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

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