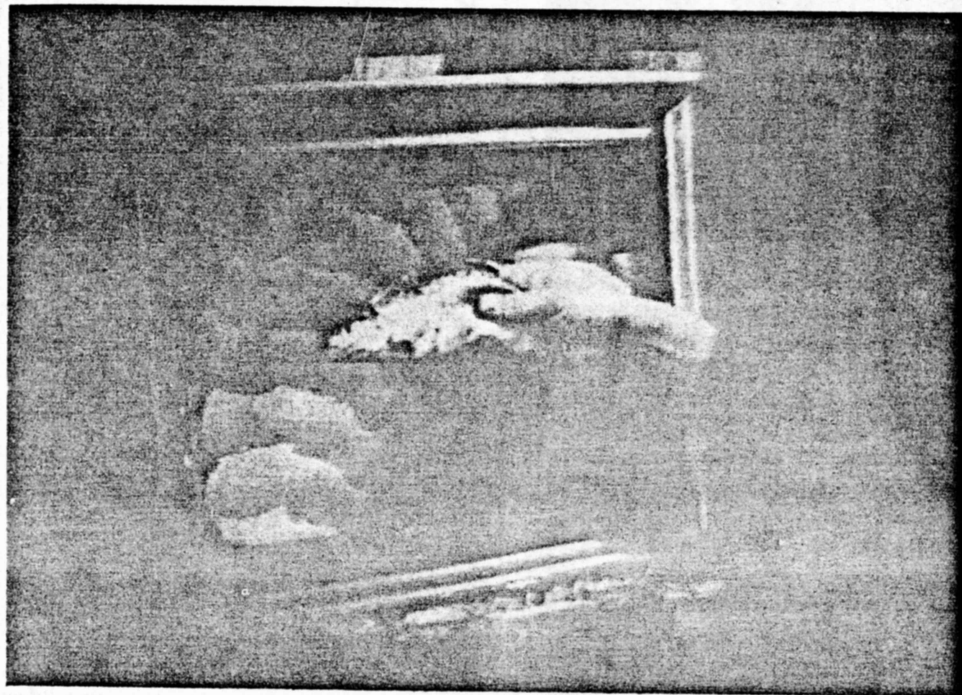


BRITISH INTELLIGENCE: THE NATIONAL FESTIVAL OF INDEPENDENT VIDEO



Steve Hawley's *Trout Descending a Staircase* was one of the tapes programmed by the staff of *Independent Media*, a British video journal and sponsor of the National Independent Video Festival.

Courtesy the Media Centre

Mary Downes

Escape from London into England's green and pleasant "Silicon Valley," where mock Georgian and Victorian dwellings house upwardly mobile computer programmers. Travel into the woody heart of Berkshire where you will find Bracknell. Drive further still into the tranquil hills, and there you will discover Southill Park, once an aristocratic mansion, now a thriving arts center with a cinema, theater, exhibition space, and Media Centre. It was to these genteel surroundings that video artists, teachers, community workers, independent videomakers, scribes, and theorists made their annual pilgrimage last November to attend the Eighth National Festival of Independent Video, the most resilient event to emerge from the burgeoning British video culture of the late seventies, the era when the magazine *Independent Video* (now *Independent Media*), the festival's sponsor, was also conceived.

Brooding over proceedings this year was an automated video installation linking a camera to a computer that spewed out continuous prints of the gathering through below. It was an interesting enough toy, with all the visual qualities of a quadratic equation, but, more significantly, it created an impression of high-tech artistry. Ever

since George Orwell wrote *1984*, the TV screen has had a very special place in our imagination and fears. Lining the walls with images of them at a festival that also draws work from the grossly under-funded community sector may not be entirely appropriate, but it beats potted palms. Recorded for posterity as black and white computer printouts, the predominantly young, lefty audience with a specialized interest in the independent sector milled affably with humble ambassadors from the powers that be—the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Film Institute, and Channel Four. Not so much a gathering of the rich and famous but more a serious reappraisal of work-in-progress by and for the workers, the festival got off to an interesting start.

The short roots of the festival reach back to the heydays of the Metropolitan Councils (recently abolished by Thatcher) when "alternative arts" flourished under radical new policies: video workshops proliferated, training projects evolved, and new technology flooded the markets. Just as young people learned how to make their own "scratch" tapes by copying and repeating TV images with their consumer-grade machines at home, so this growth was nurtured by television—Channel Four. Individuals or communities underserved by TV were given access to money, equipment, and air time. Black, women's,

and community workshops were established to fulfill a broad mandate; training and production were integrated and educational activities were encouraged. Media literacy, seen as necessary to improving the representation of disenfranchised groups, became a principle of the era.

Established in optimism and struggling through unmitigated assaults upon the arts—when even the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company are suffering—the Bracknell festival has survived on a farcically low budget from the British Film Institute and Channel Four. But to understand its programming one important distinction must be made. In British broadcasting, "independent" is used generically to describe anything non-BBC, from Putnam's Enigma Productions to small workshops operating on a shoestring. In the context of Bracknell, the term refers specifically to noncommercial work from the highly political grant-aided (state subsidized) sector—a broad constituency incorporating VHS tapes made by community groups, highly sophisticated documentaries and dramas, as well as formally innovative video art. Tapes may be commissioned or acquired by Channel Four, but the largest proportion is nonbroadcast work with a definite socio-political function. So, within this narrower definition of independent there is still a polarization between art-product and social-process. Where the two converge, the principles of the independent video movement are fulfilled, but it is the tension and contrasts between them which make the festival different from most showcase, talent-spotting, networking events.

If independent video is understood as a general description of anything noncommercial, little wonder that controversy has always plagued its programming. Exacerbated by financial difficulties, the problems become more acute. All selection policies previously employed for the festival—selections by individuals, by panels, according to themes—failed to placate the critical, elic-

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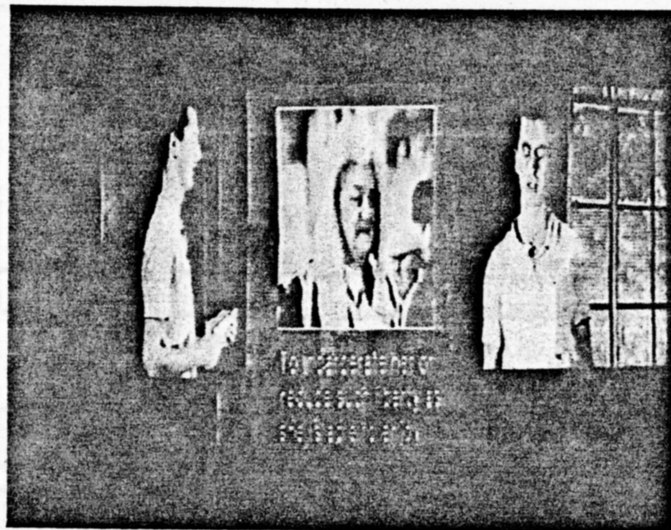
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The history of violence against the mentally handicapped is explored in Simon Robertshaw's impressionistic *Blometrika*, which was screened at the 1987 National Festival of Independent Video. Robertshaw won the student award at Bracknell the previous year.

Courtesy the Media Centre

iting charges of racism, sexism, or elitism. Last year, whispers of discontent grew into a loud chorus protesting the predominantly white, male selection of work on show. Programs ended in arguments, people stormed out, and the weekend deflated into pessimism.

This year, magazines with particular cultural or political demarcations were delegated to program the event. The black London paper *The Voice* and the feminist monthly *Spare Rib* ensured representation for blacks and women, while *New Society*, a social issue magazine, and *Performance*, an arts publication, covered community issues and video art respectively. Other permutations on these themes expanded the selection to a total of 11 programs staggered over the weekend. All representatives of magazines were curiously twinned with veterans of the independent video scene to make their selections. As a result, programming towed the sector line this year at the expense of controversy, but selections still reflected a healthy range of interests and stylistic preferences. Offensive tapes were notable for their absence as were the traditional rows, conspiratorial gatherings, protests at the bar, whining in the food queues, and complaining in the foyers. In retrospect, a little provocation may not have been a bad thing, if only to liven things up and allay accusations of complacency.

Put in a dark room and asked to guess which program was selected by which magazine, I would have difficulties. The *Spare Rib* and *New Society* selections clearly prioritized issues over production values. Typical of this dilemma was *The English Estate*, by the Community Arts Workshop, a tape about a housing estate in Rochdale produced by young, unskilled people with some professional help. Proving that a language unknown cannot be subverted, it was difficult to hear, see, or concentrate on an unstable, under-edited tape, despite its laudable intent to expose the flip side of Thatcher's new affluence. Broadly speaking, this tape represents the community-process extreme of the festival. *The Voice* program, on the other hand, offered a compelling and

varied selection with consistently high production standards. Both *Plutonium Blonde*, by Sandra Lahire, and Isaac Julien's *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (a Sankofa workshop production) dealt with important social issues, using impressionistic, elegiac styles. Julien's sensual mix was particularly striking for its assertion of sexual desire over fear and guilt. An alternative to conventional AIDS hysteria, the tape presents an imaginative plea for compassion and sexual choice.

This year, no less than others, the festival exhibited an overriding preoccupation with film and television conventions—breaking with them, challenging them, parodying them. If the independent sector is united by any theme, it must be this. Particularly worrying, however, is that social concerns and authentic drama get buried beneath a welter of self-conscious interest in form and process. In this complex imitation game an alternative code of conventions is emerging, with an orthodoxy and hallowed critical sanctuary of its own. For all that, George Barber's *Taxi Driver II* and *Trout Descending a Staircase*, by Steve Hawley, toy with TV and fine art conventions using enough irreverent wit and invention to resist dependable formulas. And the quality of compassion infuses every delicately synchronized image in *Blometrika*, a deeply moving and disturbing tape by Simon Robertshaw, the winner of last year's Bracknell student award. Driven not by technical exhibitionism but by outrage, Robertshaw crafts an oblique moral narrative delineating the sad history of violence against the mentally handicapped. Erasing the fine line between legal sterilization and selective breeding, the tape takes recent court decision to their logical conclusions and establishes parallels—perhaps a little too bluntly at times—with the programs of the Nazis and the Eugenics Society. Beautifully impressionistic yet stridently political, this was easily the most interesting domestically-produced tape at the festival.

More engrossing by far, the international programs (the first to be included in the festival) from

Alonia, France, and New York elicited some unsettling comparisons with our native offerings. Disproportionate concentration upon the visual in the foreign language tapes left striking impressions that are often difficult to translate or contrast with cultural counterparts. Absent were the documentaries and dramas which give shape and social delineation to a wash of beautiful imagery. For obvious reasons, the New York selection was more easily identifiable to British audiences. Describing pantomime-bitch Alexis Carrington as "a designer castrating machine," Joan Braderman, maker and unquestionable star of *Joan Does Dynasty*, presents a relentless diatribe on the tyranny and idiocy of the American soap. She translates the language of semiotics (not usually enjoyed for its hilarity) into cognoscenti-slang (e.g., "geriatric macho") and racy, spit-fire irony befitting the queen of camp herself. Performing her critique like an electronic circus act, Braderman incriminates the whole vicious circle from producers and stars to viewers and alternative commentators. Unlike most self-appointed provocateurs in the deconstruction business, she is entertaining, provocative, and utterly convincing. Another tape from the U.S. that concentrated on language and the interplay of preconceived notions and artifice, *Meet the People*, by Shelly Silver, provided a funny, touching, and restrained indictment of the American Dream and the folly of human fantasy.

In part, the last day of the festival, Sunday, was dedicated to talk, which like Sunday Mass tends to be long, boring, and repetitive but still a great ritual. Bemoaning the funding crisis, seeking definitive answers to ubiquitous questions (What is video art? Who controls the means of production?), or attacking easy scapegoats (TV companies, funding entities), words bounced around like boomerangs. If few conclusions were reached in these discussions, at least they consolidated dissatisfactions and general theoretical positions. Particularly amusing for its wet, liberal guilt was a paper on "Men and Video," written for a workshop of the same name, which flagellated the most self-loathing casualties of gender politics. Such absurdities aside, it's fair to report that most people left Southill Park this year with more questions than answers, but feeling optimistic, inspired, and determined.

Mary Downes writes features and television reviews for City Limits in London, as well as video reviews for Independent Media

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