

REVIEWS

Michael Rush, *Video Art*

(London: Thames & Hudson, 2003)

By Rodney Browne

Perhaps now more than ever, video technology is entering the mainstream of art practice as more and more artists incorporate video elements of one kind or another into their production. It is almost *de rigueur* for fashionable young artists to associate their production in some way with this “movement”, and why not? The moving image has become the most pervasive and compelling form of contemporary representation. Whether we speak here of mainstream film, television, the internet, computer games, or domestic video, it is the illusion of motion that is so enthralling as it seduces us into participating in the emotion, drama, visual gratification and deception of the moment.

In the text with the splendidly promising title of *Video Art* (would anyone tackle the encompassing subject of *Painting?*), Michael Rush presents what the title suggests will be a definitive analysis of the genre of video art. As a practice that has been developing and evolving over three decades, it would seem an appropriate time for such an analysis to be undertaken.

In this instance, “video art” operates as a central theme from which an historical survey emanates. Even though some modes of classification are proposed and form an important structure for Rush’s analysis these

are not used to define the practice neatly within clearly delineated boundaries, as might be suggested by the somewhat ambitious sounding but not inappropriate title of the book. Instead the text aims to “suggest multiple ways of constructing a history of the medium and offer as broad an overview as possible...” of the employment of video in the practice of art making. (8)

Rush undertakes a roundup of the beginnings of the genre of video art dating from around the early 1960s in the chapter on “Shaping a History”. All the anticipated notable figures of the period are there including Nam June Paik, Vito Acconci and the early protagonists of commercial television (an issue particularly significant at the time) such as Ant Farm, TVTV, Frank Gillette and so on. There are also references to important precursors and influences, including Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, the Fluxus movement and, interestingly enough, some practitioners who are most often associated with avant-garde filmmaking such as Jean-Luc Goddard.¹ This is not so unusual as Rush himself notes that any undertaking to discuss video will naturally fall back on the language of film due to the relative newness of the medium and lack of “handy themes” or “schools” around which to construct an analysis.² This is not unlike the relationship of photographic analysis to the language of painting in the initial development of the photographic medium.

Nonetheless, this part of the book presents a well compiled collection of the largely pre-existing material and leads into the more substantial analysis of the genre that primarily follows the development of the practice from the 1970s to the present. In this overview Rush outlines three main streams of practice which employ distinctly different approaches to the medium. In a sense these categories could also be viewed as parallel histories of video art, as some

artists and practitioners move in and out of these classifications as their work evolves (along with the associated technology).

The first of these categories focuses on the use of the camera as an extension of the body. It draws upon important early figures such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, VALIE EXPORT and others who were primarily influenced by Conceptualism, Minimalism and Performance Art – influences that were to provide a significant background for the initial and ongoing development of the field. In another approach outlined by Rush, the expansion of narrative potential was provided by a medium that offered a move beyond the conventions of cinematic narratives, which most audiences were and continue to be accustomed to. In this mode of production artists have employed various strategies to extend the narrative as in the case of two of the main protagonists, Gary Hill and Bill Viola. For Hill, a primary concern is language and its relationship to recorded image. Alternatively, for Viola, the primary concern is an investigation of personal and spiritual development mediated through the conceptually loaded technological frame. Much of this production is also associated with the widespread use of video installation and multi-screen projections dating from the 1980s and through the 1990s. These have been employed as mechanisms for layering the narrative and providing multiple perspectives for the viewer to engage with an expanded experience.

The final category offers an analysis of new visions through the exploration of hybrid technologies. The interrelationship of film, video and various forms of digital technology has given rise to many technology enabled outcomes and in the process some of the previously distinguishing qualities of this field of practice have been dismantled. The

blurring of the boundaries between film and video has provided the opportunity for artists such as Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Matthew Barney to employ a luscious filmic canvas for their work. In the process they have been able to discard the immediacy of “real time” video production along with any lingering suspicion towards the seemingly more “expensive” cinematic experience. The intrusion of digital technology into the production of the moving image has meant that the clearly defined role of video as an alternative to film has now been dismantled for ever. For Rush video art may well have been subsumed within the expanded field of filmic production that now incorporates other practices such as animation, web art, virtual reality and a wide range of other hybridised moving image outcomes. It is perhaps this final chapter that provides the most interesting aspects of Rush’s analysis of the recent practice and direction of video art. With the question left hanging as to whether video art will continue as a distinct practice, the book reads almost as an obituary for the practice and its title as a tombstone.

Video Art is a well researched and lusciously illustrated publication, notwithstanding the reader’s frustrating experience of the inadequacy of the still image, along with the text descriptions, to illustrate the impact of the moving image in the form of video art. Many readers would have experienced at first hand the confronting impact of engaging with the *Tall Ships* (1992) installation of Gary Hill, or the emotional potency of viewing *The House* (2002) by Eija-Liisa Ahtila or many of the other works mentioned. Without such experiences it is difficult to understand how these works operate, particularly as they have sought to extend and subvert the conventions of more mainstream forms of the moving image.

Nonetheless, this text provides a good overview for anyone wishing to gain an insight into the evolving practice of video art from its inception to its current questionable future.

- 1 M Rush, 41-5. Considerable attention is also given to a discussion of Goddard's more recent video practice.
- 2 Ibid, 8.

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Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*

(Translated by Roxanne Lapidus, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004)

By Jim Searle

If you haven't read anything by Michel Serres but enjoy writing that acts on its own words, that probes for something important despite and especially because of its flaws, then this book is worth tasting. And if you are already familiar with Serres' clambering thought, it provides further insights into his work. Through a series of interviews conducted in 1991, Bruno Latour engages Serres in discussions and arguments that reveal some

of the motivations that drive his work and the strategies and practical tools used in its construction. However, Latour is far from being a removed, objective observer in the process and the result is a taste of two philosophers for the price of one.

The book is built with five conversations through which runs a continuous play of ideas. The banter between the two men is a highly effective philosophical tool; its to and fro allowing thought to move quickly and lightly over potentially boggy ground. Latour's questioning is opinionated, alternating between charm and sarcasm and, always persistent, he pries Serres' thinking open, coaxing out a potent personal memory turned motivational drive, challenging a particular way of working or using imagery from all directions, or simply irritating and niggling until he provokes a response. Serres' replies are mostly careful and measured and he is easily Latour's match in conversation, countering the interviewer's flattery with cool indifference and his occasionally puerile sarcasm with a mature dry wit. Serres has the assurance of someone who knows his ground intimately but is refreshingly at ease in admitting when he has crossed into unfamiliar territory. He also has a knack of pointing to the limits, weaknesses and potential dangers of his philosophy, just when readers may be experiencing their own doubts.

Both writers are committed to maintaining a flow of connections in their approach to thinking and writing. This can be seen by the way Serres talks about the development of his thought from specific cases to general conditions. The reader of *Conversations* is constantly referred back to his books, from his books to a variety of writers, artists and situations (both contemporary and historical) and to the dictionary. His use of specialised

geographical or geological terms is precise and deliberate, and their peculiarity focuses attention on the words' physicality. Latour's pedigree is well demonstrated in his own book *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Both writers are positioned in relation to thinkers such as Barbara Maria Stafford, who emphasise analogy and metonymy rather than metaphor. In Serres/Latour, connections are deep flows of magma below the fractures of the earth's crust and experienced through rigorous inquiry. They are not the politically correct exercises of papering over cracks that can be found in some interpretations of connectedness. Indeed the book is spiced up by lapses into bickering and some cutting remarks aimed at other philosophers: at times giving the impression of scenes from Coronation Street or Eastenders.

Bruno Latour and Michel Serres are well-known names to those interested in so-called "interdisciplinary" approaches. However, their writing has important implications for situations beyond those of awkward academics trapped by their specialisms and struggling to talk to colleagues over coffee. For Serres, it is in the impossibility of completely coherent thought and successful communication that an adventure begins. He likens this to the historical search for a north-west passage linking the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans through forever-changing ice-flows. Such a venture requires total commitment, will be beset by difficulties and setbacks, and constantly risks failure. Through analogy we enter a topographical space. The problems of communication and semiotics mix themselves with those of navigation and geography. Here we find ourselves *in* (rather than looking upon) what might be referred to as liminal areas, border-spaces, or spaces-between.

This is a book for those of us who can't get our heads around "it" — whether that's the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari or the prospect of Leeds United being relegated to English football's second division next year — but who still have to get on with it and has to continue working through life's ruptures and contradictions. Both Serres and Latour argue for a practical philosophy with calluses on its palms. Such thought is not self-contained and can't be measured solely by internal criteria. The two men celebrate thinking not only as a tool but also as movement. Philosophy begins when it starts to invent and in this way the book and Serres' entire output is play — in all senses of that word. However, this approach shouldn't be mistaken for "anything goes" sloppiness. His apprenticeship in structuralism and attention to the task at hand rather compare with jazz improvisation. In putting his knowledge to work, Serres permits himself deviations and border crossings that realise more than mere transgression. In doing so he encounters, values and puts to use kinds of knowledge that traditionally lie outside academic philosophy.

Although it is ten years since its publication in English, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* remains a lively and testing introduction to two provocative contemporary thinkers and writers. I do have a complaint about the paperback edition reviewed here which I bought through Amazon.com less than six months ago and already has pages falling out — if you want to buy the book think about investing in the hardback. That aside, I've found it a great book to read alongside others by writers such as Jacques Derrida, N. Katherine Hayles and Brian Massumi. Both Serres and Latour are important writers to those of us grappling with the significance of the analog in an apparently digital and posthuman era.

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