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Grow Gills and Swim: The Evolution of Activist Video

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The massive body of work constituting “activist video” can be likened to an enormous lake—a lake so huge that it appears oceanic when you stand upon its shores. Activist video is like Lake Michigan, a couple of city blocks from the Video Data Bank in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The sea-like reservoir of activist material collected and distributed by the VDB has been fed by three primary currents: technology, politics, and art.

Television delivers people. This is both the title and the chief theoretical assertion of Richard Serra’s seminal 1973 videotape. A simple tape adhering to the strictures of minimalist sculptural practices, *Television Delivers People* consists of scrolling text accompanied by a soundtrack of cloying Muzak. With lucid precision the text explains how corporations abstract audiences into demographics that are bought, sold, and traded by advertisers. TV isn’t free. It’s paid for by advertising, and shows are designed to give you just enough entertainment to persuade you to sit through commercials.

In the '70s, people rightly thought that there could be more socially beneficial uses for such miraculous technology. The problematic of producing alternatives challenging the U.S. television networks’ centrality was first articulated in the magazine *Radical Software*. Produced by the members of a media think-tank called the Raindance

Corporation, *Radical Software* established the foundation for the past 30 years’ activist video practices.¹ The mission statement, published in the first issue, shows the germinal ideas for a revolution:

Power is no longer measured in land, labor, or capital, but by access to information and the means to disseminate it. As long as the most powerful tools (not weapons) are in the hands of those who would hoard them, no alternative cultural vision can succeed.²

Presciently using the metaphor of “software” long before the personal computer became standard equipment for daily living, *Radical Software* took its cues from theorist Marshall McLuhan, declaring that media literacy was displacing the status of the written word. Video was anointed as the new software for an electronic culture.

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 [videotape recorder] systems and video cassettes... will make alternate networks a reality.

Those of us making our own television know that the medium can be

much more than “a radio with a screen” as it is still being used by the networks as they reinforce product oriented and outdated notions of fixed focal point, point of view, subject matter, topic asserting their own passivity, and ours, giving us feedback of feedback of information rather than asserting the implicit immediacy of video, immunizing us to the impact of information by asking us to anticipate what already can be anticipated—the nightly Vietnam reports to serialized single format shows.³

Three concerns leap off the page when reading this excerpt. First is the emerging awareness of a globally integrated information economy. Second is the differentiation of television from radio. Third is the Vietnam war.

In the *Medium Is the Massage*, McLuhan famously summed up a shift of epochal proportion: “Ours is a brand-new world of all-at-onceness. ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening.”⁴ For McLuhan, television constituted the ground for a new tribalism—bands of tuned-in dissidents and pranksters of all kinds riding the waves of telecommunications, incorporating broadcast signals into an aural culture of dissent. McLuhan’s “primitivism” was not fearful of technology. It embraced it as the psyche-

delic spiritualism of the '60s zeitgeist. He recognized that television had unintentionally enlisted a generation of young people into a participatory culture. TV intimately connected people to events occurring clear across the globe, and the young wanted to do something to change what they saw—and more importantly, heard.

Rather than emphasize the visual nature of television transmission, McLuhan realized the aural nature of broadcast. In the American household, the TV was always on as a background to daily business. Television really was a kind of domestic furniture, and its developmental history was much closer to radio than to cinema. The remarkable features of both radio and television were their abilities to pump information directly into millions of homes. Like radio, broadcast television did not necessarily have to be centralized and controlled by state and corporate interests. Radio first and then television held out the possibilities for radically decentralized systems of communication exchanging information from many to many—a community-run service. The respective technologies could have arisen as regional systems governed by civic interests rather than the profit motives of big business. The *Radical Software* editors showed disdain for the notion of “radio with a screen.” With the benefit of hindsight they knew that the democratic potential for radio suffered a tragic fatality. They wanted to resist the same end for TV, and that’s why they were invested in videotape’s potential as the new book. With the coming consumer availability of video players and recorders—anticipated but not yet realized when *Radical Software* put out its first issue—the potential for an ungovernable dissemination of words, sounds, and images emerged.

This electrified free speech movement was catalyzed by a counter-culture that drew its energies from the liberation movements and radical utopian aspirations of the '60s and '70s. The Vietnam war was the ground for many seemingly disparate social upheavals. The sounds and sights of the war were the backdrop to most Americans’ mundane daily dramas. Anti-war activism politicized huge segments of the population, but television brought the war home. It connected

radicalized youth with the plight of suffering Vietnamese. It made senseless deaths of American soldiers visible. War coverage produced a groundswell of revolutionary sentiment. You didn’t have to be a communist to be sickened by the body counts and macabre scenes broadcast nightly.

McLuhan understood that electric circuitry was “an extension of the central nervous system. Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.”⁵

Video activists desperately wanted change: to end the war and to fight poverty, racism, and many other social ills. And they had portable video recording technology: the Portapak. A rather cumbersome affair compared to today’s consumer camcorders, the reel-to-reel recording decks were very large, heavy boxes. A thick cord connected the recorder to a large, sensitive tube camera that was easily burned out and destroyed by pointing the lens directly into the sun. Microphones also attached to the recorder, so all together the set-up required two or three people operating the equipment in the field. Today individual video activists can run around on their own, producing far better quality material. Yet, regardless of the difficulties we now laugh about, the portapak enabled an independent electronic news media to flourish.

Young rebels added media activism to the arsenal of organizing tools used by the liberation movements of the '70s. Documenting historic public demonstrations such as the first Women’s Liberation March in New York, the first Gay Pride March, and direct actions by Puerto Rican and Native American militants, Peoples Video Theater (PVT) used video technology as a feedback mechanism to inform people about political struggles and give activists a means to view and assess their actions. AIDS activists would later use these same tactics in the '80s. Another exemplary body of counter-cultural media was produced by TVTV (Top Value Television) in a series of behind-the-scenes investigations of the 1972 Republican

Convention, the 1976 Super Bowl, and the 1976 Academy Awards. PVT and TVTV are just two examples of the larger history of activist video as a collective enterprise. The communal ethos of the '70s informed the way television technology could be implemented through egalitarian modes of production that challenged notions of authorship. Researching these groups leads the historian to long lists of names and groups, many overlapping within several collective efforts.

Significantly, a large number of artists were involved in early video activism. Several members of Raindance were or became video artists showing work in galleries. The San Francisco collective Ant Farm was proudly multidisciplinary, drawing from the talents of video makers, sculptors, performers, designers, and activists. Ant Farm also designed the book *Guerilla Television*, written by TVTV co-founder Michael Schamberg, who also co-founded Raindance Corporation and edited *Radical Software*. Videofreex was another group that seemed to be involved in everything, from the short-lived CBS alternative television program *Subject to Change* to the Media Bus traveling workshop. Video activism was a vital social movement with an enormous amount of people passing through, collaborating, and forming shifting alliances.

The many collective efforts of the '70s were informed by a shared interest in the politics of “the spectacle,” a word often used to describe the mystifying pageantry of modern commercial media. However, the term “spectacle” has a specific meaning derived from the Situationist theorist Guy Debord. In Debord’s seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*, we learn that the substance of the spectacle is not contained within any specific image. Rather, the concept refers to the ways that representations in general mediate our social relations. Through complex operations of mediation “the spectacle” renders invisible the domination exercised by a privileged and powerful few over the far greater number of alienated and disenfranchised people who must toil daily at meaningless jobs.⁶



The Eternal Frame, Ant Farm, T.R. Uthco, 1976

Ant Farm's legendary tape *The Eternal Frame* is an excellent example of an intervention into "the spectacle" as defined by Debord. *The Eternal Frame* is an iconoclastic assault on the sacred image repertoire that traumatized a generation. In 1975 members of the collective traveled to Dallas to reenact the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy with eerie precision and in gory detail. They mimicked the Zapruder footage of the President getting shot and the First Lady trying to flee the scene. Political assassinations killed the hopes and dreams of a generation—John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy. The '60s were a time of violent upheaval and the wreckage left people confused, distraught, and angry. Ant Farm's reconstruction of the Kennedy assassination, and its self-reflexive examination of the morbid fascination with images of the dead president, captured the deep alienation people felt at the time.

The Eternal Frame also successfully embodies the meeting point of activism, media, and art. In the tape, one member of Ant Farm asked another if he thought what they were doing in Dallas was art. He replied, "It's not not art." This use of the double negative is an appropriate answer to the question of whether video activism in general should be construed as high art. All the examples in this short essay share the modernist avant-garde aspirations to merge art with life and to produce revolutionary change using the current technology. Consider, for

example, Soviet filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Alexander Medvekin or the international Fluxus movement. In fact, pioneer video artist Nam June Paik was involved in Fluxus. His writing appears in the first issue of *Radical Software*, and VDB distributes Paik's tape *Merce by Merce by Paik* (1975), a two-part tribute choreographer Merce Cunningham and artist Marcel Duchamp, as part of *Surveying the First Decade*.

The role of technology in 20th century art was a major issue that has been extensively theorized. Anticipating the rise of fascism in Europe before World War II, the brilliant intellectual Walter Benjamin warned artists that they must use new technological innovations in their work to critically disarm the lethal myths propagated by Nazi fascism.⁷ Though historical circumstances have evolved tremendously after World War II, the first video activists of 30 years ago understood the continuing relevance of Benjamin's argument. Network television and its controlling interests dominated the cultural landscape at the end of the 20th century. Practitioners who dared to represent their own versions of reality had to seize the means of production themselves. Creative people were forced to work at the margins, using tools not necessarily designed for their own use. Ironically, the same capitalist system that many tried to reform or obliterate provided artists with the tools to act. Capitalist mass production made technology available and affordable, enabling the proliferation of video



Production Notes: Fast Food for Thought, Jason Simon, 1985

productions beyond the control of network television; placing gear in the hands of consumers disidentified with establishment institutions: schools, corporations, and the government.

One of the finest examples of betrayal by a disgruntled employee with a political consciousness is Jason Simon's *Production Notes: Fast Food for Thought* (1986). While working at a commercial production house, Simon appropriated the production notes and footage for seven television commercials, making a very popular and instructive video showing exactly how corporations use media to manipulate people into buying things they don't need. The term "appropriation" describes any activity that borrows or samples sources drawn from the glut of images streaming out of commercial culture. Appropriation actually emerged out of the criminal impulse to reclaim something that we, consumers of culture, are denied—access to the means of production of subjectivity. Stealing advertising images and using state-of-the-art equipment at the production company where he labored, Simon took back what his employers expropriated: his creativity.

Video activism in the '80s was infused with fresh vitality. Relatively inexpensive, easily portable equipment seemed to arrive exactly when it was needed by a new generation of progressive activists. A conservative political movement gathered force throughout the country during the '70s and landed



They are lost to vision altogether, Tom Kalin, 1988

on the political landscape in 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected president. Corporate corruption, state-sponsored terrorism, poverty, homelessness, and most significantly the AIDS crisis marked the period. The body of work produced by AIDS activists in the late-'80s and early-'90s extended the concerns and methods of the previous generation onto new terrain. This generation was raised on television and their productions demonstrated a greater fluency with the language of the medium. Some elevated video to a level approaching poetry or literature. Tom Kalin's *They are lost to vision altogether* (1988) is an impressive lyrical work. The VDB preserved the fomentation of AIDS activism in its anthology *Video Against AIDS*⁸ and distributes other signal works of the period: Ellen Spiro's tape *DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Upfront* (1989), Marlon Rigg's *Non Je Ne Regrette Rien* (1992), and my own contributions to the corpus, *Fast Trip*, *Long Drop* (1993) and *Habit* (2001).

The most significant feature of AIDS video activism was the way it placed people with AIDS at the center of the public discussion about the epidemic. The dominant media of the '80s perpetrated a great violence against people with AIDS through representations that refused to address the concerns of the sick. The scapegoating messages of panic fostered by the commercial media were intended for an audience of uninfected people. They played to the worst fears and prejudices of a fictional "general public."



Bringing It All to You, ®™ark, 2001

AIDS video activism successfully reversed the priorities of the public discussion on the epidemic in the '80s and '90s, insisting that the people who needed care most should determine the way the disease is pictured.

The VDB continues to provide a home for the most audacious and radical electronic culture. Technology continues to advance and the Data Bank follows right along with it. Christine Tamblyn's CD-ROMs *Mistaken Identities* (1995) and *She Loves It, She Loves It Not* (1993), though now seemingly outmoded, are some of the most interesting early explorations of hypertext and interactive media. Reginald Woolery's *World Wide Web/Million Man March* and Art Jones' *Culture vs. the Martians* are just two more examples that investigate the potential for digital activism. The subversive organization ®™ark's tape *Bringing It All to You* (2001) deftly hijacks the form of the infomercial to advertise acts of anti-corporate sabotage. Activist video continues to be a vital endeavor with many practitioners entering new fields of production.

An enduring principle continues to inform activist video production: progressive social projects produce themselves as they represent themselves. Self-representation is inextricably linked with the agenda of self-determination. Video activists are no mere recorders of events. Their activity plays a central role in organizing dissent. Coming from within social movements themselves, video activists can be the poets of revolu-

tion. They occupy the place of conscience; they are the voice of rage. Finally, they are often the most eloquent representatives of broad constituencies, making the righteous case for justice to vastly larger audiences than any single speech or demonstration can reach.

As video activism continues to reshape history, greatly extended by new digital technologies. We now have the benefit of 30 years' experience and work to study the practice of political video art. VDB, on the shore of Lake Michigan, is the single most comprehensive repository of several generations of activist efforts. Staring out at the surface of a huge body of water can be deceiving to the eye. The calm surface of the sea often hides the forces stirring below. And water doesn't record the traces of the many vessels that navigate through it. So we must dive. We must explore. If we don't possess the gear to breathe underwater, we must grow gills and swim. Activism requires acts of volition that defy the poverty of our resources and our own bodies' limits.

Notes

¹ *Radical Software*, along with informative historical notes, can be found online at www.radicalsoftware.org.

² *Ibid.*, 1:1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1996 [1967]), 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings 1935-1938, Volume 3* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101-133.

⁸ *Video Against AIDS* was removed from distribution when Video Data Bank's original contracts with the artists expired in the late 1990s. VDB is committed to keeping AIDS activist work available and may re-release the anthology pending updated legal arrangements.



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