

Interview with Mark Tribe

[Mark Tribe](#) is an artist whose work explores the intersection of media technology and politics. His photographs, installations, videos, and performances are exhibited widely, including recent solo projects at Momenta Art in New York, the San Diego Museum of Art, G-MK in Zagreb, and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Tribe is the author of two books, [The Port Huron Project: Reenactments of New Left Protest Speeches](#) (Charta, 2010) and [New Media Art](#) (Taschen, 2006), and numerous articles. He is Chair of the MFA Fine Arts Department at School of Visual Arts in New York City. In 1996, Tribe founded [Rhizome](#), an organization that supports the creation, presentation, preservation, and critique of emerging artistic practices that engage technology.

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez, Claire Eckert, Mika Yoshitake, Lauren Teal

Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

I'm an artist. I work in many different forms, currently it often involves performance and video and lately I've been making prints. Like most prints these days they're digital. I think the reason why you thought of me as someone to speak with in this context is because in 1996 I started an organization called Rhizome which was, and still is, focused on the intersection of emerging technologies and contemporary arts - particularly artists and artistic practices that engage with emerging technologies critically. In 1999, we started archiving new media art projects, mostly net art or internet-based art but also other things. I think Rhizome was among the first organizations to attempt to do that in a systematic way, so we made a lot of stuff up as we went along. Rhizome's archive is called the [ArtBase](#). When we started ArtBase we looked at existing standards and models, such as Dublin Core. They didn't seem all that applicable at the time so we basically decided to create our own type of taxonomy of metadata, like what the different fields are and what different kinds of things went into those fields: lists of key words, genres, categories, and technologies. We also focused on solving the practical problems of acquiring, storing, and maintaining the work. We conceived it in 1998 or so and it launched in 1999. I continued as the Executive Director of Rhizome through the middle of 2003 and then stepped away. I remain involved as a member of the board of directors and have served on and off as chair of the board. Since 2003, I haven't been involved at Rhizome on a day to day basis, I've been teaching: first at Columbia then at Brown. I teach digital art and other things. My interests in the last ten years or so have broadened quite a bit. I was pretty myopically focused on new media art for about ten years from say 1993 to 2003. Now I'm more broadly interested in contemporary art.

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

I'm glad that you have also spoken with Ben Fino-Radin (also of Rhizome) because I feel like I am more of a former expert and the field of archiving and preservation of digital media art and the field has matured and progressed a lot since I stopped being that active in it. So please just take everything I say with a grain of salt.

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

I would be speaking totally off the cuff if I attempted to answer that question. So are you distinguishing between standards and guidelines or between standards and guidelines on the one hand and best practices on the other?

I think it's up in the air.

Let me take a stab. I would say a standard is a codification of a set of best practices. Best practices are things that people do that we may identify as really good or as the best way to do something. Standards are defined in various kinds of documents. We create guidelines to communicate a standard to members of a community so it can be implemented or developed in a practical way. Guidelines are sort of like instructions. So you could think of it as a sequence: best practices come first, then you develop standards, and then you use guidelines to communicate the standards so that others can conform to them.

Do you feel like you were able to come up with best practices, standards, or even guidelines?

We tried to make our practices the best they could be based on a lot of firsthand knowledge on the field, the artists, and their works. I know what Rhizome does has evolved a lot since then. What Rhizome does has been informed by what others do. I think there is also a desire to create consilience and congruity between and among different preservers and archivists. The idea of standards is so there is congruity, right? So people are doing things the same way so there is interoperability.

We are also very interested in the history of Rhizome and the processes that were developed there in setting up the ArtBase.

We thought of it in terms of taxonomy and the different elements of the taxonomy were fields, like metadata fields. They would have a title, artist names, I think we may have also had a field for a group name. For example, Alexander Galloway had this group that he operated under, Radical Software Group (RSG), when he made projects like *Carnivore*. The membership of RSG would change over time so it was important that we had a field that would include the names of the artists involved but also a field for a group name. We would have some kind of date field like for the year something was made, and we also recognized that artwork, especially net art, changes over time so there might need to be a range. This is when the artwork first appeared and then there would be a time during which it would grow and change and then there might be a point at which it would stop changing.

I was recently asked about a project, *Starry Night*, that Alex and I collaborated on with a third artist. It is an interface for Rhizome and there were two different versions, maybe even three, and it is now going through Rhizome's process of preservation and they are going to re-launch it. I was asked, "Which version is the definitive version?" This question implied a common misunderstanding. Is there a definitive version of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*? Of course not! Maybe that is one of the implications of a work being time-based. A lot of work that is time-based we don't think of as time-based. Each time you look at it, it appears not to be. Is *Spiral Jetty* a time-based work? In any case, these kinds of questions came up as we tried to create this taxonomy to find these fields and to make them flexible enough to be useful, accurate, workable, and not embedded with misunderstandings and misrepresentations. It can get really complicated and difficult to implement if you have a date range or different kinds of date ranges that mean different things. Then we also tried to come up with things that were less cut-and-dried like categories and genres. We had a field for the technologies used to make a work or to experience a work, things like Macromedia Director and Java. One of the reasons we started the ArtBase was because net art and other forms of digital art seemed to be very ephemeral. For example, one of the first works of net art, *The Hiroshima Project* by Akke Wagenaar, was hosted on the server of an institution where I think she taught and then left. This was in 1995. The webmaster or someone in the IT department deleted it because it was a directory that belonged to somebody that was no longer on staff. I don't believe the artist had made any backup copies. Art history had been deleted with a click of a mouse. This type of work was vulnerable. At the time, there wasn't much awareness that something on a directory on a webserver could be art.

Additionally, artists aren't always good at preserving their works.

Then there was also the issue of technological obsolescence. The technologies of internet art and new media art change more rapidly than the technologies of say oil painting or sculpture, which are much more stable. We quickly started to wrap our minds around what to do when preserving art that was made and is viewable with tools and technologies that are not going to be around forever. We had many conversations with other people involved in the field of new media preservation, particularly Jon Ippolito, a founder of the Variable Media Network, who's now at the University of Maine and was formerly at the Guggenheim Museum. He tried to apply this thinking to all kinds of different art forms. We designed a questionnaire for artists that was very elaborate. It was web-based and artists who submitted artwork to the ArtBase had to fill out this questionnaire and answer a lot of questions that were intended to guide us in the future when we attempted to preserve the work. At the time, we didn't have the resources to preserve all the enabling technologies ourselves—the operating systems and web browsers and plugins—but we imagined that twenty years out we might have a work that used Macromedia Director, but not have the

technologies to display it. We hoped that someday someone would have preserved emulators, operating systems, browsers, and plugins so that this work could be shown. We felt it was critical to have as much guidance from the artist as possible while they were still alive, paying attention, and engaged.

We identified four main ways of dealing with obsolescence. The first was documentation, e.g., textual descriptions and screen shots. We were hopeful that someday people would start doing video walkthroughs or click-throughs of works, maybe even with a voice over.

The second preservation strategy was migration. Sometimes technology changes incrementally and you can, for example, make a few tweaks to the code of a work of net art and it will work the way it was meant to. Like a classic JODI artwork that originally blinked but doesn't blink anymore because the HTML blink tag has changed. You could migrate it by going into the HTML and rewriting the blink tag. The screen would blink in the right way but it might be that it now blinks a lot faster than it used to so you may have to add some extra special code. In that case, it would help if the artist had specified whether the blink speed was important.

The third, and the most promising one we identified was emulation. You would emulate the CPU, the operating system or the browser. Then, within the emulator, you would run the original work. Nowadays, emulation is used a lot to play old videogames. At the time, emulation was not as common.

The final tactic we envisaged for dealing with obsolescence was re-creation. It might be that the very best and most effective way to deal with obsolescence was just to make the work anew from scratch. That might make sense if the work depended on the existence of an environment or ecosystem that no longer existed. You could imagine an artwork that was dependent on a community or a platform that has just gone away—for example MySpace, what if there was an artwork that really depended on lots of people actively using MySpace? In this case, we might decide to re-create it using Facebook, if the artist had given us permission and said this is what we should do. That's the idea behind re-creation. Certainly, re-creation makes a lot of sense with old media works and sometimes re-creation is required. A Meg Webster sculpture might be a big ball of mud so you actually have to recreate it each time it is installed. The instructions may be to recreate it using whatever mud is local to the venue; maybe the color changes each time. We ask artists for guidance, to basically explain all of these things. We would ask, "Is it okay if we document this work? Migrate it? Is it okay if we run it in an emulator? Is it okay if we try to recreate it? If yes, what is most important for us to know about this work? Where is the 'art' in the work for you? Is it the pacing of the animation? Is it important that there is color fidelity?" You can ask similar questions of Dan Flavin's artworks. For example, "Is it really important that this be an off the shelf, industrially fabricated florescent tube even if the color is a bit different?"

Or is it really important that it be the exact same hue and brightness, even if we have to refabricate it at the cost of a thousand dollars apiece?" The answers are important to know for preservation and future display, thus, we wanted to capture information like this from the artists as they added their works in the ArtBase.

The questionnaire was difficult and I think it was hard for artists to make the time to complete it. I remember we put a huge amount of time and thought into developing this questionnaire. They would submit a work, we'd review it and try to determine if it counted as new media art, although we would try not to make qualitative assessments of it. We tried not to ask if it was good enough for the ArtBase. It was simply if it met the basic criteria (if it was new media art or not), which could be hard to decide at times. If we said, "Okay you can submit it", they'd choose whether or not to actually give us a copy of the work in addition to all the metadata about it or whether they just wanted to give us information about it and a link to wherever it resided. When the artist gave us a copy of the work, we called it a cloned object. When the artist only provided metadata and a URL, we called it a linked object. The artists would make that decision and then, if they were giving us a copy of the work, they completed the questionnaire. They would provide all this information including information about what technologies they used, their names, and the title of the work; basically all of that metadata that I was discussing earlier.

So did you feel like you would be able to form classes of works and almost plan for the preservation of those works? For example, MySpace, if there were, say, ten works that relied on MySpace could you make a general plan for them? Or would you feel like each work needed its own attention?

That's a really good question. I never anticipated that. I don't know. I had not thought ahead to creating classes and treating everything within that class in the same way. I can see why one would want to. So I don't think we had considered that and decided not to--it's just we hadn't considered it.

Have you come across a work where you've dealt with preserving it or recreating it or somehow installing or displaying it where you don't have that information about what the artists' intention was? If so, were there guiding principles that you used in deciding how to treat the work?

I have not had that experience.

How do you think that being an artist helped you with the work you did at Rhizome with the ArtBase?

We saw artist's thoughts, desires, intentions, and views as being really important. Because we were artists ourselves, we had a sense of what kinds of concerns, thoughts, and

intentions other artists might have. If we were art historians, we might not have thought about it in quite the same way. I think in some contexts artists tend to have more respect for artists than non-artists. There were artists who chose not to put their works in the ArtBase when we asked them because they didn't want their art preserved. Sometimes there were artists who we knew were historically significant and that really raised an interesting question, "Is it the artist's right to say no, especially once a work is out there, and has been seen by millions of people, written about, and there are multiple copies?" I don't know. To what extent does the public interest trump the author's moral rights over the work? That's a rare situation, I think.

With your own artworks, do you package them for collections? Do you prepare them in some way for preservation?

I try to be good about preserving my own work. A lot of my work is video and lives on hard drives, which are volatile and unreliable, so I try to have multiple copies, but it's tricky. Also, sometimes there isn't a definitive version of a work but rather multiple versions. I want to put my time in to making new work but recently I've started to catalog my own work, too. Just in the last year I made a spreadsheet where I record metadata about each work: the title, medium, duration, dimensions, time frame, and where it resides. And if it was purchased, who bought it and where it is. It's different certainly for physical objects that are more frequently bought and sold then it is for works that are media based or performative.

How about the technical nature of the works too? Have you been able to come up with a best practice for your own works in terms of what kind of files you save?

No, not really. It's pretty intuitive. If it was a video, right now Uncompressed QuickTime would probably be my first choice instead of, for example, using the h.264 codec. In terms of images, I usually save the PSD files that have the layers in them and stuff, but I don't assume that will be around for very long, so I also try save a full-resolution uncompressed TIFF or JPEG. I would save it as a reference file. It's hard to be methodical and organized about this stuff.

Is it because each piece is so varied or because technology moves so fast?

It just takes time to stay organized, maintain working backups, etc. I often do several projects a year, so over the course of a decade I produce dozens of projects. It takes time to keep track of it all. I come up with a scheme and then I have to follow it constantly and I'm not an organization, I'm an individual. Plus, I want to take advantage of my time and focus on producing new work.

Are there any resources you rely on?

No. Would I go check some website for guidelines or best practices? Never. I think I'm a bit of an outlier in thinking about these things at all.

Are you a resource for your students then? I would imagine that they would be encountering this as well.

They don't think about this at all. They finish the work and then they often don't even save copies.

Do artists ever ask you what they should really give you? Did you ever come to a specific conclusion on what they should give you [ArtBase]?

Yes, we had some kind of guidelines for that but I don't remember what they were. I think we said this is what we want usually. The question of acquisition standards does come up for applications, such as applying for a grant or a job. They will say, "We want a JPEG minimum resolution 300dpi", which of course, is meaningless when you're not talking about something that isn't going to be printed. They should say, "We want a minimum of 800X1600 pixels." Now, more and more schools, granting bodies, and other entities are using SlideRoom for managing application processes. SlideRoom allows you to upload images and link to Vimeo or YouTube, which are becoming very important standard creators and archives in themselves.

But it is hard to think about Vimeo or Youtube as an archive, as that is not its primary function.

Vimeo has a huge percentage of the video art in existence today. That is where it lives. When someone goes to find Ryan Trecartin's work in 50 years, it'll probably be at MoMA. But there are all of these other artists whose work isn't being collected by institutions where the only copy will be on Vimeo.

How do you feel about standards making bodies in this field? Is technology too changeable and fluid for standards making bodies to have any space?

I don't know. I think those questions are much more relevant to people that are working in institutions or organizations than to me as an individual artist. I guess I did interface with those kinds of questions a little bit in my first few years at Brown because they have been in the process of creating a digital repository for some time. I thought, "Hey this is an opportunity for me to offload the responsibility of preserving my own work." I loved the idea of being able to give them terabytes of data and knowing it would be there a hundred years from now because I don't have that capability myself. I don't have a personal repository. I don't know where they are now but they were moving so slowly that I kind of gave up. I still love the idea of being able to put my digital files in some vault somewhere

with tags on them so they can be found. For them, it'd be great if they were conforming to standards and were part of some part of some standard-following body or group.

If there were best practices that were adopted or distributed by a standard making body or a professional organization, would that be helpful? Would you look at it and maybe use it?

I don't know. College Art Association is trying to do something somewhat similar for individual artists vis-à-vis intellectual property. They're trying to come up with some sort of code, a set of guidelines basically, for artists. It would be an interesting undertaking to try to come up with preservation guidelines for artists, saying, "This is what you should do with your own work, artists, if you want to make sure your work doesn't vanish off the face of the planet two years after you get hit by a bus." I assume you approach this from an institutional perspective, so what's important to preserve is the stuff that is acquired by museums and libraries. There is so much terrific and important media art being made that doesn't ever get acquired and I guess that's just dark matter. It never gets exposed to institutional light. There is a potential to preserve it but it's so volatile compared to, say, paintings made by an outsider artist. That was yesterday's dark matter.

So where is the need? Is it technical? Is it descriptive? Where would you say the greatest need would be in building a community space or some kind of community?

What comes to mind right now is the Internet Archive. I haven't been there in a couple of years, but that was a place where one could put things and hope that they would be there in perpetuity; a non-commercial entity with a mission to preserve. I never had that much faith in it just because I wondered what would happen to it after Brewster Kahle went away. It felt different to give something to them than to give it to Google. I think you could try to come up with best practices, standards, and guidelines for individual artists. There could be some kind of resource that says, "If you want to try to preserve your work, here's what you can do." The even better solution would be to provide some sort of public resource, that would say "Here, give it to us go and through this process," a little bit what Rhizome offered or offers. It could be for all kinds of non-physical media.

So you think there is space there to make general guidelines for artworks or archiving artworks?

I guess, I mean it would be difficult and then once you do that it's hard to say how much interest there would be. It's sort of like getting people to write their wills.

Is there space in the artist classroom for that?

Actually there is. I create a Wiki for each class I teach. I have students create a page for each project they make to document their work with a description and images and they write about the process of making it. Often they will link to video. I think of it more as

documentation than as preserving the work itself. Sometimes if the work is video or image-based they are preserving the work too. It enables them to show their friends and relatives the work they've done. When it comes time for them to apply for graduate school or jobs they can refer to it. It is also helpful for me as a teacher to be able to point to the work that previous students have done. There has been talk about portfolio systems in education. I have wished that instead of putting together my own crude system using a wiki, the university would build a system that would allow me to help my students archive their work and make it accessible. To some extent, the Wiki platform that Brown has is functioning as a repository but it's very volatile and it's not a good solution.

That's such an interesting link back to the artist questionnaire form for the ArtBase that you helped develop- just looking at it from a different angle with students. You mentioned Dublin Core, which is an established metadata standard. Have there been other standards that you can think of that were helpful?

I'm not sure Dublin Core was helpful. We were aware of it and looked at it and thought, "Okay, this doesn't fit our needs."

What did you find was not useful in Dublin Core?

We looked at it back in 1999, I think it just seemed like it was written for a completely different kind of thing. It just didn't have the right taxonomy or vocabulary.

The working group is looking at the standards that are in other fields, for example, the library and archive fields where Dublin Core comes from. So the instantiations that you talk about in terms of the changes and different installations of a work, you can't really document using Dublin Core. That kind of thing is almost too flat. So, we are looking at the standards in these other fields to decide if they work or not. Do they need to change or do we need to create new ones?

Something just came to my mind about defining net art—It's a picture of a couple computers connected by a network and there is a little flashing lightning bolt in the middle of the network like on one of the wires. Its says, "The art happens here." It's called [Simple Net Art Diagram](#). I love that because it defines net art not as an object that exists in one computer or another or even as an image or a website but rather as something that happens. It's a happening, it's an event. How do you archive something that happens? How to you preserve it? Sometimes it's about preserving documentation rather than the thing itself. That's an important conceptual shift. In terms of my teaching Wiki, I always thought of it as documenting the work rather than preserving the work itself.

It's not a new problem. It goes back to performance art and happenings. In the case of Chris Burden's *Shoot*, we have a photograph of when he had himself shot at a Santa Monica

Gallery. The photograph doesn't preserve the performance, it documents it. But we can preserve the photograph.

So you're re-experiencing that encounter through the documentation?

Vicariously, in a compromised way. That was another thing that I embraced from the very start. This is just fraught with compromise. This is all about doing it imperfectly and figuring out the best way we can do it, especially at a tiny organization like Rhizome, which has limited resources.

Yet the things that Rhizome has been able to accomplish is amazing.

Sometimes there are advantages to being small; you can kind of wing it.