THE 30-SECOND DILEMMA: THE FALL AND RISE OF VIDEO ART

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In autumn 2003 the left-wing critic Dave Beech published, in *Variant*, a controversial and provocative article seeking to explain why “video art wants to be boring”. In this article Beech noted video's “low and threatening status within art”, and claims that the very convenience and availability to video as a medium has made the “art world” insist on 'purifying' video as an art form, to free it from any contamination from its status as a popular culture medium related to home video and television. In short, video art is deliberately “boring” (defined by Beech as “not entertaining or not taking pleasure in popular pleasures”) in order to place it within the category of “high art.”

While this article did find the controversy it sought, it launched many heated conversations among video artists and gave rise to often-worried predictions of the future of video as an art form. Subsequent grumblings about the ubiquity of “samey samey” moving imae works infesting Turner prizes and other large scale shows also repeated the “b” word: “boring”. Because the inescapable fact is that, as evidenced by the work chosen for so many high profile exhibitions, and presented in major galleries and biennials, much of what passes for film and video art is in fact, if not exactly boring, at least unengaging, uninteresting and, compared to other uses of the technology (such as television, feature film, music video or advertising) technically poor. Worse still, a simple analyses of audience's responses to video art seems to show that Beech, if not “correct”, has exposed some truths about how the medium is perceived.

So, does video art “want to be boring?” Certainly sometimes it seems that way. During a single day at London's Tate Modern, which included an exhibition of “recent film and video art” 2, I conducted a simple observational-research project to see how long most visitors spent looking at the video work.
While the main gallery's works by Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood and Bruce Naumann attracted much visitor interest, in the “recent film and video art” show I noted that the amount of time most visitors spent with each work was 30 seconds or less. Given that this exhibition had a hefty admission charge and was specifically *about* moving-image art, one must assume that most of the visitors had a serious and possibly educated interest in film and video art, and expected to see a range of engaging and provoking works. With this in mind, ten works at 30 seconds each is not great value for either the admission charge or the time expended in getting to the gallery.

One can certainly claim that most visitors to any gallery will not spend more than 30 seconds looking at any painting or sculpture and this may be true. However it was clear that all of the works in this [and any] video show, being time based, were meant to be experienced in terms of being time based. Yet most people did not take the time. The point however is not that this was a *particularly* bad or uninteresting exhibition but precisely that it was typical. For a variety of reasons, the audience was not engaged by or with the work enough to spend more than 30 seconds it would take to watch the work unfold. As an observer, I was horrified. Later, discussing my findings with other artists and gallery visitors, more than a few expressed, confidentially, that they “don't much like video art” because “it all looks the same.”

Did this mean Beech was right, and that video art is *meant* to be boring, or deliberately

made to be boring, and chosen by curators for its adhesion to the rules of boringness as so-called “high art”?

Let me take a moment to address some of the issues that audiences - this is, willing, enthusiastic audiences, give for non-engagement with moving-image art.

Firstly, the dissatisfaction with the spatial arrangements in most galleries:

“They don't know how to use the camera”
“The screen is too low / too high / too small”
“I get uncomfortable just standing there”
“I'm not going to sit *on the floor* to watch that!”

Interestingly, most people I interviewed could recall at least one piece of work that overcame these objections. For example, the fastidious viewer who objected having to sit on the floor in the gallery to see time-based work, happily did so for over an hour in Bill Viola's “Five Angels for the Millennium.”

Next, the works themselves:

“It all looks the same.”
“Nothing happens”
“It's too slow”

But few would attend a screening of a Tarkovsky or Bela Tarr film only to be annoyed by the pacing. Slowness in itself cannot be a crime.

“They don't know how to hold a camera”

There is sometimes some truth in this, as art school is not necessarily the best place to be taught technical competence in media technology. There is rarely the kind of dedicated technical support, or critical discourse, that film school requires.

Are these then the “problems” of video art? Is it true that much of what we see, much of what is chosen for exhibition, particularly in the Anglo-American art world, has not progressed much in style and substance from the pioneering work done in the 1960s and 1970s? I can identify three major tendencies:

On the one hand there is the structural, formalist work (often made on 16mm) that seeks to “interrogate” the medium. But film's interrogation is surely over by now, while the same kind of structural approach still has not come to the fore as regards, say HD. Then, on the other hand, there is the work derived from pop art, (keeping us still firmly in the 60s and 70's) that seeks to pun, joke and comment, often in a deliberately scatological way, on the grimy absurd realities of everyday life. Lastly, there is the “poetic” video, which is harder to do and even harder to do well. At its best, this kind of work has as its antecedent the haunting imagery of Maya Deren; but more often is made up of laughably portentous sub-Tarkovskian slow-mo close-ups of something or other.

What is “video art” and “artists' film” anyway?

The first thing we need to be clear about is that “film” and “video” are outdated terms. Video is based on an electronic signal sent to tape (analogue or digital) and film is made

by the exposure of light on photosensitive film strips. While the latter is still sometimes employed in art work, the former is not. Many artist films and video art pieces use the same digital technology – DV or HD. The differentiation between these two terms seems to be the intended form of the output: narrative or loop? Walk-through, or seated? Large screen, multi screen, projected onto a surface? Yet whatever the intended outcome, the artist cannot guarantee how the work will be viewed.

Even though the technology has moved on so much that “video' means something entirely different to what did two decades ago, are we artists still churning out the same kind of things? And if we are, is this a problem? And, assuming this is all true, is the problem that video art is trying to be “high art” with all the fundamentalism - predominantly expressed as the rejection of pleasure – that “high art” demands?

And yet – the evidence shows otherwise. It is possible to see contemporary video art that is both definitely “high art” - that is, complex, thoughtful and expressive, unafraid of tender or controversial issues – and manages to be technically well-developed and innovative, as well as engaging. To experience such work is exciting. The duration of a video loop is an invitation to immerse, extract and re-immerse oneself in the art work, moving in and out of the work's own time frame, experiencing a peculiar shift of time and space, where any point can be a beginning, and the end is merely the point before the beginning resumes. This is a unique essence of video as art, it is immersive and envelops the viewer in the experience of time, but the experience of time is mutable and can be shifted and manipulated by the viewer who can move in and out of a video screening.

At the same time, “video art” is not cinema's poor and cheap cousin. The advantage of video in its early days was its facility to create intimate and personal works not easily made with traditional film, as well as durational works that would have been prohibitively costly using film. The peculiarities of the medium created its own aesthetic, separate from cinema. This is a fine inheritance, and one that is well worth continuing. While the line between experimental cinema and video may be blurred, it is predominately cinema which has moved into the territory of video and not vice versa. And presently of course the distinction between “video” and “film” is dissolved into the medium of “digital”, so the distinction now is aesthetic and intentional – no longer shaped by the medium.

Contemporary Hollywood, with its studios owned by multinationals and solely run according to the “bottom line” has all but eschewed any consideration of artistry, in story, style and form. The creates a strange situation where even quite mainstream fare is considered “arthouse.” With a few exceptions, most “Artist's film” is left in a limbo where it has no distribution, no or few theatrical screenings and the only available “home” for it is the gallery, which is to often an unsuitable host. As for “video art” the gallery is by no means more amenable to the needs to the work. I have experienced some presentations of video art that are the equivalent of laying paintings on the floor, or throwing sculptures on their sides: avant garde, maybe but neither interesting nor fair to the work. Time and again I see in galleries and museums ignorance of basics like sightlines, acoustics, lack of seating or, conversely, lack of space to move, All of these can severely distract, and ruin, the experience of the work in a way that will rarely happen to painting.

How then do we account for what Beech and others perceive as the incipient “failure” of video art to engage audiences? Largely, video is a victim of poor curatorial practice, a tendency that is being exacerbated rather than amended by the increasing academicization of the curatorial profession.

At the same time, often it seems that artists are not demanding enough, do not insist of having their work exhibited in a particular way, possibly don't think through the work to the final point of reception. (Agreeing to have one's work shown on a monitor rather than the planned projector is hardly going to show the work in the way it was intended, and vice versa.) Not only that, curators and exhibition organisers need to be aware that video is a medium that needs proper tech support: equipment needs to work, sound levels need to be monitored and acoustics and light sources carefully managed. Surely this is self-evident, yet how many times are these simple provisos utterly disregarded?

Perspectives

I come to this dilemma as an artist trained in classical film-making and photography, who moved into video art just as the medium was changing to a fully digital environment. The excitement of the burgeoning technology, together with my interest in alternative screening practices and experimenting with media, led me into producing work that increasingly fell into the formless category known as “video art” - though these categories hadn't actually occurred to me as I was engaged in making.
The excitement of video in the digital age has been the site of video as a medium capable of containing so many different formats and presentation possibilities. The flexibility and mutability of video is its greatest strength. An artist can record and manipulate sound, film directly with the video camera, or digitise and use traditional film stock, use images taken from any source whatsoever and endlessly reconfigure my source material into different variations. On another tangent, video clips can be separated into frames and them used as still images. “Video” can be projected as large or as small as wanted, can be shown on anything from a state of the art plasma screen to a salvaged 1970's TV set or a massive monitor-wall. The work can be built into an installation, or screened against a bare wall in a gallery or a garden shed.

A possible response to poor mainstream gallery practice and jejune curatorial practice is the artist-as-curator and the artist-run space. In theory at least, projects and exhibitions featuring video and run by practicing video artists should be able to understand and work to overcome these potential problems, and take an artist-centered rather than a curator-centered approach. In practice, this does happen, but both the “artist-curator” and the “artist-run space” are under threat from a strange perceived need to adhere to criteria set out by the “professional” or academic curatorial caste.

Another possibility alongside this is to locate video art within other art practices, that are outside oralongside the traditional gallery. Video can, for example, be a tool to create site responsive works, or to create narrative and experimental works which document or discuss particular ideas that arise out of one's other art practice.

Conclusion

In considering video's future as an art form, or as a tool for creative expression, we are faced with the reality that video art differs from the other art forms in that is is not really rooted in any “traditional form” such as painting, drama, music or even cinema. Even the technology has changed so much from its 1960's incarnation – changed even more than, say, drawing or painting have changed since the days of the Lascaux cave drawings. Today's digital video technology has little in common with the old portapak – or super-8 or 16mm production - other than being time-based. And the technology is still in flux, expanding, developing. It is far too early to proclaim the death of video art; in fact we are still experiencing its birth throes.

Thinking pragmatically, maybe video is a medium with which we can create a wide variety of art works rather than an art form in itself. However this depends on how or whether we choose to define the idea of an “art form,” which is perhaps an outdated notion in any case.

The artist Tracey Holland notes that “For me video was a next logical step with the work. I moved into it in just the same way I've moved into other mediums along the way ... to me video is a tool just as the still camera or the paintbrush is a tool. Video allows me to combine still images with moving, overlay images, use sound which intensifies the emotion of an image; how wonderful is all that!”

Therefore, the “boringness” of video is nothing to do with video as a medium, but is perhaps indicative of the timidity of many artist, lack of training and overwhelmingly, the obvious dearth of ideas and lack of visual development of curators and art academies.

But carping about this all-too-real issue in terms of the value of video is a dead end, and can lead to no real change in the actual problem. Instead, let artists use video to create truly marvellous works, and let visionary curators push them out into the world, make it visible in a plethora of ways, freely mix and subvert materials, genres and ideas, take charge of the medium to set agendas and challenge criteria. Let us challenge institutions that disrespect video by founding our own, or cause revolution in those that are moribund.

Video is an opportunity with few limits. But it is a tool, nothing more. A tool that needs to be mastered, and married to ideas. And while the medium is a tool, the artwork is also a tool -

> The work of art has become, like language for Wittgenstein, a tool to allow us to do a job. It wears its methods on its sleeve, attempting to make transparent the assumptions that lie behind its production, engaged in the production of knowledge and understanding, delivered as an experience - giving rise to pleasure and the construction of desire. (Ian Robertson)

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