

John Gillies

John Gillies is one of Australia's most influential video artists. Often falling between the cracks of new media and short film, his pioneering contributions and collaborations have sometimes been overlooked in favour of more easily categorised work. His recent retrospective at Sydney's Performance Space entitled *VIDEO WORK 1982-2001* (curator Blair French) provided a rare survey of his work. ● MC

Follows is an excerpt from author **Jane Goodall's** exhibition launch speech.

John Gillies is typically to be found at the edge of a crowded room, looking at ease if slightly detached, as if he's found himself there accidentally. It's a light and open sort of presence.

Lightness and open-ness are qualities I associate too with his work. It takes a lot of strength and discipline to manage the light touch. And it takes great steadiness of purpose to open the mind. What takes us out of ourselves? What lifts us from our habitual centres of gravity and to the outer reaches of our familiar experience? These are big questions, and I've seen an awful lot of rather heavy, locked up sorts of art works devoted to them.

Video is a modest medium, but it's amazing what it can open up. A sense of strangeness, for example.

There is the sound of footsteps. A slightly fizzy image of two retreating figures, something Japanese about the aesthetic of their silhouettes, walking through the woods, into the light.

A luminous green shirt, upright and empty, turning slowly, with perfect dignity, and walking away.

A woman's neck and face looming towards us from a sea of black reflecting surfaces – a wet street at night, a jeweled bombazine dress – talking and talking. She's desperate to get a grip on the world with her talk, but what world?

Video allows images and sounds to hover between the distinguishable and the indistinguishable. Images make sounds distinguishable, and vice versa,



but the relationship is never secure. They come together momentarily, and slide away from each other.

A really good Retrospective is about what's coming as well as what's past. John Gillies's work has always been hypersensitive to the emerging energies of the performance scene. The early eighties – exploratory, ironic, disoriented. The late eighties and early nineties, with the fierce energies of the Sydney Renaissance culminating in some of the strongest experiments of The Sydney Front. The millennium, with leading artists like Tess de Quincey and Claire Grant drawing on years of stringent discipline to find ways of achieving some kind of clarity in a cultural environment seething with confused propaganda. Where to, next?