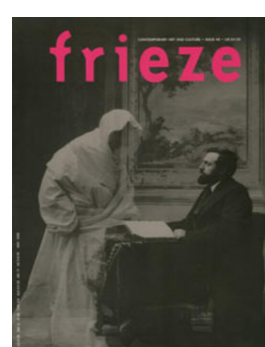




# Suicide



J BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 05 MAY 98

Featured in Issue 40

When Alan Vega laughs like a maniac through the reverb, you get the feeling he's trying to scare you, and the strange thing is, he does. His band Suicide have an almost sinister, if choreographed cool about them, and despite the fact they've survived in various incarnations for over 25 years, there's still something compelling about their often heavy-handed approach to the aesthetics of self-destruction. Lines like 'they wake you up in the middle of the night when you least expect it', would be kind of adolescent if the music wasn't so unpredictable - lush sonic platitudes reinvented beneath grinding drum-beats and minimalist framing. Imagine Elvis experimenting with Mayakovsky. It's unsettling.

'This' Vega mumbles, 'is for all the beautiful women in the world'. Pause. 'Ah' he sighs, 'you're all beautiful. You're all beautiful except for the ones that have fucked me over'. Then he staggers into song: 'I surrender to you' a David Lynch-ish, broody moan lightened with a relentless, distorted fusion of rockabilly and robotic, tuneful repetition. Wearing fingerless gloves and hunched over the microphone, with his beret pulled down over his ears, looking over the audience through red-tinted glasses, chain-smoking and lounging about in a tired-old-man-of-rock way, he looks like a weirdly benevolent, masculine Ricky Lee Jones. Until, that is, someone throws a cigarette at him. 'Fuck you too man. You know, I could pull your heart outta your asshole', he yells furiously at the thrower. Things get a little ugly. Behind Vega, leather-clad Martin Rev barely moves, except to intermittently slam his hands on the keyboard, vaguely punch the air and glare at the audience through his wrap-arounds, looking for all the world like a taller, meaner, scarier Lou Reed. After much pissed-off posturing the duo launch into a song that sounds like a train in a blizzard. The aggression of the audience begins to sound pretty tame. These aren't guys you could imagine in sunlight.

In the early 70s Vega co-founded the Project of Living Artists in lower Manhattan, an experimental art space where the then embryonic punk bands New York Dolls, Blondie and Television made regular appearances alongside Vega's 'light sculptures'. Martin Rev was playing electronic piano in the 15-piece jazz-band Reverend B when he and Vega formed Suicide, which they envisaged as 'a kind of sound sculpture'. One of the earliest bands to fuse punk with minimalism, Vega's violent performances on stage regularly caused riots. After 1980 he went solo with songs that reveal an impressively eclectic range of subject matter - from the supposed euphoria that precedes hypothermia, to top ten music, Elvis, Rockabilly, urban menace and multi-racial societies. Many of his songs were pared down to one or two chord structures. After covering Hot Chocolate's Everyone's a Winner, he released a video to the single Wipeout Beat which showed him kung fu dancing on a giant keyboard in front of an interstellar backdrop. In 1987 he described his approach with the rather Cageian phrase: 'No notes/all notes; no chords/all chords; nothing is everything/everything is nothing'. Juke Box Baby/Collision Drive, released in 1996, was described as 'anti-matter music created out of chunks of nothing'.

Although Suicide never actually disbanded, they were uncharacteristically quiet for a long time. Now they're back. '20 years of putting up with this crap - we should be given survival medals' comments a thoughtful Vega to the wired, wide-eyed audience at the end of the gig. 20 minutes earlier he was yelling 'You're goin' to die, you're goin' to die, you're goin' to die'. Now, as he follows Rev off stage, he waves good-bye and casts a worried, almost paternal eye over the punters. 'Be careful', he says, 'it's a dangerous world out there'.



## JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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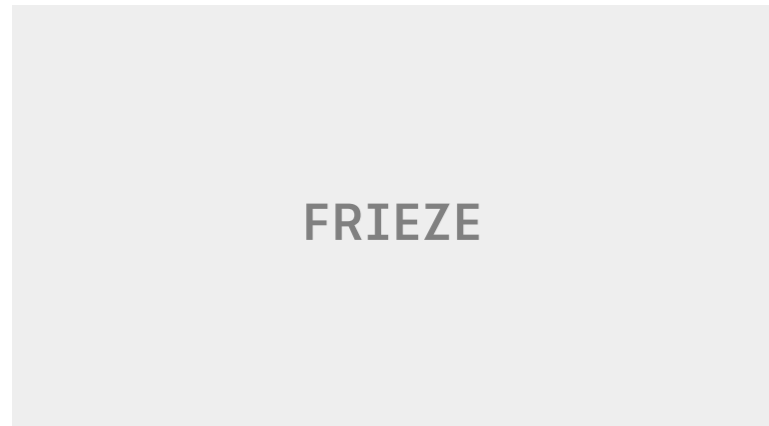


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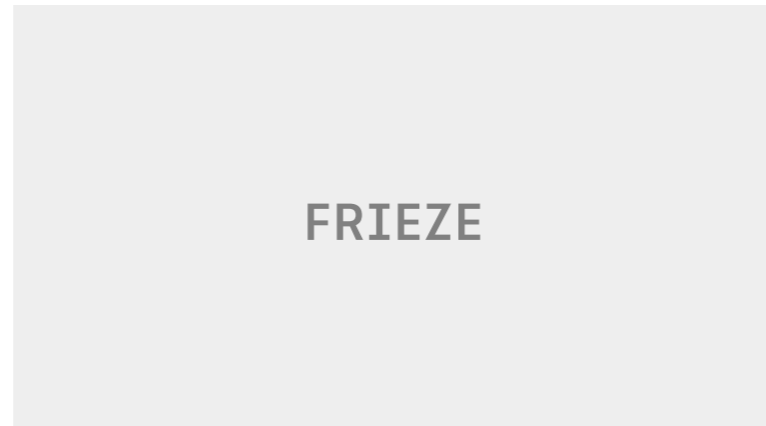


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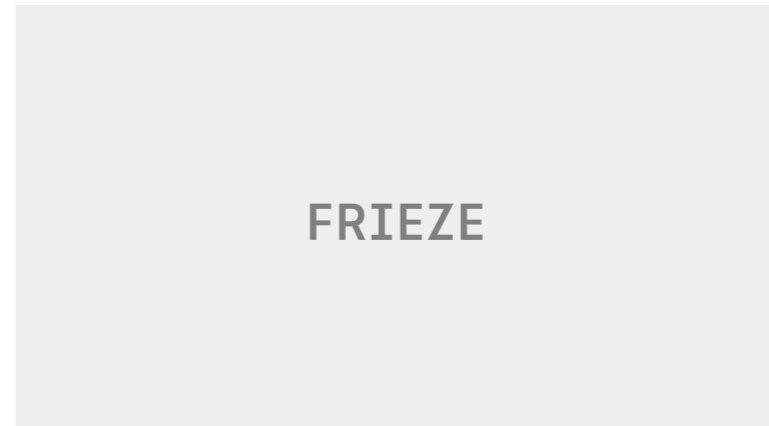
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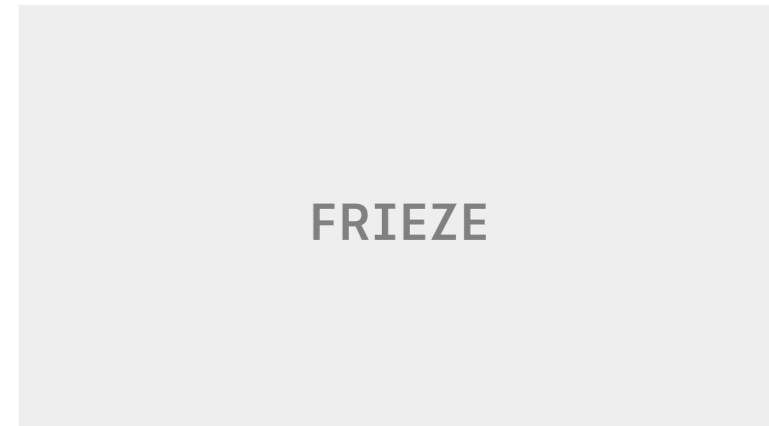
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