

It's 'Just Good Meat'

OPINION
by Nelson Potter

In Crete, Nebraska, last week, for the third and probably last time, the "Just Good Meat" show was presented to a gathering of friends — artists and friends of art — by a group that calls itself "The Church of Your Choice."

The group is four men who live and work in Lincoln: Claude Bery, Gary Hill, John Spence, and Bob Thomas. They are actively involved in the creative process, and the "Just Good Meat" show is, much of it, a report on work in progress.

THEY ARE primarily involved in visual creation — though Bob Thomas also, on occasion, plays an improvisational guitar, influenced by the many strands of the American guitar tradition, but most of all by the Indian raga.

The group has lived and worked together for the last six months, but are starting to split up. After this period of mutual exploration of the visual image, they are no doubt finding that it is time for great individuality, artistic and personal.

In their six months together they have not only been involved in the activity that produced the "Just Good Meat" show — they also played a major role in the production of "The Bread Also Rises," by Bruce Hiller at Der Loaf und Stein.

THE GROUP also played an important role in the production of "Review Three", a

broadside-poster that included striking facial closeups and comments by Claude Bery, a poem by Gary Hill, and selections from "The Bread Also Rises."

Sunday night's production of "Just Good Meat" was probably the last. The group has done other films recently, and is eager to show them, rather than the earlier films of "Meat." And, in Lincoln, the group now has no place adequately equipped to show their films.

They started out with the encouragement and support of Sheldon Gallery director Norman Geske, but their use of the Sheldon's auditorium has been withdrawn.

ANOTHER MENTOR, now absent, is one-time Nebraska photography instructor, Mike McLaughlin. Some of the films concern a trip the group made last spring to visit Mike where he now teaches at the University of Connecticut. Mike came back for the group's first triumphal showing, to a capacity crowd, of "Just Good Meat" at Sheldon.

The main emphasis in the group's film work is on the moment of visual insight and revelation. With some exceptions, there is little thematic development, no story line or dramatic interest, and little attempt to put individual images in any order.

When one first sees the group's work, it is exhausting to watch — for the viewer is constantly trying to impose



order, and to see what the point is.

IT IS FURTHER, at first viewing, hard to make stylistic distinctions between the work of different members of the group. They all seem to work in a common style, or lack of style, and they, like Andy Warhol, seem determined to throw at the audience all that they have, the successes and the failures, make the audience work to discern and decide for itself what is good.

To see their work is thus to become engaged in their creative processes. One has to do at least some of the artist's work of editing, structuring, giving order, and separating the ruined experiments from the successful.

The group is obviously interested in entering into a dialogue with its audience — to have its audience give back its honest, direct, untutored reactions, so that their work can continue as the audience gives it direction.

MANY OF the group's films are experimental in technique. One of John Spence's films is

John Liljenstolpe speaks Thursday

John Liljenstolpe, a pacifist and ministerial intern in Lincoln, will speak on the military draft Thursday at 9:00 p.m. at the Centennial College.

Liljenstolpe was a co-chairman of the group that planned the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.



animated with one second exposures of each frame of film — so that when the subject moves during exposure, he appears on the film as a ghost-like half-presence. The results of this tedious technique are interesting, but it is not clear that they add up to any worthwhile effect or are used to any purpose.

There were a variety of work films, some having at least a unity of subject, matter or technique. One film showed in negative the motions of nudes about a room. Another showed scenes from a circus including one extraordinary shot of the circus organist, foreground, playing for trapeze artists in the distance. Other films look at a midwestern-style picnic, a patriotic celebration at a small Nebraska town, and children.

One longer film, by Gary Hill at San Francisco State last year, had greater unity and more development of themes. He was obviously being less



experimental and free — trying to build more complicated effects.

THIS FILM has an interesting sound track, first of strange vocal sounds mixed with over-articulated words, and later, old rhythm-and-blues music. The music accompanies scenes of the late sixties — the revolt at State last year, images projected on bare skin, scary illuminated happenings at night along a country road.

The old, relaxed music is an ironical comment on our uptight times. The themes and images did not come together for me — but here as seldom elsewhere there was an effort to build effects by putting things together for the viewer.

On the whole, the most successful and finished work by the group is its still photos, mostly by Spence and Thomas. There is a collection of faces, taken with a close-up lens and a sharp focus.

THE FACES are young and old, hard and soft, happy, funny, sad. There are shots of Nebraska roads — great, long, and flat into the distance with clouds, fields, occasional lonely trees, road-trucks, persons, and buildings breaking the horizon.

Faces are the most hackneyed of subjects — but the people in the "Church" group must love them a great deal, for they sometimes enable us to see them anew.

One can discern the beginnings of individual style in the members of the group. Claude Bery seems in love with the Midwest, with its great, flat, open spaces, the simplicity and directness of its people — adults and children — and its honest, natural gatherings of friends and family.

JOHN SPENCE has a touch of the surreal in many of his images.

Gary Hill is probably the most embittered and mordant in his images. He is also the least self-contained person, the most open to dialogue and audience response. It is difficult to separate his person and his art.

Bob Thomas is in many ways the most successfully creative members of the group. His stills and films are interesting not just as experiments, but in themselves.

HOW IRONICAL that this year one had to leave Lincoln and travel to Crete to see this group, and enter into the creative process with them. How good it will be if they can find an audience here in Lincoln with whom they can engage in dialogue.

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