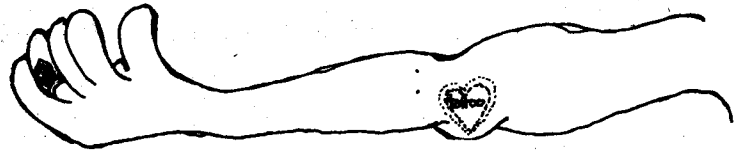


women's video festival



The limitations of videotape in comparison with films are well-known: it is less sharply clear, has a narrower range of tones, and the television screen through which it is projected lacks the all encompassing monumentality of the movies. Further, color videotape equipment is still in its technological infancy and is quite expensive, so most work in video is black and white. Ironically, just when film has become such a sensitive and gorgeous medium, increasing numbers of people excited about videotape are presenting us with works which strike us as visually crude.

But film is a tough medium to master and the advantages of videotape--its cheapness and facility of operation--are overwhelming and irresistible. Also, film is hard to break in to, extraordinarily so for women. But neither unions, nor cost have barred women from this field, and as Susan Milano, one of the Festival's co-ordinators, explained, it is because there is so much work done by women in video that it was decided to show their work for roughly a month (September 14 to October 8) at the Kitchen, a permanent videotape theater in New York.

THE FIRST NIGHT: MUSING ON EIGHT-SPACE

Although there were a few abstract works which exploited the medium for its own sake, most of the tapes were documentaries. Perhaps to compensate for the lack of esthetic "novelty"--these were, after all, mostly the kind of thing one saw on NET stations--there were eight T.V. monitors, four on top and four below all projecting the same image. It was the first time I'd seen moving multiple images and I spent the first night being fascinated by the kaleidoscopy. Music (particularly soul and rock) went well with the prismatic effect, but it was what happened to motion that was most exciting.

Mondcivitano Mission of Peace to Cuba by Keike Tsune was a radiant documentary containing landscape shots taken from a moving car: eight vistas swept by in an epic rush. The viewer rolled down eight identical ribbons of road. In this case, with motion and long shots, the multiplicity of image conferred an automatic epic quality. And repetition is an element of literary epic, which concerns not just one person or account, but a people, an incantation.

The space was different in Ex-Attica Conversations, by Ann Arlen, shot indoors and in close-up, which is about just what its title suggests. There the repetition creates claustrophobia--the shot is in so close that one looks to other screens for egress but no matter how far the limits extend (in the form of other monitor images) one confronts only the same narrow space and strains in vain. But there was rhythm in this tape seen eight times. The space was so tight and the contrast so high that the moving of an arm was dramatic. The comings-in and goings-out into the frame, times eight were starkly kinetic, creating a kaleidoscopic dance feeling.

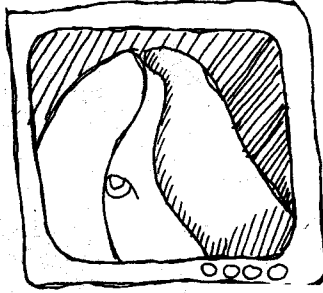
THE SECOND NIGHT AND THEREAFTER: CONVENTIONAL VISION RESTORED

Aside from a few liberal-left political tapes most of the documentaries dealt with either feminist issues or to corn (sic) a cliché, "alternate life-styles," another avant-garde compensation, perhaps for video limitations. Milano, along with Elyshia Pass and others made a tape called "Transsexuals" which went much further than a David Susskind show on the same theme in depicting the anguish involved in such a life. A transsexual says she was so miserable as a man before the operation could be obtained that he repeatedly tried to castrate himself. The person described the medical operation at length and it seemed quite natural that she should lift her dress afterwards to show the results of the operation.

Shigeo Kubota made an ambitious and epic tape entitled Joa: Impasse of the Infidelity which featured split-screen effects; of the two sets of images, one was of an extraordinary sex-dance-theater troupe which included transvestites and, among others a woman wearing a transparent net leotard with cut-outs for breasts. Both the music and the dance were stylish parodies of raunch strip, as well as stylizations of love-making. For

a long time, the images on the right seemed close-ups of the ones on the left--someone said it was due to a fifteen second delay. It was a long tape full of goodies, reminiscent of Warhol and gang.

Kubota was working with inherently interesting, kinky happening, and her taste in avant-garde is excellent and off-beat; but it is also her grand, happening-like translation that merits praise. She is an exciting artist whose work I look forward to seeing more of.



Portrait of Charlotte Moorman by Jackie Cassen was less successful in translating the avant-gardism of the world's first topless cellist, and New York's perennial muse-in-residence. The tape's few sight-gags--videocamera pasties, for one--are over-worked and don't compensate for a slow and static montage of snapshots of Moorman as a child super-imposed over her expressionless playing of the cello as an adult. There was, however, an interesting last scene in which the dress she was wearing got cut away in tatters by various men from the audience. This scene reminded me of the finale to Yoko Ono's educational television interview in which she got completely swathed in bandages, like a mummy, and carted off stage. Both scenes involve the symbolic mutilation of woman.

Participating in both the "alternate" and the feminist documentary themes were Lesbian Mothers, by Queer Blue Light Video, and The Worst is Over by Darcy Umstadter. The first was full of women who were still up-tight about their position and therefore could not relax the audience. The subject of the second tape was an abortion which was actually taking place. (Reviewed in oob Vol. II No. 9 pp 4).

There were several excellent feminist tapes: Single Women Raising Families (West Side Video), Another Look at the Miami Convention: A Work in Progress (Women's Video News Service), and The Rape Tape (Under One Roof Video). The convention tape did not really have a political point of view--women working on it said their intent was merely to show the convention from a women's point of view, and indeed there were things in the tape we rarely see in conventional male political coverage, not the least of which were many more women. The tape begins with brief portraits of key women in politics in the midst of impassioned statements, Flo Kennedy and Sissy Farenthold among others. Then, in a more leisurely way, the tape establishes, the political, cultural and seasonal climate in Miami. We see gentle ante-bellum Blacks in crisply starched dresses or under elegant white parasols; a white woman revivalist with teased hair stomping and speling ("He's my savior-ha"--the "ha" a quick intake of breath after each sentence.). A covey of elderly Jewish women, Miami residents, talk about the peace vigils in which they participate in thick grandmotherly Yiddish accents. We are restored to our female history, our endlessly interesting fellow women. The last forty five minutes of the tape, admittedly a work in progress, gets bogged down in aimless indoor wanderings in the Convention Hall, too pointedly avoiding political luminaries in a locale where it is less permissible. However, there were several interesting interviews in this section as well: several in the bathroom, a somehow archetypal female milieu.

The women doing the taping included themselves as characters and the image they projected was that of tough-talking, rock-star-like women, who alluded to "star-fucking" (taping luminaries) and whose collective editing was a sexy jam session. It was nice to see women glamorizing themselves and giving off sexual vibes to each other.

The Rape Tape is a powerful one and a half hour tape of a discussion among four victims of rape. All four women told searing, idiosyncratic stories: one woman was raped when she was looking for an apartment while her daughter slept nearby. Another was hitch-

hiking with a truckdriver (a "safe ride") who was beating her head down on his penis with one hand while he drove with the other. A third was raped in her own apartment, along with a roommate, by a man who had boarded up the stairwell and who threatened to kill the woman he was raping if the other screamed for help. The fourth was assaulted in Tompkins Square Park, while male onlookers lit her assailant's cigarette, then taken to a roof and raped. The insights the women gained seemed completely derived from their experiences, so natural and unforced they seemed inadvertent. All four were highly articulated and the discussion had a freshness and intensity which made the tape seem absolutely a first meeting, both between camera and subject as well as between the women and their memories. All of the women were subtle in analyzing their own feelings and motivations during and after the rape. The entire audience was stunned and sensitized by the tape.

In addition to the official entry tapes shown at the Festival, mostly documentaries, there was a highly abstract unofficial entry, Joanne Kyger's superb Descartes. My qualms about videotape as an art form, diminished by some tapes I saw here and elsewhere, finally dissolved while viewing this work. Not only does Kyger work abstractly, esthetically, but she does things with tape that can't be done with film.

Kyger creates a persona (as Deren did in her films) who regards her own mind with metaphysical irony. "To doubt is a drag" a woman's voice intones but it is difficult to trust your own mind, it continues. The visuals are presumable meant to convey mind-complexity and solipsism, although it is difficult to say which came first--thought or image. A small face (the woman's) is stationary within a zooming-in and out of a large one. Flags get super-imposed. Triple exposures were common; there may have been quadruple ones. There was playing with "ghost" images. Kyger introduced texture as a videotape variable--Descartes got exaggeratedly grainy, newsprinty, then normal again. There were some spectacular effects: the ground (or background) was turned into a pulsating Klee-like screen of light patterns. Over this ground a human face (the woman's) was superimposed. The pulsating light filled the hollows of the eyes in a solarized effect. Sometimes it filled just the lids, or eyeballs; other times, the whole eye, or it burned through the mouth, and the flesh image turned into a mask. The tape was run through something called a Beck synthesizer, something that can't be done to film. One feels one is looking into the future with this tape, and its dazzling, impossible effects.

Kyger's tape was made with expensive studio equipment but the equipment needed for documentary is cheap enough. A porta-pak can be had for about \$1,400. It weighs roughly 27 lbs, and one small woman can handle it, herself. A forty-five minute tape costs about seventeen dollars and can be erased up to fifty times. There is no development fee; and what you shoot can be seen instantaneously (an adapter can be hooked on to any T.V. set to convert it to a monitor). Videotape is a medium ideally suited for documentary: because it is so cheap and portable and quick, it can go anywhere with ease. Ms Milano made the interesting point that videotape establishes a more trusting relationship with a subject--a person being interviewed can see what you've shot immediately and it can be erased immediately, so there is less fear of being carried out in a box and manipulated in a lab. The portability and ease of the equipment also ease into a situation more gently, I would think. Someone else said that the tape picks up all sounds, so we feel we're "really" there. And of course, videotape has that look we're so accustomed to regarding as "actuality". The electronic manipulations which tape can be subjected to promise exciting innovations as well. Video exhibition can also be more various than that of film. A friend who works in an art gallery which is increasingly interested in videotape regards the medium as living sculpture, something one should be able to walk around, leave and come back to.

If this Festival, which was well-attended even on weekdays, argues anything at all, it must certainly be that videotape--and women--loom large as major interests of the future.

by maryse holder