Conservators face issues in preserving video and modern material artworks.

By Hugh Hart, Special to The Times
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"Video is a fugitive medium," said Getty Research Institute's Glenn R. Phillips, and he should know. As curator for "California Video," running at the Getty through June 8, he enjoyed the luxury of a massive archive produced during the '60s, '70s and '80s. The challenge: Most of the tapes, recorded in obsolete formats, were crusted with oxidized crud that made the work unwatchable and threatened to ruin any playback deck hardy enough to play them.

Jonathan Furmanski, an assistant conservator at the institute, describes one particularly unruly video installation. "The Philo T. Farnsworth Video Obelisk" (by Skip Sweeney and Video Free America) was recorded on "a phenomenally obscure 1-inch tape that plays only on a specific type of Sony deck. I needed to locate and repair such a deck in order to extract the signal from the tape. The signal itself was loaded with its own problems because the artists created a montage from a variety of sources that caused the video signal to fluctuate dramatically from scene to scene. Artists are not engineers and like to push tools like video equipment until they do something unexpected. And that unexpected thing is often the 'art.'"

The question looms large for conservators: How will audiences of the future view art created with technologies of the past? To explore this and other delicate issues, more than 300 conservators, artists, curators and art historians gathered at the Getty Center for a three-day "Object in Transition" conference earlier this year. Aimed at getting a grip on art in flux, attendees discussed new media.
On a cautionary note, Pip Laurenson, head of Time-Based Media Conservation at London's Tate museum, described how easily technology-driven work can fly off the rails, as she recalled an encounter with Bruce Nauman's 1986 installation "Violent Incident." The video sculpture is supposed to consist of 12 TV monitors playing different versions of a videotaped domestic argument. But when "Violent Incident" was reinstalled last year, Laurenson said curators failed to properly reconfigure the original structure. "Not understanding the structure of the work, three layers of monitors each shared one channel," she noted. "Not knowing what to do with the fourth layer, [the curators] simply left them out."

Old technology

Although a cryptic video installation operating at 75% strength may not qualify as a curatorial catastrophe, the Nauman misfire underscores a recurring theme for institutions dealing with video-based installations: The classic model of a free-standing art object that speaks for itself has become the exception rather than the rule. As Laurenson said, "I don't see many works in my area that fit into that rather rare model where the artist finishes a work, delivers it to a gallery, who sells it to a museum, who hangs it on the wall."

One recurring theme facing conservators of tech-embedded works: to upgrade or not? Glenn Wharton, special projects conservator for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, described the museum's ongoing effort to present Nam June Paik's "Untitled" modified player piano sculpture. In 1994, the late artist designed a player piano stacked with TV sets that blasted music recorded on laser discs. "We are now debating how we should migrate to new technologies," Wharton said. "Do we display the laser disc players and put the DVD players behind the wall so they're not visible to the public? One curator at MoMA feels that would be dishonest. Or do you display the laser disc players and hide the DVD players? Paik did not leave specific instructions."

To ensure period authenticity for video art pieces introduced 30 or 40 years ago, Wharton said MoMA officials now trawl eBay in search of vintage TV sets before they vanish entirely from the marketplace. Then again, he points out, some artists are not particularly attached to the mechanical means used to express their vision. "The art of our times is often driven by an idea or concept," he said. "It's often more about the symbolic meaning invested in the material by the artist, which is why it's so important for us to know from the artist what is it they're trying to communicate."

Easier said than done

Consider the case of James Turrell's "Trace Elements: Light Into Space." The original sculpture, acquired by the Denver Art Museum in 1994, exerted a profound effect on viewers. Several described a "magical" burst of deeply saturated blue light that kicked in after they gazed at the work for 20 minutes. In July 2006, Turrell's assistant reinstalled "Trace Elements," substituting a different brand of light bulbs because the originals were no longer manufactured.

Dissatisfied museum administrators summoned Turrell to "tune" the sculpture himself, but the artist's tweaking failed to re-create the original experience for then-curator Dianne Vanderlip. Intent on witnessing the vivid hues she remembered, Vanderlip organized a third reinstallation in January 2007, followed by a fourth last July with Getty Research Institute's Andrew Perchuk lending a hand.

After all the tweaking, David Turnbull, assistant conservator at the Denver Art Museum, says "Trace Elements" version 2.0 came "close" to approximating the original. "I would say that memories are more intense than the actual event."

The light sculpture now sits in storage.

For Turnbull, the succeeding incarnations of "Trace Elements" pose enduring conundrums. "You have to seriously question what is the artwork," he said. "Is it the experience? The drawings and documentation? The idea? The materials? How do we, as conservators, reconcile the very real possibility that the physical artwork cannot be preserved and displayed as it once was?"

Given technology's accelerating rate of obsolescence, the task of keeping art conceived with obsolete components from itself becoming obsolete has become a matter of increasing urgency. As Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, associate director for conservation and research at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, sees it, digital art increasingly takes shape as an aesthetic bundle encompassing hardware, software, blueprints, interview material and photographs. "This idea of a work of art being a singular, original object that one preserves to the best of one's ability is seriously challenged today, not just by our art and its materials but by our entire culture. Perhaps the best we can do as conservators now is to document the works of art."
Jason Lee's Bullet Falcon hits the mark

The "My Name is Earl" star and custom ace Ian Barry target motorcycles' colorful past, crossing a 1950 Triumph Thunderbird with a 1920s board track racer aesthetic. Video