

Showreel Blues

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Fresh Moves: New Moving Images from the UK, DVD and book, www.tank.tv, 2007, £19.99, 978 0 955 518102.

The Centre of Attention Magazine No 4, DVD, www.thecentreofattention.com, edition of 50, signed and numbered, £50.00/€50.00.

Now is perhaps a good time to re-evaluate the medium of video in fine art. Fairly early on in its course of evolution, after a few years of interest in transmission signals as matter or 'a new high art with new materials' as Nam June Paik once said, video was given an ethos: it was to be democratic. Easy and relatively cheap to produce and mass-consume, video rejected cinema's loyalty to painterly frame and composition in favour of the immediacy of magnetic tape. The idea was not that everyone would be an instant Warholian auteur, but that art would constantly shadow real life, desperate to preserve its fleeting moments of insignificance. Video artists have since often sought to break free from this closed circuit of art trying to simulate life which is in itself a re-enactment of art – those instances of 'the object gazing back at the camera' that Slavoj Žižek talks about in the short segment from *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* included in *tank.tv's Fresh Moves*. With the advent of high-density video, which introduces its own perverse logic of infinite magnification – seeing more or better than real life – and YouTube, which finally matches video's unforgivable ease of production in 'real time' with an equally immediate system of distribution and of assigning meaning, video stands at a new crossroads of depth and superficiality, ambitious scope and instant gratification.

Tank.tv's first DVD release, born of an internet host for video artists, is in many ways an attempt to shape viewing patterns along the lines of online video archives. It assembles a set of disparate moving-image practices, ranging from 16mm film through digital animation to performance documentation, into a rather overly strict format. Some of the videos, which include fine work by prominent artists, appropriated from big gallery screens and small monitors alike, are crudely cut to fit the three-minute timeframe and reflect the non-exclusive price range of the DVD: Daria Martin's *Loneliness and the Modern Pentathlon* and Saskia Olde Wolbers' *Placebo* are reduced from spectacular cinematic scale and detail to eyecandy, while Anja M Kirschner's *Polly II – Plan for a Revolution in Docklands* and Spartacus Chetwynd's performances of animal-costumed mayhem are condensed to trailers.



David Blandy
Sons of Slaves 2006

This approach severely limits the range of affects a video piece can carry (moody, repetitive, dreamy or even boring) to a kind of immediate aesthetic recognition, thus imposing the language of advertising on the medium. The problem with this is that YouTube makes the three-minute approach almost redundant: online archives are about excess of information and while a frequent complaint against gallery displays of video art is that they are seldom engaging enough to justify the time standing in front of a monitor, nearly 18 million individuals played the YouTube video known as 'Battle at Kruger' – a ten-minute long shaky, hand-held depiction of lions and buffalos in conflict on safari. Other videos fare better: for instance, David Blandy's ubiquitous *Sons of Slaves* – the artist miming the Junior Delgado song on the underground – mimics the video clip format anyway. Explorations of the textures of VHS and found footage, such as Ben Callaway's *Carousel* and Duncan Campbell and Maryhill's *Quartet*, also make sense on home DVD, as do painterly approaches to animation such as Katy Dove's watercoloured *Melodia* and Max Hattler's *Collision*, a pulsating mash-up of stars and stripes and Islamic patterns. Kevin Heavey's *CloudR*, an explosion of colourful atomic mushrooms over a quiet city accompanying Charlton Heston's elucidations of Nietzsche, and Alexander Heim's *Holz*, a musical collage of the sounds made by pieces of wood hitting a concrete floor, similarly work well within the constraints of a showreel. But one is left with the feeling that, while this is a wonderful opportunity to own and capture great work that is only temporarily available in a gallery, a real democratisation of video art would allow for the retail of longer individual pieces to a general audience too.

By contrast, The Centre of Attention's fourth magazine is almost too generous. Detailed documentation of the gallery's work over the past couple of years is interspersed

with artists' videos and performances. It is hard to imagine a general 'non-art' audience finding much of this interesting: shots of private views invite the viewer to recognise familiar faces and rough edits display much activity that would not be comprehensible to someone with no insider knowledge of the projects to which it relates. Nevertheless, and perhaps because of this, the magazine rewards attentive viewing, and not just because of strong, coherent pieces like Erica Scourti's *Trailer Truths I*, lines from cinema trailers edited to ominous effect, or the extract from Al + Al's *Hard Drive (A:)*, a techno-psychedelic trip through a virtual world. By situating the gallery's efforts within a social context, the DVD itself becomes one of those rare documents of the kind compiled by The Centre of Attention in exhibitions like 'Fast and Loose (My Dead Gallery)', which surveyed five decades of alternative spaces in London. In addition to providing a close-up on exhibitions and openings that the viewer might otherwise never have a chance to see, several of the pieces included attempt a critique of these settings, most notably in *Embedded*, in which the curators stage a 'bed-in' at the Miami Art Fair, and *Petit Pois*, a series of performative interventions at private views which draw attention not to such actions as a trouserless guest, a singing visitor or two dancing cow-girls, but to the strangeness of the social conventions dictating the behaviours of those around them, politely ignoring or asking them to desist. It is these social conventions, for better or for worse, that the compilation DVD gets rid of, but whether the potential for a more open art economy exists for the format remains to be seen. ■

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