

A Video Art Collection Goes Kinetic: The Long Beach Museum of Art Archive and the Woman's Building Videos at the Getty Research Institute



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Messy handwriting on faded and peeling labels goes on for what seems like forever atop high shelves—well out of reach for anyone of average height. I try in vain to pause and decode the titles scrawled on spines of more than 30 linear feet of videotapes, but I'm quickly losing sight of my guide in these labyrinthine aisles so I keep moving.

At first glance, the video archives of the Long Beach Museum of Art (LBMA) and the Woman's Building housed at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in Los Angeles, resemble any family's videotape library, gone completely out of control.

But the tapes housed on the shelves at the GRI don't hold shaky handheld footage of every special occasion and embarrassing moment in the recent past of any given family with a camcorder and an extremely dedicated videographer. What can be found among the shelves at the GRI are more than twenty years of video art history, framed by two key moments: the foundation in 1973 of the Woman's Building, an independent feminist art institution in Los Angeles and the closing of the Video Annex in 1995, an international video art production studio located at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

For scholars and museum-goers worldwide, the Long Beach Museum of Art and Woman's Building archives represent an unprecedented source for video art—the addition has made the GRI holder of one of the largest institutional video art collections globally. For the GRI, however, the acquisition of the two archives in 2006 represented both a boon and a challenge. How best to catalog, preserve and render accessible to the academic community thousands of works received all at the same time?

Five years into the Long Beach Museum of Art Archive project, the Institute has found some answers to these pertinent questions, while at the same time opening up new and exciting avenues of research and discussion for the scholarly and museum communities. Using various methods, the GRI has made available more than 250¹ of the tapes for on-site viewing and

1 Complete list available at

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inclusion in several temporary exhibitions.

Rewind: The beginnings of video at Long Beach Museum of Art

At the time its video program was created in 1974, the Long Beach Museum of Art was a small institution with a modest operations budget to match its size. Nevertheless, the Museum and its video production program, under the direction of curator David Ross, found the means to establish a vanguard approach that enabled the art making process from start to finish. This approach included inviting artists to the institution, providing the necessary support and equipment to produce, and finally, a platform to show the work. The resulting projects were extremely varied, ranging from abstract video-paintings, sculptures, performances, and political art. Above all, artists working with video at the end of the 20th century wanted to distinguish their images from those visible on television and movie theater screens.

The production studio and Video Annex were singular programs for the above reasons, as Ross points out in the exhibition catalog for *California Video* (Getty Museum, 2008) and also because toward the end of the 1970s, video was still a relatively new medium that received little institutional recognition and support. Video production was extremely costly, very few people outside of broadcasting and film sectors had access to proper equipment, and even less had the knowledge to make it work. By putting video production within the reach of artists, LBMA was not only validating video as a new medium, but also encouraging its development through exhibitions, collaborative projects, broadcast experiments and cable series. Artists who did not typically use video, or never had before were given the opportunity, and, it could even be argued, the incentive to produce original and innovative content through the use of this burgeoning medium. In return for LBMA's services rendered, artists left behind a copy of each video made on the premises, as a way to thank the museum; this was also an unintentional way to slowly build a collection for an institution that had no budget for one.

Accretion or collection? Challenges

Because of its unusual growth pattern, Ross has referred to the LBMA video archive as more of an "accretion," than a collection. Over the years the museum had acquired everything from videocassettes by seminal video pioneers such as Chris Burden, Nam June Paik and Bill Viola to the work of neighborhood artists who just wanted their first and only foray into video to be housed at a museum. As a result, the LBMA archive posed several challenges in terms of cataloging and documenting the works it contains. First was the size and scope of the acquisition: all in all there were over 4,000 videocassettes of artworks, installation works, taped

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interviews with artists, collectors and curators, and video documentation of exhibitions, performances and other events at the museum and throughout Southern California to identify and catalogue. Since the archive contains such varied work by both known and unknown artists, sometimes sharing the same videotape, the cataloging process has been arduous.

The Woman's Building Archive tapes pose a similar but perhaps even more difficult challenge. Like the LBMA archive, Woman's Building artists that experimented with video in the 1970s and 1980s may have stopped making art entirely. Moreover, because of the institution's focus on collaboration in order to avoid traditional power structures, the material is especially resistant to canonization. Many videos are devoid of faces of any kind, featuring tight shots with cut-off heads and floating bodies or else very long shots that don't allow individuals to be distinguished. Although several of the Woman's Building artists did go on to have successful video careers, the artistic process and gesture generally held more importance than any eventual individual distinction might.

On-demand, on the record

There are currently 1,186 Long Beach Museum of Art and Woman's Building archive records in the GRI's online-accessible catalog. Archive videotapes have been cataloged on a systematic and on-demand basis. Because original tapes are not available for viewing, they must be reformatted before they can be seen. When a researcher requests reformatting, the video conservator at the GRI creates master copies, and a use copy that may be made available for viewing.

A record in the Getty Research Library Catalog generally consists of the author or authors of the work or works, title, a brief description including the type of video (most of the LBMA archive videos are u-matic, or ¾ inch tape), biographical and historical notes and a summary. An in-depth finding aid for the LBMA and Women's Building Archives will eventually be available on the Getty Research Library website, which will provide a thorough listing of all of the materials belonging to the archive. In the meantime, records can be found by searching for "Long Beach Museum of Art Archives" on the GRI Research Library Catalog web page. A year from now, the GRI hopes to have catalogued the entire archive.

Transfer is the answer: An access-based approach to archives

When it comes to video, less isn't more; it's a guarantee for certain death. Although it may seem counterintuitive, the GRI's approach to preservation of rapidly deteriorating archive videotapes means that they must be watched and handled, poked and prodded, everything except remain unhandled. Consider the fact that video as a medium has a very short life span —between 10

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and 30 years, although this can be mitigated by proper storage conditions. With some of the videos dating back to the mid 1970s, it won't be long before many of these taped treasures run the risk of becoming completely unplayable, and thus obsolete. In order for artworks to continue to be accessible, they will need to be transferred to another, more viable format as they will not last forever.

Unlike traditional media conservators, a video conservator's day might typically begin with an eBay search. Much of the necessary equipment for the transfer process is vintage, so in addition to requiring excellent "seller feedback", a video conservator must also be prepared to pop open a VHS player at any time in order to perform routine maintenance. Once a videocassette has been deemed playable, and a suitable player found, the video signal can be assessed and repaired in order to smooth out any inconsistencies in the image and/or sound. Transfer, or reformatting was once a painstaking process that required every video generation to be made in real-time, but with new technology currently being put into place at the Getty, transfer will be quicker, allowing multiple copies to be produced simultaneously. These use copies are then made available to qualified researchers, accessible through the archive catalog. The reformatting process is the only way to prevent the archive videotapes from fading into analog oblivion.

Realizing an archive's potential: Access through exhibitions

What can be messy and practically illegible titles for the uninitiated can be—for a curator—guideposts along the road toward preparing an exhibition. Since at the research stages of *California Video* the transfer process was still long and laborious, it was nearly impossible to imagine transferring simply for the sake of discovery. One curator recalled that the only way to navigate through thousands of uncatalogued archive videotapes was to either work with what was already familiar, or to use a rather intuitive method —by just looking at the titles and requesting that intriguing ones get reformatted.

Exhibitions like *California Video* are a way to activate an archive, and convert potential energy into kinetic. Early, sometimes forgotten work has been brought to light in some cases, and in others, curator's requests uncovered works that had never before been screened, and were having their premiere an impressive 40 years after creation. Last, and certainly not least, works that are otherwise unavailable to the general public (the GRI only allows on-site consultation by researchers) become viewable to visitors of the exhibition. For now, access to the LBMA and Woman's Building archives will remain limited due to copyright issues, however over time the GRI hopes to make some documents available to anyone with internet access.

Freeze frame

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I'm standing outside of the cold storage vault of the Getty Research Institute, where staff members prepare to work with archive materials by donning temperature resistant parkas that look like something fit for space exploration. Cold storage is the final resting place of an "original" videotape, which having withstood the trials of years of use, storage and most recently, copying are stored for the rest of their limited lifespan.

But the videocassettes will have served their purpose well, having been included in three recent and upcoming exhibitions: *California Video* (Getty Museum, 2008), *Doin' it in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building* (Otis College art gallery, Oct 1, 2011-Jan 28, 2012), and *Exchange and Evolution: Worldwide Video Long Beach* (Long Beach Museum of Art, Oct 7, 2011-Feb 12, 2012), the last two forming part of *Pacific Standard Time*, an upcoming series of exhibitions about postwar art in Southern California. For the GRI, overcoming challenges posed by the acquisition of two important video art archives has proven to be an opportunity for discovery and public discourse in the form of several exhibitions. If the power of an archive lies not in its potential, but in its accessibility to the public, the GRI has enabled these two archives to fulfill their promise.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A Los Angeles native, Cynthia G. Valdez is currently on the way to Switzerland to complete a Master's in Museum Studies at the University of Neuchâtel. Prior to this, she spent two years in Mexico working with the Collections and Exhibitions of the Museo Amparo. In Mexico and while completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Paris, Cynthia wrote for various art publications in France and abroad, including ArtSlant, The Paris Times, The Mag L.A. and Whitehot Magazine for Contemporary Art. When not accumulating stamps in her passport, she enjoys knitting, gardening, experimental music and answering emails at [yomemoi\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:yomemoi@gmail.com).