

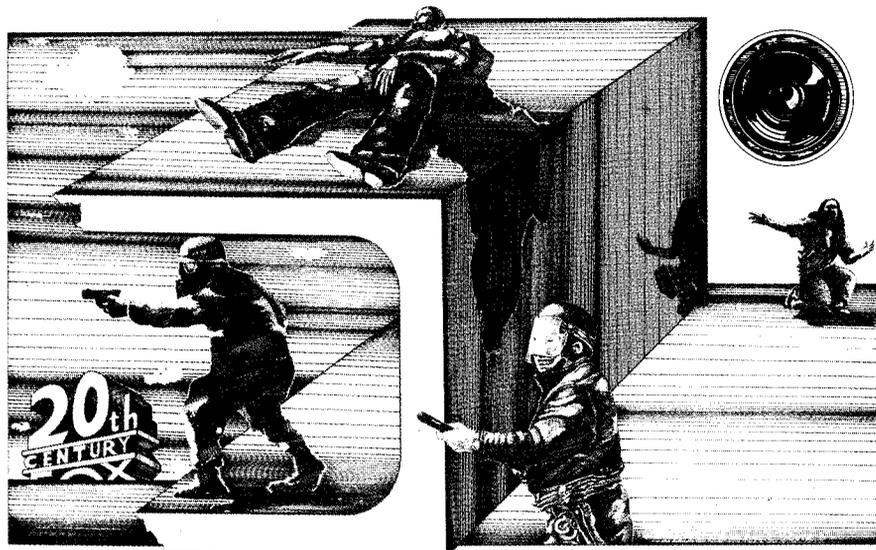
# The Global Village/Chloe Aaron **THE ALTERNATE-MEDIA GUERRILLAS**

“Everyday community problems aren’t usually considered newsworthy by TV networks. Enter, therefore, the video underground.”

Television these days is a lot more than channels 2-13. In a teeming new TV underground there are more than 30 groups in New York alone, documenting their own versions of reality on video tape. Living in studio/lofts jammed with cables, portable TV cameras, expensive special effects generators, electronic editing machines and half-finished proposals to government agencies pleading for money, they are dedicated to liberating TV from the networks, the ad agencies and the FCC. “We want to spur community interaction through electronic communication, make participatory democracy a reality with the help of our most powerful medium,” proclaims the People’s Video Theater. “We’re trying to create an alternative to existing broadcast television,” says Videofreex leader David Cort. “The networks are a rip-off.”

The new video movement has become possible through a major breakthrough in tube technology. In 1967 Sony, the Japanese firm that broke open the market for miniature TV sets, introduced a new portable video production setup. It consists of a low-cost TV camera no larger than a home movie camera and a portable recorder the size and weight of the Manhattan phone book. Up to a half-hour of sound and picture can be recorded on one reel of tape and replayed immediately—with no lab processing. Filmmakers, painters and writers looking for a new means of visual expression but put off by the high production costs of film, began to experiment with the new equipment. They had found that the film and lab fees for an hour of 16-mm film with sound amount to at least \$1,000. An hour of videotape costs about \$40. More important, it can be erased and used over again up to 50 times.

Today four major underground TV groups have emerged in New York—Raindance, Global Village, Videofreex, People’s Video Theater—which collectively have about 400 hours of videotape material in their archives. This material focuses heavily on New Left polemics and the drama of political confrontation. It includes explorations of a new world of video eroticism and straightforward documentaries of such public



issues as ecology and environmental control. And while the underground is principally preoccupied with chronicling the contemporary history of the hip left, it also has room for artistic experimentation with video feedback and special effects as well as wry looks at the straight world—Nixon’s welcome-home party for the astronauts, a travelogue on Middle America and a report on house-hunting in lower Manhattan.

Impressed with the revolutionary potential of TV, the four groups—unified only by a shared poverty—are otherwise at odds over how to achieve that potential.

Raindance emphasizes organization. Mike Shamberg, its president, feels the first priority is a computerized data bank of videotape that would serve the video underground much as Jonas Mekas’ Filmmakers’ Cooperative helped directors like Robert Downey in the mid-sixties. The tapes would be free to video producers who would contribute to as well as draw on the bank.

Although the one-monitor straight news format of the People’s Video Theater is strikingly different from the nine-channel “environmental” approach of Global Village, both groups insist that presentation is the thing. “We’re inter-

ested in visual reality, not intellectual premises,” says Village co-director Rudi Stern, who, at 33, is the oldest member of the “underground.”

The Videofreex (there are ten of them) seem preoccupied with technology. They have assembled an impressive laboratory of closed-circuit TV sets, electronic editing tables and color synthesizers in their five-floor walkup at 98 Prince Street. Rival groups say the Freex are “too much into hardware” but the Freex say they are simply on a “reality trip.”

The studio holds an extensive library of *video verité* with such titles as “The Hells Angels at Home,” “Far-out Erogeous—Frolics and Excitement 3,” “Black Panthers I, II, III,” and “Rivington Street Dope Speech.” Their material ranges from a Smokey the Bear commercial to a tape of Salvador Dali being fitted for a new suit in the cocktail lounge of the St. Regis Hotel.

The Freex have scheduled a regular public viewing of their tapes Friday evenings at nine o’clock; for anyone who needs to tape a local event, they can be hired for \$600 a day. The fee includes consultation, a production crew and special effects for coverage with a single camera. Editing, colorizing and distri-

bution are extra but, at a price, the Freex offer a complete video production service—this is how they hope to finance experimentation. “We can do a small business conference for information purposes,” says Cort, “or a rock festival that is simultaneously projected onto a huge outdoor screen to a half-million people.”

At Raindance, division of labor is a little fuzzy but it is generally agreed that Frank Gillette, always dressed in white with his long blond hair in a pig-tail, is in charge of vocabulary. His explanation of the purpose of alternate information networks is as convoluted as a printed circuit: “By utilizing a high variety of conceptual models it is possible to revivify perception and restructure an understanding of the environmental realities apropos its balanced process of negentropic with entropic forces.”

Until three weeks ago, when they moved into a refurbished loft at 24 East 22nd Street, Raindance had no studio and little equipment. For the converted or the curious, they have now initiated a Thursday night open house at the new studio where, for a dollar admission, you can drop by to see home tapes and learn how to employ the ordnance of cybernetic guerrilla warfare.

For the past year, the Raindance mailing address was member Ira Schneider's apartment which he shares with Beryl Korot, editor of a new video newsletter called *Radical Software*. Although Raindance has over 100 hours of videotape in its library, the group points to *Radical Software* as the “single most important project of the alternative video movement.”

The single issue of the newsletter that has appeared features 24 pages of mind-numbing hyperbole and one-liners like “VT is not TV—Videotape is TV flipped into itself.” Although they claim to be innovators in electronic communication, pioneers in what they call “the paperless society,” members of Raindance see no irony in the fact that the product they are most proud of is an old-fashioned magazine.

Global Village directors Rudi Stern and John Reilly shun what they call the “word tripping” of the rival groups. Sitting in their video environment at 454 Broome Street, they talk defensively about the obstacles to running a video “theater.” “We are often accused of exploiting alternative media because we charge admission,” says Reilly. “Actually, we've been working nine months without pay.” They also cite a free Friday night newsreel they initiated last May in response to what they call “irresponsible coverage of the Kent State slayings by the networks” and which they hope to continue at Village Num-

ber Two, due to open this fall near the Fillmore East on Second Avenue.

Village Number One on Broome Street, which featured two shows every Friday and Saturday night and attracted more than 10,000 people at three dollars a head, was a wrap-around theater of nine bulky, mahogany-veneer black-and-white TV sets that probably date from when Milton Berle was “top banana.” Unlike the People's Video Theater program, which changes weekly and features lengthy interviews with groups like the Young Lords and Gay Liberation, the original Village emphasized entertainment more than “alternative news.” The regular program stayed the same for four months, and the biggest drawing card was Reilly's friends John and Samantha making love anxiously in a New Jersey meadow on one TV set while Abbie Hoffman talked about Mayor Daley on another. Reilly knows what sells. In Village Number Two, he explains. “If we don't show that, we'll do something like it.” The new Village will have a similar mix of newsreels, music and erotica, but the environmental approach will give way to two rows of six monitors, facing two separate audiences, and the Broome Street foam rubber mattresses will be replaced by directors' chairs.

Stripped of their rhetoric, the various factions of the underground seem to be moving in the same direction. Right now they are trying to turn their theories about using TV to promote community interaction into grants from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Reilly and Stern want money for a “Global Village Resource Center” that would give seminars on the creative use of video to community groups (they have already been approached by encounter groups, Harlem “self-help” teams and drug addiction centers) and provide a mobile van for taping on location in the New York area. “The day-to-day structure of community problems isn't newsworthy to the networks,” says Stern. “We have to give people the means of making their own media programming that's responsive to their needs.”

Raindance proposes to create a “Center for Decentralized Television” to teach community use of videotape that sounds like the Global Village “resource center.” The People's Video Theater hopes to establish a “community video journalism” which would do the same thing.

The Freex want to gain support for videotape as a community action and organizing tool by taking their Sony cameras and their “pneumatic video theater” to New York City neighborhoods. The “theater” is a blow-up plas-



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" 'Most of cable TV will be nothing but *I Love Lucy* reruns,' says one company."

tic tube that protects equipment from the weather while projecting a video image onto an eight-by-ten-foot outdoor screen. They will do tapes about local issues like slum housing, merchant exploitation and welfare problems and then replay them that evening on the inflated screen.

Each group is optimistic about its eligibility for state money, but Russell Connor, special programs consultant of the New York State Council on the Arts, says, "Our greatest concern is with duplication. The Global Village and Raindance proposals are almost identical."

Even if there is enough grant money to go around for community-action video, which seems unlikely, there is still the problem of distribution for the bulk of the underground's material. Showing their tapes on existing TV channels is out. Established TV broadcasters claim they can't use the material because the Sony half-inch tape is not up to the "broadcast quality" of the standard two-inch tape used in commercial television.

It seems that content rather than tape width is really the issue with the networks. CBS commissioned the Freex early this year to do a pilot program on rock music and the young. "Too upsetting," said CBS when they saw the results. Although the hour-and-a-half special explored experimental theater and inflatable environments as well as rock music, CBS seemed to be most put off by a profile of a private California high school administered almost exclusively by the students. "The students didn't wear ties and they swore a lot," says Cort. "I think our view of reality was too dirty for CBS." CBS was noncommittal and said simply, "The public might accept it in two or three years," and then put it on the shelf.

The underground has high hopes that new markets outside of the networks are about to open up. A new FCC ruling on cable TV that requires nearly 400 cable stations to replace their 1930s movies with original programming by May of next year will allow them, they feel, to surface as full-time video tape producers. Second, the cartridges are coming. Video cassettes that can be mailed across the country to home videoplayers offer a new censor-free means of distribution.

Freedom from network-style domination, however, is not likely to result from the advent of cable TV. While

it fantasizes about a television era harking back to the days when our major cities had a dozen newspapers, one to suit each taste, the underground ignores the fact that many cable stations are underfinanced, most are struggling, and all promise to be hard up for programming in the foreseeable future. "There are a lot of *I Love Lucy* reruns in our future," says one cable company.

Cartridges offer a somewhat brighter prospect, but the first cartridge videoplayers that will appear on the market this summer will come from CBS, one of the corporations the underground despises. Columbia Broadcasting's first choice for their cassettes will be movies at least five years old from Twentieth Century-Fox and comedy spots by Jack Benny and George Burns—those stars you loved on radio.

There are some signs of pulling together among the rival groups. At a recent "alternative media conference," Raindance, Freex and Global Village agreed that each would donate twenty minutes of its best material to a one-hour demonstration tape which would be called "The Catalog." According to Richard Kahlenberg, assistant director of the American Film Institute, plans are under way to exchange videotapes, starting with the now-finished "Catalog," among educational stations like KCET in Los Angeles, KQED in San Francisco and WGBH in Boston.

But while *Radical Software* proclaims "the culture needs new information structures, not just improved content pumped through existing ones," the "Catalog" offers nothing new from a conceptual standpoint. The "best" hour of material from the three groups will radicalize CBS no more than the *East Village Other's* existence has altered the format of the *New York Times*. Like the underground press, the tape is sometimes innovative in subject matter but artistically crude and technically weak.

Washed-out pictures, sound interference and pictures that sometimes flip over as if the vertical hold were orchestrated by a two-year-old are the most glaring defects. The group can't hope to compete technically with the networks which have millions of dollars of equipment, and in fact they are not trying to. "We are trying to find our own esthetic within the capabilities of our equipment," says David Cort, and he has a point. Old army newsreels of Pearl Harbor are technically inferior to *Tora! Tora! Tora!* but vastly more

powerful. Still, the underground has not yet found that esthetic, and the main virtue of its efforts to date is content—material that the networks cannot or will not show—rather than revolutionary new forms of TV programming.

The Global Village tape packs fourteen episodes into twenty minutes, cutting from 60 seconds of a Black Panther rally to Abbie Hoffman describing Hefner's penthouse as a "horny nunnery." Abbie, a favorite of the underground, proves that with overexposure, anyone can become as stale as canned laughter.

The Freex use longer episodes and their piece comes from an evening they spent with the Hells Angels. After hiring a PR man to improve their image, the Angels arranged for the taping in order to explain how "misunderstood" they were. One Angel, attempting a dramatic exit, jumped on his motorcycle only to discover after several embarrassing minutes that he couldn't start.

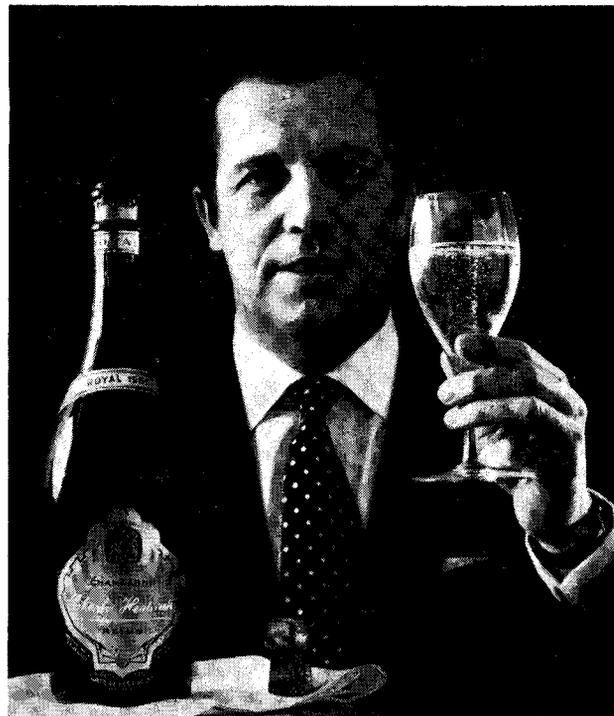
Neither content nor technical quality redeems the Raindance segment, however. The only good thing about the three minutes of Raindance executives making faces at the camera on a beach is that interference from a nearby TV station blocks out more than half of the picture. Following their ego massage at the seashore, they ruin an interview with Buckminster Fuller. The camera angle never seems to change and Fuller is never asked a question. Consequently, he seems to run on until he gets tired and leaves. The tape provides an insight into why Raindance is so proud of its newsletter.

In addition to the rival groups, who are still fighting for money from the State Council on the Arts, there is Jackie Cassen, executive director and camerawoman for an organization just getting off the ground called Video Arts Research. She is optimistic. Two months ago she received an initial grant from the Council to tape 30 half-hour programs on the film and video underground. TelePrompTer's President Irving Kahn (largest U.S. cable operator) and CBS's vice-president of program administration, Irwin Segelstein, have since joined her board of directors. "Although neither of them has made any promises," she says, "they are definitely interested in distributing the material. I think it just has to be good enough."

So while commercial TV may seem mediocre and vulnerable to drastic change—lately it seems even to be putting itself to sleep—material rather than rhetoric will be needed to shake it awake. In the end, despite an impressive revolution in media hardware, the video underground may also have to discover that there is truth in another aphorism—the message is the message. ■

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