

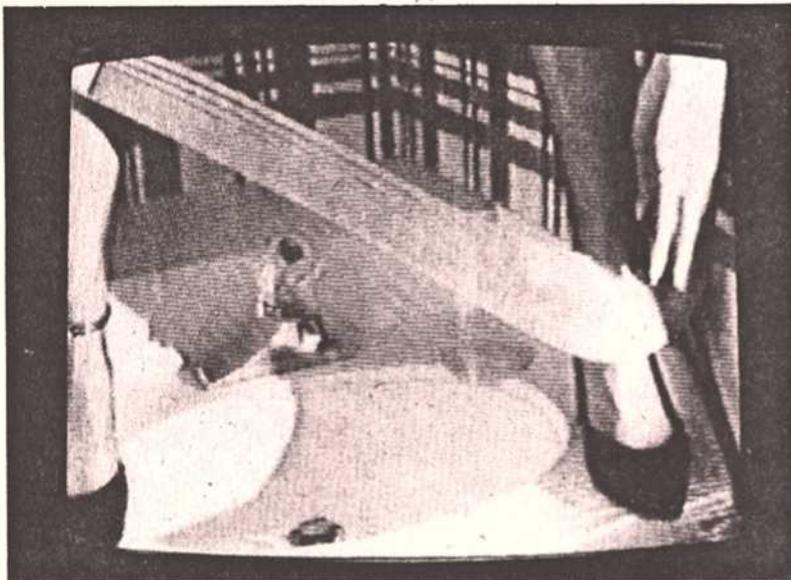
ONE FOR THE ROAD

Merle Ginsberg

**Ithaca Video Festival
April 21-May 3
Cornell University's Johnson Museum,
National Tour through
January 8, 1982**

High above Cayuga's waters, the Seventh Annual Ithaca Video Festival opened inside of Cornell's Johnson Museum, its panoramic glass windows (it was designed by I.M. Pei) overlooking campus, lake, mountains and sky. Ithaca, N.Y., seems an unlikely place for one of the country's largest video festivals (the other, the newly born San Francisco Festival, doesn't travel as yet). At the official opening, a lone monitor was placed conspicuously near the pastoral view, making me wonder how anyone who inhabits this environment could choose machine over nature, even for a few hours.

However, there is a great deal of en-



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thusiasm for video, particularly video art, in Ithaca, most of it generated by the efforts of Philip Mallory Jones. Jones is director of Ithaca Video Projects, which started as a collective in the late '60s and is now partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council. Although the festival is a focal point of the Project's activities,

Jones also rents out editing facilities, equipment and himself, for very reasonable fees, to local video talent and nearby institutions. He himself makes videotapes, shrugging off the term "video artist" and coining "portraiture" for the semi-subjective documentary style he is presently working in. It all started when he tried creative writing; it didn't work out,

so he thought he'd make films. Film was too expensive. Someone lent him a Port-o-Pak and . . . you know the rest.

The Ithaca Video Festival was born seven years ago as a local thing. This year, its 19 tapes were selected from 290 entries, which came in from all over the country — not through advertising, but just by way of a mailed announcement. Its three hours worth of tape will travel to 25 cities nationally, from neighboring Syracuse, Elmira, Rochester and Buffalo to as far away as Fort Lauderdale and Portland, Oregon.

However, it will not be shown in New York because places like the Kitchen (which has shown it in the past), the Museum of Modern Art and Anthology Film Archives simply didn't book it. This may be because a number of the festival's New York representatives have shown work at all these places and because Jones and his committee seem more concerned with a historical overview of video than with what's newest and brightest and best.

Then why does this festival carry so much weight? The most obvious reason is how accessible it makes the artists to a national audience (even if it is mostly a museum/university audience). It pays each artist \$100 per tape, which may seem minimal in view of the number of times a

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Despite its rural location, the Ithaca Video Festival carries a lot of weight. Winning tapes soon will start a nationwide 25-city tour

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tape will be aired over the duration of the festival, but isn't bad for a nonprofit grant-funded organization; many of the artists are approached by prospective buyers and showers. Plus, it provides healthy resume-fattening for the beginning video artist.

One of the festival's most interesting aspects, and again, one that contributes to its status, is the way in which tapes are chosen. Jones and a committee, this year's consisting of Barbara London (Video Curator, Museum of Modern Art), Arthur Tsuchiya (Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester) and Carvin Eison (Artists Workshop, WXXI-TV, Rochester), screened the practically 300 entries in three days, working day and night, and engaged in open-ended discussion about most of them. No such thing as a democracy here — each winning entry had to be chosen unanimously, meaning panel members often had to enlighten stubborn colleagues as to a particular tape's more subtle virtues, historically and esthetically.

The long marathon of viewing, Jones claims, also forces the committee to sight the "really-grabber tapes," the ones that excite from start to finish. I'm not sure this was achieved; the festival is top-heavy with image-processed tapes (six out of 19). Its two performance tapes, *A Visual Diary* (a performance by Blondell Cummings taped by Shirley Clarke) and *Flowers* (a performance, sort of, by Ros Barron), are self-consciously idiosyncratic to the point of silliness. One tape, *Um Laco de Inspiracao e Morte*, a narrative/performance allegory completely in Portuguese, is far too long (28 minutes) to be comprehended by non-Portuguese listeners.

However, the festival redeems itself with the local favorite *Body Count* (a sort of narrative, with some image-processing), made by Ithaca artist Dan Reeves and Ithaca composer Jon Hilton. *Body Count* is supposedly an experimental study for a larger narrative work concerning violence, childhood and Vietnam, to be shown on PBS, but its nine-minute version, orchestrating visual and aural images of kids playing at war with real footage of the blasted battlefields of Vietnam, is very provocative. At the tape's end, the kids lie bloodied, and Lyndon Johnson's assertion, "I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth into battle," seems all the more absurd.

Another two of the best entries are more or less narrative tapes: New Yorkers Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn are represented by their *Similar Nature* (which has been shown at Anthology Archives), which divides the screen into four sections (under which can be discerned a moving background); each division peeks into the daily life of two men and two women, all relatively young and, though very separate in life-style and look, quite similar. When the four sections melt into the background, a city street corner, the four coincide and never consciously become aware of their similarities. Not only is this tape absorbing to watch — it looks good because it looks real, within each frame.

Live From Lunds, a comedic tape by Tom Adair and Kenneth Robins of Minneapolis, depicts a fantasy of what could happen in a supermarket at night. At Lund's, a bizarre group of night people skulk around the racks in semi-tuxedos, while a Bette Midler clone in drag improves upon his/her bustline with some of the riper melons, then bursts into song while amazed shoppers look on. It succeeds because the supermarket is America's favorite icon to camp-ify; with

its surreal fluorescent environment and prepackaged goodies, it's the perfect place for these punky antics. *Live From Lunds* is also well made; the fine-honed editing makes its comic timing come to life.

This year's token "new wave" selection (many new-wavish tapes were entered, but only one was chosen) was the star of the festival, mostly for shock value. Ex-Californian-now-New-Yorker Neecey Twinem's *Best Friend* combines choppy visual images with an interesting sound track, a rock song which is talked rather than sung ("She jerked — let of a bloody scream — and ran into the bathroom — giggling herself — to death"), practically narrating the scenes of bubbling blood, knives on toilet seats, knives between legs and lipstick written across bare breasts. It's about backstabbing, and it carries that off because the images are as alienated from each other as the sensibility is supposed to be.

The Vasulka's, Woody and Steina, once founders of the Kitchen, now of New Mexico, are well represented by their short image-processed tapes. Best is Steina's *Urban Episodes*, which presents her "machine vision," an almost 360 degree street scene of downtown Minneapolis, which uses two revolving cameras plus mirrors to create a beautiful two-in-one circling view of a city's bustle. Woody's *Artifacts II* once again proves him to be the dean of computer-manipulated imagery. One ball becomes myriad; a hand holds one ball — within it can be seen the myriad balls, which move when the large ball moves. Vasulka continues to invent computer tools, this one a "Digital Image Articulator."

New York artist and ace image-processor Shalom Gorewitz is represented by two tapes, the best of which is the six-minute *El Corandero*, utilizing colorizers, synthesizers and other electronic instruments to swathe an Andalusian village with exceedingly unnatural movement and a pulse that beats harder than the noon sun.

Gary Hill's *Around and About* provides healthy use of a text generating images which move to its rhythm. Hill addresses the viewer as if involved in a relationship with him; "Maybe it's my fault; I'm not ready to be complex," and assaults us with quickly changing unprocessed images that do not represent, at least obviously, the words he's saying. "I certainly don't want to threaten your time," he claims, but he manipulates five minutes of it perfectly.

There are two self-consciously "video" selections — Peter D'Agostino's *Quarks*, a strange tape in which a blind man attempts to clarify special relationships while snippets of TV program audios are played behind TV-looking words moving across the screen; and Taka Iimura's *Double Identities*, ridiculous to look at (Iimura's face in and out of a monitor, repeating "I am Taka Iimura" and "I am not Taka Iimura" and "You are Taka Iimura" and "You are not Taka Iimura," relentlessly). It conjures up images of the early Chevy Chase — "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." When there are two negatives, a positive ("I am . . .") is created. This tape could send you running from your seat if it weren't so funny, and if it didn't make you think so much. And it has valuable "hard-core video" historical relevance.

What, can I say in conclusion, is important or necessary about video festivals in general? The people in Columbia, South Carolina, don't go to the Kitchen and don't watch Soho Television on cable. The Ithaca Video Festival, with its shortcomings, may be the largest vehicle attempting a nationalization of the acceptance of and awakening to video as Art. It won't be traveling lightly. ●