Early Video Pioneer: An Interview with Skip Blumberg

MELANIE LA ROSA

SKIP BLUMBERG IS AN INFLUENTIAL FIGURE in the evolution of independent video documentary and experimental filmmaking. He has produced hundreds of shorts, TV shows, installations, exhibitions, and multimedia performances and continues as an active mediamaker. Beginning in the late 1960s, during the inception of independent video, he collaborated with production groups including TVTV, Videofreex, Ant Farm, and Paper Tiger TV and with many other pioneering artists and independent videomakers, such as Nam June Paik and Shirley Clarke. Blumberg is active in the independent video community, including having served as a board member of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers.

From his seminal experimental video *JGLNG* (1976) to his classic video documentaries such as the triple Emmy–winning *Pick Up Your Feet: The Double Dutch Show* (1982), to his more recent diaries such as *Nam June Paik: Lessons from the Video Master* (2007) and experimental nonfiction video *On Dream Street . . .* (2012), Blumberg brings a distinctive, warm, personal approach to filmmaking. He was one of the first one-person-crew camcorder reporters.

Several hundred of Blumberg's movies are online and in distribution for home viewing and for academic and public screenings through Electronic Arts Intermix, Video Data Bank, and In Motion Productions, Inc. His videos have appeared on broadcast and cable TV and in museums and festivals around the world, with retrospectives in the Berlin Film Festival Videofest, Rotterdam Film Festival, and Dallas Video Festival. He has received numerous awards and grants, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Ohio State University Journalism Award; has been named one of *Esquire* magazine's Best of the Next Generation; and has been screened at the Museum of Broadcasting's TV Critics' Favorite TV Shows of All Time event. He was also artist-in-residence at several public TV stations, at the Walker Art Center, and at the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics.

Blumberg has produced for *Sesame Street* (more than 150 shorts), *Great Performances* (700,000-plus online views), *The 90's, National Geographic Explorer,* and MyHero.com, as well as for nonprofits, including the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity and the Twenty-First Century Foundation. Blumberg has been a US State Department cultural envoy in Senegal, Kosovo, Herzegovina, Slovakia, and other countries and a visiting filmmaker, artist-in-residence, and teacher at universities, schools, libraries, and media centers. Blumberg currently is Special Professor in the MFA documentary program at Hofstra University School of Communication.

MELANIE LA ROSA is an award-winning filmmaker and educator whose work is distributed by Women Make Movies and has been screened and broadcast internationally and funded by several arts councils and foundations. She currently teaches in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Hunter College, CUNY, and holds an MFA from Temple University and a BA from the University of Michigan.

MELANIE LA ROSA: Let's start with what's happening with your early videos now.

SKIP BLUMBERG: I just returned from the WRO Biennale in Poland—"the leading forum for new media art in Central Europe"—where there was a lot of exciting work and many inspiring media artists, a week of screenings, installations, concerts, performances—and it was gratifying to see the audience's interest in the early video screening. I was there with Abina Manning, from Video Data Bank. We screened newly restored videotapes from the Videofreex Archive from 1969 to 1971, which are in vdb.org's collection. It was great to see the contemporary audience connect with the work and with the activism of that time period. Videofreex has had a couple of other recent well-received screenings—in Brooklyn at Light Industry and in Washington, D.C. at the DC Arts Center.

I appreciate these screenings—and opportunity to talk to you about the early videotapes, and that era, and the history of video—because it was a rare and exciting phenomenon, a very special time. What's especially important is that it was the beginning of the medium of video, when it was brand new.

And this is also a chance to speak to you and professors about a syndrome now that I've noticed in film schools and schools of communication where the history of video is sometimes ignored. I am alarmed that, as a result, this history could be lost.

Video, as an art form and its history, is often taught in art schools. But in classes on the history of filmmaking, especially documentary and experimental film studies, the history of video is often simply left out. Film professors, many of whom are filmmakers, teach the history of film as they learned it in their film studies courses, from the earliest filmmakers in the twentieth century, and adding on current twenty-first-century digital films. The breakthroughs, accomplishments, and contributions of a sizable community of videomakers, as well as video curators, programmers, technicians, and academics are, unfortunately, overlooked. Now that videomaking has merged with filmmaking, in order for its history to survive, video must be included in film history course syllabi, as well as offered as studies courses in video documentary and experimental videomaking.

ML: Say more about the importance of video history.

SB: Video was a unique and separate medium from around 1965, when artists, activists, and mediamakers first began using video, to just a few years ago, say 2005, when digital video became completely ubiquitous as the recording medium of choice for the vast majority of filmmakers. It is a self-contained history delineated by the evolution of video technology from its analog invention to its digital near-replacement of film. The two mediums of video and film—which have very different, separate histories—have now

Skip Blumberg's movies and Videofreex videos are available for viewing on the following Web sites:

http://www.SkipBlumberg.com

YouTube
http://www.youtube.com/SkipBlumberg

MediaBurn.org
http://www.mediaburn.org/VideoMakers.videomaker.o.html?&no_cache=1&catalog=3

Videofreex Archive
http://www.vdb.org/collection/Videofreex%20Archive

Electronic Arts Intermix
http://www.eai.org/artistTitles.htm?id=303

Video Data Bank: Skip Blumberg
http://vdb.org/artists/skip-blumberg

MyHero.com
http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=skip_blumberg_2007

SesameStreet.org—Happy Cheer
http://www.sesamestreet.org/video_player/-/pgpv/videoplayer/0/5e0a65a6-f8e6–4c32–91be-356912d99ce0/happy_cheer

SesameStreet.org—Keith Haring, Exit
http://www.sesamestreet.org/video_player/-/pgpv/videoplayer/0/644ac196–155f-11dd-a62f-919b98326687/keith_haring_exit

merged. There's no difference. Video and film are both available as part of one grand digital palette that artists and filmmakers have. And what we used to call "videos" are now called "movies." So it's important to distinguish and preserve this forty-year period of self-contained history while it's still recent.

ML: So in the early days the pioneer videomakers saw the medium as unique?

SB: When we first picked up the video camera, we knew that it was quite different than film, and we identified more with television. At that time, TV cameras were only used in television studios and on eighteen-wheel mobile TV trucks. The first portable video was introduced for schools and industrial use, but pretty much a commercial failure due to reel-to-reel threading challenges. Neither the TV industry nor independent filmmakers were interested in the low resolution. Broadcast TV technicians called it "Mickey Mouse" (i.e., kids' stuff). So the earliest videomakers had the new medium to themselves.

There was a freedom and exhilaration to this new medium, without rules, mentors, teachers, or an established body of work to emulate. So video has its own technical history, artistic history, and a new way of storytelling—simply because it was an entirely new artistic tool. There are many, many unique characteristics of the medium, which, as media theoretician Marshall McLuhan noted, are more easily identifiable when the media form in question is new. As academicians continue to examine the period of early video, more unique aspects of this communications device will be identified.

ML: What made you pick up a video camera?

SB: I had played around with Super 8 film when I was in my late teens and made several edited experimental films. There were no film production classes when I went to college—I took the first film appreciation class in my university (SUNY Buffalo), and it was very cool. We screened foreign classics and art films, presented by English Department professors Leon Lewis and Bill Sherman, who were on the leading edge of the liberal arts curriculum curve. But I never took a production class—I just started by picking up a film camera.

When I found portable video, it was liberating. Filmmaking is like riding a taxi . . . when you press the trigger, you hear click, click, click, click, like the fare meter of a taxi. And you know for every click you have to pay for developing and printing. But video is like a bus. You get on the bus, and you ride the whole way for the same price. So there was more freedom to shoot a lot just because of the economics. It wasn't just the cheaper cost, though; video also gave you a lot more time on the reel, which is major.

And there were lots of other reasons why I liked video. It was new, and to be part of something new was thrilling. Here was this brand new medium developing right before my eyes. I emerged from college not knowing what I wanted to do, and so I had the availability to be part of this beginning. I was not the first—but I was among the first. This gave me a vantage point of seeing how video exploded—and the mass media did call it "the video explosion." It was exhilarating to be making videos. It was a free for all. And a free fall . . . we were exploring and finding out what was new about this medium and searching for what this medium could do best, seeking the characteristics that might distinguish it from all earlier means of art making.

ML: And you bought your first camera yourself? Was that unusual?

SB: After college, I had saved some money from teaching in a grade school in Harlem. I was on my way to Europe; it was 1969. I was going to buy a VW van. Then I ran into the Videofreex with their newly available portable video gear. They were so much fun that I kept hanging out with them, gave them all my money, and joined the group. The Euro-tour was postponed.

ML: What kind of rules of production were there—either for video or just in general—when you started? What were the circumstances and context of the time?

SB: One of the reasons it was easy to break the traditional rules of television production was because the rules of mainstream media were so strict. You have to remember, this was before the Internet, DVDs, videocassettes, home video, and hundreds of channels of cable TV. It was before music videos and MTV and at the very beginning of public access channels.

There were three TV channels in most cities, and public television was a loose affiliation of college stations and a few independent "educational" TV stations. Each of the three TV networks had a nightly news program, which was by far the dominant source of news for all Americans. A white guy in a suit, sitting at a desk, with slides behind him, anchored these. If they went live to a correspondent, the correspondent would be a live voice via telephone, and there would be a visual still of the correspondent holding the phone and a map. Film—16mm—would come in via plane and be printed, edited, and shown on the air a day or two after it was filmed.

Television was very square. Entertainment shows, even commercials, were staid. There were a few very creative and experimental TV performers and producers—Ernie Kovacs, Soupy Sales, Studs Terkel, and Jim Day and Bryce Howard at KQED in California—who played with television in various ways. But for the most part, television was corporate America's take on the world, with tightly controlled information and style.

At the same time, the other important context was more expansive and encompassed the society at large and the huge social changes that were happening in what is called "the sixties"—but lasted through the mid-1970s. There was tremendous productivity in the 1960s and 70s—now, it is often spoken about as the hippie back-to-nature movement and the protest movements, but really, there was a new world developing. It was about way more than long hair, tie-dyes, antiwar signs, and burning bras. A mass of people was activated; more than just taking it to the streets, they built new social institutions.

The alternate culture was mushrooming. The *Whole Earth Catalog,* an ancestor of the Internet, provided myriad new choices. Like the catalog, every field had a parallel universe and parallel institutions. There were new progressive schools: students didn't sit behind fixed desks and take a common curriculum, but worked in small groups with individualized learning. Architecture was going green, with visionaries like Buckminster Fuller building geodesic domes, yurts, and inflatables. The environmental movement was starting up then, too; the first Earth Day took place in 1970. And there was the alternate media that covered all of this. Newspapers like the *East Village Other* and the *Berkeley Barb.* Independent, listener-supported radio stations were expanding, like Pacifica, cultivated by people like Lorenzo Milam, the "Johnny Appleseed" of community radio.

Among the video community, we were the TV network for the counterculture. We provided alternative news, documentary, culture, art, and performance. We were the TV coverage of the be-ins and protests. Mainstream television wasn't covering it adequately—and what coverage they did was always from the outsider's point of view.

Besides the artistic breakthroughs and innovative techniques, this new medium had the application to a whole new and dynamic world. To be part of this era was to be engaged. As the counterculture's mediamakers, we went where the action was, got to meet the vanguard and the people, were part of it, and aided its progress. It was a very satisfying confluence of beginnings for my friends, our generation, and the medium.

ML: Who were your influences? How many were 16mm filmmakers?

SB: We were inspired by the political and cultural leaders of the times. We learned from everybody—we learned from 16mm filmmakers, from all the previous artists and indie filmmakers and photographers. We especially looked to the cinéma vérité filmmakers. There was cooperation, welcoming, and

acceptance from many filmmakers, film professors, programmers, and curators—notably the Association of Independent Film and Videomakers (AIVF), which included indie videomakers early on. There were many festivals internationally that presented both film and video. But there was also separation.

ML: In what way?

SB: Even among the indie film crowd, early video was not universally accepted as being technically worthy of serious production. And our freewheeling styles might have been off-putting, especially to the radical filmmakers. That's one reason video became its own field. It's possible that this early breach might have something to do with why video history sometimes isn't included in standard film school curricula.

There might have been a chasm between film and video years ago, but now we are all filmmakers, who use film cameras or camcorders based on the director's personal choice.

ML: How did video change the stories—the directing and producing?

SB: We knew video was different than film. We weren't trying to find a cheap way to make movies. First of all, the means of delivery was entirely different. There were very few video projectors. Our videos were seen on a small screen. We liked close-ups. And we liked the big head. And the corollary of that was to understand that television provides friendship to people. Part of the reason people watch TV is for that big head, to have another person in the room with them. So our subject matter was people-oriented, with lots of interviews and video vérité.

Since the medium was brand new, people were not familiar with it, and on-camera they would act more themselves, less self-consciously. They thought it was like silent 8mm home movies—they didn't know that we were recording sound, capturing a lot more than they thought. People on camera were unthreatened and not guarded in their behavior or statements.

Next, instant playback made a huge difference. This ability allowed us to technically check the footage, but more important, it gave us a way to advance our relationship with the people we were photographing. We could build a positive and practical relationship quickly. For example, recording a team or a performer, playing the footage back to them served a relevant purpose, giving them practical feedback on their performance. Immediately we became part of the team. For an interview, playback relaxed the subjects who saw what we had recorded, eliminating the mystery and building trust.

Another quality was that we could keep recording long takes that capture reality as it unfolds. The loose rhythm of recording video allows the shooter to relax and get into the flow of the situation, which cinéma vérité virtuoso DP Don Lenzer calls "shooting in the zone." You keep recording, and people in front of the lens forget about the camera and act more natural.

The fact that sound and picture were recorded together on tape was also really important because this allowed for a single-person crew. A few of us hit the streets on our own with portapak, camera, and microphone—Videofreex Nancy Cain, Bart Friedman, Davidson Gigliotti (who was my camera mentor), and David Cort; indie videomakers Andy Mann and Eddie Becker; DCTV's Jon Alpert; and others. There was even a street porno videographer named Ugly George.

I shoot all the time, to the point where I don't have to look through the viewfinder. When the recording becomes that matter-of-fact, it takes their attention off the camera and implies to subjects and to viewers that there is no medium . . . it is an unmediated window . . . the real reality TV. The camera operator is relating to subject directly on an individual, personal level. These are subtle conditions that allow capturing real behavior and real life. It was not at all fly-on-the-wall camerawork like Fred Wiseman. Instead, you establish yourself as being in the room, you are part of the group, and the other people there relate to you as a participant and a

curious person, and it just happens to be recorded. This production strategy, allowed by video, captures a true sincerity and authentic nonfiction stories.

The low-light capability and portability allowed cameras into previously inaccessible locations, influencing the choice of stories and how they are covered, like *When I Was a Worker Like LaVerne* (1976), which is by Jane Aaron and me; Alan and Susan Raymond's *The Police Tapes* (1977); and even to an extent for Jon Alpert's *Cuba: The People* (1987).

ML: Were there other distinctions based on video primarily being for TV?

SB: The TV is an object, an instant sculpture. The earliest video artists like Nam June Paik created video art before there was even videotape. He put a candle in an old TV set, plopped it on a pedestal, and the art crowd loved it.

But the fact that it was an appliance, and it sits in your living room—and that's how people look at and interact with it—also affected the perception of our videos. A TV set is an appliance everybody has. It was a new medium for recording, but for presentation it had a familiarity. It was good old television. And we were the first TV generation, born and raised with a TV set.

Film has a certain reverence and respect. You go into a darkened room. You are captive in the theater. If you want to leave, you have to push through all the seats in your row. You are in a much more committed, controlled, focused, and formal setting. TV is different. The audience is in their living room. This meant your show on TV was competing with distractions. The phone could ring. There was no reverent focus; your videos went to people in their regular everyday lives. When we made videos, there was the urge and obligation to be compelling. Although we sometimes explored using really long takes, we also experimented with a faster pace for the small screen. For TV, you couldn't have the long, narrative builds that you could have in a darkened, isolated movie theater with a captive audience. You had to keep viewers engaged and have more frequent payoffs. Ironically, we learned a lot about TV formatting from Jerry Mander's book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978).

We also were excited that TV could be broadcast, with millions of people seeing it at the same time. We were breaking traditional rules, but we were also learning to make television and developing styles to attract a mass audience. For instance, the TV Lab at Channel 13—and David Loxton, Carol Brandenburg, engineer John Godfrey, and others—was very helpful to our progress by producing and putting our videos on the air. With the indie video series *Video and Television Review,* even though it was a fringe timeslot—Friday night at midnight or something—still, we got exposure and experience with broadcasting to a TV audience. The TV Lab was an incubator—for artists-in-residence who went on to very high-profile careers, including mega-installation-artist Bill Viola, Hollywood producer Michael Shamberg (*The Big Chill* [1983] and *Reno 911!*); and documentarians Errol Morris and Ken Burns.

Despite being card-carrying avant-garde, the Videofreex always had a fairly show-business approach to screening our work. Beginning in NYC, our Prince Street studio had screenings every Friday night. We'd rack up all the tapes—music, politics, culture, dance, etc.—on different playback machines and VJ a spontaneous mix for an audience of 5 to 150 people. The screenings were unadvertised but would attract an audience based on free press, including articles in *Rolling Stone,* the *Village Voice,* and *New Yorker*'s "Talk of the Town" section.

Later, we broadcast shows over the air on Lanesville TV, our pirate TV station in the Catskill Mountains. We did hundreds of transmissions to the community, live and with tape roll-ins and interactive phone calls. This applied the unique ability of video for communicating live. It fundamentally changes the way a story is told, with live,

interactive, and open-sourcing parallels to today's Internet and social media.

ML: Who were some of the video groups in the early days? It sounds like there were a lot of people who ushered in this new medium.

SB: New York City was the epicenter of the video explosion at first, with a small community of video freaks who collaborated often on productions and shows. These were not only artists or activists, but counterculture adventurers who were attracted by the potential of TV as a creative medium and means of communication, and who formed production groups to share equipment and combine skills.

Videofreex, Global Village, Raindance Foundation, and People's Video Theater formed in the late 1960s. Quickly, other groups and independent video centers developed around the country—in San Francisco, including Ant Farm, Video Free America, and Optic Nerve; Washington, DC; Chicago; Los Angeles; Boston; and even Yellow Springs, Ohio. There was the Media Access Center at the Portola Institute, in what is now Silicon Valley. Also, simultaneously, other video communities emerged around the world—in Paris, Amsterdam, London, and Montreal. George Stoney and Challenge for Change were the beginning of public access cable TV.

Nam June Paik is recognized as the first video artist and became the most famous. As video penetrated the art world, Bill Viola, Beryl Korot, and many other early video artists had important shows. These shows started in the Kitchen and other small outposts and then overtook whole art museums with solo exhibitions like Paik's at the Whitney, the Guggenheim, and many other museums around the world. And now, of course, video is in almost every contemporary art gallery.

ML: How did this handful of people grow into a community and movement?

SB: Decades before the Internet, we found each other at video events, through our print journal *Radical Software,* and by word of mouth. Groups and individuals worked on productions together and exchanged tapes. Dubs of tapes, and even originals, were "bicycled" via the mail to others, who held public screenings. Our own networks formed. When there were big political or countercultural events, like the 1971 May Day antiwar demonstrations in Washington, DC, or Whiz Bang Quick City in upstate New York, videomakers came together to cover and disseminate this news, which was not appearing on mainstream TV. It was a dynamic and vital group of people. We enjoyed each other and learned from each other.

One group, called Top Value Television or TVTV, was a super group that Michael Shamberg, Allen Rucker, Tom Weinberg, Megan Williams, Hudson Marquez, and others formed to apply "guerrilla television" techniques to mainstream events, beginning with coverage of the 1972 national presidential conventions. Videomakers for the several crews were recruited from groups like Videofreex, Raindance, and Ant Farm. Journalist Maureen Orth was

Here are the names and links to the organizations and Web sites mentioned in this interview:

Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers & The Independent
http://www.aivf.org

Early Video Project
http://davidsonsfiles.org/

Electronic Arts Intermix
http://www.eai.org

Experimental TV Center's Video History
http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history

LabGuy's World: The History of Video Tape Recorders before Betamax and VHS
www.labguysworld.com

MediaBurn.org
http://www.mediaburn.org

Radical Software
www.radicalsoftware.com

Southwest Museum of Engineering, Communications and Computation
www.smecc.org

Television History—The First 75 Years
http://www.tvhistory.tv

Television Laboratory (TV Lab) at WNET
http://www.thirteen.org/reelny/previous_seasons/reelnewyork2/overview.html

Video Data Bank
http://www.vdb.org

Videomaker
http://www.videomaker.com

brought in, as was Anda Korsts from Chicago. Ant Farm came with their futuristic Media Van. There were college students from Antioch and a group of feminist videomakers, including Wendy Apple, who teaches at USC. Beginning with *The World's Largest TV Studio* (1972) and *Four More Years* (1972), TVTV took the new medium that had been confined to the art world and alternate culture into the larger world. TVTV wasn't particularly political, more iconoclastic. The TV programs were entertaining as well as journalistically ambitious and were well accepted and honored by many broadcasting awards. With their gonzo video style, they still appeal to today's audiences.

ML: Say a little about Videofreex.

SB: The story of the Videofreex is well told in books by Parry Teasdale, Deirdre Boyle, and Nancy Cain. Just briefly . . . Videofreex started at the Woodstock Music Festival when Parry Teasdale and David Cort ran into each other, both with video gear. They moved down to New York City, and Mary Curtis Ratcliff joined the group, which they called Videofreex. And they stumbled into a project with CBS, which ultimately was rejected for being ahead of its time. After CBS, we stayed together in a 5,000-square-foot multi-camera studio on Prince Street in Soho. Eventually because New York City got too crazy and too expensive, we moved to a twenty-plus-room former boarding house in the Catskill Mountains and started an educational and artistic program called Media Bus with grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. We also launched public access cable TV channels and media centers. With a transmitter that Abbie Hoffman gave us in exchange for writing a section of *Steal This Book,* we operated a pirate TV station, Lanesville TV. Over time, the ten active producers produced more than 1,000 videotapes that chronicle the era. The tapes are now in the Videofreex Archive at Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where they are being restored slowly over time. The Videofreex reformed as a partnership to authorize Video Data Bank's use of our tapes online at www.vdb.org. We are now spread out through the country, although still very much in touch with each other, including adding a new Videofreex member, Rhea Kennedy, daughter of Chuck, who has passed away.

ML: Nam June Paik has the unique position of being the rare, uncontested first video artist. Say more about his rule-breaking work and the reaction to it.

SB: Well, for starters Nam June used a magnet to make a TV show. And in the opposite extreme, he created video art with hundreds of people in ten studios around the world connected by satellite and transmitted live in all ten countries.

One time I walked into the editing room where he was completing a tape, and there were three Japanese teenagers—Nam June was asleep on the couch—working with the editor, essentially trying out all the special effects that were on the control room board. And then, you know, Nam June uses that footage in sculptures sold for tens of thousands and in TV shows seen by millions!

Except for the public TV labs and some international networks, broadcast TV treated him like he was from another planet. The art world really laid down the red carpet for Nam June. One reason his work was widely accepted was because he used so much popular culture in his imagery. Tap dancers and rock music, strippers and sumo wrestlers, imagery that appealed to the public. And there was lots of flash. At the same time, the art elite recognized his innovation and his positions with Fluxus and the avant-garde, which were credentials for his artistic license.

He was also the Asian TV manufacturing industry's darling. In those days there was a campaign, based on Marie Winn's *The Plug-in Drug,* to encourage viewers, especially children, to stop watching so much television. Television addiction, you know? And NJP was selling TVs! He would construct a huge map of the United States composed of fifty TV sets of different sizes. Families of robots made of a dozen TVs each. You know,

major sculptural public art pieces. Sony and Samsung, the Japanese and Korean TV set manufacturers, were his biggest supporters.

Paik was especially influential because he brought so many people along with him. Hundreds of collaborators. He collaborated with famous avant-garde artists, like Merce Cunningham and John Cage; more popular performers like rocker Lou Reed and the Dance Theater of Harlem; young media artists like Paul Garrin and Liz Phillips; and even the Japanese teens. He was professor to Bill Viola when Bill was a student at Syracuse University. He was helpful to so many other artists' and mediamakers' careers—nurtured and mentored and encouraged us all. After he passed away in 2006, I produced a video about Nam June Paik called *Lessons from the Video Master,* because everyone learned so much from him. More importantly, everybody loved Nam June. He was always fun to be around. Nam June was a good guy.

ML: Who else was influential?

SB: There were so many people who deserve recognition. *Radical Software,* the Raindance journal, is available online and lists dozens of people in the early video art community, as do the Early Video Project and the Experimental TV Center, which have video history sites. Just a few important artists from the early time are Shigeko Kubota, Beryl Korot, and Steina and Woody Vasulka. There are also Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, Gary Hill, Bill and Louise Etra, Dan Sandin, and Philip Lee Morton in Chicago. Ant Farm (Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Curtis Shreier, and many others) was in San Francisco. This is just in video art—and just scratching the surface. Important early documentary videomakers are Alan and Susan Raymond and Jon Alpert, of course. We are talking about thousands of videomakers who grabbed this new medium even in the first few years, plus a community of curators, programmers, producers, technicians, and academics.

I'm reminded of so many friends and colleagues from the early days, especially those who contributed to the growth of the community of makers, but somehow their impact has not been recorded. Like Jackie Cassen, a video artist who also brought people together in large early projects like *Process Video Revolution,* which included a gaggle of other videomakers and which was one of the first indie shows broadcast live from the TV Lab at Channel 13's Studio 46. I don't know if a tape of that show survives, or if there is any other documentation of it besides the Videofreex tape about it. And Jackie has moved to Staten Island and does poetry now. She was very important at the time, yet has become invisible in video and TV history.

Shirley Clarke, who is better remembered as a filmmaker than as a videomaker, was really important. Her independent feature films—*The Connection, Portrait of Jason,* and others—are still publicly screened. As for her videos—I don't know if there are any surviving ones. She did lots of installations and multichannel work and crazy events at her TeePee in the penthouse of the Chelsea Hotel, which was a performance space and gallery, a party place, and a workshop. We used to hang out there a lot with video artists Wendy Clarke (Shirley's daughter), Andy Gurian, Shridar Bapat, Bruce Fergusan, and many others as well as guest participants Viva, Agnès Varda, and Arthur C. Clarke (unrelated to Shirley).

Charlotte Moorman was a musician, artist, and performer—she wore Nam June Paik's TV Bra—and she also produced several New York Avant-Garde Festivals, which included the first video. These took place in warehouses and airplane hangers and on the Staten Island Ferry. They were spectacular events. Charlotte was a very successful promoter of the avant-garde in a big way, and this influence merits recognition.

ML: What are some of your favorite anecdotes? What about that UFO show on Lanesville TV? How did that start? It might be the first mock documentary.

SB: We had the TV station in our parlor, which was a big inspiration. In the beginning, we broadcast several shows a week, but after

a few months that schedule exhausted us. Then we limited it to the *Lanesville TV Show* on Friday nights, which featured any tapes we'd been shooting the week before or a relevant tape from our shelves. And we broadcast the *Buckaroo Bart Show* on Saturday mornings—a kids' show starring Buckaroo Bart, Sheriff John, Horrible Howard, and Mushroom, our dog.

When videomakers came to visit our Media Center in Lanesville—along with being our home and studio, it was a rooming house for guests and grant-supported workshop—we would produce shorts with them. Videomakers would come up for a week or so to do their own editing, but then we would think up something new to produce with them collaboratively. Tom Weinberg from Chicago came to visit us, and somehow, this inspired us to make a fake documentary about a UFO landing in Lanesville. Eric Segal, who is an artist and genius inventor, had built us a very early luminance keyer, and we came up with the idea of keying in a UFO, which was actually made of a bra. Tom, playing an Air Force investigator, goes around interviewing "witnesses" to this UFO, flying through and landing in our rural mountain valley. We interviewed a bunch of townspeople of Lanesville about something that hadn't happened, and they went along with it. It was a Christopher-Guest-kind-of-movie—unscripted, fictional interviews that our rural neighbors came up with spontaneously. There is a precious, tongue-in-cheek sincerity that makes the video very charming. At the end, the UFO picks up Tom and takes him away into the stratosphere. We didn't know it or think about it, but this was what they call participatory video now—we made it with the collaboration of an entire community and then broadcast it to that community.

ML: How is the early video work being used these days?

SB: It is gratifying to see that contemporary audiences are enjoying this work. One of the reasons, I think, is that these videos are an open window to this era, with a very fresh feel. It is not documentary per se; it is a video record from and of that era. For instance, the Videofreex tapes of the Woodstock Music Festival that screened at Light Industry recently are a detailed slice of what was happening behind the scenes at the Woodstock that you saw briefly in the concert movie. Slogging around in the mud, the bad trip tent—extensive coverage of real life, not a sentimental glimpse or a sensationalized history. The recorder stays on for long takes, and it requires a certain amount of patience to watch this unedited footage. Yet, when we screened it recently, the audiences were enraptured by the fresh and direct real-time experience. And it was also acquired for Barbara Koppel's Woodstock anniversary doc. Other recent Videofreex and TVTV screenings were at the DC Arts Center and the Maysles Film Center, which have attracted audiences of old and young activists and video aficionados.

This past spring, Red Channels had an extensive series of more than a dozen screenings of early and recent films and videos, called *Our Friendships Are Constructed on the Basis of Conflict: Collectively Produced Film & Video* at the Spectacle Theater in Brooklyn. With film and videomakers from the collectives present in many screenings, the series attracted a warm, lively, provocative following. At the screening I went to, the 1970 *Proto Media Primer* by Raindance (Paul Ryan with Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette, and Michael Shamberg) and *Four More Years* by TVTV were presented along with a 2003 video.

The Video Data Bank has made a major commitment to restoring the archive of videotapes from 1969 to 1978 that the Videofreex produced that have been rescued from poor storage conditions after years in attics and basements. There's a bunch of them already restored, thirty or forty of them now. Some of them are raw tapes, straight out of the camera. It's great that VDB is giving our group that support and recognizing the value of these antiquated videotapes as historical archives

as well as a record of the beginning of the medium. Also Mediaburn.org has a lot of the Videofreex tapes and many other early videos, too, online. And, this makes all this work available for screenings at other art centers, museums, and universities—wherever.

In addition, there are regular screenings of early videos of mine as an individual producer. Many are online. Nine of my documentaries and experimental videos are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and others are in museum permanent collections and university libraries around the world. Of course, it's gratifying to hear that my collaborative and individually produced videos are being studied in university media studies courses and being presented by professors.

ML: Teaching film history often means teaching how filmmakers were reflecting cultural standards. Do you feel that early video work does that?

SB: Yes, the videos document and reflect the times, but they did and do more than that, as I think you are implying with your question. These early videos were a means of communication for the counterculture. We became members of the communities we were serving. That's one of the rewards of doing this kind of work. You get to feel good about being helpful, and you make an impact on the world. We were part of a movement—and we called it "the Movement"—and as such we were part of something much bigger than ourselves. Especially when there wasn't an Internet or *Democracy Now,* we provided an alternative to the mainstream to people who couldn't get the information any other way. So when we sent our tapes out across the country, and groups of 25, 50, 100 people would attend—our tapes made an impact in this way.

TVTV's first documentaries were significant because we were aware that millions of people would see what we were shooting with the little black and white camera in our hands. Knowing we had this audience was both thrilling and terrifying. Besides reaching this mass audience on TV, we knew the TVTV shows had made a real impact on the field of television when they were recognized with the Columbia-Dupont Journalism Award and other mainstream awards.

There are a few key marks we can take credit for—for instance, a crew for TVTV's *Four More Years*—Megan Williams, Anda Korsts, Nancy Cain, and I—did behind-the-scenes coverage of the broadcast TV news operations at the presidential conventions. We interviewed the anchors—Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor—and the floor correspondents and the whole news staff and showed their massive production. Well, the mainstream television audience had never seen a TV news studio before. We showed them the face of the voice-over announcer—whom they also had never seen—saying "NBC's coverage of the 1972 presidential conventions is brought to you by. . . ." A couple of weeks later, the CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite gave a tour of his studio on the *Evening News* for the first time, which our show had clearly leveraged. So, in addition to the audience who had seen our *Four More Years,* millions more saw Walter Cronkite's tour. This was a very real contribution to media education of the TV audience. It may have happened eventually, but our show accelerated it at the least. And so that had a direct impact, probably even more than our documentary.

ML: What's the contemporary relevance of the early video movement?

SB: We all know the media environment is changing fast. Now, in the digital age, video has merged into larger, more potent and comprehensive forms of communication. We're entering the cloud, and we don't know yet what will be inside that cloud. This is just the beginning of it.

The early video community helped usher into common culture a media form that every single person uses now, that was the very inception of much of what can be seen on every TV and computer screen today. The early videos were precursors to music videos, reality TV, YouTube, crowd sourcing,

and many different television and Internet formats.

Also, students are so hip. Many enter filmmaking programs with advanced filmmaking and computer skills. They are the first generation born into the computer age, who speak with their thumbs and make movies with their telephone. And they accept the media environment as if it always existed in its current state.

History is important, and academia is the place to keep and share history. Isn't it important for this and future generations to know they're not the first people to do this?

ML: What are you excited about in the current media culture landscape? Do you see anything that you feel is a descendent of the early video movement?

SB: I do get excited when I hear about alternate spaces and new media centers, like the WRO Biennale in Poland, like DC Arts Center, Red Channels, Light Industry in Brooklyn and e-flux in Manhattan. Union Docs in Brooklyn, the multimedia artists Paper Rad, and Tryptich TV, three international media artists who collaboratively create their videos using the Internet, are cooperative groups of mediamakers who come together because of shared passion and creative drive. Not a direct descendent, but with parallels to the early days of indie video.

And the current media landscape now also includes many Web sites with archives that cover this period, including sites created by the early videomakers themselves, like MediaBurn.org by Tom Weinberg, the Early Video Project and Radical Software by Davidson Gigliotti, and the Video History Project by Sherry Miller and Ralph Hocking.

ML: How does video history fit into the university?

SB: On a deeper level, the utopian dream that was prevalent in the 1960s is shared by many of today's students. There was activism, experiment, and artistry in the years of early video—and also a sense that we could reach utopia. As professors, it is important for us to encourage our students to pursue their own utopia. To be not just mediamakers, but to be communicators and activists, to be able to work on messages that they believe in and care about. I think that is a primary obligation for media academicians, to propagate students' urge to do work they believe in, but also to provide them with the hope that they can, for which video history serves as a model.

ML: What are some ways you would like to preserve early video history?

SB: It would be constructive to set up a wiki site for colleagues and media historians to contribute to the recording of early video history, with a time line, glossary, indexes of videomakers and work, recommended books and videos, and model course syllabi. It could also create wiki articles on broader topics, like what makes video unique and how the medium of video influences storytelling.

ML: This is a rich history with milestones like unstructured storytelling and using new visual language. How do you hope to make video history accessible?

SB: A big satisfaction for me is this interview. Hopefully it will encourage academic colleagues to become more familiar with video history, to create new video history courses, and to integrate video history into film and TV studies courses. That will surely preserve and spread the history of video and make it more accessible to today's students—and will help video obtain its rightful place in media histories of the future.

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