

# The ideology of Tape

Jaime Davidovich y Txuspo Poyo

More than 30 years ago, in New York, the Argentinian artist Jaime Davidovich presented his adhesive tape projects, called "Tape", and more than 10 years have gone by since Txuspo Poyo put out his own work made with the same and similar materials. This conversation took place between September and December 2005 with the purpose of exploring the fascination this medium has exerted on both artists. During those months, Davidovich and Poyo interchanged a series of ideas about the expressive and conceptual qualities of adhesive tape and the seductive power it has held, in its different forms, for artists and designers.

1 .....

Dear Jaime:

We're back again and ready to get going with this conversation.

At first, it makes me feel a bit giddy, while at the same time I'm filled with a deep curiosity at the idea of lifting up the carpet to study these different approaches and the way they have become diffused with the present conceptual landscape, seeing which of them have survived and which of them went under... anyway, I don't want to jump the gun with any preference, just to be as objective as I can. Knowledge of the first pieces you made with adhesive tape, the Tape collection –and not just the material but its name– could give us an entire succinct catalogue of possibilities; that's to say, Tape as a music tape or as magnetic tape... Fascination for the technology of Tape, from the analogical aspect to the digital, from the collage cut to the editing. I'd love us to be able to travel back through time... to how it arose and to the way it was used in the first beginnings... And, later, to the applications it received in art and design.

The adhesive tape employed, whether by military personnel, the commercial sector or post-war artists... brings to mind the Red-Grid structures developed by Agnés Martín in the 1950s.

I've put forward some themes without specifying a direction to take, maybe we'll find the feel of it by just getting down to it.

Looking forward to news from you. All the best. Txuspo

2 .....

Hello Txuspo:

Sorry not to have replied before but I was dashing around preparing my participation in the Odd Lots show. It kicked off last Saturday and I've now got round to checking my emails again. I couldn't open the picture you sent with your email. There's a sort of code indicating that there's an image there. If you can, send it me as a JPEG.

As for Tape, if we go back in time, to about the mid-1960s, when I got to New York, I was surprised to see such a great number of tapes (Tapes). I was only familiar with tapes for recording sound and with Scotch Tape. In the US I discovered that everything is done with Tape. When they build a wall, instead of bricks they utilise a crushed plaster called Sheetrock and then, after eliminating the dividing line between one plate of Sheetrock and another, they use Tape. It's as if the walls were held up with this Tape. This is covered with another layer of Spackling plaster so that the surface ends up nice and smooth. I also observed that artists in the Op Art group used Tape to be able to paint a surface without a trace of paintbrush work being seen. I don't know if Mondrian used Tape or not but I do know that the Op artists used it. I was interested in the Spackling Tape because with it you could put objects on the wall and, afterwards, cover the surface with Tape and plaster so as to make it flat. Very often, when the wall's bad people say "the Tape's badly done". The craftspeople who use Tape are Tapers. In the 1960s, many artists were working against the ideas of a frame and getting rid of the object/subject, replacing it with work in which they both turned into a single entity. "Death to frames" was the watchword back then. I recall the huge pictures of Pollock, Newman and Rothko, amongst others, where the spectator became submerged in the piece. I also remember that, at that time, artists like Sol Lewit started to execute their work directly onto walls. I found that very interesting.

So these are some very disorganised ideas to get some dialogue going and work out what it is we want to "include in the fresco" or –as we say in the video field- what we can save on a Tape. To end this journey into the past, well, I made my first Tape work in 1967: I fixed a painting on the wall using some pretty strong Tape. It was Packing Tape. I remember that Agnés Martín, like the Pop artists, probably used Tapes so that her Grids would be more dilated. At the beginning of the 1960s, I also used Tapes for that reason, but what interests me is the power tape has to hold cloth up or, to put it another way, to make it stick to the wall. I await your reply so as to be able to begin the journey covered with Tapes.

Best wishes. Jaime

3 .....

Dear Jaime:

I see that the use of Tape did not really spring from art works, but that, while Op Art artists used it as a tool, you were using it as a “weapon of work”, as a poet might do with a word. Tape presents itself just as it is, acquiring a sense of matter and not of material. It strikes me as being closer to the theories of the situationists and to current activism in the US. It is interesting how context devises models. When I arrived in New York I was also somehow surprised by the different modes of construction; on the one hand, there were houses that reminded me of the tale of the Three Little Pigs: rapid, almost fantasy constructions, where brick was replaced by Sheetrock walls; on the other hand, the proportions of neighbourhoods such as Brooklyn or Queens contrasted with the buildings of Manhattan because of their verticality and the film references they stirred up...

My fascination with Tape started with the first celluloid pieces. The reels of film came like reels of Tape... it was the beginning of the idea of editing or cutting into fragments that had to be joined together. First of all, Tape served me as a structure that united the different pieces to create my own cine film: formally speaking, these fragments were vertical, in the manner of office buildings (the windows were similar to celluloid frames) whose only supporting element was the Tape that joined them from behind... the frame had disappeared. They were placed onto the walls using Push Pins. Tape and editing went hand in hand, their fragmentation and texture tell us of the plot. I recall a documentary by the filmmaker Eisenstein, where you saw him selecting, cutting and pasting pieces of film. Linked to the influence of this image were certain works from the 1960s that, although they were not particularly carried out with Tape, did maintain that fragmentation idea, where manual -physical- use wove the idea.

I wonder how what occurred in the 1960s stands up to re-examination, and not only in art but in fashion, film.... Maybe a desire to regain the vanguards... or the sadly vanished ideology whose place was taken by advertising and entertainment.

Take care. Txuspo

4 .....

Dear Txuspo:

I was a bit tied up with a show that just opened. As my contribution to it I had to do a guided visit and talk, as it happened, about the concept of supporting mediums. Here is an Excerpt from a note that appeared in Art Forum at the beginning of the 1960s: “While the merging of the canvas and the wall surface pleased him, the jarring note suggested by the pushpins, together with the need to cope with the sheer weight of the canvas, ultimately led Davidovich to the use of industrial tapes in various colors, materials, and sizes”. It all started here, back in 1967. What you say about using celluloid as frames of a continuous Tape sets the standard for the dematerialisation of the work. It is no longer cinema, it is Tape, but, at the same time, the Tape shows its little windows where the plot of the film unfolds. It is very interesting to remember that, after September 11, the Security Department recommended all EU residents to buy Duct tape. The Tape became an element that, when the moment arrived, could protect you in the case of a chemical or nuclear attack. The slogans were “cover the windows and doors with duct tape” and “duct tape can save lives”. The result, businesswise, was the year’s “haymaking” for companies that made Tape. Even in this area, advertising and consumerism provide the ingredients of gain and of fear in the Affair of the Tapes. One important feature in my projects is that the Tapes produced bubbles of air that emerged “at random” like in a John Cage piece. What is organised, covered, delineated, becomes, through the Tapes, something where the imperfections produce, in a certain way, art. In the same article I mentioned above this aspect is referred to. “The shallow cast shadows enhanced the illusion of spatial dimension”.

We’ll continue with the dialogue. I’m off to Los Angeles this Wednesday and I’ll be back to New York on October 10. All the best. Jaime

5 .....

Dear Jaime:

I’m just back from Berlin... I was there during the Fair, which you could take in because of its dimensions in a marvellous rationalist building... as for its content, it seemed very conventional despite the fact that there were big galleries. Video had given way to figurative painting. Your piece came across really well, as I imagine Petra would have told you, but as for sales things appeared to be very slack.

On one of many incursions to see the city’s exhibitions I went into a bookshop and found a book about an exhibition by artists who work with Tape... some of the projects were devoted more to design... The idea was interesting. Returning to what you said to me in your last mail...

You situated Tape bang in the middle of the war of the blocks, i.e. the Cold War... and the Vietnam War. I find the socio-political context of that period and the incorporation of the random in John Cage’s scores of great interest. I’d like you to tell me more about the period and about John Cage participating in your TV programme Live Show... also regarding the contributions you feel that Cage’s work offered for the Tapes on which you worked at the end of the 1960s.

Best regards. Txuspo

6 .....

Sorry not to have answered before. It looks like my computer was hungry. It's been wolfing all my emails. I hope it's going to behave now and that you can receive the information I send you. I received the email that had got lost. Thanks for your Berlin report. The art world is like a lift (it goes up and down). The true artist produces his/her work and uses the stairs. The lift is used by collectors and lazy critics.

What you say about the socio-political situation at the end of the 1960s is very interesting. Back then, just like now, the political panorama was full of Red Tape. Red Tape is a mysterious thing that prevents information from being used and is a way of keeping truth at bay. In the 1960s, Red Tape was outrageous. The other day I saw in a newspaper that a costume along those lines was being sold for Halloween. The disguise was called Red Tape and was a Government employee with his identity card and a hat bearing the initials CIA and ALL COVERED IN RED TAPE!

Looked like one of my pieces from 1968!!!!!! Red Tapes is used as well to cover things that are not so real or truthful. I was interested in covering for covering's sake. A way of covering up society. This is where John Cage's work comes in. Using the Random approach he covered sometimes without knowing what he was going to find. Covering and discovering. It looks like it makes no sense but it is true and it's not Red Tape. I got to know Cage through Richard Koztelanetz, a friend of his who wrote an anthology and a biography of Cage in the 1960s.

Cage came to the study dressed in denim trousers and denim bomber jacket. He was very fragile, really skinny and his energy levels were low. He spoke very slowly and the things he came out with sounded like a boy asking permission. He was very calm in the studio and talked of Duchamp, whom he admired. We did two television programmes. Afterwards we spoke together on the phone. He was quite content because I sent him cheques nearly every week. Every time the Tape ran he received a cheque. This was rather unusual in those days. Cage was already a myth, but economically things weren't going so well. I spoke to him a bit about my Tape projects and he said: "cover the middle, not the sides ". In other words, don't frame the piece: do it at Random. He talked about Mesostics: read the words in the middle of the line and not the ones at the beginning or the end. It's very interesting.

I hope to start up the dialogue again. It's being put into a space covered with Tapes to be discovered.

My warmest. Jaime

7.....

Dear Jaime:

I've just got back from Barcelona, where I spent most of my time at the Fair. I was able to see the pieces on show and meet up with various friends. I think the Fair was well up to scratch in terms of the work displayed and the way it was presented. Plus I've been told that a lot of important people, museum directors and so on, came to visit.

I'm feeling pretty wiped out, I think all the activity has left me feeling a bit feeble... but this publication has to be got moving, so I'm in your hands once again.

We were right in the middle of the process of change, where political activism created a certain feeling of instability in the Country, censorship from the government about their presence in Vietnam and the communist threat... the Paris 68 movements projected a dark side but at the same time a certain kind of hope filtered through in all this process... the most immediate was to question any information and take it out onto the street... covering, crossing out, concealing... this underground spirit comes across very palpably in your Tapes... red at first like a Warning... but what happens when other colours come into it?... in the "Blue, Red, Yellow" piece... you are covering the screen of a television that is on, a place for classified information... or when you cover a whole wall with Tape... are we in a highly fragile, tactile, physical moment burning with desire to destroy what came before and transform it? This cultural change, for the moment,... allows you to shift from the idea of packing Tape to magnetic Tape. Recording, erasing and recording again... TV... video.

Take care. Txuspo

8 .....

Dear Txuspo:

The photo of that woman terrorist in Jordan had a really big impact on me, because she appears with the explosives all covered in Tape creating a sort of Taped Project around her body. I've made this kind of application in a series of pieces from the 1970s when I used to cover everything with Duct Tape. And it all fits into the context you mention in your email: Covering so as to cover up. Also covering so as to uncover. She covered herself with Duct Tape to hide the explosives and then she uncovers what was covered. I've included the photo for you.

Best wishes. Jaime

9 .....

Dear Txuspo:

The photo I sent you is "56th St. and Lexington", from 1972. This is an intervention as part of a series of pieces about New York City.

Going back to the Tape "Blue, Red, Yellow", I must explain that the reason I did this piece in 1974 was to establish the relationship between our visual world, which revolves around the primary colours, blue, red and yellow, and the visual circumstances of Television. When the TV set was covered with these Tapes it meant setting the primary colours of our real world in the primary colours of Television, which are blue, red and green. Covering the fictitious primaries of Television with our primaries implied something like a demystification of television reality.

I found an article from 1979 where J. Maturri says: "Within this videotape one finds two verbal and visual paradoxes and puns. The first is a play on the fact that television utilizes subtractive primary colors rather than the additive ones reflected in the choice of adhesive tape colors. The second involves a pun of the word "Tape": as we see the adhesive tape pulled across the screen, we cannot be aware that this image of pulling occurs because videotape is being pulled across the head of the videotape recorder".

All the best. Jaime