

Video Preservation

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Since its founding in 1929, The Museum of Modern Art has dedicated itself to the exhibition, collection, and preservation of the "art of our time." The Museum first recognized video as an art form with the 1968 exhibition "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age." This was only three years after manufacturers introduced the first consumer video camera, which gave artists access to the medium. This was the exhilarating, formative years of video art. Technical factors made it challenging for museums to exhibit video. Nothing was automatic. Reel-to-reel tape decks required that someone be on hand to thread up, start, and rewind each tape. For the "Machine" show Nam June Paik turned his Lindsay Tape (1967) into a video installation by jerry-rigging an endless loop device. He set two open-reel, half-inch playback decks ten feet apart on the gallery floor. He ran the spliced-together, original videotape between them. Paik's Lindsay Tape wore out after one week. Scholars presumed this classic work was lost forever, until a grainy kinescope version turned up in a German archive two years ago. The kinescope can only suggest what this spirited, early work was like

The Museum again featured video in the 1970 "Information" show. Along with Xerox and "mail art," videotapes by artists from North and South America and Europe were shown. Many of these titles have subsequently been lost or destroyed due to neglect, dust, or the extreme humidity of Brazil. The "Information" catalogue serves as the primary record of this early video work.

In 1971 the Museum began its ongoing, contemporary exhibition series called "Projects" with a site-specific, "live" video camera installation by sculptor Keith Sonnier. The first video installations of Peter Campus and Bill Viola, and the video sculptures of Shigeo Kubota soon followed in the series. In many cases, the artists' preliminary sketches and the Museum's installation photographs are the only records of these early, three-dimensional video works.

In response to the broad scope of video being produced internationally, the Museum established an ongoing video exhibition program in a specially designated gallery in 1974. Since that time the Museum has presented more than two thousand independently produced videotapes from more than 20 countries. The program has helped define the evolving documentary, narrative, and other experimental video genres. At the Museum video is seen in the context of contemporary activity in other mediums (painting, sculpture, photography, installation), and in the context of films by such masters as Hitchcock, Kurosawa, and Warhol.

In 1977 the Museum began an ongoing lecture series "Video Viewpoints." Artists from around the world present and discuss the aesthetic, conceptual, and technical components of their work

with an interested audience

The Museum started to acquire artists' videotapes as the natural outgrowth of its programming of independently produced video. Initially we purchased submasters in 3/4-inch format. During the 1980s we began acquiring submasters in the more archival format of one-inch videotape. In the near future we will change over to a preservation format that is digital. Fiscally this will be a major undertaking. In the meantime we seek funding and await further standardization of digital hardware. When we do adopt a digital format, we will work directly with artists, their distributors, as well as other archives to obtain the best existing master. We will collaborate to avoid the duplication of other archives' efforts.

Today the Museum's Video Study Collection includes more than 800 titles. With the acquisition of a title, we obtain the right to hold up to three copies of each title -- a preservation submaster, an exhibition copy, and a study copy. We have catalogued the Video Collection, with the support of the MacArthur Foundation. We added video terminology to the cataloguing program used by our film colleagues at the Museum. The Department of Film and Video maintains two distinct, collection databases in its STAR system -- one for film and one for video.

Recently the Museum completed a new preservation center for the Department of Film and Video's collections. The Video Collection is stored under stable conditions -- temperature of 55 degrees (F) and relative humidity of 45%. Attached to each videotape and each storage shelf is a bar code sticker. This method of inventory control has proven to be the most efficient collection management system.

The Museum's video preservation activities have been conducted over the years with limited resources, primarily with grants from the New York State Council on the Arts. In most cases we have collaborated with other institutions. We transferred Les Levine's black-and-white, half-inch, open-reel videotape Bum (1965) to one-inch, working with the American Federation of Arts for a jointly sponsored, documentary video exhibition; we worked with the Kitchen Center in transferring Vito Acconci's 3/4-inch PAL videotape Theme Song (1973) onto one-inch NTSC. Electronic Arts Intermix joined us in the remastering of Tony Oursler's flaking, 3/4-inch color videotapes from 1980. Video art archivists work closely together to pool their financial resources, expertise, and efforts.

The eight video installations in the Museum's collection pose unique preservation issues. These environmental and sculptural works combine disparate mediums -- such as videotapes and discs, audio/video playback systems, sculptural components, and computer controllers. For example, the Museum's video sculpture Nude Descending a Staircase (1976) by Shigeko Kubota requires video monitors with screens of very particular dimensions: the screens fit into special openings cut into the risers of a handcrafted, plywood staircase. (The plywood now is extremely fragile.) Between Cinema and a Hard Place (1991) by Gary Hill has complicated, specially fabricated wiring; it requires electronic engineers to install, and careful maintenance. When installations have been exhibited for long periods of time, the specially designated cameras, monitors or

projectors become worn. This is problematic when the design calls for what is now obsolete hardware. Replacement parts become increasingly difficult to locate. The loan fee the Museum charges other institutions, when they borrow an installation in the collection, is applied to a special video installation preservation account. Over time these designated funds will be applied toward the purchase of replacement equipment and parts.

For many years The Museum of Modern Art has carefully restored early cinema, ensuring that this important twentieth century art history will reach future audiences. Today the Museum's video preservation activities are carried out with the same objective -- to insure that artists' video can be widely seen by present and future generations. Our main goal is to have high quality exhibition material. The Museum's underlying mission is educational, and we continue to develop audience appreciation for the art of our time. We perform this educational role through our ongoing exhibitions, the accompanying program notes and catalogues, as well as through the Museum's monthly and quarterly magazines, and our circulating video shows.

In 1984 the Museum opened a Video Study Center, where by appointment scholars can carry out research using our more than one thousand books and catalogues, rare periodicals, individual artists' files, story boards, and photographs. For example, this unique archive traces the history of artists' video, and documents early community video groups, the first video programs in alternative exhibition spaces and museums located around the world, and artists' production labs begun at public television stations in the United States and Europe.

In the future great value will be placed on artists' video of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In the same way that scholars constantly look back at the film of the early 20th century -- when there was a proliferation of film formats and extraordinary, creative activity, much of which has been lost -- scholars increasingly will look back to artists' video produced over the last thirty years.

Since the portable video camera appeared on the consumer market, video has been central to the discourses around contemporary art. Many internationally acclaimed artists have concentrated on video and video installation throughout their distinguished careers. They have developed distinctive themes and stylistic vocabularies. Before more fires, earthquakes, and benign neglect deprive us of our video art masterpieces, we must work together to preserve this heritage, the true art of the late 20th century.