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**UNFOLD:  
THE STRATEGIC  
IMPORTANCE OF  
REINTERPRETATION  
FOR MEDIA ART  
MEDIATION &  
CONSERVATION**

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, *Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, New York, Guggenheim Museum, 2003, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

The conservation of media art is one of the greatest challenges for the future of our digital culture. Time is slowly erasing the work of entire generations of media artists from our potential art history. This loss is irreparable and urgent action is needed.

Since the mid-1990s, the ephemerality and immateriality of much of these time-based artworks has demanded the configuration of a new set of techniques to ensure their future presentation. Media art challenges existing forms of conservation and documentation, not only because of ever-changing technology but also because of their different nature: digital art or media art, live art, and performances are different from other art genres in that they are dependent upon practices, not objects, and upon the performative role of the spectator. These kinds of work are experienced through media, browsers, networks, documentation, and forms of storage media. Most of the conservation questions have been centred on technical responses to rapid technological obsolescence, the deterioration of materials, or varied installation requirements. With the necessity to preserve long-term custody, it is necessary to continue researching beyond the object to the medium of an artwork.

Presenting and preserving media artworks is undeniably related to issues of technological obsolescence, networked connectivity, and the interactive nature of digital art. The variable nature of this art form stretches the boundaries of traditional preservation methods and requires insights from both the artist and the curator to determine the future viability of restaging the piece. How do we deal with the changes of digital or media artworks over time, and how can the performative aspect of a work be preserved and mediated? To keep our media artworks available for later generations, the following strategies are used.

#### STORAGE

The acquisition and storage of the physical media equipment, such as DVD players and computers, used in multimedia or digital artworks has proved a short-term tactic at best as hardware can quickly

become obsolete or 'stale' in storage.<sup>1</sup> Storage itself is notoriously bad at capturing the contextual and live aspects of works such as Internet art, performance art, and live electronic music.

#### MIGRATION

To migrate a work of art is to upgrade its format from an aged medium to a more current one, such as from VHS to DVD, accepting that some changes in quality may occur while maintaining the integrity of the original.<sup>2</sup> This strategy assumes that preserving the content or information of an artwork, despite its change in media, trumps concerns about fidelity to the original look and feel.

#### EMULATION

The process of simulating an older operating system [or, by extension, other supporting infrastructure] on a newer software or hardware platform is called emulation.<sup>3</sup> As in migration, the impetus behind emulation is to keep a work alive even though its original media may become obsolete; unlike migration, however, emulation of computer-based art preserves the original code underlying the artwork. Emulation software is currently in various stages of development and efficiency.

#### REINTERPRETATION

The most powerful, but also most risky, preservation strategy for new media art is to reinterpret the work each time it is re-created. Reinterpretation may require rewriting code for a completely different platform, following site-specific instructions regarding installation, or recasting a work in a contemporary medium with the metaphorical value of an outdated medium. Reinterpretation is a dangerous technique when not warranted by the artist, but it may be the only way to re-create performed, installed, or networked art designed to vary with context.<sup>4</sup>

While the first three strategies are amply used, the fourth - remarkably enough - is seldom applied professionally to media art. Reinterpretation is traditionally used in other performative art disciplines such as music, dance, and

theatre, but is almost new in the field of media art and digital art. Reinterpretation tells us a lot about a work, gives space for creativity, and can be seen as a way of reactivating the work and enabling it to live a life beyond the medium that generated it.

LIMA,<sup>5</sup> based in Amsterdam, is the knowledge centre and service provider on sustainable access to media art in the Netherlands and is internationally known as a pioneer in media art preservation. LIMA represents artists and supports them in the promotion and presentation of their work, manages public and private collections, and initiates and coordinates research projects aimed at the sustainable accessibility of digital art.

LIMA applies the various preservation strategies in its work. All reinstallations or reinterpretations suggest translation and fidelity. We are not objective or passive; we are actively engaged in the construction and reconstruction of the [authenticity of] artworks, based on our understanding of work and preservation ethics. This applies to all our services and projects, but applies in superlative terms to the least common conservation strategy reinterpretation. It is an artistic strategy and practice that has been common in music, dance, and theatre for centuries, and it is often used nowadays at academies and in workshops but is rather new at the professional level in the field of digital art. However, if we think further ahead – beyond the technology – developing a script for reinstallation in the long term is probably the best option for the continuation of a work and for ensuring that it remains comprehensible. The central questions we ask ourselves in the UNFOLD project: mediation by reinterpretation [LIMA 2016–20] are:<sup>6</sup> How can we visualize, contextualize, document, analyse, and ultimately understand and transfer creative digital work processes in production and presentation, between artists and the public, in the context of digital culture and the larger cultural field? What is the core and production method of a work? Which techniques are used in which context? How do we keep a work alive? How do we translate this

artistic practice and knowledge to the next generation?

Even if ensuring the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next is an ancient cultural activity, it is critically important to instigate new conversations around knowledge transmission, and in the case of works of media art this includes exploring the possibilities of preservation beyond a permanent process of continually changing operating systems. Thus, UNFOLD proposes to conceptualize and practise preservation as an interpretative act in which the hybrid, contextual, or live qualities of the original piece can be captured through its reinterpretation or re-enactment. In this way we look beyond the medium to the work's capacity to generate networks of relationships that interconnect different versions of the same work. Through UNFOLD we had to rethink traditional paradigms of conservation that regard artworks as fixed and static entities and more and more understand reinterpretation as a process:

- The process from which one tries to understand another creative process and how this process emerged in the very first place. Reinterpretation proposes a re-articulation of artistic thought as it unfolds in the original work.<sup>7</sup>
- Can we conceive of artworks in terms of their temporal duration – as events, performances, and processes?<sup>8</sup>
- Can artworks, including the recent portion of artistic production as well as traditional artworks, be rethought in terms of time and their intrinsic temporalities? Why and how would this matter for their conservation?<sup>9</sup>

The UNFOLD project in 2016 and 2017 consisted of several parts:

- An investigation into reinterpretation as a conservation strategy.
- Three public presentations and three network meetings, with interdisciplinary and international participants, speakers, and guests, and an exhibition of works of art.

<sup>5</sup> See the website: <http://www.li-ma.nl>

<sup>6</sup> See the website: <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/article/unfold-mediation-reinterpretation>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nicolle Beutler by the UNFOLD team, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Hanna Hölling, 'An Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent and Critical Thinking in Conservation', paper presented during the symposium *Authenticity in Transition* at the Glasgow School of Art / University of Glasgow [1-2 December 2014].

See the website: <https://semimesaa.hypotheses.org/7948>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

- A production by Joost Rekveld, whose work in process was shown and discussed during the meetings, with the premiere at and in collaboration with the International Film Festival Rotterdam.
- A workshop and presentation in collaboration with Sonic Acts, with interdisciplinary students from a diversity of art academies.
- A preliminary investigation into the possible reinterpretation of performance-based work by Nan Hoover by dramaturge Fransien van der Putt and choreographer and dancer Vera Sofia Mota.

Our multidisciplinary research group met three times, followed by a public presentation. In each session a different set of questions was addressed, with our overall questions acting as anchors. The following are examples:

- How can different strategies and technologies be used to archive, share, and understand?
- Can reinterpretation as a creative act be seen as a preservation strategy?
- Can we integrate other methodologies of preservation – such as those of theatre, music, and dance – in the preservation of media art and performance?
- What are the paradigms of the preservation of an artwork of ephemeral nature?
- How can we use staging, repertoire, remakes, enactment, re-enactment, and reinterpretation as different strategies for the preservation of cultural heritage?
- How do we deal with conservation ethics and the pressure of institutional protocols on the reinterpretation of media works of art, and how can we be transparent in that?

We explored the idea of reinterpretation as an instrument, as a kind of artistic method that makes it possible to zoom in on specific aspects of a work in its previous manifestations and explore to what extent these can be used in a new digital context. The conclusion that such

a reinterpretation discussion would have led us away from thinking about the materiality of the digital was partly contradicted. Reinterpretation is not seen as a substitute for thinking about materiality, but rather as an addition.

For his UNFOLD commission #67, the artist Joost Rekveld was asked to select and reinterpret a work by video pioneers Woody and Steina Vasulka. He chose *Telc* [1974] and *Reminiscence* [1974]. Both of these works belong to the Vasulkas' series of experiments with the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor. In *Telc*, this device is used to transform Portapak images of a trip to a town in southern Bohemia; similarly, *Reminiscence* [1974] is based on footage that Woody recorded during his visit to a farmhouse in Moravia. For Rekveld's intervention, he focused on exploring the works as experiments with modes of perceiving. He first investigated the possibilities of wearable devices that give a different kind of sensory access to the environment. The aim was to make work that strongly conveys the impression of navigating through a space, but especially to visualize a space that is not derived from visual information. Later in the project this led Rekveld to develop an interest in the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor and eventually to building one himself. Because of this, if there is an emergent 'preservationist' ethic in Rekveld's work, we might conclude that it consists in reworking the concerns of earlier works and technologies through contemporary artistic preoccupations. #67 is a tribute to *Reminiscence* and *Telc* by Steina and Woody Vasulka; this analogue HD video work is guided by the concept of 'reafference', a term that refers to the perceptual changes and sensory stimulation caused by movements of the body. In #67, we take a stroll through the electromagnetic worlds of machines and humans, structured by the fundamental frequency of power lines and the analogue video signal.

For the UNFOLD commission by Vera Sofia Mota and Fransien van der Putt on the reinterpretation of artworks by Nan Hoover, it is too early to conclude what kind of artistic process will be executed.

UNFOLD was also the starting point for Gabriella Giannachi, professor in performance and New Media studies at the University of Exeter, to write the text 'At the Edge of the "Living Present": Reenactments and Reinterpretations as Strategies of Preservation of Performance and New Media Art'.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, the complexities of integrating reinterpretation within debates of cultural heritage preservation necessitate that we go beyond the art piece and its author and incorporate gallerists, private collectors, conservators, archivists, historians, lawyers, and even economists – to name just a few. By doing so, we could, for example, really question how institutional policies would need to change if reinterpretation were practised as a preservation strategy. We believe that further research will need to unfold the layers of institutional practices while re-evaluating current attitudes and methodologies of practical conservation. Moreover, such attitudes should be confronted with the idea that some artworks are not built to last, and that it is precisely that ephemeral status that frames their conceptual meaning. In the UNFOLD project, reinterpretation as

a conservation strategy has been put on the international and interdisciplinary agenda, a conceptual framework has been developed for reinterpretation, and a manifesto has been written – all with shared support. Reinterpretation must and can now be further tested in practice in art institutions and museums. Now that the theoretical layer has been explored in a multidisciplinary international network of experts and institutions comprising UNFOLD, the project intends to launch a further number of experiments in reinterpretation.

We shall continue to explore the strategic dimensions of reinterpretations in terms of artistic yield, degrees of necessity in relation to certain types of works, required new ways of documenting, and redeployment of various contexts. To be continued..

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriella Giannachi, 'At the Edge of the "Living Present": Reenactments and Reinterpretations as Strategies of Preservation of Performance and New Media Art', in *Histories of Performance Documentation*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman, New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 115-31.

Joost Rekveld, the analog setup used to make the experimental video #67 [2017].

