When visual anarchists convene...

by Gerald O'Grady

Jonas Mekas and 25 other independent film-makers came to SUNY/Buffalo last December for a "Seminar in Teaching Making." The general experimentation at all levels of education in the 1960s, the gradual understanding of the importance of learning by doing, and some trial artist-in-residency programs had suddenly developed into a situation in which the independent film-makers were joining the poets and musicians to teach "making" on campuses all over the United States—Gunvor Nelson, Larry Jordan, and James Broughton at San Francisco's Art Institute, Stan Vanderbeek and Will Hinkle at the University of South Florida, John Schofill and George Landow at Chicago's Art Institute, Tony Conrad at Antioch, James Blue at Rice in Houston, Ken Jacobs and Larry Gotlib and now Ernie Gehr at SUNY/Binghamton, Stan Lawder at Yale, Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits at SUNY Buffalo, Willard Van Dyke at Purchase, Ed Emshwiller who had visited many for short periods, and dozens of others, including Bob Breer and Jonas at Cooper Union.

With a few exceptions—the Harry Alan Potamkin School in New York and the classes of Sidney Peterson at the San Francisco Art Institute—teaching film in American colleges had usually centered on the production and concern itself with preparing students to produce the television-styled documentary. The traditional narrative short and dramatic performance. Its greatest strength was, in fact, its seeming lack of concern with the ordinary matters of design and courses and departments as academics from other fields might perceive them. Instead, there was growing debate about the "why" and "how" of fundamental issues, whether creativity in film or any other art could be taught at all, whether schools were the proper institutions in which to attempt it, and whether teaching placed the artist's own creative impulse in jeopardy. But Breer and Peter Kubelka, among others, held that human wholesomeness which "home movies" had stood for since its inception.}

Seminar in teaching making

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issues, whether creativity in film or any other art could be taught at all. Whether schools were the proper institutions in which to attempt it, and whether teaching placed the artist’s own creative impulse in peril. Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka raised provocative questions about all of these. One wondered whether film-making was a career which one could prepare for, or a set of very different forces than those usually associated with schools.

Another problem surfaced which has great implications about how film will locate itself within the university and, soon, within the lower schools. What should be the learning context of film? What seemed a reluctance or inability to deal with it left me disturbed.

Some of the artists who had begun as film-makers had moved into video—Vanderbeek and Emshwiller, for examples; the younger Scott Bartlett had been incorporating video into his films from the beginning; and Bill Elta and Woody Vasulka, though the latter had a film background, were already teaching the nation’s first college courses in the experimental electronic image. Although many of the film-makers present had engaged in and were supportive of a variety of activities which could broadly be considered as para-cinematic or multi-media, there seemed a resistance to interfacing the moving images of celluloid with those electronically generated on videotape, and an unconcern and sometimes ignorance about the structuring of electronic imagery and all of its richly contemplative and performance-oriented offshoots, such as in-spin and closed circuit feedback, already being enlarged upon in the work of