



Free Associations: An Introduction

Twenty years in Los Angeles is an eternity. The city, with a history of forgetting,¹ is home to key organizations living, some even thriving, under radically different cultural and economic circumstances than when they started decades ago. Freewaves, now twenty years old, was clearly defined by the challenges of the West Coast art scene in the 1980s and 1990s. For its founder Anne Bray, it included a commitment to connecting artists, organizations, and media resources. It was a do-it-yourself project created in 1989 out of necessity, and it fostered the radical position of using media to create a community in the shadow of Hollywood.

At that time, the burgeoning scene in Los Angeles had wide-open spaces and little in the way of programming or support for what was then called "video art." In 1994 Freewaves created and distributed a poster, now called "You Are Here...You Could Be Everywhere" that visually mapped out resources and advocacy groups in the city. This analog mapping of Los Angeles, as Ken Rogers notes in his accompanying text, was not only a sign of things to come, but served as a signpost for the organization's mission as well as its still-in-progress contribution to the city's cultural landscape.

Twenty years after its initial effort we can start to piece together certain key tactics and ideas. With some hindsight, we begin to dig out the core principles that have remained constant. These are the principles that have sustained the organization regardless of changes in programming and curatorial strategies.

¹ Norman Klein. *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York: Verso, 1997).

Historically and fundamentally Anne Bray catalyzed Freewaves as an effort to bring together media makers and independent cultural organizations. **Networking** was crucial. Freewaves launched during a period when Los Angeles was forming its “official” institutions of art while simultaneously funding for local alternatives was drying up. Freewaves was there to fill the political potholes and has been a prescient and valuable resource ever since.

Freewaves has remained committed to media and social **advocacy** throughout its history by not only promoting new practices and technologies, but by highlighting politically progressive voices, both locally and internationally. Its programming history, varied and rhizomatically rooted within Los Angeles’ cultural history, is packed with catalogs, documents, photos, and accounts of public workshops, lectures, and screenings.²

Freewaves, ultimately has been about creating a **community** and mapping out shared public spaces in a city that historically has had difficulty with such terms. From the beginning, Freewaves fostered a progressive inquiry into the uses of media and their relationship to the public. The organization made critical strides in an effort to connect the city’s resources with artists and thinkers, and to urge collaboration among them.

Throughout its history there have been key defining moments, such as the riots of 1992 and the racially-biased inequities in the media coverage, that moved the organization and the city’s other independent cultural organizations to be self-reflexive and proactive, putting together programming for cable outlets, and organizing screenings and discussions on race and power. People started making their own videos that responded to the violence and the media coverage, which were produced and screened in a matter of weeks. For an organization that had just started a few years earlier, this was an overwhelming call to action. Over these past twenty years there were, and continue to be, many defining moments.

There is a gray area that marks the current and future work of many established non-profit and alternative spaces. Today, people are not only making and publishing their own videos (in a matter of hours, not weeks), but the aesthetic and design decisions the public makes on a daily basis—the tools at their disposal—are reflected in the trans-disciplinary and collective models artists are working with today. This is, as many observers have stated, only a condition of a larger realignment in the public’s understanding of—and role in—making art. One could even say that the “public,” taking the complexity of the term into account, is beginning to realize that art and culture are not the sole domains of the art world.

The conditions are such that it is clear that what was once considered the line maintaining art’s autonomy—the line defining what was art and what wasn’t (the same line that nurtured the modernization and professionalization of the art world) —is now slowly being erased.

² See contextualized timeline.

The rise of recent experimental and collaborative projects has attracted and launched intense artistic energy. In the last five to ten years the initiation of new feral spaces, artist collectives, and transdisciplinary cultural forums (most innovated by local MFA graduates, not cultural/social advocacy movements) are filling the “once-void” – that spatial perception that wants to articulate gaps in the system - with their own versions of experimental and localized cultural activation. Couple this with radically different funding scenarios (the move from public to private funding, for example) and we begin to get a picture of the changing political nature of the Los Angeles “alternative” art scene. This introduction is not the place to adequately trace these developments, but it does say something about the professionalization of the art world and the challenges facing now-established organizations like Freewaves. The playing field has changed. In its twentieth anniversary year, Freewaves is reconsidering its past, celebrating its accomplishments, and thinking about its future.

And it is quite a past. The history of art in Los Angeles cannot, and should not, be written without major contributions from earlier organizations like LACE, Self Help Graphics, KAOS, SPARC and of course, Freewaves. These independent projects were born of cultural/social advocacy movements that attempted to fill gaping holes in the official system. Not only were their efforts prescient, they were dedicated to causes that are still, for the most part, not being met and discussed anywhere else.

This introductory text, the subsequent essay by fellow board member Ken Rogers, and the interview with Anne Bray and her selection of videos in the accompanying DVD, are each an attempt to contextualize this twentieth anniversary, while asking questions about the future of the organization, video, and new media.

Long affiliated with video art, the history of Freewaves is, in fact, one of varying and multiple, mediums, action plans, and alliances. Ken Rogers' essay entitled “We Are Here, We Could Be Everywhere: LA Freewaves and the Use Value of Video History” looks at a forgotten but illuminating project done back in 1994, and it reflects on the organization's strategies for getting the city's media organizations and its practitioners on the same map. What Ken proposes is not only a rethinking of what Freewaves has done for the past twenty years, but is also a challenge to what is possible in the future. His proposal that Freewaves, contrary to popular belief, is not about video and video making, but about developing a spatial and political networking of like-minded actors and advocates, calls into question the importance of video as a model for the future. Given the organization's recent curatorial programming, this has to be read as a call to reconsider the role and situation of video as a social activator, not only at an organizational level, but also at a practicum/theoretical level.

Heidi Zeller's interview with Anne Bray recalls the early history of Freewaves and how it started as a collaborative effort among forty different individuals and organizations. Author James Moran suggests that the history of Freewaves was shaped by its resistance to Hollywood equally as much as Hollywood's resistance to Freewaves.³

³ James Moran. “All Over the Map: A History of LA Freewaves” in *The sons and daughters of Los: culture and community in L.A.* ed. David James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 175.

That may be so, but what the interview reveals is that the organization was less interested in keeping the industry's capitalist ethics at bay, than it was in supporting artists and filmmakers regardless of their views on mainstream media. Nevertheless, over the years, there were plenty of positions to advocate, and that is where Anne excelled as both curator and political provocateur.

The four accompanying video programs were curated by Anne and reflect her personal interests, as well as those of the organization over the past twenty years. Video compilations about political troublemakers, squirming bodies, playful dualistic tensions, and pop-media agitations suggest a focus that is at once media specific and phenomenological, as well as social and contextual.

Through it all, Anne Bray has kept Freewaves a vibrant site for production and debate for the past twenty years. Her tireless drive and persona are the stuff of art legend. She has pieced together provocative festivals and screenings that have given thousands of media artists exposure to tens of thousands of viewers and given voice to over a hundred curators. One could say that this twentieth anniversary project is *also* about making sure the story is right. As a newer board member, my relationship with Freewaves started back in 2004, as a curator for a politically charged festival called "How Can You Resist?" The experience of those marathon viewing sessions, the sharing of ideas with the fellow curators and artists in the room, the great people I met and the friends I made, all remind me that this characteristic of bringing people and ideas together is what Freewaves has been about for twenty years. Networking. Advocacy. Community.

-Bill Kelley, Jr.
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