

Name: Archiving the Avant-Garde

URL: [http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about\\_bampfa/avantgarde.html](http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about_bampfa/avantgarde.html)

Project coordinator: Richard Reinhart. Contact at [rinehart@uclink.berkeley.edu](mailto:rinehart@uclink.berkeley.edu)

Project partners/steering committee: Richard Reinhart, the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Jon Ippolito, Assistant Curator for Media Art and Carol Stringari, Senior Conservator of Contemporary Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Thomas Mulready, Director Cleveland Performance Art Festival and Archive; Martha Wilson, Director Franklin Furnace Archive; and Mark Tribe, Executive Director and Alex Galloway, Director of Content and Technology Rhizome.org. Also Steve Dietz, Curator of New Media and Jeff Rothenberg, Computer Scientist, RAND Corporation & Independent Consultant.

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Project brief and description, accessed at

Works of variable media art, such as performance, installation, conceptual, and digital art, represent some of the most compelling and significant artistic creation of our time. These works are key to understanding contemporary art practice and scholarship, but because of their ephemeral, technical, multimedia, or otherwise variable natures, they also present significant obstacles to accurate documentation, access, and preservation. The works were in many cases created to challenge traditional methods of art description and preservation, but now, lacking such description, they often comprise the more obscure aspects of institutional collections, virtually inaccessible to present day researchers. Without strategies for cataloging and preservation, many of these vital works will eventually be lost to art history.

Description of and access to art collections promote new scholarship and artistic production. By developing ways to catalog and preserve these collections, we will both provide current and future generations the opportunity to learn from and be inspired by the works and ensure the perpetuation and accuracy of art historical records.

Arts organizations and museums have been sponsoring and exhibiting variable media art such as video and installation for decades. More recently, they have incorporated even newer art forms, such as "born-digital" multimedia art and Internet art, into their exhibitions and permanent collections at an increasing rate. Nearly all the partners in the proposed project, along with many other museums of modern and contemporary art, have accessioned significant works of digital art into their permanent collections and subsequently begun to address the issues of documenting and preserving the works. Where strategies have been developed, however, they have tended to be ad hoc solutions for single works or institutions, and no one would claim to have a firm handle on these problems. Currently, no national or international level multi-museum projects are attempting to address these issues in a way that is well documented and scaleable to application in other institutions.

Each of the project partners has been selected in part because of their existing national leadership in the areas of museology, art, and new technologies, including successful large-scale collaborative efforts. The BAM/PFA currently leads a consortium of 12

museums as part of the Museums and the Online Archive of California (MOAC) to provide integrated online access to collections. The Walker Art Center established the Digital Art Study Collection, one of the premiere museum collections of digital art. Rhizome has established ArtBase, perhaps the largest single collection of digital and net.art works to date. The Guggenheim pioneered the Variable Media Initiative, engaging scientists, conservators, and artists from across the country in an ongoing professional dialogue.

### *Project aims*

The project's collaborative development, methods of dissemination, and compliance with standards such as the Open Archival Information Systems model and metadata standards will yield a strategy that is applicable across communities.

The final project report will outline a comprehensive strategy and model for documenting and preserving variable media works, based on case studies to illustrate practical examples, but always emphasizing the generalized strategy behind the rule. This report will be informed by specific and practical institutional practice, but we believe that the ultimate model developed by the project should be based on international standards independent of any one organization's practice, thus making it adaptable to many organizations. Dissemination of the report, discussed in detail below, will be ongoing and widespread.

- Develop a comprehensive strategy for documenting and preserving variable and new media artworks.
- Develop rules and schema for cataloging variable media art, in compliance with museum community standards and practice.
- Develop rules and schema for capturing necessary preservation metadata at the time a variable media work is accessioned into a collection.
- Test computer emulation as one component of an overall preservation strategy for digital art works.
- Inform the above processes with the best possible museological, technical, and artistic expertise, as well as broad professional and public input.
- Document and disseminate the results of the above to the cultural heritage community, and train professionals to implement the resulting strategy.

### Selected objectives

- Select one or two variable media art works from each partner collection to use as case study/ies for the project. Test the models for cataloging, accession, and, in the case of digital art, emulation on these works.

- Formalize and document a *Variable Media Questionnaire*, a proposed set of elements which can be completed by the artist and collector at the time of acquisition of a work. This set of descriptive elements outline the parameters for recreating the work in a new medium once the original medium is obsolete, including whether such an option is allowed or prohibited by the artist.
- Establish a set of descriptive elements which include a core description (catalog record, wall label) that can be used to manage variable media works of art that will be mapped to existing standards for documentation of art, such as the Getty Research Institute's Categories for Description of Works of Art, to enable cross-compatible records which can reside in computer systems which document entire collections.
- Develop an initial set of standardized vocabulary terms that would be used to populate catalog records and the variable media questionnaire consistently.
- Publish a professional document, *A Guide to Good Practices in Documenting and Preserving Works of Variable Media Art*, for artists, collectors, and museums. This guide will be distributed online, as well as in print, and may be used for training or implementation.
- Train and encourage a new generation of curatorial and conservation experts in this model preservation approach. The Guggenheim Museum, supported by the Daniel Langlois Foundation, has already established variable media fellowships in their museum conservation and technical departments.
- Bring the computer science and digital art communities together with the goal of developing an experimental computer emulator and testing it on case study digital artworks to measure the potential for emulation in helping to preserve digital works of art.
- Develop a preservation model for digital art which is based on the Open Archival Information Systems (OAIS), a conceptual framework for digital archives referred to by many large-scale digital library projects. The model would incorporate higher-level concepts from OAIS and place them in the context of an archive of digital art (for instance, defining what constitutes a "submission information package" or "archival information package" for art).
- Offer each project partner a practical software tool for immediately capturing the information necessary to manage and preserve variable media works (namely the Variable Media Questionnaire and catalog record using standardized vocabulary), and managing the digital files which comprise digital works.
- Document digital media storage recommendations and migration strategies for keeping the digital files which make up a work of digital art and its documentation. Research in this area is already being conducted in the digital library community (Open Archival Information Systems, for instance), and it is felt that the current project should incorporate this research as well as the experience of any partner museum which already has a media storage and migration strategy in hand.

