



Events

A Conflux of Truth Tellers—National Video Festival 1984

Patrick Scott

The vitality of video, its exceeding variability, its power to extend us into our environment, and its ability to create an electronic common ground were fully evident at the internationally oriented National Video Festival September 20-23, on the Los Angeles campus of the American Film Institute. By my estimate, over 100 hours of electronic data scanned playback equipment in six locations, which was, in large part, courtesy of the Sony Corporation of America and AFI. This saturation of more than 150 works spanned 35 years, originated from 15 countries and employed the full range of technology available today.

Essayist Benjamin DeMott (*Supergrow: Surviving the Seventies*) delivered the festival keynote and focused on "the role of independent film and videomaker as an individualistic truth teller in a time when individualism, and truth-telling are 'up against the wall.'" His comments were heard in the AFI's Mark Goodson Theater, outfitted with eight monitors and seating for 125. The Goodson provided a central arena for the festival and was the location of two lecture presentations which set up a context of commercial television, its origins and its ability to manipulate political debate.

Media preservationist and critic Robert Rosen's presentation *Television in Search of Itself: the 1950's*, charted the evolution of stylistic conventions which have become so ingrained in our collective consciousness as to become an ineluctable reality. The legacy of radio and film, television's metamorphosis of news into narrative entertainment, and the medium's, sometimes hilarious self awareness were all covered with wit and insight.

Producer and media consultant, Peter Broderick's presentation *Point Counterpoint: Controversy By Television*, was exhaustively researched and of particular appropriateness in this election year. Examining issue by issue, pro and con, including advocacy T.V. concerning gun control, smoking control, abortion, U.S. intervention in Central America, and nuclear power—Broderick was able to pose the question "Is controversy by television fair?" He explored the medium's proclivity for certain approaches: emotionalism over factuality, negative tactics over positive appeals, the impact of satire and the attendant risk of backfire.

Video Magazines

British journalist and independent producer, John Wyver's chronicle of *British Channel 4: The Story So Far*, made an effective case for the two-year old alternative channel, despite what many might call setbacks. Charges of "left-wing" bias led to the termination of a weekly news program *The Friday Alternative*. Breakthrough shows survive, however, for blacks, Asians, feminists and young people.

Alternative television's frequent reliance upon video art for content, approach and technique was the focus on a festival section devoted to the arts magazine format.

Another casualty of Britain's Channel 4 was the stunning magazine series *Alter Image*. The series electronically combined brief, unframed segments inventively documenting dance performance, fashion and other reflections of contemporary culture.

A preview of the American series *Dis/Patches*, scheduled to air by satellite this fall was introduced by Gerald O'Grady, executive producer for the Learning Channel. Video art by Ilene Segalove, Peter D'Agostino, Tom Rubnitz and Ann Magnuson was chosen for its ironic treatment of television and presented by a host in an elaborate set. The combination was not ideal. Executive producer Melinda Ward introduced her clip from the in-progress series *Alive From OFF Center* scheduled for broadcast summer 1985. The promising series, a co-production of Walker Art Center and Twin Cities Public Television, intends to encompass the performing arts and video in the creation of non-mainstream programming.

Belgian curator and producer Chris Dercon presented the acclaimed *There is a Video Cassette in the Soup*. The 63-minute historical overview of video art, directed by Stefan Decostere, who collaborated with Dercon on the concept, employs electronic graphics to mix excerpts and interviews of art and artists from all over the world, using crawling translations when needed. The creators wisely use the form to reflect the content, and the result is whimsical and full of unconventional beauty.

Video Panels: Politics, Music

The Louis B Mayer Building soundstage housed capacity attendance for two panel discussions. With producers from Central America alongside U.S. producers, *Nicaragua and El Salvador: Art and Activism, Urgency and Ethics* was significant by the fact of its occurrence. Moderator Julianne Burton delivered an essay which merits seeking out in its abbreviated form in the festival catalogue. The presentation itself did little to make the "situation in Central America" any more comprehensible. Nicaraguan Augusto Tablada, director of video for MIDINRA, the national agrarian reform society, spoke through a translator about the more than 30 educational programs which address socio-political topics from military preparedness to, for example, "¿Que pasa con el papel higienico?". Unfortunately, between the excerpt and the live translation, we never did find out what is happening to the toilet paper.

Perhaps the most notable example of extra-national solidarity video was *Waiting for the Invasion* (1984), produced by U.S. panelists Dee Dee Halleck and Karen Ranucci. Halleck remarked on the unfortunate misnomer before explaining the premise: in order for U.S. citizens to understand and care about Nicaragua, they are put in touch, via a familiar journalistic style, with other U.S. citizens living and working in Nicaragua.

Of the national tapes, *Tiempo de Audacia (A Time of Daring)* (1983), produced by

Radio Venceremos and distributed by panelist Moises Ecalante of the El Salvador Film and Video Project, had the greatest visceral impact. *A Time of Daring* was made just days after the U.S. invasion of Grenada and contrasts the elite forces of the regime, North American advisors, the FMLN, and the people of El Salvador.

The panel *Conjuring: The Image of Music* made issues self evident through juxtaposition rather than discourse. The SRO audience was lured by the promises of reggae music concert docu-video. Against this background was screened Kit Fitzgerald and Peter Gordon's excerpt from *The Return of the Native* (1984), a choreography for camera and the cows accompanied by a hauntingly astringent chamber music. The effect was cool and artful, the reception polite. Stewart Copeland, drummer for The Police, contributed footage of

himself in African locations. Disclaimed as a rough cut, the material looked somewhat like documentation of a print-ad campaign. The soundtrack was expectedly incidental. An audience member asked if Copeland was responsible for the images of himself on TV. His answer—no, it's just rock and roll—was jeered. Moderator Bob Wisdom commented upon reggae's potential to diffuse what he characterized as white rock and roll's fixation with blue smoke, leather bikinis and flame-throwers. At this point, unannounced panelist Beth B's new clip *Dominatrix*, a bondage fantasy of women ravaging a lone mechanic in a garage was screened. The audience erupted with condemnations and shouts of "We're here to talk about drums." When tempers cooled, the question "Is there an inherent dichotomy between the 'hot' physicality of reggae and the 'cool' distance of video?" went unanswered. An evening which threatened to disintegrate was suddenly rescued by Babatunde Olatuni, who recounted a tale of the first flute; the famous African drummer blew an ornate little tune to the crowd through his hands conjuring up an image of music.

Later that night *Once in a Lifetime*, a 69-minute music video montage built around the Talking Heads, drew overflow crowds and necessitated a simultaneous double screening. The 1984 work is extremely complex, mesmerizing, indebted to video art pioneers and deserves serious consideration as a music video milestone.

David Byrne dropped in on writer Dan Graham's presentation *Rock My Religion* Sunday afternoon. Graham's fascinating thesis began with Ann-Lee, founder of the Shakers, and ended up with rock priestess Patti Smith. The lecture gained almost nothing in its rough cut video form.

Video Art

Premieres and recent work by world class artists displayed a ripeness that signals both good health and great promise for video art. Works that aroused admiration, controversy and conversation inside and

out of the Goodson Theatre among curators Barbara London, Marita Sturken, Fujiko Nakaya and the many festival participants included Gary Hill's *Why Do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia)*; Pier Marton's *heaven is what I've done (for my fellow beings)*; Dan Reeves' *Sabda*; Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's *Vault*; Juan Downey's *Shifters*; and the Vasulka's installation *The West*.

Hill's extraordinary metalogue makes reference to *Through the Looking Glass*. The camera examines a detailed "real-time" dialogue between a father and daughter spoken and motivated backwards, shot end to beginning and played back in reverse. As the credits finish "come on petunia" becomes, scrabble-like, "once upon a time."

Marton's brief video poem instantly creates a deep mood out of sluggishly beautiful sounds and blurry sights. A little boy spouts simple self-evident truths. The effect is infused with poignancy.

Reeves' *Sabda* was shot in India and its twelve minutes were inspired by the mystical poet of praise, Kabir. Subtle dovetailings of words, sounds and images put the viewer in touch with a realm beyond appearances.

Of equal length and entirely different approach, the Yonemoto's *Vault* is an extremely concise and multifaceted soap opera. The "face value" is entertainment, but the wit is so edged, and the Freudian childhood flashbacks so aptly quintessential, that this Texas love affair between a cowboy-abstract-expressionist and a female-cellist-polevaulter deepens with each rerun. Furthermore, the form is a very clever rationale for using color, B&W and sepia together with a looped soundtrack of Wagner climaxes.

Downey's nearly half-hour *Shifters* stretches the viewer with a complicated philosophical videotreatise which explores translation, transportation, transmigration, transformation, and transfiguration. It fascinates with his dauntless application of these ideas to people, places, things, history, music, images and relationships. Shot mostly in Cairo and edited with many triangular quantel wipes, one cannot help but admire the artist's hauteur and deliberate esotericism. The art world middlemen, i.e. curators, i.e. shifters, if I'm not mistaken, are seen in out-takes and are at a loss for words.

Transforming itself throughout the entire run of the festival was the ravishing two-channel, six-monitor, quad-sound installation *The West*. New Mexican landscapes, saturated with color, Indian ruins, a giant radio telescopic dish and a mirrored sphere interpenetrate through the use of continuous horizontal 360° panning and vertical banded wiping. The Vasulkas have created one of the clearest extensions of so-called traditional artistic preoccupations. *The West* breathes life into the representation of landscapes by including time, sound, camera and post production technologies without sacrificing painterliness, lyricism or spiritual content.

Two important presentations, Barbara London's *Video: Recent Narratives*, including over 40 works, and Fujiko Nakaya's historical survey of Japanese Video Art, including over 25 works, were on view in small screening rooms through the festival. See report on video art in Japan, page 10 this issue.

The catalogue for the 1984 National Video Festival may be ordered by mail. Send a check for \$6.00 to: American Film Institute, Television and Video Dept., 2021 N. Western Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90027.

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