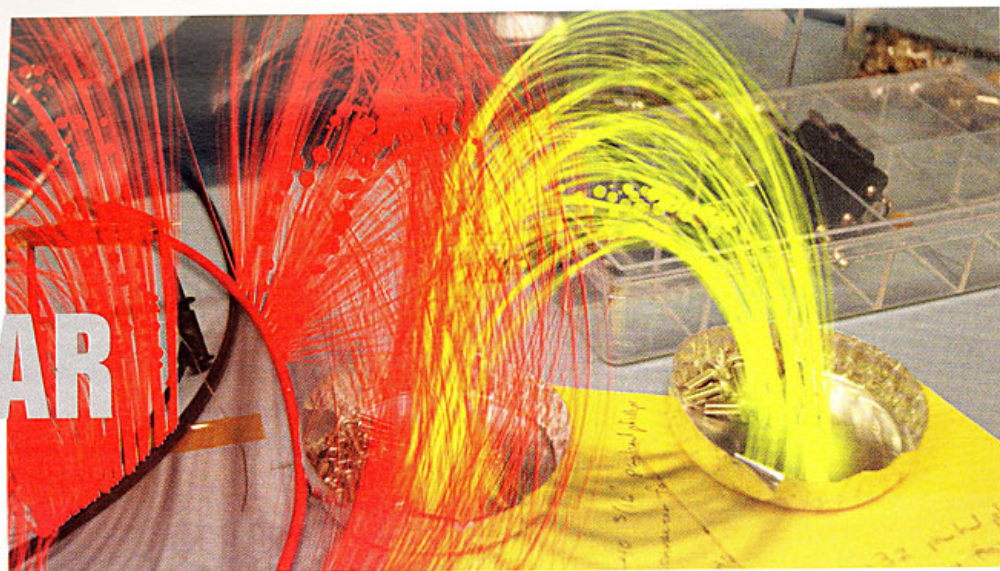


THE RADAR ART

BY SCOTT SOWERS



THEY BLINDED ME WITH SCIENCE: The British duo Semiconductor brings its *Magnetic Movie*, with images of electromagnetic field representations, to the Hirshhorn's Black Box this month.



MAD SCIENCE

The British are coming—and you have to see this to know where art is going

The hottest thing going on the Euro-art scene is about to ignite the Hirshhorn's Black Box Theater. This month, four kinetic minutes of digital filmmaking by the U.K.'s Semiconductor will catapult the modern museum onto the art world's bleeding edge. Be sure, the mixed-media aficionados camping out in DC's most contemporary households are on watch and so, too, should you.

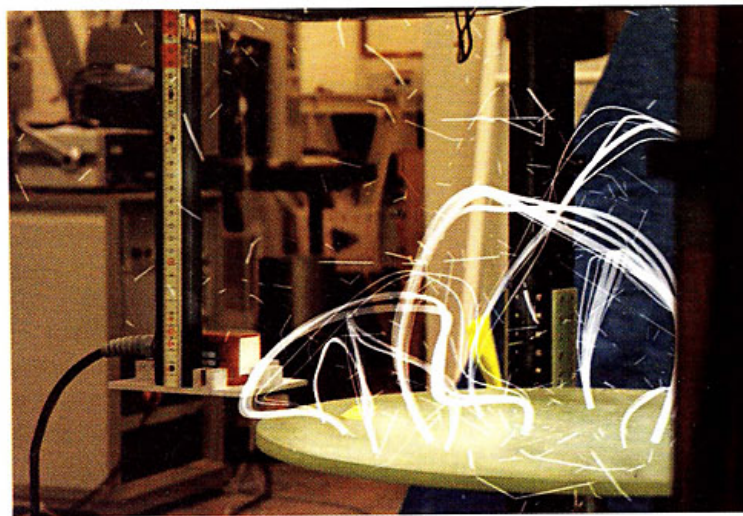
Hirshhorn curator Kelly Gordon took a trip last winter to the Rotterdam Film Festival, where she searched for fresh talent to include in the museum's edgy moving-art series, "The Cinema Effect." She sat at a computer terminal, ordered boxes of vidis and picked the shortest one of the lot—a film dubbed *Magnetic Movie*—for a quick scan. "I sat mesmerized, watching this over and over," she says. "I'm always looking for something that is like nothing I have ever seen before and *Magnetic Movie* is masterful."

Gordon's well-trained eye was captivated by the work of Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt, who are collectively known as Semiconductor. The highly creative pair of Brighton-based Brits have been walking the sharp edge of the avant-garde video art scene since 1999. They fancy themselves "semi-conducting" the on-screen action while the machines they focus their lens on serve as creative catalysts. It would sound pretentious if it were not so cool.

After meeting in—where else?—art school, the duo began combining audio tracks and animation to create sound films, as they call them. Their series of digitally animated pieces transcends boundaries and defies nomenclature. "We actually see the works more in the category of nature documentaries," says Jarman. "In fact, we call them fictional documentaries, if we can get away with saying that, as they're explorations of the extended world around us."

The duo's take on the world, both real and imagined, sometimes allows viewers to see what cannot be seen. In the case of *Magnetic Movie*, the audience peeks in on the electromagnetic energy dancing around the real-life laboratories of NASA's Space Sciences Laboratory in Berkeley. The film is narrated by rocket scientists the artists met during a five-month fellowship at NASA's University of California headquarters. The soundtrack for the piece features electromagnetic signals culled from the earth's ionosphere.

Semiconductor's mind meld of art and science has created such a following that they've completed more than 30 projects and released two DVDs of work. They also perform live, plinking away on laptops while accompanied by animated musicians who play along to their visual creations in real time.



Although Semiconductor have done a few commercial video projects, most of their funding comes from grants, awards and commissions emanating from Italy, France, Belgium, the U.K. and the U.S. In early 2008, Paris's Centre Pompidou purchased another film of theirs, *Brilliant Noise*.

The blur between what's real in the natural world and their mostly computer-generated work can cause a certain amount of frisson—a critical ingredient in pushing an art movement forward. "Recently with *Magnetic Movie*, someone ripped it and posted it online as if it was an actual NASA experiment, as if the field visualizations were real," says Jarman. "This caused a lot of controversy between people and it's been really interesting to follow them as they argue it out. It almost became a war between the scientist in people, saying how clearly unreal and fake it was, against those who could see that it was a more poetic exploration of meaning."

Although you might think this kind of out-there art would be a hard sell here in our nation's capitol, curator Gordon has high hopes for the project. "Our visitors, even the youngest ones, really respond to moving image works. I can't wait to see what they make of *Magnetic Movie*, since its format is as close as we've come to documentary," she says.

If you've already installed multiple flat screens for streaming digital art in your home, you're on the right frequency. If not, Gordon has three words of advice: "Fasten your seatbelt." ■

Magnetic Movie opens August 25 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Ave. at Seventh St., SW, www.hirshhorn.si.edu.