

GROWTH RINGS AND DIGITAL PRESERVATION

Three meditations on strategies to preserve performance-dependent items

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Abstract – This short paper consists of three meditations on potentially fruitful concepts for the preservation of performance-dependent heritage derived from a study of the use of 1970s media art. The meditations cover the following topics: 1) there are aspects to ritual that can guide principles for digital preservation, relevant to digital preservation as an aspirational conceptual model in which a goal for digital preservation is to strive for the resilience that rituals have; 2) as a result of use, growth rings that reflect that use can be added to items as a form of enriched metadata; and 3) in literary translations, ‘clouds of meaning’ can be shared with readers by showing both the original and the translation, an argument in support of end-user systems that reveal aspects of the original digital object as well as the iterative forms it takes in the process of maintaining it over time. Some future users will want to understand not just the content of item that has undergone migration or emulation, they will want to investigate that process itself, able to interrogate both the original item and its iterations.

Keywords – media art; audiovisual preservation; participatory archiving; digital preservation; metadata
Conference Topics – Sub-theme 1: Exploring the New Horizons; Sub-theme 4: Building the Capacity & Capability.

I. BACKGROUND

This short paper puts forward three concepts drawn from research into the role of use in preserving media art from the 1970s. Three

inconclusive but potentially fruitful concepts are described. The three concepts are best understood as meditations, in-depth reflections derived from fieldwork that involved testing a ‘user’s manual’ created through a process of re-enactment for a 1970s artwork, British artist Guy Sherwin’s *Man with Mirror*. Their relevance to digital preservation is to begin, an explanation of the research from which they emerged is required.

From 2014-21 during PhD research, I looked closely at a case of media art that is poorly served by recording and digitisation. I used this case to explore a hypothesis that use had the potential to ‘give back’ to the original item and strengthen it.

The reason my case study artwork is difficult to capture through recording (and therefore digitisation and digital preservation) is because it relies up the combination of a recorded performance and a live performance by the same person.

I introduced my research at iPRES 2016 in a poster titled ‘Caring for Live Art that Eludes Digital Preservation’. This paper shares three concepts relevant to principles of digital preservation beyond those early findings [1].

The artwork that formed my case study is *Man with Mirror* (Guy Sherwin, 1976 –). A summary description helps explain why recording a performance of it misses capturing the work completely. Guy Sherwin films himself on Hampstead Heath in 1976. He carries out a particular choreography involving a white backed mirror. Later

he performs with his film projected onto him, repeating the choreography, still holding the white backed mirror. The mirror now doubles as a fickle film screen, by turns white side to the audience and then mirrored side. For the audience, the thrill of this work is the poetic doubling of live Guy with film Guy.

A reminiscence by film and performance scholar Duncan White (in conversation with Guy Sherwin), describes White's first encounter with *Man with Mirror* on video. White's recollection of this first encounter provides a vivid way to understand *Man with Mirror*.

Duncan: I remember when I first saw it ... I saw the video. And I was quite blown away ... I think mostly because of the disorientation of it ... The projection screen, which you assume is this fixed thing. Just the way [the image] was scattered around and fragmented. It was kind of – the disorientation was not intoxicating but just unlike anything.

Guy: Intriguing.

Duncan: But it was so simple as well. And that's the other thing. It was quite hard at points to work out what was – where the mirror was or which way round things were. What was up and what was down. So, it's striking. [2]

Man with Mirror belongs to an area of art practice from the mid 1960s into the 1970s known as expanded cinema (resurging in contemporary practice since about 2005). Expanded cinema explores the 'situation' of cinema [3], rejecting a passive one-way relationship for the audience in which they are absorbed with the narrative unfolding on a single screen. In *Man with Mirror* the mirror-screen that Guy holds both in the film and again in the live performance intermittently faces the audience. It intermittently catches the projector beam and moves the image over the audience and around the room in which the performance takes place. At other moments, the audience sees themselves in the mirror.

Traits common to expanded cinema exemplified in *Man with Mirror* are that these works

activate the space between the audience, the projection equipment, the screen (and lack of it) and the space in which the event occurs, no longer a given that it takes place in a purpose-built cinema.

My relationship with *Man with Mirror* starts back in 2009 re-enacting the piece in my work in an artist-archivist collaboration under the *nom de plume* Teaching and Learning Cinema (TLC) with artist Lucas Ihlein and myself as archivist. (We carried out re-enactments of expanded cinema over a ten-year period work that is ongoing, although intermittent.) This experience drew my attention to the problems for performance-dependent heritage. As we carried out this re-enactment, we recorded our experience and how we did the work in a user's manual. The research that informs these three meditations begins after the manual was created. The fieldwork involved testing that manual. One test site involved an artist testing the manual with support from TLC (Ihlein and myself). The second site involved a group of artists working alone with just the manual. These tests formed the object of my study.

Preservation literature that informed my ideas about recording accounts of performance-dependent objects as important ways to strengthen and thereby preserve them included work using object biography by Renée van de Vall and colleagues.¹ I drew Sanneke Stigter's formulation that while change is usually anathema in conservation, in contemporary art conservation, a shift in mindset is called for, a shift to 'ensuring an artwork's progression in time rather than its conservation' [4]. I drew on Hannah Hölling's concept of artwork that is subject to 'changeability', works that are constituted and reconstituted from the records about them [5]. Just the objects without their archives would have left Hölling and colleagues immobilised.

My manual concepts also took account of the many projects to record artworks prone to change noting classics such as Depocas, Ippolito and Jones [6] and Laurenson [7] and recent work on conserving performance such as discussions from the 2016 symposium *Collecting and Conserving Performance Art* [8].

¹ New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (2009-13), Maastricht University, the University of Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage

<https://www.incca.org/articles/research-programme-new-strategies-conservation-contemporary-art>

My credentials in archives and media art informed this project. I have practiced in both areas for over 20 years. As an archivist I worked in audiovisual preservation, and in government information and digital recordkeeping. As a media artist I work in hand-processed and hand-made film in 8mm and 16mm film. My re-enactment work with my colleague on projects such as *(Wo)Man with Mirror* drew these two areas together.

II. MEDITATION ONE: PERFORMANCE STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT RITUAL CAN INFORM DIGITAL PRESERVATION

Given my background, digital preservation informed my thinking and shaped my PhD investigation. I described my case of Sherwin's *Man with Mirror* as an instance of performance-dependent heritage, defined as a spectrum of material from USB keys holding Word documents on one end to a case like *Man with Mirror* involving technology and performance on the other. Common to the items I described as performance-dependent is that they rely upon performance to be themselves completely. So in the case of the *Man with Mirror*, that work relies upon the performance of technology in the form of a super 8 film and super 8 projector, along with the presence of artist Guy Sherwin, using his body to perform in real time. In the case of a USB key and a Word document, they are relying on the performance of the hardware, software and metadata together producing the performance of that document. There is an expectation that those two things are extremely different, the digital file has a very reliable code that produces the same thing, the other has an unreliable code prone to variation, and that variation is desirable. My analogy between the USB drive and a live performance involving technology and a set of rules is limited to connecting them as performance dependent heritage.

I draw on work by performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider. She explains that when there is a scriptive thing, a composition in code, the performance becomes evidence that code persists. It is evidence that knowledge of that compositional device remains current. Her example is religious rituals that have continued for a long time. Each performance of those rituals is evidence that knowledge persists [8].

Reflecting on Schneider as I wrote up my fieldwork, I noted that a challenge is to find a way to

bring the robust nature of the mini ritual to digital records. So what are the qualities of that mini ritual that make it robust? Is it that many people know it and that many people practice it? If so, that is about repetition. Does repetition in multiple places by multiple people strengthen it? My research performed a micro-test of this idea and concluded it does. The potential to repeat the form was set down in a manual and that was repeated across two sites but the potential is that unlimited repetitions could occur.

So how does that work at scale? Is that relevant for an email sent by an executive last week? That is questionable but that concept of lots of repetition, lots of distributed nodes so that the information is repeated in multiple places, is that part of what makes things strong? The principle of migrating digital items and storing them in different locations is well accepted in digital preservation [9]. The nuance I drew out from Schneider that has potential application to digital preservation is that the rituals are performed, the code is used. So if we have performance dependent items, which I am arguing includes digital items that rely upon technological performance, if their survival is to have the robustness of a ritual like the liturgy, then repetition and use of that code in multiple places may be goals to strive for.

Another source of strength in Schneider's example is that to perform a religious ritual, the usual expectation is that those involved do not consult a recording or script to perform them. The knowledge of them lives in human experience of those who have seen or performed them. They also live in the imagination of those who have heard about them. Technological failure is not a factor in this model. The potential lesson for digital preservation here is that there is a limit to what can be recorded and therefore a limit to the scope of digital preservation. There are certain kinds of knowledge best transmitted into the domain of human experience and imagination. Evidence of these limitations are significant for digital preservation to support setting realistic public expectations about what can be kept in digital form, curbing what I identify is the public perception that everything can be digitized.

Another source of strength affirmed by this example of religious rituals is that they can be expressed relatively freely, supported by protocols around their use. In my case study, Sherwin's blessing as the original artist was key to these

experiments and as the project progressed, protocols emerged for aspects that were essential to him (for example, awareness for the audience that they were experiencing a re-enactment).

In the model of ritual, items remain strong because they combine the commons with protocol, widely known but still anchored to a guiding ethos. This section concludes suggesting there are aspects to ritual that may meaningfully guide principles for digital preservation.

III. MEDITATION TWO: GROWTH RING AS A SIGN OF USE AND THEREFORE AN INDICATOR OF DIGITAL GOOD HEALTH

Emerging from this research was the concept of metadata as a form of growth ring. Like a tree grows new rings around the heart wood reflecting the conditions during the time it grows, making and deploying the user's manual for *Man with Mirror* adds new growth rings to it. My research resolved that the manual made while re-enacting Sherwin's *Man with Mirror*, and then the subsequent use of that manual by others, produced new works that were both not *Man With Mirror* but also not **not** *Man With Mirror*.² They produced new knowledge about both Sherwin's work (for example what it consisted of or what modifications fundamentally changed it) and about the users and their situation (for example continuing to use super 8 or deciding to move to digital are both conscious choices that shine a light on the manual users' relationship with technology). As the manual users form new experiences of *Man with Mirror*, they also add those experiences to the manual literally as additions to it. The production of the manual itself, and the use of it by other users who also add to it, become growth rings around Sherwin's work.

To put this another way in language more familiar to digital preservation, the growth rings are enriched metadata. They are data about *Man with Mirror*.

What does this idea of growth rings contribute to digital preservation?

These rings form as a result of use. If each performance contributes a growth ring, then each growth ring is effectively *a sign of health*, a sign that the compositional code is strong. So this enriched-metadata-as-growth-rings is a health checking

system. It is a way of knowing about the health of that object through the volume of use it might have. When that use results in a growth ring, intrinsically connected to that original they have potential as a health characteristic. Is this piece of data achieving growth rings? Is it being used? Does that tell us something about the health of this piece of data? Movement remains important to our understanding of digital preservation. If the data is moving, it is used and it is still capable of being repurposed, migrated and moved around. So perhaps metadata is growth rings has potential as an early warning system. Of course there are parallels with existing protocols for checking data completeness but what this model adds is emphasising gathering data from the use process.

IV. MEDITATION THREE: TRANSLATION

My final meditation is about models that might apply from literary translation. My research concluded that stories of use can be captured as growth rings, wrapping around the original, different in themselves but not changing the original within. Those growth rings provide information about that original, they are effectively a form of metadata.

So what does that mean in a digital preservation sense? If you emulate or migrate something, you keep your source record. You record that process of migration or emulation and you hope your system captures the metadata effectively to link the two. But the user's experience focuses on the emulated or migrated object. It is not a matter of course that the user experiences both things at once, most of the time the user doesn't need or want to know that Word 1997 produced the PDF/A they are now consulting. However my research shows there are instances in which what is insightful is exactly that journey from one iteration to the next. I show that there are instances where audiences and users want to understand that they are seeing both Sherwin's *Man with Mirror* at the same time as seeing for example TLC's *(Wo)Man with Mirror* (2009 -) (that is the title of TLC's re-enactment of Sherwin's work). I also noted Sherwin also wants audiences to have this awareness, adding an ethical dimension for the performer-re-enactor.

If we think about an allied discipline of translation, some audiences want to encounter just the content,

²This formulation 'not not' belongs to Rebecca Schneider, see [10] page 42.

translated so they can understand it. What I am suggesting is that for some users, the chance to interrogate that process of translation itself is where the richness lies, as for some translators, in poetry for example, mandatory is presenting the original text adjacent to the new translation so that the clouds of meaning that hover in the translation process are available for investigation by the user [11]. In this metadata-as-growth-rings-model, the original lies within, a new ring around it. Users and audiences are able to discern this both-things-at-once experience.

So there are three points in this paper. The first point is that the model of the mini ritual points to the value of code, understood as an intelligible form of the content, used in or from multiple storage places. This potentially extends the digital preservation workflow to encompass intelligible use from different storage environments to draw out the kind of strength that rituals have.

The second thing is metadata as growth rings. I propose that enriching preserved metadata over time by capturing the story of how an item has been used acts like a growth ring, strengthening the item. That use is a sign of health. When this metadata is thin or absent, it may act as an early-warning system, alerting us to check the health of those items.

And thirdly, I'm drawing attention to the potential of positioning that original face-to-face with its translation so that process of translation and the authorship involved is an object of study in its own right. This applies to migration decisions in the digital preservation workflow. We make that process part of what the new work becomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My PhD research was conducted in the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra under the supervision of Professor Ross Gibson. Key contributors to the fieldwork were scholar and artist Dr Lucas Ihlein and artists Laura Hindmarsh and Sean Curham. Other participants included artists Melissa Lang and Joe Jowitt, anthropologist Diana Glazebrook, cinematographer Peter Humble and citizen- performer Valerie Liddle.

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