

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

Top Value Television (TNTV)

Curated by Eli Kerr

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.

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

In the summer of 1972, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, the countercultural video collective Top Value Television (TVTV) was founded by Allen Rucker, Michael Shamberg, Tom Weinberg, Hudson Marquez, and Megan Williams. TVTV 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.

TVTV 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 TVTV productions—some were also founding members. Over 30 different video makers would work on TVTV productions before the core group disbanded in 1979. While TVTV 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

**Cover:** TVTV, *Four More Years* Scrapbook, 1972. Courtesy of the Berkeley Art Museum Pacific Film Archive.

**Right:** TVTV, *Four More Years* (video still), 1972. ½ video 6t:28. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix.



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 center, 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 TVTV's 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.

TVTV 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 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.

Curator's Acknowledgments

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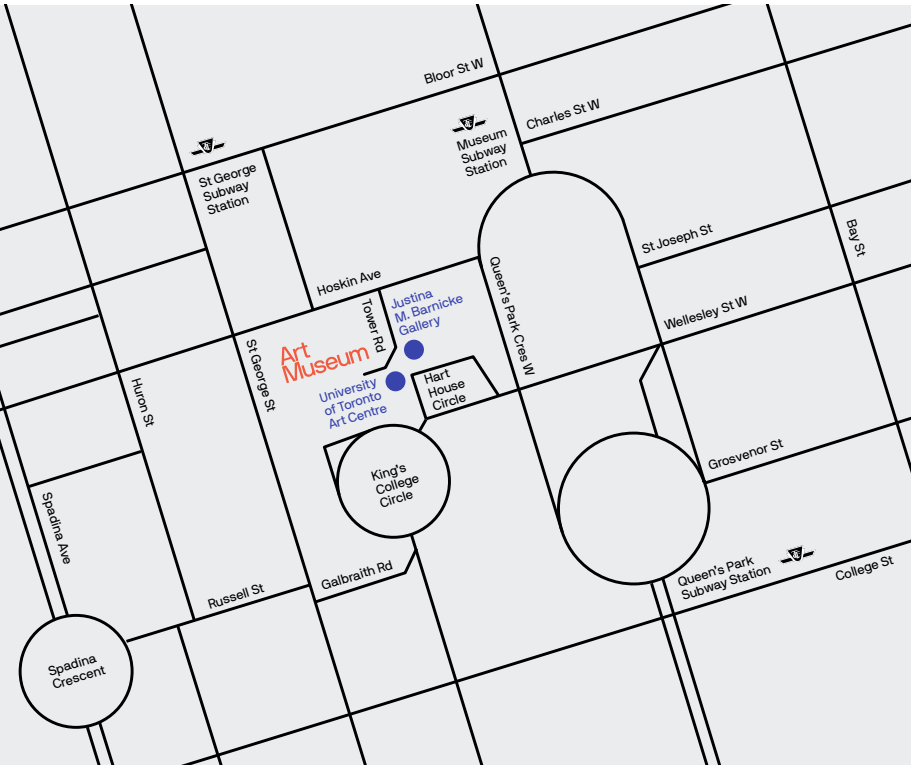
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