

VIDEO

Michael Portis

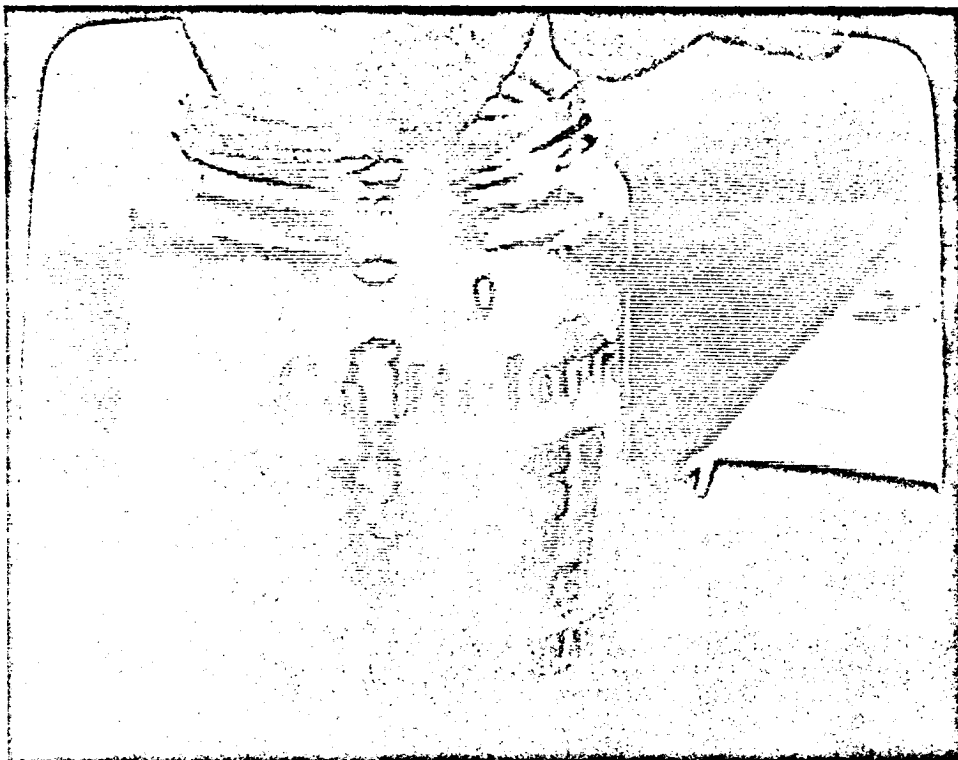
San Francisco James Hugunin
 Michael Portis' videotapes, included in *Southland Video Anthology* at the San Francisco Museum of Art, are examples of what the artist so aptly calls "interesting art." It is Portis' intent to "extract from reality the obvious and humorous and clarify it."

I spent several evenings with Mr. Portis learning about his three tapes: 1) *Hosanna Machine* (1974); 2) *Second Hosanna Machine* (1975); and 3) *Chocolate As An Antidote For Jalapenos* (1975).

Hosanna Machine represents about six hours of videotape that was edited down to a half-hour. During this half-hour Portis sits in an old armchair and in a stream-of-consciousness-like monologue reveals the attempt of "chaotic mind in time striving to be released into unified mind within timelessness." He gesticulates spasmodically, adopts various accents (he finds *his* voice "totally boring") and lapses into infantile gibberish. Yet there is a sense of structure in the vocalic distortions, the spasmodic bodily movements and the thematic material of this tape. A rhythm akin to music and dance (Portis' avocations) is generated by his "energies." Portis manages to carry on a critique of Knowledge, Being and Language in this tape: "What da haps? I wanna know. You got truth? I wanna know. I ain't gonna say I don't know no mo'." And: "I wanna feel real. I'm gonna be a different thing. The way I am is totally disassociated with the way it is!" Or: "Everything that I am is inside of my skin, how am I gonna control it? Am I gonna pull out stops; am I gonna put down trill? I gotta get in touch with my energy, man."

Portis' "kinesis" (bodily movement) is the process whereby actualization or 'energeia' is achieved which, once attained, allows unimpeded flow of activity or energy. During the best moments of *Hosanna Machine* Portis reaches such levels in his speech and movements. In this tape Portis literally is his Art; he even states, "I sorta am my Art."

The final segment of *Hosanna Machine* sees the artist replaced by an odd contraption (the *Hosanna Machine*) with a long flexible metal strip extending from the Machine directly toward and a few inches in front of the camera lens. Portis recites a monologue in an Indian guru's accent about the "time-line of wanting," and *Hosanna Man*, who "closes the fissures of wanting, making contact with external reality," and who has the "ability to will his will, to want what it gets." Simultaneously the flexible strip moves perpendicular with respect to the axis of the lens, aided by occasional pushes from the artist's hand. The effect is a visual equivalent to the monologue. The viewer's desire to see the instant of the board's coincidence with the lens axis is frustrated. We can't quite "get" the moment; we can only perceive the general sweep of the board. Our time is too slow to perceive the instantaneous moments of the motion. Something always escapes us. And so with his monologues, where many times sentences are not completed, or move directly into sounds, nonsense or silence. The syntagmatic dimension of speech, the association of word after word (linear and irreversible), is usurped by language's second dimension, the associative. Portis employs repetitions, carves up sentence structure, associates words by sound rather than meaning, destroying to a great extent the linear aspect of normal speech patterns. Within the context of Language Art today, this tape is especially innovative. It represents a maturation



MICHAEL PORTIS: Still from *Chocolate is an Antidote for Jalapenos*, 1975, videotape, at the San Francisco Museum of Art, included in *Southland Video Anthology*.

of the body art/self-confessing type video, yet still remains a very personal expression of the artist.

The *Second Hosanna Machine* is a tape of an animated film made from 360 individual black and white slides of a person sweeping in a parking lot. Keeping the camera-to-subject distance constant, Portis moved the figure in relation to a wall in the background. The effect produced is of a stationary figure sweeping ground right from under his feet as he rushes toward, then away from the background. This tape contains three distinct variations: 1) the figure moves at a constant rate toward the wall while the sweeping is chaotic; 2) the figure's sweeping is more uniform, but the movement becomes erratic, the figure coming toward, then away from the wall; 3) the sweeping is very smooth, but now the disruption of the figure in space is increased. The transition from the first to the second phase in the tape was accomplished with a mechanical lap dissolve, where frames from the first phase were mixed with those of the second in diminishing ratios until the second phase was completely achieved. The technique Portis used included a graph of the initial slides by space and time, allowing him to choose the appropriate set of slides to achieve the desired tempo of sweeping versus movement in space.

Portis hinted that the three phases or orders were metaphors for stages of Being which he calls: 1) Spasmodic Effort — the time-line of wanting, spasmodic desire; 2) *Hosanna Man* — the suppression of desire and the acceptance of what may befall us; 3) *Intentional Man* — desire reappears, but what we desire is no longer out of harmony with the Universe. Appropriately Portis pulled this quote from Advayavajra out of his desk drawer: "The judicious man who has fully / experienced that man's inmost / nature is appreciation and action / in one, because (his mind) has been / swept swept clear of (such conceptual / dirt as) the without and the within, / is in a state of bliss. There are no / more spasmodic efforts." The quote can be seen as a key to the motivations behind his tapes. Portis wants us to be better people after viewing the tapes. He closely identifies his life with his art,

the result being that talking to him in person is very much like watching his tapes.

Portis' last tape, *Chocolate As An Antidote For Jalapenos*, takes what in Mexico is a cultural association, and by putting it out of its cultural context creates an absurd, humorous association. The tape stresses the relativity of meaning in cultures. A very factual (denotative) statement — "Chocolate is an antidote for hot peppers" — is transformed into a metaphorical (connotative) sentence. On the screen a hand reaches into a large jar of peppers...amplified sounds of munching...then calmly picks up and opens a bar of chocolate...more munching...then the end. Have we been told the antidote to "hot" information? If we can't stand his tapes, are we to find something "sweeter"?

Portis' videotapes are interesting, are antidotes to the large volume of boring video that seems to be around today. While challenging the viewer visually and verbally, his tapes refrain from any pretentiousness or pedantry, and are never sentimental. His work is coherent, yet full of surprises. He has expressed a desire to communicate more extensively on an explicative level in his future tapes, but it remains to be seen how this will affect the mystical elements in his work.

In parting I asked Michael if the tapes were hard for him to do. He replied, "I think it should be very easy to make art. It is learning what you want to do and then doing it." Michael Portis had done it. □

Michael Portis is one of over sixty artists included in Southland Video Anthology, which was organized and originally shown at the Long Beach Museum of Art. When the large Anthology was on view there, parts of it were reviewed in the July 26, August 9 and August 23 issues of ARTWEEK.

James Hugunin, who is writing in ARTWEEK for the first time, was previously a contributing editor for Straight Turkey, a now-defunct art magazine published in Los Angeles. He has also written about photography.