

## **Re-construction – re-installation – the role of the authorised eyewitness. A conversation with conservators Joanna Phillips and Agathe Jarczyk**

The following notes of a conversation with Joanna Phillips (JP) and Agathe Jarczyk (AJ)<sup>1</sup> must be valued as a critical look on the initial outline of the concept to capture audience experience. The discussion helped to re-adjust and re-evaluate the various perspectives of creating, curating and preserving electronic media artworks. Phillips and Jarczyk were both engaged as conservators in the exhibition project „*Swiss Video Art from the 1970ies and 1980ies. A Reconstruction*“ at the Museum of Art in Lucerne (March 15 – May 4, 2008). The exhibition mainly focused on video installations, but also presented a selection of single channel video artworks of Swiss video art pioneers. The exhibition was designed with a specific emphasis on authenticity and on corresponding aspects of impact.<sup>2</sup> The conversation took place on July 2, 2008, was audiotaped, transcribed and translated from Swiss/German into English by the author (RW).

*RW: The subtitle of the exhibition in Lucerne was „A Reconstruction“. Could you explain the meaning of this term for the exhibition project and in which strategic context it was applied?*

JP: The claim of the curators was to attempt a mise-en-scene for the presented video installations as authentic as possible. Hence the term ‚reconstruction‘, because preferably the same technical equipment, or at least the same type of equipment, should be used again which had originally been used. In fact the exhibition had basically the goal to present and communicate issues dealing with this qualification. We wished to show how the presented artworks had looked like 30 years ago and likewise we tried to convey what knowledge might be lost if they are actualised anew with the current technology at hand. We wanted to draw attention to the fact that under such circumstances you are likely to detach yourself from the original intention of the artist.

AJ: You also have to bear in mind, that an authentic actualisation is not just dependent on questions of using the appropriate equipment. There are a lot more and small details to be considered. Just one example: How should visible wiring be installed? Like this, there are myriads of seemingly inconspicuous details which determine the looks of a piece and with it its reception. In addition to this: If you don't know the according priorities of the artist, the choice of apparatus can be as authentic as you wish, but the original meaning of the artwork might nevertheless be lost.

*RW: An authentic reconstruction attempts to be on par with the historical apparatus of an artwork and tries to be as close to the original presentation as possible. The other catchword here is integrity: Based on the initial idea of the artwork you are trying to re-install the artwork according to this idea, but with possible and maybe necessary variations.*

JP: An authentic reconstruction proceeds from both premises. On the one hand we tried to mediate the primordial meaning of the artwork. On the other hand we also tried to present the used components as historical documents which thus assign the artwork a historical value.

*RW: If you tried to realise an authentic reconstruction as close as possible to the original presentation, from what resources could you obtain information?*

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Phillips was working until mid 2008 as an assistant researcher with SIK in Zurich and is now a conservator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Agathe Jarczyk is the head of the Studio for Video Conservation in Berne and teaches at Berne University of the Arts.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.kunstmuseumluzern.ch/archiv/index.html?videoschweiz/index\\_en.php](http://www.kunstmuseumluzern.ch/archiv/index.html?videoschweiz/index_en.php) (10.10.2008)

JP: Primary sources in our case were illustrations in contemporary exhibition catalogues, artists' documentations or unpublished material from private archives. Another major source were the recorded memories of still living artists or authorised eyewitnesses. With the term authorised eyewitness we defined informants, who had been accepted as such by the artist and had mostly been involved in the production or the installation of the artworks in cooperation with the artist. The only guarantee for a certain „fidelity“ to the original work with regard to the chosen components is the memory of the artist or eyewitness.

*RW: So in Lucerne you have helped to put up a historical exhibition, which said: „This was the state of video installation art in Switzerland 30 years ago. - This is the technical dispositive, the apparatus, with which video installations were presented then.“ The offer behind this for the public was a possibility to compare present-day context with the context of that time. For the visitors it was as if they had to read a historical text. They were advised to observe the artworks as historically reconstructed and to interpret them as such.*

JP: All the artists taking part in the exhibition have received a questionnaire, wherein they were asked to state the significance of original components. Based on the answers the issues of replaceability could be defined. We have got back completely different answers.

In the exhibition we therefore tried to mediate this fact also to the public with some examples in order to make them aware of the issue of preservation. What the exhibition itself did not want to achieve were concrete strategies for the preservation of the single artworks.

AJ: Even a reconstruction remains always a compromise, especially with installations, which are strongly dependent on space and environment. A re-installation in a new space produces new references and effects. We had to differentiate between non-variable components in the sense of a reconstruction and variable components. We had to define clearly which aspects of the artwork we wanted to re-install and under what premises, and accordingly which aspects of the artwork would thus come to the fore.

Another compromise with the exhibition was, that we deliberately abstained from using original equipment with certain installations, out of considerations of maintenance or because it simply was not available. In these cases some of the reconstruction aspects were focused on displays and monitors and other visible components.

JP: In any case you need to have clear definitions of terms in order to formulate the goals and to outline the specific strategies for every single artwork and to be able to communicate the decisions taken to the audience. A reconstruction is never perfect, but it sets out from the preservation of original components and the additional completion of missing information. And by communicating how the missing information was deduced the field for interpretations is also clearly defined.

*RW: If content and intent of an artwork are defined as historical entities they become variable as such. In the 1970ies the idea of an artist has been realised by specific contemporary means. Even if the idea was mainly conceptual, it might have to be actualised in 2010 completely different to achieve the intended impact. You have to consider other aspects than merely obsolete technical components. Your strategy of an authentic reconstruction seeks an actualisation close to the original presentation. Based on the information from still living artists and authorised eyewitnesses you also could have proposed further versions of the artwork, a strategy that would maybe have thematised more the original intent of the work. Thus the public would have had the opportunity to compare different versions, similar to the exhibition ‚Seeing Double‘ at the Guggenheim in New York in 2004.<sup>3</sup>*

JP: We never considered to do this for the main exhibition in Lucerne, because we still wanted to present a compact and vibrant art exhibition and not just a research and education oriented reinstallation of the works. At the very beginning we were thinking though of putting up a small laboratory like additional exhibition on the subject in a separate gallery space, but in the end we did not have enough capacities to realise it.

AJ: I would like to add some other aspects to this topic. I am thinking of cases where the artist further develops his original concept and the artwork reaches other materialisations subsequently. Or with a twist of the angle of perspective: I have seen works where you have the slight feeling that the realisation achieved 30 years later does not fulfill its original function any more. Time is an important factor. It might happen that you realise that an artistic intention with an appropriate contemporary realisation ceases to be understood adequately. Should the work not be presented any more in this case? Except in a historicising context in

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. Caitlin Jones and Carol Stringari. „Seeing Double: Emulation Theory in Practice“. In: Christiane Paul (Ed.). *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond – Curatorial Models for Digital Art*. Berkeley (U California Press) 2008, and <http://variablemedia.net/e/seeingdouble/index.html> (1.1.2009)

order to signify that the work should be read like a historical text? The impact of the work should then not be measured as such, but I am advised to compare documented experience from 30 years ago with my actual experience. I am perceiving the message of an artwork as variable as well.

*RW: This is maybe the point where the approach I am trying to verify in my research becomes important. You have mentioned that the reception of an artwork with its variations changes over time. The general technical dispositive is changing permanently and the artist might be changing his concept as well, reacting to these changes or even reacting to the reception of his work. Reception itself is variable, because the historical contexts are changing and the audience is embedded in a changing mediatised environment. For me these are examples for the importance of the influence of the „surrounding medial layout“<sup>4</sup> on the impact. The intensity of remembering an embodied experience or simple every-day media competence for example are strongly influencing so-called moments of aesthetic experience. This is why it is methodically so difficult to document subjective experiences and subjective sentiments. It is less problematic to collect the reflected intention of an artist from his written statements or through an interview. But to document the immediate reaction of an observer or participant of an artwork is much more delicate.*

JP: It could be interesting to confront still living artists with the experiences of recipients of their work and document how they respond to changing reception. Some artist might wish to adapt the realisation. Or she might forbid a reconstructive actualisation because it contradicts the original artistic intention. Another might even declare her work as not being realisable anymore.

*RW: Especially with electronic media art we should therefore go one step beyond, the more so if it is structured interactively or participatory, and try to involve the sentiment and experience of the recipients in our strategies. But we should also pose the question whether the intention of the author is still tangible in the chosen actualisation. You might realise that this is no longer the case. Some artists see these unprecedented results as an enrichment and integral part of their work. They do not renounce such seeming misinterpretations and not intended uses. I am wondering how much the documentation of the experience will start playing an important role regarding this.*

JP: I think documentation of reception will become evermore important, out of two reasons. On the one hand, if the artist is dead or if he refuses to comment on his works, then you need to have indications on how the contemporary public received the original intention. The other reason is, simply put, fundamental art historical research: source material on these phenomena has to be produced, exactly because they are so likely to be forgotten. But still, the question remains open of how much you can actually achieve with a documentation of this quality. If an artwork turns inexplicable because, for example, the visual experience has changed: Can the documentation of previous experiences and its accessibility take the part of conveying these shifts appropriately? I am not sure whether this kind of mediation is successful? Who would be willing to observe and consume such documents in an exhibition context for instance?

*RW: We would not be dealing then with traditional art presentations in gallery spaces. We would more be engaged with research exhibitions like „Seeing Double“ or with parts of the exhibition in Lucerne. Maybe this sort of exhibition is only attractive to professionals for the time being. The public is not used to be confronted with this kind of things and might not be interested. Even the art scene itself, artists, art market, critics, collectors and institutions included, is not interested yet.*

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<sup>4</sup> Term coined by the perception psychologist James Jerome Gibson