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Intro to MIAP  
December 2, 2003

## Al Robbins

### Introduction

In October 2003, I went into Anthology Film Archives intending to inspect, identify and descriptively catalogue the Al Robbins collection. The collection is comprised of 99 reels of 16mm film, seven reels of 8mm, one reel of Super8, and two 1/4-inch open reel audio tapes. Under the direction of Andrew Lampert, the archivist at Anthology, I planned on putting each reel on rewinds and inspect for damage, adding leader and repairing bad splices as I went. I was to fill out Anthology's "Film Inspection Report" (see attached) for each reel, carefully recording the condition and assigning an archive number, unique within the scope of the collection.

After practicing splicing (a skill I hadn't used in several years) on some scrap footage and receiving Andrew's approval on my film handling abilities, I began to sort through the box containing the entire Robbins collection. It was at this point that we discovered the contents of the box were not what they had first appeared to be. Closer examination of the individual cans revealed that a vast majority of them were taped shut. Upon opening a few of the cans we found they contained film that had been exposed but left unprocessed. Assuming that the remaining unopened cans contain the same sort of material, there are a total of 80 unprocessed reels of 16mm in the Robbins collection.

This discovery reduced the amount of inspection and cataloguing work I was able to do on the collection, but it is an exciting finding that raises a number of questions regarding Robbins work and archival practice in general. First of all, there is the obvious question of what footage might be contained on the reels. Are they from the same film if they are from a film at all? Were they shot at approximately the same time? Why were they never processed? Are the reels developable? If so, should they be developed? Where will the funding for this project come from? Who might find value in this footage? What could these films tell us about Robbins and his work? All of these questions have been raised during the course of this project. Unfortunately there are not always concrete answers, but I have gathered information that will hopefully shed some light on the value of this footage.

### Al Robbins

Allan Mitchell Robbins was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1938. He studied architecture and design at Southern Illinois University with Buckminster Fuller. In the mid to late 1960s Robbins began to work with film, producing the 40 minute, black and white film *Gut Poem* in 1969. The same year, Robbins produced the short films *Sandy* and *Relativity*. *Cheetah*, Robbins' first of many video pieces, was produced in 1974. From this time on, Robbins became known for his innovative video works and gallery

installations. In addition to film and video work, Robbins was a poet and published author. Al Robbins suffered a heart attack February 8, 1987, passing away at the age of 48. That year John Hanhardt, curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum, said of Robbins that his “work was very much on the leading edge. He was pushing, exploring this medium in a really innovative way.”

The works of Al Robbins, from his short films to video installations to poetry, were often a visual mix of nature and kinetic energy. Most of the descriptions I found of Robbins’ works were of the video installations he completed in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. For instance in a 1982 press release for the installation of “catch // the speed of shiver” says “the work defines a space of pure kineticism. Its materials are video images of the fundamental units of the natural world – water, air, plant and animal forms. That matter is energy, and energy is light, is expressed in the videotapes.” The installation was reviewed in Afterimage and describes the “grainy black and white scenes of waves, motorized sea gulls acting like dive bombers, and Robbins running and leaping in space” as his “typical images.” As discussed below, the images found in the Anthology Robbins collection are similar to these descriptions, showing that there was a continuity in style and subject matter from his early film work in the 1960s through his video work of the 1980s.

### Project Work

I completed inspection, repair, and descriptive cataloguing on 15 reels of 16mm, 6 reels of 8mm, and on one reel of Super8 film. For each reel I assigned an archival number, put the film on a core, added leader to the head and tail, counted and repaired the splices, and identified the edge code. I recorded the condition of each reel by noting the amount of damage from emulsion and base scratching, dirt and grease, warping, perforation stretching or tearing, and shrinkage of the film. I also recorded any information that might be included on the original can or reel and assigned a descriptive title if there was no label. The amount of time spent on each reel varied greatly from a few minutes to an hour, as some were very short and had little damage, while others were longer and had numerous splices to be removed, cleaned and redone. Much of the 16mm film contained black and white images such as landscapes of hills, leaves, and water. There were also several reels with a young woman, and others of purely abstract images and patterns. None of the 16mm reels were labeled with titles, excluding one which had what appeared to be “Sawdy Print” written on the can. I have since discovered reference to *Sandy*, one of Robbins’ short films from the time period that the footage is from. I believe that this footage is a part of this film. The 8mm and Super8 films were in color, seemed to be home movies and most often did include titles, such as “Chicago” and “Marcy at Bahia.”

### Challenges

The search for biographical information and a film/videography on Al Robbins proved to be a rather difficult task. A search of local library and Internet databases turned up very few sources outside of obituaries in publications such as *Variety* and *The*

*New York Times*. There was one article written posthumously in *Millennium Film Journal*. Even the archive on the Video History Project ([www.experimentaltvcenter.org](http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org)) was disappointing as it only had five “matches,” none of which proved helpful for the purposes of this project. In stark contrast, video artist Nam June Paik, who it has been said was influenced by Robbins, had 188 matches on the same site. I even had trouble finding people who could attest to the value of Robbins’ work. I contacted P. Adams Sitney regarding Robbins, but he said he could only guess at his influence as he does not consider himself to be an expert on video art. Other attempts to make contacts with people failed to receive responses. It was not until I looked at the Al Robbins file in the library at Anthology that I found a great deal of valuable information. Containing obituaries, programs from video installations, interviews, grant applications, and various other publications, the Robbins file supplied the bulk of information I found on the artist. I see this as an example as to why it is important to process the undeveloped film. Anthology has already proved to be an invaluable resource for information on Robbins, supplying resources that otherwise would be unavailable to researchers. Processing the film will further increase the amount of existing Robbins material that created the foundation for later works and provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of his career as an artist.

Another challenge I encountered was that of trying to determine the provenance of the collection. Unfortunately there was not an oral history taken at the time of the donation of the film. Jonas Mekas, founder of Anthology, stated that he believed the film was donated after Al’s death by his sister, Shirley Robbins. However, in my biographical research I was unable to locate any evidence of Al having a sister. In fact his obituaries only mentioned that he was survived by his mother, Florence Glass. The box containing the collection did have “Shirley Robin” on the top. I had noticed the discrepancy between “Robin” and “Robbins” though I hadn’t put much thought into it as even Al’s name is misspelled as “Robins” on one side of the box. As my research progressed and I could not find evidence of Shirley and Al being siblings, I began to question whether or not they were. This is an example of how it is very important to keep accurate records of how collections come into the archive and contact information for those who donate them, as it will help future researchers understand the context of material within the collection.

The most obvious challenge in dealing with this collection is the unprocessed film. In its current condition it is impossible to know exactly what is contained on each reel until time and money can be put into their processing. Due to the age of the collection and chemical changes in developers it can be a challenge to process the film and adjustments must be made. As an experiment, Andrew and I took two rolls of film to Pac Lab to have them developed. The first roll was thought to be reversal but turned out to be negative. It was developed anyway, and came back with visible image. The quality of the image was somewhat degraded however, and appeared to have a “solarized” look to it. The second roll was reversal and was pushed two stops when it was processed. This adjustment increased the grain and contrast in the image, and the result was surprisingly clear when considering the age of the stock. It was exciting to view the

footage and see the how the images of rocks and water were very similar to the images on the reels that are known to be those of Al Robbins.

### Recommendations

My recommendation for the collection is to have the unprocessed film developed. The two reels that were already sent to the lab were successful in that both returned with a visible image. Of course, the largest challenge associated with this is the money that would be required to send the film to a lab. For example, the rates at Pac Lab in New York, where the first two reels were sent, start at \$13 for reversal film. Since the reels are nearly forty years old special considerations and adjustments must be made in their development. To increase the contrast in the image, the reversal reel was pushed two stops. At Pac Lab, each stop adds \$5 onto the cost of processing. Considering there are 80 reels to be developed, the lab costs will quickly add up. Also adding to the costs of processing the film will the experimentation that will have to be done in order to determine the best method of processing. As discussed above, a negative reel was developed and the resulting image was “solarized” in appearance. It is impressive that they were able to get an image out of such old film to begin with. If the lab were to experiment with the processing of subsequent reels, would the results be even better? Perhaps; certainly, the fees would be more expensive. Also adding to the cost of processing is the fact that 45 of the reels are completely unlabeled and will have to be experimented with in order to determine the best method of processing. The costs for this work might prove to be challenging and grants few and far between, though the benefits of dedicating time and money to this project will prove to be beneficial in the preservation and understanding of avant garde media. The resources at Anthology are scarce and already stretched as they are at most independent archives. When money, space, and labor resources can be so hard to come by, tough decisions need to be made. While an archivist may want to be able to save and preserve everything, this is impossible. As this project progresses, it might be found that resources would be more beneficial in other parts of the archive. If this occurs considering donating the collection to another archive or repository who already has a Robbins collection and would be able to better fund the project might be an option. Hopefully this decision will not have to be made and the Robbins collection at Anthology can be kept whole and intact.

The box containing the Al Robbins collection



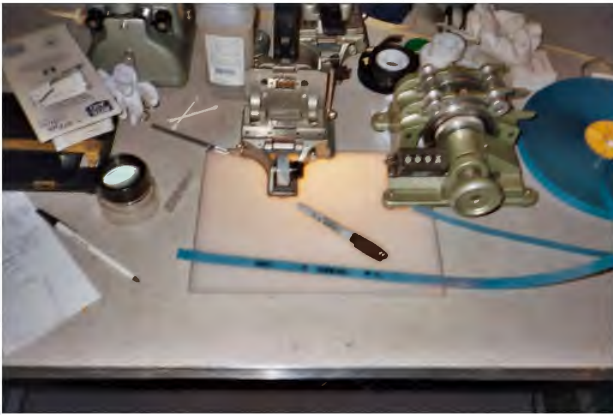
Footage on the rewinds



Splicing on leader



Leader and labeling "Head Al Robbins #7"



Completed reels



Cans of unprocessed film



ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

FILM INSPECTED BY: Margaret Mello

FILM INSPECTION REPORT

FILM TITLE: [ABSTRACT - NEGATIVE & POSITIVE] ARCHIVE #: 7

FILMMAKER: AL ROBBINS EDGE CODE: Pos - ++ (1100) Neg - ▲ (1104)  
 # OF REELS: 1 GAUGE: 16mm  
 ASPECT RATIO: \_\_\_\_\_ FPS: \_\_\_\_\_

BW /  COLOR  
 SILENT /  SOUND (specify below)

OPTICAL (VARIABLE AREA / VARIABLE DENSITY) / MAGNETIC / SEPARATE ELEMENT (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

OVERALL PRINT CONDITION

|                     |           |             |                 |      |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|------|
| PHYSICAL CONDITION: | EXCELLENT | GOOD        | <u>MEDIOCRE</u> | POOR |
| IMAGE:              | EXCELLENT | <u>GOOD</u> | MEDIOCRE        | POOR |
| SOUND:              | EXCELLENT | GOOD        | MEDIOCRE        | POOR |

0 = NONE OR NEGLIGIBLE 1 = LIGHT 2 = FAIR 3 = MODERATE 4 = HEAVY

(THESE ARE ESTIMATES. JUST USE YOUR BEST JUDGEMENT.)

|  | REEL # | 1       | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|--|--------|---------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| EMULSION SCRATCHES<br>(WHITE, GREEN, YELLOW, BLUE) |        | 1       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| BASE SCRATCHES<br>(GRAY OR BLACK)                  |        | 1       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| DIRT, OIL, GREASE                                  |        | 1       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| PERFORATION DAMAGE                                 |        | 3       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| FADING<br>(OVER, UNDER)                            |        | 0       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| WARPING  |        | 3       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| SPICES<br>(EXACT NUMBER OF SPICES PER REEL)        |        | 4       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| VINEGAR  |        | 0       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| COUNTDOWN LEADER? (Y/N)                            |        |         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| IS IT <u>EXPOSED</u> OR PRINTED                    |        |         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| THROUGH? (PLEASE CIRCLE ONE?)                      |        |         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| LENGTH (IN FEET)                                   |        | 35 1/2' |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |

NOTES:

Shrinkage = 37%  
 Negative & Positive spliced together at 28'  
 Curling throughout  
 Film is brittle (especially negative)  
 - moderate perf damage around 40'

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