

Early Video Art as Private Performance

Mike Leggett; University of Technology Sydney

Abstract The adoption of video by artists responded to the affordance of immediacy and portability for the making of a motion picture recording. In the early 1970s in England, the potential of this facility was as novel as it was without precedent in the photo-time-based arts and collaborative work between artists generated a range of approaches to working with the new media of the day. This paper draws on two sets of detailed notes the author made in 1973, now held in the British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection in London and the Rewind archives in Dundee, that record his reflections on the creative potential of the Portapak video recorder and Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) systems. The making of *The Heart Cycle* during 1973 commenced as a series of experiments with a roll of 16mm film and a CCTV system, recording a series of procedures and adjustments made to the system during experiments and rehearsals. With references to the work of Donald Schön (1983), contemporary VJ and digital video culture, the paper reappraises the creative process for framing and making the artwork. The conclusions reached at the time about synthesising the videotape's final form as private performance are explored in the context of contemporary motion pictures and the expanded public contexts for reception. *The Heart Cycle* has been selected for the Rewind/LUX DVD boxed set, *An Anthology of Early British Video Art, 1972-82*.

video art, performance, archiving

Introduction

This paper addresses an immediate concern of the Re:live conference by seeking to record a firsthand account of working with electronic media at its early inception. As Simon Biggs has recently observed: 'Whilst the subject of intensive historical study, [research] is nevertheless typified by incomplete documentation and hazy recollections of events that were either not documented or which, in their mediativity, could not be documented appropriately with the tools of the day.' (Biggs 2009)

The paper draws on two sets of documents on paper, now held in the British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection in the University of the Arts, London and the Rewind archives at the Visual Research Centre in the University of Dundee. They record my reflections on the creative potential of the Portapak video recorder and a Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) system, shortly after the technologies became available in the early 1970s to artists and other researchers. Together with case-study notes on the videotape *The Heart Cycle* (1972), the material will form the basis of a critical reappraisal.

At this time many film and visual artists were averse to the non-materiality of the electronic image and the restricted range of acuity the bandwidth could support. The materiality of the film image was much debated throughout the 1970s, less so the video image. The non-materiality of the video image arises from a perceptual paradigm: light emitted from the video monitor is an asynchronous rendition of electronic information stored on the surface of the videotape. This is in contradistinction to the image on the filmstrip in the gate of the film projector, which is in synchronous relation to the image reflected from the screen. The illusiveness of the material base for the video image became one of the themes of experimental work produced from this point onwards.

A poster, 'Video + Video/Film - Some Possibilities Suggested by Some Experience,' prepared during 1973 and exhibited at the Experimental and Avant-Garde Film Festival at the National Film Theatre in June of that year, recorded the process and outcomes of six exploratory projects pursued during 1971 and 1972 (Leggett 1973). The projects included various CCTV configurations: in 1971 for Ian Breakwell's ONE event at the Angela Flowers Gallery; the Moving Wallpaper in the Television Lounge project at the Somerset College of Art (1972); the Whittingham Hospital performance, *The Institution* (1971) with Kevin Coyne at Art Spectrum exhibition, Alexandra Palace (Fig 2); and the Artists' Placement Group (APG) exhibition (1971) at the Hayward Gallery (Leggett 1973/2005).

As performances, the events established their asynchronous materiality through the presence of cameras,

cables, monitors and the general paraphernalia of the CCTV video studio, where the formation of the image and its reception happened in the same physical space. The series was an approach taken in the spirit of what Duncan White identifies as *Expanded Cinema's* principle concern with context and the social spaces of reception (White 2008).

Practice

Several of my completed films set out to make available to the audience the means, the forms and the materials that constructed the filmic phenomena as experience. In an encounter with *film as phenomena*, as *film abstracted*, an opening-up of the spaces between its component parts is created. This is in contradistinction to the narrative conventions of Cinema, intent on concealing the many joins that hold the illusion in place. The problematics of cinema were addressed using this framework through a problem-setting process of a conceptual, substantive (material) and procedural kind. This is in contrast to traditional problem-solving approaches intent on delivering outcomes as product for a market place. My initial approaches to experimenting with video were similar, with the additional aim of developing skills with the new medium and understanding the aesthetic principles emergent from practice.

The outcome of this practise-base was a body of artworks in several media exhibited both nationally and internationally during the 1970s. The focus here will be on one of the video works, *The Heart Cycle*, for two reasons: firstly it has been curated into the *Rewind/Lux DVD, An Anthology of Early British Video Art 1972-1982* (to appear 2009); secondly, a detailed typescript account of the making of the video was *rediscovered* on the *Rewind* online database (Leggett 1973). The level of detail in the notes indicates they must have been made soon after the events they record. Some [editing] has been applied to improve syntax, as well as adding explanation and comment on the now obsolete technology and the affordance it provided in the process of making art with Video.

My initial encounters as a filmmaker with the *Portapak* (Fig 3) were revelatory. I found: *on playback, after each attempt, that additions and alterations become quickly apparent.* (Leggett 1973). In the contemporary context this may seem mundane, but in the early 1970s the potential of this facility, as others have noted, was as novel as it was without precedent (Frampton 1974, Marshall 1996, Donebauer 1996, Elwes 1996, Critchley 2006).

The opening sentence of the notes made in July 1973 evoke the spontaneity the technology made possible: *Driving home with the Portapak in the back ñ stop at the bridge and walk to the stream and set-up tripod in water ñ the idea, the location.* By beginning a process of recording the scene in front of the camera and then determining where this decision would lead, brought the conceptual framework for commencing the making of a motion picture recording into closer proximity than had previously been possible. While these experiments were proceeding, forays into the studio occurred to explore the possibilities of working with CCTV using three studio cameras connected through a vision mixer to the *Portapak*.

The Heart Cycle: selected annotated notes

Set-up the studio to look at some film ñ added another camera to relay off the monitor through mix box; [vision mixer] Ö (Fig 4) The intention was clearly to explore the relationship between the film image and the video image when the film image was used as a source to make a video image using a film projector and video camera. To relay off the monitor meant that another camera was pointed at the monitor capturing the image coming from the film projector, a feedback loop connected through the vision mixer.

My first time encounter with the vision mixer required me to understand the various effects selectable by combining knobs, faders and buttons. *became confused by mix box; the temptation being to use the various effects [and thus] making even simple switching obscure after a while ñ went back to beginning and tried again, forgetting the FX! [effects] ñ The pre-set effects for combining camera outputs with various graphical shapes tended to ape the effects with which we had become familiar on television. These visual devices ñ wipes, irises, boxes, etc - had evolved from silent cinema traditions; the adjustable matte (Key) effect however, was worthy of further investigation.*

“Came to feel the [vision mixer] box, the mix, superimpose and cutting ñ introduced third camera through Key channel and got to know the box with this very seductive FX ñ finally found the Key image which seemed to work the best, being simple in area and rhythmic in action - this was the film spool on the projector, which after a while was lit with a small spot to improve the outline of the white to black areas. This was controllable using a Key Control knob, such that the area affected by the white key could be altered from zero ñ a blank screen - to maximum, which produced a distorted image of the spool.”

Experimenting with the relation between the object in front of the video camera ñ the film spool turning on the projector ñ and the real-time control of the keyed white and black areas, produced a rhythmic device upon which to build the composition. The feedback loop created with one of the cameras and a monitor, was controlled through the use of the sliding faders on the mixer. The zoom lens (framing) and focus controls on each of the cameras added further variables in the system. During my interaction with each of these control surfaces, a shape and order began to emerge.

“Finally all the elements were combined on the final monitor. The combined images were of great interest, the only problem being where - in terms of start and finish - the [duration of the] combined [images] might exist. A series of takes [recordings] were made onto the P[ortapak] and again played back at the end of each one.”

The facility of the system being developed to show immediate results was quite unlike the experience of making a film, when there is the inevitable delay between exposing the image to film and being able to see the result as a motion picture image. The feedback from the video system encouraged spontaneity similar to making music, drawing, or writing: working with the system was something plastic and responsive.

“The [vision mixer] box proved difficult again but gradually on watching playbacks bits were noticed and technically improved by rehearsing certain box manipulations. Work on [a] short piece [at a time] ñ record then playback. Õ Finally something had sedimented out which needed final structuring - the backend of the film seemed to provide the most sympathetic images. The [use of the] Key was to start the piece with a white line on black; there would be a cut to feedback [from the camera facing the monitor] plus [the] key image [of the rotating film spool, which was] also white on black; then the introduction of the [images from the] film; then the reintroduction of the Key into the image.”

The process of investigating the convergence of these various elements gradually improved not only my skills of interacting with the various control surfaces but also the outcomes delivered as a live composition. The investigative activity shifted away from learning the system to understanding how the different components were determining the shape of the composition and the images it contained. The appearance of the film spool had been abstracted by use of the Key: the rounded shapes of the spool accentuated by the Key giving the visual impression of an electronically generated image, the source of which is not revealed until the very end of the tape - a treated electronic image of a real object”.

The Heart Cycle therefore developed from the manipulation of primary elements contained by the video system, with the images in the emulsion on the acetate of the film occupying a secondary position within the structure. The next question was how to fit the elements of the composition so far constructed into an overall time span.

“It was noticed during one of the final takes that the film spool would speed up imperceptibly as the film came closer and closer to the centre [of the spool]. such that The rate was noticeable frenetic before the film would actually run-off and suddenly stop the spool [rotating] dead. It was decided that this would complete the cycle.”

Problem solved, the duration of the performed procedures with the video system would match the length of the found footage on the projector. The experimental stages had consolidated the procedures to arrive at a series of rehearsals peaking as a final unedited performance, the extent recording of The Heart Cycle.

The recording ended with a coda, where the physical elements of the performance are revealed using a zoom out and track: the spool and the projector, the cameras and monitors, the vision mixer and Portapak,

and then the artist entering left to sit at the mixer and move a fader to take the image to black and the end of the recording.

“Three takes were needed to get the acceptable one – the obvious joy was the making of the tape as much as the collision of its various elements. To ‘perform’ the tape each time was the obvious ideal – here anyway was the recording of one of these performances.”

The observation that the ideal would be to ‘perform’ the procedure ‘each time’ to a live audience was a realisation that the black and white ‘low-band’ video recording delivered with a large television monitor, tended to undermine aesthetic value. Rather than expecting an audience to focus their attention on a television set styled in the domestic taste of the day, what was envisaged was something more expansive. This would share the spontaneity and ‘liveness’ of the proceedings with an audience responsive to the presence of the artist and the work’s development, a response in part, to the audience’s material presence: incorporation, feedback and looping becoming the key to performance of the work’s elements.

Though the Notes presciently anticipate the live performances of contemporary VJs and the dynamic architectures of digital video, analogue video had strict limitations when it came to the live performance involving complex manipulations. Though video experimentation pursued during this greyscale era could expand into gallery spaces as CCTV or prepared tape installations using multiple monitors, the restraints were nonetheless severe compared to film: by the low resolution of the image, lack of colour, imprecise editing options, random interference from poor quality recording tape, etc. When scale, colour and acuity of the image was necessary for a project and if the considerable costs associated with the alternative could be covered, film remained the medium of choice for single and multiple-screen presentation.

It is in the nature of experiments to be unclear about direction and the time needed to pursue them. The approach described here for making art with video is echoed in the work of Donald Schön and his analysis of professional practice, based not on problem solving but problem setting. The artist or researcher makes and tests ‘... new models of the situation – to function as transforming moves and exploratory probes.’ (Schön 1983) In the case of *The Heart Cycle* a point was reached in the investigations where the identified elements, emergent from the working procedures, were brought into states of proximity with one another – as images, as durations – and gradually incorporated into the process of composition, sustained for a finite period. As the series of procedures converge on the durational and physical end point of the film, abstraction seeks to undermine the ‘authority’ of the instructional documentary, creating a durational space through which the dialectic develops between the representation and its antithesis.

Liveness, Performance and Video

The making of *The Heart Cycle* was a series of live real-time performances, live in the sense of performed iterations proceeding toward the work’s final completed duration. The ‘transforming moves and exploratory probes’ employed in performing the medium is reflected in the heuristic production of evidence in viewing the completed art work; light as abstract movement, with synchronous/asynchronous sound, as image of place and surface, as image of presence and agency, interrogated within a continuous present. Kacunko describes the performative state as of ‘... a kind of highly unstable entity [where] liveness should be regarded as an authenticity guarantee’ (Kacunko 2009). This is in the face of traditional archivists (or anyone else for that matter), who regard the recording, (as a storage medium), as the authentic artefact. From ‘performing the medium’ the tendency developed in the following years towards the medium framing performance, and as the technology became more ‘film-like’ in handling and image appearance, encouraged the use of video for the hermeneutic ends of producing meaning from performance through interpretation. As improvements and upgrades were made to the technology throughout the 1970s – colour and general image quality, editing using dual-VCR controllers – the affect was to consolidate video being used as ‘substitute television’ and as others have observed (Spielmann 2008, Rees 1999), as a documentation and documentary tool, using a language made increasingly familiar in the 1980s with the expansion of ‘independent’ television production in Britain and throughout the Western world.

The migration process from the analogue version of *The Heart Cycle* to the digital artefact in 2007, introduced further interruptions and interferences to those already evident: horizontal white lines flick

across the screen, the sign of decay caused by the metallic oxide dropping off the tape mylar substrate ñ ědrop outí. Within the overall schema of the composition this ěvariableí becomes a manifestation of the rendition of magnetic and electrical fluctuation into digital data, stored on a hard disc or DVD and asynchronously reproduced on replay through microprocessor array onto the screen.

Duration and extreme duration were outcomes of artistsí work with the new media of analogue video, a medium specific for delivering to artists for the first time, motion pictures that displayed in ěreal timeí, the state of a system in synthesis. The Heart Cycle as a record of the synthesis of a performance event, retaining the finite time span of the artistís film, a singular event when replayed on the screen of a video monitor. However, in the act of viewing, it retains in the electronic genesis of the black and white DVD image, a provisional gesture in private performance towards a contemporary present.

References

- Biggs, Simon. 2009. Correspondence with author.
- Critchley, David. 2006. Video Works 1973-1983. In *Experimental Film and Video: an Anthology*, edited by J. Hatfield. Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing.
- Donebauer, Peter. 1996. A Personal Journey Through a New Medium. In *Diverse Practices - a critical reader on British Video Art*, edited by J. Knight. Luton, UK: John Libbey Media.
- Elwes, Catherine. 1996. The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art. In *Diverse Practices*, edited by J. Knight. Luton: John Libbey Media.
- Frampton, Hollis. 1974. The Withering Away of the State of the Art. In *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: the Writings of Hollis Frampton*, edited by B. Jenkins. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. Original edition, *Open Circuits: the Future of Television*, Museum of Modern Art, NYC.
- Kacunko, Slavco. 2009. M.A.D.: Media Art Database(s) and the Challenge of Taste, Evaluation and Appraisal. *Leonardo* 42 (3):245-250.
- Leggett, M. 1973. Video + Video/Film - some possibilities suggested by some Experience. Exeter: Exeter College of Art & Design.
- óóó. 1973/2005. Video+Video/Film: time-based media, the New, and Practice-based Research. In *CCS Reports*, edited by A. Johnston. Sydney: University of Technology Sydney.
- Leggett, Mike. 1973. An account of working with video and the new Portapak. In *Rewind Archive*. Dundee: Duncan of Jordonstone College of Art, University of Dundee.
- Marshall, Stuart. 1996. Video: from art to Independence - a short history of a new technology (1983). In *Diverse Practices*, edited by J. Knight. Luton: John Libby Media.
- Rees, A.L. 1999. *A History of Experimental Film and Video*. London: British Film Institute.
- Schön, Donald. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Spielmann, Yvonne. 2008. *Video: the Reflexive Medium*. Edited by S. Cubitt, Leonardo Books. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press.
- White, Duncan. 2008. *Expanded Cinema in the 1970s: Cinema, Television and the Gallery*. In *Expanded Cinema: the Live Record*. National Film Theatre, London.

Biographical Note Mike Leggett has been working across the institutions of art, education, cinema and television with media since the late-60s. He has film and video work in archives and collections in Europe, Australia, North and South America and practises professionally as an artist, researcher, curator, writer and teacher. He has a MFA from the University of New South Wales and has recently submitted a PhD to the University of Technology Sydney on hypervideo and mnemonics. He has curated exhibitions of interactive multimedia for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, (*Burning the Interface*<International Artistsí CD-ROM> also in Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne); the 1996 Brisbane International Film Festival; the 5th International Documentary Conference; and Videotage Festival of Video Art, Hong Kong. He contributes to journals (*Leonardo*; *Continuum*) and is a correspondent for the Australian contemporary arts newspaper *RealTime*.