

P13

## Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art I

Hosted by imai – inter media art institute,  
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inter media art institute  
**imai**

Der Ministerpräsident  
des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen



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**This panel assembles experts concerned with the complex issue of conservation and restoration of media art installations, who will present their recent research on restoration practices.**

**Renate Buschmann** (de)

imai – inter media art institute  
Director

## Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art

In recent years it has become ever more apparent that the demands media art places on museums and exhibition centres is greater than the usual degree of care traditionally provided by curators and conservators. Media art is difficult to define because it attempts to cover an extensive range of varying works of art which is difficult to quantify and furthermore in this decade terms such as “time-based” and “technology based” art have increasingly come in. It is nonetheless possible to come up with a set of characteristics to describe media art which enables clarification of the requirements for dealing with this type of art:

- **Transient:** media art works possess a tangible link to the technology used at the time of their creation. Due to rapid technical innovation they are subject to the transient nature of materials which to a certain extent is comparable to the short life of organic materials in art works.
- **Installation-based:** the playback and display equipment essential for media art works have a spatial presence and therefore media art works are often considered as installations.
- **Performative:** media art works are based on a time frame determined by a number of display modes of the various image media and can therefore be perceived as performative art works.
- **Participatory:** it is not uncommon for media art works to include an additional participatory dimension where the public actively participates in the functionality of the art work and for this interaction to function the preservation of the technical means is essential.

Under consideration of these hybrid characteristics, curators and conservators are faced with the question of how to adequately handle media art works in connection with museums, whose mission is to maintain the originality and authenticity of the art work while at the same time enabling

the exhibition of the respective work. This naturally includes art works which were created in the period from the sixties to the eighties and which are considered to be of historical significance. Yet art works we may consider as “young”, based on the now already obsolete technology of the nineties, are also subject to the same problems much earlier than previously supposed.

The awareness of the need to do basic research and develop target-oriented procedures for the preservation and presentation of media art has risen considerably in recent years. A number of notable international research projects such as *Inside Installations*, *Matters in Media Art*, *AktiveArchive*, and *DOCAM* have served to develop primary concepts, guidelines and instruments in this area. The international conference “Contemporary Art: Who cares?” in June 2010 confirmed that these efforts are on-going.

The imai – inter media art institute founded in 2006 has dedicated itself to communicating the special expertise in the field of media art preservation to restorers, curators, researchers, artists and students of these disciplines. This commitment is based on the history of its own collection. It was necessary for imai to preserve its extensive historical and valuable collection of mainly single-channel video art and documentary works. The process was primarily concerned with the transfer of the original analogue videos over to digital media. So far more than 1,300 audio-visual works of the imai collection have been digitized, which are now accessible to the public via an online catalogue. This action has additionally identified the greater challenges faced by exhibition authorities in connection with the preservation of complex, multi-part media art installations. The imai research project “Konkretionen des Flüchtigen” (Materializations of the Fugitive) uses case studies such as Bill Seaman’s interactive installation “Exchange Fields” (Museum Ostwall collection, Dortmund) to examine this theme.

The extent to which it is possible to authentically transfer the media art of recent decades to future generations decisively depends on the current measures used for preservation and restoration. The panel *Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art* presents initiatives such as *PACKED* and the third edition of the *Variable Media Questionnaire* to provide the resources and instruments to facilitate the collection of substantial information and adaption and transfer of techniques designed to preserve the function and concept of media art. The common view today is that the continuous change from obsolete to new technology is seen as an unavoidable step for media art works. Yet the implementation of new technology and its subsequent influence on the materiality of these works poses fundamental questions which voice concerns regarding loss of originality and the degree of co participation of the respective artist. The panel *Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art* should communicate the need to rethink preservation techniques and pass on knowledge which can only be gained by the constructive interaction of curators, conservators, artists, technicians and researchers.

## Between Remake and Reperformance: Emerging Narratives in Media Art

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No other term has worse connotation than the remake of an original film, inviting an unflattering comparison to the older original, a comparison it rarely survives. We immediately suspect a flawed and lukewarm aesthetic, and a dubious revisionist interest compromising whatever dear memory we might have of what only then becomes identified as the “original.” But prompted by media and contemporary art, this pattern has fallen apart. And maybe it was never true in the first place. The urge to go back to zero and do it again might be prompted by a much more complicated affair that emerges from the narratives of contemporary and media art.

In the past, a widely held belief positioned the genre of performance as antithetical to a collecting art institution. A strong motivation for historic performances had been precisely their anti-institutional drive. They remained a final bastion of originality, based on the presence of the artist. An analysis of the relationship between performance and document, however, sheds a different light on what is perceived now as a much more hybrid construction. As we know from the philosophical and political critique of the archive, no document exists that is not processed, categorized, formatted, in short produced by the archive. Maybe it is time now to stress the role of the museum in producing artworks. The debate that was generated by two performative museum shows in New York earlier this year, Marina Abramovic’s retrospective at MoMA and Tino Sehgal at the Guggenheim, underlined a fascinating conflict: in order to distinguish itself from the performing arts, “performance” needs to introduce a difference to the theatrical script or musical score. Sehgal thus detaches himself from the body-centered tradition of performance developing situative “interpretations”, whereas Marina Abramovic insists on the possibility of a remake, now called “reperformance”.

Looking at these more recent developments in contemporary art, we need to review two decades of symposia and workshops on the preservation of media art, which after all is performative in a fundamental way. One thing seems certain in the modern networked society: more and more people realize that ‘It’s complicated’ is by far the most realistic status update on any relationship, and that includes all relations between artist, institution, and the public. Our collecting art institutions need to embrace an open relationship and open up to debate and collaborative thinking. Models and systems will give way to emerging narratives that will capture the notion of experience in an unprecedented way.

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## Archiving Experience

### The Third Generation Variable Media Questionnaire

#### Introduction

The Third Edition Variable Media Questionnaire (VMQ3) is an information system based on a seemingly paradoxical goal: it seeks to preserve artworks by describing how they can be changed. Implicit in this goal is the acknowledgement that the physical components of any artwork, regardless of medium, will eventually degrade and lose their power; the only variable is time. Unlike a traditional museum collection management system that takes a physical artifact to be the point of greatest fixity in an artwork and thus focuses on preserving the artifact, the VMQ3 suggests that there are other aspects of an artwork that may be at least as important to preserve as the artifact itself. If the traditional system is premised on a fixed physical artifact, the VMQ3 is premised on a fixed experience of an artwork.

#### The Artifact

The VMQ3 does not disregard the significance of an artifact, it simply recognizes that artifacts are subject to failure. The important question then becomes what to do when a failure occurs. Instead of treating an artifact as a monolithic entity, the ontology of the VMQ3 conceives of the artifact as a collection of abstract parts held together by connections and interfaces. This collection of parts and connections provides a framework in which the material artifact can be described. When one of the material parts of the artifact fails, however, the abstract part provides a point of reference for how to restore or replace it within the context of the artwork as a whole (Bell 2009).

For example, one of the test cases for a previous version of the VMQ was Nam June Paik's TV Garden (1974). This video installation piece requires a number of television monitors to be spread throughout a space. As part of porting the case study from the previous version to VMQ3, these television monitors were classified as a "Media Display" type part. The abstract "Media Display" part is associated with a number of questions about how the televisions should be replaced in new showings of the piece, such as "how should you accommodate changes in resolution" and "how should the media display be integrated into the exhibition space." These questions, along with those that are associated with the other abstract parts that make up the piece, can be posed to people associated with the work with the answers providing guidance for future exhibitions.

### **The Experience**

Though the questions associated with an abstract part seek to describe parameters for the use of that part within the work, the answers to those questions often serve to convey what a stakeholder feels is the fundamental point of fixity they wish to carry forward into future versions of their artwork. For Paik's TV Garden, the preferred answer to the question "How should you accommodate changes in resolution?" is that resolution should be increased or decreased to match the current hardware; using the original hardware is only an acceptable solution, not the preferred one (Ippolito 2009). Paik's interview indicates that he prioritized the scale of the media displays over specific technical details like resolution or color depth to the extent that using his original equipment is less important to him than maintaining the experience of the viewer.

Not every artist would be as flexible as Paik, however, and the VMQ3 always offers preserving the original artifact as a viable alternative. Even then, the VMQ3 attempts to provoke thought about how to go beyond maintenance of a physical artifact by providing several abstract parts that have no physical analogue. Some parts ask questions about how people should interact with the work, ranging from the passive "Viewer" rules to "Participant" and "Performer" parts that are more active. The "External Physical Reference" part asks how an element that is not part of the artifact itself can be replaced should it change between exhibitions. Some creators may choose to include the "Key Concept" part if their work addresses an important point that should be considered in any future attempts to recreate it. The artist may not have even considered these points when the work was being made, but in an attempt to preserve the experience of the work the VMQ3 asks them anyway.

### **Conclusion**

In redefining the critical aspect of an artwork to be its point of consumption rather than its point of creation, the VMQ3 also makes some potentially provocative decisions that go beyond the scope of a museum collection. For example, basing preservation on such a highly subjective foundation as

experience opens the possibility of interviewing a variety of stakeholders about the work, from the artist who made it to a viewer off the street who just happened to see it in a gallery. Of course, conservators and curators may hold one to have more influence than the other, but the VMQ3 allows both to give their view of the piece. This sort of implication that emerges from its shifted premise may be the most valuable aspect of the VMQ3 as it provides a unique framework for conceptualizing not just preservation but the artwork itself, potentially exposing perspectives on the works it describes that had not been considered before.

#### References

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## Obsolete Equipment – the Preservation of Playback and Display Equipment for Audiovisual Arts

Media art is an invaluable and extremely fragile part of our modern cultural heritage. Media artworks (e.g. video art, interactive art, net art, computer art, media installation, media performances...) distinguish themselves from more conventional artworks by the use of electronic media for artistic expression. These works are encoded and usually stored on a physical storage device such as digital or analogue videotape, optical discs, and hard disks... and they require playback and display equipment to be viewed. The use of the rapidly ageing media technology for the recording, storage, playback and display of the media artworks affects their stability. The most obvious problem for their preservation is the obsolescence of physical storage and display formats. If the storage format becomes obsolete, one risks not being able to view the work anymore. If the display equipment becomes obsolete, the translation into new display devices (e.g. from a CRT monitor to a flat screen monitor) might change the meaning of the artwork. These are two of the most appealing challenges regarding the preservation of media art. The technology and associated knowledge are in many cases still available today but are rapidly becoming obsolete. If we don't act quickly both will disappear and we risk losing a part of our modern cultural heritage.

A year ago PACKED [i] and the Netherlands Media Art Institute (NIMk) [ii] started the research project 'Obsolete Equipment' [iii] to improve and to ensure the digitisation and long-term preservation of media artworks. The point of departure of this research project was that all technical equipment, even despite all efforts, would sooner or later become obsolete. The obsolete technologies and ephemeral materials used by media artworks are not necessarily considered for eternity and address the notion of change and

variability. This also implies that we need to know certain things in order to be able to preserve a media artwork for the future.

The following questions need to be asked regarding the preservation of media art:

- What is important to preserve with regard to a media artwork and how can this be preserved?
- What are the essential aesthetic and technological elements that absolutely need to be preserved if the artwork is to retain any integrity into the future?
- What is essential to the determination of origins and authenticity of the artwork?
- Do we have to accept a greater degree of loss than contemporary art conservation is used to?
- What is the estimated lifetime of a media artwork? How can this lifetime be calculated?
- When do we consider playback or display equipment as unavailable? When do we have to act in order to anticipate the approaching unavailability?
- Who has to answer these questions and where do they need to be discussed?

Since July 2009 PACKED and NIMk have tried to answer these questions. We inquire into the technical and ethical aspects by researching resources and surveys. We also work on case studies in order to collect best practices regarding the preservation, migration and emulation of media artworks that are threatened by the obsolescence of playback and display equipment, and on the preservation of the necessary equipment itself.

The first phase of this project runs until July 2010 and is dedicated to video art. We started with a questionnaire that posed questions on the collection policy for equipment, the storage and maintenance of equipment and the training of people in charge of the equipment. This questionnaire also became the basis of a series of interviews.

We interviewed: experts as Pip Laurenson (TATE), Christoph Blase (ZKM) and Johannes Gfeller (AktiveArchive), technicians and other specialists from o.a. Philips and Barco – staff of television archives such as VRT, Brussels and NIBG, Hilversum the artists.

The outcome of the interviews and case studies will allow us to create a set of preservation guidelines. Our research also made it possible to compile an inventory of the obsolete playback and display equipment that is still available and that is essential to continue to exhibit certain audiovisual artworks that are part of public collections in Belgium and the Netherlands. We also identified persons in Belgium and the Netherlands (and in some neighbouring countries) who still possess the necessary technical knowledge and experience to maintain such obsolete playback and display equipment.

As Pip Laurenson points out: "Discussions about authenticity and time based media works of art will become more prevalent in time" (Laurenson, 2006) [iv]. Inspired by the Variable Media Network [v] and DOCAM [vi] a

<i>The video based casestudies are:</i>	<i>The computer based casestudies are:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>Oratorium voor geprepareerde video player en acht monitoren</i> (Frank Theys, 1989, collection M HKA)</li> <li>* <i>TV-Quiz Dekor</i>, 1993 (Guillaume Bijl, 1993, M HKA collection,</li> <li>* <i>Untitled (Carl and Julie)</i> (David Claerbout, 2000, M HKA collection,</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Insert Coin</i> (Hans Op de Beeck, 1999, M HKA collection,</li> <li>* <i>Bach Two Part Invention</i> (Jonathan Horowitz, 1998, S.M.A.K. 7048/G56)</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Mon - Sun</i> (Jonathan Horowitz, 1996, S.M.A.K.</li> <li style="padding-left: 40px;">* <i>Battered Tears</i> (Dennis Oppenheim, 1994, S.M.A.K. collection)</li> <li>* <i>Das Endes des Jahrhunderts</i> (Klaus vom Bruch, 1985, S.M.A.K. collection)</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Black and White</i> (Nan Hoover, 2001, NIMk collection)</li> <li>* <i>Stragglings</i> (Christiaan Bastiaans, 1995, Kröller-Müller Museum collection)</li> <li>* <i>Project I-90</i> (Peter Struycken, 1989-90, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam collection)</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Panta Rhei</i> (Ricardo Füglistahler, 1988, ICN collection)</li> <li>* <i>Mill x Molen</i> (Bert Schutter, 1982, ICN collection)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>I Hate</i> (Imogen Stidworthy, 2007, M HKA collection)</li> <li>* <i>HeadNurse</i> (Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, 1989-1999, S.M.A.K. collection,</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Mondophrenetic™</i> (Herman Asselberghs, Els Opsomer and Rony Vissers, 2000)</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>E-volved Cultures XXWide</i> (Driessens &amp; Verstappe, 2007, NIMk collection)</li> <li>* <i>'lichtkrant'</i> (Jenny Holzer, Kröller-Müller Museum)</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">* <i>Tekenmachine 4 en 5</i> (Jochem van der Spek, 2008, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam)</li> <li>* <i>Super Bolt</i> (TM sisters, 2004, Van Abbemuseum collection – under reserve)</li> <li>* <i>No Ghost Just a Shell (Robot)</i> (Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, 1999-2002, Van Abbemuseum collection – under reserve)</li> </ul>

Fig. 1: Case studies

whole new framework and vocabulary have been introduced using notions such as 'medium independent', 'variable', 'behaviour', 'migration' and 'emulation'. A recent alternative to the concept of 'authenticity' is the notion of 'historically informed performance'. This concept is widely spread within musical performance criticism and seen as a concept related to authenticity. It describes how music was performed in the age in which it was written.

With the video art based case studies we learned to understand what might constitute an authentic installation and to make the preservation of such an installation possible. In the next phase (start July 2010) the focus will be changed from the preservation of video-based artworks to the preservation of computer-based artworks.

#### References

- [i] [www.packed.be](http://www.packed.be)
- [ii] [www.nimk.nl](http://www.nimk.nl)
- [iii] [www.packed.be/en/projects/readmore/obsolete\\_apparatuur/](http://www.packed.be/en/projects/readmore/obsolete_apparatuur/)
- [iv] [www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepaper/06authum/larensen.html](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepaper/06authum/larensen.html)
- [v] [www.variablemedia.net](http://www.variablemedia.net)
- [vi] [www.docam.ca](http://www.docam.ca)

## Conserving Interactivity: imai Case Study on Bill Seaman's *Exchange Fields*

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The authentic preservation of interactive installations and their appropriate re-installation are challenging because of the basic conflict between the preservation of the equipment and the preservation of the functionality of the installation. Here this conflict is discussed exemplarily for Bill Seaman's interactive video installation *Exchange Fields*. The installation was developed for the exhibition *vision.ruhr* at the *Zeche Zollern* in Dortmund 2000 (fig.1), and acquired by the *Museum Ostwall*, Dortmund. Only ten years later the museum staff had changed, so detailed knowledge about *Exchange Fields* got lost.



Fig. 1: First presentation of *Exchange Fields* at Zeche Zollern, Dortmund, 2000

In order to detect the parameters for future presentations of the work, the *imai – inter media art institute* (Düsseldorf) carried out a case study on *Exchange Fields* in cooperation with the *Cologne Institute of Conservation*

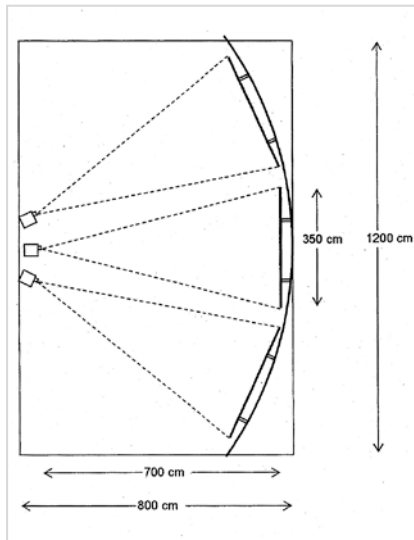


Fig. 2: Specifications of the projections



Fig. 3: Video still of one of the interactive dance videos

Sciences / University of Applied Sciences. The case study was supported by the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

The installation consists of three projection screens (fig. 2) and thirteen interface objects. Each object is equipped with infrared sensors and is supposed to be used by visitors with a particular part of the body. By refracting the infrared sensors, the user triggers a dance sequence on the central screen (fig. 3) which is poetically related to the body part represented by the used object. Dependent on the number of users, up to four videos can be layered upon each other. These features enable interactivity between the user and the installation and among single users. The double-sided screens show energy related images accompanied by a techno ambient soundtrack and a poetic text read by Bill Seaman. They are played from DVDs. The interactive images on the central screen, which are accompanied by drones from a clarinet, are played from videodisks.

In the case study we looked for answers to the following questions:

1. Which aspects determine the authenticity of *Exchange Fields*?
2. What is the meaning of the original technical equipment for the work? May it be replaced?
3. Which are the parameters for the re-installation of the work?
4. How can the interactive properties of the work be catalogued?

An interview with Bill Seaman, the analysis of the contract of sale and of earlier presentations as well as additional research led to the conclusion that the authenticity of *Exchange Fields* is basically determined by the interactivity between moving images, interface sculptures and visitors. Additionally, the exhibition space, the projections and the arrangement of the interface sculptures play a decisive role. The appearance of technical equipment (players, computer, mixer...) is not important for the aesthetic of the work, because

the devices are not visible to the viewer. However, their properties (reaction time of the system, brightness of the projectors etc.) play a decisive role for the effect of the installation. The installation specifications and the minimum requirements for the exhibition space could be determined through a test re-installation of *Exchange Fields* at the *Museum Ostwall* Dortmund in 2009.

By documenting *Exchange Fields* and its interactivity the lack of a detailed documentation model for capturing the interactive properties of installations became evident. The elaboration of such a model is quite challenging. In the framework of the case study, a first step in this direction was made. Cooperation with a broader range of scholars would be desirable to accomplish this ambitious project.