Nam June Paik Museum Symposium

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The DOCAM Project: A Nam June Paik Work as case Study

Montréal Museum of Fine Arts

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Introduction

The DOCAM research Alliance was an initiative of the Daniel Langlois Foundation for art, science and technology, Montréal, following alarming observations on the rapid state of obsolescence of many of the components comprised in the media and technological artworks held in various museum collections.

Moreover, outside from the preservation and restoration issues, the DLF observed that little research and work had been undertaken on the topics of specific documentation, cataloguing and conservation strategies, as well as on the terminology through the description vocabulary of artworks, and finally on the history of technologies used by artists.

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and other partners, the DOCAM Alliance has undertaken, in 2005 a five year (2005-2009) vast multidisciplinary research endeavour whose ultimate objective is to produce tangible lasting results. The various DOCAM partners include universities and museums, which, with the DLF, have created many multidisciplinary research committees that have been delving into the various issues and challenges encountered by museums that hold technological or media artworks in their collections.

1. General Overview

Today museums of modern and contemporary art are facing a number of new challenges that have surfaced with the recent surge in works of art featuring technological components. These works deteriorate as their original elements

break down, and the context of technological development too often eludes specialists and historians. Created during various eras, the works may be analog, digital, mechanical or electronic; they are also often multimedia and include materials that range from machines, software, electronic systems and analog or digital images to traditional (sculpted and pictorial elements) and non-traditional (industrial materials and techniques) mixed media. In fact, cultural institutions are grappling with two types of problems. On the one hand, they must create effective strategies to preserve past works of art featuring technological components. On the other hand, they must record, preserve and understand the technologies through which these works were assembled, with professional rigour as well as an in-depth comprehension of the historical context within which the technologies in question were developed. And these problems are not limited to contemporary art and museums. They are also found in the culture industries, public heritage institutions, and establishments of higher education that have amassed collections of teaching or research materials over the recent decades. This situation becomes much more perplexing when one realizes that curators, art historians and conservators have not been adequately trained to deal with the new problems surrounding the documentation and preservation of works featuring technological, electronic or digital components. Their education in this regard is insufficient, because only a handful of art history and conservation programs in Canada focus on this realm. Numerous research projects are being conducted in the archival management domain on the preservation of electronic documents, but very few such projects exist in the specific field of art history and art conservation. Standards and indeed terminology, through a descriptive vocabulary for such artistic works, are lacking and do not allow for precise and adequate documentation of these works. Historical documentation is generally rare and poorly preserved, and the Centre for Research and Documentation (CR+D) at the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology is one of the few places in the occidental world to document the field of electronic and digital art.

2. Cataloguing Structure

A cataloguing structure for works with technological components is being developed in order to complement current museum collection management systems. Six case studies in cataloguing have been conducted so far, using works selected by the Conservation research committee including a sampling of works that include Janet Cardiff's *Conspiracy Theory* (2002), *Sleepers* (1992) by Bill Viola, *Dervish* (1993-1995) by Gary Hill and *Battements et Papillons* (2006) by Montréal artist Jean-Pierre Gauthier, housed in the collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The remaining case studies have been undertaken from the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts' collection. They are: *In your Dreams* by Montreal artist Gisele Amantea (1994) and *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* by Nam June Paik (1989). In addition, these case studies were undertaken at the same time as the Multi Mimsy database was being migrated to a newer version in each museum. This process allowed the researchers and their assistants to create

new entries into the database, which did not exist before they undertook the work on the case studies and the migration.

3. Nam June Paik's *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* (1989)

More specifically, the work by Paik, which had been acquired through a donation in 1990 by the MMFA, had never been shown to the public, due to a component's malfunction. Hence, the DOCAM case study allowed the MMFA to undertake a major documentation process of the artwork, starting with its retrieval from its casing in which it had been "sleeping" (stored) ever since its acquisition. Photographs of each step of the case study were taken and added into the database. Components and pieces of the artwork were identified, described, as well as their malfunctions, photographed and added into the MM database. Technologist and multimedia artist, Matthew Biederman was consulted and gave a diagnosis of the malfunctions and a prognosis for the solutions to be undertaken to enable an eventual display of the artwork in an exhibition. Biederman even repaired some of the components; the artwork is now working but could not withstand a long exhibition period unless some of the pieces were replaced.[1] The main problem with the obsolescence of the components is that most of them are not accessible on the market anymore. The next step would be to get in contact with the Paik Estate of course, if the final diagnosis prescribed for a migration of some of the artwork's elements. The Museum could not undertake any such work without the Paik Estate's approval.
Finally, once all case studies are completed a cataloguing manual or a *Best Practices Guide* for technological or media artworks will be produced, by DOCAM and offered to the museum community.

Summary of the case study

This paper is a summary of the case study that took place at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts for the Cataloguing Structure Committee of the DOCAM research Alliance. The Nam June Paik case study was realised from May 2007 until the middle of October within the Archives department of the Museum. The research was conducted by Natalie Vanier, cataloguer and Danièle Archambault, registrar and archivist at the Museum, as well as by Émilie Boudrias, research assistant for DOCAM, in collaboration with Dina Vescio.

Objectives of the case study

Firstly, it was important for the Committee to develop a cataloguing structure for artworks containing technological components, and for the long term to build a *Best practices guide* that will ultimately be destined to all museums that hold such works in their collections.

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[1] As a result of the DOCAM case study, *Royal Canadian Mounted Police* is was re-exhibited in the contemporary art galleries of the MMFA, from November 1st until December 9th 2007.

The Paik case study was chosen for the cataloguing issues it raised. The research team wanted to define and describe the technological components and devices of the artwork, as well as detail its historiography thus facilitating its installation for future re-exhibitions. The Committee also wished to use, during its analysis, its usual cataloguing management tool, such as the MIMSY XG database..

Historiography

In 1990, the Museum received as a donation from Esperanza and Mark Schwartz Nam June Paik's *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, a video installation created in 1989. The artwork was installed one time only at the Museum, at the time of its acquisition, and was not accessible to the visitors.

The work is composed of 10 television and radio sets, of an older style, mounted together so as to give the form of cavalier's silhouette. This figure is sitting on a wooden horse and is wearing a hat that reminds us of the official Stetson worn by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Yellow stripes were painted by the artist on the sides if the piece so as to convey the trousers of the RCMP officers. We may also read words in Korean, French, English and Spanish, among which "dream" and "hope".

Paik inserted 11 color CRT (Cathode Ray Television) monitors into the old looking TV and radio sets. These CRT's all transmit images from the same video source, a videodisk containing pictures such as carousel, RCMP officers, the Canadian Flag, while using the aesthetics of the sound produced by the monitors.

Issues at hand

The issues raised by this artwork lie in its limited documentation and the short life expectancy of the monitors. The research team did not have precise details concerning its exhibition conditions, nor concerning the strategies to adopt in case of the audiovisual material's obsolescence. For instance the TV monitors in the artwork are dated between the years 1986 to 1989. Even if they are all working we can suppose that some of the components will become obsolete within a few years.

For this case study, the research team had the idea to draw a very detailed portrait of the actual state of the work. And if the artwork must change within the next few years, the Museum will hold all the details on its health state at a precise date.

Steps undertaken for the artwork's case study

Thus the team embarked on the case study in producing a report on its wrapping, adding details on each piece and component of the work. The equipment and components were divided into different categories, inspired by the typological grid created by DOCAM's Conservation Committee, noting for instance that a

component could be of commercial make, visible to the viewer or if it was modified by the artist. The components and devices were detailed according to their technical aspects as well as according to the changes that may have occurred in the artwork through the years. Each element has been described, photographed and measured. For each TV set/monitor, the name of the maker, the date of manufacturing, the model's number as well as its serial number, were documented. The various migrations of the video sources were also documented.

Once all the data had been collected, the information was treated and organised so it could be found easily in the database. This means that the pertinent fields (or categories) had to be determined in order to include the data, so they would remain coherent within the rest of the collection. When the fields were not available for the description of certain elements, the research team used the field "comment" in order to insert more of their associated data and metadata. It is in these "comment" fields that the artworks' components were detailed, as well as their actual and past states. It also explored sections of the software that had not been used until the case study, by the museum professionals, particularly fields related to the work's history of deterioration. It allowed for the description of the problems encountered when the piece was first mounted after its acquisition.

The installation of the artwork was thus realised for the case study with the Museum's audio visual's technicians. This exercise permitted to draw up a detailed protocol, which included photographs and diagrams, for the future installation of RCMP. This step also gave the team the opportunity to observe the actual state of the monitors, as well as some of the screening problems, and to further identify and document these elements.

Matthew Biederman, an artist and technologist and a DOCAM RA as well, made the adjustments that allowed the remedial of the image's synchronization problems noticed in two of the monitors. It goes without saying that Biederman's actions were well documented. MB also made recommendations concerning the conservation and preservation methods for the artwork, in order to maintain as long a lifespan for the monitors. He suggested to add a « power conditioner » that would allow to convey to the piece a well regulated current to the CRT monitor, as well as replace the 6 "power supplies" used for certain monitors by a better quality AC to DC transformer. Biederman gave some advice on the measures to adopt in order maximize the calibrating of the monitors thus giving a better image quality for future exhibitions. The art conservation department at the Museum will examine these recommendations, shortly. The Museum has also been in contact with Paik's Estate to find out if it holds any archival material on this artwork. Of course, the Museum will also contact the Estate to ask for its authorization, in order to undertake any restoration and conservation actions and endeavours.

Conclusion

To sum up, the case study conducted at the Montréal Museum of Fine arts was a good opportunity to enlighten some of the challenges the Museum faces when acquiring an artwork with technological components. These observations meet some of the conclusions reached by the Variable Media project, i.e. the necessity to detail, in a very precise way, from the acquisition step of an artwork, the parameters for the exhibition of the work as well as the museum's latitude concerning the actions it can undertake regarding its restoration and conservation. This will hopefully allow avoiding possible obstacles for further exhibition enterprises. On the information management plan, linked to the artwork, it becomes profitable to centralize all the data other than having it dispersed in many of the museum's departments. Moreover, it is pertinent to document as thoroughly as possible the changes that occurred in the artwork, the different contexts of presentation of the artwork and its the installations and dismantling, before and after the exhibition. All of these activities comprise a mine of information that makes for a better and deeper understanding of its components and behaviors. This well organized and accessible documentation accessible gives museums professionals the tools to insure the maintenance and the integrity of the artwork, and last but not least its re-exhibition.

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