

**GARY HILL'S *SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF (FOR MARINE)*:  
DOCUMENTATION STRATEGIES FOR TIME-BASED MEDIA. PART II.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Gary Hill's (b. 1951) *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)* (1991–1992), four-channel video installation, 30 x 836 x 23 cm, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C, acc. no. 05.5, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California, acc. no. 2004.78.A-K, was installed at the Hirshhorn Museum as one of 19 works in the exhibition *The Cinema Effect: Dreams*, from February 14 to May 11, 2008.

While the Hirshhorn Museum has since developed a time-based media team with a part-time contract conservator and a full-time staff conservator as members, at the time of the joint acquisition of this artwork with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Hirshhorn did not yet have a dedicated conservator for time-based works. As a result, collaboration among employees and departments—and just as importantly, with outside contractors such as the museum's electronics repair and maintenance technician—proved to be an absolute necessity. The 2008 installation tested existing documentation and created new documentation. It also provoked questions about risks that the work faces, and how these risks could potentially be mitigated for the long term. During our discussions about documentation strategies, Jill Sterrett, Director of Collections and Conservation at SFMOMA, made a point that informed much of our project: that every installation of a complex time-based artwork must also be considered a conservation opportunity. It is only in the process of making these works available—of re-animating them—that we have

opportunities to examine them closely, to test theories about documentation, and to understand them as well as possible.

The concept of time-based artworks having both physical parameters—those of the object itself, and behavioral parameters—those of what the work *does*, is well-established. Both of these dimensions obviously call for documentation, and the value of such documentation can be considered by judging it on these terms. However, looking at the ways in which the documentation of *Suspension of Disbelief* functioned during the 2007 installation pointed to another schema for categorizing the documentation—and thus for evaluating it. Categorizing the documentation based on its desired *goal or outcome* leads to three broad groupings: the descriptive, the instructive, and the predictive.

### DESCRIPTIVE

Descriptive information falls squarely into the realm of traditional conservation documentation. In the case of *Suspension of Disbelief*, the descriptive information includes both the physical object *and* its behavior. The need to create additional documentation of the physical components began long before the installation, because it was necessary to perform a major structural repair to the work. When it is installed, *Suspension of Disbelief* appears to be a single unit. In fact it is made up of three equal sections; each is a hollow aluminum beam in which the electronics for the monitors are concealed almost entirely. When installed, the joints between the three sections are nearly invisible from the gallery. All structural supports are completely invisible. A previous installation, however, revealed potential weaknesses at these joints.

Prior to installation, an internal brace was fabricated by a contract welder and fabricator in consultation with a structural engineer for the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The artist was consulted about

the repair, and his studio signed off on the plans. In a sense, although this was a major repair, from a conservation standpoint the goal was quite straightforward: the reinforcements needed to be—and were—not visible to the audience. Documentation of this treatment was thus equally straightforward: retention of designs and correspondence with the studio about the repair, photography of the reinforcements at the time of fabrication, installation, and packing.

Documentation of this kind—installation instructions that record the physical aspects of the work—can be straightforward to create. Such documentation involves physical processes that are easily observable, repeatable and photographable. But documentation of behavior can be another matter. Much of what makes *Suspension of Disbelief* behave according to the artist's intent happens behind the scenes in ways that are not observable, which puts this behavior in jeopardy of being not repeatable. Thus, creating descriptive documentation of the work's behavior was more challenging. *Suspension of Disbelief* has extremely complex behavior, given the static nature of its physical component. The video imagery is played back from four DVD players, each of which is playing back an identical DVD, approximately 20 minutes in length. The players are controlled by a synchronizer; the video signal is routed from the four DVD players to the 30 monitors via a computer running software that was developed for media installations by Dave Jones and programmed by Gary Hill.

One strategy initially suggested for documenting the behavior of the work was to record it on video, as installed, for the 20-minute duration of the video component. The problem with a video recording as document, however, was the fact that the images, which are in themselves complex and edited very quickly, flicker across the screens at an extremely fast rate. Sometimes the images flash on a single monitor for only a few frames of video; occasionally a single frame, only 1/30th of a

second. Given this complexity, trying to reconstruct the work based on a video document did not seem like a viable idea.

In order to provide human-readable documentation describing the behavior, the museum turned to a technique previously used by Tate Modern, London, for the conservation of Hill's *Between Cinema and a Hard Place*, (1991), time-based media, dimensions variable, which also uses Dave Jones' software (Laurensen 2001). At the author's request, Jones downloaded the switching information into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet runs to 6,000 lines, which should give an idea of the work's complexity.

### **INSTRUCTIVE**

The second category of documentation, instructive, details what should be done to and with the work during installation, de-installation, packing, storage, shipping, etc. The installation process did indeed test the installation instructions created by SFMOMA. During installation, the Hirshhorn's contracted electronics specialist pointed out one area that had not been fully documented: safety precautions. Prior to installation in the beam, the outer housings of the 30 cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors in the piece are completely removed, and the exposed CRTs are held in place by four bolts and aluminum spacers. In order to install the work, eight of the thirty monitors have to be removed. Two specific hazards are presented in this situation. First, components within the CRTs' electronics retain a high-voltage electrical charge for hours after the monitor is powered off. Monitors must be powered down for at least 24 hours before the electronics can be handled, a point very clearly stated in the installation instructions. Another point, however, was not made clear: the serious risk of implosion that is faced when CRTs are being handled outside of their housings. The electronics technician was quite alarmed to see these CRTs being handled during installation by people without eye protection, a situation the updated installation instructions now address.

### **PREDICTIVE**

The final type of documentation, predictive, is the most complicated, and could best be described as an attempt to identify the "known unknowns" of a work. At the heart of this type of documentation is the attempt to seek out potential weaknesses, to explore how to mitigate them, and perhaps most critically, to create a framework in which to revisit them in an active way. In the case of *Suspension of Disbelief*, the most obvious unknown associated with the work is the fate of the cathode ray tube monitors that are an integral and critical part of the work. In an interview with the artist conducted at SFMOMA in January 2005, the issue was discussed but no specific answer or instruction was given. In this case, predictive documentation can take two forms; first, not only an artist's interview conducted at the time of acquisition, but also a plan for future consultation, either at the time of a future installation, or at another benchmark should the work not be installed relatively soon. Second, technicians should be consulted to determine specific vulnerabilities to CRTs of this type, seeking sources for additional monitors and parts, and exploration of possible alternatives for the future. That there does not seem to be an immediately obvious alternative to the CRTs currently in use does not mean that there isn't something on the horizon. I would point, as just one example, to research recently done in the area of video games to create filters that will allow LCD monitors to emulate the grain, color lag, flicker, and other artifacts of color CRT monitors (Bogost 2010). Potential solutions to problems faced by time-based works are likely to come from unexpected quarters, and the conservator's responsibility for research and exploration extends far beyond the typical conservation literature.

I realize that this broad array of categories—descriptive vs. instructive, physical vs. behavioral, static vs. changeable—may seem to needlessly complicate matters, and to muddy the documentation waters. I would argue, however, that the complexity of works such as *Suspension of Disbelief* means that viewing them through the

multiple prisms is a necessity. A critical task of such documentation, and the conservators creating it, is to break down barriers between defined roles such as technician, conservator, and exhibits specialists to put focus on the longevity of the work itself.

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