Curating Video Symposium, Review by Sean Ashton

Curating Video Symposium

Chelsea College of Art & Design

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The hosts of this symposium, Amanda Beech, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Matthew Poole, have collaborated on two exhibitions of video work shown internationally in 5 locations since 2003, and on three related symposia. 'Curating Video' is the name given to their long-term research project.

Callum Storrie (architect, exhibition designer and author of The Delirious Museum), Mark Nash (curator and writer, Director of MA Curating, Royal College of Art, and co-curator of Documenta XI) and Anne Tallentire (artist, Professor of Fine Art, UAL Central St Martins) were thus invited to add their voices to a discussion that has already established paradigms concerning the relationship between the content of video and the space in which it is viewed.

The following research questions were circulated before the symposium and presented by Jaspar Joseph-Lester (Chair) in his introduction to the event:

If the video image can be experienced as a facet of the architectural, as material and object-based, then how do these constructs establish themselves as part of our lived reality?

To what extent can an expanded idea of curation take on and reflect new shifts in approaches to the materiality and affect of images as demonstrated in new philosophical, architectural and video-arts practices?

Can new attitudes to video and the curation of video works move us beyond an assumed understanding of shared public space (the place of 'everyday' experience) as authentic, real and distinct from the experiences produced through video?

How can this understanding of video and the curatorial inform and transform our comprehension of public shared space?

It made sense to begin with Callum Storrie, who as an exhibition designer has worked on video pieces requiring very different presentational formats, be it the conventional 'black boxes' of Chris Cunningham or the more experimental installations of Mariko Mori, Angus Fairhurst and Mike Kelley. The images he showed of these artists' works and his commentary of their differences, though mainly technical, was a useful primer for the debates that followed. His discussion of other projects was more theoretical, relating to themes explored in his book The Delirious Museum. Examples ranged from Rodney Graham's appropriation of the movie theatre, to Douglas Gordon's freestanding sculptural extrapolations of the cinematic, to the more architectural configurations of Jane and Louise Wilson's video labyrinths. His final example was Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska's Social Cinema, a series of temporary cinemas constructed in open-air public spaces in London that aimed to embed video within the urban environment.

The overall effect of Storrie's trajectory was thus of the moving image being dragged out of the black box – out of its Platonic cave – into 'social' space. A member of the audience asked what the political consequences of this move were, implying that Cummings and Lewandowska's project simply replicates a conventional museum/cinematic viewing experience in a more public setting. Storrie suggested that projects like Social Cinema – with its blurring of the distinction between those who have chosen to view the films and passers-by who become 'implicated' in the spectacle, and its projection of films about London onto the fabric of the city itself – extend the 'educational narrative space' of culture. While these works do not 'transform our comprehension of shared public space', Storrie's presentation demonstrated how video is increasingly experienced as a facet of architecture and, like architecture, establishes itself as part of our lived reality.

Amanda Beech opened with an image from a Direct Line Insurance advert in which a controlled explosion of consumer products is conducted in an art gallery, arguing that the use of the gallery as a site of violence – violence divorced from 'real' consequences – constitutes an aestheticisation of politics. The appropriation of the gallery as a site of violence is predicated on the assumption that art is more 'free' than other forms of experience, conveying the message that in art galleries anything can happen – as though galleries were a sort of ethical prophylactic. Beech suggests we need to rethink the gallery as a social space, to consider it as part of real social space (though not the benignly democratic kind espoused by relational aesthetics), so that it can participate in the political in a meaningful sense.

For Beech, video has been spuriously positioned as a Marxian repudiation of the materialism and self-referentiality of late modernism. An evanescent medium, video is assumed to be inherently more political than materialist practices, theorised according to the same principles of dialectical materialism by which the 'dematerialised art object' sought emancipation from formalist doctrines. However, just as such doctrines champion the procedures specific to, say, painting, there is a canon of video art that retails its 'mediumality' as content. Beech calls for political re-evaluations of video, for the development of its rhetorical potential, its power to persuade. Much early video was unedited documentation of actions performed direct to camera, the medium being used to re-present works that might once have been performed live. Perhaps it's video's emergence alongside performance – its 'objective' recording of evanescent actions – that made it co-optable into the project of dialectical materialism.

In the questions that followed, Joseph-Lester raised issues concerning notions of materialism and the need for differentiation when using the term to speak about new developments in contemporary video. Beech discussed the persuasive and forceful materialities that are at work in video and how they are distinct from the tendency to identify video's materialism with a rhetoric self-reflexivity. A member of the audience, who had been contemplating the consequences of Beech's critique of materialism, asked, 'If video has the potential to be as political as we would hope, why don't dictators have videos made of themselves instead of monuments?' Arguably, such monuments are being constructed daily by News 24 and Al Jazeera.

Anne Tallentire presented documentation of past works, framing her commentary with what Stuart McQuire has identified as the three main characteristics of video: instantaneity, architectonics and plasticity. The first time she used a video camera, said Tallentire, was to record a performance done years previously. In her own words, she saw it 'as a reflexive tool for curating myself'.

In subsequent work, this reflexivity was refined, the camera now being used to produce the work – to record and simultaneously transmit live performance. For the 1994 piece Inscribe, Tallantire transmitted actions performed in the City of London BT Telecom Office to its Irish counterpart in Dublin, Telecom Eireann (using ISDN video conferencing). Simple body movements were interspersed with pre-recorded footage of similar actions and readings from texts about institutional management. Tallentire placed the piece within the context of Anglo-Irish relations of the early nineties, implying that, as there was far more Anglo-Irish discussion taking place than was reported by the British press at the time, we might read it as a technological allegory of diplomatic exchange. Central to this was the use of the camera as an 'extension of the self'.

Referring to another work, Drift, Tallentire proposed the addition of a fourth aspect to McQuire's characteristics of video: itinerancy. Drift, she explained, arose from a period of insomnia, during which she would wander through the City of London in the small hours with a video camera, filming cleaners and maintenance operatives, who perhaps constitute a form of 'invisible labour'. In the 22 short videos of between 25 seconds and 5 minutes that comprise this ongoing work, the artist's itinerancy is contrasted with the programmed utility of the gestures filmed. The performative subject is thus constituted through the depiction of others' actions rather than through the artist's own gestures.

Responding to Joseph-Lester's question about how the display of these two pieces affects the behavior of the viewer, Tallentire stated that the audience of Inscribe is invited to move fluidly within the installation in the telecom office, whereas Drift's audience is more static (in the classic cinematic sense). Her conclusion was that her interest in video might amount to a reinvestment in those materialist principles (associated with the late sixties) questioned by Beech. However, Tallentire does not appear to be retailing the 'mediumality' of video as its content; rather, she uses it as a means of 'auditioning' everyday action as performative gesture.

Up to this point, there was a tacit assumption that we know what we are speaking of when we speak of the temporality of video within a curatorial context. Matthew Poole's paper suggested that we do not. As we move through a group show of separate video works, we encounter radically different – often dissonant – concepts of time. Of course, the same thing applies to our experience of a showreel of celluloid films, but with video things tend to be complicated by the exigencies of presentation particular to the gallery/ site-specific context – spaces in which we move freely. How might a body of video works be organised to emphasise their cumulative temporal effect on the 'peripatetic' viewer?

All video pieces obviously unfold in time, but each exhibits a different quality of time. Poole theorised this distinction between 'quantity' and 'quality' using the Greek concept of chronological versus kairological time (Chronos and Kairos). Chronological time refers to the duration of an event, kairological time to what the passing of time feels like. But as well as defining the quality of time, in Rhetoric, Kairos also alludes to the concept of grasping the right moment to win an argument (and here, emphasised Poole, the practice of employing rhetoric in Law to obtain Justice becomes evident). Poole then suggested that this is how wit functions. Wit is all about timing: saying the right thing at the right moment. In wit, chronological and kairological time fuse in momentary synthesis; thus, timing can be thought of as the sudden transformation of quantitative into qualitative time. If we understand a group of video works to be a set of distinct kairological events that share a chronological context, then the way in which they operate as an 'ensemble' – the way in which a viewer is led from one kairological event to another, through the conduit of their shared chronology – is very much dependent on curatorial wit. The Kairological Field is a site of political contestation, for the reason that different qualities of time, and different mechanisms of timing, are set in transitory juxtaposition.

Mark Nash asked two questions: 'Is video a medium?' and 'What is curating'. He reminded us that, where the medium of film is defined by a set of material conventions – the exposure of celluloid to light and the fixing of images with emulsion – video is not. And yet, because it is 'moving image', we tend to talk about it in a similar way. Nash's subsequent reference to Rosalind Krauss's critique of installation as a 'post-medium' medium afforded an opportunity to locate video's 'mediumality' in the way in which it is installed, to define it as a thing consolidated only at the moment of its presentation (i.e., at the moment of image-projection rather than image-capture), but he did not take this up, instead digressing into a general discussion of curation, the dominant medium of contemporary art.

Nash then expressed doubt over the various political critiques of video offered during the symposium. He did not disclose the reasons for this doubt.

Instead, he offered a critique of Jeremy Deller's filmed re-enactment of the 1984 miner's strike, The Battle of Orgreave,

arguing that by juxtaposing his film with factual material relating to the miner's strike (in his Turner Prize-winning installation of 2005), Deller might have left viewers with the impression that the re-enactment was an historical document of the actual event, rather than an 'interpretation'. However, given that Deller used actual protagonists of the original miner's strike, we may contend that the film already intentionally blurs the distinction between documentary and interpretation, functioning both as an interpretation of historical events and as a documentary about citizens revisiting a past whose repercussions are still keenly felt. The conflation of fact and fiction might therefore be considered a speculative political strategy designed to instill the art context with a sense of consequence – whose absence in art institutions Beech had highlighted in her critique of the Direct Line Insurance ad (though not, it should be stressed, in such a way as to necessarily endorse socially emancipative projects like Deller's). It's worth adding that Nash placed his scepticism of Deller's approach in the context of his forthcoming article for Frieze about fiction and reality. Frieze's editors, he lugubriously informed us, 'have decided they are tired of this fiction/reality binary and want to give agency back to artists.' Nash said that 'things may not be quite so simple.'

In the plenary Joseph-Lester opened the discussion by drawing our attention to a fundamental problem: that video is often theorized as if it is film. Consequently, video has tended to be perceived as a 'poor relation' to film - as opposed to having experiential characteristics that might be pertinent to our comprehension of shared public space. Mark Nash had just reminisced briefly about the materiality of film, recalling his time teaching in the film and video department at St Martins, and Ann Tallentire had reassured him that a certain 'scratch' project – whereby students make films by drawing directly on celluloid – was still taught there. Despite Beech's earlier elaboration on the type of materialism(s) at work in video, the traditional post-Marxian materialist critiques were seen to remain relevant to the ways in which it is 'outputted'. Tallentire reiterated the architectonic experience of viewing video art, emphasising the screen and context as part of its content. Contextual aspects of video perhaps become foregrounded as much by default as by design, due to the medium's material equivocity. Video's ontology lacks the essentialism of film, whose materiality is held to 'authenticate' some notion of truth. This non-essentialism makes Video an apposite vehicle for the determination of contingent truth within a political landscape now denuded of fixed ideological landmarks.

Tallentire's discussion of video's production (i.e., 'input') methods was more political, coming as it did from the perspective of one who had shot video in the City of London during the IRA's bombing campaign of the 1990s. This brought an interjection from the floor, a member of the audience inveighing polemically against the ubiquitous presence of CCTV and the advance permission now required to shoot video in urban environments. While production companies presumably continue to follow the usual channels for seeking and obtaining permission, the lone artist can no longer go out and 'just shoot stuff' in built-up areas. Of course, many still do, but surveillance saturation may have subtly altered the way we read their work: an aura of mild civil disobedience now permeates anything shot in an urban setting. (This has been explored in a number of recent films made entirely from public CCTV footage, the most well known of which is Manu Luksch's Faceless, 2006.)

Renewing her scepticism of materialism, Amanda Beech drew our attention to the economic premium of film in the art market, and to the insidious pressures placed on some artists to convert video pieces into film. She pointed out that video-to-film transfers often still end up being shown as DVD projections, thereby contradictorily appealing to but also negating the 'authenticity' conferred by celluloid. Matthew Poole reminded us that digital software, ironically, now abounds in filmic effects: editors can insert their own 'scratches' etc.

There was tacit agreement, it seemed, that video doesn't want to be film (though it might want to be cinema…). Another member of the audience, perhaps sensing this might be an unproductive consensus, then suggested that, 'What video doesn't want to be is television.' Much emphasis was laid on that last word; unfortunately, the elephant in the room had shown itself at a late stage, and there was some uncertainty as to how the symposium's remit of addressing video as a spatially experienced phenomenon could accommodate the passive experience of watching TV. The issue was left dangling somewhat, so it might be useful, in the remainder of this text, to apply some of the speakers' models to TV.

Our experience of TV is usually private. While it is consumed in the knowledge that others are privately consuming it too, this knowledge makes it all the more socially atomising (indeed, the kind of bespoke viewing packages now offered by

Sky+ make it a near-parody of Debord's mordant doctrine of Spectacular Alienation). And yet TV is socially galvanic (as programmes like Jamie's School Dinners proves). Amanda Beech suggested that by 'TV' we mean 'the moral and political space of mass consumption', and no one disagreed with this. Developing this, we might say that mass consumption tends too often to be read as 'democracy'.

As Matthew Poole pointed out, TV is a transitive medium: it tends to want to get to the point too quickly. Its content is at the mercy of its scheduling. We know that TV must always move on to the next programme, and that it can therefore seem not so much democratic as structurally predisposed to solicit premature consensus. However, we must be careful here, for this summary of TV's structure invites a simplistic Marxian reading of 'spectacular alienation', implying that any 'art' forays into TV would ipso facto entail intervention in, and disruption of, its transitivity, its need to get to the point. But this presupposes a 'passive leity' of viewers that must be jolted into politically discursive action, when in fact many incline to the view that the 'moral and political space of mass consumption' is simply a participatory point of discursive departure, not a context whose formal restrictions necessarily engender discursive ones.

While it may be true that video does not want to be TV, much of it is clearly influenced by TV. What some video art aspires to, perhaps unwittingly, is a form of subjectivised TV: think of Simon Martin's videos, which combine the institutionalism of the Open University 'short documentary' with the autodidact's personal perspective; conversely, think also of Beech's Direct Line ad as an example of TV trying to be art. Such work (i.e., video as subjectivised TV) lacks only the endorsing power conferred by the 'broadcast' – while reminding us that it would never make the political compromises required to inhabit the space of mass consumption.

The concept of the broadcast – the notion of a moving image scheduled to be viewed at a specific time – may tie in with Matthew Poole's kairological schema. Wit, as we know, relies on the timing of a gesture or utterance. Broadcast schedulers know about timing too. However, because they are constrained by viewing figures and advertising, their juxtapositions lack wit (though the continuity announcer is permitted a certain amount of carefully judged levity). It is interesting to apply the analogy of the broadcast to Poole's thinking. A witticism might be viewed as a thought broadcast at exactly the right moment: an interjection that both disrupts and makes sense of the 'conversational schedule'. The problem with how video is curated is that its scheduling – the way different works are organised into a group – is only ever spatially determined. In almost all group video shows, we find several pieces playing concurrently, almost oblivious to one another. This concurrence – the equivalent of everyone speaking at the same time, in different rooms – is actually the antithesis of wit. Curators seem to accept concurrence rather sanguinely: after all, it distances video from the one-thing-after-another dullness of the cinematic show reel and the consecutive predictability of the TV schedule, i.e., distances video from the familiar industrial regimes of the moving image. But Concurrence, for all its kairological bias, for all its endorsement of divergent qualities of time, is just as predictable a regime as Consecutiveness and its endorsement of chronological time. Any curator who believes different kairological experiences can be negotiated without those experiences simply effacing one another palimpsestically surely has to relinquish the regime of Concurrence. The question is: Would artists tolerate the kind of stage-management presumably required to steer the viewer from one temporal province to another in a more seductive and politically decisive fashion?

One final point: The purpose of this symposium was to explore the political aspects of curating video. But we must take care not to overdetermine the politics of its curation to the point of occluding the politics of its production. At this point, how video is made, where it is made, and by whom, may be more important than where it is seen. Beech, Poole and Joseph-Lester are considering the curatorial consequences of this, developing a synthesis between the politics of video production and the politics of its curation, asking whether they share the same principles and operations, and whether new, less teleological practices established in video and curation could develop a less limited political agency.

Sean Ashton, 2008