

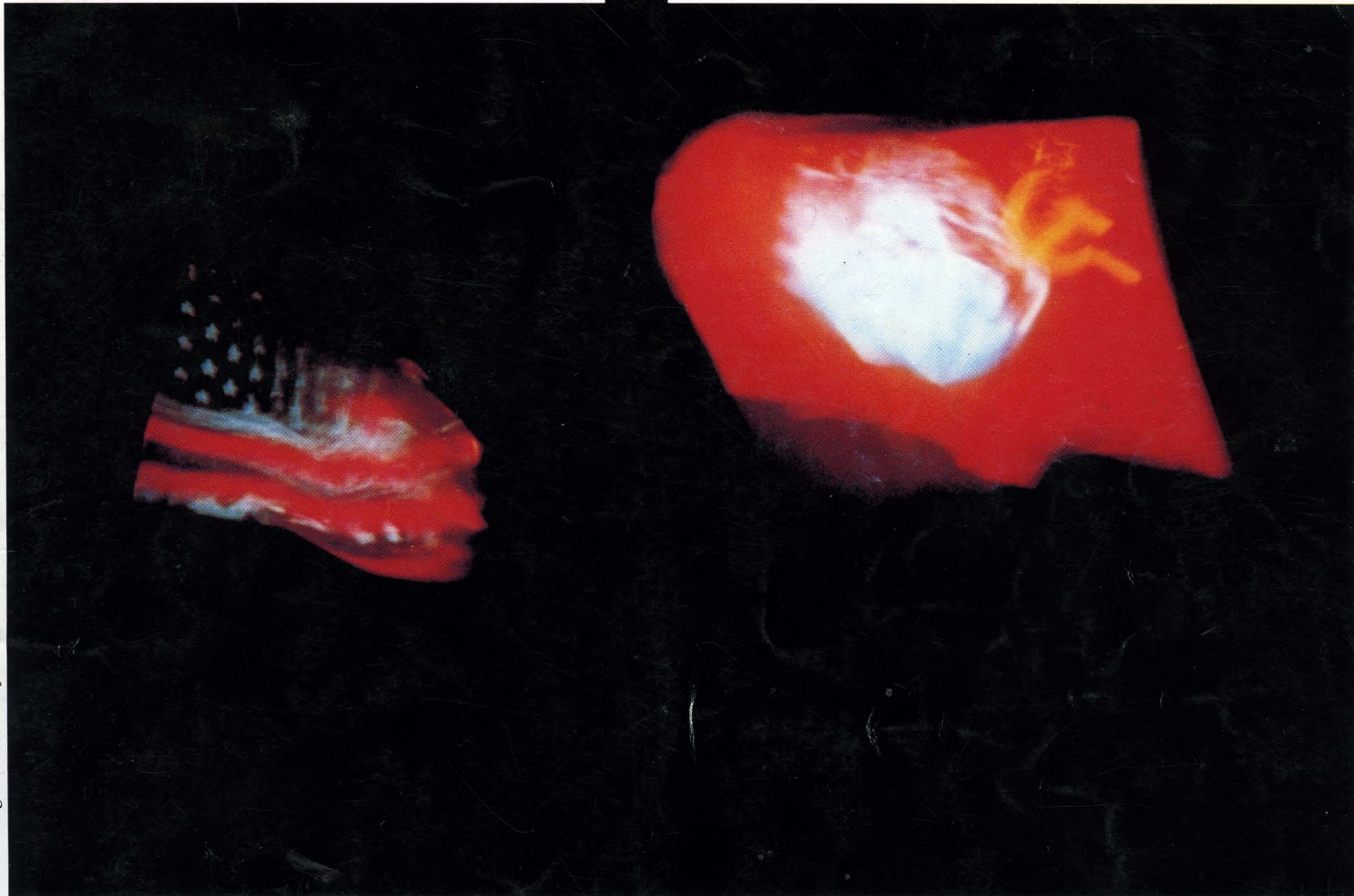
#1 • november 1992/january 1993

scope

magazine

European magazine
for electronic
audio-visual creation
• magazine européen
de la création
audiovisuelle électronique

Europe 6.50 ECU • Austria 95 Sch. • Belgium 280 FB • Canada 11\$ CDN • Denmark 55 DKr • Finland 45 FinMk • France 45 FF • Germany 13 DM • Great-Britain £ 5.50
Greece 1500 drm • Ireland 6 IR£ • Italy 11000 L • Netherlands 15 FL • Norway 55 Nkr • Portugal 1200 Esc • Spain 900 Pts • Sweden 50 SKr • Switzerland 11 FS • USA 10 \$US



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On the tracks of Memory • Sur les traces de la Mémoire

The Battle of Trafalgar

Television dominates our perception of the present, and in so doing, models our vision of the past. Groups like "Despite TV" with their video *The Battle of Trafalgar*, try to show a more accurate picture of events than that offered by the media. The confrontation of these two points of view incites the viewer to take into account the relativity of all representation.

"Despite TV" is a London-based video collective, involved in community video production and training since 1983/84. Along with an output of magazine format programmes they have also produced work for broadcast TV, in particular the remarkable Channel Four commissioned *The Battle of Trafalgar*, a deliberately non-objective, impressionistic record and camcorder view from the streets of the March 30th 1989 anti-poll tax demonstration in London. This was an event which culminated in one of the most serious inner city "disturbances" of recent times, more comparable (in many people's eyes) to the events which occurred on the streets of Paris in the Spring of '68 rather than with the inner city rioting which has become a regular feature of British life in the past decade. It was different also in a sense, rather like the Miners' strike in the early part of the eighties, in that it was a demonstration of the discontent more generally directed at the Government of Margaret Thatcher, mobilised by anger against the hugely unpopular poll tax, levied on every person over 18 throughout the United Kingdom. The angry city riot that resulted left the central London of many a cosy picture post-card and the surrounding West End (familiar to any tourist) in a state of burning chaos and confusion.

The Battle of Trafalgar is constructed from eye-witness accounts of ordinary people seen chroma-keyed against and intercut with actual footage of the unfolding events. The tape explores the situation from the multiple viewpoints of observers as well as protesters armed with light-weight camcorders, on the front line in the streets,

providing us with a different and necessarily non-subjective perspective on event, time and place.

This type of work is in part enabled by practical advances in camcorder technology, but more specifically by the camera user's obvious willingness to appear to be in the middle of events, capturing those "moments of revelation", seldom seen in conventional TV documentaries or "ENG" reportage.

British broadcast news coverage of the event - shot from high buildings and helicopters, looking in on events from a "safe" and supposedly "objective" distance - was characterised by the professional, political and emotional aim of the maker/observers to create a non-emotive balanced "objectivity". At the same time, Special

Branch surveillance teams using identical Betacam resources to ENG crews secretly undertook a form of mass and individual surveillance, reproducing "evidence" for prosecution at a later date.

Fulfilling a role both as television and agit-prop, *The Battle of Trafalgar* suggests that events were agitated by provocative and repressive policing, contradicting the official networked media line, which blamed the riot on a few "extremists" seen and singled out by the video freezes and blurred pixilated enlargements of the crowd.

Along with a number of other comparable campaign tapes from the 1980's (notably the *Miners' Tapes*, Glasgow based Declassified Elements' *The frustration game* and ACT-Up's campaigning work), *The Battle of Trafalgar* is a poignant document that reflects life and dissent in Britain. It conveys the desperation, the urgency, the confusion and subsequent violence, and communicates something of the adrenaline buzz of being in a riot, from a multitude of individual perspectives. A sense of the "spirit" of both time and place pervades the imagery. This spirit of time and place is sadly lacking in much creative British video work, often de-politicised by the technology it appropriates, or otherwise preoccupied by a desire to obtain funding, gain exposure and access to resources.

It is a mixture of high production values, politics combined with passion, "home video" intimacy and sense of involvement that set *Battle of Trafalgar* up as a significant, impressionistic, and subsequently original portrait, which captures the spirit of the time (Zeitgeist).

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