Chris Meigh-Andrews: Early Video Tapes: 1978-87.

This essay traces the development of my single screen video tapes, 1978-1987. The relationship between available technology and the ideas and content of the work is discussed in detail, with particular emphasis on the development of my understanding of the technological and material processes of video and their relationship to the content, form and meaning of the work. There are also references to specific artists and works that were significant and influential on the ideas, formal concerns and the content of my work.

First Video Tapes and The Videokalos Image Processor: 1978-1981
My first video tapes- Continuum, The Viewer's Receptive Capacity and 3:4, made in collaboration with Gabrielle Bown, were produced entirely in the TV studio whilst at the London College of Printing. Work with the Videokalos Image Processor began during the development of my first independent video tape Horizontal & Vertical, completed in 1978. Deliberately avoiding highly saturated colours, I chose to work with monochromatic hues to differentiate the passages between sections. Recorded with a Sony 'Portapack', Horizontal & Vertical explored colourising, mixing and image-wiping using the Videokalos IMP as a self-contained video mixing and image-processing device. Recorded outdoors, tapes were subsequently reprocessed in the studio. During post-production, the 'raw' video was displayed on monitors, rescanned and fed into the Videokalos . As individual input channels could be treated separately, it was possible to adjust the video images (chrominance, contrast, luminance, etc.) in relation to each other, mixing through channels in sequence during the recording session, building a final tape in 'real' time via a 'live' mix. Thus each tape was the result of a 'best take' process produced after a number of trials and rehearsals, the colours and transitions (mixes and wipes) gradually introduced across the duration of the tape. In using this process I was influenced both by the configuration of the Videokalos, and by the working practice of it's designers. As with a number of the video imaging tools built by the Vasulkas, for example, the origins of the image-processor as an outgrowth of practices derived from audio technology (including the overall "architecture") and 'live' broadcast television were also inherent in the Videokalos.

Video as an Electronic Medium
I was very conscious of the electronic nature of the video medium, and interested in establishing ideas about the relationship between the 'natural world' and the technology I was working with. At the time, video equipment was far less portable, and much of the image manipulations and interventions I was interested in working with were accomplished at the post-production stage. I was particularly interested in the idea that certain technical manipulations specific to video- an enhanced perception of the video raster and scan lines, the shifting colours, video 'wipes' which played with the horizon line, and the punctuating rhythm of a deliberately maladjusted vertical hold could have an aesthetic significance. Using a slow contemplative pace with a gradual shifting of movement, colour and tone I sought to make landscape works which, through their use of duration and the manipulation of basic video elements, made reference to a mediated experience of

landscape, and to the subjectivity of the viewer. I also wanted works that referred to their medium of transmission, to develop a language particular to video with reference to the subject matter (in this case, the landscape elements) being represented. I was also very conscious of wanting to make work, that whilst entirely and obviously video, bore no relation to broadcast television, in content or form. I wanted to make a works which were emphatically 'video' but just as clearly not TV.

Horizontal & Vertical (1978)
Horizontal & Vertical is built entirely of rescanned video material, the monochrome tinted sequentially so that the electronically generated colours gradually shift during the duration of the piece. In deciding to work with very de-saturated colours I was reacting to the intense and somewhat artificial colours of many of the so-called 'abstract' video compositions I had seen, including work by Paik and Donebauer. The muted colours that I chose to work with were used to differentiate one image transition from another- to create passages or episodes throughout the continuous single 'take' of the original video material, reconstituting it as a sequence of fluid relationships.

The use of horizontal and vertical wipes was linked to an interest in developing a set of formal codes that were specific and particular to video. Although influenced by David Hall in works such as This is a Television Receiver (1974), I was seeking a more lyrical and subjective result and was more attracted to the ideas of film-makers such as Malcom Le Grice as evidenced in Berlin Horse (1971).

Michael Snow's film Wavelength (1967) was also a major influence. Wavelength used the formal device of the zoom, to frame and provide the tension for a quasi-narrative structure. The film also had a transcendental and metaphoric dimension, neither of which was particularly in favour in English avant-garde film and video circles of the time, but one which was more in tune with Donebauer's notions of time-based art, and one that I was sympathetic to at the time.

In terms of the development of a purely medium-based language for film, the work of Stan Brakhage was of major significance to me. Working with the Videokalos was a way of gaining control of elements within the video 'frame'. Film-makers including Le Grice, working with the optical printer, and Brakhage, who drew directly onto the film surface, were able to control the level of signification within the frame. I had yet to see the work of the Vasulkas, who had developed ways of delving within the video frame in works such as Caligrams (1970) and Matrix (1976). Seeking a line-by-line method of working with the video image, the Videokalos offered me the closest possibility at that time. Gaining control of image brightness, contrast, colour changes and, in later work such as The Distracted Driver (1980) and The Chance Meeting (1981), image keying, I was able to manipulate the unfolding of the video image across time, beyond the basic cutting that I had been able to achieve in the edit suite with The Viewer's Receptive Capacity (1978).

After graduating in the summer of 1979, I was committed to continuing my video work, seeking funds and a context for my practice. Joining London Video Arts, I became a member of the steering committee, and involved in selecting work for distribution and screening. I was offered a short-term teaching fellowship at the LCP, enabling me to continue working with the Videokalos IMP. My brief was simple- to continue developing new work and to be available to interested students. I commenced working on a new project- a tape with a narrative dimension.

The Distracted Driver (1980)
As with the landscape series, The Distracted Driver (1980) was constructed from a monochrome original, but shot at night using an image-intensifying camera. Gaining confidence with my medium and becoming more experienced with the Videokalos, I began to explore the image processor's capabilities in greater depth, extending ideas developed during the landscape series. Although drawing on the work of experimental film-makers, I was totally committed to video and believed in its potential as a fine art medium. The work I had completed in the television studio had provided me with my first exposure as an artist, but continued access was unrealistic given my finances and lack of an available and sympathetic production crew.

The Distracted Driver has a clear narrative- there is a 'story' told directly via the soundtrack. Visually the tape attempted to extend the work begun in the landscape series, presenting a fluid unfolding of the image, with shifting and changing colours across the duration of the tape. In contrast with the landscape pieces, I chose to work with more saturated colours and utilised the full range of multiple luminance keying levels available. Attempting to extend the literal narrative into the application of the colourisation of the monochrome original, my intention was to introduce colours into the image which would suggest the subjective experience of the central character - the "distracted driver" of the title, actively investigating ways of representing subjective experience.

Much of the narrative in The Distracted Driver is tied into the soundtrack. The core idea was to conjure up complex memories in the mind of the viewer which were to be experienced running in parallel with the video images. My interest in the relationship between memory and moving imagery did not begin with this work, but it is the first piece in which I tried to make it explicitly part of the 'narrative' of the work. The story of the film Psycho (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) as recounted by the car's passenger makes reference to a number of visual elements from the Hitchcock film, appealing to the viewer's memory and establishing an ironic contrast to the images on the video screen. My choice of colours was arbitrary, as I was primarily concerned to use colour to represent the subjective personality of the driver without attempting to present any particular aspect of 'character'- the subjective perspective of the camera representing the driver's viewpoint.

The Establishment of My Independent Practice: Three-Quarter Inch Video/ Productions: (1980-1988)

For the most part, artist's video in England in the late 1970's was tied into the art school system and to production funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain. London Video Arts was at this time solely a distribution organisation- there was no video equivalent of the London Film-makers Co-op with its tradition of accessible workshop resources. In 1980 I formed a partnership with two LVA colleagues to purchase some second-hand video equipment. Occupying two rooms in 79A Wardour St, in Soho, "Three-Quarter Inch Video" hired out the equipment to cover costs, providing us with access to facilities for our own work. After this initial equipment purchase, the nature of the facilities developed considerably, reflecting changes in the technology, our finances, and technical requirements. Although the partnership was dissolved in 1982, the enterprise continued, and these facilities formed the core of my studio for the next six years.

The Edit Suite
The most significant impact of the new studio on the development of my work was made by the regular and uninterrupted access to picture and sound editing. Begun in 1981, my next tape, The Room With a View initiated a working process that characterised my approach to video. My practice involved working almost daily with the video image, producing a series of drafts or versions of an idea, editing and re-editing, adding images and/or sequences, testing out alternative permutations and juxtapositions, different soundtracks, building up layers of image and sound combinations. This approach, traditional to painters and musicians, less common to video artists and film-makers at this time, gave me the confidence to explore ideas and sketch out new works on a trial basis. This way of working directly with the materials of my medium would have been impossible if I had had to present ideas for proposals to potential funding agencies or had worked only when I could gain access to 'outside' facilities. This procedure allowed me to produce works with alternative uses of the same material, to make alterations or test new permutations quickly and economically. Work of this period was fluid because I was able to work more freely, and felt less tied to a particular version of a tape or approach to an idea.

The Room with a View (1982)
The Room with a View is 'about' photography,- about the view that the camera gives us of ourselves. The central theme of the tape is the way in which time, memory and image are intertwined. Notions of identity and self-image are a major theme in my video work of this period, and they lead directly to later tapes and installations in which this self-reflexive aspect of the human mind becomes central to my work. Initial ideas for this tape came out of readings of Camera Lucida (1981) by Roland Barthes and the work of Jo Spence and Cindy Sherman. Experimental films in which the still image was a primary device were also highly influential, particularly Hollis Frampton's Nostalgia (1971) and La Jetee (1962) by Chris Marker.

The Room With A View presents a sequence of family snapshots shown in chronological order, continuing until the point at which I have a clear memory of the event, untainted by the view imposed onto that event by the camera. These are pictures that make a significant contribution to my 'sense of self' - images of growing up that are infused and elaborated by parental reminiscences- ordinary events magnified by the very fact of being preserved, frozen out of the flux of life, and made iconic. I wanted to make a work that was personal but also 'public', my choice of holiday 'snaps' based on a certainty that they resembled countless other personal images.

This video assemblage of snapshots is intercut by images of the sea and sky originally recorded for a three channel video installation Field Study (1980). Additional video material was combined with captions, diagrams and simple line drawings. The Room with a View was made during the first year of a part-time MA (fine art) at Goldsmiths (1981-83), and it was presented in a wide range of venues, giving me renewed confidence to continue my experimental work.

The Prototype Videokalos Image Processor: 1982-87
Unable to access the Videokalos since the completion of my teaching fellowship, I sought ways to acquire one for my own studio. I intuitively felt that the early work I had done with the Videokalos was a starting point, and I needed to further explore its potential. Between January and May 1982, I worked under Peter Donebauer's supervision to repair and restore the prototype Videokalos synthesiser. His instruction included the background to the planning and building of circuit boards and the significance and differences between the various electronic components, as well as practical advice about wiring, soldering and layout.

Although the Videokalos did not offer any entirely new possibilities for video production, it combined facilities that were otherwise not available in a self-contained unit. The acquisition of the working prototype enabled me to considerably extend the range of image-control processes available in my studio. This innovative and unique instrument was influential on my developing attitude to the medium, reinforcing my understanding of the instantaneous and fluid nature of the video image, its production processes paralleling those of audio recording. The rebuilt prototype Videokalos was, until the addition of a digital frame store in 1987, the image-processing core of my studio.

The Videokalos gave me significant control over the video picture providing me with a sense of video as analogous to the audio signal- controllable in a fluid and malleable way. I understood video not as framework of discrete 'units' of time to be cut and pasted, but as a shifting stream of signals which could be controlled as a musician controlled sound from an instrument. Video-like music, was instant, interactive, direct and fluid.

This perception of video as accessible, fluid and personal was in marked contrast to work that was being made for broadcast television at the time. In an interview for a Channel Four documentary series on British video art, I was

very clear about my understanding of the potential for video as an art medium. To me, it was like asking a musician about the relationship between music and the radio! An important contributing factor to this view was my parallel freelance activities, which included animation work for children's television. Although free to experiment visually, I was working to a brief with a budget and a production schedule, with a specific target audience. This was a very different set of constraints, and it made me acutely aware of the demands and requirements of broadcast television, which formed a marked contrast to my fine art practice.

The issue of 'audience' for my art work was one of the most significant factors. Working on my own equipment gave me complete freedom to experiment. In the early 1980's, it was difficult to know if there was an audience for this kind of work other than within the small artistic community that had formed around LVA, the ICA and the art schools. The Arts Council had extended their "Film-Makers on Tour" scheme to include video artists in 1980, and I made a number of presentations in venues around the UK as part of this scheme, which gave me some measure. Tapes shown in this context were very often the first experimental video work to be seen by many who attended these screenings, and as such, opinions were very tentative. In any case, one looked more to the opinions and assessments of colleagues in developing ideas and approaches to new work. Critical writing on video art was limited, and came mainly from other artists who were seeking to develop their own practices. David Hall, Stuart Marshall, Catherine Elwes, Jeremy Welsh, Mick Hartney, Tamara Krikorian, all practitioners themselves, were writing about work that, for the most part, reinforced their own ideas about what constituted video art practice. In this period distribution was centred entirely on London Video Arts, who, by the mid-1980's were selecting work on the basis of criteria drawn up by a small panel of volunteers, all of whom who were artists.

Time Travelling/A True Story (1982)
Having worked with photography as an influence on memory, I decided to develop a tape about the relationship between memory and the moving image. I was particularly interested in the role of 'narrative', and the tendency of the mind to organise experiences and events into narratives, making life into a kind of story, ignoring events that do not fit, or are ambiguous, smoothing out inconsistencies. Time Travelling/a True Story organises fragments of personal 8mm film footage into a story, using a soundtrack as the structuring device.

The tape has two distinct sections; the first presenting the rescanned film footage edited to a modified voice-over from Jean-Paul Sartre's novel Nausea. Experimenting with old film footage was itself like the process of playing with memory. The images on the film were of places from my own past- 'authentic' fragments and material evidence of an early fascination with the moving image; a record of my earliest interest in cinema. This was another aspect of the 'self' that could be put alongside the childhood photos in The Room with a View. Being able to electronically manipulate, reorganise

and re-present these fragments became a major theme of the work; creating a fiction from them was the second level. This, I felt, was the strength and uniqueness of video technology in it's personal dimension. Video had become a 'support medium' and a contemporary frame for the representation of an 8mm past. These moving images could be framed by video as the family album framed the snapshot.

The second section of Time-Travelling / a True Story is a kind of reprise. Another fiction, presented in a contemporary idiom, a very obviously manipulated and electronic 'present', which comments on the past by reprising written phrases from the first voice-over as electronically- generated captions. I wanted to make a work composed of as many different layers of image-making as possible. Referring to a kind of inter-textual 'present', I was attempting to weave as complex an image as I could, presenting the video screen as an imaginary space in which these layers could briefly and temporarily mix and condense.

Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny) (1983)
Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny) was a personal experiment, a soundtrack experiment with patterns made by the repeating musical phrase derived from a 'pirated' sequence from a Bugs Bunny cartoon. The accuracy of my editing (and my edit suite) was tested, and in this sense I saw it initially as a kind of technical exercise. Fascinated by the work of the American "minimalist" composer Steve Reich, I had became increasingly interested in the visual structure suggested by the relationship between the repeating musical rhythms and the looping cycle of the cartoon characters; the musical structure influencing decisions about where and when to 'cut' the sequence.

These ideas notwithstanding, I had also had some preliminary plans to make a piece of work that was 'about' the experience of watching television. An avid Bugs Bunny fan, I had seen this particular episode many times. Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny) was significant to me because the image became 'physical', both because of the use of duration, which I had learned from the structuralist film-makers, and rhythmical because of what I had learned from listening to Reich. It was also nostalgic, because it referenced childhood television viewing, and conceptually interesting to me because it referred to the 'flow' of programming which by now seemed to define the medium of television so specifically.

An Imaginary Landscape (1986)
An Imaginary Landscape makes reference to a series of musical compositions by John Cage. Cage's influence through Nam June Paik and the Fluxus movement on early video art is fundamental, although the connections to John Cage in my video piece are less direct. I wanted to create an imaginary electronic space- a 'landscape' which was inhabited purely by reference to the image. The tape describes a space that is completely electronic- existing exclusively within the space of the screen. The landscape is 'imaginary' in the sense that the viewer is taken there through the unfolding of the (tele)visual experience. The progression on the screen from 'real' perspectival/architectural space is presented as a way of arriving there

through perceptual means. (i.e. by watching the tape unfold as it transforms between a recognisable visual space to one which is purely electronic.)

The tape is composed of a series of five repeated loops of a single sequence, each progressively less digitally processed than the last, edited together in a series of discrete steps. The sequences were processed using an early digital time-base corrector, the Gemini II, a twin-channel frame-store with a limited range of digital effects. Working with a digital system, an original video image-sequence could be 'held'- stored as an image-object and re-deployed instantly. To me, this digital storage and retrieval of image-sequences suggested an entirely new approach to the presentation of moving images which problematised durational video work. The issues that arose from this new possibility were not simply in relation to the viewer/artwork relationship, (e.g. in terms of how the work was presented and how meaning was expressed and perceived) but had profound implications on the conception of the work itself. David Dunn and Woody Vasulka have written about this in their article "Digital Space: A Summary":

Our interest and insight into this new perceptual environment results from our many years of creative use of digital technology as an aesthetic tool that has often brought us to a direct confrontation with traditional ways of composing images and sounds. This conflict has not only been initiated by our interest in new forms in general, but specifically by the profound implications of organising our materials through a numerical code. What becomes apparent from the structural demands of this technology is that there is an ability and even an affinity for discrete genre to interact through the binary code in ways which transcend linear cause and effect relationships, revealing new compositional concepts with regard to space, perspective and morphology.

In An Imaginary Landscape the second video image has been laterally 'flipped' and overlaid onto the first, and then the pixels have been enlarged to provide a simpler, less detailed video image. (This technical effect is called 'mosaic' for obvious reasons.) The original sequence has also been 'frame-grabbed', which means that a single field of video has been held for longer than the usual 1/50th of a second, and then released, which results in a jump in the image of a few seconds, skipping the intermediate frames. This produces a similar feel to slow motion, but is not the same, as picture information is jettisoned between frames, producing a perceivable jump in the continuous flow of the sequence. This breaking of the flow sheds the point-to-point relationship of the image sequence with the "visible reality" of the image source, creating a new and specifically digital flow.

The introduction of digital image-processing into my repertoire heralded a shift in my work and highlighted a creative problem leading to a growing dissatisfaction with pure durational work. In my video tapes of this period I had began to explore ideas about a potential parallel perceptual space created by the viewer/tape relationship. In my subsequent video tape, The Stream, I attempted to make this notion more explicit. I believe that the implicit non-linearity of my tape work at this point lead directly into the sculptural video installation work of the next period.

An Imaginary Landscape was most often shown in its single-screen configuration, but was intended as a two-screen piece. In the twin screen version of the work, two identical processed and edited single-screen video tapes are presented side-by-side, running in opposite directions- one 'forward' and one 'reversed', so that one image-sequence begins as a representation of the space it is recorded in, and the other begins as a digital abstraction. As the sequences unfold, the positions reverse, so that they end in opposite positions within the screen. My intention was that there would be no 'real' forward or reverse in the piece. In a sense, this also implies that there is no 'end' to the work either, simply a set of cycling relationships, a sort of 'mobius strip' of fluid images. This approach to linear presentation would later lead me to abandon durational tape-making and begin to concentrate on installations in which the image sequences would be made from repeating loop structures.

The influence of Steve Reich's music is central to the development of my double screen video tape, The Stream (1985-87). After hearing a lecture Reich gave on the composition of The Desert Music (1984) in which he spoke of his early interest in setting the verses of William Carlos Williams to music, I decided I would try to produce a 'video setting' of Music for Large Ensemble (1977).

The Stream (1985-87)
After making An Imaginary Landscape in 1986 using the Gemini II, I decided to develop a single channel work which explored the potential of the Gemini for producing split-screen effects, image symmetry and mirroring. The Stream is about dialectics- a presentation of opposing parallels, co-existencies and interdependencies, presenting fluid electronic images of flowing matter (the water of the stream depicted) in relation to a reference to the flow of human cognition. I drew inspiration from the work of David Bohm (1917-1994) who posited the notion of a crucial relationship between mind and matter in Wholeness and the Implicate Order. The Stream begins with a quotation from the book:

As careful attention shows, thought itself is in an actual process of movement. That is to say, one can feel a sense of flow in the "stream of consciousness" not dissimilar to the sense of flow in the movement of matter in general. May not thought itself thus be a part of reality as a whole? But then, what could it mean for one part of reality to 'know' another, and to what extent would this be possible? Does the content of thought merely give us abstract and simplified 'snapshots' of reality, or can it go further, somehow grasp the very essence of the living movement that we sense in actual experience?

The tape was not simply a set of images to accompany Reich's music, but an attempt to present something much more complex, both abstract and philosophical. The fluid video images should be seen to hold metaphoric and poetic significance, to be understood not simply as the record of something that existed in nature, but mediated via a technological process which ordered them for an entirely different purpose other than to simply re-present them. The images of the flowing river had, like the music, an abstract relationship to

nature. I wanted to suggest that the parallel between thought and image in nature was mirrored in the language of the moving electronic image. My intention was to merge the physical, rhythmic experience of the music with the mind's visual and visceral memory of flowing water, to make a work which established a set of interdependent relationships between the movement of the music, the flowing water, the video imagery and the flux of thought process of memory and cognition.

In many of my video tapes in the 1980's I had been interested in notions of flow, both in terms of the "flow of information" and with regard to the inherent properties of the video medium, such as how the signal is produced, recorded and displayed, but in The Stream this was combined with an interest in philosophical issues about the nature of matter itself. From The Stream onwards, flow is much more tied into an enquiry into the nature of thought processes and consciousness in relation to the substances and materials that comprise the video image and the physical world it is part of. This tape led directly on to a series of sculptural installations I produced in the 1990's in which the relationship between the two dimensional image on the screens and the objects in the space becomes the principle arena of meaning.

C M-A, London, 2004.