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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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