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A
History
of
Video
Art

*The
Development
of
Form
and
Function*

 **BERG**

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develop new courses and disciplines. Throughout Western Europe generally the structures of government and society remained, but underlying attitudes had been transformed and that set the stage for sweeping changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

GUY DEBORD AND THE SITUATIONISTS

The influence of the Situationists and the political critique of Guy Debord, one of its principle founders, on the student activists in Paris and elsewhere during the 1968 demonstrations was significant. Set up in the late 1950s the Situationists sought to build a new society in which traditional art was abandoned in favour of an enriched urban existence. As Aper Jorn, one of the main protagonists wrote of Situationism:

Visual art was a useless medium for creativity and thinking. It was the radiation of art into pure existence, into social life, into urbanism, into action, and into thinking, which was regarded as the important thing.¹

A number of the Situationists were directly involved in the Paris uprisings during the Nanterre occupation, fomenting unrest and organizing student protesters. Posters produced by art students during the riots and demonstrations took up ideas and slogans directly influenced by Situationist rhetoric: 'Are You Consumers or Participants?', 'Art Does not Exist – Art is You', and 'Propaganda Comes into Your Home', the caption for a poster depicting a forest of television aerials amongst urban rooftops. The perception of television as a major tool in the state apparatus – a force of control and manipulation propagated by the selective presentation of information and the presentation of false and distorted images of reality – was part of a growing public awareness. In *The Society of Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord identified a crisis of alienation in a society of conspicuous consumption, that struck a chord with many artists and political activists in Western Europe and North America: 'the individual's gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.'²

NEW TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS: LOW COST PORTABLE VIDEO

It is clear that industrial/military technological research and development during the 1960s was directly responsible for the introduction of the first relatively inexpensive portable non-broadcast video equipment. Demand for compact, inexpensive machines for airborne surveillance operations during the war in Vietnam opened the way for more peaceful, though certainly subversive, cultural projects.

A lot of people think that Sony developed the 'Portapak' for artists and community groups, but nothing could be further from the truth! They were actually developed for the American military to use in their aircraft during the Vietnam

War. The first Portapaks were entirely in the hands of the military and they were used basically to check where their napalm or bombs had gone. Like virtually everything in our society, the driving force is actually conquest. Whether it's successful, or as in this case, happily unsuccessful.³

As in Western Europe, the 1960s had been a decade of social, cultural and political change in the USA. This period saw the rise of a new youth culture (in 1968 almost 50 per cent of the population in the United States was under the age of 25). Experienced at civil rights confrontations and highly critical of American military involvement in Vietnam, they were politically active and fuelled with a desire for a greater participation in the democratic process and with a growing awareness of the power of cultural production. This cultural imperative swelled into a 'movement', and increasingly viewed accessible video and computer technology as major components in an arsenal of radical cultural tools. The formation of media collectives such as the New York-based Raindance Corporation grew as much out of a shared cultural imperative as from a pragmatic need to pool and share equipment. This combination of political theorists, artists and activists believed that radical social change was possible. Artists and activists alike saw accessible low-cost video as a radical alternative to commercial television. The first issue of *Radical Software*, published by the Raindance Corporation in 1970 stated: 'Unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, our alternate systems and life styles will be no more than products of the existing process.'⁴

During this early period of innocence, the newly accessible 'low cost' video recording equipment gave rise to an optimistic and enthusiastic wave of experimentation which inspired and united artists, video activists and groups of individuals committed to social and political reform. All of these groups saw a potential in portable video technology to challenge the status quo in a wide range of areas which included broadcast television, the art gallery structure and social and political inequality. Although this enthusiasm for new video technology can be seen to have begun in the United States in the mid-1960s, it soon spread to other countries, including the United Kingdom, West Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Canada and Australia.

RAINDANCE CORPORATION AND RADICAL SOFTWARE

During the winter of 1967–68 abstract painter turned media activist Frank Gillette (1941–, USA) was engaged to run a seminar on the ideas and theories of Marshall McLuhan at the Free University in New York City. Gillette's fascination with McLuhan's ideas had led him to meet Paul Ryan, McLuhan's research assistant in the Centre for Media Understanding at Fordham University, who arranged for the loan of video equipment during the spring and summer of 1968, including Portapaks,

cameras and playback equipment, which Gillette experimented with at his 6th Street studio. During this period Gillette met other video enthusiasts including David Cort, Howard Gutstadt, Victor Gioscia, and others, and together they formed Commediation, a discussion group with irregular meetings attended by Nam June Paik, Eric Seigel and Les Levine. Gillette and Gioscia had much in common, including an interest in the potential of video as a vehicle for social and political change influenced by the ideas of Gregory Bateson, McLuhan and Warren McCullough.

Working with Ira Schneider (1939–, USA), a close colleague and a film-maker with a scientific background, Gillette proposed the construction of a complex multi-screen installation entitled *Wipe Cycle* (1969) for 'TV as a Creative Medium', the first gallery exhibition to be devoted entirely to video art in the USA, which was held at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1969.⁵

Wipe Cycle combined the interests and ideas of Schneider and Gillette, drawing on Gillette's experiments with the new medium the previous summer and Schneider's fascination for the potential of live interaction and video delay. *Wipe Cycle*, which required the building of customized electronics to mix the multiple images, consisted of a bank of nine monitors in a three-by-three configuration, with four screens displaying pre-recorded 'off-air' material, and the other five showing 'live' and delayed video sequences of the exhibition itself, including the lift ride up to the gallery, and the surrounding streets outside the building. With this influential and innovative installation Gillette and Schneider were concerned to present an experience that would break the conventional single-screen TV perspective, by providing a complex mix of live images and multiple viewpoints in real time.

Michael Shamberg, who met Gillette while working on an article about 'TV as a Creative Medium' and *Wipe Cycle* for *Time Magazine*, was also interested in the potential of video as a journalistic medium and had been inspired by the writings of McLuhan. In October 1969 Gillette and Shamberg founded the Raindance Corporation, with funds of US\$70,000 provided by Louis Jaffe, as an alternative media 'think-tank' in an ironic reference to the mainstream organization, the Rand Corporation. Raindance was conceived of by Gillette and its co-founders as an umbrella organization to promote and disseminate ideas about video as a radical alternative to centralized television broadcasting through the activities of production, publication and distribution of alternative video work. Based in a loft at 24 East 22nd Street in New York, Raindance was joined by Phyllis Gershuny and Beryl Korot who set to work producing *Radical Software*, a publication dedicated to the needs of the alternative video community. The first editorial, jointly penned by Shamberg, Gershuny and Korot outlined a range of counter-cultural ideas about the control of information and the necessity of liberating the television medium from the grips of

large corporations. Drawing on ideas from Gregory Bateson, Buckminster Fuller, and others, the editorial outlined an ecological approach to an understanding of the power of technology as a cultural force.

Radical Software continued publishing until 1974, a total of eleven issues with eventual press runs of upwards of 10,000. During that period the magazine covered and publicized radical alternative approaches to video and detailed technical information championing the use of the video medium for social, political and aesthetic change. Although Raindance, constituted as a non-profit foundation in 1971, ceased to publish *Radical Software*, it also published two important and influential books. *Guerrilla Television*, written by Michael Shamberg, attempted to distil the message of *Radical Software* into book form, reaching a wider audience than the periodical, as well as publicizing the activities and philosophy of Raindance and giving them a more permanent legacy. Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1971, *Guerrilla Television* was designed by the Californian video group Ant Farm (see below). The book was divided into two sections – a manual which contained practical and technical information about video and a 'meta-manual' which presented the Raindance philosophy, distilled from the ideas of Frank Gillette and Paul Ryan drawing on the work of their mentors McLuhan, Bateson and McCullough.

In 1975, Schneider and Korot edited *Video Art: An Anthology*, the last of the Raindance publications, a survey of 73 practising video artists with contextualizing essays by Douglas Davis, Frank Gillette, David A Ross, John Hanhardt, and others. Although the Raindance Foundation was interested in a wider approach to video than gallery art, many of the most important individuals at the centre of Raindance – with Gillette, Schneider and Korot among them – were artists committed to the notion that the new low-gauge medium of video could challenge the status quo of broadcast TV in the United States and build the foundation of a new approach to communication that extended well beyond the art gallery and museum system.

Frank Gillette's contribution to *Video Art: An Anthology*, 'Masque in Real Time', gives an insight into his thinking and ideas about video as a medium at that time, and its relationship to human communication, demonstrating his affinity to the ideas and writings of Marshall McLuhan in particular:

The video network, in this sense, is the extension of a neurophysiological channel, the connection between the world and the visual-perceptual system terminating in the prefrontal neocortex. Video can thus become a record of the resonance between that channel – eye/ear/prefrontal neocortex – and natural process in time. The first criteria for a video aesthetic, then, is the economy of movement in the use of the camera as a record of mediation between the 'eye-body' taken as the symbol and substance of the entire viscerosomatic system in video art, and

the processes being recorded. Through a kinaesthetic signature which individualises the 'loop' – eye-body, the technology itself, and the process being recorded – the artist transmutes random information into an aesthetic pattern.⁶

The later distinction between video artists and video activists was still blurred at this time, and many artists who began using video were politically and socially motivated and made what came to be called 'street tapes' – direct documentation of ordinary people going about their day-to-day lives, often edited 'in camera', using the pause control of the Portapak. The artist Les Levine (1935–, Ireland), for example, made *Bum* in 1965, one of the earliest videotapes of this genre, containing a series of interviews with winos and derelicts on the streets of New York. Levine's attitude to the medium was linked to its instantaneity and its time-based aspect:

It's much easier to produce an idea in the medium where you can see the product very quickly, than to have to produce an idea in a medium which requires a lot of manual dexterity. So it seemed to me that, at the time, anyway, that the instantaneousness of the medium and its capability to use time in a certain way was some kind of issue.⁷

Demonstrating a similar attitude and sensibility to the potential of the new medium, Frank Gillette made a five-hour documentary on the street life of the hippy community in St Mark's Place during the summer of 1968, whilst experimenting with the portable video he borrowed from Fordham University.

NEW YORK AND OTHER AMERICAN VIDEO GROUPS

By the end of the 1960s, the New York video scene had flourished, and numerous cooperative groups were formed. The members of Commediation, one of the earliest, were united in the belief that video could be used as a tool for social and political change. Individually and collectively, members of Commediation went on to form a number of other important video groups, including Videofreex, Top Value Television, the People's Video Theater and Global Village (see below). Shamberg, Cort, Gutstadt, Gioscia and their colleagues realized that video had the potential for a very different mode of communication to that offered by broadcast television at that time, and these ideas were subsequently developed by other New York-based video groups. David Cort, a key member of the Commediation, saw that the new lightweight, portable video camera could offer activists the potential for a more direct connection between the subject and the viewer: 'The camera was like a funnel through which you could work. You could move in, and be intimate and close.'⁸

The Videofreex, founded in 1969 and initially based in New York City with members including Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, David Cort, Davidson Gogliotti, Chuck Kennedy, Curtis Ratcliff, Carol Vontobel, Tunie Wall and Ann Woodward, eventual-

ly relocated as Media Bus to Maple Tree Farm in Lanesville, up-state New York. It developed a considerable knowledge base in the application and use of video equipment and techniques and published *The Spaghetti City Video Manual: A Guide to Use, Repair and Maintenance* (1973), which was a comprehensive guide to the operation, use and maintenance of low-gauge video. The group operated a touring media bus programme, visiting communities and institutions throughout New York State and beyond, making and showing their community-based work, and establishing links with environmental groups and experts involved with computer information systems.

The People's Video Theater, founded by Ken Marsh and Elliot Glass, were mainly involved with community video, working with live and recorded video feedback of community issues, using techniques developed with low-cost video and Portapacks in order to present alternative views and attitudes not available via the network news. Their techniques, which included recording responses to their tape screenings, were influential on other community-based video groups, including the UK-based Graft-On (see below).

Top Value Television (TVTV) was formed in 1972 by Michael Shamberg with members of other video groups, including Ant Farm (see below), Videofreex and Raindance in order to cover political conventions using Portapacks for cable TV. *Four More Years* (1972), a hour-long tape documenting the Republican convention of that year, was produced with a crew of 19, and presented material covering a range of activities connected with the convention, including rallies, demonstrations and interviews. This project led to the broadcast of their work on PBS, the American national public broadcasting network.

According to Davidson Gogliotti (see Chapter 12), one of the original members of Videofreex, and Media Bus, the New York State Council for the Arts made an important contribution to the development of video art in New York. Peter Bradley, director of film, TV media and literature at NYSCA during the early 1970s, funded a wide variety of innovative projects, including media centres, video groups, collectives and individual artists. It is clear that many of the activities of groups such as Videofreex, TVTV and The People's Video Theater would not have been possible without the enlightened attitude of Bradley and his colleagues at NYSCA during this early period.⁹

Chip Lord and Doug Michels founded Ant Farm, a radical architectural and video group in San Francisco in 1968. The group, which at various times included Doug Hurr, Hudson Marquez, Joe Hall, Andy Shapiro, Kelly Gloger, Curtis Schreier and Michael Wright, began exploring the potential of video as an element of their installation and performance work, making use of the Portapak as an improvisational and communication tool and as a method for archiving their projects and live events. In 1971 Ant Farm designed a studio and video screening room for San Francisco art