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

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ABSTRACT

Gary Hill's *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)* is a major work by a seminal media artist and, like all time-based works, faces complex preservation challenges. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that the work is co-owned by two institutions, has undergone both a technological retrofit and a major structural repair, and utilizes the nearly obsolete playback technology of cathode ray tube monitors. This paper will detail the creation of the master conservation document for the work and examine the documentation that has been generated over the course of the work's life to date as it relates to acquisition, installation, and long-term preservation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), California, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., jointly acquired the video installation *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)*, a 1992 work by the artist Gary Hill (b. 1951). At the time of acquisition, the conservation strategy adopted by the two institutions was to compile the relevant documentation into a comprehensive preservation plan that would address the topics of acquisition, storage, installation, display, loans, and long-term preservation. The development and maintenance of this documentation was an inherently collaborative effort between the staff of both museums who shared the goal that the resulting preservation plan remain equally useful to each institution. The process of creating and compiling the documentation follows as well as discussion of some of the challenges encountered.

THE ARTWORK

Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine) is a video installation that consists of thirty 12-inch monitors stripped of their outer casings and mounted within an aluminum beam that is suspended 6 feet from the floor (fig. 1). The black and white cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors used are the type associated with surveillance applications. Images of a male and a female body move across the continuous linear space that is created by the adjacent monitors. At times, the rapid switching of the images gives the illusion of the bodies smeared across several screens. In turn, on occasion, both bodies are seen moving towards each other, overlapping one another, and then breaking apart.

The movement of the images across the beam is determined by a specific computer program that is synchronized for use with all thirty monitors. The behind-the-scenes equipment includes a video switcher, a time code reader, a computer, four DVD players, and the custom-designed synchronizer. In addition to this equipment, eight back up CRT monitors were also purchased at acquisition.

While there are two other editions of this work,[1] this particular piece is the artist's proof created in 1992 and was in the artist's possession up until acquisition.

DOCUMENTATION STRATEGY

In creating and compiling documentation into a preservation plan, there were many factors to be considered. First, the artwork was to be co-owned between two institutions with different internal staffing structures and different means of maintaining documentation pertaining to their collection. As a result, new documentation created would

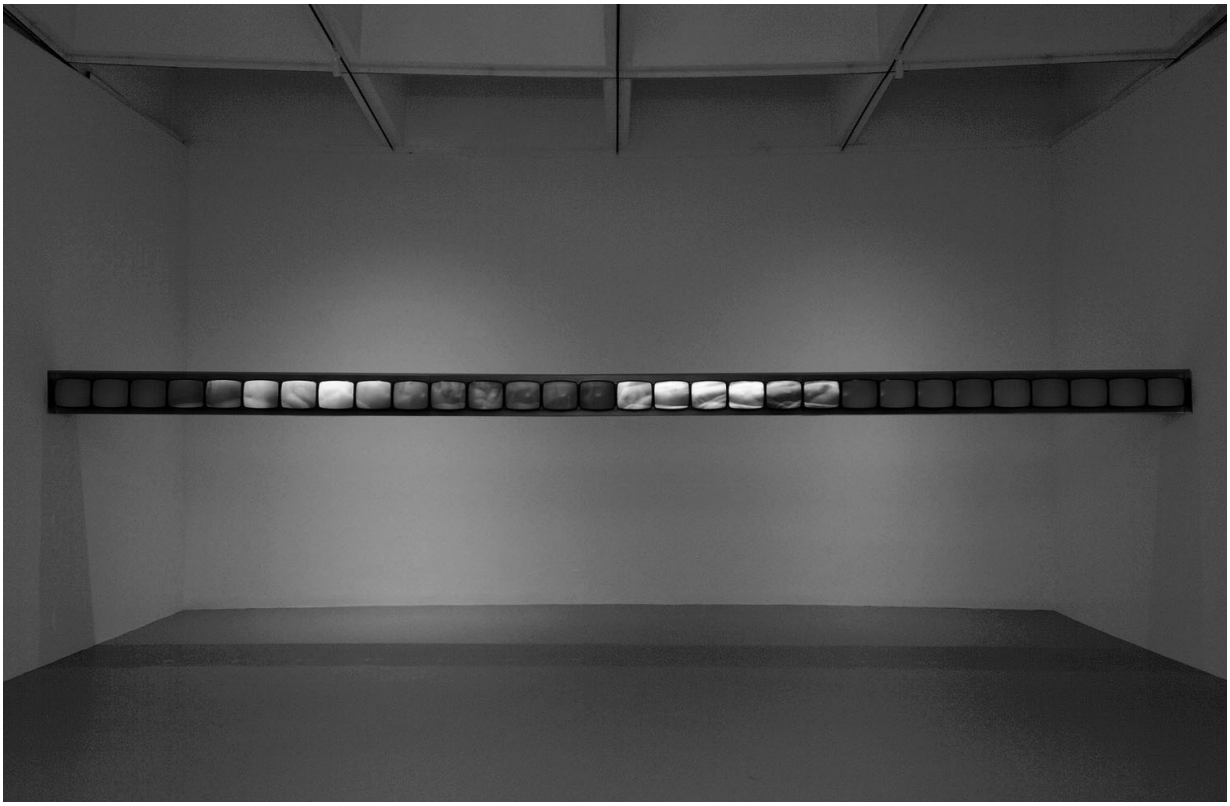

Fig. 1. Gary Hill, *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)*, 1991–1992, four-channel video installation, 30 x 836 x 23 cm, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, acc. no. 05.5 and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, acc. no. 2004.78.A-K.

need to be universally accessible to the staff at both institutions and, therefore, be un-reliant on a specific database or software system. Secondly, the artwork itself is technologically complex and presents significant migration challenges as the media components are at high risk of obsolescence but also play an integral sculptural role in the physical object. As with any work that can migrate and whose materials will inevitably be changed out or altered over time, sufficient documentation not just of the changes, but of the decision making process behind the changes is necessary, especially as it relates to the functionality and physical appearance of the work. Noting the reasons why a particular decision was made at a specific point in the life of the artwork can help future decision making processes at a time when access to the artist is no longer possible and technologies have inevitably continued to evolve in ways the artist and the original caretakers could never have predicted. The imminent and repeated need for migration of specific components of this artwork over time places the additional requirement that the forms of documentation have the flexibility to evolve and be updated as these migration challenges are confronted and explored.

These qualities that were, therefore, deemed essential for the documentation—universal accessibility, the inclusion of sufficient narrative, and the need to evolve over time—called for a means of management in a consistent manner. Without proper oversight, associated documents have the potential to change and be updated by their respective authors at different institutions and different versions of the documents could emerge and mutate independently; an expected result in the absence of the types of checks and balances that are incorporated into widely used database or software-specific systems.

The study of documentation strategies for complex installations and media art has been at the core of several recent and notable projects, resulting in resources like the Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage (DOCAM) Documentation Model,[2] documentation templates developed by the Matters in Media Art[3] consortia, and documentation systems presented by the participants of the Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art project.[4] The information generated from these projects was also used as a resource in the development of the types of data to incorporate into a comprehensive preservation plan for the artwork by Hill.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

A collaborative approach to caring for the time-base media collections is in place at both SFMOMA and the Hirshhorn; the tasks involved in maintaining media works being shared interdepartmentally among a group of designated individuals that convene on a regular basis. At SFMOMA, this group was first established in 1995 under the name "Team Media" and, at the time of this particular acquisition, consisted of a time-based media curator, a time-based media curatorial assistant, a time-based-media registrar, two conservators, an art conservation fellow, and two media art technicians. Charged with addressing the issues pertaining to preservation, including overseeing that the appropriate documentation was created, it was this group that first installed *Suspension of Disbelief* at its acquisition in 2005. At the Hirshhorn, a time-based media group has also subsequently been established and currently consists of a time-based media curator, a registrar, a representative from the exhibitions department, a media art technician, a full-time conservator, and a part-time contract time-based media conservator.

DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO ACQUISTION

As part of the acquisition of this artwork, two formal artist interviews were organized and conducted: one by phone and one recorded on video. The phone interview between the Team Media members at SFMOMA, Gary Hill, and his technical assistant was carried out with the main purpose of collecting information pertaining to the

technical components and their preservation. In preparation for this interview, a questionnaire was sent to the artist allowing him to review the types of questions he would need to address during the interview, an important step due to the highly technical nature of the conversation where well-considered answers were needed. This interview ultimately assisted the group at SFMOMA in preparing for what components would be arriving and their functionality and also addressed the particular migration and preservation concerns such as the pending obsolescence of the CRT monitors.

A subsequent video-recorded interview was conducted collaboratively between the Collections Division and the Education Department at SFMOMA. This interview was shot with high-quality video with the dual purpose of creating educational clips to run on the museum's website and also as an opportunity for further conservation questions to be addressed. As can be expected, however, as the format and intended audience was different from that of the phone interview, the answers provided by the artist also varied in tone and perspective. It is human nature to cater responses to varying audiences and this particular case points to the importance of incorporating the context of the interview into the transcript so that that the content can be interpreted appropriately in the future.

DOCUMENTATION RELATING TO LONG-TERM PRESERVATION

In terms of long-term preservation, the issues of migration were at the forefront right from the start. When the piece arrived for its installation, it was dependent on the technology of laser discs, a format that was already considered to be well on its way to obsolescence. The need to reformat these laser discs to a more current format was complicated by the fact that the synchronizer ran on a customized program that was dependent on the laser disc technology. In order to have the artwork function with a new technology, in this case DVDs, the program needed to be revised as well.

Reformatting from laser discs to DVDs and revision of the program for the synchronizer were significant alterations to the artwork and can be considered as conservation treatments. Here the question was raised regarding the appropriate method for documenting work that is conducted by outside contractors, particularly for those professionals whose knowledge is very specialized and where there may not be documentation guidelines in place for their practices that necessarily comply with conservation standards. In this particular instance, it was necessary for the conservator to be present during the reformatting process and to document it in an official report form. In the case of the revision of the program, a printout of the new program was obtained and the vulnerabilities of the original format along with the justification behind the changes made during migration were included in the conservation documentation.

The obsolescence of CRT technology also poses conservation considerations as the sculptural quality of the CRT tubes is a key component of the artwork. In both of the formal interviews conducted with the artist, it was clear that no final conclusions about the future of the CRT monitors were evident; however, through these discussions with the artist, the caretakers were made aware that, at least for right now, there isn't a clear "next step" plan for migration of the monitors. As a result, this is flagged as an ongoing discussion that needs to be revisited in the near future and, in the meantime, the measure of stocking backing up monitors is employed as the short-term solution.

DOCUMENTATION RELATED TO INSTALLATION

Installation documentation for time-based works is becoming recognized as being an essential component of their preservation. Sufficient installation instructions and parameters not only assist in the successful reinstallation of a work that involves many complex steps, they also function as an historic record of how the various components related to one another at that particular mo-

ment in time. This is a key factor for artworks whose materials and individual components will inevitably change, and perhaps change quite drastically, over time. As a result, it is recommended that installation instructions be updated with each new iteration of the artwork and old versions of the instructions be archived and documented accordingly.

In terms of the installation documentation that existed for *Suspension of Disbelief* at the time of acquisition, this was minimal and lacked instructions for performing some of the essential steps such as the removal and re-installation of the CRT tubes into the beam and the necessary adjustments to the settings of the monitors, steps that need to occur every time this piece is installed. Instructions on how to remove a CRT tube from its original casing in the instance that one of the tubes ceases to function and needs to be replaced with one from the back-up supply of monitors was also lacking. Fortunately, the first time that SFMOMA displayed this piece was for a larger exhibition of works by Hill, which provided an opportunity to bring both the artist and his assistant in to participate and play a role in the development of the necessary installation documentation.

The development of these installation documents was a collaborative process with input from the artist's assistant, the registrar, a conservator, and the media technicians sought out and included in order to make sure that the instructions could ultimately be deciphered by any of the diverse staff members involved. This was not done with the intention that the conservator or registrar would be able to do these steps necessarily (a technical professional would still be required to perform the exchange of CRT monitors) but at least with these instructions described in simple terms and well annotated, the conservator or registrar would be able to follow along with any installation and converse at a shared level of understanding with the media technicians about the various actions being performed and the overall needs of the artwork. In addition, the knowledge about the inner workings of these monitors may slowly disappear to the degree that even the technologically savvy will be unfamiliar with them. As a result, it was important to make sure that these documents were not too reliant on technical jargon that might become outdated.

The creation of these documents involved a choreographed process in which the artist's technical assistant very patiently performed each step as it was photographed. Notes were taken by both the registrar and the conservator and, from these notes, the photos were annotated with the parts of the monitor and a description of the specific task being performed in layman's terms with a final review from the artist's technical assistant and the media art technicians at SFMOMA to verify that the information was accurate. In addition, photo-documentation of the assembly of the beam and the settings for the different pieces of equipment was collected and compiled along with the necessary narratives and wiring diagrams. When fully installed, a video of the artwork was recorded as a visual reference for how it should appear when functioning properly.

Another factor considered in the development of the installation documentation was the weight given to the many conversations that happened over the course of the installation; casual comments made in passing by the artist or his assistant proved to be just as critical as those gleaned during the formal interviews. It is in the galleries where many subjective decisions are made, equipment settings are adjusted, and observations about the experience of viewing the artwork are shared—all relevant pieces of data and essential components of any comprehensive preservation plan. This is where the efficacy of SFMOMA's Team Media was put to the test. In this case, it was important for the team members to be present during the course of the installation, even if one's particular expertise wasn't called upon at that moment, with the goal of capturing that chance information.

Not only was it difficult to make sure that one was in the right place at the right time, an even more difficult challenge was getting this relevant narrative into a preservation plan. It was necessary to tease apart these in-situ discussions and determine what was relevant and for whom. The regular team format meetings both at SFMOMA and at the Hirshhorn have been the venues for attempting this process in the form of a "group download," so to speak. While it is obvious that input from all participants was essential as each person held valuable pieces of the puzzle, the overall process of organizing and compiling these puzzle pieces of information into a unified preservation plan was determined to be best designated to a minimum number of people. Narrowing down the number of individuals involved in the assembly of data facilitated many processes such as managing the different versions of a document, following up on areas that were lacking, tracking any changes made, and allowed for consistency in approach. Throughout this project, this role tended to fall within the realm of responsibility of the conservators as much of the data was, in many ways, intricately linked to the long-term preservation of the work. As this project evolved, the two authors of this paper, both currently at the Hirshhorn Museum, have been the primary compilers of the preservation plan, with subsequent review from the members of the teams from both museums being sought when changes or updates are made.

DOCUMENTATION FORMAT

Due to the need for documentation sharing between the co-owners of the artwork, all relevant text-based and text-with-image-based documentation currently exist in both Microsoft Word DOC and Portable Document Format (PDF) file formats. These formats provide a solution that is free of dependence upon a shared database, accommodates the incorporation of images, diagrams, annotation and text, and allows for each institution to "own" a set of identical digital copies. In addition, these formats are universal and can be incorporated and stored within many database systems. The aim is for the installation instructions to be retained as PDF files as the archived record in both the paper and digital files at each institution. The original Word document can be re-worked as the installation perimeters change over the life of the work, and new PDFs can be made, archived, shared, and be stored along with the previous versions, not as replacements of them.

In addition to hardcopies of all the digital documentation, all hard copy information that did not exist as a digital file (such as equipment manuals) was photocopied and shared between the two institutions. To avoid the instance of large folders being independently created and filled with the many pieces of all the documentation collected, a formal preservation notebook was compiled by the authors as the primary conservators in the time-based media teams involved. These notebooks are identical and the goal is that they will be updated with the same pieces of information during each point of installation, migration, or other "documentation worthy" event in the life of the work.

EVALUATION

After the initial installation at SFMOMA, *Suspension of Disbelief* traveled to the Hirshhorn in 2008 and was installed for a second time, an event that provided the opportunity to evaluate how comprehensive the original documentation was and to update it based upon changes or new information. The reinstallation of the artwork also provided the ability to monitor in a timely manner the vulnerabilities of the various technologies—a step that is essential with any time-based work. The unanswered questions relating to migration were re-visited at this time although some continued to remain unsolved, as is often the case with time-based works where solutions to many complex technological issues have not yet been determined.

It is clear that the maintenance of this type of documentation and the oversight required to keep it current and accurate will need to be incorporated into the job assign-

ment of a member of at least one of the media teams of the co-owning museums. The challenge with managing documentation of media art extends beyond this particular case study and it is a factor that has been recognized by many who are charged with caring for media art and is at the core of the above-mentioned documentation initiatives. However, with the added factor of this documentation being developed by two institutions, the complexity of documentation management is increased.

The shared binder, PDFs, and digital files can facilitate the retrieval of the text-based documentation, and it is recommended that any documentation that does not exist as a digital file also be scanned as a PDF in order to create a complete digital version of all shared documents. In addition, evidence of how vulnerable access to images taken only a few years ago was noted. Images that had been incorporated into a text-based document in Word or PDF formats were easily accessed. However, individual images that existed only in JPG and TIF formats tend to present more difficulties as the rapid capture of digital images that occurs during installation is compounded by the fact that ad hoc image management systems have emerged at both institutions. As is the case for collections care departments in many institutions, individuals often develop independent methods of naming and storing their quick-capture JPG images—such as the images related to activities such as installation—and these often wind up on personal computers accessible only by the person who took the original image. Matters become more complicated as personnel changes occur and several of the previous members of the media teams involved in the original documentation of the artwork are no longer present. In this case, the solutions may need to be sought as part of a larger media management plan within each institution and is out of the scope of this particular project.

NOTES

1 Edition one of two of *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)*, (1993), is in the collection of Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (FNAC), Puteaux, France. Edition two of two is in the collection of Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM), Karlsruhe, Germany (1994).

2 The DOCAM Documentation Model offers a framework that enables the structuring of a digital file of artwork or "Digital Workfile." A visualization interface of the model is available at www.docam.ca/en/documentation-model.html (accessed 01/10/11).

3 Matters in Media Art is a multi-phase project designed to provide guidelines for care of time-based media works of art. The project was created in 2003 by a consortium of curators, conservators, registrars, and media technical managers from New Art Trust, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), SFMOMA, and Tate. For further information, see www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters (accessed 01/10/11).

4 Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art was a three-year research project (2004-2007) focusing on the care and administration of installation art. Documentation strategies are presented as part of the research findings located at www.inside-installations.org (accessed 01/10/11).

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