

FILMWAVES

Chris Meigh-Andrews, Video Tapes, Installations & Projections; 1978-2001

Video is a fluid medium, it needs to get out of the studio. I soon lost interest in the broadcast television connotations of my early TV studio work at the London College of Printing and I began to recognise the potential for video as a medium for abstract, musical and multi-sited sculptural possibilities.

This was the late 1970s and the predominant form of British video art centered around the work of David Hall and the group of artists he championed or had taught, including Steve Partridge, Tamara Krikorian, Stuart Marshall, Mick Hartney and David Critchley. These artists all worked in a way that I perceived as firmly rooted in a political and conceptual formalism much more narrowly and rigidly prescribed than the English experimental film-makers working in the same period.

I was particularly impressed by the work of Chris Welsby and Malcom Le Grice, film-makers who combined a lyricism and poetry with a rigorous formal structure. I was also strongly influenced the Canadian film-maker Micheal Snow, particularly by two key films *Wavelength* (1967) and *La Region Centrale* (1971)

David Hall was an early influence as was Peter Donebauer who worked intuitively with footage of live performances mastered using the Videokalos Image Processor, a video synthesiser he designed and built himself. My own practice drew from both these approaches, but it was soon developing a distinctive character of its own.

Working with the Videokalos to process video material shot on location, I produced a series of 4 landscape tapes in 1978, including *Horizontal & Vertical*, a 12 minute tape built from a slowly drifting pan across an East Anglian rural landscape. I composed the image to present the sky and land in equal proportions, using the horizon line to bisect the TV screen. A series of horizontal and vertical 'wipes' presented electronic parallels to the natural symmetry of the subject matter.

But the use of duration and the manipulation of basic video elements also made reference to a mediated experience of landscape and to the subjectivity of the individual viewer. I was very conscious of the electronic nature of the video medium and wanted to establish connections between the 'natural world' and the technology I was using. I was particularly interested in the fact that certain technical manipulations were specific to the medium. It was possible to produce an enhanced perception of the video raster and scan lines through 'rescanning', re-shooting the image off the screen. It was also possible to directly control image colour, contrast and brightness, and create electronic picture transitions such as 'wipes' and 'fades'. These could have an aesthetic as well as a semiotic significance.

I wanted my video tapes to refer very directly to their medium of transmission, as I was seeking to develop a language particular to video with reference to the subject matter - in this case landscape. I also wanted to make something, which whilst entirely and obviously video, bore no relation to broadcast television, either in terms of content or form. I wanted to make works that were emphatically 'video' but just as clearly not TV.

These aesthetic and philosophical concerns were, of necessity, combined with an involvement in the context of dissemination - the distribution of my work.

In 1979, I became a member of the steering committee at London Video Arts, the only artist-run distribution centre in London. I involved myself with the selection of video tapes for screenings at the Acme and Air Galleries, but I quickly saw that artists needed regular and direct access to basic video production technology. At this time, LVA was solely a distribution organisation; there was no video equivalent of the London Film-makers Co-op, with its provision of accessible workshop resources. Art schools provided some access and the only subsidised video post-production facility was Fantasy Factory, run by John 'Hoppy' Hopkins and Sue Hall. Although used by a number of video artists, Fantasy Factory had a distinctly community video bias. I decided to establish my own studio.

Learning of the availability of a second-hand U-matic edit suite, I formed a partnership with Pete Livingston and Alex Meigh, two other LVA members, and bought the equipment. In September 1980, we created Three-Quarter Inch Video and set up in two vacant rooms adjacent to LVA in Wardor St. Our plan was to hire the equipment to artists to cover our maintenance and operational costs, and, importantly, to use the facilities for the production of our own work. This facility became my studio and when I registered for an MA at Goldsmith's (1981-83) my tutorials took place in the video edit suite.

Although the partnership was dissolved in 1982, the enterprise continued. After moving premises a number of times, the equipment was finally installed at my home in Brixton, where it formed the core of my own studio for the next six years. Throughout this period I worked predominantly on single and double screen 'durational' video tapes.

Many of these video tapes had strong subjective and autobiographical themes. The Room With a View (1982) was composed entirely of personal family photographs, beginning with the earliest existing image of myself and progressively moving forward in time, ending with the image of an event I could personally recall. Influenced by the photographic work of Jo Spence and Cindy Sherman, I wanted to make a work about the relationship between memory and photography.

My video work in this period also contained elements related to notions of 'flow', both in terms of the flow of information and with regard to the inherent properties of the video medium, including how the picture signal is

produced, recorded and displayed.

For example, in *Time Travelling/A True Story*, video and film sequences were multiplied to produce infinite regression using video feedback, and the repeated images were keyed into electronically produced texts. Repeated sequences were also recontextualised, set against a voice over which redefined the image context.

In later works I became interested in broader philosophical issues about the nature of matter itself. Notions of 'flow' were now tied into an inquiry into the nature of thought processes and consciousness especially in relation to the substances and materials that comprise the video image and the physical world it is part of.

In *An Imaginary Landscape* (1986), thought processes find an analogy in two identically processed and edited single-screen video tapes presented side-by-side, running in opposite directions - one forward and one reversed. One image-sequence begins as a representation of the domestic living space it was recorded in, and the other begins as a digital 'abstraction' - a pixelated electronic deconstruction. As the sequences unfold, they gradually and systematically reverse positions to end in opposite positions within the screen. In fact, there is no 'real' forward or reverse in the piece and it also implies that there is no 'end' either; it is simply a set of cycling relationships, a sort of 'mobius strip' of fluid images.

This approach to linear presentation later led 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 relationship between the two-dimensional image on the screens and the screens in the space became the principle arena of meaning.

In her essay "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between", Margaret Morse asks whether, in any given work, the spectator is expected to engage in two and three dimensional spatial worlds, or remain in 'real' space:

"All installation is ultimately 'interactive' - the viewer is presented with a kind of variable narrative of spatial and representational possibilities which s/he must negotiate".¹

In my own installation work, I anticipate that the viewer will experience both conditions, often simultaneously. The installations I have exhibited in the 1990s often required the spectator to move between the illusionism of the two dimensional image, the sculptural "support structures" and the gallery space in which the work was sited.

Eau d'Artifice, (1990) was commissioned by the Harris Museum in Preston and later installed at The Royal Festival Hall, on the South Bank in London (1993).

The installation, which is effectively an electronic 'fountain', was comprised of 35 video monitors stacked in concentric rings to form a circular pyramid. Images of water cascade down from a single 'spout' at the top, to a 'pool' of images at the bottom. Thus the viewer perceives the entire construction as a single image- the representation of a fountain, whilst being simultaneously conscious of it as built of individual (and separate) repeated images.

Frederic Jameson characterises an installation as a "material occasion for the viewing process." The mind as a processing mechanism is implicated in the apprehension of a work of art.

"Conceptual art may be described as a Kantian procedure whereby, on the occasion of what first seems to be an encounter with a work of art of some kind, the categories of the mind itself - normally not conscious, and inaccessible to any direct representation or to any thematizable self-conscious or reflexivity - are flexed, their structuring presence now felt laterally by the viewer like musculature or nerves of which we normally remain insensible." 2

My most recent installations seek to trigger the viewer's perceptual musculature, and create an awareness of his or her own process of decoding during an encounter with the work. The five screen installation *Mind's Eye* (1996-97) displays fMRI brain scan images of my own visual cortex in synchronisation with the visual stimuli which triggered the original response.

Viewers entering the darkened exhibition space from the daylight encountered the large projected image of the brain scans first, and as their eyes became accustomed to the space, gradually perceived the other components of the work, including video monitors presenting the original visual stimuli used to measure my brain's perceptual response for colour, motion and brightness. It was intended that viewers recognise that the central image might mirror their own visual response patterns at the moment of perception.

Most recently I have been working more directly with digital video projection, producing works that maintain a 'sculptural' use of repeating image loop patterns.

For example in *Mothlight 2* (2001) a large-scale 'mobile', composed of solar panels, halogen lamps and LCD projectors, is suspended via steel tubing from the ceiling at two central points. Projected images of a computer-generated moth endlessly circling in the light are "caught" in suspended glass panels. This work is intended to function as sculpture, encouraging a physical and active participation, but it is also playful, presenting a series of questions about the relationship of its constituent elements- the artificial light, the electrical energy, the video signal, and the computer-generated moths.

In *Fenetre Digitale* (2000) the first of my video projections to use glass screens, there is an element of performance. The artist, naked in his studio, attempts to smash the transparent window which separates him from his audience. Projected in full size to reproduce the scale of the original performance, the work is simultaneously about the surface of the image and

the illusory space behind it. A fragment of the artist's studio space is presented digitally.

Cuurrently I am exhibiting a specially commissioned work in the Canon Photography gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A Photographic Truth, (2001) plays with time and location, referencing the photographic work of victorian photographer Benjamin Breknell Turner. Projected onto translucent paper, a digital image-sequence recorded from the exact position of a calotype made by Turner in 1852 re-presents the location as it is today, presnting within a single image frame a multiplicity of times, light conditions and compositional elements.

Since 1978 my work has been about light, time and the relationship between perception and representation in the electronic image. Over the past decade it has become increasingly possible to control the video image "within the frame", to manipulate the components of the picture line by line, pixel by pixel. In future work I will seek to further develop ways in which to manipulate and orchestrate what Gene Youngblood refers to as the "temporal perspective" of the digital video image.

Chris Meigh-Andrews, July 2001

references:

1. Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between", *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, Aperture, 1990, p. 154.
2. Frederic Jameson, *Post-Modernism & Utopia-Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture*. MIT Press, 1988, Boston and London, p. 15.