

NEW YORK MEDIA GROUP SPINS ITS REELS IN ROCHESTER

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"Identity crisis" is how one member of the New York Media Alliance described the group's annual meeting held on May 6 and 7 at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. The lack of consensus which characterized debates on the most basic questions can be traced to two probable causes: the coexistence within the four-year-old Alliance of organizations and individuals with extremely diverse, sometimes conflicting interests; and the precarious finances of many media centers and videomakers, which engenders fierce competition for the public funds which sustain both. Predictably, one of the hottest topics at the meeting was money. Grants, earned income, matching funds, private foundations, cash flow, etc.—money words and financial fantasies—provided the muzak for most of the proceedings.

Even a proposal to start a newsletter quickly turned into an elaborate scheme for an expensive but supposedly income-generating computer network. This suggestion was not universally embraced, however. Gerald O'Grady of Media Study/Buffalo counterproposed communication via plain old typewritten, mimeographed pieces of paper. The 30-odd voting members present split on the issue, eventually settling for the low-tech solution while investigating the feasibility of electronic interconnection.

Though presented with an agenda of 16 items covering issues as varied as credit ratings, dubbing services, and video installations, only a few of these were actually dealt with and fewer still resolved. The newsletter decision was one of two reached during the meeting. The second—a plan to hold five separate meetings to analyze five basic areas of interest—production, distribution, exhibition, education, and preservation—was adopted as a means to address the Media Alliance's obvious need for a *raison d'être*.

One further agenda item, a campaign to recruit new individual members, led some independent producers to question the rele-

vance of the Alliance. Skip Blumberg, a veteran documentary producer, voiced serious reservations about the organization's effectiveness in representing the interests of individuals. Margot Lewitin, head of New York Women's Interart Center, came to the Alliance's defense, as she did a number of times, replying that independents and media centers need to work in concert. However, she did not explain either the mechanisms for such cooperation or the benefits. On certain issues the potential conflict between the Alliance's two constituent groups became specific. When, following a panel on public access cable TV, artist/member Julie Harrison, urged the Media Alliance to preserve and strengthen public access cable channels by lobbying state and local representatives, Lewitin, who is also the vice-president of the Alliance, cautioned that such a commitment might be "altruistic," not in the interest of its organization members. Sounding like a corporate manager, she asked, "What can organizations get back from public access?"

The often problematic relationship between individuals and institutions was scrutinized further but not particularly clarified in a panel discussion devoted to that subject. Each panelist, with the exception of film and videomaker Tony Conrad, spoke only about her or his own experience. For example, Carol Brandenburg, the executive producer of WNET's TV Lab and the president of the Alliance gave a concise but oversimplified and somewhat defensive account of the Lab's 11-year evolution, glossing over various controversial policies and practices. (Over the years, there have been disputes over ownership of work produced at the Lab, payments to artists, and editorial control, giving the Lab a negative image for many video artists.)

Panel moderator Kit Fitzgerald asked, more or less rhetorically, if the role of media centers should be reevaluated since video artists now own quantities of equipment (she didn't name names, though). Some don't, however, and a few of these are planning to set up the Production Facilities Project, an

"artists-only editing center" to provide post-production equipment and space at less than the going rate. Emily Armstrong, one of the initiators of PFP, did not outline the criteria which will be applied to prospective users, but instead concentrated on the venture's financial outlook, which is pretty good if a New York State Council on the Arts grant augmenting income from artist/subscribers materializes.

What will become of media centers if artists organize their own production houses? Matthew Geller, an individual member as well as a partner in PFP, asked media centers to become producers for "major works." "It's a drain on your creative energy to be your own producer," he complained, implying that a division of labor, separating the artists' domain of "creativity" from less glamorous production chores, should be developed. Speaking in very different terms, Tony Conrad pointed out that media centers function as links between artists and their communities. Conrad was, I believe, the only participant to mention the existence of minority and women producers and audiences. His comments were generally ignored, however, and discussions returned to the bottom line.

If the money-making scenarios described by participants in the "earned income" panel sounded grandiose (a \$1.2-million post-production facility at the Women's Interart Center, for instance), the financial panic which engendered them can be largely attributed to changes at NYSCA and the National Endowment for the Arts (as well as the expansion of the field). John Giancola, the director of NYSCA's media program, often contributed information about and interpretations of state funding policies and patterns. Some of his messages could be read as contradictory, however. During conversations about earned income, he advised media center administrators not to lose sight of an "alternative vision of media." But later, after Ralph Hocking from the Experimental Television Center in Owego told about refusing a proffered \$200,000 corporate grant for fear of strings, Giancola reminded the group that diversified funding, which in most cases means in-

creased profit-making activities, improves their chances for a bigger chunk of public support.

The Media Alliance's financial future is perhaps the most tenuous of all. Of its \$21,000 1983 operating budget, \$10,000 has been spent, leaving enough to employ the organization's director, Robin White, for another six months and pay some bills. The Alliance survives primarily on NYSCA funds: \$20,000 was granted the Media Alliance in 1982-83, \$10,000 outright and \$10,000 to be matched. The group only managed to raise an additional \$5,500. Whether NYSCA will continue to support the Media Alliance at this level will probably be determined when the media panel convenes in July.

Even with another year's funding, the success or failure of the Alliance's programs will ultimately prove its viability. Hopefully the outcome of the five projected meetings will be more conclusive than last year's still incomplete survey of its 32 member organizations and will lead to a clear definition of the group's purposes and functions. Without that, and some meaningful programs, the Media Alliance will soon be eclipsed by organizations such as the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers and the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers.

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Those are my conclusions after sitting through the 1983 annual meeting, but more general comments seem appropriate, since rereading earlier articles on the Alliance produces a feeling of *déjà vu*. Two years ago [Summer 1981] *Afterimage* reported: "The Alliance reelected its current board of directors." This time three-quarters of the new board are repeaters. Since the 1981-82 board (again many of the same names can be counted) was directed to "pursue key topics for Media Alliance action—cable advocacy, consortium approaches to fundraising and equipment, profit versus non-profit status for organizations, and the development of media literature," and since none of

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these actions (except, perhaps, the second to last) were taken, one must seriously question the chances that the latest mandate—to ascertain and carry out an updated Alliance agenda—will be realized. And one must ask if this organization has not descended into a state of premature senility, given to disconnected utterances, suffering from paralysis and lapses of memory.

One important, perhaps the central, lapse concerns the Alliance's collective interest in affecting the decisions made by public agencies, primarily NYSCA, but potentially public television, the public part of cable TV, the FCC, the New York State legislature, the U.S. Congress, etc. The original Media Alliance meetings were the direct result of a series of severe cuts in NYSCA funding

given to six upstate media organizations. These and other groups banded together and challenged NYSCA's action and some of the Council's guidelines. As a result, some changes were made in the system and the blow to the affected organizations was softened.

Five years later, the possibility that the Media Alliance might counterbalance NYSCA's influence seems remote. Instead, now that the Alliance is itself a grantee, will it dare bit the hand that feeds it? And what about public TV? Are the Media Alliance members who have benefitted from PBS or CPB support willing to rock the boat and push for more diverse definitions of the concept "public" and a more open system? And will the Media Alliance heed Julie Harrison's (and others') call for Alliance support for more and better cable access?

Frankly, I doubt the organization will take up any of these issues. Rather, it will proba-

bly continue to lose its politically-inclined members and attract, instead, those developing a professional profile, interested in "networking," i.e., making good connections. As the stakes in the non-profit media world get higher, the "alternatives" are becoming indistinguishable from the mainstream. So-called "alternative financial structures," which many videomakers and organizations seem anxious to adopt, look curiously like miniature versions of the Hollywood image industry.

The powerful medium of television exerts a strange influence on its poor relation, independent video. At once seduced by that power, prestige, and wealth and repulsed by its crass commercialism and inanity, media artists and administrators often seem intent on replicating that which they reject in their rhetoric. Now, in 1983, instead of working to create an enlarged public sphere for independent media, the Media Alliance, with a

few dissenting members, seems in thrall to this marketplace mentality.

As a final thought, then, let me borrow Tony Conrad's comments, made during the recent meeting: "[The film/media community] does stand in an opposition role to what is constituted as art as a market... Media culture must be, in some respects, a conspiracy against capital." The implications deserve serious attention from the community Conrad refers to, not least of all the Media Alliance. Otherwise—especially if the Alliance remains fascinated with high finance and its accoutrements, e.g., spending \$133 on *pad-ded* chairs for this meeting—the organization can only continue to move toward irrelevance.

Conrad also noted the urgent need for a pragmatic, "unresolved discourse." My observations and remarks are intended as a contribution to that discourse.