

**Introduction**

For the last few decades museums have been collecting installation art works produced with non-traditional materials and media, such as video, film, computers, light and sound. Preserving these works raises numerous questions. The rapid outdating of media technologies, interactivity, and the site-specific character of installations present a challenge to commonly accepted views on long-term preservation, documentation and presentation. Relatively little research has been conducted in this field, and the problems demand a very specific approach in comparison with traditional forms of art. Authenticity and outdating, artistic intention, and interpretation are important factors which play a role in decision-making on conservation measures. Setting up an installation satisfactorily requires in-depth insight into the artist's working method, collaboration with technical specialists and the intentions, and significance of the materials and techniques. Preservation of conceptual art or kinetic art, for example, is becoming increasingly common in museums, but there are no guidelines or manuals as to how it should be done. It is very important that methods and ethical views should be developed specifically for the conservation of modern art. Preservation goes much further than simply conserving the physical object; in fact, for installation art simple conservation may even be fatal. Unlike kinetic art, installations are often not self-destructive, but due to the use of widely varying media technologies installations are just as perishable. A museum that wants to present its installations again after a few years, let alone decades, of preservation, should be prepared for severe disappointment. Without instructions, without accurate registration and with outdated equipment, re-installation can prove to be a huge dilemma. In 2002 the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) and the Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo/Time Based Arts conducted a joint study of a dilemma of this kind: the re-installation of a complex multimedia installation called 'Virus of Sadness' by the Dutch artist Lydia Schouten. The objective of this study was to compile a list of the specific problems involved in the documentation, registration, preservation and presentation of installations. The results of the study and a subsequent expert meeting led to a plan for an international and interdisciplinary project.

**Installation project**

In June 2004 the project 'Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art' officially started. In this project, which is taking place in the framework of the EU programme Culture 2000, a total of 30 museums and institutions in six European countries are working together to study the management and preservation of installations. The partners in the project are conducting research in the form of case studies. Thirty complex multimedia installations including works by Bill Viola, Jason Rhoades, Jeffrey Shaw and Nam June Paik have been selected. The installation project is one of the initiatives of the 'International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art' (INCCA), which since 2002 has served as a platform for the exchange of knowledge and information in the area of the management and preservation of contemporary art. ICN is the co-ordinator of INCCA and also the main co-ordinator of this new European project. Five co-organisers are involved in the organisation and execution of the project and work with museums in the participating countries: Tate in England, Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf in Germany, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst in Belgium, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Spain and the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art in The Netherlands. By sharing their experiences, the partners are collaborating to develop guidelines for the preservation, re-installation and documentation of installation art. Results of the study and registrations of the installations will also be made accessible to the general public through the websites of the museums and institutions involved. The Collections Department of ICN and Montevideo are jointly responsible for one of the case studies. At present the subject of this case study can be seen at the exhibition 'Moving Parts'. The ICN/Montevideo team had already selected Shaw's 'Revolution' as a case study when a loan request reached us from Graz/Basel. 'Revolution' was chosen because the team believes it is an important work by an important multimedia artist, and it is one of the few works by Shaw in a public Dutch collection. Moreover, the team thinks this work is interesting because of its interactive character. Although the loan request presented us with practical and logistic problems (an exhibition deadline), the team was very pleased that there was still international museum interest in 'Revolution'. In consultation with the organisers of 'Moving Parts', the team decided to do everything in its power to get the installation back into exhibition condition. Before the results of the case study are presented in greater detail, first a short introduction to the artist and the art work is given below.

## Jeffrey Shaw

Jeffrey Shaw is generally regarded as a pioneer in the field of interactive art. His work should be understood in terms of a need to bridge the gap between art and life and to make the viewer a participant. He himself formulated this as follows: 'Art is essentially a conversation with the viewer, who is always reinterpreting and reconstructing the work of art.' (1) Shaw's mentality as an artist is based on views from the 1960s, when artists were trying to break through established museum conventions. By means of artistic experiments such as events, happenings and performances artists attempted to involve the public in art and even to make them participate. Of course the use of new, synthetic materials and new techniques (light and slide projections) were part and parcel of these experiments. Interactivity is the key to Jeffrey Shaw's oeuvre. In both his early works and his most recent creations, the involvement of the viewer is essential. The introduction of digital technology enabled Shaw to attain a higher degree of interactivity in his works. In the late 1970s Shaw started to use virtual, computer-generated projections. In the following period new developments emerged in rapid succession. As an artist and professor (Director of the Research Institute for Visual Art at the ZKM in Karlsruhe) Shaw is constantly examining and analysing new possibilities. Through the combination of art, technology and science, art can be experienced in a different way. Digital storage of information on a data carrier gives the work of art a different form; it is no longer tied to the traditional boundaries of a painting or a sculpture. Shaw's art works are databases of text, images and sound. These databases are continually reshaped through an interface and by the viewer using the interface. The machine-like exterior of his installations is also important. This exterior invites the viewer to take action, to perform some physical movement. 'Revolution' requires a specific physical effort on the part of the viewer. (2)

## Revolution

The installation entitled 'Revolution' consists of a man-sized column with a monitor mounted in it. The whole thing stands on a round base made of compressed wood. A bar protrudes from the column; by pushing the bar, you can rotate the column. If you rotate it clockwise, 180 'images of revolution' appear, based on iconographic material dating from the same periods as the revolutionary events. By means of collage, colouring, distortion and added drawings, the meaning of the original images is strengthened and renewed. The installation is a kind of time machine which takes you back in time, from the

French revolution onwards, thus offering an overview of two hundred years of revolutions. Since all 180 images are contained in one rotation (one revolution), and each picture can be seen during only two degrees, if you want to see the pictures one by one you have to turn the column very slowly. If you turn it faster, you see nothing but a vague blur of revolutionary images. The viewer who 'misses' a picture and tries to turn back will be disappointed: if you push the bar anti-clockwise, the monitor screen shows a millstone grinding grain to flour. History cannot be turned back. The viewer is an essential part of the installation. Without the viewer nothing happens: the grain is not ground, the revolution not unleashed. (3)

'Revolution' was purchased in 1990 by the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts (RBK, a predecessor of ICN). The purchase of this installation was not an isolated event, but part of a series of purchases for the exhibition 'IMAGO, Fin de Siècle in Dutch contemporary art'. At the time, the RBK was responsible for the management of the national collection and its presentation in the Netherlands and abroad. The RBK also had a budget for the purchase of art by living Dutch artists or artists working in the Netherlands. The art works in this collection are available for temporary or long-term loan to museums and other institutions. IMAGO was a travelling exhibition with the theme of contemporary art and technology. Because of the specific character of the exhibition, it was produced jointly by the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts and the Netherlands Media Art Institute Montevideo/TBA. Montevideo created the exhibition concept and selected the artists. All the installations made especially for this exhibition were purchased by the RBK. Between 1990 and 1994 the exhibition made an intensive tour, visiting various cities such as Amsterdam, Bratislava, Barcelona and Gunma (Japan) under the supervision of Montevideo staff. After the tour, the exhibition arrived back at the RBK in its packaging, and the installations went straight into storage, still in their packaging. Part of the equipment, such as the monitors which had been used, were taken to Montevideo and used for various purposes, including hire. The visual material (film, video, etc.) was kept at Montevideo. A few installations have made an individual appearance in the intervening 10 years, but most of the IMAGO installations have led a dormant existence in storage ever since they returned.

## Results of case study

The case studies in the framework of the installation project have three objectives:

- to document the installations (i.e. to make a detailed registration in words and pictures, which requires a trial installation of the work)
- to draft installation guidelines – instructions – which will make it possible for other people to reinstall the installations in the future
- to develop a plan of approach/strategy for the long-term preservation of installations

### **Documentation and registration**

The re-installation of 'Revolution' revealed a number of practical and ethical problems. A comparison of the situations 'before and after' will show what we have learnt from the case study so far.

The various parts of 'Revolution' were divided between ICN and Montevideo. Apart from getting the parts together again, the team had to find out which elements still worked, what restoration was needed, and if any parts needed to be replaced. The existing registration and documentation, which were incomplete, were checked and assessed. The team also searched for any existing visual material from previous installations. All the components were taken to Montevideo, where a trial installation was made under technical supervision. While the installation was being set up, its re-documentation began immediately; all the components were registered in detail, photographs were made of them, and instructions for setting up the installation itself were drafted.

'Revolution' was registered at the ICN under inventory number K90043-A-E. In the original registration the following components were listed:

- A. Monitor 2730QM
- B. Frame with push bar
- C. Floor elements
- D. Turntable
- E. Laser disc player, computer, etc.

Obviously the registration of component E leaves something to be desired, and it was at that point that the most problems were expected. As well as this registration, the ICN also had two A4 sheets with a patch diagram and a summary in English of the technical data, a list of parts (described according to IMAGO's packaging units) and instructions.

Since the trial installation we have a list of components which consists of a description and a photograph of each component. A complete registration of the installation was also made according to the installation registration model designed by Montevideo. Based on this model, registration includes not only a description and

material specifications of each component, but also a description of the properties, function and meaning of that particular component. The video data were registered and documented. Instructions were drawn up describing the construction procedure step by step with photographs to illustrate it. These instructions are supported by a film version which shows the setting up and dismantling of the installation in accelerated motion. The new registration is based on 16 components instead of 5. However, a solution still needs to be found for proper storage of this information and ensuring that it remains accessible.

### **Long-term preservation**

During the re-installation the team was confronted with several problems which could not be solved at once. Some matters will have to be examined more closely and a strategy worked out in consultation with the artist. We hope to complete this part of the case study in the autumn. However, there are already concrete results: thanks to the registration/documentation part of the case study, we now know which components are of crucial importance if the installation is to function properly, and a list has been made of the problems which may be expected. Here is a brief summary of the main problems:

- When the installation was used, it turned out that the revolutionary images were 'stuck': the images kept going back to the beginning, so that the viewer could not get much further than images of the French revolution. This problem severely detracted from the experience the artist intended the viewer to have, thus undermining the interactive character of the work of art. Fortunately cleaning the various parts (laser disc, laser disc player and tracking wheel) helped, and 'Revolution' now shows all the images again, at intervals of 2 degrees. A strategy should be thought out for the future, in case one of the parts mentioned can no longer be repaired.
- It turned out that there was a copy of the laser disc, so that there is a back-up of the video data. However, a problem for the future is that 'Revolution' is medium-specific in the sense that migrating the video data to a different data carrier would entail modifying hardware and software. The laser disc and the laser disc player are therefore crucial to the installation.
- The Eprom audio unit which is responsible for the installation's sound is custom-made and thus unique. The audio data have not yet been copied, so that the Eprom is also a crucial and vulnerable component of the installation. Although the Eprom is now still functioning well, as a

precautionary measure an alternative should be devised for the migration of the audio data.

- The operating programme used for the installation still needs to be examined more closely with an eye to migration in the future (study of the source code).
- Finally, the life span of the monitor is a problem not only for 'Revolution', but for nearly all of the IMAGO installations, because the same type of monitor was used. Of about 30 monitors used for IMAGO, there are now three left. The possibility of replacing them will have to be looked at more closely.

## Conclusion

Because media technologies become outdated so rapidly, museum professionals are not only being forced to think about strategies for the preservation and management of multimedia heritage, but also to think about ways to safeguard knowledge about the systems and programmes used: the digital heritage. Conducting a case study of a multimedia installation is complex, time-consuming and expensive. A simple list of components or a 'traditional' condition assessment is absolutely inadequate as a basis for the preservation of an installation for several decades. Re-installation is necessary to gain insight into the viability of outdated installations. At an early stage, preferably when an installation is purchased, a strategy for long-term preservation should be developed. This would prevent curators, restorers and collection managers being confronted in the near future with a *fait accompli* rather than a preservation dilemma. For installation art which has been part of multimedia heritage for several years or decades, the clock is ticking. At present a large number of installations could still be saved, but their 'use-by date' is rapidly approaching. Unfortunately, for a number of art works it may already be too late: simple conservation will have proved fatal.

The problems outlined above are too big and too universal to be solved by individual museums working on their own. The realisation that museums of modern art have joint problems and that it is of the utmost importance for them to share knowledge and information led to the European installation project. The fact that museums are working together at an international level to develop guidelines and strategies for the preservation and management of installation art is a revolution in itself. Completely in accordance with the installation in our case study, we are confident that this 'historic' development can no longer be turned back.

[www.icn.nl](http://www.icn.nl)  
[www.montevideo.nl](http://www.montevideo.nl)  
[www.incca.org](http://www.incca.org)  
[www.jeffrey-shaw.net](http://www.jeffrey-shaw.net)

(1) J. Pijnappel: 'Jeffrey Shaw: the centre for Art en Media, Karlsruhe; an interview by J. Pijnappel'. In *Art and Technology*, London 1994, p. 73

(2) A. Duguet, H. Klotz, P. Weibel: *Jeffrey Shaw – a user's manual. From expanded cinema to virtual reality*. Karlsruhe, 1997  
S. Dinkla (ed.) *Interact! Schlüsselwerke Interaktive Kunst*. Cat. Wilhelm Lehmbrock Museum Duisburg, 27 April – 15 June 1997.  
F. Gierstberg: 'Jeffrey Shaw: breaking through the traditional framework'. In: *Perspektief*, driemaandelijks tijdschrift voor fotografie, Rotterdam 1994, no. 47/48, p. 83-90  
See also: [www.jeffrey-shaw.net](http://www.jeffrey-shaw.net)

(3) Adapted from: *Imago fin de siècle in Dutch contemporary art*, catalogue of the exhibition/ ed.: René Coelho ... et al.; final editor: Jans Possel; transl. Jim Boekbinder ... et al. p. 70

This article was published in *RESTAURO* magazine, June 2005