

# Review

## Video Not Sculpture

Video Positive 1991, Liverpool, May 1991.

The second *Video Positive* staged by Merseyside Moviola at the Bluecoat Gallery and the Tate in Liverpool in April, was a much more assured show than the first in 1989. A dozen installations by artists from Britain, Europe, North America and Australia gave an engaging insight into many of the genres and concerns being developed by artists in this area at the start of the nineties. It was not a thematic show, the selection being largely pragmatic rather than proscriptive.

The technical problems involved in staging so many installations were all but invisible, for which credit should be given to the organisers and technical crew, especially when so many galleries make an issue of this, and consistently get it wrong. The split site nature of the show, between the two main venues, while posing no real problem in distance, did however, leave many visitors to the city (especially from overseas) wondering why there was no centre to the festival side of the show. A gathering place for chatting and meeting fellow visitors was sorely missed. This is only a minor criticism, as most visitors during the month long show were probably Liverpool residents, but on the special weekends when screenings were staged in the evenings, there was nowhere one could rendezvous easily. I can't think of a similar European event that doesn't get this right.

The contrast between these two venues was also fascinating: the cool gloss and formality of the museum, and the cosy familiarity of a city arts centre. The Tate did at least acknowledge the presence of the show this time around, although its Director thought, once again, that this was a good time for his annual leave. For me the problem of video as sculpture reared its head again with some artists

succumbing to the temptation of stepping over the boundary of necessary construction in order to stage the work and contextualise it, to mainly third rate sculpture. With the exception of one work, no one went too far in this respect, but it was a close run thing.

Starting with the works at **The Tate**, I was impressed by the amount of thought that had been given to the layout of the works in the two large galleries set aside for the six installations. Although sound did spill over from one piece to another, it was minimal and not disruptive or confusing.

The German artist, **Maria Vedder** produced one of the highlights of the show. *Sparkle and Fire* was a five channel installation displayed on five floor level monitors forming an arc, projecting outwards to the viewer, in a large corner of the space. Behind the monitors, slide projectors described planes and lines with light slicing through the dimness. On the screens a continuous movement was created from right to left by the incredibly precise choreography undertaken during the shooting of the work. Every frame was always slowly becoming something else as its contents moved across the screen. A collage of feathers and smoke drifted, as the camera tracked, and became a jet of dust moving sideways across first one monitor and then its neighbour and then its neighbour and so-on. When you looked back to the first monitors the process was repeated with another collection of objects or shimmering presences. Truly stunning and apparently seamless, the work was hypnotic, a real tour de force by one of Europe's premier video artists. The ambient soundtrack, by **Brian Eno** echoed the visual properties of the work, but was a little safe and unchallenging.

This was just the opposite with **Lei Cox's** *Magnification Maximus*. The quadrophonic sound track was as challenging as you can get, and was probably one of the pieces that did suffer a little from its location in the Tate as the volume level was too low. A kaleidoscope of images of animals combined with a cacophony of sound to produce his most complex work so far. Although the mania evident in the piece was intentional, it suffered from being too busy at times: a metaphorical database, spewing forth information, images and sounds, its effect was urgent and overwhelming. Lei Cox confirms his position as one of the few artists in Britain prepared to take on new digital media wholeheartedly with a vigour and freshness that is used to re-examine the human condition.

Another artist not afraid of using technologies is **Simon Biggs**. *Alchemy* is his most accomplished piece so far, a digitally illuminated 'book of hours' produced on and controlled interactively by a computer. It was displayed on two large video monitors turned on their sides and arranged like an open book, each screen becoming a page. The playback system was laser disc with interactive

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software, allowing the 'reader' to turn the pages back and forth with a wave of the hand over a photo electric switch placed in front of the display. Above the display, and forming a corridor in space was a row of dim incandescent bulbs. The raised wooden floor was rigged to amplify ones footsteps on approaching the dias producing an ethereal church like quality which enhanced and focussed the reading of the work. The pages themselves were bewitching and intricate illuminations, the creatures and figures would sometimes move across the page, unlike any real book, and the whole piece was an absorbing electronic delight. This is a work which I would like to see installed in a more imaginative setting (other than the neutral museum space) to really bring out its qualities. The work is no end-of-the-pier sideshow: it is a demanding and innovative piece using new technology, not for its own sake, but because its maker has something to say, and this is the best way to say it.

**Breda Behan** and **Hvorje Horvatic's** *Geography* was another visually stunning work. Large screen back projection monitors were revealed through ragged holes cut into three vertical banners hanging from ceiling to floor. In front on the floor, a large earthwork had been constructed which was not altogether necessary, the resonances of this work were spellbinding as it flowed from one image to another creating relationships without narrative base or causality, but upon the insight and feel of the artists moving from earth to water, fire and air.

The other works at the Tate: **Daniel Dion's** *Anicca* and **Madelon Hooykaas** and **Elsa Stansfield's** *Intermittant Signals* were less impressive. The former work was confused and ambiguous with a 'tacked on' interactive element which was meaningless. Most people watched the time lapsed clouds on one screen, which were at least pretty. *Intermittant Signals* didn't seem to know whether it should be a video installation at all, preferring to dabble in the European groove of 'if we pretend it is sculpture, maybe someone will think it is acceptable as art'.

In this case it tried to be photography as well, with flat screen LCD displays embedded in photographic frames.

Moving to the **Bluecote**, **Judith Goddard's** *Garden of Earthly Delights* stole most people's attention. A three monitor piece which is a development from her previous *Luminous Portrait* made for the Late Show last year. The work explored a super real electronic world of earthly delights in which all the techniques of electronic matting and animation, that Quantel's Harry machine is superlative at producing, were controlled with consummate and unfolding skill by Goddard's unnerving direction and artistry. A young woman is continually transformed into the bride's uniform and then the cycle reverses back again. Meanwhile, in the garden around her, and in the distance, landscape is disforming into ruin. An energetic piece of animation which I would like to see as a single channel work, I'm not sure it was an installation, more a three channel work or triptych.

**Catherine Elwes' Wishing Well** was a piece of pure whimsy and some controversy. As one needed to be five feet tall to look into the 'well', it excluded some of its obvious visitors: children. This didn't seem to stop the more resourceful, however. The 'reflection' which was the TV screen at the bottom of a constructed well was a child's face, and for me it was child as self rather than other. The piece stayed the right side of the video/sculpture debate as the construction was a necessary part of the illusion rather than for its own sake.

*The Fujiyama Pyramid Project* by **Peter Callas** was an ambitious development of the same artist's now famous *Neo Geo*. As such it lacked the simplicity and purity of the original tape, and for me fell foul of the video/sculpture principle. Elaborate structures of a pyramid and Mount Fuji relating to the graphics on the currencies of the USA and Japan were proper developments of a theme, but not necessarily as constructions or pieces of sculpture.

Steve Partridge

