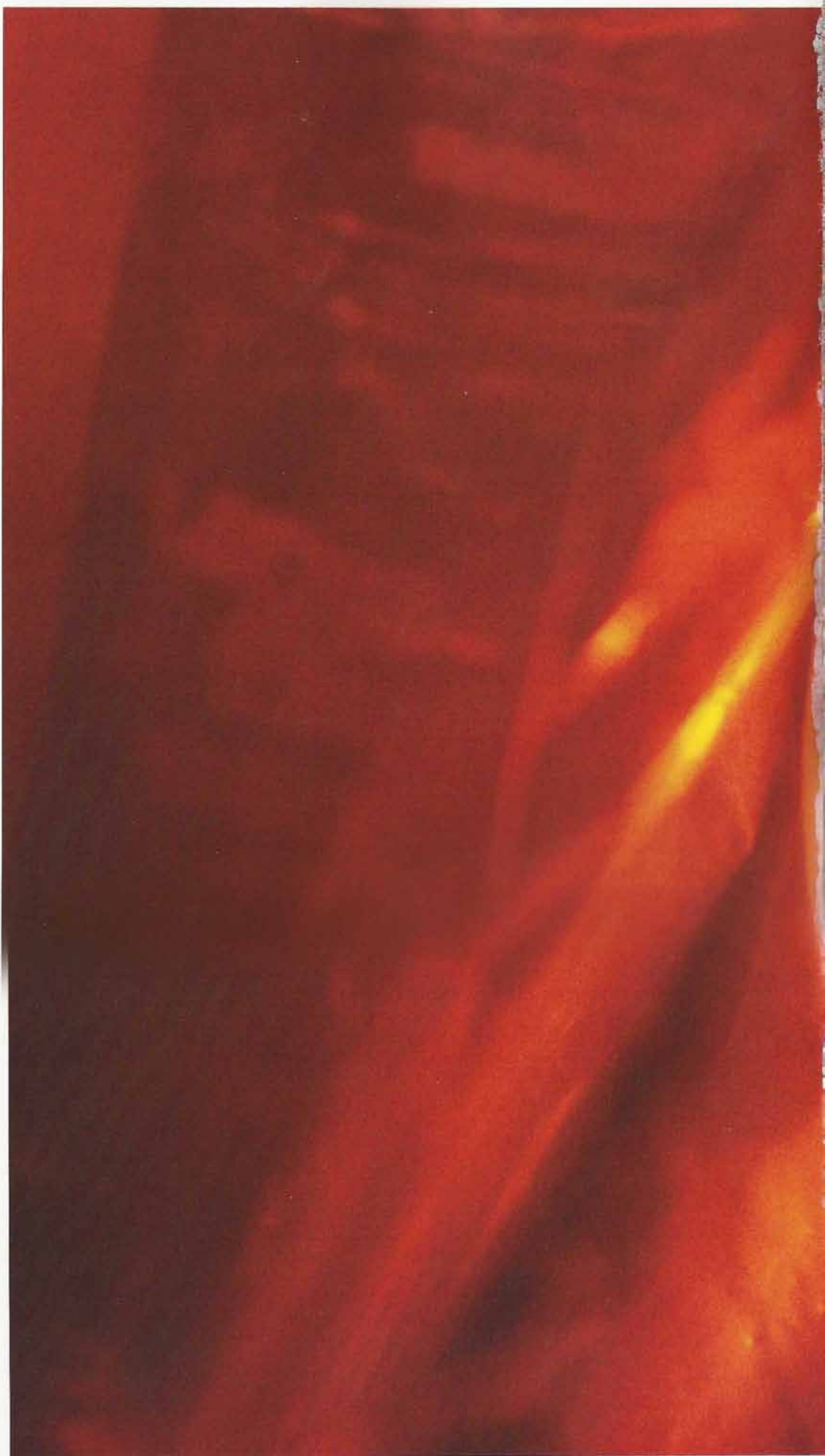
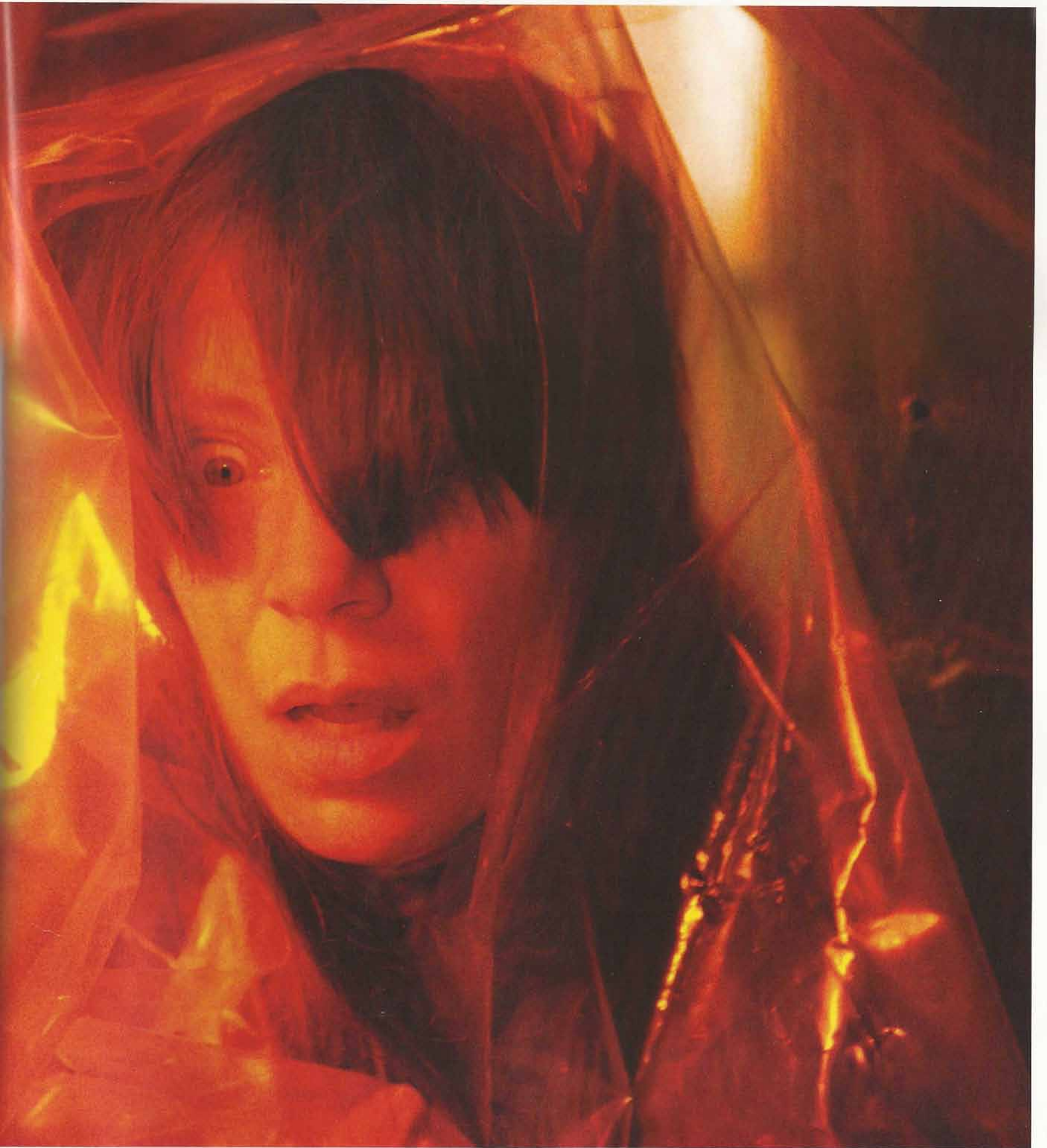


ALEX BAG'S
ADVENTURE
IN PUBLIC
TELEVISION

BY SCOTT INDRISEK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RYAN MCGINLEY

CASHI, CHAOS, UNICORNS





VIDEO ARTIST ALEX BAG landed on the art world's radar in 1995 with *Untitled (Fall '95)*, in which she portrayed the evolution of an SVA student. She continued making groundbreaking work over the next decade; in her most recent project, screened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2009, she cast herself as the demented star of a children's show. In the mid '90s, Bag collaborated with Patterson Beckwith on two freewheeling public-access television shows, *Cash from Chaos* and *Unicorns & Rainbows*. The episodes—10 hours of which will be screened this month at Team Gallery, in New York—are a mix of performance art set pieces, puppetry, visits to McDonald's, interviews with pet store employees, and found snippets of truly awful TV. Scott Indrisek spoke with Bag, who resides a bit off the art world map in Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

Scott Indrisek: How did you meet Patterson Beckwith? What made you connect both as friends and as artistic collaborators?

Alex Bag: I met Patterson when we were doing our best to advance science and art at the Cooper Union For The Advancement Of Science And Art. He was a freshman when I was a junior, and although I'm not the new age kind of witch, I swear the first time I laid eyes on that boy I saw beams of light radiating off his skull. As collaborators we follow the classic Aries/Taurus trajectory. I start projects with a fervored fever. He makes sure things get finished in a timely, organized manner and cleans up the blood splatter/spatter.

Who first posed the idea of working on a public-access television show, and what were your ambitions?

Since we were mind-melded at the time, I'm not exactly sure whose brainchild that was, but I'm sure Patterson was responsible for filling out the necessary paperwork. I know we were watching an ungodly amount of public access at the time and preferring it to the miasma of network crap. I remember a general mood of giddy excitement at the prospect of reaching this brand-new kind of audience; the 2:30 A.M. Tuesday night crowd.

What were the positives and negatives of the format?

For me especially, the Deadline was and still is an artist in its own right. Having to produce 30 minutes of footage each week forces you to carry your camera

everywhere and use it in situations never dreamed of, or to dream of all-new situations. There's no time to think, to consider, to ponder, to play around with, to use any of an artist's classic crutches. That makes a good kind of monster.

How was the show discovered? In one episode, perhaps in jest, you say that "public access is a freak magnet" and that you've "had some stalkers."

We weren't looking to be discovered. Public access is not a stepping stone, it's a rock to hide under. We didn't know if anyone heard our tree falling until we got a voice mail number. I don't know that we had "fans" per se. Mostly we had a drug-addled, sleepless, sometimes angry melting pot of viewers. There is a "community" in the utopian sense of the word, because producers of shows watch other shows and call to tell you to watch their show, and it is possible to make lasting friendships. Also stalkers. The freak magnetism comes about because ultimately, creating a show is a tedious, thankless, masochistic, narcissistic act that attracts like-minded hopeless romantics.

How did you exploit the look of the public TV format—the technological glitches and imperfections?

We were using pretty shoddy equipment at the time, the best we could afford. We were editing from one crappy VHS deck to another, even crappier VHS deck. We were possessed of some strange certainty that this was philosophically and conceptually befitting.

You visit an awful lot of pet shops on the show. Sometimes that translates into a music video moment—like when footage of Jack Russell terrier puppies is set to "I Wanna Be Your Dog" by the Stooges.

We were dog crazy at the time because we were trying to have a puppy together. After visiting with a lot of fertility specialists and incurring some very painful shots, we finally had our Norwich terrier, Boo, join our little family. Animals hold a sacred place in both our vegetarian hearts, and also, remember that the mid '90s were E years for many—hence all the warm/fuzzy.

During one episode you and Patterson travel to France and spend the bulk of your time inside a McDonald's, dissecting the differences between the franchise in France and America. Why?

It was Patterson. He is obsessed with McDonald's. He is also the kind of vegetarian who orders a cheeseburger without the burger.

Music seems very important to the show—for instance, when you pair scenes from child beauty pageants with Hole's "Teenage Whore," or footage you taped in that French McDonald's with the Birthday Party's "Release the Bats."

Sound moves images along. Even, and especially, boring images. Our particular soundtrack was just another fishing line dangling out there in the abyss.

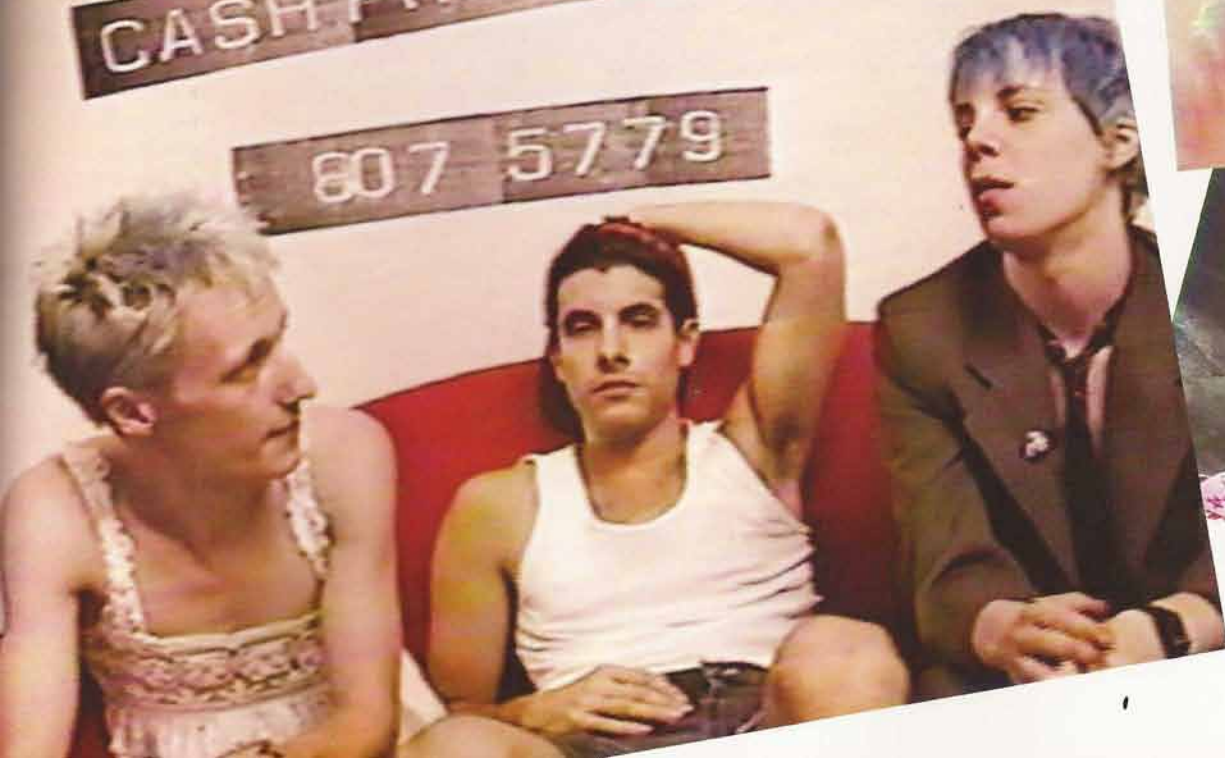
OPPOSITE:
Stills from *Cash from Chaos*.

ALL IMAGES, ALEX BAG AND TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK



CASH FROM CHAOS

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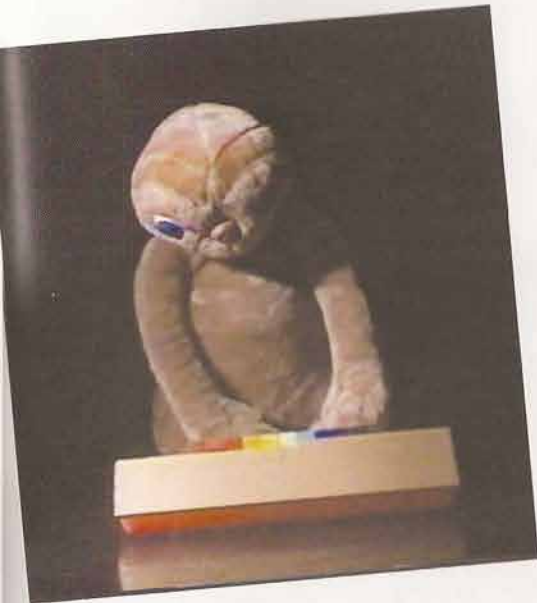




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If there's one editing technique that you use with gleeful excess, it's repetition—rewinding and replaying a small snippet of a clip, like one of a girl squirting milk out of her eyes on a talk show.

There's an advertising mantra that three times makes it stick. What happens six, sixteen, or sixty times is as yet undetermined.

As with your later, solo videos, wearing costumes and using puppets are pivotal. What makes these things such vibrant tools for an artist?

Being in costume or having an avatar is very freeing. Also, like I said: stalkers... Maybe I should use this opportunity to explain that the transition from *Cash from Chaos* to *Unicorns & Rainbows* was a precarious one. Our first show was actually cancelled because we somehow managed to be thrown off an otherwise uncensored network. When we started the second show (under a new producer, with a new show name), we were slightly paranoid that we'd be found out, so for at least one season we didn't appear as ourselves at all. Masks, wigs, puppets, et al.

The show pulls bits from sources like QVC and the talk show circuit, and as a result you combine clips that really speak to each other in odd ways—like a 19-year-old with a Mohawk talking about how her punk wardrobe is art,

followed by Michael Jackson talking about the art of plastic surgery and how he might have eyeballs implanted on his cheeks, followed by Morrissey bemoaning how people don't treat pop music as art. Were you watching a lot of trash TV at the time? Is a phrase like "trash TV" condescending?

Pre-YouTube, and after several ill-fated visits to the Museum of Television and Radio, I was anxiety-ridden that everything that happens on TV is not part of a tangible kind of Akashic record somewhere. I began taping everything in a panic. I thought I was doing God's work. And you call it "trash TV." Heathen.

For the exhibition, you've redecorated the gallery space as a viewing room decked out with furniture entirely bought at IKEA. Can you describe some of your interior decorating choices in a bit of depth?

Nothing in-depth: a 90-day return policy for a show that's up for 30 days.

When looking back at this project—and culling 60-plus hours into the 10 or so that will screen—did you feel nostalgic, or was the material still somewhat alive for you?

I hadn't looked at any of that footage for more than a decade, so it was really enlightening to find my own self completely unfamiliar to me. The end of days is a good time to revisit anything you can get your dirty filthy hands on.

What's been catching your eye and stirring your brain in terms of lowbrow television?

I am a red-flag watchdog for the de-evolution of "reality" TV. Nothing's beneath me.

You're one of the few artists I know of whose CV says that they "live and work in Glen Ridge, New Jersey." What's an average Jersey day like for Alex Bag?

Feel free to include my home address. At this point, in this town, I would welcome any and all stalkers with open arms and a modest lunch. I know that living with your parents when you're 40-plus sounds glamorous, but it's not all rose beds. I birthed a real live spalpeen into this world

almost two years ago, so my days are spent mostly in a frustrated effort to make each day exciting, awe-inspiring, and head-trauma free.

How do you think being a mother might affect the work you make in the future, especially considering that some of your videos riff on children's programming? Could you ever see casting your son in a piece, or does there need to be a strict delineation between family life and art life?

Being a mother means the end to a kind of nihilism that's been near and dear for so many years. You simply can't be a sociopath with a stroller. It's the end of an era or something—but change is good, and I'm trying to look on the bright side, which in and of itself is a new phenomenon. I will absolutely cast my son in whatever I can before he can remember any of it, and probably even after. My family life and art life are a whirling dervish of a blur, and nobody is who they appear to be on TV anyway. Playacting and dress-up are children's games and coping strategies. I hope he teaches me just as much as I teach him. It is truly frightening and awe-inspiring to watch this child watch TV. He is mesmerized and spellbound, just like Mommy. Right now I have total control over what infects his perception, but I see how we may run into big problems later on. MP

Stills from *Cash from Chaos*.

