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The Guggenheim Just Restored Its First Web Artwork. Here's How.

Overcoming the unique conservation challenges of Internet art.

Sarah Cascone (<https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25>), May 16, 2017



Shu Lea Cheang, "Big Doll," one of the pages of *Brandon*. Courtesy of the Guggenheim.

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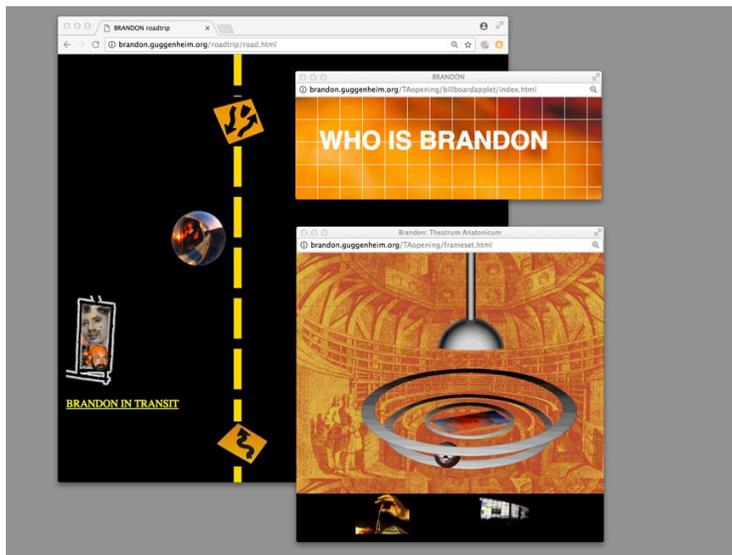
SHARE Even the Internet has ruins worthy of preservation. Amid remnants of the



early web, the Guggenheim has restored Shu Lea Cheang (<http://www.mauvaiscontact.info/>)'s *Brandon* (<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/15337>) (1998–99), the first online artwork to join the New York museum's permanent collection. The long-defunct website, commissioned by the Guggenheim in 1998 and hosted at <http://brandon.guggenheim.org> (<http://brandon.guggenheim.org>), is the first digital artwork to be restored by the museum.

Brandon, a response to the tragic 1993 rape and murder of Nebraska trans man Brandon Teena, was a “one-year narrative project in installments,” which saw numerous artists and programmers contribute to the project during its run. There were online chat rooms that allowed the public to add to the piece, as well as live “simulcast” events at the Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam and the Guggenheim's former Soho space. *Brandon* became an important repository of LGBTQ+ discourse and culture, and its subject matter is of course still resonant and timely today.

“It was a very brave step at the time, a very pioneering and visionary step,” Joanna Phillips, the museum's conservator of time-based media, told artnet News of the work's acquisition. “The piece was also groundbreaking at the time because it included many performative aspects... There was a very early web cam connection, so people in Amsterdam and New York could see and hear each other. It pushed the limits of what communication technology could achieve at the time.”



Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon* (1998–99). Courtesy of the Guggenheim, © Shu Lea Cheang.

When artists first began experimenting with the Internet, little thought was given to the conservation of these online artworks. Today, technology has developed in such leaps and bounds that works that were once cutting edge have quickly become outdated, giving rise to a whole new fleet of issues and challenges for conservators.

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“These pieces have very special needs; software becomes obsolete, hardware breaks down,” said Phillips. “In the museum world there is not a lot of precedent for dealing with these works.”

Enter the Guggenheim’s [Conserving Computer-Based Art](https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-the-guggenheim-and-nyu-are-conserving-computer-based-art-part-1) (https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-the-guggenheim-and-nyu-are-conserving-computer-based-art-part-1) (CCBA) initiative, founded this past fall with the New York University Department of Computer Science, which has collaborated with the museum since 2014. CCBA aims to analyze, document, and preserve the collection’s 23 computer- and software-based artworks. CCBA, led by Phillips, and NYU professor Deena Engel, worked with CCBA fellow Jonathan Farbowitz and NYU computer science students Emma Dickson and Jillian Zhong to [return *Brandon* to its former glory](https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/guggenheim-restores-first-internet-artwork-acquisition-through-conserving-computer-based-art-initiative) (https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/guggenheim-restores-first-internet-artwork-acquisition-through-conserving-computer-based-art-initiative).

When the project began, “many parts of *Brandon* didn’t operate any more,” said Phillips. “What we were dealing with outdated web technology and we had a find a solution to make the piece accessible to the public today.”



NYU computer science students Emma Dickson (left) and Jillian Zhong present their source code analysis of *Brandon* and discuss their migration prototypes with Guggenheim staff and invited guests in the Guggenheim’s Time-Based Media Conservation Lab. Courtesy of the Guggenheim/photographer Kristopher McKay.

Students spent two semesters carefully combing through the website’s source code to understand its intended user experience. “*Brandon* is extremely complex,” Phillips noted. “There’s a whole hidden research archive buried within the code.”

“The movement, the speed, the interactivity, what happens when you mouse over what part of the site, what functions are called into action, what are the colors... all of this can be found inside the code,” she added. “Looking at the source code was key to seeing what the behaviors were supposed to be like.”

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Cory Arcangel Excavates Andy Warhol's Digital Art from Ancient Floppy Disks

(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/cory-arcangel-excavates-andy-warhols-digital-art-from-ancient-floppy-disks-11819)

In the years since *Brandon's* creation, many of its components had stopped working, thanks to advancements in technology. Its programmers, for instance, had developed eleven unique Java applets (micro applications that work within a browser) that no longer displayed correctly. Modern browsers, such as Google Chrome, stopped supporting Java in 2015.

"We were dealing with outdated web technology and we had to find a solution to make the piece accessible to the public today again," said Phillips. One trick employed to repair the broken code—all written by hand back in those days—was the use of animated GIFs in place of the outdated Java code.

```

1 <!DOCTYPE html>
2 <!--DOCUMENTATION
3 AUTHOR: Emma Dickson
4 DATE: 12/20/16
5 PROJECT: BRANDON, Java applet migration
6 PURPOSE: This page is called by cell 10,
7 java applet has been replaced with javascript, css and div element
8 REVISION HISTORY:
9 12/20/16: Migrated java applet to css, js and new html element
10 4/5/17: Doctype changed to HTML 5 for consistency
11
12
13 <HTML>
14 <HEAD>
15 <!--NEW CODE START-->
16 <style>
17 body{
18 background-color: #000000;
19 color: #FFFFFF;
20 }
21 a:active{
22 color: #000000;
23 }
24 a:visited{
25 color: #000000;
26 }
27 table{
28 border-collapse: collapse;
29 border-spacing: 0;
30 margin-left: auto;
31 margin-right: auto;
32 table-layout: fixed;

```

The conservation intervention in *Brandon's* source code is documented with code annotation, color-coded here in light grey. Courtesy of the Guggenheim/screen shot: Jonathan Farbowitz,

The original effects of other outdated HTML elements were recreated through more modern code like JavaScript and CSS (the software equivalent of rigging an '84 Macintosh display on a 2017 MacBook). The project has fully restored the website's 82 pages and popup windows, once again providing access to *Brandon* as it would have been experienced back in 1999. "Technically speaking, the restoration effort was a migration of one technology to another," Phillips added.

This process required the creation of new protocols to ensure adherence to [conservation ethics \(http://www.conservation-us.org/our-organizations/association-\(aic\)/governance/code-of-ethics-and-guidelines-for-practice\)](http://www.conservation-us.org/our-organizations/association-(aic)/governance/code-of-ethics-and-guidelines-for-practice), so that additions to an artwork are reversible. The CCBA team was careful not to delete any of the original *Brandon* programming, creating a duplicate version of the site that annotates all additions and ensures that broken or obsolete code would no longer be executed. Additionally, all of the restoration work—which took four months to complete—and the decisions behind it has been recorded in a treatment report.

"The artist," noted Phillips, "is very excited that the piece can finally be experienced again."

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All-Star Museums Team Up to Digitize 25 Million Images, Putting Art History Online

Where you once had to get on a plane, soon you'll be able to just head to your laptop.

Brian Boucher (<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>), May 16, 2017



The Garden Court at the Frick Collection. Photo Paul Gorbould, via Flickr.

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Art history just got a lot more accessible. Students, professors, and researchers will soon be able to access some 25 million images of art, photographs, and previously unpublished art historical documents from 14 art institutions worldwide. The partnership aims to digitize and make available 7 million images by 2020.

The new database, organized by the [PHAROS Art Research Consortium](http://pharosartresearch.org/) (<http://pharosartresearch.org/>), has been spearheaded by the Frick Collection in New York and includes gems from the Courtauld Institute (London), Fondazione Federico Zeri (Bologna), Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles), Institut national d'histoire de l'art (Paris), Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) and the Yale Center For British Art (New Haven), among others.

Whereas researchers previously needed to get on a plane to sift through the photo archives of these far-flung institutions, they will soon be able to access them all online for free. At present, they can search through more than 60,000 artworks and nearly 100,000 images (<http://images.pharosartresearch.org/>). PHAROS plans to add more archives and participating institutions in the future.



Inge Reist, director of the Frick's Center for the History of Collecting and president of the international consortium, in the Frick Art Reference Library stacks on the floor that contains 20,000 boxes of photoarchival material. Photo by Michael Bodycomb.

As one example, the Frick Art Reference Library holds thousands of images from photo expeditions to private collections underwritten by Henry Clay Frick's wife, Adelaide Howard Childs Frick. The archive includes files full of notations by visiting scholars with observations about attribution, iconography, and other art-historical details. While those cards were consulted by 2,500 researchers at the Frick Art Reference Library in person in 2015, a significantly larger number—some 75,000 researchers from 91 countries—has since looked them up online.

The site is also working to develop image-recognition technology that would enable users to search the archive by uploading an image in lieu of text to find details about a work's provenance, exhibition history, and conservation history. One benefit to such a tool, the organizers note, is that it would make the database accessible to users in every language. (At the moment, that feature is only available for a small number of works of Italian art from the Frick's own collection.) Users can also upload their own images to identify matching and related works.

PHAROS was established in 2013 with funding from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

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Watch the Hilarious Video That Art Dealer Joel Mesler Is Using to Debut His New East Hampton Gallery

The dealer and artist has created a gem of deadpan humor to announce his new Rental Gallery space.

Andrew Goldstein (<https://news.artnet.com/about/andrew-goldstein-590>), May 16, 2017



The artist and dealer Joel Mesler outside his new East Hampton incarnation of Rental Gallery.

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Oh, hello. I didn't see you there. I'm Andrew Goldstein, the editor of artnet News, and this is an article about a new video that the artist and dealer Joel Mesler just released to advertise his new Hamptons gallery. Why use a video to debut a new gallery? I'm glad you asked.

Let me tell you a secret. There's no reason to create a video to debut your new gallery. Unless... you are trying to create a viral sensation with something so funny, so deadpan, so I-can't-believe-he-did-that that it will endear you to your new well-heeled clientele and give Manhattanites a taste of what they're missing.

A former Los Angeles dealer who rose to prominence in New York through his championing of market-stars-to-be at the now-defunct spaces Rental Gallery and Untitled, Mesler most recently partnered with the gallerist Zach Feuer on two Lower East Side galleries—Mesler/Feuer and Feuer/Mesler—as well as a satellite space in Hudson, New York, called Retrospective. As an artist in his own right, Mesler recently showed his tongue-in-cheek, self-satirizing paintings at NADA Miami Beach.

Here, in this promotional video, watch the dealer amble about, paint, grow a beard, hug his children, and receive some beautifully thrown shade from Gagolian's Adam Cohen—an old friend of Mesler's—who manages to praise and skewer him at the same time.

Do yourself a favor and enjoy the laid-back music, too.

The new iteration of Rental Gallery will open in East Hampton this Memorial Day weekend with a group show featuring some of the artists Mesler has championed over the years, including [Henry Taylor](http://www.artnet.com/artists/henry-taylor/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/henry-taylor/>), Jon Rafman, Rashid Johnson, Ridley Howard, and [Jonas Wood](http://www.artnet.com/artists/jonas-wood/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/jonas-wood/>).

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