

## **'The Trouble with Video Art'**

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With one or two notable exceptions, early video artists were keen to establish the difference between video art and television and went out of their way to avoid any comparison between the two. They did this by emphasizing the sculptural aspect of video, stressing the nature of the video monitor as a three-dimensional 'box' or by making multiple monitor installations that placed the emphasis of the work on the space of the gallery. This way the work, although radical in its choice of media, did little to challenge the canon of modernism, an arrangement of twenty identical video monitors being aesthetically satisfying in a way very similar to a line up of twenty identical stainless steel cubes by Donald Judd. This aesthetic purity could only be achieved by 'holding the line' between this thing called video art and television, two separate things that never the less came out of a virtually identical frame.

The generation who can remember the coming of video art can also remember their childhoods being transformed through the advent know as 'the coming of the T.V set'. Ours came sometime in the nineteen fifties. Although not the first in the street to have a 'telly', once we did get one we were amongst the first to receive ITV and consequently 'The Cisco Kid', the reason that after school so many friends were keen to come back to our house in order to watch him, and his side-kick Pancho, in action.

In thinking about the bad press that video art undoubtedly received in the nineteen seventies, television, and how it had expanded the cultural horizons of the home and 'upped – the - anti' in entertainment, was in my view the single most significant factor responsible for the tough reception that video art initially received. Within the ever increasing body of research literature written about early video art, the Cisco Kid is not cited too often, but just as it's true that he was

'quick on the draw', its also true that he helped in the ambushing of video art by art critics and public alike.

The trouble with video art was, that compared to television, it took such a long time to look at, or at least it seemed it. In art schools for example assessments now took forever, and that was even after you had got the tape correctly wound on to the reel-to-reel machine. All of this effort was in order to look at a low-grade black and white image which today wouldn't be acceptable, not even as interference. No wonder people grew impatient if the comparison they were making was to television. The content of video art didn't help either as it inevitably went the full gamut from A to B and back again. In video art's case, in its attempt to define the parameters of video as a new art form, this meant one of two things: either 'monitors within monitors', or: 'monitors within monitors within monitors'. Another thing that was guaranteed to be the same was that the work was always half an hour long, the length of a reel-to-reel tape. This was because you couldn't edit video.

Editing was also a problem for broadcasters who were forced to broadcast programmes live. In the sixties at around about the same time that Nam Juan Paik was picking up the first video portaback and consequently inventing video art, Danny Blancheflower, captain of Spurs (the league and cup double winning team) and also captain of Northern Ireland, was about to make history in another way, by picking up his 'This is Your Life' award. Eamonn Andrews and the BBC crew must have colluded with Danny's wife in order to get him to his local cinema in readiness to be whisked off to 'our Shepherds Bush studio'. Clutching the 'big red book' under his arm, Eamonn Andrews launched himself at Danny Blancheflower just as he was about to enter the cinema. At the moment of pronouncing his famous line - 'Danny Blancheflower this is your life', Eamonn must have had no idea of what was to come. 'Oh no it fucking isn't!' was the reply. Spoken in the harshest of harsh Belfast accents, these five short words radically altered my understanding of television. I couldn't believe it, not only had my footballing hero said fuck in our living room, he had at a stroke, precipitated

half an hour of Polish animations. My view of the stable reality of television as a window on the world was changed forever. In this one glorious deconstructive moment Blancheflower had thrown the B.B.C into a complete spin, which for those of us old enough to remember it, makes any subsequent 'Artists Intervention' on T.V seem tame by comparison.

Why if it was self-evident that video as a media was hard to love, did artists get so excited by it - you couldn't edit it, you couldn't get the image quality of film, you couldn't get colour. The late Noel Sheridan once used the phrase '*slow video - fast painting*'. Noel said this in relation to Bill Viola's deliberately slow re-enacted videos of renaissance paintings. Sheridan was pointing out, video might be slow but it was still quicker than painting. So in a race between painting and video, I, like many other artists emerging in the early seventies, backed video.

What video could do far out weighed what it couldn't. Firstly, unlike film, which was also much more expensive, you didn't have to wait for the results to come back from the processing lab (at least a day with 16mm, with 8mm over a week). In being able to see what you had got straight away you could either re-shoot it if you didn't like it, or go to the next scene if you did. What resulted was a reflexive way of working more akin to working with clay than with working with film. This was liberating in the same way that today with digital photography we are all experiencing the ability to edit in camera – no more albums full of bad photographs (we still take them, but we don't process them anymore).

Sound, as I remember finding out on the first video piece I ever made, was integral to the package. In 1975 I recorded a half hour video work to camera called 'Tape/Tape'. The piece involved me in a single static shot standing, Rene Magritte style with my back to camera, framed in front of a sash window. Using masking tape I slowly taped over the glass and blocked out the view through the window. Once I had covered the entire window the piece was complete and the cameraman Dave Hanson played the tape back. We were in shock when we heard our voices in conversation for we had innocently talked the entire way through the recording, unwittingly thinking we were taping picture only. The

resulting soundtrack was half an hour of gossip about the London art world. It saved a self-referential artwork from being the dullest tape ever made, but the cameraman and I, when we heard voices, seriously thought we were witnessing a paranormal event equivalent to a séance.

The light emitting nature of video permitted it to be shown on a monitor without turning the lights off. I clearly remember that the habit of turning the lights off, obviously a hang over from film persisted for some time. Self-conscious 'lights on/lights off' debates took place at video screenings with some poor soul hovering over the light switch waiting for a decision. It was a bit like sex, you could do it in the dark, but it was considered to be better with the lights on. Without any hint at sex, my mother had made a similar decision on economic grounds (which she tried to pass off on safety grounds – 'it's better for your eyes'), which resulted in us always watching television at home with the lights off. The relationship between video art and television refused to go away, and with the benefit of hindsight, two paths can now be seen to have emerged that both began at the 'lights on/ lights off' crossroads.

On the one road, the bridgehead between video art and television was starting to collapse. Some video artists were beginning to use the critical distance from television that video provided in order to critique television (principally for its one way ness). The coming of Channel Four in the UK in the nineteen eighties led to some artists being commissioned to make video works for broadcast on TV. The two frames of video and television had briefly merged. The fact that the subsequent development of Channel Four led to 'Big Brother' indicates that this brief merger was in fact a type of crossing in itself, a moment in time when reality, in its imitation of art, changed places with it. Celebrity now seems to be the most dominant reason for visual art to be covered on television. 'Television as Art' has certainly disappeared as a concept, and to an extent so to have 'Arts Programmes' replaced by Jay Gooding and Tracey Emin who have joined forces as contestants in the reality show from hell.

On the other road, video artists more interested in the visual poetry of video were beginning to develop (with the improvement in technology) multi

screen spectacles that rivaled paintings in their scale and would lead, with the advent of the video projector, to projected works that would sit easily within museums and galleries. On the occasion of the Tate Gallery exhibiting Bill Viola's 'Nantes Triptych' Nick Serota, the Tate's Director, announced that finally video art had come of age. Serota was right in one way, but in another way what he was celebrating was the end of Video Art, or at least Video Art as a separate category from art. We all know that now you can't help but fall over video art installations wherever you go. Museums, whose education departments were hitherto the only ones interested in video art, can't get enough of it, simply because it's not video art anymore. It's this other thing, this big international art biennale thing, which you hang on your gallery wall not by banging in a nail, but by turning on the power button and turning off the light switch.

Where are we now then if not in the dark, galleries, once white spaces are now blacked out, and artists, who once criticised television for its cult of personality, have become TV personalities themselves. The truth is video art came and went, it was a moment, which once it was recognised was simultaneously over, consumed by the gallery system and television alike. Understandably artists now use video whenever they feel like it in a refreshing post-modern celebration of what they see. A big part of what they see includes television itself but the difference now is that television also sees them. I suppose that we should celebrate this reciprocal arrangement that binds artists to the media. However the deal would seem to favour media savvy artists instead of media artists.

Although I shrink with embarrassment over the transparent conceit of most artists when they are positioned in front of a TV camera, I never the less think that the moment might have arrived for a media artist to show a bit of savvy, and write the TV script to end all TV scripts. This television breakthrough would take the form of a twice-weekly soap opera called 'Art World' where artists, who all live in the same place, are asked to play themselves. Each episode they would turn up at the studio, itself a set of an artist's studio, to be given the next script, which would require them to enact dramas concerned with property, ego,

relationships, and of course, their world ranking as artists. As a simulacrum on a simulacrum, it has both intellectual credibility and entertainment value rolled into one. As a means of corralling artists, so that they do the least amount of harm to the rest of the world, it is also an excellent damage limitations exercise.

Trouble is I think that like all good ideas, it's already been done.