

Interview about video documentation

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Organisation	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain
Case study	Dennis Oppenheim exhibition, including <i>Circle Puppets</i> (1994)

How do you use video documentation in your daily practice as a conservator of installations? And what are the main advantages of using video documentation for this kind of art?

In the conservation department at our museum, for about 5 years now, we have used video to record artist interviews. Interviews are a great way to discuss in depth about difficult conservation issues with the artist. Using video to document makes it easy to be in the exhibition space amongst the (installation) works at the time of the interview. We often walk around the space with the artist and point at certain materials for example, whilst we are discussing them.

Making video interviews like this is made easier as we have a good working relationship with the artists that exhibit with us. The interviews are most often made after a period of intensely working with the artist during the build-up of the exhibition. By the time we do the interview, the artist already feels comfortable with us and is thus more open, providing more information. Video interviews like this are especially useful when the artist is foreign (not Spanish speaking).

These videos however have (until now) not been the best quality, in terms of production. We have always used simple equipment and made 'amateur' videos. This kind of equipment has for example quite bad sound quality, something that is very important when documenting installations that include sound elements.

Video is also useful for documenting other kinds of information, like how works are installed and packed. These kinds of videos are easier to make and less time consuming to make than condition reports (with text and photographs) and hold a lot more information.

At the museum we also have an audio visual department who make videos that are more to do with art historical issues or general background into an exhibition. These videos hold information that is more useful for curators than conservators.

You made a video of the Oppenheim exhibition, which contains a lot of information about the artist and about how to install the works. Why did you make the film in this way and for what purpose?

The Inside Installations project provided us with the opportunity to produce a professional film about the exhibition that would appeal to a general public. By producing this video professionally we were able to include a long interview, more information and documentation than we would normally do if we were to make it ourselves.

The idea behind the film was to show the process behind setting up such an exhibition and to explain the kind of research that goes on 'behind the scenes'. It includes for example footage of how we worked with the artist installing the works as well as an artist interview where he talks in more detail about the intent of his work. This kind of information is especially important to show when working with a conceptual artist as Oppenheim. It was

also important for us to show how setting up an exhibition like this involves all kinds of museum professionals, not just conservators, but curators, technicians, colleagues from museum education and so on.

The video was shown during the exhibition and the response from the public was very positive. It is quite long (about 20 minutes) but visitors would often stay and watch the whole thing. The space in front of the video was always very busy during the exhibition. We will also make the video accessible to the public via the Inside Installations project website.

How did you go about making this video?

It was quite a long process to create this video. As we wanted to show how different museum professionals work with an artist to create an exhibition, we involved all these people in the script writing. Our multi-disciplinary project team met often to work on the script and to ensure that all types of research questions would be dealt with in the video.

The project made it possible for us to hire professional filming equipment as well a professional crew to film and edit the video. We now are planning to buy our own (semi) professional equipment to use in the future. With this equipment we will be able to make much better quality videos than with the amateur equipment we have right now.

Although this video was made for the general public it contains a lot of important information that could be useful to museum staff in the future. How will this video be stored and made accessible within your museum?

We have not yet decided how we will make it accessible within the museum. Artist interviews on film that we have made in the past are stored within the conservation department. For now, this video will be stored there too. We also have digital versions of these videos on our museum server. We are also considering loaning a copy of this video to museums who loan a work from the exhibition.

In the case of your project case study, *Circle Puppets*, what was the most difficult thing to capture on video of this work?

The most difficult things to capture are the intangible elements such as level of sound and brightness of the image (in this case on the monitor). It is possible to measure the sound of *Circle Puppets*, however if you put the work in another room the sound will change. We also had the problem with this work that the artist was not concerned with the fact that a lot of things were going on in one room. *Circle Puppets* was very close to another work in which a mechanical dog barks very loudly. For the public this is a problem as the sounds really interfere with each other. For the artist this was not a problem however. The loud dog even provided problems with our security people as they found it too loud and distracting when the museum became very busy.

Can you describe things that you have learnt in making this video that you would do differently the next time you make such a video?

Although working with colleagues from other departments was a positive experience, we found that the project group was too large and not very workable. Also, so many colleagues were 'excited' about this professional production that there were often too many people on 'the set' during the filming itself. We were in this case lucky

that Oppenheim didn't seem to mind much and was quite comfortable in talking and getting on with the work to be done. Another artist may however not have been so eager to talk with so many people standing around.

Another nice thing to mention is that because of this production, the image of the conservation department in our museum has improved. Our colleagues it seems now have a better understanding of the kind research we do and also that we can create interesting and useful films too.