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OUR NIXON

It has been said that history is written by the victors, but history is annotated by those who would venture into the archive. Director/Producer Penny Lane and Producer Brian Frye, two experimental filmmakers with a fondness for found footage, were paying attention when Super 8 film taken by Nixon's closest aides was made available after being held by the FBI for several years. What emerges from their labor of love is not only a fresh retelling of the Nixon narrative, but an ode to the archival.

Everyone over the age of 40 remembers Nixon's secret White House audiotapes, but the presidency was also being documented in other ways. Nixon's three closest aides, Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Dwight Chapin, all fresh-faced believers in the Nixon project, were filming presidential goings on with Super 8 film provided by the Naval Photographic Center,

a still-novel technology at the time. By the untimely end of Nixon's disgraced presidency, prints of the Super 8 film, shot by all three, as well as other media, were lumped together with Nixon's infamous audio recordings and other records that were confiscated by the FBI. The US government determined that the material was not Nixon's personal, private property but in fact belonged to the American people and it was then held up in court for 15-20 years while terms were negotiated for what Nixon should be paid as just compensation.

Eventually, the film prints made their way to the Nixon Library, a private institution, but were low on the list of priorities to be made public. People in the archival and experimental film community were aware of the Super 8 film, but it was generally assumed it was not of much interest. Bill Brand, film / video artist and



ALL IMAGES (unless noted) Penny Lane, *Our Nixon* (2013). Frame enlargements courtesy Brian Frye.

devoted film preservationist, made it his project to look at the films over a period of years and blow them up to 16mm. Through Brand, Frye discovered the Nixon home movies in 2000, but didn't have the means to transfer the films from film to video until 2008.

In lieu of once-open raw satellite feeds, like those used by Brian Springer in *Spin*, and happy accidents like Anthony Weiner's inadvertent crotch tweet, filmmakers need to dig deep for surprising material on public figures. Though he had really only seen about ten minutes of footage — one 400ft. 16mm reel — Frye made a leap of faith and paid \$18,000 to have transfers made of everything (second or third generation prints) at the Library. Frye and Lane spent two weeks at the artist retreat Yaddo, watching the footage to see if the makings of a film could be found in the material. Without sound, the Super 8 films lacked

context. The finding aids — the descriptions provided by the library that distinguish what is on each reel — were poor, missing basic information such as names of foreign leaders or even identification of people in the administration. Lane used flags to determine the country, cross referenced with Haldeman's audio diary to find out what the Nixon White House was doing in a given week.

Lane and Frye started making their film, working with editor Francisco Bello, and were about to send a rough cut to festivals when they received a call from Brian Pettigrew, the chief archivist at the Nixon Library. The Haldeman family had donated the original Super 8 film — a “game changer” said Frye. They returned to the Nixon Library and convinced them that video scans should immediately be made from the original, on site, and brought in Jeff Kreines with his custom



Scanning H.R. Haldeman's home movies with a Kinetta Archival Scanner at the Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California. Photograph courtesy Jeff Kreines, kinetta.com.

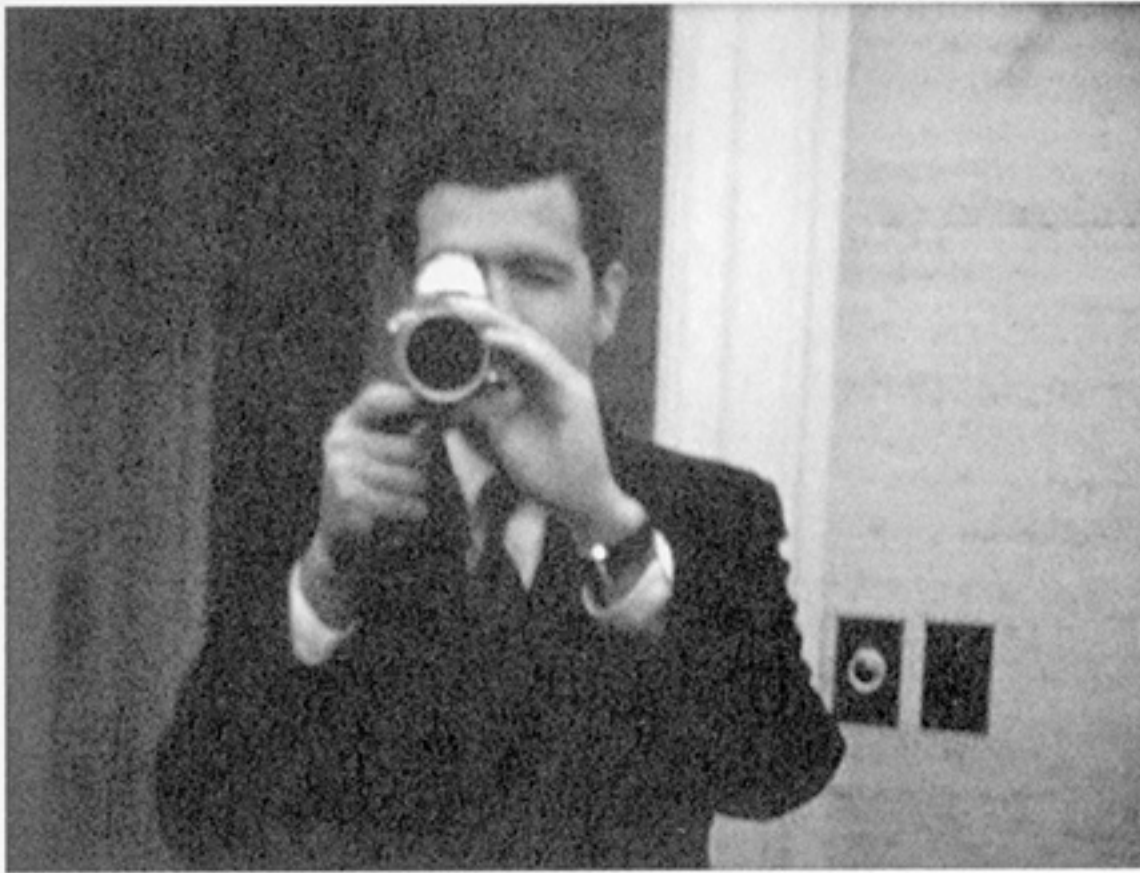
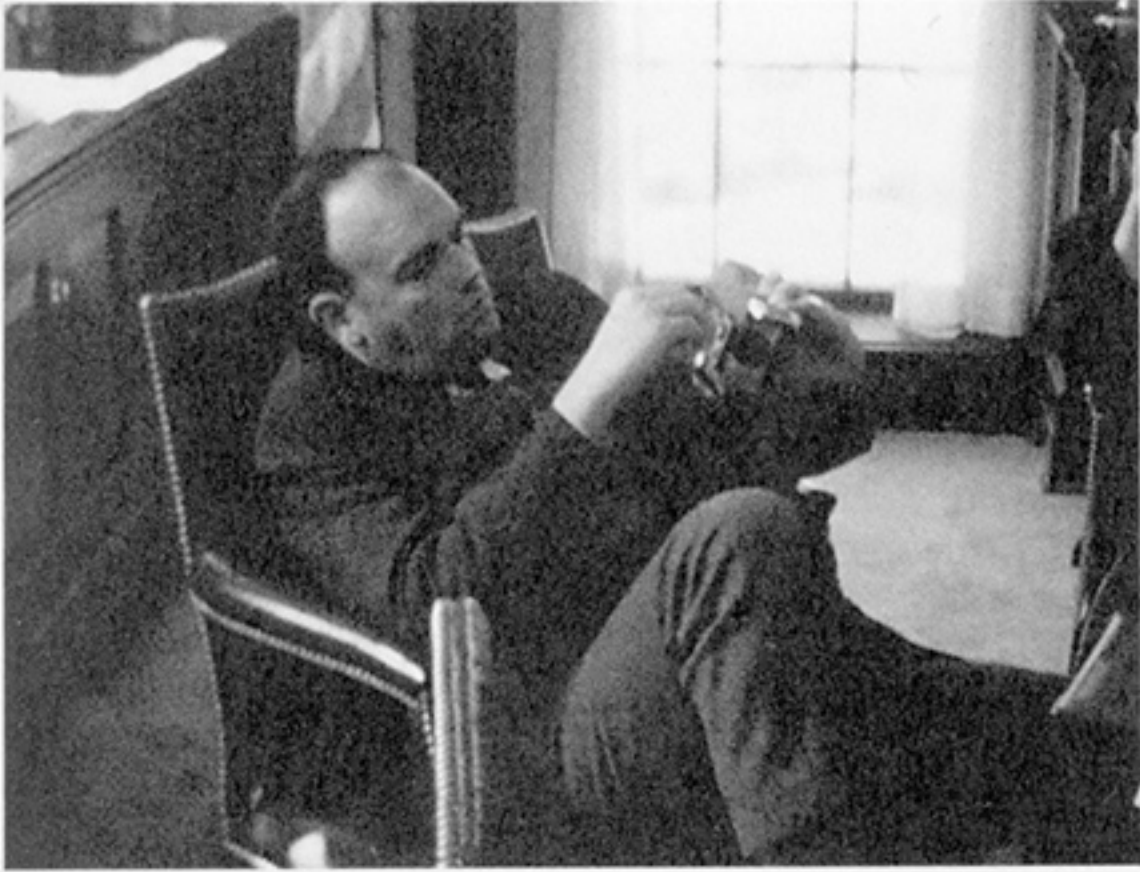
made, suitcase-sized film-to-video transfer apparatus called the Kinetta. The Kinetta scans each frame of film while illuminating it with a strobe, and the sprocket holes or framelines form alignment to produce a high quality digital video transfer. Enlarging the small frames of 8mm this way preserves the iconic grain and rich color, maintaining a kind of crispness that's more about materiality than legibility.

It has been said that art is an act that takes something and makes it strange. In this case, it was important for the filmmakers to aim for something other than strange, to make something accessible to a broad public, while maintaining the marks of an experimental film. An initial, more structural proposal for the film was scrapped in favor of what they saw in the material: a film that showed the Nixon presidency from the point of view of the three aides, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Chapin. *Our Nixon* is billed as an impressionistic collage film on its promotional website, but, negotiating between the different sensibilities of the two filmmakers — Penny leaning more toward narrative and Brian more comfortable with expressive fragments — and the urge to give the material context, the filmmakers managed to hang their playful and incisive political commentary on the scaffolding of plausible historical record.

Lane and Frye mix the home movie footage with archival interviews with the three aides (shown full screen), network news clips from ABC, NBC and CBS culled from the Vanderbilt Television Archive (shown as

a smaller 3:4 b/w image), audio recordings from Nixon's office and other sources which serve as signposts. The consistent format of the different archival sources and the film's event-based structure keep the viewer tethered to the historical narrative; juxtaposition with the grey news makes the cheerful color footage read as an idealized dreamtime.

Though easy to follow, this recipe for the material reveals a wry and playful sensibility on the part of the filmmakers that is as critical as it is hilarious. Familiar events like the Moon Landing and Nixon's second inauguration are gamely included, enhanced by new Super 8 film shots of happy staffers, balloons in the air. We see shots of the TV in front of Chapin on the plane broadcasting Nixon's departure for China as Chapin describes, (taken from a later interview), how surreal it is to be watching themselves on TV while on the plane as they depart for China. Fortuitous matching up of passages in Haldeman's audio diary with silent Super 8 film bring the footage to life: Ronald Zeigler takes a bite out of a tangerine, peel and all, while Red Army troops can be seen standing guard outside the hotel room window as Haldeman's voice notes these events. Clues to the internal logic of the administration are glimpsed as Haldeman reflects on the "rather odd" site of Nixon clapping for a Peking Opera performance, depicting the overthrow of a cruel landlord by female communist partisans, surmising that it "all seems to fit together somehow here" in China.





Super 8 film, primarily shot at family events, typically presents the affect of intimacy, but taken out of context can be generic. The Super 8 footage in *Our Nixon* is shot in professional contexts, generating a curious fissure that hints at the administration as a kind of surrogate family. This impression is encouraged by material like Chapin's painfully nostalgic recollection during an interview: "I've never laughed as much as when I worked in the Nixon White House" paired with images of a sweet looking young Chapin at his desk. There is a promise of intimacy — we see that Ehrlichman doesn't like to be filmed while eating on the plane, that even high level political figures are fascinated by a bidet in a hotel room and that filming the Pope can be irresistible when not allowed — but the camera's-eye view on its own is not especially revealing.

A somewhat guilty pleasure to those who would not count themselves as Nixon's constituency, *Our Nixon* doesn't please the few still loyal to the Nixon

project. Former Nixon speechwriter Ben Stein published an op-ed stating that *Our Nixon* is "violently untruthful." He complains that an audio recording of Nixon and Haldeman's post speech debriefing was placed in the film after the wrong speech and that the film shows nothing new. In fact, there are real surprises and insight that come from *Our Nixon's* re-mining and reframing of some of the infamous 3,700 hours of audio recording, including explicit examples of Nixon's conveniently fuzzy recollections of what he knew and didn't know about illegal activities. "He could persuade himself of almost anything," says Ehrlichman.

In one segment, footage that pans a Nixon Administration office is paired with an initial conversation about the installation of the audio recording equipment (Nixon sounding a little inept) and the scene is thick with ominous foreshadowing. Our knowledge of the fact that the tapes are Nixon's undoing, topped with our understanding that pervasive

surveillance will become commonplace and nearly unavoidable, reverberate in layers of nervous humor.

Through taped conversations we get a detailed account of how Nixon relied on Haldeman to filter news reports and to boost him up and in general, and of Haldeman's crack yes-man skills. Nixon compartmentalized, keeping one thing from this person, another from that person. Two of the three aides did not even know about the taping system. Phrases like Nixon's "Don't tell Henry" pepper the film with TV sitcom-like plot points.

We hear Nixon ideologically on point, but culturally out of touch as he tries to discuss with his aides the "movie" *All In the Family*, which, in his reading, promotes homosexuality. Homosexuality destroyed the Greeks (Aristotle, Socrates and the last six Roman Emperors were all gay, according to Nixon) and this immorality is bad for society. "That's why the Communists and the left-wingers are pushing it," he concludes. As we listen in on Nixon, through *Our Nixon*, we feel as if he is more familiar, more hilarious, more hapless.

Parsing the audio tapes brings to light gems like when Kissinger, who apparently did not know he was being recorded, offers a damning portrait of Daniel Ellsberg as an unbalanced, gun-toting zealot during his time in Vietnam, a portion of tape that Frye points out is merely 30 seconds before the famous "Bomb the Brookings Institute" bit. The most revealing audio is paired with the most innocuous film footage — a conversation about managing Vietnam protests plays out over a meandering shot following a squirrel outside the window of a White House office, detouring the specificity of nuance in Nixon's daily communications that he had intended to preserve for posterity.

The use of political home movies from this era prompts a comparison to Kennedy's home movies and the easy intimacy of Kennedy's public presentation in contrast to Nixon's prickly one. In McLuhan-style media analysis of the time, Kennedy's television presence was considered "cool" — enabling people to affectively participate, while Nixon's was "hot" — overly articulated and effectively alienating. Jonathan Kahana, in his book *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*, points to Nixon's "awkward, confrontational image" and the Nixon Administration's subsequent efforts to sow distrust in the TV image. Kennedy's candid and affable media presence masked his own, highly scripted presentation and he would even attempt to rerecord media interviews if he did not like them. In *Our Nixon*, the binary of McLuhan's "hot" and "cool" media gives way to something more

like how Friedrich Kittler understands film, television, audio recordings and transcripts ("optics, acoustics, and writing") as "storage devices" and distinct "data flows" that can be combined and recombined without losing their differentiation.

The "obscene visibility" of the Kennedy Assassination seen via the Zapruder film — spoofed, archly and irreverently in Ant Farm's reenactment of the assassination in their 1975 video *The Eternal Frame* — can be compared to an 'excruciating audability' of the inner machinations of the Nixon Administration made available through the White House tapes. This relentless audibility is softened and refocused in *Our Nixon*'s recombining of different streams of media. What becomes legible through this replaying of the Nixon archive is a psychological take on the interpersonal dynamics of Nixon's inner circle. Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Chapin are seen more as people than villains. This softening makes the blow to Nixon's personal friendships all the more tragic when the aides take the fall.

Though entertaining us at the expense of a conservative administration, *Our Nixon* doesn't have the rawness, urgency or political point of view as a film like *Four More Years* by TVTV (1972). A generation of distance leaves us more comfortable embracing the humanity of the players. The ludic sense-making apparent in this film could signify a younger generation's ease with the culture of remixing and an innate understanding that history is always histories, plural. The "is this public, or is this private?" question asked when the government decided that Nixon's archive belonged to the American public gains new implications at a time, when borrowing and remixing material is a cultural norm, social media plays out tidbits in myriad contexts and it is assumed that the NSA is recording everything anyway. Ironically, as Brian Frye points out, because this was a freely recorded presidency, under the guise that everything was private it manages to be the most transparent presidency. What followed was Reagan, "the teflon president." *Our Reagan*, anyone?

RACHEL STEVENS