

# Case Study – Colored Sculpture (2016), by Jordan Wolfson

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Colored Sculpture (2016) by Jordan Wolfson. Installation in the South Tank at Tate Modern, 3 May -31 August 2018. [https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/709/installation\\_shots/](https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/709/installation_shots/)

Videos available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsla5fbzhpw> – Performance at David Zwirner Gallery in New York  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiWh3ethjK8> – Stedelijk Show, with artist and curator comments.

Colored Sculpture can be described as a large scale animatronic installation, where a 2 meter high, cartoon-like puppet is dragged across and smashed on the floor to a tightly specified choreography within a stage like space.

The chains that hold it hang from a metal gantry and are driven by the type of motors normally used for boat anchors. The puppet’s eyes are custom-made video screens that follow visitors in the space, with regular interruptions to show numbers and images.

The sound in the space must be overwhelming, either by the sound of the chains being dropped or Percy Sledge’s “When a Man loves a Woman”.

In 2017 the work was proposed for acquisition and at that stage it was already clear that it would also be displayed in the Summer of 2018.

Even at the early stages of this process it was already clear that the scale and complexity of the work was beyond any work acquired up to that stage.

Colored Sculpture was instantiated in a collaboration between the artist, the Gallery David Zwirner, and a production company, Killstress.

Killstress worked with a series of different specialised contractors to combines technologies used in animatronics and special effects, stagecraft and motion tracking, which is broadly illustrated in this diagram, created by my colleague Christopher King:

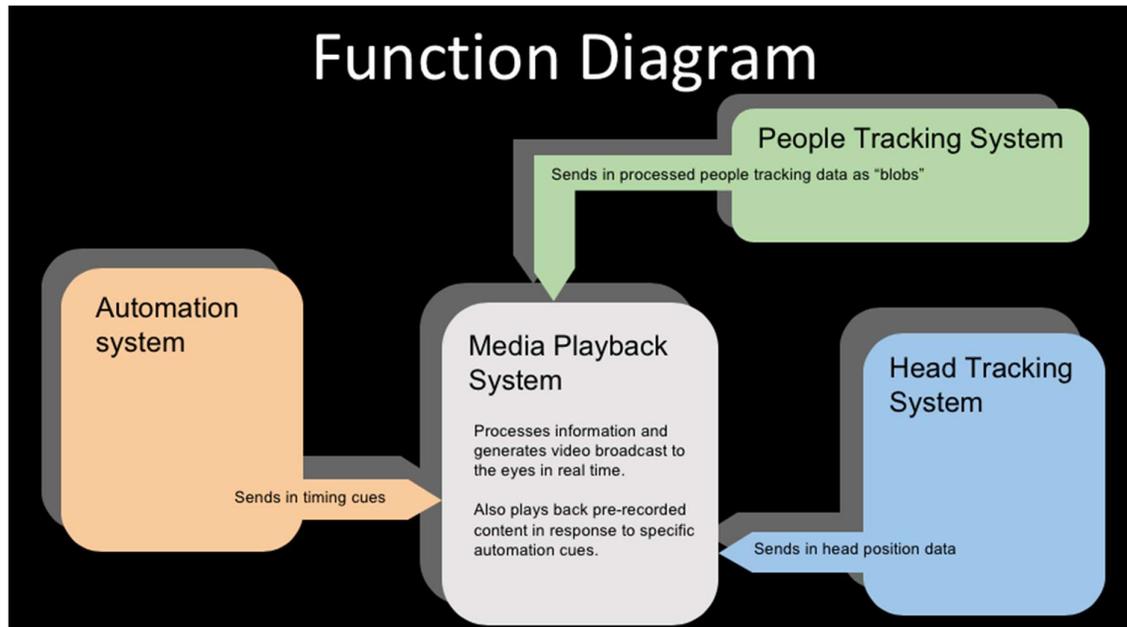


Diagram of the high level functions of the different parts of the system, by Chris King (TiBM Conservation, Tate)

The range of skills involved in the production is well beyond any expertise that Tate staff has or can become proficient in.

The puppet is constantly being damaged by all the falls, and so constant maintenance and replacement of parts is essential, which in itself is a learning process and requires a specific set of skills in electronics and stage software.

Even more alarming is the fact that the Colored Sculpture presents a serious health and safety risk for visitors, so maintenance was even more important.

The installation process was the moment to fully engage with Killstress, and so the conservation teams involved, sculpture and time-based media were able to fully document the installation process, as well as gather information about the production and maintenance of the work. This happened with further types of documentation by the Art Handling team and the Registrars, as well as documentation created by the crew maintaining the work.

What became apparent in that process was also that realistically the work would have to be re-made within 1 or possibly 2 display cycles, because the physical components self-destroy but also because the whole system that moves the puppet, including the gantry from which the chains hang, must meet industry and health and safety standards, which will require updating.

We started thinking that the work could almost be seen as a conceptual work, to be re-made regularly. This was underlined by a conversation with Killstress and the artist, which confirmed our thoughts that the underlying technologies could be replaced, as well as the fact that the puppet's choreography was set in comparison with a recording of a previous performance, which the artist emphasised had to take exactly the same form.

Some questions:

What different kinds of documentation do we need to consider, and with what intentions?

How does the complexity and the variability of the technology influence the documentation that we may need to create and keep?

What types of researchers do you think may be interested in the multiple levels of documentation being created? What type of information may they require?

12/03/2020 Patricia Falcao, Time-based Media Conservator, Tate