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Protest, identity themes at lesbian/gay film fest

By GREGG BORDOWITZ

There are a number of compelling works in the Fifth New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, scheduled for Sept. 9-15 at the Anthology Film Archives (32 Second Ave.). To the credit of the organizers, Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, the festival is a comprehensive view of independent work—mostly film, a few videos, an installation and a performance. In a testament to the prolific character of queer media producers, the selection is completely different from that shown at the recent Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. There's a lot of new work and a few old gems—in particular, an unknown Andy Warhol film.

Much of the new work reveals that now is a time for critical reflection in the lesbian and gay community. The AIDS movement galvanized our forces of resistance, but the movement has been experiencing growing pains. After 10 years of fighting AIDS, we must develop new directions and strategies to counter the country's frighteningly conservative mood.

A DECADE OF PROTEST

"Two Marches" by Jim Hubbard is an eight-minute hand-held, hand-processed diaristic film. By comparing images from the 1979 and 1987 National Lesbian and Gay Marches in Washington, it provides an opportunity to reflect emotionally upon the state of the lesbian and gay liberation movement.

At the 1979 event, the people marching seem to be filled with enthusiasm—angry, defiant and proud. These images are underscored by Tom Robinson's famous song "(Sing If You're) Glad to be Gay." The cumulative effect is a bittersweet feeling of rage fused with optimism.

In contrast, the 1987 march was a time of mourning, dominated by feelings of loss for people who have died during the epidemic and for the hopes and dreams that sometimes seem lost with them. The emerging activism it inspired was driven, in part, by the intensity of grief. The music of Michael Callen—a person with AIDS—underscores images of the AIDS quilt. As in his previous works, Hubbard has successfully used images of protest in a cinematic inquiry into the problems of representing struggles.

"Voices from the Front" by the Testing the Limits Collective is a comprehensive 88-minute video documenting the political evolution of ACT UP and AIDS activism in the United States. Interviews with a diverse group of activists are juxtaposed with documentation of the historic protests at the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the San Francisco AIDS Con-



ACT UP members cap Dan Rather and the 'CBS Evening News' last year.

ference, the Day of Desperation and more. Although this piece is inspiring, it fails to address the complex emotional experience of AIDS activism. The most disturbing aspect is that a huge number of the activists interviewed are now dead—and this is not acknowledged until the end of the tape.

It is surprising that no one comments on these deaths. This tape took over two years to produce, and the deaths that occurred during that time among the small circles of activists represented most certainly played a role in their thinking. That omission seriously hinders the video's ability to provoke new insights into the future of AIDS activism.

In "Identities," a seven-minute video piece by Nino Rodriguez, an obviously ill man sitting on a living room couch makes motions to speak. He utters few words. He never manages to start a sentence. Rodriguez edited the piece focusing on the moments before and after speech.

The result is a meditation on the social position of the person with AIDS. The dominant media have progressed to the point where they allow people with AIDS to speak, but only within very narrow parameters. Recognizing this, Rodriguez has produced a work that addresses the limits of representation placed on people with AIDS. By not allowing the subject to speak, he plays with the expectations of an audience that has by now viewed many works that present people with AIDS merely as the embodiment of a disease.

As an HIV-positive person, I know how

the experience of speaking publicly about one's illness can make one feel diminished. I have sometimes felt like my identity was reduced to my HIV status, and I am an activist who has fought hard to change the image of people with HIV and AIDS in the media. More complex representations of people with AIDS and HIV are needed to wrest control of the discussion of AIDS out of the hands of the dominant media and place it in the control of the affected people themselves.

IDENTITY IS THE CRISIS

Prathiba Parmar's work is concerned with the complex forces that shape subjectivities—the ways our identities are constituted by the aggregation of our identifications along lines of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, region, physical status, etc.; many identities that exist in constant shifting relation to one another contingent upon context and social forces. Her 24-minute work "Khush" considers the emergence of self-identified lesbian and gay South Asians. Juxtaposing interviews with footage culled from Indian cinema, this piece works toward the enfranchisement of lesbian and gay South Asians in view of India's colonial history and current cultural forces that repressively shape the discussion of sexuality.

Two animated pieces deserve mention.

"Prowling By Night" is a five-minute piece by and about prostitutes in Toronto. It is extremely effective at conveying the issues sex workers face and the ways they resist oppression by the police. The animation also resists stereotypical views of prostitution by questioning the supposedly realistic representations of the lives of sex workers produced by the dominant media. "Negative Man" by Cathy Joritz is a brilliant three-minute scratch animation piece. As a social worker explains how to deal with a difficult client, doodles appear and disappear over his face and body, constantly changing his persona and revealing his unconscious thoughts.

WAR AND MARRIAGE

A number of pieces critically look at the Gulf war from a queer perspective: "Waiting for War" by Maria Maggenti, "The Star-Spangled Basher" by Carl Michael George and "Broken English" by Derek Jarman, which features Marianne Faithfull's music intercut with anti-war imagery. Also, look for Marguerite Pars' "October 1967 Pentagon Peace March," a 10-minute retelling of the attempt to "levitate the Pentagon."

Su Friedrich makes an anthropological contribution to the festival. "First Comes Love" is a 22-minute study of heterosexual marriage customs. Fragmented reportage of straight couples entering a church to get married is interrupted by a list of all the countries that forbid same-sex marriages—every one in the world except Denmark. Images of the wedding parties leaving the church reveal the posed nature of the event, as the married couples are ordered around by photographers who completely choreograph the scene for the sake of photographs. The film is radical because it is an assault on one of the primary institutions within the order of compulsory heterosexuality. Additionally, it presumes a lesbian and gay audience, and it invites this audience to participate in the critical dismantling of specifically heterosexual institutions. Could this lead to a dismantling of those institutions? Why not? An army of queer cultural anthropologists could turn compulsory heterosexuality into a disenfranchised mess.

In addition to the films I've mentioned there are a large number of must-see shorts, new and old—"Thank You Masked Man" featuring Lenny Bruce, "Thanksgiving Prayer for William Burroughs" by Gus Van Sant, "The Diane Linkletter Story" by John Waters and many more.