BY PETER HALL AND MATT SOAR

The rich pre-history of motion graphics is filled with inspiration for screen-based image-makers

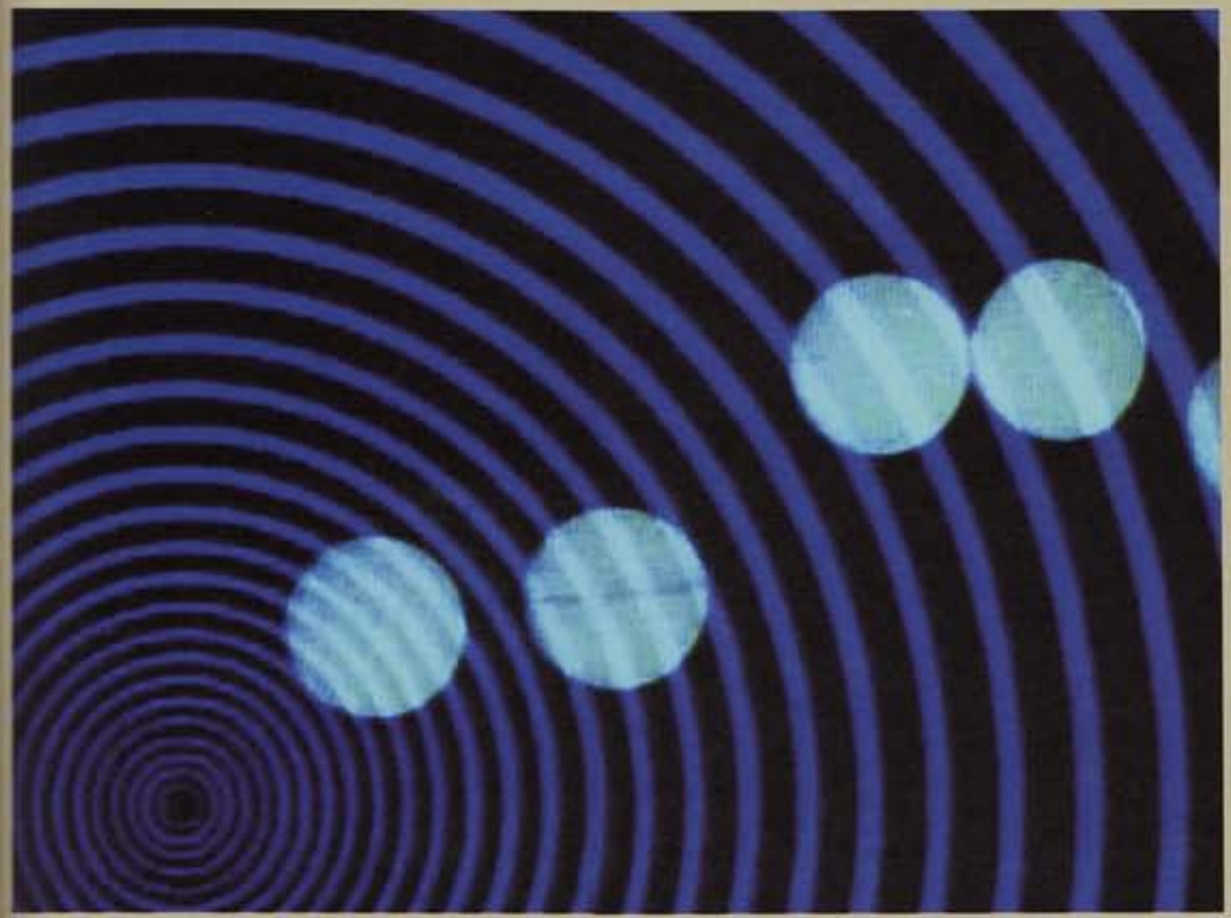
IMAGES OVER TIME

Animation
Computer graphics
Film
History
Self-promotion
Title sequences

Left: Still from Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*, 1926 (see p.30). Right: Still from Oskar Fischinger's *Circles*, 1933 (See p.33).

What do we mean by motion graphics? Although the answer is often subjective and intuitive, inclusion in the genre depends on several factors. First, they are morsels of time-based visual media: film, video, computer graphics. Second, they are generally short: from luscious broadcast stings lasting just a few seconds, to peppy promos and commercials running a few seconds longer, bringing us to the gold standard of the media age – the three-minute attention span (as witnessed in countless jiggly music videos and self-serious film title sequences). Third, the über-motion graphics of right now is a pyrotechnical melange of computer-generated imagery flowing and ebbing behind type, slickly orchestrated to champion the magical z- (or depth) axis.

This is the stuff of commercial cliché, but clichés are clichés for a reason: most motion graphics being produced today are the direct result of the promotional imperative – a confluence of profit-centered look-at-me chutzpah; increasingly sophisticated hardware and software; designers' voraciously intertextual creative impulses; and the admirable drive of the



best practitioners to strive constantly for newer, fresher modes of visual and aural expression.

The available definitions of motion graphics are many and varied, and the term itself seems to be losing ground to 'motion' and 'motion design', if the stream of new 'how-to' and showcase books on the topic is any indication. Other monikers that fall into this general arena include Web motion, interactive design, experience design, graphic films, experimental graphics, video design, and 'the new graphic landscape of moving image'. Louise Sandhaus (and her editor Denise Bratton) devised this supple definition: 'Motion graphics ... [describes] a broad field of design and production that embraces type and imagery for film, video, and digital media including animation, visual effects, film titles, television graphics, commercials, multi-media presentations ... architecture, and ... digital/video games.' [1]

Yet if motion graphics is more than these descriptions give it credit for, then let us ask the question again: what exactly do we mean by the term? Shorts such as Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* and Man Ray's *Emak-Bakia* are nearly as old as graphic design itself; Bernard Lodge's 1960s *Doctor Who* title sequence is an acknowledged classic of the genre. Assuming motion graphics did not appear from nowhere and does not function in isolation from the rest of culture, where can we look to get a better sense of the breadth and depth of its history, present, and future potential?

The question is worth asking because the field appears to be opening up. Increasingly, the practitioners of motion graphics are finding themselves armed with more creative licence than a traditional sting, bumper or opener would permit. Building façades and lobbies now feature acrobatic type manoeuvring across banks of screens. Go to the website of studios such as Psyop, MK12, PES or Shynola and you will find a smattering of short films that are not quite commercials or music videos but creative efforts, often studio-initiated, that may or may not end up promoting something. The client brief is changing from 'make a spinning logo' to 'make something cool and put our logo at the end'. The wider brief seems to beg for a wider frame of reference than the latest palette of desktop tricks, and a view of the field's own history that goes beyond merely plundering the past for nostalgic nods and winks.

Here we present an eclectic mix of films, videos and computer graphics, both new and old, that might help to complicate – perhaps even enrich – our sense of motion graphics as a dynamic set of practices and products that is necessarily bound up in, but by no means reducible to, one or more of the following: technological advances; the shifting tastes and values of designers and consumers; the artistic impulse to experiment and innovate; and the siren call of promotional capital.

1. Louise Sandhaus (2006), 'Los Angeles in Motion: A Beginner's Guide from Yesterday to Tomorrow.' *SEGD Journal*.

MARCEL DUCHAMP
ANÉMIC CINÉMA
(1926), 7 MINS

Completed in 1926, with assistance from Man Ray, Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* is a thoroughly poetic and prescient silent film, anticipating by nearly a century the current *lingua franca* of kinetic type, double entendres and ironic distancing, and the recent 'discovery' of the interpretive agency of audiences.

Duchamp was an artist's artist: an irreverent, wildly creative, sacred cow-tipping, self-reflexive, multimedia star. This artwork actively explores the third (i.e. z-axis) and fourth (i.e. time) dimensions, with swirling, dizzying vortexes interspersed with nine, spiralling title cards carrying nonsensical, alliterative statements set in capitalised French, for example: 'L'ENFANT QUI TÊTE EST UN SOUFFLEUR DE CHAIR CHAUDE ET N'AIME PAS LE CHOU-FLEUR DE SERRE CHAUDE.' [2] (For a highly informative, exhaustive parsing of Duchamp's mischievous punning, see New York artist Katy Martin's article, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma*', *Studio International: Journal of Modern Art* (Jan/Feb 1975).

Imagine Duchamp's type treatment overlaid on Man Ray's *Emak-Bakia*, and suddenly you see that 'motion graphics' really has not advanced all that much in conceptual and aesthetic terms over the past 80 years, despite the breathless evangelising of innumerable studio technology companies.

MAN RAY
EMAK-BAKIA
(1926), 15 MINS

Until recently, motion graphics generally denoted animation to the exclusion of live action. The democratisation of professional-level video cameras and editing equipment, however, has eroded this barrier and opened up the possibility of more cogent integration of frame-by-frame and conventional recording modes.

Man Ray's improvised Dada film *Emak-Bakia* is a lyrical, mesmerising example of the possibilities of such a merger. The 'motion graphics' elements of the film – swimming, revolving type, moving abstract light forms, dancing white strips of fabric – were achieved with Man Ray's cadre of filming accessories: 'Deforming mirrors, an electric turntable, an assortment of crystals and some special lamps', as the artist described the process in *Self Portrait* (1963). These optical moments are interwoven with live action fragments that are both dreamy and graphic: a pair of legs dancing the Charleston, a pair of sleepy female eyes opening, the sea revolving so that it becomes sky, silhouetted fish and a sequence of dancing, torn starched collars that become abstract light forms.

In the much copied climactic sequence Man Ray's partner Kiki appears with strangely wide, staring eyes that turn out to be painted on her eyelids. She opens these eyelids to reveal her real eyes, and we witness a 'double awakening', (as critic Steven Kovacs has described it), that reprises and mocks the previous female awakenings in the film, as 'a Dada trick perpetrated on a Surrealistic motif.'

The film was originally screened with the equivalent of pop music: a phonograph recording of a popular jazz tune, along with a live pianist and violinist who took over with tangos when the records were changed. A silent viewing highlights how Man Ray achieved fluidity with a visual rhythm in the duration of the fragments and in content (particularly the moving limbs and light forms) which is linked imagistically or thematically.

● *Available on Avant-Garde Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and 1930s (Kino Video).*

LOTTE REINIGER

THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED (1926), 65 MINS

The oldest surviving animated feature, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, anticipates Disney's *Snow White* by over a decade, and offers a strikingly different, hand-crafted and stately approach to moving graphic images. *Achmed*'s German director Lotte Reiniger was particularly adroit with a pair of scissors, and fashioned a magical world out of paper filigree for this dreamy, fantastical silhouette animation, with backgrounds created by fellow animator Walter Ruttman.

Achmed is a melange of bits of *The Arabian Nights*: Prince Achmed is given a magical flying horse by a wicked magician who plots to send him off into the stratosphere, but the crafty Prince masters control of the horse, abducts a shapely princess bathing on a nearby island and joins forces with Aladdin and a good witch to do battle with the sorcerer's army of beasties.

Reiniger's films were popular in Germany in the 1920s and she continued to make them during a period of evasive wartime wandering before emigrating to England in 1949, where she animated fairy tales for the BBC. Most striking about *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* is its sensuous flavour, which is achieved with the barest of ingredients; lush fauna, delicate fingers, curvaceous bodies and impassive expressions combine to make a shadowplay of surprising subtlety.

• *The Adventures of Prince Achmed is available from www.bfi.org.uk.*

OSKAR FISCHINGER

WALKING FROM MUNICH TO BERLIN (1927), 4 MINS

CIRCLES (1933), 2 MINS

Motion graphics history is frequently traced back to Saul Bass's 1950s film title sequences, as if the great man had simply plucked out of thin air the dancing animated blocks, type and spiralling swirls that established the rules of the genre. Enlightened historians (such as Jim Middleton – see www.animatingapothecary.com/geranim.htm) refer to the pioneering abstract animation of the 1920s: Walter Ruttman, Lotte Reiniger, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling and Oskar Fischinger.

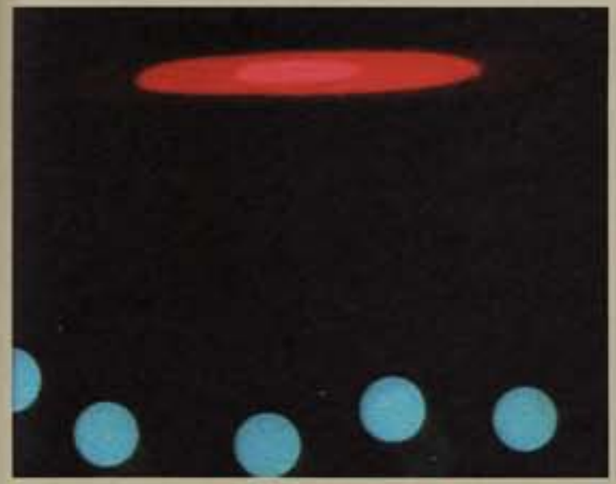
Fischinger, an engineer with Buddhist leanings, was inspired to take up film by the 1921 screening of Ruttman's *Opus 1*, 'a moving painting in time.' Fischinger went on to make animated films of dancing geometric shapes using drawings and poster paintings (5000 for a three-minute film), set in motion to classical music.

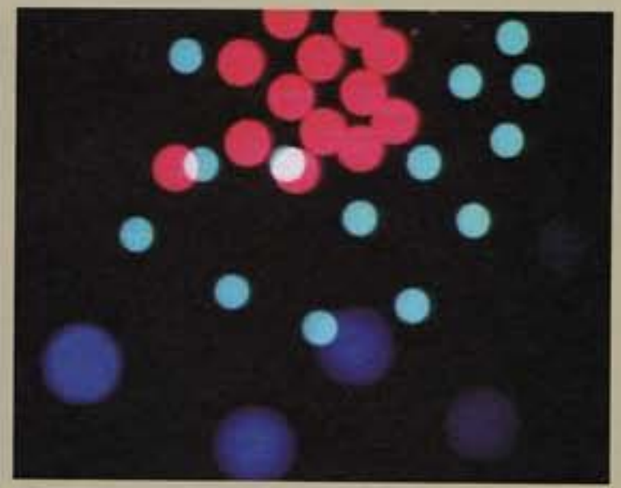
Fischinger's often overlooked early film *Walking from Munich to Berlin* is a rare live action piece (left). In the summer of 1927 he journeyed by foot along Germany's backroads, filming the landscape and people he met. He edited the footage down to four minutes to yield a surprising forerunner of the fast-cut editing associated with MTV in the 1980s.

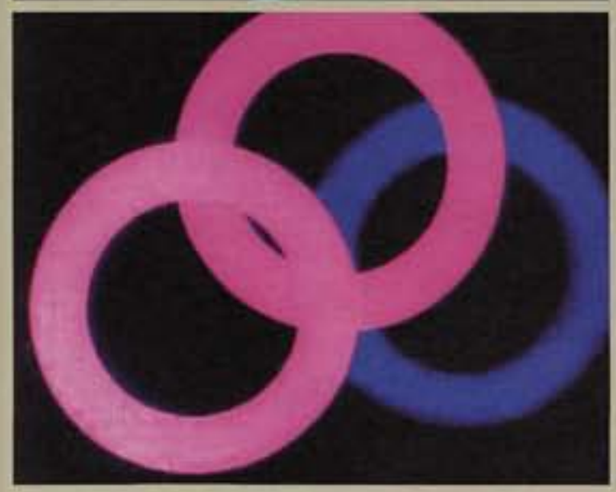
Most striking is the film's rigorous construction, the subjects forced into a consistent format as if they were geometric characters in his subsequent animations. The film was never screened publicly. (See William Moritz's *Optical Poetry*, Indiana University Press).

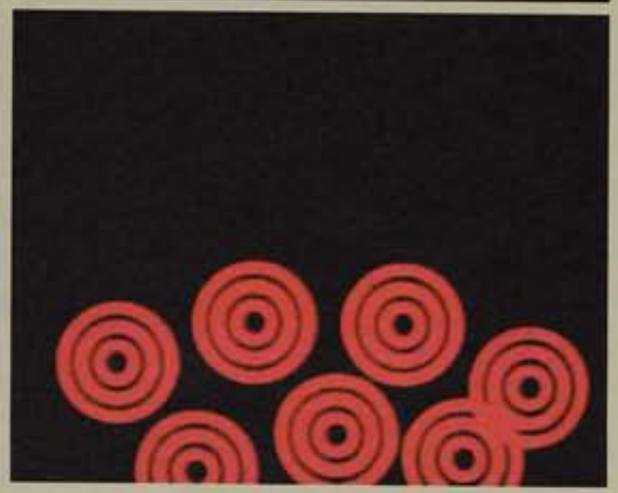
Fischinger continued his experiments into the 1930s, despite censorship by the Nazis. Commissioned by the Tolirag ad agency to make a short film, Fischinger developed a stunning composition of radiating, flying and interlinking coloured circles set to music by Wagner and Grieg, then dutifully added the Tolirag slogan to the end. After six months, when the rights returned to Fischinger, he re-shot the ending without the agency's name and with a more balanced colour palette to make *Circles*. He premiered the abstract version in 1934, cannily using the censorship approval number granted by the Nazis for the advertisement version. He left for the US two years later.

• *To order Fischinger films, see www.re-voir.com or www.usa.re-voir.com.*









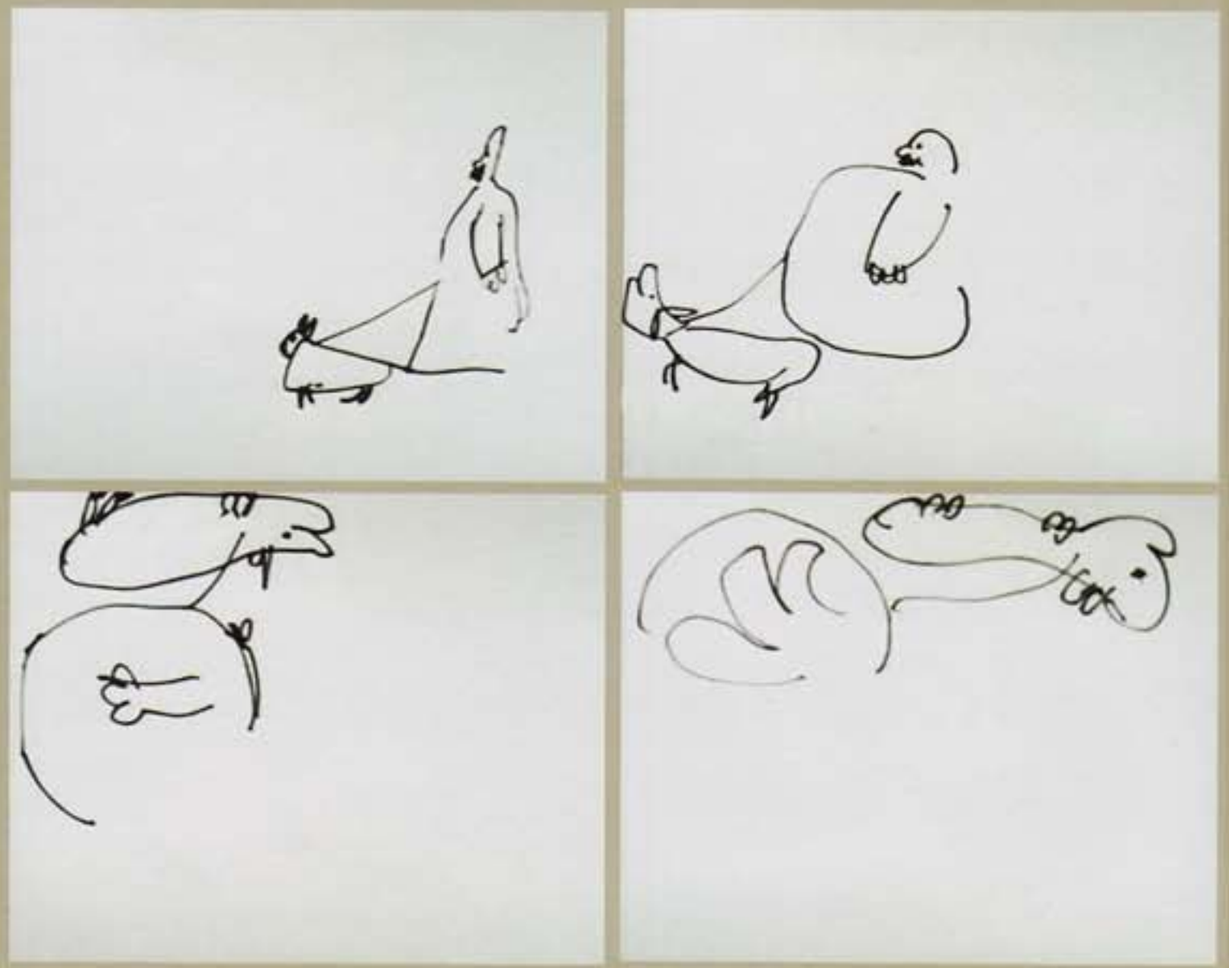
ROBERT BREER

A MAN AND HIS DOG OUT FOR AIR (1957), 3 MINS

Fans of Shynola's music video for Blur's *Good Song* (a collaboration with David Shrigley) will enjoy a quite profound forebear in this short experimental film by American artist Robert Breer. Accompanied by a stark and rather exaggerated birdsong, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air* follows floating pen lines as they transform themselves from non-figurative scribble in and out of recognisable forms. Lines moving clockwise appear to become trees, buildings, birds, clouds, a man wearing a scarf, a hill, a bridge, bushes, the word 'food' and a swallow; but each time the line begins to resemble something, it shifts into abstraction and then another proto-form. Eventually, a tower resembling the Guggenheim Museum appears, which is sucked into a circle as if seen through a telescope (reprised in the Blur video with binoculars) before morphing into the figure of a man walking his dog, who do a sudden 360 degrees around the perimeter of the screen before turning into letters that spell 'end'.

Breer, one of many American artists who moved to Paris in the 1950s, drew inspiration from pioneering animator Émile Cohl, but pursued film for its ability to test its conventions. In contrast to Fischinger's orderly frame-by-frame animation, Breer purposely disrupts our expectations of tempo. In critic Jennifer Burford's view, Breer's Zen Buddhist leanings are amply evident in the humour, 'rigorous suddenness' and his treatment of film as a 'thing in itself' rather than a form of representation. As Breer himself once declared, 'Hurray for formless film . . . an experience itself like eating, looking, running, like an object, a tree, buildings, drips and crashes. A film that instead of making sense *is* sense.'

● *To order Breer films, see www.re-voir.com or www.usa.re-voir.com.*



BERNARD LODGE

DOCTOR WHO TITLES (1963)

The original 1963 title sequence to the BBC's long-running science fiction series came out of designer Bernard Lodge's exploitation of 'howl' – the feedback that results when a video camera is pointed directly at a television monitor. Lodge, a recent graduate of the Royal College of Art, took advantage of the BBC's then advanced technology. (Video art was not officially 'born' until two years later, when Nam June Paik shot footage of the Pope on Fifth Avenue with a Portapak camera.) The vintage *Doctor Who* sequence maintains a dramatic eeriness, partly thanks to the soundtrack, composed by Ron Grainer (who also wrote the music to *The Prisoner*) and realised in the BBC Stereophonic workshop using a bank of tape decks to create the notes. When motion graphics have come to depend heavily on connotative references – the logo that looks like flying metal or coloured bricks, the parchment paper and liquid type – the idea of visual form emerging from the materials and process of video seems oddly fresh for a black-and-white, 43-year-old piece.

● *See the sequence at www.tv-ark.org.uk.*

DAVID HALL

TV INTERRUPTIONS (1971)

A pioneer of British video art, David Hall made ten *TV Interruptions* in a commission from the Scottish Arts Council. The short sequences were broadcast on national television unannounced, without titles, amid regular programming. In one three-and-a-half-minute piece, a tap is lowered onto the screen, turned on and the screen fills up with water. In another, footage of a burning television in an empty field appears on screen, itself interrupted by a voice-over saying 'interruption'. Considered the first instance of 'artists' television', the sequences, without rationale within television's *prix fixe* menu of news, drama, sports and commercials, disturbed its one-way 'flow' – as Raymond Williams famously termed the assemblage of messages that emanate from television. Hall's work set the stage for an era in which artists took up the camera to challenge television's established formulations and its power as a medium of social control. Dieter Daniels argues in an essay at Media Art Network (www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/massmedia/23/, where two *TV Interruptions* can be viewed), that Hall's interventions 'almost' established a genre, with subsequent works by Stan Douglas, Bill Viola and Chris Burden following the form of unannounced disturbances – in Chris Burden's case, uninvited studio hijackings.

In the present-day, overcrowded, self-interrupting flow of television, the notion of staging a televisual moment with no apparent logic or rationale is becoming a technique used by advertisers and designers, simply to attract attention before the product or event being promoted is revealed. Hall's 1971 pieces have weathered well, however, thanks to their conceptual rigour: they systematically challenge TV's artifices. Television's tiny screen is parodied as a kind of peephole on the world; its segmented structure is mocked with unsettling time-lapse shifts; and the production crew and equipment, conventionally excluded from its frame, make frequent, unexpected appearances.

CATHY QUINLAN

JOLLIES (1990), 11 MINS

Benning is a celebrated video-maker whose earliest works were shot on a toy camera while she was a teenager. The Fisher-Price Pixelvision – which records black-and-white images on to standard audio cassettes – flopped when it was launched in the late 1980s, but quickly became a favourite among artists seeking a novel (and cheap) way to generate usable, if very poor quality, video footage.

Benning's modest oeuvre is most closely associated with a genre known as 'dyke docs', typified by experimental, autobiographical and ethnographic works, often reflecting on the nature/nurture of desire, (homo)sexuality, oppression and liberation. *Jollies* is a fascinating document for these very reasons, but it can also be understood as an ingenious, no-budget piece of motion graphics that deftly utilises the detritus of a suburban Milwaukee bedroom: dolls, handwritten notes, lettered beads, a fishtank, a wall clock and Benning's own body.

● *Jollies is available from the Video Data Bank (www.vdb.org).*