

## Yogurt or Nothingness

# Utah Media Arts Assessed

by Michael Nash

THE UTAH MEDIA CENTER'S FOURTH Annual Utah Short Film and Video Festival program June 3 at the Salt Lake Art Center was a tribute of sorts to departing UMC director Christ Montague. During Montague's farsighted four-year tenure, the center has achieved flagship status in the promotion of media arts exhibition and education in the state. The works showcased in the festival, ranging from student productions to nationally acclaimed works by established artists, suggest the scope of the center's influence and the success of local talent that Montague has struggled to support and recognize.

Now, on with the show . . . The festival program was selected from 35 entries, the largest field to date, by a distinguished jury that included nationally exhibited and awarded local media artist C. Larry Roberts, one of the world heavyweights in media criticism Gene Youngblood, and Sundance Institute executive director Sterling Van Wagenen. The jury awarded mention and/or money to the following film and video works:

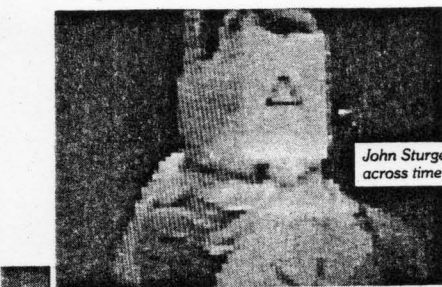
### Film

J. Russell Johnson's *The Way Out* stood out as the most sophisticated film screened. Co-winner of the Mort Rosenfeld Award (named for the late U of U instructor and film maker), *The Way Out* is a subtle meta-movie that packages its illusive metaphysical content in an intentionally superficial crime drama. As Johnson explained it: "The film uses the genre as a mode of expression rather than an end in itself. The film is about film . . . our expectations about Hollywood conventions." Johnson's intention is crystallized in the final shot in which the protagonist walks off into the desert, followed by a 360-degree pan that completes its arc without finding its subject. The shot portrays an existential disappearance in film terms — the camera "offs" its subject. This ending works on a number of levels, neatly punctuating the anti-hero story proper and its meta-content: film modes become conditions of being and nothingness (or as Woody Allen put it, "non-being and somethingness.")

Eric Vaterlaus shared the \$400 Rosenfeld Award for his film *In Passing*. I don't have the credentials of the jury, so it is with some trepidation that I say that this film is not in the same league as Johnson's. It is witty and well-acted, but this rites of passage story does not display the technical mastery of *The Way Out* and is about as subtle as a lawn mower running over a *Book of Mormon*, the opening shot of the film. However, the Rosenfeld award is intended to recognize potential as well as achievement and Vaterlaus certainly demonstrates a flair for comic timing and dramatic/comic juxtaposition.

Larry Shaw's *The Dream*, awarded a \$200 prize, is a tight psychological drama that succeeds because of its accomplished visual style. Shaw has a good sense of horror film vocabulary, and he deftly builds suspense through crisp editing and precise shot strategy. The acting is a little stiff and the story-telling a bit mechanical, but Shaw's reworking of the formula gets the visceral response it seeks.

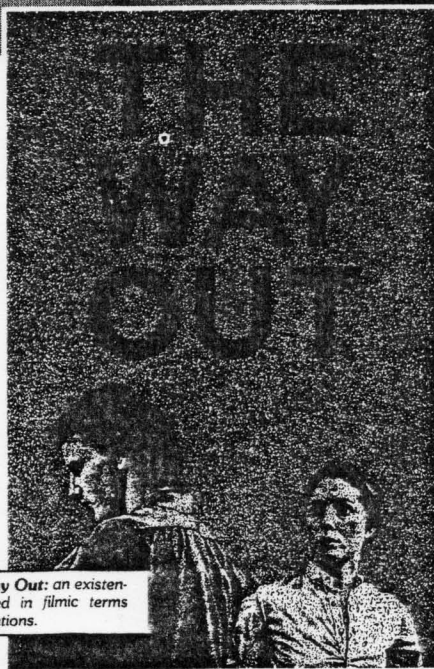
Brace, Michael Sanches' understated documentary about a brace maker, treats its potentially sentimental subject matter with such disarming quietude and self-irony that its emotional impact is irresistible. The brace maker claims to pursue his craft only for fi-



John Sturgeon's *Spine/Time*: a vision that cuts across time and states of being.



Aysha Quinn's *Excerpts*: a seamless combination of the routine and metaphysical.



J. Russell Johnson's *The Way Out*: an existential disappearance expressed in filmic terms subverting Hollywood conventions.

nancial remuneration, but the narrator's ending statement tells the film's simple truth, "My friends kid me that I'm not really handicapped. All I know is that if I didn't have a brace, I would be." By avoiding easy sympathy, Sanches lets the emotional reality linger.

Rounding out the film program, Thomas J.

Cowan's *Furs* is, by contrast, compelling through the direct and brutal approach. This documentary literally cuts through the glamorous mystique surrounding mink fur by taking a quick trip from the retail display to the friendly neighborhood mink ranch, complete with neck breaking and taxidermal close-ups. Thank God it's in black and white.

It should be noted that all the winning films were produced through Brian Patrick's program at the U of U. That speaks for itself.

### Video

John Sturgeon's *Spine/Time* has been recognized and awarded at the U.S. Film and Video Festival, the Atlanta Video Festival and the Ithaca Video Festival, so it's not surprising that he received a \$250 award in local competition. Created over a two-year period, this complex work exploits computerized video's "moving time" manipulation capabilities to produce a vision that cuts across time and states of being. This isn't no-content high-tech; technology is integrated into subject matter, the special effects parallel the relationship between consciousness and time that the tape is about.

The video has enigmatic visual abstractions, powerful psychodrama monologues, a wealth of allusion, but no unifying cosmology. This the viewer must supply. As Sturgeon puts it, the tape "is like a pool, and structurally, I'm inviting you to take a swim." He believes that video can create a zone for artist/viewer interaction, breaking down the traditional transmitter/receiver relationship. His ideas are visionary and his execution is state-of-the-art.

Equally unsurprising was the \$250 award given to Aysha Quinn's *Excerpts*, also honored at the Ithaca Festival, though her work is, by contrast, technologically minimal and straightforwardly theatrical. *Excerpts* is a diary, according to Quinn, bookending either side of a five-year gap in time. All we see are the conversations of two lovers in bed, but Quinn has managed to imply the entire course of their individual development and relationship in nine minutes of unmannered dialogue. *Excerpts* explores the ephemerality of love with piercing insight because it first establishes the sense of lived experience from which the abstractions emanate.

Quinn's approach exploits video's surveillance camera look to make you feel almost embarrassingly intimate with the couple. The improvised-sounding dialogue combines the routine and metaphysical with a seamlessness that never makes the larger issues appear forced. The art, and the impact of the work, derive from its apparent effortlessness, when in fact it took years to create. The shots look uncomposed, but Quinn uses marvelously subtle changes in framing, camera angle and eye contact to alter moods. Her work dismisses the notion that there's no place for theatricality in video art.

Gordon Jones' *Lazer 1* completed the video program. It is a technically impressive laser light show set to classical music in the tradition of *Fantasia*. This dazzling swirl of image process abstractions is perhaps best described by an old Steve Allen phrase: "bubble gum for the eyes."

The body of works exhibited constitutes a state-of-the-state message on Utah film and video production over the past year. Half of this year's Utah Short Film and Video Festival works were produced by artists who have already, or will soon leave the state. Half of the UMC staff (Montague and Susan Doi) will be leaving as well. Obviously, the continuing health of the local media culture will depend on new artistic contributions and leadership. If this revamping doesn't materialize, it may soon be true that the difference between Utah media arts and yogurt is that yogurt has an active culture.