

movie JOURNAL



by Jonas Mekas

Video Exchange, under a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, on June 24 opened its first Video Festival, "the first comprehensive showing of experimental and non-broadcast video tapes in New York City. Most of the major non-commercial video people will be represented in the series to be held at the Merce Cunningham Studio at Westbeth, 463 West Street." So says the group's press release.

My intention is to see all the programs offered at the Video Festival and report to you. My point of view, briefly, is this: video is not a unique means of producing moving images; it's only one means of many available. Each means of producing moving images uses slightly different tools and slightly different materials—which automatically affect the content and form of the images.

June 24, 8.30 p. m.: The Videofreex show their tapes. Semi-realistic, semi-freaky, semi-juvenile. A girl carries a mysterious box. It's a phonograph, we find out. A fish-like creature speaks to us, answers questions, makes comments, but we don't understand anything (because of bad recording or bad transmission).

Waterish images. Naturalism slightly destroyed by the combination of the video techniques and the deficiencies of transmission. All images seem to dissolve in water, they have that quality, the edges of images, the movement. A technique of image-making similar to the one used in painting where you dissolve paint in water, on canvas. Easy way to achieve an "arty" effect. I remember, I think it was in 1961, George Maciunas had a gallery, uptown (AG Gallery), and he had some good things there, but nobody bought them. One day, as a joke, he bought a dozen small canvases, poured water on each, and then splashed color inks on them. They looked tremendous, as the inks spread, tremendous art. He sold them all, next day.

Anyway: Videofreex. Snow scenes.

What a familiar line: "There will be a one-minute intermission. We are going to change the reels." In video as in cinema . . .

Some kind of dance. Dance banality. The image distortion makes for an easy artiness, a familiar style of all tv avant-gardists. Whenever a commercial tv wants to look avant-garde, it presents a dance program with images distorted. (Videofreex are located at the Maple Tree Farm, Route 214, Lanesville, New York 12450.)

June 24, 10.30 a. m.: The Vasulkas (111 East 14th Street, NYC). On the program: Elec-

tronic Story No 1 (Black sunrise, Horizontal, Landscape, Energies), Electronic Story No. 2, (Swan Lake by Larry), Electronic Story No 3 (Shapes).

Color designs. "Synthesized images," says Vasulka. The means of making some of the images (says Vasulka): oscilloscope, sound synthesizer, feedback.

A four-part video abstraction with different forms in each part (flying disk, a dark circle, flame-like forms, etc.). "Decay" series: a face slowly disintegrating; disintegration of image by means of interferences.

Visible formal preoccupations. Formal questions raised, answers not always received. But the beginnings are there. A sequence with a dancer, classical ballet (Swan Lake). But it's the color and the freedom of the video camera movement that makes it compelling.

One keeps thinking about the effectiveness of some of the color. It may not be true, in one respect, that a video artist has to solve what he's doing formally, the way we understand form in cinema or in painting. Because we also have the question of video as energy. So that formal solutions must be worked out also on the level of energy. That feeling comes very strongly when I watch the Vasulkas. The question of energy. Color. Not long ago I saw the color organ that Erich Siegel invented (at Howard Wise Gallery), and I thought the day may come soon

when certain color compositions will be prescribed for certain illnesses, for certain states of feeling, or even physical diseases. That is within possibility. Anyway, one can feel this color energy coming from the set, and one feels there is something about it that we don't quite know yet but that is very important. To discuss the achievement of Siegel or the Vasulkas according to the rules and criteria we know from painting and cinema is not quite right, or not enough, or not always right. That is my clear feeling. We deal with energy in cinema too. But not to the same degree.

June 25, 8.30 p. m.: Instead of video tapes, a Tina Kroll dance program. I asked why. Got the following information: A group which calls itself Video Exchange, and which organized this video festival, is using the Westbeth auditorium to tape dances. They invite different groups to perform, then they tape them and make tapes available for educational-informational purposes to the wide country. Their address, in case anybody wants to rent their dance tapes: Video Exchange, 500 La Guardia Place, NYC.

June 25, 10.30 p. m.: Video tapes by John Reilly and Rudi Stern. I have seen their tapes before, at the Global Village (which they still run). At the Global Village, their tapes are presented on a multiple set arrangement, a

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dozen sets or so. It's a "news" and "image rhythm" environment. Here the tapes were shown on a single video set. It didn't work at all. The misery came through. It is easy to fool one with patterns, surround one with many sets. But when you show your tapes on one set, they get the full attention, and the tapes of Global Village became too thin to keep the attention. One of Stern's weaknesses is that even when his footage has some factual interest he keeps chopping it and jazzing it up with rock rhythms (with rock music, of course, playing loud), which by now has become a cheap trick used whenever there is nothing else in the image. Just jazz it up, add a little video mix, and they will like it . . . By abstraction and patterning and empty psychedelicism the original meaning is taken out of the image and no new meaning of any interest is given to it, not even the meaning of the medium, because Stern's techniques and ideas go against the grain of the medium (Vasulka's are closer to the medium). The best things,

such as A. J. Weberman "Dylan garbage tape" (prepared by Reilly), which is very fine, works not because some new video techniques or language is used, but because it's a tape that could be done by Johnny Carson or anybody and it would look fine, because A. J. Weberman's personality is interesting and inventive, and the idea itself of a Dylan garbage tape is dynamic. So it works, and with no thanks to any new video techniques at all. And how miserable the Massage Lesson tape looked as compared with the one Michel Auder did two years ago, with his Bolex camera, and in color, with Viva.

June 27, 8.30 p. m.: A program by the University Settlement Video Project. Program note says: "These video tapes were made by three kids named Johnny, Millie and Willie, who live in the Elder Street Community in the Lower East Side, NYC." Documentary tapes. Interviews with residents. Demonstrations at City Hall protesting discon-

tinuation of the Welfare Educational Program which teaches welfare recipients English. Some street footage. Footage taken at the Westbeth auditorium, before the show. I sort of liked this program because it was the least pretentious, and easily casual. And it didn't misuse video. Video was used for what it seemed to do best. In one part, several children were preparing their own news show. It was a good parody of tv newscasts, and, on the other hand, it was a highly surrealistic fantasy worthy of the Marx Brothers.

June 27, 10.30 p. m.: A series of tapes by Richard Rubinstein: the Ultimate Mirror group. Documentary tapes from Spain. How much better, clearer, etc. it would have been, done with Bolex instead of video. I was thinking the same during the Stern and Reilly shows.

The Video Festival at Westbeth will continue from July 8 to 11 and 15 to 18.