

Interview with Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is a Canadian and British scholar, historian, and curator in the field of new media, digital and contemporary art. Until 2013, Cook was a Research Fellow at the University of Sunderland, where she co-founded the research institute CRUMB – The Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss – with Beryl Graham in 2000, and taught on the MA curating course. She currently holds the post of Reader at The University of Dundee. For many years, she has curated exhibitions of new media art and was instrumental in establishing new media as an academic subject and an accepted art form.

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and James Smith

Please tell us about your background and how you ended up in this field?

I am a curator, so I work in context with artists producing exhibitions. For more than a decade, I have been engaged in looking at time-based, new media, and digital art and the whole category of contemporary art that involves any form of electronic media. I would say that my experience has revolved around all the activities that go into putting up exhibitions. On a more academic side, my experience includes engaging in art history and writing about those art works, and thinking about them intellectually and philosophically in a wider cultural context. While I have had experience working in museums, curating exhibitions for museums, and doing research in museum archives, I have never held a regular day job with a collection in a museum, other than as a student or recent graduate. Therefore, I am somebody whose curatorial practice ranges in terms of partnerships with different types of organizations, from festivals to local authority, council-run galleries and museums. The artists I work with also range in terms of their practices around the media that they are using, and they range internationally. So, you are more likely to get a “big picture” perspective from me rather than very specific experience of working with objects or a collection.

I am very interested in your curatorial experience and the lens that you have from working with these types of works. Could you speak about any of the challenges in putting together a show with works that are so dependent on technology?

I suppose it always starts with a conversation with the artist and the consideration of the context of what it is that you are doing in terms of practical considerations of the “where” and the “when” of the show. For example, is it a six-day exhibition as part of a festival taking place in a warehouse? Or is it a three-month show in a gallery that has technical

staff? Or is it a show that draws on a collection in a museum? I also try to consider what the artist needs to get out of the particular exhibition experience. Those are the two ways in which we start. If the show is only going to be up for six days, we might decide to produce a less challenging installation version of a work instead of the full-blown one, which would require more production time. On the other hand, we might decide *because* it is only up for six days, we'll produce the most challenging version of it because it is a chance to experiment and we don't have to keep the piece running for three-months.

Ultimately, there is no one way to go about it in my experience. I would say that the challenges are thinking about what the artist wants to get out of it, what the organizing institution or the host can feasibly provide technically and practically, and what the audience is expecting from the work and how they might engage with it. Those things will affect the technological decisions that you are going to make about the work you are going to show. There is a danger with media art that the artist may compromise on one or any of those things because of the opportunity provided. For instance, an artist may really want to be in a festival where their work will be seen in the context of the other artists at the festival, but you can't provide them with the projector that they want for the work to be seen at its best resolution, so they will agree to it being shown on a screen (which might be less ideal). That might sound strange, but that is something that happens (not everywhere has access to technology!). Or, you would like to be able to work with them around a process-based practice where they involve the participation of the audience and the work might change over the course of time, but you realize that they are not actually going to be able to fulfill that because they have to travel halfway around the world, they are going to arrive jetlagged and there is a language barrier with the participants, so you might have to decide not to do the full workshop version of the work.

I think those considerations sometimes fall outside or beyond the technology, but have an impact on the technology that you source in order to show the work. Another example, for instance, if you are working with a work that involves biological agents as well as video documentation, then you may decide because you can get the video documentation across the border but not the biological agents, that you will work with the artist to show the video documentation or make a new exhibition version rather than show the original process-based piece. It is very much case-by-case. I have worked in contexts where I have had to deal with all of those things. I think the most important thing for curators to do is to maintain the integrity of the work of art as the artist wants best to show it. If that means that the artist wants to do something that is different to the way that it has been shown before, then you support them in doing that. Or, if the artist says, "You can't show it the way that I want you to show it," then you pull it from the show and you do something else later down the road.

You noted that there are a lot of considerations here: artistic considerations, technological and economic realities, and the situation in which it is being shown. Do you have a standard process that you go through with the artist—if she or he is available—point by point to determine what is possible and where you can compromise? And if compromise isn't possible, where you may not be able to display a particular work in a particular context?

No. I wish I did. What we normally have, on behalf of the organization hosting the exhibition, is a timeline, e.g., what equipment is needed by when. Then I go to the artist and ask them what their ideal equipment list is for showing the work and then I'll go back to the host and say, "this is what they want", and they'll respond, "Well, this is what we have." And then I'll go back to the artist saying, "This is what we got, can you work with it? Or, should we look into getting the equipment from somewhere else?" And then I go back to the host and say, "Well, we have to hire the equipment from someone else." And then they say, "Well, is that in the budget?" That back-and-forth takes place for every artwork for as long as it takes. This can be a terrifying thing when you are curating exhibitions remotely—when you are a guest curator working from afar—because sometimes you don't know the limitations until quite late on. Luckily, artists are brilliantly versatile people who see opportunities. They might arrive and realize that even though you don't have what you originally thought you did, they might find a work-around. They might create an opportunity from it. But, I cannot think of any sort of standard; I have worked with organizations where they sent out a form – a technical rider – that they have asked artists to fill out in advance, but that has been the exception to the rule.

Speaking hypothetically, do you think something like that is even possible, or do you feel that every work and situation is so idiosyncratic that it would be difficult to come up with something consistent?

It might not just be how idiosyncratic the works are, it may be that the combination of the venue and the work. If the venue consistently shows media art and it knows its constraints and equipment list, it could create some type of document and standard for all of its shows. But, speaking as a freelance curator, who isn't placed within any particular venue, my experience is different every time.

I am interested in how an artist shows the same work in lots of different places and how they might show or adapt the work differently for each iteration. I have been working with some artists over long periods of time, and I have shown their work in a number of exhibitions and each exhibition was in a different place. I'm getting to know their work from the artist's perspective by working with them, so I think it depends which side that conversation is originating from. If it is originating from a venue that is very clear about what they do and how they do it, then such a standard could probably be put in place.

As a freelancer who is not collecting these works, do you document each installation? If you do, is it more or less in a descriptive way, or do you have certain information that you want to make sure that you record? If you do document these works, what do you do with the documentation?

It's a great question, and again, it would be the exception rather than the rule that I would work with an organization that would have a documentation standard in place that they would expect me, as a guest curator, to adhere to. That's rare, in my experience. Often, as a guest curator, I might put up the show and then they would say, "Oh, we always photograph our shows and we always work with this photographer." But the curator might not be involved in that process; that might happen later. Then, I might be given copies of those photographs, but I might not have a say in how they are taken, and they may just go into the venue's own archival repository. I have tried to take my own photographs, often of the setting up and installation process, that I can use when I am giving a talk or illustrating a chapter for a book. I can use those photos to tell behind-the-scenes stories on how the work was installed. The artists may insist on doing their own documentation of the work, and as a guest curator I may negotiate or facilitate that with the venue where the show is happening. Interestingly, I can think of an example where there was a work that involved an aspect of live performance at the opening of the show. The documentation that we (as guest curators) took of the performance was deemed to be in conflict with the agreement that the artist had signed with the venue around the showing of the work, which included a documentation clause. We were asked to take our photographs down (they were online) because it was not the official documentation that the venue and the artist signed up to, which we, as guest curators, were not aware of.

I have encouraged venues to take video—because usually documentation is just still photography—so that they have video walkthroughs, to see audience reactions and interactions, and document that side of it. Through my work with CRUMB we have pointed to examples where that has been done successfully. It is rare that I work with a venue that is open to reevaluating their documentation policy or that even has one in the first place that you can influence. Perhaps this is because I have worked with festivals and new organizations more often than established museums.

I'm really interested in what you were talking about earlier, about the versioning of the work—the different versions of the work. I'm wondering how you determine and maintain the essential aspects of a piece. I imagine you do so with the artist's feedback and participation. Also, we talk a lot about hypothetical situations where you don't have the artist as a resource to consult when installing his or her work in the future. Does documenting past installations work towards preparing for future installations?

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To answer the first part of your question, I would say it is always in conversation with the artist. You discuss what is the ideal, for example this type of projector in this size of room with this amount of black out or sound control, etc. Then, the next time you see it, you might notice that they agreed to have headphones for the work because it is adjacent to another room that has a sound work and they have decided that one's volume is more important to be in the air rather than on headphones, so they have made a compromise. Then, you might see it a third time, in a room that might have a lot more natural light, but it is compensated for because there is a brighter projector and it is better for the audience to flow through the space, or something like that. In those cases, if I had been involved as a curator, I might have a note in my file in terms of my correspondence with the artist about what we have agreed to in that instance and I could go back and compare; but I don't, as a curator, keep rigorous files about that artwork and the various ways in which it has been shown, although I imagine the artist would have some form of that because they could then tell you about the different ways they have shown it in the past. I think some of that remains anecdotal, but it gets documented in the correspondence with the artist.

If it remains in the artist's files, they may send that to potential venues; they may detail the ideal version and then—as I alluded to before—the venue may counter, explaining that they, for example, will be showing the work in a space that has a window. And the artist can respond that that is okay because they have shown it in a space before that also had a window.

In terms of when the artist isn't there anymore, I think this is a big problem and I don't think that anyone is recording that information on behalf of the artist, except in situations where the work might be accessioned into a collection. So, for artworks that are not in collections, you are depending on the documentation done by the individual venues or events where the work has been seen, and that documentation is in no way standardized. It might also be patchy on the details. You might look at a photograph and think, "Oh, so there was a window there." But, you might not know any more than that. You might not have a floor plan or tech specs. Then you might go to the next festival organizer and ask, "When you worked with that artist, what were the tech specs like?" and so on. I think that is probably what would happen in the event of the artist not being there.

Have you had to install pieces where the artist wasn't available?

Yes. There have been cases where I have Skyped with the artist and video-walked them through the space, and they have coached me through the installation accordingly, or I've shared my desktop and they've decoded something for me on my computer. Often in the case where the artist is really unavailable, you might contact a curator who has shown the work before and you get guidance and troubleshooting assistance from them. You assume that the curator had a discussion with the artist about their intentions and then you feel

confident to do it that way. You would have to trust the curator that you are calling and that their show was at the quality that you felt that yours was, and you wouldn't want to do it if you had any remote chance of reaching the artist.

But there is a precedent for using trusted, past installations to inform future ones.

I would think so.

Here, we are talking about the documentation of past exhibitions as an important component of the overall preservation strategy.

I think that works, as long as you know that the artist agreed to that past installation, and ideally, agreed with how it was documented. I think it is worse if someone showed the work badly and then everyone else uses it as an excuse to install it badly in the future because it is easier and the artist isn't around to dispute it. I think that is pretty tricky. I do think that happens with people who are unfamiliar with media art. I think that they do approach artists with, "Oh, I thought it was just on a widescreen, so I thought I could do that." And then the artist has to make a decision about saying, "We were really unhappy that it was on a widescreen and we really don't want you to do that." Or, they are going to have to say, "It's a slippery slope, but since we already let another curator do that, it will have to be okay."

In the extent that you do document these in whatever way is appropriate, do you have artists asking you for the documentation that you created so that they can add it to their file?

Yes, absolutely, especially when you are dealing with something like a festival; a festival may contain numerous exhibitions, which might range from historical shows to new commissions, and so on. Often a festival will undertake more rigorous documentation because it will be geared towards marketing (so you might have people making TV spots), or they might undertake documentation because they need to make the case for getting funding to do the festival again next year. So, it is in their best interest to get really good documentation of how audiences behaved with the work or reacted to the work, and how many people were there so that they can prove to their funders that the festival was a real success. In the case where a festival has hired a crew to document the festival, and they have done it at the opening when the audiences are there and the artist is there, then I've had the artist tell me that they saw the videographer get really good footage of someone interacting with their work and they would like a copy.

To a large extent we have talked with people who are associated with a collecting institution, so when they talk about documentation, metadata, standards, and best practices, they are talking about it in the context of things that are being collected, but it is interesting to hear about what happens before something is collected, and it sounds like the bottom line is that

the best place to go to get documentation of a work before it gets collected by a museum or collecting institution is to the artist. But in that case, it is still likely to be ad hoc.

I think in an ideal world there would be funds that artists could apply for for documentation alone and there would be “documentarians” assigned to artists. For a decade or more I’ve thought that would be really nice because you meet artists all the time who have entire bodies of work, that have shown all around the world, and none of it has entered a museum collection; nobody is looking after their archives, and it doesn’t stand a chance of getting into a museum collection unless the work is known, and the way to get it known is to have it written about and have good documentation of it so that people can then imagine it in its various manifestations and can imagine collecting it.

When a museum buys a work they take their trustees and they see the work installed.

Right, documentation is almost like an essential business practice. In your role as a curator you make decisions about installing the work, are there resources or best practices that you rely on or that you feel are instrumental to your field?

No. I’m sure that there are, but in my experience, which is tempered by my workload and travel schedule, in the case of existing works, my measure of best practice is having seen it (having seen the work, and where I saw it, and who curated it, and what I know about that venue or curator). It is about my own gauge and judgment. In the case of newly commissioned work, in terms of best practices on how to show it, my go-to people are the technicians who know the space really well, or people who have installed work by that artist, or, of course, the artist themselves.

What about the technical needs of the work? Is there any type of guide or resource that you refer to?

Not other than the artist’s previous experience. As a curator, you’re thinking about the audience and their experience, and the artist’s best realization of the work, and you’re thinking about the constraints of the venue. So, you’re thinking about light and sound, traffic flow, and the chance for contemplation or the chance for an interactive experience; what the mode of the work might be, and how the work might behave in the space. So, in the case of thinking about light and sound, you might go to the curator of that venue and say, “Okay, the last five years you’ve done shows here, what has been the most problematic?” You might hear anecdotally not to put a sound work in there because the sound reverberates everywhere, or you might hear that last time they had a projection in that room, people kept tripping over whatever, or it was too dark, or, that they have never been able to successfully blackout the space, those types of things. Or, the venue director might say, “my audience never wants to go into a dark room, so we have to keep the space more open and airy because otherwise the audience will look in and then turn around and

walk out again”. Those kinds of things on a practical level are important. They need to be balanced with, from the artist’s intention, what they are really trying to get out of showing the work and what might be necessary. Then you have to put yourself in the role of the audience as well, and imagine what their experience of coming in and out of the work will be—do they want to leave one work and then be immediately confronted by another work, or do they want a bit more space to change modes before they walk into another gallery with another work that is more contemplative?

When you’re working with a venue, do you ever find that the venue collects the piece after you have installed it, or after you have put a show together? And if so, are there questions that the people who work at that venue ask you? Are you consulted in terms of what components of the work need to be collected?

I don’t think I have ever curated an exhibition in a venue that later collected the work. It is conceivable that I have curated exhibitions in spaces where collectors have been brought to those spaces and works have been acquired for other organizations beyond that one, but in my experience, in Europe and lately in Mexico, I have worked with a lot of local authorities and city council galleries, and more temporary exhibition spaces.

That is just one area that the Working Group has been looking at: acquisition needs and if there is any way to create guidelines around what you ask for when you collect a work.

Working with commercial galleries that are increasingly dealing with media art, they are establishing some frameworks and guidelines, and again, it comes back to versions; artists might make collectable versions, sort of like creating multiple editions of a piece. So, if we went back to case-by-case artists, they would probably be able to talk about how they are able to make their work collectable. But my perspective is more from the perspective of the artist than a collecting organization.

So you think it would be on a work-by-work basis.

I think you could generalize in some way about, say, works that are software-driven. You could say that you get the code in various formats, one of which is written down and printed out, something like that. But then you might get the variables of that—what equipment that code acts out on.

We have a general question about training; among the people we have talked to so far, some people are trained as traditional art conservators and have learned the more technical needs of works while on the job, and some people come start with a more technical background—digital archivists, software programmers—and then they learn the needs of fine art. Ideally, I suppose, you would have a training program that combines the two. So if you think about these two perspectives, what do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of those two

approaches. What do you do to prepare yourself for working as a curator, a conservator, or an installer etc. in this field?

I think if you come from the art side and you learn the technical side on the job, you potentially create a better legacy around the work for future art history because the technical preservation of the work is always going to change; there is never going to be one best way of doing it, I don't believe. So, that knowledge of the technical side of it is going to be the kind of knowledge that you'll be continually re-learning anyway. The knowledgebase that will remain constant is what the artwork is, what it does, how it behaves, and what its intention is. Having some familiarity with that and the different ways in which art forms emerge and change seems to me to be key, and then the technical knowledge will be a constant turnover. I think on the other side, if you come with the existing technical knowledge, you might approach the work of art with a very novel way of thinking about its preservation that might be counter to the artwork's intent. You might suggest a mode of preservation that actually changes some part of the artwork's interaction because you have understood it as being technically a key thing. That could be a good thing, but it could also be detrimental to the work because you are coming with an immediate sense of stabilizing a platform and I think that artworks are to a large degree unstable (they act in a context which changes). They are an enactment of an idea, they are a manifestation of a process or event, and you can say that irrespective of medium. You can say that of a Dan Flavin artwork, anything that uses material that is unstable, the intention is very directed.

In your role working at a university, do you find that preservation concerns are built into curatorial courses?

At the University of Sunderland, I didn't work within an art history department – I worked in a curatorial context. I teach curators. I also teach PhD students, who are themselves either curators or artists undertaking experiments in doing things and then reflecting on those things that they are doing. So, that is slightly different. In terms of curating courses, CRUMB works with students who are coming from all disciplines, not necessarily just contemporary art, and are interested in the practice of curating in a wider cultural context. So, maybe their goal is editing magazines or organizing gigs as much as it might be working in an archeological museum or something like that. CRUMB tends to address the theoretical and the practical sides of the practice of curating. So, in that, we would point to preservation as something that if you are working in this kind of context you are going to need to know more about that.

Are you referring to the logistical needs of producing a show?

One of the modules at Sunderland is called mechanics and it is based around eight workshops that cover the mounting of an exhibition from beginning to end. What we have always done in the first class with our Masters students is—I give them two colors of post-

it notes, and on one color they have to write every step of everything they need to do before the opening day of the show, and on the other color they write everything that they need to do after the show is open. And often on that second color of post-it note they write the words “sleep” or “party”. [Laughter] And then we stick them on the wall in a linear fashion—and over the course we realize that none of it is really linear, for example the grant report writing happens before and after, or the shipping happens before and after. It is a really useful way of getting them to understand where they might need to reach out for a best practice way of doing things, where they might need to adhere to a standard way of doing things, and where they might need to invent the most appropriate way of doing things for the project that they are doing.

What about the maintenance of a piece that involves technology? If a work or exhibition is up for a longer period of time, are there strategies for maintenance? Is that something that you build into your curatorial practice of putting the exhibition together?

Yes, it is very hard not to. Again, as a freelance curator, it is a scary part of the practice because you leave after the exhibition opens and you have done your curatorial walk-through or talk and you feel like you have left the institution with the responsibility to care for the work and you know that you are going to be emailed a lot about it. I try to make that part of my work with the venue that is hosting me and is hosting my shows. We discuss what maintenance might be involved and where they would go for that information. We always do the “turn-on, turn-off” routine with them; showing the staff how to turn-on and and off the work, and we check to see if their building has some type of power supply where it reboots all the lights at 3 am or something like that. Because you are the middle person between the artist and the institution, you are holding the information about the best way for works to be shown and you don’t want to be disturbing the artist about that; you want to make sure that the art work is installed in the way that the artist wants it to be and the artist has told you what to do if there is a power cut or something like that, but some of that detail you don’t want to have to burden the artist with. And you know that you are going to be the go-to person when the institution has that problem, so you might say in the budget, “Make sure you have extra bulbs for the projector” or something like that. And then the institution might say, “Oh, it’s okay, we have some extras”, but you say, “No, make sure you put it in the exhibition budget.”

I can see links between maintenance and preservation, such as maintaining hardware. Sometimes preservation is happening while it is on display. So, these two fields converge in an interesting way. Are there standard questions that you ask? Or, is this very venue dependent?

It depends if the artist has shown the artwork a lot before. The artist may have developed a standard for that particular work. It also equally depends on the institution and if they have a standard around their own maintenance and their obligation... this is where the

difference between institutions becomes significant, if it is a venue that receives a great deal of public funding and needs to maintain its reputation so that it can borrow works into the future then they may be far more rigorous about their maintenance and their condition-checking and damage-reporting because the reputation of their future shows depends on it and they will let you know that as a guest curator that they will expect that amount of information from you. Whereas a venue that is showing media art for the first time or has never dealt with it before, they may not have rigorous condition-checking and they might not realize when the art is broken down. They may not notice that the DVD is not looping correctly, or that a user has navigated far from the beginning of the work and the next user doesn't know where to start. From my perspective, it is always nice to be present as much as possible, so sometimes I will plan to be in the city for longer, or plan a return visit so that I can have another look at the show a few weeks after it opened to make sure that it still looks as good. But you are trusting the people there to do that for you, and unless the institution is really rigorous about that, you don't always know if it is still working.

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

I think that is an interesting question. Standards may be something that are determined by the institution, in terms of the quality of what they are trying to do, which artists may agree with or not. This goes back to the idea of artists changing their work so that they can get it in the Tate, for instance. Guidelines tend towards—I sort of see it as, if you're going to do it, can you at least make sure you do this much. For example, a guideline about trying not to have too much sound leak between works or don't make the room so dark that people fall over, that kind of thing. Best practices are where you are fully informed and you are trying to strive for a situation that both satisfies the artist's intention and lives up to the institution's standard and ideal way of showing something that does the most for that artwork going forward – in terms of either its documentation ending up in a collection or contributions to how that work is seen in future art histories. That is sort of off the top of my head, but that's how I think of it.

As we talk more and more, I'm getting the sense of the work as a life form, where, because of our lens, we're thinking of works most often that are in our collections—they are already established works that we care for, so this is a very interesting perspective—of works that are being formulated, they are growing up as they are being installed, shown, or versioned. I think this is an interesting and different lens than a collecting institution.

There is a difficulty with artists who are past what I would call “mid-career” and have serious bodies of work that have been shown internationally and none of them are collected. It is a major problem because there are artists who have really developed best practices in terms of those works being shown. The works have been treated exquisitely

and shown to their best, and documented and had international press around them and have toured. Yet they are still in crates. They are still not collected and I don't know how having a standard, guideline, or best practice would ensure that.

What do you think will happen to those works?

Artists may try to give them to a collection—I know artists who are willing to donate works just in the hopes that it would make it into a collection and be preserved. Still, museums might say that they are not going to take it, so that is kind of terrifying too.

Being a curator tackling these technological challenges, how do you stay abreast of and educated about all the technology.

I don't really, and it's very hard, because there is only so much that I can do. I act on behalf of the artist, so the artist is likely to tell me something that I wasn't aware of about that particular work and then I might translate that into a language that the venue can understand, or bring it to their attention without scaring them off from doing it out of fear of the technology. So, yeah, I struggle with that, although I'm lucky in that I get invited to various events that are looking at archiving and preservation, so I get to meet people who are working at the forefront of this field and I hear their stories about what they are doing, which means I know who to call if these issues come up in my practice. I don't have time to do all that reading, though I do try.

Often does the information about the specific technology come from the artist?

Yes, I suppose so. Sometimes it comes from the venue. For instance, in the case of a venue I have been working with in Mexico City where they have a video screen on the roof that we want to use, I might discover something that I didn't know about that playback system or they might say, "Oh yeah, we had to upgrade it last year and now we are working on this format" or something... but I am less of a geek on that front. I just want to make sure it is going to look good! I am trying to factor in a day's work for the artist if they have to change the format of the work because I've asked them to show it in a venue that has a particular technological presentation platform. I think that is really hard, when you know that it is going to take a day of the artist's work to make the work fit with the technology and that is not in the budget.

Do you ever find that the artist asks you questions about the best technological specs for showing a work in a venue?

Not really. They do ask me about things like the interaction or how the audience might engage with it, e.g., "Do you think that we should make the room lighter or darker?" Or, "Do you think the way that we have indicated instructions is clear enough?" I might be able to point out other ways of thinking about the work that change it. They might say, "Do you

think that it is okay that the curator has asked me to put it beside another work that I think the noise is going to interfere with? How do I tell the curator that?" Because I run CRUMB, which is a little like a self-help group, we are seen as trusted people who it is okay to share your dirty secrets with. So I do sometimes have an artist phone me up and say, "I'm having this terrible problem with this other venue and curator and they want to do this to my work and do you think I should let them?" And that could be a technological question or it could be about best practice and ethics.

I wanted to talk about CRUMB. Why did you feel that it was important to create CRUMB?

You'll get a good sense of this when you talk with Beryl Graham as well. She is someone who is trained as an artist and started to engage with electronic, digital, and interactive art from her own perspective as an artist and then decided to curate something and then realized there was no go-to person to help you curate this stuff. She was the one who thought, "There must be some way to share all of this knowledge I gained when I curated this huge show; there must be somewhere to put it." She was thinking that at the same time that a new institution was about to form here locally, and she saw an opportunity to get a bit of money from a research funding council and to bring me in. So that initial germ of an idea I would say came from her side. From my side, I had been working with contemporary art institutions and organizations, I had done an MA in curatorial practices and was at the Walker Art Center and was aware that many curators working in museums (not all!) just didn't get media art, they didn't want to know, they didn't want to engage with the technology side of it. They wanted it to be made safe or static or something. I thought that was a shame. There must be a way to reach those contemporary art curators to reassure them that media art is not such a scary thing and actually, you already have some of it in your collection! So, CRUMB emerged out of those impulses. The impulse was for it to be a professional development site for curators to exchange knowledge about the practice of curating and the lessons learned. And a site that could introduce media art in all of its emergent forms to people who want to know more about it or people who already know about it but want to discuss it further and include artists in that conversation.

Yes, it really does function as all those things.

It is curious because it is so anecdotal, and by having it as an academic, university-based research think-tank it means we can take the anecdotal and we can legitimize it and turn it into publication and therefore make it a citable reference-point. It is a slightly weird thing to do but it is how curatorial scholarship has emerged. It is mostly interviews with curators about what they did. It is increasingly one of the methods that art history uses because, in my opinion, art history is not really equipped to grapple with emerging art practice and contemporary practice, and there is a huge crisis around how art history reads the contemporary work beyond the anecdotal reporting method.

Sometimes the decisions that are made around the installation of a media artwork are different each time it is installed. Generalities come out of the anecdotal in the one-off case studies. Where do you feel that there is space for more work in this field?

Definitely this idea of how we help artists to get their work documented and collected, and where responsibility for that lies. I think curators assume a certain responsibility on the part of the artist and the artist assumes a certain responsibility on the part of the curator and we equally assume the museum's responsibility and I think a lot of stuff falls between the cracks there. The overlap between the preservation of time-based works and media work verses any other kind of art form is something that we are still struggling with and trying to explain and there is an amazing misconception that media art and time-based art cannot be preserved and that it is immaterial, and I think we have got to smash that one on the head because anything can be preserved if the money and time is put to it. And the problem with this is that they don't want to put the money into it; the collectors, or the investors, or whoever. There is no sense of the value of it, or it is not being articulated. If you can find a way to preserve a Dan Flavin work, it is because you know the value of it; you know there are not going to be any more of them. We haven't gotten there with a lot of emerging forms of media and digital art, so we need to address that, the assumed immateriality of the work. It can be preserved, it just needs investment. Whether they need research or just greater awareness.

Do you think that standards could play a part in this? Perhaps coming up with very strong best practices?

That could scare people as much as empower them. We need a sense of experimentation and, "if you want to collect it, collect it! If you want to save, you can save it! You can come up with a way to save it." You don't have to feel belabored because you need to own a huge refrigerator, or whatever it might be. I think that is what has precluded preservation of other forms of art. I think you could do some research around what wasn't collected when and why, and you might find similar things. You might find, "well, we never collected photography because we thought it was going to degrade. Or we didn't have a fridge." Or something like that. So, that may still be the case.

We have done some work – because CRUMB has not positioned itself as an expert or go-to resource around strictly preservation – we have looked at documentation because we have realized that documentation plays a different role in the career of an artist and the career of a curator. We have tried to – not necessarily come up with best practices – to suggest why you might document and who you might document for and if you have a greater awareness of those things then that might change how you document. There is a lot that could be done there. And then, just empowering artists, making it okay for artists to put their foot down

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and say, for instance, “You can’t show the work unless you are going to give me great documentation.”