



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DELLA TUSCIA  
FACOLTÀ DI CONSERVAZIONE DEI BENI CULTURALI  
Dottorato di Ricerca in  
“Memoria e materia delle opere d’arte attraverso i processi di produzione,  
storicizzazione, conservazione e musealizzazione”  
XX CICLO

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Title of the project:

*The International Debate around Conservation and Documentation  
of New Media Art. 1995-2007*

by *Laura Barreca*

My PhD research project “Conservation and Documentation of New Media Art. The Debate between the Italian Tradition and International Strategies” deals with the theoretical issues related to the strategies of conservation and documentation of New Media Art. I am especially interested in attempting a comparative analysis of the international theories of conservation of technology-based media works. In contemporary art the format and the presentation of the artwork is constantly changing, as the broad availability of new technologies continues to grow very quickly. Over the past ten years, the problems of long-term preservation and documentation of New Media Art have been a central issue within the international debate initiated by a network of American and North-European museums of contemporary art. In the XX-th century, New Media artworks represented the most significant artistic creations within the art-world. At the same time, such artworks are a challenge for museums that have been collecting them, as they are made with new, non-traditional technologies and media, such as video, film, computers, media installations and digital formats. As a new artistic display, New Media Art has changed the perception of artistic practices since the Sixties. The special element that defines a New Media Art work is its “proceeding character”, related to the inner temporality of the work. For instance, a movie shot on film may, with new technologies, be transferred onto DVD and converted into a digital format, on magnetic tape, or it may be reproduced as a Quicktime or Windows Media Player file. It can be displayed on the internet at low resolution or may even be sent and received over the web, therefore traveling in a completely “immaterial” format. Furthermore, the short life and the very quick obsolescence of the hardware does not allow an easy development of strategies regarding the conservation of New Media Art works. The international debate concerning the preservation of this new aesthetic category of art is focused in particular on the problem of documentation. In other words, it is necessary to consider that without an adequate conservation and documentation many art works will be lost to future generations. This is also the reason why theories and tools of conservation are to be urgently developed by the international, scientific community. Documenting the memory of the

present represents a real challenge for curators, conservators and restorers. It is their task to ensure the “access” to the digital heritage for generations, to come.

Over the last decade, several international projects have focused on research relating to the general criteria and the strategies of conservation and documentation. First of all, it is indispensable to define what must be preserved and how. Since it is impossible to preserve everything, it is necessary to make a selection. Like every choice, this process is discriminating and therefore needs to be supported by agreed standards and common theoretical references able to assure their correctness and transparency. In the light of their “ephemeral” nature New Media Art works are also called “Variable” or “Unstable Media”. The first definition of “Variable Media” was proposed in 1998 by Jon Ippolito, who, at that time, was Associate Curator at the Guggenheim Museum of New York. This definition is related to the variability of the physical formats for transmission. The so-called “Variable Media approach” seeks to understand the intended behaviour of the art work and its inherent characteristics, through the documentation of the artist’s intent. In 2002, the Guggenheim Museum and the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology in Montreal have established a special partnership for a consortium of contemporary art museums, named *Variable Media Network*. The aim of this consortium of international museums was inventing and sharing new approaches, new strategies and tools for preserving New Media Art works in museum collections. A major incentive to do so was inadequate documentation and technological obsolescence. This initiative has been developed through a series of conferences, symposiums and meetings around the world. As Gaby Wijers, the Dutch conservator of The Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo/Time Based Art, said: “the ‘variable media approach’ proposes that the best way to preserve artworks in ephemeral formats, from stick spirals to video installations to Web sites, is to encourage artists to describe them in a medium-independent way, so as to help translate them into new forms once their current medium becomes obsolete.”<sup>1</sup> In Northern Europe there were also other institutions involved in the preservation of New Media Art. In 2003, the archive team of the V\_2 Organization in Rotterdam conducted fundamental research on the documentation aspects of the preservation of electronic art activities. This pioneer project was called *Capturing Unstable Media*, and it focused on an approach balancing archiving and preservation initiatives. This project presented a broad inventory of case studies that have developed a different methodology. Rather than taking a static approach on modern and contemporary art, it primarily defined which immaterial and physical components of New Media Art work should be documented, described or preserved. In general, the main question is: “HOW TO PRESERVE AN ARTWORK THAT DEPENDS ON ELECTRONIC DEVICES THAT MIGHT BE OBSOLETE IN A FEW YEARS?” It is not very easy to answer this question, but one can say that every work of art has a sort of internal linguistic code, which could also be identified by applying the concept of “aura”, in order to quote Walter Benjamin. For instance, computer-based work of art has a “computer code”, a set of instructions that tells the machine what to do and when. This “computer code” should be preserved because it represents the original part of the art work and the place where the artist conceptualized his or her idea. As Wijers said: “the traditional codes for the visual arts, such as uniqueness of the physical manifestation, are not applicable to video art [New Media Art]. The work of art is certainly unique and authentic, but its tangible form as such is not”.<sup>2</sup> The Italian theorist Cesare Brandi in his famous book *Theory of Restoration* published in 1963 writes about the concept of “unità potenziale” - the potential unity of the artwork.<sup>3</sup> Brandi asserts that the final aim of any kind of restoration strategy is the preservation, and eventually the re-composition of the original information. The *Theory of Restoration* refers most of all to painting, sculpture and traditional art, but its principles can, in my opinion, also be used as an interesting starting point to address strategies in respect of New Media Art. In order to find common solutions and useful criteria for conservation and documentation it is very important to gather

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<sup>1</sup> Rif. Gaby Wijers, *Preservation and / or Documentation. The Conservation of Media Art*, 2005, published in [www.montevideo.nl/en/nieuws/detailC.php?id=72](http://www.montevideo.nl/en/nieuws/detailC.php?id=72)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>3</sup> Cesare Brandi was an Italian intellectual, art historian and critic. In 1939 he founded the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome, with Giulio Carlo Argan. In 1963 he wrote the book *Theory of Restoration*, which was later translated in English, French, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, German, Japanese and Chinese.

and compare all the different theories developed by international museums involved in New Media Art. The aim of my research project is to study the strategies developed in a number of museums in the United States and Europe and to compare them to the Italian approach, in order to acquire the knowledge for the development of this pioneering issue in Italy.

In the course of my current research, I had the possibility to interact with the following international public institutions: MoMA, Guggenheim Museum, Electronic Art Intermix, New York; Daniel Langlois Foundation, Montreal; SFMoMA, San Francisco (my PhD Tutor is Rudolf Frieling, Curator of Media Arts); ZKM (Center for Arts and Media), Karlsruhe; MonteVideo, Amsterdam; V\_2 Organization, Rotterdam; the platform rhizome.org; TATE Modern, London. These museums have been developing New Media Art preservation, by promoting research projects, case studies and laboratory experiments. In addition, they frequently organize symposiums and projects, in order to share the results available with the museum network at large.