Smithsonian Institution Time-Based and Digital Art Working Group: Interview Project

Interview with Christiane Paul

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert

Describe your experience working in the field of time-based art and its preservation.

My background is in English and American literature, and the path that led me, along with many other people, into new media art was the research of theories on hypertext and networked reading and writing, which gained momentum in the late 80s. I was deeply immersed in hyperlinked reading and writing before the world wide web existed. When the web came about, I co-founded a magazine on new media art and education, which ultimately led me into curating. I was asked by museums and curators to consult on curatorial practices for new media art and finally came to a point where I realized that, rather than consulting, I might as well curate and organize those exhibitions myself.

I entered the field of preservation out of necessity. I was hired by the Whitney Museum in 2000 as Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts, so I've been there for 13 years. At the time there were no best practices for preserving new media works that were brought into museum collections. I started my work as a curator without any institutional framework for preservation, which led me to be much more active in that field than the title of a curator would have warranted.

So what has your involvement been with preservation, acquisition, and managing the collections at the Whitney?

I had been following the work of the Variable Media Network for quite some time, and the Whitney finally started collaborating with it a few years ago. Jon Ippolito developed the network as a curator at the Guggenheim, and the Whitney joined the Variable Media Network as part of one of its initiatives, Forging the Future, which developed a suite of tools for preservation. The Whitney's specific role in the initiative was to test one of those tools, the Variable Media Questionnaire.

In terms of acquisitions or collections management at the Whitney, I have been assisting mostly in the development of vocabulary for new media. Vocabulary is important for an understanding of what constitutes the work. We also have been suggesting and developing best practices at the Whitney. Most recently I've been working with the Whitney's chief conservator Carol Mancusi-

Ungaro and Rhizome's Ben Fino-Radin on the preservation of the first net art piece that entered the Whitney's collection in 1994, Douglas Davis' *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*. We are actually going to launch that project in early June.

Is there a need for more official standards in the field?

I definitely see the need for standards but, in any kind of preservation project, there simply is no silver bullet for approaching the work. That is what every conservator would presumably agree on when it comes to preservation in general and it has not changed in the case of digital art.

You used the term time-based media and when it comes to the preservation of the range of works we are dealing with in the field of so-called new media this term becomes almost meaningless. What film or video requires is so different from what a piece of net art or a virtual reality installation requires. We have to basically assess each project on a case-by-case basis. That being said, there are fairly common practices developed by the different initiatives, from Media Matters to DOCAM. These practices are widely agreed upon and used in different variations. Storage, emulation, migration, and reinterpretation are the common approaches to conserving work.

What I like about the Forging the Future initiative and the Variable Media approach is the breaking down of artwork into medium-independent behaviors and and different components. These aspects also play a major role in the Variable Media Questionnaire (VMQ), one of the Variable Media Network's tools, and are incredibly helpful in assessing what practices or standards could be used. In the case of new media work, the components to be assessed consist of materials (hardware, media display, natural or manufactured material, sensors, mechanisms); the sources (video source, generic software, custom software, key concepts) and the environments (including the gallery space). It isn't sufficient to pay attention to the painting or video per se. You have to develop approaches for each and every one of the components of a work.

To summarize, establishing vocabulary for artworks and their components is crucial. I think there are some requirements for preservation of new media or time-based art that have to be met across the board, specifics aside. We must maintain digital archives for copies of works, to keep backups of the works themselves. Also, having virtual servers set up for emulating hardware and software would be helpful. These are just a few key concepts.

Have you been able to come up with best practices that mostly work according to these separate components? Are you able to rely on best practices or does each piece need its own direct attention?

Every piece needs its own direct attention. Archiving work in the sense of retaining a backup copy applies to any work, across the board. When it comes to concrete preservation approaches, every piece needs individual assessment. As part of the Forging the Future initiative, the Whitney tested the Variable Media Questionnaire for that purpose. We did interviews using the questionnaire to determine how works should be approached. One of the interviews we did was with Cory Arcangel, about his project *Super Mario Clouds*, which consists of a hacked game cartridge and uses the Nintendo system. That work, in particular, illustrated how changes in both the artist's approach and industry standards can affect the preservation process. Originally, Cory had said that *Super Mario Clouds* is a hardware piece and that, once the hardware ceases to function, it should be mothballed and the process of the work should be documented. He did not want the work to be

emulated. Then Nintendo itself started to incorporate emulation in their system, at which point he changed his mind and decided that emulation would be an acceptable conservation approach, although not one that can replace the Nintendo system.

Does an experience like that allow you to learn the dependencies of works that rely on videogames that you can take to planning for other artworks? Or is every work different?

I think you can learn from the experience and apply it to different pieces even if every work is very specific. There are still similarities among projects. For example, you can transfer a lot of the experience from one hardware-based gaming piece to another. I think this transfer also applies to the strategies we have used in preserving Douglas Davis' *The World's First Collaborative Sentence,* the net-art project that is going to be launched in a few weeks. The strategies establish a model that other intuitions or conservators might adopt for approaching this type of work. The project posted very interesting philosophical issues that we addressed.

What is a good way to distribute this knowledge?

It is absolutely key to share knowledge between institutions. Again, the Variable Media Questionnaire was set up so that the interviewers and stakeholders in a project can make all the interviews accessible to the public. One of the questionnaires and interviews was done with John F. Simon, Jr. about his *Color Panel v.1.0,* which both the Guggenheim and Whitney have in their collections. The work that the Guggenheim did in filling out the Variable Media Questionnaire for that project directly benefits the Whitney since the project is editioned.

It is crucial to develop frameworks that make sharing of knowledge about preservation approaches possible. This is something that curators, archivists, and conservators are talking about a lot in different meetings of the preservation and archiving community around the world. Not only frameworks related to knowledge sharing about preservation, per se, but also about collection and documentation. There is a tendency amongst institutions to build their own databases. The question is, how can we share the valuable knowledge we are accumulating? In expert meetings on archiving that I attended, everybody agreed that we need metadata standards and meta servers that allow us to share the information. It seems an illusion or a dream to assume that we will develop one key database that everybody and every organization will use. While this standardization worked shockingly well in the case of TMS [The Museum System], which is such a clunky system, yet used by so many institutions, it is not going to happen (or at least not easily) for software-based and digital-born art. I think it's crucial to think about knowledge sharing on the level of meta-language and metadata sharing.

Do you still use the Variable Media Questionnaire in pieces you acquire or newer works that come into the collection?

For new media works, yes.

What are some of the other fundamental resources you rely on? Are there others?

Absolutely, the VMQ is just one piece in the puzzle. We are also video-recording the interviews in which artists fill out the VMQ for our archive, and we are in the process of setting up server space

for back-up and archiving more rigorously. It's not only the VMQ that is helpful in the process of preserving new media work; it is one component in the standard interview process that is conducted for assessing how a work should be approached.

Do you have a standard process in place you are able to rely on?

We are still very much developing that process for new media art. It's slightly different for time-based media in the video/film category than it is for so-called new media (for lack of a better term). We are developing all of these procedures hand-in-hand and trying to accommodate the different needs. There is not yet a rock-solid framework, it's constantly being developed.

Have you come up with one term or several terms that is better at capturing what this artwork is?

We are not using the term 'time-based' because of the range within that category. New Media still is the term we are using as an umbrella category for the digital-born type of work, simply because it accommodates a bit more. Then we have different categories within the new media rubric.

What are some of the technology discoveries you have made or some of the challenges you've encountered in your role as a curator putting together a show?

The challenges started with having to revise everything from loan forms to commissioning agreements, because most of the standard categories didn't apply to new media art. For example, loan forms were asking for the dimensions of a work, which aren't relevant for software-based projects. In general, the vocabulary used didn't work for new media-specific forms and agreements. That was one part of the process. Registration was another department in which vocabulary issues needed to be solved to accommodate new media.

On the technological front, one of the main challenges is that most museums at this point are still lacking staff for supporting new media work. Many museums have AV departments which are responsible for working on exhibitions. At the Whitney, and many other institutions, the IT department is not responsible for installing work in the galleries. IT staff members typically maintain the computer network and make sure the hardware communicates. It has been an enormous challenge to have to enlist the support of people whose job description didn't include assisting curators in the gallery space. In new media exhibitions, curators often have to struggle with networks and their capacities. When I did a show called *Data Dynamics* at the Whitney in 2001, sustaining the network for all the net art pieces proved to be incredibly demanding.

Another challenge are legal issues. I am often working with the Whitney's lawyer to get institutional approval for mounting works without infringing on anyone's rights. *Data Dynamics* included one project, *Camouflage Town* by Adrianne Wortzel, which I don't think could ever be exhibited again the way it was, because it was originally shown in the pre-9/11 age and the general understanding of security was very different. The project enabled people from all over the world to move a robot through the Whitney's gallery space via a Web interface and to switch between views of the surveillance cameras in the museum. That is something I don't believe we would be able to do anymore today. After 9/11 so many places and institutions disabled their webcams. We don't have that free access anymore.

There are also privacy issues arising from the zoom factor of cameras used in new media projects. Protecting audience members from having a recognizable image of them broadcast over the Net, and doing live capture of images of audience members without permanently storing those images in a database, are some of the demanding issues that need to be solved on a case-by-case basis in mounting new media exhibitions.

What would the ideal staff look like to support organizing a new media exhibition?

Staff with a background in IT, computer sciences, and even new media art and curation would be ideal; people who are able to bridge the technical aspects with the demands of an artwork. Having dedicated staff for installing, running, and supervising this type of work is crucial and still fairly rare in museums.

Currently do you use the Whitney staff or call outside consultants?

Both, ultimately. I have always been working with the Whitney's IT department and am deeply grateful to them for doing so much work that definitely isn't part of their job description, like getting the works up and running and supporting them throughout the duration of a show. When I curated *Data Dynamics* in 2001 I had some people from the outside helping out because of the challenges in figuring out network issues. We needed experts we didn't have at that time.

Can you expand on philosophical issues that were raised around the specific net art work you are working on and how it could be a case-study for others to learn from?

The issues were two-fold. On the one hand, there was the fact that we were not able to talk to the artist and identify his intent in preserving the work. That is always a conundrum. So what do we do? Do we make educated guesses in terms of what the artist would have wanted? In terms of net art you are looking at a unique opportunity for preservation, which is to just create another version and launch two different ones. And that is what we decided to do. We are basically launching two different versions of the piece. You wouldn't be able to do that, or at least it would be more dubious to do so, when it comes to a sculpture, for example. We created a replica that takes one approach and then we still have the original. In the case of net art, the notion of the original just isn't as prevalent.

Another philosophical issue we faced in the preservation of *The Sentence* was very specific, how to deal with link rot. A lot of the links that were originally included in the piece now just generate "404 not found" error messages. The pages to which the project linked were moved or deleted. We were wondering: do we leave this as is, as a testament to the ever evolving, changing nature of the web? Or do we go to the Internet Archive and find copies of these pages? We saw compelling arguments for both solutions. On the one hand, you can make a claim for the ephemeral nature of the piece and the fact that links just break over time; but then again, you can't claim that the Web is completely ephemeral because somebody actually went to the trouble of creating an archive for it. The pages are still there, somewhere in an archive of the net. I don't want to create any misunderstandings here; it's not that we created a lot of different versions of the work, just two. In one of the versions we are launching the links embedded in the project actually point to the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, and you can retrieve the original pages. In the other version of the project, links leads to the "404 not found" messages.

Where is this digital content held? Do you have a repository and what does it look like?

We do not have an official "repository," so the work is basically just hosted on the Whitney's server. We are in the process of systematizing our server space.

Are there any kinds of training opportunities that have helped you be able to create these kinds of languages and dive into this technology?

For me, diving into the technology was very much learning by doing. Most helpful were conversations with other people: curators, conservationists and artists. Artists are a tremendous resource in the process, especially those working in the new media field. I learned so much through expert meetings and think tanks on these preservation issues.

Where do you think there is still more work to be done for the issues and the challenges related to conserving this type of artwork?

I don't even know where to start. We are in such an early stage in that process.

What are the top three?

First would be developing vocabulary and standards. I don't mean to suggest that we should create rigid categories to which we subject work, just a flexible basic framework for approaching it. Also, technological standards are needed; we need to create best practices or standards for digital repositories. In my ideal world, we would have a virtual server were I could basically emulate every version of Netscape to recreate all of JODI's pieces, pieces that were very specific in terms of using a glitch of Netscape '1.whatever' and exploiting that glitch for the creation of an artwork. Also, being able to see works in their original environment, such as a certain browser version, that would be terrific. Another important step would be the development of metadata standards.

When you talk about metadata standards, you mean in terms of technology standards?

No, I mean development of language and vocabulary. That way we would be able to more easily share information about pieces. Just think about how useless the time-based media category would be at the metadata level. It becomes very useful once you break down time-based into other characteristics. If you search a database for time-based work, you'll get everything from a video to a Web performance and a computer game.

How would you envision the best way of disseminating that kind of knowledge so it is adopted?

Ultimately it would call for an educational initiative. I learned a lot from expert meetings that were convened in different places around the world and brought together people from different continents and countries to discuss and compare approaches. I think conferences and meetings are an incredibly powerful tool.

Publicly available archives or websites that are devoted to those issues are another helpful tool. There are initiatives such as DOCAM and others, which have gathered terrific information. It

would be great to have places that would gather information on a meta-level, from different organizations; addressing questions such as, how do we actually share information with each other? What other databases are out there at this point?

If you were to train someone to do your job, how do you envision that training happening?

It would require creating the equivalent of all the existing curatorial and art-historical programs for digital media combined. There are still relatively few programs like that. The University of Maine has one in digital curating. I've also been teaching as an adjunct in the Media Art Histories program at the Danube University in Krems, Austria, and they are tackling all of these issues. Basically, programs could follow age-old educational models but update them to the requirements of digital work from an art-historical, curatorial, and technological to a conservation point of view. All of these aspects of the field would need to be included here, as they are in other educational programs.

I think in the future we will have very specialized digital media conservators, and hopefully there won't come a point when the conservator doesn't talk to the curator or isn't informed by an art-historical point of view any more. I firmly believe that people need to be trained in all facets of field to do an artwork justice.