

SM(ART) ALEX VIDEOS

ALEX BAG, ALIX LAMBERT, ALIX PEARLSTEIN

Janine Gordon

IT'S NOT THAT video is a new medium that artists are exploring, it's actually been around for thirty years or so, it's just that video has transformed into a medium that has begun to become critical of itself (and how it is used in society). Video is no longer a new terrain waiting to be approached by a trickster technician or a conceptual artist. On the contrary, its basic point and shoot procedure, handy-dandy, light weight, reusable magnetic stripping and accessibility at affordable prices have equipped artists with a delightful medium. There is the potential for communicating either a documentary urgency or a contemplative construct, but either way the means of expression assumes a familiarity accessible to every household across America (and then some).

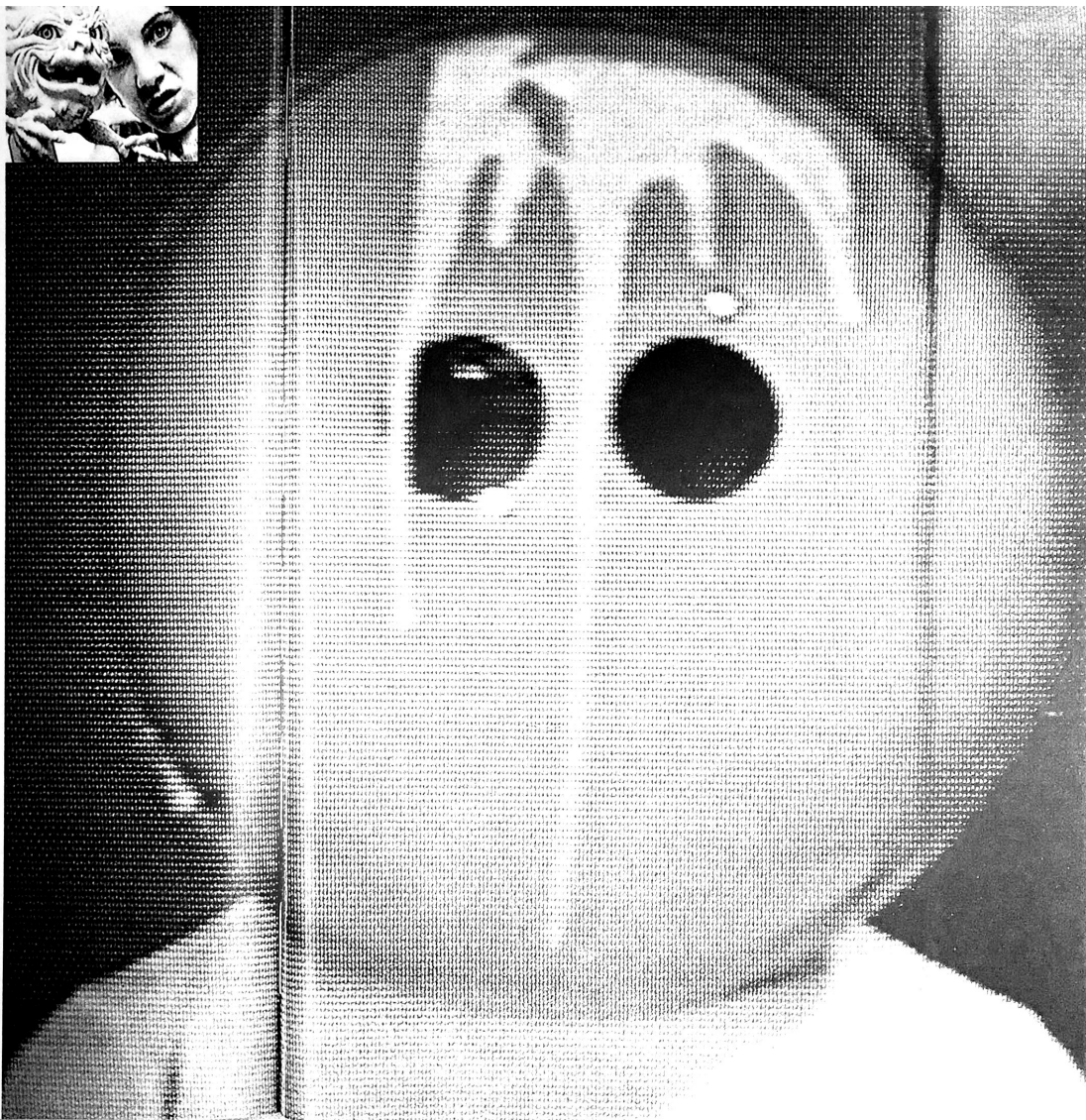
The use of video as a socially critical medium by three female artists — who happen to share the same first name — is anything but a coincidence. Alex Bag, Alix Lambert, and Alix Pearlstein are three ultra-cool chicks, each using video to enhance her agenda (which in a way is to challenge, convert or translate America's ideological positions). Let me clarify. These three homegirls (New York's terminology for a girl who's got it going on) utilize themselves (for the most part) as semi-performance artists (via Cindy Sherman) and role-play genders, fantasy characters and assorted other familiarities. Role-playing is typically a children's pastime, one not gender specific, but less socially acceptable when it is females past a certain age that engage in it (unless one aspires to be an actor or a comedian). The ability to assume characters (other than their own) empower these artists with an ephemeral "voice," resulting in an alienated gesture which objectifies the self. The relocation of the authors' voices into assumed characters (using themselves or others) reflects an almost sarcastic, silly, and intelligent play on American culture, or at least everyday life.

CNN, ABC, CBS, MTV, and VH-1 occupy our prime-time TV. Hollywood movies flood the nearest theater, info-mercials, prime-time sitcoms, Rikki Lake and art school educations feed our brains. Video is

used as readily as the printed word and distributed, reproduced, and transmitted as frequently via Blockbuster Video, cable satellite, NASA and the World Wide Web. As soon as the economy picks up, we will have videos on all our computers and we will be able to see our conversations live. In a recent show at 305, Alex Bag played various kitsch roles, each telling a somewhat different story. The skits ranged from Ms. Bag as a School of Visual Arts student (portrayed in eight semester intervals), a regressed Rave child playing with her dolls, a hypothetical MTV rock star romantically crying to a song, a murder mystery, and an advertising campaign for hot sex (major insults included in the price). There are two monitors, one for her tape and the other for a collection of recorded personal tastes (consisting of fashion shows, famous and cute actors, punk rock, hip hop, gothic punk, grunge rock shows, and other stuff). Her prevalent sarcasm juxtaposing "Alex as whoever" and Alex's pastime choice critiques the absence of reading time in the lives of American youths, who have learned to love TV instead. Whether from the acquired "educational" hours consumed by MTV's institution of mind, fashion and style control, or a blatant desire to become one with pop and sub-cultural iconography, Alex cleverly creates a powerful voice for seemingly silly and inconsequential (or what some may deem stupid) scenarios.

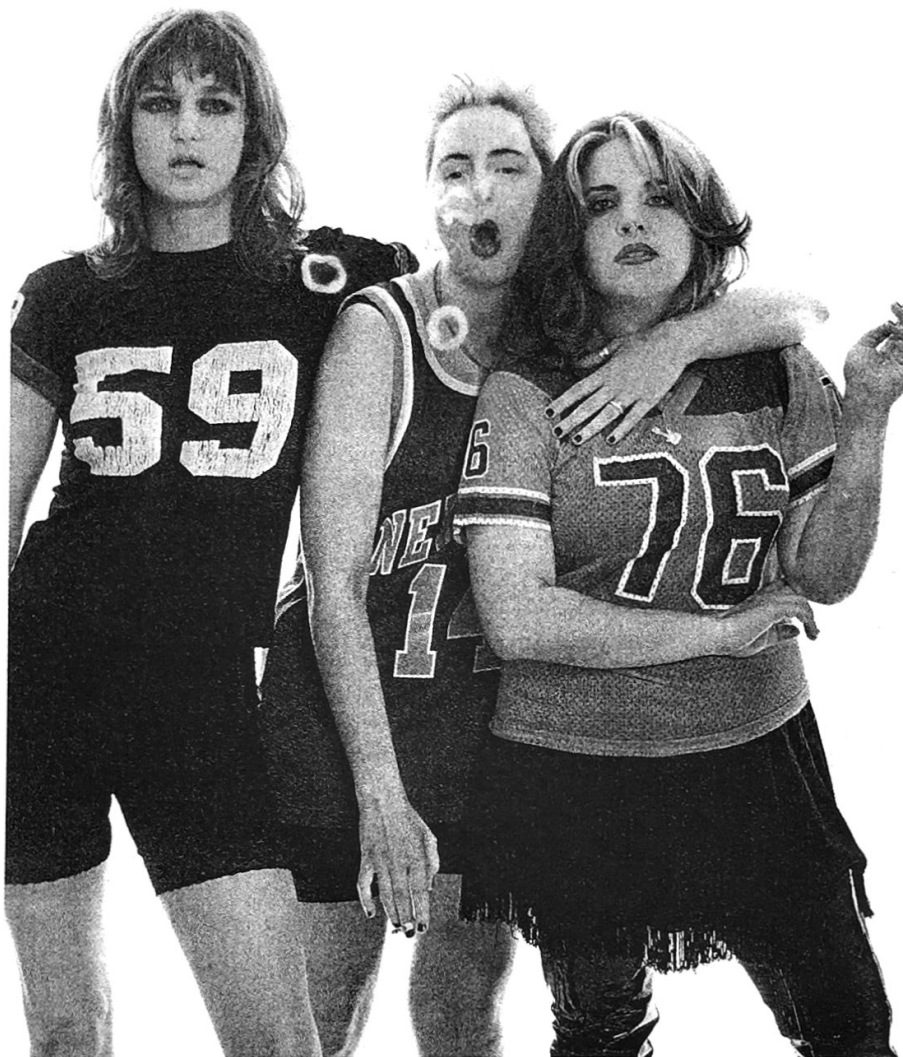
Alix Pearlstein primarily incorporates video in her work to enhance her poetic vision with associated imagery. Frequently she includes herself among the plethora of sampled images, science fiction skits, imaginary narratives, and documented experiences. In her most recent project at Lauren Wittels, Alix lays eggs in *Egg Yang*. She sports a costume with a *Clockwork Orange*-like hole cut into her derriere in order to expel the eggs. In this particular project, Alix establishes a relaxing and comfortable environment for the viewer, presenting a hypothetical

Right: Alix Pearlstein, *Egg Yang*, 1995. Video Still.
Inset: Alex Bag, Detail from *Bunnies/Monsters* (Annie), 1995. Courtesy 305, New York.



ideal theater. She even provides an yellow egg-yolky tissue ball container filled with usable contents for us to consume, if necessary, after witnessing the egg head (or Yolk Chick) drip with cracked egg-weggy. Her sensuous dance eroticizes the endless reproduction and cyclical expulsion of eggs from her bowels. Alix Pearlstein's many character roles include aliens with a passion for flowers in *Flower, Flower, Flower*; a fantasy unicorn fairy massaging her own horn in *Holes, Bagels, Horns*; a hippie girl wearing psychedelic clothes dancing as if she was on homemade hallucinogenic drugs in *Pet, Fluffy Cheezy Bunny*, and Batgirl in *Bam, Bam, Bam*. The mundane tempo of her fantasy works and her lyrical collaging of reality strips away any notion of mime for the sake of entertainment, and locates pleasure in the daydream. A taunting cynicism permeates the video works which, in turn, inform her whimsical objects created for the videos themselves or in conjunction with her installations. Alix Lambert has proven on many occasions that style (and medium) is as transmutable as the self. Lambert's projects have included her challenging the law and her marital status (in the accumulation of husbands and wives of various sexual preferences). The marriage project generated *No Holds Barred* a video in which Alix, a practicing kick boxer, consolidated a few of her identities into a boxing bride. Later she developed *King Way Trilogy*, an installation which includes three monitors of boxers punching the screen in a boxing rink. She obliterates the usual spatial distance located in the spectator sport, but ensures safe observation. In a series of photographs entitled "Male Pattern Baldness," she shaved her head to create a male basketball coach, spawning a three minute loop of her cussing and shooting hoops as if she was Pat Riley. Lambert ambitiously trained herself to be a real tattoo artist, filmed a pig being tattooed, and photographically documented the tattoos she administered. In a later project she employed herself as a documentary film-maker, recently going to Russia to research and interview prisoners about their tattoos. She investigated Russian culture, prisons, and the symbolism of specific tattoos. Currently Alix is acting and directing a full-length motion picture about a hypothetical rock band, entitled *Platipussy*, a 1995 Riot Girl version of Reiner's *Spinal Tap*. Oh, and of course, they aren't really very good musicians (at least that's what she's aiming for). Alix Lambert does not imitate the personality or styles of fictional or real characters, because she camouflages her identity and transforms her real life.

What all three women share are time, place, name and, of course, medium. These three artists have specific agendas, each encompassing projects utilizing video and the representation of the "self-portrait" — whether through a desire to be that other character or to destroy a particular image (social/feminine stereotypes), or merely to construct an imaginary character. Challenging or



Top left: Alix Pearlstein, *Flower, Flower, Flower*, 1995.
Top right: Alix Lambert, *Marriage*, 1993. Bottom: Alix Lambert, *Platipussy*, 1995.

embracing the redundant banality in everyday life through theatrical performances synthesizes and synchronizes Alex Bag, Alix Lambert, and Alix Pearlstein's videos. The mutation of an individual's so-called sincere or fixed identity into an abstract notion of selfhood questions the transparency of appearances. The knowledge that play-acting exposes by exaggerating a specific reality, theatrically unravels a concealed truth. ■

Janine Gordon is a critic based in New York.

Alex Bag was born in 1969 in New York where she lives and works.
Selected solo shows: 1995: 303, New York.
Selected group shows: 1994: "Supastore Boutique," Laure Genillard, London; "Closing In," Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

Performances: 1995: Threadwaxing Space, New York; 1996: The Knitting Factory, New York.

Alix Lambert was born in 1968 in Washington.
Selected solo shows: 1994: MA Galerie, Paris; Art and Public, Geneva; 1995: Javier Lopez, London; 1996: Jose Freire, New York.
Selected group shows: 1994: Kunstverein, Munich; Trevi Flash Art Museum, Perugia (Italy); 1995: Centre Pompidou, Paris; White Columns, New York.

Alix Pearlstein was born in 1962 in New York where she lives and works.
Selected solo shows: 1994: Postmasters, New York; 1995: Lauren Wittels, New York.
Selected group shows: 1994: "Oh Boy, it's a Girl," Kunstverein, Munich/Kunstraum, Vienna; "Bad Girls," New MoCA, New York; 1995: "World Wide Video Festival," the Hague; "Slacker Attitude," ICA, London.