



[GO.com](#)

[GO Kids](#) | [GO Family](#) | [GO Money](#) | [GO Sports](#) | [GO Home](#)

[search](#)

☒ ABCNEWS

☐ WEB

[ABOUT GO NETWORK](#) | [SIGN IN](#) | [FREE E-MAIL](#)

Video Art Gets in the Groove



High-Tech Slumming With Low-Tech on Art House Scene

A man checks out the cover art for Cecile Babiolo's video album at Postmasters Gallery in New York. The exhibit, now at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., features a "new" technology that plays video off LPs. (VinylVideo)

By [Erica D. Rowell](#)



NEW YORK, Nov. 1— Gebhard Sengmüller's head was spinning. He wanted to create a work of art that could visualize the gap between the first television broadcasts, circa 1930, and the advent of video recorders in 1958.



Video

Postmasters

Gallery director Magdelana Sawon plays some VinylVideo clips.

[RealVideo](#)

(download [RealPlayer](#).)

Maybe the evolution could be televised.

His brainstorm spawned the revolutionary VinylVideo, "something that could have recorded television back then with the technology that had been available then," says

Sengmüller.

Picture a TV sitting next to a turntable. Then imagine placing the needle on a record, but rather than just hearing sounds, you see an image on the screen. Lift the needle, and the monitor goes blank. Place the needle anywhere on the record, and it picks up the video at that point. It was a wedding of art and technology.

Related Stories

[Commentary: Nuclear Art](#)

[Pop Artist Makes It Big in Death](#)

[Digital Arts Academy Formed](#)

[Maya Lin's Advanced 'Topologies'](#)

"We had people here digging under and trying to see if there was a little man or somebody trying to manipulate it. They couldn't believe that the image actually could come from the record."

Magdelana Sawon, Postmasters Gallery director

WEB LINKS

[VinylVideo](#)

[Postmasters Gallery](#)

Copyright
©2000 ABC
News
Internet
Ventures.
Click here
for [Terms of Use](#) and
[Privacy Policy](#) and
[Internet Safety Information](#)
applicable
to this site.

[The Lab](#)

[The Tang Museum](#)

Reinventing History

Once Sengmüller had the concept, the next step was bringing it to life. The main challenge was how to fit a large, complex video signal, which has a very high bandwidth, into such a narrow bandwidth medium. In plain English, this means that the artist and his technical collaborators Martin Diamant and Günter Erhart had to shrink the video so it could fit onto a record.

They started by sizing down the frame rate, turning standard 30 frames-per-second, American video into 8 fps. Then they switched from the more robust frequency modulation (fm) to the amplitude modulation (am). And finally, they translated pixels, the smallest units of a video image, into sound.

“It’s very similar to what a fax machine does,” said Sengmüller. Each pixel, a word that comes from the phrase “picture element,” is assigned a number from 0 to 256, according to its shade of gray. Each gray level is assigned a sound level. For black, the sound is low, and for white, the sound is high.

Once the image and its many parts are translated into sounds, they can be pressed onto a vinyl long-playing record like ordinary audio. The playback, though, is anything but ordinary. Yes, it’s blurry and low-tech, but the images are actually generated by a standard LP. All you need is a black and white TV set, a turntable, and Sengmüller’s specially designed electronic black box that converts the audio signals back to video. Dubbed the VinylVideo Home Kit, it’s certainly an eye-catcher, but you probably won’t find it in living rooms across the country any time soon.



This is the essential component of the VinylVideo Home Kit. Connected to your standard turntable and television set, it can translate Sengmüller’s records to play images as well as sound. (ABCNEWS.com)

“Through the decades and millenniums I have the feeling that art has always been interested in new, emerging technologies.”

Gebhard Sengmüller,
VinylVideo inventor

To compare it to a DVD or even a VHS wouldn’t be fair and would be entirely missing the point. Finding a “missing link in media history” was Sengmüller’s goal — not capturing and displaying high-resolution, crystal-clear images. After all, the system was invented in the pursuit of art.

“Through the decades and millenniums I have the feeling that art has always been interested in new,

emerging technologies,” said Sengmüller. “Like 12,000 years ago people found out that they could draw on cave walls, and 150 years ago people found out about photography.”

Strange But True?

Here, though, it’s a clash between the old world and the new, and for some this mix of high-tech and low-tech doesn’t quite gel with expectations.

During VinylVideo’s run at Postmasters Gallery, a cutting-edge art museum in New York, gallery director Magdelana Sawon says people were intrigued by the exhibit but doubted the technology’s authenticity. They thought it was a gimmick.

“We had people here digging under and trying to see if there was a little man or somebody trying to manipulate it,” says Sawon. “They couldn’t believe that the image actually could come from the record. ... Vinyl is for sound — that’s what you can and ought to get, and that’s what’s only possible.”

Preconceptions aside, Sengmüller does admit working a bit of artifice into his creation.

For its 1998 debut at San Francisco’s experimental gallery, the Lab, Sengmüller and his team were so consumed with getting the installation up and running for the show that there was no time to commission content for it, so he created his own. What he came up with is a hilarious faux advertisement for VinylVideo.

“We’re going to present to you a revolutionary new home entertainment system,” the infomercial boasts. “With VinylVideo, you can now enjoy your favorite films at home, on-demand, any time you like, in a convenient, easy-to-use format, and at only a fraction of the price of comparable home entertainment systems.” It goes on to include customer testimonials that marvel at how the product can “do so many different things.”

It’s a perfect fit for the medium — a could-be ad for a could-be product, offering a satirical look at consumerism.

“My part in the project is to build a whole marketing environment around it which is informational but has a lot of fake stuff in it, too,” says Sengmüller.

Retrofitting Images

Sometimes exhibitions even incorporate a sales pitch by featuring “an actor [who tries] to sell stuff to an audience” as part of a live stage show. Other times, the installation is built into a lounge or living-room

set, offering a hands-on approach where people can pick out records for themselves and then sit back and watch them. Experimenting with presentation is an essential part of the exhibit — both the setting and the records themselves.

The videos, produced specifically for VinylVideo, offer up the artists' own visions of the retrofitted medium, which they welcomed as an interesting challenge as opposed to a handicap.

The disc by American artist Kristin Lucas features her image rotating around the screen as if it had actually been pressed on top of the record. French artist and musician Cecile Babiole sets in motion a sort of animated humanoid strutting across the screen scored to a bare, jew's-harp-like melody. And Austrian artist Harry Hund, as if taking a page out of television history and reworking the script for the format, offers up the "Guinea Pig massacre" in the style of a Hollywood Western.

So far, 20 artists have produced 22 records for the project, including the VinylVideo creator himself. Sengmüller, whose latest work involves a series of photographs of bulk tape erasers, hopes to produce new records with new artists.

"Since audio CDs came into the market around 1980, it looked like vinyl audio records would disappear," says Sengmüller. "Then there was a big movement ... to print records again. So it fits into that scene."

With some 25 showings to date, the VinylVideo exhibit continues to make the rounds at art galleries and museums around the world. Currently, it is part of the inaugural *S.O.S.: Scenes of Sounds* exhibit at Skidmore College's Tang museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., which opened last week. □