

# Research into four media installations

by Vivian van Saaze and Gaby Wijers

## Introduction

For ten years now, the preservation of media art has been a recurring problem for museums and all those involved in the conservation of collections. Protocols for the preservation of videotapes and the registration of video works were recently developed, and a great many video works have already been preserved as prescribed.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the research into the preservation of installations in which 'new' media were used is still in its infancy.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to acquisition, presentation, registration, documentation and preservation, multimedia installations call for a different approach from more 'traditional' forms of art, such as painting and sculpture. Such aspects as interactivity (the role of the spectator), site-specificity and changeability are raising new questions for conservators and restorers. In that sense, the problems with multimedia installations have much in common with those around the preservation of conceptual art, performances and works of art consisting of natural, perishable materials.

However, the often process-oriented nature of multimedia installations and the transience of the technology used also raise more specific questions of preservation. Such factory-made products as information carriers and playback equipment are, after all, subject to the competitive situation of the market. New technologies succeed each other at a high speed, and the production of older 'formats' and playback equipment is often discontinued.

## Case studies

To gain more insight into problems surrounding the presentation, registration and documentation of multimedia installations, the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage and the Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo/Time Based Arts, initiated an inventorial study of the international state of affairs. The re-installation of the installation *A Virus of Sadness. The Virulence of Loneliness* (1990) by Lydia Schouten functioned as pilot case study within the exploratory research. In the same context, an international programme of lectures, and an expert meeting on museological problems involved in the acquisition of multimedia installations, were held in October 2002. The lectures were presented by specialists from the Guggenheim Museum, New York, the London Tate Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

On the basis of the findings from the pilot case and the expert meeting, the Netherlands Media Art Institute started a study on the presentation, registration and documentation of four media installations:

- *25 Caramboles en variaties. Verjaardagscadeau voor een 25-jarige (25 Caramboles and Variations. Birthday Present for a 25 Year Old,* (1979/1980) by Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- *Outside Inside* (1982) by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas, artists' collection.

- *Are You Afraid of Video?* (1984-1994) by Servaas, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- *A Word of Welcome* (1997-2007) by eddie d, artist's collection.

The study took place in the context of the exhibition *Dertig Jaar Nederlandse Videokunst /Thirty Years Dutch Video Art 3* and the project *404 Object Not Found. What remains of media art?* Considerations leading to the selection of precisely these case studies were, for example, the diversity of the individual works and the degree of complexity of the technology used. The objectives of the study included finding an answer to the following more general questions:

- What aspects play a role in the preservation and re-installation of multimedia installations?
- What are the criteria for preservation and re-installation?
- What aesthetic and technical elements are essential, and should be preserved in order to ensure that the integrity and significance of the work remain intact during future presentations?
- How can installations be registered and documented?
- What technical know-how is required to ensure the possibility of future presentations of these installations?

For the re-installation of the works in question at the exhibition *Dertig Jaar Nederlandse Videokunst/Thirty Years Dutch Video Art*, it was decided to comply, as much as possible, with the artists' wishes. Each installation was built up in close collaboration with, or by, the original maker.<sup>4</sup>

**25 Caramboles en variaties. Verjaardagscadeau voor een 25-jarige (25 Caramboles and Variations. Birthday Present for a 25 Year Old, 1979/1980) by Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas, collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.**

For example, it was Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas' wish to let his work develop in accordance with the possibilities of the current technology; he chose three ultramodern silver-coloured flat-screen monitors. Such advanced technical equipment was not available in 1979, when the work was first presented; it gives the work a different aura from twenty years ago. Some spectators who remembered the work from 1979 even referred to the re-installation as a new work, or at least a new experience. With regard to future presentations, the question is whether the ultramodern presentation form does not clash with the visibly historical nature of the images. Moreover, in the past, the work was presented in different ways. The first presentation, in 1979, had the characteristics of a 'live event' or performance; a present for the 25th birthday of a friend of the artist.<sup>5</sup> For this presentation, at Café Sport in Amsterdam, the monitors were placed on a billiard table, which was repeated at the Montevideo exhibition. At other presentations, the monitors were placed on pedestals in the corners of a room, which creates a totally different perception of space. Sometimes the room was darkened, sometimes it was not. The artist himself says that he would like to see the images projected in a football stadium, or even

better: on three clouds in the sky.<sup>6</sup> And if the Stedelijk Museum, which owns the work, decides constantly to adjust this installation to the latest technological developments - in conformity with the artist's wishes - we can only guess what (the presentation of) the work will look like in 50 or 100 years' time.

**Outside Inside (1982) by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas. Artists' collection.**

Stansfield and Hooykaas here visualized the invisible driving force (movement and direction). The element of unpredictability - the direction of the wind - is combined with pre-composed images and sounds. Wind and wind direction determine sound and images. The installation consists of a wind vane with an in-built camera installed on the roof of the exhibiting institute. The vane is directly connected to four monitors in the exhibition gallery. Each of these represents a specific wind direction. For example, when the wind is northwesterly, live images of the north and west side of the building can be seen on one of the monitors. Pre-recorded, weather-related images are simultaneously displayed on the other monitors. A small compass is placed in the middle of the monitors, thus indicating the wind directions.

For the presentation at the exhibition *Thirty Years Dutch Video Art*, the wind vane with camera was attached to the chimney on the roof on the street side of the Netherlands Media Art Institute. The artists preferred the vane to be placed in such a way that it was visible from the street, with the images received inside including a sky area of approximately 1/3 of the total. The camera had to transmit closed-circuit images and sound from the roof to the monitors in the exhibition area. Because *Outside Inside* had always been installed for just a few days, while this time, in 2003, the installation was intended to last for two months in winter, we expected interference during this period. The camera was therefore protected with a piece of PVC pipe, and fortunately the expected interference kept off. When the equipment and tapes had been delivered, Ramon Coelho (Netherlands Media Art Institute) made a trial installation. An inexplicable problem with this trial installation was that the wind vane transmitted signals to three monitors rather than one. The distributor was re-soldered and the signal switched to one, instead of all four, monitors. Moreover, video images of satellite maps had to be used instead of the intended topical teletext images, because a cable connection was difficult to realize.

'Although tied down by the laws of technology, during the conceptual phase of their work Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield mostly give free rein to their intuition and spontaneity. Using portable video cameras, they shoot images, usually outside, for which there is no 'story board' at all. Later, at the studio, this material is processed and/or manipulated with the greatest precision. When finally the installation is being built up, there is once again room for coincidence and spontaneity.'<sup>7</sup> The artists clearly regard this installation as a kind of score. The concept remains, but the context keeps on changing, and therefore the work as well. The form of presentation depends on the location. The artists have entrusted all the components of the installation to the Netherlands Media Art

Institute, in the hope that, the work shall be preserved and, available for future presentations.

### **A Word of Welcome (1997-2007) by eddie d. Collection of the artist**

The work *A Word of Welcome*, by eddie d, has also been presented in different forms. With a view to preservation and future presentations, an interview with the artist was held and recorded on video. The intention was to explore the limits to, and possibilities of, change to this installation. The interview dealt with questions about the process of creation, the significance of materials and technology, the form of presentation, obsolescence, restoration and preservation. *A Word of Welcome* is a 'site-related' work which consists of a doormat with welcoming motto and a monitor placed on a pedestal at the entrance to a room or building. The work requires active participation from the viewer. When the visitor enters and steps onto the doormat, he/she is confronted with the image of a TV presenter wishing him/her a good morning or afternoon, depending on the time of day. With each step on the mat, the image jumps and the fragment is repeated, or a new word of welcome spoken. By repeatedly stepping onto the mat, the visitor creates a rhythm of images and sound which undermines the reality value of the personal welcome.

Since the installation first came into existence, eddie d has made different versions, varying from one to several monitors, and from a single 'good morning' to various welcoming texts in various languages, in random order. The artist keeps on pushing the date of creation forward into the future (now: 1997-2007), to indicate that new versions are possible and that the work is still developing. *A Word of Welcome* has been presented in various countries. Each time the artist looks for image fragments in the language of the country in question. Moreover, he aims to use doormats that welcome the visitor in his/her own language.

Eddie d has made use of a Commodore Amiga 600, a relatively old type of computer. The artist selected TV images, after which the video sequence was converted into a jpeg image sequence on the Amiga computer, with the audio track being processed into a wave. To realize the connection between the stepping onto the mat and the images, he used a so-called contact mat of the type often used in shops. The contact mat lies hidden underneath the welcoming mat, and is connected to the mouse port of the Amiga. The computer will construe contact with the mat as a click of the mouse, and will activate the image (the contact pins of the right-hand mouse button are then connected to each other).

At the Netherlands Media Art Institute, the installation was placed on a pedestal, at approximately two metres from the entrance. The monitor used was a Sony Black Trinitron. In the artist's opinion, the size of the monitor is not of vital importance. Essential is the proportional relationship between monitor and space, that is, the screen should be noticed immediately as the visitor enters, so that he/she will perceive the connection between the mat and the image. Initially eddie d favoured the use of a TV monitor, because this comes closest to the

domestic TV set. However, according to the artist, the presenter's power of expression proves to be strong enough to show the image on an LCD screen, or by means of projection. This does not detract from the association with television images.

The interview with eddie d has made clear which aspects of the work he finds of importance for a good presentation. This is, of course, information with which the artist was already familiar, but which thanks to the recorded interview can now be handed down to future exhibition makers. Moreover, the artist is currently examining whether another (more recent) system could yield the same desirable results as the Director 2 'multimedia authoring' software of which he makes use at the moment. 'I'm looking into the Macromedia programme Director MX, which is also a 'multimedia authoring' programme. The work would then have to be run on a Powermac.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Are You Afraid of Video? (1984-1994) by Servaas. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam**

*Are You Afraid of Video?* consists of four monitors forming a square, the screens facing outwards. In the middle of the square stands a red funnel, with a red plastic whip in it. The same images can be seen on all four monitors. Servaas recorded these images from TV; the footage includes TV ads, fragments from sex and feature films, TV shows and news flashes. The red whip lashes out violently in all directions, propelled by the degree of aggression emanating from the images. Servaas intended to update the TV images every year over a period of ten years (1984 -1994). However, after just a few years Servaas had learned that 'things are always the same. (...) But whether I show 1984 or 1986, it is all equally miserable.'<sup>9</sup>

In *Are You Afraid of Video?*, spatiality and spectators play an important role. Due to the set up of four monitors lined up into a square, the visitor is invited to walk around the work. The force of the threatening whip, the sound from the monitors and the cracking of the whip turn this work into a physical experience. The images almost literally transcend themselves, and demand the spectators' involvement.

A trial installation was set up at the Stedelijk Museum before the work was transported to the Netherlands Media Art Institute. Most of the technical equipment was still present and in good state. However, the original air compressor was not available anymore, and had to be replaced. It is unclear whether the 8 bar that propels the whip is only a safety requirement. Servaas' own description from 1990 reads: Sony colour monitor type PVM-2000 . The artist did not specify any other requirements to be met by the monitors. However, experience shows that it is essential to reinforce the monitors, because of the impact of the cracking whip. The choice of monitors is decisive of the overall image, and moreover, the size of the monitors has consequences for the size of the podiums and the relationship between the various components. The monitors used to be placed on wooden podiums. Photos of the work show that these varied from simple pedestals to a construction in which the monitors are partly sunk. Both types probably found favour in Servaas' eyes. The presentation at Thirty

Years Dutch Video Art was based on the construction with the sunken monitors, because, from an aesthetic point of view, both the Stedelijk Museum and the Netherlands Media Art Institute preferred this.

### **Registration and documentation**

During the investigation into the case studies it soon became clear that sufficient registered data on materials, techniques, technical equipment and meaning concerning the installations was lacking. An important objective of the study on the four installations was thus the realization of practical scenarios or 'scores' with a view to future presentations and preservation. What is the art-historical significance of the work? How does the artist see the preservation of his or her work? What is the relationship between the physical objects, the carriers of images and sound, the playback equipment used, and the space in which the installation is presented? Can equipment be replaced when the original material is no longer on the market? And if so, what are the minimal and maximum system requirements to be met by the apparatus?

One of the greatest challenges in the area of registration of multimedia installations is the stipulation of rights and restrictions with regard to future presentations. At the same time, there is a field of tension between the wish to enable registration - the need to lay down information in order to make the work transferable - and the changeability of installations. In some cases, this changeability is part of the concept. However, changes are also inherent in the technology used and the functioning of that technology. Information on the significance of the technology used, the manner of presentation, and the intentions of the artist is crucial to the preservation of media art. However, the development of methodology and instruments for the acquisition, registration and opening up of such information is still at a relatively early stage.

For each of the four installations, a reader has been set up for the benefit of re-installation and preservation. These readers include, among other things: art-historical background, reconstruction of previous presentations, technical data, object registrations, installation instructions, bibliography and recommendations for follow-up research. Furthermore, the construction of each work of art is photographically documented, and the installations were recorded on video during the exhibition.

The key focus of the reports is to communicate the margins of what aspects may or may not be altered if the essence of the work is to remain intact. Not by forcing a rigid or fixed interpretation onto the work, but by respecting the creative process and being well aware of the idiosyncratic nature of contemporary art.

As we already expected, it turned out to be impossible to develop a generally applicable data registration model for multimedia installations within the scope of the research into the case studies. However, a concept model has been set up and used as a guideline for the registration of the installations. For this concept model, we made use of existing models that were developed during the research

projects *Conservation of Modern Art* (1997) and *Project Preservation Video Art* (2000-2003).

The concept data registration model for multimedia installations is set up according to the following fields/captures:

1. Identification (location, general description, overview of documentation etc)
2. overview of technical equipment
3. specification of equipment
  - playback equipment
  - monitors
  - projectors
  - projection surface
  - amplifiers
  - speakers
  - computer system
  - software
4. carriers
5. objects and props
6. specifications of space
7. instructions on installation
8. handling of the work of art

The present data registration model can serve as a practical guideline or checklist for the description of multimedia installations. Of course this model is still a work in progress. New case studies will be carried out in order further to develop the model and to integrate it into museum data systems.

### **Work group**

The research into the case studies and the concept model for data registration was presented during the congress *404 Object Not Found. What remains of media art?*. During the workshop, we focused on two of the case studies, namely, *Outside Inside* by Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas and the installation by Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas. Vivian van Saaze gave an explanation of the history of these installations, Elsa Stansfield talked about her work and Ramon Coelho entered into the technical aspects. Together with Heiner Holtappels and Gaby Wijers, the group described which problems were encountered during the re-installation of the works, what our considerations were, and why we eventually made certain decisions.

We discussed some of these problems with the working group to see which decisions the participants would have made. And, equally important, why? As a tool for discussion we used the decision-making model, developed during the *Conservation of Modern Art* project in 1998. Moreover, the question was raised whether this model can function as a guideline for making decisions on media art.

The work group gathering resulted in the following statements:

- Its not enough to buy media art, media art needs care and maintenance
- Preservation of media art needs an interdisciplinary approach; it should be a collaboration of artists, art historians, technicians and conservators
- Authenticity in media arts includes perception, material and artistic intention
- Preservation skills for media art are rare; the focus in the future should be on education
- An expertise platform on these matters will help in the development of good practise

## Annotations

1 Among other publications, see Gaby Wijers, Ramon Coelho and Evert Rodrigo (ed.), *The sustainability of video art. Preservation of Dutch video art collections*, Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, 2003, ISBN 90-807675-1-4.

2 The term multimedia installations here refers to: works of art consisting of various components (such as, sound, moving images, architecture, electronics, live elements and physical objects), with the mutual relationship between the components, the environment and the spectator often playing an important role.

3 *Dertig Jaar Nederlandse Videokunst/Thirty Years Dutch Video Art* (January 11 - March 8, 2003), Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo/TBA, Amsterdam.

4 In the case of *Are You Afraid of Video?* by the deceased artist Servaas, the owner, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, was involved in the re-installation.

5 The first version of this work, which was only presented at Café Sport (Amsterdam, October 1979), was in black-and-white. One year later, the artist acquired a colour camera, and made a new version of the work. This time in colour.

6 Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas, interview made in December 2002.

7 Josine van Droffelaar: 'preamble'. In: Hooykaas/Stansfield: *Audio Video Installations*, 1983.

8 eddie d, interview made in January 2003.

9 The Decision Making Model for the Conservation and Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Art. In: Ysbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (ed) *Modern Art: Who Cares?* Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art/Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999, pp. 164-172

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