John Gillies interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg

In the following interview of l0 November, l993, video artist John Gillies discusses his collaborations with The Sydney Front, particularly *Techno/Dumb/Show* (l99l).

Can we begin by discussing your work with The Sydney Front?

Well, I've known some of the members of The Sydney Front for quite a while and I'm very interested in what they're trying to do - particularly their attempt to seize the excitement of live events. One of the reasons for forming The Sydney Front about five years ago was very much their feeling that there was a gap in Australian performance at this particular time - John Baylis describes their alternative as the exploration of 'excess' and of 'a gesturing that goes beyond that necessary for any reasonable discourse'. In much the same way, I've always had this idea of extending video beyond the narrow confines of what video art is meant to be. Before working with video, l had worked in theatre and was particularly interested in performance-based work, so l was intrigued by the possibility of making a video in collaboration with them - that's how *Techno/Dumb/Show* came about. I was also attracted by the way that they work, which is very improvisational, rather than being defined by a script. Their work is very exploratory, and l like to work in music and in video in that way too. l don't write a script and then act it out. It's an exploration, and something that builds up - the meaning of the piece is generated through the torturous process of sculpting the thing as it goes along, rather than defining it totally before it even starts. So there was a confluence between the ways in which we worked that seemed like an interesting starting point.

Could you tell me what you understand the confines or orthodoxies of existing videoart to be - or what it was you were resisting in your work?

Well, the fairly obvious ones - a few years ago - were the emphasis on technology as the content of the work, and a futuristic kind of rhetoric embracing the glamour of new technology. Even though I'm a techno-freak as well, *Techno/Dumb/Show* quite purposefully didn't fit into that kind of rhetoric. Video art was also very self-referential, constantly referring to video art, as if other forms didn't even exist. While a lot of early video artists, such as Nam June Paik, came from Fluxus and music, this was not spoken about so much. The discourse around video became very self-referential, and when video artists, people tended only to look at video-tapes of the recent years of video - mostly American - without much reference to music or cinema, etcetera, etcetera.

Has your work been an attempt to work within those wider traditions? Aspects of *Techno/Dumb/Show* seem to refer to silent cinema, early Russian cinema and expressionist cinema, for example.

Yes - that was another reason for doing it, because I'm interested in the way in which The Sydney Front is composed of non-talking actors. They may talk or speak in their shows, but whereas other actors may concentrate totally in developing these incredibly articulate speaking voices, The Sydney Front only use text in their work as part of all of the other elements. I'm fascinated by silent film - not because it's nostalgic - but because it conveys the excitement of the period when people were discovering the medium - it's exciting to see people trying out certain gestures or ways of moving for the first in front of the camera. *Techno/Dumb/Show* self-consciously used a device that I'd noticed a lot of silent actors talked about - including Marlene Dietrich and Lillian Gish - they set up a mirror next to the camera, and checked their performance in the mirror all

the time. That gives a very different quality to the performance - it gives a self-consciousness to it, and also gives an autonomy to the performers.

Instead of a mirror, we used a video monitor, so that the performers could see what they were doing, or very, very quickly, without having to change positions, could see a playback of what they did, and then adjust what they were doing accordingly. They could see the edge of the frame and what their performance looked like, and using that electronic mirror they could direct themselves in a sense, as well.

That's very interesting, because one of my feelings was that you're obviously working with close-ups and very intense expressions, and probably with the relationship between the frame and that part of the talking-head which was visible. I was wondering how that might relate to live performance on the stage, where you might have lots of people - whole bodies and whole groupings of actors - whereas in *Techno/Dumb/Show* it's almost a series of expressionist cameos. Presumably the performers were actually framing themselves in a series of portraits - so in a way, it's a sort of self-conscious cinema for the face, acting within a frame.

Yes, that's a good description. I remember seeing this documentary a while ago in which someone mentioned that when Griffith first used close-ups in cinema, people were upset when they saw his films because they'd paid to see the whole actor!

How did the members of The Sydney Front respond to this use of close-ups of their faces? Did they enjoy that, or did they want to use other gestures and movements?

l think it's kind of a confronting process, because it's very much like someone staring at your face and there's no make up or anything like that, which is common in video production. The faces look under a lot of stress, and at the time we were shooting *Techno/Dumb/Show*, they were under a lot of stress, and l was under a lot of stress, because we were all doing other things at the same time, and you can almost see that process inscribed on their faces. Sometimes, l remember, people looked back and found it a little bit shocking to see that they actually looked like this.

Did they find that these close-ups diminished their usual impact or did they comment that it perhaps condensed or intensified some of the things that they do?

l was very much trying to condense their impact. It's part of the medium - of video and of cinema — that a body moving in space is not going to be the same when it's inside a frame. You have to think differently about framing and the movement within the frame, and how to seduce people or gather people's attention. Something that will feel fantastic in performance is not going to do the same thing on the screen. l mean, they've got a million tapes documenting their performances, and that's something l didn't want do. There's always something lacking in that sort of documentation, so have to dismiss that whole process and think about it differently. For example, in performance, what's interesting about their work sometimes is that don't know whether a performer is going to come up to you very close, or speak to you. l was trying to get that sense in video, of the performers being close to you. l picked certain aspects of their performance and amplified that, with my own kind of signature on it as well. l see *Techno/Dumb/Show* as an angst-ridden work, although l also see it as being humorous as well, with a black or sly kind of humor.

What sort of decisions were you making editorially, in terms of the juxtaposition, superimposition and accelerations of content and image? It seemed quite a fast sequence, although perhaps occasionally you've got frozen images and faces which then accelerate into actions.

There's obviously that juxtaposition between different tempos, because if you want to have something move very fast, and you have something juxtaposed which is very slow, it makes it move faster. l wanted to grab people's attention with the fast thing, and then try and hold it there with a very slow thing, almost to the ends of boredom. l wanted to try and give people a reason to want to concentrate that much, and then almost thread them through a whole series of time and tempo changes. The rhythms and the tempos are conceived almost musically, l guess.

Did you compose the soundtrack beforehand?

No, some of the little short segments of sound may have been composed roughly beforehand, but it was very much a process of constructing the soundtrack while l was editing the images together, in relationship to each other. In some places the tempo of the rhythm of the images follows the tempo of the sound, and in other places it's the opposite process. It's important that they're conceived together - I'm interested in making works where there's a dialogue between the soundtrack and the images.

Did you do all the sound yourself, or was that partially collaborative? I noticed Rik Rue's name among the credits for *Techno/Dumb/Show*.

l sound-designed and constructed the sound-track, though Rik recorded and contributed this crackly fire-sound which l then integrated into it. Another musician,]amie Fielding, who sadly died this year, collaborated with me on the soundtrack sequence and Cassi Plate also recorded the city atmosphere at the beginning. It was for another piece, but it ended up in this sequence.

What about the use of colour? Every now and then things seem to fade from black and white back into a sort of tinted colour.

The image is in fact very processed, although l don't think this is very obvious. The image has actually gone through many generations of analogue processing to get the look that it has in combination with the lighting that I've used. It was a technical experiment into lighting and using certain processes to highlight lighting and to create colours. There were two separate ways of doing it - either it all came out black and white, or it came out with very, very red, underexposed skin tones. l was leaning towards heavy darks and dark kinds of colour, but it came out that way anyway, as a result of the exploration of the technical process. I found it a very enjoyable process, processing those images - it was almost like painting them, in a sense.

Was the work planned in any particular order? I'm thinking for example of the way in which Robert Wilson relates that when he does a production he plans the movements first, and then the setting and then the sound, and then finally adds any dialogue. Did you start with any particular emphasis?

We began with a huge gathering process where nothing was censored, during which themes gradually emerged. We simply had a great big list of things that we wanted to collect, and then we went and shot them in the studio and improvised on them as new things developed out of these activities. Then over a long period of time, l grouped the materials together, threw out nine-tenths of the material, and started to hone it down to the essential images – or what l thought were the essential images. l then began linking those images to sound, trying out different ways of

cutting. Then l constructed very diagrammatical flow-charts for each section, and started to structure the piece. Even though the structure of *Techno/Dumb/Show* may seem very loose, it has allusions to other structures - to the way in which plays and early cinema often set the scene in the first section, putting it in a certain place, while the last section acts as a kind of closure for the whole thing - although in this work it's an ambiguous kind of closure. l played with partial returns in which you think you've seen or heard something before, but then you're not quite sure if you have or you haven't - these structures were the most interesting thing for me.

So it's almost a fusion of minimal structures with maximal contents, perhaps! The progression of slightly changing actions might be compared to something like a Sol LeWitt drawing, but instead of varying neutral lines there's a lot of high-power action.

Yes - I'd run them through their paces, seeing what happened when you put one sequence of actions next to another one, and then I'd put these next to another sequence, and get something new every time.

These intense shifts of image also seemed very impressive in the installation version of *Techno/Dumb/Show* in the 1991 Australian Perspecta exhibition. How pleased were you with this installation? Did you find it worked better than the video version?

I've been told so by some people. When l was shooting it l was very lucky to have a friend who had access to a cinema with a video projector, so l used to go and check the rushes there to see what it would look like on a big screen. I always had the idea in my head that even though this was being made for a television screen, it was also being made for a big screen. People seemed to really enjoy the way in which it was installed as a pseudo-installation at Australian Perspecta[1] - it was like entering totally into something like a cinema experience, except that it happened all the time as a loop.

Was it on several walls?

No, it was just on one wall, but it filled up a whole wall, and of course the faces became huge, so it was quite disorientating - but many people said they went back to it many times. l didn't really conceive of it as an installation, but l think that it worked in that context, in terms of the darkness of the space and the sound.

Did you use any found footage in *Techno/Dumb/Show*?

Yes - there's an image early in the work of a man coming down a wire. He's a cable engineer or something like that. l have done a lot of work found imagery and I'm still very fascinated by it. My work developed from using a lot of found imagery to shooting my own material, which has the look of found imagery. l don't want it to be obvious where these images are coming from.

Perhaps there's something of this ambiguous quality in *Test*, your recent piece with The Sydney Front, which seems to evoke parallels between footage of a screen chart accompanied by a mechanical bleep, and a series of shots of faces miming to that bleep.

Yes, at the front of rolls of processed colour film you often have character that called a 'China Girl' — a sort of nondescript female figure who at the head as a colour reference, before the countdown sequence, along with a beep to calibrate your equipment. *Test* grew out of improvisation that Andrea Aloise and Elise Ahamnos were doing, where they simply screamed at each other.

Were they actually screaming?

Yes, they are screaming, but that sound's been lost. When we the screaming it peaked out the meters - it's very hard to record, because microphones are too sensitive.

Did you in fact substitute the bleep?

Yes, and that seemed to work, because it's also setting the level at the loudest sound that will appear in any film or videotape will be. Technically speaking, in engineering terms, that sound is zero, so it's height of the loudness of sound, or the height of the loudness of emotion, something like that.

Are you planning to use this kind of found sound and footage in any further projects with The Sydney Front?

Yes, at the moment we've done a rehearsal for a short work based on a 1950s recording of Molière's play *The Miser.* It's a cut-up piece in a sense – an inter-active cut-up piece - where various phrases from a performance by the Comédie Française are sampled, and in which the performers can trigger these phrases by foot-switches. So if they open their months, they can mime a line from the recording, so that the Comédie Française speaks through them, as they construct gestures.

That's very interesting isn't it - it's a bit like dubbing, only it's dubbing the gestures rather than dubbing the sound.

Yes, it's very strange - it's uncanny! I'm very interested in this whole area of performance, puppets, and the strangeness of things that are half-dead and half-alive.

One of the things that l wrote down in my notes on the two works was 'puppets' because you've got these faces, almost in a Punch and Judy stage-set, which move and sway.

Exactly - I'm a bit like the puppet-master in this piece. I've got the buttons and I push the buttons and pull the strings, and these faces or people move around on the screen.

Will you be emphasizing facial close-ups in this Molière piece?

No - it's more like the last highly gestural sections of *Techno/Dumb/Show* when you see the upper half of the body - the arms and hands are being used a lot.

What about the text - are you planning to use the whole of Molière's play, or are you just using samples?

It's samples - it's using the rhythm of the language, rather than its meaning, although they'll be interesting aural juxtapositions, l think.

Would it be fair to say that you're using and juxtaposing different technological and live materials in order to generate new energies and effects, rather than subscribing to the fairly prevalent idea that technology neutralises creative impacts.

I think that technological determinism can neutralise content, but l don't think that technology *per se* neutralises content at all. l can't really see that. Often technology creates new kinds of content.

What do you mean by technological determinism?

Well, for example, it's often argued that we can only have music on FM radio rather than AM radio, and that AM radio is for voice – and therefore the voice is not for FM radio, because FM is stereo. A lot of media debates in Australia are technologically driven rather than considered in terms of what you can do with technologies. Yet they're simply technologies - just part of the equipment available. Sometimes people get very hung-up about technology, when it might simply be treated as junk and as something that you can dominate. Of course, the more you work with it, the more you understand what it will do, and the more it will start to generate things. But technologies don't generate things on their own — they need human beings and artists playing with these things.

People are often too reverential towards technology. But also have to work with technology with a lot of care - it's sometimes a very crafted sort of process. Sometimes I feel that making video is something closer to printmaking or something like that. Maybe the process isn't as one thinks - perhaps humans have been doing these kinds of things for a long time.

In other words technology allows them to explore or extend those impulses that they've always had in a new language which initially seems scary but which in ten years may seek quite user-friendly?

This fear is perhaps also something like the fear of in puppets and in images of people who seem partially alive and partially dead. There's a strong mythology bound up in technological images of people - there's a huge cultural mythology about the devilish quality of technology.

Would you say that your work is trying partially to overcome or perhaps, to utilise that fear?

Maybe it's an attempt to confront people with it, rather than to overcome it.

Perhaps, after all, there is something a little self-consciously devilish about your use of images? Perhaps you're playing with their fear of technological representation?

Yes. It's a little like the fear people have of puppets, and of technologically produced beings. People's reception of filmic and televisual images seems shaped by a double fascination and fear.

This argument seems to offer a welcome alternative to the usual claim that film and television just product rather bland, neutral, superficial talking heads or silhouettes without any substance.

But a talking head is a very weird thing - just a head on a screen. Interestingly, the first broadcast on the Baird system in England was of a puppet - a ventriloquist's dummy called Stooky Bill.

And when the first Baird system camera was shipped to Australia in a box, Stooky Bill was also shipped out in that same box. So there's some kind of link here between these new technologies for representing the human being, and this older technology of puppets, ventriloquist's dummies, Punch and Judy, etcetera, etcetera. There's a strong link between the past and the present that I find really fascinating.

A shortened version of the interview originally published in 'Electronic Arts in Australia', *Continuum* Vol 8, no 1, 1994.

Nicholas Zurbrugg obituary:
http://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/oct/26/guardianobituaries.books