Caring For Live Art That Eludes Digital Preservation

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ABSTRACT

This poster outlines my research on strategies of re-enactment to keep alive artworks that rely on performance. While digital documentation for some of these works circulates, the live nature of the works means they evade meaningful digitisation. In an artist/archivist collaboration, Teaching and Learning Cinema, myself and colleague Dr Lucas Ihlein have evolved three principal ways to bring these works from the original artists through to future generations – direct engagement with the original artist, extensive documentation of the re-enactment process and the formulation of new 'expressive' instructions.

This approach resonates with a newly ignited discussion in Australia about how the conservation profession can effectively reach beyond institutions to communities. This work suggests that empowering communities to find their own solutions to intergenerational transmission means the process of preservation becomes part of the cultural product, a preservation of doing.

Keywords

Archives, cultural collections, intangible cultural heritage, re-enactment, contemporary art.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the Australian artist/archivist collaboration Teaching and Learning Cinema (TLC) has been working with live artworks made by artists in previous generations. These are artworks that were made to be experienced live and made without concern about how future generations might be able to experience them. While institutions increasingly collect and preserve works that include ephemeral elements like video or degrading materials, the situation is different for works that are made to be experienced live. In 2016, the conservation profession in particular is engaging with this problem. Discussions about the preservation of embodied knowledge that takes the form performance and other kinds of ephemeral art are the focus of two international conservation meetings this year, IIC in Los Angeles and a conservation profession symposium in German [1]. This communicates the urgency and interest about the problems of keeping alive cultural heritage whose essence is other than a tangible object.

This word 'essence' links us to digital preservation where we expect an essence attached to performance layers and carriers. In the case of the live art TLC is concerned with, the works are scattered both physically and intellectually. TLC's experience points to a way to bring this scattered essence together. While TLC's work engages with resolutely analogue examples, it sheds light on how such a process could also occur with digital essences that may defy what have become expected digital preservation pathways.

2. EXPANDED CINEMA AND THE PRESERVATION PROBLEM

TLC's work is concerned with a subset of live art, film performance artworks known as Expanded Cinema. These works combined experimental film with live performance. Their lineage in 20th century art lies in performance art, conceptual art and early media art and installation [2].

While part of these Expanded Cinema works consist of tangible objects such as 16mm film or super 8, there are no instructions for the work and the knowledge about it is distributed, for example between the original artist, film archives and other collections.

To illustrate this, in 2013, TLC visited British film artist Malcolm Le Grice who had decided it was time to 'train a stand-in' [3] for his work *Horror Film 1* (1971), a work for multiple 16mm projections and performer.

At first glance, we could presume that *Horror Film 1* is safe for the future – Le Grice still performs it, social media captures his recent past performances, a film archive has video documentation of it along with the film raw materials and other archives hold programs, photographs and correspondence about its early performances and material about the scene in London it emerged from. Yet none of these material traces about *Horror Film 1* can stand in for the experience of the work itself.

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING CINEMA RE-ENACTMENTS

TLC began re-enacting Expanded Cinema works so that we could experience them for ourselves. The works that we are drawn to have emerged from the scene around the London Film Makers' Co-op in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While there has been an international resurgence of interest in these works[1] and the original artists continue to perform them, there is little access to performances of them for Australian audiences.[2] Our distance from London contributed to the logic of re-enacting the works in the first place [4], re-enactment making little sense if we had ready access to performances of the works by the original artists.

From our evolving process, three consistent approaches have emerged: direct engagement with the original artist, extensive documentation of the process and formulating 'expressive' instructions.

Our 2009 project on British artist Guy Sherwin's *Man With Mirror* (1976) sets out this process of direct engagement with the original artist – a straight forward process of gauging his interest and forging connections with him. His positive response led to him stepping us through the work during a visit he made to Australia in 2008. This direct transmission from Sherwin to TLC made it possible for us to make sense of the resources brought together from our research eg we found

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[1] In 2002, a major retrospective film program and research project entitled *Shoot Shoot Shoot, The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative and British Avant-Garde Film 1966-76*, launched at Tate Modern and embarked on a world wide tour.

[2] An exception to this is work by Australian artist group OtherFilm who toured Guy Sherwin, Malcolm Le Grice and other moving image artists to Australia from 2008-10.

diagrams and other descriptions of the series of movements the work requires that are performed with a mirror. It was not until we spent the short time under Guy's tuition that we could make real sense of this material.

The second part of our approach involves extensive documentation of our process using a blog to record diary-type entries of our experience and to capture knowledge of the structure and technical details of the work as they emerge. Examples of entries include drawings, photographs and digitised archival material we locate in our research along with reflections on the work as it unfolds. This has several impacts. It captures our decision points, where inevitable deviations from the original work occur. These points become critical for us as part of the new artwork we create through the re-enactment, making transparent where and why these decision points have occurred. An example of this is the decision to include two performers in our re-enactment of *Man With Mirror* – TLC's re-enactment became *(Wo)Man With Mirror*. This apparently minor change shifts the emphasis substantially from Sherwin's original – for example audiences read the piece as a commentary on male female relations, not relevant in Sherwin's original. In capturing our decision points, there is a record of how our knowledge about the work unfolded, akin to the reversible treatments in preservation.

For *(Wo)Man with Mirror*, we then captured this knowledge in the form of a user's manual that set out context for the work, background about Sherwin along with step-by-step instructions to put the work together. In 2016, we worked with a young artist, Laura Hindmarsh, to use the user's manual. This highlighted its gaps as 'expressive instructions', to use American philosopher Richard Sennett's phrase, points where the manual failed to overcome the gap between instructive language and the body [5].

4. TLC'S RE-ENACTMENTS AS PRESERVATION AND AS A PLATFORM FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY

TLC's approach resonates with a newly ignited discussion in Australia about how preservation services can effectively reach communities beyond institutions. In 1995, Australia was ground-breaking in embracing a national preservation policy. A recent call to revisit this policy in part responds to the situation where preservation work occurs predominantly within institutions and proposes measures to expand this work into the wider community [6]. The proactive labour of re-enactment puts the available resources to work to make an iteration of these artworks, behaving as a practical form of preservation.

The *(Wo)Man With Mirror* user's manual engaged another artist, expanding the community that cares about this work and now engages in seeing it survive in the future. The user's manual points the way to the process of re-enacting the work as one of community building. This suggests that part of the solution to the problem of preservation is for communities to care for their important stuff themselves. The work of TLC is one example of how we might transmit our work from one generation to the next in an iterative process where the work is an opportunity for community building in and of itself. The work is no longer the invisible professional work of the conservator but an active engagement with the work and the documentation of that engagement becomes both the work and its preservation – a preservation of doing.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

6. REFERENCES

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