The theme of the multimedia reviews of this issue is the use of experimental media in the 1960s and 1970s at the intersection of art and architecture. The tactical use of film and video incited a new understanding of the built environment. New forms of practice blurred the line between building and performance in ways that still resonate today. These documents require detailed and equally innovative historical analysis.

BEATRIZ COLOMINA

Ant Farm, director
Chip Lord, executive producer

**Ant Farm Video**

“There was born in America during World War II a generation of children who were to be introduced to the new invention, television, at a formative age. This generation, different from those older whose view of reality was catalyzed before television and those younger who never knew a reality without the tube, is the ‘television generation.’ They grew up as the medium itself was growing up.”

...did not, of course, only anticipate, “Admirals, RCA’s, G.E.’s, Sylvania’s, Zeniths and Hoffmans will fly apart in a cathartic explosion.” *Media Burn* was presented in this document as a “statement” against “television addiction” and its effect of producing a “narrowing view of reality.” It was to be a message delivered by delegates from that television generation who had an intimate but not yet naturalized relation to television and who hence seemed ideally positioned (historically speaking) both to understand the power and functioning of the new “medium” and to adopt a critically self-conscious position with respect to it. *Media Burn* was, furthermore, a statement scripted and engineered by three representatives of that generation who were trained as architects: Doug Michels had graduated from Yale University in 1967, Chip Lord from Tulane in 1968, and Curtis Schreier from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) that same year. As the event’s press release stressed, they were now cultural agents committed to “present[ing] works in the public domain.”

*Media Burn* did not, of course, only take the form (or format) of a performance staged at the Cow Palace. Designed to attract the press and their multiple formats, archival artifacts, and even very nature pose particular challenges to, and opportunities for, historical scholarship. The formal, functional, material, temporal, and tactical character of this aspect of Ant Farm’s production, as well as its modes of dissemination and the question of its very location(s), implicitly problematize more traditional descriptive tools and methodologies.

This important release on DVD of video work by the Ant Farm collective (1968–1978) makes a significant contribution to our ability, as architectural historians, to access time-based material and hence to investigate the group’s tactical responses to the complex of forces impacting architectural (and more broadly cultural) practices during this historical period. The compilation brings together seven diverse tracks, a diversity speaking at once to the multiple and changing make-up of the collective and to shifts in the way they used video. *Ant Farm Video* includes, in the first instance, some of the group’s earliest experimentation with Sony Portapaks: *Ant Farm’s Dirty Dishes* (1970–71), a “video scrapbook” of communal life in their Sausalito warehouse; *Inflatables Illustrated* (1971), a reworking in video format of Ant Farm’s...
anniversary of its production; and Amarillo, Texas, on the twentieth Ant Farm’s famous roadside attraction in recent reediting, as the title suggests, of 1974/1994 their bizarre antics; news anchors trying to make sense of as of talk show appearances with local Romeo at Yale ing the video works. The first, fields within explanatory text accompany- films” are accessed through interactive sequent fate. Contemporary Arts Museum and its sub- video about the time capsule Ant Farm recently edited and temporally entropic Capsule 1972–1984 (2000), another Ned T elly and the Golden Spanner, as well as of talk show appearances with local news anchors trying to make sense of their bizarre antics; Cadillac Ranch 1974/1994 (1994), a revisiting and more recent reediting, as the title suggests, of Ant Farm’s famous roadside attraction in Amarillo, Texas, on the twentieth anniversary of its production; and Time Capsule 1972–1984 (2000), another recently edited and temporally entropic video about the time capsule Ant Farm developed for the opening of Houston’s Contemporary Arts Museum and its sub-sequent fate.

In addition, two short “hidden bonus films” are accessed through interactive fields within explanatory text accompanying the video works. The first, Johnny Romeo at Yale, is a short piece derived from video shot during Ant Farm’s spring 1971 Truckstop Tour, and depicts Michels in a rubber mask introducing their inflatable, ICE-9, and a local amateur singer who they convince to perform in the gallery at Yale in lieu of giving their lecture. The second presents Ant Farm’s remarkable House of the Century (1971–73) in Angleton, Texas, and consists of digitized 35 mm slides cut into video footage of the house shot from a boat on the adjacent MoJo Lake. Not only does this footage of the house offer valuable documentation of the work in its pristine state, it suggests the conceptual connections between Ant Farm’s more conventionally architectural production and experimental video. Dating back to the earliest drawings of February 1971, the House of the Century was depicted as being suspended within circuits of information flow, as a mediatic relay point between video recording and playback equipment, and later as a repository for electronic media archives. The editing of this bonus film, as it appears in Ant Farm Video, reminds us, however, that we are no longer in the realm of video proper, just as negotiating the menus and the very modes of access to these additional tracks are a function of a distinct generation of interactive media, the DVD. Ant Farm Video does not, then, simply make this time-based work available but it also edits and reformats it.

The early half-inch videotape (both open-reel and reel-to-reel) formats initially used by Ant Farm and the playback equipment necessary for viewing it have long become technological ruins. In fact, they were even in Ant Farm’s time. And videocassette and VHS standards are themselves now distinctly antiquated. The transfer of early video to digi-beta and the release of this sort of work on DVD serve an important role in preservation and archiving, just as they do in ensuring contemporary circulation. But these new technological substrates also mark our historical distance from earlier modes of viewing the work as video, both with respect to the social context and the technological milieu within which it emerged. Moreover, our perceptual apparatus has been, to invoke a Benjaminian formulation that remains all too relevant, “retooled” through encounters with subsequent technological transformations.

To complicate this situation, many of the videos on Ant Farm Video have been reedited multiple times. Indeed as works they remain distinctly fluid in the eyes and hands of their creators, serving as raw material for multiple revisiting and recasting. In this sense most are not exactly archival. Their ambigious status might render the works somewhat problematic from the perspective of historical scholarship (for instance, it is certainly difficult to accurately date them). Yet that status offers an important reminder of the ethos of feedback and exchange, and even a demonstration of the centrality afforded not to the object as such, but to the circulation of information that was characteristic of the underground network of early documentary video and tactical “guerilla television” with which Ant Farm was affiliated in the early 1970s. We need to ask then, on many levels, not only what the individual works speak to historically but also what sort of historical documents we find embodied in this compilation.

Media Burn offers many clues to the question of what might have motivated a group of young architects to adopt magnetic tape, Sony Portapaks, instant playback equipment, cable channels, and even broadcast networks as a new set of tools for operating on the environment. Announcing the pioneering assault of Ant Farm’s brave “media matadors” on the “autocratic political forms” that controlled media space, Media Burn’s “artist president” announced in comical Kennedy-esque diction, “I say it is time to loosen the grip of mass media on the flow of information and images!”

At stake in the production of this work, as with many titles in Ant Farm Video, was the question of how to operate within a new type of public domain. From Ant Farm’s perspective that domain was no longer encompassed by traditional social, educational, and political institutions and their spatial and material correlates—whether conventional urban spaces, architecture, or earlier media formats from print to cinema—even if those all continued to remain present and important. What appeared to them (as to others) to have increasingly troubled older spatiotemporal paradigms, and even the very locus of political power, was television, with its largely private, highly centralized and controlled forms of programming, its lack of mechanisms for feedback, its dispersed network of information distribution, its capacity of transmitting the same information to millions of locations simultaneously, and its appetite for “media events,” as well as its familiar interface, the TV set.

Television could be everywhere and nowhere: its information structures undermined traditional logics of place
while giving rise to new forms of territoriality and new modalities of social and political control. What Samuel Weber has theorized as television’s “splitting of the unity of place” posed implicit challenges to architecture at this moment, challenges that Ant Farm took seriously as a provocation for architectural experimentation: how could the discipline comprehend the structure and functioning of this transformed environment? How could it generate techniques of representing or “capturing” that reality, replete with its new temporalities, modes of transmission, and techniques of power? And how could it intervene to progressive ends?

Talking to a reporter from the Berkeley Barb on the occasion of Media Burn, one Ant Farm member explained: “when you start working with the communications medium you find it’s been stitched up as tightly as the automobile has. And instead of polluting air it pollutes thought patterns, instead of wasting valuable resources it wastes valuable time.” Ant Farm recognized that technologies affiliated with television could be employed in the service of alternative cultural visions by intervening in the flow of information. Portable video was not only used as a tool of research and documentation but also as their primary weapon in developing strategies through which to talk back to (or through) television—not simply in the sense of speaking truth to power but in attempting to develop strategies of ironic citation, even mimicry, with which to unstick those structures of power. The ambition was to occupy a new type of environment (media space) differently, to open up new spaces, to take control over time.

Earlier Ant Farm video experiments had taken a different if equally instructive form. Perhaps their most compelling early study of an “environment” captured in time was World’s Largest Bridge, a hypnotically rhythmic record of the Media Van’s journey across one of two parallel 24-mile-long, double-lane decks that traverse the lake from New Orleans to Mandeville. The unbroken shot is a brilliant study in duration, suggesting a reflection on the ceding of the national highway system’s priority as an organizing infrastructure with the emergence of an “electronic communications highway,” the sixties predecessor of the information superhighway of the nineties.

Unlike Media Burn, this tape was far from televisual in character, and it is hard to imagine it being transmitted by that system. After the opening sequence of entry onto the causeway, the principal view is through the windscreen, with the asphalt, white lines, railings, and second deck receding toward a vast horizon that neatly divides the screen into two halves, just it divides the water from an overcast sky. From the length of the tape—24:10 minutes—and the length of the bridge—24 miles—we can deduce an even 60 miles-per-hour speed. If one might anticipate monotony from these parameters, the tape proves to be far from repetitious. It is punctuated, in the first instance, by other components of the infrastructure that emerge into and pass out of view—turnarounds for emergency vehicles, changes in elevation to allow the passage of boats, signage, occasional lighting, etcetera. In the second instance one finds less preempted if not atypical events: being overtaken and moving left to avoid a broken-down car, as well as a series of self-conscious breaks in the camera angle. In perhaps the most disorienting move, the camera is held out the window to shoot the road surface directly before righting itself. One finds oneself simultaneously enjoying the slow transition of the primary framing and hoping for further departures from it.

Whether we are considering their documentation of environments and events, process-based forms of exchange, or tactical media inversions, it is crucial to stress that Ant Farm’s use of video technology was not conceived as translating literally into a modality for design nor a means of facilitating a more realistic or virtual representation of space or of one’s potential flow through it in time. Watching the slow, pulsing rhythm of the bridge produces a reading of those environments quite distinct from other attempts by architects to develop graphic means and representational tools for depicting time or for capturing the anomic American highway environment, such as appeared in Donald Appleyard and Kevin Lynch’s 1964 The View from the Road or Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s 1972 Learning from Las Vegas.
Ant Farm’s use of electronic media was also radically different from attempts to simulate movement through space, as was (and is) often sought by computer graphics and animation via three-dimensional modeling, exemplified for instance by the Architecture Machine Group at Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s URBANS (1967) or, much later, their Aspen Movie Map (1978–79). The latter was a project not incidentally conceived as applicable for simulating spaces of potential military intervention and hence for use training soldiers to operate within a new territory. But, as demonstrated in Ant Farm Video, they did attempt to capture something of contemporary relations between subjects and their milieu—not, to reiterate, in the register of depiction or verisimilitude but in terms of modeling visual structures, processes of control, and techniques of power at work in that (televisional) environment in order to develop strategies for opening up alternative lines of communication within it, strategies for occupying a small slice, or moment, of that public realm.

Reflecting on the social function of film as a tool of mediation between subjects and their environment, Benjamin famously argued that the “optical unconscious” revealed by the filmic apparatus not only produces “insight into the necessities governing our lives” but that it “manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action.”1 Video was of a course a distinct apparatus from film, but as made evident in this compilation, through engaging video’s technical capacities and modes of dissemination, Ant Farm managed both to produce a certain insight regarding forces governing modes of life at that moment—what Media Burn’s artist president identified as “Militarism, Monopoly, and the Mass Media” and their connection to television—and to suggest possibilities for new and historically contingent fields of action.

If a subsequent generation has grown up while ever newer mediums were growing up—those facilitated by personal computing and the internet, with which come updated problems of archiving, collection, access formats, and modes of scholarly reading—Ant Farm’s video work serves to remind us of the importance of continuously interrogating the specific workings of technologies impacting architectural work, not in order to refuse technological change but to ask how to render its effects legible, even how to imagine reconfigurations and alternative spaces of communication that expand the public domain. We might then paraphrase the artist president’s ironic question and rhetorically ask you, “brave Americans,” whether at least once in your life, you haven’t wanted to kick the shit out of your computer?

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Notes
1. Ant Farm, Media Burn souvenir booklet, 1975. In addition to representatives of the mass media, many Ant Farm friends and collaborators participated. On Ant Farm’s video work, see the excellent article by Steve Seid, “Tunneling Through the Wasteland: Ant Farm Video,” in Ant Farm, 1968–78, ed. Constance M. Lewallen and Seid (Berkeley, 2004), 22–37.
3. These drawings are in the collection of Marilyn Oshman and were included in Ant Farm: Radical Hardware, an exhibition dedicated to pre-Media Burn Ant Farm that was curated by Mark Lasuita and myself and on view at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at Buell Hall, Columbia University, 24 March through 2 May 2008.
4. The opening menu of Ant Farm Video indicates Media Burn, Cadillac Ranch, and “Way Underground Video,” the latter taking us to a further menu organized within an image of a toy ant farm. Inflatable Illustrated and World’s Longest Bridge appear above ground and Ant Farm’s Dirty Dishes, OFF-AIR Australia, and Time Capsule 1972–1984 below in the ant’s burrows.
5. In this speech, adapted from one given by George McGovern two years after losing the 1972 presidential election to Richard Nixon, the artist president pointed to “an unworthy war,” “political scandal,” and “economic turmoil,” declaring in all too haunting terms the impact of contemporary forces of “Militarism, Monopoly, and the Mass Media.”

Architecture and Animation in the Films of Gordon Matta-Clark

The Films of Gordon Matta-Clark
Films from 1971–77 (with some contemporary restorations), eight programs plus The Wall
New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, VHS and DVD, running times vary, www.eai.org

1964 was a year of transitions for Gordon Matta-Clark. While in Paris, the twenty-one-year-old student scripted a number of alternative scenarios about his future: “If things work financially, I would like to finish school at Cornell and try to get some practical, technical experience in films towards I don’t know what exactly. If I can’t come to NY right away, I would like to enroll in a cinema school in Paris,” he writes in a letter to his mother Anne Clark in April of that year, and asks to talk “about a career with films [sic]” with his former stepfather Hollis Alpert, who was a noted film critic in New York.1 A week later, Gordon would sketch a few further “ideas about getting tangled up into the film industry,” and after having apparently done some research, he “weighed up” his “options” in more detail. He could either “stay in Paris and attend I.D.H.E.C. [Institut des hautes études cinématographiques]” which would require two years of technical training, or “return to Cornell for a year, then transfer to Columbia” for his senior year “and at the same time try to spend summers working around in films to acquire technical experience.”2

None of these study plans ever materialized. Following a brief internship in an architecture office in Rome during the summer of 1964, the young student would eventually decide to