Preserving the Video Record with the Guerrilla Television Network

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[Slide: Ads for Sony video cameras 1965–1968]

In 1965, Sony introduced CV-2000, now popularly known as the Portapak, a videocorder with optional camera that, for the first time, gave the public a portable TV studio: "Make your own home movies, record TV shows, or for sales presentations, time and motion studies, and many other imaginative uses." [sic] The next three years would see Sony introducing more truly portable models and the impact was immediately felt, with activists, artists, and documentarians embracing the revelations of a brand-new medium. Sound and image were blurry and black and white, but the Portapak permitted a new kind of moving image making: shooting could be casual, easily recorded over if the footage was unsuitable, and, crucially, playback could be instant. A videographer could immediately rewind to examine the footage they just shot. Early collectives like the Peoples Video Theatre built that feedback into their working method, showing footage to their subjects and recording their responses but also incorporating their suggestions into the finished video.

[Slide: Images from PVT's "NY Message to San Francisco"]

It was, in the early years, a medium without conventional outlets for exhibition or distribution. Resolution was too low for big screen projection. The image was better suited for television monitors, but without access to broadcasting facilities that meant copying and transporting videotapes.

[Slide: Images of Global Village multichannel screenings]

Screenings in the late 1960s largely took place at loft galleries, often consisting of multiple monitors running simultaneously—an early adaptation to the difficulty of editing video that became its own aesthetic. The Global Village in New York embraced that aesthetic, combining documentary footage of political actions, of interviews and speeches, of rock concerts (both those shot by the videographers and taped off broadcast television), of naked hippies having sex in the woods with light shows, and, eventually, of Buckminster Fuller-inspired "video environments."

[Slides: Images from Global Village's 1969–1970 programs]

Indeed, the distinctions that would soon solidify between gallery video and documentary were much blurrier in the late 60s and early 1970s.

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[Slide: Images from Vision and Television exhibit]

The Rose Art Museum's *Vision and Television*, generally regarded as the first major museum exhibition devoted to video, featured works by gallery pioneers like Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, Aldo Tambellini, and Jud Yalkut alongside the Videofreex, Raindance's Frank Gillette and Ira Schneider, and Global Village's Rudi Stern and John Reilly. Cameras were shared—gallery owner Leo Castelli's Portapak seems to have passed through the hands of every artist in his circles in New York City at some point in the late 60s, but outside of the galleries, video was largely the domain of collectives.

[Slide: PVT's *Erotic Arts Coloring Book* and Charles Simonds Buildings]

They brought their cameras into the streets, to parties, to gallery openings, to protests—recording was typically open ended and exploratory, the flexibility of the medium allowing entire videos to be made of the sorts of chance encounters and everyday observations that celluloid documentarians would rarely waste film on. This sort of shapeless, undirected shooting has left us with an archive of remarkably vivid portrait of the everyday.

[Slide: Communications for Change's "Landlord Protest"]

They used cameras as political instruments, shooting meetings and protests, documenting landlord neglect and the effects of hazardous jobs on workers' health. The tapes were shown at political gatherings, which were then sometimes recorded by the same videographers. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were frequent subjects: interviews, speeches, demonstrations. There was a general emphasis on capturing that which was neglected by mainstream media—and on providing new and different perspectives on those events that were otherwise well documented, turning their cameras onto the bystanders—and often the media itself—rather than on the main event.

[Slide: Images of TVTV group and Four More Years]

In 1972, TVTV (Top Value Television), which gathered together members of collectives like the Videofreex, Raindance, and Ant Farm, among others, created two programs that were broadcast around the country, introducing "guerrilla television" and independent video to a broader audience than it had ever had before. The two videos—*The World's Largest TV Studio* and *Four More Years*—covered that year's political conventions. They were two of the decade's most thoroughly, exhaustively documented political events, and yet nothing else on the airwaves resembled the work of TVTV.

The collectives sought to provide an alternative to the mainstream media in form and content, but also in its relation to the viewer. The concept of "guerrilla television"—a term coined by members of the Raindance collective—was born of a desire not simply to insert independent productions into the existing mediasphere, but to reshape broadcast television into a participatory form: one in which the populace could contribute and which reflected their lives and their concerns. That meant, for groups like the Videofreex, starting their own television station. The Freex broadcast weekly on channel 3—which was otherwise unused—in Lanesville, a small town in the Catskills. With the growth of public

television stations, independent groups like the Portable Channel provided programming for stations like Rochester's WXXI. As the 1970s progressed, there were increasing opportunities for independent video makers to showcase their work on PBS stations, on cable, and on public access—largely, but not exclusively, offering the biggest showcases to documentary work that was relatively conventional in its structure. The endlessly open possibilities of the guerrilla television movement weren't lost, but they were minimized and, to a certain degree, neglected.

Guerrilla television's participatory ethic also meant that collectives collaborated with local organizations and offered workshops and classes teaching children and community members to make their own videos. It meant encouraging new and different voices. As a result, independent video in the 1970s included the work of video makers who were far more diverse than those employed by network television. Videos were made by people of color, by women, by queer people, by residents in rural communities and poor communities, by children and teenagers—people who were excluded from access to equipment and training.

[Slide: Nancy Cain]

The history of video has often focused on the male-dominated realm of the art gallery, but the guerrilla television movement was largely driven by women: Nancy Cain, Bonnie Sherr Klein, Beryl Korot, Barbara Sykes, Mary Curtis Ratcliff, Carol Vontobel, Ann Woodward, Shirley Clarke, Deirdre Boyle, DeeDee Halleck, and on and on.

In the first decade-plus of independent video production, a remarkably productive and diverse community of videomakers developed. And as the original collectives evolved or disappeared, there grew a network of organizations devoted to providing equipment and instruction for ordinary people interested in video. These artists and organizations were, of course, decentralized. The archives of this movement have existed in closets and basements and in storage lockers and in the archives of organizations like Media Burn.

The work in those archives ranges from edited documentaries that resemble work being made in 16mm at the time to pure documentation to talk show-like conversations to abstract patterns of shape and color produced with a video synthesizer. It represents a time of possibility and openness towards new voices and new forms, before the professionalization and institutionalization of video. It's a vivid archive of a broad range of everyday lives, of political actions, of testimonies, and artistic expressions. And it won't last much longer without concerted preservation efforts.

The Resurrecting Guerrilla Television project, funded by CLIR, is a collaboration between Media Burn, the University of Chicago, Community TV Network, the Experimental Television Center, Kartemquin Films, Appalshop, and the New Orleans Video Access Center that will fund the digitization of over 1,000 tapes from 1968 to 1970 as well as the creation of the Guerrilla Television Network, which will host a database—including online videos—of independent video tapes, covering both completed, edited videos and raw footage. These videos will soon find a permanent home alongside the work of other key video works on the Guerrilla Television Network, which will continue to grow as further tapes from the era are

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recovered and digitized, and more archival institutions join our efforts. That online portal is currently being constructed by the University of Chicago.

The need for this effort to preserve and digitize independent video is pressing. Video is an incredibly fragile format that starts to decay after only a few decades. Inconsistent and sometimes inadequate storage methods only exacerbate the problems. But even under the most ideal circumstances, early video needs to be transferred to a more stable, more accessible format as quickly and carefully as possible.

Many things go into a video reformatting project; in the interests of brevity, we will simply highlight here some of the larger issues we've encountered in the hands-on portion of the project.

In the earliest days of archival digitization of video, an institution had few options other than to invest in proprietary software in order to create a file from the information on the tape. Media Burn was no different in this regard—when we began digitizing our own archives in the mid 2000s, we used a program called Digital Rapids, which would convert the signal from analog to digital and simultaneously output to both an uncompressed master file and to H264 access files (which we would then post on our site). This was certainly adequate to the task at hand—with this program, we were able to populate our site with more than 5,000 videos and establish ourselves as a public-facing archive. But by 2021, when we began this particular project, the Digital Rapids program was no longer up to the task. The program was more than 15 years old, and hadn't been supported by its creator or updated for more than a decade. Even worse, it was beginning to fail technically, becoming prone to dropping the signal in the midst of capture, to the great frustration of our archival technician. Furthermore, its only option for the creation of a master file was an uncompressed .avi, which would quickly eat up our storage space— an hour of uncompressed video adds up to about 75 GB.

[Slide: The Vrecord window during capture]

To streamline this, we revised our entire capture process, switching to Vrecord as our means of creating video files. Vrecord is a free and open-source program created by the A/V archiving community, which we run with a Blackmagic analog-to-digital converter and a Mac Mini. Vrecord allows for a variety of different output files, and we have settled on the Matroska standard in an FFV1 wrapper. This newer standard has been widely adopted by the video archiving world and takes up far less digital storage than do any of the uncompressed formats. Furthermore, Vrecord creates a plethora of metadata relating to the capture process—along with the file itself, we also have a frame-level MD5 checksum, a handy visual reference explaining the luma and chroma levels for the file, and other various records that will ensure that the specifics of the capture process are well documented.

[Slide: Decaying 2-inch tape]

Revising our transfer process at the beginning of this project was a wise move, as it turned out, since capturing a large collection of old videotapes carries its own set of challenges to begin with. The formats we planned to transfer consisted mostly of ½-inch open-reel tape, and U-matic ¾-inch videocassettes; obviously, these formats are both obsolete—fortunately, we had access to the proper playback

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equipment—and extremely old. Tapes of this vintage are subject to a variety of hazards, including mold infestation, general physical wear and tear, and sticky shed syndrome. This latter issue occurs when the binding agent holding the ferric oxide particles to the plastic tape breaks down, and the actual metallic particles that carry the information on the tape will then fall off the tape. This often occurs after years of absorbing ambient moisture in the air. Needless to say, a tape that's been around for 50 years has probably accumulated quite a bit of moisture, so this has been a recurring problem in the course of this project.

[Slide: Baking tapes]

The most common way to fight this problem is to bake the tapes. Recommendations for how precisely to do this vary, but we generally will let them bake for 48 hours at 140 degrees Fahrenheit, though we've found ourselves having to let some cook for weeks at a time before they are rendered playable. Sticky shed was common enough in the first few batches of tapes that we adopted a general policy of simply preemptively baking every collection we receive, which has streamlined the whole process significantly.

[Slide: Alterations made to the ½-inch deck]

Moldy tapes cannot be played until they are cleaned, lest they infest the playback decks and then spread to every other tape that follows it, and the various physical damage common to old tapes must be remedied in the manner most appropriate to the situation, often in a quasi-improvised fashion. Some tapes have been torn and needed to be spliced back together, some have become bunched up in the wind and need to be gingerly unwound by hand, some have become warped with age and require temporary modifications to the playback deck—our digitization specialist has often added bits of tinfoil to the guiding pegs along the tape path in order to keep especially tangled tapes on the passage to the video head and finally the uptake reel. For all of the planning and creation of meticulous workflows that are necessary for a successful digitization project, equally necessary are an ability to be creative in one's approach to troubleshooting and a willingness to try anything.