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_Anton Perich Presents_ and _TV Party:_ Queering Television on
Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982

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Abstract

*Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party*: Queering Television via Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982

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Though largely overlooked in academia, Manhattan public access television became a forum that allowed a variety of behaviors, sexualities, and genders to invade a highly controlled hegemonic apparatus in the 1970s and early 1980s. In this thesis, I argue that Anton Perich’s *Anton Perich Presents* (1973-c.1978) and Glenn O’Brien’s *TV Party* (1978-1982) worked to actively queer the form and content of television. Since these shows grew from rather exclusive underground communities, I argue that the broadcasting of these fringe personalities, genders, sexualities, and behaviors to a broader, cable-viewing public formed unique queer counterpublics. I situate *Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party* in relation to the norms of broadcast television in order to establish the limits, norms, and codes of these diverse genres and in order to ascertain viewer’s expectations of them. By positioning *Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party* in conversation with mainstream television shows, I identify a queerness these public access shows lent to television and its viewers through their deliberate manipulations of the medium.
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Public Access’s Artistic, Technological, and Social Possibilities in New York City

Public access television emerged out of three interrelated events in the mid-twentieth century. First, in 1948, John Walson founded cable television when, as an appliance store owner, he realized that the limited appeal of his television sets to his local consumers was due to the poor reception of Philadelphia’s television signals in his rural, eastern Pennsylvania town. Identifying the Pennsylvania mountains as the signal-blocking offender, he erected an antenna tower on New Boston Mountain that overlooked Mahanoy City and ran a cable from the antenna to the television sets in his store. The tower sent the signals via cable directly to his store and, after witnessing the success of his experiment, Walson convinced local residents to hook up to his cable line.1 This enterprise became known as Community Antenna Television (CATV), a term that references the utopian, community-building possibilities Walson envisioned when he united Pennsylvania’s rural and urban residents through a shared source of information.

While cable television was still known as CATV through the 1970s, the three major networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, continued to dominate cable television throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The communities formed and strengthened by cable television were those who supported, or were at least willing to uphold, the values of the status quo. Early radio-to-television sitcoms, such as *Amos ’n’ Andy* and *The Goldbergs*, that made use of ethnic and racial comedy suffered from “the popular promotion of assimilationism that accompanied the mass migration of immigrant and second-

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1 “John Walson Sr., 78, Pioneer of Cable TV,” *The New York Times*, 30 March 1993, Obituary section. Before persuading the residents to try cable television, he used coaxial cables to improve picture quality and improved the sound by developing amplifiers. He charged $100 to hook up the cable system in residents’ homes and $2 per month for service.
generation White families from inner-city neighborhoods to suburban tracts.” The shows’ focus on “hardship or difference” due to race and class conflicts “suddenly seemed old-fashioned” in light of the emerging white, heterosexual, nuclear television families. Throughout the 1950s and largely into the 1960s, sitcoms such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, and The Donna Reed Show* dominated the airwaves. These shows revolved around white, middle-class families that emphasized familial love, lessons learned, and moral growth, as well as a sense of stability, togetherness, and clear distinctions between right and wrong. Variety shows such as *The Jack Benny Program* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* similarly focused on middle-class jokes and misunderstandings, while dabbling in broad sexual innuendos and battles between the sexes. Though attempts were made to break with the conformist, formulaic norms of these genres by Jackie Gleason on *The Honeymooners* and Ernie Kovacs on *The Ernie Kovacs Show*, major network programming ultimately never addressed alternative audiences, such as those with non-normative sexualities and genders, racial minorities, and those holding radical political or social beliefs, largely because these voices lacked representation on mainstream television.

Lastly, recognizing the lack of individual and community voices on cable television, the government issued a statement regarding the importance of creating a virtual space for such expression. In July 1970, exactly a year before the inauguration of public access cable channels in New York City and around the same time that the large

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networks began broadcasting “socially relevant” sitcoms, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) made three observations: “broadcasting affects the sense of community of those within the signal area of the station;” “recently governmental programs have been directed toward increasing citizen involvement in community affairs;” and cable “has the potential to be a vehicle to much needed community expression.” The FCC thus recognized television’s ability to strengthen communities and mediate between individual groups and larger power structures in the public sphere. While material access and use of this access greatly differ, these hopes for cable television were not fully realized until the advent of public access cable channels, which both furthered and complicated the democratic ideals of community-building by creating a virtual space in which mainstream and rebellious voices could coexist and potentially reach the same audience via their respective shows.

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New York City, already a pioneer in cable systems, became the first city in the country to require cable companies to reserve certain channels for leasing to outside users on a first-come, first-served basis. The project was first conceived by the Mayor’s Advisory Task Force on CATV and Telecommunications, which recommended in 1968 that New York City cable companies reserve “two channels only as a carrier” for “lease by outside users who wish to present original programs.” Then, in July 1971, Manhattan’s two cable television companies, Sterling Manhattan Cable and TelePrompTer Cable TV, launched their public access channels, Channels C and D.

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6 Quoted in Harrington, 35. It was not until 1972 that the FCC in its Cable Television Report and Order mandated a national public access system. They ordered that “all cable systems with thirty-five hundred or more subscribers” had to “set aside three noncommercial ‘access’ channels: public (free indefinitely), and educational and governmental (free for at least five years).” For more information on the origins of public access, see Laura R. Linder, *Public Access Television: America’s Electronic Soapbox* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 7.
TelePromTer serviced the area north of 79th Street on the West side and 86th Street on the East side; Sterling serviced the area south of these boundaries. Within these geographical boundaries, viewership of public access channels was limited to cable subscribers in Manhattan and only 108,966 New Yorkers paid the $6 per month to subscribe to either cable company.7

This new televisual format offered a means of communication beyond the control of the directors, sponsors, and producers who, up until this point, regulated network television’s programming and content. Eventually, the content of public access evolved from programs produced by community and special interest organizations and recordings of school board meetings and story hours to more contentious, radical broadcasts of Gay Liberation activist programming, experimental films, and feminist news. Manhattan’s public access channels thus generated a space within the tightly-controlled airwaves for a variety of identities, politics, and agendas, which sparked condemnation from many conservative viewers. In an early 1970s article for the New York Daily News, for example, conservative television critic Kay Gardella reproached legislators who “have gone gung ho on freedom of speech” and warned that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”8 Gardella saw moral danger in the public’s unrestrained access to the medium.9 Chastised by some as a dangerous opportunity for the perpetuation of social depravity and hailed by others as the ultimate example of a democratic medium, public access channels redefined the relationship between the public and broadcast technology by making equipment and airtime easily accessible.

7 Harrington, 9.
9 Harrington, 38. Gardella was not alone, however, as this development sparked the formation of vigilance groups, such as the “Concerned Citizens on Public Access,” which consisted of a priest, a couple of ministers, a lawyer running for city council, and his close friends. The lawyer, Paul Crotty, even went as far as to write that one public access show, Anton Perich Presents, was “corrupting the whole concept of public access” (“The Cable Blues,” Newsweek, 9 April 1973, 83).
The shift in public access programming echoed the radical social and political changes that were not only sweeping the country, but greatly impacting New York City residents at a local level. Nationally, pre-AIDS, post-pill, pro-choice 1970s America continued to grapple with the vestiges of the 1960s. The civil rights campaigns for women, minorities, and gays gained ground, while the Vietnam War and student revolts persisted. The impeachment of Nixon over the Watergate scandal added to an already depressed and anxious nation. In New York City, crime, poverty, prostitution, and drugs plagued the city throughout the decade and the ghost of the Stonewall riots continued to haunt the local queer community. Despite the goings-on nationally and locally, the city’s downtown creative milieu that was emerging in the 1970s embraced and utilized the despair and squalor of the city. Playwrights, fashion designers, artists, musicians, and poets thrived off the seedier side of their urban environment, unafraid of lingering in the obscure, the destitute, and the ephemeral.

Though new art venues and collectives such as the Kitchen, Mercer Art Center, Franklin Furnace, and the Collective for Living Cinema opened in the 1970s and early 1980s to cultivate the burgeoning avant-garde of the new era, many artists and musicians preferred the nightclubs and ephemeral galleries of downtown New York. These artists, concerned with the immediacy and accessibility of their work, sought to break away from the “elitism and self-isolation of experimental culture.” Therefore, the post-pop and punk aesthetics that dominated the 1970s underground frequently mingled in the dark, graffitied, loud, grungy urban spaces of drag clubs, Club 82, Max’s Kansas City, CBGB, the Mudd Club, and Club 57, in which the boundaries that presumed to divide art, music, video, theater, dance, and life were blurred. Warhol associate and public access

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11 At Max’s, for example, a Dan Flavin sculpture hung in the back room next to several works by Andy Warhol and other artists who frequented the club, while the upstairs disco featured bands such as the Velvet Underground, Off Off Broadway plays, poetry readings, performance art, and plays by the likes of John
underground star Glenn O’Brien once noted this collapse of media in the backroom at Max’s Kansas City, which “was the center of fashion fucking art, music fucking fashion, art fucking music, etc…A painter throwing a punch at a guitar player is a multimedia event, but this was a multimedia world. Every art and every class and every trade and every state of mind was there drinking with each other, showing off with each other, and going home with each other.”

Even punk filmmakers, such as Scott and Beth B and Vivienne Dick, preferred to show their films at places like the Mudd Club, CBGB, Club 57, Danceteria, and the Peppermint Lounge, settings which encouraged watching the films “in distraction, rather than in apt concentration, and made viewing contiguous with listening to music, dancing, drinking, or socializing.”

Watching these films in clubs, as queer scholar Juan A. Suárez notes, also “enhanced the closeness of what was a fairly self-contained scene where there was considerable overlap between filmmakers, performers, and audiences. Many of the films were inspired by club culture or shot in clubs and were made and acted by regulars of the downtown nightlife, who were, again, the films’ main audience.”

This interactive, experiential, and cross-media world persisted throughout the decade, which saw filmmakers become musicians, musicians become filmmakers and photographers, poets become musicians, and artists become actors.

It was from within this collaborative, mix- and cross-media underground world that emerging artists looked to public access television as yet another common, potentially vernacular space that could successfully collapse the high/low, artist/audience,
and public/private divides.\textsuperscript{15} Two of the most successful New York City public access shows of the 1970s emerged directly out of the downtown club, theater, film, and music scenes instead of established art world spaces. Anton Perich’s \textit{Anton Perich Presents}, an early, pre-recorded public access show that began in 1973 and eventually ended after years of sporadic programming around 1978, and Glenn O’Brien’s \textit{TV Party} (1978-1982), a live late-night New Wave show, reveal a dense, yet physically fragile, archive that contains substantial links to some of the most important members of the New York underground, including: Taylor Mead, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Wayne County, Candy Darling, Debbie Harry and Chris Stein, Amos Poe, and Klaus Nomi. These figures, among others, frequently mingled at the hippest downtown nightclubs, drawing inspiration from their multimedia environments. In fact, both Perich and O’Brien occasionally filmed and screened episodes of their shows in clubs or alternative viewing spaces.\textsuperscript{16}

Captivated by the spontaneity and improvisation of the city, Perich’s and O’Brien’s shows brought the thriving underground to a larger audience. In addition to his “short movies,” which were loosely-scripted half-hour episodes often featuring Taylor Mead, Perich sought to capture the downtown scene on video by airing fashion shows by Betsey Johnson, interviews with the likes of Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol, and even once filming a party-filled night at the Chelsea Hotel hosted by Warhol star Tinkerbelle and attended by filmmaker Shirley Clarke, fashion designer Zandra Rhodes, and window-dresser Victor Hugo, among others. Perich’s show challenged the viewer’s senses, as the

\textsuperscript{15} By the late 1960s, video artists had begun to think about the possibilities of the medium outside of the walls of galleries, co-ops, and performance spaces. The idea of experimental television was growing in popularity and various individuals and groups launched projects such as Guerilla Television, Deep Dish, and Paper Tiger TV. None of these enterprises, however, utilized public access television.

\textsuperscript{16} In March 1973, Perich showed tapes at the Abbey Theater, “in conjunction with live concerts by rock group Wayne County and lead singer Queen Elizabeth.” The audience then had the chance “to be taped and see themselves immediately afterward” (Ernest Leogrande, “Fit to be Taped?” \textit{Daily News}, 27 February 1973, 6). O’Brien often took his show to the stage of the Mudd Club.
nightclubs did, with over- or underexposed, grainy, shadowy scenes, inconsistent sound, and a constant din of conversation. These elements, along with the diverse performers in his shows, brought the underground club experience and corresponding topics of concern, such as drugs and homosexuality, to a larger, cable television-viewing audience.

Perhaps more explicitly referencing the club scene, O’Brien’s show may have been better suited for a club stage than a studio. Emceeing the show, O’Brien introduced guests such as Johnny Thunder, the Contortions, and Fred Schneider of the B-52s. *TV Party* was literally a televised party with New Wave and punk music, Warhol-esque camerawork, onscreen marijuana use, drinking, dancing, and conversation. O’Brien’s show and Perich’s thus engaged in multisensory experiences that worked to transport the viewers out of their living rooms and bedrooms and into the dingy, loud, dimly lit, music, art, sex, and drug scenes of lower Manhattan.

Perich and O’Brien succeeded in bringing an authentically gritty, edgy, vibrant world of “infantilism, chaos, and insanity” to television by pulling from the aesthetics and personalities they encountered in the club scene and their urban environment.17 By drawing so explicitly from a variety of creative outlets, Perich and O’Brien demonstrated their cultural and underground expertise, which legitimized their positions as cultural producers in a rather exclusive, judgmental world. Carmel Johnson-Schmidt, a Mudd Club regular, noted that the club culture had “a very strong, self-policing policy of what was cool…You could wear the grubbiest thing, but you had to style it. There was a definite dislike for anything unstyled.”18 This extreme attention to style, or even a deliberate stylistic rejection of style, of the underground can be seen in not only the dress of the shows’ performers, such as O’Brien’s trademark Ray-Bans, but in the intentional

18 Quoted in Hager, 51.
unpolished form of the shows themselves, which, again, functioned to assert Perich’s and O’Brien’s underground authenticity.¹⁹

Though public access channels cropped up across the country, the unique combination of urban space, queer communities, the underground punk, New Wave, and No Wave cinema and music scenes, as well as the emerging graffiti, performance, and video art movements made public access channels in New York City a distinctive forum for the participants in these movements to converge. While other artists of the period addressed and challenged taboo subjects, such as homosexuality, sex, nudity, incest, and drugs, these videographers did so using a highly visible medium, easily accessible outside of art galleries, museums, and alternative exhibition spaces. Therefore, these shows allow us to trace a new relationship of video art to the viewer, as their imagery and content directly invaded the private home and, like graffiti and mail art, blurred the capitalist boundaries of the traditional art world. Although these shows developed alongside video, performance, and graffiti art and a dynamic music scene, we must view them as not just the outgrowth of a new technology, or as extensions of new developments in painting or performance, but as permeable and varied enterprises that reached a new public within

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¹⁹ I have found the term “underground” most useful in the context of these shows, as opposed to “subaltern” and “subculture,” because of its associations to the 1970s and early 1980s club culture. I do at times use “subaltern,” but I use it broadly to refer to those operating outside of hegemonic power structures (whether voluntarily or involuntarily). Though perhaps unavoidable, I do not necessarily intend to directly recall the very specific associations of the term in postcolonial theory (see specifically Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 271-313, see also the writings of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and bell hooks). In his foundational text on “subcultures,” Dick Hebdige in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (New York: Routledge, 1987) argues that members of “subcultures” signal their belonging through the deliberate use of certain styles. “Subculture,” then, may perhaps most accurately describe the punk movement in which O’Brien participated. However, I refrain from consistently using the term throughout the thesis in part because Perich’s crowd cannot necessarily be classified as a “subculture” given the assorted members of his entourage, nor do I want to suggest that all of O’Brien’s associates staunchly followed the tenets of the “punk subculture.” Therefore, I find “underground” to be the most flexible term that allows me to appropriately address the wide range of people, ideas, and styles involved in these public access television shows.
the realm of the everyday through the transmission of images of alternative forms of public life and versions of the everyday.

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The ultimate goal of my project is to explore how various subcultural and underground communities in New York City converged to actively queer television. By “queer,” I refer to dimensions not necessarily involving gender and sexuality, exclusively. While I recognize the term’s academic, historical, and social associations to homosexuality, I seek to extend the notion of “queer” to reference a sensibility—a way of being, of navigating the world, and of expression. My conception of “queer” draws upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s understanding of “queerness,” which she locates in the “sites where meanings [don’t] line up tidily with each other.” These queer, in-between, messy places operate outside of, but in relation to, the rules of dominant discourses. Because I prefer a queerness not exclusive to homosexuality, this term may then extend to incorporate other bodies and behaviors. Sedgwick also suggests that “queer” seems to “hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation.” It is within these performative experiments of the self and relationality that we can locate the queerness in *Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party* and push beyond a hetero/homo binary.

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20 My reservation to entirely divorce “queer” from homosexuality and gender transgression is largely in response to Sedgwick’s warning that “given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against every same-sex expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself” (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 8). At the same time, Sedgwick acknowledges the importance of recent intellectual work that “spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example” (Sedgwick, 9).

21 Ibid., 3.

22 Ibid., 9.

23 I want to stress here that the word “queer,” to my knowledge, has not been used by Perich or O’Brien in reference to their work or to their performers. Perich has referred to Taylor Mead as a “homosexual,” but the term “queer” has yet to be used by them to describe their work. Perich and O’Brien tend to situate their work within the politics surrounding public access television and in relation to mainstream genres, formats,
Public access television became a forum that allowed a variety of behaviors, sexualities, and genders to invade a highly controlled hegemonic apparatus in the 1970s and early 1980s. Viewing these shows and public access television at large through the lens of queer theory will productively open up the content, production, and reception of these shows. Following Alexander Doty’s claim that queer readings and queer discourses can “account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are ‘queer’ or non-, anti-, or contra-straight,” I situate Anton Perich Presents and TV Party in relation to the norms of broadcast television in terms of form and content. By normative, or “straight,” television forms, I allude to the formal qualities (camerawork, stage sets, clarity, color, etc.) of soap operas, sitcoms, and late-night variety shows, while acknowledging that these so-called narrative forms are quite heterogeneous in relation to each other. In terms of content, I turn to specific shows, such as All in the Family, All My Children, and The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson, in order to establish the limits, norms, and codes of these diverse genres and to ascertain viewer’s expectations of them. By positioning Anton Perich Presents and TV Party in conversation with mainstream television shows, we can identify the ways in which these public access shows complicated the norms and aesthetics of television by offering queer alternatives and possibilities.

In addition to “queer,” one other term must be clarified. Throughout this thesis, I refer to queers, punks, transgenders, artists, musicians, and their associates as “marginalized.” I do not mean to insinuate that these identities constitute such groups as victims. Instead, I see this marginal position as a “site of radical possibility, a space of and aesthetics. Regardless, I find the term “queer” and, subsequently, queer theory to be useful in examining the gendered and sexual politics in which these shows engage.

resistance.” In fact, these cultural producers were not immediately concerned with their work in relation to television’s “norms,” though they often deliberately borrow from mainstream formats. They do not particularly care about, nor see themselves in a marginal position in relation to television. *Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party* are not reactive, but instead function alongside of, and in addition to, the mainstream. These shows work to create their own worlds, their own spaces, and thus, in turn, their own centers. In the coolness and aloofness of the performers, we see not a concern about coming into the center, but an interest in creating a new center. If Perich and O’Brien had truly wanted to infiltrate the space of mainstream television, they surely could have bought their way in, though, in doing so, they would have risked hegemonic incorporation and commodification.

In this thesis, I examine the counterpublic possibilities in *Anton Perich Presents* and *TV Party* and the role gender and sexuality play in their counterpublicity. I primarily rely upon Michael Warner’s expansion of Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.*

I argue that publics (and counterpublics) can indeed form around new media, such as television, which can encourage rather than suppress rational-critical debates. Since these shows grew from rather exclusive underground communities (primarily Warhol’s Factory and New York’s New Wave scene), the broadcasting of these fringe

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26 The most obvious example of an artist invading mainstream television was Andy Warhol and his two shows *Andy Warhol’s T.V.* (1980-83) and *Andy Warhol’s Fifteen Minutes* (1986-1987). Other artists, whether hired to design and film commercials or shorts, also managed to infiltrate mainstream airwaves. PBS, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, was a popular outlet for many artists, such as Peter Campus and Nam June Paik, who frequently showed their works on Boston’s WGBH-TV.

personalities, genders, sexualities, and behaviors to a broader, cable-viewing public formed unique counterpublics. These shows worked to queer television through both form and content by carving out a virtual space for these marginalized bodies and voices and challenging the norms of broadcast television. Viewers and participants alike, through their involvement with these non-straight public access shows, created their own televisual world of humor and rebellion, and music and drugs, which operated alongside, and in addition to, the New York downtown club and art scenes.

There is very little existing scholarship on public access television. Most of what exists, such as Laura Linder’s *Public Access Television: America’s Electronic Soapbox*, adheres to a strictly historical account of the development of public access television. No one has yet to explore specific public access shows in terms of their content, production, context, or meaning, or their intended or actual audiences. David Joselit’s recent work *Feedback: Television against Democracy* and Lynn Spiegel’s *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* remain more interested in the commercial aspects of the medium and in artists’ involvement in network broadcasting than in artists’ experiments with public access.²⁸ Several artists, art directors, and art critics in the late 1960s and 1970s expressed interest in the relationship between video art and television, but most art historical discussions of video as a medium, such as *A History of Video Art* by Chris Meigh-Andrews, often overlook the possibilities television and public access channels opened up for video artists.²⁹ To rectify this historical imbalance, I seek to reconstitute this art historical and cultural moment through primary sources, such as press

clippings, articles, and interviews that address Manhattan’s public access television at large and these individual shows in particular.

Because Manhattan public access channels have been largely overlooked in art history and media studies, as well as queer studies and history, this project will not only bring this critical historical and cultural moment to light, but will significantly contribute to current scholarship by filling in existing gaps and by pushing the boundaries of academic disciplines. This archive offers the possibility for a fresh historical sense of new technological possibilities and new types of publics, one that should be an essential addition to any visual or cultural understanding of the era.
Public Access and Queer Counterpublics

_A funny thing happened to the First Amendment on its way to the public airwaves._

~ Stephanie Harrington in _The New York Times_ (27 May 1973)

On a late Sunday night in 1973 (February 4, to be exact), cable subscribers who were still awake in Manhattan tuned in to watch a new show premiering on Sterling Manhattan Cable Television—_Anton Perich Presents_. After being teased by a few shorts, which included a fashion show, a woman provocatively dancing with a dog, and a poetry reading accompanied by a striptease, the main feature finally began. “Mr. Fixit” started as innocently as any other episode from a mainstream sitcom based on a husband-and-wife duo, but the shaky camerawork, murky shadows, and black and white picture alerted the viewer to a potentially surprising evening of television-watching.

Reclining on his bed in a sparsely decorated apartment, a robe-clad husband asks his thin, extremely blond, and garrulous wife what is wrong with the television set, to which she replies that it broke the previous evening. So, when he discovers that it is Sunday and the broken television may cause him to miss the Super Bowl, he anxiously leaps out of bed, demanding that she immediately call a television repairman. In agreement, the wife proclaims that she must not miss watching herself on _Hollywood Squares_, and urgently searches for a television repairman willing to work on a Sunday.

Shortly after placing the call, a handsome, Mick Jagger-look-alike TV repairman appears at the door, though he immediately realizes that he has forgotten his tools. Through a ridiculous confession by the wife, the repairman soon learns that the couple has four other functioning television sets on which she and her husband refuse to watch _Hollywood Squares_ and the Super Bowl. One is a black and white set, but she could
“never watch Hollywood Squares with me on without color.” On another, the “green isn’t grassy enough” for her husband to watch football and the others are “too vertical” and “too horizontal,” respectively.

As the repairman sets to work, the husband temporarily vacates the room, leaving the repairman alone with the wife. The wife frequently interrupts the repairman with her blatantly obvious seduction tactics, but her unsuccessful attempts are soon interrupted by the return of her husband. Together, the husband and wife convince the repairman that his clothes are “gamey” and should be washed. Eventually, toward the end of the episode, the husband and the repairman (who, at this point, wears only a pair of briefs) are left alone. The husband guides the repairman over to the bed to look at one of the TVs, and their conversation turns to the repairman’s hemorrhoids. While the half-naked repairman reclines nonchalantly on the bed, the husband offers to take a look at them, claiming “I’ve got a good method of curing them.” Shortly thereafter, as the husband pulls out a Vaseline-coated, phallic-shaped light bulb from the dresser drawer and as the repairman lies on his stomach and spreads his legs, the screen unexpectedly goes blank…

This moment of blankness and the sexually explicit plot interrupts the flow of the show, transporting the viewer outside the safety of the light-hearted, innocent humor of traditional sitcoms. It is at this brief moment, when the screen goes blank, that a queer counterpublic is formed—a moment in which viewers must complete the episode themselves as they are shocked out of the conventions of daytime soap operas and evening family sitcoms at the mention of hemorrhoids, the suggestion of nudity, and the possibility of witnessing a queer exchange between the husband and the repairman. The imaginative possibilities of this moment stem from the non-straight narrative of the episode, urging the viewer to visualize the insertion of the light bulb into the anus of the
repairman. Though this imagining largely happens in the personal space of one’s home, television-watching does not prevent the viewer from participating in a larger collective. The viewer is situated within a coincidental community of fellow viewers, unlike theater- and gallery-goers who share the same space and can see one another. Television-viewing is always in a constant state of flux. The viewer has the ability to change channels, turn the television on or off, or walk away from the set entirely. The intimacy of television watching is thus, at the same time, a public enterprise capable of shaping “public” experiences since the very medium is founded upon the principles of broadcasting.

The episode, which at first appeared to be either an experimental film or a deadpan, tongue-firmly-in-cheek sitcom proved to be neither. It was the product of public access television that, as a new form of communication and expression, necessarily involves a reconfiguration of the notion of “publics.” Therefore, the history of public access channels in Manhattan is not one just to be reconstructed through a recitation of dates and regulations, but one that must extend an analysis from mere targeted “groups” or “communities” to a consideration of the nature of “publics” themselves.

**PUBLICS, COUNTERPUBLICS, AND PUBLIC ACCESS**

In order to reconceptualize the nature of “publics,” one must turn to the theories of the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose writings have formed the basis of contemporary public sphere theory that has proliferated since the 1980s. In his seminal 1962 text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, in which he first establishes the

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30 See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) for articles written by contemporary scholars from a variety of fields. This text provides a useful starting point for debates over public sphere theory, beginning with Habermas, in feminism, history, cultural studies, politics, and media studies, amongst others.
foundations of public sphere theory, Habermas turns to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which he locates a structural transformation which yielded a new model of publicness. He defines this new bourgeois, literary public as one consisting of private individuals who, by engaging in rational-critical debates, held state power in check; the public sphere thus allowed bourgeois civil society to express and act on its varying concerns. He attributes this shift to, amongst other developments, the rise of print media and critical discussions of music, art, and literature. The public formed around social spaces, such as salons, coffeehouses, clubs, and in philanthropic, civic, cultural and professional networks, which were marked by the circulation of information and political debate. One’s entry into this public sphere, however, was only possible if one was a well-educated, property-owning individual (i.e., man) belonging to the “literary public sphere” because it was within the private institution of the bourgeois family that critical discussions of art, literature, and music first emerged.

Habermas laments that the exclusivity of the eighteenth-century’s public sphere gave way in the nineteenth century to an expansion of the public sphere, which included other classes and those who did not own property. This growth meant the weakening of the public sphere and the blurring of the distinctions between the public and the state.

31 These “rational-critical” debates, generally defined as the public use of reason to critique and check state power, are essential to an effective, opinionated public, according to Habermas. They were concerned with the democratic execution of power and the greater good of society at large. The rational-critical debates were primarily founded upon print media and often circulated within salons and coffee shops. Public sphere theorist Nancy Fraser notes that, at first, the public “aimed to [hold] the state accountable to society via publicity” by “requiring that information about state functioning be made accessible so that state activities would be subject to crucial scrutiny and the force of public opinion.” The public eventually shifted to mean “transmitting the considered ‘general interest’ of ‘bourgeois society’ to the state via forms of legally guaranteed free speech, free press and free assembly, and eventually through the parliamentary institutions of representative government” (Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in The Cultural Studies Reader, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1999), 521). It is within this second development that we see the immense political and social power that Habermas attributes to speech and print.

32 Fraser adds that this complex, exclusive web of associations was “the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a ‘universal class’ and preparing to assert their fitness to govern” (522). So we see that those in the public sphere actually intended to transition to state power, a complication Habermas largely overlooks.
since “society was polarized by class struggle” and “the public fragmented into a mass of competing interest groups,” resulting in a “welfare state mass democracy.” 33 With the entanglement of society and the state, “publicity in the sense of critical scrutiny of the state gave way to public relations, mass-mediated staged displays and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion.” 34 The apolitical, leisurely “pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption,” in Habermas’s words, replaced the rational-critical bourgeois, literary sphere “in the world of letters.” 35

Though Habermas turns to the transformation of the family as a contributing factor, he primarily blames the “new media” of television, radio, and, film for the expansion of the public sphere. He argues that media producers convince cultural consumers that they participate in a public, when in fact this public no longer exists because it has become a prefabricated marketable commodity that serves to entertain and placate the audience rather than to spark rational-critical debate. According to Habermas, television, radio, and film shattered the critical nature of the bourgeois public because the “communication of the public that debated critically about culture remained dependent on reading pursued in the closed-off privacy of the home. The leisure activities of the culture-consuming public, on the contrary, themselves take place within a social climate, and they do not require any further discussions.” 36 Ironically, for Habermas, it is the shift of consumption from the private to the public that destroyed the eighteenth-century’s construction of the public.

Instead of meeting in coffeehouses to debate newspapers and politics, the twentieth-century consumer of “new media” entered into a privatized public, in which the

33 Ibid., 521.
34 Ibid.
35 Habermas, 160.
36 Ibid., 163.
consumption of television, radio, and film became an individual, pacifying experience that demanded no rational-critical debate about the greater good of society at large. The consumption of this “new media” allowed for public experiences in private spaces and private consumption in public spaces that, according to Habermas, erased any form of critical discussion. Habermas claims that the “new media” demands the silence of the audience in comparison with print media because:

> the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under ‘tutelage,’ which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to ‘exchanges about tastes and preferences’ between consumers—even the talk about what is consumed, the ‘examination of tastes,’ becomes a part of consumption itself.37

This new cultural consumer, for Habermas, is passive, selfish, and easily persuaded by the institutionalized public opinion of political, social, and cultural elites.

Though public access television may serve as a prime example of Habermas’s expansion of the public sphere, in no way does the medium demand that the viewer not “talk back.”38 One must view the public access consumer as a potentially active rather than passive agent because shows such as Anton Perich Presents and TV Party not only expected but actually demanded “talking back.” The outrageous and absurd plots on Anton Perich Presents and the call-in portion of TV Party encouraged similar rational-critical debates with the state and dominant discourses that Habermas located in the print media and bourgeois social spaces of the eighteenth century. Habermas argues that mass culture, essentially by replacing face-to-face dialogue with mediated, institutionalized public opinion, destroyed the possibility for rational-critical debate. But in shows such as Anton Perich Presents and TV Party, we can see public access functioning more like

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37 Ibid., 170-171.
38 Ibid., 170.
print in its encouragement of critical discourse. Television allows for public experiences in private spaces, but these two shows encourage critical dialogue (even if mediated by the medium). These shows represent attempts by various underground communities to critique larger power structures using a medium often associated with dominant ideology. Because public access operates largely beyond the grasp of producers, directors, and sponsors, public access cable television returned public opinion to the masses by allowing anyone access to studios and technology in order to broadcast their opinions, or lack thereof. Though Habermas views the modern age of “new media” as causing the demise of autonomous and critical individuals, public access allows for dissent and debate and can indeed serve to keep political powers in check. Therefore, public access allows autonomous individuals to occupy a “public space” and engage with other unseen individuals. The public airwaves of the twentieth century can then be understood as replacing the exclusive coffeehouses and salons of the eighteenth century.

More recently, queer theorist Michael Warner has extended Habermas’s theory of the public to include what he calls counterpublics, those publics characterized by their opposition to the dominant public. Warner locates several similarities between counterpublics and more Habermasian publics, since counterpublics are essentially publics formed against more mainstream publics. Both are self-creating and self-organizing and, as such, are as much notional as they are empirical, since, in their

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39 Nancy Fraser has also extensively addressed counterpublics, in terms of a multiplicity of publics, by considering those publics Habermas ignored, such as those formed by the proletariat, women, and (though this term did not exist until the early twentieth century) homosexuals. I turn to Michael Warner and his discussion of counterpublics because he is most interested in queer counterpublics, specifically. Furthermore, I agree with Fraser and Warner in that not only is there a multitude of competing publics, but that a single person may occupy more than one public at any given time. In fact, Fraser points out that one of Habermas’s leading assumptions in his text is that “the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics” (524). I agree with her reading of Habermas’s preference for a monolithic public and hope this thesis demonstrates the power of a multiplicity of publics and, especially, the import of counterpublics formed from a variety of publics.
circulation, the participants are more imagined than known. Rather than viewing cable television as a medium that merely mediates the needs of discrete communities, public access and television at large create publics that include “more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.”

This notion of an empirically unknowable public of strangers is especially pertinent when considering the audience of public access since cable companies never calculated cable subscribers’ consumption of public access channels.

Warner also argues that a counterpublic, like a public, is necessarily text-based because its survival depends on its circulation. Though “text” may of course expand beyond print media alone, Warner, like Habermas, privileges the forms of writing and speech over other media. For instance, he turns to examples of gossip, lyric poetry, sermons, and various forms of print media as the means through which counterpublics circulate and formalize, rather than considering the counterpublic possibilities of the “new media” deplored by Habermas. Because Warner fails to delve into the critical-rational possibilities of media, such as television, his text ignores a vital means through which publics and counterpublics are mediated and circulated.

A counterpublic can primarily be distinguished from a public through its awareness and acceptance of its own subordinate status. Warner argues that its conflict

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43 Warner’s allegiance to spoken and written modes of communication may in part stem from his desire to situate his argument within Habermasian terms and address those modes that concerned Habermas. However, in restricting himself to Habermas’s sources, Warner’s argument appears slightly outdated and less immediately concerned with contemporary technological possibilities.
44 Counterpublics need not only be formed by subalterns. Instead, Warner notes that Christian fundamentalists form their own counterpublic because they, like queers and bohemians, set themselves in opposition to dominant discourses. See Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 119.
with dominant structures “extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness.”

A counterpublic’s critique of dominant power structures and ideologies thus extends to its entire way of being and circulating. Public access operates within the mainstream medium of television, but its form and content are at odds with the assumed form and content of this mainstream medium. This virtual space allows individuals toappropriate mass media to engage in critical-rational discourses and encourage counterpublic formation in unprecedented ways that would otherwise be absent from television.

The radical possibilities of counterpublics primarily lie in the momentary and experiential. Those from dominant and subaltern publics, alike, can equally be drawn into a common counterpublic, if only temporarily, when participants of both publics are jarringly pulled from the ordinary and the expected into a bizarrely different world. Counterpublics are therefore not pre-formed or existing entities comprised of pre-established individuals, but rather form spontaneously. Through this unsettling and possible fracturing of dominant publics, if only briefly, subalterns have found ways in which to radically alter existing publics and power structures.

It is through this lens of counterpublicity that we can best analyze the transformative power and collective world-making of Anton Perich Presents and TV Party in terms of alternative, queer, and non-normative behaviors, sexualities, and genders. These shows use content and form to challenge the norms of broadcast television and create, I will argue, queer worlds that mediate:

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the most private and intimate meanings of gender and sexuality. It can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy. It can therefore make possible new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender.\textsuperscript{46}

Using Warner as a springboard, the following section explores this queer world-making as it relates to the convergence of queer and bohemian communities and the public access audience on \textit{Anton Perich Presents} and \textit{TV Party}. These shows participate in a dynamic discursive space that destabilizes sex and gender norms, but combines these critiques with other political and social discourses, such as drug use, control of the media, and current politics.

By entering the realm of public discourse via television, these counterpublics inevitably encountered the limitations of public media. As with any counterpublic that invades the space and medium of a dominant public, censorship and deprecating threats presented themselves as real dangers to these counterpublics and served as a reminder of their marginal position. However, because counterpublics remain aware of, and revel in their marginality, they work to renegotiate their existence in relation to these threats. So public access, despite its democratic ideals, both provided and failed to provide space for alternative sexualities, genders, and behaviors not seen on commercial television.

\textbf{PRESENTING ANTON PERICH PRESENTS}

Croatian-born Perich moved to New York City in 1970 after spending five years in Paris working as a painter, poet, and filmmaker. Upon his arrival, he quickly became a fixture in the underground art scene; as a photographer and filmmaker, he documented Andy Warhol’s Factory scene, the backrooms at Max’s Kansas City, and, later, the

concerts and nightlife at Studio 54 and the Mudd Club. Drawing inspiration from both Warhol’s films and the denizens of Max’s Kansas City, Perich conceived of a public access cable show that brought this subcultural world to a broader audience through the creation of a “humorous, satiric soap opera” with “the kind of language you’d hear anywhere.”

This “anywhere” was not nor could not be just anywhere, though. Instead, it was a language specifically embedded in the New York underground. This language was also not one of mere speech as Perich suggests, but of a style and a way of being. What Perich perceived as everyday life was limited to the underground groups who drank and mingled at Max’s, including queers, artists, musicians, writers, and fashion designers. The exclusivity of the underground cliques in the backroom at Max’s was, to Perich, much too inhibiting. Perich once argued in Rolling Stone that these fringe personalities “should be seen by the mass audience at home…not only by people who go to films. Someday people will not go to films anymore at all. They will be able to stay home and watch The Last Tango in Paris on television.” Wanting to “change television forever,” Perich broadcasted the aesthetics, personalities, and concerns of the New York underground to a broad audience through public access television.

Anton Perich Presents belongs to a long tradition of transgressive television humor, but it pushed beyond the limits of any other show before it. During the 1950s, Ernie Kovac’s effeminate Percy Dovetonsils, Milton Berle’s drag performances, and the Jackie Gleason’s The Honeymooners were all “mild violations of the social taboos of middle America that kept well within the traditions of slapstick and vaudeville

49 Anton Perich, telephone interview with author, 20 November 2009.
comedy.” Such humor proved too risky for the networks, as evidenced by their short life spans. In the 1970s, Norman Lear’s shows, though groundbreaking in terms of content, were “cast in the conventional context of family situation comedies” and neatly, if not problematically, reconciled any conflict by the end of each episode. In *All in the Family*, for instance, it was the bigoted, yet humorous and much-loved, Archie Bunker who functioned as the hero, instead of the liberal-minded Mike Stivic. The 1950s variety shows and the sitcom served as a springboard for Perich’s show, yet Perich sought to camp and queer these genres by exploiting the familiar to push the viewer into the realm of unfamiliar television.

Setting a precedent for his subsequent episodes, Perich’s debut show was a unique combination of Warhol associates, sex, and television. Perich had filmed the episode late at night, after Max’s had closed, in a second-floor loft lent to Perich by the art gallery director Joseph LoGuidice. Playing on the inherent absurdity and conformity of broadcast television, and of formats such as soap operas and sitcoms, Perich adapted these genres to underground comic situations.

At the time of “Mr. Fixit’s” debut, daytime soap operas and sitcoms ruled the airwaves, genres from which Perich borrowed, but mainly parodied. By the late sixties and early seventies, *One Life to Live* and *All My Children* introduced affluent career-oriented black characters and career-oriented female characters, but “the basic premise behind most soap operas was still primarily white, middle-class, and oriented toward hearth and home.” So despite their breakthroughs, most soap operas adhered to traditional, predictable characters and familial struggles. In *Anton Perich Presents*, most

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51 Ibid., 26.
plots revolved around husband-and-wife teams, but these narratives upturned familial concerns as, in one episode, a father (Taylor Mead) attempts to seduce his daughter (Candy Darling) and her boyfriend (Craig Vandenburg), and, in another, an Italian film producer (Taylor Mead) can only impregnate his wife (Cyrinda Foxe) as long as his male chauffeur is around to sexually excite him. These episodes quickly diverged into homosexual relations, exhibitionism, and absurd, sexually-charged plots, marking obvious differences between their content and that of network soap operas.

Soap operas follow, according to Tania Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, formulas that make them both attractive to and suited for women. One characteristic she identifies is the never-ending narrative. She notes that “the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end an end in itself.” Part of the joy of a soap opera, she claims, is the knowledge that its serial nature prevents it from concluding problems, scandals, and affairs at the end of each episode. Though a non-serial show, *Anton Perich Presents* draws upon this sense of anticipation, as its plots never truly resolve themselves at the end of each episode.

Furthermore, *Anton Perich Presents* refused, week after week, to allow the viewer to continue with the loose plot. There was not even a remote possibility of a future resolution in Perich’s show as there may have been with a soap opera since soap operas “offer the promise of immortality and eternal return—same time tomorrow.” In contrast, each week Perich presented different actors and entirely different plots from the previous week’s episode. In this sense, his show resembled an anthology series.

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53 See *Anton Perich Presents* “Candy & Daddy” (1972) and “La Dolce Vita Grande.” (1972).
55 Ibid., 81.
throwback to popular radio and early television formats), but, again, the show’s unresolved plots and inconsistency set it apart from soap operas and anthology series since, sometimes, Perich’s show would not air for weeks if he did not get his tapes finished in time.

In a similar vein, Perich’s show departs from the normative structure of sitcoms. Perich’s show rejects the continuous nature of sitcoms, which air week after week with the same cast of characters in a rather permanent time slot. In primetime, sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Odd Couple* reigned throughout the early 1970s and the family-in-the-suburbs narrative left little room for dramatic, controversial breaks with conventions. Communication scholar Joanne Morreale defines situation comedy as a genre that centers around “relationships in the family, workplace, and community; in so doing, [it] express[es] the ideological tensions that mark particular social and historical moments.”

Anton Perich Presents plays upon these familial dynamics by slightly skewing them through queer sexual and gendered lenses.

Perich’s parodic show utilizes and exploits the conventions of these formats, a method that ultimately lures unsuspecting viewers into a queer counterpublic. In “Mr. Fixit,” for example, described at the beginning of this chapter, the viewer immediately recognizes the trope of the nonchalant, handsome husband and the attractive, but worrisome and garrulous wife. In this episode, music producer Danny Fields takes the place of characters such as Mike Brady, while Warhol star Susan Blond replaces the likes of Carol. By drawing upon the common tropes of sitcoms, such as gender conflicts and humorous misunderstandings, “Mr. Fixit” then subverts viewer’s expectations of primetime sitcoms.

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“Mr. Fixit” carries the unsuspecting viewer through the episode by drawing upon the sexual tension traditionally utilized in soap operas and sitcoms. The viewer waits for Blond to seduce the TV repairman (played by underground film star Sami Melange) and anticipates the ensuing drama, just as, on a mainstream show, there may be flirting between the wife and the milkman or another woman’s husband (fig. 1). But, the viewer’s understanding of the couple as heterosexual is entirely undermined as she or he witnesses, or rather imagines, the homosexual exchange between the husband and TV repairman when Fields offers to “take a look” at the repairman’s hemorrhoids and presents a light bulb as his cure (fig. 2). While shows on mainstream television would omit any explicit sexual acts, Perich surprisingly fulfills the audience’s desire to see sex (or, at least, would have had the episode not been censored), but he subverts the viewer’s expectations of heterosexual sex (an expectation he acknowledges with Blond’s attempt to seduce the repairman) by showing us a queer exchange. The audience’s assumptions of the trajectory of the plot are entirely upended with the appearance of the light bulb. This episode thus adapts the devices of mainstream television to challenge the audience’s expectations, to destabilize the viewer’s understanding of sexuality, and to unify an eclectic audience of those who know how to imagine what might happen and those who may not.57

*Anton Perich Presents*, in a similar manner, destabilizes gender norms. In another episode, Taylor Mead plays a famous movie star running for the mayor of New York City in “The Star Candidate” (1973). After Mead makes ridiculous and playful mayoral promises to the public, including “three Quaaludes a day for everyone in Manhattan” and paving over Central Park to make New York a “50-lane highway running from the

57 See also “Candy & Daddy,” in which Taylor Mead plays Candy Darling’s father who tries to seduce his daughter and her boyfriend (played by Craig Vandenburg). This episode most directly parodies soap operas, as they literally interrupt the plot to stage a commercial for soap.
Battery to the Bronx,” the episode shifts into a raunchy, but critical commentary on sexuality and gender.

In the final third of this episode, gender and sexual taboos are unapologetically exploited and embraced. The appearance of Mead’s mother (actress unknown) creates a situation in which the cast humorously engages in a discussion about nature vs. nurture in the development of gender and sexuality. In response to Mead’s flamboyant behavior, she explains, “You know what his problem is. From the day he was born I could never decide if he was a boy or a girl.” Mead replies, “Oh mother, you’re really turning me on. Because you’ve despised me for so long, I’ve begun to dig it.” His mother begins to spank him and eventually begins to rub the spike of her high-heeled shoe across his rear: “You were always a naughty little boy. I despised you. I hated you” (fig. 3). Mead lightheartedly encourages this transgressive incestual act by laughingly responding, “Oh, you taught me how to take it.” This unashamedly vulgar scene blurs the lines between pleasure, punishment, and play and also serves as an excellent example of an underground comic situation testing cultural mores on television.

This strange mother-son dynamic is immediately followed by a similarly shocking exchange between Mead and his gay son (played by Wayne County). Mead approaches County, who reclines in a nearby chair, and bends down toward County’s crotch, from which a white cone-shaped object protrudes. County, in faux surprise, exclaims, “Father, paaaaleeesee!” as Mead simulates fellatio (fig. 4). “They gave me a sex change and this is what they gave me,” complains County as he pulls a conch shell out of his unzipped pants. Mead then turns around and sits down on County’s lap. Using the conch shell,

58 County, wearing heavy makeup, is dressed androgynously in a hat and suit. County’s boyfriend, who is actually a woman dressed in men’s drag, wears a Panama hat, suit, and bowtie. Not only do County and his boyfriend call attention to the performativity of gender, but their relationship encourages a critical consideration of a queer relationship in which a woman wears men’s drag and a man appears as gender-neutral.
County simulates anal sex (fig. 5). As County grunts, “Up your fucking ass,” Mead turns to the camera and cheerily exclaims, “Vote for mayor!”

Through their content, episodes such as “Mr. Fixit” and “The Star Candidate” offer a world without sexual taboos, even if this world is one of tongue-in-cheek parody. The performers unapologetically bring non-normative sex and genders to the public sphere, and the viewers contribute to this queer world through their complicity (i.e., watching) and knowing. As Warner notes, queer counterpublics activate:

non-heteronormative worlds because they refused to pretend that privacy was their ground; because they were forms of sociability that delinked money and family from the scene of the good life; because they made sex the consequence of public mediations and collective self-activity in a way that made for unpredicted pleasures; because, in turn, they attempted to make a context of support for their practices; because their pleasures were not purchased by a redemptive pastoralism of sex or by mandatory amnesia about failure, shame, and aversion.59

In *Anton Perich Presents*, pleasure becomes a refusal to comply with dominant, normative ways of being, primarily because these alternative pleasures have found visibility on television. These episodes ask the viewer to critically engage with discourses of gender, sex, sexuality, television, and societal taboos. 60

In “Mr. Fixit,” Perich explicitly relates television to sex. At the beginning of the episode, Fields complains, “First I wake up and she’s dressed. Now the television’s broken.” Both events, externally imposed celibacy and the inability to watch television,

60 Here I draw from Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, in which he argues that perverse sexual pleasures are “the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures.” He locates pleasure as a site of resistance since the “implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. And accompanying this encroachment of powers, scattered sexualizes rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice.” (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), 48). So the perverse pleasures in *Anton Perich Presents* work to destabilize the norms of sex and, consequently, pose a threat to the “multifarious power devices” upholding the rigid sexual norms on television (Foucault 48).
equally upset Fields. Later in the episode, while Melange explains the details of repairing televisions to Blond, she strips to her bra and panties. The camera zooms to Blond’s waist and crotch just as Melange expounds upon video outputs and video inputs, which simultaneously sexualizes both Blond and the television, for one cannot help but visualize the phallic ends of input cables entering the voids of the output outlets in the television set (fig. 6).

The final scene between Melange and Fields complicates this relationship between sex and media. Though perhaps not directly responding to the oft-quoted phrase that the “medium is the message” in Marshall McLuhan’s renowned 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in “Mr. Fixit,” Fields literally queers the medium of light through its use. For McLuhan, electric light (and the light bulb) is the ultimate example of “pure information,” a pure medium. McLuhan privileges the medium over the content, arguing that “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.” The light bulb, the purest of mediums, in Perich’s episode becomes a tool used in a queer exchange that shapes this moment of public intimacy. This revelation makes way for a medium, not just content or a message, to be actively queered.

The very aesthetics and format of the show challenged the norms of broadcast television by implementing a variety of underground film strategies and techniques. The average primetime cable subscriber in 1973 would have also been used to seeing high-quality, fully-scripted shows in color, such as *All in the Family*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, and *Marcus Welby, M.D.*. Sketch comedy and variety shows also dominated the airwaves, such as *The Flip Wilson Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, and *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-

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61 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994), 8. McLuhan defines the content of electric light to be those activities that occur because of light, such as a night baseball game or brain surgery.

62 Ibid., 8-9.
In, which were likewise broadcast with clear pictures, elaborate stage sets, and professional sound. Perich’s show permitted comparison to the foregoing primetime counterparts and offered a decidedly amateurish alternative to these shows because the viewer of Anton Perich Presents was greeted with grainy images, black and white pictures, heavy shadows, overexposed scenes, shoddy props and minimal sets, shaky camerawork, and inconsistent sound, making it difficult at times to discern what was happening in certain scenes.63

Though many of the shows on public access were unpolished and made by inexperienced videographers, Perich’s aesthetic decisions were quite deliberate and stemmed from the underground film scene. In fact, Perich credits Warhol with making it “okay to make bad movies with bad sound and bad pictures.”64 Oftentimes, in both Perich’s shows and Warhol’s movies, the viewer sees cameramen, booms, and crew members adjusting lighting during filming. By making the production process visible, Perich and Warhol frequently blurred the lines between fiction and documentary, a confusion further emphasized by poor lighting, inaudible sound, and often improvised dialogue. There is a long legacy of such aesthetics in film and also a precedent in television. Even if a public access viewer was unfamiliar with the utilization of these qualities in experimental film, they certainly had a televisional point of reference. Early

63 Though black and white television sets were still in use in the early 1970s, color television sets were quite common and all network broadcasting was in color. Since cable subscribers were those with a certain level of disposable income (given that one had to pay a monthly subscription), it is reasonable to assume that the majority of cable subscribers would have owned color sets. By 1973, 60.1% of American households with televisions owned color TVs (“Television Facts and Statistics- 1939 to 2000,” Television History—The First 75 Years. http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm). A viewer of Perich’s show, therefore, would have been struck by the low technical quality and the black and white picture of Anton Perich Presents.

64 Anton Perich, telephone interview with author, 7 December 2009. In terms of underground film, Perich was not just preoccupied with Warhol’s cinematic experiments. Rather, in the same interview, Perich alludes to the expressive film tradition of filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage. Indeed, Perich saw the camera as “an instrument you can paint with,” which explains his use of a handheld camera that is in constant motion.
television programs in the 1940s and early 1950s were often marked by these characteristics, but most of these aesthetic choices were not deliberate. Instead, the grainy pictures, overexposed scenes, and poor sound resulted from early equipment and broadcasting capabilities. Perich’s show thus recalls early television, but deliberately exaggerates and heightens the “badness” of the show’s aesthetics, recalling precedents in both television and film.

Though admitting Warhol’s influence on the aesthetics and format of his show, Perich saw his work as much more innovative than Warhol. In contrast to Warhol, who was able to show his films in what Perich believed to be the “safe” space of movie theaters and galleries, Perich infiltrated and unsettled the very public medium of television from the inside.65 Though Warhol upended several film traditions, Perich felt as though the exclusivity of galleries and theaters where Warhol’s films were often viewed made Warhol’s films less revolutionary. In contrast, the publicness of television, for Perich, meant accessing a much larger audience and one that was possibly unwilling to engage with his material.66 Public access television as a genre thus allowed Perich to work within the very public medium of television while simultaneously working outside of the dominant structure of network broadcasting because public access operated alongside and in addition to commercial channels.

The destabilization of sexuality and gender are mirrored in the aesthetics of *Anton Perich Presents*, further contributing to the creation of a queer world. Formally, Perich’s shaky camerawork and quick cuts often visually disorient the viewer, who must also struggle to follow the impromptu dialogue often spoken by a number of different actors at

65 Anton Perich, telephone interview with author, 7 December 2009.
66 Here Perich assumes that the gallery- and theater-goers, by their mere attendance, agreed with or were at least open to Warhol’s work. Perich’s assumption is somewhat a misrepresentation, since Warhol’s screening venues were quite diverse; however, Perich’s understanding of his own work in relation to Warhol’s reveals just how much more public (and therefore powerful) Perich saw public access television than film.
once and the seemingly random details in the plotline. In “The Star Candidate,” one tries to make sense of the scene unfolding onscreen as Perich’s camera flits from Warhol’s screen prints, to two lingerie-clad girls cavorting through Mead’s campaign video, to Sami Melange’s penis that frequently emerges from beneath a black trench coat, and to Mead holding his genitals in his hands. Meanwhile, Mead continues to ramble in one of his signature stream-of-conscious monologues, while Susan Blond (playing his wife) complains about the presence of the “showgirls,” and Tinkerbelle (playing his secretary) reprimands Mead for his outlandish behavior. This layering provides the viewer with his or her own creative space in which to make sense of the quick, sometimes chaotic scenes onscreen, allowing for not one but several layers of meaning and interpretation at once. Perich’s show thus does not offer any stable meaning or any single perspective.

Following “Mr. Fixit,” Sterling Manhattan censored about twenty minutes of every sixty minute episode.67 Perich’s show was already relegated to a late-night timeslot, playing at 11pm on Sunday nights, a marginalized position within the cable lineup. Furthermore, the scenes that were censored were those exhibiting explicit homosexual behavior, such as the one in “Mr. Fixit” dealing with the light bulb. James Brady of The New York Times argued that such outrage on the part of Sterling Manhattan Cable, TelePrompTer Cable TV, and conservative watchdogs was because “the high camp of drag, homosexual clowning and strange situations… [had] never been shown on television before.”68 Evidently, the queer world’s audacious entry into television provoked not just outrage, but fear that demanded the censorship of the most explicit evidence of these queer relations.

67 Brady, 82.
68 Ibid.
Though Perich never found a way to avoid censorship without altering the content of his shows, he continued to subvert and challenge the system by submitting his videos too late to be prescreened by the cable companies, that then had no choice but to air the episodes and censor them live. However, one may argue that by pulling the tape during the most explicit scenes, the cable company unwittingly created a blankness (a deliberate technique used in experimental film), which allowed creative space for the viewer to literally fill in the blank. These interruptions, reminiscent of commercial breaks, did not just disrupt the narrative, but actually replaced parts of the show with blankness, during which played “Musak while the public access people watched their monitors in disbelief.” Not only did the blank screen allow for active imaginations to run rampant, but the playing of “Musak,” unobtrusive background music, provided the viewer with the opportunity to ironize and fantasize as prompted by the relaxing soundtrack.

The debates over Perich’s show reveal the constant tensions between the counterpublic and dominant publics. This queer world expanded gendered and sexual meaning on the public airwaves, since, ironically, the controversy over Perich’s show drew more viewers to public access cable television. At the time his first episode premiered, few cable subscribers turned into public access channels, but when the controversy surrounding Perich’s show grew, viewers finally tuned in: “Anton Perich has turned out to be the man who put cable television’s public access channels in the public eye—splat! in the eye.” Public access viewership grew thanks to Anton Perich Presents and so did a new counterpublic.

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69 In fact, the prescreening of public access video submissions did not begin until after the airing of Perich’s scandalous “Mr. Fixit” episode. The provocative form and content of Perich’s show ultimately altered the way public access operated.
71 Leogrande, 6.
While Perich worked primarily with the vestiges of the 1960s Factory scene, Glenn O’Brien’s *TV Party* was deeply invested in the latest New Wave developments in New York City. As a punk television show, *TV Party* brought together both known and unknown performers, artists, writers, directors, political activists, and musicians and extended the exclusive punk New York underground beyond the walls of CBGBs and the Mudd Club into the homes of Manhattan cable subscribers. The counterpublic formed by this show was less explicitly centered on overt questionings of sex and gender norms as in *Anton Perich Presents*, but *TV Party* still contributed to a queer world-making project by embracing non-straight ways of relating. Though the format generally followed other mainstream late-night talk shows, the guests and music were adapted to an underground punk aesthetic. Unlike *Anton Perich Presents*, *TV Party* was never censored, but the viewing audience held the performers in check through sometimes explicit and violent remarks made during the phone-in portion of the show.

O’Brien first conceived of *TV Party* after appearing on Coca Crystal’s public access cable show *If I Can’t Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution* in 1978. He notes:

> Coca's show was fun but I didn't think anything about it until the next day. I was on the subway and strangers came up to me and said ‘Hey, I saw you on TV last night.’ Others accosted me on the street. I thought, ‘My God, people are watching this stuff!’…Amazingly, with no money, you could have a show with a potentially huge audience of Manhattan cable subscribers.

After his appearance on Crystal’s show, O’Brien immediately signed up for a timeslot at E.T.C. Studios. The studio provided him with access to studio space, cameras, microphones, and other broadcasting equipment for the bargain price of $60 per hour.

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72 O’Brien already had extensive experience in print media. He wrote “Glenn O’Brien’s BEAT” for *Interview Magazine*, freelanced for *Rolling Stone, Playboy, and Esquire*, and contributed to *High Times* and various art magazines.


74 Coca Crystal performed her shows at E.T.C. Studios, as well, which was run by James Chladek.
O’Brien devised a TV program with his friends in the New York New Wave scene. The premise of the show was a literal onscreen party, including alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and live music. Chris Stein, the guitarist for Blondie, became O’Brien’s co-host, New Wave film director Amos Poe became TV Party’s director, and Walter “Doc” Steding (former Warhol assistant) led the TV Party Orchestra. Other regulars included Fab Five Freddie (graffiti artist, musician, and future MTV personality), Jean-Michel Basquiat (artist), Debbie Harry (lead singer of Blondie), Kate Simon (photographer), Richard Sohl (keyboardist in the Patti Smith Group), Fred Schneider (of the B-52s), and David Walter McDermott (artist and performer). TV Party thus became an outlet for current underground news, such as upcoming performances by bands, but, more importantly, it provided broader visibility and a voice to those forming artistic scenes in the improvisational spaces of New York City.

The New York punk scene was a multimedia endeavor that extended beyond music and clubs to become a lifestyle. In 1975, John Holstrom and “Legs” McNeil published Punk, a hand-lettered fanzine that concentrated on CBGB’s house bands. Amos Poe’s 1976 film The Blank Generation captured the gritty, anti-authoritarian spirit of the movement in New York City. Filmed live at CBGBs, Poe’s do-it-yourself movie, whose grainy aesthetic is paralleled in TV Party, captured many of the musicians who came to define the era, such as Patti Smith, Richard Hell, Television, The Ramones, Talking Heads, Blondie, Wayne County, and the New York Dolls. Punk and No Wave cinema grew throughout the decade with projects by Eric Mitchell, Dick Nares, Scott and Beth B., and Vivienne Dick. On the stage, the New Wave Vaudeville Show (1978) at Irving Plaza, produced by Tom Scully and Susan Hannaford and directed by Ann Magnuson, replaced the hardcore punk sensibility with one less destructive that combined

75 O’Brien, “The TV Party Story.”
elements of “pop culture, futurism, revivalism, and gay cabaret.” The movement finally branched out into television with O’Brien’s show.

O’Brien merged the improvisational, do-it-yourself spirit of punk music with the do-it-yourself character of public access television when TV Party debuted on December 18, 1978. “The Premiere Episode” appropriately opened with a dance party and a recording of Kool and the Gang’s “Funky Stuff,” which O’Brien interrupted with his slogan: “Hi, welcome to TV Party. The TV show that’s a cocktail party, but which could be a political party.” O’Brien envisioned his show to be a “socialist realist TV” program and, in fact, hanging on the sparsely decorated walls behind the folding chairs were posters of Vladimir Lenin, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. But O’Brien’s specific brand of socialism meant “going out every night” and was based on the belief that “social action started with socializing.” His political party, one founded on rebellion, comradeship, and leisure, was straight out of the downtown club scene where, evidently, O’Brien felt the anarchic nature of the clubs could contribute to “the withering away of the state,” which “sounded like fun, so we made fun of the state every chance we got.”

O’Brien admits:

I actually intended to get the TV Party on the ballot and run for mayor of New York. I figured that once people got in a voting booth and saw TV Party there they would definitely vote for us. Some people like Democrat and some people like Republican, but everybody loves TV. We went so far as to actually get petition forms. We just never got any signatures. We were sleeping too late.”

In the midst of the 1970s culture of youth, radical politics, drugs, and television, O’Brien’s show and political allegiances proved especially timely, and TV Party

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76 Hager, 22.
77 O’Brien, “The TV Party Story.”
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
represented a drive toward social change, even if it was slightly frivolous and self-indulgent.

In addition to O’Brien’s overt political position, he acknowledges the influence of media theorist Marshall McLuhan on the conception of the show in “The Premiere Episode.” O’Brien explains that the idea of the show is in reaction to Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” theory of the media—“that television is supposed to make the world one big culture.” “Well!” exclaims O’Brien, “We never believed that did we?” “We believe,” continues O’Brien, “that the world is not a global village, but a global ghetto.” Reveling in multiplicity, difference, and various “flavors” (as O’Brien refers to both yogurt cultures and human culture), O’Brien offered public access viewers a taste of diversity, radicalism, and surprise.

Just as Perich pulled viewers along through his episodes by using recognizable and familiar formats and tropes, O’Brien appropriated the hip, party atmosphere of Hugh Hefner’s Playboy after Dark (1969-70) and Johnny Carson’s late-night variety show The Tonight Show, only to upend viewers’ expectations. Each episode of TV Party began like any other Tonight Show episode, with music, an opening monologue, banter, and an introduction of guests. However, Glenn O’Brien replaced Johnny Carson, Chris Stein filled in for Ed McMahon, while Walter “Doc” Steding led the band instead of Doc Severinsen. Because of these similarities, a viewer of Carson’s show who tuned into O’Brien’s would have perhaps expected something similar to the mainstream variety show, with its colorful sets, a nice desk for the host and comfortable chairs for his guests, and a full accompanying orchestra. Instead, in E.T.C. Studios, the walls were draped with a drab cloth, the host and guests sat on metal folding chairs, and the band squeezed into a small corner of the room amidst wires, amplifiers, and instruments. The grainy,
black and white picture paired with inconsistent sound and oftentimes confused camerawork resulted in few other similarities to Carson’s show.

*TV Party*’s guests were similarly unlike anything seen on Carson’s show and rather than turning his avant-garde guests into spectacles, the show turned them into ordinary, everyday individuals—the outrageous became the norm. On “The Sublimely Intolerable Show,” which aired on January 8, 1979, viewers witnessed a diverse cast of characters parade before the camera, coexisting and performing in a shared, almost utopian space, in which varying transgressive discourses met and mingled. The show begins with a performance by Compton Maddux, a country western duo. Dressed in long white laboratory coats, O’Brien and Debbie Harry join the musicians, performing the backup vocals and dancing in the background (fig. 7). Klaus Nomi follows Compton Maddux’s performance. A fixture in the East Village art, music, and queer scene and “one of the finest pastry chefs in New York,” Nomi wears his trademark, pointed hairstyle, heavy makeup, and a plastic jumpsuit, resembling a spacesuit, cinched at the waist with a belt of scrolling lights (fig. 8). His eerie, futuristic performance of the “Samson and Delilah” aria, also known as “Mon cœur s’ouvre à ta voix,” from Camille Saint-Saëns’s 1877 opera *Samson and Delilah* significantly contrasts with the upbeat, modern songs, like Compton Maddux’s “Caca Disco.”

Following these two musical acts, No Wave director Eric Mitchell announces the opening of the now famous St. Marks Cinema at 12 St. Mark’s Place. The viewer sees a clip from his film “Kidnapped,” featuring Arto Lindsay, Lounge Lizards, Duncan Smith, and Anya Phillips. Andy Shernoff from the Dictators then plays a cover of the Beach Boys’ “Be True to Your School,” and is backed up by Tish and Snooky, the owners of New York City’s first punk boutique Manic Panic located in St. Marks Place, dressed in cheerleading outfits. This portion of the show concludes with “the part of the show
where white people talk about reggae,” in which the British director David Silver and Kate Simon expound upon the similarities they see between reggae and New Wave music. O’Brien concludes the discussion by smoking a joint onscreen and stating, “You don’t have to smoke pot all day to like reggae, but it doesn’t hurt.”

The diverse set of characters on “The Sublimely Intolerable Show” served to illustrate the creative and performative space TV Party created for many of New York’s fringe personalities. By refusing to follow any sort of televisual code of decorum, TV Party invited performers and guests alike to participate in their alternative world of anarchy, creativity, and transgression. Mixing and mingling onscreen, these performers and artists contributed to a new counterpublic by urging viewers to share in a critical engagement with social norms and television as a medium.

Like Perich, O’Brien was interested in the sexual possibilities of the medium of television. Because TV Party was live, O’Brien identified and exploited its direct relationship to the audience. If O’Brien’s show did not necessarily queer the medium, it at least became a queer-friendly medium. On February 17, 1981, O’Brien and the TV Party cast and crew launched a crusade to have the “first mass television orgone linkup” on “The Crusades Show.” Drawing upon Marshall McLuhan’s notion that all media are extensions of man and Wilhelm Reich’s conception of the orgone, a primordial life force founded on the principles of Freud’s libidinal energy, O’Brien turns the television into a pleasurable extension of the human body.80 He blurs the boundaries between viewer and performer by transforming the medium of television into an orgone-transmitting mechanism.

80 Reich also developed an orgone accumulator, which was a box he thought was able to trap one’s orgone energy. For more on Reich’s theories, see Wilhelm Reich, Selected Readings: An Introduction to Orgonomy, ed. Mary Boyd Higgins (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961).
At the beginning of “The Crusades Show,” one is struck by the odd ensemble O’Brien wears. He dons a backward jean jacket and saggy long johns for pants, while a blond wig swings freely from his crotch. His face is largely obscured thanks to his signature Ray-Bans, and atop his head he sports an upside-down bowl topped with rabbit ear antennae. The antennae paired with the extremely hairy crotch transforms O’Brien into a highly sexualized personification of a television. Dressed in this manner, he explains his project over a din of bells, a violin, and an accordion played by band members dressed in a similarly unusual manner: “We have supercharged ourselves with television and now we can turn the force around and make it work for YOU! Now, how? ‘How?’ You might ask are we going to do this. Through TV! We are going to complete the circuit!” At this exclamation, O’Brien turns directly to the camera and inserts one finger into the circle he makes with his fist, an extremely sexually suggestive gesture that likens the performer-to-viewer-to-performer circuit to sex.

O’Brien requests something soothing from the band and instructs his viewers to “just relax. Turn off all of the appliances and all of the lights. Just leave the TV on. Turn up your television all the way and turn the brightness control up as far as you can and still see the image. Okay now I want you to take off your clothes. We’ll wait, go ahead, take them all off. That’s right, all the way all the way.” In case there is any hesitation on the part of the viewer, O’Brien reassures him or her that “they’re stripping down in the control room right now” and walks to a camera aimed directly at the control room. He asks for a “shot of that” and the camera switches to a blurry, grainy scene of several people taking off their shirts in the control room.

The camera returns to O’Brien as he asks, “Okay, now everyone completely nude?” Assuming that his viewers are, he sits down on the floor and instructs his viewers to do the same. O’Brien crouches before the camera, the blond wig grazing the floor.
While holding the microphone in his right hand, he begins to simulate masturbation by fondling the wig with his left hand and tells his viewers, “Now, I want you, if you’re alone, I want you to touch yourself. You know where. And just make it feel good. And if you’re with someone special or maybe someone you just met, well, take your left hand and keep it right there on home base and take your right hand and fondle the friend to your extreme right.” Once everyone is “all hooked up,” the mass orgone can begin to form: “Okay now we want you to just feel good and get into it and relax and breathe deeply. Okay, feel it now everybody out there in TV land? Imagine hundreds, thousands, ten thousand, a hundred thousand people all over Manhattan right now are feeling that same wonderful feeling of orgone infiltrating their being.” The close-up on O’Brien’s face shifts to Chris Stein, dressed in a black hooded cloak, who squeezes the bellows of his accordion next to the microphone to imitate the sound of heavy breathing.

While urging viewers to focus on their own pleasures, O’Brien ensures that they also take into consideration not only what they are feeling, but also what they are seeing on their TV screen: “Do you feel it? Can you feel that mass orgone out there? If everybody did it at the same time all the time this is what it would always feel like. Okay now you feel it. I just want you to look into your TV and just clear your mind, a complete blank, and concentrate on the image on your screen.” What is on the screen, at this moment, is a close-up of O’Brien’s crotch, where his hand continues to tug and caress the wig (fig. 9). Then, the camera shows Stein, with the accordion, who expands and contracts the bellows slowly at first and then quickens his pace as he grits his teeth, suggesting the rising physical intensity of an orgasm, while O’Brien says offscreen, “I just want you to think, just feel that force, just feel it coming up your spine and you feel it coming into your head and igniting all those pleasure centers in your head. And mmm, mmm what a feeling…Try to direct that feeling into your TV set.” All of a sudden,
O’Brien exclaims “Woah, what a rush!” and falls back onto the floor, apparently from the sheer force of the orgone circuit. “Wow,” he continues, “Okay, keep it up. Keep that orgone coming. But not too fast, we’ve got a couple more minutes.”

As the first “rush” subsides, O’Brien urges the band to “slow it down now slow it down, it’s a little heavy. Now let’s give them a little tempo.” Directing his attention back to the viewers, O’Brien intends to guide them to the final conclusion of the circuit:

Okay now just relax. You can feel it. Let it happen. It’s coming over you. Look into my eyes. This is our crusade. This is the means which we’re going to use to get into each and every home and cleanse the five senses of those garbage impediments which have sealed off the truth of the American way. Who can resist an empire made of dreams and pleasure and orgone for everyone?”

As he speaks of this ideal, pleasurable empire, the camera focuses on a poster of Abraham Lincoln hanging behind the band. Lincoln, a familiar symbol of freedom in America, becomes the face of this new revolution—the orgone-television revolution.

Though “The Crusades Show,” and this segment in particular, are performed tongue-in-cheek and depend largely on viewerly complicity (and a sort of “winking,” if you will), there is an feature of technology in which O’Brien is seriously interested. During his performance, O’Brien constantly reminds his viewers to focus all of their attention on the television and their bodily pleasures, associating the pleasure of feeling with the pleasure of seeing. The television becomes a means through which these pleasures can circulate amongst viewers, which, in turn, presents a queer condition in which human bodies and television can be connected through orgone and cables, blurring the distinctions between humans and technology. O’Brien urges his viewers to “hook up” to his or her “friend,” just as one hooks up cable television. O’Brien offers an opportunity for a variety of sexual acts at once: masturbation, group sex, anonymous sex, technological sex, or public sex—all without gender specifications. This interactivity between those on- and off-screen contributes to the formation of a queer counterpublic.
At the time, one had the option to prerecord or air live. O’Brien notes that he wanted to do the show live because that was what TV was like when he was a kid: “It was exciting. Anything could happen. I remember watching Playhouse 90 and the U.S. Steel Hour in the fifties and a set might fall over, or someone would blow a line badly or a stagehand would accidentally walk in front of the camera with a ladder...I knew live was where it's at.”

Live television not only allowed O’Brien to immediately interact directly with his audience, but it also offered him a chance to break with the formal conventions of network broadcasting, which, by the 1970s and early 1980s, relied almost solely on recordings.

O’Brien’s first job in New York City was working for Andy Warhol, so his conception of the technological possibilities of video largely stemmed from Warhol’s films. O’Brien writes, “He was my mentor. I was a great fan of his movies and I liked the ‘bad’ camerawork. Somehow the lack of technical slickness heightened the realism and impact of the films. So as long as TV Party looked and sounded as good as Andy’s Nude Restaurant, I was happy.” In fact, TV Party is, at its surface, a show about nothing, just as Warhol’s Nude Restaurant (1967) appears to be a film about nothing. In Warhol’s film, off-screen sounds and shadows frequently mingle with onscreen dialogues and actions. We hear the crew fiddling with sound equipment and the cast and crew chatting behind the camera. Even during the kissing scene, we hear footsteps and doors slamming, which interrupt the “romance” of the onscreen kiss. Cast and crew members often walk in front of the lights, casting shadows across scenes. These are a few of the characteristics O’Brien admired so much in Warhol’s films and features that he carries over into his show. On TV Party, audience members often walk in front of rolling

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81 O’Brien, “The TV Party Story.”
82 Ibid.
cameras and sometimes cameramen focus on nothing of particular importance, such as O’Brien’s sneakers. The viewer often sees O’Brien directing the cameras or fixing microphones while onscreen, which further heightens the sense of realism of *TV Party*.83

O’Brien, like Perich, embraced video’s inconsistencies and cited Warhol’s films as an inspirational source, but, because *TV Party* was live, O’Brien largely surrendered his control of the technical aspects of the show to director Amos Poe and inexperienced technicians. The overexposed scenes, missed segments, and inconsistent sound that resulted certainly added a sense of heightened immediacy that O’Brien so admired in Warhol’s videos.84 In *TV Party*, we do see direct references to Warhol’s camerawork. For instance, in Warhol’s *Camp* (1965), Mario Montez performs an upbeat rendition of “If I Could Shimmy like My Sister Kate.” While Montez wildly shakes his hips to the beat of the music, the camera frantically zooms in and out, visually pulling the viewer into the whirlwind of the music and the rhythm of Montez’s dance. The camera operators on *TV Party* frequently employ this same technique when the *TV Party Orchestra* performs.

The first ten minutes of “The Sublimely Intolerable Show” exemplifies the hazards and wonders of live television that O’Brien embraced. Shortly after O’Brien introduces the audience to the show, the technicians lose sound capabilities. Jean-Michel Basquiat and others in the control room realizing that O’Brien and his onscreen guests have lost their ability to communicate with the viewers, take it upon themselves to utilize

83 Significantly, as J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum have pointed out in *Midnight Movies*, there are several parallels between camp and punk sensibilities and, though such a comparison expands beyond the scope of this paper, is a topic worthy of future analysis in terms of how O’Brien, and even Perich, reuse and play with existing forms and conventions. Such a consideration about the relationship between camp and punk may also reveal even more about the 1970s and the continuation of Pop in the midst of punk.

84 O’Brien notes that the studio “had three cameras, one of them usually out of focus, and numerous microphones, at least half of which were broken. It would have been difficult for real technicians to produce a visible, audible show here, and we weren’t technicians” (“The *TV Party Story*”).
the “character generator,” or keyboard, to communicate directly to the audience. Viewers see the following flash across their television screen:

NO SOUND!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

FUCK!!!SHIT!!!FUCK!!!!$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$$

UNBEKNOWNST TO GLENN THERE IS STILL NO SOUND

WE ARE EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. PLEASE STAND BY

TELL GLENN THERE IS NO SOUND (fig. 10)

While O’Brien continues the show, this text floats across the silent images. This sudden and unexpected change in the program asks the viewer to actively engage with the show because he or she must interpret both the text and the speechless performers. The final line, “Tell Glenn there is no sound,” seems to appeal directly to the viewer, perhaps prompting him or her to call the studio and alert Glenn to the technological problems. The “character generator” provides space for multiple levels of discourses and interpretations and also provides a creative space for the TV Party crew. Ultimately, one may also view the “character generator” as the technological equivalent of Basquiat’s spray can, and the television screen as the wall on which he writes.85 The overlay of the text on image is a perfect example of how these New York “worlds” collided in visual terms through the specific technology of television.

By the time TV Party debuted on public access, shows such as Midnight Blue and Ugly George had gained loyal followings. In comparison, O’Brien’s show was tame,

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85 For example, in one episode, the camera scrolls across the posters of political figures that hang on the walls (known as the “hero gallery”). While O’Brien identifies them one by one, Basquiat types: MUSSOLINI, ABE LINCOLN, SAMO, 3 STOOGES. This technology allows Basquiat to question power structures, by inserting himself and his name into world history. His text is in dialogue with O’Brien’s discussion, who refers to the poster of the 3 Stooges as “the three master political theorists of our time.” The title of this episode is unknown. It is included on the “The Sublimely Intolerable Show” DVD as an extra feature entitled “Nile Rodgers Call In.”
with less sex and nudity. However, though *TV Party* did not suffer overt censorship like Perich’s show, it was still subject to moral patrolling during the call-in portion of the show, which Chris Stein once called the “experimental portion.”

O’Brien intended this section to be an extension of the tenets of public access: “Too often, access to the public forms of communication are cut off and denied to the general public. So, all of you out there who have secret information or important knowledge which could alter the course of human events are invited to call up now and to relate this information to us.”

Though some callers ask what the point of the show is, and others praise the performers’ boldness, these expressions of admiration or condemnation often surfaced in racial or sexual forms. For instance, in one episode, one female caller asks Chris Stein, “When can I suck your dick?” which is shortly followed by an irate caller who exclaims, “Your mother takes it in the ass you fucking black bastard cocksucker nigger fuck.” These two extreme reactions to O’Brien’s show reveal the intensely felt responses the show provoked in its viewers.

Interestingly, the sexualized nature of these calls reminds us that the viewers linked sex with the show and expressed their emotional responses in sexual terms. Though O’Brien dismisses these remarks as merely the result of the “lingering erections” from the preceding show, a porn talk show called *The Robin Byrd Show*, clearly the show, through its anarchy and improvisation, pushed viewers a bit too far into the realm

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86 “The Sublimely Intolerable Show.”
87 The title of this episode is unknown. It is included on the “The Sublimely Intolerable Show” DVD as an extra feature entitled “Nile Rodgers Call In.”
88 Comments such as these open up a whole new discourse about fandom and public access television. Though the brevity of this thesis prevents such a discussion, one must certainly consider the fandom that cable subscribers developed for these underground celebrities. The title of this episode is unknown. It is included on the “The Sublimely Intolerable Show” DVD as an extra feature entitled “Nile Rodgers Call In.”
89 Every show ended with a call-in segment, which allowed those of the counterpublic and those against it to voice their opinions on air. The broad, viewing public could at once encourage and discourage O’Brien’s project, but the show itself was not immediately threatened by censorship, as Perich’s was.
of the transgressive, so several felt the urge to push back. Apparently, the most outraged viewers turned to sexual epithets as a way to affirm their own sexual normativity in light of alternative sexual possibilities. The counterpublic that formed around TV Party was not merely punk, but a rich, vibrant queer counterpublic founded on sex, drugs, and anti-establishment sensibilities. 

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The form and content of Anton Perich Presents and TV Party offered an alternative to television’s norms. Perich and O’Brien brought underground aesthetics and content to a broader audience that experienced these often transgressive shows within a highly personal space. The unpolished, do-it-yourself nature of these shows countered network television’s aesthetic standards and viewers were often asked to critically engage with the content through call-in portions of these shows and direct onscreen address by the individuals on the shows. Through my reconsideration of publics and counterpublics, we can thus identify the continuation of the rational-critical discourse in “new media” and, perhaps, more importantly, we can see that these shows offered audiences new ways of being and new queer possibilities of engaging with television by transforming them, if only temporarily, into queer counterpublics.

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90 O’Brien, “The TV Party Story.”
Concluding Remarks and the Future of the Public Access Archive

Given the rapid expansion of our virtual world in the past two decades, a return to early public access channels allows us to situate current phenomena such as youtube.com within a historic trajectory of do-it-yourself media. Ironically, Anton Perich, who has his own channel on youtube.com still cannot show many of his episodes on the website due to the sexual nature of his show. This censorship has required Perich to upload his shows to his own website. TV Party has enjoyed the privilege of reaching a broader audience than Perich’s show in the past few years with the release of several episodes on DVD. One may view short clips from TV Party episodes on sites such as youtube.com, but access remains rather limited and most of the shows continue to be largely unavailable. Though the medium and times have changed, some problems, such as censorship and accessibility, remain the same.

This thesis represents only the beginning of my investigation into this valuable cultural archive. Future research should include Coca Crystal’s If I Can’t Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution, Jaime Davidovich’s The Live! Show, Davidovich’s art-related projects Cable SoHo and Artists Television Network, Colab’s All Color News, and Willoughby Sharp’s Downtown New York, which profiled artists such as Laurie Anderson, Gracie Mansion, Michael Smith, and Cookie Mueller, amongst others. One must also consider singular, one time ventures, such as Cave Girls, a feminist work by Kiki Smith and Ellen Cooper.

Further examinations of Manhattan public access shows would greatly impact our current art historical understanding of video art and performance art. These shows defined new relationships between art and viewership because these artists extended their work beyond public gallery environments (both commercial and alternative) into the
private space of cable subscribers. By transmitting their works through the public airwaves, these video and performance artists engaged an entirely new public not available to artists whose work was generally seen within the confines of galleries and museums.

This public access archive also expands our knowledge of the New York underground of the 1970s and 1980s. In the often incidental onscreen meetings among artists, actors, musicians, directors, writers, designers, and others, new histories and connections emerge, revealing an otherwise obscured collaborative, interconnected New York underground scene. These public access shows are vital historical and cultural documents that will largely transform our understanding of the era.
Images

Figure 1: A still from “Mr. Fixit” (*Anton Perich Presents*).

Figure 2: A still from “Mr. Fixit” (*Anton Perich Presents*).
Figure 3: A still from “The Star Candidate” (*Anton Perich Presents*).

Figure 4: A still from “The Star Candidate” (*Anton Perich Presents*).
Figure 5: A still from “The Star Candidate” (*Anton Perich Presents*).

Figure 6: A still from “Mr. Fixit” (*Anton Perich Presents*).
Figure 7: A still from TV Party’s “Sublimely Intolerable Show.”

Figure 8: A still from TV Party’s “The Sublimely Intolerable Show.”
Figure 9: A still from *TV Party’s* “Crusades Show.”

Figure 10: A still from *TV Party’s* “Sublimely Intolerable Show.”
Bibliography


**Videography**


Filmography


Vita

Kara Elizabeth Carmack grew up in Harrisonville, Pennsylvania. After completing her work at McConnellsburg High School, McConnellsburg, Pennsylvania, she entered Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She graduated magna cum laude from Dickinson with Bachelor of Arts degrees in both English and art history in May 2008. The subsequent fall she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. In the fall of 2010, she will begin her Ph.D. in art history at the University of Texas.

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This thesis was typed by the author.