

Chapter 2

The Coming of Age of Media as Art by Jim Hubbard

For artists working in media and for curators who regularly program their work, the funding of artistic expressions in media remains absolutely crucial to our culture. As John Hanhardt, senior curator of Film and Media Arts at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, asserts, “If one is not supporting film and the media arts, then one is not supporting the leading edge of transformation of our culture.”

Nevertheless, many funders cannot understand the need for funding media-based art. Inundated by hugely expensive and highly profitable Hollywood movies, bombarded by the inanities of commercial television, they are unaware of the urgent need to fund the wonderful artistic expressions using film, video and new media that find viewers in film showcases, museums and galleries. “They cannot figure out why and how a nonprofit mentality would even enter into the media equation. They can’t imagine that people need money, because they see it as a place where you can make millions,” explains Cynthia Gehrig, President of the Jerome Foundation.

At least since the 1920s, artists have been exploring various imaginative uses of film. Utilizing surrealistic techniques to explode narrative, painting directly on film, creating abstract animation, and revealing the physical and psychological underpinnings of film outside the language of Hollywood, artists have created an alternative art history. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the introduction of the PortaPak (the first portable and affordable video camera) video artists began to realize the possibilities of the medium outside the half-hour, commercial-interrupted norm of broadcast television. In the past decade, adventurous media artists have employed computers to make new images and to explore the possibility of interactivity in forging art forms that are utterly unlike anything known before.

These endeavors—video art, experimental film, innovative narrative films and new media art—deserve support because they create something original and thought-provoking. These art forms change our world, making it a more complex and exciting place. They allow us to see ourselves in an entirely new light. Joan Shigekawa of the Rockefeller Foundation, one of the world’s major funders of media art, elucidates: “Throughout the twentieth century, media has been one of the dominant creative expressions in American culture. Rather than why fund media—to the extent that we fund the creative community in the country—it would be, why *not* fund media?”

VIDEO ART: NAM JUNE PAIK

Nam June Paik has been at the leading edge of video art for almost 40 years. He is “a pioneer artist in transforming how media, video and television could be seen as a means for creative expression,” according to John Hanhardt, who curated the Paik retrospective

that took over the entire Guggenheim Museum in 2000. The exhibition was the perfect embodiment of Hanhardt's belief that "museums, if they are to maintain themselves as institutions fully engaged with the history and contemporary directions of our visual culture, need to embrace film and media. If they don't, then they will become only historical institutions."

Much of Paik's work involves elaborate installations and complex sculptural forms utilizing numerous monitors. The retrospective was underwritten by a number of foundations, including the Bohen Foundation, which commissioned two of the more spectacular new pieces. Merrill Lynch provided major funding.

Anita Contini, first vice president, senior director of Global Sponsorships, has the responsibility of connecting funding opportunities with the work Merrill Lynch is doing. Her work comes out of the marketing department and is "aligned to overall business and brand objectives." She saw the exhibition as an opportunity to associate Merrill Lynch "with technological innovation, particularly because Nam June Paik is one of the greatest originators and innovators of contemporary multimedia art." Beyond this, Merrill used the Paik retrospective as a chance to educate its employees about video art. They arranged visits to the museum, organized curatorial talks for employees and even brought Hanhardt in to speak to executives. Contini emphasized that "it's not so dissimilar to what museums do when they present educational programs about their exhibitions."

Furthermore, Merrill Lynch's support for the Paik show is seen in the larger context of supporting more traditional artistic endeavors. "Media is a very important art form," Contini stresses. "It shows us that technology has the capacity to enrich and enhance our view of the world around us. It is an important art form to support, as important as supporting any of the visual or performing arts."

Indeed, video art and installation using video have remade the visual arts in the last 40 years. Joan Shigekawa reminds us, "If you think about the journey traveled by video art from the late sixties until the eighties or nineties, it's pretty fast track to travel from 'what is it?' and 'I don't get it' to the selection of video artist Bill Viola to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1995."

While no one doubts the importance of foundations supporting exhibitions, it is crucial that more foundations fund the creation of new work. Many foundations remain disinclined to fund individuals under the mistaken belief that the IRS imposes onerous conditions on such grantmaking. Foundations are required to obtain approval from the IRS before starting individual grantmaking programs. This is to prevent conflicts of interest that occurred in the past. There are many ways that foundations can get approval to make individual grants and, according to Cynthia Gehrig of the Jerome Foundation, "my strong feeling is that it is no more complicated than any other grantmaking process. In practice, ours has been very simple to administer, and we've had very, very few problems with it—no more than we've had in our general grantmaking program."

Even if foundations decide not to fund individuals, they can still do it indirectly. They can establish re-grant programs, or they can fund organizations with the understanding

that they will hire individual artists. Gehrig states, “I think the key thing for foundations that don’t fund individuals is to realize that there are nonprofit media organizations that can accept money for programs that do benefit individual makers: regional media centers, state film boards and video activist groups. There’s a whole variety of nonprofit media organizations that we need to help to become more competitive applicants for grantmaking funds.”

EXPERIMENTAL FILM: PEGGY AHWESH

Peggy Ahwesh has been making experimental films for more than 20 years. Her work has been shown at such places as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, The Cinematheque in San Francisco and the Rotterdam Film Festival. She started out making exquisite, idiosyncratic, personal works, often in self-processed Super-8 film, that revealed startling psychological and social truths about ordinary people. She has also made work in 16mm film and video. “I worked for many, many years...applying for grants and not getting them,” she says. After more than a decade of showing her uncompromising work, she received her first grant from the Jerome Foundation. “It was a huge boost to my ego, to my sense of belonging to a community of artistic workers.” As a consequence of the grant, her work became even freer: “I was always very frugal, but I allowed myself to do some experimentation because I had more money.”

The Jerome Foundation funds “emerging” mediamakers, which it defines as professional-level artists, early to late career, whose work is not yet substantially recognized by their peers. The directors of the foundation chose this strategy because they “always try to find a niche in the arts funding environment in which a small foundation like Jerome can make a difference.” Furthermore, Gehrig says, “It’s been a good niche for us. Overwhelming response has been for us to continue with that focus.” In addition, Jerome provides underwriting for the Museum of Modern Art to purchase a number of works funded by the foundation each year.

Ahwesh echoes many experimental filmmakers when she says, “I think the Jerome Foundation is a miracle and has kept us afloat...during the culture wars, people abandoned experimental film and I think that was really a tragedy. So the Jerome Foundation to me is really important.” As filmmaker Toni Dove explains, this commitment is doubly important because, “While the explosion of independent film has in many ways been good for smaller films, it has also put more emphasis on the commercial film and contributed to reducing the support for experimental work.”

NARRATIVE FILM: STEPHEN WINTER

While there may be an explosion of feature-length narrative filmmaking, not all of it will find funding from investors or studios. Stephen Winter is a young filmmaker whose work represents the complexity of funding narrative work outside the mainstream. His first feature was *Chocolate Babies* (1996), a comedic fantasy about a harsh underworld where raging HIV positive African American and Asian gay outcasts become radical AIDS activists kidnapping anti-gay politicians. Winter made the 80-minute film for about \$100,000 using loans and credit cards. Frameline, the film’s distributor, provided

finishing funds and opened the film, mostly in West Coast cities. Winter is still paying off the credit cards.

In 1997, Winter started work on *Sylvester, Mighty Real*, a film about Sylvester, the disco star, who in the 1970s was “out, flamboyant, black, gay, fabulous and extremely talented.” Winter says the film will depict “a spiritual journey from childhood to confronting AIDS in the 1980s.”

Sylvester is budgeted at \$3.5 million. While Winter and his producer are actively seeking investors, they turned to foundations for development money. “This is a musical about a very particular time period, a chapter in gay culture that arguably hasn’t been portrayed adequately in film before. It’s about a unique black artist, and films about black artists are few and far between,” argues Winter.

In 1998, Winter received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. What did the grant give him? “Two years. It got me to write the screenplay. I was able to go to Los Angeles and San Francisco, where Sylvester was born. I talked to surviving relatives and friends, did a lot of research and took time to do the first couple of drafts. The grant also helped legitimize the film.”

The Rockefeller Foundation is very interested in expanding the boundaries of what kinds of stories are told in cinema. It has funded such groundbreaking films as Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie’s *Smoke Signals*, the first feature film written, directed and acted by Native Americans and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, a poetic evocation of a time of transition in the culture of the Gullah, descendants of slaves living on the islands off South Carolina and Georgia.

Although these films achieved a certain commercial success, that is not so important as artistic success. Joan Shigekawa explains it this way: “Foundations ask a different set of questions than for-profit investors in a film. We ask if the production will reach its intended audience. We hope that the filmmaker does not have to go in to credit card debt to finance his vision. We hope the filmmaker will be able to have health insurance. We hope that as many people see it as possible, but our net return on a supported project is that the audience engage the issue and not how much money was made on ticket sales. That’s why we’re a grantmaking institution and not a cinema production company.”

NEW MEDIA: TONI DOVE

Toni Dove is exploring a whole other world of narrative filmmaking. She began her career as a painter, moved on to installation, incorporating multiple slide projectors, and has been utilizing computer-based interactivity in her work for nearly a decade. She conceives of her most recent work as “movies that come off the wall and into the room with you.”

Currently, Dove is working on a piece called *Spectropia: A Ghost Story on the Infinite Deferral of Desire*, “a cross between a theater piece, a movie and a video game. I think of it as a movie instrument that two players play for an audience.” *Spectropia* has been supported by numerous funding agencies including the Rockefeller Foundation, the

Greenwall Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. The Daniel Langlois Foundation also provided major funding.

The Daniel Langlois Foundation, based in Montreal, has been an important funder of new media since its founding in 1997. Jean Gagnon, the president of the foundation, believes that it is incumbent on all foundations to support leading edge work. “I think that given the fact that new technologies are becoming increasingly dominant in society as a whole,” he says, “it is crucial for private foundations or those involved in philanthropy to be able to grasp that phenomenon.”

Funding this kind of vanguard work can be very difficult for foundations, but John Hanhardt, for one, believes that it is vitally important for foundations to support new media. This new world of possibilities “should not be available only to a few. It should represent a variety of cultural points of view and individual points of view. Here again, foundations can provide enriching leadership. Informed risk should take place in terms of supporting freedom of expression and possibility.”

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is crucial that all foundations that are interested in furthering and nourishing a stimulating, lively artistic culture fund artistic modes of expression in media. According to John Hanhardt, “The sustained confident attention to these media art forms is absolutely essential, and it should come from foundations, both the large ones and well-known as well as newer ones.”

Toni Dove concludes: “I think it’s incredibly important at this particular point in time especially for artists to be viewed as a cultural resource for research and that they be allowed to develop and contribute to existing media syntax. I don’t think we want game developers to be completely in control of the language. There should be a broader spectrum and one that doesn’t only have a profit goal. Artists are producing a very interesting experimental language in new technologies that could be very useful to the culture at large.”

Jim Hubbard has been making experimental films for over 25 years and has worked on the preservation of film and video for the past ten.