


**Video  
Review**

## Symphony of a City

By Teresa Roberts

**B**oston, a city known for tight quarters and high rents, is facing perhaps its worst housing crisis yet. Repeals of rent control, market forces, and avarice have allowed landlords to yank up rents inordinately, leaving low and medium-income tenants insecure, poorer, and often homeless. But as opposed to the years when rent control was on the ballot, housing issues seem to be glossed over in the political discourse in Boston these days. It's as if the moguls in charge are just glad that their homes have tripled in value.

But where politicians and journalists fear to tread, artists often jump in. Political artists John Ewing and Liz Canner developed an intricate, interactive video art project focusing on housing and community activism. *Symphony of A City*, which premiered in April, at once challenged and celebrated the city of Boston.

Part of the public art movement that seeks to relocate art from museums into everyday public arenas, Canner is known for her documentaries such as *Deadly Embace: Nicaragua, the World Bank and the IMF* and *State of Emergency*, spotlighting police brutality. Ewing is primarily a political muralist, working with disenfranchised communities throughout the U.S. and Latin America.

In their multifaceted piece *Symphony of A City*, they placed tiny cameras on the heads of four Bostonians from different walks of life and projected the footage simultaneously onto Boston City Hall and onto the web, at [Symphonyofacity.org](http://Symphonyofacity.org). It's like *Being*

*John Malkovich*, except that instead of one life, you become spy/voyeur/guest in four lives simultaneously. These lives are as diverse and interesting as the city around you, commenting on social issues from divergent points of view.

Eight "wearcam" operators (four on each of two days) started in the morning wired with audio and video and viewers took a ride through their entire day seeing everything from their perspective: their activities, their families, their challenges, focusing on issues of housing and community activism.

Audio speakers around Boston City Hall allowed spectators to listen to a jumble of four coexisting lives or to walk close to just one speaker and focus on that individual's experience. But as the viewer learned what was happening to that particular Bostonian at the moment, they were also simultaneously aware of passing events in the lives of the other three. The atmosphere at the premiere April 27 was a cross between free outside movie, forum for political debate, and urban picnic. Wearcam operators mingled with artists and the public, including tourists and locals, those who sought out the show and those who stumbled upon it.

The wearcam operators were nominated by various community groups, such as the Asian Community Development Corporation and City Life/Vida Urbana, and addressed housing or activism in some way. For instance, cameras were worn by and showed the lives of a tenant facing eviction, a tenants' lawyer, a wealthy landlord, and a homeless person. The identity of each wearcam operator, including their class, race and gender, only became apparent as the viewer watched.

At once there was a democratizing element in the representation of those who are struggling economically, who are often made in-

visible in our society, and also a jarring comparison of those lives with privileged others, who are disproportionately powerful in our world.

The result was not only interesting from a purely political standpoint, it also challenged traditional concepts of artist as "the maker" versus art as "that which is made." Canner and Ewing provided wear-cam operators with technical training, but the wear-cam operators decided what to portray and how. Some showed a carefully planned sequence of activities or interviewed friends about housing issues, others went about their day as if the camera weren't present.

Much of the interest of *Symphony of A City* emanated from its unpredictability and the questions it raised: What can seeing life from another's perspective teach us about the city around us? Is the realism of an "average" person's day art? Given that the images of city life and social justice issues are projected onto two archetypal symbols of civic dialogue—the age-old city hall, and the techno-modern Internet—is it the process which decides that the thing is art or rather the achieved aesthetic?

On the days *Symphony of A City* premiered, the project's website was interactive and enabled viewers to choose which realtime streaming video to watch, or perhaps to watch several simultaneously. The viewer could then use the site to access more information about these issues, to participate in an online dialogue with other viewers and ask questions of the camera operators, to read about them and the neighborhoods they come from, and ways to become involved in local progressive politics.

The artists plan to continue the website until spring 2002, including edited 10-minute segments of the wearcam operators' lives. **Z**