

Interview with Caitlin Jones, Jana Grazley, and Scott Owens

Caitlin Jones is the Executive Director of the [Western Front Society](#) in Vancouver, Canada. Prior to this appointment she had a combined curatorial and conservation position at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and was the Director of Programming at the Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York. A key member of the Variable Media Network, Caitlin has also been responsible for developing important tools and policy for the preservation of electronic and ephemeral artworks. Her writings have appeared in a wide range of exhibition catalogues, periodicals, and other international publications.

Jana Grazley is a Media Archivist at the Western Front in Vancouver, Canada, and a 2013 graduate of the dual Master of Archival Studies and Master of Library and Information Studies program at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests centre on the concept of the record, with emphasis on non-prototypical audiovisual records such as performance documentation, installation and exhibition documentation, and documentation of public events. Prior to coming to the Western Front, she worked with born-digital audio and video at the Museum of Anthropology, UBC, and as Program Director at CFUV 101.9fm, University of Victoria. She is committed to helping under-funded and over-stretched organizations find practical solutions to the management and preservation of analogue and digital cultural heritage.

Scott Owens is a Media Archivist at the Western Front in Vancouver, British Columbia and is in the process of completing a dual Master of Archival Studies and Master of Library and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. His coursework has focused on digital preservation, digital records forensics, and the trustworthiness of records in digital and analog environments. His research and professional interests are focused on digital records, digital preservation, managing digital artwork, and metadata creation and management. Prior to the Western Front, he worked the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia and the Japanese Canadian National Museum.

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez, James Smith, and Lauren Teal

Can each of you please tell us about your background as it relates to media art?

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Jones: I was an art history student and I did my Master's in Archival Studies. From that point, I worked in film and video on the production side of things, and then I received a fellowship at the Guggenheim Museum. The fellowship was called the Variable Media Fellow and it was to establish the Variable Media Network, which was an international, multi-institutional initiative that included the Guggenheim, the Daniel Langlois Foundation, Franklin Furnace Archives, Rhizome, the Walker, and a number of other organizations. We were looking at not only time-based media, but variable media, meaning that the work has issues over time such as hardware and software obsolescence. We were also looking at questions about how those kinds of works could be articulated and extrapolated by looking at other things that museums collect, like installation based works, performance art, even painting and sculpture to a certain extent. That was the crux of what we did there for about 5 to 6 years. I worked on a number of case studies, conferences, and exhibitions, and things like that. From there, I continued working in the art world and now I find myself at the Western Front as the Executive Director. We have a huge archive here of about 1500 artworks- video artworks and a considerable audio archive from formats on 1/2 inch and 3/4 inch open reel to miniDV; we have many different formats here. So now, I have the pleasure of working with our media art curator Sarah Todd, and the two archivists Jana and Scott, who are really digging into the meat of the issue for us here. I'll let Jana talk about her background now.

Jana: My undergrad is in linguistics, but during my time in university and a little bit afterwards as well, I got into campus community radio. I had already been audio nerdy, but I got even more so working there. That was my focus when I went to graduate school to do a dual Master's in Archival Studies and Library Information Studies, which I just completed. I had a desire to work specifically with the preservation of audio-visual materials. I've been working with the collections at Western Front for two years. The first stage was to do an inventory to get our heads around what we have. Audio-visual material has a set of unique preservation challenges that keep me really engaged in working with it, beyond working with other more traditional kinds of records. I found, through doing my Master's, that there are some shortcomings about how we think about archives, because basic archival theory doesn't always apply to the way that we deal with material like this. I am very interested in exploring how these kinds of materials do and do not align with other ideas that we have about archives, and what that means for how we preserve and present them.

Scott: I did my undergrad in Contemporary Art History and then the same program as Jana. I'm doing a dual Master's of Archival Studies and Library Information Studies, but I haven't completed it yet. I came to the Western Front about a year ago. Before that, I worked at another gallery that had a lot of related stuff. Most of my experience comes from working here. This is my first time working with a lot of time-based media art material because

previously I worked with other archives and ephemera, but mostly it was graphic and textual materials.

With your varied collection, are you able to create classes of content? Are you able to group things to come up with preservation strategies? Or, does each piece need its own attention?

Caitlin: We mostly have single channel video, performance documentation, and audio recordings and documentation of audio performances. We are not a collecting institution, per se. We are a production institution so the works that we have here are works that were created here through our residency program, which has been active for over the last 40 years. We record the performances and events that happen here over the life of the center. So we have very specific work that we are dealing with, mainly single channel video. There has always been a loose catalogue of what we have, which maybe Jana can talk more about. There have been efforts over the years, for example, there was an effort in the 80s when a lot of material was transferred to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch material at that time. When I came in 2009, I was charged with revitalizing and reinvigorating the archives. Jana started in 2011 as a co-op student, and together we articulated that what we needed to do as an institution to nail down our system and figure out what best practices were available for us to adopt. It took about two years to build the database, develop our systems, and start working through the materials. Now we are there and we are ready. We have been transferring and digitizing materials as we've gone along and now we are ready to do a wholehearted, large scale upgrade of preservation, restoration, and migration of materials.

Have you been able to draw on best practices and develop your own standards? Or standard workflows?

Jana: Workflows are still something that we are looking at. We digitize audio in-house, but we send our video to V-Tape in Toronto, Canada. So there is less workflow around video. There are multiple aspects of this that we are working on all the time, but one thing that Scott and I have been looking at is how to deal with new works that are being born-digitally. There has been more workflow thinking around that than around digitization, per se.

When determining preservation priorities and some of the classifications within the collection that we have, I made use of my archival-theoretical training to determine within the collection what the originating program was. Western Front has specific programs, and it's my understanding that historically those programs were silo-ed from one another. Over the last few years, there has been a move towards integration across the programs. In terms of arrangement, one of the things that I did was to group items together that originated out of the same programs. Then it was easier for me to see where priorities were

in terms of certain kinds of documentation or certain eras that hadn't been transferred over the years, so we were dealing with vulnerable older tapes that have been largely neglected. And also to get a sense of some of the content to determine priorities based on what has the mix of highly vulnerable and highly valuable, because we feel that on some level, a certain amount of selection is going to be necessary given the amount of resources that we have to put towards the collection.

How much of the collection that you have is a historical record of the artistic performances, as oppose to video, audio, or computer-based artworks?

Caitlin: It's probably about half and half. Half is video works that were created here—some are single channel video art that was created at the Western Front as part of our artist-in-residence program. The other half is program archives, for example in the 70s we had a literary arts program, which no longer exists, but we have a tremendous amount of footage documentation of artists, such as Kathy Acker, reading poetry and things like that. So there is this historical document of performances and activities that happened here.

Could you talk about the differences in how you approach the preservation of the works that are more historical documentation as oppose to the works that are artworks. Is there a difference?

Caitlin: At this point, there isn't much of a difference. We are getting our workflow ready to move forward. I think this is an issue that also relates to best practices, which I think we can touch on later. A big issue for us, which is an issue for everyone that deals with this type of material, is funding and finding capital to deal with these transfers. So in an ideal world when we transfer a single channel artwork we would have the artist come here or they would go to V-Tape where the transfer was happening, and they would look at the color correction and any other issues so that they could contribute to how it was being preserved for the future. That is obviously a best practice when you are dealing with single channel artwork. But at this point, we are not able to do that. That is less of an issue for performance art documentation—we still want to make sure that the audio levels are correct and the color correction is done well, but it is less of an issue when you are dealing with documentation, than when you are dealing with an artist's artwork.

For the newer artworks that are being produced at Western Front, are you able to consider preservation issues with the artist beforehand or during the creation of the artwork?

Jana: I'm quite wary of interfering with the production side of things, even if I recognize that artists are creating works that are destined for obsolescence in a very short period of time, as we all are with anything that we create digitally. We are working in a situation

where we are advising on records management in a more cut-and-dry administrative sense. It is my place to advise on what formats to use and to guide the creation of those records so that it would ease the entire workflow and the digital preservation picture going forward. However, when you are dealing with people creating art, you definitely do not want to advise on what format they are using or what technology they are using just so that it would be easier for us to preserve. That said, because we haven't been preserving components of works, we have been preserving either a document of a performance that may make use of various technologies in various ways, or we have a video tape. We haven't really had to confront some of those messier underlying concerns in terms of dealing with hardware and software components of works. So that is not something that we have looked at specifically when it comes to new works that are being created. We have talked about adopting a form that we would fill out with the artists who are creating works here. It would give us more documentation from the start about how the works are created and how the artist views what constitutes preservation of their work so that we know what the most responsible course of action is to take with their work.

Scott: We do have technical standards in terms of the videos we get because we are a production house and are able to request uncompressed files.

Could you talk more about that? Are you referring to technical standards at the point of acquisition? Have you been able to do that for classes of works? Is it successful to advise on or require certain formats for acquisition?

Caitlin: We don't really acquire works, so we don't have an acquisition policy. Artworks that are made at Western Front become part of the Western Front's archive, as part of the standard agreement.

Scott: Usually what happens is our technical person will shoot the performance that we have here using our camera and they'll output it through QuickTime. Then they'll make the derivatives that they need in order to put it on to the website or show it somewhere else and then they'll output it to an Uncompressed QuickTime and then we usually enter that into the database. We also have a linear tape open system that we've implemented, so we give that a name and an identifier and we put whatever descriptive information and technical information that we have about it, and then we put it on LTO tape and give it a checksum. The plan is also to make multiple copies of the LTOs and eventually house one offsite. As for the standards that we have worked with, we have worked with PREMIS and we have also looked at DOCAM—those are the two sources that we are taking technical standards from. It is difficult for us because PREMIS doesn't have a great video characteristic extension right now, so it is kind of like things that we think are important

and trying to box things in to the significant characteristics area of PREMIS, but we basically take things like video picture encoding and color space and things like that and record a checksum. And also, the things that we output from Final Cut Pro have an ID that gets assigned to it and we keep that information as well.

It's interesting to hear you talk about using some of the standards that are out there. There was some discussion earlier about looking at best practices when you were trying to formulate a plan for the collection. Could you talk a bit more about those best practices and standards that you do rely on? Also, what resources have you found to be really helpful in tackling the needs of your collection?

Caitlin: I came to this job from the Guggenheim and other organizations that have collections, so there is a lot more money invested in the collection and there is a lot more at stake in their preservation. The Western Front is a mid-sized artist run center in Vancouver. Even though we have a 40-year history, we are a scrappy upstart in most areas. We go in with our eyes very wide open. We have access to the very best practices and then we have to take a very realistic approach to what we are able to accomplish within that frame of best practices. Sometimes, we have to make compromises, for example, "Okay, we can't make *three* copies of this; we can only afford to make one copy of this." And those kind of decisions must be made again and again. Purchasing a linear tape drive was a huge decision for us, and I'm very glad that we did it. We were wrestling with where we were going to keep digital copies of works once we transferred it, but no one felt right about it because there are so many unknowns with data decay and all these things, so we made a decision as an organization to invest in that linear tape drive and I think it was a very good decision for us. We have to do the research before making these decisions. It is great that we have two archivists that came to the Western Front as students; it's been a very educational process for all of us. I solidly feel that we have made decisions based on these best practices established by places like the Guggenheim or the Tate, where they have the highest level of standards where artwork is concerned. We have made very logical decisions to best serve our collection using the resources that we have available.

It is interesting to hear how you deal with the compromises between what ideally you would like to do in terms of digital preservation and what you are able to do given the resources that are at your disposal.

Caitlin: Through my experience at the Guggenheim with the Variable Media Network, I met with so many people from Europe and other smaller institutions that were dealing with their collections. There was a lot of hand wringing and hair pulling about what to do. Of course, it is a huge issue, but for me, because of my experience, it was very easy to say,

“There is precedence from smaller institutions in preserving their own collections.” We can do this; we can find the resources. We don’t have to despair. This is not an impossible task. We just have to figure out how we can scale it so that we can do it.

Jana: We have a solid system in place and we are ready, as Caitlin said before, but getting the funding to do the actual digitization is a huge challenge. When I arrived two years ago, I did a lot of hand wringing because within my Master’s program the way that we learned about video... we didn’t learn much about audio visual materials. I had to make that the focus of my independent projects and I worked with the digital A/V stuff at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC to complement my education. The narrative we were told in school was, “Video is a huge challenge, there’s no best practice, there are no standards, no one really knows, we don’t have an agreed course of action, and the stuff is decaying really fast!” There is this particular narrative about the vulnerability of video and the crisis of video preservation that I felt paralyzed by when I first started here and with audio, I have experience with audio, there have been good standards for audio for a while now, so that felt pretty straight forward, but with video, when I took a preservation class three years ago we were still hearing, “Well, if you can buy time with digi-beta while we wait for an agreed upon standard file format for the long term preservation of video, then do that!” The idea that you would buy time for yourself with another expensive tape format, that is obviously not going to happen. So it has been interesting to have an on-the-ground experience of the development of the conversation around video and I’m a member of AMIA, and I am monitoring the listserv all the time and keeping up on that stuff. It is good to get to a point where a smaller organization like this feels like we can take action because I think it is partly what we have heard about video that made it seem so overwhelming.

Scott: I find that it is difficult because the standards haven’t been developed as much for video as a lot of people would like. There is a lot of talk of JPEG-2000 and the MXF wrapper on the AMIA listserv, but there are still only a couple of formats that are accepted and a lot of video formats can’t hold metadata, so there is a lot of technical stuff that is yet to be sorted out in the video preservation community. In terms of training in Canada, we do not have a specialized video or media archivist program, so even though there are some specialized schools in the United States, they do not exist here. The only time that we touch upon these issues was in the non-textual class that is supposed to cover everything that isn’t text, which includes graphic material, software, single channel video and audio, and things like that.

Do you feel that there is space in an archives training program to talk more about media and some of the things that are happening?

Jana: Yes, absolutely.

Caitlin: There should be more discussion in the training programs. I was in the same program as Jana and Scott, just 10 years earlier. Digital records or digital materials shouldn't just be one or two classes that you take when you are in archival studies, it should be a huge part of what you do.

Western Front is known for supporting emerging artists and curators. We have an emphasis on emerging practices and always have had that, so for us it feels great to be supporting Scott and Jana. I wish that I could be more hands-on in terms of direction and knowledge but I think that we have done very well here as a group. Jana and Scott are getting incredible training. We have access to best practices and experts that we can talk to. We work with V-Tape in Toronto, we mentioned that we send a lot of tapes to them for digitization so we have cobbled together an ad hoc training program and now I feel that the Western Front is lucky enough to have two of Canada's best audiovisual archivists who are sort of home-grown. But that's two people that we can handle here at a time.

Does it help to impart some of that knowledge to the artists that you work with as well?

Caitlin: There is a plan afoot to do a big conference here in 2014, which will be around preservation and will be focused for the Canadian context. The plan is to involve artists, so it is not just archivists talking to one another about standards. It will include artists talking about how they are dealing with these issues. We invited Rudolf Frieling to give a talk here last year; he talked about his involvement with the German video art project. It was very interesting. I expected all the people who were working in the archives field to be here, and it was almost all artists in the audience—like video artists—who came to hear him speak. They had concerns about their own work, for example, "Here's the codec that I am using for this video I made five years ago and now I can't play it back." That is why it is great that we have this archive and it is really great that we are engaging with these issues with the artists that are coming here. As Jana said before, obviously, we are not telling them what to do, but we are providing some guidelines to think about.

In thinking about the work that you have done over the last few years with your collection, are there any areas where you feel there are some major gaps or challenges that need to be tackled?

Jana: I want to make a distinction between a lack of standards and a lack of information, because there is lots of information out there; there are lots of reports, and I have enough to read and think about in terms of informing myself of the various formats and the various pros and cons that have been discussed. The conversation is happening and the

information is out there. It feels much safer if you feel that there is something like a technical set of guidelines... for example, we just received a grant to digitize a series of photo negatives and I've been using mostly the technical guidelines from the Library of Congress from the FADGI [Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative] group to inform my process. It is tremendously helpful and efficient to have a document that I can rely on that comes out from the best people working in this area. I eagerly await a FADGI set of guidelines that would make us feel like we are doing the right thing and there is always a desire to take the safest course of action. With video there is a certain amount of drawing on those vast amounts of information that are out there and making the most prudent decisions for what you have in front of you, and also recognizing that we need to be taking action on digitization now and not wait for that perfect set of guidelines to emerge.

Scott: While I sometimes do think there is a lot of information out there. One of the things that I found to be the biggest gap was... I feel like if there weren't standards for video or to deal with some of the more technical aspects, then there are other standards that we could rely on that dealt with things in a larger level, like PREMIS, which is a little bit more object independent in some ways. But sometimes the biggest gap was getting there because the technical stuff has been a bit harder to implement because we don't have an IT department. It would be nice to get some more metadata content standards that are related to our field, but also if you have those there is the problem of getting what you need to implement it. So it is an education problem just as much as it is a lack of existence of standards problem.

What do you see as the main differences between best practices, guidelines, and standards? And when do you think one or the other is applicable?

Caitlin: We look at best practices and then we have to create our own guidelines based on those best practices and standards that are going to work for our organization's particular situation and infrastructural challenges. For example, we don't have climate controlled storage and we're in a 1922 building that is insufferably hot in the summer and really cold in the winter, and we all know that is not good for audiovisual archives. We do the best with what we have and try to mitigate those conditions.

Have you encountered anything in your collection that seemed outside of general classes that you work with? And, how would you approach that work?

Jana: There is nothing that comes to mind that is challenging in that way technically because we are dealing with video and audio, and within those we are dealing with a broad but standard range of formats. So there is nothing that comes to mind in terms of the technical part of it. For me, it would have more to do with documentation and metadata

and description parts of dealing with the collection because one of the things that was part of the initial inventory was looking at how we were going to handle metadata and develop an application profile that makes sense for our collection which is very diverse in terms of content. The challenges were mostly in developing the metadata, and hammering out a number of things where I think this is sufficient to describe single channel video works, we have a certain number of fields, and this all makes sense. But, we also have things that have come out of the exhibitions program over the years, so we have videos that are technically components of larger works; things that were presented as part of a larger installation. In terms of how we nest the various entities in our database to make those connections apparent and make all those relationships explicit, that was more of a challenge.

Caitlin: In terms of challenges, we can't get money from Canada Council to do digitization, but we can get money from Canada Council to do programming, so we started a program where we could bundle the cost of preservation into a project grant. We invited artists and writers to visit the archive, select tapes, and then create a new project or piece of writing or screening on those tapes. One of the first ones that happened was by a writer, Michael Turner, who came in and looked at some literary works, in particular, a Kathy Acker piece, a piece by the Four Horsemen, and one more work that I can't remember the name of. All these works were in pretty rough shape. Because 50% of our collection is documentation of performance, and there is this assumption that documentation of performance is an objective, single-shot kind of thing, but in fact, in the early days of the Western Front, it was not that at all. The artists who were filming the works were doing all sorts of crazy pans and zooms in and out. So Michael did a piece of research that really looked at these three works, these three documents and problematized the very core of what it is that the Western Front has in those art works. Yes, they are documentation of readings, but they are also documents of a particular historical moment at the Western Front and in terms of metadata, who was the camera operator? Who was the audience member that was heckling the speaker? So there are these stories that unravel and complicate our collection of performance art and literary readings documents. There is really no way of dealing with that except on a theoretical kind of... it's a topic for constant debate and discussion. That really enriches our collection, to be able to talk about it not only on this technical how are we going to do the nuts and bolts of preservation, but what are the larger issues behind what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Michael Turner's [*Three Readings: Camera, Tape and Sound \(Kathy Acker, bpNichol/Steve McCaffery, and Kevin Davies as introduced by George Bowering\)*](#) and [the full text](#) can be accessed as part of Western Front's "Past is Prologue" series.

How are the decisions that you make informed by the amount and kinds of access that you want to give people to the works?

Caitlin: For example, in Michael Turner's case, he knew the history very well and he knew that these ¾ inch tapes existed and he wanted to see them. He knew what he wanted and knew what was on the tapes he selected. Someone else might not have that knowledge to ferret out a piece that hasn't been digitized. We do have a significant portion of the collection that was transferred in the 2000s. So some tapes are viewable. In terms of access, we are not set up to be providing people with access to this information so that is why we have to do it in a well curated, monitored fashion. So, we invite someone into the collection or researchers contact us quite often, and if we can provide them with access to a tape, or if they have the money to pay for the transfer of a tape then we will do that for them. A lot of those decisions are driven by need and wants from other people, or from within the institution. We're not in a situation where we can take a group and digitize it all just to look at it. Right now it is happening in a case-by-case, specific basis.

Do the technical needs of the work change according to access?

Scott: We have preservation masters and we make small derivatives and it just depends on what we want to do with them. For audio it is much easier because we can just make derivatives and send people MP3s; for larger videos we can send stuff to people on WeTransfer. But it doesn't really change just because of the fact that we do have these two separately existing copies; there is one that is much easier for people to view just because of the size of the files, but the video that we do right now for the most part is straight captured. So, we don't change what we are preserving from what we're giving access to in a lot of cases.

Caitlin: We have a new website, and that goes back to institutionally, what you are capable of and what you can handle; for us, we put clips of things, often we put up full artist talks depending on what the artist is comfortable with. We are uploading QuickTime h.264 files to our website. Or, we're using SoundCloud to provide access to our audio stuff. We can't create a content management system for that kind of stuff; instead, we are using the tools that are available. It works great for us in terms of proving access to the materials that we have.

Any last thoughts?

Scott: One of the things that I was thinking about when I read the question guide was the question about the role of the American Alliance of Museums, etc. and I was thinking about the education component like small professional development training, like webinars and

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things like that, because it seems like the large scale preservation projects with media art seem to come out of institutions like the Guggenheim and MoMA, and places like that, so for these organizations to serve as resource aggregators would be helpful.

Jana: It is always very helpful to have places that you know you can go to, to get reliable information. The information right now is all over the place.

Caitlin: I think Europe is further ahead of America in terms of doing those projects, possibly because of funding.

Scott: the DCA, the Digitizing Contemporary Art project, for the EU, that was great. Jana and I both read through a lot of that stuff to form a lot of the decisions we made as well.