PHILIP MALLORY JONES
Interviewed by Chris Hill
July, 1995

CH: How did you get involved in video?

PJ: I was writing fiction; I was in graduate school at Cornell, in the writing program. I began making animated 16mm films at the same time, and I was interested in moving from the printed page to screen images. I wrote a screenplay based on a short story that I had written and out of that came a shooting script. Of course 16mm film was all I knew in 1969, and I couldn't afford to do a 16mm film from this shooting script. In the process of trying to raise the money to make a16mm film I almost literally stumbled across a CV portapak.

This was just an odd little thing that was part of the Architecture and Fine Arts library at Cornell. Of course CV portapaks are not interchangeable, that is, you couldn't take a tape that had been produced on one recorder and play it back on another deck. The deck was record only, black and white, no editing, and you had to hold your hand over the lens of the camera for a full minute before you could open it, in order to allow time for the recorder to stabilize. So it was very much a tinker toy and a throwback to photo's very early imaging days, and it was intriguing for all of that. I was really seduced by this rickety gadget, and just kept trying to do something with it.

It was months and months later into this project, still trying to make the shooting script with video, when Sony came out with the 8500 deck that would make a crash assembly edit. I'll never forget it. It was really one of the defining moments of my life when I made my first video edit around Christmas time in the dead of winter in 1969. It was midnight. My wife at the time was with me, and I remember walking around the Art's quad in the middle of the night in knee deep snow not feeling anything but this elation that I could edit video, knowing that, for me, this was really the future. This was it, and I just never stopped.

It was not an abrupt change for me. It was an organic shift from one medium to another, from one set of tools to another. The basic motivations and the basic concerns hadn't changed from when I was writing to making video. I was still trying to do the same things; I was still basically concerned with the same ideas about making intelligible or comprehensible a certain vision, matters of control of image and a kind of concreteness in the medium. It didn't matter to me if it was video or print on a page or animation. Video just seemed like a quicker way to do it...

Also, there were no rules. That was critical. The people that were making video in the first days made the rules and defined the field, and that was very attractive to me. It was not television, although engineers tried to claim it as television and the early videomakers certainly had to struggle to insist that this was not television. Those that did it, defined what it was. And there was an aspect of that shared experience and that shared consciousness among early videomakers because we all knew that. The discourse that went around among early video makers was significantly about that, and there was a very fast moving internal discussion about what this was and how it worked in terms of content and structure, how was it different from other forms.

CH: Where was that discourse carried out—in conferences, visits, in writing?

PJ: In all of those things. Constantly. Get togethers or gatherings were not always big or organized. For instance, Videofreex came through Ithaca before the Ithaca Video Project was formed. I think it was before we actually established a corporation. There was still this cadre of people, of course, and Videofreex came through in all their splendor and weirdness. They were there for 3, 4, 5 days, living in peoples' houses, and there was this constant battle going on about ideas, about approaches, about technique and dogma. On and on, right down to the names of organizations and why this name, and why this spelling of this name, and what does that mean, and what are you trying to say, and what's important.

There was Top Value TV (TVTV), Shamberg and the others..Another whole attitude, which I didn't necessarily agree with or care for, but still aggressive, committed, vocal, and active. And out of that whole mishmosh or cauldron there was a very alive and fluid process going on. And it also touched on money because it took money. So there were intrigues, scandals, interesting political wranglings happening around money, of course, and the New York State Council on the Arts and the state legislature, all these early players.

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, and these things were a part of almost everybody else's concern, too. We were all talking about making revolution because we were all outsiders, and 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 was made and distributed and experienced.

There were glorious and grand schemes and expectations about what small gauge video was going to do. It didn't happen. Other things happened that aren't fully appreciated. 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, and claimed it, and largely didn't acknowledge where any of it came from. And I'm still seeing today things that video artists were doing 20 years ago and it's new to TV. Without question the video game industry and the small computer industry, these things were invented by video artists, and people with money recognized what they were doing. People who were working at the Experimental Television Center when it was at Binghamton, NY—David Jones and some other people, Bill and Louise Etra and Steve Rutt. A lot of people got involved with early computer development, early video game development. I supposed some of them made a lot of money but it was the art incubator that birthed them.

In terms of making revolution, the learning process of how to make video was forced by the immediate, critical, concrete need to make things and distribute things, and that was not luxurious. That was very exciting because the people who were doing it had to figure out how to do it, and we didn't have a lot of precedents to go on. 16mm documentary film techniques were not really applicable. Television techniques were not appropriate. There was a different experience which had to be sorted out and the ways of doing that were defined through doing it. Doing it with tinker toys, doing it by 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 could crash an edit, and using paper tapes to measure the cue distance. There were all kinds of tricks, and these things were shared constantly. Somebody would come to town and say,

well, 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, like CTL Electronics in New York. Lui, and the Captain, and there was an engineer there, John...That man was one of the real hard-core pioneers. That man built matrix switchers, for instance. He built prototype video walls, and clearly groundbreaking work was done right there in C. T. Lui's window. That's where this guy worked, right there in the store front window. He would build these contraptions and sit there and tinker with them. In there was where you could buy *Radical Software* and the other pioneering journals for the field. And that's where people met, in the back room. We would truck down from Ithaca, a 4 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. Inside video, there was a revolutionary mentality going on. It made for a camaraderie that was critical to the development of the field.

The way that it started out was not corporate. It started with a vengeance; it was other than corporate, although everybody incorporated into not-for-profits. Those were the rules. If you wanted the money from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), you became a not-for-profit corporation. Everybody figured it out and got around to doing it as quickly as possible. In terms of NYSCA, that's a whole other wonderful little story about how NYSCA began to spend money on video art. The Media Program had a vision and they helped to invent the field because they solicited applications from the people who they felt were innovators in this unknown field. They made it possible for Videofreex, Raindance, Global Village, Experimental Television Center, the Kitchen, Downtown Community TV, People's Video Theater, who were followed by the Ithaca Video Project, Synapse, and so on. Media Study/Buffalo, the Kitchen—those people made it happen because they were the ones that made those first grants in the early 1970s. The TV Lab at WNET was a bold thing, and it happened because there was so much money being spent all of a sudden. NYSCA was expanding so rapidly...

CH: I agree that NYSCA had the major role in institutionalizing what you've described, and what others have described as this ad hoc, very invested group of people who were initiating all of these projects.

PJ: NYSCA forced not-for-profit corporations. If you wanted the money, you had to incorporate. You had to get a little bit orderly. You had to figure out how to make a presentation that was comprehensible and organized. But at the same time, they allowed makers to define the field and that's not going on any more, for some years that has not been the case. Some video groups, and they were almost always groups, aligned themselves with other organizations, and that created an awareness in a much larger community of the potential of this form, these little machines. These video groups were working in one way or another all over New York State.

But being involved with these other groups also made for interstate activities. These were political organizations, grass roots community organizations, community educational and social service delivery organizations that these media entities aligned themselves with and subordinated themselves to in many circumstances. Certainly Ithaca Video Projects put ourselves at the disposal of other organizations and worked very hard to fulfill their agenda while incorporating media. Of course it was raggedy and limited but it was there, and it was a start. Eventually these organizations recognized that they had to spend their own money and train their own people, and that media should be an integral part of their activity.

CH: What kinds of projects were you aligned with?

PJ: Well, for example, Ithaca had a very well-established anti-drug program that was a coalition of many many social service and educational activities, and they had meetings, conferences, seminars and workshops. We were very involved with many aspects of that whole effort, especially in relation to speed and heroin, developing training and educational materials that this consortium of organizations would use. We worked a long time with people to develop media material that did what they wanted it to do. We worked with organizations engaged in preserving the history of the Finger Lakes region, we worked in the schools. We were also periodically involved with the Black Panther Party and other things going on in that direction.

CH: Was there a Black Panther Party in Ithaca?

PJ: Not a chapter. There were card carrying members of the Party in Ithaca so I was very much involved with some Panther Party activities. In fact, from Ithaca we sent by courier, so to speak, a man to Algiers with a portapak to interview Eldridge Cleaver. At the same time a reporter from the *Village Voice*, and Timothy Leary and his wife Rosemary were there. And this portapak was there at the same time. So in this stunt for the camera, Cleaver puts Timothy and Rosemary Leary under house arrest...Cleaver made this long statement, maybe an hour , about the nature of the struggle in the country at the time, the importance of being committed and clear-headed...The deal was that the portapak had to stay in Algiers. So we literally smuggled this tape back into this country through Canada on buses, and edited the video, put the audio on it, put some titles on it, put some Rolling Stones soundtrack on parts of it, made copies of it, and began to show this tape.

This was the guerrilla theater approach to disseminating video information and this was something that was being done by many video groups. You just take it to the street, literally. And we did. We just set up a monitor on the sidewalk sometimes and ran the tape, and particularly around places where people would gather like the Shotaway bookstore in downtown Ithaca, a very important old piece of history, and the Magic Mushroom, a craft and what not place. We also took it into bars. We took it into hardcore blue collar bars around Ithaca at shift change time. We'd ask the owner if we could set this monitor up on the bar and play a tape, and often we were told OK. At 4:00 in the afternoon, the shift change at Ithaca Gun or Morris Chain would come and hang out there, and here is Eldridge Cleaver talking about the drug culture in America and the need for revolution. It didn't go over very well usually, but the effort was there.

The consciousness was that we could take a perspective and a message into places where it hadn't been before, speak to people who hadn't heard this message before, and maybe it would make a difference. We were convinced it would make a difference. We were eventually convinced otherwise, but the effort was there, and this was going on all over. This kind of application of the processes and the procedures, the skills, the crafts that we were developing into a direct action, and that was an important part of the effort.

Eventually, that led me around to being in New Haven one night when Huey Newton was speaking at Yale. I had my tape of Cleaver. I was close to some people that were close to Huey Newton, and one of them said come with me, and he takes me over and introduces me to someone else. Meanwhile, there's pandemonium outside this auditorium. So the person puts me in a pay phone booth, dials the phone and says something and puts the receiver to my head, and this woman's voice on the other end of the line is the Minister of Information from the Panther chapter in New York City who says—turn over all copies

of this tape, don't make any more copies, destroy whatever you have, we don't want to see nothing else about this. This was coming out of the split between the west coast group in Oakland and the New York City chapter of the Party, and the purges that were going on inside the Black Panther Party. So New York was having nothing to do with Cleaver and his renegade operation in Algiers, and here I am disseminating the word of this traitor and provocateur and running dog lackey. So I was supposed to stop.

CH: So had you recorded Newton at that point?

PJ: I was hoping to. I was looking forward to speaking with him because I was very proud of what we had done. This was a concrete thing we had done. We had moved video equipment half way around the world. We had made material that nobody else had, and we had disseminated it and distributed it in this country. I was very pleased and I thought this was a worthwhile thing to do, and then for somebody else to tell me, for other reasons, that this was incorrect, intolerable, inappropriate and wrong, counterproductive, and so on ...But I was not having it, because I had my own vision about what it was I was doing. And the subjugation of the discourse that I felt I was involved in to some other agenda was not acceptable, and that was the end of my relationship to the Panther Party, that night. I was done, because I felt like what we were doing was not something that you could put a lid on like that, and I didn't necessarily buy the justification for the suppression of information. I saw something else going on, that myself and my colleagues and other people in the field were involved in, that was not going to be held in check by that limited understanding and agenda. So that was it. Subsequently, other tapes came out of Algiers made on that equipment. And that whole scene, certainly it became more aggravated before falling apart entirely. And Cleaver came back here and did his other trips and what not, but my involvement with that whole process taught me a lot.

CH: It's an interesting distinction between the active left politics of the time with carefully controlled agendas, and with what were the aspiring politics of the alternative video movement, which put at least as much value on the act of speaking as on the content.

PJ: There were all kinds of organizations at the time, and even the Ithaca Video Project made their own, internal choices about lifestyle which were pretty much shared. There was the idea of a video collective.

CH: So Ithaca Video Project would have called itself a collective?

PJ: Without question, that's where it started. I remember the night that me and a half dozen other people sat around after a Thanksgiving meal and invented Ithaca Video Project by just saying—we like to work together, let's work together. Let's get serious about figuring out how we can continue to have this much fun all the time and make a living, or survive, by doing this. I was writing and making animations and making video. There was an architect who was making video and films, and a still photographer, and a dancer, and a painter, and a musician, and we pretty much by consensus spontaneously invented Ithaca Video Project. It was a given that we would live together, we would pool our resources. This was 100% commitment, this was a collective, and decisions were made by consensus, and leadership was by consensus and sometimes by force of will. Everybody was doing that—Videofreex and other organizations were active the same way, and also other organizations around us, in our area. Ithaca was a center for communes and collectives, and the two were not necessarily the same. Commune and collective were seen as different propositions.

Ithaca Video Project was a collective and we saw that as an active, political organization aside from being a communal living situation. We had another purpose for why we came together and that was political, as an active agent, and we took that model from others who we had seen. We were all very conversant with the communes in the area. Some of them are still out there in the hills around Ithaca. So many of our friends and the places that we hung out were communal. We were involved in the founding of the Ithaca Real Food Coop, which was one of the first, if not the first, cooperative food distribution organization in the country. We were right there sitting on the floor in someone's living room figuring out how we were going to get to Syracuse at 5 am for the farmer's market, buy some produce, bring it back to someone's garage and split it up and so on. That was the world that we lived in and in which Ithaca Video Project was born. It was young and self-defining. The way that we approached making media was part of that whole thing. The vocabulary, the concerns, the content, the risk-taking, the insistence on finding another way, and self-definition were a part of it from the start, and there were some real characters...

CH: What do you think signaled the next phase, which was recognizing the end of or inability to achieve a revolution and the beginning of something else?

PJ: One thing that happened was personal casualties. Collective living, communal living, and shoestring budgets take their toll and beat up on a lot of people. That happened to Ithaca Video Project, and it was ironic that it happened after we had received our first significant grant. That is, we got our first $10, 000 grant from NYSCA after we'd been operating for around two years on $100 here, $100 there from local organizations. Everybody had spent every nickel that they had. We were at each other's throats. My wife and I were absolutely at the end of the line, and then we got this $10,000 grant. We sat around the table one day, and we looked at each other, and we looked at this check and we said, well, we're not staying together. We can't stand each other anymore. Let's put the money in the bank and walk away, and that's what we did. We disbanded. I went to New York with Fred Mangones, who had been one of the principals and founders of the Ithaca Video Project. My soon-to-be-ex-wife took off for somewhere else. Other people went in other directions, and we just left the money in the bank account and didn't even think about it. There was no point in giving it back. Nobody had that odd thought, but we just put it in the bank and literally left town.

A while later, maybe 6 or 8 months later, after I got abused in New York City long enough, it dawned on me one day — wait a minute. There's $10,000 sitting in this bank account and I can sign for it. Let's revive the Video Project. And so I came back to Ithaca and started spending money—that is, I paid myself $25 a week, which was a princely sum at the time, and reformed the Ithaca Video Project. New people became involved in it. To some extent my first ex-wife became involved in it but that was short lived, but then my second wife became involved in it, and that was much longer term. Other people became involved, coming out of community organizations, other kinds of media interests. The Ithaca Video Project was literally reborn with this $10,000 that had been sitting in the bank for close to a year. And we were able to buy some machines, and make some tapes, and get active again. I'm sure that that process went on with other organizations as well. They went through name changes, and so Videofreex became Media Bus and eventually went through personnel changes. The People's Video Theater went through changes, moved to Woodstock and Jamestown. Bill Stevens [People's Communications Network] disappeared, for a time anyway.

CH: So the Ithaca Video Festival came out of the second generation of this project.

PJ: Right. It started in 1974. It was the first juried touring collection of video art, and it ran for 9 years. It became one of the most respected and entered video festivals. By 1985 it was dead. But for awhile there it was really spectacular and it toured extensively and we kept it cheap, really cheap—$25 a week or $50 a week to rent this many hour program. By staying cheap it meant that it could go to places that otherwise couldn't show this kind of work. If we were charging what it was worth, it never would have been seen in Elmira or, for example, in Chautauqua-Cattaragus Library in Jamestown.

We really kept it cheap so that anyone could afford it, and that would help to achieve our political agenda, which was to educate a wide audience to the presence and the precepts of video art—this is not TV, and this is not MTV, this is not a concert, this is a thing called video art, and these are the people making it. We printed posters, programs. We gave each artist a token fee, and we distributed the hell out of these tapes. By the seventh or eighth festival they were enormous propositions. We had multiple tours going on and it was a year round thing. For the eighth festival we had 350 entries, and we picked 20 to show. That was an indication of how well it was regarded in the field.

It had to be a unanimous decision of the panel for a tape to be included in the final collection. That meant that for 3 or 4 days, 3 or 4 people would be locked up in the studio in Ithaca with all these tapes, and we would have to come to a unanimous decision. That meant we had to talk to each other, and we had to lobby and debate and discuss and argue, and do whatever to come to a unanimous decision. And that was one of the best educations I ever had. Other panels have been very educational for me, but that experience, curating on the Ithaca Video Festival panel, was really critical because of the engagement of the people involved. We tried successfully to have panels composed of makers and curators and critics who were respected in the field. There was a wide variety of people. It included John Hanhardt, Steina, Ed Emshwiller, on and on. People who were regarded by their peers as serious, who would come there, and really work hard. One of the main moments to me was when Arthur Tsuchiya was there, and we were looking at this tape that I could not bear. Arthur took two days to hip me as to why this was an important work. It took two days. It wasn't that I liked it. I still don't like it, but I recognized the value of it in the context of the field and in the development of ideas. That kind of thing was very important, not only to my own development, but for the whole process, and making the collection legitimate, and giving it a focus. Each year the Festival was different. It wasn't necessarily a survey of the field. There was a point to be made by each edition of the Video Festival, and that point was defined by the work that was submitted. Some years were heavy on documentaries, and some years had no documentaries but more abstract, expressionistic, conceptual, or performance pieces. We really tried to be thoughtful about the place of the Festival in the world of video art because it was, at the time, virtually all that was happening in a lot of places...

CH: I know that you did work that explored the African diaspora. You went to Haiti and did work. Did you ever go to Africa?

PJ: Many times.

CH: Could you talk about that diasporic investigation? Others were involved in similar pursuits in the 70s.

PJ: One thing before that. In the second incarnation of the Ithaca Video Project, I worked with my second wife Gunilla. That was a really critical thing because it changed what we were doing. We lived together, we worked together, and we also traveled together. That was a really intense and formative

time for both of us. The work that we did together was different from what preceded or followed it, and we were definitely understood to be a team, a unit, in our approach to making video. Gunilla had never threaded a machine in her life or pressed an edit button, but she could look in a monitor and invent, and she could think about sequences of images. We worked out how to work together. On locations, she would sit with a monitor someplace and I would run the camera, and we had hand signals where she would communicate to me how to frame or how to move or what was going on that I wasn't paying attention to. And we would work on edits together, often across a ping pong table—what the image looked like, the visual quality, the sound textures, ideas about duration, and concerns about content. These things happened in several periods between 1973-80 working with her. For both of us it was a very intense and very inventive period.

CH: You did travel to Haiti with her, didn't you?

PJ: Yes, and when we stopped working together I stopped making video for five years because I didn't think I could do it. It had been so integral, this dual vision, that I stopped making video until 1986. When I came back to it, it was with a different set of eyes and a different understanding about who I am, and that was the trigger to the first trip to Africa. Haiti had been in 1975 when Gunilla and I were together. I had no idea about the African diaspora. I recognized that we were culturally in an African place but my relationship to it was very strange, uninformed, misinformed. By 1987, I was back into making video as art, and I was recognizing other things that could be done with extending the reach. In the early days of my work in video and Ithaca Video Project we were engaged in making revolution in this country. We saw in the rhetoric a global way, but largely I was not engaged in any international activity other than what I described.

I went to Paris for the first time in 1985 with the festival. That was interesting and I was confronted by language problems. ... I was hired as a consultant for Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia to invent a video festival for them. I had been involved in a pioneering effort, so they were putting it to me— well, what do you see now as being interesting? We can't just replicate what you did before because everyone's doing that, so what now? Just off the top of my head, standing in front of this group of people, I said—look at what artists-of- color are doing in terms of defining an aesthetic that comes out of being an artist-of-color, without necessarily restricting it to the U.S. What's interesting to do today, and that was in late 1986 actually, is to look at an international Diaspra aesthetic. It ended up being the collection, *Icono Negro: The Black Aesthetic in Video Art*, which actually was conceived with support from Scribe and then adopted by the Shomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Ellis B. Haizlip. Ellis was the special events person at the Shomburg. We did an international solicitation of material, put it all in one room, and brought in several people to participate in selecting the exhibition. It was 1987, and there were enough artists of color who were in command of the tools at this point that we could look at the body of work and make some determinations about what discourse was going on here. How does that video art discourse relate to the discourse among artists-of-color in other fields?

My thesis was that somehow we were going to be able to find resonances, sympathetic elements, a common or a shared discourse, and a shared language... It was not a survey. It was insisting that artists-of-color and their collaborators, who don't have to be of color, are engaged in defining an aesthetic, and you can find out what that is by looking at what they do. You have to possibly throw out preconceptions about what artists-of-color do. You have to look at what the work is, and look at it in the context of other disciplines, and then you could find other relationships.

CH: So you were looking for this because you felt that there would be a common aesthetic that it would come out of some notion of diaspora or common concerns or common ways of working?

PJ: No. It's the other way around. You can define diaspora by looking at the work. You can understand what that whole community is by looking at what the artists do. There is where you find the elements. You know they're real because you can find them across the board, because you can find them in more than one field and in more than one place. That's how you know there is a diaspora because the makers are showing you over and over, saying that there is this international and interdisciplinary discourse going on. What happens in music in West Africa impacts what happens in theater in New York City. That impacts what happens in some other form in Rio...Music is the main form in terms of the speed and extent of this cross fertilization which is now global and very fast...

Ethnicity is one thing. Race is the invention of Europeans. The concept of race, it was invented by the Europeans at the Council of Ghent in the mid 1700s, and it is probably one of the biggest crimes committed on the world. The concept of race was invented, of course, to facilitate the making of profit from human beings being enslaved. They had to figure out how to make this palatable in a Christian world. They invented race, and we need to get past that...

A lot of the work that I've been doing since 1989-90 is more focused on that global perspective. Coming to these new definitions by going and seeing who is out there and what do they know, how do they operate, what are their conceptual and symbolic languages. This has to do, too, with the growing awareness of language as a barrier. I can't remember what it was but I ran across some pieces some years back that were non-verbal. Some of the things that Daniel Reeves was doing, because he was in Ithaca and we were really close.

CH: I remember that, you were working together on that documentary you did on Vietnam vets.

PJ: Yes and I shot some scenes on his *Smothering Dreams*. We were very close for a number of years. One of the subliminal impacts he had on me was looking at his non-lingual approach. It was just spectacular, and then being in Paris and subsequently being in West Africa, and particularly in Africa seeing how verbal language is a limitation and a barrier to communicating. One of the things that happened to me, one of the really central events, probably in my life happened in 1987 in Burkina Faso. I was walking down the dusty road, and I encountered a man sitting under a tree by the road. I can't imagine the life this man led, no idea, but there he was sitting there next to this sewage ditch, and everything about him was the same color. And that was the color of the dust—his hair, his eyes, his skin, the rags on his body, the dust he was sitting in, the trunk of the tree, everything was the same red dust color. I stopped there, and I just stared it him, and he stared at me, and I went on. There was no way we could communicate. I hardly spoke French. I'm sure he did not, let alone me or him speak some other common language. Our histories, our experiences, vastly different. Our concepts of things, different. Somehow, we were absolutely related. Somehow we shared things. As Tshome Gabriel put it— shared language and retained secrets. I have wanted since then to be able to speak to that person. I can't do it verbally. I can do it symbolically, and from 1987-88, a lot of what I've been about is developing, evolving, inventing symbolic language in video to accomplish that end, to be able to get past language barriers in making messages...

Where to look for these ideas, this is not necessarily a new idea... There are many symbolic languages...English, for instance, is a pre-literate language. Written English is the abstract interpretation

of spoken English. It only means anything because there is spoken English. Hieroglyphic was never spoken. And then there are other kinds of symbolic language. There are other kinds of representations of ritual imagery, sacred imagery. Rhythms are a symbolic language. Dance is a symbolic language. I spent some time in India a couple years ago. The Indian dance forms are codes, they are complete languages in movement. The instrumentations that go with them are complete languages. At the University of Abidjan in Ivory Coast, there was the Department of Drumology. According to the head of it, you can study any discipline through the drum. All disciplines, medicine, literature, you can study through the drum . There are many kinds of symbolic languages that persist...

CH: Do you know about the Garafuna drumming festival in Belize? Apparently the Garafuna are descendants of West Africans who were on a wrecked slave ship. They found themselves on a remote island that was too difficult for the British or the Portuguese to farm, and so they were left alone, isolated for a hundred years. Then they were moved by the British to the coast of Central America, which was a mosquito-infected coast, and so they were again relatively isolated. As a result of these periods of isolation, their West African heritage and language has survived relatively intact.

PJ: We spent some considerable time with Garafuna people in Belize...We drove to a town, me and my two comrades. It took us about 10 hours through mountains and rain forests, and really was life threatening more than once, but we got there. In fact this local group did perform and that was a very interesting event because the Garafuna women in this village are very committed to preserving their tradition and their culture and their heritage. At the same time, there was this other thing going on on the other side of the village, where they were building a house to have a ritual . The ritual was going to summon the ancestors to the aid of a member of the community who was sick in New York City. The whole village was involved, virtually around the clock, building this structure, and that meant that, virtually around the clock, drums were playing, singing was going on. There was this big communal house-raising going on, and that was going to culminate in a boat going out with a couple of people in it to some secret remote island off the coast, and do something for a couple days, and then come back and have a big ceremony. Of course we wanted to shoot, but that didn't happen.

But what did happen was that we sat under a tree for hours, me and my two colleagues, talking to a Garafuna woman while she washed clothes in a tub. She really took us to school for several hours about life, and what's important, and how to live in the world. We just sat there and talked to her and listened to her, and she was younger than us, and for a while her husband was standing 15 feet away, just watching and listening, and we later determined that he was sizing up our attitude toward her, and seeing how we acted and if we were worth the effort. Eventually he seemed to accept that we were ok and he came and sat down. Under that tree, I screened for them a piece, *Paradigm Shift*, one minute, non-lingual. It was intended for a multi-lingual audience. The problem that I presented myself with was what do you say in 60 seconds that's worthwhile for one thing, and how do you do that without words? What that piece was about was that African people are at risk in the world. Survival is at least partially keyed to recognizing the innate creativity in the individual and the community. With batteries and headphones and a 5-inch monitor, I screened this piece twice, one time for each of them to hear it and see it. Yes, they got it, and they told it back to me in a way that was poetic and profound and expanded on my idea in ways that I hadn't seen, but it was what they saw. That experience was critical because here was the proof this can be done...It was another one of those defining moments, and like many, it passed without documentation. Could have shot it but somehow it never occurred to anybody to do it.

CH: But because it was so directed at audience, you know that it's being retained through the audience. Somehow documentation and audience can occasionally be tied up at opposite ends of a problem that has to do with reception...Let me turn back a little more to the 70s. It's very interesting to see how the 70s experiences have focused what you're doing now.

PJ: And to a large extent the point is still the same. I started out making video in the context of making revolution and that is still the case. It has always been my understanding that making art is a revolutionary act. You cannot make art if your mind is in chains. One of the things we see, moment to moment going on, is the effort to put minds in boxes and to control and limit what is thought and what is talked about. Limiting the discourse is what all of this nonsense going on at the upper levels of government and foundations is about; limiting the discourses. The effort of the artist is to expand the discourse. That was true in 1969 ,when I started making video, and it's still true today. Today I understand it in somewhat different ways but it's still the same effort. To do work that is interpretable across language barriers and 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 that is not the case now, 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 not. To make work that indicates that it can be done is working toward that effort. Somebody else in some other place can look at a piece of mine and say—OK, I can do that sort of thing out of where I come from. I can make things that are indigenous to my understanding, and they can be interpreted somewhere else, and that will create a sense of a global presence. It requires giving up a lot of these limiting concepts but that's necessary. That effort hasn't changed. Its just been focused in some other way.

CH: One of the things that is universally cited in discussions about the revolutionary aspirations of the 1960s in the U.S. is that many people came to those aspirations though either active participation in the civil rights movement or through relating to people who had. Maybe some of the people that were active in the early 70s were too young to have actually participated in the early civil rights organizing, but the accomplishments of the civil rights movement in the U.S. provided important models for social change, and had given people experience with issues that had to do with violence versus nonviolence, the importance of people being able to develop agency themselves rather than working through intermediaries. There was also the Kerner Commission in 1967 which spoke powerfully to the relationship of commercial media and oppression, especially of blacks in urban areas. Is there anything from civil rights work that you can point to, or maybe coming out of some aspect of the new left, or being influenced by McLuhan and the revolution of cybernetics, that influenced your getting involved with video?

PJ: For me, a period of working with Panther Party before ever touching a video camera, and before that working with Delta Ministry in the Mississippi Delta, doing voter registration and other kinds of guerrilla organizing. In 1968, I was in and out of jail in Mississippi, in and out of jail in Memphis. I got released from jail in Memphis a week before Dr. King was assassinated.

CH: Were you doing voter registration there?

PJ: In Memphis, no. I was looking for trouble, and I managed to find it and survive it. So for the year and a half or so preceding my introduction to video, I was armed and dangerous basically, and like a lot

of people very actively engaged in this political change-oriented activity. And what I discovered in that process was that I do not do that sort of thing well. I am not a street organizer. I'm not the charismatic leadership that kind of thing needs. I tried and made a lot of mistakes and survived, and went on to do something different. I started writing, writing out of that experience and writing with that perspective, and then stumbled into video. There was some real hardcore go-out-and-do-it times which grew out of a number of things. Being at certain places at certain times, you ran into certain people, and were exposed to certain ideas. That led me to Mississippi and so on. That context predated video. There was also a recognition that I was responsible, and everybody that was involved in those kinds of organizations took it personally. That was something you just had to do. To say—I will not sit by and let this go on, I won't. That was part of the context of the times, and if that's your attitude, it's going to put you into all kinds of situations. Now that same sort of attitude for me has evolved into—well, I need to go and see it for myself. I needed to go to rural South India and see this thing. And I needed to go to see this, partly because it's not going to be there in 10 years. If I don't go now, I'm not going to see it, except on somebody else's video.

CH: Did you grow up in a city?

PJ: In Chicago, which had one of the most important Panther chapters. In the early years of the Panther Party, there were some truly remarkable people involved, real leaders, and look out America, that's where its going to come from again. It will come off the street. The real charismatic leadership will not come from any of these people who are put up in politics as leaders or these alleged clergy. They will be somebody off the street who nobody ever heard of except in that neighborhood, and they will become real impact people. Certainly in those days, they were there in Chicago, and they were there in a cauldron of gangbangers and combat veterans and thugs and visionaries. And they were very strange and volatile and inventive times. I was 20-21 (1967-68). There was a lot going on, and that was the mind set when video came along. Video was also a weapon, and it was seen that way by a lot of people who were involved in it. We were going out to do battle, using this little device, and we watched it be co-opted and watched it change...

CH: Did you feel that the kind of McLuhanesque rap about technology was inspirational.?

PJ: Sure, because part of what was going on was a process of discovery, and there were a number of people who helped to clarify it. Buckminster Fuller was one, and even before I got involved with video, in the middle of 1969, I went to the first Alternative Media Conference at Goddard College in Vermont. And there was this inflatable dome and there were these Videofreex doing this video projection on the side of this dome, and there was Bucky Fuller holding court. I went there because I was interested in comic books and comic book art. And Stam Lee was going to be there, and I was very much involved with Marvel Comics and did some extensive written critiques of comic books. That's what got me there, even before I had any thought about making video. Here it was in this very enthusiastic, aggressive, guerrilla context out in the woods.

CH: This was at least one place where the underground press and the underground media met.

PJ: Well bookstores too, like Shotaway in Ithaca and other alternative media centers, although they masqueraded as book stores. There were all kinds of places that attracted a variety of people, and video was just one of the things in the mix.

CH: There are a lot of things that have to do with the process of making that seem to come up over and over again in what you've said. It's interesting to hear you articulate this and finding, in a sense, that this is what was common to so many videomakers' experiences in this early period. This is, in fact, how a number of people whose work is very different describe this period.

PJ: That was about the makers defining the field, and the field was that big. There was not just one kind of thing or one place. The same people were bumping into Woody or me, or Bill Viola in Syracuse. I remember when Bill was in school and the first time I saw him he was climbing up out of a sewer where they had been stringing the cables for Synapse's first studio on the Syracuse University campus. The membership card was a portapak, and that was the common vocabulary in this very exclusive community that was disparate and diverse, but there was a common element that meant that we could talk to each other. We needed to talk to each other, we needed to be allies, we needed to support and encourage and learn, and really there was nothing more interesting to do. If you get people who are acting with the attitude—what is the most interesting thing that I can do?—in terms of taking chances and finding out new things, well this was it. And there were no rules and we could say what it was, and that was glorious...

CH: Were you ever interested in cable? Because there was a lot of talk about cable being important for local community issues, and I think it was also seen in minority communities as an important opportunity to potentially own or program communications space. There was also hope at one point that this would be a place where minority businessmen would be able to buy into the system, although it certainly didn't work out like that. We're you ever interested in cable for any of the utopian reasons?

PJ: Oh yes, we were active very early because Ithaca had the first cable system in the country.

CH: Because of the hills?

PJ: Right, you could not get TV without cable, so Tony Cerrachi put up a tower and wired the town himself. It was something that Ithaca Video Projects aggressively approached, and we got zero response, and eventually we got tired of it and didn't fuss with Cerrachi Cable anymore. We approached him and tried to get programs on and they were not interested—this is not TV, and you people don't make TV, and you people are raggedy, and you've got long hair, and we don't like you anyway, and you are not white males so, NO. And eventually we got tired of that and decided that it was a lost cause. Let's do something else. We've got other things to do than fuss with these clowns, and so we just stopped. What we had done was stir up some ideas, and other people didn't stop until, through a lot of hard work over a lot of years, they got a lot of public access. Public access—Toni Cerrachi wouldn't even say the words "public access." This was an anathema. This was sacrilege and heresy. Cable was about making money and nobody was going to force him to do this. Certainly not the city. He was the only show in town...We looked at it, we tried, and we got beat up. That was that. And I haven't paid much attention to it since. Television is just too big, it's too powerful.

CH: One of my notions is that what happened at the end of the 70's is that the gambling on television audiences wound up heavily influencing the media art field. Not that it totally distracted it. I think stunning work has been produced in the last 25 years. But this early aspirations...to see not only that all these people worked in groups but that many of these groups became media centers often times or media projects. And this whole idea of turning audiences into active producers and active receivers was really a

part of the agenda until the whole notion of revolution lost its steam. But also I think the gamble on television audiences was symbolic of the shift and possibly brought about even more changes.

PJ: What do you mean, the gamble on television?

CH: I think that by the end of the 70s some artists gambled on the larger audiences that television could deliver, but a lot of the work that people were doing wouldn't be work on television, in fact, was antithetical to television. There was a certain kind of work done in the 80s that was cleaned up for television, that tried to bridge the literacy gap between television audiences and media art audiences. Also, in terms of access to tools, NYSCA and the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) could no longer fund new tool development for decentralized media art centers as they had through the 70s. So they had to look to access programs that could be related to the industry, which could afford that expensive tools development. So you had the On-line and the Stand-by programs developing in New York, which put artists in contact with high-end post production tools, but of course that meant that people began to post-produce work with professional editors, so that the whole relationship to tools and the whole notion of process shifted.

I'm not trying to put a value judgment on the aesthetics of it. Perhaps the economics and politics of access to tools and audience made that development inevitable. Right now certainly there is great pressure in media arts centers to bring in big audiences, which sets up to some degree a trade off with artists' work. And this is not to say that you shouldn't try to get big audiences for certain programs, but rather that there has to be some understanding or acknowledgment that the core audience for new work and new makers is going to be other makers, not mainstream commercial TV audiences. What we did (in Buffalo) was to see production access as being integral to the development of a responsive video exhibition program.

PJ: That's a legitimate approach because it becomes a community of sharing, and you bring in new information for these people who can then incorporate it into their work, and also critique work that's brought in. One thing that I'm reminded of in terms of this shift is that in the early days, we had to do everything. We had to speak to everybody. We had to address all the needs of a new field. After awhile, and for me that was after 1985-86, I didn't feel that way anymore. I didn't have to do everything. I didn't have to cover all the bases. There were enough new people who were going to do these things—struggle with the cable system, be in the schools, run workshops, and do exhibition programs. This was going to happen. This was being done by other people. In 1971 when the Ithaca Video Project started, we felt like if we didn't do it, it wasn't going to happen, and that was true. I've paid my dues and now I'm interested in doing something else and not compromising this other thing that I want to do because of those demands. I think that a lot of other people have gone through that personal change. There's enough other people doing this grunt work that all the video groups started doing, and me and other people can move on now and still be about inventing the field. That was a critical change and it comes from being tired bit also from developing this sense of what the medium is that goes beyond this kind of functionality.

CH: What you're saying as a mature maker is that you want to continue to reinvent something and carry forth this agenda. I think that the field doesn't know whether to pay attention to people like yourself and support that kind of making as art, which is risk-taking and adventurous, and may or may not be politically approved of by legislators who will grandstand to voters on issues of budget and morality. Basically to support artists, you're supporting the process but not the end result, which you can't control. Or, you could argue that arts funding should support something that is more like media education, which

would be to support an end result that could be anticipated—that is, cultural literacy for the next generation through learning media production and analysis, which would enable people to access and negotiate a media-dependent world. But often times now those two different kinds of culture-making, supporting media artists or media education, are put into competition with each other.

PJ: ...I'm fortunate in that I have a job, and my job is to make art, and that is not something that's always been the case. Video is such a remarkable phenomenon because of where it started and who started it and the whole inspiration and attitude that was involved. That happened in a particular world that was decidedly anti-establishment and interested in these new tools. In considering the early work and interviews like this, the work itself does not necessarily say what the makers claim it did when talking about it today. That's a fact. The effort was there, the intention was there, but the work didn't necessarily accomplish all those things for a lot of reasons—compromises, lack of craft, on and on.

CH: Also people in the 70s were often just mesmerized by the social and cultural processes that video contributed to. People were into process then and they aren't now.

PJ: Part of the context for looking at the early 1970s work is to know all of these things. The work doesn't necessarily do all of the things that were going on in people's heads at the time.

Philip Mallory Jones was a co-founder of the Ithaca Video Project and coordinator of the Ithaca Video Festival. He is currently Artist-In-Residence in the Institute for Studies in the Arts at Arizona State University in Tempe.