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Bauer's "Giving Rise to Habit": An Encouraging Experiment

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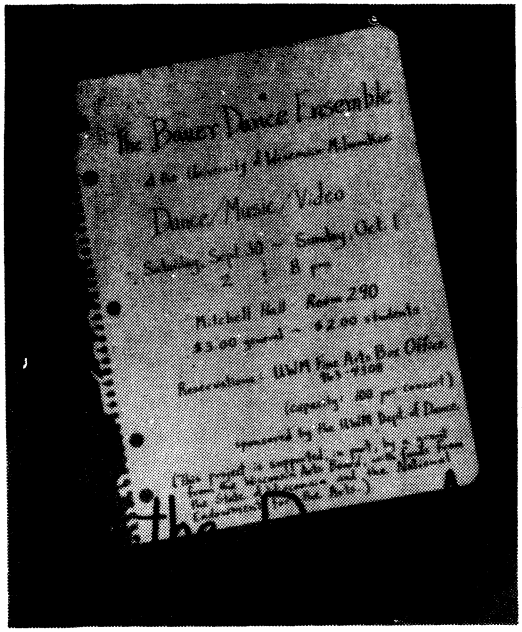
by Curtis L. Carter



A continuing trend in the arts of the Seventies is to forage creations out of multi-media. Since 1963 artists have been exploring the creative potential or "Video Art," or the use of television as an art form. In recent years dancers have become interested. Dance and video share with music the property of being "arts of time." It is not surprising to learn that dancers and video artists have been working together for several years.

At first the obvious potential for simply recording the choreography in performance offered a way to preserve works that might otherwise be lost. Later on, artists such as Amy Greenfield, who is a New York dancer and a video artist, was the potential for more creative interactions between dancers and video artists. Naturally those who call themselves video artists are interested in a more central role in the creative process.

The performance of "Giving Rise to Habit", Sept. 29-Oct. 1, by the Bauer Dance Ensemble at U. W. Milwaukee's Mitchell Hall brought together the talents of choreographer Susie Bauer, video artist William Burrow, and composer James Pease. If the performance is not the first video dance by a Milwaukee company, it is a promising start for such collaborations.

A formidable array of video and sound equipment necessarily dominated the setting, for the performance: a large high ceilinged dance studio in the remodeled Mitchell Hall. On the left were tables of tape recorders, mixers, synthesizers, amplifiers, and rows of sound loops. On the right were the corresponding cameras, video controls, and scope. The performing area is defined in part by the seven TV monitors facing the audience, three on each side and one in center stage area.

The dancing of the six member Bauer group exhibits the look of a style somewhere between Merce Cunningham and Viola Farber. Essentially abstract in character, the movement in this work nevertheless is more expressive than some of Bauer's earlier pieces. There is less stiffness and less of the sometimes pretentious seriousness than in earlier performances.

Two video cameras, one each left and right stage, provided a continous instant feedback of the dancers, giving eight simultaneous images rather than the one live performance. The effect of the personal video image actually softens the abstract dance movements. Here is an instance where, contrary to common views, technology actually humanizes rather than depersonalized the art.

The video-sound components substitute for other theatrical conventions. They provide, for example, a stage set, substituting for curtain, and other conventions. With very limited lighting possibilities in the space, the video component particiaptes heavily in the phrasing and the pacing of the movement.

The video component, together with the music, actually worked quite well together in "Giving Rise to Habit." At times, however, the enthusiasm of the video artist to show the potential of that medium resulted in excess. Video "solos"

between movement episodes were too long. A firm over-all artistic direction for the piece is needed to establish "right" proportions between movement and independent video activity.

Dancers in the Bauer company are Kathleen Anderson, Charles Higgins, Joan Gonwa, Susanne Mead-Benish, Ann Sexton , and Ms. Bauer. The quality of skill varies throughout the group, with the director showing the most accomplishment. The level of dancing is certainly worth seeing, but I wish it were better. Part of the problem is economics. The group deserves much credit for persevering with very little financial support. The full house audience of 100, mainly college age with a smaller mix of adults, is an encouraging sign.