

2008

# Wiggle Room: Documenting Acceptable Levels of Technical and Conceptual Variance For The Reinstallation of New Media Art

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**Wiggle Room:**  
**Documenting Acceptable Levels of Technical and**  
**Conceptual Variance for the Reinstallation of New Media Art**

**Mark B. Schlemmer**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of**  
**the requirements for the degree of**  
**Master of Arts in Museum Professions**

**Seton Hall University**  
**May 2008**

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## **Abstract**

### **Wiggle Room: Documenting Acceptable Levels of Technical and Conceptual Variance for the Reinstallation of New Media Art**

**Mark B. Schlemmer**

In recent years, more installation art has found its place among the permanent collections of art museums around the world. The genre proves to be popular with artists who seek a way to branch out into a fourth dimension (interactivity) with their artistic creation. Additionally, as the art-seeking public begins to demand more experiential activities from museums, cultural institutions are finding that exhibiting installation art is one such way of meeting the public's expectations. By bringing installation art into a museum environment, certain ethical mandates must be met that treat it just as any other work of art, be it a painting, sculpture, photograph or drawing. For example, the work must be properly documented and safeguarded for future generations. However, the inherently complex nature of installation art, in particular those which comprise elements of new-, or time-based media, require a new paradigm in our approach to museum work. Principal to this is the need to draw upon a wide body of experts from both within and outside the museum community. Conservators, curators, registrars, technicians, artists' assistants, architects and the artists themselves may be called upon to help create a precisely documented account of the installation for the museum's object file.

This thesis intends to address the paramount importance of documenting, at the time of acquisition, the acceptable levels of technical and conceptual variance for the reinstallation of new media art.

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## 1. Introduction

*Interactive research resulting in guidelines for individual works of art is the basis and often the only guarantee for the continued existence of the work. Should no communication exist in this regard, then one would have no idea of how to tackle these works after their initial installation. An installation might remain 'unvaryingly' installed and often disintegrate because of its fragility.*

-Frederika Huys and Anne De Buck. in: "Research on Artists' Participation." Inside Installations.<sup>1</sup>

*Documentation is the key to contemporary installations as it is critical to our interpretation of future and ongoing installations.*

-Jill Sterett in: "On the Museum's Response to Installation Art."<sup>2</sup>

### a. Three Problematic Scenarios

Pioneer multimedia artist Nam June Paik died in January 2006 leaving an impressive body of work in museums, galleries and private collections around the world. A year later, in February 2007, a panel discussion was organized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which brought together Paik's assistant, art conservators, theorists and curators to contemplate a paramount issue that was just beginning to surface: preserving the artist's video installations in a manner true to Paik's original intent.<sup>3</sup> The artist had always been an active participant in the reinstallation of his work, and perhaps because of that, very little documentation was produced during his life to concretely define and formalize the artist's acceptable levels of variance in the technical

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<sup>1</sup> Huys, Frederika, and Anne De Buck. "Research on Artists' Participation." Inside Installations. 10 Mar. 2008 <<http://insideinstallations.org>>.

<sup>2</sup> Sterett, Jill. "On the Museum's Response to Installation Art." Tate Modern. *Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles? Artists' Installations and the Museum*. Tate Modern, London. 22 Mar. 2006. 7 Apr. 2007 <[www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)>.

<sup>3</sup> Frieling, Rudolf, Ulrich Lang, Barbara London, Gwynne Ryan, Jochen Saueracker, Glenn Wharton. "Preserving Nam June Paik's Video Installations: the Importance of the Artist's Voice." MoMA. College Art Association Annual Conference. Museum of Modern Art, New York. 16 Feb. 2007.

and conceptual elements of the work. Today, we rely on the notes of Paik's assistant, his memory and judgment to perpetuate the legacy of the artist.

From November 17, 2006 to March 11, 2007 the Ball State University Museum of Art in Muncie, Indiana presented the influential exhibit "Engaging Technology – A History and Future of Intermedia." The exhibit was commended in a feature on Rhizome, an eminent online resource for the new media art community. Exhibition designer Randy Salaway explained the challenges involved with staging "Engaging Technology," emphasizing the inconsistent level of documentation on the part of the artists.<sup>4</sup> When available, the participating artists were involved with the reinstallation process, but this was not universally possible. The documentation provided to the museum to achieve this ranged from very detailed construction specifications and technical guidelines, to a promised, but never delivered set of instructions. Salaway reported that in one case, an artist could not really recall what the installation originally looked like, so photos of previous installations were referenced as much as possible. No explicit documentation had ever been made for the work and the resulting obstacles that this created for the museum not only affected Salaway's work, but also negatively impacted everyone involved in the realization of the exhibit.

In the fall of 2007, a major museum in Europe exhibited an artist's elaborate room-sized installation whose components included scavenged wood scraps and other detritus in addition to various electronic mechanisms.<sup>5</sup> After the run of the exhibit, the museum diligently worked to create a thorough documentation of the work as it was to be

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<sup>4</sup> Salaway, Randy R. "Intermedia Documentation." Emails to the author. 7, 8, 9 Feb., 27 Mar., 13, 14, 16 and 18 Apr. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the sensitive nature of this particular example, the names of the museum and the artist have been omitted.

de-installed and stored indefinitely. As this was the first installation of the piece, a lot of the documentation was being dealt with after-the-fact. The museum and the artist were engaged in discussions about what aspects of the large installation needed to be stored and what could be recreated in the future. Unfortunately this topic had not been discussed previously and the resulting conversations were strained by what the museum saw as impossible requirements. The artist demanded that the scraps of found wood used in the installation be stored for subsequent reinstallations. The museum argued that such minutiae rendered the work impossible to store or exhibit outside of Germany due to the logistical restrictions on the exportation of certain wood products. If this conversation had been initiated at the onset of the project, accords could have been reached before approaching such critical and conflicting levels.

These three anecdotes illustrate an emerging museum conundrum of considerable heft: the complications which surface during the reinstallation of elaborate works of new media installation art. Artists who are often adamant about liaising with museums and galleries during the subsequent reinstallation of their work cannot possibly be counted upon to collaborate indefinitely. Additionally, reliance on the memory of artists and their assistants is inconsistent at best and unreliable at worst. Even when the artist is available to aid in establishing installation parameters, the crucial discussions are frequently had after-the-fact thus leading to contentious situations that could even possibly result in litigious ends. All of these scenarios can be avoided by adopting a stringent attitude towards the documentation of acceptable levels of technical and conceptual variance with the artist at the time the museum acquisitions, or is considering acquisitioning the installation. The rate at which new media installation art is being incorporated into the



permanent collections of museums brings the insistence on proper documentation to the forefront.

#### **b. The Rise of New Media Installation Art in Museums**

The headline of an article in The Art Newspaper in the spring of 2007 says it all: “New Media on the Rise.”<sup>6</sup> More and more US art museums are actively adding to their contemporary art collections. New media art, which can include video, Net.Art, digital content and multi-media installations, is high in demand. Based on their unwavering commitment to such art, it is not entirely surprising that institutions like the Guggenheim, the MoMA, the SFMoMA, the Whitney, or the Walker Art Center rank among the nation’s major supporters of new media art. What is perhaps more insightful to glean from an examination of current collecting trends is that smaller art museums, like the Ball State University Museum of Art, are also collecting and exhibiting with vigor. Digital culture is not only of interest to a core group of progressive major institutions. The impact this art has on museum practice goes far beyond acquisition issues.

As the very nature of new media art transcends, and even subverts the concept of what has been referred to traditionally as “Art” (i.e. fixed in a medium such as stone, paper, canvas, video, etc.), alternative registration, conservation and documentation techniques must be developed to fully integrate this emerging work into the larger body of museum collections. Of critical concern is establishing a frank discussion between the museum and the artist about agreed acceptable levels of variance in the subsequent reinstallations of work, which is frequently defined by its fluid, transient, or even

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<sup>6</sup> Stoilas, Helen. “New Media on the Rise.” The Art Newspaper Apr. 2007: 19-23.

unidentified limits. Unfortunately, such best practices have yet to be fully designated to make this essential information part of the required documentation for the accessioned work's object file – the documentation core of every museum-owned object. Museums, international consortia, and independent bodies are actively working towards determining the appropriate, legal and ethical procedures related to museum documentation. In order to alleviate future logistical nightmares, art museums must, at the time of acquisition, thoroughly document the acceptable levels of technical and conceptual variance for the reinstallation of all new media art.

### **c. Thesis Overview**

In the first part of this thesis, I will explore historic dimensions. The concept of conserving installation art vis-à-vis other, more traditional art work will be the initial topic. This will lead to a discussion of the first conferences and symposia on the topic of contemporary art. In turn, I will expand the scope to take in specific concerns of registration techniques and strategies. To round out the first section, I will look at some very specific ways to perceive the “content” of new media art.

The second part of my project will address systemic dimensions. I will look at the importance of documentation, especially in determining whose responsibility it is. These insights will lead to a candid presentation of the potential legal and ethical dilemmas associated with eschewing the proper documentation of the art. The second part of this thesis will be concluded with the paramount concern of documenting the artist's intent and with guidelines for conducting artist interviews and for the video documentation of installation art.

The third section of this paper will look at the taxonomical problems which are all too evident when exploring new media. Additionally, two contemporary artists, Bill Viola and Vera Frenkel, will be highlighted as artists who take a proactive approach to the documentation of their own work. This will give us some concrete reference points from which to see the fourth part of the paper.

Finally, to synthesize the entire project, I will look at what current procedures are in place which attempt to address the issue of documenting new media installation art. I will analyze what seems to be working and what is deficient in the status quo based on recent reports. From this, I will present my recommendations and conclusions in an attempt to suggest appropriate guidelines, which any museum can carry out when presented with the option to acquire a work of new media installation art.

As new media art is integrated into the permanent collections of art museums, certain standards must be put into place that aid the museum in proactively anticipating the challenges this particular work presents, especially in relation to its subsequent reinstallation. Proper documentation is the key. By highlighting how different museums, consortia and institutions are currently addressing this issue, we can more clearly understand not only the challenges which lie ahead, but more importantly realize the necessity of calling upon expert professional allies and resources to ensure that subsequent reinstallations faithfully represent the agreed parameters of variance, which allow for the essence of the work to remain intact. Though the task may seem daunting, the insight gleaned from others currently engaged in the issues surrounding new media installation art can act as models for other institutions to emulate.

## **2. Historical Dimensions**

### **a. Conservation and Restoration Theory**

The idea of conserving, documenting or defining parameters of contemporary art has only recently become a major issue to museum professionals. The materials artists choose to use in creating work have no limits. In addition to traditional materials like wood, paint, stone, and canvas, artists increasingly use ephemeral materials, detritus and digital content to meet their creative needs. A painting or drawing may be partially defined by its two-dimensionality, but with much of contemporary art, installation art specifically, nailing down such defining parameters has all but become impossible. That is not to say that attempts to define, identify or give meaning to such issues were ignored or not important in the past, but rather that situations were dealt with ad hoc as they emerged.

Mostly, these issues were addressed from a conservation point of view and with an emphasis on the materiality of the work. Whereas four of the tenants of restoration theory, as outlined in the Code of Ethics of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC),<sup>7</sup> call upon conservators to consider the durability and authenticity of their interventions, in addition to ensuring that their work is minimally invasive and reversible, these concepts are questioned for their applicability in dealing with contemporary art. Durability, in the context of restoration, applies to the idea that upon completing the intervention, the materials used to restore the work of art will remain unchanged for an extended period of time. In contrast, authenticity, in this context, refers not to materials, but to the artwork being restored. Conservators must

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<sup>7</sup> "AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice." American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. 3 Feb. 2008 <<http://aic.stanford.edu>>.

strive to respect the original object from not only an aesthetic point of view, but from a documentary perspective as well. The dual mandates to restore with techniques and materials that are minimally invasive and reversible leave the restoration open for future interventions based on assumed advances in our understanding of restoration. All four of these tenants are called into question when applied to the restoration of installation art.

Material durability, as an overarching goal, now seems a rather outdated objective. Distinguished conservator Dr. Cornelia Weyer, citing the work of Françoise Hanssen-Bauer and Giorgio Torraca, explains that “it is not a contextless classification of material that should concern us but the concern with the use of material in relation to the object to be restored.”<sup>8</sup> It is entirely possible that the original materials chosen by the artist were meant to disintegrate, decay, or disappear. In Dennis Oppenheim’s installation *Ageing* (1976), for example, wax figures made by the artist were intended to melt within the installation. Applying the mandate of durability to the restoration of the work is, in this case, nonsensical. If durability is not of concern to the artist, why should it be required in the restoration?

Similarly, questions of authenticity require the conservator to respect the originality of the art. If mass-produced elements or found objects are utilized in the creation of the installation, what kind of authenticity must be maintained in its restoration? Traditionally, authenticity, with regards to the plastic arts, is traced from the marks made by the hand of the artist. These marks could be brush strokes, chiseled paths, pencil hatchings, etc. In other words: workmanship. Such ideas aid in questions of connoisseurship and in embedding certain aspects of value or quality in a work. In

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<sup>8</sup> Weyer, Cornelia. “Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art.” *Inside Installations*. 7 Feb. 2008 <[www.inside-installations.org](http://www.inside-installations.org)>.

installation art, especially in considering its subsequent iterations, the goal should not be in giving the observer an authentic aesthetic experience, but rather in providing them with the most authentic art object possible.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Pip Laurenson, Head of Time-based Media Conservation at the Tate, has dealt with issues of authenticity specifically in reference to new media installation art. As the focus on artwork has moved past its materiality to emphasize its conceptual, or performed core, a new way of considering authenticity has come to the forefront. Laurenson explains:

*What is emerging is a conceptual dependency between the ontological framework in which an object is classified and described and the attending concept of authenticity. If the ontological framework is focused on the material so will the notion of authenticity. If the ontological framework shifts, then we expect a similar shift in our concepts of authenticity, change and loss.<sup>10</sup>*

As time-based media installation is at the same time temporal and ephemeral, somewhere between performance and sculpture, it may be more beneficial to view it, and its subsequent installations, in terms similar to the way we approach a musical score.

Time-based media installation art is similar to a performance in that it must be experienced in its installed form.<sup>11</sup> Though there is no exact parallel between the way a composer notates the music and the way we can document time-based media installation art, it does serve as an appropriate analogy. Philosopher Stephen Davies, whose writings on music serve as a touchstone for comparisons with time-based media installation art, expresses the notation of music as being either ‘thinly’ or ‘thickly’ mandated. “Works for

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Laurenson, Pip. “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations.” *Tate Papers*. Autumn 2006. 25 Nov. 2007 <<http://tate.org.uk>>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

performance can be ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ in their constitutive properties. If it is thin, the work’s determinative properties are comparatively few in number and most of the qualities of a performance are aspects of the performer’s interpretation, not the work as such.”<sup>12</sup> We can extrapolate from this the degree to which an artist specifies how to approach their installation work. Some artists dictate the minutiae, others allow for a greater degree of change. In either case, a new, more flexible way of dealing with this type of artwork becomes obvious. It balks traditional ideas of authenticity in allowing, or even demanding that we consider future iterations, and with them, change.

Laurenson further explores the connections between Davies’ philosophy on music and her own views on the documentation of time-based media installation art by looking at relationships with the play-back devices used in the installations and in ‘work-defining’ properties. Whereas musical performances are usually presented live, time-based media work is typically pre-recorded. The performance quality can therefore be seen not so much in the media, but in the process of installing the work in the gallery or museum. The control of this ‘performance’ is made possible in the documentation of the installation. Photographs, installation guides, interviews, light and sound level recordings, etc. add to the goal of capturing the ‘work-defining’ properties of the installation.<sup>13</sup> All of these considerations have led Laurenson to formulate a new approach to the overarching understanding of conservation of time-based media installation art. Her suggestions:

1. *Conservation is the means by which the work-defining properties are documented, understood and maintained.*
2. *Conservation as a practice aims to preserve the identity of the work of art.*
3. *Conservation aims to be able to display the work in the future.*

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<sup>12</sup> Davies, Stephen. Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2001. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

4. *Conservation enables different possible authentic installations of the work to be realized in the future.*<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the materials indeed may be important, but the conceptual core remains the essence of the work and in turn controls our comprehension of a new authenticity paradigm.

This shift is both of paramount importance and understandable. Time-based media elements lose their integrity over time and ephemeral objects made from wax, plastic and other random material radically change their inherent form and disintegrate in museum galleries and storage spaces. Necessity dictates an intervention. As a manifestation of *fin de siècle* musings, the 1980s and 1990s saw the convening of several influential symposia and conferences to explore current and emerging conceptual and technical approaches to conserving, protecting and documenting modern and contemporary art.

**b. The First Conferences and Symposia on Contemporary Art**

Conferences in the 1980s, like the “International Symposium on the Conservation of Contemporary Art” in Canada (1980) and “Conservation and Contemporary Art” in Australia (1984) led the way, but in the 1990s we began to see a proliferation of influential conservation forums. One such event was The Getty Conservation Institute’s “Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art” held in Los Angeles from March 25-27, 1998. The conference and its subsequent publication (in 1999) remain to this day a seminal reference and touch-stone for developing issues of how we should approach both the large picture of conservation, and the minutiae of techniques and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



theories behind such concerns. The conference was not just a forum for conservation specialists, but gave voice to artists like Judy Chicago, Bill Viola, and Tony Cragg to present their perspective on how their oeuvre should, or could be conserved in a museum or collection context. In addition, case studies representing contemporary photography, mural conservation, and various ephemeral materials found a forum and generated discourse on how to formulate new paradigms of conservation.

Absent from much of this discourse was the registrarial perspective on the issue of conservation. I am in no way implying that the role of the conservator should be superseded by that of the registrar, but rather that as the person traditionally charged with keeping and generating object documentation, the registrar is an obvious collaborator and should be put to maximum benefit. Surprisingly (or not), two of the important reference books widely used in the registrarial profession fail to even address the 'how-to' of documenting contemporary art.

### **c. A Registrarial Approach**

Years spent on the listserv of the Registrar's Committee of the American Association of Museums (RC-AAM), a virtual community forum where professionals post questions and answers to the workaday challenges encountered, has taught me that among the books recommended again and again are The New Museum Registration Methods, a bestselling AAM publication edited by Rebecca A. Buck and Jeanne Allman Gilmore, and Basic Condition Reporting: A Handbook, edited by Marie Demeroukas and published by the Southeastern Registrars Association of the AAM. Both volumes are revised and expanded editions of past efforts, but neither sufficiently provide for much

insight in reference to contemporary art.<sup>15</sup> Coincidentally, both publications date from 1998, indicating that the zeitgeist apparent in the forums and publications dealing with the conservation of contemporary art did not effectively translate to the registrarial profession in the same way.

To find a symposium which begins to bridge the view of the collaborative efforts of the registrar and the conservator in issues of contemporary art, we have to turn to The Netherlands. “Modern Art: Who Cares? An International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern Art” was held in Amsterdam from September 8-10, 1997. This conference was a result of the apparent lack of cohesive information on the subject at hand. Supported by both the Dutch Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, the symposium and subsequent publication are, like the 1998 Getty conference, frequently referenced sources of relevance even today.

The twenty papers and seventeen seminars presented as the core of the “Modern Art: Who Cares?” conference were really the culmination of an eighteen month-long project on the conservation of modern art. In addition to explorations related to specific artist materials, the subject of the ‘artist’s intent’ emerged as a dominant component for the successful conservation of contemporary and modern art. Documenting this intent presents some very nuanced and complicated challenges for the museum and will be dealt with in more detail later in this thesis. Basically, museums need to instigate and document very candid and freely-structured conversations with the artist whose work is

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that The New Museum Registration Methods is currently undergoing a major rework. The next edition, tentatively titled MRM5 and set for a 2009 or 2010 publication date, will indeed include a chapter which specifically deals with the documentation of contemporary art. I have been approached by the editors to develop this chapter, which will include online references, suggested forms, checklists and different strategies applicable to museums of varying sizes and foci.

acquired for the permanent collections. Though museums have been sending detailed questionnaires to artists for many years, the face-to-face interviews are encouraged as they are more organic in their structure and lead to more interrelated perceptions which truly get to the core of the artist's definition of what makes the work uniquely his/hers.

As a precursor to conversations with the artist as a means of documenting their work, a more refined approach to registrarial documentation emerged from the "Modern Art: Who Cares?" research. Current registrarial models often leave little room for the documentation of 'nontraditional' information. Data such as materials used, identification number(s) assigned, date created, etc. are all essential information, but in the case of much contemporary art, this barely begins to provide a complete picture of the work. To properly document the art, a double-branched approach was developed in Holland: one for data registration and one for a new perspective referred to as 'condition registration.'<sup>16</sup>

Data registration encompasses the documentation of: identification (including the artist's intent and the meaning of the work), location, description, production (materials and techniques including any pre-fabricated/ready-made components and more abstract concepts such as movement or sound), handling of the object, presentation/installation (an additional area for recording issues of the artist's intent), literature and/or correspondence, the artist, and acquisition.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hummelen, Ijsbrand, and Dionne Sillé, eds. Modern Art: Who Cares? - An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art. London: Archetype Publications, Ltd., 2005. 174.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 176.

Condition registration was created to supplement data registration and is a concept still in an experimental phase. It relates to issues of conservation and the decision-making processes involved in such concerns. The five areas of condition registration include: diagnosis (a comparison of the current condition with the original state of the work; the effectiveness of this information is directly proportional with the accuracy and depth of original data documentation), conservation options (an exploration of various possibilities which calls upon the consultation of various experts like ethicists, conservators, technicians, curators, the artist, etc.), propositions (choices to be made), treatment reports (as standard to conservation and restoration), and preventive conservation advice/minimum conservation needs (an essential and far-reaching view towards proactive ideal conditions.)<sup>18</sup>

These registrarial approaches resulted from an increased awareness not of concerns unique to contemporary art, but rather as a more refined way to deal with issues of storage, transportation, installation and conservation. Though developed for contemporary art, much of what is addressed is relevant to all art. Issues unique to digital media in general, and complicated installation art in particular are not specifically addressed, but are applicable for these strategies. Perhaps one reason for this is that these types of art are considered excessively and inherently 'messy' and therefore outside a manageable structure of registration. Documentation, conservation and registration schema particular to digital media were however the focus of a conference and study, which developed almost concurrently on the other side of the ocean.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 177.

#### **d. New Paradigms**

“Preserving the Immaterial,” a conference at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York from March 30-31, 2001, addressed issues relating to nontraditional media art. Though minimalist and conceptual art were dealt with in general, it was the groundbreaking work done with new media and digital art which made this symposium and the publication, The Variable Media Approach, seminal projects in the field of documenting contemporary art. With its impetus in the “Variable Media Initiative,” the conference and its online component provide an introduction to a new way of thinking about art independent of its media. The application for the registration and documentation of new media installation art is all encompassing. At the core is a new way of identifying the essence of the conceptual base of the work. No longer is the physicality of an object the defining element of art. Ideas and concepts, and the explicit acceptance of them as the art, are not synonymous with the object.<sup>19</sup> Art can thus be formless.

As proposed by almost everyone involved in any aspect of documenting contemporary art, the approach to variable media is based upon formulating a questionnaire and dialogue with the artist to serve as a springboard in identifying non-media specific concepts. John Ippolito, Guggenheim Associate Curator of Media Arts at the time, summed up the project as an “approach [which] asks creators to play the central role in deciding how their work should evolve over time, with archivists and technicians offering choices rather than prescribing them.”<sup>20</sup> To this end, the Variable Media

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<sup>19</sup> Buskirk, Martha. The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2003. 6

<sup>20</sup> Depocas, Alain, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, eds. The Variable Media Approach. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications. 2003. 47.

Questionnaire is broken down into eight sub-topics, each addressing a particular 'behavior.' These ideal states are:

- installed (implying that the work has more complex exhibition requirements than mounting on a wall or placing on a pedestal, issues of site-specific placement, scale, access and lighting are addressed)

- performed (emphasizing that the process is as integral as the end product/object created; the artist therefore provides instructions for the performers, installers, etc. to follow in addition to specifications of sets, props, etc.)

- interactive (referencing not only computer-based work, but any installation in which the visitor is essential in the work through their active participation with it; this method is documented in how, and to what extent external participation is carried out, and whether this interaction is recorded)

- reproduced (documenting any medium, such as film, audio or video in which the result of producing a copy from an original master results in a loss of quality)

- duplicated (explaining that a work does not lose any quality when copied from the original; most works of digital media and ready-made, mass-produced objects typically are considered as duplicated)

- encoded (implying that the essence of the work is created with a computer code or special language; depending on the nature of the code, it may be possible to archive the transcript or notation separately and independently from the work), and

- networked (designating that the work is experienced via the Internet or some other electronic system; websites, email, surveillance, etc. are all networked behaviors.)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 46.

Identifying work in terms of behaviors references it in its ideal state. However, any changes or alterations over time, whether happening naturally or as a result of conservation interventions produces a shift away from this ideal. Ippolito calls this phenomena ‘slippage.’<sup>22</sup> The documentation of the artist’s philosophy over these questions will aid the museum in taking decisions on how to deal with this ‘slippage.’

### **3. Systemic Dimensions**

#### **a. Whose Responsibility is Documentation?**

In contemplating the necessity of proper documentation in a museum context, one overarching issue tends to create confusion: whose responsibility is it to document the conceptual and technical variances of new media installation art as proposed in this thesis? By definition, the registrar is charged with maintaining the documentation of objects. Rebecca Buck, in her introduction to The New Museum Registration Methods, states that among the multiple responsibilities of the registrar is the need to create/compile the “histories of use of permanent collections objects.”<sup>23</sup> More specifically, the registrar keeps track of the object’s legal status, condition, insurance, location within the museum and any other details regarding the ‘life’ of the object within the collection. Depending on the institution, these individual tasks of compiling and tracking this documentation may be shared by various staff members, some outside the office of the registrar. Additionally, issues concerning the condition of the object frequently fall under the auspices of the office of the registrar. However, conservators

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Buck, Rebecca A., ed., Jean Allman Gilmore, ed. The New Museum Registration Methods. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1998. xiv.

and curators may also be charged with this. It is the latter who may in fact be the best ally to the registrar in undertaking the documentation I propose.

My thoughts regarding the charge of the registrar in the task of documenting and determining the variables involved in installation art derive from a careful read of the American Association of Museums' "Code of Ethics for Registrars":

*Registrars, through the records maintained, are accountable for the objects in custody of their museum and must be able to provide current information on each object, its location, status, and condition.*<sup>24</sup>

The Code continues in promoting the values of meticulous, honest and complete records. Installation documentation clearly falls under such a mandate of general record keeping. This may seem obvious when applied to paintings, sculptures, drawings or other artworks, but becomes less clear when the materials and content of the art are not so easily 'packaged.' How can a registrar be 'honest' and 'complete' when dealing with something that seems so ephemeral, variable or limitless? These overarching concerns drive much of the new research into installation documentation.

Other policies which can be seen as promoting the thorough documentation of installation art (or really any museum object) can be found in the best practice guidelines established by John E. Simmons in Things Great and Small – Collections Management Policies. In particular, and this will become a keystone to my overall argument, Simmons points out the need for the Documentation Policy section of any institution's Collections Management Policy to purposefully require the "capturing of key information about the

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<sup>24</sup> "Code of Ethics for Registrars." The Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums. 17 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.rcaam.org>>.



object” as one of the *initial*, or entry records.<sup>25</sup> That a mandate be written into the Collections Management Policy of the museum to collect or create this information early in the acquisition process is of paramount importance. Not only does doing so set precedence in establishing it as a requirement, but it emphasizes its overarching importance by demanding complete documentation at a time when it would be easy for the museum to put off creating or collecting this information. Even though it is rather common for museums to skip over this vital step to attend to other pressing concerns, any time documentation is put off to a later date, the museum opens itself to potential mismanagement issues.

#### **b. Legal Considerations**

In addition to the ethical obligations to adequately document museum objects and best practice collections policies, legal concerns also must be considered. Of principal importance is the perpetual relationship that exists between a created work of art and its creator, even after the transfer of other rights such as copyright or physical ownership. In general, rights regarding such aspects as the perpetuation of an artist’s moral rights fall under the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 (VARA). In A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections, Marie Malaro succinctly summarizes the overarching legal perspective of VARA:

*Rights of integrity give the artist the right to prevent intentional distortion, mutilation, or other modification of a work that would be prejudicial to the artist’s honor or reputation.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Simmons, John E. Things Great and Small – Collections Management Policies. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2006. 93.

<sup>26</sup> Malaro, Marie. A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1998. 187.

From this, we can clearly see the potential risk to the museum regarding a disaccord between the museum and the artist in changes in the artwork that come about from the reinstallation of it. An artist whose intent is changed or distorted could lead to litigation. VARA establishes clear distinctions between deliberate, or malicious distortion of an artist's work, and changes made through ethical restoration techniques, even if the end results are not keeping entirely to the artist's wishes. The former could lead to legal actions by the artist; the latter would not be applicable. In any case, to avoid any type of litigious action, the museum has two distinct routes it could pursue: waivers and/or accurate documentation of the artist's intent.

To avoid potentially contentious situations, even in the case of misunderstandings, it is in the best interest of the museum to have precisely defined agreements with artists whose work is to be part of the permanent collection. One possibility is to have the artist waive his/her rights normally covered under VARA. Such a waiver should be explicit in its specified use (installation, exhibitions, etc.), name the work and be duly signed by the artist. In the case of art created collaboratively, one of the creators may waive the right of the entire group even without their consent.<sup>27</sup> Of course, it may not be in the best interest of the artists to sign away their rights, but they may feel compelled to do so in order to see their work accessioned into the museum's collection or included in a particular exhibition. Baring such waivers, documentation, dialogues, interviews, and written agreements serve all parties well.

It is worth pointing out that VARA is both finitely defined and discouragingly vague. Regarding the art covered by the Act, strict definitions are laid out limiting just

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 189.

what type of art is covered<sup>28</sup>, but at the same time leave the application of the Act open to interpretation. A recent case at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) provides a provocative example.

Briefly, in the fall of 2006, Swiss installation artist Christoph Büchel began to create the enormous and elaborate environment *Training Ground for Democracy* on-site at Mass MoCA. After working on it for several months, the artist abandoned the project as an unfinished work due to confrontations he had with the institution over the costs, which had doubled what was originally budgeted. In May 2007, Mass MoCA took the decision to include the unfinished installation in an upcoming exhibit. Büchel took the institution to court claiming that the museum did not have the right to exhibit a work which he, the artist, viewed as modified from his intent. Additionally, the artist claimed that the museum was attempting to attribute the work to him even though he had not authorized them to do so. In the artist's point of view, the abandoned installation was not his work. Büchel's court case was grounded in the application of VARA. The judge in the case eventually found in favor of the museum (which in the end decided not to exhibit the unfinished work as originally planned.)<sup>29</sup> More than anything else, the entire proceeding managed to create not only a sensation of malaise between the artist and the museum, but also set a precedence of dismissing the moral rights of artists in the United

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<sup>28</sup> According to the Act, only works of 'visual art' are covered by the legislation. Visual art is defined as: "original paintings; drawings; prints that exist in single copies or in a signed and consecutively numbered edition of no more than two-hundred copies; sculptures that are carved or fabricated in multiple casts of two-hundred or fewer and that are consecutively numbered by the artist and bear the signature or other identifying mark of the artist; and still photographs produced for exhibition, provided these exist in signed single copies or in a signed and consecutively numbered edition of no more than two-hundred copies. Although photographs must be produced for exhibition, they will not lose their protection if they are used later for non-exhibition purposes." 17 U.S.C. § 101.

<sup>29</sup> Lufkin, Martha. "Mass MoCA Dismantles Artist's Unfinished Installation." *The Art Newspaper* 27 Sept. 2007. 7 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.theartnewspaper.com>>.

States. This overall unfortunate situation proved that because of a lack of proper documentation and artist-museum written agreements, a resolution was sought through litigation rather than through a less damaging means. In the end, both parties lost out.

### **c. Documenting the Artist's Intent**

The best way to alleviate such contentious and litigious situations is to document the artist's intent via interviews and questionnaires to record their views regarding potential changes in subsequent installation parameters. The former will provide more complete results, but the latter seems to be more widely utilized. Questionnaires, which tend to focus mostly on very factual information like the brand of play-back equipment, dates of production, materials used, etc., are indeed useful to the museum. However, even art museums that advocate for the persistent use of questionnaires admit that it is not enough. A registrar at a major American museum of contemporary art<sup>30</sup> summarized the problem in a way that I heard echoed again and again by those charged with documenting contemporary art: "We often have information deficits once the questionnaires are returned, so when it comes time to reinstall, we often need to follow up with the artist or, if provided, the individuals the artist might have named on the form (i.e., fabricators, galleries, etc.)...When all else fails, we basically leave it up to the curator to decide how to install."<sup>31</sup>

Some institutions address core situations with the artist during the formal acquisition stage. The Walker Art Center has created a checklist which includes such

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<sup>30</sup> For issues of privacy, the names of the registrar and the institution have been omitted.

<sup>31</sup> Registrar. "RE: artist questionnaire." Email to the author. 27 Mar. 2008.

unambiguous questions as: “In case of equipment obsolescence, the Walker may find it necessary to replace vintage equipment with newer components. If this can be done in a discreet manner (i.e., bypassing original equipment), is this acceptable to the artist?” and “Does the artist wish to be consulted, should such a case arise?”<sup>32</sup> Media Matters, a Tate research project on the care of time-based media works of art, advocates for even more emphasis on these issues during the pre-acquisition phase. Again, the questions are blunt yet of vital importance: “What are the essential vs. desirable exhibition conditions, including space requirements?” and “What can and cannot be changed in the display?”<sup>33</sup> These are just a few of the questions directed at the artist to assist in preparing the museum to assess the impact the work will have if it becomes a part of the permanent collection. A deeper investigation into the artist’s thoughts regarding his/her work is often best elaborated through questionnaires and direct interviews.

As a response to art institutions that were seeking guidance on formulating questionnaires, The International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) established an effective general resource guide to conducting artists’ interviews for the purpose of garnering essential insight into their oeuvre. With a view to collecting and effectively exhibiting art in keeping with the artists’ intent, the guide proposes seven approaches or methodologies to conducting artist interviews. Communication via letter,

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<sup>32</sup> Depocas, Alain, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, eds. 43.

<sup>33</sup> “Acquisitions: Pre-Acquisitions.” Media Matters. Tate. 7 Feb. 2007 <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/acquisitions/preacquisition.html/>>.

questionnaire, phone call, face-to-face conversation, brief or limited interview, extended interview, and working together with the artist are all explored.<sup>34</sup>

The most basic communication with the artist is proposed via a letter or email. This is best developed with very explicit and concise questions in mind. The goal is not only to acquire insight, but to have something which can serve as documental value for the object file. Unfortunately, the museum cannot always rely on receiving a timely or appropriate response to a letter or email. The same holds true for a more elaborate questionnaire. Letters and questionnaires demand a lot of the artist's time, and motivation to complete them may not be seen as a top priority by the artist. Similar to a letter, a questionnaire cannot however be depended upon to elicit the breadth and complexity needed to document an artwork. For example, certain queries would just be too unwieldy to respond to succinctly in a written format.

To address the relationship among the various components which comprise a total work usually requires the prompt of being physically within the installed work. This is true especially of work which has a highly interactive quality, is composed of complicated arrangements or employs the accumulation of many parts of even seemingly random detritus. To address such issues, oral communication is usually a better alternative.

Phone calls are often effective in clarifying very precise details or in obtaining answers to specific concerns. They also permit a more fluid conversation which may lead to direct questions not previously anticipated. As with any type of communication, the person instigating the call will be at the mercy of the artist and certain questions could be

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<sup>34</sup> "Guide to Good Practice: Artists' Interviews." International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art. 7 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.incca.org>>.

construed as an interruption to his or her work, or an invasion of privacy. Additionally, not everyone communicates effectively via telephone. Face-to-face conversations may be the better all around strategy.

The best face-to-face conversations take place in the physical presence of the art work itself. As in all cases, extensive preparation on the part of the instigator will provide the best results. Careful consideration should be made regarding the duration of the conversation and to judiciously controlling the direction of the dialogue. These interviews can be either brief undertakings or extended as more exploratory-based investigations.

In either case, it is often beneficial to prep the artist with the content of the interview ahead of time. For brief or limited interviews, documentation techniques should be determined and confirmed with the artist. Audio, video and just taking notes are all viable options, but obviously video provides more content from which to base future conclusions. INCCA encourages multiple interview sessions and even multiple voices in conducting the interview (curator, conservator, technician, art historian, art-handler, registrar, etc.) This could lead to suggesting more extensive interviews with the artist.<sup>35</sup>

The extended interview allows the interviewer to probe more deeply not only into particular works, techniques or intents, but allows for a more far-reaching exploration of larger themes, or connections in the artist's oeuvre. The questions for an extended interview are usually more open-ended and can (hopefully) provide deeper layers of content. Obviously, the extended interview shows a commitment on the end of the artist to effectively document as much about their thoughts and expectations as possible. If the

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<sup>35</sup> I fully acknowledge that these recommendations from the INCCA represent ideal scenarios. Museums struggling to make the best use of a limited staff may balk at what could be seen as an impossible demand on their time. Nonetheless, interviews with the artist should definitely be conducted, even if the institution must modify the extent to which the conversations are carried out.

artist is extremely intent on providing as much insight into their creative process as possible, a session spent with the interviewer working together with the artist will provide a very desirable level of information.

If you can arrange to observe an artist's working session, or, better yet, an installation of their work in which they are participating, you may be able to glean information that goes far beyond responses to questions. A certain level of trust and comfort must exist for an artist to agree to such a session. The interviewer must be able to read the situation well and know how far to take the conversation. As with all interviews, the key is in the preparation.

In all cases, it is recommended that notes and annotations of the interviews be presented to the artist afterwards for their approval. The end result of all interviews and questionnaires is a record which provides the museum with vital information to turn to in the future. The timing of these interviews and of the documentation in general is also vitally important. The more time that has passed from the creation of the work to the documentation of it, the more removed the artist will be from it. Additionally, after the work is created, it takes its place in art history while the artist continues to develop and advance his or her personal progression. Therefore late intervention on the part of the artists in reference to documenting their work makes them too far removed from the *Kunstwollen* of the work.<sup>36</sup>

These interview scenarios suggested by the INCCA are general in scope. With regard to specific interview considerations for new media installation art, we must turn to some undertakings by the Tate Museum's Pip Laurenson and by the Guggenheim

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<sup>36</sup> Hummelen. 207.



Museum's Carol Stringari. Both are at the forefront of time-based media conservation. They are frequently called upon to present at international symposia and I was fortunate to meet and talk with them when I attended "The Object in Transition: A Cross Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art" at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, from 24-25 January 2008. Their agency with the theme of time-based media conservation can be traced back to their active participation in the "Modern Art: Who Cares" symposia in 1997.

Laurenson presented at this symposium on the theme of documenting video material when it is a component of installation art. She emphasized issues which are still today considered at the core of effective documentation. Broken down under the headings 'video material,' 'copyright and editions,' 'display,' and 'access,' the general criteria under the display topic emphasize the unique considerations of new media installation art vis-à-vis more traditional art materials and genres. Not only did Laurenson advocate for confirming with the artist if the installation is 'tightly defined,' but she was one of the first to really press the issue of documenting the play-back equipment and attitudes towards media obsolescence and the relationship between the equipment and the meaning embedded in the work.<sup>37</sup>

At the same symposia, Stringari also addressed issues pertaining to installation art. Regarding the artist's intent, she emphasized its importance especially in determining the essential relationships which exists among the various components of the installation. The danger in fixating on the components, however, is the tendency to fetishize the minutiae. Stringari emphasizes that "it should be kept in mind that the inherent nature of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 270.

creativity defies our obsessive need to categorize and catalogue...The harmonious whole and not each singular element is what constitutes a successful work.”<sup>38</sup> This is of paramount importance and encourages the documentation of the installation with the artist so that those charged with the stewardship of the artwork will not inadvertently waste time and effort fixating on nonessential details. The only way to do this is through dialogue and documentation, including the video documentation of the installed work.

#### **d. Video Documenting Installation Art**

A recently published article, “Video Documentation of Installations” by Gaby Wijers, provides an excellent primer on the subject. By addressing the issue of not only *how* to document, but *what* to document, the guide manages to fill the gap between theoretical and practical concerns. Some the benefits of video documentation of installation art include capturing the “overall impression, visual aspects of components, relation of components, relation to space/architecture, sound, movement, choreography, time specific aspects, interactivity and presence (and experience) of the audience.”<sup>39</sup> All of these would be extremely unruly, or even impossible to document in a written form. Just as proponents of artist questionnaires concede to the benefit of video recording, the same is seen in reverse. Wijers agrees that “in theory, the best approach would be to find a method describing the work, its history and its (re)presentation(s), and use a framework to trace, collect, describe and classify documents and information.”<sup>40</sup> The necessity of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 281.

<sup>39</sup> Wijers, Gaby. “Video Documentation of Installations.” Inside Installations. 10 Mar. 2008 <<http://insideinstallations.org>>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

video documentation fills in the gaps of information essential to understand what cannot be written down.

The key to video documentation for the purpose of facilitating the re-installation of the work is exactitude. Principally, the relationship and position of the individual components and how they relate to the complete installation are at the core of why video documentation should be utilized. In order for this information to be useful for re-installations, this must be paired with an explanation from the artist as to the vital importance of these relationships or the extent of their variability. In addition to documenting relationships, processes are also essential to record.

One video documentation strategy which can be of benefit is capturing the (de)installation process. Done using static surveillance cameras, these long exposure recordings are not helpful in their original form, but when viewed in a sped-up, or fast-forward manner they provide an overarching record of the specific installation process which will benefit those undertaking the same in the future. However, this type of documentation lacks an essential level of detail and should only be used in a very general way to steer future installations. The guide recommends that the *de*-installation process should be documented in this manner and the resulting video formatted in reverse to show how to install the work. A simple trick, but useful in alleviating the stress and insecurity often connected to the installation process. To add to the fast-forward view, multiple cameras may prove more useful in seeing the installation from various viewpoints. A combination is the best approach.

Overall, a complete video documentation 'package' for the intended purpose of being a guide for re-installation (as opposed to a publicity video, etc.) should include a

general installation (static) overview, zoom views of details, recordings of sounds, and voice-overs indicating elements that may not be clear from a mere visual standpoint.<sup>41</sup>

Even though it seems that video documentation is the best way to guarantee a successful and true iteration of future installations, the issues of cost and time loom above every project. The budget will dictate to what degree video documentation will take place and the cost to do so should be included in the pre-acquisition considerations reviewed by museum acquisition committees. Videos can be prepared by staff members, contracted out to semi-professionals, or in the best-of-all-worlds completed by video specialists. The latter will be able to provide the best post-production options. As a further aid, this guide has a free, online tutorial which helps in teaching the techniques necessary to adequately document installation art with video.<sup>42</sup>

The course consists of two modules, one which is more theoretical and encourages discourse on why documentation is necessary, and a second which intends to instill more practical, how-to skills. In addition, there is an online test, a library of videos to illustrate 'module 1,' and several interviews with researchers who share their views and experiences in working with the video documentation of installation art. Between the published article and the online tutorial, a clearer understanding of the importance of video documentation becomes apparent. Augmented with research, the results of artist questionnaires and other written documentation and registration, the complexities of documenting installation art become more effectively tackled.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.inside-installations.org/onlinecoursevideodocumentation/>

#### 4. “New” New Media

##### a. The Taxonomical Problem

New media, time-based media, unstable media, emergent media, digital media, multimedia...perhaps it goes without saying that yet another of the overarching challenges of dealing with this type of art in a museum context is a question of semantics. Flipping through art magazines, reading scholarly journals, or perusing blogs and websites opens up the researcher or the casually-curious to so many different taxonomies that it is a challenge to argue for a linguistic standard (and to address the necessity to do so in the first place.) Before delving deeper into questions of language and vocabulary, it is beneficial and even essential to define the core concept: what is new media art?

Writer, curator, theorist and university educator Beryl Graham, in a paper presented at the Museums and the Web conference in 2005, succinctly defined new media art as: “Art made with, and for, digital media, including the Internet or computer-controlled installations. These definitions of digital art will therefore be considered through the wider lens of categories from the world of art.”<sup>43</sup> I find this definition to be valuable as it insists upon dealing with new media art not as some mysterious ‘other’ but rather as part of existing concepts.

Additionally, we have to keep in mind that the discourse over the taxonomy of new media art is all encompassing. A participant in the New Media Curating Discussion List eloquently outlined the issue in the following way:

*The taxonomies that new media art curators, academics, artists and critics are dealing with go much deeper than the structuring logic of a museum’s*

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<sup>43</sup> Graham, Beryl. Taxonomies of New Media Art; Real World Namings, in J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds.). *Museums and the Web 2005: Proceedings*, Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, published March 31, 2005 at <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2005/papers/graham/graham.html>

*collection or exhibition programming schedule, they permeate the entire culture industry such as funding institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation and other grant awarding bodies, and more visibly they shape or determine the structures of art schools and graduate programs within research universities so that the definitions of new media art are made or shaped before the art is even produced. [...] So unlike earlier moments when definitions were usually connected to individual artists' practices, new media art has sort of, in my estimation, been reverse engineered so to speak.*<sup>44</sup>

It is this concept of reverse engineering vocabulary that is one of the largest obstacles in establishing an authority source. How can we document something, or even thoroughly discuss it when the words we try to use to do so are so intrinsically tied to describing the processes involved? Rhizome, a non-profit organization “dedicated to the creation, presentation, preservation, and critique of emerging artistic practices that engage technology”<sup>45</sup> defines new media art as “contemporary art that uses emerging technologies in significant ways.”<sup>46</sup> This definition is at the heart of one of the most influential aspects of Rhizome: its historical and continuing documentation of the language surrounding new media art and its creation.

The Rhizome ArtBase Vocabulary is an on-line growing record of terms and language used by artists themselves to describe the content, creation and reference for their work. Artists can select from the database of terms currently on record or supply their own terms if necessary. Once a term achieves a certain level of popularity it automatically becomes part of the established vocabulary thus insuring that the Rhizome vocabulary best reflects the changing semantics of new media art.

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<sup>44</sup> Sutton, G. (2004). “taxonomies, definitions, archives, etc..” E-mail to NEW-MEDIA-CURATING@JISCMail.AC.UK (New-Media-Curating Discussion List). Tue, 7 Sep 2004 08:35:02 -0700 consulted March 9, 2008, <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind04&L=new-media-curating&T=0&O=D&P=38941>

<sup>45</sup> “General Information: History.” Rhizome. 12 Feb. 2008 <<http://rhizome.org>>.

<sup>46</sup> “ArtBase: Selection Criteria.” Rhizome. 12 Feb. 2008 <<http://rhizome.org>>.

In spite of the fact that so much of the language attached to new media is in flux, there are certain fixed resources and established vocabularies which can be referenced to aid in documenting new media installation art. The trilingual (English, French, and German) New Media Encyclopedia compiled by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, is one such source.<sup>47</sup> Normally when seeking standard language resources for cataloguing or documenting art, many turn to the well-established Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) compiled and maintained by the Getty Research Institute.<sup>48</sup> Murtha Baca, Head of the Getty Vocabulary Program, explained that the AAT already contains a “great deal of terminology relating to contemporary art and new media.”<sup>49</sup> However, terms like ‘Net.Art’, ‘new media’ or ‘electronic art’ produce no results in a search for such basic concepts integral to documentation. The Getty Vocabulary Program relies on submissions from qualified external sources to keep the thesaurus current. To date, however, Rhizome has not provided any vocabulary to the AAT.<sup>50</sup> This leads me to consider that as authoritative as the AAT is, perhaps those searching for new media vocabulary are turning elsewhere when searching for contemporary uses of appropriate taxonomies.

The New Media Encyclopedia and the Rhizome ArtBase Vocabulary are by far not the only commendable vocabulary sources available. In fact, the glossary maintained

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<sup>47</sup> “Encyclopedia Consultation.” Nouveaux Media / New Media / Neue Medien. 19 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.newmedia-art.org>>.

<sup>48</sup> “Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online.” The Getty. 7 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.getty.edu>>.

<sup>49</sup> Baca, Murtha. “Re: Query From CCO Workshop Participant (Chicago 2007).” Email to the author. 18 Mar. 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

by *Electronic Arts Intermix* goes beyond conceptual definitions to include a very thorough list of technical components and play-back equipment.<sup>51</sup>

On the topic of semantics, another problematic area emerges when seeking a unified vocabulary to discuss general issues of installation. In an art historical sense, the term ‘installation’ was first used in the 1960s to refer to how art works were arranged or organized in a space.<sup>52</sup> When artists began to see the arrangement or installation of the work *as* the art itself and not just a means of display, the term ‘installation art’ came to be used to reference work where the space, the relationship between elements displayed, and the participation of the viewer all worked together to create the totality of the work. In that way, the general idea of installation art can find its roots in Dada, Arte Povera, Happenings, and Environments. Julie H. Reiss further emphasizes that in installation art “there is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer.”<sup>53</sup>

The pan-European collaborative project “Inside Installation: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art” has just released the results of their three-year-long project in which participating cultural institutions throughout Europe explored installation art from a display perspective to an in-depth view of documentation. Regarding documentation, the consortium created a glossary which, though very much a work-in-progress, serves as an authoritative source for those seeking terminology or language to reference installation art.

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<sup>51</sup> “Glossary.” *Electronic Arts Intermix*. Independent Media Arts Preservation, Inc. 16 Feb. 2008 <<http://eai.org>>.

<sup>52</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge. 2005. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Reiss, Julie H. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1999. xiii.



Accessed through the project's web presence,<sup>54</sup> the organizational approach to the vocabulary provides insight into the impetus of the project which can be traced back to other research. In particular, the glossary not only provides reference to terminology used in documenting the workshop sessions and video conferences associated with the project, but acknowledges the work already accomplished in sources such as the Getty Research Institute's Art and Architecture Thesaurus, the Variable Media Questionnaire, and in the Subject Descriptions from the Catalogue of Netherlands Media Art Institute/Montevideo.<sup>55</sup>

Though only encompassing about one hundred key terms, the glossary is an excellent introduction and a keenly organized resource for emerging terminology. The words, phrases and concepts are organized under the following six categories: typology of installation art, characteristics, identity of art work, behavior of art work, status of the conservation object, and conservation strategies. What sets this glossary apart from other existing dictionaries, or word-lists is that the concepts explored are not merely defined, but rather are given a fuller context through descriptions, referenced texts or linked explanations. As an on-line tool, it provides a quick and efficient guide to currently used installation art nomenclature. My only hope is that the guide continues to be updated as the study of installation art continues. Since the government-funded project has drawn to a close, this question is a real concern.

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<sup>54</sup> "Inside Installations Glossary." Inside Installations. 22 Feb. 2008 <<http://insideinstallations.org>>.

<sup>55</sup> "Catalogue: List of Subjects." Catalogue Netherlands Media Art Institute. 22 Feb. 2008 <<http://catalogue.montevideo.nl/>>.

## **b. Bill Viola: A Proactive Artist**

To better see how artists are approaching the concept of documentation as an integral part of the self-preservation of their new media installation art, I was specifically directed to the efforts of artist Bill Viola. An early adopter of exploiting time-based media to achieve a creative end, Viola is explicit in the restrictions he places on his work and in documenting his views on both the present and future levels of flexibility in maintaining his videos and installations. When preparing for his 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Viola discovered that some of his early work was no longer playable in its original format as the tape had deteriorated extensively. This realization in turn altered the concept of the exhibition to the artist; exhibition was taking on the form of restoration.<sup>56</sup> As a result, Viola began to think beyond just the technical considerations of the media and started to standardize the architectural plans for his installations, document sound levels for future reference and create detailed instruction guides for future iterations of his oeuvre.

Forced to consider his views on the future existence of his work, Viola formulated the following response to the question: What do you see in the distant future for your work?

*It's hard to say. Some days, I envision a conscientious curator who ensures that the master tapes and the equipment remain updated to the current format and who diligently reads the archival materials to ensure that the work is installed according to my original intentions... We simply do not know the fate of all these works we are producing or in what way they will be used in the future.<sup>57</sup>*

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<sup>56</sup> Corzo, Miguel Angel, ed. Bill Viola. Mortality/Immortality? the Legacy of 20th Century Art. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999. 87.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 87-88.

Later, perhaps after re-evaluating these statements, Viola began to take even more agency in the fate of his work. Ten years ago, few museums were taking the initiative to be proactive in the registration and documentation of new media installation art and, as a consequence, Viola and his studio staff developed their own registration procedures and created their own condition reports and maintenance schedules for the display equipment.<sup>58</sup>

With time, Viola's individualized notes to document the self-proclaimed restrictions over subsequent iterations of his installations became a standard mandate attached to his work. For example, Viola's video installation *Anima* (2000) is accompanied by an artist's statement meant to guide the museum or gallery with explicit instructions on how to deal with all the conceptual and physical aspects of the work. Heavy on the restrictions, the text insists on maintaining the original physical composition, limiting ambient lighting, and keeping the silver/gray framing intact, just to name a few.<sup>59</sup> On a flexible note, the artist allows for future iterations of the work to expand the scale of the projection screens (yet states that in no case should the scale be reduced.) Additionally, if technological advances permit, future renditions of the work can have the play-back equipment mounted within the frame of the work if it is small enough to be unobtrusive. Of all the comments from the artist, absolute mandates are set stating that under no circumstance is the work to be altered in quality, even if technology permits it. It can never be reconfigured to alter the original exhibition and it is to exist

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>59</sup> "Resource Guide: Preservation/Installation/Case Studies." Electronic Arts Intermix. Independent Media Arts Preservation, Inc. 10 Oct. 2007 <<http://eai.org>>.

always as a unique object, meaning that there can not be simultaneously exhibited multiple exhibition copies of the work.<sup>60</sup>

Viola's wife, Kira Perov, has been charged with overseeing and managing the archive, documentation and preservation concerns of Viola's oeuvre for nearly thirty years now. Viola's studio demands such control over every aspect of production and exhibition due to the delicate nature of the digital medium. Perov explained: "If you get it wrong just a little bit, you get it wrong a lot."<sup>61</sup> Every edition of the work is numbered and accompanied by a signed certificate, installation plans, detailed instructions, and, in most cases, original playback equipment. Additionally, a cloned master copy is included with each acquired work. These master copies are considered the decisive core, or life of the work. All of this is done in order to maintain that the artist's intent is firmly embedded as a tacit understanding when acquiring the work.

### **c. Vera Frenkel's "Living Will" Documentation**

Canadian media artist Vera Frenkel, on her own accord, has developed an online documentation strategy to preserve and help facilitate future iterations of her installation *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love*. The installation itself has a website component, related wall works and a digital file of 'Dreadful Songs.'<sup>62</sup> However, it is the addition of a companion online site, whose tripartite purpose of documenting the work, providing assistance in installing it, and promoting the work, which stands out as a

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Resource Guide: Preservation/Installation/Interview: Perov." Electronic Arts Intermix. Independent Media Arts Preservation, Inc. 20 April 2008 <<http://eai.org>>.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.the-national-institute.org>

forward-thinking, proactive step on the part of the artist with reference to installation stewardship.<sup>63</sup> Frenkel refers to this online resource guide as a ‘living will’ for her work.<sup>64</sup> Though this is the first such online guide she has created, her intention is to continue utilizing these descriptive websites and developing them further as the amount of information connected to her oeuvre grows and changes over time.

There are many referential parts to the ‘living will’ which explicitly dictate the minimum requirements for the installation while also spelling out which ideas/components are more flexible. In her introduction to the exhibition resources, the artist explains that “these guidelines are provided to assist curators and installation personnel to identify overall exhibition requirements when installing *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> in a given space.”<sup>65</sup> This expands into a downloadable PDF document with parallel information located in pull-down menus.

The guidelines have at their core the balance between restrictions and flexibility. Physical specifications, like stating a preference for tungsten lighting over halogen/fluorescent lighting, flood lights over spots and raking lights over direct illumination, explain and document the importance of the ambient lighting to the artist. In contrast, there are fewer restrictions on the spaces and layout for the installation. The artist emphasizes that the installation can be installed in a small-, mid-, and full-scaled version. Each option is further documented.

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.the-national-institute.org/tour>

<sup>64</sup> Frenkel, Vera. “Re: [NEW-MEDIA-CURATING] Documenting New Media Installation Art.” Email to the author. 28 Mar. 2008.

<sup>65</sup> “Installation Guidelines.” The National Institute for the Arts on Tour. 27 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.the-national-institute.org/tour>>.

Currently there are six different iterations represented on the website. Each one can be categorized as representative of various different scales. Individual reinstallations show the floor plan, documentation photos of the space, screen shots, technical installation details and object placement. All of the photos are noted with additional information which helps compare similar components in their different iterations. There is also a video of the inaugural installation at the Hart House at the University of Toronto in 2003. The artist even includes a downloadable condition report form in the exhibition resource guide.

In evaluating this endeavor, I found the idea of an artist documenting and assisting in the further existence of her installation work to be a compelling and positive advance in my advocacy for documenting new media installation art. However, there are some deficiencies in her project which need to be addressed. Of paramount importance is the concern over the perpetuity of the website. Currently, the site is maintained by the artist via DreamHost, an established, yet inexpensive web hosting service. If the contracted service period expires without being renewed, or the company ceases to remain an active provider, the documentation could be lost, or at least compromised. Additionally, the condition report supplied by the artist is ineffective in giving guidance to adequately document the components of the installation. For example, as is, the report simply provides spaces to fill out noting the 'item' and indicating the incoming/outgoing condition as 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', or 'poor.'<sup>66</sup> To stabilize both of these situations the information documented on the website could be transferred to a museum, library, university, archive, etc. to maintain as part of their digital heritage collections (though the

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<sup>66</sup> "Forms Available from *The Institute*<sup>™</sup>: Condition Report." The National Institute for the Arts on Tour. 27 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.the-national-institute.org/tour>>.

longevity of even these institutions needs to be questioned as well.) As for the condition report, established, and media-specific reports currently developed as part of the Media Matters project could be substituted for more explicit documentation.

Additionally, the installation guidelines often speak in overarching vague terms like “[the] visitor experience is the most important consideration,” and “good documentation is required, both with and without visitors, on completion of the installation” without providing any guidelines or examples.<sup>67</sup> So, this ‘living will’ may not be a perfect solution to the documentation challenges that impact museums, especially as the guidelines continuously refer the reader to contact the artist or her team to discuss the project. Though this allows for the wider level of variance in reinstalling the work, it creates a dependency on the artist to make too many ad-hoc decisions and, in effect, may negate much of the previously documented work as merely anecdotal. In any case, I commend this proactive artist-led initiative and view it as a good start. I would encourage more artists to consider doing the same as an integral component of any installation created.

## **5. Installation Art Documentation: The Status Quo**

### **a. Intermedia Stewardship Projects**

Leading from the contact I had with Vera Frenkel and the personal documentation efforts related to her oeuvre, I was curious to determine what the status quo was regarding attempts at documenting new media art in general. To that end, I reached out to three professional listservs. I posted to two listservs from the American Association of Museums: the Registrar’s Committee (RC-AAM) and the Museum Computer Network

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<sup>67</sup> “Installation Guidelines.” The National Institute for the Arts on Tour.

(MCN), and to the New Media Curating Discussion List which is facilitated by Professor Beryl Graham of the School of Arts, Design, Media and Culture at the University of Sunderland (UK) as part of CRUMB (Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss.) The response I received from registrars, curators, technicians and artists reiterated much of what I had already discovered from prior research. Respondents highlighted seven principal initiatives, organizations or projects as exemplifying substantial strides in documenting new media art, some of which have previously been introduced in earlier sections of this thesis. The New Art Trust, The Variable Media Network, Electronic Arts Intermix, Inside Installations, DOCAM (*Documentation et Conservation du Patrimoine des Arts Médiatiques*) in Canada, INCCA (International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art), and V2\_ in Rotterdam are all currently experimenting with different aspects of concern to art museums interested in intermedia stewardship, which includes storage, safeguarding, documentation, exhibition, preservation and conservation issues. Though their collective voice speaks to the same end, the separate proposals put forth by the groups vary in scope and detail. Still, there are enough similarities in their conclusions that we can extrapolate at least the start of what may become good practice.

Founded by Pamela and Richard Kramlich in 1997, The New Art Trust is composed of registrars, conservators, curators and media technical managers from the MoMA in New York, the SFMoMA in San Francisco, and the Tate in London. Over the course of several years, the consortium intends to develop international standards which address the unique care, handling and installation needs of time-based media works. Their goal is to create practical strategies which move beyond theoretical discourse.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Collaborating Towards the Care of Time-Based Media Works of Art." *Media Matters*. Tate. 10 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/>>.



The first phase of this project, which concerned the loan process, dealt primarily with creating a series of guidelines and templates for museums to use when borrowing or lending intermedia art. Accepting that these prototype documents needed to be thoroughly tested in real situations, the consortium agreed to make all of the documents available for museum professionals to freely download and adapt to their particular use. Available at the Tate website (<http://www.tate.org.uk>), the various documents and guidelines have at their core another idea inherent to this project: collaboration.

Perhaps the most basic consideration to accept when approaching the topic of intermedia art in a museum context is the absolute necessity to draw on the talents and skills of many different people, including those who come from outside the traditional museum circle of professionals. As further emphasis on instilling the importance of collaboration, The New Art Trust readily solicited comments and edits of their recommendations. While still obviously in an experimental phase, I have seen members of the Museum-L listserv and the RC-AAM listserv recommend these templates to colleagues who were seeking solutions to their concerns with intermedia documentation. The word is slowly getting out and people are turning to the documents to address media issues.

Apart from providing check lists, facility standards and budgetary guidelines, the detailed, yet adaptable templates are the core of the project. The forms range from condition reports for CD/DVDs to more complex installation templates which attempt to aid in the documentation necessities of everything from recording public flow to synchronization details and maintenance requirements. The Trust also promotes documenting the artist's regard to the critical elements of their work by advocating for

purposeful interviews conducted by museum professionals with the artist. This key issue surfaces again and again as being essential in the establishment of criteria and flexible limitations on the reinstallation of the work.

Pip Laurenson is a member of the Trust project team and frequent panel presenter and session leader at international symposia and conferences. At last year's DOCAM conference in Montreal, Laurenson acknowledged that there is a certain level of anxiety in the museum profession when it comes to dealing with new media art. The New Art Trust is thus attempting to explain their goals to as wide of an audience as possible with the hope that their project will serve as a springboard to put different ideas and resources out there for others to adapt to their uses.<sup>69</sup> With the feedback from participants, the Trust is able to retool their original output to eventually reach their desire of creating a standard.

The Variable Media Network (previously known as The Variable Media Initiative) began as a partnership between the Guggenheim Museum and the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology. Later, many more partners, collaborators and consultants were added to the core group resulting with the current dynamic mix of individuals and institutions. The focus of the affiliation "is to help build a network of organizations that will develop the tools, methods and standards needed to implement [the preservation of conceptual, minimalist and video-based art]."<sup>70</sup> Whereas The New Art Trust focuses on producing working documents adapted to the

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<sup>69</sup> Laurenson, Pip. "Where are We Now? Capabilities, Process and Change in the Conservation of Time Based Media Works of Art." Documentation et Conservation du Patrimoine des Arts Mediatiques. DOCAM 2006 Annual Summit. Tanna Schulich Hall at the McGill University Schulich School of Music, Montreal. 26 Oct. 2006. 6 Apr. 2007 <[www.docam.ca](http://www.docam.ca)>.

<sup>70</sup> The Variable Media Network. 8 Mar. 2007 <<http://variablemedia.net>>.

particularities of new media art, the Variable Media Network provides conceptual considerations, which aid in producing a detailed record of ephemeral work.

The members of the Network propose that we approach ephemeral art in terms of ‘behaviors’ and ‘strategies.’<sup>71</sup> A ‘behavior’ is a concept that transcends material descriptions in order to consider the conceptual core of the work. To describe art in terms of being networked, performed, installed, interactive, etc. is one means of documenting essential elements which often escapes traditional record-taking. ‘Strategies’ allow the artist to document their view on how to deal with the obsolescence of the components of their art. The four proposed strategies are storage, emulation, migration and reinterpretation.

Storage implies that perishables like hardware, bulbs, projectors, etc. will be stockpiled for future installations. The hazard to this is that once this supply is used up, the work will cease to exist. Neither the artist, nor the museum usually desires such demise. Museums do not fulfill their missions by allowing artworks to transform into useless relics in the back corner of their storage facilities. Still, some artists insist that, for example, certain obsolete play-back equipment is essential to the integrity of their work. If this is the case, all parties involved need to understand this from the very beginning in order to assess the ability and willingness of the museum to undertake the restriction and its subsequent ramifications. E-bay has indeed become a veritable marketplace of ‘dead media’ which desperate registrars comb carefully for obsolete replacement parts. Whether this is the best use of their time remains debatable.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Emulation allows for future installations of the work to be imitated in a way that mimics the original by using new materials, hardware, etc. This eschews questions of proper storage for media files by permitting the work to be created as a facsimile in a totally new medium. An example of this would be to utilize new software to ‘impersonate’ old hardware.<sup>72</sup>

Migration, on the other hand, involves upgrading equipment and source materials. The risk involved here is a compromise on the original look of the work as the result of utilizing new equipment will surely produce a different ‘feel.’ Transferring work created originally on laserdisc to DVD is an example of migration.

Reinterpretation, the most radical strategy, involves totally rethinking the essential or metaphorical elements of a work when reinstalling it. In other words, the work will look totally different each time it is exhibited.<sup>73</sup> For a reinterpreted work, it is the idea alone which guides its iteration. There is no integrity imbedded in the physical materials used to originally create the work. This extreme reinterpretation of work, though radical in its approach and obviously not applicable nor acceptable to a wide range of work, does guarantee longevity by allowing for the broadest interpretation of the work against cultural or technical obsolescence. In the end, it is the decision of the artist which helps direct the museum professional as to how to deal with these thorny issues.

Once again, recording the artist’s voice is seen as paramount. The Variable Media Network created an interactive questionnaire to aid in documenting the artist’s views on how to approach their work in the future. By dealing with issues that have no connection

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

to the materials used, but rather address the conceptual core, the Network effectively transforms the concept of the traditional artist questionnaire into a conversation about the work's essence. This questionnaire is meant to be a starting point and not an exhaustive and complete document. Eventually, the intent is to generate a database which can be referenced by Network members, artists and other people interested in the recorded information. Though the primary focus of the Network is for preservation, it becomes evident that these issues are directly related to concerns involving the reinstallation of the work. The focus is on being able to maintain the work not only in storage, but in the future exhibition of the art as well.

Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) was established in 1971 and is today one of the leading non-profit resources dedicated to time-based media art. Of particular interest is their online resource guide to collecting, exhibiting and preserving media art.<sup>74</sup> This guide establishes a more step-by-step approach to installing new media art, and you could definitely come to this source when looking for a realistic guide into what to anticipate in the reinstallation of media-based work. The guide establishes some generalized best practices, but in a very overarching manner. Where this resource proves the most useful is in encompassing the myriad issues involving budgeting, planning and technical concerns which may arise before, during and after the installation of a new media exhibit. There is an extensive and illustrated technical chapter, which explains what could easily be perceived as a daunting array of cables, display devices, and various media components. Echoing the recommendations of The New Art Trust and The Variable Media Network, EAI implores for explicit communication with the artist for everything

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<sup>74</sup> "EAI Online Resource Guide for Exhibiting, Collecting and Preserving Media Art." Electronic Arts Intermix. 2006. 6 Feb. 2007 <<http://resourceguide.eai.org/>>.

from understanding intent, to achieving technical specifications and construction documents. And, as not to reinvent the wheel, EAI provides direct hyperlinks to the New Art Trust templates described previously. The collaborative theme runs strong through the entire EAI resource guide.

Inside Installations, which I introduced in an earlier chapter, was a three year long pan-European initiative to promote the collaborative research of twenty-five cultural institutions involved with time-based media installations. Funded by the European Commission's Culture 2000 program, thirty works were selected to be studied, documented and reinstalled with the view to create *good* practice in five study areas: preservation strategies, artists' participation, documentation and archiving strategies, theory and semantics, and knowledge management and information exchange.<sup>75</sup> The project was completed in late 2007 and online and print documentation of the findings are an influential resource for institutions concerned with intermedia installations.

INCCA and DOCAM, as websites, primarily serve as collections of resources for a variety of research projects and initiatives undertaken to advance the conservation and documentation of contemporary art. INCAA tends to focus logically on issues of conservation, while the more expansive DOCAM has a much further reach within the limit of digital media. One aspect of DOCAM, which acts as an essential research tool, is its extensive video archive of seminar sessions, roundtable discussions and other related presentations. In the past, these were unavailable to anyone who had not attended the actual event in question. DOCAM projects range from terminology initiatives to pedagogical schemes.

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<sup>75</sup> Inside Installations. 10 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.inside-installations.org>>.

Finally, research was conducted in 2003 by V2\_, the center for art, culture and technology in Rotterdam. Under the title “Capturing Unstable Media,” the project involved, in part, an exploration into appropriate techniques for documenting intermedia installations.<sup>76</sup> Due to the complex and heterogeneous nature of most media art, documentation strategies for it need to be approached in alternative and inventive ways. A major concern surfaced, which highlighted the difficulty of documenting new media art due to a lack of consistent taxonomies. More than anything else, the enormous inconsistencies in terminology will need to be addressed before any great strides can be made in documentation, which intends to serve a universal need and not just the needs of a single institution.

Of the standards proposed in documenting time-based media installations, the researchers emphasized that much of the documentation would hinge on the level of detail necessary to capture accurately the essence of the work. Some categories of documentation will not be relevant to certain institutions, but that does not imply that pertinent information should be excluded. In the end, a hierarchical metadata structure of concepts called the Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model (CMCM) was developed.<sup>77</sup> Of a more exacting nature than the other documentation strategies proposed by different groups, this format depends on exact vocabulary and precise descriptions of the relationships between various electronic activities in order to achieve eventual archival interoperability.

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<sup>76</sup> “Documentation and Capturing Methods for Unstable Media Arts.” Capturing Unstable Media. 2004. V2 Organisation. 6 Feb. 2007 <<http://capturing.projects.v2.nl/>>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

## **b. Recent Project Findings**

*Contemporary sculpture [including installations] knows no boundaries. There is no material or technology, from dirt to video, that sculpture won't pick up and exploit for its own ends, and there are no formal parameters like, say, the flatness of painting to constrain it.*

-Ken Johnson in: "Is Sculpture Too Free for Its Own Good?"<sup>78</sup>

We can continue with Johnson's musing on contemporary installation art as indefinable by extending its limitlessness to documentation as well. On the outset of this project, I had originally contemplated that I would be able to establish, or at the very least advocate for some type of best practice in the documentation of new media installation art. After considering the recent findings of DOCAM and through discussing the topic with curators, registrars and conservators, my intentions are now more in line with facilitating guidelines to help best assess individual situations. I still fully advocate that it is paramount to document the technical and conceptual levels of variance for all new media installation art, but now more clearly realize that to do so, the best route involves suggestions rather than mandates.

At the Museums and the Web 2008 Conference, a session entitled "New Media Art in Museum Collections: A Report from the DOCAM Cataloguing and Conservation Committees" summarized the recent research and case studies undertaken regarding, among other concerns, the paramount issues of archival, technical and ethical challenges which museums face when incorporating new media art into their permanent collections. As part of their research, the DOCAM Research Alliance surveyed institutions in North America, Europe and Australia to get a better perspective on practices in different countries. The Alliance's goal parallels mine: advocating documentation as a means to

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<sup>78</sup> Johnson, Ken. "Is Sculpture Too Free for Its Own Good?" The New York Times 7 May 2004. 15 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.



protect new media heritage which effectively maintains consistency in keeping the artist's integrity intact.

When exploring the archival element of documentation, the DOCAM Research Alliance emphasizes that “to protect an artwork's integrity, it is necessary to provide a description of conceptual aspects as the work evolves and transforms in various presentations and as it adapts to technological changes.”<sup>79</sup> To this end, they recommend utilizing, or combining, the Variable Media and Media Matters approaches, both of which I have presented in earlier sections of this project. Both of these strategies can help museums adapt and add to their current collections management procedures to successfully accept the intricacies of the specific documentation challenges of new media art. In addition, the Alliance iterates that documentation, conservation and exhibition be seen as interrelated activities. Artist interviews and questionnaires couple with the more standard practice of creating inventory lists to accurately document new media work. Additionally, documented installation procedures (notes, blueprints, guides, etc.) and customized new media databases aid in protecting new media art.

On a technical level, the two principal issues that the Alliance emphasizes regarding the importance of documenting both how and why digital content is transformed over time are important. This involves any time media is migrated to a different or new format, emulated in an alternative form or even when the playback equipment is updated. “An understanding of how the work operates on a conceptual and functional level is necessary in order to foresee its behavior at each presentation and its

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<sup>79</sup> Gagnier, R., et al., *New Media Art in Museum Collections: A Report from the DOCAM Cataloguing and Conservation Committees*, in J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds.). *Museums and the Web 2008: Proceedings*, Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics. Published March 31, 2008. Consulted March 31, 2008. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2008/papers/gagnier/gagnier.html>

evolution from a technological standpoint.”<sup>80</sup> All of this adds to the understanding of the parameters, or levels of variance, which are deemed acceptable in subsequent iterations of the work.

The third tier for museums to consider when collecting and exhibiting new media art is on an ethical level. Specifically, it is with issues of copyright that this is most evident. Unlike other, more traditional media like painting or sculpture, copyright in new media extends not only to the final work produced, but also to the production of the work itself. To ethically (and legally) exhibit work with new media content, museums must ensure that the artist had acquired the right to use any software used in the creation process in addition to having cleared any authorship restrictions connected to creating in a collaborative manner. The museum must be certain that programmers, technicians, collaborators, etc. who have had substantial input in the creation of the work present no copyright concerns for the exhibition of the work. Adding to the severity of the issue of copyright and its emerging importance in museum work in general is the issue over different international copyright laws. This is not an area to be taken lightly, and consultation with a legal professional will be one of the most proactive forms of insurance a museum can take to protect themselves from future litigious situations regarding copyright infringement.

Of all of the Alliance’s findings, I deem two of their ideas worthy of highlighting individually. First of all, they insist that museums address the integrity of new media artwork as a primary concern. They sum up the interconnected importance of all of this work by reminding us to keep in mind at all times the goal of defining the “relationship

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

between the concept, the artist's intention and the artwork's technical expression."<sup>81</sup> Secondly, they call to our attention the potential 'danger' in depending on the opinion of the artists in resolving issues of collection management. This may seem contradictory to what was mentioned previously, but what the Alliance is emphasizing is that too often museums which collect and exhibit the work of living artists remain reliant on the artists' opinions *indefinitely*. This opens up the museum to myriad complications as artists die without leaving behind documented proof of their opinions regarding the future lives of their oeuvres. It is far more practical to document from the onset these concerns with the artist than to attempt to reach out to the studio, foundation, or heirs of the artist to facilitate such information or take such decisions.

These recent presentations are not the only topical directions being explored for the future of new media installation art. INCCA has recently announced a new undertaking by the German Foundation Imai (Intermedia Art Institute) called "Materialized Fleetingness: Conservation and Re-enactment of New Media Art Installations."<sup>82</sup> This two-year project will continue on the work of previous consortia but with a finite focus on *only* new media installation art. I anticipate the results of this research project in advancing even more the necessity of the museum community to address the unique stewardship issues of this type of artwork.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> "Media Art Research Project: Materialized Fleetingness. Conservation and Re-enactment of New Media Art Installations" International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art. 2 April 2008 <<http://www.incca.org>>.

## **6. Conclusions**

### **a. Conversations with Museum Professionals**

Throughout the entire process of writing this thesis I obviously sought out the opinions of many working museum professionals. It was essential for me to share my ideas with curators, registrars and conservators and obviously to learn from their perspectives on the same topics. My contact with these professionals was via listservs, personal meetings and attendance at conferences and symposia. Though the viewpoints changed depending on the person, their institution and their professional focus, I did hear similar concerns and opinions. These ideas have aided greatly in the formation of my own opinion of what is of paramount importance in documenting the conceptual and technical variance for the reinstallation of new media art.

My interaction with museum professionals peaked at the “Emerging Voices Forum” of the Registrars Committee at the AAM Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado on April 28, 2008. I had been invited to present my thesis work at this forum and for nearly three hours I met, advised, and questioned one registrar after another about how they were addressing the stewardship issues of time-based installation art in their collections. I heard the same stories over and over: how museums were forced to install work without sufficient documentation to guide them, how they struggled with artwork which was acquired years ago but is just now becoming problematic, and how registrars were left feeling unprepared to foster the correct care for installation art. A major, and quite personal intention of mine regarding my thesis research was the deeply held desire to disseminate the information I had synthesized about documenting new media installation art. I prepared a resource guide for registrars which highlighted the readily

available online resources to aid them as they developed policies and practices which could best meet their particular situation. Before the Forum came to an end, I had completely run out of handouts.

#### **b. Present and Future Considerations**

Of all the challenges which must be addressed when dealing with new media installation art in a museum environment, three inescapable issues surface again and again which taint even the best of intentions: lack of money, information and time. The former often falls outside of the museum professional's control, but the latter two can be addressed head on.

With reference to the lack of information, my research for this thesis alone proved to me that there is indeed a plethora of guides, templates, tutorials, glossaries, symposia, and discourse surrounding the documentation of new media installation art. So the more accurate comment may perhaps be that there is as a lack of effective dissemination of information. Those involved with the subject, even peripherally, seem to be aware of the consortia Media Matters and Variable Media Initiative, and the excellent resources they provide, which I outlined in earlier sections of this thesis. However, the breadth and more finite scope of projects like "Inside Installations" and the overarching and collective work of DOCAM and INCCA seem largely to be known only to specific professional groups.

That said the lack of access to certain information is not always controlled by the person seeking it. The ongoing INCCA project to maintain an archive of contemporary artists, research conducted on their oeuvre, treatment strategies for the preservation of their work and interviews conducted with the artists themselves or with others associated with them remain an insular and closed project. To access the database requires not only

that one is a member, but that contributions are made to the database. This latter restriction is somewhat understandable in the spirit of giving back to the conservation community, but I find it somewhat backward-thinking to limit access to this essential body of information. Registrars, curators and others charged with the stewardship of contemporary art could benefit greatly from access to this database.

As I have advocated from the very beginning, proper documentation requires the collaborative effort of many people, including those from outside the traditional museum circle. More effort needs to be made to supply reviews, annotated resource guides and general information to those who seek out guidance. The AAM, the RC-AAM and other professional groups should maintain updated contact lists and online resources to aid in the effective documentation of new media installations. My invitation from the RC-AAM to present my thesis can be viewed as a step in the right direction to more collaborative learning and dissemination of research.

Carol Stringari acknowledges that proper documentation does indeed take many hours of staff time to correctly undertake. Museum environments are undeniably hectic and there is always high demand on making the best use of limited staffs. However, when it comes to documenting new media installation art, being proactive will in turn save both time and money for the museum in the long term. Reinstallations, as I have addressed in this thesis, have the potential to create an overwhelming amount of problems. If museum professionals can anticipate, even to the slightest extent, future installation requirements, they will alleviate the need to be burdened with the tedious and time consuming tasks attached to determining the answers to questions of appropriate, ethical and realistic

reinstallations. Stringari optimistically projects that this proactive stance will become more widespread as museum administrators make proper documentation more routine.<sup>83</sup>

In conclusion, the multivalent and complicated challenge of properly documenting the conceptual and technical variance for the reinstallation of new media art can be summed up by a suggested list of five key ideas:

1. There is no need to reinvent the wheel! Various sources already exist online which any museum can exploit to assist in preparing condition reports, installation guides, facilities reports, et al.
2. It is vitally important to document the artist's intent. Again, by turning to existing guides for advice, museum professionals can effectively formulate questions which solicit the most beneficial information for the future installations of the work.
3. To properly document, it will be necessary to call upon the expertise of others. Curators, registrars and conservators are logical allies within the museum community, but architects, technicians, and artist assistants will all be able to help in providing essential details.
4. New media is at the same time new and familiar. To document time-based media you must look at it in terms that go past aesthetics or materiality. By learning to reference the behaviors of a work, you can reach the essence of the digital content.
5. Documentation involves more than creating a written record. Photography, and more importantly video, will serve the documentation process well and permit a visual and aural record of the complicated relationships of installation

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<sup>83</sup> Hummelen. 280.

components and of abstract concepts like interactivity. Again, online sources can teach museum professionals the ins and outs of effectively documenting an installation with video.

Every installation is its own unique world. Because of that, it may be impossible to ever approach any kind of best practice for its documentation. Still, guidelines and suggestions from those who have studied and researched new media installation art can provide insight and encouragement to aid in formulating the most effective strategies to assess the documentary requirements for each individual work. In the end, not only will the museum professionals charged with the stewardship of collections be permitted to ethically and responsibly address the specific requirements of new media installations, but they will be providing their future colleagues with the wiggle room they will need, and appreciate, when called upon to oversee subsequent installations.



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