

# Large Text

## **Alternative Convention: Top Value Television's *Four More Years***

Curated by Eli Kerr

September 8–October 9, 2021  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

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Works by Top Value Television (T VTV)

This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design, University of Toronto.

**Art  
Museum**

# Alternative Convention: Top Value Television's *Four More Years*

*Alternative Convention: Top Value Television's Four More Years* revisits a landmark work by the 1970s video collective Top Value Television (T VTV). At the foundation of the experimental documentary genre known as 'Guerilla Television', their groundbreaking tape *Four More Years* offered alternative coverage of the 1972 Republican National Convention and was the first independently produced ½-inch video to be broadcasted on national television. With press passes and lightweight camera equipment, T VTV deployed alternative journalistic techniques on the convention floor. By pointing their cameras in the other direction and interviewing the network press about their coverage, T VTV subverted the hegemonic establishments of television news and reportage.

Over thirty different video makers contributed to T VTV productions during the group's activity between 1972-1979. They came from various corners of the counterculture including members from Raindance Corporation, Videofreex, and Ant Farm. T VTV were pioneers of the then-novel portable video technology. Their productions not only proposed innovative and decentralized ways of making television; they also developed exciting communicative forms that collapsed journalism with entertainment, all while being part of the shift in consciousness that demanded a democratization of the mediascape during Vietnam War Era America.

T VTV and the practitioners of Guerilla Television envisioned a future where video would allow civics and prosumer media to merge as a political currency in a communicative democracy. Nearly 50 years later, this vision has largely come to fruition with the emergence of the internet and participatory media as the dominant forum, just as the psychic, social, and structural impacts of the past television environment become visible in a McLuhanesque shift. Through experimentation with remediating video and disparate ephemera, this exhibition maps and centres T VTV's *Four More Years* to consider the legacies and implications of Guerilla Television in today's commodified and politically divisive user-generated media environment.

## **Our Supporters**

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# Exhibition Essay

In the summer of 1972, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, the countercultural video collective Top Value Television (T VTV) was founded by Allen Rucker, Michael Shamberg, Tom Weinberg, Hudson Marquez, and Megan Williams. T VTV emerged out of a fertile period when portable video recording systems, such as the Sony Portapak, first appeared on the consumer market. In 1967–1968, Marshall McLuhan was a guest professor at Fordham University in New York City, and it was through McLuhan’s research assistant, video artist Paul Ryan, that Portapak equipment first came into the hands of the artists who would form the countercultural thinktank Raindance Corporation in 1969. From 1970–1974 Raindance published *Radical Software*, the first journal dedicated to the new technology of video. *Radical Software* solidified an active community that brought together theorists, practitioners, and artists who were thinking and making at the intersections of media, philosophy, and politics presented by video.

T VTV can be thought of as a meta-collective. Members of the New York–based collective Videofreex, Raindance Corporation, and the San Francisco art and architecture group Ant Farm often worked on T VTV productions—some were also founding members. Over 30 different video makers would work on T VTV productions before the core group disbanded in 1979. While T VTV became incorporated as a freelance production company in 1973, it attempted to preserve the non-hierarchical organizing principals of its collectivist and anti-establishment roots. This agile outfit would allow the group to continue working on a project-by-project basis as it aspired to produce fresh and youthful programs for both public and network television.

In 1971, the year prior to the formation of TVTV, Raindance Corporation member Michael Shamberg published *Guerilla Television*, a meta-manual and how-to guide for independent video production. Clearly modelled after Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, which had published its last issue only a few months earlier, *Guerilla Television* paired illustrations and instructional texts with Shamberg's polemical critique of television's archaic industrial and corporate structures. Encouraging activist video collectives to start up around the country, the publication attempted to distill and popularize the ideas of Radical Software in book form, while the term *Guerilla Television*—adapted from McLuhan's "Guerilla Media"—became the name of the niche genre of alternative documentary that TVTV's work would exemplify.

The collective's first tape, 1972's *The World's Largest TV Studio*, covered that June's Democratic National Convention and was followed by *Four More Years*, which documented the Republican Party's renomination of Richard Nixon. TVTV was a departure from the newsmen of "Big Three" networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—that dictated the status quo for how reporting transpired on the convention floor. No member of the group was over 25 years old. TVTV's crew had women operating the camera and directing interviews. They wore denim instead of suits. The men had beards and long hair, and their unassuming cameras provided a ruse that allowed them to be perceived as dismissible amateurs.

With official press credentials in hand and a crew of 20, TVTV's lightweight equipment allowed them to navigate the convention floor and infiltrate the processes of politics and television. Their shooting philosophy was to point

its cameras in the opposite direction to the networks to capture the stories that the mainstream media overlooked. Correspondents would interview common people and get within inches of Ronald Reagan and Henry Kissinger. In an act of detournement, TVTV would interview the media—and report on their reporting. They covered the neglected story of the antiwar protestors outside the convention centre, even sneaking some of them in on borrowed press passes.

TVTV's productions presented innovative and decentralized ways of making television. Its countercultural techniques and verité documentary style also collapsed the distance between journalism and subversive entertainment, foreshadowing reality TV and the citizen journalism and activist tactical media movements of the 1990s, all while being integral to the shift in consciousness that demanded the democratization of the American mediascape at that time.

*Alternative Convention* foregrounds TVTV's *Four More Years* as an object-lesson to consider the legacies and implications of Guerilla Television, considering both the potentials and limits for artists and activists seeking to subvert mainstream information ecologies through participation in them. Featuring a montage of disparate archival materials, the exhibition also focuses on shifting technological platforms, highlighting TVTVs alternative coverage through remediation as it brings digitized files back onto 1970s television sets, juxtaposing Walter Cronkite's CBS program of the 1972 Republican Convention with TVTV's alternative coverage.

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Nearly 50 years later, this vision lives on in the emergence and predominance of the internet and participatory media, making newly visible the psychic, social, and structural impacts of the shifting, if not disappearing television environment.

## About the Curator

Eli Kerr's curatorial practice consists of organizing, exhibition-making, writing, and advocating for artists. He co-founded projects VIE D'ANGE (2015-ongoing) and Parc Offsite (2020-ongoing) in Montreal and continues to develop future initiatives for contemporary art in the city. His current research revisits 20th century media communications and early video art as prescient histories reverberating in the present.



# Curator's Acknowledgements

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# Public Programming

Online streaming of *Four More Years*

September 24–October 9, 2021

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