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The New Museum dedicates its Fifth Floor gallery space to "XFR STN" (Transfer Station), an open-door artist-centered media archiving project.

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# XFR STN

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## "XFR STN": THE NEW MUSEUM'S STONE TAPE

### INTRODUCTION

Magnetic tape is compact, responsive—all the sales chatter says it is. Also: delicate, and prone to lose its memory." In the plot of Nigel Kneale's seminal 1972 BBC TV special, *The Stone Tape*, this visionary declaration spurs the teleplay's research into new methods of video preservation. Given that "tape's finished...its day is done," protagonist Peter Brock and his coterie of Ryan Electronics technicians embark on developing a groundbreaking new media format—one that will defeat the Japanese electronics industry, replace the need for magnetic tape, and make all of them filthy rich. To house their mass of requisite machinery (oscilloscopes, microphones, data recorders, and computing esoterica), Brock's team relocates to a sprawling countryside castle. However, once there, the engineers soon encounter eerie apparitions of the building's deceased former inhabitants. Appropriately enough for the classic era of British science fiction television, Brock decides to use his team's instruments and "go after it with electronics," quickly discovering that the ghosts aren't ghosts, per se. Rather, the aged Gothic edifice itself is revealed as a powerful and enduring new recording medium capable of preserving moving images—a "stone tape": free from delicate physical supports prone to decomposition, replaying video inside the minds of humans.

When I first heard the rough conceptual parameters of the New Museum's "XFR STN" project, the premise of Kneale's imagined institutional memory bank immediately came to mind. The "XFR STN" undertaking proposed installing elaborate electronics workstations, seeking a unique context to preserving information held on magnetic media, and trying to make it last for millennia. Trained technician graduates from New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program would operate thousands of dollars' worth of old video and digital equipment (reconditioned with the generous technical support of DuArt Film and Video's restoration department), adhere to reformatting best practices, and store all resultant material through a partnership with the Internet Archive, where it would be made publicly accessible. In this, "XFR STN" seemed just as wonderfully ambitious, peculiar, and geeky as the objectives of Ryan Electronics.

In the last half-decade, several of New York's major art museums have recognized the imperative of Ryan Electronics's quest for a media preservation super-strategy. At the Guggenheim, Joanna Phillips's strong record of media collections and exhibition-driven conservation, and Peter Oleksik's immense achievement-in-progress of digitizing MoMA's mammoth video art canon, are two efforts that immediately come to mind. But as an institution without a comparable collection or retention policy, the New Museum's proposal to offer a publicly displayed free media transfer service, open to all, is radical in practice and distinct within contemporary modes of video and data preservation. In lieu of mere celebration, this essay attempts to articulate some of the stakes "XFR STN" addresses given videotape transfer's clandestine, expensive, and politically charged history.

### COPYING VIDEOTAPE IS ARCAINE

Lucas Hilderbrand's 2009 book, *Inherent Vice*, excavates the illicit nature of videotape copy-making and traces the practice of bootlegging, suggesting that the resulting signal degeneration of videotape copy-making reflects an "aesthetics of access."<sup>1</sup> While Hilderbrand posits that each videocassette transfer becomes a singular and fetishized text, the clandestine nature of videotape copy-making practices he points to is far more pertinent to this exhibition's contrarian approach. Secretive duplication extended beyond illegal bootlegging universes, echoing in dominions of commercial dubbing, industrial mastering, television production, and home off-air taping. While copy-making of tapes may have been ultimately aimed at their eventual exhibition, the act of transferring tape and making video copies can generally be understood as a historically private, concealed, and arcane activity.

The home entertainment market commoditized videotape for over two decades, principally through the VHS format. Yet, practically and technically how those billions of linear tape feet were magnetically encoded with moving images remained a complete mystery to most of the public. The technology for recording electricity signals that can represent moving images via videotape is complex. And, unlike film, videotape's black binder hides the logic of its information transmission. Consumers bought copies of their favorite movies, completely unaware of the existence of thousands of daisy-chained VCR rigs or high-speed anhyseretic contact dubbing Sony Sprinters at large commercial duplicators like Rank Video Service or Magnetech Corp. While the mystification of labor may have played a role in this functional ignorance, did anyone really care how the millions of VHS-dubbed minutes of *Forrest Gump* were created to fill Blockbuster's shelves?<sup>2</sup>

In the bygone era of amateur "taper" cultures, too, videotape copy-making was done behind closed doors—by home enthusiasts or enterprising copyright infringers. Off-air taped compilations of network soaps or wacky cable-access shows, in addition to bootlegs of contraband classics like *Cocksucker Blues* or *Superstar: the Karen Carpenter Story*, were created anonymously and circulated underground. Even the now-defunct "old" Kim's Video was rumored to homebrew their own copies of Monday/Wednesday/Friday Video Club titles, never broadcasting that fact to MWF honcho Alan W. Moore (who nonetheless could figure it out). For love or for gold, making homemade copies generally remained private—whether for the development of a personal home library, to avert copyright infringement lawsuits, or to simply save the price of a legitimate store-bought copy. At friendly neighborhood PAL-to-NTSC services, similarly, transfer is a backroom activity. At contemporary video preservation vendors, where videotape duplication is offered as a paid service, this mysterious occlusion exists in climate-controlled, secure, off-site facilities that house towering racks of electronic decks, cabling, and flashing lights. Even in the city's own archives, museums, and libraries that have the sufficient resources, video reformatting stations are situated deep within their fortresses and subbasements, often in nondescript and undisclosed locations.

The reversal of praxis that "XFR STN" provides is one of its most immediately striking aspects. While promising to give new and renewed visibility to hidden caches of material content, "XFR STN" importantly also draws back the veil of video transfer and video technology in a zoological fashion. This seems apt given what Canadian video artist Tom Sherman calls the video medium's inherent "communications potential."<sup>3</sup> As a project of the New Museum's Education Department, here, on the pedestal of the open gallery, the public is invited to learn as much about the transfer process as they are to witness it being undertaken and endure the real-time commitment it involves. This fact makes "XFR STN" a very decidedly different operation for copying videotapes.

### VIDEO TRANSFER IS EXPENSIVE

The obvious exceptions to this narrative of hidden video duplication are the scores of artist-run video production and distribution centers that emerged in the 1970s and '80s. Many of those enterprises are well documented through primary "how-to" documents and oral histories, which evidence that large scores of artists and amateur movie-making enthusiasts did indeed train, learn, and teach the nuances of video creation and duplication. In no small measure, the output of several of these New York-based groups—Colab, ETC Studios, and eventually MWF—forms the rationale and content focus of the "XFR STN" project. Detailed primary source accounts of their efforts, and those of others, can be found elsewhere in the pages of this publication. Yet, even for these factions, the process of taping, transferring, and copying the video they produced and distributed often carried with it large economic barriers-to-access for hardware equipment, blank tape stock, and expertise. In the early 1970s, as one example, an Ampex AVR-1 broadcast-grade two-inch Quad VTR cost over \$100,000—about the average price of three new houses at the time. As time progressed, newer, smaller formats partially reduced these costs, but not to the degree moving image-makers enjoy today. The fact that the New Museum will be using "XFR STN" as an opportunity to digitize materials from its own institutional videotape archive only reiterates this point.

While video technology's economic realities were mitigated by community media organizations across North America, large-scale duplication of videotape content remained a costly and time-consuming process attached to the price of newer and higher-grade tape stock and hardware. In the era of digital preservation these costs have rebounded, given the need for storage devices that require ongoing fixity verification, obsolescence monitoring, and data migration. Unlike physical videotape objects, you can't just place data on a shelf. Nowadays, in museums and collecting institutions, preservation transfer and maintenance costs for legacy videotape collections are pricey enterprise-scale activities, requisite for investment protection. The costs may be even dearer if an artist insists that an institution repurchase an older work in its new-fangled high-definition "restored" instantiation. Or, when an artist insists on antiquated cathode ray tube monitors to display their older digitized "tapes," thereby forcing the museum to keep a working inventory of monitors and parts.

By enabling artists-at-large to sign up for free transfers of their personal archives and work, "XFR STN" joins in the lineage of community media efforts and alleviates the financial burden of transferring materials. While the aggregate number of transfer hours the "XFR STN" project proposes to accommodate may be modest relative to the amount of material in need of migration, this effort should prove invaluable to those artists wishing to participate.

<sup>1</sup>Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>2</sup>"Audio and Video Tape: An Industry Status Report," *Tape/Disc Business*, 1 August 1995.

<sup>3</sup>Tom Sherman, "Transvideo," republished in *Explosion in the Movie Machine: Essays and Documents on Toronto Artists' Film and Video*, ed. Chris Gehman, (Toronto, ON: The Images Festival and the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto, 2013), 73–9.

## VIDEOTAPE IS CONTENTIOUS

Given the costs of these transfers, the limited means available to do so, and the sheer gargantuan mass of videotape created in the technology's half-century of formats, it is no slight understatement to say that videotape transfer can be a contentious act. Whose work gets shown, exhibited, rented, duplicated, sold, acquired, and ultimately preserved, when not everyone's can be? Whose doesn't?

Looking at the historical relationships between collecting institutions and video artists, this contentiousness gets intensified. Like, a lot. What is—and, crucially, what isn't—in institutional video art collections, proves, as Martha Gever put it, “the inadequacy of video history conceived as art history.”<sup>4</sup> If, as Winston Churchill is attributed as uttering, “the best way to make history is to write it,” then the best way to make video history may be to do transfers. This is no plug for elitist connoisseurship, but rather proof of how “XFR STN” stands to turn histories of curatorial exclusion on their head. Decades removed from its pubescence, eclipsed by digital technologies, video art's “History” cannot be accurately sketched without ensuring access to the breadth of works made on tape by all kinds of artists—not just those represented by the fanciest galleries or owned by the most prestigious institutions. Accepting established histories of artist-made tape and television from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s by replaying video art's Greatest Hits misses the evanescent chance to know a wealth of other important contemporaneous ancillary works. For those with any serious curiosity in moving image history, it runs the risk of turning into a bad classic rock radio station.

Given the reality that manufacturers have failed to indefinitely support videotape technologies beyond their commercial viability, format obsolescence ratchets up the high stakes of this contentiousness. The tape-is-dead clairvoyance of Ryan Electronics's fictive technicians is realistically echoed in the conclusion of the 1973 *Spaghetti City Video Manual*, where the collective Videofreex write, “The best piece of video equipment today may be practically obsolete next week.”<sup>5</sup> Today, this could not be truer. Untold hordes of video artworks are under threat of becoming locked into physically bulky obsolete formats, forever inaccessible, and destined for use as doorstops or computer monitor risers. (Consider the fate of your own VHS collection.) Yet, the utopian task of transferring “everything” is still in development. Parties within broadcast video and preservation fields have, for years, engaged in passionate discourse over how exactly to go about preservation. Even now, community debate persists over the adequacy of various target digital formats, codecs, wrappers, sampling rates, and metadata schemas, amid an absence of standardization. In this milieu, “XFR STN” enacts a provocative and proactive get-it-done approach, not dissimilar to the model of nonprofit community-based video preservation centers recommended in a 1997 Report of the Librarian of Congress on the state of video preservation.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of “XFR STN's” free access to newly digitized material also muddies the waters of the complicated art market of editioned moving image works. As media scholar Erika Balsom's research demonstrated at a recent Light Industry lecture, the videotape editioning model that matured in the 1990s did so by echoing a late-nineteenth-century art market rearguard impulse for “reconstructing rarity in a climate of proliferating copies.”<sup>7</sup> While “XFR STN's” free digitization could be seen as reifying the manufactured value of editioned canonical videos and their “certificates of authenticity,” conversely these transfers also publicly de-commodify video work—through free access to digitized material and in circumventing the expensive process of long-term preservation. This can place artists in a strange interstice between the lucrative desire to be collected, albeit with the potential corollary of limited public access to their work, and the innate desire to have their work seen by as many audiences as possible, even if less money enters into the pockets of creators. Here, “XFR STN” complicates marketplace notions of scarcity and value, but moreover the barrel-aged contentious debate over access (making sure that works can be seen) and preservation (making sure that works are ensured longevity, before granting access to them).

Tied to the marketplace, the artificial scarcity of moving image editions is understandable, but from a preservation perspective, the logic can be dystopian. (Save for the wonderful promise, perhaps, of employment for those working as media conservators.) Specifically, this is the case with the common practice of editioning DVDs—the format heir to videotape—whose longevity has been scientifically demonstrated as fractionally that of videotape's.<sup>8</sup> The reality of increasingly shorter media format life spans across the history of moving image carriers (from film, to videotape, to digital and web-based platforms) makes the high value placed on content held on fragile, short-term, and near-dead media formats a paradox.

This last point reiterates the most undoubtedly important component of “XFR STN”: migrating born-digital artists' works trapped on obsolete computer software and hardware. A chronological quandary, these are the most precarious media formats requiring the most immediate care and attention. And as a recognized leading entity in the field of digital and internet art, the New Museum affiliate Rhizome's crack squadron of digital preservation experts come to the exhibition's forefront with an ambitious plan to accommodate migration and emulation of already antiquated materials held on floppy, Jaz, and zip disks, and a host of other computing formats.

## LIFE AND DEATH AND THE DIGITAL SÉANCE

To conclude, I want to return to the morbid hauntological paradigm that Kneale's *The Stone Tape* addresses regarding media formats. Comparing the format obsolescence of all sorts of media to death is hardly a new perspective. The fact that videotape's binder, onto which signal information is magnetically encoded, is made up largely of ferric oxide (aka rust) even technologically invites this viewpoint. And, the fragility of digital supports as replacements for physical tape and film has led many to suggest that much of what is created today—on the internet and with new digital technology—will ultimately become lost, imposing a “digital dark age” for historians studying our current age.

Having grown up in a funeral home, I often think that I unintentionally followed in my father's footsteps by becoming something of a funeral director for media. Indeed, analogies of death are ripe in this exhibition: arranging appointments with artists to send their material to a final resting place, releasing that material's spirit/signal from its physical bonds, etc. (Videotapes even come with their own coffin-like cases!) But, if critics and artists in the 1970s and '80s pointed to analog video's most distinct ontology as being its immediacy, its capability for real-time transmission, and its “live-ness,” then perhaps the best way to understand “XFR STN” is as a life-giving act.<sup>9</sup> “XFR STN's” accessible engagement with now-antiquated technologies through gallery-centric transfer and preservation, via a host of public symposia and panel discussions, and by the porting of artworks to the internet, ultimately stands to ask: How did these works once live, and how can they live on?

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Walter Forsberg

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<sup>4</sup>Martha Gever, “Pressure Points: Video in the Public Sphere,” in *Art Journal* 45.3 (1985), 238–43.

<sup>5</sup>Videofreex, *The Spaghetti City Video Manual* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 113.

<sup>6</sup>Murphy, William Thomas, *Television and video preservation 1997: A report on the current state of American television and video preservation: report of the Librarian of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1997), n.p.

<sup>7</sup>Erika Balsom, “Original Copies: The Limited Edition in Film and Video,” lecture delivered at Light Industry, Greenpoint, NY, April 23, 2013.

<sup>8</sup>Jennifer A. Wade and Michele Youket, “Characterizing Optical Disc Longevity at the Library of Congress,” in *The Electronic Media Review* 1.1 (2012), 97–105.

<sup>9</sup>See: Bill Viola's tracing of video's pre-videotape roots and broadcast television in his essay, “The Porcupine and the Car”; Rosalind Krauss's critical investigation of the live video “loop” in her widely read essay, “Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism”; and Marita Sturken's discussion of video's role in creating cultural memory and that relationship with its inherent aesthetic connotation of the immediate, instead of the past, in her essay, “The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions.”