

Interview with Steven Dye

Exhibitions Technical Manager, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Visual and sound artist

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Interviewers: Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert

Please describe your experience with time-based media artwork.

I went to school at the California College of Arts and Crafts, which is now the California College of the Arts. I studied film, video, and performance; so I have a background as an artist with that material.

I started working at SF MoMA in late 1995, doing work in their theater—public programs and film screenings. In 1999, I moved up into the galleries, and since then, I’ve been installing works from the permanent collection, traveling shows, and that sort of thing. The program for media art has become more dense, in terms of the complexity and the number of works we show. So I have a little over a decade of putting these works on view for the public, and coming up with answers to some of these hard questions that you are working on. I sometimes refer to the “forensic science of installing artworks,” because many times it means tracking down clues about what an artist’s intention was, how a work has been installed before, how to replicate conditions, where to find equipment—that sort of thing.

We realized very early that it was important for the preparers such as myself to communicate with registrars and curators—to have a deeper conversation, earlier in the installation or acquisition process, so we are asking the right questions when we acquire this work and are trying to identify any hidden costs that might be there. So no one is surprised if later we say we need to spend large amounts of money, say, getting equipment or migrating media. That conversation has also led to us having good communications with others like the Tate and MoMA New York.

We have the benefit of having the Kramlich Collection close by. In 1999, Bob Reilly, the Curator of Media Art at the time, put together a show called “Seeing Time,” which was a look at the Kramlich Collection. In part because of putting that show together, and working with that collection, the Kramlichs certainly have an interest in how we as institutions are communicating about this work. That initiative spawned this effort with the Tate and MoMA to develop language—not “standards” necessarily, but just [a lexicon] so that we are

all describing the same ideas in the same ways, and so we are all on the same page in terms of how we are talking about this work.

That has led to the question of expectations for how collectors and institutions communicate with artists and private galleries, and trying to set up some real hands-on tools that people can use.

What are the main challenges you have seen over the years with respect to preservation of these types of works?

We're at the mercy of industry for all of the tools we use. I like the phrase you used, "technological dependencies"—we are dependent upon what is manufactured for commercial purposes. Technology can go in and out of fashion, even as standards are being developed within industry. We have to rely on that, because that is what artists are working with. Many times, they are using that technology in ways that it was not necessarily intended to be used, or pushing it in new directions. That's one of the things that makes it exciting—to see the technology being used in unexpected ways.

The challenge for older works is interpreting *how* to preserve a work. Is it an artist's intent that we are preserving? Is it a look and feel from a particular time? Is it an impact on the audience? To some degree, I always feel the human question is more challenging than the technical one. Given enough time, you can almost always come up with a technical solution, for example, if you are migrating a work. But you can't do that in a vacuum; you need to have a conversation with the artist to discuss [relevant issues]. For example, CRTs are not being made anymore; so how do we resolve that [in works that employ CRTs, so as to preserve] the intention or the look-and-feel that the artist wants, [or to preserve the work as it was when] a collector or a curator brought it into the collection? Resolving those questions is the more challenging part.

When you are getting together with registrars and other to "ask the right questions" when a work is being acquired, how do you know what those questions are? Do you work from templates? Or is it something done on a case-by-case basis?

In the Matters in Media Art group, we developed a template based on those questions. At this point, it has become a little more intuitive for me. I always think, "Do we have the information we need to install this?" I walk through a thought process: We have this kind of media? What is it being played on? Do we have the specs for what this is supposed to be played on? Do we understand the kind of room it should be in? I'm aware that all of these pieces need to be connected somehow.

To step back a little bit, there are always going to be three components: the media itself, the way it is played back (e.g., the player for a digital file or DVD), and the display (e.g. a monitor or a projector). Maybe there are variations, but those three elements are always going to be there. Then also the question of whether we understand enough about the room it is supposed to go in. As these projects get more complex, understanding the electrical requirements for them becomes important. Are there specific sound conditions we need to understand? Is it supposed to be really loud, for example, so we need to be mindful about what we put it next to? Or maybe the artist's intention is that we experience the work in silence; and so again you have to think about what's next door.

While installing the works, I deal less with the archived elements. If we get the media in a video file or whatever, there is an exhibition format, which many times is very different from the preservation format. Our registrars and conservators are the ones asking questions about preservation formats. The question for me is whether we can get a display format from that—or, more generally, what is the process for getting a display format? Are [the display format and preservation format versions] coming at the same time?

For example, if a work came on DVD, DVD is not a preferred acquisition format for preservation, because it's compressed and has a short lifespan. It is fine for display, though, there are a lot of decisions that the artist has made in terms of parameters you can apply when compressing a file to get it into a small, easily playable format. So you need to understand what those compromises are. Is it resolution that they are losing? Is it squishing color or contrast in a particular way?

So there are several different conversations going on when you acquire a work?

Yes.

Do you see any standardized formats coming out of these conversations, whether for exhibiting or for archiving? Are there best practices that all of this points to?

Again, the degree to which we are dependent on industry developing standards [is an important issue]. From an industry perspective, it's a commercial enterprise. For example, is it more profitable to make equipment that uses proprietary language and proprietary video codec? Or is it better to use open source? For example, an Apple ProRes file is a very specific thing, and it's really common. So as an institution, we need to be familiar with that format.

Is there a preferred format for acquiring something? That's a grayer question, because it's less about a specific format, and more about getting least-compressed version of something, with the most information, so we have as much material as possible as we move

that item forward into the future, because we will need to migrate it. As we become more file-based and less tape-based, there is less possibility of degradation, but more chance of finding we just can't read something or can't figure out a format. That conversation is always a little bit in flux.

For a long time, the default video preservation format was tape. It used to be Beta SP, then it was DigiBeta, then there was the big conversation about converting from analog to digital. So best practice is less about what the specific format is, and more about how we translate the most information. In part, that is a conversation with our colleagues. For example, who else has this equipment?—because it is enormously expensive.

In industry, they are looking for the biggest market. They recognize they can sell a lot of video if there is a standard format, like DVD. It's the same conversation they have about BluRay; it's higher definition. Those are all distribution formats, and less valuable to us as preservation formats, but the same kind of conversations are leading whoever is making cameras or editing systems to think about standards. As these technologies develop, those conversations are happening. It's fortuitous that it is not a single company dominating the entire market; there are a lot of different ways this stuff can get played back.

On that point, about the kind of file system or database you are using: My feeling is that the best file system is the one you are using. You could theoretically make the most perfect system; but if you are not using it, then it's kind of pointless. It could be the Dewey Decimal System—that's fine if you are using it, you are familiar with it, and there is a language within your institution you are using to communicate about that. When our institutions talk with one another about which way they are going, that helps inform bigger decision about how we *all* understand how this works.

When we talk about the jump from tapes to files, that raises the question of repositories. I'm curious about that, because I know Matters in Media Art is now tackling this. Do you work with your IT team about that?

I personally am less directly involved with that process. But because we do collectively have these conversations, I'm listening to what they are saying and involved in it to some extent. To the extent we are working with our IT department, we recognize that they have experience in managing digital assets, so the conversation for us revolves around whether there is anything different—whether there is any kind of additional oversight—that we need to apply to their system.

Is that system serving the needs of the Art? The answer is “yes and no.” In part, it's a resource question, which might be different for different institutions. How are these

projects being funded? For example, if we just suddenly told our IT department they need to handle all of this material, there is a significant workload issue there. We would have to advocate for the resources. Funds for preserving media might not necessarily be showing up in the budget for more general file management at an institution.

The other side of the question is whether there are specific specialties in terms of personnel that we need to have. In our IT department, for example, they don't typically handle a lot of digital video. So they might not know what to look for when looking at that. So when we upload things to the server, what do we need to be looking for? What kinds of protocols do we need to have in place to make sure that material is safe? Are we uploading what we need to upload? Are we monitoring what we need to monitor? I would say we are still piloting a number of different approaches there.

... There are standards for what a particular codec requires. If you're being purely technical, all you need to learn is what those codecs are. The broader question is, how many different codecs do you want to absorb? That's a much more challenging question, because over time, those standards will change. It will never be possible to have a single standard for everything.

But that's true of any conservation effort. Not all metal materials are the same, so you have to understand each one and how it needs to be repaired, conserved, stored, or handled. It's the same thing with different kinds of paint materials. Those sorts of approaches apply [to digital materials]; a lot of those conservation principles and methodologies are appropriate and applicable to media. It's just the particulars that are different. Instead of knowing all about polymers and adhesives and plastics, you need to know more about how digital sound or video are encoded in different ways, and how you store it.

In terms of standards, you are basically looking at the industry standards, and thinking about what is likely to happen to those standards in the future. That is driven a lot by whether a lot of people have invested in a particular format; if that's the case, it is likely to stick around longer. And if it does change, there will be a lot of people interested in how we migrate from that format to whatever the next step is.

What do you see as the distinctions between standards, guidelines, and best practices in the preservation of time-based media art?

In part, standards and guidelines are the same. There are standards in the sense of "minimum quality you are looking for"—but even in that situation, you may not have the luxury [of achieving those standards]. Depending on the circumstances, you may have to go with a DVD or an old VHS tape and move on from there. In terms of best practices, the same

rigor applies that we use in conversations about object preservation and how we handle the cultural legacy of any other kind of artwork.

It's a good point you raise about the differences in what we mean when we talk about "industry standards," versus a standard in the sense of the minimum information we should collect at the time of acquisition.

I think all three of those—standards, guidelines, best practices—are saying the same thing. They are helping you understand which questions to ask and which ways to go. And how we make those decisions are based on the kind of conversations that we are having here.

Later on in your interview guide, you ask how organizations like AAM and AIC could play a role. I think the most important thing is just communicating with each other. This technology does not exist in a vacuum, and the artwork does not either. I think those organizations provide excellent forums for those kinds of conversations, and they are very valuable in that respect. So if we are thinking, "the way we decided to do things 10 years ago maybe is not the right way to go; how can we change that?" [you can discuss that in such a forum]. We have a space within those organizations to assert, "I think it should be done this way, and I feel strongly about it," while giving people who might have a different view [a chance to express it]. How are we having that dialogue in the service of protecting our cultural legacy?

That's a very different role from what organizations like those in the previous question (e.g. ISO, SMPTE) do, which is to serve as actual standards-making bodies.

Right.

Is there anything in caring for these artworks that would be amenable to a more rigid standard, like the standards that come from those bodies?

There's a danger in becoming too rigid, because as soon as you make it iron-clad, or say "It can only be this, and not that," you are immediately cutting off a lot. Inevitably, there will be a piece that will be an exception to that rule.

SMPTE is giving you valuable tools, for example. But not every video artist uses the camera or video standard as they are "supposed to," and a lot of work is exceptional precisely because they are breaking those rules. That's not always the case; others make artwork using standards as they were intended, so when you send it to be displayed somewhere, the color bar means [what it is supposed to mean] or the audio standard means [what it is supposed to mean] when you are calibrating it. Sometimes artists are certainly using those tools in the way that industry has defined them. But there are enough projects that work

outside of that box—for example, not recording the color bleed the way you are supposed to. The question for us is how we safeguard that material so we can play it back as intended.

What about the hardware?

There are general categories. It pays to know the proper way to set up a projector so you get a square picture and you get the most out of the color and things like that. But there is some nuance in setting things up. Every installation has compromises in one way or another. The challenge is understanding where those compromises can take place. The space might not be exactly the right size or shape. Or you don't have the older projector you were supposed to use. So if you use a newer projector, should you go with a quieter projector, or a brighter one? What would the artist prefer? Should you just go for the brightest thing you can possibly get, because the sound doesn't matter that much? What kind of surfaces are you projecting on? Trying to tackle those kinds of nuances in installation really matters.

The preparator has an effect on a work, in terms of the shading. For example, two different installers could have two different ways to tune sound in a given space. How are we understanding and capturing that? You could install everything by the book, and it could turn out very flat; you need to have some nuance. It's similar to how you light a painting; it could be too bright, or it could be not bright enough. Or think about the effect you can have with photographs; you can damage the work because it is lit too brightly and you are actually destroying the emulsion. It's a similar thing media art. How are we installing this projector? How are we capturing the subtleties? Most of that comes down to that human element of communicating with the artist, communicating with the curators, finding out how a piece fits into the overall flow of an exhibition. I am using the projector as an example, but this idea applies to any use of technology in the display of artworks.

That's a good segue into our questions about training. What aspects of your training have been most useful to you in your job?

That I come from an art background informs much of what I do. But I don't think that's a requirement. Having some facility with equipment and technology is also important. Even more important than that is an ability to know what you need to learn to make something happen, and that's more challenging.

I've been asked this question before, and it is an interesting one. Part of it is like apprenticeship work; you start out in a studio and learn from a particular school of thought about how something is done. That kind of training is really important. Making these sorts

of projects myself as an artist, I can communicate with artists and understand where they are coming from. It's not just technology-by-the-numbers; there is some subtlety, some way that they are trying to push or pull a particular installation. You have to be sensitive to that and understanding how that theatricality works in an installation. A lot of it is just attention to detail.

You mentioned knowing where to look for the information you need. What kinds of resources do you use?

There is no substitute for experience; we install a lot of work here, we have a new-work program, we produce commissions. We gain a lot of experience because we are working with artists while they are making or installing their work. That informs the installation of other projects. Your biggest resource is the artists themselves; so while they're available, having those conversations with them, observing how they work, is the number one [resource]. It's possible to learn anything you need to learn about a technology; the hard part is knowing how that technology is applied. You are looking for ways to work with artists to make that happen. I'm not sure there is a school you could go to where you could learn that; it's something you learn by doing. We are also in a position to really understand how the public interacts with artworks. That perspective also informs many decisions as to how we install or set up a gallery.

How do you capture that knowledge and make sure it is retained at your institution, rather than just residing with the staff who are working on that project?

[Laughs] That is the question, isn't it? That's just an evolving process. We have tried a number of different ways to capture that. Artist interviews are a part of that. For the installation notes, we try to have a "key ingredient": what is the essential "thing" in this [artwork]? For example, is it the sound that you really need to pay attention to? If there is a conversation I have had with an artist or an artist's studio, or if there's a way we resolved an issue I think is notable, I'll make a note of that in our installation notes, so someone can refer to that later.

But it's very difficult. I'll go back and read the notes from some project we installed eight years ago, and I'll say, "Wow—that's really all the notes I took?" So I don't know that there is a standard or a specific way; you just try to capture why you made certain decisions in a particular installation. Maybe you made a decision based on a time constraint or available materials, so you make a note of that; maybe if you did not face those constraints, you would have gone about it differently. Many times we'll have a conversation about how we have a photo from 1974, for example, and a monitor is in a particular condition or cables are set up in a certain way, and we'll wonder whether it was the artist's desire to do it that

way, or whether that was just what we had at the time. What are the reasons behind this picture? Capturing that kind of metadata in the documentation of a piece is really key.

Do you have an internship program so you are working with up-and-coming installers or technicians or conservators?

From the preparator's standpoint, there are two ways to answer that. There are a number of local artists who teach at institutions, and they will bring classes through. As practicing artists, they are aware of the role of the installer in making their art work successful. So I've had the opportunity to communicate with them behind the scenes in that way: "this is what goes on to put your work on view in an institution like this" (as opposed to in a private gallery or in a smaller artist-run space). That's a distinction they may not be familiar with; how we handle or approach things is very different from how it would be done in other kinds of spaces.

On the other side, there's a labor concern. Some of it is just physical labor, and we are less likely to have an internship in that way. Some of it is just the economics of installing a piece. We don't really have that luxury of time; we have a very limited amount of time, so we just need to apply that professional rigor to make it happen in the time we have.

We do have fellowships. We have greatly benefitted through the conservation department, where there is more room for that, through schools and what not. For example, Martina Haidvogel is a conservator here who has been working on a fellowship for two years. I'm not sure about the specific details of how her fellowship works, but we have been able to bring in other fellows on funded projects to work with the collections and learn how we have done things, as well as to learn from their experience and expertise. They are in touch with the broader conservation world, in terms of standards.

With the installers, there is less inter-museum conversation than there is among Conservation or Registration professionals. Because we have had a number of touring media shows, I have had the opportunity to install things at other locations. So there has been more communication that way. Because I am involved in the conversation at SFMOMA about how we preserve or present media materials, I have been to the AIC meetings a number of times, and have had a chance to talk with colleagues there. But I think there is less of that for art handlers.

Why do you think that is?

At SFMOMA, and I think for some other Museums as well, traditionally it is more likely that the Conservator, or Registrar would travel with an exhibition. That has been the tendency, but I think it's changing, partly because the works are becoming more complex. Also, I think

people are coming to realizing how important the Preparators are in understanding the works. For example, The Getty has hosted for a couple years now a preparators conference PACCIN (Preparation, Art Handling, and Collections Care Information Network).

... I'm always surprised—in a good way—to find [when I talk to artists] that whatever I think is the most important part of an installation is often not it. There is some other aspect. You have to pay attention to the subtleties artists want to achieve. Or maybe there are no subtleties; maybe they want some aspect of it to be bombastic and over-the-top. Just paying attention to the fact that there are differences in how different artists approach things gives you a perspective on how things could be different [from what occurs to you].

Would you say working with artists gives you a new perspective on works you have already installed as well?

It all adds to a general experience, but I don't know that I would necessarily take a specific thing that I learned and apply it to another piece.

I jokingly refer to it as “the splendor and horror of working with artists.” It's not always easy. Artists work in different ways, and are under different pressures themselves. Part of it is knowing how to resolve conflicts in a stressful situation. When you are working with an artist whose work is owned by somebody else, there can be conflict there in terms of how the different parties might want to resolve a particular issue. As the preparer, we are stuck in the middle there.

As a collecting institution, that's an important thing to consider: the artist's wishes may not necessarily jibe with the collector's. Or if you are communicating with an artist about an earlier work, they may have a completely different perspective on it than they had when they made it. For us, understanding why a curator brought something into the collection is also part of the conversation. So it's really just piece-by-piece.

Where do you think there needs to be more research into preserving these works?

I think there needs to be more technical facility among registrars, conservators, and art handlers, so they all know how to communicate. If you go to school to learn to be a registrar, unless you are already familiar with media, when you jump into a professional situation you have to learn a lot of material quickly on the job just to know what you are looking at. Our registrars have gotten very good at this because we handle this material a lot. It's the same thing with conservators, although I think there is now more attention paid to media [in conservation training] just because it is such a big thing.

Here at SF MoMA, we have AV support for public programs, which is very different from the technical support that I provide for Art in the galleries. For an institution our size, that is a very important distinction to maintain. That's not to say I don't work with the people doing the public programs; but frequently, the way they apply technologies is different, and the demands and concerns that are placed on them are different from the ones I deal with. I think both sides suffer when those roles are just lumped together.

What did we forget to ask you?

This sort of process that you guys are doing is huge. I applaud you for that. It is exactly what needs to happen more.

I'd like to stress the idea that "whatever system you are using is the best system." Even if it's just piles on a desk, if you are interacting with those piles, you know where things are. If you are categorizing things, as long as everyone knows how you categorizing, it's okay. That kind of inter-institutional, inter-department communication is super-important.

So the usefulness of the method is more important than the sophistication of the method?

Exactly! [There's a joke that goes,] "That system works great in practice; but will it work in theory?" What is it we are trying to achieve with all of this conversation? Is it that you want to define standards per se? Is it because you want to display the art well? Is it that you want to improve the communication of these ideas among institutions? Remind yourself of what you want to achieve at the end. I think it's really easy to get bogged down in the specific details, at the expense of the bigger picture. The same is true when understanding all the details that go into the installation of media artworks.