

LBM A VIDEO

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Television Art

A REPORT by LEWIS MAC ADAMS

In cooperation with UCLA's College of Fine Arts, the Long Beach Museum of Art acted as the Western production unit of a three-hour live television show October 22 that asked many more questions than it answered about the future of artist's TV. The show, broadcast nationwide (mostly to small, rural cable systems) by the Appalachian Community Service Network, suffered a number of serious technological problems - the L.A. feed lost its sound for the first hour of the show - problems that could well have been prevented by more rehearsal time. But scripting for the piece didn't begin until a few weeks before the program was aired. Reportedly, Lexington, Kentucky, where the show was mixed and beamed from, didn't even have a script until the day of the show. The show's "interactivity" also seemed to be hampered by the differences between Iowa City's, New York's and Los Angeles' concept of what the program should be. Iowa City opted for a more sociologically oriented, talking-heads-behind-desks-at-the-university-extension approach. The Iowa City contribution seemed to be a high level review of the electronic culture featuring the likes of John Hanhardt from The Whitney Museum, NY, and Nicholas Johnson, the former FCC Commissioner.

New York's contribution tended toward Performance Art. Due to limited production capability, they relied on pre-recorded tapes of performance pieces, including tapes by Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian (Bogosian's Men In Dark Times produced by NYC's The Kitchen). The pieces were of a professionalism and dramatic intensity that made me think the once-fatuous remark that performance is the breeding ground for the New Television may not be far from right.

L.A. and Long Beach organizers referred to the three-hour project as a "show." L.A. weighed in with a kind of artist vaudeville strategy that featured everything from a Tequila Mockingbird-Peter Ivers funny costume chorus to Bernd Kracke's repeatedly pushing a television set and-over-end up a ramp. The image of Kracke on the TV's screen as he pushed the heavy TV upward gave a thoroughly modern definition to the Sisyphean image he projected. But much of the L.A. approach was vitiated by the hour-long loss of audio.

The most exciting pieces - to think about at least - were the interactive performance pieces between artists in the three cities. Gary Lloyd in L.A. with John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn in Iowa City appeared against chroma-keyed backgrounds, their disembodied heads fading simultaneously in and out of each other like Robert Rauschenberg litho-

graphs while they chanted "we recognize no boundaries, we recognize no limitations." Two guys named Mike (Mike Kelley and Michael Smith) in identically depressing sets in New York and Los Angeles, howled out "Mike" back and forth at each other across the sky. Pier Marton in L.A., Nancy Buchanan in Iowa City and Shalom Gorewitz in New York - "Telepathos" - tried with uncertain success to telepathically transmit simple information among themselves. These pieces all seemed to herald a new kind of socially constructed reality. Watching them, questions like "what is space" and "what does 'here' and 'there' mean" continually boggled the mind. These pieces are clearly the next step beyond Keith Sonnier's open television "holes" between L.A. and New York in the early 70s, a serious advance toward the electronic transfer of personality that is basic to the making of this planet into a truly "global village."

The interactive show was a feast for aficionados of what Jaime Davidovich, the show's Iowa City anchor, called "a three-hour extravaganza of unrehearsed television." Unrehearsed tends to guarantee screw-ups, it is true. But unrehearsed also means the freedom to play around a little, the freedom to stretch out, to expand the form. Robin White, coordinating the show's New York end, may be right in saying "if artists don't want to remain ghettoized, they have to drop the name 'art' and just compete as 'television.'" But one has to wonder where else on television one could find nationwide interactive theatre but under the rubric "artist television." No doubt, someday, interactive will be a household word. But right now it's the artist doing it first. As Nicholas Johnson argued "the real politics of television is access to television." The occasional video class level of the three-hour production argues for more access by artists to broadcasting facilities, not less.

Viewers who were willing to hang in throughout the three hours would have been treated to a piece by Chris Burden, which summed up many of the program's challenges and dilemmas. Burden swept onto the set with a pile of wood shavings and bowed sticks and preceded to try to make fire by rubbing the sticks together. Television cameras rolled up to where Burden was squatting, and viewers and technicians alike peered over Burden's shoulder to see if he could do it in the one minute left before the end of the show. Burden's string broke. Quickly, he replaced it. Tension and drama built to the highest level of the day as everyone stopped what they were doing to watch the oldest act in show business - a man building a fire. The image was riveting, both in the studio and on the screen, but Burden couldn't pull it off before the sign-off. Well, neither could the program exactly. The show could definitely have been better; but by the end, viewers and participants alike knew more than they did when they started. The definition of television itself was pushed out a little further at the edges. And that's a lot more than you could ever say about The Dukes of Hazard.

Lewis MacAdams

Lewis MacAdams' latest book, Africa and The Marriage of Walt Whitman and Marilyn Monroe from Little Caesar Press is now in the stores.

THE ARTIST AND TELEVISION. On Friday, October 22, The University of California Los Angeles, College of Fine Arts, in collaboration with the Long Beach Museum of Art, participated in an interactive satellite teleconference presented by the University of Iowa, the American Television and Communications Corporation, and ACSN (The Learning Channel). The three hour live event raised the question "Is Video Art a legitimate medium" and presented artists, curators, critics and mass media specialists. Los Angeles, Iowa City and Manhattan cooperated to bring this program "live" to a nationwide viewing audience. For more information contact the Long Beach Museum of Art, Kathy Huffman (213) 439-2119 or the College of Fine Arts, U.C.L.A. (213)206-6465 for viewing information.