

Interviews of the Videofreex, Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, Bart Friedman, Davidson Gigliotti, Mary Curtis Ratcliff, Parry Teasdale, Carol Vontobel, Ann Woodward, Abina Manning and Tom Colley, lead by Sibylle de Laurens and Pascaline Morincôme between June 2014 and October 2016 in New York City (NY), Saugerties (NY), and Chatham (NY) and from Paris, in connexion with Desert Hot Springs (CA) et Berkeley (CA).

Pascaline Morincôme & Sibylle de Laurens: At the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, different video groups were created such as Raindance Corporation, Global Village and People's Video Theater, this was made possible by the introduction in the U.S.A. of SONY's first video recorder, the Portapak. Videofreex was part of this "Videosphere". How did you start to work as a collective?

Skip Blumberg: In 1967, Sony introduced this half-inch video for two markets: one was schools; the other was industry. I think tourism and other home-use were a third consideration, but artists and activists picked up the camera.

There were all these little communities of people that applied video in different ways: some in the art world, some in music, some in business, some in schools, some in news and TV.

Mary Curtis Ratcliff: In 1968, David and I were living in New York and he had a camera. He went to Woodstock, (...) and he came back with the camera and Parry. There is a saying in English that goes, "if you can't beat them, join them". So the three of us decided to start a group. We would just go and shoot anything that was of interest. Music, marches, etc.

P&S: One of the particularities of Videofreex in comparison to the other video groups at that time, is that you started to work for one of the biggest television networks in the U.S.A. The Videofreex – David, Parry and Mary Curtis - were chosen by a CBS producer, Don West to work on a new pilot program that West hoped would replace The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, a show the network judged too controversial.

Mary Curtis: Yes, it's how we became a group. All of a sudden there was too much work to do and we had to hire other people, so we took Nancy to Chicago with us. At that time she was working for CBS (*ed. note: she was Don West's assistant*).

Skip: Carol introduced me to the Videofreex. She and Nancy were friends before Videofreex... they were roommates in uptown Manhattan. And when Nancy started working with Don West, the Videofreex needed help. So I left my job teaching and I started working with the Videofreex on the CBS project, in September or October of 1969.

Mary Curtis: We needed a technical person who really knew what to do and we found Chuck Kennedy. David met Davidson in a bank; he had a camera in his hand (laugh)! And then Bart came. We met Ann after CBS at an exhibition at Brandeis University (MA).

Ann Woodward: Yes, I was a curatorial assistant as a student at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University. The director was Russell Connor, who had been involved in the first network television program about video art at WGBH in Boston. He created the exhibition "Vision and Television" which brought in a lot of video artists. This was Waltham, Massachusetts, in February 1970. Videofreex were part of that show.

I had an offer to stay on at the museum through the summer and after that, I could either stay on working in the basement of the Rose Art Museum which was pretty mundane, or I could do something more fun, like move to New York and get involved with the group. So that's what I did.

P&S: Paradoxically, for *Subject to Change*, which was about recording all the important events happening in the counter-culture at that time, you worked for CBS, one of the major TV networks. Why did you accept the job?

Mary Curtis: To tell the honest truth, although some people might not agree with this, we didn't have a lot of money. We were living on 25 dollars a week. But we did get money for a certain period of time; it was only for 5 or 6 months, from CBS. And it gave us the possibility to go to Chicago and to California. Because we couldn't afford that before. But it was difficult to be working for CBS and be part of the counterculture. There was a huge tension there.

I remember in Chicago, we had talked to Abbie Hoffman and then we talked to William Kunstler (ed. note: *William Kunstler was the lawyer of the Chicago Seven*). We were in his office and Tom Hayden (ed. note: *he was founder of Students for a Democratic Society*) was there too and we were videotaping him. William Kunstler said "Are you working for someone?" and we said "yes"....and he said "who are you working for?" We said "CBS" and he immediately said "Erase all the tape that you just made of me", and Parry just did exactly what he said and erased the tapes.

P&S: During the *Subject to Change* period, you did an interview of one of the members of the Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton who was killed by the police a couple of months after that. How did the Black Panther Party accept to make an interview with you as CBS reporters?

Mary Curtis: We had to be honest with them and say we were working for CBS. The money that allowed us to come to Chicago was paid for by CBS. But we said that we would make sure that CBS would not have this material, and that actually was what happened. Because we were up in the country in upstate New York in a farmhouse editing the video for *Subject to Change* and we read or heard on the radio that Fred Hampton was killed by the police. And then we were even more determined not to let CBS get those tapes. We finished the edit, we left the tapes up in the farmhouse and for some dumb reason, we came back to Manhattan. They sent a private airplane or helicopter up to that same farmhouse and they stole those tapes of Fred Hampton and Abbie Hoffman.

Bart Friedman: CBS wanted to exploit our relationship with the counterculture. We were able to talk to people that would not talk to CBS. The executives were supposed to come down to our loft in Soho to look at the result of our work. Don West wanted to add some CBS network footage about Fred Hampton's funeral. Parry said "you can't use that footage and if you try we won't do the show".

Mary Curtis: After that, Skip and Parry went to the CBS building on 53rd St with an empty guitar case and they got the tapes back. We really had to do that because we promised the Panthers, it was a point of honor that CBS would not hang on to those tapes and be able to do what they wanted to with it.

P&S: In 1969, you actually did present the *Subject to Change* pilot, as a multi-monitor video and sound installation performed live in the Videofreex loft in front of the CBS producers and they refused the project. After that, you kept on doing screenings in your loft every week. Those were the *Friday Night Screenings*, what was their concept?

Mary Curtis: Yes, that was after CBS. Because we were not the only group, there were many video groups and artists, and none of us could get on broadcast television and we wanted to show each other what we were doing.

Videofreex had a loft on Prince Street, in Soho, it was not yet Soho, but it became Soho. And we would invite everybody and by word of mouth it would get an audience. And we showed each other what we had videotaped and people would bring their tapes. It was around the same time as The Kitchen. At the time there were only three television stations in America, NBC, ABC, CBS. So what we were doing was really very different. We were recording the counterculture and none of their cameras were there. CBS was not there, ABC or NBC. We were hippies, we were inside the counterculture. All we had to do was point the camera in any direction. We just ran out with the equipment and videotaped whatever was happening. It was a real revolution in this country at that time.

Carol Vontobel: We absolutely videotaped everything that moved. If it happened we videotaped it. There are hours and hours of tapes of how to make a basket, how to shear a sheep, you know, there was just everything! Every dance crew, every theater. Just all kinds of tapes, just everything. Some of those tapes will never be seen again

P&S: At that time, the counterculture was intrinsically linked to the antiwar movements. Videofreex participated to the Mayday Protests, videotaping and sharing images of police violence, and edited a fifty-minute tape as part of the Mayday Video Collective. You also recorded the Days of Rage in Chicago in 1969, the Women's Liberation March in New York in 1970, and how the movements organized themselves. What was your involvement in those political issues? Your position during these demonstrations?

Mary Curtis: It was the position of wanting to record what was happening, none of us were in a political group. At that time there were groups of women, support groups for women about feminism, consciousness rising, but none of us women in Videofreex were in those groups, for some reason.

Nancy, Carol and I went to the Women's Lib demonstration in Manhattan, just to record what was going on and that was the reason to do it, just to record it. Also it took us a while to figure out what was sexism. I grew up in the 1950s (...) and so it was all very new, the idea of not only being a mother, a teacher, a nurse or a secretary, that there were other possibilities was a new idea. I was like 26, 27, so I wished that I had gotten smarter earlier and been in that wonderful big march on the Fifth Avenue where all the thousands and thousands of women were there.

What I tried to do is to give information through the *Curtis' Abortion* tape. In 1970, all of a sudden in the state of New York it was legal to have an abortion, for the first time ever. So I wanted to give the other women that information in case they needed it. So that was a radical thing to do. And I had hard times saying yes to do it and after that to have this tape restored because it was very very personal to me. But still I think it was a good thing to do. It was a risk that I took to get the information out.

P&S: What was the link between this new politically involved video community, which considered itself as activist and the artistic avant-garde?

Nancy Cain: I never thought I was making "art" when I picked up the video camera. I recorded events and talked intimately with people I met, and even though it was video to me, Barbara London the first video curator at MoMA would happily play the tapes; for example, a long portrait video of "Sharon" talking about her life as a battered woman and subsequent escape to freedom.

As Barbara saw it, it was art. So it was art. There are many examples of this sort of video that have morphed from “things I did” and “things I saw” and “things that happened” into rarified moments in time that were thought of as art, by a certain crowd.

The Freex loft, on Prince Street in 1970, with snazzy galleries springing up, and some Freex related to them and liked to mingle with the serious high-priced art crowd and partake of the finest hors d'oeuvres. Looking back it seems to me they were always two factions within the group, the “artists” and the “documentarians”. But if there were an art show being produced by Freex, we would all participate.

Ann: Videofreex is considered as an art group now, but it really wasn't. It was more political, – news and information, “semi-documentaries,” and getting the media out to the people.

Davidson Gigliotti: Anti-intellectualism was a common stance on the radical left of the late sixties and early seventies. Elitism was the clear enemy, and the term was generally applied to government and institutions, but could also be applied to individuals who displayed arrogance or spoke from positions of authority.

When I say radical, applied to American activists of the sixties and seventies, I do not propose that they were all Marxist scholars, readers of Sartre, Althusser, the Frankfurt School, Frederic Jameson, or Chairman Mao. Some had that knowledge, of course. But most of the people I knew were responding to the direct experience of America in the sixties.

They understood television. Most had never known a time without TV, and all had had certain shared experiences; grades K to 12 in the fifties, college in the 60s, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation, the killings at Kent State College, the nightly news on NBC, ABC, and CBS. American radicalism of the sixties grew, I believe, from these experiences.

Regarding the establishment art scene, the Videofreex, Raindance, and the Ant Farm, were outsiders. During the sixties the important writers and galleries were committed to Pop Art in painting. In sculpture Minimalism was ascendant. The nascent video community was never a consideration. An exception was Nam June Paik, who was a recognized artist in Europe, not so much as a video artist, but as a music composer and avant-garde performer. That helped, but even he was on the establishment fringes here in America.

This is not to say that the art world was blind to video. But it was a matter of being properly credentialed.

Bruce Nauman, for example, had the right credentials, an MFA from UC Davis, and an association with several important West Coast artists like William Wiley and Wayne Thiebaud. In 1968 he started working with video, using the hour-long tape format of the early CV studio decks to record certain durational performance pieces. Nauman was a recognized artist in the establishment art world. Leo Castelli gave him a show in New York featuring his videotapes in 1969. Videos by Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Lynda Benglis, etc., soon appeared in the Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films catalogue.

My point here is that video was OK if you were already a recognized artist whose work in other disciplines was known. The establishment art scene was not interested in Videofreex.

Skip: Some of us had art backgrounds. We had friends who were artists. We were invited to exhibit, we went to conferences and screenings in art museums, and we received art grants, but we were videomakers. We really saw ourselves as TV people.

There was a development of video art in the art world that was contained. The art world was part of what we showed in, but we also showed in community centers, we were applying it as an activist tool; we were applying it in a lot of different forms. The video tools were created for a sort of home use and industrial use, but we saw that there could be television use.

Television was a shared experience. Everybody watched at the same time. There was no instant replay at home; you had to watch it live. There was no VCR, there were no recording. It was like a shared community experience and very powerful for entertainment and news.

Now there is time shifting, streaming television. Some people don't watch television at all anymore; television will be obsolete someday soon.

But the point is, the tools were not intended by Sony and the other manufacturers to be used to make television.

We used it and we were rejected by the TV stations first because of vertical blanking, because of vertical sync... if the 15,750 cycles per second frequency wasn't exactly right the tapes wouldn't play properly on televisions receiving their signals broadcast over the air through their TV's rabbit-ears antenna. So then the time-base error corrector was invented, which allowed our videos to go on broadcast television. It took our tapes' signal that was not exact, it locked it into a solid signal. It replaced vertical blanking with new vertical blanking that could be sync'ed at the TV station. It kept the picture the same, but it replaced blanking and sync, so our work could be transmitted and seen by millions of people, even if Sony never intended it to be like that.

P&S: In 1971, Michael Shamberg, member of Raindance Corporation published the founding text "Guerilla Television", about this generational movement of video makers that would produce a new kind of independent television, with educational and social goals.

The same year, you decided to leave New-York to settle in the Catskills Mountains, in the small village of Lanesville (New-York) where you produced your own independent and local TV program called *Lanesville TV*.

Parry Teasdale: Yes, Governor Nelson Rockefeller set up the New York State Council of the Arts funding to grow from about a million or 2 million to 20 million in one year. And back then it was a huge amount... and that created quite some controversy and the reason that we actually left to go upstate was because we realized with some good advice from people who knew about such things that the money was going to be spread out over a lot of groups and there wasn't much going on upstate.

P&S: You rented an old boarding house called Maple Tree Farm and turned it into a video center welcoming people interested about this new technology and organizing workshop all around the state. At that time, this public program also supported other media centers such as the Experimental Television Center or the Alternate Media Center and gave you the possibility to install an economy and to sustain the life of your group.

Parry: It was necessity that drove us together. But when we worked together it worked very well because there was this shared understanding of the need for a group approach to make it happen. There were disagreements, actually there was not even a shared concept of or political outlook but we had general agreements: we were all opposed to the war, we had nothing good to say about the Nixon administration and domestic policies, and we knew we were being spied on by the government (*ed. note: Maple Tree Farm was spied-on by the FBI*). At that time, everybody was experimenting with ways of making communities. Creating communities kind of instantly was perhaps an unrealistic expectation, anyway. But we had a community of interest where we could find people who were interested in using the same tools, but not for the same end. That made it distinctly different from having a dogma, an ideology.

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community of interest where we could find that the people who were interested in using the same tools, but not for the same end. That made it distinctly different from having a dogma, an ideology.

Carol: And we had a one-inch deck.

Parry: Well yes we had invested early-on in that technology. And we had the ability to support it because we had a technical person working with us, Chuck Kennedy. Working with him we were able to make the equipment to do a lot of things that it wasn't supposed to do and blend the portable cameras with multi-cameras systems or to do editing.

The editing suite that we had was sophisticated for this time. It's primitive now but it would allowed us to do clean electronic cuts and to insert pieces of video in other pieces of video and took it in the editing process, that was really too expensive to do most anywhere else.

Carol: And that's what we were funded to do, to teach people. That's how we got money from the State Council. I'm not exactly sure that we would have (...) been able to keep the money some other way, so people came because of course we needed to do that.

Parry: And because we were interested in doing it. The thing was that our interests coincided with the interests of the whole community because everybody wanted to be able to make more refined work. And you couldn't do that with the tools as they were presented.

Skip: People would come here to Maple Tree Farm and stay for a while. People came from all around the U.S. and the world, and we hosted them, with grants to pay for part of it, so we never charged our visitors.

P&S: Related to Videofreex willingness to contribute to the democratization of video, you also designed and edited a user manual. This kind of guide was actually really popular at that time. Abbie Hoffman's book *Steal this Book*, also has a chapter about how to make your own pirate TV.

Carol: It was a big movement at that time. Everybody was doing that. You can compare it to *The Whole Earth Catalogue*.

Ann: Yes, we did *The Spaghetti City Video Manual*. Parry wrote it, I illustrated it and Chuck was the kind of the technical consultant.

Parry: The funny thing is that I actually signed an agreement with a publishing house in Paris; it had to be in 1975. And they would have translated and published it in French and it never happened. But the Germans did the translation, took all the pictures, and made a pirate edition just spiral bound. And we couldn't complain because here we were running a pirate television station. But mainstream television was just the opposite of this idea. You couldn't see something after it had been originally aired.

P&S: Some other Media Centers, as dedicated places for video and technical democratization, controlled their own diffusion, and were running their own TV program on local or cable TV channels.

Videofreex economic strategy is interesting as you were working and living with the support of the state under the name of Media Bus which at the same time gave you the possibility to run your own illegal TV channel. How did you technically start to produce *Lanesville TV*, as an illegal program?

Bart: We were hacking. Hacking became a popular notion a few years ago, so I use that word now and I apply it to the things we did when we started. We took a modulator that created a Channel 3 signal. When we bought the equipment there was a little portable RF unit in the battery compartment and this modulator would turn the video signal into A TV signal. You put a wire from the modulator to the terminals on the back of your television set and turn the channel selector to Channel 3 because the modulators were all Channel 3 and all televisions had a blank Channel 3. It was like a dead zone. So you plug it in and at the moment when the wire touches the terminal at the back of the TV set you get the channel 3 signal. So we had one that was about the size of a big bread box and it was used, along with a signal amplifier, for transmitting our video signals from our roof-top antenna to the town.

Parry: Mainstream television had special effect boards. They used them constantly in TV shows but they didn't do much with it. And they would use a switcher that could dissolve or fade out to black or fade up. Very quickly, Sony came out with something called the SEG 1, Special Effects Generator. It was a small little box with faders and switches for cameras. It was meant to be for little schools systems, organization or amateurs but it was meant to work with a little studio cameras, so everybody would stand behind the tripod. That would be the miniaturization and the bargain basement version of a big TV studio.

We didn't use cameras like that, we didn't put them on tripods, we liked to get them off, to walk around with the camera and to be engaged. So, we began to assemble what amounted to the equipment for TV production house but focus on the small equipment. And focus on mobile production, bringing back in the studio and then blending it in some way either a live presentation or videotape programs that would include the editing. So we invested in one of those SEG 1 boxes very early on. And we were then able to do multi-camera television production.

The one thing is that we didn't really have a very good piece of equipment for what was an intercom. In television it's all command and control, talk down approach to have you create something. CBS had given us these old telephone operator headsets; I guess they were still using it for television, but they never worked exactly right, we hated them, so we got rid of it. And then, if you had a good shot, the camera people and the action is really dictated by what was going on, it was chaotic, and it wasn't smooth, but it gives you a different sense, it was not some plotted script thing, it was spontaneous and that has good and bad aspect to it but it generated some excitement.

The best of it was when for instance for the CBS show, when we did the music, the music lends itself to fast cutting and fast switching and to people getting eye camera angles, so everyone who was doing the switching could work with the rhythm of the music but the camera was also working with the rhythm of the music and nobody was saying "Camera 2, get the guitar player, Camera 1 get the bass player, the drummer". It was much more spontaneous. I'm not saying we invented it, since there have been millions of hours produced for music videos and things, but it was a way of working that was different from what we had seen on television.

P&S: How were you perceived by the community of Lanesville? How did you involve them in the videos and the TV?

Bart: We were ten or eleven of us. We arrived driving a Volkswagen van and we were long haired, and we were from the city. The people were curious but they still were hostile because they suspected that we were going to use drugs, sleep with their daughters, whatever, I don't know. But all those fears of foreigners came out.

I'm still friendly with John, the little boy in Bart's Cowboy Show. His family lived in a trailer in town. There were two parents, one girl and four boys. John was about seven and he was the kid that picked up gravel and threw it at our car when he first saw us and yelled, "You dirty hippies!" So I thought to myself, "Oh, this is good kid! He's brave, he's got a voice, and he hates us", So I decided to make him a video star!

Nancy: I think that *Lanesville TV* did have a role in the community development in Lanesville. They liked us and we liked them.

P&S: We are interested in how the tapes produced in Lanesville can be considered as a new type of activist imagery in regard to the ones recorded in demonstrations or your interviews with political leaders. The tapes made in Lanesville are a new way to share your political engagement and to record things – as fiction or non-fiction - beyond the limits of television and cinema.

Ann: *Sybil*, for example, is sort of art and sort of politics. Nancy was interviewing and Carol was the face upside down, the chin was the top of the head, and they painted the eyes and mouth with makeup and lipstick. It's a conversation. Nancy is interviewing Sybil about what she thinks about the feminists. I think it was made in Lanesville. And as I remember the character Sybil was not too liberated. It was kind of ironic. And as I remember it, the character Sybil was not too liberated. It was kind of ironic.

Nancy: As far as I am concerned, I wasn't interested in the "documentary form." I wasn't that interested in television or film. Video is not TV or movies. It has been said that video is VT, not TV. It's dyslexic.

While editing the videotape *Harriet* it occurred to me that what I was creating was a docu-fantasy. Maybe you can call it documentary, but really it is a unique form of its own.

My background was in theater. I had no background in art or documentary. I didn't study media and approached video from a place in my mind that had no rules. So what I produced had no script, no director, no design element to speak of. I would share the creative process with everyone involved in production both in front of and behind the camera. Then later in the editing process, I would create a media product designed for the entertainment of our audience. Even though I had no formal training, interestingly, when I went to Hollywood, I got jobs as a field director. The first job I got was at Fox TV when it first started, on a late night show called "The Wilton North Report". I showed them a reel of *Lanesville TV* and they hired me.

P&S: By recording these tapes made in your living room or at least in the Lanesville community, your private sphere was used with the political aim to be spread in the public realm. We can perceive your political or at least video engagement in these images taken in your intimacy, and consider them as politicized images.

It is something interesting in regards to your audience, the way that you involve them, in your political goals and your community. *Lanesville TV* programs were broadcasted just a couple a kilometers around.

Some of you have experienced different scale of distribution during and after Videofreex, with TTV for example. The shootings were well organized and you were aired by important channels and networks. You actually had reviews on national newspaper etc. It was something really different from *Lanesville TV*, from your way to work to your local audience.

How was the public involved in this alternate TV movement? What was your relation with the question of audience?

Skip: We experimented with what was unique about the new tools. And finally we experimented with the tools interacting with people... whether it is an interactive video installation, with visitors coming to the gallery sitting down and becoming part of the artwork themselves, or at the other end TV shows, a pirate TV station with viewers calling in and seeing themselves on tapes or in our studio live... Because the camera could record in low light, because it could record long takes, because the tapes were cheap, we could take the camera to places cameras had not gone before. But we also took the TV set to a lot of places: we put the TV set in a taxi cab playing videos of cab drivers, or in a railroad train dining car playing back tapes we recorded earlier to the staff and fellow passengers on screen, who had never seen video before!

Parry: The problem with video was there was not much of a way to play it to large audiences. You could gather people and set up a monitor, like set up your computer here and set up the video recorder and play tape, but even if you invited people there wasn't a place or a mechanism to get it out. That's what was happening during that time. Cinema had a distribution system, they didn't belong to union, maybe, but there were definitively organized, they were particularly effective all the time. They could get films out to campuses and to community groups where there were availabilities. And there was a lot of technology in place; the 16mm projector was ubiquitous in school.

That is the problem we confronted and the solution was twofold. One is to first of all have this pirate television station not necessarily in the order of priority and the other was to train people how to do it for themselves so they could applied what they were doing to whatever mechanism, avenue or distribution came available to them. So sometimes there would even be Public Television stations although very infrequently. Mostly it was cable and sometimes it was community performances...

And then there was this group TVTV I didn't really do the shooting but Skip, and Nancy and Bart were all very involved and Chuck was there too. They managed to get TV time but these, by video standards, were highly polish documentaries, look at the editing of the Republican and Democratic Convention in 1972.

Nancy: I'm amazed to find in answering this that it barely made a difference to me from delivery system to delivery system, from audience to audience. My concept of video did not change. The video was consistent. A wider audience does not change the way video is in my mind. Transitions in location and venue were for me pretty seamless. My POV shooting style improved a bit, but didn't change. *The Nightowl Show* in Woodstock was a logical progression from *Lanesville TV*. Programming was produced by community members who all had different ideas and were quite diverse. There were no restrictions set on any of the producers. It made the channel quite surprising but it also got us in a lot of trouble with the Woodstock city council, the cops and the district attorney, but that's another story.

P&S: In 1978, after eight years in Maple Tree Farm, the last of the Videofreex left Lanesville, which ended the collective.

Why did you take this decision to stop the *Lanesville TV* project and not to live together anymore?

Davidson: In 1973 OPEC imposed an oil 'embargo' in response to America's involvement with Israel's Yom Kippur War. This and other causes began a cycle of inflation, making money worth less and less. This impacted the Videofreex, of course, since most of our income at that time came from NYSCA grants, and was relatively fixed. By 1975, when I left for the city, it was harder to sustain life at Maple Tree Farm for nine people who lived there.

Parry: Many people considered themselves to be full time artists and, they were going in one direction. Others were trying to figure out what was going on, and I put myself in that kind of realm: how do you make a living of this, how do you sustain it? Those are difficult questions but it also seems worthwhile especially because of the connection we developed with the community.

To share and export it was a real challenge. While we were developing a pirate television station, cable TV was coming in with access channels which made it completely legal and completely easy to do it and the challenge was, what are you going to do now?! And there were real active experiments, not even experiments, programs that developed out of that.

With Cable TV, channels were available to whoever subscribed to Cable Television. At first there weren't very many people but it became a few hundred thousand, which was a lot by our standards. And there were regulations. Over a certain number of subscribers cable TV production had to offer a certain numbers of channels...and then people realized they could put stuff on it and of course people who were really eager to do community experimentation and community work came along. But the pornographers came along, and ... basically the whackos took over ...

Now, I'm a publisher, local newspaper, I'm still in community media, much like *Lanesville TV*. I did a lot of other things. I produced video programs in various ways, and then I get involved with one of the people who visited Lanesville was a guy who worked with Ant Farm and TVTV, but he was a lawyer and later he became the head of something called the Low Power TV Task Force at the Federal Communication Commission and he was working on making TV stations like *Lanesville TV* legal. And he asked me to write a report about *Lanesville TV*. Strangely enough, in 1980, Low Power TV was adopted by this commission of the Federal Government, the one that regulated all broadcasting access.

All the news media were interested in the Low Power TV, I think it was on the front page of the New York Times: "First New Broadcast Service in Twenty years" and it became legal to do what we did in *Lanesville TV* in a much higher power.

Carol: Our dream was that everybody could make their own TV and everyone does now. When access came it wasn't taken advantage of it in many cases.

But in some cases it was. All the sudden, the importance of what we did was based on how people thought it was valuable, not on its novelty. We were no longer novelty. And that changed the way we had to think about what we did.

And also we were all easily bored. We didn't want just to make this thing and do it forever. We just wanted to do new things. And that's apparently why people spun off too. We got to be "hey this is the new thing, let's do this". You can really get into that. Once you got the taste of it. So that's what happened also. It was just, if there is something good to do, let's do that. Doing television programming like *Lanesville TV* that's really hard work and tedious after a while.

P&S: In his essay "A Proposal for a New Television Network" Tom Weinberg detailed how after revolutionizing the production and the TV broadcasting, alternate television communities will have to control its distribution. He proposed the creation of a new independent television network. Independent videomakers and producers never had their own control on their distribution, but TVTV can be an example of the fact that some videomakers tried to change the way television is made from the inside by accepting to be distributed by the major networks.

It is also interesting to point that some of the Videofreex members were at various scales, also involved in some bigger production after the group ended.

Skip: Video was brand new and so we were able to break down that hierarchal approach and just operate by consensus and collaboration and so men, women, whatever, we all just did jobs and

helped each other. We didn't have this strict job like "lighting designer," anyone could do any job according to their skills and interests.

I worked very hard to get my camera skills professional quality, and that way after a while other indy videomakers invite me to shoot for them. So that's how I got into TVTV. So we had roles based on skills.

I went on to specialize in producing and directing hundreds of TV shows for PBS and National Geographic TV, for websites like www.MyHero.com, and fund-raising videos for non-profits, mostly educational agencies, but I have continued as an independent filmmaker producing video art, single channel work and multi channel installations, performance videos like *In Motion with Michael Moschen*, cultural documentaries about events and phenomena like Eskimo sports, a rodeo for elephants, bonobos in a zoo in Florida, and my most well-known show *Pick Up Your Feet: the Double Dutch Show*, that I think is still in the collection at Pompidou. I hope to find out while I'm in Paris for the exhibition at TREIZE in January.

Ann: I never really had anything to do with making videotapes. With Carol, I worked on cataloging things and labelling things, getting some kind of order. I would do sort of supplemental things, like when David went to Israel and did a lot of taping I would look at the stuff, screen it, and log the tapes in with descriptions of what had been shot. I kind of soaked up from Parry and David what editing was. After I moved back to New York City, (...) my friend Russell Connor called me and said that he had left the museum, to work for the New York State Council on the Arts. He did that for a while and then became an independent producer. He said, "Why don't you come and help me, because I have a show that has to be edited". I was sort of interested in editing because it was like making a collage. I worked for him for three or four years and then I got a job as an editor in an editing house and I spent maybe ten years doing that. I worked for many years on the Barbara Walker's show. I became a nurse in 1992, and finally now can devote my time to my work in mixed media painting and collage.

Bart: Nancy and I moved 20 miles east into Woodstock, New York, where we incorporated a not-for-profit, public access cable channel that we helped operate for another ten years. It still thrives.

P&S: Videofreex took the decision to digitalize the tapes. What was your relation to the question of conservation and archiving?

Skip: We saved about fifteen hundred tapes, but we recorded thousands. We lost only forty or fifty tapes that were on our shelves in Lanesville, but we lost a lot of tape by sending originals to other video groups around the world or just recording over previous recordings. Because after we would make a tape, and we might record over it, because to recycle and save money. We shoot a tape, we show it on Friday night, and then, we would make another recording on the same tape and show it the next Friday.

So a recording wasn't precious, you know... we didn't preserve individual "works of art" during a certain period. We called it "process" versus "product." Product, you work carefully to make something and then you save it, and you have this product. Process is about the interplay, the interaction, about time passing, it's about making something, and then throwing it away, making something else. And that's what process was about. Some of our works were process-oriented, but some of our work were also product-oriented, that's why we have fifteen hundred tapes left, because we did have a big bookshelf, in Prince Street in the control room, and then in Lanesville there was a viewing room in the parlor, it was filled with hundreds of tapes, and it kept growing, more and more as the years passed

Parry: But the issue of preservation is a big question. And maybe as we grow older, the concept of preserving for some of us seems more important, because what else we do of our lives. That's ok,

I think it is fine but I'm not as invested, and I speak only for myself. It doesn't make anything less valuable and I've written about it (...) but that's something I did and I'm doing something else now.

Carol: And the idea of looking for the stuff, finding stuff, was not fun actually. "Did I save this, did I not save this"... I'd rather not think about it. (...) You know for at least twenty years I never even thought about Videofreex. Maybe thirty. Parry and I, we used to have the tapes in our attic and it pulled the wall away from the ceiling, it was so heavy on the floor. The house was sinking! I had no idea where there were going to go.

Parry: Yes and Video Data Bank came and took it all away and they catalogued it. The technology that was so wonderful for editing ended up eating much of my tape with blue mold. And I lost several years of work, and I say, you know, maybe I'll find something else to do. Now that I've seen that some of the tapes that have been restored, I'm actually curious.

Davidson: Several of the Videofreex have always been concerned to preserve our tapes. We did not always have the same reasons for wanting to do so, and it took until about 2002 to get a plan together. That was about the same time that Jon Nealon and Jenny Raskin began to approach us. It all came together with Video Data Bank and Jon and Jenny at about the same time.

P&S: The problem of storing and preserving video tapes seems to be one of the urgent reasons that encourages today's conservation and digitization process as described by Deirdre Boyle in «Video preservation : securing the future of the past». But how did the collaboration between Videofreex and Video Data Bank started?

Abina Manning and Tom Colley: In 2000, Kate Horsfield, a co-founder and then director of the Video Data Bank, met with Parry and Carol and interviewed them as part of Kate and the Video Data Bank's ongoing interview series On Art and Artists. From this initial conversation, the process of collaboration on the preservation and distribution of the Freex archive began.

It took several years of discussions about the best way ahead for an agreement to be drawn up between the Videofreex and the Video Data Bank, and for the preservation of the tapes to begin. In October 2006 an agreement was signed between Video Data Bank's Director, Abina Manning, and the Videofreex representative Skip Blumberg.

P&S: We are also interested in Skip's recent work of re-edit made with some of Videofreex videos, in a form of «hacking» of Videofreex tapes. Indeed, Videofreex maintains an ambivalent position regarding they own archives. Besides the digitalization process taken in charge by Video Data Bank and the diffusion fees demanded by the organization, some videos are available on YouTube. Could we consider this a way for Videofreex work to once again escape institutionalization?

Davidson: Skip feels free to edit, and in some ways that is like a continuation of the Videofreex story. I watched his most recent compilation and the thought occurred to me that it should be shown in tandem with Jon and Jennie's film. The reason is that the film tends to focus more on the people and the lifestyle, but not on the work particularly. Skip's compilations focus on the video work, not on the lifestyle at Maple Tree Farm. That's a good thing. The film is a good thing also, but Skip's work enhances it.

Skip: Our goals are to restore and diffuse as much of collection as is called for by demand. Distribution via Video Data Bank is a way to support these efforts, in addition to grant support that VDB raises. The Videofreex Pirate TV channel is just beginning with a goal of supporting our web

presence forever. Our work is an evergreen portrait of the utopian 1970s and we will always be among the first to use this medium that everyone carries around in his or her pocket now, with smart phone video recording. We hope that our legacy will be a model of applying technology for higher values, of using technology as a tool of activism and for artistic experiment into the future. The YouTube Videofreex channel and the videos that I post on YouTube and Vimeo are our way of conforming to the notion of open sourcing that we began in the 1970s. Then there are, ironically, the video pirates' videos that have been pirated and posted by contemporary digital pirates.

P&S: Videofreex was using the alternate television medium and was supporting - with the Friday Night concept, the Video Theater and *Lanesville TV* - an access to their images as broad as possible.

Today, for entirely understandable economic reasons, the diffusion of the tapes are subdued to fees. But what is the impact of this on the diffusion of the work and the political and social aspects of Videofreex work?

Abina Manning and Tom Colley: Founded in the mid-1970s, the Video Data Bank grew out of this same organic and rhizomic time period as the Videofreex. The Video Data Bank has always worked with almost exclusively artistic, activist and countercultural video makers.

We are finding that many people are interested in seeing these early approaches to the use of video, and learning about video's early history as an alternative to mainstream television culture. The democratic use of video by artists and activists resonates with younger audiences, who take for granted that their telephones record every aspect of their lives, whether selfies of themselves alone or with loved ones, or recordings of live events on the streets.

One tension that we have noticed is that while the work of Video Data Bank and other distributors has been important, and somewhat successful, in both fostering awareness and scholarship of video and media art, it often costs too much for many people to access more work through screening rentals. On the other hand, it is part of our mission to ensure that artists get paid for the exhibition of their work. Video Data Bank TV has been our way to bridge this gap.

P&S: What is the point for you to exhibit Videofreex in the museums and what is the importance of transmitting Videofreex vision and political statement today?

Davidson: The Videofreex moment was unique to its time. The essence of it, the newness of the portable analog video medium, the psychological impact of seeing oneself as an active media participant, not just as a passive viewer, was almost shocking in its intensity. But now these characteristics have largely been subsumed within our constantly changing digital culture. The cell phone is the direct descendent of the portapak.

The Videofreex do have an historic claim. They were present at the beginning of all this, and they were aggressive in pursuing the agenda of change as it applied to all media. They were very early in the process of combining dissemination with dialogue in media. This is important and they are notable for pioneering in this.

You can argue that museums themselves are elitist institutions, certainly. That was the opinion of some of the Videofreex. But that, in a sense, is to call the entire project of history elitist. There are those who do, who equate history with baggage. I am not one of these. This has isolated me sometimes, because it puts me in a position where I cannot always agree with my friends. I was never the most politically correct of the Videofreex. I've always been interested in history and politics and how cultures change. I have often felt more like an observer than a participant.

Skip: At that time we considered that art museums were institutions, were agents of the status quo. There were about preserving what existed. we wanted to forget what existed and just move on.

So we saw art museum as agents of the status quo and we were agents of change. And now it is ironic that, suddenly by exposing our politics, the exhibition at the Dorsky (*ed. note: "Videofreex, the Art of Guerilla Television", the first retrospective exhibition on the work of the Videofreex took place at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in 2015*), was an agent of change, and the Videofreex are agents of the status quo, and we want our old work preserved and viewed in the hallowed galleries of the art world. (laugh)

So the context changed. So again yes, as a political act, we are pleased to be reconsidering those years to be years of ferment, of social ferment, of cultural ferment, of artistic ferment, and of political ferment. There are still wars to protest, and civil rights abuses in the U.S., meaning unfair limits of minority rights, gender rights, especially women's rights, there are still issues that even though there have been a lot of accomplishments since the 1970s, there is still a ways to go and we will keep going until it's all been made good.

So yes, we're pleased to become part of the TREIZE community in Paris, and to interact with it... to show our work, receive feedback, and find out, especially with the current state of domestic U.S. and world events, if it generates any activism, media activism or political activism, and, since you promised, any parties at TREIZE.