

Toronto video artists explore...

High tech art

by Ted Fox

They exist in warehouses, a former garage or auto repair shop, the basement of a house, and a storefront. They are organizations like Trinity Square Video and The Arts Television Centre. Here Toronto video artists produce, exhibit and distribute their work. The medium they have chosen has advantages and disadvantages, but all are using it rather than film.

Prior to 1971, working artists didn't have such a choice. At that time video was a new technological tool, and Trinity Square Video was founded to educate the public in its use. As a community program of Toronto's Church of the Holy Trinity, Trinity Square Video was funded by the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. In 1977 it became a non-profit charitable organization with independent membership. Through the years it has become a fully functional production center for artistic, cultural video.

Of its current 123 members, ten belong to community-based groups that employ video to address community problems in a political way. (Single membership is \$100 per year. Organizations with a gross yearly income of less than \$250,000 pay \$200 per year.) Members use the facilities for video production, post-production, titling, editing, video installations and television re-scanning. There is in-house and mobile access, a viewing area, an information center and electronic design consultation. A regular program of workshops offers the public an overall introduction to video technology.

"I think the criticisms of video as a technical tool are well founded," says Patricia Wilson, Trinity's general manager. "Video artists are quite enamoured with working with light as a medium. There is an affection for the electronic image-making techniques that you can get with video and video interface with computers that you can't possibly get with film. To compare the two is unfair. Film has a beauty and tranquility that

video will never have because of the way it impacts on the human eye." She adds that as a teaching tool video has the immediate playback quality of a computer and can best be seen in a very intimate setting of 30-40 people.

Wilson argues that both film and video employ different languages. Theater influenced early filmmakers; film influences the style of videomakers. "In *Grapes of Wrath* there are scenes that are visually set up for theater. It's a film set up for theater. We have video producers who shoot like they're still filmmakers. And I can see the setups."

One of Trinity's members - Nancy Nicol - is a video producer and mixed media artist. She made the tape *Mini Skools Pays Mini Wages*, an account of a strike by daycare workers in Mississauga. With the Women's Media Alliance she worked on a tape on Jessies, a center for teenage mothers.

For Nicol video breaks down the shyness and intimidation that people might feel when they are faced with a camera. "Video", she states, "demystifies the whole process of making film in a very immediate way. You can play back into the situation what you have been recording. You can involve the people who are the subjects of the production in the production itself. I have a journalistic approach: I try to get at the truth."

Nicol makes provocative work quite cheaply and shows it to small intimate groups where discussions follow. "Video gives the final image an artificially contrasty look. There are much lower costs involved in making video. We did Jessies for a little over \$4000 and Mini Skools for about \$300."

Since film has much more light latitude, she does shoot a lot of Super8 and then transfer to video. "I would like to work with film. It is the budget that always throws me. I just can't face having to raise money, get tax shelter and try to raise private investment. Being involved in the business aspects of filmmaking can lead one away from the immediacy of the work and its creative aspects."

Trinity's archives hold tapes that cover the beginnings of Toronto's community activities in the early '20s, as well as more recent video developments. Others cover recent CRTC hearings and the Federal Cultural Policy

Review Committee Hearings. Artists' tapes are constantly added to the collection through monies supplied by the Toronto Arts Council. "We consider the overall scene culturally," says Wilson, "and what is produced by community, artistic or cultural people." Purchases include documentaries that deal with political issues in a clean and objective way, and docudramas that confront problems experienced by people in society and the workplace.

Tapes produced at Trinity have shown internationally - the Frontier series presented by WNED-TV in Buffalo, the San Francisco Festival, the Berlin Show, the Venice Biennial and the Kijkhuis Worldwide Video Festival in Amsterdam.

Lawrence Adams, director of The Arts Television Centre, firmly supports the work of groups like Trinity. "It's amazing that they get anything done because they deal with poor equipment and work in very adverse conditions. But they do it. They've got a lot of guts. I'm sympathetic to their goals. And I will help them any way that I can. We need them to keep the community alive."

Officially opened on May 31, 1984, The Arts Television Centre is a dream come true for Lawrence and Miriam Adams who have struggled for three years to make it happen. Canadian artists and organizations (whether filmmakers, actors, technicians, writers, or photographers) can now become part of an environment that can produce high quality work for television. And no membership is necessary.

"The arts have to move toward television production simply as part of a diversification that is coming to society. There has not been a happy relationship between the arts and television," says Adams.

In 1969 the Adams gave up dancing careers with the National Ballet and opened 15 Dance Lab with a view to choreographing and teaching. It became a showcase for the avant-garde works of over 100 choreographers. To interview the choreographers and record their works, the Adams set up a small video production facility.

Due to the increasingly positive reac-

tions of local working artists, they decided to expand. In January 1983 they renovated a former garage and auto repair shop that they leased for 60% of the normal rent for a downtown location. Nearly a year of funding problems passed before sources of capital became available.

In November 1983 a capital grant of \$50,000 was approved by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture; this was followed by another \$50,000 from the Federal Government's Cultural Initiatives Program. Operated by the Visus Foundation as a non-profit arts organization, the Centre now receives assistance from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.

The studio, complete with dressing rooms, can be rented for any artistic endeavour such as casting, auditioning or filming. There is also in-house rental of the video equipment.

Several projects are lined up for the fall. Seminars will take place on varied topics including television as a marketing medium and the costs involved in television production. A series of colloquia will immerse artists in the potential of television. These colloquia, Adams feels, should prove very helpful to filmmakers since to survive they must adapt and branch out in new directions. "Film people have to take their values from their own experiences, wits and minds. That's what's good about them. The fact that they are filmmakers has nothing to do with it. There are some great filmmakers in this country and what's great is them. It's not the tools they use. The tools are changing. You can't keep making films like you used to. Its impossible. We live in a different kind of media environment."

At Charles Street Video 100 member-artists use the post-production facilities. Members contribute significant amounts to the budget, and arts council subsidies now account for only 40% of the budget as compared with 95% in the past.

The main tape format here is 3/4" whereas broadcast tape formats are mainly 1 or 2 inch. "We're basically in the same league as small industrial post-

VIDEO

production houses," says director Michael Brook.

For Brook the film and video media each have limitations that determine how an artist develops. "In video if you shoot sunsets you burn the tubes. Whereas in film sunsets are beautiful. If you shoot video at night under spotlights they burn in and lag and trails result. In film you don't get that. In video you end up not having bright points of light in your image."

"As a generalization," Brook adds, "people working in film have much higher production values. If they switched over to video the costs would be inherently higher immediately because they are used to having a crew. It's only now that video people are starting to say: 'Gee, perhaps I should get somebody besides me to do the sound.'"

International video distribution comprises 90% of the activity of Art Metropole. To document, collect, publish and disseminate information on the work of avant-garde artists was the main reason for its establishment in 1974. Work includes multiple media formats such as

recordings, videotapes, installations and performances. Works made in another medium and transferred to video are not distributed. "We don't provide any kind of production facilities," says video curator Christina Ritchie, "nor do we act in any kind of agency capacity for artists that we represent."

A retail shop sells international avant-garde material such as postcards, posters, records and magazines. Art Metropole also publishes books and critical anthologies. *Video By Artists*, published in 1976, was the first publication in Canada to deal with artists' video.

"I think video is only a tool," says Ritchie, "and as an artist you select the tool according to its efficacy. There are qualities specific to video that are distinct from film. One is physical and chemical. The other is electronic."

Ritchie feels that it is more expensive to produce the same professional quality as a film. There is not enough equipment available, and to access it in a professional studio can cost anywhere from \$250 to \$500 an hour.

"The interest in video on the part of filmmaker is more with regard to its

ease of distribution. If you want your film to be distributed in a home video store it's totally appropriate that it be on video."

There are two main exhibition spaces for video artists in Toronto. Both are members of the Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres (ANNPAC).

A Space has approximately 1000 square feet that artists may use to exhibit experimental works related to contemporary art. Recently new video work was shown from Britain as part of the British-Canadian Video Exchange '84.

The Artculture Resource Centre (ARC) has an exhibition/performance space that is accessible via a street level storefront. In April it hosted the second annual International Festival of Video. Seven countries participated - West Germany, Belgium, Canada, France, Great British, the United States and Japan. Video artists from these countries gave lectures and workshops giving both the public and the community artists an overview of new international developments in video.

Video is soon to play a role in the programming at The Funnel, an organization serving as a production, exhibition and distribution center for avant-garde film.

Of video the director/programmer Michaelle McLean says: "To be a technical purist is very very limiting. Some of the video work that I have seen suffers because artists have not paid enough attention to the practical and theoretical work that has already been done in film. Some video artists appear to have not taken advantage of film development, of how audiences read images, and relate to certain kinds of cutting."

For her film and video have a lot in common. "It's important for film and video makers to see them present and in the same venue."

The dividing line between film and video is blurring. More and more artists are shooting on film and editing on video, or shooting on film and distributing on video. There is an integration of the electronic immediacy of tape and the aesthetic qualities of film. A new media environment has arrived.



● Art Metropole distributes works by video artists like Tomiyo Sasaki whose 60-minute tape *Sunday 4 pm* was made in 1982