Video as art: collecting artists' moving image in academic art libraries

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Video collections have been part of library holdings for several decades, but developing and managing these collections presents a number of challenges. This is the case particularly for artists' film and video, and this article attempts to identify the issues involved and to offer some practical guidance, drawing on the experience of collection development and management at Chelsea College of Art and Design Library, and across the libraries of University of the Arts London and elsewhere.

'Some people take my work too seriously and some don't take it seriously enough.'
John Cage[1]

Introduction

Moving image collections have been a common feature in library collections for more than 30 years, playing an important role in a variety of settings. But although users take their presence for granted today, this development was only possible with the introduction of mass market video formats during the 1970s. The majority of libraries, and almost all academic libraries, did not collect film (or early professional video formats), a role that was left to film archives and commercial film libraries. In the UK, the British Library (unlike the Library of Congress), did not systematically acquire moving image material, which is not subject to legal deposit, this being one of the functions of the British Film Institute (BFI)[2] since the 1930s.

The technical difficulties of making film accessible (in terms of equipment, use and storage), and its limited availability and the difficulty of sourcing material, contributed to the poor use of moving images in universities for teaching and learning, and for research. The situation changed in the early 1970s with the introduction of the videocassette and the first affordable recorders.[3] In 1971 Sony introduced the ?" U-matic, and, in 1975, the ?" Betamax, the first videocassette aimed at the home market. One year later, JVC introduced the VHS (Video Home System) format, which eventually emerged as the preferred consumer video format in the early 1980s. Videocassettes made it possible for academic libraries to develop significant moving image collections, by acquiring pre-recorded material or recording tapes in-house. The affordability and universality of VHS lead to an explosion in the size of these collections, which were further transformed by the introduction of new digital formats. DVD (Digital Video Disc), launched in 1995, has gradually replaced VHS as the universal format for home video, combining its affordability and availability with a much higher image quality. In recent years, new generation digital formats have been introduced, with Blu-Ray Disc (BD) being currently the most popular.

The current moving image collection in an academic art library is typically in a variety of formats. At Chelsea College of Art and Design Library, for instance, there are around 1500 DVDs, 1000 VHS and 100 U-matic cassettes, the majority pre-recorded commercial publications, but with a significant number of television programmes recorded off-air and some original material acquired through donation.

Artists' film and video

Artists' involvement with the moving image is almost as old as the medium itself.[4] From an interest in technology and science to a fascination with popular culture, and especially from the desire to investigate the aesthetic possibilities of film (and video from the late 1960s) as a visual art, the moving image has been particularly attractive to the more radical modes of artistic practice.

Developments in the technology of film and video that have increased affordability and accessibility (for example the introduction of amateur film equipment, the popularisation of 16mm and 8mm formats, the development of Portapak and other video cameras, or the digital revolution) have also contributed to increased interest by fine art practitioners in experimenting and producing work in this medium.

Cinema and Modernism are roughly contemporaries, and the 'historical' avant-garde produced a substantial corpus of work that would be hugely influential in the development of contemporary art. Artists associated with Cubism, Abstract and Constructivist art, Futurism and, particularly, Dada and Surrealism, produced films – from Marcel Duchamp to Salvador Dali, including Fernand Leger, Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger and Man Ray.

From the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lettrism, Situationism, Fluxus and other new 'radical' movements created important film work, and the parallel development of video art and Conceptual art and Minimalism in the late 1960s produced the first generation of artists using the moving image as their main or sole medium of work. Artists as diverse as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Carole Schneemann, Robert Smithson, Wolf Vostell or William Wegman started to make moving image work during this period.

From the late 1970s, installations where video or film are often combined with other media and/or performance in a gallery context (as, for instance, in the work of Gary Hill), became the prevalent form of artists' moving image work, a trend that culminated in the 1990s and continues today, although significant 'single-channel' (i.e., using a single screen) work continues to be produced, with some artists moving between the two (from Bill Viola to Pipilotti Rist), or alternating film or video work with work in other media.

In an article published in the *Art libraries journal* in 2004, academic and video artist Karen Mirza was quoted as stressing the importance that 'the next generation of video artists should be able to watch historical, as well as contemporary, work while they are completing a degree (...) Students need to be aware of its origins, not just current practice'.[5]

Film and video are ever more popular as a form of contemporary art practice, particularly in the context of installations, as any visitor to art galleries, or art college degree shows, will know, and have been taught as a subject at the latter since the late 1960s. At Chelsea College of Art and Design, for example, the roll call of former staff and students that have produced significant work in this medium include Anne Rees-Mogg, Guy Sherwin, Chris Welsby, Jock McFadyen, Anna Thew, Charles Garrad, Stuart Marshall, Gillian Wearing and Steve McQueen. The imperative for art librarians to build collections of artists' moving images to serve the current and future needs of artists and art historians is clear.

Acquisition

Acquiring videos in academic libraries can be considered more difficult and time consuming than other, more traditional materials, for reasons that include the lack of specialist library suppliers, limited availability of historical and back catalogue titles, changing and diverse formats, complex legal frameworks, etc. Selecting and purchasing artists' videos is often even more challenging, due in part to the nature of the material itself, that of an art work. As with artists' books, prints or multiples, the librarian working with artists' moving image assumes the role of the curator.

Publishers and distributors range from commercial galleries to mainstream film and video distributors (Artificial Eye, BFI, Facets, First Run, Palm Pictures, Tartan, T&C Film, etc.), and include artists' organisations and centres (Art Metropole, Electronic Arts Intermix, Lux, etc.); public galleries and art agencies (Artangel, Arts Council, Baltic, Bifrons Foundation, Centre Pompidou, ICA, etc.); publishers of contemporary art books, artists' books and multiples (Bookworks, Edition Fink, JRP Ringier, Les Presses du Reel, mfc Michele Didier, Onestar Press, etc.);[6] and artists' film and video specialist distributors and publishers (Anarchive, Artpix, BDV, Canyon Cinema, Center for Visual Music, Cinenova, Film and Video Umbrella, Filmarmalade, Heure Exquise!, Index, Light Cone, Lowave, Mystic Fire, Re:voir, The Film-Makers' Cooperative, V tape, Video Data Bank, etc.)

Films and videos can be available as limited edition artworks, often numbered and/or signed; as institutional copies in 'professional' formats,[7] often

acquired with public performance and other rights; or as mass market releases on VHS or DVD for domestic use.

Film and video work by a specific artist can be available through some, all or none of the above channels. Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* has rarely been shown in public and was released in a limited edition of 20 for the art market, but part of the third film is available as *The order: Cremaster 3*, a mass-market DVD published by Palm Pictures. Tracey Emin's *Top spot* was released in cinemas, and in VHS and DVD for the home market by Tartan, but her earlier short film *CV* is not available on video, and neither are Gilbert and George's historical early 1970s short films, in the Tate Collection.

Self-publishing is common, not only for relatively unknown artists or those at the beginning of their careers, but also for well-established practitioners (a remarkable example being Takahiko Iimura). In art college libraries, and some specialist collections, non-editioned work is often donated by staff or students. These are normally copies on VHS or DVD made by the artists, but would only very rarely be the original master copy.[8]

Availability issues, and the very high average prices for this material, make it challenging to achieve a good coverage, with balance between historical and current practice. Anthologies and compilations are a good way of increasing the coverage of the collection, and often the only way of acquiring the work of certain artists or periods. A special kind of compilation is the video magazine. A number of magazines presenting video art at first hand on VHS appeared in the 1990s, including *Compiler*, *Factory video magazine*, *Grey suit*, *Untelevision* and *Zapp magazine*. Multimedia magazine *Engaged* presented its issue no. 5 (1997) in this format.[9] Currently, titles like *Artpix*, *Journal of short film* and *Liveartwork* continue this format on DVD.

A final source of artists' film and video is television. British universities and other educational institutions with an ERA Licence[10] are allowed to record off-air television programmes for educational use. From Channel 4 Turner Prize specials to BBC programmes on Jeremy Deller's Battle of Orgreave, British television is a source of documentary material often not available commercially, but also of original artists' moving image work.[11]

Legislation

Although videos have been part of library collections for more than 30 years, the use of this format in academic institutions still presents a number of challenges, with a complex legal framework that includes several grey areas. The brief information provided in this section is intended for general guidance only and individual institutions should establish clear and comprehensive policies and guidelines informed by professional legal advice to ensure that their practices stay within the law. The BUFVC (British Universities Film and Video Council) provides advice to its members on all aspects of audiovisual collection management and usage.[12]

Copyright is possibly the most important and most complex of the legal issues related to this material. Films, videos and television programmes are protected by copyright legislation. In the UK, commercially produced video in any format (including VHS and DVD) can be shown for teaching purposes, as long as the audience consists of registered students only. Copying and adapting this material is not allowed without the permission of the copyright owner. The director and producer are the principal joint owners of copyright, and other people may own the copyright in parts of the programme, e.g., the screenplay or the music. If a programme is produced for an employer, copyright is owned by the employer. Copyright of a film lasts for 70 years after the death of the director, producer, screenwriter and composer of any original music. Copyright on television programmes expires after 50 years. Non-commercially produced videos are also protected by copyright. The conditions in which they can be used depend on the terms of the acquisition, and can be subject to a written contract.

Artists' film and video public performance, display and other rights are often offered for sale to institutions (including libraries), and can occasionally be a compulsory requisite for purchase.

Censorship is also a very important legal consideration, particularly in the UK, where the Video Recordings Act 1984 introduced compulsory video censorship.[13] Since 1985, the supply of videos not classified by the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) is a criminal offence, unless exempt, as is supplying a rated video to anyone under the age stated; a video is not covered by the Act and is exempt from classification if it is considered educational or if its subject is sport, religion or music. However, this exemption is only granted if the video does not contain images of human sexual activity; mutilation, torture or other acts of gross violence towards humans or animals; human genital organs or human urinary or excretory functions; or techniques likely to be useful in the commission of offences. The interpretation of the law to establish what material it does not cover requires subjective

Selected suppliers

BDV (Bureau des videos) (France)
http://www.bureaudesvideos.com
Contemporary video art distribution and publishing company created in 1994. Limited editions on professional formats include public performance rights. Unlimited editions on VHS and DVD for private use only are also available for sale. Catalogue available online.

Canyon cinema (USA)
http://www.canyoncinema.com
Filmmakers' cooperative specialising in the distribution of experimental film, founded in 1967. Collection of more than 3500 films available for rental and sale in different formats, including VHS and DVD. Catalogue available online.

Cinenova (UK)
http://www.cinenova.org.uk
Non-profit organisation dedicated to distributing films and videos made by women, formed in 1991. Collection in different formats, including VHS and DVD, available for rental and sale. Catalogue available online.

Electronic Arts Intermix (USA)
http://www.eai.org/eai/index.htm
Non-profit media arts centre and distribution service for video and media art, founded in 1971. Collection of 3000 works available for rental or sale in different formats, including on DVD for educational use in libraries or classrooms. Catalogue available online.

Filmarmalade (UK)
http://www.filmarmalade.co.uk
New publisher of contemporary artists' film and video. Each DVD release includes a single work, published as a limited edition. Catalogue available online.

Heure Exquise! (France)
http://www.exquise.org
Organisation dedicated to distributing video art, created in 1975. Collection of 2700 works available to members for rental in different formats. Copies on DVD for educational use in libraries or classrooms are also available for sale. Catalogue available online.

Index (Austria)
http://www.index-dvd.at/en/index.html
Publisher of Austrian and international film, video and media art on DVD, established in 2004. Catalogue available online.

Lowave (France)
http://www.lowave.com
Publisher of contemporary film and video art on DVD, established in 2002. Catalogue available online.

Lux (UK)
http://www.lux.org.uk
Non-profit arts agency for the support and promotion of artists' moving image. Founded in 2002, it builds on four decades of work by predecessor organisations (The London Filmmakers Co-operative, London Video Arts and The Lux Centre). Collection of 4500 works available for rental and sale in different formats, including DVD. It also publishes the collection *Afterimages* and anthologies on DVD. Catalogue available online.

The Lux shop is an excellent source of commercially published VHS and DVD titles.

Re:voir (France)
http://www.re-voir.com
Publisher of artists' film and video on VHS and DVD, established in 1994. Catalogue available online.

Video Data Bank (USA)
http://www.vdb.org
Distribution service for video art, established in 1976. Collection of 1600 works available for rental and sale in different formats, including VHS and DVD. Its Early Video Art collection includes many titles from the Castelli-Sonnabend collection, the first and most prominent collection of late 60s and 70s video art. Catalogue available online.

V tape (Canada)
http://www.vtape.org
Arts center and distribution service for video and media art, founded in 1980. Collection of 3500 works available for rental and sale in different formats, including DVD. Catalogue available online.

judgement, and should only be applied in the context of institutional policies and guidelines. Off-air recordings made under the ERA Licence are not covered by the law (as television programmes are regulated by OFCOM).

Access and preservation issues

The cataloguing of artists' videos is discussed in detail elsewhere in this issue,[14] but I would like to close this survey with a few practical considerations regarding both access and preservation. At University of the Arts London, local guidelines for the cataloguing of video recordings have been produced to achieve maximum consistency in the application to these materials of the international standards AACR2, MARC21, DDC and LCSH. Guidelines for cataloguing artists' multiples are also used for some of these items. Good subject and genre indexing and selection of access points are crucial elements in creating catalogue records that facilitate access and use of artists' moving image collections.

Most of the artists' moving image works in the collection at Chelsea are for reference use in the library, for reasons including purchase licence conditions and other legal requirements, to maximise access to expensive resources, and also for preservation purposes.

Chelsea, like most academic libraries, has no archival role in this area, and the vast majority of this collection comprises non-original material, mostly commercial pre-recorded VHS tapes and DVDs, off-air recordings on both formats and some copies of original works made by the artists on different formats. However, the need to ensure that these items, many difficult to find or access in other public collections, are available for future use in teaching and research, means that preservation considerations have been made a priority.[15]

Developed to make video affordable, VHS was not designed to achieve high resolution and long life. Deterioration of tapes, particularly with heavy use or when played in poorly maintained equipment, is common. The fragility of digital discs is also a well-known problem. Migration of material to new copies, when legal (e.g. transferring VHS off-air recordings to DVD), and substitution of commercially available titles, when practicable, are partial remedial solutions.

Equipment and format obsolescence may pose a greater threat to video collections than media degradation factors. The need for dedicated equipment for different formats (U-matic, VHS NTSC, multi-region DVD, etc.)[16] and the pace of technological change could mean that in the long term video collections on cassette or disc formats will not be sustainable. According to audiovisual preservation expert Dietrich Schüller,[17] 'within a few years all video specific recording systems will become outdated to be replaced by the handling of video signals as true file formats by computers. This means that all video formats currently in use will be obsolete in the near future'. From the mid 1990s the consensus principle for long term video preservation is that efforts must concentrate on the content, which can only be preserved by migration from analogue to digital formats. In the case of material under copyright, this can only be achieved with the explicit agreement of the copyright holder. This is also the view of Pip Laurenson, Head of Time-based Media Conservation at Tate, who has written extensively about the specific preservation issues of artists' video, in the context of Tate Collection and installation art: 'An ongoing preservation program ensures that the videos in the collection are always stored on a current format (...) A regular transfer of the video signals onto new stock, to overcome the problem of material deterioration, and onto new formats to overcome the problem of obsolescence, is therefore essential for the conservation of these art works. The Tate Gallery plans to do this every five or six years. Copying video signals without the loss of information or picture quality is therefore essential and can be achieved using digital technology.'[18]

References

1. In *Four American composers,* directed by Peter Greenaway (Channel Four Television, 1983). Cited in A. L. Rees, *A history of experimental film and video* (London: BFI, 1999), vii.
2. The British Film Institute (BFI) is the agency responsible for the moving image heritage in the UK, through the BFI National Archive. In 2005 the BFI and Arts Council England appointed Curator of Artists' Moving Image William Fowler to develop this area of the collection. The BFI makes 275,000 films available for rental in 16mm and 35mm copies (see the *BFI avant-garde catalogue* (London: BFI, 1994) for some of the material available in these formats) and offers an on-site Research Viewing Service. It also publishes the *British artists' films* series in partnership with Illuminations and Arts Council England, as well as the *History of the avant-garde* series and individual titles on DVD format.

3. Professional video technology had been in use in the broadcasting industry for 20 years. The Ampex Corporation Quadruplex videotape (launched in 1956) was first used in the USA to record television programmes so that they could be broadcast across multiple time zones.
4. A general historical overview of the development of this form of practice is available in *A history of experimental film and video* by A. L. Rees (London: BFI, 1999). David Curtis provides a definitive account of artists' moving image in the UK in *A history of artists' film and video in Britain* (London: BFI, 2007). For video art specifically, see Catherine Elwes, *Video art: a guided tour* (London: Tauris, 2005).
5. Annamarie McKie, Jill Trumper and Nicholas Turner, 'Diverse practices: video art and libraries,' *Art libraries journal* 29, no. 1 (2004): 35-41.
6. Galleries and bookshops that specialise in artists' books and multiples are often very good sources for artists' videos, particularly self-published videos (e.g., Printed Matter, Boekie Woekie, Florence Loewy).
7. Professional formats are high quality formats used in broadcasting like Betacam or Digital Betacam, as opposed to lower quality consumer formats like VHS or DVD. One of the advantages of acquiring high quality formats is the possibility of producing in-house copies in lower quality formats without additional loss of image quality.
8. A specialist collection that accepts copies of original work is the British Artists' Film and Video Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, see David Curtis and Steven Ball's article about the Collection on p.??-??.
9. *Aspen*, the first of the multimedia 'magazines in a box', included a reel of 8mm film with four short films in issue no. 5+6 (1967). These were Hans Richter *Rhythm 21* (1921), Laszlo Moholy-Nagy *Lightplay: black-white-grey* (1932), Robert Morris and Stan VanDerBeek *Site* (1964), and Robert Rauschenberg *Linoleum* (1967).
10. The ERA Licence permits staff at British educational establishments to record, for non-commercial educational purposes, scheduled free-to-air broadcasts on BBC television and radio, ITV Network services, Channel Four, E4, More 4 and Film 4, and Five Television. Strict terms and conditions regulate use, labelling, retention, making of copies, etc. More information is available at http://www.era.org.uk/.
11. See John Wyver, *Vision on: film, television and the arts in Britain* (London: Wallpaper Press, 2007).
12. British Universities Film & Video Council, http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/.
13. The Video Standards Council, the UK's video industry professional body, has produced a very clear guide to the Video Recordings Act and subsidiary legislation, which is available at http://www.videostandards.org.uk.
14. See the article by Jacqueline Cooke on page ?? - ??.
15. The National Preservation Office has published practical guidelines for libraries, *Caring for CDs and DVDs* (2008), http://www.bl.uk/npo/pdf/cd.pdf. The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) has developed similar guidelines for videotapes, *Videotape preservation fact sheet*, http://www.amianet.org/resources/guides/fact_sheets.pdf.
16. Different colour encoding – PAL, NTSC, SECAM – for VHS and regional encoding – 1 to 8 – for DVD require compatible equipment. Current and future compatibility issues should be considered when acquiring new material.
17. Dietrich Schüller, *Audio and video carriers* (TAPE, 2008), http://www.tape-online.net/docs/audio_and_video_carriers.pdf, 12.
18. 'The conservation and documentation of video art,' in *Modern art: who cares?* ed. IJsbrand M.C. Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (Amsterdam: Foundation for Conservation of Modern Art, 1999), 263-271.

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