

On the Make: Activist Video Collectives

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for Raymond Navarro

This paper could have been written by a group of people. In all but the most basic sense, it was. As I draw upon experiences of people in "real-life activist video collectives," this insider's view is not the result of an un-collective process. I want to discuss the underpinnings of our work, the fuel for it, the subjects and the products, and the relationship between those things. After I explain this endeavor, one collaborator turns her head, looks at me from the side of her face, and says, "I really don't think twenty pages will be enough." Sure. But we have to start somewhere. So, true to collective process, the first thing on the agenda is to set the agenda.

Setting the (Alternative) Agenda

During the last few years, gay and lesbian and AIDS-activist video collectives in New York City have caused a chain reaction of grassroots production. Often there's no office or telephone. Often the members meet a lot of times, with not enough time, anytime, and, when the crunch is on, all night long. Some persevere, continuously producing clips like a radical newsreel. Others make one tape, get a little exposure, and then procrastinate or get distracted by other productions, with members regrouping in another collective with a different acronym. All get at least a little bogged down in bureaucracy, but maybe only for a moment before getting back in gear.

Across these variations, no one gets anywhere without an agenda. Besides, an agenda—whether to foreground activists with AIDS protesting their own limited access to health care, or to represent lesbians and gays of color in an empowering and insightful way—is usually what brings the group together in the first place. Often more than one agenda, of the personal and historical type, crowd the room, and never do just a few remain hidden. Whether the problem is a peculiar editing style, previous sexual involvement with someone in the group, authoritarian ego, dogmatism, or political desperation,

magazine: (white) face after (white) face, skimpy (white) women running around in next to nothing. Next page, (black) women, skimpy as well, and running around in next to nothing too, but with a different, sometimes almost subtle, exotic quality. Maybe it was the leopard skin underwear.

I Object has been described as “spunky,” a term apropos of rapidly successful upstarts. Given that very few of the members of this collective had any background in video, the tape represents a powerful combination of suggestive shots, rhythmic editing, political savvy, excellent tunes, and great looks. Shot on borrowed equipment, in collective members’ homes, edited at work after-hours, and finished a couple of minutes before its premiere in a video marathon at a popular nightclub, *I Object* is an origin story of sorts, one that aptly describes the nativity of many collectives.

Clearly a predecessor of House, the Paper Tiger Television Collective (PTTV), was the brainstorm of a few media agitators who were interested in exercising the democratic mandates of public access cable TV in the early eighties. Since then, the Paper Tiger production philosophy has influenced the evolution of many New York City video collectives and should rightfully be credited as a model for much quick-and-dirty media that evolved later in the decade. As an urgent response by, for, and about the ever-present medium of television, PTTV demonstrates a methodology by which to reinterpret cultural misrepresentations using the very same tools of their production. Cofounder DeeDee Halleck has noted, “There was a very conscious effort to make *Paper Tiger* a model for cheap television, to think about what those elements are in television that make television what it is.”¹ House of Color continues the tradition of calling to question the racist, sexist, and homophobic backbone of network television that posits all “special interest groups” as such.

Paper Tiger’s weekly shows—aired citywide on public access television, with roll-ins—have a handmade look and an immediate message. By challenging network forms of television, it represents alternative TV, and can be watched not only at home but also in community centers and galleries, in schools and organizational meetings. Fundamentally, the group maintains that people “should be able to work in media, so they can be critical of the mass media and not victims of mass culture.”² Whereas network TV perpetuates the hierarchical structure by which it is produced, the collective nature of the particular alternative media at issue here redefines a long, profit-guided history of nonparticipatory forms of TV production.

True to form, the PTTV collective is completely open to volunteers, so most progressive video producers in the city today, at one time or another, either have worked on a Paper Tiger tape, spiritually guided one, or been a commentator who deconstructed a propaganda mechanism of the information industry for one of their programs. Paper Tiger encourages anyone who

already knows (or is willing to learn) about a certain topic, to investigate relevant documents, organize a script, paint a backdrop, put the headphones on, and get behind a camera. In PTTV, producers are encouraged to research, analyze, and represent social and political issues despite (and at the same time, because of) their own race, gender, class, age, and sexual identity.

Between its New York City headquarters and Paper Tiger/Southwest, a San Diego affiliate, the fluid group of lesbians, straights, and gay men that comprise PPTV—more or less in that order—has produced four of the earliest activist documentaries pertaining to the AIDS crisis. In *PWAC Talks Back* (1988) the late Max Navarre of the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC), discusses the organization's unique publications *Surviving and Thriving with AIDS* and *PWAC Newslines*, a monthly newsletter. In *Simon Watney Speaks about Clause 28* (1988) the author of *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* provides a scathing critique of homophobia in the UK by closely reading the mainstream media coverage of England's repressive legislation against queers. Like Jesse Helms's parallel amendment to a bill on AIDS education funding, Section 28 limits government support for "materials which promote homosexuality."

Then the San Diego crew came out with *Transformer AIDS* in 1989, which features University of California, San Diego graduate Bob Kinney illustrating the vacuity of Ronald Reagan's lip service to the AIDS crisis. Two years later the same queer crew again occupied the university's in-house studio and graced us with *The Silence that Silences*, which calls into question "pictures without context." Kinney examines desolate, desperate, lonely photographs of people with AIDS taken by Rosalind Solomon and Nicholas Nixon, and sees not the implied "AIDS victim," but rather a manipulated image of people living with AIDS who seem to lack agency and voice, unlike many people with HIV who are vehemently fighting with their lives, for support, love, family, friends, lovers, and themselves. Like other activist collectives, PTTV/Southwest also used footage of protests in its half-hour reformulations of mistaken, mainstream dictum, changing a documentary into unapologetic agitprop.

Such informal linkages as those between the Paper Tiger collective and House of Color similarly inform the history of another early, collectively produced tape on the AIDS crisis, *Testing the Limits: NYC*. In spring 1987, the Testing the Limits Collective (TTL) turned out their half-hour documentary about what some people living with AIDS were saying and doing about the dominant heedlessness of government and medical officials. Notably, the gay and lesbian liberation movement was the genesis both for this collective video work and for the earliest activist responses to the AIDS crisis. After taping demonstrations against the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* Supreme Court decision, which upheld state sodomy laws, a few folks got together in the

familiar networking-the-circle fashion to record the growing AIDS activism in New York City. The early TTL members were lesbian, gay, and straight: David Meieran, Gregg Bordowitz, Hilery Joy Kipnis, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and, later, Jean Carlomusto. In 1986 and 1987, they spent six more months covering various demonstrations of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Subsequently, they completed the tightly edited and well contextualized *Testing the Limits: NYC* about the swirling hellhole of AIDS deaths, panic, misinformation, and governmental bigotry that the city had become.

TTL attracted many other eager video jocks from the paisley of ACT UP's energetic band, many of whom created DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), which targets ACT UP members as its primary audience and makes videos by, about, and, most importantly, *for* the movement. Nine folks founded DIVA: Ray Navarro, Jean Carlomusto, Gregg Bordowitz, Bob Beck, Costa Pappas, Ellen Spiro, George Plagianos, Rob Kurilla, and myself. All TTL members were immediately considered members of DIVA, because we thrive as a loose affiliation that chronicles the commotion around City Hall, at the Stock Exchange, inside the Department of Health—some key



Transformer AIDS: Bob Kinney Looks at Media and Governmental Response to AIDS, Paper Tiger TV Southwest

Everyone then suggests the person: "She's not here anymore, so she can do it."

As we all expected, future projects have been tabled until next meeting. Also for next time, think about DIVA T-shirt imagery. We've been offered free silk-screening. If no one comes up with any more ideas, we'll have to decide between color bars—activist video in jail—or Lady Liberty with a camcorder leading the people.

Is this meeting adjourned?

Notes

1. DeeDee Halleck stresses this purpose in an interview with Judith Mayne and Lucretia Knapp, "Feminisms Does Media Activism: An Interview with DeeDee Halleck," *Feminisms*, vol. 3, no. 3 (May/June 1990), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.* p. 3.
3. Peter Bowen, "Collect Yourself," *Outweek*, no. 52 (June 27, 1990), p. 108.
4. Julio Garcia Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema" [1969] in Coca Fusco, ed., *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1987), p. 167.
5. Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS," in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, eds., *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), p. 174.
6. Ellen Spiro, "What To Wear on Your Video Activist Outing (Because the Whole World Is Watching): A Camcorder's Manifesto," *The Independent*, vol. 14, no. 4 (May, 1991), p. 24.
7. Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October* 43, (Winter 1987), p. 7.
8. Isaac Julien and Pratibha Parmar, "In Conversation" in Boffin and Gupta, p. 100.
9. Stephen Heath, "Representing Television," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Patricia Mellencamp, ed. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and BFI Publishing, 1990), p. 298.
10. An affinity group usually coalesces for the planning stages and the duration of a demonstration in order to carry out specific, small, group actions. As many as twenty coordinated affinity groups have participated at one time in a large ACT UP protest.
11. Other activist video collectives, with multiple overlapping memberships, complement the work discussed here. For example, Media Against Censorship (MAC Attack) was founded by Dean Lance, Maria Beatty, and Branda Miller in August 1990. The group is a collective of video artists and media activists documenting acts of and protests against censorship. In May 1991 they produced a one-hour documentary, *State of the Art/Art of the State*. ReproVision, the video collective affiliated with WHAM!, was founded by Julie Clark, Dolly Meieran, and Dana Nasrallah. In September 1991 they produced *Access Denied*.
12. Arch-conservative Reverend Donald Wildmon got his hands on a copy of *Like a Prayer*, and he searched for a way to connect it with his attempts to embarrass the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He discovered that the Second Coming clip played in

New York's lesbian and gay New Festival as part of Ray Navarro's memorial tape. His frantic and skewed call to arms included the following bit of hysteria: "Considered most shocking of all was the fact that twelve hundred dollars of Council money paid for the Festival's movie guide which promoted the film, *Jesus Christ Condom*, produced by militant gay activists who call themselves DIVA-TV." In response, the NEA drafted a fact sheet about DIVA: "That organization, a small group working in media-based AIDS awareness programs, never received a grant from the NEA." And we probably never will.