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*Mall Teens: Tony Conrad's Panopticon*

A network radiates over a small town, with its shadowed skyline and TV/radio tower, for Tony Conrad's 1988 installation *Panopticon*. The town is a scenographic stand-in for America, the net of communication representing its centralized or corporate media. [Fig. 1, Fig. 10] The installation, set in a darkened space, has a homemade flair, resembling a kind of twisted Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood made with orange plastic fencing and paint on folded cardboard and foam core. A low-lying, planar version of a sofa spreads out like a recliner. A hanging tin disk with rotating, satellite-like metal rods casts a mechanical gaze from above. Below, a paper roadway infrastructurally links several sites—the mall, the television station, the art gallery/art agency, the video camera store, and the domestic living room. Five video monitors, one for each "site," show Conrad speaking to us with headphones on. The conceit is that we are watching Conrad listening in on surveillance camera footage from these five different institutions. He narrates what he is overhearing, alternating between imitating the peoples' voices and providing commentary. He looks out at us and looks back behind him toward rudimentary mannequin heads or masks hung on his studio wall. [Fig. 2] The seams of this makeshift set-up are visible; if he needs to shift the focus on the camera or readjust the masks on the wall he reaches over and does it himself. Conrad is his own camera crew, cast, writer, and set designer.



[Fig. 1] Tony Conrad, *Panopticon*, 1988  
installation view Galerie Buchholz, Cologne, 2023

These several civic sites give a glimpse of how television and video are functioning in society. The people Conrad is watching all seem to be directed by commercial impulses or norms. But Conrad, or the narrator of *Panopticon*, wants to foster instead a dehierarchized mediascape comprised of active producers, and he treats each of the people he encounters as a potential recruit. The news anchor at the television station thumbs her nose at amateur video footage and independent movies. The salesman at the camera store snickers that his customers won't bother to use the equipment once they've bought it. But even these cynical characters, Conrad says, should rethink their position and instead try making their own content, unhitched from high production values. The guy on his couch watching evening television mentions that he could do it better, but he is also lulled by an illusory feeling of participation that Conrad wants to shatter: "he thinks he's on TV, because Letterman has the stupid pet tricks on...that makes the guy think *he's* on TV."<sup>1</sup> It's the teenagers at the shopping mall who really get Conrad going. They are thinking way ahead of the adults—as they see their image on the surveillance cams, they imagine making their own material and screening it on the mall's TVs.

<sup>1</sup> Tony Conrad, *Panopticon*, 1988, "Couch Potato", 14'58"



[Fig. 2] Tony Conrad, *Panopticon*, 1988, "Retail Video", 9'28", video stills

Conrad's installation dramatizes so many TV sets entering our interiors like a sci-fi intercom system. Its title, *Panopticon*, goes so far as to analogize the power of mainstream, commercial media in the US in the '80s to the disciplining of subjects in Jeremy Bentham's infamous panopticon design, with its central observation tower and circumference of cells around it, in which inmates sense they are under watch potentially at all times. As Foucault theorized it, Bentham's architecture was a modern penal technology based not primarily in the communal spectacle of visible punishment but in an individuated, automated manner. The implied ever-presence of the prison supervisor's gaze (or another institutional authority) produces subjects that police themselves, while the centralization of knowledge and information-keeping renders more efficient the management of greater quantities of people at once.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, this type of power relation and the role of culture and forms of spectatorship within it was a preoccupation informing Conrad's compositions from day one.<sup>3</sup> But if his early work in the 1960s with film, flickering light, and acoustic environments explored physiological means of liberating subjects from disciplinary programming, the 1980s and 1990s saw Conrad taking a special interest in democratizing access to the tools of production and in facilitating networked communication, as a form of oppositionality.

In order to encourage the growth of a diversified, media-literate public sphere, one key target Conrad took up was that of expectations. He continually disobeyed what was "expected" of a given medium, of art in a gallery or museum, or of social or academic decorum, as if that were a founding principle for him of what it means to make art. Conrad was clear that expectations were no laughing matter. They can be the means of enforcing oppression or legally setting power structures into place: "Expectation, the armature which shapes force into authority, has all the complexity of real-world psychological stuff—a cluster of interactive, related, but different transactional structures—command, interrogation, belief, and negotiation."<sup>4</sup> When it came to the medium of video specifically, Conrad undermined expectations set by corporate television, MTV music videos, and high budget Hollywood movies, but also by a lot of contemporary video art including what was screened on PBS's "Alive from Off Center". Conrad sought a vanguard in the opposite direction: "[s]tudent, amateur, home, marginal industrial (e.g. real estate sales), ceremonial (weddings), pornographic, and regional artists videos—these works define the growth margin of the field, the site from which new makers arise."<sup>5</sup> He was inspired by "work which sidesteps questions of quality by failing to participate in the established currents of 'mature' work." By the time he made *Panopticon*, video had come into view for Conrad less as a formal and aesthetic medium to be analyzed as in structural filmmaking, but rather as a force for decentralizing cultural production and denaturalizing expectations of "quality". To his mind, the electronic flow of video was one tool in an array of "new ways to create and package information"; he aligned its capacities with xeroxed zines, "audio cassette distribution, ...computer bulletin boards, answering machine messaging," and the hacking of phones and computers—forms that "arise without leadership, geographically dispersed." His *Panopticon*, then, registers the era's excitement about early internet's new dimensions of networked participation, while its title acknowledges the specter of control underlying that technology. Conrad enters this fray with an absence of paranoia, however, as if defiantly, deliberately extinguishing its lurk.

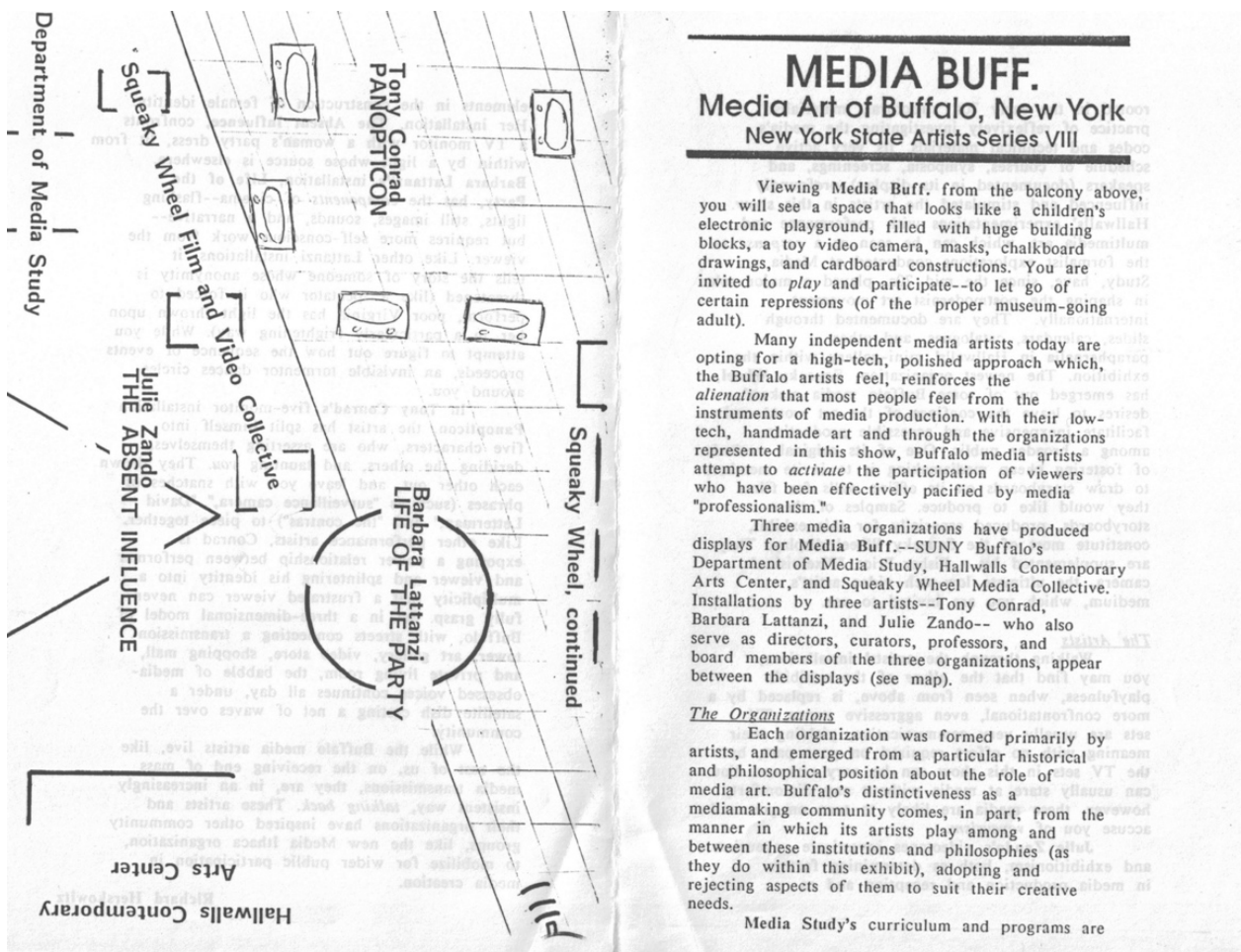
<sup>2</sup> Within the panopticon, Foucault writes, individuals are subject to constant monitoring and denied lateral communication; the individual "is the object of information, never a subject in communication." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

<sup>3</sup> Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage: A "Minor" History* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This and the following quote are from Tony Conrad, "Dolomite: Having No Trust in Readers," in *Media Buff: Media Art of Buffalo, New York, New York State Artists Series VIII* (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 1988), np. Also reprinted in Constance DeJong and Andrew Lampert, eds., *Tony Conrad Writings* (Brooklyn, NY: Primary Information, 2019), 48–54.

<sup>5</sup> This and the following quote are from Tony Conrad, "Video as Opposition: Remodeling Postmodern Media," *Motion Picture 3* (Winter 1989–1990): 49–52. Reprinted in Constance DeJong and Andrew Lampert, eds., *Tony Conrad Writings*, 430–447.

The artist community in Buffalo, where Conrad lived and taught from 1976 onward, rallied around ideas of the decentralization of cultural narratives, representation, power structures, and resources. Keyed into the art scene of New York City yet located almost eight hours' drive north of it, this upstate enclave was sometimes referred to by Conrad and others as the last stop on the New York subway. Its establishment since the early 1970s as a hub for experimentation in computing and media art also meant that it was networked internationally with video activists and media art circles.<sup>6</sup> And while the Buffalo scene was well-connected abroad, its local networks were also particularly strong. Artist-run organizations sprouted up in Buffalo in the 1970s and '80s, to provide access to event spaces and the tools for media production. These were supported with annual grants offered at the time by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center was started in 1974 by then art students Robert Longo and Charles Clough in the hallways of their studio building and evolved into an important space for exhibitions, screenings, live performance, literature events, artists-in-residence, and a post-production editing suite. Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Resource Center was created in 1985 to make what were then still expensive and cumbersome tools (video and film cameras, microphones, cables, batteries, sound and editing equipment) as well as a library, and training workshops in film and video accessible at low costs. Its newsletter *The Squealer*, xeroxed after-hours on University at Buffalo photocopiers, connected subscribers, published members' writings, and surveyed regional developments in its recurring feature called "The State of Upstate." These organizations located in Buffalo were kept alive by artists, and they in turn kept artists alive, creating jobs and a salary for many and making collectively held equipment available to people after they graduated out of university access.<sup>7</sup>



[Fig. 3] "Media Buff.," 1988, exhibition handout excerpt, text by curator Richard Herskowitz

<sup>6</sup> The Department for Media Study at the University at Buffalo and the not-for-profit center "Media Study/Buffalo" were founded in 1973 by Gerald O'Grady. See Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel, eds., *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973-1990* (Karlsruhe: Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, 2008). Attesting to the international recognition of this milieu, in the same year he made *Panopticon*, Conrad was co-curating with Chris Hill, Peter Weibel, and Rotraut Pape that year's edition of "Infermental," an annual videocassette "magazine" that was founded in Hungary by filmmakers Gábor and Vera Bódy. The curation process involved considering hundreds of submissions from around the globe including tapes from Latin American and many smuggled illegally out of Eastern Europe. Chris Hill, discussion with the author, March 5, 2023. See [http://www.infermental.de/infermental\\_07.htm](http://www.infermental.de/infermental_07.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Chris Hill, discussion with the author, March 5, 2023. Ed Cardoni, discussion with the author, February 17, 2023.

Conrad's *Panopticon* was in fact created initially for an exhibition at Cornell University that aimed to convey this not-for-profit ecosystem in Buffalo alongside new artworks.<sup>8</sup> "Media Buff: Media Art of Buffalo, New York," which opened at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell in September 1988, included sections devoted to Squeaky Wheel, Hallwalls, and the Department of Media Study, along with works by three artists who were all deeply involved: Julie Zando, then director of Squeaky Wheel; Barbara Lattanzi, technical director and video curator at Hallwalls; and Tony Conrad, on faculty at the Department of Media Study and a key member of all of the above.<sup>9</sup> [Fig. 3]

At Cornell, Zando exhibited several video works in a triangular room titled *The Absent Influence*, psycho-sexual fantasies mixed with footage of politician Budd Dwyer who had recently committed suicide at a televised press conference. Squeaky Wheel's section of the show included open-sourced storyboards and a Fisher Price PixelVision toy camera for deployment by museum visitors. Lattanzi showed a dizzying installation *Life of the Party*, which used a series of analog read-switches to alternate lights and spin the sound of tap dancing around the circumference of a circular room, animating a succession of drawings on the wall. Hallwalls' history was narrated in three stages, personified in three photographs by Lattanzi and artist/curator Chris Hill. In the second photo, we see Buffalo affiliate and co-founder of ACT-UP's DIVA TV Ellen Spiro on the phone in Hallwalls' material-busy office, the address labels for their far-flung mailing list cascading over the side of a filing cabinet. [Fig. 4] Everywhere in this picture is the texture of creative ambition to form and leverage networks in a just- pre-digital world.

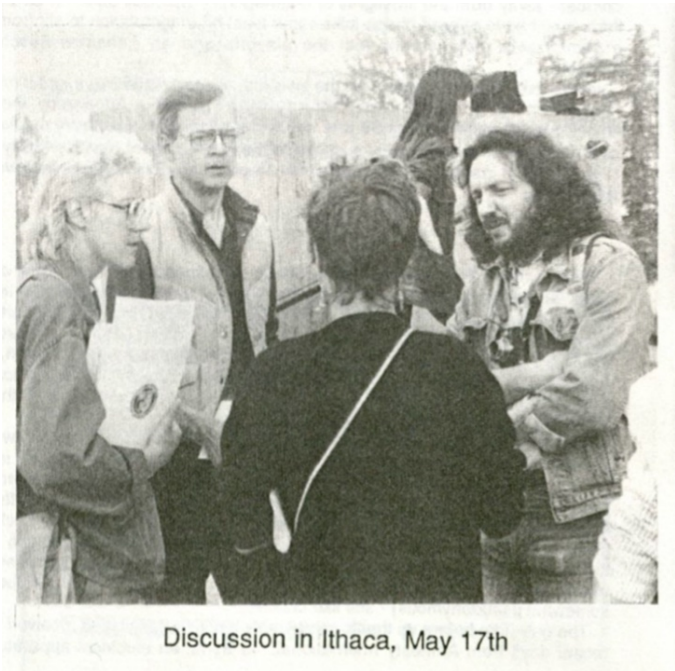


[Fig. 4] Chris Hill and Barbara Lattanzi, photographs made for Hallwalls section of "Media Buff" exhibition, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1988

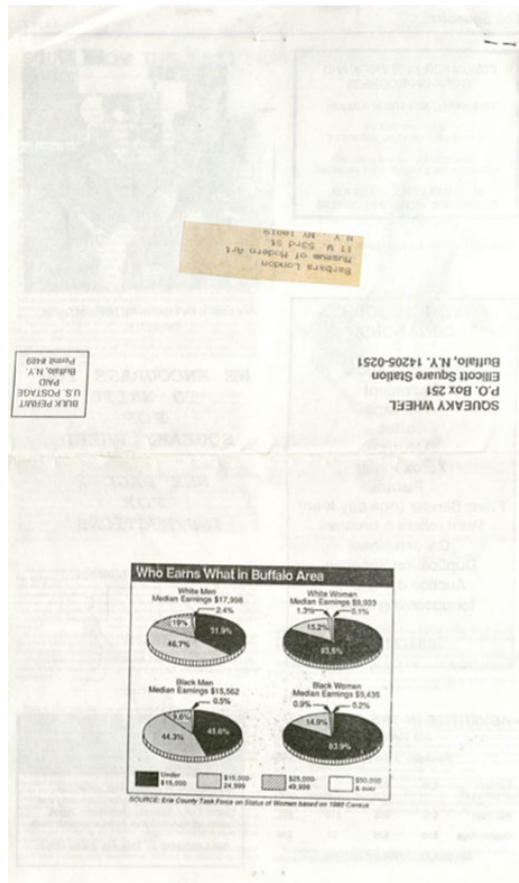
The artists' presentations, curator Richard Herskowitz explained, were deliberately low production value: "Many independent media artists today are opting for a high-tech, polished approach which, the Buffalo artists feel, reinforces the *alienation* that most people feel from the instruments of media production." Instead, Zando, Lattanzi, and Conrad were attempting with these works "to *activate* the participation of viewers who had been effectively pacified by media 'professionalism.'" The show's unpolished DIY character was, in other words, politically intentional. And the pairing of artworks and histories of these organizations was also meant to serve as a working model for Ithaca's media artists, who were then in the process of building up their resources in a manner similar to Buffalo, as had been discussed in the prior year's Upstate Media Conference. [Fig. 5]

<sup>8</sup> Conrad first showed *Panopticon* in "Media Buff: Media Art of Buffalo, New York" at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in 1988. He then re-installed it a year later in the Albright-Knox Gallery's group exhibition "In Western New York 1989". The *Panopticon* "satellite" hung from the ceiling in Conrad's studio for many years. Curator Cathleen Chaffee later found the other remaining elements and exhibited the piece in the 2018 retrospective "Introducing Tony Conrad". *Panopticon*'s 2023 installation at Galerie Buchholz in Cologne also takes a slightly different configuration, with the premise that the components can respond to their site of installation.

<sup>9</sup> In her text for the Cornell exhibition catalogue, Zando credits Conrad as an inspiration for the setting up of Squeaky Wheel: "Tony Conrad was the driving force behind our organizational efforts. I think that only Tony had the vision to see our future potential." Julie Zando, "Squeaky Wheel Media Collective," in *Media Buff*, np. Underscoring Conrad's role in the artistic community of Buffalo, Ed Cardoni wrote in 1988: "Tony Conrad...is undoubtedly the single most influential figure on the Buffalo media scene. As a teacher, he's practically a guru for many, and as a practicing artist the sheer volume of his production and its unflagging freshness are a constant source of amazement and have made him a role model for successive generations of aspiring avant-gardists. Nearly every film and videomaker (and media curator) in town has passed through his classes at CMS, where he has shared with them his inexhaustible and continually replenished supply of high theory and low technique. He is one of those rare artist/teachers who actually has time for his students, instead of treating them as something between maggots and a meal-ticket, who sees his impact on succeeding generations as an important aspect of his overall artistic mission." Ed Cardoni, *The Squealer*, November 1988, 3.



Discussion in Ithaca, May 17th



[Fig. 5] Tony Conrad at the Upstate Media Conference, Ithaca, photo by Seth Tamrowski, Zando, Julie: "Tangentially about the Upstate Media Conference", in: The Squealer, June 1987, p. 5, The Squealer, June 1987, front and back cover, [front cover by Ellen Spiro.]

In the years following this show, back in Buffalo, Conrad adopted the cause of the city's Public Access cable studio and got especially invested in the Education Access channel "BLT: Buffalo Learning Television." Working closely with artist and educator Barbara Rowe, Conrad created on this channel a live news bulletin program for local schools (*School News*, 1993–1997) and led a call-in show for homework questions with a group of young students (*Homework Helpline*, 1994–1995). [Fig. 6] These involved kids in the construction of peer-to-peer communication networks and were meant to supplement a drastically underfunded public school system in Buffalo.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, the format and content was open, letting in whatever math problem, middle-school gossip, or joke came on the line. Prior to this, Conrad had campaigned on the steps of city hall together with Cathleen Steffan and others under the name First Amendment Network (for their show "Studio of the Streets," 1991–1993), talking with whoever passed by about the need for an autonomous public-access studio and asking them what issues they'd want to raise on TV. [Fig. 8] Founded as a democratic stage for free speech, the Buffalo Public Access channel and its board gave a platform to essentially anything people proposed, of all political stripes. This meant airing local evangelism alongside footage taken by the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights regarding anti-abortion blockades of a women's health clinic in Buffalo, or progressive critiques of mainstream media coverage produced by Paper Tiger Television and linked to Deep Dish TV, a free satellite network.<sup>11</sup> Squeaky Wheel and Hallwalls ran "AxleGrease" and "Art Waves," weekly shows that featured Buffalo video artists and advertised the organizations' resources. [Fig. 9] With a group called the 8mm News Collective, Conrad, Lattanzi, Brian Springer, and others also created a three-episode series called "The News Diaries," in which they trailed (or, trolled) the local TV news team throughout the day, "covering" the process of news coverage itself. This ranged from the mundane, such as a spot about lunch-hour concerts at M&T Bank Plaza, to the bleak, interviewing a family about the media harassment they'd experienced after their home caught fire.

Such projects, which provide a context for *Panopticon*, can be read not only in terms of serving a local community but also as a means of opposing the "manufacture of consent." In 1988, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman had published their study *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, in which they argued that the media's support of corporate and political interests in the US amounted to a propaganda model, wherein debate or dissent are allowed but only within boundaries of elite or imperial consensus. Citizens' political participation was thereby reduced essentially to that of consumption, buying into one or the other party's line. Cable access and satellite were seen as a counterforce to this, providing not only alternative views of current events but a virtual gathering place for people to speak and think for themselves.

The initiatives in Buffalo in this period were also part of a national swell in video activism, intensified by the camcorder boom. If the Portapak's release in the late 1960s had inspired a wave of "guerilla television" and artists' uses of video, in the mid- and late-1980s the introduction to Western markets of the camcorder (which combined audio and video recording, and minor editing capabilities, in one handheld machine) ignited ideas of widespread countersurveillance and documentation of political movements from the inside. By the mid-1990s, scholar Laurie Ouellette wrote, "[f]or activists mobilizing around AIDS, the environment, abortion rights, racial equality, the media, and other social and political issues, low-budget video technology has become as indispensable as the ubiquitous protest sign."<sup>12</sup> The potential for this to change the status quo was felt on both sides—by mainstream journalists and alternative media. The seismic impact of George Holliday's camcorder footage, taken from his balcony as LAPD officers assaulted Rodney King, proved in 1991 that we had entered an era in which citizens' footage held new ground.

Hallwalls' answer to the early camcorder moment was the project "Video Witnesses: A Festival of New Journalism". Conceived by Barbara Lattanzi and media artist Brian Springer, these festivals occurred annually in 1989, 1990, and 1991. The curators solicited an open call for tape submissions from individuals across the US and Canada, issuing awards to several videos and screening them in thematic groups. The festivals were toured via the Video Data Bank, another resource born out of media art networks in the 1970s—based in Chicago, VDB preserves, archives, and rents out video work still today. Chris Hill, who also worked to organize these festivals, described the concept of "Video Witnesses" in hindsight as:

not [done] as a utopian wish (e.g. what if everybody suddenly decided to make their own TV with camcorders AND somehow recaptured their own information distribution systems or TV channels), but rather as a serious cultural research question: how will people, artists and non-artists, position themselves with camcorders, this new tool? Will the widespread availability of this new tool actually move people any closer to a confrontation with the authority of their consumer-oriented/spectacle-driven environment? And how will the camcorder capture the popular imagination? Will people approach it like a visual typewriter documenting family and

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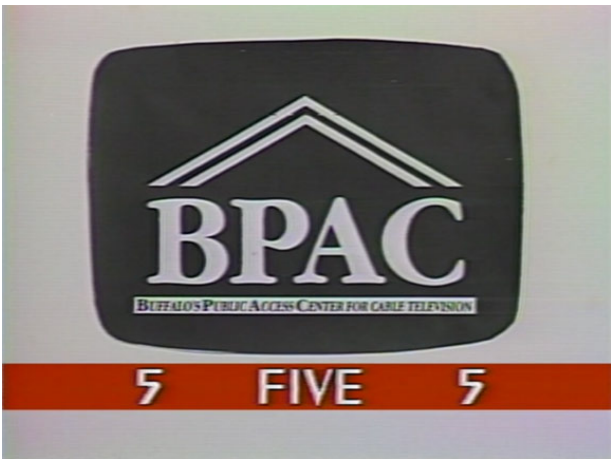
<sup>10</sup> Ted Conrad, in discussion with the author, March 2023. On Conrad's involvement with local television and his sustained involvement with public protest, see also Paige Sarlin, "In Person, On Screen, In Context, On Tape" and Annie Ochmanek, "TCTV," in Cathleen Chaffee, ed., *Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Cardoni, "Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights," *The Squealer* (Summer 1992): 77.

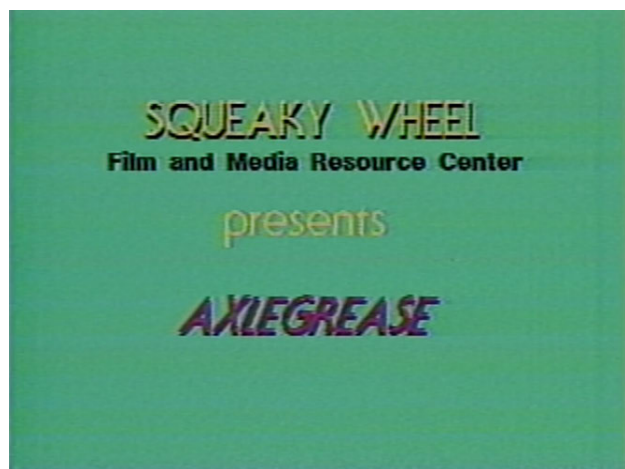
<sup>12</sup> Ouellette, "Will the Revolution Be Televised?," 170–171. Ouellette also cites here Ellen Spiro's *The Camcorder's Manifesto of 1991*: "Camcorder footage contributes to a broader analysis of an event by offering an alternative to broadcast media's centrist view. It has the power to add a dimension to the chorus of voices heard..."



[Fig. 6] Tony Conrad, "Homework Helpline," 1994-1995, video stills



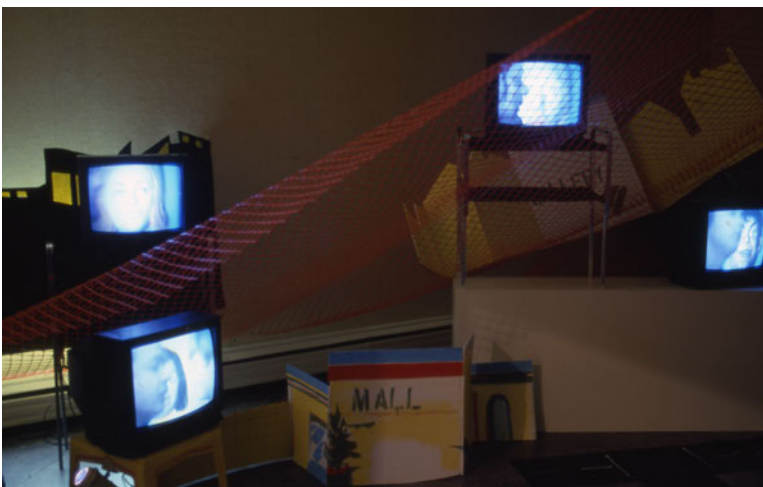
[Fig. 7] BPAC (Buffalo Public Access Center for Cable Television) countdown screen  
 [Fig. 8] Tony Conrad, "Studio of the Streets," 1991-1993, video still



[Fig. 9] "AxleGrease" intro (with view of Squeaky Wheel exterior), 1989 and outro, 1988, video stills

community events? Or will it inspire them more like a musical instrument, like youth who form themselves into bands? Or will it develop the intimacy of the telephone?<sup>13</sup>

Conrad's *Panopticon* came out of a similar curiosity in this moment and an impulse to egg on whatever may come, but also with a quotient of what Hill here calls a utopian wish, for everyone to make their own entertainment and to form homegrown information networks. Elements of *Panopticon* respond directly to changes at the outset of the camcorder boom and are in that sense specific to their time. The "video retail store" was a relatively new phenomenon, as was the TV news station's having to contend with amateur footage. The installation participated in what Conrad then saw as an urgent responsibility for video artists to guide what was a rising tide in media democratization. Speaking at the National Video Festival in Los Angeles in 1986, Conrad stated: "The job for 'post-'postmodern video is to create sociocultural leadership for potentially *active viewers*, to display what the equipment affords but that television *and* modern art squelch: opportunities to *change their minds*—to decentralize the concept of **quality**—to authorize the power of diversity that we ought to have in a 'democratic' society."<sup>14</sup> The fact that *Panopticon* aims to do so via a willfully analog aesthetic showed that, for Conrad, the medium or the technology itself was not the message; what was important was its mobilizing potential, contingent on peoples' picking it up and making use of it. The diversity he refers to here means not only one of identities but also of different political positions and opinions. Inviting the disagreement and cacophony powering actual democracy, Conrad's project distinguished itself not only from polite professionalism but also from techno-determinism and from any solipsistic formalism.



[Fig. 10]  
Tony Conrad, "Panopticon", 1988  
installation view, "Media Buff", Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1988

Looking back via this lens of the artist community in upstate New York that "Media Buff" represented, Rosalind Krauss's take on the topic of the "center," in her formative essay on video art written for *October* journal in 1976, appears somewhat ironic. Taking her cue from Vito Acconci's *Centers*, 1971, Krauss asks what it means to point at the middle of a TV screen. For modernist painting, to point at its center had meant formal reflexiveness. For postmodernism, emblemized by the medium of video, it meant instead a mirror-reflection, a *mise-en-abyme*, a "collapsed present," a narcissism that Krauss identified as the condition of video.<sup>15</sup> By contrast to Krauss's analysis of such earlier uses of video by New York City-based artists, Conrad's and his colleagues' perception of feedback loops was that of a public resource, a means of a local audience developing a discourse or debate; not simply a narcissistic tautology but a newsletter, a live bulletin, a helpline. The fragmented and improvisatory spirit of Conrad's installation

<sup>13</sup> Chris Hill, "Sighting the Almighty: Challenging TV Territories & Educating for Translocal Sensibilities," introduction for screening of Video Witnesses program, the "Next 5 Minutes" conference, Amsterdam, January 8–10, 1993. Regarding decentralization as a motivating force for other curatorial projects at Hallwalls, Hill wrote in 1994: "It became clear from working in Buffalo, a border city on the 'Niagara Frontier', that the authorized video art scene in the U.S. was increasingly a construction of the relatively few curators and distributors who act as filters for the work coming into the resource- and audience-intense cultural centers—mainly New York and Toronto. We became interested in the project of researching work that didn't look to either of those centers for authorization. Through serving on juries, traveling, and asking questions, we established ongoing dialogues and exchanges with media artists and organizations in other upstate New York cities, in Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Chicago, San Francisco. We remained interested in why artists or independents on the cultural margins might pick up a video camera and make a tape.... Programmers are convinced that Hallwalls must remain a kind of decentralized uplink for some version of contemporary culture, and not merely a downlink from some distance tastemaking authority." Chris Hill, in Ronald Ehmke and Elizabeth Licata, eds., *Consider the Alternatives: 20 Years of Contemporary Art at Hallwalls* (Buffalo: Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, 1994), 94–95.

<sup>14</sup> Conrad, "A Propaedeutic for Active Viewing" (text of a talk delivered at the National Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, December 6, 1986). Published in *The Squealer* (February 1987): 5.

<sup>15</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976): 51–64.



and the overall aim of “Media Buff” to incite visceral participation and even social organization evidences the other side of video, as an energized networking tool, that Krauss was not yet seeing.

In his catalogue text for “Media Buff,” Conrad situates his and fellow Buffalo artists’ media projects squarely within the larger ambition of decentralization (of power, resources, criteria): “Nothing, it seems to me, can more directly serve the purposes of exploding cultural authority out of its log-jammed power-pool at the center than emphatically to display (to readers or viewers) the misery and delight that flow out of our unrecognized expectations, anticipations, presuppositions, assumptions—as they are templated and manipulated by authors and other makers.”<sup>16</sup> This type of empowering critique of authority can also be, as Conrad showed so relentlessly in his work, the result and the source of fun. That was no doubt another message that the liling panels and laughing narrator of *Panopticon* hoped to impart. Even given that (as Herskowitz’s exhibition text made clear) the installation’s ad hoc aesthetic was a deliberate choice, it may yet appear to contemporary eyes as a distant playpen from a transitional era. But as recent interest in cable and public access and in artists’ experiments with early television suggest, this period of just- pre-internet interventions can teach us a great deal, at a moment when they’re newly recognizable as of a historical past.<sup>17</sup> Access to networking technology in the palm of one’s hand has of course been revolutionized since the late 1980s, while many of the societal concerns that Buffalo’s artists and other media activists were addressing then have only escalated. The tools of digital networking have reared their heads as the source of previously unknown levels of monopolization and wealth concentration.<sup>18</sup> In the US, a corporate duopoly continues to masquerade as democratic participation. In the art world, conglomerates and blue-chip behemoths help to deaden critical discourse and to raise the price of admission. As such, an adversarial position such as Conrad’s, against not simply high budget production values and commercial media but the expectations, corporate cultures, and ideologies they set in place, is all the more piercing today.

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<sup>16</sup> Conrad, “Dolomite,” np.

<sup>17</sup> See the recent exhibitions “People Make Television” curated by Lori E. Allen, William Fowler, Matthew Harle, and Alex Sainsbury, Raven Row, London; and “Signals: How Video Transformed the World” curated by Stuart Comer and Michelle Kuo, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; both 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Cecilia Rikap, “Capitalism as Usual? Implications of Digital Intellectual Monopolies,” *New Left Review* 139, Jan/Feb 2023, 145–160.