

MARTOS GALLERY

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Poetic View of TV

By HELEN A. HARRISON

AS early as 1930, when television technology was being developed, David Sarnoff characterized the infant medium as an art form, capable of broadening horizons of esthetic perception and appreciation. Since then, television has seldom lived up to this lofty ideal.

In the last dozen years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in television as art. The first generation of experimenters established the validity of the creative use of video, although one wonders if their abstract concepts and synthetic images were quite what Mr. Sarnoff had in mind.

The current video installation at the Firehouse Gallery of Nassau Community College is appropriately entitled "Video Vis a Tergo" in an effort to identify this artistic approach as a "force from behind," an alternative to the commercial and theatrical vanguard. It is described by the gallery's curator, Curtis Crystal, as a second-generation show, with little evidence of the psychedelic color distortions and spacial flights of fancy so prevalent a decade ago.

The tapes, all made within the last three years and ranging in length from one to 60 minutes, are shown on four monitors lent by the Sony Corporation and Harvey Sound of Woodbury. The entire program lasts nearly four hours.

Although there is no unity of either style or content, the show's overall focus seems to be subjective and poetic, rather than formal or purely visual. Many of the tapes use written or spoken interpolations rather than dialogue or straight narration. Even the pieces that could most fairly be described as documentaries are highly personal and make little attempt at objectivity.

Michel Auder's "Portrait of Alice Neel" is far from a straightforward conversation with the irrepressible and calculatingly outrageous artist. The camera cannot resist straying to the background landscape or focusing on wisps of her delightfully unkempt hair, using these interpretive clues to heighten the impact of her spoken revelations.

What begins as a documentary on the

life and customs of the primitive and violent Yanomami Indians of Venezuela evolves as a personal odyssey by Juan Downey. His desire not merely to record but to confront and ultimately be consumed by his subject results in an uneven but disturbing and provocative piece.

In "Mothers Are Always Daughters," Joan Logue has created a deeply moving portrait of herself and her mother with minimum contrivance. As the two women sit almost silent and motionless before the camera, concentrating on their own images in an unseen monitor, they make contact through the very medium that records their reactions. As we and they watch, self-consciousness becomes dialogue, introspection and emotion. The artist adds a temporal dimension to portraiture and exploits the unique capacity of video to allow the subjects to see and be seen simultaneously.

Compared to this innovative work, "Watch," the short study of a television viewer by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, seems slick and contrived.

Quite the opposite is true of Alan Sondheim's "South-Western Tape," a study of cultural dislocation expressed through words, images, sounds and scenic changes that emphasize the artist's theme of lost contact with the collective "way."

Davidson Gigliotti's journey across the Minnesota landscape in a hot-air balloon concentrates on the abstract qualities of the region's agricultural terrain and is at its best when the artist zeroes in on the fields, lakes and even the rooftops of suburbia. The longer shots, more documentary in the objective sense, unfortunately break the piece's dominant mood of heightened perception.

"Plural Bells," by an artist who calls herself "Anna Livia," is the closest thing to pure formalism in the show. An introductory text from "Finnegans Wake" precedes a series of seductive close-ups of objects shown briefly and then at greater length. As in the James Joyce quotation, rhythmic relationships are essential ingredients.

"Video Vis a Tergo" runs through March 27. The gallery is open Mondays through Fridays from 11 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. and Wednesday evenings from 7 to 9 P.M. Further information may be obtained by calling 222-7165. ■