

# Chicago Fun Times: 'Off the Air'—TV, or not TV?

You don't have to turn on your television set anymore to find out just how lousy television is. It's everywhere you go these days, in the taverns, in the grocery stores, on security desks in highrise buildings. Gigantic discount stores and banks have it. Schools have it. The Catholic Church has it. And if you're not watching it, you're on it. You can't get away from it.

Finally, there's relief. To avoid seeing **Off the Air**, a television special that's not intended for the home screen, all you have to do is stay away from the Photographics Gallery on Saturday night.

**Off the Air** springs from the fevered imaginations of a group of local videomakers banding together for this event under the name Halsted St. TV. Their video productions are to regular television what **Candid Camera** is to those detergent commercials staged in supposedly realistic Laundromats.

While **Groove Tube** and videomakers like San Francisco's TTVT were the front-runners in creating bizarre scenes never meant to be seen by the folks at home, the Chicago video people claim that they have widened the little screen to new proportions. Of course, they can't say exactly how they've widened it, because their show, which consists of spontaneous, non-commercial bits that use live talent, defies description. Defying description is part of the gig. What you see on regular television is a programmed product. In this video show, what you see is what you get.

The prime movers behind this unknown force are Tom Weinberg, Scott Jacobs, Valjean McLenighan, and Nick Despota. By their own admission they are "video freaks," but that doesn't mean what it used to: the original video freaks were rich kids who walked around recording their version of reality on the streets of San Francisco while tripping. Gradually, though, the term has acquired some authority since then. Videomakers are now regarded in some circles as "documentarians" who have only infrequently managed to invade regular network programming, although commercial televi-



The Great Dragan (Ilic)

sion has tried adopting some of their techniques and ideas. **Saturday Night Live's** home movie segment and **Second City TV** are a couple of examples of their style of "new" television. WTTW is currently soliciting tapes for its **Nightwatch** programs.

Tom Weinberg, a founder of TTVT (the only documentary group around to have broken into network television) says he would rather be like Bob Hope on TV than watch Bob Hope on TV. Except he doesn't want to be Bob Hope at all, he wants to be involved in putting the stuff in the boxes instead of watching the end result. But Weinberg, whose logic clearly defies reason, also admits that he likes watching TV. "It's foul. It's terrible. It's crude. It has ruined at least a generation and a half of people already," he says.

Weinberg was catapulted to video fame with his half-hour underground video classic, **Media Burn**. "A few years ago we decided to blow up television, which we did," he says. "We piled up a pyramid of television sets, poured kerosene on them, lit them on fire, and drove a Cadillac through them. If there is a groundswell of demand to show that tape, perhaps we could arrange it."

he adds.

An Australian-Yugoslavian electronic conceptual artist who calls himself the Great Dragan (Ilic) is scheduled for a special guest appearance at this Saturday's storefront show. The Great Dragan (the accent is on the second syllable) is set to do a performance consisting of the following elements: an electric drill, 50,000 sharpened pencils, an electric planing machine, and himself. Ilic, as videomaker Scott Jacobs explains, is "an accident of fate, a person who happened into our lives at this very moment. We want to give people something new, and the Great Dragan certainly qualifies as a person to be kept off the air."

The Halsted St. TV folks will go so far as to describe their show as tidbits of tape that are mostly natural, real-life situations with real people—or else they (the tidbits? the situations? the people? who knows . . . ) are totally off-the-wall.

"We're going to have five or six TVs all over," Weinberg confesses.

"We're going to show it on TVs thanks to the interactive electronic wizardry performed on the Sandin electronic image synthesizer. People will be sitting on chairs watching one TV. Maybe they'll be watching the Great Dragan and on the TV next to them the same thing will be happening, only someone will be fooling with the image, getting inside and seeing what makes electric work."

"There's something going on in Chicago," Weinberg says. "Over the last several months a whole lot of people doing videotapes are getting together and discarding jealousies and a whole lot of the bullshit. Nobody is running it and nobody is pushing their way around. We're in the midst of getting funding for a videotape editing center. People are just giving in their tapes and doing it."

Doing what? If you're interested in finding out, **Off the Air** will be aired at 8, 9:30 and 11 this Saturday night and for the next three Saturdays through November 20 at Photographics, 2048 N. Halsted.

Admission is \$2 —Pat Colander