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Keeping New Media New

Conservators are rushing to keep pace with technology as they find ways to extend the working lives of art made with code, VHS tapes, and other rapidly changing platforms

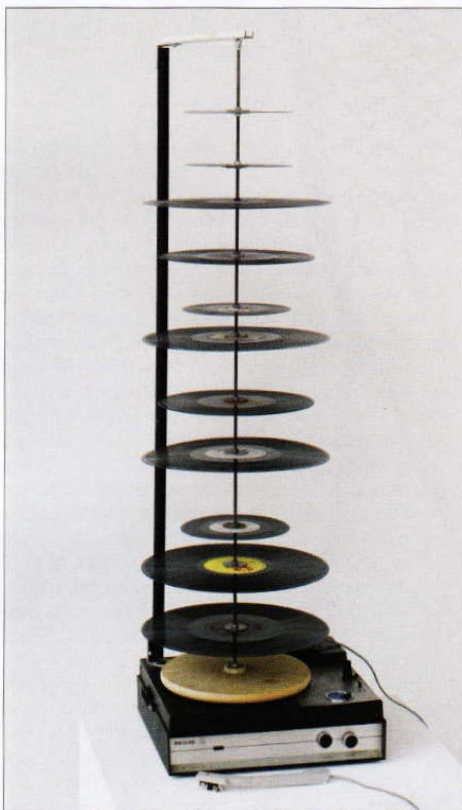
BY RACHEL WOLFF

In our increasingly tech-addled world, the 2010s are proving to be something of a turning point. By and large, the last 50 years of technology have been forced into retirement, superseded by better, cheaper, and faster tools. Analog television went dark in 2009 in favor of digital communications, and cathode-ray tubes (or CRTs) live mostly as relics on eBay. VHS tapes gave way to laser discs; laser discs to DVDs; DVDs to Blu-rays, which almost immediately yielded to pure data. And our computer and Internet systems have evolved well beyond their slow and buggy progenitors (not to mention Ray Bradbury and Philip K. Dick's wildest dreams). The technicians trained in dealing with such recently outdated modes of technology are becoming increasingly rare, too.

This can bestow on new media work—much of which was designed to be ephemeral in the first place—a certain aura of mortality. Like an overtaxed laptop, a decade-old MySpace account, or a first-generation LCD flat screen, the natural fate of most new media art would be to flatline and die. But what turns out to be exciting is the creative way in which artists, curators, and conservators have been navigating new media art's afterlife—be it via a commemorative plaque, a spiffy new operating system, or a 2.0-type clone.

"Art is just one professional field that is trying to grapple with the preservation of digital and new media

Rachel Wolff is an art writer, editor, and film producer based in Brooklyn, NY.



ABOVE Nam June Paik, *Random Access (Schallplattenschaschlik)*, 1963/1979, record player with lengthened axis, records, and moveable pick-up arm. OPPOSITE Paik's *Untitled (robot)*, 2005, undergoing conservation.

THIS PAGE: PAIK: ANNETTE WAPSCHEWICH; MUSEUM NUMBER: ART. NAM JUNE PAIK. ISTOCK/COUSTES/VEHBI/KCC FOUNDATION. ISTANBUL. ON LOAN TO THE NEES MUSEUM, NUREMBERG. OPPOSITE: GEORGINA GOODENBERG/COUSTES/SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART INSECURE WASHINGTON, D.C.

CRISTIN TIERNEY



material," says Richard Rinehart, director of the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University. With fellow digital trailblazer Jon Ippolito, Rinehart has penned what will be the first book dedicated to the subject of conserving new media art, *Re-collection: New Media, Art, and Social Memory*. It is due to be released by MIT Press in the spring.

"Archives, libraries, government agencies, universities—they're all grappling with the same problem," Rinehart adds. "We need to reach out to these other fields to inform us, to tell us how to do this stuff. The flip side is that the art world has a very unique way of thinking about media. And when it comes to new media, I think that the art world has an intellectual toolkit at its disposal that can make an interesting contribution to the digital preservation conversation on a broader scope."

It starts with understanding the ways in which artists and curators think about the artworks themselves. "These are more or less living artworks—they have a pulse," says Michael Mansfield, associate curator of film and media arts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Mansfield, who oversees the museum's new media conservation efforts, helped organize the recent exhibition "Nam June Paik: Global Visionary." "It's interesting to consider the model built by zoos for living organisms," says Mansfield. "That they have a life cycle and you document that life cycle as best you can. And then, when they're gone, you use that research to inform the next generation of the species."

The Paik exhibition is a fascinating case study in this regard. The first comprehensive retrospective of the pioneering video and new media artist's work in our decidedly post-CRT age, the show included aging and refurbished examples of Paik's output. For instance, the once user-dependent *Random Access* (1963/2000), an abstract collage featuring strips of audiotape that squeal in response to friction, was only activated a few times a month on docent-led gallery tours in order to preserve the piece for the lengthy run of the show; installations were updated with CRTs from Paik's substantial archive (which the Smithsonian acquired in 2009); and one of the artist's untitled robots from 1992 was outfitted with small, new flat screens behind the original CRT shells that account for its eyes and stomach.

Post-op, the newly anointed "Paikbot," joined Twitter.

After thorough research and consultation with his estate, the Smithsonian concluded that the late Paik would have signed off on the adjustments and even the Twitter feed. "He had an interest in his work remaining alive," says the museum's senior curator of film and media arts, John Hanhardt. "He understood better than anyone that this is all going to change."

On a technical level, the Paik exhibition allowed the museum to put some of the new media preservation techniques into practice. "Electricity heats up and cools down," Mansfield says. It vibrates, it breathes, it powers on and off. "Every day it's a new exhibit. And you have to take precautions to care for it daily." A digital show-control system modified to fit the Smithsonian's exacting needs optimizes "on" times and alerts staff to failing systems and bulbs. Installed in 2009, it is unique to the museum, adapted from a program used to run and maintain amusement parks.

Another tactic that has emerged in recent years and stands more or less in direct opposition to common practice for works of traditional media (paintings, sculptures, photographs, and works on paper), prescribes that art be hidden away in carefully controlled environments between shows to allow it to rest. With new media, "what we've found is that because of the aging and obsolescence cycles of both

the technological equipment and also the software that's operating behind it, the preservation imperative is actually predicated on frequent display," says Jill Sterrett, director of conservation and collections at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "You have to keep checking that thing over and over and over," she says. "It's a very active process as opposed to a passive one, and this is sort of challenging us to change our rhythms in museums."

Living artists themselves are also crucial collaborators in this effort. And one of the most effective tools among conservators today may be the practice of interviewing the artists relentlessly. "We want to know how much authority they're transferring to the museum to interpret the work in the future, what we should do if the technology that they originally showed it on is no longer available," says Glenn Wharton, a special projects conservator at MoMA and professor at the Conservation



In Adam Chapman's *Diagram of Isolated Moments Forming a Memory (Andy G)*, 2008-9, the figure is constructed by computer-generated lines and forms.



Once viewed on a rear-projection television set, Jim Campbell's *Digital Watch*, 1991, is presented using a digital projection and flat screen.

Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. In essence: which part is the art? It's a technique that is, of course, shared among conservators of all types of contemporary art—from installations of sewn and aging fruit peels (in the manner of Zoe Leonard) to dark-chocolate figurative busts (as in the work of the late Dieter Roth) to spontaneously amorous museum patrons (à la Tino Sehgal). Yet this information needs to be shared and preserved, too, and what's missing, says Christiane Paul, the Whitney Museum's adjunct curator of new media arts, is a MetaServer—a single place where all of the information can be posted, updated, and accessed. "I think that will be a major effort in the future," she says.

Video artists tend to perceive their work as somewhat fluid. For the pioneering video and new media artist Peter Campus, the physicality of the medium is irrelevant. "I want my work to keep changing and growing—that's very important to me," Campus says. "Because this is a medium that keeps changing, and I don't want to pretend that it doesn't."

Campus has been proactive in this regard. Using new technology, he has been able to streamline some of the

effects he originally created in his video works from the 1970s, many of which rely on the use of closed-circuit cameras, projectors, and, originally, videotape decks. *Anamnesis*, for instance, a 1974 piece Campus exhibited late last year in a solo exhibition at the Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York, projects two images of the viewer onto the wall as he or she observes the piece—one in real time, one captured several seconds earlier. Campus updated the work with a "black box" apparatus that creates the time-delay effect by holding the viewer's image on a hard drive and then releasing it at the desired intervals. Originally, a tape ran between two clunky players to achieve the delay.

Institutions, too, are increasingly keen to preempt such transitions. This summer, the New Museum offered artists free media-migration services to preserve and archive work made using aging or defunct media formats (think floppy disks, zip disks, CDs, MiniDV's, and VHS) by uploading them onto the publicly accessible site www.archive.org. Titled "XFR STN" (i.e., "Transfer Station") and initiated by artist Alan W. Moore, the project functioned as something of an exhibition as well: after the migration process, the obsolete media went on display.

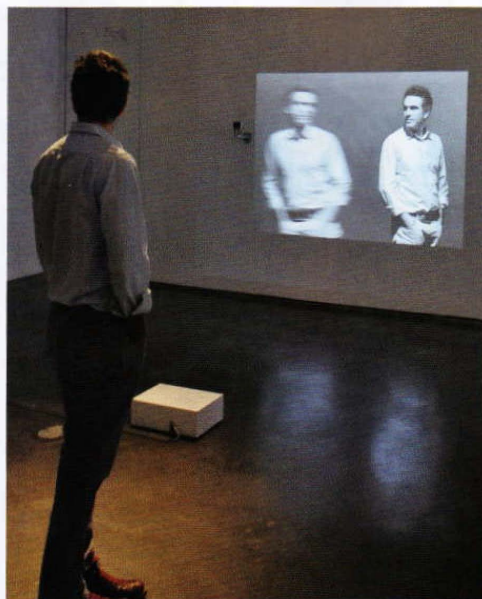
Similarly, video artist Tony Oursler has taken to

remastering his older work in the studio for posterity thanks to newly available consumer systems and software—something that just ten years ago would have required an outside editing house and considerable funds to accomplish. Jennifer Crowe and Scott Paterson have given the Whitney Museum explicit instructions to transfer their audio-tour-as-art piece *Follow Through* (2005) to any and all future media formats, ranging from iPods to iPads to *Star Wars*-style holograms. And Jim Campbell oversaw the migration of his *Digital Watch*, a 1991 piece owned by SF-MOMA, from a rear-projection television set to a digital projection on a black-framed flat screen.

Given the transferability of some of this work, back-up copies and data can and do exist in ways one would never imagine with regard to other types of art. “We came up with language around the sale that would allow the collector to suspend copyright temporarily in order to transfer the data from one delivery system to another,” says Catharine Clark, a San Francisco gallerist who specializes in new media work. Adam Chapman, an artist represented by Clark, provides collectors with the actual data and code needed to recreate his generative digital drawings (works that come to life over time as computer-generated lines and shapes collide on an LED screen installed behind a piece of archival paper to form sketches of sinewy Schiele-like nudes—a new series of which will be on view at Clark’s gallery in November). Campbell has provided second full versions of his pieces to museums at their request (the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among them)—the idea being that, “if it breaks, you have one there to compare it to.” And, Glenn Wharton says, MoMA is in the process of digitizing its entire film and video archive.

I DID NOT FEEL SEPARATED I FELT VERY CLOSE
EVEN THOUGH WE WERE THOUSANDS OF MILES
APART AND I WAS SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE HERE I
FELT CLOSE

This touching fragment—that presciently gets at why many of us still use the Internet today—begins Douglas Davis’s 1994 piece of web art, *The World’s First Collaborative Sentence*. Commissioned by the Lehman College Art Gallery and acquired by the Whitney in 1995, it is widely considered to be the first work of Internet-based



Peter Campus updated his 1974 video installation *Anamnesis* so that the visual effects are now achieved using a sleek, contemporary apparatus.

art to enter the permanent collection of a museum.

The concept was simple enough: Kick off a sentence with a provocative prompt (courtesy of fellow new media artist Nathalie Novarina, who typed and entered the above from nearly 4,000 miles away in Geneva, Switzerland); post it on the web; then allow anyone with Internet access to add to it at will through an online form. Entries ranged from perfunctory to poetic to absurd: “WELL ISN’T IT JUST FUN TO WRITE TOGETHER LIKE THIS. . . . This is far too spontaneous for Canadians We prefer our Babel towers a little politer. . . . TECHNOLOGY WILL NOT ELIMINATE THE DECAY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT. . . . boo boo boo yahoo yahoo yahoo . . . osram traktor, osram lada, da da da dada dadada da.”

Yet the coding, the hosting, and the sheer functionality of the project were far more complex than its interface—a sim-

ple white webpage splashed with black text and the occasional hyperlink—may suggest. By 2005, the piece was dysfunctional and warped, plagued with a rusty foundation that was no longer compatible with our current digital tools. Non-English characters were jumbled, the layout was off, links were broken, and the add form didn’t work.

The piece languished in its creaky and defective state for years but, in 2012, with requests coming for loans and a sense of responsibility to the artist, the piece, and the Whitney’s groundbreaking acquisition, Christianne Paul decided to take action. The now 80-year-old Davis was unavailable to advise on the project, so Paul herself oversaw the conservation, keeping the artist’s original intention in mind at every juncture.

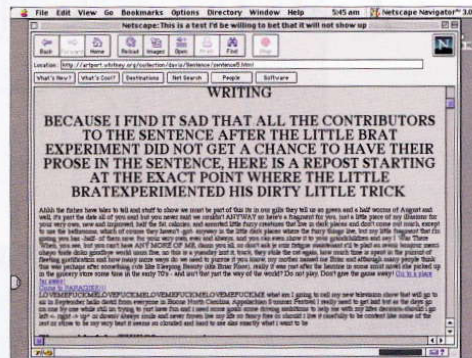
It was an unexpectedly daunting task, both technically and conceptually. Paul settled on a two-piece solution (both parts are newly available for perusal at artport.whitney.org). Version one recreates the sentence right up to the point where it stopped working—a digital restorer preserved unusual characters and formatting and repaired broken links using the Wayback Machine, a sprawling Internet archive that preserves defunct web pages from 1996 on. Version two is an emulation—an updated, reprogrammed, live version of the sentence to which viewers can add just as they did with Davis’s original work. It’s in this form that the interactive component of the piece will live on.

COURTESY BRYCE WOLKOWITZ GALLERY, NEW YORK

Methods tend to change when the message is the medium, and no artist illustrates that better than Brooklyn's Cory Arcangel. Best known for hacking old-school Nintendo systems in the name of art, Arcangel has made it known to the institutions that collect his work that when his clunky delivery systems of VHS tapes and 1990s-era video-game consuls are obsolete, his pieces will only live on as relics—documents of a bygone time. His *Video Painting* (2008), for instance, a VHS tape that projects colorful abstract imagery when played (the sole copy of which was acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum) has the unfortunate side effect of deteriorating into an unusable piece

of plastic by the end of an exhibition run. The museum owns an archival copy and a second-generation copy from which it makes exhibition copies for shows.

"Arcangel is, in some sense, fetishizing the technology of the videotape and commenting on that material," Michael Mansfield says. "And he really created it thinking about its institutional life. Artists are working to challenge institutions like ours." Mansfield likes to think the Smithsonian is rising to the occasion—preserving the work for as long as blank VHS tapes are still available on eBay, then fulfilling Arcangel's wish of transitioning the piece into an archive to be studied and remembered fondly; to live and let die. ■



ABOVE A VHS tape projects multicolor images in Cory Arcangel's 2008 *Video Painting* (left). In 2012, the Whitney Museum digitally restored Douglas Davis's net art piece *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, 1994 (right).
BELOW Inside the Nam June Paik Archive at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ©2008 CORY ARCANGEL, SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, MUSEUM PURCHASE MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH DEACCESSION FUNDS; WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, GIFT OF BARBARA SCHWARTZ IN HONOR OF EDGEMOND M. SCHWARTZ, ORIGINALLY COMMISSIONED BY LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY, THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF GARY WELZ, ROBERT SCHNEIDER AND SUSAN HOEJELZ, COURTESY SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

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