

6 VIDEOTAPES BY ERIC CAMERON

- 1) CONTACT PIECE: A NUDE MODEL (DORITT)**
- 2) CONTACT PIECE: A WINDOW PANE (IN MY HOME)**
- 3) CONTACT PIECE: THE WALLS OF A ROOM
(MATILDA'S ROOM)**
- 4) INSERTION PIECE: A MOUTH (MY MOUTH)**
- 5) ATTACHMENT PIECE : WALKING WITH THE CAMERA
FASTENED BY IT'S OWN LEAD
TO THE ANKLE (MY RIGHT ANKLE)**
- 6) REWINDING PIECE: REWINDING A HALF-HOUR TAPE
FOR HALF AN HOUR WITH THE
CAMERA TRAINED ON A CLOCK
(FEBRUARY 5th a.m. 1973)**

**111 GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA, WINNIPEG.
MARCH 14-21 1974**

OPENING: FRIDAY MARCH 15 9p.m.-11p.m.

August 14, 1972
(Expurgated)

Eric Cameron: Notes for Video Art

1. Fall from the Empire State Building
2. An Approach to Video-tape as Art
3. Video Projects in Hand
4. The Condition of Modern Art
5. Video Time and the Time of Painting
6. What I read on my Summer Vacation

1. Fall from the Empire State Building

In video recording, the camera and the recording apparatus containing the tape are distinct units. The camera may be so roughly treated as to bring about its complete destruction without in any way damaging the tape or impairing the quality of its reproduction. In standard equipment the lead is no more than a few feet long, but I was assured in a telephone conversation with a member of Sony Electronic that it could be extended to 700 or 800 feet without loss of definition. A lead of this length attached through a window to a recorder installed half way up the building would allow the camera a free fall of twice that distance -- more than adequate for the project. I propose to stand on the open observation platform at the top of the Empire State Building, switch on the camera, carry it to the edge and throw it over the surrounding parapet. The tape will be allowed to play itself out. A lens offering a good depth of field will be used, but apart from that, no attempt will be made to persuade the visual or aural traces to resolve themselves as coherent information.

2. An Approach to Video-tape

"Fall from the Empire State Building" is one of several projects I have in hand which respond to the open question, "What can you do with a television camera?"

For most day-to-day purposes it is necessary that we should assume the standard, normal, reasonable, day-to-day answers to questions of that type. Food is to eat and soap is to wash with. We might get away with the alternative, but even if the results were not too physically disagreeable, the effort of making such decisions at every turn would exhaust all our energies. We would never find time for more important things. The day-to-day answer

to the question, "What can you do with a television camera?" is that you can use it to make television programmes, and that will usually stand us in good stead. To speak of the television medium's potential for recording and transmitting information, of visual effects and feedback loops is only to expand the same reply, and for most day-to-day purposes I would be a staunch advocate. If in the context of art I give a different sort of answer, this is precisely because it places the decision at an altogether more fundamental level.

What then can you do with a television camera? A list of my current suggestions appears over the page. For one thing one might throw it off the top of the Empire State Building. Or one might put it in one's mouth or someone else's. The tubular form of the lens fitting gives it more the resemblance of a finger (or a penis) than of the eye which its function seems to duplicate. One might use it to feel over the surface of a wall or fondle the body of a girl. Alternatively one might disguise it to look like an eye. A little padding and some fur could easily transform the average video-camera into a very plausible one-eyed dog. The trigger-switch which turns it on would figure as an outsized penis and, with wheels fitted, one could take it for walks on its own co-axial lead. Freeing the trigger from its sexual connotations you could fire the camera at a target like a gun, and forgetting the camera itself one might spend a whole half-hour rewinding the tape.

It is not possible to pose a question like "What can you do with a television camera?" without in the same instant suppressing the pre-echoes of an obscene reply: " " Modern art has often developed by refocusing our attention in ways which previously seemed inconsequential or perverse, and the anxiety caused by admitting this reply to consciousness may be more

likely to indicate its validity than otherwise. But it is to be understood that the question itself is a fiction, a verbal device to facilitate verbal explanation. Another false question follows closely on the heels of the answers: "If a television camera is not for making television programmes, why involve it at all?" If I choose to throw a television camera off the top of the Empire State Building () in preference to eating soap or washing with corned beef, it is not because there is anything inherently unintelligent about these latter suggestions, rather that their adoption imposes a secondary level of decision as regards presentation or documentation.

3. Video Projects in Hand

Famous Falls

1. Fall from the Empire State Building

2. Niagara Falls

The camera is to be switched on and thrown into the water close to the brink of the falls. The recorder is to be situated at the base so as to allow the current the possibility of carrying the camera downstream once clear of the drop.

Contacts

In each of these projects a wide-angle lens is attached to a standard portable camera. The camera is placed in physical contact with the object concerned and drawn over it. The area around the point of contact will be lost in a blurred pattern of light and shade, beyond the range of focus of the lens, but details at a little distance emerge more clearly as the lens tilts obliquely. The friction of the camera's movement registers parallel traces in sound as it responds to contact with differing surface textures.

Contacts continued ...

1. (A girl's body -- title to be the first name of the model)

The camera is drawn freely over the body of a nude girl who may herself move into new positions to facilitate a greater variety of approaches.

2. Bedroom

The camera is held firmly about chest high and in oblique contact with the wall and carried forwards at a slow pace around the room, maintaining a constant height and angle of contact with the wall- (door-, window curtain-, or picture-) surface.

A work combining versions of the two preceeding projects was realised some time ago. Played back on paired monitors, the piece was in three episodes separated by ten-second bands of black simultaneously appearing on each screen. The right monitor carried the tape of the girl, Sue Sterling, a model from the University (nude in the first two episodes and clothed in the final one). In the left monitor the camera slowly moved from left to right around the walls of a bedroom in my home. On one wall was pinned three sheets of paper bearing the captions, "Et in Arcadia Id", "Sue I" ("Sue II" or "Sue III", according to the episode) and "by Eric Cameron". As the camera passed over these words I read them out loud. The complexity of this preliminary work puts it in a different category from the main body of video-projects with which I am concerned at the moment.

3. House

I will draw the camera over the outside walls (doors, windows) of my house following the same procedure as in the last project.

Contacts continued...

4. My body

5. Window-pane

Using a wide angle lens set at its shortest focus the camera will be moved freely over the inner surface of a window-pane.

Insertions

1. My Mouth

A portable camera will be used with a small wide-angled lens. Sitting with my elbows resting on my knees, I will hold the camera in both hands with the lens towards my face. I will insert it in my mouth, withdraw it, and repeat this act until the tape runs out. (A preliminary version of this tape ran for only five minutes.)

2. (Name of girl)'s mouth

Sitting opposite the girl, I will insert the lens in her mouth, remove it and repeat the process.

3. Mouths

I will switch on the camera, insert it in someone's mouth and leave it there for a minute or so. I will then remove it and carry it to insert in someone else's mouth, and so on.

4. The Atlantic Ocean

Standing knee-deep in the water, I will raise the camera above my head, plunge it into the water, and then repeat the process.

5. A Jug of Maple Syrup

Sitting at the breakfast table with my family in the kitchen of my home and resting my elbows on the table I will swing the camera slowly down into the jug and then back up, repeating until the end of the tape.

Insertions continued ...

6.

7.

Re-winds

1. A Clock for Half-an-Hour

The camera will be set up in a fixed position facing a clock with a prominent second hand. For a total period of half-an-hour (equal to the length of the tape) the tape will be freely wound-on and wound-back allowing varying times for recording.

It follows that some parts of the tape will remain blank (i.e. showing snow).

2. Curtains for Half-an-hour

This will be executed in the same way as the previous project, but the camera will be set up facing slightly billowing, white, light-weight curtains in front of an open window.

Video-dog

The camera will be modelled by cloth padding and fur coverings to simulate the form of a dog. Wheels will be fitted and it will then be taken for walks. The tapes will be designated, "Video-dog: Walk I" (Walk II, etc.)

Shots

The camera will be taken into a pistol-firing range, aimed at the target and "fired". This will incidentally switch it on. It will then be aimed again and "fired" (incidentally switching it off). This process will be repeated.

Breathing on a cold lens

Prior to recording the camera will be reduced to a low temperature by putting it in the ice-box of a refrigerator. I will then hold it (switched on) in both hands facing my mouth and breath heavily on it. Ice crystals will form on the lens but will later melt as my breath causes the temperature to rise.

Scratching the lens

I will again hold the camera in my lap with the lens facing me.

Using a diamond glass-cutter I will begin scratching the surface of the lens and will continue to do so for the duration of the tape.

4. The Condition of Modern Art

Modern Art operates increasingly through the implications of the fact of its existence rather than through any contained meaning or message. An old joke about the hand-signals of women drivers states that if a woman puts her hand out of a car window, the only thing you can be sure of is that the window is open. That modern criticism has often preferred to attach most significance to observations of this type is undoubtedly because they are certain facts which do not call into question the authority or competence of the artist. The externalisation of content -- the inversion of art's traditional frame of reference -- neutralizes the variability of the human element, but also isolates art from the criteria of its evaluation which must accrue to it through the accumulation of meaningful interpretations.

The role of the modern artist is to determine the existence of art and he may defer secondary questions to the necessities of that central issue much as well-founded academic theory once deferred compositional decisions to the requirements of the subject. But the fact of art's existence may be construed at many different levels: as physical object or situation, as sensory stimulus or response, as event in time and space, or as act or the traces of an act, as concept or decision or the focus of the factors which lead up to the decision. Or its existence may be viewed essentially as art in relation to the category of art within the structures of classifying behaviour which sustain it. The artist may direct his energies and attention at whatever level he will and may defer decisions on one level as functions of another, but in the end what he determines is the existence of his art and not the construction which is to be placed upon it. If he attempts to impose a particular mode of interpretation (or to adjust to the anticipated reactions of his audience), his work reverts to traditional type. The imposition (or the condescension) itself represents a contained meaning which may compromise the integrity of his art's existence. The spectator will approach art at a level of his own choosing, if indeed he troubles to notice it at all.

It is a moot point what distinguishes the existence of art from the representation of the theory of its existence. Many modern artists have attempted to avoid the intervention of a second order of awareness by deferring the determination of their art's affective presence, wholly or in part, to the mode of its physical fabrication or to the decisions of other people.

The situation with regard to videotape is particularly complicated, because television continues to function as a medium for contained messages within

comprehensible norms of signification.

5. Video Time and the Time of Painting

The word "art" (in spite of recent developments) carries a primary anticipation of paintings, sculpture and related objects. My own main artistic activity (till very recently) has been in painting, and the problem presents itself in terms of that experience.

The main difference is the factor of time. Nothing can exist outside time and the fact that painting does not normally move in no way exempts it from the general rule. It is simply that the effective time of painting is the time of the spectator. Theatre and music operate within the time of the performer. If one turns up late one has missed the show. In painting there occurs a separation of the time of the artist as he performs the act of executing his work and that of the spectator who contemplates it. The finished work may contain varying indications of the time the artist spent, whether he worked quickly or slowly, and the stages through which the work approached completion.

The notes in my Halifax exhibition catalogue suggest that my paintings may be explained as a rationalisation of the use of masking-tape. In my preliminary attempts the dominance of the final layer always betrayed a multiplicity of levels of decision as well as execution. The change to a rectilinear arrangement of tape at intervals equal to the width of the tape itself provided a theoretical resolution, but in practice the tape can never be laid exactly straight. Implementation required a modification of the theoretical premises from which it proceeded. The ideally conceived regularity of the system, in its actualisation, superimposed another tightly integrated system of specific relationships, while the marginal overlapping of successive layers, re-established the temporal perspective of the work's

execution as clearly as before.

Painting (and particularly my painting) resembles the performing arts in that it respects the temporal sequence of the act of production. In the film, by contrast, the shooting of the scenes may be done in any order, regardless of their place in the assembled reels. The use of flashback technique in the telling of the story is a different matter. It can occur in the theatre, and the narrative paintings of former days admitted temporal manipulations too. We may find anachronisms in the art of Masaccio but not of Pollock. The distinctions I am concerned with are ones of mental set rather than objective comparison. If we chose to regard the projectionist as the performer in the cinema, then the film is a function of his time, and respects its sequence.

Videotape is in much the same case as cinema except that the domestic connotations of television perhaps predispose us to expect more direct presentation. For the artist viewing videotape in terms of its existence as art rather than its content this consideration is secondary. The standard videotape lasts half-an-hour. Even if the camera is not switched on it takes half-an-hour to play back the tape. For the moment I am prepared to defer the determination of the length of my tapes to that consideration. Most of my projects accept the camera's being switched on as part of its functional definition, but I would not, on the basis of my involvement with painting, wish to propose a dogmatic unity of action. If, however, the camera is switched off, or if the sequence is disturbed, these decisions are of such consequence for the existence of the work that I must allow them to determine its every aspect. Perhaps the practical principle is one of the integrity of different levels of decision. Where this principle fails to resolve an issue I defer it negatively to convention,

but to the conventions of art rather than of television. It follows that my tapes have no "stairs", no "blacks" and no "titles". The place for titles is the catalogue -- and the cover of the box in which the tape is stored -- and they should be simply descriptive unless in some way they constitute a decisive aspect of the existence of the work. None of my projects so far involves the refocusing of the camera during the making of the tape. I would rather have my tapes shown in an art gallery where they depend on the voluntary commitment of the viewer than in a theatre where he is confined in a fixed relationship to the monitor for the duration of the piece.

6. What I read on my Summer Vacation

Martin Heidegger. Being and Time, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. New York, 1962.

Edmund Husserl. Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology, translated by Derian Cairns. The Hague, 1960.

Ludwig Wittgenstein. Tractatus logico-philosophicus. London, 1963.

Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophical Investigations, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (3rd ed.). Oxford, 1968.

A. J. Ayer. Language, Truth and Logic. New York, 1952.

A. J. Ayer (ed.). Logical Positivism. Glencoe, 1960.

Roland Barthes. Elements of Semiology, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. London, 1967.

Noam Chomsky. Selected Readings, edited by J. P. B. Allen and Paul Van Buren. London, 1971.

Claude Levi-Strauss. The Savage Mind, translated from the French. London, 1966.

Claude Levi-Strauss. Structural Anthropology, translated by Claire Jacobson Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York, 1963.

Sidney Hook (ed.). Philosophy and History, a Symposium. New York, 1963.

William Elton (ed.). Aesthetics and Language. Oxford, 1959.

Gregory Battcock (ed.). The New Art, A Critical Anthology. New York, 1966.

Ursula Meyer. Conceptual Art. New York, 1972.

Douglas Davis. "Video-Obscura" in Artforum, April, 1970, pp. 65-71.

