

Kathy Rae Huffman: The Contemporary Art Television Fund

A unique concept to bring artists' video production into the context of public television was realized with the creation of The Contemporary Art Television Fund. Established in 1983, with a special three year commitment from The Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, New Works Development Award Program, the collaboration between The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA) and WGBH TV, Boston combined the expertise and resources of two major American institutions whose support of contemporary art (video art in particular) had earned widespread recognition. The CAT Fund dream was global, managerially unique, and its three-year development plan underscored its creators' ambitious objectives. Because there existed no similar model for the international expansion of television as a creative medium, The CAT Fund required foresight on the part of its initial funding organization, and the highest standards and aesthetic sensibilities from its directors. The creative leadership, therefore, was intentionally placed into the hands of a "curator" who had familiarity with the institutional network for video art, and the artists who had earned the highest respect internationally – as well as a "producer" who was familiar with the production needs of artists and television. Therefore, the "curator/producer" as a role emphasizes the duality of purpose: to identify and commission extraordinary, new and significant works of art for video, and then, to facilitate the professional production, broadcast and widespread distribution of these works to new markets and new audiences.

The most recent approach to merge artists with television, The CAT Fund bridges a gap that has widened since the first artists stepped into the television studios of WGBH in Boston. The first "experiments" there were visionary attempts to open television and the mystery of the technology to new contemporary conceptual artists, writers, dancers and musicians before the porta-pack was introduced. Under the direction of Fred Barzyk, these relationships were formalized as the New Television Workshop in 1974, five years after the first national broadcast of "The Medium is the Medium" produced at WGBH. The early studio experiments provided the first hands-on experience to well known artists like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, Peter Campus and Nam June Paik. Other artists like William Wegman and Bill Viola participated in the workshop program, later to become the pioneers of the medium. Video Art – born in the TV studio, was of necessity, developed in the artists' studio with the availability of portable equipment during the late 60's and early 70's and the works produced outside of television's presence became a genre that would continue to provoke the interest of critics, the art world and television for years to come. It always defied category and subverted the immediate need for TV supported production. At the time, artists were involved with the explorations of the limits of the medium and their personal relationship to video technology.

As technology became more of interest to artists, systems were developed with federal funding (NEA) and with generous support from the Rockefeller Foundation in the form of Media Art Centers based regionally in metropolitan areas of the United States (San Francisco, Long Beach, New York, Chicago) to offer more advanced equipment access to artists in a democratic manner. The Media Art Centers (MAC's) organized, as well, to program both film and video for the public, to collect information, and to advocate access to the air with both public television and cable television as targets; with some success. WNET in New York provided the technical support project "TV Lab" from 1972 to 1984 – offering sophisticated "on-line" editing, and broadcast of video art to the New York audience. WGBH's New Television Workshop offered financial support and technical production to dancers and choreographers alongside visual artists, writers and musicians. The access to television, in these programs, was administered by television professionals – although creative in their own

modes – they were within the system that maintained the standards of broadcast in competition with commercial television audiences.

American public television is supported from the private sector and from federal funds which are allocated through a complex system of peer panel review. It is a democratic system that rewards efforts to reach large audiences, represent minority points of view, and educate a large, disparate audience. National programming is, likewise, subject to the same guiding principles, and each public television station has the option to produce or receive programming from the national level. These decisions are often made with regard to the financial support received locally the audience who watches, and donates money to their public television station. The 1980's presented new concerns for the public funding of "experimental" television, which includes production by artists. The WNET TV Lab closed in 1984, and the WGBH TV New Television Workshop found itself facing a shortage of production funds and a resulting lack of vitality that it had once enjoyed. Commercial production companies were producing with advanced technology that the public system could not afford to keep up with, and artists were looking elsewhere for support and recognition for their creative efforts.

The creation of The CAT Fund, at a time when artists' involvement with American television seemed to be at its most dismal point, underscores the determination on the part of the parent institutions (ICA and WGBH) to maintain a presence for artists within the purview of television while providing the leadership for other institutional collaborations. Key to the ultimate, self-supporting structure built into the long range plan of The CAT Fund was the development of a national and international forum for the marketing/distribution of the video art works it produced. Sales and rentals would eventually form the financial base and would translate into the program's operating costs. With the overall goal to broaden international audiences for video art through a variety of avenues including local, national and international broadcast, cable, home video and exhibition, artists can expect increased revenue from their works as well. The CAT Fund has forged strong business links with marketing specialists that have proved to be invaluable to the program's success. International TV sales are managed by Producer Service Group (PSG) and are represented at MIFED, MIP and The London Multimedia Market alongside PBS specials; independent documentaries and dramatic television specials. Marketing strategies to introduce the work of artists for National Cable and for home distribution are underway, all in addition to the established educational distribution systems for artists' video. The marketing and distribution of video has traditionally been outside the interest of the museum – and considered a "product" of narrow audience interest by television.

The first national "series" of creative television, including works by artists, was introduced to the American public in 1985, produced by Minneapolis public television KTCA as "Alive From Off Center". Its success has generated a second season for 1986 which will include two co-productions from The CAT Fund (The World of Photography by Michael Smith & William Wegman and a new work for television by Laurie Anderson). This series represents a multi-disciplinary approach to programming with a target audience of young (under 50) and media sophisticated viewers. Internationally, Channel Four (Great Britain), ZDF (West Germany) and RTBF (Belgium) continue to produce and program new works by artists internationally. The CAT Fund joins these long-standing creative producers, and demonstrates that distribution is an important factor for consideration in the international co-production possibilities that will result from common interests in the years to come. The work by contemporary artists is of interest to a "public" who recognizes that artists can widen the scope of television, and create a new definition of the medium of broadcast to include alternative means of reaching audiences.

The Contemporary Art Television Fund Program Descriptions: Completed Works

EASY LIVING

by Chip Lord & Mickey McGowan

18 minutes, color, 1984

This program takes a microscopic focus to ingeniously depict leisure life in suburban America with a cast composed entirely of little plastic dolls and miniature model cars – the very toys which shape American children's ideas about success and adult life. The work communicates effectively the propaganda that has created a vision of what the middle-class American dream has become: Easy Living.

THE WATER CATALOGUE

by Bill Seaman

27 minutes, color, stereo, 1984

A video album of sounds and images that captures the hypnotic power and beauty of water in its endless variety of forms. The steady pattern of rainfall, the pounding of the surf in a storm, rivers flowing and ice melting – one image of water converges into another as the narrative lyrics and music draw the viewer in to experience our physical, emotional and psychological connection to this precious element. Filmed in New England.

DOUBLE LUNAR DOGS

by Joan Jonas

25 minutes, color, stereo, 1984

A vision of post-apocalyptic survival aboard a spacecraft travelling aimlessly through the Universe. In this work, which was inspired by the Robert Heinlein science fiction story, "Universe", the timeless travellers have forgotten the purpose of their mission, and their attempts to re-capture their past on "that destroyed planet" Earth are reprimanded by "Authority". Cast includes: Spalding Gray, Joan Jonas, Jill Kroesen, John Malloy and David Warrilow.

EVOL

by Tony Oursler

27 minutes, color, stereo, 1985

A view of love from the flip side. The audience peers into the delirious and erotic dreamstate of a young man through a series of anecdotal scenes that provide humorous insight into the stereotypes of sex and love, loneliness and useless longing. Props and inanimate objects hold a special significance in representing these human dilemmas – as in abstract representation in paintings. This work challenges our assumptions of what television is supposed to be.

MORE TV STORIES

by Ilene Segalove

14 minutes, color, 1985

Six true stories, bright and humorous, satirize the relationship between people and their TVs. In a whimsical manner, this artist brings attention to the powerful influence that television has on the public – how it is able to introduce new information into the human experience, thus changing our attitude, ideas, and concept of truth and power. Segments include: "The Pastrami Sandwich", "Dial 116", "Truth on TV", "Anatomy in Motion", "Hotel Suite", and "The Forbidden Channel".

IRONY

by Ken Feingold

30 minutes, color

An experimental, multi-layered dramatic format is used to explore the relationship between thought and action (at any given moment). The subjects are "in production" on a film in which

we are given the means to realize that even the most momentary aural and visual information is lost if we pay attention to only one thing at a time. Through superimposing and dissolving, the artist explores that space wherein intentionality reveals itself as an act of comparison by substitution.

WILL-O'-THE-WISP (A DECEITFUL GOAL)

by Dara Birnbaum

10 minutes, color, stereo

This work is centered around the development of the female character from the Faust legend, Margarete, as she reveals herself. The tale is based upon the meeting with a man who is no longer there as part of Margarete's daily experience, but who is very much existent in her sense of being and her longing. The artist utilizes video effects in portraying the woman, along with a diagonal composition that takes the form of "rain" and a musical component which provides tension for the work. This is the second part in an ongoing work by the artist entitled "Damnation of Faust".

"NEW ENGLAND FISHERMEN: SPOTS"

by Joan Logue

15 minutes, color

New England Fishermen communities are the subject of this series of video portraits. The artist captures the spirit of individuals in the context of their daily environment in a manner that is compelling, intimate and revealing.

"O PANAMA"

by James Benning and Burt Barr

28 minutes, color

Is a film for television focusing on the mental landscape of a sick man confined to his apartment during the winter. As the camera follows the man through his days of "captivity", we become caught up in his feverish obsessions with time and temperature. Color and imagery evoke shifts of reality that the man experiences in his entrapped state.

"THE WORLD 'OF PHOTOGRAPHY"

by Michael Smith and William Wegman

24 minutes, color

A humorous work modelled on the style of the educational videotape. This piece proposes to "guide the most ignorant student through the basics of photography" using the "slice of life method". The viewer is included in a typical day in the life of a professional photographer (played by Wegman) who is bitter, disenchanted, tenured and generally unsuccessful, and an amateur photographer naive, unskilled but willing to learn (played by Smith).

AS IF MEMORIES COULD DECEIVE ME

Marcel Odenbach

video-installation with three monitors

video tape

17 minutes, color, stereo

completed April 1986

The keyboard of the piano is to be used as the static metaphor that proposes three different levels of meaning in this work. By combining informational, symbolic and emotional levels, Marcel Odenbach creates a permanent moving thought that shatters the appearance of the otherwise narrative approach to his personal experience and social phenomenon in post-war Germany. Marcel Odenbach has produced his work in Boston with the New England Symphonic Orchestra video recording and in other locations. This production is in collaboration with the Goethe Institute in Boston, receiver of a New Works grant from the

Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

Bill Viola (Untitled)

60 minutes, color, stereo (to be completed June 1986)

This videotape is a personal investigation of the inner states and connections to animal consciousness we all carry within. The work is in four parts, and its structure reflects and directly evokes in the viewer the states of being under investigation. It functions more like a map rather than a description of the animal psyche. Images of animals mediate a progression from an initial stage of non-differentiation (pure being), proceeding through stages of the rational and then physical orders, finally arriving at a transcendent state beyond logic and the laws of physics.

STORM AND STRESS

by Doug Hall

30 minutes, color, stereo

(to be completed August 1986)

A meditation on the storm as phenomenon and as metaphor that will suggest feelings, impressions and ideas experienced by the artist during the production of the program. The artist intends to capture the beauty and power of turbulent weather in visual poetry that illustrates how man is inextricably connected to these elements in both his evolution and his temperament. To be recorded on location in both the "Four Corners" desert area of the southwest and in "Tornado Valley" near Norman, Oklahoma.

TALK NORMAL (Working Title)

by Laurie Anderson

30 minutes, color, stereo

(to be completed August 1986)

A series of songs and stories about animism: about life forms between biology and electronic technology. The story of people who have created a world of two-dimensional ghosts and phantoms which they imitate and finally idealize – a story of people whose technology has come to life. This work will utilize computer-generated images, video, film, and original music by Anderson. It is a co-production between the CAT Fund/WGBH and KCTA-Minneapolis (Alive from off Center).