

(COMMUNITY) VIDEO ART

DCTV'S EXPANDED DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

JOEL NEVILLE ANDERSON

On the edge of New York's Chinatown in a landmark firehouse constructed in the late 1800s, one finds trappings of creative reuse characteristic of converted lofts: exposed brick, high ceilings, and a fireman's pole running floor to floor. Freely roaming the second floor office space and slipping into an anonymous door resembling an apartment unit entrance, a handsome dog was my first clue that the arts nonprofit I was visiting as a summer youth media workshop instructor had a deep and complex relationship to its city's history that extended beyond architectural references.

Occupied by Downtown Community Television, or DCTV, since 1977, the former firehouse at 87 Lafayette Street is divided into multiple spaces that reflect this organization's diverse activities: a fire truck loading bay that has been converted into an open screening space and a suite of digital video editing rooms; a second floor that includes general administrative offices, an education department, and equipment rentals open to DCTV members; and a peaked third floor that houses a documentary production unit producing work on contract for HBO, as well as a small studio used on occasion for public screenings. On a typical day, administrators hustle through the building, visiting filmmakers sit making use of post-production resources, and the dog moves in and out of the living quarters where the organization's founders have been residing for the past three decades in a historic and remarkably generative live/work situation.

Founded in 1972 by Jon Alpert and Keiko Tsuno, DCTV has survived the neoliberal transformation of the city's social, economic, and cultural geography due to the asset of its entanglement in the center's landmarked real estate property, in addition to the diversity of its various nonprofit and commercial enterprises. This physical persistence, as well as the continued leadership of its two co-founders, has seen a constant renegotiation of DCTV's organizational mission within the political possibilities of its urban surroundings. With varying emphases on video production equipment rental, production services, branded content production, youth media education center, professional development, video distributor, and theatrical exhibitor, DCTV has continued to adapt.

Due to its current prominence in the fields of progressive documentary practice and media education, DCTV's part in the video art and performance scenes of the early 1970s has not received ample study. Yet the connection is an important component of DCTV's organizational history, and remains significant to the continued activities of this groundbreaking media arts center. During the period of its emergence, DCTV's media activities were marked by a distinct commingling of personal vision and community activism, defining a politics of subjectivity now visible in its institutional mediation as producer and nonprofit administrator. An investigation of the organization's early experimentations clarifies the relationship between video art and the adjacent community video movement of the period, and informs our understanding of DCTV's expanded documentary practice today.

Though DCTV is now synonymous with its physical location at 87 Lafayette, the organization actually started in a nearby apartment on Canal Street, where Alpert and Tsuno began living together in 1970. The couple first met in December 1968, when Tsuno moved into the apartment next door to Alpert. A young artist and recent graduate of an art school in Japan, Tsuno had moved to New York from Tokyo to gain exposure to pop art, and was increasingly drawn to emerging practices in conceptual art. Raised in Port Chester, Alpert was a Colgate University student doing his junior year at New York University, where he became increasingly drawn to social justice activism. Though he returned to Colgate for his senior year, earning a B.A. in urban studies in 1970, Alpert moved back to Canal Street and into Tsuno's loft upon completing his degree.

After initial experiments in 8mm and conceptual art, Tsuno became dissatisfied with her work in these areas and asked a fellow Japanese artist what kind of camera she should buy. He suggested she go into "video." This was the first time she had heard the name of the medium that would come to define her and Alpert's work. Upon her friend's recommendation, she attended the first product demonstration of the ½" Portapak system by Sony Corporation in the city. Bypassing Sony's lengthy waiting time for the import license required to make an order from the manufacturer, Tsuno instead had her mother in Japan purchase a Portapak system directly from the company's headquarters in Tokyo at approximately USD $1,600, and mail it straight to her in the US.[1]

For citations and references, please access www.mfj-online.org/anderson-dctv-notes/

OPPOSITE DCTV, Community Reporting Unit (1970-1974), documentation. All images courtesy DCTV.

It's important to stress that for Tsuno, turning to video at this time was not a matter of convenience, nor was video a particularly logical tool for documentation, given the high cost and unwieldiness of early video equipment. Tsuno's interest was specifically in the unique properties of video as a medium. She recognized the possibility for immediacy—relaying an image to a television monitor without the processing time of film—as the future of media. In addition, she believed the film image appeared one level removed from experience, while the softness of the video image appeared closer to one's perception of reality. This element of mirroring a representation of reality in such a fluid manner was new and exciting for her. In addition to these phenomenological and practical degrees of firstness, she notes she was drawn to the medium due to its undefined potential as an artistic material for exploration.

Carrying the Portapak's clunky camera ensemble (consisting of a camera, recording deck, and audio recorder) in a shopping cart, Tsuno began experimenting with video by creating short ethnographic sketches of communities in the Lower East Side. She dressed in drag while shooting, as the neighborhoods she passed through were potentially dangerous to a young woman, particularly one carrying expensive electronics.[2] Tsuno actively exhibited the resulting "tapes" alongside other early artists engaged in video and performance in the New York art scene of the late 1960s and '70s. It was these ethnographic videos that made Alpert interested in video's potential.[3]

Between 1970 and 1972, Tsuno earned money waiting tables, while Alpert worked as a taxi driver. Tsuno describes this time as their experimental "fun" stage. Tsuno actively participated in the art scene with the support but limited engagement of Alpert, while they both became increasingly involved in community activism. The work they made during this period preceded their establishment as a community media "center," their purchase of the firehouse, or their assumption of the DCTV name. However, their wide interests during these early, experimental years lead directly to the prolonged engagement with technological innovation, urban space, and cultural politics for which the couple is best known.

The provocative, freewheeling *Is This Music?* (1971) reveals substantial overlaps between Tsuno's and Alpert's early, experimental video art and their later media practices.[4] Seventeen minutes in length, the video features Alpert, Tsuno, and Tsuno's cousin Yoko Maruyama—a classically trained pianist who was living in New York during this time to study jazz—in a series of vignettes shot at various locations throughout New York: the Brooklyn Bridge; Staten Island before the Statue of Liberty; Tsuno and Alpert's Canal Street apartment; and the apartment rooftop. In a hoarse rendition of the US national anthem, Alpert blows on a trumpet and Tsuno operates a saxophone while bashing sheets of metal and long cardboard tubing. In various levels of undress, or trading festive hats, their proximate performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" teases the viewer to see a picture of and tribute to the nation while consolidating urban space, and displaying a wild sense of play. This comic or parodied sense of patriotism foresees the sharply critical perspective of their later exposés on American government and foreign conflicts, while also exemplifying the playful attitude that distinguished Alpert's and Tsuno's work from the staunch nationalism of the period, as well as the seriousness of their art-video peers.[5]

Is This Music? was initially exhibited at The Kitchen as a ten-channel installation, monitors stacked on top of each other in an open space allowing for the free movement of visitors. Cardboard tubes like those that appear in the film were distributed within the space, engendering a participatory sense of play in the gallery that connected to the events on the screens. Based on the success of this exhibition, Tsuno, Alpert, and Maruyama were invited to participate in the Annual Avant-Garde Festival of New York in 1971, a celebration of the experimental music scene organized by Charlotte Moorman. DCTV works were also shown on public television through David Loxton's TV Lab program *Video and Television Review* (VTR) airing on WNET/Thirteen, which profiled the work of diverse groups of video makers and featured interviews by Russell Connor. Within such contexts, DCTV's work was displayed and discussed alongside that of renowned and now-canonical artists such as Shigeko Kubota, Nam June Paik, John Cage, and Shirley Clarke.



DCTV, *Is This Music?* (1971), The Kitchen, exhibition still.



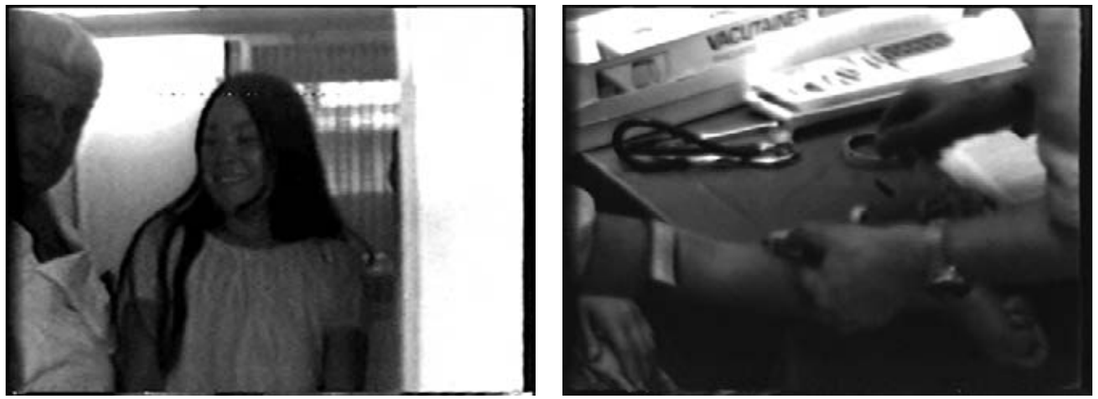
Tsuno and Alpert's correspondence to the formal art world was not always fluid and reciprocal, however. In pursuing their early video projects, the couple sought the assistance of an unnamed local video collective to learn proper editing procedures. When the group charged them $25 for a simple lesson in best practices for editing ½" video tape, the couple became determined to hold their own free workshops for the local community. This would be the start of DCTV's educational workshops, which would meet every Thursday at their Canal Street apartment, and which they continued for the next 20 years until their formalization under DCTV's nonprofit organization. This period of the early to mid-1970s also saw Tsuno's continued interests as an artist and Alpert's interests as a budding documentarian/reporter converge, intermix, and become something new.

An important step toward this was when Alpert, as a young taxi driver, participated in a strike in the Bronx of the yellow cab drivers union—Taxi Drivers and Allied Workers local 3036. Alpert asked Tsuno to join him on this strike to produce a tape they could show to union members as a way of uniting their continued interests and enthusiasm. The resulting tape, *Taxi* (1971), shows Alpert and Tsuno working out the production methodologies that would define much of their early work: Tsuno operating camera, and Alpert managing sound while interviewing onscreen subjects. *Taxi* features the first appearance of Alpert's distinctive voiceover, with his rushed, non-rhotic New York accent contributing an eager, personable feel to the video—one that is characteristic of their early works. The tone of this specific video, however, betrays Alpert's professional and emotional proximity to the labor action being documented, resembling a playful agitprop short more so than the dry, no-frills video journalism their DCTV-branded productions would later come to embody. In *Taxi*, the couple's skilled conversational approach to subjects is intact, with Alpert asking driver after driver why they are striking without providing any professional introduction or priming for the camera. But this familiar strategy appears alongside decidedly uncharacteristic formal elements. For instance, the video features cutaways to title cards spelled out with dimes (a reference to the ten-cent-per-fare deduction scheme instituted by management, supposedly for union benefits), as well as the comical insertion of stock footage of fighting seals (described in voiceover as a documentary record of the union bosses reacting to the successful bottom-up organizing of rank and file workers).

The political efforts documented in *Taxi* caused the controversial union leader Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. to resign. For Tsuno and Alpert, this proved that video could be highly useful to community organizing. As Tsuno describes it, this project—initially undertaken as a personal investment connected to the threat of one's professional wellbeing—revealed to Alpert "the



DCTV, **ABOVE** Downtown Community Television Youth Program (1977), **RIGHT** Community Reporting Unit (1970-1974), documentation.



DCTV, *Chinatown Health Fair* (1971), frame enlargements.

power of video," with the potential to organize people such as taxi drivers who are by the nature of their vocation set in disparate locations and not always capable of efficient communication.

The success of these projects, in addition to a NYSCA grant for individual artists in the amount of $2,000, allowed the couple to dedicate themselves more seriously to production work and the organizational management of a media arts center. Formally founded as DCTV in 1972, they began creating shorts on local issues, as well as instating their weekly video workshops at their Canal Street apartment, showing people how to shoot and edit tapes, and lending out equipment. Even prior to purchasing the firehouse in 1979, they were servicing participants from senior citizens to high school students in remarkably high numbers. As Erik Barnouw recounts in one of DCTV's few appearances in formal histories of documentary media, "during its first seven years DCTV gave free training to no less than 7,000 people, with instructions in English, Chinese, and Spanish."[6] As Tsuno recalls, the unpredictable nature of running a media arts center from their apartment required round the clock on-call preparations not unlike a firefighter, noting "Sometimes, I didn't change my clothes because I knew somebody was coming, and I didn't want to meet somebody with my, you know, nightwear, so I went to bed just dressed up."[7]

For these first DCTV productions, Tsuno would work as camera operator, Alpert as the interviewer and sound recordist, and Maruyama would handle the recording deck, monitor incoming audio, and often take up the camera herself. It's important to observe that this balance of genders in production roles was relatively uncommon in DCTV's peer alternative video collectives, as well as amongst documentary filmmakers and news reporters of the time. It's also worth noting that the group didn't demonstrate aspirations toward an elevated professional status in journalism, instead seizing upon their relatable appearance as an asset by using a baby carriage to wheel around the bulky recording component, until development of the more manageable ¾" U-Matic cassette systems followed by BetaCam allowed for greater mobility.

Without an established physical center, Tsuno and Alpert purchased a used mail truck for approximately five dollars in a city auction in order to create a mobile unit for the organization. The vehicle was outfitted for reporting, as well as exhibiting tapes through multiple onboard television sets, tape decks, and video cameras. Parking unannounced on Canal Street or elsewhere, they would lure passersby unfamiliar with video by presenting them with an unexpected electronic mirror of their own image. People randomly encountering DCTV's mobile reporting unit would laugh, jump around, and generally improvise a performance for the camera on the street. After capturing peoples' attention in this manner, the DCTV crew would show them a pre-recorded tape, one of their early programs on community issues in Chinatown.

Tsuno describes the exhibition of work on DCTV's community reporting unit as her and Alpert's own informal film school. The drift of viewers' attention spans, caught by this video street spectacle, would, in practice, dictate the editing patterns for DCTV's tapes going forward. As Alpert adds, "The audience voted with their feet," "If they liked something, they'd sit around and watch. If they didn't, they were off to where they needed to go."[8] While Tsuno and Alpert's general impression of a documentary work was of segments either cut to thirty minutes or sixty minutes fit for theatrical exhibition or more likely in television broadcast programming blocks, their practical operations compelled them to make their own projects far shorter for this form of spectatorship in transit. They did this responding to where the audience—or rather passersby—laughed, appeared to get bored, or simply walked away. "Sometimes we thought we had made something great, only to realize it didn't resonate with the public. It pushed us to try to tell a story in a concise fashion, in a way that connected with the audience. It was a great learning experience that kept us humble," comments Alpert.[9] This unique exhibition format pulled the running times of early DCTV projects toward ten minutes, however with variations based on the project.

Their 1971 tape *Chinatown Health Fair* offers a demonstrative example of their formal operations as well as social interactions in the local community at this time. The soft grey of analogue video's black and white images show signs of their improvised manual splicing, and the work is again narrated by Alpert's distinctive voice, though Chinese language versions were also produced. Establishing shots show a New York City block closed for traffic with trailers, booths, check-in tables, and crowds milling about. Tsuno herself appears on camera to play a patient in a kind of reenactment performance of a sample medical test. Alpert's voiceover explains that this is a community-organized health fair providing medical screenings for those otherwise barred from care due to finance and language, and in part conducted by members of the community who had received basic training. As his voiceover proclaims, "the center of Chinatown became a hospital in the streets." But instead of signing up for a free medical test, or training to give one, Tsuno and Alpert produced this video, finalized for community screenings in association with local Chinatown groups and improvised exhibition via the mobile reporting unit.

In order to involve passing walkers in the cinematic or televisual experience they were offering, the DCTV mobile reporting unit did something familiar for street showmanship. They sought to perform a trick in order to captivate their audience, feeding images of that audience to the mounted monitors to be experienced in real time—a novelty for those unfamiliar with video. In exhibiting the technology in this way, they demonstrated that video's basic capacity for simultaneous recording and transmission could be utilized not only to encourage a fascinated confrontation with an image of the self, but also to influence social relations. This summation of video's immediacy models the basic perceptual phenomenon of its use, while also underscoring the medium's potential to facilitate a community's self-representation. While the video image's status as electronic mirror has often been framed in terms of narcissism, in the case of DCTV's practice, the moment of self-recognition is literally followed by a confrontation with the larger social realm. A street performance facilitating a fascination with the self here leads directly to an unexpected instance of community engagement, revealing how, for DCTV, video's capacity for self-documentation was inseparable from its potential to broach a public sphere and redefine urban space. The politics of subjectivity DCTV engaged in with reference to 1970s video art, and the social justice documentary practice they developed, together provide useful terms of analysis by which to approach the organization's complex institutional mediation of personal and social documentary work today, as well as the status of contemporary documentary practice more broadly.



Keiko Tsuno and Jon Alpert, In front of the Downtown Community Television Firehouse at Lafayette and White (2012), documentation.



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FRONT: Sondra Perry, *Ashes for Three Monitor Work Station* (2016), Squeaky Wheel, installation view. Courtesy the artist.
BACK: Colab, *Potato Wolf* (1980), screengrab. Courtesy Colab.

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DCTV, *Is This Music?* (1971), The Kitchen, exhibition still.

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Film by Abraham Ravett

Holding Hands with Ilse (2017) 93 min.
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Walbrzych, Poland 1950

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Joel Neville Anderson: DCTV Notes and Citations

“Bypassing Sony’s lengthy waiting time for the import license required to make an order from the manufacturer, Tsuno instead had her mother in Japan purchase a Portapak system directly from the company’s headquarters in Tokyo at approximately USD $1,600, and mail it directly to her in the US.”
[1] Interview with Keiko Tsuno and the author, February 12, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, all further quotations from Tsuno are taken from this interview.

“Carrying the Portapak’s clunky camera ensemble (consisting of a camera, recording deck, and audio recorder) by pushing a shopping cart throughout the Lower East Side, she dressed in drag as a boy in order to disguise herself in the neighborhoods she passed through, potentially dangerous as a young woman as well as someone carrying expensive electronics.”
[2] Kevin Howley, Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.

“It was these ethnographic videos that made Alpert interested in video’s potential.”
[3] Tsuno’s first complete video work, entitled Video Poem, was exhibited at The Kitchen (then at the Mercer Arts Center). This short film is both in need of restoration in its original half-inch open reel video tape format, as well as digital transfer. However a portion is viewable as a background image to the ending credits to the WNET/Thirteen program Video Tape Review or “VTR” airing 1975, which profiled DCTV’s activities up until that point, and interviewed Jon Alpert, Keiko Tsuno, and Yoko Maruyama.

“The provocative, freewheeling *Is This Music?* (1971) reveals substantial overlaps between Tsuno’s and Alpert’s early, experimental video art and their later media practices.”
[4] Unlike the majority of the couple’s output under the DCTV institutional authorship, which is distributed either by the organization itself, or the video and media art advocate Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), *Is This Music?* is also in peril, with a single copy recently discovered in DCTV’s archives.

“This comic or parodied sense of patriotism foresees the sharply critical perspective of their later exposés on American government and foreign conflicts, while also exemplifying the playful attitude that distinguished Alpert’s and Tsuno’s work from the staunch nationalism of the period, as well as the seriousness of their art-video peers.”
[5]While this essay focuses on the confluence of community video and video art in DCTV’s foundational years, the group is better known for their television documentaries critiquing the long arm of American empire. They were famously the first American television crew to be allowed into Cuba to produce a documentary since the 1959 revolution, creating Cuba: The People (1974) and selling it to PBS. Cuba was also the first ½” color video work to be broadcast on television. As Alpert recalls, “It was literally the first or second one off the assembly line” (Jon Alpert, quoted in J. Hoberman, “Jon Alpert’s Video Journalism: Talking to the People,” American Film: Magazine of the Film and Television Arts 6:8 [June 1981]: 54). The success of this project was followed by a number of other major broadcast projects at PBS with the support of WNET’s David Loxton, including Chinatown: Immigrants in America (1976), and Vietnam: Picking Up the Pieces (1977). On the latter of these projects, DCTV was the first U.S. TV crew admitted into Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. After working on contract projects at PBS, Alpert began producing independent projects for the NBC network’s Today series. However, Alpert’s long and productive NBC contract abruptly ended when his footage focusing on civilian casualties in Iraq during the first Gulf War led to the cancellation of the news program three hours prior to broadcast. Subsequent DCTV productions have been made with HBO for cable broadcast, such as Baghdad ER (2006) and China’s Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province (2009).

“As Erik Barnouw recounts in one of DCTV’s few appearances in formal histories of documentary media, ‘during its first seven years DCTV gave free training to no less than 70,00 people, with instructions in English, Chinese, and Spanish.'”
[6] Erik Barnouw, Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film, 289.

“As Tsuno recalls, the unpredictable nature of running a media arts center from their apartment required round the clock on-call preparations not unlike a firefighter, noting ‘Sometimes, I didn’t change my clothes because I knew somebody was coming, and I didn’t want to meet somebody with my, you know, nightwear, so I went to bed just dressed up.'”
[7] “Pioneer Of Community TV Celebrates 40 Years,” Around the Nation, NPR (New York, NY: December 2, 2012), http://www.npr.org/2012/12/02/166336709/pioneer-of-community-tv-celebrates-40-years.

“As Alpert adds, ‘The audience voted with their feet,’ ‘If they liked something, they’d sit around and watch. If they didn’t, they were off to where they needed to go.'”
[8] Lyndon Stambler, “The Accidental Filmmaker,” Scene: News and views for the Colgate community (2010 Autumn), 38.

“’Sometimes we thought we had made something great, only to realize it didn’t resonate with the public. It pushed us to try to tell a story in a concise fashion, in a way that connected with the audience. It was a great learning experience that kept us humble.’”
[9] “The Early Days of Video: A Conversation with Jon Alpert & Keiko Tsuno,” IFP: Independent Filmmaker Project, October 3, 2012, http://www.ifp.org/resources/the-early-days-of-video-a-conversation-with-jon-alpert-keiko-tsuno.