

Interview with Beryl Graham

Beryl Graham is Professor of New Media Art at the School of Arts, Design, and Media, University of Sunderland, and co-founder of CRUMB, the resource for curators of new media art. She is a writer, curator, and educator with many years of professional experience as a media arts organizer, including books for Heinemann and MIT Press, presentations at Banff Centre for the Arts and V&A, and the exhibition *Serious Games* for the Laing and Barbican art galleries.

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and James Smith

Please describe your experience.

My background is primarily in photography, film, and video. I did my BA in London in the 1980s with Victor Burgin at the Polytechnic of Central London. Then I worked in a media art center as head of the photography department in Newcastle in the late 1980s and early 90s. I became increasingly interested in new media art. In the early days, that meant digital photography. But from there, I became more interested in the aspects of new media that were not just digital versions of old media, like interactive forms. I have a deep interest in interactive new media and participatory contemporary art of all kinds.

I worked in San Francisco for some time, doing work with San Francisco Photo Fest and the Exploratorium. Then I came back to do a PhD, specifically about what we called at the time “computer-based art”—one of those ever-changing names for new media art. I curated a show called [*Serious Games*](#), which was all interactive or participatory new media and non-new-media art, for the Barbican and Laing art galleries in 1996.

I actually know rather little about the technicalities of preserving new media art, because I’m not trained as an archivist; my interest is as a curator. I’ve never myself been in charge of a collection, but I work with a lot of curators who are.

Now we have the CRUMB resource, which is a university-based research center that is there to help curators, installation technicians, and really anyone involved in exhibiting new media art, whether online or in physical spaces. We’re not archival experts, but we do work with archivists. I’m very interested in how commissioning and exhibiting new media art relates to preserving and collecting it. In 2010, we did a one-day conference with the Contemporary Art Society, documented on the CRUMB website, called “[Commissioning and](#)

[Collecting Variable Media](#).” So we have that linking of commissioning with collecting and preserving. Organizations often cite preservation problems as a reason for not collecting new media art, but I think it is more complicated than that, and reflects a more general unfamiliarity with the art, and a humanist distrust of technology. Obviously, there are issues there, but nothing that a skilled preservationist can’t deal with.

More recently, I edited a book for Ashgate publishers, which should be out next year. That is about collecting, but it does include some chapters by people who are very skilled in preservation, like Pip Laurensen at the Tate. It is not primarily about preservation, but it links preservation issues to broad curatorial issues of collecting¹.

Because I have this interest in interaction, I have an interest in how it is documented. As the Variable Media Initiative pointed out, collections databases don’t usually have fields for information such as whether a work is interactive, or what kind of interactivity it involves.

Could you discuss some of the challenges you encounter as a curator putting together a show with these works, and any insights about preservation that come out of installing a work.

A lot of those issues are covered in a book that I and my colleague Sarah Cook wrote for the MIT Press, called *Rethinking Curating*². New media works in a very different way than straight video art; it can be time-based, but it is a different kind of time-based. We ended up using Steve Dietz’s three categories of net art as a useful way of thinking about it. His categories are:

- Connectivity. A lot of web art uses “live” data.
- Computability. Many curators are less familiar with this, because it deals with the generative nature of software. An artist might design the software in a certain way, once it is on display, unexpected things might happen. If the software can “evolve,” you need a different attitude toward the media.
- Interactivity. That’s what I’m very interested in, and that I think creates a lot of problems for curators in terms of installing and exhibiting, because it radically changes curators’ attitudes toward the audience. If they are participating rather than just observing, you have to arrange exhibitions in completely different ways.

So there are a lot of aspects of how this art creates challenges for curators, and these relate to preservation in interesting ways. In the *Variable Media* book, the example of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is used. In his work, you are invited to take, for example, a poster from a pile of posters or a sweet from a pile of sweets. Now, this may be an apocryphal tale, but I heard that in one display of his work, the pile of posters was behind a velvet rope, so the audience couldn’t take one—which defeated the interactive intent of the artist. How do you

document? What kind of information do you need to document how people are supposed to interact with a work like that? What would you tell the guards in that room? What would they be instructed to say to visitors? All those kinds need documentation.

In the Ashgate book, Lizzie Muller has an interesting chapter. She has studied audiences' experiences of interactive works, including David Rokeby's work. Her research involved interviewing audience members, as well as talking to the artist in depth about the interactive intent of a work. That research has actually been attached to Rokeby's work when it goes in a collection. That information on audiences' experience will be very useful to curators who are exhibiting that work in the future. The artist will usually provide a description of the physical nature of an installation, but what Lizzie Muller's research does—which is unusual—is to talk to the audience and the artist about all the immaterial things that affect the experience of a work, like the nature of the interaction.

When you are installing a show do you look at past installations? Do you document how the piece behaved and how people interacted with it?

As a curator, I'm unusual because I did a PhD on audience reactions to computer-based artworks. A lot of curators might want to do that, but the limiting factor is time. I was able to take the time to do it because it was part of my PhD. Lizzie Mueller did her research as part of a PhD as well. But it's very time-consuming research, which not everybody can do.

The artists are usually great repositories of knowledge. Quite often, they have informally observed how people use their work; if a work is interactive, most artists are very interested in what actually happens, which does not always match what was intended. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has a work in the Tate's collection that is interesting. He is very experienced with observing how people use his works, and he says it is always out of control of the artist and the curator.

So the artist is a great source of knowledge, which is fine as long as the artist is alive. Artist interviews have been used by a lot of museums. Those become particularly important with respect to new media interactive works, to inform future curators.

Would it be useful to have a systematic approach to that kind of documentation, so it's easier and less time-consuming for museums to gather it?

There is the Variable Media questionnaire for that. I haven't really tested that myself in depth, but I know it includes questions for the artist about the interactive intent of the work. It's just a simple text question that asks for a narrative description.

With new media, there are a lot of technical things to get right, which your museum might not be an expert in. So artists have got very good at doing “Installation Guides for Dummies”, and I’m thinking here of Toshio Iwai’s immaculate instructions for *Resonance of 4*, which included turn-on and turn-off procedures.

Many curators are obsessed with labels, and that becomes even more important with interactive art. I end up discussing the nature of the labels with the artists a lot, and well in advance. Sometimes museums have inflexible rules about what should go on a panel or a label, and that can be a problem when artists have their own specific views about labels. Does the audience need to be told to stand there and wave their arms? Or is that dumbing down the work? Sometimes, the artist will even supply the copy for labels, based on previous observations of how audiences have used the work; then that may have to be negotiated with the museum, given its rules. Those things can be very fraught; as a curator, you get to negotiate those relationships between what the artist wants and how the museum has always done it.

Have you worked on any pieces where the artist was not around, and you had to make those kinds of decisions?

Because I work with new media, they tend to be younger, mobile artists, so not really. Of course the dialogue with the artist is most important, but there are still some factors that might be out of the control of both the artist and the curator. In the Ashgate book, Rudolph Frieling from SFMOMA has a very interesting chapter that relates to that question, and shows how collecting documentation around conceptual art can help inform installation choices for new media art. He curated a show called *The Art of Participation*, which included some older works from the Museum’s collection. For example, Tom Marioni had a work in the show called “The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art.” But it also included newer works, like those of Erwin Wurm.

That chapter talks about how these types of work might change the museum rules for documentation. I mentioned how audiences can provide useful information through how they interact with a work; quite often, they will document their own interactions and it ends up, for example, on YouTube. For that SFMOMA show, you had curators looking at things on the web and saying “Wait a minute, what actually happened in the galleries?”³ If you are talking about the Wurm works where you have to balance broomsticks on your head and that kind of that thing, people want to take photos of that. SFMOMA has a history of interactive exhibitions including *010101*, and the default rule was that photography is not allowed in the galleries, but they really couldn’t stop it, so changed the default rule to allow photography would unless specifically forbidden by the loaner or artist. *The Art of*

Participation benefitted from this change of rules because it was useful documentation for them. Now, that kind of crowd-sourced documentation does not replace good old careful museum documentation. SFMOMA still does that too. But it can be a useful addition to it. It's more informal. The audience documents itself, and this helps inform curators on future installations of the art.

Art itself is very well-documented by art history, but exhibitions are not necessarily well-documented. As a curator, I find that interesting⁴. At the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, they collected a whole show called *No Ghost Just a Shell*. It was initiated by two artists Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, who then invited other artists to make variations. In Japanese 3D animation, you can buy animated characters that are created in software—a kind of “shell”—that you can use in whatever you are making. The two artists did this, and then they gave the character to other artists. The end result was an exhibition that was basically created by the artists. Then the Museum collected the whole exhibition. What happened was that they had to change the documentation system of the Museum so the individual works had document titles that were connected to the exhibition, which was what was being collected. They had to link all those database records together and call them “work sets” so they would be able to collect the exhibition as whole. That was a shift for the Museum's systems⁵.

So you asked earlier if there is any kind of system for documenting exhibitions, and the answer is that no, there isn't really a shared system yet. I did a case study of the exhibition *010101* in 2001 at SFMOMA, when I was doing a research residency there, and I made a deliberate effort to interview those who had the closest contact with audiences, such as docents and gallery guards. Current research, including curatorial-practice-led research, and the questioning of art historical methods, is helping to develop this area. I think developing the systems of documentation is key, and I think that for interactive works this needs to include audiences.

... Especially for these works that are only present when they are actually installed—you can't just pull them out of the vault and look at them.

Yes! There is a parallel there with conceptual art, where sometimes what you are collecting is a set of instructions, like Marioni's artwork, which is actually just a set of instructions that specifies this kind of bar, tables, bottles of beer, and so on. It's the same with some of Yoko Ono's work, where you are just collecting a set of written instructions.

When working with media people, how do you handle the technical challenges?

You need a team approach. I think a good model for a lot of these things—installation, preservation—is SFMOMA. They have a really good preservation team, but they also talk to a lot of people: curators, technicians. In British museums, technicians are often neglected because of their status within the institution; but you need a really good integrated team with technicians. You also need to invest in training them so they can relate to registrars, curators, and artists. The artist will often work directly with the installation team and technical people; but in British museums, that communication often does not work very well. Sometimes as I curator, I've had to fight for technicians to be taken seriously.

It was steep learning curve for me with *Serious Games*, lots of very basic technical infrastructure knowledge was needed such as Three-Phase power, and ventilation needs for large computers. I know a certain amount about software, but it's changing all the time. So quite often, you have to bring in expert freelancers you have worked with before to do the technical stuff. Especially with server issues, which are rather specialist. That's a new idea for a lot of museums—that the web team might have role in the preservation of art works.

My colleague Sarah Cook has curated at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Newcastle/Gateshead, and has done works that has involved talking to the building management team and electricians about lights and circuits turning on and off. She also had to talk to the server people. If you are dealing with the whole building system, which new media often does, you have to be able to access the right people and gain that trust and get that permission to do things.

How do you keep yourself up-to-date on the technical side? What resources do you use?

I'm sure I could do better at that! As a curator, I look at the technology from the audience's point of view. But sometimes it's not about the technology; it's about the social systems that surround the technology. For example, if you are using online social networking platforms you have to understand the differences between, say, a discussion list and a chat room. Even if you are just tweeting, you have to understand how Twitter works—the rhythm of it and the social rules that govern it. A lot of curators don't do that. They are not familiar with new media, and they tend to be somewhat disdainful of it. A lot of that comes down to just understanding the audience experience of these things.

On the technical side, I just have to talk to people and develop relationships with good technicians; because I don't personally know, for example, how a server works. You have to develop these relationships and keep them going.

Also, when you are budgeting for an exhibition like *Serious Games*, you have to insist on having a quick-response technical support at every venue for the duration. In that case, we actually named people who would make themselves available in a certain kind of time frame if something went wrong—people who were familiar with and respectful of the art and understand how they work technically. With *Serious Games*, we were able to do that, but quite often, especially in times of economic decline, that can be hard to fight for. It's political as well, because as I said, in British museums, technical cover is not a high priority. Curators often don't really understand what it involves, because technology is not a big part of their own lives.

Do preservation issues ever come up in your educational activities at the university or CRUMB?

I think preservation is always present in the minds of curators, even though they are not necessarily responsible for a collection, or may not have gotten around to collecting new media yet. You are in a better position to think about these connections in a university, because you get time for research, and there is a lot of new stuff to understand. Doing the book about collecting has really opened my mind to all those different factors. However, it's pretty much current discourse; I'm not sure people really have fixed rules yet. What we do have are some very interesting experiences from curators and some working models.

A chapter in the Ashgate book by Lindsay Taylor at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston is a very interesting example. Preston is in an economically depressed area in the Northwest of England; the Harris is an art museum with a collection of things like silverware and snuff boxes. But over a period of time, Lindsay Taylor encouraged them to start collecting video and, more recently, new media as well. They built up an audience for new media, and then last year they did the *Current* project that was an open call for new media artists who were selected and exhibited. From the six artworks that were exhibited, they planned for one to be selected for the collection. There was a panel of experts to select the work that would be collected, but they also got feedback from the audience on 'the people's choice' for collection. Perhaps surprisingly, the panel and the people agreed, and the work was complex, used some technologies maybe unfamiliar to the audience, and presented some challenges for collection. It was a work by Thomson and Craighead that had two projections of numbers on opposite walls. One showed the number of miles traveled through the solar system in a year and other showed the number of barrels of oils left in the world, using live data pulled from the internet.

How do you collect something like that? Are there any common standards there, or does every work have to be deal with on its own terms?

Every work is different. Thomson and Craighead, who have been working in these media for a while, have a whole set of strategies for what to do upon acquisition, because they have also sold to private buyers. What is collected in that case, is software controlling Web browsers. But they also built in self-sustaining instructions, like what to do if the Web browser changes—that didn't turn out to be much of a problem—or if future data sources for the information change. In that case, they have a set of different data sources and written instructions about what to find if none of those sources works. It's like what you have to do with Gonzalez Torres's work.

Naming and taxonomies become very important in museum online collections databases. I spent some time looking at international sites online, and found that few use the same basic terminology for new media. The word "video" is pretty well established now, and "digital" which covers everything from digital photography or 2D graphics to mixed media installations, and hence is imprecise. But there's not much useful detail. Even in the Tate's database, it's very difficult to find new media works. Is it "performance"? Is it "time-based"? Beyond that, if you are trying to find works that are interactive or participatory, you find that those words really do not come up. It's a very random set of terms right now. It could be much better.

So we need a global data dictionary?

Yes—just some very basic terminology would be good start.

What would be the best way to distribute something like that? Traditional standards organizations, or professional organizations, or what?

I always think that rather than re-inventing wheels, it is better to build on things that already exist. The Dublin Core [metadata schema] is used by a lot of museums. It is bad at mentioning any kind of media, but it might be a decent starting point. However, I'm not enough of an expert in library science to talk about that in detail. I think Rhizome is good at developing keywords for its *Artbase* collection, which includes both expert panels and folksonomies.

In your role as a university teacher, do you cover preservation topics?

The [MA Curating](#) course for which I'm program leader is really more of a contemporary art curating course than a museum studies course, where you might cover more of the preservation material. We do try to integrate issues of preservation alongside other practical skills of documentation and collection in every module. The course is about contemporary art in general—it's not new-media specific, although we do integrate new media issues into it, and I think we are unique in Britain for doing that. Even contemporary

curating courses have been slow to take on new media. For preservation-specialist training that includes new media art, there are good European courses in the Netherlands and Bern.

Any other comments or ideas on the work that remains to be done in this field?

I would say that much of the work that needs to be done remains to be done, because this is still new media. But I am always impressed by curators who manage to come up with interesting solutions: As I discuss in the Ashgate book, museums tend to use preservation challenges as an excuse not to collect new media at all, and so there are a range of “collection-ish” strategies which might help to start the processes. For example, Benjamin Weil, who is at Laboral Centro in Gijon, Spain and who spoke at the [Commissioning and Collecting Variable Media](#) suggests acquiring a work, but with no promises to keep it going for more than, say, 10 years. It may be good sometimes to acquire a work without providing any unrealistic promises about how long it is going to live. Some new media art, like other types of art, just eventually dies. Those “collection-ish” strategies are an interesting way to respond to that. In some ways, the documentation becomes much more important in these cases, because that’s what is left: the legacy of how people used a work, what it looked like, what the audience experience was, and all those kinds of things which live on.

¹ Graham, Beryl (ed.) (forthcoming 2014) *New Collecting: Exhibiting and Audiences after New Media Art*. London: Ashgate.

² Graham, Beryl and Sarah Cook (2010) *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

³ Graham, Beryl (2009) “An interview with Rudolf Frieling.” *CRUMB*. [Online]. Available from URL: <<http://www.crumbweb.org/getInterviewDetail.php?id=34>>.

⁴ Graham, Beryl (2013) “Exhibition Histories and New Media Behaviours.” *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 2 (2). 242-262.

⁵ Saaze, van, Vivian (2013) “Case Study: No Ghost Just a Shell by Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and Many Others.” In: Hediger, Vinzenz, Barbara Le Maitre, Julia Noordegraaf, and Cosetta Saba (eds.) *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives. Framing Film 4*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 172-177.