conceptual framework, however, for artists seeking a

solution to this impasse was offered at the time by British film theory and the various discussions which were taking place in journals such as *Studio International*, *Screen* and *Afterimage*. Peter Wollen's article 'The Two Avant-Gardes', for example, offered a critical appropriation of Modernism for film via the introduction of semiotic theory as a means to describe the shift in the historical avant-garde away from more conventional means of representation.[8] Wollen saw Cubism as the decisive break from a Realist concern with the relationship between a representation and its referent in the outside world; he saw it as the beginning of a concern with the relationship between signifier and signified, marks and their associated meanings, within the aesthetic sign itself. Within film this led, on one hand, to formalist experiments with light, time, colour etc. by artists such as Hans Richter, Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, and on the other, to new avant-garde concerns with montage, disjunctive narrative and the nature of representation by film-makers such as Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein.

Although this echoes Marshall's identification of two parallel strands of practice within early video production, unlike Marshall, Wollen saw the possibility of their convergence within a specifically filmic practice as being highly unlikely. However, of major importance to the development of an avant-garde video practice was the discussion within film theory of the multiple levels of codes with which film was simultaneously capable of working. For Wollen, the most important of these was sound. Early film had been silent and, as a result, the importance of language to film had not been clearly dealt with in avant-garde film practice. This coincided with the legacy of a Renaissance aesthetic which was capable of dealing with visual forms on a sophisticated level but was incapable, or actively hostile, to dealing with problems of language and narrative. As such, for Wollen, this was an aesthetic legacy which survived the modernist break, leaving Modernism incapable of dealing with the work which foregrounded the relationship of art and language.

It was in the journal *Afterimage*, and subsequently within contemporary debates about the critical value of an avant-garde moving image culture, that Marshall accounted for the work of video artists such as Tamara Krikorian in terms of their critique of the position of video within the gallery space.[9] For Marshall, the recording or instant play back possibilities of the technology, which were used by some artists in the 1970s to record performances or to confront viewers with images of themselves in the gallery space, had led to an ideology of real time as an assertion of the 'truthfulness' of continuous recording, free from the conventions of the edit. In a work such as Krikorian's *Vanitas or An Illusion of Reality* (1978), however, the ideology of real-time or duration was challenged. Traditionally, the Vanitas was a popular genre of painting in which objects were symbolically arranged to remind the viewer of life's transience and the vanity of earthly ambition. This was referred to on the first monitor via an image of the artist holding a mirror which was traditionally a component of the vanitas genre. An apparent real-time recording of a moving skyscape was reflected in the mirror

From Tamara Krikorian's two screen installation *Vanitas or An Illusion of Reality* (1978)

[REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST]

allowing the viewer to re-think the implications of narcissistic video work through an open reference to the history of art. In a similar vein the second monitor, which appeared to be a real-time recording of a still-life, problematised the viewer's understanding of continuous video. The tradition and meanings associated with the still-life, disrupted as it was on occasion by a bubble or a butterfly passing the screen, overlay the assumed transparency of the real-time tape as a site free from the ideological articulation of the edit.

Such work marked a shift from the early modernist concerns outlined by Hall in which many video artists began to re-appraise the critical nature of their own practice. The realisation that only limited meaning could be drawn from formal experimentation with the properties of the video media alone began to necessitate the reference of other works, art forms and broader social and political concerns which were beyond the critical remit of earlier work. Furthermore, as we have seen, video art was liable to be rejected anyway by a Modernism which could not account for work in temporal media and which had too much to lose if it did. This realisation signalled a move beyond the critique of TV as a self-proclaimed window on the world to a set of concerns with meaning and the structures by which meanings are themselves enabled. The critical formalism of early video practice began to give way to a concern with narrative, language and the ideological nature of those structures which sought to privilege certain forms of meaning while suppressing, or simply disallowing, others. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the Women's Movement provided the most developed theoretical and practical resources within which such problematics could be negotiated.

FEMINISM, VIDEO AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE ART OBJECT

In our society the art object has been allocated a privileged status as exemplar of cultural value, a bench mark by which we can measure our own cultural achievements and against which we can judge the relative merits of others. This has been decisive in the development of a range of theories which have sought to account for the experience of the aesthetic in terms of its separateness and difference to other experiences within our sensate life. Such conceptions of the art object and the type of experience which it is supposed to provide would obviously marginalise any practice which sought to refer beyond a set of concerns seen to be 'proper' to the production of art. Any attempt therefore to reclaim art practice as a site of social, historical and political intervention would, of necessity, have to destabilise such concepts of the art object and its function. Within the Women's Art Movement this took the form of a sustained critique of the fetishisation of the art object. The institutionalisation of the art world, its insistence on separating art from everyday life, and the total dominance of male artists within the Western canon were held to be representative of a set of relations which produce

individuals as classed and gendered subjects. By radically re-thinking those processes by which patriarchal power relations are constructed and maintained, feminist theoreticians were able to reject the naturalisation of existing gender and power relations and, instead, launch a powerful critique of the establishment of meaning itself within our society.

Laura Mulvey, for example, in her influential article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', argued for the importance of psychoanalysis in any feminist critique of representation.[10] She located the paradox of phallocentrism in its dependence on the presence of the image of the castrated woman in order to enable the phallus to function symbolically and, conversely, for the image of woman to be seen as lacking in signification – functioning as 'other' within a patriarchal ordering of meaning. Within classic Hollywood cinema, Mulvey postulated that the female body was intended to act as a stabilising object in the male ordering of diegetic narrative, as a passive sight for the active male gaze. This denied the possibility of a female subjectivity – making her body over into an object to secure the dominance of the male gaze. However, for Mulvey, the female body always endangers the mastery of the male gaze by posing the threat of castration and unpleasure, a role given to it by a patriarchal society that must, of necessity, privilege the symbolic nature of the phallus in difference to woman's otherness or lack. Mulvey therefore argued for a conception of femininity as a force which was capable of destabilising the existing privileging of patriarchal representation and of re-negotiating the scopic drive, the pleasure taken in viewing, which has historically worked for men and against women.

In the introduction to their book *Framing Feminism*, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker noted how these ideas also informed the related problematic of negotiating new forms of pleasure in the act of looking which would not be oppressive to women.[11] Within women's art practice this led to a radical rejection of the languages and forms of Modernism as a privileged site of male dominance. Concomitant to this was the rejection of the pleasure taken in the experience of the finished art object and the privileged position of the artist as creative genius, working outside of and separate to the complex relations of everyday life. Instead, women artists sought to re-appropriate their own bodies as sites of meaning and pleasure in their own terms, and to work with materials and subject matters which were not normally seen to belong to the world of art.

Works such as Marion Urch's 1979 tape *An Introduction to Womanhood in the Modern World*, for example, used simple imagery to work simultaneously on several complex layers of meaning. A birthday cake, decorated meticulously to represent the face of a young woman, is carefully set out on a table. Sixteen candles are set around the edge of the cake before being lit and blown out. The cake, as a representation of the kind of object which women are supposed to be within our society, is then carved into 16 pieces. This activity cruelly parodies the celebratory

Marion Urch's *An Introduction to Womanhood in the Modern World* (1979)

[REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST]

rhetoric of a woman's age of consent which accompanies the tape via a sound track composed of 1950s and 1960s pop records such as *Sweet Sixteen* and *She Was Only Sixteen*. Here, the age of consent is seen as an enforced entry into the exchange of women as objects within the sexual economy of a patriarchal society. The woman's features, represented by the cake, are literally carved up and given away, signifying the loss of identity rather than the gaining of sexual awakening which the lyrics of the songs would seem to imply. Similarly Caroline Stone's 1982 tape *Our Sex Lives* cuts from a dialogue between two women attending a Family Planning clinic and quotations from *The Hite Report on Men and Male Sexuality* (first published in 1978). The tape's polemic is constructed through a constant shift between the matter-of-fact intimacy shared by the women as they await their respective appointments and the anonymous, sanitised attitudes of a male sexuality which perceives intercourse as necessary to the acquisition of masculinity.

As already mentioned, many artists also felt the need to move beyond such critiques of male representation and to attempt, instead, to re-claim their own bodies and subjectivities by addressing their consciousness and sexual difference. Implicit in this was the need to negotiate borders between the didactic polemics of agit-prop and the more subjective and exploratory forms of work which could be facilitated by video. Catherine Elwes, for example, in her essay 'The Politics of the Personal in British Video Art' pointed to the political importance of video's ability to provide artists with instant access to their own image.[12] Unlike earlier narcissistic uses of video real-time by artists who sought to make their presence the subject of their art, Elwes indicated the possibility of using video to enable both male and female artists to record previously inaccessible and private situations. For feminist video-makers in particular, this provided the possibility of politicising activities and ways of life which had previously been disallowed significance within a male dominated society. Elwes' own tape *There is a Myth* (1984), uses personal imagery and insights to explore the unfounded male fear of maternal power and, conversely, the use which is made of this fear in order to justify the oppression of women within patriarchal society. The dominant image throughout the tape is of the artist's milking breast being roughly caressed by her baby son's hand. This is juxtaposed with the image of the artist sucking her thumb and close-ups of her mouth violently slamming shut. The tape negotiates a personal exploration of the pleasurable relationship between mother and son and the subsequent fear of castration, and impotence, felt by males in the face of a female sexuality which is able to take pleasure on its own terms.

Within the work of Mona Hatoum, relationships of personal difference, otherness and the struggle for identity are continually explored and re-negotiated. In her tape *Changing Parts* (1984) she explores the ability, or lack of ability, to communicate. At first, atmospheric monochrome shots of various bathroom details, accompanied by Bach's *Cello Suite No. 4*, are interspersed by the sound of static and the image

of the artist trying to show her face by clearing away the mist on the surface of a mirror. As the tape progresses the jarring, distorted sounds become more dominant, as does the image of the artist frantically moving and scratching out abstract marks in soap against what appears to be a transparent shower curtain. Her body is always partially hidden by this mark-making activity, a struggle which seems to deny our engagement by its very ephemerality. Each gesture systematically erases the mark which has been made before, simultaneously denying the promise of meaning whilst creating, once more, the fleeting opportunity to read. The viewer is forced to question the superficiality of imposing a meaning on the work in order to understand a situation over which they have no control. Yet Hatoum's struggle to make herself visible, and the ultimate denial of this right, points to something more fundamental than this. It acts as a reminder of our alienated condition; a condition which we implicitly deny every time we communicate, every time we join in the discourses which are allowed to be meaningful within our society – a society in which the voice of the 'other' is denied.

Changing Parts (1984) by Mona Hatoum

[REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST]

The female image, as Lisa Tickner pointed out in her essay 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970', is the result of the exclusion of women artists from art practice in the Western tradition.[13] As a consequence of this, for Tickner, the image of woman within our society can be viewed as an empty sign; disembodied from the ownership of women and re-inscribed with the codes and conventions of a male society which seeks to oppress the possibility of a female subjectivity. For her, the paradox is that the very tools which would enable women to objectify their experience within our culture are already value laden – they can never be free from the discursive processes of a society which they are seen to embody. If she is right, then this is the Pyrrhic victory of the feminist critique of the art object. It has indeed made palpable those ideological manoeuvres which have sustained a Western art tradition in terms of individual genius, and the aesthetic experience of an art object separated from everyday life. But at the same time, by the very act of moving away from the autonomous tyranny of the art object, it has opened up the practice of art as a site of struggle where new forms of communication, experience, pleasure and understanding can, and need to be, negotiated through the work itself. To conceive of art practice as a location for cultural interaction is therefore a far remove from Hall's fear of a 'nebulous' and undifferentiated video culture. It is to the objects produced within this practice, renewed as discursive sites through the critical intervention of feminist art production, and to their location within the gallery space that we must now return.

VIDEO AS ART OBJECT: FROM GALLERY TO TV AND BACK AGAIN

In his article 'The Necessity Of Doing Away With "Video Art"', John Wyver located what he saw as a decisive shift within our culture from a traditional reliance on the exchange of printed information to digitised forms of storage and transmission.[14] This, he contended, would provide the possibility for a new kind of visual culture which would have as much impact on our society as the commercialisation of photography did in the 1840s. Because of this shift Wyver suggested that the notion of producing video art was already anachronistic. Although he saw the importance of earlier arguments for video's specificity when it was being excluded from the art world, Wyver viewed the development of a self-sustaining curatorial and distributive network as securing for video artists a parochial position which was increasingly separate from the concerns of a new and dynamic moving image culture. In doing so, Wyver risked overlooking the specificity of art practice whilst, simultaneously, collapsing a critique of such practice into a critique of the art object as such – assuming the accessibility of TV to a mass audience to be simply the opposite of art's singular commodity form and the limited engagement which this provides.

To do away with the notion of video art, simply because technology now allows for the cross-fertilisation of previously distinct cultural practices, is to miss the intention of a significant number of video artists to work within the limits of these new technologies. Many artists now rely on the necessity to test the limitations of technologies and to resist, through the production of a critical practice, those processes of naturalisation by which the messages enabled by new technologies become the dominant forms of their meaning. Simon Robertshaw's *The Observatory* (1993), for example, consciously invites a theoretical re-evaluation of they way we represent ourselves through, and are represented by, the technologies we use. The work itself is formed by a central octagon of glass sheets which is surrounded by a further layer of suspended sheets, some of which are silk-screened with images from the history of Western medical science. As the viewer walks around and through the piece, various overhead projections are triggered which are displayed on, and refracted through, the glass structure. The viewer's own multiple reflection, which re-occurs across the kaleidoscopic space of the work, is presented within a shifting and prismatic experience of historical and contemporary representations of the human body. From images of human incarceration and DNA codes to a projected CT scan of a child's head which is constantly in a robotic process of structuring and re-structuring itself, we are left in no doubt that these are more than mere records of our physical existence. As such we are reminded of our responsibility to reject any simplistic notion that we are being objectively observed by an amoral and 'well' meaning 'science'.

Furthermore, as we have seen in our consideration of Hall's defence of early British video art practice, to reduce the practice of video art to the exchange value of its products is to fall into the trap of seeing the art object as simply a commodifiable form. This is to miss a conception of the art object as a potential site of resistance to the ideologies upon which commodification itself relies. Such economically reductive arguments would ignore the importance which privileged sites of experience, and the interests which they can be seen to serve, still play in the dominant hegemony of late capitalism. A capitalism which can afford not to own, or even see as valuable, those paintings which are currently held to be great, but which cannot afford to do without those reasons by which it identifies and secures meaning and value. This can be made clearer if we look at the dissatisfaction felt by some artists after working with the media of video for broadcast TV.

By the mid-1980s an increasing number of artists began to be commissioned by network television companies to produce short works on video tape for broadcast. This enabled artists such as Anne Wilson and Marty St. James to access audience levels which were not possible within the limited confines of the art world. Their tape *Iron Heart*, for example, which was made in 1986 with a view to future broadcast and transmitted by Channel 4 later that year, was a satirical critique of the pulp fiction genre of romance in the work-place. Here, the classic theme of a secretary falling for her boss is constantly returned to motifs of the mundane,

repetitive tasks which have become representative of our modern industrialised life. As such, the sexual divisions which underpin this unequal relationship are revealed to be the result of the Industrial Revolution's intrusion into our private life: the regulation and packaging of our feelings and expectations into desires which can no longer be realised within a lived experience, but which must be satisfied by access to the surrogate world of the television soap. However, despite the ability to platform such views to a mass audience Wilson and St. James had, by the late 1980s, become dissatisfied with working for television. Amongst other things, disputes over artistic licence, the necessity to work within rigid broadcast time-scales and the inability to exercise any control over the reception of their work led them away from TV and back to the gallery space. The imposition of such constraints seemed a contradiction to a freer medium and reminded artists that it was not the perceived singularity of the art object, and therefore its inevitable commodification, that was problematic. It was the processes of validation themselves which were the problem, as feminist practice had shown, and the best arena in which to challenge these notions head-on was to return to the ideological milieu gallery space itself.

Wilson and St. James' recent video portrait, *The Sea* (1994), is a wall-mounted monitor surrounded by two oval frames, on which the outline of a frontal portrait contains the image of waves gently lapping against the edges of a shore. The work depends, in order for it to exist as a work of art in a gallery space, on the interrelationship of three elements: the image itself, the use of traditional wooden frames, and the technological element which drives it. Nevertheless, it is the form which the technological element of this work takes, i.e. video, in conjunction with the culturally loaded presence of the frame, which gives this work its critical value. It is the oval frames which bring us into sharp focus with the uncomfortable relationship that still pertains between high and low culture within our society. The presence of more traditional framing devices, and the cultural baggage which they inevitably bring to our reading of the piece, re-focus the difficulties we have in experiencing the everyday communicative form of a moving image as art. At the same time, we are also reminded of the dependence of traditional image-making practices on the same three elements and, centrally, of their reliance upon communicative technologies of one form or another in order to signify as art at all. However, *The Sea* does not hide or emasculate the nature of its production, one is free to walk behind the illusionistic flatness of frame and screen to see, as in Hall's *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II*, the back of the monitor – the essential workings which, ideology tells us, we must ignore if we are to indulge in the fantasy of moving image as reality.

To hide the evidence of a work's production or communicative function would be, for Wilson and St. James, to indulge in the fantasy or trickery of illusionistic theatre. In their work the possibility of absorption between viewer and object, so important to the possibility of an aesthetic experience which Fried saw as the

Marty St. James and Anne Wilson's video portrait, *The Sea* (1994)

defining characteristic of a modern art practice, is denied. Instead, relationships between viewer and object are insisted upon – as the very stuff out of which we are made. As we have already seen, Fried saw the insistence of a split between object and viewer as being paradigmatically theatrical, a condition which it was the job of modern painting and sculpture to resist. This was because, for him, the condition of theatre was itself symptomatic of a bourgeois split between object and subject, addresser and addressee, actor and audience which it was art's task to somehow transcend within the realm of aesthetic experience. With video art, however, our experience is always negotiated across time, space and the ideological discourses of the art world. The possibility of a discrete and disinterested aesthetic, which exists somewhere beyond the realms of our everyday interaction with the social, historical and political milieu of our lived experience, is negated. Nevertheless, we can begin to see what Fried was trying to do. By insisting upon the possibility of an experience in which both subject and object were united, he was attempting to rescue some kind of experience from a set of intrusive post-war social relations in which subject and object had become irrevocably split. In order to accomplish this, however, Fried threw the baby out with the bath water. He was forced to return to an isolated and asocial conception of the aesthetic, one in which process, or duration, could not be part. By denying the temporal any relevance in the experience of the aesthetic, Fried had also denied the aesthetic legitimacy of using media such as video to question how our experiences may be socially and historically ordered.

Consequently, video art occupies a situation in the gallery space in which, according to the Modernist canon, it cannot function as art or, according to writers such as Wyver, it is a self-obsessed and inward looking practice cut off from the mainstream of contemporary moving image culture. This is the paradoxical situation which video art occupies within our visual culture today. But it is a situation through which elitist views can be challenged, both within the discursive field of Modernism and the accompanying ideological site of the gallery space, and within which video artists can scrutinise the effects of the video age on its own terms. As we have seen, the work produced by feminist artists from the mid-1970s onwards provided a critical platform from which the dominant ideologies of institutional Modernism could be radically de-stabilised. However, we must not lose sight of Hall's claim for the critical specificity of earlier video work. To do this would be to fall into the reductivist trap which fails to acknowledge the complex diversity of twentieth-century art practice preferring, instead, to identify all such work as Modernist and, in doing so, to render it fossil fuel for equally reductive forms of Post-modernist debate. Instead, video art must be seen to offer a unique opportunity to look at how we are structured through language and communication industries and, simultaneously, the possibility of decentralising the monadic self-hood of art's proclaimed autonomy. By continuing video interventions into the gallery space, therefore, our socially produced and constantly shifting nature can

not only be investigated but thoroughly developed. This returns us to the question of how we might best negotiate a reading of Hall's *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II* within a Modernist gallery space.

CONCLUSION

As already stressed, it was never an intention of this essay to offer a reading of Hall's work, or to trace a chronology by which we could somehow explain its meaning. Rather, the intention has been to map out the terms of a critical and theoretical engagement by which we might meaningfully approach such a work in a gallery space. This necessitated the negotiation of those borders which are seen to separate 'good' from 'bad', high culture from low culture and art from kitsch within our society. As a result, the analysis of the position which video art can be seen to occupy within our society relies on identifying the shifting and complex relationships between three discrete, though mutually determining areas.

Firstly, we must account for the specificity of the practice itself. This would not merely entail a critical re-appraisal of earlier practice, but would entail the responsibility to acknowledge those social, institutional and theoretical parameters which made the development of British video art possible, and which would sustain its existence as a relatively discrete form of critical visual culture. Secondly, we must identify the relationship which video art practice has to other forms of visual representation other than the televisual experience. Whilst dominant televisual codes are undoubtedly the first ordering system through which we make sense of the video message, we must not lose sight of the debt which this system owes to the history of Western visual culture from the Renaissance onwards. To coherently re-deploy the communicative codes and conventions of other artistic forms does not necessarily indicate a downward spiral into a Post-modernist culture where all meanings become lost and all values relative. Instead, it indicates the political necessity to re-evaluate the dominant structures through which we are represented on a sustained and continuing level of critical engagement. Finally, there is the necessity to develop a history and theory of video art which can conceive, as dynamic interaction, the specificity of this practice and its relations to other forms of visual culture. Furthermore, such a history and theory must also be capable of embedding its own critical debate within the social, political, sexual and institutional milieu through which it would be formed, and to which it would directly contribute.

What the reading of video art should point to is our responsibility as a society to constantly engage with, and to allow ourselves to be engaged by, a visual language which is the very material through which we are produced and which, in turn, we may use in order to reproduce ourselves. The struggle, then, in both the production and analysis of video art within the gallery space is for meaning and, crucially, to

secure democratic access within the social construction of new meaning – to produce new forms of dialogue which would challenge the legitimacy of those methods and relationships which others would impose.

REFERENCES

1. In this essay I have used Modernism (upper case) to denote a relatively identifiable and relatively stable, though not necessarily fixed, set of institutionalised discourses which order and regulate our understanding of modern art practice through the distributive network of the gallery space. In contrast to this, I use modernism (lower case) to denote the diversity of oppositional or counter-cultural practices which, of necessity, must reference themselves within the framework of a dominant modernist discourse in order to be read, or to function as art at all. The absorption of the latter by the former, and the attendant insistence that narrativity and political tendency are asides within a competent reading of Modernism, does not, I believe, equate to the failure of modernism's more coercive strategies or the exhaustion of its more seditious moves. Rather, this essay seeks to negotiate, or rescue, the possibility of critical meaning which may be developed through, or over, the border between two radically different forms of modernism.

2. David Hall, in Lisa Haskel (ed.), *Video Positive '89*, Liverpool, Merseyside Moviola, 1989, p. 23.

3. David Hall, 'Before the Concrete Sets' in Michael Maziere (ed.), *LVA Catalogue 1991*, London, LVA, 1991, pp. 41-43. A revised version of Hall's essay is reprinted in this volume under the title 'Early Video Art: A Look at a Controversial History'.

4. Stuart Marshall, 'Institutions/Conjunctures/Practices' in Stuart Marshall (ed.), *Recent British Video*, London, Onlywomen Press, 1983, pp. 1-4. Marshall subsequently revised his catalogue introduction for publication in *Screen* in 1985 under the title 'Video: From Art to Independence – a short history of a new technology'. In this later version, which is reprinted in this volume, Marshall replaced the term 'post-modernist practice' with 'recent video practice'. According to Sean Cubitt this was *possibly* because Marshall subsequently felt post-modernism provided an inadequate explanatory framework for the video work being produced in the early 1980s. In his essay 'Before the Concrete Sets' Hall refuses

to name any specific writers, but in a revised version of this essay, reprinted in this volume as 'Early Video Art: A Look at a Controversial History', Hall does directly reference Marshall, but has stressed in conversation that other writers also made similar contentions.

5. Hall, 'Before the Concrete Sets', op. cit., p. 42.

6. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Art Forum*, 5 (10), June, 1967, pp. 12-23.

7. Ibid., p. 22.

8. Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', *Studio International*, 190 (978), Nov-Dec, 1975, pp. 170-75.

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11. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970 – 1985*, London, Pandora Press, 1987, p. 54.

12. Catherine Elwes, 'The Politics of the Personal in British Video Art', in Maziere, *LVA Catalogue 1991*, pp. 61-64. See also Catherine Elwes, 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art' in this volume for further discussion of this.

13. Lisa Tickner, 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970' in Parker and Pollock, pp. 263-75.

14. John Wyver, 'The Necessity of Doing Away With "Video Art"', in Maziere, *LVA Catalogue 1991*, pp. 45-48, and reprinted in this volume.