

# Attention! Production! Audience!— Performing Video in its First Decade, 1968-1980 by Chris Hill

## 1. A radical communications paradigm for a participatory democracy

The argument was not only about producing new form for new content, it was also about changing the nature of the relationship between reader and literary text, between spectator and spectacle, and the changing of this relationship was itself premised upon new ways of thinking about the relationship between art (or more generally 'representation') and reality...the adequacy or effectivity of the devices employed depends entirely upon the historical moment or "conjecture" within which they are manifest.

—Sylvia Harvey<sup>1</sup>

### a. Cultural agency and new technologies

Artists and social activists declared video a cultural praxis in the United States in the late '60s, a period of radical assertions fueled by a decade of civil rights confrontations, controversy surrounding U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the rise of a new youth culture intent on consciousness expansion. Within a charged atmosphere of personal and social change and political confrontation, the production of culture was understood to be a necessary step in the development of a reinvigorated participatory democracy. The first issue of *Radical Software* (1970), a tabloid published by the New York media collective Raindance Corporation, asserted that video making and other "information software design" were radical cultural tools and proposed that "unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, our alternate systems and life styles will be no more than products of the existing process."<sup>2</sup>

The video art and communications projects nurtured by this radical climate were fused into a cultural "movement" by the introduction to the U.S. market of the relatively affordable (\$1500) and light weight half-inch open reel portapak in 1967-1968. In the half decade before the arrival of this mobile video production unit, art about television or its technology had entered the cultural imaginary through Fluxus artists' modified TV sets, which challenged bourgeois televisual sensibilities, at art and technology exhibitions at major galleries. Speculation by the influential Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan on the parallel evolution of communications media and structures of consciousness fueled utopian conjecturing about a new information-based society. McLuhan's writing had particular impact on the post-war generation that grew up with television. In 1968 artists and social activists welcomed the new attentional terrain offered by the unthreatening, real-time video medium and the possibility of developing an accessible democratic communication system as an alternative to commercial television.

Unified by cultural imperatives for a more open and egalitarian way of living as well as by the pragmatic need to pool equipment—portapaks, microphones, and a growing assortment of independently engineered tools—a number of artists, activists, and electronic tool designers formed working collectives. Woody Vasulka described video in 1969-1970 as "a very free medium, and the community was very young, naive, new, strong, cooperative, no animosities, kind of a welcoming tribe. So we ganged together west coast, east coast, Canadian west and east coasts, and we created overnight a spiritual community."<sup>3</sup>

Chris Hill: *Could you talk about the confluence of experimental film, music, and video making in the late '60s?*

Tony Conrad: In the context of the underground... in film, as in theater, you had already overlapping forms and intersecting forms. Of course, out of this potpourri, there began to emerge other terms of this crossover having to do with the imbrication of high culture with the low culture. Already in the Velvet Underground you have the Exploding Plastic Inevitable shows at the Fillmore East or at the Dom [in New York City] where Gerard Melanga theatrically wielded a whip on stage, the band played pop music, and there would be a light show. A lot of the syncretism of different elements was abetted by the taste for that kind of overlapping and totalizing experience on the part of the drug culture.

There were two things going on at the same time, as sort of dialogical forces—one was minimalizing and one was totalizing. In some respects these weren't so remote from one another as they appeared to be, other than as functions of temperament. The totalizing drug culture of course was not as repressive, characteristically. There were people who were mixtures, like Andy Warhol, who is in a way the exception that proves the rule in both cases. The discovery of minimal culture arose out of three different things. One was the serious discovery on the part of the artists that by confining their tools and concerns more narrowly than had ever been proposed, that they could achieve wider understandings and more profound circumstances for the reception of their work. That perception was encapsulated

Even before the appearance of the portapak in the late '60s, sculptors, experimental filmmakers, painters, performers, musicians, and dancers had begun to seriously challenge long-held concepts about the formal separation of specific art disciplines and interpretive discourses. Some would eventually include video in their interdisciplinary investigations. Starting in the late 50s, Happenings expanded paintings into interactive environments, engaging those aspects of art which "consciously intended to replace habit with the spirit of exploration and experiment."<sup>4</sup> By the late '60s some members of the counterculture involved with the absorbing psychedelic underground of music, experimental film, theater, and light shows found video to be a provocative new moving image and installation medium. Sculptors who had been working within the emerging vocabulary of post-minimalism, found video to be a medium with which they could foreground the phenomenology of perceptual or conceptual process over the aesthetic object or product. Artists participating in the "high" art gallery and museum spaces as well as those positioned in the clubs, concerts and mass cultural scenes found reasons to explore the new moving image and sync sound medium.

The manifestos and commentary by those caught up in the early video movement of 1968-1973 reflected an optimism stemming from the belief that real social change was possible; they expressed a commitment to cultural change that bordered on the ecstatic. During this heady period political theorists, artists, and activists delivered powerful arguments for a participatory democracy. The possibility of working for radical social change was conflated with the task of personal change and with imperatives to explore one's consciousness through music, art, drugs, encounter groups, spirituality, sexuality, and countercultural lifestyles. The valorization of "process" and "an almost religious return to experience" was shared by both political and cultural radicals of the late '60s, even though their agendas and strategies varied considerably.<sup>5</sup> Much of the enthusiasm expressed about the "process" available to artists and audiences through the new portable video technology centered on instant replay and immediate "feedback" of one's experience.

The social and cultural challenges of the '60s were "a disruption of late capitalist ideology, political hegemony, and the bourgeois dream of unproblematic production."<sup>6</sup> The decade opened with the beginning of the civil disobedience phase of the civil rights movement and the

formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which organized interracial Freedom Rides to integrate restaurants and restrooms in the South in 1961. According to Todd Gitlin, sociologist and '60s activist, "The [civil rights] movement's rise and fall, its transmutations from southern nonviolence to black power, its insistence on the self-determination of the insulted and injured, was the template for every other movement of the decade."<sup>7</sup>

Influenced by SNCC's egalitarianism, where middle class and poor struggled together, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962 issued the Port Huron Statement which called for a "participatory democracy" based on "love and community in decisions shaping private lives." This New Left asserted that necessary social change would come about only by replacing institutions of control not by reforming them.<sup>8</sup> The civil rights movement, SDS, the growing anti-war movement, and community organizing around urban poverty provided activist models that would challenge the generation coming of age in the mid-'60s to interrogate institutionalized authority, national priorities, and conventional expectations of personal satisfaction and class privilege. On college campuses teach-ins, information sharing, and local organizing around issues of housing, health, and legal rights offered practicums for a radically revised education for living. By 1968, 50% of the population was under 25, and across the country young people were swept up in the intoxication of the expanding and celebratory counterculture, its music, and its libertarian lifestyle choices. Although deep divisions between political radicals and lifestyle radicals remained throughout the decade, the country experienced a profound transformation of cultural relations in their wake.

As part of the progressive dialogue on college campuses between 1968 and 1973, tracts by writers like Herbert Marcuse were broadly circulated and discussed. They described the media as a "consciousness industry" responsible for the alienation of the individual, the commodification of culture, and the centralized control of communications technologies. In his widely read books, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), Herbert Marcuse identified a relationship between the consciousness of the individual and the political, asserting that "radical change in consciousness is the beginning, the first step in changing social existence: the emergence of a new Subject." This new citizen, aware of and actively dealing with "tragedy

Tony Conrad (cont'd)

in the maxim "less is more." The second thing that went into the hopper was that [minimalism] was a route to irony and humor. That is, there was both the possibility of disturbing the bourgeoisie, but more generally in taking advantage of the expectations that were to be found in the environment of high culture. For example, Maciunas' [Fluxus] concerts were frequently staged as high culture events, but then deviated radically from the forms of high culture. The spirit that motivated this had a lot to do with having fun. The third element in all of this, I think, was the fact that the gallery scene found it possible to cash in on these developments. There was a ready-made ideology and set of circumstances which resulted in a high level of salability...

The Kitchen environment was set up to sort of overlap between video, technical work with video, work that was concerned particularly with a technological engagement, a build-it-yourself ethos, a dirty hands ethos in the approach to video. There was a lot of enthusiasm which underlay the establishment of a place like the Kitchen... When I was invited to do a piece at the Kitchen in 1971... I wanted to suggest a subjectivist and spiritual reading of this environment, that is, to encourage in the terms of that time a meditative approach to the exercise. Encouraging the audience in a meditative direction was a way of creating an atmosphere of sacred expectations that was achieved in the gallery or museum through the imposition of the white cube and the silent treatment. The way reflection could be understood and made legible in that day was to carry over audience expectations based on the drug experience and on meditational

Tony Conrad (cont'd)

experiences. Although today we tend to look back and discount some of these seemingly "spiritual" elements as artistic chaff, in effect, that's a discrimination which is made unevenly. It is allowed to condemn the idealism of New Age thinking but not of the Civil Rights Movement, and is allowed to condemn the hubris of the anti-war movement but not of the gallery or museum...

The work is part of a larger cultural object, which includes the production and viewing situation, and that the object itself can not be sensibly taken out of context as an object of contemplation in and of itself. That it is simply incomplete or fragmentary without regard to its functioning as a consequence of the circumstance of its generation and the audience impact. Efforts have been made to formalize these sorts of networking contextualizations by speaking of the space, the space before the camera, the space of the image, the space on the screen and so forth.

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### In Depth: Parry Teasdale

Chris Hill: *With the Subject to Change project, were you and the Videofreex interested in the reflection of your generation on television, or were you so opposed to television that this wasn't a key issue for you?*

Parry Teasdale: We knew that there wasn't an accurate representation of the generation on television, and I think we were naive at the beginning of the CBS project to think that there could be. The

and romance, archetypal dreams and anxieties" would be less susceptible to "technical solutions" offered through contemporary society's homogeneous "happy consciousness."<sup>9</sup> Marcuse's utopian ideas supported other mandates for consciousness expansion and change and validated the role that personal agency should play in accomplishing social change.

By 1969, through confrontation and consciousness raising—the sharing and study of personal experience and history—blacks and women declared themselves new historical "subjects." Strategizing around separatism and alliances, their liberation movements developed solidarity with other U.S. and international movements as global awareness permeated their public discourse. The gay rights movement, born after the 1969 Stonewall confrontation, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) also asserted political and cultural identities through public actions and networking during the early 1970s. These new movements focused both on histories of economic exploitation and systemic cultural domination. The Port Huron Statement had demanded a less alienated society and claimed a definitive subjectivity for the generation coming of age in the '60s; these new movements also sought profound transformation in both socioeconomic and cultural relations.

Although the New Left and the anti-war movement in the late '60s had close ties with progressive documentary filmmakers, such as the film collective Newsreel, their information was disseminated by an extensive underground press.<sup>10</sup> The Left learned to regard the mainstream media, including commercial television, with distrust. Planning for the 1968 anti-war protests in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention did include strategizing around national press coverage, but it was fringe groups like the Yippies that specifically sought confrontation with and coverage by commercial media. Forays into network broadcasting, such as the Videofreex collaboration with CBS on the aborted 1969 *Subject to Change* project revealed the industry's contradictory aspirations for new broadcast programming and reinforced alternative video makers' wariness of corporate television.

By the early '70s video theorists writing in *Radical Software* along with Marxist critics Todd Gitlin and German socialist Hans Magnus Enzensberger outlined arguments for an alternative, independent electronic media practice. In 1970, building on ideas developed

earlier by Bertolt Brecht about the corporate structure of radio communications, Enzensberger critiqued the asymmetry between media producers/transmitters and media consumers/receivers. The radio and television industries had centralized and controlled access to the production, programming, and transmission of media, and limited those individual receivers to participation as consumers. However there was nothing inherent in the technology that could not support a more reciprocal communications system such as, for example, the telephone. Enzensberger concluded that new portable video technology set the stage for redressing this contradiction:

For the first time in history the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves. Such a use of them would bring the communications media, which up to now have not deserved the name, into their own. In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system.<sup>11</sup>

Such political analysis was generally overshadowed at the time by the popular views of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, whose books on the history of communications technologies were widely discussed by the national media. McLuhan wrote in *Understanding Media* (1964) that human history was a succession of technological extensions of human communication and perception where each new medium subsumed the previous technology, sometimes as an artform. Through the inherent speed and immediacy of electronic video technology, television had become an extension of the human nervous system. His notion of television's "flowing, unified perceptual events" bringing about changes in consciousness spoke directly to the contemporary psychedelic drug experience as well as to artists experimenting with new electronic visualizations. His aphorism "the medium is the message" suggested that consciousness change was brought about primarily through formal changes in communications technologies rather than the specific content delivered by those media, which resonated with the concentrated formalist investigations practiced in the contemporary arts.

Although McLuhan's and others' prescriptions for technological utopia appeared poetic to many, he

Parry Teasdale (cont'd)

net result is that we found that that avenue was closed so we had to find new avenues to do it and that's what we did. We first of all started with our shows in the loft [in New York City] and moved on ultimately to broadcasting [pirate low power TV in Lanesville, NY] because that was the way that we could control the entire process. By having the live phone line, by going out and talking to people in the community, by trying not to edit them in a way that would be unfaithful to what they had to say, and by letting them participate in the making of the shows we were representing them more faithfully than television could... We not only used [Lanesville, TV] for ourselves, but we extended the principles of representation to the people we were supposedly representing through our station, because it was everybody's station. You want to come use it? You can do it. You want to talk? We don't cut anybody off on the telephone. If you want to go on and on, you can go on and on.

In one sense of the representational issue, we embodied a different approach to it completely... We were defining ourselves in terms of what we were not— not being manipulative and not being controlling in the same way as the networks. We had our own goals but we were willing to listen to other people's goals as well. The problem was that we weren't dealing always with an educated or interested audience, because people had lives to lead, as is true in relationships to all media... To the extent that they watched and participated, they had a chance to have an outlet and we encouraged that constantly because we felt that that was an integral part of what we were doing...

*Parry Teasdale (cont'd)*

The other element that we always included...was a live phone line where people could call in because, again, we believed in interactivity before that was a buzz word. We felt that [media] should be interactive, that people should be encouraged to respond to what they see on television and that the people who are producing television should be responsive. [These strategies] create better television and make people engage with what they're watching and make it a less passive experience.

We hoped that it would improve the community in some way, if only through communication. The thinking process ended with the virtues of response rather than [asking] what does that do for anybody, but the passivity of television was so extreme that just breaking that cycle of information delivery or, as [Les] Brown puts it in that wonderful book, the business of television is delivering an audience to an advertiser. That always was a startling revelation to me. Basically the job of television should be to deliver information but also to connect people to their communities, to connect people to ideas, and to connect people to each other. That was something that could be used to the betterment of the community and of humanity.

*Interviewed May, 1995. Parry Teasdale, a member of the Videotrex and Lanesville TV, is now editor of The Woodstock Times.*

popularized the notion of television as a "high participation" as a generational marker and as a potentially liberatory information tool in the hands of the first generation that had grown up with it. McLuhan did not not address ways of restructuring a more democratic telecommunications system, but he inspired others to apply his ideas to using the new video medium.

The belief that new technologies would inspire and generate the foundation for a new society was underwritten in part by the American post-war investment in the grand cultural imperative of science, which had brought about the international green revolution in agriculture and the space race. Americans had landed on the moon in 1969, in the "biggest show in broadcast history."<sup>12</sup> The rational spirit of science resonated in a series of art and technology exhibitions at major museums. Critic Susan Sontag articulated this "new sensibility" in the arts:

What gives literature its preeminence is its heavy burden of 'content,' both reportage and moral judgment...But the model arts of our time are actually those with much less content, and a much cooler mode of moral judgment—like music, films, dance, architecture, painting, sculpture. The practice of these arts—all of which draw profusely, naturally, and without embarrassment, upon science and technology—are the locus of the new sensibility...In fact there can be no divorce between science and technology, on the one hand, and art, on the other, any more than there can be a divorce between art and the forms of social life.<sup>13</sup>

Enthusiasm about new technologies—computers and the information-based society they might anticipate, and theorizing on human evolution, cybernetics, human perception, ecology, and transformable environments—appeared at a time when post-war economic growth generated confidence and society seemed to be capable of radical change. Through the writing of McLuhan, Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, Gregory Bateson and others<sup>14</sup> the intersection of information and systems theory with biological models provided intellectual references about communications and human potential for a generation that had grown up with the increasing availability of powerful and expressive personal tools—cars, televisions, transistor radios, 35mm and 8mm movie cameras, electronic musical instruments, and now video cameras. The mixed metaphors of science, biology, and revolution, dubbed "cyber-scat" by critic David Antin<sup>15</sup> are evident in Michael Shamberg's description of "Media-America":

It may be that unless we re-design our television structure our own capacity to survive as a species may be diminished. For if the character of our culture is defined by its dominant communications medium, and that medium is an overly-centralized, low-variety system, then we will succumb to those biologically unviable characteristics. Fortunately techno-evolution has spawned new video modes like portable videotape, cable television, and video-cassettes which promise to restore a media-ecological balance to TV.<sup>16</sup>

b. *Early video collectives and access to cable and public broadcast TV*

The video collectives that formed between 1968-1971 embraced the new portable video technology and assumptions about the need for cultural and social change that could include humanely reconfigured technologies. The individual groups were bonded by the practical need to share technical resources, and to collaborate on the many tasks required for productions. Some of the video collectives functioned as communes, with members living together as well as working regularly with video. Parry Teasdale, a member of the Videofreex, recalled "the video medium ... was part of the concept of enjoyment as well as experimentation, as well as art, as well as politics, all those things."<sup>17</sup> Philip Mallory Jones described his involvement with the Ithaca video community, initially as a member of a video-producing commune:

For me it was a two way thing. There was the individual vision and the individual maker working with a set of tools to do something. The tools were something I could get access to one way or another, without a lot of money. The other concern was the serious business of making revolution. These things were not separated. These things were a part of everybody else's concern too.<sup>18</sup>

The expansion of these various collectives into an informal national network of producers with common interests can be traced through the "Feedback" sections of the early issues of *Radical Software*, published by the New York City collective Raindance. The masthead from the first issue articulates the broad aspirations of the editors' proposed cultural intervention: "Videotape can be to television what writing is to language. And television, in turn, has subsumed written language as the globe's dominant communications medium. Soon accessible VTR [video tape recorder] systems and videocassettes (even before CATV [cable antenna television] opens up) will make alternate networks a reality."<sup>19</sup>

Manifestos about making video with portapaks and practical user information were made available through publications like *Radical Software* (1970-1976) which reported on videomaking initiatives in art, education, psychotherapies, and community building. Hands-on technical guides like *Spaghetti City Video Manual* (1973) and *Independent Video* (1974) demystified the technology, encouraging independent problem-solving and self-sufficiency with video tools. These publications were critical in promoting a vision of radicalized personal communications, providing an education for the unsophisticated and curious, and identifying a network of fellow enthusiasts. Their pragmatic approach to the present and sometimes utopian visions for the future were shared by others who examined and challenged the delivery of basic institutional systems—education, communications, government, health—and envisioned new grassroots configurations which often centered on new or reconfigured technologies. The first edition of the widely referenced *Whole Earth Catalog* (1969) begins with a section on "understanding whole systems," including communications, featuring descriptions of Super-8 filmmaking and audio synthesizer construction and describing the role that accessing and understanding tools might play in a new society:

So far, remotely driven power and glory—as via government, big business, formal education, church—has succeeded to the point where gross defects obscure actual gains. In response to this dilemma and to these gains, a realm of intimate, personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the *Whole Earth Catalog*.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the early video collectives developed projects which articulated production and reception as essential structural components of their telecommunications visions, reflecting a pragmatic need for new exhibition venues that would accommodate videomakers' aspirations as well as the period's recognition of the politicization of culture. Specific audience feedback structures were envisioned which exercised portable video's capacity to render real time documentations of everyday events, perceptual investigations, and experimental tech performances. These structural concerns combined with the imprecision of early video editing initially overshadowed the production of a singular tape. The work of the early collectives reveals their acknowledgement of video as social relations—managing or guiding the attention of viewers, directly engaging viewers in some aspect of the expressive, performative or production process, and educating audiences as new users. The often-stated goal of radicalized communications was further reflected in the early collectives' strategies for the distribution of information they produced. Tape libraries, tape exchanges, and mobile services were established, the print media—journals and books—were considered important adjunct communications "software," experimental video labs and theaters accommodated interactive screenings, and transmission using low power broadcast, cable television, and public broadcast television was explored.

The diverse "cultural data banks" inventoried in the early issues of *Radical Software* were maps of the counter cultural imagination of the time, such as: "Dick Gregory speaking at San Jose State College 11/69" by Electric Eye; Eric Siegel's tapes made with his Psychedelevision color video synthesizer; "a tour of el barrio by a Minister of the Young Lord's Party" and "Gay Liberation Day" by People's Video Theater.<sup>21</sup> Enzensberger recognized the radical potential of video data banks to be a "memory-in-readiness" for a changing society, and contrasted it with class-based notions of intellectual "heritage."<sup>22</sup> These pioneering recordings were documentations of the counterculture, by the counterculture. Like home movies, they were a collection of personal experiences, but unlike those private records, these tapes were contributions to an information bank from which anyone could draw, where no one person was specifically credited with having produced the tape. The contents of the video libraries posted in *Radical Software* were not commodities for sale, but participated in an alternative cultural economy that valued information exchange for imaging a new society.

The cultural exchange performed through the production/reception configurations of early collectives' projects varied according to specific agendas and sites of operation. In New York, Raindance Corporation was the video movement's self-described research and development organization. Raindance also was responsible for *Radical Software* (1970-74), the chief networking tool and theoretical organ, *Guerrilla Television* (1971) by Michael Shamberg, and *Video Art: An Anthology* (1976), edited by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot.

People's Video Theater was founded by Ken Marsh, an artist working with light shows, and Elliot Glass, a language teacher videotaping his students' conversations in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in New York. They videotaped interviews and events on the streets of New York during the day and invited interviewees to their loft "theater" in the evening for screenings and further discussions as part of "activating the information flow."<sup>23</sup> PVT's interactions took the form of community "mediations" where points of view on a particular issue would be researched and recorded, then played back for politicians, community leaders, and neighborhood people as part of the negotiating process. Ken Marsh regarded video production at the time as an aspect of citizenship. "The rhetoric that we subscribed to was that 'the people are the information'... Everybody could do it and everybody should do it. That was the mandate—pick it up, it's there. Like the power to vote—vote, take responsibility. Make it and see it."<sup>24</sup>



Video Free America documented the West Coast counterculture—including Buckminster Fuller's World Games in Washington state and a yoga festival in Golden Gate Park—and these tapes were screened to audiences at their production and exhibition facility in San Francisco. After shooting a frisbee competition as a parody of television sports coverage, Arthur Ginsberg had the idea of examining the porn industry, which developed into an ongoing video verite installation on love, marriage, and living with media, *Carel and Ferd*, a countercultural precursor of the controversial PBS documentary series *An American Family*.

In 1972, the Videofreex, a New York City collective, moved to the Catskills, renamed themselves Media Bus, and began broadcasting live and recorded programming each week over a low power, pirate TV station to their tiny community in Lanesville, New York. Visitors interested in using their editing system or viewing tapes from their extensive library were welcomed at their communal home, Maple Tree Farm. Media Bus travelled around New York state giving workshops in live and recorded video production for artists, educators, and civic officials.

Another seminal group formed around experimental filmmaker and dancer Shirley Clarke; her T.P. Video Space Troupe (NY) produced interactive exercises and events using video, dance, and performance, which served as a video training model. One of Clarke's exercises, a sunrise project, concluded when participants reconvened at her Chelsea Hotel rooftop apartment at sunrise to replay the evening's portapak documentation of New York's nightlife. A little further west, the Ithaca video commune collaborated with local social service projects and screened their sometimes controversial programming in bars and bookstores, generating discussion about local and national issues as well as educating local audiences to the possibilities of portable video. Philip Mallory Jones and others eventually initiated the Ithaca Video Festival, the first touring video festival (1974-1984) and an important showcase for early video art and documentary.

At Antioch College in Ohio an active national tape exchange was maintained by students through their Community Media Center. At the Antioch Free Library people were welcome to borrow tapes or add their own tapes to the collection. Through the college's alternating semesters of work and school and its new program in communications, media students became actively

### In Depth: Philip Mallory Jones

Chris Hill: *What got you involved in media in the late 19'60s?*

Philip Mallory Jones: We were all talking about making revolution because ...we all had similar basic sympathies and we all understood the tools as part of that process. This was an opportunity to redefine the way information is made, distributed, and experienced. There were glorious and grand schemes and expectations about what small gauge video was going to do. It didn't happen. What the early video makers were looking for largely didn't happen because the money was more powerful than we knew at the time. Television was more powerful than we recognized at the time and it didn't cave in. It just bought it and ran away with it, claimed it and largely didn't acknowledge where any of this came from. I'm still seeing today things that video artists were doing 20 years ago and it's new on TV...

In terms of making revolution, there was a critical, concrete need to make things and distribute things. And that was not luxurious; it was very exciting because the people who were doing it didn't have a lot of precedents to go on. The 16mm documentary techniques were not really applicable. Television techniques were not appropriate. The experience had to be sorted out and the ways of doing that were defined by doing it manually—rewinding the reels on your edit deck a certain number of turns and rolling them so that the machines get up to speed and you can crash an edit. Use paper tapes to measure the cue distance. All kinds of tricks. These things were shared constantly. Somebody would come to town and say, well I do it this

*Philip Mallory Jones (cont'd)*

way, I do it with an audio cue, and someone else would come and say, well I do it with a visual cue on the playback machine.

Also the dealers became centers for information, for example, CTL Electronics [New York City]. There was an engineer there, one of the real hard-core pioneers. That man built, for instance, matrix switchers; he built prototype video walls. Some really interesting and clearly groundbreaking work was done right there in C.T. Lui's window. That was where you could buy *Radical Software* and the other pioneering journals for the field. That's where people met, in the back room. We would truck down from Ithaca, a four hour drive, and hang out at C.T. Lui's and spend money, the little we had, and meet people. Those were very important places. For us they were largely in New York City...It made for a camaraderie that was critical to the development of the field...

It has always been my understanding that making art is a revolutionary act...That was true in 1969 when I started making video and it's still true today. Today I understand that in somewhat different ways, but it's still the same effort. To do work that is interpretable across language barriers, across cultural barriers, and political boundaries is to contribute to that effort. African people in the world have to talk to each other and we have to do it without intermediaries. We have to define our own messages, and there will never be liberation until that is the case. You will never be liberated if you don't control your own messages, and we do

involved in planning and establishing public access cable operations all over the country.

Alongside the inspiration of the portapak, the burgeoning cable television industry was heralded as a promising technological development by artists writing in *Radical Software*, as well as community activists, and urban policy planners. Portable video technology could introduce non-professional people to production, and cable television companies which contracted with individual municipalities could use their local systems to disseminate citizen-generated and community-responsive programming. Public access provisions were understood as incentives to potential municipal clients by cable companies, anxious to expand into new markets in the early '70s, and as a negotiated resource in exchange for the companies receiving access to municipal infrastructures (utility poles, right-of-way to lay cable) by public policy planners and community media activists. Citizens' access to cable TV could begin to develop the media voices for those largely unrepresented by commercial television, as well as encourage cultural consumers to become cultural producers.

In a 1970 issue of *The Nation*, Ralph Lee Smith chronicled the competition among broadcast TV, cable TV, and the telephone companies for a "wired nation." Smith cited post-war federal commitment to building the interstate highway system as a precedent for mandating similar planning in the public interest for the development of an "electronic highway" in the '70s. Smith's prescient article concluded:

It is hard to assign a dollar value to many or most of the educational, cultural, recreational, social and political benefits that the nation would receive from a national communications highway. It is easier to assert the negative—that the nation probably cannot afford not to build it...It cannot be assumed that all the social effects of the cable will be good. For example...the cable will make it less and less necessary for the more affluent population of the suburbs to enter the city, either for work or recreation. Lack of concern and alienation could easily deepen, with effects that could cancel the benefits of community expression that the cable will bring to inner-city neighborhoods. At the very least, such dangerous possibilities must be foreseen, and the educational potential of the cable itself must be strongly marshaled to meet them..."<sup>25</sup>

The "benefits of community expression" cited by Smith are echoed in "Minority Cable Report" written for *Televisions* magazine. Roger Newell argued for minorities' stake in the cable business and community

projects that would keep the public informed and also "operationally involved." He pointed out that in the findings of the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (the Kerner Commission), "blacks interviewed by investigators for the commission felt that the media could not be trusted to present the true story of conditions that led to the riots." Furthermore, "proponents of the use of cable in minority communities saw it as the clear alternative to commercial broadcasting ... Cable gives us a second—and perhaps last—chance to determine whether television can be used to teach, to inspire, to change humans' lives for the better. The task will be demanding and expensive."<sup>26</sup>

The movement to develop public access to cable in the United States initially centered around New York University's Alternative Media Center (AMC) and George Stoney, who had directed the Canadian National Film Board's Challenge for Change from 1968-1970, a project which encouraged "community animation" by training people to use media to represent themselves and local issues to government agencies. Dorothy Henaut and Bonnie Klein describe the investment of citizens participating in Challenge for Change in the first issue of *Radical Software*:

Half-inch video allows complete control of the media by the people of a community. They can use the camera to view themselves and their neighborhood with a new and more perceptive eye; they can do interviews and ask the questions more pertinent to them; they can record discussions; they can edit tapes designed to carry a particular message to a particular audience—an audience they have chosen and invited themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Stoney worked with other video activists taking portapak into New York City neighborhoods, strategizing with city officials, federal regulators and cable companies, and speaking out at public hearings about the need to establish diversity of programming voices in order to prevent cable from becoming a copy of commercial broadcasting. In 1970 Stoney and Red Burns founded the Alternate Media Center at New York University with support from the Markle Foundation and, shortly thereafter, the National Endowment for the Arts, to train organizers to work with interested community groups, cable companies, and city governments to develop public access to cable TV around the country. Descriptions of tapes made by Alternate Media Center interns in Washington Heights, one of the first neighborhoods in Manhattan to be cabled, indicate their commitment to process-oriented productions and the

*Philip Mallory Jones (cont'd)*

not. To make work that indicates that it can be done is toward that effort.

**Chris Hill:** What were the precursors of what you described as being a revolutionary time? If you came to work in video in 1968, what lead up to that?

**Philip Mallory Jones:** A period of working with the Panther Party before ever touching a video camera. Before that working with Delta Ministry in Wallover County, Mississippi, doing voter registration and other kinds of guerrilla organizing. In '68, I'd be in and out of jail in Mississippi, in and out of jail in Memphis. I got released from jail in Memphis a week before King was assassinated...

*Interviewed June, 1995. Philip Mallory Jones worked with the Ithaca Video Project and is currently producing videotapes and CD ROM projects and teaching at the University of Arizona at Tempe.*

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### **In Depth: Bob Devine**

**Chris Hill:** *In the late '60s at Antioch, how did you see yourself in terms of the desire to actualize social change and the need to educate a population to the possibilities of radical change?*

**Bob Devine:** We put together a major in Communications at Antioch in 1969... We were all reading Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*, and trying hard to think about revolution, but art was inseparable from the communications activism. They were absolutely inseparable. They were part and parcel of the same package... We were reading the Leftist literature of the 40s, 50s and '60s, where

Bob Devine (cont'd)

communications was relegated to a very secondary position. There was a distrust of anything but print on the Left, generally, and media was part of the opiate of the masses. And so the new take for us was—no, media is absolutely central and essential to what we're doing, and the art is inseparable from the social change. It's a really critical point to understand ... that it was really hard to differentiate between what was arts oriented movement motivation and what was social change oriented. The confluence was not just a convenient marriage in many cases. These two things come together and fit together hand in glove...

Like all social movements and like all historical periods of time, things seep up like ground water in many places at once. There's no authorship because literally from coast to coast, every place that we looked, people had been doing the same things and looking at *Radical Software*. Everybody was thinking about these same things. And we thought we were the only people doing that ... The fuel was that those were tumultuous times, those were civil libertarian times, those were liberal apologist, social democracy times, those were information economy times. And there was this new technology that got melded in there and made the whole stew have a distinct flavor.

*add early history of AC*

Interviewed April, 1995. Bob Devine helped originate public access in Dallas and was the first director of MATA, the Milwaukee Access Television Association. Devine is currently Chairman of the Communications Department at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

viability of community participation in cable television:

Tape 190: Black Response to Riots 9/25/71. Cabled: Teleprompter, Sept 14, 16, 18. Because of an article in the NY Times about Dominican and black gangs fighting, Joel went up to 164th St. and Amsterdam Ave. to see if videotape could be used in any way to help in this situation possibly by using tape to get information to both sides, possibly putting this information on public access to bring the communities' attention to this incident. It was the first time Joel had gone out alone, so he gave the mike to the people because he had no partner to take sound. At the beginning, Joel asked questions, but then the people just started relating to each other and totally ignored Joel. He felt they really wanted to get something out and had a strong need to speak. He played the tape back for the people through the camera and they dug it...The stereotyped image of a Black voice is destroyed by the information on the tape showing the difference of views. People talk to each other as well as to the camera. 28

In 1972 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), under the leadership of Nicholas Johnson, issued regulations which required every cable system with 3,500 or more subscribers to originate local programming and to provide one dedicated, noncommercial public access channel, available without charge at all times on a first-come, first-served, non-discriminatory basis to carry that programming. At that time the cable industry had a 7% penetration of U.S. households. This legislation provided the groundwork from which citizens, municipalities, or cable companies could initiate public access programming, and establish equipment and training resource centers all over the country.

Cable access facilities typically supported local production by providing consumer video equipment, training, and programming access to cable channels; they were funded primarily by mandated fees paid by cable companies to cities. In 1976 former AMC interns established the National Federation for Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP), an umbrella organization whose newsletters and conferences generated communication and ongoing education within the growing number of centers. The NFLCP continued to support citizens, municipalities and cable companies interested in initiating public access to cable facilities around the country, and their legislative and grass roots advocacy impacted significantly on national communications legislation throughout the decade. By 1986 there were over 1,200 public access facilities in the United States, actively supporting productions and programming by the public on cable TV. 29

Although cable could reach potentially large television audiences, not all communities were cabled. And because cable companies charged viewers, many households chose not to subscribe. Local public television stations were also potential distribution outlets for video producers. The stand-alone time base corrector appeared on the market in 1973; by stabilizing the signal of 1/2" open reel tapes, it effectively ended technological objections to broadcasting portable video. As video began to replace film for news productions, independents using portable video equipment began calling for more diversity in points of view, challenging existing union policies as well as programming policies. Video groups began working with local PBS stations—Portable Channel with WXXI in Rochester (New York) and University Community Video with KTCA in Minneapolis—to produce news and documentaries specifically for local broadcast audiences. Technical development—portability, color video, 3/4" U-matic cassette format, CMX computer video editing—all enhanced video production throughout the decade while raising a complex of issues around independents' access to new technologies and broadcast TV's audiences.

Public libraries were pioneers of community video activity—extending their mission by loaning out portapak, collecting and screening tapes, and advocating for public access to cable. Public libraries in Port Washington, the Cattaraugus-Chautauqua Public Library in Jamestown, and Donnell Library in New York City became notable sites for videotape production and dissemination. Port Washington Public Library's video director Walter Dale asked the questions: "Could the library maintain in the area of video those qualities it fought for in print; namely, the right to read all views and expressions? Could the library become a true catalyst for the free market place of visual as well as printed expressions?"<sup>30</sup> To Dale, the answer was yes.

Reflecting back on the formative period (1968-1973) both technological utopians and social historians testified to an inspired engagement with the possibilities of a new society. Hans Magnus Enzensberger commented on 1968, when "... utopian thinking seemed to meet the material conditions for its own realization. Liberation had ceased to be a mere wishful thought. It appeared to be a real possibility."<sup>31</sup> Videofreex member Parry Teasdale recalled the imperative to make a commitment: "Without understanding the dynamics of the war in Vietnam and what that did to society; I don't think you can understand video ... it spawned the technology and it created the necessary groundwork for an adversarial relationship within the society that defined sides so clearly that people could choose and choose righteously to be a part of something."<sup>32</sup> Ralph Lee Smith looked back on his first encounter with advocates for public access cable TV: "Those people were... applying not just technology but appropriate technology. That is to say they were adopting enough of the technology, at a level of expression which was just adequate to do the job and no more, to achieve what they wanted to achieve... They were way ahead of their time."<sup>33</sup> Woody Vasulka recalled a time when many welcomed "a new society that would be based on a new model ... a drive for personal enlightenment ... the possibility of transcendence through image as an actual machine-made evocation ... Some thought of this as a healing process or ... a restructuring of one's consciousness."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the limits to change eventually encountered by the early video practitioners, widespread questioning of fundamental ideological and lifestyle choices did inspire the invention of experimental community structures and economies founded on the use value of media production. Such emphatic commitments focused a radical subjectivity which identified itself as an alternative to the "alienated" and spiritually bankrupt bureaucratic mainstream. Collectives and networked individuals invented new cultural forms and nourished an energy which focused, invigorated, and sustained productive social scenes. Existing institutions—television networks, museums, schools, libraries—were challenged to respond to the interests and needs of their audiences, markets, and users. Optimistic about the role the new media technology could play in a new society, these early

video tribes committed themselves to the performance of a radically de-centralized and potentially more democratic electronic communication practice. This alternative vision of decentralized media culture(s) was funded starting in the early '70s as not-for-profit artists projects, artist-run spaces, video access centers, and public access cable facilities, and received support from federal, state and local arts councils, private foundations, public television and cable companies.

*c. Invisible histories—reconstructing a picture of decentralized media practice*

Few of the tapes from the immense body of work produced by these early collectives and access projects have been restored and are available today. Most open reel tapes from this period are in desperate need of preservation. Archivist Roger House recently described "Inside Bed-Stuy," one of the first black-produced community access shows (1968) as revealing "a community in the midst of trying to speak to itself, articulate its needs, appreciate its creativity, and urge its residents to rise to the challenges of the times." He commented on "how healthy it was to see average people of all ages, in splendid plainness of speech and appearance, speaking out on the Vietnam war, unemployment, urban blight, black capitalism, and black power."<sup>35</sup> Much research is needed to identify, recover, and evaluate a comprehensive history of the alternative video culture from this period.

Videotaped documentation of community "process" set out to establish a new media vocabulary for a new way of speaking in American society. Why have so many of these tapes been relegated to the back shelves of social and educational institutions and producers' attics? Part of the answer lies in the social and institutional dynamics of any cultural scene. Almost any cultural production, whether destined for a museum or a living room via public access cable, depends on intersecting social and institutional systems that construct the motivation for the work's production, and the distribution or exhibition vehicle which connects it with an audience, all contributing to its value and meaning. In working to establish a decentralized media practice that had more to do with practice and process than product, especially in the early '70s, producers consciously positioned themselves on the cultural margins. Many of these early initiatives were undertaken by members of minority groups or geographically-isolated communities, which had never established cultural currency outside their local scenes.

Many of these early communications projects were intended to be narrow-casted to specific audiences, and conceived essentially to intersect with locally constructed social and cultural territory. Are these challenges to existing limitations imposed by class, race, age, and gender less legible today? Contemporary viewers may require a context explaining the previous generation's commitment to process, lack of narrative closure, and rough editing.

Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson claimed at the end of the '70s:

Authentic cultural creation is dependent for its existence on authentic collective life, on the vitality of the 'organic' social group in whatever form...[The] only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system...and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system.<sup>36</sup>

Jameson cites women's literature, black literature, and British working class rock as examples of this authentic collective life, but the alternative video scenes' efforts to realize a new citizen-based, locally-responsive media culture across the United States at the time would also qualify.

## 2. Video art practice and its interpretive strategies

A few years ago Jonas Mekas closed a review of a show of videotapes with an aphorism to the effect that film is an art but video is a god. I coupled the remark, somehow, with another, of Ezra Pound's: that he understood religion to be "just one more unsuccessful attempt to popularize art." Recently though I have sensed a determination on the part of video artists to get down to the work of inventing their art, and corroborating their faith in good works...A large part of that work of invention is, I take it, to understand what video is. —Hollis Frampton 37

Perceptual and structural changes...have to go with relevance rather than forms. And the sense of a new relevance is the aspect that quickly fades. Once a perceptual change is made, one does not look at it but uses it to see the world. It is only visible at the point of recognition of the change. After that, we are changed by it but have also absorbed it. The impossibility of reclaiming the volatility of perceptual change leaves art historical explanations to pick the bones of dead forms. In this sense, all art dies with time and is impermanent whether it continues to exist as an object or not. —Robert Morris 38

### a. Post-minimalist perceptual relevance

Although they often remarked on the pleasure of working in aesthetic territory that was open to new gestures and a new critical vocabulary, the first artists to explore new video technology in the late '60s were educated through minimalism's measured structures and procedures and shared late modernism's investment of the "real" in the materials of artmaking. The mid-'60s saw a shift if not a crisis in contemporary modern art predicated on a radical reassessment of aesthetic foundations and a politicized evaluation of the institutional delivery system for art. Critic Clement Greenberg's reigning tenets of post-war modernism argued that art was "an escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society," and that, in contemporary art, "a new and greater emphasis upon form...involved the assertion of the arts as independent vocations, disciplines, and crafts, absolutely autonomous, and entitled to respect for their own sakes..."<sup>39</sup> This description of an art object whose integrity was specific to a discipline and was intended to be appreciated in isolation from the complex social and cultural contexts of its making began to be challenged in the late 50s. The multi-disciplinary, participatory nature of Happenings, the invasion of mass media via parody in Pop Art, and the aberrant humor of "intermedia" Fluxus projects and performances fractured audience expectations of the normative conditions for art making. While many artists began the '70s by investigating the "essential" properties of video, the confluence of "high" and "low" art forms, the performance of radical subjectivities, and shifting attitudes toward cinema, television and narrative would set in motion competing cultural agendas for videomakers by the end of the decade.

By the mid-'60s painters, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians, and dancers were not only embracing interdisciplinary work but also contributing important critical perspectives, articulating their own working assumptions in major art journals like *Artforum*. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins argued in 1965 for the "populism" and "dialogue" of "intermedia" and against "the concept of the pure medium, the painting or precious object of any kind."<sup>40</sup> Conceptual art, articulated by artists like Sol Lewitt, minimized the importance of objecthood altogether in the aesthetic exercise. Participating in this debate critic Michael Fried wrote in 1967 that "in previous [modern] art what is to be had from the work is located strictly within it," and the art object should occupy a privileged meditative space. He objected to the "degenerative theatricality" of new process-oriented works of art that acknowledged the viewer and were "concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters work."<sup>41</sup> However other critics, such as Annette Michelson, heralded post-minimalism for acknowledging "temporality as the condition or medium of human cognition and aesthetic experience."<sup>42</sup> And Lizzie Borden pointed out that the value of considering the perceptual phenomenology of an art event "underline[d] its actual way of working with the viewer" which amounted to the "liberation of the art object from the idealization of critical theory."<sup>43</sup>

Sculptor, performer, and sometime videomaker Robert Morris traced the shift from his early minimalist project of describing objecthood to a post-minimalist articulation of the new "landscape" of material and perceptual processes:

What was relevant to the 1960s was the necessity of reconstituting the object as art. Objects were an obvious first step away from illusionism, allusion and metaphor... [However] object making has now given way to an attention to substance... substances in many states—from chunks, to particles, to slime, to whatever... Alongside this approach is chance, contingency, indeterminacy—in short, the entire area of process... This reclamation of process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception... What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes.<sup>44</sup>

This attention to the process of working with specific materials and artmaking as a way of changing perception itself constituted "a dialectic between structure and meaning which is... sensitive to its own needs in its realization."<sup>45</sup> This phenomenological dialogue was articulated through an essentially formal vocabulary that attempted to focus precise attention on fundamental structures and procedures involved in producing work, more akin to science than poetics. Experimental filmmaker Paul Sharits described the critical vocabulary brought to bear on non-narrative film of the '60s, a way of speaking about work which was adopted by the early videomakers:

It is noteworthy that during the 1950s and 1960s a relatively successful vocabulary ("formalism") was employed by critics of painting and sculpture. It was a mode which by-passed the artists' intentions, dismissed "poetic" interpretations, and focused on apt descriptions of the art object; the aim was a certain discrete "objectivity."<sup>46</sup>

Experimental film, like sculpture and painting, had been grounded in modernism's materials-based formal vocabulary and was strictly anti-illusionist (*vis a vis* the Hollywood narrative), and videomakers would assume this bias for their camera-based medium as well. Filmmaker Malcolm LeGrice commented on experimental film's investment in the descriptive reality of physical materials and viewers' perception in 1977: "The historical development of abstract and formal cinema ... seeks to be 'realist' in the material sense. It does not imitate or represent reality, nor create spurious illusions of times, places and lives which engage the spectator in a vicarious substitute for his own reality."<sup>47</sup>

Artists and critics were re-examining fundamental assumptions about modern art which for decades had been isolated within a personal contemplative moment and removed from popular culture and mass media. Hermine Freed remarked:

Just when pure formalism had run its course; just when it became politically embarrassing to make objects, but ludicrous to make nothing; just when many artists were doing performance work but had nowhere to perform, or felt the need to keep a record of their performance;... just when it became clear that TV communicates more information to more people than large walls do; just when we understood that in order to define space it is necessary to encompass time, just when many established ideas in other disciplines were being questioned and new models were proposed, just then the portapak became available.<sup>48</sup>

#### *b. Immediacy, process, feedback*

In step with late modernism's imperative to explore the essential properties of materials, videomakers were initially rhapsodic about the inherent properties of the medium, such as immediacy and real time feedback. Compared to film, videotape was inexpensive, immediate, and recyclable like audiotape. Editing videotape between 1968-1971 was primitive; aesthetic strategies and narrative constructions that relied on precise editing emerged only after the development of sophisticated editing equipment made editing feasible at media art centers, TV labs, and public access centers. During this early period, the simultaneous recording and exhibition of events in "real



time" or the real time "synthesis" of images using analog electronic instruments dictated the structure of the work. Early tapes using these time-based instruments foregrounded duration itself, along with the mapping of attention over time, and relationships between space/time and sound/time. Critic David Antin discussed at length early videomakers' calculated denial of the attentional framework or "money metric" of television. (49) Joanna Gill, writing for the Rockefeller Foundation in 1975, described these early video works as "information/perception pieces," projects determined to expand the limits of viewers' ability to perceive themselves in video-mediated environments. 50

The mapping of perceptual, social and/or technological "processes" was valorized above the tape as an art "product." Early video projects often took the form of installations—configuring cameras, monitors, and/or recording decks with immediate or delayed playback, a common adaptation of an open reel tape recorder accomplished by creating a tape loop between the record and playback heads on one or more decks. *Wipe Cycle*, a multi-monitor installation by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette, part of Howard Wise's historic 1969 exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, featured an 8-second tape loop whereby people entering the gallery encountered delayed images of their own arrival played back to them on a bank of monitors. The artists described the installation as an "information strobe" in which "the most important thing was the notion of information presentation, and the notion of the integration of the audience into the information."<sup>51</sup> Antin, writing about this installation said that "what is attempted is the conversion (liberation) of an audience (receiver) into an actor (transmitter)."<sup>52</sup>

Other artists pursued these ideas throughout the decade. Dan Graham, for example, structured "consciousness projections" which featured technical and human feedback and delay systems in which the audience could explore its apprehension of present and past time, subjective and objective information. Graham wrote:

Video is a present time medium. Its image can be simultaneous with its perception by/of its audience (it can be the image of its audience perceiving) ... video feeds back indigenous data in the immediate, present-time environment or connects parallel time/space continua. <sup>53</sup>

Through the use of video-tape feedback and tape delay the performer and the audience, the perceiver and his process of perception, are linked, or co-identified. The difference between intention and actual behaviour is fed back on the monitor and immediately influences the observer's future intentions and behaviour. By linking perception of exterior behaviour and its interior, mental perception, an observer's 'self', like a topological moebius strip, can be apparently without 'inside' or 'outside'.<sup>54</sup>

Video artists exploited the phenomenon of video "feedback," a specific artifact of video tools, accomplished by pointing a video camera at a monitor. An infinite tunnelling or mirroring effect is produced. Besides being an easily produced and mesmerizing psychedelic effect, feedback expressed an essential concept in information systems theory. The feedback effect was a powerful metaphor for the ability of a self-monitoring information system to function as an organic or self-regulating physical system. It was invoked by artists in investigations of duration, information exchange and modification, the phenomenology of self and the everyday, and relationships with audiences. Strategies using information feedback were also employed by community activists interested in models of participatory social mediation and political advocacy where citizens could represent themselves and deliver their messages as a kind of extended dialogue with public officials on video, the image currency of the time.

The portability and unity of image and sound represented by the portapak meant that the video cameraperson could approach documentation in terms of his or her ability to enter into a relational process with a constantly evolving situation. Bob Devine commented on how the attention of the cameraperson constructed the event:

There are qualities which distinguish the sort of tape in which resonance or receptivity predominates. The takes tend to be unbroken. The point of view has the unity of a single continuous interactive perspective. The camera moves through and among; it does not define space with fronts, backs, sides or even frame-edges, but instead "occupies" the interior of the space and presents a structural awareness of that interior. The camera is distractable; it reacts, is drawn through attention to particular features or interactions. The tape represents a record of the focus of receptive attention in the taping context. Attention is edited in real-time.<sup>55</sup>

c. The electronic material of video and the development of tools

Artists working directly with the technologically-charged environment of this time-based medium generated a discourse celebrating the particular processes of electronic image-construction. The video camera transforms light and sound information into the video and audio signals as waveform, frequency and voltage, which can be displayed on a cathode ray tube—a television monitor—or magnetically encoded and stored on videotape. Woody and Steina Vasulka articulated their video project in 1975 as primarily a "didactic" one; they were developing a "vocabulary" of electronic procedures unique to the construction of a "time/energy object."<sup>56</sup> Other artists were also dedicated to aesthetic and scientific research into interfaced electronic tools, anticipating what would be the television industry's eventual menu of "special effects." In the early 1970s, artists invented this imaging as a fundamental electronic lexicon, long before it became a pre-programmed stylistic embellishment.

By 1978, Woody Vasulka had broadened his discussion of electronic image vocabulary to include digital as well as analog codes.

I want to point to the primary level of codes, notably the binary code operation, as a principle of imaging and image processing. This may require accepting and incorporating this primitive structure (the binary code) into our views of literacy, in the form of binary language, in order to maintain communication with the primary materials at all levels and from any distance. The dramatic moment of the transformation into a binary code of energy events in time, as they may be derived from light, or the molecular communication of sound, or from a force field, gravity, or other physical initiation, has to be realized, in order to appreciate the power of the organization and transformation of a code.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout this period artists, usually in conjunction with independent engineers, modified and invented video "instruments" or imaging tools, making possible the construction of new video and audio systems shaped by their individual aesthetic agendas. Throughout the late '60s, Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) celebrated collaborations between visual and sound artists and scientists in a number of exhibitions, seeking to integrate new ideas in technology with contemporary culture. Labs and studios designed specifically to explore electronic imaging and facilitate collaborations between video artists and engineers included the National Center for Experiments in Television at KQED in San Francisco, the Television Lab at WNET in New York, the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton and later Owego, New York, the studios at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>58</sup>

One aesthetic and technical issue carried over from music and experimental film that provoked the interest of early videmakers was the structural relationship between electronic sound and image production. Nam June Paik's experimentation with the electromagnetic parameters of television and instrument design were extensions of his earlier activity in avant-garde music. Paik's 1963 Fluxus modifications of television sets with powerful magnets and his TV bra for cellist Charlotte Moorman were ironic gestures, exposing television's electronic materiality and toying with audience expectations around the TV set as everyday site for meditation and cultural reception. He had earlier attacked and compromised pianos as German cultural icons. In 1969 with engineer Shuya Abe, Paik pioneered the construction of the Paik-Abe video synthesizer, an instrument which

enabled an artist to add color to the standard black and white video image. In the production of video, both sound and image are determined by the same fundamental analog electronic processes. Modular audio synthesizers, developed in the early '60s by Robert Moog and Don Buchla, were models for much of the video synthesizer development. Video artists' explorations into the physical materiality underlying visual, aural, and cognitive phenomena and into the fundamental structuring of sound and image through mathematical algorithms and machine systems, occupied common territory with aesthetic inquiries in music, experimental film, and sculpture at this time.

#### d. Video and performance and its audience

If video was celebrated by late '60s artists for its immediacy and ability to function within or capture a sense of real time, so too was performance art a "situation" or gesture which invigorated the present. Both videomaking and performance supported the investigation of the everyday, the vernacular, the conditions of active perception and information gathering in various settings. Portable video, with its immediate playback, as well as performance foregrounded the producer/performer and his or her negotiation of a theatrical moment, and could be resituated in the streets or the studio, removed from a gallery setting. Both video and performance raised questions about the function of art at a time when modernism's validation of the transcendent aesthetic experience was challenged by artists. Barbara Rose commenting on the politics of art in 1969 observed: "The real change is not in forms of art, but in the function of art and the role of the artist in society, which poses an absolute threat to the existence of critical authority."<sup>59</sup>

Performance art posited the aesthetic gesture in the body of the artist, with his or her personal tools, in the present tense, and video could function as one of those personal tools or as a recording instrument for documenting the situation. The subjectivity of the artist and/or the expectations of the audience could be investigated through performance. Vito Acconci, whose early work as a poet involved words and the page as space, remarked that his involvement with performance was a shift away from the material to understanding the self as an instrument and "an agent which attends to it, the world, out there."<sup>60</sup>

#### In Depth: Peer Bode

Chris Hill: *Could you talk about the Experimental Television Center, an artist-run facility in Owego, NY?*

Peer Bode: By the end of the '60s and in the early '70s a number of factors came together so that there could be funding for these alternative artists-run centers, and so they happened. And then a whole range of work was created within those centers. The Experimental Television Center had an early access program that had to do with loaning out the five or six portapaks. Ralph's [Hocking] was dealing with the idea of serving and sustaining a community. How is it that one extends the idea of these tools and deals with some of the needs of an arts making community? Also, how does one deal with electronic tools in a way that doesn't create a model which just imitates industry when, in fact, it uses industrial tools?...People needed to actually learn how these tools worked and what new configurations might be that would deliver what they might want, since possibilities for these electronic tools were largely unknown. The model of industry was not the model one wanted to imitate because it was structured to produce certain genres of work...It was a kind of joke—the Detroit way of working. And one didn't need to make work that way...The material in the studio begins to be in dialogue with the material of the world, and at that point one can critique the world as well...

People like Nam June [Paik] and Shuya Abe were good examples of what we would now call computer hackers, where this sort of kludging of found stuff would happen. The Paik-Abe synthesizer was a color encoder from a color camera and a video mixer. They didn't invent those

*Peer Bode (cont'd)*

components, they were found... At this time, the early '70s, ideas would come from music and sound ... For example, the guys from WNET came to the center. John Godfrey was a broadcast engineer and very sympathetic and interested in a new kind of working, and David Loxton was a producer. I remember them being at the Center wearing their white shirts and ties and looking very formal, like business men, and holding clip lights for Nam June while he had a little model of the Empire State Building on a lazy susan spinning around [one of the shots in the tape *The Selling of New York*, 1972, by Nam June Paik]. They had several cameras going at once that were then being colorized and keyed and overlaid. The scene was Nam June grabbing the Empire State building with his hand and pulling it out of the frame. In any case, WNET didn't have their lab yet in New York and Paik and Abe came to the Center to do their work. Within a year or so they established their lab for artists to work and make new television. So again, these ideas, these things all happened simultaneously. There were clearly people with these ideas in the newly established PBS structures...

That whole relationship between the PBS artist centers and the other artists-run centers is another interesting one to flesh out, because the artists-run centers had connections to their local communities and also created a different definition of community... There was a difference between the large capital investment productions and the low capital investment productions. This is something that doesn't get talked about enough—what does it mean for something to be a \$50 production, or a \$100 production or a \$10,000

Performance art had often functioned historically as a transgressive gesture. With its postwar experimental roots in the aleatory music of John Cage, who advocated the listener's focused "learning" so that "the hearing of the piece is his own action,"<sup>61</sup> and in paradoxical Fluxus events, which embraced boredom in combination with excitement to "enrich the experiential world of our spectators, our co-conspirators,"<sup>62</sup> performance art in the '60s and '70s undermined audiences' cultural habits and expectations. It also shared with multi-media happenings "in a real, not an ideological way, a protest against museum conceptions of art—preserved and cherished."<sup>63</sup> Performance art clearly participated in an economic critique of the art establishment's investments in objects through its refusal to be commodified. Video installations, performance documentations, and process-oriented recordings at the time shared with performance art an accommodation of chance events. As unedited documentation of live events, with grainy black and white images of unknown stability, video also had questionable archival, and therefore investment, value within the art market.

Performance assumes a relationship with a local audience, which shares to some degree in the risk-taking or experimental nature of performance work. Writer and artist Liza Bear cited the "heightened awareness of audience as an intrinsic element of the whole performing situation."<sup>64</sup> Vito Acconci's work in particular functioned as a kind of encyclopedic study of relationships constructed between the performer and his/her audience through the video monitor. His repertoire of entertaining, erotic, and threatening overtures catalogued the narcissism, seduction, and risk-taking in personal theater and its proto-narrative gestures by directly engaging the viewer in the construction of attentional needs. By exposing his intentions within his performances, he begged the audience's consideration of their own intentions and unstated assumptions. Acconci has written about the intimacy involved with video performance and its "fertile ground for relationship."<sup>65</sup>

At the same time that artists were venturing structural studies of video performance and measures of intimacy, feminists drew on the intimacy of shared life and art experiences generated through conscious-raising groups and women-centered cultural scenes. Concentrating on the body as a performance vehicle as well as critiquing its representation in mass media and art history, feminist artists such as Hermine Freed, Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler,

and Linda Montano, among others, used video and performance to assert and focus female presence and raise issues of gender and subjectivity in art. The invigorated confidence of women as performers and producers, their ambivalence about being the object of desire before the lens or audience, and their politicized relationship to audiences and institutional venues developed into a vital and complex discourse through video and other camera-based media like photography and film. Having attended the second Women's Video Festival in New York, reviewer Pat Sullivan offered her experience as audience member: "The striking feature of the festival was the revival of communal viewing...Being puzzled or amused or even angered by the responses of the other viewers forced me to search on the screen or in my mind for the origins of my own reactions."<sup>66</sup>

The video project's relationship to its audience was assumed to be a structural aspect of work that expressed a range of radical subjective assertions. The early feminist insight that both cultural production and viewer reception were constructed according to gender was eventually extended to other "differences," such as class, race, and ethnicity. Community media activists worked to transform citizens from passive television consumers into active video producers who would reveal specific local agendas. Artists investigated the phenomenology of viewers' attention in a variety of performative situations which included installations of electronic instruments as well as personal gestures. And the countercultural "longing for group experiences that would transcend the limits of the individual ego...a craving for a sort of public love, a communal self-determination"<sup>67</sup> was reflected in part by viewers' openness to the experience of duration through largely unedited verite video documentation.

The investigation of phenomenological and social relations mediated by video also inevitably introduced television, a paradoxically intimate and remote technology located in the home. Television's intimacy with audience was taken up in diverse west coast work by William Wegman, Ilene Segalove, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco. In *The Eternal Frame* (1976) Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco reenacted the media spectacle of the Kennedy assassination and revealed "inscribed audiences."<sup>68</sup> members of the general public who had originally witnessed television's public channeling of the horror and intimate details of the Kennedy assassination and who now inadvertently found themselves in the middle of public performances recorded in the streets of Dallas and

Peer Bode (cont'd)

production or a \$5 million production? It was clear that some work could be made with just that portapak.

That same kind of difference began to set up around different aspects of media production. When you have a larger capital outlay system for the production, you also have a larger capital outlay for the promotion and distribution of that production. These activities are certainly part of working in an information and an advertising based culture. The resulting perception can be, though, that those projects which didn't spend the money on advertising never existed, and that's part of the history that needs to be done. Dig up what actually happened because a lot of the focus and the commitment in the '70s was to put the resources into the actual making of the work, not into its advertising ... The larger institutions were clearly in dialogue with other scenes, where some of the research and new idea developments happened, places which received less funding but were higher in terms of freedom and actual connection to communities...

*Interviewed March, 1995. Peer Bode worked as access coordinator at the Experimental Television Center in Owego, NY, and now teaches video at the State University of New York at Alfred.*

San Francisco. They confirm the public's pseudo-familiarity with those events, becoming unalienated partners in an ironic disassembling of the authority of the news media.

The tourists standing in Dealey Plaza in 1976 may have been unwitting cultural collaborators, but, like the New York audiences for video and performance events, they were assumed to be important receivers of video by this first generation of video artists. Liza Bear, writing about performance in *Avalanche* in 1974, stated: "Part of content was an articulation of ... the audience's knowledge, beliefs, expectations of the artist in question ... and it was a consciousness of the audience as people who've come to see a particular artists' work, as people who know or work within the art context, and also, in some cases, a consciousness of the limitations of that context."<sup>69</sup> Critic Peggy Gale concluded that by "shifting away from the marketplace and the production of a precious object ... the role of the audience was redefined to play a part in the completion of the work through their response and feedback: the video model of simultaneous record and presentation, objectification and immediacy, was in effect reiterated."<sup>70</sup>

*e. Video and the construction of "reality"*

Artists explored the immediacy and performative possibilities of video, producing work that legitimized new political and cultural assertions about subjective, lived experience and extended to audiences a considered and responsive function. These critical intimacies and ideological realities as they were mapped out through the video art and alternative media culture, however, were largely antithetical to the commodified "reality" portrayed through mass culture. Although the spectacle of television appealed to the intimate wants and desires of its audience or market, as Enzensberger elaborated, the relationship proffered through television inevitably resulted in a false intimacy: "Consumption as spectacle contains the promise that want will disappear. The deceptive, brutal, and obscene features of this festival derive from the fact that there can be no question of a real fulfillment of its promise...Trickery on such a scale is only conceivable if based on mass need."<sup>71</sup>

The viewers' expectations of video art were complicated by their experiences living with television. That experience was described clearly at the end of the decade by Dan Graham:

TV gains much of its effect from the fact that it appears to depict a world which is immediately and fully present. The viewer assumes that the TV image is both immediate and contiguous as to time with the shared social time and parallel "real world" of its perceivers—even when that may not be the case. This physical immediacy produces in the viewer(s) a sense of psychological intimacy where people on TV and events appear to directly address him or her.<sup>72</sup>

The capacity of camera-based work to signify truthfulness, to claim to witness or represent reality, results in its legibility to many viewers as an "essential" and confirming realism. The documentary form, which introduces images and sounds as evidence, was embraced by many women and other previously marginalized producers working with video in the '70s, in part because seeing new images of self was undeniably powerful and evidenced the production of a new version of the real. Documentary representation was also challenged by women and others as inevitably a product of a specifically focused lens and ideology, with edited inclusions, omissions, and censorships.<sup>73</sup>

Contending ideas about the phenomenological, political, and subjective constructions of reality dominated cultural debate at the end of decade. New developments in narrative film theory, feminist theory, and the semiotics of image-making repositioned late '70s and early '80s artmaking within an emerging discourse that focused on the construction of subjectivity through the signifying practices of mass media, in which ideology was transacted through commodified and reproducible images. These cultural shifts, generally regarded as postmodern, forced a re-evaluation of critical strategies for artists in creating video "texts."

In the early '70s videomakers articulated their opposition to television's codes and one-way distribution system, evident in assertions such as "VT is not TV," and exhibitions at new artists' centers titled "No TV," "Alternative TV," "Process TV," and "Natural TV." <sup>74</sup> The independent network at the end of the decade included media collectives, artists-run media centers, public access organizations, and artist collaborations with public television, and remained an alternative to corporate television, however marginalized those cultural scenes. Whether intentionally oppositional or mainstream, video artists, public access producers, and independent documentarians worked with technologies and cultural codes shared in part by the dominant communications media. In the United States, though not in all countries, this was primarily a commercial venture. Work intended for television would inevitably be evaluated in terms of its marketing value, which would shadow its other intentions or merits. In the late '70s video artists and independent producers negotiated the contradictory possibilities of broadcast television's great visibility and potential censorship. David Antin pointed out that an artist's videotape ended, not when it was time for a commercial, but when the artist's intention was accomplished. <sup>75</sup>

A decade of producing work, exploring relationships with audiences, and nurturing a viable alternative media infrastructure developed into a video cultural discourse which framed the capacity of a videotape to represent its maker's access to production technologies, to reveal its maker's strategies for approximating or constructing the "real," and to engage a performative interaction with an anticipated audience. Alternative videomakers were able to map out diverse intentions as they developed modes of address specific to different audiences—the art world, public television, local community media. The videomaker's various strategies—attentional, representational, formal, performative—for articulating an art or communications event remained a choice, and always measured the critical distance between the dominant language of commercial media and the videomaker's independent voice.

### *3. Emergence of public funding*

Artists with electronic skill have transformed old TV sets into the dazzling 'light machines' that have appeared in galleries and museums, and some have developed video colorizers and synthesizers which permit electronic "painting." A relative few have penetrated the engineers' citadels of broadcast television to create experimental videotapes with the full palette of the switching consoles. A larger number, working since 1967 with half-inch portable video systems from Japan, have explored the potential of videotape to reach out and open circuits of communication within a variety of small communities—giving substance to attitudes and concerns which monolithic broadcast television has ignored to a point of near obliteration ... This new area of Council [NYSCA] involvement suggests the extraordinary potential of the medium still to be explored as we go forward into tomorrow's wired nation.  
—Russell Connor <sup>76</sup>

#### *a. From collectives and community media to video access centers, public access centers, and public television labs*

In the decade following the introduction of the portapak, video art and documentary practice developed within an alternative media infrastructure nurtured by the parallel growth of public arts funding. Early videomakers found that keeping up with the quickly evolving, high-end consumer tools of electronic media was expensive, even when resources were shared. Early video arts funds supported proposals by artists and collectives, and developed by the mid-'70s into funding programs for both individual artists and a nationwide system of regional media arts centers, some of which evolved out of the early collectives.

By the late 1960s public funding for experimental and documentary film had been established through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the New York State Council on the Arts

(NYSCA). Gerd Stern, an artist and early NYSCA staff consultant, outlined the rationale for NYSCA's early commitment to the new medium of video art as "a societal shift away from stockpiling a product ... [T]he Council had always maintained a very open attitude toward new art forms and a willingness to experiment, to take chances, to recognize the difficulties of arriving at tight value judgments in new situations where the standards were still nascent, embryonic."<sup>77</sup> Funding of not-for-profit cultural organizations and artists was promoted by public policy planners to encourage cultural research and design that would invigorate the marketplace and enhance the quality of life in a democracy. Some argued that public funding for the arts would force individuals to become institutionalized and could co-opt or blunt the edge of cultural dissent and creativity. Others countered that public funding would maintain a publicly accessible platform for discussion of cultural values which would contribute alternatives to a marketplace of ideas dominated by art collecting and the interests of commercial media. A more thorough tracking of the dialogue, initiatives, policies, and the negotiations between the funding institutions, legislative and judicial bodies, commercial interests, not-for-profit arts organizations and public access centers, and artists' peer panel participation during this period must be developed elsewhere.

Artists in the late '60s challenged the dominant aesthetics of modernist high culture and the economic assumptions of the art world establishment. Demonstrations at major museums protested the lack of support for living artists and called for a general reassessment of the business of art making and art dealing. A manifesto by the Art Workers Coalition in 1970 declared: "Artworks are a cultural heritage that belongs to the people. No minority has the right to control them." Their demands challenged, among other conditions, the make-up of museum boards of directors, inattention to the work of minorities, and a lack of information about active local artists.<sup>78</sup> Although many galleries and museums supported new work and were responsive to criticism from working artists, the very existence of artist-run cooperatives and media and performance laboratories indicated the existing system was not adequately meeting the shifting needs and interests of a new generation of artists.

The late '60s saw the development of new structures to support the production and funding of video art. Some of the first experimental sites for "television art" were at educational television stations (soon to become "public television"): KQED in San Francisco, WGBH in Boston, and WNET in New York. Both KQED and WGBH received Rockefeller Foundation support in 1967 to establish experimental workshops, each taking different directions. Firmly committed to process-oriented research, the San Francisco project set up a studio for video instrumentation design as well as interdisciplinary (poetry, video, music, dance) television art projects. This became the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET) in 1969. The Rockefeller Foundation also supported research in the development of media programs at the university level, and educators were invited to observe the electronic arts research happening at the NCET. WGBH's New Television Workshop produced a series of innovative programs in the late '60s, including the critically acclaimed *The Medium is the Medium* (1969), a television art magazine of early video experimentation.

The Television Laboratory at WNET was established in 1972 with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, NYSCA, and the NEA. Between 1974 and 1984, WNET's residency program provided access to state-of-the-art broadcast video technology for five to eight artists each year. The station showcased a range of independent documentary and video art to its large New York market through series such as the "Video and Television Review" ("VTR") (1975-1976), hosted by artist/curator Russell Connor. Although the TV labs clearly represented a rare window for technical and programmatic experimentation within broadcast television, public television ultimately did not sustain its support for media art research and equipment access, nor did it continue to provide adequate outlets for independent work.



An accessible funding structure for the media arts emerged in the late '60s. NYSCA was established in 1960 and was the nation's first government agency for support of the arts, mandated to respond to the art needs of New York City, the epicenter of the post-war international art world. Art was business, especially in New York, and the 1972 NYSCA annual report noted that the tourist trade as well as "two major industries of New York City—fashion and communications—are there ... because only there can be found the ideas and energy on which they depend." 79 Governor Nelson Rockefeller, in supporting NYSCA's expansion, could claim in 1971 that more than 75 million attendances were reported at New York State arts events in the previous year. Between 1969 and 1970, NYSCA's overall budget increased almost ten fold from \$2.3 million in 1969-1970 to \$20.2 million in 1970-1971. This same period saw NYSCA film and television expenditures grow from \$45,000 to almost \$1.6 million, with over \$500,000 going to new video projects. The NEA, established by Congress in 1965, initiated its Public Media Program in 1967 and by 1971 was spending \$1.26 million on film and television art. By the end of the decade the NEA was spending \$8.4 million on media arts (film and video) and committed to supporting a network of regional media arts centers.

NYSCA's early and substantial funding for video was critical in the start up of diverse projects throughout New York State. Many video collectives as well as museums and libraries received support in 1970-71, NYSCA's first year of media funding. The list revealed a broad range of initiatives and included, in New York City: Shirley Clarke's T.P. Video Space Troupe, People's Video Theater, Raindance, Global Village, Media Equipment Resource Center (MERC), and the Artists' TV Lab at WNET; in Brooklyn: Operation Discovery, a cable program on the cultural life of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood; in Ithaca: Collaborations of Art, Science, and Technology (CAST); on Long Island: Port Washington Public Library; in Rochester: the Videofreex at the Rochester Museum of Science and the Visual Studies Workshop; and in Binghamton: Community Center for Television.

Often building on the existing media collectives, new media centers and multi-disciplinary artist-run spaces were required to be incorporated as not-for-profit organizations. Expanding on the collectives' communications paradigm, these emerging sites of alternative cultural activity typically offered production facilities, training workshops, and active exhibition programs that positioned video within a critical environment of other disciplines that often included experimental, documentary, and narrative films, music, performance, photography, and the visual arts. Screenings by visiting artists were common and were often accompanied by discussions with local audiences about the work and news about the growing field. Many media centers and museums published their own bulletins, catalogs, regular program notes, and posters. This ephemeral material, in combination with contemporaneous periodicals, catalogs, and critical journals, offers a vivid picture of alternative media activity during this first decade.

A respected video art and alternative media discourse was disseminated by publications such as *Radical Software*, *Afterimage*, *Vidicon*, and *Televisions*. *Avalanche*, *Art News*, and other arts magazines featured special issues on video. The National Federation of Local Cable Programmers published *The NFLCP Newsletter*, which was succeeded by *Community Television Review* in 1979. *The Independent* began publication by the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF) in 1976, and *Video 80* started publication in 1980 in San Francisco. *Sightlines*, published by the Educational Film Library Association, regularly reviewed independent videotapes. Video distributors such as Electronic Arts Intermix, Castelli-Sonnabend, Anna Canepa, Video Data Bank, Third World Newsreel, California Newsreel, Art Com, and Women Make Movies were critical in building and sustaining informational conduits among artists, exhibitors, curators, and educators.

Exhibitions at galleries and museums in the late '60s and early '70s—including the Howard Wise and Castelli Galleries (New York City), the DeSaisset Museum (Santa Clara, California), and the University Art Museum (Berkeley, California)—helped to legitimize video art within established art institutions. Especially important was the founding of video departments at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Everson Museum, and the Long Beach Museum of Art, whose curators regularly positioned video art within highly visible contemporary exhibitions, such as the Whitney Biennials.

At a 1983 conference of the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC), a three-year-old organization which claimed 80 institutional members, speakers asserted that media arts centers had "now become a significant presence in our culture." NAMAC's chairman, Ron Green, identified the "cultural lack" that media arts centers addressed:

Blacks and women may have realized that lack inherent in the images of them that has been perpetrated by the media art of the film and television industry, but American society did not ... Democracy was understood [by our forefathers] to require universal education, specifically the ability of all citizens to read and write in order not only to assimilate the issues on which they would vote, but also to contribute to the formulation and presentation of those issues through writing. Since much, if not most, of our information two centuries later is presented through the media instead of writing, and since the media are not accessible to most of us (nor even to most of our best media artists), this requirement of our political system is not being met. <sup>80</sup>

Artists, independent documentarians, and public access activists were joined by curators, programmers, distributors, and librarians who continued to support media culture on many fronts. By the middle of the '70s the alternative media network featured overlapping but largely independent organizations, funding infrastructures, and audiences. These projects may have shared basic assumptions about the importance of media arts and distribution systems, but were testing and reconfiguring different identities and survival strategies. The vision and work that extended the alternative media arts infrastructure throughout the '70s would be faced with an ongoing struggle for legitimacy and survival requiring public visibility and support. Green addressed the field:

→ The biggest problem we are having in seeing the future stems from scale illiteracy. Through hard work, innovation, and persistence we have made a field where there was none ... There can be little doubt that the price of genuine cultural pluralism in this country is in the billions of dollars. ... Britain recently began providing large financing to genuinely independent, even avant-garde, media artists under the new BBC fourth channel ... It is common knowledge that our American public telecommunications system never had a chance; it has always been ludicrously underfinanced. How can we who promote the independent media arts ever have expected a system with enormous capital and personnel expenses, and impossibly weak financial structures, to be seriously concerned about cultural pluralism? To expect that is a manifestation of our illiteracy of scale. <sup>81</sup>

As regional media arts centers expanded primarily through public and private arts funding, the cable industry was growing. Public access facilities proliferated around the country, and both the local benefits and the economic and political costs of public access continued to be challenged. In developing public access facilities through cable franchise agreements, media activists inevitably found themselves up against the pragmatic need to work with established power structures—city governments, cable companies, and the state and federal regulators. Cable channels remained a public forum for speech protected by the First Amendment not available on broadcast channels, <sup>82</sup> and access operators supported the education of a diverse community of users. However, access organizations occasionally found their political and financial support threatened by providing uncensored access to large local audiences. They found their goals of first-come, first-served access positioned between potential critics of free speech on cable and their constituencies—between city officials and their voters, and cable companies and their paying customers.

These tensions were also played out in the courts, where federal regulators contended that they must arbitrate between "social engineering" by public access advocates and protecting a "free market" for the expanding cable industry. In 1972 the FCC had established access requirements for the cable industry, which many cable operators promoted. Access provisions at this time served the enlightened self-interest of the cable industry which needed to garner the support of municipalities and the public as it faced competition from the broadcast industry. The subscription-based cable industry was portrayed as a threat to free television by the broadcasters. By the late '70s, however, the cable industry challenged the financial burden of complying with access provisions in the courts. In 1979 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the cable industry, stating that the FCC did not have the statutory authority to require cable companies to support public access. In what would remain a shifting regulatory landscape, public access organizations joined forces with the National League of Cities to lobby Congress for new communications legislation under consideration at the end of the decade. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 mandated that cable companies support public access channels, prohibited cable operators from asserting editorial control over access producers, and declared that public access regulations "serve a most significant and compelling government interest—promotion of the basic underlying values of the First Amendment itself." <sup>83</sup>

Although many media producers in the early '70s believed that their work functioned in opposition to television, by mid-decade documentarians challenged the absence of independent points of view on broadcast TV. AIVF had formed in 1974 to advocate for more public funding for independent film and video makers. In 1976, 15 independent video production groups lobbied the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), arguing that independents should have more funding and equipment access through public television. In 1977 and 1978 AIVF testified at the second Carnegie Commission, charged with evaluating the first decade of public television. AIVF also testified before the Congressional Subcommittee on Communications, examining public television in its revision of the Communications Act. Even though the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act had specified that high quality programs be obtained from "diverse sources," AIVF charged:

Public television at this time does not reflect the rich diversity of American social, cultural, and political issues. The reliance on in-house staff productions and British imports has limited both the subjects and the substance offered. In a society which relies heavily on electronic media for information, independent video and filmmakers are being denied the full exercise of their constitutional rights, and the public is denied access to the diverse viewpoints and vigorous debate which are intrinsic to informed self-government. <sup>84</sup>

The 1978 Public Telecommunications Financing Act authorized specific appropriations for independents, although the distribution of those monies would continue to be contentious. A *Public Trust*, the 1979 report of the second Carnegie Commission on public television, also mandated programming diversity and financial support for independents: "Americans have the capacity to rebuild their local communities, their regions, and indeed their country, with tools no more formidable than transistors and television tubes..." <sup>85</sup> These recommendations would not be interpreted and actualized, however, until after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, which proved to be a period of shrinking government support for public television.

By the end of the '70s, new satellite technology also contributed to the vision of yet another kind of independent network. "Communications Update," for example, a Manhattan public access cable series started up by Liza Bear in 1979, produced informative programs on the World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC). WARC is an international UNESCO conference held every 20 years to determine policies for the allocation of access to the electromagnetic spectrum and the management of telecommunications satellites. Anticipating the confluence of cable, telephone, and digital information services, artists, independent producers, and public policy planners continued to raise questions about access to new and existing telecommunications technologies. <sup>86</sup>

Independents' relationships with television would continue to raise fundamental questions. For video art or documentary work to reach a commercial television market, would access to broadcast technology be necessary to make that work competitive? Throughout the '70s public and private funders pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into industrial grade and occasionally broadcast quality equipment for regional media centers. Technology for video was evolving rapidly, and it was clear that this need for regular retooling would not abate. If independent work aspired to television's mass audiences, could additional support be expected from public television or even commercial television for ongoing equipment upgrades? How could artists afford the time to experiment in an editing suite and/or exercise the kind of control over post-production decisions if sophisticated tools were only available with professional editing assistance? What was the relationship between broadcast television's special effects technology and the independently-designed tools that had been invented by pioneering engineers and artists? These questions confronted individual artists and funders in consultation with peer panels, who, in determining which projects should receive funding, inevitably debated issues ranging from the structures of access to new technologies, to the representation of minority voices in independent and mainstream media, to promising and exhausted expressive cultural forms.

By the late '70s a media arts infrastructure in collaboration with public and private funders had expanded the production and exhibition opportunities for emerging artists, foregrounding new art forms, and becoming a critical factor in the development of new audiences for this work, but not without significant resistance. Mapping the trajectory of public support for the arts, David Trend quoted a 1981 Heritage Foundation document written during the Reagan administration that accused the NEA of having grown "more concerned with the politically calculated goals of social policy than with the arts it was created to support. To accomplish goals of social intervention and change ... the Endowment...serve(s) audiences rather than art, vocal constituencies rather than individually motivated artistic impulses." <sup>87</sup> A struggle, which would eventually be described as a cultural war, was underway for the legitimacy and survival of an independent media arts practice and infrastructure, one that by the early '80s was more alternative than oppositional, and was described accommodatingly by NAMAC as a "counterculture ... only in comparison to the mass media." <sup>88</sup>

How could an alternative media cultural practice be validated by a delivery system that depended on legislators for appropriations and reviewers for visibility by the end of the decade? Martha Rosler, who has written extensively about the cultural delivery system during this period, remarked that "video's marginality produces shrunken or absent critical apparatuses ... This leaves the theorizing to people with other vested interests." <sup>89</sup> Peer Bode, who worked in an artist-run access center, reflected on the late '70s:

→ The people who then wrote about media gradually were not practitioners but actually came to observe video from other disciplines. At this point the understanding of the value of issues around labor and production were lost ... Various making communities and language communities [recognize] that written language still has a real legitimizing power within the culture, and the commercial publications that ended up as a forum for writers were often not interested in those projects which were not commercially based. As any writer will tell you, within the art magazines, one could only represent what happened in those not-for-profit alternative art centers to a very small extent because the publications survived on a commercial advertising base. <sup>90</sup>

By the end of the decade independent video art and documentary making had been integrated into academia through art, media art, and communications departments that had given tenure to early video practitioners. Though the production of independent media continued through university programs, media art centers, and public access centers, the '80s also saw cultural theory take up the study of the dominant genres of narrative filmmaking and television, emphasizing a critical

ideological and psychoanalytic reading of popular culture as seen in its internationally disseminated products, Hollywood cinema and television. Such writing acknowledged the insights of independent video and filmmakers occasionally, but rarely the alternative media institutional infrastructure that supported their independent cultural production, or the encoding of that production system through the art work's invention of signifying practices.<sup>91</sup> With the growth of cultural theory as an academic discipline, an oppositional or ambivalent posture to the dominant media often took the form of critical writing rather than critical media production.

### *b. Conclusion*

Video was spawned at an historical moment when personal and communal experimentation and institutional invention made sense within a widely embraced vision of a radically changing society. Inspired by the availability of the portapak, a personal media tool, and emerging at a time when culture was widely acknowledged as political terrain, videomakers performed initiatives which sought to radically reconfigure local art and communications structures, invigorating their respective communities' capacities for informational and participatory feedback. Communications production and reception were reinscribed in contemporary culture by early video independents as social relations, which could be negotiated by ordinary people and art scenes as well as media corporations and advertisers. Videomakers' work queried the dimensions and structures of the tele-vision's address—how far, to whom, how expensive, does it feedback, with what images does it create, engage, transform, misrepresent, and censor? Artists and independent producers integrated production, exhibition, distribution, transmission, audience feedback, and media education into their work, and they invited the cultural participation of individuals as artists, critics, scientists, citizens, and educators, creating a vital alternative infrastructure.

In a period that advocated for expanded consciousness and a critical reassessment of institutionalized authority, artists engaged various attentional constructs using feedback from a newly accessible electronic time-based medium; they experimented with the fundamental structures of a new image language available through electronic materials; women producers asserted a gendered subjectivity and both women and men transgressed viewers' assumptions primarily through performance-based work; and artists enlisted video in an expansive documentary exploration of the vernacular, the everyday as well as investigations of dominant social institutions. A negotiation of attentional terrain with viewers, the sharing of authority in the work through ongoing efforts to develop structures that would guarantee broad access to production, and the recognition of audience as subjective participant in the work and social partner in sustaining cultural scenes characterized the performance of video art and communications projects throughout its first decade.

A fundamental speaking point of this first generation of video artists was that in order to engage a critical relationship with a televisual society you must primarily participate televisually. Their art, performance, and documentary projects are available today as tapes, which deserve conservation and study as part of an extensive moving image "literature," and as the alternative stages and scenes supported by the surviving independent media infrastructure.

Video art and alternative media production was developed by artists in the late '60s and early '70s as a public dialogue about new cultural forms and access to communications technology distributed through a proliferation of new sites for exchange. The revisiting of that period through an historical survey is, in part, an effort to link the cultural insights and strategies of portable video's first decade with the present conditions for producing media culture. Attention to the video projects of the late '60s and '70s, those surveyed in this project and others yet to be rediscovered, is timely in view of

the advent of international media hardware and software expansion and new decentralized multi-media networks. The democratic use of these tools can only be realized with considerable efforts toward widespread media literacy, a necessary extension of basic reading and writing skills.

Such an education for media cultural fluency must encompass access to and experience with production tools and an understanding of the interpretive structures of moving image media "literatures"—video, film, sound, digital multi-media, radio, cinema, television, internet—that have been produced to date. It is necessary to beware of the emancipatory claims of new technologies, as well as the liberal notion that the access to production alone will bring about critical participation in view of the capacity of the mass media to assimilate new cultural forms. However, the early '70s participatory affirmation of an alternative media practice bears amplification at the present time in order to reconsider the efforts of that earlier generation to initiate new forms of cultural exchange, and to share the authority of technologically intensive cultural production with diverse audiences and local communities. In supporting the production of a vital, multi-vocal, and accessible contemporary media culture artists and educators must continue to question—what were the cultural issues negotiated by past bodies of work, who has training and access to increasingly sophisticated tools, and how can diverse audiences approach the work produced—and on a much broader scale than has been accomplished to date.

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