

## THE BOX

October 1–October 31, 2007



*Dreamhouse*, 1991 (Photo: Daniel Brooks)

### *Paper Tiger Read Paper Tiger Television, 2007*

*The media has become more doctrinaire and rigid, and more and more people are rightly seeking serious alternatives of the kind Paper Tiger has been providing so well....—Noam Chomsky*

Self-described as “smashing the myths of the Information Industry since 1981,” the New York–based media collective Paper Tiger Television celebrates itself in this enlightening backward glance into the mirror. Matching clips from its own rich archive with on-screen commentary from the present, *Paper Tiger Reads Paper Tiger Television* is an efficient primer on working for social justice by means of alternative media. Committed from its inception to working collectively, with participants including artists, technicians, academics, and activists, Paper Tiger Television became known early on for its creatively low-budget productions that reiterate the message that everyone is potentially a media producer.

First seen as weekly, half-hour shows on Manhattan public access television, Paper Tiger programs pioneered the form of having a person perform an on-air “reading” of given phenomena: from mainstream publications, as in one of PTTV’s most widely seen shows, *Herb Schiller Reads the New York Times: The Steering Mechanism of the Ruling Class* (1981), to political and social situations, as in *Thulani Davis Asks, “Why Howard Beach?”: Racial Violence and the Media* (1987), to popular television shows, as in *Joan Does Dynasty*, with video artist Joan Braderman (1985). Through the efforts of hundreds of volunteer producers over the years, Paper Tiger gradually expanded its activities to include ambitious series, such as 1991’s *Gulf Crisis TV Project*, and to providing media literacy and production training to countless underserved populations. In 1985, the group took the lead in

establishing Deep Dish TV, a satellite television network delivering progressive media.

Paper Tiger Television was the first recipient of a Wexner Center Residency Award in media arts in October 1991. Their residency took the form of a large-scale exhibition, *Dream House*, that fully occupied Gallery A and its adjacent public spaces, as created by an ever-evolving roster of Tiger operatives settling in Columbus during the show’s three-month duration. Consisting of a series of domestic rooms cohabitating in the gallery, *Dream House* was a media-active, media-friendly environment in which visitors were free to relax, take a seat or lie in a bed, and watch T.V.: Paper Tiger Television productions and ones from Columbus’s then public access station, ACTV, available as cassettes to be played on the numerous monitors and TV sets in the space. Echoing Paper Tiger’s video production ethic, the installation expressed the values of “the handmade, the comfortable, the non-technocratic—a look that says friendly and low-budget, and the seams show...,” as they noted at the time. The installation also functioned as the production studio for three programs Paper Tiger produced during the residency: *Judith Mayne Reads Soap Magazines* (Ohio State’s preeminent film scholar finally getting serious), *Paper Tiger Reads Columbus Media* (featuring local muckrakers), and *Luis R. Beltran Tunes in to Bolivian Miners’ Radio* (the South American scholar commenting on indigenous media strategies).

Paper Tiger was founded in what now seems to have been the golden age of public access television, the federal mandate to cable systems to provide training, equipment, and air time to anyone for noncommercial use. In practice, that mandate continues to be subject to the regulatory and budgetary whims of each community, with public access in Columbus essentially terminated in 2000 after the city council eliminated its funding, although it’s thriving elsewhere in Ohio. Since Paper Tiger’s beginnings in 1981, digital media and the Internet have dramatically expanded the channels for media dissemination, leading some heavily lobbied Washington politicians to introduce legislation waiving the public access mandate—although that’s unlikely to pass any time soon given its importance within rural and smaller urban communities. Still, as we wrote in the introduction to *Roar: The Paper Tiger Guide to Video Activism*, the catalogue of our exhibition, in the wake of the first Gulf War, “No stronger confirmation could have been produced for supporting this collective, and no other instant stands more disquietingly clear for the need to make space for independent media from all places and all people – the space of the airwaves as well as the space of the dream houses we all of us inhabit.”

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**Paper Tiger Television**  
*Paper Tiger Read Paper Tiger Television*  
app. 45 mins.

**Wexner Center for the Arts**  
The Ohio State University