BEST PRACTICE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF 88 CRT-TVs?

Technical feasibilities reflected on Nam June Paik’s Fish Flies on Sky

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INTRODUCTION

In conservation of technology based artworks best practice comprises a range of options, which include the repair, replacement, migration and emulation of an artwork’s defective parts as well as its preservation as a relic. (Bel, 2011) All options that maintain a work’s function consequently also influence its material integrity to a greater or lesser extent. Due to the obsolescence of technical equipment, like cathode ray tube televisions (CRT-TVs), some of the strategies seem to be restricted others may contradict the work’s identities and (traditional) conservation ethical considerations.

CASE STUDY

Nam June Paik’s multi-monitor-installation Fish Flies on Sky (1985/95) consists of 88 CRT-TVs, suspended from the ceiling. With an operating time of more than 20 years, the 1995 re-installation has now exceeded its predicted lifespan, which is manifested by increasing failure rates of electronic components and particularly by worn out CRTs. An interdisciplinary team examined and evaluated the technical feasibility of the above conservation options (Imhoff, 2014) and reflected on their ethical basis (Giebeler et al., 2016).

CONSERVATION OPTIONS

1. EMULATION: Two different concepts of emulating CRT-TVs have been realized and tested. The prototype, which involves a rear projection appears to be a potentially convincing substitute to maintain the work’s appearance, but already shows a disproportional cost-benefit ratio and impacts significantly on the material integrity.

2. MIGRATION: Even though Paik agreed with migrating technology 1, this appears not to be an option for Fish Flies on Sky. The CRT’s specific sculptural quality and its “look and feel” is an essential feature which defines the artwork’s context of transposition and temporal location. Migration also involves the problem of technological obsolescence, as suitable flat screen displays are no longer readily available and are short lived.

3. REPLACEMENT: Numerous matching new and used CRT-TVs have been traced. However, all of the few remaining stocks with sufficient amounts of CRT-TVs were produced in the 2000s and therefore are of rather poor quality. They would require an intensive preparation for the museum environment and permanent maintenance, a service which is barely available. This strategy might be appropriate for smaller installations, but again depends on obsolete technology.

4. REPAIR: In a repair procedure called “tube rebuilding”, which derives from the zenith of CRT production and service, all the exhausted material from a CRT is exchanged. This intervention not only technically renews the life expectancy of a tube, but also allows to introduce additional material, which prolongs its lifetime far in excess of the manufacturer’s specifications (> 35 years). In collaboration with a specialized technician this approach has been successfully conducted in a pilot project and is planned to be applied to preserve Fish Flies on Sky for the next decades.

CONCLUSIONS

Weighing of conservation options demonstrates that all approaches currently share similar restrictions regarding their availability or technical feasibility. Still, it was possible to implement and test each of them, allowing the following evaluation:

1. EMULATION and MIGRATION reproduce the problem of technical obsolescence and are therefore NOT RECOMMENDED. Both options depend on new technologies, which are subject to rapidly changing innovation cycles, while their sustainability and maintainability deteriorate. Ethically these strategies may be regarded as critical, as the artwork is threatened by becoming increasingly uprooted and disconnected from its original state.

2. REPLACEMENTS are HARDLY AVAILABLE due to the declining market for CRT-TVs. Life cycle assessments show, that the technological change of display devices is mostly completed. This also applies to the trading of remnants stocks and the second-hand market, where larger numbers of identical CRT-TVs are hardly available. There still is an active CRT industry in the Far East, but its (poor) product quality is designed for the home market.

3. REPAIR is compliant with the traditional code of ethics, but also HARDLY AVAILABLE. Neglecting „preservation as a relic“ this option appears to be most suited to reconcile conflicting demands like an authentic appearance and the material integrity of the artwork. Unfortunately, the service infrastructure was mostly lost to the collapse of the CRT market.

4. TUBE REBUILDING - A PERSPECTIVE? Obsolescence results from a general technological progress, which is clearly exceeding conservators’ competence and possibilities of influence. However, with reach and much more promising than preserving an artworks technical part itself, is the preservation of some service infrastructure that a technology depends on. The last of their profession have to be connected to a new patronage before their craft, wisdom and experience are also lost to obsolescence. We suggest that this strategy should be supported by combined institutional efforts.

REFERENCES AND NOTES


IIC 2016 Los Angeles Congress: Saving the Now: Crossing Boundaries to Conserving Contemporary Works