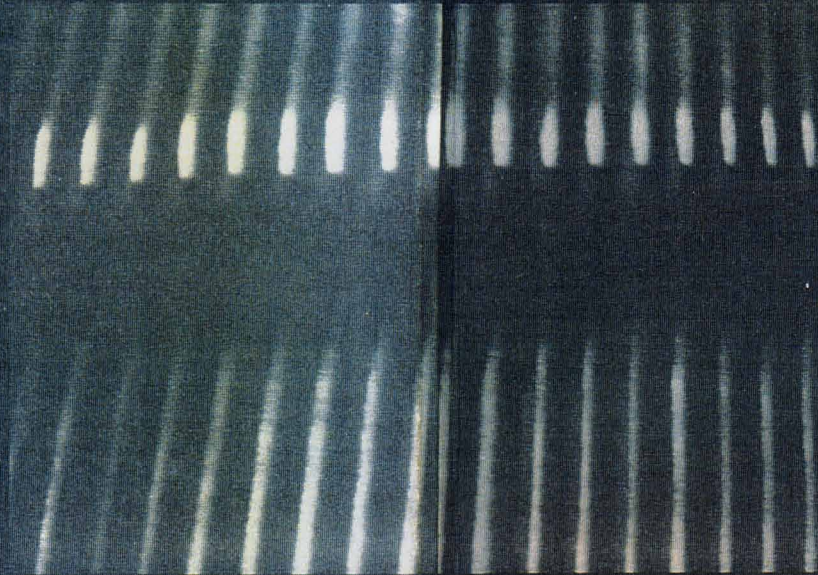
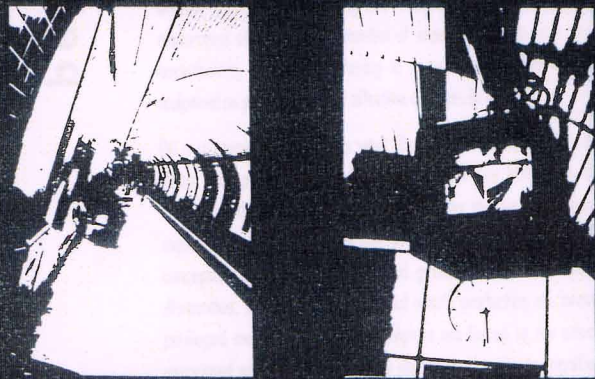


ESCALATOR

verside studios



TINA KEANE



'Escalator', video/lightbox/neon installation, Riverside Studios, London, 1988.

foreword

ESCALATOR carries forward two characteristics of Tina Keane's earlier video installations: first, the use of a single, simple metaphor as the focus for a more complex flow of images; second, the establishment of a clear duality in that imagery, contrasting (on the up side) fantasies of glamour and high-tech based on the City of London and (on the down side) fleeting glimpses of the homeless sheltering in London Underground stations. An authentic response to these polarised visions of humanity, brought together at this unlikely mechanical site reeking of the Last Judgement, lies between the hard documentary realism of the original Video recording and the more surreal edited collage and compression into cinemascopic space.

We are very pleased to present this most recent piece by Tina Keane, certainly one of the most important artists working in video in Britain and with an already strong international reputation. Along with the influence of the work itself, Tina Keane's teaching and organisational activities have served many of her contemporaries.

We thank DER for their generous support of this exhibition; Ian Robertson for making the lightboxes; and the Riverside Gallery Appeal Benefactors and Patrons along with The Henri Moore Foundation for their support of Riverside's Visual Arts Programme, which alone make commissions like this possible.

Special thanks are owed to Jean Fisher for working so thoughtfully on the essay printed here, on an extremely short notice.

The artist would like to thank Sandra Lahaire and Robina Rose for help during production; Peter Harvey of London Video Arts for technical assistance; and St. Martin's School of Art for making editing facilities available.

We, finally, thank Tina Keane for responding with such enthusiasm and acuity to our invitation to make a piece especially for the Riverside Studios Gallery, and for her co-operation at every stage.

GREG HILTY
KATE MACFARLANE

The journey, the basis of storytelling, traces an intimate relationship between the order of language and the unfolding process of life. From its beginning, it describes the child's encounter with time and its inauguration into life history. But the already determined structures of language also sentence the emerging human subject to prescribed social roles which limit the expression of individual desires and aspirations. In Tina Keane's work, the journey confronts the limits of this institutionalised self; negotiating a passage between the space of the imagination and the social boundaries of culture, it proposes a different story altogether.

Hopscotch, 1985,¹ is a microcosm of the journey — a game that marks out the spatiotemporal boundaries of the social self, tracing connections between ancient systems of knowledge and the passage of the modern child into the symbolising processes of art and language. In the installation version shown in Germany, *Hopscotch* presented the Totenkopf (deadhead) or spiral configuration, its nine neon numbers and nine video monitors (multiples of three) alluding, perhaps, to the three stages of human life. In the final single-screen video version, the images are organised like the pictures in a family photo album with the game played against the grey backdrop of a working-class street.

A child's perspective, perhaps; or an adult looking back to an innocence or potential already compromised by a language that assigns the self to a given place within the social order. If there is an echo of sadness in this gaze, it is nonetheless subsumed under Keane's infectious optimism and wry sense of humour. The videotaped performance of *Demolition / Escape*, 1983,² depicting the artist's struggle to climb a rope ladder, suggests the effort involved in the task of breaking free from stereotypical roles; but the persistence and humour of the attempt, and the allusion to the fun of the playground, are in themselves liberating gestures.

Keane's metaphors of breaking through imposed limitations are echoed by the form and processes of her work. Like many women artists working during the '70s, Keane turned away from the traditions of painting and sculpture towards an exploration of the critical potential of expanded media. Her sensuous use of colour and spatial elements makes clear, nevertheless, that, while refusing to invest in the traditional art object, she does not reject either the painterly or the sculptural as pleasurable and affective qualities in the work.

On a strategic level, Keane's work illuminates why the shift to time-based, intermedia practices was not simply because video, film, performance and installation were less historically dominated by male codes of production, but because the concept of the sovereign subject reflected by the static autonomous object of modernism was felt to be inadequate to express the uncertainties and diversity of human identity in late 20th century society. Feminism and intertextuality became conceptual tools by which the fixed gender roles at the heart of social relations of power could be interrogated and dismantled. The established codes of artistic production are heavily implicated in Western society's strategies of power; as privileged media, painting and sculpture are linked to the priority given to vision, a sense which, in Lacanian terms, is associated with the visibility of the phallus as the primary signifier of potency and hence women's disempowerment. Vision establishes the art object as external to the self, encouraging a relation of distance rather than intimacy. But the relation this objectification engenders is disabling and deadly; Narcissus is transfixed by an idealised imaginary other in which he cannot recognise himself. As a counterpoint to Narcissus, however, there is Echo — the dispossessed body condemned, as merely a sound, to utter only the last phrase of another's speech. Echo has no status as a full speaking subject or as an originating force. She is a mediator, or in terms of technological media, a transmitter or playback — constantly shifting,

always displaced, and without a fixed position. However, Echo's playback is by no means a passive repetition; never identical to its putative source, it is a constant production of difference: the resonances of the dispossessed body whose 'madness' exceeds and transgresses the logical order of things. This production of difference lies at the core of Keane's manipulation of technology and temporality, enabling the structure and processes of the work — its spiralling movements and motifs, its sense of continuity in change, and the interactive strategies through which the viewer may negotiate her own meaning in the work — to function as metaphors of the itinerancy of human identity, as well as providing the means by which the fixed cultural positions assigned to the subject may be constantly displaced.

Keane's displacement of the established terms of representation is effected through subtle juxtapositions of familiar elements that are refreshingly devoid of judgemental commentary. Nevertheless, although there is a generous acknowledgement of the pleasure of mass culture's fantasies, the satirical twists given to its popular images and songs alter the direction of flow of meaning. For instance, in the video installation *The Diver*, 1987,³ Keane's manipulation of media's use of the female body as erotic spectacle reclaims this body as the female body politic. Designed for a glass enclosed courtyard, the installation presented thirty video monitors face up on the floor amid an aquatic blue haze of neon lighting, and presided over by the suspended, larger than life-sized, neon figure of a female diver — the Thirties logo of the Jantzen swimsuit. The monitors, looking like 'growths on the sea bed, strange submarine flowers,' displayed a kaleidoscope of images — the sensuous elegance of the swimming star Esther Williams contrasting with the absurdity of Busby Berkeley's abstract formations, and humorous sequences of modern synchronised swimming. An excess of meaning bursts forth with these multiple cyclical 'flowerings'. If the journey to self-fulfilment is symbolically arrested in the hermetic enclosures of Busby Berkeley's formations, it is reanimated by the lithe figure of Esther Williams. Like the image of the python in *Media Snake*, 1985,⁴ the swimmer has a body perfectly tuned and in control of its medium; sleek, sensuous and self-assured, it constantly escapes the confines of the frame that seeks to entrap it. The self-possessed body reappears momentarily as the woman 'working out' amid the stream of hallucinatory images of *Faded Wallpaper*, 1987.⁵ Celebrating the achievement of an identity beyond the conventions assigned to it, it is a figure in stark contrast to the earlier clumsy and vulnerable body of *Demolition / Escape*.

The passage to a more fully realised sense of self in Keane's work is effected through an exploration of the relations between inner and outer experience, between individual history and cultural myth. Indeed, insofar as it is in the effect of relations that meaning arises, Keane's manipulation of both the cultural codes of speech and the materiality of sound is particularly significant. The sound of Echo travels through objects, connecting internal with external space, one place; with another, and one body with another. In *Playpen*, 1979,^{6,7} and *Demolition / Escape*, both of which turn on the relationship between childhood and adult experience, the seemingly innocuous playground song is played back with all the nuances of its sociosexual politics laid bare. In *In Our Hands*, Greenham, 1984, and the related installation *A Bouquet*, 1984,⁸ homages to the women's peace initiative, the subversive potential of the 'unauthorised' voice is revealed through the women's chants, their alteration of the words of familiar songs, and through the wordless ululation that were the spontaneous response to police intervention. It is, perhaps, through the wordless materiality of sound that the repressed body finds its means of expression; for if articulate language orders and translates experience into logical abstractions and representations, the body henceforth can find direct expression only through an involuntary utterance that is beyond predetermined symbolisation.

The soundtrack of *Faded Wallpaper* is a disturbing account of this inner conflict. Juxtaposed with images of a woman tearing and gouging at layers of patterned wallpaper in a confined space, and the memories triggered by this process, its collage of guttural whispers, exotic soprano voice, and incomprehensible snatches of French commentary, painfully evokes the Babelian madness of a self struggling through the prescribed patterns of language to resymbolising herself by means of her own experience, memory and imagination.

If *Faded Wallpaper* presents the search for an independent identity through inner experience, *In Our Hands, Greenham* emphasises the potential of collective experience. The female narrator (Helen John) reflects upon her awakening to the implications of nuclear war, and her decision 'whatever her husband thought' to march for peace. Her personal testimony is juxtaposed with the collective experience of the women's peace camp whose activities — joining hands, spinning webs of wool symbolising strength in unity, and decorating the perimeter fence with messages, art and memorabilia — exist quite literally beyond the boundaries of patriarchal order. Both *Faded Wallpaper* and *In Our Hands, Greenham* recapture the spirit of Keane's first film, *Shadow of a Journey*, 1980.⁹ Rhythmic images of a passage across water, accompanied by the poignant strains of a Scottish lament, form the affective space in which a woman's voice narrates the consequences of the Clearances in the Western Isles; it is also the history of a collective experience transmitted orally between generations of women: 'as I have heard from my mother and as she has heard it from her mother.'

The importance that Keane attaches to the dialogue between personal and collective experience is embodied in her earlier relationship with her daughter Emily — a mother/daughter dyad in which the experience of the one echoes and recalls that of the other: as Guy Brett so astutely suggests, 'Her collaboration with Emily is with herself as a child.'¹⁰ As the women's collective at Greenham Common stands in conflict with the Civil Law, so the mother/daughter dyad exceeds the Law of the Oedipal nuclear family — the alibi for capitalism's supply and demand, (re)production and consumption. Another economy of desire is at work here: a joyous affirmation of the self founded not on division and loss but on the formation of creative bonds.

Tina Keane's most recent installation, *Escalator*, 1988, ostensibly takes up the more sociopolitical, less personal, threads of the journey described in *Hopscotch*. Eleven pairs of video monitors are mounted on a flight of mobile stairs ascending to the back wall of the gallery. The videotape on the left hand monitors presents the escalator steps of the London Underground in a seemingly continuous upward movement. The movement is split, using a compressed 'cinemascope' effect, by shots of the City — views of the monumental glass curtain walls of corporate architecture, and the comings and goings of impeccably dressed businessmen and women — evocative of the seductive visual style of TV 'soaps' like 'Dynasty'. The mood of privilege, order and complacency in this bright daylight world is ruptured momentarily by the wry irony of the statement 'How many of Fortnum's customers are aware that some of their fellow citizens' have taken up residence more or less permanently in cardboard boxes?' The downward movement of the right hand escalator tape leads us, through its 'on the spot' TV documentary style, into another world altogether. This is the subculture of the Underground station; the 'city of broken spirits': the homeless, the winos, the student buskers and the beggars, who go more or less unnoticed by the stream of travellers that cross and recross the video screen. The relentless movement of the escalators, one that is impossible to arrest, evokes a sense of impotence. Like the fall of the chips in *Hopscotch*, a fine line divides skill from mere chance, and the consequence may be either an upward mobility or a trip on a downward spiral. We need not, however, be

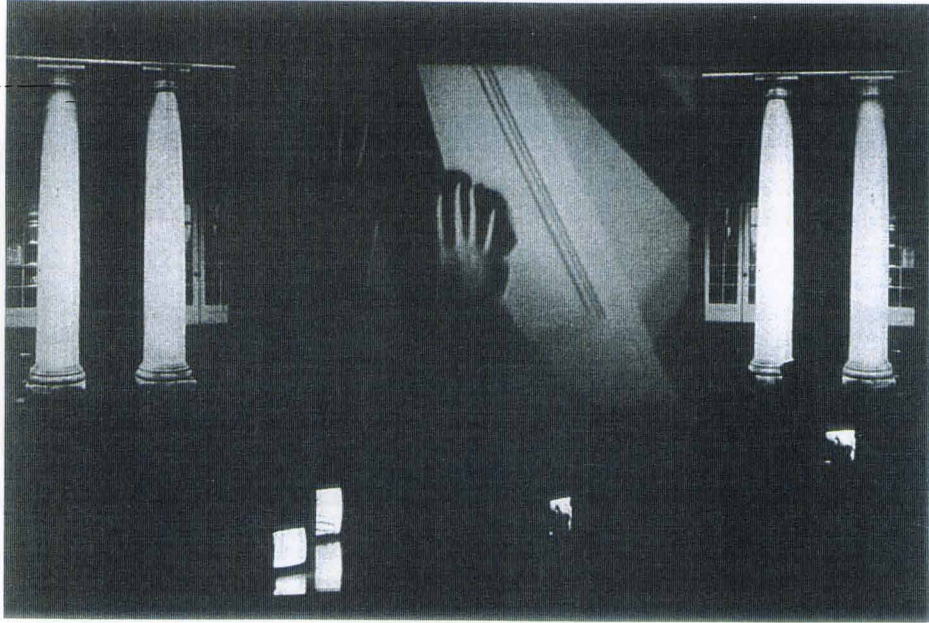
trapped in the inertia induced by assigned social roles. We may break the mesmerising spell of *Escalator's* mediated imagery and duck under the scaffolding of the steps into a different realm. Here the dense blue neon glow creates the effect of a quiet and undifferentiated space, where one might feel the rhythms of one's own body and thoughts free from the hypnosis of the TV screen. It represents, perhaps, the space of the imagination, which, as the narrator of *Faded Wallpaper* says, 'does not spring from nothing, it is what we have made within us out of all past relationships, with what is outside, whether they were realised as outside relationships or not.' Keane's journey, making connections between inner and outer experience, is an understanding of one's own past as the source of creative solutions for the present, and a celebration of the richness and diversity of human identity.

JEAN FISHER

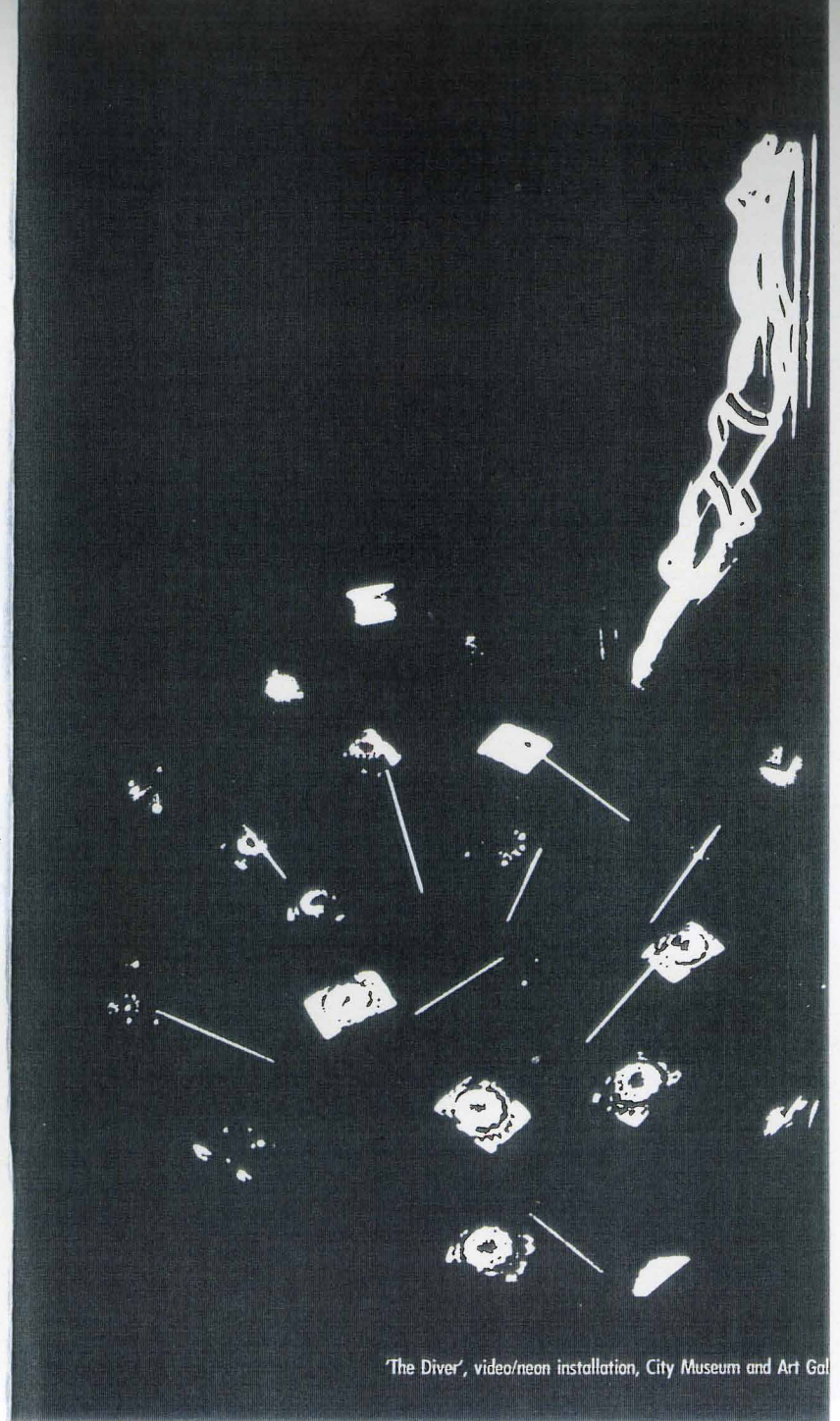
FOOTNOTES

1. David Galloway, review of *Hopscotch*, 'Artware: Kunst und Elektronik', 1987
2. Jean Fisher, review of video installation *Demolition/Escape* at the AIR Gallery, Artforum, May 1983
3. Jeremy Welsh, review of *The Diver*, Art Monthly, March 1988
4. Guy Brett, 'Snakes and Ladders: a profile of Tina Keane's work', Performance Magazine, no. 42, 1985
5. Reg Skene, review of *Faded Wallpaper* at the International Intermedia Performance Festival, MTC, Winnipeg Free Press, Saturday 20 September, 1986
6. Rob la Frenais, review of *Playpen* at Four Corner Films, Performance Magazine June 1981
7. Tam Giles, review of *Playpen*, Undercut 2, 1981
8. Guy Brett, op. cit.
9. Tam Giles, op. cit.
10. Guy Brett, op. cit.

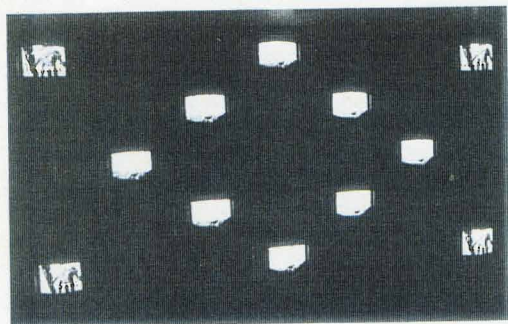
1988



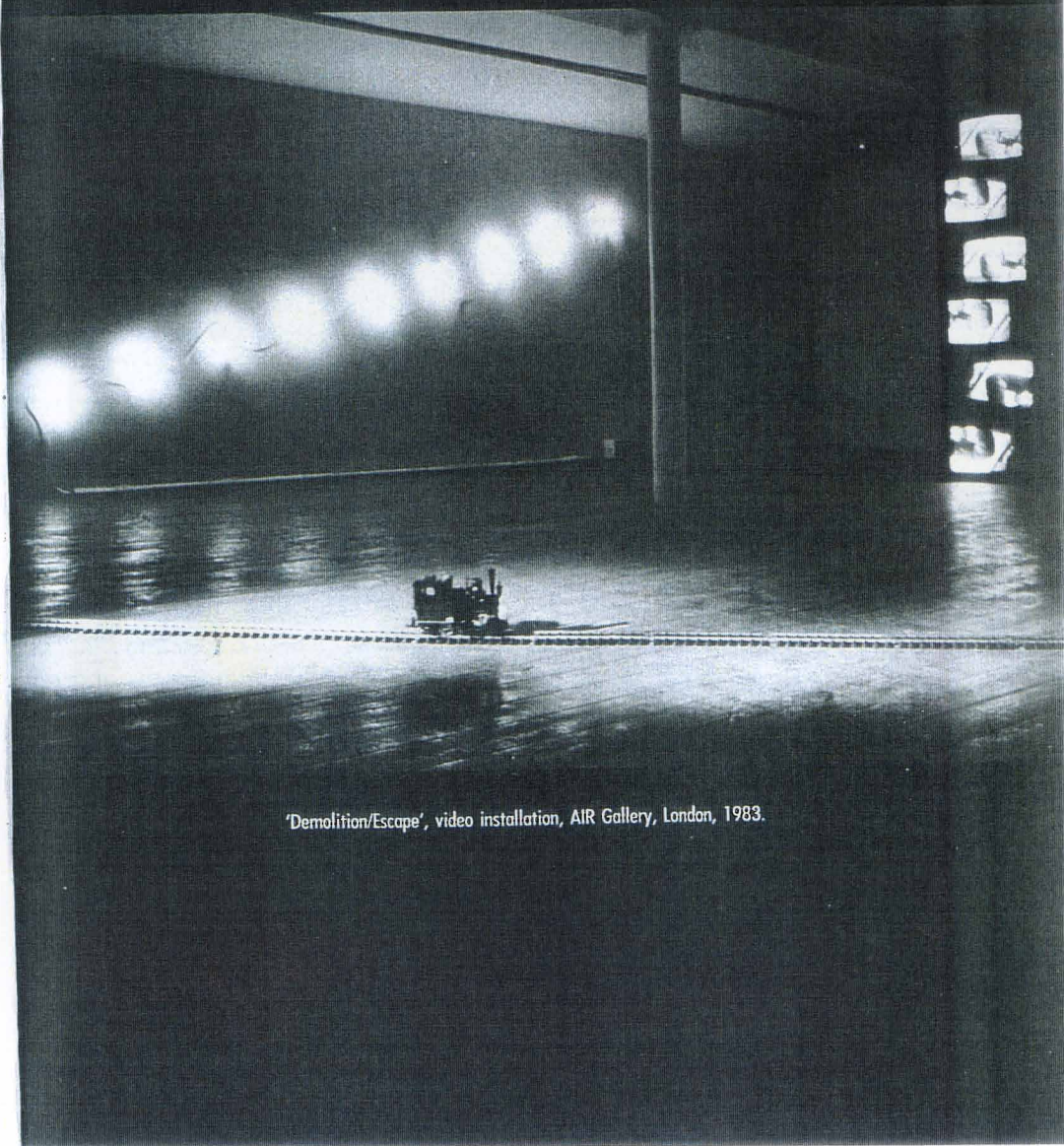
'Faded Wallpaper', video installation/performance, Tate Gallery, London, 1987.



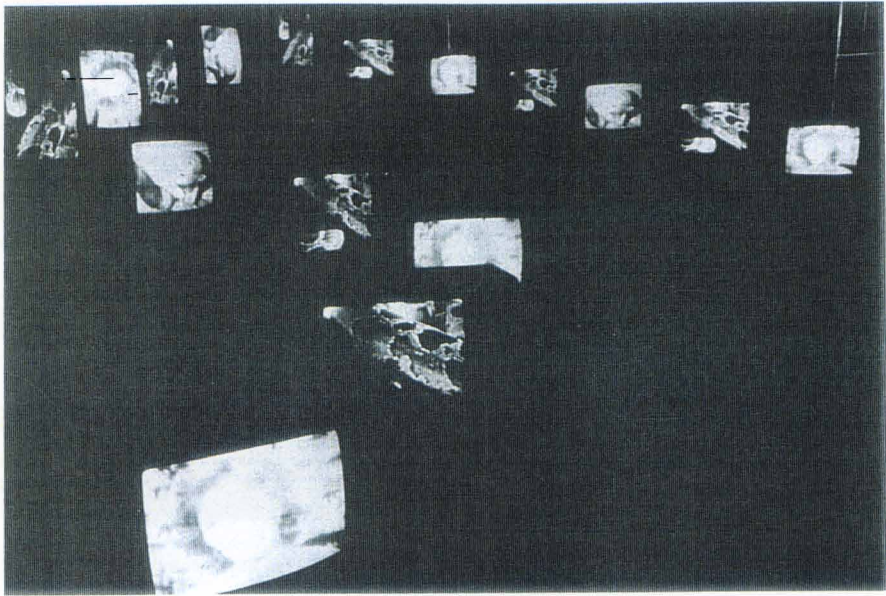
'The Diver', video/neon installation, City Museum and Art Gal



'In Our Hands, Greenham', video installation, A Space, Toronto, 1984.



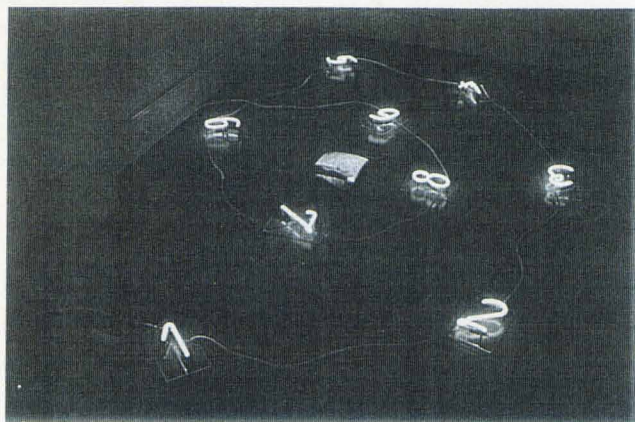
'Demolition/Escape', video installation, AIR Gallery, London, 1983.



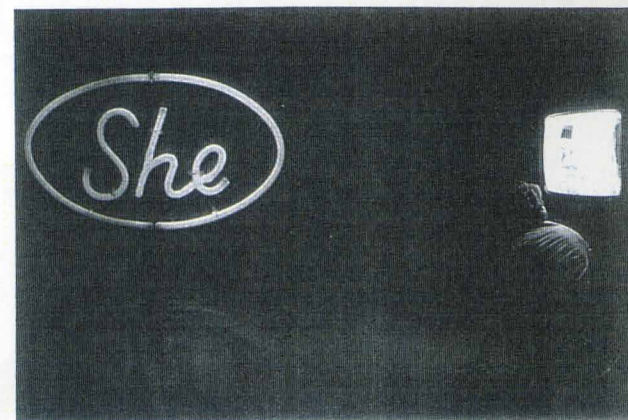
'Media Snake', video installation, ICA, London, 1985.



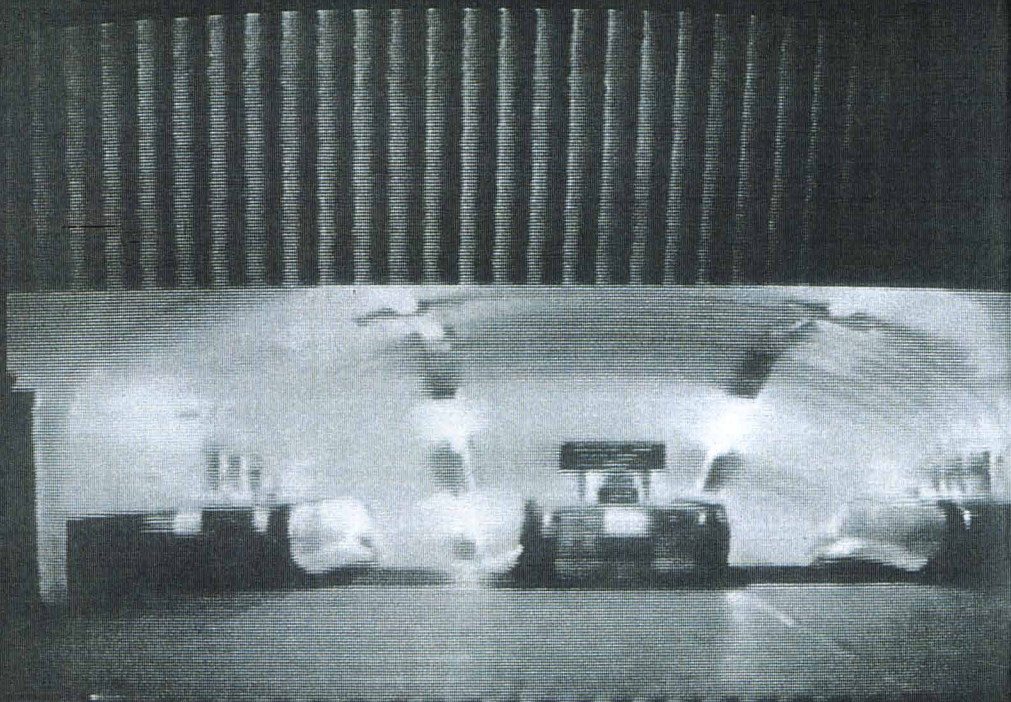
'Shadow of a Journey', film, 1980.



'Hopscotch', video installation, Interim Art, London, 1985.



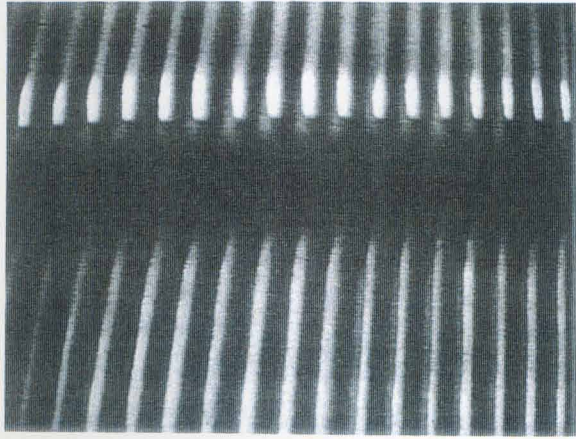
'She', video/performance, Hayward Annual, Hayward Gallery, London, 1978.



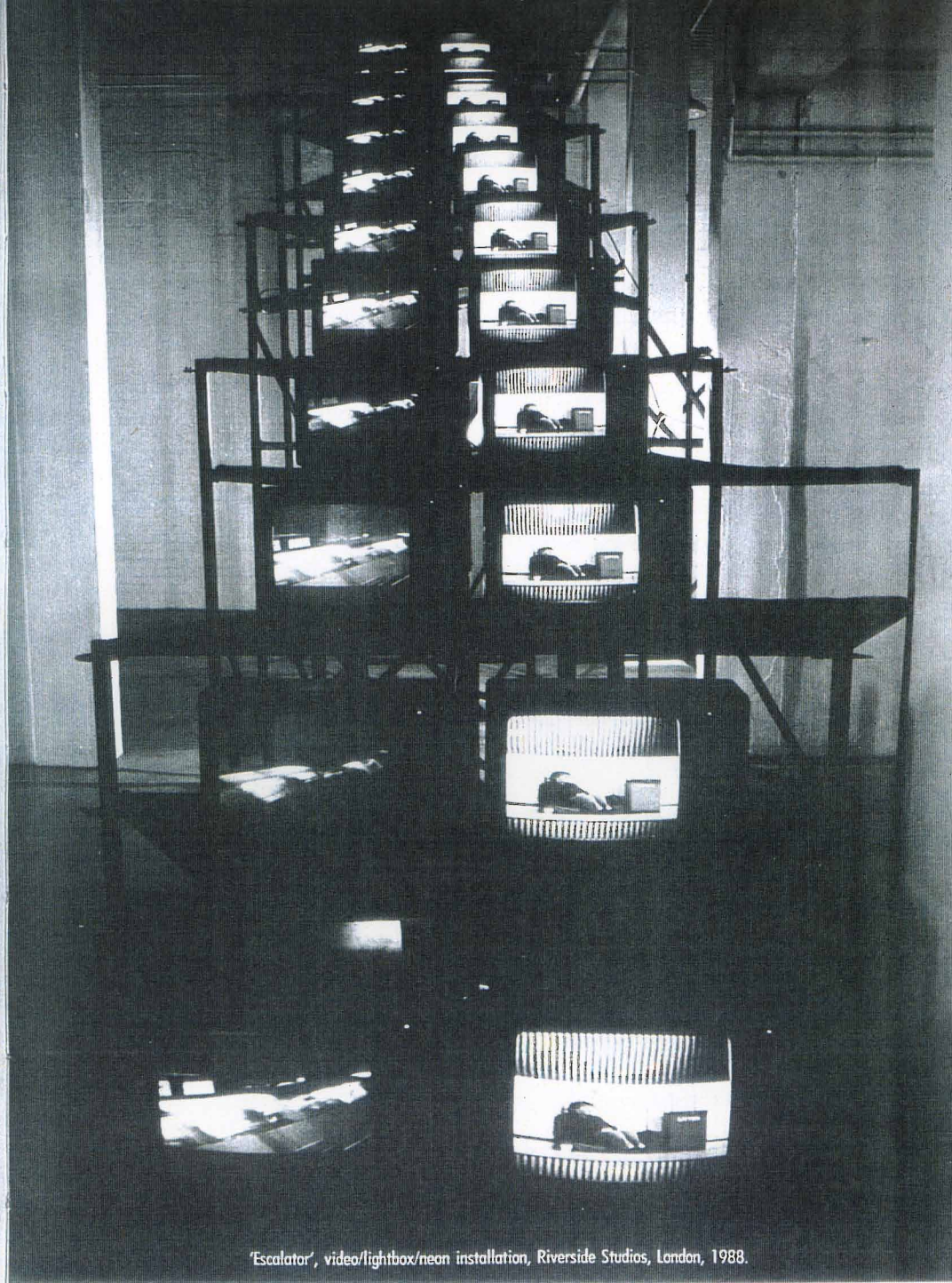
'Escalator', video/lightbox/ neon installation, Riverside Studios, London, 1988.



'Escalator', video/lightbox/ neon installation, Riverside Studios, London, 1988.



'Escalator', video/lightbox/neon installation, Riverside Studios, London, 1988.



'Escalator', video/lightbox/neon installation, Riverside Studios, London, 1988.