

READER

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New Fare for the Broadcast Diet

THE IMAGE UNION on WTTW, Channel 11

By B. Ruby Rich

The *Image Union* is a brand-new program on WTTW about which you're likely to hear a lot more. A one-hour show emphasizing Chicago-made independent film and video, it premiered this past Thursday and is slated to reappear at 10:30 PM on alternating Thursdays for a long time. *The Image Union* is an important program, both for its content and for its very existence. To appreciate just how important, a little backtracking is necessary.

Once upon a time, there was a brand-new program on WTTW designed to emphasize independent film and video (in the mood for *deja vu*?). The package invented to make the show interesting featured a star personality (Gene Siskel), audience participation (a telephone call-in line), and an offbeat format (all night long, which isn't called the *psycho shift* for nothing). Sure enough, the combined studio and call-in personalities quickly took over the focus of the show, leading to wounded outrage on the part of our independent producers, who felt their work was being demeaned, and to a wholesale tune-out by all those viewers with a greater interest in film/tape than in lonely-heart's-club socializing. A state of demoralization set in. Product for the show became scarce, local boosters even scarcer. WTTW had meant well, but *Nightwatch* became a bad joke.

Enter constructive action. In far-off New York City, the Global

Village video center had received a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to stage a number of regional conferences aimed at opening up lines of communication between independent producers and their various local PBS stations. The timing couldn't have been better. Their Chicago workshop took place last May, cosponsored by WTTW and the very new Chicago Editing Center, the city's first production facility for independent video. By the end of the third day, no doubt everyone else involved was as amazed as I that the Global Village had somehow precipitated exactly the process it was intended to set off.

It all started when WTTW president William J. McCarter came down to the Editing Center's facility to make one of those obligatory introductory speeches befitting his position. Instead of the usual polite applause, however, he was met with a vehement outburst of criticism by members of the film and video community gathered there to have their say. The dissatisfactions were aimed at the unanimously despised *Nightwatch* as well as at WTTW's whole attitude in dealing with outside producers, both artistically and financially. McCarter's perfunctory appearance stretched out to a three-and-a-half hour grievance session in which, according to all reports, he conducted himself admirably, fielding complaints, really hearing the criticisms, and promising both a follow-up meeting and corrective action. To McCarter's credit, he kept his word. The second meeting permitted an airing of prob-

lems minus hostility, building the cooperative atmosphere that led to the November debut of *The Image Union* under the direction of Tom Weinberg, the man who had helped arrange the workshop, who had been one of the few local videomakers able consistently to work with WTTW, and who has the trust of both independents and the station. A natural liaison.

So much for the background. With all said and done, the show still has to stand on its own—a task that it can handle, I'm glad to say, quite well.

Weinberg has dispensed with the studio host as a connective tissue, preferring to program the material in such a way that it provides its own structure and explanation. Because there is just one hour to work with, he has opted for combining short works with excerpts from longer ones (a practice that is usually deplorable, but which actually worked rather well in the context of broadcast time considerations). The first *Image Union* offered 11 different films and videotapes, with quirky fillers sometimes separating them or breaking up the mood in key spots: these ranged from Swiss and German television commercials to old clips of Mayor Daley (saying, for example, "the police force is not here to create disorder, it is here to preserve disorder").

The whole point of a show like *The Image Union* is to give us the kind of fare not ordinarily available on the airwaves, even on the PBS frequency. The selections that worked best on the show were those most unlike the norm, with the selections that tried too hard

to look like the big leagues suffering most by comparison. Into this latter category fell the one dramatic film, *The Assassins* by Charles Robert Carner, and Kathy Shubert's heartwarming dog party *Ingrid (She Knows)*. Both tried hard to look like standard television material and suffered from a broadcast context that threw them into close proximity with their models. Ultimately, programs like this should either be up to PBS standards (and, therefore, programmed on the network) or left

VIDEO

off altogether, lest *The Image Union* become a PBS waiting-room.

On the other hand, several of the portrait-style documentaries pointed up the richness of materials normally left out of our television diet. *Such a Day* by Maxi Cohen and Joel Gold, makers of the Chicago Film Festival hit *Joe and Maxi*, sketched a musical portrait of Otto and Margaret Falkenburg, residents of the Clark-Irving Senior Apartments. *The Bums*, by Scott Jacobs and Valjean McLenighan, peered into the camaraderie and panhandling techniques of a close-knit circle of San Francisco winos (a portrait made sadly topical by the recent strike of the Skid Row killer in L.A.).

The show traversed a wide sample of approaches to film and video. Many gave a good idea of how people live their lives in this city: the girls' self-defense class in Kartemquin's *Now We Live on Clifton*; the election pollstering in *TV Magic Ballots* by Cindy Neal, Lilly Ollinger, and Tom Finerty; the archetypal footage of Big Time Sarah, Bonnie Lee, and Sunnyland Slim performing at Elsewhere, taken from a Jim Passin-Nancy Grosse videotape. Other works explored less predictable terrain: the synthesized color images of Barbara Sykes's mock-primitive *Electronic Masks*; the flip acknowledgement of the broadcast context in Jane Veeder's one-minute confession; the wacky humor in *A Message From the Power Company*, in which Warren Leming and Nate Herman combined their own comic monologues with Larry Bafia's clay animation for a parody of corporate public relations exposing the truth behind the message.

Of greatest interest in the show was the one work that critiqued mainstream television via its own format and message, *Television Delivers People*, by Richard Serra and Carlotta Schoolman. It is a simple tape, with all the force of simplicity brilliantly executed. The tape consists of nothing but rolling titles, moving up the screen at a leisurely pace accompanied by a Muzak sound track—literally a replica of cable telecasting and a metaphor for television in general. Expanding on the theme of its title, the rolling text provides the viewer with a series of statements analyzing the relation of

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television to consumerism, advertising to programming, audience to sponsor—all this accomplished quickly, smoothly, without rhetoric or pedantry. Simultaneously art and education, the tape takes on broadcast television on its own terms, for example: "You are the

product of television" ... "the consumer is consumed" ... "there is an inherent conflict between Commerce, Information, Entertainment," and so on.

Television Delivers People was no doubt made for an art gallery context, where such videotapes are regularly screened on video monitors for small audiences (much like the Editing Center's monthly Video Sea showings). Watching the tape on WTTW, it became clear that the context unquestionably altered the viewing experience and the tape itself. Seen on a closed-circuit monitor, the tape would still be good, but a bit subject to the whistling-in-the-dark syndrome, aimed at a target quite separate from and oblivious to its uninvited critique. Broadcast

on Channel 11, however, the tape developed a muscle it could never otherwise flex—it acquired a wit and immediacy as a direct result of the format. Such programming is exactly the sort of thing that a show like *The Image Union* ought to be offering. It restores excitement and unpredictability to television, meanwhile giving both the station and the independent producer a richness and strength that neither could achieve alone.

The second *Image Union* installment airs on Thursday, November 30. No advance schedule was available (Weinberg is keeping the show close to the chest, and flexible), though one selection promises to be Valjean McLenighan's *Busia and Cioc*, a portrait of two elderly Eastern

European women reminiscing about their early days in Chicago—thus continuing the show's commitment to oral history, allowing ordinary people a place in a medium so often dominated by biographical fantasies.

The Image Union is a program that both WTTW and coordinating producer Tom Weinberg can be proud to claim—and improve. While the show was well programmed and packaged, respecting the integrity of the individual works (and, incidentally, paying better for them than any of its predecessors, always a reliable index of respect), it is still limited by its potpourri form. The emphasis on Chicago work will hopefully grow from being the show's raison d'être to being merely its base

assumption. That done, material could be combined into coherent themes; more flexibility could be allowed in individual running times (to accommodate more than short bits). If *The Image Union* establishes a strong identity and mandate for creativity, it will provide a forum for independent work that can't be misconstrued as a ghetto, PBS tokenism, or this year's funding fashion. Not an end in itself, *The Image Union* is nevertheless an extremely promising beginning, with Weinberg's presence a sign of good faith all around. WTTW deserves praise for handling the show so well, and our serious attention for its next phase of activity. Tune in next week for *The Image Union*, part two.