

Bush Video

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Bush Video was a unique collaborative video operation running on an unconsciously anarchic model. It was the seminal organisation through which video in many of its forms was established in Australia. Established in 1973 by Joseph el Khourri and Mick Glasheen, it's initial role was to develop a cable network for community video at the Aquarius Universities Arts Festival held at Nimbin in May 1973. When the people who assembled around this task returned to Sydney after the festival Glasheen's studio space in Ultimo became the centre for Bush Video activities. Video recording of local cultural events, alternative architectural discussion, film-making and computer graphics production as well as the development of new technical capacities particularly in video synthesis and electronic music as well as the deeper engagement of other artists in the experimental arts of the time meant that there was a constant flow of production and a regular display of new work through the Bush Video Theatre that occurred on weekends in the studio. In 1974 Bush Video moved to Guriganya in Paddington, and continued its operations with ongoing and new involvement from people who were also attracted to the loose network structure and its experimental activities. I will explore its activities and work produced through its two year history.

In 1972 Mick Glasheen, who had abandoned his studies in architecture at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in favour of experimental film-making, and Joseph El Khouri, who graduated in arts at the University of New England (UNE) and whose interest in film led to him moving to Sydney and subsequently Melbourne to make his own films, met in central Australia when they became involved in a Pitjantjajara inma or large ceremony. El Khouri was part of the team providing infrastructural support for the inma and he and his friend Melinda Brown were also there filming for his *Ascension of the Rainbow Serpent* (El Khouri 1973). Meanwhile Glasheen had been filming time-lapse landscapes and sunrises around Uluru along with footage of [the Pitjantjajara elder] Lively Number One walking round the rock, telling the stories. (Glasheen 2005)

At previous stages in their lives they had both been inspired by Buckminster Fuller's talks on the integrated nature of the global biological, engineering and communications ecology, and subsequently they had both independently been introduced to video; Glasheen when he recorded a series of Buckminster Fuller lectures at UNSW and El Khoury in working with Bert Deling on his film *Dalmas*, when they used an Akai 1/4" portapak to film some tripping scenes. El Khoury had been reading about video in the magazine *Radical Software* and wanted to get into the experimental realm that video offered.

On a previous trip to Uluru, Glasheen had realised that he should be using video to record the stories, so on this second trip he and Jack Jacobsen (aka Fat Jack), who was providing the technical support, brought along a borrowed Sony 1/2-inch video portapak. (Glasheen 1978) Glasheen heard on the grapevine about the inma and they travelled to the site where they recorded hours of video. He says of this experience that it was his

“first extensive experience with [portable] video, and that was not doing any electronic effects that was just recording aboriginal stories really, or aboriginal corroborees. I did one experimental tape, just following footprints in the sand, just animal tracks and things, at dawn. And I thought this is so amazing, to spend that amount of time. (Glasheen 2005)

Nimbin

When Glasheen returned to Sydney from Uluru he moved into a vacant floor of the Fuetron [1] building, a factory building at 31 Bay St, Ultimo, which was then owned by John Bourke who had studied architecture with Glasheen at UNSW. Glasheen moved into the 4th floor to set up his studio so that he could edit the material he had shot at Uluru into an intended film about the mythic science of the aboriginal dreamtime. (Glasheen 2005)

Around February 1973 Johnny Allen, cultural director at UNSW, and Graeme Dunstan had been travelling to all the universities in Australia to enthuse the students about the Australian Union of Students (AUS) Aquarius Arts Festival (to be held in Nimbin, northern NSW, in May 1973) of which they were co-directors. They visited Glasheen to talk about making a film of the Festival and to set up a video co-operative as one of the projects, and they were going to apply for funds from the Film and Television Board (FTB) of the Australian Council for the Arts. They had also been speaking to El Khouri and others in Melbourne and Adelaide, and had written to 'Hoppy' Hopkins in the UK which led to John Kirk returning to Australia to join up with the project.

One aspect of the Nimbin festival was that it might provide a space in which to develop ideas leading to a democratic and accountable media. This was partly introduced by a Canadian visitor, David Weston, who suggested that a community media centre should be operated within the festival township. (Anon 1973) A meeting was organised in February 1973 at Nimbin to discuss arrangements for setting up the infrastructure.

Both Glasheen and El Khouri were present and decided to get involved. However Weston was unable to stay for the Festival and so it fell to El Khouri and Glasheen to organise the media centre. The main aim of the project was to introduce interested festival-goers to video so that they could go out and record festival events and then broadcast these out around Nimbin and the festival site through a collection of TV monitors to be placed in the main sites of the festival, eg, the Rainbow Café.

El Khouri and Glasheen decided what equipment they would need and El Khouri wrote an application for funding which was presented to the FTB under the banner of the Australian Union of Students (AUS). They received \$15,000 with which they purchased a Sony and two National 1/2-inch portapaks, a colour 1/2-inch video tape recorder, a small studio camera, lights, video tapes, a van to carry all the equipment, and enough coaxial video cable to cable up the township and the main areas of the Festival. According to Glasheen, in the two months before the festival

“A lot of people just gathered around Fuetron, they heard that there was going to be this great festival on and there was this place, Fuetron, where you could come and ... people would kind of squat there. So I remember Jonny Lewis arrived, and he was excited, with his girlfriend Ann Kelly. And then John Kirk arrived, and he'd just arrived from England and he'd heard about it in England. Johnny Allen had actually sent some communication off to John Hopkins about doing this video thing in England. And other people who were friends of mine, like Tom Barber and Jack Meyer and Fat Jack and people who had helped me ... do experimental film things, ... joined in. So it was this amalgamation of old contacts I had and new people.” (Glasheen 2005)

This band of artists, film-makers, architects and others made their way to Nimbin over the weeks before the festival. A video distribution hub was established in a house near the centre of town, and the work of laying the coaxial cable network began. It took nearly the whole period of the festival to get the cable laid but it did happen and towards the end of the festival videos that had been recorded during the festival were shown on the network.[2] Bush Video had been maintaining and lending out the portapaks to all comers and many tapes were shot. El Khouri made several tapes, including recordings of some of the main events such as the Dollar Brand and Bauls of Bengal concerts, and there were many other tapes shot, from play in the swimming-hole to trips into the surrounding landscape and whatever was happening in the Festival. To a large extent the festival participants had little experience of film or video making, and as Glasheen noted, during the festival

“all these tapes came in, but we kept on not having enough tapes and recording over the tapes and not putting any value on what was recorded. Because when I was seeing it, it didn't look like it was all that valuable anyway, you know. Much of it wasn't well recorded. (Glasheen 2005)

Bush Video

When the Bush Video team returned to Sydney they moved back into the Fuetron building and began to edit the Nimbin videotapes, but editing in those days was a very tedious affair and little was achieved. However, now the experimentation started. Although the group had a constantly changing configuration Bush Video

functioned as a loose collective of artists that somehow managed to work together for nearly two years. Through its Video Theatre evenings the studio space in the Fuetron building became a regular gathering place for the members and their friends to try things out, discuss projects, gather collaborators and to show the results of their production. The primary video work was highly experimental with a considerable degree of synthetically generated imagery, bits of computer animation, and Glasheen's time-lapse sunsets, sunrises and skylines, along with portapak video gathered from Nimbin and the city and the performances of dancers and musicians who joined in regularly.

Bush Video was still affiliated with AUS and, in August 1973, published the Bush Video edition of *Tharunka* which was intended to introduce the many facets of video to the students at UNSW. [3] It summed up much of the general politico-aesthetic thinking of the time, not so much for the 'fine art' world as for the experimental art world, whose interests were both an expression of the ideology of transcendence and the recognition of the ecological linkage between the biosphere and the development of the community both environmentally and spiritually. The Bush Video studio established in the Fuetron building included the video monitors from Nimbin now set up as a wall of screens with the cameras in front of it for feedback or to record performances. Along the opposite wall was a control-booth with the recorders and the mixer and whatever equipment they were able to build or borrow that could help make interesting electronic video. [4] One piece of equipment that made an irregular appearance was a video colouriser, [5] which was used to colourise the feedback effects that were so much a part of what Bush Video produced. Other equipment included an oscilloscope used for making Lissajous figures and a video synthesiser built by Ariel.

Beyond the ecological community aspects of the ideology of video there were the aspects of spiritual transformation that video seemed to represent, especially through the use of feedback as well as its more synthetic images. Glasheen's description of the attraction that video had for him illustrates:

"I was drawn to the organic nature of it, it seemed to me that video and electronic art is really an image of light energy! Electromagnetic fields that are made visible! And so I thought: This is amazing! That we've got our hands on this! Just like ... the first time I saw a television image I couldn't believe it. You know, there's this glowing cathode tube with an image there that was alive. So I just felt that this is a new life-form, when you're doing the feedback effect of video. Bush Video pursued hours of this feedback... Then I was feeling drawn to that because it was this kind of... it seemed to be that that's where the life was... in this machine". (Glasheen, 2005)

This transformative idea extended into explorations of the synthesis of new realities. El Khouri described it as 'the mythological version of video'. He went on to say: I was obsessed with these two areas of alchemy and memory theatre because I read this book of Frances Yates... her books on Giordano Bruno (Yates 1964) and *The Art of Memory* (Yates 1966) ... and I was reading Jung's *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Jung 1956) - [I was] fascinated by science but also fascinated by the roots of science which was this occult and alchemic kind of tradition which has this almost eastern Tantric thing in it. So my idea was to combine all of these things - the feedback... and [how] it transforms your personal life. Cinema as a process of transformation. Then moving into video because it's much more accessible and malleable to the personal. - and of course then we discover this metaphor of the effects mixer and the video process where you can make this state of heightened consciousness where everything changes colour and reality becomes a malleable transformable metamorphosing exhibition. (El Khouri 2009)

As Ariel described it, much of Bush Video's production involved remixing stuff that was captured with a camera. - One of the schemes was that you'd actually have all these banks of monitors sitting against the wall and then you'd have blank areas and there'd be like film being projected on parts of the wall. The whole place would be dark and - you'd be shooting the thing so it was like doing compositing with the camera plus mixing with more than one camera, and also colourising mono[chrome] sources, and so forth. (Ariel 2005)

Generating interesting video feedback was one of the main things Bush Video explored, although many of the best feedbacks never got recorded. You had to set up the video and then finesse the system to do what

you wanted to do. (Glasheen 2005) Feedback is a decidedly evanescent process and the most beautiful effects can be lost by the slightest change of conditions. However some tapes did get made. The most important was Meta-Video Programming which was commissioned for the Philip Morris Arts Grant [6] by James Mollison, then director of the National Gallery in Canberra.

Bush Video also had connections to Doug Richardson's experimental computer graphics facility based on the PDP-8 mini-computer that he had developed at the University of Sydney, (Jones 2008) and to some of the more radical, ecologically oriented members of the architectural community of Sydney. Having studied architecture, Glasheen had a strong interest in the geometry of space, both architectural and microphysical. He had been doodling around on the PDP-8 system, drawing and animating 3D objects, especially the tetrahedron, which represented for him the fundamental geometry of the microcosm. These animations were then recorded and incorporated in the mixdowns of electronic imaging that Bush Video specialised in, for example, the 'circle and square and triangle, the old Taoist pattern' (Glasheen, 2005) appears in Meta-Video Programming.

Money was always tight, despite support from the FTB, and in early 1974 Bush Video had to move out of the Fuetron building. They were fortunate enough to be invited to live in an old mansion on Oxford St, Paddington. On the land behind the mansion there was an independent school called Gurigunya. So Bush Video moved in, continuing their video activities, and became something like mentors for the kids who were students at the school. One of the more surprising results of this move was that right across the road the FTB had set up City Video, the first Video Access Centre in Sydney [7], and the National Resource Centre, which was to be the hub of the nationwide network of access centres they initiated under their local version of the community media project.

Bush Video continued as a centre for the experimental community around the art, architecture and theatre scenes in Sydney. They recorded plays at the Nimrod Street Theatre and provided assistance to many other people who were developing an interest in video. One of the early members, Martin Fabinyi along with John Kirk, produced *The Vacuum*, another important early video work, which was a TV talk-show send-up featuring Sylvia and the Synthetics, who were part of the early revival of cabaret in Sydney in the 1970s. There was a show made with the White Company who were a group of travelling players in the model of the medieval Mummers troupes. El Khouri finished a couple of complex, multi-layered mixes of synthesis, feedback and naturalistic video. One was an alchemical work called *Mysterious Conjunction* and the other, *Ajit Mookerji Speaks* was built up from a recording of Mookerji lecturing on the principles of the Tantra.

Bush Video at Australia 75

In January 1975 Bush Video was invited, through their connection with Doug Richardson and their general role in the electronic culture of the time, to participate in the Computers and Electronics in the Arts exhibition that Richardson was organising for Australia '75, to be held in Canberra in March 1975. There was already some stress in the group and this proved to be their last major activity together, but even then it was fractured. They drove the van down to Canberra, set up the dome and camped out at the Commonwealth Park site. Ariel and El Khouri set up the monitor stack and video players, as used in the Bush Video Theatre evenings, in a wall of monitors on the stage of the Ballroom of the Lakeside Hotel in Canberra and showed the mixed tapes of feedback, computer graphics, synthetic and colourised video that Bush Video had made over the preceding year and a half. Ariel has said:

“At things like Australia '75 we just used what was available at the time. We had about ten vcr's and monitors all stacked in different ways and in a darkened space you could actually see all these separate tapes running at the same time so you could get a mix, if you like, in the viewing space of all these different computer and analogue generated video sources”. (Ariel, 2005)

After Australia 75, Bush Video broke apart, never moving back into Gurigunya, with members going off in their different directions to follow up their separate interests.

In conclusion

We can see here from this early work that video experimenters in Australia were very aware of its peculiarly electronic aspects as well as its simple ability to record a naturalistic image from the camera. Some of the video artists considered that they were working towards a new secular electronic notion of the divine. Much of this is brought out in Glasheen's *Communication as a Conscious Experience of Energy* (Glasheen 1973) and El Khouri's discussion of video as a memory theatre, both of which appeared in the *Bush Video Tharunka*. (El Khouri 1973) The use of the electronics and the computer was to make video based on the intuitive sacred geometry that they felt was an important aspect of this new communication. In curatorial terms the most important outcome from *Bush Video* was *Meta-Video Programming*. However, possibly the most valuable result from *Bush Video* was its impact on the local culture. A large number of people had been exposed to the wide possibilities of video through *Bush Video* and went on to pursue all sorts of interesting careers, most of which continued to involve video making.

Notes: 1. The *Fuetron* building was named after John Bourke's brand of furniture which was sold from the ground floor. 2. John Kirk [telephone conversation, 5 November, 2005] reminded me that the cable network was regarded by the Post Master General's Department (PMG) as being significant enough for the PMG Research Department to have a teleconference with Glasheen and Kirk about the project at the time of the Festival. There is a transcript of the conference in the *Bush Video Tharunka*, [Glasheen et al, 1973, p.14.] 3. Conversation with Mick Glasheen recorded on 14 May 2005 at Palm Beach. *The Bush Video Tharunka* happened after we'd come back from Nimbin, only about two or three months later. Ö [while] we were still part of AUS. This was a University of NSW publication. ... we were still in touch with the university to actually bring out the uni paper as a whole *Bush Video* edition. 4. Ariel listed the available equipment: we had a whole stack of monitors, and a colour video open reel recorder and maybe one colour camera and a few black and white cameras, video mixer and then a lot of this other stuff that was just built by Fat Jack [Jack Jacobsen] or Mad Jack [Jack Myers]. (Ariel 2005) 5. This was one of the first commercially available colourisers and was developed in England by the Michael Cox company. The ABC and probably other TV channels or production houses used them for title colourising. 6. The video was included in the The Philip Morris Arts Grant 2nd Annual Exhibition, 1975. It was then shown in the National Gallery of Victoria's *Performances Documents Film Video* exhibition in September 1975. 7. Which in 1976, moved to the Paddington Town Hall as the Paddington Video Access Centre.

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