NEWSREEL
ACTIVIST FILMMAKING IN THE LATE 1960s
AN INTERVIEW WITH
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ORDEAL BY ROSES
MISUNDERSTANDING MEDIA
PHOTOGRAPHY FUNDING
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PRIVATE PRACTICES
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THE AFI NATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL
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The L.A. weather was steady 18% medium gray for the American Film Institute’s 1986 National Video Festival (Dec. 4-7). By the time I arrived on Friday afternoon, numerous participants already were making similar observations about the festival and expressing a yearning for high-contrast drama.

The festival had programmed a wide range of choices: from a High Definition Television Showcase to consumer “home videos” in AFI’s “Visions of U.S.” competition; from over 50 hours of curated public television from Britain’s Channel 4 and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to over 50 hours of independent video by producers “working” from student to the first generation. But, somehow, when this formidable array of “outside” and “on-the-edge” voices was cut down over an eight-page, seven-column schedule, a postmodern leveling effect occurred—not unlike that known to television—and many videophiles found themselves frantically flipping the dial.

Essentially absent from this whirl were the festival’s outsiders—women and minority producers. Weeks prior to the event, publicity materials indicating a scandalously low proportion of women’s works among festival premieres had caused rumblings of dismay and outrage across the country. For the festival, a newly-formed Los Angeles public intervention group named Mothers of Medusa: The Western Coincidence of the Art World stumped onto the heads of several hundred rubber snakes paper strips bearing messages such as “Welcome to the AFI...Where a woman’s work is seldom shown!” and “AFI...Dick or Deek, what’s the difference?!” These snakes were distributed about the AFI campus—rather shoddily—in rubbery globs of approximately 50 snakes each on hallway tables, between cars in the parking lot, in the women’s bathroom, etc. One sympathizer complained to me that AFI staff had removed the rubber snakes bathroom supply of snakes overnight. What else could be expected, I thought. Even an Easter egg hunt would seem a more effective distribution strategy. For her Saturday night presentation, Brandi Miller, one of only 2 women among 20 premiering artists, calculated from the festival catalogue the disparity between these male and female producers at over 1000 minutes to 10 minutes tape time respectively.

Enter Paper Tiger Television, the festival’s official on-the-edge antagonist. Paper Tiger Television, well known for its five years of on-the-air media criticism on New York cable and its 1986 Deep Dish national cable access program on social issues, was invited by AFI to present tapes and to “read the National Video Festival” with an on-site production to be screened on the festival’s last night. In an atmosphere promoting viewer passivity, PTT was a welcome sight and a reminder to festival participants of their real participation in constructing and nurturing this field of video. Logging equipment back and forth from the Sony Center, shooting scenes in the back of a truck in the parking lot, interviewing people on the Goodson building balcony, PTT was a reassuring presence. They would intervene; they would say it for us. In the meantime, the festival/week proceeded as programmed.

Premieres

Controversy notwithstanding, the video art premieres provided the most successful part of the festival for me. In past years, premieres have been programmed via an “au-then-tish” approach, with the festival committing early to major artis’ upcoming works based on past performance. This year’s premiers were the result of specific meetings with either finished or nearly finished works. In the past, last minute crash-out editing and psychological stress relating to pre-scheduled payoffs have produced several less-than-outstanding premieres.

Premières of AFI’s premieres (all 1986 unless indicated), however, were exceptionally strong.

As evidenced by Steve Fagin’s gorgeous and intelligent The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Rousseau, Ken Kobland’s filmic, sumptuous Flaubert Dreams of Travel, Piers Martin’s controversial reordered Like Men, Paul Knott’s pro/auto-art objetification We Are Things (1985-86), Tien Yarbrow’s high-tech Atomic Dreams, and Vul- ture Video’s Lo Pay No Way! (1985), a rap, scratch, strike tape against working conditions in the fast-food industry.

In good tradition, three premières extended video’s longstanding critique of television. Gary Hill’s installation In Situ seeks to reproduce physically and conceptually the television viewing experience by overloading the television’s objecthood. A mechanical device at ceiling level cranks out paper texts, which float down to litter the floor among a TV set, an easy chair, and speakers emitting the sound of whirring fans while blowing out air. Buzz Stoltz by David Daniels also presents an information overload. Using nineteenth-century techniques such as 3-D-Slice animation, Daniels created a twentieth-century “Media Hemorrhage.” One gory face follows another in a melting pot of ugliness. Violent disintegrations and rapid transformations barrage us in an accelerated television travesty. Avoiding history, context, plot, and reason, we’re propelled through equally repulsive daily “reports” from Monday to Friday, only to be shocked still further by an ever newer, more extended instantaneous replay.” The tape, which Daniels describes as “maximatism,” “finally ends with the title “No End.”

In Line by Tony Conrad also exposes this sadomasochistic TV-worship experience, but with different tactics. Instead of direct address, Con- rad’s face on the monitor psychologically batt- ters the audience with a paroxysm of mind control. He attempts to hypnotize us. He staves us down. He knows we can’t turn away from the screen. He holds objects in our line of view to control our thoughts. He forces us to think of country singer Webb Pierce by showing us an album cover. “You think I have to seduce you,” he says, finally rising from his tortured position, which we now realize has bested his previously invincible toilet, by a toilet. In his personal appearance following this screening, Conrad appropriately did not ask for questions from the audience. Instead he surprised us with another humorous performance/lecture—Students don’t like video,” announced Conrad, who teaches at SUNY-Buffalo. “Video suspects it holds the key to better TV watching. It is a question of quality.... Home video’s marginality is different than the marginality of...”

Another premiere tape to which perfor- mance was integral was, of course, Doug Hall’s. The artist’s premiere, Storm and Stress is subtle but significant. Storm and Stress is at the centerpoint of nature, tech- noogy, and beauty, a multimedia collage of landscape documentary, sci-fi, and video art. Cloud movements are dramatized in stopped mo- tion. A black and white surveillance camera exposes the eye of a tornado. An artificial tor- nado rises in a spiral on a laboratory floor. Inside a storm research center, in an isolated chair and a stationary pose, Hall looks up at an enormous screen display of nature. This configuration evokes memories of Hall in Songs of the 80’s (1983) and of Edward G. Robinson in Smart Guy (1973). This screen that both separates and connects hu- manity and the elements becomes a motif later in the tape when nature and culture share monitor time via an internal rectangu- lar key. The blazing fire of a furnace is keyed into a forest fire. The internal view of a boat’s control room is keyed into the waves that are raging against it. At the convergence of at- traction and repulsion, stress disperses. In a small, isolated, outdated town, still with boardwalk and vertical sign, a group of child- ren gape at a storm, then run from its thun- der. Similarly, Hall mesmerizes us with a primordial cityscape of fences, sign, power- sets, cups, and ribbons—accompanied by music of Giuseppe Verdi—and then pre- sents black and white evidence of the de- struction they wreak.

Storm and Stress is one of three CAT (California Abstract Television) premières presented at this year’s festival's Others

Rubber Snakes & Paper Tigers

This year’s premieres (all 1986 unless indicated), however, were exceptionally strong.
of perception and emotion, impressive for its
dynamic visual as well as its experimental
sound track.

It is impossible within the AFI facili-
ties and time frame to exhibit everything
of perception and emotion, impressive for its
dent in the festival's conceptualization of the
hierarchical agenda for the gaze.

The festival maintains, perhaps inadvertently,
premiering. This is true. But it is also true that
the festival bangers for a serious discussion.

Rather than "challenge the basic condi-
tions of its trap.

"I'm not sure it was ever the intention that the
festival actually reinforced
them. Not only were premier tapes
given higher visibility than other tapes in the
festival, but by providing travel and hotel
awards, AFI assured these artists a certain presence in their
progressive programs, such as Regional Visions and Student Com-
petition. This effect was subsumed by a false geography
of presence and absence necessitated by the
structure. Rather than celebrating and highlighting outsiders',
the festival's focus was on insular filmmakers
seamed unstandardized while the star system
was all but abandoned.

To the festival's credit, a "Best of the Fest"
showing of tapes, determined by popular
evoting, was a tape that debunks a television evangelist
whose miraculous telepathic powers depend on
his car by way of rider who
seizes messages from his wife backstage.
The censure of this festival screening
the good sense to allow time for
Ram in responding to spontaneous questions from the audience.
 esteem of the tapes earlier screening as part of the
Video Regions program.

Visions of U.S.

Another pleasant surprise I experienced in the
Best of the Fest screening was Colette's Vignette (1986) by Wendell B. Harris Jr.,
principal winner of AFI's "Visions of U.S.
marathon one-hour video project.

A self-educated black woman with an obsessive humor and a
natural talent on the syntagmatic plane. Her
monologues, clearly "post-scripted" via jumbled documentation and a
rape, to her pretty cousin's dark skin,
to motherhood and baby shit. Shot in single frame
three different camera angles, her face is shown in close tight-up—were
preoccupation with past, which was
discussed, that is, that Colette who makes this tape original!

I asked my mom to get me an operation to clip my
left hair. I'm not sure what happened because
I never did. My dad, he said, "Like, you go to a motel. And he's like, "You should have brought a razor!
shouldn't have been so stupid. I was treating him so
disrespectful, and he wanted to spend the night with the right
him. He wasn't there.

"Was I a virgin then?"

Grossing from Paper Tiger Scars the (Earth)national Audio/Video Po
dub (1986), by Peter Broderick

first prize winner in the nonfiction category.
I'm not sure if it was ever the intention that the
eight festival was felt most in the
closethematic possibilities available for
exhibitions, installations, and demonstra-
tions. This year, High Definition Television (HDTV) was on display with an international
screen of tapes. With 1125 scan lines
tation—projected wall skin—indeed looked exceptional. Less
impressive, however, was the selection of
tapes used to show off the technology.

Though I was unable to view the entire pro-
gram, the few videos I did see constituted an
unsettling consumerist discourse. Though
 rewritten it was not an easy task. NKH's
(Japan Public Television) introductory tape,
such as the use of a nude woman to demonstrate its
scanning process. Hence Morish's Fashion Show Presentation (Japan)
was achieved. This "beauty" is a model for an
euphoric to Ways of Seeing. Four
models, fashionable Japanese en-
trap viewers with the classicaladvertising
rhetoric, left me wondering what the lower barrow . Is this a displaced stalemate be-
ong the kind of diversity that is a goal of the program

and conference needs to take a new
look at the field, as exemplified by this year's re-
spectable catalogue. On taking on an
issue like regionalism, the investigation
should be planned so as to move beyond
generalizations and the status quo. To be
flexible, any focus on "regional" voices should
be considered and the festival should consider
the needs of its design that themselves uphold
governmental and hegemonic authority. It
be exceptional this festival must challenge its
own regionalism. Nor can this festival's
year's effort should not be considered a cul-
dose, but rather a step toward future festi-
sing that the national video field is as

Equally important, the festival should con-
firm its commitment to the idea of
production. Ultimately the festival's advanced
on its ability to consider criticism and
on this achievement, this year achieved by Paper Tiger Videol
be made a festival tradition. A festival methode
marvelous medium, perhaps something should be built on the
cartoonish and limited concept of an instant video booth where participants
can record their thoughts on the festival. In any case, the directors were
years hence to look back over "self" refl-
ctions of the festival and to applaud the evolu-
tion of a truly original artistic architecture.