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Getting into the Picture

Resources for Video Artists in New England

Kevin Concannon



Betsy Connors—*Swan Pond*, videotape still

The price of a tube of paint can't come close to the cost of one hour in a video post-production studio. With professional editing and special effects facilities costing between \$300 and \$700 an hour, long laboring over one's work is a luxury few video artists can afford. Nonetheless, even aspiring video artists of modest means manage to produce work. In New England, as everywhere else, there are three basic options for the underfinanced: community-access cable television, university video facilities, and media arts centers.

Boston video artist Betsy Connors has produced work through a creative and ambitious exploration of these and other options. "When I made my first tape, I guess it was out of a cable access facility," Connors said. "Then I worked in the mid-70s at WGBH, which at the time was real prime for video artists. They had an ongoing workshop where they had fifteen core people who helped other artists to create work. You could use the facilities when they weren't being used by invited workshop participants. I used to edit at the station at night, and the budget was nothing. The equipment was there, and it cost the price of the tape—some of which we even scrounged. Then it moved up, I guess, to getting my grants." Connors also depends to some extent on artists-in-residency programs at

schools, and works at MIT's facilities in the new List Visual Arts Center. She also supports herself by freelancing her video services. This also provides access to equipment.

"The most important thing for anybody is the ability to use *some* kind of equipment in the beginning," said Anne-Marie Stein, who administers the Mass. Productions Program of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, funders of videos by Connors and many others. "That's the first step—it doesn't matter how good (the equipment) is." And indeed, access to that equipment is the video artists' number one problem.

Currently, most beginners are best off at a media arts center. These centers have sprung up all over the country in response to the problem of artists' access to equipment. In New England, Real Art Ways, in Hartford, and Boston Film Video Foundation, in Boston, provide promising options.

Boston Film Video Foundation's director of production services, Raj Sharma, told me that BFVF pursues a three-part mission: to produce exhibitions, to provide education, and to offer equipment access and production services. As with most video facilities, users must demonstrate a reasonable proficiency with the equipment before

being set loose with it. Membership fees, ranging from \$50 to \$250 a year, entitle members use of the cooperative's equipment at substantially subsidized hourly rates. To insure that the equipment is being handled by competent users, BFVF offers a wide range of courses covering everything from entry-level to the most advanced post-production techniques. At BFVF, the courses and facilities are geared toward a step-by-step approach to training users from A to Z. Many organizations, including public-access cable television, require these courses simply to insure that the equipment is handled properly. The advantage of university and media centers over cable facilities depends largely upon the quality of the teaching. The chances of finding this kind of support and such dedicated instructors at cable outlets are slim. Media art centers and universities also tend to offer environments more conducive to creative activity.

"BFVF just spent close to \$75,000 on a time-code editing system. This is kind of unique as media arts centers go; we try to attract and keep experienced video artists here," explained Sharma. At BFVF, producers can time-code their raw footage, designate all the edits digitally, and walk into a

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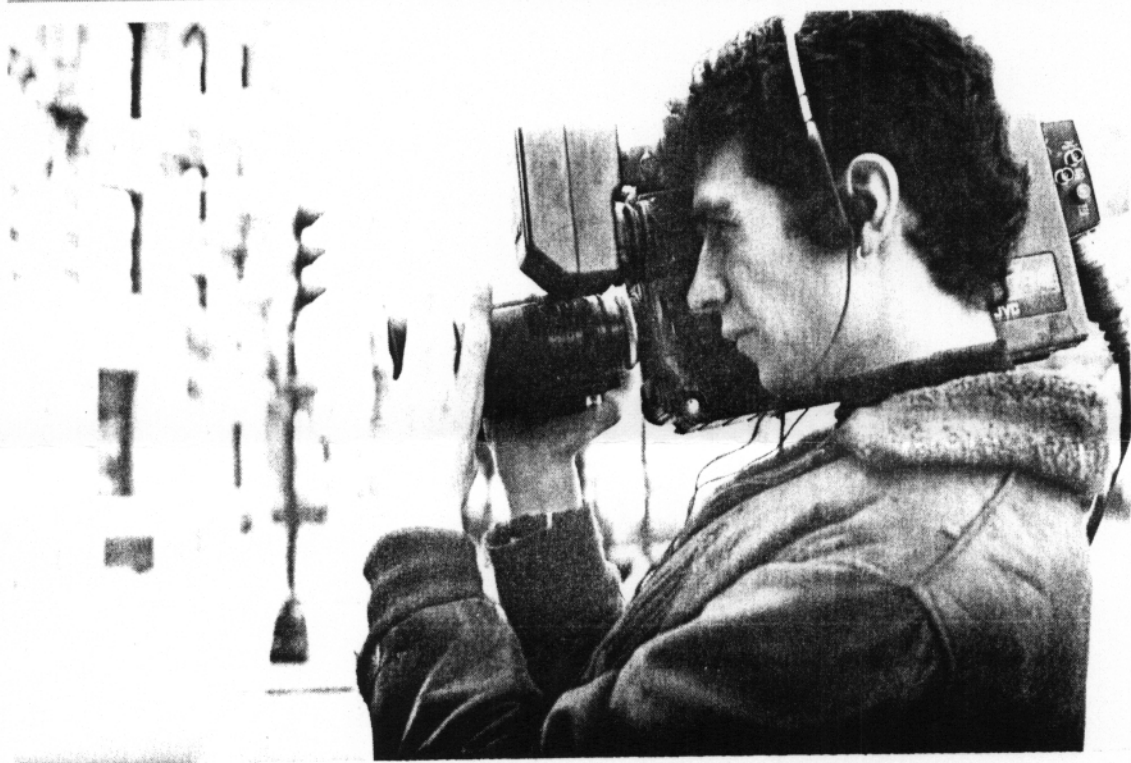


Photo: Crispine Kinsinger

broadcast facility for a quick (and cheap) final edit. If one had to do all this using commercial production houses, market conditions would soon wipe out video art altogether. Betsy Connors has produced 15-minute tapes with as little as \$15,000 raised through grants. When you consider the astronomical budgets for one-minute television commercials, this is quite an impressive accomplishment. And \$15,000 is a relatively large budget for work by most video artists.

As Connors explained, "The grant is kind of the mainstay. A lot of these granting agencies and institutions are in some ways the facilitators of creative work because they allow you to realize something that you couldn't otherwise. You can't just own a TV station, or you can't own \$200,000 worth of equipment. No video artist can." Grants are, in fact, the video artists' only reasonable hope of gaining access to state-of-the-art equipment.

Hartford's Real Art Ways also offers reduced-rate production facilities for video artists and even offers a limited number of residencies. Many state arts agencies fund video artists. New York's On-Line program links up video artists with commercial video post-production facilities on a non-prime time basis. Artists benefit from access to state-of-the-art equipment, and studios can make some money during their "down" time. On-Line is run by the Media Alliance, an organization funded with both public and private money. Such partnerships of nonprofit and commercial organizations have become increasingly popular in the face of uncertain subsidized arts budgets. In video, however, the partnership addresses not only financial considerations, but artistic issues as well. Artists may be gaining access to otherwise prohibitively costly equipment, but commercial houses gain the creative insights and eccentric visions of the artists who work there.

Video artists work within a medium that has developed as a commercial industry. Some artists work consciously against "commercial" styles; others exploit the technological innovations made possible by the industry within which they work. Some video artists began working with Super 8 film because it's relatively cheap, and video transfers of film lend themselves to even more formal manipulation than video alone. As an example of genuine interchanges between the commercial and purely artistic sectors, a number of recent television advertisements and promos have incorporated this technique of Super 8 transfer, playing on the consumer's perception of the medium as personal—loaded with all the family associations and emotional baggage of home movies. A local television station for example, solicited home movies from viewers as part of a "feel good about that" promotional campaign.

Video artists, despite being emulated by ad agencies and art directors, face serious financial obstacles. The On-Line program, which has served as a model for similar programs in Los Angeles and Chicago, should encourage further initiatives toward cooperation between artists and "commercial" concerns. The notion of subsidized equipment access represents an approach to the problem that, however legitimate, ignores the other obvious, potentially improved partnership: between artists and distributors.

Boston's Contemporary Art Television (CAT) Fund, a cooperative venture between the Institute of Contemporary Art and WGBH television, funds, co-produces and presents new video work by artists. The New England Foundation for the Arts coordinates and funds the creation and distribution of video art to cable television systems, affording artists the opportunity to create new work and reach expanded audiences. There are other such

collaborations between non-profit arts presenters and public and cable television stations. Inroads yet to be made, however, include commercial networks—or stations—and video sales and rentals. There are very few distributors of video art tapes. Chicago's Video Art Databank and New York's Electronic Arts Intermix are prominent among them. Few individuals can afford to collect at an average of \$200 per tape. Rentals to institutions account for most of the minimal income, video artists receive for their work. Distributors have yet to take advantage of the network of video rental shops springing up all over the country. Even such video stars as Bill Wegman and Nam June Paik can't make their livings on sales or rentals. It's time to network art videos into the racks of "Rambos" and "Rockys." The discerning customer at a video shop would find Betsy Connors, Bill Seaman, or Nam June Paik a welcome alternative to a plethora of magnetic pulp.

The bottom line is that video artists need the same equipment that network producers routinely use. Unlike first-generation video artists of the '70s (whose equipment was state-of-the-art only because it was the only equipment around at the time), video artists find state-of-the-art equipment completely out of reach financially. If artists expect to afford today's high technology, their best hope is to reach beyond an esoteric audience by more aggressive marketing of their work. There are too many people out there renting *Casablanca* for the tenth time simply because there's nothing else to intrigue them. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

Kevin Concannon works out of the New York area and writes about time-based media for a number of publications and produces radio about art. He is currently seeking funds to match an NEA radio grant.