Shirley Clarke: an interview

Shirley Clarke: well-known dancer and filmmaker, started working with video about ten years ago. She now operates the Teppee, a Video Theatre Workshop partially funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and located in the tower of her loft on top of Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel. She is currently developing a video troupe to take the video circus around the country. 

Shirley was interviewed by Antoich's VideoBall. The questions and responses which follow are excerpts from that interview.

VIDEOBALL: At this point, it's been about two years since I started working with 1/2-inch video equipment, and though I have progressed nicely in basic cable, dirty recording heads and signal-to-noise ratio, somehow I have the feeling that if I had chosen to go into the business of selling 1/2-inch equipment, by now I might at least have been rich...I guess I read the signs wrong or the wrong signs. Five years ago (the speed of life, etc., being what it is), I figured that by now we'd have equipment that for starts didn't fall apart the minute its three-month warranty ran out - and that cable TV would be a fact. In a majority of the major cities across the country - why, we might even have videogadgets (a kind of mini-two-way cable)! Indeed, I thought the next New Era of Communications would be in '80 - but after a careful checkup in several encyclopedias, it looks like '85 is the earliest date when we might expect...So what do we little people do who are not involved in sending pictures to the moon, who don't have access to industry, who are not the heads of scientific departments, and who don't even want to work for the next great Educational Network? Are we supposed to do? Those of us who spend all day every day and night pushing video things that we enjoy watching/working in 1/2-inch video as a profession - a career - a way of life. What do we do - while we're waiting for future times to arrive?

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VIDEOBALL: Why should we be doing anything different than we're doing now? We are all exploring and learning at this stage.

Shirley: Of course, that's true. And it is working the best we can for the people who are interested in cinema verite video portraits - interested in Second is equipment. Nobody questions the fact that equipment needs to be improved - and we should continue writing letters to the manufacturers and get all our friends to do so also. And by compelling to our distributors, they in turn will exert pressure particularly on Panasonic and Sony. But what has been the most helpful to me has been the information I've gotten from other videomakers, so I think we should find ways to exchange information - and use whatever. Like in the back section of Radical Software, we could use lots more information sheets like Dumping Ground; I think we'll use a week or two longer, may any of us becomes in finding ways to adapt or improve any equipment, we should pass the word around. Here it is: An unusual phenomenon that rarely if ever happens on the art scene, namely a Video artist, Nam June Paik, arranged to give us access to his synthesizer via the TV Lab at Channel 13. This is very generous and he deserves many thanks from all.

Third, third, the cassette. The cassette could be an important outlet for all of those in Video who are making electronic video films, and for all of the videomakers who are doing personal video biographies or autobiographies. I see the cassette attracting customers in much the same way that we now buy books and records. With this in mind, I think we should start now to form a number of small video publishing companies. We should not allow the cassette hardware manufacturers to function also as our distributors as they are doing now - they're busy stockpiling for the future and not paying any money, just future rights - and they are making deals with the cassettes one by one and obviously rippening them off at a time.

VIDEOBALL: In terms of the distributor, do you think some place should be centralized, that Radical Software doing a one-stop where much group itself? I see the cassette developing a library of tapes, and everyone is welcome to join. They offer many different kinds of services - maybe they represent the format suitable for an Alternate Media Publishing House; but if we want some kind of income, we will need some sort of publishing or videomakers like the Filmmakers' Co-op. The advantage of many different groups is that they can pay attention to their own interests. Their first concern is to get the heads of their special images and needs, and then all of them could form an organization, a body that could protect and check up on all our deals with the equipment companies and distributors - in unity there is...etc. In other words, we need some alternate media business people.

Fourth is tours and travel. The most obvious way for many of us to be able to find out what's happening around the country and to learn the 'hey how? For many other is face to face - so for the time being, we should find ways to tour and travel and get paid for it! I've been working on a plan for a troop to go on tour after spending a three-month period of training together. We will travel on a three-month tour in the large community that is already into Video or has access to Video equipment. We plan to rent a station wagon carry some special equipment, prints, costume, lights, etc. - there will be about five of us in the troupe, now, for starts we'll ask the communities to pay us $100 apiece. In each location, we plan to spend several days as guests of the community and we will invite anyone who has any interest or background in electronic video or film or theatre or become temporary members of our troupe. We hope to find ways to use their ideas together with ours, and all of us will do a show for the community - we will have developed a video format and methods to do this during our rehearsal period. Also, we hope to discover our own ways to do things. We'll pick up the easiest methods of working with video and when we travel, we hope we'll have been in some new places - and on their own will continue to work in this node. We plan to start these tours very soon, so I hope you'll invite us down your way.

Now point five is cable access. I guess we all have our own ideas about the kinds of social-cultural-political changes that would take place if we, the people, were to