

# When visual anarchists convene . . .

by Gerald O'Grady

Jonas Mekas and 25 other independent film-makers came to SUNY/Buffalo last December for a "Seminar in Teaching Making." The general experimentation at all levels of education in the 1960s, the gradual understanding of the importance of

learning by doing, and some trial artist-in-residency programs had suddenly developed into a situation in which the independent film-makers were joining the poets and musicians to teach "making" on campuses all over the United States—Gunvor Nelson, Larry Jordan, and James Broughton at San Francisco's Art Institute, Stan Vanderbeek and Will Hindle at the University of South Florida, John Schofill and George Landow at Chicago's Art Institute, Tony Conrad at Antioch, James Blue at Rice in Houston, Ken Jacobs and Larry Gottheim and now Ernie Gehr at SUNY/Binghamton, Stan Lawder at Yale, Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits at SUNY Buffalo, Willard Van Dyke at Purchase, Ed Emshwiller who had visited many for short periods, and dozens of others, including Bob Breer and Jonas at Cooper Union

With a few exceptions—the Harry Alan Potamkin School in New York and the classes of Sidney Peterson at the San Francisco Art Institute—teaching film in American colleges had usually centered on the production studio and concerned itself with preparing students to produce the traditional narrative short and feature or, later, the television sta-

## The press of freedom

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tion documentary.

But now artist-teachers were engaging the students in programs which encouraged them to be total makers—conceivers, cameramen, editors—of their own films; to express themselves not only in personal forms like autobiographical film and advocacy reportage, but in cerebral forms which might self-reflexively lead them to investigate the very act and materials and techniques of making itself; and to pursue modes evolved from sophisticated psychological and anthropological, and even cyberne-

tic and bioenergetic theories of lifestyles.

Despite the diversity of the endeavor, perhaps because of it, there seemed to have been almost no interchange of information and the new forms of teaching were undocumented and unexamined. The seminar was primarily intended to be a celebration, a gathering of the clan, but also to provide an environment in which the artists could open each other to their ideas about the best way to teach making. I had invited the field's leading practitioners to Buffalo not in search of anything remotely approaching a model curriculum or a pilot program that could be adopted by the increasing number of colleges beginning film-making courses, but simply to give the artists' views and experiences some resonance and currency among each other and a small body of concerned foundation and National Endowment officers who had been supporting these new ventures.

The seminar was emotional, argumentative, and even erupted, on occasion, into explosive personal dramatic performance. Its great strength was, in fact, its seeming lack of concern with the ordinary matters of design of courses and departments as academics from other fields might perceive them. Instead, there was passionate debate about "more truly" fundamental issues, whether creativity in film or any other art could be taught at all, whether schools were the proper institutions in which to attempt it, and whether teaching placed the artist's own creative impulse in peril. Stan Brakhage and Peter Ku-

former film-maker Shirley Clarke and others.

I was disappointed by this tendency among the artists not to generalize their activity at least on the commonality of the moving image, not to mention other elements which the two media share.

I find the same tendency in their more academic associates who are founding "pure film" study departments at New York University, UCLA, and Richmond College. I understand the impetus because serious film study has had a difficult time in the colleges. It has often been absorbed by departments of communication who did not perceive film as an art form but only as a channel of information and interested themselves in problems of censorship, sponsorship, etc. It has been claimed by drama departments who had an interest in acting, setting, psychology of plot, but little if any in the materiality and physicality of the medium and its basic properties of rhythm, light, and graphic motion. Its location in art departments was hospitable to the visually experimental film but art teachers could not do the aural part of the medium justice and were historically more adept at handling the still image. Literature departments, with strong concerns in narrative structure and symbolic forms of various kinds, but usually no awareness of film technique, are the most recent and

strongest "interlopers," their activities usually marred by a fatal attraction for popular culture and entertainment, a complete reluctance to deal with the documentary heritage, and, strangely, an aversion for the independent film "poets" who came to the conference.

So I am disturbed that "film," which is still without a tutorial tradition, is being departmentalized and compartmentalized, and to make a long-standing complaint briefly, I should like to see it grounded, to borrow a word from Paul Tillich, in the *human body*, a concern for physiological and psychological behavior; the *student body*, the social interaction in which we are all teachers and learners from birth to death in an information environment which is already an open global university; and the *world's body* in which we would extend the physical and biological concepts of ecology to include the artistic endeavors of men and women as critical factors in the maintenance of our ecological balance.

There are signs of hope. In the past year, more of Jonas's "Movie Journal" columns have been on non-film events than in any previous time. Anthology Film Archives is now publishing a film and video bulletin. Jacques Ledoux, the curator of the Royal Film Archives in Belgium and organizer of the world's best experimental film festival every five years, was recently in town and decided that this December's festival will feature a special event which would highlight video in its iconic and environmental forms. It may be that we can yet move filmic activity toward that human wholeness which "Movie Journal" has stood for since its inception.

JONAS MEKAS is on vacation.



about more truly fundamental issues, whether creativity in film or any other art could be taught at all, whether schools were the proper institutions in which to attempt it, and whether teaching placed the artist's own creative impulse in peril. Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka raised provocative questions about all of these. One wondered whether film-making was a career which one could prepare for, or a different force than those usually associated with schools.

Another problem surfaced which has great implications about how film will locate itself within the university and, soon, within the lower schools. What should be the learning context of film? What seemed a reluctance or inability to deal with it left me disturbed.

Some of the artists who had begun as film-makers had moved into video—Vanderbeek and Emshwiller, for examples; the younger Scott Bartlett had been incorporating video into his films from the beginning; and Bill Etra and Woody Vasulka, though the latter had a film background, were already teaching the nation's first college courses in the experimental electronic image. Although many of the film-makers present had engaged in and were supportive of a variety of activities which could broadly be considered as para-cinematic or multi-media, there seemed a resistance to interfacing the moving images of celluloid with those electronically generated on videotape, and an unconcern and sometimes ignorance about the structuring of electronic imagery and all of its richly contemplative and performance-oriented offshoots, such as in-spin and closed circuit feedback, already being enlarged upon in the work of