

John Gillies and the Craft of Video

Nicholas Zurbrugg

Writing in *Trans-avantgarde International* (1982) a mere decade ago, the Italian critic and curator Achille Bonito-Oliva argued that the whole “generalized situation of catastrophe” (p48) characterizing the late seventies and eighties had “caused the historical optimism of the avant-garde – the idea of progress inherent in its experimentation with new techniques and new materials – to collapse” (p8).

In other words, whereas the more lucid of modernist critics, such as Walter Benjamin, understood that the greatest virtue and value of the early twentieth century avant-garde was its capacity to aspire towards “effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form” (p239), myopic postmodern theory has increasingly decreed that this kind of confident aspiration has “collapsed”. Bonito-Oliva, for example, concludes that art finally overcome “the technological fetish” (p81), and has abandoned the futuristic aspirations of the technological avant-garde for the relaxed nostalgia of the transavantgarde – a realm of “uninhibited superficiality” in which the image is “relieved of any weight it may have borne” (p68), and simply surfaces “without asking where it comes from or where it is going, following drifts of pleasure” (p66) and evincing a logic of “eclectic association” (p76).

More recently in an interview in *World Art* (Nov. 1993), Bonito-Oliva insists that “The myth of the future is not part of the transavantgarde”; a tendency which he still defines in terms of “the main operative function” of “quotation”, and most particularly, the strategies of “quoting from new technologies or ... appropriating earlier styles of figuration and abstraction” (p 21). So far as Bonito-Oliva is concerned, “The transavantgarde is typically European and is linked to long traditions of art history, particularly painting”, whereas “Postmodernism is essentially an American movement rooted in architecture and arising from a culture obsessed with notions of patchwork and assembly” (p20).

At the risk of patching together too many quotations from Benjamin and Bonito-Oliva – and thereby neglecting John Gillies, the subject of these pages – I think that we can now distinguish several competing definitions of contemporary art.

For Benjamin, one of the most dynamic tendencies in late twentieth century art ought to be new kinds of art forms which finally offer technological realization to the aspirations of the twentieth century avant-garde movements. For Bonito-Oliva, this avant-garde impulse has become neutralized by allegedly overwhelming “situation of catastrophe”, leaving the artist two options – the brash American model or the refined European model. On the one hand, it seems that art might simply quote from the New World present, picking and mixing references from the vulgarity of assembly-line pop culture. Jeff Koons, please take a bow. On the other hand, a rather more highbrow form of quotation and appropriation might take place in Europe,

based upon the transavantgarde's enthusiasm for picking and mixing older images and thematics from the venerable "traditions of art history". Four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, please, for Carlo Maria Mariani.

The obvious advantage of Bonto-Oliva's argument is that it reminds us of the inevitable continuities between past and present art; a useful antidote to the apocalyptic theory-tales obsessed with the supposed discontinuity between the postmodern condition and the earlier artistic values and traditions. Bonito-Oliva's conviction that the technological avant-garde is somehow dead, and his related suggestion that the continuities between past and present artforms are best affirmed by consciously light-weight sampling, are more disturbing.

As the pages of *Flash Art* indicate, just about any half-competent artist can amusingly juxtapose images from different centuries, and about and half-competent critic can label such work "intertextural", "deconstructive", "rhizomic", "nomadic", "post-auratic", or perhaps as examples of "trans-nationality" (p20) and of "conceptual realism" (21) – Bonito-Oliva's present favourites. One wonders why such strategies ever seemed of interest. Surely the banal process of picking and mixing from past traditions in past techniques is about as exciting as the "Mix-Omatosis" that Jeremy J. Bendle's *Will Pop Eat Itself? Pop Music in the Soundbite Era* (1989) wittily discusses with reference to pop music's own transavantgarde – the now almost extinct Jive Bunny and the Mastermixers.

What seems much more interesting that the "Jive Bunnies" of the transavantgarde are those rather more serious artists whose work both explores new technological forms (thereby realizing some of the aspirations of the modernist avant-garde, while concurrently proposing new aspirations for eventual realization by future technologies), and at the same time re-explores past artistic traditions (thereby establishing quite unexpected continuities between "now" and "then"). Such work does not simply recycle past fragments in the Jive Bunny or Hooked on Classics mode, but redefines past models and practices by combining past, present, and presently emerging technologies in works informed by their own originality and integrity.

It is this kind of independent self-confident exploration that distinguishes the work of artists such as John Gillies from the banal "mixing" of those artists who have somehow lost their confidence, their nerve, their faith, or whatever, in contemporary creativity's capacity to experiment productively with new technologies and new materials. Watching Gillies' *Techno/Dumb/Show* (1992) one is probably initially most struck by the sheer energy and velocity of this composition – by what Peter Callas identifies as Gillies' ability "to process two image sources running simultaneously ... by rapidly switching or mixing between these sources". More specifically, Gillies' orchestrations of meticulously calculated image-fragments offer what Callas terms: "one of the most successful uses of actors in Australian video art". Not so much an exploration of abstract kinetic art, or of abstract energy or velocity – realms already abundantly charted and colonized by twentieth century film – Gillies' collaborations with the members of the Sydney Front have led to video

which, like the Sydney Front's performances, seizes what he calls "the excitement of live events" with particular intensity.

Deliberately disregarding video's "self-reverential" impulse, Gillies' work projects a broad, multi-media sensibility (interweaving aspects of music, performance, film and theatre) across more recent video technologies. Remarking that he is 'fascinated by silent film – not because it's nostalgic – but because it conveys the excitement of the period when people were discovering the medium", Gillies himself registers this same kind of creative excitement (albeit with late rather than early twentieth-century techniques). For example, discussing the intense grimaces of the performers in *Techno/Dumb/Show*, Gillies both compares and contrasts his methods with those of silent film (registering both thematic continuity and technological difference)

"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, 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 and 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."

In somewhat the same way, Gillies acknowledges that the impact of his highly accelerated or suddenly immobilized close-up images of the Sydney Front may well induce something of the "fear people have of puppets, and of technologically produced beings".

"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".

Significantly, such links seem to be implicitly demonstrated rather than explicitly calculated. Rather than merely "quoting" the Sydney Front's work, Gillies might be said to be translating – and in a sense transforming – live performance into quite another electronic domain. As he observes, this process necessarily requires – and if successful, finally displays – another kind of sensibility, another kind of language and another kind of "signature". Explaining that he was "very much trying to condense and impact", Gillies observes:

“They’ve got a million tapes documenting their performances, and that’s something I didn’t want to do. There’s always something lacking in that sort of documentation, so you have to dismiss that whole process and think about it differently. For example, in performance, what’s interesting about their work sometimes is that you don’t know whether a performer is going to come up to you very close, or speak to you. I was trying to get that sense in video, of a performance being very close to you. I picked certain aspects of their performance and amplified that, with my own kind of signature on it as well ... I 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. I 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, I guess.”

Elaborating his sense that *Techno/Dumb/Show* orchestrates live performance that edited video footage in an almost “musical” manner, Gillies specifies that “it’s sometimes a very crafted sort of process” and to one’s surprise, perhaps, adds:

“Sometimes I feel that making video is something that’s closer to printmaking or something like that. Maybe the process isn’t as new as one thinks – perhaps humans have been doing these kinds of things for a long time.”

Gillies surely carries conviction here. All art repeats a “process” that humans have been doing “for a long time”. Yet almost against all odds, new technologies add new dimensions and new registers to this kind of process when they are orchestrated by artists who have not lost their creative faith and their creative nerve, and who aspire to something more than Jive Bunny mixes or “uninhibited superficiality”. John Gillies is one such artist.

Nicholas Zurbrugg's (1947–2001) publications include *Beckett and Proust* (1986), *The Parameters of Postmodernism* (1993), *Critical Vices: the Myths of Postmodern Theory* (2000), *Jean Baudrillard, Art and Artefact* (1998) ed. and the posthumous *Art Performance Media: 31 Interviews* (2004).

Originally published in ‘John Gillies: Armada’ catalogue, Queensland College of Art Gallery, Griffith University, 1994

Works Cited

- Beadle, Jeremy J. “Will Pop Eat Itself? Pop Music in the Soundbite Era”. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins. 1973
Bonito-Oliva, Achille. “Trans-avantgarde International” Trans. Dwight Gast and Gwen Jones. Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1982
“Achille’s Zeal” (Bonito-Oliva, interviewed by Peter Hill). *World Art*, Inaugural issue (Nov. 1993): 22-23.
“Peter Callas Interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg” in *Electronic Arts in Australia*, Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture vol. 8 no. 1, ed Zurbrugg 1992
“John Gillies Interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg” in *Electronic Arts in Australia*, Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture vol. 8 no. 1, ed Zurbrugg 1992