



## **DESIRIUM PROBE**

by James Nares

performed by Andy Ditzler

May 23, 2012 at The Goat Farm, Atlanta, Georgia

previously performed

December 1977 at 112 Mercer Street

and January 1978 at The Kitchen by James Nares, New York City

April 13, 2012 at the Elliott Street Pub by Andy Ditzler, Atlanta

## **DESIRIUM PROBE (1977)**

In *Desirium Probe*, James Nares stood on a stage, lit by a television screen mounted from the ceiling. Wearing headphones, holding a remote control, and switching between channels at will, he reinterpreted the television content in real time. The audience could neither see nor hear the television; they could only experience the

content through Nares' voice and body. *Desirium* = desire plus delirium: a probe of the human psyche via live performance and television technology.

Nares performed the piece twice, both times in Manhattan. The first was in December 1977 for an audience of friends at the Mercer Street loft of artist Joan Jonas. Then on January 24, 1978, Nares performed *Desirium Probe* a final time just a few blocks away at The Kitchen, for a large audience. One photograph survives; an audiocassette recording of the performance was subsequently lost. The piece was never reviewed and was largely forgotten until 2008, when Amy Taubin began her *Artforum* article on Nares with a description. (This description, along with Nares' memories, serves as a de facto "score" for the piece.)

January 24, 1978 was a Tuesday. Nares began his performance at 8:30 pm and planned to continue until 11 or until the audience left. But they stayed, and Nares was driven to perform until exhausted. According to the *New York Times'* television listings for 1/24/78, Nares had fourteen channels from which to choose – a mix of programming from the three major networks and their affiliates, public access stations, and stations local to the New York City area. The networks had a mix of popular sitcoms (*Laverne & Shirley*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Three's Company*), talk shows, a Bette Davis thriller, *Twilight Zone*, *The Tonight Show*, a hockey game, *Let's Make a Deal*. CBS was broadcasting a special report on "the CIA's secret army." It was a rich cornucopia of American culture for this transplanted British artist to draw on.

But the piece is not only about the vast landscape/wasteland of American television. *Desirium Probe* represented a "found script" for

Nares to act out in public. What he was acting out was as much from inside the artist as from television. In his notes, Nares made reference to the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their concept of “desiring machines.” The machine is the television – but it is also the human. It’s an interface. The piece is not exactly about mimicking television, nor is it quite an improvisation. Nares says that at times, if a news anchor was describing, for instance, a battle zone, he would act out the gunfire instead of describing it. The key was not to think about it, not to make decisions. It was about courting a kind of temporary madness, letting the psyche bubble up in all its untrammelled desire. The performer’s choices of how to interpret the TV shows, which channels to follow, when to change channels, when to mash the remote buttons randomly in the hope of obliterating the performer’s conscious intent – these choices are made in the moment, ideally without conscious thought. The performance becomes a reflection of the inner psyche of the performer, ironically triggered by the most public of media, and the “blankest” of machines. This is the “probe.” It is also the paradox of the piece. As Nares wrote in a program note, “He becomes the T.V. The machine. Controlled by it, but at the same time released by it.”

*This event is curated by Andy Ditzler for the Film Love series.*

#### **FILMS BY JAMES NARES**

repeating throughout the evening, beginning at dusk

*in the Village Green:*

**TV Faces** (1977, 6 min, super-8mm)

The same year as Nares first performed *Desirium Probe*, he turned his movie camera on the television for one night, capturing TV’s human faces and their bursts of interrupted speech.

*in Goodson Yard:*

**Primary Function** (2007, 2 min, HD video)

This video represents one of the tests Nares underwent while recovering from an aneurysm. Like *Desirium Probe*, it is a slightly absurd test of both endurance and cognitive function.

**Roof** (1975, 12 min, 1/2" video)

For this video, taken on the roof of his apartment building, Nares built an ingenious contraption – a long plank of wood holding a heavy 1970s model video camera on one end, and in the middle his own head sticking through a hole. The result is a “self-portrait as a head adrift in the city.”

**Steel Rod** (1976, 5 min, super-8mm)

Back on the roof, Nares and an offscreen friend play catch with a rather heavy object.

**Waiting for the Wind** (1982, 8 min, super-8mm)

Nares is an artist of remarkable resourcefulness. Here, using nothing more than a super-8 camera and the objects in his soon-to-be-abandoned loft, he creates a convincing, dramatic, tornado-like destruction of his environs.

Notes 2012 by Andy Ditzler

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