INTRODUCTION

Why should a Women's Video Festival exist? Why should women, who constitute more than half of the U.S. population, need a special showcase for their work? The answer, I think, is rooted in the sociological and technological developments of the last decade. In 1968 women made up 32% of the working force. In media alone, they represented only 10% of officials and managers in radio and television and 5% in newspapers according to EEOC figures. Any woman interested in filmmaking in the sixties had to overcome the motion picture industry's rigid union entry rules. Unless she was an actress, script girl, cosmetician, designer, or production assistant, her experience was not unlike that of a black man trying to join a construction trade union. Television, too, was a veritable no-woman's land unless she was young, beautiful and photogenic in which case she could try to get a position in front of the cameras—but even then she had no say in programming.

In 1970 the cover of *Newsweek* finally acknowledged a social movement with photographs of fist-clenching women who had taken to the streets to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the entire system that restricted them. This serious attempt to initiate change was undermined in the media by ridicule ("bra burners") and commercialization ("You've come a long way baby"). Women in the Movement knew that the possibility of change depended on their own ability to reach the public with *their* message—not a reporter's version of it. Many newspapers and publications were born, independent films made, and organizations formed. Very slowly avenues of communication began to open: small monthly publications were able to expand distribution to more states; independent women filmmakers started distributing their own films—first to other women's groups and then to the growing number of universities and colleges offering women's studies programs. There were frequent setbacks, as publications had to cease publishing and many filmmakers could not meet the rising production costs of film and still afford to eat.

During this activity, a quiet revolution was happening in the world of electronics. Since the 1950's a new medium that used magnetic tape to record both sound and picture (much like an audiotape recorder) had been used industrially and commercially. As the process was magnetic and not chemical like film, the recording medium, videotape, could be used over and over again by simply re-recording (changing the coded pattern of the magnetic oxide on the tape). There were no developing costs and you could view your results (using a closed-circuit monitor) immediately.

The equipment was very large and the cost prohibitive for anything but a wealthy institution or network, but during the 60's many Japanese electronics firms were racing to develop a portable video recorder for the consumer market. Finally in 1967 Sony Corporation began selling a unit called the portapak here in the U.S. For about $1100 you could buy a VTR (videotape recorder), camera (with built-in microphone), battery pack and power adapter (for recharging or use with AC current) that allowed you to shoot a continuous 20-minute reel of videotape (in black and white) for approximately $15. The tape could be played back instantly (no developing costs) or used again if desired.

But to Sony's surprise it wasn't so much the average American consumer who bought this toy but rather the independent filmmaker, the artist, the community mobilizer and the curious. Half-inch video (unlike its fat predecessors the tape was only ½" wide) was the *new* medium. By connecting one or two cables and flicking a switch you were ready to record—no light meters, no calculations. Your result looked, for the most part, like the image you saw in the one-inch monitor/eyepiece of the camera and sounded like the audio you heard in the headphones—if someone bothered to tell you that wearing them was a good idea.

Pioneers in the use of this equipment paid the price of its eventual improvement and continued sophistication. In the race to corner the market, the manufacturers had made several concessions to cost and speed. One of the results was that the technical standards of half-inch did not meet the Federal Communications Commission's requirements for broadcast on VHF television. So to view the work of people using half-inch one had to go out to watch TV. The Kitchen, a multi-media theatre begun in 1971 by Steina and Woody Vasulka and Andy Mannik, was one of the first such showcases to really open its doors to anyone using video in *any* way (abstract, documentary, live performance) and there the videophile could expose his or her work to an audience.

But when Steina Vasulka organized a collection of work for a show on Video Art in early '72 she found that there were surprisingly few entries from women—surprising because she knew that at least one-third of the New York video community was comprised of women. Because of its newness, half-inch had no rules to break—no glamour jobs, no unions to join, no enclaves to threaten—and in larger cities (notably New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco) there was equipment available through schools or community groups. Portable video and the Women's Movement had sprung up together. It was at Steina's request that I agreed to do a collective show of women's work.

Photo: Ann Eugenia Volkes

With the help of Shridhar Bapat (then Kitchen program director) and Laura Kassos (an interested friend) we contacted women from New York and California and assembled six evenings of programming. Using an open-entry policy (what we got was what we played), tapes were not limited as to content or form and were not excluded if men worked on them, but we emphasized that the work be created, produced or directed by women videotape makers.

Since that first series in 1972 the audience interest and continued need for exposure to women's work has prompted us to continue doing the Festival. In 1973 we obtained funding from the New York State Council on the Arts through Electronic Arts Intermix. And in '74/'75 we moved the production of the show to the Women's Interart Center which has provided the kind of support and encouragement vital to the completion of any creative endeavor. Under the Center's aegis we've received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts that has made it possible to experiment with new forms of video—some which don't use tape at all (e.g., viewing environments and sculptures). Since most people watch television in the privacy and comfort of their own homes it always seemed so unnatural to seat them in an austere room with hardback chairs and a table holding "the device." The viewing environments therefore are an attempt to make it *seem* more like you're watching TV at a friend's and to give videotape viewing its own identity separate from moviegoing.

The Festival, which has used the jury system for tape selection since '74/'75, currently writes to individuals and groups across the country and in Canada when looking for new work. It is the response from these women that make the show what it is in any given year. It would be no small oversight to understate the value of this response or the value of past contributors to the show like jurors Jeanne Betancourt, Louise Etra and Lynda Rodolitz or like Ann Eugenia Volkes (co-coordinator in 1974/75) who have each added something very personal to the final product.

With recent developments in technology that make it possible for tapes shot on half-inch to be aired on broadcast television, the crack in the door is getting a little wider. But one still doesn't find many women's names in technical and directorial positions when production credits roll by at the end of a program. One finds even less broadcast programming that has anything to do with what's going on with *real* women today. Until these gaps start closing the need for a Women's Video Festival will continue to exist.

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