GABY WIJERS (iD)

UNFOLD
The Strategic Importance of Reinterpretation for Media Art Mediation and Conservation

ABSTRACT: UNFOLD: Mediation by Reinterpretation is a research project and interdisciplinary network initiated by LIMA, Platform for Media Art in Amsterdam, that examines reinterpretation as an emerging practice for artistic production, presentation, and preservation of media works. New elements stretch the boundaries of traditional preservation methods and require insights from both the artist and the curator to decide how pieces can be restaged. This essay investigates how to deal with the changes of digital/media artworks over time, and how to preserve and mediate their performative aspects.

Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 193–203

UNFOLD

The Strategic Importance of Reinterpretation for Media Art Mediation and Conservation

GABY WIJERS

The conservation of media art is one of the greatest challenges for the future of our digital culture. Time is slowly erasing the work of entire generations of media artists from any future art history. This loss is irreparable, and urgent action is needed.

Since the mid-1990s, the ephemerality and immateriality of much of these time-based artworks has demanded the configuration of a new set of techniques to ensure their future presentation. Media art challenges existing forms of conservation and documentation not only because of ever-changing technology but also because of their unique nature: digital art, media art, live art, and performances are different from other art genres. They are dependent upon practices, not objects, and upon the performative role of the spectator. These kinds of works are experienced through media, browsers, networks, documentation, and forms of storage. Most of today's digital works of art are processual, ephemeral, interactive, multimedia, and, fundamentally, context dependent. However, most of these issues have been centred on technical responses to rapid technological obsolescence, the deterioration of materials, or varied installation requirements. Together with the need to preserve long-term custody of all forms of recorded material, it is therefore also necessary to continue researching beyond the object:

to look at the medium of an artwork and, more urgently, beyond the medium, to focus instead on the creator and user.

The following strategies are normally used to keep our media artworks available for future generations: (1) Storage: The acquisition and storage of the physical media equipment such as DVD players or computers used in multimedia or digital artworks, has proven a short-term tactic at best, as hardware can either quickly become obsolete or 'stale' in storage.[1] Storage itself is also notoriously bad at capturing the contextual and live aspects of works, such as Internet art, performance art, and live electronic music. (2) Migration: To migrate a work of art means to upgrade its format from an aged medium to a more current one, e.g. from VHS to DVD, accepting that some changes in quality may occur while the integrity of the original is maintained.[2] This strategy assumes that preserving either the content or the information of an artwork trumps concerns over fidelity to the original look and feel, despite its change in media. (3) Emulation: The process of simulating an older operating system (or, by extension, other supporting infrastructures) on a newer software or hardware platform. In migration, the impetus behind emulation is to keep a work alive, even though its original media may become obsolete. Unlike migration, however, emulation of computer-based art preserves the original code that underlies the artwork. Emulation software is currently used in various stages of development and efficiency. (4) Reinterpretation: The most powerful, but also most risky, preservation strategy for new media art is to reinterpret the work each time it is recreated. Reinterpretation may require rewriting the code for a completely different platform, either following site-specific instructions regarding the installation or recasting a work in a contemporary medium with the metaphoric value of an outdated medium. Reinterpretation can be a dangerous technique when not expressly permitted by the artist, but it may be the only way to recreate performed, installed, or networked art that is designed to vary with changing contexts.[3]

---

1   'Variable Media Glossary', in *The Variable Media Approach: Permanence Through Change*, ed. by Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), pp. 123–37 (p. 129) <https://www.variablemedia.net/e/preserving/html/var_pub_index.html> [accessed 12 March 2021].

2   Ibid., p. 126

3   Ibid., p. 128.

Theater

Storytelling

Art history

Digital Art

Reinterpretation has different theoretical and practical significance

for different art forms and professional roles

Music
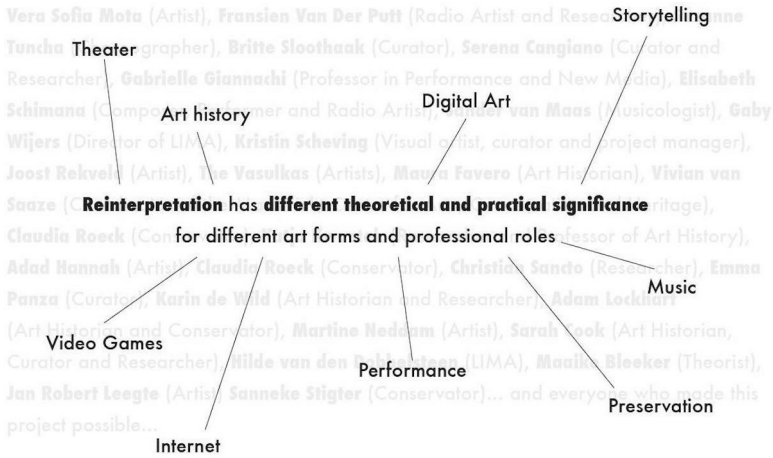
Video Games

Performance

Internet

Preservation

Figure 1. UNFOLD design by Pier Taylor

While the first three strategies are amply used, the fourth is, remarkably enough, seldom professionally applied to media art. Reinterpretation is traditionally used in other performative art disciplines, such as music, dance, and theatre, but it is almost new in the fields of media art and digital art, although it both tells a lot about a work and gives space for creativity. On the whole, reinterpretation can be seen as a way of keeping the work alive. Presenting and preserving media artworks is undeniably related to issues of technological obsolescence, networked connectivity, and the interactive nature of digital art. The variable nature of this art form stretches the boundaries of traditional preservation methods and requires insights from both the artist and curator to determinate the future viability of restaging the piece. How do we deal with the changes of digital or media artworks over time, and how can the performative aspect of a work be preserved and mediated? Reinterpretation is a method that brings us perspective on the potential of media articulations to live a 'life' beyond the medium that generated them.

With these issues in mind, the platform in the Netherlands for media art, new technologies, and digital culture, LIMA, has responded to the need for looking further and beyond the object and medium of

an artwork.[4] This is how the project UNFOLD: Mediation by Reinterpretation was born.[5] In the course of one year (March 2016 to March 2017), LIMA investigated reinterpretation as an emerging practice for the conservation of media artworks. To facilitate this research, LIMA brought together international professionals, artists, art curators, archivists, conservators, choreographers, musicologists, and theatre and performance scholars, as well as those whose practices traverse several of these disciplines.[6] The aim was to provide greater insight into the challenges related to media art conservation beyond technology and, ultimately, to create a consortium for a future collaborative, interdisciplinary, and international project to conduct further research on this topic.

UNFOLD studies processes of documentation and conservation of performance, post-net, and digital art in relation to dance, theatre, and music, which have ensured their survival and transmission through live actions. Bearing in mind that media and digital art share a number of related characteristics with performance art, the project's main research questions were: (1) Can reinterpretation as a creative act be seen as a preservation strategy for media artworks? (2) Is it possible to develop new standards and techniques within media art preservation strategies by using reinterpretation to capture the hybrid, contextual, and live qualities of the original piece, rather than proposing an ongoing process of changing platforms and operating systems?

By analysing how a work is mediated and how it is performed (again) it may be possible to come to a different — and perhaps more relevant — core of the media artwork. Reinterpretation could ensure the continual presentation of art happening in the 'now'.

The project's point of departure was the definition of reinterpretation as presented in 'Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach', which in turn resulted from the research undertaken under the project The Variable Media Initiative. Thanks to this groundbreaking project, a flexible approach to the preservation of a

---

4   See LIMA's webpage at <http://www.li-ma.nl/> [accessed 7 December 2019].

5   The final report and manifesto can be found online at <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/article/unfold-mediation-reinterpretation> [accessed 19 July 2018].

6   Gaby Wijers (director), Lara Garcia Diaz (researcher), Christian Sancto (assistant researcher), and many others. See the whole team at <http://www.li-ma.nl/lima/about> [accessed 7 December 2019].

range of creative practices was introduced, and the notion of variable media started to be taken seriously. The project introduced a whole new vocabulary, opening up and challenging traditional notions of preservation. Within its framework, reinterpretation is defined as 'the most radical preservation strategy', since it implies 'reinterpret[ing] the work each time it is recreated'. For the Variable Media Initiative, reinterpretation is 'a dangerous technique when not warranted by the artist, but it may be the only way to recreate performed, installed, or networked art designed to vary with context'.[7] Considering the research already undertaken, and through the organization of three network meetings, one expert meeting, three public events, and one workshop, UNFOLD aimed at configuring a project that would continue and reinforce a line of research in which the possibilities and potential consequences of reinterpretation could be addressed in debates concerning media art mediation, transmission, and preservation.

Even if ensuring the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another is an ancient cultural activity, it is critical to instigate new conversations around knowledge transmission. In the case of media art, this includes exploring possibilities of preservation beyond a permanent process of constantly changing operating systems. Thus, UNFOLD proposes to conceptualize and practice preservation as an interpretative act, in which the hybrid, contextual, or live qualities of the original piece can be captured through its reinterpretation or reenactment. In this way, it is possible to look beyond the medium and see the work's capacity to generate networks of relations that interconnect different versions of the same work.

Through UNFOLD, traditional paradigms of conservation that regard objects as fixed and static entities were rethought, and reinterpretation as a process became better understood — mainly the process through which it is feasible to understand another creative process and how this process originally emerged. Reinterpretation proposes a rearticulation of artistic thought as it unfolds in the original work: can we conceive of artworks in terms of their temporal duration — as events, performances, and processes?[8] Can artworks, which include

---

7   'Variable Media Glossary', p. 128.
8   Unpublished interview with Nicolle Beutler by the UNFOLD team, 2016. See also Hanna Hölling, 'An Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Imper-

both the most recent and traditional forms of artistic production, be reconsidered in terms of time and their intrinsic temporalities? Why and how would this matter for their conservation?[9]

UNFOLD's multidisciplinary research group met three times for discussion, and a public presentation followed the debate. For each session, a different set of questions was addressed, with our overall questions acting as anchors: how can different strategies and technologies be used to archive, share, and understand? Can reinterpretation as a creative act be seen as a preservation strategy? Can other methodologies of preservation, like those of theatre, music, and dance, be integrated into the preservation of media art and performance? What are the paradigms for the preservation of an ephemeral artwork? How can staging, repertoire, remake, enactment, reenactment, and reinterpretation be used as different strategies for the preservation of cultural heritage? How does one negotiate conservation ethics and the pressure of institutional protocols when reinterpretating media artworks, and how can one be transparent about that process?

The group explored the idea of reinterpretation as an instrument, as a kind of artistic method that makes it possible to zoom in on specific aspects of a work in its previous set-ups and explore to what extent these can be used in a new digital context. The conclusion to which such a reinterpretive discussion led stayed far away from any conclusions about the materiality of the digital; in fact, it partly contradicted the concept. Reinterpretation cannot be seen as a substitute for thinking about materiality, but rather as an addition.

For his UNFOLD commission #67, artist Joost Rekveld was asked to select and reinterpret a work by video artist duo Woody & Steina Vasulka: he chose *Telc* (1974) and *Reminiscence* (1974). Both works belong to the Vasulkas' series of experiments with the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor.[10] In *Telc*, this device is used to transform Portapak images of a trip to a town in Southern Bohemia; similarly, *Reminiscence* (1974) is

　　　manent and Critical Thinking in Conservation', paper presented during the symposium 'Authenticity in Transition', Glasgow School of Art/University of Glasgow, 1–2 December 2014, documented online at <https://seminesaa.hypotheses.org/7948> [accessed 16 December 2019].

9　　Ibid.

10　Cf. 'Rutt/Etra Scan Processor', in Yvonne Spielmann, *Video and Computer: The Aesthetics of Steina and Woody Vasulka* (Montreal: The Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2004)

based on footage that Woody recorded during his visit to a farmhouse in Moravia.

For his intervention, Rekveld focused on exploring the works as experiments with different modes of perception. He first investigated the possibilities of wearable devices that would give a different kind of sensory access to the environment. The aim was to make a work that also strongly conveyed the impression of navigating through a space — a visualized space that does not derive from visual information. Later on, this led Rekveld to develop an interest in the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor and to eventually build one himself. If there is an emergent 'preservationist' ethic in Rekveld's work, one might conclude that it consists of reworking the concerns of earlier works and technologies through contemporary artistic preoccupations.[11]

For Vera Sofia Mota's and Fransien van der Putt's UNFOLD commission concerning the reinterpretation of artworks by Nan Hoover, time will tell what kind of artistic process will be executed. UNFOLD was also the starting point for the text Gabriella Giannachi wrote, who is a professor of performance and media art studies at the University of Exeter: 'At the Edge of the "Living Present": Re-enactments and Re-interpretations as Strategies of Preservation of Performance and New Media Art'.[12]

The research group's next steps address the questions how to deal with digital artworks as they change over time and how to maintain their performativity. It is essential to ensure that such artworks can still be experienced in the future, which goes beyond maintaining physical availability; it is about keeping the works accessible, intelligible, and relevant. Reinterpretation is a suitable complementary approach that requires — and gives — insight from both the artist(s) and the

---

<https://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=456> [accessed 12 March 2021].

11   Cf. *UNFOLD #3 Reinterpreting the Digital + Workshop presentation by Joost Rekveld*, LIMA, Amsterdam, 1 December 2016 <https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/news/unfold-3-reinterpreting-digital-workshop-presentation-joost-rekveld> [accessed 12 March 2021].

12   Gabriella Giannachi, 'At the Edge of the "Living Present": Re-enactments and Re-interpretations as Strategies of Preservation of Performance and New Media Art', in *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*, ed. by Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 115–31.
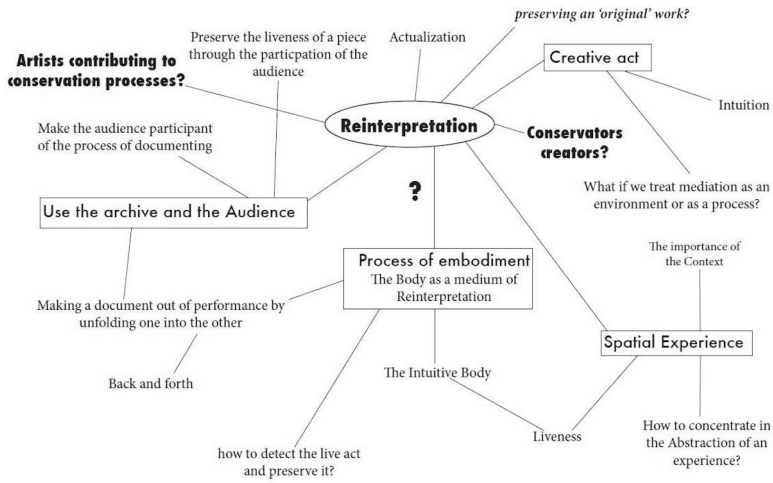
Figure 2. *Questions and Topics* by Lara Garcia Diaz for UNFOLD

curator(s) on the future viability of either reinstalling or repairing the work. It is known that every new presentation of a work contains a certain element of reinterpretation; this element is often seen as a disturbing noise to be reduced as much as possible in order to minimize the risk of deviating from or clouding the artist's original intentions. Resistance to this reinterpretation is traditionally centred on ideas of authenticity.

Reinterpretation as a preservation strategy has been around for twenty years, but it is still controversial. The most interesting developments, however, are the challenges that arise when reinterpretation is actively, rather than implicitly, implemented and seen as more or less undesirable. Dealing consciously and openly with reinterpretation yields a wealth of insights and skills. Instead of suppressing reinterpretation as part of a custodial relation to an artwork, we advocate embracing reinterpretation as a vital and dynamic element in this chain, as an important force for further artistic developments of the lifecycle of artworks. Reinterpretation has great potential for maintaining the relevance of works of art for present and future audiences, as well as to activate collections and archives and to unfold creative and curatorial processes and role patterns.

Starting from the initial question — can reinterpretation as a creative act be seen as preservation strategy? — the project ultimately led to what was perhaps its inversion: can preservation be understood as a creative act, and therefore include reinterpretation as one of its strategies? The duality between, on the one hand, the idea of conservation as a creative act and, on the other, artists reinterpreting and contributing to conservation processes has pivoted the LIMA group's focus. With no clear ground as yet, the group has nonetheless used such a position to frame reinterpretation within a temporality that does not obey linearity but rather follows the network form. It was, in fact, possible to confront the idea of the origin suggested by classic art historian discourses, and the rhizome was used as a research plane to investigate preservation, not just as a practical necessity but also as a creative space. Thereafter, reinterpretation was reframed as a tool to rethink, to rearticulate, or — as Giannachi suggests by taking up Giorgio Agamben's idea of repetition — to be able to live what has perhaps been unlived: that is, reinterpretation as the exploration of the past from the present that equally permits the questioning of our contemporaneity and the devising of other futures.[13] However, in order for us to use this tool effectively, many discourses on authorship and conservation ethics need to be challenged and opened.

Jon Ippolito has highlighted that the importance of social impact lies in what the object is by briefly presenting his research on indigenous media and its mode of preserving culture. He has discussed the case of a Malangaan sculpture, and how anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has shown that natives of Papua New Guinea sell that sculpture after a public display, only to then destroy it so that the new caretaker must have it recreated from memory.

For Ippolito, a Malangaan figure carved from wood and shells is not nearly as ephemeral as a *lamak* made of palm leaves — or indeed, a website made of HTML and Perl. But each generation recreates Malangaan sculptures because they value such 'proliferative preserva-

---

13   Cf. *UNFOLD: Mediation by Re-interpretation – Annual Project Review Report, March 2016–March 2017*, ed. by Gaby Wijers, Lara Garcia Diaz and Christian Sancto (Amsterdam: LIMA, 2017), p. 15 <https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/sites/default/files/Unfold_verslag_excl.pdf> [accessed 12 March 2021].
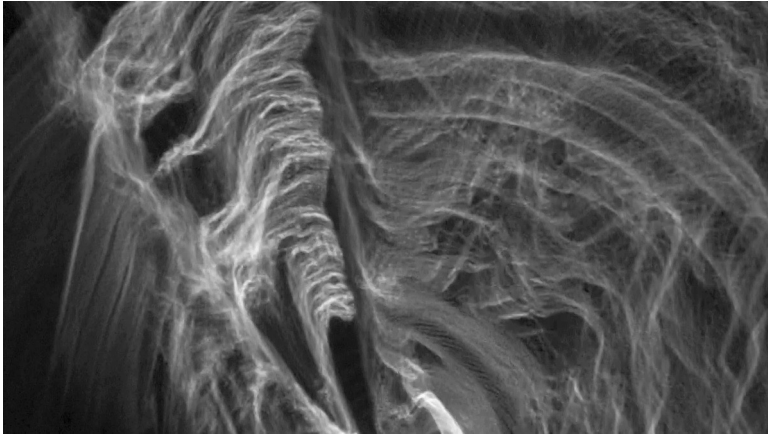
Figure 3. Joost Rekveld, *#67*, 2017, still from video

tion' as a mechanism for forging interpersonal bonds across clans and generations.

Ippolito concludes by pointing out the necessity of examining preservation models and traditions in different contexts, detecting their constraints and limitations when it comes to aspects of heritage and ownership. What Ippolito is proposing could be applied within a critical examination of conservation's complex theoretical and methodological approach, due to the existence of new artistic processes that, for example, are not built to last. It is precisely this ephemeral status that frames the conceptual meaning.[14]

In conclusion, the complexities of integrating reinterpretation within debates of cultural heritage preservation necessitates going beyond the art piece or its author and incorporating gallerists, private collectors, conservators, archivists, historians, lawyers, or even economists, to name just a few of the possible actors. By doing so, one could, for example, really question how institutional policies would need to change if reinterpretation is to be practiced as a preservation strategy. Here, further research will be needed to 'unfold' the layers of institutional practices while simultaneously reevaluating current attitudes and methodologies of practical conservation.

---

14   Ibid.

Moreover, such attitudes should also be confronted with the idea that some artworks are not built to last, and that it is precisely their ephemeral status that frames their conceptual meaning. In the UNFOLD project, reinterpretation as a conservation strategy has been put on the international and interdisciplinary agenda, a conceptual framework has been developed for reinterpretation, and a manifesto has been written, both with shared support. Reinterpretation must and can now be further tested in practice in art institutions and museums. Now that the theoretical layer has been explored in the multidisciplinary international network of experts and institutions comprising UNFOLD, the project ventures to further launch a number of experiments in reinterpretation.

The strategic dimensions of reinterpretation will be further explored in terms of artistic yield, degrees of necessity with respect to different types of works, required new ways of documenting works, and the redeploying of various contexts. To take the next step toward fulfilling these objectives, IMA, LIMA, Ars Electronica, and other affiliates have begun writing an application in the scope of Horizon 2020.

To be continued…

Thanks to all the participants and special thanks to UNFOLD researcher Lara Garcia Diaz.

REFERENCES

Depocas, Alain, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, eds, 'Variable Media Glossary', in *The Variable Media Approach: Permanence Through Change* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), pp. 123–37 <https://www.variablemedia.net/e/preserving/html/var_pub_index.html> [accessed 12 March 2021]

Giannachi, Gabriella, 'At the Edge of the "Living Present": Re-enactments and Reinterpretations as Strategies for the Preservation of Performance and New Media', in *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*, ed. by Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 115–31 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645384-13>

Hölling, Hanna, 'An Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent and Critical Thinking in Conservation', paper presented during the symposium 'Authenticity in Transition', Glasgow School of Art/University of Glasgow, 1–2 December 2014, documented online at <https://seminesaa.hypotheses.org/7948> [accessed 16 December 2019]

Spielmann, Yvonne, *Video and Computer: The Aesthetics of Steina and Woody Vasulka* (Montreal: The Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2004) <https://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=456> [accessed 12 March 2021]

Wijers, Gaby, Lara Garcia Diaz and Christian Sancto, eds, *UNFOLD: Mediation by Reinterpretation – Annual Project Review Report, March 2016–March 2017* (Amsterdam: LIMA, 2017) <http://www.li-ma.nl/lima/sites/default/files/Unfold_verslag_excl.pdf> [accessed 12 March 2021]