

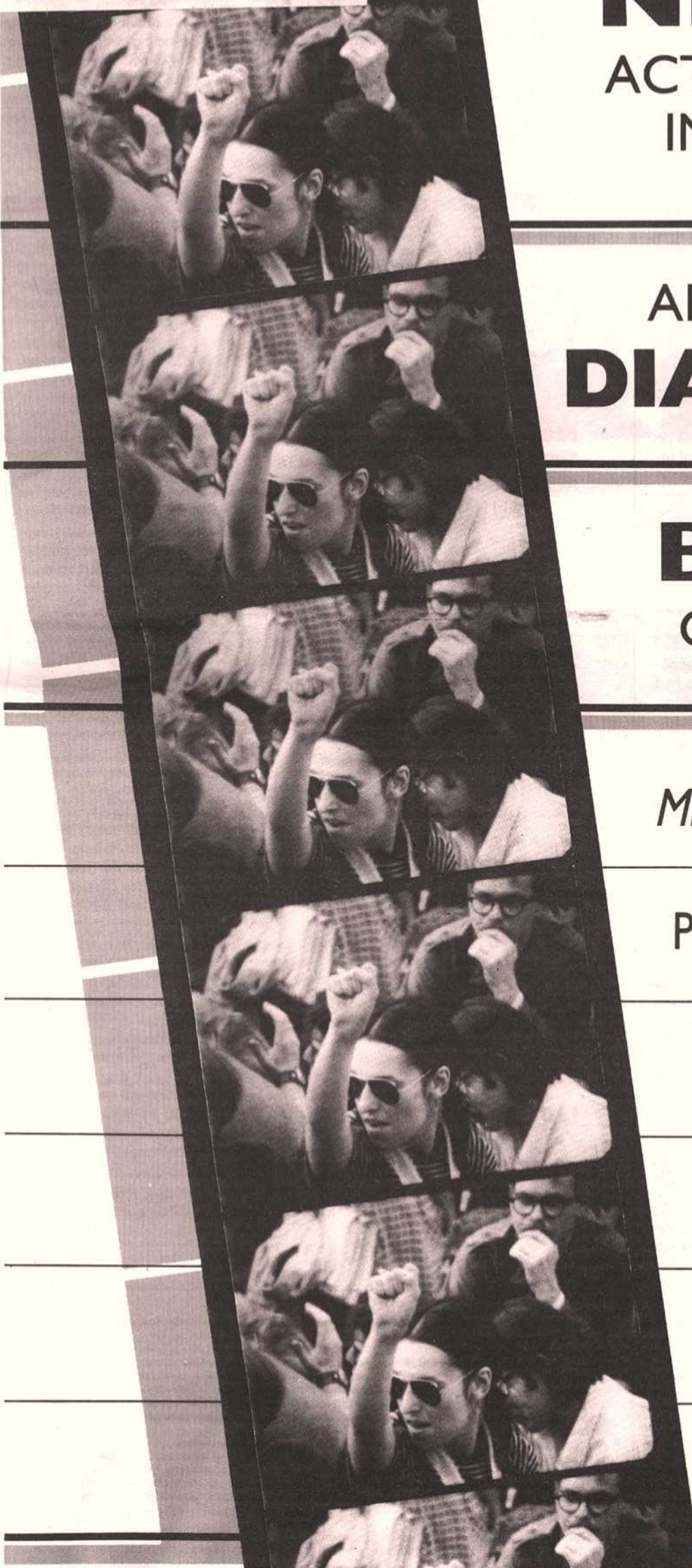
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ACTIVIST FILMMAKING
IN THE LATE 1960s

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THE AFI NATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL

CHRIS STRAAYER

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 Orson Welles Television to the latest Godard; from 1940s Panoram Soundies to 1980s music videos; from a West German video selection to U.S. regional representation; 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 "ranking" from students to the first generation. But, somehow, when this formidable array of "outsider" and "on-the-edge" voices was outlined 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 Conscience of the Art World stapled 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 Deck, 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 entire 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, Branda 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. Lugging 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/we 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 "auteurish" approach, with the festival committing early to major artists' upcoming works based on past performance. This year's premieres were selected primarily from finished or nearly finished works. In the past, last minute crash-out editing and psychological states relating to prescheduled payoffs have produced several less-than-outstanding premieres.

This year's premieres (all 1986 unless indicated), however, were exceptionally strong,

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RUBBER SNAKES & PAPER TIGERS

THE AFI NATIONAL VIDEO FESTIVAL



Top: frame from *Storm and Stress* (1986), by Doug Hall. Photo by Kira Perov. Middle left: frame from *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel* (1986), by Steven Fagin. Middle right: frame from *Art of Memory: The Legend* (1986), by Woody Vasulka. Photo by Erika Suderburg. Bottom: frame from *I Want Some Insecticide* (1986), by Branda Miller. Photo by Kira Perov.

as evidenced by Steve Fagin's gorgeous and intelligent *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel*, Ken Kobland's filmic, surreal *Flaubert Dreams of Travel*, Pier Marton's controversy-engendered *Like Men*, Paul Knotter's pro(anti-art)-objectification *We Are Things* (1985-86), Teri Yarbrow's high-tech *Atomic Dreams*, and Vulturne Video's *Lo Pay No Way!* (1985), a rap,

scratch, strike tape against working conditions in the fast-food industry.

In good tradition, three premieres extended video's longstanding critique of television. Gary Hill's installation *In Situ* seeks to reproduce physically and conceptually the television viewing experience by overflowing 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 whirling fans while blowing out air.

Buzz Box 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 even faster, more concentrated "weekend instant replay." The tape, which Daniels describes as "maximalism," finally ends with the title "No End."

In Line by Tony Conrad also exposes this sadomasochistic TV-viewer experience, but with different tactics. In direct address, Conrad's face on the monitor psychologically batters the audience with a parodic display of mind control. He attempts to hypnotize us. He stares 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 torturer's position, which we now realize has been metonymically informed 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. . . . We think it's a matter of quality. . . . Home video's marginality is different than the marginality of

punks or nudists because it is rapidly becoming a majority." Conrad describes his own work as post-post-postmodern video—leadership for potentially active viewers.

Another premiere tape to which performance was integral was, of course, Doug Hall's. The artist's presence in *Storm and Stress* is subtle but significant. *Storm and Stress* is at the centerpoint of nature, technology, and beauty, a mixture of landscape documentary, sci-fi, and video art. Cloud movements are dramatized in stepped motion. A black and white surveillance camera exposes the eye of a tornado. An artificial tornado rises in a spiral from 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 *Soylent Green* (1973). This screen that both separates and connects humanity and the elements becomes a motif later in the tape when nature and culture share monitor time via an internal rectangular 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 attraction and repulsion, stress condenses. In a small, isolated, outdated town, still with boardwalk and vertical parking, several children gape at a storm, then run from its thunder. Similarly, Hall mesmerizes us with a prismatic collage of tornadoes in spirals, vessels, cups, and ribbons—accompanied by music of Giuseppe Verdi—and then presents black and white evidence of the destruction they wreak.

Storm and Stress is one of three CAT (Contemporary Art Television) Fund productions premiered at this year's festival. Others

AFI, cont'd.

(continued from page 3)

of perception and emotion, impressive for its dynamic visuals as well as its experimental sound track.

It would be impossible within the AFI facilities and time frame to exhibit everything equally, even in such an extensive festival as this. Certainly I am vulnerable to accusations that my own personal aesthetics motivate arguments that certain other tapes deserved premiering. This is true. But it is also true that the festival maintains, perhaps inadvertently, a hierarchical agenda for the gaze.

In the independent video field, economics has, in fact, replaced geography as the defining element of regionalism. This is most evident in the festival's conceptualization of the Video Regions program, which showcased tapes funded by the NEA Regional Fellowship Program. In his catalogue essay, "Video Regions: NEA's Regional Media Fellowships Program," curator Neil Seiling (of UC Video in Minneapolis) explains the NEA's rationale for this regional funding, now in its fifth year.

A laudable step toward greater cultural democracy, the program intended to decentralize the process of getting funding to independent producers by setting up a system of re-granting media arts centers in seven NEA regions. . . .

The kind of diversity that is a goal of the program is critical for the health of a field that can be criticized for the stratification of an elite layer of producers who receive a disproportionate percentage of funds and exhibition opportunities.

Rather than "challenge the basic conditions of the regional trap," as Steve Ricci hoped it would, the festival actually reinforced them. Not only were premiere tapes given higher visibility than other tapes in the festival, but by providing travel and hotel funds for premiering artists, AFI assured these artists a celebrity presence. Potentially progressive programs, such as Regional Voices and the AFI Student Competition, in effect were subsumed by a false geography of presence and absence necessitated by the festival's traditional structure. Rather than celebrating and highlighting outsiders' voices, the festival's basic logistics silenced them. The false semantics of regionalism remained undaunted while the star system was allowed to stand.

To the festival's credit, a "Best of the Fest" screening of tapes, determined by popular request, provided one mechanism for flexibility. It was during this screening that Aaron Ranen met with a most enthusiastic reception for his *Television Believers* (1986), a tape that debunks a television evangelist whose miraculous telepathic powers depend on a tiny transmitter in his ear by which he receives messages from his wife backstage. The AFI staff person facilitating this screening had the good sense to allow time for Ranen to respond to spontaneous questions from the audience. Only two people had attended the tape's 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., grand prize winner of AFI's "Visions of U.S.," a national contest for 1/2-inch home videos. Colette is a young, self-assured black woman with an aggressive humor and a natural talent on the syntagmatic plane. Her monologue, cleverly "post-scripted" via jumpcuts, slides from a nervy discussion of sex, to depression, to her pretty cousin's dark skin, to motherhood and baby spit. Shot in simple talking-heads style, her expressive face is shown in tight close-up—wise production choices that acknowledge, as does the title, that it is Colette who makes this tape original.

I asked my mom to get me an operation to clip my ears. She told me no because I was not a Doberman pinscher. . . . Most of the guys I date are stupid, stupid. . . . My prom date is a good example. I said, like, "Hey let's go to a motel." And he's like, "Yeah, let's." I said, "Forget it. You're tripping." He shouldn't have been so stupid. I was treating him so obnoxious all that night, why the hell would I want to spend the night with him. He wasn't that fine. . . . Was I a virgin then?

AFI started the Visions of U.S. competition, sponsored by the Sony Corporation, in 1984 in an effort to find out what was being done with 1/2-inch consumer video equipment. The competition was open to anyone

from kids to professionals as long as their works were noncommercial and shot on Beta or VHS. "Are people creating new ways of speaking?" asked Melanie Ingalls in the first year's Visions of U.S. catalogue.

Well, yes and no. Television language is something we have grown up with and it is not surprising that we know its formulas well enough to use them ourselves. Many of the entries in the "Visions" contest were clearly based on network television shows. However, in the hands of many home videomakers, video is being used to create personal statements of depth and originality. Even when working within the conventional TV formats, these takers bring creativity and enthusiasm to the medium.

I wish I could say that my favorites among this year's winners included some young, amateur talent and nouveau styles and dashing content, but I can't—though the complete list of winners does offer a wide variety of personal (and geographical) specs. My own taste in a contest of this design is for works that don't mimic television, but rather grab onto what television cannot, or will not, touch. From this point of view, I appreciated Angelico Cruz's *Pete's Steam Bath* (1985),



Frames from *Paper Tiger Scans the (Inter)national Audio/Video Festival* (1986), by Paper Tiger Television. Photos courtesy of Paper Tiger Television.

first prize winner in the nonfiction category. It is a documentary about a private men's club in Connecticut where middle- to older-aged men—all naked—get massages, cook sausages, eat, drink, sing, and brag about their sexual prowess.

High Definition

Each year, the Sony Corporation's sponsorship of the National Video Festival is felt most in the sophisticated technology available for exhibitions, installations, and demonstrations. This year, High Definition Television (HDTV) was on display with an international showcase of tapes. With 1125 scan lines, these high-resolution images—projected wall size—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 program, the few videos I did see constituted an unsettling consumerist discourse. Though stylistically advanced, the content of these promos was extremely backward. NHK's (Japan Public Television) introductory tape, *This is Hi-Vision*, uses the image of a nude woman to demonstrate its scanning process. Hanae Mori's *Fashion Presentation* (Japan) would provide John Berger ample material for an epilogue to *Ways of Seeing*. Four female models, fashionably Japanese, entrap viewers with the classical advertising gaze, then jerk their heads to the side in a unified snobbish rebuff. Ironically, Barry Rebo's music video of John Lennon's *Imagine* (New York City), an extended track through a closed cycle of stylishly sterile, gleamingly white, upper-class, heterosexual choreography, left me wondering what the lower classes will look like in high definition. There was too remarkable a similarity between these promo tapes and a 1960s scapitone film jukebox "hit" playing just down the hall—Debbie Reynolds in a fluted mini-skirt singing "If I Had a Hammer."

How could two decades of obvious technological advances produce such unchanging, incestuous content? This question, of primary importance to many videomakers, regrettably was not on the showcase's agenda. In fact, one of the festival's

shortcomings was a lack of constructed space for critical discussions.

Critical Discussion

Yes, there's a difference between festivals and conferences. However, as the field of video now stands—with very few festivals and even fewer conferences, with theory-informed artists who not only create but comment—people come to any event with basic needs: to validate their field, to talk business, and to engage in serious critical discourse. Though the catalogue this year is the best yet, with articles worthy of their commissions, the practical embodiment of these analyses rarely came to life.

There was a valid attempt by the festival to provide a certain level of discussion—including a group presentation introduced by Peter Broderick, "Beyond the Pale: Provocative British Television," and a panel called "Packaging: The Part and the Whole," with Amy Taubin ("Two Moon July," The Kitchen in New York City), Melinda Ward ("Alive from Off Center," KCTA in Minneapolis) John Archer ("Saturday Review," BBC in London), Raymond Bellour (director of research,



Frames from *Paper Tiger Scans the (Inter)national Audio/Video Festival* (1986), by Paper Tiger Television. Photos courtesy of Paper Tiger Television.

CNRS in Paris), and John Wyver (television writer and critic). But the effort essentially failed. In some ways this was no fault of the festival. It's just that we're tired of envying Channel 4, and U.S. TV curators are beginning to seem like middle-management fixtures.

The design of a panel on packaging video for TV simultaneously recognizes and dismisses independent videomakers' struggle for access to the airwaves. By privileging the particular strategy of packaging—devised by go-betweens—such a panel collapses discussions on power relations and aesthetics. Thus Archer talks about the leveling effect of television and video's attempts to interrupt the television flow; Bellour describes video's position "right up against TV" and its potential to silence TV; Taubin recognizes that all packaging marginalizes works by those independents who want to be included but aren't; Ward explains that public-TV design decisions often must cater more to the taste of 200 stations—potential buyers of a show—than to the viewing public.

John Wyver writes in his catalogue essay, "Dunkley's Paradox: Packaging Video for TV," that "if television continues to dictate the terms, video's potential for offering new visions, new conceptual frameworks and new understandings of our place in the world may be significantly diluted." From the audience at the presentation, Bill Viola argued that TV is itself the overwhelming context, regardless of packaging variables; incorporation into TV is grotesque. Implicit in the entire discussion is an acknowledgement of "the Boss," that power to and from which curators bow and borrow. Is this a displaced stalemate between independents and broadcasters? If so, we're banging our heads against a wall, and our discussion needs to take a new track.

Three of the panelists described their own programs as much as they discussed relevant issues, thus confusing the roles of representatives and authorities. There was essentially no discussion of the numerous packaging efforts taking place throughout the country, e.g., those that regularly program video straight—Image Union in

Chicago, Mixed Signals in New England, and the WNYC New York Screening Room; those that mix video art with extensive commentary by hosts or artists, such as the Independents from Washington, DC (the Learning Channel, national cable) and the Territory in Houston; those participating in the sponsorship or production of tapes, such as Open Channels in Long Beach and the CAT Fund in Boston; and local cable shows, including No-TV in Rochester, NY, UC Video/MTN in Minneapolis, Gay Cable Network in San Francisco, and Paper Tiger Television in New York City.

There was not even much debate about selection criteria—from the panel or the audience. The panel's discussion of whether video was art, or avant-garde, or postmodern seemed either an ironic rationalization or a slap in the faces of independents wanting access. With so many issues at stake, so many assumptions in place, and so little tangling with either, this panel demanded either an uproar or a long sigh. It got a long sigh.

The Festival's Conclusion

The festival's closing night drew a sizable crowd for the final premiere—*Paper Tiger Scans the (Inter)national Audio/Video Festival*. I was expecting to experience some long-awaited critical discussion vicariously through Paper Tiger; the festival dialogue in *absentia* would spring forth in a self-reflexive critique full of frank comment to the camera. I smiled to myself remembering a balcony scene I'd overheard in which John Manning (head of art and technology at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) said he felt like the festival burglar for desiring a serious discussion.

However, Paper Tiger Television—free spirit that it is—had its own discourse to worry about. "Reading" Hollywood with its own language, PTT produced a narrative spoof in which a young, opportunistic musician arrives at the National Video Festival with a song in her heart and walks away with 50 business cards. Regarding the paucity of women's premieres at the festival, Paper Tiger staged a bathroom scene with Branda Miller, Ardele Lister, Lyn Blumenthal, and Robin White in which the appalling statistics were recorded in lipstick on the mirror.

So, at first, I among others was disappointed in Paper Tiger Television for not stirring up something. (This psychological need for significant drama at video gatherings betrays our collective '60s unconscious.) Soon afterwards, I decided that in fact, in the environment squeezing around them, PTT had stirred up quite a lot. Their presence as process was the festival's vitality. Their quick pace, consistent perspective, and commitment to critical analysis that extend far beyond the parameters of this festival offer an example for the entire field. Inviting Paper Tiger Television to the National Video Festival was the American Film Institute's best programming decision.

In summary, the National Video Festival fills a void and is needed intensely by the field. As one of the only opportunities to watch video day and night, attending it was for me a delight. At the same time, the festival could benefit from more participation from the field—as exemplified by this year's respectable catalogue. When taking on an issue like regionalism, the investigation should be planned so as to move beyond generalizations and the status quo. To be effective, any focus on "regional" voices should be felt through every facet of the festival, and the festival needs to deconstruct those "givens" of its design that themselves uphold segregation. This is not an easy task, but to be exceptional this festival must challenge its own seemingly natural definitions. This year's effort should not be considered a cul-de-sac, but rather a step toward future festivals that demonstrate that all areas of the country are producing good video.

Equally important, the festival should construct a space for meaningful critical discussion. Ultimately the festival's advancement depends on its ability to consider criticism and to self-criticize. A mechanism for reflection, this year achieved by Paper Tiger Television, should be made a festival tradition. Since video is our preferred communication medium, perhaps something should be built on the model of Channel 4's "Video Box"—a sort of instant video booth where participants can record their thoughts on the festival. In any case, it would be rewarding several years hence to look back over "self" reflections of the festival and to applaud the evolution of a truly original aesthetic architecture.