

Alternative Media Landscapes in Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s

Essay for *Collaboration Labs*/18th Street

Julia Bryan-Wilson

I. California as Screen

From the beginnings of the modern movie industry in Hollywood to the “Silicon Valley” internet boom in San Jose, California has long played a central role in the formation and development of mass media technology. At the same time, alternative artists in California have looked to experimental uses of screen cultures—including video, television, digital/computer media, and satellite technologies—in order to create new kinds of practices, form alliances, rethink human and machine interfaces, and ask probing questions about media representations and their exclusions. Coming together as collaborative networks that intentionally functioned outside the mainstream production of commercial material, artists in Southern California in the late 1970s and early 1980s used the tools of technology to radically expand notions of art alongside and in concert with their political visions.

This essay examines the politics of mediation, video, and experimental technology in the work of the ARIADNE network (co-founded by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz-Starus), EZTV (begun by John Dorr), and Electronic Café International (Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Each of these groups is a key case study in the exhibit *Collaboration Labs: Southern California Artists and the Artists Space Movement*, curated by Alex Donis, and I argue that looking at their work in dialogue with each other provides a fresh lens on how technologically-informed art motored collective work at this time. This text does not and cannot provide a comprehensive narrative of these three important groups—none of which have been sufficiently examined or appreciated within art history and film studies. Rather, it thinks through how their diverse activities—crucially situated in southern California, the contested capital of the global media industry—worked within and against the mainstream as they each seized alternative media for various ends. How did these collaborations envision electronic networks and new media as forging new aesthetics, as well as using technology as a complex tool for political organizing within the social movements then emerging in Los Angeles, including feminism, gay liberation, and cross-race community building?

One such history of the rise of video art vis-à-vis the wider Californian art historical landscape was elaborated in the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *California Video: Artists and Histories*, curated by Glenn Phillips in 2008. While this show and the accompanying catalog are excellent resources, the story of experimental media told in *Collaboration Labs* is intentionally different. *California Video* focused in large part on the importance of institutions such as the Long Beach Museum of Art, one of the first museums in the country to embrace video art with seminal shows such as *Southland Video Anthology 1976-1977*, organized by David Ross, and a survey on California video put together by Kathy Huffamn in 1980. The Getty show did not include independent spaces such as EZTV (whose core membership was primarily gay men), or the collective models of ARIADNE (who strategically used mass media television as a critical component of their feminist performances), or the telecommunications innovations of Electronic Café. In fact, even in its heyday the Long Beach Museum was perceived by some as offering a fairly limited, conservative view of the potential of video: as EZTV founder John Dorr noted in an interview in 1982, the museum wanted only short tapes that could be consumed by the gallery-goer in a relatively brief amount of time, a model of viewership meant to be aligned with looking at sculpture, rather than watching a feature-length film.

As a result, what I offer is a *counter* history to that increasingly consolidated narrative, for it is especially vital to consider non-institutional works as they shaped the vital terrain of art, technology, and politics in southern California. Los Angeles is not just a company town, with a monolithic movie culture or a singular art scene: its vastness and diversity has made it a fertile incubator for alternative modes of making that take advantage of their proximity to the resources, machines of publicity, skilled labor, and cast-offs of mainstream media. For example, video makers affiliated with EZTV were able to mobilize the talents, expertise, and abilities of under-employed Hollywood editors, technicians, camera-people, and actors; while the performance actions made under the auspices of ARIADNE utilized the connections and exposure provided by local reporters.

Los Angeles has been at the heart of success but also controversies about the integration of high-tech industries and art. For instance, the California branch of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), brought to LA by Dr. Elsa Garmire and Ruth Baker, encouraged scientists and technicians to collaborate on new ideas for artmaking, and led to several working relationships that teamed artists with California Institute of Technology scientists. One such joint effort involved an E.A.T.-sponsored performance by Barbara T. Smith that celebrating the Apollo moon landing. Yet fierce debates often erupted when artists used technology; to cite a well-known example, in 1971, Maurice Tuchman curated the exhibit "Art and Technology" at the Los Angeles County

Museum of Art, which unleashed a furor around questions regarding corporate interest and artistic autonomy. As Jack Burnham wrote,

Critics saw it as a covenant between two capitalist organizations (e.g., the museum and each of its corporate benefactors), in collusion with or against all the artists involved. Even Tuchman in the catalogue intimated that most of the artists in the show would not have participated by 1971, the year [it] finally opened, primarily because much of the art world believed by then that there was or is a nefarious connection between advanced technology and the architects of late capitalism.

Collusion or subversion? This overly simplistic binary does not do justice to the complicated ways that artists in Los Angeles have historically negotiated their relationships with technology. As David Joselit has commented, "there is no longer a position outside capitalism in the United States, and under such conditions, facile revolutionary claims for art (not to mention television) are little more than posing."

It is important to note that many artists all over the world began to use video as a medium in the mid-1960s, in part due to the newly accessible Sony Portapak, a more affordable and mobile video camera that was used by the likes of Nam June Paik (who has been "canonized," as Martha Rosler comments, as the iconic father of video art). But the artists and collectives I examine were by and large not making straightforward art-video work; instead, they used already-existent television networks to publicize their events (ARIADNE), or jerry-rigged new kinds of recording devices (EZTV), or engineered elaborate satellite hook-ups (Electronic Café).

California itself is like a screen: it is site of projection and fantasy—both a dreamscape of utopian promise and a nightmare of social problems and apocalyptic disasters. But the artists discussed here reject the too-often-repeated negative caricature of Los Angeles as a "placeless" city, somewhat unmappable, or disorientingly decentered, by instead creating literal gathering places, pockets of collective activity, and loose networks of affinity. They also exploited the fissures and seams within the actually quite fractured and at times wildly unconsolidated media landscape, one that included upstart television channels, rogue videographers, and guerrilla electronic interventions. Makers like Labowitz-Starus and Lacy, the members of EZTV, and Galloway and Rabinowitz co-exist within the city's "heterotopology," as Edward W. Soja puts it, and, most importantly, actively contribute to its vibrancy.

II. ARIADNE

ARIADNE: A Social Art Project, organized by Lacy and Labowitz-Starus and active between 1978-1980, has been one of the most striking attempts by artists to turn the operations of mass media and broadcast television against itself for political purposes. ARIADNE was not a physical alternative space; rather, it was a conceptual network, a model or structure for strategizing and sharing resources, that grew out of collaborations between Lacy and Labowitz-Starus regarding violence against women. Both artists were committed to the feminist movement, and came to their collective work from slightly different perspectives. They met in 1977; Labowitz-Starus had just come back to the U.S. after studying with Joseph Beuys in Germany, and Lacy had been deeply involved in the Woman's Building. Both were invested in the feminist notion of collaboration as a way to share power and to overturn conventions of authorial ownership. Both were also concerned with damaging media representations of women, casually reproduced in every sphere of American culture, from album covers to advertisements.

In addition, they were searching for ways their artistic collaboration could conduct a thorough and feminist *media analysis*. They were inspired in part by the theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht, who urged artists to use technology in order to "change the apparatus over from distribution to communication." In addition, they looked to the protests of Greenpeace, which was founded in the early 1970s to protest nuclear testing, whaling, and other environmental issues using direct non-violent action. Greenpeace pioneered the activist use of popular media to make visible their campaigns, chartering boats that bore flags and colorful banners big enough to be legible to television cameras. The Greenpeace method of captivating the attention of the public through large-scale media campaigns—and potentially changing public opinions—challenged Lacy and Labowitz-Starus to think critically about not just rejecting mass media as fundamentally (and perhaps structurally) sexist, but using it to raise awareness about women's issues.

Both Labowitz-Starus and Lacy had utilized the media previously to the founding of ARIADNE: Lacy, in her work *Three Weeks in May*; Labowitz-Starus, in her *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* (a collaboration with Women Against Violence Against Women that urged a boycott to protest misogynistic record covers); and together, for *In Mourning and In Rage* (all from 1977). For *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy worked with many collaborators that included both artists and social service workers to produce a durational, multi-media performance that involved mapping rapes in the city of Los Angeles on a large mural in City Hall, as well as organizing over thirty public events such as lectures, sidewalk chalkings, self-defense workshops, ritual performances, readings, and rallies. This series—called a "public information campaign"—galvanized feminist

awareness about the under-reporting of rapes, as well as provided crucial information about services available to women who were survivors of abuse and violence.

In addition to the nearly month-long campaign of *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy and Labowitz-Starus were also interested in one-time, focused performances, or "media events." One such action, and the one that the pair is best-known for, was *In Mourning and In Rage*, a carefully choreographed rally held in front of Los Angeles City Hall in December 1977. *In Mourning* was staged in response to a particularly intense time of focus on violence against women – the month in which ten women in southern California were murdered by the "Hillside Strangler," which set off a media frenzy. In this piece, a motorcade of women followed a hearse from the Women's Building to the front steps of City Hall, where a news conference had been called. The cars had their lights on and displayed stickers that read: "Funeral" and "Stop Violence Against Women." When the hearse parked, nine women dressed in all-black outfits complete with tall hats that cloaked their faces and made them each seven feet tall, got out and stood in formation in front of the reporters.

A final woman, the tenth (the number of victims of the strangler) was dramatically dressed all in red. They each spoke about different forms of violence against women, and after each speech, she was wrapped in a blood-red scarf as women from the motorcade shouted: "In memory of our sisters, we fight back!" A large banner was unfurled behind the dignified, but also intimidating, row of large women. In response to the sensationalization of these crimes and the victim's lives, Lacy and Labowitz-Staruse offered a sobering response of mourning, anger, and also action (in the wake of this performance, politicians and rape crisis outreach organizations pledged to do more to prevent crimes against women).

This piece was conceived specifically to be seen on television. Its audience was, in fact, explicitly the televisual public, and every aspect of the work – the height of the women's hats, the stark black-and-red color scheme, the duration of the speeches, the size and graphic design of the banner – was calibrated to maximize its impact on the screen. It used the spectacle to critique and transform the spectacle. Such aesthetic considerations did their job and escalated the visual effectiveness of the performance: the work had extensive coverage on the local and state level. In other words, they realized that, within the television-saturated landscape, "the way to reach the broader audience in LA was certainly directly through the media," as Lacy put it.

In the process of working with both "public information campaigns" and singular "media events," Lacy and Labowitz-Starus found many like-minded women amongst activists, NGO workers, and local politicians, and were eager to not let those connections wither. They also wanted to offer their help and support to other women interested in creating events; it was out of

this urgent impulse that the umbrella organization ARIADNE was born. ARIADNE had no official membership, but consisted of reporters, activists, politicians, who came together in a coalition to share information, host workshops, and create dialogue around issues of violence against women, particularly regarding interventions and interruptions of media representation. As Lacy and Labowitz-Starus wrote in 1981:

Within popular culture we are constantly presented with images of women as victims. Along with feminist activists, women artists are exploring how these images affect our lives and how we can create alternatives. Trained to analyze the structure and manipulate the content of an image, artists can help to restructure our visual reality. Artists can demystify image-making and help women understand how media manipulates.... Our intentions with these performances have been to interrupt the consistent flow of media images and messages that perpetrate the myth of woman as victim with positive and active images of women.

Though it did not have any sources of independent funding or actual administration, ARIADNE also lent its name to help sponsor other projects, including works by the Feminist Studies Workshop and others. Consistent with its focus on using the media to change public perceptions, ARIADNE organized a screening of the 1979 movie *Hardcore* (directed by Paul Schrader) in order to challenge its depiction of the Los Angeles porn industry. The screening was attended by reporters, and ARIADNE, along with co-sponsor and sex worker activist group California Advocates of Trollopes, moderated a discussion to produce feminist analyses of a movie.

Though Lacy and Labowitz-Starus's *In Mourning and In Rage* has been discussed extensively within feminist art history, ARIADNE, the social art coalition that came out of it, is still poorly understood. In part this is because its sliding, somewhat unfixed authorship bucks against the fetish for sole ownership within art that still holds sway today, despite conceptual rejections of originality. In addition, the ongoing sexism of the art world continues to erase or overlook important precedents by women. But ARIADNE deserves to be properly positioned, not as a feminist art footnote, but as a major aspect of artists and activists who have used mass media tactically. These related activities not only include the protests of Greenpeace, but also the work of Chris Burden (who purchased advertising time on local networks to show his video work) and art groups such as Ant Farm, whose televised spectacle *Media Burn*, a performance at San Francisco's Cow Palace in 1975 which included a car being driven through a wall of fifty burning TVs, was lionized within the Getty's *California Video* show.

Media Burn was cast as an explicitly anti-popular culture. Before the car rams through the televisions, a John F. Kennedy look-alike reads a speech that includes the following statement, "Mass media monopolies control people by their control of information...I ask you, my fellow Americans, haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen?"

In ARIADNE-sponsored events such as the *Hardcore* screening and debate, however, Lacy and Labowitz-Starus do not set out to *destroy* media, but instead to understand, analyze, and recode conventional representations in film, television, and advertising, using the channels of mass media as an opportunity to raise feminist awareness, broadcast activist viewpoints, and suggest alternative meanings.

IIV. - IV. Removed

V. Media Activism, Media Art

In conclusion, these artists had complexly articulated, highly developed reasons for turning to television, close-circuit video, and satellite communications: they did not reject such media out of hand as simply "manipulative," as was a common refrain within the New Left during the 1960s, seeking instead to mobilize, or "hijack," the media for their own purposes. In the 1960s, many activists and artists singled out the rise of computers and other technology as systems of social control—recall the Berkeley students of the Free Speech Movement who complained that the university turned into them into little more than bureaucratic number. In reference to the IBM computer punch cards that tracked their enrollment and grades, students carrying protest signs that read: "Do not bend, fold, spindle, or mutilate." Todd Gitlin, one of the early presidents of the Students for a Democratic Society, has argued that the moment when SDS turned towards embracing television as a weapon—as indicated in their chant "the whole world is watching" from the 1968 Chicago protests—was the death of student activism, as they should have focused on grassroots, local campaigns rather than dilute their message for consumption by the media industry.

However, as media theorist Hans Magnus Enzenberger noted in 1974, this kind of skepticism does not serve the left, for it is crucial to *mobilize*, rather than ignore or castigate, the media. This has been the case for many media activists in the 1970s, including collectives like Videofreex and TVTV, who used the advent of cheap, consumer-oriented video cameras to "make their own television." The artists I have discussed mobilize mass media as well as emerging, cutting-edge technologies, seeking to utilize, interrupt, or transform the means of production themselves through their commitments to counter-hegemonic models of making. They also use technology in the service of their art, pushing the limits to come up with new forms of interaction, narrative forms, and aesthetics. From the feminist use of broadcast television and the deconstruction of Hollywood film, as in the case with the interventions of Lacy/Labowitz-Starus and ARIADNE, to the experimental satellite technology of Electronic Café, to the close-circuit feature length films of the members of EZTV, Los Angeles artists have been at the forefront of media interventions, collective organizing, and formal refigurations.

Today, though ARIADNE no longer exists, Lacy and Labowitz-Starus continue to occasionally collaborate, including their recent "The Performing Archive," which is not just a physical record of their work together, but also invites the active, performative re-reading of these materials by younger feminists. The ephemera, paper files, records, and boxes that

comprise "The Performing Archive" is located at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica. Indeed, 18th Street is a focal point for these alternative media practice, as it also houses the still-active EZTV and Electronic Café. EZTV moved to Santa Monica after the passing of Dorr, but continues to be a visionary force in the desktop video movement computing. It is run today by run by director Masucci and president Johnson. It has been one organizing principles of 18th Street to nurture experimental work, and it is today a site for exploration outside of the commercially-focused, art-institutional confines.

The historical look at five experimental southern Californian artists and collectives on view in *Collaboration Labs* interrogates why collective and alternative spaces still matter. The exhibitions also make an argument for the lasting significance of technologically-influenced art as a kind of political practice—from debates about censorship, access, and democratic participation on Youtube and across the internet. It is ever pertinent to reconsider how alternative artists using technology both within the public sphere and as a field of artistic practice. Artist's collaborations with media and technology grew out of and fed feminism, gay liberation, and the new left, and continue to be zones where politics and aesthetics are mutually defined.

Julia Bryan-Wilson is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (University of California Press, 2009).

Glenn Phillips, ed., *California Video: Artists and Histories* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2008).

Mitch Tuchman, "John Dorr's EZTV, or Movies While You Wait," *Los Angeles Reader* (April 23, 1982), p. 16; see also Tuchman, "An Interview with John Dorr," *LAICA Journal* (Summer 1981), p. 66.

The history of E.A.T. has been mostly focused on the New York branch, originally conceived in 1966 by engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer, and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman; the California activities are lesser-known. For more, see Klüver, J. Martin, Barbara Rose, eds., *Pavilion: Experiments in Art and Technology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972).

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Urban theorist Mike Davis has discussed how this vision of has been historically constituted and politically contested; see *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books 1992). See also his *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

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