

SUSAN MOGUL is a 27-year-old New Yorker turned Los Angelino three years ago. She works in video, photo-montage and still photography; on the evening of October 17th, she appeared at Anthology Film Archives to present four videotapes, one from each of the last four years. In the tapes she talks a blue streak directly to the camera, usually with a few small props—her bargain clothing, her vibrator, her billboards, for example—whose importance in her life she relates to us in a flexible mixture of Yiddish comedy, feminist sincerity and pseudo-conceptual art self-consciousness. She kept her audience in stitches with her raucous monologues, through which are filtered the intense autobiographical issues of Mogul's Jewish upbringing, her sexuality, her desire for recognition as an artist and her effort to match herself to a stereotyped artist's persona.

In her most recent tape, *Big Tip/Back Up/Shut Out* (1976) she grinningly declaims on her fantasy of being a comic as back-up work in case she never makes it as an artist.

"My mother always told me I should have a backup job," she says (I paraphrase loosely) "well I've always thought what would happen if I lost my eyesight and couldn't do visual art. I could be a musician, but let me tell you right now, I never had any musical talent. So I decided to be a nightclub comedian." (. . . It would be perfect: she could work at night, have lots of free time to make her own art . . .) "And if I got too famous, if I got too many bookings, well I'd just sort of let my art slide for awhile, and let the money roll in."

After the blur of a splice in the tape, Mogul reappears as her fantasy comic (her head is now encased in a swimming cap and wound with a muffler over that) with her eyes shut tightly and her brow upraised, the way she thinks she would look if blind. Thus she gropes while she yaks her way through the rest of the film.

I know of no way to reduce the fantastic density of Mogul's chatter into a few lines of a review, and still retain her hilarity. For her videotapes' fundamental irony is built on the juxtaposition of utterly deadpan backgrounds (often no more than a blank wall against which she is framed from the waist up) with her hyenalike laughter and wild gesticulation. Her extroversion is so extreme that her story leaps out from the vacuum around her, over the camera and off the screen entirely. These are qualities that survive transposition into a reviewer's terseness very poorly.

What is singular about Mogul's work is that she is constantly straining against the gap between herself and her audience that the video camera imposes, and at the same time is tremendously conscious of it. Far from trying to perfect an illusion for the camera, she shouts down its quiet, monochromatic concentration. At all times she is speaking both to the audience directly, and to an insufferably dumb machine. Somehow one is aware that as she is extemporizing, she is bludgeoning out of existence her embarrassment about performing alone in a bare room with no company but an impassive batch of transistors. At the end of *Shut Out*, after trying a few jokes on the camera/audience as a "professional" comic, she suddenly grows angry that nobody's laughing.

"I guess you don't like my jokes? Well if you don't like my jokes let's see if you can come up with a better one. Do you need time to think? I'm going to the bathroom, I'll give you time to think. When I get back let's see you tell it."

With that Mogul exits. Whether she's been challenging the audience (which unbeknownst to the projected Mogul has been cracking up all the time) or her machinery is left thoroughly ambiguous.

Mogul's performance is all spontaneous self-examination, marinated in self-mockery and extremest hubris at the same time. She regularly puns on her name (two generations back it was Mogulesky) saying of her arrival in L.A., her learning to drive and her finding a job painting billboards (she unfortunately had to leave them unsigned, but millions saw them) "I became what's known as a Hollywood Mogul." In the montage of the same name, she shows herself at the center of the Mogul empire.

The themes of her four pieces are as follows: in *Dressing Up* (1973) she tells us about some of the great bargains she got on clothes, appearing on the screen naked and rhapsodizing about each decrepit item as she puts it on; in *Take Off* (1974) she tells us the virtues of her vibrator while she takes breaks to masturbate with it under the table—among the details we learn is how many batteries an orgasm requires; in *Mogul Is Mobile Part III* the camera leans over the back seat of her car to hear her talk about her first years in L.A.; in the 3-part tape, *Big Tip/Back Up/Shut Out*, she talks about waitressing, being a comic, being a blind comic. This tape, the most sophisticated in the show, is a running metaphor for Mogul's try at being an artist. She can't quite imagine herself a

member of that elevated clan; hers is, of course, a common, if sorry plight. With feigned naiveté she shoots full of holes the romantic notion that an artist should give up absolutely everything to his or her work, and that he should spend endless pre-public years in monkish agony.

Mogul's tapes suffer fairly simple flaws that she will doubtless overcome with some disciplined study of the work she has done so far. Her major difficulty is that she cannot always sustain the interest and humor of her monologue: at least a few times in each film she stumbles and gets lost for words. This is an inherent danger of spontaneous monologue, and although Mogul manages to recover quickly, she cannot really afford to lose any momentum in such short tapes. Mogul's ethnicity at times becomes overbearing, but this too is a problem that I think will vanish with practice. The possibilities of the style Mogul has forged are substantial. While her Jewish chautauquas have so far been largely concerned with the trials of growing up, we have yet to see how wildly philosophical they can become.