



Smile! You're on video, say the Vasulkas (above left), Global Village (above right), and People's Video (below right). 'AC/DC' (center) is too.

Everybody Will Be On Television

BY SAMI KLEIN

When my fuckin' revolution comes, everybody in the world's gonna be on television all the time. Then there's gonna be an "information explosion." No more names. No more signature artists. No more selective newsreader psychosis. There's gonna be TOTAL ACCESS... TOTAL ACCESS.

—Sadie in 'AC/DC'

Television is dynamite, and we're leaving it around for any idiot with a match.

—A British TV director, quoted in Newsweek

Armed only with two half-inch Sony portapacks and a Hasselblad, bearing the dubious credentials of an imminent underground video magazine, three video veterans and a neophyte descended upon NASA headquarters, Cocoa Beach, for coverage of Apollo 14. Nodding deliberately at our hardware, NASA officials quickly handed us 24-hour pink press passes.

The night before launch: We drove—closer and closer to the towering white rocket bathed in floodlights. One mile, one-half, one-quarter—we were almost upon it. Unbelieving, we looked for guards. How was it we were here? Finally, we came to a security gate. "Where's your escort?" a guard asked. "We couldn't find one," we replied. "You shouldn't be here without one," he admonished. "Can we take some pictures as long as we're here?" we entreated. "Sure." He waved us inside the gate. We pulled over, stunned at our success, and spent a leisurely 20 minutes shooting the Saturn 5 rocket.

"One of the good things about video is it gets you places," says Frank Cavestani, actor/video artist who had a similar experience with the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington: We went there loaded down with equipment. We took a walk upstairs with the camera on. No one stopped us. They figured we should be there. We asked them, "What's wrong with your security?" They said, "Well, what are you gonna show us?" I

said, 'My trip here.'

What makes half-inch video revolutionary? First, its low cost. Sony portapacks retail for about \$1300—and, the word is, the Japanese sell a camera domestically for about \$40. Furthermore, there is no costly processing of tape, such as there is with film and even stills.

The second factor is the machine's simplicity. Anyone can shoot reasonable tapes right from the start. There just isn't that much to know.

Finally, there's video's unique capability to set-up instantaneous two- or multi-way communications between "viewers," who are also "actors." As John Reilly of Global Village video theater puts it: "The real excitement here is that you can turn the theater into a studio."

The political implications of video, in terms of helping to define and articulate the interests of groups which up to now have been deprived of a voice (or at least an audience), are perhaps the most far-reaching. Consequently, much of the rhetoric that has grown up around video has focused on its "politics." But it is crucial to realize that no aspect of modern culture is likely to remain unchanged. Art, music, drama, sociology, psychology, education, religion—all will be, all are being, profoundly affected. Video communities are springing up all over the country, composed of groups and individuals exploring such diverse areas as porn, propaganda, community action, self-processing, hip soap opera, electronic ministry and abstract composition; color and black and white.

Videofreex, the largest such video group, with branches in New York, California and Montreal, is the archetypal "media guerrilla" outfit. A spokesman sees Videofreex's role as one of decentralization—making media work for the people by breaking it down into smaller, less insulated units: "That old idea of network has to be changed—'cause you know what the networks are now—this homogeneous milkshake that's all around the country. Everything's the same. There's chocolate, strawberry and vanilla. That's about it. You can't get any other flavors. We hope that the new informa-

tion 'network' will be coming from two people to five people, or from fifty people to one hundred people, or maybe from ten people to one person."

A revealing Freex idiosyncrasy is the group's insistence that all quotes be collectively anonymous: "So we decided that we'll have one ego that doesn't exist and we'll call him Leo and he says everything for us. Then we don't have to parade ourselves in front of the masses. We can hide behind them." (Actually, Leo is incarnate in the form of a gruesomely overweight cat.)

Freex has been funded to equip a fleet of "media buses" with cameras, playback decks and monitors, on which they will travel around—making tapes, teaching people to use the equipment, and linking community residents up to local cable facilities. They also hope to "liberate" equipment, which, as Leo explained, is being used in schools and universities in "the most dull, boring ways," or worse yet, isn't being used at all. "It's locked in closets," Leo says. "Strange people you never see have the keys."

In a substantial library of tapes ranging from political (Panthers, Women's Lib, Rotary meetings) to humor, Freex include service tapes such as "How to Build Domes," or "How to Get an Abortion." All can be rented very cheaply.

People's Video Theatre in New York is also community-oriented but has no taste for ideology. "The only thing that can be alternate in this society," co-founder Eliot Glass says, "is that the power will be in the hands of more people than it is."

Instead of pushing a point of view opposed to the established one, People's Video aims to "provide the place where points of view can be exchanged," which, Elliot notes, "is really maybe what media and communications is about."

Nevertheless, most of People's Video's work is with the underdog, and in an upcoming project, they will be working with the Young Lords co-producing a series of tapes examining Puerto Rican culture which "might be a basis for them to politicize the people on the street." In addition, the weekly show at the PVT loft features a live forum, where cameras turned on the audience record its re-

sponse to specific issues aired on tape. The responses are then incorporated into the program.

One video group that mixes both politics and entertainment is Global Village, directed by Rudi Stern (a former kinetic light artist) and John Reilly (a former filmmaker). Juxtaposing political, rock, erotic and humorous tapes on ten monitors which are constantly switching, a kind of total environment effect is created. The technique, called multi-channel, is used more extensively by Global Village than by any other video group because, John Reilly believes, "it better exemplifies a non-linear approach to a given image. If you fragment the information grid," he says, "you closer approximate the way we actually receive information."

Rudi Stern intends to use multi-channel also in a video opera he is producing for the Public Broadcast Corp., based on the character Mishkin in *The Idiot*. The opera will utilize lights and other environmental effects and will probably not have a live audience.

Global Village is also publishing a video cassette magazine, in full-color, which will be coming out this spring. Containing mini-documentaries on various alternate culture topics including activist groups and rock, it will be distributed initially to colleges and universities. Reilly is soliciting tapes from other video artists and hopes that students, once they see the magazine, will be encouraged to set up "mini-stations" on campus that will feed material back to Global Village.

Another video group working out of New York, Raindance, is putting out a magazine—in print form—called Radical Software, which is sort of an underground video trade publication. Raindance also produces all sorts of tapes, among the most interesting of which are self-processing or self-evaluation tapes. "With video we can know the difference between how we intend to come across and how we actually do come across," Paul Ryan has written in Radical Software. "What we put out, what is taken by the tape, is an imitation of our extended image, it is our monkey. A video system enables us to get the monkey off our

John Lorraine

backs where we can't see him, out onto the tape where we can see him."

A person's response to themselves on video is as revealing as the video, and many psychologists are using both in therapy. At the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic (for drug freakouts) during the heyday of the hippie, Lee Kaminski, a San Francisco video artist now on assignment in New York, reminisces, "freaks who needed help talked into a videotape recorder, in little rooms called carels, and played them back for themselves and/or for a psychologist." Athletes, dancers, actors, all use video extensively for this purpose—to understand and improve their performance, and it works.

One group that seems to have a refreshingly absurd outlook on everything in general (and video in particular) is Video Free America, hailing from San Francisco. "I've yet to meet anyone in underground video who's in it for any reason but to get rich and/or famous," rollicking, rotund Art Ginsberg declared several times during a very informal interview. "I'm not in it to get rich or famous," his partner Skip Sweeney protested. "You're lying," Art retorted, adding, "fame is more important than money."

Video Free America is in New York doing the video for the Chelsea Theatre's production of Heathcote Williams' amazing play, *AC/DC*, which explores the destruction wreaked by media on the human psyche. The main characters are Perowne, described in the International Herald Tribune review of the London production as "an alcoholic stupefied by media," Maurice, a schizophrenic, and Sadie, an American black who is somehow vulgarly sane.

Perowne: I've been watching a lot of television.

Maurice: You've got fuckin' radiated, haven't you? You've got fuckin' media rash, haven't you?

Perowne: I feel a little over-loaded.

The play mercilessly indicts media cult-heroes like Mick Jagger and the Beatles for extracting immeasurable quantities of energy from millions of dotting kids:

Sadie: Think of all that energy that went into the Beatlemachine. Think if

you'd had a Cosmic Energy Transformer when they first surfaced in Hamburg, 1960. Think what might have been created.

Think. Ironically, the play is the first to make video (ad nauseam) an integral part of its structure, in the form of 18 on-stage monitors. (Curious also was the playwright's recent disembarkation in our naked city with fashion model Jean Shrimpton strung on his arm. Media rash?)

AC/DC is not the only remarkable venture that Video Free America is into. There is also Video Gum. "Did you ever have bubble gum with trading cards of all the athletes?" Art asks. "Our gum will have pictures (in the shape of TV screens) of all the people in underground video, with their resumes on the back. It'll be instant notoriety. You won't even have to make tapes. We'll be very powerful because we'll be printing them and if you print a lot of someone they're not valuable at all. So we'll probably print very few of ourselves and lots of everyone else." He is dead serious.

Another charming pair of video personalities are the Vasulkas, Woody and Steina, who work together on almost all projects. Much of their work is abstract, utilizing a synthesizer that converts sound frequencies into video images and vice-versa. They also do abstract tapes composed of mixes of real-time tapes sent through a special-effects generator, and some real-time tapes. Steina, in fact, has put together the first feature-length video "special" (the likes of which television could only imagine), on Jackie Curtis, one of Andy Warhol's drag superstars, who really does look like Greta Garbo.

Pointedly, none of the Vasulkas' tapes are political. "We lived through revolutions in Poland and Czechoslovakia," they told me. "We were very involved in those revolutions. We saw that afterwards it was the same thing. Now we are not involved." The Vasulkas' tapes are, by any definition, high art, and after the deprecation to which high art has been subjected recently, it was delightful to see the crowds mass in Max's Kansas City last week, on three consecutive nights, to see the Vasulkas' work. Art, like God, lives.

Interestingly, the most important political use of video so far was made not by an American group, but by Eldridge Cleaver in Algiers, where the Panthers were holding Tim and Rosemary Leary captive. Video artist Guy Pignolet had accompanied Michael Zwerin of the Village Voice to Leary's quarters, with his portapak. Panthers guarded the apartment, and Zwerin reports that Leary related a fantastic tale of Panther elusiveness and strong-arm tactics. Cleaver allowed Guy to shoot the tape, and the video remains essentially intact, but he completely dubbed over Tim and Rosemary's audio track with his own; a manifesto impugning Leary as counter-revolutionary in his adherence to the drug culture and dangerous in his weakness of mind (drug-induced).

The tape is a brilliant piece of political propaganda. Cleaver saw clearly the power inherent in the immediacy of video—in the ability to control it. It is also significant that he released the tape to the video underground, not to the established media. Guy has left his portapak with the Panthers and we can expect to see more tapes from them in the coming months.

Despite the absence of humor in most sober—and lofty video raps, much of the tape is plain funny. Humor is infectious and perhaps needs no help from communications theory.

Henri Bergson in his book *Laughter* says that the essence of humor lies in the presentation of the human as the mechanical—making a person come off as a machine. (Hence Charlie Chaplin, etc.) Video is really good at doing that: All the awkwardness of spontaneity is captured. An uncanny resemblance to Smokey the Bear is immortalized by placing a Smokey the Bear hat on one Freex head; or the androgynous confusion of Jackie Curtis is captured, in a similarly mind-blowing way, in his/her rendition (donning ostrich feathers and flexing muscles) of "My Sweet Old English Rose." Television understood very early the potential video held for comedy. (Remember Ernie Kovacs?) But it soon forgot.

Outside of production, there is a whole other aspect of video—dissemination, and

the major outlets will apparently be cable TV and video cassette, at least for the time being. (Satellite broadcast will eventually provide unlimited channel capability.)

Cable, as of April 1st, will be required by the FCC to originate local programming, providing some opportunity for video artists to air their work in cable-supplied communities. If, as FCC officials have recommended, cable systems are declared "common carriers," on the model of Bell Telephone, they will be required to lease time to anyone and everyone who wants it.

Cassette systems, of which there are a superabundance of incompatible types and some compatible ones, will start coming out in a few months. People will be able to rent or buy whatever tapes they want—in stores or through the mail. Hopefully, the market will prove more enlightened than the Neilsen ninnies would indicate.

Some video artists, such as Jackie Cassen, who has a grant to work with NET in New York producing experimental tapes, believe that the networks will also open up. "Television has a younger and younger audience," Jackie says, "an increasingly sophisticated audience. My two-year-old daughter sat through a two-hour TV performance of the Royal Ballet just recently. If she can do that, then television will have to change."

In any case, most video artists are not worried about the market. As Art Ginsburg says, "Video will flourish by producing tapes. Don't worry about the market. Have video images. Think video events; video happenings. Take the equipment there and do them."

Despite the vicissitudes of life and strife in the video community, largely centering around that major evil, money, a community "spirit" does still exist. Rainedance, Freex and People's Video have gotten together to put on a joint program Saturday nights, and at just about every studio or loft in town, calls keep pouring in from other video artists. Will it survive success? Will it survive failure? Both are inevitable. The power of communication has been given to the people. It is up to the people to use it.