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Paper: Art Criticism and the New Media

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Earlier this year another conference took place quite near to here at Monte-Carlo. The subject was related to this insofar as it was involved with the new technologies in special effects and computer graphics on the TV screen. One reporter to the Monte-Carlo conference wrote as follows:-

"David Niles of Captain Video, France, showed an amazing moving video painting. It combined the effects of - wait for it - Magritte, Samuel Beckett, Stockhausen and probably others too grand to spring to mind. Inside a white room, with clouds passing overhead, against a background of synthesised rock music, a man was desperately trying to get through to a pair of moving pink lips and the eyes of a beautiful girl, which seemed to be a part of the wall. He never got through; and this short existential masterpiece, which combined bleak claustrophobia with sensuality, dream fantasy and synthesised rock music and created a very beautiful electronic hell, seems to me one of the most comprehensively creative experiences the so-called New Image has produced, full of Freudian inexplicables. Clearly it's just the start of what we can look forward to when electronic artists really start working with this wonderful medium." (1)

I do not quote at length to extol the virtues of this particular piece of art criticism but it does set the scene for what I will discuss which is video art, the enormous commercial expansion ("popularization") of video and multi-channel television, and, tentatively, art criticism's response to these developments.

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After another conference, "The Video Arts: Demonstration and Discussion", this time in New York in 1978, the aesthetician Curtis L. Carter commented:

"Aestheticians have barely begun to address the issues of video art and television. This is explained partly by the relative newness of these media. Aestheticians' activity consists of speculative and empirical analyses of the arts and they require longer gestation periods than critical commentaries and factual reports for the mass media." (2)

I will take up on one aspect of what Carter says where he describes the activities of aestheticians as "speculative and empirical analyses." My point is not so much the time it takes art commentators to get around to evaluating new art but that the reflective nature of some art commentary, and I think there are art critics who are closer to theory and philosophy than simply reportage of art, is the antithesis to art uses of the new media and I think this difference requires some understanding before we can talk about art criticism vis à vis the new media. On the other hand we have seen the growth over the last decade of a direct, live, "upfront" art criticism that uses much the same methods as video art or TV art and reflects much the same kind of approach as these new media.

I

Video and to some extent cable television were developed in the sixties through commercial interests in the United States. Artists were experimenting with video by the mid-sixties and in the early seventies some European television channels showed Artist's films. Through the seventies the technology became increasingly sophisticated in every respect and artists too became more sophisticated in the use of video in particular which was the major innovation. Not surprisingly perhaps the writers on new media tended also to be participators for they knew most and could explain some of the technical involvements of the processes. (3)

The emergence of video was automatically compared to the earlier

innovations in television, photography and cinema, and these seen in the wider contexts of social and political change. Indeed the emergence of printing which occurred as part of what we now see as the shift from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance was also mentioned. The historical justifications for these comparisons remains to be seen but two aspects that are highlighted in these discussions of video are (a) an apparent technical revolution and (b) an apparent potential to reach and/or interact with a wider ("mass") audience.

I think without doubt we are the most history-conscious generation and also, much recent art history, largely through the influence of sociological studies, includes the possible implications of technological changes particularly photography and to some extent cinema for fine art. A lot of impetus for this sociological concern has come from some of the artists themselves. Undoubtedly photography and cinema did effect the traditional fine art disciplines but if for example we examine those artists who actually used photographic sources during the early period when the technology of photography was emerging then we find that the artist's interest was more in the results of the medium than in the complexities of photograph making. Degas exploited the final photographic print for its unusual angles and cropping. It was a later generation of artists who used the camera with as much ease as oil paints, indeed Charles Sheeler's paintings can be said to emulate the aesthetic of his photographs. But again the interest was with the aesthetic quality of the product, though a very different aesthetic to that of Degas. We cannot make any easy corollary between nineteenth century artistic reaction to photography and twentieth century artistic reaction to video because conditions and attitudes have changed enormously but any such evaluation must take into consideration broader factors than the technical developments themselves.

Art and technology are, by and large, uncomfortable bedfellows. When El Lissitzky had his vision of a library without books, with instead something akin to video, his embrace with technology was more Utopian than actual - as, I suspect, are a lot of other similar utterances on the part of artists. The Experiment in Art and Technology

(EAT) of the late sixties in the United States where a number of artists acted as designers in factory situations ended in much acrimony and failure. And when Christo sets about his environmental projects he employs the engineers who he knows have the expertise. Christo is an exception in wedding art and technology and an exception because his projects have to be absolutely right as engineering if they are to work at all. Most artists experiment along with trial and error in the technical domain.

I would suggest caution with the more rapturous appraisals of the "video revolution" for when the dust settles we discover that art practices go on much as before which is to say there will be some degree of experimentation with the new media and it will be assimilated into art practices. The medium is not so much important as an end in itself but the issues, at least for critics and historians, are (a) the motivations towards the adoption of a medium and (b) the outcomes in terms of aesthetic sensibility.

The present assessment of video as a medium is that artists were more interested in the earlier and therefore cruder stages of development in the late sixties and early seventies. Barbara London as curator of the Video Program in the Museum of Modern Art in New York wrote in 1980:

"In the late '70s, video activity in this country declined slightly. This was only partly due to the recession; some artists were frustrated showing their work repeatedly to the same, local closed audience, while others became discouraged when their videotapes or their larger installation pieces did not sell." (4)

In a 1981 article Richard Lorber (5) listed a number of video artists of the seventies who had switched to other media. Meanwhile video has soared as a commercial proposition to the extent that it now represents a challenge to both the snapshot industry and the national television industry. The most serious challenge is to the cinema because now we can rent or buy new movies in the form of the video cassette. To some extent then, video has attracted a considerable section of the public. Yet it is following in the mold of the Hollywood film

industry which is to say that the mass video industry is a commercial enterprise selling either entertainment (movies) or a hobby (video hardware).

There was a time when critics worried about High Art versus Low Art, about Art and Kitsch, about the culture industry. Those days appear to be gone, except insofar as we still have left some of the old rearguard anxious to uphold "quality" in art. But, in these days of post - New Wave and Punk, performance artists are as likely to be using material from rock music as the converse. The artist and critic Douglas Davis writes:

"Freed from endless labor and besieged by a diversity of possibilities, we choose a movie now, a stripper tomorrow (male or female), a museum the next day. Yes, pleasure is the goal of every free choice - ranging from hedonism to intellectual provocation. But why should art and pleasure be antithetical?" (6)

While the possibility of any ethics involved is denied or overlooked by Davis we know from our own experience that considerable numbers of people these days, in the art world, will take the intellectual one day and pure entertainment the next. However, on the whole, the converse is not happening although there are signs in that direction. Performance artist Laurie Anderson made a hit record in 1981 and now performances and reviews of her work sometimes fall within the rock music category. (7) In other words here is a fine artist who is on the way to becoming a popular artist with a potentially wider following than Andy Warhol could ever command. But despite the expansion of both video equipment and cable television over the last decade there has not been a proportionate expansion of video art or television art. Video art, for example, is scarcely represented in our major international museums, (though partly because institutions have to establish the basic equipment necessary), much less gaining access to a wider public.

One view of the high art/low art dichotomy is described by the sociologist John McHale as the "vertical fallacy" where high art is the pure research before it is then applied. He says:

"The artist's ivory tower is fitted up as a laboratory, in which discoveries are made, and visions created, which eventually furnish new cultural landscapes for the masses - hence the intake of cultural materials into the new mass media channels." (8)

This is a version of the "trickle-down" theory from sociology which was acceptable maybe twenty years ago but today, if I can comment on sociological study, there is a recognition that influences for change are more complex than the "trickle-down" view would suggest. Take for example the current vogue for "Superman", which has achieved a good deal of success from both artists and critics and the wider public. Is this a case of "trickle-down", "trickle-up", or a mixture or both? There may be a case for saying that the critical and box-office successes of recent years are based not so much in "high" art values as in popular culture which has attracted the "high" art echelon. The performance element of rock and punk music attracts the interest of fine artists involved in performance and this music has encouraged the development of a visual use of video by musicians that brings a kind of video art, albeit low culture, to the wider audience. The "trickle-down" theory may have in certain circumstances a degree of veracity but in conditions where art apparently emulates "low" culture we require either a more expansive or, an alternative explanation.

The shift within fine art towards popular culture is epitomized by Douglas Davis in a line from his "Silver Screen (silent movie)" of 1979 which runs, "I gave up video for the silver screen". (9) This comes as a reminder of the high-mindedness of minimal/conceptual art of the seventies and of the video works in that mode, (John Baldessari, Vito Acconci, Peter Campus), and of the reaction to conceptualism in the performance art that emulates and/or parodies the poses of superstars with the rejection of "authenticity", "truth", and "art". In art criticism the present extreme choices are either to condemn out-of-hand that art which uses popular culture as subject-matter as in Formalist criticism, or to try to uncover the reasons and motives for such choices of subject-matter. Why indeed have artists given up video for the silver screen ?.

It seems that in the art world of the early eighties there is a prevalent trend to include popular culture, just as in the early seventies a prevalent trend was more reductive, more towards art as art. The "controversy" in these terms is little more than prevailing trends. Yet the trends can be restricted and studied from the point of view of art itself because so far only some popular culture will meet

the level of acceptance required by the art world. "Superman" succeeds where a lot of mass entertainment will be scorned and dismissed. It is possible that "Superman" was made into cult once it received the consent of the art world. How that happens and why that happens is the result of fluctuations within art which themselves are the result of indirect, wider social and conceptual changes.

There is no sense in which I wish to imply that the inclusion of some "low" culture to be permanent or that there will be further expansion. First, art's interest in popular culture is restricted to a small minority of practicing artists and second, the course of art, or popular culture, is predictable only to the extent that certain trends can be retrospectively connected by art historians and critics. The present shift towards alternative culture is in much the same vein as Futurism or Dada before it - more gestural and aggressive than Pop Art; a more emphatic rejection of the artistic and ethical assumptions of abstract-reductive art.

II

Before turning to art criticism and the question of what changes, if any, for art criticism might be implied by the new media it should be emphasized that the most vaunted element of video and TV is that of time. These media operate in time in the sense which the written word or fixed image do not. "Time" however is not something which came to the attention of artists through video and TV over the past twenty years rather, I would suggest, twentieth century art has throughout expressed a prior interest in the time concept which has in part led to the enhanced use of first film and then video. Gabo and Pevsner we remember stated in their 1920 Manifesto that space and time were the two concerns of the modernist artist. Moholy-Nagy while at the Bauhaus used available technology to create works that operated in time. Later, in the fifties, Jean Tinguely made his self-destruct sculptures which again were time-based. The first visual art uses of video were by Nam June Paik whose early training was in music which occurs in time. In fact the time concept was so revered in modernism that it as often as not assumed a mystical quality which post-modernist artists have made the target for parody. Here is part of a

script by Douglas Davis:

"SUPERMAN: Where is Devine ? Just a few pages ago, she stood right there (points toward upper left).

MOTHER: My son, she belongs to another time. She is there, now, not here.

SUPERMAN: Back in the Cafe Voltaire, with Tzara and Huelsenbeck ?

MOTHER: No son. She is sparking the boys at Woodstock Nation.

SUPERMAN: Good for her. But I'm living now, on this page, filled with answers to the questions on page 31. Shouldn't I supply them, now here ?" (10)

The cartoon strip is instantly convertible to the film-maker's story-board and from there to film with the sequence of time. Static images have come under the scrutiny of the camera and have been made to "move". The first demonstration of what can happen when a painting comes before the roving eye of the camera was by John Berger in his now historic television series "Ways of Seeing", shown in the early seventies. (11) Berger had a camera pan around a painting in a number of different ways, each lending to a different interpretation of the painting. The static nature of painting and sculpture as against the transitions of film and video was alluded to by the Malcolm Le Grice film of 1975, "After Manet, After Giorgione - Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe or Fete Champetre", where the enacted picnic scene is shot by different cameras at different viewpoints and all shown simultaneously on the same screen. As Jonathan Price said in connection with video, "(it) imitates the flow of attention, not the conclusions of thought." (12)

If it is true that the new media "imitates the flow of attention", is art criticism to participate in this "flow", or is criticism to maintain a reflective position which attempts to formulate the "conclusions of thought" ? Within criticism itself there seems a certain lack of direction or ambiguity with critics adopting particular attitudes to particular artworks and conditions. For example in his TV essay, "Shock of the New", Robert Hughes talks of "the complete reflective permanence of great art" in connection with Matisse (Part III) (13) while later he accepts (in Part VII) that modern art's defence to the "mass environment" was to assimilate it: "By grafting the vitality of media on to what had become a wilting language." (14) Yet Hughes himself seems to agree, in his paraphrase of Walter Benjamin, "that it was going to be hard, and

maybe impossible, for any child raised in the howling blizzard of signs and signals (i.e. new media) to find his way back into the exacting silence of the book." (15) Hughes appears to place value on permanence and reflection in art while his own spoken and written art criticism is a collage of images and commentary more in keeping with ever-changing TV sequences. Jonathan Price's criterion for video applies to the style of Hughes' criticism as "not a single rigid plot or pattern." (16) In Hughes' case the art criticism is certainly affective but it does not provide the consistency of thought for any kind of art theory.

The beginnings of an analysis of the new media has been in the field of structuralism. René Berger delivered a paper in 1977 entitled, "Video and the Restructuring of Myth", in which he stressed the differences between the new media and transitional forms". (17) Like Price, though in quite different language, Berger is keen to describe what he regards as the non-reflective nature of the experience of TV. His analysis is:-

"Once the time required by the process of reading has been cut out, everything proceeds as if, on the one hand, the collection of elements stabilized in a medium abandoned their structure in order to convert themselves into a train of images mirroring the flow of time, and on the other, the reader-spectator gave up the time previously needed to decipher in order to make his perception coincide with the actual unfolding of images". (18)

René Berger suggests that in the participation involved, "the critical consciousness tends to fall away", (19) which he compares to myth. Myth is the creation of analogies that call into play the person's experience of the world rather than his critical consciousness. What we then have is "TV rite".

One of the dangers in discussing the new media is to refer to it as if it were just one thing whereas of course media can be used in a practically limitless number of ways. For example, there are, indisputably, television programmes which demand a high degree of single-minded concentration and the level of concentration will not be all that different from that involved in reading a book: it will be intensive. So if Price could claim that "TV lectures" (20) did not work we are entitled to ask

what is Price looking for in the first place? TV lectures can be compelling viewing - witness the English historian A.J.P. Taylor in his "improntu lectures" delivered in the television studio without any visual aids or prepared script. This is an exception rather than a rule but it indicates that we will learn to use these media in our own way, just as in writing or in lecturing. Some will do this better than others and, as we know, learning to use television requires practice and experience.

As yet the image that video gives on the screen is most likely not fine enough for the TV lecture format. Alternatively where less concentration on a speaker is sufficient, video has come into its own. Community television with the use of video is now regarded as a social priority by many western governments and this kind of interaction with local communities is seen as a way in which TV art time could be introduced or developed. John Berger raised this point ten years ago in "Ways of Seeing" when he said that the art experts talk through the television but the listeners cannot talk back to the experts via the medium. With cable, local television channels have introduced ways of "talking back" though these are highly mechanical answers in a very crude system. Technologically we seem a long way from an interactive or discursive means of dialogue.

The main question is in regard to the methodology of art criticism in the use of the new media and this seems to me to be a question of the extent we wish to move into the "flow" of the media concerned. So far art criticism, largely because of its low priority rating, has not received much air-time therefore art critics are often awkward and reluctant in using the media through their lack of experience. However it is predictable that increasingly art critics will participate as video and cable TV expand and newspapers and journals decrease. But there are inherent dangers in working within a medium which simultaneously, through the multi-channels, transmits everything from soap opera to political forums, to drama, to news, and there is the danger of reducing it all to the level of muzak; of rejecting any notion of value. That is what in effect the punk generation are doing, what some artists are also doing, and if art criticism follows this course we relinquish any serious attempt at a coherent understanding of art. Criticism involves considerations besides response to the immediate: it also involves the rigours of intellectual disciplining.

Footnotes:

1. Charles Robinson. "Electronic Art"; Video World; June 1982; p.21
2. Curtis L. Carter. "Aesthetics, Video Art and Television"; Leonardo; Vol.12 No. 4; Autumn 1979; p.291
3. For example, Nam June Paik, Peter Campus and Jonathan Price.
4. Barbara London. "Independent Video: The first fifteen years"; ArtForum; Sept. 1980; p.39.
5. Richard Lorber. Review; ArtForum; Sept. 1978; p.81.
6. Douglas Davis. "Post-Performancism"; ArtForum; Oct. 1981; p.33.
7. In the Observer newspaper 20 June 1982, Anderson is reviewed in the Rock column rather than in the Art column.
8. John McHale. "The Future of Art and Mass Culture"; Leonardo; Vol. 12 No.1; Winter 1979; p.60.
9. Davis. "Post-Performancism"; p.33.
10. Ibid. p.39.
11. John Berger. "Ways of Seeing"; British Broadcasting Corporation.
12. Jonathan Price. Video-Visions: A Medium discovers itself; Plume; New York; 1977; p.4.
13. Robert Hughes. "The Shock of the New"; Part III; The Listener; 19 October 1980; p.484.
14. Ibid. Part VII; 6 November 1980; p.609.
15. Ibid. p.610 (My brackets in quotation)
16. Price. Video-Visions; p.4.
17. René Berger. "Video and the Restructuring of Myth"; Davis & Simmons (eds); The New Television: A Public/Private Art; M.I.T.; 1977.
18. Ibid. p.212.
19. Ibid. p.216.
20. Price. Video-Visions: "Lectures fall flat on TV"; p.7.