

IN THE INTERESTS OF CONFLICT

Long Beach / Hunter Drohojowska

For all of those who've forsaken video art as a pastime more boring than cricket, the tape-installations at the Long Beach Museum of Art just might change your mind. Kathy Huffman, acting curator at Long Beach since Nancy Drew's recent appointment to the National Endowment for the Arts, has brought together the works of Peter D'Agostino, Charlemagne Palestine and John Caldwell. Each artist designed his own installation space, and although there is no intentional "theme," a sense of anger and confrontation provides a cohesive flow.

D'Agostino's *Proposal For QUBE* confronts the pretense of the participatory cable system, QUBE, in Columbus, Ohio. In theory, this two-way system enables customers to interact with their TV. They may respond to questions flashed on the screen by pushing one of the five selection buttons on the QUBE console. D'Agostino's tape is divided into five segments that correspond to those selection buttons, with the intention of letting the audience edit their own version of his art (120 variations are possible). Each of the segments represents some area of the media: text, newspaper, photograph, film clip and video performance. Particularly ironic is a film clip from *The Projectionist*, where Buster Keaton dreams that he is able to climb right into the silver screen and "participate." Certainly, QUBE encourages this fantasy, but as D'Agostino found, the interaction only operates on the level of a simple-minded game show. In the video segment, Phil Donahue's voice-over explains the QUBE process while increasing numbers of dice are rolled over a photograph of the QUBE console, reinforcing the concept of selection and chance.

D'Agostino's tape also attacks the political issues of feedback and ideology in a media system. He questions the almost sacred McLuhanesque canon that maintains video is automatically "participatory." His accompanying installation of white cubes offers various "Quotes from QUBE," the press release version of the system's function, and "Quotes to QUBE," the limitations that D'Agostino has encountered. Although he was encouraged by QUBE to do his "proposal," bureaucratic red tape and delay prevented it from being aired.

Palestine's anger is internally directed in *Dark Into Dark*. His background as a musician helps to make this a dramatically cathartic piece, bringing us to the outer limits of sanity and civilization. Seated in a darkened room, we hear at first only the odd clacking and muttering noises of the "enemy." Then two pinpoints of light reflect from the lenses of his glasses. In slow crescendo, a battle swells between Palestine and the "invisible enemy." His face emerges from the darkness, a garish mask of video hues. Contorted in the agony of two personalities, he looms enormous on the Advent screen. He hums, cackles and screams in a ritual of schizoid rage, trying

to exorcise the demon-enemies plaguing his soul.

"No, No! I thought we made a deal!" he says. A foreign voice from the same mouth says, "No deals!" When his face becomes fully visible, Palestine is haggard and drinking, "I'll get rid of you...I'll drink you away!" He shatters a series of glasses on the floor and looks at the camera with sad, lucid eyes and says, "It's me, too, you know." Then, "SHUT-UP! Leave me alone!" And as the face recedes back into the darkness, the invisible enemies appear to have won. A chuckling Palestine admits, "It'll pass, it'll pass..." *Dark Into Dark* hurts — it's uncomfortable to watch, impossible to ignore, and thankfully free of the sterility that is so much a part of this decade's art.

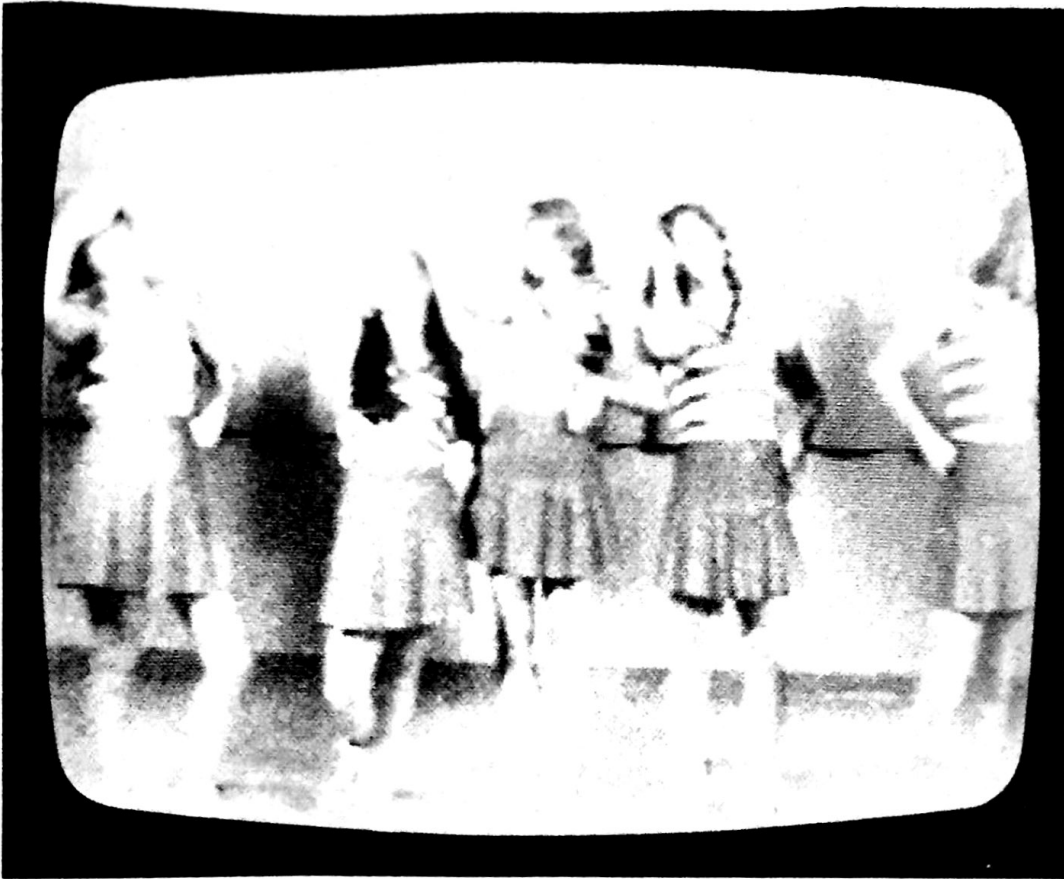
Caldwell's *Flame Jumper Series* touches on issues common to the other tapes, and much more. The tight structure of the forty-minute tape just barely keeps the complexity of the information from overwhelming the viewer. Caldwell offers a wide range of emotionally charged problems through the distanced objectivity of the media altar. Social, political and moral dilemmas are presented, with all their inherent

Continued on next page



CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE: Still (detail) from *Dark to Dark*, 1979, video, at the Long Beach Museum of Art. Photo: William Hellermann.

Video



JOHN CALDWELL: Still from the Flame Jumper Series, video.

contradictions, in a "useless" esthetic format. Solutions are not proffered because solutions do not exist. He explores the ongoing breakdown of interpersonal relationships, our depressing blindness to surrounding evils, the conflict between growth of civilization and preservation of nature, and the relativity of what we think of as "truth."

The title refers to Caldwell's concept of the TV as the new hearth around which the family and the greater family, i.e., society, gather. His installation in the viewing gallery functions as a physical extension of the video elements. Black and white cutouts of cheerleaders are suspended from the ceiling. On the video these same cheerleaders shout out Caldwell's messages with inappropriate cheer. Small alfalfa cubes littering the floor outline silhouettes of animals. The grassy odor, totemic wall paintings and occasional strains of tribal music affect the viewer on a visceral, almost primitive level. Yet the monitor projects archetypical, twentieth century suburbanites acting out "double bind" situations of schizophrenia. One character pulls a certain response from another, only to contradict the response with unpredictable behavior. The disembodied voice of a public health worker reveals dreadful, inner-city case histories, as a woman in a baboon mask peers in the windows of a conventional tract home. A truck cruises normal suburban streets, its P.A. system announcing an abridged summary of man's accumulated philosophy through the centuries. Towards the end of the tape, a clip of baboons in a tree is accompanied by a voice that explains that no matter where man exists, he believes himself to be the center of the universe.

As various historically accepted "truths" are compacted and interwoven, we find that "truth" is very much a matter of context. Simplified educational symbols try to clarify the issues and make us think about them, but the tape does not attempt to draw conclusions. Caldwell's work is not dada, nor is it an exercise in absurdity. The point is that there is no point, and the intricacy of the presentation is an attempt to avoid the arrogance of pretending to know. Facts, fantasies and heresies are provided, and it is up to each viewer to find the solutions. □