From here to eternity: Experimental and creative approaches to collecting and distributing new media art within regional arts organisations

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Abstract

This paper is an overview and analysis of preliminary research undertaken for the creation of a framework for collecting and distributing new media art within regional art galleries in the U.K. From the 1960's practitioners have experimented using computers, and the art-form has evolved into multiple strands of production, presentation and distribution. But are we, as collectors, researchers, artists and enthusiasts facing an uncertain future concerning the integration of new media art into institutional cultural organisations? Recently, concerns have been raised by curators regarding the importance of learning how to collect new media art if there is to be any hope of preserving its past. A fear of the unknown of experimental models of curatorial activities such as collecting, preservation and documentation seems to be a barrier to some mainstream, university and municipal galleries when acquisitioning new artworks into their collections, while methods of distribution using new media platforms are still at a very experimental stage. This paper explores that by collaboration, experimentation and the sharing of knowledge and resources, these concerns may be conquered to preserve and make new media art accessible for future generations to enjoy and not to lament over the obsolescence of what it once was.

Keywords

New media art, collecting, documentation, distribution, access, collaboration, experimentation, innovation, networks

Introduction

The introduction of the catalogue that accompanied the pioneering *Cybernetic Serendipity* international exhibition from 1968, curated by Jasia Reichardt, reveals how far technology has progressed in almost fifty years: '*Cybernetic Serendipity* deals with possibilities rather than achievements, and in this sense is prematurely optimistic. There are no heroic claims to be made because computers have so far neither revolutionised music, nor art, nor poetry, in the same way that they have revolutionised science'. [1] However, those 'possibilities' noted by Reichardt have evolved into achievements and mobile technology that could only be imagined and portrayed in the context of science fiction all but fifty years ago; the use of computers and networks have allowed for mass distribution and seemingly endless possibilities

Websites and social media platforms have become online galleries for the presentation and distribution of new media art affording a huge audience reach. According to statistics website *Statista.com* it is projected that by 2020 there will be almost three billion users of social media creating global media culture, whether that be sharing images, blogs, music or art online. But what would happen to this ongoing documentary of the world community if social media sites decided to call it a day or Google ceased to exist? How many artistic creations and collaborations would be lost in cyberspace? With consumers becoming ever-more dependent and aligned to all things networked and digital, which of course makes for easily accessible distribution channels, it is imperative for galleries and institutions to be unafraid of the integration of new media art into their programming and collections to engage with both physical and digital audiences. Although it is generally acknowledged that the medium does pose numerous challenges to curators and exhibition staff, the omission of new media artworks in recent art history books has more than highlighted this issue.

Through the collaborative work of researchers such as Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, co-founders of CRUMB, (*Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss*), forward thinking curators Steve Dietz and Christiane Paul, artists Cory Archangel and Casey Reas and arts organisations, such as the V&A and the Guggenheim, there is an awareness of new media art within contemporary and traditional art organisations which has led to experimental models of curation and collecting. For example, in 2010, the innovative, collaborative project *Current: an experiment into collecting Digital Art* was initiated by the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, a municipal gallery in Preston, UK, which I will discuss and examine later in this paper. As Graham accurately points out 'One of the significant differences between new media and other kinds of art is that the same set of new media are used for both the art itself and the interpretation, exhibition or collections management.' [2] These notable differences can be a cause of concern for the purposes of documentation to preserve the artworks' longevity.

However, research undertaken by organisations such as the *Variable Media Network* which emerged from the Guggenheim Museum's efforts to strategise the preservation and associated activities of curation of its new media art collection aim to combat these concerns. The intention is 'to establish a process and means to address artworks created across a variety of media and materials, to determine protocols and initiatives that will bring a flexible approach to the preservation of a range of creative practices'. [3]

This paper will examine the experimental and alternative models of collecting, documenting, distribution and preservation of new media art from an interdisciplinary perspective, by mainstream and grassroots organisations, with the intention of banishing the myths that it is problematic, costly and unworthy of collecting. Cultural institutions cannot afford to ignore new media art as it will alienate their future, technical-savvy visitors and curb the reach of their virtual audience. Although some municipal, university and mainstream institutions seem to struggle with even the subject of new media art, artists and some curators are finding ever more innovative ways of creating, collecting, documenting and distributing artworks. Artists are aware of their audience demographic and take advantage of the often free, digital and online channels and platforms available. Occasionally even the distribution is an integral concept of the artwork. In order to understand the integral components that the curation of new media art entails, I will break them down into four sections for the purpose of this paper: Distribution, documentation, preservation and collecting. I intend to do this by examining experimental models that have gone on to be employed by various organisations and artists alike.

Experiments with creative and innovative models of collecting and distribution with Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art will further the analysis of this research. NGCA is a small regional gallery in the North East of the U.K. with a focus on commissioning and exhibiting while collecting works from exhibiting artists. NGCA will stand to benefit from this research with the aim of developing distribution networks, keeping costs to a minimum, and a clear collecting remit written within the collections development policy.

Distribution

With so many diverse and distinct methods of distribution it could be considered that the way in which artworks are made accessible is part of the making process and central to the artworks' integrity. Through the course of research undertaken so far, creative and cost-effective models have been identified, such as the *MulengaMojis* which digital artist Emily Mulenga employs. This model takes up no physical space -an important factor for an emerging artist as it is cost- free. (Ironically her 2017 *Firstsite* exhibition was titled *Taking Up Space*). She makes her new artworks accessible for one hour to allow collectors to download using Vimeo, Drop Box and Weshare. Does this limit the reach or make them more attractive to collect as they have a limited availability?

Another economical approach of distribution is operated by *little man*, based in Liverpool, U.K. who borrows space for non-exhibitions. That is to say that artist exhibitions are installed, documented and taken down in a single day without ever opening to the public, they can only be viewed through the littllemangallery.com website or by using Instagram. Created by Gabrielle la Puente and Michael Lacey, *little man* allows artists and curators to develop their practice in an exhibition context without burdening themselves with the logistics of accessing and opening spaces, or the unnecessary social pressures common to artist-led activity. Their belief that engaging with art online is now common practice and that many art enthusiasts view exhibitions on the internet as opposed to physically visiting these exhibits. This in itself finds artists most engaged and supported by their audience within their social media following. Cynically this could be perceived as giving up on the physical art experience. Or is it making the artist and their work more accessible when they would not have ordinarily been given the opportunity to stage a physical exhibition? This model allows for a high turnover of artworks to be displayed and thus made accessible.

Due to the *little man* model's advantage of quick and logistically light installation, programming for a similar model within the physical gallery space at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art is being undertaken, where an audio visual 'drum' or viewing module can be utilised for the display of one artwork at a time. As it has multi-purpose functionalities for viewing AV works and pre-installed projection equipment, NGCA has the advantage of quick installation. The aim is to make new media artworks from the NGCA collection accessible for short periods of time with supporting publicity using their social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr and YouTube, while considering the reproduction rights of the artist. Some artists are open to their works being publicised using these platforms but there is a risk that the works can be manipulated and then distributed while the original intent of the artist is lampooned, or completely diminished. The *MulengaMoji* model will be considered with the intention of making the

artworks from the collection accessible to an online audience. Engagement will be captured and analysed to assess its suitability for the distribution of artworks from the NGCA collection.

Following on from accessing artworks digitally, the s[edition] platform allows users to create a collection using digital editions, which they compare to a 21st century version of silk screen and woodcut printing. Any digital display device can be used for display. Similar to physical art, the artworks can be sold on to other collectors using the *Trade* platform. A Tracy Emin edition can be purchased for £62.00 making the artworks accessible to collectors with limited funds. s[edition] have gone to great lengths to establish fixed rules and practices to ensure a fair trading platform. For example, collectors are not free to do with the artwork as they wish. It cannot be downloaded further, it must be streamed to the application only which does raise questions and concerns of ethics and authenticity where networked and digital distribution is employed. How far can the artwork be replicated? Can it be altered? Artists such as Corey Arcangel positively encourage the replication, modification or manipulation of their works while others such as Phil Collins insist on the exact specifications of display and situation as originally prescribed by him, the artist. While some believe it to cheapen the integrity and monetary value of their work, for others, distribution is an integral component of their work: Seth Price, in his artwork *Dispersion* (2002-), which takes the form of an historical essay, considers that there must be evidence or knowledge of an artwork in order for it to be considered art, therefore without a method or methods of presenting to an audience, how could an artwork be classified as such without ever being viewed?

The Museum of London recently ventured into a new model of exhibition distribution by collaborating with London based grassroots art collective furtherfield. The 2017-18 exhibition *City Now, City Future* staged at the Museum was the result of a collaborative project with furtherfield whose focus is on arts and media community involvement projects. By working reciprocally with an organisation who have the relationships, tools and knowledge in place to distribute artworks digitally, the Museum of London benefitted as they reached a new audience rather than that of the physical museum visitor or snippets of the exhibition being uploaded to the institution website. Furtherfield also promote knowledge distribution between institutions by working with a new stream of curators who then go on to work in mainstream institutions. From a researcher's perspective, it would be interesting to investigate the effect this has on the modes of curation of mainstream institutions as to whether the new curators with 'grass roots' training use their

experience to engage with an audience not usually connected with a more 'formal' organisation. When compared to the training fledgling curators experience when working with organisations such as furtherfield, commercial gallery owner, Jonathan Carroll states that he sells to the art institutions which tend to be more adventurous in their approach to collecting. He also acknowledges that the approach of some institutions has changed dramatically. He credits this to the new tranche of institutional curators who have grown up with digital technology and art and therefore a natural choice for new acquisitions.

The most prevailing form of distribution and making accessible new media artworks by institutions is by the use of an online database, an excellent example of this can be found at the V&A website which feature images and full documentary records of each artwork. This is followed by collaborative projects between institutions and organisations such as the furtherfield/ Museum of London project or the Harris experiment. Loaning artworks out to other institutions where the building has the correct environmental conditions and security measures in place also ensure artworks become accessible by a wider audience. The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, is currently researching ways into making the collections accessible by the use of new mobile media. While this appears to be a relatively new experiment for institutions, artists already employ these sustainable and far-reaching methods. Institutions may take note of artists like Emily Mulenga and her *MulengaMojis* from 2012 to experiment with innovative distribution methods by the use of new media.

Preservation strategies

While it is acknowledged that new media art is commissioned, created and exhibited (the genre features in more than one hundred specialised festivals and two hundred biennales internationally) it has not made significant inclusion into the collections of museums, galleries or private collections. One of the anxieties of curators is how to preserve not only the artwork which can be process oriented, time-based and networked, but the ever evolving hardware that is integral to the work. As Andrea Lissoni, Senior Curator of International Art (Film) at Tate, illustrates: 'In a digital landscape the environment is made of data, and how we preserve these data is a big question. This is going to be a big challenge, because so many works are now conceived as a part of something that changes'. [4]

To try and combat the 'big challenge' addressed by Lissoni, experimental preservation techniques are being tried and tested by means of case studies on artworks belonging to the Guggenheim Collection by the *Variable Media Network*. To understand the needs of each

artwork, each physical component becomes a case study which is broken down into four main strategies of preservation:

- Storage and collecting (hardware)
- Emulation (recreation of operation systems- NOT the artworks itself)
- Migration (is it possible to present on an alternative platform?)
- Reinterpretation (is it possible to transfer to an alternative technological framework?)

The approach invites creators to imagine how an artwork might be translated into a new medium in the future once its current medium expires and to define their work independently from the medium, thus promoting the longevity of the artwork. The migration and reinterpretation strategies could prove problematic, as the original intent of the artist must be carefully considered. By testing and sharing the results of artworks with varying behaviours, comparisons can be made against those with similar behaviours to promote a future for artworks not previously tested in this way. This demonstrates that although the solution to preservation appears at first complex and daunting, by working methodically through each issue, solutions can be found and documented for future use. By working alongside the creator or artist, museum and media professionals can imagine potential futures for artworks to successfully be integrated in to a collection using tried and tested methods.

Documentation

Archival specialist, Annet Dekker, sums up the position most curators are faced with in her 2014 paper *Assembling traces, or the conservation of net art:* 'Artists and museums are trying to document or conserve net art. In spite of all these efforts the reality is that many net artworks have already been deleted by their creators, are dysfunctional due to out-dated software and network changes, or are unable to perform because of incomplete hardware or hardware that has become obsolete'. [5] As the characteristics of a new media artwork are variable and not permanent or fixed, identifying the work's behaviours and strategies can assist curators and conservators in advancing the preservation of the work.

Even wall labels have recently become a bone of contention; due to the minimal amount of disruption they are intended to cause the nature of their singularity is detracting from the intensive labour, collaboration, technician-ship, and programming from a whole team that contribute to the finished product, rather than the noting of one artist name. Along with Andrea Lissoni's observation on the environment of data and how to preserve it, *Variable Media Network* Co-ordinator, Jon

Ippolito was so concerned about the negative influences of the supposedly innocuous wall label that he waged war with them in his 2008 article *Death by Wall Label* warning 'The gravest threat to the cultural survival of new media art may very well be its wall label' [6a] arguing that the fixity that a wall label imparts, for digital culture, means death. Ippolito reinforces this point by stating 'It is important to convey the behaviour of these works, rather than their material, in wall label or caption…nevertheless, this shorthand should be able to telescope when more detail is required, with the understanding that the second part of the medium line may vary with the version of the work'. [6b]Whereas the accepted norm is to use wall labels, former art museum director, Rudi Fuchs chose to show only the name of the artist and the year in which the artwork was made for his 2017 exhibition, *Excitement,* of Dutch contemporary artists at the Stedelijk. His decision was motivated by the desire for visitors to view at their own pace and have the freedom to get a feeling for the artworks themselves, not to make sure the label matched the artwork and then move on as is so often the case. Fuchs also believes the artworks do not need a title as many of them are 'untitled' anyway.

The difference between the accompanying documentary labels while viewing an artwork and the documentation required for behind-the-scenes curatorial necessity are distinctively contrasting. A key member of the *Variable Media Network*, Curator and Conservationist, Caitlin Jones, argues that the centrality of documentary evidence when writing history is invaluable. Her 2008 paper *Surveying the state of the art (of documentation)* states 'Documents related to an artwork can provide us with invaluable information about the production, provenance, exhibition and evolution of the work throughout its life and into the future, and curators, conservators and other researchers rely on it heavily'. She goes on to explain '…because it provides information such as the original technological context or artist's intent, it's unfortunate that due to a lack of consistent documentation in the past, we know far too little about many of the landmarks works of new media.' [7] So, regrettably, while they are not trained to check for the presence of integral components of the artworks, condition checkers will search for flaws in the artworks.

By the use of factual and evaluative documentation, complete checks can be made to reassure curators of preservation strategies for individual artworks. During a residency at the Daniel Langlois Foundation in 2007, Jones and Media Arts Specialist, Paul Kuranko, surveyed the many documentation models currently use individual case studies of individual artworks, including physical models proposed by the DOCAM *(Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage)* Project and theoretical models raised in discussions by CRUMB. Although it was never the

intention to propose a new model, the *Variable Media Questionnaire* used a questionnaire to gather information from artists and by conducting a series of documentation case studies three distinct phases of documentation were identified:

- Collection and Creation- data gathered on the conceptual, technical and experiential nature of the work
- Arrangement- the structure of the archival arrangement of the work
- Description and Access- components of artwork and the relationship to the collection as a whole and how the work can be accessed physically or digitally

Collecting

An excellent starting point and another example of the case study approach of experiments and collaborations between collecting institutions, arts agencies and artists is the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, (UK) whose collections include fine art, costume, textiles and archaeology. The Harris is a local authority museum and art gallery which collaborated with a local arts charity to produce *Current: an experiment into collecting Digital Art* in 2010. Curator at the time, Lindsay Taylor, in Graham wrote 'that the aim of the project was twofold: to celebrate innovative and creative use of digital media technology and to undertake a practical case study for the collection and integration of digital artworks into existing permanent collections'. [8] By understanding the principles for future and experimental collecting from a traditional, municipal perspective, this model could be translated to a university gallery such as NGCA.

Following research into the Harris' Collections Development Policy I was led to a Scoping Report written by specialist visual arts advisor, Wendy Law, commissioned by the Harris in 2009. The purpose of the report was 'to support the Harris in developing a nationally significant collection of new media work and to be undertaken in conjunction with the Harris' overall collecting policy, with new media acquisitions being integrated with existing contemporary and historic collections'. [9] The aims and objectives of the 2006 Arts Council England *Turning Point* long-term strategy to build on existing investment and the success and impact of contemporary visual arts were incorporated into the Scoping Report which was an appendix to the Collections Development Policy at that time. The new media art collection is now housed within the Photography collection which suggests that collecting new media art is still very much in its infancy.

The experiment proved successful with positive and encouraging feedback from visitors and in 2012 was followed by *Digital Aesthetic 2*, a multi-site exhibition, website and conference curated in partnership between the Harris and the University of Central Lancashire. The *Current* exhibition curator, Lindsay Taylor, has expertise in curating exhibitions and developing public collections of contemporary art, particularly in areas currently under represented in museum collections nationally. Taylor was the curator at the Harris for the duration of the *Current* project and invited professionals from Computer Arts Society, FACT and Tate to be part of the expert panel who would eventually select the artwork to be included in their collection. The chosen artwork was by Thomson and Craighead, *The distance travelled through our solar system this year and all the barrels of oil remaining*, 2011, which made use of a live internet data stream and tackled environmental issues. Support from the Contemporary Art Society and other agencies demonstrate the success of the project as its legacy lives on and is acknowledged on the museum website that photography, film and video are being used increasingly in contemporary art practice. Taylor is now Curator at the University of Salford Art Collection and has acknowledged in the Collections Development Policy that there is a digital gap in museum collections- often due to concerns about the longevity of the technology required to experience the artwork. As a university it is part of their responsibility to pioneer the collecting of difficult work, to take risks and to find ways of conserving digital artworks, as part of the focus of debate and the evolving cultural infrastructure and landscape. The text below is taken directly from the University of Salford Art Collection Forward Plan 2015-2018:

We are now living in a digital world, and it is important that our art collection reflects some of the excellent artworks made by artists either about, or using digital technologies. This gap is recognised in the North West's regional museums' collections – often due to concerns about the longevity of the technology required to experience the artwork. As a university it is part our responsibility to pioneer the collecting of difficult work, to take risks and to find ways of conserving digital artworks, as part of the focus of debate and the evolving cultural infrastructure and landscape. [10]

This strategy could certainly apply to the Collections Development Policy of NGCA as the gallery has given first UK shows to artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Cory Arcangel several years prior to other galleries acknowledging recognition of the artist. As the gallery commissions work it also collects from the commissioned artists and has a volume of photographic prints as well as new media artworks of various mediums by Graham Dolphin, Dan Holdsworth and Simon Martin. As NGCA comes under the umbrella of Sunderland Culture which also includes National Glass Centre and Sunderland Museum, its specific collecting remit reflects the gallery's commitment to exhibiting and collecting innovative, experimental art.

An interesting model of both collection and distribution was used at the William H. Van Every and Edward M. Smith Galleries at Davidson College, North Carolina, USA. The common university model of display is employed where artworks can be found in campus buildings and loaned to other institutions but recently a giant video wall, usually used for lectures and presentations has found itself the home of new media art by contemporary digital artists initially selected by members of the Art Collection Advisory Committee. The unusual acquisition process involved discussion by gallery interns and stories shared about their favourite artworks which led to public votes on which to acquire. The goal was to foster a sense of community involvement in the acquisition process while celebrating the unique contributions of each artist and work. The Galleries initiated a *Give Campus Campaign* which raised just over $7,500 to acquire ten new artworks for the collection. The collection ranges from sixteenth century woodcut prints to the new media artworks recently included into the collection, demonstrating that integration is possible by use of an experimental and innovative approach.

Summing up and concluding

Collaboration between institutions, transference, distribution of knowledge and an open mind to experimentation are conducive to the integration into collections and henceforth the preservation of new media art. As there are many diverse organisations with their own approaches to collecting, preservation, documentation and distribution it is inevitable that there will be no 'one size fits all' model to inform each of the activities associated with promoting the longevity of new media artworks. Although some collecting institutions appear apprehensive when considering acquisitioning new media art, due to the testing of more experimental and innovative curatorial practices, anxieties can be overcome. It is true that knowledge, funding, equipment and physical space are integral and essential factors to achieving successful collecting but the evidence outlined in this paper advocates that it can be achieved. If we consider the commitment of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation to innovation, experimentation and collaboration, this model can be tailored to the requirements of smaller, regional arts organisations:

Committed to **innovation***, the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation* **collects, preserves** *and interprets modern and contemporary art, and explores ideas across cultures through dynamic curatorial and educational* **initiatives and collaborations.** [11]

Taking into account Steve Dietz's categorisation of the three characteristics of new media art, of *computability, interactivity* and *connectivity,* it is evident that the title *new media art* has become an encyclopaedic term for an ever expanding and evolving range of creativity and artistic practice. By exploring experimental and innovative practices and having an open minded and progressive approach to curatorial activities, this paper has demonstrated that concerns around the assumed complexity of collecting, and distribution can be alleviated. By collecting important data and detailing of thorough documentation we can strive to keep new media, digital and networked art from disappearing into obsolescence.

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