

Collecting, preserving and archiving the media arts

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Museums of modern and contemporary art today are facing a range of new problems arising from the recent proliferation of artworks with technological components. These works are characterized by the use of various technologies from different periods. They are analog or digital, mechanical or electronic, often multimedia, and include diverse objects such as hardware, software, electronic systems, analog or digital images, mixed traditional materials (pictorial or sculptural elements) and non-traditional materials (industrial materials and techniques). The collections grow because of deferent influences from art dealers, curators and currents in the international contemporary art scene. What are the conditions necessary for a wider consideration of media art works and of new media in these collections ? Often, we will ear that to preserve these works or even to exhibit them is too complicated. What are the state of the research in terms of preservation and exhibition strategies for this kind of works ? What are the necessary tools for archiving and documenting this thriving current of the contemporary arts sometimes called media arts, new media, electronic or digital arts, or technologically based art works.

Over the past few decades, a new art form – one that features technological components – has been throwing traditional conservation and documentation practices into upheaval. These works of art are many and varied. They may be analog or digital, mechanical or electronic; they are often multimedia-based and include a variety of components, such as machines, software, electronic systems, etc.

Museums, which are charged with preserving these works and in doing so providing the public future access to them, often find themselves without adequate resources and must make do with methods and means that are poorly adapted to the new artistic practices. The associated problems vary, but one constant remains: most of the technologies featured in the works are becoming progressively obsolete, thus threatening the survival of the works themselves. Moreover, the technological context within which the works of art were created is all too likely to elude future experts and historians. It is also important not to lose sight of intellectual property issues (copyrights, patents, etc.), which could seriously impede the preservation of the works. This situation becomes that much more of a concern when one considers that curators, art historians and restorers do not have the training required to effectively address the challenges involved in documenting and preserving works of art that feature technological, electronic or

digital components.

To address these problems, interdisciplinary research is necessary to pool numerous fields of expertise, including art preservation, art documentation, art history, technology history, information sciences, archival management, engineering and computer science. We need to focus on three principal areas or phases in order to produce tools, guides and methodologies essential to preserving this new cultural heritage.

The first phase involves designing the tools and guidelines required for the history, analysis, description and classification of the technological components used in technological and media arts. Key among these tools will be a bilingual (or even multi-lingual) thesaurus to manage the descriptive vocabulary associated with the documentation, themes, instruments and works of art featuring technological components, and a cataloguing structure for such works of art.

The second phase focus on developing documentation strategies adapted to works of art featuring technological components to allow for an overall understanding of the role of these works in media technology history as well as their artistic applications. Relevant archival fonds should be examined permitting in-depth analyses to be conducted on relevant works. This phase involve the development of documentary resource management and access tools adapted to works of art featuring technological components.

The third phase involves technological and methodological research on the preservation of works of art featuring technological, electronic and digital components. Case studies focusing on works that present complex preservation challenges are the basic methodology of this third phase.

The new problems associated with collecting, preserving and documenting works of media art are real and of increasing importance. It is therefore crucial that an interdisciplinary research provide the stakeholders involved with the tools and means they so urgently need. The solutions generated would benefit professionals in museums and other heritage institutions, artists, researchers and the general public. Its also imperative to start the training of a new generation of skilled professionals, who will play a major role in new and specific educational programs and in the filed of art conservation.

Ultimately, interdisciplinary research around these issues and the three areas we have identified for such research should strive to produce tangible and lasting results, such as the implementation of new university study programs, the adoption by the media arts community and by heritage institutions of new tools, and the development of cultural policies adapted to the new realities of works of art featuring technological content.