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Video Festival: A Rare Medium Well-Done

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The third annual Ithaca Video Festival, which begins April 26 at the Johnson Art Museum, has been developed and is sponsored by the Ithaca Video Project, directed by Phil and Gunilla Mallory-Jones. The videotapes to be shown were selected from over 200 entries from across the United States and Canada. After their five days here, they will be shown in Elmira, Jamestown and Syracuse.

What is video art? Video is distinct from television in that it is not wave broadcast, but closed-circuit. It is distinct from film in that it is not a chemical, but an electronic process of image making. Since the material used is magnetic tape, which can be erased and revised, the video process is inexpensive compared to film. There is no development time; the image can be seen instantly. Thus video leads itself to spontaneous experimentation more readily than film.

The video tapes in this festival are part of a brief tradition begun in the mid-sixties. At that time, Sony developed a portable closed circuit video system. As soon as that unit was commercially available, artists began to experiment with it, but many of these artist-migrants returned to their original media after a short affair. What is beginning to emerge from the people who remained with the medium is a body of work that is indicative of the medium's special qualities. The Ithaca Festival has several examples of this trend, as well as other contemporary kinds of video. The festival could be mapped tentatively into several categories of concern: spontaneity and personal contact, documentation of other art forms, sound-image relationship, and electronic enhancement and experimentation.

Examples of the spontaneous and personal contact category are "Graffiti People," "Milk," "Curiosity Killed the Cat," and "JGLING." "Graffiti People," a straight documentary (the only one in the show), is a series of interviews with N.Y.C. subway graffiti artists. The advantage of video over film in this situation is the possible simultaneous recording of sound and image, allowing for one-person taping, and thus a more intimate documentary. The outcome in this case is a stunning interview; a revealing recording on the self-reflection of the graffiti people.

The same kind of intimacy and availability of the medium lends itself to another tape in this category, "Milk." In this tape, a sort of self-portrait, the artist places herself in front of the camera, demonstrating and discussing breast milk and expressing her breast. Another intimate tape, this one, by presentation of the anecdotes about breast-feeding her children is successful as a self-portrait than any painting could be.

In the category of documentation of other art forms is a preponderance of dance tapes: "Dance Nine," "That Crystal Palace," "Dying Swan," and "Merian." With the possibility of recording movement in space it is expected that there be this kind of assortment of dance tapes. Because of its lack of movement, "That Crystal Palace" is the most intriguing in this selection. Another, "Dance Nine," has tried to work dance into the electronics of video by choreographing movement around electronic wave-forms.

"December 10, 1976," "Words," "Migration" and "Improvisation with Bluestone" are among the tapes in the category of sound-image relationship. In "Bluestone," the sound is used as a pulse to change the image and its colors. That is, the sound is translated electronically to different color frequencies. In contrast to the dance tapes, where the sound is an associational factor. Part of the success of "Words" is that the sound is in the rhythm of rock music, and the tape demands visual and auditory attention. This tape is the "hit tune" of the festival.

Finally, some of the tapes can be grouped in a category of electronic experimentation and enhancement. These are: "A NewTape," "Old Sister Cow," "466.5 Ins and Outs," "From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda," and "Merian." "466.5 Ins and Outs" and seems to be a reference to editing control of images receding and advancing. This tape has a stroboscopic flicker which affects the viewer's perception in the way of image enhancement, Edin Velez's tape, "Merian," uses electronic color and synthesizer music by the Ithaca group, *Mother Mallard*, to decorate a female figure dancing within a landscape. In contrast, Steina Vasulka's "From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda" deals with exploration of the electronic colorizer in minimal fashion. Where it seems that Velez overloads the viewer with color and synthesizer music at once. Steina Vasulka develops a narrative that evolves in complexity from simple colorizing to experimentation with the video synthesizer. Her sound is incidental, and lends authenticity to the tape.

There are a number of tapes that do not fit into the above categories. These tapes "Road Kills," "You Send Me," "Artistructure," "Curiosity Killed the Cat" - - appear to have been included in the festival for their exotic and diverse character. There are snakes, dead animals, paper cup explosions, deliberate television anarchy and obscure leaves with Gregorian chant.

What the Ithaca Video Project and judges are presenting to us are tapes in the historical mainstream of video art. We highly recommend a visit to the Johnson Museum to witness the Festival. The tapes will run continuously from April 26 to May 1.

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