

Case study proposal in Focus 1, Domain 3: Artistic activities: Methods of appraisal and preservation

Title: Model for description and preservation of documents created using unstable and variable artistic techniques.

Proposed by: James Turner, Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, Ann Butler and Caitlin Jones.

Description: The general goal of this proposal is to analyse the development of a model for description and preservation for unstable and variable forms of artistic practices, especially those using digital technologies. The Variable Media Network (VMN) proposes an unconventional new preservation strategy: the variable media paradigm encourages artists to define their works independently of the media of creation so that a work can be translated once its current medium becomes obsolete. This requires artists to envision acceptable forms a work might take when translated to new media, and to pass on guidelines for recasting work in a new form once the original has expired. New tools and standards are needed to keep track of this information. The Variable Media Questionnaire is an interactive form linked to a database designed to assist artists and museum staff in writing variable media guidelines (See accompanying screenshots of the database interface). The questionnaire is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to spur questions that must be answered in order to capture artists' desires about how to translate their work into new media once the work's original medium has expired. The variable media concept is not limited to digital art forms and can be applied to a broad scope of media, including media that are electronic but not digital. However, our case study will focus on digital art. This case study will follow the development by an international network of organizations (the VMN) of the tools, methodology, standards, practices and vocabulary that are needed for the description and preservation of variable media art forms using digital technologies and presenting behaviors such as "networked", "encoded" or "interactive". The study will try to achieve the following objectives:

- to describe the process by which members of the VMN select appropriate works for test cases
- to discover how the input of these various and heterogeneous test cases affects the structure, tools and standards of description
- to analyse various aspects of the development of the structure of description used by the Variable Media Network (VMN)
- to track and document the evolution of the network database developed and used by the VMN
- to document and analyse experimentation with software emulation by the VMN on selected test cases
- to make explicit the contribution of each member of the network in the development of the VMN project
- to identify other initiatives with objectives similar to the VMN's main objectives, namely the description and preservation of digital and new media art, and to map similarities among the initiatives
- to evaluate the model produced by the VMN in order to determine the limits of its scope, and then to prepare a second case study in which the VMN model would be enhanced and proposed as a stable model

In order to achieve these objectives, and with the collaboration of members of the VMN, we will document the development of the project from its inception as a network to the point at which tools and practices can be considered stable.

Rationale: Variable media have a number of important characteristics not shared by other digital art forms, hence the need to study them. The VMN provides an opportunity to learn from the groundwork experience gained so far in this area. By building on this work, it will be possible to assess the possibility of developing a model that can be used in the broader context of digital art using variable media.

Many museums already have a considerable number of variable media artworks in their collections, and they are in dire need of new strategies for documentation and preservation that take into account the specificity of these works. The VMN initiative will undoubtedly have a strong impact on documentation and preservation methods used by museums, and these organisations stand to benefit greatly by participating in the VMN and by taking an active role in the development of this much-needed set of tools and strategies. If the VMN case study takes place within InterPARES2, museums will have even stronger motivation for participating in the project.

Research methodologies:

- Documentation of the development of the VMN project with a focus on the online questionnaire used by artists and their collaborators to provide guidelines for storage, exhibition, and care of their digital works and on the database used for storing this information
- Description of the underlying technological infrastructure
- Interviews with members of the VMN network to gain an understanding of how they perceive the project and their inputs to it
- Abundant use of narration and description of entities and processes

Timeline: This timeline has been constructed to concur with the timeline of the VMN. The VMN began in 2002 with a partnership between the Guggenheim Museum and the Daniel Langlois Foundation. In 2003 the VMN will become a multi-member international network. Between 10 and 20 organisations which collect variable media works are expected to join, consisting mainly of museums and archives. This international network of organisations will attempt to implement the variable media concept within the member institutions, and these will develop the questionnaire, the description vocabulary, the supporting database, and best practices for managing these unique and complex works.

November 2002	Formal submission of proposal to international team, for approval at the December meeting
winter 2003	Conduct interviews and gather other data. Report on progress at Vancouver meetings
spring/summer 2003	Develop a structure for analysing the development of the model
fall 2003	Complete the model
fall 2003/winter 2004	Write up the results of the work and publish it. Presentations at conferences

Case study team and roles:

- James Turner (Université de Montréal) : Lead investigator
- Alain Depocas (Fondation Daniel-Langlois) : co-investigator, development and analysis of database
- Jon Ippolito (Guggenheim Museum) : co-investigator, conceptual issues
- Caitlin Jones (Guggenheim Museum) : co-investigator, implementation issues

Resources needed:

- Research assistant to conduct interviews, document the evolution of the VMN project, and structure the data

Additional information: Four screen shots of the database interface

The Variable Media Questionnaire is an interactive form linked to a database designed to assist artists and museum staff in writing variable media guidelines for specific works. Note (top left corner of the images) that even in this preliminary version, data is already encoded in two languages. The database structure allows for the inclusion of additional languages as needed.

English
Français

Nam June Paik *TV Garden*

Select work See the record

q00000016 See the account

Account: Jon Huffman

contained installed performed interactive reproduced duplicated encoded networked

variable media questionnaire

PREVIOUS STATES

state	1996 São Paulo	comments
audiovisual equipment	speakers	Samsung (see details under
installation instruction	paper score or script	Artist's instructions sent by fax
installation dimension	(specify)	15 X 25 feet
media dimension	(specify)	24"



Photo by Jon Huffman
Installation view at the 11th
Videobrazil in São Paulo, 1996

IDEAL STATE

		can vary	comments
space	fine art or museum gallery	Somewhat	flexible, but must be contained (must read as
boundary	defined by physical components	Slightly	can take up entire room but doesn't need to.
access	number of viewers determined by space	Slightly	best if big room and big viewing area.
lighting	as dark as code allows	Slightly	
sound	specified volume as... (specify, e.g., 50 decibel)	Slightly	should be medium to loud - spill over is ok -
security	requires guard	Greatly	all ways are acceptable - none preferred.
base/s	custom-made	Not at all	wooden jigs and scaffolding ok if not
distribution of elements	other (specify)	Slightly	Mass of television and plants should be in a
display equipment for inert elements	other (specify)	Not at all	see bases.
architectural placement	a combination of the above (explain)	Slightly	should be able to walk around or view from
equipment visibility	conceal some (specify)	Somewhat	not necessarily important - but equipment

GO TO PRESERVATION STRATEGIES >>>

English
Français

Nam June Paik *TV Garden*

Select workSee the record

q00000016See the account

Account: Jon Huffman

containedinstalledperformedinteractive**reproduced**duplicateencodednetworked

variable media questionnaire

PREVIOUS STATES

state	1996 São Paulo	
audiovisual equipment	speakers	Samsung (see details under
installation instruction	paper score or script	Artist's instructions sent by fax
installation dimension	(specify)	15 X 25 feet
media dimension	(specify)	24"



Photo by Jon Huffman
Installation view at the 11th Videobrasil in São Paulo, 1996

PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

		status	comments
installation dimension	Maintain fixed overall dimensions [Storage]	Discourage	
	Custom-build installation space to match overall dimensions of work [Emulation]	Preferred	Jon Huffman believes Whitney
	Scale dimensions to fit existing space [Migration]	Acceptable	The work can scale to fit
	Adjust dimensions according to site-specificity [Reinterpretation]	Unacceptable	
media dimension	Maintain fixed image size	Not applicable	We cannot predict which
	Adapt new equipment to re-create scale of original image [Emulation]	Preferred	
	Adjust image size according to site-specificity [Reinterpretation]	Discourage	
image quality in display	Allow image quality to dictate display dimensions [Storage]	Not applicable	We cannot predict which
	Enlarge the image to fit the exhibition context even if the quality is compromised [Migration]	Not applicable	We cannot predict which
unusual display surface	Build flat of hanging wall or float work onto the surface [Emulation]	Not applicable	Not a 2d work.
	Adapt new displaying method according to site-specificity [Reinterpretation] (e.g., angle image onto the wall, juxtapose images instead of facing each other)	Not applicable	Not a 2d work.

GO TO IDEAL STATE

English
Français

Grahame Weinbren *The Erl King*

Select workSee the record

q00000016See the account

Account: Grahame Weinbren

containedinstalledperformedinteractive**reproduced**duplicateencodednetworked

variable media questionnaire

PREVIOUS STATES

state	1987 New York	
programming language	other (specify)	CPC PASCAL
authoring environment	other (specify)	Custom authoring system
sound compression	not applicable	Sound came from laserdisc.
video compression	not applicable	Video from laserdisc.
aspect ratio	4:3	
non-standard code	TK...	Unknown at time of first



Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987 New York

Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987 New York

IDEAL STATE

		can vary	comments
screen resolution	optimum resolution	Somewhat	
colour palette	not applicable	Not at all	Program is encoded, but not audiovideo
external data source	video files	Not at all	Three laserdiscs (see Reproduced for
fonts	indexed (see comments)	Slightly	Some fonts generated by control program,
source openness	open to every user	Somewhat	Artist intended but never accomplished open

GO TO PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

English

Français

Grahame WeinbrenThe Erl King

Select workSee the record

q00000016See the account

Account: Grahame Weinbren

containedinstalledperformedinteractivereproducedduplicatedencodednetworked

variable media questionnaire

PREVIOUS STATES

state	1987 New York	comments
programming language	other (specify)	CPC PASCAL
authoring environment	other (specify)	Custom authoring system
sound compression	not applicable	Sound came from laserdisc.
video compression	not applicable	Video from laserdisc.
aspect ratio	4:3	
non-standard code	TK...	Unknown at time of first



Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987 New York

Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987 New York

PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

		status	comments
Resolution	Should the resolution be maintained even if the image becomes diminutive relative to contemporary standards [Storage]	Preferred	
	Should the resolution be increased to match contemporary standards even if the image becomes pixilated as a result [Migration]	Discourage	
	Should the resolution be improved to match current standards by interpolating or recreating the image [Reinterpretation]	Discourage	
obsolete software	Should the original software be rendered in an algorithmic metalanguage for future emulation [Emulation]	Preferred	The video cues cannot be
	Should the original software be regularly translated into updated versions to evade obsolescence [Migration]	Discourage	Previous attempt to migrate
	Should the original software be rewritten in a different language to evade obsolescence [Reinterpretation]	Discourage	Original code has intrinsic value
pacing	Should we add timeouts to maintain the original pace [Emulation]	Preferred	
	Should we allow faster pace to match current standard chip [Migration]	Discourage	
aspect ratio	Should we custom-build monitor casing or add sidebar to maintain the original ratio [Emulation]	Preferred	
	Should the original ratio be modified by panning and scanning the image [Emulation]	Discourage	

<< GO TO IDEAL STATE