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ESTABLISHING TIME-BASED MEDIA CONSERVATION AT THE NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND: CREATING MORE IN TIMES OF LESS

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ABSTRACT

The National Galleries of Scotland houses a collection dating from the Renaissance to the modern day over three main sites in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland. Six conservators working across the disciplines of paper, paintings, and frame conservation care for over 96,000 objects, including 20 time-based media art works in the core collection. In 2012 the opportunity arose for one of the paper conservators to begin to establish time-based media within the disciplines covered by the department. This paper will present a case study of the approach taken and the aims, challenges, and solutions proposed and addressed along the way.

INTRODUCTION

The National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) are based in Edinburgh and houses a collection of over 96000 artworks dating from the fourteen hundreds to the modern day. The collection is split across five gallery buildings at three sites in the city, and includes easel paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, miniatures, furniture, sculpture, modern installations, archives, and time-based media. NGS also co-own the ARTIST ROOMS collection with Tate and this includes over 1000 artworks from thirty-three modern and contemporary artists.

Six full time conservators are employed at NGS covering the disciplines of paper, paintings, and frame conservation. Due to the breadth of media types found within the collection, as a team they are often faced with situations that fall outside their expertise based on training and background. This is an issue that is growing as the collection expands and diversifies. As a result opportunities can often arise within the department for diversification of skills beyond the conservation discipline in which the conservator was trained. The situation described in this paper is by no means unique, nor are the methods and approaches taken. However, the desire is to describe the aims, challenges, and issues faced by a conservator beginning the transition to caring for electronic media as a case study for others in a similar situation.

CONTEXT

In 2012 one of the paper conservators began to consider ways in which their job description and approach could be widened to include time-based media. This was motivated in part by a professional desire to ensure that this area of the collection was being safeguarded and a personal interest in all things technical, digital, and film. The conservator found themselves responsible for caring for a media type previously unknown to them. Additionally, in times of financial constraint, economically viable choices and solutions for addressing not only the backlog of documentation and preservation decisions, but to deal with new acquisitions and loans into the collection, needed to be found within the boundaries of existing work programs. Some of the issues faced were potentially time sensitive in terms of the formats used, and this needed to be understood and a course of action decided.

It was thought that there were around twenty time-based media artworks in NGS holdings, but their exact number and nature were unknown. These artworks were occasionally going on display and loan. However, this was facilitated by the curator dealing directly with the Audio Visual (AV) technician, who is part of the IT department,

and conservation staff were not involved in the process at any point. The focus was on getting the artwork on display on a case by case basis. As a result, little consideration was being made in terms of the cost impact of equipment needed, the formats being purchased, or how the institution would preserve these artworks long term, including the skills, equipment, and resources required. It seemed that artworks based on video, DVD, pen drive, or similar were being viewed as having a different status than more traditional media, and their display and use were not being approached in the same way as other media types in the collection where procedures were clear and well established. This was one of the dominant issues that needed to be addressed; procedures needed to be written, agreed upon, and implemented to clarify the situation and to create a robust management structure for the long term preservation of this section of the collection. A role needed to be created for the conservation department where one previously did not exist. Documentation methods needed to be developed alongside procedures, guidelines, and processes to support staff working in this area. Importantly, these processes needed to be integrated into core working practices across all departments involved.

The tone of the approach taken was set by two factors. First, it was not possible in the foreseeable future to create a specific post for time-based media within the department. This was due to a combination of financial constraints and the needs of the collection; with only twenty items to care for, it would be difficult to argue for an entire post dedicated to this area, even a temporary one. This was also an opportunity to gain skills and knowledge and build upon them in-house. Second, the conservator taking on this responsibility had to be able to do so within their existing work program, which included areas of paper and preventive conservation. It was possible to argue for about 15% of the staff member's time to be dedicated to time-based media, equating to about thirty days across a year. However, this was only possible by using the needs of the pre-existing exhibition and loan

program that happened to include several electronic media artworks, and which needed to be facilitated.

With no history of the discipline at NGS, an on-going concern was how to reconcile a lack of knowledge of this field with meeting the immediate needs of the collection. Both of these areas had to progress together in a symbiotic manner. Spending time studying through a formal program in this field prior to the project beginning was not logistically possible. Initially this was a seemingly overwhelming and daunting task. Realistic aims and a project timeline were established to help focus the tasks and staff involved. The purpose of these aims was build confidence, both personally and professionally across the organisation at a pace that was manageable.

AUDIT

One of the first tasks was to understand what was in the collection. This information was not initially clear and this was due in combination to a lack of a consistent approach and the collection database, Multi-Mimsy, not being used to record this type of artwork effectively. The conservator worked with a member of the audit and documentation team to undertake a formal audit of holdings. This was a quick win solution that provided a clear foundation for all future work; knowing exactly what was held in the collection allowed learning and development to be targeted to the necessary media types and crucially, it aided in writing a preservation management plan for the collection to meet its long term display and preservation needs. This plan was the foundation for all future work, including addressing the documentation backlog and creating budget and funding submissions for any equipment and training needed.

As a result of the audit, all of the components of each artwork were found and physically corralled into one storage location. The keywords used to describe the artworks in the collection database were clarified to ensure consistency across all records and a method was developed of using two of the database fields to record the component

parts of each artwork and any associated accessories. By cataloguing each artwork in this manner in the collection database, each component of each artwork can be location tracked separately, which was not previously possible. Another issue that had to be faced was the easy portability of this type of artwork, meaning that master copies had previously ended up all over the gallery, including in people's offices, which presented non-ideal storage spaces. By corraling all of the artworks in one store, managed by one staff member and by giving all components an accession number, a system was created to manage the movement of this area of the collection, as all requests for access pass through an established system for accessing items from this specific store.

DEVELOPING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

The process of gathering, understanding, and documenting the items held in the collection was used as a means for the conservator to develop the expertise required. This was made possible through the use of the Matters in Media Art project website, which was the result of a collaborative project between the New Art Trust, MoMA, San Francisco MoMA, and Tate (Documenting Media Art, 2014). This website provides downloadable documentation templates and a narrative for the processes needed to surround this documentation. It was used as a key source of guidance and from this documentation templates and draft processes were evolved to meet the NGS specific context. Each of the templates provided included a list of all of the questions that need to be asked for each section of the documentation and thus the user is led through the process of gathering the necessary information. Creative solutions were required to be able to address the necessary professional development. Though a time-consuming route, using completion of the documentation as a means of development allows information on the collection to be developed alongside the necessary expertise.

The National Galleries of Scotland are in the fortunate position of being connected to Tate through the shared ARTIST ROOMS collection. Tate currently has the only

fully established time-based media conservation department within the United Kingdom and through the shared collection, the NGS conservator has been able to visit the department and spend time with staff understanding processes and equipment. Experience of installation processes, equipment, and documentation has been gained through attending relevant exhibition installations with Tate staff. While not everybody will have access to a time-based media conservation department in this manner, if available, such collaboration is positive and productive for those trying to move into this field. Finding opportunities to work with conservators with experience, and being present to follow installation guides, to plug DVD players into monitors, follow the documentation already created, and ask questions of established conservators or the artist's studio if they are in attendance, is an invaluable experience in the journey of learning through doing.

ESTABLISHING A ROLE FOR CONSERVATION

If a role for Conservation was going to be established within NGS, all of those already involved and those who needed to be had to start communicating and working together. An organic rolling program of development was created and a multi-disciplinary working group was established, chaired by the conservator, to bring together key staff. In addition to the conservator, staff included members of the curatorial team, loans and exhibitions registrars, a member of the documentation and audit team, and the AV technician. The aim of this group was to establish the necessary lines of communication essential to the success of the project.

Within this group, the conservator's role has often been to ensure that all parties involved are communicating effectively and making the best ethical decisions possible, in addition to ensuring the necessary procedures, guidance, and documentation are in place to solidify the institution's knowledge and approach in relation to this media type.

This group has also acted as a discussion forum to ensure the correct decisions are being made for our collection.

Some interesting issues have arisen. For example, one question discussed related to how we could ensure a digital file was disposed of in a legal sense if a lender had asked us to delete it at the end of a loan. In the absence of having a framework in place for this situation, until we establish a process, we are returning files to lenders as this allows us to log the entire process in our collection database. Another interesting question was raised by a colleague who asked: "If we own an artwork as a digital file, why can't we create two exhibition copies of that single file and have them both on display at different venues at the same time?" While multiple editions of artworks of course exist and so can be on display in different venues at the same time, this is different to a collection owning one copy of an artwork and having it on display in multiple places in parallel, unless this is explicitly agreed upon with the artist. None of the artists held in our collection have agreed to this, so if we are approached by multiple venues wanting to display one of our artworks at the same time we cannot lend and we refer the venue to the artist's studio to find another edition that can be used. Both of these situations are interesting examples of the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach to the management of this area of the collection. It is also an example of the need for a conservator to be able to represent the ethical object based perspective of what we are doing.

In tandem to the establishment of this group, a strategy document was written by the conservator and agreed upon by the group. This has acted as a reference document for the organization concerning our short and long term aims and includes the principles behind some of the decisions that have been made. For example, it describes our choice of approach for acquisitions where we have chosen to commit to buying master copies of artworks, as opposed to exhibition copies. This means we have accepted that the collection will have continued preservation needs with the associated implications of resources for in-house skills and budgetary requirements. The document also looked at how the team would deal with acquisitions, including creating a processing

team for each artwork; working as a team aims to ensure communication structures are developed and confidence in the processes built. The strategy document also encapsulated that we would use the documentation process and the pre-existing loan and exhibition program as a means of development for all staff involved.

The working group also created smaller groups to facilitate specific sections of the project. For example, the conservator, documentation officer, and AV technician are currently working on an equipment asset register that will be housed within the collection database. Every piece of equipment that can be used in the display of the collections' time-based media artworks will be listed along with information of maintenance schedules, when guarantees expire and where the equipment is located. It will describe which artworks that piece of equipment can be used to display and the aim is to use this as a tool to assist with planning and management of the equipment pool and the co-ordination of exhibition installations.

EQUIPMENT SHARING NETWORK

One of the other areas NGS still need to address is access to equipment to be able to view the formats owned in our collection. The long term aim may be to acquire the equipment and develop the skills to use it in-house, but in the short term, the aim is to build links to those who do have the equipment and develop methods of collaborating with them, working in a cost neutral manner for mutual benefit. One model being considered is to create an equipment sharing network. In this case, organizations would trade time using equipment with a skilled user. For example, NGS might trade a week of analysis using our micro-fader for a week of time with a deck digitizing our video collection. Hopefully, this approach will be a cost neutral endeavor with the added bonus of developing visible partnerships with other organizations, while helping us to cover our short term skill and equipment shortages.

The NGS Conservation department also uses a professional freelance register for conservators and conserva-

tion and art handling technicians. During projects where the full complement of in-house staff is insufficient to meet the demands of the work program, freelance staff can be brought in through this mechanism for a fixed daily rate. The aim is to add conservators and technicians with skill bases relating to time-based media to the freelance register to assist with the various exhibitions and projects scheduled. In this way we can bridge gaps in skills and staff and by working alongside freelance staff, we can build experience, knowledge, and a network of related professionals that will benefit the collection.

CONCLUSION

The National Galleries of Scotland is still at a relatively early stage of the process of developing time-based media conservation expertise in house. The nature of the approach taken means that this is a prolonged process, but it is one that can be completed to the long term benefit of the collection. The process is also an iterative one and despite having already visited and developed documentation templates, process and procedure guidance, a strategy, and despite having completed an audit and clarified and developed our use of our database, the conservator and working group will continue to re-visit all of these areas as we progress as an organisation.

One of the unexpected elements of the project for the conservator involved has been the personal mental shift required in dealing with this new discipline. However, despite initial appearances, the conservator has found that the same conservation principles and conceptual approach can be applied as with more traditional formats. If you apply the fundamental principles of the profession and respect your skill base, research what you don't know and think carefully about the short and long term implications of decisions, hopefully decisions can remain sustainable and robust.

In the current climate, with collections growing but staff numbers not necessarily reflecting this growth, creative solutions and opportunities are a positive way forward

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to challenges faced by a collection, particularly if they can be combined with collaboration with more experience professionals to mutual benefit. The proliferation of online learning either as full academic programs or individual modules and short courses may further assist conservation professionals already established in the profession to embrace this interesting and diverse area.

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