

Fig. 1. Sequence of a horse jumping by Eadward Muybridge, 1887. Image from Wikipedia.

TIME-BASED MEDIA CONSERVATION - PRESERVING SUBJECTIVISM

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Time-Based Media (TiBM) artworks are inherently unstable. Obsolescence of technology and equipment is increasingly growing. Due to the variable nature of these works, changes may occur in different installations of the same artwork. This paper presents some thoughts on how conservators review their traditional approaches to material conservation in order to manage the extent of variation allowed in this kind of artworks. Museums have a decisive role in the extent and quality of TiBM preservation due to the staff and financial necessities these works represent. Brief considerations are made in order to open a discussion that has been spreading in the Western museum communities but needs development in southern countries.

Keywords:

time-based media – conservation – art – original – obsolescence

1. INTRODUCTION

Time-Based Media (TiBM) refers to media that comprise artworks which depend on technology and time to unfold (Phillips, 2015: 168). Installation, video art, recordings of performance, computer art may be comprised in this general definition which refers to artworks that often hold video projections, audio elements or digital programming. For conservation purposes it is an extremely relevant and defining term that forces conservators to consider the temporal dimension, which frequently changes traditional perspectives on preservation approaches. They may also be inserted in installation art as a part of the elements that build the overall artwork. TiBM artworks are inherently unstable. Strongly developed during the sixties and seventies by video artists and accompanying breakthroughs in technology, often non-professional technology, these artworks have defined a moment in the history of art, deriving mostly from conceptual art, performance and experimental film. We can name Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Wolf Vostell and other Fluxus artists as some of the pioneers. As a conservator and registrar working with modern and contemporary art since 2006, I have gained experience and knowledge in these kinds of artworks and their particular needs, which cross traditional conservation ideas with progressive, curatorial based ones and oblige us to develop deep

discussions about preconceived ideas regarding materiality and authenticity.

2. THE SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES OF THE TiBM ART CONSERVATION

Obsolescence of technology and equipment is increasingly growing. Due to the variable nature of these works, changes may occur in different installations of the same artwork. Conservators have had to review their traditional approaches to material conservation in order to manage the extent of variation that is allowed to each distinct installation without compromising the work's identity. The artist's original intention as well as technical and spatial components of the artwork and their correlation must be understood in order to preserve these works. James Coleman and Dan Graham are examples of artists whose pieces I have dealt with, which require certain precision in order to recreate faithful renditions of their works. In these cases, vigorous efforts must be made to preserve their equipment requirements, some of which have now undergone obsolescence (or a growing disappearance of the technical expertise needed to handle them). James Coleman often shows slide projections accompanied by a voiceover. "These slide-tapes emphasize the active participation of the viewer and explore the subjective nature of



Fig. 2. James Coleman, *Slide Piece*, 1972-73, slide projection in continuous cycle, with synchronized audiotape. Images courtesy of Ellipse Foundation.

experience. As Coleman says: “My work is not about true or false realities, it’s about consciousness of shifting realities” (Cooke, 2003: 113). Figure 2 shows an installation shot of one of such works. ‘Slide Piece’ which consists of a projection of slides showing the same image, synchronized with audio. For the artist, it is important that the 35mm slides are not replaced by a digital projection.

On the other hand, there are artists who intend to resist a particular aesthetic, or even technological, social or cultural moment and want their work to unfold through time or to take advantage of technological progress; in these cases we may resort to migration¹ (Fig. 3). For instance, if the artist wishes to convey a certain image with extreme detail, he/she may be interested in new digital high-resolution technologies – James Turrel has ordered an upgrade in the optical projector towards one with sharper edges and focus in his work ‘*Fargo, Blue*’, from 1967, and insisted that he did not consider his work properly installed with the

previous equipment; or, if the artist’s intention is to develop certain interactive behaviors, she/he will also benefit from technological evolution (if they do not regard other particular aspects related to technology as relevant).

Most of the TiBM artworks that I have worked with, however, tend to live in a limbo, in a space between these two approaches. This is either due to the varied components that construct them or from an avoidance of specific perspective from the artists, curators and/or conservators. Nam June Paik’s ‘*Wrap Around the World Man*’ consist of a sculpture comprised of several analog TV sets, some small portable LCD screens, old TV casings and a complex deal of wires (Fig. 4). Paik is known by his evasive discourse towards preservation and substitution of parts and the relevance that he attributed to technology has also been discussed by the community (Harnhardt, 2003: 70-77, van Saaze, 2013: 61-108). With this type of pieces we could choose to maintain the original TV’s as further as possible

¹ Migration: process of upgrading equipment and/or source material to preserve a certain artwork (Ippolito, 2003, pp. 50-52).

but we could also emulate² the experience through placement of LCD's inside TV monitors, allowing us to show the same image and which would probably not be a problem for the artist. "Communication is not a physical or chemical phenomenon nor is it an intrinsic feature of the object; rather, it depends on the subject's ability to derive a message from the object. In contemporary conservation theory, the primary interest is therefore no longer on the objects but rather on the subjects. Objectivism in conservation is thus replaced by certain forms of subjectivism" (Muñoz Viñas, 2012: 147). As Nam June Paik said, one should use one's judgement (van Saaze, 2013: 71). Nonetheless, risks may occur if we move too far from materiality. The concept of a museum risking to 'kill' an artwork is not new regarding conservation ethics, but it is definitely one of the most important ones regarding TiBM preservation. These thoughts open ways to the possibility of a conceptual and/or material evolution for certain artworks or to partial or total loss of the artwork.

3. A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO TiBM CONSERVATION

An artwork without an enclosed significance(s) may present itself as the biggest challenge within TiBM conservation. This leads to a great responsibility when it comes to its future preservation (which, of course, means its exhibition as well). So, in order to care for a TiBM artwork we should preserve: its concrete content (be it a video, a computer file, etc.) through its permanent replication, guaranteeing that the loss is as little as possible; and its ontological content, contacting the artist (whenever possible), as well as having the perspectives of the conservator, the curator and the art historian.

Sometimes, time creates a "falsification" of the artwork (although the material is still the original one) (Mancusi-Ungaro, 2016) and the museum becomes an inauthentic place where 'artworks' are enclosed. As Hito Steyerl (2016) argues, "history invades the

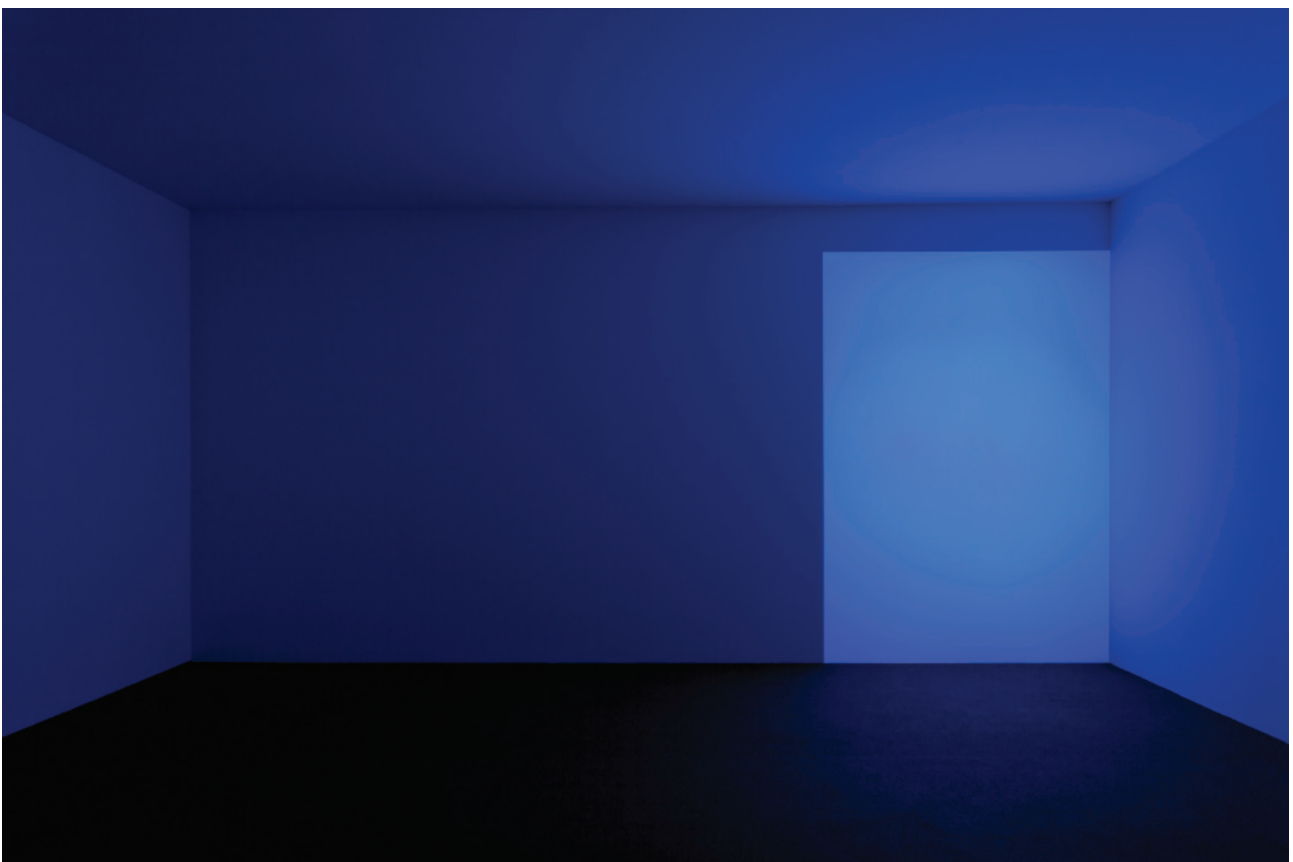


Fig. 3. James Turrel, *Fargo, Blue*, 1967, UID 102-579. Image by David Rato. Courtesy Museu Coleção Berardo.

² Emulation: process of devising a way of imitating the original look of the piece by different means (Ippolito, 2003: pp. 50-52).



Fig. 4. Nam June Paik, *Wrap Around The World Man*, 1990, UID 102-418. Image courtesy of Museu Coleção Berardo.

hypercontemporary. It is not an account of events post factum. It acts, it feigns, it keeps on changing. History is a shape-shifting player, if not an irregular combatant. It keeps attacking from behind. It blocks off any future”. If we do not allow a work to exist or unfold through time, then we are only looking at it as part of History. Reinterpretation³ may serve as a way of not forgetting, yet we must make an effort to preserve the work’s identity. Even with some of the most rigorous installation plans, I have watched changes occur that were instructed by the artist or her/his studio after the work was already installed according to the original instructions. This creates the need to document these changes and noting who made them, as well as the conditions where and why they occurred. Other than that, I have observed, since my first contact with TiBM artworks, that, whenever some aspects regarding installation are missing, people tend to follow a certain tradition, a word of mouth conviction. To enhance this conviction, the artist Tino Sehgal, who refuses to be called a performance artist, denies attributing materiality to his artworks, in whatever forms. He states that a better preservation strategy would be something like this: disabling all owners of keeping records, plans, acquisition documents, video recordings, and every other tangible proof (Gleadal, 2013). Given the examples, we could assume that recording a video of a Sehgal’s performance would not be a good conservation decision, just as it would not be by replacing projectors for James Coleman

Slide Piece (even if we added the sound of the slide shifting images, to emulate the real installation).

4. THE PRACTICAL CONSERVATION OF TiBM

In practical terms, regarding acquisition, the museum must:

- Request media in its original form (or as close to it as possible);
- take care of the artwork’s safeguarding and archival replication;
- guarantee access and fixity;
- maintain respective equipment;
- preserve all the information available about:
 - * original concept
 - * technical production process and formats of the work
 - * parameters of installation and variability
 - * meaning of the devices or technologies for the artwork
 - * exhibition history and iterations
 - * interviews with the author about the aforementioned and about her/his perception of the works unfolding through time, including after her/his death
- requesting other legal documents that testify

³ Reinterpretation: process that allows artworks to be preserved through different interpretations (Ippolito, 2003: pp. 50-52).

Fig. 5. Dan Flavin, *Untitled (Monument to Vladimir Tatlin)*, 1964, white fluorescent lightbulbs. Image by David Rato. Courtesy Museu Coleção Berardo.



ownership and copyright license.

All this will also provide cost estimations for preservation and installation, allowing conservators to identify vulnerabilities regarding medium and equipment.

Considering loans, the decision process must be made by the institution that owns the work (which sometimes agrees to communicate certain loans and/or asks for the artist/studio/gallery's permission and coordination) and the instructions and technical requirements must be clear, with or without an in-house conservator being present on the installation site. All the alterations to this plan require consultation. Details on the final installation must be communicated to the owner and forms filled accordingly (Matters in Media Art, 2015).

5. CONCLUSIONS

⁴ According to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (2015), "Versioning should end with the death of the artist unless you leave specific instructions on what you need your estate to accomplish. (...) Should the collector attempt to preserve the work with a migration path that is egregious and not approved by the artist or estate the title of the work will be automatically void and the artist will be able to sell it again".

We deal, nowadays, with some of the problems through active dialogue with the creators of most of TiBM artworks but, from my point of view (and I do not see one right and absolute answer coming anytime soon) the big question is "who is entitled to determine the changes that are allowed to a work's upgrade or survival kind of change after the artist has died?" (Lozano-Hemmer, 2015)⁴. We have already seen both bad and good decisions (at least, that is how we perceive them now) made by the estate, by the owner or conservation or curatorial departments, and we have also seen some "bad" ones made by the artist herself/himself, which also makes us think of the *protagonism* that we offer the author even years after her/his creation was born. On one side, not respecting the artwork's ontology and fetishizing its original aspects in what concerns materiality, would be a huge mistake for something that depends on updates or replacements to work. Dan Flavin's "Untitled (Monument to Vladimir Tatlin)" (Fig. 5) needs the

replacement of its constituent lamps whenever they burn out.

Even though the available elements are no longer identical to the original, the Studio acknowledges their substitution with what is available in the market. Being that one of the principles of Flavin's artworks is the use of industrial things that can be easily acquired, we perceive this migration like a good conservation decision because it equals the original material in nature. However, if suddenly fluorescent white light-bulbs in this format stopped being produced (which will eventually happen), one could not replace them by new LED ones or other market available alternatives as a successful reinterpretation. Each work necessitates its own thoughtful discussion and that is the key for its ontological stability. On the other side, replacing mechanisms or equipment when these are an absolute part of the artist's intention, like on the aforementioned James Coleman's 'Slide Piece', would be catastrophic.

Quoting Steyerl (2016) again: "More than the artworks themselves, the thing that threatened (...) - be it privatization or overprotection - is public access. But it is public access, to a certain degree, that makes art what it is in the first place, thus necessitating its

conservation. Hence the contradiction: art requires visibility to be what it is, and yet this visibility is precisely what is threatened by efforts to preserve or privatize it." I believe this instability is a prolific gift that makes us think deeply about the preservation and exhibition of art; conservators are not neutral custodians but performers in the sense that their actions have a formatting effect (van Saaze, 2013). Contrary to the scientific conviction bound to traditional conservation practice, that aims to reveal an artwork's truths through the revelation of the original material, contemporary art conservation, and mostly TIBM conservation, cannot depend on the sole analysis of material aspects; it needs an open discussion on its subjectivities. I truly hope that the Museum will be a place where the art market or the fetishization of materiality does not dictate the historical relevance of an artwork nor their fruition on future times, and that the dialogue, research and open discussion are more widespread than ever; because if you're not confused, you're not thinking.

Received: 30 November 2017
Published: 30 November 2019

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