A roundtable series of "Scratching the Belly of the Beast: Cutting Edge Media in Los Angeles, 1922-1994" organized by Film Forum Los Angeles, CA.

In her introductory essay in the catalog for the festival "Scratching the Belly of the Beast," Holly Willis defines transgression as a moment of excess, when an outside or beyond can be seen from within a particular boundary. In Los Angeles, the city of commodified excess, it is a challenging task to determine what could possibly lie beyond the swelled boundaries of the entertainment industry and the consumption that sustains it. Due in large part to its ethnic diversity and opposition to the entertainment industry L.A.'s alternative media scene is a model of multiple fronts, a multiplicity of efforts, and a continuous ad hoc community.

Three roundtable discussions were held to explore the future of alternative media in L.A. Entitled "Changing Channels: Media Arts in the `90s," the series served as a reunion of longtime participants in the media arts community who have seen their already tight budgets stretched to the limit. It also included individuals who are developing new strategies in order to gain access to and maximize existing access to new technologies.

The roundtable discussions provided a glimpse of what the future 6f alternative media might hold and also a wake up call for artists and filmmakers to recognize that public policy can influence who has access to new technologies. The catalog for the festival describes sponsor Film Forum's interest in creating a broad dialogue about both theoretical and practical issues. "It is our hope that such conversations will encourage the development of new coalitions and strategies to sustain and advance the region's rich media legacy." The catalog also raised questions such as: What will happen to the avant-garde in a historical moment that threatens to completely swallow it? What will the new developing technologies hold for artists? How can artists have/demand access to said technologies?

The first roundtable panel entitled "Questioning on/the Cutting-edge" consisted of David Ehrenstein, John Goss, William Jones, and Erika Suderburg. Film critic Ehrenstein's remarks underscored the importance of the press as a sustaining element of avant-garde practice. More specifically, he discussed its role in creating interest in and publicity about film and video events. Ehrenstein argued that critical writing about the avant-garde is especially important because screenings are so limited that published writing about the films is far more likely to reach a larger audience.

Goss, a painter turned media artist, discussed the collapse of support for alternative media arts practice. He expressed the desire of artists for larger budgets, and more access to equipment and distribution, especially in the context of Hollywood's co-option of avant-garde strategies. Filmmaker Jones, whose independent feature Massillon (1991) was shown at last year's Whitney Biennial,

discussed the importance of making films you yourself would see. Jones argued that the monolithic avant-garde canon has ended and that there is now a multiplicity of avant-gardes and avant-garde practices, each with its own conflicting demands. Jones felt that the one thing that sustained all these practices as avant-garde was a notion of resistance.

As the discussion turned from artist's practice to artists access there seemed to be a note of emergency and panic in the room. Given the current economic climate new strategies for the `90s need to be addressed. Multi-media artist and writer Suderburg asked "What would the new sites [of avant-garde practice! be?" She noted that they seem not to be sites of exhibition. Some examples that were suggested were electronic bulletin boards and community organizations such as Film Forum. Jones discussed the value of being satisfied with a small, more intimate audience, which could provide a more meaningful connection between the filmmaker and the viewer.
The discussion soon returned to technology. Suderburg posed the question that most artists are probably not ready to hear: "If you had the Infobahn, what would you do with it?" Interactive technology as it stands today, in CD-Rom form, for example, is not a viable alternative, largely due to its non-interactive nature. The so-called information superhighway was seen as a closed monopoly, with access to it bought and sold. Goss suggested the need to collaborate with technicians and the importance of producing work for friends.

The second roundtable explored the changing media environment and new technologies. "New Technologies: Hands On or Hands Off" included Linda Mabalot, the director of a non-profit media arts center, independent video producer Jesse Drew, Nolan Bowie, a professor of mass media and communication theory, Jon Schwartz, the president of the non-profit cable network The `90s Channel, and Peggy Weil, a creator of CD-Rom titles. The discussion focused on how emerging technologies affect the exhibition and distribution of alternative media.

Drew outlined the reasons that the media environment is changing: the technical base is changing to allow more access, but distribution remains monopolized. According to Drew, fewer than 10 corporations own most, of the world's media technology. Activists are currently exerting pressure to gain access to, and control over, some of these channels. Weil added to this investigation of monopolies by reminding the group that the military provided early funding for Internet technology. She said that this should be an inventive time in the industry, as evidenced by progress in technologies such as CD-Rom, but the industry is instead becoming increasingly compartmentalized and commercialized.

Schwartz brought the issue of the effect of telecommunications policy to the table. Schwartz believes that policy decisions are still up for grabs, especially in the area of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules governing leased access channels, which are commonly used as community non-profit channels. Will there

be special rates for non-profit organizations on the Infobahn? Also, policy must address the questions raised by the delivery of video programming over telephone lines. The telephone company can't control what is said over airwaves like television can, and besides, the FCC turned down non-profit rates for this. The telephone company would like to control what will be available on their lines. Will there be a public bandwidth? Will public libraries have to pay? Schwartz stressed the importance of public policy that reserves access for the non-commercial users as with public television and radio.

Bowie is also extremely interested in how public policy will determine access to technology. Instead of dismissing entertainment media as a passive form of enjoyment he urges us to think of it as source of information. He stressed that information is increasingly a source of wealth and power, and that those with access to information are at an advantage. This poses a problem when government bodies such as the FCC are run by Presidential appointees rather than elected officials. Nolan described the information superhighway as an inappropriate metaphor because it will actually have 500 channels or "lanes" and will function more like a telephone than a road. There will be unlimited amounts of access based on one's ability to pay for it. He believes that the appropriate role of the government is to provide incentives for companies to compete in the marketplace, and that ultimately the public will benefit.

The third roundtable discussion, "The Future: Media Movers Fast Forward," explored the future of alternative media, and included media advocate David Jensen, media educator Barbara Osborn, DeeDee Halleck, founder of Paper Tiger Television and professor of Communications at UC San Diego, Gail Silva, co-director of Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco, and filmmaker and independent programmer Craig Baldwin. Discussants expressed concern over the fact that the arts are not mentioned anywhere in debates over telecommunications policy. Halleck discussed the Internet as an alternative distribution system for artists. She reported that Che Che Martinez made a tape of human rights abuses in Mexico during the Chiapas uprising in January 1994 and sold 200 copies of it on the Internet. Also during the Chiapas uprising, subscribers were able to log on and receive current information on the resistance from Subcommandante Marcos, on-line from the trenches, instead of seeing individuals locked away isolated in their homes on on their computers, Halleck envisions a new community formed through technology.

Baldwin discussed the importance of alternative means of distribution. On the one hand, he discussed a critics conference to be held next year, which will bring critics and writers together to write about and distribute information about what artists and filmmakers are up to. He also described the importance of the `zine phenomenon; where individuals, often teenagers, publish/photocopy their own magazine and distribute it to their friends. Silva discussed the importance of teachers in providing entry level access to media education at schools and in media centers. She said that in 1993, 200 more people were regularly using her

facility than in 1992. She also stressed her concern that artistic vision not be driven solely by technology.

Suderburg's question, "What would you do if you had the Infobahn?" should be on every artist's lips--if not as a strategy for revolutionary change, then as a distribution tool for work in a shrinking economy of access. Also, if artists surrender a piece of the telecommunications pie, it will gladly be taken up by larger commercial interests with advertising in mind. What good is this technology if we have 500 channels of infomercials? Decisions about access and technology that will greatly influence the lives of artists, writers, and filmmakers are being made behind closed doors without any input from the public, and certainly without input from artists. Artists must address their role and responsibility in forming public policy and in shaping its longterm effects.