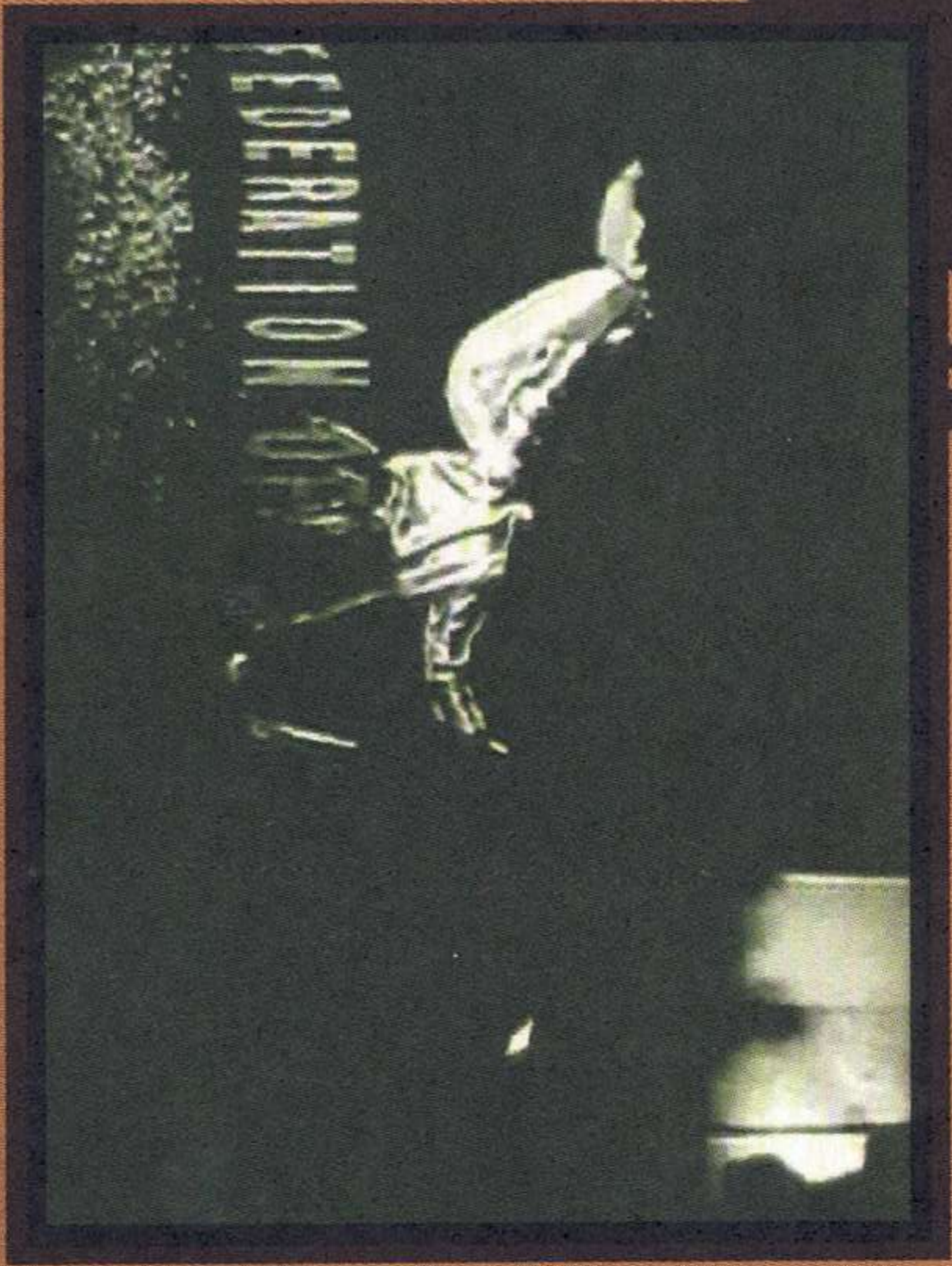


# SICK AND DIZZY



FLOATING ADRIFT IN A SEA OF MEDIA

# INTRODUCTION



## EXPLORING THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN BODY AND MIND, IN THE EFFORT OF ORIENTATING OUR COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

*Sick and Dizzy* is a collaboratively curated program of film and video art from Australia and Hong Kong. Curator, critical writer, and video artist, Fion Ng, and Director, Griffith Artworks, Beth Jackson have co-curated a program of works drawn from both the Griffith University Art Collection and from the Videotage Collection for presentation at the Screen Culture program of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art and the MAAP99 Festival (Multimedia Art Asia Pacific) in September 1999. *Sick and Dizzy* will also be presented at the Microwave Festival in Hong Kong in January 2000, as well as being offered for tour in Australia during 2000.

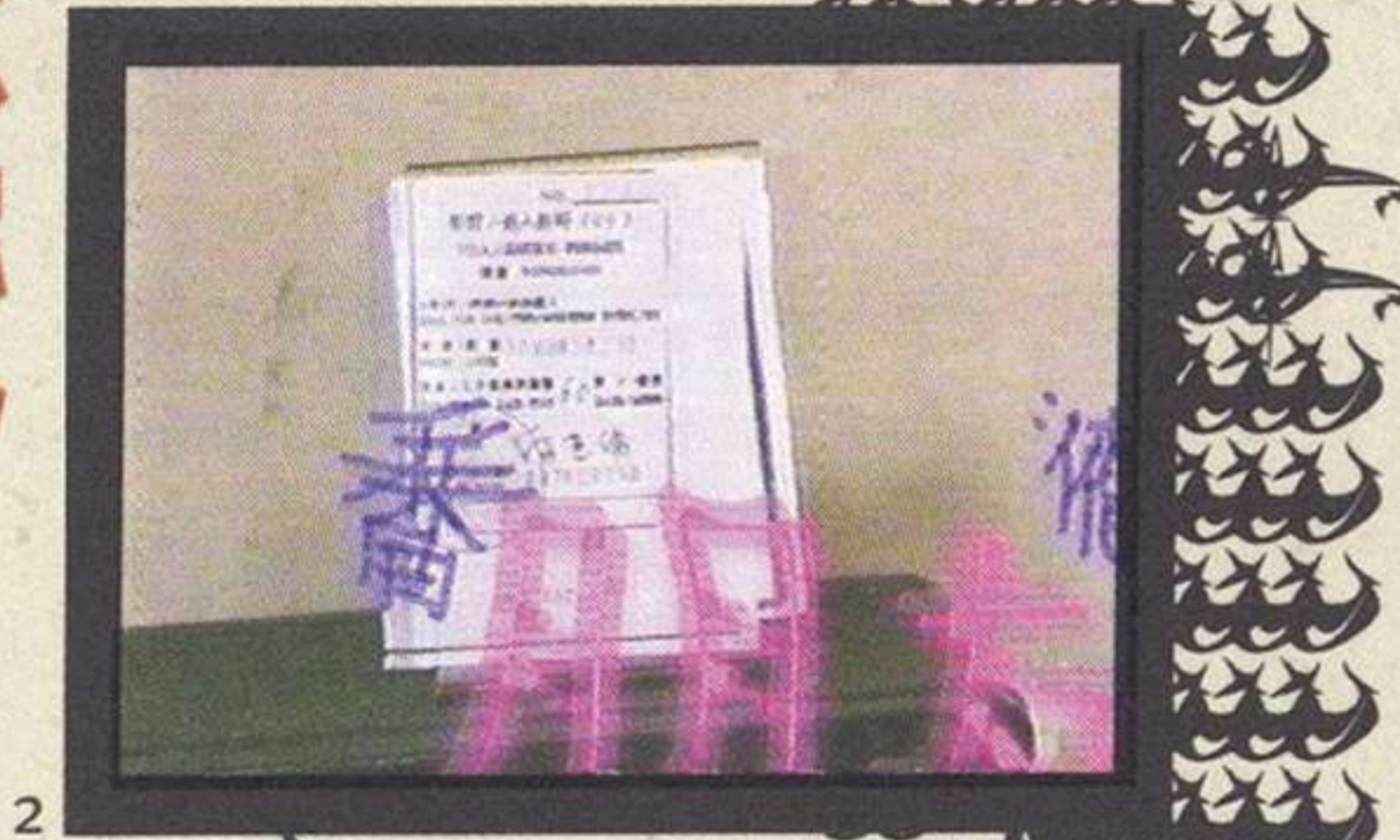
The jointly developed theme, *Sick and Dizzy*, refers to a sense of disorientation and discomfort. Technically and aesthetically this refers to the mobility of the camera and the intense spatial qualities of filmic imagery, which is being ever-more intensely explored by new technologies and virtual, scopic architectures. In the contemporary world of cable television, supermarket cinemas, IMAX theatres, game parlors and the Internet we are increasingly feeling like we are floating adrift in a sea of media and hypermedia. *Sick and Dizzy* refers to a collective sea-sickness, and the dilemma of whether to shut our eyes and go with flow or focus on the horizon and pinpoint some landmarks. The artworks presented in *Sick and Dizzy* explore the dialogue between body and mind, in the effort of orientating our collective consciousness.

At another level *Sick and Dizzy* refers to cross-cultural experiences of diaspora and migration, of re-orienting one's self in a new place. It can also be seen to refer to the collective wave of nausea which has passed over the population of Hong Kong in the 'hand-over' from British to Chinese rule. Hong Kong is pitched at the entry gateway into the east, a space of commercial and cultural exchange and flux. Is the sea-sickness there settling down or just beginning? Similarly in Australia, we are experiencing our own waves of immigration and struggle with cultural diversity and national identity, as we try to orient ourselves in the Asia Pacific region and debate and celebrate events such as the Olympics, the referendum on the Republic, and the centenary of Federation. The artworks presented in *Sick and Dizzy* engage in these contemporary socio-cultural and political issues.

**BETH JACKSON**

DIRECTOR, GRIFFITH ARTWORKS

# ARTWORKS



2

# VIDEOTAGE

Griffith Artworks is a centre within the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, responsible for the acquisition, care and exhibition of the Griffith University Art Collection. This Collection of contemporary Australian art is guided by a broad interdisciplinary policy, focussing on debates within the artform and wider Australian society. The Collection holdings include a unique body of historical and contemporary artworks in film and video, acquired originally through the assistance of an Australia Council Collection Development grant. These works range from early experimental films such as 'hand-made scratch' works to social documentary, from the hand-held past to the digital present and the smart-art future. Each work is archived in digital format, accessible through the University libraries, and accompanied by written individual educational commentaries.

Videotage is an interdisciplinary artists' collective in Hong Kong which provides and produces publications, an annual festival event (*Microwave*), professional collaborations, and education and training for contemporary Chinese artist practitioners working with film, video, and new media. Through publications, educational programs and collaborations with various cultural organisations, Videotage is a vital link in presenting the arts to a broader community. Videotage receives funding through government and corporate agencies, gifts and donations from individuals, and membership contributions.

“Until now, the images of ourselves that we carry in our minds have tended to be private and quite urbane. They have been shaped for us by artists, painters, novelists, dramatists since the Renaissance, and the invention of the printing press. Something like a civilised and personal interiority has been nourished by readers sharing a common understanding of the publicness of space and the privacy of mind. We still like this mental shape. We think it is innate, hence eternal.

A totally new variety of mind is now developing very quickly. It is collective, it is public, it is technically assisted. It is extremely fast and it is starving for a better understanding of itself. As the technological civilisation delegates more and more mental responsibilities to machines, we need a much better idea of who we are and what we are like.”<sup>1</sup>

So with the advent of mass media and multimedia communications our collective imaginings go public, the bubble of private subjectivity pops, and with it cherished and persisting notions of ‘civilisation’. ‘I’ am contaminated by popular culture. Amidst my fondest and most personal childhood memories, float spectres from ‘Gilligan’s Island’ and ‘The Brady Bunch’. Was it a dream? Was it a memory? Was it something I saw on television? Was it an add? I feel dizzy. Adrift on John Tonkin’s artificial sea of computerised waves, swelling and falling to infinity. I hear the music of civilisation but there are no landmarks in sight, no signposts to plot a course by. Is it possible that there’s a type of art that is not civilising? Maybe all art starts off wild, only to get tamed by the marketplace later on?

It’s more than that. It’s not simply the images and texts, memories and fantasies, all swimming together, but the very ground they’re embedded within is giving way. Underneath what I think and feel, something else is going on. I feel dizzy and sick. And art that makes us sick and dizzy erupts out of that weird place.

“The way we live with our bodies in cars, planes, and now sitting in front of computers is changing at breakneck speed, while our minds lag behind. When we are not jet-lagged, we are quite simply ‘culture-lagged’. In much larger patterns of social activity, as well as in the smallest molecular adjustments at the core of our physical organisms, the changes that we are undergoing are not immediately perceptible, but the change goes ahead anyway.”<sup>2</sup>

MESMERISING PULSATING VISIONS

Art that’s sick and dizzy is not trying to get control – it’s not trying to sell us a product, tell us how to bring up our kids, or what we should wear. What’s going on then? Maybe it’s just into the rush of feeling everything break apart – even if only for a minute or two. Disruption. New ideologies emerge out of the rubble – only to reinvent the same old forms of domination. As if there isn’t a different type of order, other ways of seeing, thinking, knowing?

At this moment, on television, politicians and social commentators are discussing the preamble to the new Federal Constitution for Australia and the coming November referendum when we have to vote whether to be a republic or not. Around five or so years ago, we pretty much thought that a republic was an inevitable development. But now, ironically, we have a prime minister who’s committed to the British monarchy. Somehow the spectres of colonialism just won’t die, won’t be exorcised – we shoot them down and they just get up again like the zombie creatures inside our gameboys, playstations, and PC games. This makes a lot of people sick and dizzy. But it comforts a lot of others with its predictability.

Peter Callas’ work *Night’s High Noon; An Anti-Terrain* was one of the most powerful artistic-political statements which addressed Australia’s bicentennial. 1988 sparked a lot of political action, particularly around Indigenous issues, and there was even some funding for Indigenous people then (as tokenistic peace offerings). Now, with the Olympics, the new Millennium, and the looming centenary of Federation, the dead horse of nationalism seems to be well and truly flogged, while the government continues to desperately push for a further ‘selling off’ of public discourse to cover the growing debt of cultural bankruptcy. *Night’s High Noon; An Anti-Terrain* remains powerful – it’s mesmerising, pulsating visions, echoing our collective fears and desires, our ritualised violences and denials in this crazy colony, not even one hundred years a (Western) nation. Works such as Ian Andrews’ *Programme* and John Gillies’ *London* also engage with the disciplining logic of the state, pursuing it to its nihilist conclusion, while reveling in their own technical manipulation of appropriated footage.



# SICK AND DIZZY

The pulsating electronic surface of the film screen plays freely with its own body of pixelations, shimmering and shivering in the self-indulgent spectacle of the public. Video art can be dizzy with its own brilliance. Troy Innocent's psychedelic singer *Special Go Man* says everything and nothing. Of course, this is karaoke – you can sing anything that's already been sung. And this is Callas' *Double Trouble*. A culture of appropriation and imitation, the logic of sameness, the denial of difference. I am seeing double – I must be sick or dizzy or both.

Somewhere in my guts, beneath the surface of my mental habits and manners, new forms of language and identity are churning away. Art erupts from the social body. It's vomited up, or leaked out. That's why we hate it, fear it, refuse to understand it, but that's also why we pay it so much attention, try to clean it up, get it respectable, able to be bought and sold and collected and invested in. Art can make us very uncomfortable, unless there's the 'proper' facilities around to take care of it. Then we can enjoy it – in a weird, private way. As long as we don't get the idea it may be criticising us, attacking our values, biting the hand that feeds it. A bit like our kids, like young people – they should show proper respect.

But then we're all a bit sick aren't we?! The *D-VOID* men in suits compulsively straightening their ties, walking in straight lines, working away like clockwork. Or the woman who thinks she's *Snow White*, grooming herself before the mirror, obsessing over her body image. And we all need to get out of it sometimes! To be dizzy. To get away from it all and feel the benefits of a drive in the country, casting off our old clothes, running through the woods, rolling in grass like *Mild Bear*.

Actually, it's amazing how sick and dizzy our bodies can become. How much we will allow. How inscribed, prescribed we are. How penetrated and manipulated. How sick. How dizzy. That neutral computer voice inside our heads speaks to us, navigating through the streams of our subjectivities, Peter Hennessy's *PathL*, instructing us, telling us which bits of ourselves are good, which bad, which to punish, which to reward. We hunger, but we fear the organic fluid juices of our own salivation. Don't eat with your fingers, don't speak with your mouth full, don't play with your food, don't spit.

Is it possible to tune ourselves to hear new possibilities? Can we instruct the body to experience new pleasures? From the pulsating zips of light, the blurring beams of electronic energy, we begin to hear words. *Homage to John Cage* – "I have nothing to say. And I'm saying it. And that's poetry." Never fear the void for it may just be our becoming.

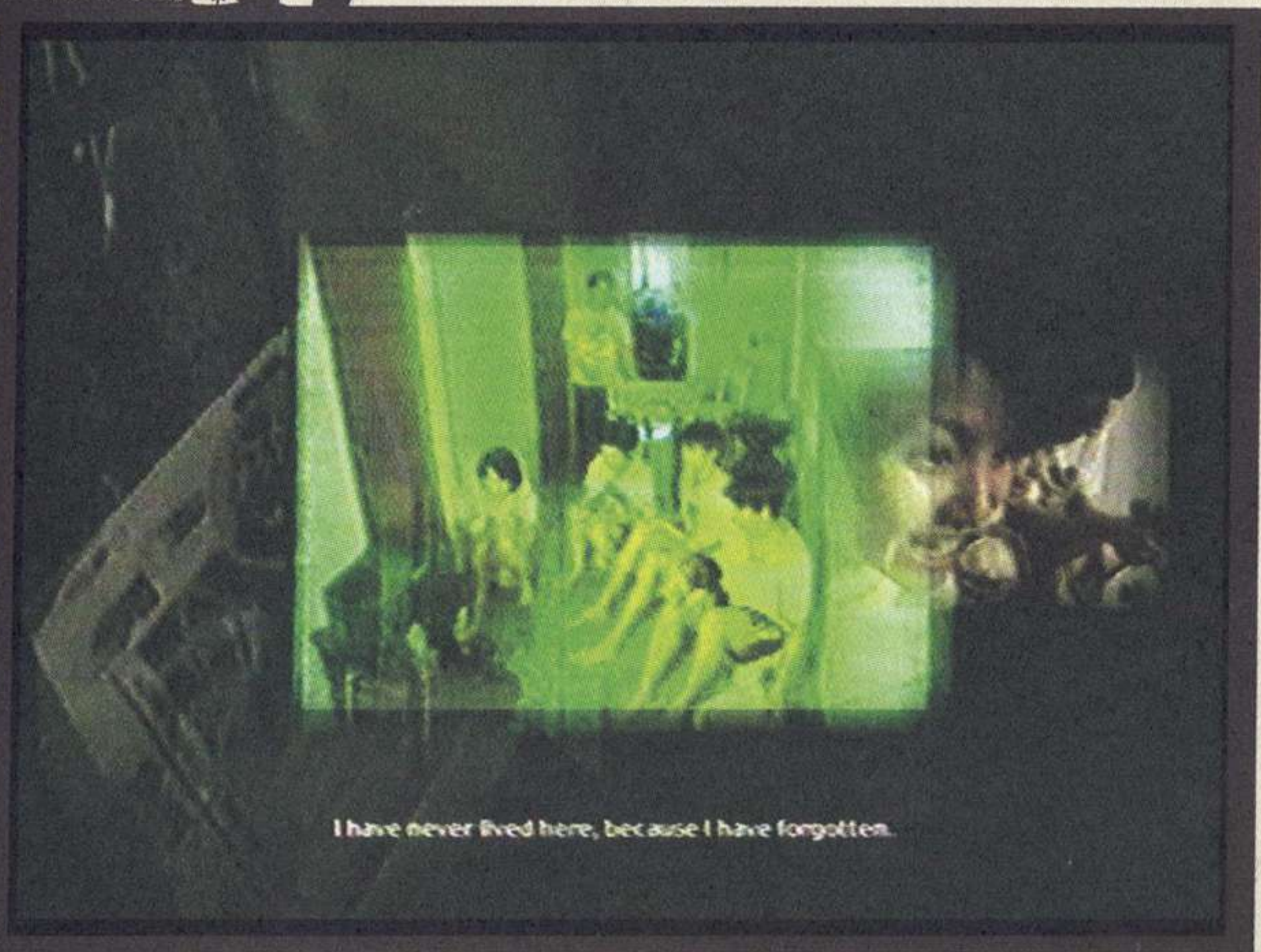
CAN WE INSTRUCT THE BODY



"I have stakes in the cybermensch. The stakes are simple – life is short; novelty can offer the chance for growth; we might change things for the better, whatever that means, by enabling new sorts of subjectivities, new creatures. Paul the apostle thought doctrines of faith and redemption would do just that; he used the words *kaine ktisis* – new creature – to describe the output of the redemption system. My work isn't about faith or redemption, but it sure as hell is about new creatures. I mean the creatures we might become, will become, are becoming." <sup>3</sup>

BETH JACKSON

1. Derrick de Kerckhove "A Volcanic Theory of Art", *Press Enter: Between Seduction and Disbelief*, exhibition catalogue, The Power Plant – Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada, 1995, p.89.
2. *ibid.*, p.90
3. Allucquere Rosanne Stone "Neural Games: remapping the locus of desire", *Press Enter: Between Seduction and Disbelief*, exhibition catalogue, The Power Plant – Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada, 1995, p.132



I have never lived here, because I have forgotten.

3

## RUNNING WITH OUR

Do you know the term ‘Sick Chinaman’? When I was a child in the seventies, television was important entertainment. When watching martial arts (kung fu) films<sup>1</sup>, I always heard actors such as Huang Fei-hong and Bruce Lee saying “we Chinese aren’t the Sick Chinaman”, then slap their enemies’ face in one kick or yell in a powerful voice, acting in a very dramatic way. This repeated ‘slogan’ enters a kind of immortality, which we may call ridiculous, and looks laughable indeed.

Sickness becomes part of the Chinese body when you discover the cruel facts from the modern history of China. Hong Kong is a reproduction of sickness - through the means of colonization. But I, who have grown up in a ‘British Colony’, don’t share this historical burden even if I want to. Though we retain close links with traditional Chinese culture, and our values remain very ‘Chinese’, we are greatly susceptible to Western influence and quick to adapt to innovation. We own such a confusion of being! We are constantly in the shadow of the Tienanmen Square massacre of 1989, and the hand-over of Hong Kong to China in 1997. It is so hard to be able to develop an identity that fits and feels comfortable enough. And no one can do it for us, nor tell us how to embrace the past and present, to be easier for ‘adoption’ into a ‘perfect’ identity.

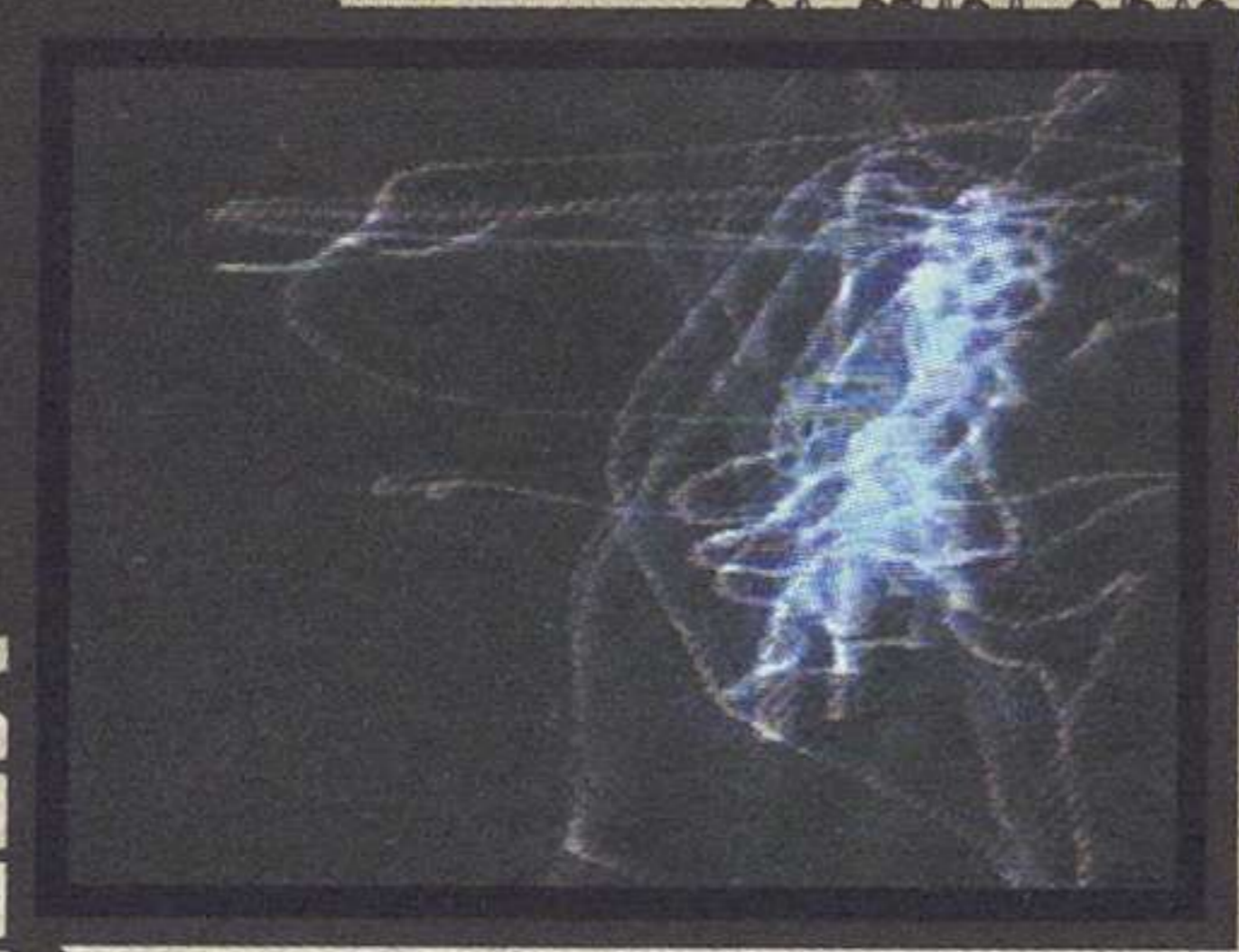
Even though we try hard to show off our love to China, do we really want to kiss with this authoritarian government heartily? The endless kiss with the happy China folk song in Hung Keung’s *I Love My Country’s Sky*, acts like the kung-fu films’ actors speaking “we Chinese aren’t the Sick Chinaman”. To be sure, kiss, as a weapon is a joke - a sense communicated, at least to me, the kiss is also a statement, made on behalf of a naive political earnestness, a sense of honesty which I have never come across in other works. In opposition, Kary Kwok’s *You don’t know me, but...* gives you the naughtiest answer. He uses the fundamental feature of video - the time factor - in thirty seconds, without losing his usual sense of humour, not only in regards to nationalism, but rather more to our community and what was happening around us.

The actual world does embody a chunk of us. People here have never stopped to encounter the reality of the hand-over of Hong Kong. It is such an on-going struggle for us to develop one’s art, one’s identity, to the point of mastery. Our self inhabits such a broken and empty place, which begins to be a container that can fill up with ability. Olive Leung’s *Anaesthetic* offers a means with which to penetrate the deepest recesses of the self, and the reconfirmation of visual perception derived from touch. The body represents one’s attitudes and values. It is the supposedly autonomous art object. Its flesh is both the recipient and source of

desire. It is potentially 'political'. So is the body in *Anaesthetic*. It becomes agitated when the fingers wriggle and wring the body, while we are unable to distinguish an identity, race or gender.

Jamsen Law's *Getting Used to Run* also digs out our inner striking insecurity. It was the most powerful, experimental video I saw in 1997. The abstract sound of a heart beat, the racing city scene, the historic footage of parade, and the narrative sound effects, describes the common fast-paced rhythm of our mind and our everyday life. It gives a fresh perspective upon time and memory. One can also find this city rhythm in Fung Wai's *Alice in Hong Kong*.

Rita Hui's *Invisible City (Wall)* expresses the same way of seeing, but presents in an entirely different way. Three elements – the dialogue (Cantonese and Mandarin); the wall; and the interaction of people (marathon runner, two girls, the house-keeper and the pairs inside the lift) – continuously provoke sensibilities in the viewer in a united structure, to invent and re-invent our selves in history and memories. Trapped in this invisible wall, we see and are seen. It is difficult to come up with an answer, or all or nothing may be the answer. Sharing the same concern, Ellen Pau's *Recycling Cinema* uses the simplest elements to explore not only time and memories, but also the nature of the moving image.



4

Among the ceaseless end of the millennium prognostications, we are now seeing the development of cyber port and high technology. Floating in the sea of cyber culture, our paradise is to be able to rest in peace. Kal Ng's *First 7 Minutes of Creation* is an attempt to tackle part of the eternal question of where humanity comes from and where humanity is headed.

As the tone of these works suggests, you can feel the desire for a lightness of being, rather than magnifying the pain of our difference, imperfection, and 'brokenness'. Without anger or blame, we still walk on our own road like the marathon runner. Sometimes we stand across the street imagining we are the birds, or wander without any destination. So I choose Dorotea Etzler's *Yi Gau Log Yat Ling Ling Zatt – At a Snail's Pace to Hong Kong* as the end. Nothing could be better than to describe our identity as a traveler, our longing for Hong Kong to remain as an open city, where everyone can come and go with freedom of the spoken and written word; with a modern culture freely developing. It is interesting to see how Dorotea sees this city and how she adapts the routine of this city-life in an uncommon way.

Samuel Beckett in his short novel *Tranquilizer* told us that only death could really make people clam down. Before death comes, what people can do is to speak a story to/for their own in order to prove our being. Optimism is the opium of the people. We do not need it. Even if we are sick and dizzy, we still run till we die.

FION NG

1. Martial arts film is one of the most popular cinema genre in Hong Kong from the fifties to eighties. The Cantonese Huang Fei-hong series began production in 1949 and laid the foundations for the development of kung fu film in Hong Kong. Bruce Lee's films won great success all over the world, and established him as the Chinese cinema's foremost international ambassador in the seventies.

**THE AUSTRALIAN WORKS** (FROM THE GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION)

- \* Troy Innocent *Special Go-Man (excerpt from PsyVision)* from Art Rage: artworks for television 1996 computer animated video 1:52
- \* Michelle Mahrer and Gravity Feed (Denis Beaubois, Ari Erlich, Alan Schacher) sound: Rik Rue *D-VOID* 1995 SP betacam 3:00
- \* John Tonkin *air and water I* computer animation 1993 – 94 3:25
- \* Adam Cullen *Mild Bear* from Art Rage: the compilation video 1994 video 2:01
- \* Ian Andrews *Programme* 1995 shot on super 8 and 16mm, finished on SP betacam 2:15
- \* John Gillies *London* 1986 video 7:00
- Peter Callas *Night's High Noon; An Anti-Terrain* 1988 video and computer animation 7:26
- \* Robyn Webster *The Comb – Snow White* from Art Rage: artworks for television 1996 digital video 1:40
- \* Peter Hennessy *PathL* from Artrage: artworks for television 1996 computer animation 1:56
- Peter Callas *Double Trouble* 1986 video and computer animation 5:26
- + Frank Osvath *Homage to John Cage* 1992 video 7:00

\* Acquired with the assistance of the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

+ Donated by the artist.



**THE HONG KONG WORKS** (COMPILED BY VIDEOTAGE)

- Jamsen Law *Getting Used To Run* 1997 digital video 9:00
- Ellen Pau *Recycling Cinema* 1999 digital video 12:28
- Hung Keung *I Love My Country's Sky* 1997 U-matic hi-band 7:00
- Kary Kwok *You Don't Know Me, But...* 1998 digital video 0:30
- Olive Leung *Anaesthetic* 1998 U-matic low band 7:00
- Rita Hui Nga Shu *Invisible City (Wall)* 1998 digital video 11:00
- Ernest Fung Wai *Alice in Hong Kong* 1997 digital video 5:00
- Kal Ng *First 7 Minutes of Creation* 1998 beta 7:00
- Dorotea Etzler *Yi Gau Log Yat Ling Ling Zatt – At a Snail's Pace to Hong Kong* 1998 digital video 2:58

THE WORKS





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Stills photography: Jeffrey Sams

## LIST OF IMAGES

cover: still from Jamsen Law's *Getting Used to Run* 1997

1. still from Ellen Pau's *Recycling Cinema* 1999
2. still from Dorotea Etzler's *Yi Gau Log Yat Ling Ling Zatt – At a Snail's Pace to Hong Kong* 1998
3. still from Rita Hui Nga Shu's *Invisible City (Wall)* 1998
4. still from Frank Osvath's *Homage to John Cage* 1992
5. still from Ian Andrews' *Programme* 1995

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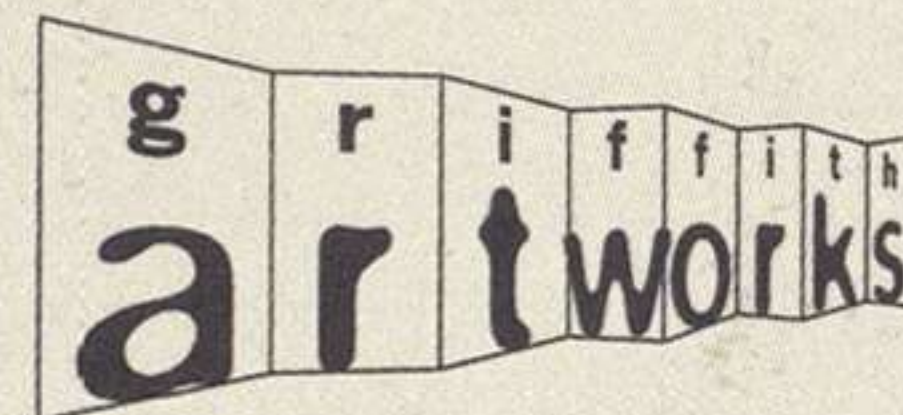
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