

SUBVERTING TELEVISION

1

deconstruct

selected by Mark Wilcox

2

scratch

selected by Michael O'Pray

3

alter image

selected by Alex Graham

A three part programme of British video art

dē-constrūc'tion

Deconstruct

This two-part programme gathers together a varied selection of visually exciting and demanding videotapes; some are historical, others are contemporary. Seminal works from the history of British video art, for instance, can be seen alongside the latest 'Scratch' work in which the boundaries between art and pop video melt away. Out of these unique juxtapositions a common thread can be teased which brings meaning to the present selection, which allows a new work, a new totality, to emerge under the banner of *Deconstruction*. All the tapes, in one way or another, attack the beliefs and conventions which govern the way our world is represented on television and in the cinema. These conventions make the complicated process of putting a film or TV programme together invisible – as viewers, we're given a window on a world in which everything seems natural and ordered. In contrast, the following videotapes engage with that world, turn it on its head and force us to question our position as spectators.

The two programmes are both self-contained, a complementary echo of one another. They pursue the same argument, starting from an important early work of the late Modernist period when the material factors of video technology became the self-reflexive content of the videotape itself. Each programme moves onto Post-Modernist work of the early 1980's which picks up the challenge of representation and narrative, attempting to deconstruct the fictions which make up our reality – albeit with another fiction. The two programmes are finally brought up to date with work by a younger generation of artists and include a selection of 'Scratch' video. The scratch artists borrow eclectically from the image depositories of mainstream film and TV, making a radical critique of contemporary society – a society dominated by the media and by the mediated image.

Video art in the 1970's got a bad name; it was meant to be boring, interminable and either austere or narcissistic. What might be surprising for new viewers is just how exciting, pithy and sensual the two works from this period by David Hall look. Recorded on crude black and white equipment, *TV Fighter* compiles a powerful sequence of archive war footage, originally shot from cameras mounted on the nose of fighter planes as they strafe enemy targets. The spectator is pinned down in the hot seat, vicariously experiencing the excitement of speed and danger and also aware of the destruction in which s/he is implicated – just by looking. This videotape highlights the ambiguous position of the viewer, safe in the darkness of the auditorium but gripped by a spectacle which is clearly an illusion, yet also forms a visceral experience.

David Hall's *This is a Television Receiver* is one of the few pieces of video art created to be broadcast on British TV. As such, it should be considered as 'television' – what is experienced in an auditorium or gallery today is a video record of a work originally beamed unannounced into peoples' homes. The well known TV newsreader, Richard Baker, delivers a didactic text which exposes the illusion that a human being is talking to us. We learn from him, for instance, that his voice is emitting not from his lips but from a loudspeaker in the TV set. This address is repeated and each time the image and sound are re-recorded and degenerated his face and voice become more grotesquely distorted. This figure of authority is reduced to what, in essence, he is – a series of pulsating patterns of light on the surface of a glass screen. In this way, paradoxically, the verbal statement is realised by its own disintegration, along with that of the image. The illusion of both transparency and of power are shattered. This is deconstruction in its primary, irreducible form; only by remembering these important lessons have artists subsequently been able to venture out of the enclosure of self-reflexivity and into the perilous world of representation and narrative.

John Adams is such an artist. We are guided through *Sensible Shoes* by the voice of a woman who narrates a complex and bizarre story. As a Post Modernist text this tape is both literary and poetic; it presents a reality made up of compounded fictions, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary. The leading characters are never seen; instead the camera explores a room in which a TV set is playing, as an oblique relationship develops between what we hear and what we see. Images of cat food and of violent, macho TV heroes accompany a tale of love, betrayal and revenge.

One of the lessons of Post Modernism is that there are many ways to tell a story. *Calling the Shots* remakes a technicolour sequence from a 1950's Hollywood movie – not once but three times. It progressively exposes the artifice and mechanics of production; behind the painted set plus poised actors, lie cameras, lights and technicians. Reconstruction becomes deconstruction. Simultaneously questions of the representation of women are raised and the power politics of gender are explored. The tape is funny and disturbing, a piece of subliminal agit-prop for the liberation of women and men from stifling roles.

Another point of attack on mainstream film and TV is through the eyes of personal experience. This has been the greatest strength of the excellent feminist video art which has emerged in Britain. Catherine Elwes' *The Critic's Informed Viewing* is a restless, meandering journey through an evening's viewing in front of the box. The woman in this piece is not an object designed for the gaze of men but is instead a critical, active observer. She is the viewer, not the viewed. The artist as armchair critic examines the way in which TV represents women and even intervenes in the playback of the videotape itself; freezing frames, flipping channels, cracking jokes and munching on a TV dinner. However, despite the throwaway lines and glib remarks, we know by the end of the tape that there aren't any easy answers. Exploring the same problem of spectatorship which David Hall looks at in *TV Fighter*, she comes to a perhaps similar conclusion; we have a dreadful fascination for what is bad for us, that which turns us into passive and powerless consumers of the image.

Graham Young's *Nil by Mouth* is also, in a different way, personal. The tape is an unedited record of what is, in effect, a performance by the artist – delivered not to a live audience but to a static camera. Taking the opposite approach of the scratchers who cut fast and furious to convey their message, Young instead presents us with the power of slow, even mundane, human activity. The artist gradually removes all the fittings of his room, including a radio receiver and TV set during a simultaneous stereo broadcast of a Beethoven symphony. We are watching what can only be described as an act of physical deconstruction. The illusion of realistic film and TV is utterly dependent upon the magical cohesion of sound and image. The tape makes a powerful assault on this tyranny of synchronised sound in a series of bizarre visual jokes. Richard Baker again appears and, prompted by the title *Nil by Mouth*, we conclude that as in David Hall's piece the voice of authority (or in this case of high culture) is but a ventriloquist's trick.

A precursor of much recent scratch work, *The Science Mix* by Steve Hawley and Tony Steyger takes us into a grouping of videotapes which use almost exclusively pre-editing footage. This tape re-cuts and fuses two adverts for washing machines; one from the 1950's, the other from the 80's. Using only this original source material the tape creates a dialogue between two media visions of a technological utopia – both equally absurd and disturbing.

Sandra Goldbacher and Kim Flitcroft's *Night of 1000 Eyes* is an epic of scratch video. Created not only for an art video audience but also for playback in a nightclub context, it is structured around and cut to a number of electro-funk dance tracks. It is also concerned with post Freudian concepts of pleasure – both to be celebrated and to be problematized. And foremost of pleasures in our visually orientated culture is looking. Kitsch Hollywood and Hammer horror films are broken down by machine-gun like edits which repeat themselves obsessively. Here the act of deconstruction is to distill and make manifest the hidden violence and sexuality in the products of mainstream film and TV. However, the scratch edit itself fetishises the filmic fragment and is a source of uneasy pleasure. This work is ambiguous, both diagnostic and celebratory; it exposes the pathology of contemporary experience latent in the cinema and on TV in a deeply pleasurable way.

Jeremy Welsh's *I.O.D.* is similarly seductive: a meditation on the 'media culture' of Western society as we slip into the apocalyptic anxiety common to the end of each century. He portrays a culture overloaded and polluted with visual and aural information. The tape consists of images and sounds electronically processed, overlaid and

finally abstracted into a fluid and sensual pattern. Superimposed is the text; "A glut of imagery... Images of despair... Images of desire... Images of destruction... Images of deconstruction". It is at this level of poetic analysis that the tape can perhaps be seen as a theoretical rationale for the structurally very different scratch video. The problem of 'information overdose' is both stated and revealed before our eyes. It is all the more a problem in that *I.O.D.* celebrates the fascination of our entropic decline into a vortex of indiscriminate information. It is up to the scratchers to provide one answer to this problem.

There is a sense of moral outrage in the cluster of 'hard-core' scratch tapes which complete the present selection; *Amen*, *Death Valley Days*, *Tory Stories*, *War Machine* and *Blue Monday*. Unlike the fluid scratching of Welsh and the Goldbacher/Flitcroft team which exploits all the sensual effects of video processing, these hard-edged works depend on the classic principles of film montage. Despite their modernity and pop influences they have many precedents reaching back into the history of film. In 1941 British cinema audiences enjoyed *Germany Calling... The Lambeth Walk* as part of their weekly entertainment. In this propaganda short Hitler was seen goose-stepping backwards and forwards repeatedly, in re-cut footage which had him prancing to the popular tune of the day. The political opposition, the didactic ends, the moral alarm remain the same but the subjects are now Reagan, Thatcher, the police state and nuclear war. Simultaneously scratch attacks television, stealing off-air images from the broadcast channels and forcing them into new, humorous and disturbing juxtapositions. It answers back, using the very same images to interrupt the one-way stream of information. Scratch moves from deconstruction to the reconstruction of values and meaning, to a moral order in an overloaded culture.

It should be said in conclusion that the selection of work described here is neither a "state of the art" survey nor a history of British video art. It has no such pretensions. However, if it indicates some of the intellectual challenge and visual richness to be found in such work it will have achieved its purpose, whilst exploring an important cultural and political theme.

Mark Wilcox

This programme of tapes was originally selected for tour on the Netherlands Video Circuit. Mark Wilcox would like to thank the British Council, London Video Arts, Michael O'Pray and the artists involved.

Programme 1

David Hall, *This is a Television Receiver* (8 mins 1976)

Steve Hawley/Tony Steyger, *Drawing Conclusions - The Science Mix* (6 mins 1983)

Graham Young, *Nil by Mouth* (13 mins extract 1983)

Catherine Elwes, *The Critic's Informed Viewing* (10½ mins extract 1982)

Mark Wilcox, *Calling the Shots* (13 mins 1984)

Off the Record, *Tory Stories* (6½ mins 1984)

Duvet Brothers, *War Machine* and *Blue Monday* (5½ mins 1984)

Programme 2

David Hall, *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* (10 mins 1977)

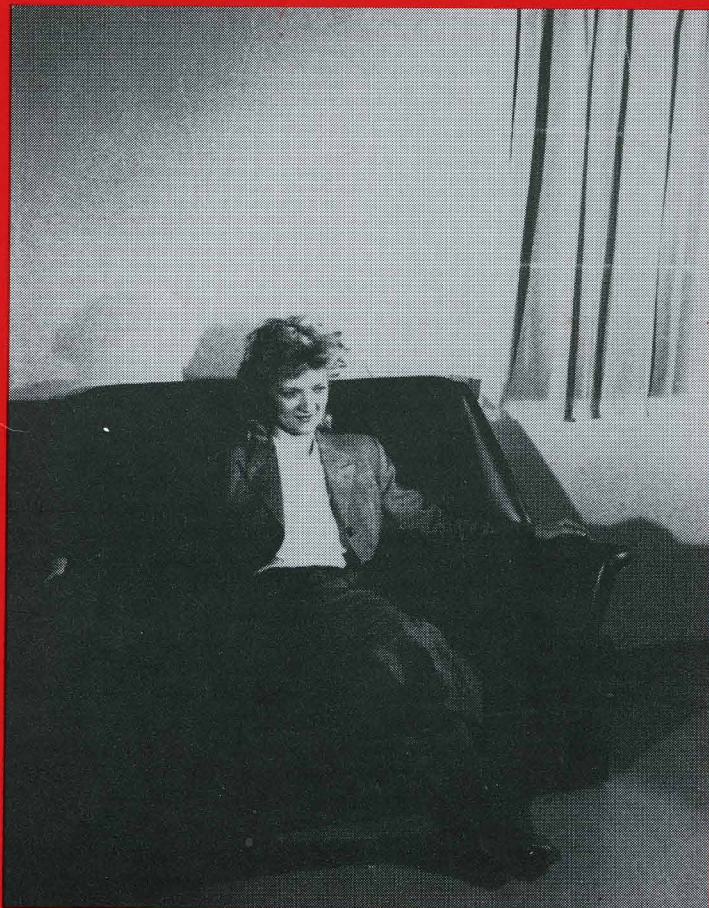
John Adams, *Sensible Shoes* (11 mins 1983)

Jeremy Welsh, *I.O.D.* (9 mins 1984)

Sandra Goldbacher/Kim Flitcroft, *Night of 1000 Eyes* (27 mins 1984)

Nick Cope/391, *Amen (Survive the Coming Hard Times)* (3½ mins 1984)

Jon Dovey/Gavin Hodge/Tim Morrison, *Death Valley Days* (10½ mins extract 1984)



Calling the Shots

scratch video

Scratch video

Hip Hop Video, image break-dancing: television does a body-pop. Broadcast TV is scoured for arresting images and fed into video editing systems like shredding machines. The fusion of funk rhythms and visuals on collision course crumble original context. Reassurance and sweet reason, television's facade, disintegrate before your bombarded eyes.

The Video Lounge at the Fridge in Brixton, with its 20-screen TV installation (presently moving house and re-opening in 1985) provided one of the few exhibition venues in London for scratch video to reach a wider audience. Now established video-makers like Derek Jarman, Cerith Wyn Evans and Richard Heslop are joined by bored TV addicts with a lot of state-paid time on their hands, and a video recorder in the front room.

Scratching is so simple. Just playing with the TV remote-control console, quickly switching stations at random, is a basic scratch. What emerges isn't just a jumble of voices and images but the personality of broadcast TV itself. Its self-importance, its hectoring, its banality and plastic smile.

It is just this attitude to television which unites the diverse offerings of video-scratchers. The focus isn't narrative film genres, or individual TV programmes, but the effect of television on tap, the stream of the schedules. It was only a matter of time before television got the scratch treatment. We had to wait for the tools of TV and video to fall into the 'wrong hands'.

An idea of this attitude might be an all-nighter of the movies *Koyanisquatsi*, *Atomic Cafe* and *Videodrome* with maybe the *Animal Film* thrown in. That's a world out of control, a victim of technology's own mindless momentum, with a humanity hopelessly alienated from nature, and, via the mass media, image-numbered into unreality. Scratch prescribes *Close Encounters of the Subliminal Kind* as the antidote. George Barber takes the innately seductive quality of TV to mix colour, shapes and movement into hypnotic, fluid sequences. The screen becomes a crystal ball, triggering the subconscious. TV as the Dream Machine.

The tape from Brixton-based multi-media outfit, Nocturnal Emissions, is called *The Foetal Grave of Progress*. It leaves you feeling you've just witnessed the final death-throes of a civilisation, sadly ours. All its past traumas flash by in seconds, before the last electronic bleep and oblivion. The soundtrack is an aimless, pathetic whine punctuated with snatches of speech, traffic and baby chuckles, as if we're on remote-control search for meaning amongst the image debris of an information-overdosed world.

Nick Cope, a video scratcher not included in this programme, is fond of quoting Situationist writings to explain what he does. "Work follows the random fragmented path that our mind takes every day, turning from dream to reminiscence, from nightmare to prescience, from the longings for objects to the longings for sex. As the foundations crack, our society follows this pattern, as random event piles on random event, and like a drowning man the past of all ages flies before our eyes. Instead of imposing order, this vortex is received and celebrated, then concentrated into a force of unexpected power". Which is probably where Genesis P. Orridge and Psychic TV come in. Armageddon cultists and William Burroughs devotees, Psychic TV give innocent entertainment a very bad name. Which is just as they intended. Their live performances of sensory over-kill, employing extreme imagery of satanic sex rites or spoof christian ikonography are experiments in mass disorientation. 'Altered State' tests attempting to free the spirit from predictable control, like those voodoo dances which induce trance-like states. If television's the opium of the masses, will orgiastic communal seances such as these be the bingo of the future? William Burroughs predicted as much in 'Wild Boys' back in 1968. Along with punk style ('the chic thing is to dress in expensive tailor-made rags and all the queens are camping about in wild-boy drag') he gives us *The Penny Arcade Peep Show* - moving multi-screen video boxes, enveloping us in a fusion of sound and vision. 'Fragmentary glimpses linked by immediate visual impact... a sensation of speed as if the pictures were seen from a train window.'

Scratch has arrived. But will the media, as usual, simply detach the style from the substance to market newer bands and consumer durables?

Video-scratching is an inter-active response to the one-way arrogance of broadcast television. And perhaps the growing accessibility of the medium, both for creating new messages and distributing alternative information, gives some hope. A flick through the extensive library of London Video Arts in Wardour Street, or the Videothèque at the ICA shows just how adept video-makers have been in subverting conventional expectations.

Can video wean us off our addiction to the dominant television habits so assiduously nurtured by consumer capitalism? Certainly it can claim to have established itself as a specific creative medium, no longer in hock to the codes and language of film narrative or broadcast television. And scratch brings together the fluidity of video-editing, more akin to sound-mixing than montage film techniques, with a healthy critique of the mass media.

But are we ready for it? And with the absence of social exhibition venues, will most people ever be challenged to think differently about the sort of information they receive and how they consume it? When confronted with the apparent incoherence of scratch, are we prepared to suspend our critical faculties - in order to re-discover them?

If television is our shop window on the world, scratch has just chucked a brick through it, and is busy looting 30 years of goodies, with abandon. Will the results be inflammatory or wallpaper?

Andy Lipman

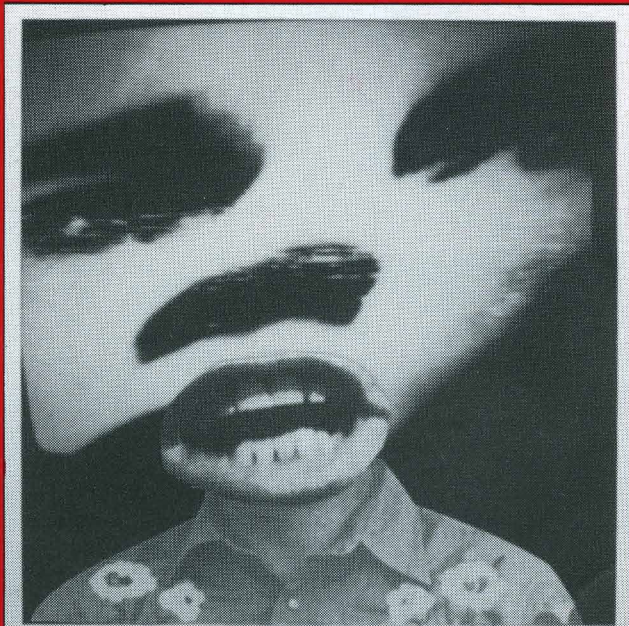
(This is an edited version of an article which originally appeared in *City Limits* No 157 Oct 5 - 11 1984.



The Duvet Brothers George Barber Sandra Goldbacher Kim Flitcroft

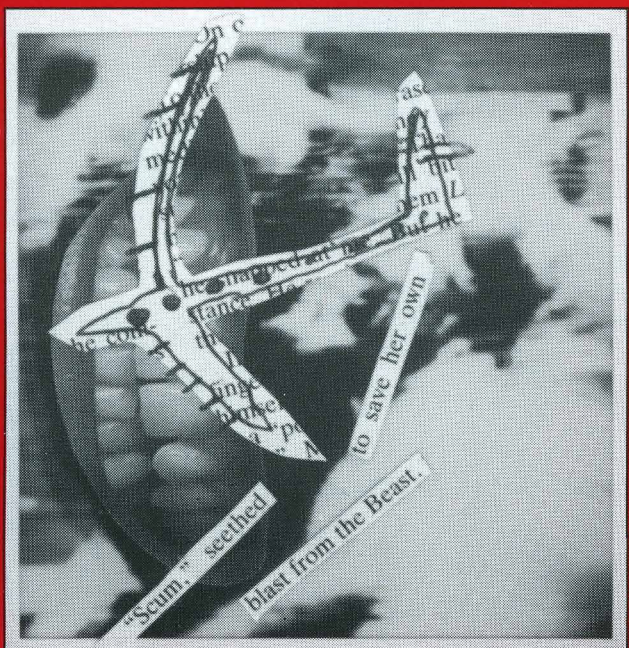
Programme

- Take It** (The Duvet Brothers, 1984, ½ min)
- Scratch Free State** (George Barber, 1984, 4 mins)
- Night of a 1000 Eyes** (Sandra Goldbacher & Kim Flitcroft, 1984, 3 mins extract)
- Aapri Facial Scrub** (Jeffrey Hinton, 1984, 1 min)
- Blue Monday** (The Duvet Brothers, 1984, 4 mins)
- Curtain** (John Scarlett-Davis, 1974, 2 mins)
- Bucks Fizz** (Jeffrey Hinton, 1984, 2 mins)
- Tilt** (George Barber, 1984, 5 mins)
- War Machine** (The Duvet Brothers, 1984, 2 mins)
- Circus Logic** (John Maybury, 1984, 3 mins extract)
- Even The Good Times Are Bad** (Nocturnal Emissions, 1984, 6 mins)
- The Foetal Grave of Progress** (Nocturnal Emissions, 1984, 12 mins)
- Language** (Richard Heslop, 1984, 6 mins)
- Fuck You G.I.** (Richard Heslop, 1984, 6 mins)

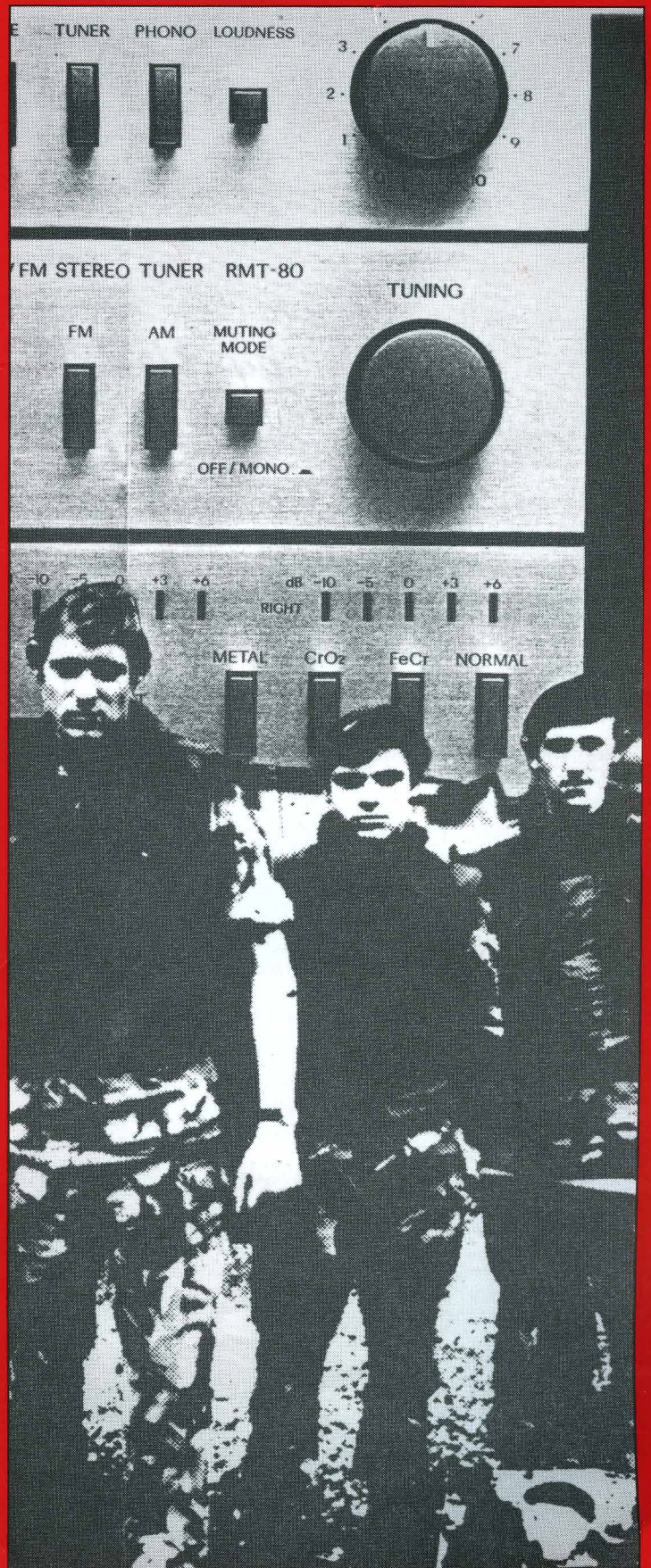


garrotte the man was vertebrae.

Language



Fuck You G.I.



Nocturnal Emissions

alter image

Alter Image

"After image – The impression of a vivid sensation, retained after the external cause is withdrawn OED

After Image is a small video production group with a core of four people – Jane Thorburn, Mark Lucas, Anne McGeoch and Robin Thorburn – added to as the occasion demands by other creative and technical personnel.

From a background in the visual arts they started After Image in 1978 determined to create a production practice which would provide an alternative to mainstream television on the one hand and artists' or community video on the other. Their studio base is part of a converted meat-pie factory in Brixton alongside the studios of twenty or so other artists – painters, sculptors, musicians.

Although much of their early work in video was situated in the commercial market-place, making rock promos and educational video, (learning the tools of their trade with the professional disciplines of client-originated work), their roots and interests lie firmly in experiment and innovation.

With the rapid growth of the video cassette market in the early 1980s, the apparent future of alternative programme strategies for video suggested the possibility of an arts-based video magazine and thus the idea for *Alter Image* was born. This original idea was subsequently transformed in 1982 into a commission from Channel 4 Television for a series of ten half-hour programmes to be broadcast in peak-time in the early summer of 1983.

Billed as an alternative arts programme, (although in fact commissioned by the then Commissioning Editor for Youth Programmes Mike Bolland), the subjects for *Alter Image* were drawn from the sub-cultures of fashion, music, art and alternative life-styles. Not only was the content of *Alter Image* a radical departure for British television but the means of production and presentation too represented a break with tradition. Gone was the formal mediation of a presenter, gone too the journalistic overview or authoritative comment so familiar in arts programmes. Instead the programme's subjects were encouraged to collaborate with the producers to create a new work specifically for the cameras or devise an appropriate context that would allow existing work to speak for itself, with particular reference to its visual impact.

Above all the essential strength of *Alter Image* lies in its visual emphasis; the links between items in each programme being enacted by a computer graphics logo which, through repetition, became the familiar call-sign of the series. This device recalls the genesis of the project as destined for cassette distribution, the very repeatability of the programmes or items within them reflecting on video technology in a way that no other television programme could easily sustain.

Inevitably, in a project which aims to be both innovative and contemporary, casting its net across many untested territories, there will be failures among the successes. Ironically, it is where *Alter Image* radically differs from most television that it is most successful and least so where it adopts the traditional journalistic approach that it otherwise sets out to circumvent.

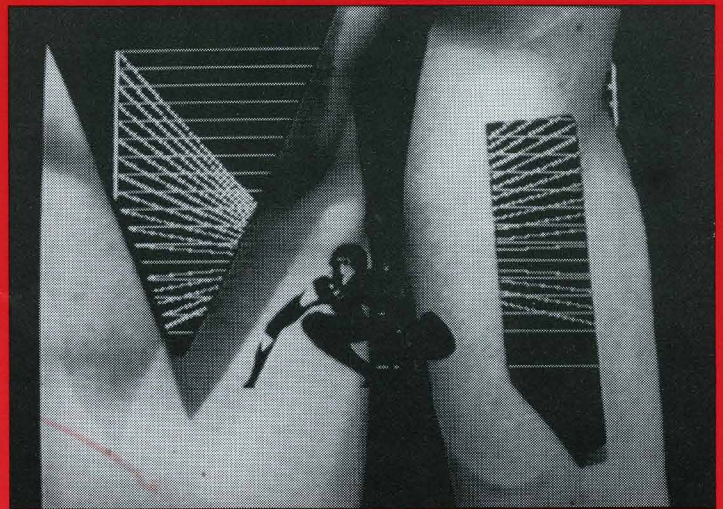
This selection concentrates on those items which stand, individually, as complete and satisfying pieces and which do not suffer the constraints of a topicality now superseded. The attention to soundtrack, the use of music as a unifying device, is an important factor in each case and points to the accessibility which made the series such a popular success. To quote the producers themselves, *Alter Image* is "an arts programme that is neither patronising, discursive, pedantic nor pompous. Representing as it does the current, new and innovative work in the arts, it is, above all, entertaining".

The beauty of *Alter Image* is that it manages to achieve all this without compromise to the work itself or to the producers' original determination, leaving an impression indeed of a vivid sensation that has been retained long after the event.

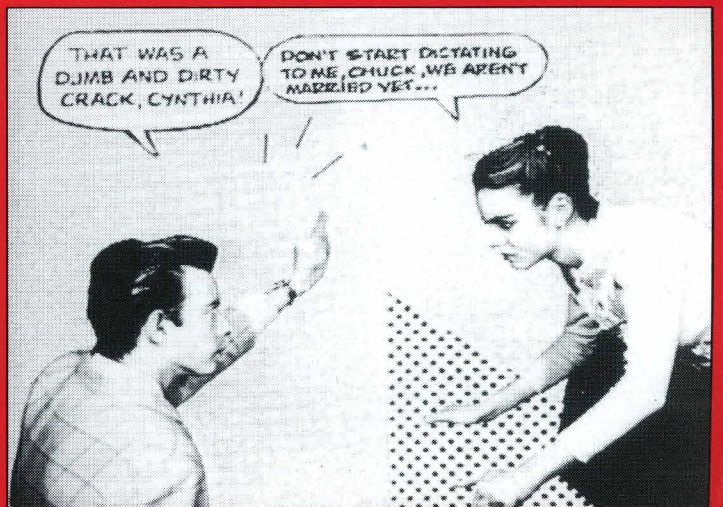
Alex Graham



Three Courgettes



Blue Dance



Chic Pix

Programme

Sankai Juku

Extraordinary performance by the Japanese Buto dance group of the same name, renowned for their upside-down hanging events, suspended on ropes from the facades of public buildings. In the eerie wastes of a derelict Battersea Power Station the performers act out a ritual elegy, like subterranean spirits of the displaced energy that once drove the massive turbines, mechanical gear and other redundant relics in the post-industrial terrain.

Three Courgettes: Dirty Pans

Ludicrous snap razzle and pop song on the fashion potential of kitchen utensils, scourers, Jifs and J's, Brillo and other bright delights in edible outfits. Hilarious bad taste!

Andrew Logan's Alternative Chat Show: Duggie Fields (AI 2)

A cult figure in Japan, the paintings of Duggie Fields are as stylised and glamorous as his lifestyle, invoked here under the aegis of the irrepressible Andrew Logan in a lexicon of stylised motifs and mottos.

Fashion and Style

"A Trip Through the Wardrobes of Your Mind" with subtitles for the stylistically blind. Style types from the 1960's to the present including resistance fighter, left-bank intellectual, Berlin whore and macho-man. 'Nothing is new... save that which is forgotten'. Text by Ian R Webb, video by John Scarlett-Davis.

John Giorno: Life is a Killer

True to the spirit of the 'cut-up' technique devised by Brion Gysin and explored to such influential effect by William Burroughs and Anthony Balch, Giorno's shout-poem, from After the Final Academy, resounds against the backdrop of London's famous landmarks and the occasional perplexed passer-by.

Blue Dance: (Between The Acts: Interval One)

One of two pieces commissioned by Channel 4 for broadcast in the intervals of Peter Hall's National Theatre production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. Stunning chroma-key interplay between dancer Oke's sensual rhythm, computer graphics and David Cunningham's specially composed music, itself inspired by the *Oresteia*. Music with Michael Giles, Jamie Muir; Body Design by Phyllis Cohen and Robyn Beeche.

Maasai: Pages from the Book of Rain

A symbolic tale of tribal and urban life, interweaving fantasy, ritual, streetwise black youth and a yearning for a culture lost. Choreography by Gary Hurst.

Andrew Logan's Alternative Chat Show: Miss Aldershot

Michael Haynes is a respected and accomplished designer but with an alter ego of starstruck, militaristic dimensions. As the flamboyant Miss Aldershot she carried off the crown in Andrew Logan's outrageous Alternative Miss World competition at Olympia complete with military band and the oompah strains of Land of Hope and Glory. Together with Naafi tea and bully beaf, "her" favourite pastime is 'camping' in England.

Robyn Beeche

A photographer specialising in fantastic, illusory make-up, here using video effects to expand the illusion in disconcerting ways. With make-up artist Phyllis Cohen.

Jim Whiting

A bizarre day in the life of the 'Pervy Men', Whiting's apparently uncontrollable mechanised maniacs: from a disastrous breakfast to a night on the town - "Do It Funky Pervs".

Chic Pix/Flying Lizards

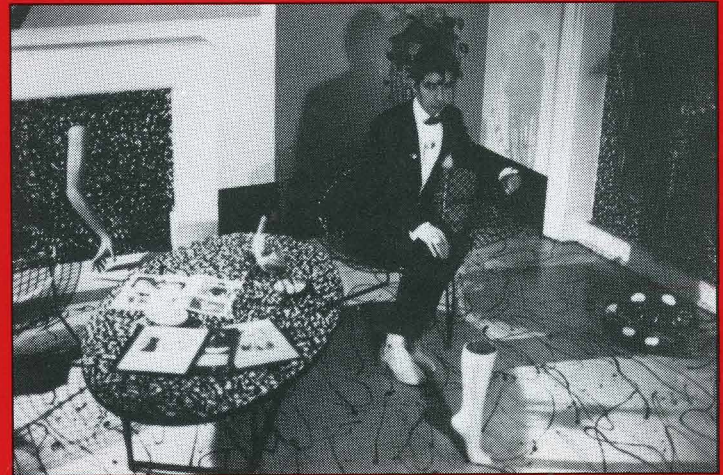
New Flying Lizards arrangement of their No 1 hit 'Money' illustrated by the zany animated postcards of the characteristically kitsch Chic Pix.

All programmes produced by After Image for Channel 4
Television GB 1983.

Programme notes by Alex Graham.



Sankai Juku



Duggie Fields



Maasai Dancers

Broadsheet edited by Michael O'Pray
Thanks to David Curtis, Bruno de Florence, Andy Lipman and Mark
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