

I find myself examining the Demo or Die poster that features a figure in front of a fire, reading messages in the smoke that legitimize the living archive and the yodel as communications models. I've been living in southwestern Ohio for the past 3 years and recently I hosted Tuscarora curator Jolene Rickard and Mohawk artist Alan Michelson's presentations at Antioch College, which became the occasion to explore some of remaining extraordinary mound architecture from the Adena and Hopewell cultures of southern Ohio. Some of the mounds rise to the level of the treetops, suggesting to me (*) that some kind of signaling, perhaps with smoke or reflective materials (smoke and mirrors), could have been facilitated by these structures. There is speculation about the uses of these mounds, but since there are no descendants of the Adena and Hopewell people that can testify to their cultural assumptions, the cultural agendas surrounding the mounds remains speculative. In 1848, 3 men travelled the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys documenting over 10,000 mounds in geometric and animal forms. While a surprising number still remain, most were plowed over by farmers once these rich agricultural lands were stripped of their forests, and all that remains are the 150 year old drawings.

As a panelist I want to briefly look back at some analog work, presently housed in various video archives, through the filter of the digital present. What specific cultural questions to these collections, which in many cases have been laid to rest as mechanically unviewable or culturally marginal or irrelevant, raise?

I'd like to introduce the notion of the media archive as a demo, a "tactical occupation of space." A media archive, or a collection of tapes that have been considered for any number of reasons as some whole body, can be understood as a trace, as partial or contested evidence of an earlier cultural scene. Scenes, loosely defined as locally specific, intimate, cultural groups that collaborate (more or less) for a couple of years or perhaps a decade, share, produce and reproduce certain values, ways of working, pools of equipment, audiences, critical analyses, and institutional frameworks for funding and/or distribution...These scenes produce and reproduce critical dialects and flows of cultural currency within their respective locales. For independent media scenes, one critical aspect of the working environment is the relationship between makers and their machines, not only how the machines are used as sensing, recording and editing instruments, but more importantly the shared assumptions and political and cultural policies that structure access to the machines as well as to the institutional machines that drive and direct distribution and relationships with audiences.

Referring to work produced during the first decade of video practice in the U.S. in the context of "Surveying the First Decade," I wrote:

A decade of producing work, exploring relationships with audiences, and nurturing a viable alternative media infrastructure developed into a video cultural discourse which framed the capacity of a videotape to represent its maker's access to production technologies, [PAUSE] to reveal its maker's strategies for approximating or constructing the "real," and to engage a performative interaction with an anticipated audience...The alternative videomaker's various strategies—attentional, representational, structural/formal, performative—for articulating an art or communications event remained a *choice*, and always measured the critical distance between the dominant language of commercial media and the videomaker's independent voice.

While independent work does implicitly code relationships between maker, tools and audiences, these codes, especially the codes that initially shape the attention to the work, can lose legibility over time. Like the recording machines themselves which may have become obsolete because critical parts can no longer be found, contextualizing references for these tapes fade or drop out, and are commonly reinterpreted through contemporary analytic lenses. From the distance of at least one generation, one often encounters the work, and in fact it is often useful to reconsider the work, not as individual projects but as a collection. What values that might be brought to bear on interpretation are brought into closer focus when work is considered as a collection?

[One of the most ephemeral aspects of media seems to be the attentional apparatus/framework. What assumptions are being made in any given work at any point in time, about the viewers' attention? What focuses (and defocuses) the viewer's attention--hard content, a commitment to exploring the perceptual structures of the artist and viewer, voyeurism, editing rhythm and pacing, density of imagery, sound/image relationship, recognizable and popular genres? And in addition to questioning the attentional apparatus, interrogating why a particular person at a particular time and place decided to pick up a camera or camcorder, or for that matter buy editing software and a new digital camcorder--what compelled that person to become a self-authorized producer, or artist? I will return to these questions of attention in a minute, but let's go on to what is perhaps more germane to this discussion,]

And, the relationship between collections and their gatekeepers?

Considering collections and gatekeepers conjures of questions about authorship (for example, collective production characterizes certain periods, and individual authors may remain unnamed, or denied credit), about access to the work (who gives permission and why?), about access to interpretive strategies, about traditions of collecting--(e.g. collecting is valued within the arts but perhaps not so directly with community work that might have been intended for a specific audience around a particular issues and place)? Do tapes that were produced primarily with public money remain in the public domain?

While individuals migrate out of one scene and into another, it is often the case that work from a specific scene forms itself into a particular collection--initially simply as a collection of tapes on the shelves of a media art center, a library, an artist's editing suite, a public access center, or a school. Like the yodel, there is a concrete geography (of cultural institutions, their shelves, and air conditioning systems) that contributes to the shape of the collections over time. Collections of work tend to accrue at sites of production, exhibition, distribution, or archival storage. To some degree, those collections as collections reveal, reflect or borrow, intentionally or not, the values implicit in the collecting institution's enterprises. Another way of describing the relationship between collections and the places that come to house them would be that the decision to include particular tapes in an archive creates a story, which becomes part of the grand cultural narrative that the work itself is a part of.

[In recent years I have worked on 2 projects that considered independent or alternative media work from archives and/or as collections. One project investigated early U.S. video from the late 1960s and early 1970s video and the other independent media work from east central Europe in 1989 and the early 1990s. Both of these periods of media work coincided with a political and cultural paradigm shifts that profoundly influenced the respective media-producing scenes. In both cases bodies of work were produced as part of movements to democratize media, to reposition the maker in relation to his/her access to tools and audiences.]

In 1983, Robert Horwitz, then a citizens radio activist and arts editor of *Co-evolution Quarterly* spoke on a panel on Art and Communications narrowcast on public access TV in New York. The other conversants were Liza Bear (then editor of interview-based *Avalanche* magazine and producer of the seminal New York public access program *Cast Iron TV*),

Keith Sonnier (video artist and satellite networker), and Robert Arn (Canadian art critic and early writer on video art and technology). Horwitz called attention to shifting sensibilities informing the practice of media art and telecommunications in the early 1980s. From the 1983 Art and Communications transcript:

I'd much rather that people stopped thinking 'what is the most useful or exciting or creative way that I can relate to this technology,' regardless of whether the results are art-like or not, or whether the art world acknowledges it or not. If people did that I think they might find that the most exciting, useful, empowering ways [to relate] might not be anything like producing specific concrete, program-like events...Although the concept of art has changed a lot over the last thirty years, the concept of the artist has not changed much at all. The artist still gets most of the attention and glory, even though it is the gatekeepers to the distribution channels—the curators, the dealers, critics, and editors—who wield the power...When I look closely at the things that I enjoy most about access to new communications technology, what is most empowering and unique is having access to a huge array of inputs and outputs and being free to choose among them. Access means the right to send and to receive, to produce and to consume, with equal emphasis on each mode....I don't think it is any accident that the three of us up here have gravitated to the role of editor as the most creative and empowering position in an information rich environment. Editing involves gathering, selecting, combining, juxtaposing, distilling, contextualizing information, and then sending it out hopefully in a more meaningful and intensified form that it came in with...Other role models that seem to fit the telecommunications environment, well, to me at least, seem to include investigative journalism, policy activism, programming, espionage, gossip, scavenger, manager, and so on...

Horwitz' 1983 comments seem quite prescient/lucid in anticipating issues around information movement in environments such as the internet and museums in the late 1990s, as well as ways of approaching and studying the work of both cultural gatekeepers and artists.

Recent writing by Tony Conrad offers insight into the postmodern contemporary audience member/cultural consumer who plays a role in shaping reception of these collections as well. Tony Conrad has recently commented (in his *Early Minimalism* CD liner essay, 1997) on how post-WWII cultural consumers' exposure to diverse bodies of popular music through collecting records, tapes and CDs, and distributors' efforts to capitalize on phenomena such as world music have set the stage for what would be considered postmodern sensibilities and practices such as quotation in music as well as media arts. From Conrad's *Early Minimalism*:

For [Fredric] Jameson postmodernism is a condition of radically extended literacy, in which the text enters and occupies every crevice of inquiry or action, and commodity

culture has swollen to fill our entire space...If it seems hard to discern the outlines of musical postmodernism, that is simply because music has inhabited a peculiarly postmodern corner of 'culture' ever since the late 50s, when the critical paradoxes of Cage opened the ear of 'serious' music onto the world, when the machinery of international capitalism coalesced with the machinery of popular music, when both ethnomusicology and music history became participatory enterprises for the active listener.

At one or two generation's distance from the making of the work, gatekeepers (as compared to the artists) emerge as managers of these collections that now exist as potential digitizable commodities, as (to use a concept that was popularized in the early 1970s) video data banks. While these archives might still sustain their integrity as bodies of work that map certain cultural praxes, the other question is how the contemporary media and economic environment relates to these collections of images and sounds unexercised for 2 decades. Horwitz' remarks about the gatekeepers could refer to the panels and funders who now will decide which work gets the precious little money for preservation, that is, which work will be viewable a decade or two from now. How should value be attached to work which was probably supported by public funders and/or not-for-profit access centers, exhibitors, and distributors? Should the cleaning and preservation of early work depend on business models--of the ability to make profits from footage sales for example, a strategy that many of us involved in the arts have been advised to attend to even by major public funders? And how does other marginalized cultural work, for example marginalized 1970s community-oriented work from the U.S. or from the samizdat (underground) independent video from Eastern Europe 1988-90, get enough attention to attract archiving monies and assume an active role as the subject of local or international cultural discourse? How is the internet being used to build reference archives? How have artists performed or in some cases reperformed some of these collections? How is our attention to media practice in the present and past shaped by gatekeepers and their relationship to new technologies and both local and global cultural currencies/economies?

I'd like to use the remaining time to briefly consider a few collections that pose specific problems and ... examples of how collections and archives have been problemmatized in the present digital moment...how these projects function as demos to tactically re-occupy cultural space, or as in the yodel, to reveal a faded geography...

Black Box (issues of revealing the archive was implicit in the reasons behind its making)

Original Video Journal (Walking Trips in Czech Lands here)

Judit Kopper--pre-spectacle E and W media cultures (Video World)

Rtmark #29.95 project (Lucy Gunning tape)

"The force and potential danger the Black Boxes represent against power abusers in Hungary lies in the mere existence of their compiled material. The obese Black Box archives (the result of indefatigable, constant presence virtually everywhere where the flow is likely to become an "event") form not just a collection of news-items. They constitute a fragment of the hidden conscience of the country..."

VDB history and the problem of assessing what's out there

XXXX + NEA project X OVA + representing the media (ova.zkm.de)

[QMM and Zahm's connection with Greenhaven prisoners]

artists specifically narrativizing or performing archives: Arnold Dreyblatt, Rick Prelinger

Finally, back to a point I left hanging--about the attentional aspects of work within the context of its making, with its scene of making. It is the contemporary curators and editors as gatekeepers to this work, reframe and revalidate the work for preservation and screening, and thereby reinscribe their values. Sometimes their reframing reiterates the especially ephemeral attentional frameworks/codes/ understandings/assumptions that fade so quickly from the work; sometimes it obscures those same frameworks. It's both the part of the work that I find so precious, that I am interested in considering as a yodel takes its communicative form from bouncing off the local terrain. Looking at/pointing to

In the present age where independent producers, citizens and artists are exploring new relationships with technology...the interfaces...potentially new relationships with gatekeepers of the present age...

developing narrative work out of media collections (Prelinger, VanTijen, Dreyblatt, Halleck), re-performing the work of an early generation in a

shifted critical environment (McGough, Conrad), the problem of verbal and cultural translations (Sei, Montgomery), the hypertextuality of the internet leading to new structures for handling files/collections of information (Haskel, Manovich, Vasulka), democratic access principles applied to emergent technology-based movements (Teasdale, Wrynn).

While new technologies and cheaper memory are I would like to consider 2 collections that emerged historically at moments when bodies of work were created around newly configured relationships to production and post-production media tools, where access to tools itself was a foregrounded issue in the work—the first is the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of radical political and cultural aspirations, were democratizing the media... and in the period around 1989 and early 1990s in east central Europe, when citizens and independent producers were able to control distribution or their work, when they passed from a period of not being legally able to make copies of tapes, films, and writing to the post-1989 period that make xerox machines commercially available and not privately controlled. In both the U.S. and east central Europe the political and cultural moods have shifted since this body of work was created, and these archives now "demonstrate" /testify to certain values inherent in the production of the work, and the new role of the gatekeepers (curators, editors, librarians) in this digital age.

In that essay I also quoted Fredric Jameson (from "Reification and Mass Culture," *Social Text* #1, 1979):

Authentic cultural creation is dependent for its existence on authentic collective life, on the vitality of the 'organic' social group in whatever form...[The] only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system...and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system.

Jameson cited women's literature, black literature, and British working class rock as examples of this authentic collective life. The alternative video scenes'/communities' efforts (and most individual artists did start their "careers" participating in "scenes" or networked communities of shared cultural concerns) to realize citizens-based, locally-responsive media culture in the U.S. in the 1970s would also seem to qualify. Other collections proposed for study in this edition of *Wide Angle* (for example, Eastern

European samizdat videotapes from 1988-91) also fall under Jameson's rubric of "authentic cultural life." Existing videotape collections offer access to the study of media "scenes," whose work necessarily intersected with locally constructed social and cultural territory, however ambitious individuals may be/have been for attention and affirmation from authorized cultural "centers." Scenes evolve distinct performative sensibilities, aesthetic discourses, and cultural value systems. For example, in researching community-inspired work for *Surveying the First Decade*, I realized that most of the individuals who did the organizational work in the mid to late 1970s of forging relationships between municipalities, cable companies, and citizens' groups that led to the founding of public access centers, were students of either George Stoney and Red Burns at the Alternate Video Center at New York University or Bob Devine at Antioch College.

While the description of a "radically extended literacy" building off of the post-WWII consumption of mass culture also applies to the widespread textual analysis of mass culture, less attention has been directed at independent media work in general (of course there are exceptions to this; Patty Zimmerman's study of home movies being one of them), and especially to video work from the late 60s and 70s. Horwitz' remarks about the gatekeepers could refer to the panels and funders who now will decide which work gets the precious little money for preservation, that is, which work will be viewable a decade or two from now when the generation of late 60s makers themselves may have passed. How should value be attached to work which was probably supported by public funders and/or not-for-profit access centers, exhibitors, and distributors? Should the cleaning and preservation of the early work depend on business models--of the ability to make profits from footage sales for example--as many of us involved in the arts are told to attend to/encouraged even by major public funders? And how does other marginalized cultural work, for example samizdat (underground) independent video from Eastern Europe 1988-90, get enough attention to attract archiving monies and assume an active role as the subject of local or international cultural discourse?

Sei has lived in East Central Europe since 1987 and has been both a curator and critic since the early 1980s when she worked for Scan Gallery in Tokyo, then one of the only regular exhibitors of video art in Japan. In 1988 she

curated, with Alfred Birnbaum, *Infermental 8—Tokyo*, a 5-hour international videomagazine. Among other interests, Sei has been involved in archiving and writing about/exhibiting underground samizdat video produced in 1987-91 in Hungary, Romania, Poland, and (former) Czechoslovakia.

While museums have begun to collect the samizdat writings from this period and the early 1980s, the same attention has not developed for the very important samizdat/underground media produced and distributed during this period. This, despite the attention given to the role of electronic media in stimulating the changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Sei was a co-organizer of the March, 1990 international conference in Budapest which examined the role that television and video had played in the various Eastern European governmental changes in late 1989). Keep in mind that before 1989 it was illegal in these Eastern bloc countries to make copies of anything—original writing, photographs, videotapes, or films. So circulating dubs of illegally produced videonewsmagazines was very risky, though an important way of sharing information about current "parallel" cultural events and demonstrations before 1989. Sei will write about the issues surrounding these collections of tapes which were radical gestures, both culturally and politically. I am also interested in publishing the ephemeral materials connected with these tapes, especially short statements by the artists and producers (some of this material is already collected and a sample of the interviews is accessible via my 1998 website *Walking Trips in Czech Lands*: <http://www.ecn.cz/osf/scca/hill>).

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I also had conversations with other artists and writers involved in archive-related projects that would contribute important vectors to the existing proposal. Without going into extensive detail, I visited the director of the Open Video Archive and Open Audio Archive websites in Berlin. These sites appeal to independent individuals, artists, and institutions to contribute data about their existing collections. When I was working on the Video Data Bank project ("Surveying the First Decade"), I was tortured by the problem of identifying the scope of existing work from the period under examination. There were the widely known video archives (VDB, WMM, EAI, etc.) and then there was the rest of the material out there that begged to be identified, especially in the context of a "comprehensive" survey of the first decade. Margaret Burns' early 1990s video archiving project at AFI (which has since lost most of its funding and Margaret as director) enjoined those U.S. institutions and individuals with existing video archives to use an information and filing system she and her team developed (one also recognized by the Library of Congress) to pool information. This was a well-thought through plan and a ray of hope but has been badly crippled by loss of funding. While the Open Video Archives

does not attempt to be comprehensive in the way Burns was working to be, it at least offers a public model for information submission and sharing, and an internationally accessible site (server space funded by ZKM in Karlsruhe). The creators/designers of this site are artists who previously designed and administered International Stadt, a very important early city model of a public access internet site primarily for residents of Berlin. They have a lot to say about analog-to-digital worlds.