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Rechanneling TV, 'Off the Air'

By David Witz

First there's this massive pile of pencils, thousands of them, all in a giant heap in the middle of the floor. Out pops this bearded head, and then, like Godzilla rising from the sea, a naked artist emerges from the pile, bellowing and flinging pencils all over the place. A naked girl joins the naked man, and he flings pencils at her. Then he does a little pencil art on the walls while she lies on the floor. Did I mention it all happens to a soundtrack of the Chambers Brothers singing "Time?"

Actually, conceptual artist Dragan Ilic, the man responsible for "Electronic Pencils," is fully dressed in pencil-riddled clothing, watching himself cavort through the above motions on a nearby video monitor. At tonight's first show, he'd re-enacted his work while clothed (it lost something in the translation). Show Two played back the first show over various TV monitors. Now, for the last hurrah, a camera focused on a monitor is bending Ilic's pre-recorded naked image into synthesized bits of intense color.

By now you may feel that the lines between art and video have lost all horizontal hold. Yet "Electronic Pencils" and the 20 or so other tapes in a program called "Off the Air," which ran last Saturday night at Photographics Gallery, 2048 N. Halsted, and which will be presented over

the next three Saturdays, makes for a fascinating if perplexing evening of oddball TV.

Sitting on the floor or on a folding chair, one can view the tapes in comfortable surroundings. A variety of video people emcee, and spontaneous arguments fly freely between audience members and creators. While the banter gets lively, the real action remains on the tube.

A member of the Ant Farm, in Australia, runs around in a metal suit and TV helmet as "Ned Telly," dismantling a suspension bridge with a giant wrench. A sculptor outlines his plans for a work at O'Hare Field by drawing onto a videotape of the airport. "The Last Eight Minutes of Richard Nixon" catches the ex-Prez in the moments just before his resignation speech. Nixon starts relaxed, almost puckish, trading jibes with the TV crews and still photographers. Finally he waves one photog away, commenting, "Ollie's always taking my picture. I'm afraid he'll catch me picking my nose."

Another interesting one is "Cabbie," by Scott Jacobs and Tom Weinberg. In "Cabbie," the camera sits up front with the driver and catches the reaction of the unsuspecting passenger who suddenly finds himself on video. So who gets in the cab? Pulitzer Prize-winning TV critic Ron Powers, that's who. And what does this seasoned cathode vet do upon catching sight of the lens? Plug his new book, that's what.

"Off the Air" is an inspiration to anyone ready to take the tube into his or her own hands. The shows, which will feature 5 to 10 tapes each, are at 8, 9:30 and 11 Saturday nights, and cost \$2. The "Off the Air" people tend to catch audience members in the lens, so look sharp.



Punk fashion, video style, on Halsted St.

Snappy Sammy Smoot, always in pursuit of knowledge and grace, accidentally stumbles upon an exhibit of domestic computer systems. . .

