

Television

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

SHE is in her late 20's. He is in his early 20's. She has been, among other things, a performer in pornographic films. He is a junkie and a homosexual. They have decided to get married.

She is Carel. He is Ferd. And they are the stars of "The Continuing Story of Carel & Ferd," created by a San Francisco-based group called Video Free America. According to its publicity, "The Continuing Story" is "a closed-circuit, multiple-image, video-tape novel about pornography, sexual identities, the institution of marriage, and the effect of living too close to an electronic medium."

Though incomplete, that description is adequate enough. "The Continuing Story" also happens to be, at least for this viewer, an extraordinary experience. It is being presented this weekend and next in The Kitchen of New York's downtown Mercer Arts Center. Future exhibition, if that is the word, will depend on response to the current engagement. Excluding an intermission, the "performance" lasts about an hour and a half. Admission is \$3.

Video Free America's work has already been seen in New York as prominent visual assets in two recent stage productions — Heathcote Williams's "AC/DC" and Allen Ginsberg's "Kadish" — at the Brooklyn

Academy of Music's Chelsea Theater Center. The group, led by Arthur Ginsberg (no relation to Allen), is part of a bustling national network usually referred to as underground video or video freaks. The medium, obviously, is video tape, considerably cheaper and infinitely more flexible than film. And, still relatively new, the medium is being provocatively explored as both medium and message.

"The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd" began in November of 1970. The couple had already decided to get married and, "in simplest terms," to have a home movie of everything surrounding their wedding. The present version of the "documentary soap opera" ends in September of 1971, with Carel and Ferd watching and analyzing some of the edited tapes. After a screening on a recent afternoon, Carel and Ferd even emerged from the live audience to answer any possible questions. In the shifts between image and reality, the possibilities for dislocation are endless.

At The Kitchen, the audience can either sit on chairs or sprawl casually on the floor facing a bank of eight television receivers, which are arranged in a tight horizontal line of four on four. The on-screen images can be different for each of the eight receivers or can be the same, turning subtle facial movements into balletic en-

What Hath The Underground Wrought?

semble productions.

During each performance, the combination of images is controlled and manipulated by a member of Video Free America. In a basic sense, he or she is the performer, accounting for inevitable differences between performances.

At one point in "The Continuing Story," someone refers to the content as a "Sartre-ian drawing-room comedy." The comment is perceptive. In the constant shuttling between "reality" and the performance, the conscious directing of that reality, there is a seamless, almost suffocating, sense of no exit.

A closer parallel, however, might be found in the technique of "whirligig" that Sartre traced in the work of Jean Genet. The whirl of images and ramifications in "The Continuing Story" is often dazzling.

Carel and Ferd don't only use the camera; they need it. Carel needs it more than Ferd. As she declares near the beginning: "I can't express myself to you on a perfectly honest level except through a machine." Carel talks freely to the cameraman, at times even sneaking

in monologues when Ferd isn't around. When Ferd objects to a particular "scene," she objects in turn with the demand, "Don't direct me, this is real live."

Carel begins by playing the woman to Ferd's boy. She is the instigator, sharp, assured and experienced. Neither is very intelligent, but both are practiced in fashionable jargon and clever intuition. Partial to phrases such as "intensely concerned," "harrowing emotional crisis" and "exceedingly deep," Carel almost, but not quite, gets away with lines like, "I would like to free myself and find another illusion" or "why doesn't somebody materialize some coffee?"

Both, fortunately, have a saving sense of humor. In offhand comments about her career in pornographic films, Carel insists she felt the films "ruined my sex life completely."

"The Continuing Story" follows its subjects through preparations for the marriage, the marriage ceremony and foiled wedding night, and the failure of the marriage. The idea of the marriage was wrapped in "high-energy" intentions.

The reality thrust Carel and Ferd back on their own normal energies, which proved to be inadequate.

Analyzing themselves and each other to the point of psychic constipation, they wind up hostile, lonely and disappointed, just like, as Carel observes, "every other mundane freak." Carel, with fresh bags under her eyes, can cry freely in front of the camera. Ferd, the stronger in survival, can refer to himself and Carel as "paradigm examples of some of the most victimized people in America."

The point is well taken in the closed world, labeled Hedge City, that ends with the whimpering conclusion that anything is as good as anything else. How much of this directly reflects the real Carel and Ferd? Quite a bit, evidently; more perhaps than even they might concede. As one of their friends remarks, "The camera's affecting them, but I don't think they're doing it because it's on."

The result is not quite "cinema verite." The relationship between cameraman and subject is much more complex. Sections of the story, in fact, were recorded by Carel and Ferd themselves, who carried a video portapak along on their marriage trip. Commenting on the tapes, Ferd says, "It's really like watching Ozzie and Harriet." For Carel, "it's just objectified

now, just a bunch of electrons."

For Video Free America, considering past showings of "The Continuing Story," "we can say that there's something in it for the mediaphile, existential psychologist, pornography buff, gay lib supporter, graphics freak and cineaste, and perhaps even the Queens housewife and West Village teenybopper."

Whatever the tag attached to either product or audience, the process is fascinating. The use of video images is imaginative. A tape of a face may be complemented with a tape of the same face on a TV receiver within the TV receiver being watched. One or several of the screens might be filled with a shot of the technical video equipment and a closed-circuit picture of the operator's hands. One superb sequence counterpoints an explicit drug scene with an explicit sex scene, blending visual and audio elements with almost chilling effectiveness.

The Kitchen, incidentally, will be presenting a Video Festival for the month of June. Organized by Woody and Steina Vasulka, Shridhar Bapat and Bill Etra, the programs will include the works of United States and Canadian video artists. The specific format will be video as an electronic art medium. Increasingly, that medium is proving that it deserves attention.