TATE FILM

THEO ESHETU
TRANSFORM: ARTISTS' FILM, ARTISTS BEYOND FILM

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain
Monday 13 October 2014
19.00–21.00

Theo Eshetu *Travelling Light* 1992, production still of Lindsay Kemp. Courtesy the artist © Theo Eshetu

Production still from *Travelling Light* of Theo Eshetu and Lindsay Kemp, 1992. Photographer Paolo Porto

**UPCOMING TRANSFORM SCREENINGS
IN THE CLORE AUDITORIUM**

IAIN FORSYTH & JANE POLLARD
3 November, 19.00-21.00

**BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE,
HELEN CAMMOCK & ANDREA ARNOLD**
19 January 2015, 19.00-21.00

Transform is curated by Zoe Whitley,
Curator and Jenny Lund, Assistant Curator,
Contemporary British Art at Tate Britain.
With thanks to the artists and Andrea
Lissoni, Curator, Film & International Art
at Tate Modern.

A pioneer of video art, this rare screening of works by London-born Ethiopian artist Theo Eshetu presents his unconventional, uncompromising and visionary practice since the 1980s.

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Autumn 2014 marks the launch of Tate Film's monthly artists' film programme at Tate Britain.

One Monday evening per month, *Transform* brings to the screen a selection of recent and rarely seen artists' films to highlight the unparalleled ability of moving image to capture the immaterial and things unseen: the essence of sound, the passage of time and constructions of the self.

Celebrating the protean ability of film and video to conjure other forms, Transform looks at how artists push the medium into new narrative, sculptural and sensual realms. Each screening features the artists in conversation, allowing the audience the opportunity to engage more deeply and directly.

PROGRAMME NOTES

BACK TO ZERO
Theo Eshetu, 1985
BVU video, 11 min

Back to Zero is the last episode in the series *Till Death Us Do Part,* which was inspired by the Nuba peoples and by Leni Riefenstahl's photography of their rituals. The concept behind the project was to show the relationship between the medium of video and other means of communication and expression. *Back to Zero* explores the link between video and cinema: differing from the other episodes by moving beyond a biographical dialogue between Africa and Europe to instead address states of consciousness and the representation of world cultures.

The title *Back to Zero* comes from the phrase by Jean Luc Godard designating what he considered a new starting point for cinema. Eshetu explores the medium of video for its flexibility, immateriality and close relation to dreams, memories and the subconcious. *Back to Zero* was inspired by Kennneth Anger's film *Eaux d' Artifice* (1953) and can be seen as a homage to the filmmaker. Eshetu filmed *Back to Zero* directly off the TV screen, focusing on an image of a Buddhist monk meditating under a waterfall. Even though the video is designed to be viewed on a single video screen or as a single projection, Eshetu had the intention of turning it into a sixteen-screen video wall and edited it accordingly.

TRAVELLING LIGHT
Theo Eshetu, 1992
Beta SP, 57 min

In *Travelling Light* Theo Eshetu combines experimental video practice with documentary filmmaking technique to create a biographical and artistic portrait of legendary dancer and mime actor Lindsay Kemp (born 1938), a cult-figure renowned for his extravagant performance works including *Flowers* (1974), *Salome* (1975), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1985) and *Onnagata* (1991). Portraying Kemp through a dreamlike video montage, Eshetu subverts any clear distinctions between reality and fiction, truth and illusion. Electronically-manipulated images mix with real life footage as Eshetu evokes Kemp's imaginary and metamorphic universe.

The video is composed of a wealth of material from multiple sources and took Eshetu almost a year to edit. It includes interviews with Kemp, Kemp's mother and his closest long time collaborators; improvised performances by Kemp at home and in television studios; Kemp in the dressing room, at rehearsals, teaching; and selections from Kemp's performances including the premiere of *Onnagata*. It also includes archival footage and contextual material like Kemp's early dance recordings, which provide insight into the eclectic influences informing Kemp's art and its cultural context.

Travelling Light received the first prize at the 1993 Berlin Video Festival.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Theo Eshetu (born 1958, London)
Lives and works in Berlin and Rome

Theo Eshetu has worked in media art since 1982, challenging conventional genres and moving across formats including experimental video, installation art, documentary, and photography. Interested in the expressive potential of video and its distinctiveness from other art forms, Eshetu explores how electronic media shapes identity and perception.

Theo Eshetu was born in London and grew up in Addis Ababa, Dakar and Belgrade. He received his artistic training in London, obtaining a degree in Communication Design from the North East London Polytechnic in 1981. Moving to Italy shortly afterwards, he lived and worked in Rome until 2012, when he was awarded an Artist in Residence on the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) program in Berlin.

Eshetu's decision to move from photography into video art in the early 1980s was based on a fascination with a new medium that had yet to be considered broadly within the context of fine art. He was interested in challenging the representational language of television, attracted to the unexplored hybrid qualities of video.

Moving away from conventional plot and narratives, Eshetu explores the formal components of video - time and light - creating electronically manipulated visual effects such as fractal repetition, kaleidoscopic mirroring, multi-screen projections and mosaic-like patterning of images. These effects are not employed in the name of an idealized abstraction, however – one can always detect symbolic and emotive content throughout Eshetu's work.

Eshetu's dual African and European background has informed much of his work, which juxtaposes images, symbols, and rituals. Drawing on themes and imagery from anthropology, art history, scientific research, and religious iconography, Eshetu's evocative montages challenge established and prejudicial beliefs about civilisation and savagery, reason and passion, black and white.

Since the 1990s Eshetu has been testing the limits of narrative storytelling and portraiture through works such as *Travelling Light* (1992) and *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* (1997). Eshetu's work also reveals and enacts his spiritual concerns and questions. *Body and Soul* (2004) and *Africanized* (2002), which were screened at the Venice Film Festival, show a clear fascination for the interrelation of world cultures and for the metaphysical nature of video making. This artistic commitment is evident in his earlier installation *Brave New World* (2000) and also in his video *Ways To A Void* (2000), which reflects on specific Buddhist practices and themes of light and darkness, time and space, being and nothingness. *An Extraordinary Event* (2006) explores the role of images in faith and in mass media, shot and edited during the year-long preparations which led to Pope John Paul II's funeral.

More recent works include the fifteen-screen installation *Return of the Axum Obelisk* (2009), which chronicles the repatriation of the monumental war trophy from Rome to Ethiopia and the civil and religious ceremonies that surrounded its restitution, and *Veiled Woman on a Beach Front* (2011), which address the role of Islamic art and the social and political implications of a dialogue with the world of Islam as a basis for contemporary art practice.

Eshetu has exhibited internationally. His pioneering video-wall installation *Till Death Us Do Part* appeared alongside works by Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, and others at the *International Art Show for the End of World Hunger* held at Minnesota Museum of Art in 1987. Recent solo shows include *Brave New World* at the Museum of African Art, The Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC (2010) and the *Return of the Axum Obelisk* at the DAADgalerie in Berlin (2014).
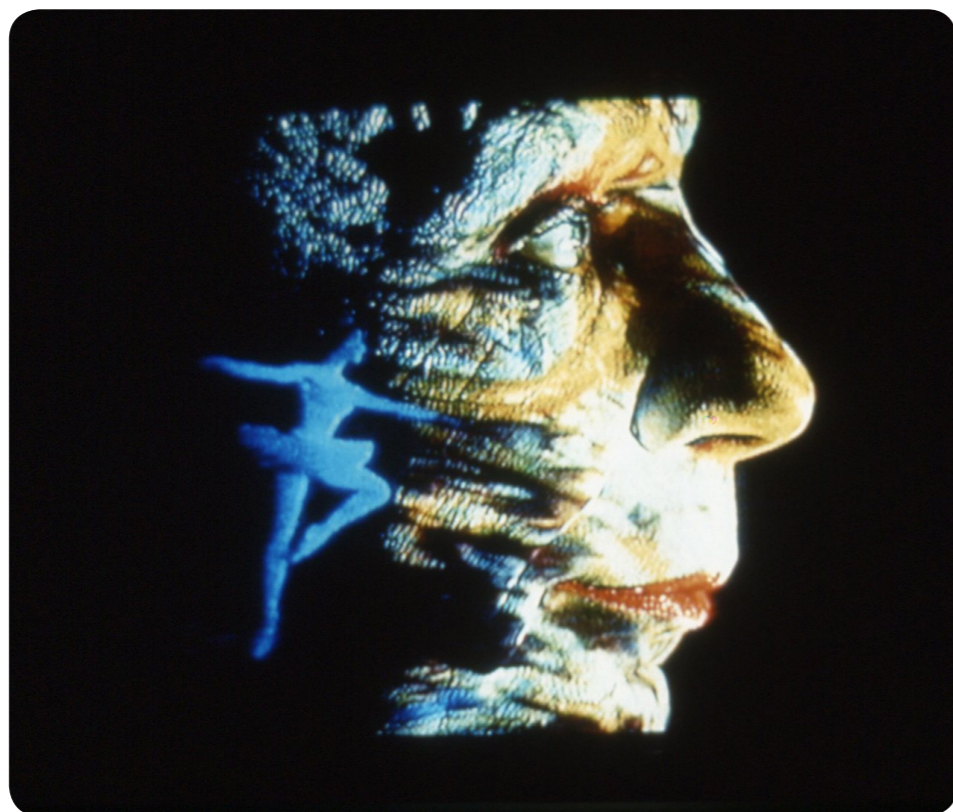
Theo Eshetu *Travelling Light* 1992, production still of Lindsay Kemp. Courtesy the artist © Theo Eshetu

Portrait of Theo Eshetu and Lindsay Kemp, 1992. Courtesy the artist