

Interview with Christine Frohnert

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert

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

I started working with time-based art in 1997, and that included not only film, slide and video-based art, but also interactive installations with mechanical components and light-based works. (I call it “art with a plug,” but I don’t want to get too tied up with the terminology.)

I was traditionally trained as a paintings and sculpture conservator, and I remember asking myself how my skill set could possibly translate into the needs of those works. This is when I learned about a program that became available in Bern, Switzerland specifically addressing the conservation of modern materials like plastics and media-based works. So I went there and graduated from that program.

When I first was exposed to time-based art, I found it very helpful to have been a conservator by training, because of the code of ethics that is one of the supporting columns of our profession, as well as the critical thinking and methodologies that are relevant in conservation, help to structure the needs of time-based media conservation. I was fortunate to graduate from one of the few schools that provide this kind of education in modern materials and media conservation.

I think it is important to understand the works in context. Since we are facing the likelihood that these works can be technically upgraded with newer technologies as they become available, it requires a deep understanding of what the work is, when it was made, and how it is anchored in technology of that time to translate our conservation approaches to these works in a respectful way.

When did you attend the Bern school?

I graduated in 2003.

Is that the only program of its kind?

There is also a program in Berlin, which has a slightly different goal. The program provides courses in media preservation and photographic materials. But they also focus on technological heritage, like historic machines that need to be conserved. So that's a slightly different scope. Some conservators who graduated from that program focus on the conservation of kinetic art.

Now there is also a third program in Stuttgart, which focuses on born-digital works.

The technical aspects of the field change rapidly. We're curious about the resources that you use that help you stay abreast of new technologies.

As a field, we might be about 15 years old; so we're really, really young and evolving. But given the considerably short period of time, there has been a lot of research, a lot of publications, and a huge body of knowledge developed. Of course, not everything has been covered yet, but we are certainly not where we started 15 years ago.

One of the most useful resources for media based works are the documentation templates that have been developed by *Matters in Media Art*, and that are supplemented by Joanna Phillips' iteration sheets developed at the *Guggenheim Museum*, which provide good guidance on the documentation of those works. I do think that when it comes to electronic media conservation in general, documentation *is* conservation. It's the first and most important step in conservation.

Furthermore, there's the publication of the 3-year European research initiative *Inside Installations*, which looked at various case studies in that area even beyond time-based media works and also included e.g. light-based works. Since last year, the Electronic Media Group of the American Institute of Conservation has published the first periodical internationally focusing entirely on time-based art. So a lot of good research has been translated into guidance for our field, but with the fast-growing technologies we face, we certainly need continuous education. With HD surrounding us, and providing capacities that a single work can easily be in a terrified region, I'm not sure if all institutions are equipped to handle it yet.

It sounds like there are a lot of emerging resources coming out all the time. How do you see the distinction among “standards,” “guidelines,” and “best practices” in time-based art? When is it appropriate to apply one or the other?

I think it depends. Some standards have been developed with respect to the e.g video master formats that we are accepting when a work is acquired. And I think this is something that most museums have standardized in the meantime. But a work enters an institution not through the acquisition process, and when a work is not [documented upon reception] to the standards that have been formulated by our profession as a whole, it is very hard to go back to the artist and get what you need to serve the preservation needs.

I think the standards that have been developed for acquiring a work and its master preservation formats or files are important. I also think standards that have developed in terms of documentation and guiding your thought processes through the documentation are very helpful.

But, because of the nature of these artworks, they will not always fit those standards, especially when it comes to early experimental works with artists-modified technology, which need to be looked, understood and conserved on an individual basis, with very little or no *standards, guidance* or *best practice* in hand. If standards that have been established for certain categories cannot be applied to a certain work, it is also very important to understand why.

What aspects of time-based art do you think are suited for standardized processes, and which ones are just so variable that you have to look at them on a case-by-case basis?

It is important to understand an artwork very well before it enters an institution, if you have the chance to do so. I see in many cases that complex electronic media artworks are entering an institution as a gift, after they have been in private collections or elsewhere, where the owners have come to understand over time the responsibility of owning such complex works. But when they enter an institution at a later time, it is very, very hard to apply those standards. So I really do feel those standards should be applied when the artwork is acquired for both, institutions and private collectors —the standards that have been developed to help guide [acquiring institutions] through the documentation process. From there, I think it really depends on the individual needs of the art work, and [that can be] accompanied with the research that has been developed over time and that is available to us.

Do you have a specific artwork you could use as a case study where you have worked with standards to some degree, but also had to think more creatively about how to preserve it?

Let's not think about film- or video-based works; let's think about works that are interactive by nature. One that comes to mind is *Magnet TV* by Nam June Paik, which is currently in D.C.

This work was made even before video became available. It uses CRT technology that is now considered obsolete. We tried to acquire as many replacement tubes as possible for the Whitney Museum of American Art, but we will certainly reach a point where replacing the tubes will not be an option, because we simply cannot find the specific CRT tube model from the 1960's anymore. Also, over the course of time, one important aspect of the work—the interactivity—was discontinued because visitors are not allowed to move the magnet independently anymore, and this has compromised the work.

So we're currently thinking about whether the documentation of the interactivity of the work could be re-created entirely virtually, and shown next to the original, or, the viewer could experience the impact of a magnet on another CRT next to *Magnet TV*. Following the guiding question: How could the work be best experienced in its intended interactivity in the future?

Maybe this is not the best example, but this is certainly a work where strategies of thinking outside the box have to be considered to find solutions for keeping an artwork alive for future generations.

I'm curious about digital components of works, specifically in terms of storage and standards needed for digital repositories that are different from what has already been done—say in the OAIS archival model or the Trusted Digital Repository (TDR) auditing processes. Are there TDR needs specific to artworks that need to be addressed?

Yes, absolutely. We are not just looking at large HD video files; we are also looking at computer-based works that are dependent upon digital files and software and the entire surrounding—which needs to be handled a little differently. There are no/few standards for artworks yet [in our area]. Many institutions are looking into the standards that have been provided by the library and information science field, based on the OAIS model and the ISO standards. I had some students researching the current state of the field and what museum need to move forward to find at least an interim solution when they acquire digitally born works. But to my knowledge, there are no standards yet that can be adopted by institutions 101.

There is a project underway in the Netherlands called *Digitising Contemporary Art*, and a lot of good resources are developed there. But there is certainly a need to design digital repositories according to the very specific individual needs of complex artworks. ...New

research is released by *Digitising Contemporary Art*, as we speak and has been done already, but it just needs to move a couple of steps further to become usable for museums. And in turn, the museums need to dedicate budget, staff, hardware and need to be willing to implement those best practices in cooperation with their IT- departments, overseen by conservators.

There are organizations that are in charge of creating standards, or that take that on as one of their roles—the ISO, the SMPTE [Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers], the Audio Engineering Society. And there are also professional associations that help to distribute this knowledge and create these standards. What groups do think would be relevant to the process of framing such standards?

All the groups you mentioned are relevant. And conservators need to look at those standards and see how well they apply to artworks. I think this is a responsibility the Electronic Media Group of the American Institute of Conservation [AIC] is trying to take on, by organizing this conference series, *TechFocus*. Organized in a systematic way by each media category. *TechFocus* is meant to fill the gap of missing educational opportunities for conservators and to provide continuous education. It is the art conservation profession, along with affiliated professionals, who need to review those standards and see how well they can be applied. But I'm pretty certain most of them are applicable to artworks in a certain way, as we have 'borrowed' some of the analytical tools developed by SMPTE to quantify our observations of e.g. video or CRT technology.

What do you see as some of the main hurdles for progress toward standards—beyond just time and resources?

It has to do with the fact that there are so few trained media conservators out there who could make that decision. Our profession is just so young, and it just needs more training to understand, discuss and adopt those standards where they fit. I think the field needs a little more time to evolve. But also, we *desperately* need education, especially in the US, where no electronic media art curriculum for conservators is in existence so far

Do you have any suggestions about types of training programs or resources that you would like to see available to conservators?

I really do see the need for training. At least one of the conservation schools should develop a curriculum to cover that need. During my time as chair of the Electronic Media Group, I received repeated requests from institutions all over the country that were in need of trained conservators and could not find them. There is a strong need to develop as a

curriculum, maybe in collaboration with existing programs e.g. within the NYU umbrella. A place like New York could have some potential.

In preparation for the seminar course *Art with a Plug: The Conservation of Artworks containing Motion, Sound, Light, Moving Images and Interactivity* that I thought in Fall 2012 at the Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, I started thinking about what a curriculum could look like. I was using the NYU conservation program model as an example, and was looking at how this is currently structured. I was also looking at courses offered at MIAP and courses that are offered at ITP, and how those could unfold in a program that entirely focus on electronic media conservation. From my own education, I do know that it is important to have a solid foundation in ethics and methodologies, and then building on that to expand our [media-art-specific] knowledge. [Just as we need to understand] chemistry to treat organic works, we need to add the technical [media] knowledge to our palette, which is probably best understood if [we provide] an introduction to engineering and electronics and systematic education on each media category and its preservation challenges.

I found it very handy that the Bern program provided instruction on both media conservation and the conservation of plastics, because if we look at media-based artworks, what are they made of? In most cases, synthetic organic materials. To understand the degradation phenomena of those materials is helpful in developing an overall education plan. So I see different parts that could interact to provide the education needed in the field.

But within the structure of the conservation schools that currently exist in this country, it would be hard to make [this additional training] fit into three years, given all the other requirements that need to be fulfilled. It's a lot of theory that needs to be understood and applied.

Are there any specific resources or tools you use in your work that you would recommend?

I really do like the documentation forms that have been developed by *Matters in Media Art*, and I also like the forms developed at the *Guggenheim*, which are helpful for everyday documentation. Based on that, my business partner Reinhard Bek and I are currently in the process of developing forms specifically tailored for, say, CRT monitors. Those help to guide you through the process—to look at the work and note all the details necessary, and not have to come back later when you see that you have forgotten to note some important information. I find this extremely helpful.

Could you tell us about your experience working with contractors or others who are not art specialists, but are specialists in a field that you need to utilize to preserve a time-based

artwork—say, computer engineers? Could you talk about best practices for those kinds of working relationships?

It's important to be able to use the same language as a technician or an engineer you are working with. If you have to outsource some of the necessary work, it is important to define your goals clearly, especially if you work with non-conservators. Defining those goals without using the engineers' or technicians' language is difficult, and there is potential for misunderstanding. So you have to make sure your use of all the technical terms are correct.

Also, it is important to sensitize those people to the specific needs of artworks—especially [to help them understand] that conservation does not mean “improvement.” You are not trying to make the artwork “better.” It really requires a long relationship to sensitize these kinds of professionals to that.

On the other hand, we rely on that network of experts so much, and we are currently in the process of identifying more of these individuals to develop working relationships with. Sometimes it is challenging, because if we are looking for experts for works made entirely of analogue technology, naturally they are a bit older by now. And at the end of a career, people have differing degrees of willingness to adapt workflows that have worked well over a long period of their professional time. So it requires some willingness to accept that working with artworks is different from, say, the CRT repairs they have performed in the past, or the migration of video. It is possible to sensitize individuals to that, but it requires trust, time and soft skills.

You mentioned the resource “Digitising Contemporary Art” from the Netherlands. Do you know of any other initiatives that appear to be up-and-coming or fundamental in this field?

I have a whole presentation on that, to talk to my students about it. To my knowledge, this was first addressed at the *Modern Art Who Cares* conference in 1997, which was held at Amsterdam. This was when best practices of video conservation were discussed, and it was Pip Laurenson who really shaped our field as a whole. Then in 2000, there was a conference on *Tech Archeology*, which was organized by the newly founded Electronic Media Group which was a path-breaking conference that resulted in a special issue of the periodical of the American Institute for Conservation—that is still well-regarded. In the early 2000s there was a major exhibition on *40 Years of Video Art*, which was held in Germany. This also contributed to valid applications and serves as a great reference now. Also in the early 2000s, there was the conference on reconstructing video art held in Switzerland, which is a great reference. Then we had the DOCAM initiative and its proceedings, which is still a valuable resource on their website. Now in the Electronic

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Media Group, we are trying to contribute to education by organizing the *TechFocus* series, and hopefully our colleagues will be able to take some knowledge home to their institutions and apply it there.

Do you know of any initiatives specifically aimed at documenting or questioning technical standards for TBMA?

You mean like an alliance between SMPTE and conservators or archivists on how their standards are applicable to the art field? Not to my knowledge.

Any other comments?

I just have one request for you. As an emerging field, it is important to raise the issue of education needs, and whenever you can do so, please do. That's really, really important. There are so few of us, and with so many works entering institutions that have technical components or are entirely computer-based, I have a huge fear that they won't be preserved. Whenever you can raise that issue, I would be grateful.

Would it be beneficial to look at some of the technical standards and assess them for the needs of artworks?

Definitely, that's one aspect that is worth looking into.

An experience crossed my mind. The previously mentioned class that I taught at NYU last fall was open to both conservators and art historians, and some of the art historians were specifically interested in becoming media curators. I realized that providing them with some knowledge of what should be asked for in an acquisition/exhibition process would really help them to formulate questions in the future. At the beginning, I found it very difficult to teach both conservators and art historians, because for the conservators, I would have gone into much more of the technical detail than I could with the art historians. But at the end, I was pretty happy how it worked out, because future colleagues got to know each other early and started to discuss best practices in institutions.