Video Journey Through Utopia

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> A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not
> worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country
> at which Humanity is always landing. And when
> Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better
> country, sets sail.
>
> *- Oscar Wilde*

The founder of the Raindance video collective, artist Frank Gillette, distinguishes between the Fluxus current in video history and the utopian current. The Fluxus current, which surfaced in the careers of a host of individual video artists, led by Nam June Paik, overwhelmed and diluted the utopian current which lived and died with the video collectives of the late sixties and early seventies. (Gillette, 1995) The anomalous case in the Fluxus tradition is Joseph Bueys who considered his work social sculpture. However, just as with the video collectives, Bueys failed to actually change society in any radical way.

One "sociological" way of describing this "victory" of the European Fluxus current over the indigenous American utopian current is to say that the institutionalization of video as art came at a price. The anonymous collectives (once the Videofreex collective refused to given out any name to an interviewer, except the name of the house cat) gave way to "name" artists. To become validated as "art" the collective desire to radically change society with video, triggered by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, had to

mutate into celebrity status for selected individuals willing and able to structure their ego's in compliance with the star system for solo artists.

Currently, there is a renewed interest in utopia. Pierre Levy's book *Collective Intelligence* (1997), recently published in English, echoes both the early Lewis Mumford and Marshall McLuhan by linking utopia with electronic technology. The subtitle of Levy's book is "mankind's emerging world in cyberspace". He sees mankind as emerging out of a commodity space into a knowledge space. In this space, humans can relate to knowledge in all its diversity. Identity becomes nomadic. We involve ourselves in the production of meaning. We generate worlds of signification. New ways of living in time and space emerge from collective becomings. (Levy p. 175) Collective intelligence is a "utopia of the unstable and the multiple." (Levy, p. 202)

Levy sees utopias, not as unrealizable dreams for fools and fascists, but as seeds that can engender the actualization of highly differentiated pluralistic societies. This article reports on a utopian "seed" that emerged from my own experience working with video in the collective current. This brief article is a modest sequel to "A Genealogy of Video" inspired by Foucault which I published in *Leonardo* in 1987 about video history in New York City between 1968-1971 (Ryan, 1993, see also Bolye, 1997). In that essay, I traced the tension between video as a tool of social change and video as an art form. Just as that essay was "a" genealogy that asks to be considered in context with related genealogies, so this essay is "a" case history that asks to be considered in context with related case histories.

More specifically, this presentation reports on my own effort to start a video utopian community between 1971 and 1976, after having participated in the

Raindance video collective from 1969 to 1971. Through this report, I want to suggest that the utopian current in video history can be reinterpreted as a fecund virtuality. For the reader to accept my suggestion does **not** necessarily require a willing suspension of the post sixties cynicism that now uses the term "utopia" in a disparaging way. What it does require is an appreciation of the distinction, used by Pierre Levy, between the possible and the virtual. This distinction, put forth by philosopher Henri Bergson, is key to what I am articulating. (Bergson, 1992, pp. 91-106; Deleuze, 1991, pp. 91-113)

For Bergson, the possible is linked to the real; the virtual is linked to the actual. The link between the possible and real is one of a model and its copy. The concept is complete in the model before being executed in the copy. According to this way of thinking, the fully formed human being is already "modeled" in the fertilized egg. Embryological development is just a rendering in reality of a correct copy of the model of the possible. Monsters are failed copies. By contrast, the link between the virtual and the actual is a link of differentiation. The fertilized egg encodes a virtuality that generates a range of self differentiating organs which actualize into a self organized fully formed human. The virtual does not make copies of itself but creates differences that make differences in the actual world. Failure of the virtual is the failure to create differences. Artists understand this distinction. Serious artists with shared interests, such as the impressionists, do not copy each other but form a virtual community, a "mutual differentiation society" that manages to actualize a plurality of work. Before applying this distinction to the utopian current in video history, let me specify my own experience.

In the fall of 1971, I moved from New York City upstate to the beautiful Shawangunk Mountains near New Paltz. At the time, New Paltz was a thriving

countercultural center, populated by art students and former arts students at the State University of New York campus in New Paltz, then known for its arts programs. The local movie theater played *King of Hearts* monthly to a full house of locals who believed with Shakespeare that "the poet, the lunatic, and the lover are of imagination all compacted." This wonderful movie about the eccentric inmates of a mental institution let loose in town in the midst of the follies of World War One provided the town of New Paltz with a self image during the Vietnam War.

Through a conduit organization, I had a $20,000 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to figure out how to produce video interpretations of ecological systems. In 1972, the Council provided another $5,000 to support my efforts. By 1973, I had hit an impasse with my work and did not apply to the council for funds. During a trip to the southwest that year, a conceptualization for a utopian community of ecological videomakers came to me in a burst and I wrote it up in three days. (Ryan, 1974, 1993)

The idea was to configure an intentional community of thirty-six videomakers. Each videomaker was to be part of three different triads. The first triad was to care for its members, the second to take care of the business of supporting a community, and the third to produce video interpretations of ecological systems. My intuition was that if self-correcting teams of three people could be stabilized, a leaderless, thriving community could be stabilized. Of course, my own attempt to *start* a leaderless community involved a personal contradiction that I became keenly aware of over the next few years.

In the early seventies, the idea of utopian communities living within ecological limits was in currency. Ernest Callenbach's widely read book about a breakaway

state in the Pacific Northwest called *Ecotopia* appeared in 1975. In conceptualizing Earthscore, however, I did not rely primarily on readings from the utopian tradition. My key text was the rule of Saint Benedict, the founder of western monasticism. From the age seventeen to when I was twenty-two I had lived in a contemplative preaching order of the Roman Catholic Church. I wanted to start a non-celibate, aesthetic order capable of interpreting ecological systems with video that would be as sturdy and long lasting as the ascetic order of the monastic tradition I had experienced.

In an attempt to recruit members for the community, I passed out over a hundred xeroxed copies of the Earthscore utopian document to people I knew in the town of New Paltz and got two takers: videographer Steven Kolpan and artist Robert Schuler. We started working together in 1973, setting up a non-profit organization and drafting an intricate set of triadic bylaws. We applied to the New York State council on the Arts, submitting the utopian document. From 1974 through 1976, NYSCA supported us with $60,000. During that time we produced an enormous volume of videotape of ecological systems as well as forty five hours of triadic tape, tape of people interacting in threesomes. As mentioned, the premise of the utopian document was that self balancing groups of three would be the basic unit in this video utopia community. There would be no hierarchy. However, since normal interactive patterns usually involve hierarchy and two against one dynamics, we first had to "invent triadic behavior". Most of these triadic tapes were produced in collaboration with the Dancing Theatre company in New Paltz founded and directed by tap dancer Brenda Bufalino.

A showing of this work took place at the Kitchen Performance Center in New York City in the spring of 1976. After that, Earthscore Foundation went

dormant. We had produced shelves of video interpretation of ecological systems, some of it merely exploratory, some quite successful and beautiful. We also invented a basic repertoire of collaborative behavior for three people. But we had used up all our emotional coupons doing so, did not develop a triadic decision making process and could not figure out how to address issues of gender and triadic behavior. Moreover, the New York State Arts Council decided to zero our funding.

If you think of Earthscore strictly as a utopia, a possibility that went unrealized, then you can consider this utopian effort a failure. Your post sixties cynicism is justified. End of story. I ask you, however, to think of Earthscore as a virtuality that has been actualized in many different and divergent ways, none of which are simply executions in practice of the plan in the original utopian document. If fact, only after the effort to realized the possibility of Earthscore as a utopian community was abandoned did the virtual power of Earthscore start manifesting itself. For myself personally this meant that rather than be trapped in an isolating effort to realize the utopian concept of a video community, I was released into the actuality of the world, and the actual, as poet Wallace Stevens says, is a "deft beneficence".

Since 1976, Earthscore has mutated from a utopian plan to a notational system. That notational system is based on three comprehensive categories of knowledge organized for collaborative learning by a relational circuit. The notation also includes a formal way of understanding events and a method of interpreting anything to anybody. The full codification of the Earthscore Notational System was published in 1989 in *Leonardo* magazine. (Ryan, 1989, 93)

The power of Earthscore as a virtuality, as a notational system for generating differences, is evident when you consider the non-utopian actualities that have been generated using the Earthscore Notational System. Let me cite some of the projects that have been actualized by myself and others using components of the Earthscore Notational System. Please note that just as video was originally deployed for both art and social change so the Earthscore Notational System has been deployed in both the realm of art and the realm of social change. Here are some of the projects generated by the Earthscore Notational System.

- The conceptualization of a bioregional magazine in North Jersey called *Talking Wood* that included a Watershed Watch Program. *Talking Wood* was published in 1979-80 and successfully used a three-person procedure for making editorial decisions. Before folding, the magazine managed to identify and publicize the dumping of toxic waste by Ford Motor company in an abandoned mine shaft near a reservoir and secret test drilling for uranium by Shell and other oil companies. The waste site was put on the Superfund list and a law banning uranium mining in New Jersey was enacted.

- The design of a two week intensive program to retrain workers displaced from the defense industry in Connecticut. The program used a three-person team learning strategy to teach the workers to use "new workplace skills" in their job search. Fifty out of the sixty workers trained found work.

- An art of relationships called *Threeing*, that works for three people the way T'ai Chi or Yoga works for an individual. This art of relationships has

been presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and elsewhere.

- A design for an environmental television channel that has been presented at the the Cathedral of St John the Divine and the United Nations and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Other uses of the notational system include the design and implementation of an educational program on sustainability for New York City public school teachers, the design and implementation of an architectural curriculum at Parsons School of Design and the production of numerous videotapes.

I submit that these iterations demonstrate that Earthscore as a notational system can cultivate differences that make differences. I think that the notational system itself is a kind of virtual code for organizing differences that can help actualize a rich and healthy pluralism of differences in society. I consider this notational system more valuable than any videotapes I've produced. I doubt, however, if the notational system itself could have been generated without a video journey through utopia.

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