

Contemporary Art that does not last without being changed: Issues for Librarians

Art Now! Contemporary Art Resources in a Library Context

2012 IFLA Satellite Conference

By Howard Besser, New York University

<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/>

Many contemporary works of art cannot be re-displayed even a decade later due to fragile materials, technological obsolescence, or other dependencies. Works ranging from sculptures of candy, to those incorporating obsolete video formats or cathode ray tube displays, to works that employ software from operating systems discontinued more than a decade ago -- all these works must be changed in order to be seen at a later date.

Conservators call these works "variable media", and groups of museums have undertaken a handful of collaborative projects over the past decade to develop approaches and methodologies for appropriately re-interpreting, re-creating, and re-installing these works in ways that are consistent with the intention of the original work.

Though museum professionals have been quite successful at developing ways to revive these works that are no longer displayable in their original form, they have not focused on ways to label and distinguish between various instantiations of a particular work. Labeling and consistency-of-citation are primarily the realm of librarians, and library-world concepts and tools like IFLA's "Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records" (FRBR) and the "Resource Description and Access" (RDA) are likely to be very effective if applied to these works. This problem is not unlike the issue of referencing various versions and editions that librarians solved long ago.

In this paper Howard Besser will first explain the underlying problem of variable media art, and will show a number of different examples. He will then review several of the international museum collaborative projects designed to deal with re-installing variable media works. And in the remainder of his paper he will suggest how the application of library tools like FRBR and RDA will allow us to distinguish between the different instantiations of a work, and how this will allow for better reference and citation.

Underlying Conservation Problem with much Contemporary Art

A key problem with conservation of contemporary art is that many works cannot be kept functional over long periods of time.

Conventional artworks (such as paintings and sculptures) are typically displayed in a museum temporary exhibit, then put into storage, then taken out many years later to be displayed in another exhibit. If the storage conditions were good, very little work needs to be done in order to re-install the work years later.

Many contemporary works art works cannot follow this pattern. For some (such as the straw and leaf sculptures of Anselm Kiefer, or the candy sculptures of Félix González-Torres), the material used is much more fragile than paints or paper, and will not survive the decay brought on by pests or bacteria, or by merely moving the physical object.

For works incorporating forms of electronic technology, parts of the technology become obsolete, rendering it impossible to re-display the work even a decade later (Besser 2009, 2001a, 2001b, 2000). This is true not only of art works using computer programs that depend upon an operating system or floppy disk drives (or game cartridges) that are no longer available, but it is also true of older analog technologies such as Super-8 film, video disc, or videotape formats that can no longer be played.

This is also true of works incorporating slide transparencies; slide projectors are no longer manufactured in North America, and almost all slide duplication involves digital intermediates, which introduce artifacts into the duplicates—artifacts that may be acceptable for consumer slides, but are unacceptable for works of art. In 2011 the Tate established an Advisory Committee to help it deal with “Dying Technologies: The End of 35mm Slide Transparencies” (Weidner forthcoming).

In our interconnected networked world, art pieces increasingly rely upon processing information taken from outside the artwork itself. For example, Mary Flanagan's **[Phage]** (2002) is dependant upon personal files, internet downloads, and websites visited – a set of external elements to the art work itself. Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar's **I want You to Want Me** (2008) relies on posting to a variety of commercial online dating sites. Christian Marc Schmidt's **Marketscape** (2007) is dependent upon the Standard & Poors index of daily stock market activity. Works like these are dependent upon dynamic external resources – resources that are constantly changing.

Variability is also an issue in works involving performative elements. A piece of performance art is often re-enacted years later, usually in a different physical space, and often with different performers. In its 2010 “exhibit” titled “The Artist is Present”, New York's Museum of Modern Art presented re-enactments of 1970s and 1980s performance pieces by Marina Abramović (Spieker 2010).

All of these types of contemporary works (as well as murals and other works that are difficult to move) require re-installations or re-enactments of the work at a later time, and often using different internal elements, technologies, or performers. In the past dozen years, a number of important efforts have emerged within the art museum world, all struggling with how to handle the problems surrounding works that need to be re-installed or re-enacted.

Collaborative Contemporary Art Re-Installation Projects

At the beginning of this millennium, the Guggenheim Museum began collaborating with the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology to create the Variable Media Initiative.¹ This Initiative served as an umbrella for several related projects exploring the issues around media art works that could not be easily re-installed or re-enacted. These projects included beginning to design a vocabulary for how different elements of a work might be allowed to vary in future installations, developing a questionnaire for artists to help a museum determine what types of changes to a work might be permissible to that artist, and curating a museum exhibition focused on the preservation technique of “emulation”. Before Variable Media, conservation documentation and other efforts focused on the materiality of a work; in today’s world of contemporary art, we recognize that, for many works, the behaviors and concepts of the work may be more important to document and preserve than the materials and components, particularly if those materials and components are fragile or subject to obsolescence.

“Variable Media” postulates that a contemporary media work can be expressed as a set of behaviors that are somewhat independent of the medium or media in the original instantiation of the work (Depocas et. al. 2003). And as the media that the work uses become obsolete, other media that can convey the behaviors or meaning of the work can be substituted for the original media. So a re-installation or re-enactment might be able to take place using a different set of media or a different physical space, and still be the same work. Variable media has developed a questionnaire that is given to the artist (or, if dead, someone who worked with him/her), who responds to groups of questions (Ippolito 2003: 48). These questions focus around parts of the work that might become obsolete (or difficult to maintain), and attempt to determine what portions of the work might be changed without altering its meaning and aesthetic value.

The variable media questionnaire focuses on eight different behavioral aspects: installed, performed, reproduced, duplicated, interactive, encoded, networked, and contained. (A particular work might need to be treated with more than one of

¹ <http://www.variablemedia.net/e/> (accessed 1 May 2012)

these aspects, often at different times.) For installations, one would want to know about gallery or other space preferences, lighting and sound parameters, viewer access, and security issues, as well as how elements should be distributed, how equipment can/cannot be displayed, and environmental/architectural concerns. For performances², the questions focus on the set, performers, audience, costumes, props, and instructions.

Variable Media also curated a 2004 exhibition that examined emulation as a means of re-installing works of art. For “Seeing Double”³ the Guggenheim and the Langlois Foundation commissioned the emulation of more than half a dozen art works which were near the end of their lives because of technological obsolescence. (Obsolescence factors included: videodisc systems interacting with computers, video game cartridges hacked to substitute art for games, obsolete computer hardware, television sets whose images can no longer be altered by interfering with the yoke by using a magnet, etc.) Each original work of art was shown side-by-side with its emulated version. The exhibition was accompanied by a symposium⁴ entitled “Echoes of Art: Emulation As a Preservation Strategy” featuring panels of artists, curators and conservators, and people involved in emulation.

The work of the Variable Media Initiative has established ways in which a museum can ask an artist for guidance as to how her or his work can be re-displayed in the future. In less than a decade since the end of the formal portions of Variable Media, a number of collaborative projects have followed its lead in examining artists’ attitudes towards re-displaying their work and in developing conservation plans that may involve re-installation of the work using different elements than the original work.

Inside Installations was a 3-year research project (2004-2007) exploring strategies for preserving and presenting installation art. Led by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) with participation from other members of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), the project was comprised of several areas of research including case studies, documentation, artist participation, preservation strategies, theory, and knowledge management.⁵

² Variable Media’s definition of “performance” is broader than the way that the theatrical world looks at it.

³ <http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/emulation/index.html> and <http://variablemedia.net/e/seeingdouble/> (accessed 1 May 2012)

⁴ <http://www.variablemedia.net/e/echoes/> (accessed 1 May 2012)

⁵ Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, Inside Installations: Research. (<http://www.inside-installations.org/research/>) (accessed 1 May 2012)

The Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst of Ghent researched the artist participation component of Inside Installations and published a report on their findings. Influenced by anthropological and sociological research methodologies, communication, observation, and participation are emphasized. They conclude that the artist interview is the ideal form of communication with the artist, though other primary sources should also be consulted (e.g. artist’s assistants, art installers, colleagues). In addition, the report describes how observation and participation are important during the installation of an artwork when the conservator and the curator interact with the artist.

Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage (DOCAM) was a 2005-2010 Canadian research project “to examine the factors that threaten the technological arts heritage and to put forward solutions and tools to allow artists, collaborators, museum professionals and collectors to better document and preserve this heritage.”⁶ In some ways this was a follow-up project to the Variable Media Initiative, and was coordinated by the Daniel Langlois Foundation, with participation from a variety of Canadian museums, as well as academic programs at New York University, McGill, Queens University, the University of Montréal, and the University of Québec at Montréal.

Among its contributions, the DOCAM project developed a “Preservation Guide for Technology-Based Artworks”,⁷ and a “DOCAM Documentation Model”⁸ that gives a framework for examining the life-cycle of a media work from creation, through dissemination, installation (and de-installation), and research.

Matters in Media Art was a 5-year research project that sought to establish guidelines for managing, exhibiting, caring for and handling time-based media artworks.⁹ In 2005 the Tate, the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art, and the New Art Trust formed a consortium to collect and share their agreed-upon best practices for loaning and acquiring time-based works of art.

The project segments the acquisition process into three phases, and (liberally illustrated by diagrams) explains the basic steps and procedures to follow in acquiring a time-based media work. The post-acquisition phase includes both interviewing the artist and developing a conservation plan for the work *at the time of acquisition*.

⁶ <http://www.docam.ca/> (accessed 1 May 2012)

⁷ <http://www.docam.ca/en/conservation-guide.html> (accessed 1 May 2012)

⁸ <http://www.docam.ca/en/documentation-model.html> (accessed 1 May 2012)

⁹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/matters-media-art> (accessed 1 May 2012)

Issues for Librarians

Though the museum world has made great progress over the past decade in understanding what it takes to re-install a work, they have not made significant progress in documenting and expressing how the various installations of a work may relate to one another. They do not even have a well-developed system for distinguishing between one version and another. For example, below are excerpts from a Guggenheim Museum website¹⁰ discussing the conservation of Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman’s 1982-1985 interactive media art work “The Erl King”, a touch-screen work that allows the user to guide the narrative structure. One can see from the images that each installation looks very different from the others. But the only way that the caption for each image distinguishes itself from the others is by naming the museum where it was exhibited and the year of exhibition.



The Erl King as installed at the Guggenheim Museum as part of the exhibition “Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice”, 2004. Image used with permission of artist Grahame Weinbren.

¹⁰ <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/conservation/conservation-projects/variable-media> (accessed 1 May 2012)



The Erl King as installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in their Biennial exhibition, 1987.

Image used with permission of artist Grahame Weinbren.



The Erl King as installed at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in their exhibition “MOCA and The Temporary Contemporary”, 1986–87.

Image used with permission of artist Grahame Weinbren.

And not only are they not able to distinguish between different installations through naming them, they also cannot distinguish which attributes of each installation are the same, and which are different. This problem that museums face is not unlike what librarians face with distinguishing between different versions or editions of a given work.

In an article published eight years ago (Besser 2004) and in Talks since 2000, this author has suggested that IFLA’s 1999 Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) would provide a conceptual structure for handling the variant forms that one might find in each re-installation of a contemporary art piece. But only after the Resources Description and Access (RDA) cataloging standard was released in mid-2010, did developers begin to build applications that would support FRBR, and it is really only in the past year that those applications have become extensive enough that we might even begin to consider FRBR as a tool that might be implemented within bibliographic and other cataloging systems.

But we need more than software tools to employ FRBR in this way; we also need further conceptual development on how to use FRBR for Variable Media works.

FRBR is designed to group the different versions and editions of a work together in a hierarchical arrangement where versions in the lower orders of the hierarchy (children) inherit descriptive metadata from those versions above them in the hierarchy (parents and grandparents). For example, we could place the written fable of “La Belle et la Bête” (Beauty and the Beast) by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot (1740) at the top of the hierarchy, and describe the basic plot and characters. We’d place the 1756 abridgement and the 1757 English translation below Barbot’s, and they would inherit metadata about the plot and characters, though the English translation would have different names for the characters. Cocteau’s 1946 film would inherit the metadata from one of the French versions, and Disney’s 1991 film would inherit most metadata from the earlier English translation. The Disney film would add metadata concerning the songs to that particular version (it was a musical), and that metadata, in turn, would be inherited by the Disney theatrical production that played on Broadway from 1994-2007.

Conceptually, FRBR should allow us to group all these versions and editions together into a hierarchy where the metadata is passed from parent to child, and each child only needs the metadata that describes the ways in which it differs from its parent. But as thusfar implemented, FRBR has a somewhat rigid character. Only 4 levels of FRBR are commonly recognized – Work, Expression, Manifestation, and Item, and most catalogers focus on identifying on which level an item should be placed. This simplistic view of FRBR would not be particularly effective at reflecting metadata inheritance with the “Beauty and the Beast”

example, as the original tale would, strictly speaking, be the “Work”, and all the others would be at a common hierarchical level as “Expressions”. The “DOCAM Documentation Model” (DOCAM 2010) noted the need to expand FRBR to encompass a lower level (labeled “Component”), but actually each level needs to be expanded to permit a reflection of hierarchies within a level (not merely between levels).

In addition to adding hierarchies within each level of the FRBR model, it would be fruitful for librarians to work with museum personnel and historians of media art in several other areas. On the broad level, a collaborative project to systematize the naming of the variable forms of a work could lead to a more sophisticated way of referring to different installations (similar to our example of “The Erl King”). On the narrower level, librarian organizational skills could be usefully applied to the vocabulary developed to express how a particular media art work might vary. One might envision re-grouping the terms that are used in the Variable Media Questionnaire in ways that more systematically reflect differences between the different ways that one might re-install a work. And this, in turn, could contribute to better naming conventions for variant forms of a work. Ultimately, work like this should help scholars to differentiate between the different forms of a work, and should help improve the reference to and citation of works that no longer exist in the form referenced and cited.

References

- Besser, Howard. 2000. *Digital Longevity*, in Maxine K. Sitts (ed.) **Handbook for Digital Projects: A Management Tool for Preservation and Access** Andover Mass: Northeast Document Conservation Center, pages 155-166 (<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/sfs-longevity.html>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Besser, Howard. 2001a. *Longevity of Electronic Art*, in David Bearman and Franca Garzotto (eds.) **ICHIM 01 International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting: Cultural Heritage and Technologies in the Thrid Millennium**, Volume 1 - Full Papers (Proceedings of the September 3-7, 2001 Milan meeting), Milan: Politecnico di Milano, pages 263-275 (<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/elect-art-longevity.html>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Besser, Howard. 2001b. *Digital Preservation of Moving Image Material*, **The Moving Image**, Fall, pages 39-55 (<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/amia-longevity.html>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Besser, Howard. 2004. InterPARES 2 and the Electronic Café International:

- Aging Records from Technology-based Artistic Activities, American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Electronic Media Group (<http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/emg/library/pdf/besser/Besser-EMG2004.pdf>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Besser, Howard. 2009. “Why Video Art Preservation Requires Special Handling”, in Move On Asia 2009, Seoul: Gallerie Loop (<http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/09gallery-loop.pdf>) and (<http://eyeball2ng.tistory.com/entry/Topic-Why-Video-Art-Preservation-Requires-Special>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage (DOCAM). 2010. DOCAM Documentation Model (<http://www.docam.ca/en/documentation-model.html>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Deopcas, Alain, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones (eds). 2003. Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach, New York: Guggenheim Museum (<http://variablemedia.net/pdf/Permanence.pdf>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Ippolito, Jon. 2003. “Accommodating the Unpredictable: The Variable Media Questionnaire.” Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach. Eds. Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones. New York: Guggenheim Museum, pp. 47-53 (<http://variablemedia.net/pdf/Permanence.pdf>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Spieker, Sven. 2010. The Artist is Present: Marina Abramović at MoMA (Review Article), Art Margins Online, (<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/582-artist-present-marina-abramovic-moma-review-article>) (accessed 1 May 2012)
- Weidner, Tina. 2012 (forthcoming). “Dying Technologies: The End of 35mm Slide Transparencies”, Archiving 2012 Proceedings, Springfield VA: Society for Imaging Science & Technology.