



The de Quincey Tapes (2001) video & sound installation
(made in collaboration with Tess de Quincey)



JOHN GILLIES MAKES VIDEO

There's nothing predictable about the work of John Gillies, however, certain patterns appear. They seem familiar and recur throughout the work. There are repeated positions and angles in the shots. We might notice the way he records sound and brings to the surface a sequence of repetitions but it is difficult to determine Gillies' working method, for each piece maintains its own unique set of ideas and actions, its own internal logic.

To find the pattern we can look for micro themes: the body in space, in movement or dancing, rhythms of light saturating the darkness where spoken words are made flesh or allegorical connections. There are connections between, for example, the burning bush in the landscape of the colonial-biblical work called *Divide* (2004), and the martyrdom of Mary Queen of Scots in *The Mary Stuart Tapes* (2000). These signals evoke a different sense of what it is to conquer and to rule. One gets the feeling many things have developed side-by-side, to form what is an often complex weaving of poetic intentions.

John Gillies' work operates outside the common (museum) parameters of much video and art projection today. It is unorthodox. The work stands at a crossroads, almost as an extension of experimental theatre yet maintaining its unique position as a visual art of the moving image. In a 1993 interview, he states his fundamental intention clearly, "I've always had this idea of extending video beyond the narrow confines of what video art is meant to be." In describing collaborative and improvisational contingencies, he says,

I 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 tortuous process of sculpting the thing as it goes along, rather than defining it totally before it even starts. i

His approach to the creative impulses of improvisational work has allowed him a greater artistic flexibility and association with other like-minded artists in different fields. Perhaps his finest collaborations have been with theatre director Nigel Kellaway, Sydney Front performer/devisor Clare Grant, and dancer/choreographer Tess de Quincey. The works made from these artistic partnerships have been a central feature of his practice and those processes have lent his work a further depth and density.

Gillies is of a generation of image-makers, through whom we encounter the accelerated use of new technical media, at a moment when their application and cost, crossed each other. Almost overnight, moving-image-editing condensed into a quick and affordable application of procedures. Evidenced through Gillies' work are the advantages of these sophisticated and efficient digital processes. This sort of editing can be observed in the way he constructs and weaves layers of sound and image in the four videos presented in this exhibition.

What has surprised me, since first seeing John Gillies' work, is the way in which the performative modes of theatre are so central to his work and how this seems to allow his work to operate more freely



Divide (2004), video, 25 mins



My Sister's Room (2000) video and sound installation

and distinctly outside the current styles of video projection and their accompanying post-photographic protocols. It seems that Gillies has been a less futuristic fetishiser than many of his peers who have tied themselves to the 'newness' of technology and media. Much of the technical language used to construct his video works appears borrowed from an era of silent film; their theatrical gesturings, accompanied as they are by sound tracks, and with their visible collaging, looping and use of repetition. Gillies also seems to be referring to a more extended action and filmic enterprise, one that owes a debt to the performances and cinema of the Fluxus movement of the 1960s.

It is the devices of theatre that make these video constructions such compelling viewing. Gillies appears fascinated by the way the materiality of imaging and sound can be manipulated and layered. His innovation might best be described as a relay effect, linking moments from another performance staged somewhere beyond the screen with performative elements enwrapped, overlaid and then mesmerisingly remastered. Perhaps there is a distortion here that's worth commenting on. The artist plays in a space between the continuity of his inherent narrative logic and a sort of gestural time writing. There exists a clarity of character even within the deliberately reduced expressive possibilities so that a kind of reductivism propels us into the meaning or 'poetic unmeaning' in an altogether animated theatre of the screen.

In *Techno/Dumb/Show* (1991) I feel swept up into a beehive of energy/ies, where collage and overlay crash through grainy black-grey portraits and figures. Edward Sheer has observed, "What he (Gillies) is doing is unleashing the performativity of the gestures themselves: the autonomy of an action broken into its component parts. At its root this is what montage performs".ⁱⁱ It is this oily skin of light whose capacity and velocity, rhythmetrics and repetitions, are the focal points of an almost trance-like state generated by the work. With accelerated audio and visual syncopation emitted, the video also seems wildly operatic. I left behind the solidness of reality, to enter a sort of contractual hypnosis with the work. The collage or montage elements of *Techno/Dumb/Show* remind me of the physical movements and edits of Walter Ruttmann's great urban classic, the film-portrait Berlin, *Symphony of a City* (1927). Both works are alive, complex and vast, and full of kaleidoscopic anxiety. Through a different kind of expressionism, Gillies creates a series of embodied human dramas, and by using engineered fragments and rapid movements constructs, through video montage, a highly sustained sequence of analogue-video-collage.

Of course velocity isn't always rapid – and any good artist understands that.

Often there is a need for dramatic counterpoint. Speed is used to change the feeling of the modal direction of moving images and sound. Gillies modifies the appearances and the sound syncopations in a work like *The Mary Stuart Tapes* (2000) to major dramatic affect. In these works, Gillies encases the body in a 'timely fashion'. The performer of *The Mary Stuart Tapes* is Clare Grant. Her voice has a gravity, particularly when set against itself, on the supplementary, spoken-word audio track. We are introduced to Mary Stuart, Catholic martyr and lonely political prisoner. Imprisoned and condemned, Mary Queen of Scots is recounting her last days and hours before being executed by her sister, Queen Elizabeth 1. Mary Stuart wants her freedom, not to overthrow the Protestant Church of England. *The Mary Stuart Tapes* monologue is re-translated from Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) *Maria Stuart of 1800*. Gillies shot this work in the modern streets and night crowds of Sydney, 200 years after Schiller's work was written and four hundred years after the deed was enacted into British history. Discussing this deeply allegorical work, Gillies noted, "Australia is the inheritor of the British idea of the

state. Within the idea, Mary Stuart is buried, potentially a force trapped within." iii

Works such as *Hymn* (1983), *The Mary Stuart Tapes* (2000) and *The de Quincey Tapes* (2001), share certain similarities. In these works, the body hovers and appears suspended. Sound, rhythm and repetition, with light often used as a form of saturation are common to each. These painterly techniques generate a very physical response in audiences. A similar kind of agitation can be experienced in the installation, *My Sister's Room* (2000). *My Sister's Room* is constructed by incorporating photographic stills of the artist's sister. Here the artist performs a memory ritual. Maintaining the camera at arms length, he frames the alternating portrait images, allowing the perimeters to move slightly in his outstretched hand. This sequencing is reductive, almost minimalist in action, as he cuts between portraits. The focus is on a single detail but the camera's vibration simultaneously suggests the artist's presence and the subject's absence. This work is perhaps less theatrical in nature, designed as it is for installation, where the viewer is positioned to participate and complete the work.

One of the most compelling qualities in John Gillies' work is the way in which new and old technologies combine to represent the human body and the play of the mind, through surface and materiality. Gillies himself has commented on the role fear plays in representation, as a condition that accommodates, "people who seem partially alive and partially dead." iv

Ruark Lewis is a language artist and lives in Sydney.

i Nicholas Zurbrug, 'John Gillies', in *Electronic Arts in Australia* (Continuum: Journal of Media and Culture 8/1), 1994

ii Edward Scheer, 'Live Art/Media Art: John Gillies, Performance and the Techno - Live', in *John Gillies - Video Work: 1982 - 2001* (exh cat), Performance Spae, Sydney, 2004, p.7

iii Therese Davis, 'John Gillies: A Cinema of Lost Images', *ibid*, p.4

iv *op.cit.*, Zurbrug, p.214

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