

# Webster

UNIVERSITY

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI  
GENEVA • LEIDEN • LONDON • VIENNA

9/17/91

Hi Folks -

Thanks for letting us use your tapes. There's a small rental check on the way.

The benefit for Legacy Productions was a success. They made a little money & we had a good time.

It was great seeing your stuff on a good 10½ x 17 ft screen w/a good sound system.

Lynnie & I saw the Juniper Tree last night, which was filmed in Iceland. It looks a lot like New Mexico in a way.

Best wishes,  
Van

Saturday,

April 13,

8:00 p.m.

Winfred Moore Aud., Webster University, 470 E. Lockwood, St. Louis

Legacy Productions presents

REFRACTION

# Van McElwee and Friends

STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA  
MAX ALMY  
ORESTES VALDES

R D ZURICK  
KATHY CORLEY

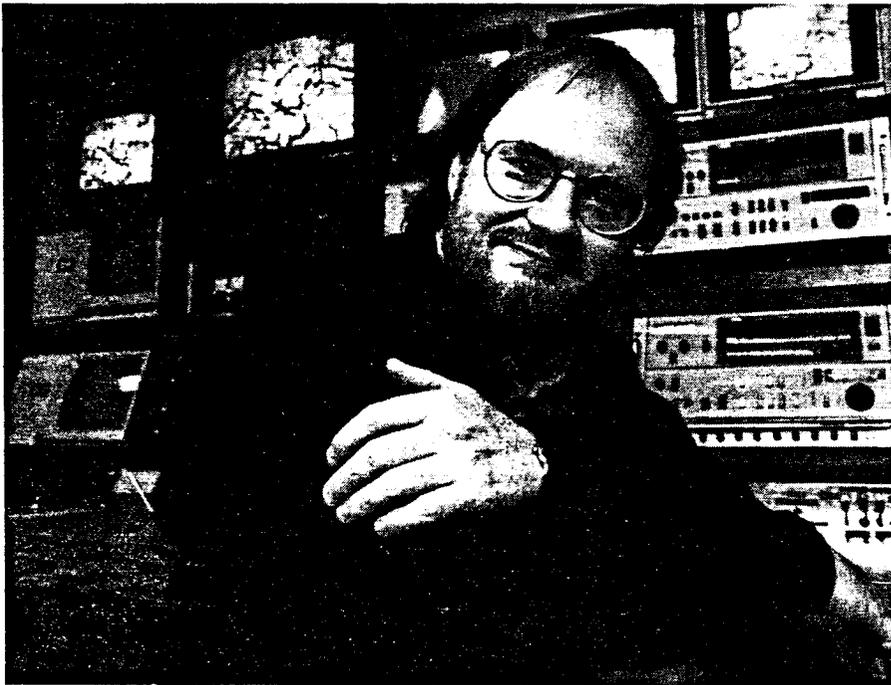
JILL PETZALL



VAN MCELWEE

Van McElwee, video artist and faculty member of Webster University, will present an evening of experimental video to benefit LEGACY PRODUCTIONS, a non-profit organization that supports the Media Arts. Included in the program will be some of the finest regional/national video artists. A reception, in the lobby of the Svedrup Business/Technology Building, will follow the program. Tickets \$12., \$7. for students \$5. for Webster students. For more information or to purchase tickets, contact 961-2660, ext. 7525.

# VAN McELWEE EXPERIMENTS WITH VIDEO ART



Van McElwee

video art, the content is radically different from the medium's traditional applications; in others, like the works of musician Brian Eno, content has been almost entirely severed from television's capacity as a recording device.

Such wildly varying approaches to video and to art do not make this an easy field for the uninitiated. For those largely unfamiliar with video's alternative currents, *Van McElwee and Friends*, a program at Webster University this week, offers a point of entry. McElwee, who teaches at Webster and Washington universities, has been creating experimental video since 1977, and his works have been seen at galleries and festivals throughout the United States and Europe. His videos are abstract, experimenting with the technological possibilities of television yet

never falling into a mechanical fascination with technology for its own sake. The works he has chosen for the Webster program share his interest in abstract video, though their methods are varied, from the impressive 16-monitor screen installed by the Vasulkas for "Ptolemy," to the simple charm of Orestes Valdes' "Ivo." Though some artists represented have strong national reputations, many, like Valdes, Roy Zurick and Kathy Corley, are local videographers for whom public showings are infrequent. (The program is a benefit for Legacy Productions, itself a source of support for local film and video artists.)

In lieu of a detailed description of the program — most of the works are so purely visual that a written description would be misleading — I asked McElwee to outline some of the aesthetics of video art, as represented in his own work and those he's selected.

**McElwee:** Without trying to define art, I'd say that video art is art that utilizes video as its primary medium. In other words, it's some sort of creative, expressive new idea or form that could not be realized without video. This could conceivably encompass any genre, although typically and historically, video art is known for going beyond normal television formats and was seen in the early days as an extension of the visual arts.

**RFT:** It also seems to be almost by definition an abstract art form. The documentary trend of independent video that was common in the mid-70s seems to have been assimilated by public-access TV and other outlets.

**McElwee:** A lot of the stuff I've picked for this show involves image manipulation, using the tools of video to create something unique. But there are very definitely areas of video in which there's little if any manipulation other than the normal manipulation and distortion of standard production techniques. There are forms of video art that are narrative or documentary, or that give a straight, unprocessed image of the world. The documentary current in video was more mainstream in technique and content from the very beginning. It just had its place in alternative television because its subjects were those you might not find on normal television. Sometimes they were considered video art, sometimes not.

**RFT:** When you started in video, the idea that individuals could create their own TV programs was still relatively unusual. Now that VCRs and camcorders have become more common, has that changed the field?

**McElwee:** Yes and no. The fact that relatively sophisticated video tools are now available to individuals means that there is a lot more exciting video being produced, a lot of it of an experimental nature. Access to equipment has always been the major problem for video artists. The major stumbling block has been that much of the hardware is too expensive to use. But now with the proliferation of high-resolution camcorders and inexpensive access to editing, I think we're seeing more work being produced.

**RFT:** Has that affected the content of video art? The most obvious thing I see in student videos is the influence of MTV.

**McElwee:** Probably. It's definitely of cultural interest. I don't know if each example would fall into the category of art, but we're so much a media culture, and a lot of students have grown up with video cameras and are very familiar with the tools.

**RFT:** MTV has created an acceptance of non-narrative forms, but when you see TV commercials using the styles of music video, it's obvious that it's something they feel comfortable with.

**McElwee:** I think the lack of narrative opens a lot of artistic possibilities. However, the lack of narrative, especially with MTV, can also represent a degeneration of the form. It's still very content-oriented, but dealing with the content in a shallow way. That's where you can make a real strong distinction between valid experimentation and commercialism.

**RFT:** I would think that even students

**N**ot all that long ago TV meant *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, *Wheel of Fortune* and *I Love Lucy*. Everybody watched the same things, which had been chosen for them by CBS, ABC or NBC. The growth of the cable TV, videocassette and video-camera industries has changed all that, making an irreparable dent in our TV-mad society. For the first time in decades, people are making their own choices about what they watch — and even making their own programs. The TV viewer is no longer forced into passive acceptance of the medium.

Granted, any video revolution that includes the home-shopping networks and the video jukebox is badly in need of fine tuning. Alternatives to TV's almost exclusively commercial discourse still need to be heard. For years, one such alternative use of the medium has been proposed by video art, a diversified and still-unfamiliar alternative to the world of Roseanne and Mr. Whipple.

There are no standard definitions or guidelines for video art. Some artists, like Steina and Woody Vasulka and the field's grandmaster, Nam June Paik, are as concerned with changing the physical environment of the TV screen as the program. Others, like music video director Zbig Rybczynski, appear to imitate the effects of traditional filmmaking while taking advantage of video's potential for distorting and reshaping reality. In some

BY ROBERT HUNT

# TEST TUBE

Van McElwee  
experiments  
with video art

see page 22

# The Riverfront Times

FREE (50¢ AT THE AIRPORT)

ST. LOUIS' BEST... EVERY WEEK

60 PAGES

NUMBER 653

APRIL 10 - 16, 1991



Van McElwee's "Digital Debris"

raised on MTV would find pure abstraction of the kind in the Webster program unfamiliar.

**McElwee:** When they see an artistic use of the medium, quite often they tend to approach it strictly from the technical area rather than the perceptual, rather than realizing its place in the whole spectrum of media and art.

**RFT:** That's a very common response to video art, to see it as technology for its own sake.

**McElwee:** That can be a problem with experimental video, and it's a problem that anyone involved in it can be vulnerable to. As artists, we love our tools and we love seeing new things. Sometimes our tools show us new things, but they have no meaning.

**RFT:** Video art is displayed in theatrical settings, in gallery installations and even on broadcast TV. Is there an ideal setting or an ideal audience?

**McElwee:** You're really talking about two different things. The ideal audience would be looking for a new potential in video. If they're expecting to see artistic variations on normal television forms, they'll be disappointed. As for setting, all of those are valid. Many artists work in all those areas. There are many ways television can be appreciated. In Japan, the "video letter" is very important. A few years ago the Tokyo Video Festival had a whole category of video letters. These were tapes that an individual could make and send to someone who would then make a tape to send back. They were displayed as a dialogue and they were fascinating. One of the things that interests me about television is all the different ways that you can create and be shown.

**RFT:** When you started working in video, there was much less awareness of the form, even in the academic world. How did you get started?

**McElwee:** I got into video in graduate school, in sort of a roundabout way. I majored in printmaking, went to art school, but I experimented with sound and, like a lot of people in the late 60s and early 70s, I was very interested in the idea of time in art and what it meant. Not musical or narrative ways of time, but dealing with time as a process. I did a lot of crude audio experiments for years, and I was attracted to the graduate program in multimedia at Washington University. With video, I could expand what I was doing and combine both areas. It was an extension of the visual arts. A lot of experimental work in video comes from people who had an interest in graphic arts. In fact, to me video has always been a type of four-dimensional printmaking.

**RFT:** A lot of video art seems designed to create an awareness of more than just the image itself. On one extreme, you have the monolithic installations of the

Vasulkas, and on the other, works like your own "Digital Debris," which has an almost microscopic effect.

**McElwee:** Again you have the visual-arts connection. There's the space on the screen and the space around it. You can explore and manipulate space and time, not just in a physical sense but in a perceptual way. I think that's important to a lot of artists, as opposed to regular TV, which only creates a screen space.

"Digital Debris" is an imaginary digital close-up of nature. Computers are relatively crude compared to the infinite complexity of nature. That's the aesthetic jumping-off point for me. These were actual leaves falling, filmed and rotoscoped into line drawings and then digitized. It was important that actual nature was buried in the piece.

**RFT:** Why rotoscope the leaves instead of digitizing the original footage?

**McElwee:** It was an aesthetic decision.

To just digitize leaves would have been turning a knob. I think just turning a knob can be an intelligent solution to a problem when it's appropriate, but I wanted the leaves to be my drawings. First you're turning the leaves into a linear form — the drawings — and when you digitize that into squares, you've really crunched it three-dimensionally in a way that isn't possible if you just turn a photograph into squares. There's an element of wanting to get my hands in it, too. Even though the viewer doesn't have to know that process, something of it remains in the piece.

**RFT:** Where do you see video art going? Will it work its way into the mainstream, or will it always be looking for some new technological horizon?

**McElwee:** I like the idea of very simple, elegant pieces that don't require exotic new technology. By its very nature, experimental video tends to manipulate the medium, but that doesn't always mean new equipment. Doing things like editing in a new way is just as important — more important — than a new digital effect. I'd like to think that there wouldn't have to be any new technological advances at all for wonderful art to be produced. By the same token, the technical possibilities of the future are endless. I think the world of computer graphics and the way the trajectory of television will intersect it will create wonderful new opportunities, but hopefully there will be ideas that match and require the technology.

The program Van McElwee and Friends will be presented at 8 p.m., Saturday, April 13, at Webster University's Winifred Moore Auditorium, 470 E. Lockwood. The program is a benefit for Legacy Productions, which has sponsored the work of McElwee and many other local film and video artists. Tickets are \$12 for general admission, \$7 for students, and \$5 for Webster students. Call 961-2660, ext. 7525.

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SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 1991

(2)

FINAL 5-STAR

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## REVIEW VIDEO

# A Diverse Look At Current Experimental Videos

### "VAN McELWEE AND FRIENDS"

Running time: 1:30

By Harper Barnes

Post-Dispatch Movie Critic

VAN McELWEE of Webster University has chosen about a dozen videos by national and St. Louis artists to give a diversified look at contemporary experimental video production.

The program at Webster includes three videos by McElwee. The others, McElwee said, "are by artists I have been influenced by or admire." Included are two videos, "Photographic Memory" and "Ptolemy," by Steina and Woody Vasulka, very influential video artists who now live in New Mexico.

"Photographic Memory" works with views through the same window at different times of the year, blurring the time frame and using overlapping images to create a dance of the seasons. "Ptolemy" is a video record of an installation of 16 monitors showing similar images from different perspectives.

"Digital Debris" and "Refraction," both by McElwee, begin in nature,

with trees and branches and falling leaves, and use modern animation techniques to derive a dazzling variety of associated abstract images.

"Ivo" by Orestes Valdes is an animated dance, half flamenco, half Martha Graham, to an ethereal piece by the music group the Cocteau Twins. Jill Petzall's "November Nine," shown

here in a preview, looks at the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and relates it metaphorically to Crystal Night, the anti-Semitic riots staged by the Nazis on the same date in 1938.

Morey Gers and Tom Hamilton produced "Best Value We've Seen Yet," a blend of electronic music and kaleidoscopic imagery that suggests a much

more sophisticated version of '60s light shows.

Also included in the program will be videos by R D Zurick, Kathy Corley, Max Almy and others. The program will begin at 8 p.m. Saturday in the Winifred Moore Auditorium, 470 East Lockwood Avenue, Webster Groves.

*Followed 11:21*

March 1991

Dear Friend of Legacy:

Like many small arts organizations, Legacy Productions occasionally faces a deficit situation that requires the help of our friends and members. We are in such a situation now and we are asking for your financial help in alleviating this debt crunch.

In case you don't know much about us - Legacy Productions, Inc. is a statewide, not-for-profit, tax exempt organization headquartered in St. Louis at the Center of Contemporary Arts. Legacy Productions was organized in 1982 to promote the development of independent media art and artists in Missouri and the Midwest.

Legacy's purpose is multifaceted, and based on the desire to encourage the creation and exhibition of independent film and video works. By providing information, referrals and educational workshops, as well as funding to area artists, Legacy seeks to create an environment that is accommodating and hospitable to new and established media artists. Legacy also offers screenings of first-rate, foreign films at the Center of Contemporary Arts.

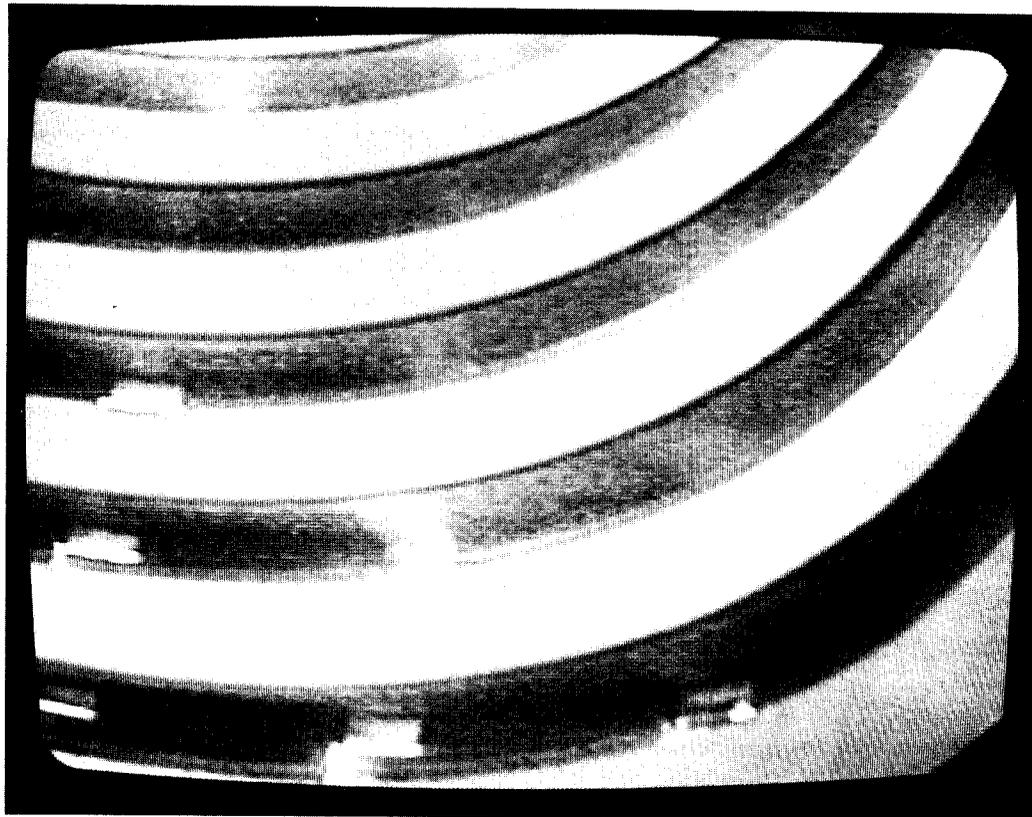
Because we want to give our thanks the best way we know how, we are offering four options for you to consider. Each of them will help Legacy raise money and will provide value and enjoyment for you.

- Become a Legacy member for a minimum of \$35. (but please consider more) and receive the benefits listed on the back page of this newsletter.
- Buy tickets to our April 13 fund raiser at Webster University. This evening of video art by Van McElwee and artists such as Steina Vasulka and Max Almy will also feature a reception afterwards. Tickets are \$12. each and may be ordered by sending a check or money order to Legacy at the address listed below.
- Buy a 10 admission pass to the Film Series. This pass, only \$25., gives you a discount of \$1.50 per admission and will help the Film Series offer programs year-round.
- Become a maniacal subscriber: For \$125. you will receive a year's membership in Legacy, including all the normal benefits as well as 50 admissions to the Legacy Film Series. Have a party and bring a few friends, even 49 of them! This pass will allow you to come to many of our fine film programs.

Each of these benefits offers the much needed financial help to Legacy, as well as value to you. Please consider these offers and choose one today.

Thank you very much,  
The Board and Staff of Legacy Productions, Inc.

**Legacy is located at 524 Trinity in University City, MO 63130. (314) 863-1004**



"Space-Time Loops: Cityscape" Van McElwee

**Saturday, April 13, 8:00 p.m.**

Winifred Moore Auditorium  
Webster University  
470 E. Lockwood

## **Van McElwee and Friends**

*A Fund Raiser for  
Legacy Productions*

Tickets \$12.00,  
\$7.00 for Students.

Video Artist and faculty member of Webster University Van McElwee will present a recent work ***Digital Debris***, plus the St. Louis premiere of ***Refraction***. Works by artists **Steina Vasulka**, **Max Almy** and others will also be screened. A reception in the lobby of the Svedrup Business/Technology Building on Webster's campus will follow the program. For more information or to purchase tickets, contact Vicki Knoll at 961-2660, ext. 7525



## VAN MCELWEE AND FRIENDS

*Three pieces by Van McElwee*

"In these tapes sound and image operate as two aspects of one form. There are no stories being told. The subject is the viewer. Rather than make a point, I try to cast a spell. In this sense the work is a kind of architecture, an environment to be inhabited by the viewer." V. M.

### Installation: INTERSECTION

1987

Forms and processes are revealed to be interpenetrating. The sound is derived from vocal and electronic sources.

### DIGITAL DEBRIS

1987

This piece is a study of natural form and a fantasy of digital space. The simple images are the result of an imaginary computer close-up of the natural world of endless form and detail. Actual falling leaves were filmed, rotoscoped into line drawings and superimposed on a grid. The sounds reflect a reality that is abstracted as the leaves pass through the monitor frame. *Funded by Legacy Productions.*

### REFRACTION

1990

Natural form is carried in a new direction. Moving shots of bare tree limbs and the songs of a mother and her five year old son are made into a special food for the eyes and ears. Postproduction techniques allow the viewer to experience over twenty million edits in five minutes and forty seconds.

### THE THINKER

*Max Almy*

Max Almy is known for her literate, technically sophisticated tapes. A beautifully researched script is the basis for this visually dense performance video.

### MIGRATION

*Bill Viola*

**Migration** is an older piece that once made, and continues to make, a strong impression on me. When viewing Bill Viola's work, I feel like I'm inside of his mind. Time and consciousness are intensified in **Migration**. Viola has said "Duration is to the mind as light is to the eye."

According to Viola: "Reality, unlike the image on the retina or on the television tube, is infinitely resolvable -- 'resolution' and 'acuity' are properties only of images. The piece evolves into an exploration of the optical properties of a drop of water, revealing in it an image of the individual and a suggestion of the transient nature of the world he possesses within."

## PRECIOUS PRODUCTS

*George Kuchar*

Kuchar has developed a personal video art that exploits the directness and the immediacy of the medium. Improvisation and intricate planning operate together in these camera-edited tapes.

According to Kuchar, "This, another in the series of homes I visit when the original occupants are out of town, is a rare look behind the walls of the rich and famous to see what's scratching at the woodwork."

## ARTPARK 81

*R D Zurick*

Roy has always shown me aspects of film and video that I hadn't noticed before. In this piece, the crisp, frame by frame quality of the image is energized electronically by video; time altered by film, film altered by video.

In the words of Roy: "Festival participants, as well as the objects d'art, are abstracted through electronic colorization and feedback processes, allowing the visual rhythms (most often at 4/18 of a second) to dominate the footage. Primarily presented as a rhythmic exercise, *Artpark 81* still retains the festive nature and artistic integrity of the historic cultural event originally documented on film at Benton Park in St. Louis."

## PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

PTOLEMY

*Steina and Woody Vasulka*

The legendary Vasulkas are true electronic pioneers. They create video tools and ways of using them that redefine the medium and extend our vision in startling ways.

*Photographic Memory* was produced in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Steina and Woody now live. *Ptolemy* was a four channel, 16 monitor, installation at Ars Electronica, Linz.

## NOVEMBER NINE

*Jill Petzall*

This sophisticated work deals intuitively with complex issues and emotions, utilizing a limited palette of powerful symbols.

In Jill's words: "In the conflict between the camera and the musical suggestions, the work implies ambiguous images of human struggle evoking the doubly-historic date November 9th, (the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Nazi pogrom of Crystal Night in 1937). The video gradually suggests that what has fractured and fallen close to the earth is the real achievement of the recent, horrific German decades. The video moves back and forth between symbol, memory and hope."

Produced/directed/videotaped by Jill Petzall; Poetry by Paul Celan; Off-line editing by Jill Petzall; On-line editing by Wally Bonham; Music by Otto Pert.

**IVO**  
*Orestes Valdes*

Orestes is an artist of incredible range. The clearly upbeat *Ivo* balances other indefinable and powerfully disturbing work. The anonymous female figure in *Ivo* functions for me as a positive Anima image.

In Orestes' words: "*Ivo* is an animation experiment dealing with light, color, movement and music. The soundtrack is by the group The Cocteau Twins, and is being used courtesy of 4AD Records. The animation technique used in the film is rotoscoping. The original animated footage was shot on 16mm color negative film stock, then was transferred to, and edited on, 3/4 video tape." *Ivo* was selected as a finalist in the 10th Annual Short Film and Video Competition at the USA Film Festival in Dallas, TX, 1988.

**SOMBRA A SOMBRA**  
*Dan Reeves*

Dan Reeves became famous for emotional, socially critical tapes that stemmed from his experiences in Vietnam. Living in India resulted in another phase of work based on Eastern mysticism and poetry. *Sombra a Sombra* represents a further maturation of Reeves' art.

In Reeves' words: "This videotape is an elegy of remembrance and a meditation on the architecture of the abandoned. Taped from 1983 to 1987 in deserted villages and houses in the mountains of Spain, it explores that space in the human heart which is shaped by the departure of the people and things of this world."

**BEST VALUE WE'VE SEEN YET**  
*Video by Morey Gers*  
*Music by Tom Hamilton*

Morey was the first video artist I met after moving to St. Louis in 1976. Shortly after that I began studying electronic music with Tom. I'm still learning from both of them. Best Value is an artistic tour de force of aesthetic/production strategies.

In the artists words: "This piece, produced in 1982, explores the use of a common audio/video delay and looping technique with organic images and sounds. To answer an often asked question - there is no computer generated imagery in this work. The visual images were all created through analog methods, beginning with a camera or video switcher effect. The audio combines many real sounds, along with synthesizer generated effects. The gathered video elements were processed in many ways, including camera modulation, digital effect moves, and animation stand movement. Audio pieces were similarly manipulated with multi-track recording and analog synthesizer techniques. Techniques of reduction, magnification, looping and layering of video and music were used to create this organic, non-narrative form. The final mix of all elements was 'performed' in real time, by creating a multiple video tape delay through several one-inch VTR's and an equally timed audio tape delay through multiple audio decks."

*Please join us in the west lobby of the Svedrup Building for the presentation of the last piece in tonight's program. The Point Is will be screened several times throughout the reception in room 123 of the Svedrup Bldg. Several of the artists presented this evening will be there and, of course, food, drink and good conversation. The Svedrup Building is located on Big Bend - it is the new, one story building behind the building you are currently in.*

**INSTALLATION IN ROOM 123 OF THE SVEDRUP BUILDING**

**THE POINT IS**

*Video by Kathy Corley and Carlos Pinero*

This is videodance as it should be. Choreography, music and video merge to create a unique form that transcends its components. We see it tonight as it was intended, as a square of four monitors; the movements of the dancers extended into visual patterns.

The Point Is premiered at the St. Louis Artists Coalition in June of 1988 and was funded by a Creative Artists Grant through the Missouri Arts Council.

Choreography by Suzanne Grace

Music by Carl Weingarten

# LEGACY

PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Legacy Productions, Inc. is a statewide, not-for-profit, tax exempt organization headquartered in St. Louis at the Center of Contemporary Arts. Legacy Productions was organized in 1982 to promote the development of independent media art and artists in St. Louis, the state of Missouri and the Midwest.

Legacy's purpose is multifaceted, and based on the desire to encourage the creation and exhibition of independent film and video works. By providing information, referrals and educational workshops, as well as funding to area artists, Legacy seeks to create an environment that is accommodating and hospitable to new and established media artists.

In its efforts to promote the media arts, Legacy Productions concentrates on these major programs and services:

## RESOURCE CENTER

Legacy's resource center consists of a knowledgeable group of experienced media artists, as well as a library of up-to-date periodicals and listings. Fielding questions about everything from writing grants, to funding agencies, to where to get in touch with a particular artist, Legacy's resource center provides information, consultation and referrals to media artists and the general public. It is located at the Center of Contemporary Arts in University City.

## NEWSLETTER

The *Viewsletter*, a quarterly newsletter, is a Legacy's Productions' publication and is distributed throughout the United States. It contains material on new, independently produced films and videos; grants, workshop and film festival announcements; reviews; film series listings; interviews with filmmakers and; other articles of interest to media artists.

## WORKSHOPS

Legacy sponsors several workshops each year featuring nationally and regionally-known film/video artists and other media professionals. The workshops are structured as four-hour master classes or seminars led by the visiting artist. Topics range from grant writing to animation techniques to documentary filmmaking and fundraising.

## FILM SERIES

Legacy's film series has built a reputation of providing first-rate alternative/foreign film to St. Louis filmgoers. From films produced in China, Japan and Brazil to the black and white screwball comedies of the 40's, Legacy continues to bring to the public films not available in any mainstream theater.

## SPONSORSHIP OF NEW MEDIA PRODUCTIONS

Each fall, Legacy accepts applications from new and established independent media artist for Legacy sponsorship. If selected for sponsorship, the artists receive fundraising assistance and other consulting services to enable them to produce their works. Legacy also facilitates the distribution of sponsored projects.

Legacy Productions receives funding from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis, the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency and The Arts and Education Council of Greater St. Louis.

Additional funding is provided by Legacy's members. One of the best bargains around, a minimum donation of \$35. entitles the donor to a number of benefits, including free film passes to four different theaters, a subscription to Legacy's newsletter, *Viewsletter*, and discounts at Legacy's sponsored events. For more information call 863-1004.

524 Trinity  
St. Louis, Missouri 63130  
(314) 863-1004