

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY, WAYS FOR DIGITAL CURATION

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Abstract

Which challenges involve the relevance and current issues of contemporary photography? Which are the challenges for digital preservation and curation? Which are the limits between disciplines? What is an interdisciplinary work nowadays? What is the conservator’s role in this work?

This paper talks about how contemporary photography can be applied to Digital Curation depending on its use and context, where Digital Curation means study, research and representation of contemporary cultural heritage. It is possible to identify two different ways in which the representation, management and access of digital media differs from analog media.

For preserving contemporary photography and digital heritage it is necessary a new understanding and re-contextualization of the interdisciplinary work between curators, art historians, informatics scientists, gallery owners, collectors, conservators, etc., also a new theoretical and methodological work for studying the thematic, new technical and medium aspects, as well is important to understand artist’s intent that means use and access.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary photography represents a bridge between analog world -techniques, supports, materials- and new ways of information like Internet and New Media. During the transition that we are experiencing these days, photography like no other

support or media in History has already been assimilated, developed and grown up into the digital realm.

This paper talks about how contemporary photography can be applied to Digital Curation depending on its use and context, where Digital Curation means study, research and representation of contemporary cultural heritage. It is possible to identify two different ways in which the representation, management and access of digital media differs from analog media. One could consider photography as an artwork through digital technology, I will mention two examples for this application, which represents the use of photographic language as a contemporary strategy for the artistic production and the continuing evolution of this medium for visual experimentation. Then again photography could be used as a medium to document ephemeral or non-permanent art projects or artworks, as specific case I will describe one site-specific installation. That means that photography could represent the memory of other artworks.

All these functions are already part of the curatorial work in contemporary museums and institutions. They represent different ways of access, management, curation and conservation issues.

Which challenges involve the relevance and current issues of contemporary photography? Which are the challenges for digital preservation and curation? Which are the limits between disciplines? What is an interdisciplinary work nowadays? What is the conservator's role in this work?

Not all these questions can be completely answered yet. The solution involves a new understanding and re-contextualization of the interdisciplinary work between curators, art historians, informatics scientists, gallery owners, collectors, conservators, etc., also a new theoretical and methodological work for studying the thematic, new technical

and medium aspects used for contemporary photography, as well is important to understand artist's intent that means use and access.¹

As a young conservator, I think that conservation work needs to be closer and more related to art history and curatorial programs in order to get a better understanding, show, disseminate and protect our contemporary cultural heritage. Let us review this two ways of contemporary photography.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN ARTWORK THROUGH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Artist of different generations, with different backgrounds and interests find in contemporary photography and digital technology the ideal media to manifest themselves, as well as transmit, spread and show their work.

The next two cases are examples of the media versatility that it is also use as a platform of Internet access. The adoption of an old photograph aesthetic like a revival attempt, is one of the main themes used by contemporary artists, whom have used mixed media and technology for experimenting and for obtaining a certain aesthetic and an interesting material appearance; amazing textures and results.

The work of the young artist Geoff Lillemon² (Boston, 1978), centers in visual experimentation –with surreal themes-, the artist mixes diverse media in order to obtain an original digital aesthetic, the result is an interactive collage webpage. This artist already has had shows in several countries like Spain, Canada and Mexico.³ To show the possibilities of his net art, he usually presents his work in live performances.

¹ To define, describing, and understanding contemporary art and new techniques through typology, characteristics, identity, behavior, status and conservation strategies I recommend the INSIDE INSTALLATIONS GLOSSARY (2007) <http://glossary.inside-installations.org/categories.php>; accessed 26 May 2008.

² Geoff Lillemon is a Boston based surrealist working in the net art movement. In 2005 he had his first solo exhibition at the Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, was the "invité d'honneur" at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, performed his collaborative music project l'Orchestre de Oculart at CCCB Barcelona /OFFF, New York, Toronto, and Mexico. Recently, he has implemented his unique art into commercial success with award winning advertising agency Modernista as well as continuing to produce Oculart.com and exhibit internationally. http://www.fitc.ca/speaker_detail.cfm?festival_id=5&speaker_id=6164; accessed 25 May 2008.

³ ARTISTIC PROJECT OCULART (2004) www.Oculart.com; accessed 26 May 2008.



Geoff Lillemon, oculart.com copyright by the author

Claudia Kunin (L.A. 1954), uses in her artwork new techniques for digital prints: “anaglyph/lightjet prints” which are based on the optical phenomena of overlaying in order to achieve a three-dimensional effect based on the primary and secondary colors (anaglyph) using textiles. The artist experiments and transfers this result to a psychology level since she creates “phantoms” series. The results are related to Kunin’s formation who happens to be a psychologist as well,⁴ these represents an interesting combination for producing art.



⁴ ARTISTS WEBPAGE (2008) <http://www.claudiakunin.com/>; accessed 26 May 2008.
<http://www.berezin.com/3d/3dglases.htm#Anaglyph>; accessed 26 May 2008.

Lillemon and Kunin work show the problem for exhibition and interpreting this kind of artwork nowadays. Internet and interactive projects present different problems for example technological obsolescence and the necessity of software update or the artist presence to perform his own work, stating a question of using strategies like migration or emulation for presenting it in the future. In the specific case of Kunin, her digital prints (objects) and her webpage and online images, in my opinion are two different artworks, these means; through the Internet platform the same artwork can have a massive dissemination, use and a specific aesthetic, in the other hand we can see in the photographic objects another characteristics: dimensions, texture and appearance, so we need to understand artist's intent in order to respect it.

Let us now proceed to review the second way for contemporary photography.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEDIUM FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF EPHEMERAL OR NON-PERMANENT ART PROJECTS OR ARTWORKS

The feeling or impression caused by observing an image (analogical or digital) that forms part of the documentation of an artwork or project⁵ will not be the same as if it was the original event, because many of this kind of artworks are produced during live performances, nevertheless photography, as an object and witness, can get us closer to another time, impression and feeling.

In my experience working with ephemeral or non permanent art, where the object does not have a value itself but the message that wants to be communicated becomes more important, normally photography represents the only way (medium) to preserve and have access to it in the present and future. Ysbrand Hummelen explains "*for*

⁵ Documentation of contemporary art could represent photographic register, drawings, diaries, books, texts, any object used by the artist becomes part of the documentation process.

many contemporary artists, durability is less important than and plays a secondary role to the power of expression in an artwork”⁶

As an example let us consider the documentation project and exhibition for the site specific installation “*Dialogía visual IP*” for the “*Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros*”⁷ a Mexican museum in Mexico City, in July 2007, where an interdisciplinary work between conservators (Jo Ana Morfin and myself) and the artist have been done.

The artist Victor Lerma (Mexico, 1955), defines the project as:

Intervening public spaces inhabited by specific audiences. In the case of the modernist museum-workshop Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros (Mexican Muralist), the project unites artistic and scientific values, the act of discovering and bury whatever shows the aspects, interventions and architectonic modifications which will be discovered through cross sections made by Lerma and his team⁸

The conservation work consisted on making a register and documenting the artwork, making the cross sections as well as the analysis, identification and observation of the materials conforming the walls in the building. Since it is an ephemeral intervention, its’ preservation and understanding will be through documentation; why, with what and how is going to be presented in the future, are theoretical aspects which will be solved by contemporary conservation. In this case the artist decided to create a photographic register of the work process.

⁶ Hummelen Ysbrand, (1999) “Conservation of Contemporary Art” (1999) in Corzo M.A. (editor). *Mortality Immortality?, The legacy of contemporary art*, USA, The Getty Conservation Institute, p. 174.

⁷ Old Studio from the mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, now is a Musuem

⁸ Artist’s talk and opening exhibition “*Dialogía Visual IP*” Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City, July 2007. <http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/saps/>; accessed July 2007.



Victor Lerma, “Dialogia Visual II” Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros, Mexico, Julio 2007.

Cross sections, site specific intervention

Copyright by the autor



Victor Lerma, “Dialogia Visual II” Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros, Mexico, Julio 2007.

Artist’s talk and openinig

Copyright by the autor



Victor Lerma, “Dialogia Visual II” Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros, Mexico, Julio 2007.

Cross sections and photographic documentation

Copyright by the autor

The most important element of this multidisciplinary project is the result obtained by a direct collaboration with the artist, in order to build a conservation strategy; here we can see the methodological conservation work for making material’s research, as well the professional documentation work, which includes a photographic register, the artist made the designs and interpretation of each intervention, seven in total all around Siqueiro’s Studio. From this example we can conclude that each case or project will determine its’ own guidelines as well as the final result.

PRESERVATION

In my experience, it is people and not materials that are the greatest threat to the preservation of an artwork. Human behavior is the key element in conservation. Bill Viola⁹

⁹ Viola Bill, (1999). “Permanent Impermanence” in Corzo M.A. (editor) *Op. Cit.*, p.88.

We are still living nowadays the transition from analog to digital media. For contemporary photography and digital heritage it represents a rupture and fusion between media and mediums –mixed media, ways of access and use, stating a reflection towards information, its conservation, context and use. Allain Depocas writes “*with the arrival of new technologies of information and digital media, the notions of ‘museum’, ‘library’, ‘archives’ or ‘documentation center’ will increasingly come together*”¹⁰, in this new context, the artworks and its documentation are inseparable”¹¹ for that reason an adequate conservation planning and strategies for the New Media are an urgent necessity. The memory of contemporary art is in danger, not just because of the non-permanent condition of the pieces, but for the difficult work of showing, studying, documenting, using them and preserving this media.

The American Library Association (ALA) defines:

Digital preservation combines policies, strategies and actions to ensure the accurate rendering of authenticated content over time, regardless of the challenges of media failure and technological change. Digital preservation applies to both born digital and reformatted content ¹²

In order to completely understand this change and act on the name of preservation it is necessary to answer the next questions. How are digital materials different? How are they produced? Who is in charge of its conservation? Who has to be involved with this work? It is important to remember that it is essential to fully understand the nature, production and meaning of these media in order to establish an adequate conservation plan,¹³ which needs to look forward three main aspects: ¹⁴

- Research -locating the relevant data-
- Preservation –perpetuating the data-, and

¹⁰ Depocas Allain. *Digital Preservation: Recording the Recording*. The Documentary Strategy, p. 2 http://www.aec.at/festival2001/texte/depocas_e.html; accessed 26 May 2008.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (ALA), <http://www.ala.org/ala/alcts/newslinks/digipres/index.cfm>; accessed 26 May 2008.

¹³ Jones M. and Beagrie N. (2001), *Preservation Management of Digital Materials*, London, British Library Cataloguing Data, England, p. 20.

¹⁴ Depocas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

- Dissemination -making the data available

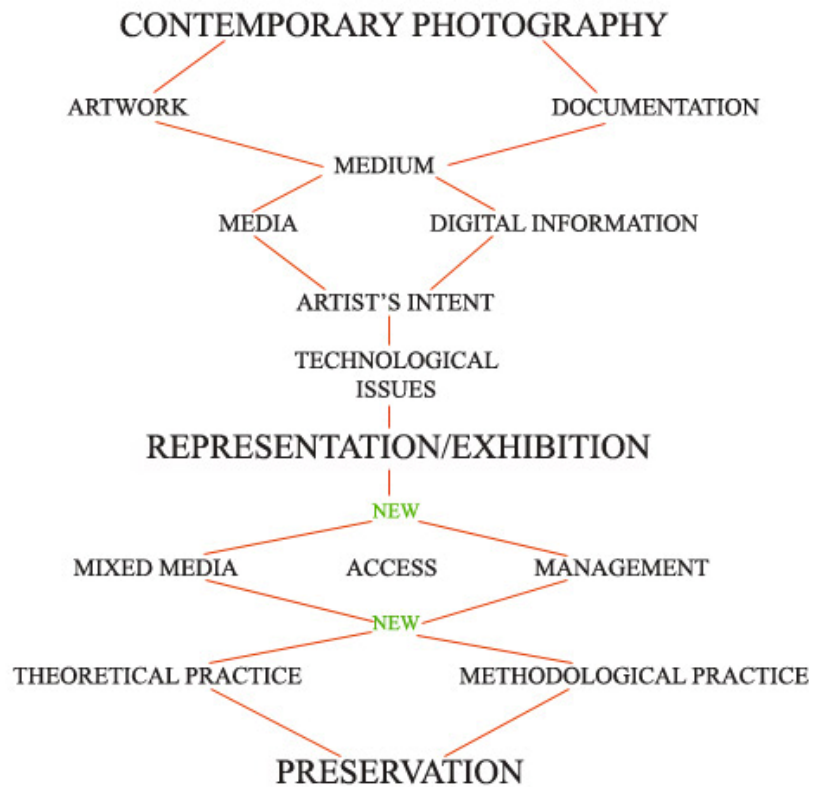
It is also necessary that the specialists document this information, as well they should value and disseminate in order to fulfill its teaching duty. Depocas states “*Documentation of New Media art must not be a mere illustration, but an interpretation, an attitude. And to reflect this attitude, the documentation must be based on a structure similar to that of its subject’s*”¹⁵ This means that documentation should have a clear and defined structure and conservation strategy, the work must be “recording the recording”, which means that continuous work is the key for preservation.

For the representation and exhibition of contemporary cultural heritage we need to realize that nowadays the public has a complete interactive participation through blogs, podcasts and new contents via Internet into curatorial and museum’s work, this situation changes the face of the exhibition, where artists and curators don’t have anymore the monopoly of art.¹⁶ That means that new contents and technology are already used for accessing to the culture inside and outside of the museum.

Lets resolve some questions and make a review of this paper, the next diagram resumes the structure:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Weibel M, Director of ZKM, Karlsruhe. Presentation at the professional workshop “Museum 2.0” Centre Pompidou 1 April 2008.



As a conclusion I present this diagram; it represents a new understanding of the interdisciplinary and professional work practice for curation and preservation of digital heritage as well contemporary cultural heritage:

PROFESSIONAL WORK

	Specialist	Interdisciplinary work	Result
PRESERVATION	Artist Conservator, Informatics scientist, etc	Consultant- production	Artwork
	Museographer, curator,, Art historian, conservator	Guidelines for an adequate exhibition, handling, management and storage	Exhibition, Catalogue
	Collector, gallery owner, artist, conservator	Guidelines for an adequate exhibition, handling, management, lending and storage - Artist's intent	Commercialization
	Scientist, Informatics specialist, art historian, conservator	Research on deterioration processes, materials	Specialized studies, catalogue and exhibition

It is possible to identify the group-work with other specialists in different moments that are essential to the understanding of an artwork: its production and creation, dissemination, exhibition, acquisition and finally specialized studies.

I emphasize the reflection made by video artist Bill Viola, who states “*future curators in the field could take on the function of the interpreter or ‘conductor’ of the work*”¹⁷ in my opinion we are in front of a new specialist called “conservator-curator” since presentation for contemporary cultural heritage means looking forward it’s preservation.

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¹⁷ Viola Bill, (1999). “Permanent Impermanence” in Corzo M.A. (editor) *Op. Cit.*, p.89.

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