

the physics room

P R E S E N T S



Berlin Alchemie

The Physics Room is pleased to bring **Berlin Alchemie** to New Zealand in conjunction with transmedia '97 and the Wellington Goethe Institut. Curated by Knut Gerwers & David Hatcher, the two programmes *Subvision – Subversion* and *Strange Attractors* present works by 16 contemporary artists working with video in the city that never sleeps.

The curators would like to thank: Akiko Hada, Belinda Drum, Berlin Alchemists, Blank Industries, Claudia Anthor-Croft, Creative New Zealand, Deborah Lawler-Dormer, Ilam School of Fine Arts, Independent Images, Jon Bywater, Jo Eckhardt, Marcus Chesterman, Tessa Laird, The Honeymoon Suite, The Moving Image Centre and RDU.

The Physics Room is a Christchurch based not-for-profit organisation acting as a catalyst for the development and promotion of ideas and dialogue through art. It runs a project space on the ground floor of the Observatory Tower in the Arts Centre of Christchurch (South Quadrangle, near the Ginko tree), as well as publishing a journal and maintaining an electronic platform on the World Wide Web.

transmedia '97  
10. VideoFest

## ART OUT OF THIN AIR

Presenting these works together on the sole ground that they happen to originate from the same city would be fairly simplistic. Despite a narrow geographic focus, the tapes collected here represent many of the most innovative and productive independent video artists working in Germany. What draws them all to Berlin is anyone's guess, though perhaps this is less of a mystery when the city's unique social and political experience of the late 80s is taken into account.

Produced since that period, these highlights and touchstones have been selected to foreground the experimental and diverse nature of the Berlin scene without attempting to provide a comprehensive or definitive view. Both programmes privilege content over formal issues, and rightly so, as many of these artists show a general lack of concern for formal convention. Their strengths lie in a willingness to risk: to experiment in unfamiliar territories, to challenge dominant or conventional perceptions and to tamper with traditions of style and content. As they pursue unorthodox approaches to familiar material and complacent viewing habits, opposites are combined in the irreverent crucible of video-alchemie.

Madness, love, old age, fire, death and humour: the postmodern cosmos is constituted from a variety of elements still under investigation. Not "art for art's sake", but the burning of bridges, the pouring of salt in wounds

and the placing of hands in the fire – conservatism lies far from these artists as they involve themselves in the unknown: television reality goes under the video artist's knife; documentary practice is immersed in the acid bath of experiment.

Production opportunities and financial support for video artists in Berlin remains reasonably scarce, especially in comparison to the situation in France or Denmark, where numerous institutions make it possible for artists to work relatively comfortably. Rather than adding to the clamour on this issue though, let's just say these programmes could well be called: *Berlin Video – art out of thin air.*

Wallowing in the mud and mire in search of an 'essence', these Berliners pursue an electronic alchemie in the media laboratories of the city. Concocting something new from the available resources produces unknown effects – process becomes paramount when the goal is to extract gold from the ether.

Of course, not all trials succeed – what is remarkable is that the independent video makers of the last decade managed to haul any treasures into the daylight at all. In this media environment it is easy to see how practitioners are lured away by better pay or secure teaching positions. In this way, Hanno Baethe and Monika Funke Stern, two of Berlin's leading video artists, were wooed away to academies in other towns.

Multimedia is the other factor contributing to the production of fewer original video works in recent times. Its emergence has branded video as a slow and obsolete medium almost overnight. However, it would be premature to pass judgement on the real advantages of on- and off-line processes. Still in its early stages, this area remains relatively unexplored and therefore extremely seductive. OK, I confess, I myself have been working on an Internet project for a good part of the last months while my video productions have been put on the back burner!

Maybe video will develop in a similar way to cinema, passing through a period of crisis to a fertile phase in which artists again reflect on the intrinsic qualities of the medium. Clearly its possibilities are not yet exhausted – the future of video will be shaped by the intuition of artists and their negotiation of new technologies. The potential for new tales to be told and new images to be discovered still lies dormant in the medium.

The Berliner Alchemists are working towards this: onwards regardless – new novitiates are conducting their experiments in the academies and elsewhere with promising signs already emerging. Perhaps they will set off new fissions, fusions or reactions in their audience. Here follows a subjective selection of gleaming pieces from the Berlin laboratories.

Knut Gerwers, March '97

## SUBVISION - SUBVERSION

The human race – a monster with a thirst for mirrors. Delving further than a narcissistic surface, these works are suspicious of given truths and popular representations of reality, especially as described by the popular media. Some employ appropriate techniques to counter complacent reception of media events, while others utilise digital effects to undermine narrative certainty, archival political footage, or the possibility of a stable image of the city itself. Perhaps these sentiments are exemplified by the spectacle of a camera observing itself on the fiery path to oblivion!



**Notfall – Emergency** – Kain Karawahn



**Lost Memories of the Woman in White**  
Friederike Anders <[http://www.icf.de/frau\\_in\\_weiss](http://www.icf.de/frau_in_weiss)>

### *Notfall – Emergency* – Kain Karawahn, 1988, (5)

We are not able to record our own dying process - but a camera can. As the artist incinerates a camera we witness the fascinating 'death' of the imaging mechanism in real time.

### *Luck Smith* – Gusztav Hamos, 1987, (5)

An associative portrait of the city is constructed during an electronic journey on the overland and underground systems of Berlin.

### *Zygnosis* – Gavin Hodge, 1991, (26)

A portrait of the German political artist John Heartfield, a close collaborator with George Grosz. Digital effects are

employed in the spirit of Heartfield's satire, presenting us with Hitler and his skateboard at the Nuremberg rallies and the real meaning of the nazi salute.

#### **Lost Memories of the Woman in White**

– Friederike Anders, 1997, (17)

Everybody recognises the Woman in White, but who is she? A bride? A nurse? A ghost? A schizophrenic assassin? She forgot, but one thing is certain – she's in deep trouble and the nuptial dream of purity has become as tainted as her dress. This almost narrative version of Anders' complex World Wide Web project presents scenes collected from the Woman in White database; sampled for keyword search from Hollywood movies and other popular media.

#### **Rauchnächte – RASKIN / Rotraut Pape, 1990, (11)**

An ensemble of stylised characters meet around an



**Rauchnächte – RASKIN / Rotraut Pape**

invisible table in video-limbo. As they speak in fragments, their thoughts, memories and associations become visible in the clouds of smoke rising from their cigarettes.

#### **Steinwelt – Angela Zumpe, 1991, (8)**

This experimental piece on the Gulf War combines a poem by Peter Weiss on the subjective experience of a civilian war victim with the cleansed and filtered coverage of events carried by broadcast news.

#### **der Tod IST – Knut Gerwers, 1994, (16)**

Our insatiable appetite for accidents and disaster has transformed us into a breed of media vampires, gathering daily to suck blood from the television screen. Resurrecting Klaus Kinski from the dead and featuring one of the fastest video sequences ever cut, this report on the boredom of eternal life is perhaps the ultimate scratch video.



**Steinwelt – Angela Zumpe**

# STRANGE ATTRACTORS

A quick trip through the undergrowth of the Berlin scene uncovers lyrical, comic, erotic, earnest and intimate aspects of the city. These often personal experiments present us with visual riddles about masculinity, sketched associations between history and personal identity, unashamed nakedness, and approaches to sex and the aging process without a trace of keyhole voyeurism. Instead, the search for the essence of such existential processes in these complex portraits demonstrates the qualities that make video an ideal medium for capturing the subtleties of character and the mysteries of time.



**Ohio Bang Bang** – Akiko Hada

*Mattscheibe* – Christoph Doering, 1989, (5)

The interior of a television set becomes a percussive inner space.

*Ohio Bang Bang* – Akiko Hada, 1988, (4)

A collaboration with the German avant garde musician Holger Hiller to produce the perfect audiovisual synthesis: every sound becomes an image – every image explodes into sound.

*Und die Galaxien hörten* – Maria Vedder, 1990, (11)

An experimental portrait of the Spanish singer and performer Maria de Alvear. Combining one of her performances with atmospheric staged settings and biographical extracts, it suggests that art and poetry can never be fully explained but need to be experienced and approached in as many ways as possible. As Maria de Alvear puts it: "Art must be like a potato: digestable. It must feed you."

*Parfait d' Amour* – Monika Funke Stern, 1988, (11)

A close encounter of the erotic kind – using an endoscope camera (the ones doctors stick in your vein) and a sensual montage of colour and black and white imagery, the work takes us on a joyride through the skin, teeth and hair of the lustful protagonists.

*Akt: Inge (für Franz) – Hartmut Jahn, 1994, (6)*

An intimate portrait of Inge; an elderly woman who is involved in a passionate affair and continues to work as a nude model for artists. Drawing on her own experiences, she reflects on differences between male and female sexualities.

*Pars pro Toto – Veit Lup, 1991, (13)*

A performance-oriented piece on men's paranoia about potency and proliferation. Males and sex... always a problem... well, quite often, and rarely presented as humourously as in this work.



**Pars pro Toto – Veit Lup**



**STAY – just a moment – Hanno Baethe**

*STAY – just a moment – Hanno Baethe, 1990, (16)*

A naked old man stretches and moves through a wooden attic, meeting and comparing the texture of his skin with that of the bodies of young women. "I experience a difference, I don't see it, don't feel it. When you're as old as I am, you'll have to suffer from it – inside you're still 17 but on the outside people just see an old man." Ernest Berk, modern dancer and experimental musician, interprets the sufferings of a young spirit trying to overcome this increasingly painful difference.



Fallgeschichte – Antal Lux

*Fallgeschichte* – Antal Lux, 1992, (5)

An experimental autobiographical piece on Lux's flight from Hungary during the Russian invasion of 1956.

*Ein-Blick* – Gerd Conradt, 1987, (12)

A camera points from a house in West Berlin to a nearby house in the East. Between the houses sits the Berlin Wall. The curious and expectant responses of the DDR border guards and the residents to the East of the Wall are caught as the camera shoots one frame per second for a 12 hour period. In the evening West-German television programmes flicker on the screens of the TV monitors in the East.

- AUCKLAND** – Auditorium, Auckland City Art Gallery  
April 3rd and 6th – 7.30pm
- HAMILTON** – The Studio, Waikato Polytech  
April 7th and 8th – 7.30pm
- NEW PLYMOUTH** – Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
April 20th and 21st – 7.30pm
- WELLINGTON** – City Cinema, City Gallery, Wellington  
April 22nd and 24th – 6.00pm
- CHRISTCHURCH** – Cloisters Theatre, Arts Centre  
March 19th and 20th – 8.00pm
- DUNEDIN** – Dunedin Public Art Gallery  
April 12th and 13th – 7.30pm



Cover image: "der Tod IST"

# SUBVISION - SUBVERSION

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GOETHE-INSTITUT  
WELLINGTON  
German Cultural Centre