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A BRIEF HISTORY OF MWF

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 ever-increasing numbers.

It was from this moment of hope that the MWF distribution project was launched. It was also a response to art-world conditions. The 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 opportunist. 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 artifact of the decision by Leo Castelli Gallery in the 1970s to sell video as signed, limited edition artworks, along the lines of 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 1980, this group of shifting 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 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.

These were followed by a number of other artist-organized mega-shows in the early ’80s. Some were in Brooklyn, like the “Coney Island” show (forerunner of today’s “hysterical society” action) and the Gowanus Memorial Artyard. In the East Village, there was the building-wide “Ninth Street Survival” show at CHARAS, and the “Ralston Farina 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 hip-hop wave.) Charlie Ahearn’s indie feature *Wild Style* (1982), with a climax filmed at the East River park amphitheater, represents the meeting of downtown hipsters and early hip-hop. The heady populist confluence of gallery, street, and club led to the East Village art scene of the mid-1980s, with venues like the Fun Gallery on 10th Street, Gracie Mansion, and the graf-friendly 51X 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 late ’70s. These newbies were also making Super 8 films, and some started “punking out.” Diego Cortez moved into the bubbling music scene in the Lower East Side and started haunting CBGBs with the star-crossed glamour-puss Anya Phillips. Amos Poe was already there. He and Ivan Kral documented the early CBs scene in *Blank Generation* (1976) and screened his feature *The Foreigner* (1978) in a vacant lot at Cannes.

In 1978, the New Cinema screening house opened on St. Mark’s Place. Here Colab filmmakers like Eric Mitchell, James Nares, John Lurie, Tina Lhotsky, Betsy Sussler, and Becky Johnston showed video transfers of their 8mm synch-sound feature films on an Advent projector. Subjects included terrorists, astronauts, Roman emperors, strippers, and disaffected butchers.

The New Cinema crowd, many of whom lived on East 4th Street near the NYC Men’s Shelter, cleaved to a Warhol-tinged vision of beat life and glamorous pose. Other artists in Colab formed the All Color News (ACN), a documentary-oriented group working on public

access cable TV, a new outlet for artists. These included the Ahearn twins, Charlie and John, the team of Scott and Beth B, Tom Otterness, Virge Piersol, and me. Together with Michael McClard and Coleen Fitzgibbon, ACN produced live cablecasts at Experimental Television Center (ETC) on 23rd Street, a low-cost commercial TV studio. One emergency cablecast featured our Congressman Ted Weiss. Clutching his messy briefcase under his arm, he spoke against the draconian criminal code called S-1 proposed by Congress during the European antiterrorist fever; this early move toward total state surveillance was defeated.

After Colab formed, All Color News dissolved. Soon *Potato Wolf* formed to make a cable TV show, a whimsical name assigned by first series producer Cara Perlman. *Potato Wolf* (PW) cleaved to an open, artist-driven, and eclectic mix of programming, most of it fictionally based, and parodic of the forms of mainstream television. PW often pre-taped at the Young Filmmakers studio on Rivington Street, but did most of their work live at the ETC studios. Shows like the memorably chaotic “Nightmare Call-In Theater” and “Call to Wobulate” frightened Jim Kladdach, the usually imperturbable manager of that venue. For the latter show, upstate hardware maven Terry Mohre plugged his homemade “wobulator” synthesizer directly into ETC’s main board. Among PW’s producers was the team of girlhood friends Ellen Cooper and Kiki Smith. They made *Cave Girls* (1982), a collaborative work of research, re-enactment, and creative anachronism about a prehistoric tribe of techno-savvy women. Scenes for this were taped in SoHo and filmed in New Jersey and in the weed-filled backyard of the new cultural center ABC No Rio.

Potato Wolf shared sensibility and some personnel with other artist-run cable TV series, most notably “Communications Update,” a project run by Liza Béar, and the still extant *Paper Tiger Television* (PTTV). PTTV also adapted the practice of making live TV and for a while emulated the tacky painted paper look of *Potato Wolf* productions (an aesthetic which PW artists called “cardboard consciousness”) as a backdrop to their critiques of contemporary media hosted by academics and cultural critics.

MWF was the last media project of “old Colab” before the membership turned over. As such, we could consolidate previous years of work for public access cable TV. Much of this work is included in the MWF catalogue under the category “Artists’ Television.” Other artists’ cable shows of the period included Glenn O’Brien’s late-’70s “TV Party.” Hosted by the *Interview* writer, the show tapped the underground music and club milieu as it shaded into punk and new wave at bars like the Mudd Club. O’Brien’s crew included Walter Stedding and Chris Stein in the band, and guests Debbie Harry, David Byrne, and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

The *Willoughby Sharp Show* was a more lavishly produced series, actually funded by Manhattan Cable. The show followed the avant-garde curator, journalist, and animator into the dense cultural mix of mid-’80s nightclubs like Danceteria, Kamikaze, and Limelight, and their East Village counterparts Pyramid, 8BC, and Limbo. The show also featured clothing and jewelry designers, and art from the second wave of East Village galleries like Civilian Warfare, Piezo Electric, and James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook’s Ground Zero.

Colab and its projects had been sustained by funding from state art agencies. Though money contracted in the Reagan years, the MWF venture continued to put something into the pockets of artists, even if only nickels and dimes. By then, MWF represented work by once-inimical factions of Colab in its video catalogue. Soon other experimental film- and video-makers who had worked with Colab were persuaded to pitch their fruits into the pushcart. These included “Erotic Psyche,” the neglected mystical erotic work Bradley Eros did with sequential collaborators Aline Mare and Jean Liotta. While we didn’t distribute much from them, MWF occasionally showed work by the Naked Eye Cinema group, centered around Jack Waters and Peter Cramer, the managers of ABC No Rio.

Though MWF grew out of video art and artists’ television, we also sold low-budget “artsy” narrative features, including at first some of the New Cinema productions. The documentary category included performances, readings, and art bands, most local to the East Village and Lower East Side. In addition to its distribution, MWF mounted frequent shows, theme-related video salons at various EV venues—Phil Sanders and Joanna Dawes’s RYO, Bert Ball’s Art & Commerce Gallery (in the premises; he was gone), Jon Gerstard Gallery on 1st Street, the 2B Gas Station, bOb (“Trailer Trash and Porn” night at ex-Rivington School—hand Jack Vengrow’s bar on nearby Eldridge Street), the (old) Knitting Factory, and most recently at the now-defunct Scott Pfaffman Gallery.

In the late ’80s, the most popular MWF titles were Nick Zedd’s. Nick championed a group of filmmakers he called the Cinema of Transgression in his photocopied zine *Underground Film Journal*. This group worked in the East Village and was committed to narrative fiction filmmaking in the crowd-pleasing genres of crime, horror, and pornography.

Like the punk rock musicians, the Transgression cinema crowd made underground stars of themselves. Although most were men, the movement included Cassandra Stark and Tessa Hughes-Freeland. Punk singing diva Lydia Lunch spun elegant foul-mouthed rants and won Zedd’s heart. His *Wild World of Lydia Lunch* (1983) is a kind of Super 8 love poem, albeit

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, *Totem of the Depraved*.

MWF's art films and social documentary chart changes and upheaval in the neighborhood over the last twenty years and chronicle its bards, 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. Phillipe Bonous and Marie Martine's *11th & B* 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 in a 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.

Alan W. Moore, with editorial assistance by Michael Carter
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