DURING THE WINTER OF 1986, A SMALL KNOT OF ARTISTS OPENED A "SALON" CALLED THE MONDAY-WEDNESDAY FRIDAY VIDEO CLUB IN A TINY STUDIO APARTMENT ON HOUSTON STREET NEAR THE BOWERY. THE APARTMENT WAS TO HOUSE A HOME VIDEO RENTAL PROJECT. BUT IT WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER VIDEO STORES OPENING UP AROUND TOWN THEN. WE HAD ONLY ARTISTS’ TAPES—NOTHING COMMERCIAL, AND NOTHING THAT’D EVER BEEN ON TV.

The twin communications innovations of home video and cable TV were supposed to change everything for artists in the 1980s. Eager to reach a larger audience with more popularly accessible work, visual and performing artists turned to video in exponentially increasing numbers. It was from this moment of hope that the MWF/ABC No Rio distribution project was launched. It was also a response to art-world conditions. Those artists who started MWF had been shut out of the few commercial and institutional outlets for artists’ work. The ideology behind the MWF project was populist, and the intentions opportunistic. Art should be accessible to as many people as possible, so we elected to sell videos at low prices directly to whoever wanted to buy them.

Artists’ video was (and is) generally available only at high prices. This is largely an artefact of the commercial market as played out by Los Alamos Gallery in the 1970s to sell video as signed, limited edition artworks, along the lines of the artists’ books. Today MWF lists over a hundred tapes at consumer prices, between $20 and $50, in its online catalogue.

The paradigm of the limited edition has recently reasserted itself with a vengeance, however. Today, international art stars’ video work sells for thousands as “single-channel installations.” The situation still irks many artists. In 1999, RTMark sponsored a project called “Video Aktivist $29.95.” This videotape called on people to illicitly tape artists’ videos in galleries and forward them to RTMark, which would distribute bootleg copies for $29.95.

The parent organization of MWF was Collaborative Projects, aka Colab, a group of some forty artists that began meeting in 1977. In 1986, this group of shuffling members pulled off two important exhibitions in New York, do-it-yourself blockbusters called the “Real Estate Show” (opened January 1) and the “Times Square Show” that summer. The first, in which a group of art artists took over a vacant city-owned building in a protest exhibition, excited political artists and led to the formation of the ABC No Rio cultural center in the Lower East Side. In the much vaster “Times Square Show,” Colab artists working under teams of artist curators made over a three-story building as a broke-down palace of art and installation, and it caught the attention of both the popular media and the art press. This was followed by a number of other artist-organized mega-shows in the early ’80s. Some were in Brooklyn, like the “Coney Island” show (runrunner of today’s “hysterical society” artists, and the Gowanus Memorial Art Yard. In the East Village, there was the building-wide, “Ninth Street Survival” show at CHARAS, and the “Balston Fatima Memorial” show at CUANDO. All of these big events created small sensations, generated popular interest in art that engaged social issues, and networked the NYC art community. Significantly, they also regularly included artists from the new wave of the graffiti movement, who came from the street.

Graffiti had first been seen in a formal gallery context at the Fashion Moda art space in the South Bronx. After the “Times Square Show,” downtown venues—mainly nightclubs—vied to show graffiti artists, together with the nascent hip-hop culture of rap and breakdance. (Perhaps because of graphic reproducibility, graf artists were then in the lead of the new wave.) Charlie Ahearn’s indie feature Wild Style (1982), with a climax filmed at the Mudd Club, told the story of a graffiti artist’s relationship with a corporation. Hitchcock’s Scarface, which featured Tony Montana, was released in the same year as the East River Park amphitheater, represents the meeting of downtown culture and hip hop. The graffiti scene’s confluence of gallery, street, and club led to the East Village art scene of the mid-’80s, with venues like the Fun Gallery on 10th Street, Gracie Mansion, and the gay-friendly SIX on St. Mark’s Place.

While Colab is known as the cauldron of the ’80s big show, the group came into being because of the requirements of media work. Several members had participated as junior artists alongside SoHo heavyweights in the satellite broadcast projects of Liza Béar in the mid-1980s, with a climax filmed at the Mudd Club. “Video Aktivist” projected a video tape of live performance at the ETC on 23rd Street, a low-cost commercial TV studio. One emergency cable-station production was “The Willoughby Sharp Show,” a lavishly produced series, actually funded by Manhattan Cable. The show followed the avant garde curator, journalist, and animator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, who was also an astute political figure. In 1999, RTMark sponsored a project called “Video Aktivist $29.95.” This videotape called on people to illicitly tape artists’ videos in galleries and forward them to RTMark, which would distribute bootleg copies for $29.95.

The Willoughby Sharp Show was a more lavishly produced series, actually funded by Manhattan Cable. The show followed the avant garde curator, journalist, and animato...
unrequited. Southern-born filmmaker Richard Kern’s humor is callous and direct. His stark and startling short films, cleanly filmed Larry Clarkish vignettes of the low life, featured lots of drugs, guns, and chicks sucking tattooed cock. This led him to a photo gallery career and recent books with the Swiss art and sex publisher Taschen. You Killed Me First (1985), his collaboration with David Wojnarowicz, was shot and shown at Ground Zero on East 10th Street, and features performance artist Karen Finley as Lung Leg’s ma (David is her pa). Zedd, crucially influenced by Jack Smith, continues to produce uncompromising hardcore art films. He recently published a picaresque journal of his tortured life, Tear of the Drunken.

MWF’s art films and social documentary chart changes and upheaval in the neighborhood over the last twenty years and chronicle its bands, performers, and eclectic denizens. Franck Goldberg’s early films exude the harsh realities of the pre-gentrification EV, as in his short piece on the killing of graffiti writer Michael Stewart—mourned by Madonna—by subway police. Philippe Bonneux and Marie Martinez’s 10th & B It was made during the early days of Life Cafe. It’s a music video, really, including artists, local characters, and police on horseback during Operation Pressure Point, all cut to soundtracks by Suicide and the False Prophets. Jim C, who ran a gallery near the Rivington School, shot footage of the DIY gallery hubbub and club hijinks, as well as a classic 1984 reading by Miguel Piñero. Arleen Schloss’s Art Around the Park (1992) documents a creative and joyous event—the encirclement of beleaguered Tompkins Square Park with paintings during a time of strife around that turf.

MWF has also collected video describing the artistic subculture of Lower East Side squatters and their resistance to gentrification. Clayton Patterson’s videos of Tompkins Square during the police riots of 1988 and the Tent City and “Dinkinsville” that sprang up afterward capture key moments in the district’s recent past. Goldberg’s angry documentary How to Squash a Squat (1990) records the heavy-handed eviction of artists living in city-owned abandoned buildings by NYC police. And Rik Little’s Home Invasion documents the climactic violent eviction of the 13th Street squatters in 1996.

ABC No Rio inspired the creation of the No Se No social club and Nada Gallery, which spun off the Rivington School. This group of sculptors built a succession of huge collaborative junk metal constructions on the vacant lots they squatted. The group was scorned by the New York art world for their rowdy drunken ways, so very little was written on them. By default, then, MWF has principal documents, like sculptor cowboy Ray Kelley and Ed Higgins sitting around jawing during the “99 Nights” performance events shared between No Se No and Storefront for Art & Architecture (1984). And, finally, the Neoist artist Monty Cantsin filmed the bulldozer destruction of the Rivington School sculpture garden. The most substantial of these documents is Rik Little’s 1999 work exploring the group, a carefully researched personal retrospective. Little also shot an extraordinary tape of cowboy Ray and the painter Richard Hambleton in the Gas Station 2B days before its demolition. The reflective comments of these two old hands are almost totally inaudible over the sounds of construction.

Once the playground of junkies and muggers, and the seedbed of New York City’s creative bohemia, this neighborhood’s real estate has become favored by the young bourgeoisie. The color and texture of the East Village has been radically altered. The Houston Street building with the studio apartment was sold to a large well-heeled bank. The eviction went ahead, okayed by a crooked judge (now serving time—small consolation), and MWF lost its Manhattan home. The club relocated out to Staten Island where the idea of an extra-institutional independent creative sphere is pretty foreign.

MWF came back to the EV to mount two summers of screening events on East 1st Street in ‘00 and ‘01, really good ones with Walter Wright and friends, new music and media makers from Boston, a Henry Hills night, a Rockets Redglare tribute, and a night of custom-made image machines and programs. It was all free and visible from the street through a plate glass window. But the EV’s bistro-bound crowd passed by without even looking in.

NYC is a new world it seems, and DIY doesn’t seem to cut it. We lost a bundle on the 1st Street shows, but with so little capital and a part-time work ethic, MWF has been able to persist, even if it’s sometimes Frankensteinian state of hibernation. Despite falling Bush-era sales, we may even last out the digital turn. Right now, MWF has gone retro. We’re archiving the more than one thousand tapes that have sedimented from the distribution project, seeking to do our part to save the legacy of the area’s recent past. MWF Video Club continues in its dual purpose of dissemination of aesthetic media and information and its preservation.

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