

Conservation and Documentation of New Media Art

by Laura Barreca

The debate around the conservation and documentation of New Media Art has been internationally developed, due to the increase of the use of ephemeral media, new technologies and other non-traditional materials used in the contemporary art field during the 20th century, and especially since the Sixties.

Preserving New Media Art has been a challenge for museums and contemporary art institutions collecting electronic and conceptual artworks since the early Nineties. The physical lifetime of New Media Artwork --including Digital Art, Internet Art, Multimedia Art, Software Art, Video Art, Installation Art [we would suggest not capitalizing these terms], and in general artworks that incorporate elements of new technology-- is shorter than that of traditional works of art. In terms of conservation, the strategies applied for painting, sculpture and drawing seem inappropriate for unstable or *variable* media, due to factors such as hardware and software decay and the obsolescence of technological devices that make it difficult to provide strategies of conservation for New Media artworks. Moreover the documentation of the artist's intent should be considered as guiding principles for conservation. Museums interview artists, recording as much of the data as possible about the artwork. Today the artist is much more involved in the process of conservation, because without good documentation of the artwork it's difficult to present the work again in the future.

In 2005 the Serbian-Dutch artist Marina Abramovic declared: "That's such a delicate thing, how far you can go in the compromise without changing the meaning of the work, and how much living artists have to be aware of that and give as close instructions for preservation of that kind of work as possible. What is our responsibility once we are not there?" The documentation is connected with the issues of authenticity, authorship and the medium in a discussion of performance.

The new *status* of contemporary artwork depends upon new factors such as time, context, and the relationship among the artwork, the public and the place. In this perspective the preservation process must to respect the "functional significance," but also the "cultural significance" where the artist's intent resides.

In the last decades, the international debate around the long-term preservation of New Media Art has been covered mostly in America, Canada, Great Britain, Germany and The Netherlands, thanks to a network of museums and public institutions that have been investing resources for the preservation of permanent collections of contemporary art, making them accessible in the future. Many projects and initiatives have been focused on common strategies, protocols and theoretical guidelines for the preservation and documentation of New Media Art.

In 1993 a network of 11 international institutions under the organization of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage worked on the "Decision Making Model" a method for the conservation of contemporary art, a structure that includes the "Model for data registration" and the "Model for condition registration." The project research was presented in 1997 for the international symposium "Modern Art: Who Cares?" organized by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art and held in Amsterdam. The conference was the culmination of a case-study-based research project that put artists together with conservators, art historians, materials scientists, philosophers, lawyers, arts managers, and critics to develop conservation theory and practice. Between 1999 and 2002 the INCCA-International Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art was founded as a platform for exchanging information and sharing the knowledge of conservation.

In 2007 the Tate London started the project Media Matters, describing the tools for recording data and information of variable media artworks. All the templates for the data registration of installation art, film and video, and time-based media artworks are on the website of the Tate London.

Although extensive knowledge on the restoration and conservation of traditional art forms has been produced in Italy, it must be admitted that, as regards artwork of the 20th century, Italian public

institutions have offered only limited participation in the international debate on conservation of new media art. Although Cesare Brandi's *Theory of Restoration* (1963), which is considered the best theoretical guide for the conservation process, refers primarily to paintings, frescoes, sculptures, archeological pieces and other forms of traditional art, I am convinced that some of those principles remain applicable to the preservation of contemporary art, or they could at least be an interesting starting point in the process of conservation strategies. At the same time, we now recognize the need to connect the Italian approach with the international strategies developed in the last 15 years.

A primary aim of museums is to document and preserve the artwork in its physical appearance, but it is also essential in documenting the artist's intent, that in contemporary practices means understanding the specific nature of the work through its historical and aesthetic significance.

Among others, this relationship (*historical instance* and *aesthetic instance*) is one of the most interesting principles that Cesare Brandi stressed in his book. The historical instance is the time of the artwork; the aesthetic instance is the meaning impressed by the artist. Brandi's is a theoretical text and it is based upon some fundamental philosophical concepts which can be adopted as a guideline for the preservation of new media art.