

VIDEO DAYS

by Nancy Cain (Videofreex, Camnet, writer, photographer)

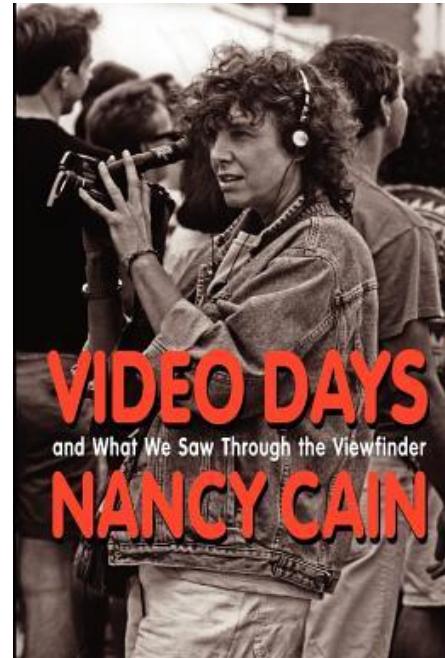
Afterword: Psychic in Retrospect

Shortly before Video Days was first published in 2011, I was feeling quite optimistic about the new citizen journalists and the future of alternative media. This good feeling began on September 17, 2011, in Zuccotti Park, located in New York City's Financial District when Occupy Wall Street, and the live global revolution, arrived streaming on my devices. Occupy, the ninety-nine percenters, were ultimately protesting in a thousand cities demanding economic and humanitarian justice for all.

They started with Wall Street (they wanted them indicted), and grew to occupy everywhere and anywhere corruption and evil needed exposing. I found them suddenly and after all the years of working to free the media, when the tipping point arrived, I felt it viscerally. It was exhilarating because only a few weeks earlier, I had resigned myself to the fact that our good old video media revolution was history, and that it had been replaced by the new social media revolution and I was thinking that was going to have to be enough. I would have to be content with a benign Facebook/YouTube sort of world filled with brave single-mothers-by-choice, dogs who play Beethoven, and all those millions of kids in Asia. “Go on,” I wanted to urge them, “Broadcast Yourself.”

“You know,” I wanted to tell them, “this was my idea in the first place. It was my plan exactly.”

“Show me what democracy looks like,” the Occupiers would chant. “This is what democracy looks like,” the response. I loved them. The shooting style was familiar. Intelligent. Woot! What I saw could have been me behind the camera roving and roaming, cutting through the side streets, wandering the city, recording with no commentary, streaming unedited, with no news anchors or pundits. Did everyone like the revolution? It didn’t matter. The point was that it was happening. It was real and you were there if you wanted to be. And I wanted to be there in New York where thousands of video freaks with all manner of devices were recording all the action as the cops were threatening the Occupiers with closure of their camp sites. The cops were preparing to trap the protesters inside a cage of orange netting and cart them off to jail. I watched as push came to shove. I watched it all live as the NYPD shouted “Back off! Get behind the barriers or you will be subject to arrest!” The people held their ground. The people held their ground and the cops backed off. And right before my eyes, the phalanx of officers was ordered by their commander to take two steps back. The





people held their ground. The police stepped back. It wouldn't always be that way, but it was amazing. Filmmaker Michael Moore, who had been on the Occupy site often, asked a NYC police officer why the city was not taking a hard line with the protesters. And the police officer said, "Mayor Bloomberg is afraid of YouTube." Video was back and it was roaring. Cable news and other media were undoubtedly canned and undeniably moribund in the face of live streaming cameras. It was the live streaming revolution that we had imagined. It had happened. Viewer participants were posting comments on the moving crawl alongside the streaming video. "Fox News is fake,"

someone posted. Finally, it was becoming clear. People were catching on. At the top left corner of the screen was the reminder that "Citizen Media is Not a Crime."

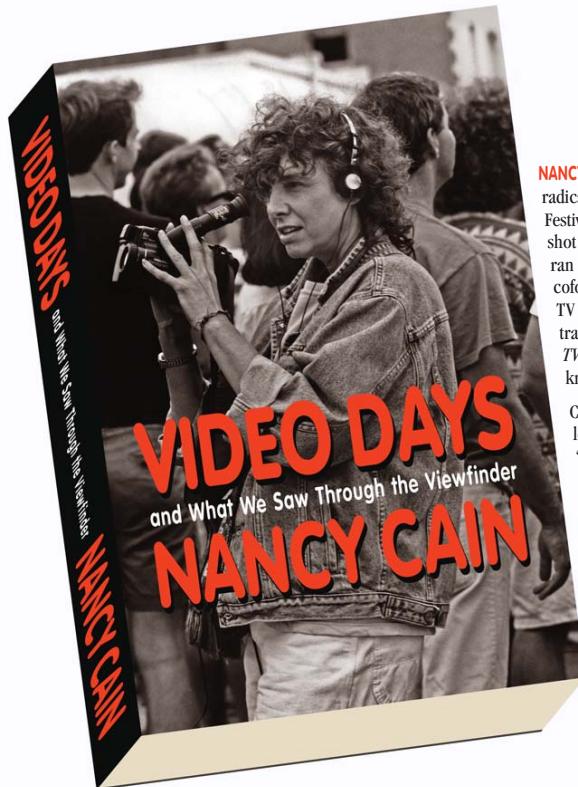
And now today in 2014 ten days after Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson Mo., Robert Lloyd, the television critic at theL.A.Times wrote a beautiful poetic article about following the story on an online stream from the website Vox. What Lloyd understood initially about the coverage of the unrest in the aftermath of Brown's death, was that "sometimes the camera looked up the street and sometimes it looked down, but in either case it sat and looked." He also describes a feed from a Vox team where the cops kick the media out, and the crew puts the camera in the car and takes the viewer on a long ride looking for the media staging area in a Target parking lot. I happened to be on that ride too. I remember it well. We stopped for gas, bought snacks, got turned back a couple of times by the cops, and committed at least one traffic violation. 'I don't want any comments on Twitter about me running that stop sign, either,' the driver said to the camera (us). "I know y'all saw that." You just don't see that on CNN. About the unblinking eye Lloyd said, "When you slow to a crawl, new details can be glimpsed; and when you pull back from the crowd new patterns can be seen; and when you sit still, the world passes before you. It takes a certain willful willingness to pay attention, especially when 'nothing' is happening.

"But it pays off in subtle ways. You start to study hair cuts, clothing, body language; the way this person strolls and that person struts... you notice signs in the street, shadows on a wall, catch snatches of passing conversation ..." This a way to watch that's beginning to be understood.

But wait. Through the haze of the sweet satisfaction of free media for all, I had not considered the risk of freedom, the dark side of social media. Steven Stalinsky, Executive Director of the Middle East Media Research Institute, has pointed out that social media is at the heart of Jihad, and terrorist organizations have moved their online presence to YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It was inevitable that there would be difficult viewing ahead. Abuses, beheadings,

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PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

NANCY CAIN began playing with video as a member of *Videofreex*, the radical video collective in New York that shot footage of the Woodstock Festival and the Chicago Eight. She worked on the first video pilot ever shot for network television with the *Videofreex* at CBS in 1969, and ran an offbeat weekly video show at the *Videofreex* loft in Soho. She cofounded *Lanesville TV*—known as “Probably America’s Smallest TV Station.” The pirate broadcasts were made possible by a transmitter donated by Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman. Along with *TTV*, she defined the video documentary movement of the 70s, known as “guerrilla television.”

Cain was a co-creator and producer of *The '90s*, a weekly hour-long alternative show for PBS, which the *New York Post* called “refreshingly irreverent, opinionated and outlandish.” She was the co-creator and producer of *CamNet The Camcorder Network*, America’s first all-camcorder channel.

Rolling Stone designated *CamNet* second only to HBO in their list of “the ten things in 1993 that didn’t suck,” and heralded *CamNet* as “a brilliant and democratic vision … a peoples CNN,” and “the inevitable next stop in the liberation of television from network owners and broadcasters.”

“*CamNet* is delightfully offbeat, often insightful, genuinely entertaining.” —*Wired Magazine*

“Cinema vérité meets vox populi.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

“*CamNet* is a nonestablishment C-Span” —*TV Guide*

• • • • • PRAISE FOR VIDEO DAYS • • • • •

“Nancy Cain balances her way along the alternative media tightrope between Pirate TV and YouTube with considerable insight and wit. *Video Days* is an entertaining and significant slice of countercultural history.”

—Paul Krassner

author of *Who's to Say What's Obscene: Politics, Culture and Comedy in America Today*

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—Richard J. Simmons

former curator of
The Everson Museum of Art.

“Had a few good days of edge-of-my-seat reading. I learned lots of new things about Nancy, her video adventures and, as always, enjoyed her fantastic POV. Want to learn how to speak in tongues? Buy the book. You’ll be able to say anything you’re thinking, even when the kids are present.”

—Bart Friedman, video producer,
Videofreex Partnership, Media Bus Inc.

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disasters, kidnappings, executions, the cutting off of hands, people set on fire, women stoned to death, all being posted on our social media pages to be shared with friends. And just like the good news, these atrocities were and are being blasted directly to the news feeds of millions of connected users. Simply touch “Share.” That’s how we use video streaming to grow our new communities, good or bad. And as for everything else, it’s the technology, stupid. We don’t have to do a thing. Digital lifestyle providers make sure we get what we’re looking for. We don’t have to search for our news, our news finds us. It’s the same with products and services. Relax. Your preferences are known.

To be admitted to the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, you must present your driver's license to a uniformed woman seated behind a sleek counter to be copied.

Then you must step back two paces and stand behind a line drawn on the floor and smile because that's where the guard snaps your picture. After that you are allowed to pass through the security gate and go to the elevators.

Upon arriving at the Video Data Bank, I am greeted warmly and escorted into a large room filled with shelves stacked with Videofreex tapes, neatly set up in numerical order exactly the way they had been in our viewing room in Lanesville. Fifteen hundred of them, all there in the original boxes, with our original labels on the spines. There is my handwriting. Here is our earliest archive, safe and temperature controlled and waiting in line to be digitized. Videofreex Archive@VDB.org, launched in 2007.

And today, happily, for video aficionados, museum goers, media buffs, press workers, journalists, performers, producers, friends, colleagues, and you, are finding that 2015 is shaping up to be the year of the Videofreex revisited. Early rumblings for this renewed interest began in the spring of 2013 at the School of Visual Arts in New York City when David A. Ross, chair, MFA Art Practice Department, and Ron Simon, curator of television and radio at the Paley Center for Media, reunited the Videofreex with CBS executive Don West, after 44 years of silence since the 'Subject to Change" project ended badly.

During the SVA symposium, "We're All Videofreex: Changing Media and Social Change from Portapak to Smartphone," Don West said that in his opinion the Videofreex had wasted their lives and had never progressed from that night 44 years ago. He said that what he was seeing of the Freex today was "a self indulgent world of people having fun, wasting their time and other people's resources." He was bitter and possibly sad. The Freex, of course, disagreed with his assessment. The panel then went on to discuss, as per plan, the Videofreex "contribution to video-art history and renewed significance at a moment in which the proliferation of personal recording devices and decentralized broadcasting platforms fuel uprisings worldwide."

This renewed interest went on to excite the production of an analog extravaganza, titled "Videofreex: The Art of Guerrilla Television," a big exhibition at the Dorsky Museum at the State University of New York in New Paltz, beginning in February of 2015 and running for 22 weeks. The exhibition will survey the history and mythology of the Videofreex. Curator Andrew Ingall promises photography, drawings, prints, ephemera, publications, historic audiovisual equipment, and newly restored videotape excerpts. The campus community and the public will engage with the exhibition through workshops, live streaming from the galleries, and other participatory programs. It's free.

Then, sometime in 2015, the opening of a new feature length documentary by filmmakers Jon Nealon and Jenny Raskin titled “Here Come the Videofreex.” In progress at this writing, the movie is described by the makers as “the quirky tale of ten people’s optimism and creativity, and their vision of what television could have become at a time when the three big networks ruled the TV airwaves.”

This resurgence gives me a warm feeling. In the beginning when people would see me with a video camera and ask “What’s that for?” I would explain that it was for adventure and freedom and possibilities and truth. I iterated that it wasn’t movies or television, it was video. Video was a rover. Video came along for the ride. It was immediate and participatory. All of that turned

out to be true. From the moment I held the camera, we were best friends forever. We were partners. We took each other on an amazing journey. My camera was my ticket.

I saw a little kid at the post office yesterday with her mom. She was maybe five. She was carrying a device that checked out to be a Fisher-Price kid-tough video camera. It was pink. I asked her mom about it and she said that her daughter loved it and wanted to take it with her everywhere. She told me that the camcorder lived up to its hype as being “robust and strong,” and was able to “survive falling and drool.” I could relate.

“Hi,” I said to the kid. She smiled.