

Introduction to the Problems of Video Art Conservation

by Xandra de Jongh

For a relatively young medium, the problems associated with the conservation of video art are considerable. Over the last decade at least three symposiums have been held to focus international attention on this issue: *How Durable is Video Art?* (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 1995), *Playback 96* (Bay Area Video Coalition, 1996) and *Zwischen Flut und Flüchtigkeit. Die Bewahrung von Videokunst und digitalem Kulturgut* (Berne, 2001).

There is still a lack of knowledge about ageing processes and composition of materials regarding video art. Next to that, video art is not yet provided with a consistent theory in which materials aspects and the meaning of the works are sufficiently embedded.

The first step in addressing conservation problems is to acknowledge that a video artwork is more than simply data on videotape. An electronic artwork consists of software, that is, a support for a signal which can only be made visible with the aid of playback equipment, i.e. hardware. Other components, such as monitors, projectors and playback equipment, are also sometimes intrinsic parts of an artwork.

In Nam June Paik's video installation *TV Buddha* from 1974, a camera is aimed at a sculpture of Buddha. The Buddha stares at his own image on a beautifully designed monitor. There is clearly an interactive relation between the Buddha sculpture and the design of the monitor. The monitor is an intrinsic part of this work, and without it the work would lose its artistic meaning. Hardware and software are here inextricably linked.

Aspects of the conservation problems associated with video art can be categorized as follows:

Medium degradation

Magnetic tape is highly sensitive to such factors as temperature, humidity and pollution. The durability of magnetic tape is not limitless, even under stable storage conditions. The estimated life expectancy of videotape ranges from 10 to 30 years. Bearing in mind that the video signal support degenerates, the conservation of video art ultimately means that it will always have to be converted onto a new support.

Space of time

In contrast to most other visual art forms, video art is characterised as a time based art. The specific space of time – the frequency of image and sound – is decisive for the appearance of the work. Converting tapes to a new (digital) format brings the risk of disturbing the original rhythm of it and, as a consequence, destroying the intended appearance and meaning of this work of art.

Format/hardware obsolescence

One of the major obstacles facing the development of a long term conservation model is the lack of standards. A feature of the technology and the medium is that new technologies are constantly being developed and existing equipment replaced. Industrial standards are subject to competitive market conditions. This drives producers of electronic media to continually come up with new innovations, forcing older formats and playback equipment out of production. The ability to show video art in the long term is hampered by two interlinked obstacles: the conservation of the 'original' format and the fact that the decoded signal can only be played on the correct playback equipment. It would be pointless to conserve a particular format if the right machines were no longer available to play it back on. Also, as a consequence of rapid technological developments, little scientific research has been carried out into the durability, life span and storage of the various video formats.

Scarcity of expertise

The problems surrounding video conservation demand a technical understanding which conservators and other museum employees do not usually possess. Moreover, there is only a small group which possesses the expertise to use and maintain obsolete playback equipment. This knowledge is often only found outside the museum world and it takes time to establish a suitable specialist support network. There is also very little literature in existence which addresses the problems of video art conservation, particularly from a museum perspective.

Scale and cost

The number of video tapes that are now in a critical state is enormous and many museums and stewards of other collections are being confronted with the necessity of conserving their video art collections. Their budgets are unable to cope with the costs of conserving such a huge number of tapes.

Authenticity

The problems are further complicated by the 'authenticity criterion', which plays a crucial role in the reading of (Western) art. Current restoration ethics, which aims as far as possible to preserve the material authenticity of an object, is confronted with the highly perishable nature of (many of) the materials that are used in modern art. This tension is exacerbated in the conservation of video art. Being a medium that is technically reproducible and extremely perishable, it is the medium itself that problematizes the notion of 'authenticity'.

Similar to negatives in photography, video art has a 'master' tape, which is (usually) made by the artist. A copy of the master, a 'submaster', is in fact a secondary artwork. Collectors, however, regard these submasters as an original, seeing as the master frequently remains in the artist's possession. A situation therefore arises in which there is more than one 'original', thus complicating the issue of an actual artwork and its conservation.

Considering that every support of a video signal deteriorates, the conservation of video art ultimately always entails the signal's conversion onto a new support. If the master or a copy is converted for the purpose of conservation, what is the status of this copy? Is it a reproduction or a new original? The conservation of video art requires a new reading of the meaning of 'original'.

Conservation

The method of conservation chosen depends on predetermined conservation criteria. These conservation criteria are not clearly defined in the case of video art. An initial move towards developing a conservation strategy might be to establish which (material) components are indispensable to the expressive qualities of the artwork, in other words, those features of the medium that convey the artistic intent.

Generally speaking, the conservation of video art is split in two directions:

The so-called **puritanical** approach, which aims to conserve the specific technology by extending its life span or replacing electronic parts or other components. The maintenance of technical equipment demands a lot of attention and, if indeed still possible, requires the acquisition of a collection of reserve playback equipment, monitors, and so on. This approach to conservation is extremely costly and time consuming and is not a very realistic option when dealing with large numbers of video works. Moreover, in the long term, it does not present a permanent solution for conservation, particularly as these collections of equipment will in the end prove inadequate and will still lead to the demise of the artwork.

A more **pragmatic** approach takes the signal rather than the specific technology as its starting point. Here, the videotape is converted to a present-day (digital) format and this copy of the master comes to replace the original. The original recording and playback equipment does not need to be preserved. This option makes conservation significantly simpler than the previous method, but it also means a continuous process of conversion, bearing in mind that no durable support yet exists.

Meaning of technology

One of the problems confronting the museums and other institutions in charge of collections is the lack of information on the *meaning* of the technology used in an artwork. As has earlier been remarked upon, video technology is constantly changing and technical features can also be conveyors of meaning (i.e. the production format or systems which are different from the distribution format, the choice of an analogue or digital support, playback equipment that is no longer adequate; for example, a video work that was made for a small, rounded monitor may later be projected on a large, flat screen). For a responsible approach to the conservation of video art to be developed, an understanding of the meaning of the materials is vital and consultation with the artist is essential.

Video Art Conservation Projects

How does one conserve video art? Does digitization provide a responsible solution? What factors apply to the conservation and digitization of video art and how should it be carried out? This is just a small selection of the questions that Dutch modern art museums and other institutions in charge of collections sought answers to in 1998 under the supervision of The Netherlands Institute for Media Art, Montevideo/Time Based Arts. The Pilot Project for the Conservation of Video Art aimed to acquire an understanding of the procedures, technologies and costs associated with the digitization of video artworks. This pilot subsequently led to the extensive Video Conservation Project which, under the auspices of the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and carried out by The Netherlands Institute for Media Art, Montevideo/Time Based Arts.

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