

Interview with Koven Smith

Koven Smith is Principal at Kinetic Museums and the former Director of Technology at the Denver Art Museum (DAM)

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and James Smith

Could you talk about your current activities in the field of media art and how you came to be in this position?

While I was Director of Technology here at the Denver Art Museum (DAM), I had dominion over a whole range of project types. I oversaw all the normal IT type functions such as systems, networking, and desktop support, but also the so-called creative side, which included in-gallery interpretive development, software development, mobile applications, and those types of things. The technology department at DAM is also heavily involved with the presentation and installation of variable media/time-based media artworks, some of which are in the DAM's permanent collection. To be this actively involved with the art objects themselves is, I believe, rather unusual for a technology department.

When I first started at DAM in 2010, my team and I were initially involved with these types of objects in a relatively practical way, focusing primarily on installation logistics. We became more actively involved with the entire lifecycle of these works when we became involved with a large show of variable media artworks from the permanent collection (*Blink!*) that opened in early 2011. We worked collaboratively with collections managers and conservators to figure out, in a practical way, how to present, store, and maintain these works in logical and sustainable ways. This involved not just developing procedures for working with these objects, but also developing policies around the acquisition and storage of them as well.

In a general sense, that's how I came to be involved with variable media art. I don't have any particular background in this type of media. The nature of us being a small staff means that we in the Technology Department were the obvious candidates to become involved as soon as we started working in a very serious way with these types of works.

That brings me to questions about how a file, one component of a work that is essential to the artwork, is managed. Is it conceived differently in your museum from some of the other assets you manage that may come out of public programming or mobile development? Could you speak a little bit about how it's treated differently; if it is?

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

Ownership of an artwork file is much more tightly controlled. Dealing with digital files **as** art objects, as opposed to dealing with digital **representations** of artworks is different, because your primary goal is often restricting access rather than enabling access. With most of our other digital assets, we want to ensure that everyone in the museum has access to them and can use them in appropriate ways, but with born-digital artworks, we have to ensure that rigorous security protocols are in place. In this situation, what we are really looking at doing is trying to establish a chain of custody to make sure that we know exactly who *can* access a given file and who *has* accessed it. Should a file get out into the wild somehow, we will then have done our due diligence and can say whether or not there's a likelihood that the file came from the Museum.

That bleeds into the presentation as well. We have dedicated exhibition servers for these types of works. When we do a temporary exhibition, the work is copied onto the exhibition server for the length of the exhibition and is then deleted from the server when the exhibition terminates. Its primary resting spot is an art storage server that is dedicated for that purpose.

The focus on security is very interesting. I like this idea of checking-out or signing-out, like you would in a physical vault.

I think some of the security concerns about handling variable media artworks are due to the fact that we have a lot of older works where the creator might not be as favorable to sharing, as say with more current media works where sharing is often built in or is an assumed part of the work. When you are dealing with an older piece, you're often not even dealing with the artist anymore; you're usually dealing with the artist's estate, which often will be more restrictive about what can and cannot be done with a given work. The DAM has a lot of variable media works by deceased artists in its collection, and because of that, our approach to newer works tended to be more conservative than perhaps a museum focused exclusively on new works might be.

You mentioned that you don't have any, or at least before you started working in this role, you didn't have any background in time based media art. Was your training entirely in the IT field?

No, actually. My experience is in IT and new development. I was in the digital media department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and I actually got started in the museum world as the collections DBA at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. My formal training is in music--I have a music composition degree from Berklee College of Music. My "training" as such has been largely practical.

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Working with artworks has given you a good sense of what the needs of a fine artwork are and what makes it different from, let's say, another kind of technology based asset. How do you interface with conservation staff? What kinds of decisions fall under your scope?

How conservation and technology interface is always slightly different depending on the object at hand. It's hard to generalize because the objects are so different from one another. We typically work at the direction of the conservator--while we will try to inform the decisions that the conservator makes (for example, if we have a longevity issue with certain types of equipment or a problem with file corruption or deterioration), the ultimate preservation decisions are not ours to make.

Earlier you talked about setting up policies. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about that and about any standard or best practices that could be applied to maybe classes of objects or assets or components, say single channel video or even computer based works. Are there any sorts of generalities you can make towards planning for the preservation of a work? Is this able to turn into a policy or not?

What is interesting about this type of work is that a significant chunk of the preservation burden actually shifts to the acquisition process--much of what can be done on the conservation side is constrained by what rights and capabilities the registrars were able to secure during the acquisition phase. Nam June Paik objects are great examples of this issue. Many of his works consist of televisions that are supposed to receive analog broadcast signals off the air, which is now impossible in the United States since the switchover to digital. In these cases, you now have to fundamentally alter the work (by attaching digital receivers, for instance) in order to present it as "originally" intended, which gets you into a gray area very, very fast. You will almost certainly have to work directly (in this case) with the artist's estate to determine what sort of modifications are acceptable and which are not, and this can be extremely time-consuming.

If we had known back in the 1970s when we acquired the work to check off certain boxes like, "yes, we are allowed to make these types of modifications to this work" or "yes we can migrate the media to other file types" we would have significantly expanded what preservation options are available to us without always having to go back to the artists or their estates. In terms of policy, we want to make sure that we have as many options available to us as possible and that those options are codified during the acquisition or loan process--ideally we want to have as much leeway as possible while still preserving the artist's intent. I think from a policy standpoint, that's probably the biggest shift. The Denver Art Museum's time-based media working group includes representatives from the exhibitions team, conservation, technology, and curatorial, but it also includes registrars and collections management personnel, which I believe to be critical.

Is the museum's acquisition process standardized for artwork with a media component?

For the most part, but this would be a better question for the DAM's registrars. In general, if there are digital files involved, we try to make sure that the agreement includes permission to migrate, make copies, etcetera.. If we don't have that permission--or if we have to seek that permission out while we're doing the installation--it can slow things down by months. That part of it is standardized, at least as far as digital files. It is hard to completely generalize because each one of these objects will often have some unique component that you can't always be prepared for ahead of time.

At what point do components or pieces of works need their own attention? Are you able to come up with best practices for acquisitions then, such as formats? Do you get asked that sometimes: What is the best file format or what is the archival format here? Is it on the artist?

To a great extent that is on the artist. The working group does have some specific questions that are asked during the acquisition process--we need to make sure that we aren't acquiring a work that will be impossible to maintain. A work still might be acquired even if it has problematic components, but at least the risk is well understood up front. You don't want to be surprised years later when some component of the work has become un-presentable for some reason.

I would like to talk about the work that you do with installations. Please talk about any best practices that you have been able to come up with in terms of installing works.

The first question that you need to answer is always, "what is the object?" Is the object just *what* is projected, but not necessarily the projectors *themselves*? Is the object the resulting sound that you hear, or does the object include the surround-sound equipment itself? We always have to clarify whether the equipment is actually a part of the work or not. As simple as that sounds, it's actually a huge discussion. It means, for instance, if we have an object that has six projections and a surround-sound component, we have to know whether the projectors and the sound system are themselves considered part of the object. The reason for this is that if they are, all of those components must be de-installed and stored with the rest of the piece and can't be re-used for other purposes or installations. This type of situation occurs frequently, particularly if the equipment is highly specialized. DAM has a Tony Oursler in its collection that is like that--it requires a very specific type of projector that cannot be repurposed for other projects.

That said, it's far more common that the projected images *themselves* (rather than the equipment used to project them) are considered to be the work of art, and the artist is indifferent as to the equipment used to achieve them. When this is the case, the institution presenting/acquiring the work has more options, particularly with budgeting and procurement. Often, the technology department might procure the equipment, rather than the curatorial department, which is unusual for most acquisitions. This may seem like a minor issue, but it is something that we have to deal with all the time.

Code-based works are similar. Is the work of art what results from the code? Is the code itself part of the work? Do I need to preserve the original operating system on which that code runs? Do I need to maintain legacy versions of software? If it's the case that the code doesn't matter and it's only the output of that code that is important, then, again, we have far more options. We can upgrade the OS, upgrade the software, or make fixes to the code so that the output of the work remains as the artist intended.

Interestingly, it is a bunch of givens that then allows you to move into the policy that you have for those givens, so in that way, you are standardizing your workflow according to the givens that are there according to the needs of the work, the acquisition of the work, etc. Could you talk about how you work with others in the museum to address these types of questions and issues?

The cross-disciplinary team model works very well with this type of work, because there are so few dedicated variable media conservators out there, and even those who are out there tend to come from a traditional conservation background, rather than an IT or a hacking background. Until that day comes, and we have a bunch of variable media conservators lying around, the problem will remain by nature a cross-disciplinary one. So the team approach has worked very well, and it feels like we always have the right perspectives in the room to address those questions.

What do you see as the distinctions among standards, guidelines, and best practices?

I am wary of looking for or applying best practices too rigidly when dealing with this type of work, because the work tends to evolve far more quickly than practice around it. Guidelines are great, as are recommendations or appropriate lines of inquiry, but the idea that a "standard" set of practices could be applied to these works seems, to me, problematic at best, harmful at worst. If you have an accepted best practice, standard, or a set-in-stone rule for how you deal with a certain type of media or artwork, and a work comes along that is a variant of that type, even in the slightest way, you run into a situation where a too-rigidly applied best practice or standard could get you in trouble. You could end up conflicting with the artist's intent or worse, actively sabotaging the artwork in some way by attempting to conform to a standard practice.

With paintings conservation, you're talking about an art form that has remained relatively stable for hundreds of years, so it makes sense to deploy best practices in treating those works. With variable media, however, a single artist might pass through 10 or more distinct phases in his or her career, with each of those stages demanding entirely different approaches to conserving objects. As tempting as it is—and this is my personal opinion—I feel that trying to find a generalized set of best practices for dealing with this work is a white elephant.

Do you think there are any pieces of the process that could be standardized?

It's possible, but only if you're dealing with a very limited set of variables. Video art would be a good example--because the emphasis is on *what* is being shown, rather than *how* it is being shown, you could (and many conservators already have) develop appropriate, standardized methods for media migration and so forth. As soon as you are dealing with anything more complicated than that, say something with an interaction component, it quickly becomes almost impossible to discuss these types of objects in a general way. For example, an artist might create an object with an interaction component using \$10,000 worth of infrared equipment, but now that same artist two years later will create a similar type of interaction using a Kinect that just cost a few hundred bucks. Even though both of these works are by the same artist and have an interactive component, they are still very different types of works in terms of how we would approach them from a preservation standpoint. It is so hard to generalize.

When you install an artwork do you find it helpful to have information about the previous installation?

Yes, absolutely, and it varies depending on the artwork. For instance, the DAM has a Charles Sandison piece in its collection for which the documentation is very detailed—diagrams, dimensions for the projector mounts, instructions on how to sync up the projectors, etc. Detailed documentation is an immense benefit for those installing the piece.

Maybe something that could be a good practice towards standardization. We have been talking to a lot of people about installation, and best practices are being developed in that area.

I think the nature of installation documentation is about to change significantly, particularly as 3D printing becomes more sophisticated. With 3D printing, you might no longer have to turn to mass manufacturers to replace components of artworks; you will simply be able to create them yourself. For example, a Dan Flavin work requires a particular type of fluorescent tube that is no longer being manufactured. In the past, the documentation would have said, "For this piece to be presented appropriately, it requires exactly this light filament manufactured by this company with these specifications." Now, the documentation could instead say, "OK, here are the dimensions you need to create this filament yourself." That is potentially huge for these kinds of artworks, since one of the most devastating problems with presenting them is dealing with components that are no longer manufactured. 3D printing (in theory, at least) may allow us to get around that problem, but that will entail an entirely different approach to documentation, because what would have been a paragraph description of what to purchase, is a full description of how you would make that thing if you needed it.

Like a spec sheet.

Yes, ultimately, I think that is where we are probably headed.

Do you think that kind of documentation is feasible to produce, in your job?

I don't think that it is feasible now. I don't think anyone has the time to do it, and it would be hard to justify the time needed to do it, given that it would entail preparing for a future that has yet to manifest itself. It would be like saying, "we need to specify how we could manufacture all of these things in the future, at some point, when that capability would exist." [laughter] It is all speculative right now. It would be hard for a museum director to justify his or her staff spending time on that kind of documentation.

It also might be something that is larger than that, you know, for every museum, or every—if you need this piece for this technology, there may be a company out there who can make it...

That is a great point, because those are sort of classes of problems, in a nice way. For example, museums could collaborate, like, many museums have Nam June Paik pieces, and let's say the works all have these four kinds of components you see across all of them, so a consortium of museums could get together and write out the specifications for how to manufacture those components if they're needed in the future. That might be a likely path. It may be that this type of conservation in the future is done in a more collaborative way than this type of work is done now. That is all wild speculation, of course.

It's interesting that you came through the museum-technology world into this position, working with these kinds of challenges. How do you stay knowledgeable about the technologies?

I read a lot. Having regular dialogue with colleagues at museum technology conferences is critical. I have a very strong collegial network; I know if I have a question, I can ask someone within that network. It's impossible to be up on everything in advance of it hitting me; I just usually hope that when a problem completely confounds me that maybe someone in my network will have seen it before. But a lot of it is just reading and keeping up as best I can—where I think the field is, where I think it is going, what new technology is out there that may make our jobs easier. It's not a very exciting answer to that question, but the nature of working in technology now is keeping up with everything, really, on a daily basis. Just six months ago the landscape was different than it is now, and I need to be aware of that as much as I possibly can.

In thinking about your role and working towards the preservation of some of these artworks, what aspects of your training, background, or experiences have been the most helpful?

Not much of my training. A lot of it was just encountering situations for the first time and then trying to figure it out, and trying to learn from it so that the decision that we make in that instance can inform decisions that we make in the future. I have worked with conservators a lot in the past, but in a more abstract way, like working with them on documentation software and things like that. I had never actually worked directly with artworks in as direct a way as I did at the DAM. The best thing that I can say is just, and I have said this in the past, I think the best technologists that I know are people who are good at pattern recognition. People who can recognize that it might be a class of problems that we are dealing with now, as opposed to this very singular thing, so that you can start to do this kind of generalizing outward, and say, “Ok, this happened, what can we learn about this that we can now apply to other problems of this same class.” Therefore, in terms of training, I approach so many problems in the technology realm with that sort of mindset—that pattern recognition mindset—that probably serves me well in dealing with these kinds of artworks.

Do you think that there are any classes of challenges that are similar that could be approached in that way. Do you see any standards or guidelines that would be helpful in looking at the patterns of caring for these artworks?

The biggest pattern that I see is that of the necessity of understanding the artist’s intent. All institutions dealing with these kinds of objects need to understand the “essence,” if you will, of the works in question. Is the intent of the artist to show these colors on the wall, or is it to show these colors on the wall at exactly these dimensions, or is the intent of the artist to have the code maintain its integrity and not be changed? When a variable media work comes in, all institutions need to be able to identify, broadly speaking, what type of work it is. Is it one where the mechanics of it are extremely important? Or are the mechanics mostly irrelevant and it is really just what it looks like? The answers to those questions set you off on different paths in terms of how you approach the work.