



FIGURE 4.1. Crowd turns out in public screening room during the first Gulf War to watch antiwar videos from Gulf Crisis TV Project (GCTV). Photo: PTTV.



4. The Collective Camcorder in Art and Activism

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As myth has it, in the midst of the caveman choreography of the Chicago Police Department at the 1968 Democratic convention, the chant arose "the whole world's watching."¹ This vocal response to the frenzied beating of demonstrators has been described as a manifestation of the collective realization of the centrality of television, and of the prophesied global electronic village. The year 1968 was also when Sony Corporation's consumer-level video camera, the self-contained, battery-powered, quarter-inch, reel-to-reel Portapak, became widely available.² The camera was affordably priced and did not require the technical proficiency normally required for television production. The concurrence of these two serendipitous developments resonated with a new generation of artists and activists eager to experiment with the world's most powerful medium. It would be tempting at this point to reiterate the folklore surrounding the nascent video art years and the associated artists: Nam June Paik and the first Portapak, the playful studio experiments of Bruce Nauman, William Wegman and his dog Man Ray, Vito Acconci and his video repetition of simple gestures. This official history has already been written, however.³ The intent of this essay is to poke around this well-established canon, and to provoke another way of looking at the foundations of video art in the United States.

In an art-world culture that worships at the altar of individualism, this essay seeks to blasphemously point a finger at the contributions made by collectives of videomakers, and to position their rightful place within the established framework of video art history. Certainly, some collective groups already form part of the established history of video art. References to groups like TVTV, Rainedance, Ant Farm, and Videofreex surface frequently in citations, retrospectives, and anthologies. Their contributions,

however, are normally only recognized when their work crosses within the narrowly defined boundaries of what the art establishment has sanctified as "art." The reality is that many artists' groups were also working in the video medium, exploring the creative potential of the video image, subverting televisual representations, tinkering, collaging, and contributing to a body of video cultural work. This essay will grind a new lens using a set of expanded parameters, and focus on the work of video collectives within the period 1968 to 2000. In particular this investigation will look at one of the longest-lived video collectives in the United States, Paper Tiger Television.

Reevaluating the accepted parameters of video art reconnects video's historical roots to many past media groups, such as the Newsreel Film Collective, the Canadian group Channels for Change, and back to the Film and Photo League of the 1930s. Many of these media groups were concerned with the same subjects addressed by contemporary video artists, issues such as the politics of identity and representation, a critique of daily life, the deconstruction of cultural control mechanisms, and the subversion of authority, while also believing passionately in working collectively to produce and present ideas and work to the public. It is this kind of praxis that informs much of the early Portapak work that is gathering dust in archives around the United States; tapes of the first Woman's Liberation March up New York City's Fifth Avenue, images of a family picnic inside the walls of a New York State prison, early gay liberation activity, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, numerous countercultural happenings, conversations with artists, intellectuals, and activists. In early black-and-white Portapak footage, whether the work of socially conscious video collectives or individual artists' video studio experiments, one sees a similar self-conscious playfulness on-screen, with murky and grainy images appearing to be shot through cheesecloth, with primitive single-tube cameras comet-tailing or blooming across the screen, the primary difference being a focus on content over form. This is a division not rigidified until the later "museumization" of video work. Marita Sturken, in her essay on early video art, explains that,

While rigid boundaries are now drawn between socially concerned videotapes and video art by the institutions that fund and exhibit this work, few categorizations were used when artists and activists first began making tapes. The standard subcategories that are commonly used to describe video today—such as documentary, media-concerned, image-processing, and narrative—while glaringly inadequate now, had no relevant meaning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Distinctions between art and information were not initially made by these artists; to them, everything was simply "tape" (and many eschewed the title "artist" as one that connoted elitism).⁴

Evidence of this approach can be gleaned by viewing archival copies of *Radical Software*, the main journal of the video art movement. In

one column, Nam June Paik waxes enthusiastically about the video channels of the future. Some of his tongue-in-cheek lineup includes *Chess Lesson* at 7:00 AM by Marcel Duchamp, *Meet the Press* at 8:00 AM with guest John Cage, followed by confessions of a topless cellist by Charlotte Moorman, and *Guided Tour of Kurdistan, Turkistan, and Kazakstan* by Dick Higgins.

Many art critics, gallery curators, and other arbiters of the art world, of course, have been fixated on form, and often ignore work based on content or context. Likewise, they tend to dismiss such work as "political" art or not art at all, as somehow art that focuses on larger social issues, or art that is situated in the public sphere, is too depersonalized, less individualistic, and thus less intrinsic to the approved and marketable stereotype of the sensitive and creative artist. Video collectives have naturally tended to focus more on larger social concerns relevant to the public, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Contrary to those who dismiss such work as being too "social," video collective proponents have countered that the seemingly spontaneous generation of art, as lionized in the art world, is typically a manifestation of the internalization of social norms and culture, absorbed from the artists' social, economic, and political position, and is thus ultimately a collective product as well.

Is video art concerned only with new forms or the self-conscious use of the medium? Or can it work to reintegrate media practice with daily life, challenge complacency and cultural passivity, and confront the public's expectations and prejudices? Arts movements such as surrealism and Dadaism, movements often given lip service by the art establishment, were concerned with such issues as were other cultural movements that sought to fuse daily life with artistic expression, such as Situationists, Beats, Diggers, and Hippies. Many video collectives continue to work in and be inspired by the traditions set by such movements. As Marita Sturken put it, "The marginal way in which the collectives are treated in video history is indicative of the way in which socially concerned work was simply written out of the art-historical agenda for video set forth in its museumization (and ultimately historicized quite separately)."⁵

That the art world does not validate the collective role in art production is well understood by video collectives. Contemporary art production is intimately connected to the art market, and thus financial considerations often take precedence over many aesthetic concerns. Thus, the question of ownership and authorship becomes crucial within this context if an art product is to have value. Collective art production is often antithetical to authorship and ownership, or is at least ambiguous. The question of authorship, however, is strongly tied to the financial value of the work. Even more, it is integral to modern Western ideas of the genius of the individual as the

prime mover of history. Prevailing ideas of individual art production and creativity have been ingrained for so long they have become nothing less than "common sense." This despite the transformation by mechanization, industrialization, and the recognition of intertextuality that lie at the core of modern cultural production. Even the most industrially organized of the creative arts, that of cinema, succumbed decades ago to the cult of the individual, with the adoption of the notion of "auteurship." Ingmar Bergman lamented this situation memorably in 1957: "Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. Thus we finally gather in one large pen, where we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realizing that we are smothering each other to death."⁶

That said, while painting and writing tend toward being solitary pursuits, video production is often intrinsically collective, tied as it is to practicalities like feeding tape stock, wrangling electricity, and tweaking machines. Perhaps no other artistic medium has such an integration of craft and art, providing a kind of vitality intrinsic to video productions. Other reasons for a collective approach to video production have been the cost of the equipment, whose steep price encourages many artists to collaborate. One of the primary funders of early video art, the New York State Council of the Arts, solely funded groups and collectives for reasons of economic efficiency. This is a radical change from today, when most funders stipulate that only individual artists can apply for support.

Video work, however, is about not only production but also, perhaps as importantly, exhibition and distribution. Organizing video playback, exhibition, and distribution is often a collective endeavor involving a division of labor in procuring and setting up equipment and assembling an audience, an activity that culminates in the collective experience of a video screening, in contradistinction to the normally solitary activity of modern television viewing.

There are many other reasons not endemic to the technological or financial imperatives for the collective production of video in the early years of its development. Frequently downplayed or ignored by believers in "the great man" theory of individual genius is the symbiosis of the work with the social, economic, and political environments inhabited by artists. Video art's development at the end of the sixties and into the early seventies had much to do with its aesthetic, content, and style of work. The social, political, and economic context in which this video art practice arose is often forgotten or downplayed as the individual is decontextualized and placed within

the hermetic environment of the art gallery. An essential element of late 1960s activism was the yearning to incorporate daily life into one's beliefs, so that convictions and everyday life become one. This "lifestyle" ideology was mostly absent from those of pre-World War II media radicals, whose domestic life was often untouched by their politics. Many in the 1960s and 1970s countercultural milieu couldn't justify spending the day being an activist or artist only to go home to a routine living arrangement in mainstream culture. The belief in making personal life as important as political/cultural life propelled the movement to build communal living situations in many areas. These living arrangements encompassed many thousands of people and established collectives of all kinds, from filmmaking to organizing to bread baking to newspaper publishing. The growth of feminism and the gay rights movement in the early 1970s helped to spread these concerns to all parts of daily life, throughout the home and into the bedroom and kitchen.

Scanning the graveyard of video archival material from the 1960s and early 1970s, one sees a plethora of titles shot during these early years by groups such as Alternate Media Center, People's Video Theatre, Downtown Community Television Center, Portable Channel, Marin Community Video, Broadside TV, Headwaters TV, University Community Video, and Videopolis. New York State alone had over a dozen functioning video collectives. For many of these early videomakers, the rising of the little Portapak against the major studio cameras was an electronic David versus Goliath, an apt analogy that fed into the articulation of guerrilla video. This potent image arose in a world inflamed by the rebellion of oppressed people against modern imperialism and neocolonialism. Che Guevara, the Vietnamese revolution, the uprisings in Africa against Apartheid in the South and against the Portuguese colonies in the North, and a myriad of armed foci rebellions against the "gorillas" (dictators) in Latin America played a major role in shaping the mindset of a generation of video artists. A collective form of organization was part and parcel of this ideology. Guerrilla tactics were seen as essential in an environment where television was rigidly controlled by just three major corporations—CBS, NBC, and ABC—and guerrilla tactics required a collective style of work.

What constitutes a collective is clearly something open to interpretation. Collectives run the gamut from loose associations of like-minded individuals working toward a common goal, to rigid, cadre-like, single-minded organizations with a vanguardist, democratic centralism at their heart. It would be safe to say at least that collectives generally seek some kind of consensus around work to be performed, be it a film production or a potato harvest. Egalitarian concerns are high on the list of priorities, whereby rank is downplayed, at least official rank, and the division of labor seeks to be

nonhierarchical and rotating, so that everyone can do all. These ideals spring from utopian elements of communalism and are influenced and tempered by political imperatives often derived from clandestine liberation movements. Guerrilla manuals reflect on the necessity for egalitarianism, not only for building the "new society" but to make a more fungible political movement. In centralized organizations, if the head is cut off, the organism dies, but in a decentralized movement, many more heads just spring back up. Of course, to use a more mundane example, if the character generator technician doesn't show up, the cameraperson can take over the job for the shoot.

Early video collectives held these ideals in common with many of today's video collectives. As pointed out by Martha Rosler, the early video movement was infused with this kind of "utopian" ideal. Video was going to change the world and collapse the art world into itself:

Thus, video posed a challenge to the sites of art production in society, to the forms and "channels" of delivery, and to the passivity of reception built into them. Not only a systemic but also a utopian critique was implicit in video's early use, for the effort was not to enter the system but to transform every aspect of it and—legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde project—to define the system out of existence by merging art with social life and making audience and producer interchangeable.⁷

With the slow decay of the heady, idealistic 1960s, much of the video art world devolved into a bland narcissism, wrapped up in the solitary gesture or the gimmickry and gadgetry of the medium. Provoked by a culture of ironic detachment, video artists mused around with the form, experimenting with the equipment while side-stepping its roots in television. In the depoliticized climate, becoming void of social consciousness made for better response from gallery patrons, and what was good for the patrons was good for the galleries.

Curiously enough, official video art history ends in the 1970s, when the medium enters the palaces of art and lives happily ever after in the glow of Bill Viola installations. But, perhaps it's time to realize this history was written prematurely. As time stretches out, and as we gain the advantage of hindsight in a "history" that is now forty years old, the contours of the past become clearer. In such a shadowy world there would be more importance accorded to the early 1980s as the coalescing moment at the heart of the video art movement. It was then that many of the more utopian ideas of the movement reached some fruition, with greater participation of women and people of color, and with less fetishism placed on the gadgetry and mechanical awe of the products.

The election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Moral Majority in 1980 fueled a younger generation of artists, particularly those not part of the art establishment. The impending culture wars and the attack on the

morals and aesthetics of artists led many to search for the reasons that led to this disconnect between cultural creators and the public. Defunding also led to a major effort to reconnect with the public and reestablish a connection between cultural workers and community. Much culpability was placed on the role of the mass media and the culture industry, which had been forming the pictures in people's minds while video artists were busy playing with their own image on the screen. The new political and economic realities of the 1980s led to an investigation into how to reconnect with the public while challenging the views of the religious right and other groups hostile to artists. For many video collectives, public access television was one way that allowed artists entry into the homes of people not accustomed to visiting galleries and museums. The establishment of neighborhood media and art centers was another, as part of a strategy to get art out of the galleries and into the streets and neighborhoods.

This cultural groundswell was not just part of the art scene, however, but was intricately bound up in the burgeoning contestatory subcultures of punk and hip-hop, with their funky, homegrown DIY aesthetic. These subcultures were frequently collective creations. The punk scene, often deprived of venues for its music, had to organize its own alternative spaces, in warehouses, abandoned storefronts, and squats, relying on a system of alternative 'zines to spread the word. Bands, fans, 'zines, and spaces were part of a collective apparatus that went along with the territory. Hip-hop culture, homegrown in the ghettos and barrios, was often organized around "crews" whose cultural work collectively ranged from spinning vinyl and organizing block parties to holding dance competitions and painting spray-can art on trains and public walls. All of these activities were contributing to a new type of collective cultural production that privileged group activity over individual activity. This collective groundswell rose alongside growing right-wing Reaganite repression.

In the early 1980s, the ever-increasing corporate stranglehold over commercial television and mass media became more apparent, but for the most part established video artists showed no great concern. As the "professionalism" of the video art genre grew, the stakes got higher and higher for experimenting with new high-tech video tools. Artists and galleries wanting to play in this game grew increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship, frequently from the same corporations benefiting from the new drive toward media conglomeration. Besides, video artists were usually eager to distance themselves from television, which they saw as the hillbilly cousin of aristocracy. Younger video artists, however, who were surrounded by and absorbing popular culture, were eager to critique, comment on, deconstruct, and defeat the message of commercial television and media. Work increasingly

focused on such a task, creating spoofs, subverting messages, and implementing the slogan "copyright infringement—your best entertainment value." Such a spirit was more in tune with bohemian art movements such as funk, pop art, collage, and Dadaism and stood in stark contrast to much of the cold and bleak techno-art beeping and flashing in galleries. This upsurge in media activity emerged simultaneously as a heightened interest in cultural studies, mass media studies, and cultural criticism. Television is, after all, at the heart of our popular culture, the culture of the everyday, and dominates the media landscape. Video, when all is said and done, is a form of television, a media device that conveys information. It is natural that video artists cross the boundaries of art and activism, and frequently choose to subvert the message, not just exploit the form. This artistic jujitsu, using the weight of television to fall upon itself, emerged as a popular strategy among video collectives. Increasingly, video artists in the 1980s and 1990s embraced the necessity to reflect on, intervene, and challenge the contested terrain of television, mass media, and popular culture, and leave the art-video aesthetic behind. As B. Ruby Rich points out, this approach blurs further the distinction between "art" and "activism":

Once upon a time, way back in the seventies, it was possible to speak of "two avant-gardes" that posited a binarism of form and content. Times have changed, and along with them, categories of concern. Such a construct is irrelevant to a nineties video/film praxis that locates its politic instead within a renegotiated subject position, for both artist and audience. In the process, genres are recast, media resituated. It's no longer possible to speak of aesthetics in a vacuum, to speak of intentionality without the counterbalance of reception, to speak arrogantly of the individual without speaking humbly of the collective, not as something abstract but as a quality within us.⁸

The convergence of these new political, cultural, social, technological, artistic, and economic developments provides the impetus to the establishment of Paper Tiger Television (PTTV). While the instigators of PTTV had roots in the sixties and seventies art scene, the raw energy came from a new generation of artists, angry and hungry and ready to tear into the dominant culture. The early Paper Tiger collective was an amalgam of artists, activists, critics, cultural theorists, and academics eager to seize control of the medium of television and reinject it into the American psyche.

According to Dee Dee Halleck, one of the founders of the group, Paper Tiger Television came out of a group of students, artists, and activists in New York City, emerging from a group project called *Communication Update*.⁹ The first Paper Tiger program was based upon the analysis and personality of Herbert Schiller, then media scholar at Hunter College in New York City. Schiller, with his biting critique of the culture industry and his prophetic take on the consolidation of media by corporate giants (not to

mention his heavy Brooklyn accent), was the perfect person to begin the series. Shot entirely live to tape in the studio, the backdrop consisted of Schiller sitting in a funkily arranged New York City subway, while he deconstructs and shreds away at the paper of record, "the steering mechanism of the ruling class," the *New York Times*. In one scene, he analyzes and deconstructs an image in the paper of an astronaut, an image of a NASA space shot, and reinterprets the framing, perspective, and intent of the photo and accompanying text. The production is entirely put together by the newly formed collective and launches the first of many programs.

The newly formed Paper Tiger Television collective created sixty or so tapes of this kind in their first few years of existence, featuring a broad spectrum of scholars, artists, and activists. Some of these early studio productions include *Joan Does Dynasty* (Joan Braderman's take on the *Dynasty* TV program), *Renee Tajima Reads Asian Images in American Film: Charlie Chan Go Home*, *Donna Haraway Reads National Geographic*, *Artist's Call to Central America: Lucy Lippard and Art for a Cause*, *Eva Cockcroft Reads Art-Forum: Art and Language and Money*, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*, *Michele Mattelart Reads the Chilean Press Avant-Coup: Every Day It Gets Harder to Be a Good Housewife*, *The Trial of the Tilted Arc* with Richard Serra, and *Tuli Kupferberg Reads Rolling Stone*. Dee Dee Halleck describes the difficulties of collective television production:



FIGURE 4.2. Media critic Herbert Schiller dissects the *New York Times* in an early Paper Tiger Television production. Photo: PTTV.

There is something about going out to audiences live that sets the adrenaline pumping. However, it's hard to put together a show on short notice, using a large crew. Most television is not made with a collaborative, non-authoritarian structure. Achieving unity and strength while maintaining maximum participation, imagination, and humanism is a basic problem for any group. To try to make a TV show in a non-authoritarian structure is formidable. Subtlety and tolerance are difficult to achieve in the supercharged tension of a television studio, about to go on the air in three-and-a-half minutes.¹⁰

Paper Tiger was built on the distribution network provided by public access television, the electronic commons fought for by media activists and artists in the 1970s. As Paper Tiger tapes began to be distributed to other access centers, it became apparent that many others were becoming aware of the creative possibilities of television production. The involvement of hundreds and then thousands of community TV producers began to swell the ranks of access stations nationwide as TV programs on all subjects bloomed across the nation's TVs. Such activity stimulated the creation of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, an organization that served as the central locus of public access television constituents (now called the Alliance for Community Media). Relying upon this nascent network of public access producers for local cablecast, Paper Tiger tapes began to get mailed around the country, provoking the idea of a national distribution network. It became apparent that there were many local video groups producing tapes, and the idea emerged for a unified system that could tie together all these local groupings into one national network. Observing that the burgeoning commercial cable networks are essentially held together by satellite uplinking and downlinking, Paper Tiger members adopted the same technology and initiated the Deep Dish TV Network to distribute videowork.

A glance at the booklets and directories produced by Deep Dish TV after the first two broadcast seasons conveys a picture of the growing movement of video collectives in the mid-1980s. The purpose of creating the Deep Dish directory was to establish lines of communication between newly organized video groups around the country by publishing contact information on the groups that had submitted tapes to the Deep Dish series. In the booklets, the work of many collective and group efforts is evident, and reflective of a wide range of interests and backgrounds. Among the groups that submitted video for the series were Alternative Views (a group that had been in existence as long as Paper Tiger), Somerville Producers Group, Southwest Reports, The Committee to Intervene Anywhere, Xchange TV, Madre Video Project, Mill Hunk Herald, Labor Information Committee (from Toronto, Canada), The Cambridge Women's Video Collective, Mon Valley Media, Ladies Against Women, Video Band, The Alternative Media Project (based in New Haven, Connecticut), The Atlanta Media Project, Artists TV Network,

Subterranean Video, Squeaky Wheel (Buffalo, New York), The Labor Video Project (based in San Francisco), The Coalition to Save General Motors/Van Nuys, The Committee for Labor Access (from Chicago), The Labor Media Group (from Ann Arbor), The New York City Labor Film Club, The Not For Profit TV (based in Harlem, New York), Video For Kids (Mt. View, California), and Third World News Review.

The proliferation of these groups and collectives shows the growth of the collective approach to video work in the 1980s and early 1990s. Groups often came together as video arms of both broad-based and single-focus organizations such as gay and lesbian groups, nuclear freeze groups, Central America activist groups, labor groups, and many more. Some groups, such as Not Channel Zero, produced work from the perspective of Black and Latino youth in New York City. Among the most active video collectives was DIVA (Damn Interfering Video Artists), allied with the group ACT UP, which became an important and effective catalyst for fighting AIDS and for challenging the public's perceptions of the disease. This group produced many tapes detailing the fighting spirit of HIV-positive people and helped propel a culture of optimism in a community devastated by sorrow. As Jim Hubbard wrote in an essay for the 2000 Guggenheim show on archived AIDS videos, "Fever in the Archives":



FIGURE 4.3. Radio activists go on the air with a transmitter built by mini-FM advocate Tetsuo Kogawa. Low-power FM radio experiment in San Francisco. Photo: PTTV.

Many of these tapes, although made solely as timely responses to the crisis, retain an extraordinary vitality. The videomakers clearly positioned themselves in opposition to an unresponsive and often antagonistic government and mainstream media. They eschewed the authoritative voice-over, the removed, dispassionate expert, and the media's tendency to scapegoat, while embracing a vibrant sexuality and righteous anger.¹¹

Some groups began using video as countersurveillance, such as Cop-Watch, which began video surveillance of rogue cops. Labor groups formed in Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities to challenge the antilabor bias of mainstream television and to give voice to the creative expression of workers. The growth of these grassroots video collectives was propelled by the enthusiastic response of audiences and constituents, who were thrilled when their own stories, identities, and representations appeared on monitors and screens, in storefronts, community centers, and alternative spaces, as well as video-projected into public spaces. Artists could take advantage of this growing network of video exhibition, bypassing official channels to explain their own perspectives on AIDS, censorship, domestic violence, racism, cultural values, homelessness, and other issues not talked about in Reagan America. The fact that these videos were often made by those directly affected, and not by outside professionals, made them all the more powerful. A Paper Tiger Television production produced by PTTV members in conjunction with striking miners in Pittston, Virginia, illustrated such enthusiasm. The tape (*Drawing the Line at Pittston*) showed at a conference of labor representatives, following a screening of a "professional" tape on the same subject, for which the audience sat politely and gave tepid applause. The PTTV tape, on the other hand, played to wild and tumultuous applause, as the self-shot viewpoints of the miners themselves came across in the face of police repression, shaky cameras and all. It was audience response in these kinds of venues that helped fuel the desire to create a collective movement of grassroots video.

By the early nineties, the culture wars had become more pronounced, as right-wing politicians hacked away at the funding base for the



FIGURE 4.4. Video frame from *Drawing the Line at Pittston*. Paper Tiger Television. Photo: PTTV.

arts. The introduction of the camcorder, particularly the range of "prosumer" formats such as Hi-8 and S-VHS, allowed the producer to get out of the studio and into the streets. Mobile video operators proliferated at public events, as programs began to be produced entirely in postproduction, which also allowed a number of special effects technologies (slo-mo, fades, wipes, text) formerly restricted by economic reasons to the major broadcasters. These changes became more apparent in later series of Deep Dish TV programming. Of hundreds of tapes submitted to Deep Dish programming, the majority indicated an association with a group effort, from simple partnerships to collectives and co-ops, yet this tremendous collaborative effort does not as yet show up on the radar of most galleries and venues of the arts institutions. This "utopian" moment of video, seemingly lost in the early 1970s, was growing invisibly under everyone's feet.

The morphing of the Reagan regime into the Bush regime only helped spur the desire for independent video production. In the face of the militant mediocrity of the culture industries, demands for representation of people of color, of working people, of gay and lesbian people fueled the independent artistic production of video, television, and film. Many new independent media groups were created, and established cultural groups swelled with eager younger members, in groups such as Film Arts Foundation, Cine Accion, Frameline, National Association of Asian Television Artists, Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, Bay Area Video Coalition, Artist's Television Access, Third World Newsreel, and California Newsreel. A collaboratory effort resulted in the creation of the Independent Television Service in 1991, an important funding resource for independent videomakers. These efforts were attempts by artists to create or influence television, not perpetuate the precious videotape as art object. The people involved in these efforts recognized television as a stream of electronic images, and recognized the benefits of some kind of industrial organization, particularly in creating an audience for such work.

The Paper Tiger collective evolved along with these multitudes of video organizations, moving beyond media criticism, away from reacting to the culture industry, toward determining its own agenda, its own aesthetics, its own relationship to technology. By the 1990s, the Paper Tiger collective had made some several hundred video programs, on a wide range of both social and artistic subjects, that sought to illuminate what was ignored by the culture industry. They did so with the now standard PTTV approach—a sense of humor and a decidedly low-tech, DIY sensibility.

With the launching of the so-called Desert Storm by George Bush Sr., Paper Tiger initiated the Gulf Crisis TV Project and plugged into a wide network of active video groups nationally and internationally. This project

took on national and international significance and brought together a wide coalition of video collectives and artists, creating ten thirty-minute programs critiquing the war in the gulf. The voices and vision of artists, intellectuals, and activists were highlighted in this series that made its way into the homes of millions of viewers nationally and internationally.

The electoral defeat of the Reagan-Bush dynasty was welcomed by many artists as a respite from many years of conservative scapegoating of artists as cause for moral decline and social turmoil. During the last month of the 1992 electoral contest, Paper Tiger TV had built a large-scale installation at the McBean Gallery in the San Francisco Art Institute. It was modeled as an enormous television, and the public walked through the cracked screen of an enormous CRT screen and along the electronic copper traces past capacitors and resistors to view the "myth" circuits embedded in our electronic culture, such as the myth of High Art and the myth of Freedom of Choice. Election night 1992, the gallery was packed with hundreds of artists and activists, as PTTV members performed a live mix of election returns and found footage and sound. The art critic for the Hearst San Francisco Examiner described the event this way:

The most dramatic demonstration of the beginning of the end, the end of the Reagan/Bush era, revealed itself at the San Francisco Art Institute, where Paper Tiger Television, the activist TV collective, hosted an election night party. When Bush gave his concession

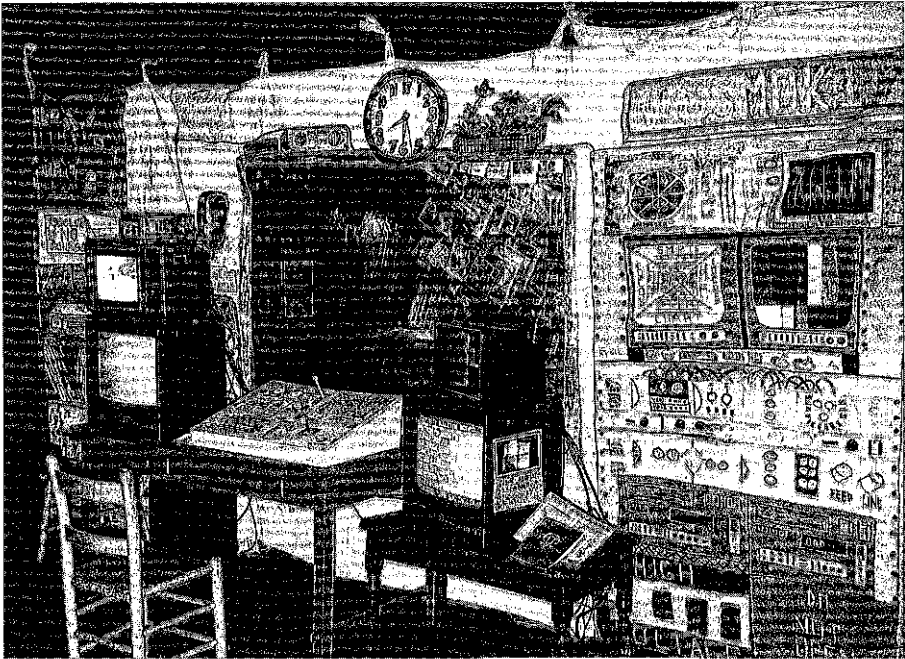


FIGURE 4.5. Paper Tiger set of television studio. Photo: PTTV.

speech, the crowd of young artists-to-be let loose a storm of curses, imprecations, and threats that was as terrifying as it was liberating. Their uncompromised expression underscored the widespread hatred felt for Bush and the Republican Party he led into a fatal flirtation with far-right extremism.¹²

By the late nineties, it was obvious that all was not quiet on the technological front. A new wave of digital camcorders was blowing apart the “not broadcast quality” excuse both commercial and public broadcasters used to ignore independent production. The Internet, the so-called information superhighway, was expanding exponentially, multiplying the communications reach of videomakers, whose tactics range from building Listservs of potential viewers to marketing tapes online to streaming real-time video clips. Hypertext, CD-ROM, DVD, and other formats promising nonlinearity, instantaneous deliverability, and the possibility of including extensive background material inspired many video activists. Many video groups embraced a multitude of mediums and divorced themselves from the restrictions of medium dependency, further confounding the museum and gallery establishments that depend upon such classifications.

The growth of low power FM radio was also seized upon, and a burgeoning network of “pirate” radio stations sprang forth, such as Free Radio Berkeley, SF Liberation Radio, Steal This Radio, Radio Mutiny, and many others. This movement has resulted in the legalizing of hundreds of new LPFM



FIGURE 4.6. Free Radio advocate Tetsuo Kogawa leads a radio-building workshop for media activists in San Francisco. Photo: PTTV.

community radio stations, now in the process of becoming established. The possibility for communication and for an end run around mass media and the culture industries was heartening. Many saw the uprising of the Zapatista rebellion of indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico, and its poet-leader Subcommandante Marcos as especially inspiring, with its fusion of art and politics. In a videotaped statement to a cultural gathering in Mexico, organized by Rage Against the Machine and others, Zapatista spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos, holding a guitar, says:

If you would like me to sum it up, I would tell you that we made ourselves soldiers like that so that one day soldiers would no longer be necessary, as we also remain poor, so that one day there will no longer be poverty. This is what we use the weapon of resistance for. Obviously, it is not the only weapon we have, as is clear from the metal that clothes us. We have other arms. For example, we have the arm of the word. We also have the weapon of our culture, of our being what we are. We have the weapon of music, the weapon of dance. We have the weapon of the mountain, that old friend and compafiera who fights along with us, with her roads, hiding places and hillsides, with her trees, with her rains, with her suns, with her dawns, with her moons.¹³

It was many of these ideas of cultural activism, media criticism, and culture-jamming that inspired video activists and media activists to come together around the planned World Trade Organization protest in Seattle in 1999. Armed with a myriad of new media tools and the network capability of instantaneous Internet access, an organism coalesced around the creation of an Independent Media Center (IMC), now a model for the surging tide of worldwide independent media production. That such an effort reached fruition largely from electronic exchanges between mediamakers is testimony to the promise of networks. Independent Media was born amid the chaos of tear gas and truncheons, in a chorus of digital images, sounds, and text. The IMC model has brought forward a new generation of collectives, now no longer limited by physical proximity, but united around the idea of cultural expression of truth and justice, built around temporary autonomous zones and flash mobs. There are now many IMCs around the world.

Comparing the Independent Media Center's coverage of the "Battle of Seattle" with TVTV's ground-breaking coverage of the Nixon Republican Convention in Miami Beach in 1972, *Four More Years*, one sees both the similarities and the differences between contemporary collective media production and those of the 1970s. Much of the motivation remains the same, and as Sturken says about the early 1970s collectives,

While the members of these collectives were artists (and many still are practicing artists), their concerns with amassing alternative information, addressing issues of media and technology, and their pluralist approach to documenting history were antithetical to the way in which discussions of video evolved in the art world. The belief structure of art in

Western culture espouses the primacy of the individual creator and the notion of a masterpiece as a means to establish the financial worth of a work of art; it does not bend easily toward the concept of collectivity.¹⁴

In *Four More Years*, TVTV, like the IMC video crews that roamed Seattle, wanted to convey a perspective not shown in the usual channels. Then, as now, artists continue their love/hate relationship with the medium. As TVTV members were fondling their Portapak machines inside the convention, a popular float paraded around the chaotic streets surrounding the Miami Beach Convention Center, an installation mounted on a flatbed truck presenting television as the "Great American Lobotomy Machine."

Like the subversive call to on-duty soldiers, "Turn the guns around," TVTV righteously turned its cameras around onto the media, puncturing the pomposity and arrogance of the chosen few who determine what we see and don't see on television. Viewed from our current jaded era, however, this can seem somewhat quaint and antiquated. In the tape, TVTV still admires and respects the news anchors, and by placing them at the center of their gaze, empowers them. It still reflects the public obsession with TV personality. The news organizations' agenda forms TVTV's agenda. Today's independent media artists have few such illusions. Grandpa Cronkite is long gone, and with the near-complete seizure of media by corporations, so is much semblance of journalistic integrity.

While TVTV was ensconced in their posh digs outside of town,¹⁵ today's camcorderists would have been bivouacked in Miami Beach's Flamingo Park, along with the thousands of other demonstrators. They would not have been content being an "embedded" alternative news crew on the convention floor. On the last night of the convention, frustrated and overworked riot police invaded Flamingo Park, viciously attacking, beating, and macing thousands of unsuspecting campers. Their unrestrained violence went unrecorded.

Contemporary collective video is integrated along with many other facets of digital media to challenge the cultural hegemony of the culture industries, to express emotional and intellectual concerns of artists, and yes, even to create works of beauty. To these ends, many other forms have been adopted, extending to radio, CD-ROMs, Web sites, and DVDs. The negative effects of globalization have provoked an awareness of the deleterious effects of the corporate domination of media and have spurred a new collective response to it. Contemporary groups and collectives such as RTMark, Electronic Disturbance Theater, los cybrids, Independent Media Centers, Undercurrents, and others have arisen to meet this challenge.

It has turned out that the fate and destiny of video art is much larger than the art world. Independent video penetration into the public

sphere has become paramount, and public interventions such as peer-to-peer file sharing, blogging, streaming, and even the lowered cost of video projectors have become important means allowing artists to reclaim public space. Through this process, video work enters into culture, not just the rarefied art world of the museums and galleries.

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.¹⁶

New video practices will emerge in the cracks and crevices of social life on the fringes of a market-driven economy. The collective response will continue to be a vibrant, dynamic, and appropriate means of creating art and culture, no matter what the form.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World's Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

2. Setting a date for new technology introduction can be difficult, as there can be a discrepancy between unveiling a prototype, releasing a limited introduction, and releasing it in different markets. While there have been Portapak's as early as 1965, this model is considered to be the first standardized, marketable video camcorder system. See, for example, B. Keen, "Play It Again Sony: The Double Life of Home Video Technology," in *Science as Culture*, vol. 1 (London: Free Association Books, 1987).

3. Probably the best survey of writing on video art is D. Hall and S. J. Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (San Francisco: BAVC/Aperature, 1990).

4. Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form," in *Illuminating Video*, ed. Hall and Fifer, 107.

5. *Ibid.*, 113.

6. Ingmar Bergman, Introduction to *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

7. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video*, ed. Hall and Fifer, 31.

8. B. Ruby Rich, "The Authenticating Goldfish: Re-viewing Film and Video in the Nineties," from the catalog of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, 91.

9. Dee Dee Halleck, *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

10. *Ibid.*, 120.

11. J. Hubbard, "Fever in the Archive: AIDS Activist Video" (2000), essay for exhibition. Online source at <http://www.actupny.org/divatv/guggenheim.html>.

12. D. Bonetti, "Artists Ponder Clinton's Election," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 4, 1992, D1, D4.

13. Subcommandante Marcos, videotape message to the public forum "Culture of Resistance" in Mexico, D.F. (1999). From the online EZLN archives, <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/~hmcleave/chiapas95.html>.

14. Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form," 115.

15. See Deirdre Boyle's account and analysis of TTV in *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

16. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

