The Seventh Ithaca Video Festival

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.

The judges learn from one another by 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 convinces 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
grapher who pool their respective talents to create a videotape essentially sustained by George Lewis' excellent music. Billed as "a narrative form without utilizing a storyline," 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 closeups 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 superproof 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 Baron; Best Friend by Neecy Twinem; Quarks by Peter D'Agostino; and Double Identities by Taka Limura. 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 32; Northwest Film Study Center, Portland OR, January 1-15, 1982; Kitsap Library, Bremerton WA, January 1-8.

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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, Smotherings Dreams, produced through The Television Laboratory at New York's PBS station, WNET-13, and aired this September as part of the station's Video Film 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 colorized images are interspersed with raw reality, closeups 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 remembrance—a 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 Amtrak 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/vi-