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Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art

In recent years it has become ever more apparent that the demands media art places on museums and exhibition centres is greater than the usual degree of care traditionally provided by curators and conservators. Media art is difficult to define because it attempts to cover an extensive range of varying works of art which is difficult to quantify and furthermore in this decade terms such as “time-based” and “technology based” art have increasingly come in. It is nonetheless possible to come up with a set of characteristics to describe media art which enables clarification of the requirements for dealing with this type of art:

- **Transient:** media art works possess a tangible link to the technology used at the time of their creation. Due to rapid technical innovation they are subject to the transient nature of materials which to a certain extent is comparable to the short life of organic materials in art works.
- **Installation-based:** the playback and display equipment essential for media art works have a spatial presence and therefore media art works are often considered as installations.
- **Performative:** media art works are based on a time frame determined by a number of display modes of the various image media and can therefore be perceived as performative art works.
- **Participatory:** it is not uncommon for media art works to include an additional participatory dimension where the public actively participates in the functionality of the art work and for this interaction to function the preservation of the technical means is essential.

Under consideration of these hybrid characteristics, curators and conservators are faced with the question of how to adequately handle media art works in connection with museums, whose mission is to maintain the originality and authenticity of the art work while at the same time enabling

the exhibition of the respective work. This naturally includes art works which were created in the period from the sixties to the eighties and which are considered to be of historical significance. Yet art works we may consider as “young,” based on the now already obsolete technology of the nineties, are also subject to the same problems much earlier than previously supposed.

The awareness of the need to do basic research and develop target-oriented procedures for the preservation and presentation of media art has risen considerably in recent years. A number of notable international research projects such as *Inside Installations*, *Matters in Media Art*, *AktiveArchive*, and *DOCAM* have served to develop primary concepts, guidelines and instruments in this area. The international conference “Contemporary Art: Who cares?” in June 2010 confirmed that these efforts are on-going.

The imai – inter media art institute founded in 2006 has dedicated itself to communicating the special expertise in the field of media art preservation to restorers, curators, researchers, artists and students of these disciplines. This commitment is based on the history of its own collection. It was necessary for imai to preserve its extensive historical and valuable collection of mainly single-channel video art and documentary works. The process was primarily concerned with the transfer of the original analogue videos over to digital media. So far more than 1,300 audio-visual works of the imai collection have been digitized, which are now accessible to the public via an online catalogue. This action has additionally identified the greater challenges faced by exhibition authorities in connection with the preservation of complex, multi-part media art installations. The imai research project “Konkretionen des Flüchtigen” (Materializations of the Fugitive) uses case studies such as Bill Seaman’s interactive installation “Exchange Fields” (Museum Ostwall collection, Dortmund) to examine this theme.

The extent to which it is possible to authentically transfer the media art of recent decades to future generations decisively depends on the current measures used for preservation and restoration. The panel *Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art* presents initiatives such as *PACKED* and the third edition of the *Variable Media Questionnaire* to provide the resources and instruments to facilitate the collection of substantial information and adaption and transfer of techniques designed to preserve the function and concept of media art. The common view today is that the continuous change from obsolete to new technology is seen as an unavoidable step for media art works. Yet the implementation of new technology and its subsequent influence on the materiality of these works poses fundamental questions which voice concerns regarding loss of originality and the degree of co participation of the respective artist. The panel *Still Accessible? Rethinking the Preservation of Media Art* should communicate the need to rethink preservation techniques and pass on knowledge which can only be gained by the constructive interaction of curators, conservators, artists, technicians and researchers.