

A9/18

“It is undoubtedly one of the greatest miracles of Nature that the most violent fire can be produced in a moment by the striking together of bodies that have the coldest appearance”

Emily du Châtelet

Reservoir

John Hayward Gallery

The Arts Council of England
Centre Galeries de Belfast, Ireland

New York NY Gallery, Providence

London & Paris

JUDITH GODDARD

Reservoir

John Hansard Gallery

in association with

The Arts Council of England
Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon

Moviola

Newlyn Art Gallery, Penzance

Southern Arts

Judith Goddard

Judith Goddard's work has never ceased to be enigmatic. In her earlier single-screen work especially she confidently yet sensitively engaged the video screen with concepts and images used symbolically, so that external objects and events became metaphors for internal states. Thus insides, so to speak, are turned outside and what is outside becomes an image for what is inside. For Goddard, it is as if to locate one or the other in any firm space would break the subtle dialectic between them both. By inside and outside I mean something quite particular and not simply the general notion of the inner and outer world but just that relationship between the person as physical body and social occupant of space, time, culture, history and the person as the site of psychical states and their representations. In other words, she has explored and located mental states in external objects such as flowers or fruit. The body whilst represented is at the same time, almost paradoxically, a metaphor for states essentially hidden, trapped, repressed. Underlying this symbolist aesthetic of strong Romanticist sympathies there is at times a humour and irony, sparked by associations within our culture. For Goddard, one believes, there is no direct route either to the world of matter or of the mind - we have surfaces, structures, currents, visual languages and so forth with which we can only struggle to say what perhaps finally cannot be said, but like Heidegger's Being can only be revealed in its saying¹.

A clue to the centrality of this theme is the role Goddard played in her early tapes. She appears (sometimes fragmented - part of her face, her arm) in five of her early tapes - *Time Spent*, *Under the Rose*, *You May Break*, *Who Knows the Secret?* and *Lyrical Doubt*. Like many artists before her, she has placed her own body and self as image alongside other images constructed by her. This has subtle effects. First, it relates that self-image associatively at least to other images; second, the artist's own body is transgressive at a certain level for both spectator and artist. Third, it raises questions about the self as a representation.

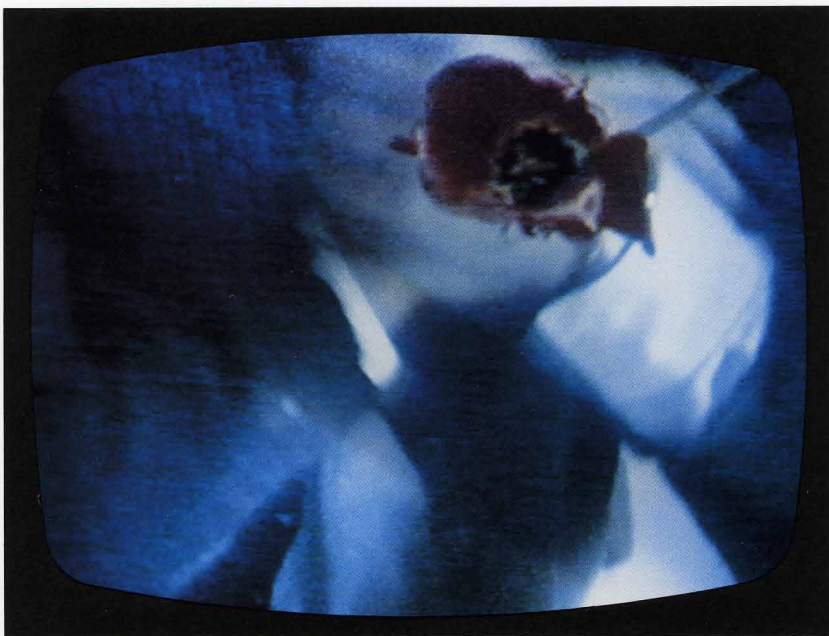
Interestingly, Goddard's use of this device is quite distinctive from, say, the American avant-garde film-maker Maya Deren who in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land* plays a "character" role within a narrative albeit a fragmented dream one. It is also quite different to English film-maker Jayne Parker's use of herself in *Almost Out*, *K* and *The Pool* in which she is a confrontational performance-like figure. In contrast, Goddard's is the figure one comes across, one who occupies the space of her representations, stumbled upon in a state of wistfulness or pensive melancholia, or an anxious agitated personae, or caught naked staring into camera as if caught by a voyeur, ironically herself. This subjectivity caught reflects what Gary Hill has called video's "parallel to thinking", a quality that distinguishes it from film. In this work Goddard

presents the artist as self, alighted upon by chance in a documentarist fashion almost, as if unmodulated by the video text itself, as if falling outside its representational field. Of course, this is only an appearance. Goddard is playing a role, even if only in the most minimal sense, like we do when posing for a snapshot, but it is one with a quite specific inflection, one where the artist seems potentially unbounded by role. It suggests that the artist is the originating consciousness of the text somewhat like a dreamer of the images. It also suggests a deliberate threat of loss of control, the opposite of how it is generally understood; that is, as a stable mark of authorship.

Artists' use of themselves within their own work, besides the autobiographical implications, places a being within the text that at the moment of taping/filming is the origin of that text - she is the swarm of consciousness. This is a status not assignable in the same way to other objects, events and persons he or she might introduce within the text. In *Lyrical Doubt*, for example, the frisson created by Goddard's figure seated in a waiting pensive, at times bored, mode before the camera is at one and the same time a sign of fixity - we believe the maker must know what she wants - and a potent disturbance, a possible eruption, a site of fluidity determined by the very internality of that figure which controls, in fact has shaped and constructed, what we are seeing at that moment.

This wistfulness passing over into anxiety and pent up aggression is memorably depicted in *You May Break* where we can only guess that it is the artist's arm that we see that knocks over the vase and in the final sequence violently hurls it against the surface. The desultory violence in this tape ensues, it seems, from an ennui, a boredom, a melancholia which cannot find its real object or cause but must enact out this unearthly (in its slowed down effects) act of aggression as some sort of action in a scenario in which human agency seems pointless. A further interpretation of this tape offers itself. The flower, always there it seems in her early tapes, is a symbol of the "good" object, a sign of what in our culture is a means of communicating love and death, which becomes the focus of aggression.

Goddard's persona is present in *Who Knows the Secret* where the black and white opening sequence of a room with an empty chair is transformed near the end of the film when she is found sitting in the chair of the self-same room. Again the image is one of brooding pensiveness, a wistful passivity that speaks of the internality of the subject, the artist, through a painterly convention of narrative portraiture. The inside of the film comprises, between these two sequences, an upside-down mouth masticating and a long close-up shot of melting chocolate. The reading is a startling one of an inside of the body where the good object is rendered viscous and repulsive, as if we are seeing what the mouth has ingested being eaten away by the stomach's acids. Thus in the Goddard figure the state of mind is given a metaphoric reading. But the piece



in its reference to a chocolate advert and through the soundtrack to banal notions of romance in our culture - Mantovani, Palm Court music - is shot through with wit.

Much has been made of primacy of the narcissistic mode of video art ², of which Goddard's own "performance" in her work, might seem a typical example, but such an interpretation seems ultimately reductionist. It is a theoretical suffocation of what is quite complex and much richer than the rather formal relationship, of narcissism, suggests. In Goddard's case this is given even more weight by the juxtaposing of images of flowers (usually in tight close-up, almost like a scientific documentary film) and other natural objects and the figure of the woman (later and sometimes a man). This brings me back to the inside being placed or turned outside in her work. These meticulous stamens, the sheer fleshiness of the petals and leaves in intense close-up, their materiality and intricacy are redolent of female sexual organs and the literal insides of the body, the juice, blood, plasticity of internal organs. Similarly fruit is shown in a raw state when it is squashed in a hand. Flowers are slowly burnt. This disembowelling of or attack on the body is not uncommon in art - Rembrandt's dark glittering body beneath those luminous faces reeks of internality, of the darkness, the mess of the innards, the excremental colour of rich dark infinite browns flecked with jewels.

Rembrandt painted the female nude as the sagging repository of jewels and dirt, of fabulous babies and magical faeces despoiled yet later repaired and restored ³.

As if to validate this very thought Goddard's close-ups of the body often centre on the mouth - eating, chewing and as if confused with these very internal associations, crossed and rendered partially visible by shadow, the manipulation of light. There is here the tension and anxiety of revelation - the partially shadowed face, revealing only the lips and chin.

When I suggested that this relationship worked both ways - outside becoming the inside as well as the other way, I meant something again quite specific and that is the role of the emotions in this dialectic. For if these objects - flowers and fruit - are images of the interior then they are also signs of states of minds, for as Freud showed there can be no projections without an affect, without an accompanying mental state, or feeling otherwise we are dealing with simple mechanical systems which persons are decidedly not. And it is in this interpretative space that Goddard's enigmatic qualities are situated. For it is in the relationship between the body as a whole - the woman seated in the chair - and these insides-as-natural-objects that we can derive the emotional ambivalence of the tapes themselves.

Goddard quite deliberately turned away from what she called this "subjective" form after *Lyrical Doubt*. *Celestial Light*, *Monstrous Races* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, with their highly worked metaphorical nuances with strong undercurrents of social unease and horror, are



almost transitional pieces between the early subjectivism and the later installation works. It seems no accident that in *Celestial Light* she begins the piece with a quote from Milton whilst in *The Garden* the reference is to Bosch's nightmare depiction of hell through the social world of the time in all its brutal and sexual vagaries. *Celestial Light* attempts the fusion of inside and outside through the incorporation of bodily parts - an eye especially - within the body itself, a male one. But its most potent moments are reserved for images of the world - the sky, skyscrapers and a jet cutting through the sky - and the sound of a community now lost, church bells. A similar foreboding is found in *Electron* which has a loud electrical hum as a ground bass to the piece in which a house nestles among towering pylons (an image that surfaces again in the mad disordered atmosphere of the opening sequence of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*) and the skull-like faces achieved through focus and lighting (reminiscent of techniques of the earlier films). The skull is surrealist suggesting Margitte's *The Spoiler* (1935) and the torsos of his canvas *The Act of Violence* (c1932).

Electron was originally an installation commissioned by TSWA for Believer Forest on Dartmoor and comprised a circle of seven monitors encased in steel boxes. Its images are of pylons, the Thames bank with its "seats of institutional power" including Big Ben (Goddard's early work often contains public clocks): a fly caught in amber and an electrical spiral. She describes the piece as "a combination of mythology and technology" relating ancient objects like stone circles, and on the soundtrack are Blake's Jerusalem and a celtic lament to the physical means of relaying electricity. An apocalyptic view of society and its discontents is underpinned by her idea of an invisible force - this time a physical one - the charged particles of electricity, a kind of natural chaos. The strong British cultural references - Blake, ancient rites and contemporary icons of social authority - are also found in her tape *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a three part triptych. In the magnificent confrontational opening sequence a bride and her groom stand in front of their suburban house overtowered by pylons. She extricates herself, leaving herself behind like an empty shell, or doppelganger to walk towards the camera where she performs a brazen striptease to leave the shot as she insolently removes her blonde wig. In the second part, the same woman holding her baby disconsolately walks back and forth in front of a nightmarish Trafalgar Square through which runs a tube train. Matted in are shots of riots and gruesome red worms. A huge pelican forever attempts to take wing, a fountain's water cascades upwards. The whole scene is manic, one of social chaos and mental turmoil. In the final sequence madness rules as a woman eternally spins, two heads swivel, a large insect menaces, a used ashtray turns, and in another corner an eye operation takes place. None of these figures or objects occupy real space, they are scattered about the screen in a dance of perpetual horror and incoherent disjuncture.

Goddard's move to installation has been highly successful in its resolution of some of the themes that have engaged her work since the beginning. She has moved from a medievalism where the spectator relates to the image as if before a Church fresco to the theatricality and incorporation of the spectator involved in installation. There is an invitation in installation where space is manipulated as well as time. For Goddard, it is as if the spectator's body in the installation's force-field replaces her own, or at most echoes her own.

Reservoir has a schemata, a grammar almost, in another visual language from that of the earlier single-screen pieces, but fundamentally articulating similar ideas. The move from the collaged single-screens to the Newtonian space of installation signals a pared-down economy of form and thought. In fact, it would seem that Goddard has returned to the dualism of consciousness and world found in the early works, except that she is now using different metaphors and most importantly the strong identificatory qualities of installation itself. The world is represented by its internal energy - namely electricity - which itself comes to stand for subjectivity, for a kind of chaos, the possibility of the will to act, albeit spontaneously and without real direction. The image of the Wimshurst machine is a Romantic one that thrusts us back to the universe of Newton and the visionary Blake.

Reservoir involves a projection of water falling, shot at high speed and slowed down to give an impression of an abstract patterning movement that is equivalent to the close-up abstraction effects of *Time Spent* and *Under the Rose*. It also contains a device incorporating spontaneity and determined by elements outside of itself. It is in many ways a metaphor for consciousness, for life. The electricity of the body, the basic energy-type of humans is given a scintillating form. The two parts of the installation use triggering devices, of an electrical current and of strobing before the "upward moving" drips are both symbols for the film-maker and the subjectivity inherent in the piece. A fascinating aside is that Goddard shot the water-fall in the Tivoli Gardens Italy where the American underground film-maker Kenneth Anger shot his classic *Eaux d'Artifice* in 1953. Inspired by Anger's film which also uses shots of cascading water rendered as abstract patterns, there is also Anger's own mark of subjectivity in the final frames of the film when he scratches on the woman's fan to create a wavering green line of material filmic process in this dream-world of artifice, a magical moment of transcendence of reality. The scratched-fan finds its equivalent in Goddard's electrical wave. In the BBC one-minute piece, *Luminous Portrait* Goddard provides a more concise and humorous example of these interests with her medieval woman whose environment evolves into the detritus of contemporary society, and whose face for a few seconds is transformed into a grinning skull.

Descry, made before *Reservoir*, deals with the same dichotomy. On the one hand there is an objective, quasi-scientific pictoriality and on the other, the trace of consciousness in the gold-leaf

and fish passing "through" the monitors. This wedge between rational determinist scientific processes and a consciousness evoking free-will, spontaneity and imagination is at the heart of Romanticism. It is not exclusive to Goddard. Gary Hill's Renaissance-like miniatures have a similar resonance, in his case of high technology disquietingly used to depict the body. Although his use of the body as a surface and texture perhaps owes more to a Classicism than Goddard's essentialist rendering of the body as seat of consciousness and hidden physical processes.

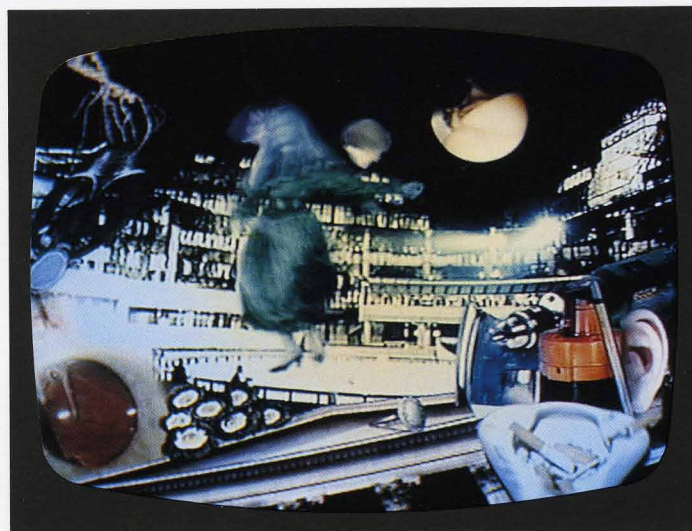
Goddard's work is a witness to the ongoing and perennial struggle in all art to give form to the love, fear and anxiety that dominates our relationship to ourselves and to the world. Judged in these terms, her art stands as an enormous achievement.

Michael O'Pray

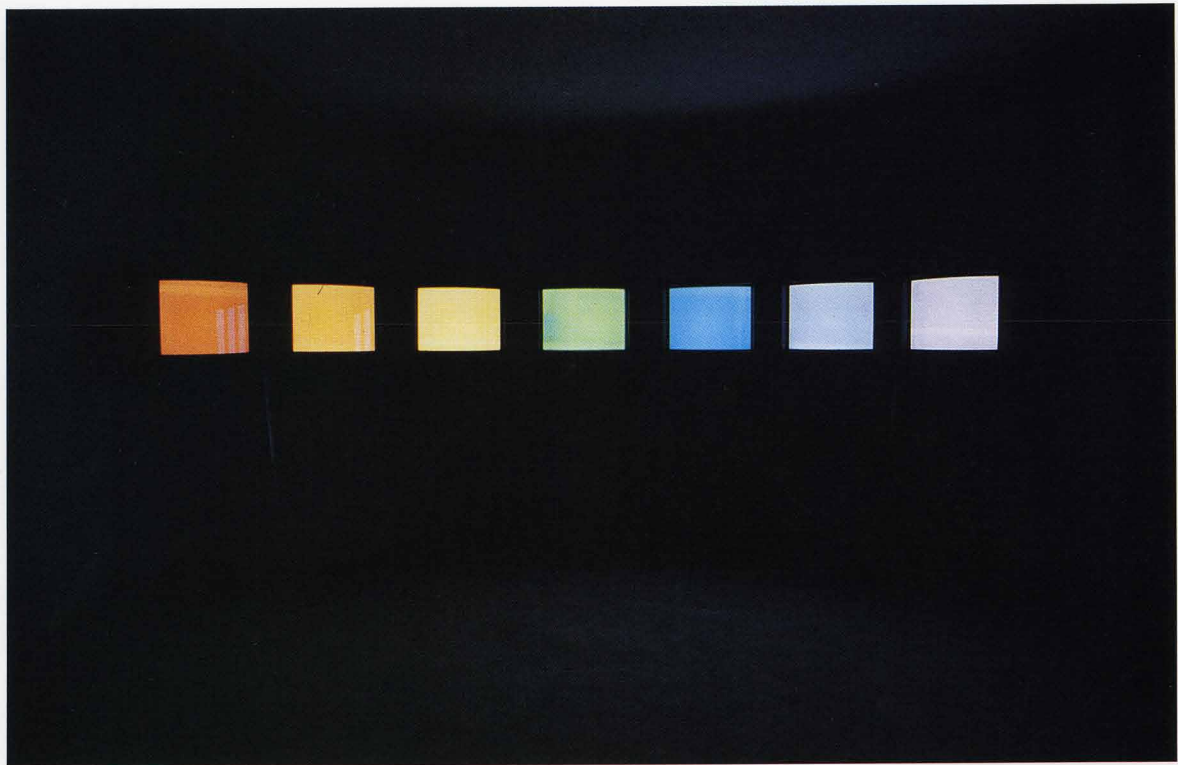
London

May 1994

1. See Martin Heidegger *On the Way to Language*, Harper & Row, 1971.
2. See Rosalind Krauss "Video - The Aesthetics of Narcissism" in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* ed John Hanhardt, New York, 1990.
3. Adrian Stokes *The Image in Form*, Penguin, 1972 p.119.



Garden of Earthly Delights 1991



Reservoir

Reservoir is a dynamic, interactive, audiovisual system combining fire, water and electricity to dramatic effect. Intimately concerned with perception, both in its experimental and its cognitive senses, it asks, semi-rhetorically, "do you see?" ... then, "do you understand?". The viewer must actively evaluate what is perceived, and figure out whether it belongs to the realm of illusion or reality. Only when the viewer is present does *Reservoir* become whole.

This is a binary installation, consisting of two opposite yet complementary parts. In a white space, a Wimshurst machine enthroned in a perspex case faces a projection of a waterfall whose deep roar fills the air. The Wimshurst's majestic stillness is broken only when the beam-breaking viewer crosses an invisible threshold. Then it comes to life, with a smart industrial snap, producing electric sparks, that are instantly magnified and projected in place of the water from the Villa d'Este.

In a black space a trio of ceiling-mounted water drips release droplets one by one onto a metal tray on the floor. The amplified sound of their impact echos through the space, like a regular beat marking passing time. When the beam-breaking viewer triggers a strobe, the light transforms the water drops into iridescent jewels that appear by turn to be suspended in space and to travel upwards in defiance of gravity. Such play with water and light recalls Bill Viola's *He Weeps for You* (1976). To one side of the space a trio of 3" LCD monitors broadcast the familiar trace of an ECG, the human equivalent of the disembodied spark, and every so often the transient, flickering image of a gender reassignment operation wipes over the three screens.

Understanding Judith Goddard's inspiration involves reflecting on the significance of the electric spark in the manner of Bachelard, whose *Psychoanalysis of Fire* made room for feeling to open up avenues of natural inquiry that lie beyond the reach of science. Feeling your way through *Reservoir* evokes multiple resonances centring on the spark that brings the meaning of creativity, nature, science, and life itself into question.

When we gaze at the spark in wonder, and hope for enlightenment, we resemble the crowds who thronged to see the electrical displays given by itinerant Newtonian lecturers in the 18th century. These men of science, used forerunners of the Wimshurst machine to conjure up sparks believing the generation of electricity to be proof of God's activity in the world. Like Prometheus, and like Mary Shelley's Dr Frankenstein, they risked divine vengeance in daring to usurp The Creator's sole right to animate the world with the spark of life.

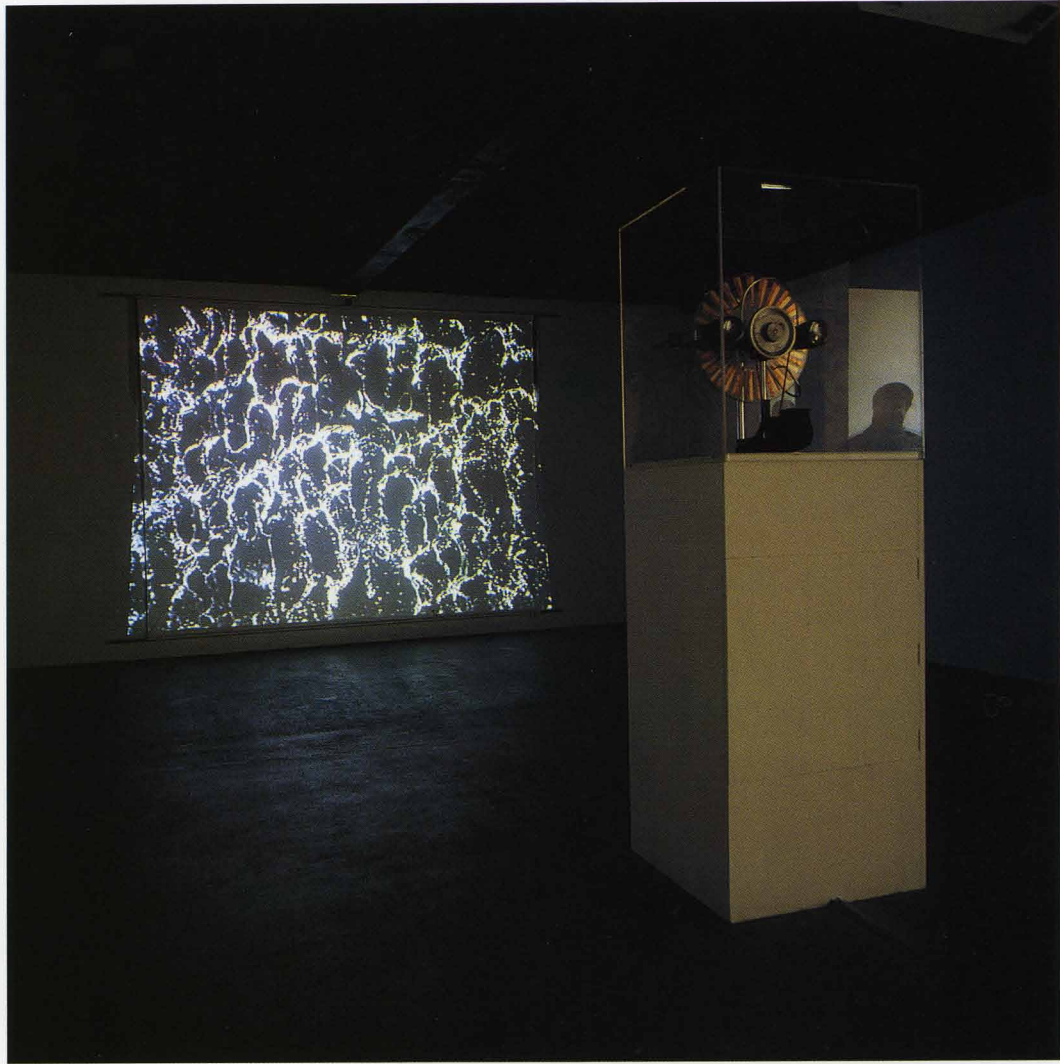
Reservoir points to the hubris of science in aligning itself with God in an attempt to subjugate nature. In the 18th century science satisfied itself with the spark of life, today, as the ECG

suggests, it has progressed to the pulse of life, extending its control to the very heart of human identity - gender.

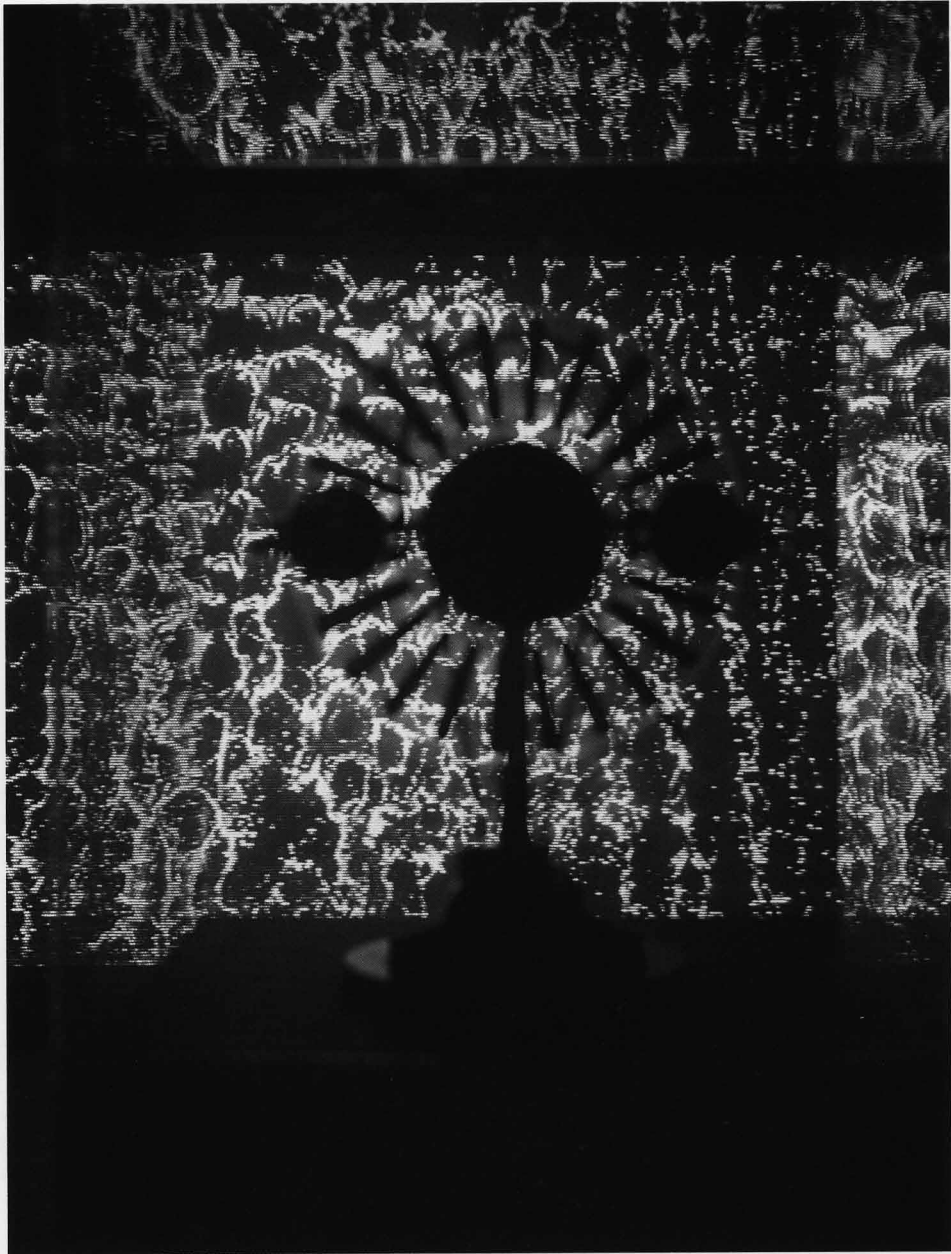
At the same time *Reservoir* celebrates the magic of physics, and the aesthetic possibilities of nature constrained. The Wimshurst machine in action, is quite simply beautiful; the glistening water droplets suspended in mid-air are exquisitely painful; the squiggle and bleep of the ECG are a refined abstraction of the human form. It is as if Goddard is suggesting that pleasure and beauty might be gained by transgressing the laws of nature, turning them on their head to produce illusions that are supranatural rather than supernatural. In this sense *Reservoir* has much in common with Huysman's decadent novel *Against Nature*.

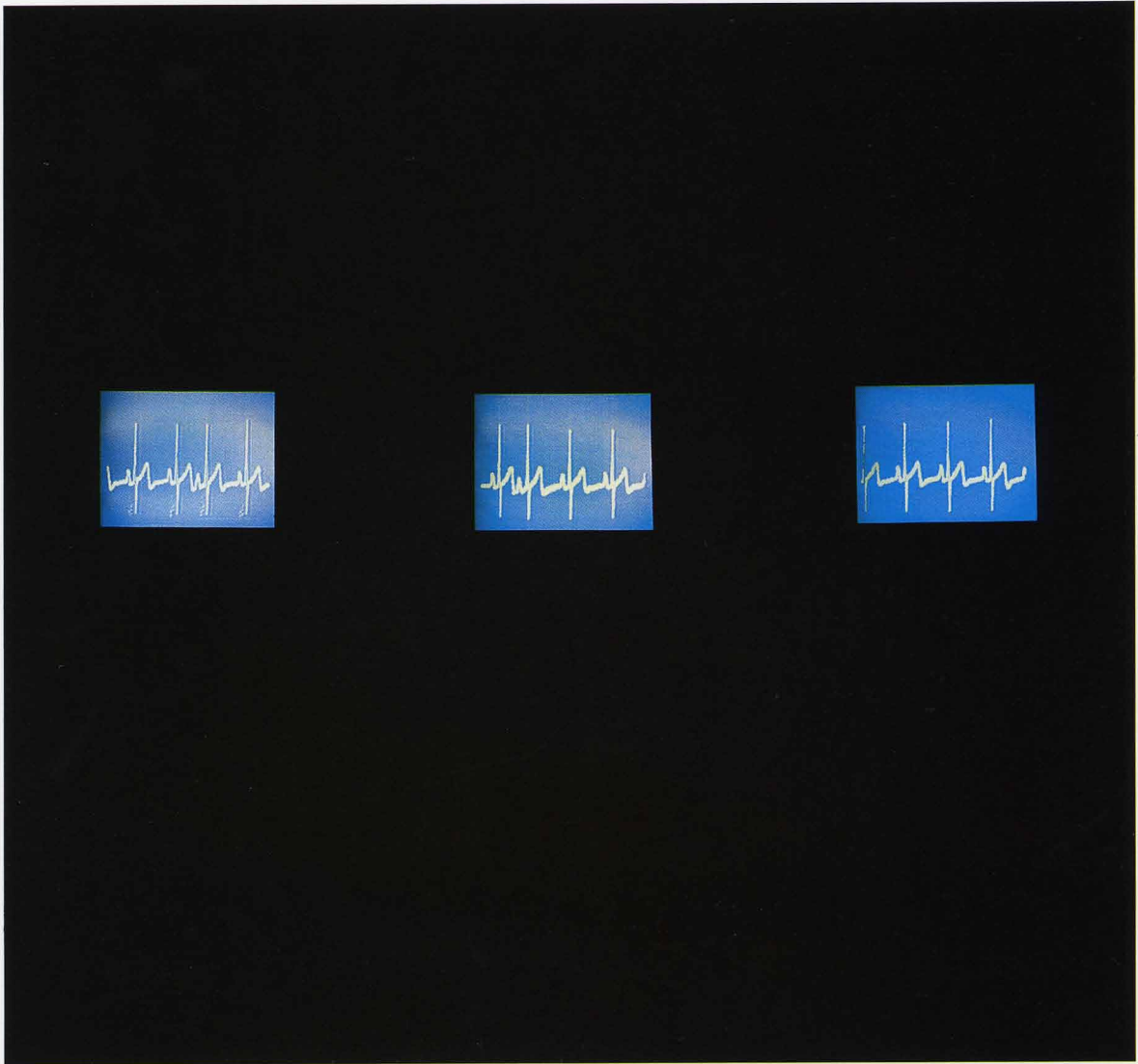
Ultimately, the installation invites the viewer to muse on the moment of creation, divine, human, scientific, and natural. In reality, this moment is always a fleeting flash of brilliance, but in the world of illusions that make up *Reservoir*, it is drawn out into an eternity. Or so we perceive.

Marina Benjamin



Reservoir 1993







Reservoir 1993

Reservoir

JUDITH GODDARD

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“This is the very problem of the creative life; how to have a future while not forgetting the past?
How to ensure that passion be made luminous without being cooled”

Gaston Bachelard **The Psychoanalysis of Fire**

