

Susan Dowling: History of the WGBH New Television Workshop

Since 1967 (although not given an official name until 1974), the WGBH New Television Workshop (Workshop) has continually sought to make the tools of television accessible to artists working in a variety of disciplines. It continues to operate from a firm and unchanging philosophical base: the creation of innovative, experimental programming produced in collaboration with independents. It takes continuing advantage of the medium's unexplored potential to present material of technical and creative excellence in entirely new ways.

Early experiments and projects under Workshop Director Fred Barzyk were what inspired the creation of the Workshop. These efforts, under the Rockefeller-supported Artists-in-Television Project, included works by Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Thomas Tadlock and Aldo Tambellini. They collaborated with television technicians in search of new ways to explore television as an electronic art form on "The Medium is the Medium", aired nationally in 1969. While an offscreen pianist played Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata and an offscreen Paik periodically advised viewers to close one eye or both eyes ("This is audience-participation TV"), the screen showed double and triple images of a nude go-go girl, President Nixon's face stretching puttylike as he talked about "the brilliant manager of my campaign for the Presidency", three shaggy hippies mugging for the camera, and dancing wave patterns looping and rolling and changing color. At the end, Paik's laconic voice was again heard, telling the viewers, "Please follow instructions. Turn off your television set." The people at WGBH were a little surprised by the go-go dancer, but everyone there was delighted with Paik. The program also served to focus attention on independent artists as prime movers in television program innovation.

In 1967-68 there was a pre-worked series called "What's Happening Mr. Silver?" This one hour weekly program was hosted by David Silver, a professor of English at Tufts University. Each show was a collage of intellectual, visual, aural and emotional bombardment.

When Korean-born Nam June Paik, "the George Washington of video" and his Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, came to Boston in 1969 he brought with him five junk television sets, a set of giant magnets, miles of masking tape, rubber boots (to prevent shock) and hand-drawn schematics for the world's first videosynthesizer. Paik, as one of the participants in Artists-in-Television Projects funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, brought his dream, the synthesizer, to life, and broadcast his four hour "Video Commune – The Beatles: From Beginning to End." All images on the show -surreal landscapes (crushed tin foil), eerie abstractions (shaving cream), bursts of color (wrapping paper) – were transmogrified by the synthesizer at the very moment of broadcast: "live" television at its most unexpected. The videosynthesizer also gave impetus to Ron Hays, whose metier is the creation of video image 'scores' to classical music. Hays directed the Music Image Workshop at WGBH until he went to Hollywood.

WGBH continued to provide independents with broadcast access for experiments through the 70's. A television first was "The Very First On-the-Air Half Inch Videotape Festival Ever", in 1972. The Workshop invited anyone they could find who was working with half inch portapak equipment into studio A with their tapes, monitors and decks. The four hour festival included documentaries; political tapes by people who saw this new medium as a revolutionary tool; humorous and dramatic work by high school and college students as well as work by video artists.

With public awareness of video art growing, the Boston Symphony Orchestra collaborated with WGBH to rethink "the rather static visual nature orchestral concerts." Together a group of artists were commissioned to make the BSO telecasts more interesting to the eye. The

result, "Video Variations", was an hour special featuring the work of eight artists experimenting with television images suggested by orchestral music – a far cry from conventional concert coverage. (1973)

In 1974 the Workshop's half inch "studio" began life in an abandoned movie house just outside Boston. Funding was received from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

In its first years the Workshop studio offered commissioned artists ready use of low cost half inch video equipment, free from the pressure of conventional production scheduling and broadcast deadlines. It existed to take chances, to explore risks, to fail as well as succeed in an environment free from the burdens and demands of high cost, high quality technical production. In the first year more than seventy-five artists from the fields of dance, drama, video art and music streamed through the Workshop doors to try new forms and concepts from and for the medium.

In 1976 over 300 independents strode in and out with fresh ideas for high-risk, low cost programming. Dorothy Chiesa, with one technician and numerous volunteers, did the heroic task of coordinating this incredible influx of activity.

Another landmark achievement for the Workshop was "Video: The New Wave", aired nationally on PBS in 1974. Written and narrated by Brian O'Doherty, the program was simultaneously a retrospective and a preview of video artistry, assembling works produced at the Workshop and other pieces produced independently. Artists included were: Otto Piene, Doug Davis, Bill Etra, Stan VanDerBeek, Rudi Stern, David Atwood, Ron Hays, Stephen Beck, Dan Hallock, Nam June Paik, William Wegman, Frank Gillette, Peter Campus and Ed Emshwiller. Electronic abstractions mixed sharply with personal documentary; realistic images were manipulated to create new ways of seeing the familiar (i.e., "William Wegman Teaching his Dog", "Man Ray", or "How to Spell".)

Also in 1974, the Dance Project of the Workshop was formed under Nancy Mason Hauser to explore ways of breaking down the barriers between the worlds of dance and video. This was the beginning of an on-going mandate to work choreographers in developing video dance which has been carried on by former dancer Susan Dowling since 1979. Dowling also works with artists in other disciplines and fields. Another person of major importance in the history of the Workshop was Olivia Tappan. Tappan (along with Barzyk) goes back to the early days of free-wheeling experiments at WGBH and the creation of the Workshop. Next to Barzyk, Tappan is the person most responsible for the survival and development of the Workshop from 1967–1983.

In 1975 "Artists' Showcase" would take wing as a regularly scheduled collection of innovative works, aired locally in their entirety at the close of the broadcast day every Sunday. Throughout the fall of 1979, the Workshop reassembled highlights of landmark programming from the last dozen years into a special "Artists' Showcase" retrospective series, each program introduced by critic commentator Russell Connor. What came as a pleasant surprise (or mild shock) is that "showcase" has built a faithful following, a large enough head count late Sunday night to generate ratings. Artistic invention has created its own kind of establishment for those who are weary of the conventional.

The Workshop gave up its studio in 1978, giving most of its equipment to BGVF (Boston Film and Video Foundation). The current scene at the WGBH New Television Workshop is, for better or for worse, not as crazy or reckless as those early days and the financial strains are more difficult than ever. But Susan Dowling, as Director of the New Television Workshop since 1983, tries to continue the never-ending spirit and perseverance modeled after Barzyk.

Also in 1983 the New Television Workshop and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston created the Contemporary Art Television Fund (The CAT Fund) with a three year grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. Co-directed by Dowling and David Ross (Director of the ICA), the CAT Fund commissions artists breaking new ground in the video medium to produce new work whether for broadcast, exhibition, installation, with performance, for disc or other new uses. The second goal of the CAT Fund is to help promote and develop national and international marketing for these works. This includes museums, avantgarde centers, art and video festivals, galleries, and other arts and educational institutions, home video and disc. This non-broadcast exposure and marketing is of significant benefit to the artists and their work. The curator/producer responsible for the daily on-going operation of the CAT Fund is Kathy Rae Huffman. The latest Workshop project in development is a collaboration with WNET to create a new series called New Television that will broadcast simultaneously in Boston and New York. We think of it as the grandchild of WNET's TV Lab and the Workshop's Artists Showcase. We hope to introduce this new series in March, 1987.

The Workshop wants to help build a body of work in new video art fields and encourage other stations and media centers to do the same. We want to persevere in introducing these vanguard works to the mainstream. We want to compete with excellence in artistic vision, craft and content. The Workshop may be the only on-going operation of its kind in the world dedicated to working with artists in developing new video art forms. 1986 will celebrate our 19th year of commissioning artists to create new works for television.

Subnote: What is not included in this history are several Fred Barzyk drama projects, some in collaboration with WNET, like "Collisions" with writer Jane Wagner & Lily Tomlin. Another collaboration with Warner's OUBE and WOSU created the first interactive drama, "Lulu Smith."

WGBH NEW TELEVISION WORKSHOP

The New Television Workshop is an autonomous production unit within WGBH. The goal since 1967 has been to create new works of art especially designed for television. The Workshop has won national and international attention for its innovative programming in the arts and for its expertise on assisting the artists in creating work for television.

The Workshop has worked with a long list of artists. Among them are:

* In Dance:

Rudy Perez, Gus Solomons, Jr., Dawn Kramer, Ruth Wheeler, Remy Charlip, Dan Wagoner, James Waring, Louis Falco, Twyla Tharp, Marta Renzi, Lisa Fox, Beth Soll, Deborah Hay, Douglas Dunn, Karole Armitage, Bill T. Jones, A. Zane.

* In Drama:

Writers – Kurt Vonnegut, Jean Shephered, Mary Feldhous-Weber, Charles Johnson, Ned White, Burt Barr, Denis O'Neil. Performers- Lily Tomlin, Dan Aykroyd, Glynn Turman, Matt Dillon, Gilda Radner, James Broderick, George Coe, John Erdman, Willem DaFoe.

* In Visual Arts:

Nam June Paik, Otto Piene, Stan VanDerBeek, Ron Hays, Ros Barron, Betsey Connors, William Wegman, Patrick Ireland, Peter Campus, Fred Simon, Lee Krasner, Andy Mann, Bill Violas, Joan Logue, Joan Jonas, Chip Lord, Tony Ousler, Bill Seaman.

" In Music:

John Cage, Michael Colgrass, Ralph Shapey, Lucas Foss, Ivana Thernmen, George Rochberg, Rhys Chatham, Earle Brown, Joan Driscoll, Richard Lerman, Robert Ashley, Jeffrey Lohn, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Peter Gordon, Bruce Springsteen.

The WGBH NEW TELEVISION WORKSHOP is the only operation of its kind in the nation which is dedicated to working with artists and creating new works for television. The Workshop has the passion, commitment and expertise for continuing on a long term basis innovative arts programming in all media (inter-arts), Visual Arts, Music, Drama, Performance Art, Poetry, and Dance, etc.).

Another important mandate of the New Television Workshop and The Contemporary Art Television Fund (a co-venture between WGBH Workshop and The Institute of Contemporary Art) is: To develop comprehensive, international distribution systems for artists' work (PBS, foreign broadcast, non-broadcast venues such as museums, festivals, media centers, arts and educational institutions; cable; home video, and disc).