VIDEO TAPE SURVIVAL
The Cleaning, Time Base Correcting and Reformatting of Deteriorating Video Tape for Real to Reel: Artists' Video 1970-72

by Sharon Grace

Despite having names of Greek shepherds (polystyrene, polyvinyl, polyethylene), plastic, is in essence the stuff of alchemy.... It is less a thing than the trace of a movement.... In the hierarchy of major poetic substances, it figures as a disgraced material, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal....

Roland Barthes, Mythologies.

It seemed like a fun idea. A show of the first, ½ inch, open reel, video work produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s by San Francisco Bay Area artists Stephen Beck, Howard Fried, Paul Kos, Richard Lowenberg, Tom Marioni, Skip Sweeney and Willie Walker. Discussion with the artists confirmed there was interest and excitement at seeing, some 15 years later, this first Bay Area video work. For many artists it had been a time of heightened creativity as they found their muse in the unexplored dimensions of the new video technology. Introduction of the new tools coincided with the move away from materialism and the marketing of art as commodity. It had been time for the primacy of the idea over its object. Funding was provided by the California Arts Council and the San Francisco Art Institute to present the work on a large screen projector, in an evening event, Real to Reel: Artists’ Video 1970-72, at the San Francisco Art Institute.

It was obvious from the first that we were facing some 'reel' problems. Video recorder formats had changed constantly throughout the first decade of the new technology, making it difficult for artists to reformat their work. Most of the artists no longer had the appropriate playback decks, and had not viewed their work for many years. In a magnanimous if not naive moment, I volunteered to locate the playback decks. I collected the artists' tapes; borrowed an assortment of old ½ inch, open reel, decks; applied to BAVC for subsidized use of the Harris 690 time base corrector and made arrangements with Video Free America to use their facility for the reformatting process.

I soon discovered that many of the vintage video tapes were stuck together, like rolls of Scotch tape (the non-video, sticky type). The first tape we attempted to play back froze the Sony 3650 within ten seconds; the image flickered and turned to snow, as the deck ground to a halt. This was to be the scenario for every one of the forty-three, open reel tapes we attempted to play back. Clearly more information was needed in order to address the problem of the unplayable, sticky, tapes. Research revealed there are two major factors which contribute to the deterioration of video tape: environmental stress (humidity, oxygen, heat, dust) and mechanical damage (tape mishandling, poorly maintained VTRs).

Although it isn’t possible here to present all the information relevant to tape composition and the causes for tape deterioration, the following describes the basics of environmental stress.

THE CHEMICAL BREAKDOWN
Video recording tape is composed of approximately 20 wt% magnetic oxide particles and 80 wt% polymeric materials. Recording properties are ascribable to the magnetic oxide particles. Almost all commercial magnetic recording tapes

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New and Renewed Members


JUST A REMINDER... Be sure and get your nominations in before April 20 for the Board of Directors' open seat. Anyone who is currently a member-in-good-standing may run for the Board or may nominate another member by submitting a 75-word statement on background and reasons for wanting to serve on BAVC's Board of Directors.

Special Thanks to Mervyn's

Special thanks to Mervyn's who has made it possible for BAVC to purchase an IBM PC, Amdek amber monitor, Juki 6000 letter quality printer, and a VP 2 Chyron character generator. The IBM PC will be used primarily by office staff for accounting, membership lists, grantwriting, and the newsletter. The computer will cut my accounting procedures in half," says Dave Weissman, Office Manager. "The VP 2 makes cleaner titles and has many more added features including graphics capabilities and palette animation," enthuses Dwight Kiyono, Facility Manager.

Business plays a vital role in contributing to the arts — in this case to the continued success and high quality of independent broadcast programming. The BAVC staff, Board of Directors and membership join together in expressing a great appreciation for Mervyn's generous donation.

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Special thanks to BAVC's Business Volunteer Tom Wood from McKesson Corporation who has been generously donating his time to consult with BAVC staff about the purchase of the office computer and software.

LIGETS OFF! VIDEO ON!

A partnership between Media and Medicine

by Sally Jo Fifer

"Lights off, slides on," were always the first words uttered by Virginia Ernest, a cancer epidemiologist at the University of California, San Francisco, at the beginning of her slide presentation, Mixed Messages.

Now Dr. Ernest (or anyone else) can say: "Lights off, video on." The video version of Mixed Messages will speak for Ernest about the ubiquitous and deleterious effects of cigarette advertising has had on women.

"Dr. Ernest's presentation was being requested all over the country and it was physically impossible for her to meet the demand," says Bill Vogler, independent producer and director of Mixed Messages.

"At first we considered making it into a sound-sync slide show but realized that the distribution would be so much wider with a more accessible format like 1/4 and 1/2 inch videotape. Also, people extend information to move more rapidly on television; we could be so much more succinct on video, using half the time for the same amount of information being delivered by a live presenter."

The presentation was pared down from 45 to 27 minutes. Vogler kept the presentation lively with a frequent change of slides and the skillful use of camera movements. He eliminated 110 slides per page of script, totaling 140 slide changes during the program. "You'll put your audience to sleep unless you have a visual for every point," he warns.

The slide transcription was the most critical part of the program and continued. Vogler's camera goals had to begin and end at precise moments to match the narration. At one point the narrator introduces a recent ad where there is a woman executive smoking. The camera zooms in and focuses on a jar of jelly beans on her desk. The narrator describes the advertisement's subliminal message that this smoker, like Ronald Reagan who also keeps a jar of jelly beans on his desk, may be headed for the Oval Office.

The slide transcription presented other challenges. Ernest's collection of print advertising was a non-video ratio. In many cases, the vertical format needed borders which could continue the mood depicted on the slide. For example, a dark border with filmy edges frames an ad from the 1920's of a moonlit setting in which a woman tells her smoking companion, "Blow your smoke my way," "The vertical slides had to become horizontal and whole is that where BAVC editor Lo Mack really worked magic," says Ernest. Vogler concurred, "I knew all along during the slide transfer that BAVC facilities would make my tape into a clear, polished program."

The use of graphics, chyron and Ernest's own narration of the script underlines the scientific foundation of the program. "By having Dr. Ernest do her own narration, we gained in emphasis and timing what we may have lost in professional voice quality. She knew exactly where her audience needed an extra moment to chuckle or to take in some hard facts."

If there is a drawback to turning a slide presentation into video, it may be the lack of ease in updating the material. "In my talk," Ernest says, "I just needed to pull a slide or add a fact. With video I will eventually have to re-edit to keep up with recent developments such as lung cancer surpassing breast cancer as the leading form of cancer for women; or R.J. Reynolds' new cigarette called the 'Ritz,' with the Yves St. Laurent label targeting fashion-conscious, upscale women."

However, Ernest remains enthusiastic that video will become an increasingly important vehicle for science. "Up until now, we have been using Model T Ford modes of communication. And in a world that may not be able to afford science unless it can give a more immediate payoff, a partnership between media and science is inevitable."

The next step, she recommends, is to hook up more scientific research institutions with foundations that budget media. "Do you want to know my fellow colleagues' most frequent question after they see Mixed Messages? — How do you make a video?"

For information on how to rent or purchase Mixed Messages contact: Better Health Programs, A Project of the Regional Cancer Foundation, 2107 Van Ness Avenue, Suite 408, San Francisco, CA 94109.
The chemical reaction is reversible, a property which suggests a methodology for restoring and rejuvenating environmentally degraded tape. Being a reversible reaction, there exist environmental conditions of relative humidity (RH) at room temperature which are ideal for long-term archival preservation.

**GOOD STORAGE HABITS**

It is recommended that the storage environment have some type of environmental control to maintain temperature and humidity in the range of 70°F and 50%RH relative humidity. Cool and dry is better; hot and humid is worse. All tapes, both open reel and cassette, should be stored with some type of hub support, and placed vertically, like books, in storage racks. The vertical placement is necessary in order to prevent the tape from compressing downward against the flanges which can cause edge damage. Prior to storage of any recorded magnetic tape, the tape should be completely rewound end-to-end to remove all stress and improper stacks. Every twelve months, all tapes in the library should be rewound end-to-end to relieve any stresses that may have occurred during storage.

**EXTENSION OF TAPE LIFE**

Once we understand the malady of the artists’ 15-year-old tapes, the next step was to restore them. The Harris 690 time base corrector was not the best model for this type of technical problem. Unlike more forgiving models, the Harris 690 would display any bit of debris or loose oxide as a frame of inchent information and hold it ad infinitum. This necessitated recleaning the heads, drum, and guides on the playback deck and starting the whole process again. A friend recommended a company on the San Francisco peninsula which had a good reputation for quality tape cleaning services. Strategies were discussed with the company engineers, we were sufficiently reassured, and the cleaning was completed — well almost. Several days later when we tried to play back the newly cleaned tapes, one out of every two played without freezing the deck. Some of the tapes required recleaning three or four times. Essentially the tape cleaning process consists of running the tape, at very high speed, over a razor-type knife which removes debris and oxidized residue from the tape surface. The residue is deposited on removable filters which are cleaned regularly. However, there is a point of no return in the deterioration process. The technical term for this condition is “the chemical end of tape life,” when the plastic polymer constituents have completely degraded. At this point, the tape will begin to shred and peel. Perhaps conservators will develop restoration techniques to correct this problem, but as of now, none exist.

All tape is deteriorating. Since tape formulations are changing, it is difficult to predict the exact storage life achievable with magnetic tape. Tape manufacturers claim that with ideal storage conditions tape may survive for fifty or one hundred years. The 1/2 inch open reel tapes seem to be playable for approximately five to ten years. Cassette tapes may fare a little better by virtue of their protective cartridge. Some manufacturers have produced a whole edition of faulty stock which ages prematurely. SONY high density, BR 375, is one example. The potential for censorship — what will survive and what won’t — is clearly inherent in the problem of tape deterioration. Presently there has been a joint effort by the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Film Institute to address the preservation and conservation of digital broadcast television and video. However, artists themselves must become and remain alert to the danger of extinction threatening their work and begin to take precautions now. A truly useful understanding of the problem requires more space than is available here. The research material from this project is available through the Bay Area Video Coalition Library.

Sharon Crace is a Bay Area artist, Director of Video Documentation and Archiving Program and Instructor in Video at San Francisco Art Institute.
Events

CGBP Program Officers have been invited by California Independent Film Producers for a reception May 12 (date subject to change). Palm Productions will host the event at The Mason, Building D. Officers will schedule individual meetings with independent producers to review their proposals. Appointments will be set up on a first-come-first-served basis. For more information, call Film Arts Foundation, (415) 552-8760.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present its annual Screening: A selection of video installations, performances, and screenings will be on view on the fourth floor of the museum from April 11 through June 2. The installation, especially designed by the artist for the museum’s coveted main exhibition space, will run through June 2. For more information, call SFMOMA, 415 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco, (415) 972-8400.

Screenings

Video Free America will present Video Shorts Festival: A Celebration of Television on Sunday, April 28 at 8 p.m. at VFA 442 Shotwell, San Francisco. The festival features works under 5 minutes by Michael Seragione, Tony Silver, Yoko Suko Bliss, Sun Break Productions, Dan Orellana, David Gray, Dan Appelstein, Brooke Cardwell, David Stout, and Bill Knowland. On Monday, May 6, VFA and New Performance Gallery will co-sponsor a new dance video of Timothy Bickley and the Turners. The screening will take place at the New Performance Gallery, 1315 17th Street, San Francisco. Admission is free. For further information, call VFA, (415) 684-5980.

The National Video Festival Student Comedy Competition, the second annual Video Festival, has been completed. One of the entries includes a curated exhibition of student video work to be presented at the 1985 National Video Festival next September in Los Angeles. The entry form deadline is May 1; the tape submission deadline is June 1. The Competition is an annual component of the National Video Festival presented each year by the American Film Institute and sponsored by the Sony Corporation of America. For more information, contact The National Video Festival, P.O. Box 27999, 2011 North Western Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90027. (213) 685-7788.

The Philadelphia International Film Festival (Philfilm) accepts $500 to $550 and film entries by May 15. Categories include: Documentary, Short, Animation, TV Commercials, Experimental, Industrial, and Student. Entry fees vary from $20 to $100 based on length and school class. For more information, contact: Larry Chatman, 1212 N. Broad Street, Suite 240, Philadelphia, PA 19107; (215) 977-2870.

The 4th San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Video Festival seeks entries in 14 inch or 16 inch VHS before June 1. Categories for this year’s festival have been expanded to include erotic video as well as art, shorts, comedy, social documentary and music video. Entries will be shown on Bay Area Cable, EZ-TV in Los Angeles, and Manhattan Cable in New York. Call for Entry: E-Mail: FAX: 415-432-8250. For more information, contact: John Canall, 128 B Castro Street, San Francisco, CA 94114. (415) 801-0843.

Information Film Producers of America will hold its 28th Annual Cindy Convention sponsored by Eastman Kodak Company. Gold, Silver and Bronze awards are given in 44 categories including: Television, Business/Industry, Government, Environment and Education. Entry deadline is June 4. For more information, including additional information, contact: IFPA, Cindy Competition, 500 Palm Ave. #10, South Pasadena, CA 91030. (818) 441-2274.

The Nebraska Interactive Videodrama Awards: Call for entries and 2, 3 and video productions in the following categories: Educational, Independent, Corporate, and Commercial, product demonstration. The entry fee is $25. The deadline is mid-June. For more information, contact: Ron Student, NGC, P.O. Box 81111, Lincoln, NB 68501. (402) 472-3031.

Jobs

The Media Tree, a non-profit organization whose goal is to develop critical public awareness of the role of the media in contemporary society, is seeking a qualified person to become its first executive director. Salary: $20,000 to $25,000 a year. The qualifications include a sense of commitment, charismatic personality, and a dynamic approach. Necessary skills include good planning, organizing and implementing community programs; fundraising; grantwriting; effective oral and written communication skills; experience in public relations; and supervision of a small staff and volunteers. Please send in your resume, including references, by April 19 to: The Media Tree, Drawer #15, 5070 4th Street, San Rafael, CA 94903.

The Academy Internship, funded by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, places a limited number of promising new directors with established directors during the making of a feature film, miniseries or movie for television. Interns selected receive a weekly stipend. The internship occurs over a year-long cycle; the next deadline is June 30. For more information, contact: AIP, 212 North Western Avenue, P.O. Box 27999, Los Angeles, CA 90027. (213) 856-7640.

Distribution

The Great Northern Cable Network is now accepting applications from independent videomakers. Contact: GNCA, 4020 2nd St., Suite 100, Berkeley, CA 94704.

R JF Film and Video, a new distribution company targeted to international television and home video markets, is seeking works in non-commercial formats and genres. For further information, contact: R JF Film and Video, 1433 10th Street #7, Santa Monica, CA 90403. (213) 394-2984.

Video Women, a cable access series focusing on women, acena films and videotapes to cablecast 4 to 10 times during a two week period. Send publicity materials and compensations to: Video Women, Access Video, 1150 Greenfield Avenue, Pittsburg, PA 15121.

San Francisco State University (University Cable 30) is now accepting works by independent video artists and filmmakers. 314 inch videotape and 16mm films will be considered. Selected works will be featured on a weekly program on Cable 3. For information please write to Special Projects Cable 35, BCA Department, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132.

Art Music, Inc. seeks works in video in 9 inch format for a 13-part series to be cablecast on WNYC. Three producer directors, video and audio works shorter than 60 minutes are preferred. Selected works will receive $400 for 2 plays. Contact: Paul Nichols 212-982-0320, or Wendy Chambers. (212) 686-3549.

Nightlight seeks shorts tapes and films by students and young artists for a "New Filmmakers" segment on USA cable. Those selected will receive $100 per minute for use as Nightlight. Submit 3 copies of a tape, a video summary and a proposal. Deadline: June 15. For more information, contact: cable, 615 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY 10036.

The University of California, Berkeley, Media Arts Center will soon offer a program of video and film workshops for university students. The program will be funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation. For more information, contact: Media Arts Center, Berkeley, CA 94720.

Campus Network, a television network that broadcasts exclusively to colleges and universities offering 8 inch video programming. If accepted, producers will receive $57 per minute for a 4-minute exhibition period. Contact: Campus Network, c/o Steve Amaturo, 114 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10011. (212) 206-1925.

Alive from Off Center is a pilot program serving as a showcase for new dance, theater, music, and electronic art works that focus on social, cultural and political issues facing today’s arts and television. The project will feature a regular series of performance television on public broadcast. Independent producers are encouraged to submit 8 inch or VHS tapes immediately for possible inclusion in the series. Send samples of work or inquiries to Melissa Ward, Dir. of Media, Walker Art Center, 1300 17th Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55403. (612) 737-9260.

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The most exciting development in video production equipment is high speed half-inch "component" video equipment. The advantages of this new format are worth considering: improved color resolution, simplified color correction, Dolby audio, compatible with proposed digital TV, and standardization of both VCRs and videotapes.

"Component" VTRs record the electronic signal before it is fully encoded, thus eliminating several stages of electronic signal processing. It is safe to say that since processing degrades the signal, recording the signal on tape before it is encoded preserves picture resolution. Eliminating the encoding circuitry also reduces the size of the field recording equipment, making it the smallest, lightest professional quality equipment.

The most popular half-inch format so far seems to be Sony's Betacam equipment. Panasonic has developed a high speed VHS format (M-format) whose benefits are similar to the Betacam. Several camera manufacturers already have designed cameras with a component output jack designed to work with the Betacam recorders. It is also simple to adapt any camera to work with a Betacam recorder.

The field equipment can be used in one of two ways: there is a 'Camcorder' configuration that mates the camera directly to the recorder, eliminating the need for a VTR operator, or the recorder can be outboard and connected to the camera via a multipin cable/adapter.

The facilities that have Betacam players on-line today take the encoded and time base corrected output of the playback machine and route it through the edit system the standard way — not getting full advantage from the component field masters.

However, equipment for post production that will process the component video signal is not far away. Grass Valley, Shintron & ISI are introducing component switchers; Portel builds a component time base corrector, and component monitors are available.

The drawbacks of the Betacam system are pretty basic. First, the maximum recording time per tape is only twenty minutes; and second, the field recorders do not play back. The only solution for the second problem at the moment is to bring along a battery powered playback VTR which is one more piece of gear to tote and not practical for engineering type work. Rumor has it that the solution to the first problem is to be introduced at NAB mid-April. The bottom line for independent producers is a cheaper, more portable format whose quality surpasses 3" and rivals 1", as Betacam and M-format are sure to be with us for quite a few years to come.

Leana Sims is an engineer at Applied Video Engineering in Southfield.

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MEMBERSHIP

You make it possible for BAVC to continue its important and extensive services to independent video artists and producers. Your membership helps us maintain low-cost access to high quality equipment. A tax-deductible membership donation provides you with:

- a subscription to Video Networks, published ten times annually;
- discounts at a growing number of businesses in the Bay Area that cater to the video community;
- access to BAVC's resource library of media books and magazines;
- discounts on workshops and seminars in all aspects of video, sponsored by BAVC;
- one free classified ad in Video Networks.

Please use the registration form located in this issue of Video Networks.

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