

Attention! Production! Audience! *

Performing Video in its First Decade, 1968-1980

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1. A radical communications paradigm for a participatory democracy

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

—Sylvia Harvey ^[1]

a. Cultural agency and new technologies

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

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

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

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

The manifestos and commentary by those caught up in the early video movement of 1968-1973 reflected an optimism stemming from the belief that real social change was possible; they expressed a commitment to cultural change that bordered on the ecstatic. During this heady period political theorists, artists, and activists delivered powerful arguments for a participatory democracy. The possibility of working for radical social change was conflated with the task of personal change and with imperatives to explore one’s consciousness through music, art, drugs, encounter groups, spirituality, sexuality, and countercultural lifestyles. The valorization of “process” and “an almost religious

return to experience” was shared by both political and cultural radicals of the late ‘60s, even though their agendas and strategies varied considerably.^[5] Much of the enthusiasm expressed about the “process” and “experience” available to artists and audiences through the new portable video technology centered on instant replay and the immediate “feedback” of one’s experience.

The social and cultural challenges of the ‘60s were, “a disruption of late capitalist ideology, political hegemony, and the bourgeois dream of unproblematic production.”^[6] The decade opened with the beginning of the civil disobedience phase of the civil rights movement and the formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which organized interracial Freedom Rides to integrate restaurants and restrooms in the South in 1961. According to Todd Gitlin, ‘60s activist and sociologist, “The [civil rights] movement’s rise and fall, its transmutations from southern nonviolence to black power, its insistence on the self-determination of the insulted and injured, was the template for every other movement of the decade.”^[7]

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

As part of the progressive dialogue on college campuses between 1968 and 1973, tracts by writers like Herbert Marcuse were broadly circulated and discussed. They described the media as a “consciousness industry” responsible for the alienation of the individual, the commodification of culture, and the centralized control of communications technologies. In his widely read books, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), Herbert Marcuse identified a relationship between the consciousness of the individual and the political, asserting that “radical change in consciousness is the beginning, the first step in changing social existence: the emergence of a new Subject.” This new citizen, aware of and actively dealing with “tragedy and romance, archetypal dreams and anxieties” would be less susceptible to “technical solutions” offered through contemporary society’s homogeneous “happy consciousness.”^[9] Marcuse’s writing framed other mandates for consciousness expansion and change and validated the role that personal agency should play in accomplishing social change.

By 1969, through confrontation and consciousness raising—the sharing and study of personal experience and history—African Americans and women had declared themselves new historical “subjects.” Strategizing around separatism and alliances, their liberation movements developed solidarity with other U.S. and international movements as global awareness permeated their public discourse. The gay rights movement born after the 1969 Stonewall confrontation, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) also asserted political and cultural identities through public actions and cultural networking during the early ‘70s. These new movements focused both on histories of economic exploitation and systemic cultural domination. The Port Huron Statement had demanded a less alienated society and claimed a definitive subjectivity for the generation coming of age in the ‘60s; these new movements also sought profound transformation in both socioeconomic and cultural relations.

Although the New Left and the anti-war movement in the late ‘60s had close ties with progressive documentary filmmakers, for example the Newsreel film collective, their reports and analyses were disseminated primarily through an extensive underground press.^[10] The Left regarded mainstream media, including commercial television, with distrust. Planning for the 1968 anti-war protests in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention did include strategizing around national press coverage, but it was fringe groups like the Yippies that specifically sought confrontation with and coverage by commercial media. Forays into network broadcasting, such as the Videofreex collaboration with CBS on the aborted 1969 *Subject to Change* project, revealed the industry’s contradictory aspirations for new broadcast programming and reinforced alternative videomakers’ wariness of allying with corporate television. **[Insert sidebar B—interview with Parry Teasdale on Videofreex]**

By the early ‘70s video theorists writing in *Radical Software* along with Marxist critic Todd Gitlin and German socialist Hans Magnus Enzensberger had outlined arguments for an alternative, independent electronic media practice. In 1970, building on ideas developed earlier by Bertolt Brecht regarding the corporate structure of radio communications, Enzensberger critiqued the asymmetry between media producers/transmitters and media consumers/receivers. The radio and television industries had centralized and controlled access to the production, programming, and transmission of media, and limited those individual receivers to participation as consumers. However there was nothing inherent in the technology that could not support a more reciprocal communications system such as, for example, the telephone. Enzensberger concluded that new portable video technology set the stage for redressing this contradiction:

“For the first time in history the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves. Such a use of them would bring the communications media, which up to

now have not deserved the name, into their own. In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system.”^[11]

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

Although McLuhan’s and others’ prescriptions for technological utopia appeared poetic to many, he popularized the notion of television, a “high participation” “cool medium,” as a generational marker and as a potentially liberatory information tool in the hands of the first generation that had grown up with it. McLuhan did not address ways of restructuring a more democratic telecommunications system, but did inspire others to apply his ideas as they investigated video production and theorized about the new medium.

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

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

Enthusiasm about new technologies—computers and the information-based society they might anticipate, and theorizing on human evolution, cybernetics, human perception, ecology, and transformable environments—appeared at a time when post-war economic growth generated confidence and society seemed to be capable of radical change. Through the writing of McLuhan, Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, Gregory Bateson and others^[14] the intersection of information and systems theory with biological models provided communications and human potential references for a generation that had grown up with the increasing availability of powerful and expressive personal tools—cars, televisions, transistor radios, 35mm and 8mm movie cameras, electronic musical instruments, and now portable video cameras and recording decks. The mixed metaphors of science, biology, and revolution, dubbed “cyber-scat” by critic David Antin^[15] are evident in Michael Shamberg’s 1971 description of “Media-America”:

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

b. Early video collectives

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

“For me it was a two way thing. There was the individual vision and the individual maker working with a set of tools to do something. The tools were something I could get access to one way or another, without a lot of money. The other concern was the serious business of

making revolution. These things were not separated. These things were a part of everybody else's concern too."¹⁸

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

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

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

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

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

The cultural exchanges performed through the production/reception configurations of early collectives' projects varied greatly according to specific agendas and sites of operation. Descriptions of a few of these early projects give some sense of the range that existed across the country. People's Video Theater (PVT) was founded by Ken Marsh, an artist working with light shows, and Elliot Glass, a language teacher videotaping his students' conversations in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in New York. PVT videotaped interviews and events on the streets of New York during the day and then invited interviewees to their loft "theater" in the evening for screenings and further discussions as part of "activating the information flow."²³ PVT also taped community "mediations" where points of view on a particular issue would be researched and recorded, then played back for politicians, community leaders, and neighborhood people as part of the negotiating process. Ken Marsh regarded video production at the time as an aspect of citizenship. "The rhetoric that we subscribed to was that 'the people are the information'... Everybody could do it and everybody should do it. That was the mandate—pick it up, it's there. Like the power to vote—vote, take responsibility. Make it and see it."²⁴

In 1972 the Videofreex, initially a New York City collective, moved to the Catskills, and began broadcasting a mix of live and recorded programming each week over a low power, pirate TV station to their tiny community in Lanesville. Another seminal group formed around experimental filmmaker and dancer Shirley Clarke. Her T.P. Video Space Troupe produced interactive exercises and events using video, dance, and performance, which also served as a video training model for participants. One of Clarke's exercises, a sunrise project, concluded when participants reconvened at her Chelsea Hotel rooftop apartment at sunrise to replay the evening's Portapak documentation of New York's nightlife. A little further west, the Ithaca video commune collaborated with local social service projects and screened their sometimes controversial programming in bars and bookstores, generating discussion about local and national issues as well as educating local audiences to the possibilities of portable video. Philip Mallory Jones and others eventually initiated the Ithaca Video Festival, the first touring video festival (1974-1984) and an important showcase for early video art and documentary. **[Insert sidebar C—interview with Phillip Mallory Jones]**

At Antioch College in Ohio an active national tape exchange was maintained by students through their Community Media Center. At the Antioch Free Library people were welcome to borrow tapes or add their own tapes to the collection. Through the college's alternating semesters of work and study and its new program in communications, media students became actively involved in planning and establishing public access cable operations all over the country. **[Insert sidebar D—interview with Bob Devine about intersection of social activist and video art agendas]**

c. Access to cable and public broadcast TV

Alongside the inspiration of the Portapak, the burgeoning cable television industry was heralded as a promising technological development by artists writing in *Radical Software*, as well as by community activists and urban policy planners. Portable video technology could introduce non-professional people to production, and cable television companies that contracted with individual municipalities could use their local systems to disseminate the citizen-generated and community-responsive programming. Cable companies anxious to expand into new markets offered public access provisions as incentives to potential municipal clients. For public policy planners and community media activists public access provisions could be negotiated as a resource in exchange for the companies receiving access to municipal infrastructures (utility poles, right-of-way to lay cable). Citizens' access to cable TV was welcomed by diverse factions as potentially invigorating the voices of those largely unrepresented by commercial television.

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

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

The "benefits of community expression" cited by Smith are echoed in "Minority Cable Report" written for *Televisions* magazine in the early '70s. Roger Newell argued for minorities' stake in the cable business and community projects that would keep the public informed and also "operationally involved." He pointed out that in the findings of the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (the Kerner Commission), "blacks interviewed by investigators for the commission felt that the media could not be trusted to present the true story of conditions that led to the riots." Furthermore, "proponents of the use of cable in minority communities saw it as the clear alternative to commercial broadcasting... Cable gives us a second—and perhaps last—chance to determine whether television can be used to teach, to inspire, to change humans' lives for the better. The task will be demanding and expensive."^[26]

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

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

Stoney worked with other video activists taking Portapaks into New York City neighborhoods, strategizing with city officials, federal

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

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

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

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

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

Although cable could reach potentially large television audiences, not all communities were cabled, and because cable companies charged viewers for their service, many households chose not to subscribe. So despite the opportunities offered by cable TV, local public (broadcast) television remained important channels for early video producers. The stand-alone time base corrector appeared on the market in 1973, stabilizing the signal of 1/2” open reel tapes and effectively ending early technological objections to broadcasting portable video. As video began to replace film for news productions, independents using portable video equipment began calling for more diversity in points of view, challenging existing union policies as well as programming policies. Some video groups established working relationships in the early ‘70s with their local PBS stations—Portable Channel with WXXI in Rochester (New York) and University Community Video with KTCA in Minneapolis—to produce news and documentaries specifically for local broadcast audiences. Technical developments—portability, color video, 3/4” U-matic cassette format, CMX computer video editing—all enhanced video production throughout the decade. At the same time debates, which continue today, began to take shape around independents’ access to new technologies and the receptivity of public television and its legislative and corporate funders to independent programming.

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

personal enlightenment... the possibility of transcendence through image as an actual machine-made evocation... Some thought of this as a healing process or... a restructuring of one's consciousness."^[34]

Despite limits to systemic change sought by the early video practitioners, widespread questioning of fundamental ideological and lifestyle choices did inspire the invention of experimental community structures and economies founded on the use value of media production. Such emphatic commitments focused a radical subjectivity that identified itself as an alternative to the "alienated" and spiritually bankrupt bureaucratic mainstream. Collectives and networked individuals invented new cultural forms and nourished an energy that focused, invigorated, and sustained productive social scenes. Existing institutions—television networks, museums, schools, libraries—were challenged to respond to the interests and needs of their audiences, markets, and users. Optimistic about the role the new media technology could play in a new society, these early video tribes committed themselves to the performance of a radically de-centralized and potentially more democratic electronic communication practice. This alternative vision of decentralized media culture(s) was funded starting in the early '70s as not-for-profit artists projects, artist-run spaces, video access centers, and public access cable facilities by federal, state and local arts councils, private foundations, public television and cable companies.

d. Invisible histories—reconstructing a picture of decentralized media practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Video art practice and its interpretive strategies

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

"Perceptual and structural changes... have to go with relevance rather than forms. And the sense of a new relevance is the aspect that quickly fades. Once a perceptual change is made, one does not look at it but uses it to see the world. It is only visible at the point of

recognition of the change. After that, we are changed by it but have also absorbed it. The impossibility of reclaiming the volatility of perceptual change leaves art historical explanations to pick the bones of dead forms. In this sense, all art dies with time and is impermanent whether it continues to exist as an object or not.”

—Robert Morris^[38]

a. *Post-minimalist perceptual relevance*

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

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

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

“What was relevant to the '60s was the necessity of reconstituting the object as art. Objects were an obvious first step away from illusionism, allusion and metaphor... [However] object making has now given way to an attention to substance... substances in many states—from chunks, to particles, to slime, to whatever... Alongside this approach is chance, contingency, indeterminacy—in short, the entire area of process... This reclamation of process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception... What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes.”^[44]

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

“It is noteworthy that during the 1950s and 1960s a relatively successful vocabulary (‘formalism’) was employed by critics of painting and sculpture. It was a mode which by-passed the artists’ intentions, dismissed ‘poetic’ interpretations, and focused on apt descriptions of the art object; the aim was a certain discrete ‘objectivity.’”^[46]

Experimental film, like sculpture and painting, had been grounded in modernism's materials-based formal vocabulary and was strictly anti-illusionist (vis a vis the Hollywood narrative), and videomakers would assume this bias for their moving image medium as well. Filmmaker Malcolm LeGrice commented in 1977 on experimental film's investment in the descriptive reality of physical materials and viewers' perception:

“The historical development of abstract and formal cinema... seeks to be ‘realist’ in the material sense. It does not imitate or represent

reality, nor create spurious illusions of times, places and lives which engage the spectator in a vicarious substitute for his own reality.”^[47]

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

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

b. Immediacy, process, feedback

In step with late modernism’s imperative to explore the essential properties of materials, videomakers were initially rhapsodic about the inherent properties of the medium, such as immediacy and real time feedback. Compared to film, videotape was inexpensive, immediate, and recyclable like audiotape. Editing videotape between 1968-1971 was primitive; aesthetic strategies and narrative constructions that relied on precise editing emerged only with the development of more sophisticated video editing equipment and eventually access programs available through media art centers, TV labs, and public access centers in the early ‘70s. During this very early period, the simultaneous recording and exhibition of events in “real time” or the real time “synthesis” of images using analog electronic instruments dictated the structure of the work. Early tapes using these time-based instruments foregrounded duration itself, along with the mapping of attention over time, and relationships between space/time and sound/ time. Critic David Antin discussed at length early videomakers’ calculated denial of the attentional framework, or “money metric,” of television.^[49] Joanna Gill, writing for the Rockefeller Foundation in 1975, described these early video works as “information/perception pieces,” projects determined to expand the limits of viewers’ ability to perceive themselves in video-mediated environments.^[50]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Artists working directly with the technologically charged environment of this time-based medium generated a discourse celebrating the particular processes of electronic image-construction. The video camera transforms light and sound information into the video and audio signals as waveform, frequency and voltage, which can be displayed on a cathode ray tube—a television monitor—or magnetically encoded and stored on videotape. Steina and Woody Vasulka articulated their video project in 1975 as primarily a “didactic” one, an inquiry into developing a “vocabulary” of electronic procedures unique to the construction of a “time/energy object.”^[56] During the early 1970s, such artistic research into interfaced electronic tools and the new images produced was understood to be the development of a fundamental electronic lexicon, long before similar constructions would assume the role of a pre-programmed stylistic embellishment, the television industry’s menu of “special effects.”

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

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

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

[Insert sidebar G—interview with Peer Bode (on alternative studios)]

One aesthetic and technical issue carried over from music and experimental film that provoked the interest of early videomakers was the structural relationship between electronic sound and image production. Nam June Paik’s experimentation with the electromagnetic parameters of television and instrument design were extensions of his earlier activity in avant-garde music. Paik’s 1963 Fluxus modifications of television sets with powerful magnets and his TV bra for cellist Charlotte Moorman were ironic gestures, exposing television’s electronic materiality and toying with audience expectations around the TV set as an everyday site for Americans’ meditation and cultural reception. In earlier Fluxus projects he had attacked and compromised pianos as icons of German culture. In 1969 with engineer Shuya Abe, Paik pioneered the construction of the Paik-Abe video synthesizer, an instrument that enabled an artist to add color to the standard black and white video image. In the production of video, both sound and image are determined by the same fundamental analog electronic processes. Modular audio synthesizers, developed in the early ‘60s by Robert Moog and Don Buchla, were models for much of the video synthesizer development. Video artists’ explorations into the physical materiality underlying visual, aural, and cognitive phenomena and into the fundamental structuring of sound and image through mathematical algorithms and machine systems, occupied common territory at this time with aesthetic inquiries in music, experimental film, and sculpture.

d. Video and performance and its audience

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

Performance art posited the aesthetic gesture in the body of the artist, with his or her personal tools, in the present tense, and video could

function as one of those personal tools or as a recording instrument for documenting the situation. The subjectivity of the artist and/or the expectations of the audience could be investigated through performance. Vito Acconci, whose early work as a poet involved words and the page as space, remarked that his involvement with performance was a shift away from the material to understanding the self as an instrument and, “an agent which attends to it, the world, out there.”⁶⁰

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

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

At the same time that artists were venturing structural studies of video performance and measures of intimacy, feminists drew on the intimacy of shared life and art experiences generated through conscious-raising groups and women-centered cultural scenes. Concentrating on the body as a performance vehicle as well as critiquing its representation in mass media and art history, feminist artists such as Hermine Freed, Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler, and Linda Montano, among others, used video and performance to assert and focus female presence and raise issues of gender and subjectivity in art. The invigorated confidence of women as performers and producers, their ambivalence about being the object of desire before the lens or audience, and their politicized relationship to audiences and institutional venues developed into a vital and complex discourse through video and other camera-based media like photography and film. Having attended the second Women’s Video Festival in New York, reviewer Pat Sullivan offered her experience as audience member: “The striking feature of the festival was the revival of communal viewing... Being puzzled or amused or even angered by the responses of the other viewers forced me to search on the screen or in my mind for the origins of my own reactions.”⁶⁶

For feminists, community producers, and artists, the video project’s relationship to its audience was assumed to be a structural aspect of work that expressed a range of radical subjective assertions. The early feminist insight, that both cultural production and viewer reception were constructed according to gender, continued to be articulated across other cultural differences such as class, race, and ethnicity.

The investigation of social, phenomenological and psychological exchanges mediated by video also inevitably (re)introduced and referenced television, a remote (“tele-”) technology located in the home. Television’s paradoxical intimacy with audience was taken up in diverse west coast work by William Wegman, Ilene Segalove, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco. In *The Eternal Frame* (1976), Ant Farm and T.R.Uthco reenacted the media spectacle of the Kennedy assassination and revealed its “inscribed audiences,”⁶⁷ members of the general public who had originally witnessed television’s public channeling of the horror and intimate details of the Kennedy assassination and who now inadvertently found themselves in the middle of public performances recorded in the streets of Dallas and San Francisco. The taped comments of those audiences confirmed the pseudo-familiarity of the events; the audiences became unalienated partners in an ironic disassembling of the authority of the news media.

The tourists standing in Dealey Plaza in 1976 may have been unwitting cultural collaborators with Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, but, like the New York audiences for video and performance events, they were valued as receivers of video by this first generation of video artists. Liza Bear, writing about performance in *Avalanche* in 1974, stated: “Part of content was an articulation of... the audience’s knowledge, beliefs, expectations of the artist in question... and it was a consciousness of the audience as people who’ve come to see a particular artists’ work, as people who know or work within the art context, and also, in some cases, a consciousness of the limitations of that context.”⁶⁸ Critic Peggy Gale concluded that by, “shifting away from the marketplace and the production of a precious object... the role of the audience was redefined to play a part in the completion of the work through their response and feedback: the video model of simultaneous record and presentation, objectification and immediacy, was in effect reiterated.”⁶⁹

e. Video and the construction of “reality”

Artists explored the immediacy and performative possibilities of video, producing work that legitimized new political and cultural

assertions about subjective, lived experience and extended to audiences a considered and responsive function. These critical intimacies and ideological realities as they were mapped out through the video art and alternative media culture, however, were largely antithetical to the commodified “reality” portrayed through mass culture. Although the spectacle of television appealed to the intimate wants and desires of its audience or market, as Enzensberger elaborated, the relationship proffered through television inevitably resulted in a false intimacy:

“Consumption as spectacle contains the promise that want will disappear. The deceptive, brutal, and obscene features of this festival derive from the fact that there can be no question of a real fulfillment of its promise... Trickery on such a scale is only conceivable if based on mass need.”^[70]

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

“TV gains much of its effect from the fact that it appears to depict a world which is immediately and fully present. The viewer assumes that the TV image is both immediate and contiguous as to time with the shared social time and parallel “real world” of its perceivers—even when that may not be the case. This physical immediacy produces in the viewer(s) a sense of psychological intimacy where people on TV and events appear to directly address him or her.”^[71]

The capacity of camera-based work to signify truthfulness, to claim to witness or represent reality, results in its legibility to many viewers as an “essential” and confirming realism. The documentary form, which introduces images and sounds as evidence, was embraced by many women and other previously marginalized producers working with video in the ‘70s, in part because seeing new images of self was undeniably powerful and evidenced the production of a new version of the real. At the same time documentary representation was challenged by women and others as inevitably a product of a specifically focused lens and ideology, with edited inclusions, omissions, and censorships.^[72]

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

In the early ‘70s videomakers had articulated their opposition to television’s codes and one-way distribution system, evident in assertions such as “VT is not TV,” and exhibitions at new artists’ centers titled “No TV,” “Alternative TV,” “Process TV,” and “Natural TV.”^[73] David Antin had pointed out that unlike television, an artist’s videotape ended, not when it was time for a commercial, but when the artist’s intention was accomplished.^[74] The independent network at the end of the decade included media collectives, artists-run media centers, public access organizations, and artist collaborations with public television, and remained a vital alternative to corporate television, however marginalized those cultural scenes. Whether intentionally oppositional or desiring the attention of mainstream audiences, video artists, public access producers, and independent documentarians worked with technologies and cultural codes shared in part by the dominant communications media that, in the United States, though not in all countries, remained primarily a commercial venture. Independent work intended for television would inevitably be evaluated in terms of its marketing value, which would shadow its other intentions or merits. By the late ‘70s increasing numbers of video artists and independent producers were negotiating the contradictory possibilities of broadcast television’s great visibility and potential censorship.

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

3. Emergence of public funding for media art

“Artists with electronic skill have transformed old TV sets into the dazzling ‘light machines’ that have appeared in galleries and museums, and some have developed video colorizers and synthesizers which permit electronic “painting.” A relative few have penetrated the engineers’ citadels of broadcast television to create experimental videotapes with the full palette of the switching consoles. A larger number, working since 1967 with half-inch portable video systems from Japan, have explored the potential of videotape to reach out and open circuits of communication within a variety of small communities—giving substance to attitudes and concerns which monolithic broadcast television has ignored to a point of near obliteration... This new area of Council [New York State Council on the Arts] involvement suggests the extraordinary potential of the medium still to be explored as we go forward into tomorrow’s wired nation.”
—Russell Connor^[75]

In the decade following the introduction of the Portapak, video art and documentary practice developed within an alternative media infrastructure nurtured by the parallel growth of public arts funding. Calls for structural changes in institutional support for the arts came from working artists in the form of challenges to the economic assumptions of the art world establishment. Demonstrations at major museums protested the lack of support for living artists and called for a general reassessment of the business of art making and art dealing. Although many galleries and museums supported new work and were responsive to criticism from working artists, the very existence of new artist-run cooperatives and media and performance laboratories indicated the existing system was not adequately meeting the shifting needs and interests of a new generation of artists.

Early video arts funding supported proposals by artists and collectives, and developed by the mid-'70s into funding programs for both individual artists and a nationwide system of regional media arts centers. By the late '60s public funding for experimental and documentary film had been established through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which would increasingly fund video along with film projects. The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), an early supporter of video as a medium distinct from film, greatly expanded its funding of video starting in 1970. Between 1969 and 1970, NYSCA's overall budget increased almost ten-fold from \$2.3 million in 1969-1970 to \$20.2 million in 1970-1971. This same period saw NYSCA film and television expenditures grow from \$45,000 to almost \$1.6 million, with over \$500,000 going to new video projects. The NEA, established by Congress in 1965, initiated its Public Media Program in 1967 and by 1971 was spending \$1.26 million on film and television art. By the end of the decade the NEA was spending \$8.4 million on media arts (film and video) and committed to supporting a network of regional media arts centers.

Gerd Stern, an artist and early NYSCA staff consultant, outlined the rationale for NYSCA's early commitment to the new medium of video art as, "a societal shift away from stockpiling a product... [T]he Council had always maintained a very open attitude toward new art forms,... to recognize the difficulties of arriving at tight value judgments in new situations where the standards were still nascent, embryonic."⁷⁶ At this time, funding of not-for-profit cultural organizations and artists was promoted by public policy planners and legislators who asserted that cultural research and design would invigorate the marketplace and enhance the quality of life in a democracy. Some artists argued that public funding for the arts would force individuals to become institutionalized and could co-opt or blunt the edge of cultural dissent and creativity. Others countered that public funding would maintain a publicly accessible platform for discussion of cultural values which would contribute alternatives to a marketplace of ideas dominated by art collecting and the interests of commercial media.

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

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

A more thorough tracking of the dialogues, initiatives, policies, and the negotiations between public and private funding institutions, legislative and judicial bodies, commercial interests, not-for-profit arts organizations, public access supporters, and artists' peer panel participation during this early period is essential for understanding the development of independent video practice, but must be developed elsewhere.

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

"Blacks and women may have realized that lack inherent in the images of them that has been perpetrated by the media art of the film and television industry, but American society did not... Democracy was understood [by our forefathers] to require universal education, specifically the ability of all citizens to read and write in order not only to assimilate the issues on which they would vote, but also to

contribute to the formulation and presentation of those issues through writing. Since much, if not most, of our information two centuries later is presented through the media instead of writing, and since the media are not accessible to most of us (nor even to most of our best media artists), this requirement of our political system is not being met.”^[77]

By the late ‘70s a media arts infrastructure supported by public and private funders had expanded the production and exhibition opportunities for emerging media artists, foregrounding new art forms and becoming a critical factor in the development of new audiences for this work, but not without significant resistance. Mapping the trajectory of public support for the arts, David Trend quoted a 1981 Heritage Foundation document written during the Reagan Administration that accused the NEA of having grown, “more concerned with the politically calculated goals of social policy than with the arts it was created to support. To accomplish goals of social intervention and change... the Endowment... serve(s) audiences rather than art, vocal constituencies rather than individually motivated artistic impulses.”^[78] A struggle, which would eventually be described as a “cultural war,” was underway for the legitimacy and survival of an independent media arts practice and infrastructure, one that by the early ‘80s had become more alternative than oppositional, and was described accommodatingly by NAMAC as a, “counterculture... only in comparison to the mass media.”^[79]

4. Conclusion—(re)considering the first decade now (in the mid-‘90s)

Independent video production was spawned at a historical moment when personal and collective experimentation and institutional invention made sense within a widely embraced vision of a radically changing society. Inspired by the availability of the Portapak, a personal media tool, and emerging at a time when culture was posited as political terrain, videomakers *performed* initiatives which sought to radically reconfigure art and communications structures locally and globally, invigorating their respective communities’ capacities for informational and participatory feedback. Communications production and reception were reinscribed within contemporary culture by early video independents as social relations that could be negotiated by ordinary people and art scenes, as well as by media corporations and advertisers. In a period that advocated for expanded consciousness and a critical reassessment of institutionalized authority, artists engaged a range of attentional constructs using information and electronic signals fed back through a newly accessible time-based medium, and experimented with the fundamental structures of a new electronic image language. The negotiation of attentional terrain with viewers, the sharing of authority in the work through efforts to guarantee broad access to production, and the recognition of audience as subjective participant in the work and social partner in sustaining cultural scenes, all characterized the performance of video art and communications projects throughout their first decade.

An enormous range of art, performance, and documentary projects survive today as tapes, deserving conservation and study as both individual projects and collectively as archives. This early media work and its cultural aspirations beg to be considered part of our normative education for living in the contemporary world. At this moment, however, many of the surviving tapes from this period are in a precarious state—many tape collections are badly documented and sit deteriorating on dusty shelves. Most remain unviewable in their current condition, requiring both conservation attention to the tape medium and/or transference of the electronic signal to a viewable contemporary format. Bodies of work, produced within certain communities or by collectives, need to be (re)discovered and addressed, as well as do the tapes of individual artists whose work is already valued. And it is clear that today’s gatekeepers to these materials—librarians, curators, editors, artists, public access workers, distributors, funders, and folks who may not realize the value of the old rotting tapes taking up space in their closets—will play very important roles in determining which work will be identified, which tapes will be allocated funding for preservation, and which projects will survive as the cultural and historical record. Robert Horwitz, a citizens’ radio activist and arts editor, presciently pointed out on a panel discussing art and communications on public access TV in 1983 that it is these editorial positions that are, “the most creative and empowering within.... an information rich environment.”^[80] These gatekeeping positions will create a cultural economy from the existing media data banks, routing and regulating the flow of information in our increasingly digitized world.

Video art and alternative media production were developed by artists in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s as a public dialogue about new cultural forms and access to telecommunications technology distributed through a proliferation of new sites for production, exhibition, and exchange. The revisiting of that period through a survey of ideas that informed that body of work^[81] is, in part, an effort to link the cultural insights and strategies of portable video’s first decade with the present conditions for producing media culture. Attention to the video projects of the late ‘60s and ‘70s, those identified and valued and others yet to be rediscovered, is timely in view of the advent of international media hardware and software expansion and new decentralized multi-media networks such as the Internet. The democratic use of these tools can only be realized with considerable efforts toward widespread media literacy and direct experience with media production, a necessary extension of basic reading and writing skills in the contemporary media cultural world.

Such an education for media cultural fluency must encompass *access to* and *experience with* production and post-production tools in combination with an understanding of the interpretive structures of moving image media “literatures”—video, film, sound, digital multi-media, radio, cinema, television, internet—that have been produced to date. It is necessary to beware of the emancipatory claims of new technologies, as well as the liberal notion that access to production alone will bring about critical participation in view of the capacity of the mass media to assimilate new cultural forms. However, the early ‘70s participatory affirmation of an alternative democratic media practice bears amplification at the present time in order to reconsider the efforts of that earlier generation to initiate new forms of cultural exchange, and to share the authority of technologically intensive cultural production with diverse audiences and local communities. In supporting the production of a vital, inventive, multi-vocal, and accessible contemporary media culture, artists and educators must continue

to question—what were the cultural issues negotiated by past bodies of work, who has training and access to increasingly sophisticated tools, and how can diverse audiences approach the work produced—and on a much broader scale than has been accomplished to date.

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