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## FROM PORTAPAK TO CAMCORDER: A BRIEF HISTORY OF GUERRILLA TELEVISION

DEIRDRE BOYLE

Nearly 30 years since the video portapak launched an independent television<sup>1</sup> movement in the United States, a new generation of video activists has taken up the video camcorder as a tool, a weapon, and a witness. Although the rhetoric of guerrilla television<sup>2</sup> may seem dated today, its utopian goal of using video to challenge the information infrastructure in America is more timely than ever and at last practicable. Today's video activism is the fulfillment of a radical 1960s dream of making "people's television."

### The 1960s: Underground Video

In 1965 the Sony Corporation decided to launch its first major effort at marketing consumer video equipment in the United States—an auspicious moment for the debut of portable video. The role of the artist as individualist and alienated hero was being eclipsed by a resurgence of interest in the artist's social responsibility, and as art became politically and socially engaged, the distinctions between art and communication blurred (Ross). At first there were few distinctions between video artists and activists, and nearly everyone made documentary tapes. Les Levine was one of the first artists to have access to

half-inch video equipment when it became available in 1965, and with it he made *Bum*, one of the first "street tapes." His interviews with the winos and derelicts on New York's skid row were edited before electronic editing became possible. Rough, unstructured, and episodic, *Bum* was characteristic of early video.

### Street Tapes

"Street tapes" were not necessarily made on the street. In 1968, with the arrival of the first truly portable video rigs (the half-inch, reel-to-reel CV Portapak), video freaks could hang out with drug-tripping hippies, sexually liberated commune dwellers, cross-country wanderers, and yippie rebels, capturing spontaneous material literally on their doorsteps. During the summer of 1968 Frank Gillette taped a five-hour documentary of street life on St. Mark's Place in New York City, unofficial headquarters of the Eastern hippie community (Yalkut). Gillette was one of a number of artists, journalists, actors, filmmakers, and students who were drawn to video. They were "the progeny of the Baby Boom, a generation at home with technology—the Bomb and the cathode-ray tube, ready to make imaginative use of the communications media to convey their messages of change" (Armstrong 20-21).

Turning the limits of their technology into a virtue, underground videomakers invented a distinctive style unique to the medium. Some pioneers used surveillance cameras and became adept at "free-handing" a camera because there was no

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viewfinder (Teasdale). Tripods, with their fixed viewpoints, were out; hand-held fluidity was in. Video's unique ability to capitalize on the moment with instant playback and real-time monitoring of events also suited the era's emphasis on "process, not product." Process art, earth art, conceptual art, and performance art all shared a deemphasis on the final work and an emphasis on how it came to be. The absence of electronic editing equipment—which discouraged shaping a tape into a finished "product"—further encouraged the development of a "process" video aesthetic.

The early video shooting styles were as much influenced by meditation techniques, like t'ai chi and drug-induced epiphanies, as they were by existing technology. Aspiring to the "minimal presence" of an "absorber" of information, videomakers like Paul Ryan believed in waiting for the scene to happen, trying not to shape it by directing events. The fact that videotape was relatively cheap and reusable made *laissez-faire* work as feasible as it was desirable.

Underground video groups appeared throughout the United States, but New York City served as the hub of the 1960s video underground scene. Prominent early collectives included the Videofreex, People's Video Theater, Global Village, and Raindance Corporation. The Videofreex was the movement's preeminent production group, acting as its technological and aesthetic innovator; People's Video Theater used live and taped feedback of embattled community groups as a catalyst for social change; Global Village initiated the first closed-circuit video theater to show underground work (followed by the Philo T. Farnsworth Obelisk Theater, a project of the Electric Eye in California); and Raindance served as the movement's research and development arm.

Since the chronicling of any movement tends to encourage its expansion, Rain-

dance played a key role, producing underground video's chief information source and national networking tool, *Radical Software* (edited by Beryl Korot and Phyllis Gershuny). In addition, Raindance members contributed to a cultural data bank of videotapes from which they collectively fashioned "Media Primers," collages of interviews, street tapes, and off-air television excerpts that explored the nature of television and portable video's potential as a medium for criticism and analysis.

Hundreds of hours of documentary tapes were shot by underground groups, tapes on New Left polemics and the drama of political confrontation as well as video erotica. Video offered an opportunity to challenge television's authority, to replace often negative images of youthful protest and rebellion with the counterculture's own values and televisual reality.

Observers outside the video scene found early tapes guilty of inconsistent technical quality. Critics faulted underground video for being frequently infantile, but they also praised it for carrying an immediacy rare in Establishment TV (Aaron). The underground's response to such criticism was to concede there was a loss in technical quality when compared to broadcast. Hollywood had also been fixated on glossy productions until the French "New Wave" filmmakers in the early 1960s created a demand for the grainy quality of *cinéma vérité*, jump-cuts, and hand-held camera shots. Like the *vérité* filmmakers 10 years before them, video pioneers were inventing a new style, and they expected to dazzle the networks with their radical approach and insider's ability to get stories unavailable to commercial television. The networks did try underground video, briefly.

In the fall of 1969, CBS pumped thousands of dollars into the ill-fated "Now" project, a magazine show of 16mm and portable video documentary vignettes that prom-

ised to show America what the 1960s youth and culture rebellion was really about. Nearly everyone with a portapak in New York worked on the show, but CBS concentrated its resources and hopes on the Videofreex, who interviewed Abbie Hoffman at the Chicago 9 conspiracy trial, got Black Panther Fred Hampton on tape days before he was murdered, and captured scenes of alternative life and hot tub enlightenment along the California coast. CBS executives eventually rejected the 90-minute show, later titled "Subject to Change," euphemistically finding it "ahead of its time" (Videofreex; West).

Aware of the centrality of media in modern life, of the way television shapes reality and consciousness, video pioneers tried to gain access to mass media. Arrogant and naive, they learned the hard way that television had no intention of relinquishing its power. They would have to look elsewhere for funding sources and broader distribution outlets for their work, forced to take seriously A. J. Liebling's observation, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

The "Now" project marked a turning point as the underground discovered its freewheeling rebellious days were over. The time had come for an information revolution. Influenced by theorists like Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller, artist-activists began to plot their utopian program to change the structure of information in America. In the pages of *Radical Software* and in the alternative movement's 1971 manifesto, *Guerrilla Television*, they outlined their plan to decentralize television so that the medium could be made by as well as for the people. Adopting a sharply critical relationship to broadcast television, they determined to use video to create an alternative to the aesthetically bankrupt and commercially corrupt broadcast medium. As the underground began to search for other ways of reaching their audiences, cable TV and video cassettes seemed to offer an answer.

## The 1970s: Alternative TV

The 1970s ushered in a new era of alternative video. The underground became an above-ground media phenomenon as magazine articles on the "alternative-media guerrillas" appeared in mainstream periodicals like *Newsweek* and *New York Magazine*. When federal rules mandated local origination programming and public access channels for most cable systems, cable seemed to promise a new, utopian era of democratic information, functioning as a decentralized alternative to the commercially-driven broadcast medium.

The new AV format portapak appeared in 1970, conforming to a new international standard for half-inch videotape. For the first time, tapes made with one manufacturer's portable video equipment could be played back on competing manufacturer's equipment. Not only did this boost competition among video manufacturers and accelerate the development of portable video, it also facilitated the exchange of tapes, which would become even more widespread once the 3/4-inch U-matic cassette became available in 1972. The new AV format, with an eyepiece that allowed instant playback in the camera, proliferated across the country as more and more people began to explore the medium.

Government funding for video was inaugurated by the New York State Council on the Arts in 1970. With it, the "all-for-one" camaraderie of early video activity—which had begun to break down in the scramble for CBS dollars the year before—soon deteriorated into an all-out funding battle as video groups competed for their share of the pie (Aaron, "Alternate"; also see Vassi). Within a year, sharp divisions between "video artists" and "video activists" surfaced. In time alternative videomakers subdivided into two factions: community video advocates and guerrilla television producers.



Skip Blumberg interviews Douglas Kiker in TVTV's *Four More Years* (1972). Photo credit: Marita Sturken.

### Guerrilla Television

Although exponents of guerrilla television professed an interest in community video, they were generally far more interested in developing the video medium and getting tapes aired on television than in serving a localized constituency. Probably the best known guerrilla television was produced by an ad hoc group of video freaks assembled in 1972 to cover the political conventions for cable television. Top Value Television (aka TVTV) produced hour-long, documentary tapes of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions and made video history, providing national viewers with an iconoclastic, alternative vision of the American political process and the media that cover it. TVTV relied on the technical and artistic expertise of groups like the Video-freex, Raindance, and the San Francisco-

based group, Ant Farm, adding a distinctive way of producing and promoting the event for cable television.

In *Four More Years* (1972), TVTV's crew of 19 threaded its way through delegate caucuses, Young Republican rallies, cocktail parties, antiwar demonstrations, and the frenzy of the convention floor, capturing the hysteria of zealots while entertaining viewers with the foibles of politicians, press, and camp followers alike. With a style loosely modeled on New Journalism and dedicated to making facts as vivid and entertaining as fiction, TVTV used a sharp sense of irony to puncture many an inflated ego. As self-proclaimed guerrillas, they tackled the establishment and caught it off guard with the portable, nontreating equipment that gave them access to people and places where network camera-

men, burdened with heavy equipment and the seriousness of commercial TV, never thought of going.

Like *cinéma vérité* in the 1960s, guerrilla television's documentary style was opposed to the authoritarian voice-of-God narrator ordained by early sound-film documentaries and subsequently the model for most made-for-television documentaries. Practitioners eschewed narration, substituting unconventional interviewers and snappy graphics to provide context without seeming to condescend. They challenged the objectivity of television's documentary journalism, with its superficial on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand balancing of issues. Distinguishing themselves from network reporters who stood loftily above the crowd, video guerrillas proudly announced they were shooting from *within* the crowd, subjective and involved (Boyle, *Return*).

TVTV's success with its first two documentaries for cable TV attracted the interest of public television, and TVTV was the first video group commissioned to produce work for national broadcast on public television. New technology—notably color portapak, electronic editing equipment, and the stand-alone time base corrector—made it possible to broadcast half-inch video. And so guerrilla television revised its revolutionary aims into a reform movement to improve broadcast television by example. Without the radical politics of the 1960s to inspire them, guerrilla television's producers became increasingly concerned with the politics of broadcasting.

In 1974, shortly after TVTV introduced national audiences to guerrilla television, the first all-color portable video documentary was produced by Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV) and aired on PBS. DCTV was formed as a community video group serving New York City's Lower East Side. But unlike other community video organizations, DCTV did not confine itself solely to social issues on

the local level. *Cuba, The People* offered a fast-paced tour of life in Cuba, indicative of a style of investigative video journalism that DCTV developed throughout the 1970s. More conventional than TVTV's satiric iconoclasm, DCTV modeled itself on television documentaries but with a viewpoint. For this tape, DCTV toured the mountains, countryside, and capital of Cuba, talking with people about life before and after the revolution. These interviews were linked by DCTV founder Jon Alpert's disarming narration. Unlike the detached statements of a standup reporter, Alpert's high-pitched voice registered irony, enthusiasm, and frequent surprise, pointing up improvements since the revolution without glossing over some deficits under socialism. Public television agreed to air the tape, but not without a wrap-around with Harrison Salisbury to stave off possible criticism. The wrap-around afforded an unexpected and amusing contrast between old-style TV journalism and DCTV's contribution to guerrilla television's direct, informal, advocacy style (Boyle, "Cuba").

One of the most talked about tapes of the period was produced by two filmmakers who decided to explore the potential of low-light video cameras to capture the nighttime reality of an urban police force. Alan and Susan Raymond's *The Police Tapes* (1976) was a disturbing video *vérité* view of ghetto crime as seen by the policemen of the 47th Precinct in the South Bronx, better known as Fort Apache. Structured around the nightly patrols, it focused on 10 real-life dramas and the leadership of an above-average commanding officer frustrated by "commanding an army of occupation in the ghetto." Distilled from over 40 hours of videotape, *The Police Tapes* was produced for public television and then reedited into an hour-long version for ABC (Boyle, "Truth").

Because guerrilla television was given national exposure on public TV, its gutsy style influenced many documentary video



Edin Velez uses slow motion to underscore the relationship of the "other" to the observer. *Meta Mayan II* (1981). Photo credit: Kira Perov.

producers around the country. Not only were many community video groups affected, but as television news went from all-film crews to ENG (electronic news gathering) units, the style of TV's news began to reflect guerrilla television's influence. Once absorbed by television, the style and purpose of guerrilla television was transformed into something often at odds with its origins. For example, independent videomakers' preference for ordinary people rather than establishment spokespersons began to show up in "mockumentary" entertainment shows like *Real People* and *That's Incredible!* By the end of the decade, many of the distinctions between guerrilla and network television had blurred as the networks absorbed the style and content of independent work as well as some of its practitioners. TVTV, after making an unsuccessful comedy pilot

for NBC, disbanded in 1978 and several of its members found work in commercial television and film; by 1981, the Peabody-award-winning *The Police Tapes* had become the template for the popular TV drama series *Hill Street Blues* and its producers were working for ABC; and by 1979, DCTV's Jon Alpert was an independent journalist producing investigative stories for NBC's *Today Show* and *The Nightly News*.

#### Community Video

Proponents of grassroots video saw the medium as a means to an end—community organizing. Their primary focus was to use portable video to effect social change, not to experiment with a new medium or dismantle the structure of broadcast television. Canada's Challenge

for Change, a government-sponsored effort, pioneered the use of video as a catalyst for community change in the late 1960s and served as a model for many U.S. experiments (McPherson). Community video groups sprang up all across the United States, reflecting the regionalism of the 1970s. Some of the many groups active during this time include the Alternate Media Center (co-founded by George Stoney, former director of the Challenge for Change), People's Video Theater and Downtown Community Television Center (New York), Portable Channel (Rochester, NY), Urban Planning Aid (Boston), Marin Community Video (CA), Broadside TV (Johnson City, TN), Headwaters TV (Whitesburg, KY), University Community Video (Minneapolis), LA Public Access, People's Video (Madison, WI), Washington (DC) Community Video Center, Videopolis (Chicago), and New Orleans Video Access Center, to name a few.

Community video advocates often differed about whether they should be producing tapes for broadcast or emphasizing process over product by exhibiting unedited tapes to citizens in their homes, community centers, or other closed-circuit environments. Many activists were leery of being co-opted by their involvement with television, and their fears were well grounded, as the experiences of at least three early community groups testify. In Johnson City, Broadside TV produced community video for multisystem cable operators who were mandated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to provide local origination programming; in Minneapolis, University Community Video purchased 30 minutes of broadcast time weekly to air its half-hour documentary video series on local public television; and the New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC) relied on the public affairs interest of a local network affiliate to get its documentary productions broadcast. For various reasons each group's involvement with television—whether cable, public, or network TV—eventually jeopardized

the organization's commitment to community-made media.

Broadside TV was founded by Ted Carpenter, a former VISTA volunteer and Ford Foundation Fellow, who had combed the backhills of Appalachia during the early 1970s making short documentaries or "holer tapes" on regional issues. Carpenter held his camera in his lap and used a monitor rather than his camera viewfinder to frame a picture, allowing him to establish an intimate rapport with his speakers. He then shared these tapes with remote neighbors, inviting them to make their own tape. Half-inch video's portability, simple operation, and unthreatening nature made it easy for people to speak their minds before the camera. Carpenter's form of networking information among Appalachian mountain people inaugurated an electronic era for oral tradition and established an important model for community documentary productions ("Homegrown").

In 1972 Carpenter went to Johnson City, TN, where he started Broadside TV. Appalachia had been a prime cable market since the early 1950s. Carpenter realized that Broadside TV could provide all the "narrowcast" programming—both local origination and public access—demanded by the FCC. From 1972-74 Broadside TV was a uniquely self-supporting community video enterprise, supplying all the local programming for four multicable systems in the area, narrowcasting four to six hours of programming each week. Shows featured Appalachian studies, mountain and bluegrass music, regional news and public affairs programs, entertainment, and local sports. However, the demand to generate programming led Broadside away from the intimate neighbor-to-neighbor communication originally championed by Carpenter. Programming was produced for the community, not by it. Disaster struck once the federal mandate on local origination programming on cable was challenged in 1974, and Broadside lost its distribution outlet and economic sup-

port structure. Although Broadside continued to produce documentary tapes, its independence and vitality was seriously compromised as was its ability to extend access to community members. With efforts divided between producing and fundraising from private and government sources, Broadside TV was finally forced to close up shop in 1978 (Hilenski).

In Minneapolis, a coalition of students and community video activists forged one of the most successful video access centers of the 1970s. Backed by liberal funding from student fees, University Community Video (UCV) rapidly developed into a thriving center for community-based documentary production. In 1974 UCV began producing a weekly documentary series for local public television, buying the time from KTCA to air its critically acclaimed series *Changing Channels* (Aufderheide). Influenced by midwestern populism and a strong tradition of journalistic integrity, UCV's award-winning documentary programs married guerrilla television to broadcast journalism. *Changing Channels* was named the best local public affairs program on public television in 1977, but as UCV staffers became more and more interested in producing documentaries for television, the organization's original intention of making video accessible to community members took a back seat. The pull to produce tapes that met the ever higher broadcast production standards prompted a crisis of purpose for the group (Sinard). Although UCV decided to cancel *Changing Channels* to concentrate on community production in 1978, it metamorphosed in the 1980s into a media arts center and severed its ties to the university and local community. What had once been a bastion of community and regional documentary production in the 1970s had, by the 1980s, evolved into a media arts center for nationally-recognized video artists. Other forces besides those of television were influencing once thriving community video groups.

Realizing that New Orleans would not be wired for cable for years and the local public television affiliate was uninterested in airing community video productions, the New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC) turned to network television for distribution of its documentary tapes in the mid-1970s. NOVAC staffers began producing social documentaries on the problems facing the city's low-income black population for a local network affiliate and won awards for their work. With the pressure to produce technically sophisticated and conceptually complex documentary productions, NOVAC—like UCV—increasingly relied on staff producers rather than community members. NOVAC learned, as did many other community access groups of the time, that once the novelty of exploring video equipment wore off, many community members had little interest in becoming video producers. Although many residents expressed interest in using this new tool for social progress, few had the time to develop the skills required to become producers of documentaries for broadcast (Kolker and Alvarez). And so the pressure to produce for television, with its large audiences and increased possibility for influencing social change, seduced many community access centers away from their original purpose of facilitating people-to-people video.

#### The 1980s: Documentary Pluralism

By the late 1970s, teams and individuals had replaced the early collectives, a result of changing funding patterns favoring individual "artists" over production groups, the end of an era of collectivism, and a creative need felt by many individuals to branch out and develop their own styles and subjects. People who had learned their craft as members of video collectives or community groups began to produce independent documentaries for public and network TV (for example, Greg Pratt and Jim Mulligan of University Community Video; Louis Alvarez, Andy Kolker, and Stevenson Palfi of New Orleans Video Ac-



Jon Alpert interviews a Philippine family for *The Today Show*. Photo credit: Maryann DeLeo.

cess Center; Blaine Dunlap of Broadside TV; Skip Blumberg of the Videofreex, et al.; and Jon Alpert of DCTV).

The 1980s arrived on a wave of conservatism that threatened to undermine the efforts of social activists and video innovators of earlier decades. As young videomakers opted to make lucrative music videos or neo-expressionist narratives hailed by the art world, the documentary seemed on the verge of becoming an anachronism. But enterprising videomakers invented new strategies so that they could continue to address controversial subjects without driving away their increasingly conservative sources of funding and distribution. Challenged to discover new forms for their work and inspired by advances in video production and postproduction equipment, videomakers veered in two different directions, responding to the low- and high-tech options and funding available to them.

Producers like Dan Reeves, Edin Velez, and Victor Masayesva, Jr., to name a few, incorporated the aesthetic strategies of

video art to produce personal essays and autobiographies that pushed the limits of the documentary genre. This overlapping of the narrower definitions of art and documentary not only served to bridge the chasm between the two but it also reanimated the video documentary in otherwise inhospitable times.

Edin Velez was the first to call his nonlinear, poetic documentaries "video essays." In *Meta Mayan II*, he exaggerated the natural rhythms of the mountain Indians of northern Guatemala to reveal the depths of an ancient culture in conflict with a hostile world. A far cry from the realism typically employed in political documentaries, *Meta Mayan II* spoke powerfully but symbolically.

Dan Reeves's autobiographical essay on his wartime experiences in Vietnam further stretched the boundaries of documentary video. His hallucinatory collage of audio and visual images snatched from the collective data bank of television and popular music was a cathartic reenactment, a

burning antiwar statement, and a devastating analysis of the mass media's role in inculcating violence and aggression from childhood onward. Hopi videomaker Victor Masayesva, Jr. adapted the latest, state-of-the-art video techniques to serve his age-old oral tradition and culture. In *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (1984), Masayesva slipped effortlessly from realism to surrealism, colorizing images and speeding up actions, creating a mythic dimension that invited viewers to experience a different, Hopi sense of time, place, and meaning.

In contrast with the special effects and symbolic language of these experimental documentaries, interest in stripped-down, low-tech portraits and straightforward storytelling was seen. Fred Simon's *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran* offered a relentlessly compelling account of what it is like to love killing only to live long enough to regret every bloody deed. Simon concentrated the black-and-white camera on Frank talking, a style that, in the hands of a lesser person, would produce nothing more than a banal "talking head." However, Simon's persistence in revealing the deeper messages conveyed in Frank's tormented eyes and strained face yielded a forceful, moving portrait.

#### Guerrilla Video Revived

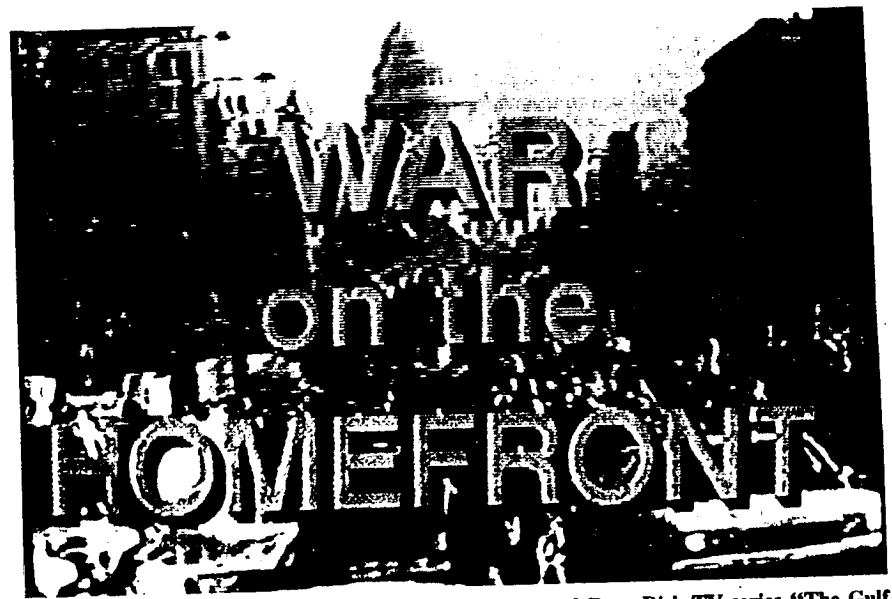
On June 12, 1982, an historic event boldly proclaimed the revival of guerrilla television and collective video action. A massive rally in support of the United Nations Conference on Disarmament was held in New York City, and as a part of that demonstration 300 independent video producers collaborated to interview over 3,000 individuals about their views on disarmament. In keeping with minimal video aesthetics, each interview had a standard wide-angle, head-and-shoulder shot with no internal editing of any statement allowed. Eight hour-long compilations were made and shown, *not* on television, but closed circuit in media vans during the rally in New York City and in

other locations (Crowley and Blumberg). Taped when disarmament was the world's most discussed public policy issue, the *Disarmament Video Survey* revealed video at its grassroots best, turning a frequently passive medium into an active one, a forum for an exchange of ideas and debate. Emerging from a tradition of collective, politically-motivated video begun in the late 1960s, it suggested the best impulse of guerrilla television, to decentralize TV and turn it back to the people, was still alive.

Since 1981, a weekly cable program critical of the mass media has been produced for the public access channel in New York City by an energetic collective of independent videomakers. Drawing on the traditions of radical video, Paper Tiger Television has invented its own funky, home-grown video aesthetic, demonstrating that energy, talent, modest resources, and public access cable are enough to make revolutionary television. The show's hosts are articulate critics who analyze the corporate ownership, hidden agendas, and information biases of mainstream media (Boyle, "Home Video"). As collective members have moved on, they have set up regional offshoots from Maine to California that continue to expose not only the hidden ideologies of the mass media but a variety of national and international social issues.

In 1986, Paper Tiger rented time on a satellite and began to transmit community-produced tapes to over 250 participating cable systems and public TV stations around the country. The successful syndication of "Deep Dish TV"—the first national public access series of community-made programs on issues such as labor, housing, the farming crisis, and racism—has helped stimulate a new era for alternative documentary productions in the 1990s.

During the summer of 1990 Paper Tiger worked with Deep Dish to produce a TV teach-in on peaceful alternatives to war in the Persian Gulf. "The Gulf Crisis TV Project" offered the only national broad-



A title from a program in the Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish TV series "The Gulf Crisis TV Project" (1991). Courtesy: Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish TV.

cast coverage of dissenting opinion about the war before it began, demonstrating the power of alternative video to reach a national audience and fulfill a critical information need (Marcus).

The return of guerrilla tactics and idealism was sparked, in part, by the widespread availability of consumer video equipment and by a younger generation of videomakers caught up in the political and social issues of a new age—war in Central America, nuclear proliferation, homelessness, environmental dangers, reproductive rights, among many others. What the Vietnam War was for the 1960s, the AIDS crisis became for the 1980s, an issue uniting an entire generation against an undeclared war that claims thousands of young lives each year. A host of video collectives organized around these issues have proliferated in recent years, groups such as DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), Not Channel Zero, ReproVision, and MAC (Media Against Censorship) Attack, to name a few. Eclectic

and pragmatic, young video activists incorporate whatever works into their tapes. By mixing the slick sophistication of music video style with guerrilla-like coverage of demonstrations, by juxtaposing the high-end quality of broadcast Betacam with the low-tech grit of home video camcorders, they have appropriated the full range of production tools and aesthetics and effectively rendered distinctions between low- and high-tech documentary video obsolete, further democratizing the medium and opening it up for creative and political possibilities. Foregoing broadcast television and mass audiences for closed-circuit distribution and public access exposure to targeted audiences, they are determined to avoid the traps that derailed video revolutionaries in the past.

Jon Alpert had been the only independent video producer to successfully straddle the worlds of network TV and radical community video. His investigative "minidocs" for NBC's *The Today Show* won both criticism and praise. As one of

the few independent producers to cross over from public TV to network TV and maintain control over his stories, Alpert brought the plight of midwestern farmers, urban squatters, and inner-city heroin addicts as well as embattled citizens around the globe into the breakfast nooks of mainstream America. As a muckraking reformer—not of broadcast television, but of contemporary society—Alpert angered critics on the right and on the left who insisted he was not above staging sequences and entrapping “the enemy” for dramatic effect despite NBC’s staunch defense of his journalistic integrity (Thomson). The Faustian bargain Alpert made in his decision to work within the networks demanded certain compromises but it also allowed him to influence not only millions of viewers but key legislators and corporate execs who otherwise might not have had to take his messages seriously. For 12 years Alpert worked as a freelance producer for NBC’s *Nightly News* and *The Today Show* until his trip to Iraq during the Persian Gulf War earned him summary dismissal. Even the dexterous ability of a seasoned video guerrilla to deal with the vicissitudes of commercial media proved inadequate when facing the formidable opposition of a network fearful of government reprisals for broadcasting unpopular images of a popular war (Hoyt).

### The 1990s: Future Uncertain

Support for alternative media in America is at a new low as all art comes under fire from conservative forces anxious to eliminate funding for the arts and dismantle public broadcasting. Alternative videomakers have come under special attack from right-wing legislators like Senator Jesse Helms and Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, among others. But in the face of such opposition articulate voices continue to be heard. Marlon Riggs—whose extraordinary video essay on being black and gay, *Tongues Untied* (1989), has been the target of numerous

attacks in Congress as well as censorship by public television and, most recently, distortion in one of Pat Buchanan’s presidential campaign ads—has spoken out against the bigotry, race-baiting, and homophobia that characterizes America today (Riggs).

At no time in the past 30 years has freedom of speech—particularly as exercised by liberals, leftists, women, gays and lesbians, people of color, and ethnic minorities—been opposed so powerfully in the United States. Video activists of the 1990s have become true video guerrillas, waging a subtle war of words and images to preserve the full expression of diversity in America today. The future of their work is uncertain. But its role—as ever—is clear. To be a tool, a weapon, and a witness.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In differentiating various phases of this history, I have taken the liberty of assigning terms to certain periods which were not used so exclusively at the time. For example, alternative television, guerrilla television, and grassroots video were often used simultaneously, and underground video was also called cybernetic guerrilla video warfare. In order to identify and track rapidly evolving styles and goals, and to avoid the many confusions such divergent work presents, these distinctions, however arbitrary, are employed.

<sup>2</sup> The term “guerrilla television” was the title

of a 1971 book which gave the movement a name and a manifesto. Written by Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation (one of the first video collectives organized in the late 1960s), *Guerrilla Television* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) equated portable video with the Gutenberg press, the latest result of a technological trend toward decentralization and high access to information.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1960s and early 1970s collectively-produced tapes rarely differentiated roles in their credits. If any credits were listed, only the group name would be cited or an alphabetical, nonhierarchical list of participants. Ownership of individual work was antithetical to group process and egalitarian idealism, but by the end of the 1970s credits had become a troubled arena as groups like TVTV split apart over bitter credit quarrels.

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