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Pasatiempo

THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN March 12 - 18, 2010

ON THE COVER

30 A dream within a screen

Artist Alysse Stepanian once dreamed of a cleaning lady whose broom became a machine gun, and this fantastic image, inspired by Stepanian's memories of the 1979 Iranian revolution, was woven into one of her short films. Since early 2009, Stepanian has brought Santa Fe monthly installments of cutting-edge video art in an ongoing program called Manipulated Image. On Friday, March 12, *For Action's Sake* — a four-hour-plus program of music, live performance, and moving pictures by artists from 10 different countries — celebrates one year of Manipulated Image in Santa Fe. On our cover is an image from the *Ballettika Internettikka* project of Igor Stromajer and Brane Zorman.

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This week's issue is dedicated to Brooke Phillips Dorman, a former *Pasatiempo* copy editor, who died at her Santa Fe home on Feb. 24.

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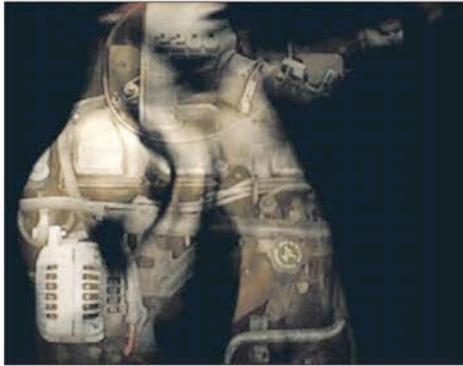
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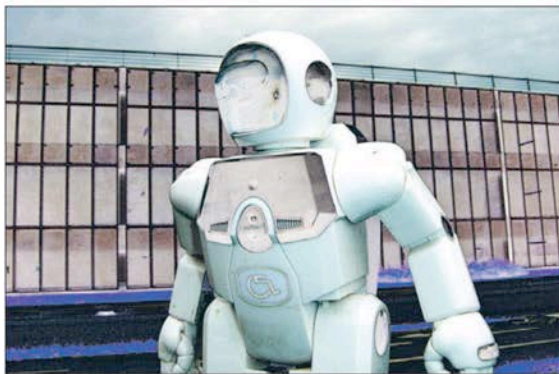
Casey Sanchez | The New Mexican

A DREAM WITHIN A SCREEN

One year of *Manipulated Image*



David Kareyan (Armenia): *No Return*, 2005



Igor Stromajer and Brane Zorman (Germany): *Ballettikka Internettikka*, 2001-2010, still from the project

I trust I am not alone in my reaction to the phrase "video art." Should I be caught in a gallery whose lights start to darken as a film screen lights up, I start scurrying for the exit. The fault, I think, lies not with the artists but with their medium's demands on our attention spans. A lackluster painting or an atrocious sculpture can be easily glanced over as the eye roves in search of more pleasing art. Experimental video seems to place the same demands on our attention as a friend calling in a favor to dog-sit. But that mind-set could lead us to overlook some really great video art being produced in Santa Fe.

Santa Fe video artist Alysse Stepanian knows that it takes time to cultivate an audience for her work. For a year now, Stepanian and Wilfried Agricola de Cologne have been curating *Manipulated Image*, a monthly experimental video art series at Santa Fe Complex. On Friday, March 12, the series celebrates its one-year anniversary with *For Action's Sake*, a show interspersing concerts by Santa Fe musicians, online performances by German and Swedish video auteurs, and video reels from artists the world over.

A meeting place for scientists and artists, Santa Fe Complex's raw space on Agua Fria Street is the perfect place to soak up the work of video artists whose very medium is technology. For this show, Stepanian, an Iranian-born Armenian, brings together 15 video artists from 10 different countries including Greece, Sweden, Norway, Austria, Spain, and Belgium. The artists were invited by Stepanian and Agricola de Cologne, who had viewed the work online or in person. "I don't like to put out calls for work. I don't like the idea of sending rejection letters," Stepanian said. "I like the grace of inviting people." She also hopes the mix of food, music, live performance, and video art will allow audiences who may be skeptical of video art to sample a visual art that remains a minority taste.

Unlike painting, sculpture or even performance art, many audiences are unfamiliar with the medium of video art, thinking it akin to the surrealist films of Maya Deren, Salvador Dalí, or even David Lynch, filmmakers who muck with imagery and gum up story lines to evoke the netherworld of the unconscious. Yet much of video art, including that on display

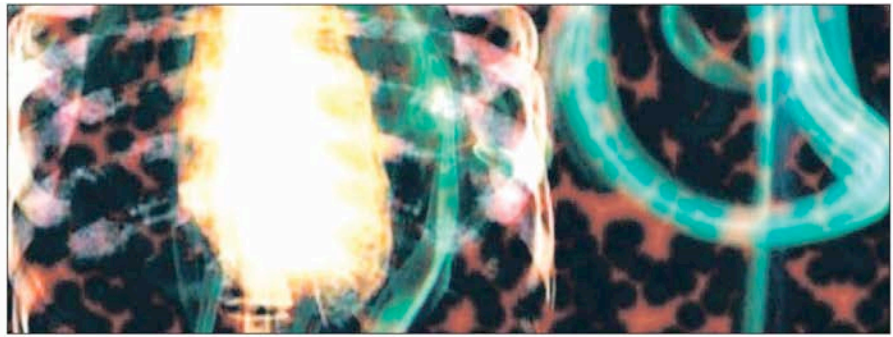
at *Manipulated Image*, abandons any sense of narrative altogether and works in a manner similar to abstract painting. It does not "look like" anything in particular or tell a story of any sort but instead uses color, image, and sound to evoke a mood or wryly comment on political or social conditions.

For instance, upstate New York artist John Criscitello, who is on hand at *Manipulated Image* to talk and answer questions about his work, uses rock music and video to create haunting images of death lurking behind scenes of seeming joy. In *Altamont Rescue*, he loops *Gimme Shelter* documentary footage of a concertgoer being savagely beaten at the infamous December 1969 Rolling Stones performance as Mick Jagger pleads, "Just be cool down in the front there, don't push around." In the strangely hypnotic *Damocles*, the artist's young son dons a skull mask with a moveable jaw, smiling and twisting around like a giddy grade-school Grim Reaper while Lou Reed sings "Sword of Damocles," his eerie hymn to mortality.

In one of the show's few narrative offerings, Greek artist Ioannis Roumeliotis uses two separate screens to explore a violent, fetishistic killing in *Picking Cherries*, a video that displays his considerable formal training in photography and interior design. Despite being filmed largely on a rooftop and inside a Berlin airport restroom, the cinematography is lushly rendered, devoting as much attention to the sheen on bathroom tiles as to the grimace on the murderer's face.

Swedish artist Igor Stromajer contributes a live show to *Manipulated Image*, broadcast over the Internet from a site in Hamburg. Stromajer is primarily known for his *Ballettikka Internettikka*, a sort of lo-fi, high-art version of *BattleBots* in which laptop-controlled robots are marched into the sea, stage fistfights in public toilets, and battle with flying cow robots for supremacy, or at least for control of a toilet stall. For much of the past decade, Stromajer has staged mutating versions of the performance, scored to an improvised minimal-techno soundtrack, in locales from Hong Kong to Belgrade to Tokyo.

Where Stromajer's work is often bizarre and whimsical in the manner of Spike Jonze, the same cannot be said for other attempts at humor in the show. Jonas Nilsson, also from Sweden, films himself dancing around in his underwear in *Self-Muser*. In *Me & Myself*, he distorts his



Alex Lora (Spain): *So Much Love*, 2007

face across two screens, in which the pair of noseless visages with comically close-set eyes recite the lyrics of Right Said Fred's "I'm Too Sexy." The result suffers from what I like to call "artist statement syndrome," in which video loops of mindless nonsense are only partially redeemed by statements such as Nilsson's, which reads as tongue-in-cheek: "I've been far too used to an easy life. Instead of having to earn it, I have just been given everything and it's almost paralyzing."

Should you find yourself sighing or rolling your eyes at such recorded self-indulgence, stick around — the videos are shown in short segments broken up by musical performances. In one such interlude, Santa Fe Complex will be turned over to music by the husband-and-wife duo of Martin Back and April Mae Bassett. The pair performs *32/40 Drone*, a new work with Bassett on cello and Back on *gopichand*, a stringed bamboo resonator instrument used by wandering Bengali minstrels.

After another video set, the Autotelics take the stage. The Autotelics is the name of a new collaboration between Santa Fe musicians Philip Mantione and Al Faaet. Al Faaet is a free-jazz and experimental percussionist whose multimedia performances have involved fire-eaters, dancers, and distorted slide projections. Mantione is a composer for

chamber ensembles who has created software and custom electronics to produce soundscapes for concerts and multimedia performances.

He is also Stepanian's husband and scored her latest video installation, *Roghieh*, which is shown at the Manipulated Image anniversary show. The video revisits a dream journal Stepanian kept as an adolescent in Tehran during the initials months of the 1979 Iranian revolution. "After the revolution there was a lot of social role reversal," said Stepanian. In the two-screen video, which seeks to re-create her dream, a teenage Stepanian awakes to her parents admonishing, "Hurry up, the cleaning lady is coming." Her bed sits atop an open-air roof overlooking a parking lot. Tropical birds tweet in the foreground as the girl turns over in bed, her nightstand cluttered with photos of a destroyed Tehran. When the cleaning lady enters, she is dressed in military fatigues, a balaclava obscuring all but her eyes. She lifts her broom as if to sweep, then points it in the air, revealing it to be an assault rifle, attached like a bayonet to a broom. The cleaning lady jumps off the roof and into the revolution.

As Stepanian notes, it is far from "the typical Hollywood movies that go very well with

popcorn." Instead, it is a narrative without a resolution that speaks in the logic of a dream. To appreciate what Manipulated Image has to offer, one must give up the passive approach a flickering screen so often induces and pore over the work as if it were a painting or a novel. "We are used to certain stories from cinema and TV," said Stepanian. "With video art, the more you're exposed to it, the easier it is to understand." ◀

details

- ▼ For Action's Sake, one-year anniversary celebration of Manipulated Image
- ▼ 6:30-11 p.m. Friday, March 12
- ▼ Santa Fe Complex, 632 Agua Fria St., 216-7562
- ▼ \$10 at the door, includes food and reception; for information, see www.manipulatedimage.com



Jonas Nilsson (Sweden): *Me & Myself*, 2006



Julia Zastava (Russia): *Son of King*