Video Art

Jan Debbaut
Belgian Video Art

Peggy Gale
Video Art in Canada

Roselee Goldberg
NY Video Art and Cable TV

David Hall
British Video Art

Sue Hall and John Hopkins
The Metasoftware of Video

Wulf Herzogenrath
Video Art in West Germany

Mark Kidel
British TV and Video Art

Richard Kriesche
The State of Austrian Video

Stuart Marshall
Video Art, The Imaginary and the Parole Vide

Hein Reedijk
Video in the Netherlands

David Ross
Artist's Television in the US

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VIDEO ART AND
BRITISH TV

Mark Kidel

When ‘Arena: Art and Design’, BBC-2’s visual arts
programme, recently transmitted a selection of work
by British and American video artists, a special
directive had to be sent to every single transmitter in
the country, preparing them for the ‘irregularities’ in
the material. Without this warning, transmission would
have been interrupted, as the machinery
was programmed to reject anything ‘sub-standard’. A case
of censorship, or just a case of technological
indigestion? The incident is symptomatic of a situation
where, although the content and style of video art are
intimately related to the substance of broadcast TV, the
two are split by an almost unbridgeable
estrangement.

The new art may have been born out of television
— which had provided a new technology and a culture
for artists to examine, demystify and undermine — but
only an infinitesimal amount of actual air time has
ever been given to video work. This has been most
simply explained by the ‘guerrilla-TV’ theory, based on
Nam June Paik’s famous dictum about the
fundamental enmity between artists and broadcasters,
and the need to stage an ‘attack’ against the mammoth
forces of established TV. Accurate as this explanation
may have been in spirit, however, it does not reveal
the depth and complexity of the relationship, and fails
to describe the fundamentally different worlds within
which ‘artists’ and ‘broadcasters’ operate.

Broadcast television as we know it (the TV we have
chosen and therefore deserve) consists mainly of
illustrated journalism, performance of one kind or
another and stories. Each genre is presented for the
most part in a language which obeys generally
accepted rules of mass communication grammar: it is
a verbal/linear/rational as opposed to a
visual/lateral/expressionist language. The qualities
that are recognised as accessibility, clarity, immediate
involvement and excitement, and as with popular
journalism, ultimate success is judged in terms of
viewing figures rather than any intrinsic originality or
interest. As long as public service is defined as
providing programmes which a mass audience will
watch, it is easy to see why art, with its rich mystery
and complex ambiguities, cannot be accommodated
within broadcast TV. And on the rare occasions when
art is included, it is always in a watered-down form,
filtered through verbal explanations, rationalizations
that so often define the power of the original work:
reduced to the accepted format of mass
communication.

Video art has flourished in direct proportion to ease
of access to equipment. The American pre-eminence
in the field stems from the comparatively low cost of
portable equipment in the US, as well as the existence
of the public TV network, which has regularly opened
its doors to artists. ‘Public’ television in the US sees
its role as primarily educational, and as an antidote to
the excesses of the commercial networks. The
differences between public and private are therefore
much more pronounced. In Britain, in a characteristic
way, things are more blurred. The BBC combines its
educational function with entertainment, and even on
the ‘minority’ channel, audience figures are of
paramount importance. British TV occupies a middle
ground which avoids some of the excesses of American
TV but tends to shy away from what is regarded as
‘experimental’, material considered unpalatable for a
mass audience.

It is for this reason that Britain has not witnessed
anything like the exciting experiments promoted by
stations like WGBH (Boston), WNET (New York)
and KQED (San Francisco). These have included
*KQED’s experimental workshop, which later developed
into the National Centre for Experiments in Television,
a scheme for commissioning work from artists (eg
Terry Riley’s excellent Music with Balls), and a
programme of video pieces by six artists including
Nam June Paik, Otto Piene and Allan Kaprow
produced at WGBH with funds from the Public
Broadcasting Laboratory. Stan VanderBeek and Paik
also spent three years each as artists-in-residence
with WGBH.

The limited exposure of video art on British TV also
reflects a generally sceptical attitude towards
contemporary artistic activities. Avant-garde ‘culture’
does not have the exalted status recognised in most
continental countries. Not surprisingly, video artists
have fared much better in Germany, Sweden and
Holland. They have been welcomed there as if they
had a right of access to the most important
communication medium of the day. Here, on the other
hand, access to TV has been monopolistically guarded
by the professionals, the academicians or
grammarians of mass communication, who see their
role as one of protecting the language they have
created as the currency of the world’s ‘least worst
television’.

It is not just the language which has been seen to be
needing protection against the non-linear/real time
excursions of video art, but also the unvarnished picture
quality produced by British engineering – an obsession
in some ways, but a negative virtue only in so far as
it has produced inflexibility. For control over a given
technology is not to be sneered at; it is crucial, and
if this writer’s experience is anything to go by, the
BBC’s engineers remain the best in their field. Video
art often exploits technical errors in order to undermine
what artists see as the blandness and predictability of
broadcast TV. However valid this may be, there is
always a danger in using it as rationalization for faulty
machinery or inexperience, and there is no doubt that
2½, 3½ and 1½ equipment, the major tool of video art,
is still not perfect.

The question of quality is central to the debate that
has surrounded the use of helical scan (anything but
the usually broadcast 2") material. There is at present
a union ban against it in Britain, although it can be
successfully transferred to 2". There is only a minimal
loss of quality, and one which would worry engineers
alone. The access programme ‘Open Door’ has
transmitted 2½ black-and-white material and in the
US whole programmes originating on ½" have been
broadcast (eg Top Value TV’s ‘Lord of the Universe’).
So what is making the unions so stubborn? Partly the
concern about quality, which itself originates from the
institutions having deprived technicians of a
genuinely creative contribution, leaving them with
nothing but quality as a standard of excellence. But
there is also the union’s distrust of change, particularly
change which might lead to the deprofessionalization
of programme-making: the postpack is so cheap that
it cannot be controlled, and union men are worried
about the TV companies buying whole programmes
made by ‘amateurs’. The use of helical scan material
is now the subject of national negotiations, but if this
barrier is overcome, will British artists find it any easier
to see their work broadcast or to gain access to the
unique equipment? There are still sizeable obstacles,
if the experience of artists in the last ten years is
anything to go by.

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British television has not entirely ignored video art, but it has not exactly encouraged it either. It was no surprise that, when the Arts Council organised a major video show at the Serpentine Gallery last spring, it was totally ignored by British TV, though ironically reported by WNET of New York and Swedish television. The limited direct access which artists have had to television studio equipment throws some light on several of the problems beyond those normally experienced by artists who consent to their work being 'interpreted' on television.

One of the earliest instances involved Hornsey's Sound and Light Workshop with the programme 'Release' on BBC-2: their 50 minutes of highly unconventional work were judged unworthy of transmission. Outsiders were not involved again until 1974, when 'Second House' commissioned an eight-minute tape from the 'electronic painter' Peter Donebauer. Unfortunately, he could not use BBC equipment, because he bends the tools of the trade, extends their possibilities beyond the intentions inherent in their design. Whereas he had encountered few difficulties at his usual work-place, the Royal College of Art's TV studio, a BBC studio was too inflexible, with its specialist design and a layout ideal for the needs of conventional broadcasting. With the time available it was impossible to upset all the fine adjustments on the cameras and mixing desks. A television studio is built to accommodate a narrow degree of specialization reflected in physically separate lighting, sound and main control rooms — not the intimate situation Donebauer was used to.

Time, and its correlate money, are the other major limiting factors in the production of video art in a 2" broadcast setting. The technology works best with a tight and simple script, and is not suited to improvisation and experiment. More adventurous 'professionals' find this a constraint too, and it has severely limited the visual expansion of the broadcast medium. Bill Fitzwater's Relay with American choreographer Alwin Nikolais was hailed by both artists and broadcasters as a brilliant departure from standard TV techniques, but it cost far too much, and the experiment has never been repeated on such a large scale. 'Directors' like Fitzwater have found it difficult to experiment because so little time can be allocated to rehearsals on any given production. The same difficulty arises when bringing an artist into a broadcast TV set-up, as we discovered on BBC-2's 'Arena' in March, when we had to abandon two commissioned pieces by Clive Richardson because of limited rehearsal time. Apart from establishing an important set of precedents, the exercise did indicate how easy it was to win the sympathy of initially deeply suspicious engineers and technicians in the studio.

Their conception of appropriateness was fast unfrozen, and they were soon participating enthusiastically and creatively in the work. There was, however, little comprehension of the artistic possibilities of video: to them, video is all about 'effects' — uses of the technology that can be adapted for specific programme purposes. This blinkered attitude is not limited to the technicians, but is shared by most broadcasters, who cannot, because of their training and the perception they have of their own role, see beyond the conventional uses of the medium. When an experimental TV workshop was suggested to the BBC six years ago, it was argued that the BBC could not back 'experiments' for their own sake, but only within the context of given programmes. The idea that today's most powerful medium of communication might be accessible to artists did not come into it.

And yet a strong case could be made for the creation of such a workshop as part of a public service, possibly with some financial assistance from the Arts Council — a facility for access to sophisticated 2" equipment, sympathetic engineers and technicians, outside the mainstream of broadcasting operations and costing. The group's output would be intended for eventual transmission, but would not be subject to the normal criteria used to judge broadcast TV: the success of a given project would not depend on the approval of a television executive, but on someone with a definite commitment to arts access. If the projected fourth channel lives up to some of the access lobby's hopes, there is always the possibility that an experimental workshop might operate within the much looser institutional framework and radically different broadcasting philosophy that would emerge in the context of educational and independently produced programmes. If such a facility existed, there is no doubt that British video art would take a giant leap forward, with a wider participation by artists who have so far been cut off by the financial and technical limits of the medium. It is also arguable that television output as a whole would be enriched by the transmission of such material.

Before anything else, the powers that control broadcast TV will have to change their definition of the content and style of programmes. What is possible in terms of a televizual language must be broadened to encompass the truly visual. It is sometimes argued that the best drama and documentary on TV is the art of our time, and there is undoubtedly artistic work on TV. But it rarely transcends the limits of the medium or takes the viewer out of the accepted context of broadcasting. Only a redefinition of the medium will change its message. Real access to artists — those who attempt to avoid any sort of compromise — would mean a radical change, and hopefully the beginnings of such a redefinition.