(RE) CONSIDER MIX FLOW

HELEN DE MICHIEL

1. WHEN I sit in meetings concerned with national media policy, global media reorganization, media reform, or intellectual property and copyright issues, or in briefings on technologies that promise to drive new terms of innovation, an expert will usually refer in passing to "content" and "content providers"—as if the creators of film, video, television, games, the Internet, or whatever motion media platform is being discussed can be neatly contained in a box and brought out only when needed to fill up the pipelines. People who create or support the work at the point closest to the ground and who give public meaning to its shapes are usually absent from these particular discussions, little known, less understood, and generally avoided in the context of these larger systemic issues. The language of the imagination and the articulation of how different groups of media creators (including artists, curators, programmers, funders, technologists, and writers) actively participate in shaping the media landscape are challenging to insert into dialogues where the task is to engineer a contingent yet useful sense of order around these large and unruly issues.

It is often at this point in a particular meeting that I start daydreaming about how I got there—why I was invited and what I have to offer—because I am a practitioner shaped by the media arts landscape both intimately on an experiential level and panoramically, on a social scale. I look through a lens that scans a field layered with new and old structures constantly being built from scratch and obsessively rebuilt by artists and tinkerers enthralled by the visual arts, sculpture, art criticism, political activism, cultural theory, music, performance, or theater and who carry their passions to the moving-image medium. I think about what I want to bring to these discussions—questions and examples about how creators, and the strategies they discover to reach audiences and sustain their work in public, are central to the biggest and seemingly most intractable questions of media change and upheaval we are now facing. The questions stem from a simple belief that change and innovation come from the margins, and in ways that are utterly unpredictable yet profoundly transformative, especially when they are reconsidered, remixed, and reflowed throughout new contexts of understanding.

I recall what I know of the scattered histories of this outer "arts" region of the media world and its ephemeral, fleeting nature—almost invisible in our zeal to see what may come up in the next fifteen minutes of technological seduction. I always want to learn more and to know it from those who lived it, thought about it, and worked it, because from my point of view, the panorama of American media arts practice over the last thirty years is not yet understood fully or deeply. The effort to frame and connect this work—which can often feel both remote yet still contemporary— into the larger picture of social- and cultural-change movements of the late twentieth century is only beginning to find new interest. I don't think we have yet begun to figure out the significance of the media arts in the greater movements for self-determination and access to tools and distribution systems.

Many of these histories are still hidden or temporarily forgotten, with documents and media materials stashed in boxes, closets, and a warren of facilities or archives to which they have migrated. The actual media works may be trapped in co-dependency with aging viewing technologies that are getting harder and more costly to maintain. Depending on your generation—even if you have cared to pay attention, excavate the archives, or talk with the artists whose work may be difficult to find for viewing—you may know mostly only little bits and pieces of these histories. How does this past still speak to us today?

2. When I asked Kathy High, artist, writer, teacher, and publisher of the video art journal *Felix,* to join me in co-organizing the 2005 edition of *A Closer Look,* we had been talking about clearing a space in which to reconsider artistic exploration as it unfolded among clusters of media makers who were (and still are) developing organizations and public spaces to facilitate the emergence of an alternative language of motion media, a language that would prove to have a quickly evolving array of dialects and idioms, forms and approaches. It would be a process of reconsideration that seemed right for this moment as media breaks out from its traditional presentation formats and moves into iPods, mobile phones, and other emerging technologies and screening venues.

For this issue, which marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of NAMAC as a national organization serving the media arts field, we put out a call to our members and supporters to write about collectives, communities, and collaborations that embody the spirit of a movement that has gained energy from—and always existed in a key dialogue with—issues of race and identity, marks of regionality, processes of tool exploration and the forms these tools trigger, and the artifacts of mediated communication scattered throughout the environments we inhabit. Historically, the spirit of the media arts has been to push back, to question, to ask the tough questions, to chip away at the rules that say something can't be done, and to make work or

construct processes while the critical investigation is going on. Although it comes at a great price, that is why independents choose to be independents, working alone or in small collaboratives, in nonprofits, or in academic environments where they can be free to succeed or fail on their own terms.

The media arts flourish and gain traction where there has been hospitality from an enthusiastic base of funders and audiences. These two important vectors of the scene are by no means stable and have been coming and going since the field acquired a name for itself in the 1970s. With generous (by today's standards) local, state, and national funding, along with foundations willing to commit resources to advance media organizations that were incubating new works and new programs, a burgeoning energy magnetized in the 1970s and 80s around nonprofit media arts centers, community exhibition programs, and distribution entities.

Boundaries between groups, institutions, and venues were permeable as they were in the process of being defined, and experiments in organizational structures as well as media-making practices exploded. With more funding available, artists were able to tour, present their work on a rapidly developing circuit, and create new pieces in multiple locations, both nationally and internationally. It was not always necessary for adventurous artists to confine themselves to one genre. In the 1980s, Bill Viola's single-channel video works were distributed through Electronic Arts Intermix to non-theatrical buyers, his work was broadcast on the PBS series *Alive From Off Center,* and he was creating site-specific video installations in museums.

Today, platforms, niches, and defining disciplines are solidifying, and compartments are neatly erected. Since the traditional sources of arts funding, beginning In the 1990s, have turned elsewhere, the nonprofit media arts sector is in the midst of a period of broad redefinition and restructuring. And as technologies, viewing platforms, and virtual networks evolve at ridiculous speeds, and generational, political, and cultural identities churn in categoric flux, media makers, too, are being forced to choose to work in specific genres: Are you a documentarian or an indie narrative filmmaker? Are you positioning yourself in the rarified world of the museum's white cube to be an installation video artist? Does you work exist only online, or in digital conference presentations? Are you okay with a small but devoted influential audience, or are you still hoping for a large public to see your work exhibited on a big screen, or broadcast and in eternal DVD release? And how will you be able to support your media-related activities and make work over the long term?

The articles we have chosen to include here cannot, by any means, represent a comprehensive view of the range of histories of the media arts field. They are simply what we have today—an eclectic grouping of voices, passions, and concerns. The authors open up a field of inquiry for a new generation that may know very little about the organizations, times, and artists profiled, and they delve into perspectives about these subjects that only the long view backward can offer. By mapping these activities from a twenty-first-century perspective, they point toward the work that still needs to be done on other histories and chronicles that are missing from our collective body of knowledge.

We realized that the histories of the media arts are not easily explained in linear fashion. They are slippery, ephemeral, messy, multicultural, hybrid, and three-dimensional—layers upon layers that may touch one another at moments but that also remain discretely separate or related to other creative or technological disciplines. What makes this collection unusual is that the essays are written by individuals who, as artists, organizational directors, scholars, and programmers, are directly participating in the field as it is developing today, and who have a stake in seeing it expand its centrality in the culture at large. It is thinking from the inside out, rather than the other way around.

3. Reconsider, remix, reflow from the past into the future. The thread that runs through the subjects of all these essays is that of creating dynamic communities and making welcoming places where the artist can be emboldened to try out new ideas or new processes and to break out of the rigid patterns of conventional media storytelling structures. From explorations in self-expression to political message-making in these stories, we see the beginnings of participatory media interactivity. Whenever tools have become available, artists have flocked to try them out, creating a back-and-forth or give-and-take in which the artist refines the tool and, in turn, the medium opens up an increasing range of expressive or storytelling possibilities.

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The past is full of materials and questions still unresolved, especially as relates to older practices that shade the work of today. From an alternative perspective, these histories set the stage for thinking about how media can open up a liberating dialogue: for the individual artist herself, with the tools and artifacts of creation, and for the community of creators and the public seeing and responding to the work. Ultimately, these histories open onto the question of how the whole process transforms society and culture in a larger way.

When Patricia Zimmermann looks at the wide historical range of multimedia performance, she takes us from the beginnings of cinema to the farthest new frontiers of locative media experiments, tracing how programmers and artists are continually mining the archives to break down the barriers erected by participants, by tools, and by the screens that either isolate us or bring us together in shared communal experience.

Scott MacDonald considers his cinematic coming-of-age in a memoir that confronts the challenges of the present. What is the role of the film historian in developing new publics for the classic works of "critical cinema," and how can that work be kept alive for new generations?

The role of regional media organizations as mediators and incubators between artists and the public is explored by Mary Lampe in her chronicle of the unusual history of the Southwest Alternate Media Project in Houston, its visionary founders, and the exchanges that occurred as cinephilia took root and opened out into the Texas landscape. Robin Oppenheimer brings back to life Seattle's multidisciplinary art space *and/or* (1974–84), a fluid and influential environment that reveled in experimentation and ephemerality and that still offers a vital legacy for current alternative multimedia arts practices. Ralph Hocking, Sherry Hocking, and Kathy High reconsider the history of the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York. ETC nurtured the beginnings of video art and should be considered one of the original 'open source' environments in which artists, technologists, engineers, and researchers were able to come together to explore, share, and learn about tools and processes in a friendly, laboratory-like space dedicated to freedom of artistic expression and unswervingly committed to "processing and processes."

In a roundtable e-mail discussion, Melinda Stone, Andrew Lampert, and Rick Prelinger investigate the role of the secret archive in encouraging the ongoing public relevance of works and in sparking the rediscovery of hidden materials by new viewers. What power does "lost film" have? "Access is our highest calling as archivists," says Rick Prelinger. But what are the tensions and balancing acts that arise between hiding films for preservation and collection purposes, on the one hand, and opening them up to access for the public to rediscover and enjoy or for media makers to use for remix?

Erika Dalya Muhammad opens up vast new terrains of inquiry when she traces "electrocultures," the underecognized lineages of artists of color who continue to reshape digital culture and ideas of race, gender, and multiculturism as they converge in hip-hop practice and cut-and-mix culture.

It is an expansive landscape that moves freely and expressively from new digital exhibition and performance spaces to virtual online worlds that touch and play with the tropes of current popular culture, reasserting, again, for a new generation the idea of visual media as a process rather than an object or product.

These histories are strong reminders that uncertainty and unpredictability are part of the effort of making media that communicates to others while often mysteriously harnessing moments of collective expression and consciousness. The force fields surrounding the subjects these authors tackle may have changed over the years, but the questions they amplify re-emerge in new ways as the generations overlap and eventually overcome one another.

In organizing this issue of *A Closer Look,* we hope to trigger a multi-generational transmission of ideas, to examine the exchange of lineages and patterns of practice that, when re-interpreted, have newfound significance for the concerns we face now, both as makers and as organizations. And we want these transmissions to continue, deepening back and forth as we try to help the multiple histories of this field to be told, debated, and reconsidered.

A CYCLICAL MODEL OF HISTORY

KATHY HIGH

LIBERTATIA was a (possibly fictional) pirate community formed in the late 1600s by a Captain Mission, in Madagascar. There the pirates constructed "a purely socialist society in which private property is abolished and all wealth held in a common treasury." There was even a new language, "a mélange of French, English, Dutch, Portuguese." This renegade culture, developed as a haven for "outlaws," included a mix of races, both exiles and natives, creating a cross-cultural community that was non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and idealist—as Peter Lamborn Wilson described it, "a pirate utopia."[1]

In introducing the texts of *Hidden Histories,* I would like to embrace this utopian idea of pirate renegades creating intentional communities and controlling the conditions by which they live and extend it to those revolutionary moments in our own media arts histories as models of what Hakim Bey has called "temporary autonomous zones"— places and moments in which radical actions and creation occur outside of the constrictions of societal norms and cultural controls.[2] These are zones in which pirate media renegades can create, invent, and incubate in the space of a generative moment.

I don't think things happen by accident. I settled in New York State and have lived here for thirty-four years, since I was seventeen years old. I thought I was following the money—New York has been one of the only states that has actively funded the arts since the beginning of the sixties. In 1961, the New York State Legislature created the New York State Council on the Arts. In 1969, the NYSCA Film Program became the Film and Television Program and began accepting applications for electronic media projects.

But there was something else that attracted me to the state: upstate New York has a rich history of intentional communities, utopian pursuits of collective effort that have risen and fallen over time and given birth to many remarkable instances of creativity. In the nineteenth century utopian moments occurred in Oneida with the Perfectionist community, in New Lebanon and Albany with the Shakers, near Buffalo with the Lilydale Assembly Spiritualist community. There was also the first major women's rights conference, held at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. There, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott presented the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (modeled after the American Declaration of Independence), proclaiming the need for the equality of women with men and calling for the first time for women's right to vote.

Fast forward about one hundred years, where in upstate New York the first museum program of video art was established at the Everson Museum, in Syracuse (begun by David Ross in 1971 and continued by Richard Simmons), one of the first video synthesizer design sites was launched at the Experimental Television Center (run by Ralph Hocking with Dave Jones), the first university program devoted to combined practice and theory of media arts was initiated at the Center for Media Study and Media Study/Buffalo, and radical video collectives began to operate in the state, like the Videofreex. These energetic, temporary autonomous zones also have been marked by a rich history and by the rise and fall of bursts of creative energy emerging from utopian ideals.

The reader will forgive my musings and meanderings here, for I am sure similar historical tracings can be found in many other places throughout the country. But these New York communities serve as a useful example of the kinds of historical connections that exist among the various experimental utopian moments the United States has seen: during middle of the nineteenth century, during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and during the 1960s and 1970s. I am interested here in the generative moments that lie behind these communities, the similarities between "mediums," and their ultimate goals. I mention energy as one of the hallmarks of these moments since we are dealing with electronic media and sound waves, and with transmissions between periods in history and among generations.

Oneida 's Perfectionist community was founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848. Noyes believed that "man [was] able to live without sin in his life if he [was] in the perfect environment," and he tried to establish that perfect environment in one of the most successful utopian communes in history. For approximately thirty years, the Perfectionists lived in a gigantic group union—what Noyes called a "complex marriage"—in which all men were to be married to all women. This form of free love (which included more than two hundred people at the end) was intended to promote love and loyalty to the group and the sharing of property, exchanging the small home, nuclear family, and individual possessions in favor of the larger unit of group-family life.[3] In 1879 the community abandoned its original ideals and Noyes fled to Canada.

It was in 1848 as well that the Spritualism movement was founded in Rochester, where the Fox sisters were in communication with spirits. The Lilydale Assembly, a separatist Spiritualist commu- nity, was founded in 1879 near Elmira, just south of Buffalo. This intentional community, formed as a radical branch of the Quakers, is known for communicating with the dead, acting as mediums, and channeling such things as medical diagnoses, political speeches, and diatribes against slavery while in a hypnotic trance. Spiritualists were often criticized for practicing "free love" and supporting both progressive women's rights and abolitionist teachings. In the close connection between mysticism and social idealism, they explored radical religious and social reform. The

first woman who ran for U.S. President was in fact a Spritualist; Victoria Woodhull declared her candidacy in 1871, forming a new political party, the "People's Convention," and was nominated in Troy, New York, by suffragists, socialists, and Spritualists. (Many women at that time spoke publicly for the first time by channeling male historic figures.)[4]

> Historian Robert Hine defined a utopian colony as consisting of:
> "… a group of people who are attempting to establish a new social pattern based upon a vision of the ideal society and who have withdrawn themselves from the community at large to embody which vision in experimental form. The purpose is usually to create a model that other colonies and eventually mankind in general will follow."[5]

From Perfectionist communities to video collectives, these groups emerge, as Hakim Bey wrote, as separated revolutionary clusters, which are temporary. That is to say, they come and go. There is a flaring of energy, a power surge, and then they fizzle out. During these revolutionary moments, when uprisings occur and new alliances are formed, new extended families are created. And when people come together because of similar psychic needs and interests there is also the creation of a place where productive learning occurs, invention is encouraged, and new languages arise.

Many such examples of media arts groups existed in this upstate area—perhaps feeding off the energies and histories of these radical intentional communities. Media Study/Buffalo was founded in 1972 by Gerald O'Grady, coexisting with its educational counterpart, the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Here, media artists practiced their art and theory together, sharing resources, crossing disciplines, trading media skills. O'Grady embraced the need for what he called "mediacy," or a form of media literacy. "It's a political issue: one cannot participate in society unless one can use the channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives."[6] O'Grady brought together some of the leading media practitioners of his time, including filmmakers Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, and James Blue, and video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka.

There were also various New York City video collectives that fled upstate in New York to create a more utopian situation. Paul Ryan of the Raindance Corporation moved to New Paltz in 1971, and in 1973 conceived of a utopian community of ecological videomakers called Earthscore:

> The idea was to configure an intentional community of thirty-six videomakers. Each videomaker was to be part of three different triads. The first triad was to care for its members, the second to take care of the business of supporting a community, and the third to produce video interpretations of ecological systems. My intuition was that if self-correcting teams of three people could be stabilized, a leaderless, thriving community could be stabilized. …I wanted to start a non-celibate, aesthetic order capable of interpreting ecological systems with video that would be as sturdy and long lasting as the ascetic order of the monastic tradition I had experienced.[7]

The Videofreex likewise moved from New York City to Lanesville, New York, in the Catskills, to form a video community in 1971.[8] This group was involved with shooting videotapes of countercultural events, teaching technology, and creating video tools. They published *The Spaghetti City Video Manual,* which served as a training guide and illustrated the workings of the guts of VCR equipment. They operated an editing room for the use of artists and video producers and founded a tiny pirate broadcast TV station, Lanesville TV. This group of radical activists, who documented events such as the antiwar movement, Woodstock, the Chicago 7, and the Black Panthers, worked together until the late 1970s, when they dispersed.

These "intentional media communities" formed in the 1960s and 1970s along with other media arts organizations across New York State. They involved media arts practices that were unstratified and non-hierarchical, and followed nineteenth-century utopian tenets regarding the egalitarian

distribution of goods and conducting work one enjoys while contributing to the good of the community, emphasizing individualism and creativity and often practicing open sexual expression. All were examples of those synergistic moments that allow for the creation of small groups of people who want to work together to make new communities, new alliances. It is an impulse that has continued to transmute into new projects such as DIY, residency programs, communal laboratories, collectives, participatory Web networks, and other utopian media ventures.

> It is important for us to explore and share these histories, in tandem with the people who lived them, so that we might understand a bit more about the contexts that give rise to these kinds of creative events. This project with NAMAC is only the beginning. There are histories and stories that need to be collected now that will help to define and diversify the history of media art.

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At a recent conference held at Banff, called *Refresh!,* it became obvious that the history of new media art has not been a common one: there is no one through-line, no single track. Because of the multiplicity of contributors and technologies (factors that continue to grow) and the broad definition of terms like "new media," no summary has been made at this point. At the end of the 1980s, with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the bilinear Western history as we know it came crashing down as well. We need to create a new understanding of our histories with many entry points, and with an eye to the renegades and "pirate utopias" that operated within them.

I thank Helen De Michiel for shepherding through this volume of *Hidden Histories* and for her vision in leading NAMAC, which I hope will continue to expand this kind of historical work in the future.

NOTES:

1. Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegadoes* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1995).

2. Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z: The. Temporary Autonomous Zone, Onotological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism, 2nd ed.* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 2003).

3. See http://www.rouncefield.homestead.com/files/as_soc_family_27.htm.

4. See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

5. Robert V. Hine (1953), quoted in George L. Hicks, "Utopian Problems and Explanations," http://www.press.uillinois.edu/epub/books/hicks/ch2.html.

6. O'Grady quoted in Karen Mooney, "Gerald O'Grady: The Perspective from Buffalo," *Videoscope* 1, no. 2 (1977). http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php3?id=66.

7. Paul Ryan, *Video Journey Through Utopia,* http://208.55.137.252/videojourneythroughutopa.html

8. The Videofreex consisted of Skip Blumberg, Nancy Cain, David Cort, Bart Friedman, Davidson Gigliotti, Chuck Kennedy, Mary Curtis Ratcliff, Parry Teasdale, Carol Vontobel, and Ann Woodward. See Davidson Gigliotti, "Video History Project," http://208.55.137.252/index.html.