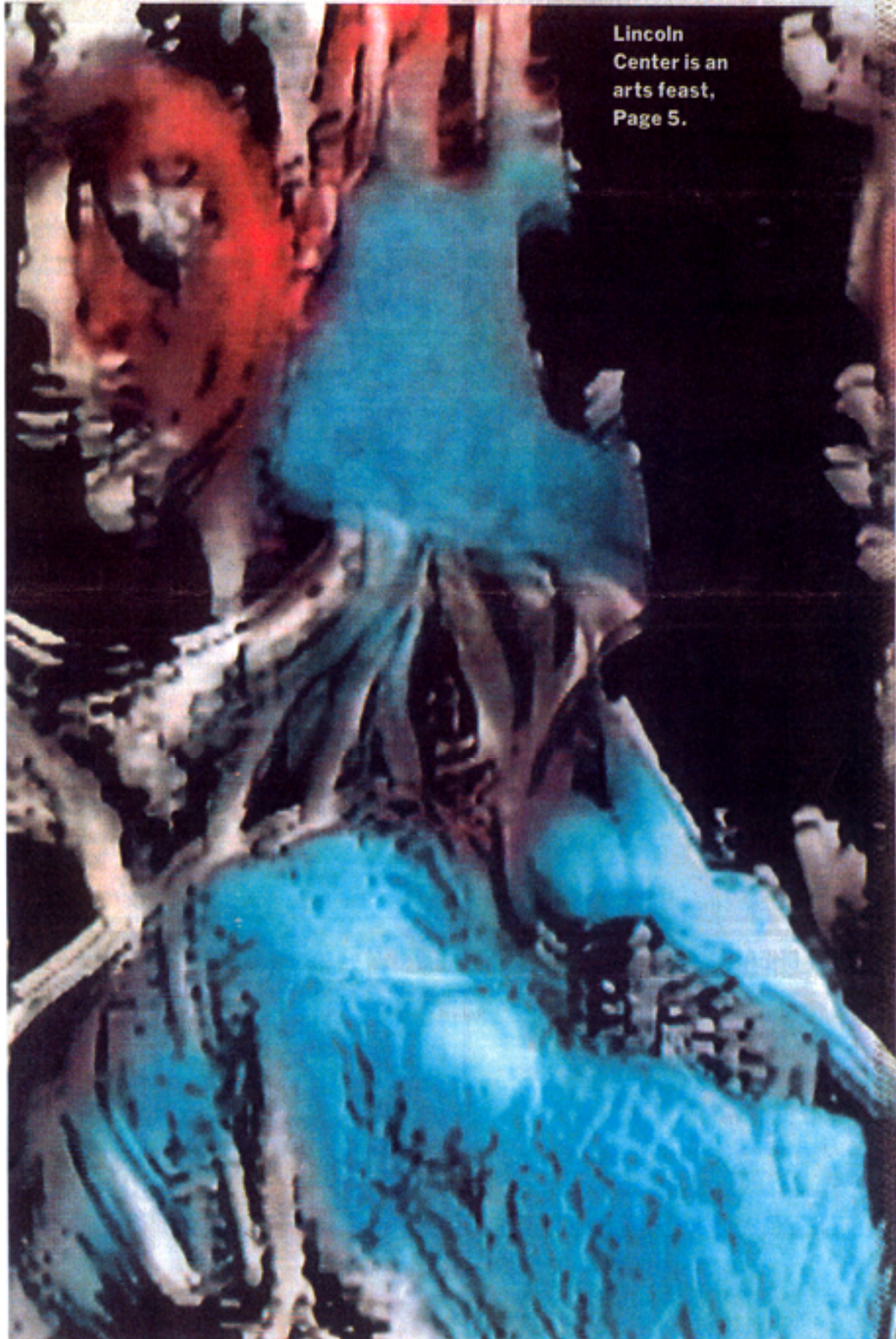


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In the Flux of Reality Recomposed

By A. O. SCOTT

At the beginning of Alfred Leslie's "Cedar Bar," the abstract painter Barnett Newman muses on the irreconcilably opposed interests of artists and the critics who analyze their work. He thinks about those who traffic in aesthetics, he says, the way a bird thinks about ornithologists. It seems at first that Mr. Leslie is offering a bird's-eye view of his subject, since Mr. Newman's wise words, gleaned from a black-and-white television interview of unspecified vintage, are followed by the image of a vaudeville mountebank spouting German-sounding gibberish translated via subtitles into the prose of Hilton Kramer, always a convenient straw man for attacks on critical arrogance.

Luckily, though, Mr. Leslie's collage of found images and staged arguments — to be shown tomorrow as part of the New York Video Festival at Lincoln Center Festival 2001 — is more than a

harangue against the intellectual appropriation of creative impulses. (If it were, I might put aside my ornithologist's binoculars and haul out my taxidermist's kit.) Instead, "The Cedar Bar," based on a play Mr. Leslie has written and rewritten several times since the 1950's, invites us to ponder questions that a number of other selections in the festival's program also engage. To whom do works of art belong? Who controls their meanings? Do they inhabit a world of pure forms or the everyday realm of bodies, objects, words and dreams?

Rather than pose such questions outright — what fun would that be? — Mr. Leslie launches a barrage of combative words and provocative pictures as he imagines a contentious, drunken evening in 1957 when a group of painters, collectors and dealers associated with the New York School confront Clement Greenberg, the critic who fancied himself, to follow Mr. Newman's metaphor, the keeper of the aviary in which they fluttered and strutted. As one listens to the voices of actors

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Photographs from the Film Society of Lincoln Center

From top: Irit Batsry's "These Are Not My Images," Donigan Cumming's "My Dinner With Weegee" and Alfred Leslie's "Cedar Bar," at video festival.

tomorrow and Tuesday, digitally breaks up and recomposes the reality it records. Ms. Batsry's images — blurred and fragmented, their colors bled out and oversaturated to resemble the digital equivalent of smeared pigment — have a haunting familiarity. They are images of third world rural poverty that have been a staple of earnest documentary filmmakers. But as the voice-over narration — split among a European filmmaker, her Indian guide and an exiled friend — soon makes clear, this is not a documentary but a fictional meditation on the delicate political and epistemological issues that shadow any attempt to capture the truth.

These issues find their way, obliquely and overtly, even into less abstract selections. One of the most enduring genres of video art — by definition infinitely adaptable and renewable — is the diary. That the intimacy of the form is hardly a guarantee of reliability is suggested by Joe Gibbons's scary, hilarious "Confessions of a Sociopath," part of a program called "Life Stories" being shown tonight and Monday.

Mr. Gibbons has assembled bits and pieces of Super-8 films to compose a chronicle of petty larceny, drug abuse and general irresponsibility, all of which he characterizes as research. Mr. Gibbons's persona, if not his actual personality, is at once guileless and entirely untrustworthy, as if the distinction between lying and telling the truth had never occurred to him. This may make him, too, an exemplary video artist.

Paired with Mr. Gibbons's piece is "My Dinner With Weegee," a new work by the Canadian photographer and video artist Donigan Cumming, whose work records, with an unsettling mixture of prurience and sympathy, the lives of desperately sad characters. His latest study in abjection is about an old man named Martin, an alcoholic whose circle of acquaintances once included the lower-depths photographer Weegee.

At first Martin seems an affable if dissolute raconteur, with a clear memory and a thoughtful, gentle manner, but he seems to deteriorate in subsequent visits (the chronology of the piece is not clear), until he is barely able to rise from his bed.

Mr. Cumming observes his subjects with an objectivity that seems not so much to reveal the loss of their dignity as to participate in it. At last year's festival, I thought his contribution, "If Only I," crossed into the ethically troublesome zone of exploitation. Though "My Dinner With Weegee" provoked similar qualms, especially in a long sequence of Martin standing unsteadily over a toilet to urinate, its edge of cruelty was softened by Mr. Cumming's own presence on screen. Not only does he beg Martin to stop drinking and

drive him to a clinic to dry out, but he also faces the camera to reflect on his own life in a way that establishes a sad and touching kinship between himself and Martin.

In "a k a Kathe," a more conventional documentary that will be shown tomorrow and Tuesday, Minda Martin uses her own experience as the starting point of an investigation into the damaged life and violent death of a prostitute in Tucson. The piece, compassionate, thorough and sad, is the portrait not only of Kathe, the murdered woman, present only in snapshots and recollections, but also of her three older sisters, two of whom also led lives of drug abuse and prostitution, and her melancholy son.

Somehow, despite its bitter frankness and the hopelessness it surveys, "a k a Kathe" has an undeniable warmth and humanity thanks to Ms. Martin's quiet narration and the trust she has evidently earned from her subjects.

A similar feeling pervades Michael O'Reilly's "In the Shadow of the Shortest Saint," shown with Ms. Martin's piece in a program called "Sinners and Saints," even though Mr. O'Reilly's aleatory, almost abstract visual style is a world away from Ms. Martin's careful naturalism.

"In the Shadow" is difficult to describe; like many other works in this year's festival, including "These Are Not My Images" and "The Cedar Bar," its spoken text and its images intersect obliquely and diverge suddenly.

The kind of attention these works demand is pointedly unlike what the dominant narrative forms of film and television have accustomed us to; they are more abstract and more sensual, feeding us back the world that is unmistakably out there in altered, even unrecognizable form, illuminating the bars on the bird cages we live in.