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Reconstructing the Forgotten: An Exhibition of 1970s and 1980s Video Installations, Re-staged with Authentic Technology

Joanna Phillips

Fig.1 Chérif & Silvie Defraoui
La Traversée du siècle II 1988
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I am a conservator working for the interdisciplinary research project AktiveArchive. We have been commissioned by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture to investigate questions relating to the preservation, documentation and accessibility of electronic art and to convey our discoveries to the museum professionals who are involved with Swiss contemporary art collections.

AktiveArchive is based at two institutions, the Swiss Institute for Art Research in Zürich and the Berne University of the Arts, with two team members at each institution.

The term electronic art embraces a wide range of diverse art genres such as video art, technology-based installation art, computer art, net art and sound art. In order to learn more about the specific demands of these different art forms, we have established a number of focused projects around them. Over the course of the project's five-year duration, we have on the one hand concentrated on analogue video and video installations, but have also studied digital art forms such as net art and sound art.

As part of the Replication Workshop, I would like to introduce one of our major initiatives, an exhibition project that involves the reconstruction and presentation of early Swiss video installations and tapes from the 1970s and 1980s. Our exhibition concept is extraordinary and controversial, because the historic video installations will be installed by means of their authentic technology or – if the original equipment does not exist any more – with equipment from the time of the work's creation.

Indeed, the dilemma of preserving ephemeral works of art is taken to a further level when it comes to video installations. Their electronic components are not only subjected to material wear and decay, but also suffer from rapid obsolescence, depending on the video format and devices employed. As soon as a format becomes outdated, spare parts will cease to be available and devices cannot be repaired or replaced any more. Owing to the rapid development of media technology, video installations have commonly been considered as variable and have undergone many changes in their appearance during their exhibition history.

Today, being confronted with contemporary versions of early video installations can sometimes be very irritating for the historically informed viewer. The range of curatorial interpretations can fatally influence the appearance and authenticity of a video installation, if the original appearance, historic and spatial context, as

well as the artists' intent at the time of creation, are not thoroughly researched. Without this research, it is impossible to distinguish between variable and non-variable, constituent parts of an art work.

Depending on a defined degree of variability, video installations can have an element of replication or reconstruction every time they are re-installed in a different space or at a later time. This is especially the case with the video installations we have selected for the exhibition, since most of them are in an incomplete, fragmentary or even non-existent state. This is due to several reasons: early video art was not recognised yet by the established art world. It was staged at festivals or small galleries and was rarely collected by museums. Until today, many of the works are still owned by the artists themselves. Therefore, their condition and completeness is dependent on the conscientiousness and diligence of the artists and how much they invested in the storage, care and documentation of constituent parts.

Even when video installations did find their way into a museum or private collection, the electronic devices were rarely considered as parts of the work. If they were acquired with the installation, they were often disposed of at a later date and replaced by contemporary museum technology.

Major initiatives, such as the Variable Media Network or the subsequent DOCAM project, are suggesting a media-independent preservation approach and promote the constant migration of obsolete formats to contemporary technologies, if the artists' intent so allows. Since the functionality of the devices is a key for conveying an art work's idea and concept, it will not be necessary to upgrade the technology over the course of time. But the extent to which the historic appearance of a work should be compromised requires some further consideration.

In many cases – and this applies especially to the early works – video art is poorly documented. Moreover, some of the installations to be shown at the exhibition have not been on display since their time of creation and, in some cases, had been forgotten.

We are aware that this elaborate project does not offer a sustainable preservation strategy. We are rather aiming to provide an art historical, topical review of the Swiss video pioneers, with a faithful display of the works in order to bring them back to memory and at last document them thoroughly. By way of illustration, I shall be presenting four different cases of reconstruction involving video installations of René Bauermeister, Chérif & Silvie Defraoui, Jean Otth and Hannes Vogel.

As most of the artists are elderly, but still alive, this might be the last chance to gain and secure valuable information on the works. Together with the artists, we have selected the installations and evaluated published and unpublished documentation material. The histories of exhibition and presentation forms were researched for a better understanding of which components and devices are still existent or missing and requiring replacement. Historic playback devices and monitors will be provided by the AktiveArchive collection of reference devices, or will be purchased. After the exhibition, the devices will return to the AktiveArchive collection. The exhibition will take place at the Kunstmuseum Luzern and opens on 15 March 2008.

Questions we are facing/problems we have been posed:

1. How will the dated devices survive an eight-week exhibition duration? How many extra devices can we provide for replacement in case of failure?
2. Will installations with rare or delicate devices be subjected to a restricted operation time?
3. How elaborate will the maintenance of the old devices be during the exhibition?
4. How will the visitor be informed about what is original and what is reconstructed?
5. Do the reconstructions count as originals?