

BY BEVERLY CRAMP

More than 30 years ago, artist Michael Goldberg hitchhiked from Montreal to Vancouver to join a group of multidisciplinary artists experimenting with a new technology. That technology, which seems old hat now, was video, and the group, called Intermedia, later split into several important offshoots in Vancouver's alternative art scene.

With the help of Goldberg and others, Video In Studios evolved from these early beginnings and has become a major producer of media arts in the city. Not only did the organization and its artists gain national and international recognition along the way, but Video In became the training ground for many of the city's top video artists. And it has compiled one of the most significant noncommercial video-art libraries in Canada open to the public. The library contains more than 3,000 titles.

This almost didn't happen. Goldberg initially steered away from video after someone described it to him in 1967 as being the art form to embrace if one wanted to "get into the future".

"That was enough to convince me to stay away from video for almost two years. I didn't want anyone telling me what to do, and had been turned off television in my late teens. I didn't yet think of video as an alternative to TV," he writes in his essay for the new anthology *Making Video 'In': The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast* (Video In, \$29.95).

The first post-Intermedia incarnation of Video In was the Satellite Video Exchange Society. Goldberg sent out 1,000 postcards around the world in 1971, inviting artists and groups working with video to form a network and get a list of their videos published. More than 170 responses were mailed back and Goldberg published his first *International Video Exchange Directory*, a forerunner to the influential but now-defunct magazine *Video Guide*.

He expanded on this concept two years later with a video-exchange conference at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It was here that some of the early "Video Inners" met, including video artist Paul Wong.

"The registration fee to the show was a videotape," recalls Wong. "At the end of it we had over 120 titles, and from this we started our tape library."

The newly born collective found its first home at 261 Powell Street in the Downtown Eastside in 1973. It was the ground floor of a rooming house. "That was a cockroach-infested place with thin walls, chicken wire on the ceiling, and one bare bulb," says Wong. "But we had thought hard about where we wanted to be, and it wasn't in touristy Gastown."

Its name was derived from the input jack at the rear of a VTR, usually labelled "video in". Because members of the collective sometimes lived in the rooming house, the place was dubbed the Video Inn.

Shows go on, despite strike

Two of the city's independent theatre companies are breathing a collective sigh of relief now that their venue is picket-free during evenings. Pi Theatre and Rumble Productions had feared the cancellation of their show *Three in the Back, Two in the Head* at the Roundhouse Community Centre would leave them financially destitute. But Del Surjik, artistic director of Pi Theatre, told the *Straight* striking city workers in CUPE Local 15 assured him before the show opened November 2 that they would picket the community centre only between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. That allows audiences to enter the front doors of the facility for the 8 p.m. shows without crossing a picket line. In addition, the union is not picketing the stage door.

"We opened to full houses on the weekend and we hope that people will continue to attend," Surjik said. For now, *Three in the Back* is the only event going on at the expansive centre, and it runs until November 18. "No CUPE work is being displaced by us," said Surjik. "It's eerily quiet in here."

Meanwhile, picketing seemed to have little effect on the biggest-grossing show ever produced by Ballet B.C. The company's critically lauded *The Faerie Queen* premiered to almost-full houses in its three-night run November 2 to 4, executive director Kevin Myers told the *Straight*. Striking city workers did not picket the stage door of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, but they did take action at the front doors. The Saturday show drew the biggest audience, filling 92 percent or more of the venue's seats, Myers said: "We might have been fuller sooner [without the strike], and that would have been nice, but we'll never know for sure."

The Faerie Queen is slated to tour from Ottawa to St. John's, Newfoundland, in February. Thanks to critical and audience enthusiasm for the work, "we're very eager to take what we've got to international stages," Myers said.

HIDDEN HISTORY From Mr. Peanut to Paul Wong and from Sniffy the Rat to I Braineater, an exhaustive new book traces the lively history of Vancouver's performance-art scene. *Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver* grew out of a festival last year of the same name, and was published with millennium funding from the Canada Council and B.C. 2000. "It puts down a very hidden history of Vancouver," said Glen Alteen, director of the *grunt* gallery, which published the book. "It's a long history, and we just wanted to get it down while people were still around." Thirteen writers, including Wong and artist Judy



Since its beginnings three decades ago, Video In has helped put Vancouver on the map for video art. And as a new anthology called *Making Video 'In': The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast* makes clear, it's also been a force for social change.

Video Activists Embrace New Media

After censorship battles and growing pains, Video In welcomes the digital future

"We built a loft where out-of-towners could sleep," says Wong. "In the early days we got together every week on Wednesday for dinner and to hold meetings. Everyone took a turn cooking."

Years later, the second "n" in Video Inn was dropped when the collective moved to a new space without sleeping quarters; the facility is currently located at 1965 Main Street.

From the beginning, Video Inners were interested in more than exhibiting experimental art. "We were both artists and activists," Wong asserts. "That's what separates Video In from the rest. We saw video as a social tool and political weapon as well as an arts medium."

The collective's reputation spread internationally. "We were, at that stage, in contact with the shakers and movers of experimental art, and guerrilla-TV types who were doing political work," says Wong, who points to the Wounded Knee siege by the FBI in the U.S. as a significant episode in Video Inn's history.

"One of our contacts, Peter Berg, was inside Wounded Knee and he was able to get a videotape out which presented a different message than the one being broadcast on mass media," says Wong. "We were selected to receive the tape because the people caught in the siege wanted to ensure the alternative voice was heard."

Another battle associated with Video In was the fight against censorship. "We aimed to educate and debate, not suppress," says video artist Sara Diamond, a long-time Video In member who became artistic director of the media and visual-arts department and executive producer for television and new media at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1996. "We responded to censorship by exhibiting—if someone tried to say 'Don't show it,' we would show it. We did really brave stuff."

In 1984 Wong—who will launch *Re-Act*, a CD-ROM catalogue of his media-based artworks, at Video In on Saturday (November 11)—took the Vancouver Art Gallery to court for breach of contract when the institution cancelled the installation and screening of his multichannel examination of nonmainstream sexuality, *Confused: Sexual Views*. The VAG justified the controversial cancellation by claiming the video installation was not art. Wong eventually lost the court battle, but won artistic vindication when the VAG acquired a copy of *Confused* for its collection earlier this year.

Radul, contributed to the book, which traces the art form as far back as 1965. It's \$22 at the *grunt*, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery gift shop, and Artspeak.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS Thanks in large part to a successful art auction, the Vancouver Art Gallery has announced it will not face budget shortfalls and temporary closures at the end of this year. The VAG's auction on October 28 generated \$360,000, more than twice the expected \$175,000 take. Despite word from several artists that they would not be donating works to the auction due to controversy over former director Alf Bogusky's departure and the appointment of former board member Joe McHugh as acting director, more than 70 people gave work to the event. The gallery also attributed the rosier financial picture to higher-than-projected attendance at the Impressionist Masterworks exhibition.

Last August, the gallery notified its union that it was considering temporary closures due to a projected budget deficit of \$401,000 by the end of the year. At the time, union members expressed concern about bearing the brunt of financial problems at the VAG; several have since been laid off. Members of an artists' group calling for the resignation of McHugh and the VAG board executive have speculated that severance paid to Bogusky and the cost of a search for his replacement could have contributed to the budget crisis. McHugh has pointed to a failed 1999 lottery and lower-than-expected attendance at exhibitions in the past year.

• JANET SMITH