

HOW TO KEEP EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO

ON PBS NATIONAL PROGRAMMING

By

Nam June Paik

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The new Carnegie Commission report, A Public Trust, rightfully argues that public television needs more innovation, research and development. I have worked since 1968 in this sphere of television, at WGBH in Boston and at WNET in New York in the days of the Ford Foundation's Public Broadcasting Laboratory, and I would like to suggest a few CONCRETE plans from my own experience.

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Everyone knows that we need more innovation. But we also know that innovative programs are not always popular during the lifetime of the artist. How, then, do we justify in a broadcast schedule the rather exotic programs of artists on tax-supported TV channels?

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If PBS gives to the public only what the public wants, PBS will become the same as commercial TV and will kill itself. However, if PBS gives to the public only what the public SHOULD have, then PBS kills itself also, because no public will follow it.

How to solve this dilemma?

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An ancient Chinese said, "It is not hard to become a sage; it is harder to find one." Even then there seemed to be problems in the selection and editing process. Therefore, let's look at some other more successful information-processing sectors, that is, the worlds of publishing and photo-journalism.

Doubleday's editors, for example, are surrounded by thousands of manuscripts ALREADY COMPLETED by writers from U.S. Presidents to college sophomores. Expensive manuscripts are not necessarily better than, say a

free poem by an avant-garde poet, who just wants his works to be published. Both can be offered to the public by the publisher and there will not be a de facto censorship. Editors at Popular Photography, also, have the same luxury of selecting a few good pictures from 10,000 completed photos -- already finished products. In this way, competition and diversity of product are guaranteed. (And, of course, there is also more than one outlet.)

In television, however, this selection process is completely reversed. The program director selects programs, not from finished products, but from mere ideas or scripts. Creators for television therefore need PRIOR FUNDING to make a pilot or product out of an approved script. This, to my mind, evil necessity of PRIOR FUNDING automatically eliminates about 95 percent of work by new talents because no one is allowed in the television system to risk a production budget on an unknown name.

Again, in the literary world, great individual talents such as James Joyce, Henry Miller, or Jean-Paul Sartre got no advances for their first writings. And many great poems were first published on mimeograph machines. How, in today's television selection process, can a true but undiscovered genius ever successfully go through the funding process?

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Therefore: AMERICAN TELEVISION WILL NOT IMPROVE TOO MUCH UNTIL THIS PRIOR FUNDING SYSTEM CEASES TO EXIST AND THE PROGRAM DIRECTORS ARE ABLE TO CHOOSE THE BEST PRODUCT FROM FINISHED WORKS BY MANY FREE CREATORS AS IN THE FIELDS OF LITERATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY. (!!!)

The British Broadcasting Corporation should and cannot be the model for PBS because BBC is running with an antiquated philosophy that there is only ONE typewriter in the whole of England, and their job is how to perfect IT. They may have an otherwise liberal philosophy but their existential

format is dictatorial in the true etymological sense. American television must have a philosophy that says: EVERYBODY MUST HAVE HIS OR HER OWN TYPEWRITER for their expression and participation. In the long run, this is the ONLY THINKABLE way to achieve a truly PUBLIC television. Public TV must become a switchboard for multiple voices using broadcasting and other new outlets.

This Utopian prophecy is already quite a concrete prospect. Three million VTRs are in use in the world now; in 1983 we will have 32 million VTRs. (There will be 15 million in the U.S., 10 million in Europe, and 7 million in Japan.)

Through the introduction of CCD and "chip" technology, we can soon punch out like doughnuts color cameras without the vidicon tube.

By 1995, the American people will be able to express themselves as easily and as cheaply on videotapes as they now do with poems, photos, dances and songs. At that time, public TV will stand on a new ground, and we may then require Carnegie III!

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Needless to say, artists have led this Copernican Revolution from one-way television to two-way television. I cannot emphasize enough the political meaning of Bill Wegman's first tapes with his dog, Man Ray. Using the most primitive SONY CV equipment and without any prior funding, he managed to create a piece which has won the approval of a wide range of people from museum curators to producers of the TONIGHT and TODAY shows, and their audiences. Only PBS engineers had the affrontery and nerve to refuse to broadcast it, even after it had been aired twice by the NBC network. And locally, at WNET and WGBH many times. (After many hassles, PBS reluctantly broadcast Wegman's tapes with flag warnings that it violated the FCC's

standards of Vertical Blanking, for which, stations were told, they could be fined up to \$25,000. Consequently very few PBS stations carried the broadcast.

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Our bookshelves contain a much wider variety of subjects and far deeper stimulation of our intellects than television fare because most books are initiated by writers without PRIOR FUNDING. Most TV is initiated by producers with PRIOR FUNDING. In fifteen to twenty years, through the wider use of home VTR as a Time Shifting Machine, a slow conversion of funding and selection methods will occur, as well as an expansion of prime time viewing from today's three hours to 24 hours a day! At that time, PBS would be able to broadcast programs with high intellectual quality but with low public appeal at, for example, 3:00 A.M., and an interested viewer could record it for later viewing.

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Now, what else should we do in the next fifteen to twenty years?

I suggest, for one thing, that we broadcast two-way artist-initiated programs, not as avant-garde experimental programs, but as DO IT YOURSELF showcases. Audience participation shows have precedents in print journalism in the "Dear Abby" columns, as letters to the editor or "amateur corners" in photo magazines and "call-in" shows on radio. In these ways, people can easily relate to programs, even if sometimes the technical quality may not be high. In this way we flip the coin: artist's experimental video will no longer be categorized as low-budget entertainment, but the most successful common people's video creations. Middle America, for which PBS programmers always express concern, will respond to such programs even more enthusiastically because advanced two-way video gadgets, including home computers, are sold more in Middle America than on the Eastern Seaboard, which has a variety

of other pastimes. The deepening energy crisis will force the leisure pattern of rural America more from Car and Steak to information games. Non-gravity resisting products such as computers and video are energy efficient, therefore inflation-proof: their costs relative to high energy production items such as cars, steel and steaks, will decline. We can solicit viewers to send in their own video tape products through the airwaves, works lasting a few minutes perhaps, and offer prizes in home video contests. Corporations can back the expenses of such programs. This will be very different from Public Access cable channels. In this case, a highly talented editor would have complete freedom of selection and excerpting. An artist's far-out tapes can be mixed with other documentary shows in magazine formats. Luckily, the new tendency in the video art world is in making short tapes. Each segment can be preceded by a slide of the artist or a short introduction by the artist or amateur himself, so that viewers can relate more easily with it. For technical standards, we should not worry too much.

The new time-base correctors can straighten out most time-base errors. Even if it fails, however, we can rescan the tape with a high resolution camera. Both Wegman's dog tape and John Reilly's IRISH TAPES were rescanned with a normal studio camera and both tapes were aired with great success. Viewers really follow information anyway, not technical quality, especially if the information is sufficiently interesting. The moon landing was the best TV with the worst picture quality!

Eventually, PBS has to accept two technical standards: one for professional entertainment and another for populist, grass-roots video. It is a natural development: The New York Times uses good paper for its Sunday Magazine section (fashion ads) and less good paper for the news sections. Since in print journalism there are no government restrictions on paper quality,

TV should also establish technical standards such as Sync pulse and time-base correction. In print journalism, an attempt to ban publication simply because an essay is printed on cheap paper would be unthinkable.

But we video artists have been living under this arbitrary regulation for fifteen years. We independent producers must test the constitutionality of FCC-NAB's technical standards - to the Supreme Court if necessary, because it amounts to a de facto infringement of the First Amendment. We ask that the ACLU or some enlightened foundations pay for the legal expenses. I say that loudly from my personal agony of having lived under the arbitrary terror of the Vertical Blanking regulation, which has absolutely no consequences to 99 percent of home TV sets. What has angered me even more was that this rule was REGULARLY ignored by virtually ALL the commercial TV stations during their news broadcasts when they used ENG (electronic news gathering mini-cameras) and reruns of I Love Lucy. WNET local station, seeing that NBC, CBS, and ABC news shows ignored the regulation, was quite tolerant to us. But the PBS national program engineers continually gave us problems. There is no other line of law which has so impeded the healthy development of TV as this Vertical Blanking regulation. Although this problem has now been solved by the introduction of new frame buffers in time-base correctors, we must keep vigilant so that no new artificial barriers will be set up to keep the monopoly of the air waves. The only piece of technical regulation we need is one in which the Sync pulse would be solid enough to make a solid picture frame in the majority of TV sets ten years old or older. I don't imagine that any other technical standard set up by a trade organization such as NAB would stand up in court if challenged on First Amendment grounds.

I assume that not all artists would like the idea of being broadcast in the same series with amateur videomakers from the hinterland. Artworks

often need a dignifying frame, especially if one works with minimalist (esthetic) vocabularies. However, "emergency Exits" were necessitated by our continuing frustration in having Video Art aired on national airwaves. Although we have made significant inroads into the schedules of WNET and WGBH, especially in the after-11 PM time periods (WNET's TV-Lab has broadcast easily 100 separate shows if one counts my own 30 five-minute pieces at the end of the broadcast schedule, which received respectable ratings and encouraging reviews), we have failed to get regularly on national airtime, or when we did, it was often not carried by local stations.

As far as funding is concerned, the matter is even worse. In the first three years of The Rockefeller Foundation's funding, WGBH matched the \$100,000 a year on a one-to-one basis from 1967 to 1969. Since then, federal funding to CPB increased from a mere \$5 million in 1969 to \$120 million in 1979 - an increase of 24 times! But, disastrously, the contribution from stations (local and national) dwindled to practically zero.

The Carnegie Commission report envisions \$190 million annually for the Program Services Endowment, whose only function would be to create TV programs, especially "creative programs." To quote:

While stations will use their considerable resources to provide mainstream programs and services nationwide, the Endowment will concentrate on the unconventional, creative, untested ideas in programming and telecommunication services on which the stations, acting alone or in combination, would be unlikely to risk their funds. (Emphasis added.)

Specifically, Carnegie II recommends that \$10 million be spent for Research and Development alone (pages 132 and 246). From our past track record we are amply justified in getting a small pie from this new funding source.



Carnegie II even specifies that "the Endowment might finance a Center for Independent Television, whose job would be to develop broadcast formats that can take advantage of the range of talent among independent TV producers."

(page 168)

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As a small part of this envisioned "Center for Independent Television,"

I would like to suggest the following five mechanisms:

A. Fellowship Program

The selection process must satisfy the following conditions:

- 1) It must be cheap and speedy, so that precious money will not be evaporated in the pipeline.
- 2) It must insulate against any one director's taste.
- 3) Funds must go directly to individuals and not to stations or staff producers.

So far, three funding sources, The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts, have had a fine tradition of promoting independent videomakers and video artists. They all have also fine panel systems, which have so far worked quite well. If the three organizations recommend 15 projects altogether, and fund them at \$10,000 each, it will give the incentive for the Endowment of Carnegie II to match with \$20,000 or \$30,000 each. It will make each project budget for \$30,000 or \$40,000. Creators are not required to make a full 30-minute program, since funds at \$40,000 may be insufficient, especially if one employs professional performers.

B. Roving Editors

One current problem in video art is that people have too many hours of unedited tapes. "Media Bus" alone has more than 500 hours of unedited tape

shot since 1969. Some of these tapes increase in value with the passing of time, since videotape has the unique quality of "freezing time" which makes historical feedback even more interesting than immediate playback. Our bottleneck is in editing. It is not only that artists lack machines to edit on, but also, artists have not acquired the skills and mental training to view and make critically hard choices from their own materials. If a new Center for Independent Television were to hire a few highly talented editors who can edit a broadcastable show from such chaotic materials, it could greatly benefit the PBS system. Of course, many artists would resist having their materials changed by a third person, but we will find enough artists who will live with excerpting, especially if the artists get rich compensation, such as \$1,000 per minute, or so.

These editors must be appointed by the program directors of the TV station, or acceptable to them, so that the program director has the FULLEST confidence in their judgment. Program directors of large TV stations are so busy, they have to rely on verbal communication from trusted lieutenants or well-trusted producers. Since videotape watching is time consuming, and since we cannot ask the program directors to extend their day from 24 to 28 hours, we must therefore set up a mechanism convenient both to independents and programmers. My idea is to let the program director pick his man, but WE artists pay that man's salary, so that we can have veto power! And since this man (or woman) will know where his salary is coming from, he must therefore fight for more air time for the artist and independent.

### C. Community Editing Centers

The most heartening development these days is the increasing number of regional editing centers set up or assisted by The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the

Arts. Editing is the central nervous system and the camera is peripheral as the eyes. Too much attention is spent on camera quality and not enough on editing gear. Producers and even funding agencies tend to favor expenditure on programs with immediate high visibility and not on editing machines with slower returns. Editing machines should and can become as cheap as a darkroom. If one avoids joy-stick systems (fancy but fragile), an \$8,000 system can produce 10,000 hours or 20 hours a day for two years, if the equipment is properly maintained. That will make the per-hour cost one dollar. The major cost for an editing center is personnel and space costs - administration, engineers and room rent. This can be reduced if one or two persons supervise four or five machines! Earphone operation can make the sharing of the same room by many people possible. All major cities should and must have such communal editing centers with at least five editing machines. The R and D budget of the Endowment must amplify the trend already begun.

#### D. A Cost Efficiency Test

Financial self-reliance is a pre-condition for freedom - and two-way video. The artist has again led in this struggle. In a "typical" educational TV show of the past, hardware studio costs took so much money that producers had no way of hiring good talent for appearances or research. (There were exceptions.) The result was talking head after talking head. The producer-artist must have ample elbow room in choosing the ratio of hardware to software in the budget. For example, one can choose the 3/4 inch format for mastering, and the resulting saving of thousands of dollars can buy a round trip to Moscow. In my tape, "New York-Moscow Media Shuttle," (done in collaboration with Dmitri Devyatkin) I mixed some parts mastered on 3/4 inch tape with parts mastered on 2-inch tape. It was aired nationally once and three times over WNET. Nobody, not even God (much less PBS engineers), could distinguish the parts mastered

on 3/4 inch tape from those mastered on 2-inch tape.

New hardware development makes this Hide and Seek game obsolete. A new 1-inch recorder (the NAB approved it for broadcasting) is supposedly better than the 2-inch recorder. I strongly urge that the WNET TV-Lab upgrade its current 3/4 inch playback master to 3/4 inch playback system in favor of a 1-inch master system which will make artists' tapes achieve full broadcast standard. The price reduction from \$2,500 a day for 2-inch to about \$500 a day for the 1-inch system will pay the new equipment off (about \$70,000) in 35 days, or roughly in ten TV shows.

#### E. Indexing

The power of The New York Times is found not only in its circulation and quotability, but also in the fact that it is the ONLY newspaper thoroughly indexed. The fleeting vision of one show is bound to be wiped out by the next like a morning dew under the rising sunshine. If it wants to be The New York Times of broadcasting, PBS must develop for critical re-evaluation a healthy hardcopy indexing reference system through the video disc. PBS can thus produce shows to be aired in the future on subjects who may not be celebrated enough when the shows are made. Then we can avoid the embarrassment of having missed two such great geniuses in American art and music as Marcel Duchamp and Harry Partch, who recently died at advanced ages. PBS will live with this shame for the next thousand years.

I want to emphasize for the record two very important quotes from Carnegie II:

The Endowment must have the flexibility to support experiments and high risk projects utilizing non-broadcasting as well as broadcasting systems. (Page 162). . .Endowment will have a programming mission extending beyond the development of

broadcast radio and television shows. It might sponsor a variety of experiments on developing technologies potentially applicable to public telecommunications. (Page 170)

Video artists have been the pioneers. We are the first social group who made an INTERNATIONAL video network through museums, colleges, community centers and libraries for alternative distribution and critical re-evaluation. Three funding sources (The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts) should continue and be joined by others in their support of non-broadcasting arts. And the Carnegie II-proposed Endowment must include these non-broadcasting artists under their R and D budgets and programming ventures.

Ezra Pound's fame is not based on his broadcasting from Italy.