

Carry On Screening

review

3rd New Visions Festival of film, video and new media

Glasgow, October/November 1996

SPANNING OCTOBER 11th to November 10th, the third New Visions festival took place in a city-wide range of venues, in Glasgow. The core week, focusing around the screening of the International Zeitgeist programmes, was the 11th to the 20th. These were all single screen and recent works, brought together from an open submission, some of which are reviewed below, in more detail, by Chris Byrne. Robert King also focuses on the CD ROM presentation at the Gallery of Modern Art elsewhere in the magazine. Here I will try to present a short overview of the Festival, giving the reader some notion of its breadth, scope and highly ambitious intentions.

All in all it was a massive and highly successful effort on the part of the organisers, Ann Vance and Paula Larkin. With way over 200 events, encompassing film, video, talks, installations, performance and new technology; from as far flung locations as South America and Japan, there is simply nothing quite like it in Glasgow.

New Vision's 'underground' spirit and character can also encompass very thorough historical assessments: such as the programme of experimental film exploring the Kinecraft movement (which centred around Glasgow School of Art in the 30's and included artists such as Norman McLaren and Helen Biggar); a presentation by Professor Walter Schobert, director of the German Film Museum, on German avant garde films of the 20's and a 'retrospective' of the filmwork of Tina Keane. Within this, the festival is also very conscious of the fact that it provides a platform which is the only chance a great deal of younger video and film makers actually get to show their work, in any kind of context or social framework.

With the festival, this time around, centring around the Glasgow Film & Video Workshop (one of the few fully equipped production and exhibition spaces in Scotland), a more open and accessible feel was generated. One particular example being the warm environment of the Virtual Living Room, an installation prepared by Martha McCulloch and Alice Angus, in which one could choose from a library of documentary, issue-based work and travelogues. There was something just straightforward, enjoyable and human about being in a comfortable space, taking in its carefully prepared notions about home and travel, and

actually being able to watch something interesting on a TV set in the early afternoon.

One could extend this 'theme' further in one of the first events, at the Tramway, with Max Eastley's 'Sound Sculptures.' Experimental music events can—in the pre-judging sense—threaten some kind of undeserved relentless barrage of angst aimed at small and innocent bones in the ear. Not in this case. Eastley's work has a rare and subtle beauty within it, perhaps hinted at by his only words to the rapt audience at the end of the performance: "I've really enjoyed being with you all tonight." A psychically audible cry came back from us all: "So have we Max, so have we." This was immediately followed by a mass migration to the stage, fuelled by ecstatic, urgent curiosity to find out how he had produced such medicine for the soul. Discovery of the means only deepened the spell.

The event at Java (an internet cafe with an exhibition space) perhaps also shared something of this approach, in the way it adopted a 're-humanising' treatment of technology, with an 'on-line interactive performance' by the group Elevator, whom I think emerged from Dundee Art College, which has maintained a long influence on electronic art in Scotland. This was a more quirky methodology perhaps focusing more on the body. The performances included a live soap opera, enacted after taking its plot from contributions from the web.

Street Level was the venue for works produced for the New Media Commission, a collaboration between Hull Time Based Arts, London Electronic Arts and New Visions, to fund and exhibit new work. This featured two distinct video installations: 'and finally their eyes looked in' by Stephen Hurrell, and 'joyride' by Keith Stutter. The remit of the commission aimed at issues of 'Civil Liberty & Civic Pride,' fast becoming mutually exclusive terms in Glasgow.

Video has become such an accessible medium that even TV producers are frightened of it, or at least frightened of who's hands it might end up in, particularly with the tactical possibilities fast becoming associated with it. This was taken up in the forum on Tactical TV. It seems we have to be protected from being eye-witnesses to some things in our society.

Working with other venues and allowing them involvement in the work was a key aspect of the festival. It should be pointed out that New Visions functioned on half of the budget for the previous year, and that the event receives no funding whatsoever from the Scottish Arts Council. The Festival is a showcase for artists working in different areas, styles, genres and production values, what binds it together is the commitment of its organiser's and participants and the celebration of 'non-mainstream' work. While 'mainstream' could be said to be in the eye of the beholder, it is still used as a bludgeon to denigrate independent voices. New Visions represents a 'channel of resistance' to this routine. The organisation is not made up of a pool of jaded film theory addicts or wanna-be comfortably ensconced curators: essentially it draws on the strength of the artistic community, in other words it is of its community. New Visions may exist in the manipulated-from-on-high, toy town art world that Glasgow is fast in danger of becoming; but it showed itself responsible and yet unafraid to take risks. The Cinema of Transgression programme would have been quite a different matter, had it not been entertainingly put in context by a more than fairly knowledgeable presenter/enthusiast, Jack Sargent. The International Zeitgeist programme, in that it

tried to reflect the 'spirit of the age,' can of itself be taken as representative of the spirit of the festival. Where New Visions really works is in its commitment to combining such a large and open selection of artists' work with wider discussions and lectures. What you saw (events were almost all free) and what you combined that with was the mark of how engaged you chose to be, something very different for each individual.

Although contingent on the level of our personal involvement and by nature a temporary event, a festival's life or spirit is also something that exists or persists after the event. It is in this place of the mind when memory begins to assess, that we look to gain some notion of what we have learned, how we have been influenced, and arrive at thoughts of how we should or should not be influenced. Film and video are themselves quickly transformed into memory and have an intimate relationship to its processes. Into my mind immediately comes memories of Cordelia Swann's video, 'Desert Rose. A tremendous work, which, in its ability to evoke such convincing 'memories' (at times ancestral, at times childlike, at times harrowing), communicates with the viewer in a way which renews one's faith in the medium. It too looks 'back', though it distorts our sense of time. In content the work 'remembers' the Nevada desert nuclear 'tests,' a big part of which was the deliberate exposure of the population to radiation by the 'authorities.' It blends this with the 'exposure' to mind pollution and materialism that is Las Vegas. In its drifting gentle reproaches it tells us that this utter loss of all humanity was surprisingly and specifically predicted in the dreams and visions of the first people who inhabited the land. A land they inhabited so well that their art/myths are still pervasive. So do you want to end up in a radioactive Las Vegas? For some people working in the mainstream entertainment industry that's their big ambition.

William Clark

A FILM AND video festival is a curious event: groups of people sit for days in darkened spaces, watching hundreds of short works. The festival screening lies somewhere between the worlds of art and cinema. Boundaries between entertainment and intellect are at times blurred. It's a bit like a party—who will you meet, will you enjoy the experience?

New Visions sought to present works on their own terms, against what the catalogue termed, "the current frenzy for all that is themed and packaged and the increasing marketability and acceptability of certain brands of video art produced for the gallery system". The International Zeitgeist screenings, drawn from open competition, inevitably were themed, though this seemed sympathetic to the art shown.

I was struck by the number of video and film pieces utilising performance, often in front of a fixed camera, without editing. These techniques date back to early video art, and performance video has formed a vital element of artistic practise ever since. The use of minimalist and conceptual strategies today can be seen as a reaction to the high tech, glossy aesthetics widespread during the 1980's. Direct performance to camera could help the recorded image regain a sense of immediacy. Given the cheap availability of camcorders, it is simple to produce.

This approach could be seen in Tape, by Glasgow based duo Stephanie Smith and Edward Stewart. We see a human form below the waist, bound almost entirely by plastic adhesive tape. As the tape is slowly peeled away, two bodies are revealed, the performers 'joined at the hip', back to back. The piece is reminiscent of a 1970's performance by Marina Abramović and Ulay from their Relation Work series: the artists sat motionless, back to back, for seventeen hours. Both works can be seen as testing the limits of the body's endurance, but Smith and Stewart's act seems a teas-





ing pose in comparison. Despite a mild edge of sado/masochism, the attitude seems one of cool self awareness, a voyeuristic distance—not unlike Andy Warhol's films.

Stella D'Ailly's, *Lick* starts with a close-up of a face, appearing to perform cunnilingus. The camera zooms out to reveal D'Ailly alone, her face reflected in a mirror held between her legs. The action seems similar to a performance by Annie Sprinkle: she invited the audience to examine her vagina with a gynaecologist's speculum. D'Ailly's video could have been a passive meditation on the female form, safely enclosed within the camera frame. Instead, the initial voyeurism of *Lick* is turned back on the viewer as the interpretation of the scene changes. *Lick* manages not just to tease and deceive, but also to confront the viewer's gaze.

Also prevalent at *New Visions* was the aesthetics of the processed or re-edited image, sometimes using found footage or video recorded off-air. These methods stem from a loose tradition spanning structural films from the 1960's and 1970's, to *Scratch Video* in the 1980's.

Hic et Nunc, by Berlin artist Veit-Lup, takes as its material the static of the untuned television screen. He transforms this seemingly mundane image through the slowing of time, magnifying and refracting the cathode ray image through different lenses, and building layer upon layer of 'snow' through video effects. The electronic soundtrack seems derived from the television's own sounds, re-sampled and looped. What look like crystals slowly forming soon mutate into pulsing patterns of light and dark in dazzling variety.

Veit-Lup articulates the omnipresent continuum of television transmission: the 'Here and Now' of the title. Taking the form of the medium as subject, his approach echoes early work by European video artists, many of whom initially made experimental films. Indeed it seems there was some collaboration with veteran German video artist Ant Lux.

Jan Krogsgard's, *Titled For Archive* presents a conundrum to the viewer. Four short strings of text were looped and reprocessed continually, becoming nearly illegible in the process as the picture jitters horizontally in a rapid strobing pattern. A repetitive mantra of sound mirrors the cycles of the image. The text reveals itself to the viewer, whilst never appearing in a fixed moment: literally it is half-glimpsed. Tantalising flashes of imagery occasionally surface from the blur, but so cut-up and stretched they remain unrecognisable.

What does the text say? 'Theotheories'; 'stratastrategies'; 'sanskrit of cells'; 'tongues of junkies'. The lines give clues to the "reading" of the work: presented as an abstract field of signs, much as ancient Sanskrit texts were viewed before translations were available. The metaphysical tone hints at viewing as a trance-like experience. The fragmentary, flickering *Titled For Archive* reminded me strongly of the *Dreamachines* of Brion Gysin.

Finn McAlinden and Beverley Hood's *Transference* is bound by a more conventional structure. A kaleido-

scopic narrative unfolds, following a woman as she walks in the forest and the city. The two scenes are cut together in rapid sequence, matching shots using symmetry and movement. The forced connection between separate locations containing the same protagonist resembles techniques used in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-up*. There seem to be common concerns: the sense of mystery around a journey; and simultaneity, the idea that moving images can create parallel realities at the same moment in time.

The best attended retrospective screenings were dedicated to underground films of the 1980's: *Cinema of Transgression* featured shorts by 'famous' names like Richard Kern, Lydia Lunch and Nick Zedd. Many of the films had roots firmly in the US independent tradition of low-budget schlock. Influences ranged from Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Blood Feast* to John Waters' camp epics, mingled with the DIY aesthetics of punk and live performance to create a heady brew.

Among the contemporaries of Kern and Zedd shown was David Wojnarowicz and Tommy Turner's co-directed *Where Evil Dwells*. Only the trailer for the film survives, based on news reports about a teenage AC/DC fan who murdered a fellow teen, claiming when arrested that it was a sacrifice to Satan. It opens on a ventriloquist's dummy reciting obsessive dialogue: a distant ancestor to Beavis and Butthead perhaps. Intercut with the teen murder scene, the dummy begins to stab Tommy Turner to death, screeching dementedly. Finally an orgy of motorcycles, leather, chains, rape, murder, mutilation, and decay, conjuring a rock'n'roll vision of Hell. The scenes evoke an atmosphere similar to the films of Kenneth Anger. Eventually, *Where Evil Dwells* bores with its constant attempts to break taboos: and it is a trailer for a much longer film.

The main aesthetic of *Cinema of Transgression* was one of Gothic nihilism: other people merely playthings of desire, to be used and abused, even to the point of mutilation and death. Yet it's play acted, sanitised: a game. The film-makers were carrying on a tradition from the Romantic poets—de Sade, Byron, Shelley, through to Burroughs—all 'gentlemen of leisure' indulging in sexual pleasures and opium habits. In a similar way, these darlings of the New York post-punk scene had some political insight into their time. One response to the moral strait-jacket of the Reagan years was to immerse the body and psyche in sex, drugs, violence: all the 'forbidden pleasures'. Despite possible radical intent, the film-makers seemed unable to break beyond a scopophilic fixation

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on sex, the look of it, the easy power of sexual or violent imagery to shock.

Made more recently, Tessa Hughes-Freeland and Holly Adams' *Nymphomania*, opens to a shot of performer, dressed as a Wood Nymph, dancing in a forest to Debussy's 'Apres-midi d'un Faun'. A character made up as a Satyr watches, masturbating as the Nymph sheds her flimsy garment. The inevitable rape scene ends in the Satyr's barbed penis piercing the Nymph's abdomen, killing her. It is all carried off with an understandably ironic humour. The film is an interesting development, focusing more on mythology than the contemporary. The return to unreconstructed Romanticism has been influential—*Nymphomania* is a precursor to the use of such imagery by art world favourite Matthew Barney.

A retrospective of the Cinema of Transgression 'school' will show at the Whitney Museum of Modern Art. If ever viewed as transgressive, these films are now firmly in the dusty embrace of the academy.

Which brings me back to a central problem with much of the work I saw, particularly recent performance video. Many artists choreograph, stage and record intimate moments or visual gags. Belying the spontaneity of such an approach, they fall back on the strategies of the past. Plagiarism can allow artists to develop new variations on old strategies, to take art forward. Unfortunately, only rarely do the results include social critique, or show much awareness of the wider technical, psychological or political impact of video and television. These ideas were often fundamental to the art they seek to emulate.



This leaves concerns mainly around surface, appropriation of aesthetic styles, and self-promotion of the artists as hip personalities. Suspicion arises that such works cynically 'quote' older artists who are currently in vogue. The product is knowing, self-referential art which adopts the tactics of the market's leading 'brands' from the late 1980's. Younger artists have followed their lead for places in the Saatchi collection, the Pompidou and the Tate.

There has always been a tendency in video art towards the one-line gag: a simple, often funny idea delivered with a stylish gimmick to engage the viewer. Alongside more ponderous works, short bites of humour provide light relief. If they become the dominant trend, eclipsing other modes of representation that is worrying. It would be sad if video and film artists lost sight of any distinction between their work and that designed to market global corporations. Not that art should necessarily be serious, or didactic. But if everything becomes entertainment, whose interests does it serve?

Chris Byrne