

The Experimental Scene: L.A.'s Media Renegades

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By Steve Anderson

One of the little known facts about Los Angeles is that the city is home to some of the most diverse and cutting edge experimental media production in the world. The scene has a long history stretching back to the 1920s, but it also has a very current presence, thanks to the work of numerous artists whose work brings together a commitment to theoretical sophistication, stylistic innovation, and political engagement. Many of these artists express their faith in the power of alternative media by performing in multiple capacities, making films, videos, or multimedia projects while also teaching, writing, and curating. Among these artists are William Jones, Erika Suderberg, Tran T. Kim-Trang, Jesse Lerner and Ming-Yuen S. Ma. For these makers, "independence" is a necessity rather than a marketing strategy--they do not aspire to three-picture deals with the latest mega-merged entertainment industry giant or a distribution deal with Miramax. Although their work is widely disparate both formally and thematically, these artists together constitute a strong, smart, and much needed alternative media presence in a city that, thanks to general funding cuts, has almost no remaining infrastructure to support them.

William Jones

An Ohio native with degrees from Yale and CalArts, William Jones has emerged as one of L.A.'s most articulate and iconoclastic filmmakers. In his rigorously structured and densely erudite film and video work, Jones has developed a unique mode of historico-etymological exposition which highlights the entangled operations of history, politics, economics, and sexuality. His work is both highly personal--by turns confessional, autobiographical and analytical--while always remaining politically charged.

The appropriation of images--both from domestic and industrial sources--plays an important role in much of Jones' work, ranging from the use of his father's frantically neurotic home movies in *Massillon* to the operatic power plays enacted in Eastern European porn video which he excerpts in *The Fall of Communism...As Seen In Gay Pornography*. Likewise, in *Finished*, Jones pairs images of gay porn star Alan Lambert with scenes from Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* in order to investigate the relationship between Hollywood and the porn industry and the complex interplay of images and desire.

For Jones, Los Angeles offers both opportunities and likely frustrations to those seeking to combine art with political engagement. He notes that "there is a fundamental contradiction between the individualism encouraged by the American cultural establishment and the solidarity required for concerted political action. It's no surprise that independent filmmakers usually make diffuse and ineffectual collectives. Like academics, they are notoriously difficult to organize."

Los Angeles' legendary geographical dispersion also contributes to a pervasive sense of fragmentation and disunity even among members of the relatively small community dedicated to alternative media. According to Jones, "Los Angeles tends to be a haven for isolated crackpots. When people ask me about movements or scenes in L.A., I have trouble answering their questions, since I'm one of those crackpots." Nonetheless, his work has received support from several of the city's existing institutions, including Filmforum, the California Community Foundation, and a now-defunct program at the AFI. "I can't claim a total isolation. I suspect that film culture here is just a bit less abject than it is in most of the rest of the United States, though I know that's not saying much."

Jones also emphasizes the interconnections between industrial production in the city and its double in alternative circles. "My work, and for that matter the work of any other filmmaker, would be impossible without the film industry. The materials making up the entire apparatus of production are industrial products under the direct or indirect control of monopolies." Although his work clearly resides at the "experimental" end of the independent feature film spectrum, Jones professes a certain fascination with narrative and the aspirations of certain industrial productions. "In Southern California, it is virtually impossible to exist in some sort of anti-Hollywood cocoon, an illusory place to reside, in any event. The whole infrastructure is here, though getting access to the means of production can be extremely frustrating. A powerful mythology clings to the state of being taken seriously in Hollywood, and it is very difficult to distance oneself from that."

Erika Suderburg

With a body of video work that ranges from the conceptual sublime (a naked woman in a swimming pool backstroking languorously across the frame) to the historically specific (an evocation of what it must have been like to be the pilot who has just dropped a bomb), Erika Suderburg is one of L.A.'s most prolific and versatile practitioners of marginal media.

In addition to teaching in the Film and Visual Culture program at UC Riverside, Suderburg has edited two books on video and installation art: *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (with Michael Renov) and *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. She is currently completing an experimental documentary about Los Angeles and her work is the subject of a recent retrospective at L.A. Filmforum. In her video and installation work, Suderburg brings a rare combination of understated humor and theoretical sophistication to issues of gender, ideology, and the politics of representation.

Suderburg's various roles as teacher, writer, curator and artist are linked by a commitment to advocacy for marginal media practices. "People who are interested in marginal practices have to work hard to keep connected, which is why people like [L.A. Freewaves founder] Anne Bray have been so important. In the 80s the AFI, MoCA, LACE, and the Long Beach Museum all had very supportive programs and now all of it is gone. These kinds of institutions created communities that just can't

be replaced by a once-a-year festival. And this fetishization of the internet can definitely never be a substitute for it.”

The loss of institutional support in Los Angeles [national funding cuts over the last seven years have hit LA hard] has been coupled with shifts in exhibition and distribution which further threaten the future of alternative media [the Long Beach Museum, for example, once a central source for new video art, now rarely programs video, and its Annex is no longer readily available for artists]. “People think it can be replaced by people at home with their computers, but that’s not *community*. The internet is a fundamentally isolating activity which displaces a lot of what’s interesting about marginalized practice. Artists also used to do a lot more curating and large festivals used to have significant experimental components, but now they’ve gotten very conservative. It makes for a very boring climate.”

Somewhat ironically, Suderburg cites the presence of the film industry in Hollywood as one of the primary advantages of working in Los Angeles. “Hollywood is completely cathected to my work. I’m not in the industry but I work with people who are. There’s a core of underutilized talent - people who don’t get to do their own work or exercise their creativity - that I can tap into.” For Suderburg, this tactical appropriation of the industry’s productive apparatus gives her work some of its political edge. “My work is not ‘activist’ in the traditional sense but I am engaged in various forms of political subterfuge. At one level, just being in the margins and making work that is not a dominant narrative is itself political.”

Tran T. Kim-Trang

It is a rare video that brings the language of psychoanalytic theory into the traditional realms of documentary and video activism--and a rare video artist who is equally comfortable talking about Freud and the Khmer Rouge. In her work, L.A. based videomaker and Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Scripps College, Tran T. Kim-Trang insists on bringing these two worlds together. “My work is definitely informed by theory,” she reports, “what I try to do is bridge the academic realm and the public arena. I don’t try to reach everybody but I’d like to put the two together.”

Tran sees no contradiction in bridging the historical divides between theory and practice, form and content. “Hopefully if you’re versed in theory, then maybe the ideas will be challenging to you even if you don’t share the politics of the work. And if you’re politically savvy, then maybe you’ll start to think about formalist values without just falling back into modernism and assuming that all experimental work is inaccessible and politically retrograde. For me, form and content really go hand in hand and from that point of melding we can go on to another level of engagement and discussion.”

Although her background is in studio art (with an MFA from CalArts) and she works primarily in video, Tran’s teaching has been swept in the direction of interactive media, web design, digital video production and motion graphics. Partly as a result

of these new technologies, she sees an erosion of the distinctions between commercial production and underground, experimental work. "We've come full circle now--it's not just Hollywood borrowing from us any more. Younger people are looking at MTV and learning a lot from that style, so it's getting harder to delineate the line between the avant-garde and the commercial-industrial realm. I think there's a real ingratitude about how much independent makers have borrowed from the industry. It's hardly ever acknowledged, but I see the relationship as symbiotic."

Unlike many other marginal practitioners, Tran is hopeful about the future of institutional support for media arts in Los Angeles, particularly as it becomes increasingly cross-fertilized with the energy and aesthetics of other media. "There's definitely a community here, which is pretty supportive and cohesive. It's contentious sometimes, but not as bad as New York. In L.A., the boundaries between different media are not clear cut--partly by virtue of a handful of people like Anne Bray and [Visual Communications Director] Linda Mabalot who provide a space, and a network to allow the community to expand and spill over into the other visual arts."

Jesse Lerner

It's a truism of postmodern culture that the difference between truth and fiction is not what it used to be, but for Jesse Lerner, this is more than an empty slogan--it's a point of departure. An Assistant professor of Media Studies at Pitzer College, Lerner has been making films in and around Los Angeles for over ten years, bringing a wry humor and critical eye to bear on what he calls "hemispheric histories" and the cultural imbrication of the U.S. and Mexico. His most recent film, *Ruins*, is a feature length "fake" documentary which exposes the persistence of colonial paradigms in pre-Colombian historiography and calls into question the conventions by which the disciplines of archaeology and art history are constituted.

Although he has ambivalent feelings about it, Lerner confesses to benefitting from his proximity to Hollywood. "David James has written perceptively about the ways in which the presence of commercial cinema has shaped all sorts of alternative production practices in L.A., even those which might be thought of (initially) as existing in opposition to the studios. I use the same labs, post-production facilities and rental houses as the industrial cinema. So although I might like to think I'm engaged in an oppositional practice, in the end, my relationship to the studios is probably more symbiotic than I'd like to admit."

As a person who is committed to integrating theory with practice, Lerner travels extensively and works to create a wider context for work which might otherwise be defined strictly in regional terms. "When things are going well, I see my various roles--teacher, writer, maker and curator--as convergent parts of a whole. A lot of what I do involves neither filmmaking nor writing, but working towards building an international community of practitioners, scholars and venues that support this kind of work."

In Southern California, Lerner identifies a few venues and institutions including L.A. Freewaves and Film Forum as "particularly important in nurturing a creative community of media artists, community activists, and maker/curators with sensibilities attuned to the dynamics of the region." However, he notes that affiliation with an existing community - even if it is composed of like minded artists, activists or educators, "implies a negotiation with a set of institutions and traditions that at times may feel like a supportive infrastructure, at other times may feel like a troublesome absence."

Ming-Yuen S. Ma

Technologies shape consciousness, affecting not only *what* we see but *how* we see. In an age of camcorders and electronic surveillance, video has become an integral part of identity, creating avenues rich with possibilities for personal expression and, on the negative side, supporting what Donna Haraway has termed the "informatics of domination." In his various roles as artist, teacher and curator, Ming-Yuen S. Ma has explored both sides of video's schizophrenic nature, while serving as one of L.A.'s most avid proponents of alternative media.

In his work, Ma brings post-structural theory to bear on highly personal issues of diasporic identity, sexual politics and nomadic existence. His current project, for example, charts the shifts his mother experienced when she left Hong Kong and set up a new home in London, while an earlier tape, "XLPI: Myth(s) of Creation," investigates the various notions of travel, both as movement from city to city, and across language and various identities. And, in his first year as director of the L.A. Freewaves Festival Ma organized a series of brilliantly conceived "video bus tours

For Ma, living and working in Los Angeles is a double-edged sword. "Being in LA you're in both the best and the worst of it. You're ignored by the industry, which is a good thing because it translates into a freedom that you wouldn't have otherwise." He also notes the irony of living in the city where most of the world's popular media is produced while barely managing to sustain what has been described as one of the worst public access systems in the country. "If we lived in a culture that valued challenging, progressive media, things would be different. But alas, we don't."

Having learned the hard way about the difficulty of balancing creative work with economic necessity, Ma is also less than hopeful about the idea of tactical appropriation of industrial tools. "I think it's a myth that working in the industry is a good way to get access to equipment and facilities which you can use for your own work during down time. I can count on one hand the number of people I know who have been able to complete projects that way."

For Ma, a more important set of resources may be found in organizations such as Visual Communications, an Asian American visual arts organization founded at UCLA in the 1970s, and the Long Beach Museum of Art, whose historic significance

is unquestionable, in spite of its uncertain future. With the virtual disappearance of arts funding since the 80s and the demise of local access programs once supported by organizations like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Ming looks hopefully to institutions like L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art and Side Street Projects, a non-profit visual arts program, to step into the void and expand their support for media arts.

According to Ma, the independent film "movement" has become essentially a "commercial genre" which benefits certain types of production while ignoring others. "'Independent' is a term that I don't even identify with anymore except in terms of being an alternative to the commercial industry - which is ironic since the independent film movement has its roots in the experimental spirit of the 60s and 70s which has now been essentially shut out." Nonetheless, Ma remains hopeful about the future for alternative media practice. "There has always been a very vibrant, strong, innovative media arts community here. Going back to people like Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren, you can see independent or experimental work as a kind of flip side to the industry. There is a tradition here, even if people don't know about it."