

A Brief History of American Documentary Video

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From the earliest days of free-form experimentation, documentary video has tended toward a radical pluralism. This is evident in the diversity of titles by which it has been known—*street video*, *community* or *grass-roots video*, *guerrilla television*, *alternative TV*, and *video essay*.¹ These terms only hint at the various stages and aspirations of documentary video in the United States.

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. The first "consumer" to buy this still rather cumbersome equipment was Korean artist Nam June Paik, who produced the first publicized video documentary while riding in a taxi cab in New York City. The 1960s was an auspicious time 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.² 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 in the camera, one of two primitive means of editing 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. With the arrival of the first truly portable video rigs—the half-inch, reel-to-reel CV Portapak—in 1968, video freaks could hang out with skid-row winos, 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.³ Gillette was one of a number of artists, journalists, actors,

filmmakers, students, and assorted members of the Now generation who were drawn to video. Portable video served as a bonding agent for individuals in search of a new source of community and shared sense of purpose. 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."⁴ Aware of the centrality of media in modern life, of the way television shapes reality and consciousness, they tried to gain access to mass media. When frustrated, they created their own underground and alternative media, taking seriously A. J. Liebling's observation, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

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 viewfinder.⁵ 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 sixties video underground scene. Prominent early groups 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, Raindance 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 cul-

tural data bank of "Primers," collages that explored the medium for criticism.

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tural 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 the boob tube's authority, to replace television's 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.⁶ 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 ten 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 promised 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, titled "Subject to Change," euphemistically finding it "ahead of its time."⁷ Arrogant and politically naive, the underground 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.

Multichannel Documentary

One reason the "Now" project proved antithetical to broadcast TV norms was that it was performed as a live, multichannel spectacle, mixing live music performance with colorized tape and film documentary segments. Video innovators sought to extend the limits of the small video screen to embrace a larger spectacle. Since playing back a single-channel, edited tape on a small video

monitor lacked the impact and spontaneity demanded of the happenings of the era, producers devised multichannel video installations as live theatrical events. This called for live mixing of a variety of inputs—including performance, video feedback of an audience, and edited video and film clips—displayed on ten or more monitors in specially designed video theaters.

Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette, Les Levine, Rudi Stern, Skip Sweeney, and Steina and Woody Vasulka were some of the early explorers of multichannel video. In the early 1970s, two major documentary installations were produced, and their innovation on the form proved sensational but short-lived.

Global Village's cofounder John Reilly became interested in the conflicts in Ireland in 1970. He invited Stefan Moore and a crew to shoot what turned out to be some highly explosive sequences in Belfast, pioneering the use of half-inch portable video in a combat zone. Moore's quest to edit one hundred hours of tape was still unrealized after three versions when Reilly suggested that he edit three channels instead of one for playback on ten monitors. Not only would Moore be able to escape the linear narrative form, but he could create an "event" to engage viewers more deeply in the dramatic, emotionally charged scenes on tape. The format allowed Reilly and Moore to juxtapose the hard-edged reality of the war-torn Irish with images and attitudes about the Irish at a New York City St. Patrick's Day parade.⁸ Their live performance of *The Irish Tapes* was presented in 1973 and was greeted with controversy and acclaim.⁹

On the West Coast, *The Continuing Story of Carel and Ferd* by Arthur Ginsberg and Skip Sweeney of Video Free America was presented as a multichannel show in 1972 and billed as an "underground video documentary soap opera—a closed-circuit, multiple-image, videotape novel about pornography, sexual identities, the institution of marriage, and the effect of living too close to an electronic medium."¹⁰ This improbable chronicle of the marriage between a porn star and a bisexual junkie was performed using three cameras (one on the audience, one on the operators, one on the preview monitors) and three VTRs (one with the narrative line, one with highlighting comments, one with bold visuals). All six inputs were processed through a matrix switcher and juxtaposed in varying combinations on twelve monitors.

Arthur Ginsberg noted at the time in *Radical Software #4* that he and Skip Sweeney began taping the couple as "a piece of video erotica," but their project quickly metamorphosed into "a Warholesque study of a couple of freaky people, then a hip study of the institution of marriage, and finally . . . a number about media process and public life style."

Both *Carel and Ferd* and *The Irish Tapes* were later updated and edited into single-channel tapes for broadcast in 1975 by WNET-TV. By the mid-1970s video theaters were a thing of the past, multichannel installations were



John Gustafson/John Reilly, *Giving*

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John Gustafson/John Reilly, *Giving Birth, Four Portraits*, 1976.

the province of art, and public television was the chief venue for documentary video work.

The "Now" project marked a turning point. The underground had discovered its freewheeling rebellious days were over. The time had come for an information revolution. Influenced by visionaries 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*, written by Michael Shamberg and Raindance, 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 "alternate-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 manufacturers' 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.¹¹ 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.

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 videomakers 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 upon the technical and artistic expertise of groups like the Videofreex, 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 nineteen threaded its way



Skip Blumberg interviews co-creator of the TVTV show, Skip Blumberg, in a half-inch, open reel, black and white format, 1972.

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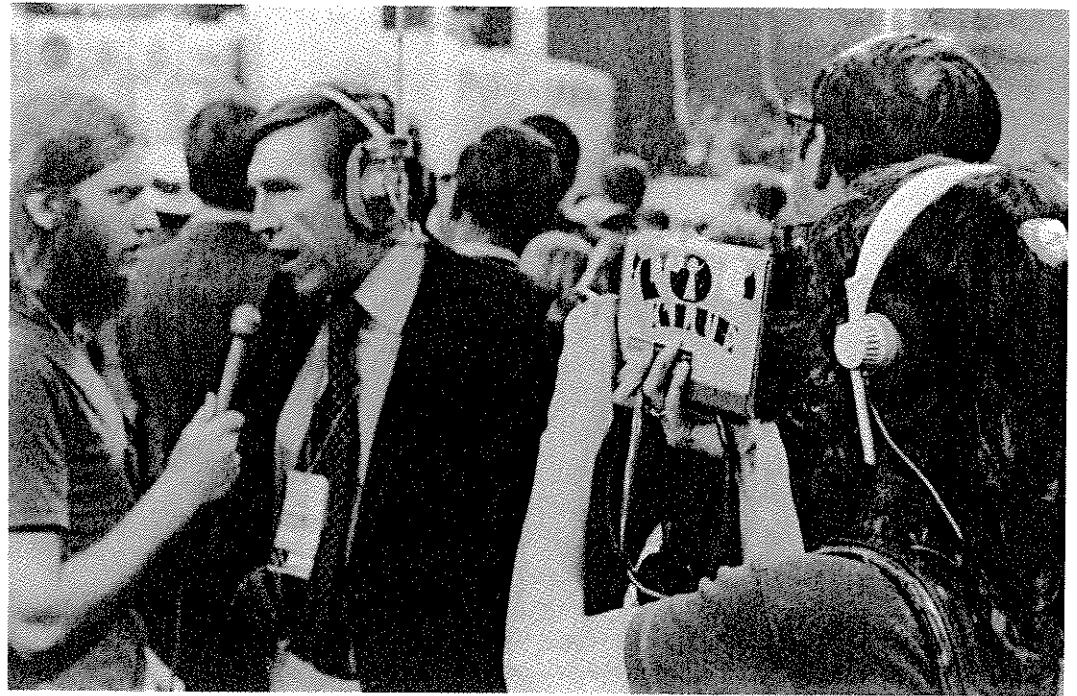
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Skip Blumberg interviews correspondent Douglas Kiker as Nancy Cain videotapes them with a half-inch, open reel, black and white portapak for TVTV's classic documentary, *Four More Years*, 1972.

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, nonthreatening equipment that gave them entrée to people and places where network cameramen, burdened with heavy equipment and the seriousness of commercial TV, never thought of trying.

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.¹²

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 portapaks, 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* (1974) 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 guerrilla iconoclasm, DCTV modeled itself on television documentaries but introduced an advocacy viewpoint disarmingly interpreted by codirector Jon Alpert. 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 Alpert's narration. Unlike the detached statements of a stand-up 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 wraparound with Harrison Salisbury to stave off possible criticism. The wraparound afforded an unexpected and amusing contrast between old-style TV journalism and DCTV's contribution to guerrilla television's direct, informal, advocacy style.¹³

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 44th Precinct in the South Bronx, better known as Fort Apache. Structured around the nightly patrols, it focused on ten 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 forty hours of videotape, *The Police Tapes* was produced for public television and then reedited into an hour-long version for ABC.¹⁴

Because guerrilla television was given national exposure on public TV, its gutsy style influenced many documentary video producers around the country. Not only were many community video groups affected, but as television news

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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 of 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.¹⁵ 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 (cofounded by George Stoney, former director of the Challenge for Change), People's Video Theater, and Downtown Community Television Center (New York), Portable Channel (Rochester, N.Y.), Urban Planning Aid (Boston), Marin Community Video (Calif.), Broadside TV (Johnson City, Tenn.), Headwaters TV (Whitesburg, Ky.), University Community Video (Minneapolis), LA Public Access, People's Video (Madison, Wis.), Washington (D.C.) 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



Alpert, independent video journalist, totes a broadcast Betacam rig as he interviews a Philippine family for the *Today Show*.

local origination programming; in Minneapolis, University Community Video purchased a half hour 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 TV, 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 "holler 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 piece before the camera. Carpenter's form of networking informa-

tion among Appalachian tradition and established productions.¹⁶

In 1972 Carpenter founded Broadside TV. Since the 1950s, Carpenter realigned "cast" programming—the FCC. From 1972 to 1978, community video entered multicable systems in the region, airing each week. Shows included music, regional news, and sports. However, the program was challenged from the intimate neighborhood by Carpenter. Program support was struck once the FCC was challenged in the economic support structure of documentary tapes, it was as was its ability to be provided between production sources, Broadside TV.

In Minneapolis, UCV forged one of the most liberal funding from the developed into a thriving institution. In 1974 UCV began public television, buying series, *Changing Channels*, a tradition of journalist programs married guerrilla was named the best but as UCV staffers battled for television, accessible to community that met the ever high purpose for the group to concentrate on core 1980s into a media a community. What documentary production i



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tion among Appalachian mountain people inaugurated an electronic era for oral tradition and established an important model for community documentary productions.¹⁶

In 1972 Carpenter went to Johnson City, Tennessee, where he started Broadside TV. Since 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 to 1974 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 support structure. Although Broadside continued to produce documentary tapes, its independence and vitality were seriously compromised as was its ability to extend access to community members. With efforts divided between producing and fund-raising from private and government sources, Broadside TV was finally forced to close up shop in 1978.¹⁷

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*.¹⁸ 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 backseat. The pull to produce tapes that met the ever higher broadcast production standards prompted a crisis of purpose for the group.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ And so the pressure to produce for television, with its large audiences and increased possibility for influencing social change, unwittingly seduced many community access centers away from their original purpose of facilitating people-to-people video.

New Constituencies

Community video activists were not only dedicated to serving regional constituencies but also to serving the specialized interests of multicultural communities such as women, gays, blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, among others.

Portable video's debut coincided with the burgeoning of the women's movement, and documentary video offered another avenue of expression for women who were redefining their history as well as their future. Since half-inch, black-and-white video was still a lightweight, low-status medium, women were free to move into the forefront as video producers, and their concerns represented a distinctive voice in early video work. Women began exchanging videoletters; they started their own video access centers and programmed their own cable channels; and they ran their own video festivals.

In 1972, Susan Milano organized the first Women's Video Festival in New York City, defining guerrilla activity in feminist terms. In 1973, the first feminist documentary aired on public television was produced by a San Francisco video group known as Optic Nerve. Sherrie Rabinowitz and Lynn Adler went behind the scenes for an unusual view of the Miss California Beauty Pageant. *50 Wonderful Years in vérité* subtly asked viewers to con-

sider the demeaning nature of enthusiastic contestants, but perpetuated in society. In her mother, *Ama L'Uomo Tu* generational communication interest in family role and sexual abuse. woman and the social structure.

As video technology came increasingly difficult hierarchical structures, bootleg tape production; and as increasingly became a medium ground as editors, white men and camera operators.

Black pioneers like different territories for the videomaker politically. In 1971 Stephens founded with Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver and the tapes to be aired on network to the States, Stephens as a community video activist on Idi Amin, which BBC.²² During the 1977 Festival, a major touring also began producing documentaries joined by a growing number of young filmmakers like Singleton Hudlin, St. Clair and others who became influential.

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sider the demeaning nature of the pageant's policies, not by ridiculing the enthusiastic contestants, but by probing the organizers to reveal how sexism is perpetuated in society. In 1975, Cara DeVito's intimate portrait of her grandmother, *Ama L'Uomo Tuo (Always Love Your Man)*, presented a view of cross-generational communication between women. Made during a time of increasing interest in family roots and growing feminist awareness about the psychological and sexual abuse of women, the tape offered a complex view of one woman and the social structure that molded her.

As video technology became heavier, more established, and costlier, it became increasingly difficult for women to act in central production roles. Hierarchical structures, borrowed from film and television, were applied to videotape production; and as the medium gained new professional status, video increasingly became a man's domain. Some women receded into the background as editors, while others struggled to maintain a high profile as producers and camera operators.²¹

Black pioneers like Bill Stephens and Philip Mallory Jones mapped out different territories for early video work. Stephens began as an underground videomaker politically engaged by the tumultuous events of the late 1960s. In 1971 Stephens founded the Revolutionary People's Communication Network with Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver in Algiers. There he recorded the breakup between Cleaver and the U.S. Panther Party in one of the first half-inch videotapes to be aired on network TV on Cronkite's "Nightly News." Upon his return to the States, Stephens established the People's Communication Network as a community video access center in Harlem. He later produced a documentary on Idi Amin, which was excerpted by ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, and the BBC.²² During the 1970s Philip Mallory Jones established the Ithaca Video Festival, a major touring showcase for video art and documentary work, and he also began producing documentaries and lyrical video essays. Today, they are joined by a growing number of producers of color, many of whom—like Warrington Hudlin, St. Clair Bourne, and Michelle Parkerson—are former filmmakers who became involved with video while producing for public television.

The first Hispanic videotapes were made by the Young Lords in cooperation with People's Video Theater. Since then, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Latin American-born producers have championed social issues and explored personal expression, developing a variety of styles reflective of their diverse heritages. For example, Californian Rick Tejada-Flores invented a lively, visually opulent style for *Low 'n Slow, The Art of Lowriding* (1983). Puerto Rican-born Edin Velez developed his lush, multileveled, nonlinear style while making documentaries in Central America. And Chilean artist Juan Downey also redefined the documentary in personal terms while exploring his roots in the Brazilian rainforests. Asian producers such as Loni Ding and Keiko Tsuno pio-

neered documentary video during the 1970s, joined in the 1980s by a growing community of concerned Asian videomakers, including Shu Lea Chang, Chris Choy, Sachiko Hamada, and Renee Tajima, to name a few.

Native Americans were actively engaged in producing community video throughout the 1970s, addressing local and national issues from tribal council meetings to American Indian Movement protests.²³ By the 1980s, American Indian producers had penetrated mainstream media with conventional documentaries about pressing social and political issues, such as disputed land rights and the tragedy of alcoholism and unemployment, as well as experimental documentaries like those by Hopi documentarist Victor Masayesva, Jr., who focuses on spiritual concerns and vanishing traditions.

Rise of Independent Documentary Producers

By the mid-1970s, teams and individuals had replaced the collectives, a result of changing funding patterns, 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 Access Center; and Blaine Dunlap of Broadside TV.

One of the most prominent "new" independents was Skip Blumberg, who had developed the intimate style of video cameraman/interviewer as a veteran member of such collectives as the Videofreex, TVTV, Videopolis, and Image Union. In the mid-1970s, Blumberg began producing lively cultural documentaries on ski jumpers, whistling champs, jugglers, and musical saw players—work that he felt "warmed up the cool medium of television." Blumberg's artful cutting of his Emmy Award-winning tape, *Pick Up Your Feet: The Double Dutch Show* (1981), made his largely one-camera shooting seem like live-TV studio mixing, revealing an underground appreciation of stretching the limits of low-budget technology to their maximum effectiveness.²⁴ His inspiring portrait of black and Hispanic urban girls excelling in a sport of their own typified a new style of documentary suited for the 1980s, one that addressed social issues in an oblique but effective manner.

The 1980s: Documentary Pluralism

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



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Edin Velez, *Meta Mayan II*. Arresting the gaze of a walking Indian woman of Guatemala, Edin Velez uses slow motion to underscore the relationship of the "other" to the outside observer. 1981.

ing 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, Skip Sweeney, Edin Velez, Victor Masayesva, Jr., and Juan Downey, 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* (1981), 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. By juxtaposing an American news broadcast about a Marxist peasant "uprising" with the slow-motion walk of an Indian woman down a country road, Velez used the woman's floating passage as an emblem of her people's plight: like her, they were suspended in time and space, vulnerable to external forces over which they had little control.

Dan Reeves's romantic 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 culminated in a re-creation of an ambush on the Cua Viet River in Vietnam in 1969 that had haunted him ever since. Weaving together childhood dreams of military glory with adult nightmares of gruesome death, *Smothering Dreams* (1981) 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. used the natural landscapes of Arizona to poetically evoke the history of his people. In *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (1984), the last male member of the Bow Clan recounted his own personal history as well as traditional versions of the Hopi Emergence story and an account of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. By adapting the latest state-of-the-art video techniques to serve his age-old oral tradition and culture, Masayesva slipped effortlessly from realism to surrealism, coloring images and speeding up actions, visually 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, a new interest in stripped-down minimalist portraits and straightforward storytelling was seen. Fred Simon's *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran* (1981) 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"—but Simon's persistence in revealing the deeper messages conveyed in Frank's tormented eyes and strained face yielded a forceful, moving portrait.

Wendy Clarke's minimalist portraits, collected in her series *The Love Tapes* (1981), were equally spare and emotionally riveting. Traveling around the country, Clarke set up video booths where individuals of all ages, races, and walks of life could record their thoughts about love for three minutes, then play it back and decide whether to erase the tape or keep it. Clarke then compiled edited versions drawn from the statements of more than 800 people who offered alternately funny, pained, angry, philosophic, sensitive, and weird monologues on the complexity and endurance of love. The deceptive simplicity

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of these powerful yet minimalist portraits were a stark reminder that much could be done with a low budget plus some sensitivity, political awareness, and social concern.

From Portapak to Betacam

Over the years documentary video evolved from the raw vitality of underground "street tapes" to the polished independent "minidoc" for prime-time TV news. Although it seems ironic that the very people who set themselves up in opposition to broadcast TV should now be making television, the irony existed from the start, with abortive efforts like the CBS "Now" project or the failure of the MayDay Video Collective in 1971 to get its tapes broadcast by NBC. Despite their utopian visions of creating an alternative to broadcast television, those video guerrillas determined to reach a mass audience had to abandon cable as an alternative and work within the broadcasting system, subject to numerous factors over which they had little or no control. And despite congressional mandates fostering independent productions on public television, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting System have generally denied independents regular access to a mass audience. A glimmer of hope is on the horizon for the 1990s in the form of new legislation establishing an independent production service. How this service will work and what role CPB and the independent community will have in setting guidelines will determine how varied in form and content such independent media will be.²⁵

For those with the more modest aspiration of serving local audiences using public access cable channels, revised FCC rulings during the 1970s undermined the production of local origination and public access programming and turned the cable medium over to the marketplace. Community videomakers who persevere today must produce work on shoestring budgets for embattled public access and leased access channels. But recent efforts to network independent work via satellite interconnects are hopeful signs that independent ingenuity may prevail against otherwise insurmountable odds. Curiously, the development of "trash television" programs for network TV has spawned new interest by cable program services in documentaries with controversial subjects. Whether Home Box Office and Arts & Entertainment can offer a safe—and ethical—haven for independent documentarists remains to be seen, but the courtship dance has already begun.²⁶

Just as the channels of distribution for documentary video work have diminished, so too has its funding by private as well as government agencies. In an age of conservatism, the fostering of nonfiction work by independent producers who historically have been linked to the Left clearly threatens the status quo. This reduction of funding is made all the more poignant by the ever-increasing cost of state-of-the-art broadcast videotape production and postproduc-

tion equipment. It is not surprising that producers of the 1980s have frequently chosen either to cast their fortunes with the lot of commercial television and hope for the best or produce a new brand of low-tech work for limited or closed-circuit distribution.

An example of the former is Jon Alpert, the only independent video producer to successfully straddle the worlds of network TV and radical community video. His investigative "minidocs" for NBC's "Today Show" have 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 has 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. Alpert is a muckraking reformer—not of broadcast television—but of contemporary society. Yet critics on the Right and on the Left insist he has not been above staging sequences and entrapping "the enemy" for dramatic effect despite NBC's staunch defense of his journalistic integrity.²⁷

The Faustian bargain Alpert made in his decision to work within the networks demanded an inevitable compromise. Although his transformation into another hired gun for network TV may be overstated, it suggests the enormous problems that have continually faced documentary video producers who have tried to work within the transformative context of broadcast television.

This issue was raised early on in *Guerrilla Television* (1971):

*Anyone who thinks that broadcast-TV is capable of reform just doesn't understand media. A standard of success that demands thirty to fifty million people can only trend toward homogenization. . . . Information survival demands a diversity of options, and they're just not possible within the broadcast technology or context.*²⁸

Mainstream media simply absorb alternative efforts, transforming them into standard fare. The alternative press discovered this fact the hard way, and alternative television producers have had to learn this lesson, too.

Guerrilla Video Revived

On June 12, 1982, a 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 three hundred independent video producers collaborated to interview over three thousand individuals about their views on disarmament. In keeping with minimal video aesthetics developed by Wendy Clarke and others, 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

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media vans during the rally in New York City and in other locations.²⁹ Taped when disarmament was the world's most discussed public policy issue, the *Disarmament Video Survey* revealed video at its grass-roots 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 American media has been produced for the public access channel in New York City by an energetic collective of independent videomakers. Drawing upon the traditions of radical video, Paper Tiger Television has invented its own funky home-grown studio aesthetic, demonstrating that energy, talent, modest resources, and public access cable are enough to make revolutionary television. Many of Paper Tiger's half-hour programs are live studio "events," faintly reminiscent of 1960s video "happenings." The show's hosts are articulate critics of mainstream American media who analyze newsstand publications for the most part, examining their corporate ownership, hidden agendas, and information biases.³⁰

In 1986, Paper Tiger organized "Deep Dish TV," the first national public access series, distributed via satellite to participating cable systems and public television stations around the country. The successful syndication of this anthology of community-made programs on issues such as labor, housing, the farming crisis, and racism promises a new era for alternative documentary productions.

The return of guerrilla tactics and idealism has been 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 newer age—from disarmament to war in Central America to the challenge of AIDS—yet tutored in the lessons of video's past. Forgoing broadcast television and mass audiences for closed-circuit distribution and public access exposure to targeted audiences, a new generation of committed video documentarists seems determined to avoid the traps that derailed video revolutionaries in the past.

Eclectic and pragmatic, these young video activists incorporate whatever works into their tapes: by mixing the slick sophistication of music video style with guerrillalike 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. Thus, the gauntlet passes from one generation to the next. What new directions for documentary video the 1990s will hold remains to be seen. But for the past three decades, documentary video had been subject to change, even as it has changed our ideas about art, documentary, and television.