

The Fantasy Factory Videotape Archive

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Introduction

In a basement in EC1 there is a unique collection of cultural material on hard-to-play videotapes mainly shot by John "Hoppy" Hopkins in the 1970's with other collaborators, the most prominent and long lasting of whom was Sue Hall, co-founder of Fantasy Factory. If it is not retrieved soon it will be lost like old film used to be before its value was recognised.

Hoppy is already well known for his 1960's photographs and for being a cultural entrepreneur (*International Times*, *UFO Club*, *London Free School* etc). His recent successful 1-man shows in London and elsewhere have shown there is a continuing market for these works. As an artist, the video collection represents his work in the 70's as a leading figure in the development of video as a creative medium outside of mainstream TV. A well-attended retrospective of Hoppy and Sue's video work was held at the Lux before it closed, timed to coincide with Hoppy's photo show at the *Photographers Gallery*.

In 1969 the video portapak arrived in Europe. For the next 10 years Hoppy and Sue used video, mostly black and white, in a variety of situations including street level, art and broadcast TV. By 1979 we finally got the long-sought funding to start the first art/independent U-matic edit suite with a tiered rate structure and cheap access - Fantasy Factory enabled hundreds of producers to access professional video editing for their productions. Our own production activity then largely stopped.

Fantasy Factory's archive comprises an estimated **145 hours of recordings over the period 1969-79 on several different half inch videotape formats** (plus the odd 16mm sep mag, 2inch and Umatic videotapes), breaking down into about 30 programmes and 240 "unedited" reels.

A list of programmes from the period is **attached** (*Appendix 2*) and illustrates the breadth of content, from *Videospace* made in colour studios at the BBC; via the portable videos of street life, squatting, local history, music & alternative festivals, to the technically innovatory early digital phoneline-TV of *Slow Scan is a Slow Scam*, which predated the Internet by at least 10 years.

Clearly this material should be preserved, not only for future viewers but also because it is part of a unique cultural heritage, similar to but distinct from that of the *London Filmmakers Coop*.

Preservation in this case means first getting the tapes to play (many of the tapes require heat treatment); playing out in a transfer suite where video, audio and sync signals can be closely monitored and tweaked in real time for the best results, and re-recording on to a current format such as Digi Beta. Only then can copy masters be made to other digital formats and storage media e.g. MPEG files, allowing further (re)editing and packaging for future use.

Technical considerations, which are the key to unlocking the potential of the material, are dealt with more fully in *Appendix 1*.

Apart from the need to contextualise, the technical parameters of **Picture/Video, Sound/Audio, Control & Sync. Pulses** all need to be technically **manipulated by an experienced technician during the transfer**, who needs to be able to make sensitive judgements on the actual picture and sound as well as read a waveform monitor and get signal levels correct, to make an optimally viewable copy master on e.g. Digibeta format.

Without this real time "riding" of the video and audio controls at certain points in the copying process, the quality and therefore accessibility of the masters produced is likely to be degraded enough by modern standards so as on occasion to impede comprehension of the original message.

An understanding and management of these processes is required to avoid losing or destroying potentially interesting material during the transfers.

Time & timescales

A considerable amount of viewing and logging of technical events by the transfer staff prior to final transfer will be needed to optimise the transfer process on a per-tape or per- batch basis. This will take quite a bit of time in itself and will require some gash transfers e.g. to VHS first, as viewing and logging on open reel formats is completely impractical.

Where currently playable viewing copies don't exist, the process would go:-

- Heat treat old tape (where applicable)
- Play once. Can a copy be made easily? If Y, make gash VHS viewing copy with BITC
- If N, note possible problem e.g. unstable, hard to see, hard to hear, and put tape aside for later.
- Use viewing copies to log technical events (changes of lighting, sound, picture break up) to improve during transfer.
- With problem tapes, run noted problem sections carefully through transfer chain trying variations and see if transfer is possible or not. If only some sections of a tape can be transferred, a management decision should be taken in advance whether to do this or not.
- Make final transfer.

Therefore the set-up and transfer time for a ½" open reel tape may take 3 - 4 times its nominal running time. Also, FF and REW are very slow on old format VTRs and tapes snap easily. So, additional viewing and logging outside the transfer suite will clearly be needed to optimise transfer and this must be done either by the transfer technician, or by a person acting as the "director" who is also present in the suite.

We would like to be present/do ourselves any transfer of FF archive material.

At Fantasy Factory we have 145 hours of ½" tape on 4 different formats, mainly ½" EIAJ Hi-D. On the assumptions above, our tapes alone will use approximately 500 hours in a transfer suite if we transfer them all. Were we to work 14 hours/day, 5 days/week plus viewing, it would still take about 8 weeks to transfer our tapes alone.

Note on Funding

If a transfer suite meeting our technical criteria is put together, it will be suitable for other collections as well and it will probably need to be continuously in use/ available for 6 months. Where long loans are not possible, financiers should seriously consider purchase and resale of the modern equipment compared to cost of hire.

Any transfer suite which meets the above criteria will require considerable funding and all tapes made at the time of any cultural interest at all should therefore be transferred. We hope to collaborate, share resources where possible etc with Ben Cook of The Lux and anyone else working in this area. Funding should be made available to publicise the transfer opportunity including advertising in the trade press and direct mailings to people known to us.

Content and social context: Between the Hippies and the Punks

Many of our own tapes from the 1970's are a unique representation of life in the north London squatting community, and what went down on the streets around us. It was socially innovatory, experimenting with lifestyle, housing, social protest in a traditional North London working class neighborhood, and against the realities of local right wingers, the police, thieves and councillors.

The inevitable clashes and debates were often caught on videotape in the streets, council offices, as well as at more planned and structured meetings and seminars. In those early days the nature and consequences of video recording were not well understood - people were more unguarded and open in their behaviour while being recorded

After all, our "community" was the global village idea going live with moving pictures and sounds, documenting a lifestyle based on short term occupation of stolen unused state property (empty houses) and exploration of different types of communal lifestyles, which freed people up to try new ideas not driven by the profit motive.

Some people tried art, music, some smoked dope all day and dreamed, and some took on Camden Council with a bit of alternative social engineering of their own. Some developed their madness in groups - the Mental Patients Union started there.

Cultural Context: Where Art meets Technology

At the start of the *Arts Laboratory* movement, many groups of artists started working with new technologies. Hoppy was a founder artist member of the *Institute for Research in Art and Technology* which housed both his own group, TVX, and the London Filmmakers Co-op. Via TVX, they made guerilla interventions such as the 1970 breakup of the *David Frost Show*.

Via the *Centre for Advanced TV Studies (CATS)*, Hoppy and his confederates made significant contributions to the formal understanding of the potentialities of the new medium of video via the academic periodical *J.CATS*, *Video in Community Development* written for the Home Office, and many research papers.

Sue Hall first encountered video in the early 1970's as a radical planner using new techniques to arouse local interest, and later to document the street life of alternative communities, at the same time authoring many conference papers and magazine articles.

Our approach was entirely different from that of the established film world, and was based on communications and cybernetic theory: Shannon and Weaver, Stafford Beer, Ross Ashby, Stuart Hall, Tapio Varis, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Helmut Krauch and so on.

Starting from a different theoretical standpoint, it is not surprising that for some years these concepts were not accepted by the establishment as represented by the BFI and the Arts Council, let alone the left intellectuals of the *Independent Filmmakers Association* and the ACTT union. In fact it was not until the opening of Channel 4 in 1981 and the spread of domestic videos that their impact began to be felt, and not until the mid 80's that they were allowed to join the union.

Sue & Hoppy's involvement in the first decade of 'independent' video is documented in *Diverse Practices - a critical reader on British Video Art*, Arts Council, 1996, ISBN 1 86020 500 7. See *Appendix 3*.

Other Collections

In addition to our own material, there are other collections in the UK from the 1970's which together with ours represent the beginnings of a new video culture, and roughly parallel the first years of the London Filmmakers Coop - though with entirely different artistic and political agendas.

Via Ben Cock of The Lux we expect that a lot more work from the 1970's will be uncovered which is also worth preservation, including many of the early pieces in the (then) *London Video Arts* distribution archive.

There should therefore be enough material to consider setting up a video transfer operation for a few months to transfer all of the extant cultural material pre-1980. As this will be a 1-off operation it should be to a high quality, tested master format.

Alongside the videotapes, we have preserved sets of key magazines and journals servicing the new field of independent video, which carry the critical debates and discussions of the 1970's, leading up to the launch of Channel 4 in 1981.

Foreign collections

There are similar collections in US and Canada, and many W. European countries. Fantasy Factory also has a small selection of tapes on 525-line standard, plus a VTR for playback, from the US and Canada which were following a similar cultural development. These tapes, largely from East Coast independents and the National Film Board of Canada were very influential on the early UK videomakers.

APPENDIX 1 - Transfers: Technical & Logistics

Status of "unedited" tapes

The "unedited" reels often have a status different from the "rushes" of today's film and video practice. Many tapes were edited in the camera because post-production editing was not available until the latter half of the 1970's, and even then on 1/2" it was inaccurate and cumbersome. Many documentary tapes that were shot were used uncut in community development and social applications (known as "process"). However, from today's perspective, once they have been retrieved they will then be potential rushes for new programmes yet to be made, which will put this historic material in its context to make it more accessible for future viewers.

Half-inch tape formats (monochrome)

These formats are all incompatible i.e. to play a tape it must be on a VTR of the correct format. The majority of tapes extant are on EIAJ Hi density format.

Format	Era	Lines	Notes
CV2000	69-70	405	Will also need standard converter 405-625 line
CV2100	70-73	625	VTRs had no capstan servo. Ideally adding a servo to an existing VTR of this format would make a project for engineering trainees. Ask Skillset and manufacturers for help?
EIAJ low density	73-75	625	JVC manufactured
EIAJ high density AV 3670	73-on	625	The Sony Rover standard. Tape needs heat treatment before it can be played at all, and then can only be used a few times. Heat treatment usually cant be repeated. [Panasonic made a colour capable version of this format which can also be used to playback low density tapes - see above]

Old format VTRs should ideally be available in pairs in the transfer suite, because:

- 1 - Sometimes a tape that wont play on one VTR will play on another of the same format.
- 2 - In the event a VTR breaks down or is damaged - very likely - without a back-up the whole operation stops.

We have one CV2000 and one AV3670 VTR which we would make available to a project, subject to insurance and our other criteria being met, see below.

Proposed project stages

- 1 - Advice Stage. Get the best expert advice possible re: problems identified and expect that more will show up as project progresses.
- 2 - Research Stage. Test and try out every piece of equipment proposed with actual tapes, as many formats as possible, before deciding on its use. Record the results for evaluation. Include heat treatment. Find solutions for difficulties identified if possible. See *Technical Research* below.
- 3 - Pilot Stage. Plan and implement transfer suite, including competent technician or engineer to run and oversee it. Make sure it all works OK in situ with actual tapes before suite is commissioned & bulk of work is attempted.

4 - Bulk Stage. Run suite intensely as a production line.

Technical Research

To increase the likelihood of a successful transfer on the majority of tapes, at least the following should be checked and treated prior to any transfer suite being commissioned and for any sizeable amount of transfer to occur.

Video (see Video diagram)

All early half inch recordings were black and white. The blacks were not "clamped" and rose up and down as the lighting altered, often during a shot or take (the size and shape of the sync pulses also varied similarly). The brightest parts of the picture, "whites", would sometimes be technically illegally large, upsetting other equipment in the image chain (monitors, TVs etc) unless "clipped" first (procamp, TBC). Or there would be low light levels and very little luma; to see what was going on **it needs to be lifted a lot more than modern image processing equipment is designed to do.**

A good wide range procamp, or built in perhaps as part of a couple of TBCs in series, should be part of any current transfer suite. A switchable video delay line – often overlooked in transfer – is needed to keep differently delayed signals in sync. A large well-set-up, with Pluge etc, Grade 1 monitor should be on the end of the transfer chain.

As different equipment with similar specs. performs very differently in practice, a series of tests using short hires or borrows of different image processing equipment in the transfer line is essential in our view before specifying equipment required for the suite.

Audio (see Audio diagram)

Similarly all old format tapes suffer from hiss and often cheap mikes and poor technique didnt help – a range of equalisation (see below) and a high quality mixer e.g. Alice, Yamaha with several bands of EQ on board and driveable pre-programmable faders with memory are essential. High quality stand-alone graphic and parametric equalisers together with sweepable notch filters and a switchable delay line must be in the audio line. Then when levels suddenly alter in mid take, or a different mic is plugged in mid shot, the technician can correct for this in near-real time. A switchable audio delay line should be included.

Control & Sync Pulses

The technical parameters which enable the tape to play through a modern image chain – or even to play back at all – left a lot to be desired at the time of origination, and have deteriorated further during the last 20-30 years.

The optimum device to correct for this might be a wide window TBC or standards converter with soft lock/floating window characteristics. Failing this, a well lined up Sony BVT500 TBC in series with a modern wide window TBC with digital component outputs for feeding into the DigiBeta should be tested at the research stage.

After the above tests have been run on a short series of typical material, it will be apparent which equipment is best for the purpose and how successful overall the transfer is likely to be.

Present day key transfer considerations

An experienced technician will need to be hired to manage, line up and run the transfer suite to get the best out of it. To make unique historic material available to modern populations on modern media **it is not sufficient to just make playable copies on modern formats.**