

Methodological Report

Générique (2001), Alexandre Castonguay. Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
The Table: Childhood (1984-2001), Max Dean and Raffaello D'Andrea. National Gallery of Canada
Unex Sign No.2 (from the Survival Series) (1983-1984), Jenny Holzer. National Gallery of Canada

Submitted to the Cataloguing Structure Committee
DOCAM

Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage

By

Marie-Ève Courchesne, Research Assistant

Research carried out under the supervision of Anne-Marie Zeppetelli (MACM)
and Geneviève Saulnier (NGC)

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
National Gallery of Canada
Autumn 2007 – Winter 2008

Introduction

This report is a summary of work carried out by the research assistant at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) and the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in relation to the participation of these institutions in a research project of the DOCAM (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage) Alliance as part of the Cataloguing Structure Committee. A total of three case studies were completed between late November 2007 and mid-March 2008:

- a) *Générique* (2001), Alexandre Castonguay. Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
- b) *The Table: Childhood* (1984-2001), Max Dean and Raffaello D'Andrea. National Gallery of Canada
- c) *Unex Sign No.2 (from the Survival Series)* (1983-1984), Jenny Holzer. National Gallery of Canada

These case studies were carried out under the supervision of Anne-Marie Zeppetelli, collections archivist at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and Geneviève Saulnier, contemporary art conservator at the National Gallery of Canada.

The primary objective of these case studies carried out under the auspices of the DOCAM project was to develop new methodologies and tools appropriate to conservation and documentation-related issues with regard to artistic practices based on the use of technologies¹. More specifically, the case studies serve to enable identification of the cataloguing practices and tools for works with media and technological components, recommendation of methods for improving these practices and development of a set of essential new tools for documentation and preservation of art works with technological components. Finally, the outcomes of these case studies and previous studies will serve in laying the groundwork for a practical cataloguing guide for use by museums that acquire media and technological works.

During our research assistantship, we focused on producing an exhaustive document describing each work and its components in detail while also outlining the various transformations the work underwent over the course of its presentation. This information will be useful to the various museum departments (archives, restoration, conservation, etc.) in preserving the integrity of works through repeated exhibits and installations.

Methodology

First, we chose to follow the method used by Tommy Lavallée, the previous research assistant at the MACM, that is, to use a hyperlink network that is managed by using a master file [this document is available on the intranet site reserved for use by DOCAM researchers]. We opted for this method due to its user-friendliness and interactivity. The associated procedures are also in keeping with the institutional

¹ DOCAM [online], URL: <http://www.docam.ca/fr/?p=13>, page consulted on March 4, 2008.

culture and practices of the MACM, the organization accommodating us at that time. This hyperlink network, which is managed by using a master file named FICHE_TECH_ARTIST'S NAME, consists of a series of data taken from the collection management tools of the MACM and the NGC (*Mimsy XG*²), supplemented with technical information including setup instructions, restoration history, element-specific information, images of components, etc. The naming of the master file always follows this format. This method is based essentially on exhaustive documentation of the metadata related to the work³.

We also adapted the documentation for this technical record to our needs by creating two new sections setting out additional details about the work. In the first new section, "Elements," we associated each element to a hyperlink with a detailed description of that element. The information provided is divided into several information categories: current or prior state, typology, identification, registration, description, producer, country of production, model, serial number and technical specifications. We based this addition on case studies carried out at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA). Second, we added a "Restoration History" section to the technical record; in our opinion, this information enables a clearer understanding of the transformations that a work undergoes through the years.

However, sharing this hyperlink network among multiple museum departments (restoration, archives, audiovisual, other institutions in the event of loans, etc.) is difficult due to the challenges of managing the great quantity of files contained in each folder and configuring Word and HTML files for printing. To remedy this situation, we produced a hard-copy document in keeping with the format of the document produced during the research assistantship at the MMFA in the summer of 2007 [document drafted by Émilie Boudrias and available on the intranet site reserved for use by DOCAM researchers]. We added an executive summary to this document. We adopted this approach after visiting the website of the Tate Gallery in the United Kingdom. The Tate Gallery prepared documents⁴ of approximately two to three pages each on selected works found in its collection. Each document contains a brief iconographic description and outlines the artist's intentions, primary technical considerations and how the work functions, along with bibliographic references. We took the approach of producing these summary documents because it quickly provides an overall vision of a work while also setting out the most important technical concerns from the readers' point of view. These documents could be drafted either by a curator, an archivist or a cataloguer.

At the end of the hard-copy document, we have also appended the documentation used in carrying out

2 See the website of this database's designer, Willoughby Associates [online], URL: http://www.willo.com/mimsy_xg/default.asp, page consulted on March 12, 2008.

3 See RINEHART, Richard, A system of formal notation for scoring works of digital and variable media art [online], URL: http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about_bampfa/formalnotation.pdf, page consulted on March 6, 2008, and LAVALLÉE, Tommy, L'importance des métadonnées pour une préservation intelligente des œuvres d'art médiatique en milieu muséal [online], URL: http://www.docam.ca/intranet/wp-content/uploads/tlavallee_docam_exercice_theorique.pdf, page consulted on March 6, 2008.

4 See an example concerning a work by Jenny Holzer [online], URL: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=-1&workid=6691&searchid=28047&roomid=false&tabview=text&texttype=8>, page consulted on March 6, 2007.

each case study. These metadata are grouped under four sections: specialized literature, technical information, transcript of artist interview as applicable and visual documentation.

In summary, our research enabled us to:

- a) determine the current state of works and track their history;
- b) identify the specific elements making up each work;
- c) describe how each element works;
- d) gain a better semantic and technical understanding of each work;
- e) facilitate subsequent installations;
- f) make this information more accessible to various museum departments.

The data collated in these case studies could subsequently be copied or linked to the databases of the two institutions taking part in the case studies, in both cases *Mimsy XG*.

Phase 1: Documentary Analysis

First, we carried out bibliographic research on cataloguing practices for media and technological works in general. We did so in order to collect material for reflection and identify possible approaches for changes and improvements in relation to preceding research assistantships.

Next, we analyzed the documentary holdings available at the respective museums. We carefully reviewed all information on archiving, conservation and restoration. Through these studies, we were able to identify gaps in this information, insofar as some files were more complete than others. Based on this documentary analysis, we observed that the current documentation does not contain all of the information required for step-by-step installation of works. The following is a summary of the information consolidated on each work.

Générique (2001), Alexandre Castonguay. Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

- a) The file did not contain setup procedures.
- b) The setup plan for the most recent installation of the work at the MACM was missing from the file and was rather found in the curator's files for the permanent collection. We consequently scanned this setup plan and linked it to our technical record.
- c) The technical specifications were only general and missing detailed information on the elements making up the work and the software, as designed by the artist and his programmer.
- d) The work was restored prior to its most recent installation. However, these changes were not documented in the file. Instead, a single person, the audiovisual production coordinator, held this

information.

- e) Proper visual documentation was available for reference to preserve the integrity of the work during setup.
- f) The work contained a number of technological components subject to deterioration, yet this was not documented.

For this case study, our objective was to draft setup instructions, list the work's components and produce visual documentation of these elements, describe how the work functions, produce a restoration history of the work, indicate which elements were most susceptible to deterioration and document the artist's opinion concerning possible migration and emulation of the work.

The Table: Childhood (1984-2001), Max Dean and Raffaello D'Andrea. National Gallery of Canada

- a) The file did not contain a comprehensive list of elements.
- b) This work is made up of various electrical and electronic components. However, no diagram had been produced to document how the work functions.
- c) Information on the program used to operate the work was only general, and no installation guide had been produced.
- d) The wheels used to enable movement of the work were replaced prior to its most recent presentation; however, this was not officially documented. In addition, the wheels appear to pose a major challenge for this work, in that the table's weight exceeds their capacity. This problem has yet to be resolved.
- e) A condition report was on file and proved to be highly useful in understanding how the work functions.

For this case study, our objective was to draw up a list of the work's components, provide specific information on these components and produce visual documentation, draft setup instructions, collect information on how the work functions from individuals familiar with the work, and produce a restoration history of the work.

Unex Sign No.2 (from the Survival Series) (1983), Jenny Holzer. National Gallery of Canada

- a) This work has undergone multiple transformations over the years. For example, the cassette player used to transmit images and text to the sign was eventually replaced by a laptop computer. The information on these transformations was poorly organized, making overall understanding of the work difficult.

- b) The setup procedures were incomplete and did not take into account the work's various transformations.
- c) Documentation on the work's components was minimal.
- d) Very little visual documentation was available on the components.
- e) The work is currently subject to emulation. Information on this is documented by various departments but has yet to be assembled into a single record.

Our objectives for this case study were consequently to describe the components and their current condition, produce visual documentation, specify how the work functions, assemble documentation on the current emulation in a single record/document, complete the restoration history and finalize setup instructions.

Phase 2: Data Collection

Next, we focused on collecting the data required in carrying out the case studies. We collected missing information from various contact persons (conservator, archivist, technician, and curator) and other information sources (publications, artist websites and other websites of interest, etc.). With these sources, we were able to:

- a) Specify and understand the history of the works through interviews (conservator, archivist, curator and technician).
- b) Understand the evolution of the works over the course of their various presentations through a review of publications and restoration records.
- c) List the components and open the casings of works to understand how they function.
- d) Understand how a work functions by filming an interview with the artist and his technician, for the work by Alexandre Castonguay.
- e) View interviews with the artists and/or appropriate art experts on websites (e.g., DOCAM, the Venice Biennale).
- f) Transcribe the interview filmed with the artist and his technician, for the work by Alexandre Castonguay.

We also sorted the information and grouped it by metadata type: specialized literature, technical specifications, visual documentation or general correspondence. This classification helped us to decide on final organization of the data in the technical records. Overall, the information we collected helped us to gain a better understanding of the technical aspects of each work with a view to drawing up draft

versions of setup instructions.

Phase 3: Setup of the Work

The third phase of our project involved participating in the setup of each work. This phase provided an opportunity to enhance any existing technical documentation on how each work functions while also documenting the current condition of each element. Taking part in the setup of each work also enabled us to produce a comprehensive instruction guide to assist the museum's technical team in understanding the various steps, and in getting each work to function properly. Each instruction guide is to be supported by visual documentation in the form of a video or photographs.

In the case of the work by Castonguay at the MACM, we attended the setup of the work and recorded the entire process on video. Technicians from the MACM were present during setup, making it possible for us to collect information that they alone held (adjustments were made to the program for the last presentation of the work without passing the information on to the collection archivist, and so we took advantage of the opportunity to document the technicians' knowledge). We then edited the video recording and linked it to the technical record. Following setup of the work, the curator, archivist, conservator, audiovisual technician and research assistant collectively interviewed the artist and his technician to supplement the documentation and obtain answers on a number of outstanding issues. This time spent with the artist and his programmer was of particular interest to us, as the resulting conversations were extremely informative and gave us information that we would have otherwise been unable to collect.

Setup of the work by Dean was impossible due to a scheduling conflict between the terms of our contract and the planning of an installation date for the work at the NGC. Please note that to date, the installation date has yet to be finalized.

As with Dean, setup of the work by Holzer was impossible due to a scheduling conflict between the terms of our contract and planning of an installation date for the work at the NGC. Please note that to date, the installation date has yet to be finalized. However, the restoration committee carried out installation of the work in the summer of 2007 to verify its operating status and the condition of its components. A Summary Guide⁵ was produced as documentation of this. We were consequently able to extract a great deal of useful information from this technical guide, which we used to clearly identify the various elements of the work and their condition, as well as the steps in setting up the work in its previous form.

⁵ This Guide was provided to us as a Word document by Ainsley Walton, a member of the restoration department at the NGC.

Phase 4: Structuring of Data

Lastly, we incorporated all data collected during the preceding phases into the technical record and the hard-copy document. These are therefore a synthesis of data extracted from the database and the information we collected. They were produced based on the types of data collated and where they were captured (various fields under the "Authority" and "Activity" sections) in the collection management tool used by the MACM and the NGC, Mimsy XG. The "Description," "Number of Elements," "Comments," "Restoration History," "Publications," "Event" and "Exhibit" fields received particular attention.

What makes the technical records unique is that they can be linked through the hyperlink system to multimedia documents, such as videos and images, that cannot be inserted directly into the Mimsy XG database. We therefore created a link in the technical record for the work by Castonguay to the video recording of the work's setup in the section on the work's documentation. We also included a transcript of the interview with the artist and his programmer in the hard-copy document, under the interview transcripts section for documentation used in carrying out the case study, which we also linked to the technical record.

The hard-copy document and the DVD of the interview and the setup of *Générique* (2001) were also placed in the file for the work in the collection archives of the MACM. We have retained copies of these videos in DVCAM format.

Conclusion/Opportunities for Reflection

In summary, the preservation of works with media and technological components is not solely a task of conservation, storage and restoration. It also entails the documenting and cataloguing of the works, which serve as primary sources of information in the event of inquiries or future installations and presentations. These case studies and the associated cataloguing work must be carried out in the form of detailed investigations and in a spirit of discipline and synthesis. Completion of case studies makes it possible to establish the exact condition of works, identify the elements of works most vulnerable to deterioration, understand how the works function, support subsequent installations and presentations and, in particular, consolidate exhaustive documentation, outlining the evolution of each work since its acquisition. The case studies also provided an opportunity to test the two methods proposed by previous research assistants with regard to organizing data (hard-copy format at the MMFA, technical record at the MACM) and identify any related weaknesses. Finally, our research demonstrated the importance of careful organization of all information relating to works in the collection management tool and, in this regard, making more effective use of certain database fields that have been underutilized to date.

Our participation in the DOCAM Alliance's research project generated a number of opportunities for reflection on current cataloguing practices and ideas for possible improvements. In light of the fact that an entire group of researchers and professionals at DOCAM (not to mention elsewhere in Canada and abroad) have been undertaking reviews of current preservation and conservation practices for works with media components, we naturally tend to agree with many of their conclusions. Nonetheless, we also arrived at a number of conclusions in relation to the specific works we analyzed. In our opinion, the most constructive recommendations applicable to the three types of works we studied are as follows:

- a) Collect information about works and, more specifically, organize it clearly as it is received by the archivist or cataloguer for entry into the database by making better use of certain fields. This documentation should be transparent, accurate and easily updated.⁶
- b) Document in full all restorations made to works with a view to providing a portrait of the evolution of works since their acquisition. In this regard, we suggest raising awareness among employees working outside of archives, including each institution's technicians and curators, of the importance of conveying information on any modifications made to works prior to setup or exhibit. In our opinion, increased cooperation among the various departments would decrease the risk of loss of information or of information being held by a single person, and would also promote and facilitate the documentation of works.⁷
- c) Document setup problems concerning the operation of works as they occur. The fact of maintaining a list of solutions to various technical problems facilitates the subsequent installation of works in that technicians are already aware of any possible technical weaknesses that a work may have.
- d) Outline in detail how the work functions overall, as well as the operation of each of its various components. This makes it possible to evaluate obsolescence and anticipate potential migrations, as well as to understand their intrinsic function and their impact on the evolution of a work.⁸

Together, these considerations demonstrate the great importance of the role of metadata concerning works and of carefully documenting every element, installation, restoration and event in relation to a work in order to maintain an accurate history of its evolution.

6 Expression taken from an article by Alain Depocas titled "Digital Preservation: Recording the Recoding – The Documentation Strategy," 2002.

7 For additional information on cooperation, see, for example, Pip Laurenson's article "The Management of Display Equipment in Time-Based Media Installations," 2005.

8 See the "Condition Report Guidelines" section of the Media Matters project [online], URL: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/loans/resource_conditionreport.shtm, page consulted on March 6, 2008.

References

- DEPOCAS, Alain, Jon IPPOLITO et Caitlin JONES (Directed by), *L'approche des médias variables : la permanence par le changement*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and Fondation Daniel Langlois pour l'art la science et la technologie, Montréal, 2003, [On line], http://www.variablemedia.net/f/preserving/html/var_pub_index.html, consulted November, 2007.
- DEPOCAS, Alain, *Préservation numérique : la stratégie documentaire*, Fondation Daniel Langlois, pour l'art, la science et la technologie, 2002 [On line], <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/f/activites/ArsElectronica/imprimante.html>, consulted December, 2007.
- DOCAM, Comité conservation, *Grille typologique d'œuvres*, [On line],: <http://www.docam.ca/intranet/wp-content/uploads/grille-typologique-dœuvres.pdf>, consulted January, 2008.
- DURANTI, Lucinda, *Preserving Authentic Electronic Art Over The Long Term*. Interpases, 2004, [On line], <http://www.interpases.org/book/index.htm>, consulted December, 2007.
- ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), *Glossary*, [On line],: <http://www.eai.org/resourceguide/glossary.html>, consulted February, 2008.
- FAUCONNIER, Sandra et FROMMÉ, Rens, *Capturing Unstable Media: Summary of research, V2_*, Institute for the Unstable Media, 2003, [On line], <http://capturing.projects.v2.nl/summary.html>, consulted November, 2007.
- HANSEN, Brad, *Digital Media Knowledge Base*, [On, line], http://www.hansenb.pdx.edu/DMKB/dict/search_key.php, consulted November, 2007.
- INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARTS PRESERVATION, *EAI Online Resource Guide for Exhibiting, Collecting & Preserving Media Art*, 2006, [On line], <http://resourceguide.eai.org/preservation/installation.html>, consulted December, 2007.
- LAURENSEN, Pip, « Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations », *Tate Papers*, Autumn 2006, [On line], <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm>, consulted December, 2007.
- LAURENSEN, Pip, « The Management of Display Equipment in Time-based Media Installations », *Tate Papers*, Spring 2005, [on line], <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05spring/laurenson.htm>, consulted December, 2007.
- LAVALLÉE, Tommy, *L'importance des métadonnées pour une préservation intelligente des œuvres d'art médiatique en milieu muséal*, [On line], http://www.docam.ca/intranet/wp-content/uploads/tlavallee_docam_exercice_theorique.pdf, page consultée le 6 consulted March, 2008
- NATIONAL INITIATIVE FOR A NETWORKED CULTURAL HERITAGE (the NINCH), *The NINCH Guide to Good Practice in the Digital Representation and Management of Cultural Heritage Material*, États-Unis, 2002, [On line], <http://www.ninch.org/guide.pdf>, consulted December, 2007.
- POISSANT, Louise, (dir), *Dictionnaire des Arts Médiatiques*. Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1997.
- REAL, William A., "Toward Guidelines for Practice in the Preservation and Documentation of Technology-based Installation Art", *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, Volume 40, Number 3, Article 4, 2001, p. 211 à 231, [on line], http://aic.stanford.edu/jaic/articles/jaic40-03-004_3.html,

consulted January, 2008.

RINEHART, Richard, *A system of formal notation for scoring works of digital and variable media art*, [On line], Adresse URL : http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about_bampfa/formalnotation.pdf, consulted March, 2008.

RINEHART, Richard, *Bien fixer les éléments d'information : L'art numérique et la propriété intellectuelle*, Réseau canadien d'information sur le patrimoine (RCIP). 2006, [On line], http://www.rcip.gc.ca/Francais/Propriete_Intellectuelle/Fixer_Elements/index.html, consulted December, 2007.

TATE RESEARCH, *Inside Installations: The Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art*, [On line], http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/nauman/home_1.htm, consulted January, 2008.

TATE RESEARCH, *Media Matters, Collaborating towards the care of time-based media*, [On line], <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/>, consulted January, 2008.