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LIFE AFTER TAPE: COLLECTING DIGITAL VIDEO ART

JOANNA PHILLIPS AND AGATHE JARCZYK

The shift of artist-created video towards file-based formats and the approaching obsolescence of digital videotape challenge collecting art institutions in regard to the preservation, storage, and display of contemporary video artworks. In the previous era of digital videotape, the museum's choice of master formats, migration cycles, and storage parameters was guided by established archival standards and best practices. Importantly, tape formats also defined the image geometry of the recorded video and ensured its compliance to broadcast standards and its compatibility to standardized playback and display equipment.

In art production today, many artists make use of the rapid advancement of consumer technology and no longer rely on semi-professional vendor-supported production and post-production software. As a result, artist video files arrive at the museum in an abundance of different codecs, containers, frame rates, and pixel resolutions. Artists' use of proprietary formats, especially of proprietary codecs, raises the concern of limited file sustainability. In addition, the quality of mastering of artist video can reflect differing levels of technical expertise, and in some cases artist-provided files might be operational only on a computer, but are incompatible with standardized video playback and display equipment in the galleries. The latter can necessitate reformatting the artist-provided, native master files—a measure that touches on the notion of authorship and authenticity and can create an ethical dilemma for

the conservator. In this context it has to be discussed how far the museum interferes with the artistic process when making sustainable format recommendations or stipulations regarding acquisition deliverables.

Regardless of the question of which file formats to acquire, museums must develop protocols and implement workflows for quality and condition checking video files. Not only may the artist's video lack established standardization, but different playback and display environments have a severe impact on the visual rendering of digital video. Thus, when defining a reference for the quality and condition of video artworks, a conservator should consider determining factors such as the computer's graphic card, the player software, and the display technology. In addition to evaluating the video content, it is important to also adopt digital preservation standards and establish procedures for metadata creation, check-summing, and redundant server storage.

This paper is based on a joint research initiative between the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the University of the Arts Bern, Switzerland. It identifies the challenging factors of collecting video art in digital file form and discusses possible approaches and tools the museum can employ to ensure the quality and integrity of the digital video material that enters its collection.

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