

Feedback in Radical Software

Nellie Kluz

FEEDBACK

Reading the publication Radical Software (1970 – 1975) is an information overload. Formed as a newsletter for the 'Alternative Television Movement,' the magazine published eleven issues in two volumes, covering all kinds of aesthetic, technical, conceptual and political implications of emerging technology like the Sony Portapak, introduced in 1968 at a price point which gave TV consumers the equipment needed to produce their own videos on half-inch video tape. I want to focus on just one element of Radical Software: the 'Feedback' section that frequently appeared as a feature throughout the magazine's first volume. Made up of responses from readers and contributors, Feedback gives glimpses into the experiences and concerns of an emerging community fascinated with new video technology and the larger questions that arise in its orbit. Using a malleable jumble of formats that evokes the classified ad, letter to the editor, and alumni-magazine class notes, Feedback is a collage of letters, diagrams, clippings, blurbs and lists, a forum in which Radical Software's community becomes responsive to itself. Contributors include video-makers, technicians, inventors, artists, activists, students, and entrepreneurial hustlers, all interested in ways to use VT (video tape) technology to break the hegemony of regular TV.

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and writing that collectivity might suggest;

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Founding editors Beryl Korot and Phyllis Gershuny retreated to a cabin in upstate New York, with Gershuny's new baby in tow, to lay out Radical Software #1 (1970). The magazine was published under the auspices of the Raindance Corporation, a video collective that included Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Michael Shamburg, and others. Its masthead included a shifting roster of Raindance affiliates. The first issue was based on a survey that asked exploratory questions about how people were using video and communications technology, based on a mailing list that Korot and Gershuny compiled. Written replies were submitted by artists, activists, educators and other video users. During the layout, as Gershuny describes, "We carefully read everything that people sent. As the replies and articles got edited to fit into the whole it became, for me, a kind of ventriloquism of mind."¹ In contrast to Radical Software's more formal, authored articles, the Feedback section is a catch-all comprised of loosely-organized manifestos, announcements, and statements of purpose. Small electrical symbol graphics are dotted alongside the blue-and-white text. The format and the layout process are in keeping with the initiating vision and purpose of Radical Software. This vision, as Gershuny describes it in a first-person account written for Rhizome in 2015, was "for individuals to be able to communicate interactively without the filters of broadcast media. Even at a more formalized stage the process superseded any formulaic views."²

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ALTERNATIVE
MEDIA PROJECT

Especially in the first-ever Feedback section, the contributors come from markedly different contexts, united as an audience by the editors' mailing list and their choice to respond to a survey. Notes from well-known video artists like Nam June Paik live alongside replies from obscure entities, never again to appear in Radical Software, like: "Dial Access Videotape TV - West Hartford, Conn School System - Van Ftergiotis." There is a palpable hunger for connection and information in the first Feedback pages. Some respondents use the space for bios and resumés, sending out a signal to share their solo visions and offbeat experimentations. Peter Sorensen of Shady, NY (a hamlet near Woodstock) describes a new kind of TV he's devised and built: "a featureless black cube for a cabinet with a 24" full circle screen. I like to think it is reminiscent of the monolith in 2001. Having a round screen lets one forget that he is watching television..." Many respondents, though, have already formed in-person alliances, sharing equipment, ideas and resources, to create the live-work video collectives, like Raindance, that formed the structural backbone of the Radical Software community. The VideoFreex, based in a New York loft, establish a vivid collective vision and voice: "The Videofreex are involved in television technically and artistically, intellectually and emotionally. Technical labors bring us together. We are in a web of video/audio energy flows. We are caught in the act of electronic fucking. And we sure like to fuck."



A contemporary reader of Radical Software can glean vivid impressions of the early 70s video that these collectives and individuals are making without even watching the tapes themselves. Despite a half-inch videotape postal exchange network, which Radical Software helped grow among its readership, print was the easiest medium for trading ideas, and contributors use the magazine to verbally describe their tapes. The experimental video community is its own best audience, familiar with the emerging genres of work being made and hungry for a variety and volume of new tapes. Common themes are: coverage of protests and concerts; video feedback used as an element in psychological counseling, sex, and performance; forays into synthesizers and video processing. "Genuinely very spacy," says a video-maker who's been taping a group of recovering addicts in group therapy; "lots of nice 'touchy, feely' shots of 20 hands zeroing in on prostate, immobile bodies." The makers of San Francisco's new alternative variety program Electric Eye promise, "the show concludes with a touch of jolly nihilism" — even if the tapes can be overly long and the technicians are still learning their way, there is always some bright spot to be highlighted within a tape. The real criticism is reserved for conventional TV, which is both the parent of alternative TV and its enemy — a stable medium owned by government and corporate entities with no chance for input from users. Radical Software #4 fills space in a layout with image of a TV set, captioned with a reference to the game 'Monopoly': "CABLE TELEVISION. If one 'utility is owned rent is 4 times the amount shown on dice. If both 'utilities' are owned rent is 10 times the amount shown on dice."



Contributors were able to communicate via the Feedback section across geographical distances, with distinct clusters — many video collectives, including Raindance, the VideoFreex, TVTV, the People's Video Theater, and Global Village, were formed and based in New York City apartments and lofts, adjacent to broader art movements. The video movement covered by Radical Software was decentralized, though, also including makers and resources across the United States (especially California) and Canada, as well as the UK. With the portability of video technology, collectives could be nomadic — they didn't have to stay at home to watch TV. Homeskin, a video commune in San Francisco, shares its daily schedule for a free-spirited "regular rolling event spirit fare faire truck race and traveling radio," which involves living in a convoy of trucks and surviving on parasitic food-gleaning. Activities include:

4. Lay in the sun
5. Badmouth the lame gatherers & deadbeats
6. Praise those who surprise & delight you with their vigor & imagination



an insistence on the continuing possibilities of

Other groups wanted be mobile but stayed put — the vast, interconnected network of video-makers covering the US that Ant Farm envisioned on the cover of Radical Software #4 was subject to practical limitations. One modest Feedback blurb from a group named "The Blue Bus" reads: "we're a traveling media/education project stuck in NY trying to pull together a new bus...we have two tapes on life in the People's Republic of China." Hoping for help, they provide a Brooklyn contact address. In addition to wanderlust and the desire to spread alternative communications networks, competition for resources became one practical reason for video groups to decamp from New York City. The likelihood of receiving generous New York State Council on the Arts grants became much higher if groups relocated to less populated upstate counties, and groups like the VideoFreex and eventually Raindance chose to do so.

exposure to all views and especially to avoid inaccuracies in conventional media by letting people generate information about themselves independent of unseen controls.

The picture you label as illustrative of our concept of information is not of us, not our studio, nor representative of any of the material we videotape.

Raindance Corp.
MICHAEL SHAMBERG

generate information about themselves independent of unseen controls.

The picture you label as illustrative of our concept of information is not of us, not of our studio, nor representative of any of the material we videotape. In fact, we have never seen these people before in our lives.

Sincerely,

Michael Shamberg

Feedback entries speak to an urgent need for video-makers to share technical notes on equipment and video techniques. One of the main types of articles featured in Radical Software are detailed tech manuals — valuable instructions for building editing setups, setting up camera rigs, copying tapes. In the Feedback section, there is room for quick tips, scrawled notes, sketched diagrams, and reactions to gear, sometimes handwritten and with spelling errors:

Sony ECM-22 cartiod [sic] condenser (directional) microphone \$100.00 being used successfully by Pablo Ferro, Raindance and VideoFreex with portable video equipment

Saw the demonstrations of Sony's new color cartridge outfit...big deal. It seems like a big hustle for Sony-made color tape cartridges so far.

Feedback creates a space to find out what equipment you should be buying and what you should be paying for it. Contributors want to empower consumers and evade manufacturers' proprietary moves with workarounds. Adventurous engineers and video technicians also found a place to connect with artists and video-heads, like "C.T. Lui of CTL Electronics" — a whiz with video who immigrated from China to the US as a teenager, and who is still in business. In Radical Software #1 he offers "free technical information on video and innovation in video."

in Montreal, the snowbound city, another gathering of media freeex has taken place, this time just video people. Coming together, our egos clashing, finding we are not exactly of one mind as we had wished, trying out of our diversity to put forth an alternate line to the future. Since Vanguard and before, we had all been to be the alter way. And the ferent direct found a difference inevitable if it

We were talking Change, a group have been doing community development that most of community has been a generation from cable a

video show places, tape exchanges, etc., with everyone trying to sway the group toward his pet project.) Later we spoke with a fellow from Bell Research who has been doing experimentation in interaction and feedback, but he was feeling a little

different direction. I have been fortunate in local networks. The conference local groups organized by visiting in at a bit longer than them ready to put

g dialogue which questions were fully we can come

The tone of Feedback's technical advice blends generosity and enthusiasm with superiority and contempt. It's a mode of address that's familiar to anyone who has spent time reading contemporary online tech forums. Skimming the instructional elements in Radical Software now, when much of the technology is obsolete, brings to mind Phyllis Gershuny's initial interests when she had the idea for Radical Software, which were broadly conceptual and aesthetic rather than technical. Not a video-maker herself, she writes, "I read poetry and Scientific American as if it was poetry. The obscure terminology and imagery fueled my imagination."³ The shorthand that flourished in Radical Software's Feedback, fostered by a narrow set of common interests, now provides beguiling clues about the experience of being a video person in the early 1970s. Al Shefflin (NYC) boils down his concerns and affiliations to spare, evocative keywords: "kinesis and video...24 hour taping of Puerto Rican family...Albert Einstein school of Medicine."

The experiential clues that Feedback gives about this moment in video culture also include signs of tension and dissent within Radical Software's base. Marco Vassi, an erotica writer and Radical Software contributor, makes a pointed critique of the atmosphere he observes at the Raindance loft and wider attitudes in the video scene in issue #2's Feedback: "Women are conspicuous by their absence or relegation to minor tasks. One sees no black faces; gays have not been involved. Several Wall Street advisors are on the scene." Feedback gives a view of the alternative television movement as a scene of experimental art and political activism but also a tech scene looking to sustain itself and its members and advance its own perspectives, often male and white. The editorial loop of the newsletter only includes so many people and views. Phyllis Gershuny writes about her experience of feeling pushed out of the publication she helped to create, and her decision to leave the Raindance environment, a "landscape with people I couldn't come to artistic or financial terms with and who represented an opposing view and ethic."⁴ The proposed exploratory, open ethos of Radical Software balances against the goals, biases, and the needs of the editors and publishers as they try to establish priorities and compete for support for their projects and groups.

4 VIDEO NEW Y

Videofree who dig to make have a large capable of p... tap. We do using single and multiple camera systems. We are using Sony AV portable and studio decks for taping and an IVC 860C (one inch) deck for editing. In addition, our studio is outfitted with a gen lock (making possible mixing taped and live material on a 1/2 inch level), a video and sync proc, video and audio mixers, and complementary video and audio equipment.

We are presently showing our tapes at informal viewing sessions Friday nights at nine o'clock at our studio at 98 Prince Street, NYC...



"incompletion," instability, incoherence, "broken-off-

Despite these real limitations, within the content and format of the Feedback section, Radial Software editors tried to make good on the Alternative TV movement's desire to create more channels and cross-currents for information. Feedback evokes the flow of associations found in channel surfing. One of the more charming types of entries in Feedback are imagined, ideal schedules for future television — a videophile's daydream about what TV could be. J Kearney, of New York, envisions 24 hours of programming that includes lunchtime "conversations with wisemen," organic farming segments, jazz, chanting, skill sharing, and 4am "sexual art set to music." His suggestions now seem like wholesome, hippie-inflected previews of today's internet video cornucopia, PBS, or public access fare (with the addition of sex).

These subsequent TV-related formats are linked to the same impulses and groups driving Radical Software, especially cable public access, which was an active concern and a tangible byproduct of the Alternative TV movement. Feedback entries include notices about meetings and initiatives from activists who are working to secure public access rights with newly-emerging cable TV networks. Negotiating with legislators and corporations, activists like Theadora Sklover saw the opportunity in the emerging technology to try to wring something concrete for the public good out of corporate infrastructure, in the form of increased public access to mass communication broadcasting. The resolutely practical and the dreamily speculative are in an active dialogue, in the mix of concrete information and out-there ideas

available in Feedback.

Electric half-inch, black and white video equipment. It consists of five regulars working in Santa Clara and has irregular agents in Rome, New York and Fresno.

...Our current offering is the Philo T. Farnsworth Video Obelisk. This effort consists of a double-tracked, eighty minute video show which is played on a stack of seven television monitors varying in size from nine to twenty-two inches. Every Thursday night the Obelisk flickers at Intersection, 756 Union Street in San Francisco.

The Obelisk is a tribute to Philo T. Farnsworth, the man who invented television at 202 Green Street in San Francisco. The actual content of the Obelisk is a lead article on Philo T. Farnsworth II as told by his son Philo T. Farnsworth III. The show continues with such portions as video feedback; an exclusive and deliberately slanted interview with Richard Nixon; Dick Gregory in his role as the "Scholar in Residence"; The Top-Ten Vibrations of the week; various juxta-

...We're working on a tape involving a talk back approach with young black parolees who have been studying art under a friend of ours. People like to have their say into a camera. It lends authority for some reason—probably because they know their words will become indelible and someone somewhere may catch what they have to say. Anyway, it's exciting to really be free with the camera and let happen what may—much better than scripts which we haven't gotten around to yet. We're also into sound a lot and have been getting a lot of good material on a Sony cassette re-

Feedback was, similarly, an interface between the straight world and the alternative cultural spaces and practices represented by Radical Software contributors. Universities are an ongoing presence in the Feedback pages, as sites from which to acquire and exploit video equipment and resources, hold workshops, and seek funding. The very first Feedback section features a chart listing all the State University of New York colleges and their respective video equipment. There's an implication that these resources are best used for non-institutional purposes; contributors are flippant about establishment figures and media types. In Issue #2's Feedback, the editors mockingly feature a letter from an executive at the ad agency Young and Rubican, in which he complains that his paid-for copy of Radical Software hasn't arrived and threatens to report the publishers to the Better Business Bureau. Despite the prevailing anti-establishment ethos, grant funding was, understandably, very much on the minds of some Feedback contributors and video groups, as state agencies allotted resources specifically for video experimentation. Granting agencies published requests for proposals from video-makers, with Radical Software being the obvious place to reach artists doing the work. In Feedback, you can find a formal request for grant applications from the New York State Council on the Arts, in detailed fine-print, pasted alongside the simple, intriguing announcement: "MICHAEL HASTINGS (TORONTO) has written... 'They; Not We,' a pagan fantasy sermon for television."

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Feedback is a feature of Radical Software's first volume, comprised of 5 issues published and edited by members of the Raindance Corp and a few others. Increasingly finding the magazine money- and time-consuming, when they wanted to focus more on video-making, Raindance opened up and "farmed out" most issues of Radical Software Volume 2 to guest editors. These included the video group at Antioch College, the art collective Great Balls of Fire, and San Francisco artist Phil Getzen, each creating thematic issues relevant to their own communities and interests. The publication evolved away from the strange primordial mix of the first issues and their reflection of the productive confusion of the first years of accessible video. With control of RS given over to contributors, the Feedback section disappeared in Volume 2.

In Radical Software #3, Raindance's Louis Jaffe wrote a Feedback piece expressing his frustration with a phenomenon he calls "the wandering eye," evident in so many of the video tapes he was watching. When a camera-man has the wandering eye, Jaffe explains, "he is afraid to settle on one aspect of the situation, one operation, one detail, and watch and let it develop. He fears that by letting the camera's vision simply rest on one thing for a period of time he will miss something vital going on somewhere else." He appeals for a kind of cinematography that lets the viewer take in one thing at a time, focusing on details before moving onto another shot. It's good cinematographic advice, but by settling into a more methodical way of shooting there's a loss of the frenetic, excited mode of attention — that ping-pong ball gaze freely juxtaposing ideas and images — that Radical Software's Feedback creates in print form.

NOTES

1 Segura, Phyllis (Gershuny). "Creating Radical Software: A Personal Account." Blog post. Rhizome. New Museum, 28 Apr. 2015. Web. <<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/apr/28/creating-radical-software-personal-account/>>

2 Ibid.

3 Segura, Phyllis (Gershuny). "Creating Radical Software: A Personal Account."

4 Segura, Phyllis (Gershuny). "Creating Radical Software: A Personal Account."

Videosphere