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THE LEGIBLE CITY—ONE ARTWORK, MULTIPLE EMBODIMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The Legible City (1989–1991) is one of the major works of the Australian media artist Jeffrey Shaw (b. 1944) and a milestone of 1990s interactive, computer-based new media art (computer-graphic installation, dimensions variable, ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe). In this installation, the spectator rides a stationary bicycle in a dark room, experiencing a virtual journey through projected views of the cities of Manhattan, Amsterdam, and Karlsruhe. The real physical exertion on the bicycle is converted into the virtual distance covered. Since the beginning of his career, one of Jeffrey Shaw's main preoccupations has been overcoming the traditional, institutionally laid-down distance between the artwork and the viewer. From the mid-1970s on, Shaw moved from sculptural to computer-based work, seeing the computer as a particularly efficient medium for his work since programmed software configurations could function as modules that could be adapted to create new artworks. Jeffrey Shaw's *The Legible City* illuminates numerous problems specific to the emerging field of digital art preservation. On the one hand, the interactive installation is based on proprietary, i.e. work-specific and licensed, software. On the other hand, it uses obsolete hardware and custom-made components. Both factors contribute to the high cost of maintaining this work. By tracing the complex evolution of this artwork since its first presentation in 1989, this paper aims to illuminate the various strategies employed by the ZKM for the maintenance and

preservation of this installation over the course of the past twenty years. In his double capacity as artist and director of the ZKM | Institute for Visual Media from 1991 till 2003, Jeffrey Shaw carried out several changes to *The Legible City*. Since the creation of a 1988 prototype of the artwork—which could be interactively operated by a joystick—the interactive installation has undergone several technological modifications, partly owed to the artist's desire to take advantage of enhanced software possibilities, and partly caused by the obsolescence of components. Since the artwork was acquired by the ZKM, the institution has adopted the strategy of hardware preservation for the conservation of the artwork. *The Legible City* is one of ten case studies in the European Union funded research project Digital Art Conservation (<http://digitalartconservation.org>), which took place from January 2010 to December 2012, and part of the traveling exhibition *Digital Art Works: The Challenges of Conservation*, held at the ZKM from October 29, 2011 to February 12, 2012. As part of the case study, an in-depth retrospective documentation of the different stages of alteration of the work was carried out for the first time, with the aim to formulate recommendations for the long-term preservation of this artwork with regard to its authenticity and integrity. In addition, in dialogue with the artist, a porting of the software was carried out. This paper will examine the measures undertaken over the course of the installation's twenty-year history as well as this most recent undertaking.

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