

## **UNENCODED - My Shifting Relationship to Electronic & New Media Practice**

I have a confession to make: I'm an Essex man.

I was born in Braintree in 1952, and the following year my father brought home a TV set in time for the Coronation.

When my family resettled in Montreal, in 1957, we lived for several years in a block of flats almost immediately behind the National Film Board of Canada offices. A number of the ex-pat Brits, imported by John Grierson to help establish the fledgling Canadian film industry lived nearby, and I was brought up to be very aware of their output, especially the animation and the special effects.

In school, when the teachers didn't know what else to do with us, we were shown films by Norman McLaren. Many of these were made by drawing directly onto the film stock. They were abstract, and non-narrative, often with electronic soundtracks. The CBC also often broadcast these films between regular programming, and their influence on my conception of filmic and televisual space cannot be underestimated.

In 1966 I was initiated into the mysteries of B&W photography, and installed a basic but functional darkroom in the basement of our suburban family home. The following year my father gave me a season pass to Expo '67 and I spent the summer in a daze, mesmerized by an explosion of abstract and multi-screen films which included Walt Disney's 360 degree film, The National Film Board's "Labyrinth", shot on Imax, the Czech Pavilion's multiple choice film (an early initiation into the potential for non-linear film) and the Ontario Pavilion's "We are Young", which I was later to learn had been edited by a certain Woody Vasulka.  
(More about him, later!)

In 1969 I sat in the balcony of Montreal's only Cinerama movie theatre and was transported by Kubrick's 2001. (My girl friend's father, a special effects man- one of those NFB ex-pats, had been flown over to England by Stanley Kubrick on the strength of his Oscar nomination for Universe, and then thrown off the set after a row with the great man- his name expunged forever from the credits.)

In 1970 I saw a documentary film about Edward Weston which contained the revelation that it was possible to work with photography and be considered an ARTIST.

I left school the following year, and because I understood cameras and tape recorders, managed to get a job in the AV dept at the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. They had a piece of kit that I'd never seen before- a Sony "portapack".... This device seemed to me to be the perfect creative tool- it produced results instantly- just like a tape recorder, but it made pictures AND sound and played them back on a TELEVISION SET. I was certain that whatever else I might do, this was a tool I wanted to use.

Once in a while they even used to let me take it home.....

In 1974 I saw my first bit of "real" video art. In complete fascination I watched as Peter Campus tore a hole in his own image and emerged from behind it. This eloquent work made perfect sense to me- I felt completely at home in the kind of imaginative electronic space that the image occupied.

During my first summer in England in 1976 I saw the BBC's Arena Art & Design feature on video art. Sitting in the dark as prescribed, I watched whilst Richard Baker was systematically deconstructed into flickering pixels and sonic distortions. This was followed by an extract from Joan Jonas' hypnotic "Vertical Roll", and some more Peter Campus....

And then there was Peter Donebauer's Struggling. Here was something I had not anticipated- totally abstract video. I had never seen colours of such purity and saturation, or forms of such fluidity. Here was a primal experience beamed directly into my parent's front room in Southend-on-Sea!

Within two years of that revelatory broadcast Donebauer became first my tutor, then my mentor- finally my friend, and his attitude to video as primarily signal had become something we shared.

In 1974 Donebauer had been commissioned by BBC television to produce videotape for broadcast on Second House, an arts magazine programme. Because the BBC had no portable video recording equipment at the time, the work was transmitted via an outside broadcast microwave link from the TV studio at the RCA. This experience of the flexibility and ephemerality of video had a deep effect on Donebauer's sense of the medium and on the subsequent development of his work

Donebauer joined forces with electronics engineer Richard Monkhouse to develop a new video instrument- the Videokalos Image Processor, a video colouriser, vision mixer and programmable video keyer, primarily designed for live performance work using multiple image sources.

The prototype machine was completed during 1975, and an improved manufactured version became available in 1978, which is when I began to work with it. Between 1978 and 1981, I completed 5 videotapes using the Videokalos IMP. which was installed in the video edit suite at the London College of Printing School of Film & Television. The first student to use the instrument in any systematic way, I became the resident expert on the Videokalos, which gained me my first part-time teaching in 1979.

The tapes from this period, all shot outdoors with a "portapack" explored the colourising, mixing and image-wiping functions of the Videokalos. During the post-production phase, the 'raw' video recording was displayed on monitors, rescanned via monochrome studio cameras and fed into the Videokalos IMP. As the 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 gradually introduced across the duration of the tape. In using this process I was influenced by the configuration of the Videokalos, and by the working practice of its designers. As with a number of the video imaging tools built by American artist/engineers such as Stephen Beck and Dan Sandin 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

By this time I was very conscious of the electronic nature of video and interested in establishing ideas about the relationship between what I perceived as the 'natural world' and the technology I was working with. I was convinced that certain technical manipulations specific to video- an enhanced perception of the video raster and scan lines, the shifting colours, the wipes which played with the horizontal and vertical lines could have aesthetic significance. Using a slow contemplative pace with a gradual shifting of movement, colour and tone I sought to make landscape works which, through the use of duration and a manipulation of basic video elements, made reference to a contemporary sense of a mediated experience of landscape, and to the subjectivity of the individual viewer. I also wanted my work to refer to its medium of transmission, to develop a language particular to video with reference to the subject matter it was representing. I was also very conscious of wanting to make something, whilst entirely and obviously video, that had no relation to broadcast television, either in terms of its content, form or in terms of its intentions. I wanted to make a work which was emphatically 'video' but just as clearly not TV.

For me, working with the Videokalos was a way to gain control of elements within the video 'frame'. Film-makers including Malcom Le Grice, working with the optical printer, or Stan Brakhage, who drew and painted directly onto the film surface, were able to control the level of signification within the frame, orchestrating the film at every level.

Although aware of Paik's distorted television sets, I understood these works as substantially manipulations of broadcast television. I was seeking a line-by-line method of working with the video image, and at that time, the Videokalos offered me the closest possibility.

After my undergraduate studies I began a part-time MA at Goldsmiths and in partnership with two other artists from London Video Arts, established a video edit suite that functioned as my studio. I was also keen to acquire a Videokalos, as there was nothing more appropriate to my needs available at the time.

I felt that the video image was not constituted by individual frames in the same sense that film was, perceiving video to be fundamentally a continuum- a fluid

signal which conceptually at least, suggested that a hard transition, or 'cut' was a filmic imposition, a device that whilst convenient and effective, went against the 'grain' of my chosen medium. I intuitively felt that the work I had done with the Videokalos was merely a starting point, and I needed to further explore its potential. Central to my ideas about video at this time was a belief in an accessible and flexible working situation. The rationale to the development of my own studio was the need to have complete control over the entire production process.

I purchased the prototype Videokalos and under Donebauer's supervision restored it to operating condition. The acquisition of the prototype enabled me to considerably extend the range of image-control processes available to me, and it was, until the addition of a digital frame store and time-base corrector in 1986, the image-processing hub of my video studio. It was used extensively in image work during the production of the following tapes: *The Room with a View* (1982) *Time Travelling/A True Story* (1983) *Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny)* (1983) *Still Life with Monitor* (1984) and *The Stream* (1985-87).

The Videokalos gave me limited, but 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 in a way that a musician controlled sound.

Video- like music, was instant, interactive, direct and fluid. With this level of image-control in my own hands, literally, it became central my image repertoire. Working with it daily, I learned to use it instinctively, and my sense of the medium was significantly influenced by its integration into the making of my work during this period.

#### The Digital

The introduction of digital image manipulation into my creative palette began in the mid 1980's. Working for BBC TV as a freelance film animator between 1981-88 to earn a crust, I had very occasionally been granted access to a new and fascinating tool that enabled a kind video multi-tracking. In the bowels of the Television Centre at Wood Lane, the graphics dept. had installed a computerised video rostrum which recorded its output to a colossal hard drive. With this wonderful gadget it was possible to make multi pass recordings, thus building up images in a perspectival relationship simply by changing the distance between the camera and the artwork. I didn't get to use it much, but it gave me a glimpse of something I am still trying to make sense of.....

Away from fantasyland and back in my humble studio in Brixton, I was working in more modest ways with digital imaging, completing my first digital video piece in 1986.

#### An Imaginary Landscape (1986)

*An Imaginary Landscape* makes reference to a series of musical compositions by John Cage. Through my researches into the history of video, I was aware

that Cage's influence through Nam June Paik on early video art was fundamental. The connections to Cage in my videotape are less direct. I wanted to make reference to an imaginary electronic space- a 'landscape', which is inhabited purely by reference to the image. The video sequence in *An Imaginary Landscape* is in no sense narrative, and neither is the 'place' of the landscape depicted. 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 mind 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.

Working with a digital system, an original video image-sequence could be 'held'; stored as an image-object and re-deployed instantly. The 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 about the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, for example 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 recent 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 organizing 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.

The introduction of digital image processing to my repertoire heralded a shift in my work and highlighted a creative problem leading to a growing dissatisfaction with durational work. I had begun to explore ideas about a potential parallel perceptual space created by a relationship between the tape and the viewer. *An Imaginary Landscape* was my most explicit attempt to do this to date, and in my subsequent videotape, *The Stream*, I attempted to make this notion even more explicit.

*An Imaginary Landscape*, most often shown in its single-screen configuration, was planned so that two identical processed and edited single-screen video tapes would be presented side-by-side, running in opposite directions- one 'forward' and one 'reversed', so that one image-sequence began as a representation of the space it is recorded in, whilst the other began as a digital abstraction. As the sequences unfold, the positions reverse, ending up in

opposite positions within the screen. The intention was that there was no 'real' forward or reverse. This also implies that there is no end to the work either, simply a set of cycling relationships- a 'mobius strip' of fluid images. This approach to linear presentation led me to abandon durational tape making to concentrate on installations in which the image sequences were repeating loop structures.

#### Installations: 1989-1996

Around 1989 I altered my working practice radically, dismantling my studio and selling off the equipment. My fine art practice had altered my interests and I was intent on working with sculpturally based ideas, specifically large-scale works which required funding, exhibition venues, residencies and commissions.

During this period I worked initially with multiple monitors: An Imaginary Fountain (1989) 9 monitors, 3 video channels; Eau d'Artifice (1990 & 1993) 34 monitors, 4 video channels; Stream Line (1991 & 1992) 9 monitors, 9 video channels, but then increasingly with less screens and in combinations of projectors and monitors: Cross-Currents (1993) monitor, projector, & live video camera; Perpetual Motion (1994 & 1996) wind turbine, 2 projectors, Apple Mac, video monitor; Fire, Ice & Steam (1995), 4 solar panels, 3 video monitors, projector and dry ice machine; Vortex (1995), LCD projector & video player.

#### Perpetual Motion (1994)

Perpetual Motion was the first installation in which I used digital imaging exclusively, exploring the 'infinite' looping potential of the computer system. It was also my first work to feature the use of 'renewable energy resources'.

In Perpetual Motion flow was made into a physical experience- the wind turbine powering the image was driven by a flow of air the visitor could feel. He/she is prompted to make connections between the flowing movement of air and the flow of electricity and images by a direct physical experience, which has a conceptual relationship to the ideas behind the work.

The installation presents images of nature that were clearly manipulated and mediated- as if fragments of nature were trapped and contained.

The equipment and devices that comprise the installation were all arranged in a logical, almost schematic way, a chain of interrelated technological objects across the gallery space. A 'wind machine' was plugged into a conspicuous wall-mounted mains plug, the stream of air and roar of the machine filling the gallery space, causing a wind turbine to turn rapidly. Visitors could follow the cables connected to the turbine up into the ceiling where a small colour video monitor displayed the kite flying sequence. The projector, also ceiling-mounted, created a rectangular patch of waving digitized grass on the gallery floor.

A concern that continued to be significant from previous installation work was the relationship of perceptive thought to a decoding and reading of the installation. I was interested in finding ways to produce an awareness in the

viewer of the perceptual process at work during a viewing of the installation, making him/her conscious of this as part of the function and intention of the installation.

In a sense, there had been a progressive development away from the ideas of 'shape' that were present in Eau d'Artifice and, to a lesser extent, in Streamline. With Cross-Currents I had initiated a shift towards a kind of 'schematic' approach, in which the linked elements were to be read sequentially and made to form a 'map' in the mind of the viewer rather than to be read 'all at once' and so perceived as a cohesive 'whole'. The elements in Cross-Currents and Perpetual Motion still could be seen to be producing an overall conceptual 'object', but to reach that point, the viewer needed to follow a sequence, which by so doing s/he would be made conscious of the process of building the whole from its elements. My ideal was that all this should happen simultaneously, and that consequently the viewer would take away these two co-existent models in his/her mind. I think here I was trying to make my work operate simultaneously as sculpture, and as film or music. The viewer "takes his body with him" as I had learned from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but as with other time-based media such as cinema or music in which the perceiver is active only mentally and/or emotionally, a memory of 'shape' is also important.

#### New Horizons

Here I must jump fast because I'm running out of time. I've made a number of significant installations since Perpetual Motion, a number of which are important to the position I locate myself in now. A number of these installations have been site-specific, and one has a web-based link. They all make use of digital processes, and those processes are important to the function and meaning imbedded in the works.

The key aspect of work I'm currently engaged with is tied into notions of projection and the relationships between illusory space and virtual space. In Mind's Eye (1997) I worked with images of my brain functions produced using the fMRI process. In essence I projected a large animated representation of the human brain in synch with the visual stimulus presented during the original scan session. As with earlier work, I wanted to draw the viewer into a conscious awareness of the simultaneous parallel perceptual processes operating in the gallery. I wanted to make a work in which all those co-existent "spaces", the physical, the representational, the virtual and the mental were made apparent. It didn't work, but I like to think it was a gallant failure.....

Mothlight (1998) and Mothlight 2 (2001) use solar energy as a metaphor for transformation and involve the endlessly repeating flight of a computer generated moth making reference to the computer term "a bug in the system".

Most recently I have been working with digital projections onto glass or paper which play on notions of location and time- Fenetre Digitale, in which a digitally manipulated time/space fragment of my studio is re-presented life-size in another time/space. A Photographic Truth, (2001), in which a particular

geographical location is linked through space and time via an art historical connection.

In a newly commissioned work to be exhibited next year- For Henry Fox-Talbot, solar energy will be harnessed to provide a life sized real-time digital projection in the Victoria & Albert Museum of the famous latticed window at Lacock Abbey.

My concerns with this new work centre on the cultural relationships and resonances between old and new media and the significance of location, place and history that new technology can reveal, and over the last 25 years I have evolved a practice which endeavors to explore the relationships between imaging technology and the culture we engage with.

As the American writer and critic Gene Youngblood has pointed out, there is a crucial relationship between the development of new technological systems and the language inherent in them:

"Our task is to discover it, identify it, draw it out and name it".

Preston, 2001.

This talk was delivered at Unencoded: Folly Gallery, Lancaster, 7/12/02.