

## **Media dialects and stages of access-**

**Barbara Lattanzi and Chris Hill** were asked to speak to the issues of “video witnessing” or how the “layperson” engages in capturing events upon video tape. Their observations arose from both their work as video curators at Hallwalls Gallery and from their active participation with a variety of media communities across the country. What events become “videoed” outside of the mainstream media making? How does one really “access” this medium of television and use it as a real activist tool to create change? In Buffalo NY, and other communities, low-end video documentation and public-access television have prompted the creation of an alternative television medium which allows “everyday people” and their political actions (that sometimes take on a kind of vaudevillian performance sense) to establish two-way systems that are truly interactive

– Eds.

### **Chris Hill and Barbara Lattanzi**

**Barbara Lattanzi:** In general we want to consider the development of public-access television as a public stage, as a stimulus to regionally- specific and culturally-diverse video dialects, and as crucial to the construction of an active audience.

**Chris Hill:** I am particularly interested in the media audience that can be engaged by conditions in a city like Buffalo. This city’s sense of itself as a once-prosperous industrial center, struggling in recent years to shift its economic base, needs to be further articulated to reflect its broad cultural diversity. Public-access TV is one the only community resources I can think of that promises to serve the cultural agendas of any speakers or performances in the city, with the additional benefit of directly reaching a majority of the TV sets in the area. But we need to focus on engaging the viewer. Buffalo itself is small enough that most people here have a reasonably functional map of the city their heads- they travel to different areas of the city to do business and can identify issues that might be relevant to people in various neighborhoods. So public-access producers who may have distinct cultural and community agendas can expect to make direct contact with certain audiences, depending on the subject of their program, and over a period of time to establish some kind of intimate framework of shared references with their audiences.

What will be the dynamic range of these increasingly diverse cultural contacts with public access viewers? In addressing the viewer of public-access TV in recent years, producers and programmer here have begun to explore interactive media strategies. Since most public-access viewing takes place in private homes, this exploration inevitably enters into consideration of media production in private and public performance spaces.

**BL:** The colliding definitions of appropriate uses of public and private spaces have had their particular histories in Buffalo: for example, First Amendment struggles over public-access television operations- which have been replicated in other regions of the country.

**CH:** One question I ; where can free speech take place in this country? I think this is why we are all interested in public access- it actually is a place where freedom of expression is protected. Curiously, the TV set, which is actually framed by the private spaces of our living rooms and bedrooms. SO the intimacy of dimension of public-access TV we just spoke about not only refers to potentially shared references of the public steers and neighborhoods, but also to the programs and speakers who perform on the remote public-access proscenium in our private homes.

**BL:** Corporate and state-controlled spaces typically restrict speech through asserting rights of private ownership (like malls) or through the arbitrary application of state regulations (as with the recent episode where 18 artist were arrested at ArtPark in Lewiston, NY.) Anyone can stumble into this contradictions and then produce media projects that will sustain the contradiction long enough for public debate (for example, Disorderly Concept, a documentation of the 18 arrests made by you and James Hartel with B.A.A.R.C Buffalo Artists Against Repression and Censorship).

**CH:** You are describing the public performance of free speech. For example Brain Springer's recording of Unedited Satellite Transmissions (1989), which captures news anchors' and televangelists' candid behavior and remarks during commercial breaks, performs the citizens rightful access to alternative sources of information- in this case satellite transmissions.

Another question is what motivates the public's performance of free speech? A Tony Conrad and Cathy Steffan's weekly agitprop performance on the steps of City Hall, Studio Streets (1990-91), was designed to remind Buffalo politicians about the lack of public access studio in the city. Using hand-held camcorders, Conrad and Steffan interviewed citizens about what's on their minds and what's happening in their neighborhoods, informing them about the current status of public access TV in Buffalo, and asking them what they would produce if they could make a TV show. Most people have no trouble coming up with an idea for a TV show, but few realize that they have the right to develop such a study for free speech in their own community. Not only does this program create a regular public discussion about public-access TV, but probably more importantly, it demonstrates to and with the public that they/you do have a first amendment right to speak using TV. The scale of this project is impressive: the massive columns and stairs of City Hall literally frame this ongoing dialogue with the public and over 75hours to date has been cablecast to a steadily growing public-access audience.

A different kind of public performance takes place in response to the media place in response to the media pranks Group X in Portland, Oregon. The story goes that after much public discussion and no action regarding changing the name of Front Stree in Portland to "Martin Luther King Blv". Group X suddenly one night changed the all the signs for this main street to Malcom X St. They are another example of individual initiatives generating some kind of critical public interaction amongst citizens. Group X's Malcolm X prank also addressed the scale of a public opportunity for a large audience (in this case all the citizens driving into downtown Portland that morning who experienced the changed street signs) to have first hand experiences with a controversial event covered by the mainstream news. Their tape includes the mainstream news' coverage of

the prank where citizens were inadvertently drawn into a lively public dialogue about the issues, as well as about the irreverence of the prank.

**BL:** Maybe Group X jumps-starts a dialogue about race relations because what had been framed as a dialogue (by the mainstream media by government officials) was not that at all. I think of Group X as stand-ins for “the public”, just as anonymous, just as invisible. But capable of direct, effective intervention in a so-called dialogue from which they were being excluded.

The Group X action provoked responsiveness to an issue which the public could otherwise ignore. However, the public couldn't avoid noticing that their street signs were changed and they couldn't ignore the race issue encoded in the new street name. “Malcolm X Street.” And the public (aka Group X) temporarily controlled the framing of the event, outside the control of the mainstream media. Though the street signs, citizens' responsiveness is made materially specific and vivid- not constructed from a predetermined ideological platform. The prank opens up the issue to a materially specific interaction.

Another approach which I term “video witnessing” is also an interesting way to create a dialogue with an audience in a similarly non-rhetorical way. Videotapes such as those included in the annual Video Witness Festival at Hallwalls may take an explicit stance towards an issue, but I think that the more interesting witnessing tapes aren't redefined to that point. It seems that it is in the editing that rhetorical positions emerge. But in their more raw forms, when they are taking the initiative to document particular events, they interact with the viewer in a much more material and specific way. Viewers are empowered to make their own interpretations, and they are able to evaluate issues for themselves. It's not so didactic.

**CH:** Yes, not only are viewers able to consider their own reactions and construct their own positions, but it's important to recognize that these performative projects that create dialogue with an audience don't happen in a cultural vacuum. In any one region or cultural community you have particular histories of public response to events. One question I have as we watch tapes made by “video witness” in Buffalo and around the country is whether we're in fact witnessing the emergence of video dialect in various locales. Producers intend to get a dialogue going around certain issues, but additionally contribute to the development of a local media dialect around viewer participation and the use of public stage. For example, in Milwaukee, where public access producers have experimented in recent years with the live call-in show format, viewers seem to come to understand their TV set as a stage, and recognize that their fellow citizen/producers are creating a variety of frameworks for their own improvisations on live television through the phone lines.

**BL:** There have been a succession of public-access live phone-in cable series in Milwaukee at MATA (Milwaukee Access Television Authority); Stew, ¼ Tank, 2x4, One for All,- all experimenting very adventurously with live, viewer-interactive television. These programs are not only formally and visually interesting, but are very effective at confounding the communication loop between the public-access production

and the performing spectator. Even though the viewer uses the phone to participate in a particular program, there are usually some other elements that make the participation a more complex experience on a structural level (way beyond radio phone-in shows). I am thinking of a topological metaphor; a two-way communication loop twisted into a Meobius strip....Who's one the outside and who's on the inside of the production? Who is controlling the changing imagery? Who is controlling or authorizing the representational frame when the viewer's participation is constantly pushing and destabilizing that frame?

**CH:** One of the Milwaukee shows, Brian Springer's Koffee Klutch- part of your weekly program, Milwaukee Newsreel, that took place during and after the war last spring- offered photos from recent popular magazines for the callers-in to animate, creating a kind of remote-control puppet theatre. Masks were made of a number of recognizable images, for example, George Bush from the cover of Time, and an American soldier in desert fatigues from the cover of Newsweek, their lips were cut out and mounted on mechanical devices that were voice activated. People calling could literally put their own words into the mouths of these public-figures-as-puppets. Familiarity with these public personae suggested a variety of scripts with which viewers could begin to improvise.

**BL:** Koffee Klutch gave viewers props with which to "co-produce" the televised puppet theatre. The success of the presentation depended upon viewer involvement and viewer involvement depended upon shared sets of references; in this case, the recognizable politicians and celebrities whose magazine images were used as puppet masks, hooked up mechanically to the phone lines.

I would say that the 8mm News Collective in Buffalo created a production, News Diaries, which projects the same dynamic into a real life situation. That is, the group acts as a surrogate audience entering the real-life space of the mainstream news business. The News Diaries documents and shares with the viewer their in flesh confrontations with mainstream media.

The Success of the project as a video production also depends upon shared references with the viewer- the recognizable character of a local television news operation. The local news operation (WGRZ- Channel 2) became the prop for the 8mm News Collective qua TV viewers. The irony is that the local news self-authorizes itself to represent "the community". But if things turn around and the "community" decides to create a representation of the local news operations the result is a kind of comedic theatre in which the news operators (reporters and managements are included as a cast of characters.

When members of the 8mm News Collective go into a real-life situation in their matching seersucker jackets, they inevitably theatericize, it but also, more importantly, they reveal the inherent theater of the real-life situation itself. In Burned by the News (part 2 of the series News Diaries) we watch WRGZ Channel 2 news managers play their "roles" at the same time the 8mm New Collective, in a no more outlandish was, performs their "roles" as provocateurs. In Burned by The News the news station management called the police. They threatened to sue- anything to keep their viewers away!

**CH:** The New Diaries frames the news as a fiction-making enterprise. The news fictions invented by WGRZ of course, ultimately construct their viewers as a market, asking them to buy their story. The 8mm News Collective, on the other hand, questions whether they as viewers can afford to buy the story. The Collective's production reveals the artifice of their own documentation process; their viewers are authorized to construct their own version/fiction of the event. While the 8mm News Collective clearly authorizes its own theatre, it finally invests in a potentially media-literate audience where the performative structure of a media event- the taping of the media event and the framing of the media event- are exposed and obvious to the audience. There is no attempt to create seamless programming, to tuck away the artifice of the production, or to "sell" the audience.

**BL:** In the third installment of the New Diaries series, *Death of the News*, the 8mm News Collective interviews some people who have experienced a lethal fire that has killed two of their children and destroyed their home. This was a story that had been reported by the TV news stations in Buffalo and has been criticized by viewers of at least one the TV channels in letters to the station complaining of its sensational treatment of the tragedy. (These letters, by law are available for public scrutiny, and the 8mm News Collective simply went through the viewer-letter files at the particular TV station).

The news station, according to the *Death of the News* interviews, had encountered one of the surviving children who were coming home from school just after the tragedy had occurred, and they showed the child the video footage of the dead brother and sister being taken out of the house. The news reporters invaded the privacy of this family very brutally in that instance. In *Death of the News* there is a discussion with the neighbors about how the mainstream media had continued to invade the privacy of people in the neighborhood who were either in mourning or in shock or needing to deal with each other, and who didn't need a news team parked on the sidewalk waiting to document everything that happened as they went from house to house.

**CH:** The neighbors witnessed the production of the story about the fire and deaths of the children as it evolved around them over a period of days. As a result, they were very sensitive to how the story was being constructed by the reporters and who was authorizing the information gathering and conclusions. Of course these people were not trained to be commentators or critics of the news, but through this event they became very motivated and alter students of the news. In their discussions with the 8mm News Collective they were very articulate about what kinds of questioning produced an accurate story and what pictures, for example, might garb the attention of a TV audience but distort the story in such a way as to cause continuing pain for the family who had lost the children.

One of the tapes in the Video Witnesses Festival last year, *Do Y'All Know How to Play Dixie?* (1990) by Lisa Guido, Susana Aiken and Carlos Aparcio, is very interesting as a comparison. In.....Dixie the viewer has great difficulty determining who authorized the production of the tape- how did you, the viewer/voyeur get into that Tennessee kitchen with those Klan folk? The tape doesn't have the kind of production values that accommodate a comfortably distanced or formal relationship with the subjects; rather, the viewer is abruptly and intimately positioned within their home, witnessing an informal and lively country music jam session. As a result, the disoriented

viewer is set up to respond to these Klan members as if they were neighbors, or even family. As lifelong viewers of TV, we expect that our confrontations with those politically objectionable “others” will be mediated through constructions of oppositions and distance- for example, we would be more comfortable hearing Klan members speak to us about their beliefs from the platform of a nationally-televised talk show. The viewers of ...Dixie, finding themselves in the familiar/foreign Tennessee kitchen must reorient themselves. Through this orientation process- and examination of the production dynamics of a public-access stage- viewers will authorize and construct the meaning of the tape themselves.

**BL:** I think that the power of Do Y'all Know How to Play Dixie? Has to do with the collision between two incompatible ways of experiencing the tape, which really seems like two incompatible ways of experiencing reality; one a pleasurable and sensual encounter with the music; and the other, a moral positioning in relation to the Klan biology and what it stand for

There s such a startling ordinariness to that scene. And maybe that's what “video witnessing” is about: witnessing symbols in collision with material expression of the “everyday”. This is how value systems emerge- out of ordinary engagements. And the packaged spectacle of mainstream TV can never give that sense. Maybe if TV viewers could see the banality of the circumstances under which significant expressions occur, they wouldn't take for granted these ordinary situations that contribute to the production of culture, of ideology, of identities...because the TV viewer is participating in that production whether she/he pays it any mind or not.

**CH:** Yes, it has to do with the authority of the people who are putting together the spectacle of the TV program. If you see them as having skills and information that you don't have, then it's easy to go on to make the assumption that they somehow have a larger or more important picture of the news of world events, of what's valued as culture. And of course, they don't necessarily. It's essential for viewers to have direct experience with the means of production in order to understand their actual relationship to the information that finally arrives to them on their TV set. And public access, through its guarantee of first-come, first served, free access to channel time, is the only community/cultural resource that accommodates this essential phrase of public education on the scale that is necessary- every citizen in the city should be media literate.

**BL:** In talking about the artist in relation to viewership or accessing the means of production, there is a tension or artificial wedge between the artist who uses public access and the general public access user of community user. There seems to be a sense that they are two different groups, and one shouldn't interfere with the other. It is important that artist produce alternative models and, as you have said in other conversations, break codes....

**CH:**....yes, breaking the codes that exist in mainstream TV and cinema, which then allows those elements to be reconfigured in different ways.

**BL:** The artist is just another kind of viewer- a member of community- who has learned how to use the vocabulary of the television medium and the potential of public-access, and who focuses those efforts towards productive and rich experiences of what goes into the idiot box and what comes out of it.