Diverse practices: video art and libraries

Annamarie McKie, Jill Trumper and Nicholas Turner

This article looks at the many problems that art libraries experience in developing video art collections. It considers a range of issues, from why it is often difficult to acquire video art, to reasons why many of the respected library art collections, do not actively collect such material. Most of the findings arise from a workshop called "Diverse Practices", which was held at Kent Institute of Art and Design in February 2003.

Video art? Artists' video? Video installation? Experimental film? Clearly, there are some ambiguities over this art form. Who as an art librarian, has not experienced some mild form of panic when asked to get hold of work by a video artist? We may find it difficult to relate to this art form, which comes in a format that we cannot easily admire or often even buy.

Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman jumping from one side of a square to the other for ten minutes, John Baldessari copying out the line "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art" over and over, Pipilotti Rist's close-ups of her naked body, Marina Abramovic's self-harm…. Video art often requires us to devote the kind of concentration we might give to a painting or sculpture, but it does not make this easy. Tapes can run on for hours (on auto repeat) , they can seem out of focus and grainy and the subject matter may seem at first, very uninteresting. Iain Sinclair, in a review of this year's Tate Britain exhibition "A century of Artists Films "writes:

"Films could be over in seconds. Or they might go on for ever. The autistic gaze of Andy Warhol, not looking at the Empire State Building (but letting the camera run), or a few frames of hand painted celluloid from Brakhage…" [1]

The form and content of video art make it very difficult for Librarians to classify. It is also very difficult to judge the quality. With a book we can look at the binding, examine the content and basically get a "feel" for the material; no such luxuries exist for video art! Like artists books, video art is not a 'natural' library format, being primarily a work of art . It might seem out of context within a library setting. Perhaps this is why many libraries have avoided actively collecting it. In Chapter 4 of the Collection Development Policy for the National Art Library, in relation to video art, it is written:

Only exceptionally does the Library acquire work of artists in this medium
(i.e. the work of "video artists"), usually when the bulk of the work of the
person in question is in a medium in which the V&A of NAL is interested. [2]

A lot of film and video work has only been shown in a gallery context and has not been made widely available. This presents even greater problems for the non-collector librarian with a small specialist budget. Douglas Gordon, for his recent Hayward Gallery show, "What Have I Done", only ran off a few copies of "24 hour Psycho", his slowed down version of Hitchcock's Psycho, and these sold to collectors for around £13,000 each.

Video art falls into two main strands. The first strand comes from a tradition of experimental film making using solely video and film, usually outside a gallery context (examples might be John Baldessari, John Smith, Stan Brakhage, Bill Viola). The second strand consists of the use of video within gallery installations, so that the

video work may just be one of the media the artist works in (examples of this might be Douglas Gordon, Steve McQueen, Darren Almond). From the library perspective, the first strand is more accessible, mainly because of the price and availability. However, there is no one supplier or definitive database that we can tap into to buy such work. This means that we are often confronted with sourcing the supplier ourselves, relying on a network of contacts we may, or may not, have built up. This presents many problems, the most obvious being we will have to deal with a supplier who is probably not based in this country and who only delivers on receipt of payment. There are usually conversion fees (from NTSC to VHS PAL) to consider, and where not explicitly stated, there may be added import costs. All of this requires an adaptable Finance Office. Time is not always on our side, especially if we have to resource a course in this area, so some of us may resort to using Visa cards, in order to speed up the process. This is not ideal.

   All these factors make it difficult to acquire representative collections. Should video art be more accessible and less expensive to educational institutions? Certainly there is some pioneering work being done by companies such as Illuminations, in this area.   However, while education libraries can easily buy tapes of Bill Viola's work for around £20 each, acquiring video art by an artist such as Bruce Nauman, can cost hundreds of pounds, even if a supplier has been found. The size of our budgets inhibits what can be acquired and we are confined to purchasing small collections of readily available artists' video work, rather than achieving well balanced collections. One solution is the development of antholgies of video artists work, such as "Surveying the Decade" [3] They are accessible, "value for money" and improve the breadth of the collection.

Video art has moved on substantially since the early days of Nam June Paik. A Korean musician, performance artist and sculptor, he is thought to have been the creator of video art.   It is everywhere, in advertisements, projected onto buildings and part of gallery installations. Increasingly in educational institutions, courses are developing which incorporate the study of video art, whether it be on Fine Art or on more traditional film courses. It is important, then, as Librarians that we think about achieving balanced collections on the subject.

The workshop

For some years the Library at Kent Institute of Art and Design (KIAD) has been working closely with the college's Video With Film (formerly Time Based Media) course in developing a collection of video art resources for the students, which are reflective of current practices and trends. In order to obtain some of this material, we have had to approach many sources, the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) , Lux, Illuminations, Revoir, Video Data Bank and Electronic Arts Intermix, for example. Acquiring the works themselves has produced problems , from delays in transactions to unexpected costs in import duty and conversion fees. Nevertheless, the Library has found a rich variety of sources, as well as some near- definitive databases of video art.

With this experience, we began to develop a useful list of tried and tested sources and this then developed into an idea for an ARLIS/UK & Ireland workshop. Could we share good practice in this area? Were other people experiencing the same sort of difficulties getting hold of this material as we were? Were there art librarians faced

with having to resource a course who had no idea where to start looking for video art? The outcome was a workshop on sources for artists's videos which was held at the Kent Institute of Art and Design, Maidstone, on 26 February 2003. Delegates were from a variety of backgrounds, most from art colleges such as Goldsmiths, Wimbledon and Winchester but also some from larger universities such as the London Metropolitan University and the University of Westminster. Interestingly, we had one librarian from a sixth form college. Reasons for attending the workshop ranged from the need for help in developing video art collections because of the demands of art courses, to experiencing similar problems to those of KIAD in getting hold of material. One librarian told us about one of his academic staff, who had suggested that the video artist should be contacted direct! Delegates also expressed some difficulties in defining video art. One delegate said, 'When I see video art in a gallery, I'm a little bit wary of it and I'm never sure how long to spend watching! I'm not sure if I get it!
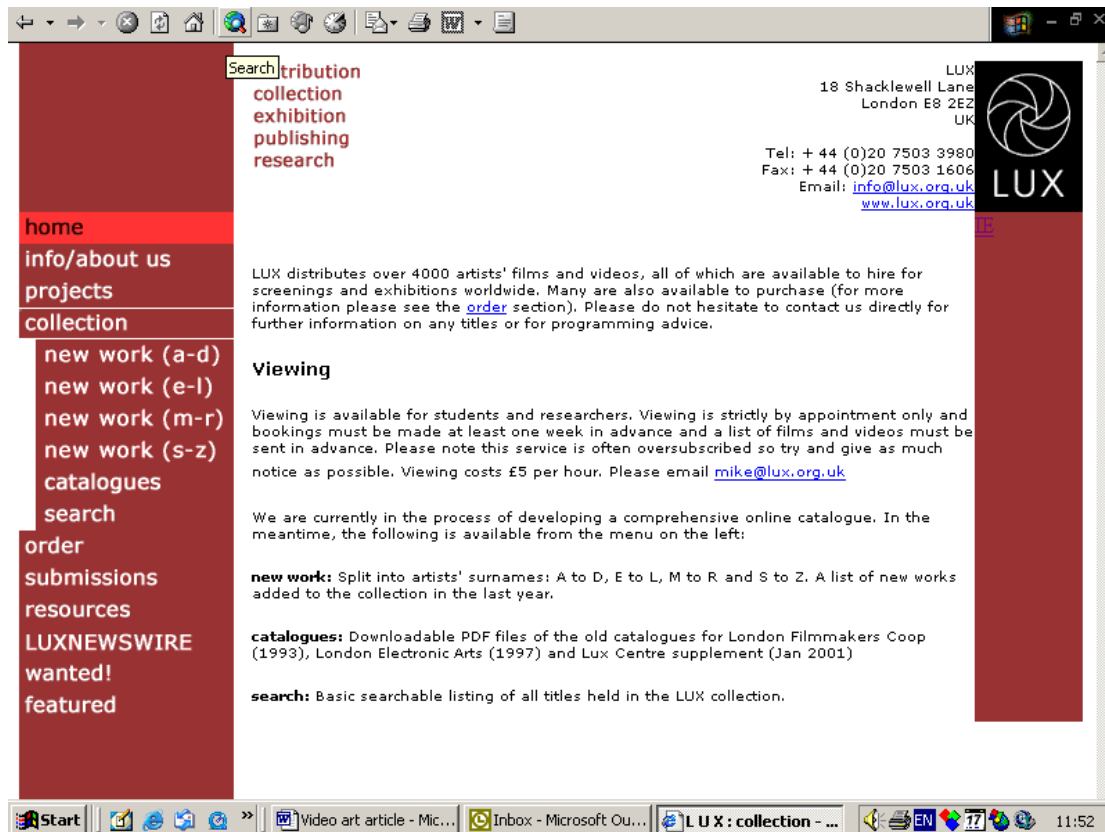
Outline of the ARLIS workshop

The organisers decided that it would be particularly useful to invite to this workshop a practitioner in the field, someone who could dispel some of the confusions in this area and perhaps introduce everyone to as yet undiscovered sources. On the recommendation of Al Rees, former head of Time Based Media in the college, and respected figure in this field, we asked Karen Mirza: an influential figure in artist film and video, a recently-appointed trustee of the new LUX organisation, and a tutor in film and video at the Royal College of Art for several years.

Karen stressed the need to build links between video artists and libraries, arguing that the next generation of video artists should be able to watch historical, as well as contemporary, work while they are completing a degree. She described the growing popularity of video art as a subject, partly because of the burgeoning audio-visual culture we live in, and also because a lot of artists are using video art as part of installations in galleries. She spoke about the 'White Cube, Black Box' effect – these days we may as easily see a film in a blacked out art gallery, as in a conventional cinema.

Video art, though, is not a new art form: it has been around for forty years. Students need to be aware of its origins, not just current practice. It has not always been easy to get hold of historic examples. Karen spoke about Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, [4]which for years had been the stuff of film textbooks only. Very few people had actually seen the work, because it was never widely available. It can now be bought on DVD. Karen encouraged librarians to work closely with tutors to help set up collections of video art, since educational establishments are a relatively new market for this art

Karen also argued that video art as a genre is not as established in Britain as it is in other countries. She criticised collections of video art in this country for being decidedly patchy when compared to other international collections, such as those of the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Karen was very keen to promote sources for such material in this country, as all the attendees spoke about the problems with international sources. She highlighted the Lux Centre (formerly London Filmmakers Co-Op) in London (www.lux.org.uk) as an excellent distributor of video art.

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LUX distributes over 4000 artists' films and videos, all of which are available to hire for screenings and exhibitions worldwide. Many are also available to purchase (for more information please see the order section). Please do not hesitate to contact us directly for further information on any titles or for programming advice.

Viewing

Viewing is available for students and researchers. Viewing is strictly by appointment only and bookings must be made at least one week in advance and a list of films and videos must be sent in advance. Please note this service is often oversubscribed so try and give as much notice as possible. Viewing costs £5 per hour. Please email mike@lux.org.uk

We are currently in the process of developing a comprehensive online catalogue. In the meantime, the following is available from the menu on the left:

new work: Split into artists' surnames: A to D, E to L, M to R and S to Z. A list of new works added to the collection in the last year.

catalogues: Downloadable PDF files of the old catalogues for London Filmmakers Coop (1993), London Electronic Arts (1997) and Lux Centre supplement (Jan 2001)

search: Basic searchable listing of all titles held in the LUX collection.

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www.lux.org.uk *Lux Website*

The Lux Centre is able to offer advice on establishing a collection of video art in terms of subjects, genres and purchasing costs. In addition the Lux offers a service which allows individual students to view artists' videos at a cost of £5 per hour (they only need an email or phone call, giving one week's notice).   Visitors to the site can also sign up for a monthly e-newsletter, LUX newswire (which you can subscribe to through the Lux website) , which includes news on recent publications and forthcoming screenings of video art.

Sources for artists' video work

The workshop also gave delegates the opportunity to review several genuine enquiries about video art, and to go through some of the tried and tested sources used at Kent Institute of Art and Design. Examples were:

I want to show my students a piece of work by Bruce Nauman called 'Playing a note on the violin whilst walking around the studio'. Can you get it please.

We tried the Internet first for this, and after wading through lots of dead-end links, were directed to a database called CINOVID (see below).
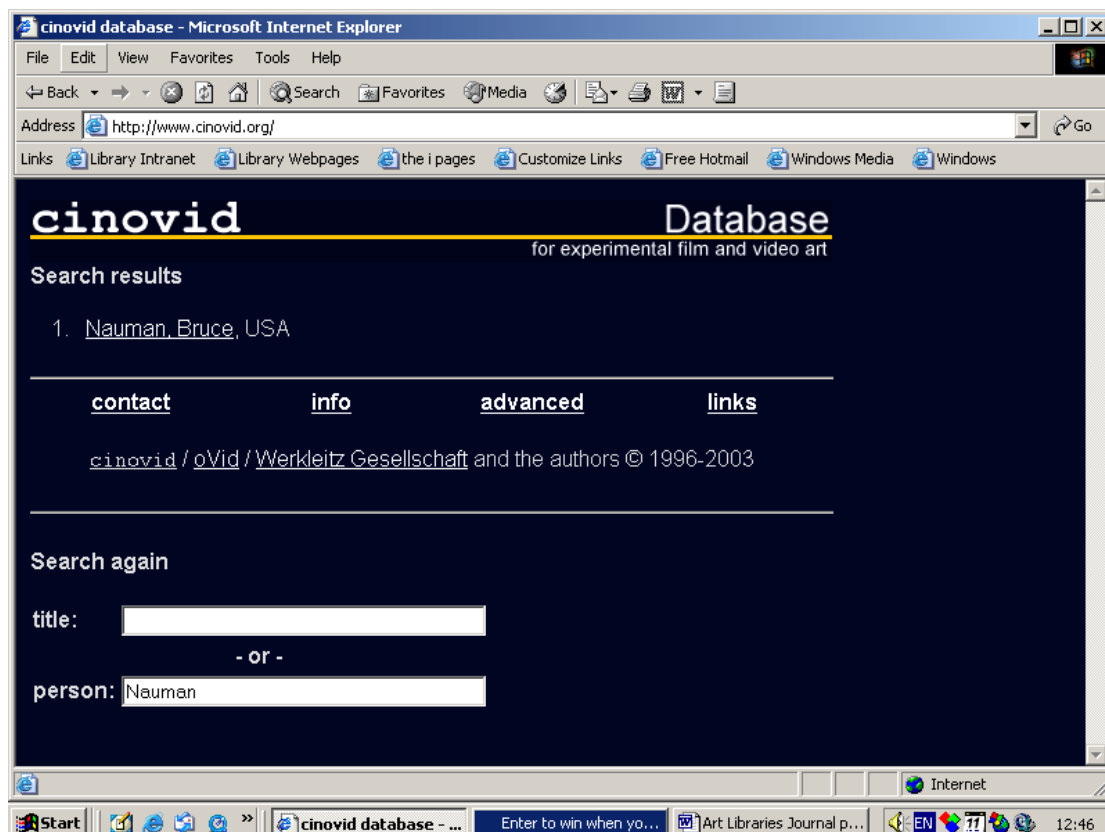
Cinovid database (www.cinovid.org): search for Bruce Nauman's *Playing a note on the violin whilst walking around the studio*.

Cineovid is a good source, coming near to being a definitive database on US video artists, but is probably more useful for US librarians than for those based in the UK. A search for Nauman, Bruce, led to a full chronology of his works, and clicking on the search title produced a screen of information about them and a link to Electronic Arts Intermix in the United States. This appeared to be the only source for this work.

Are there any sites that give media clips of artists' video works?

There are sites such as Video Data Bank (www.vdb.org) and Re:Voir (www.revoir.com), which include media clips.
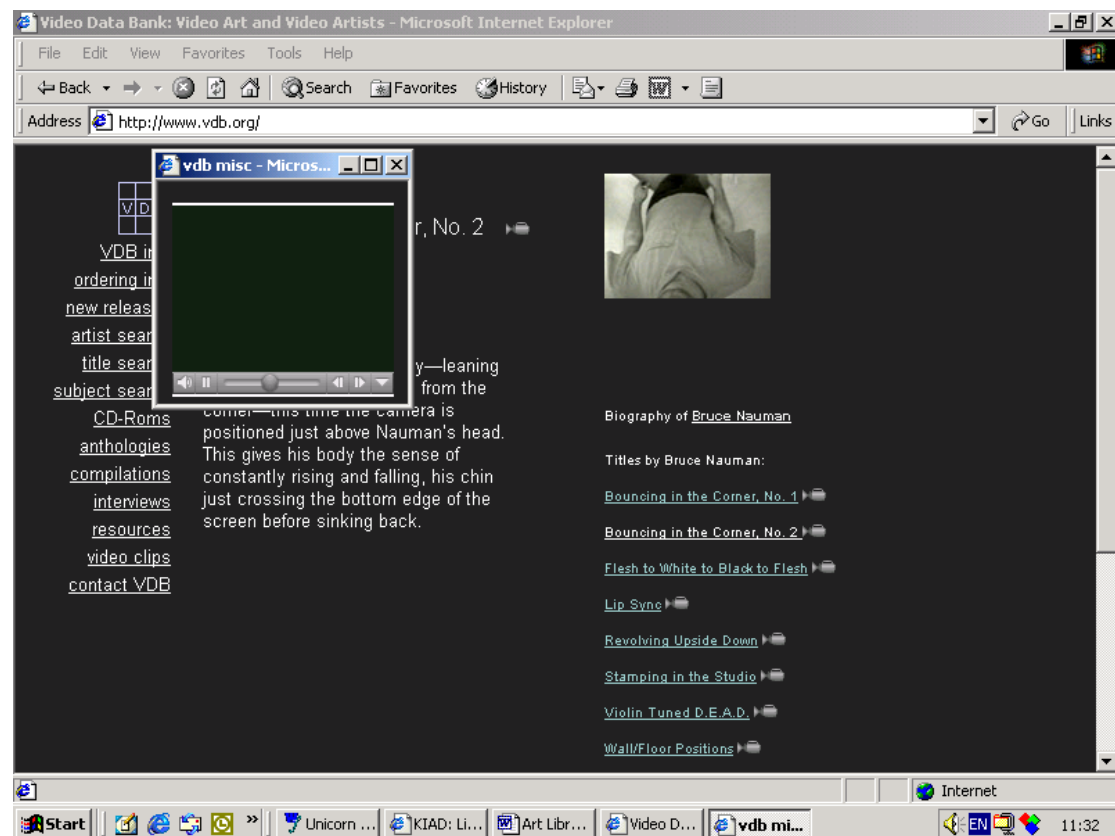

Video Data Bank website (www.vdb.org)

I would like the Library to purchase a video called 'Surveying the first decade'.

Lux used to sell it.

This is available from the Video Data Bank (www.vdb.org) in the US. It is not, however, easy to get hold of, and prices seem to vary, depending on availability. The best route is to email first, checking whether it is in stock, then to put an order through, quoting a purchase order number and indicating on the order that it is for educational purposes only, and finally to arrange a bank transfer. The purchaser needs to be aware that there may be extra charges like conversion fees (from NTSC to VHS Pal) and import duties once the video has reached the UK.
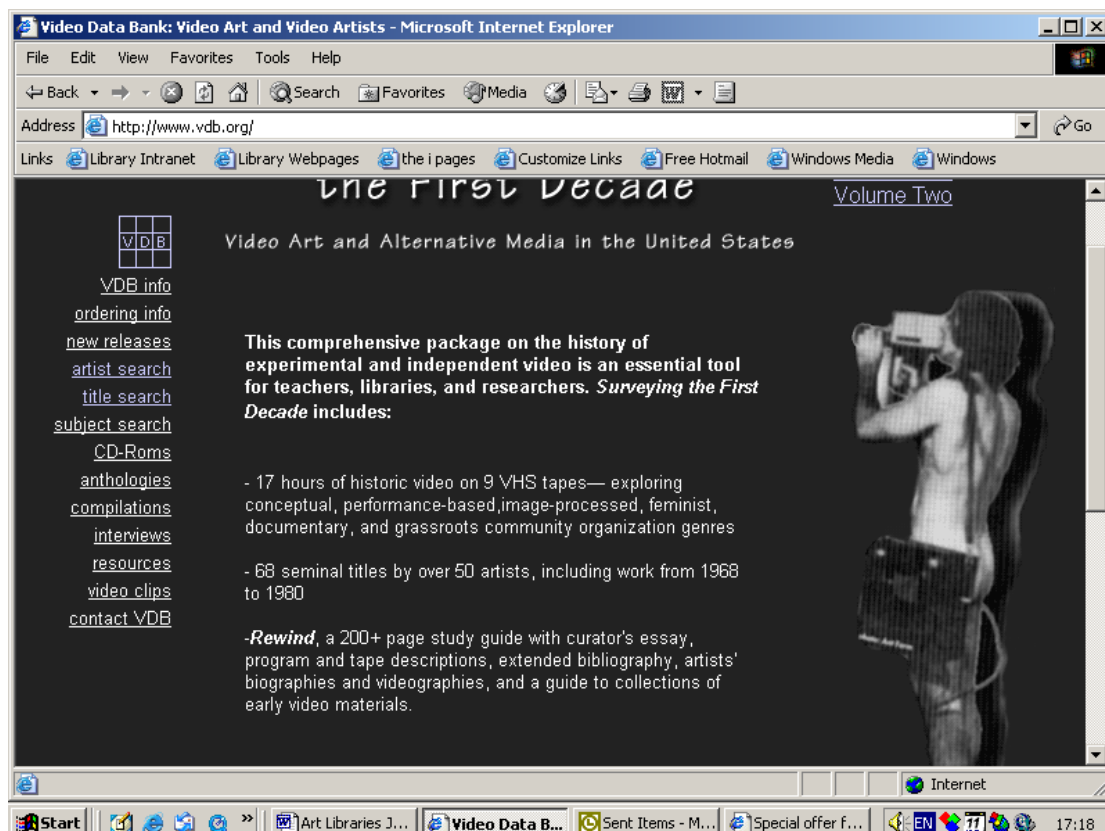
Video Data Bank search for *Surveying the first decade*.

Recommended sources for video art

Mystic Fire

www.mysticfire.com

US suppliers of Experimental and independent film (Deren, Jarman and Brakhage)
and some mystical stuff (trance, Tibetan, krishnamurti, etc)

Lux

http://www.lux.org.uk

Promotes and supports mostly British artists' moving image work

Video Data Bank

http://www.vdb.org

Leading resource in U.S. for videotapes by and about contemporary artists.

Revoir

http://www.re-voir.com

French film project , founded to make available a collection of videotapes of
experimental film.

Arthouse

http://www.arthouseinc.com

US - Arthouse Inc features videos, films, audio tapes and books for sale.

Exsquisite

http://www.exquise.org

Heure Exquise is a site promoting video art and video creation, with a large catalogue
of videos to buy or rent.

Light cone

http://www.lightcone.org

French company features mostly films for rental, but does have some videos for sale.

Walther Konig

http://www.buchhandlung-walther-koenig.de

A German bookshop, also selling artists video.

Artangel

http://www.artangel.org.uk

Gallery, publisher and commissioner of work.

Electronic Arts Intermix

http://www.eai.org

US Resource for artist video and interactive media.

Institute of Contemporary Arts

http://www.ica.org.uk

Gallery and book shop. Also has a good range of artists videos.

Video Pool

http://www.videopool.mb.ca

Canadian artist-run centre for independent video, audio and multimedia.

Illuminations

http://www.illumin.co.uk

Illuminations is a production company for arthouse films and artists video.

The Kitchen

http://www.thekitchen.org

Centre for music, dance, performance.

Facets Multimedia

http://www.facets.org/

Good source for world cinema on video. Also has good collection of avant-garde (Warhol, Brakhage, etc)

Raro Video

http://www.rarovideo.com/catalogo.htm

Italian experimental and avant-garde film – a good selection of Warhol

Websites which are good sources of information about artists' work

Video Data Bank

http://www.vdb.org

Moffitt Library, University of California, Berkeley

http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/

Other information.

Cinovid

http://www.cinovid.org

Database of video art and experimental film, aiming to support distribution, research

and publication in the field. Also has a link to some of the artists.

http://www.hi-beam.net

Has links to specialist video retailers plus bulletin board for artists, curators,

librarians, etc.

Lux Newswire (www.lux.org.uk)

A monthly e-newsletter which you can subscribe to, covering UK and international

artists moving image news. Email: info@lux.org.uk. Contact: Ben Cook

British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection (www.research.linst.ac.uk/film centre)

Good database of British work. Videotapes can be viewed on the premises. David Curtis (Senior Research Fellow) and Michael Maziere (Research Fellow) are respected academics in this field.

Conclusions

As a profession librarians are not actively collecting video art or artists' video. The reasons are many, but the main one is that libraries cannot get hold of this type of art work, very easily. Finance departments are too rigid to cope with the informalities of the Internet, which is where most of this material has to be purchased.

Another problem is that there are no guidelines. What should be bought to achieve balanced collections? As well as keeping up with current trends, it is important to have good historical collections. Where do we start looking and who can we ask? There are no definitive databases on the subject, but there is some pioneering work going on. David Curtis of the Film and Television Centre, at Central Saint Martins, is compiling a near definitive list of British artists, and Lux have a pretty impressive list of such material to buy. Both organisations are extremely helpful and can offer advice on suppliers and distributors of video art. Illuminations are also offering some interesting artists on video, often at more reasonable prices.

Ideally what is needed is an organisation set up solely for educational institutions, that will act as a middle agent and purchase this material for libraries, perhaps offering discounts as well. We can do this for books and journals. Why not for video art?

As a profession, we also need some meaningful collection guidelines on video art. After all, this art form is here to stay. Video art is not just confined to the backwaters of experimentalism. As Mark Nash writes:

'In the past thirty years, the use of moving image in art films and video installations, has transformed contemporary art and curatorial practice to such an extent, that entire exhibitions, even whole careers, are based upon work in this relatively new medium'[5]

If we are to provide well balanced art library collections, we need to take heed of some of these findings.

References

1. Iain Sinclair. Unreal visions. Guardian Review. Saturday 17 May 2003. pp 18-19

2. www.nal.vam.ac.uk . (National Art Library website) . A Policy for the development of the collection. Edited by Jan Van Der Wateren and Rowan Watson.

3. www.vdb.org. (Video Data Bank website) – for "Surveying the Decade"

4. Michael Snow's "Wavelength", 1967. 45 mins (available on Anarchive 2:Digital Snow DVD)

5. Mark Nash. Wait Until Dark. Tate Magazine. February 2003. pp 55-56

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[1] **Iain Sinclair. Unreal Visions. Guardian Review. 17 May 2003.**
[2] **www.nal.vam.ac.uk (National Art Library website)**
[3] **Surveying the decade website**
[4] **Michael Snow "Wavelength"**
[5] **Mark Nash 'Art and Cinema;Some Critical Reflections'**