

MONSTER CRASH & THE CULTURE WAR

Nine AM, Japanese Video and the Strange Story of Cactus Boy

JAPAN: Land of the rising Sony ... Love hotels ... rampant technological consumerism ... Hiroshima ... sex comics ... Samuri TV ... Americana ... corporate culture ...

NINE AM: A looseknit group of artists, medianiks and 'scratchers' occupying a territory somewhere between the dancefloor of the pop-promo aesthetic and the art gallery ; a territory of whizzbang effects, pumping funk, kitsch and robots. Boys with toys or something more ... ?



Ibiki and Nemurin

Beyond the media-mixed world of 9AM's tapeworks, a pop arty place most recently highlighted in *Time Zones*, lie the central protagonists of the group - Clive Gillman and St. John Walker. They met several years ago at Sheffield's Media Department and, after leaving college, continued to work both individually and collectively in video.

With similar attitudes towards video art - professionalism, technical knowhow and the "pleasure factor" high on the Agenda - Walker and Gillman were quick to collaborate in producing scratch heavy video works that dubbed and dabbled in that blurry area defined, on the one hand, by experimental entertainment and, on the other, the art of spectacle. It's this strategy which sees 9AM happily

criss-crossing from live video scratching for nightclubs to installation work and gallery based pieces.

Initially operating out of Sheffield, the 9AM crew went global in 1985 with a visit to Japan at the invitation of a Tokyo gallery and a 3-month stay which, eventually, resulted in the aforementioned *Time Zones* tapes. Since then 9AM's track record looks impressive: commissioned works for Danish TV and European festivals; screenings in Japan; 'outreach' work in the States; and regular throw-downs in the UK.

The instigators of this barrier breaking activity are Walker and Gillman. Breathless and dynamic, it's Walker who strikes one as the well meaning motormouth of the group - he's

recently returned from America where he was working with performance artists and "saving Neil Young's cows from death" and is soon headed back to Japan - while Gillman balances this wide-eyed optimism with a quieter and more thoughtful manner. When pressed on the issue of a subtle racism at work in *Time Zones*, by example, it's Gillman who responds with the most concern while Walker simply states that the Japanese themselves actively enjoy the way they are depicted through the Western gaze of 9AM. "I do take on board criticisms like that", says Gillman, "but I think you can turn it around in some ways. The Japanese are always looking outside themselves and their culture towards other people and countries - with *Time Zones* that situation is reversed".

Currently set to launch a 9AM compilation tape featuring works from Gillman, Walker and the three other members - Sven Harding, Pam Smith and Mike McDowell, all ex-Sheffield students - titled *Electric Monster Crash*, the group are also busily collecting material and shooting tape for what is described as a "multi-cultural epic". Walker explains, "With this tape, we're looking to produce a work which is about the artificiality of national identities. The focus of the tape will be the self-generated myths children create in their own multi-cultural situation ... I've been doing a lot of work in Leicester with kids from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and for a lot of them the nationalistic boundaries that adults have don't exist. Their culture is a very lively mix of all sorts of influences and myths - in a way they've produced their own mythology which cuts right across barriers of race and religion".

Titled *Sabotein Boi* (Cactus Boy), this drive through the playpens of McLuhan's 'global village' is headed for a March completion date with a high profile world premiere screening at the Tokyo School of Plastic Arts in April. ("We're hoping for a launch here too", muses Walker. "Something a bit razzmatazz"). While conversation drifts into other areas - the state of UK video art, television culture and the 'Sheffield style' of doing things - I express the opinion that perhaps Japan's culture is a culture in crisis, not so much a hi-tech Utopia as a nation occupied by foreign influence and wholly TV fixated. Gillman and Walker don't see it like that: "I think that actually the great thing about Japan is the way in which the older

traditions and new mediums and forms become integrated," says Walker.

Nonetheless, nagging doubts remain. In the gizmo cluttered world of 9AM, where comic characters and TV cartoons, transformer toys and state-of-the-art scratching are the fuel to the powerhouse of the group, one wonders quite where the headline of critical thinking lies. In the 9AM equation, the playtime iconography of the TV age, the signals and texts of the mass media, are all there to be scrambled into an ironic megamix of references and images.

Picking through the junkyard of late 80's pop culture - the 9AM name, Nine Attribution Magentic, is taken from a brand of Japanese video tape, while their new logo is a devil character from Japanese comics - the group see the cross-cultural mythology of children, a place where cartoon futurism and other myths collide, as an optimistic sign-of-the-times.

What's left out of this neat and seductively packaged idea, however, is the way in which big business creates those self-same legends and serves up the readymade, take-away myths of He-Man, Hellcats and Gobots for profit. (American toy corporations manipulate the marketplace of children's imagination with carefully researched and orchestrated campaigns that see cartoon series transmitted in tandem with the launch of new brands of expensive games, toys and gadgets directly related to the televised cartoons).

Whilst it may be unfair to criticise 9AM's approach with the tape, as yet incomplete, this pick'n'choose attitude toward popular culture throws up more general problems. (When St. John Walker suggests that there is something essentially exciting about the fact that Japanese schoolkids involved in keep fit exercises don't look at their teacher but at the monitor showing a video of their instructor, I'm left to ponder notions of manipulation through media and an Orwellian nightmare of TV control.)

For 9AM, these problems are subsumed to a wonderland of global TV, cartoonery and a pop-art style, a space in which to create new meaning and expose hidden angles, perhaps. Quite whether this is a strategy of funtime resistance or a passive re-cycling of mass culture is not for me to say - see the tapes and

make up your own mind - but while Nine AM will always get my vote for their energy, initiative and barrier breaking approach, not least for dragging video art out of its backgroom ghetto into the highlight of public space, for this viewer there is sometimes a frown behind the smile.

Ultimately, perhaps, this is what 9AM is all about - ambiguity and a sophisticated irony. Caught between outright enthusiasm for a collective enterprise which gets to grips with TV culture, high art and pop appeal and an uncertainty over quite what's on show, what I'm left with is a text from Umberto Eco:

"Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there was the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives for those who were not prisoners of the mass media. Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on". (From *Travels in Hyper-Reality* by Umberto Eco; Reports from the Global Village. Page 150. Picador 1987.)

Electronic Monster Crash is available from Nine AM at 12 Sandown Road, Stonygate, Leicester LE2 2BJ. The tape is a 60 minute compilation featuring, amongst others, *Time Zones*, *Cover Up*, *Strobe Zoom* and *Sentinel Needle*. It's on VHS and costs £35. A full colour sleeve, poster and badge will cost you another £2. Work by members of 9AM, including *Time Zones*, is available for hire through London Video Arts. Ring 01-734 7410 for details ●

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