

# Moving History

What follows is an edited discussion, conducted via e-mail, between Chris Byrne and Malcolm Dickson that starts to plot a history of the profusion of film and video activity in Scotland. This discussion is an attempt to redress, in a very small way, the recent miasma surrounding the documentation and discussion of such activity in Scotland.

Chris Byrne: There is currently an absence of real discussion in Scotland about what we might call Moving Image art. Video art, experimental film, screen-based art displayed on computers or via the internet, it is all out there, happening. It's just that no-one seems to talk about it much. There is a sense of operating in a relative vacuum: ideas and influences appear from elsewhere, outwith Scotland. Yet there are traditions of work in these fields by artists within Scotland. It seems that very few know much about them. It is essential to begin the process of mapping a history of these areas of practice, with a specifically Scottish context.

If there are Scottish histories, when did they start? Certainly with Avant-Garde film there was a good deal of activity in the 1930s around Norman McLaren, Glasgow School of Art and the GPO film unit. Unfortunately the sources of this experimental energy left for Canada and elsewhere, leaving post-war Scottish film practice to the documentarists and dramatists.

Malcolm Dickson: That period in question is an interesting starting point to an origin of forms for 'experimental' practice in film. The hand-crafted nature of these films, most of which involved animation, suggests a correlation with painting which shouldn't have been too much out of step with the dominant taste of the art schools and the 'academy'. I don't know very much about that time or extent of the practice and how it made itself visible in public terms. Film-makers have been grouped around the 'Kinecraft' movement, and I believe the Scottish Film Archive is the first point of call regarding that history. The 1996 New Visions festival, co-ordinated by Ann Vance and Paula Larkin, included a package of works on the Kinecraft movement put together by Pauline Law.

CB: Out of this milieu did emerge a distinctive voice in film, that of Margaret Tait. Her films were grounded in realist documentary, but transcended the standard conventions to become much more lyrical, poetic works. Simply made, but with great elegance and flair, focusing on moments, fleeting glimpses, everyday settings. Telling stories through moving images and location sound.

MD: Margaret Tait is interesting because she has a creative proximity to a literary tradition. I think the links through literature and philosophy to the visual arts are quite strong and robust—it offers a more holistic overview than one constrained to a stifling tradition of fine art. Writers and artists in moving image have and do work together—it's important to mention Tom McGrath, Writer in Residence at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art (DJCA) who worked in the video department in 1985/86.

CB: Tait's was a lone voice during the 1960s, when most Scottish film makers were pre-occupied with documentary realism, or 'the movies'. This situation was in contrast to what was happening in London, New York and elsewhere, where underground and

experimental film making was flourishing. Video art had also started to make an appearance in Canada, America and Germany.

One exception to this trend took a London-based artist to the Edinburgh Festival in 1971. David Hall made a series of short television works, which were broadcast on Scottish Television in place of advertising during the Festival period. Shot in and around Edinburgh, they are a landmark both for UK television and moving image art in Scotland. Mick Hartney in his essay 'Int/ventions' in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art* states that Hall's television works were part of 'Locations Edinburgh', curated by Alistair Mackintosh at the Scottish Arts Council for the Edinburgh Festival. According to Hartney: "The central idea of the project was that the artists should deploy the various communication networks of the city to make their work or to make it visible." Other artists in the show included Stuart Brisley, David Parsons and Jeffrey Shaw, all with Hall part of the 'Artists Placement Group' (APG), a conceptual art grouping which interested itself with tactical interventions into popular culture and public space. Brisley apparently staged a slow-motion car crash in a disused car showroom, Ed Herring played back ambient sounds into the environment, Parsons made street banners, Shaw and others made inflatable sculptures.

MD: John Latham's statement underpinning the APG, that 'context is half the work' of course went on to inspire and provide the philosophical foundation on which David Harding began the Environmental Art Course at Glasgow School of Art.

CB: Later in the 1970s, the first 'video art' started to appear in galleries in Scotland. In 1973 the Scottish Arts Council gallery in Edinburgh hosted 'Open Circuit', featuring video, photography and film, including an ongoing performance installation by David Hall, using video equipment.

MD: Scotland at this time wasn't so far out on a limb in terms of artists intervening in exhibition structures, as limited as they were. The 'Open Cinema' exhibition in the Scottish Arts Council's gallery in Charlotte Square in 1976 is another case in point. It included film makers centred around the London Film Makers Co-operative, such as Malcolm Le Grice, Tony Sinden, Tony Hill, Nicky Hamlyn, Annabel Nicholson and Jane Rigby. The introduction to the catalogue by Deke Dunsiberre stated that: "This programme of 'expanded cinema' offers Edinburgh the opportunity to see recent examples of an area of international avant-garde film-making... By inviting film artists to present new work..., the SAC is opening new perspectives on the cinema; perspectives yielding film installations which should be viewed not in the narrow context of conventional film history, but in the general context of art history."

Also in 1976, the exhibition 'Video: towards defining an aesthetic' was held at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow. It argued for specific codes of consideration in the medium of video with David Hall's article beginning with the challenge: "... A brief attempt at some of the distinctions between video and film may be useful." The issues raised are interesting in relation to time-based art and they are not marked in my mind as being time-specific. In fact, there are resemblances to debates around digital arts, interactivity and new media happening today in forums such as *Digital Dreams*, *LoveBytes*, *Shock Waves* and *Ground Control*, numerous events organised at the ICA and throughout the Video Positive Festivals to ISEA 98. There is a suggestive critical rigour there that clicks with earlier ideas which in retrospect have had quite far reaching consequences. It's not as if we don't have the Stuart

Marshall's of today it's just that our terms of reference have altered and are more fragmented. Two books to mention here are Sean Cubitt's *Timeshift: On Video Culture* and also Owen Kelly's *Digital Dialogues*. Every page of these books explode with ideas that are linked to practice—they aren't hypothetical. Another point of reference which I have to mention here are the articles by Sara Diamond and Kate Elwes which featured in a series of works on 'Women and New Technology' in the first volume of Variant.

Another change that has taken place I think is the notion of 'opposition' and positions of contestation. Video was seen as challenging conventional broadcast television and indeed institutionalised art.

But to get back to an earlier point we've been alluding to regarding a lineage for practice today, is that the lobbying for mainstream legitimacy is not something new—even if it was articulated as contesting that which it actually depended upon—and the aforementioned bears a frustrating similarity to the contemporary situation in the 90s. However, now the ownership of an experimental tradition is not such a critical issue between a film history or an art history—both are too constrictive.

CB: On the distinctions between film and video as tools for making art, the two are often grouped together under a broad moving image category. There are significant differences in the ways that the image is reproduced, however.

Experimental work did not really take off in Scotland during the 1970s. Certainly it was a turbulent time politically, and there were indeed groups making what might be termed 'agit-prop' films in Edinburgh, notably Red Star Cinema, who made low-budget Super-8 films on topical local political issues of the day. I think Robin Crichton (now with Edinburgh Film Workshop) and Dave Rushton (now running the Institute of Local Television in Edinburgh) were involved with this group.

Maybe it was seen as more important to be politically 'avant-garde', i.e. socialist, in Scotland at the time. The big movements in theatre at the time seem to mirror this trend. It also seems that anyone not involved in political, community-based groups was aspiring to make popular entertainment, either for cinema or television. Also during the late 1970s and early 1980s the film-making avant-garde based around the London Film Makers Co-op was in the grip of a rather austere Marxist concept of 'structural film', whose main theorist was Peter Gidal. This aesthetic may have seemed out of touch and unappealing to many artists, perhaps unfairly. Video art of the time was possibly more adventurous, but addressing itself to the galleries of London, New York and Cologne. There may have been a reaction against such a metropolitan outlook in Scotland, or possibly no-one here was much interested!

When Channel Four was set up in the early 1980s, the Workshop Declaration gave funding to film and video workshops to support their activities. Apart from London Video Arts, who distributed and helped to produce video artists' works, I think all the workshops were community based organisations making work mainly around social issues. This includes Edinburgh Film Workshop, the only Scottish organisation to be funded.

So perhaps it is more a question of the support infrastructure not being in place for artists' production in the 1970s and 1980s. After all, it is difficult to make films or videos if you can't get access to equipment and maybe an artist would not think of working in such a medium, if no-one was advocating it. Central to this was the role of the Scottish Art Schools, who did not embrace these 'alternative' media unlike similar institutions in England and Wales. There were

a handful of individuals who helped support work. Colin McLeod, now with the Photography, Film & TV Department at Napier University, was I believe working at Edinburgh College of Art in the late 1970s as a film technician in the Architecture School. If 'fine artists' wanted to make films, they went to him.

Access to resources changed somewhat with the arrival of video artist Stephen Partridge as a tutor at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art (DJCA), Dundee in the mid-1980s. He persuaded the College to invest significant resources in the video department, and it has become one of the UK's leading centres for video and media art teaching and production.

MD: That takes us back to David Hall and what is lightly referred to as the 'Maidstone mafia' from Dundee. Joking aside, the influence has been profound.

CB: Yes, Partridge was a student of Hall's at Maidstone College. The course was the first in the UK to teach video specifically as a medium for artists. It has been very influential, and during the 1980s some saw the artists trained there as an overbearing legacy of 1970s conceptualism.

Later in the 1980s Edinburgh College of Art set up Animation and Film & TV departments, followed by Napier University. Though these courses were not specifically designed to teach video art or experimental film, the result of this activity in education was that many more artists were versed in the technologies. The establishment of new access-oriented, membership-based film and video workshops in Glasgow and Edinburgh meant that artists could source camera equipment and post-production facilities after leaving College.

MD: There were possibilities brewing in the late 80s regarding film and video from an 'experimental' perspective. What it lacked was a desire on the part of funders to strategically support this growing and visible area of practice. It was different with photography

in Scotland where it took a SAC commissioned consultancy chaired by the director of the Scottish Film Council to go through the motions of validation—then for a proposal for a festival to be drawn up, encouraged by the SAC, and for Fotofeis to be established. Now of course the funding has been withdrawn. Where do people interested in that direct their enquiries now? The same is true for New Visions—the Glasgow based bi-annual festival of film, video and new media—although that is on a different scale and economy of financial and human resources.

There have been notable advances in the past that I think we can still pick up on: the SAC established the Visual Artists Video Bursary in 1987. Pictorial Heroes, who were among several recipients of the award, made some very large and arresting video installations for the Scottish Society of Artists and the Royal Scottish Academy. Prior to that there was EventSpace 1, which involved Stephen Partridge from Dundee, Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson of Pictorial Heroes. That event, held at Transmission in its early years, was the first exhibition in Scotland of video since the 1970s. Artists included in that were Kevin Atherton, Steve Littman, Zoe Redman, Partridge, Rigby and more. Whilst at Transmission we organised a series of events under that title. When our tenure on the committee was up we formed EventSpace separately—Ken Gill, Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson were the others. The model there as far as I was concerned was Projects UK in Newcastle—that of a non-venue based agency promoting innovative work in site-specific and non-gallery locations. The most significant event organised there I think was 'Sites/Positions' in 1990 which commissioned several artists to make new work, including Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Alison Marchant, and Gillian Steel who created an animated film with girls from Springburn. 'Sites/Positions' was the first event of Glasgow's Year of Culture, and all the more significant for that. EventSpace continued with similar projects before focusing more strongly on the moving image with a series of screenings before organising

the New Visions festival in 1992.

The SAC set up a New Projects Scheme (NPS) in 1988. This was at a time when discussions were taking place between advocates of the sector and with both SFC (Scottish Film Council, now Scottish Screen) and SAC. Many agonising moments were spent trying to justify what this work was and was not. The 'get out clause' was always the inability for the definition of experimental to fit within any established funding criteria or for that matter just being able to recognise that. So, the video bursaries and the NPS I think were ways of attempting to address that and it must be said the arts officers, Lyndsay Gordon (who in fact had been involved in organising the '76 video show at the Third Eye Centre) and Robert Livingston were supportive.

It is worth noting some of the many events that have marked this period: I remember a huge Dan Reeves installation at the Pearce Institute in Govan 1990, then later his 'Jizo Garden' at the CCA in '92. He appeared again as part of the National Review of Live Art, which (with the help of the video department at DJCA) for many years hosted many installations and screenings and gave video a strong platform and presence. The homage to David Hall's 'TV Pieces' was replayed again with Fields & Frames' 'TV Interventions' event in 1990. Even earlier in 1989 Jane Rigby and Steve Partridge working under the company title of 'Art Tapes Ecosse', put together 'Made In Scotland' which was shown at several festivals and events. The same year I was involved in making Variant Video, which was an electronic compliment to the printed magazine. One edition featured works from Dundee and interviews with video artists.

CB: An important show was 'Interference', at the Seagate Gallery, Dundee in 1987, this being the first video show outwith the central belt. A clutch of artists associated with the course at Dundee made installations over the course of the event. Stephen Partridge, Pictorial Heroes, Chris Rowland, Alistair McDonald,

Tony Judge, and Kevin Atherton. Single-screen tapes by other artists were also shown. The year after, Partridge and Steven Littman from Maidstone organised the video section of the National Review of Live Art at the Third Eye Centre. Installations were staged by Mineo Aayamaguchi, Lei Cox, Paul Green, Daniel Reeves, Chris Rowland, and Jeremy Welsh.

MD: So there has been a lot of frenetic activity.

CB: The Fringe Film Festival was started by Harald Tobermann in 1984 as an alternative experience to the mainstream Edinburgh Film Festival. Community projects and low budget Super-8 films were shown alongside old classics and 'Indie' movies. The festival consisted of cinema screenings mainly, with some occasional interesting live events. Particularly memorable was a night of classic silent films with newly composed musical scores, performed live. Tobermann went on to found an unfortunately short-lived Scottish based video distribution company, which promoted productions from the many workshops then active in the UK.

It was not until 1990, when film-maker Louise Crawford ran the festival, that Edinburgh saw expanded cinema again: several installations were shown at the Collective Gallery in addition to the core event of cinema screenings. In 1991 the first video art appeared at what was by then the Fringe Film and Video Festival (FFVF), Video being added to the title, co-ordinated by video artist Nicola Percy. Between 1992 and 1993 I organised the festival and showed several site-specific moving image and performance installations during the period. Artists included Riccardo Iacono, Kenny Davidson, Ally Wallace: also in 1993 I brought over a show to the Collective Gallery from the World Wide Video Centre, The Hague which included work by Jaap de Jonge and Justin Bennett. During the 1995 and 1996 events organised by Dave Cummings and Becky Lloyd, the FFVF showed a video sculpture by Bob Last at the Collective, an early Cary Peppermint internet performance, plus various works on CD-ROM.

The significance of a festival such as the FFVF was, I feel, not appreciated widely at the time. It gave artists and film-makers the opportunity to make their work visible to the public. It also provided an annual focus around new work, raising the profile of this area with funders and exhibitors. The forums for debate on the film and video sector in Scotland were an important chance to meet other artists and discuss concerns and issues of common interest. The fact that the scene now seems so fragmented can perhaps be attributed to the lack of any such regular forum for showing and discussing new work.

MD: Both festivals engaged a wide cross-section of makers, public and supporters. Their great strength was the diversity of international media art production that both embraced and their motivation in linking local makers and concerns with a wider international perspective. A main feature of New Visions has been the 'International Zeitgeist' programmes culled from open invitations—as you will know there are hundreds of responses to these calls for submission. That's encouraging in terms of the volume of new work being made. There has been an attempt to blur art and community approaches through the 'Communities of Resistance' programme theme devoted to documentary, group and issue-based work. Another feature has been the forums for debate: in 1994 there was the 'Digital Deviance' event featuring Despite TV, Graham Harwood and Mathew Fuller, and the 'Tactical Television' theme; representatives from Van Gogh TV came and from the Amsterdam Translocal Network. There was a lot of discussion created and some anticipation concerning how the prospects for image making could be linked to the social purpose of working with those marginalised from the mainstream through the creative use of new technologies.

Many Glasgow based artists put on installations at New Visions in different venues: Smith/Stewart, Stevie Hurrell, Ewan Morrison. But it's really just the tip of the iceberg, and whilst we might bemoan the lack of structural support for activity emanating from the 'grass-roots', there has been a process of legitimacy aided by the international attention given to the emergence of video projection by artists such as Bill Viola and Gary Hill. This has assured the absorption of

video into the mainstream institutional context of art history. Douglas Gordon's '24 Hour Psycho' at Tramway in Glasgow was quite influential I think in affecting younger artists here in their perception of what video was or is and how it can be used. I hope that the 'V-Topia' show also at Tramway is a case in point here. The aesthetic of video has eluded the critics and journalists because they have been unaware of its presence and history in Scotland—there hasn't been anything that has penetrated that fog to bring all the connection points together. Now we can't talk of medium-specific aesthetics given the convergence between digital arts, fine art practice, graphic design, film, video and multimedia, except to provide an historical cohesion for present practice—that, however is vital.

CB: I think that is true, there is more promotion now of the individual artist as opposed to the medium. That said, in the past few years video in particular has had a higher profile in the major art institutions. In Edinburgh, Marina Abramovic showed a video sculpture installation at the Fruitmarket in 1995; there was a lot of work in the British Art Show in 1996; the Fruitmarket showed Bill Viola last year, Yoko Ono and of course Smith/Stewart this year. This rash of activity is interesting given that during the 1980s there was I think only one video show at the Fruitmarket: Marie-Jo LaFontaine in 1989. Unfortunately these recent shows have been confined mainly to successful artists already made famous by the international art market. Exceptions to this rule include recent installations by Dalziel and Scullion at the National Gallery of Modern Art, and David Williams at the National Portrait Gallery.

It has been mainly in what used to be the alternative spaces that video by Scottish based artists has been most prominent in the last few years. The Collective Gallery has a particularly good record of supporting work. This was often in collaboration with the FFVF in the past, but over the last few years some interesting artists have made video or computer works in the space: John Beagles and Graham Ramsay's incisively witty show being easily the most memorable.

MD: I like to think of art activity as being made up of all these little points of nascent energy and the role that a festival or an organisation has is to temporarily harness that without dulling it. Many venues have focused a lot of attention into the Lottery in terms of building based projects, rightly so I suppose in that the infrastructure has to be there to be materially facilitated. There are a couple of non-venue based organisations in Glasgow though who are doing their thing, but in the area of the moving image and new technology there is not an established organisation that understands the nuances of the inter-connecting sectors of small budget film, independent video, fine art and the possibilities with the new media to bring all those things together in exhibition and distribution across Scotland.

CB: Certainly the need still exists...one only has to look at the example South of the Border. England would not have anything like the presence it now has in this field without organisations such as the London Film-Makers Co-op, London Electronic Arts, Film & Video Umbrella, Hull Time-Based Arts, Videopositive...the list goes on. With the withdrawal of funding from FFVF, New Visions and Fotofeis, in Scotland we now have no organisation at all advocating, promoting or touring in this area of work. Whilst some galleries do a good job, I still think they need support, and the artists in this field certainly do.

MD: Lobbying tends to come in cycles—ten years is probably the maximum amount of time anyone can sustain energy on one issue without a corresponding change occurring from the lobbying before they have to move on, if they are not burnt out. There have to be tangible legacies to build upon in practice.

CB: Hopefully what has gone before can inform future developments. If not, the field will be left to others to start from scratch all over again.