

## Utah's Video Pioneers: Ready for Prime Time Artists

by Michael Nash

**H**URRY UP, JOHN, YOU'RE ON TV now."

Aysha Quinn, the pragmatist of the pair, summons John Sturgeon from the next room. John is missing the start of his rare broadcast appearance, in a short feature about their video production class, on KSL's *Prime Time Access*. Park City residents Sturgeon and Quinn are Utah's most prominent video artists, but this, ironically, is their first access to prime time during their three-year stint in the state.

KSL's segment focuses on students with business applications in mind for video technology. Margaret Smoot's report is to John and Aysha's artistic work what television is to video — the marketable veneer.

Sturgeon and Quinn, however, are pleased with the coverage because that's precisely what they're desperate for — marketing. They will probably be forced to relocate for want of it. Departing Utah Media Center Director Chris Montague said in a recent interview, "I'm amazed that they have survived in Utah as long as they have. There is no local market at all for video art."

Their reluctant uprooting appears inevitable just as they approach the height of their influence and achievement as video artists. It would be naive to call this paradoxical, but it would be fatuous to accept the "starving artist" rationalization. An inquiry suggests itself.

Montague minces no words in describing the pair's impact on the local scene. "Through their interest, advocacy, teaching, exhibiting, finagling equipment and general willingness to provide a lot of unpaid help, they are largely responsible for everything the Media Center has got going in video, from production to visiting artists to the Park City festival." Given the Media Center's preeminent role in promoting video in Utah, that makes Sturgeon and Quinn the principal proselytizers of the new art in Zion.

And, judging by the success of their production work here, their Utah hiatus from the frantic L.A. scene has helped clarify their respective and collective points of view. Their most recent tapes, Sturgeon's *Spine/Time* and Quinn's *Excerpts* constitute quantum leaps for both artists from their earlier work. The Ithaca Video festival recently honored these tapes by selecting them for its prestigious traveling show (scheduled for Utah exhibition this fall) from a field of over 200 entries. In a surprise to no one, they also split the video prize money in this June's Utah Short Film and Video Festival, far outclassing the field.

*Spine/Time*, also awarded honorable mention at the U.S. Film and Video Festival and second place at the Atlanta Video Festival, fulfills and transcends Sturgeon's 10-year purpose: to yield a visionary experience out of the video process. He mapped the psychic landscape during what video curator David Ross called his "provisional" period, particularly in *I Will Take You* (1977) and *Of Matter, Of Mind* (1978). These works evidence the development of his incantatory narration, poetic construction and eye for the revelatory icon, but don't begin to suggest the scope or technical fluency of *Spine/Time*.

Created over a two-year period and condensed from over 16 hours of tape, this dense experimental work exploits computerized video's "moving time" effects, inviting the viewer to take a mesmerizing hejira through time awareness. (For reviews, see

*Canyon Times* Vol 2 Issue 17 and Vol 3 Issue 1.)

Quinn's sensibility and approach are radically different. Her background in theater contrasts with Sturgeon's fine arts orientation. "I was never fine arts oriented. In kindergarten I distinctly remember breaking all of the crayons out of frustration," Quinn says of her first fine arts performance.

In *Excerpts* the technology is transparent. Quinn describes the work as a diary lapsing over five years, recording the conversations of two lovers in bed. The short exchanges we overhear are the Jungian iceberg tip of the couple's individual and "inter" personalities, with subtle changes reinforced by an understated composition strategy, offering a luminous wealth of implication about the unconscious forces lurking just out of the frame.

Quinn's work has always attempted, in her words, to juxtapose the mundane and metaphysical, most notably in *Shed Your Skin or Die* (1977), but in *Excerpts* they achieve seamless coexistence. Her technique accomplishes such honest characterizations that paranormal preoccupations seem part of the daily routine. *Excerpts* dismisses the fading notion that there's no place for theatricality in video art. (For a review, see *Canyon Times* Vol 3 Issue 1.)

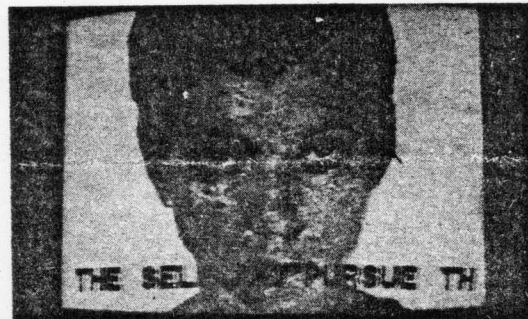
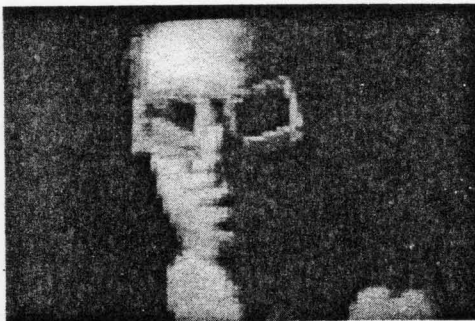
The dissimilarities are deceiving. They act in each other's productions and lend technical as well as conceptual assistance. And in their collaborative performance work, their synergy is evident.

During the pair's Utah residency, the performances have become truly confluent with Quinn's stage presence providing theatrical timing to balance Sturgeon's more spatial fine arts fix. The performances have also become more visible. They broke ground last summer as part of a satellite project, linking video artists in three cities, in a pioneering improvisation that was nationally cable-cast. Their latest performance work, *No Earth/No Earth Station*, first staged in Iowa City in conjunction with the satellite pieces, was recast for showcasing at the Los Angeles County Art Museum on July 26, in connection with the Museum's 20 year retrospective of its Young Talent Awards, which Sturgeon received in 1978.

Their fine arts performance sensibility synthesizes video art, video installation and theater in an improvisational structure that attempts the tricky business of saving the moment of creation for the audience. At the beginning, the station keepers tell us that "We are in a holding pattern," which is true of the construction of the piece as well, for it is a suggestive inquiry, anticipating the terms of its own technical difficulties, creating a zone for particularizing the universal alienation from cause and purpose. When the station keepers abandon the stage at the end, we are confused and uneasy, left with a single burning candle and a projected neon emblem as the sole artifacts representing the "earth station's" continuance.

But the vital tension of different orientations and personalities that is their performances' strength, pressure-cooked in the volatility of extemporaneous exhibition, is not without a downside. "Collaboration is the worst," John muses, and Aysha recalls painfully, "The night before the first performance of *No Earth* I started hitchhiking home."

Such conflict is necessary because it is the subject of the work. The performance problem is the esthetic problem: improvising unity



From John Sturgeon's and Aysha Quinn's individual and collaborative video works. Photos by Todd Gabler.

when reality is divisively subjective, adapting to a kinetic present tense.

Sturgeon and Quinn thrive on adversity; they've incorporated it into their art. But no video artist thrives on indigence, given equipment costs, not to mention house payments, and they haven't been able to translate artistic success into financial viability or adequate post-production facilities here in Utah. So, after three years invested in establishing an outpost of progress in Deseret for what many believe to be the media of the future, they are starting another transition; Sturgeon begins a faculty position at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, this fall, while

Quinn debates her next move. This after "they've gone to just about every local organization they could try to make inroads," according to Chris Montague.

Why can't Utah support two dedicated artists, working in the media of the future, at the prime of their creativity?

Well, in fairness, no video maker earns a living solely from the art as currently exhibited. Video art hasn't broken into broadcast television, so it's limited to museum and festival shows for the serious, curious and dilettantes of the avant-garde.

There is grant money, but it is capriciously awarded, and it runs out. "I've already re-

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start your next round, or try the smoked trout, carved beef or shrimp creole. Oh, what the heck, try a bit of each, and grab a slice of quiche and a barbecued rib.

The efficient staff keeps the offerings fresh. Sit back and enjoy the live piano music while you contemplate the dessert table.

A model of excess, this array includes huge fresh boysenberries, eclairs, chocolate mousse, giant fresh strawberries next to a pot of melted chocolate for dipping, bread pudding with hard sauce, and more. The chef at yet another table will fold a crepe around your choice of fruit and cream cheese fillings and flambe it in peach brandy.

Despite the ornate setting, the dress ranges from three-piece suits to running shorts; do what feels best. Offered from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. this could easily be your only meal of the day. \$10.65. Little America, 500 S. Main, SLC.

**Mulboon's** in Trolley Corners offers outside dining on the umbrellaed patio; hot muffins brought to your table will whet your appetite for "the bountiful buffet."

Crisp green salad, fresh strawberries, melons and juicy pineapple wedges are laid out next to cheese danish, cinnamon rolls and flaky croissants. The friendly young staff in their period knickers and touring caps will make sure you have fresh coffee and juice.

Head for the warming table for traditional breakfast fare: scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, hot eggs benedict and french toast. For a more substantial meal, try the baked halibut or baron of beef, or, try the pineapple chicken made fresh by the gregarious Hawaiian chef.

This relative newcomer is one of the most popular in town already, and if there's a drawback to their brunch, it is the same that affects their dinner — a long wait, first to get in, then at the serving tables. Still, it's Sunday; no reason to hurry. At \$7.95 for adults, \$4.95 for children, this repast is worth the wait. Mulboon's, Trolley Corners, SLC; 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

**Brickyard Seafood** is the newest addition to Sunday's brunch roster, and this fledgling restaurant is really trying. The staff, from waitresses to chefs, seems genuinely con-

cerned. Starting with poached eggs and Canadian bacon perched atop an english muffin and cloaked with hollandaise sauce, is only \$3.95, as is the New York sirloin steak and eggs and the Market Street omelet, filled with tomatoes, mushrooms, onions and chili peppers. All the specialties are served with Market Street potatoes, and freshly squeezed orange juice, homemade cinnamon rolls and fresh strawberries are offered.

A bartender is on duty to provide setups for your "hair of the dog" and after noon mini bottles are available. At these prices, this might be the place to go after a hard Saturday night. Market Street Grill, 50 Post Office Place; 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

**The Cattle Baron** in Emigration Canyon has the best price for a buffet brunch, recently lowered to \$6.95. The staff is more than helpful and it's an attractive restaurant, elegant in an Ethan Allen way. We were disappointed, though, with the canned fruit salad, not very fresh pastries and recently frozen potatoes. The baked salmon was good, but like most of the hot dishes, not very hot.

Omelets are made to order by a bandanaed chef in a covered chuckwagon-turned-kitchen in the middle of the room. This is your best bet here.

The Cattle Baron serves from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Ruth's Diner**, next to the Cattle Baron in Emigration Canyon, offers a mean breakfast on Sunday as they do every day. Try the gargantuan omelets, stuffed with everything from chili to crabmeat, or the homemade whole wheat pancakes. Freshly squeezed orange juice is a treat, and this is one of the few restaurants that brews fresh decaffeinated coffee. Breakfast starts at 8 a.m. (though the intimate atmosphere means it's almost never too early to wait for a table) and ranges from \$3.25 to \$6. For the best view of the canyon, try for a table on the patio.

Enough choices for you? Try a couple of these, then check our next issue for Part II of *Canyon Times'* annual Sunday brunch roundup. Happy eating!

8/15

8:00 p.m. on 20 **Georgy Girl**: Lynn Redgrave, Alan Bates, James Mason, Charlotte Rampling in rarely shown 1966 British comedy of morals.

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8:00 p.m. on 7 **Brubeck at Snowbird**: Gadozooks. Dave at the Bird. Taped last year. Take 5 and relax for an hour.

**NOTES**: Channel 2 is attempting to compete with MTV by offering *Friday Night Videos*, 90 minutes of new music and comedy videos. Fridays at midnight. Channel 7 has been offering different fare for night owls: Saturday evenings at 11 the Cambridge Forum Series, *Threat of Nuclear War*. It is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to "think about the unthinkable" at this ungodly hour, but you might consider urging the station (KUED) to reschedule a prime time showing later in the year.

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ceived my lifetime allotment of Guggenheims and NEA grants," John says. Thus video-makers must resort to related endeavors, usually teaching and commercial production.

Sturgeon has taught at a number of places, including UCLA, and both have been guest instructors at the Art Institute of Chicago. But video is not taught as a fine arts medium on any appreciable scale in the Utah higher education system. Sturgeon and Quinn have resigned themselves to practically giving their time away instructing the Utah Media Center-Studio 3 classes.

And, despite a \$24 million capital investment for video hardware in Utah, commercial video production has been inexplicably dormant. This most of all aggravates Sturgeon and Quinn. "I find it to be bizarre and limiting that there are companies in this state holding on to millions of dollars of state-of-the-art video hardware as though it were just so much more food storage in the basement," Aysha charges, "and actually, almost nothing gets produced."

Ultimately, however, all this may be symp-

cerned Senator Lowell Weicker's father enough to inquire about his son's safety.

The instrumental role that media coverage, especially television, played in the evolution of the event was apparent. Never before had such extensive camera presentation of governmental hearings been undertaken. The notion was to bring the facts into the homes of Americans so they could judge for themselves. The committee members were aware of the power of the medium since an effort was made to schedule at least one witness for comic relief. Humor made political scandal more palatable night after night.

The only disappointment in this genuinely excellent program was one that haunted the committee throughout its existence. They, and we, never got to hear the Nixon tapes. Imagine hearing Nixon swear. Then again, that could never be shown on television, decency codes being what they are today.

omatic of insufficient public support for video art. Despite Quinn and Sturgeon's constituency-building efforts and even with adequate advanced billing, an exhibition of their works May 3 at the Salt Lake Art Center was attended by less than twenty people. If two nationally acclaimed artists can't attract more attention, is Utah ready for video art?

Sturgeon and Quinn remain optimistic. "I think there is a future here for video makers," Aysha says, refusing to generalize her experience. "I just can't see a future for me." John is philosophical: "The artist's supreme objective is to eliminate his own profession by reincorporating it into the dialogue of everyday life."

But the reality, abstractions and good will aside, is that John and Aysha are disheartened, and Utah is about to lose two valuable resources.

"Don't touch that dial, we'll return after a few commercial messages," Utah seems to want Sturgeon and Quinn to say, oblivious to the fact that their artistic statement is to commercial message what video art is to television — a voice crying out in the wilderness.