Interview with Digital Media Preservation Specialist Savannah Campbell

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Author: Jing Zhao
Interviewee: Savannah Campbell
Advisor: Sara Devine
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Electronic Media Art is an art form with time-based arts disciplines, such as video, audio, and software-based art. It involves many early artistic attempts that used analog signals and includes lots of later art practices influenced by the progressing digital technology. It also can be dynamic, interactive, and collaborative. Electronic Media Arts are generating novel ways of thinking and making contributions to art and society. Meanwhile, art institutions are facing the challenges that Electronic Media Art poses. On October 28th, 2020, I interviewed Savannah Campbell - Digital Media Preservation Specialist of the Media Preservation Initiative at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

During that time, I worked on a case study project - *Media Art Conservation in the European Union and American Spheres*. In our conversation, Savannah answered many questions mainly related to this case study and shared some of her reflections and prospects of digital media conservation.

Figure 1 | Savannah Campbell, Video and Digital Media Preservation Specialist, Media Preservation Initiative, Whitney Museum of American Art

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JZ = Jing Zhao

SC = Savannah Campbell

JZ: Where did you study? What led you to work as a Video and Digital Media Preservation Specialist at the Whitney Museum of American Art?

SC: My background was originally in cinema studies. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree from San Francisco State University. However, I knew that I wanted to work more in the preservation and archival field. After that, I studied at NYU's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program and achieved my Master's degree in 2017. I was very interested in working at a museum rather than a library or an archive. So, I worked at a couple of different non-profit art institutions and did many video preservation projects for artists and museums. Those experiences eventually led me to work at the Whitney Museum as a Digital Media Preservation Specialist.

JZ: What are the Media Preservation Initiative (MIT) 's mission and process of preserving digital media? How many staff in this initiative? How does it cooperate with other departments at the museum? How does it get financial support?

SC: The Media Preservation Initiative is a three-year-long grant-funded project started by the Whitney Museum in 2018. I came on board first as the project's assistant to create a plan and workflow for the rest of the project. Also, I did lots of the documentation. Around November 18th, I transitioned to my current role as a digital media preservation specialist. We also got a full project team of five people (a project manager, a preservation specialist, a cataloger, and a project researcher). Our mission is to holistically take care of all those time-based media we have, which is almost 800 artworks (including films, videos, and software-based works). In the process, we went through research, created documentation, and did cataloging. We launched a digital repository to store the digital files and applied new protocols for conservation assessments of all the media formats.

For cooperation with others in the museum, we do work with the curatorial department in the museum. They bring works to the collections and decide where to exhibit the works in the shows. And, for some incoming exhibitions, we were also involved in the process. We communicated with the curators and artists about what we were getting and answered their questions related to the show. There is an AV department in the museum that works on activities like installing the works in exhibitions. Our project team would document the process of the install. In some cases, especially for long-duration exhibitions, when an exhibition copy of the digital file had been made, I would make additional copies for backing-up.

The MIT project was initially funded by an art foundation for the first year. And the other two years' funding came from a private donor. As far as I know, in the Whitney Museum, the budget is very separated by department. Many donors would like to see their donation go to a specific project rather than to the museum as a general. Before the MIT project, Whitney has done other similar projects. The first round is called the "Collections Documentation Initiative." It focused on works on paper, like drawings and prints. The second round focused on paintings and sculptures. The Media Preservation Initiative is the third project in that line. The Whitney Museum is trying to get intellectual control of their holdings and have everything get documented appropriately. So we are project staff that works on Whitney's collections, but we are not a permanent department on our own.

JZ: I see the Whitney Museum as a member of the Variable Media Network. Are there any differences between the Whitney Museum's digital media preservation strategy and other American organizations' in the network (for example, the Guggenheim Museum, Berkeley Art Museum, and the Walter Art Center)?

SC: I think there are always similarities and differences between any two museums. We are using some models developed by the Guggenheim Museum, and we tailored them into the model that precisely suits the Whitney Museum. I haven't personally worked too much with the Variable Media Network, but I collaborated with colleagues in other art institutions (such as the Guggenheim Museum, MOMA, and the MET). We tried to

exchange ideas with each other in many ways. If I have specific questions for someone, I will email them. There are also annual conferences. The main one is the Electronic Media Group in the America Institute for Conservation. All of us from different institutions can talk about time-based media at that conference.

JZ: Could you talk about the historical differences between the European Union and American media art institutions? And, are they treating media art conservation in different ways?

SC: I think it's a case by case. There is undoubtedly a big exchange of ideas. I have colleagues working at the Tate and many other art institutions in Europe. The Tate was the first institution to have a dedicated time-based media department, and they are very much ahead of the curve in that area. They hired their first conservator in 1996, while the American art institutions took longer to have dedicated media conservation staff. Besides, the ZKM in German is mainly focusing on electronic media, which is rare to see a similar art institution in America. The Whitney Museum focuses on modern and contemporary American art, including media art, painting, and sculpture. And, for the MET, they collect everything. They have ancient art all the way to today's software-based art. So, I think it is a matter of the institution's focus, not so much of where it locates.

For the preservation of media art, I think there are not so many differences between the two spheres. We are trying to learn the best way to deal with media art together. Instead, I think funding is a big issue to consider. In Europe, art institutions got lots of funding from the state and the government. Whereas, in America, the funding relies a lot more on wealthy individual donors. I think the different funding models have a very big impact on both sides of art institutions.

JZ: Currently, I'm researching Nam June Pike's work as a part of my case study. Could you talk specifically about the Whitney Museum's strategies in conserving Paik's early video installation - *Fin de Siècle II*?

SC: *Fin de Siècle II* was initially shown at the Whitney Museum in the late 80s. It didn't enter the collection at that point. Instead, a collector in Hawaii bought it and installed it on a beach, which is not ideal for artwork with so many television sets. All the video installation elements were exposed to the weather, and the piece almost stopped working. After that, this work was donated back to the Whitney Museum. And it was severely damaged when it came to the museum again. All of the television sets were corroded, and they were not turning on anymore. The laserdisc playback of the video was also in poor condition.

The restoration of this piece was started before the MIT Project launched, and it took almost a year. My colleague Richard Bloes worked on it quite a bit. He is also one of the

people who were installing the original work in 1989. He was still there when this piece came back to the Whitney Museum. So, he knew what was back then. The project team went on eBay and tried to find the replacement of the broken original TVs that Paik used originally and made sure they were the correct size. The laserdiscs were transferred for getting the video off them. Later, I think it took them about five years to get this video installation exhibition ready. The restoration project mostly happened before the museum hired me. However, I still did some work on this project when I was there, which was preparing those digital files that came from the laserdiscs for storage in our digital repository. Other MIT members worked a lot on documenting *Fin de Siècle II* and other artworks that were shown in Whitney's exhibition - *Programmed: Rules, Codes, and Choreographies in Art, 1965-2018* in 2018. One of the co-curators of this show - Carol Mansci Ungaro (Associate Director for Conservation and Research) also made a part of the decisions in the restoration project of *Fin de Siècle II*.
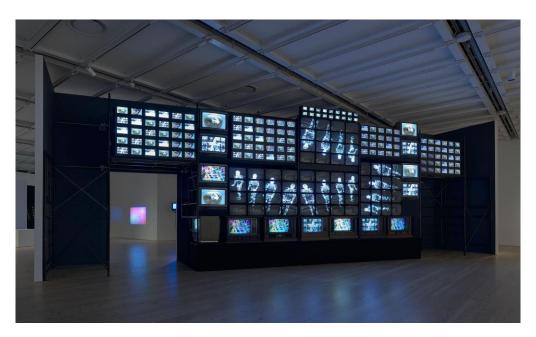

Figure 2 | Fin de Siècle II, Nam June Paik, 1989. Video installation, 207 television sets with seven video channels. (image from whitneymedia.org)

JZ: Facing the fact that some equipment is increasingly unavailable, 'migration' and 'emulation' are the commonly used strategies in the conservation of early media artworks. Could you talk a bit about your interpretation and reflection of these two strategies?

SC: 'Migration' is a form that puts something in one format to a different one. Many early media works are analogs (like VHS tapes or laserdiscs that carry analog signals). To migrate them to a digital file, we need to digitize them, which means put them into the original player and hooking that up to a capture card or a computer. We played them back in real-time to record them in a high-quality preservation format. It can take a lot of trials because we want the recorded color as correct as the original one. And, of course, in some cases, a series of decisions should be made to balance the work's future viewability and the work's original look. We are trying to keep the work as authentic as we can. But, sacrifices sometimes have to be made. For the video migration, we use some devices (such as radar machines) that measure the original signal levels, and we try to match them. If the original analog is still working, we can watch that side by side with the digital file and make sure it's close to the original.

'Emulation' is the method we do more with software-based or computer-based artworks rather than videos. During the emulation process, we are getting the old software to play on new hardware. Today's computer is a lot more powerful than the earlier one. You might see some early software base artworks look differently on today's computers. They might be played too fast. Same as the migration method, we will set up equipment and test them to find an ideal solution to keep the emulated work similar to the original piece.

Talking about keeping the original experience, I want to mention that the documentation is critical during the migration and emulation process. There are a couple of reports (identity report and iteration report) we use, and we use a model first developed by the Guggenheim Museum. The identity report is like the work's biography that includes its entire history (including the information of the artist, the people involved working on it, and it's exhibition record). The iteration report was the report we did each time when we installed it. It tracked the people involved in the installation, and all the decisions had been made during the process. We also will add to the report every time a new file is created (includes the person's name, the date, and reasons). Photographs and notes will also be added to the report as supplemental materials.

JZ: How would you interpret these terms: "Digital Art," "New Media Art," and "Time-Based Media"?

SC: I use "time-based media" for all media art, including film, video, audio, and digital art. These works have duration, and certain kinds of technologies are involved in them. "Digital Art" I would interpret it as a term to describe the arts with software code. To me, "New Media Art" is an outdated term because many early media arts are not new anymore. One of the things that the Whitney Museum was doing is moving away from using "New Media Art" and replacing it with "Digital Art."

JZ: What the future solutions of preserving time-based media you think would be like? What is your advice for the students who want to work in the digital media preservation field?

SC: The thing about technology is that it is always progressing. So, the best thing we can do right now is not going to be the best we can do after 20 years. Everything has to be kept on and improving. And our job is to keep up with those changes. The work we are migrating now might need to be relocated again down the line. It probably would be a never-ending job. That's the reason we say "we are always preserving it" rather than saying "we preserved it." That's why documentation is so important. It can show the steps that people took overtime.

I would suggest students interested in this field to get experience in media formats as much as possible. Doing internships is a good way to practice. Any experience in AV archiving is good. In my program, we are required to do three internships. And in each one, the interns had to work with a different kind of material (film, video digitization, and coding).

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Having been a practicing artist in photographic and electronic media, I raised my interest in how media art is exhibited, collected, preserved, and interpreted. As far as I continued studying museums and digital culture, I did lots of research on digital media conservation, which is one of the most challenging parts of the whole genera because it requires comprehensive and philosophical thinking. Savannah Campbell was the first specialist in this field that I have talked to. After her detailed description of Paik's Fin de Siècle II's story, I had a much more vivid and practical understanding of the conservation process. Also, she has answered many questions I had, such as the

definition of different terms describing media art. Her responses altered some of my previous presumptions. I'm going to think of digital media conservation as a continuous and continuously changing process rather than a solid one.

Read More:

1. Conserving Nam June Pail's *Fin de Siècle II, 1989,*

   https://whitney.org/media/39545

2. Variable Media Network*,*

   https://www.variablemedia.net/e/index.html

3. Lecture by Christiane Paul: From Archives to Collections: Digital Art in/out of Institutions,
   https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Christiane+Paul+new+media+art&&view=detail&mid=87F477EE37764C38547687F477EE37764C385476&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3DChristiane%2520Paul%2520new%2520media%2520art%26qs%3Dn%26form%3DQBVR%26sp%3D-1%26pq%3Dchristiane%2520paul%2520new%2520media%2520art%26sc%3D0-29%26sk%3D%26cvid%3D9C9DF7A8340A42BE8260DD63069CE79C