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The Videotape Collection at Media Study/Buffalo: A Report

BY JOHN MINKOWSKY

Media Study/Buffalo, a not-for-profit, workshop, exhibition, and study center in Buffalo, N.Y, has recently initiated a Videotape Collection of important experimental videographic materials. Intended as a research and teaching "archive," the 125 hours of videotape in the collection provide a unique record of artists' explorations (1964-1976) with systems of electronic tools that have allowed for the generation of purely electronic imagery, as well as the manipulation of signals from television cameras and other sources.

This collection of experimental video was made possible with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and of the New York State Council on the Arts. Grants from these organizations helped to pay for artists' fees, duplication costs, and stipends which enabled artists or others whom were intimate with the work produced at various video centers, to assist in the selection and to oversee the transfer of the tapes.

By starting this collection, Media Study/Buffalo intends to make accessible works of historical importance, which would otherwise be unavailable for study. The collection includes not only completed works but also unfinished pieces: exploratory probes into the nature of the equipment and processes involved. These individual and collaborative experiments are the results of some of the earliest attempts to define and control a vocabulary of the expressive techniques available through video. In general, these attempts were part of a broader investigation of concepts concerning the nature of the electronic medium.

A central tool in sophisticated video systems has been the Video Synthesizer. Media Study's collection documents the use of two kinds of synthesizer, both designed by artists, from their earliest stages of development. The first is the Paik-Abe Synthesizer, designed by Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe, which processes camera or broadcast signals, manipulating, mixing, and coloring them in complex variations. The second is Stephen Beck's Direct Video Synthesizer, which is able to generate a complete video signal through internal circuitry that creates configurations of points, lines, and shapes in motion and color. A third type of synthesizer, the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, is also documented, in tapes produced with it by other artists, as are a variety of other electronic tools, from colorizers and keyers through computer video animation systems and digital synthesizers.

This engagement of artists with sophisticated equipment that results in uniquely electronic visual works is commonly termed "synthesized video," and it is the primary, although by no means sole, focus of the Videotape Collection. The range of theoretical and aesthetic approaches adopted by artists in the earliest years of "dialogue" with such systems, and the equally varied results, ranging from attempts to define aspects of the medium to more traditional expressive statements using video's graphic possibilities, are demonstrated.

Much of the earliest video experimentation was done at three major centers that provided artists access to expensive television equipment and encouraged them to realize the potentials of the medium. The experimental workshops at KQED in San Francisco (later to become the National Center for Experiments in Television, known as NCET) and at WGBH in Boston both began in 1967, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Media Study's Videotape Collection recognizes the seminal role of these two centers in the development of video art, and includes over 80 hours of work from NCET and a dozen hours from WGBH. The WNET Television Laboratory in New York, established in 1971 with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, is also represented by a number of works.

The activity of individual artists not associated with these centers was equally crucial to the development of new systems for videographic exploration. Skip Sweeney, and Woody and Steina Vasulka are represented by more than a dozen hours each, of both experimentation and completed works.

THE COLLECTION

Tapes from the National Center for Experiments in Television: The National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco, established in 1969 and active as a force in video experimentation until 1973, grew out of experimental workshops held at public television station KQED in 1967. NCET, under the leadership of Brice Howard and Paul Kaufman, supported a group of artists from diverse backgrounds to cooperatively explore the electronic arts, as well as to design and develop new tools. In a facility separate from KQED, NCET artists were free from the constraints and pressures of producing work for broadcast, although works realized at NCET - such as Tom O'Horgan's experimental video/theater piece *!Heimskringla!* - were shown on public television.

William Gwin, an artist at NCET during its most productive period, was commissioned by Media Study to select and transfer over 80 hours of tapes from the Center. Artists most comprehensively represented in the collection, through individual and collaborative works, are Bill Allen, Stephen Beck, Richard Felciano, William Gwin, Don Hallock, Brice Howard, Warner Jepson, William Roarty, Willard Rosenquist, Loren Sears, and Robert Zagone. Among the many completed works in the collection are **Irving Bridge** by Gwin and Jepson, **Kiss With No Up** by Hallock, **Passage** by Roarty, **Lostine** by Rosenquist, and **Sorcery** by Sears and Zagone.

Highlights of process experiments and documents of the Center's activities include: six hours of Stephen Beck's work (1970-74) including the first recorded images produced with his Direct Video Synthesizer and digital Video Weaver; more than 10 hours of "Videospace Electronic Notebooks" and "Notes in the Beginning," which are theoretical discussions/demonstrations concerned with video's unique properties; and many experiments integrating video with the other temporal arts of dance, theater, music, and poetry, including video processing of readings by Charles Olson and Robert Creeley.

Tapes from WGBH: WGBH, Boston's public television station, has been credited as the first center to recognize the artistic uses to which the medium might be put when, in 1964, Fred Barzyk produced **Jazz Images**, five short visualizations of music pieces. In 1967, WGBH began its experimental workshops and its Residency Program, inviting mixed media artists to use a full professional facility and staff, as well as the first Paik-Abe Synthesizer, to realize special projects. Among the results were abstract video interpretations of classical music, experimental video/dance and video/theater works, simultaneous two channel broadcasts, and a collage-type series, **What's Happening, Mr. Silver?** WGBH was dedicated to the dissemination of video art over public TV, and almost all the tapes from WGBH in the collection are complete and previously broadcast works.

Fred Barzyk, the founder of the Artist-in-Residence program, selected the WGBH tapes to be included in the collection. These include the early **Jazz Images** and three segments of **What's Happening, Mr. Silver?**, a 1967-68 experimental collage/barrage-of-information series in which several dozen inputs, mixed live and somewhat randomly, focused loosely upon themes such as "Madness and Intuition." Experiments in two-channel broadcasts are represented by Stan Vanderbeek's **Violence Sonata** and a dance work, **City/Motion/Space /Game**, produced by Rick Hauser. Innovative video-dramas are **Zone** and **Royal Flesh**, and two "classic" programs showcasing works by artists-in-residence are included - **The Medium is the Medium** and **Video Variations** (the latter made with the Boston Symphony Orchestra). Artists whose early video works make up these two tapes are Jackie Cassen, Russell Connor, Douglas Davis, Allan Kaprow, Constantine Manos, Nam June Paik, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Thomas Tadlock, Aldo Tambellini, Wen-Ying Tsai, and Stan Vanderbeek. Recent work from the WGBH New Television Workshop, begun in 1974, is represented by a **Workshop Showcase, 1975-76** which includes pieces by Peter Campus, Ron Hays, William Wegman, and many others.

Tapes from the Television Laboratory: WNET's Television Laboratory in New York City, begun in 1971 and directed by David Loxton, has provided video experimentalists extensive access to its professionally staffed and equipped color studio, which includes computer animation and editing facilities. Works produced by artists-in-residence at the TV Lab are Ed Emshiller's **Scapemates**, **Crossings and Meetings**, and **Family Focus**, and William Gwin's **Sweet Verticality**.

Tapes by Skip Sweeney: Skip Sweeney, more than any other videomaker, has explored the richness of video feedback-the continuously evolving patterns achieved by pointing a video camera at the monitor which is receiving

its signal. The 13 hours of experiments by Sweeney, made between 1969 and 1973, include unprocessed feedback, feedback processed through keying and other techniques, and feedback as a visual element with which a live dancer interacts.

Tapes by the Vasulkas: Woody and Steina Vasulka, co-founders of The Kitchen in New York City, and presently living and working in Buffalo, have been among the most articulate and innovative explorers/researchers/theorists of the electronic image, working on systems of their own design consisting of components built to their specifications. The collection includes 18 of their completed works, such as **Golden Voyage**, **Key Snow**, **Soundgated Images**, and **Home**, as well as their section of 11 hours of taped process experiments made between 1969 and 1972. These document an evolving sophistication with concepts of the electronic image and with hardware such as the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, as well as continuous experimentation with processes such as horizontal drift and the generation of image and sound from the same electronic signal. The tapes also include "documentary interviews" with the Vasulkas, and a jam session at The Kitchen with Bill Etra and Shridar Bapat.

STATUS OF THE COLLECTION AND FUTURE PLANS

Although the term "archive" has been used with reference to the teaching/research collection, Media Study is not, strictly speaking, a preservation facility for these often rare tapes. The collection is housed under relatively stable environmental conditions but, at present, videotape is **not** considered an archival medium upon which information may be stored over an extended period of time with relatively little decay in signal quality. The shelf life of videotape produced since 1971 may approach a **maximum of 20 years**, and then only when the tape is stored in an optimal environment, which is continuously controlled for temperature, humidity, and dust, and from which the tapes are not regularly removed for viewing. The extremely rapid deterioration of the magnetically stored video signal was, in fact, realized in the process of transferring copies of NCET masters for Media Study's collection: a number of the original tapes were found to have already developed substantial signal problems.

A basic list of the works in the Videotape Collection now exists, with a more extensive catalogue planned for the near future. In addition to titles, artists, production locations, and dates, the catalogue will include information regarding the equipment and electronic processes used in each tape, the nature of collaborative efforts, and other available descriptions and references to print material. Cross-referencing with regards to equipment and processes used will also be included for serious researchers and historians.

Although the collection is geared at present toward tapes involving the electronic manipulation of the video signal through the use of such tools as synthesizers and computers, Media Study hopes to expand it in the future to better represent many other approaches to video, including videotapes made by visual artists known for their work in other media, documentary and narrative videotapes and, of course, other important works made with new electronic equipment in the continually evolving area of videographic exploration.

JOHN MINKOWSKY is Video/Electronic Arts Programmer at Media Study/Buffalo. He recently wrote the introductory essay for **Extended Images** (1977), a catalogue of Bart Robbeft's work.

ACCESS TO THE COLLECTION

As a record of the experimental process in the early growth of video as an art form, the Videotape Collection serves as a teaching resource in Media Study workshops. It is also available to all individuals engaged in research regarding the history and theory of the electronic image.

By arrangement with the artists whose work is represented, the tapes may **not** be exhibited publicly or outside of Media Study's facility. Those interested in viewing the tapes may make appointments to reserve in-house screening facilities by contacting John Minkowsky at Media Study/Buffalo, 207 Delaware Ave., Buffalo, N.Y. 14202; telephone (716) 847-2555.

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