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# Italian video art centers and archives: a treasure yet to discover.

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## Italian video art centers and archives: a treasure yet to discover

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### Abstract

Italy was a vibrant centre of Video Art production and exhibition throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This period was all the more remarkable because of the early and seminal experimentation in the medium and the international reach of the work produced. Artists connected to the Italian video centres include well known names such as: M. Abramovic, V. Acconci, J. Baldessari, A. Boetti, C. Boltanski, D. Buren, G. De Dominicis, A. Kaprow, J. Kounellis, M. Merz, N. J. Paik, G. Paolini, F. Plessi, B. Viola and many more. This seminal experimentation laid the foundation for Video Art practice, it was only a few years ago that the history and the social, cultural, political and economic circumstances that characterized its rise and its fall into critical oblivion, have been brought to light. REWIND*Italia*, the AHRC funded project I am part of as a Research Assistant, started from these premises. Because currently there is no Italian public and central archive for videotape only a relatively small part of the tapes have been retrieved and are available to the public. In this paper the present situation of some of the most important historical Italian video archives, centres and artists' studios, (such as ASAC in Venice, which contains art/tapes/22's videotapes, DOCVA in Milan, and Centro Video Arte in Ferrara, MuEL in Varese) are examined, showing the uniqueness of their cases. As an overview it aims to show that the seminal early Italian video production is still to be discovered to stimulate interest from a research and curatorial point of view.

**Keywords:** Italian Video Art, Early Video Art, Archiving

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Italy was a vibrant centre of Video Art experimentation and exhibition.

Private initiatives such as art/tapes/22, Videoteca Giaccari in Varese, Cavallino Gallery in Venice, as well as public institutions such as Centro Video Arte in Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara and the Venice Biennale, attracted some of the most interesting and renowned European and American artists of the time, giving them the chance to conduct early and seminal experimentation in the medium. Among them were: Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Alighiero Boetti, Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, Gino De Dominicis, Douglas Davis, Allan Kaprow, Jannis Kounellis, Sanja Ivekovic, Ketty La Rocca, Mario Merz, Nam June Paik, Giulio Paolini, Bill Viola and many more.

Furthermore some Italian artists, such as Luca Maria Patella and Gianfranco Baruchello, began to use videotape independently and produced works in their studios as well.

Thus it was only a few years ago that its history and the social, cultural, political and economic circumstances, which characterized its rise and its fall into critical oblivion, were finally brought to light.

Starting from this assumption, REWIND*Italia*, a project funded by AHRC, and led by Prof. Stephen Partridge (Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, Scotland) aims to bring the story of Italian Video Art to international attention.

In the last couple of years as a research fellow of REWIND*Italia*, I have been exploring the 70s and 80s videotape archives and centres in Italy. In this paper I will offer a survey of their

current state, addressing some of the main issues that emerged during my researches.

As mentioned above, very little is known about the Italian 70s and 80s video scene. The early experimentation of videotape by Italian artists remains unknown outside Italy (and sometimes in Italy too) and very few Italian pieces are in the archives or collections of other European countries or American ones. Just a few American and British artists' videotapes, made in Italy, are well-known but, their origin, the context and the story of their production are marginalized. A very interesting example of this mis-contextualization is Vito Acconci's *Theme Song*, a celebrated videotape from 1973, which constitutes a significant early experiment about the relationship between camera, artist and public. *Theme Song* is very well known by scholars, curators and practitioners but only few of them know that it was produced at art/tapes/22's studios in Florence. This is partially due to the fact that besides a small number of books<sup>1</sup> and some early and more recent exhibition catalogues<sup>2</sup>, there are only a very few resources available in English to access documentation related to this interesting and pioneering era of production. Furthermore, only some Italian artists and archives have worked to recover the pieces that were recorded on 70s and 80s formats (EIAJ ½-inch open reel tapes, and U-matic, for example). These require the original devices – the recording apparatus (that have become obsolete and rare), and the tapes themselves are unplayable as they have often succumbed to 'sticky shed syndrome' or by another sort of bacterial degradation (Lockhart, 2012, p. 189–190). Just a small part of the tapes have been retrieved (by migration to current video formats or digital files) and are now available in Italy to the public but many more are still to be discovered and recovered. Since 2007, when a group of re-mastered and digitalized works from the art/tapes/22 collection were presented at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale (Barbero, Vettese & Bertola, 2007), a new interest has developed towards art/tapes/22 and early Italian Video Art more in general, and Italian video works have been included in exhibitions and publications. Following that event, major exhibitions were organised including: "art/tapes/22's" at the University Art Museum – California State University, Long Beach<sup>3</sup> – curated by Alice Hutchinson (September 4 – October 19, 2008) (Hutchison, 2009) and *Video Medium Intermedium*, curated by Bice Curiger at Ca' Giustinian (November 27 – December 31, 2011) and organised by La Biennale, with a selection of videos from Biennale's archives mainly from art/tapes/22 productions. (Videotapes of Venetian artists from the Cavallino Gallery were only available on PC that allowed access to the Biennale video archive). But the history of Italian Video Art cannot be limited to the rediscovery of art/tapes/22.

Currently the major archives in Italy, which hold a collection of videotapes from the 70s and 80s are: ASAC – Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, which is the Venice Biennale Archive; MuEL, which preserves the Videoteca Giaccari; Centro Video Arte's archive in Ferrara; the Cavallino Gallery's archive in Venice and DOCVA in Milan.

The principal criteria that led to the following analysis are: the preservation of the original sup-

1 Such as *An electronic bridge: New York University – Centro Video Arte Ferrara* (2002).

2 Among the most relevant catalogues, available in English from the 70s, are *Americans in Florence, Europeans in Florence*, dedicated to an exhibition of art/tapes/22's works, curated by David Ross and Bicocchi, that opened simultaneously in many venues, showing the possibilities of this new dematerialized medium, its portability and its replicability ("Americans in Florence...", 1974); *Video 79*, the catalogue of an exhibition held in Rome and curated by Alessandro Silj, which included a wide selection of video works from Italy and abroad ("Video 79," 1979). More recent is the catalogue of an exhibition held in Long Beach dedicated to art/tapes/22 (Bicocchi, Bonito Oliva, Ross, & Viola, 2009). As for Centro Video Arte, many of their catalogues had English and French translations but were published in Italy and had limited distribution abroad. One of the most internationally known catalogues of Ferrara's Centro Video Arte is *Pour un art video*, the catalogue of an exhibition held at Centre Pompidou in May–June 1982.

3 The catalogue for this exhibition was based upon, and included translations of the original art/tapes/22 distribution catalogue.

port and digitalization of the tapes; and the presence of an archive and of documents, photos, ephemera, that document and contextualise the video works;

ASAC Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee holds a rich collection of videotapes that includes the video productions of the Biennale itself, and art/tapes/22's pieces. In 1979, "249 original tapes" were listed in ASAC and today there are almost 2000, considering all the copies in different formats ("Press Release Video Medium Intermedium", 2011).

Biennale's *Laboratorio Audiovisivi* (Audiovisuals Laboratory) was founded in 1968 by the architectural historian Wladimiro Dorigo (Venice, 1927–2006): it was a permanent feature of the Biennale, which had the duty to record on videotape the events, live performances, plays and exhibitions organized by it. In 1972 Gerry Schum was invited to present some "video objects" at the 36<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (room 32 of the Italia Pavillion, now the Main Pavillion) and to produce for the Laboratorio some video works with the artists invited to the exhibition (such as, for example, Ketty La Rocca) (Schum, 1972, p. 31–32; Durante, 2009, p. 219–220). Unfortunately those tapes have not yet been recovered.

Since 1976, ASAC has also preserved art/tapes/22's video works. Art/tapes/22 was founded in 1972 by the curator and gallerist Maria Gloria Bicocchi, daughter of the painter, musician and writer Primo Conti (1900–1988), in her apartment in Via Ricasoli 22 (the number included in the name of the subsequent production studio) in Florence, and it is one of the most internationally renowned Italian video productions from the 70s. That is principally due to its international calibre, to some seminal exhibitions which displayed its production<sup>4</sup>, and to the collaboration and exchange of artists with the Castelli Sonnabend gallery in New York.

Bicocchi produced several video artworks in collaboration with Italian, European and American artists, among whom are: Alighiero Boetti, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Maurizio Nannucci, Gino de Dominicis, Jannis Kounellis, Douglas Davis, Daniel Buren, Vito Acconci. Art/tapes/22 also produced some early works by Bill Viola, who worked at art/tapes/22 as an assistant in 1974–76. In 1976 due to financial distress, Maria Gloria Bicocchi tried to find some financial support from the city of Florence: unfortunately it never came.

Only Carlo Ripa di Meana, at the time President of the Venice Biennale, took an interest in the situation so art/tapes/22's works (produced and distributed) and archive (at the time believed to be in its entirety<sup>5</sup>) were passed to the ASAC (Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee – the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts) (Bicocchi, 2009, p. 84–85). As part of the contract, Bicocchi was hired to work as the curator of the video collection but soon left that position and went back to Florence. For a long period after that, art/tapes/22's videotapes were not available and were showed only on rare occasions<sup>6</sup>.

In 2005 the Venice Biennale commissioned the preservation of art/tapes/22's works in their original support to CREA (Centro Ricerche e Elaborazioni Audiovisive) and La Camera Ottica of University of Udine (Bordina & Venturini, 2007, p. 194–213).

As a consequence of that, for the first time after a long period of oblivion, art/tapes/22's seminal experiments in Florence began to be studied and reassessed, in particular in Italy.

Since 2007, as mentioned, the Biennale has displayed the art/tapes/22 video works on many occasions (at exhibitions, conferences and screenings), and has undertaken the recovery of the rest of the art/tapes/22 collection. Books, catalogues and essays have also been dedicated to

<sup>4</sup> See note 2.

<sup>5</sup> As recent research by Dr. Eleonora Charans shows, part of Bicocchi's Archive was sold to Egidio Marzona, the German collector of Italian origins, and now is preserved in his collection, which today is divided between the Hamburger Bahnhof and the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin (Charans forthcoming 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Most relevant events include screening curated by Valentina Valentini at Taormina Festival in 1988 (Valentini 1988).

art/tapes/22. In the future we hope that the rest of the videotapes from their collection will be recovered and reassessed properly through exhibitions and critical surveys.

Nowadays the works produced and distributed by art/tapes/22 and the related archival documents<sup>7</sup> and catalogues are available at the new ASAC VEGA venue and catalogued online on the ASAC DATI system<sup>8</sup>. It is important to remember that among the works distributed by art/tapes/22 there are seminal pieces such as *Art must be beautiful* by Marina Abramović and part of the Castelli-Sonnabend production.

Another Italian video Archive that has been under the spotlight in the last few years is Giaccari's Muel (Museo Elettronico), which celebrated 40 years of activity as a Videolibrary in 2013. In 1967 the painter Luciano Giaccari from Varese, with his wife Maud, founded Studio 970/2 with the aim of organizing artistic events. During the late Sixties, Giaccari recorded those organized events on videotape, and made that recording a fundamental part of installations and performances (such as *24 Ore di No-Stop Theatre* in 1968). Later, in 1971, he began his production of artists' videotapes and founded the *Videoteca Giaccari* (Giaccari's Videolibrary), to preserve his productions.

During the following decades, Giaccari continued to produce and make artists' videos by himself and other artists, and to record art performances as well as theatre and dance pieces, travelling throughout Italy. He produced works by and with Allan Kaprow, Dennis Oppenheim, Giuseppe Chiari, Luciano Fabro, Urs Luthi, Hidetoshi Nagasawa, Vettor Pisani, Antonio Dias, Mario Merz, Richard Serra, Braco Dimitrievich, Helmut Shober among others (Giaccari, 1987).

Later Giaccari founded the MuEl (Electronic Museum) based on his archive (Giaccari, 1990). MuEl opened to the public first in 1995 and changed several venues during two decades (Castello di Masnago, Villa Toeplitz), due to the availability of public spaces. It was shut down in 2005.

Unfortunately, after the closure and changing of use of its previous venues in Varese, the collection no longer has a venue and the videotapes and the related documents are not continually accessible to the public. Giaccari has recovered part of his vast archive and his tapes are shown in exhibitions, screenings and events<sup>9</sup>.

At the beginning of 2013, Giaccari had also managed to arrange a temporary venue for his collection at the Art Museum of Gallarate near Milan, but a fire destroyed the museum before the collection was displayed.

Another important video archive in Venice is the Cavallino Gallery's archive that holds a remarkable collection of videotapes produced by Paolo Cardazzo (at the time the owner of the gallery with his sister Gabriella) in the 70s and early 80s (Marangon, 2004). Cavallino began producing artists' videotapes in 1974, giving the chance to numerous Venetian artists to access and experiment for the first time with the new medium.

Paolo Cardazzo, who recently died, dedicated the last decade of his life to recovering and digitizing these videotapes himself, as well as to promoting the videotapes with the publication of a catalogue in 2004. This exceptional private effort allowed him to save his legacy from oblivion. Today his archive (which includes documents, photos and ephemera) is run by his daughter

<sup>7</sup> art/tapes/22 documents were divided in the existing artists' folders.

<sup>8</sup> Data can be accessed from <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/>.

<sup>9</sup> The most recent and remarkable events include: *Addio anni 70: arte a Milano 1969–1980* (Milan, Palazzo Reale, May, 31 – Sept, 2 2012), curated by Francesco Bonami and Paola Nicolin (Bonami & Nicolin, 2012); screening at *Parole Spalancate*, 19<sup>th</sup> Genoa International Poetry Festival (June 19, 2014); *Anni 70. Arte a Roma* (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Dec, 17, 2013 – Mar, 2, 2014) curated by Daniela Lancioni (Lancioni, 2013).



Figure 1



Figure 2

Angelica and can be visited by appointment. The collection includes works by artists who lived in the Venetian area such as Claudio Ambrosini, Michele Sambin (Fig. 1)<sup>10</sup>, Luigi Viola, Guido Sartorelli, Pier Paolo Fassetta as well as works by artists from the former Yugoslavia such as Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Di Martinis and Živa Krauss. In fact the Cavallino Gallery had many relationships with centres and galleries in the former Yugoslavian area and participated in 1974 and 1976 with Motovun Video Encounters. A group of seminal videotapes were made regarding the theme of “identity” by Italian and Yugoslavian artists (“Identitet. Identità,” 1977).

Another major Italian video archive is that of Centro Video Arte of Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. The centre began its production in 1973, under the direction of curator and critic Lola Bonora, and involved Italian and International artists such as: Fabrizio Plessi, Federica Marangoni (Fig. 2), Guido Sartorelli, Claudio Cintoli, Christina Kubisch, Luca Maria Patella, Marina Abramović and Ulay, Angela Ricci Lucchi and many more. Beside artists’ tapes, seminal performances, conferences and events of a different nature were also recorded on videotape. Centro Video Arte’s video production activities ended in 1994.

Even if the content of Centro Video Arte’s archive have been catalogued and published (Magri 1995), the videotapes have not yet been digitized and the archive at the moment (which also includes documents and ephemera) is not open to the public. Projects regarding the digitization of Ferrara’s Centro Videoarte’s archive have been proposed on many occasions in the last few years but have not yet been accomplished.

Some videotapes produced by Centro Videoarte are still displayed in exhibitions and screenings because they were recovered in other contexts and promoted by the artists themselves. This is the case of Plessi and Marangoni<sup>11</sup>.

Last but not least there is DOCVA in Milan, hosted at the Careof Centre, an archive that holds a rich collection of Italian and International videotapes from the 70s and 80s and the following decades. The archive, curated by Marco Gorni, offers a selection of tapes from different productions and studios, and a library as well, which documents Italian experimentation in the

<sup>10</sup> Michele Sambin’s video artworks are also available online on his website: <http://www.michelesambin.com/> (Retrieved Feb 2014)

<sup>11</sup> Federica Marangoni’s video artworks are available online: <http://www.federicamarangoni.com/> (Retrieved Feb 2014).



Figure 3

Figure 4

medium.

A different story concerns the artists that didn’t join or collaborated only sporadically with any of the mentioned initiatives or art centres and produced videotapes independently. These videotapes are now preserved in the artists’ private archives or studios and only in a few cases have the tapes been recovered and digitized. In many case the tapes were lost when their support deteriorated or became obsolete.

In my experience as research fellow on REWIND*Italia* I had the chance to discover that the Italian media artist Luca Maria Patella had preserved the original open reels of his works in his private home and had never migrated them to digital. Patella’s video production was at the time believed to be lost by Italian scholars and by the artist himself.

But between 2011 and 2012 REWIND*Italia* recovered and digitized three seminal video performances by Patella (Figs. 3–4) and now after more than 30 years these are available again to the public (Leuzzi, 2013).

In conclusion to this analysis, we can state that due to the fact that there is no Italian public and central archive for videotape and there is no national programme for the recovery of artists’ videotapes, only a small number of artists’ tapes from the 70s and 80s have been retrieved and are now available to the public. Furthermore many artists hold in their private archives ephemera and materials about their video practice that could contribute to re-tracing the histories of Italian video but these are sometimes not catalogued and documented.

As a consequence many of these seminal and extraordinary art works, and the related documentation, are at risk of permanent loss. So our hope is that soon they will be recovered by a public or a private initiative and fully reassessed and studied in their context.

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