Access to Moving Image Collections

Assignment #1

Joey Heinen

For my investigation into collections access and research I decided to focus on institutions that specialize on the preservation of avant garde video works and time-based media. I was interested in this subject both as a means to research a specific format (Portapak) but also because I was curious as to how a collection would handle the access and presentation of works that were born on tenuous playback media and are generally considered unique or valued items in and of themselves. To put it another way, many video artists were drawn to the format due to the unique and haphazard results that came with tweaking the interlacing of the video signal to create new effects that otherwise would not be possible on film or other digital processes yet to come. By virtue of that fact, many of the artists would view it as necessary that the preservation format continue to embody the original aesthetics of the work which are not always best captured in the digital format. Electronic Arts Intermix is the perfect example of an institution that values community access but also preservation of the original format into future generations. Of course, an institution such as this must still adopt a traditional access model where access copies are easily retrieved and do not risk being damaged.

Electronix Arts Intermix is a "non-profit resource that fosters the creation, exhibition, distribution, and preservation of media art."[1] They serve as a repository, a site for preservation, and as a distributor of the works that they have acquired. They were not my first choice for a site visit since I was not familiar with their organization. Initially I was interested in visiting the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim who are renowned for their time-based media programs. Unfortunately I was not able to speak with anyone at either organization who either considered themselves educated enough on the subject to assist me or who had the time. I found this strange given the staunch

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[1] http://www.eai.org/index.htm

views put forth by Nancy Goldman on the importance of a thorough reference interview. Nonetheless, I imagine that demand to view material is especially high and the scope of their projects may not reflect the staff that they have available. In asking organizations about their collections on Portapak, I would often be sent to the director of the department who was more of an authority on this subject considering the reference assistant did not have the tools to determine the media type of the master. Often times I would eventually hear back from the director who would politely state that they did not have any Portapak in their collection. Additionally, arranging a visit required a month's notice or more (though this was with the understanding that I had something particular in mind to view which would require retrieval time, thus I would not have direct access to the collections).

Considering the difficulty in accessing collections at a larger institution, I decided to aim my sights at a more niche and less stratified establishment. EAI (Electronic Arts Intermix) has a full-time staff of eight and they also proved difficult to get ahold of. In fact, one of the only reasons I was able to procure an appointment was because I heard they would be tabling at the New York Book Fair at PS1 so I hunted them down in person. I was interested in viewing a panel discussion that EAI organized at DIA:Beacon but they needed a month's notice in order to procure a copy (and permission) from DIA. I booked a slot in the viewing room anyways, figuring that I could browse the collection myself and find something of interest and perhaps even some Portapak works, migrated or not. I was greeted at the door and seconds later I found myself in the viewing room, left completely to my own devices. While I was easily able to freely browse the collection and view access copies, I was surprised to find that the

process was entirely digital. EAI has digitized and uploaded most of their owned and distributed material and are also developing a more advanced MARC-based browsing site where users can search by media type, sound, runtime, etc. Thus I could simply search "Portapak" and the result would be a full page of video works to browse. Though, upon speaking with Desiree Leary, the Collections Manager at EAI, I learned that they are still working on the metadata scheme for advanced searches so there are likely to be many more works from the collection on Portapak than what turned up in the initial search results.

The viewing room consisted of a large desktop MAC and a viewing monitor. There were also U-Matic and VHS decks in the room but these are only offered under specific circumstances. The user can simply browse the online catalogue, select a video and drag it over to the monitor which functions as a basic mirror page. Thus the process of viewing is no different than that of viewing the work on your personal computer - but with a few exceptions. First, of course, is the ability to view with higher resolution and in facilities that are set up for a full "cinematic" viewing experience. Second, a vast majority of the EAI collections are not available to view through unlicensed computers. But, most importantly, is that any material that can be viewed on your home computer comes with a watermark in the corner such that pirated material would be easily identifiable and visually distracting. Videos are viewed as quicktime files so I was able to easily jump between 7 to 8 videos of interest. Afterwards I asked if I could have a brief tour of the facilities and collections. Desiree brought me through the digital preservation room and also the video collections. I learned that all open-reel material is preserved by a separate vendor, the Standby Project at Mercer Media, and that they have camera

originals, masters, and submasters in both analog and digital format. They continue to migrate works from the collection on analog and digital (as a non-profits whose mission is endeared to video) though Desiree admitted that this presents some major funding challenges.

As a comparison I decided to explore the Whitney Museum's online catalogue, a MARC-based program called WhitneyCat. The Whitney uses a similar process of on-site research/viewing as EAI in that appointments are requested over e-mail and do not require one to fill out an application form. As I learned previous to my visit at EAI, though, quite a bit of advanced notice is required in order to procure a slot. The online catalogue is very extensive and by all definitions is easy to use for basic searches. However, if one wanted to merely browse what videos belong in the collection (i.e. browse by media type) you would need to know to search "[videorecording]" rather than "video." It was only through searching for for a video artist whose collections holdings would certainly be in video form that I discovered that one must bracket the keyword in order to turn up searches on video. Perhaps this is a standard in all catalogue browsing, but there was no explanation of this in the "Help" section of the WhitneyCat page. Another nebulous aspect of the browsing, and ultimately requesting of materials, is that it's unclear what items are accessible to the public and which ones are merely in the collection. A videotape of a dialogue between Hollis Frampton and David Ross at Anthology in 1975 is marked as "on shelf" in the Special Collections Media area and has a given call number. A work by Dan Graham originally produced on videotape is listed as currently located in the archive with no available call number.

Another issue with the Whitney site is that even once you have found an available title it is unclear how you go about viewing it. Many documents are available for temporary download and the process to go about accessing a video "document" appears to be no different than viewing a digitized journal essay. When you choose the file format or to have it e-mailed to you, the page times out. Either this is not the intended avenue for accessing moving image documents or it is dysfunctional. While some records do show up as "16mm transferred to DVD" there is little known about what version of the original is available or if any material is available at all. Clearly a phone call or a site visit would clear this issue up a bit, but of course it could be a month or more before you are actually able to view the work.

Time-based media collections clearly find themselves in a bit of a lurch. They must simultaneously champion work that is decidedly unique and fixed within a specific historical and technological context. Playback of these materials is becoming increasingly impossible and the material's continued relevance into the future requires dissemination and migration. The double-edged sword is that few institutions focus so specifically on this cause, thus there are fewer resources to extend towards the public. I completely empathize with the limitations in staffing and funding that these institutions face, thus I can only be understanding of the difficulty in procuring appointments and receiving research assistance. One can only hope that this quandary does not effect the number of people who decide to pursue video as a field of study, or to find out about video art in the first place. It is obvious that institutions such as Electronic Arts Intermix and the Whitney have a lot challenges ahead of them but their efforts are nonetheless worth applauding and deserve continued encouragement.