Skip Blumberg:
Culture Beat
(micro-retrospective)

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Video Out Distribution
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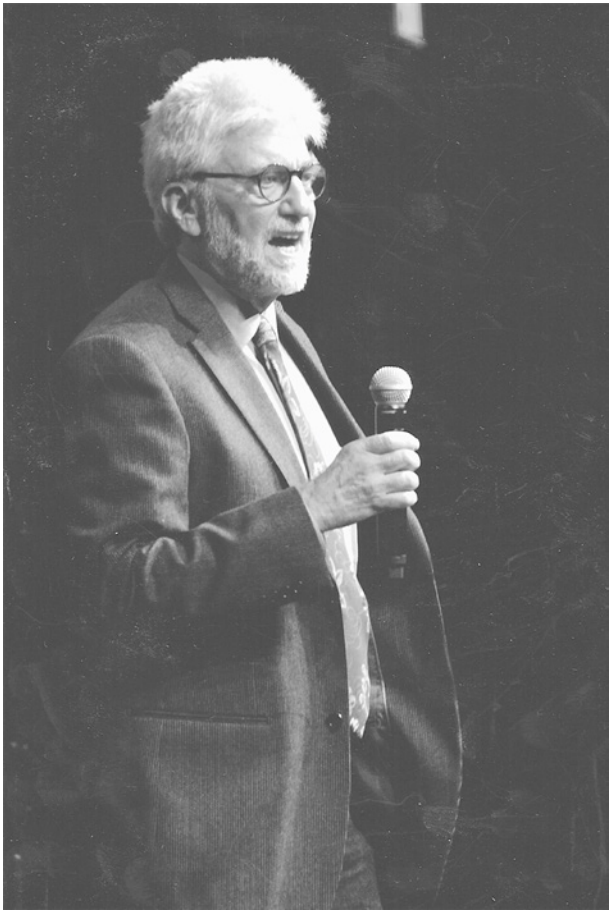
Video Out Distribution/VIVO Media Arts Centre with the support of DIM Cinema/The Cinematheque is proud to present *Skip Blumberg: Culture Beat*, Wednesday July 10th, 2019, a 107-minute program at The Cinematheque, followed by a live Skype Q&A with the artist.

One of the original camera-journalist-turned-independent-videomakers, Skip Blumberg's practice is situated between discourses of art, journalism, activism, and guerilla filmmaking. He is a founding member of the Videofreex, a pioneering New York video collective for countercultural movements from 1969 to 1978. *Culture Beat* is just a small sampling of Skip's prolific output, from his 'on-the-ground' participatory style to his travelogue footage around the world as an artist, producer, and correspondent.

What comes across in every video is a strong sense of narrative flow, pacing, and suspense. Working in a broadcasting-for-TV mindset, Skip's works combine vérité style shooting with a storyteller's vision to draw the audience in, whether it is a 5-day long Olympic event, or an in-your-face critique of the medium of television itself. His works are always in celebration of the up and the offbeat, capturing optimism of the human spirit, in a range of communities, cultures, and contexts.

2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the Videofreex, and Video Out's Casey Wei interviewed Skip over email to reflect on his work, legacy, and evolution.

Skip Blumberg is a producer, filmmaker, camera journalist, artist, and video pioneer, has made hundreds of productions so far over his 50-year career: on the web with 3,000,000+ views, including on www.SkipBlumberg.com and MoreArtistsMovies.com; in permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and other U.S. and European museums; on Showtime, PBS, Disney Channel, National Geographic TV, and TV channels internationally; and appearing in the documentary features, *Here Come the Videofreex* (2016), *TVTV: Video Revolutionaries* (2018), and *Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review* (2019). Blumberg is recipient of three NYC Emmys, Ohio State University Journalism Award, Guggenheim Fellowship, Winter Olympics Artist-in-residence, Paley Media Center's "TV Critics' Favorite TV Shows of All Time," and many other honours. To view Skip's newest movies, please visit SkipsNewMovies.vhx.tv.



Skip Blumberg speaking at My Hero Project: Ron Kovic Celebration, 2013. Photo courtesy of MyHero.com.

1. Program



***What's That For? Videofreex*, 1971 / 2017, 2min**
An introduction to how it began: a 2017 infomercial edit of Videofreex Parry Teasdale's 1971 6-minute work, featuring Skip lugging up a camera-chest up the 5-storey staircase of the Videofreex's original Prince Street studio, where public screenings were held every Friday night. Originally screened as a part of a 64-minute program of 44 shorts.



***Pick Up Your Feet: the Double Dutch Show*, 1981, 28min**
This tape chronicles highlights from the 8th annual World Invitation Double Dutch Jump Rope Championship held at Lincoln Centre. Exciting on-the-ground coverage of a youth competition that is as nail-biting as it is heartwarming. *Pick Up Your Feet* is featured in the Museum of Broadcasting's screening series "TV Critics' Favorite Shows of All Time."



***Flying Morning Glory (on fire)*, 1985, 4min**
An early precursor to the food-travelogue genre in Phitsanulok, Thailand, Blumberg captures a virtuoso sidewalk chef's cuisine-art performance.



***World Eskimo-Indian Olympics*, 1983, 27min**
A document of the 21st World Eskimo-Indian Olympics held in Alaska, showing such events as the one-foot and two-foot high kick, the knuckle hop, the blanket toss and the four-man carry. The WEIO is currently in its 58th year, and is also registered with the State of Alaska as the World Exhibition of Indigenous Olympics after President Obama's removal of the term 'Eskimo' from official government usage. More information on their name and history is available on their website, http://weio.org.



***Seoul Brother Report*, 1986, 4min**
This short, dynamic work was Blumberg's contribution to artist Nam June Paik's 1986 live satellite extravaganza, *Bye Bye Kipling*, which linked New York, Tokyo, and Seoul. Reporting from Seoul, Blumberg celebrates the diverse forms of performance found in everyday Korean life, from street games to political avant-garde performance.



***Chinese Noodle Making: Backwards & Forwards*, 1990, 5min**
Shot during his time in Vancouver for a Video Inn production residency in 1989, *Chinese Noodle Making* is a playful work on the art of making hand-stretched noodles. The tape was shot at Yang's Restaurant, starring its proprietor and chef, David Yang.



***Todd Alcott: Television*, 1990, 2min**
A satirical TV-spot of the forces behind the screen, demanding full engagement from the viewer at all times. Todd Alcott (screenwriter, playwright, actor, director), and Blumberg collaborated in the early 90s on the series, "Dangerous Ideas," and "The 90s."



***On Dream Street...*, 2012, 17min**
A collaborative document made with the cast of *On Dream Street,* all with developmental disabilities, as they create, rehearse and perform to an enthusiastic audience at NYC's Central Park Bandshell. Cast, staff, and friends are interviewed in this behind-the-scenes look of a model program.



***Growing Up Bonobo*, 2014, 17min**
Co-produced with Tom Weinberg
An upbeat short about an endangered species, and the inspired photographer who loves them. Blumberg stakes out the Jacksonville Zoo, observing the promiscuous primates, ogling zoo-goers, and dedicated staff interacting in public.



***Instagram Movie*, July 10, 2019, 1min**
Shot, produced, and exported today, a social-media to cinema experience speaking to the possibilities and limitations of our digital age. Skip made the movie in Instagram, exported and emailed to The Cinematheque, where the projectionist, Al, made a last-minute DCP file for its world premiere this evening.

2. Interview

Video Out in conversation with Skip Blumberg
Fall, 2018

VO: In 2019, it'll be the 50-year anniversary of Videofreex. In a conversation with Melanie La Rosa in 2012, you spoke of how important the history video has been to the history of filmmaking, the two being very separate up until recently, now with digital filmmaking being the standard. When we screened your work *Instant TV/Gender Politics* (1992) this past September as a part of VIVO's 45th-anniversary program, a friend remarked how cinematic your camerawork was, which was a surprising statement to me, as I see your camerawork as very specific to video, or journalism, speaking to an immediateness and closeness with your subjects. Their comment reflects that unification of video and film. How you feel about that unification?

SB: Tru' dat. Video and film were separate mediums for about forty years—from 1965 to 2005. Now a good selection of our work is restored, digitized, edited for 21st-century viewers, and on-demand at VideofreexPirateTV.vhx.tv. The former stalwarts of moving image production are now styles that can be simulated with techniques, special effects and filters. Ironically to me as an early videomaker and camcorder enthusiast, the electronic digital medium that I use is for what's called 'filmmaking' and I am called a 'filmmaker.' Formerly resistant, I have accepted that both are commonly used, plus 'camera journalist' and many other digital mediamakers' monikers.

Whatever I'm called, I still use a very basic, high-quality professional camcorder and my iPhone for recording, and Final Cut Pro for editing. My filming and editing styles derive from film, from video, from all other audio-visual media, and from whatever is new in the gear. When the gear was simpler (and there were fewer choices) it was easier to learn and to operate. There were fewer opportunities for errors, and the tech obstacles were often easily diagnosed and fixed. Some of what is new is incredibly powerful—like color correction and re-scaling; some

a humongous pain in the ass—like passwords and software that gets more complicated, and then is incompatible with your other software, etc., etc. The technology treadmill creates deprovements as much as improvements. And the large picture is that we are only beginning to understand the ramifications of our habitual personal behavior determined by complex digital 'systems,' which have remarkable intelligence and awareness as well as profound stupidity and ignorance. We are at the bug-ridden beginning of technological singularity where at this point the system works great unless it doesn't.

KC: The Videofreex 50th-anniversary party will be held at the same house, Maple Tree Farm, where you all lived in from 1971 to 1978. What was the old house like? What is it now?

SB: Maple Tree Farm, owned then by the Ginsbergs who lived down the road and were our friends, was a boarding house before we moved in Spring, 1971. The big house had 17 bedrooms with 27 rooms all together. It rented for $400/month (the rent went up to $450/mth during our seven years there).[1] I have very warm feelings about MTF, which was a place, but far more than simply a physical space. The rambling building was our home, workplace, media center, pirate TV station, community hangout, a great party house, and a hideout (one of the reasons we left NYC was because our Prince Street studio was getting too hectic with the parade of radical politics, alternate culture, avant-garde performance, etc. passing through). In a way it was an achievement of a childhood fantasy—a friend's clubhouse with no adults around. We celebrated personal, group, and community holidays and events together—including Mary Curtis' wedding, and Parry and Carol's Sarah Teasdale born into the household. I met my wife of 40 years, Jane Aaron, when she moved into the attached apartment next door. It was where I learned how to service a car, to garden, and to help care for the baby then toddler; the home of our dogs Mushroom and Lucky, the three (or were there four?) cats, and David Cort's parrot, Oberon. It was an active place and a lot happened in and around that house. The house kept us together and facilitated all of that, which in sum gave each of us more

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[1] Please see https://videofreexsite.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/aboutmtf.pdf for complete list of rooms, photos and history.



Freshly painted sign, designed by Davidson Gigliotti, locating the Videofreex at their Lanesville, NY farmhouse, August, 1971.

power and accomplishment than if we were on our own. [2]

Returning to Maple Tree Farm for 10 days in summer 2019 will be a trip. The big house has been renovated and upscaled to a fairly luxurious and sustainable AirBnB called 'Breathe Inn at Maple Tree Farm,' with a salt water swimming pool, a yoga studio, master bedroom suites, atrium ceiling in the living room, restaurant-quality bar-b-q, and many other amenities. David and Patty, the new owners, have become our friends, and more than that have embraced us, with a strategy for spinning the image and decorating the house that includes its history, with the Videofreex years featured in blown up photos and a scrapbook.

In addition to gathering as a reunion of the original members, our families (including grandchildren), and early video colleagues, there will be a formal two-day 'convening' conference called 'Participatory Media: Roots and Branches' that will be recorded and reported, as well as two live radio shows "Videofreex Dance Party for Change" and "The Videofreex/Woodstock Festival 50th Anniversary Radio Show (with pictures)" on WGXC 90.7-FM and the web on WGXC.org.

[2] The feature doc *Here Come the Videofreex* (2016), made by Jon Nealon and Jenny Raskin, tells more of the story.

We'll also have outdoor screenings of documentaries that we and our friends are in, including *Here Come the Videofreex* (2016), *TVTV: Video Revolutionaries* (2018), *The People's Woodstock* (2019), and *Rolling Thunder Review* (2019).

It portends to be a grand fête celebrating the past, looking forward to our future, and the main emphasis on enjoying the moment, with group hikes through the mountain trails, bbqs, and family independence, with lots for us and our guests to do in the remote valley in the heart of the Catskill Mountains.

KC: How did this group of "struggling crazies," as New Yorker magazine called the Videofreex in 1970, stay living and working together for a substantial amount of time? Is Videofreex operating today as a group?

SB: We were an early start-up and MTF was a prescient incubator of early technology users. We operated administratively by consensus as a collective, and emotionally much like a family. There was no HR in this start-up. I think the reasons we stayed together for almost a decade were many… each of us was by and large personally dedicated to being very productive; we had separate skill sets that helped each other and also allowed independent domains with no supervisors; we each contributed to the whole group's smooth functioning in addition to our own and collaborative projects; we were in accord on a strategy of positive activism as well as protest; and we all had an anti-establishment show-biz and performative approach to our productions.

We are actively in touch with each other, especially during this 50th anniversary year, despite the fact that we are spread across the continent. We have continued the group formally in the 21st-century as the Videofreex Partnership, with me as admin/spokesperson, Freex partners Nancy Cain and Davidson Gigliotti as consiglieres, and Chuck Kennedy's daughter Rhea is the webmaster of www.Videofreex.com. We facilitate Videofreex exhibitions, distribution, events and web presence. We aim to establish a relevant, historic website, as a portal to the Videofreex movie archive that documents a unique era, which are both robust enough to last past our own lifetimes.

KC: How did you get involved with VIVO?

SB: In the beginning of the 'video revolution' towards the end of the 20th-century, new indy videomakers and groups got in touch with the Videofreex directly as they discovered the new medium. With an international but small community (that had no internet and even long distance phone calling was expensive for poor indy filmmakers), we'd stay in touch through *Radical Software*, our community's publication that came out regularly. So we knew about VIVO from its founding as the Video Inn media center and Video Out distribution catalog.

I really got to know VIVO, Vancouver, and my friends there with a week-plus residency at Video Inn in the 1980s. I lived in Chinatown, producing *Chinese Noodle Making: Backwards and Forwards*, which is just that, with a terrific crew that included Paul Wong (who appears on screen with his sister at the end eating the noodles we recorded making and cooking).

KC: The counter-culture spirit of the 60s (which you say lasted well into the 70s) that comes across in the medium of video and its message, got lost along the way for a long while I feel. Probably through a combination of 80s conservatism, corporations branding the aesthetics of revolution and rebellion, the internet, etc. But it is a potent time right now, with a lot of young people mobilizing and fighting for what they believe in. They're most definitely documenting everything as evidence; do you have any advice or guidance for them?

SB: The political and social change we desire is an unending process. It is a marathon not a sprint. Burning out individually and as groups before we attain our biggest reachable goals is always something to avoid. The generation coming of age now is dubious about the world they are inheriting. There is an innate skepticism, but I have seen that staying chill is a priority for them. However, with so much web stimulation and input, it's important to be selective in spending time on the important stuff, and keeping everything together, aimed directly towards the most substantial achievements. And certainly avoiding the internecine politically-narrow dissension that so often plagues progressives.



Skip with David Yang and Paul Wong, on the set of *Chinese Noodle Making: Backwards and Forwards*, made during his Video Inn residency in the Fall of 1989. Photo courtesy of the Crista Dahl Media Library and Archive.

KC: What strikes me the most about your videos is how easily you're able to talk to people.

SB: The ease in talking to people comes from inside. My innate curiosity and my appreciation of individuality fuel my ability to talk to people. Having a camera provides a reason to meet anyone I'm interested in, and that purpose overcomes any shyness. The ease also builds from technical practice—learning the gear so well that you can keep your attention on the person you are talking to, which is key, and not be distracted by the requirements of production. This allows a camera journalist single-person-crew to have a full, direct experience of the people in front of the camera, interacting in a human way that's very close to a normal conversation. Developing ESP is also advantageous. ESP is an instinct more than a skill, but facilitated by sensitivity to vocal qualities, facial expression, and body language... the cues used in normal conversation to read a person, which can reveal their inner thoughts, feelings and actions before they happen.



Skip at Maple Tree Farms, 2019. Photo by Bart Friedman.

KC: What are you working on currently?

SB: With a team I recently completed www.MoreArtistsMovies.com, a network of a dozen streaming and informational websites with more than 200 posted free and pay-per-view movies by indy experimental filmmakers Jane Aaron, Videofreex, Mayday Video and myself. I make and post movies with my iPhone on Instagram and www.SkipsNewMovies.com… most recently *Cycling on the Williamsburg Bridge when a train comes along…* which is 38 seconds long.[3] I'm also developing new long form documentary and experimental movie production projects. We'll see. I'm at a pivot point in my life.

[3] Free preview: https://vimeo.com/300390660


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