

VOULKOS & COMPANY

A Film by Susan Fanshel

Of the many films being made about artists and craftmakers today, the reasons for making them tend to be very personal. For one, a fairly strong relationship of some kind exists between the film maker and the subject, a relationship which needs illumination. It is the touchstone of the work, in which the *process* of making the film becomes a kind of rite of exorcism, and the search for meaning becomes the *creative* act. These are committed works; the maker does not go *out* on an investigatory study, but rather stays in close to existential experience.

Susan Fanshel's *VOULKOS AND COMPANY* is a film of this genre, a subjective portrait of Peter Voulkos, ceramist and sculptor, who also happened to be one of the filmmaker's teachers while she was majoring in art at the University of California at Berkeley. Reflecting on the four years spent as a student of Voulkos, Fanshel says, "He was a very important teacher for me. In a sense, he was some kind of force, not someone I understood or someone I was familiar with..."

With few preconceptions other than knowing that she did not want to make a biographical film or a study of Voulkos' art, Fanshel embarked on her first film — a search to decode the elements that made the experience of learning and working in Voulkos' studio so important and stimulating. Taking two and a half years to shoot, one and a half years to raise the money and six months to edit, she reflects, "Sometimes you do things because you don't know any better and it's good that you don't, otherwise you would be intimidated... yet, in some way, the making of that film was trying to resolve things that I valued..."

At the inception of the film project, Voulkos was just finishing a monumental bronze sculpture for the Hall of Justice in San Francisco. Although Fanshel had not planned to structure her film around an *event* it did seem that the final assembling and placing of that sculpture could be used to stress some of vigors and energies so special to Voulkos' spirit and his studio. Because of endless and unforeseen delays, the actual installation was not to be completed for over two and a half years.

Remembering this difficult interim in which substantial strains were put on both filmmaker and sculptor, Fanshel says, "Any work you do has some sort of spark and that is why you make it. But in the long run you have to sustain other kinds of energy besides being turned on. And if it's not something you want to do, then it's useless. One thing I knew was... whatever was

going to happen, that I would have that sustaining energy because I *cared* about the subject. This I learned from Pete." Much of *VOULKOS AND COMPANY*'s special character issues from the quiet tribute to one responsible for teaching her this central lesson—the joy of work.

Manifest in the title, *VOULKOS AND COMPANY*, are some of the attitudes the film attempts to reveal: an artist working and teaching in a warehouse studio assisted by a crew of artists/students in an ambience stripped bare of the romance of creativity. We are witness to a thriving art company. It is a place of energy, activity, intensity. It is a place of fire, metal, and noise. And a place in which a bountiful supply of film imagery is to be found. Fanshel, steeped in the forms of painting and sculpture, dips into the studio's reality, not for the story it may hold, but for the visual montages it offers.

Deceptively, the film appears sometimes to be telling a story, possibly about sculpture. Scenes of casting, welding, brazing, polishing, are presented; the formal dedication ceremony of one work; the removal of sod for the replacement of another. In fact, I find the sequences tracking the transportation of the commissioned piece (a colossal speeding sculpture)—traveling over the Oakland Bay Bridge, handling sharp turns, slowing down for a traffic light, shots meant to expose its shifting spatial relationships with the various aspects of the film. Yet the device of using visual vignettes—a champagne party, a brief speech, the unveiling of a sculpture, curious onlookers, the dedicated hecklers—is an original method of editing, not for the purpose of building up a final story line, but as a means of keeping the rhythms flowing so as not to isolate them from the flow of life.

The form of the film is not of factual recordings. It is a composition of personal readings with the only "real" information given by means of intercutting two old TV clips about Voulkos and his many past achievements, in the breathless style of headline news. And for a brief moment, we are reminded of that curiously unsatisfactory experience of receiving *facts*. The juxtaposition of documentary styles, one *cold* and the other *hot*, serves as a subtle plea for the art of poetic interpretation rather than one of mere information.

from *CRAFT HORIZONS*
FALL 1976
(review by Denise Hare)