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## **Videography**

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### **Video Art: The Seventh Ithaca Video Festival**

**By Victor Ancona**

The Ithaca Video Festival is becoming the most celebrated, traveled and talked about video festival in the United States. The seventh edition is no less prestigious than were the last two covered in this column, (See Videography September 1979; September and October 1980.)

The first year, 1974, drew 40 entries, seven of which were chosen for showing in Ithaca. There were 290 this year. The 19 tapes selected will be seen in at least 25 cities throughout the United States. "It is gratifying to know that the work is being shown in so many places, to a greater number of people than ever before," said Philip Mallory Jones, director of Ithaca Video Projects, which sponsors the festival. It is hoped that the festival will soon travel abroad. Japan is interested, and France is a likely place for grateful audiences.

U.S. balance of payments will not be substantially affected by the nominal weekly rate of \$50 that is charged to institutions wishing to book the festival, regardless of audience size. What's more, Ithaca Video Projects does not have the personnel to insure an optimum viewing environment. Is the public sufficiently prepared to experience non-television video fare? While some other festivals prejudice tapes before submitting the balance to a "distinguished panel of artist/producers, critics and curators," the panel that is chosen to select the tapes for Ithaca sees every tape submitted during the course of a three-day marathon viewing session.

This year's panel consisted of Barbara London, Museum of Modern Art, New York; Arthur Tsuchiya, formerly video curator at Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester NY and now with the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA); Carvin Eison of the Artists Workshop at WXXI-TV, Rochester NY; and Philip Jones. "The panel sees everything. We have no prejudging of tapes," said Jones. "I found out repeatedly that if I prejudged tapes, some would never make the festivals -and this year would have been no exception. First, the judges go through all the tapes, make notes if they wish, but do not make hard and fast decisions before they see every submission. We attempt to put together an exhibition package that will give the public a broad overview of the kind of work being done in independent video. Ideally, we would have examples of the major directions in video. Ideally, we would have a geographical distribution." Since Jones claims not to favor any particular artist, he does not believe in anonymity. "Some tapes have such a strong stamp of the maker that judges would be hard put not to identify the producer. Who does the work is not as important as how well it was done. We are looking for tapes that are truly exceptional, yet we don't expect viewers to like everything we choose."

The judges learn from one another discussing the tapes and telling why they favor one tape over another. It takes time, but anything one does well takes time. The panel then arrives at a consensus. Any "no" vote keeps a tape out, so it's essential that they talk about the work before voting. According to Jones, in a number of cases certain members of the panel are not particularly impressed by some of the work submitted until one or more of the panelists very carefully and cogently convince the reluctant ones. Next year, Jones hopes to give the panel an extra day for judging, "to give them the chance to walk away from the work before rendering a final decision."

With 290 submissions to select from, the panel chose two tapes from two videographers: Shalom Gorewitz of New York City and Steina of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Without begrudging them their respective honors, I question whether any of the other entries could have rated further exposure over these two fine artists' double billing. Admittedly, Steina's two tapes were quite different in concept and execution, but Shalom Gorewitz's tapes were not too dissimilar. Videotapes of performance and personal visions were predominant in this year's festival, with documentaries being conspicuous by their absence. "The lack of documentaries was not at all intentional," said Jones. "it was a combination of the chemistry of the panel and the work submitted."

Conditions for submitting work to the Ithaca Festival are minimal but stringent. Entries must have originated on videotape, be on 1/2-inch open reel or 3/4-inch U-Matic cassette not exceeding 30 minutes in length. Fortunately, there is no entry fee. Submissions chosen for exhibition are awarded a one-time rental fee of \$100 for each tape selected.

The festival auspiciously opened with Ed Emshwiller's three-minute tape, *Sunstone*, a computer-graphics animation tour de force that took the maker eight months to complete using a digital paint program at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT). Emshwiller, an innovative image-maker, now Dean of Film and Video at California Institute of the Arts, painted the electronic images using a computer with graphic tablet. The immeasurable movements and transformations were achieved through computer programs written by members of the NYIT graphics laboratory.

*Sunstone* has deservedly won national and international recognition for its original concept and execution. It was screened abroad this summer at the Sixth Edinburgh Television Festival along with *Scapemates*, another celebrated Emshwiller oeuvre. *Sunstone* begins with a moon face found in the computer bank by the artist. He then drew, manipulated and transformed it into images corresponding to his inner vision - images we are privileged to explore as the work moves from one imaginative phase to the next. The artist's sensitivity and warmth are paramount reasons for the tape's accessibility despite the use of hard-edge technology. Emshwiller is master of the medium, perfectly blending science and art.

While Emshwiller produces tapes using available technology, the creative team of Woody and Steina Vasulka, who incidentally have three tapes in this year's festival, lean more heavily on technology tools they often create to interface with their electronic image and sound output. Woody's *Artifacts II* and Steina's *Urban Episodes* and *Selected Treecuts*, while highly inventive and exciting in their mechanical, optical and electronic manipulation of images, result nevertheless in inducing a restrained and distant emotional response. We are moved by the artists' inventiveness but not by the works themselves.

In the program notes, Steina says of *Urban Episodes*: "In the spring of 1975, I started working on a series of installations and tapes involving mechanized modes of camera control. The effort resulted in a collection of work I call *machine vision*. *Urban Episodes*, shot in downtown Minneapolis, is the latest in this series." Regarding *Selected Treecuts*, Steina writes: "This work is composed of a rhythmical collage of images of trees, conceived either directly from a camera or from camera images held briefly in computer memory. Additional movement is produced by an automatic in/out zoom lens."

Woody Vasulka describes his nine minute videotape, *Artifacts II*, "as a collection of images initiated by basic algorithmical procedures, to verify the functional operation of a newly created tool, the digital image articulator, designed by Schier/Vasulka specifically to study real-time image performance." The Vasulkas designate their work as essentially being "a dialogue between the tool and the image." That may be precisely why I experience a certain distance when viewing their work, as if I were watching a dialogue rather than participating in one. While I marvel at the human capacity to create tools, visual effects per se can be tiresome.

Of the three Vasulka tapes in the festival, I found Steina's *Urban Episodes* the most satisfying because she allowed me to see and experience a typical cityscape with new eyes. Bravo to Steina and Woody Vasulka for their continuing risk taking and explorations. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their ingenious forays into the possibilities of the video medium and whose mechanical/optical/electronic image-manipulation tools bring us nearer to using the medium as a means of infinite expression.

The extraordinary team of Dan Reeves and Jon L. Hilton was represented in the Fifth Annual Ithaca Festival, and I'm glad their work was selected again this year. *Body Count*, this year's entry, is an experimental study for a larger, more narrative work, *Smothering Dreams*, produced through The Television Laboratory at New York's PBS station, WNET-13, and aired this September as part of the stations *VideoFilm Review* series of new and innovative work. The exceptionally orchestrated editing, the juxtaposed images of archival and re-enacted war images, portray a nightmare and horror that translate into a document of powerful proportions. Quick cuts of colored images are interspersed with raw reality, close-ups and panoramas of death and destruction that build up to a

climactic need to cry out “NO MORE WAR!” There is a relentless barrage of fantasy/reality as children and adults emulate one another in their inhumanity. It seems unbelievable that the total experience we go through lasts only nine minutes - the message crams a lifetime of anguish and pain. The work is a powerful personal statement that speaks a universal language. The makers say the tape is “an autobiography of the surreal, an act of remembrances purging of 13 years of anger, sorrow and anxiety as well as a warning about lessons too quickly forgotten.”

*Body Count*, a tape that should be required viewing for all politicians, is dedicated to the men of the Third Platoon Company, a first Amtrack Battalion and the North Vietnamese soldiers who died on January 20, 1968 along the Cua Viet River. This superb video chronicle was written, produced and directed by Dan Reeves with video editing assistance from Jon L. Hilton. The equally superb synchronous electronic music, sound effects and audio mix are credited to Hilton with editing help by Reeves. A fine team, consisting of production manager, field and postproduction engineers, technical assistant, researchers, and a cast of young actors, helped actualize the Reeves/Hilton masterpiece. The makers have closed the gap between documentaries and experimental video, using the very best characteristics of both genres.

After experiencing the masterful Reeves/Hilton tape, unfortunately the other works pale in comparison. *Blue Squawk* is a long three-minute tape by Eva Maier, “a classically trained dancer whose inspiration for movement comes from a variety of sources: human, machine and animal.” This inconsequential tape, made on a sunny August morning on a farm in Bennington, Vermont has Maier dancing amid chickens and passing cars who manage to steal the show. The dance/video she makes should be left to others.

*A Visual Diary*, by Blondell Cummings and Shirley Clarke, is a collaborative effort by a choreographer/performer and an award-winning filmmaker/videographer who pool their respective talents to create a videotape essentially sustained by George Lewis' excellent music. Billed as “a narrative form without utilizing a story line,” the tape is supposed to be a look at a private moment in one's life. Unfortunately, it remains private and the work proves to be ambiguous, pretentious and arty, with close-ups that do an injustice to the performing artist.

*Um Laco de Inspiracao e Morte*, by Christopher Coughlan, Denise Milan and Nana Vasconcelos, I am told, was adapted from an allegory about the process by which one recognizes the myths and preconceptions with which one lives and then struggles to overcome. Heavy! The title of the tape refers to the relationship between life and death; the end and the new beginning. The tape is set to the poetry of Denise Milan and the music of Nana Vasconcelos. The language is Portuguese. Coughlan's virtuoso technical abilities are apparent and well represented in this long, rambling, ambiguous and uneven tape. However, its allegorical, symbolic and poetic imagery allows viewers to invent their own ideas about what's going on. So who cares if the theme is pronounced in a foreign language?

*Live from Lunds*, a tape by Tom Adair and Kenneth Robins, is the only comic relief in an otherwise staid and serious exhibition. The fun, fantasy and frolic going on in this loony supermarket ballet is super proof of the makers' love for zany humor replete with sound video production standards. “Video artist is too strong a term to describe myself,” says Tom Adair. “I'm more of a frustrated TV viewer who has realized that the only way I'll ever see anything broadcast that appeals to my sense of humor is to do it myself, and hopefully I'll entertain a few other people along the way.” Adair's hopes have been realized! As a child, Robins watched TV, dreaming of the day there would be video so he could be a video artist. Now that that time has arrived, he finds himself pioneering the advent of the fairy tale verité, as in this hilarious tape, thanks to Lunds Foods Stores and the Adair/Robins madcap humor.

Other tapes included in the festival, in a variety of genres, are: *Measures of Volatility* and *El Corandero* both by Shalom Gorewitz; *2 Aspects* by John Sturgeon; *Similar Nature* by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn; *Around and About* by Garry Hill; *Steel and Flash* by Dana Atchley and Eric Metcalfe; *Flowers* by Ros Barron; *Best Friend* by Neece Twinem; *Quarks* by Peter D'Agostino; and *Double Identities* by Taka Imura. All deserve further mention and comment were it not for pressing time and space considerations.

The festival appropriately inaugurated its nine-month traveling schedule at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum in Ithaca NY, then played in museums, galleries, colleges, universities and media centers in Bayville, Elmira, Rochester, Syracuse, Jamestown, Buffalo and Port Washington, all in New York State. It also toured Bowling

Green and Dayton in Ohio; Long Beach and San Francisco in California; Bradford and Cambridge in Massachusetts; Houston, Texas; Decatur, Georgia; Norman, Oklahoma; and New Orleans, Louisiana. The festival was even booked at the Peppermint Lounge in New York City, thus blurring distinctions between discos and museums.

Videography readers still have a chance to see the tapes at the Albany Public Library, Albany NY, November 6-17; the Seattle Public Library, Seattle WA, November 9-15; Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale FL, November 19-25; McKissick Museums, Columbia SC, November 22-December 12; Northwest Film Study Center, Portland OR, January 1-15, 1982; Kitsap Library, Bremerton WA, January 1-8.

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