

### Alex Bag at 303

Art school is the main subject of Alex Bag's hour-long videotape, *Fall 95*. Thanks to Bag's sharp wit, and her intercutting of other material, the viewer is quickly drawn into this apparently unpromising topic. The 16-part tape follows an unnamed student, played by the 26-year-old Bag, through eight semesters at New York's School of Visual Arts (SVA). Each episode, in which the student speaks to the camera about her life and studies, is followed by a short, unconnected video piece. (A second monitor made available Bag's collection of pirated music videos.)

In the first semester the student's moplike hair, heavy lipstick, pierced tongue and black nail polish caricature the current crop of art students. More timeless is her excitement at being away from home and among people who "understand" her. In the video which follows, a scantily clad blonde satirizes a phone sex commercial. "Call me," she coos to the camera, while striking sexy poses. Gradually her come-ons grow barbed: "Are you a fat, beer-guzzling good old boy? Call me. . . . God you're dumb. Maybe you should go back to school and pay attention. Call me."

As the semesters roll by, the SVA student acquires a more sophisticated look. Her opinions undergo an equal transformation. After complaining, in the fourth semester, about having to take a Western Civilization class, by the next sequence she's convinced that humanities classes and not studio work will make her "stuff" better.

In one of the non-SVA segments which use toys and dolls

to mock male violence and aggression, a Ronald McDonald doll tries out some boorish pickup lines on a stuffed kitty. The segment titled "Video Artist" wickedly caricatures a '70s-style artist delivering a monotone lecture about her equally dull videotape (she films the contents of her purse for seven hours a day). In "Shopgirls," two hilariously exaggerated English sales clerks—they look like Nico and sound like Eliza Doolittle—trade complaints about working in a trendy clothes store.

In the final SVA episode, after taking one of her teachers to task for misquoting a song by Nirvana, the student launches into an attack on the commodification of her "slacker" generation. Her articulate rant is a far cry from the naiveté of the earliest segments. Bag likes to reveal intelligence and elo-



Alex Bag: Video still from *Fall 95*, 1995; at 303.

quence where viewers least expect it: the student learns to intelligently question authority, the "call me" woman turns out to be no mere sex kitten, even the London shop girls are shown to be smart and witty.

In the last segment, the camera frames a Vermeer-like scene of a woman pensively handling a long-stemmed flower against a pop music soundtrack. After a minute the woman breaks into tears. The camera keeps running until the end of the song, which all but drowns out the woman's sobbing. Coming after Bag's sharp satire, this final image of emotion and vulnerability is unexpected and moving. What's more, like every other part of this compelling work, it seems indispensable to the whole. —Raphael Rubinstein