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REFLECTIONS ON THE SMITHSONIAN'S "CONSERVING SOFTWARE- BASED

ARTWORKS" SYMPOSIUM

April 21, 2014

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As artists experiment with the possibilities of what they can create with digital technology, the institutions that are acquiring software-based artworks are faced with a set of challenges unique to the medium. Such artworks are not only a new chapter in art history and museum practice, but also require the teams tasked with the care of those works to take a creative, sometimes unorthodox, approach to preserving them for future generations. On January 17th, the Smithsonian Institution's Time Based Media Art Working Group (TBMA) sponsored a day-long symposium titled *TECHNOLOGY EXPERIMENTS IN ART: Conserving Software-Based Artworks* which looked closely at two of these challenges: the long-term care of works rooted in short-term technology, and the systematic care of works created in idiosyncratic ways.

In his opening remarks, symposium organizer Jeff Martin

cited a manifesto that Robert Rauschenberg wrote for the November 1, 1967 issue of E.A.T. News, which served as a baseline for the symposium:

Maintain a constructive climate for the recognition of the new technology and the arts by a civilized collaboration between groups unrealistically developing in isolation.

With that sage advice in mind, this symposium brought together speakers from a range of disciplines where technology, experiments, and art co-exist, overlap and intersect. The TBMA Working Group invited artists, conservators, programmers, curators, and technicians to share their projects and discuss their work. They presented on the challenges of conserving software-based artworks, each from their unique perspective, and provided specific case studies and solution systems that they've implemented.

The speakers and their presentation titles were:

- Deena Engel & Mark Hellar: "Technical Narratives and Software-Based Artworks"
- Matthew Kirschenbaum: "The Afterlives of AGRIPPA: Preserving a Disappearing Digital Text"
- Alex Cooper: "Acquisition and Conservation of Generative Artworks, National Portrait Gallery"
- Lincoln Schatz & James Murray: "It will fail and become obsolete" (artist and studio partnerships in software-based art conservation)
- Diane Dietrich & Desiree Alexander: "The Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, Cornell University"
- Aaron Straup, Senior Engineer, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum: "Planetary: collecting and preserving code as a living object"

The discussion ranged from discussions of specific artworks, such as William Gibson's [Agrippa \(a book of the dead\)](http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/source/agrippa.asp) (<http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/source/agrippa.asp>) and Lincoln Schatz's generative artwork [The Network](http://thenetworkportrait.com/) (<http://thenetworkportrait.com/>) to broader efforts in media archeology, retro-computing, gaming emulators, and digital repositories. The general consensus of the panel was that these types of conversations and cross-disciplinary communication are key to keep these artworks alive and active. The future will follow a collaborative path: educating artists about technology, while also educating curators, registrars and conservators about how to ingest and collect time-based and digital artworks. The TBMA Working Group hopes to continue to have these conversations and share information and experiences as we move into exciting and uncharted territory.

For more information on the Smithsonian Time Based Media Art Working Group, please visit www.si.edu/tbma (<http://www.si.edu/tbma>).

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