

THE SYNAPSE MEDIA CENTER: AN OBJECT LESSON IN CLOSING AN ARTISTS' ORGANIZATION

Last month we reported on the closing of the artists' editing facility at Rochester's WXXI-TV, which had been funded by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). In recent weeks concern has arisen among New York media artists over the disposition of the assets of another major upstate post-production facility. Both the videotape collection and the equipment of the Synapse Television Center in Syracuse, N.Y. are now in the hands of Syracuse University, its former parent organization. The transfer occurred against the wishes of former Synapse director Henry Baker and a number of artists represented in the collection. At issue is the right of Syracuse University to act as a successor to Synapse in fulfilling contractual obligations to public funding agencies. Considering the circumstances of many artists' organizations which face cuts in state or federal grant support (many of which, like Synapse, are contained within larger institutions), the scenario is significant as a case study—perhaps even an object lesson.

Synapse was founded in 1970 as a student and community video center which would complement the media curriculum at Syracuse University. In 1974 the center began to seek funds to expand its programs. Unincorporated as an organization and without a non-profit status, Synapse applied under Syracuse University sponsorship. That year, with NYSCA support, Synapse began to offer grants to artists for the production of video works. During the following year, the program was expanded to include grants for broadcast quality post-production on the 2-in. equipment of the Syracuse University S.I. Newhouse School of Broadcast and Communication.

In 1976, with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for 99% of the cost, Synapse added a CMX 340x Computer editor to the university studio—making it one of the most sophisticated artists' post-production facilities in the U.S. Between 1977 and 1980, Synapse added other equipment with funds from both NYSCA and the NEA. By 1980 Synapse had acquired roughly \$29,000 worth of equipment. (It consisted of an AV 8650 ½-in. VTR and a Sony 12-in. monitor, paid for entirely by NYSCA; an AV 2800 ¾-in. VTR and a 3M processing amplifier, paid for in part by NYSCA; a time code generator and a teletype, paid for entirely by the NEA; and the CMX editor.)

Synapse made about 30 grants per year to artists for use of the post-production facilities—about \$250,000 per year at commercial rates. (Artists funded included Douglas Davis, Juan Downey, Tom DeWitt, Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, Julia Heyward, Gary Hill, Les Levine, Ira Schneider, and Bill Viola.) Synapse received the right to lease finished tapes for three years, with

royalties paid to the artist, and to retain a copy of each tape for its archive. (This was usually the 2-in. master, though artists had the right to buy it back.) Synapse also sponsored workshops and screenings, published a newsletter, and worked to place tapes on PBS and cable. These services, according to Baker, were financed with funds secured by Synapse from outside Syracuse University, which provided in-kind services to match the grants.

In the spring of 1980 the University began to show symptoms of dissatisfaction. Although Synapse had established a national reputation, the Center's relationship to the University's educational curriculum was viewed by university administrators as insufficient. Baker proposed a reformulation of Synapse into a more educationally oriented media center. According to Baker, an application reflecting this restructuring, endorsed by university officials, was submitted to NYSCA in February 1981. Two months later, before the Council had acted on the proposal, the University informed Synapse of its intention to terminate the program. The reason, stated in a letter to Baker by the University vice-chancellor, John Prucha, was that "revenues which accrue to the University from Synapse are inadequate to justify continuation." (When questioned by *Afterimage* about the decision to sever connections with Synapse, Newhouse School Dean Edward Stevens replied: "It served its purpose," adding that the equipment was being used in the spirit of the original grant. Stevens declined to comment further.)

Baker resigned. During the summer of 1981 Synapse incorporated as a non-profit organization under the direction of Barbara Wood and Ralph Busch. New contracts were drawn up which released artists from their obligations to the University, and reassigned rights to Synapse. Sixty percent of the artists signed the new contracts. That fall Synapse moved into an office in downtown Syracuse. The University kept the equipment. In November Wood closed Synapse and turned the videotape collection over to the University.

The equipment is still housed in the Newhouse School and is used, according to Dick Pitzeruse, the University Audio and Visual Support Services director, primarily for classes in television and radio production. Artists are permitted access for a fee. Baker and artist/producer Kit Fitzgerald, who approached the University for access, state that the rates they were quoted last spring and fall for a fully equipped studio were \$120-150 per hour—well above the \$20.00 per hour that Synapse had in its later years required artists to contribute to their grants. However, Roger Albert, Supervisor of University Video Services quoted a current

rate of not more than \$60.00 per hour. But one way or the other, since the University takeover, no artists have used the equipment purchased by Synapse.

One way to interpret the situation (Baker's view) is that the University's ouster of Synapse has demonstrated its lack of interest in providing support to artists, and that the current fee structure for equipment access makes it prohibitively expensive for artists' use. The University's stand (as stated by Pitzeruse) is that as a department within the University when originally funded, Synapse's assets belong to the University; that the University had modified its equipment to function with the CMX editor; that the original terms of the grants have expired; and that the equipment continues to be used for "very similar" non-commercial purposes by Syracuse University students.

Meanwhile, the Synapse videotape collection of approximately 140 works resides at Syracuse University's Art/Media Study department, chaired by John Orentlicher. Orentlicher stated that he would like to see the collection kept whole, intact, and in Syracuse where it could be made available for study and distribution in a manner similar to the Synapse arrangement. Orentlicher is currently working to secure funding to allow the University's Light, Audio, and Media Program (LAMP) to implement the continuing service. The difficulty of untangling the artists' contracts and determining whether they will accept LAMP as a distribution system has prevented any action.

The future of the Synapse equipment and archive was discussed at the January board of directors meeting of the New York Media Alliance, a group composed of both administrators and video artists which takes an active advocacy role in promoting the interests of media artists and organizations. The board recommended that:

—artists whose tapes are in the collection be given the option to get them back through a revocation and/or renegotiation of contracts.

—NYSCA require a complete index of tapes in the collection so that the artists concerned can be notified as to the present status of the collection.

—NYSCA repossess from the University all equipment purchased with 100% NYSCA funds. (This means only the AV 8650 ½-in. VTR and a small monitor.)

No action will be taken by either NYSCA or the NEA until more detailed information has been received. Don Drucker, program specialist at the NEA Media Arts program

stated that Endowment policy is clear: original intentions for grant-supported purchases must be maintained or the equipment will be relocated. NYSCA's attitude is a matter of law rather than policy: equipment purchased with Council funds remains NYSCA property and reverts to NYSCA when its use is altered or discontinued. However, NYSCA is accepting applications for the NYSCA-owned equipment, pending a determination of whether the University is using it for purposes other than those for which the equipment was originally funded.

As the situation unfolds, it could well bring into focus the way NYSCA and the NEA redistribute the assets of media centers which are forced to close down, and encourage a clearer definition of the difference between access to media facilities for students and access for working artists. It will also test the influence of the New York Media Alliance, which, though only two years old, represents a relatively organized group of artists and media centers.

The debate about the Synapse tape collection has implications which extend beyond the obvious ones of distribution rights and protection of artists' work. The Synapse archive consists of about 140 tapes. If that figure is combined with the collection of the Everson Museum, also in Syracuse, which ceased to exhibit the tapes it had acquired after the departure of video curator Richard Simmons, the result is somewhere between 550 and 650 tapes out of active circulation. According to Simmons, in the case of both the Everson and Synapse collections, a need exists for the highly perishable tapes to be transferred onto new stock and to be stored in the proper conditions. The effective suspension of the functioning of the two archives only points out the lack of a coherent strategy for the preservation of artists' tapes in New York State, a situation which defeats most of the good intentions implicit in subsidizing their production.

—David Trend

CORRECTIONS

The pictures reproduced with Martha Fleming's review of Arnaud Maggs's "Downwind Photographs" in the January issue appeared courtesy of the Jane Corkin Gallery in Toronto. In the December issue, the book referred to in Robert Morgan's "Conceptual Art and Photographic Installations" as John Baldessari's *Closely Cropped Tales* should have been *Close-Cropped Tales*.

NYSCA ESTABLISHES VIDEO CRITICISM GRANTS

In response to a need consistently expressed by editors of arts publications, critics of video art, videomakers, and museum curators, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) has allocated funds for a program intended to stimulate serious critical, theoretical, and historical writing about video art. In 1982, approximately \$55,000 will be awarded to non-profit arts organizations in New York State for 10 to 15 writing projects; grants will range from \$2,000 to \$5,000. According to NYSCA guidelines, "a broad range of styles and content will be considered." The

guidelines permit the use of funds "for authors' fees as well as for publication and printing expenses," and require that "writers' resumes and samples of previous work should be submitted with the applications." An organization may submit up to five requests. The deadline for applications is March 1.

More information is available from the NYSCA Media Program, (212) 587-4537. Copies of the guidelines can be obtained from: Office of Public Information, NYSCA, 80 Centre St., New York, N.Y. 10013.

LAST CALL ON THE NEA 1982 BUDGET

With the Reagan administration's approval of the 1982 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) budget, the NEA's Media Arts Program has begun to amend upward its original awards to organizations. The 1982 Endowment budget of \$143-million represents a 10% reduction from the \$158.5-million allotted in 1981. The reduction is reflected in the Media Arts Program budget as an 18% decrease—\$10.2-million for 1982 as compared to \$12.5-million for 1981. Still, the amount al-

lotted to Media Arts is well above the 50% figure at which projects were tentatively funded in January [see *Afterimage*, Summer 1981]. As we went to press, Media Arts Program staff were conferring with panelists on projects to receive additional support.

The Visual Arts Program will receive \$6.5-million, or roughly 90% of the \$7.2-million it received in 1981. According to NEA spokesperson Michael Faubion, panels for grants to organizations felt satisfied with the size and amount of the grants they were able to recommend. The additional funds provided by the 90% figure will be applied to fellowships for individual artists, allowing Visual Arts to make a comparable number of grants to those awarded for fiscal 1981, when about 50 photographers received fellowships.

COVER: Storyboard from *Denman's Cal (Geometry)* (1981), by Mary Lucier. See "Mary Lucier's Elemental Investigations," by Martha Gever and Marita Sturken, page 8.

CONTENTS

Letters and News *pages 2 and 3*

Features

MAINTAINING PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ART OF DEFENSIVE PERCEPTION by James Huginin *page 4*

PHOTOGRAPHY AND OTHER ART-HISTORICAL LACUNAE by Michael Starenko *page 6*

MARY LUCIER'S ELEMENTAL INVESTIGATIONS by Martha Gever and Marita Sturken *page 8*

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD ANYTHING ABOUT COWBOYS: AN INTERVIEW WITH J.J. MURPHY by Scott MacDonald *page 12*

Reviews

MANHATTAN SHORT CUTS by Ann-Sargent Wooster *page 18*

BUCK-EYED PHOTOGRAPHY by Geraldine Wojno Kiefer *page 20*

RECEIVED AND NOTED *page 20*

Sources and Notices *page 22*

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