

VISION NEWS VISION NEWS VISION NEWS VISION NEWS VISION NEWS VISION NEWS

THE TELEVISION LABORATORY

Thirteen FALL, 1979

The Independent Documentary Fund: The Story So Far
 by Kathy Villa

In October 1977 I came to the Television Laboratory as the project coordinator for a new grant, the **Independent Documentary Fund**. While working in the media program of the National Endowment for the Arts, I'd developed a respect for and interest in the TV Lab. It seemed like a lively, committed, unbureaucratic place with a sense of humor.

The two major funders for the Independent Documentary Fund, The National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation, have for years been in the forefront of support for innovation in the media arts. This project involved a substantial grant, enabling independent film and video makers to produce their own documentaries, conceived and designed according to their particular, individual visions. This fund was to provide a bridge between that vision and the criteria of television.

Everyone concerned has learned a tremendous amount. We realized, for instance, that there are over a thousand documentarians all over the United States, with various levels of accomplishment. This meant we had to put together a screening process which would not only be fair and equitable, but efficient as well. We spent days on the road, talking and listening to independents. Hours of screening time were needed for completed works and works-in-progress. Decisions had to be made which involved compromises. And finally, we had to work closely with grant recipients, considering individual needs and diverse personalities.

All of this has been a monumental task, involving far more juggling of resources than I anticipated. I've utilized the resources of WNET/THIRTEEN far more extensively than I expected — its legal services, finance department, press information, mail room, music advisor, copy machines, etc. If it weren't for this donation of staff time and materials, our budget for administration would have been far higher.

I had not expected to invest time in working with the grant recipients after they had been awarded funding. At the end of our first two-day advisory panel meeting, after we had awarded our first eight grants, I sighed a sigh of relief, thinking our job was complete. Now the grant recipients would go off and return with a finished documentary. But as we left the conference room, Lab Director David Loxton explained to me that our work had only just begun.

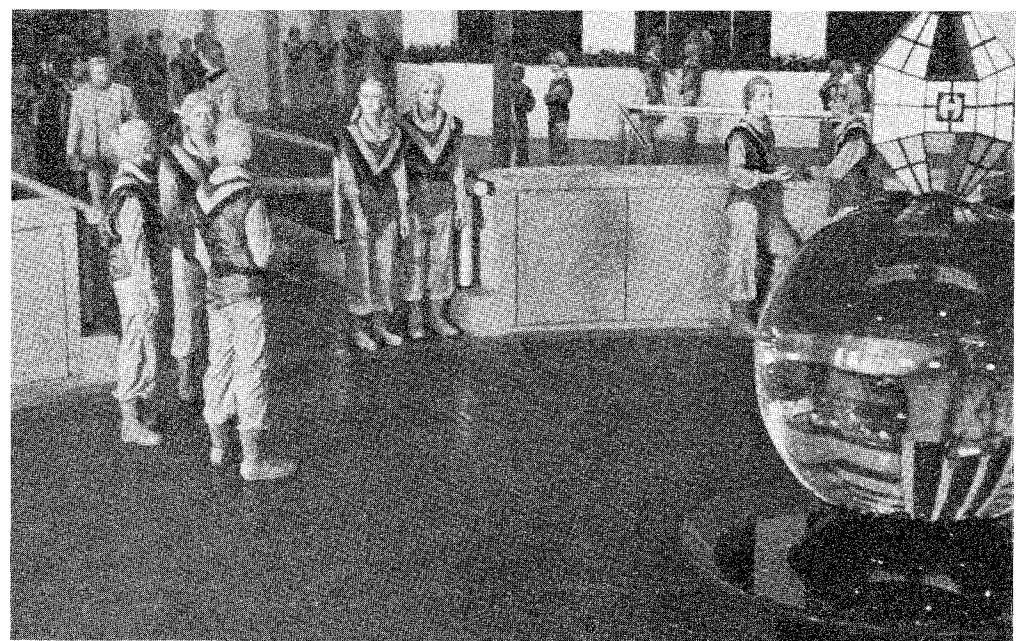
Fund, we have not only provided requested resources, but more importantly, we have supplied a much needed perspective. We have looked at work-in-progress and discussed its focus and direction. Rather than being an intrusion, as I'd feared, our interest has been viewed as sympathetic but far enough removed to act as an external audience. We also helped explain the requirements and concerns of broadcast television, which were new to most independent filmmakers.

Then there was the task of getting each program scheduled and publicized. Additional money from the Ford Foundation enabled us to increase publicity for the programs. Press releases and stills were sent to more than 1200 newspapers and publications, phone interviews were arranged between television critics and the documentarians, and at times, newspaper ads were run. The station's normal "on-air" promotion included 30- and 60-second spots which were fed to all the PBS stations.

We made changes in our procedure as experience and criticism warranted. We wanted a decentralized regional screening process, so the first year we had independents from media centers around the country view sample
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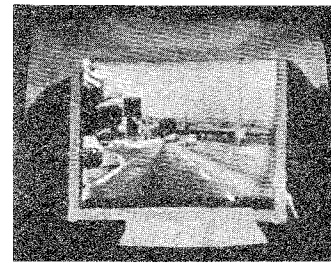
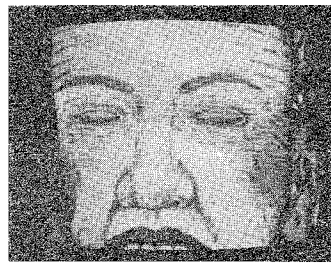
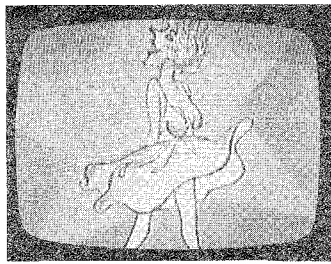
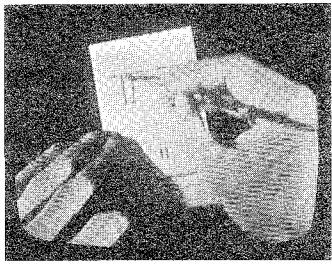
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Production on The Lathe of Heaven nears completion. See page 6.

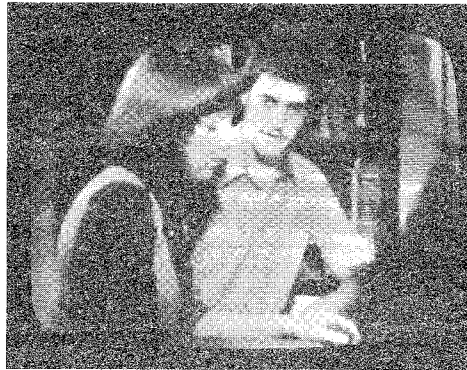
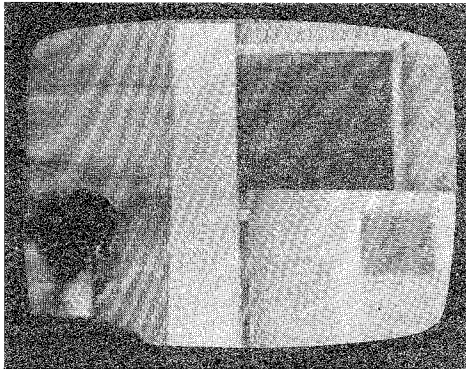
Ron Phillips



New American Animators: Part I, aired on July 29, was the first of two half-hour programs featuring the outstanding work of five American animation artists. This program included **Head** by George Griffin, an ironic look at the process of animation; **Sand** by Carolyn Leaf, which was based on Peter and The Wolf; **Confessions of a Star-Dreamer**, a story about an aspiring actress, by John Canemaker; Mary Beam's **The Tub Film**

about a woman who takes a bath; and Vincent Collin's **Fantasy**, a surreal comic cartoon. **New American Animators: Part II**, which aired on August 5, was the second animation anthology program in the VFR series. This second half-hour highlighted four young animators. Each animator introduced his/her work in a brief discussion of the techniques and artistic concerns involved. Included in this program: a 3-minute excerpt from Susan Pitt's

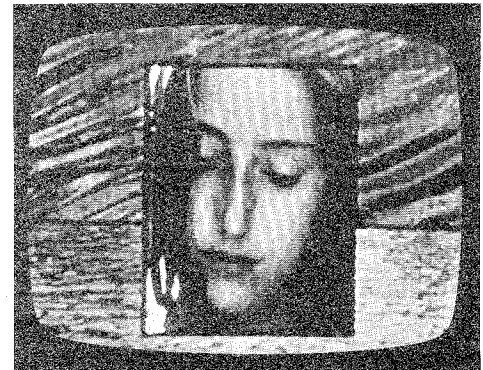
Asparagus, depicting a lone woman's inner landscape populated by brightly colored objects from her imagination; **Pasadena Freeway Stills** by Gary Beydler, which utilized re-photography to create manually the illusion of motion picture projection; **Pandora's Box** by Steve Segal in which a constantly changing box opens to reveal a series of free-associative vignettes; and **Sonoma** by Dennis Pies, a lyrical depiction of a California landscape.



I Want To Live In The Country, a 30-minute videotape by Joan Jonas, aired on July 22. **I Want To Live In The Country** explores two states of mind, past and present, and two environments, a city and country. The soundtrack — journals kept by the filmmaker on her country sojourn — washes over past and present images interchangeably providing a melodic continuum from then to now. "Unusually compelling." — John O'Connor, *The New York Times*, 7/20/79.

Dubs, a 30-minute videotape by Ed Emshwiler, was telecast on August 12. **Dubs** combines concrete poetry with spatial transitions and video-editing techniques to create a kind of visual choreography. Also included in this program was **Sunstone**, which was produced utilizing revolutionary new digital video techniques. "**Dubs** represents the ultimate use of television as a visual medium . . . there has been nothing else like it on the tube." — Carol Burton Terry, *Newsday*,

Robert Breer: Frame Of Mind was broadcast on August 26. This program presented a 30-minute portrait of Robert Breer, a painter turned filmmaker, praised by the *Cahiers du Cinema* as one of the three greatest living masters of the art of animated film. Breer's films, "LMNO," "69," "Recreation" and "A Man and His Dog Out for Air," are featured in this program.



Red Grooms: Ruckus In Focus aired on September 23. This 30-minute program presented a close look at painter/sculptor/filmmaker Red Grooms. It included excerpts from "Ruckus Manhattan" — a film documenting the building of his monumental construction — some early animation, "Fat Feet" and his latest film, "Little Red Riding Hood." *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman interviewed the filmmaker in his studio, where he is currently completing a life-sized "family portrait" commissioned by a Miami family.

Group Portrait: Six Artists In Video, an hour long program produced by Russell Connor and Ann Woodward of the Cable Arts Foundation, was telecast on September 30. **Group Portrait** interviews and presents the work of six video artists — Bill and Louise Etra, who have been working with video since the mid-sixties, Woody and Steina Vasulka, early pioneers in the manipulation of video images and creating multi-monitor; and Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, who use real images to create abstract videotapes relating television to the environment.

Sea Travels and The Breakfast Table, by Anita Thacher, presents two new works, one in film and one in video. Utilizing optical printing techniques of live-action images, **Sea Travels** explores themes of childhood memory — its dreams, fantasies and unique language. The leading characters of **The Breakfast Table** — a husband, wife and parrot — live in a cartoon world of the 1940's and present a comic view of the morning rituals that take place between husband and wife. This final program in the VFR series was broadcast on October 7.