

EMILE SHEMILT

ARCHIVES AND MEMORY: Reflections on the REWIND Archive  
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One of the more unique elements of the REWIND research project is that it moulds the basis of a social history. Through the gathering and archive of interviews, REWIND plays two games by clearly defining the works as an important era in the history of art in Britain, yet simultaneously highlighting a certain sense of individual debate amongst some of its artists.

Although these British Artists were physically clustered together by institutions like London Video Arts and by exhibitions like the Serpentine Video Shows, the personal reflections of those involved, provides one with a sense of these artists, as individuals, separate from their defining bracket as video artists of the 70s and 80s. The interviews allow for differing reasons for engaging with video, for mixed reflections on video's status as an art form and provocatively, what counted as "Video Art".

It is interesting because in today's terminology, Video Art is indistinct. With the emergence of digital, there is a debated convergence of technologies. Some would argue that digital media possess the ability to easily replicate the imagistic qualities of film and of video. Also, groups of artists are much less clearly defined now, often referred to through social circumstances, rather than by their media. Mainly because trends are such that artists feel less and less tied to one medium. With its increasing popularity, and easy accessibility, moving image is no longer an isolated practice. Somehow the status has been lost. The emergence of digital has not only had a progressive effect on technology, it has also had a profound social effect. Strangely, and perhaps ironically though, the term Video Art, has stuck in a way that more unifying terms such as Moving Image or The Cinematic have yet to. For one of the artists, David Hall:

*It is too readily still used as a convenient term now. In terms of the gallery world, that is the commercial museum, gallery world, you rarely hear the term film art used of all this moving image work. It's usually called video art and it's a much more latter day term than film. It wasn't called film art. It was called artist film or experimental film in the old days. It only became known as film art when video art as a term took off to distinguish them. But "film art" is not used very much now. Somehow, Video Art sounds more catching?*

Maybe Video Art is a term that should be relegated to the past. Labelled and shelved in a museum. But if it were to be confined to history, what would the

distinctions be that define it? REWIND is particularly interesting as an archive that embraces these debates and also raises questions as to why these distinctions exist. Retrospectively asking whose art was then, and is now, exemplar and why? Is it confined to the 60s, 70s and 80s? Is it defined by technology? And what did everybody think at the time?

It may be the case that more vocal practitioners unintentionally provoked definitions of what counted as "Video Art". It could also be because of a lack of a clear market place, and the issue of funding becoming integral to people's ability to practice. It is probable that funding held many keys to the reasons why distinctions were made between video and film. In their battles for both autonomy and status, Collectives were formed. Experimental and Avant-garde filmmakers founded the Filmmakers Co-op, while video artists formed London Video Arts. In the same way that Video Artists were desperate to establish video's own autonomy from film, the filmmakers were shouting, "We are film, we are not cinema". (*Le Grice*)<sup>ii</sup>

At the time of London Video Arts' birth, the Filmmakers' Co-op was struggling to get its funding, and according to David Curtis, who was Senior Film and Video Officer at the Arts Council of England at the time:

*The Co-op was very much making its argument for funding from the BFI at the same time that LVA was making its arguments with the Arts Council. It was interesting. The video artists actually used the word "artist" very clearly and in a sense were making their address to the Arts Council and so it was art. The Co-op was much less clear about what it was. They were basically filmmakers. I would have classified them all probably as artists at that time, and certainly have done more recently, but it wasn't a term that they wanted to use.*<sup>iii</sup>

By arguing for autonomy and separate funding schemes, could this have had a knock-on affect on some work being very video specific in its subject matter? In fact, from the beginning video was a very dense amalgamation. It had a number of different aspects to it, from its instant feedback to its sculptural uses via the monitor, and from its relationship with television to the community video. No sooner that its inauguration, video demanded its own aesthetic and cultural sovereignty. To quote David Hall:

*There was medium specific work, quite clearly stuff that was actually concerned, I would always argue not just technologically specific, but also culturally. That is work that reflected the culture of moving image, and video moving image, which was primarily television and the whole culture surrounding that. The culture of the medium and the technology of the medium were integral considerations, or apparently so, in the work; right through to work*

*that was like performance work, which was really just using it as an artist's video. It wasn't video art.*<sup>iv</sup>

Even as video technology was emerging, already visions were frequently debated as to the validity and the lesser validity of what constituted video artwork. While one hand was happily bouncing a number of artists, thrilled with the potential of a new medium and all the new types imagery to be made with it, the other hand was strictly saluting to designations leaning towards the didactic.

One such form that didn't seem to make the cut was what was deemed as documenting a performance on tape, provoking cynicisms of: "Because they put it on tape, they think it's special". Video artists argued that these videos were facsimiles of a performance rather than being a pure artwork in itself. Ironic considering performances to camera like Gilbert and George's *Gordon's Makes Us Drunk* was amongst the few video works to actually make an impression on collectors and dealers at the time. Still, somehow historically, certain works have been fore-grounded against others, and it's possible that this happened through artist-curated exhibitions. Who better to expose the work than the artists themselves? One artist who on the whole seemed to be ignored was Peter Donebauer:

Donebauer used video as a more graphic medium creating images that could only be created electronically. Unfortunately it was apparently all too often dismissed as special effects or moving wallpaper. It was even trivialised as just playing around with equipment. In his own words:

*I've had very little response from external viewers or writers, partly because I've not been in the mainstream of art practice in terms of my aesthetic concerns. Their heads were in a completely different space. They were fairly conceptually structuralist. At least they were in some kind of art domain, but not in the kind of free expressive experimental area that I was interested in. Even painters struggled with my work because they produce very static images, so this explosive moving colour in time makes them giddy on the whole. They're just looking at one image for weeks on end. So this, twenty four frames a second, most of which are changing over several minutes, was very uncomfortable for them.*<sup>v</sup>

The dismissal of Donebauer's work is very interesting when one compares it to the work of Czech artists Woody and Steina Vasulka. The Vasulkas are now firmly established as video pioneers, and at the time successfully received numerous funds to make their work. And although they were predominantly New York based, it is interesting how similar their ideas were to Donebauer's. So one might rightly ask as to what such comparisons might unearth, and do they typify the climate of the UK art world?

Obviously, with an archive of works, one has the opportunity to view works in their full length as apposed to edited clips or as stills in books. But, the REWIND project adheres to a subtle line of Preservation not Restoration. When digitising artists work, the deterioration of the image, faded colour or sound is seen as part and parcel of the medium itself. Gradually, as digital begins to become omnipresent and analogue all but disappears it is these subtle deteriorations of the image that become the defining individual stamps of the medium. Just as digital artefacts become the new speckles of spilt light or dirt marks on film. So with preservation, REWIND intends to future proof the work by digitising it. Transforming its actual state to code and preventing its viewing from the confines of the nearly obsolete technology of a VHS machine. Even today, VCRs are harder to get hold of, and even if one does get one, there is always the nostalgic, yet highly frustrating, issue of the incomprehensible manuals.

So there you are watching a video on a DVD player or from a computer hard-drive, and fuzzy lines appear at the top and bottom of the image, one should remember, that whatever the debate is, we may be watching Video Art, but we're not watching Video.

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<sup>i</sup> *Quote taken from REWIND interview with David Hall*

<sup>ii</sup> *Reference taken from REWIND interview with Malcolm Le Grice*

<sup>iii</sup> *Quote taken from REWIND interview with David Curtis*

<sup>iv</sup> *Quote taken from REWIND interview with David Hall*

<sup>v</sup> *Quote taken from REWIND interview with Peter Donebauer*