

Douglas Davis and Open Circuits

In 1969, art writer Douglas Davis left his hometown Washington D.C. for New York.¹ He visited *TV as a Creative Medium* at the Howard Wise Gallery, an exhibition he was prone to favor, but which nonetheless captivated him more powerfully than anticipated. Davis recognized that he too was the progeny of television, going back to his early fascination with Alitha Agee, who hosted an after-school news show in Washington in the mid-50s. (Aware of the intimacy of TV, Agee lip synched to popular records and blew kisses though the camera; Davis blew more than a few back.) Davis was also an artist. He organized “happenings” in the Capital District, which occurred intermittently from 1967 through 1971. His modus operandi was to congregate a sizable group of people at an unusual yet immediate and focused event, getting them to interact freely, surmount natural inhibitions and realize a social creative potential. Television might intensify this experience since people habitually dropped their guard in the presence of TV sets.

In June 1971, Davis organized his final climactic happening in Washington, *Electronic Hokkadim*, produced with the Corcoran Gallery and CBS affiliate WTOP-TV. Poster manifestos proclaimed, in appropriately streaming syntax, “the world’s first participative telecast live while it is happening the viewers create what they watch and hear at home.” The day-long event culminated in a half-hour evening broadcast involving many pioneering video artists, including Nam June Paik, Eric Siegel, Bruce Nauman and Peter Campus, as well as the artist collectives Videofreex, Raindance Corporation, Global Village and People’s Video Theater. Howard Wise, now a familiar colleague, delivered a keynote statement that “the artist’s role in society is that of a pre-sensor of things to come.” Although *Electronic Hokkadim* had mixed results, failing to live up to its claims as a “two-way broadcast,” it tapped into yet unexplored capacities for television.

Around this time, John Hightower, newly appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art (he previously shaped the very progressive New York State Council on the Arts) became determined to hedge against MoMA's reputation for stodginess. A forward showing of artists' television could rattle the moribund institution. Hightower spoke to Davis about reconvening the spirit rallied at *Electronic Hokkadim* – of artists, filmmakers, critics, curators, administrators and others attuned to the video medium (which still eluded aesthetic categorization and art-world acceptance). First intended to be spearheaded by an exhibition that met resistance from MoMA's "stodgy" curators, it quickly became obvious that the pressing need was for a wide-open forum on artists and television.

Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television was an anomaly at MoMA, as it was organized from outside the museum. The three co-directors were Davis, Gerald O'Grady (a professor at SUNY, Buffalo where he headed the Center for Media Study) and Fred Barzyk (of WGBH in Boston, founder of the New Television Workshop there).² This well-credentialed triad of art critic, academic, and public television producer required a museum liaison. Willard Van Dyke, the eminent, elder curator of the Film Department, turned out to be a staunch inside ally. Within the short period of winning approval, Hightower had been replaced as director by Richard Oldenburg. Oldenburg maintained support for *Open Circuits*, with the stipulation that it must be self-financing. The decision to organize a three-day conference instead of an exhibition called on different fund-raising strategies than usually adopted by MoMA. Howard Wise oversaw this initiative, for which his new not-for-profit organization, Electronic Arts Intermix, seemed tailor made. He oversaw successful grant applications to the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and, over two consecutive years, the New York Council on the Arts, all the while keeping the directors on best

behavior and shepherding modest funds advantageously around an over-ambitious budget.

The “wish list” of delegates was heady indeed, including media titans David Sarnoff (founder of RCA and its offshoot NBC) and his rival William Paley (founder of CBS); gurus of the intelligentsia such as Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Lewis Mumford, John Cage and Herbert Marcuse; and a host of young artists, curators and other architects of the video generation. While none of the aforementioned illuminati attended, the last group predictably filled out the final invitation list drawn up by Davis (who selected practitioners) and O’Grady (responsible for philosophical and aesthetic content), which numbered 40-plus in the end. The remarkable roll call included Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Gregory Battcock, Stephen Beck, Peter Campus, Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Hollis Frampton, Frank Gillette, Wolf Herzogenrath, James Harithas, Joan Jonas, Allan Kaprow, Shigeko Kubota, Edward Lucie-Smith, Nam June Paik, Robert Pincus-Witten, David Ross, Richard Serra, Michael Snow, Gerd Stern, Stan Vanderbeek, Elayne Varian, Woody Vasulka, and many, many others, from the United States, Europe, Japan and South America.

After more than two years of planning, *Open Circuits* was held on January 23–25, 1974. The atmosphere was electric and highly expectant. (Even *TV Guide*, the mainstream tract of TV populism, more than a year in advance mentioned that something exciting was in the works at MoMA. ³⁾ The discussions have been fondly recollected by those in attendance as cantankerous and defiant, as “obscene” television broke into the sacred space of the museum. Within the conference, there was plenty of heated proselytizing to one another. Video art was at a volatile juncture – its future about to splay into several directions. Its present was stunning and various enough. Nam June Paik’s unforgettable presentation simply consisted of a preview of his breakthrough masterpiece, *Global Groove*. And each day, between panels and papers, thematic

viewing sessions were dedicated to anthologies of new video works, coordinated by Barzyk. Thus, the conference retained a vestige of its originally-planned exhibition.

The richness of *Open Circuits* can be gleaned from a little-known anthology of writings – prepared for, presented at or responding to the conference – called *The New Television: A Private/Public Art*, edited by Davis and Allison Simmons and published in 1977 by the MIT Press, under the auspices of Electronic Arts Intermix. Testimony to the successful aftermath of *Open Circuits* was the fact that the book included an entry from Barbara London, the new Curator of Video Art at MoMA – no such position existed before the conference! By the end of the 1970s, most every major modern and contemporary art museum brought video into its portfolio, public television made terrific strides in artist-produced programming and video distribution services, such as EAI, were flourishing. A community had been galvanized.

Ben Portis, August 2001

¹ In Washington, Davis was the staff critic for *The New Observer* and a contributor to *Art in America*, which dedicated the better part of its Jan./Feb. 1968 issue to his overview on “Art & Technology.” In New York he mainly worked at *Newsweek*. Within a year of his arrival, Davis took over the arts desk there, a position he held from 1970–76. He continued to contribute intermittently to *Art in America* as well as *Arts*, *Artforum*, and *Radical Software*.

² Early in the planning process, O’Grady came in as a replacement for Russell Connor.

³ “New York’s Museum of Modern Art ... is deep in the throes of an ambitious international exposition of video-tape works to open in 1974.” Neil Hickey, “Notes from the Video Underground,” *TV Guide*, vol. 20, no. 50, issue 528, (Dec. 19, 1972): 8.