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Museums Seek Methods for Preserving Digital Art

By SCOTT CARLSON

Museums are accustomed to holding and preserving a variety of old art, such as vases from Mesopotamia or busts of Roman emperors. Those works exist in durable materials that curators know how to preserve -- fired clay and stone.

With digital works, preservation is a bit more tricky. Several museums are organizing to recommend methods for preserving digital art -- works that deal in light, code, and constantly changing technology. The project seeks to create a historical record of an art form that barely has any history at all, and that constantly threatens to slip away.

The project, called Archiving the Avant Garde, will establish a set of guidelines for museums, galleries, and artists who wish to preserve their digital works, along with other hard-to-preserve pieces, such as installation art and performance art. A diverse group of museums are involved in the project, including the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, which is associated with the University of California at Berkeley; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; Rhizome.org; the Franklin Furnace Archive; and the Cleveland Performance Art Festival and Archive.

"This is, as far as I know, the first real network of organizations dedicated to trying to deal with conceptual media, variable media, new media -- these things that are hard to document and catalog," says Mark Tribe, the executive director of Rhizome.org, an organization that supports and shows online art. "They are unlike a drawing, which is a stable object with existing standards about how to document it and preserve it."

Archiving the Avant Garde will propose a number of rules and techniques to preserve digital art. Mr. Tribe outlines four different strategies that will be discussed in the project: documentation, emulation, migration, and recreation. Documentation, a preservation strategy used with other art forms, would record the work in snapshots and descriptions.

The other strategies might be unique to new-media art. Migration, for example, would replace the outdated computer code of a work with new code that could be run on a newer machine. Emulation would make a new computer use the software of an older one, allowing it to show an old digital artwork. In some cases, however, a work can't be migrated or emulated, so curators might need to use descriptions and documents to recreate the work.

"The idea that you might recreate, migrate, or emulate an art work is completely foreign, almost antithetical, to standard archival practices," Mr. Tribe says. For example, he says, curators would never try to recreate a Rembrandt piece in digital or three-dimensional form.

The museums involved in the project will do case studies of particular works, but the project will mainly concern itself with laying down rules for preservation, and generally will not engage in specific preservation projects. The project is scheduled to issue a report within two years. During that time, members of the project will discuss preservation techniques with other museums and with artists.

Mr. Tribe wants to prevent a hole from forming in art's history. "The history of new-media art is pretty short," Mr. Tribe says, but major galleries have already begun collecting it. "It is widely recognized. Major funders support it, major institutions exhibit and collect it."

"My feeling is that the most significant cultural practices are going on in" new-media art, he adds. "At the turn of the last century, photography and film were very new and not widely recognized as viable art forms. But we look back at that time period, and some of the most important work was done during that time. I wouldn't be surprised if the new-media art of this period rose to the top."
