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AFI CONFERENCE

Casting an Eye on Video Art

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Opening night of the American Film Institute's first national conference on film and television will not focus on a Hollywood spectacular, a compendium of beloved classics or a panel of silver-haired luminaries. The four-day event, at the Sheraton-Universal Hotel today through Sunday, will start evening programs tonight at 8:30 with a screening of video works by a batch—some would say a ragtag band—of vanguard artists. The 90-minute show consists of 13 tapes (including four excerpts) by 19 artists.

Granted, Friday night's screening of Bernardo Bertolucci's new film "Luna" and a discussion with the illustrious film maker and Saturday evening's "rediscovery" of the 1932 classic film "Scarface" with commentary by historian Daniel Boorstin and author Ray Bradbury will attract larger crowds, but artists' video has been given major conference billing. In a society where artistic experimentation usually plays court jester to commercialism's imperial majesty such victories are not taken lightly.

"Kicking off the conference with video is not what was expected of us," said AFI conference director Sam Grogg, "but we wanted the idea right up front that we are not merely interested in what's traditional and established." Taking a few minutes out Tuesday from incessant phone calls in his office in the stables of AFI's Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills, Grogg explained, "From the very beginning, we planned to bring a microcosm of film and television to the conference. We aimed to put out the whole menu. I hate to use the metaphor, but it's not all hamburger

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"Too often, what's highly visible forms our definitions," he said. "In this conference we wanted to show the personal and idiosyncratic side . . . to recognize the cutting edge and demonstrate the virtuosity of the media in our culture. The video works represent the range of possibilities that confront artists."

Preconference publicity has billed "the blending of electronic technology and creativity" as "the fulcrum of all 'mediart' issues" to be explored. The video art evening was touted as "a symbol of what the conference is about." Videotapes were selected by John Giancola, director of media programs for the New York State Council for the Arts, instructor of video at New York University and long-time video advocate.

AFI's attention to experimental video does indeed stand as a symbol of support for vanguard efforts. Whether selected tapes represent "the cutting edge," the ultimate in virtuosity, a perfect blend of technology and creativity or a full range of possibilities is open to question.

To an audience unaccustomed to viewing video in art galleries, such work as Stephen Beck's "Union," a pulsating metamorphosis of organic shapes eventually bubbling into a figure in a lotus position, or Dan Sandin's "Water, Water, Ice," a painterly abstraction based on rushing, swirling, undulating water, may seem the last word in camera art, but to video devotees, this sort of thing is quite ordinary. Some tapes are six or seven years old—hardly an up-to-the-minute report of the state of video.

Giancola's selections, if occasionally outdated, are generally high in quality and interest, running from genuine jewels to flawed gems and a few trinkets. The range of approaches includes on-the-street documentary, expressionistic probing and abstraction derived from both natural and manipulated imagery. Heavy social and political criticism, which makes up a big chunk of current video activity, is noticeably missing.

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What we have, then, is a nice, safe compilation of some, but by no means all, important video directions in the '70s, squeezed into a palatable and informative package. For those who are curious about what's been going on in artists' video in the last decade, the evening is a rare opportunity — an efficient way to become sensitized with no danger of overdosing. The program, open to the public with a \$6 ticket, will be shown on two 72-inch screens.

Pioneer Nam June Paik, with Ed Emshwiller, will launch the show with the remarkably effective "Suite 212 — The Selling of New York," a humorous view of commercial television. A complex collage of the city is punctuated by Japanese Pepsi ads and a canned voice on the tube, droning on and on about New York's role as a media marketplace. The commentator gets switched off by a woman taking a bath, a hairdresser and a couple making love. The ultimate turn-off occurs when a burglar enters an apartment where the commentator had begun to report on the crime rate. When the reporter says robbery and burglary have dropped off sharply in the past year, the thief flips the switch, retracts the antenna and walks off with the TV set.

Andy Mann's "One-Eyed Bum" is a model of low-budget accomplishment. This short exchange between a man with a camera and a happy-go-lucky transient with a cataract is a poignant and loving portrait, not likely to be forgotten. Another warm moment comes in John Alpert and Keiko Tsuno's "Third Avenue," an interview with a joyfully

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Jack Smith is on assignment.

Ed & I will make sure you come to Cal Arts and I want to meet you in Santa Fe! →

VIDEO ART

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married old couple who hang on to their past life while dealing, argumentatively, with the new. Business is terrible, inflation is killing but it doesn't seem to matter much because they have a sense of humor and each other.

William Wegman, who is forever trying to teach his dog Man Ray something or other on video, is briefly but well represented by "The Spelling Test." The dog as student sits on a stool looking quizzical as Wegman patiently explains the dog's spelling errors. Wegman's deadpan mockery of educational methods shouldn't be funny after all these years of exposure, but it is.

Among the most successful forays into abstraction and manipulation are Steina and Woody Vasulka's "Vocabulary," a play of spatial conflicts between a human hand and manufactured images; Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn's "Order," a brisk composition of audiovisual collisions, and Gary Hill's "Objects With Destinations" where ordinary tools and furniture are converted to abstract shapes and patterns.

The show will end with Bill Viola's "Sweet Light," a confusing work that contains lovely vignettes shot in a studio and at a dinner party. The piece goes off in too many directions to add up to anything memorable.

The remainder of the conference, the first of a proposed annual series, will consist of constituent meetings for special interest groups in the mornings and a variety of film and television symposiums. Most events will be open to the public, but tickets are necessary. Call the AFI conference office at the Universal-Sheraton (980-1212) for information on ticket availability, rates and schedules. Tickets can be purchased at the hotel's conference registration desk.

Bach-to-Mozart Festival Set for CalArts Friday, Saturday

CalArts will host the second Bach-to-Mozart festival Friday and Saturday on the Valencia campus. Daniel Shulman will ~~conduct the CalArts Orchestra~~ in Haydn's