

HOUSEWATCH (1985 to 1992)

Compiled by Ian Bourn for the "Remix" catalogue and intended as an introduction to Housewatch's work for Japanese audiences.

HOUSEWATCH PROJECTS is Ian Bourn, Lulu Quinn, George Saxon, Tony Sinden, Stan Steele and Alison Winckle.

They are a unique group of artists whose work transcends the traditional framework of cinema, gallery and exhibition space. Using light, film, sound and 'live' performance the HOUSEWATCH PROJECTS group are developing new and exciting venues in ordinary urban situations.

HOUSEWATCH was conceived in the spring of 1985, when Ian Bourn invited artists to use the facade of his East London terraced house as a vehicle for back-projecting films. A group was formed, the members of which produced film material specifically designed for the offered site.

Using the street-facing windows as back-projection screens (in this case two bay windows, a small window and the glass panels of the front door), the HOUSEWATCH group was able to transform the visible 'content' of the building. Its formerly predictable illuminated domestic interiors, as seen through the windows at night, were transformed into 'openings' or 'surfaces', through or across which could be viewed limitless visions, vistas, abstractions and conceits.

Each artist produced their own multi-screen projection work designed for the house, which resulted in a programme of six compositions, each very different in style and approach, each responding to the site and surrounding environment.

This hour-long event, shown over a number of weekends in the autumn of 1985, was called '**Cinematic Architecture For The Pedestrian**'.

By projecting images from within existing architecture HOUSEWATCH had devised a new format of film-making designed to be viewed from the street, something that potentially allowed any building to become an outlet for artistic expression.

"To see this phenomenon pedestrians do not have to be under the influence of anything stronger than cocoa. It is a new art form called HOUSEWATCH...."

Sarah Jane Checkland, THE TIMES, Nov. 4th 1985

In the autumn of 1986, with Arts Council and Artangel Trust funding, HOUSEWATCH was able to produce new work and adapt some of its original compositions for use in three different buildings in London. Over the period of a month, with weekend shows at each venue, HOUSEWATCH mounted its first small tour.

The prospect of touring HOUSEWATCH events and adapting to different architecture

was explored over the following two years with shows in London, Edinburgh, Bristol and Bath.

"Taking film outside the cinema and gallery reminds me of its roots in the fairground booth. In Britain today the need to brighten up our streets (in this case literally) is not simply an artistic demand but a social one too...."

Michael O'Pray, ART MONTHLY, No.92 Dec/Jan 1985/86

In 1990 HOUSEWATCH PROJECTS returned to the streets of its original shows in East London to produce a self-financed event called '**Wounded Knee**'. This was an experiment in expanding the HOUSEWATCH concept.

This time using two separate buildings and two motor vehicles situated in the street the group devised an 'environment' which audiences could 'explore' as an urban installation instead of, as in the previous format, a programmed show. They used preprogrammed slide projection and film loops, making the event continuous and causing changing relationships to form between the separate elements and locations of the film installations.

Inside one of the house installations, hidden from the audience, a group of musicians improvised a soundtrack for the moving images on its windows which revealed a sea of crawling maggots. A grey 1950's Volvo, parked in a dark corner of the street, was different only in that its swishing windscreen wipers were ghostly white projections and anyone approaching it became dampened by a hidden source of artificially generated rain. The other car, a Metro, was itself a projector - beaming a sequence of slide dissolves through its front windscreen onto the corrugated iron sheets of a fence that separated the road from a nearby subway line. The rhythm of the changing images was counterpointed by the lit window frames of passing trains and intermittently bleached out by counter flashes of the car's own headlights. The windows of a corner house were filled with car engine machinery - pumping pistons and dripping oil.

Recorded sound, improvised music, car horns, engine noise and the rattle of the nearby railway served to produce a complex overall ambience that changed constantly, both in time and in relation to the audience's position in space.

'**Wounded Knee**' was not just a technical and aesthetic experiment for HOUSEWATCH. The central theme of '**Wounded Knee**' was to question political and environmental notions of 'transport and road building' verses 'homes and housing' as it was sited in a street due for demolition and in a residential community living under threat from a motorway building scheme.

"Strange...I thought I knew this road. All this makes it seem like another planet...."

Local Resident, Dec 1990

'**Wounded Knee**' was influential as a precursor to many ideas inherent in three very

different projects HOUSEWATCH have instigated this year. These are '**Contra-flow**' (May, London), '**Little Big Horn**' (June, London) and '**Paperhouse**' (in production for November, Kobe, Kyoto and Mito, Japan). HOUSEWATCH are also producing a piece to be called '**Imaginary Opera**' designed for the Kyoto Prefectural Museum building in Japan, which will be a large scale projection piece incorporating a live orchestra and using elements of their original 1985 concept .

In '**Contra-flow**' HOUSEWATCH produced their first piece in which all six artists collaborated on a single unified work.

The situation was the pedestrian precincts of the modern building complex at Broadgate, in the heart of London's financial area near Liverpool Street Station. HOUSEWATCH shipped in eighteen dilapidated Morris Minor cars and, using film, video and mainly the physical actions of the artists themselves, devised a week-long continuous performance that took place in daylight and darkness.

Taking the simple 'action' of pushing a car (a familiar experience of drivers whose cars are 'out of action'), the HOUSEWATCH group pushed the collection of vehicles around the paved walkways of the Broadgate Arena and Exchange Square. The cars were moved in accordance to preplanned and improvised routes in a sustained piece of choreography that had them continually repositioned in different configurations. At night the cars appeared as being 'pushed through the surrounding architecture' by means twenty-four projections across the windows of one floor of the Exchange House building. At another time the cars were physically anchored to it by vast lengths of coloured hazard tape which swooped up from the wing mirrors of each vehicle to a single point on the top floor of the office block.

"It's the juxtaposition of battered cars against the bastion of capitalism and commerce. You do a doubletake. And it's the surprise too, of seeing cars projected on to the seventh floor of Exchange house..."

Lois Keiden, THE INDEPENDENT, May 12th 1992

In '**Little Big Horn**' HOUSEWATCH used cars again. This time producing six individual works by each of the artists. The work was sited in an area known as the 'undercroft', a large space directly below the Queen Elizabeth Hall and part of London's busy Southbank arts complex. Its darkened walkways, usually the domain of skateboarders, were ideal for film projection even during daylight hours.

Taking a variety of vehicles (nine in all) and positioning them around the darkened space HOUSEWATCH created the ambience of an underground car park. Each artist worked on one or two cars each, using installed film projectors, video, sound and physical modifications to the bodywork to make them individual 'vehicles of expression'. Like '**Wounded Knee**' the show was continuous and similarly the audience was able to walk through the piece experiencing a mix of the various sounds and soundtracks, some of which were trigger-switched by the movements of the viewers themselves.

A car alarm screamed from a blood-red Peugeot. Window wipers swung in syncopation to a sampled 50's pop single. Two cars were caught in the frozen impact of a collision, with their celluloid occupants being constantly thrown forward. Another car, apparently driven by a giant cat, crouched on a ledge as if waiting to pounce on a van full of chickens. A sleek black Ford Capri, occupied by leather-clad lovers, thumped to a mega-bass beat. A giant tow truck had a sculpted tree trunk swung from its winch and emitted the operatic strains of 'Orpheus'.

The individual cars and their proximity to each other generated an amalgam of meaning and reference, from the accumulative hell of a generalised 'car culture' to the more personal obsessions of the artists themselves responding to what has become an icon of the twentieth century.

The next project will be '**Paperhouse**', planned to take place in Japan this November. For this HOUSEWATCH have designed a 'house' that will be placed in different spaces and environments. A portable structure that can act as a 'housing' of projected imagery or, put another way, a twelve screen video projection designed to look like a house.

The proposed building will be simple in design, square, with a low overhanging roof which forms a verandah on all sides so as not to look 'out of place' in a Japanese setting. Having blank, doorless shoji-screen walls, its function is to appear as having no immediately apparent function or at least to provoke curiosity in this respect - is it a bar, a tea house or kiosk of some kind?

On activation of the internal system of video projection, the paper screen walls become cinematic screens and thus will begin a series of six multi-screen compositions by each of the HOUSEWATCH artists.

To explore the work the audience should be encouraged to walk around the structure and view from all sides.

It is hoped that '**Paperhouse**' will prove a fascinating way for Japanese audiences to experience HOUSEWATCH and the sounds and imagery from an English-European culture adapted for a Japanese context.

HOUSEWATCH PROJECTS intend to explore new possibilities for video projection used in this way in future works. They are hoping to produce similar structures like '**Paperhouse**', which they are calling 'metaphysical' or 'archetypal' structures, to be sited in different parts of the world and in different environmental and cultural settings.