

Video and collective creation:

chance and necessity

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In the mid-sixties, video appeared as tool for creation and communication in a socio-cultural context that led artists to generate their works in a participative way. There was a wide range of possibilities, from anonymous audience participation to collective creation, passing through the interaction between the audience and the work, and the co-operation between artists and engineers or technicians. The communications current and the merely artistic side of video where both influenced by the ideology - or perhaps the idealism - of a time (60s/70s) that encouraged co-operation, altruism and rebellion in the face of established values, whether in the field of art or the social and political spheres.

Counterinformation, or the need for collective creation

In the most counter-information and counter-cultural sides of video, video makers created their works within alternative groups, nearly always attributing them as collective products.

With the 70s came the *Guerrilla Television* movement, made up of different radical groups who focused their interests on the confrontation with TV through an impassioned conception of television as an instrument destined to revolutionise the world. *Raindance*, *Ant Farm*, *Telethon*, *Video Freex* and *TVTV* in the US; *Videoheads* in Amsterdam; *Telewissen* in Germany; *TVX* in England and *Video-Nou*¹ in Spain (Barcelona). The term «guerrilla television» comes from the title of a book that would give the movement

its name and a manifesto, and it is significant that *Guerrilla Television* was published in 1971 by a collective, *Raindance Corporation*². This was the same group that published, between 1970 and 1974, *Radical Software*³, the magazine that most and best contributed to encouraging the «subversive» use of the medium.

The magazine included instructions, technical advice about video and other information, mixed with enthusiastic manifestos and zany articles that followed the model of the «underground» publications of the time. In the 1970 summer edition of *Radical Software*, for example, you could read: «Television is not merely a better way to transmit the other culture, but an element in the foundation of a new one (...) to encourage dissemination of the information in *Radical Software* we have created our own symbol of an X within a circle. This is a Xerox mark, the antithesis of copyright, which means: DO COPY»⁴.

As well as promoting the values of collective creation and free and accessible information for all, among the different *Guerrilla Television* collectives there prevailed a strong desire to be useful - to be at the service of others, and to be everywhere - which is reflected in the slogans «Make your own television» from the German group *Telewissen*, «You are information» from *Raindance* and the *People's Television* from the English *TVX*. The idea was to put the focus on the audience, an effort that paralleled what had already begun to happen in the art world when artists decided to share authorship of their works with the public.

The first television broadcasts organised by artists, on public or local TV channels, tried to develop initiatives in which the audience/participants had the chance to communicate over distances «thanks to» television, offering a bi-directional and decentralised communication. In the program *The Medium is the Medium*, broadcast in 1969 by channel WGBH in Boston and organised by Fred Barzyck, the pioneer of action art, Allan Kaprow, began a series of alternative interventions in the channel's programming with his work *Hello!*, a kind of television «happening» that showed the medium's two-way communication potential. In this work, TV audiences could communicate amongst themselves through a closed circuit that linked the WGBH with another four points within the city: MIT, a hospital, a library and an airport.

The counter-TV performance *Media Burn* by California group *Ant farm*, who were a good example of collective creation, was at the crossroads between art and activism. This event was staged as a typical American variety show, where artists perform various feats that risk their physical integrity. It closed with a Cadillac - significantly called the *Dream Car* - crashing against a wall of television sets in flames. But this action, which took place on the mythical date of the 4th of July, 1975, was only possible with the active participation of the audience: it began with 500 friends of the artists entering the site (a parking lot), playing the role of *spectators* to «act like an audience».

In this time of technological euphoria, which was based on the belief that *access equals power*, the emphasis was not on the authorship of the work, but on the newly minted possibility of «equal to equal» communication on the huge mass media circuit. From then until now, alternative video with an activist bent followed this tendency towards anonymous and collective creation, even to the extent that it would sometimes seek shel-

ter in anonymity more *from necessity* than desire.

Videoart: co-operation, participation and interaction

In the realm of art, meanwhile, neo-avant-garde movements were producing a series of artistic manifestos that focused on discrediting the idea of work in art, the use of chance and play, a process-based idea of art work (happenings and performances) and, of course, an attempt to make the author - and the myth of the author - disappear.

Video works that were based on these premises also tended to relativise the importance of the author, although it would soon become obvious that the author could not completely *disappear*. In this way, before collective creation, artists encouraged audience participation and interaction with their work. Artists who used closed circuits in video-performances and video-installations - Dan Graham, Bill Viola, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette,...- tried to encourage audience participation with a simple and conclusive premise: «without an audience there is no work of art»⁵

When visitors are recorded in a closed circuit, the artist was taking the viewer himself as the subject of the work, making him confront new experiences and proposing different options (journey, performance, position, vision), so that it is his own image and actions that sustain the piece. The viewer actively participates in the process, becoming an integral part of a work that he himself can change and transform. To a certain extent, audience participation in these rituals that are pre-established by the artist involve a kind of shared responsibility in the process of creating a work. On one hand, a viewer's role as observer is replaced by that of actor; on the other, it draws attention to the process-based nature of a work that only exists while the audience

is participating: when the viewer leaves the room, the work stops existing.

Collaboration between artists and technicians

During this period, the relationship between art and technology raised the development of human abilities in two problematic areas: the co-operation between artists and technicians, and industrial production in art. Under these determining factors, when artists decided to generate works based on technological experimentation, they became aware of the need for interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration between specialists from both fields.

One of the best examples of this kind of symbiosis began in 1967, when the artist Robert Rauschenberg and the engineer Billy Klüver created *E.A.T (Experiments in Art and Technology)* in New York. This group encouraged personal contact between artists and engineers, and introduced both in industrial organisations; the idea was to allow artists to use factories in the same way that they used their own workshops. EAT gave this role the meaningful name «matching».

There were also spontaneous and personal encounters between people experimenting in the areas of art and technology, which would turn out to be highly fruitful. Engineers and technicians played a big part in the success of the creative processes, as they invented the tools that made the «new images» possible; the works, however, were almost always attributed only to the artists.

The idea of «matching» never managed to become truly operative in the world of art. And although in specialised circuits the name of Nam June Paik is inextricably linked with that of Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, as the name of the Vasulkas is linked to engineers such as Steve Rutt, Bill Etra, George Brown

and Eric Siegal, the artistic splendour of the artists has always prevailed in the minds of the majority.

Once again, the emphasis was not on collective creation, but on the idea of **co-operation** between technicians and artists, who are considered as the «true authors» of the works.

As this field continues to develop, the new inventions and tools available to artists, together with their increasing technical skills (due to inescapable personal experimentation), will create self-sufficient creators-artists, with the collaborative aspects of technicians relegated to the background.

Video and the art market: or the incompatibility of self-managed, multiple or undefined artists

The 60s and 70s recovered the revolutionary spirit of the vanguards of the beginning of the century, reactivating confrontation and systematic criticism of institutions and the art market; a criticism that came, above all, from the artists themselves.

This led to the creation of alternative production and dissemination circuits that, in tune with the ideology of the period, allow participation among different artists, and between artists and the public. In video-art, alternative galleries played an important legitimising role, but it was the independent centres, like the emblematic *The Kitchen*⁶ (New York), or *Vidéographe* (Montreal), that tried to place control of the artists in the hands of artists themselves.

The Kitchen was founded in 1971 by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Bill Etra and Dimitri Devyatkin as an electronic laboratory where artists could experiment together with the possibilities of image and sound, and freely show their works⁷. In that same year, Robert

Forget founded *Vidéographe*, which opened its doors 24 hours a day, offering artists and activists free production, post-production, distribution and exhibition services⁸.

As they couldn't escape from the gradual advance of these new ideas, museums tried to integrate these new forms into their programs, boasting of an astonishing capacity to absorb, which it had clearly demonstrated with the avant-garde movements of the beginning of the century. Rather than betting on new options that changed traditional institutional habits, the art market moulded its own requirements to the exhibition and commercialisation of video, managing to make the most of even the initial obstacles. Like photography, video tapes were easier to distribute than a painting or sculpture: its small size and light weight allowed it to travel much more easily to festivals, museums, galleries and TV stations all over the world.

From the 80s, when video definitively penetrated the art market, the values and principles of the avant-garde movements would be definitively affected by market laws, with the idea of *no-authorship* suffering the biggest crisis.

There were two main reasons for this, both intrinsically interrelated: On one hand, the price of the works⁹, and on the other, the mythologizing of the author. For commercial art, it is essential to clearly determine the identity of the author, given that institutions and collectors base their success and profit on its mythologizing. Works made by collectives in which it's impossible to establish a charismatic, concrete and representative personality, revealed themselves to be completely incompatible with the art market.

The mythologizing of collective creation - chance or necessity?

Video-communication and video-art have followed different paths in relation to the creative process and authorship. While the determining elements of the first have practically «obliged» authors to associate themselves and remain anonymous, in the field of art there have been other factors - direct: the self-mythologizing of artists; and collateral: the omnipresent art market - that have resisted collective creation, so that it is only possible to talk in terms of co-operation (between authors), participation and interaction (between artists and the public).

The prevailing countercultural ideology in the 60s and 70s led to the (over)valuing of participative and community-based situations, and also magnified the idea of collective authoring, which in itself is merely circumstantial.

In the context of art, a video is not *better* because it is a product of collective creation. It's simply a characteristic that neither adds nor subtracts value from the piece - what is the added value of a work attributed to many compared to one attributed to a single artist? Are quantity and quality now equivalent?

In the area of communication, there can only be collective works. Although it may *intellectually belong* to a single director or producer, the great majority of documentary-type videos are a «product» of the creation of a collective made up of sound and lighting technicians, editors....

In any case, we shouldn't speak of ideal situations, but of different ways that we can come to terms with the creative process, which are equally valid and fruitful, and depend just as much on chance as necessity.

NOTES

1. See Carlos Ameller's "Video-Nou" text in >>Forward. Original from the magazine *Banda Aparte* n.16, 1999 http://www.zemos98.org/spip/article.php3?id_article=37
2. Davidson Gigliotti, *A Brief History of RainDance* <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html>
3. *Radical Software* 1970-1974. Nueva York <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/>
4. Cited by Dominique Belloir in *Vidéo Art Explorations, Cahiers du Cinéma*, Hors de série, Editions de l'Etoile, Paris, 1981.
5. . José Ramón Pérez Ornia (ed.) *El arte del video*. RTVE, Madrid, 1991.
6. *The Kitchen* 1971-1973 <http://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/>
7. «In relation to the programs, our idea was to avoid making selection of or decisions of any kind, But simply to allow works to be presented and distributed. No one was ever displaced or favoured. We were among artists, among creators. Among friends. Anybody who had something to show would turn up with their material, their equipment, their audience. After the last session, the audience would help to clear away the chairs and sweep the room. Some artists kept it free, but those that requested an entrance fee were free to keep it all for themselves, share it, or give it to us. Almost all of them gave it to us, which allowed us to print and distribute our monthly program, and have a small kitty for unexpected expenses. Thanks to this diluted form of management, all of us felt that we participated in running The Kitchen, and in this way participation became one of the most important factors of our success, if you can call it that» Woody Vasulka, *The Kitchen*, (1977) en *Steina & Woody Vasulka Vidéastes*.
8. *Vidéographe* <http://www.videographe.qc.ca> «At the level of production, anyone could present a project, which would be studied by a committee, and, if accepted, would be produced at no cost to the author of the project. Distribution focused mainly on cultural centres, universities, groups,...; anyone who wanted to obtain a copy of a program only had to pay the cost of the blank tape». Eugeni Bonet, en *En torno al video*. Bonet, Dols, Mercader y Muntadas. Gustavo Gili, Colección Punto y Línea, Barcelona, 1980.
9. «The high prices are a sign of high quality that opens up the doors of the museum, and allows, by the same consecration, to raise prices even higher. The process described here is the transformation of an art work into a product, a transformation that is necessary if it is to enter the market and so fulfil its destiny». Alberto Corazón (ed.) *Constructivismo*. serie A n.19 Comunicación, Madrid, 1973.



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