

A2/12

Judith Goddard

Katharine Meynell

Monika Oechsler

3 Video Installations commissioned by Kettle's Yard

abstract still life portrait

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Kettle's Yard

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Bluecoat Gallery

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A Kettle's Yard exhibition organised in association with Moviola.

Kettle's Yard, Castle Street, Cambridge CB3 0AQ Telephone: 0223 35 21 24 Fax: 0223 32 43 77

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Introduction

Well, we've reached the final decade of the twentieth century and 'visual art' has managed to cling onto its discrete place within a vastly changed society. The dreams of the pioneers of this century, that art should lead the way in a great transformation of society, have been neatly sidestepped and the myth of the lone artist genius and the tradition of the valuable hand crafted original have survived.

Or at least that is the picture we obtain from a cursory glance at the coverage of art in the culture section of the media. In these uninspiring pages, art is presented as at most a dangerous commodity and at worst an escape from our present social breakdown. This art takes its place as a minor element of the heritage industry, preserving working practices no longer valued by capitalism but nostalgically respected by an audience disorientated at the pace of change. Artists uphold 'human' values in the culture ghetto while real decisions are removed to the abstracted realm of multinational economics. Art pacifies, but the idea that it might provide a space to suggest alternative social propositions is gradually lost.

Of course such an argument is a gross generalisation and many publications, such as this catalogue itself, argue for a much wider potential for art practice. To be content with these pages is, however, to abandon the field of popular journalism too easily. In the present state of democracy in England, marginalisation can easily move through rejection to expulsion and anathematization.

If the intention of a gallery is to persuade sufficient people of the relevance of contemporary art to its society and to ensure a supportive base to fund its activities, we must engage with popular media. Video which, as Marina Benjamin points out, has become a domestic commonplace, is one strategy which seems to offer great potential.

The exhibition *Abstract Still Life Portrait* makes use of this newish medium to explore subjects which have obsessed artists for centuries. By linking art history to popular image production, a framework is established which allows the audience to orientate themselves and to identify the unexpected or the

unacceptable. The art reference of the title preserves the valuable license to puncture social assumptions which has been historically permitted to artists. At the same time the three exhibitors commit themselves to a language which is far more familiar to a twentieth century audience than painting or sculpture ever can be. Centre and margin are momentarily combined, the familiar hierarchy of media is disturbed and the image opened to a more questioning gaze.

Realistically, we can only expect the disturbance to last for a short while; but in that time the opportunity exists to begin to reposition the gallery in relation to other opinion forming institutions. If that can be achieved, the ambition to turn the gallery into a place of discussion and exchange is advanced and the naive dream of the empowerment of the audience as much as the artist might be able to offer a new challenge to the cynicism of the market place.

Charles Esche
Exhibition Organiser

Black Boxes and Art in Time and Motion

To claim our age as the age of video has a ring to it that is faintly ridiculous; it fails to resonate with the kind of 'new world' possibilities that are elicited by the mere mention of microchips or superconductors. Video technology has been a victim of its own functional success – a success that has allowed it to be tamed and domesticated, removed far from the cutting edge of scientific discovery. The video now comfortably takes its place in consumer culture beside the washing machines, televisions, hi-fis and other sundry electricals at Rumbelows. Even its magical power as generator of illusions has been harnessed to serve the fantasies of a mass culture hungry for escape from the mundane world. A genuine living-room opiate, it pacifies and mollifies, sugaring rather than sweetening our daily lives.

Because video is overwhelmingly identified with the pulp end of mass culture using it creatively is almost by definition to subvert. The domestication of video has thus lent video art a revolutionary edge that throws the medium back on itself and makes the familiar unfamiliar. When video art was in its infancy it suffered all the restrictions of novelty; the new can shock and challenge but it cannot circumscribe meaning. When video artists made installations that deconstructed the medium they ran all too often into the limitations of self-conscious self-referentiality and obsession with the technology. The domestication of video by contrast has given video art an 'Other' against which to define itself, a context to address even through denial, and a culture to reclaim.

The video installations in this exhibition reappropriate video from the mass-market by denying us our culturally-determined expectations of the medium. They disturb and disorientate by making us aware of the illusions we crave; by using multiple monitors they offer us fragmentation where we expect unity; and their repetitive loops of concept-led imagery tease us with non-narrative sequences where we expect a story. Each of the three installations deftly weaves multiple view points and multiple contexts into a thematic unity that is truly postmodern because it is heterogeneous. In Frankensteinian fashion they forsake the integrity of the whole for a creation hewn from disparate with its sutures still visible.

Forging a further link between video art and postmodernism the artists fully exploit the power of video to violate the disciplinary categories of traditional art. They all contain classical elements; Monika Oechsler tackles portraiture, Katharine Meynell takes on still life and Judith Goddard negotiates abstract art. Yet they all remould these elements in time and motion – an alternative context that allows portraits to depict shifting identities, still life to accommodate movement and abstract art to form a backdrop for the intermittent intrusion of precise form. Continuing in iconoclastic vein the exhibition nurtures video art's potential to undermine the Romantic myth of the artist as spontaneous creator. The solid presence of video monitors make visible what is generally concealed in art, namely, the manufacturing process. The monitors draw attention to the cultural and technological components of art; they enable, mediate and communicate the artist's vision; they are part of the art and simultaneously artifact; they sculpt the spatial terrain of the installations for which they are vehicles and they insist that the artist's relation to the art is that of director rather than creator. In one fell swoop Classical ideals and Romantic deification of creative genius are put to bed.

Monika Oechsler

Monika Oechsler's contribution to the exhibition, *In the House of Love*, plays on the physicality of the video monitor as part of its exploration of gender, identity and desire. The five video monitors each featuring a talking head are encased in human-sized aluminium covers. They are literally embodied. The cold reflective surfaces of the metallic cases conjure up images of coffins or body freezers thus nipping in the bud any tendency to anthropomorphise the monitor-case entities. What they conceal is not life, but death, hollowness and void. Reality lies in the surface alone, stylised and polished. Only a ghost lies in the machine.

The characters on the four central monitors engage in a verbal game of free association that points to the problems of communication between the sexes and reveals men's struggle to maintain the social and sexual order in the game of life. The intrusion of images of one of the women blindfolded and spinning, graphically portrays women's resistance to comply with fixed notions

of femininity. Woman is decentered, forever orbiting her own identity, her non-linear path always bringing her back to herself. The blindfold signifies the disenfranchisement of women within a culture that defines them as unseeing objects of the male gaze. Blindness is represented as a metaphoric death to which women are condemned. Indeed the glass-encased blind person's stick can be construed as a memento mori. *The House of Love* reverberates with intimations of death, execution, victimisation and suppressed violence that find explicit expression in the body – target. The intrusion of images of the men in shooting glasses and earphones signify the veiling of voyeurism and a masculine refusal to listen. The audio-visual miscommunication, heightened by the strobing and freeze-framing of the characters, serves to question the ability of words to embody meaning and the adequacy of the body as the container of identity.

The board game designs painted on one-way mirrors suspended from the ceiling of *The House of Love* complement the verbal repartee. They echo the undercurrents of competition, risk and power struggle between the characters, as well as hinting that playing by the rules has a domestic analogue in the oppressive rule of the father. Since rules are made to be broken the game hints at the possibility of transgression and rebellion.

The fifth monitor occupies a recessed space of its own, a pride of place, reserved for screening the 'judge' who lays down the law. As law giver and patriarch he is outside the fray. His authority, like the rule of the father, is distanced, elevated and beyond question. The identification between man, father and law giver becomes disturbingly clear when the 'judge' undresses. His threatening presence shifts from the institutional to the personal domain, from the apparel of the law to the naked body of the man. His reading of a death sentence seems to hold in check any temptation to break the rules of the game.

The House of Love is a contested space at the level of the real and imaginary. It embraces the private sphere of domesticity, sexuality and desire while the public sphere of law and order fights for squatters' rights.

Katharine Meynell

Katharine Meynell's *Eat Video* is extraordinarily powerful at a gut level, indeed it is centrally concerned with all that is visceral, carnal and illicit in the world of flesh and sexuality. Meynell uses the symbolic power of food to contrast the rituals of cleanliness and formality that attend the preparation and display of food, evoking images of the protective mother, with the taboo connections between food, flesh and contamination. The dinner table wall projection is eloquent in its formality, dishes are neatly laid on white cloth, all is pure. This is the realm of manners and taste, of bourgeois codes of behaviour and politesse. As the little girl skips across the table, picking at the foods, the viewer senses that a transgression is occurring, that the untouchable is being touched. As innocence personified, the girl is blissfully unaware of overstepping an invisible line; the tension arises because her presence alerts the viewer to their own hypocrisy, to their everyday denials of the visceral and sexual resonances of food.

Facing away from the projection these carnal connections are made explicit. Five monitors foreground the five dishes in the projection against a background that teases out their metaphoric connotations. Some are overtly sexual, others more textured. The sweet potato resting on a folded pile of laundry overlays images of fast-moving trains and highlights a contrast between the homely, feminine aesthetic of domestic quietude and the relentless, hard and fast pace of the public sphere identified as masculine by the train-phallus. On another monitor a bottle of sterilised milk is ringed by brain-like walnuts as if to enhance milk's promise to nourish growth. Behind this a child attempts to pull out a milk tooth – the first rite of initiation into adulthood – and bloodies its mouth. Blood and milk become synonymous as vital juices of life and growth.

The naturalistic soundtrack, uncomposed and discordant, is particularly provocative in the *vampire s eat*. As the viewer approaches, a seemingly innocuous chair, sounds of slurping and squelching can be heard. These are the sounds made by a mouth licking and sucking the glass screen of a small monitor sunk into the seat of the chair. The inarticulate lips that mouth no

words, that literally speak in tongues, confront us with the zero of nothingness and remind us of the silencing of women in patriarchal culture. When the mouth becomes bloodied, the symbolism begins to operate at a more primal level; instead of desiring rational speech, the mouth seems simply to hunger. The need to consume, to ingest, carries sexual overtones; woman as blood-sucker, lamia and castrator of men are all prefigured. The mouth becomes confused with the vagina and anus. *vampire s eat* is a groping but not grasping seat of unlearning.

Judith Goddard

Judith Goddard's meditation on light and vision, *Descry* is a highly aesthetic installation resplendent in colour. Her arc of seven monitors are awash with the visible end of the electromagnetic spectrum. The seven colours of the rainbow flood the screens from corner to corner, and bleed into one another – a process that reminds us that colour is not in the eye of the beholder but a function of the transformative power of light; it is a matter of wave lengths. The arc of monitors cup a lone monitor on which an eye operation is screened. The operation involves replacing the eye's own lens with an artificial lens, Diopta 23. This allusion to man's ability to imitate nature is reinforced by the presence of a glass lens suspended in front of the monitor. The installation reveals how technology can not only re-create the process of seeing but also light itself, bringing to mind Keats' complaint that Enlightenment Newtonian optics destroyed the mystery of the rainbow.

The title of the installation is germane to its visual play. To descry means to catch sight of, to dimly discern; etymologically it has less in common with scientific observation than with scrying, that is, crystal ball gazing. A dialectic between the scientific gaze and mystical vision, between vision and visionaries, is intelligently exploited. The soundtrack which features a woman humming the Japanese Cherry Tree Song adds to the mystical feel of the piece, the woman's presence is unmistakable yet ethereal, her ghostly presence is in spirit not body. Her feminine voice echoes deeply ingrained cultural associations of light with purity, spirituality and goodness, and implies a darkness hiding ignorance

and evil under the cover of night.

Goddard has managed to contain a great deal of analytic, almost scientific, content within an installation that retains a holistic, 'close-to-nature' atmosphere. Lest the viewer is lulled into mistaking artifice for nature, she has introduced humorous and ironic elements into the piece which return the viewer to an awareness of experiencing an illusion. Feathers and gold leaf blow across the screens, images of exploding fireworks make a periodic appearance, even a fish swims along the arc of monitors.

To conclude I want to reflect on the obdurate, opaque and inscrutable physical presence of the video technology, particularly in view of the customary identification of science and technology as masculine. In reality this identification is beyond dispute, the world of science is male-dominated – the laboratory as a sanctum of masculinity has only recently been infiltrated by professional female scientists – and the power of technology has been aligned with men's attempts to preserve man-made meanings in a man-made world, most disastrously with the manufacturing of the atomic bomb. Yet in the realm of the symbolic the video lends itself to another interpretation which can be clarified, ironically, by a scientific analogy: the black box. The term black box, aside from being an apt description of the video, is used by cyberneticians to designate items of machinery or sets of commands that are too complex. A black box is something about which the scientist need not bother his head, save from knowing the input and output. Only the input and output count. Like Pandora he has learnt not to open the box. The black box model lends video technology an unknown quantity by mystifying the image-generating process within. In the realm of the imaginary the video becomes an incubator, a feminised womb-like space nurturing creativity. But more importantly the black box model enables us to side-step issues of technology by giving us license to concentrate on its output, in this case the art of video installations.

Marina Benjamin

Judith Goddard

13 Judith Goddard

The picture we see on a colour television screen is made up of tiny dots arranged in groups of three. Each group contains one red, one green and one blue dot. Without magnification the dots are too small to see and the eye blends them together to form a comprehensible picture. The transformation of three colours into many more is called additive mixing. Blue plus green makes cyan; red plus blue makes magenta; red plus green makes yellow. Other shades of colour can be created by changing the intensity (ie red and weak green light with no blue at all produces brown). To create white in a colour tube electron beams stimulate the dots in each group equally. Black is produced by not stimulating them at all.

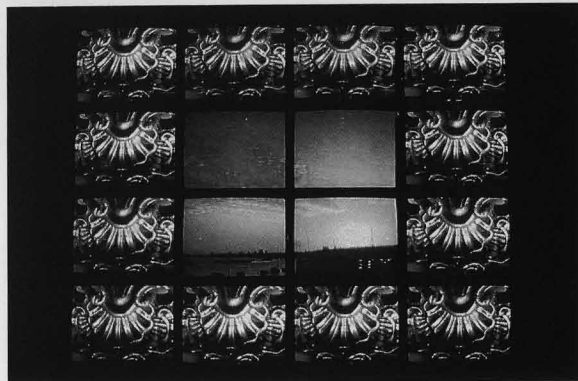
Rarely do we experience a single light or complete darkness.

But as my sight by seeing learned to see
The transformation which in me took place
Transformed the single changeless form for me

That light supreme, within its fathomless
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space;

The first mirrored the next, as though it were
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame
Breathed equally from each of the first pair.

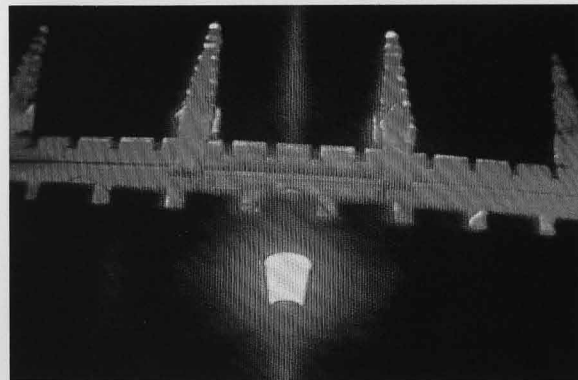
Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto XXXIII
(translated from the Italian).



Urban Turner 1989
video wall, Tate Liverpool



Luminous Portrait 1990
T.V. Commission BBC2



A Bluish - Green 1990
T.V. Commission BBC Scotland



The Garden of Earthly Delights 1991
Triptych for 37" T.V.'s video positive

Katharine Meynell

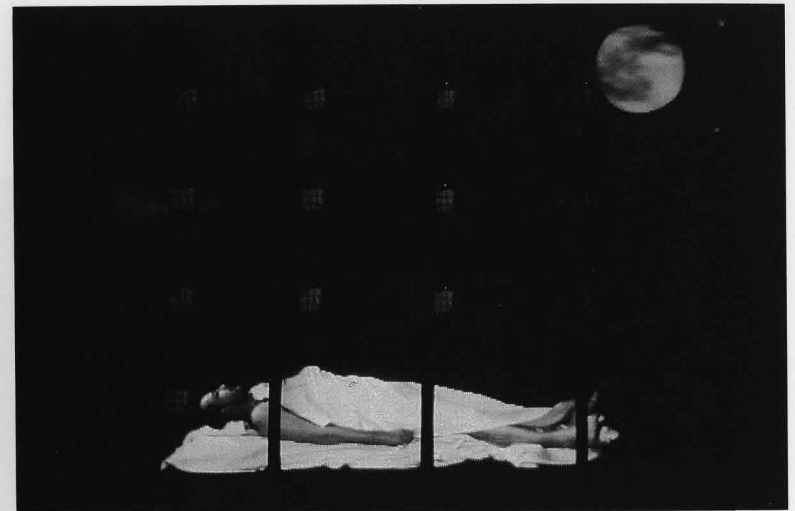
Eat. Yes food, but also pride, ritual, order and system. Eat and swallow its counterpart, pollution, chaos, blame. Eat guilt and the apportioning of that. Place it in the archive of our collective memories and refer to it minutely. Eat, adjust the input and output, the signals relayed and broken down.

Eat Video firstly the spectacle, a large projection onto the plaster wall of the gallery, an electronic fresco. The image is a still life, a table obliquely suggesting a last supper formally laid out. Five places each an arrangement of food and objects – an accumulation of resonances. A child walks across the table, a forbidden act. She plays with the food, naughty child. Her figure fades and reappears as a thought lost and then remembered, in response to the food. Five monitors are suspended with their backs visible, sound and light spills out. Their screens can be seen separately from the projection in a more confined space.

Within the frame of each monitor is a single part of the larger still life, a one place setting. On these, images are enmeshed and overlaid, to form footnotes and subtexts. For this I have used both 'real time' and enacted records of domestic incidents with their fragments of sound.

vampire s eat a screen placed in a seat. A woman's mouth. Castrating mouth. The mouth that you sit on to draw menstrual blood, eater of babies, Lilith, vampire; woman disordered and out of order unspeaking and unspeakable. The screen, prophylactic, the sanitised box that removes you from the experience, that allows maimed bodies to enter your living room without affecting your life; that here is displaced, is placed in a seat for you to place yourself over, to sit on and to remind you of that place as you stand.

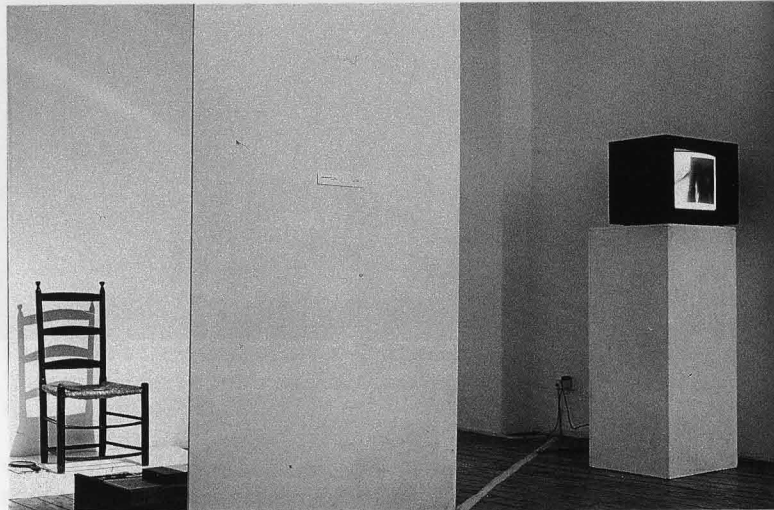
All the video source tapes are looped. This causes a repetition of pictures and noises that happen, are forgotten, and surface again; so becoming a part of the viewer's memory. They are lost and found, unconfined by linear progression.



Moonrise 1989
Installation. Tate, Liverpool



Moonrise 1989
Installation. Tate, Liverpool



A Book for a Performance 1986
Installation. Air Gallery



Her Gaze 1988
Installation. Victoria & Albert Museum

Monika Oechsler

IN THE HOUSE OF LOVE

The game.

In chess the figure is ruled by geometry and thus ordered into harmony. The figure attains the status of a graceful symbol in a contrived courtly dance ritual. But the figure of the Queen, object of idealised love, is advantaged through a freer movement.

One night I woke up from a dream in which I could not find the Queen. Finally, I had to substitute another figure for her. As the game progressed it became clear that it was virtually impossible to protect my King without the aid of the Queen. Nor did I have any chance for a check-mate.

Nine Men's Morris is played on a board of three concentric, linear squares and their interconnecting lines. The outcome of the game is predetermined by the strategic positioning of the nine men each player is given.

A morris man is a dancer in a morris dance.

I once watched a morris dance and wondered why there were no women dancers. Until somebody explained the costumes are based on characters of the Robin Hood legend.

In certain parts of Europe there still exists an old traditional dance whose main movement consists of a group of dancers revolving around a central axis. The impression is similar to that of the Glockenspiel found at the top of old town halls. The circle of dancers hold up arches of garlands spanning across from one to the other. This dance takes place every seven years in the public square. It is performed to commemorate the end of the black death and the name of the dance is Schöffliertanz.

The woman who spun around her own axis did not feel nauseous, but every time she stopped she said: In the proximity of your relentless gaze all distances are equally divided and near'.

One day I was invited to join a party of eight in the House of Love. The number of men and women were equal. The last game of the evening was Blindman's Buff. Unfortunately nobody won.

I used to know a blind man who would refuse to use a stick and insisted that his body was his guiding stick. He developed a great sense of the world around him, only nobody else did. His capacity for sight was of an altogether unusual quality. He was never afraid of the dark.

The law is blind.

The statue of Justice at the Old Bailey is blindfolded. Maybe that explains why it is represented as a woman.

Women are prudent and capricious.

To do oneself justice is to do something in a manner worthy of one's own ability.

Before they lead him away they put a blindfold over his eyes, so as to spare him his sight.

The death sentence transgresses death. The law states that both the living and the dead body are to be confined on prison ground.

As a young child I used to look at dead bodies. In the days of my childhood dead people were displayed in open coffins and behind glass. I used to carefully observe their waxen skin and sunken facial features, just like people do at Madame Tussaud's. Though I never thought they were replicas, only examples of age, living and something turned sacred.

There were rumours of believed-to-be-dead people awakening and knocking against their casket. Sometimes, at night, I could hear those knocks.

They always had to take off their clothes. There was enough time for that. And to us now they seem like reborn children: naked, exposed and fragile. And their ivory skin and bare heads shimmer forever in the afterglow.

His love failed him.

The female protagonist of the modern love story was split into four. She has four lovers. Yet the fulfilment of her desire is still not complete. She was deceived by the promise of ideal love.

Love is negligent.

In previous times, in certain parts of the world, there used to be professional matchmakers who would be amply rewarded for services rendered.

A compatibility profile is a computer printout that compares the character profile of two people. Mine was very satisfying. It coincided with all the knowledge I had of myself.

I love you means I want to be loved by you and I need to be loved in general. You and me in love.

Her lips quivered slightly, consistently and even the tip of her nose every now and then received a tiny burst of tremorous charge. The edges of her mouth lifted upwards, one corner in particular, and discharged disdain whenever they were lowered. Although her lips remained tight, they were not sealed, therefore sound was emitted.

Love is not the same as desire, though both spring forth from the imagination.

When the Sirens sang all things would vanish. Drawn into their mystical presence the sailor lost his sight and sunk into the torment of hearing. In his ears sound transformed into the beautiful and the obscene. The Sirens song was essentially ugly and its magnetic force and overbearing noise were produced by strange creatures lying in wait for a victim. He was lured by their passion to a place of origin where he eventually disappeared.

Sign language reconstitutes the ear for the eye. No voice is necessary. The sign is the symbol of language and, in this case, or always, language itself.

Seeing is not believing.

The vision of God is the belief in faith. Faith and fate are interminably linked.

Olympia had her eyes purloined from her lover Nathaniel. It was at the precise moment of his recognition that she, the automaton, drove him into madness.

The natural law of the snake is to shed its skin. When it does so the outer lens becomes visible, because it also is discarded in the process. The transparency of the disposed outer layer belies the otherwise colourful appearance of the snakes body.

Once there were men who believed women to be transparent. Women made of glass as clear cut as crystal. This enabled them to observe complicated procedures and draw conclusions in many areas of the law of nature and physics. Unable to avert their gaze they followed glassy channels of veins and vessels and peered through translucent layers of tissues, always following the rushes of the blood, brilliant and red. First, they were fascinated by the multi-layered, multi-faceted refractions. Once they had studied all they noticed their own reflection upon the glassy substances. That was when it all came to a sudden end. From that time onwards they began to adhere to their own order.



Book Ends for left and right, with Sexual Act and Spiritual Substances 1991
dura - trans, fluorescent tubes, perspex, mdf, cellulose paint, wine glass with wine, silver plate with alter bread

abstract

still life

portrait

Judith Goddard

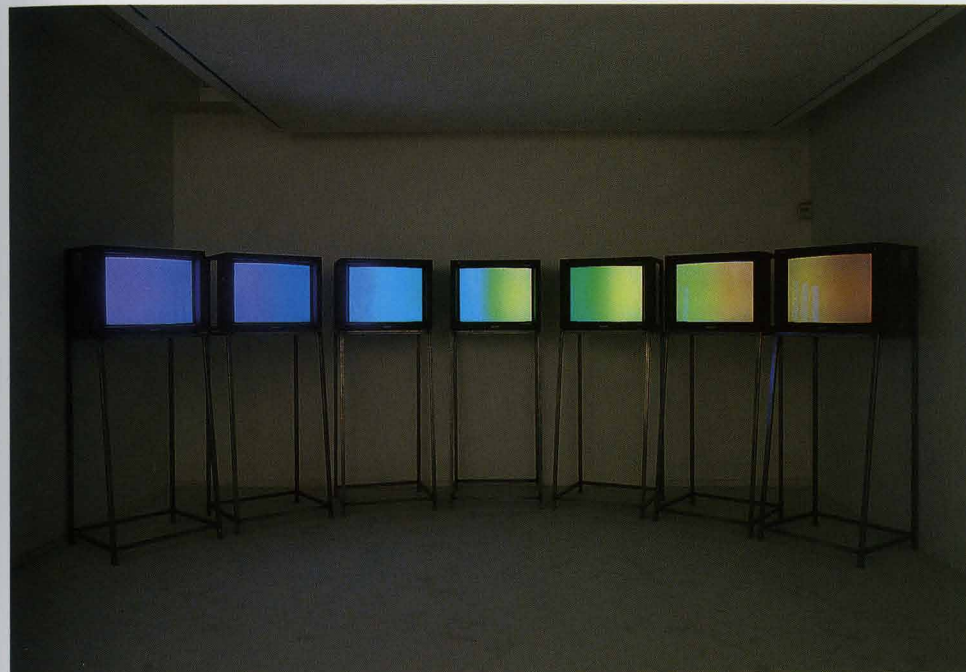
Descry

Katharine Meynell

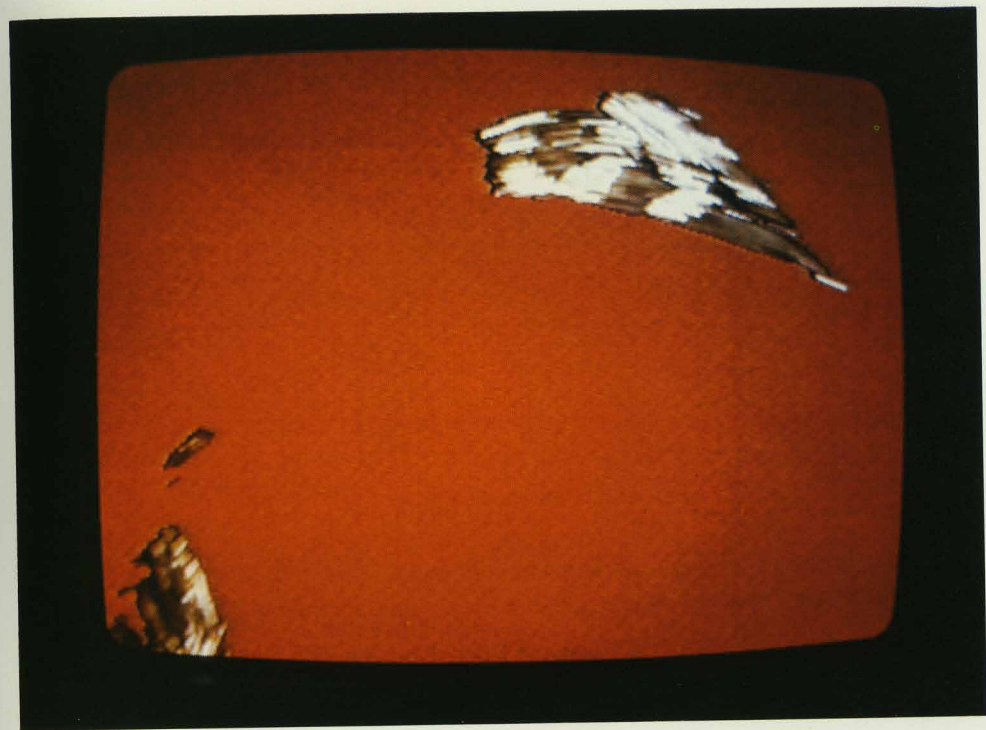
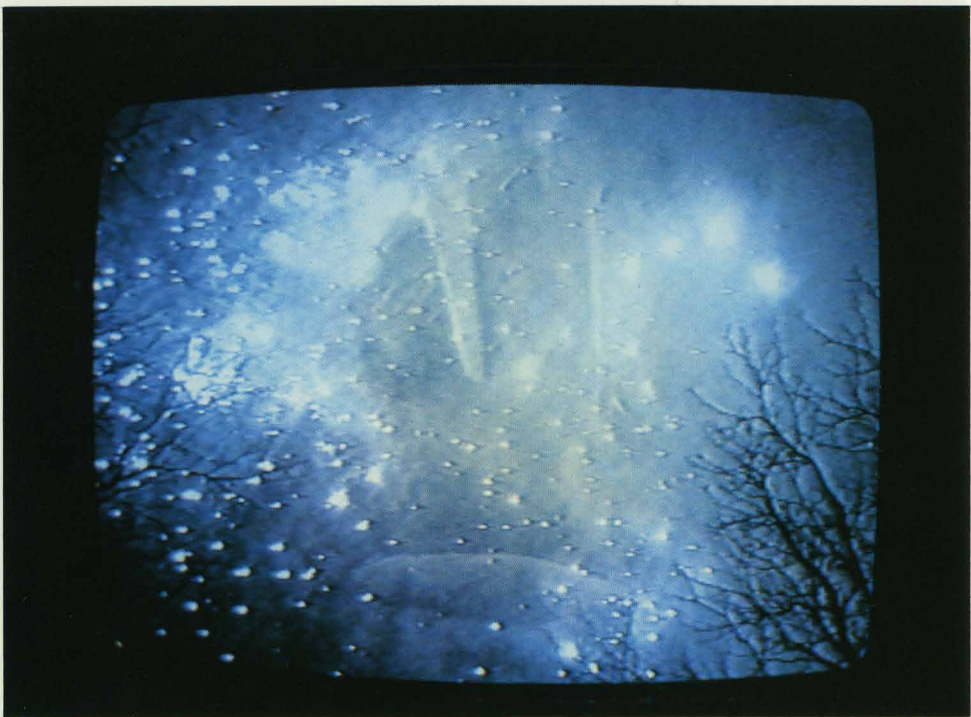
Eat vampire s eat

Monika Oeschler

In The House Of Love



Judith Goddard



Screen images from 'Descry'



Single monitor facing the arc of seven.



Katharine Meynell





vampire s eat



Monika Oeschler





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