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Surveying the state of the art (of documentation)

Introduction

"History is composed of documents, because the document is what remains."

Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*

This quote by French historian Jacques Le Goff refers to the centrality of documentary evidence in the writing of history. In the case of art history, this evidence is most often based on the art objects themselves. However, in cases where the object no longer exists or is altered from its original state, the *document* is, as Le Goff suggests, what remains. Documents related to an artwork can provide us with invaluable information about the production, provenance, exhibition and evolution of the work throughout its life and into the future, and curators, conservators and other researchers rely on it heavily. While this is certainly true of more traditional media, such as oil paint or marble, in the field of new media art — where works of art are prone to obsolescence — documentation serves an especially vital function. And because it provides information such as the original technological context or artist's intent, it is unfortunate that due to a lack of consistent documentation in the past, we know far too little about many of the landmark works of new media.

As members of the Variable Media Network, both Paul Kuranko and I have been deeply involved in issues surrounding media art exhibition, preservation and documentation — myself as a curatorial and conservation researcher, and Kuranko as Media Art Specialist at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Through our involvement with a variety of institutions, we have had the unique opportunity to hear firsthand and participate in preservation and documentation initiatives undertaken around the world. While these institutions vary in their perspectives and approaches to issues such as technological obsolescence, artist intent, and deteriorating materials, the importance of good and thorough documentation is unanimously cited as essential by the major artists, conservators and curators in the field.

For our residency at the Daniel Langlois Foundation in the fall of 2007, we proposed a series of documentation case studies included in the exhibition *e-art: New Technologies and Contemporary Art* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: David Rokeby's *The Giver of Names* and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Subtitled Public*. Before we began with our documentation process, we felt it important to look at the field of new media art preservation and the major players and proposals and learn from the many models that have been both put forward and put into practice. Given the particular scope of our research, we were obliged to narrow our focus to those projects we felt were highly developed on both a theoretical and practical level. As a result, this is far from an exhaustive list of projects in the field (as many new initiatives have yet to publish results or make their process publicly available).

What follows is an unscientific analysis of the issues — a personal assessment of what constitutes good, thorough documentation — and a study of the practical realities of documenting artworks with time and budget constraints. For each initiative, we examined the theoretical and methodological underpinnings in combination with practical applications, tools and any other relevant deliverables that emerged. As a result, our

assessment takes the form of a working document that tracks, for each example, what proved most useful to us in our particular task of creating a documentation case study.

Surveying the field: Existing paradigms for documenting media art

The projects we chose to look at most closely were: The Daniel Langlois Foundation's DOCAM project, V2_'s Capturing Unstable Media project, The Variable Media and Archiving the Avant-Garde consortiums, the Media Matters consortium, INCCA and its Inside Installations project, and the curatorial resource CRUMB.

a) DOCAM (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage)

<http://www.docam.ca/>

The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology
Montreal, Canada

Project goals and methodology

The DOCAM project is a multi-institutional, multidisciplinary research project spearheaded by the Daniel Langlois Foundation. As stated in its mission, the main objectives of the DOCAM project are to "conduct multidisciplinary research into the science, techniques and practices needed to resolve the problems of preserving the works and heritage associated with technological and electronic art in the domains of the visual and performing arts (theatre, dance and performance) and architecture." The DOCAM project is divided into a number of subcommittees that include Preservation, Pedagogy, Publications and, particularly interesting to us, the Documentation subcommittee.

As part of its research, the Documentation subcommittee has taken on a number of case studies and identified an exhaustive list of key document types, which it (currently) calls the "Artwork Digital File/Dossier" (to be publicly released by DOCAM at a later date). This dossier identifies a wide range of materials that those compiling documentation should endeavour to capture, including the artist's original documentation for a work (e.g. models, simulations, interviews, etc.), documentation related to hardware (e.g. equipment manuals, vendors and suppliers), exhibition parameters (e.g. physical space, budget), and environmental parameters (e.g. acoustics, paint colours). Most importantly however, each document in the DOCAM file is attributed to a source, be it artist, curator, technician or conservator, so that future researchers have a reference for the source of each document.

Our assessment

DOCAM's Digital Dossier is extremely valuable, both practically and theoretically. Theoretically, by not imposing a strict structure, it recognizes the flexibility needed to deal with highly variable works of art; practically, it provides a realistic and comprehensive list of documentation types to look for. DOCAM's emphasis on document attribution is an often overlooked but increasingly important part of the documentation process. Because much of the documentation in our case studies (particularly in *The Giver of Names Documentary Collection*) was created by us as researchers and not by the artists themselves, an explicit acknowledgement of this is integral to the future understanding of a work. In addition, DOCAM's arrangement of materials according to each specific installation mirrored our concerns with documenting differences between iterations of a work.

b) Capturing Unstable Media

<http://capturing.projects.v2.nl/>

V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media

Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Project goals and methodology

In 2003, V2_ published an extensive research project entitled "Capturing Unstable Media." Initiated by researchers Sandra Fauconnier and Rens Fromme, the project clearly delineates its intent to create a structure that "captures" details about works of art rather than proposing a preservation strategy. By outlining broad document types and physical elements, the researchers created a complex yet intuitive structure through which the documentation of digital objects and performative projects can be described, arranged and accessed.

The V2_ team created the [Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model](#) (CMCM), a clear model capable of describing both the work as a whole and specific iterations of the work so that changes can be easily tracked over time. The highly prescribed format and interoperable data structure is intended to allow for sharing across platforms and institutions. Documentation types fit into the following broad categories: *occurrences* (documents related to the establishment of the time and place of the performance or installation), *components* (documents related to installation parameters, hardware, software, network, content, system design, moving image and sound formats), *user interaction* (documents related to input and output), and *artists/makers* (documentation related to the artist or artists).

Our assessment

While the CMCM was never fully implemented, it serves as an extremely thorough study of the key issues. By formally delineating the notion of the occurrence, the CMCM sets a clear and important distinction between the documenting of a work as a whole, each specific installation of that work, and the contextual information surrounding the work.

Highly prescribed and detailed, the CMCM may be somewhat complex for broad use, but the questions it raises, the document types it outlines, and the structure it suggests are highly relevant for anyone working in the field.

c) Variable Media Network - Archiving the Avant Garde - Forging the Future

<http://www.variablemedia.net/>

<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about/avantgarde/>

<http://newmedia.umaine.edu/feature.php?id=685>

Project goals and methodology

The Variable Media, Archiving the Avant-Garde, and Forging the Future projects are a loose affiliation of institutions (under different names for funding reasons) working together to create and support scholarship and tools in the area of new media and contemporary art conservation. The Variable Media Network grew out of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's preservation strategies for the conceptual, installation, video and new media art in its collection and evolved into a large multi-institutional project. One of the major contributions of the Variable Media Network was its introduction of the notion of "behaviours" as a means to describe an artwork. By asking an artist to describe his or her work as a series of behaviours, (such as "installed" or "duplicated"), rather than strictly according to its medium-specific attributes, the paradigm allows

conservators and curators to record a broader range of preservation options should the specific media cease to be available in the future. In addition to numerous and noteworthy exhibitions and conferences, the Network has created and promoted a number of tools and structures specific to the documentation of media art. Two tools of particular note are the Variable Media Questionnaire (VMQ) and the Media Art Notation System (MANS).

Variable Media Questionnaire.

<http://www.variablemediaquestionnaire.net/>

The VMQ is a database designed to assist artists and museum staff in writing preservation guidelines (according to the Variable Media standard of behaviours) for a work of art once its current format is no longer viable. While the VMQ was originally a FileMaker Pro database, the Forging the Future project is currently working on an online version that will be openly available.

MANS

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media_art_preservation

Created by Richard Rinehart, Digital Media Director and Adjunct Curator, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, MANS is similar to V2_'s CMCM. A formal notation that delineates between the work as a whole and its specific iterations, MANS attempts to function as a "score" for future re-creations of a work. Based on an XML structure, MANS also allows for highly detailed levels of description and interoperability between platforms and institutions, theoretically allowing a greater degree of access.

Our assessment

Through our direct involvement with the Variable Media Network and its partner projects, we have found this paradigm to be the most closely related to our understanding of the issues of preservation and documentation. While our overall experience with these projects provided a general background to the issues, the VMQ and MANS were particularly helpful in developing our case studies. Although not used as an input device or database, the VMQ is an invaluable guide for conducting artist interviews, as the medium-independent line of questioning often elicits highly descriptive responses to questions about a work's past and future incarnations. Similarly, Richard Rinehart's MANS provided a framework for reflection on the logical arrangement of collected elements. Both tools are highly prescribed in their structures — too much so, in our opinion, for a realistic and easily repeatable documentation project — but the theoretical underpinnings of both are highly valuable and informative.

d) Matters in Media Art (formerly Media Matters)

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/>

Project goals and methodology

Media Matters is a consortium of three major museums and the New Art Trust. Curators, conservators, technicians and registrars from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Tate Modern have joined together and established best practice guidelines for the acquisition, loan and care of time-based media works.

In keeping with their intent that "others will not only benefit from this information but will also contribute over time to the further refinement of the methods of care for these works of art," the team has made all of the documents in this landmark project public (although

not yet participatory). Through its sub-sections [Acquisitions](#) and [Loans](#), the site provides access to process diagrams, workflow charts and a wide range of downloadable templates (such as condition reports and standard loan and purchase agreements).

While the project is aimed at museum and gallery professionals, many of these templates provide important information for anyone documenting a work of art. In particular, the template "[Installation Documentation Guidelines](#)" provides a lengthy list of details that will ensure proper installation of time-based media. These details include, but are not limited to, general description, format details (e.g. media format and standard), equipment lists, installation space parameters (e.g. entrance, exit, traffic flow, screen sizes, acoustic specifications), spares and necessary backups (e.g. backup lamps, etc.), artist statements, and general notes.

Our assessment

While the group's primary audience is comprised of other museums or institutions that are custodians of media artworks, its templates and tools are universally applicable. Like DOCAM's Digital Dossier, its Installation Documentation Guidelines provide an invaluable list of documentation elements to consider for collection. From an access perspective, *Matters in Media Art* is an excellent resource with a highly usable Web page that contains clear and practical information for the reinstallation of an artwork.

e) INCCA (International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art)

<http://www.incca.org/>

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Project goals and methodology

INCCA is a network of professional conservators whose prime mandate is the sharing and distribution of knowledge within the international conservation community. Begun in 1999, it has continued to grow, establishing tools and funding publications and conferences in the field of contemporary art conservation.

Highly relevant to our project was INCAA's leadership on the initiative Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art [<http://www.inside-installations.org/>]. This project involves more than 25 European institutions and a multitude of case studies on installation artworks; to date, 33 case studies have been made public through its Web site. In addition to these individual case studies, the [Research section](#) of the website consists of a number of useful "how tos" for the documentation of specific elements of an artwork. For example, texts can be found on the proper recording of light and sound levels as can a very useful tutorial on how to create clear, practical moving image documentation for installations. In addition, a simple template entitled Document Structure, co-published by the Tate and S.M.A.K in Ghent, Belgium, provides a straightforward, flexible list of necessary document types from an institutional perspective.

Our assessment

Having been involved with INCCA over the years, we have learned a great deal from many of its members. The case studies from the *Inside Installations* project afforded us numerous examples of the range of forms that case studies can take. We pored over these for similarities and differences that would contribute to our approach, both from a structural and content standpoint. For example, the Tate's case study on Bruce Nauman's [MAPPING THE STUDIO II with color shift, flip, flop, & flip/flop \(Fat Chance](#)

[John Cage](#) was an inspiration in terms of presenting a completed case study to the public in a usable form. This being said, the way it is presented is neither flexible nor easily expandable, as the work changes over time.

As previously mentioned, the Research section of this site, despite a few technical glitches, contains many highly useful and practical guidelines.

f) CRUMB (Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss)

<http://www.crumbweb.org/>

University of Sunderland
Sunderland, United Kingdom

Project goals and methodology

CRUMB is an academic resource dedicated specifically to issues surrounding the curating of media art. Based out of the University of Sunderland and headed by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, CRUMB's highly read discussion list tackles the curatorial challenges involved in exhibiting works of media art. Concerned with the broad issues of curating, one particular item that has been continually raised over the years is how the process of documentation has increasingly become an integral part of curatorial practice.

While CRUMB does not propose any models or paradigms for documentation, my reason for including it comes from a purely theoretical perspective that is missing from some of the other models. Issues of representation (distinctions between an artwork and its documentation), the subtle differences between documents that are created rather than collected, and the distinct roles of the artist and curator in the documentation process are just a few of the theoretical concerns that CRUMB's discussions have touched upon. Practical matters that have also been raised include how to finance documentation, where the responsibility for documentation lies, and how to provide access to it once it has been completed.

Key strengths

In 2008, I visited Sunderland to consult with CRUMB and lead a workshop entitled [Documenting New Media Art](#), a presentation and discussion with a group of curators, artists and arts professionals. The discussion addressed not only the broader issues of creating meaning by how we choose to document, it also underlined the very real concerns about financing, working with artists and providing access to materials.

One of the most enlightening things to come out of the CRUMB workshop and its subsequent work in the area was the use of public photo and video sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube. While these sites are facing many difficult issues in terms of longevity, proprietary formats, copyright and proper representation, they should not be discounted as highly valuable resources. As we, as a culture, increasingly document our own experiences, these channels are becoming a growing source for documentation.

g) Other models and institutions

As previously mentioned, many other institutions and organisations around the world are working on this issue from a number of different perspectives. Some related institutions and programs worthy of note and further examination include:

The InterPares Project

<http://www.interpares.org/>

School of Library, Archival and Information Studies
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

This long-term international research project "aims at developing the knowledge essential to the long-term preservation of authentic records created and/or maintained in digital form and providing the basis for standards, policies, strategies and plans of action capable of ensuring the longevity of such material and the ability of its users to trust its authenticity." InterPares2 (the second phase) dealt specifically with artistic records and documentation. The Mustica Project [<http://mustica.ircam.fr/>], is one of the most engaging partners in this project. Its project looks specifically at the documentation of musical performances, and like CMCM and MANS, its structure allows for a separation between a work of music as a whole and specific performances of that work. This highly relevant and detailed project is currently being expanded upon.

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research

<http://media.lbg.ac.at/>

Linz, Austria

The objective of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research is to undertake innovative research into the history of media art and create new strategies for the documentation, description and conservation of media art. With partners such as Ars Electronica and the Lentos Museum in Linz, the LBI and its network of scholars have so far produced excellent scholarship in the area and promise to produce much more in terms of new theories and tools for documenting media art.

Netherlands Media Art Institute: Montevideo Time Based Arts

<http://www.nimk.nl/>

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Montevideo has been involved in numerous initiatives to preserve and document video and installation-based art over the course of its long history. It is a founding member of INCCA, was a leading participant in the Inside Installations project, and has been a key partner in a number of other European preservation and documentation initiatives (including OASIS [<http://www.oasis-archive.eu/>] and Inside Movement Knowledge, an upcoming project on the documentation of dance). A leader in the field and highly knowledgeable about all of the associated issues, its contributions, while often incorporated into larger initiatives, are always noteworthy.

Electronic Arts Intermix: EAI Resource Guide

<http://resourceguide.eai.org/>

New York, United States

In 2007, EAI created a Resource Guide aimed at helping museums, galleries and artists address the complicated issues surrounding the collection, exhibition and preservation of media art. This very useful and informative site provides links to work done in the field, extensive glossaries, budgets, format guides, and many other case studies and articles related to single-channel video, video installation and computer-based art.

Our model/decisions

From the outset, it was never our intent to propose a new "model" or paradigm for documenting works of media art. With so many well thought-out and clear structures already in practice, we felt adequately armed with examples and philosophies to draw from. After examining these existing paradigms, it became clear that when talking about documentation, three distinct phases emerge: Collection and Creation, Arrangement, and Description and Access.

Collection and creation

Artist interviews form the backbone of our case studies; the Variable Media Questionnaire provided an unparalleled framework through which to conduct interviews with the artists and gather information about the conceptual, technical and experiential nature of the work. In addition to our interviews, we collected and created documents specific to the installations by David Rokeby and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The DOCAM checklist had an impact on the basic document types as did examples from INCCA's Inside Installations project and, of course, our experience within the field.

Our fortuitous collaboration with fellow Researcher in Residence Lizzie Muller also contributed significantly to the interview process. Her work on audience experience and questions about the experiential nature of an artwork influenced the direction of the interview and further illuminated many issues, providing us with an enhanced interview strategy. As well, her collection of video documentation of her interviews forms a significant portion of the David Rokeby case study.

For the first time, we also attempted to incorporate "amateur" photographs and video from file sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube. Countless photographers are documenting artworks overtly or serendipitously and uploading them to these online repositories, providing viewers with access to an unprecedented range of sources. It is within this wide range, however, that DOCAM's focus on proper attribution becomes increasingly important. A photograph taken by a museum visitor and uploaded to Flickr and one taken by a conservator serve different functions and should be noted as such. This aspect of the preservation of documentation became increasingly important within our work. In the case of the David Rokeby *The Giver of Names* case study, the majority of information was created by us (see Muller and Jones, "[The Giver of Names: Documentary Collection](#)") and therefore needs to be viewed from this particular perspective.

Arrangement

Once the documentation is collected, to be useful it needs to be arranged in a logical order or contained within a usable data structure. As seen by the survey of the field, however, this order is highly variable.

Traditional archival arrangement in Canada follows the principle of *respect des fonds*, meaning that the original order in which the records were kept is a key element to maintaining the integrity of a collection of documents. In the case of a created collection such as ours, however, these rules are significantly less prescribed. Our aim was therefore to arrange the materials in a system similar to that proposed by V2_'s CMCM

and Richard Rinehart's MANS. These structures allow for levels of description related to the work as a whole as well as more detailed descriptions of specific iterations/occurrences of a work. For a work that has been exhibited as often as David Rokeby's *The Giver of Names*, this multi-level approach was deemed particularly relevant.

Such a structure would also emphasize the tension between the "ideal" notion of the artwork (as a composite, theoretical idea constructed from artist statements, technical schemas and the accumulation of many iterations) and the "real" individual experiences of the audience members as explored through our collaboration with Lizzie Muller.

Although this multi-level approach was our original intent and the preferred logical arrangement of materials, we subsequently arranged the materials on the Daniel Langlois Foundation web site simply by broad type, for example interviews, installation views, technical details and hardware, exhibition context, other installations, and audience interview. With the documentation arranged in these general categories, any structure can be applied to it. We do not intend to impose a strict hierarchy of information, but rather through the future application of tags and keywords to allow for multiple combinations of information, from general to specific and back. This structure is also highly flexible and will allow for easy expansion in the future.

Description and access

While it is not our intent to provide an in depth analysis of the documentation, we hope our brief description of the various elements articulates the nature of the documents collected and their relation to the collection as a whole. The description should also illuminate the relationship between the documentation of the audience experience and the documentation of the conceptual and technical/installed aspects of the work. Through the future use of tags and keywords, we hope to help people make connections within the documentation — between specific interview clips, technical diagrams and audience interviews. These will be drawn from various cataloguing standards developed in the field, particularly those developed by DOCAM and the Variable Media and Forging the Future projects.

In terms of access, all documentation will be made available via the Daniel Langlois Foundation Web site. Given its excellent track record in providing digital access to materials, we have drawn on its existing examples and experience to provide access to the information. The Tate and INCCA's Inside Installations project have also provided us with excellent examples of how to make documentation available in a logical format.

Conclusion

It is often noted by conservators and curators that one prime moment to document a work of art is during its installation. With the artist and technicians often present and engaged in the work, fruitful questions arise and can be solved in a way that illuminates many core issues surrounding the criteria for a successful installation. This period can also unfortunately be one of extreme time constraints and related pressures. Other issues can complicate the process as well. Despite the best intentions, artists and technicians may not always have the time or inclination to revisit a work for documentation purposes, and issues of copyright and privacy may also hamper complete documentation.

As to be expected, there are certain gaps in our documentation. These gaps and the potential complications stated above are the reasons why our goal was to propose a flexible structure. Such a structure can easily be added to as further documentation and other scholarship becomes available. New and variable media artworks are often infinitely mutable and flexible. The way we document them should reflect this reality.