



Buzz bites: Found footage, including a Holzer caution, strobes off the screen.

MTV Gets a Buzz On

BY AMY TAUBIN

Amere five years ago, downtowners were willing to do anything—spend the night, move in—just to get next to a TV equipped with cable. That's how much they wanted their MTV. Today, Music Television has gone the way of alcohol, drugs, and codependent relationships (the addiction was short-lived, not because it was all that destructive, but merely tiresome, the lame playlist and predictable visuals quickly losing their charm). Which might be why most of the responses to the March transmission of the *Buzz* pilot came from outside New York, from the audience that has made the Saturday morning *Yo! MTV Raps* hosted by Fab 5 Freddy one of the network's top-rated shows. Touching tributes arrived at the station, illegibly scrawled or painstakingly printed in microscopic letters. "Wow," or "Give us more," or "You've made me think twice about bringing a baby into a world like this."

Buzz, which stands a good chance of becoming a series, is neither as astounding as Ernie Kovacs, nor as moving as the stuff that Jean-Luc Godard offhandedly throws together for French TV (and, I suspect, hardly as piquant as the series of Japanese porn and gangster films hosted by John Zorn and currently showing on tape at the Collective). It is, however, smarter, more personal, and a lot more presentable than most of what passes for video art on public TV's *Live From Off-Center* or *New Television*.

Super-rapidly edited, the 30-minute *Buzz* show maintains just enough of a magazine format to keep it from lapsing into stream-of-consciousness chaos. It's a collage of mostly found footage, much but not all of it from MTV itself—thematic snips of news, music videos, interviews with stars and fans (a single sentence cobbled together from a dozen different talking mouths), and such flora and fauna as Caribbean game shows. Some of this goes by so quickly—faster than a speeding Brakhage!—that the image on your TV strobes right off the screen.

Buzz was conceived and produced in-house by Mark Pellington and Jon Klein

("We're two men living in the same brain," said one or the other), a couple of the creative types MTV relies on for its "happening" image. The more restricted the playlist gets, the wilder the promos, station breaks, and interstitial bits need to be. Nevertheless, *Buzz* might not have gotten off the ground if Fox Network hadn't put something called *Go Global* into development just at the moment that MTV, trying to expand its advertising base, started promoting itself as an international network. "They got worried that Fox was going to get there first," says Pellington, "so they let us go ahead."

Buzz's opening goes out of its way to establish a comfortable framework for the average (white, 18- to 24-year-old) MTV viewer. "It's the whole world in its entertaining weirdness," announces a Dr. Strangelove voice, zeroing in on MTV's most pernicious message—because if that's all the world is, what better adap-



tation than to become a voyeuristic zombie? But there was an intriguingly self-conscious irony in the references to "bite-sized digestible pieces," the invitation to "a spin through the pop-culture blender," and the *Eraserhead*-like black-and-white close-ups that kept me from changing channels.

MTV was so pleased with the ratings for the *Buzz* pilot ("They like it when there are more people watching at the end than there were at the opening," Pellington explains) that the network is now seeking a major sponsorship for a series. The idea is not only to show *Buzz* in the U.S., but to syndicate it on progressive stations like Britain's Channel Four and Canal Plus in France.

It's logical that the found-footage collage, a genre pursued by video artists from Ken Feingold to Dara Birnbaum, would finally be authoritatively realized by two producer/editors who've spent their entire working lives in TV editing studios. (Klein has worked for both ABC

and MTV News; Pellington made his way up from intern to senior producer/director in MTV's promo division.) *Buzz* is divided into chapters with headings so familiar—Sex, Lust, Beauty, Style, Art, The Future—they might have doomed the project were they not packed with such striking and contradictory clips. Klein and Pellington are interested in the range of difference those same old standards can hold. Their formal intuition, however, outstrips their political and social analysis (or maybe they haven't figured out how to include such analysis without becoming "educational" or "preachy"). You could too easily come away from *Buzz* thinking that human variety is accidental or a mere matter of the personal, rather than a function of gender, race, class, and history.

Buzz's most promising sections are Art (Jenny Holzer and William Burroughs do compelling show-and-tells); the refreshingly ominous collection of *Buzz Data*; and the too-brief Music Roots, with snippets of such Third World artists as Toure Kunda and the Bhundu Boys. "We know we're walking a fine line between exposure and exploitation," says Klein. "In the end, this is a First World show. But we want to be free to criticize the U.S."

"We made the pilot for ourselves—we wanted to confront our own confusions," Klein adds. MTV refrained from breathing down the necks of their much-valued "wild men." The question is whether *Buzz* will find a sponsor that's equally permissive.

Jenny Holzer, who's interested in MTV's international audience, is currently also negotiating a contract to make some "art breaks." Supervised by Abbey Terkuhle ("Vice-President/Creative"), *Art Breaks* is a series of randomly aired 10-second to one-minute spots by some two dozen artists, from minimalist Richard Tuttle and cartoonist S. Clay Wilson to such filmmakers as the Brothers Quay. The artists receive a small honorarium and a decent production budget (one videomaker told me \$10,000—or about 2 per cent of the average cost of a class-A 60-second commercial and more than twice what it costs to get an hour of *Yo! MTV Raps* on the air). MTV also arranges studio access and provides a producer.

If Holzer can reach an agreement with MTV (she wants artistic control and a guarantee that her work won't be credited or recycled in other contexts—"I don't want to find it selling M & M's"), she plans to produce several computer-animated texts (the words "will flip and flop") accompanied by a voiceover. The voiceover is crucial. Art breaks that rely mainly on visuals, besides looking like warmed-over Surrealism (a few too many eyeballs get tossed around), are lost in MTV's hyperbolic image flow. Narrative pieces that feature low-key voices (there's one by Barry Yourgrau and several by Robert Longo) are the best antidotes to MTV's relentless visual bombardment and synthesized AOR beat. Longo does an update on *Thamesong*—a Vito Acconci early '70s video classic—with a manic Steve Buscemi coming on to the impassive Alexandra Auder by yammering top-40 lyrics in her ear. Longo takes knowing advantage of the opportunity for self-promotion, ending each spot with a drum beat heralding his name etched full-screen in red letters. Of the film- and videomakers, animator Jan Svankmajer fares the best. His dancing steaks find themselves waltzed right into a frying pan—a mordantly literal spin on "meat is murder."

While *Art Breaks* obviously benefits both the artists and MTV's image with its advertisers, its effect on the audience is less clear. Pellington said he made *Buzz* because he wanted to stay in the viewer's head for more than a minute. But on TV repetition counts more than duration. No matter how many art breaks are included, the guaranteed result of a night of MTV is that I wake up inwardly singing the percussive theme that accompanies the logo.