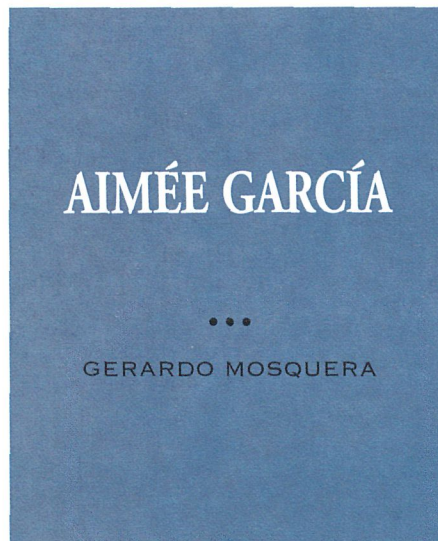


One of the most curious phenomena that has occurred in modern Cuban art is a marked tendency to paint in European historical styles, from Romanesque to neo-classical. Many artists borrow from these styles or even from specific works, making changes and ruptures of different kinds, with different aims. It seems it was Lázaro García who introduced this trend in the early 90s, which has even spread to sculpture in some cases.

This type of work has largely contributed to establish the stereotype of a greater formal concern in the current decade than in the previous one. A salient feature of the trend is that, at least at the outset, this borrowing is not done from the original works (which young artists have not seen), but from reproductions published in books and magazines. This borrowing from illustrations enhances the artificiality and mock representation that are purposely sought as components of the artists' discourses. These vary from Antonio Mariño's direct political and cultural commentary, to Lissette Matalón's religiousness, to the Christian imagery of Eduardo Garaicoa's and Bernardo Prieto's Afro-Cuban gods. But there is evidence of a common quest for meaning through open, often complex, symbols. This practice is linked to a certain surrealism stemming from the introduction of incongruent or heterodox elements into the images.

The symbolisation aspect seems to me to be more important than the borrowing in these works. Borrowing is done in order to provide a structure for an open, polysemous type of symbolism which is greatly refined in the oeuvre of Aimée García. It is not a question of



recalling, from the present, the sensibilities of former periods, or an elaborate literary play on the history of art, or even mannerism involving certain aesthetics, like Italian *pittura colta*. Although the latter is, to an extent, implicit in their work, the Cubans, as has been usual practice in the new art from the 80s, seek to convey ideas. Here, they draw on symbols taken from ancient

mythology, Christianity and other themes found in European painting, together with other connotations which stem from them. But they also use figurative mechanisms that are activated when images with a story are alluded to, reproduced or restructured.

There are three dangers with this trend: going too far with formulas that were used frequently by the old surrealists and, by extension, playing with a sumptuary "middle brow" market, combining "beautiful painting" with Latin American clichés of the fantastic, magical realism and marvellous reality. The other danger is precisely achievement of a low artistic level in naturalist symbolism. Perhaps so as to move away from all this, and also on account of the current boom in installations as compared to painting, some artists are combining exterior elements with pictures. Others, such as Jacqueline Brito,



Aimée García, *El pacto*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 85 x 111 cm.



Aimée García, *El sueño*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 55 x 74 cm.

restructure references and meanings with great spontaneity, turning them into a sort of play on decapitation.

Aimée García is probably the most “classic” example of this trend, and also the most personal. She has captured historical referents in an intimate *huis clos*. The personal elements interact with learned data, as in one of Lezama’s poems, but without baroque tendencies. Her work is like a perverse Dutch painting which has borrowed from counter-reformist mythology. It weaves an

existential discourse with a whole host of implications.

Her work possesses a disturbing perfection which might have had the effect of freezing it were it not for the fact that it is part of the actual structure of the discourse. The paintings look like the work of a goldsmith, with polished formal and signal sophistication. They allude to a women’s domestic world, of the past, with embroidery and handicrafts. They do in fact have a considerable aftertaste of precious metal

work. They are never just paintings, but pictures crafted painstakingly like hybrid objects or, better still, like micro-installations. They recall refinement, the devotion and eroticism of the nuptial embroidery of former times and, in general, of many of the home crafts that are still popular in Latin America.

But they are poisoned. A delicate violence bursts into her seductive, apparently aseptic world and, without raising its voice, perverts standards, myths and expectations. It is interesting

that other young artists should explore the ambiguity of exquisiteness-violence through women's crafts. The Mexican Paula Santiago springs to mind, with her garments woven with human hair, and the Costa Rican Priscilla Monge, with her documentary texts on acts of violence, so delicately embroidered into the cloth. Aimée also works with hair, thus adopting the current trend to use this and

other organic materials. Santiago and Monge share the Cuban artist's perversion -from inside outwards- of the sensibilities and values associated with these "women's crafts" and with the "feminine" world.

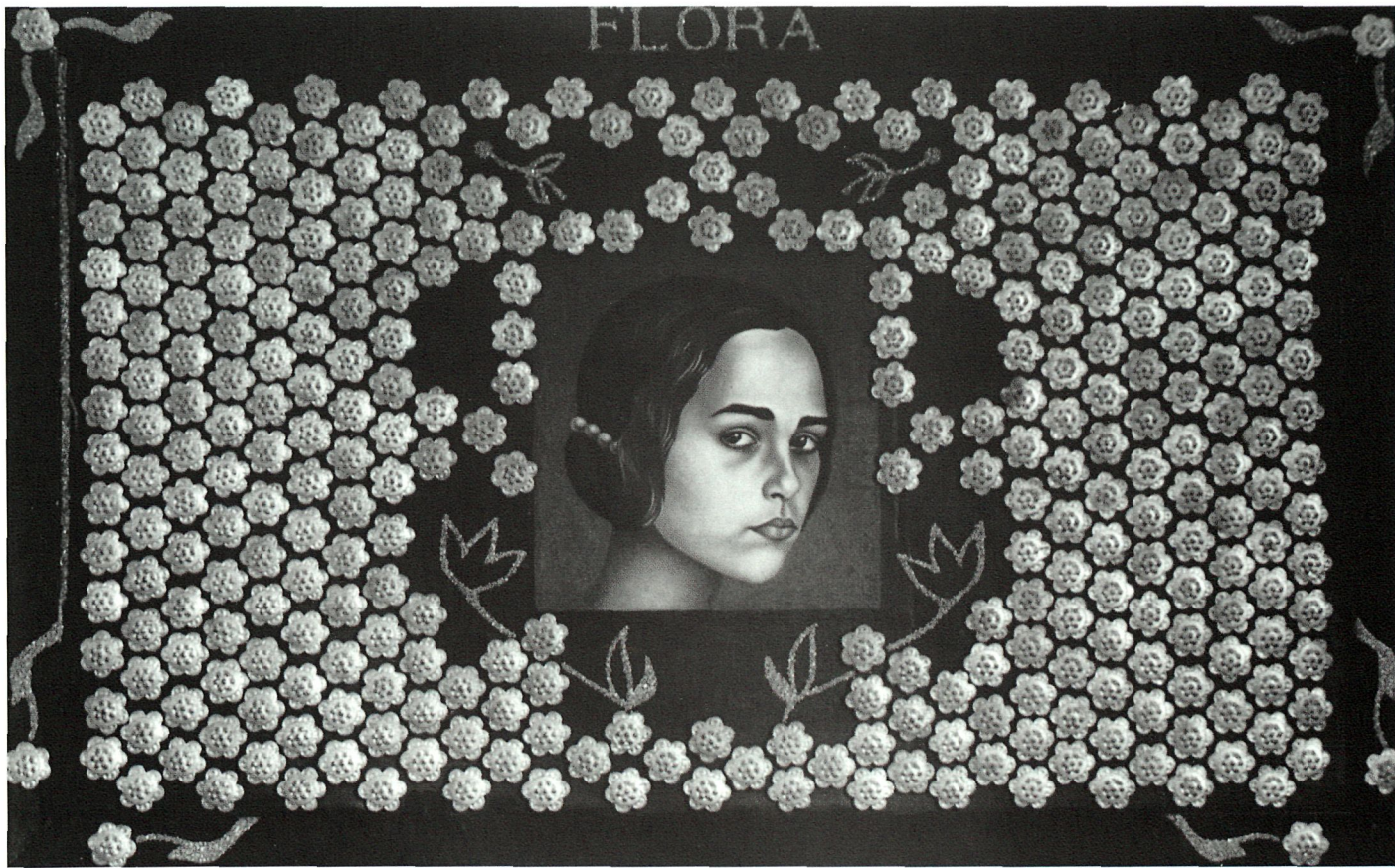
Aimée calls into question the major existential issues: the self, the other, nothingness, loneliness, fatality, death... from positions that are free of delusion

and furthermore charged with her experience of being a woman. She thus takes up the critical (in the general sense of the world) tendency of new Cuban art, incorporating the post-utopian viewpoint of many of today's most interesting artists. The relationship between reality and virtuality in art and in the artist was a salient theme of her most recent showing. Another important theme is protection from the other's appropriating gaze and contact. The work focuses on the self and its duplicities and is narcissistic to the extreme of multiple self-portrait, yet, at the same time, open. However, this openness is centripetal: it sets the world inside the private terrain, protecting itself inside its capsule. In one of the paintings, Diana paints her body with the blood of a hare.

The two themes inter-penetrate each other: reality, with its flies and scorpions, enters the paintings as much as its representations, and from them emerge painted tears which fall to the ground converted into lead. Different layers of virtual reality are woven continuously between the pictorial and non-pictorial, between the world and its representation, between the self and others. Painting itself is the protagonist in this picto-centric work, and to an extent it identifies with the self-planned world it builds. Structurally speaking, the actual frame which delimits the pictures from the rest of the components acts as a metaphor of personal self-reference, interacting with physical elements and external imageries. The "picture" as an entity always carries decisive weight, it is the star of these representations. The play is often enigmatic and affords the works



Aimée García. *La primavera*, 1996. Oil on wood, 33 x 28 cm.



Aimée García. *Flora*, 1995. Oil on canvas, 50 x 81 cm.

great figurative richness. It is in this that Aimée is different from other Cubans, particularly Magalis Reyes, who take their personal image "outwards", in order to convey social, political and cultural commentary.

The new works continue to display considerable use of overlapping material and images, a key strategy in Aimée's art. Poetics that enhance the plastic, constructive and tactile qualities of materials, charged with symbolism, can be found in contemporary installations, particularly those of Brazilians such as Waltercio Caldas, Cildo Meireles and José Resende. The Cuban Juan Francisco Elso went even further, going as far as to activate materials to explore their mystic potential. But it is very uncommon to

find this multipurpose aspect of material in relation to painting, and less so with images taken from the "great" tradition of painting on easel. A novel feature of his most recent exhibition, entitled *El Canto de Penélope*, was the use of photography, also in dialogue with painting. The testimonial and narcissistic connotations of photography reinforce the personal significance of Aimée's poetics, introducing a vivid modernity which underlines the artist's ambiguous combination of temporalities, virtual realities and histories.

When people attempt to define the characteristics of the 90s in Cuban plastic art – an issue on which the state has insisted, in order to amputate the generation of the 80s by dispersion – they

fail to mention something of primary importance: the significance of women. Never before have so many prominent female artists worked at the same time on the island (or, perhaps, in exile). Even more significant is the consolidation of a type of art which can be linked to differentiating feminism, even though it lacks a programme and self-awareness, and the artists themselves reject the term, considering it to be belittling. Nonetheless, this is a plausible viewpoint from which to discuss these women artists' works. Aimée is, here too, a clear yet different example of usual practice, who directs her gaze outwards from the private domain and the body to society. The artist is both Diana and Penelope at the same time.

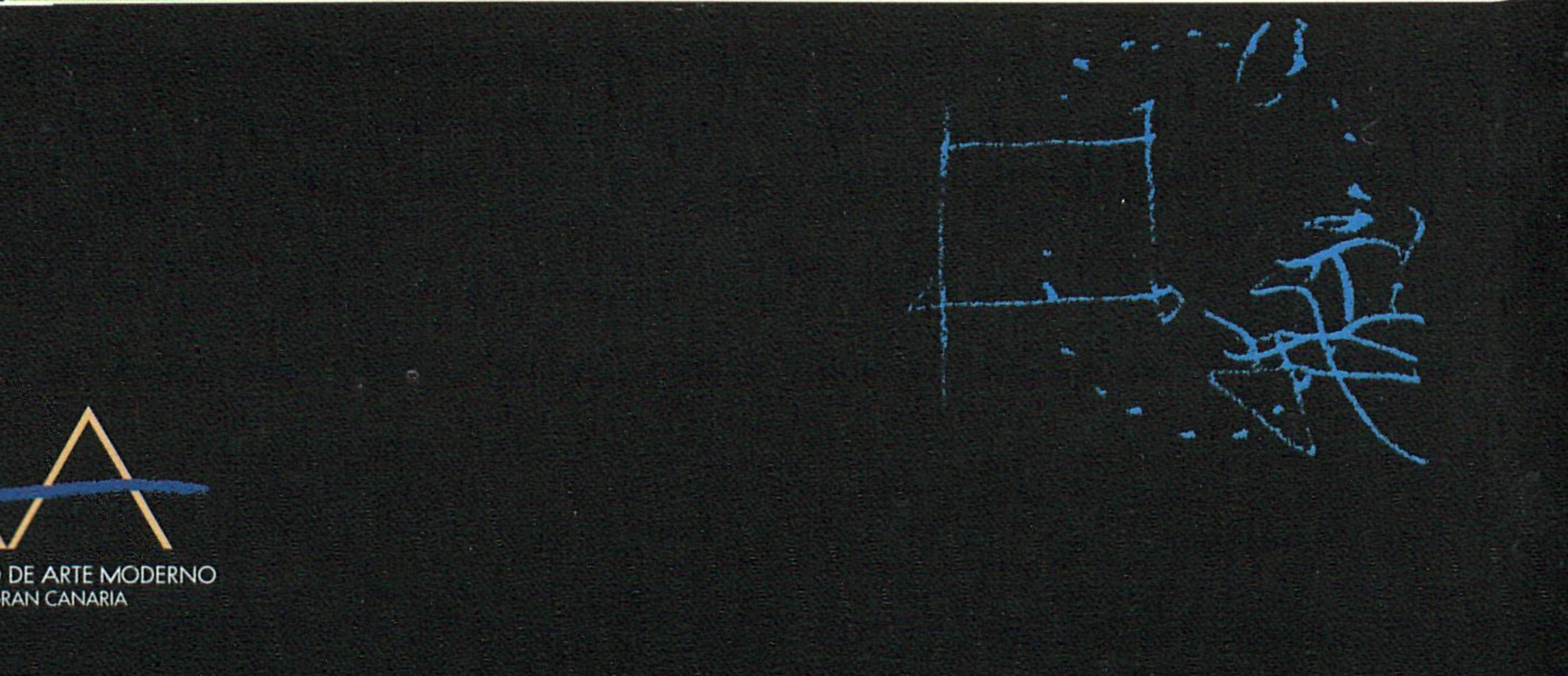
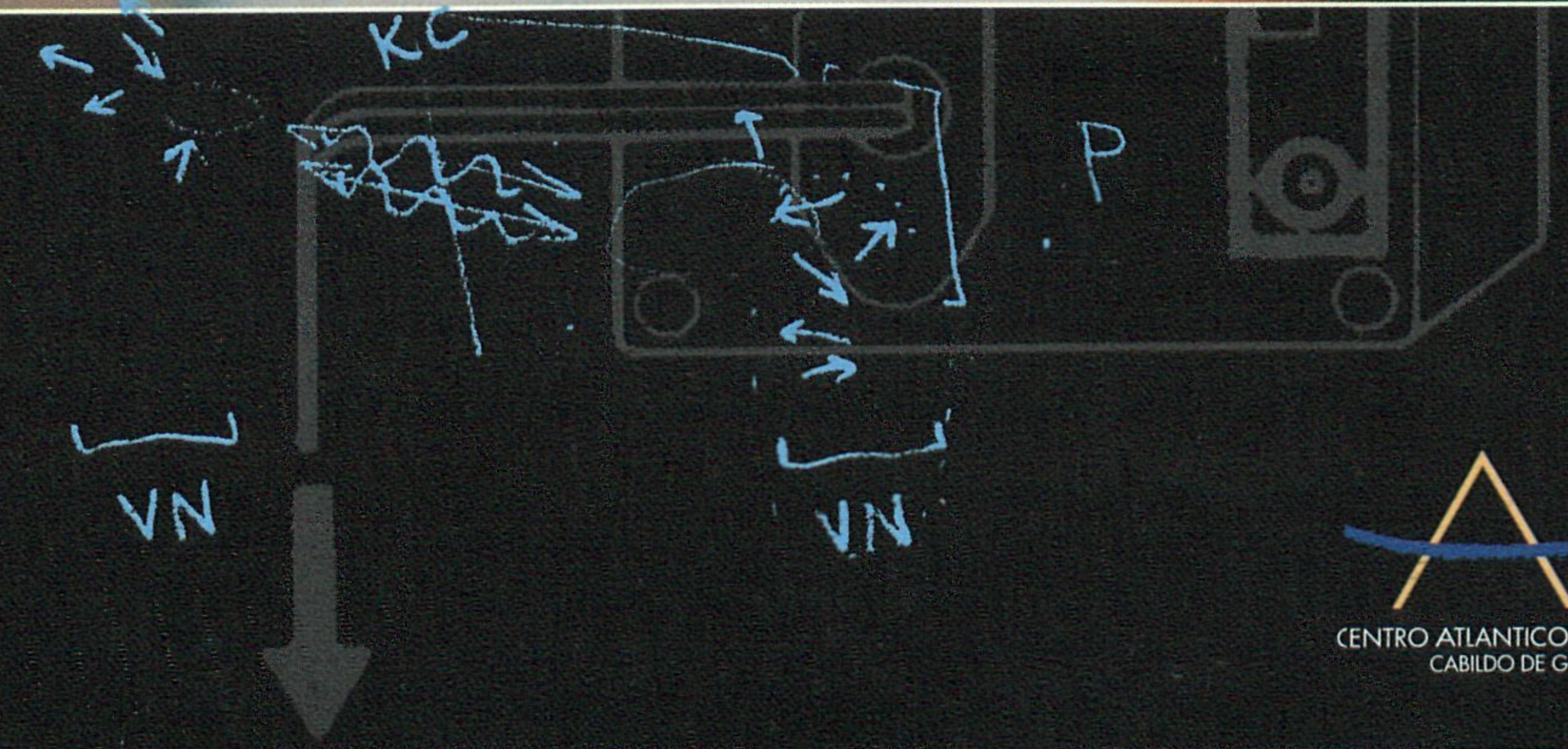
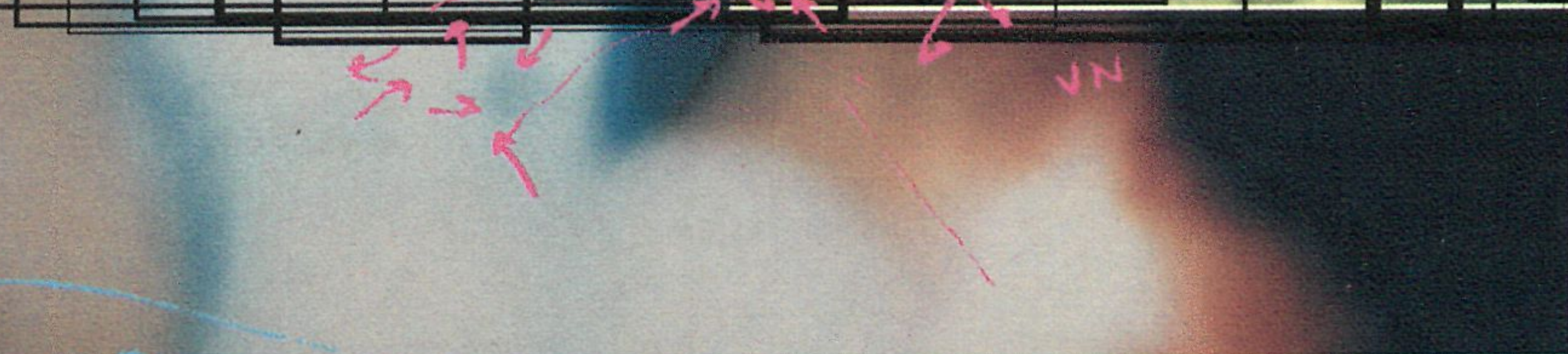
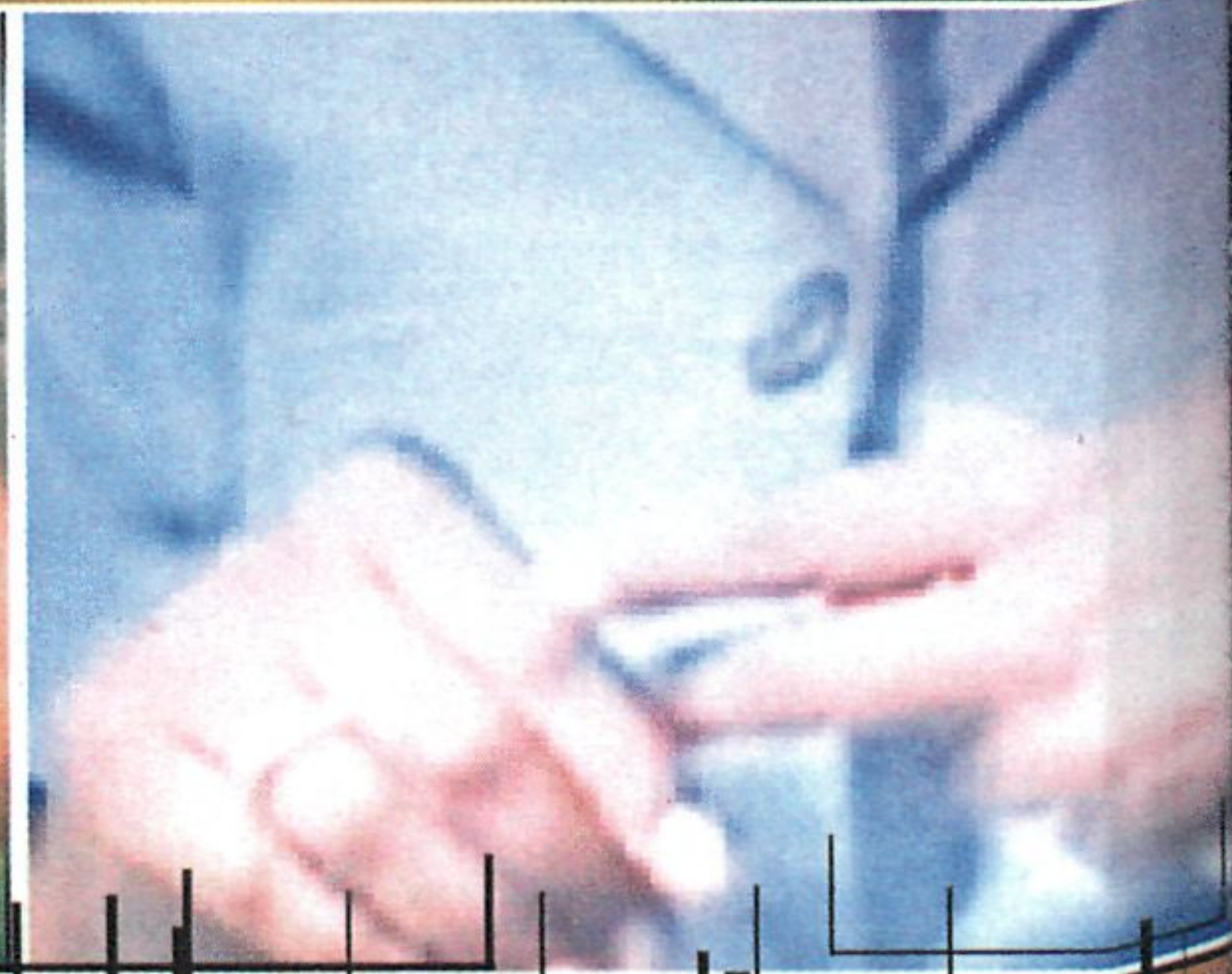
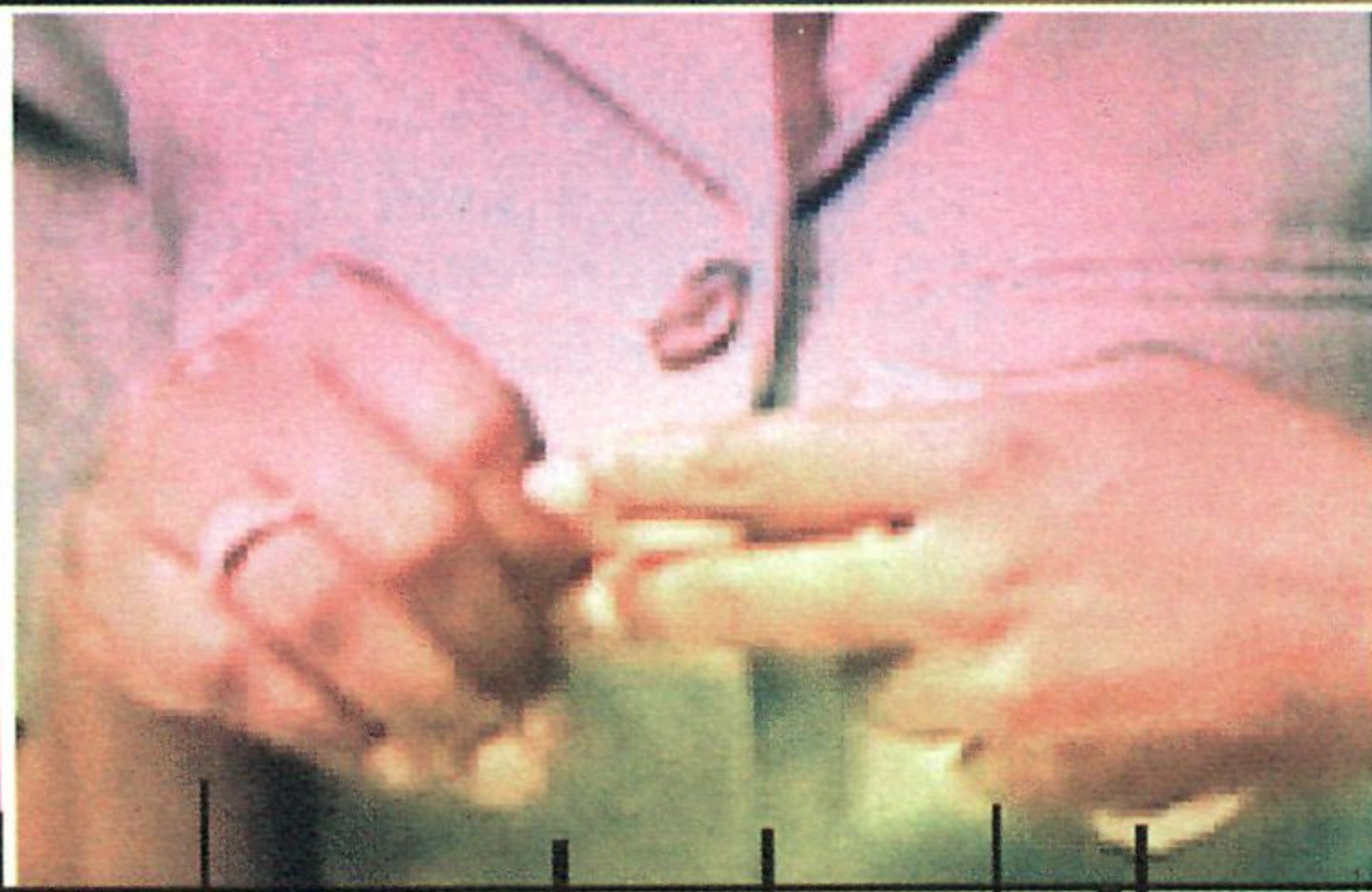
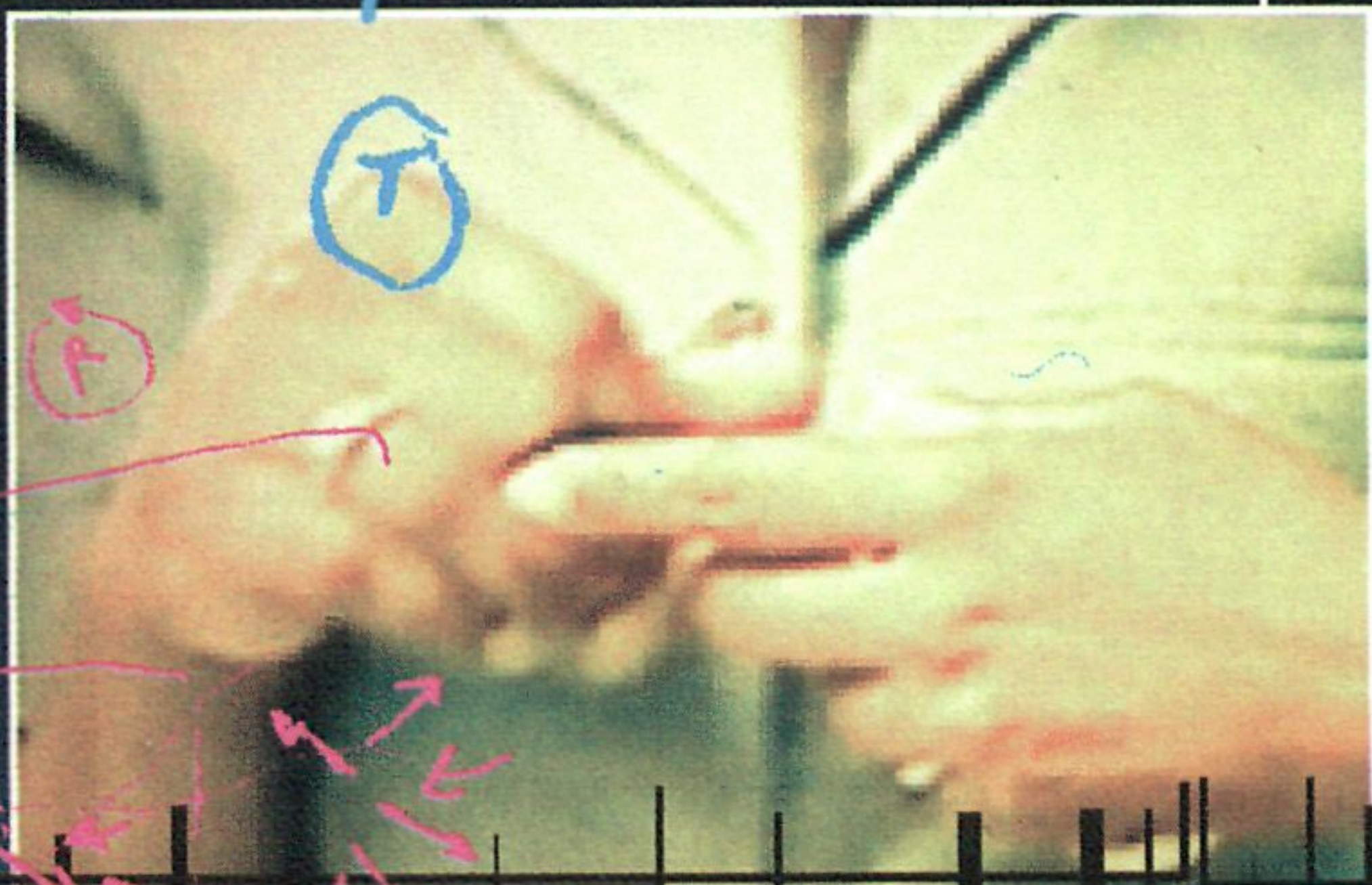
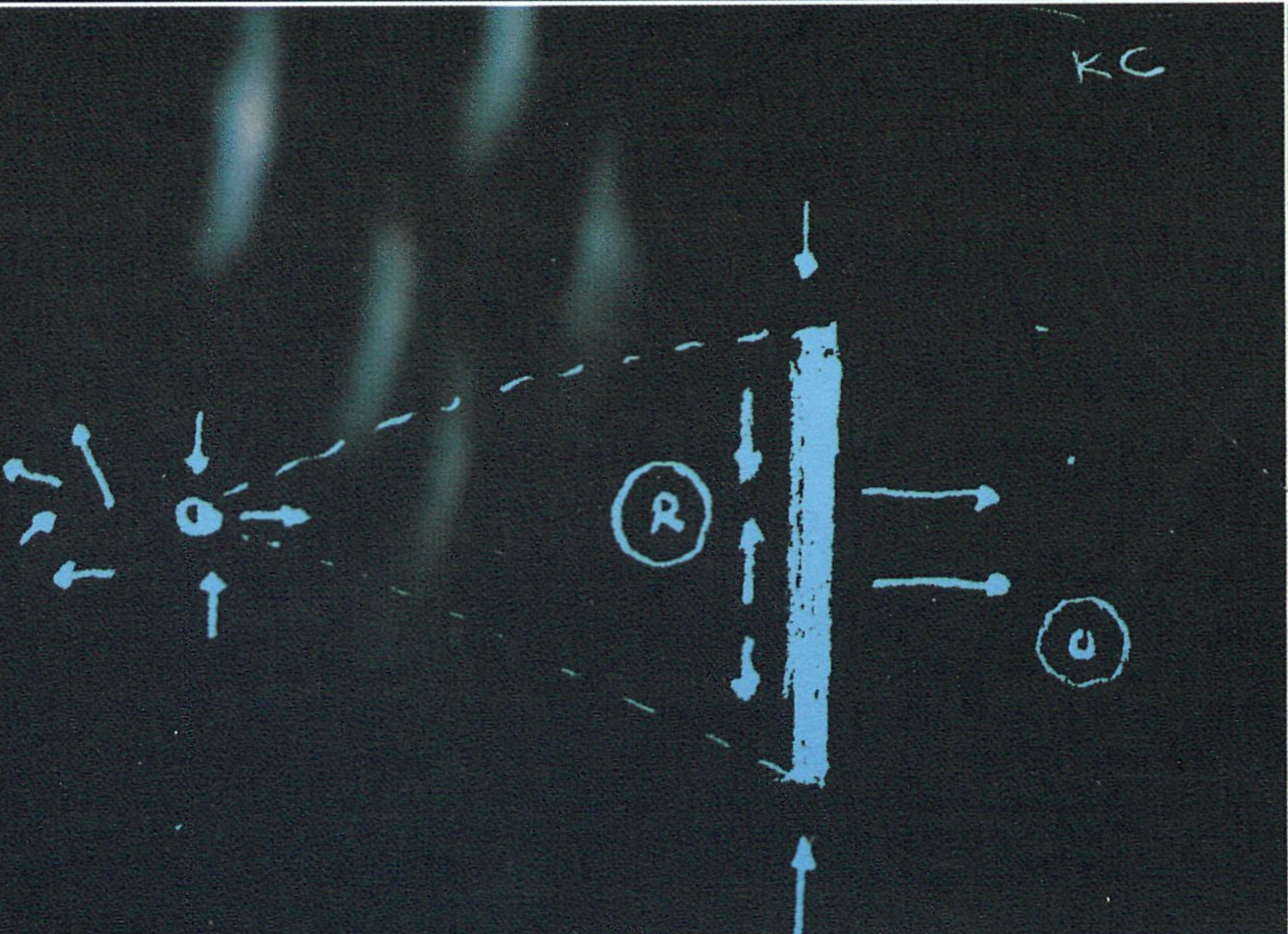
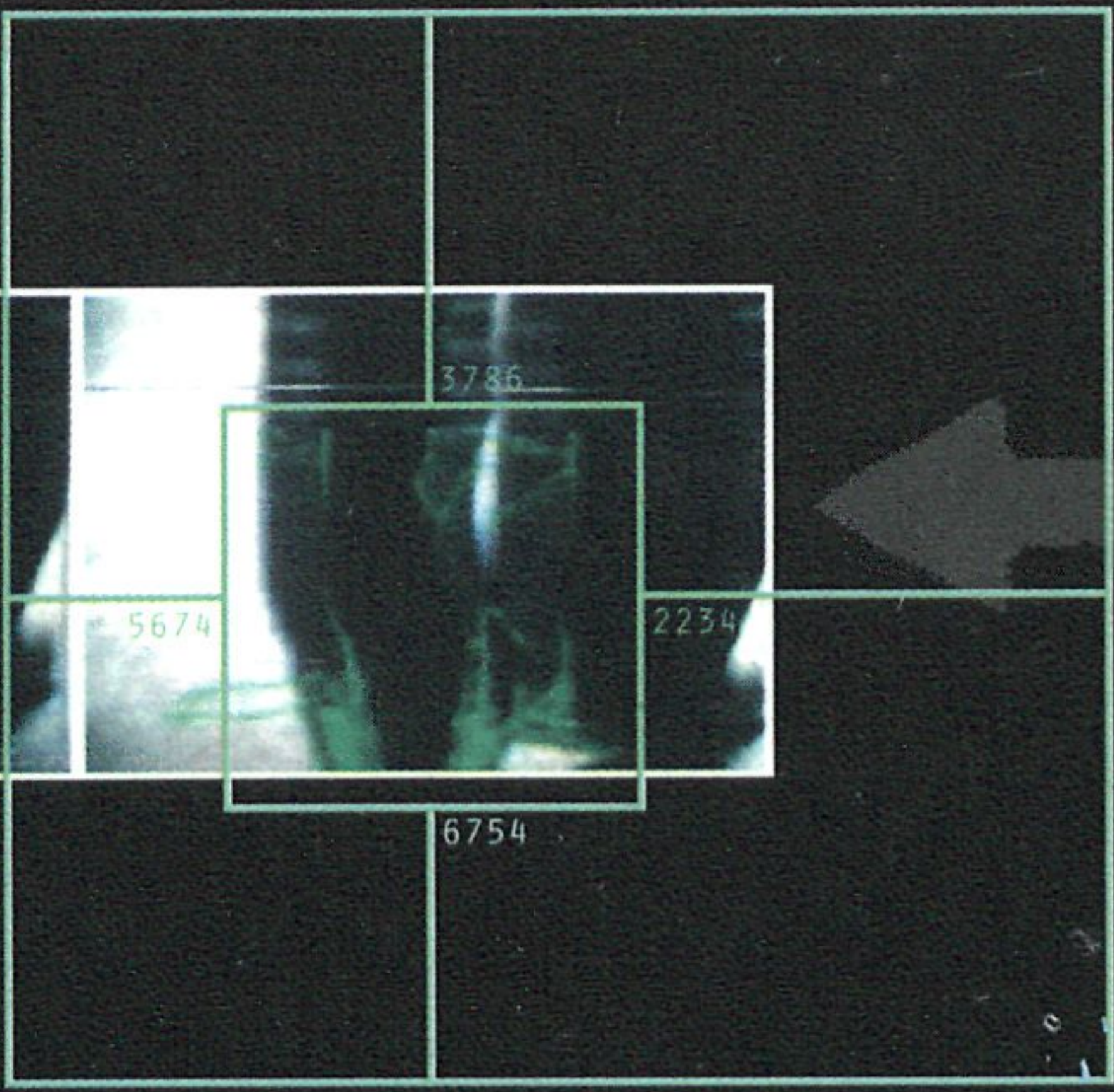
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Miró Mainou

RETROSPECTIVA

CENTRO ATLÁNTICO DE ARTE MODERNO
Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
23 de febrero - 4 de abril de 1999






CENTRO ATLANTICO DE ARTE MODERNO
CABILDO DE GRAN CANARIA

