

Chris Dercon

"I'm Not Looking for Works, I'm Looking for Artists"

Thursday, June 26th, 1986

9:50 p.m., FS 2

ORF-Videonale 86

Club II Discussion

Consecutively:

Perfect Lives – An Opera for Television By Robert Ashley, Production John Sanborn

Part VI:

The Church (After the Fact)

Ed and Gwyn arrive, Dwayne and "D" attending. Lucille appears.

Friday, June 27th, 1986

10:05 p.m., FS 1

ORF-Videonale 86

Summing up Video

Consecutively:

Perfect Lives – An Opera for Television by Robert Ashley, Production John Sanborn

Part VII:

The Backyard (T'Be Continued)

Portrait of Isolde, a mysterious epilogue in the twilight of The Backyard.

At the end of the ORF-Videonale 86 the video expert Chris Dercon, staff member of the Belgium Broadcasting Company, reviews "A Television Week with Different Pictures".

Responsible for the broadcast: Kunst-Stücke team, Direction: Werner Woess

Belgium video critic Chris Dercon interviewed by Kim Machan. April 1986.

K. M. Do you think artists are changing their approach to video because of access to television, in regards to that what differences have you observed in Europe and the USA?

C.D. I think the best video artists did not change their approach because of access to TV, in fact I think it is the opposite!

But when considering the majority of work from America, I would say yes. In the cases of the American artists where they depend on a history of liberal industrial sub-culture, but not in the case of the more interesting European situation. Generally in recent years the U.S. are thinking of video in 3–8 minute format and when compared to, for instance, the Belgium situation where video artists are working in the field of fiction, of documentary, the works are generally 40–60 minutes long, so you must admit that there are obviously very different approaches.

K. M. It is an interesting point to consider, what kind of possibilities can be created in 6 minutes and again in 60 minutes. There seems to be a totally different commitment to the ideas of scale, time and content and also somewhere involved in this, attitudes towards "popular culture".

C. D. The more interesting artists in America, for instance, Bill Viola, Tony Oursler, Michael Smith, Charles Atlas, Steve Fagin, are working on a 40–60 minute approach, but more typically in the U.S. there is this talk about a diabolical thing called an "attention span", not only by artists but by museum curators also. When they curate a video package they think of the audience in terms of an "attention span". They take the whole ideology of TV "Don't get bored", "Quick cuts and fast works" and "Let's make short programs". This is the negative

influence of TV on video works.

I have just returned from the States and have seen a lot of uninteresting work just because artists are considering television too much. A lot of people there are talking of such things as "how should we make a dialogue with TV", "how should we make our program look acceptable for TV" and in fact compromising the whole potential of innovative video works and innovative television.

I think only minor artists accept working in that kind of "TV Format"; it's not just the question of short tapes but the idea of "TV Format" which is not necessarily what TV can be. I think the most interesting work for television is made by artists that don't care about being broadcast, really in the end, a video work has many terminals for viewing, the museum, alternative spaces, libraries, on home systems and TV. The terminal is not important, it is the video work.

In Europe one of the last statements about video in connection to the visual arts was at the Documenta 6 in Kassel; it was actually the first and the last major statement made in that way, because after '76 the whole idea of the de-materialized art object was less focused on and figuration became more important, which doesn't fit to the more conceptual tendencies of video work. So in Europe video festivals, museums, alternative spaces and TV took over the idea of exhibiting video made by artists and the term "video art" receded, especially in Belgium and France where the term "video creation" was much preferred. These artists moved more and more to the strategies modelled on the independent film makers. The video field opened up and included cooperations not only with people from the visual arts but also people from literature, music, theatre and film. This was encouraged by the fact that the visual arts world was not so interested in the work or the medium of video as previously in the mid and early 70's. Video drifted about and then made links to film, in a very poor way but a very important way. This was the situation in Europe while in America video was being supported by foundations. Video departments sprung up in museums, for instance the Cinema Department in MOMA, which was the first museum in the world to create a film department. In America you even have production departments in museums while in Europe you didn't find this at all, so in Europe the video festival took over the function of presenting video art within the concept of a visual arts exhibition. There were many problems that went along with this, the whole video art crowd were very naive ... curators went to be critics, critics went to be producers, producers went to be artists, artists went to be critics and so on. It really became a melting pot and the situation was very blurred. Video art stood separate from the visual art world and had to establish it's own critics.

K. M. It seems that there is a great need for the level of criticism to improve, how is it progressing?

C. D. It's only been in the last couple of years that critics have tried to seriously consider video and the artists using it. There is at the moment a certain amount of pessimism, but that is a very positive progression in the development of criticism as I too agree that there is an enormous amount produced and a lot is really not interesting.

I'm looking more at the body of work from an artist, not for just an interesting minute or excerpt of a tape. I'm not looking for works, I'm looking for artists, I'm looking for authors.

K. M. There are many different concerns and directions that video is taking at this time, what are your general views of the "scene"?

C. D. In my opinion the most important direction in video work is in the new narrative and documentary video. One should be very careful when mixing ideas of "computer culture", "simulated culture" and "digital culture" to the broader sense of video created by artists. It is very important to realise that image processing is a tool to be used and that the trap that many

works fall into is one of just fascination with the medium. As an observer of video I find the most interesting work being produced in the new narrative video (referring to such artists as Jacques Louis Nyst, Marie André, etc.). They may in fact use image processing but in a way to reconstruct narrative, rewrite narrative. To quote Raymond Bellour, who wrote extensively on this and video's relationship to film: "One day it may become clear that the shift from film to video is comparable to what happened in poetry with the shift from Alexandria to free verse".

And so, how can we use image processing and all the sophisticated video techniques to rethink, restructure and rewrite a new concept of the entire idea of narrative? It is an interesting idea to refer to the special effects of video as the furniture of the television screen and also to note that we mainly see the uses of special effects on TV; compare it to the way that film uses special effects. In film it is used more often to create an analogue situation that moves from surreality to blend with reality and reality blending with sub-reality. This situation is not true of video users who tend to use special effects in a more "pathological" way.

Video is the first post-modern art form using the idea of production and reproduction at the same time, thanks to image processing and memory techniques, new possibilities have been created, another kind of memory, another kind of fast thinking.

K. M. And the future of video, what do you see coming?

C. D. Well I don't predict the future, but the visual artists have again turned interest towards conceptualism AND figuration and it probably means that video installations, video works and film will be again included in that dialogue to a much greater extent. Though I say again, the terminal is not important and the artists will continue personal works regardless, and we the curators, critics and producers must follow the important questions asked by these artists. We must establish criteria.